

Dead Minus One
Chapter 8
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For the President of the Russian Republic, morning arrived when the cell door opened. And the morning appeared very slowly this day, creaking in like an old man's shoe, as it gradually gave way to the light. What passed for light filtered in as a dim gray change of pace from the tedium of blackness. And most of the that light was blocked by the figure with the cattle prod.

“Good morning, Mr. President.” came the quiet greeting. He stepped into the room and closed the door, letting it moan into the the lock. “And how are we today?”

“Good morning, Nicholas. Are you Nicholas?” He tried to get up, but the restraints kept him in the usual position. He leaned back and let out a deep sigh. How much longer?

A few steps closer. There was that slightly sickly stench that appeared in the cell every time one of them came in.

“No, sir. I'm Nicky. Nicholas has a special job, a special calling and will not be with us. For now I will help you through today. There is much to do. Come on, get up.”

The shadow reached for the restraints, keeping the cattle prod (there was always a cattle prod) at a distance. The President lay motionless, knowing the consequences. The restraints loosened.

“Get up.” with a first touch of threat in the voice.

Slowly, so very slowly, first supported by his elbows, then sitting up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, aware of the prod now held close to his heart. Any attempt to demand, to cajole, to plead, had been ripped out of him the first night.

The night of the living dead, he called it to himself. Was it so short a time ago, a day, perhaps two ago that that demented Defense Minister came to him, rushing toward his desk after begging an interview, his eyes wild, his nose with a slight redness.

“Mr. President, I have the papers. All you need do is sign here”, he said, showing some sheets of paper, “and here. Of course, we'll need the codes.”

“What is the matter with you, Minister?”, “ the President had said. “Those codes? I will do no such thing. Are you all right?”

“Sir, look,” the minister said, placing maps, figures and spreadsheets before him. “I have proof from the Minister of Information himself that the Saudis are prepared to reduce their oil prices, in their continued obeisance to the Americans, to ridiculous lows. We live on oil sales too. We will be ruined. Russia must be returned to its rightful place as a great power. The greatest power.”

His eyes didn't focus. There was blood coming from his nose. This man was insane.

“There are people in Russia who support us, Mr. President. People in other parts of the world as well. People who want to bring the Saudis down. Bring America down. People will need Russian oil. It is time to bring Russia back. And Mr. President, we will do this with you or without you.”

The small pistol was pulled from the coat and pointed at the President. Remain calm, he told himself, but if this is the end... The gun wavered, then shook, then it was lowered.

“I'm sorry, sir. We've long been friends.” the Minister said. “You must cooperate. I need the codes. If you will not defend Mother Russia, than I will.”

He took a small phone from his pocket, and spoke into it. The door to the office swung upon and four soldiers, escorting the President's rather harried staff, stepped into the office.

“The Kremlin is sealed, sir.”, the Minister continued. “People will think we are in serious crisis mode. No one will disturb us. Not even Natasha. We will talk. Please have a seat.”

The staff was manhandled to chairs. Their terrified looks were boring into the President's mind, quiet calls of panic coming from them. They were as trapped as he was.

“Other members of the cabinet, including the prime minister, are otherwise occupied tonight. It's just us. No calling anyone, the lines are disabled, except for my own. But I mis-”

He stopped for a moment, and wiped some blood from his nose.

“I misspoke. One more person will join us. Unfortunately, since you refuse to give us the codes, and there would be hell to pay if I shot you, from an associate, we'll need some help. Nikita.”

A tall man with a thin drawn face entered. His hair was unkempt. His clothes were all black down to dull looking boots, with a touch of sickly sweet smell, like a cologne for the dead. He gave the President a quiet nod and then turned to the Defense Minister.

“How may I serve Russia?” he asked in a raspy voice, like he had a bad cold.

The Minister indicated the President with a flick of his gun.

“We will need the codes. Help the President remember. I- wait a minute.”

His cellphone was ringing.

“Yes? Not yet. Of course I know that. Don't worry, this will be over soon. And, yes, I'll get to it.”

He hung up. “You know, sometimes I really get sick of me.” and then stifled a giggle.

“My apologies. Nikita, if you will. Dmitri, I am sorry. But we'll take good care of you.”

The greasy haired man turned to the President. Two soldiers came over and held the President down in the chair. As the dark tailored Russian approached, the President could see the room before him open up into a chaos that was going to happen on what had started as an ordinary day. Now he was pleading, almost begging to an insane man to stop what he proposed doing.

And is he working for someone else?

Two long hands reached around his hand, and it felt like worms entering his mind, dancing and twisting through his brain, reaching for neurons, and finding thoughts, discarding them, finding more. Looking, looking.

