

the Losing Role

Steve Anderson

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Also by Steve Anderson

Under False Flags: A Novel

Liberated: A Novel of Germany, 1945

Double-Edged Sword (Kindle Single)

Sitting Ducks (Kindle Single)

For René,
of course

One

October 1944

Max lay flat on his back, in the mud. The mud was cold and seeping through his wool corporal's uniform. Why were his arms above his head? Someone must have been dragging him. Was he hit? He moved his legs. They worked, thank God—he'd still dance again one day. Fingers? All there. He could still play the piano. He felt at his stomach and chest, fingering the tin buttons, dry leather straps and coarse worn tunic, and found no blood. Lucky man.

The night sky burst with whites and oranges. In flashes he saw the men of his unit rushing by, their mouths wide open screaming.

He found his feet and yelled at them but couldn't hear himself and his heart swelled with panic. Every actor needed good ears—to hear his cues, for timing, to sing any song at all. He slapped at his ears. They popped and his hearing returned to the tumult of a thousand cracks and thumps. He remembered—his unit was being bombarded for the third time that day. The show must go on here on the Eastern Front, and the Red Army was pulling out all the stops.

Max ran. "Run, boys, run," he yelled as the others pushed him along. He'd been lying in the middle of the road, a road exposed in all directions by vast fields. The salvos kept coming. One had a whistle to it, a real screecher. It burst at Max's back and he kept going, the cold wind smacking his cheeks. Soon the bombs were

landing behind them and Max glanced back to take it all in—the craters, the bodies and the heap of metal that had been their last working truck. Its tires burned, spitting flames. Nearby lay the tangled lumps of their last two horses. Their last screams were ringing in his ears now, and he wondered if maybe it wasn't better not to hear. If only he could make this stop. If only he could wear silk pajamas and sip a warm cognac. If only. Napoleon's winter retreat from Russia was a parade march compared to this. The whole German Wehrmacht was a right wreck in this sector, and his unit was only one shred of it.

After the bombing the air had a gritty, metallic reek. Max's thirty or so worn-out comrades trudged on with equal pace as if sharing one mind. They passed through a wood and entered a darkened town. One of the sergeants was waving them onto the main street, where the signs were a mix of German and Polish—*Fleischer, Piekarnia, Einbahnstrasse*. Rubble and debris clogged the side streets. The town square was too dark, too wide open, so they turned a corner and the sergeant led them into what looked like a modest church or a city hall. It was hard to tell, since its front was blackened from fire. Fatigue setting in, they staggered through the double front doors and hit the floor in the dark, toppling onto each other. The floor was soft, luckily—they had actual carpet under them. Moonlight shone through holes in the ceiling, giving them some light.

As the men tossed their gear into piles, the women appeared from wherever they'd been hiding, their farm girl headscarves making triangle shapes in the shadows. Whispering, they found their men and curled up to them.

Anka came to Max, her cheekbones shining blue in the moonlight. She pressed against him and squeezed his hands in hers, her grip as strong as ever (from all

that milking, he guessed). These seven or so women were their only stroke of luck. They were *Volksdeutsche*—Eastern ethnic Germans, who simply could not and would not be left behind to the Red Army. Anka had great legs under that peasant skirt of hers. Max pulled her closer.

She brushed dirt from his forehead. “The bombs, they knocked you down and out,” she said in her antiquated German. “Drag you along is what I tried to do.”

“That’s my girl,” Max said. He might be pushing thirty-three years, but Anka was young and strong enough to pull him through the mud.

As the group settled in, they lit cigarettes and passed them around while others slept, some snoring, some with eyes wide open from the exhaustion and constant terror. Someone wept. Anka pecked Max on the cheek.

“Say, Maxi. Our horses back there—what if there’s any meat left on ‘em?”

Always thinking, his girl. What a delight. Max stroked her straw hair. “Darling,” he whispered “the Russians could be anywhere. Lying in wait.”

Anka grunted. “Does not matter. It’s October. So we must hoard now.”

She was right, of course. This first real cold was harsh enough yet the truly grim conditions loomed. When Max lived in America, this time of year held so much promise. October brought the Halloween holiday, that strangely pagan dress-up *Fest* in a land of prudish Christians. It was his favorite holiday there. Everything seemed to remind him of America these days. The further he was taken from her, the more he wanted her. Anka, with her scrapping wiles, reminded him of New York City—and of Lucy Cage.

