

Red, Hot and Dark

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Moscow: Monday morning, August the 20th, 1991:

The soldiers on the back of the personnel carriers stared around, wide-eyed, clutching their rifles like drowning men hanging on to buoyant life-rafts. They were out of their depth, teen-age conscripts from the sticks being trucked in by the Grey Men in the Kremlin, none of them sure what they were meant to be doing here. The emigre group seemed to be taking it quite well as the BMP's rumbled past their hotel. They clustered in the bar, talking quietly in small groups, occasionally pestering a vodka out of the distracted staff. Reporters swarmed and darted everywhere, like wasps around a rubbish bin in summer. And Oleg Meir ...

Oleg Meir ignored the soldiers as he left the temporary safety of the hotel. The phones were down, only international calls from the city's contingent of foreign correspondents getting through. They must be crazy, he thought: cutting off communications at a time like this. Trembling with a chill, he thrust his hands deep into his coat pockets as he walked back towards the University. He glanced up at the clock jutting from the face of one of the office buildings on the opposite side of the road. It was almost ten o'clock! He'd have to hurry. Oleg increased his pace until it was little short of a trot. Got to get the papers, destroy them or something. Change myself, get lost in the crowd. That way they won't find me. If I can do it before Andrei catches up with me ...

Yesterday's events had brought everybody out onto the streets; everyday life had ground to a halt. The air was filled with tension, as if an abscess was about to burst. Never had he seen crowds of people who all looked so angry; it scared him almost as much as the horror of a remembered guilt, the phone call in the early hours from his mysterious patron -- just before the public lines went down.

Tanks were drawn up in the square outside the University, their engines ticking over, soldiers milling around uncertainly in front of a throng of defiant youths; they made no attempt to detain the bespectacled professor as he made his way past them towards the concrete monolith of the Institute of Space Sciences. Nobody stopped him as he went in, but he noticed a few anomalies: a distinct shortage of staff, a surfeit of students milling around the foyer and chattering.

Can't be good. Oleg made for the elevator, half-remembered skills blending him with the shadows like a third element of light and darkness. Too many people about. The elevator began to rise. He yawned uncontrollably. The elevator stopped; its brass gate slid open. "Professor Meir?"

Oleg jumped. "Who is -- oh, Anatoly. What is it?"

The student stared at him. "You looked a bit preoccupied, is all," he said. "About the coursework, I know it's overdue --"

"Don't worry about it." Oleg looked away. "Heard the news?"

"Which news?"

"Don't worry." Moving down the corridor towards his office, the student following him: Oleg had things on his mind. "Have you got a few minutes?"

"For you, professor?" The student's elaborate shrug was wasted. Oleg was too busy unlocking his office to notice.

"These filing cabinets. Do me a favour, get everything out of the top drawer there, stacked in order, and put it on the table. Please? I'll make it worth your while."

"How worthwhile?" Something nudged Oleg's attention, but when he looked up Anatoly looked back at him innocently. "A regrading?"

"You said it, not me." Anatoly turned to the filing cabinet eagerly. "Now if you will excuse me --"

The terminal on Oleg's desk was an antique, but it still connected him to the machines in the basement. To his surprise, Oleg found that his palms were sweating as he sat down and logged on. This has gone too far. He shivered and glanced over his shoulder. If Andrei gets his grubby hands on these there won't be an excuse under heaven that'll save me! Still he hesitated. Something in the air tickled his nostrils; scent of woodsmoke and gasoline far away, screams remembered in the moonless night. From her. Behind him, Anatoly was systematically stripping his files from their steel nest. Oh well. It had to happen -- now or later.

Oleg began to type, carefully -- the sluggardly machine could barely keep up with his keypresses -- a short e-mail message. He stared at it for a few minutes after he finished it, trying to understand what he had done. To KGBVAX, the police monitor on the net. User: Valentin016. An anonymous label. Danger. He'd been sweating before he started. Now he pressed enter, consigning the message to the invisible guts of the connected mainframes, where it would find its way eventually to the destination --

To Valentina. Who'd know what to do, if anyone did. Oleg logged out and turned round, stood up and stretched, stared at the student working on his files. Time to think about avoiding Andrei. Why did I ever let it get this far? he wondered. Hands deep in pockets, he wandered over to the window and stared out towards the distant Kremlin. Dancing with the devil ...

Twenty five years ago:

Oleg had first met Andrei back in sixty-three, sixty-four, back when he had been a young student of astrophysics, fresh in from the sticks. Always the terrified compulsion to look up at the stars -- attending Shklovskii's bull sessions about intelligent life in the universe made him feel out of control, his thin veneer of sophistication in danger of cracking open to reveal the depths of his superstitious fear. The feeling had a shuddery attraction to Oleg, who was unable to join in the merry banter of his colleagues.

"You see, comrades, if we are not alone in the universe, the very fact of our lack of uniqueness has implications for our way of life! No longer are we part of an isolated, unique trend. Other intelligences, once their existence can be proven, would provide a powerful stimulus to our exploratory tendencies. Such intelligences, should they be more advanced than us, may be expected to be in constant communication even if physical interstellar travel is impossible -- yes? What is it? Meir, again?"

Oleg cleared his throat. "I think you overlook something," he said, suddenly aware that his heart was pounding. "Perhaps, all is stillness and quiet not because we are alone ... but because they are scared. After all, ideas can be dangerous, can they not? -- Just as socialist ideas are considered dangerous by the capitalists, so may there be, darker things lurking among the stars. Things that listen, like us, for the transmissions of the unwary ..."

"Like Voice of America?" some wit interrupted, and the whole room burst out laughing.

Oleg sat down, his face turning beet red. He looked round, searching for support against the hilarity -- there was a man he had never seen before at the back of the hall, and his expression was set and thoughtful. Something about him was vaguely familiar, like a half-remembered family photograph. Oleg looked away rapidly, and tried to ignore the good-natured joshing he received after the lecture from those who believed that the laws of dialectical materialism applied to interstellar communication. But somehow the face stuck in his mind; and he was not surprised when, two days later, he was awakened by a peremptory rap on the door of his room.

