

Milieustudie

a *Babylon Berlin* fanfic

by **Rodo**

for **Aquatics**

CHARLOTTE RITTER LEANED against the structural support pillar in the middle of the main office of the Castle's *Inspektion A*. Her eyes kept darting to the door, even though she knew she should pay attention to the inspectors seated around the table. Böhm kept tapping his notebook with his pen. Some of the others fidgeted in their seats. Only the Buddha was still standing. As always, he was calm itself. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Henning glance at the clock and on instinct she did the same. It was almost five past.

Finally, the door opened and the entire room seemed to sigh in relief. Gereon Rath entered the office and hurried to his seat. He went by so fast, Charlotte barely had time to notice the bags under his eyes that were even more pronounced than normal. He looked like he hadn't slept a wink in the last couple of days.

"You're late," Gennat reprimanded him. And it was a reprimand, even if it didn't quite sound like one.

"The U-Bahn," Gereon replied. "Some technical difficulty."

Gennat nodded. Böhm sneered.

"Leave earlier next time," Gennat told him, before he started with the briefing. Böhm took the lead, explaining the progress he'd made on the night club stabbing he was working on, then the others followed. Charlotte had to admit she didn't pay the attention she was supposed to. She was too intrigued by the enigma that was Gereon. He was even more tired than usual these days, and a little more unkempt as well. Normally, she'd worry if his shaking had gotten worse, but she hadn't seen him shake in weeks now, nor had he excused himself discreetly to avoid the others noticing. She could tell something was gnawing on

him, but what it was, was a mystery. One that she would love to solve.

When the briefing was over, Gennat finally turned to Gereon, who had solved his last case three days ago, leaving him to go through the files that piled up in the bowels of the Castle.

“A new one for you, came in fresh this morning,” Gennat told him, then dropped a file in front of Gereon. It was thin, containing maybe one page. From her post at the pillar, Charlotte saw him opening the file and take a quick glance, then he nodded at the Buddha.

“Take Miss Ritter with you,” Gennat told Gereon when he stood up to leave. “She hasn’t seen a crime scene this fresh yet and needs the experience.”

Gereon glanced at her and a small smile flitted over his face, only to be replaced by a frown as he turned to Gennat and nodded. Charlotte nodded at Gennat as well and tried her best not to let it show just how excited she was to finally get to work on a new case again. She grabbed her coat and notebook as fast as she could and followed Gereon as he read the file more closely on the way to the paternoster.



They arrived in Wedding in no time, thanks to the car borrowed from the Castle. On the way, Charlotte had time to read the file in its entirety. She’d been right; it was just a page, containing the initial report from the local constables. Unidentified male, estimated around forty, found dead in a backyard of some tenements. Time of death uncertain, but likely sometime during the night. Cause of death, also uncertain. They left the car in front of the address they were given. It was as run-down as all the others in this area, grey and lifeless. Laundry was drying over their heads as they walked through the narrow alley leading to the scene of the crime. Everything smelled of wet concrete and piss.

At the entry of the yard, a constable in uniform stood guard. He let Gereon pass without comment when he flashed his badge, but eyed Charlotte curiously when she did the same. The yard was small and dark, fenced in as it was by several storeys of housing and covered in criss-crossing lines of laundry. Charlotte marvelled at how silent it was. She’d spent her life in buildings like these and they were rarely silent. But there were faces peering out the windows curiously, watching their every step.

The only sound to be heard was the click of the camera. Charlotte smiled when she saw the small man crouched over the body.

“Good morning, Mister Gräf,” she greeted him, and earned herself a smile. “Have you been here long?”

Gräf shrugged and tilted his head at the body before taking another picture. “Half an hour, maybe.”

“Do you know if the local constables have started canvassing the buildings?” Gereon asked. He knelt down opposite Gräf, on the other side of the body. Carefully, Charlotte moved closer, resisting the urge to hold her nose. The dead man was slumped against the building’s trash. Old sacks and bins that reeked of sour mould. His head was tilted forward, the legs were slightly bent, one hand rested in his lap, the other beside the body. In the dim light, you could just about make out the dark stain discolouring the dark brown suit on his right side. If she didn’t know better, she’d think the man was dead drunk, not dead.

“Looks like he was painted by Zille, doesn’t he?” Gräf asked.

Charlotte nodded, and leaned in closer, kneeling on the floor to get a proper look at his face. Large nose, red cheeks. He’d already started to smell. And he smelled of something else.

“Alcohol,” she told Gereon.

He nodded. “Could be he got something spilled on him with all this mess,” he said, gesturing at the trash.

“In this neighbourhood?” Charlotte had to laugh. “Trust me, they don’t waste a drop. No, he got that on him on his own.”

Gereon frowned at the body as if it could tell him all its secrets if only he stared hard enough.

“Miss Ritter,” he said, using the formal tone of voice he liked to put on whenever he told her something official, “if you would be so kind to talk to the constable while we wait for the coroner’s people to take the body away. Find out what they’ve done so far.”

Charlotte sighed in disappointment but obeyed. The constable still eyed her curiously when she walked over to him. He was about her age, but his uniform looked well-worn already. To look more approachable, she took her cigarettes out of her pocket and lit one, offering him another. The constable took it, and Charlotte leaned against the wall opposite her.

“Detective Ritter,” she introduced herself.

“They hire women in Homicide now?”

Charlotte shrugged. “Sure thing. The Inspector wants to know what you’ve done so far.”

