

Flare

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Pyotr held the reinforced mesh of the hose in his hands and braced himself. The flames of the building rose high against the dark cloudy night, and shapes danced along his mirrored helmet, kevlar jacket and worn boots and pants.

A fierce wind ripped through his clothing, and despite the proximity of the fire, and the layers, it still found its way between his jacket and the oversized pants. The cold sliced at his midsection.

All around him, the dim, almost fuzzy shapes of other people flickered in their own struggles. Dull shouts came from both around him and inside the building.

“Pyotr! Are you ready?” Someone behind him yelled.

He turned slowly in the bulky equipment and waved his hand in confirmation before assuming the braced stance from earlier.

The liquid shot through the hose like a bullet. The pressurized system sending the water spraying upward in a high arc and into the warehouse. White smoke stained the gray sky as mist and smoke combined in the flurry of wind and fire.

Pyotr felt the pressure surge through the system as the hose fought in his hands like a thing alive. Could he feel the coldness of the water? It was below freezing. He could almost feel it through the mesh, that ice liquid against his skin.

The fire tumbled and blossomed, twisted and struggled against the sky. It stretched from its roots in the heart of the building and strained against the gravity holding it down. It shot through open windows and reached upwards, like the separate heads of a mythical beast.

He doused one blaze, deftly aimed the nozzle and directed the jet of water to one of the open windows. The fire within it died as well.

“Clear out the doorway! We've got to get in there!” The man behind him yelled.

The path was cleared. The fire hissed and retreated briefly.

From over head, and falling from the darkened clouds, came snow. The flakes existing paradoxically just beside the horrible blaze. The wind did not mind. It swirled them both the same.

There was a shudder from within the building and Pyotr heard the slow but terrify creak of metal giving way. His long years of the craft told him that part of the power plant was collapsing. It was likely they would not be able to save it. But the section was far away, and his ears tuned out the distant cries of men, and the groaning of twisted rebar.

“The generators are on this side.” He said into his mask. The smell of smoke assaulted his nostrils and the sting of acerbic gas swept across his face. “Watch for signs of chemical fire. Who knows what this

place was running off of. We're on the ground floor though. With any luck this will be something normal."

He stepped into the mouth of the beast. He could feel the heat of the fire all around him now. He could feel the pressure of the air behind him, pushing him in as the fire demanded more and more to continue its burn. The wind was deafening and ensnaring. It lead into the center of the building, where the main body of the blaze was busy destroying priceless equipment. It called him onwards.

Pyotr stepped over fallen girders and broken paneling. Thankfully there was no basement. He had no desire to fall through any floors. He looked behind him to make sure the hose and the other man were still following. It would do him no good to advance into the heart of the place without the hose working, or to have it snag on some metal piece.

He worked methodically, sweeping the hose from side to side. The fire cried out at him. He gripped the hose nozzle tighter and refocused his efforts. It withered and sputtered, steamed and smoldered. The hiss of fog billowed up, catching in the flame induced updraft and was sucked through the ceiling like some exorcised ghost.

He moved onward.

The generators lay on the other side of a railroad channel which ran through the next ruined massive subsection of the building. It was covered on both sides by concrete reinforcing. Not a single thing between him and the generators was flammable. He could not see how the fire could have bridged the gap if the generators were the device which had started things, but this did not phase him overly so. Many things now did not make sense. None of his thoughts could alter the fire which raged around him.

He stood on the other side of the concrete base and aimed the hose. The liquid shot out of the tube and instantly was swept aside by a gust of wind which ran along the railroad depression. The spray of water flung itself to the ground even as Pyotr edged closer and closer to the edge of the depression.

"Fuck!" He shouted.

"Its no good! This damn thing is acting like a channel! We have to get closer!" He yelled to the man behind him.

He could feel the wind shifting, and suddenly the heat became more noticeable, even through the kevlar suit. He looked around him. The ceiling was yet uncaught, but the walls and every other piece of equipment he could make out were burning. Piled high against the iron support of the building were rusted barrels and discarded trash. Scraps of wood and junk machinery clogged the floor in every place except the railroad.