Struggling out of bed, Oleg made his way to the door. "Who is it?" he called, half-certain that it was the apartment warden about to complain again about him lying in on a perfectly good Saturday --

"Open up!" called a voice outside. "We haven't got all day!"

Oleg tensed, shivering with more than cold -- muscles bunching and coiling like ropes beneath his skin -- then opened the door a crack. "What's it about?" he asked. "I was in bed --"

"Never mind that. You can get dressed now. You're going for a drive in the country this morning, how about that? Don't bother packing, you'll be back before sunset, I promise. Come along now!"

Goaded into sudden action, Oleg grabbed his clothes and began to yank them on haphazardly. "You can come in," he called when he had his trousers belted. The door opened. "Have we met?" he asked politely.

The stranger shut the door behind him. "Two nights ago, at the Institute. I was in the row behind you."

Oleg's shoulders slumped with something like relief. "I thought you were with the cheka," he muttered as he buttoned his shirt.

The stranger looked at him and smiled, exposing his teeth. "You thought right -- sort of. The people I'm with ... the KGB don't like us, but we don't have to put up with them. Do the initials GRU mean anything to you?" Oleg stared uncomprehendingly. "Good. Now they do. We're going for a little drive in the country, and we'll have lunch at a dacha and I'm sure you'll enjoy our little chat; I'll drop you off back here this evening. How does that sound, comrade?"

Mouth dry, heart pounding again: "you want me to be an informer?" Oleg pulled on his boots, not looking at the man from the GRU, whatever that was, trying to memorise his face in case he had to --

"Don't be an idiot. We're not the fucking MVD; we're the army. What you were saying

about contact with extra-terrestrial civilisations interests us ... we just want to ask you a few more questions, bounce some ideas about, see what you can come up with. And you know something else?" Oleg jumped round as a hand landed on his shoulder, then froze. A faintly familiar smell tickled at his nostrils like the memory of a forgotten sin. "I was right," said the stranger who had stolen his identity. Then, in a language far older than that of the russ -- "how long have you been living alone among the humans, my friend?"

Moscow: Lunch time, 20th August 1991:

Cosmology and guilt and a blind fear of the unknown blurred together in Oleg's mind as he tried to concentrate on what he was doing. A trip to see the big military radar system at Semipalatinsk blurred into the dog-eared files he was lifting out of the back of his cabinet, vast banks of humming tubes meshed with the sleek Western computer chained to his desk. Time was of the essence: panic was ...

Possible. The big old radio beside the window was tuned to Radio Free Europe, but the MVD were jamming it again for the first time in years, the pock-pock-whirr of microwaves blasted into the ionosphere to stop the people learning of the crimes committed against them. Radar stations in the hands of Andrei and his dark-worshippers. Oleg shuddered, uncertain. Just as long as he doesn't know where to point them. He looked up, clutching a sheaf of papers about Cepheid variables. "Get me everything you can find under Krasnoyarsk," he muttered.

"Under what?" Anatoly looked perplexed.

"Krasnoyarsk," Oleg repeated. "It's a radar installation. You know? One of the big ones the military let us borrow."

"Oh, that. Isn't it one of the ones comrade General Secretary agreed with the Americans to dismantle?"

Oleg sniffed, bitterly amused by the way Anatoly still referred to Gorbachev by his title. "I see. What do you expect to find there, boss? Is that where they're holding him?"

"Not on another planet," Oleg muttered, thumbing through notes made years ago. The pile of paper was inches thick, held together with rough string and stale lies. Some of the documents were twenty, thirty years old: some were new, and of these a number bore CONFIDENTIAL stamps. Oleg had removed these from his safe.

He sighed as he contemplated the documents with a mixture of fear and pride. My life's work, and this is all there is to it? Itchy fear made the skin in the small of his back crawl; his leg muscles twitched, aching to be elsewhere. If Andrei gets hold of these ... they were the originals, not the precisely-faked duplicates he had filtered to the GRU Colonel over the past years. Careful cooperation, playing the useful idiot to find out how much Andrei knew, who his friends were, that was one thing. But this was for real; the probable coordinates of the end of the world ... he stopped subvocalizing so suddenly that he nearly bit his tongue. Maybe they knew where he came from, what he had done. Frightened, he looked over his shoulder, but only a bust of Lenin was watching. He scooped up the bundle and began to squeeze it into his brief-case. Half-way through the process he discovered that it wasn't going to fit unless he emptied the case first; he up-ended it over the carpet. Anatoly watched with what Ol

g assumed to be amused tolerance. He had to leave out the confidential papers, the ones about Krasnoyarsk, but finally everything fit together and he bent down to close his case.

Behind him, Anatoly cleared his throat. "There's something you should know, professor."

Oleg turned to Anatoly, who stood behind him, and sniffed, although he could tell perfectly well what was happening. His guts loosened abruptly. "What's going on? Where did you get that gun?" He tried to conceal his dismay as his companion stared at him. "What's happening?"

"This way, academician." The gun was small, oily-looking, the hole in its muzzle horribly dark; he could see the rifling in the barrel, which pointed straight at him. "Your services are required. Happenings more significant than the current ... ruckus, are being expedited under cover of the confusion. Events of cosmic importance. You could say the trigger just fell into our hands." Anatoly -- the being who wore the student Anatoly's face -- gestured Oleg backwards.

Oleg glanced left and right, but there was no way out. He backed slowly towards the door. The stranger was holding his brief-case, and Oleg had a gut-deep feeling that his living cooperation was not essential. "What do you want with me?" he whispered.

"Just cooperate. Through the door. Into the lift."

The lift grilles rattled open behind him. The gunman crowded in close, thrusting the muzzle of his weapon into a coat pocket to conceal it from by-standers. "Press the first floor button."

Oleg did as he was told, obedient, tense, knees trembling. "What are you doing?" he mumbled.

"Taking you somewhere safe." Anatoly sounded bored by the question.

"But -- this is crazy! Why are you kidnapping me? Who are you?"

