

# CHERNOBYL

miniseries bible  
by  
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January 6, 2016

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An overview

*"Don't call these 'wonders of Soviet heroism' when you write about it. Those wonders really did exist. But first there had to be incompetence, negligence, and only after those did you get wonders... that those orders should never have been given, that there shouldn't have been any need, no one writes about that. They flung us there, like sand onto the reactor."*

*--Igor Litvin, Chernobyl "liquidator"*

*Chernobyl* is a six-part miniseries for HBO that dramatizes the worst man-made catastrophe in history. But this is no mere history lesson. While every aspect of the disaster will be covered— from the cover-up of the reactor's fatal design flaw to the terrifying danger that exists even now— the story of Chernobyl is not one of atoms and safety tests and thermal explosions and contaminated earth.

It is a story of the worst of the human spirit.

It is a story of the best of the human spirit.

True— to explain Chernobyl, you first must understand the facts. What do people know of the events of April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1986? They know that a nuclear reactor "blew up." What they don't know is why. They don't know that the reactor had a fatal design flaw. They don't know that the accident occurred during a safety test. They don't know the series of brash, bureaucracy-fueled decisions that led to the disaster. They don't know the insane lengths that were required to stop the meltdown and halt the damage.

They don't know how close and how much of the entire European continent came to becoming completely uninhabitable.

They don't even know how nuclear reactors work.

They will. On one level, *Chernobyl* will work like an investigative thriller as we dramatize the efforts of the men and women who grappled to understand and tame the disaster— all while battling the clock, their own mortality, and the awe-inspiring force of the atom. The plot points of the historical narrative are shocking and dramatic. They twist and turn faster than any fictional account could hope to achieve. And the stakes constantly shift from the quietly tragic to the massively disastrous to the unfathomable.

These are the terrible things that happened. But these are not the reasons we tell this story. In *Chernobyl*, the atom is not the villain, and sickness and death are not the enemy any more than the concrete sarcophagus entombing Reactor #4 is the hero.

In *Chernobyl*, the Soviet system is the villain. In *Chernobyl*, the Soviet people are the heroes.

This is not the story of an explosion. It's the story of a system born of brutish arrogance and toxic repression, where lies were truth and truth was a crime. Only the Soviet system could have built that reactor. Only the Soviet system could have run that test. Only the Soviet system would have pretended nothing happened for two days. Only the Soviet system would have doomed innumerable civilians to unnecessary sickness and death. Only the Soviet system would put the ignorant in charge and the informed in prison.

This is the terrible truth of Chernobyl.

But it is also true that only the Soviet people could have solved Chernobyl. Only the Soviet people would sacrifice themselves knowingly and en masse to save the rest of the world. Only a Soviet man would swim through deadly water in the dark to protect a continent. Only a Soviet miner would dig under a hellish mass of radioactive lava to keep an entire country safe. Only Soviet conscripts would dig up a forest and bury it under itself to keep millions of people alive.

This is the terrible beauty of Chernobyl.

When the series is concluded, everyone will know the heartbreaking scope of the worst accident our planet has ever experienced... the lingering effects of which will likely outlast mankind's own existence.

Everyone will know how close an entire continent and much of civilization came to a shattering end.

Everyone will know the great crimes of the Soviet government.

But everyone will know the depth of the human spirit. They will know the firefighters who were among the first to die. They will know the scientist who saved her family, and then was put on trial for the crime of telling the truth. They will know the men who worked as "human robots" in two-minute shifts amidst rubble so radioactive, no machine could withstand it. They will know the miners who toiled naked in 130° heat and deadly dust. They will know the engineers who presided over the fateful test... and who died before they could learn it was not their fault. They will know the liquidators— clean-up workers— who were shipped to Chernobyl by the hundreds of thousands without training or safety equipment, and given a few rubles and some vodka for their efforts. They will know the unborn baby who absorbed a fatal dose of radiation, saving her mother from death. They will know the countless families who survived with sickness, and they will know the children who died because their school playground was in the path of a fatal breeze.

They will learn the name Valery Legasov— the scientist who martialed all of the Soviet Union's might to quench Chernobyl's fire and save Europe from disaster. They will watch as he uncovers the truth of what happened and why. They will witness the Soviet system prevent him from revealing the truth, and they will finally know that he hanged himself on April 26, 1988, two years to the day after the Chernobyl explosion.

But they will hear his truth at last, and he and all of the heroes of Chernobyl will be honored. Chernobyl may have been the very worst that a group of people could inflict upon the world, but its unparalleled horror was overcome by the very best of individual men and women who gave their lives for a simple principle: the good of men outweighs the evil of men.

Watching *Chernobyl* will not be easy. There will be violence and despair. There will be cruelty and death. And perhaps worst of all, there will be cowardice and stupidity.

But this miniseries doesn't seek to punish. Quite the opposite. When it is finished, the audience will understand how beautiful and boundless and resilient humanity can be. There will be renewal, revival, and a gift... a gift given to us all by the untold many who suffered and perished.

There will be hope.

—Craig Mazin

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

*As Chernobyl is a dramatization of historical events, some characters will be portrayed biographically using their real names, and others will be compilations representing the kinds of individuals involved in the events of the story. Biographical characters will be noted.*

**VALERY LEGASOV** (biographical), 50: Legasov is the protagonist of Chernobyl—the hero of a story with many heroes. At the time of the disaster, he was the First Deputy Director of the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy in Moscow. A brilliant scientist who dedicated his life to advancing Soviet efforts in the development of nuclear weapons and nuclear power, he rose quickly through the ranks.



