

the dragon of pripyat

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New Canadian writer Karl Schroeder was born and raised in Brandon, Manitoba. He moved to Toronto in 1986, and has been working and writing there ever since. His first novel, written with David Nickle, was The Claus Effect. His second novel, Ventus, this one a solo effort, will be out soon, and he's currently at work on a new one.

Here he takes us on a vivid and suspenseful pilgrimage to a place where few people indeed would dare to venture, to the intensely radioactive, eerily deserted wasteland left behind after the Chernobyl Disaster, and takes us hunting through the ruins for the secret at the heart of the deadly maze—a secret that may be even deadlier than the ruins themselves . . .

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here's the turnoff," said Gennady's driver. He pointed to a faded wooden skull and cross-bones that leaned at the entrance to a side road. From the pattern of the trees and bushes, Gennady could see that the corner had once been a full highway interchange, but the turning lanes had overgrown long ago. Only the main blacktop was still exposed, and grass had made inroads to this everywhere.

The truck stopped right at the entrance. "This is as far as I go," said the driver. He stepped out of the idling vehicle and walked around the back to unload. Gennady paused for a moment to stare down the green tunnel before following.

They rolled out some steel drums containing supplies and equipment, then brought Gennady's motorcycle and sidecar.

The driver pointed to the Geiger counter that lay on top of the heaped supplies in the sidecar. "Think that'll protect you?"

“No.” Gennady grinned at him. “Before I came I did a little risk calculation. I compared the risk of cancer from radiation to that of smoking. See? Here the Geiger clicks at about a pack-a-week. Closer in, that’s going to be a pack-a-day. Well, I’ll just avoid the pack-a-minute spots, is all. Very simple.”

The driver, who smoked, did not like this analogy. “Well, it was nice knowing you. Need anything else?”

“Uh ... help me roll these behind the bushes there.” They moved the drums out of sight. “All set.”

The driver nodded once, and Gennady started down the abandoned road to Pripjat.

The tension in his shoulders began to ease as he drove. The driver had been friendly enough, but Gennady’s shyness had made the trip here an uncomfortable one. He could pretend to be at ease with strangers; few people knew he was shy. It still cost him to do it.

The trees were tall and green, the undergrowth lush. It smelled wonderful here, better than the industrial area around Gennady’s apartment. Pure and clean, no factory smell.

A lie, of course. Before he’d gone a hundred meters, Gennady slowed, then stopped. It all looked serene and bursting with health—a seductive and dangerous innocence. He brought out a filtered face mask he had last worn in heavy traffic in St. Petersburg. For good measure he wrapped his boots in plastic, snapping rubber bands over his pant cuffs to hold it on. Then he continued.

The view ahead was not of a straight black ribbon with sky above, but a broad green tunnel, criss-crossed at all levels with twigs and branches. He’d expected the road would be cracked and buckled from frost heaving, but it wasn’t. On the other hand underbrush had overgrown the shoulder and invaded the concrete, where patches of grass sprouted at odd places. For no good reason, he drove around these.

Over the next half hour he encountered more and more clearings. Tall grass lapped like waves around the doors of rusting metal pole-sheds once used for storing farm equipment. Any houses made of lath and plaster had caved in or been burned, leaving only single walls with windows looking from open field to open field. When he spotted the giant lattice-work towers

of the power line loom-ing above the trees he knew he was getting close. As if he needed visual confir-mation—the regular ticking from the counter in his sidecar had slowly become an intermittent rattle, like rain.

Then without warning the road opened out into a vista of overgrown concrete lots, rusted fences and new forest. Wildflowers and barley rioted in the boulevard of the now-divided highway, and further ahead, above patchy stands of trees, hollow-eyed Soviet-style apartment blocks stared back at their first visitor in ... years, possibly.

He shut off the bike and brought out his Pripyat roadmap. It was thirty years out of date, but since it was printed a year before the disaster, the roads would not have changed — other than the occasional oak tree or fallen building blocking his path. For a few minutes he puzzled over where he was, and when he was certain he pulled out his phone.

“Lisa, it’s me. I’m here.”

“You okay?” She had answered promptly. Must have been waiting. His shoulders relaxed a bit.

“I’m fine. Place looks like a park. Or something. Very difficult to describe.” There were actual trees growing on the roofs of some of the apartment blocks. “A lot of the buildings are still standing. I’m just on the outskirts.”

“What about the radioactivity?”

He checked the Geiger counter. “It’s not too hot yet. I’m thinking of living in a meat locker. Somewhere with good walls that got no air circulation after The Release.”

“You’re not near the reactor, are you?”

“No. It’s by the river, I’m coming from the northwest. The trees hide a lot.”

“Any sign of anybody else?”

“Not yet. I’m going to drive downtown. I’ll call you when I have the satellite link running.”

“Well, at least one of us is having an exciting day.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it exciting. Frightening, maybe.”

“Well.” She said ‘well’ in that tone when she was happy to be proved right about something. He could practically see her. “I’m glad you’re worried,” she said at last. “When you told me about this part of the job you pretended like it was no big deal.”

“I did not.” Well, maybe he had a little. Gennady scratched his chin uncomfortably.

“Call me soon,” she said. “And hey—be careful.”

“Is my nature.”

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Downtown was too hot. Pripjat was a Soviet modern town anyway, and had no real centre aside from some monolithic municipal buildings and farmers’ markets. The populace had been professional and mobile; it was built with wide thorough-fares connecting large, partially self-contained apartment complexes. Gennady read the cultural still-birth of the place in the utter anonymity of the buildings. Every-thing was faded, most signs gone, the art overwritten by vines and rust. So he could only identify apartment buildings by their many small balconies, municipal offices by their lack of same. That was the beginning and end of Pripjat’s character.

Gennady paused often to look and listen, alert for any signs of human habitation. There were no tire tracks, no columns of smoke. No buses passed, no radios blared from the high rises.

He found himself on the outskirts again as evening reddened the light. Twelve-storey apartment blocks formed a hexagon here, the remains of a parkette in its center. The Geiger counter clicked less insistently in this neighborhood. He parked the motorcycle in the front foyer of the easternmost tower. This building still had a lot of unbroken windows. If he was right, some of the interior rooms would have low isotope concentrations. He could rest there, as long as he left his shoes outside, and ate and drank only the supplies he had brought with him.

The echoes of his boot crashing against an apartment door seemed to echo endlessly, but no one came to investigate. Gennady got the door open on the third try, and walked into the sad evidence of an abandoned life. Three days after Reactor Four caught fire, the tenants had evacuated with everything they could carry but they’d had to leave a black upright piano

that once they might have played for guests who sipped wine here, or on the balcony. Maybe they had stood watching the fire that first night, nervously drinking and speculating on whether it might mean more work for renovators and fire inspectors.

Many faded and curled photos were pinned to the beige kitchen cupboards; he tried not to look at them. The bedroom still held a cot and chest of drawers with icons over it. The wallpaper here had uncurled in huge rolls, leaving a mottled yellow-white surface behind.

The air was incredibly musty in the flat—a good sign. The Geiger counter's rattle dropped off immediately, and stabilized at a near-normal level. None of the windows were so much as cracked, though the balcony door had warped itself to the frame. Gennady had to remove its hinges, pull the knob off and pry it open to get outside. Even then he ventured only far enough to position his satellite dish, then retreated indoors again and sealed the split frame with duct tape he'd brought for this sort of purpose. The balcony had swayed under him as he stepped onto it.

The sarcophagus was visible from here on the sixth floor. Twenty years ago this room must have looked much the same, but the Chernobyl reactor had still sported the caged red-and-white smokestack that appeared in all early photos of the place. The stack had fallen in the second accident, when Reactor Two went bad. The press referred to the first incident as The Disaster; the second they called The Release.

The new sarcophagus was designed to last ten thousand years. Its low sloping sides glowed redly in the sunset.

Gennady whistled tunelessly as he set up the portable generator and attached his computer, EM detection gear and the charger for his Walkman. He laid out a bedroll while the system booted and the dish outside tracked. As he was unrolling canned goods from their plastic sheaths, the system beeped once and said, "Full net connection established. Hi Gennady."

"Hi. Call Mr. Merrick at the Chernobyl Trust, would you?"

"Trying..."

Beep. "Gennady." Merrick's voice sounded tinny coming from the computer's speaker. "You're late. Any problems?"

"No. Just took a while to find a secure place. The radiation, you know."

“Safe?”

“Yes.”

“What about the town? Signs of life?”

“No.”

“The sarcophagus?”

“I can see it from here, actually.” He enabled the computer’s camera and pointed it out the window. “Well, okay, it’s too dark out there now. But there’s nothing obvious, anyway. No bombs sitting out in the open, you know?”

“We’d have spotted them on the recon photos.”

“Maybe there is nothing to see because there is nothing there. I still think they could be bluffing.”

Merrick grunted. “There was a release. One thousand curies straight into the Pripyat River. We monitored the plume. It came from the sarcophagus. They said they would do it, and they did. And unless we keep paying them, they’ll do more.”

“We’ll find them. I’m here now.”

“You stayed out of sight, I trust.”

“Of course. Though you know, anything that moves here stands out like a whore in church. I’m just going to sit on the balcony and watch the streets, I think. Maybe move around at night.”

“Just call in every four hours during the day. Otherwise we’ll assume the worst.”

Gennady sighed heavily. “It’s a big town. You should have a whole team on this.”

“Not a chance. The more people we involve, the more chance it’ll get out that somebody’s extorting the Chernobyl Trust. We just barely hold on to our funding as it is, Gennady.”

“All right, all right. I know I come cheap. You don’t have to rub it in.”

“We’re paying you a hell of a lot for this. Don’t complain.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not here. Good night, Merrick.”

He stretched out for a while, feeling a bit put out. After all, it was his neck on the line. Merrick was an asshole, and Lisa had told him not to come. Well, he was here now. In his own defence, he would do a good job.

