

Jeremy VanSeader
Madoxlabs@gmail.com

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LOCALITY

by Jeremy VanSeader

CHAPTER ONE

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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Aleksander watched Boris Kovalenko head back along the path and disappear into the long shadows of the oak trees lining the edge of the park. He had actually held onto some small hope that he could appeal to Boris somehow, to convince him to stop fiddling with the plant during the General's visit. The experiments with the turbines could be done next week, Alek was sure, the results mailed in to Moscow, however Boris had his eyes firmly on the promise of acclaim and advancement. A placement at the Pripyat facilities didn't hold the highest regard in either military or civilian service. Most people did their time there while keeping an eye out for something better. Alek simply wanted to keep his superiors off his back a little more, which was not very likely given the outcome of their clandestine meeting. It was bad enough that he had had to wait until Boris's own shift ended so they could meet, but the meeting had let Alek verify his suspicions that the plant manager was indeed planning to alter the power plant's operation during his shift.

[Be more descriptive?]

Unknown to the civilian power plant workers and to most of

the population of the city, the military base located at Pripyat housed three long range MIRV-type ballistic missiles, designated 15A18, each carrying multiple 700 kiloton nuclear warheads. It was one of the many defence bases of the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces secreted throughout the Ukraine, in rural areas, safe from American detection. Many of the city's populace probably suspected the truth, but there was no official acknowledgement publicly. The power plant was seen as a perfect cover for the radiation signature of the missile silos, so once the base was ready, the reactor was built around it and then the city to house the workers and their families. Alek and his team were one of the many silo technical teams that manned one of the three control rooms in shifts.

Boris's plans meant that there was a real possibility of a power failure in the missile silos during the military demonstrations that were planned for the week. As well, civilian plant personnel would be active in parts of the plant that joined with the underground base, possibly getting in the way as they were apt to do. It was a complication that should have been entirely avoidable, but the presence of the general being in the city had the unforeseen effect of rallying the power plant staff to showing off their solution for the power grid problem. Such good Soviets.

Alek stood and took in another view of the lake before turning to leave. The far side of the lake was already starting

to darken. Beyond the river, past the east bank, the country side stretched to the horizon showing off vast forested regions and empty grasslands. There were no other signs of civilization to be seen beyond the city limits. Any roads that might exist was too small and well hidden to be visible from here.

Behind him, west of the park, was the city proper. It wasn't a large city by any standards, but it was big enough to have its own hospital and shopping malls, a movie theatre and graduate school. The small commercial and civic regions were surrounded by modern three- and five-story residences, including several buildings reserved for married couples. The streets were largely broad avenues, free from the close quarters of other soviet cities. They were quite well lit and tree lined that getting about the city on foot was rather pleasant.

His left leg wasn't complaining as much as he knew it could, which was a blessing. He walked along the footpath away from the power plant, the base, and the coming problems. The park was starting to fill up with couples, lost in each other's company, going for lake side strolls. A boy about six years old came bursting from between two trees followed closely by a white and brown sheep dog. He laughed and threw a ball he was carrying for the dog. The boy's father brought up the rear of the group, nodding at Alek as he followed after his two small charges. It was high time to leave before the sight of so many happy faces started to turn his mood ugly.

The park adjoined onto Builders Avenue, which Alek turned onto and headed towards the residential complex that housed his apartment. The route would take him in the direction of the city centre where a stage and fencing were being hastily constructed in front of city hall, in preparation of the General's visit. The sidewalks were beginning to fill up and Alek forced a few early evening revellers to step out of his way as he refused to move aside for them.

The neighbourhoods he was walking through was quickly changing from parks and broad avenues to low rise buildings and store fronts packed shoulder to shoulder along the streets. He approached an elementary school on his right consisting of a squat two story concrete structure next to a small paved playground with a chain link fence around it. Alek had forgotten that the school was on this route home and would have liked to have taken another way.

