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**ATTACK
OF THE SPHERES**

A Science Fiction Novel

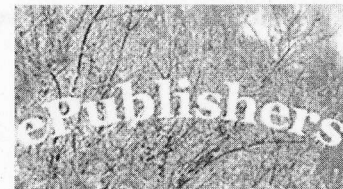


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CHAPTER 1

A BEER IN KRASINSKY SQUARE

In the afternoon when everything began, Viaceslav Barela, journalist with Fakt, the best-known tabloid in Poland, was having a beer with three of his friends. Summer, just like the day, was coming to an end, but the heat still persisted, increased by the hot tarmac covering Krasinsky Square. Temperature in the square didn't matter much to the beer drinkers on the tap house terrace, as they were taking shelter from the sun under the colorful awnings of the tap house. The cold beers in the mugs made bearable not only the temperature, but also the political changes in the past few days. Quite seldom did you hear someone talk about soccer, most of the beer drinkers being concerned about the Polish Government's decision to initiate a referendum for EU exit.

Opinions were, as usual, divided, but discussions were held in a civilized manner, and no one raised their voice. Most of the people sitting at the table were drinking Karpackie beer, not necessarily out of patriotism but rather

because a new flavor had just come on the market and everybody was curious to try it.

Viaceslav Barela was listening absent-mindedly to the discussions around him, and Piotr Lew, a photographer for the same magazine, noticed his grim expression and asked him:

“What’s up, man? What is it you don’t like?”

Viaceslav looked at his buddy gloomily, shrugged his shoulders, and then replied with a play on words he had used before:

“You want to know what’s going on? The fact that nothing is going on.”

As his friend didn’t seem to understand, he explained:

“For a couple of days now, all they’ve talked about is the fact that our soccer team lost the game with an incredible score for the Hungarian team, as if those guys didn’t have the right to win every now and then. People have been talking for weeks about the EU exit, and I just have a feeling they will all forget about it in the long run. Oh, yes, and there was also that derailed train from Lvov, but by the time we got there, everything looked brand new and trains were running normally.”

He sighed, took a sip of beer, and then added:

“I wish I could arrive first at a scene that would hit the front page of the newspapers.”

Piotr, about five years his buddy’s senior, shook his finger at Viaceslav:

“Buddy, be careful what you wish for; sometimes life beats movies, and it beats it so hard that it may hurt you too if you’re around.”

He took another sip of beer and wanted to explain further how things were, but just then, the crash of a collapsing wall covered all other sounds in the square, and near their table, less than thirty-two feet away, there emerged a black sphere about ten feet in diameter. The ground shook heavily, but no one moved.

“What the heck was that?” Viaceslav asked, with his eyes fixed on the unusual object, while Piotr automatically removed his video camera from its cover.

The surface of the sphere was black matte, and it dented the asphalt only a few inches. It looked pretty much stationary there and didn’t seem to want to roll towards them, despite the slight dip.

“First take some still shots and then record it,” he whispered to Piotr.

Stones falling from the nearby building could be heard; other stones came down from where the sphere passed on its path to the square.

“Take some pictures of the building, too,” Viaceslav said, pointing toward the structure.

“I will, I will,” Piotr answered breathlessly, turning his camera toward the several-story building where he

could see a hole the size of the sphere cut through the old walls.

Shifting the video camera from the hole in the wall to the sphere, he couldn't help saying out loud:

"I'm sure it's a bomb sent by the Russians. If I'm not mistaken, it came from the north, so from that bloody enclave of theirs, Kaliningrad. I've heard they do all kinds of experiments there...."

Meanwhile, people walking in the square started to gather around the sphere, and soon there were dozens of them.

"You may be right," Viaceslav confirmed out of the corner of his mouth. "It's just, if it had been a bomb, we wouldn't be standing here talking about it, or people around it, for that matter."

He finished his beer and got up from his chair, urging his friend to do follow:

"Let's get closer and see what it is."

They pushed through the crowd and came near the sphere. Even when they looked at it from a closer range, the sphere didn't reveal much about its nature. If they hadn't heard it crash and seen the pit in the tarmac, they might have thought it was a publicity stunt for a commercial for God-knows-what new product, brought there by some company. The surface had a matte texture, and there was no scratch, no sign of its having gone through a building, such a strong building like the one in the square.

A woman moved away from the crowd; she was walking a sturdy bulldog in a leash. Actually, it looked more like the bulldog was walking her, pulling her toward the sphere, seemingly against her will. For one moment, the woman pulled the leash, trying to stop him, but the bulldog was powerful and stubborn, so they both came near the sphere.

"Be careful, Madam, that thing could be dangerous!" one man from the crowd yelled.

The woman turned around. She looked distressed, trying to say something, but the dog jerked her once again, and they were less than a foot away from the sphere.

There was no tree in the square, which was frustrating for the dog, so he decided that for lack of a better substitute, the sphere could work as well, so he lifted his leg and marked his territory.

"Start recording," Viaceslav whispered to Piotr as if he suspected what was about to happen.

But Piotr was already recording it, along with other people gathered round the sphere who were using their cell phones for the same purpose.

