

RED STAR TALES

A CENTURY
OF RUSSIAN AND SOVIET
SCIENCE FICTION

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RUSSIAN LIFE BOOKS

MY DAD'S AN ANTIBIOTIC

Half asleep, I heard the quiet rumble of a flyer touching down. The thin, fading song of the plasma engines, the rustle of the wind straying around those smooth surfaces. The window to the garden was open, and our landing pad was right by the house. For a long time, dad had been threatening to haul off the ceramic slabs that made up that five-meter circle and move them further away, into the garden. But he probably had no intention of doing that. Because if he needed to land without any noise, he could just shut off the power. That's a no-no – it's too dangerous and complicated, but dad pays no attention to little things like that.

And that's because my dad is an antibiotic.

My eyes still closed, I sat up in bed, fumbling on the table for my folded clothes. Then I changed my mind and shuffled to the door in my pajamas. My feet tangled in the carpet's long, warm nap, but I deliberately tried to keep them in contact with the floor. I really liked

that chunky, soft carpet; you could turn somersaults, jump and do whatever else on it without risking a broken neck.

The thudding outside the window was from the flyer's landing skids. The dull red light of the brake exhaust seeped through my eyelids.

Keeping my eyes tightly shut, I opened the door, and began going down the stairs. If dad had done a loud landing, that meant he wanted me to know he was back. But I wanted to show that I knew it too.

One step, another step. The unpainted wooden steps were pleasantly cooling to my feet. Not with the dead dampness of metal, not with the uncaring, icy chill of stone, but with the living, affectionate coolness of wood. A real house, if you ask me, has to be made of wood. Otherwise, it's not a house but a fortress. Just a shelter from bad weather.

One step, another step... I came down off the last tread and stood on the smooth parquet of the hallway. It's fun to use the flooring to figure out where you are. One step, another step. I ran face-first into something hard and smooth, like steel. Slippery and supple, like fish scales. Warm, like human skin.

"Sleep-walking?"

My father's hand ruffled my hair. I peered into the darkness, trying to make out anything at all. Of course dad had come in without turning on any of the lights.

"Put the light on," I said huffily, trying to duck my father's hand.

Yellow-orange lights began burning in the hallway corners. The darkness cowered, escaping into the broad rectangles of the windows.

Dad looked at me, smiling. He was still wearing the assault force's protective suit, and the pitch-black bioplastic that fit his body so snugly was beginning to brighten. It was adapting to its new circumstances.

"Did you come straight from the cosmodrome?" I asked, eyeing him admiringly. How annoying that it was night and none of the guys in my class would have seen him.

The suit seemed thin, probably because the muscles stood out so sharply under the chameleon cloth. But that was just an illusion. Bioplastic can take 500-degree temperatures and deflect a burst from a large-caliber machine gun. It's flexible on one side. I don't know how

that's done, but if you touch the outside, it's hard. It might as well be made of metal. And then, when you put it on (dad let me do that sometimes), it's soft and stretchy.

"We landed an hour ago," dad said distractedly, still ruffling my hair. "We handed our weapons in and headed for home."

"Is everything OK?"

Dad winked at me, looked around furtively.

"Everything's better than OK. The disease has been eliminated."

That was what he always said. But still, he couldn't manage a smile. Even his suit was restless, with the sensors scattered across the fabric twinkling and the indicator panel on his left wrist glimmering in a multicolored pattern that meant nothing to me. The color of the suit was by now impossible to distinguish from the pale-blue wallpaper. If dad stepped over to the wall, he'd drop out of sight.

"Pop," I whispered, feeling the sleepiness slipping away, "was it rough?"

He gave a silent nod. And frowned. And that was absolutely for real.

"Quick march, now, back to bed! It's two in the morning."

That was probably the voice he used to give orders out there, on the diseased planets. And no one dared argue.

"Yes, sir!" I replied in the same crisp tone. But I still had one last thing to ask him: "Pop, did you see?"

"No. But never mind. Now you'll be able to gab with your friend again. The planet will be back online by morning."

I nodded and went upstairs. In the doorway, I turned and saw my dad standing on the threshold, stripping off the flexible, light-blue armor. Leaning over the railing, I watched the taut coils of muscles rippling across his back. I could never be that ripped; I don't have the patience. Dad noticed me and waved me away.

"Go to bed, Alik. I won't show you your present until the morning."

That's cool, I like presents. Dad had been giving them to me since I was just a little kid and didn't know what he did for a living.

