

# CHERNOBYLITE

A man in a gas mask and backpack stands in a field of tall grass, looking towards a hazy, industrial landscape. In the background, there are cranes and structures that appear to be remnants of a destroyed facility, possibly a power plant. The scene is misty and atmospheric.

CHERNOBYLITE SHORT STORY

# THE ARRIVAL





It had been a long day for Sashko Horobets. He hadn't slept in over 24 hours, and the last thing he'd eaten was two hard-boiled eggs and a couple shots of vodka in a Kyiv dive bar. For a man born and raised in Moscow, this Ukrainian city was strange. But it was also his mother's hometown, which made him oddly nostalgic. He didn't dwell on it, though. He wasn't the type to think too deeply about his feelings.


Life had taught Sashko not to waste time on self-pity, because it never helped. It didn't help when his drunken stepfather beat him, and it didn't help when he tried to protect his mother, and got beaten even worse. Despite what his Ukrainian grandma told him as a child, no guardian angel had his back. If he did, he would've descended from Heaven a long time ago to kick his stepdad's ass and cast him down to Hell, where he belonged. Only one person had ever had his back, but they'd vanished, and now Sashko was determined to find out why.

He had to take a few detours to arrive at his final destination undetected. Police patrols could always be evaded or bought off. Despite being a wanted man, he still had some contacts on the force from the good old days when he was a runner for Yura the Brick.

But this time everything was different. Sashko was after someone – someone who was on the run, someone he desperately needed to have a word with. And this person was here, in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. „Why this radioactive hellhole, of all fucking places“ – he wondered – „Why not Caracas or Mexico City?“ On top of that, this place had attracted corporate vultures with enough cash to hire an army of mercs and lock down the entire area. NAR, that's what they were called. But Sashko







didn't care about any of that. For him it was just another complication, and he was used to the hassle. It was his bread and butter.

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The sun was setting above a secluded cove on the Pripjat River when Sashko met with his contact. The local smugglers turned out to be a couple of shady individuals, eyes gleaming out anonymously from behind worn gas masks. Their unwashed clothes reeked of rotgut, onions, and flatulence.

They stared at the tall, sinewy silhouette in a sleeveless t-shirt and khaki pants, trying to read him.

„You're late," – said one of them, with an anxious glance over his shoulder. He tightened his grip on an old Mosin-Nagant, a gun that probably saw service in the Great Patriotic War.

„I'm here now," – Sashko replied – „so let's cut to the chase. I need to be on the other side of the perimeter after nightfall."

„Look at this clown, Vanya," – the smuggler took one long stride towards Sashko – „he hasn't even paid us, but he's already barking orders. We don't like that kind of... >>customer<<."

Sashko slowly moved his hand to rest on the grip of the combat knife hanging on his belt.

„Please forgive my little brother," – the second smuggler laughed, trying to diffuse the tension – „Alexey gets nervous when he's scared. He used to wet his bed every night."

„Fuck off!" – Alexey barked.

„I don't have time for this. Can you take me across or not?“ – Sashko interrupted in a firm voice.

„Of course we can!“ – Vanya quickly answered – „Do you have the payment we agreed on?“

Sashko removed his backpack and reached inside. He carefully set two packages wrapped in green paper on the ground. Even through the gas masks, he could see the excitement in their eyes.

Vanya reached for one of the packages, but Sashko grabbed his hand.

„Careful,“ – he said – „if you know what's good for you.“

„Sure, sure.“ – Vanya lowered his hand again, shaken.

Alexey kept staring at the packages, nervously scratching his scalp.

„We should've just asked for money,“ – he said – „Do you even know how to use this thing?“

„Money we have,“ – Vanya shook his head – „but this... This will open many doors for us. Literally. And you know how hard it is to come by these days.

„Do you know how to use it without blowing your hands off?“ – Sashko asked.

„We've got someone who knows. Besides, how hard can it be? What is it, Semtex, C-4?

„It's my own special brew. It gets the job done.“





„Is that all that comes with” – Vanya hesitated – „the package?”

„You’ll need blasting caps. You get those when I’m on the other side,” – Sashko replied.

„Who do you think you’re dealing with, asshole!?” – Alexey angrily burst out.

Sashko shrugged, unmoved.

„I think I’m dealing with a couple Kolkhoz rednecks purchasing explosives out of a stranger’s backpack.”

„We could just off you right now and take the blasting caps, you know.” – Alexey put a hand on his rifle but stopped short of pointing it at the stranger.

„I’d like to see you try.” – Sashko’s eyes pierced right through Alexey, and his confidence visibly waned.