So we're burning junk for power now? Or was this some bizarre recycling technique?

Either way, it had doomed this place. And maybe them as well.

"Ah. Keep the hose from that stuff. Who knows what the fuck is in there." he turned to shout at the other man, only to find him right beside him.

“The wind's taking the water. I'm going to climb down. Hold this damn thing so it doesn't go snaking on us.”

A man hit by a loose hose could easily be knocked over. Maybe worse, it could destroy itself against something sharp, or spray water into something alkaline and bring the whole damn place down on them.

He threw his legs over the edge of the tracks with a huff. The air was thicker down here. He looked turned as quickly as he could with the oversized equipment and saw that sometime between when he had last looked and now, the fire had brought down the framing for the railroad door. If it was making its way to the ceiling now, they would have to move quickly!

He pushed himself over the edge and fell the rest of the way. The impact shook through him as his reinforced suit and boots crushed him down. The heat was like a blanket now. He could literally feel it on his skin from where he was. It wrapped around him, grabbed him by the chest.

He exhaled and shouted up at the other man. “Hey throw down the hose. I can walk it over!”

But his voice was interrupted as another section of the building gave way. He could distantly hear yells, or perhaps screams. Whether they were of men or metal, only time would say.

The other man pointed to his ear, shook his head and started to drop down with him.

“No, fuck it, don't waste the time...”

But it was clear that the other man could not hear him.

Pyotr's voice sounded uncharacteristically soft to him. He coughed, slammed up his visor and spat an acidic taste onto the ties. The heat seared his face. He was blinded suddenly by superheated air. He threw a hand across his face, and struggled the visor back into place with a curse.

“Alright, lets just get this fucking thing into place...” he muttered, not even sure if he could be heard.

The two struggled their way over to the other side of the tracks. It seemed though that with every step the going got harder and harder. The gravel of the tracks was loose and their heavy boots and equipment caused them to sink into the fill. Pyotr lifted a boot and almost set it down on one of the rails before he thought twice. The metal would melt anything it touched, flesh included.

Pyotr pointed at the tracks and shook his head, but the other man's head was down, trudging with the hose over his shoulder.

Pyotr test fired the hose and was satisfied with the result. He stopped at the other edge of the rails, and prepared to aim the thing at the generators.

He stopped for a moment though to catch his breath. His throat suddenly seemed very itchy. He coughed once inside his mask, and then again harder.

“Fuck!” He cursed and doubled over as he hacked another uncontrollable cough.

Something was wrong. He felt light headed. His vision was swimming. The hose suddenly felt very heavy. His arms and legs felt very heavy. He was aware of the heat around him in a very intimate way, as if it had reached out and grabbed him.

He gritted his teeth and fought the feelings aside, steadying the hose.

He looked up at the generator, which now was wreathed in flame. The thing was probably unsalvageable, but there were probably multiple units, and they might as well start with this one. Besides, necessity bred invention, and there was a lot of necessity going around right now. The engineers might be able to make something of even the melted parts.

A whirl of flame attracted his attention. It spun around the generator, glowing faintly green, morphing and flowing between shapes. It extended a tongue which licked the ground near him, blackening the concrete. He could hear the slab groan under thermal stress. They were on the ground floor! A detached part of him said to itself. For once, couldn't it be a normal fire?

He stared transfixed. His vision narrowed as he tried futilely to wipe the sweat from the inside of his helmet. The mirroring caused the already warped flames to twist even greater. He went to turn on the hose, but the spigot burned his fingers through the gloves.

Shhhh. The green tinged fires said to him. His eyes were starting to run, and he was blinking almost continuously now under the heat and acid smoke. He lifted a gloved hand to ward off the flames. As he did so his breath caught in his chest and he felt himself falling. The hose slipped from his hands.

He was breathing slowly, eyesight dimming, staring unfocused at the ceiling, which was just now starting to alight. The man behind him lumbered forward yelling something that Pyotr could not hear.

The man knelt towards him, reaching down with a gloved hand. Above him, Pyotr could see the green tinged flame getting higher and higher. It swirled and arced away from him, down into the sky.