The rough walls of the lift shaft rose up on either side. "Don't be naive, Oleg. You made a bargain years ago. Your research to be allowed to continue, with our support, in return for obedience -- when the time came. And what happens? You call your KGB kitten! That's not what I call obedience. And the falsehoods you've been feeding us this past year have not amused us greatly. Anyone would think you were trying to play a two-way game ... and you know what happens to people who get caught in the middle."

The lift came to a stop. Oleg looked around frantically. The lobby outside the elevator cage was deserted but for four Interior Ministry soldiers, rifles at the ready. One of them crossed the floor and pulled the doors open. Anatoly gestured him back with his free hand. "Forward, professor. We have a long journey ahead of us." He smiled as one of the guards opened the front door to reveal an armoured personnel carrier backed up against it, engine running. "Glad you could make the party!"

Leningrad: Monday morning, August the 20th, 1991:

Valentina was waiting impatiently in the station lobby at the airport, a woolen coat pulled tight around her; when she saw the uniformed officer she waved. He approached her

rapidly. "This had better be good," she said.

He looked away from her. "Maybe not," he said, so quietly that the words were nearly lost in the omnipresent traffic roar. Louder: "there's a message for you from Moscow, high priority. You want to read it here?"

Valentina stared at him. Just another uniformed flunky. "Give it to me."

He passed her the sealed slip and hung around, evidently pleased with himself. She hadn't bitten his head off, which was an unexpected bonus: Major Valentina Pavlova was notorious for expecting of her subordinates the same efficiency that she was known for herself.

She read the message quickly, face expressionless in the gloom. The officer glanced around, nervously; there were few people in the airport today, and when he looked at them they turned away pointedly. "What's going on?" he asked. "First the putsch, then this priority traffic --"

She stopped him with a brisk shake of the head. "I wouldn't worry about the coup if I were you. It will all be over soon. I need to get to Moscow as soon as possible. Take a message! When you see me leave, tell Major Gromov I'll report back in three days, until then I'll be in deep cover."

"You'll be --" she stared at the messenger until his eyes watered and he looked away.

"Don't ask. Tell him it's urgent. Is that understood, sergeant?"

He straightened up: saluted. "Yessir!"

"Good." She was already moving, walking towards the check-in desk, coat billowing out behind her.

"What is it?" he called over her shoulder.

"Got a plane to catch," she said, hurrying through the door.

"Authorisation --"

"No problem."

"Papers? Channels?"

"No time."

"As you say. Sir." They approached the milling crowd at the ticket counter together. The queue was long and agitated, worried travellers anxious to return to their own republics; but when Valentina produced her official pass everybody scattered. Despite the resentful glances, some things never changed.

"Yes? What is it?" sniffed the clerk. She looked tired and irritated.

"This. Where is your manager?"

She thrust his badge under the clerk's nose. It didn't have the desired effect. The woman snorted, as if amused: "You don't expect that to get you anywhere, do you? Chekist."

We've had enough of your kind ..."

Valentina reached out with a fluid motion and grabbed the clerk by one wrist. "You do as I say," she said quietly. "Otherwise I break your arm. Do you understand?"

The clerk mouthed something silently, her eyes growing round with surprise and sudden pain. "What -- what do you want?" she stuttered.

"To see whoever is in charge here," she said. "Of the air defense facilities. I have a plane to catch, for Moscow."

"But no flights are scheduled!" protested the clerk. Valentina let go of her wrist, but continued to stare at her unblinkingly.

"Now there is. I repeat; where is the manager? I have a plane to catch."

The clerk picked up a telephone handset and began to dial, glancing up warily at Valentina as she did so. "I'll see what can be done, but I make no promises," she said.

Valentina caught the sergeant's eye; he nodded imperceptibly. "Tell Gromov," she emphasized. "It is essential."

The clerk paused. "But why?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her fear. "What's so important?"

Valentina glanced over her shoulder at her assistant. "She asks what's so important," she said quietly, all the time conscious of the crowd watching over his shoulder, not yet nasty but quite capable of turning if they saw something not to their liking ... "what's important? I'll tell you what's important," she said. "If we don't get to Moscow by noon, both you and your boss can look forward to an extended holiday in Siberia ... whoever's in charge ..."

Moscow: Three o'clock:

The ancient Kamov chopper she'd requisitioned clattered into the Moscow air defense region. The phones were down: whether it would have made any difference was questionable. Valentina sat in the middle of the narrow, glassed-in cockpit, beside the pilot. Her jaw was rigid, as tense as steel; her eyes were focussed on a point a million miles away, replaying cinema reels of memory. Glacial, slow memories. Memories of an interview, not long after she'd come to Moscow: memories of a militiaman long forgotten, one of the kin, who'd helped her change her life ...

They'd been lucky to find her. Not so much gone to the dogs as abandoned to the humans ... twenty-nine, addicted to heroin, living as a street prostitute, a member of the officially non-existent underground encouraged by the Brezhnev faction during their twenty year reign of hypocrisy. My, but they did a good job of westernizing us fast! All the vices and none of the virtues ... lost in her memories, she blinked, astonished by the strange value systems her own mind was capable of throwing up. Hey, live among humans for long enough, you even start thinking like one --

It had been pure coincidence. One of the street-sweeps they'd been so keen on under Andropov; the weerde who finally found her was a militia lieutenant assigned to mopping up the untouchables who weren't meant to contaminate the crime sheets of the

squeaky-clean new order -- after all, prostitution and drug abuse were western problems, weren't they? She remembered the cigarette smoke rising in spirals from the ash tray on the scarred desk, the long interviews by lamp light as they tried to work out who she knew and why she had been tolerated for so long: unable to admit publicly that all cultures have a dark side, that everyone needs something to be afraid of, to lust after, some forbidden fruit ...

The woman in the fur coat, black mini-dress, tights and make-up that weren't even in the shops for people to queue for; the first thing that had caught the policeman's attention was how attractive she was. Thin, but not gaunt, young-looking but not a child. She shouldn't be pretty, not with the kind of life-style she led -- a three needle a day habit, not to mention the chalk mixed with the damned Afghan dust by her scumbag dealer. "We know all about you," he said, tapping her folder meaningfully, and she had laughed at him like a wolf in the depths of the winter forest.