He was used to soft townsfolk, petty thieves, and dark tourists from the West going on an exotic, radioactive safari. Them he could shake as ruthlessly as he wanted. But he’d never encountered a man like this. This stranger was like a rock. One could not simply bully him into submission.

„Now, now.” – Vanya put a calming hand on his brother’s shoulder, and once again acted as the voice of reason.

He once again decided to become the voice of reason.

„It’s all good. We’ve got a deal.”

He turned to Sashko, still a bit uncertain.

„Do we have a deal... partner?”

„Where is your boat?” – Sashko asked.

„Hidden in the rushes. It’s not far. We can take you there now.”

Sashko gave him a crooked smile.

„After you... partners.”







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The small boat bobbed quietly along, nothing but a dark shape upon the water. Without an engine, it was going to be a long trip. The two smugglers plainly knew what they were doing – they rowed without splashing and would be invisible to NAR patrols. Sashko was sitting in the stern, peering into the mist, but even his eagle eyes couldn't pierce the darkness around them. Sashko suspected the brothers must know this secret route to the Zone by heart. They didn't need to see the way – they felt it. The sound of a patrol boat engine rose up once or twice, but away in the distance. At one point, Sashko thought he could see a faint light, but it was far off, and he couldn't be sure it wasn't his imagination.

Eventually, Vanya shipped his oar and turned to Sashko.

„You can relax,” – he declared with easy confidence – „we should be safe for now.”

„Why are we stopping?”

„Because we're not goddamned galley slaves,” – Alexey grunted. „We need to take a break. Anyway, we're nearly there.”

Sashko nodded.

The three men were silent for a moment. The summer night was warm and dark. But then Sashko realized there was something missing. Since they entered the Zone, he'd heard no sound of birds or insects. Only the trees along the bank rustled ominously in the breeze. Otherwise, they were enveloped in a dead silence.

„So why are you going to the Zone?” – Vanya asked – „Not that it's any of my business, but...”

Sashko didn't answer.

„...you don't look like a tourist. Besides, what tourist pays with explosives?”

„I'm looking for someone,” – Sashko said after a long pause.





„Aren't we all, partner?” – Vanya chuckled – „But this place, it's not what it used to be. It'll swallow a man whole and spit out his bones. Even a tough guy like you.”

He sighed.

„Since NAR locked everything down, the whole place has gone to shit. It wasn't exactly Disneyland before, but now...” – he gave Sashko a strange look – „You're not from around here.”

It was a statement rather than a question.

„No, I'm not.”

„Figures,” – Alexey muttered. Sashko wondered if the young smuggler was going to be a problem.

„How bad's the radiation these days?” – Sashko asked.

„It's manageable. There are still pockets you should steer clear of, but other than that–”

„Just keep an eye on your dosimeter, and you should be fine,” – Alexey grunted – „The radiation will be the least of your worries.”

„What does that mean?”

„This whole NAR business is really sketchy.” – Alexey tried to sound indifferent, but Sashko detected an undertone of fear – „They were talking on TV about some huge recultivation project, but I never saw any sign of that.”

„Bah!” – Vanya shrugged this off – „You wouldn't recognize recultivation if it bit you on the ass, little brother.”

„Since they showed up with their crew of mercs, some weird shit started going down. I'm telling you! My friend Petya, he saw something... something terrifying.”

„Yeah, maybe Petya shouldn't buy drugs from Pripyat Bratva Evgeniy,” – Vanya said, irritated – „Now, grab that oar and start rowing. Or do you want to be sitting here yakking when the sun comes up?”



The moon was still high when the smugglers' boat scraped bottom near Pripjat Port. The three men disembarked into knee-deep water, and swiftly dragged the craft into some nearby rushes. Scrambling ashore, they waited under an old, twisted tree, the branches spreading above them like the tentacles of some spooky creature. It was dead quiet.

"Who's this guy we're waiting for?" – Sashko inquired.

"Someone I do business with," – Vanya said – "He will guide you from here."

"NAR?"

Vanya shrugged.

"Anyone can be bought. Or convinced. This man can be trusted."

"He should have been here by now," – Alexey mumbled – "He's never late."

"He'll be here," – Vanya replied.

"Maybe he got busted by a patrol?"

"He's too smart to get caught by those idiots. Besides, there shouldn't be any patrols in this area tonight. I should know, I paid good money for that intel."

"I think I saw a light on the riverbank earlier," – Sashko said.

"Impossible," – Vanya scoffed – "Like I said, there are no NAR patrols scheduled in this sector."

"It was unusual though," – Sashko continued – "greenish–"

"What did you just say?!" – Alexey's face turned white as paper against the night's blackness.

"I said the light was green."