When mom left us, I was five years old. I remember her kissing me; I was standing by the door with no idea what was going on. Then she left. For good. She said I could go and spend time with her whenever, but I never did. Because I had found out what she and dad had been fighting about, and I was ticked. It turned out that mom didn't like dad serving in the Assault Force Corps.

Once I accidentally heard them fighting. Mom was saying something to dad, quietly, wearily, the way people talk when they're trying to persuade themselves rather than the other person.

"Don't you see what you've become, Boris? You're not even a robot. They have their Three Laws, but you don't have any. You do what you're told, and never think about the consequences."

"I'm defending Earth."

"I don't know... It's one thing when your corps is fighting the Pilgrim Saboteurs. It's something else altogether when the assault forces are pacifying the colonies."

"I have no right to think about that. Earth decides. It diagnoses the disease, it prescribes the cure. And I'm just an antibiotic."

"An antibiotic? That's true. They lash out indiscriminately too, at the person as well as the disease."

They were silent. Then mom said, "I'm sorry, Boris, but I can't love... an antibiotic."

"Good enough," dad said calmly. "But Alka stays with me."

Mom was quiet then, and a month later dad and I were on our own. To be honest, I didn't feel it at first. Even before, mom had been away a lot. She's a journalist and travels all over Earth. Dad was home a lot more, although once or twice a month he left for several days at a time. And when he came home, he'd bring me presents, amazing things that nobody sells in any store.

Once he brought me a Singing Crystal. It was a little pyramid less than a centimeter across and made of transparent blue stone, and what it did was play – quietly but never silent, not even for a second – an eerie, never-ending melody. The sound changed when it was raining

and was louder in sunlight. When you moved it closer to metal, its tone changed. Wrapped tightly in cotton batting and hidden in the farthest corner of the closet, it sings its eternal song to this very day.

And there were the Lota mirrors, and those little sculptures from Rethe – people molded of soft pink plastic that grew up, got old, were sometimes all smiles and sometimes sullen.

But the best present ever was the pistol.

That time dad had been away almost a week. I had been going to school and playing with my friend Mishka (a.k.a. Chingachgook). His parents drove the two of us to the next town for the start of the Laughter Festival. Mishka even slept over at my house several times. But still, it was kind of boring. And dad probably realized that. When he came back, he didn't even launch into the usual stories. Instead, he rummaged a while in his pack and held out a hefty metal object to me. I clutched it for a second without the slightest idea of what this was all about. It wasn't until my hand got tired and I nearly dropped the thing that it came to me: this weapon wasn't a toy. They would never have made a toy too heavy for anyone but a grown-up to hold.

"It doesn't shoot," said dad, guessing what I was going to ask. "I broke the beam generator."

I nodded, trying to aim it. The pistol trembled in my grasp.

"Where's it from, pop?" I asked hesitantly.

Dad smiled.

"You remember what my job is?"

Sure I did. "An antibiotic," I replied.

"That's right. This time around we were curing a disease called cosmic piracy."

My breath caught in my throat. "Real pirates?"

"All too real."

It wasn't just the unusual presents that made me like my dad's work, of course. I also liked that he was so strong, stronger than anyone we knew. He could get a flyer off the ground single-handed, could walk right across the garden on his hands. Every morning, in all kinds of weather, winter and summer, he would spend two hours training in

the garden. I was used to it, but first-time visitors who saw my father glumly doing two-finger pull-ups with his left hand or shattering big thick planks set in special stands all over the garden – they were blown away. And when they noticed that he was moving about and throwing those punches with his eyes closed, a lot of them got rattled. When that happened, my father would laugh and say that his work was ninety-nine percent fitness training. After all that, the question would come: What is your job? Dad would give a cheerful shrug and say “I’m an antibiotic.” The guest would digest that for a second and then, understanding, would blurt out, “The Assault Force Corps!”



The first thing I did when I woke up was look out the window, sort of checking that I hadn’t dreamed it and my dad really was back. But everything was as it should be, with a swift shadow flickering through the trees. Dad was training, cutting himself no slack for having been up half the night. There was a dull thumping. Those wooden targets were having a bad time of it.

I went over to the videophone, a little matte-white panel on the wall. With unspoken hope, I punched in the number – a long one, a whole five digits. The planet code. The city code. The videophone number...