Several dozen school children, from all grades apparently, were out in the playground arranging themselves in orderly lines. A few taller figures standing apart from the kids were busy waving their arms at the children. The teachers, no doubt, putting the students through their paces, practicing some sort of presentation that they would perform for the arriving dignitaries. The happy din of carefree young children reached his ears as he grew closer. It was a sound he was not completely adverse to, and despite his desire to get home, he found himself

stopping to watch the proceedings.

The students were still wearing their smart looking dark blue uniforms, white dress shirts and red ties for the boys, knee length dresses for the girls. It was almost the same exact uniform his little Sasha wore to school when he was little. Alek could easily imagine his son being one of the proud children going through their steps that would be so important tomorrow during the presentations. He scanned the faces of some of the smaller boys, looking to see if any bore even a passing resemblance to Sasha. None did, but it didn't stop Alek from thinking about his son even more.

Sasha used to be the first one to wake up in the family sized apartment they were assigned to. He would awake full of happy exuberance, bounding into the bed he shared with Sonja, eager to see his parents each morning and start breakfast. Alek could still feel the little hand curling around his index finger as Sasha tried to lead him to see a spider he found, or to play a game that he invented. Could still remember the way Sasha laughed as he ignored his father's calls and ran ahead of Alek on their walks to school each morning. Alek would good-naturedly jog along behind, letting his son win every time.

Of course the apartment was long gone now, reassigned to a family that needed it more. Those times he fondly remembered of the three of them enjoying each day as it came were also long gone. Sasha was gone. That was before the drinking started.

Alek tried to banish these dusty thoughts but they were determined to stick around. He forced himself to look away and keep walking, head down to examine the cracks in the sidewalk as he passed over them. It was no good to dwell on things that he couldn't change anymore. It was best to leave such happy thoughts to a time when happiness bloomed and didn't wither and die, the way it had afterwards.

It wasn't far to the apartment now, just three more blocks to get past and he could get some rest. Alek didn't make it that far though. Between him and his bed stood the Builder's Beerhouse. The tavern occupied the bottom floor of a three story building and had a sign hanging out front over the sidewalk showing a hammer and a beer. Alek was still lost in thought when his feet turned him in towards the tavern entrance and he pushed open the heavy wooden door. He had had a lot of practise with this door over the last few months.

Inside the Builder's, the air smelled of beer, sweat and maybe a hint of someone's lunch that had come back up. The lights were dim but Alek could still make out some of the regulars at their usual spots. There was the old guy that mumbled all night seated at the end of the bar. The three husky men, probably construction workers, aptly enough, that liked the table back in the corner were there. Alek didn't know any of their names, he couldn't care less, and none of them paid him any attention when he took a stool along the bar, away from the

old man.

Tonight, there was also a man standing by himself in the shadows near the door, holding an untouched pint glass in his hand. A couple kids from the professional school where at a table along the wall, near shelf with the radio, hollering and laughing about some triviality. And oddest of all, a woman also stood at the bar accepting a glass from the barkeeper. She appeared to be alone and sipped her drink quietly while looking over some papers. The radio was pumping out some upbeat song that Alek didn't recognize. Disco music was the new fad among the kids this year.

Alek caught the barkeeper's eye and waved him over. The barkeeper was a middle-aged balding man who didn't mind having a drink himself, from the size of his gut. Alek waved the man to come in closer and leaned forward, something the barkeeper's protruding waistline prevented him from imitating.

"I need something today, Yuri," Alek said, "What have you got?"

Yuri placed his hands facing up on the top of the bar. "Hey, I have nothing today, maybe tomorrow, you know?" he replied apologetically.

"Don't give me that," Alek said, "Just give me anything, whatever you got, I don't care."

"I'm out, my friend," Yuri straightened up and absently picked up a nearby cloth, "Times are tough, harder to get things

lately. How about beer today? Vodka?"

Alek sighed, "No, I just... ," he started, seemed to change his mind, then said "No."

The barkeeper shrugged and went to busy himself wiping out a glass left on the bar.