Anka sat up. Her face hovered over him in shadow and the glints of her eyes darted back and forth. "You hear me? Do the bombs make you deaf? It's good horsemeat, that."

"Well, I could lend you my knife," Max said, smiling.

"No. You go and starve if you want." Anka shoved at his chest and stood. She lifted her skirt and scurried past the intertwined bodies for the front doors.

What could he do? The knife line was meant to be a joke. He sat up and lit a harsh Polish cigarette.

Others were sitting up, hunched silhouettes facing each other. "Where are we?" someone asked. "Who can tell?" replied another, and they huddled around and rubbed their hands together.

"Maps are no good," added a sergeant. "Could be into Poland. Prussia maybe?"

Someone spat and said, "Screw Prussia." Screw Hitler, this really meant.

"Soon Old Prussia will be no more, I can tell you that much."

They were lost and doomed. If they didn't die first, they'd freeze in a Soviet POW camp. Max had heard it all before. He even half believed it. Yet something told him he was going to make it, something he'd learned from his time in America. In show biz alone the Americans had a thousand proverbs about survival. "It's not how you get knocked down," went one, "it's how you get up again." Or, "Rock bottom is a PhD." They tossed their slogans about like their penny candies, and he'd judged them silly at the time. But now? What else could he believe in?

Max woke with a nasty kink in his neck and a whopping headache. He must have gotten a concussion in the bombardment. In the carpeted room, the light had

turned a faint purple. Morning was coming, and his Anka hadn't returned. The sad truth of it helped kill his aching hunger pangs.

Then, as his eyes adjusted, he saw a second set of double doors across the room. They were cracked open—through them he could make out, shining within shafts of morning light, the tops of rows of seats. This sight was all too familiar. He crawled over to the doors. Farther down, beyond the seat rows, he saw the contours of a stage.

They were in a theater. They'd been hiding in the lobby of it. How fitting, he thought—a bomb-damaged drama house for a banished actor.

He nudged at the sergeant sleeping next to him, but the sergeant only snorted and rolled the other way. He clambered over to another sergeant and suggested they move the group into the main hall where it was safer. The sergeant agreed and Max led them in. The holes in the ceiling had showered the hall with dust and plaster chunks, yet its gilded decor still shined. Golden harlequin monkeys served as wall sconces. A red carpet ran down the center aisle. Max strode the gradually inclining lane and gazed at the plush seats, the balcony up above, the orchestra pit before the stage. The place was damp like a barn and smelled like an outhouse, but no matter. Again he thought of New York—there they knew a stage when they saw one. The group straggled in, rubbing their eyes, and Max showed them a little bow. A private smiled, a farm girl curtsied back and Max, grinning, produced one of his last German cigarettes that he had placed in his silver holder (which he kept safe in his boot). "A fine spot we got here," he said in American English, lighting up. "Just swellegant."

The Russians never came so they holed up. The sun beamed down through the punctured ceiling and lit up

the gilding, and they kept the doors open so the breeze would kill the damp reek. In the afternoon, Max took the stage and sang for them. He did folk songs and they danced. He did schmaltzy songs. He took requests. He did his best at “Lili Marleen” and nailed “The Ballad of Mack the Knife.” Meanwhile, the sergeants and privates went out on forays and scored sawdusty bread, turnips, and even a stray chicken. As evening came more soldiers wandered in, having heard about the good thing they had going at the theater hall. They brought wine and a potato schnapps that wasn’t too bad. Max told them about New York City, about how much he missed the hustle, the color and the fair chances they gave you. All you needed was luck. He told them:

“If I can confide in you? I will return there, I can tell you that.”

No one had seen Anka. They found candles and used them as footlights. Max did Rodgers and Hart, the corniest he knew—“I Wish I Were in Love Again,” from *Babes in Arms*. No one got the English, but no one was complaining. To keep things lively, he trotted out his impersonation of their Commander-In-Chief, Hitler. Chaplin’s was far better, he knew, but who here had seen the great Charlie? Of course, he was taking a chance. What motif could be more taboo? Yet he gave it everything he had, and soon most of his comrades were laughing and clapping, even the Austrians and the ones who slept with their machine guns. He pranced around and shook his fists and played up the Austrian dialect. He spat and stomped.

