



Older Readers Short Story

DUSK KALEVIA

The Raven of Leningrad
(Demyan)



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Dusk in Kalevia

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Preview

“Care for some tea, Comrade Chernyshev?” Plotnikov asks as he ambles over toward the samovar steaming in the corner of his office. The thing must date from the time of the czars, its intricate enamel incongruous with the rest of the bland office furniture. It is among Plotnikov’s many pretensions--a taste for fine tea supplanting one for spirits due to his unfortunate combination of ulcers and ostentation.

Demyan accepts both a teacup and a taste of the old man’s mood: smug superiority over those he thinks he controls. Perhaps not the most palatable, but it’s been ten weeks since Demyan’s been out in the field. He’s hungry.

Galina is seated in the chair next to him, as still and pale as if she were fashioned from the same porcelain as the cup in her hands. She always looks like that, her petite body poised and graceful even when she’s shattering inside. Demyan wouldn’t go so far as to say he likes Galina, but he respects her--she’s an excellent operative, one of the best, and he thinks she deserves more than the KGB is willing to give.

They’ve worked together many times before, but Demyan knows her far better than she knows

him. He knows when her ankle is acting up--the injury that took her out of a promising ballet career--and knows that when she looks out the window at the distant smokestacks on the horizon, she is thinking of the father she lost to the steel mills of Magnitogorsk. He knows that he scares her less than he does almost anyone else because she's already accepted that she will die young.

Plotnikov stirs a spoonful of jam into his cup and then adds another, before easing himself back into his chair with an audible creaking of joints. He takes an unhurried sip and closes his eyes, a man used to the patience of those below him. Demyan, growing restless, jabs peevishly at Plotnikov's mind.

"Let's get to it, shall we?" Plotnikov says, roused by an errant jolt of anxiety. "For the past few months, we've been tracking a numbers station, broadcasting from somewhere in the vicinity of southern Norway. Traffic analysis leaves little doubt that the message is military in nature, but would despite our cryptologists' best efforts, we've made little progress."

"What's our lead?"

"Of course you remember that we brought in one of theirs last month--the defector? He tipped us off to an agent, bringing the key to the cipher with him, set to meet contacts in Leningrad. We've narrowed it down to a short list, but it's almost certainly our main suspect: an American Intelligence Operative, alias Jonathan Clarke."

"So we collar him at the border." A waste of their abilities, Demyan supposes, but at least he could use the opportunity to wring a bit of sustenance out of the unfortunate soul.

"It would be best if we could avoid an arrest. He's got diplomatic cover: Third Secretary with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. We can do better."

"Keep it quiet?" Demyan raises an eyebrow.

"We're thinking something along the lines of the last mission in Novgorod. You see?"

"A honeypot," Galina says. Her exquisite face betrays nothing of the distaste Demyan knows is creeping under her skin.

"Comrade Fedorova, our little swallow." Plotnikov can't quite hide his leer, the dirty old man. Demyan hates him more with every briefing. "You'll meet your target when he stops in Leningrad to make the drop--follow him, intercept him. I'm sure you'll have no trouble. According to your file, you're quite talented."

Galina gives a sharp nod, her brown eyes fixed on a point somewhere over her commander's shoulder. He pays her no attention and continues to pontificate.

"In the best-case scenario, we get the key, maybe even get a little dirt on the fellow, and Clarke continues on his merry way as a compromised agent. We'll get the messages and they'll think he's still

clean. Hell, if we eventually get a defection or a double agent out of the deal... Well, let's just say that those at the Center will show you due gratitude. At worst, if you fail, we have Comrade Chernyshev accompanying as backup to employ some, shall we say, less *pleasant* forms of persuasion."

The implication irks Demyan; his interrogation tactics have always been far more elegant than physical coercion. They call Demyan in for stubborn cases and marvel when he gets them to crack without raising a hand, then ask Demyan to teach them the trick to it. He shrugs them off, for his technique, though simple, is not easy for humans to replicate.

"If you're asking me to beat it out of him, I prefer other methods..."

Plotnikov looks unimpressed. "I don't care about your methods. Whatever it takes to get us Clarke."