Alek looked around annoyed at Yuri, and then felt annoyed at himself. What was he doing here? The best thing would be to just go home to bed and get what sleep he could. Still he stayed in the bar. He could feel the familiar craving nagging at him and wouldn't let him be until it was sated.

His gaze fell across the figure standing in the shadows by the door. Alek could feel their eyes meet and looked away. Something about the man bothered him but he couldn't place the feeling yet. On the radio, some song by Kino started playing causing the grad students to begin singing and banging the table.

"Aleksander Berezin," the woman at the bar beside Alek said, "Is that you? Are you still smoking that awful hashish?"

Alek stared at the woman in surprise. This was someone that knew him, and his habits, but who could be here at the ass end of worthless postings? She turned to look at him and right away he knew.

"Miri, what are you doing here?" he said.

Miri turned back to her drink. God, she was still gorgeous. Her round face still had a youthful glow about it, and her deep

set eyes hadn't lost their power to draw men in to their sultry gaze. She had her brown hair long, reaching just passed her shoulders, and appeared to been as thin and lithe as ever.

"Are you following me?" Alek asked.

She laughed with honest surprise. "Follow you, Alek," Miri replied, "No," She paused and looked at him, seemed to consider what to say. "I got a job here. Secretary at the power plant. Meeting you here is just a happy coincidence,"

"Thought maybe Sonja sent you," Alek said quietly.

"No, she didn't," Miri said. She turned herself fully on the bar stool to sit facing him. Alek was bothered to see a look of pity in her eyes. No, maybe he was only seeing things. "She is done with you, Alek. After everything? No,"

Alek stared at down at his hands on top of the bar's dark surface, unsure how to proceed. He no longer wore the silver wedding ring that once lived on his left hand ring finger, but it had left an impression on his skin that remained. He hated for Miri to see him here like this, hated the way so many memories of his wife swam to the surface when he saw her. Did she still talk to Sonja? Letters perhaps? Did they still get together on birthdays, maybe? They had been friends longer than he knew Sonja. He cleared his throat and prepared to ask the questions that he would hate himself for later.

Miri took in a breath and exhaled loudly before preempting him, her tone suddenly adversarial. "Why are you still smoking

hashish? Did you learn nothing from the car accident? What would Sonja think? It was nearly the death of you both, and can still be the death of you," The last word was said with emphasis.

"I live with that crash every day, Miri," Alek said, hand unconsciously moving to massage his left knee. "Things are... hard for me,"

Alek hadn't meant to talk so openly to Miri, but something about seeing an old friend of his wife's, someone who knew them from Before, had made him want to rekindle the last spark of a connection to Sonja, however fleeting.

Miri laughed at him. "Hard for you?" she asked incredulously. "Do you know what Sonja had to endure since walking out of your home that night? What kind of life she can make now? But you don't care, its all about Alek still. Maybe I should tell you she has to sell herself for money. Would you care?

"She can't even get a proper divorce and start a new life - it is too expensive. I don't know how she can endure it. First Sasha's death, then you and your drugs, trying to kill her,"

"I didn't... " Alek tried to protest feebly.

"She is better without you there to ruin everything, not that there was anything left to ruin. You were horrible for her, Alek. Horrible"

Miri stood up and placed down some money on the bar, underneath the glass.

"I never wanted to see you again. Neither does she." Miri made this final pronouncement and walked towards the front door of the tavern. Alek didn't watch her leave. Screw her. Why did she have to be here now, of all places. He didn't need this, the constant reminder of things he worked to forget. In her reaction to him, he saw himself as clear as if she had held up a mirror, and he didn't like it. He tried his best just to get through each worthless day and onto the next. And now she was here to taunt him. Bitch.

"Yuri! Vodka," Alek called to the barkeeper who had disappeared somewhere in the back.

