

*The following short story is something I wrote when I did a free online writing course at FutureLearn.org. It's not the best thing in the world true but I was trying hard to write characters so, imperfect as it may be, I'm quite proud of it.*

Enjoy :)

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Jeremy pulled open the door of his flat, a grin of welcome plastered over his Nordic features. His best friend Peter was standing in the doorway, bemused and irritated, his dark eyebrows knitted together as if he didn't quite understand what was going on.

"Hello Pete?"

"Jerry? What do you mean, 'Hello?'" Peter's voice started to rise.

Jeremy's grin faded as he stood to one side to let Peter enter. Peter didn't move, just looked at Jeremy, his reddening face betraying his increasing anger.

"You pulled me away from dinner; porterhouse steak, medium rare with a balsamic sauce, not to mention a rather superb bottle of wine. Oh yes," He almost snarled, "And from Ms. Foxwell, ex-cheerleader and a rising local businesswoman."

"Peter!" Jeremy's voice rose to match his friend's, "Stop! Listen to me! I have something to tell you. Something perhaps a little more important than any cheerleader."

Peter stopped, mid-rant, alerted by the strident tone in Jeremy's voice.

"Something that couldn't wait until tomorrow?" Peter's voice had calmed slightly, contained a note of curiosity, "What?"

Jeremy stood, looking at him, still holding the door open in invitation.

"Alright Jerry," Sighed Peter, "Ten minutes, no more!"

"OK."

Peter stepped across the mantle and, although he had been to Jeremy's apartment many times before, stood uncertainly in the large hallway.

Jeremy and Peter had met at university, graduating with first and an upper second degrees respectively. Peter didn't resent his friend's better grades but there had still always been an element of friendly rivalry between them so their grades often came up as a subject of conversation over late night drinks. None of which had stopped them going on to form the IT security company, MoreSec. With Jeremy's brilliance and organisational skills it had been natural for Peter to take up the lead sales and management role while his friend concentrated on the technical side of things. Now, ten years later, the company had expanded from two to thirty five employees. With Peter at the helm, the military interested in what they had to offer, looked as if it would grow considerably larger.

"The study?" Jeremy's voice was flat and Peter looked at him curiously before turning down the hall towards a door on the left. As he passed them Peter shrugged off his coat, deftly caught it as it fell and threw it on to a set of hooks on his right, a perfect shot. He heard Jeremy laugh behind him.

"Years of practice I suppose?"

"Indeed." Jeremy replied closing the door to the flat.

Peter stopped outside the study then, at Jeremy's gesture, stepped inside the room. Jeremy followed.

Peter stopped and drew a sharp intake of breath. He stared at the bank of monitors in front of him; ten, no twelve, large high-resolution monitors arranged into a video wall and a fair number of smaller screens dotted around. Many of the smaller screens had information scrolling across them at a rate too fast to be readily viewed but it was the video wall that really held his attention.

"The South Eastern US coast? Florida?" Peter asked.

"It is." Jeremy's reply was short.

"And the circles?"

"They centre on Cities."

"A strange answer?"

"I guess." Said Jeremy.

"You're not telling me much Jerry."

Jeremy stepped over to a powerful looking computer system and typed something in. The map on the screen shrank to show the first the Eastern seaboard then the entire US mainland. He turned and looked at Peter, now gawping at the screens.

"So that's the whole country?" Peter finally asked.

"Alaska and Hawaii excepted, yes."

"The red squares?"

"Military bases."

Peter looked at some of the other screens which showed camera views on what were clearly military installations. Nothing seemed amiss; no great activity or anything to indicate a problem.

"The red triangles? The ones just off the coastline?"

"Submarines."

"Ours I presume?"

Jeremy didn't answer as he removed his spectacles, breathed on them and cleaned them with a cloth from his desk.

"Your ten minutes is up." He said looking at Peter. Peter started to turn to the doorway then whirled back.

"For God's sake Jerry! Tell me what the fuck is going on!"

For the first time Jeremy looked uncertain. He pulled his plush, brown office chair towards him and slumped into it. He gestured to another chair and Peter sat, more upright and on the edge of the seat. Jeremy took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds then exhaled.