It got dark quickly, and he didn’t dare show much light, so reading was out. The silence grew oppressive, so he finally grunted and sat up to make another call.

This time he jacked in to the Net. He preferred full-sense interfaces, the vibrant colours and sounds of Net culture. In moments he was caught up in a whirlwind of flickering icons and sound bites, all the news of the day and opinions from around the world pouring down the satellite link to his terminal. Gennady read and answered his mail, caught up on the news, and checked the local forecast. Good weather for the next week, apparently. Although rain would have helped keep the isotopes out of the air, he was happy that he would be able to get some sun and explore without inconvenience.

Chores done, he fought upstream through the torrent of movie trailers, whispers of starlet gossip, artspam messages and hygiene ads masquerading as real people on his chat-lines, until he reached a private chat room. Gennady conjured a body for himself, some chairs and, for variety, a pool with some sunbathers, and then called Lisa.

She answered in window mode, as she often did. He could see she was in her London apartment, dressed in a sweatshirt. “Hi,” he said. “How was the day?”

“It was okay.”

“Any leads on our mythical terrorists?” Lisa was a freelance Net hacker. She was well-respected, and frequently worked for Interpol. She and Gennady talked almost every day, a result of their informal working relationship. Or, he sometimes suspected, maybe he had that backwards.

She looked uncomfortable. “I haven’t found anything. Where have you been? I thought you were going to call as soon as you arrived.”

"I told you I'd call. I called."

"Yeah, but you're not exactly reliable that way."

"It's my life." But this was Lisaveta, not just some anonymous chat on the Net. He ground his teeth and said, "I am sorry. You're right, I make myself hard to find."

"I just like to know what's going on."

"And I appreciate it. It took me a while to find a safe place."

Her expression softened. "I guess it would. Is it all hot there?"

"Most of it. It's unpredictable. But beautiful."

"Beautiful? You're daft."

"No really. Very green, lush. Not like I expected."

She shook her head. "Why on earth did you even take this job? That one in Minsk would have paid more."

"I don't like Minsk."

She stared at him. "Chernobyl's better?"

"Listen, forget it. I'm here now. You say you haven't found our terrorists?"

She didn't look like she wanted to change the subject, but then she shrugged and said, "Not a whisper on the Net. Unless they're technoluddites, I don't see how they're operating. Maybe it's local, or an inside job."

Gennady nodded. "Hadn't ruled that out. I don't trust this Merrick fellow. Can we check into the real financial position of the Trust?"

"Sure. I'll do that. Meanwhile . . . how long are you going to be there?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Not long."

"Promise me you'll leave before your dosimeter maxes out, even if you don't find anything. Okay?"

“Hmm.”

“Promise!”

He laughed. “All right, Lisaveta. I promise.”

Later, as he lay on his bedroll, he played through arguments with Lisa where he tried to explain the strange beauty of the place. He came up with many phrases and examples, but in the end he always imagined her shaking her head in incomprehension. It took him a long time to fall asleep.

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There was no sign that a large group of people had entered Pripjat at any time in the recent past. When Trust inspectors came they usually arrived by helicopter, and stayed only long enough to replace the batteries at the weather stations and radiation monitoring checkpoints. The way wildflowers and moss had begun to colonize the drifted soil on the roads, any large vehicle tracks should have been readily visible. Gennady didn't find any.

Despite this he was more circumspect the next day. Merrick might be right, there might well be someone here. Gennady had pictured Pripjat in black and white, as a kind of industrial dump. The place was actually like a wild garden — though as he explored on foot, he would often round a corner or step into an open lot and find the Geiger counter going nuts. The hotspots were treacherous, because there was no way to tell where they'd be.

A few years after The Disaster, folk had started to trickle back into Pripjat. The nature of the evil was such that people saw their friends and family die no matter how far they ran. Better to go home than sit idle collecting coffin-money in some shanty town.

Then the Release happened, all those who had returned died. After that, no one came.

He had to remind himself to check his watch. His first check-in with Merrick was half an hour late; the second two full hours. Gennady completely lost track of time while skirting the reactor property, which was separated from the town by marshy grassland. All manner of junk from two eras had been abandoned here. Green helicopters with red stars on them rusted next to remotely piloted halftracks with the U.N. logo and the red, white and blue flag of the Russian Republic. In one spot he found the

remains of a wooden shed. The wood dropped over matted brown mounds that must once have been cardboard boxes. Thousands of clean white tubes — syringes, their needles rusted away—poked out of the mounds. The area was hot, and he didn't linger.

Everywhere he went he saw potential souvenirs, all undisturbed. Some were hot, others clean. The entire evidence of late-Soviet life was just lying about here. Gennady found it hard to believe a sizable group could spend any time in this open-air museum, and not pry into things at least a little. But it was all un-touched.

He was a bit alarmed at the numbers on his dosimeter as he turned for home. Radiation sure accumulated quickly around here. He imagined little particles smashing his DNA. Here, there, everywhere in his body. It might be all right; he would probably be perfectly healthy later. It might not be all right.

A sound startled him out of his worry. The *meow* came again, and then a scrawny little white cat stepped gingerly onto the road.

“Well, hello.” He knelt to pet it. The Geiger counter went wild. The cat butted against his hand, purring to rattle its ribs loose. It didn't occur to him that it was acting domesticated until a voice behind him said, “That's Varuschka.”

Gennady looked up to see an old man emerge from behind a tall hedgerow. He appeared to be in his seventies, with a narrow hatchet-like face burned deep brown, and a few straggles of white hair. He wore soil-blackened overalls, and the hand he held out was black from digging. Gennady shook it anyway.

“Who the hell are you?” asked the old man abruptly.

Was this the extortionist? Well, it was too late to hide from him now. “Gennady Malianov.”

“I'm Bogoliubov. I'm the custodian of Pripjat.” Bogoliubov sized him up. “Just passing through, eh?”

“How do you know that?”

“The Geiger counter, the plastic on your shoes, the mask...Ain't that a bit uncomfortable?”

“Very, actually.” Gennady scratched around it.

“Well what the hell are you wearing it for?” The old man grabbed a walking stick from somewhere behind the hedge. “You just shook hands with me. The dirt’ll be hotter than anything you inhale.”

“Perhaps I was not expecting to shake hands with anyone today.”

Bogoliubov laughed dryly. “Radiation’s funny stuff. You know I had cancer when I came here? God damn fallout cured me. Seven years now. I can still piss a straight line.”

He and Varuschka started walking, and Gennady fell in beside them. “Did you live here, before The Disaster?” Bogoliubov shook his head. “Does anybody else live here?”

“No. We get visitors, Varuschka and me. But if I thought you were here to stay I wouldn’t be talking to you. I’d have gone home for the rifle.”

“Why’s that?”

“Don’t like neighbours.” Seeing his expression, Bogoliubov laughed. “Don’t worry, I like visitors. Just not neighbours. Haven’t shot anyone in years.”

Bogoliubov looked like a farmer, not an extortionist. “Had any other visitors lately?” Gennady asked him. He was sure it was an obviously leading question, but he’d never been good at talking to people. He left that up to other investigators.

“No, nobody. Unless you count the dragon.” Bogoliubov gestured vaguely in the direction of the sarcophagus. “And I don’t.”

“The what?”

“I call it the dragon. Sounds crazy. I don’t know what the hell it is. Lives in the sarcophagus. Only comes out at night.”

“I see.”

“Don’t you take that tone with me.” Bogoliubov shook his cane at Gennady. “There’s more things in heaven and earth, you know. I was going to invite you to tea.”

“I’m sorry. I am new here.”

“Apology accepted.” Bogoliubov laughed. “Hell, you’d have to do worse than laugh at me to make me uninvite you. I get so few guests.”

“I wasn’t—”

“So, why are you here? Not sightseeing, I assume.”

They had arrived at a log dacha on the edge of the grassland. Bogoliubov kept some goats and chickens, and even had an apple tree in the back. Gennady’s Geiger counter clicked at levels that would be dangerous after weeks, fatal in a year or two. He had been here seven years?

“I work for the University of Minsk,” said Gennady. “In the medical school. I’m just doing an informal survey of the place, check for fire hazards near the sarcophagus, that sort of thing.”

“So you don’t work for the Trust.” Bogoliubov spat. “Good thing. Bunch of meddling bureaucrats. Think they can have a job for life because the goddamn reactor will always be there. It was people like them made The Disaster to begin with.”

The inside of Bogoliubov’s dacha was cozy and neatly kept. The old man began ramming twigs into the firebox of an iron stove. Gennady sat admiring the view, which included neither the sarcophagus nor the forlorn towers of the abandoned city.

“Why do you stay here?” he asked finally.

Bogoliubov paused for an instant. He shook his head and brought out some waterproof matches. “Because I can be alone here. Nothing complicated about it, really.”

Gennady nodded.

“It isn’t complicated to love a place, either.” Bogoliubov set one match in the stove. In seconds the interior was a miniature inferno. He put a kettle on to boil.

“People die, you know. But places don’t. Even with everything they did to this place, it hasn’t died. I mean look at it. Beautiful. You like cities, Malianov?”

Gennady shook his head.

The old man nodded. “Of course not. If you were a city person, you’d run scream-ing from here. It’d prey on you. You’d start having nightmares. Or kill yourself. City people can’t handle Pripyat. But you’re a country person, aren’t you?”

“I guess I am.” It would be impossible to explain to the old man that he was neither a city nor a country person. Though he lived in a large and bustling city, Gennady spent most of his free time in the pristine, controllable environments of the Net.

Bogoliubov made some herbal tea. Gennady tested it with the Geiger before he sipped it, much to Bogoliubov’s amusement. Gennady filled him in on Kiev politics and the usual machinations of the international community. After an hour or so of this, though, Gennady began to feel decidedly woozy. Had he caught too big a dose today? The idea made him panicky.

“Have to go,” he said finally. He wanted to stand up, but he seemed to be losing touch with his body. And everything was happening in slow motion.

