

## **Cold Cunning**

by

**K.A. Bachus**

2,423 words

“Misha, we are surrounded.”

Vasily’s low voice held no hint of panic or any other emotion. It was a bald statement of fact meant solely to inform. He was watching one of three sides of the perch where they had taken refuge. The roof and parapet of a square keep in a ruined castle had miraculously survived time, war, and weather. The cliff face forming its fourth side periodically dropped clouds of snow onto their heads.

Louis appeared more agitated as he trod through fifteen centimeters of snow, tamping down new pathways from aperture to aperture in the crenelation. He did not move with nervous short steps, but rather in long strides, anticipating the violence to come. Besides sex, he could find no better way to feel alive than to risk death.

Misha’s cold, still countenance did not change. He stood like a snowman, his hatless blond head well on its way to matching the landscape. One of the drawbacks to his habit of stillness, thought Louis. You risk turning into an ice sculpture. He smiled at the idea. The snow made it harder to see Misha against the white sky, like an effective camouflage. Louis shivered at the cold and became more careful about showing his dark head between the apertures.

He marveled as Misha displayed an even more deliberate economy of movement than usual as he watched the scene below through binoculars. The AK-47 Louis carried would easily reach the men on his side. Louis peered carefully through an aperture on Misha’s side in an effort to see what could be so fascinating. The man below them, just inside a curtain of trees, seemed to be in silent communication with someone to his left, judging by the hand signals he was giving. Misha shifted the binoculars to his right and Louis’s eyes followed the movement, finding the other half of that conversation, also within range of their AKs, which meant they themselves were in range of their enemies’ weapons.

It seemed Charlemagne was trapped. This was the name Misha, Louis, and Vasily had given themselves when it became clear they needed the cooperation of friendly governments to defeat their enemies. The name gave those governments a team they could hire without attribution. It gave the team a name they could use to avoid disclosing their personal names. Governments hired them for their skills with guns, knives, and explosives, and in Vasily's case, also with fists. Charlemagne accepted these government commissions for increasingly large sums and for access to the information they needed to stay ahead of their enemies. They had many enemies, though they were yet only in their twenties.

"How many?" Misha asked, not taking his eyes off the man he seemed to suspect might be in charge. The man in his binoculars signaled to either side, often emphatically.

Louis moved to a different aperture. "I have two in this view and one more in the next aperture to the west."

"I have three," said Vasily. "The entrance is below me."

Eight. A bit excessive for the elimination of three young men on a hiking holiday in the mountains. They had been careful to hide their weapons, and Misha had even forbidden Louis from enjoying the obviously willing young woman at the hostelry they stayed in last night.

"You will not be able to hide your gun from her," he had said.

"It has never been a problem before."

"It will be a problem here. These are small, poor villages and it is winter. They have nothing else to do but talk."

And make love, thought Louis. Perhaps my refusal caused more comment than my gun would have. She was both delectable and willing. But he had kept his mouth shut and obeyed without an audible grumble. He and Vasily had come to realize their survival depended on Misha's judgment. It was superior to their own. But as in this instance, it could be hard to be so constrained.

Misha wore a snow blanket at least a centimeter thick by now. Louis noted that it did not melt. So his body temperature is as cold as his manner, he surmised. He moved back to the aperture on Misha's side of the keep to discover what could be so enthralling.

The man below signaled frantically, emphatically, in fact arguing with his hands. He was easy to see even without Misha's binoculars. His black jacket and waving arms stood out against the pristine white of the snow around his position both on the ground and in the trees, weighing down the branches of the pine he stood next to.

"There is some disagreement among them, Misha," Louis murmured.

Misha also kept his voice low. "It appears a few loyalties have become more fluid. We must find how best to exploit it."

"They all are in range," said Louis, "and not well covered. I can take at least one, probably more, before they scramble to conceal themselves."

"It is the same on this side," said Vasily.

Misha dropped his binoculars and picked up his AK. "We will each take only one. Mine is the commander. One on each side, then silence. If they attack, we will respond, but I do not think they will." He paused briefly. "On my word..."

"Now."

Misha's modulated voice never changed.

The commander had drawn his arm back but died before he could sweep it forward to order the attack. Two other men, one on either flank, died in the same moment. Three more ran. The two who remained were in Vasily's view at the front of the keep. They stepped into full view holding their weapons by the straps out to their sides at arm's length. Then, dropping the guns to the ground, they stepped away, arms raised, and waited.

Both Vasily and Louis reported no other movement. With a gesture Misha sent them below while he covered the approaches to the door.

Vasily covered him as Louis checked their prisoners for more weapons and gathered in the two AK47s on the ground. Once upstairs, they tied their hands behind them, made them kneel, and began the interrogation.

"He is a brute," said the taller man, Milos. He shook his blond curls in contempt for the target. "He beats his wife. He beats the servants. Ask Blago here. He will tell you."

The smaller, dark-haired man with a pinched face nodded. "He hit me repeatedly for a minor mistake. A very small mistake."

Misha regarded him silently. "Tell me about this small mistake."

Blago paled, perhaps at the memory of the beating. More likely, at the quiet purr in Misha's voice. He swallowed and said, "I spilled some wine."

"What kind of wine?" said Misha, still quiet, still purring.

Another swallow. "Lafitte."

Blago could not tell if his interrogator knew the wine. The man betrayed nothing. His stillness made Blago shiver involuntarily.

"How much did you spill?"

Somehow, Blago understood it would be unwise to lie. "I dropped the bottle."

"A full bottle?"

Misha did not need a verbal answer; the man was trembling. He reflected that he would have hit him also. His father would have disapproved of such an act when dismissal might be more appropriate, but he was not his father. He would have hit him. Perhaps not repeatedly.