"No matter how much you think you know about me you will never know all about me," she said. She stared at him with black, glittering eyes, ice cubes that didn't melt under the lamp.

"Really?" he asked. To a human it would have sounded like something between a cough and a grunt.

Her eyes had widened, but not from fear: he had seen her fingers flexing to strike, and tensed. "If my brother sent you to get me back," she had said, "you can tell him I'm not interested."

The cop had leaned forward, exposing his throat: "really?" he asked. "And why would your brother do a thing like that?"

"Because he loves me. Or he thinks he does. I don't think he would know love if it bit his throat out. All he's in love with is the dark." She relaxed her hands, looked down; noticed for the first time how bony they looked. As if her skin had become a translucent film, a winding sheet for her skeleton, in the undead time since she came out of the forest. "That's why I left. After our parents died."

The cop had leaned back, the hardest bit of the interview over: making her decide to talk. "And since leaving, is that when you began to hang out on the street?"

She shrugged. A certain tension had gone out of the interrogation; now it was more like a conversation. "It's a living. I have no papers, as you may have noticed ..."

"That can be remedied." She blinked rapidly, surprised by a stab of resentment. Trapped. "But first, it would help if you would answer a couple of questions. Strictly on a cooperative basis; it makes it look better on the record."

"Like what?" she asked, forcing herself to relax. The sense of being caught in a trap intensified.

"Like beginning with when did you last see your brother?"

"Huh." She snorted. It would have been a laugh if she'd been human. "He wrote to me until a year or two ago; I burned the letters. He always knows where I am; where he is I don't think even the KGB know." She stared at him. "Do they?"

"Really!" The kin who was also a militia lieutenant shrugged. "Hey, don't look at me like that. The word has gone out from on high that people like you don't exist. So what are you going to do about it?"

"Why should I do anything about it?" she asked, feeling a chill run up and down her spine as she met his gaze. This was what she'd been afraid of for a long time, since the icy nights so long ago: the loss of her freedom of action. "I'm doing very well as it is."

"No you're not." He had stared at her until she was forced looked away. "You're ill. Your shit-head of a pimp is cutting your fix with chalk, you know that? Your apartment has slime on the walls and the residents hate you -- that's why you're here. You were fingered."

"So what business of yours is it, how I go about destroying myself?" she asked, mustering a calm as brittle as her paper-fine skin; "why do you want to stop me?"

The cop reached out and took her hand -- gambling that nobody would be watching this interview, that it was not a hidden test of some kind -- "because you're one of us and you've been hurt by those fucking animals," he grunted. Her eyes flickered left and right, but she didn't pull away. She could feel his pulse against her skin, fast, like any other of her kind. "How long is it since you had a proper meal?"

"What's one of those?" she asked. "Hey, don't lay that shit on me!" Now she pulled away. "I can look after myself. What are you after?"

The lieutenant glanced at the ceiling, abashed. "Nothing," he said after a moment. "I don't want anything from you. At least nothing you can give me. I just thought --"

She reached out and touched his hand. "Okay," she said. "Comrade. So that's what it is?" She looked at him askance. "That's all it is?"

"And a full list of all your partners in crime," he added; "but that's no reason to run away from me. I'm not a monster. I'll settle for just the humans."

"Uh-huh."

They sat in silence for a minute as Valentina collected her nerves for the next step in the process. There was an inevitability to it, a determinism, which scared and exhilarated her; will everything begin to get better, now? "There is one thing, though," she said quietly.

"What's that?"

"For the records, we need an excuse. I can't just disappear."

"So?" The temperature in the cell seemed to drop a couple of degrees.

"I want to cut a deal."

"Oh."

Then Val leaned forwards intently. "My help," she whispered, "in return for yours. I'll need a hand afterwards, you see. I'll give you everything you want. But in return I need something."

"And what would that be?" asked the cop, leaning back in his chair, staring at her with cool expectation.

She licked her lips. "I've been thinking," she said. "This is no career for a lady. But tell me, do you know how easy it is to get a job in the undercover police?"

She was awakened by the change in engine noise as the chopper came in to land. From the military field it was a half-hour drive into the city. She was out of the police car as soon as it pulled up outside the Institute building; before she reached the doors some students emerged. They gathered in front of her, blocking the path. "What do you want here?" demanded one of them, a fat, balding man with a beard and the look of an agitator about him. "Who the hell are you?"

She stared at him, breathing hard. "Is Academician Meir in his office today?" she asked; "I need to speak to him urgently."

"I'll bet you do," began the fat man, only to be cut off by one of his companions, a woman; "Wait! Who are you? Why do you want to see the professor?"

"He's in danger," she said simply. Nameless emotions threatened her control; she fought back ruthlessly, steeling herself for the big half-truth. "I want to get him out of it."

Almost at once the students crowded in. "You're too late," said the woman. "Militia came for him oh, half an hour ago! In an APC." She positively bristled. "Fuckers threatened to shoot anyone who got in their way --" There was an angry rumbling from behind.

"Do you have any idea where they were taking him?" She asked, excitement and dread washing through her.

"No, but, hey! What -- "

She pushed past the fat man. "Where's Oleg's office?" she asked.

"Here. I'll take you." It was the woman student again. They hurried indoors, then waited interminably for a creaking lift to arrive. "We've barricaded the stairs -- if they try to root us out we'll shut off the lift motor," said the student. "Who are you?"

"A friend of Oleg's. Not all the security forces are against you," said Val. The lift doors opened and they crowded in. "Where did they go?"

"One of them -- an informer, looked like one of us -- came and took the Academician downstairs. Oh, there's his office."

"Looks like he left in a hurry," observed Valentia, as the student swung the lift doors open and darted into the room. "Hey, what a mess! What ..."

The woman leaned over the desk, concentrating. "These are all his papers. Shit."

Valentina stepped closer, her right hand thrust deep into her pocket. "What are they about?" she demanded.

