

Dead Minus One

By Thomas Martin

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Russia. Early 1990s.

You're never sure if you're one of the lucky ones. Sometimes life could not get worse (Dead minus one), but sometimes you could actually enjoy the thing.

Unfortunately, this was Dead minus one time. And he knew it.

The hospital was state-of-the-art, total military, nothing but the best. His room was clean, sanitary (and he needed a lot of sanitary) and devoid of anything remotely human, except him. But even he had tubes in this part of him, tubes out of other parts. Staff came in, shit went out. He kept living.

Dead minus one.

He had plenty of time for thinking. That soldier might have done him a big favor if the bullet had gone right into the brain instead of the thigh. Of course, he would have missed out on the last fifty years or so. And he also would have missed out on the last fifty years. One bullet.

They said he was lucky. If there wasn't a breathing tube in his mouth, he would have laughed.

The door at the far end of the room opened silently on hinges oiled to perfection. Through that door normally came nurses and aides to check the machines, look him over, wipe his ass, and leave him here to the whiteness of the walls and the sound of the pumps.

But he had a visitor today.

The man in military walked slowly, almost reverently through around the machinery, and approached. The slight footfalls of polished military shoes were sounds absorbed by the protective walls. Finally the military man got to the side and peered down at him.

He was unimpressed with the military by now. No, in fact, scratch that, he loathed them, had loathed them, and would always do so. Only the colors of the uniforms changed. The number of medals. Size of the chest, and the look of power.

No need for a look of power now. The face was bland, curious, as if inspecting a new bug. Grey eyes and brows under the cap which should have been removed the moment he'd walked in, the bastard.

Relax. Breathe. As if he had a choice. The pump still worked.

"I have good news," said the what was he, a general? Yes. Didn't get many generals anymore. Not since the accident. Anyway, he raised an eyebrow in response.

The general smiled. Those teeth were perfect, unlike his own which were in a jar, someplace around here.

"It appears the Americans were successful. The clones have hatched."

He remembered the old carol they'd sing in church when there was church. Oh, come let us adore him. The fools. But he nodded. He was supposed to nod.

"Now the clones will live his life and be him. Bregner will watch. We shall watch. And learn better this time. We have his notes from the war, and we have your work here, comrade."

The general chuckled.

"I know, you never liked the word comrade." The hammer and sickle symbol on his general's cap glistened off the light, making a flicker on the wall. "I meant, 'Old friend.'"

He took off the cap and laid it on the small stand next to the bed. He slicked back his greying hair.

"Can you believe it, Eric? Fifty years now since the war, since that day outside Berlin, you remember. Our orders were to find you. We knew, all the Allies knew what you were doing with soldiers captured -- and even some of your own. Building the Fuehrer's superman. Training, teaching, working, experimenting. You'd started before Hitler assumed power, amazing that you were all so sure. But time ran out."

The general shrugged.

"And you all ran. Some ran toward the Americans. I think you were all running that way. I don't blame you. I would have, too."

The general leaned in. His breath was as clear as vodka on a Moscow night.

"You, alas, ran into me. And my gun, of course. But you recovered. And here we are, fifty years later."

The general stood up.

"Yes, and we made such progress. Such progress. You had money and all the support you could use. You and your fellow scientists. Still had people to work with, to help you. Comrade Stalin had plenty of those.

"Years of experimentation. Leaders came and went, and we waited. The real race with the Americans. The space race fed us, and we were glad the Americans won. More money for this, for you?"

This was getting tedious. Out with it.

“We never got our John Alpha. Oh you tried, said you tried, and we believed you for years. You had that one attempt at your laboratory in Chernobyl. Then that accident that happened. Too much power too soon, and all we had was dust and destruction.

“They got their Alpha and we got nothing.”

The general bent low to whisper in his ear.

“Nothing.”

Back to attention. Every night someone came and did this. Reminded him of his errors. Fifty years ago, working with slave labor. SS volunteers, and not-so-very volunteers. Then prisoners, first German and then Russian, then whatever came along. Computers became stronger. They'd gotten so close. But then there'd been the explosion. The pain. Everything gone except the pain.

And here he was, still in his bed. His penance. He was alive and reminded nightly of his failure.

Well, Bregner had succeeded, he guessed, unless they were lying to him, which would not surprise him. Might as well believe it. Success. What they had planned for, what they had worked for. Had been achieved. Glorious.

He could not hide the smile. Good for them. Good for them. If he could laugh, he would.

The general seemed somewhat disgusted at this twisted skeleton of a man, skin hanging on him, kept alive by the President's order. All it would take would be a accidental pull of a cord. But that might be a mercy.

“But,” the general continued, “as we know, we did make some progress in other areas.”

The general nodded again. The door swung open as if in response -- and it probably was. She walked in. Here was his final enemy.

The woman -- a plain one, near fifty with a mole by her thin lips, and a look as if her shoes were too tight -- came to the general's side. He smiled.

“Good evening. And how are things at the Institute of Parapsychology?”

She merely nodded, too much in awe of a national hero. Hero, bah.

“I will leave you to your work.”

Those words did it. He knew what was coming. He tried to tighten himself inside for the coming battle. The woman nodded again and turned to him. She had a wan smile on her face.

“Here we are again, Doctor. Let us begin. Please do not resist. Share your thoughts. Share your work. We must begin again.”

She reached out her hands, touched his temple. Not this time, bitch. Not this time.

“Share,” she whispered.

“Share,” said the general. “We need your thoughts, those notes in your head. We need to begin again. And you are all that is best. Do not resist. You live for this. You are kept alive for this.”

Slowly, like fierce worms, the burrowing began. The fight was on.

He was kept alive for this. Dead minus one.