

BACKSCATTER

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by

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First edition, 2023

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CHAPTER I

PERTURBATION

THE THICK CONCRETE WALLS OF THE BUNKER had a habit of drowning out noises. Someone could be having a loud conversation right outside, and those within would be none the wiser. Kommandant Yuriy liked the silence. He could sit here for hours, alone with just his thoughts and the white noise on the radio.

It took a second or more for him to realise the phone was ringing. He reached for, and quickly brought its receiver to his ear. His superiors were not tolerant of wasted time. But the phone was still ringing.

“Shit!” Yuriy swore, realising his mistake.

It was another phone that was ringing. Not the general-use grey one.

The other handset. Covered in dust, but blood red. Its scream continued to echo within the room. Yuriy all-but threw the receiver of the grey phone to the floor in his hurry to reach the device. It was older, heavier and made a menacing click as it was lifted from its housing. With purpose, he raised it to his ear.

“Is this Kommandant Yuriy, of the State Intelligence Directive?”, a voice asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “What has happened?”

“We need you to travel to Novi Chernomorsk. Immediately,” the voice stated.

“For what purpose?” Yuriy demanded.

“ReDis again. They found something.”

* * *

The Rediscovery Directive occupied much of the Central Plats. It was, allegedly, an almost one-for-one copy of a former Soviet government building in Stari Bishkek. Brutalist architecture had a bad habit of surviving.

Of course, ReDis put their own flourishes on it as well. Where the original building had prominently featured the usual communist regalia of stars, hammers and sickles, the reconstruct instead flew the flags of the State. Above the main entrance hung the emblem of the Rediscovery - a stylised beam of light radiating from the ground. Below that, a motto written in Angliski: “as Before, now Beyond”.

Two bored-looking soldiers stood at the door. Yuriy showed them his ID. Immediately they stood to attention.

“Come this way. They are waiting.”

Like most such buildings, the door immediately led to a wide atrium. Glass cabinets housed prized items recovered in past years. Sometimes the public would be allowed in for a rare glimpse of Original Design batteries, Kalashnikovs or other items long-since copied. Judging by the dust covering these displays though, no one really considered them more than a curiosity. Yuriy knew the interesting discoveries were far outside of public view.

Past the atrium, the soldiers led Yuriy through a winding series of corridors, offices and then a heavy steel door. This one only opened when a correct binary code was tapped on a receiver. Behind it stood another atrium, smaller than the first, but much more sparse. Elevators lined the back wall, while a squadron of heavily armed soldiers occupied a central position. These, he noted, all wore patches associated with ReDis, rather than the general military.

More ID checks followed before a new soldier tapped yet another code, and one of the elevators popped open. “Things usually don’t go this easily...” Yuriy thought as he stepped inside.

* * *

The floors were not numbered, and the elevator cabin did not display any information as it descended. The long period of inertia convinced Yuriy he was now many stories underground. ReDis was possibly the only State Directive more paranoid than Intelligence.

Another set of security personnel appeared and whisked him away to a conference room, occupied almost completely by a sturdy wooden table, around which six Rediscovery Directive officials of various ranks sat. Yuriy sensed they were annoyed - or perhaps stressed. The small details were always important.

“Good morning Kommandant, I trust the airship journey here was comfortable?” one asked, before identifying himself as Chief Archaeolog Dugin of the Black Sea Province.

“Of course, only the best the State could supply,” Yuriy lied. “But perhaps you could explain why my presence was necessary at such short notice? IntDir resources are spread thin as you are aware.”

“Straight to the point then. Fine. We do it your way,” Dugin replied curtly. The Rediscovery Directive had a poor relationship with Intelligence at the best of times.

“Four days ago we excavated a basement at the Stari Kyiv site. Once we cleared out all of the radioactive ash we came across this,” He continued, pointing to a large book-like object in the centre of the table. Yuriy immediately recognised it. A copy of the Editorial.

“Ok... that’s all well and good - but officially we have over one hundred of these. Unofficially, thousands. Why is this worth bringing me all the way down from the Karpats Mountains?” Yuriy questioned. “Are you going to explain to the Directorate why you wasted precious government assets to show me a copy of possibly the single most reprinted book in the State?”

Dugin was unfazed. He'd been expecting this.

"We thought that too. Originally. But then, one of our junior Archaeologists noticed something. This book has more than fifty extra pages when compared to the original Editorial," he said while gesturing towards the object.

On second glance it did appear thicker than others Yuriy had seen displayed in museums - and he'd seen them alot.

