

*In this extract from Chapter One of Alexey Vinokurov's new novel "Guardian Angel," the chief consultant in a mental hospital in the Donbass region of Ukraine, Dr Yasinskiy, has just ventured out in a snowstorm to collect medical supplies from a pharmacy. On his way, he recalls how he came to be the chief consultant: his predecessor, Dr Onopko, fearing that the hospital would be bombed, evacuated a group of the less disturbed patients, promising to return for the rest.*

The last time medicines had been dropped off was by volunteers two weeks ago. Dr Onopko, then the consultant, had chosen that same moment to snap into action. He had found a bus from somewhere and filled it with patients to be evacuated. The most serious cases, of course; the lighter ailments remained behind to roam the city.

The bus that turned up to take them was rusty, beaten to blazes, dug up from God knows where. No-one had any idea how the thing succeeded in moving at all.

Doctor Yasinskiy had stood with his back to the hospital, numb with cold, and observed how their seriously disturbed patients were being loaded onto the bus as if they were lumps of stone. He watched Nyura, the orderly, such a good, kind lady in her middle years, run up all in a fluster and hang a piece of white rag on the rear-view mirror: the difference between life and death. Dr Onopko, the big boss, attached similar white rags to his Lada, on the mirror and aerial. From inside the Lada, bloody, red, stuffed with hobbled, obstreperous specimens of humanity, the obstreperous themselves gawked in fear. They did not understand where they were being taken, why, what kind of punishment this was. They would rather have been tied to their beds, being shot up with drugs, beaten, tormented: that would have quietened them down.

Behind Yasinskiy, the remaining nutcases looked at the bits of rag and talked among themselves.

'Why are they white? No-one'll be able to make them out in this snow.'

'They're enchanted, they are. That old witch Lyubich has put spells in them. It's a charm. Death can't get past it. A shell sees it and makes a left ...'

Oh boy. Your shell is not going to make any kind of left, thought the doctor darkly. Shells don't change course. Guided missiles do—but they turn *towards* death, while ever there's a living soul for them to chase after. And of course no-one looking from his hellish, hostile position far away will see these strips of white on the cars, and anyone who does won't give a damn.

Yasinskiy did not say any of this out loud. He merely waved his hand without looking, and set about driving the patients back inside the building. They began to trot back in tamely enough. These were, after all, the less serious cases, only slightly mad.

Doctor Yasinskiy watched them go. How times change. Only recently (roughly back around the time of Ancient Rome), the preferred treatment for nutcases was to thrash them. These days, they get everything handed to them on a plate: crisp white sheets, Hardol, straitjackets free of charge. Shelling doesn't do them much damage beyond heightening their nervousness; on that score, it was a case of be glad you're alive and haven't been caught by a mortar. Not that mortars scared them

much, in any event. A mortar slams into the ground and rolls away. Cluster bombs. That was what scared them. If one of those killed you, you stayed dead.

Dr Onopko, the consultant in charge, had shifted from foot to foot among the white drifts, drawing a creaking sound from the snow. He looked up at the sky and along the road, dithered, stood irresolutely. Then he seemed to make up his mind, and went and took Yasinskiy's hand in both of his own. He gave it a squeeze and looked searchingly up at him, his black, beady mouse's eyes sleepless and red-rimmed. Of a sudden, he lost control of himself and thrust his dull, bald head into the doctor's chin, right into his stubble, and started to shake with dry sobs.

'Forgive me, if you can. I'm leaving you in the lurch.'

From the consultant came a waft of medicinal spirit. The last few days he had been steeped in it, as if he had not so much been drinking it as dousing himself with it morning and evening instead of eau-de-cologne, or taking baths in it. The bath-taking theory could be discounted, though. Stocks in the hospital were not plentiful enough to permit a man to clamber into a bath of medicinal spirit. Onopko had been drinking, and after that ... well, drinking again. He was saturated with alcohol to his guts and to the winding pathways of his brain. In ordinary life, he had appeared a strong person, but war and death he could not withstand. He was broken.

'Pyotr Petrovich, what kind of talk is that? You are not leaving me in the lurch.' Onopko was in need of comfort; he had to cross the front line with a car full of the obstreperous. 'When you get the chance, come back and pick up the rest.'

'Yes, I'll pick them up.' The consultant raised his head, loyally blinked his mousey eyes, and looked at the doctor hopefully, as though he himself were staying in the war-torn city and Yasinskiy had to save him. 'I shall most assuredly return, my dear friend. I shall return and pick them up, you may take my word for it.' And the consultant, afraid of once more losing his composure, dropped the doctor's hand out of his own, turned, and set off for his car at an old man's jittery jog-trot. There was the slamming of a door and the roaring of an engine, and to the rattling of its metal guts the bus moved off, while behind it, skidding and revving in the snow, rolled the red Lada, the consultant hastily brushing from his eye a sneaky tear. In this manner, at minimal pace, they had passed out through the gates, towards the way out, towards salvation—but the patients gawked at Yasinskiy, pressing their frightened faces to the glass. And behind the fence had crawled, slowly crawled, a procession of other cars with feeble white rags on their aerials and mirrors, as if practically the whole city was moving in a funeral cortege.

He lied. Head of Department Dr Pyotr Petrovich Onopko lied, he whose doctoral dissertation was titled 'The clinical features of the flow of sharp alcoholic hallucinations under traditional therapeutic conditions.' He did not arrive the following day, nor any day thereafter. Maybe on his way back he came under fire. Maybe the orcs did not let him through. Or perhaps he simply hit the bottle huge time, to the point of sharp alcoholic hallucinations, and found a home in the land of barrel fever and pink elephants. It happens, especially with people returning from a war zone, and people who have made promises but not kept them.