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Pawns

Hans wakes to the cold bite of an SVT-40 in his neck. There is a man above him, a Russian soldier. How could that occur in his bedroom, here in Aachen? And the cold... Someone must have left the window open. Then he remembers. This is not Aachen. This is the Ukraine. His unit, the "Groß Deutschland" was completely wiped out by the Russian troops the day before, and he was left alone in the cold winter snow.

"Vstavaï, sobaka," the Russian says. Get up, dog. He jabs Hans once again, then leans over and picks up Hans' Gewehr 43 and pack from where they were lying in the snow beside him. Hans gets up, not daring to speak. Even if he wanted to, his lips are so frozen they are almost immobile. His hands are tightly bound, and the two commence to walk, Hans stumbling in front of the Russian, aware of the gun in his back. He wonders where they are going, but doesn't dare ask. Probably to Nedrigailov, where he was told the Russian army was situated. But he wasn't sure. One could never be sure in 1943, with a war raging and countries torn apart. So he stays silent and continues to trudge on through the swirling snowstorm, aware of the soldier behind him holding his life in his hands.

And so the two go on, Hans silent and the Russian occasionally mumbling something about coordinates to himself under his breath. From what Hans understands from the Russian he learned in school, they are lost. By this time, Hans almost wishes they would find the other Russians, even if it might mean his death. The cold is unbearable, and his whole body is stiff, his mind turned off by the pain of his chapped and frozen skin and lips. Then he sees something through the snowflakes. A house, maybe? No, a barn. Hans' heart lifts. Maybe this is their destination. He will get to stop.

With his gun still pointed at Hans, the Russian opens the door of the barn and peers in. "Ebena mat'!" he curses, at the fact that this is not his planned destination, then signals for Hans to enter the barn. He does, with relief. It is a small, dark barn, but there

is a corner filled with hay and it is definitely warmer. Hans sinks down on the floor, not caring about what might happen to him. The Russian enters, silently grabbing a milking stool from the corner, and settles himself opposite Hans. After a couple of minutes, the Russian opens his pack and pulls out a rope. He ties Hans up to a support beam and then resumes his place on the stool, where he pulls out a bottle of vodka and takes a long drink. After a few minutes, the Russian lights an oil lantern that he finds hanging on a hook in the barn. The lantern emits a small halo of yellow light. With a show of reluctance, the Russian shares some bread and water with Hans. Weary with cold, Hans dozes for a half hour.

Hans drowsily watches as the Russian pulls out a roll of canvas from his pack and spreads it out on an old crate along with an array of black and white figures. Looking closer, Hans sees that it is a chess set. He closes his eyes. Suddenly, he is no longer tied up in a barn, but in a warm and shady courtyard with his best friend Johann. They are concentrating hard, staring at the board between them and the figures on it, not uttering a single word. That is what they used to do, before this war, before Johann was killed by a Russian just like this one holding him prisoner. Anger and sadness bubble up in him then, bringing him back to the present and washing away the cold until he feels as if on fire.

"Do you feel powerful keeping me tied up here, you dirty schweinhund? Are all Russians like this, or are you the only heartless idiot in this gottverdammte neck of the bloody woods?" Hans growls at the Russian, who casually looks up from his game and takes another drink of vodka. Hans has never hated anyone as much as this man in front of him now.

"It would have been easier for me to put a bullet through your head." The Russian goes back to the chess game, cursing under his breath. This gives Hans something to think about, something to distract him from the pain of the blood running down his fingers from the bonds at his wrists. But the question is, would he rather be alive or dead now? This thought keeps running through his head, along with the faces of his friends and family, dead and alive. His head gradually slumps, the tears running down his face stop, and his breathing slows. He is asleep. Later, the Russian walks over and loosens the ropes around his prisoner's wrists, then extinguishes the lantern, immersing them in darkness.

The following morning, Hans is awoken by the Russian, who this time is prodding him with his boot, signaling him to get up. He does, flexing his sore fingers, noticing that the tightness around his wrists is not as fierce as yesterday. The ropes must have loosened during his sleep.