The constable shrugged and took a drag of his cigarette. “Nothing much to do. Schmidtke went through the building after we notified you guys. Nothing. Nobody missing. Woman who found the body when she took out the trash didn’t recognise him either. Must have wandered back here while he was hurt or something.”

“And when was he found?”

“Around eight. Might have been here a while, though. Most people don’t bother you if you’re passed out drunk around here. Unless you look like you might have something on you.”

That, Charlotte knew well enough. She’d filched from enough pockets when she’d been a child, and the idiots who were stupid enough to get drunk enough to fall over were always the easiest targets. Couldn’t even describe you to the police if they’d looked right into your face for a straight minute.

“He could have visited someone,” she pointed out.

“Not according to Schmidtke. Man’s a real gossip. A pain to work with, but the best we have at the station when it comes to getting information out of people. You lot were in luck he was on the early shift today.”

“I’ll make sure to thank him personally,” she joked. The constable looked slightly confused and disappointed at that, but before he could make a comment he’d regret, Gräf shoved past them with his camera back in its bag.

“You get a good picture of his face?” Charlotte asked him.

Gräf half-turned and nodded. “Why?”

“Can you develop it as soon as you’re back in the Castle? We’re going to need it.”



The rest of the morning, Charlotte had the unenviable task of collating the information collected by Constable Schmidtke, a genial man with greying blond hair, ruddy cheeks and a beer belly. His colleague had been right; he was the worst gossip imaginable, but he had a mind like a steel trap. He had asked every single one of the neighbours whether they had noticed anything out of the ordinary, including hearing an argument or late visitors, and he insisted on

relaying every morsel of information to Charlotte, including titbits on who was suspected of having an affair with whom, and who had recently gone to the pub more often than usual. If only his notes weren't such a mess, she had no doubt Gennat would find him useful. As it was, Charlotte was glad she would likely never see him again while her mind drifted to Gereon, who had the very much enviable task of wrapping up the crime scene.

They met again for a brief early lunch before heading to the morgue at the Institute for Forensic Medicine. Doctor Schwarz already awaited them in all his disagreeable glory. He barely deemed Gereon worthy of a nod and treated Charlotte as if she were invisible.

The victim was waiting for them on the back table, bathed in light and naked like the day he was born. And cleaned, so Charlotte finally got a thorough look at him. His hair was brown, with a little grey beginning to show at the temples. He had a face that might once have been attractive before a hard life and drink took its toll – he was missing the lobe of his right ear, there was stubble on his face, and his hands were calloused.

“What can you tell me about the victim?” Gereon asked the coroner, who grabbed his clipboard.

“Male, around forty, manual labourer,” Schwarz answered curtly.

“And the cause of death?”

“Three stab wounds to the torso,” he answered with a wave to the man's right side. The wounds looked harmless, cleaned of blood as they were. “The upper one hit the liver, the one in the middle nicked the renal vein. Cause of death was shock due to blood loss.”

Charlotte craned her neck to get a good look at the wounds and tried to imagine how he got them. She imagined someone stabbing the man once, twice, thrice in close succession, before he could do as much as raise his arms in defence.

“And the weapon?”

“A long thin knife, single-edged, fifteen to twenty centimetres in length.”

“A trench knife,” Gereon said, and Charlotte could see the memories dance behind his eyes for a moment.

“Most likely,” Schwarz confirmed. “Although there are other possibilities.”

“Our killer was left-handed, then,” Gereon observed.

“Couldn't he have stood behind him?” Charlotte asked, earning herself an angry glare from Schwarz.

Gereon, on the other hand, smiled. “Probably not. It’s possible, but not likely. When you’ve got a knife and stand behind someone, you’re more likely to put it in his back than try to reach around. You only do that when you hold the person in place against your chest.”

“And there is no *perimortem* bruising that might indicate such a thing,” Schwarz added.

For a moment, silence descended on the three of them as they stared at the unknown man in front of them. Outside, some angry car driver blew his horn.

“Time of death?” Gereon finally asked.

“Late last evening, early this morning, going by the temperature and state of decomposition. Hard to say precisely with the weather we had. He didn’t die immediately, by the way.”

That aroused their interest and both Charlotte and Gereon lifted their heads.

“So the constable at the scene might be right,” she said. “It wasn’t the scene of the crime, he could have got hurt somewhere else and then fled to where he was found.”

Gereon nodded. “It would account for the lack of blood and other evidence.”

“That, I leave to you gentlemen,” Schwarz said, then his eyes flickered over to Charlotte, obviously having noticed his mistake but being too proud to admit it. “This is all I can tell you. Now go, I have a lecture in half an hour.”



The afternoon was even worse than the morning, if anything. Gräb had handed them a couple of copies of the best portrait shot he’d got of their dead man and Gereon had handed her, Henning and Czerwinski one each and off they went in the four cardinal directions. Charlotte had knocked onto more doors than she could count, and not a single one had yielded anything useful. The only thing of note was that a couple had had an argument in Number 32, but even that appeared to be business as usual. She’d been to two pubs, three grocers, one barber and an assortment of other businesses, but the story had always been the same: never seen the guy, didn’t hear anything unusual, wasn’t here anyway.

It was almost five when she was just about ready to give up. Charlotte didn’t want to speak to another person, didn’t want to ask the same questions, didn’t want to get the same curious stares when she flashed her badge. Her feet hurt

even though she wore flats. Nobody would notice if she just took a break to think and smoke for a bit, and so that was what she did. She wasn't the only woman doing so, she noticed, although the two women on the other side of the street were probably at the start of their workday, not at the end. They eyed her curiously. They'd probably seen her while she went in and out of buildings. Oh well, Charlotte thought, she might as well try.