"What do those extra pages contain?", Yuriy demanded, realising the gravity of the situation.

"We believe they are additions."

"Additions? By the Editor?"

"No. By another," Dugin interjected. "Do you now understand why you were sent here?"

The remainder of the officials in the room looked down at their papers nervously.

"Were the annotations written Before or After?" Yuriy questioned.

"We can't say for sure, but possibly both. The room we excavated it from belonged to the Organisation. You would recall that Kyiv was destroyed in an retaliatory hydrogen bomb strike approximately a week after the final phase of the Implosion began. But we found a well-equipped shelter. It was there." the Archaeolog explained, before gesturing to the book. "Its geolocation and its chronolocation, as well as its condition, give us reason to suspect the annotations were made following the initial production of the Editorial, by someone involved in the Organisation, possibly one of the Contributors."

"Understood. And beyond those in this room, how many people know about this?"

"Just the Archaeolog who initially noticed the discrepancy."

"Where is he now?"

"She has been transferred back to Varshava," Dugin corrected. "And she can be put under round-the-clock surveillance."

Yuriy wondered why he made that last offer, but decided to not question him on it for the time being.

“Had she completed a translation?” Yuriy asked.

“No. Protocol dictates that we hand off such matters to IntDir. Hence we called you,” Dugin said, in a slightly irritated voice. “I cannot help but assume that you are testing me to see if I am following State Orders correctly. However, I assure you, you will find no sedition here to boost your career.”

Yuriy hid his surprise. He did not know of any protocol governing what to do if non-standard versions of the Editorial were found. Indeed such discoveries did not exist. However, given the constant political infighting between Intel and ReDis, it was better not to let on anything. Instead, he played along. People were afraid of Intel’s internal surveillance mandate, and this could be used to great advantage, even when dealing with equally powerful Directives.

“We all have a job to do Chief Archaeolog. Yours is to dig things up, and tell the government, and only the government, what they do. Mine is to make sure the regressive ideologies that caused the Implosion do not gain hold in the State,” Yuriy replied. A condescending tone to hide his growing unease.

“Of course, I do not suspect that you are a Regressive or a Defeatist, or have done anything but follow orders to the letter. However, vigilance is the only reason our borders have not been overrun, so vigilant I will be,” Yuriy continued with an almost word-for-word quote from State ideology.

Dugin stood up, and shoved the book towards Yuriy. Its strange biopolymer skin slid effortlessly across the steel table.

“Similarly, you would be wise to do your job and get this translated as fast as possible. We can supply you with a secure room, and the requisite equipment for the task. This may not be a problem at all, or it may be a political shitstorm the likes of which your Directive would be ill-equipped to deal with,” Dugin said, and then promptly walked out of the room.

* * *

One of the remaining officials had led Yuriy from the conference room even deeper into the underground facility. At the end of the final corridor was another steel door, suspiciously similar to the ones used in Intel prisons. It opened with a solid clunk, revealing a sparse, tiled room, bristling with equipment. Some was even Original Design. The requirement for security was self-evident.

Another reprinted copy of the Editorial lay open on a single wooden desk. Yuriy examined it. 23rd Edition: Annotated. The original Angliski on left pages, with a translation into Standartni on the right.

Yuriy sat himself down on a spare steel chair in front of the desk and contemplated the work ahead of him. From his earliest years of school, he had learnt of the Editorial. A singular document, comprising a collection of news articles, comments, maps, scientific data and first-hand accounts. The belief was that it was the work of a single group, dubbed the 'Organisation' by historians, that determined at some point that the Implosion was inevitable.

They attempted to chronicle it. A warning to whatever new civilisation would rise from their ashes. He had been taught that many copies of the Editorial were made, the materials used in their manufacture were still impossible for the State to replicate. Clearly, these books were intended to survive. And survive they did.

Yuriy knew the story. An unfathomable tragedy. A global society of 9 billion people collapsing in on itself. So unaware were they of their own freefall that they did not scream until they hit the ground. And, when you cut through all the analysis by historians, one thing remained clear to him: the Editorial was that dying scream.

From a young age he had been taught what it all meant - the very same lessons that had been incorporated into State ideology. It had always comforted him to know that their very foundations were underpinned by this warning, this scream, echoing into the present.

So, it was with somewhat more than an afterthought, that Yuriy flipped the annotated Editorial back to the beginning, before respectfully placing the newly discovered copy beside it.

He began to read.

