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## LOCALITY

by Jeremy Van Seader

PROLOGUE

Exothermics

Aleksander Berezin sat alone on the wooden park bench, green paint already cracked and peeling, awaiting another waste of time with dwindling patience. It wasn't as if he had more pressing matters to attend to. No interesting pastime to look forward to, no pleasant distraction to put a smile on his face. Such things were a part of the past, beyond him. He didn't expect to meet those old friends again. No, it was the waiting that annoyed him, it was the talking that would lead to nothing, it was forcing himself to profess concern when none existed.

The park was a fair size for a city as small as this one. There was one footpath that wound through a tasteful sprinkling of trees, none of which had started to put out new springtime buds yet. It took almost five minutes to walk across the park, an act that Alek was familiar with. He walked along the park

path whenever he needed to escape the inane charade of dealing with people. Today, he was alone at far side of the park, which suited him just as well.

Alek stood up slowly, jaw set in expectation of the discomfort that comes with moving his left leg. He was well into his fifty-eighth year, a fact given away by the grey fringe in his hair, and had collected his fair share of health problems. The leg was a reminder of a time his car decided to roll over on the highway. It was fine, though. He endured it.

The sun was still a few hours above the horizon, casting long shadows behind him. The ground still had some soggy patches from the recently melted snow. It was late April, and everyone had their hopes up that it was the last they would see of winter. Alek squelched through the muddy grass uncaring, and flipped the collar of his overcoat up against the wind. The park was located on a raised piece of land that overlooked a large lake. It was a man-made lake and had no name, simply The Lake, or officially Coolant Discharge Reservoir 38-2. It was built about seventeen years ago along with the city. Beyond the lake was the thin, muddy ribbon of water that made up Pripyat River, from which the city got its name.

The metal of the railing was cold against Aleksander's hands, helping fight off the exhaustion he was feeling. This week his team had pulled the night shift which he had already completed today. Alek currently held the prestigious rank of

Captain Aleksander Berezin of the Soviet Armed Forces, Strategic Missile Division. He, and his squad of four men, had been posted to Pripyat military base for the last three years, and Alek presumed that he would hold this post until he died - most likely of old age. It was fine.

At the end of his rotation, he had held out some small hope that he could have retired to his bed. Should have done so hours ago. Instead, he had been forced to stay up to come meet with Boris Kovalenko, Plant Director for V.I. Lenin Power Plant. The power plant itself loomed a few minutes walk away to Aleksander's right, its four large reactor stacks standing proud against the clear sky. A steadfast bastion providing proof of the greatness of Soviet ingenuity. Alek sighed inwardly.

Looking over the railing, down at the lake below him, water swirled and churned around a series of three spillway vents, each about a meter across. The lake was not very deep here, and a number of concrete chute blocks jutted out of the frothing stream like giant teeth. He stared at the water for a time, watching the hotter outflow water interact with the cool lake water, creating small whirlpools and long trails of froth. It relaxed him and the playful dance unfolding below helped take his mind off of some unwanted thoughts.

"Go ahead and jump, huh?" a rough voice called from behind him, perhaps hitting a closer to the mark than either man realized.

Aleksander turned, favouring his right leg. So here we go, he thought. Alek gathered himself and painted a smile on his face. Well, hopefully it will pass for a smile.

Boris Kovalenko stopped walking when he reached the edge of the path, not wanting to trod through the soft muddy grass. He had the last remains of a cigarette in one hand, one of the unfiltered kind that were cheaper to get but tougher on the throat. Seeing that he had Aleksander's attention, Boris tossed the butt on the ground and stepped on it.

"Such a long face, and here at the start of a wonderful spring", he said, gesturing broadly at the barren trees, drab concrete buildings, and empty flowerbeds.

Alek slowly made his way back to the bench and sat down without ceremony. "I have been waiting for you for so long, it tries one's patience," he replied, sterner than he meant to, "Why are we out here anyhow?"

"My office isn't the best place to meet right now," Boris explained as he lowered himself down at the other end of the bench. "We are trying to manage things ourselves, without interferences, you know?" Boris flashed a toothy grin at this last comment.

Alek had a hunch that he knew what the other man was getting at, but wanted to get Boris to state it out in the open with no misunderstandings. He decided to get through this as directly as he could.

"Ok, let me begin with the topic I tried to bring up on the phone earlier," Alek said with a touch of annoyance. This entire meeting should have been a matter of a quick phone call to sort out the civilian shenanigans at the power plant. Instead, Alek had let Boris talk him into coming out to the park after shift rotation. He couldn't get Boris to budge on the matter.

"This is a very busy week for us," Alek began, making sure that Boris understood that 'us' did not include him or his people at the plant, "and any kind of deviations from normal operations during the week is going to only cause problems for everyone. We..."