"Hey, are you going to stand there like a dumb sheep or are you going to help?" snaps the Russian, who is now pushing at the door with considerable force. "This piece of drisiya door won't open up against the snow. Chert!" He starts kicking it with the same boots that had been prodding Hans, and Hans joins in, doing the best he can while bound. They work at it, until the Russian signals for them to stop. "We are stuck. Here is your breakfast." He takes a crust of bread from his pocket and gives it to Hans, then stomps back over to his stool, where the chess set is once again laid out in front of him.

"Spasibo," Hans says, feeling he should thank the Russian for the meal, as small as it is. His response is silence, and he finds himself watching the chess board intently, like a cat watching a mouse just out of its reach. For Hans, this game reminds him of all he had in his life before the war. The day passes this way, both men silently concentrating on one board, until the Russian grudgingly gives Hans another small piece of bread. After Hans has finished it, the Russian unties him.

"Go piss. There is a pot in the corner. One wrong move, you are dead." The Russian has the gun pointed at Hans, who goes and quietly does his business before returning to the post, where he is tied up again. This time the Russian gives him a bit of slack in the rope, enough for him to lie down, which he does gratefully, allowing himself to succumb to his fatigue.

The next two days pass in a similar fashion, Hans silently watching the Russian play chess, the Russian silently untying Hans once or twice a day, and then tying him back up again. The door is unrelenting under the weight of the snow, so they are still trapped. Despite the chess, both parties are becoming bored, the Russian more prone to fits of temper where he curses and kicks the walls, once kicking Hans. It is for this reason that Hans silently prays that the games of chess go well for the Russian, for it is when he makes a mistake that he turns angry. On the fourth day of their imprisonment in the barn, Hans works up the courage to make a suggestion to his captor during one of his many games.

"I would move that Bishop instead of the Knight, if I were you." The Russian jerks his head up in surprise, almost knocking over the ever-present bottle of vodka.

"What did you say?"

"I said, you would be better off to move the Bishop. That would put you in a position to capture the enemy's remaining Knight, and the King would be unprotected." Hans prays he was not too rash in opening his mouth, shaking as the Russian walks over, unties him, and drags him to the other side of the chess board.

"You think you are so good, da? Well, you will play with me and I will show you what it means to be a chess player. Your hands move away from the game..." The Russian makes a gun with his hand and silently pulls the trigger before reassembling the chess set. They start then, the Russian eyeing Hans. Hans avoids his gaze and concentrates on the game. The Russian was right. He is good, extremely good, and Hans must never let his brain wander. The game continues on until afternoon, at which point Hans wins by moving his Knight to get rid of the Russian's Queen, leaving his King undefended for Hans' next move.

"Der'mo! You are good, better than I would have expected from a German! We will play again!" The Russian is quite amazed, and surprisingly, not angry. He sets up the board again, and they play, until it is too dark to see, even by the glow of the lantern. The Russian gives Hans some bread, but this time with a small piece of cheese, which Hans devours gratefully before lying down in his corner, once again tied up to the support beam.

Artillery wakes Hans up from a deep sleep the next morning. He rubs his eyes and looks around, and sees the Russian with his ear pressed to the door, a look of extreme concentration on his face. "Was passiert?" Hans asks, forgetting to speak Russian and slipping into his native German. The Russian frowns at him and swears at him to be quiet, which he does. It is many minutes before the Russian pulls his ear away from the door and addresses Hans with an air of superiority.

"Do you hear that? That is the sound of the German army retreating. The Russians must be defending their line well." Hans stays silent and unmoving, until the Russian pulls out another slice of bread and cheese, bigger this time, which Hans accepts. They eat in silence, and sit for a while until the Russian once again speaks to Hans.

"Hey, you want to play chess?" Hans is shocked. Here he was, a war prisoner, and his captor was asking him to play chess!

"Da, I will." Hans waits until the Russian unties him, then goes and settles himself on the opposite stool. And so they begin, but unlike the days before, there is a more relaxed air. The Russian no longer seems to be playing to best the German, but for enjoyment. The light of the lantern reminds Hans of playing chess with Johann. At one point, Anatoly looks up and opens his mouth.

"Menya zovut Anatoly. Vy?" My name is Anatoly. You?

"Hans...from Aachen." He is not nervous, but careful of what he says, in case Anatoly should misinterpret something that comes out of his mouth.