A private bounded in through the open double doors. “Stop, stop,” the kid yelled waving hands.

Max halted center stage. All turned, listened. They heard vehicles. A sergeant barked at the private who pulled the doors shut. Outside, brakes screeched and

engines revved. These sounded like German makes, but who could be sure? The women headed backstage while the men drew their guns and held positions behind rows of seats. Max blew out the candles, and the hall went dark. He crouched down at the rear of the stage.

A rap on the front doors. A shout: "Open up, please, open up."

No one answered it. The voice sounded German, but that meant little—the Russians played impostors all the time.

The fool kid private had not locked the double doors. The lever turned, the doors opened wide, and soldiers—German soldiers—charged in wearing shoulder flashlights that shot white beams through the darkness. Roughly twenty in number, they took up places along the walls, their machine guns aimed.

"You can come out. You're in good hands," shouted an officer from the doorway. The accent was educated High German—Hanover, most likely.

"With those guns trained on us?" Max said, chuckling. "My good fellow, show us some civility." A flashlight hit him in the eyes, but he didn't flinch. He'd had worse lighting.

"Very well." The officer waved for his men to lower their guns.

The farm girls came out first, clasping their hands together in thanks. Max relit candles for a better look at the soldiers. They were Waffen-SS—the standard combat SS, but this was no frontline unit. At least they weren't those Special Police bastards, or the Gestapo. Still, they had brand-new gear like those bastards. They shot smiles at the farm girls. Max pulled back, out of the light.

"What's the special occasion?" one of Max's sergeants said.

The officer who'd called them out was a captain. He strode down the aisle wearing a tailored, shiny leather overcoat. Max hadn't seen such fine costume in a long time. The captain had a passable henchman's look, but his jowls were flabby and his eyes too soft. He stopped halfway down, putting himself in the middle of the scene, and studied the worn, tired faces. He pulled his gloves off and slapped them in an open palm. Now that was better, Max thought.

"So. Who's in charge?" the captain said.

"Maybe you could tell us?" one of Max's other sergeants said. "Sir."

The captain wagged a finger. "Don't you worry. We'll get you right back to your regiment so you can keep up the fight." He shook a fist and showed his teeth. "That's right, *Kameraden*, we'll push those Bolshevik bastards all the way to the Orient!"

Such poor material—it was straight from propaganda section. Heads were down now. "'The Orient,' he says," someone grunted.

"First things first." The captain pulled a file from his map case and read. He cleared his throat and said in a monotone, as if doing a casting call, "I am looking for a man, and his name would be . . . Kaspar, or perhaps 'von' Kaspar?"

The word 'von' meant a noble background. The soldiers and farm girls gaped at each other. Max had never told this group his old stage name. Some were chuckling now.

The captain eyed Max. "First name, Maximilian?"

The group gathered nearer the stage, perhaps to protect Max, perhaps to get a closer look. The whole room was looking to him. He had sat back down, on the edge of the stage. His head felt heavy and he let it hang. This performance was over, show closed.

"This fine fellow right here is none other than Corporal Max Kaspar." It was one of the farm girls talking, practically shouting in her Eastern German. "Oh, you don't recognize him now, not like this—some sorry, worn-out, aging footslogger, aye, but he was a grand performer once. The toast of New York City he was."

"Well, not exactly," Max muttered, "maybe I was laying it on a little thick."

The captain held up a promo still from 1940 Berlin—Max in tuxedo and top hat, flanked by dancing girls.

"That's him! And our leaders are such good judges of talent, they went and made this man a corporal in the infantry," added a third sergeant (using one of Max's own favorite lines).

"He dances! Sings! Impersonates!" It was the first sergeant, sounding like Max's press agent. "You want it, our Kaspar has it, from opera to cabaret, drama to comedy..."

The captain held up a hand. He looked to Max. "Your name is Kaspar. In New York you called yourself Maximilian von Kaspar."

Max let out a sigh. "True story. Too true."

"I must say, you've been harder to find than toilet paper out here."

"Nothing is so hard," Max said. "So. Where are you taking me?"

"Why, we're taking you back where you belong. Where else?"