The sound of metal scraping on wood immediately to his right brought Alek out of his dark downward spiral. His head snapped around to see who it was now that had come to bother him. His face had become quite stern, lips compressed in bottled anger as his thoughts started to feedback on themselves. It was the stranger from the door who sat on the barstool looking relaxed and at ease. The man wore a dark blue woollen overcoat, common among the people of Pripjat, but when Alek caught a glimpse of his pants, the fabric seemed to be something finer than wool. Could it be silk? Alek couldn't be sure, how could he be? The stranger placed his still full glass on the bar with a thump, exposing his left wrist from the confines of the coat sleeve. Alek was given a brief glimpse of a large silver wristwatch, bigger than any watch he had seen before with a

peculiar face. It seemed to glow softly in the dim light of the bar, but his view of it was too fleeting to be sure.

The man had short sandy hair over a square face that sported a short pointed nose. Dark glasses prevented Alek from seeing his eyes, maybe that was what threw him off before. Nevertheless, Alek could feel those eyes skewering him from behind the tinted circular lenses. The man's gaze was intense and strong.

"Forget her, mine friend," the stranger said with oddly accented speech, "I could hear it all, ya? Fuck ze bitch," The man's comments echoed Alek's own thoughts. Alek didn't acknowledge him.

Yuri had finally reappeared from the back of the bar and had a bottle of vodka and an empty glass pinched between two fingers. It was some of the crap Hrenovuha stuff, Alek saw, but it would do. The barkeeper started to pour into the glass, but Alek took the whole bottle from his hand. Before Yuri could get out of reach, the stranger grabbed chubby man's wrist, eliciting a questioning glance from the barkeeper. The stranger said nothing but nodded towards the left side of the bar behind Yuri, and released his wrist. Yuri frowned at this silent directive but complied anyways, stepping backwards to fetch a small wooden box from under the bar.

"Mine friend, I think I have somezing better for you den zat," the man said softly. Spinning the box around so that the

hinge was on the far side, the man opened the lid. Inside lay six rolled cigarettes, no doubt the hashish that Yuri claimed to not have. "My own supply, better zan what this buffoon serves, ya? He holds it for me." The man again seemed to know what Alek was thinking.

Alek continued to ignore the stranger, pouring himself a drink from the vodka bottle. The small wooden box and its contents drew his gaze though. The odd man sitting beside him smiled and nudged the box closer.

"Indulge me, then" the man said, taking one of the cigarettes for himself and materializing a lighter with a flourish. He lit the end and left it dangling at the edge of his lip while holding out one for Alek. Alek took the man up on his offer. What the hell, his initial need that drove him in here hadn't diminished any with running into Miri. If anything it had grown.

"What happened to your son? I can see za damage it has caused. Your pain tried to hide behind uncaring, but it is still there, ya?" the man went on, not leaving Alek alone. Perhaps he thought he was entitled to some level of discourse in exchange for the hash. Alek took a drag on the cigarette, letting the smoke linger inside before releasing it.

"I too had a son once. Mine boy was eight years old, so happy, so carefree. We loved him," the strange said, refusing to give up on Alek. "He was hit by a train while walking home from

school. My wife saw it. She was heading out to meet him halfway so zey could walk home togezer. She was never za same. None of us were."

The stranger took off his glasses and folded them carefully into his coat pocket. He had greying blue eyes that had some urgency about them. "I see myself in you. I see your anguish and recognize it for mine own."

"My son was twenty," Alek said after a pause. "We don't know what happened. He was away at the time." Alek looked up at the man before continuing, "Afghanistan."

The stranger sighed, "Ah... dat is ugly business, za war." He took a thoughtful pull on his cigarette, "You shouldn't blame yourself, zou, you couldn't be zere. It happened, yes. A tragedy happened and you are stuck now, feeling sorry for yourself, ya?" The man shook his head slightly.

Alek didn't know what the man's deal was or why he felt the need to be so talkative. This odd man with a funny accent thought he knew Alek, thought he understood what Alek had gone through, clearly, by some shared experience. Alek felt the need to show that he was not so easily read.

"I do not spend my time feeling sorry for myself. Maybe you did, I feel nothing anymore," Alek said. He put the man's cigarette down on the edge of the bar favouring the vodka to the hashish. He drank what was in his glass and refilled it.

