

PROMPT #2: You open a book and a note with a letterhead falls out. At the top it says: If you are reading this, ...

Grey Diplomacy

by [Anonymous]

It was a cold winter morning, a light blanket of snow covering the grass and rooftops. He rounded the corner onto his street, and began the final stretch of his nearly hour-log run. Except for two Ford Explorers parked across the street, things were exactly as he'd left them.

Despite some hiccups, his winter break had been quite relaxing; a welcome departure from the monotonous drone of electrical engineering. On his way up the driveway, he paused to bring in the mail. To his surprise, among the slew of junk mail, there was a rather large white paper package addressed to him.

Now inside, he made his way to his desk and tore apart the thin paper packaging. Inside was a slightly weathered copy of *American Prometheus*. He flipped the cover open, but paused for a moment when he noticed a set of initials: I.C. The initials of his father. He checked the packaging, but could not find a return address. As a matter of fact, there was no address at all, only his name. The package had been hand-delivered.

Despite the unnerving nature of the situation, he decided to press forward. He noticed a dog-eared page about a third of the way through the book. Flipping it open, he landed at page 220. Here, he found that the page had been replaced with a sheet of paper. On the sheet was a hastily written jumble of letters: a cipher.

He did not find this unusual. His father loved ciphers, and he had quite a few childhood memories of learning to solve such codes. At initial glance, it looked to be a Caesar cipher. But as he observed the pattern more closely, he could see that it was most likely a keyword cipher.

He spent the next few hours testing keywords. Having exhausted himself and his options, he slumped backwards into his chair. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the cover of the book.

“Prometheus”

Just a few minutes later, he had successfully decoded the message.

“IF YOU ARE READING THIS THEN ANTIMATTER DEVICE STILL HIDDEN NEAR THE WHITE LAKE SITE DESTROY AT ALL COSTS DAD”

He could hardly believe what he was reading. So this is what his father had been researching? An antimatter reactor? But it simply didn’t make sense. He looked at his calendar: 21 December 2013. Four years. Four years since the lab accident. How could he just now be receiving the package?

Unless, of course.

His father’s death was no accident.

He glanced out the window. The two Ford Explorers were still parked across the street. Guests? Perhaps. The only problem: His neighbors had left for France a week earlier.

He began to connect the dots. The “White Lake Site” was a nickname he and his dad had given to an ice fishing site near the family’s cabin. It suddenly became abundantly clear why the book had been delivered to him. They expected him to lead directly to the site of the antimatter device.

“DESTROY AT ALL COSTS”

The words echoed in his mind. But he had greater plans. From his desk, he withdrew a sheet of paper, and began to hammer out a letter in Cyrillic. The most powerful device on the planet, and the vengeance opportunity of a lifetime had come knocking on his door. He was not the type to let such things go to waste.

Over the next few hours, supplies were gathered, calculations were made, and plans were drawn. His procedures were bitter and methodical; he now had purpose to his actions.

As day turned to night, cloud cover combined with a new moon to enshroud the entire neighborhood in darkness. Only a few scattered streetlamps pierced the darkness with their yellow light. Silently, he made his way through several backyards, and finally arrived at Michael’s house.

The light in his room was on; possibly another late night counter-strike session. He flung several woodchips at the window, before resorting to small stones. He considered hurling a brick through it, but Michael opened the window before he could locate one.

“Emily?” Michael inquired.

“Unfortunately not.” came the response.

“Seryy, is that you?”

“No, it’s Ronald Reagan.” Seryy responded sarcastically. “Are you going to let me in or should I freeze out here?”

After some hasty greetings, the two friends entered the kitchen.

“Would you care for anything to drink?” Michael asked, as he filed through the refrigerator.

“Just a glass of water, please.” Seryy replied as he took a seat.

“No Problem. So, what brings you to my backyard at this hour?”

“I have to talk to you about something.”

“Ever heard of a phone?” Michael remarked.

“Yes, I have. But I think my house has been wiretapped.”

“What makes you think you’ve been wiretapped? Do you know how resource intensive-”

“Yes, I am aware.” Seryy cut him off. “However, the presence of heavily tinted Ford explorers would imply that I am a person of interest.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing much, just received a package. From my father.”

Michael’s expression changed suddenly. His sarcastic demeanor now replaced by a look of grave concern. “Package?”

Seryy spared no detail. The book, the cipher, and the device. His suspicions surrounding his father’s ‘accidental’ demise. And finally, his plan. Michael listened intently, paused, and gave his response.

“It’s a terrible idea.”

“What? Why?” Seryy asked.

“Look Seryy, we’ve known each other for 15 years. I know you well, well enough to see that you have once again failed to see the human cost of your actions.”

“How so? If things go wrong, My life is the only one on the line.” Seryy responded, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

“There is more to a human being than their life, Seryy. Think of your mother and your sister. How would they respond, emotionally, to your decision? How would they respond to your absence if things go wrong? I know studying electrical engineering isn’t the most exciting thing in the world, but you have to consider the costs of the path you are taking.”