Demyan opens the dossier laying before him on the desk, the scant information painting a picture of a young man new to the foreign service. There's a single photograph--taken at an embassy function--of a freshly-minted bureaucrat, suit pulled tight across his broad shoulders, all squeaky clean patriotism and cocky grin. It's the son of Uncle Sam himself, the kind of idealistic summer fool who challenges the world to break him.

What does a face like that know of fear, of despair? Famished as he is, Demyan's response is practically Pavlovian; his mouth waters, and he can't help

the shiver that runs through him at the promise of the mission ahead. He wants to ruin this man, to drain the optimism from his face and leave a dark scar in his breast; he could run him through with shadows, devour his heart, and lay him bare. It would only take a moment.

“He’s good-looking.” Galina employs her characteristic knack for understatement.

“*All-American Boy*,” Plotnikov says, showing off his English. He bares his crooked teeth in a smile.

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The pub is small, tucked away in an old brick building half an hour’s walk from the wide thoroughfares and colorful facades of Leningrad’s center. It feels larger than it appears from outside, narrow and oddly shaped, the tiny alcoves and ribs of brick under the low ceiling giving it a subterranean appearance. The sharp tang of pickles, cigarette smoke, and spilled beer permeate the stale air. Someone has made an effort to lighten the atmosphere by painting pastorals on the plaster, but to Demyan, the amateurish murals look more like the work of a child allowed to wreak havoc with a paint box in a wine cellar.

Why their mark chose this particular establishment to duck into in the middle of the afternoon, Demyan can’t say, but there he is, alone at the bar, silently nursing his beer. It’s a relief--Demyan and Galina have trailed him for the better part of two hours, huddling together like a couple of newlyweds as they strolled along the canals, maintaining their

distance and fading into the crowd when the American thought to look around him. For the most part, however, Jonathan Clarke seemed caught up in his thoughts, staring off at the dome of Saint Isaac's or into the water. Demyan spent an entire fifteen minutes watching Clarke watch the snow fall. It's aggravating, but Demyan knows that of all the virtues expected in an agent, patience sits near the top of the list.

When he steps up to order a vodka, Demyan sneaks a glance down the bar at Jonathan Clarke. There's the sandy hair, and the same turned-up nose and strong jaw as his photograph, but he seems smaller somehow--if not in stature, then in spirit, his broad back hunched against the cold. More than anything, he seems oblivious to the world around him, a bad habit for someone in his line of work, and Demyan decides to try his luck.

As the taciturn barkeep pours the drink, a thread of Demyan's shadow snakes into the man next to him. It's only enough for Demyan to get a small sense of his adversary's state of mind, but not enough to agitate him. It still tells Demyan enough. Clarke is nervous, uncomfortably so, but it's different from the tense anticipation of an agent waiting for a contact who may or may not show. Intrigued, Demyan digs in, acutely aware that he risks spooking Clarke before Galina arrives.

He holds the list in his hand, reads the names of the operatives called in for questioning. His name isn't on it. His hand doesn't shake. He's proud of that.

This isn't the prelude to a hand-off, but just a man frustrated, licking wounds dealt to him before he ever crossed the Russian border. As much as Demyan wants to continue, he got what he came for: the coast is clear. With a twinge of regret, he situates himself at a small table by one of the few windows, takes a swallow of vodka, and sets a copy of Pravda on the scarred wood by his elbow. A moment later, Galina is coming down the stairs, shaking the snow from her mink.

Their signal is simple: if Demyan's newspaper is open when she comes in, she should wait to approach, and if the paper is folded on the table, she should proceed. His eyes flick up from the window-sill to meet hers for a barely perceivable instant, and then she's past, sashaying and smiling like an entirely different woman.

Although the bar is mostly empty, Galina heads straight for her target, nearly jostling him as she greets the bartender with good cheer. She's swapped the headscarf she wore all morning for a hat, which she removes with a sweet little laugh, letting the torrent of her auburn hair tumble down over her shoulders. Demyan's always fascinated by how she can transform herself, slipping on this girlish seduction as effortlessly as she would a disguise. He has never once seen her smile outside the presence of an enemy.

She gets her drink and takes a dainty sip, knocking her boots against the stool, her cheeks still rosy from the cold. Demyan is far enough away that he can't read either of them completely, but the pub

is relatively dead in late afternoon, and he feels their emotions reverberating through the air of the vault-like room. Demyan likes that about playing the lookout—he can sense a dangerous mood before it erupts into trouble, the canary in a coal mine for a deal gone sour. He scans the lines of the folded newspaper beside him, reading none of it, eavesdropping on the hidden conversation between two souls.