“Maybe you better wait for it to wear off,” said Bogoliubov.

Minutes or hours later, Gennady heard himself say, “Wait for what to wear off?”

“Can’t get real tea here,” said the old man. “But marijuana grows like a weed. Makes a good brew, don’t you think?”

So much for controlling his situation. Gennady’s anxiety crested, broke in a moment of fury, and then he was laughing out loud. Bogoliubov joined in.

The walk back to his building seemed to take days. Gennady couldn’t bring himself to check the computer for messages, and fell asleep before the sun set.

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Lisa shook her head as she sat down at her terminal. Why should she be so upset that he hadn’t called? And yet she was —he owed her a little

consideration. And what if he'd been hurt? She would have heard about it by now, since Gennady had introduced her to Merrick as a subcontractor. Merrick would have phoned. So he was ignoring her. Or something.

But she shouldn't be so upset. After all, they spoke on the phone, or met in the Net—that was the beginning and end of their relationship. True, they worked together well, both being investigators, albeit in different areas. She spoke to Gen-nady practically every day. Boyfriends came and went, but Gennady was always there for her.

But he never lets me be there for him, she thought as she jacked into the Net and called him.

Though she didn't intend to, when he finally answered the first thing she said was, "You promised you'd call."

"You too? Merrick just chewed me out for yesterday." He seemed listless.

"Credit me with better motives than Merrick," she said. She wanted to pursue it, but knowing how testy he could be, just said, "What happened?"

"It's not like I'm having a picnic out here, you know. It's just not so easy to stay in touch as I thought." He looked like he hadn't slept well, or maybe had slept too well.

"Listen, I'm sorry," he said suddenly, and he sounded sincere. "I'm touched that you care so much about me."

"Of course I do, Gennady. We've been through a lot together." It was rare for him to admit he was wrong; somewhat mollified, she said, "I just need to know what's going on."

He sighed. "I think I have something for you." She perked up. Lisa loved it when they worked together as a team. He was the slow, plodding investigator, used to sifting, through reams of photographs, old deeds and the like. She was the talker, the one who ferreted out people's secrets by talking with them. When they'd met, Gennady had been a shy insurance investigator unwilling to take any job where he had to interview people, and she had been a nosy hacker who got her hands dirty with field work. They made a perfect match, she often thought, because they were so fundamentally different.

"There's an old man who lives here," said Gennady. "Name's

Bogoliubov. Has a dacha near the reactor.”

“That’s insane,” she said.

Gennady merely shrugged. “That’s where I was yesterday—talking to him. He’ says nobody’s come through Pripyat in ages. Except for one guy.”

“Oh?” She leaned forward eagerly.

“We had a long talk, Bogoliubov and me.” Gennady half-smiled at some private joke. “He says he met a guy named Yevgeny Druschenko. Part-time employee, of the Trust, or so he said.” As he spoke Lisa was typing madly at her terminal. “He was a regular back when they still had funding to do groundwater studies here. The thing is, he’s driven into town twice in the past year. Didn’t tell Bogoliubov where he was going, but the old man says both times he headed for the sarcoph-agus with a truckload of stuff. Crates. Bogoliubov doesn’t know where they ended.

“Bingo!” Lisa made a triumphant fist. “He’s listed, all right. But he’s not on the payroll anymore.”

“There’s more.” She looked at him, eyebrows raised. Gennady grinned. “You’re going to love this part. Bogoliubov says it was right after Druschenko’s first visit that the dragon appeared.”

“Whoa. Dragon?”

“He doesn’t know what else to call it. I don’t think he believes it’s supernatural. But he says something is *living* inside the sarcophagus. Been there for months now.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I know. It’s fatal just to walk past the thing.”

Lisa scowled for a minute, then dismissed the issue with a wave of her hand. “Whatever. I’m going to trace this Druschenko. Are you through there now?”

“Not quite. Bogoliubov might be lying. I have to check the rest of the town, see if there’s any signs of life. Should take a couple of days.”

“Hmf.” She was sure he knew what she felt about that. “Okay. But keep in touch. I mean it this time.”

He placed a hand on his heart solemnly. "I promise."

It was hard. For the next several mornings Gennady awoke to find Bogoliubov waiting for him downstairs. The old man had designated himself tour guide, and proceeded to drag Gennady through bramble, fen and buckled asphalt, ensuring he visited all the high points of the city.

There was a spot where two adjacent apartment blocks had collapsed together, forming a ten-storey arch under which Bogoliubov walked whistling. In another neighborhood, the old man had restored several exquisite houses, and they paused to refresh themselves there by a spring that was miraculously clean of radiation.

What Bogoliubov saw here was nature cleansing a wound. Gennady could never completely forget the tragedy of this place; the signs of hasty abandonment were everywhere, and his imagination filled in vistas of buses and queues of people clutching what they could carry, joking nervously about what they were told would be a temporary evacuation. Thinking about it too long made him angry, and he didn't want to be angry in a place that had become so beautiful. Bogoliubov had found his own solution to that by forgetting that this was ever a place of Man.

Gennady was suspicious that the old man might be trying to distract him, so he made a point of going out on his own to explore as well. It was tiring, but he had to verify Bogoliubov's story before he could feel he had done his job. Calling Merrick or Lisa was becoming difficult because he was out so much, and so tired from walking—but as well, he found himself increasingly moving in a meditative state. He had to give himself a shake, practically learn to speak again, before he could make a call.

To combat this feeling he spent his evenings in the Net, listening to the thrum of humanity's great chorus. Even there, however, he felt more an observer. Maybe that was okay; he had always been like this, it was just cities and obligations that drove him out of his natural habits.

Then one night he awoke to the sound of engines.

It was pitch-dark and for a second he didn't know where he was. Gennady sat up and focussed on the lunar rectangle of the living room window. For a moment he heard nothing, then the grumble started up again. He thought he saw a flicker of light outside.

He staggered to the balcony where he had set up his good telescope. The sound was louder here. Like an idling train, more felt than heard. It seemed to slide around in the air, the way train sounds did when they were coming from kilo-metres distant.

Light broke around a distant street corner. Gennady swung the telescope around and nearly had it focussed when something large and black lurched through his visual field, and was gone again. When he looked up from the lens he saw no sign of it.

He took the stairs two at a time, flashlight beam dodging wildly ahead of him. When he got to the lobby he switched it off and stepped cautiously to the front doors. His heart was pounding.

Gennady watched for a while, then ventured out into the street. It wasn't hard to hide here; any second he could drop in the tall grass or step behind a stand of young trees. So he made his way in the direction of the sound.

It took ten minutes to reach the spot where he'd seen the light. He dropped to one knee at the side of a filling station, and poked his head around the corner. The street was empty.

The whole intersection had been overtaken with weeds and young birch trees. He puzzled over the sight for a minute, then stood and walked out into their midst. There was absolutely nowhere here that you could drive a truck without knocking over lots of plants. But nothing was disturbed.

It was silent here now. Gennady had never ventured this far in the dark; the great black slabs of the buildings were quite unnerving. Shielding the light with one hand, he used the flashlight to try to find some tracks.

There were none.

On impulse he unslung the Geiger counter and switched it on. It immediately began chattering. For a few minutes he criss-crossed the intersection, finding a definite line of higher radioactivity bisecting it. He crouched on that line, and moved along it like he was weeding a garden, holding the counter close to the ground.

As the chattering peaked he spotted a, black divot in the ground. He shone the flashlight on it. It was a deep W-shaped mark, of the sort made by the feet of back-hoes and cranes. A few meters beyond it he found another. Both were incredibly hot.

A deep engine pulse sounded through the earth. It repeated, then rose to a bone-shaking thunder as two brilliant lights pinioned Gennady from the far end of the street.

He clicked off the flashlight but the thing was already coming at him. The ground shook as it began to gallop.

There was no time to even see what it was. Gennady fled through whipping underbrush and under low branches, trying to evade the uncannily accurate lamps that sought him out. He heard steel shriek and the thud of falling trees as it flung aside all the obstacles he tried to put between them.

Ahead a narrow alley made a black rectangle between two warehouses. He ran into it. It was choked with debris and weeds. "Damn." Light welled up behind him.

Both warehouses had doors and windows opening off the alley. One door was ajar. On a sudden inspiration he flicked on the flashlight and threw it hard through a window of the other building, then dove for the open door.

He heard the sound of concrete scraping as the thing shouldered its way between the buildings. The lights were intense, and the noise of its engines was awful. Then the lights went out, as it paused. He had the uncanny impression that it was looking for him.

Gennady stood in a totally empty concrete-floored building. Much of the roof had gone, and in the dim light he could see a clear path to the front door.

Cinderblocks shuddered and crashed outside. It was knocking a hole in the other building. Gennady ran for the door and made it through. The windows of the other warehouse were lit up.

He ran up the street to his building, and when he got inside he pulled his bike into a back room and raced up the stairs. He could hear the thing roaring around the neighborhood for what seemed like hours, and then the noise slowly faded into the distance, and he fell back on his bedroll, exhausted.

At dawn he packed up and by midmorning he had left Pripyat and the contaminated zone behind him.

* * * *

Merrick poured pepper vodka into a tall glass and handed it to Gennady. “Dosvedanya. We picked up Druschenko this morning.”

Gennady wondered as he sipped how the vodka would react with the iodine pill he’d just taken. Traffic noises and the smell of diesel wafted through the open window of Merrick’s Kiev office. Merrick tipped back his own drink, smiled brightly and went to sit behind the huge oak desk that dominated the room.

“I have to thank you, Gennady. We literally couldn’t find anyone else who was willing to go in there on the ground.” He shook his head. “People panic at the thought of radiation.”

“Don’t much like it myself.” Gennady took another sip. “But you can detect and avoid it. Not so simple to do with the stuff that comes out of the smokestacks these days. Or gets by the filters at the water plant.”

Merrick nodded. “So you were able to take all the right precautions.”