"I've been doing some, ah, research."

"Hacking you mean?"

Jeremy nodded.

"You've seen the news? The situation in Russia?"

Peter nodded in turn. He had seen the reports; you couldn't really avoid them plastered across the news stations as they were. Poverty, starvation, riots, curfew and more besides; the country seemed to be on the verge of utter social collapse. In complete contrast to America of course. The US had poor people of course but nothing on the scale of Russia and social reforms voted through a decade ago had meant that few people were now truly below a reasonable, if basic, standard of living. Still, he suspected he didn't know half of the problems Russia was experiencing.

"It's worse!" Jeremy confirmed Peter's thoughts, "Much worse! The military and government is out of control."

"OK?" Peter wasn't sure where this was going, "And what does this have to do with that?" He gestured to the video wall.

"I was curious ..."

"And you decided to hack the Russians. Their embassy?"

Jeremy grimaced.

"The Kremlin!"

"You did what?" Peter virtually screamed as he shot up out of his chair.

"I hacked the Kremlin but I found something ..." Jeremy said.

"What?"

"Plans!"

"What kind of plans?"

"The lethal kind."

"Lethal for who?"

"Us!" Jeremy paused, "For us. The US. America!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the Russians are planning an attack on us. On the US!"

"You're serious?"

"Yes."

"So those submarines?" Peter spoke cautiously as he formed his thoughts, "They're not American? They're Russian?"

"Yes."

"And I presume they are carrying nuclear missiles?"

"They are."

"How many missiles?"

"There are thirty two submarines each with a payload of sixteen missiles; each missile has eight separate warheads."

"That's, er," Peter closed his eyes in calculation, "That's ... Jesus! That's over four thousand warheads"

"Yes."

"But the military knows about them!"

"No. They're pretty much undetectable until the moment they are launched."

"But the Russians must know we'll retaliate!"

"Yes."

"We'll wipe them out!"

"We will."

Peter sat down again, thought for a moment then smiled.

"This is a joke right?"

"No." Jeremy's face was pale.

"Oh!" Any doubt was swept from Peter's face; he knew his friend's sense of humour and this wasn't it, "But you told the authorities right?"

"I did."

Peter sighed in relief and relaxed back into his chair.

"So everything is OK."

"No. Not really."

"Why?" Peter leant forward again.

"They didn't believe me."

"They didn't believe you? Did you show them the evidence?"

"I told them what I'd discovered, told them I could send them evidence, yes."

"And what did they do?"

"They laughed!"

"They laughed?"

"They laughed!"

Peter flopped back and sat in stunned silence.

"So," He spoke slowly, "What now?"

"Well as a general rule, when one is hit by a nuclear missile one disintegrates rather rapidly ..."

"Jerry!" Peter snapped.

"Sorry!" Said Jeremy, "OK, if the detail I have is correct then, at midnight central time, those submarines will launch their missiles, the US will retaliate before it gets obliterated and our country, the entire world most likely, goes up in nuclear holocaust."

"But," Peter looked at his expensive watch, "That's less than fifteen minutes away?"

"Yes."

"And you thought it a good idea to drag me away from a Château Canon-La Gaffelière St.-Emilion and a beautiful ex-cheerleader to tell me this?"

"Yes."

"For God's sake why? It's not like I need to know!"

"Perhaps I am being naïve but I thought it would be nice to spend my last minutes on God's

green earth with my best friend."

Peter stood up and walked to the window. He shook his head and started laughing.

"On God's green earth?" His voice was mocking, "You're an atheist!"

"So are you and I was waxing poetic."

Peter laughed again.

"I have a balcony you know," Jeremy spoke quietly and little hopefully, "On that balcony is a barbecue, already fired up. I have beers on ice and a bottle of 1998 Dom Perignon in the cooler with which we can toast the end of the world."

Peter's laugh got louder as he turned to his friend.

"You're right," He said, "I'm not busy right now and, whilst Ms. Foxwell had potential, I can think of nothing I would rather do!"

Jeremy laughed along with his friend.

"It's going to be one helluva show!"