Once she'd crossed the street, she smiled at the women and nodded in greeting. They were still wary, though. Maybe they thought she was the competition. The older one was thin, and maybe forty-five; the younger one was probably in her twenties and in possession of a bosom that she'd curse in a decade or so.

"Afternoon," Charlotte said. "Would you mind if I asked you a couple of questions?"

"Depends," the older one said, taking a drag of her cigarette.

"On what?"

"On whether you work for the coppers or not," the other answered.

"Well," Charlotte said, "if I worked for the police, hypothetically speaking, I would have no interest whatsoever in your activities. As far as I can tell, you're just a couple of upstanding ladies having a nice afternoon chat before you go home to your husbands to make a nice roast for dinner."

The older one snorted, very unladylike, while the young one tried unsuccessfully to bite down a smile. They both kept smoking, but hadn't said no yet, and so Charlotte kept smoking her own cigarette, shifting from one foot to the other to alleviate the pain.

"Let's hear it then. What do you want?" the older one finally said. She was clearly the one in charge.

With a practised motion, Charlotte fished the photo out of her pocket. The edges were beginning to wear, but you could still recognize the man. She showed it to each of the women and they peered at it with interest.

"Do you know him?"

Both nodded.

"Henry Schomaker. What's he done?" the older one asked.

Charlotte shrugged. "Anything more you can tell me?"

"He was always following Mariechen around. Fancied himself in love," the younger one added. "She works up the street for Kowalski. One of his best girls,

and no trouble, until Schomaker showed up. Came in from Hamburg a year ago. He told her he used to work as a dockhand, but fancied a chance at making it in the big city.”

The other one scoffed. “As if. He was a drunk, and delusional. Kept harassing her, telling her about all those big plans. Poor girl isn’t the brightest. She almost believed him until we talked some sense into her.”

Charlotte nodded along, itching to take out her notebook, but she feared that might scare them off. Instead, she did her best to memorize every bit of importance. “Marie, you said?”

“*Mariechen*, her actual name. But she’s done nothing wrong, I can tell you that. Not the type.” At that, the older one breathed out deeply and blew the smoke just past Charlotte’s face, as if to say that Mariechen might not be the type, but Charlotte was.

“I’d just like to ask her a bit more about Schomaker.”

“Up the street, eleven houses, this side of the road, third floor. But I doubt Kowalski will let you in, unless you’re up for work.”

“Not today,” Charlotte mumbled after a quick glance at her clock. “I’m off.”

“Well, good on you,” the younger woman said.

Charlotte made a point to thank them and to wish them a good day before walking to the nearest phone booth to call the office. Some assistant took down what she had to say, and no doubt a secretary or junior detective would hurry off to the archives to assemble a file that would land on her or Gereon’s desk in the morning. But for now, she was done. If her feet weren’t sore, she’d feel like skipping.



“Lotte, you’re on time today!” Toni cried while Charlotte shrugged off her shoes. “This is the first time in weeks!”

Charlotte had to smile at her sister’s enthusiasm. “I was working out of the office, so it was easier to get away. How is Grandpa?”

“He’s alright,” Toni said, eagerly eyeing the groceries. No, Charlotte hadn’t forgotten again. Four eggs, some flour, cheese, two tins of beans and three apples. Ever since Toni was the one responsible for cooking food for all of them, she treated her sister like a lackey whose only purpose in life it was to run errands.

Charlotte didn't mind, not really. Now that they had their own little flat, Grandpa, Toni and her, everything was so much calmer. No idiotic Erich to steal their money and start an argument at every turn, even if it meant that she was the only one who could earn money. Detectives didn't make that much, but more than they were all used to, and enough to feed the three of them and keep a modest roof over their heads and Toni in school.

"How was school, by the way?" she asked her sister, following her into the kitchen of their small and still barely decorated flat.

"Can you peel the potatoes, please?"

"That's not an answer."

"It was fine," Toni answered with a long suffering sigh. "It was school. I did my homework already. The potatoes."

Charlotte sat down and took the first one while her sister started to chop the onions. From the other room, she could hear Grandpa snore softly. The calm still wasn't something she was completely used to, but it was a nice change of pace. They could eat and take care of Grandpa before settling down to do some homework or listen to the wireless. Or talk about Charlotte's work, as it happened.

"So, what did you work on today?"

"Stabbing victim. We had to identify him first and still don't know what happened."

"But you did identify him, right?" Toni asked, just like she did when Charlotte used to tell her fairy tales when she was younger.

"Of course, you've got a clever older sister, after all."

"If you don't know what happened yet, do you have to leave again tonight?"

With a start, Grandpa woke up in his chair, and noticing them settling into their evening routine, shuffled off to his own room to sleep.

"No," Charlotte said. "Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow. Detectives need to sleep too."

"So you'll be staying in, for once?"

Charlotte thought about it. In the end, she wasn't someone who stayed in. After sitting still for a while, her feet had somewhat recovered, and she felt too giddy to settle down. One day, living like this would catch up with her, but for now, she was determined to enjoy her youth while it lasted. She shook her head.

“Dancing again?”

“No.” Today, she was in the mood for something else.