UN hails progress made in achieving decarbonisation targets

24/04/28¹

[View Count: 236,000]

The UN Secretary General has lauded industrialised nations for progress towards meeting their decarbonisation targets set during the Paris² Accord more than a decade ago.

Speaking in front of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General repeated information gathered by the IPCC that global annual CO2 emissions had peaked in 2025 and had since declined by 6 percent.

“This is evidence of concrete steps being taken by the global community to fight the very real threat of climate change,” the SG said. “But much more must be done.”

Climate scientists have now confirmed that the global average temperature has increased by 1.6 degrees above pre-industrial levels. The Paris Agreement committed signatory nations to keep global temperatures “well under” 2 degrees of warming. Despite recent CO2 emissions reductions, many now warn that keeping to this target is impossible.

“Realistically, there is no chance this will be achieved,” said Prof. Yang Xiaomen from Oxford University³. “What isn’t being said from the politicians here is that much of this warming is already baked-in. Even if we reduced carbon emissions to zero tomorrow, the warming trend will continue.”

As the UNGA hearing progressed, police struggled to contain violent protests outside the UN building.

¹The reason for this date marking the beginning of the Editorial is unknown.

²‘Paris’ has been geolocated to a submerged ruin-field off the coast of Frantsiya. Further information unavailable due to Defeatist activity in the region.

³Destroyed, largely overgrown. See ReDis remarks on the ‘London Expedition’.

Collection of vox pops taken outside UNGA meeting in New York⁴
[Broadcast 23/04/28 - Interactions 1.32M]

Interviewer: Do you think the effects of climate change are being taken seriously by world leaders?

Respondent 1: No. Not at all. Last year when Lucy hit, 230 people were killed and the Metro was shut down for days. How many more of these hurricanes will it take for the President to do more than pay lip service to these reductions?

Respondent 2: Why should they take it seriously? Anyone with half a brain can clearly see that the issue is being pushed by China as a way of bankrupting our economy so we can't match their military build up.

Respondent 3: I've had it with these Globalists deciding our fate behind closed doors. They just want to find an excuse to control our lives even more. Fuck them — [Cut]

Interviewer: Why are you protesting here today?

Respondent 4: The government must do more. Just look at the news goddammit. How many more heat records need to be broken before they actually get off their lazy asses and start to take action?

Respondent 5: I ask myself that a lot too. Maybe it's too late.

Respondent 6: My brother lived in Sacramento⁵. Why the fuck do you think I am here?

Interviewer: He lives in Sacramento? Was he there when...

Respondent 6 No, I said he lived there.

⁴The ruins of the UN building in New York are understood to have collapsed into the sea in the mid 2340s.

⁵Believed to be a reference to a pre-Impllosion firestorm that partially destroyed the city. Further information unavailable due to remote location outside of State control.

Commentary 1⁶

Much of this document will focus on how we, as a civilisation got to this point. To start with, however, I would like to reflect on how I personally got here.

Perhaps certain professions gave people greater levels of perspective on what was unfolding. A higher vantage point, and often a greater reach. For me, that was journalism. The process was simple. Find out something new, or some piece of privileged information, verify it, and then share it with the world. Text, photos, video, sound, it didn't really matter. The important part was the information, and the impact it had.

I will not say I was talented at any of the above. Speaking cynically, I would say that I was simply lucky. That I had the right background, the right gender, the right passport and that above all I was in the right place at the right time. Taking a more arrogant tone, I might be inclined to say that there was one thing which I could do better than most others: chaotic system analysis. A Deep Learning⁷ algorithm can easily spot correlations within simple systems, and even a few complex ones. However, if we introduce the vagaries of humans into the picture and the chaotic implications of their decisions, such technology becomes all but unusable on longer time-scales. Nonetheless, I believe (or am self-deluded enough to think), that I can make better predictions. Without all the variables, without all the data, I always had a feeling on how things would play out. And, more often than not, I was right.

So it was, that not more than half a decade after I began work as a journalist, I found myself starting my own company. We first just reported the news. We didn't have many resources, but we realised that we were somehow faster than the biggest news-gathering services around the globe. This attracted readers, viewers, followers. First in their hundreds, then in their thousands, and later in their millions.

We grew. But money was tight. The traditional business model of journalism had collapsed over the past two decades, and even with tens of millions of pageviews a day, we could keep little more than a skeleton staff. Until one day, eight years ago, we received an email⁸.

⁶Semantic analysis confirms that this is the first text in the Editorial authored by the Editor.

⁷Unreconstructed technology, likely related to machine intelligence. Legal status: Banned.

