

Purity in the Cemetery
by Nicholas Santiago

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"I made it," Burke whispered gently. This would be heard by the WIRE (Wire Integrated Reception Echo) implanted under the base of his jawline that ran to just below his cochlea. That small, DARPA-developed device would cover reception anywhere on the earth that wasn't basement level in the middle of nowhere or in Antarctica. Except now former Special Ops Lance Burke readied to infiltrate the superstructure off the end of a military cargo ship with two decades of training through special ops and Gulf tours, finely meshed with Middle Eastern combat regimen. His eyes twitched up to notice the pitch-black sky. A perfect night for a 4am stealth swim. Time and again he took these swims, but there was no way he could get used to the freezing cold each time.

"I read you. Keep your eyes peeled for any of your fans," Agent Nina Hart snickered back sarcastically. She had been his handler in the field for years, and often sent him into dangerous zones, globetrotting anywhere from skyscrapers in New York to hellish weapons facilities in Abqaiq and opium farms in back-end Siberia. Hart loved to remind him of his crisis during the middle of it, but never on the ground. Her taunts were good natured, and Burke never took them lying down like a dog; in truth, he took them as he hung inverted from a rope on the ceiling... or during a certain stealth swim to a dangerous Chinese military cargo ship. Today was one of those days, given that he had barely finished climbing the rungs to a ladder and was susceptible to electronic tagging. Not that he had all the time in the world to cover his tracks anyway; exfil would be ready within the hour.

"Intercepted radio transmissions we monitored on the NRO grid paint ROOT personnel at the front of the ship, probably asleep or slacking off." Colonel Washington stated. "Whatever that material is, it's likely to be held in the lower bow ballast for safekeeping. No one likes waking up dead. I am positive you will be the one who gets us a vacation in Fiji." The ROOT was established sometime in the late nineties as corporation for clean-up detail of radioactive material. Except these boys were sent to inspect this cargo ship.

Burke closed his eyes and held back the explosion at the back of his throat. Two voices in his head redefining idiosyncrasy.

Just my luck, the one day he can't stay home, he thought to himself.

"Hart's updated your grid and maps, the waypoint markers aren't exact but we're receiving the blueprints of the ship now from Murkoff Industries," Washington explained.

Murkoff. That name brought Burke memories that brought him a cold sweat. Just last year, Burke and another agent had infiltrated the place to gather documents regarding a cyberattack on the States. Information warfare was the rage between China and the States, and an agent's specific job with a matter this delicate was to collect, scan and photograph but not capture any documents. A quick escape was impossible if he considered the patrols; single units on the outskirts of the ship with teams roving the center. Burke shook his head and focused back on the mission at hand, observing the decks periodically for any unwanted company.

Now checking his updated maps, Burke was impressed with this new show-off technology as the screen on his smartphone displayed a three-dimensional and rotatable view of the entire ship starting from his location. He was also given a small telescopic lens in the form of a monocle for long-range scouting. Imagine how this technology could have been used during

the war on terror during Bin Laden and Hussein's early days. A red square indicated his own position while a green circle indicated his target: the ballast below was the target destination. A thought came to mind.

"Nina?" Burke replied. "How lethal in radiation are we talking about here? I'd rather keep my face during a cowboy standoff with a nuclear tanker."

"Just relax. The inspectors and staff onboard the ship will always have supply of protective gear. You know how nit-picky governments can be with nuclear material, especially if they have near-future use for it. Trust my calculations; you'll be okay so long as you don't exceed an hour of exposure."

Over the years he had gained an immunity to fear of radiation. He had a near-severe case of VX gas exposure on an earlier op that required emergency extraction. Once it paid off when he placed a tracker inside one container, that led to the stop of a nerve gas attack on a politician's convention on the summit in Geneva. The resulting exposure left him incapacitated for several weeks.