The man jerked upward and saw the generator fire. He grabbed the hose from the ground beside Pyotr and aimed it at the strange blaze.

A slow undercurrent of fear swept through Pyotr as he saw the man lift the device. Pyotr's addled mind had finally put two and two together. The smoke? The color? It wasn't just a chemical fire, it was an electrical one. The fuckers had lied to them. It should have been a normal fire on the ground floor. The effect couldn't reach that far. So that could only mean one thing: they hadn't turned off the fucking power before they bolted!

He raised a hand slowly and yelled to the other man not to turn on the hose, but his voice came out as a slow exhale, like a bubble growing deep underwater. It oozed from his lips and hovered inside his helmet. He tried again, crawling painstakingly towards the other man, who was still fiddling with the hose control.

He reached forward to grip the man's ankle.

Water shot from the hose onto the machinery. A bolt of lightening in return arced through the water, turning the liquid to steam as it came. It shone white-green, blazing its imprint against Pyotr's eyes.

Its ok. It said to him.

The current killed the other man instantly, melted through the rail, arced to the plate which had been burning a hole through Pyotr's knee and jerked him into unconsciousness.

He had visions of a person wreathed in green flames, reaching out a hand towards him. He recognized the figure in a way that can only happen in dreams, instantly and totally, but without being able to make out details. He stretched out his arm, his hand towards the person, wanting to feel the heat from those strange flames.

But his body was an anchor. He could feel it distantly behind him, immovable. No matter how hard he tried he could not reach the flame bodied person.

The figure recognized this and spoke to him. Its words were sad, yet their voice filled him with an indescribable longing.

Not now. But soon. The figure smiled at him. *Very soon.*

His unit was the only one in the apartment still occupied. Once, a very long time ago there had been others. But as the air had grown cold, and the state of things turned worse and worse, one at a time they began to leave. Pyotr did not know where they had gone. Maybe they had gone nowhere. Maybe they had simply walked into the forest. Such things were apparently common now. Coming back from the hospital he had seen a body floating face down in the canal. There was nothing to be done. These were simply the realities of the time.

He sat down on the worn beaten sofa and pulled an equally worn blanket around him. He grabbed the large button which controlled the radio and tuned into an entertainment station. He had no desire to hear the news. Not today. He gave the device a moment to turn on.

The electromechanical gyros started up, giving off their tell tale hum. It was a sound which was familiar to him now, and to all who could afford such devices. Some still complained of the sound, and hearkened back to when pure electronic devices were usable. But to Pyotr, the sound was comforting. There would be no fires from this device. Only humming. And the laughing of the people on the other end.

He reached out and pulled his table close. Wood was too expensive but he had his old television case, long since gutted of anything that could short. On top of the improvised furniture, he placed his dinner for the night: something from a can warmed atop a gas canister. The colors on the side indicated what flavor it was supposed to be, but after years of eating them, Pyotr would be hard pressed to tell them apart. What mattered is that they were balanced to have exactly the nutrients needed for a person. That was it.

As the background laughing of the program and the warm food ran together, Pyotr's mind wandered to the aftermath of the previous evening.

Pyotr sat blankly on the plastic chair, arms braced against legs, staring expressionlessly forward into the distant corner of the room. The fire station was austere but efficient. The station chief soon filed into the room.

“Pyotr, I'm so sorry.” The station chief said. He was an older man with a furious beard and matching mustache. Once, in a time Pyotr could almost no longer remember, and under very different circumstances, the station chief had invited Pyotr and a number of other people to his house for dinner. The party had gone late into the night enabled by electric lights, with eating, drinking, and joking, laughing; it had been almost morning when the group had admitted defeat and crawled off to their respective houses. In that time the chief had been a jolly man.

Time had carved him down. The creases which once were caused by laughter had turned to those of worry. His house had burned down in one of the larger events, as had so many others. The chief who looked at him now was a gaunt man, hollowed out by the passage of time and the reality in which they now lived. But his words were no less sincere.