Get out, Get out of my mi-

My name is Nikita, came the thought. I am soon to be leader of Russia. I must learn all I can about governing so I may be good for my people, and lead them back to glory. Help me find the way. Or I must find it myself.

The President started screaming again, could hear some laughing, and passed out. He awoke in his cell, and had been told about the nuclear launch. His staff was being held at another site. Then another man, who looked strikingly like Nikita, but called himself Nick, had told him what to say in the phone calls to the Americans and officials at the United Nations. The hands on the face and then “*Tell the Vice President this.*” The words would come out of his mouth. He was well treated, if you count a dank room with minimal toilet facilities and military food as well treated for the President of a major power. Well, once a major power. He'd heard about the bombing, but that's all.

Then Nicholas and Nick. And they all looked strikingly like each other, and seemed to know each others thoughts, finishing each other's sentences, dragging the President to the room where he'd be asked questions and be forced to answer. He'd already given up codes and personal information on many world leaders and Russian officials. Beliefs and policies, habits and peccadilloes, preferences in dinner guests and the bedroom partners. It was all there.

And he could not stop them. He had no idea where he was, who these people were aside from first names of people who all looked alike, as if they were clones or something. More questions, more mental torture. And he was alone.

They took him to a small room where there would be a metal chair with restraints on the arms and legs, and one at the top of the chair for the head. He's be immobile. He'd be given a sedative. One of them would look in his eyes.

“Just relax. And think of Mother Russia.”

It was time for the screaming to begin.

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Ivana Turgenev was in her own cell, though it had comfortable seating, a nice passing view, and a slight rocking motion. She, and her companion, were on a train that had been moving as annoying slow as possible, at least to the man across from her, for the past 36 hours, and they were slowly approaching Vladivostok.

She's taken in what scenery she could, as there was no conversation, except for his occasional mumblings about lack of speed, and dozed when night fell, jumping awake when the train lurched. The gun pointed at her didn't help. Didn't he ever sleep? Didn't he never need to go to the bathroom? He had at least allowed her a small break time, following her to the lavatory, and then following her back. Nothing happens like it does in the movies, the movies she would go to alone all the time. If they did Richard Gere or Igor Petrenko would step into the hall, brush against this psychotic man, grabd his gun, and she'd be saved, with maybe a kiss. But she was merely marched back to the cabin, she to her spot, he to his.

And on it went as it had for two days, since the meeting in Red Square, since the murder, since the running began. They'd taken the Metro back to her apartment where he had told her to pack some bags. Her questions were answered with the gun.

“Please, it is important. People will be hunting for you, to kill you. You've got to come with me, Ivana.”

She'd seen guns before, and not just in the movies.

“Why would people want to kill me?”

He gestured with the gun toward the door.

“They killed your friend. Leonid was very powerful in their organization. He wanted to bring you back in to work with them, to use your mental powers to help with their project. You would have never left the project. No one would have missed you.”

The last line hurt, and she showed it. But he paid no mind.

“I am here to take you to Vladivostok also, but we are going to stop them.”

“Stop who?”

“Just pack.”

The gun looked more serious. She went into her bedroom. He followed her, but just stood in the doorway, gun pointed to the floor.

“While you're packing, I'll tell you a story. Maybe not as good as your movies....”

She tried not to react, but opened a suitcase as ordered. She listened as he talked, as if she had a choice. As he talked, the packing slowed. Then stopped. Her breathing, which had tried to remain calm, now slowed more to control the anger. What have they done? Did they never learn? Either of them?

“Are you ready?,” he asked.

She finished up and clicked the suitcase closed.

“Do you need to hold that gun on me? I won't cause you any trouble.”

“Right. This gun ensures there will be none. I'm sure you don't trust me, and you will try to escape. I would. But Ivana, right now you are the most powerful woman in the world. And I am a very lucky man.”

As she thought about the conversation, staring out at the waning sun on the Siberian tundra, she finally turned to him. He was looking at her as usual, his eyes like working lasers.

“Why are you a very lucky man? You never answered.”

“Redemption.”

He turned from her for the first time, and faced the wall. The gun went into a shoulder holster.

“If you'd like to get away, now would be a good time to try.”

The train moved on, and Ivana just sat, considering its terminus. Vladivostok, a place she'd hoped she'd never hear about again, even from Leonid, that these bloody fools that played with nature, with DNA, with people's minds for God's sake, would ever stop. She should know about playing with people's minds.

Was he sleeping? Yesss.

She reached out, now that his defenses would be down, began to probe.

And she found him. And heard his story, as she was supposed to.

Ivana Turgenev was the epitome of the Soviet parapsychology studies of the 50s through