"This -- these are all confidential! I didn't know Professor Meir worked for the army --"

She turned and made a dash for the lift; Valentina followed her, grabbed the back of her

coat. "Wait," she hissed. "What kind of papers?"

The student twisted round, then saw Valentina's expression. "Uh --"

Breathe. Relax. Val forced herself to smile. "What were they about?"

"Uh ... oh. Something about the radar base at Krasnoyarsk. You know it? Big rocket forces base. They're going to dismantle it soon. Uh. I could have sworn you --"

But Valentina wasn't there any more, wasn't in the lift; was back through the office then half way down the stairs and out to the police car before she stopped to think, before the student could even blink back after-images of what she had thought she'd seen in Val's face.

"Airfield," Val snapped at her driver: "fast!" Rubber screeched. "I've got a plane to catch." Why Krasnoyarsk? she puzzled, consulting her inner oracle, her memory of her brother. But all he did was shrug and smile and say something: and all she could make out was one phrase. Three thousand megawatts.

Three o'clock:

Oleg Meir peered out of the small, dim porthole and tried to ease the pain in his wrists. The hand-cuffs were too tight, and the fleshy part of his hands tingled with pins and needles. A simple exercise, thinning out his own flesh, would ease it -- but his captors knew who they were dealing with, and there were limits to what could be done in an hour or two. Besides, with fists the size of a baby's he'd be in no position to put up a fight.

This is the worst part: the waiting. He looked down across the white emptiness below, tried to ignore the itching in the back of his throat and the pain in his ears. Outside the fuselage, four giant Turmanskii gas turbines howled across the tundra. The sky overhead was the deep blue of an ice age. Pine trees clustered across the low-lying terrain to the south, but the flight path of the jet was carrying Oleg ever closer to the Arctic circle. How long will this take? He tried to calculate it in his head; assuming an air-speed of five hundred knots, that would make it ... seven hours. Give or take. To the land of ice and sky fire, where nuclear-powered pyramids brooded beneath the eternal sun. Vast, many-tracked crawlers bearing fiery cylinders of nuclear death. Oceans of ice beneath which submarines crept in cold-war pursuits. Ancient tribes of ice-dwelling hunters, bemused by the entry of the modern world into their dream of ages, forced out of the wire-wrapped military reservations. Solzhenitsyn had w

ritten about the Gulag archipelago, the islands of prisoners locked in the sea of Siberia, but this was something else. This was the continent of the military, gripped in the paranoid embrace of an eternal winter of the soul.

I ought to stop them from doing it, Oleg told himself for the thousandth time. It was a pathetic mantra, but repetition made it seem more practical; if only the sense of doing it would not so stubbornly elude him ...

Up front, a door banged open. Oleg looked up; it was Anatoly, or whoever passed for him. The shadows standing out beneath his high cheek-bones gave him a lupine appearance. Oleg turned his head away and closed his eyes. His captor ignored this; seconds later he sensed warm breath centimetres from his face.

"You don't have any choice in the matter, you know."

Oleg opened his eyes. "Don't I?" he asked.

Anatoly -- whoever he was -- seemed to find this amusing. "Avoid the end of the universe? Huh!" He drew away a fraction and Oleg flinched, expecting a blow. It never came. "We are not cruel, Professor. We are not the dark. Our intentions are good."

Oleg held up his chained wrists. "Then why ..?"

Anatoly shook his head slowly. "You don't understand. We can't afford to take any chances. It has been many years since we tried and failed ... too long ago. Our German colleagues who set the agenda at the Wannsee conference -- now they were evil. In human terms, at least. But us? You do me a disservice." He leaned forward until he was nose-to-nose with Oleg. "We are here to help you."

"Help me!" He snorted. "How?"

"Help you --" Anatoly paused for a moment -- "help you do what you didn't have the guts to do on your own. Even though you've known how to do it for years, now ... even though we gave you all the facilities you could possibly need. Don't play the innocent, Professor. You know what I'm talking about."

"I do?" Oleg found himself unable to look away from Anatoly's dark eyes; the expression on that face, the shared fear of the pit over which he had been walking these past years, black as his worst fears ... "You really think that I can summon down the Dark?" His stomach turned over, a vast uneasy sense of urgency growing inside him. His heart raced, and the handcuffs slid around his slippery wrists as if on a thin coating of slime.

Anatoly leaned close to him. "I know you can, Oleg. Because you want to do it, don't you? Otherwise you'd have turned me in long ago, to that chekist major you can't leave alone, you think we don't know about that?"

Anatoly's face rippled slowly before Oleg's eyes, twisting into another shape that it had worn for a long time before it's owner had chosen to pass for a student; a visage at once familiar and frightening. "I know you better than you think, Comrade Academician. You like your cosy office too much, and you're still afraid of the dark the way they taught you to be. But part of you wants to get it over with very badly, doesn't it? You don't like human people, although you try to hide it -- isn't that so? You don't even like your own kind very much. So you crouch in dark corners and search frantically for the key to the thing that scares you most, telling yourself that you need the information in order to hide better -- such nonsense! I'll tell you what you wanted to know. You wanted to work out where the Dark had gone, in those long aeons since it first came, while the sun swung around the core of the galaxy -- isn't that right? -- because you knew better than most of us where the technology was leading the humans."

Anatoly-Andrei turned sinuously and sat down beside Oleg. Oleg stared, trying to fix ever tiny detail in his mind: the pores in Andrei's skin, the faint, acrid smell of the kin, the slight, nervous way he fidgeted with his left hand. Andrei stared back, eyes wide in a display of inhuman concern.

"Another twenty years and their geneticists, they'll be able to pin us down everywhere. Have you thought of that? It would mean the end of us, the end of everything. But not if we have the guts to do what we should do, and use those three thousand megawatts, no? If we get our blow in first, we can be safe again. All of us. To sleep away another age without fear of interruption by the hairless apes." Andrei -- visibly Andrei now, still as youthful as when Oleg had first met him in the mid-sixties -- stared like an obsessive, fear and calculation mingled in his gaze. "Isn't that right?" he asked. "Don't you know it's true? We can't let them carry on --"

"You're --" Oleg stopped, at a loss for words. He thinks he knows everything. Andrei blinked rapidly, as if looking for a further justification.