⁸Unreconstructed digital communications technology. Legal status: ~~Pending State decision~~ Permitted for State use (see Council decision No. 10452).

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A corporate client requesting a quote for 'regional risk analysis'. A fancy term for what amounted to an informed guess on how likely a given oil well, port, mine, etc., was to be rendered unviable due to geopolitical or environmental factors. We had no idea how much such a service was worth, so we quoted high. They accepted within an hour.

Two years later this now formed the backbone of our business. Tens of corporations were paying sums of money which we considered truly insane, for a service that was effectively prophecy.

And like all good prophets, when we looked into the future, we saw only doom.

Cyclone Chapala rapidly intensifies in the Bay of Bengal

[View Count 52,394]

Tropical Cyclone Chapala has continued to intensify in the Bay of Bengal as the Bangladeshi government prepares to evacuate low-lying areas.

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has released new data on Cyclone Chapala, which has now strengthened to a Category 4⁹ storm. IMD drones¹⁰ recorded top sustained wind speeds of 221 km/h and gusts of over 240 km/h, while offshore buoys measured a 4m 'bulge' in sea levels over the storm's eye wall.

"This is a very dangerous storm," said the IMD's Vihaan Ghosh. "The level of intensification of the storm over the last two days is exceedingly fast. Right now models are predicting the storm will continue in a north-northwest direction towards Bangladesh"¹¹, however authorities in West Bengal are on alert for any possible change in course."

Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi government has advised citizens to evacuate low-lying areas around the Ganges River Delta, as the country prepares for a direct hit. Local government offices have been closed and shelters have been opened across the south of the country in expectation of widespread flooding.

Many in the region fear a repeat of 2026's Cyclone Vayu which struck as a Category 5, and inundated large sections of the low-lying country, killing over 20,000 people.

Government officials however have been keen to stress that new flood prevention measures have since been enacted in order to mitigate deadly storm surges.

"We are confident the Delta Works will hold against this storm," said RS Chatterjee of the Dhaka Municipal Council, explaining that the system of levees and artificial breakwaters was designed to protect even against 5m surges.

⁹Analogous to a Force 2 Urugan under the State Meteorological Classification System.

¹⁰Automated flying vehicle. Legal Status: Banned.

¹¹Inaccessible for correlation study. Grounds: Submerged/Red Zone Designation/Hard Light/Outside of State Control/Presence of Hostile Forces.

Transcript of call to local government office, Kuakata, Bangladesh - 16:32 - 14/04/29

-
- Hello?
 - Yes sir, this is not a good time.
 - This is [REDACTED]¹², I am a journalist calling from [REDACTED], can you tell me what the situation is like in Kuakata currently?
 - Sorry sir I do not have time to answer questions. The situation [] not good.
 - I understand that you are busy. Can you just tell me what is height of the water at your location? Is the levee holding?
 - Not []. Water over road already. We are now on [] floor. Cannot get to vehicles.
 - Can you repeat that? I didn't catch the end.
[line dies]

-
- Yes? This is [REDACTED].
 - Help us please. We are trapped. We cannot get out. The water is [] the stairs. The wind []
 - Hold on. Tell me exactly where you are.
 - The roof is breaking. Tell [] love her! Please! No! Allah——
[line dies]
-

¹²It is believed that the censorship included within the Editorial was an overt attempt to obscure the names, genders, titles and positions of members of the Organisation.

'The Bodies in the Bay'¹³

[Unpublished Draft]

The smell hits you first. Three hundred thousand corpses were rotting in the fetid marshes of the Delta. The cyclone struck only 4 days ago, but yet the 38-degree heat and humidity were doing their work. No one could take more than a few breaths without resorting to covering their mouth and nose with a filter or an oily rag - anything to mask the stench that rose from the river.

By the water's edge heavy machinery was being used to fish the bodies out. A Caterpillar digger scooped down, before lifting another body, dumped seconds later onto a flatbed truck. Another. And another. A shoe fell off this one as it was lifted. Or was it a foot?

—

Dhaka's population of 21 million attempted to continue their lives even as a tropical rendition of Hell floated between their streets. The Ministry of Infrastructure was no exception.

"We do not have time to answer press questions. This is a critical situation, as you can see," an official said, before staring out the broken window of her office.

A small body floated past. A child.

She turned back towards me.

"You want a story? Fine. Here is your story. Yes, the levees weren't high enough. Yes, there were not enough shelters. But there never would be," she started in a controlled voice that did little to hide the anger that burned beneath each and every word.