The screen lit up, pale blue, then the text appeared: *The Communications Service apologizes. The connection with the planet Tuan is down for technical reasons.*

Just what I needed, an apology... And so glib! Of course if a planet is in its third day of rampaging rebellion, and the insurgents’ heavy tanks have been firing on the relay stations at close range, that could be called a technical reason. Just like a person’s death could be mislabeled as “the process of decay winning out over the process of synthesis.”

After pushing a few more keys, I left the room. Now the computer would continue redialing on its own every fifteen minutes. Arnis and I

had an arrangement only to make manual calls to each other, but today was special. So I didn’t think he’d be peeved.

The present was waiting for me in the kitchen. On the little table by the window, where I like to have breakfast. Next to the coffeepot and the sliced raisin bread.

First I poured some coffee. Nibbled on a piece of raisin bread. And only then did I pick up the broad metallic bracelet lying on a box of fruit jellies.

As bracelets go, though, this one was strange. It didn’t look like any kind of accessory and even less like some tricky gadget from an assault force kit. It was just a flattened tube of gray metal. A very heavy tube, weighing almost as much as the pistol. There were no buttons or indicators, not even a latch. But no... there was a button, just one. Large, oval, made of the same metal as the rest of the bracelet. It was pressed in, almost flush with the smooth surface. I tried to dig it out with my nail, but couldn’t.

I didn’t get it, this present. As I finished off my coffee, I put my fingers in the middle of that heavy ring and spun it. It rotated a bit unevenly, as if it had mercury inside or lead ball bearings were rolling around in there. Which was perfectly possible... But how did you put it on? The opening was so narrow that even my hand wouldn’t slide through.

Dad came in, dressed only in swim trunks and slick with sweat. He pulled a bottle of cola from the fridge and casually suggested: “Want to take a run to the lake? We’ll have a nice brisk dip.”

What am I, nuts? Ten kilometers through the woods. After a cross-country sprint like that, anybody would pass on a nice brisk dip in favor of spending the rest of the day sprawled under the nearest tree.

“No. I’m not an antibiotic.”

Finishing his cola (just three good mouthfuls for my dad), he smiled. Now he was just razzing me.

“Oh, all right. We’ll take the flyer.”

I perked up, then shook my head again.

“Dad, I can’t. I have to find out how Arnis is.”

My father gave an understanding nod. The assault force knew very well what friendship was all about. That's why dad never griped when he was paying the videophone bill.

"The connection will be back up in a couple of hours. We drove by the relay stations and they were in good shape. The antennas are intact, and it's no problem to switch out the equipment."

I gave my father another admiring look. To talk so calmly about it! As if they'd been tooling around in the family car, not driving the assault force's ceramic-clad combat vehicles. Amazing! The planet Tuan orbiting a star called Behlt. Almost forty light-years from Earth. And my dad had been there. Saving people. Treating a disease called Rebellion.

"What's this, pop?" I asked, holding up the bracelet.

"It's the rebels' ID tag."

Explaining the value of a present is an art in itself, no less so than picking out a good one. My dad could do both. Now I was looking at the metallic ring with a lot more respect.

"What's the button for?"

"That's like a signal." Dad had taken the bracelet from me, and was spinning it with two fingers. "We never did make complete sense of it, but as far as we can figure, the bracelet contains a powerful single-use transmitter. The button's supposed to be pushed when the situation's critical, after the wearer has been wounded or captured. It signals 'I'm out' – get it? You can only push the button once."

I got that too. The bracelet's owner had already sent his signal...

"Did you take it off a rebel?"

Dad nodded.

"And how do I put it on?"

"The usual way. Push your hand through, and it'll expand. The metal gives in one direction, like my jumpsuit."

I was all ready to put it on when something dawned on me.

"Dad... how do I take it off? Because it won't expand the other way."

"Of course it won't. It'll have to be cut off. You take a cutting tool, push it under the bracelet and turn it on. The same on the other side. And then there'll be two halves and a smell of burning in the air."

Dad was silent, and I felt, almost physically felt, the tension in him. Whenever dad made a mistake, I would notice it straightway. We understood each other very well.

"All right, then, I'm out of here." He made a vague gesture.

"To the lake?"

Dad nodded, and I was left alone. Holding that heavy bracelet. I looked at it, simply unable to bring myself to push my hand into that stiff metallic ring. The answer was in the bracelet...

How could anyone get it off a rebel's arm without cutting it? Without ruining a once-in-a-lifetime present?

Very simple. All you'd have to do is...

I shook my head. No.

No!

That couldn't be. It was a whole lot simpler than that. A direct hit. Blown to bits by plasma fire. Leaving only his ID tag on the heat-blackened ground.