"The function systems, Professor. We've seen your interest in Lyupanov space and chaos theory. We even heard about those programs you ran -- after you erased them and shredded the results. We can guess. You know exactly how to go about summoning the dark; where to point the antennae, what message to send, how long it will take. The radar site at Krasnoyarsk interested you, so we guessed. Big, powerful transmitters. That's it, isn't it? You are our people's only hope, now."

"Why? I don't understand. What's in it for you?"

"Nothing, probably. Freedom from fear." Andrei shrugged, suddenly abashed. "Come now, professor. We're all afraid together, aren't we? Those who think the Dark will kill us, and those -- like you -- who fear it but understand the need. I just --" he sighed and looked away for a moment. Then: "I just want to get it over with. The fear, not knowing. We live among animals who could turn on us at any time. What could be worse than that? Face it, professor. When it comes down to it, we are all kin. And that's all the humans will see if they learn of us."

Oleg held up his hands again. "With these, how can I trust you?" he asked, simply.

Andrei held up a key. "How can I trust you, if you won't even tell me what you're running from?" he asked. "Say it. You can't hide forever."

"Say what ..." Oleg's mouth was dry, his heart pounding; he barely noticed that the tension of years was melting away from him as he let his real face peep through, let the darkness that had been raised in his childhood soul reveal itself to his captor.

"We know about the taiga."

"The taiga ..." Oleg swallowed, breaking out in sweat. "What do you mean?" He looked at Andrei, terrified beyond rational cause; he had expected them to kill him, not dig up his past.

"We know what you did. All we want you to do is to do it again. How does that sound?" It was a plea rather than a threat, and it spoke to Oleg. "Is it so bad that you must forget even who you were, what you did?"

"You're mad," Oleg whispered, falling back on his last defense.

Andrei shook his head sadly. "If I am mad, then so are you," he said, turning away. "Think about it professor: it's not so much. And you will do it, don't you? Because you want to. See you later ..."

He left. And Oleg sweated out the rest of the flight, cold as ice and frightened as a ghost. Because, when he forced himself to confront the issue, Andrei was substantially correct. Nothing would please him more than do to away with these turbulent humans, except for the cost of returning to his own worst nightmare ...

"They took off two hours ago, outbound for the Kola peninsula on a 192 with long-range fuel tanks and a detachment of military police. Looks like they're clear of you."

"Shit." Valentina thumped the table so hard that the telephone on it bounced. "Can't you do anything about it?"

"Like what? Take them down?" The voice on the other end of the line was sardonic. "Be sensible! He's only a dissident --"

She hung up angrily. "Well?" called the base political officer from across the room.

"Air Defense says no," she muttered; "well fuck 'em!"

"You could follow them," suggested the captain, complacent in his insularity. "It's only a slow cargo plane."

"No. I'd still be too late. All they need is the authorization to run a quick sky-search; that's what Oleg had. An astronomer. Then blast three gigawatts of pulsed microwave energy in the direction of ..." she shuddered, searching for an excuse. "The American early warning satellite." What a good lie. We should never have let them discover the wheel ...

"I didn't know it was that serious," the political complained. "If they'd warned us, through proper channels --"

"Forget it," she snapped. She stared out the window of the office, towards the runway where the MiG-29's squatted on their landing gear like menacing green wasps. "Those birds. Any of them ready to go? With a passenger?"

"But they're single-seaters --" the political stood up, paused for a moment of indecision -- "I think one of them's a trainer, though. You're going to requisition a fighter?"

Valentina turned and stared at him. "Why not?" she asked, deceptively innocent. "The man's got to be stopped. He's dangerous. I've got to get where he's going -- fast. Can you suggest anything better?"

"Can you?" challenged the captain. "I mean, it's all very well for you, but me -- I've got to answer to the boss! Who will be unhappy, unless --"

"Name a price. Bill Department Seven Special Circumstances for the budget." She was already half-way to the door when she paused. "Where do you keep your flight suits?" she asked.

The base security officer was smiling. "This way," he said. "You're really going after him? To get there first and arrest him?" Valentina nodded, unwilling to trust her own tongue. "That's great! Just like in the movies!" And he held the door open for her as she went to collect her flight kit.

Six twenty-three:

Almost before it taxi'd to a halt beside the despatch terminal, a personnel carrier drew up beside the jet. The evening sun scattered in orange shards from the truncated pyramids in the distance; a fine powder of snow dusted the runway beneath the aircraft's nose. An ancient military stairlift drew up beside the cockpit canopy as it swung open. As Valentina clambered down the ladder she discovered a welcoming committee. "Major Valentina Pavlova? Major Rostopov, base security. I hope you have an explanation for this." The spokesman wore a coat with major's epaulettes and a smile as charmless as a rattlesnake. His guards were decked out in full winter combat gear, rifles held at the ready.

"There's an explanation all right. Who are you?" Valentina shivered in her flight suit: it was a summer's evening, and the temperature had already dropped below freezing.

"Your papers --"

Valentina stared at him coldly. "Contact Leningrad Central KGB. The exchange code is gold nine zero five. Ask to be connected to the office of Marshal Dmitri Yazov. Explain that Major Pavlova is here and you require clearance to proceed."

Rostopov recoiled slightly, then caught himself. "And if I don't?" he asked sharply. "This is a cold country, major. Have you noticed which way the wind is blowing?"

"Or you can contact Moscow Parliament. Ask for the office of the President. Tell Comrade Yeltsin's secretary to read you Presidential Emergency Decree forty --"

"Enough." Rostopov raised his hands abruptly, as if surrendering. "If you would care to get inside the carrier -- I'm sure we can discuss this in my office --" He looked as if he had tasted something extremely bitter.

"No time. I want to go to the Priority Installation, not the airfield. Can you take me there directly?"