"We tried to play your game. We built factories and workshops to produce consumer items. We even made a little money doing it. But in the end, we get knocked back to zero."

She stepped towards me, brandishing a piece of laminated paper that had earlier been repurposed as a fan.

"Do you know what percentage of the world's CO2 emissions were produced in Bangladesh? No? It's 0.1 percent. For over 170 million people. Even if you make your bullshit emissions targets, this entire country, all 170 million

¹³Authorship unknown.

of us will be underwater in a century¹⁴. This is genocide in slow motion.”

At the Dhaka International Airport, military units had managed to clear a single runway of debris. A Red Crescent plane taxied across the tarmac, before coming to a stop next to the terminal. Almost immediately, it lowered a ramp at the back and began dispensing pallets of food and medical supplies.

A crowd of people stood two hundred meters away behind a fence. Refugees from the inundated south. A shout rang out as they saw a soldier open a pallet with an axe, causing a sack of rice to spill grains onto the damp concrete. They began shaking the fence. Its foundations had been weakened in the torrential rain and wind of the cyclone. It began to lean, and then with a crash, it fell forward. Several refugees began running towards the rice sacks.

The soldiers first shouted at them, then raised their rifles. The refugees kept pouring onto the runway. There were now more than 200 of them running towards the food, perhaps the first they had seen since Chapala hit. A soldier fired into the air. Some fell back, but others kept coming. A second soldier aimed lower, and let off an automatic burst from his M-16.

Screams and splashes.

¹⁴Exaggeration. Oral history of the region suggests this process took at least two centuries.

Yuriy was not particularly moved by the scene described. A quick death from gunshot wounds or drowning was far from the worst fate that could have been suffered during the Implosion. Or, he thought darkly, the worst fate one could suffer while under IntDir arrest.

Dutifully he went back to checking both books for any discrepancies. “What?” he exclaimed out loud.

The recently recovered text was longer. Indeed it contained an entire additional paragraph that followed the previous scene of violence. Yuriy did not recall ever reading it before, even during school when he was first forced to study this text.

Two bodies were rolled off the runway, and into a flooded drainage ditch.

Maybe the official had been right, and this was all our fault. The industrialised nations of the West and East Asia ruined the planet at the cost of the Global South. But as the bodies of the two refugees stained the water red as they bled out, you could also find yourself taking a different view.

The problem was all of us.

Commentary 2

"We cannot get out."

The final words of a man drowning as his life sank both metaphorically and literally into an angry sea.

When I first read them I was immediately struck with a sense of profound, yet disturbing nostalgia. The kind that creeps up on you when thoughts drift in a place scarred by memory.

I had read almost the exact same words before.

"We cannot get out. We cannot get out. The end comes soon. We hear drums, drums in the deep."

Thus wrote JRR Tolkien in his famous work, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Glimi reads from the Book of Mazarbul in Balin's Tomb. The last dying sentences of a lost people, awaiting their fate, deep underground.

—

It took me weeks to accept why this parallel continued to echo within my mind. Our projections were trending towards calamity. Our work reporting, chronicling, analysing and dissecting was not dissimilar to that fictional book. If read 100 years later, would the effect not be the same? A warning of all we did wrong? A thousand voices screaming in unison: *"Do not repeat our mistakes!"*

Yuriy almost missed it. The newer version of the Editorial was again subtly different. Instead of saying "Do not repeat our mistakes!", a well-known line which historians taught as the core 'message' of the Editorial, this passage had been corrupted.

A thousand voices screaming in unison: *"Do not think you are different!"*

He marked it with a red highlighter pen and resolved to be more careful in the future.

And like the Ohrwurm which you cannot seem to kick, this thought stuck in my head.

We are trapped.

We cannot get out.

I did not want to accept it. I did not want to accept that our civilisation which spanned the circumference of the globe was now unravelling. I could not believe that just as we were beginning to take our first steps off this planet, we were simultaneously jumping off a cliff. Just as we started to understand who and what we are, our very nature would destroy it all.

Excuses of course.

But then the feedback started.

Yuriy inwardly laughed at the Editor's apparent belief that humans had reached anywhere beyond Earth orbit. State Archaeologists had long since confirmed that the so-called 'Moon Landing' was a US-sponsored hoax created during the Information Collapse in the early 21st century. One of the most enduring in fact. Despite the fact that no evidence of this implausible voyage had ever emerged since, many State citizens still clung to the belief that it was real.

He remembered in school learning about the Four Errors.