"We have to turn back! Now!" – Alexey declared in a strained voice. He too had turned pale, and seemed panicked about something.

"What the fuck are you are talking about?!" – Vanya hissed – "Pull yourself together, you idiot!"

"Can't you understand?!" – Alexey was babbling like a lunatic – "They're going to get us!"

"Who?!"

"The green ghosts!"

"Not this again! Look, when we get back, you and I are going to have a little chat about—"

"Quiet!" – Sashko raised a hand for silence.

"What did you say?"

"Shut your fucking mouths, both of you! Listen!" – Sashko commanded in a harsh whisper.

He had been facing the tree line for several moments now.

The smugglers fell quiet, except for Alexey's heavy breathing. A weird noise pierced the overwhelming silence, a kind of roar, hard to place...

"Back away. Slowly." – Sashko said.

Sashko scanned the seemingly impenetrable shadows. At first, everything was just a blurred palette of black and grey. He focused his gaze like a snake, attempting to catch any sign of movement among the trees. Then he saw it.

A man-shaped silhouette was slowly approaching, limping, swaying, holding some kind of green lantern. There was something unsettling about that light, but Sashko couldn't quite put his finger on it.

The noise came again. None of them had ever heard anything like it, an eerie growl that sent a shiver right through them.

"Give me the rifle," – Vanya whispered, touching his brother's arm.





Sashko slowly drew his knife. With his other hand, he reached into his backpack and produced an over-under shotgun, sawed off for close quarters use.

The silhouette emerged from the treeline, and Sashko realized it was not human. Or not what one would normally call human, anyway. It was something else. It had no distinguishable features –no face, no eyes– as if a clay figure had come to life. Its movements were jerky and uncoordinated, like a drunkard on the verge of passing out. Sashko saw that there was no lantern. The creature's whole body glowed with a faint, green light. It was changing colors, iridescent.

"What the fuck is that?!" – Vanya yelled, abruptly losing his cool.

The smuggler started wrestling with his rifle, hands shaking so badly it looked like a living thing trying to escape his grasp. He pointed the barrel at the creature.

In that instant, a burst of green light exploded in front of them and something appeared next to the creature. It looked like a warped funhouse mirror hovering in the air, a hole cut from darkness by an invisible blade, simmering with bizarre energy.

Vanya screamed in terror and fired. The echo bounced away between the black trunks of the trees.

The humanoid figure jumped right into the gap in reality. The thing, the green light, the mirror, all vanished. The woods were dark again.

"Get back to the boat! Now!" – Vanya yelled. He shoved his brother in the direction of the cove, and both men started to run. Alexey stumbled, but Vanya jerked him upright before he could fall.

Sashko didn't move. He stood stock still, vigilant, listening to every sound. Then the buzzing noise came again.

He spun toward the smugglers, who were already pushing the boat out onto the water. But it was too late.

The nightmarish mirror opened right next to them, and the creature emerged with one exaggerated stride. It was a grotesque sight, like a drunk stumbling through a hole in an invisible wall.

The thing charged the smugglers like a wild boar, knocking Alexey to the ground. Despite its disoriented motions, it was surprisingly strong. The younger brother lay prone on the ground, the creature sitting on his chest and swinging its nightmarish arms.

Vanya screamed in terror, dropped his rifle, and bolted away in the opposite direction.

"Vanya! Help! Help me, please!" – his brother begged in a voice full of pain and terror.

But Vanya nimbly skirted around Sashko and disappeared among the trees.

Alexey rocked from side to side, trying to shake the nightmare off him, but to no avail. He was fighting for his life with every breath.

"Vanya! Please don't leave me! Vanya!" – his voice weakened. It seemed he was about to faint.

Sashko moved like lightning. With three giant leaps, he was next to Alexey. Transferring every ounce of his momentum, he jump-kicked the shadowy monster off the young smuggler. It jarred his leg all the way to the hip, as if he'd kicked a statue carved from solid rock; Sashko winced with pain.





The green horror roared as it fell to the side in the tall grass. It immediately started to rise, but Sashko was already pressing the barrel of his shotgun against the creature's head. At least he *thought* it was the head.

He pulled the trigger... and heard a click followed by a sizzling sound.

Misfire.

"Cyka blyat." – Sashko said.

One of the abomination's long, branch-like arms struck him in the chest, sending him flying. Sashko collided with a nearby tree trunk, fell to the ground, and for a couple of seconds everything was black. When he regained his senses, his whole body hurt. Blood poured from his nose. He felt like he'd been clipped by a train. Slowly, dizzily, he picked himself up. The shotgun was gone, but he still had his knife. Everything was silent again. The creature had vanished, but Sashko knew it could reappear at any time.