They had little time to say goodbye. Max squared his shoulders, set his chin high, and strode up the aisle as the old gang lined his way. "It's a special call from above," said one. "Look, it could be your great comeback," said another. They said it slowly, mechanically, the way you tell a child the trip to the

dentist will be fun. They shook his hands. They hugged him. The women kissed him. One gave him the tongue. What a wench. He loved that about wenches.

At the top of the aisle, he pivoted to face them. "It was an honor to play for you," he said and gave a long and slow bow, one arm outstretched. No need to be too grim. After all, they were the ones who had to stay. It was the way the world worked. One day you're down, and the next? "Breaking a leg," as the Americans said. If he had any luck left at all.

Outside, the captain escorted Max to the rear of a late-model Horch command car. The seats were leather and almost warm. Feeling cheeky, Max asked for a blanket, and to his surprise they gave him one. He draped it over his shoulders like a cloak. Before they sped away, rain started to fall, tapping at the fabric roof. The driver handed him a cigarette. It was a rare French Gauloises, made it all the way to the Eastern Front, rich and full of life.

Max smoked and sat back and thought of lovely Anka. He looked out the window—and saw her. She had returned to the group, who were gathering in the doorway of the theater. She was with one of the sergeants now, inserting herself inside his overcoat, rubbing at his ribs, and laughing. It made sense, Max thought. His Anka had probably run into that SS captain and pointed him in the right direction. She could have made a play for Max, told them she just had to be with him, but she'd placed her bets on a warm sergeant and a shot at more horsemeat. Smart girl, Max thought. Sensible. Can't teach what she's got. The sad fact was, comebacks were a lost art these days, and his needy Anka knew it. Then again, he thought, chuckling, she should have seen him do that Rodgers and Hart number.

Two

The SS captain had orders to put Max on a train for Bavaria. The problem was finding the right train, since it was high season for full retreat on the Eastern Front. For a night and a day Max's SS escorts traveled the countryside in search of rail lines, crossings, stations. In better times it might have made a fine motoring tour. The low green hills shimmered in the late fall sun. A rocky stream rushed alongside the road, foaming white. Max kept his blanket draped over his lap. The captain's men brought him hot food and schnapps and played cards with him. And Max vowed to keep this damn good thing going as long as he could.

In the middle of the night, they stopped at an abandoned mansion. The usual scavengers—passing troops and forced laborers on the lam—had cleaned out the food and liquor; but in an antique armoire Max discovered riding boots, jodhpurs, a corduroy blazer, a lambswool sweater, and a floppy upper-class hiker's hat. He put all this on. In the mirror he saw a cultured German impersonating an English gentleman, the very look he'd given himself before the army. He would wear his finery the rest of the way. He even took an ivory-handled cane with him. The captain had no objections and let Max keep his worn field gray-green uniform in a rucksack. The men played along by calling him "*Mein Herr*," as if they were seeing off a rich and eccentric uncle for an adventurous trip abroad from which he'd have many interesting stories. They lent him a leather overcoat like the captain's. And Max played it up all the

more. He had a shave with warm water and left a pencil thin mustache like the one he had in America. As they toured on, he told himself he was over his farm girl Anka. Had she really almost talked him into deserting? Wait out the war in a refugee camp and then score a little farm? Nonsense. Crazy girls put crazy ideas in your head. The war put crazy ideas in your head. Her new sergeant was probably dead already.

They ended up at another mansion. At dawn the captain invited Max out on the veranda where they draped their fine overcoats over their shoulders, drank coffee, and smoked as if this place was the captain's country villa and a real war was his future hope and not a daily nightmare far out of control. The captain told Max his name was Pielau—Adalbert von Pielau.

"I am a real 'von,' *Herr* 'von' Kaspar," the captain said and sighed. "These days, I mostly leave the 'von' off. Some see the noble background as a weakness. I never imagined it possible."

"They're just envious," Max said. "We all want what we don't have, isn't that so?" The coffee was perking him up. He tapped his cane on the veranda slate, two pops. "Now, good von Pielau, if I may, how about you telling me what they're to do with me."

Pielau smiled. Max had asked the captain's men this many times. They'd only shrugged. They were on a top-secret job, they said.

"When the SS comes looking for you," Max said, "it can mean a tight spot."