"So pervasive was misinformation during the Late Precipice period, even someone as intelligent and well-informed as the Editor believed in ideas not backed up by reality," his teacher had said.

He tried to recall what the remaining Errors were, but came up blank. So instead he turned the pages of both books, figuring he would remember when he came to them.

Both pages were completely different. The newer (or much much older) book contained a diary entry Yuriy had never seen before.

Entry from the audio diary of [REDACTED] - July 12, 2029

I'm back in the London office. It finally stopped raining outside.

This morning I tried to request funding for a research trip to Brazil. We needed to confirm the latest deforestation figures. Since debris from that Indian ASAT test keeps fucking up Low Earth Orbit, getting satellite imagery is way harder. Faster and cheaper to send me down there to conduct a drone survey.

Finance said there wasn't any money available. Why? Budgets had been capped.

I asked where all the investor money we received last month went. "Redirected," I was told. To where? Another project, something big, something very very expensive.

Curiosity piqued. What kind of project?

The finance guy had no idea. Something under a shitty code name. Paranoid motherfuckers up top acted like they were in a fucking spy novel.

Anyway, because of some bullshit called *Balin's Tomb* I am stuck here in London for the time being.

Oh, and look, it's started raining again.

“Shit...” Yuriy breathed.

He tagged the page with another red paperclip, then closed both books. He looked around the room. No one was present. The occasional murmur of voices filtered through the door.

The situation was more serious than he had thought. Luckily ReDis had not realised just how problematic this new Editorial could be. It needed to be brought to the State Intelligence Directive HQ in Varshava immediately.

Another Editor appeared to be not just annotating the Editorial, but also inserting their own content. And, from what little Yuriy had read, he already understood their intent: distortion.

The State was already involved in wars against three separate Defeatist groups which all claimed that we were misinterpreting the Editor’s words. Evidence of one of the Editor’s contemporaries presenting an alternative reading of the Editorial would only add fuel to the fire, and give these violent groups yet more ideological ammunition.

This book was a threat to State security. It was now Intel’s responsibility.

* * *

Yuriy opened the door from his makeshift office and stepped out into the corridor. He did his best to appear confident as he approached a nearby soldier.

“This is Kommandant Yuriy of the State Intelligence Directive. I am requesting to use your telephone,” Yuriy asked, speaking his title slowly for emphasis.

“I apologise sir, but this is a secure ReDis facility. Only authorised staff are allowed to make calls to outside,” the soldier replied uncomfortably.

“I understand, but I am afraid my Angliski is not as good as it was in school. I must call to request a translator from HQ to assist me,” Yuriy said. “This would, of course, only be a call from one State Directive to another, so I cannot see any potential security risk.”

The soldier glanced around unsure what to do. He was very young - perhaps just out of school and completing his two years of State Service. As a conscript, he probably had little loyalty to the Rediscovery Directive.

“What’s your name son?” Yuriy continued, sensing an opportunity.

“Alexi Kurashov sir. From Belgarod,” the young soldier replied.

“Nice city. Was posted there once a few years ago. Still have some friends in the local office, come to think about it,” Yuriy lied. “Not much work there though. Must be tough for your family.”

Like every Tier-3 city in the State, Belgarod was hopelessly corrupt. And while Intel officially denied it, even the lowest-IQ citizen knew that they controlled the levers of that corruption. Favours and shady dealing was the name of the game. Yuriy hoped the soldier was ambitious enough to understand what he was being offered.

“Yes sir. Finding a job when I finish my Service will be tough. But I did well in school. Perhaps I will find myself a position as an analyst at IntDir,” he replied, taking the bait.

“Well, we of course reward those who are in a position to help us.” Yuriy said, glancing towards the room housing the telephone equipment.

* * *

Five minutes later Yuriy sat down at the telephone apparatus. It was of a different construction to those used by the Intelligence Directive. Its manufacturer had been taking their design cues from Original Design technology, however, the clamshell receiver with its absurdly large cord was more of a mockery the Rediscovery’s persistent inability to master mobile communications. And while a Late Precipice ‘smart-phone’ would contain no buttons at all aside from its apparently magical touchscreen, this device spouted no less than 20 small steel keys for making calls.

Yuriy glared at the young soldier until he left the room, then rapidly dialled the number of the Electrical Operations unit at Intel HQ in Varshava.

“This is Kommandant Yuriy. Verification code - 54739Zh83B10.”

“Confirmed. What is your request.”