"But you did feel something, when it happened?"

"Yes"

"Self pity? Sorrow? Did you need a shoulder to weep on? Someone to wipe your cheeks?" the man queried, steeling an unseen glance at Alek as if to see what effect his words were having.

"I was angry, ok? Of course I was angry," Alek spat out, "Fucking Afganistan. Fucking war. Fucking Americans."

The stranger smiled this outburst but again Alek missed seeing this reaction, he was focusing his gaze on the bottle.

"Anger, yes," the man said approvingly, "You raged at za machine dat ate your son. At za ones dat took him from you,"

"It was so pointless," Alek went on, "and for what? Nothing. American influence spreads everywhere, it is their nature to fight and destroy. The Soviet republic can not stand up to them. Sasha died standing up to them, we were told everyone must help to stop them. But they lied, we can't stand up to them. I hate them."

This last simple statement brought a sparkle to the strangers eyes. He poured Alek more alcohol which was accepted and downed readily.

"The Americans deserve your hate. Zey are a scourge certainly, zey can not stand to see the Soviet empire prosper and gladly kill its sons to prevent it. But what of our own leaders, surely zey are not blameless?"

"No one likes this war," Alek agreed, "There is no reason

for it. Still we are told to send our sons out to die. They lie, they never stop lying". Alek's hash had kept burning during the discussion and was mostly gone. Alek didn't mind, tonight seemed to call for vodka after all. He took another drink straight from the bottle.

"We can't do anything, better to give up. Everything is pointless. We are nothing, cogs in a machine that doesn't care that the gears are stripping"

"You are wrong, mine friend," the stranger said, leaning in closer, "Zere is always something we can do. One man can have power. One man in the right place can make a decision that could set everything straight. Punish the Americans, send a message of displeasure to our leaders. One man. Listen..."

[Add more]

[Add kids in bar being boisterous, they are soldiers, loud and visibly angry at the govt also.]

[Kids provide hints at the prank coming next]

#

Alek leaves the bar to go home, he is kind of drunk and he ends up walking the wrong way back toward city centre where the setup is happening.

Workers setting up stages and such have gone home but he can see a few people in dark clothes moving around in the scaffolding.

A convoy of military trucks is coming down the main street headed towards to base. Unknown to Alek, they are carrying some extra warheads to stock the base silos with.

Alek sits on a bench to rest and wait for convoy to go by, he needs to cross the street. His head is spinning maybe.

The people on the scaffolding come down and fetch a long rolled up banner. They seem to be stringing it up on top of the stage to be unfurled later. It reads something like 'Fuck you General Whoever' basically. Alek sees some of the people are the kids in the bar. He realizes that they are setting up a prank.

Another prankster is carrying a bunch of fireworks up a ladder to rig up to the banner, presumably part of the prank. There is a bundle of wires trailing behind the kid, down the ladder, presumably to trigger the prank. Alek might wonder where they got those from.

A prankster on the ground is prepping the controller in some bushes near Alek's bench. He is pissed that Alek is there and wants him to leave. Alek doesn't give a ship and gets up to leave. The prankster is wiring up the controller and checking if it works. Alek stumbles into the guy and he accidentally triggers the controller to fire the fireworks.

One set of fireworks shoots off at an angle towards the slow moving convoy. The prankster on the ladder drops it and it falls, shooting. His hand is burned and he cradles it as he gets down. People are shouting wtf happened, and get the hell out of

here.

The fireworks are big flower kinds. One shoots between the convoy cars, hits the store fronts across the street and bursts into flowers. The back of the convoy begins to stop while the first part keeps going. Another shot punches through the canvas side of the convoy. It was carrying various munitions as well as nuclear warheads. Three soldiers and the driver all jump off of the truck and run as it catches fire.

Everyone is running and Alek is also. He runs along the store fronts using the wall to hold himself up as he goes.

A short time later there is a giant explosion as the truck's cargo explodes. The warheads are destroyed but do not detonate. Fragments of radioactive materials are spread around the city centre stage area.