“Ah, that hits the spot. Warms you right up.” Galina shivers and snuggles down into her furs, cocking her head at Clarke. “What are you having?”

Clarke flares with frustration, which is not quite the usual response to Galina’s arrival on the scene. “Sorry. I...uh...I don’t really speak Russian,” he says, switching to English. This, as Demyan knows from his dossier, is patently untrue.

“Oh! Apology! Not having good English, but...” She’s prepared for this, launching into a clumsy schoolgirl patois. Demyan has heard her speak beautiful, accent-free English during a job, but in this case, she has chosen a safe point somewhere between adorably incomprehensible and suspiciously fluent. “My name is called Tatiana. You...American, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Not many American here. Especially not so good-looking one.” She brushes up against Clarke, pressing her arm into his, baring her pale neck as though to throw him the scent of the rosewater she’s dabbed behind her ears. “Today lucky.”

She natters on next to him for a while, telling him about her university studies and her family, all while acting like he's the most interesting thing she's ever set eyes upon despite his monosyllabic replies. Demyan's worried as he tries to get a read on Clarke, knowing that by this point in the game, the target should be feeling a little more enthusiasm at the prospect of a lovely Russian fling. Demyan feels nothing, however, other than the same vague anxiety compounded by a growing impatience with the interloper.

"I am go Leningrad for visit teacher, stay in hotel first time ever! Me only!" Galina tells Clarke excitedly, and then drops her voice, her proposition inaudible as Demyan watches her slide a stealthy hand up her target's thigh.

Demyan can feel the man cringe from across the room. A war seems to have broken out within Clarke--indecision and discomfort, a swell of fear that has nothing to do with Demyan's presence and everything to do with the petite bombshell snuggling up at the bar.

Every time he kisses a woman, he does it for the eyes of others--the boys cheering as he plants one on Laura at the Christmas party, just to be safe, tasting lipstick, gin, and shame. How many of his so-called love affairs have just been misdirection, another trick of the trade? If he takes this one to bed, who is there to fool? Why bother if no one will see?

"No," Clarke finally chokes out. "No, that's all

right.”

Demyan unfolds his newspaper and shakes it out with a decisive rustle. He thinks he sees Galina’s eyes flicker over the movement, and then return to her prey; he *knows* she’s seen it when he feels the burst of annoyance at the alert he’s raised.

“Excuse. I am needing go powder my nose.”

Galina rises--throwing Clarke a jaunty little smile--and trips blithely away in the direction of the restrooms. After waiting the requisite time, Demyan follows her downstairs into a grotty hallway, where he finds her leaning against the wall by the public phone cubby, arms crossed and an aura of vexation about her. She’s back to the cold statuette he knows so well.

“Having trouble, Galchonok?” Demyan asks quietly.

“Fuck off,” she says, frowning at the nickname.

“Comrade Galina Dmitrievna Fedorova, do you require assistance?”

“He’s not taking the bait.”

“I noticed.”

“No, but really, he’s not giving me *anything* to work with. Shit.” Galina stomps her foot. “What am I *doing*?”

“I don’t know, I’m starting to think this one isn’t on you.”

She raises one brush-stroke eyebrow. "You mean..."

"I'm saying that if a swallow isn't catching Johnny boy, we have the wrong bird."

Galina takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, nods as though she can see the picture developing in front of her face. "I was starting to wonder."

"Your instincts are on." Demyan pauses, trying to figure out how best to broach the topic. "Which means that if we stick to the plan, we need someone to play the raven."

Galina doesn't look shocked. They both know the KGB repertoire and its multitude of ways to exploit weakness. The occasional employment of a seductive male agent--a "raven"--has the added benefit of providing blackmail material.

"Who?" she begins, and he grins at her, mischievous and sharp.

"For mother Russia."

"But...are you...?" Galina stumbles over the question.

"Come on, you know better. What I want has nothing to do with it."

Demyan feels the plunge of her heart, and knows what's coming. He's seen this memory before--never this vividly, but sometimes, when she's feeling melancholy, he'll catch glimpses of it in the

shadow that hangs over her soul.