Charlotte had snooped around and found Gereon’s home address the moment she knew he had one. It irked her, how much of a mystery he was. She didn’t know how he lived and had never seen his flat – a ground floor flat in one of the slightly better parts of town – but she knew he lived with the woman and the boy she’d seen twice. She knew the woman wasn’t his wife – not that she judged – and that he’d told her it was “complicated”, but that just made her want to know the truth even more. For a while there, she thought they had something, when he’d carried her in his arms beneath the moon and the sun. But he had the woman, even though she evidently didn’t make Gereon happy, or he wouldn’t show up to work more tired than the day before each day.

And so Charlotte decided to treat him like a case and figure him out, if only for her own peace of mind. The light was still on when she arrived and decided to wait on the other side of the street. She didn’t know for what, but she’d been on a few stake-outs now, and you generally didn’t know what they might turn up. To pass the time, she lit a cigarette and stared at the white curtains with a faint, flowery pattern. What went on behind them, she wondered. If she strained her ears, she could hear a record playing, but she couldn’t make out the melody.

Charlotte was standing there for half an hour, maybe, when something started to happen. A nice car drew to a halt in front of the building and in the light of the street lamp, she could see the woman get out. She wore a nice dress, one you’d wear if you met a lover at a nice restaurant, or at a party. For a split second, Charlotte felt a burning jealousy that she couldn’t quite understand. She wanted the dress, the man, the flat. But then she thought better of it, since that life wouldn’t suit her in the least. She’d tire of it within a few hours. And maybe it didn’t suit the woman either, since she was alone. No Gereon followed her inside, she just said goodbye to the driver (did they know each other?) and went up the stairs. Once she was inside, Charlotte could see her shadow pass by one of the curtains. Then the argument started.

It wasn’t loud. In fact, she could barely hear it at all. There was still the faint music, muffled by the glass, only now it had gained some atonal undertones.

They didn't want to wake the boy, Charlotte thought as another shadow was cast against the curtain. But she doubted it would work.

Then someone stormed out the room – the living room, she thought – and a few moments later, she managed to duck down the stairs leading to a souterrain just in time to watch Gereon walk out the door. He was angry. It was easy to tell by the way he held his shoulders and turned right with more purpose than usual.

Carefully, Charlotte slipped out of her shoes and followed him. It was easier than it should have been. She didn't even bother to avoid the halos of the street lamps; Gereon didn't look back even once, and the woman didn't follow. A couple of hundred metres up the street, he took a right turn, then he went straight, then left. There were still a few people on the street at this hour, and more than one gave her an odd look when they noticed she went only in stockings (which hopefully would survive this adventure), with her shoes in her hand. But this was Berlin, where the strange was commonplace. None of them tried to stop her as she followed a familiar back, until he stopped next to a car.

The driver was familiar, somehow, but Charlotte couldn't place him. He was leaning against the hood of the car, smoking a cigarette. Gereon exchanged a few words with him before slipping in the back.

"Damn," Charlotte cursed, casting her eyes about and wondering what she was supposed to do. Then she spotted a cab and hailed it. The driver gave her a once-over and stared at her shoes, probably wondering if she could pay.

Charlotte just slipped into the back. "Can you follow that car?" she asked him. "Discreetly?"

For two heartbeats, the man stared at her. "Do you think this is some kind of penny dreadful?"

Through the driver's window, Charlotte could see the car starting to pull away from the curb. "Can you do it or not? I'll pay extra." She waved her purse in emphasis.

The driver breathed out through his nose with so much force he looked like an angry bull, then he turned around and shifted gears. Charlotte inspected her stockings – dirty, but salvageable – and put her shoes back on while the car wove through traffic, past the tram, always on the tail. The driver was competent, or the other one was careless. Whatever it was, they weren't spotted. When the car stopped in front of a large building in Adlershof, Charlotte's driver kept driving past and took the next right while Charlotte laid down on the back seat. Once

they were parked, they haggled over the money. Charlotte ended up paying almost double, then she got out and stood alone on the street. When she peeked around the corner, she saw that the car Gereon had taken was still there, but the driver was gone, as was the passenger. Looking left and right, she walked past slowly, trying to act as if she always went this way. When she walked past the entrance, she spotted a plate.

“Institute for Suggestive Therapy?” she mumbled under her breath, and wondered what the hell Gereon was doing here at this late an hour. Surely he didn’t have an appointment. It was far too late for that. The sun had set an hour ago and it was the still summer. And what was Suggestive Therapy anyway?

Once she was around the next corner, Charlotte leaned against the wall and waited. And waited. One cigarette, two cigarettes, three. Then she was out and cursed herself for not bringing more. This area was so quiet there was little chance she’d find a kiosk, let alone one that was still open. She could either abandon her post or stick it out, and Charlotte was not one to give up once she actually had a promising lead.

All in all, she must have ended up waiting an hour until three men emerged from the bowels of the shadowy institute. The first was the driver. When he turned to walk around the car, the light from the building caught his face just so, and Charlotte’s heart missed a beat. She knew the man. She’d seen him before. He worked for the Armenian. What—

Then Gereon came, accompanied by another man in a white coat. He was older, and his face looked strange in the dim light, but he smiled at Gereon in a slightly crooked way and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I hope you’re feeling better now,” the white coat said. “But you know I can’t do what you ask of me. It’s for the best.”

“Anno...” Gereon began, then shook his head. “I’m not saying it will be easy. I’m not saying it will go well. But it’s the truth. You’re the one who always insists on facing the truth.”