"Or, something great, something honorable. Don't forget that."

"It has to do with performing?" Max said. "I mean, what else am I good for? Maybe it's the Troops Entertainment Section, give our boys a good show. That's the only way you'll see me back at the front, I can

tell you—in stage makeup.” This last bit was pushing it, despite the sugar coating. He had to gauge Pielau’s SS principles.

The captain’s flabby jowls had stiffened. He moved to the edge of the veranda and glanced around to make sure no one was listening. He whispered, “Here’s the thing, Kaspar. If I knew more myself, I think I could confide in you. Believe me, I want to survive as much as you.”

Max took the captain’s disclosure for one of those tricks of implied meaning. The playwrights called it subtext, but regular Germans had perfected the art in the last ten years. It required a response of equal measure.

Max walked to the edge of the veranda. “If I were in your boots,” he whispered, “I’d get as far from the Russians as you can. Get to the Western Front. You’re a nobleman, right? With contacts? Get nearer to the Americans. And for devil’s sake, when the end comes don’t be wearing that uniform with an SS death skull on the collar. The Americans will take it literally.”

When the end comes, Max had said—when the war was lost, was his subtext. Did Pielau get it? Or was Max merely projecting his own hopes?

Pielau’s face had lost color. “Let’s not talk rashly. There are many ways to survive. Victory is the best way.”

“Of course, yes,” Max blurted and let out a nervous chuckle. “Who’s talking rash, my good man?” He patted Pielau on the back. Pielau chuckled and offered Max another of his Gauloises.

That afternoon they crossed from what used to be Poland into Germany. In a town called Görlitz, Pielau found Max a passenger train west. On the platform, the locomotive pumped steam as people pushed their

children and elderly into the packed cars. Pielau issued Max his papers. He saluted Max first, though Max was only a corporal. "With any luck, we'll meet again," he told Max.

Still in his fine clothes, Max climbed into a passenger car and muscled his way through to a cramped spot in the passageway. He sat on his rucksack, his head pressed up against the cold window. At least he had a window for the night. For long dark hours he slept sitting up, nodding off and jerking awake, as the car rocked and the tracks clicked, and the train stopped for problems he did not want to know. In the morning, he barely recognized Germany. Along the horizon, towers and spires he'd known had vanished. Barrels of black smoke spiraled up into the sky, and the air was peppery with soot.

Traveling into Nuremberg was like passing through a rock quarry. Once splendid medieval streets were rubble piles of gray and black. Seeing this, the elderly couple next to Max cried. The main train station was such a ruin that the armed forces check-in post was a tent outside. Max reported here. A teenage clerk issued him pea soup from the field kitchen and a truck ride to Grafenwöhr.

Grafenwöhr. Any German with the slightest military *Bildung* knew this massive training complex between Nuremberg and the Czech border. At least it wasn't a concentration camp, Max thought. His truck was packed with fifteen or more soldiers from all branches of service. They straightened for Max when he climbed in wearing his fine getup. They probably think I'm a producer, he thought. In no time he'd be telling them he was only an army corporal, and he hoped they could see the sad irony in that.

During the bumpy ride the men sounded upbeat, if not thankful, and it kept Max's confidence high. Most in the truck had volunteered, he learned—they were

responding to an urgent armed forces-wide request for English-speaking personnel, and that was all they knew. Hearing this, Max let himself feel somewhat honored that the powers-at-be had come looking for him. And they all had so much in common in the truck! There were other actors, a dancer, musicians, a chef, headwaiters, a playwright, and even a screenwriter. A few had been merchant sailors before the war. Two of the sailors smoked large curved pipes.

Like Max, most all these men had been to America.

They rolled into Grafenwöhr at dusk, passing rows of army barracks shaded purple from the sun going down. The compound had perimeter fences as if for POWs. "That's for secrecy," someone chanted. "Right. It's for our safety," another said, and they nodded in agreement. At the front gate they poked their heads out and joked with the guards, but the guards only stared back as if deaf or zombies (straight from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Max thought).