In a hurry, afraid I'd change my mind, I put the bracelet on. It was unexpectedly warm, as if it was still preserving that spurt of flame. And it wasn't all that heavy. It would be no big deal to wear it for a couple of days.



We lived on the outskirts of Irkutsk. It was a hundred kilometers or so to town, meaning that at night we could see the gleaming needles of its tower blocks on the horizon. But if there's one thing I've never, ever, wanted to do, it's to live in a building like that. A kilometer of concrete, glass and metal, stretching aimlessly upward. Like there's not enough room on the ground...

And I'm not the only one who thinks so. If I were, every megalopolis like Irkutsk wouldn't be surrounded by commuter belts two hundred kilometers across.

Comfortable, upscale, single-family homes and multistory villas mixed in with scraps of forest and the occasional mirror of a lake.

I was walking down the path to Mishka's house. It was an easy walk, maybe too easy. Even if two kids like us ran back and forth to each other's houses ten times a day, they would never wear out anything like this.

The path had been laid by robots following the template of a perfect forest trail that was stored in their memory crystals. And it had come out just as it should.

Behind every bend, behind every unpredictable curve there was something absolutely unexpected to look at. In an ancient stand of pines, there'd be a scenic little marsh circled by all kinds of willows. Or hiding behind an enormous oak would be a little clearing covered with lush green grass. Where the stony bed of a fast-flowing stream cut across the path, a tiny wooden bridge was there to arch smoothly over it.

You could walk along that path forever and never get bored. A fifteen-minute trip shrank down to an instant.

Mishka's house looked more like a medieval fortress. It was a square building of gray stone with small turrets on the corners. Mishka's parents had probably come up with that. They were archeologists and had never met an antiquity they didn't like.

Mishka was waiting for me in the doorway. I hadn't called him, hadn't set up my visit in advance. But it wasn't at all strange for him to be waiting there.

The thing is, he's a sniffer.

Of course there are prettier words to use, but that doesn't change what it is. Mishka smells odors an order of magnitude better than any dog can, let alone a person.

His parents had done a special course of treatment to be sure that Mishka would be born the way he was. But if you ask me, he doesn't

appreciate it much. He told me one time that smelling hundreds of odors together is very unpleasant. Like listening to the din of a whole lot of tunes being played at once. I don't know. I would have liked to be a sniffer myself, so I could guess when my friends were coming from a good hundred meters away, just by scenting their odor on the air.

Mishka waved at me.

"Your dad's back," he asked, but it wasn't a question.

I nodded. Sometimes, when Mishka's in a good mood, he likes to show off.

"Yes. Is it strong?"

"Sure. Something charred, tank fuel and explosives. Very strong smells..." Mishka hesitated for a split second. Then he added: "Sweat too. The smell of tiredness."

I shrugged. You got that right, Sherlock.

"Want to go for a swim?"

"At the lake?"

"No, that's too far. In Tolka's pool."

Our buddy Tolik Yartsev – he was seven – had the biggest swimming pool in the neighborhood. Fifty meters long and twenty meters wide is no laughing matter.

"Let's go."

Then Mishka saw the bracelet on my arm.

"So what's that, Alka?"

"A present from dad."

"What's that, Alka?"

He repeated the question as though he hadn't heard what I'd said.

"A present. It's the ID tag of the rebels on Tuan."

"That's where your dad's been?"

Mishka looked at the bracelet with a fear I didn't understand. I'd never seen him like that before.

"What's with you?"

"I don't like it."

An unexpected thought shot through me.

"Mishka, what can you tell me about this contraption? Sniff it! You know you can."

He nodded with the slightest hesitation, as if he'd been trying, and failing, to find a reason to say no.

"Disinfectant," he said after a moment. "It's been processed very carefully. There's nothing left. And a trace of ozone."

"Correct," I confirmed. "The rebel who lugged it around was burned up with a plasma gun."

"Toss the nasty thing, Alik," Mishka said quietly. "I don't like it."

"Not a chance. Dad brought me this bracelet from an assault operation."

Mishka turned away. And in a hollow voice, he said: "I'm not going anywhere, Alka. See you tomorrow."

Just what I needed, a know-it-all. Brimming with scorn, I watched him go. Mishka was jealous of me, that was all. And no wonder. My dad's an antibiotic.