Boris chuckled amicably and clapped Alek on the shoulder, cutting him off, "Yes, yes, you don't need to be so serious about it. Come on, Captain", Boris said this last word with mock seriousness, "The news of General Maksimov's arrival is all over the city. This is exactly why we need to do these extra tests - to show him. You don't know what this means for us. It's fine, what do you care, huh?" Boris stood up and started arranging his overcoat around him eager to get back. There was an eagerness to get back about the plant director. The man's excitement about something was apparent just under the fake smile he shone at Alek, in the quick way he tried to end the talk.

Alek stayed seated. He could feel himself becoming irritated and tried to stomp it down. Not at the other man's insistence at screwing up the military's plans, but at the jab

at his rank. It seems that his past would never leave him alone and everyone in this damned city would make sure of that.

"Alright, no seriousness, just friends talking right?" Alek tried on a grin. Boris nodded back at him happily but distracted, more intent on locating which pocket currently held his pack of cigarettes. Clearly the other man was already imagining himself back at the plant preparing his tests. "You are right, what do I care? I'm sure that you have involved Bukosky and he has agreed with it. What about Pletrev? What did he say?"

Vladimir Bukosky was the science manager at the plant. Vladimir was one of the most knowledgeable people there that knew the inner workings of the how the plant operated, back to front. Usually, any change to normal operations at the power plant had to be approved by him to avoid anyone causing an accident. The only person who might know more than Vladimir was Vanko Pletrev, the chief designer. Vanko was kept on at the plant to consult on matters to do with the facility itself, the building and infrastructure that ran the reactions. Alek knew all this, since all military personnel had to have full understanding of the civilian workforce. The opposite was not true. Alek also knew that Boris had not conferred with either man.

Boris quickly sat back down and grabbed Alek's arm hard with a firm grip. "Now you listen, Berezin", Boris hissed, all

pretence at camaraderie was gone. "Neither of them know, and do you know why? They would steal the glory for themselves! They would tell the General that it was their great plan to fix the power grid problems. No! It will be Boris that gets the glory!

"Do you know how many times a solution to this problem has been tried? Three time! Three failures. But this one will not fail. I know it will work this time. I figured it out!"

Alek had expected as much. The power grid problem was a concern, but only a minor one. In the event of the national power grid going down, the reactor's water pump would stop pumping cold water into the reactor. The plant had backup generators that would take up to a minute to restart the main water pump. This would leave a minute where the reaction could get dangerously hot. Overall, it was a rare event, but with the current conflict in Afghanistan and other tensions with the Americans, any attack that might impact the Soviet power grid scared the Generals, and the powers that be wanted every hole plugged.

"We have our own tests to run too," Alek argued, "Tests that actually matter more than you begging for a treat like some mongrel. Now, my team is going to be on station at the time you have scheduled this so called 'maintenance window'. I do not need you putting the power plant through shutdown drills and dicking with turbine outputs all while we are trying to carry out the General's agenda. How do you even plan to carry out your



clandestine tests without Bukosky finding out?"

Boris had loosened his grip on Alek's arm and had resumed the search for the cigarette pack. He shook his head at the last question and smiled the way one does when he is about to impart some great wisdom. The man was so capricious, Alek could feel his mood growing darker.

"Why do you think the test is set for after midnight, huh?" Boris explained with a wink, "We solve our problem, with proof, and none the wiser until we make the presentation to the General."

"You will be simulating a grid failure, then?" Alek pressed.

"Yes."

"And during this period of no power, the plant is required to run at low power output, is it not?"

"Well, yes. Until the turbines get the pump up to speed," Boris had finally freed his cigarettes from his inside coat pocket and lit one. The smoke blew towards Alek, making him wish the man had better taste in tobacco. "But only for a moment. The new procedure will have almost no down time"

Alek decided to lay all his cards on the table, to make the plant director understand his situation, as much as Boris was allowed to know.

"Listen to me, now," Alek started, "We need the base at full power. If the grid is down, we must rely directly on the

plant. If the plant is running at low power, it may cause problems for us. What if the safeguards activate when the reactors get too hot? You could have done this weeks ago, not now.

"If things go bad for us they will go very bad for you and worse for all the others." Alek turned his gaze toward the city lights where almost 30,000 wives, children, merchants and others not directly working for the base or the plant lived. "Maybe you better eat well tonight, who knows what types of rations will be available next week."

"You really are a grumpy one," Boris said, "Look, nothing will go wrong. Nothing I have planned endangers the reactor cores, it is just the diesel engines. You will still have full use of the reactor output."

"Not if it is in low power mode," Alek countered.

"Only for the briefest of moments. What do you guys do to need so much power?" When no reply seemed forthcoming, Boris clapped Alek on the back, "It will work this time,"

Boris stood up to leave again and turned to point a finger at Aleksander. "It doesn't matter anyhow. If you tell Pletrev or Bukosky, it will still happen. They would run the tests themselves, you know it. This is my chance and it is happening. Why don't you do your job and let me be."

The plant director didn't wait for any reply and strode away back down the path in the direction he had come, the

direction of the power plant.

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