"Aachen...I have heard of it. I am from St. Petersburg, in the north of Russian. Believe it or not, but it is colder there than here." Seeing my surprise, he laughs. "Da, much colder. We are doing you Germans a favor by keeping you out of our country." At this they both laugh, and Anatoly passes the vodka bottle to Hans, who takes a drink. At this gesture, all traces of fear have been washed from Hans. He feels an unexplainable bond with Anatoly, an impossible but real bond. Sometime in mid-afternoon, they stop to eat, once again bread and cheese, but this time, Hans is not tied up and can move freely. After they are done eating, Anatoly settles himself by the lamp gazing at a photo from his pocket. The look on his face is odd, a mixture of pain and contentment.

"Tovarishch, what are you looking at?" Hans asks, wanting to know what could cause such strong emotion on the face of his fellow captive. Anatoly looks up, a smile on his face.

"A photo of my wife and son back home."

"May I?" Hans extends his hand, in which Anatoly places the photo, then moves himself so he is looking over Hans' shoulder. Hans looks at the photo. It is a woman Anatoly's age with her hair in a braid wrapped around her head and a little boy of about four in her arms. They are standing in front of a house and smiling broadly at the camera.

"This was taken in 1940, shortly before I left. I haven't seen them since. Evgenia writes once a month, but that is not the same. I think about them every day." Anatoly

takes the picture back and puts it in his pocket. "What of you? You are too young to be married, but you must have a girlfriend, nyet?"

Smiling, Hans then reaches into his own pocket and draws out a picture he had almost forgotten about, which he hands to Anatoly, who studies it intently.

"Krasivyĭ. What is her name?"

"Hannelore. I met her in school," Hans replies. "I also write letters to her, but I am really looking forward to seeing her at the end of this war. I was going to propose to her, but then I got drafted the night before I was planning on asking. I hardly even got to say goodbye." He accepts the picture from Anatoly, who clears his throat.

"You will get to propose. When we find my unit, you will be held as a prisoner until the end of the war, but when it is over, we will ship you back to Germany along with the rest of the POW's. So I would not worry if I were you, Tovarishch. Your war is over. Who knows, I might even be able to sneak some letters from you to your Hannelore into the mail once in a while." Hans can do nothing but smile gratefully past the lump in his throat. Anatoly is silent for a minute, then he gets up and returns to his place in front of the chess board.

"Well, why don't we play another game of chess? It's too early to sleep now." Hans nods and goes to sit opposite Anatoly. They are silent for a while, concentrating on the game, until Hans speaks.

"It is funny, how much this chess game resembles our lives. Soldiers like us are the Pawns, never having a say about anything, doing what we are told. The first ones in and the first ones down. It seems as if our only purpose is to fight." Anatoly nods in agreement.

"Da, but to fight for what? Hitler and the Nazis? This is not my war. This is yours."

"Saying all Germans are Nazis is like saying all Russians drink vodka. I don't want to be here anymore than you do," Hans responds. At this Anatoly laughs loudly and takes a large drink of vodka.

"There is a problem with your statement, Hans. We do all drink vodka! But I see what you mean. If only all problems could be solved with a game of chess." At this he

wins the game, and reaches over to extinguish the lantern. "Goodnight." Hans responds in kind and lies down.

Hans is awoken by Anatoly the next morning, who nudges him with his boot and then cocks his head as if listening to something. He gets up abruptly, and walks to the door, where he presses his head against it and listens intently. By now, Hans can hear something too, the voices of many men singing all at once. As it gets louder, he recognizes the language as Russian.

"Is this your unit?" Hans asks Anatoly, who nods, then motions for Hans to come over. "You are still my prisoner, and you will pretend you don't speak Russian. Now I am going to tie you up, and then we will make some noise." Anatoly then takes the ropes, puts them around Hans' wrists, and the two commence to pound on the door, Anatoly shouting in Russian.

"Eï, Tovarishchi! Ya zdes', v saraï!" Hey, comrades! I am here, in the barn! The singing stops and the men draw closer. A harsh voice cuts through the wall of the barn.

"Anatoly Vladimirovich? My God, it really is! Men, we've found Anatoly Vladimirovich. Vodka for all tonight!" There are cheers, loud ones, but then the voice silences them. "There is snow blocking the door. We will dig through. Are you alone?"