“I am currently in the Rediscovery building in Novi Chernomorsk. I arrived here at 09:34. I need an expert Angliski translator to come and assist me today. Have a large workload, unable to leave. How long would it take for you to send some assistance to this location?”

There was no guarantee this phone call wasn’t being listened in on by someone elsewhere on the ReDis switchboard. So Yuriy defaulted to well-practised code. The oddly-precise time was a diversion. The time itself was completely meaningless, but the digits contained within were full of meaning to those on the other end of the phone.

“Understood. We can send assistance within an hour.”

Yuriy hung up.

The subtle wail of the dial tone filled the room as he closed the receiver. There were no sirens and no one came running. For now.

He stood, exited the room and swung its steel door shut. As he did, he scanned the hallway with intent, memorising its layout. First door 5 meters right. Second door 12 meters left. Third door 15 meters left. Fourth door around 20 meters right. Elevator next right. Emergency stairwell opposite on the left.

Back in his office room, he sketched a map and began making plans.

* * *

At least 16 armed guards stood between him, and a route outside. Technically they all reported to the same authority, but since the Simferapol Incident, things were complex to say the least. Control over an item as important as this book represented political power, and he was sure it would be worth a few bodies.

He collected the two copies of the Editorial, and stuffed them unceremoniously into his leather rucksack. A few miscellaneous papers

remained stacked on the desk, held down by a glass ashtray. This gave Yuriy an idea.

He crumpled up the papers tightly, before stuffing them into the steel rubbish bin in corner of the room. He then took out his lighter and emptied the majority of its fluid into the bin.

A person trying to flee a high-security facility alone was going to be impossible. But joining a flood of panicked people might give him a chance. Yuriy still had to avoid burning down the entire building however - that would cause political ramifications that even the State Intelligence Directive would have to answer for.

He gazed at his timepiece, watching the seconds tick by.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Seconds became minutes.

Tick.

Tick.

Soon almost an hour had passed. Yuriy felt his heart rate increase as the moment drew near.

Tick.

Tick.

Darkness.

Without warning all the lights had gone out. The various machines humming in the nearby rooms whirled to a sudden stop. Unseen people called out in alarm.

It was time.

Yuriy flicked the wheel of his lighter, creating a weak flame that barely illuminated the room. He held it to the fuel-soaked documents in the bin. The room was immediately filled with a brighter orange glow. The papers ignited in a smokey pall.

Yuriy kicked the bin towards the wall of the room, away from anything more flammable. With a burst of energy he slammed open the door and began to yell.

“Fire! Get out!”

He ran from room to room, banging the doors and yelling.

“Help! Fire! Run!”

Dark silhouettes emerged through their doors, smelling the smoke and seeing the flickering glow emanating from Yuriy’s office. Their animal instincts took over, and they scrambled towards the exit.

More and more people evacuated their rooms forming a small panicked crowd by the elevator.

“It doesn’t work! Power’s out! Where’s the fire escape,” a voice called out from the near-total darkness.

“Over here! Quick! Come to me! The stairs are here!” another replied.

Yuriy quickly ran towards the second voice, pressed in on several sides by others. He almost tripped when his foot hit the first step, but managed to regain his footing. The stairwell became a cacophony of heavy footsteps and shouts as he began to ascend.

After a minute or two of frenzied climbing, the stairwell lightened to a faint grey. Yuriy’s head spun from a combination of exhaustion and dizziness. Perhaps 5 or 6 ReDis personnel were ahead of him on the stair, with another dozen stragglers behind. He kept his head down, hoping to not be recognised.

“Here! This door is the way out!” a voice echoed down.

A series of loud thumps then followed before a heavy door swung open. The stair filled with light. Pressed along by the mass of people behind him, Yuriy was forced through the opening. He swinted as his eyes adjusted to the harsh light.

He was back in the atrium of the building. Luck was on his side.

The soldiers guarding the entranceway were taken by surprise, as more and more people piled out of the fire escape.

“What happened?!” one demanded.

“Lost power! A fire. Down in the basement. Send help!” a winded Rediscovery Directorate worker managed to reply.

“Shit! Someone call the Fire Authority!”

“Can’t! Phones are dead!”

Confusion reigned as the soldiers attempted to understand what was going on. Yuriy slowly walked towards the door, hoping no one would notice his departure.

All was going to plan, until he pushed the revolving door. It gave a metallic groan as it began to turn.

“Hey! Where are you going?” someone demanded.

“To another building! Going to alert them about the fire. Their power might still be on,” Yuriy replied, making up a plausible excuse on the fly.