“Only when not facing it negatively impacts our lives,” the white coat argued. “As it did with you, as it does with many of my patients. But not all truths are like that. You know that too.”

Charlotte could see the men stare at each other as if it was a battle, and it was easy to predict who would retreat first. She wasn’t surprised when it was Gereon who shook his head and took a step back. The white coat was eerily determined

and she could tell that he had the kind of charisma that could convince people to follow you into hell.

“Good night,” the man said, and a few seconds later it was echoed by Gereon, who then got into the car with the Armenian’s man again. Charlotte hid in the darkness of the alley when they drove past, wondering what to make of all she had witnessed.

“What are you doing, Gereon?” she asked the moon.



Gereon didn’t look any better when he arrived at the Castle the next morning, Charlotte noted, but at least he was on time. He was early enough to take a look over the files, even. Henry Schomaker was known to the police, even if he’d only arrived in the city a year ago. Two counts of disorderly conduct (intoxicated), and one pub brawl with bodily harm (a mild concussion). There was an address listed, and Gereon made a note to dispatch Czerwinski to do a search. There’d been a file on Kowalski too, Mariechen’s pimp, based on the address the two women had given Charlotte. He was a member of one of the many *Ringvereine* in Berlin, and a known criminal.

“Good work, Miss Ritter,” Gereon told her. “It seems we have a suspect.”

“More than any of you found,” Charlotte agreed cheerily.

“Well, we weren’t entirely useless,” Gereon said. “Schomaker was drinking in the pub *Zur Linde* until about eleven PM the evening before he died. The proprietor didn’t know a name, but he came by every so often. Then he left, rather drunk.”

Gereon spread a map of the quarter on his table. It had a couple of red marks on it already – the place the body was found and the pub. Now Gereon added two others – Schomaker’s address and, in a different colour, Kowalski’s. If you connected all of them in a line, you’d get a crooked line, but a line nevertheless.

“He left home, went drinking, then someone killed him while he was on the way to Kowalski, or on the way back?” Charlotte suggested.

Gereon shrugged. “A definite possibility.”

It was the possibility he brought up to Gennat during the briefing, and the Buddha agreed. A little later that morning they had their search warrant.



Kowalski's brothel looked just like any other brothel Charlotte had been too. Too much colour, and everything looked shabby in the light of day. The décor was chosen with electric light and half-darkness in mind, to better hide the blemishes and imperfections of the workers. There were other establishments as well, of course. Classier ones that didn't suffer from stained wallpapers or peeling paint. But even those looked somehow wrong when you entered them at 11:34, as Charlotte did that morning when she followed Gereon up the stairs. A burly man in his mid-thirties tried to stop them half-heartedly, but it was more for show than anything else. This wasn't Kowalski's first time. He even leered at Charlotte. Very sure he wouldn't be caught, that one.

"May I ask what you gentlemen are doing here this fine morning?" Kowalski asked as the uniforms swarmed the rooms to look for evidence and round up the residents.

Gereon showed him his badge, and the warrant. "We'd like you to come with us to headquarters."

"Am I under arrest?" Kowalski asked, but Charlotte had stopped paying attention to him. In ones and twos, his girls were being led into the foyer of the establishment. Most were yawning and still wearing their nightdresses. A couple did a good job at pretending to be indifferent, but the others – Kowalski had eight girls in total – were visibly tense. One even seemed on the verge of tears. She was pretty, early twenties, long blonde hair and green eyes. Mariechen, Charlotte would bet. Just like she'd bet they were in the right place.

"We found something," one of the uniforms called from the other room. Charlotte and Gereon walked into a small room to the right, evidently Kowalski's office. The constable was standing next to a desk with its drawers open, and he held a knife in one gloved hand. A long, thin knife with a wooden handle.

"And that's going to forensics," Gereon told Kowalski when they were back in the foyer. "As for you ladies, please get dressed, we have some questions for you as well."



They dumped the suspect and potential witnesses in the interrogation rooms at the Castle, and then went to get a quick lunch before planning their approach with Gennat. Henning and Czerwinski, it was decided, would take on four girls each, while Gereon would take a crack at Kowalski, with Charlotte there to observe. Sometimes, she hated being the new one, and more than anything being the new *girl*, because she knew for a fact she'd be of more use than Henning or Czerwinski. Charlotte was born for this, and she was sure she could do it. But Gennat insisted she still had to learn, and what better way to do that than to watch a professional? And while she did like watching Gereon work, she would have liked working herself even more.

Together they went into the interrogation room where Kowalski was already waiting. He wasn't impressed by their attempt at letting him stew a little, and neither was he impressed by Gereon carrying a cup of coffee along with his files. Still, Charlotte observed when she took her post with her back to the wall in the corner by the door, Gereon didn't let that break his calm confidence. He sat down, opened the file and took a sip of his coffee.

"You've quite the rap sheet, Mister Kowalski," he remarked casually, "going back all the way to 1920. Two stints in prison, but you're still at it."

Gereon looked up to gauge his reaction, but Kowalski just smiled. "Was there a question in there, Inspector?"

"No. You were in Flanders, though, weren't you?"

Kowalski nodded with false boredom.

"Is that where you got the knife?"

"That isn't mine. Belongs to one of the girls. Took it off her when I saw it yesterday and put it in my desk for safe-keeping."

"Your concern for your ... employees is touching, Mister Kowalski. You won't mind telling me the girl's name either, I bet."

Now, Kowalski started grinning and leaned forward. "Mariechen Weber. Nice girl, good worker, but not the smartest. I was worried she might cut herself with it."