The trucks left them on a parade ground lit up with bright spotlights, and even Max had to shield his eyes from the light. Another truckload had already arrived. The men huddled in groups, mostly according to branch of service, and sat on crates that seemed to have been set out for them, the beams of white light illuminating their steamy breath. A group of Luftwaffe noncoms played Skat. A circle of medics passed around music magazines. An army private was juggling turnips, alone. He managed four, then five, and then added his knife into the mix. Around his neck he wore an orange scarf that was a little too bright and long. His hair flopped over his ears, longer than many women's. A real seedy cabaret type, this one. What sort of production was this to be? Max wondered. Could it be vaudeville? Not so bad

there. He would be returning to his roots. Still, that didn't explain the sailors and chefs.

A group of sappers was doing some black market trading. Max strode over and let them jeer at his exclusive attire. He loved it. The sappers loved it. One offered a *Jägerwurst* and three potatoes for Max's cane, and Max commenced negotiations, "That's all good and well, but what a gentleman really needs, boys, is a nice country egg—"

"What the devil are you? Mister dandy pansy?" Someone was yelling. It came from the office at the edge of the ground, some thirty feet away. An SS lieutenant was standing on the office steps, his hands on his hips. Max assumed the lieutenant was yelling at the juggler, but the juggler had stopped. He'd tucked his longish scarf into his tunic. The lieutenant continued, "That's right, I'm talking to you! Speak up you!"

"Surely that little tyrant's talking to someone else," Max said to his group.

The SS lieutenant marched across the ground, the steam pulsing out his mouth. The sappers parted and stepped back. Max's uniform was packed in the rucksack on his shoulder. He lowered the rucksack to his feet. The lieutenant came straight for him.

"Excuse me, gents," Max said and turned to the lieutenant—

Who screamed and spat spittle: "Why aren't you in uniform? Speak, you. Name and rank and unit."

Max smelled *Bockbier* and liver dumpling. What a bore, he thought. He stood at attention and saluted, and only then did he notice he still had on the white gloves he'd traded for on the train. "Before I tire you with the whole story, sir," he began, "I should clarify that I'm a lowly army corporal, in the infantry, just arrived from

the Eastern Front and, well, my uniform was so worn from the hard fighting, I did not want to offend anyone.”

“Another goddamned thespian, that it? Now strip and get your kit on.” The lieutenant kicked Max’s rucksack for emphasis and marched off with his arms folded behind his back like a drill instructor.

Men joked with Max as he stripped in the biting cold and switched into his itchy old uniform. The sapper returned, frowning, and gave Max one egg for his sore luck.

Across the ground, the SS lieutenant had stopped at the juggler. He screamed something in the juggler’s face and the juggler, tottering, reached in his tunic and pulled out the length of his tucked-in orange scarf. It flopped at his belt buckle. The lieutenant grabbed at the stretch of scarf, pulled the juggler to his chest, drew his service knife and hacked the scarf off close to the juggler’s neck. This got few laughs. The lieutenant laughed anyway and sauntered back to his office, his arms swinging.

Their training was so secret the enlisted men could not send mail or have outside contact. Max got a bottom bunk in a barrack and a standup locker slapped together with cheap pinewood. That first night he set his fine clothing in a neat pile in his locker and dropped into his bunk, worried. He was little more than a recruit again, it seemed. Then he lay back, his head snug in his new pillow, and decided worrying was pointless. Almost anything was better than where he came from.

The lone juggler got the bunk above him, and Max suspected the SS lieutenant put them together so he could keep an eye on them. The juggler’s name was Menning, Felix Menning. As they stowed their gear, Max tried to chat him up, get his mind off that asshole lieutenant, but Felix Menning gave him little. He too had

been in America, he said—for over two years, and he'd been in the circus to boot. Then he clammed up and climbed into his bunk.

Soon after lights out, Max heard what first sounded like sniffles. It was sobbing, but muffled as if into a pillow. It was Felix Menning up above him. Max nudged the upper bunk with a knee. "Buck up, *Kamerad*," he whispered. "Change is good, don't you see? Even in war. One door closes, another opens."

"Amen," someone said a couple bunks down. "He's right, circus boy," said another.

Felix Menning said nothing. Soon he was snoring.

Next morning at reveille, Max and Felix were the last two out the barrack door. Max was groggy and slow getting his uniform on, while Felix took his time. At the doorway, Felix waited for him.