"The Priority ..." Rostopov stared at him. "What is this? You've got the Emergency Committee and the President in your pocket and ... shit, I don't believe this!" He clambered into the body of the APC, still muttering vaguely. "You bet I'm going to check your credentials, comrade, this is extremely irregular --"

Valentina followed him into the passenger compartment. As she did so she removed her right hand from her pocket. The Stetchkin automatic that nestled inside had not been needed -- this time. It's amazing how gullible the confusion makes them ...

The carrier rumbled off towards the compound gates, under the gaze of the perimeter guards. She sat very still, waiting for the hot-air blowers to blast the chill out of the rattling metal box. It felt unnatural, in a way that she had never really learned to block out; too much living among humans numbed the senses, trained them to ignore alien smells and ways. She'd have told her brother it was a bad idea if he'd ever asked, back when they were young -- but he wasn't likely to ask such penetrating questions, and she was not about to volunteer her opinion without it first being requested. That was the basis of all her relationships, after all. She remembered all too well where breaking that rule that had got her in the past.

As they travelled, Major Rostopov tried to wheedle information out of her. This Valentina found vaguely amusing. "What is going on, comrade, that can't wait until the

current situation blows over? You nearly gave the Colonel a heart attack when he heard what kind of speed that bird of yours was doing -- he thought it was a yankee F-111 coming down his throat -- what gives?"

She yawned. "It's been a long day, Major. And very unpleasant. Wet working conditions, if you take my meaning." Rostopov blanched and shut his mouth with an audible snap, then scrambled forward into the driver's section.

The carrier rumbled through a tight turn and stopped while the outer gate opened in front of it. Rostopov re-appeared; "I can take you as far as the commandant's office," he said. "They won't let this vehicle go any further. You'd better have your papers ready."

Valentina nodded. "That will do."

The diesel wound up into a full-throated howl and the armoured personnel carrier went to full speed. It was all she could do to prevent herself from being thrown from wall to wall like a rag doll; conversation was out of the question. For a gut-freezing moment she tried to remember whether she'd set the safety on her gun: a Stetchkin looked like a pistol, but it could discharge a full magazine in only a second, spraying white-hot lead around the whole compartment. That was why she'd chosen it. I might only get the one chance. Somehow the thought elated her at the same time as it scared her to death: it made her think of blood-red nights and flesh-hot mouths, of predatory passions that humans could not and should not understand. She'd come a long way for this, unimaginably far.

The one chance -- she remembered her brother, the last night. He'd gone away when she was a baby, leaving her alone with their parents: gone away to school in the city where buildings of stone scraped at the sky until it wept stars of blood. Left her to years of cloying intimacy, the family that lived alone on the tundra in a hovel that froze from the inside out in winter: strange, inbred folk ignored by humans, shunned by everyone but the nomadic trappers ... it couldn't last forever. When he returned from the unimaginably distant city she was older and wiser, but not old enough. He took her by the hand: "I love you, sister," he said, "you're the only one." Twenty years older than she was and he was right, there were no other kin within five hundred kilometres. When he touched her her skin caught fire and burned with an alien heat. "Let me show you why," he said.

They had gone outside in the woods, he and she, alone at dusk in summer, when the mosquitos bred in swarms above the stagnant ponds that lay among the roots of decaying pine trees. The summer tundra was stagnant and fetid, like a bloated corpse. He'd led her by the hand, deep into the woods along a path that human eyes could never follow, to a small glade surrounded by dead trees. There he set fire to her senses with his hands and body: it was not a new experience, for she was weerde and fey and coming into adulthood in a land where the ice rarely melted. When she came she bayed like a wolf at the midnight sun.

Afterwards, as they lay side-by-side together, he said to her slyly: "I have a secret, sister. Do you want to know what it is?"

Still warm from his embrace, she had said yes, she did. "It's the humans. The trappers. Do you wonder why so few have visited us this spring?"

She'd nodded, mutely. Thier absence had worried her unaccountably. "They're not our

people," he said. "Ancient, primitive ... they think they know it all. But we scare them. They mutter curses and keep their women behind the covers of their yurts because they think we possess the evil eye. Maybe they'd tell the communists, but they're afraid of us ... the hex is still stronger than the red star. You know something? They're right."

He stood, naked, above her: shape melting into the trees like the ghost of something unimaginably ancient. No longer human, but raw and elemental as the winter. "I hold the key, sister. I know where It dwells; the thing with no Name, of which the legends speak." Leaning down, he helped her rise. Inhuman eyes glittered in the un-night. "One day this will return, whether we will it or no. They sensed this, I think. I had no alternative."

Together they walked deeper into the forest, where the trees wove overhead into a canopy of darkness and the ground was a rancid mulch of needles, he leading and she following. "They came in the night to lead the kommunisti to us," he said.

Deep foreboding chilled her to the core: "What have you done?" she demanded.

"Didn't want to lose you," he said, reaching for her hands. "They were doomed anyway. In the nature of their people. Look:" she looked. Saw what he had done to the traders who had been their only contact with the outside world. "I did it for you, my love. Didn't want to lose you. What's wrong?"

She remembered bending her head forward to kiss the dead thing that passed for an altar, no longer breathing, gagging on the stench of decomposition -- "One day this will return, whether we will it or no" -- striking out, changing her face, her mind, her memory to expunge the memory until the day a year later when she woke up to see a letter lying on her straw-filled pillow -- her fingers flexed involuntarily, opening and closing like talons. Why did it fall to me to be born to the parents of a monster? He couldn't leave her alone; through all the years he'd tracked her, from a distance, known where to find her. Bracing herself against one green-painted wall, she reached into her pocket for reassurance. But he'd never dared to face her down, to venture an explanation. Happiness is a warm gun. Yes, there it was: the sick feeling in her stomach subsiding momentarily. A flash of malice made her shudder with its intensity; I hope he's still there, the bastard. So many lost years to answer for, and when

e finally calls it's only to tell me ...

She noticed Major Rostopov was back. He was staring at her. She let herself smile back at him; let it all shine out, then closely observed the fear sketch livid shadows beneath his eyes.