Pyotr managed a nod, and murmured a response. “He was a good man, and a good fireman. He will be missed.” Then he shook his head. “I cannot believe I didn't think of the power. Of all the basic things...”

But the chief laid a hand on Pyotr's shoulder. “Pyotr, the device *was* off. You know how it is now.”

Pyotr grimaced. “But it was on the fucking ground. It's not supposed to work like that!”

“You're right...” The chief said, nodding his head. This time the tune of his voice was still the familiar one that Pyotr remembered, but the man no longer looked at him.

Instead, several other people silently walked into the room. Pyotr looked around.

The chief regarded the intruders. For the first time since he had entered, Pyotr studied the other man's face. A mixture of hatred and fear ran through it, distorting the kindly disposition that Pyotr had once known.

“You again!” The chief exclaimed, setting his hands against the barren table. “What horrible news should I expect now? I suppose you're to tell me that was our last power plant? Or that the fire has found a way to burn metal and concrete?”

The aides looked sheepish, and retreated into the edges of the rooms and stared at their feet.

But their leader was less intimidated.

The man was short, and at one point, had been grossly overweight if the dim memories of the before time served him true. The engineer general reached up to his head and snatched the small cap into his hands. His bald head showed signs of weariness.

“It does no one favors to lurk in the dark. Despite how grave the news might be. Especially the not the fire chief. Your men will bear the brunt of our findings, that is true, but we did not make the problem. Do not kill the messenger.” He said curtly, settling into one of the plastic chairs, and shifted around.

The aides looked at their boss, then back to the chief. Pyotr surveyed the table with disinterest and detached horror. What could possibly make things worse than they already were?

“Alright.” The chief said, collapsing backwards as the chair legs protested across the concrete floor. “What terrors do we have in store for us.”

The engineer general hesitated and looked at Pyotr. “Ah... the findings are somewhat sensitive. Disclosure is being limited at this time.”

Pyotr went to get up, but the chief motioned for him to stop. “Pyotr is my best fireman. I would have to tell him anyway to prepare a response.”

“Ah, well... keep it in this room. Tell no one.” The engineer general flipped through his notes until he found the correct page. He detached it neatly from the binder and slid it across the table.

The chief was an educated man. He stopped his complaining and silently read the notes. His brow furrowed even further if possible.

“This is it then.” He said, his hands shaking slightly as he returned the note to the table.

His face was ashen. He looked at Pyotr, but the other man was impassive.

The chief half got to his feet, picked up the note and slid it over to Pyotr. “By god, read that.”

“Ah... I will may remind you that the findings are based on our best data collection. So there may still be a chance that we are wrong. Or that something is off. We are waiting for results from others.”

Pyotr read over the notes but found his vision blurring over the statistics and charts.

“I'm sorry. I don't understand.” He said, giving the notes back.

The chief clenched his fists. “Its the fire from two nights ago. It wasn't some fluke. That's the new normal. Nothing is safe now. Its not just tall buildings, its everything. Every device. Any... metal. Its all going to spark.”

“Ah... Yes. That is what it would seem. The coronal ejections have increased in frequency. I would like to say I know what this means, what this entails, but I do not. I am not aware of anyone who can say with any certainty what the future will bring.”

The engineer fidgeted with his hat. “Perhaps if we could run the old simulations once more. But so much research was lost in the initial events. So much, ah... human capital. The research department says is still working on their fully plastic pneumatic computer, but I doubt it has the speed needed to model the sun to any degree.”

He clapped his hands together, trapping the hat inside.

“So, ah... I can't say with any certainty what will happen as our lovely field is pushed further and further. More cancers, that's for sure. And more fire...”

Pyotr did not remember the rest of the conversation in any detail. Afterwards he and the chief had

talked about possible responses. Like the field, they were being pushed too far too fast. They didn't have time to adapt. It was taking all they had to merely keep their head above water.

Did the other nations which had chosen war regret their decisions? Was cancer from solar radiation better than that caused by the fallout of nuclear weapons?