Felix put a flat hand to Max's chest. "Listen, Kaspar, you leave that shithead lieutenant to me. I know how to handle the likes of him." He said this with emphasis, but not anger, as if he were counting out change.

"You can have him." Max fought a smile. "Such the blackguard, aren't you? I forget, you were in the circus —"

"And Berlin. Parts you don't even want to know about. So I know my way around a lug like him." Menning's stare had become a smile. He patted Max's chest. "We'll get on better that way. Trust me."

Max never got to the quartermaster first thing. That morning the interviews began, and Max was one of the first to be called in. Two of the strangely mute guards escorted him to a wooden bungalow that looked like a larger version of the standard German garden hut. They left Max inside, alone. A chair stood in the middle of the room before a desk. Max sat in it. The interior was little more refined than the exterior. As in the barracks,

everything here was unpainted wood—floor, walls, ceiling, desk—all made of pinewood planks and so raw it was furry in the light. One could catch a sliver on any of it, he thought. Frightful. Four metal chairs and two file cabinets completed the dreadful decor. Only the iron wood stove in the corner helped warm this up.

The door swung open. Four officers entered—two horse-faced SS lieutenants who looked like young doctors, the shithead SS lieutenant who Felix Menning said he could handle, and to Max's great delight, Captain Adalbert von Pielau.

Max wanted to shout out the good man's name. He stood and gave his best salute.

Pielau did the Hitler salute, as did the others, and they sat, Pielau at the desk facing Max's chair and the other three behind Max. Pielau introduced the horse-faced lieutenants. Shithead introduced himself. His name was Rattner.

Pielau tried a curt smile. "So, we meet again, Corporal Kaspar—or is it von Kaspar?"

Max got the picture. This Pielau had to play it straight. "My army paybook says Kaspar, sir," Max said.

"So it does, yes." Pielau pulled folders from his map case and slapped them on the desktop. He stared at some papers as if reading, but his eyeballs weren't moving. Behind Max, one of the officers was trying to clear his throat, and the phlegmy screech combined with the greasy smell of the wood stove fire made Max's stomach clench up and his throat constrict.

"You lived in America," Pielau said. "Eight years. Your family had emigrated there and got themselves to New Hampshire. You end up in New York City. Why?"

"I'm an actor," Max said. "We like a new challenge." Pielau stared, expecting more. "And a shot at success, of course," Max added.

Pielau pursed his lips and moved them around, as if he had meat stuck between teeth. "Other Germans went too. They made films. Hollywood embraced them. That traitor bitch Marlene Dietrich. That little rat Lorre."

"Hollywood still embraces them."

"Lucky for them. You dabbled in American forms."

"Forms, sir?"

One of the officers behind Max said, "Musicals—with the Negro's jazz." It was Lieutenant Rattner. "And all the while you work with Jews," he added.

"I'm not Jewish," Max said. "My race certificate is in order and on file."

Pielau was glaring at Rattner. "No one's doubting your racial purity, Corporal. So, why return to Germany? Why return in '39?"

"I'm a German. By '39 I knew my place was here." Max too could play it straight. He wasn't lying so much as interpreting. He'd really believed something like this back then.

"You never joined the party," one of them said.

"You never joined the SS," another said.

"You were lucky not to land in prison, the schemes you've been up to," Rattner said. "Refusing good German roles. Exploiting the black market. We should have thrown your type back to America."

If they insisted on pecking, why sit behind him? Max turned and glared at the three lieutenants. He wanted to say what was really on his mind, but a modern German had to pick his battles. His refusals had been about art, at first. The roles he declined were melodramatic junk that not even Hollywood was doing. As far as the black market went, Max was only one of many. These sheltered SS clowns had no idea. Max simply had the poor fortune to be one of many minor scapegoats. The three met Max's glare with dead stares, their eyes dark.

Max said, "No, instead you put me in an army uniform. Let me fight. And for that I am grateful. Sirs."

Rattner spat.

"Corporal, please, turn back around," Pielau said. "Thank you. Back in Germany, there was also a woman."

"Liselotte. Yes."

"Not just any woman, I should add. Frau Auermann was an inspiration to us all."

They had no idea of inspiration, Max thought, simmering. Inspiration took imagination.

"She died, in an air raid," Pielau said.

"In Hamburg. It was an American air raid, to be exact."

