

A suffocating feeling of air, as heavy as the military ammunition that once was coursing this aerodrome he was now guarding was tearing Boris's nostrils with its burning savour, bringing his hangover on a different level. His head was already in terrible pain from the amount of vodka he had previously consumed, and the dirty, polluted air did not make his condition better.

On the other hand, he only has himself to blame for continuing this repetitive chain of drinking until he falls to his intoxicated slumber, wakes up with a terrible headache, sobers up and gets back at it.

At some point, when the aerodrome just got completely shut down and everything of any importance was transported from it, leaving Boris to guard the remainings of it and the ghosts of its glorified past, he would take strolls all over it – passing the old sites, offices of his former superiors – now empty and easily accessible – the launching zones, commanding blocks – everything. It was both comforting and dreadful for him. He had not yet resorted to alcoholism back then, saving his last bit of hope for a better future. He would spend his time exploring those bits of it that were inaccessible back when he was a cosmonaut. Boris would read old documentation, that was, again, not intended for him to read, yet turned out to be useless since it never really got taken with the rest of what used to belong here – just a pile of dusty furniture and electronics were left.

Now he grew bored of it. He knew everything there was to know.

Strolling around the aerodrome would only mean coursing through the remains of what had not yet rotten and trying to picture what it used to look like from his memory. To imagine his former colleagues (he wondered – where did they go in life?), all cheerful and hopeful, the life he used to have and wished to bring back. Used to wish.

Boris had long since accepted his fate of rotting together with these machines while the epoch he used to live in decayed with time, leaving him and this godforsaken place behind, in the past. He used to praise it, he used to glorify and put his hopes in it, but his everlasting solitude brought him the realisation that there was nothing to praise – it was just a regime. A militaristic regime that worked on the labour force of people, of his own too. And didn't value a single life, since there were so many more. That made him resort to alcohol, to fill in the void that emerged inside of him. The loneliness. The seclusion.

He felt apart from the rest of the world as if he was in some sort of personal hell of his own where he was doomed to meet his end.

He was not completely isolated, however. That would be an overstatement. As much as we hate it, sometimes we are not presented with a different choice rather than accepting the circumstances we are in. So had Boris.

He felt alarmed in the presence of Borodine, the director of a factory that was just one monorail trip away even while drunk. His wreck of a factory was just as rotten as Boris's aerodrome. Serguei was just as lonesome and left to his own

company as Charow. At the first sight, in their eternal disappointment and solitude they were quite even – but no, they were different.

Everybody has their own way to cope, he guessed.

Ever since a certain singer, Helena Romanski came to their then thriving community of Komkolzgrad with a cooperative concert for the workers of the factory(AND the aerodrome), Serguei was unable to drop her off his mind. He was fixated. Obsessed even? And was eager to convince her to come here again. So far, he never managed to, as much as Boris was concerned. Borodine alarmed Charow, indeed – he was ready to do anything for the sake of accomplishing his wish. He turned the rusty reeking pipes of the factory into an organ, he made and programmed a pianist for it, the way he talked about it and Helena – he was preparing – Boris once saw these by his own eyes while the ecstatic ex-director of the Komkolzgrad factory was showing him his best creation while doing a detour. Borodine fell into a lapse of insanity.

Boris's despise of Serguei was probably mutual. And yet, they wouldn't stop meeting occasionally.

Seems like despite anything, human nature remained the same – they both needed company. One would ramble about his fixation, the other would pretend to listen. Judging by their dynamic, it was Borodine who was in a desperate need of acknowledgment and occasional small talk to keep his mind at peace – Charow was fine in his own company, considering how he mostly stayed silent throughout the entire vent of the other one.

That day seemed no different from the dozens of others he already lived. Going outside to catch some air would not be the best option for his headache – it's polluted and dirty. The wind was blowing from the coal mines of Borodine's factory and brought the smell of rusted metal and coal with it. Despite living here for nearly a decade he could not adapt to this completely.

Boris washed his face with a bit of refreshing cold water. His attempts to put himself together were cut short by a creaking sound of an arriving monorail, provoking a terrible pain inside of his already poor skull. It was Borodine. He soon entered Charow's humble cabin carefully, while its owner was already sitting in a chair across him, and unintentionally coughed:

– You're quieter than usual. – Remarked Charow in a muffled tired voice after holding a pause that felt like an eternity.

– You've been drinking again, haven't you? Huh. – Serguei said mockingly, and coughed again – this time in his fist, and stepped a bit further, taking a seat across from Charow's. He took out two bottles of vodka and placed them on a table in front of his companion who's hangover worsened at the mere sight of these cursed bottles.

Boris annoyingly gestured with his hands for the director to put them away. He complied and put them aside, out of Charow's sight, yet making them still be on the table.

– Get this out of my sight, I can't even look at these right now. – Said the former cosmonaut harshly.

– Stop whining, stop whining. – Said Borodine and switched the topic immediately, – I did. You won't believe how blessed I was today, Boris.

– What is it?