Alek is knocked down. Lights are coming on and Alek hears the fire alarms starting up. Trucks will be here soon. He continues stumbling home to go to bed.

[This prank is critical for the finale, creating a disturbance and providing cover for people to masquerade as cleanup workers as cleanup is going on]

#

Alek reports to the base for the start of his shift. His first duty is to report to his commanding officer about the

meeting with Boris Plant Manager. He is not looking forward to reporting on his failure.

He is not fully recovered from the bar and is typically depressed. He ponders about the stranger but cant remember a lot after the first part of the conversation. Never got a name or anything about the man.

At the bosses office, he has to wait because he is yelling at some low ranking officers about the prank. He is demanding to find out who the pranksters were. He cant believe how useless the soldiers are, why didn't they take initiative and start looking already. Yells about convoy delays and the need for a cleanup crew. The men mention how one private(?) was picked up with a burned hand last night but he didn't cooperate. They recovered the controller and the banner that was strung up.

Boss demands to know where fireworks came from. No one knows, maybe home made? Alek knows they were not homemade as he saw the one flower burst, overhearing. More yelling about security on munitions and supply rooms. Guys agree just to get out of there. Alek is pretty pissed off that this event is making the boss extra mad about his own report.

What is Alek doing all this time, is there a secretary stopping him and to talk to? Maybe he wants a smoke though its inconsistent? He just paces the floor thinking about the boss's character?

Alek finally gets to go in. The boss is visibly annoyed to

see Alek but makes an effort to deal with Alek. Asks Alek with false politeness about his meeting and how he expects Alek straightened out the problem with the plant.

Alek launches into his recap of the plant manager's plans and how they wont be able to stop it. They are hell bent on impressing the General. The boss gets agitated during the delivery and says he knows the General wont care at all about this. He bitches generally about how no one can do their job of late. He is disappointed but not surprised that Alek failed. After all, what do you expect from someone with as big a problem as Alek. After his kid died, he got busted repeatedly for drunkenness and finally crashed a military car with his wife in there. Boss rants - he wanted to boot Alek as worthless, but he was agreed accept a demoted Alek and place him here where he could do no harm and just play out his service. The boss isn't really happy about someone unambitious that is just killing time.

Alek attempts to take the words and leave. Boss wants to go on to the tests. Alek is pissed too, he knows all this but has to listen to the boss talk about it again. Boss says, 'you know this leaves the base potentially underpowered and the plant itself vulnerable to an overload.' Tells Alek to watch the power levels, cant do anything about overheating. Tells Alek that the tests will start at 1am when most of the city wont notice the activity. The General is already here doing some rounds. He

tells Alek to not fuck it up and goes over the list of tests. If all goes well, boss hopes to get out of the shit detail and on to a real posting since the base will be fully ready without needing oversight.

Alek asks about the warhead installation. Boss gets super mad suddenly. Installation needs to be cancelled since the warheads were damaged in the prank. The boss has a mini rant about the idiocy and how the cleanup for radiation materials will take a couple days. The centre is closed to civilians and all festivities are cancelled. Nothing else can go wrong.

Alek leaves to head for his posting. He is momentarily upset about the boss chewing him out over his past but then he doesn't care. Sasha is still dead weather he cares of not. It was leaders like this boss that send kids to die, ambitious men only caring for better perks and postings killing the republic's sons. He wishes that Sasha could be avenged, or at least make people understand the loss. Grows more mad at the soviet government and then gets mad at Americans for instigating everything. War never ends, we attack them, they attack us, pointless. It is always tit for tat and in the end nothing changes just death.

Then he remembers that isn't true, couldn't one man change things? Isn't the message from the stranger. If only he could be that man.

#

At the test the next day
Bitch out the men under him
They are happy, and it pissed him off
Rethinking the bar scene
He sets up a real launch
Perform test with launch
Watches the chaos and waits for the end.

Problem -

During silo test, power plant doing test

What is silo test?

Flight test? Involves launch

Silo test - open/close

Control room reaction time

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