Still, nerve gas, nuclear material and radiation held a very special, dark place in his heart. Invisible, inescapable and odorless, heavy radiation had a cute habit of mutating the body and brain to their core, which may or may not manifest in on the exterior. Survivors dealt with nausea, vomiting, bloody excretions, hair loss, tumor growth... destroyed cells in multitudes was a grotesque sight to behold, a horrid way to die. He had never seen a two-headed cat or glow-in-the-dark fish on part of radiation, nor did he want to. Having his remains positively identified by the MSS – the Ministry of State Security and China's version of the CIA – was not on his shopping list.

Yet, he trusted Hart and Washington with his life before and would do so again.

One eye fixed on the screen, the other navigating and observing for movement, left led away; right led to the destination.

"Well, shit."

The compartmental engine room was roughly sixty feet from his position, but the distance from his eyes and aware of his situation felt like the position was a football field away. Fate conspired against him in the cruelest of ways by placing seven ladders, one flight of stairs and deck scuttles with corresponding railings just to reach the engine and ballast.

The ever-updating, godlike map flickered for a few seconds before the screen read "NO CONNECTION."

"Someone forgot to pay the phone bill. What gives, did the tech wizards at Langley just forget we had an op?" Burke inquired, his head hung low in annoyance.

"Damn. The ROOT boys are demagnetizing the place, you might want to get comfortable," Hart sighed.

Ships like the one navigated often picked up magnetic charges that throw off radio transmissions and more importantly, Geiger counter readers. Demagnetizing, or degaussing emitters were the only way to clear the magnetic field at the cost of shutting down foreign communications not included on their specific tactical channel.

"Okay, switch to internal search for now," Washington advised. Internal search was to look on a pre-made map on the phone, which might have been outdated in the last few years of production. With Washington's leadership and Hart's SigInt– Signals Intelligence – expertise on this mission, he was confident the night would run smoothly.

But there was no need to switch to internal search. Burke tucked the phone away and decided to improvise. A dangerous gambit, but there was no room for error.

* * *

Slowly removing his silenced rifle from his back and flipping it to a ready-low position, he began to crouch and move steadily to the right of the ship.

The rifle, an FN F2000 is equipped with telescopic sight and integral muzzle container with silencer. Meant for night-time missions, low-light conditions provided the perfect opportunity to use the target dot reticle with auto adjustments for this mission. After 2007 cyberattacks and information warfare, the CIA had removed the telescopic sight and replaced with proper CRW sight, a tactical praise for its ability to magnify a fixed 1.5x and accepted most configurations. It's non-lethal component was its gas-powered 50mm under barrel launcher with a modified weaver to deploy smoke grenades, knockout gas grenades and EMP's. Burke's favorite attachment was the AeroDart, or the "Aero" for short, a high-voltage discharge device in the shape of a tiny canister, coated in resin. Upon contact with a target's chest, the container erupts with electricity, rendering them unconscious. A headshot would likely cause unwanted brain damage as this was a prototype toy from the ballistics geeks, and the mission required that no one on board is to die.

With the rifle at the ready, he crept down low, glided around the corner and trudged at a snails' pace. On the way, he stopped and wondered why and how he ended up on a Chinese cargo ship when just a few months ago he was posing as a miner in a destitute Peruvian city. It paid handsomely to be a multifaceted field agent, but it was more likely that the agency had no better trained operative to send in.

He shook off the train of thought and continued. Thirty feet in, he could make out a small and unmoving red dot.

"Any luck getting the grid back online? I'm not a bat, I can't echolocate."

"Hardy har," Hart winded. He could already see her face straightened with dead eyes at the jest. "I'll navigate from here. Up ahead is a target, be careful and avoid engaging if possible. Nappers, if possible but sleepers if forced. Should I repeat it slower, and in Aramaic?"

Another old joke. He thought up a snarky response, smiling to himself. Almost suddenly did a figure appear from a hallway not marked on the map. The now orange dot had been coming from a cigarette, and not a possible camera by a soldier who felt a smoke break was in order. He considered his options on mode of attack; he preferred not to attack at all when his mission was to remain quiet.