Gennady thought of Bogoliubov’s warm tea settling in his stomach ... and he had done other stupid things there too. But the doctors insisted his overall dosage was “acceptable.” His odds for getting cancer had gone up as much as if he’d been chain-smoking for the past six months. Acceptable? How could one know?

“So that’s that,” said Merrick. “You found absolutely no evidence that anyone but Druschenko had visited the sarcophagus, right? Once we prove that it was him driving the RPV, we’ll be able to close this file entirely. I think you deserve a bonus, Gennady, and I’ve almost got the board to agree.”

“Well, thanks.” RPV—they had decided the dragon must be one of the Re-motely Piloted Vehicles that the Trust had used to build the new sarcophagus. Druschenko had taken some of the stockpiled parts and power supplies from a Trust warehouse, and apparently gotten one of the old lifters going. It was the only way he could open the sarcophagus and survive.

Merrick was happy. Lisa was ecstatic that he was out of Pripyat. It all seemed too easy to Gennady; maybe it was because they hadn’t seen the thing. This morning he’d walked down to the ironworks to watch someone using a Chernobyl-model RPV near the kilns. It had looked like a truck with legs, and moved like a sloth. Nothing like the thing that had chased him across the city.

Anyway, he had his money. He chatted with Merrick for a while, then Gennady left to find a bank machine, and prove to himself he'd been paid. First order of business, a new suit. Then he was going to shop for one of those new interfaces for his system. Full virtual reality, like he'd been dreaming about for months.

The noise and turbulence of Kiev's streets hit him like a wall. People every-where, but no one noticed anyone else in a city like this. He supposed most people drifted through the streets treating all these strangers around as no more than ghosts, but he couldn't do that. As he passed an old woman who was begging on the corner, he found himself noticing the laugh lines around her eyes that warred with the deeply scored lines of disappointment around her mouth; the meticulous stitchwork where she had repaired the sleeves of her cheap dress spoke of a dignity that must make her situation seem all the worse for her. He couldn't ignore her, but he couldn't help her either.

For a while he stood at a downtown intersection, staring over the sea of people. Above the grimy facades, a haze of coal smoke and exhaust banded the sky a yellow that matched the shade on the grimy tattered flags hanging from the street lamps.

Everywhere, he saw victims of the Release. Men and women with open sores or wearing the less visible scars of destitution and disappointment dawdled on the curbs, stared listlessly through shop windows at goods they would never be able to afford on their meagre pensions. No one looked at them.

He bought the interface instead of the suit, and the next day he didn't go out at all.

* * * *

He was nursing a crick in his neck, drinking some weak tea and preparing to go back into a huge international consensual-reality game he now had the equipment to play, when Lisa called.

"Look, Lisa, I've got new toys."

"Why am I not surprised. Have you been out at all since you got back?"

"No. I'm having fun."

“How are you going to meet a nice Ukrainian girl if you never go out?”

“Maybe I like English girls better.”

“Oh yeah? Then fly to England. You just got paid.”

“The Net is so much faster. And I have the right attachments now.”

She laughed. “Toys. I see. You want the latest news on the case?”

He frowned. No, actually, he didn't think he did. But she lived for this sort of thing. “Sure,” he said to indulge her.

“Druschenko says he was just the courier. Says he never drove the dragon at all. He's actually quite frantic—he claims he was paid to bring supplies in and do the initial hook up of a RPV, but that's all. Of course, he's made some mighty big purchases lately, and we can't trace the money and he won't tell us where it is. So it's a stalemate.”

Gennady thought about Merrick's cheerful confidence the other day. “Did the Trust actually make the most recent payment to the extortionist?”

“No. They could hardly afford to, and anyway Druschenko — “

“Could not have acted alone.”

“What?”

“Come on, Lisa. You said yourself you can't find the money. It went into the Net, right? That's your territory, it's not Druschenko's. He's a truck driver, not a hacker, for God's sake. Listen, have they put a Geiger counter on him?”

“Why. . .”

“Find out how hot he is. He had to have been piloting the RPV from nearby, unless he had a satellite link, and there too, he's just a truck driver, not James Bond. Find out how hot he is.”

“Um. Maybe you have a point.”

“And another thing. Has the Trust put some boats in the river to check for another radiation plume?”

“I don’t know.”

“We better find out. Because I’ll bet you a case of vodka there’s going to be another Release.”

“Can I call you right back?”

“Certainly.” He hung up, shaking his head. People who lived by Occam’s Razor died young. That, he supposed, was why he got paid the big bucks.

* * * *

He spent most of the next week in the Net, venturing out for groceries and exercise. He smiled at a pretty clerk in the grocery store, and she smiled back, but he never knew what to say in such situations, where he couldn’t hide behind an avatar’s mask or simply disappear if he embarrassed himself; so he didn’t talk to her.

In the platonic perfection of the Net, though, Gennady had dozens of friends and business connections. Between brief searches for new work, he participated in numerous events, both games and art pieces. Here he could be witty, and handsome. And there was no risk. But when he finally rolled into bed at night, there was no warm body there waiting for him, and at those times he felt deeply lonely.

In the morning the computer beckoned, and he would quickly forget the feeling.

Merrick interrupted him in the middle of a tank battle. In this game, Gennady was one of the British defending North Africa against the Desert Fox. The sensual qualities of his new interface were amazing; he could feel the heat, the grit of the sand, almost smell it. The whole effect was ruined when the priority one window opened in the middle of the air above his turret, and Merrick said, “Gennady, I’ve got a new job for you.”

North Africa dissolved. Gennady realized his back hurt and his mouth was dry. “What is it?” he snapped.

“I wouldn’t be calling if I didn’t think you were the perfect man for the job. We need someone to make a very brief visit to Pripyat. Shouldn’t take more than a day.”

“Where’s that bonus you promised me?”

“I was coming to that. The board’s authorized me to pay you an additional twenty percent bonus for work already done. That’s even if you turn down this contract.”

“Ah. I see. So what is it you need?” He was interested, but he didn’t want to appear too eager. Could lower the price that way.

“We want to make sure the sarcophagus is intact. We were going to do a hel-icopter inspection, but it’s just possible Druschenko did some low level... well, to put it bluntly, got inside.”

“Inside? What do you mean, inside?”

“There may be some explosives inside the sarcophagus. Now we don’t want anybody going near it, physically. Have you ever piloted an RPV?”

“Not really. Done a lot of virtual reality sims, but that’s not the same thing.”

“Close enough. Anyway, we only need you to get the thing to the reactor site. We’ve got an explosives expert on call who’ll take over once you get there and deactivate the bombs. If there are any.”

“So he’s coming with me?”

“Not exactly, no. He’ll be riding in on a satellite link. You’re to establish that link in Pripjat, drive the RPV to the reactor, and he’ll jack in to do the actual assessment. Then you pull out. That’s all there is to it.”

“Why can’t somebody pilot it in from outside the city?”

“It’s only works on a short-range link. You’ll have to get within two miles of the sarcophagus.”

“Great. Just great. When do you want this to happen?”

“Immediately. I’m having your RPV flown in; it’ll arrive tonight. Can you set out in the morning?”

“Depends on what you’re willing to pay me.”

“Double your last fee.”

“Triple.”

“Done.”

Shit, he thought. *Should have gone for more.* “All right, Merrick, you’ve got yourself an RPV driver. For a day.”

* * * *

Gennady debated whether to call Lisa. On the one hand, there was obviously more to this than Merrick was admitting. On the other, she would tell him not to go back to Pripyat. He wanted to avoid that particular conversation, so he didn’t call.

Instead he took a cab down to a Trust warehouse at six o’clock to inspect his RPV. The warehouse was a tall anonymous metal-clad building; his now practised eye told him it might remain standing for twenty or thirty years if abandoned. Except that the roof would probably cave in ...

“You Malianov?” The man was stocky, with the classic slab-like Russian face. He wiped his hands on an oily rag as he walked out to meet Gennady. Gennady shook his hand, smiling as he remembered Bogoliubov, and they went in to inspect the unit.

“What the hell is that?” Whatever it was, it was not just a remotely piloted vehicle. Standing in a shaft of sunlight was an ostrich-like machine at least three metres tall. It sprouted cameras and mikes from all over, and sported two uncannily human arms at about shoulder level. Gennady’s guide grinned and gave it a shove. It shuffled its feet a little, regaining balance.

“Military telepresence. Latest model.” The man grabbed one of its hands. “We’re borrowing it from the Americans. You like?”

“Why do we need this?”

“How the hell should I know? All I know is you’re reconnoitering the sarcoph-agus with it. Right?”

Gennady nodded. He kept his face neutral, but inside he was fuming. Merrick was definitely not telling him everything.

That evening he went on a supply run downtown. He bought all the things he hadn't on his first trip out, including a lot more food. Very intentionally, he did not pause to ask himself why he was packing a month's worth of food for a two-day trip.

He was sitting in the middle of the living room floor, packing and repacking, when Lisa phoned. He took it as a voice-only call; if she asked, he'd say he wasn't dressed or something.

"Remember what you said about how Druschenko would have to have had a satellite link to run the dragon?"

"Yeah." He hopped onto the arm of his couch. He was keyed up despite the lateness of the hour.

"Well, you got me thinking," she said. "And guess what? There's a connection. Not with Druschenko, though."

"Okay, I'll bite."

"Can you jack in? I'll have to do some show and tell here."

"Okay." He made sure the apartment cameras were off, then went into the Net. Lisa was there in full avatar—visible head to foot, in 3-D—grinning like the pro-verbial cat with the canary.

"So I thought, what if Druschenko did have a satellite link to the sarcophagus? And lo and behold, somebody does." She called up some windows that showed coordinates, meaningless to Gennady. "At least, there's traffic to some kind of transceiver there. I figured I had Druschenko right then—but the link's still live, and traffic goes way up at regular intervals. During the night, your time. So we're dealing with a night-hawk, I thought. Except he wouldn't have to be a night-hawk if he was calling from, say, North America."