He pushed through the door without waiting for a response, then began sprinting towards the street. Running in this case might actually look more convincing, he thought.

Between the building and the street was a 50 meter stretch of bare concrete dotted with the odd metal sculpture or flower bed. Beyond, a steady stream of vehicles whizzed by, unaware of the commotion. A final checkpoint manned by a lone guard marked the exit of the ReDis compound. Yuriy attempted to ignore him, but the guard moved to block the footpath.

“Sir! Gotta check your bag before you leave!” the guard shouted.

“There is a fire in the main building! No power either. I need to find somewhere to make a call!” Yuriy shouted back

Yuriy slowed down so as not to appear as a threat, but did not stop. He strode forcefully past the bewildered guard and out on the street. A black car bearing the insignia of the State Intelligence Directive zoomed around the corner.

“Come back here!” the guard yelled again.

The IntDir vehicle screeched to a halt. Someone in the back seat threw open a door.

The guard drew a pistol.

“Stop! I will shoot!”

Yuriy kept moving towards the vehicle.

Crack!

A loud noise echoed out across the courtyard. The guard crumpled over, clutching his chest.

A large calibre pistol pointed out of the shadowed interior of the vehicle. Smoke drifted lazily from its barrel.

“Come on! Get in! We gotta go!” a deep voice commanded.

Yuriy jumped almost headlong to the vehicle, slamming the door shut behind him. Even before he had time to take in who had just rescued him, the car’s electric motor hummed to life, accelerating away from the Rediscovery compound and pressing him back against the seat.

“Kommandant Yuriy right? Got orders to get you out of here,” the driver said. “I’m Captain Radicz. Local Intel branch.”

“Yes... thank you Captain.” Yuriy replied still out of breath. “Better drive fast. The Reds are not gonna be happy that you shot one of their personnel.”

“It’s nothing. Just a riot control round. He’ll be walking funny for a few days, but no lasting injuries,” Radicz said. “Still, best we get the fuck out of here. Got your airship still moored here right?”

“Correct. At Zapadski Aerodrom. Let’s hope the batteries are fully charged.” Yuriy answered.

* * *

The car sped onwards, weaving between the traffic. Luckily it was around midday and the roads weren't clogged up with commuters yet.

About a kilometer away from the Aerodrom, sirens began to ring out on the street behind them.

"Looks like they're onto us!" Radicz exclaimed.

Yuriy was pressed back into the leather interior once more as the car accelerated further, zooming through an intersection. A screech of tires and a metallic crunch followed. Two other cars had collided, showering the intersection with debris. Smoke rose from mangled wrecks as their lithium batteries ignited. Flashing lights illuminated the haze, before receding as Radicz expertly drove their car away.

* * *

At the Aerodrom, Yuriy's airship was still on station. A huge DC power main connected to its cabin via a gantry. A half-dozen Intel officers stood around on guard. They snapped to attention as the car slid to a stop on the gravel.

"Looks like we got some Reds on us. How quickly can we get out of here?" he demanded.

"Five minutes. Batteries are not at 100 percent though," an officer replied, without questioning Yuriy's motive.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

Shots rang out from back at the street, penetrating through the car's backseat and shattering its windows.

"Shit, live rounds!" Radicz shouted.

"Better make that one minute!" Yuriy yelled at the officer. He rolled out of the car and ran towards the gantry, jumping up the metal stairs three at a time. Shots pinged around him.

The IntDir officers scrambled to disengage the power coupling. Others began firing back, towards the Rediscovery troops, however were hopelessly outgunned.

Yuriy mounted the gangway between the airship and the gantry, and then dove into the cabin. A split second later, another fusillade of bullets peppered the space where he had just been.

“We’re disconnected! Go! Go! Go!” a officer yelled.

Radicz’s bullet-riddled car suddenly exploded into flame, momentarily obscuring the gantry. The officers followed Yuriy up, still blindly firing through the smoke. One by one they made it to the cabin, with Radicz bringing up the rear.

“Alright! Time to fly fuckers!” he yelled.

The airship lurched upwards.

A high calibre tracer round went sailing narrowly past. Yuriy hoped that it hadn’t touched the airship. Molten magnesium and hydrogen do not mix.

More followed, but this time fell short as the airship ascended. The chaos at the Aerodrom fell away.

After a minute they were about 500 meters up, and Yuriy attempted to regain his composure. Still shaking from adrenaline, he checked his backpack. The two copies of the Editorial were still there.

“All this for a book,” he thought.