

The Battle



The voice crackled through the oxidized copper grill. “What do you see?” it said. “It’s important that you tell us exactly what you see.”

But Sergei didn’t look at his screen. Instead he wiped the aspic from his drooping mustache, closed his government-issued lunch pail and glanced over at Ivan asleep at his joystick. Sergei swiveled his chair and nudged the back of Ivan’s with his boot.

“Listen to this,” Sergei said. He nodded at the disembodied voice, at the filament’s twisting blue incandescence as the voice repeated its request. “Tell us exactly what you...”

But Ivan’s head remained stationary, firmly nestled face-down in his olivje salad. Sergei loosened the empty bottle of Stolichnaya from the crook of Ivan’s elbow and pulled his nostrils into view to prevent death-by-snorted-mayonnaise. “Are you there?” the voice said. “Are you there station four?”

He was there. He and Ivan were there. Alone among thirteen otherwise empty workstations. The two unlucky souls working on Anastasia Day, the day when all Russia paused from its daily toil to ponder how beautiful President Eugenev’s second wife was.

“Da,” Sergei said. “Da, Da,” into the microphone. “I’m here.”

Anastasia wasn’t his type. She was sexy alright—with her oversized breasts and undersized skirts—but she wasn’t beautiful. Not like Anna at workstation twelve. Sergei stared at the back of her empty chair, at the white teddy bear Vladimir had given her last week. He looked out the window at the promenade, at the sun glistening off the languid waters of the Black Sea just outside the compound, and knew they, Anna and Vladimir, they and his other coworkers, were most certainly at the beach today. He shuddered at the thought of Vladimir’s hairy-knuckled hands rubbing fresh coconut oil into Anna’s mole-peppered skin, his fingers slipping briefly beneath the elastic of her suit as if by accident as he did.

Sergei swiveled back toward the screen, toward the fuzzy, shape-shifting blobs transmitted from the infrared periscope of sub #4, his sub, the one Sergei called Bobik after his late, near-sighted terrier.

“What do you see station four?”

Sergei sighed. Was this a joke? Was High Command taunting him on this day of forced labor? Unlike the sun-kissed sands of Baklavakovanya beach, surely packed at this very moment with heat-emitting bodies on this holiday, High Command knew full well the fleet of unmanned subs were now traveling through several months of polar night, with nary a sunbeam or a warm-blooded Anna to flare the screen green with life.

Nevertheless Sergei finally obliged. “Looking, High Command,” he said, before pressing his glasses against the bridge of his nose. “Looking,” he repeated as he powered up the screen. Yet when Sergei finally looked he had to rub his eyes and look again before he truly saw. He kicked Ivan’s chair. “Vanya, wake up!” he said, watching the green forms dance on the screen before him. “What is that?” he muttered to himself, to the still-snoring Ivan, to the room that now seemed terribly empty and large.

How could this be? After months of one blank screen after another, months of mind-numbing surveillance monotony, months of Bobik dropping weighted Russian flag after weighted Russian flag upon the disputed Arctic seabed, today of all days, Anastasia Day, God decides to pull a cosmic joke on poor Sergei?

Ivan wasn’t stirring. The voice from the copper grill grew more insistent, more impatient with every passing moment. The filament in the speaker’s glass tubing coiled and danced an angry blue with High Command’s increasingly peremptory tone.

“Give your coordinates station four.”

Sergei replayed the afternoon in his head. They’d powered down the main console, dimmed the screens, lit an old hurricane lamp and piped in *The Battle of the Accordions*, whose sudden-death finale they listened to on this very holiday each year. Armed with pine brandy, for Sergei preferred it to vodka, he had matched Ivan, shot for shot, with each eliminated contestant.

“Her tits would freeze in a swimsuit, Sergei,” Ivan had said. “And Vladimir’s probably wearing those gloves of his. It would be like trying to feel Anna up with flippers.”

“The hottest November 11th in Russian history, Vanya,” Sergei replied. “You heard the man. *Ever*. And here we are, inside a concrete bunker.”

“It’s still cold,” he said. “Too cold for bikinis and coconut oil.”

Sergei shrugged and took a swig of pine brandy, gargling it mournfully before swallowing.

“Remember how long it took him to learn to control his sub, to earn his own joystick?” Ivan

said. "Remember Sergei? Even barehanded he couldn't undo the clasp on her brassiere with the help of his own mother. Remember in the simulation, his sub stuck deep in that crevasse, long after the rest of us were doing maneuvers with real submarines?"

"Maybe he's stuck in her crevasse," Sergei said. "Wedged high up in there right now."

Ivan paused to picture this. "It's probably warm in there."

"Record temperatures," Sergei said as an accordionist's fingers danced nimbly through Lady in Spain.

Sergei remembered little else. Just Ivan at the teletext, another arbitrary order to move part of the fleet. This time from the Norwegian oil rig to the west coast of Svalchuk. Then came Sergei's nap, truncated by the fitful gelatinous gurgle of Ivan aspirating his salad.

Sergei looked now at the teletext and noticed the red light blinking. Was it blinking before?

"Station four, if you do not respond..."

He initiated the safety on Bobik's joystick and raised himself from his chair. The contest was over but the walls moved and groaned like an accordion's pleated bellows. He stumbled toward the teletext, put his weight into the crank, turned it round and round until it spat up its contents, until the red light went dark once again.

Sergei gathered the filmy grey papers, the first they had received in weeks, and scanned quickly through their contents.

United States distress signal intercepted and unscrambled successfully at 12:45 GMT.

Eight hours ago. Had it been sitting there all this time?

U.S. Destroyer "Ice Angel" headed toward Svalchuk.

"Station four?"

Unconfirmed gunfire at Danish-Norwegian border.

"Your superiors have been called into..."

Canadian troop movements confirmed.

"Wait, wait!" Sergei said, catching his breath as he fell before the microphone. "It looks like an immense amount of heat, sir. Like flames, like a structure on fire."

"Confirmed station four. Standby for further instructions."

“What is it High Command? What is Bobik, what am I, what are we looking at?”

Just then, Ivan lifted his head from the olivje salad, his face covered in a ghostly white sheen.

“I had the strangest dream,” he said.

Sergei shook his head. Not now, Ivan, not now.

Green flames danced a polka in Sergei’s eyes. Ivan followed them back to the screen of station four. What could produce such heat in weather so cold, Ivan wondered, thinking of vodka, of accordions, of Anna’s warm crevasse. Ivan swiveled toward the teletext, blinking an urgent red yet again. He glanced at the seaside promenade through the window, at a young couple walking in the sunshine hand in hand, and then back once more at the face of his friend.

“Who won?” Ivan asked. “Who won?”

[clear-line]

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