Burke moved quietly, and when within range he hunkered behind a nearby crate. The soldier held on his waist, a 1911 Colt .45 automatic pistol, a strange issue for Chinese personnel when that was standard issue for Navy and Marine personnel on land.

Without warning, the man's head snapped toward Burke, sensing movement. He froze in place as a statue would, his brows furrowed, and face contorted. Had Medusa been on board would his frozen expression be reasonable? Five seconds – an eternity – had passed before he cocked his head twice and gestured forward. His hands crept down toward the gun holster.

Burke wasted no time and fired. The small canister hit straight into the man's chest, his head sharply snapping back and crumpling him, forcing his body to seize in similar manner to a taser. He crept up to the man and checked for a pulse. It was strong and steady; the man had simply become Sleeping Beauty.

He disposed of the man's gun, tossing it overboard, and secured his wrists and ankles using flex-cuffs. That would be one less gun trying to murder him before sunrise.

He crouched before the entryway to the engine room and remembered the golden rule of dealing with explosives: move slow and be careful. Burke had been warned the patrols on board may have rigged the ship to go up to deter enemy intelligence.

Gently maneuvering the door handle, he poked his head in to observe any new bodies present and swept inside. At the entrance, he attempted to contact Washington and Hart for further updated, but communications were still being jammed. He continued anyway.

The engine rods nearly gave Burke an early heart attack. Each engine sat upon massive pressure-dampening springs, each spring reaching up to his thighs in length. As expected, the springs carried enough pressure to prevent movement, so he removed his single-eye binocular and inspected the casing of the engine.

It took him seven minutes of careful, light-assisted scanning of the casing to identify a different serial number on each of the canisters. He photographed it and retreated. This was all he needed, as the radiation would only be handled by proper authorities. He keyed his microphone with a press under his ear and got a light squelch in return. Still no reception.

Too much steel walling, he figured.

Abruptly, the hatch of the engine room swung open as two geared up inspectors ran Geiger counters over each of the engines, each one giving the same steady but slow and loud chirping. Brief dialogue went between the two in an indistinct and slurred dialect, Burke could not make out what was being said though it sounded to be irritation expressed at being assigned this sector.

His earpiece rang out into his head, disorienting him.

“Lance...out...now!” The voice to belonged to Washington. Knowing that was a call for emergency exfil, waiting for the men to leave felt like centuries. Burke managed to climb back up the catwalk and retraced his steps back outside, making a gradual beeline for the exfil point. Burke had been electronically tagged and was at risk for attack. He made a swift escape and slid back into the cold waters he came from, heading to the mainland with a limited amount of time and oxygen supply.

* * *

ONE WEEK LATER

“Take a seat,” Washington said. He pointed to a rotating office chair in the conference room and sat down in his own chair at the roundtable. He did not seem to be in the brightest of moods today.

Colonel Dean Washington was a man with a strict moral code to protect American interests and homeland security, every now and then violating one international law to save another became commonplace under his command. The only “games” he played were dealing with clandestine operations, strategy in the field arranging runners for the various agents stationed internationally and dealing with the stuffy bureaucrats from the Whitehouse. Casual conversation with him was as wise as cracking a joke with a drill instructor.

But this was normal in a branch of the CIA that was unknown to most international and national intelligence agencies. Being a former war veteran in the Persian Gulf under the Navy, he quickly became part of agency operations before becoming executive director of the NPW (Nuclear Proliferation Wing) at Langley. On one of the company’s interdepartmental missions, he met Burke and the two stood as allies through two presidential administrations. In his time, he found himself under extreme racial prejudice and bias, not gaining proper respect as an African American in the upper echelons of the letter agencies. Under current President Rune’s

administration, black budget earmarks were given to the agency, namely to Washington, to fund a new silent intelligence wing: Black Hawk. The operations he led paid off immensely and earned him the current-title of Director of Black Hawk under the CIA's Clandestine Operations wing.