Seryy paused for a moment. Michael was right, he really hadn’t considered his family in the equation. “Also,” Michael continued, “Regardless of their role in your father’s death, don’t you think a democratic nation should control such technology as opposed to an autocratic one? Or, better yet, why not follow your father’s final wishes, and destroy the device altogether?”

Seryy had considered that option, but it felt almost wasteful. Despite its destructive capabilities, antimatter technology would be needed for interstellar flight. After all, his father had sacrificed so much to complete the technology. How could he just throw it all away?

Seryy shook his head. “No, I don’t think I can destroy it.”

A few moments of silence passed.

“Look, I don’t think this is the right path to take. But I am willing to help with the plan.” Michael concluded.

“Thanks,” Seryy replied. “I have just one favor to ask.” Seryy reached into his pocket, and withdrew an envelope.

2650 Wisconsin Avenue, NW Washington DC.

Michael’s eyes widened at the address, especially after Seryy explained its significance.

The duo then headed outside, and made some modifications to the neighborhood’s electrical system. The procedure took half an hour, with Seryy nearly getting electrocuted twice.

Finally, the two friends said their goodbyes. Despite the promises to keep in touch, there was a looming sense of permanence to this farewell.

Crawling through backyards once again, Seryy made his way back to his house. Now the harshest, most difficult part of the night awaited him: the farewell to his family. Seryy peered into the living room. His mother and sister sat there, embroiled in one of their many re-watches of Return of the Jedi. He took a moment to collect himself, before striding in.

He strode out two hours later, with a burning sensation in his eyes and an ache in his chest.

He tried to sleep that night, but found it to be nearly impossible. Finally, the clock struck 0400, and the time had come to mobilize. With his supplies in order, he waited nervously for the next stage of his plan. At exactly 0430, the electrical modifications kicked in. All the lights in the neighborhood went off with a ping, leaving the area in a complete and total darkness. After a final embrace with his mother and sister, Seryy quietly made his way outside, and loaded his gear into his father's old Volvo 240.

He placed the transmission into neutral, and quietly pushed the vehicle down the driveway and out to the road. Now at the entrance to his neighborhood, Seryy cranked the engine. With a heavy clatter, the 240's ancient power plant started up. He threw the transmission into gear, and peeled out of the neighborhood, finally en route to the lake.

Despite the successful escape, Seryy was nervous as ever. His nerves, combined with cold weather and an inoperable heater, caused his teeth to chatter uncontrollably. He fumbled through the glove compartment, and withdrew a few cassettes. He picked one at random, and jammed it into the 240's tape deck. The warm hum of Rondo Alla Turca filled the cabin, and he finally began to relax. As the hours passed, the sun rose, lighting up the sky with a brilliant crimson hue. More importantly, the cabin began to warm up.

As he flew across the vast fields of northern Ohio, he passed a parked sheriff's cruiser. He didn't think much about it. After all, he was only going 54 in a 50. But then he remembered: *You can't outrun a Motorola*

He began to speed up.

About half an hour later, he arrived at the site. The gravel road was invisible under the snow, but he had memorized the path over the years. The shock absorbers hissed as the Volvo leapt across potholes, its tyres tearing at the snow and leaving a grey slurry in its wake. After a few minutes, he pulled up next to the cabin.

As he stepped out of the car, he observed the beautiful expanse of the lake and forest. The treeline had changed slightly over the past few years, but the cabin remained unmoved. The difference was the sound, or lack thereof. No birds, no wind, just the crunching of snow under his boots. It felt as if the whole planet was holding its breath.

He finally arrived at the door of the cabin, undoing the deadbolt with a flick of the wrist. The room was slightly different than he had remembered it. The furniture had been rearranged slightly, and the blinds were drawn. The last man to walk through this cabin had been his father.

The device had to be here somewhere, but he couldn't see any obvious storage areas. The whole cabin was one room, with a front door, a back door, and an enormous wood-burning fireplace centered on the northern wall. Not many places to hide an antimatter reactor.

He briefly considered the crawl-space beneath the cabin, but the access door could barely fit a person, let alone a complex, powerful reactor. Having exhausted his options, he strode around the cabin, searching for anything that could tell him the whereabouts of the device.

Then he noticed them. Markings on the stone.

The fireplace had dozens of tool marks scattered across its structure. Now that he thought about it, the fireplace entrance was considerably wider than he remembered it. One by one, he felt the stones near the entrance of the fireplace. Until finally, one stone clicked under the weight of his arm.

With a firm tug, he dislodged the stone, revealing a small silver keyhole behind it. He considered improvising some lock-picking tools, but remembered the keys in his pocket. The Volvo's keychain featured 5 keys: One for the car, one for his house, one for the cabin, and two unknowns.

He had never thought much about these 'unknown keys', but now he considered the possibility that they could match this lock. Seryy inserted the first key and attempted to turn, but it wouldn't budge. He switched to the second key, and inserted it into the lock. He closed his eyes, and twisted the key.

