



ESCAPE FROM CHERNOBYL

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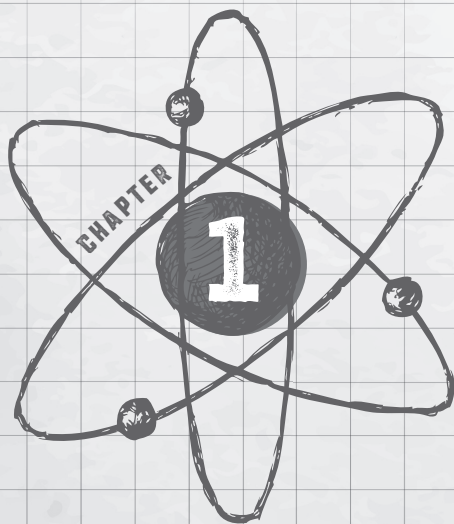
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Yuri Fomichev picks a wooden splinter from his palm. Months of mopping floors and wielding hammers have turned the sixteen-year-old's hands into the tough, calloused mitts of a Siberian oil worker. He flicks the shard away and grips the handle of his mop.

The only way to avoid splinters is to wear gloves.

Yuri refuses to wear gloves.

Better to toughen up. The people he respects most in the power plant—the *atomschiki*, the nuclear engineers who have risen to great heights, thanks to their brilliance and hard work—keep their bodies as fit as their minds. They box, run races, row up and down the river Pripyat, then grind out all-night

shifts at the plant, taming the atom and bending it to the will of the Soviet State.

Yuri is the Moscow Engineering and Physics Institute's youngest scholarship winner. He swirls the mop's shaggy bristles through the puddle on the tiled floor with the same righteous fury and tightly coiled energy that drove him toward this goal.

Yuri had been seven years old when the Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station was officially connected to the Soviet power grid: 27 September 1977. Now, nine years later, alone in the endless corridor that connects the plant's turbine hall to its four massive reactors, Yuri can still hear the triumphant hymn sung by those first scientists, broadcast on State TV across the Soviet Union: *"For today, for today, current flows from the RBMK!"*

The RBMK.

Reaktor bolsшой moschnosti kanalnyy.

High-power channel-type reactor.

The national nuclear reactor of the USSR, twenty times the size of the American ones! That same TV show had taken viewers like Yuri, kneeling on the carpet in the living room of his family's Moscow apartment, on a quick tour of the glorious new power plant. The inner workings of the RBMK are a highly classified state secret, but the broadcast had been permitted to show fleeting glimpses of the polished marble stairs and stained-glass panels of Chernobyl's administration block; the sanitary locks where workers traded street clothes for white overalls, white caps, and white boots; the steel cavern of the turbine hall, all looming machinery and mysterious shadows; and, finally, the concrete vault that housed and shielded the reactor core, as big as Yuri's apartment building.

Seven-year-old Yuri had pressed his face nearly against the screen, convinced of several things at once:

His destiny had just been unlocked.

This five-minute TV special had opened up a wondrous new path that would take him far from Moscow.

The mysteries of the atom would rocket him into a glorious future, as if he'd been launched into the stratosphere like the man he's named after, famed cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first human being in space and a Hero of the Soviet Union.

For today, for today—

For today I am mopping the floor, Yuri thinks. Just like yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that.

Yuri had floated through his first day at Chernobyl as if in a dream, moving through the very same sanitary lock he'd seen on TV as a little boy, donning the same white garments as his new colleagues and mentors, the technicians and atomschiki he'd spent his young life idolizing. Once he was dressed, it hadn't taken long for one of those atomschiki to puncture the dream by handing him a mop, leaving him stranded in a new reality.

Yuri caught on quickly to the rules of this reality.

At Chernobyl, *scholarship winner* means “intern.” And *intern* means “errand boy, laborer, janitor.”

Yuri oils squeaky machinery, prowling the catwalks of the turbine hall like a stowaway aboard some vast submarine, oilcan in hand. He patches up hairline cracks in the rats' nest of steel pipes that deliver cooling water to the reactor core. He delivers trays of potent coffee to the engineers in the control rooms monitoring the delicate machinery of the RBMK, catching a glimpse of the dashboards and panels, the dials and switches and gauges that stand between atoms controlled and atoms free to spark their deadly chaos.

But, mostly, Yuri mops.

Chernobyl is a leaky place. Yuri has come to think of it as a living creature with a beating reactor-core heart, and that creature—the monumental thing that looks so tough in its granite and steel—actually has a soft and easily wounded body. And from those wounds, many of them very well hidden, drip fluids of all kinds, from plain old water to oddly tinted oils to viscous, foul-smelling goo.

He lifts the mop from the puddle, sashes it into his bucket, then presses the lever that lifts a plastic hatch to wring out the liquid. Such a simple and effective mechanism satisfies him. He splashes the mop back down into the spill, which is shaped like one of the lakes that claw Russia's vast interior. This spill falls into the "oddly tinted oils" category. Weird colors swirl and dissolve.

To occupy his mind, Yuri plays a game he invented called *where did this leak come from?* Where is this wound in the Chernobyl-creature? He also ponders a much more interesting question: Will this leak ever be fixed, or will he be dispatched to mop the same section of corridor, again and again, for no apparent reason?

Yet another mystery of Chernobyl.

He glances up at the ceiling and scans it for the leak's source. Nicknamed "the golden corridor," the 800-meter hallway is paneled in thin strips of blond wood polished to a high sheen. It's like staring down an impossibly long tube lined with rich gold plating, and the ceiling is no exception: more gold, interrupted by harsh overhead lights.

There, in a seam between the panels, is the sparkle of liquid catching the light. In his mind's eye, Yuri drifts up through the ceiling, to the pipes running just beneath the roof of the corridor, connecting the control rooms and reactors with the turbine hall.

Yuri studies Chernobyl's blueprints late into the night. He suspects that,

if he were given the proper tools, equipment, and ten or so years, he could take the power plant apart and put it back together all by himself.

He notes the location of the leak. He will report it to a foreman, and the leak will either be patched or it won't, according to some political process that Yuri doesn't understand. The place where the splinter went in begins to itch and he rubs his palm against his white overalls. Whenever he thinks about the orders coming down from on high, which either get followed or don't, according to a *different* system of orders, Yuri's body tingles. The politics of grown adults are another kind of new reality, too shadowy for him to fully grasp—and in his heart, he doesn't much care to try. He feels a creeping sense of guilt, as if this silent thought is the same as actually *criticizing the Soviet State out loud*—

Which is what his uncle Pavlo does, every night, as he sips his after-dinner tea.

Yuri's knuckles turn white as he tightens his grip on the mop.

Uncle Pavlo is Yuri's father's brother, and he has been hosting Yuri since he's been in the city of Pripjat, interning at Chernobyl.

Yuri has never met anyone like Uncle Pavlo. He is a radio announcer, the voice of Pripjat's news station. All day he reads news reports celebrating Soviet progress—the launch of a new submarine class out of the shipyard in Leningrad, announcements from the Kremlin—plus news of American failures. Pavlo's voice is comforting and familiar to the citizens of Pripjat. Yuri has witnessed total strangers greet his uncle in the Rainbow department store and shake his hand, proud to pose for a photograph with the voice of Radio Pripjat.

But at home?

At home, it's a different story.