Then in full view of the crowd, the dog touched the sphere with his leg. There was a light noise, like a smack, and without warning, the dog was slowly pulled inside the sphere. The dog's mistress shouted and pulled on the leash, but despite her efforts, the dog was completely swallowed

inside, and the woman was left with only the leash in her hand.

“Bruno, Bruno!” the woman shouted desperately, but nothing could be heard from the sphere.

Curious, but also trying to remember as many details as possible for a future article, Viaceslav came near and took the woman by the shoulders, trying to pull her back.

The woman struggled weakly for a moment, turning her head toward him, and looking at him with tears in her eyes.

“My husband will kill me for having lost his dog. He told me not to take him, for I could not handle him, but I just wanted to take him out for a walk.”

She leaned her head on Viaceslav’s shoulder and cried even harder, while Piotr, who was behind her, took some close-ups of the cut end of the leash: the slice was as fine and clean as if it had been made by a scalpel.

Viaceslav turned his head and said to Piotr:

“Get close to the sphere and take some pictures of the place where the dog disappeared. Maybe there is a trace....”

Piotr shook his head.

“If the lady’s husband comes up, the dog will be our least problem.”

“What do you mean?” Viaceslav asked, confused.

His friend explained:

“The lady’s husband is Josef Sokolovski, a main pivot in the Polish rugby team. And he is famous for being extremely jealous.”

Recalling several violent incidents in which the rugby player had been involved, and which he had written about in their magazine, Viaceslav tried to get the woman away from him, but at that very moment the crowd parted like breaking ice. The ice breaker was Josef Sokolovski himself, who regarded the embracing pair with a cold eye, thinking he would deal with it later.

His priority was the dog, of which only a severed leash remained.

“Where is Bruno?” he asked in a deep, baritone voice.

When his wife pointed to the sphere, the man came near the black wall and shouted as loud as he could:

“Brunooooo!”

The windows of the buildings around them rattled and a few car alarms started, but there was no sound from the dog.

He looked at his wife again, his face black as coal, and stormed toward the sphere, undoubtedly determined to destroy it.

“Sir,” Viaceslav spoke hesitantly, “please be careful. If you get too close, it could be dangerous.”

The main pivot Josef Sokolovski grinned sardonically and snapped:

"You'll see what a dangerous situation is as soon as I get my dog back."

He came closer to the sphere and shouted the dog's name once again. He reached toward the black matte sphere, hesitated for a brief moment, and then plunged his hand into the pitch-blackness.

Nothing happened for a couple of moments, but then his hand got pulled in. The Polish national rugby team's pivot turned a desperate look toward the people behind him, maybe the first such look in his life. He tried to speak, but he was quickly pulled inside the sphere before getting the chance to say anything.

"Josef," his wife screamed frantically, and before Viaceslav could stop her, she pulled herself from his arms and ran toward the sphere.

She disappeared inside it before anyone could say or do anything.

"Get back!" the journalist shouted hoarsely, and after regaining his voice, he urged: "Take all the children and stand back! This sphere is dangerous!"

No one needed further instructions, because before their very eyes, a dog, a mountain of a man, and his wife had disappeared into its darkness without leaving the slightest trace.

The journalist took out his phone and dialed 911, his hands shaking with emotion.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Viaceslav Barela. I work as a journalist for Fakt and I want to report that there is a bomb in the Krasinsky Square, right near the Karpackie tap house."

He listened for a few moments and then confirmed: "Yes, Ma'am, I used to work as a war reporter in Iraq, and I know what a bomb looks like."

He listened for a few more moments and then said: "Certainly, Ma'am, I shall make everyone get away from the bomb, and I'll wait for the police to get here."

He made signs toward people around him to step away, and in less than five minutes, the first police car pulled up beside him. A corpulent commissioner got out of the car and asked in a thunderous voice:

"Where is Viaceslav Barela?"

When the journalist raised his hand, he walked toward him and asked:

"And where is the bomb?"

When Viaceslav indicated the sphere, the commissioner burst out in annoyance.

"Does this look like a bomb to you? Who knows what a bloody chewing gum commercial this is, and you make the police come for nothing!"

"If I had said that in the square, there was a black sphere swallowing up people, would anyone have believed me? Or you would have sent an ambulance to take me to the madhouse?"

“A sphere swallowing people...” the commissioner burst out again, even more contemptuously. “I am thinking that you will end up with a serious fine.”

Piotr Lew walked over to the commissioner, played the recording in front of him from the very beginning, and after he watched it all the way through, he spoke compellingly:

“Commissioner, my colleague used to work as a war reporter in Iraq, so he can definitely tell a dangerous situation when he sees one. I’d say you’d better listen to him.”

Overwhelmed by the situation, the commissioner gestured to the journalist to take the floor.

“Commissioner, I believe that you should call in backup, plus a team with barricades, to keep everybody at a distance. Then I would call in the army, as it is very likely we may be dealing with a new type of gun and we don’t know how dangerous it is.”

Viaceslav let the commissioner think everything over for a moment or so, and then uttered another thought that had just crossed his mind:

“Just think about it. What if at some point this sphere feels like moving and starts absorbing everything in its path?”

The commissioner got chills at that thought and started shouting orders over his radio.

People who overheard the journalist thought that would be a very likely scenario, so despite their curiosity, they started to back away, putting a safe distance between themselves and the mysterious sphere.