Galina is suddenly back there, the evening sun slanting through the tall windows of the empty studio, hands soaking in the warmth of Sonja's slender waist through her leotard as they practice a pas de deux. Galina leaps, and as her friend's arms catch her from behind, she feels lips press lightly on her neck. She can't help her gasp, her body thrilling as their eyes meet in the mirror, dumbfounded to think that all this time, she hasn't been suffering alone. It's later, when a red-faced Sonja tucks an escaped strand of Galina's unruly hair back into a tight bun, that Galina falls in love for the first and only time. Somehow she knew--even then, before the injury--that she would never have another chance.

Galina huffs and tosses her hair over her shoulder, trying to cover for the momentary break in her composure.

"True enough," she snaps, and then pauses like something has occurred to her. "You know, you've always reminded me of a raven. Dark, creepy, too smart for its own good."

"You've always made me think of a swallow. Small, scrappy, mouth full of nonsense." This earns Demyan something near to a smile: a slight tightening at the corner of her mouth. He'll count it as a victory.

"I'll head back and wait for you," she tells him, buttoning her collar up against the cold. "Don't scare him off."

"Yeah. Wish me luck."

Galina gives him a terse nod, and makes as though she's leaving, but after a few steps she turns back toward him.

"Thank you," she says quietly, and then hurries out before Demyan can determine what she might be thanking him for.

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When Demyan sidles up to the bar, Clarke is still staring glumly into his pint. Demyan smirks as he signals the bartender.

"Another vodka, and one for this poor fool who doesn't know how to drink properly."

The bartender snorts and Clarke throws Demyan a sideways glare, too icy to be mere coincidence, betraying his understanding of Russian.

"Mind if I join you?" Without waiting for an answer, Demyan plants himself on the stool next to the man. "I couldn't help but notice you speaking English before. You American?"

Clarke makes a surly little noise that could mean anything. Caught, he's dropped the act of linguistic ignorance and has adopted the more traditional cold shoulder.

"Where's your friend?"

"She left."

"Turned her down, eh? Cold."

"Better not to get mixed up with a tramp like that," Clarke says dismissively, into his glass. "Probably looking for an easy mark. A working girl--you know the type."

Demyan feels sudden and surprising anger on Galina's behalf, but he buries it quickly under a mantle of sarcasm. "Oh, but haven't you heard?" he asks, puckish. "There are none of those here anymore, thanks to the revolution."

"Really."

"Read it in the paper." Demyan rolls his eyes meaningfully at the propaganda lie, joking even while he bristles inside. *Typical hypocrisy*, he thinks bitterly. *The government saying that while asking us to sell ourselves.*

The bartender sets two crystal-clear glasses and a plate of snacks between them, then goes back to his business. Demyan extends a hand.

"I'm Alexei."

"Jonathan."

Demyan has taken his fair share of human lovers over the centuries, falling into his role as a physical being with genuine pleasure. He knows this body is beautiful to them, almost unreasonably so, but any attention it might garner him is soon offset by the unease he instills in the human mind. People grow self-conscious around him, anxious and depressed, their fears bubbling to the surface. Demyan accepts the despair woven throughout him as inevitable, and

his dalliances tend to be passionate, volatile, and invariably short. He envies those who carry light within them rather than shadow. For them, seduction must be much less fraught.

Still, Demyan has his ways. When skin meets skin in the firm grasp of the handshake, he searches for an opening, trying to call the perfect memory.

Summertime at Coney Island, smelling motor oil and fried dough carried on the salt wind. He's barely tall enough to see over the shoulders of the milling crowd, standing on tiptoe and dodging elbows as he tries to get a better view of the Chinese acrobats. He's already seen the spinning plates and swaying pyramids, but it's what's happening now that captivates him. A man is dancing with a sword, its edge flowing over his sinuous body, caressing him as he twirls. Johnny can barely breathe watching the youth dance with the deadly blade, rapt and aware of something unspeakable awakening within him. He's afraid.

There it is. Fear and desire, mingled and made more potent by their union. Demyan stares unblinkingly into Clarke's blue eyes, letting his message hang there between them.

I'm the sword, Demyan thinks, and raises his glass.

"To your health, then, Jonathan."

They drink. Clarke shudders, and Demyan doubts it's from the alcohol.

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