– We are alone no longer. – Replied he mysteriously, with a grin on his face. – A train had arrived at the station and made a stop— A mechanical train. I don't know who is there and for what purpose, but I sense I might finally finish the pianist... Anyway, I thought you'd be in the mood for some vodka and brought two bottles with me. It seems like you're having enough of a hangover, I see.

– I do... – Charow scratched the back of his head, processing the information he had just received. – A mechanical train, hm...

– This is very good. – Serguei interrupted him, leaning forward, emotionally gesturing with his hands in front of Boris. – I only have to find Helena... Write to her... All my letters, they were returned... Where could she be? I wonder.

The cosmonaut silently nodded – he had nothing else to add. He didn't know what. He listened to Borodine unstopably rambling for most of the time and so far only followed along without being sincerely into his business or caring about his welfare. What he clearly understood, though, is that the director was a man of a dangerous nature. He was unstable, if not yet insane.

– And the hands – I only have to finish the hands. They are the most difficult part, as I've told you. So far I've never managed to make them at least relatively close to how *he* did...

What he also truly believed is that *none* of them had real regard for each other. For Borodine, Charow was merely an instrument or a bystander he could pour all his senseless monologues on – the presence of someone is the only thing of importance. This created an illusion of a dialogue, of human contact. And for Boris, Serguei was no one but a threat. Not for him, though, for he didn't exactly feel like he would be in danger, but for someone more vulnerable, or for society overall he would seem a beast.

And he was one.

Borodine looked atrocious – years of running an abandoned factory and his obsession got better of him. It was not only the hard physical work, but his stature – a crooked back, always same clothes; a strange mask he always wore around his head(seems as if he lost most of his hair), *scabies*... And his eyes, God, were they terrifying – the way they would fill with pure madness, were red and almost always inflamed. He was usually covering them with goggles.

They had different views on life and secretly(or so it seemed to themselves but not to each other) despised each other, perfectly understanding how their entire communication is built on wanting at least a single thread to the open world, to someone just like themselves. There was no one else in the world who could understand their situation better than eachother.

Had it been for the aerodrome and the factory not closing down, he doubted they would ever cross each other's paths apart from that single Helena Romanski concert.

They were just too different – but in their solitude were they even.

Borodine seemed to be visibly bored by the lack of reaction from Charow – mostly the director doesn't pay that much attention to these details. The remains of his almost invisible brows have crossed in annoyance, almost falling onto his plain empty eyes.

– Look, right there. From here, you can see the train. – The man composed himself, got up and walked clother to the exit, pointing at the distant object at the station, very excited. – It is an epitome of machinery. It's exquisite. But you don't seem too interested, don't you?

– I sense you're planning something evil. – Replied the cosmonaut, still dizzy. – And as someone who was appointed to guard this darned hellhole, I say you must stop.

– Look at your state, – Borodine was amused, referring to Boris pitifully. – And what are you gonna do to me, captain? Are you going to try and stop me? Spare yourself. You're no one but a drunkard, we both know that.

– How dare you? – Charow suddenly got up, clenching his fists. Yet, he had not regained enough strength for a clash, which made him fall back into his chair. He realised his absolute incapability to do anything and looked defeated.

– Moreover, – Continued the director, his grin fading. – I am not going to do anything of the sort. I am just going to take a look. I neither want or need to hurt people.

– You lost your mind, Borodine, and a long time ago.

– So we're going to exchange mutual insults now? – Serguei coughed. – I don't care what you think, Charow, I hope that makes it loud and clear. And considering how much alcohol you consume each day, you won't be able to stop me in that pitiful state. What do you make of yourself, anyway? We're both stuck in this shithole, where laws do not apply. Don't stick to that meaningless role of yours. We may both stay here forever, but you should never compare yourself to me. I would never drop to your level.

Boris was silent, his head tilted.

– Well then – farewell, friend. Today I might actually finish my pianist and I must tend to it immediately.

Serguei left, leaving Boris with an agonizing feeling of helplessness and embarrassment. He might've been long since a director of nothing, but still had the same unbearable temperament as all of them.

The nerve! But Boris had nothing to reply with. He understood his state, had accepted his own weakness – yet it was still embarrassing when he was unable to stand up for himself, both literally and metaphorically. And would he try anything afterwards? Or the moment is lost? That the man wondered. He let Borodine

disrespect him and get away with it – most probably it was the tone their relationship was going to adopt.

With these thoughts, the former cosmonaut gazed at the outside of his filthy cabin. He finally took a look at the train himself – his eyes suddenly widened. Unbelievable... It was impossible to study it from such distance, but it looked marvelous even from afar. Not like any other industrial train that used to pass through Komkolzgrad. These were filthy and were no better than the place itself – they radiated exactly the atmosphere of an environment they were built and exploited in. But this train? It surely brought something different into their world of taintning darkness and dirt.

On another note, he thought it reminded him of someone. Only someone brilliant could construct and build something like this. He couldn't wrap his finger around who it could be, of course.

Whoever was on it, Charow sympathised with them. They were very unlucky to stop there.

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