"Wait, wait, you're getting way ahead of me. What's this traffic consist of? You intercepted it, didn't you?"

"Well, not exactly. It's heavily encrypted. Plus, once it's in the Net it goes through a bunch of anonymous rerouters, gets split up and copies sent to null addresses, and so on. Untraceable from this end, at least so far."

"Ah, so if he's from North America, that narrows it down a bit. To only

about half a billion possibilities.”

“Ah, Gennady, you have so little faith. It’s probably a telepresence link, right? That’s your dragon. Nothing big was brought in, so it’s got to be an adaptation of the existing Chernobyl designs. So whoever it is, they should be familiar with those designs, and they’d have to know there were still some RPVs in Pripyat, and they should have a connection to Druschenko. And —here’s the topper—they had a lot of start-up capital to run this scam. Had to, with the satellite link, the souping-up of the RPV, and the missiles.”

“Missiles? What missiles?”

“Haven’t you checked the news lately? One of the Trust’s helicopters crashed yesterday. It was doing a low-level pass over the sarcophagus, and wham! down it goes. Pilot was killed. An hour after the news was released I started seeing all sorts of traffic on my secure Interpol groups, police in Kiev and Brussels talking about ground-to-air missiles.”

“Oh, shit,” he said.

“So anyway, I just looked for somebody involved in the original sarcophagus project, on the RPV side, who was American and rich. And it popped out at me.”

Gennady was barely listening, but his attention returned when she brought up a window with a grainy photo of a thin-faced elderly man. It was hard to tell, but he appeared to be lying on a bed. His eyes were bright and hard, and they stared directly out at Gennady.

“Trevor Jaffrey. He got quite rich doing RPVs and telepresence about twenty years ago. The Chernobyl project was his biggest contract. A while after that he became a recluse, and began wasting his money on some pretty bizarre projects.”

“Dragons?”

“Well, Jaffrey’s a quadraplegic. He got rich through the Net, and he lived through it too. When I say he became a recluse, he already was, physically. He dropped out of Net society too, and spent all his time and money on physical avatars —telepresences. I’ve got access to a couple of them, because he had to sell them when he couldn’t pay his bills. Want to see one?”

“What, now?”

“I’ve got a temporary pass. This one’s being used as a theme park ride now. At one time Jaffrey must have spent all his free time in it. The mind boggles.”

She had his entire attention now. “Okay. Show me.”

“Here’s the address, name and password. Just take a quick peek. I’ll wait.”

He entered the commands, and waited as a series of message windows indicated a truly prodigious data pipe opening between his little VR setup and some distant machine. Then the world went dark, and when it came back again he was un-derwater.

Gennady was standing on the ocean floor. All around were towers of coral, and rainbow fishes swam by in darting schools. The ocean was brilliant blue, the sunlight above shattered into thousands of crystal shards by the waves. He turned his head, and felt the water flow through his hair. It was warm, felt silky against his skin. He could breathe just fine, but he also felt completely submerged.

Gennady raised a hand. Something huge and metal lifted up, five steel fingers on its end. He waggled them—they moved.

This is not a simulation, he realized. Somewhere, in one of the Earth’s seas, this machine was standing, and he was seeing through its eyes and hearing through its ears.

He took a step. He could walk, as easily as though he were on land.

Gennady knelt and ran his fingers through the fine white sand. He could ac-tually feel it. Black Sea? More likely the Caribbean, if this Jaffrey was American.

It was achingly beautiful, and he wanted to stay. But Lisa was waiting. He logged out, and as he did caught a glimpse of a truly huge number in American dollars, which flashed *paid in full* then vanished.

Lisa’s avatar was smiling, hands behind her back and bobbing on the balls of her feet. “Jaffrey can’t pay his bills. And he’s addicted to his telepresences. You should see the arctic one. He even had a lunar one for a while. See the common thread?”

“They’re all places nobody goes. Or nobody can go,” he said. He was starting to feel tired.

“Jaffrey hates people. And he’s being driven out of his bodies, one after the other. So he turns in desperation to an old, reliable one —the Chernobyl RPV. Designed to survive working conditions there, and there’s still parts, if he can pay off an old acquaintance from the project to bring them in.”

“So he does, and he’s got a new home.” He nodded. “And a way of making more money. Extort the Trust.”

“Exactly. Aren’t I smart?”

“You, Lisaveta, are a genius.” He blew her image a kiss. “So all we need to do is shut him down, and the crisis is over.”

“Hmm. Well, no, not exactly. American law is different, and the Net connections aren’t proven to go to him. We can’t actually move on him until we can prove it’s him doing it.”

“Well, shut down the feed from the satellite, then.”

“We were about to do that,” she said with a scowl. “When we got a call from Merrick. Seems the extortionist contacted him just after the missile thing. Warned that he’d blow the sarcophagus if anybody cut the link or tried to get near the place.”

“A dead-man switch?”

“Probably. So it’s not so simple as it looks.”

He closed his eyes and nodded.

“How about you?” she asked. “Anything new?”

“Oh, no, no. Not really. Same old thing, you know?”

* * * *

It was raining when he reached his apartment building. Gennady had driven the motorcycle in, leaving all his other supplies by the city gates. He wanted to try something.

The rain was actually a good thing; it made a good cover for him to work under. He parked his bike in the foyer, and hauled a heavy pack from the sidecar, then up twelve floors to the roof. Panting and cursing, he paused to rest under a fiber-glass awning. The roof was overgrown with weeds. The sarcophagus was a distant grey dome in a pool of marshland.

He hooked up the satellite feed and aimed it. Then he unreeled a fibre-optic line down the stairs to the sixth floor, and headed for his old place.

Somebody had trashed it. Bogoliubov, it had to be. The piano had bullet holes in it, and there was shit smeared on the wall. The words “Stay away” were written in the stuff.

“Jesus.” Gennady backed out of the room.

Scratching his stubble nervously, he shouldered his way into the next apartment. This one was empty except for some old stacking chairs, and had a water-damaged ceiling and one broken window. Radiation was higher than he would have found acceptable a week ago—but after he finished here he could find a better place. Then think what to do about Bogoliubov.

He secured the door and set up his generator and the rest of the computer equipment. He needed a repeater for the satellite signal, and he put that on the balcony. Then he jacked in, and connected to his RPV.

At first all he saw was dirt. Gennady raised his head, and saw the road into town, blurred by rain. He stood up, and felt himself rise to more than man-height. This was great! He flexed his arms, turned his torso back and forth, then reached to pick up his sacks of supplies.

It was a bit awkward using these new arms, but he got the hang of it after spilling some groceries and a satchel of music disks into the mud. When it was all hanging from his mantis-like limbs, he rose up again and trotted toward town.

The RPV drank gas to feed its fuel cells. Bogoliubov had shown Gennady some full tanks on the edge of town, enough to keep the thing going for months or years. Thinking of the old man, Gennady decided that as soon as they were done with Jaffrey, he would visit Bogoliubov with the RPV, and confiscate his rifle.

He jogged tirelessly through the rain until he came to his building.

There he paused to hide the bike, in case the old man did come around today, then bumped his way into the stairwell and went up.

Gennady paused in front of the apartment door. He hadn't counted on the eeriness of this moment. He listened, hearing only the faint purr of the generator inside. Hesitantly, he reached to turn the knob with a steel hand, and eased the door open.

A man crouched on the floor near one wall. He was stocky and balding, in his late thirties. He was dressed in a teal shirt and green slacks. His eyes were closed, and small wires ran from his temples to a set of black boxes near the balcony door. He was rocking slowly back and forth.

Jesus, am I doing that? Gennady instantly cut the link. He blinked and looked up, to find the doorway blocked by a monstrous steel and crystal creature. Its rainbow-beaded lenses were aimed at him. Plastic bags swayed from its clenched fists. Gennady's heart started hammering, as though the thing had somehow snuck up on him.

Swearing, he hastily unloaded the supplies from its arms. After putting the stuff away he found himself reluctant to re-enter the living room. Under this low roof the RPV looked like a metal dinosaur ready to pounce. It must weigh two hundred kilos at least. He'd have to remember that, and avoid marshy ground or rotten floors when he used it outside.

He linked to it again just long enough to park it down the hall. Then he shut the door and jammed a chair under the knob.

* * * *

The morning birds woke Gennady. For a long time he just lay there, drinking in the peace. In his half-awake state, he imagined an invisible shield around this small apartment, sheltering him from any sort of pain, aggravation or distraction. Of all places in the world, he had finally found the one where he could be fully, completely carefree. The hot spots of radiation could be mapped and avoided; he would deal with Bogoliubov in time; Jaffrey would not be a prob-lem for long.

No one would ever evict him from this place. No one would come around asking after him solicitously. No noisy neighbours would move in. And yet, as long as he had fuel to run the generator, he could step into the outside world as freely as ever, live by alias in any or all of the thousands of worlds of the Net.

Be exactly who he wanted to be ...

Feel at home at last.

But finally he had to rise, make himself a meagre breakfast and deal with the reality of the situation. His tenancy here was fragile. Everything would have to go perfectly for him to be able to take advantage of the opportunity he had been given.

First he phoned Merrick. "You never told me about the helicopter."

"Really? I'm sure I did." It was only a voice line; Gennady was sure Merrick wouldn't have been so glib if they'd been able to make eye contact.

Gennady would feel absolutely no guilt over stealing the RPV from him.

"Forget it, except let me say you are a bastard and I'll join the Nazis before I work for you after this," he said. "Now tell me what we're doing. And no more surprises or I walk."

Merrick let the insult pass. They set the itinerary and time for the reconnoitering of the sarcophagus. Gennady was to use the RPV's full set of sensors to ensure there were no tripwires or mines on the approach. Druschenko had denied knowledge of anything other than Jaffrey's RPV. Certainly hearing about the missiles beforehand would have been nice.