“Ryan Teller, meet your contact. For the sake of privacy, let's call him Bob.”

Burke juttred an eyebrow at Washington for such a generic name given to him.

Washington turned toward Burke, with Teller's eyes burning holes in both men. Teller was a field agent who ran a CIA black site in Taiwan since 2013, “holding” some of al-Qaeda's leftover supporters, which fetched the man the nickname of Snake Eyes. Teller's appearance echoed a brick wall: roughly six feet-tall, above two-fifty pounds with a gruff look on his face and thick goatee-chops combo. Seeing him at the head of the table in a suit did not fit him. It looked as if he were preparing to probe their minds the same way he did his prisoners.

“Ryan is here at the request of President Madelyn Rune to brief us. But keep in mind that we won't be taking the lead for this next phase of the mission.”

Teller opened an aquamarine folder lying before him. “A little history lesson, gentlemen. The CIA has kept meticulous database on nuclear fission and materials, with the origin of isotopes.” He took a sharp inhale and a sip of water provided beforehand, “that said, we've traced the isotopes you were exposed to on the ship: thorium and cesium. It is a common by-product, the natural release of radiation from nuclear fission coming from the detonation of nuclear weapons or uranium handling in power plants.

“But those are too common, it seems almost insignificant when there's millions of instances where cesium especially was involved. It's all over the place, you can find it in the soil within immediate vicinity of the nuclear blast. The latest hit we found of cesium on this scale was thirty years ago.”

“When?” Hart inquired with a shapely brow raised. Her long brown hair hung in front of her almond-shaped brown eyes to obscure the look on her face. Rarely did she smile. Expecting a smile from her was a fool's quest.

“April 26th, 1986.”

All in unison, “Chernobyl.” Washington and Burke leaned back into their chairs, sighing at the impending fury the Secretary of Defense would put on them.

“There's only one place you can get so much material, we have a ninety percent probability,” Teller stated grimly.

“Russia can't be behind this,” Washington boldly stated. “They've already been under heavy watch, what motive could they have for this kind of attack?”

“The SAC doesn't think they're directly related. But it's where the Chinese and Iranians got it from, given the export manifests in recent months. I'll keep this simple. We need someone to go into Chernobyl and take samples. This operative will be fully equipped, briefed and provided transport”

Someone. Burke thought, knowing full well that he would be the test subject. The Special Agent in Charge likely wouldn't throw themselves into the field as his or her job was to run operations.

Hart snickered and looked around the table, covering her smile with bits of her shoulder length hair. She leaned over to tech wizard Johnny Birkoff, resident smart aleck and tech geek, “While Bob and Dean fought in wars that year, I was in the second grade.” Birkhoff was too busy scouting the western region of Chernobyl with satellite surveillance, trying to get a bead on any foreign forces in the area. He found it was a dead zone.

“We need to know how and who, nothing more,” Birkhoff said out loud, still staring into his computer. Hart concurred, annoyed at being taken away from critical cybersecurity work, but kept a straight face before the command of Teller.

The thought of traveling into Chernobyl territory was a daunting one for everyone at the table. With so vast a radius and ground to cover, it was no conceivable matter to imagine carrying a Geiger counter into radiated territory like that. As history recalled it, Russian Soviet soldiers, civilians and any other volunteers rendezvoused in exit friendly towns. Pripjat, the nearest town to the Chernobyl disaster stood as the only route ready to transport hundreds of thousands of people. The material the ship contained came from this place, likely hidden and buried by rubble.

“Did the Ukrainians raise alarm for any missing nuke material?” Burke wondered. “That’s not something you can just put under your shirt and run away with.”

Teller scratched the bridge of his nose and processed the thought. “I wouldn’t be shocked if they didn’t. Shit, for years the U.S.S.R. called the explosion a minor mishap, for God’s sake. We have to assume they’re being tight-lipped on this.”