I went to swim at Tolik's on my own. There, my pride unruffled itself a little. The kid listened to my every word with bated breath and a half-hour later was scampering around with a bunch of other little tykes, playing assault forces. After I had climbed out of the pool and was lazily drying myself with a thin, pink towel, I could hear all the "You're dead! Take that bracelet off!" coming from behind their house, a modern heap of huge plastic spheres.

I couldn't help smirking. For the next couple of days this new game, with its loud yelling and deafening "blaster" fire, would give the neighbors no peace. And that was all my doing... Maybe I should have told Tolik that the assault forces do their fighting quietly and stealthily, like Indians?



When I got home, the videophone computer was still redialing. The connection with Tuan hadn't come back up.

I found my dad in the library, sitting in his favorite deep armchair and leafing unhurriedly through a book with the brainy title of *No Peace Among the Stars*. The cover showed a starship breaking apart for no visible reason. When I bent my head a little, the picture shuddered and changed, shifting the illustration into another phase. Now the starship was in one piece, but a dark-blue ray was drilling into its side, somewhere between the main reactor and the crew quarters. Dad carried on reading, acting like he hadn't noticed me. I turned around and quietly left the library. If dad was into one of his old outer-space blockbusters, that was a sure sign he was in a bad mood. Even an antibiotic can probably be sad now and then.

Back in my room, I scrambled up onto the bed and spent a minute wondering what to do. Lying on the table was a copy of *The Saga of Fire and Water*, an ancient book about war that I had mooched from Mishka's archeologist dad but hadn't gotten around to finishing. Its worn paper pages had been laminated and its cover was completely gone, but that only made it a more interesting read. It was showing me a side of the Second World War I hadn't expected to see. Not that I've ever been much of a history buff...

There was something else to keep me busy, though – the undone math problems that had been sitting on the computer for three days. It wasn't the best idea to put that off, because the teacher could be checking them any time now.

But instead of picking up the book or sitting down at my school computer, I said: "Turn on the TV. News about the uprising on Tuan over the past six hours."

The soft light of the TV screen lit up on the wall. The frames started flickering by one after another, too fast to register. The television was sifting through thirty-plus twenty-four-hour programs, fishing out all the reports that mentioned Tuan. The search was over in a few seconds.

"Twenty-six broadcasts, total run-time eight hours, thirty-one minutes," the blasé mechanical voice told me.

"Begin with the first," I ordered, making myself comfortable.

The logo of the entertainment channel and the title card of the Victor Show flashed on the screen. An artificially young-looking man gave a jaunty wave and said: "Hi! What's got you all so deep in thought, like insurgents waiting for the Assault Force to drop by?"

And, obedient to the unseen director, thunderous laughter rolled through the studio.

"Deselect," I ordered, feeling a disgust even I couldn't understand.

Then there was the solemn tone that introduced the government channel, and a huge hall came up on the screen. A man was speaking into a microphone.

"Events on Tuan have brought home to us the need to maintain the financing..."

"Switch."

The screen filled with a dense blackness. And slowly, smoothly, a coppery yellow bell surfaced from the gloom, accompanied by a long, full-bodied pealing. It was the news program "I Witness."

"Stay."

The bell dissolved, morphing into a human eye. The pupil grew larger, became transparent, giving way to the outlines of armored vehicles, of people carrying weapons. Then the familiar voice of Grigory Nevsysan, the broadcast journalist everyone knew, came up.

"We are on Tuan, the first planet in the Behlt system. The tragedy that has played out on this quiet, peaceful world must surely have touched us all..."

I lay there, listening. About the extremists who had tried to seize power on Tuan. About the residents being suckered into the rebellion. About the members of the Assault Force who had risked their lives to restore order.

"Some are calling the use of assault weapons a crime. But isn't it twice as criminal to drag teenagers, children, into your political games?" Nevsysan was asking. "There were twelve- and thirteen-year-

old boys fighting on the rebels' side. They were issued weapons and ordered not to give themselves up."

Now I was mad: how low was that? Kids of my age – that meant Arnis could have been one of them. He could have been ordered not to surrender...

"Not one of the rebels... I'll say that again: not one... was taken prisoner. Once cornered, they kept firing until they ran out of ammunition and then blew themselves up with grenades. Now here's a thought, and it's a no-brainer: that kind of fanaticism can only be achieved through hypnotic suggestion."

"Off," I commanded, rolling onto my back. I lay there, looking at the ceiling. Time to order some soothing music with a smooth drop in volume and a seamless transition into the rustle of falling rain. And when morning came, something lively and feisty to wake me up...