To his surprise, the key rotated. A heavy clunk was heard, followed by electrical whirring. Seryy took a few steps back as the noises intensified. He watched in awe as the entire fireplace began to disassemble itself, the large walls shifting outward and the central stack moving upward. Finally, the ash covered base of the firepit swung down into the cavern below, and in

its place rose a new platform. Atop this platform was a large spherical device, with computer systems and batteries crudely wired to the side. The entire assembly sat upon a wheeled steel frame.

Seryy was stunned for a moment. While he had been expecting to find the device, half of him could not believe that it was real. With a few heavy tugs, he managed to roll the assembly out from its position in the fireplace. He ran his hands along the cold, grey metal of the device. Titanium, perhaps? He knew that some kind of magnetic field must be needed to contain the antimatter, and titanium was non-ferrous.... And then he discovered the letter.

“Dear Seryy-

I hope all is going well. I apologize for my absence, and I realize that things must be quite stressful for you. However, I think you deserve to know the story that unfolded before 1991.

During the 1980s, I was working on a prototype antimatter device in the Soviet Union. As the decade wore on, hardliners managing the project wished to convert the device into a weapon, with the hope that it could somehow grant us strategic superiority in the waning days of our empire. But I, along with 6 other scientists, refused to complete the work. In October of 1988, we took whatever research we could keep, and destroyed the rest. We defected to the United States.

During the 90s, we worked to perfect the antimatter technology. This is about the time you and your sister were born. And by 2005, we had a stable prototype reactor, capable of long-term controlled reactions. By 2007, however, we were ordered to modify the device to allow for fast reactions as well. We were briefed about intel, which implied that the PRC was researching a similar device, and that we had to maintain technological parity. I, along with several other scientists, vehemently opposed the idea. But we really feared the consequences of an opposing nation establishing an antimatter monopoly. So we continued the research, and developed the device you are looking at today.

By December of 2009, we had begun work on an even larger device. But then things came crashing down. It was revealed that the intel about the PRC's development of such a device had been a hoax. My team started to panic, as we realized that we had accidentally given an antimatter monopoly to the US. We finally agreed upon a plan: All blueprints and technical data were to be destroyed, with the exception of a single prototype and the data stored in its memory. This device was to be hidden as a time capsule, so future generations could re-create the technology, and perhaps deploy it in less primitive ways.

The device is controlled by a master key, with 4 positions: 0, 1, C/S, U/F. “0” is the default power-off position. “1” activates the device and allows for linking of instruments. “C/S” is used for slow, controlled reactions during experiments. “U/F” is used for an uncontrolled fast reaction of all the matter and antimatter contained in the device. Typically, experiments are managed via computer. But there is a grey button on the main control panel which can force the device to run an experiment without computer controls. Do with this information what you see fit.

Once again, I apologize for my absence, but I hope that you now realize why I did what I did. Remember: The key to the future is in your hands.

Love,
Dad”

Seryy was in a state of shock. He simply could not believe what he had just read. His mind poured over the letter, again and again, half expecting it to disappear. But it remained.

His thoughts were interrupted by the shrill shriek of a megaphone.

“Seryy Chelovek!” Thundered the voice.

“This is agent Edward Smith of the United States FBI, we have you surrounded! Step out of the cabin with your hands on your head!”

Seryy peered out the window, and noted over a dozen men dressed in black tactical gear, all equipped with submachine guns. Their leader – the one he presumed to be Agent Smith – wore a black jacket and wielded a megaphone. Overhead, the flutter of helicopter blades could be heard.

Seryy glanced down at his watch: 1048. Where were they? They should have arrived at least fifteen minutes ago. Moments later, gunfire erupted from the treeline. Nearly a dozen white figures emerged, and a full-scale battle erupted outside.

But Seryy knew it was useless. Even if the Russians managed to win, how could he go through with his plan? How could he give his father’s work – the most destructive device on the planet – to the very nation that wanted to weaponize it in the first place? Still in a state of shock, he recalled the last line of the letter. “The key to the future is in your hands”

His mind shifted to the last key on the Volvo's keychain. The key to the future. He inserted it into the control panel of the device, and twisted. The position switched to "1" and the device's computer systems kicked on. A green light flashed near the "READY" indicator.

The doors and windows of the cabin were shredded apart by the crossfire, forcing him to withdraw into the confines of the fireplace as gunfire pelted the stones around him. Seryy briefly glanced out from the fireplace, and noticed two figures stumble in. One appeared to be a GRU operative, dressed in all white. The other was agent Smith, now wielding a service pistol.

Both men took shots at each other, before taking cover on opposite sides of the fireplace, effectively pinning Seryy in the center.

"So, the circle is now complete!" Remarked the GRU operative. "It seems that the son of Dr. Chelovek has returned the device to its rightful owners."

"This isn't over!" Smith shouted. "In case you aren't aware, kid, your buddies in Moscow have been trying to weaponize this tech since the 80s!"

"I am aware of that information, just as I am aware of your ambitions!" remarked Seryy. "Then who'll it be, kid? Us or them?"

"Actually..."

Two distinct clicks echoed across the room.

"...I think I found a third option."

as he firmly pressed the grey button.