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Terespol
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TERESPOL

With the train from Moscow comes a wrong aura. And from where he stands, buttoned in wool, sipping coffee beneath the eaves of the station at Terespol, he notes it. An off-kilter intimation. The way the smoke trundles down and away, bullied. That detached quality to the clouds—their gray remove. How blasts of air and steam and screeching metal compel his men to wince, to lean away like the high grass growing between ties on the far set of tracks. When they board, the passengers—all looking vaguely familiar—pay either too much or too little attention.

Then there's the memory that has cropped up for no apparent reason. (Earlier, while the train is still arcing through the pastures of Belarus.) A face from his first year at the academy: Witold Something. Several times this morning he's recalled the moment when Witold announced that he couldn't take it anymore. Plum color rising to mottle his neck and cheeks, hands shaking. Gap-toothed Witold, drummed out. Because someone has to be the goat.

Suited up in lead and waving the wands of Geiger counters, his men head aft. Within minutes he hears the anticipated shout several cars down. When he reaches her, a middle-aged woman stammering in Polish, he sees she has no idea she's carrying uranium. He cuffs her anyway. In the back of the van he dumps the contents of her handbag. There, wrapped in cloth, he finds a crucifix hot enough to burn a hole in the firmament.