The videophone summoned me with a cheep and announced respectfully: "Call accepted. Contact in twenty seconds."

I jumped up. Rushed to the screen. Stood in front of the camera's round, bluish lens. Contact in twenty seconds.

Station antennas hundreds and maybe even thousands of kilometers away were preparing to hurl my call upward, into space, as a coded signal compressed into milliseconds. Somewhere high above the planet, parked in a geostationary orbit, the automatic relay stations would take over, transferring the message via modulated laser beam to the interstellar transmitter, a sphere two kilometers across moving in an independent near-solar orbit. And from there, translated into the language of gravitational pulses and packaged together with thousands of other messages, the signal would take off, into the cosmos. In deep space, near Behlt, the local station antennas would pick it up. And then it would all go in reverse order.

The screen was glowing with a calming emerald light. "Wait," it said. But I didn't need any convincing; I'd already waited all day. Now I'd stay in front of that screen through the night if I had to.

The screen came to life. The picture was out of focus for a second, then adjusted. I saw a wood-veneer wall and in front of it, a woman

with a tired face. Arnis' mother. She was wearing a severe dark suit, and I suddenly realized that the subjective time on our planets was in sync. So, then, it wasn't likely that I'd dragged her out of bed. But still, I was horribly uncomfortable.

"Hello," I said awkwardly. "Good evening."

Her name had suddenly slipped my mind altogether. And the harder I tried to remember it, the more firmly I forgot it.

The woman on the screen stared at my face for several seconds. Either the videophone image was still too fuzzy or she simply didn't recognize me. We had seen each other two or three times at most, and then only on a video recording.

"Hello," she said, without a hint of surprise. "You're Alik, Arnis' friend."

"Yes," I gladly confirmed. And for some reason, I added: "We were at sports camp together last summer."

She nodded. And carried on looking at me in silence. With a look that was off-kilter somehow. Indifferent.

"Is Arnis asleep?" I asked uncertainly. "Can he pick up?"

Her voice lost even more of its color.

"Arnis isn't here, Alik."

I got it. I got it straightaway, perhaps because, despite what my rational mind had been telling me, this is what I'd been afraid of. But still I asked again, stubbornly refusing to believe.

"Is he asleep? Or out somewhere?"

"Arnis isn't here anymore," she repeated, adding only one word. A crucial word. Arnis isn't here *anymore*.

I heard my own voice: "It's not true!" Then I was shouting, not understanding what I was saying, "It's not true! It's not true!"

And that was when she cried.

It always scared me when grown-ups cried in front of children. It's not normal, it's unnatural. I would start feeling like I'd done something bad, would start saying all sorts of dumb things – how I was going to be better, stuff like that, even though I hadn't done anything wrong.

But this time I didn't give a rip about all that. Arnis, my friend, my truest friend in all the universe, the one I'd spent two months with in Florida and would never see again, was dead. Killed. People don't die of colds in a war.

"Tell me. Tell me what happened," I begged her. "I have to know, I need to know."

And why exactly did I have to? Because Arnis was my friend? Or because my dad was an antibiotic that had taken too long to cure a disease?

"He was with the insurgents," she said quietly. So quietly that the idiotic videophone automatically regulated the sound, making her whisper so loud it was almost deafening.

She was talking, and crying all the while. And I listened. Hearing how Arnis had left the house and she hadn't been there in time to stop him. How he had called home, proud as could be, to announce that they'd given him a real military machine gun. And how she found out that the insurgents had been issued not only machine guns but also devices that would automatically self-destruct after the wearer was dead. And that Arnis, thank God, hadn't been given one of those devices, so she'd be able to bury him. His face was peaceful, though. He had felt no pain. The neutron ray had killed him instantly. And he had almost no visible wounds, just a little red spot on his chest... where the ray had hit... and his hand... with a laser...

She was talking, probably unaware right now that I was from Earth. From the great planet that had sent the antibiotic assault forces. The ones who had destroyed the insurgents, and the little boys who just couldn't wait to play with real machine guns.

We'd enjoyed playing war in Florida too.

Of course she didn't remember who my father was. So she could look me in the eye. But I couldn't look at her the same way. And when she stopped talking but kept on crying, turning away from the videophone camera's unpitiful eye, I reached out to the keypad and cut the connection.

It was dark and quiet in my room now. There was only a branch swaying in the wind and stroking the window with a soft rustling sound.

"Lights!" I roared. "All the lights!"