He found Alexey. The young smuggler was dead, his skull caved in like a shattered bowl, his face nothing but red pulp. It looked as if he'd been beaten to death with a huge meat tenderizer.

As quietly as he could, Sashko began walking toward the boat. Then the buzzing of the nightmarish portal sounded again, and he looked over his shoulder. There was his nemesis, standing and watching from ten yards away.





Sashko drew the blasting caps from a hidden pocket of his trousers, and armed the explosives the smugglers had left behind in their boat.

Standing at the bow, he waved at the creature. In his left hand, he was holding a detonator, in the right his knife.

"I'm here!" – he shouted – "Come and get me, you ugly motherfucker!"

The creature raced towards the boat, but again disappeared, midstride, into a vortex of green light.

But Sashko was ready.

He had no idea what he was up against, but wasted no time thinking about that. His enemy had a material form, and that meant it could almost certainly be killed. Sashko trusted in his speed and strength, but even more in his ability to change tactics in the heat of battle. This fight was like solving a riddle. The enemy was throwing down a challenge, and only finding the solution would guarantee a win. Sashko had learned as much during the turf wars of his youth, in the dim alleys of Moscow. Adaptability was the name of the game, and he played it well.





The moment he heard the portal expanding behind him, he leapt to the side, narrowly escaping the monstrous arms. He pivoted, ducked, and swiped his blade across both his enemy's legs, putting all the strength of his right arm into the desperate blow.

Some liquid sprayed across his face, and the beast roared, losing its footing on the rocking craft. Sashko plunged his knife into its abdomen, and kicked its right leg. The heavy body collapsed with a thud into the bottom of the boat, right on top of the armed explosives.

Sashko jumped straight into the murky depths of the Pripyat River, feet first. He was careful not to wet the detonator. Then he kicked furiously away, left hand held aloft. He pressed the button.

The explosion sent shockwaves in every direction and seared Sashko's hand, but the cold water instantly eased the pain. He waited a couple seconds, holding his breath, before emerging from the river.

The boat was completely destroyed, and the nearby rushes were burning. The creature was lying in a pool of green liquid like a crumpled rag. Its skin had been turned to charcoal and no longer showed the weird green iridescence.

Sashko kicked it cautiously. It was dead.

"Got you, fucker" – he muttered.

\* \* \*

The sun was rising in agonizingly slow increments, the sky blood-red. Sashko found his shotgun and pushed two new shells into the breach. For a moment, he stood in silence, wondering if he should go back, but he quickly dismissed this thought. He had come here for a reason, and nothing would sway him – neither men nor creatures from Hell.

He gathered what supplies had survived the blast and set off into the forest. He didn't know exactly where he was going now, but the explosion was sure to attract NAR patrols, or perhaps more of the ghastly green creatures. In any case, he needed to put some distance between himself and the cove. His left hand hurt from the recent burn, but he ignored it.

About an hour later, Sashko came across Vanya. The smuggler was lying on some loose wooden planks, trapped in a cluster of strange, green crystals that seemed to be suffocating him. He was still alive, but only barely able to draw breath.

"Help... help me...."

Sashko struck at the crystals, but they were impervious, hard as diamond. They must have something to do with the monster that attacked them. There was nothing he could do. Besides, he had to go. He had his own mission.

"You left your little brother to die," – Sashko said, in a voice so cold it surprised even him – "Don't you know that brothers always look out for each other?"

He put his shotgun to the smuggler's head.

"I'm sorry..." – Vanya was fighting for every breath – "I'm so, so sorry..."

"I know," – Sashko replied and pulled the trigger.

There was no misfire this time.





## **CHERNOBYLITE SHORT STORY: THE ARRIVAL**

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# CHERNOBYLITE

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It had been a long day for Sashko Horobets. He hadn't slept in over 24 hours, and the last thing he'd eaten was two hard-boiled eggs and a couple shots of vodka in a Kyiv dive bar. For a man born and raised in Moscow, this Ukrainian city was strange. But it was also his mother's hometown, which made him oddly nostalgic. He didn't dwell on it, though. He wasn't the type to think too deeply about his feelings.

Sashko was after someone – someone who was on the run, someone he desperately needed to have a word with. And this person was here, in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. „Why this radioactive hellhole, of all fucking places” – he wondered – „Why not Caracas or Mexico City?” On top of that, this place had attracted corporate vultures with enough cash to hire an army of mercs and lock down the entire area. NAR, that's what they were called.

Rumors say that strange things are happening in the Zone. That this place has changed and it's even more dangerous than before...

Will Sashko find the answers he is looking for?