Silence behind him. They'd all lost someone close. Max turned to them and could tell from Rattner's looser stare that Rattner had lost more than one. He faced Pielau again, and they shared a knowing glance.

"Perhaps we leave loved ones out of it," Pielau said.

"In New York you changed your name, called yourself a noble," Rattner said to Max.

"My agent's idea," Max said. The name change was Max's doing. His agent thought it too corny yet hokum only seemed to help in America, Max had argued.

"And you let him," Rattner said. "*Amis* say jump you say how high, is that it?"

Max shrugged. In German, the word "*Ami*" was slang for an American. He thought it boorish and never used it. Now he'd use whatever it took. "Not exactly," he said. "The *Amis* are persistent, to be sure, but not in that way. Especially in New York. They won't listen to reason. They follow their own paths, I suppose. But the longer you're there, the less you know . . ."

A moment of silence crept in. They all knew less these days.

"You mentioned success," Pielau said. "Did you find it?"

"Let's just say I'm still looking," Max said. Stalling. Thinking. They were offering him some kind of opening, and he sure as hell would take it. Yet to come up with a plan, he would have to survive first. He knew what he had to do, for now. He'd pull out all the stops. The Nazis liked a show. Bombast was their milieu.

"Gentlemen, if I may say something?" Max said.

"Go on."

Max stood and met the eyes of all, fists at his sides. He let one knee wobble, in anger. "I hate America," he said. "I despise her. It. It knows no culture. It breeds contempt for others. It's a bourgeois wasteland of fat cats and unruly sheep. This all threatens the National Socialist ideal. The only threat worse is Communism. May the two rot in hell. So if I can help make that happen faster, I stand ready." The lieutenants nodded. Max turned to Pielau, clicked his heels, gave the Hitler salute and practically threw his arm out doing so.

Pielau gave a half-salute. "Fine, admirable. I'm sure you'll have your chance. Our intrepid commander—code name, Doktor Solar—will need such enthusiasm from all of us on this mission. We're all a part of this now."

So Pielau was jumping on the bandwagon. Smart man, the captain. Anka should have been this smart. "So, you speak English too," Max added in English.

Pielau stared. He nodded, and then began to shake his head—

"*Ach*, but of course, you do," Max blurted in German, helping the poor soul out. He turned to Rattner. "And you too, I suppose," he continued in English—

Rattner snorted a laugh. "Speaking of tongues, I bet you'd like to know about the guards here?" he said in German, changing the subject with as much skill as a

rhino diving into a creek. "They're Ukrainian SS. Don't speak German well enough to know what's what. You see? We don't want our guards knowing a thing, going into town, getting too full of beers or brandy and spilling the beans. Now do we?"

"You don't trust your own men, sir?" Max said.

"That we will soon find out." As Lieutenant Rattner spoke, Max glanced at Pielau. The way Pielau's flabby jowl had tightened up, it was clear whom the lieutenant was addressing.

That evening, Captain Pielau sent for Max. Pielau met him outside on the parade ground alone. Max saluted and the captain clicked his heels. Pielau was smiling, his teeth glowing in the moonlight. He lit cigarettes for them. He handed one to Max.

"Let me tell you the greatest secret. Doktor Solar? Our commander? He is none other than SS Lieutenant Colonel Otto Skorzeny. You have heard of him, yes?"

"Of course. The man is a legend." Max didn't want to know. Surely, this was top secret.

"So I must warn you. What you said to me about fleeing to the Western Front? You must never say it to anyone again. Especially not here."

What about divulging top secrets to enlisted men? How did that fit in? Max shuddered, but it wasn't from the cold. He grimaced and hoped it was a smile.

"I mean it, Kaspar. Less astute SS officers would have had you shot for less."

"Rattner, for example. So I should thank you." Max clicked his heels.

Pielau stomped. "This is no joke. The war can change now. I can see how it can." He grasped at Max's wrist, his voice rising. "There are new weapons. The grandest

plans. And we, here, are a part of that. We can win this. I tell you we can. When will you understand it?"

Max pried Pielau's hand from his wrist and stood back, locking eyes with the captain. "Oh, I understand, dear Pielau. I understand all too well." His cigarette hung from his lips, a cold dead stem. It had already gone out.

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