Seven fourteen:

Tracking Control was a cavernous chamber in a bunker deep beneath the permafrost, protected by layers of air defense missiles and interceptor squadrons against the day when the B-52's came over the horizon. Oleg Meir felt anything but safe, though. Even with Andrei behind him, smoothing the way at every turn and smiling-joking with the Colonel in charge, it felt wrong. Perhaps it was guilt. Oleg knew exactly what he was doing ... and he had a feeling that Andrei, however strong his faith in the Dark might be, did not. Besides which, Oleg knew who was coming. Fear and guilt roiled inside him until he felt almost hollow. What if she's right? He worried. What if she hasn't forgotten?

"So I would like it if you could load the ephemerides and begin transmitting for a period of one hour as soon as the message is loaded. Think you can manage that?" asked Andrei.

The captain in charge of the post nodded. "And bill the Institute ... for SETI? Think we'll find anything, comrade Academician?" He seemed to be more bemused than anything else.

Oleg shrugged uncomfortably, glancing at Andrei, who smiled down at him with tight-pursed lips. "It's a theory. We need to complete it for a thesis, big international conference, you know the sort of thing. Anyway, the Americans haven't done it yet -- they've listened, Project Ozma back in the sixties was the first -- but transmitted? If this trial is a success we'll be able to get backing for a full research project. Who knows? We might even get to keep the big dish, whatever arms treaties they come up with."

The captain's eyes glittered. Like far too many of the hairless apes, Oleg realised, he thought of his machines as being more human than other people. "So what is the text of the message, exactly?" he asked.

Andrei nudged Oleg surreptitiously. Oleg tapped a couple of keys on the shielded terminal, calling up a listing. He'd loaded it off tape barely an hour since, under Andrei's wary eye. He hadn't given him an inch of slack, whatever he might have said on the flight in; Oleg was precisely as free as he had been before, handcuffed or otherwise. "It's a fractal. Random looking, in the most unimaginably deterministic way. There are very few ways you can decode it, and all of them imply that it is no coincidence ... the message is the medium, in this case. With three gigawatts punching it out, it should be quite deafening out to a couple of hundred light year's range. If I get the chance to repeat, we'll need to sustain it for a full year." But we won't need to, thought Oleg. Not if the old legends are correct. If thoughts alone could summon it, even a fraction of a megawatt beaming the right message should be overkill ...

"That's settled, then," said the captain. "All I need is the authorisation -- oh." He stopped, looked up.

Andrei leaned over Oleg's chair and turned the full force of his personality on the hapless officer. "I'll see to that at once! I'm sure Colonel Blavatsky will agree; after all the project release has been signed by the ministry, hasn't it?" He smiled, baring spotless teeth, and the captain nodded back helplessly. "Perhaps you'd like to load the transmission sequence now and run it through the modulator stage, just to check that there are no unforeseen problems ... you're sure you can transmit on twenty-one centimetres? The, uh, water hole?"

"H-band, yes." He nodded so violently that one of the technicians glanced round in concern before bending back over his diagnostic station. "Of course. You want me to load it? Sure."

He began tapping keys on his terminal at a surprising rate. Oleg watched, fascinated and terrified at the same time: his authorisation on this system didn't extend to actually issuing commands. It was all automated -- a phased array radar was nothing more than a series of pulses propagating through silicon, after all -- but still it made him catch his breath, to see a palid-looking captain sitting at a desk steer a billion roubles of electronics to point at an ephemeris from which no American missile could possibly originate ...

There was a banging, some way off in the building. Oleg ignored it, watching instead the big wall screen that painted the beam path across a polar map of the Union. The highlighted strip jumped, suddenly, pointing inwards and upwards; a searchlight beacon of microwaves pouring energy out towards the stars. "That's good," he said, encouragingly.

The young officer grinned back. "We can point it anywhere," he said; "even down here, if we wanted to fry our brains out. Hey --" He made as if to stand up, but Oleg caught his hand and held it.

"Sit down," he said softly. "Let the colonel deal with it." Behind him, Andrei was moving towards the door. "You don't actually think this is a good thing to do?" he asked the captain, suddenly curious to hear this young man pronounce upon his own species' demise.

For a moment doubt flickered across the young man's features. "What makes you ask that, comrade? Is this some kind of political thing?"

A shadow of exasperation crossed Oleg's features. "They don't tell you anything out here, do they? About the coup? It'll collapse, you know, but the Union will go on in one form or another. No, not politics. Just ... think what might lie out there! What hideous evil we might be summoning down when you transmit that call sign ..."

But the captain shook his head and grinned. "But you must be wrong, comrade! Look --" before Oleg could stop him he punched keys. "I send it now! And you know, of course if they can understand what they are reading in decades time from now, they must be more intelligent than us, more civilized! Mustn't they?"

Oleg stared at the anonymous soldier, utterly aghast. There was a staccato banging noise in the distance. For a moment ice water coursed through his veins instead of blood. What have you done ... "Of course, if you are wrong, you might have killed the human race." He felt a giant laugh, two-thirds relief and one third terror, rumble through the back of his head like an echo of thunder, the humour of a mad god. Acutely aware of the guards, the guns pointing ever inwards, his guts melted to jelly. You fool! The most important event in the history of your species and you do it because of a discredited political theory! It's humans like you who screwed us over so badly that this is the only way out -- a grand, manic hilarity bubbled up inside him, thirty years of terror set free in a single moment.

The captain, oblivious, shook his head and smiled. "Rubbish, comrade! Any aliens sophisticated enough to read your message, of course they'll be good communists, won't they? I mean, it stands to reason that all intelligent life must be evolving towards --"

Oleg felt a sudden gust of cold air on his neck. The captain stood up, mouth hanging open, as Oleg spun round in his chair to face his sister, her frozen vengeful face, the ridiculously small pistol she clutched in her hands -- "you can't be serious," he tried to say, smiling with embarrassment and fear: "I didn't do it. They did it to themselves! After all these years I never even had to raise a finger!" Staring down the barrel of a loaded gun, wondering as if for the first time if he might be held accountable: "won't you be reasonable? Talk to me!"

His sister took a step forward; and for a moment Oleg thought he saw her smile. "What's there to talk about?" she asked.

"Everything --" he began.

But he was much too late.

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