The lights blazed, every single one in the room. The matte dome lights on the ceiling, and the crystal chandelier, and the night-lights with their dark orange glass, and the table lamp on its thin, flexible stem.

The light was blinding. It cut the silence that hung in the room to shreds. And the silence came back to life, sidled over to me, crawled into my ears. Even the branch outside the window had stopped swaying.

"Music! Loud! News program! Educational program! Loud! Cycle through the radio programs! Loud!"

The silence exploded, vanished, turned into nothingness. Modern rock blasting in surround-sound, one radio program following another every three seconds. On the TV screens, lessons in the subtleties of Italian, instructions on how to grow orchids, the latest news...

"Stay with the news!" I yelled, in a pointless shouting match with the racket. "Everything else off, stay with the news!"

The din stopped. The familiar name of the planet had already disappeared from the news screen. Now they were showing us smoking ruins. Little human figures in glossy fireproof suits were meandering among mounds of concrete.

"... of enormous force. Not only the morgue but also the attached hospital complex have been destroyed. A spokesperson for the security forces has refused to rule out the possibility that a terrorist raid was responsible for that. It was this morgue that only twenty-four hours earlier had taken delivery of a group of insurgent fatalities that, contrary to their usual practice, had not blown themselves up but had died fighting."

The title card for the news on the hour flashed onto the screen.

"Turn off," I ordered, without thinking. And I looked at the bracelet.

It was a very good idea, a device that explodes after the combatant's death. With a brief, two- or three-minute lag, so that whoever had killed him would have time to approach the body. A device like that

could be made to look like a bracelet, but one that was impossible to remove. Could be equipped with a pulse monitor and a payload of powerful explosives, or, even better, a plasma charge with a magnetic trigger.

And it would need a delay too, for when a group was fighting together so an immediate explosion wasn't wanted. For example, a button that could be depressed to postpone the blast for twenty-four hours. Even an explosion like that could do a lot of damage to an enemy who didn't know the secret. It would be best, of course, if the stupid enemy got the bracelet off and took it as a souvenir. But if he gave it to his son, that wouldn't be such a bad thing either.

I tugged on the bracelet with all my might. But the tube that had given so easily when I'd shoved my hand through wasn't budging now.

I tried to pry it open with a screwdriver, to widen it and tear it off that way. But that was useless too. That bracelet had been made by some smart, savvy engineers. They were probably the only ones who knew how to release it.

In a mindless frenzy, I started tearing at the bracelet with my teeth. And I smelled a light, pleasant odor.

What had I been thinking? Mishka could never have picked up the odor of ozone hours after a shot had been fired. Ozone, the triatomic molecule of oxygen, is one of the most unstable compounds ever. But it's given off by working electronic devices and by magnetic booby traps with a plasma charge.

Death had latched onto my arm. A fearsome, fiery death that was determined never to release its prey. But suddenly, that no longer frightened me.

This was not my death. It had been intended for Arnis. Dad had brought it to me, even though he hadn't known what he was doing. An unthinkable coincidence had become valid simply because it was unthinkable.

Slowly, like a sleepwalker, I walked to the door. The carpet's soft pile... the chill of the wooden steps...

I pushed open the door of dad's bedroom. And entered the room where the weary antibiotic was peacefully sleeping.

Settling into an armchair at the head of dad's bed, I still didn't know what I was going to do. Wake dad up; doze with my head resting on the cold bracelet; or sit for a minute and then go into the forest, as far away from the house as I could. Whatever I did, it would make no difference.

But dad woke up anyway.

Jumping nimbly out of bed, he turned on the light with an imperceptible movement. He relaxed a little when he saw me, then was immediately tense again. He asked his question with a shake of the head.

"Pa, this bracelet's a bomb on a timer," I said, almost calmly. "I won't waste time explaining. But that's for sure. It will explode twenty-four hours after its first owner died... give or take. Do you remember when you killed him?"

I've never seen my dad go so pale so fast. An instant later he was standing next to me and was trying to yank the bracelet from my arm.

I howled. I was in a lot of pain and a little annoyed that my clever dad was doing something so clueless.

"Dad, you won't get it off. It was sized for a boy. Do you remember if he had a mole on his left cheek, pop?"

Dad glanced at his watch. And went over to the videophone. I figured he was going to call someone. But instead he punched through the wood-veneer panel to the left of the screen. And reached into the small opening and pulled out a pistol with a long, mirror-bright barrel ridged with heat-dissipating channels.