Gereon sighed, leaned back and flipped through his file, casually sipping on his coffee. Kowalski eyed him with interest. He was a professional too, Charlotte noted. He knew exactly what he was doing when he blamed Mariechen. He'd probably wiped the knife, or got her to touch it somehow so the prints were inconclusive. Did he think she'd pledge self-defence and get off easy?

"Have you ever seen this man?" Gereon asked, changing his approach and

sliding one of the photos of Schomaker over to Kowalski.

Kowalski took the photo with a complete lack of surprise, eyed it for a few seconds and then gave it back. "Henry Schomaker. A regular. He likes Mariechen. Anything happen to him? I hate losing a customer."

"A knife happened to him. When was the last time you saw him?"

Kowalski tilted his head as if to think. "Day before yesterday. He was pretty drunk. Had spent too much money at the pub, so I had to ask him to leave. Which he did."

"Do you happen to remember when?"

"Of course. Must have been half past eleven at night."

"And do you know what happened to him after?"

Kowalski shrugged. "He walked down the stairs. I stayed in my flat."

For a long moment, Gereon said nothing, just stared at the man opposite. Finally, he emptied his cup and closed the folder in front of him. "Do you have anything more to add?" he asked with a hint of curiosity.

"Mariechen left for a bit shortly after. Said she wanted to apologize. Always such a nice girl, Mariechen."

"Well, thank you for now," Gereon said, nodding at Charlotte. "If you'd wait for a bit while we clear this up."

Kowalski snorted in annoyance when they both left the interrogation room to regroup. Charlotte and Gereon smoked a cigarette while they waited for Henning and Czerwinski to join them. There was no use in calling forensics about the knife yet.

"He's lying," Charlotte said, just to get it off her chest. Kowalski was a piece of shit, and now he wanted to blame his crime on somebody else. He wasn't even shy about letting them know it.

"Of course," Gereon said. "The problem will be proving it. In the end, our best chance is going to be the evidence. And the statements from the girls."

But none of them said a word, revealed Henning and Czerwinski, once they had finished trying to pry out anything more than their own names. They saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing. The case had come to a dead end, it seemed, but Gereon still wasn't ready to give up, and neither was Charlotte.

"Let me talk to the girls. Maybe they'll be more willing to talk to a sympathetic face."

Gereon thought it over for a second. "It can't hurt. And take a glass of water

with you. For our other suspect.”

“Why?”

Gereon smiled. “Because I’m going to do the same with Kowalski. If we’re lucky, only one of them is going to be left-handed.”



Mariechen Weber was a nervous wreck when Charlotte entered the room. Charlotte felt sympathy well up in her chest on instinct and put on her best reassuring smile. Like Gereon, she had brought a folder with her, and a glass of water. She put the water in front of the poor girl they’d dragged out of bed in the morning, after what must have been a trying few days. The girl hesitated to take it, though, and made herself small behind the table. Mariechen might have the beauty of a swan, long-limbed, graceful and fair, but at heart she was a mouse. How had she ended up with someone like Kowalski? Charlotte would bet ten marks it was a story of a sad childhood followed by an even sadder adulthood.

“Please, have some water,” she told her. “We’ve kept you here for so long, we shouldn’t let you die of thirst now, should we?”

Mariechen frowned at her but obeyed. She used her right hand, Charlotte noticed.

“My name is Detective Charlotte Ritter. Did my colleagues tell you why you’re here already?”

Mariechen hunched in on herself even more, if that was even possible. “Henry Schomaker was murdered.”

Charlotte kept smiling, even though her face felt like it was about to cramp up. “What can you tell me about him? I heard you were the one who knew him best. Or do you know anybody else who could help us?”

The girl shook her head. “No. His family is dead, except for a brother he hasn’t talked to since before the war. They never got along very well. He’s a sailor. That’s all I know. And he hasn’t been in Berlin for very long, so he didn’t make many friends.”

“Except you, that is.”

“I suppose. We aren’t very close, really. He likes me. But I just ... he is – was a bit old, you see. But he was nice. Said he’d help me become an actress. He likes plays and talked about the one he was working on. One of his mates from school

works at a theatre, I think. He said that. Anyway, he is – was – nice. Even if I didn't want to go out with him."

"You said one of his friends works at a theatre. Did he mention any other people? Or any jobs he had while he was working on his play?"

Mariechen shook her head.

"When did you last see him?"

The question seemed to hit the girl like a blow. "Don't know."

"Really? But your boss said it wasn't even two days ago."

The girl quivered, there was no better word for it. "Then that must have been when," she mumbled.

"Were there any arguments?"

Mariechen shook her head, but her eyes darted to the side like that of a terrified hare that was looking for a chance to run away. This was getting her nowhere, Charlotte, thought. It was time for a different approach. Gennat might not approve, and neither might Gereon, but she didn't really want to see this poor girl take the fall for a man like Kowalski. And so Charlotte took her chair and moved it so that she could sit at the side of the table, not at its head. She put a hand on Mariechen's and leaned in close, hoping it would comfort her.

"Listen, you can tell me the truth. I know men like Kowalski. They beat you about when you get in their way and they have no compunctions about getting rid of you when you're no longer useful. I know you're afraid of him, and that you've got every right to be, but if you don't tell us the truth, we can't help you. He already all but told us it was you who did Schomaker in."