"You're to do the initial walking inspection this afternoon at 2:00. Is that enough time for you to familiarize yourself with the RPV?"

Gennady glanced at the apartment door. "No problem."

With everything set, Merrick rang off and Gennady, stretching, stepped onto the balcony to watch the morning sun glow off the sarcophagus. It was an oval dome made of interlocking concrete triangles. Rust stains spread down the diamonds here and there from the heavy stanchions that held it all together. Around the circumference of the thing, he knew, a thick wall was sunk all the way to bedrock, preventing seepage of the horrors within. It was supposed to last ten thousand years; like most people, Gennady assumed it would crumble in a century. Still, one had to be responsible to one's own time.

Humming, he groped for his coffee cup. Just as it reached his lips the computer said, "Lisaveta is calling you."

He burned his tongue.

“Damn damn damn. Is it voice or full-feed? Full-feed. Shit.”

He jacked in. He hoped she would match his laconic tone as he said, “Hello, Lisa.”

“You asshole.”

He found it difficult to meet her gaze. “Are we going to get into something pointless here?”

“No. I’m going to talk and you’re going to listen.”

“I see.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me you were going back?”

“You’d have told me not to go. I didn’t want an argument.”

“So you don’t respect me enough to argue with me?”

“What?” The idea made no sense to him. He just hadn’t seen what good it would do to fight. And, just maybe, he *had* been afraid she might talk him out of it. But he would never admit that to her.

“Gennady. I’m not trying to run your life. If you want to throw it away that’s your business. But I’m your friend. I care about you. I just...just want to *know*, that’s all.”

He frowned, staring out the window. Dozens of empty apartment windows stared back. For an instant he imagined dozens of other Gennadys, all looking out, none seeing the others.

“Maybe I don’t want to be known,” he said. “I’m tired of this world of snoops and gossips. Maybe I want to write my memoirs in a private language. Apparently that’s not allowed.”

“Pretty ironic for you to be tired of snoops,” she said, “inasmuch as that’s what you do for a living. And me too...” She blinked, then scowled even harder. “Are you referring to — “

“Look, I have to go now — “

“*That’s* what this is about, isn’t it? You just want to be able to hang up on anybody and everybody the instant you start feeling uncomfortable.” Lisa looked incredulous. “Is that it? It is, isn’t it. You want to have your cake and eat it. So you found a place where you can hide from everybody, just poke your head out whenever you need someone to talk to. Well, I’m not a TV, you know. I’m not going to let you just turn me on and off when it suits you.

“Keep your empty town and your empty life, then. I’ll have none of it.”

She hung up.

“Bitch!” He yanked off the headset and kicked the wall. No neighbours to complain—he kicked it again. “What the hell do you want from me?” He’d put a hole in the plasterboard. Dust swirled up, and he heard the Geiger counter buzz louder for a second.

“Oh, God.” He slumped on the balcony, but when he raised his eyes all that met them was the vista of the sarcophagus, gleaming now like some giant larva on the banks of the river.

Unaccountably, Gennady found his eyes filling with tears.

How long has it been, he wondered in amazement, *since you cried?*

Years. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and blinked a few times. He needed to walk; yes, a long walk in the sun would bring him around . . .

He stopped at the door to the apartment. There was the plastic wrap he should use to cover his shoes. And the face mask. And beside that the Geiger counter.

A horrible feeling of being trapped stole over him. For a few minutes he stood there, biting his nails, staring at the peeling wallpaper. Then the anger returned, and he kicked the wall again.

“I’m right.” To prove it, he sat down, jacked in, and called up the interface for the RPV.

* * * *

Gennady held his head high as he walked in the sun in a plaza where no

human could set foot for the next six thousand years. He knelt and examined the gigantic wildflowers that grew in abundance here. They were *his*, in a way that nothing else had ever been nor could be outside this place. This must be how the old man felt, he marvelled — but Bogoliubov's armour was a deliberate refusal to believe the danger, he was in. With the RPV, Gennady had no need for such illusions.

He didn't take every opportunity to explore. There would be plenty of time for that later, after he reported the accidental destruction of the RPV. For now, he just sauntered and enjoyed the day. His steel joints moved soundlessly, and he felt no fatigue or heat.

Beep. "Merrick here. Gennady, are you on-line?"

"Yes. I'm here."

"Gennady, let me introduce Dentrane. You'll hand the RPV off to him when you get in position, and he'll take it from there. If we're lucky, we'll only need to do this once."

"Hello, Gennady," said Dentrane. He had a thick Estonian accent.

"Good to hear from you, Dentrane. Shall I walk us over to the sarcophagus and you can take a peek at what all the fuss is about?"

Dentrane laughed. "Delighted. Lead on."

Time to be 'all business' as Lisaveta would say. He jogged towards the river.

* * * *

"It's American law," Lisa was saying to Merrick. They had met in a neutral room in cyberspace. Merrick's avatar was bland as usual; Lisa had represented herself as a cyber-Medusa, with fibre-optic leads snaking from her hair to attach to a globe that floated before her. "When you're dealing with the Net, you've got both in-ternational and local laws to worry about," she explained. "We can't guarantee our trace of the paths to the satellite signal. We can't shut it down on the satellite end. And unless we have proof that it's Jaffrey doing this, we can't shut it down at his end."

"So our hands are tied." Merrick's avatar was motionless, but she imagined him pacing. In a window next to him, the live feed from the RPV showed green foliage, then the looming concrete curve of the

sarcophagus.

“You’re going to have to trust me. We’ll find a way to prove it’s Jaffrey.”

“I have sixteen military RPVs waiting in the river. The second I see a problem, Ms. MacDonald, they’re going in. And if they go in, you have to shut down Jaffrey.”

“I can’t! And what if he’s got a dead-man switch?”

“I’m relying on Dentrane to tell us if he does. And I’m relying on you to cut Jaffrey off when I order it.”

She glared at the avatar. It must be ten times she’d told him she had no authority to do that. She knew how to, sure—but if they were wrong and Jaffrey wasn’t the extortionist, she would be criminally liable. But Merrick didn’t care about that.

He didn’t seem to care about Gennady, either. And why should he? Gennady had chosen to plant himself right next to the sarcophagus. If it blew up he would have no one to blame but himself.

And that would be absolutely no consolation when she had to fly out to watch him die of radiation poisoning in some Soviet-vintage hospital ward. She had woken herself up last night with that scenario, and had lain awake wondering why she should do that for a man whom she knew only through the Net. But maybe it was precisely because their association was incomplete. Lisa knew he was as real a person as she; in a way they were close. But they would not have really met until she touched his hand, and she couldn’t bear the thought of losing him before that happened.

Angrily she glanced at her ranks of numbers and documents, all of which pointed at Jaffrey, none conclusively. It all made her feel so helpless. She turned to watch the movement of the RPV instead.

The RPV had scaled the steep lower part of the sarcophagus, and now clam-bored hand over hand toward a red discoloration on one flank. With a start, Lisa realized there were some bulky objects sticking up there. The camera angle swerved and jittered, then the RPV paused long enough for her to get a good look. She heard Merrick swear just as she realized she was looking at tarpaulins, painted to resemble the concrete of the structure, that had been stretched over several green metal racks.

Then one of the tarps disappeared in a white cloud. The camera shook as everything vanished in a white haze. Then —static.

“What was that?”

“Holy mother of God,” said Merrick. “He launched.”

* * * *

Gennady froze. He had stepped onto the balcony to let Dentrane get on with his work. From here he had a magnificent view of the sarcophagus, so the contrail of the rocket was clearly visible. It rose straight up, an orange cut in the sky, then levelled off and headed straight at him. He just had time to blink and think, *I'm standing right next to the RPV signal repeater* before the contrail leapt forward faster than the eye could follow, and all the windows of the surrounding buildings flashed sun-bright.

The concussion was a sudden hammer blow, nothing like the roaring explosions he heard in movies or VR. He was on his back on the balcony, ears ringing, when he heard the *bang!* echo back from the other buildings, and could almost follow its course through the abandoned city as the rings of shocked air hit one neighbourhood after the next, and reported back.

A cascade of dust and grit obscured the view. It all came from overhead some-where. He realized as he sat up that the explosion had occurred on the roof. That was where he'd set up the big dish necessary for Dentrane's data-feed.

The fear felt like cold spreading through his chest, down his arms. He leaned on the swaying balcony, watching for the second contrail that would signal the second rocket. The dish on the roof was the link to the Net, yes; but it fed its signal down here to the transmitter that sat a meter to Gennady's left, and that transmitter was the control connection to the RPV. It was the only live beacon now.

Nothing happened. As the seconds passed, Gennady found himself paralyzed by indecision: in the time it took for him to rise to his feet and turn, and take three steps, the rocket might be on him — and he had to see it if it came.

It did not. Gradually he became aware that his mouth was open, his throat hurting from a yell that hadn't made it from his lungs to his vocal cords. He fell back on his elbows then shouted “Shit!” at a tenth the volume he thought he needed, and scrambled back into the apartment.

He was halfway down the stairs when the cell phone rang. He barked a laugh at the prosaic echo, the only sound now in this empty building other than his chattering footsteps. He grabbed it from his belt. "What?"

"Gennady! Are you all right?"

"Yes, Lisa."

"Oh, thank God! Listen, you've got to get out of there — "

"Just leaving."

"I'm so glad."

"Fuck you." He hung up and jammed the phone back in his belt. It immediately rang again. Gennady stopped, cursed, grabbed it, almost pressed the receive but-ton. Then he tossed it over the banister. After a second he heard it hit the landing below with a crack.

He ran past it into the lobby, and pulled out the bike. He started it, and paused to look around the sad, abandoned place he had almost lived in. His hand on the throttle was trembling.

The release could happen at any moment. There would be an explosion, who knew how big; he imagined chunks of concrete floating up in the air, exposing a deep red wound in the earth, the unhealing sore of Chernobyl. A cloud of dust would rise, he could watch it from outside. Quiet, subtle, it would turn its head toward Kiev, as it had years ago. Soon there would be more ghosts in the streets of the great city.

