

*Click-trtrtt-ting!* sung the bolt of the rifle as it was thrown up then backwards, ejecting the smoking brass cartridge. *Trrrr-ting!* echoed it's encore as it was flung forward again and tugged back down into place. Silence for a breath, then a thundering crescendo of flame and violence as the round surged forward. Perhaps the rifle did not make subtle music, but just like the 1812 Overture it was a sound that demanded respect through force alone. The gun and the overture had another thing in common. They had both sprung from the minds of Russians, though dozens of years apart.

Of course, the man using the rifle had never heard of Pytor Tchaikovsky before, much less when he had written his overture. He had no concept of where Russia was or why they had manufactured his gun. All he knew was that the deer he was trying to kill was running away and he couldn't afford many more shots.

*Crack!* rang out his next bullet. The sound permeated the forest around him, startling birds and worming its way through gnarled pines. *Crack!* came a last shot, the noise bouncing back from the canyon walls to fill his ears. The bounding deer crumpled to the ground, a crimson mess.

He stood from his cramped kneeling position with a grunt, and slung his rifle across his back. Although he had no idea, and indeed no care, that it was a weapon of his ancestral enemies, he could tell you it's name. The Mosin-Nagant. M1891 as was stamped in steel on the bottom of the magazine. It was a relic now, from wars and nations long past.

The man trudged forward. He was lean and dirty, a man of the wilds. Everyone was these days. His eyes were hard, green-grey orbs that scoured the forest before him. Nothing escaped his gaze. Below that his mouth sat in a perfect unmoving line, almost frozen in permanent

grimace. His hair was long and coarse, swept behind him. A rough beard hid a dozen scratches and scars on his chin and lips from the jagged edges of food cans. When you were starving, it was hard to care that you were bleeding into your meal.

His clothes were hand made for the most part. Deer hide, furs, and a handful of weathered garments he'd found or bought from Ruiners. His favorite was his bag, an oversized rucksack patterned in speckled green-brown camouflage. It had cost him a month of his life spent hunting to provide for Ruiners while they dug through the rubble around some kind of cache. They had come through in the end though. Even found enough ammunition to reimburse the rounds spent hunting. Ammo. The Survivor sighed as he remembered he was getting awfully low again. Another visit to The Bastion to trade and barter for the scant 7.62 cartridges.

He remembered last time he had been in the collective that talk of rebuilding machinery and extracting the minerals to build more guns and bullets had been the buzzing rumor of the day. But he thought there was little chance it would ever be more than a rumor. Another miracle invented to keep people distracted and hoping. The Survivor reached his prey and knelt to examine it. A healthy buck, plenty of meat. He could dry a good portion of it and eat the rest now. Looking up and around he studied the landscape for a place to set camp. There, a rocky table set in the mouth of a stunted canyon. Cover on three sides, foliage to keep it concealed.

The Survivor set to work, dragging his deer to the campsite and shoring up the area. Here, a place for his tent. There, a set of snares and bells to tell him if anything was near. He still needed water so he took his mess kit apart and ferried a cup back from the spring flowing through the center of the canyon. It was nearly dark, so a fire was in order. The work took a few

hours and at the end was several salted cuts of meat for the road. It was fortunate that salt was easy to come by these days, it let the Survivor keep his food for much longer.

The stars sat overhead and the moon was bright tonight. As he sat and ate the last of the meat unsuited for curing, a tune came to mind. He hummed it softly as the fire sunk lower into its coals. It was gentle, bouncing in half-jovial melody through the night. The words to the song were familiar, but for the life of him he couldn't remember. He cursed silently and shifted. A cartridge slipped through his bandolier and fell to the ground with a sparkling clatter. He bent to pick it up and realized he'd forgotten to collect his spent casings earlier. With a sigh he set off. It was a waste to leave perfectly good brass when he could still trade it later.

The woods were dark but still alive. Crunch of needles underfoot seemed so much louder in the quietly churning nightlife. His steps led him back near through the mouth of this canyon. There, no more than a glint in the moonlight, sat the four casings in a haphazard pattern. He crouched to gather them and looked up at the land around him. A pillar of stone he had not noticed on the way in seemed to shine in the starlight. Microscopic flecks of mineral gleamed and glowed, a shining beacon four feet wide and easily a dozen tall. It was strange and surreal. An oddity in an otherwise unremarkable valley.

The words to the song suddenly came back to the Survivor. He scooped up the brass and shoved it into his pocket.

A step forward and he began to sing. His voice was shy and ragged, a tentative risk to remember what was and what will be. "Miraculous Crystal, given by the stars."

The monolith loomed closer above, black shining and blue gleaming like the windows of the buildings long since shattered. "I can foresee the future in fabulous glass."

Its obsidian exterior was not perfectly smooth as he drew near enough to see. Etchings, symbols, adorned its surface. He remembered the stories his mother had told him of the world before, of how much had been lost. “Lie spilt on the caves. Mock scribbled upon us.”

In the center was a trefoil. That cursed circle divided into three arcing triangles. Set to warn of radiation and death. A reminder that history was nuclear. “Earth's doom day is close.”

A compulsion to climb took the Survivor and so he took hold of the crystal and hauled himself upwards. The sharp edges dug into his flesh and the going was tough. But ridges appeared in just the right places--almost as if it was intended to be scaled. Images flashed by his eyes as he scrambled up. A grinning skull, two brothers in arms, the cross swords of a million nations. He could no longer tell what was etched in the stone and what was echoing in his soul.

The next verse came to him as he pulled himself atop the pillar of stone. A wind picked up and blew aeon-scorched ash across his face. His voice was not afraid to be heard anymore. “Dancing on the ashes of the world!”

He threw his head to the night sky. A billion blinking stars stared at him like the eyes of an alien god. “I behold the stars!”

A furious gale whipped around the Monolith and it's Survivor. He fought to overpower their voice with his. “Heavy gale is blowing to my face, rising up the dust!”

The trees lay below him, gnarled and stunted by the corrupting influence of thousands of rotogens hundreds of years ago. “Barren lands desperate to blossom!”

The night was cold and hostile now. A world trying to choke out the last of the human scourge. “Dark stars strive to shine!”

Not all men were invaders. He was not and would never be. “Still remember blue ocean in this dying world!”

Silence seized the night as he paused. Then, raising his hands and proclaiming as if a prophet, he spoke the last verse he could remember.

“The seas overdumped!

The rivers are all dead!

All planet’s cities turned a deserted land!

Annihilation declares his day!”

The last words caught in his throat. His eyes welled with tears as he remembered days he could never know. There was a world long before this one and all he could hope to do was pray and offer a solemn promise. It was humbling to realize how much had gone on, and devastating to know it would never be known. He swallowed his grief and lifted his voice to the dark stars and barren lands. “Life slowly utters We Remain!”

Credit to Firelake and GSC Game World for the lyrics of “Dirge for the Planet”, the song referenced in this short story.