For the billions of burned skulls grinning from amid the rubble of cities, did it matter that natural fire had caused their end, or did man-made fire cause some difference in how the bones lay?

And now Pyotr was back in his apartment. The food was gone. The radio hissed. Either it had lost the channel or the broadcast was over.

He lifted the heavy device and put it into its heavy stone enclosure. Yet soon, even this too would be useless, like all the other things of the past.

He sat on the couch, staring at the wall.

A strange surreal light played its way across the floor. It was shifting and snaking, trailing and wavering. A thousand times ephemeral, flickering with colors of blue and green. The lights came again. The whole world could see them now. Every night as of late. He would never get used to them.

They reached out, with their slithering green hands, and grabbed him, bringing him up the deserted, half eroded stairs. He had his jacket in his hands. He hastily put it on and kicked the door to the roof open.

The sky swam before his eyes. The ribbons played their way across the sky, twisting, breaking and rejoining in their organic, yet alien fashion. The glow was bright. Brighter than before.

He stood on the roof, at the edge, and gripped the rail in the frigid cold with his bare hands. The pain was a distant thing as his gaze floated among the shifting colors.

The sky grew lighter.

The sun made its appearance known as it started to break the edge of night. He had been awake the whole night? Or had he slept as he thought of the conversation before? It all blended together for him.

The wind ripped into him atop the tall building. The snow covered the remains of the city. Distantly he could see the flickering of some distant fire the night team had to deal with. There were few people in the streets and those that were were covered from head to toe.

Amid the frozen scene, the sun rose, yet the ribbons did not leave. Not this time. They defied the ascension of the morning, mixing their green and blue with the coming nascent orange of the birthed star.

Today was different.

The cold of the night air was pushed aside, as the rays of the first light ran themselves across Pyotr's

face. He held a hand to his own face to feel the heat there. It was thin and piercing yet he raised his hand higher, and held the sun in his hand.

It moved higher in the sky.

Now he could see its true shape. The circle could not be contained, it seemed. There were tendrils looping off into pale of the morning, each one burning an after image into his eye. His heart moved at that moment, and he felt the pull of the light upon him.

The loops expanded outwards as pure white ropes of fire.

Now it is time.

He inhaled, his heart racing for the first time in what seemed like forever. His hand, held uselessly in the air between him and the orb, felt like it was on fire. A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind, but none seemed of any importance compared to what he was seeing.

The swirling greens exploded with color. More vibrant than anything he had ever seen. More shades and hues ran and were added to the fray. The burning light came closer. It hit the atmosphere and spread the lights like soap on water.

The lights descended, first amid the peaks of the mountains, then the spires of the tallest buildings. The ribbons snaked through the city. Pyotr could feel the light burning on his skin, but remained transfixed.

The city was melting. There were cries and alarms. Snow melted in an instant. The rusted husks of cars sparked lightening, then burst into flames. The railing near him ran with live current caused by no traditional source.

He raised his hand higher, but he now no longer tried to block the sun from his eyes. Nothing could do that now. Instead he reached for the green swirling colors that lay around him. He touched the edge of the field with his hands, and felt the charge raise the hairs on his arm.

He was charged now. Changed. He was one with the flow of the energy and the fields. He closed his hand over it and felt its steady pull, urging him against the edge.

He climbed the railing and grabbed on with both hands. He was lifted from his feet, ever so slightly. He could hear a dull noise now, like static from a radio, growing ever louder. The light became brighter and brighter.

He could no longer make out the sun. Everything was illuminated past what his eyes could perceive, and in those swirling vibrant burned out after images, she danced green and blue amid the searing light.

She writhed and twisted, sensual and longing. His feet left the edge. He was floating into the air.

Her hand extended down, a long garment of emerald and turquoise. He felt her embrace in the tingling of his hand. He stretched his arms outwards and clung to her as she moved into his embrace. She returned the gesture, covering him with the swirling wild charge. He held her to his body.

The air burned, the roaring of the oncoming plasma was now deafening, filling his senses, just as she filled his eyes.

“Now?” He asked her.

Now. She agreed.

Then the pressure wave hit and he was no more.