He would get away. Lisa would never speak to him, and he could never walk the avenues of Kiev again without picturing himself here. He could never look the survivors of the Release in the eye again. But he would have gotten away.

"Liar!"

The sound jolted him. Gennady looked up. Bogoliubov, the self-proclaimed custodian of Pripyat, stalked towards him across the courtyard, his black greatcoat flapping in the evening breeze.

"Liar," said the old man again.

"I'm not staying," Gennady shouted.

"You *lied* to me!"

Gennady took his hand off the throttle. "What?"

"You work for the Trust. Or is it the army! And to think I believed that story about you being a med student." Bogoliubov stopped directly in Gennady's path.

"Look, we haven't got time for this. There might be another release. We have to get out of here. Hop on."

Bogoliubov's eyes widened. "So you betrayed him, too. I'm not surprised." He spat in the dirt at Gennady's feet and turned away. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Wait!" Gennady popped the kickstand on the bike and caught up to the old man. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I came here because of the dragon. How could I know you weren't involved?"

Bogoliubov whirled, scowling. He seemed to be groping for words. Finally, "Trust was a mistake," was all he said. As if the effort cost him greatly, he reached out and shoved Gennady hard in the chest. Then he walked rapidly away.

Gennady watched him go, then returned to the bike. His head was throbbing. He shut the bike down, and walked slowly back to the entrance of the apartment building. He stopped. He waited, staring at the sky. And then he went in.

* * * *

"Lisaveta, I'm linking to the RPV now."

"Gennady! What?" He smiled grimly at the transparent surprise in her voice. She who liked to Know, had been startled by him. Gennady had linked the cell-phone signal to the RPV interface. She would get voice, but no video this way.

He adjusted the headset. "Connecting now." He took a deep breath, and jabbed the *enter* key on his board.

Vision lurched. And then he was staring at a red tarpaulin, which was

tangled up in the fallen spars of a green metal rack. Several long metal tubes stuck out of this, all aimed at the ground. A haze like exhaust from a bus hung over everything.

The missile rack shook. Gennady cautiously turned his head to see what might be causing the motion. Directly beside him was the black, rusted flank of a thing like a tank with legs. Several sets of arms dangled from its sloped front, and two of these were tearing the tough fabric of the tarp away from the collapsed rack.

“Gennady, talk to me!” He smiled to hear the concern in her voice. “Where are you?”

“Dentrane’s out of the loop, so I’ve taken over the RPV. I’ve got it on the side of the sarcophagus.”

“But where are you?”

“Lisa, listen. *Someone else is here.* Do you understand? There is another RPV, and it’s trying to fix the missile rack.”

“Jaffrey...”

“That his name? Whatever.” The black dragon had nearly unravelled the tarp. If it succeeded in realigning the missile tubes, it would have a clear shot at the balcony where Gennady now sat.

“It’s ignoring me. Thinks I’ve run away, I guess.” He looked around, trying not to turn his head. There was nothing obvious to use as a weapon—but then his own RPV was a weapon, he recalled. Nothing compared to the hulking, grumbling thing next to him, but more than a match for —

— the missile tubes he pounced on. Gennady felt the whole structure go down under him, metal rending. He flailed about, scattering the tubes with loud banging blows, winding up on his asbestos backside looking up at the two spotlight eyes of the black RPV.

He switched on the outside speaker. “This isn’t your private sandbox, you know.”

Two huge arms shot out. He rolled out of the way. Metal screamed.

A deep roaring shook the whole side of the sarcophagus. He could

see small spires of dust rise from the triangular concrete slabs. The dragon had leaped, and utterly smashed the place where he had just been.

Just ahead under the flapping square of another grey tarp Gennady saw a deep black opening in the side of the sarcophagus. "This your home?" he shouted as he clambered up to it.

"Stay away!" The voice was deep and carrying, utterly artificial.

"What was that?" Lisa was still with him.

"That would be your Jaffrey. He's pissed, as the Yankees would say."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Lisa, he's going to make a release. We both know it. Only a fool wouldn't realize there's a backup plan to me being here. If I fail, the men in the choppers come in, am I wrong? You and I know it. This guy knows it. Now he's got nothing to lose. He'll blow the top off the place."

"Merrick's ready to send the others in now. You just get out of there and let them handle it."

"No." The monster was close behind him as Gennady made it to the dark opening. "I can't avoid this one. You know it's true."

She might have said "Oh," and he did imagine a tone of sad resignation to whatever she did say, but he was too busy bashing his way into the bottom of a pit to make it out. Gennady rolled to a stop in a haze of static; his cameras adjusted to the dark in time for him to see a huge black square block the opening above, and fall at him.

"Shit!" He couldn't avoid it this time. Something heavy hit him as he staggered to his feet, flicking him into a wall as though he were made of balsa wood. He didn't actually feel the blow, but it was an impossibly quick motion like a speeded-up movie; sensation vanished from his right arm.

He managed to cartwheel out of the way of another piston blow. Gennady backed up several paces, and looked around.

This was sort of an antechamber to the remnants of one of the reactor rooms. Circles of light from the headlamp eyes of the dragon swooped and dove through an amazing tangle of twisted metal and broken cement under the low red girders of the sarcophagus' ceiling. Here were

slabs of wall still painted institution green, next to charred metal pipes as thick as his body. The wreckage made a rough ring around a cleared area in the centre. And there, the thing he had never in his life expected to see, there was the open black mouth of the obscenity itself.

Jaffrey, if this was indeed he, had made a nest in the caldera of Reactor Four.

Gennady bounded across the space and up the rubble on the other side. He clutched at a cross-beam and pulled himself up on it while the dragon laboured to follow. When he reached with both arms, only one appeared and grasped the beam.

“Come down,” said the dragon in its deep bass that rattled the very beams. Its bright eyes were fixed on him, only meters below.

“What, are you crazy?” he said, instantly regretting his choice of words.

The dragon sat back with a seismic thud. It turned its big black head, eerily like a bear’s as it regarded him.

“I’ve been watching you,” it said after a long minute.

Gennady backed away along the girder.

“When I was a boy,” said the dragon of Pripyat, “I wrote a letter to God. And then I put the letter in a jar, and I buried it in the garden, as deep as I could reach. It never occurred to me that someone might dig it up one day. I thought, no one sees God. God is in the hidden places between the walls, behind us when we are looking the other way. But I have put this letter out of the world. Maybe God will pass by and read it.”

“Gennady,” said Lisa. “You have to find out who this is. We can’t cut Jaffrey’s signal until we have proof that it’s him. Can you hear me?”

“I watched you walking in the evenings,” said the dragon. “You stared up at the windows the same way I do. You put your hands behind your back, head down, and traced the cracks in the pavement like a boy. You moved as one liberated from a curse.”

“Shut up,” said Gennady.

“Do you remember the first photos from the accident? Remember

the image of this place's roof? Just a roof, obviously trashed by an explosion of some kind. But still, a roof, where you could stand and look out. Except you couldn't. No one could. That roof was the first place I had ever actually seen that had been removed from the world. A place no one could go or ever would go. To stand there for even a moment was death. Remember?"

"I was too young," said Gennady.

"Good," said Lisa. "We know he's old enough to remember 1986. Keep him talking."

Gennady scowled, wishing the RPV could convey the expression.

"Later I remembered that," said the dragon. "When I could no longer live as a person in the world of people. Remember the three men in the Bible who were cast in the belly of the furnace, and survived? Oh, I needed to do that. To live in the belly of the furnace. You know what I mean, don't you?"

Gennady crawled backward along the beam. The horrible thing was, he did know. He couldn't have explained it, but the dragon's words were striking him deeply, wounding him far more than its metal hands had.

"So look." The dragon gestured behind it at the pit. It had arranged some chairs and a table around the black calandria. A bottle on the table held a sprig of wildflowers. There was other furniture, Gennady now saw—filing cabinets, book-shelves, and yes, books everywhere. This monster had not merely visited this place; it lived here.

He saw another thing, as well. On the back of the dragon, under a cross of bent metal spars, was a small satellite dish. This spun and turned wildly to keep its focus on some distant point in the heavens.

"Lisa, he's linked directly to the dragon. No repeaters."

"That a problem?"

"Damn right it's a problem! I can't stop the thing by pulling any plugs."

"You and I have had the same ambition," the dragon said to Gennady. "To live in the invisible world, visit the place that can't be visited. Except that I was forced to it. You're healthy, you can walk. What made you come here?"

“Don’t,” said Gennady.

The searchlights found and pinned him again. “What hurt you?” asked the dragon.

Gennady hissed. “None of your business.”

The dragon was now perfectly still. “Is it so strong in you that you can never admit to it? Tell me — if I were to say I will hunt your body down and kill you now unless you tell me why you came here — would you tell me?”

Gennady couldn’t answer.

The dragon surged to its feet. “You don’t even know what you have!” it roared. “You can walk. You can still make love —really, not just in some simulation. And you *dare* to come in here and try to take away the only thing I’ve got left?”

Gennady lost his grip on the beam and fell. A bookshelf shattered under him.

The dragon towered over him. “You can’t live here,” it said. “You’re just a tourist.”

He expected a blow that would shatter his connection, but it didn’t come. Instead the monster stepped over him, making for the exit.

“I can run faster than your little motorbike,” it said. Then it was gone, up the entrance shaft.

Gennady tried to rise. One of his legs was broken. One-legged, one-armed, there was no way he was getting out of here.

“Gennady,” said Lisa. “What’s happening?”

“He left,” said Gennady. “He’s gone to kill me.”

“Break the link. Run for it. You can get to the motorcycle before he gets to you, can’t you?”

“Maybe. That’s not the point.”

“What do you mean?”