Mariechen shivered. "I didn't – I couldn't, I—"

"I believe you," Charlotte told her. "My boss believes you too. But we need proof, and we need to know the truth. Can you help us? You'd be helping yourself too."

"But he's going to hurt me."

"He killed someone. With his rap sheet, he'll get the rope. Life in prison if he's lucky. And if you're worried about your job, I know someone who might give you one, if you want it. She's a nice one, even if she seems gruff on the outside."

Finally, it all tumbled out of Mariechen: Schomaker had come for a nice time, as usual. Only when he didn't have enough money left to pay, he made a fuss. He insisted Mariechen was in love with him and would do it for free. He told Kowalski she'd done it before, even though she really hadn't, and then he

continued to mock the pimp with the fact that he couldn't keep his girls in line. Kowalski had already had enough of Schomaker months ago, and another girl had just left him, so he felt like he had to make a point. He stabbed Schomaker three times, then threw him out the door. What happened after, Mariechen didn't know. The girls had to spend the rest of the night scrubbing every bit of blood away while Kowalski burned the ruined rug that used to lie at the entrance of the foyer and swore the clients (old friends of his) who'd witnessed the scene to silence.

Gereon nodded in satisfaction when she told him what she'd found out, adding that Kowalski was definitely left-handed. They'd need to get the other girls to confess as well, but that, they'd leave to Henning and Czerwinski with threats of being on the hook for lying to the police. All that was left to do was tying up loose ends for the prosecutor. And Charlotte had an introduction to make.

"How about a celebratory drink?" Gereon suggested once they were both done for the day.



They didn't stop at just a drink. It started that way, but then Gereon ordered another and then Charlotte did, all the while talking about this and that and nothing of consequence. They talked about their colleagues, the cases they'd worked on, Berlin on the whole, music, food, whatever came into their minds, just not what Charlotte really wanted to talk about. But that was okay; they were having a good time and she didn't want to ruin it by getting serious. Instead, she suggested going dancing, and to her surprise, Gereon agreed.

They went to a club, some hole in the wall that Charlotte knew, and danced until their feet hurt. It was strange, dancing with Gereon. It was as if he finally came out of his shell when he started moving, no longer wearing the inspector like a coat, his frown giving way to wide smiles. Charlotte didn't appreciate it the last time they had danced – she barely knew him then, after all. But now she did, and she wanted the evening to never stop. She wanted to keep dancing, swaying in concert with him while forgetting about everything else.

Unfortunately, they both needed to breathe and eventually took a seat at the bar, Gereon nursing a beer while Charlotte sipped on a cocktail.

“You did well today, you know?” Gereon told her, leaning in close to be heard over the music.

“Of course,” Charlotte said. “I knew I could do it.”

“I knew you could do it too. You’re a good detective.”

The statement warmed her heart. “I know. There’s just one mystery that I can’t seem to solve.”

Gereon drew his head back a little to look at her with his eyebrows raised in question. “What?”

“You,” she said.

“I’m not a mystery,” he insisted, but moved away from her slightly and took another sip of his beer.

“Yes, you are. I know absolutely nothing about you outside of work. I know more about Gräf than about you, and we don’t work together as closely nearly as often.”

“Nothing much to know,” Gereon insisted.

“And what about the woman? Yes, I know, it’s ‘complicated’, that’s the definition of ‘more to know’. Is she the reason you’re always tired?”

For a while, Gereon didn’t answer. Instead, he just stared at her, as if he were seeing a side of her he hadn’t noticed before. Which was preposterous; he knew how terminally curious Charlotte was better than anyone else, except maybe Toni.

“Her name is Helga, and yes, it’s complicated. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Why? Are you afraid I’ll judge you?”

At that, Gereon smiled. “Afraid of being judged by Miss I’m-Not-Looking-For-Anything-Permanent? No.”

“Then maybe you should talk about it. Who knows, it might help.”

Gereon sighed, then emptied his beer and ordered another. “Helga is my sister-in-law,” he finally confessed.

“Didn’t seem like that to me,” Charlotte joked, because it really hadn’t. Gereon had looked at her like she hung the moon.

“That’s the complicated part. We were a couple, before she married my brother. And then we both went to war and I was the only one who came back. She’d just had Moritz and, well. It didn’t help that they never found Anno’s body and he was only declared dead this year.”

“So you can finally start a life together now?”

Gereon scoffed. "I wish. No. It's this city and the secrets we have from each other here. Helga has secrets from me and won't tell me what it is. And I have secrets from her too."

"Like that you have one of the Armenian's men drive you to a clinic late at night."

Gereon gave her a sharp look. "You've been following me."

Charlotte shrugged.

"Did you see the doctor?"

Charlotte nodded.

"That's Anno. My brother. My dead brother and Helga's husband. He wants to stay dead, and he wants me to keep his secret, but keeping it from her ... it feels wrong. I can't be with her and not tell her about him."

Charlotte nodded sagely. "No offence, but your brother sounds like an arse."

Gereon laughed. "Believe it or not, most people wouldn't agree with you."

"I won't believe it, then."

They laughed together, heads so close they were almost touching. Charlotte couldn't help but notice how Gereon's eyes twinkled in the light and how inviting his lips looked. She didn't know whether it was the alcohol or the weightless feeling left behind now that there were no more secrets, but she leaned forward the last little bit and finally pressed her lips to his like she'd wanted to so many times. And Gereon didn't draw back as she'd feared. Instead, he moved closer and kissed her back. The sudden heat between them felt almost unbearable.