"Nyet, I have a prisoner, a German. He is tied up tight, so he can't escape." The men get their shovels out and start to dig. Fifteen minutes later, the door cracks open, and morning sunlight pours into the barn, almost blinding Hans and Anatoly after the darkness of the barn. Right away, Hans is grabbed by two heavy-set men. They start to march, Anatoly surrounded by his fellow soldiers, laughing and joking. They do not stop until almost nightfall, at which point they reach a large circle of tents with a blazing fire in the middle. There are five men sitting around the fire, one of whom gets up and walks towards the group as they approach. This man is obviously the one in command. He nods to Anatoly and starts to question him, Hans silently listening.

"Anatoly Vladimirovich. Welcome back. I see you have brought us a prisoner." The tone in his voice scares Hans, who does all he can not to let it show. Anatoly also looks slightly nervous.

"Da, Ivan Oleksandrovich. I found him sleeping in the snow." The man laughs, sending shivers down Hans' spine.

"Ha! You are just in time, Tovarishch. Food is short, so we are executing all our prisoners in two days' time. They will be kept in the big tent over there. Now, Tovarishch, you will bring your 'friend' to his other filthy comrades, and you will join us for some vodka," the Russian in command says, waving his hand to indicate the tent, which is the farthest from the fire. Hans cannot believe what he is hearing. It is all he can do not to crumple to the ground in a useless heap. Anatoly stiffly comes over and grabs him by the wrist, forcing him to move. The other Russians move away toward the fire and seem to forget all about him.

They make their way towards the prisoners' tent, silent. Anatoly's grip on Hans is as strong as iron. As they draw near, Anatoly releases Hans, shoving him into the tent with the other prisoners, then walks away.

Hans struggles not to fall as he enters the tent, not knowing what to expect. He is greeted by the vacant, sad stares of about twenty other soldiers wearing uniforms like his. Some can move, but others are curled up in corners, shivering and moaning. Some of them call out to him in feeble tones.

"Kamerad! Hilfe uns, bitte!" Comrade! Help us, please! "Hast du Zigaretten?" Do you have cigarettes? "Oder eine Decke? Irgendetwas!" Or a blanket? Anything!

"Nein." No. This all Hans can say as he searches around for a place to sit. The pain in his heart is growing now, knowing that Anatoly has betrayed him. He silently curses himself for trusting him, believing what he said. Of course he is going to be shot. He finally sinks down just by the door and falls into a deep sleep full of unrest.

Hans sleeps most of the next morning, troubled by nightmares, and finally wakes up at noon. The other soldiers are either sleeping, like he was, or staring blankly off into space like corpses. Time passes so slowly here, it seems to stand still. Hans stays silent, not talking to anybody, hardly moving.

On the day of their execution, Hans and the other prisoners are brought outside and lined up by several Russian soldiers. Anatoly grabs Hans and shoves him to the back of the line, where he is tied to the prisoner in front of him. They start to march, shuffling along in quiet despair. Hans' heart grows heavier with every step. All of the sudden, Anatoly grabs Hans from his position behind him and punches him.

"What did you say, you dirty pig? I will teach you a thing or two about insulting me! Come, you swine!" The other Russians overseeing this march laugh and cheer, congratulating Anatoly.

"Da, that is what you have to do, Tovarishch. Teach these pieces of filth a lesson!" one shouts, causing the others to laugh harder. Cutting Hans free, Anatoly drags him off into the woods, swearing. Hans is terrified. The Russian forces Hans to move quickly and they march until they can barely hear the other prisoners, then Anatoly stops, releasing Hans.

"I told you your war was over, did I not? Take this bundle. Head West, the German line is not that far." Hans accepts the bundle.

"Spasibo. You have saved my life," he says. Anatoly nods.

"Do svidaniya, Tovarishch." Goodbye, comrade. At this, he pulls out his gun and fires two shots into the air, then walks back to the group. Hans hears him shouting.

"Did you hear that? One word from any of you and the same thing happens! Ponimaete? Now walk!" Hans is stunned, but he manages to make his legs move. He is free.

After several hours, Hans allows himself to stop. Hungry, he reaches into his pack and finds food and water. Tears run down his cheeks. Reaching again into the pack, he closes his fist around something hard and draws it out. There, in his palm, is a single Pawn.