The result of this investigation came clear in Burke’s mind in the form of a chessboard the Russians were so fond of. His years have taught him to first assume the mind’s eye of the enemy than the ally for precision. What could this news mean? Was it a distraction strategy, where he, the bishop would be the sacrifice? Or was it deeper to the extent that a knight could be operating this whole shebang? Or was it truly what it looked to be; China’s surpassing of Iran in nuclear force and now leading an attack on homeland security?

“So where do we begin? You can’t expect me to just do the Tango with a Geiger and expect to sniff the location of the material. No point letting a K-9 mutate into a wolf.”

“No, Mr. Bob. You can expect a full tac-ops and close-by-play on your desk by noon,” Teller reassured the group. Hart coughed quietly to cover her laughter at Burke’s christened name.

“You leave in one week’s time to begin the operation.” Washington affirmed. “You’ll be geared up with radiation gear and briefed soon.”

“If I may suggest?” Teller raised his hand lightly. “In the Chernobyl zone is an asset Deputy Director Kendrick and I want you to contact, courtesy of the Russians. Your contact is Natalya Kosolov, ex-Spetsnaz, GRU Major and currently our eyes and ears in the zone. She will navigate you to the waypoints personally.” Washington was surprised at Teller’s polite demeanor despite his reputation.

The name Kosolov had bounced around Langley a few times in the last few years. Her scientific exploits in the early two-thousands was enough to earn her an early retirement, but here she was advocating for the defense of a superpower. Nationalistic to the end it seemed, as were her parents, who infamously partook in Perestroika at its peak. Sharp as a blade and raised as the daughter of a soldier and a seamstress, all she had known was hardship and poverty much of her life, to the point she despised the rich, privileged and spoiled who never needed to fight for their food nor freedom. Her alias was the Ice Queen by most alphabet agency bulletins for her incredible tact, effectiveness in the field for both recon and combat, and her otherwise unshakable resolve.

* * *

PRIPYAT, UKRAINE

Burke went on a two-hour drive to the site the contact would be staying. The near-astronaut shaped radiation suit was too uncomfortable for the ride and opted to avoid sweating and change later in the car. Abandoned and destroyed buildings surrounded both sides of the street as nature – what constituted as nature anyway – began to reclaim its lost territory. Seeing a lone individual, he stopped the car nearby and began trudging toward the geared-up woman. Stealing a side look at him, she turned toward him only to walk right past him.

“I must smoke,” Kosolov murmured in heavily accented but perfect English. Nowadays, Natalya Kosolov was a radiobiologist with experience in these parts; it made sense that she would be stationed here. Thirty-four years young, she was tall and slender, with porcelain skin, light blue eyes and sharp black hair tied in a loose pony tail. “What I do for the Americans is provide information. I am the only one that was sent here.”

Burke realized after putting on the radiation suit that it was unnecessary; the suit was for the Chernobyl zone later because this area was not too affected. Then again, Hart had instructed him to do so. While she was an effective and brilliant workaholic, she always found time to prank Burke.

The silence seemed to have its own gravity, becoming deafening and unbearable as the neighborhoods reverberated nothing but wind and silence. Slight fear began to set in one Burke began to imagine all the people that suffered a fate that was not their own to suffer. The markings for evacuation on balconies seemed to come to life and light up with the radiation and imaginary voices of the eighties could be heard. He turned to his new colleague and attempted to make conversation.

“How many years have you been stationed here? You said there were no other assets.” “*Da.*, I came five years ago after college, recruited by the GRU. Langley came up with the million-dollar idea to make this a joint op.”

“I’m sure you helped tons.” He felt bad for his remark, but he could sense in this young woman that told him that much of what she knew was through research and observation, not in progressive combat, though her maturity and iron will be something impressive indeed. His special remark would have earned him a beating from the trainer he had in his youth; she was the reason he pursued work as a company man to begin with.

“Very funny, James Bond. How many do you think died here?”

“Thirty-one was the official count at home, more were listed as MIA.”