"Want to take this some place else?" Charlotte breathed against his lips.

"Your place?"

Charlotte shook her head. "I share a room with my sister. A hotel?"



The moment the door of the hotel room fell shut, Charlotte pounced on him. She kissed him and pressed her lips and hips against his. He was hard already – what wasn't visible with the wide trousers he preferred to wear, she could feel pressed against her. She grasped his backside firmly to keep him close and he gasped aloud. Charlotte couldn't help an impish smile.

"What do you reckon?" she asked, her lips centimetres from his. "Am I going to get fired for seducing my superior officer?"

Gereon huffed a laugh against her lips, running his hands down her arms. “Depends. Are you doing it for a nefarious purpose?”

Charlotte cocked her head as if she was pondering the question. “It depends on your definition of ‘nefarious’, I suppose.”

With a smile, Gereon buried his head against her neck and began sucking on it, sending shivers down her spine. Charlotte sighed contently and left him to it, arching in his embrace. She undid his tie and let it fall to the floor.

How they made it to the bed was a blur of tangled limbs and sighs. She remembered Gereon caressing her breasts as he slid her blouse off her shoulders, stepping back to admire her as she stood before him topless. He suffered from this strange notion that he needed to treat her like a gentleman, and she could only laugh at it and snap his suspenders before divesting him of his own shirt. The rest of their clothes followed in a matter of moments. Gereon’s skin was warm and inviting, and they fell onto the bed laughing.

Charlotte didn’t know if it was the alcohol still affecting her or the satisfaction of finally having solved the riddle that was Gereon, but she half felt like she was floating. No matter how often she kissed him, Gereon’s lips lost none of their appeal, and so Charlotte embraced him again and lost herself in his arms, his scent, his touch, enjoying the feel of his skin against hers as their naked bodies aligned on the bed, writhing together.

In the end, Gereon was patient where Charlotte was not, and it was she who ended up on top of him, impatient to get to the good part. When she took a seat on his thighs and put a hand on his chest, he looked at her as if she was a goddess, and the rush of power that made her feel was intoxicating. In a practised motion, Charlotte took his cock and guided him inside her, arching her back. Gereon moaned deeply, and it made her feel more powerful than anything else ever had.

“God,” Gereon mumbled, and Charlotte had to agree. For one glorious second, they were motionless, joined as one as they were. Then Charlotte started moving, lifting her hips, then letting herself fall back onto Gereon’s cock in a primal rhythm.

Gereon, for his part, did his best to match her, thrusting up when she ground down, joining her in a dance to music only they could hear as the electric light painted shadows on their bodies. Charlotte was fascinated by him as they moved, as the lust pooled in her belly: the lines painted on his face by the harsh light, the way his neck curved and his eyes fluttered when they moved *just right*, the taut

line of his stomach. She loved to make him moan and watch him lose himself in the sensation. *I did that, she thought greedily.*

He was simply beautiful, and Charlotte enjoyed every second of having him inside her. His cock felt divine. She groaned when his left hand grabbed her thigh a little too tightly, while his right thumb moved to play with her clitoris. He was so good at this, she could barely believe it.

“Yes!” she hissed when he thrust into her and hit that one spot that was the best thing about sex. For a second, she envied the women who got to teach him how to pleasure a woman, but then another deep thrust made her forget about it. There was only pleasure, only their bodies, only Gereon and the oppressive heat that made her lose her head and forget the world beyond this room, beyond them. She was in love, that much she could admit in these private moments, even if it was completely unlike her. Even if she would never say it out loud. But it was so good to have someone on the same level to play with and she wished this night would never end.

Gereon’s thumb kept rubbing her clit, and his cock was thick and deep inside her, every thrust increasing the pressure bubbling up in her until finally, they both reached their peaks. Charlotte was first. She felt her orgasm approaching and wished she could delay it, to make this moment stretch into eternity, but it was no use. Completion overcame her like a wave, her body stiffening as Gereon kept thrusting erratically, fire coursing over her skin wherever they touched. She heard herself whimper as the ecstasy ebbed, and she felt Gereon go through the same, felt him come and saw his eyes clench shut as his hands tightened their grip on her.

After, they were both breathing heavily. Charlotte felt her cunt throb with him softening inside her. When she saw him look up at her through half-closed eyes, she had to chuckle at how utterly dishevelled he looked.

Gereon cocked his head as if to say “right back at you.” And he was right. The sweat clung to her like a second skin, but she didn’t mind. She let herself fall forward to kiss him deeply. It was a long, languid kiss, now that they were both sated. Then she slid off him and lay down at his side, snaking an arm around him and burying her head in the nape of his neck. Gereon was still breathing heavily, caught up in his own climax. When he finally calmed down, he got up and fetched his cigarettes and a lighter from his coat. He handed one to her before lying back down with his arm around her. It was intimate and mundane at the same time, and Charlotte loved it.

“So, how nefarious was it?” she asked.

“Not nefarious enough to get you into trouble.”

“I’ll have to try harder next time, then,” she joked, and Gereon laughed.

As the smoke curled above their heads, Charlotte finally had time to admire the décor of the room they were in. The red and gold stylized floral pattern of the wallpaper was particularly egregious, and she smiled when she noticed just how tacky it was. She was about to tell Gereon, but when she turned her head, she saw that his eyes had fallen shut, even if his cigarette was still lit. With an amused sigh, she took the cigarette and finished it too. Gereon needed the rest, she figured, and there was nothing to say that couldn’t wait until morning.

Fin