"How many times did he hit you?"

Again he saw the answer before the man spoke. "Only once."

So far, the target was behaving as he would, including the attempt at ambush. His attempt at that would have succeeded, however.

The shadow of the wall behind Misha had begun to creep over the other man. It would be dusk soon, a good time for another ambush. They had to move. He knew Louis would prefer to execute these two before moving on, but he was sure there was more information here.

He remembered a shallow cave they had passed on their way down to this valley. The narrow entrance to the cave would be easy to defend against anything other than overwhelming force, though the climb would be arduous in the snow. He led the way, with Vasily and Louis prodding their charges, none too gently, to move quickly.

Misha gave each man a sip from his canteen before separating them to opposite sides of the cavern and setting a guard schedule. He considered continuing the interrogation but decided he would rather have enough light to see their faces as they spoke. It is easy to be deceived by the mere voice of a man who believes his own lie.

Vasily bound their ankles and gagged them. The team took turns on watch while the other two slept stretched across the cave entrance. Dawn streaked in through that

entrance, leaving a bright narrow strip to the back wall of the cave and plenty of light outside to continue their questions.

Vasily could smell it and so knew to look and find it in the wet trousers of the servant. He himself had been in this position and knew that pity would be neither useful nor appreciated by the recipient. Instead, he helped Misha continue the interrogation, each taking one of the men outside to relieve himself while Louis enjoyed another hour of sleep. They stood knee deep in snow on a wide rock ledge overlooking the white sagging treetops of the forest.

"How do you know he beats his wife?" Misha asked as he retied the fair-haired man's hands behind him. He saw the stiffening in the man's shoulders during an almost imperceptible pause. "Do you know her?" he prompted. Again, a stiffness and a pause.

"I have spoken with her on occasion," came the careful reply.

"If he is so reprehensible, why did you join the ambush party?"

The man's mouth opened and closed twice, before managing to produce sound on the third try. "I hoped to sabotage it."

"Did you succeed?"

"No. the commander was about to order the attack when you shot him."

"But there was dissension. Did you lead the dissent?"

The man looked at his shoes and shook his head. "Blago did."

"Do you mean the servant?"

He nodded, head low.

"Tell me how it is you are able to speak to the wife."

After much rambling, pinning, clarifying, evading, admitting, Vasily and Misha understood the target's wife was from the same village as this man, that she was very beautiful, and they had grown up together.

"Does she have a child?"

The man looked up with the suggestion of a smile. "Yes."

"A boy? A son?"

"Yes. A son," he answered with a pathetically easy to read expression.

"Your son," said Misha.

The man's eyes opened wide. "You are a devil!"

Blago blinked in the sunlight. Vasily had made sure the sunlight fell on the man's pants to dry them.

"Tell me about the disagreement you engineered," said Vasily, prepared to persuade the man's tongue, but hoping he would not have to. Funny how the simple human disaster of peeing one's pants could call up his sympathy. Perhaps it was because he had been there, not very long ago, until Misha and Louis pulled him out of that hellhole.

Blago shrugged. "Somebody suggested the commander wanted many dead so he can take over the province."

"Who suggested it?"

There was no answer.

"To whom did you suggest it?"

Another wide eyed stare, but this man did not call Vasily a devil.

"I told a tree. I pretended there was someone behind it."

"Why?"

Another silence. Vasily moved in close, using proximity to make the man feel his menace like a creeping cold.

Blago shivered in the sun. "She paid me."

"Why would she do that?"

"To protect him."

"Him? The other man with you?"

"Yes, Milos. When you began shooting, I tackled him and made him stay down. Then I made him surrender with me."

"Why not let him run away with the others?"

"Because..." Blago looked at his boots. "Because he is sure to say the wrong thing to the wrong person. He always does."

"You judged it safer to be with us?" Vasily wondered about these people. "Why?"

"Because we hired you."

"A man calling himself Alfrid hired us."

Blago nodded. "He is the intermediary. We sent someone to the city to find a person. They found Alfrid. My brother-in-law raised the fee. He is head of the next village over, across the river. Everyone contributed. Stefan (the target) took almost all the harvest this autumn and sold it. We are hungry. We had to do something."

Vasily wondered what additional tactics helped create such universal generosity in commissioning a murder, though he knew hunger could be a powerful motivator.

“And the wife?” he asked.

“She will marry Milos and he will take charge.”

“You suggested he is stupid.”

“Yes. If he were any smarter, it would not work, you see. He would know that she is actually in charge. This way, he will be happy, she will make him think he is the boss, and we will eat.”

“And you? What position will you hold?”

The servant looked away before answering. “I will be her advisor.”

“And lover,” Misha murmured when Vasily relayed the conversation to Louis.

Blago’s intelligence was key to the success of their task. They killed seven of the body guard before reaching the target, The guards died without much pain, having consumed the better part of a bottle of very fine whiskey, probably provided by the servant out of the target’s own cellar. Misha and Vasily each took out a sentry silently. With surgical precision, Louis dropped the first two men who turned towards the door as Charlemagne entered. An unlucky three more fell to a single automatic burst before the rest either fled or surrendered.

The woman appeared finally as they prepared to leave after selecting several files from her late husband’s office as part of their payment. She wore an embroidered sash and her blonde hair curled like a crown around her head in a tight braid. Her young dark-haired son held tightly to her hand.

“Do you not think, Misha, she would be better off marrying the servant?” asked Louis as they left. “He is more intelligent.” He stuffed their fee, paid in gold, into his rucksack and hefted it onto his back.

Misha considered for a moment before answering. “But she and her village will be safer this way. She has the gift of cunning.”