Natalya nearly choked on the cigarette drag she pulled. “Pfft! Thirty-one! Four times as many relief effort volunteers died within ten minutes, radiation turned them into jelly! Women, children, the works. Thirty-one...” her voice trailed off as she stared at the floor and chuckled at the number he told her. The Americans had been horribly misinformed.

He could see why she worked closely here. It was a nationalistic fight and she sought to relieve the memories of her and her country’s past by assisting in rehabilitating the town. Her voice did not crack or break off, showing her iron will once again.

“How many?”

“Between the Motherland, Ukraine and Belarus? Three hundred thousand.”

The number staggered Burke, silencing him.

“Come, Bond,” she pointed to the east. “Chernobyl is that way. Eighteen miles is the minimum safest distance.”

They loaded up the car and departed.

* * *

Farms, barns and other smaller buildings appeared along the drive, made of mostly unappealing gray concrete. Banks, grocery stores and the works also appeared magnificently

only to show signs of rot, acidity and deterioration. True to the Soviet way, everything seemed to have a Lego-like composition to it, each building appearing as boring as the one before it. Gotta love Perestroika, he thought to himself.

It wasn't just the silence that stammered him, it was the lack of life and stillness of the environment. Everything seemed frozen, unadvanced ever since that day in '86. Clothing and wheelbarrows of possessions stood sprawled all over the street when the people had scrambled to run for safety. Only they didn't make it and could not avoid air. Children's playgrounds had been filled by bushes, and the metal structures that had been a plaything to climb on had become no more than a half-melted, rusted and towering giant.

This was a true living hell, he decided. His musing caused Kosolov's discussion of genuine Borscht to go ignored.

She hit his shoulder to regain his attention. "If you think this is bad, the radiation here will not diminish for another three or four hundred years. The contamination will not become safe levels until then. But never, ever come at night."

He heeded her words of wisdom. If the daylight of this shook his soul, the night would break it.

They passed an apartment building complex, with the balconies marked for evacuation after seeing the result of the explosion. He envisioned men, women and children in pajamas that fateful morning, completely unaware that the explosion they saw from their bedrooms contained a nuclear material deadly enough to kill them all, silently. He noticed a number on the side of each balcony. Faded, but each bore a white roman numeral.

"I didn't figure there to be enough time to paint an aerial marker," Burke stated in a low tone. The depression of walking into a battlefield was harsh, but to walk into a nonviolent zone filled with ghosts and death was something altogether. These people were innocent. They had not known to fear the tinted clouds heading their way, not that it could be prevented anyway so long as there were ventilation systems.

Natalya sighed. "They were for the buses. The people weren't evacuated until the next morning by martial order, long after the children had been sent off to school. The people were told to mark their balconies with the number of their evacuation bus just in case loved ones returned. They would know what happened."

Except no one returned. The thought forced his eyes closed. He had seen enough and instructed her to warn him when they reached the target waypoint. He had thought of his young daughter Alexandra during this time, determined to return home someday and finally admit what he really did for a living. Burke was not an international property manager as he led her to believe. Yet at any point he was overseas, she like many millions of people back home in America and his neighborhood in Maine could be attacked. He would not forgive himself to lose his only child.

It was not the thought of a technological apocalypse that unnerved him, it was the unpredictable human potential to destroy that hurt the most. War, hatred, prejudice, terrorism. These would last forever, and he had no way to prevent it other than to defend his country from those who would seek to destroy it.

Focus on the mission. Focus. Focus.

The car continued under the now darkening expanse of the sky. Tonight, would bring something new. He sat upright in the passenger seat, now staring at the road at a cloud of smoke up ahead, ignoring his mind's eye for the moment. He quickly eyed Natalya's expression; she had noticed the smoke before he did. As they drove in closer with the car did it become apparent

that the cloud was dust, not smoke. Someone is, or was, digging here. Through radiated soil, as if to dig something up, or bury it.

They left the car and slowly approached the ashy ditch.