That was when I got scared. A member of the assault forces who kept a functioning weapon at home faced being kicked out of the Corps and having to pay a whopping fine. And if the weapon was fired, there'd be prison time.

"Pop," I whispered, staring at the pistol. "Dad..."

Dad grabbed me, slung me over his shoulder. And bolted to the door. He didn't say anything, probably because there was no more time for talking. Then we sprinted through the garden.

He jumped into the flyer cabin and started keying in the distress-call program on the console. He had flung me onto the rear seat, and a second later threw the pistol back there too and the first aid kit.

"Take a double dose of painkiller," he ordered.

Frightened as I was, I almost laughed. A painkiller just before a plasma charge exploded? That's like bringing a penknife to an elephant hunt.

Still, I found two tiny, bright-scarlet ampules. Crushing them in my fist, I clenched my fingers, feeling the icy cold of the medicine oozing through my skin. My head spun a little.

Dad was running the flyer at its top speed. The air wailed as the cabin's transparent canopy split it apart. Did he really think that someone, somewhere could help us? Would have time to help us?

The flyer braked, hung in the air. The shriek of the high-powered motor transitioned to a soft roar. We were hovering in the night sky, two people in a miniscule husk of metal and plastic.

"We're above the lake," dad said, adding a clarification that meant nothing to me: "Can't be done above the forest. A bunch of animals would die, and the animals haven't done anything wrong."

He pressed something on the console, keying in commands I didn't know. The safety routine chirped – it wasn't pleased – and the cabin canopy rolled slowly back. With a kilometer between us and the ground!

The cool night breeze slid over us. There was a faint smell of water. And of ozone, that damned ozone – not from the bracelet, of course, but from the running engines.

Dad clambered into the rear seat. The flyer rocked a little, and I saw down below the dim glistening of a smooth expanse of water.

"Hand," dad commanded. And I obediently laid my hand on the cabin's outer ledge. Dad sat next to me, pressing me against the seat back with his whole body. When he took me by the hand, my fingers

sank into his broad palm. It was very cold. And hard, like the fabric of his protective jumpsuit.

"Don't be scared," dad said. "And you'd better not look. Turn away."

My breath caught in my throat. My body went limp. I realized that I wouldn't be able move now. I wouldn't even be able to turn away.

Dad picked up his pistol. For a second longer I felt his fingers. And then a blinding white light flashed in the darkness.

I'd never known real pain before. All the pain I'd had to that point was just a preparation for this – the one, the only, the real, the unbearable. A hurting that no human being should ever know.

Dad smacked me across the face, driving the cry back into my lungs. And roared, his voice cracking: "Hang tough! Save your strength! Hang tough!"

I couldn't even close my eyes; the pain was forcing the lids to stay open and my body to contort in a tortured spasm. I saw my hand in my dad's. And a ridiculous, pathetic stump where my wrist should have been. And the silvery bracelet slipping off that stump and plunging into the lake.

Five seconds passed, no more. The cabin was beginning to close and dad was pressing 03 on the console, setting a priority flight to the nearest medical center. Then the flash came from below, a piercing, hot, orange light. An instant later, something jolted the flyer. And I watched a towering fountain woven from steam and spray falling back into the reddish-orange mirror of the lake.

Dad was right, as always. Something like that couldn't be done over the forest. It would have been too hard on the squirrels. And the animals hadn't done anything wrong...

They say that the more people love animals, the more they love people. Probably so, up to a certain point. But after that, it's the straight-up opposite.

I came to on an operating table. I was stripped and had sensors attached by suction cups all over my body. People kept coming up to the table, one after another. Dad was there as well, dressed in a white

surgical robe and muttering something. The doctors were talking back and forth too as they leaned over my hand.

"It's amazing for a cutting tool to leave such an even wound. There's almost no blood, as if it was done with a laser..."

"Nonsense. Where are you going to find a military laser on Earth?"

Someone noticed that I had opened my eyes. He leaned down until we were nose to nose and said calmly: "Don't be scared, pal. Your hand's going to be fine. We'll put it back. Just be more careful with tools in future."

And, turning aside, he added: "Nurse! An analgesic cube... and an antibiotic. Best get the Octamycin, 500,000 units."

I burst out laughing. The pain was as bad as ever. It was still gnawing at my arm with its blunt, red-hot fangs. But I laughed anyway, twisting away from the mask with its mind-numbing anesthetic smell. And all the while I was whispering, whispering, whispering.

"An antibiotic... an antibiotic... an antibiotic..."

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