He raised himself on his good elbow. “We haven’t got our proof, and we don’t know if there’s a dead-man switch. Once he’s done with me he’s just going to come back here and tear the roof off. Are Merrick’s commandos on their way?”

‘Yes.’

“Maybe they can stop him. But I wouldn’t count on it.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m in his den. Maybe I can find what we need before he gets to me.”

For a moment her breath laboured in his ear, forming no words. Gennady told himself that he, in contrast, felt nothing. He had lost, completely. It really didn’t matter what he did now, so he might as well do the decent thing.

He bent to the task of inspecting the dragon’s meagre treasure.

* * * *

“Talk to me,” she said. Lisa sat hunched over her work table, out of the Net, one hand holding the wood as if to anchor herself. All her screens were live, feeding status checks from her hired hackers, Merrick’s people, and all the archival material on Jaffrey that she could find.

“There’s no bombs here,” he said. His voice was flat. “But there’s three portable generators and fuel drums. They’re near the entrance shaft. I guess the dragon could blow them up. Wouldn’t be much of an explosion, but fire would cause release, you know.”

“What else is there? Anything that might tell us who this is?”

“Yes —filing cabinets.” That was all he said for nearly a minute.

“What about them?” she asked finally.

“Just getting there — “ Another pause. “Tipped them over,” he said. “Looking . . . papers in the ashes. What the hell is this stuff?”

“Is it in English or Russian?”

“Both! Looks like records from the Release. Archival material. Photos.”

“Are any of them of Jaffrey?”

“Lisa,” he snapped, “it’s dark, my connection’s bad, and I only saw that one photo you showed me. How in God’s name am I to know?”

“There must be something!”

“I’m sure there is,” he said. “But I don’t have time to find it now.”

She glanced at the clock. The dragon had left five minutes ago. Was that enough time for it to get to Gennady’s building?

“But we have to be sure!”

“I know you do,” he said quietly. “I’ll keep looking.”

Lisa sat back. Everything seemed quiet and still to her suddenly; the deep night had swallowed the normal city noises. Her rooms were silent, and so were her screens. Gennady muttered faintly in her ear, that was all.

She never acted without certain knowledge. It was what she had built her life on. Lisa had always felt that, when a moment of awful decision came, she would be able to make the right choice because she always had all the facts. And now the moment was here. And she didn’t *know*.

Gennady described what he saw as he turned over this, then that paper or book. He wasn’t getting anywhere.

She switched to her U.S. line connection. The FBI man who had unluckily pulled the morning shift at NCSA Security sat up alertly as she rang through.

Lisa took a deep breath and said the words that might cost her career. “We’ve got our proof. It’s Jaffrey, all right. Shut him down.”

* * * *

Relief washed over Gennady when she told him. “So I’m safe.”

Her voice was taut. “I’ve given the commands. It’ll take some time.”

“What? How much?”

“Seconds, minutes—you’ve got to get out of there now.”

“Oh my God Lisa, I thought this would be instant.”

Gennady felt the floor tremble under him. Nothing in the den of the sarcoph-agus had moved.

“Now!” She almost screamed it. “Get out now!”

He tore the link helmet off: *spang* of static and noise before reality came up around him. Sad wallpaper, mouldy carpet. And thunder in the building.

Gennady hesitated at the door, then stepped into the hallway. Light from inside lit the narrow space dimly—but it was too late to run over and turn out the lamp. From the direction of the stairwell came a deep vibration and a berserk roar such as he had only ever heard once, when he stood next to an old T35 tank that was revving up to climb an obstacle at a fair. Intermittent thuds shook the ceiling’s dust onto Gennady’s shoulders; he jerked with each angry impact.

Gennady shut the door, and then the end of the hall exploded. In the darkness he caught a confused impression of petalling plasterboard rushing at him, accom-ppanied by a gasp of black dust. The noise drowned his hearing. Then Jaffrey’s eyes blazed into life at ceiling level.

He was too big to fit in the hallway—big as a truck. So Jaffrey demolished the corridor as he came, simply scooping the walls aside with his square iron arms, wedging his flat body between floor and ceiling. The beams of his halogen eyes never wavered from pinioning Gennady as he came.

Into the apartment again. The dial on the Geiger counter was swinging wildly, but the clicking was lost now in thunder. The windows shattered spontaneously. Gennady put his hands over his ears and backed to the balcony door.

Jaffrey removed the wall. His eyes roved over the evidence of Gennady’s plans — the extra food supplies, the elaborate computer set-up, the cleaning and filtering equipment. A deep and painful shame uncoiled within Gennady, and with that his fear turned to anger.

“Catch me if you can, you cripple!” he screamed. Gennady leapt onto the balcony, put one foot on the rail and, boosting himself up, grabbed the railing of the balcony one floor above. He pulled himself up without regard to the agony that shot through his shoulders.

Jaffrey burst through the wall below, and as Gennady kicked at the weather-locked door he felt the balcony under him undulate and tilt.

The door wouldn't budge. Jaffrey's two largest hands were clamped on the concrete pad of the balcony. With vicious jerks he worked it free of the wall.

Gennady hopped onto the railing. Cool night air ruffled past and he caught a glimpse of dark ground far below, and a receding vista of empty, black apartment towers. He meant to jump to the next balcony above, but the whole platform came loose as he tried. Flailing, he tried a sideways leap instead. His arms crashed down on the metal railing of the balcony next door.

He heard Jaffrey laugh. This platform was already loose, its bolts rusted to threads. As he pulled himself up Jaffrey tossed the other concrete pad into the night and reached for him.

He couldn't get over the rail in time, but Jaffrey missed, the cylinders of his fingers closing over the rail itself. Jaffrey pulled.

Gennady rolled over the top of the railing. As he landed on the swaying concrete he saw Jaffrey. The dragon was half outside, two big legs bracing him against the creaking lintel of the lower level. He was straining just to reach this far, and his fingers were now all tangled up in the bent metal posts of the railing.

Gennady grabbed the doorknob as the balcony began to give way. “Once more, you bastard,” he shouted, and deliberately stepped within reach of the groping hand.

Jaffrey lunged, fingers gathering up the rest of the metal into a knot. The balcony's supports broke with a sound like gunshots, and it all fell out from under Gennady.

He held on to the doorknob, shouting as he saw the balcony fall, and Jaffrey try too late to let go. The bent metal held his black hand, and for a second he teetered on the edge of the verge. Then the walls he'd braced his feet against gave way, and the dragon of Pripyat fell into the night air

and vanished briefly, to reappear in a bright orange flash as he hit the ground. Rolling concussions played again through the streets of the dead city.

The doorknob turned under Gennady's hand, and the door opened of its own accord — outward.

Trying to curse and laugh, hearing wild disbelief in his voice, he swung like a pendulum for long seconds, then got himself inside. He lay prone on some stranger's carpet, breathing the musty air and crying his relief.

Then he rose, feeling pain but no more emotion at all. Gennady left the apartment, and went downstairs to get on with his life.

* * * *

Lisa sat up all night, waiting for word. The commandos had gone in, and found the violated sarcophagus, and the body of the dragon. They had not found Gen-nady, but then they hadn't found his bike either.

When the FBI cut off Jaffrey's signal, the feed to the dragon had indeed stopped. They had entered his stronghold apartment minutes later, and arrested him in his bed.

So her career was safe. She didn't care; it was still the worst situation she could have imagined. For Gennady to be dead was one thing. For her not to know was intolerable. Lisa cried at four A.M., standing in her kitchen stirring hot milk, while the radio played something baroque and incongruously light. She stared through blurred eyes at the lights of the city, feeling more alone than she could have prepared herself for.

It was midmorning when Gennady called. Her loneliness didn't vanish with the sound of his voice. She started crying again when she heard him say her name. "You're really all right?"

"I'm fine. At a gas station near Kiev. Didn't feel like sticking around to be debriefed, you know. Sorry I lost the cell phone, I'd have called earlier." There was a hesitancy in his voice, like he wasn't telling her everything.

"Merrick says there was no release. Were you irradiated?"

"Not much. Ten packs or so, I guess." Despite herself she laughed at his terminology. She heard him clear his throat and waited. But he said

nothing else.

She held the phone to her ear, and glanced around at her apartment. Empty, save for her. Lisa felt a sadness like exhaustion, a deep lowering through her throat and stomach. ‘You’re just a voice,’ she said, not knowing her own meaning. ‘Just a voice on the phone.’

‘I know.’ She wiped at her eyes. How could he know what she meant, when she didn’t?

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I can’t go on like this.’ His voice faded a bit with the vagaries of the line. ‘It’s not working.’

‘What’s not working, Gennady?’

‘My—my whole life.’ She heard the hesitant intake of breath again. ‘I can’t control anything. It’s just. . . beyond me.’

She was amazed. ‘But you did it. You got Jaffrey for us.’

‘Well, you know ...’ His voice held a self-conscious humour now. ‘It was your hand on the switch. I just kept him busy for you. It doesn’t matter. I don’t know what to do.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I can’t just go back to Kiev. Sit around the flat. Jack into the Net. It’s not enough.’

‘You don’t have to,’ she said. ‘You have money now. I’ll make sure Merrick comes clean.’

‘Yeah. You know... I’ve got enough for a vacation, I figure.’

Lisa leaned back in her work chair. She toyed nervously with a strand of her hair. ‘Yeah? Where would you go?’

‘Oh . . . Maybe London?’

She laughed. ‘Oh yes! Yes, please do.’

‘Ah.’ His shyness was such a new thing, and charming—but then, he wasn’t falling back on the safety of the Net this time. ‘One condition?’ he ventured.

“Yes?”

“Don’t ask me too many questions.”

For a second an old indignation took her. But she recognized it for the inse-curity it was. “All right, Gennady. You tell me what you want to tell me. And I’ll show you the city.”

“And the Tower? I always wanted to see the Tower.”

Again she laughed. “It figures. But we go only once, okay? No more castles for you after that. Promise?”

“Promise.”

* * * *