But once the disaster occurred, Legasov became the leader his nation and people needed. He understood the deadly scope of Chernobyl, and in that moment, he cast aside his ambitions and politics. It was Legasov who fought the Party when it sought to cover up this accident as it had covered up others. It was Legasov who insisted the nearby town of Pripyat be evacuated, no matter "how it looked to the world." It was Legasov who warned of the risk of thermal explosion, Legasov who knew the water table under the reactor was threatened, and Legasov who helped lead an army of 600,000 men... men who marched into battle against an invisible enemy to do the impossible.

And yet, Valerie Legasov was hardly a conventional hero. Indeed, had a terrible secret. Years before the accident, he was made aware of a fatal flaw that had been found in the RMBK reactor design—the kind of reactor used at Chernobyl. The KGB and the Kremlin suppressed the information, and Legasov, when faced with the decision to go public with the information and become a dissident, opted to do what everyone else in the scientific community did... and remained silent.

*Legasov could have prevented the very event that made him a hero.* This was the terrible darkness that drove him. This was the sin he carried. This was what he thought of every time he sent men to their doom. He was not driven by great ideals or a political cause, but rather an all-too-human and crippling sense of shame. Chernobyl was both Legasov's greatest victory, and his greatest failure.

In the shadow of Chernobyl, Legasov abandoned the culture of lies. In his official report on the accident, he told the Party that the ultimate blame rested with the Soviet system itself—a system that encouraged shoddy work, false results and coverups of flaws.

His report was rejected. Despite saving millions of lives, Legasov could not bear to know he had failed to prevent yet another accident from occurring. Two years to the day of the Chernobyl disaster, Valery Legasov hanged himself in his apartment. But the truth of what he spoke eventually saw the light of day, and the hero of Chernobyl, Valery Legasov, was redeemed at last.

**LYUDMILLA IGNATENKO** (biographical), 23: wife of Pripyat fireman Vasily Ignatenko. Through Lyudmilla's eyes, we will experience the immediate human toll of Chernobyl... from the moment she witnesses the explosion from her apartment window just a mile away, to her eventual relocation far from the home she knew. Her husband is one of the first to suffer the effects of radiation sickness, and over the first two weeks following the disaster, she refuses to leave his side.

Lyudmilla's story isn't merely the tragedy of a young wife losing a husband. It is the story of the life and culture of the Soviet people. She and her husband show impossible strength in the midst of his own brutal death. And yet, neither of them understand just why he is dying, and no one around them ever makes it clear. We will watch in shock as they advise her not to spend "too much time near him," but never actually supervise or restrict her visits. Even when they discover she is pregnant, they still fail to stop her from seeing him.

Lyudmilla will care for her husband from the moment he is hospitalized until his terrible final moments. She will watch as he is placed in a zinc-lined coffin, a buried in a grave they fill with cement. In that moment, she will understand how deadly her husband was to her.

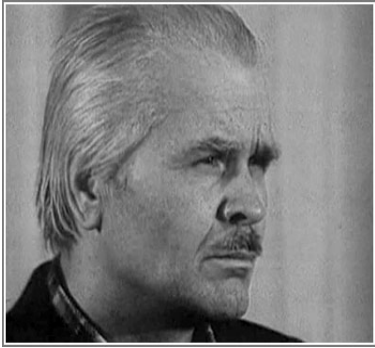
Lyudmilla gives birth two months later to a baby girl she names Natashenka. Natashenka lives only for four hours. Her heart and lungs were measurably radioactive. The doctors tell Lyudmilla that her daughter absorbed the brunt of the radiation Lyudmilla received.

Lyudmilla's baby saved her by dying.

In the years following Chernobyl, Lyudmilla meets a new man and has a son. She lives in Kiev, in a neighborhood with other refugees of the Chernobyl disaster. She has found a way to survive, but she is forever scarred. Her husband was a hero. She lost him. She was pregnant, and she lost her daughter. She had a home, and she can never return.

And she is one of many. Unsung, and forgotten. Until now.

**ANATOLY DYATLOV** (biographical), 66: Vice-Chief Engineer of the Chernobyl plant, and the man in charge of the control room during the safety experiment that led to the explosion.



Dyatlov is our first villain. A surly, arrogant man hell-bent on running his test despite dozens of reasons not to, his primary concern seems to be earning glory and a possible promotion. Dyatlov's dismissive attitude toward procedures stems not from an ignorance of nuclear reactors, but an overconfident knowledge of them.

Dyatlov was an early nuclear engineer, one of the first generation of Soviet nuclear engineers. In the early 1960's, he was assigned the task of installing nuclear generators into Soviet submarines.

This is when Anatoly Dyatlov had his first brush with radiation. An accident occurred under his watch, and Dyatlov received a triple lifetime dose of radiation. He survived, but his young son died of leukemia shortly thereafter. Perhaps Dyatlov had radiated his own son. Perhaps not. It turned him bitter, but it did not scare him away.

If anything, he threw himself more intently into his work, as if his very life was a testament to man's domination of the atom. Dyatlov felt he had tasted the worst of his enemy, and he did not fear it. He was a risk taker who sneered at the overly cautious rules and regulations governing his reactor. He was cruel to the men under him, and threatened their jobs if they voiced concerns or objections.

It was Dyatlov who insisted on going forward with the safety test even though only an inexperienced crew was available. It was Dyatlov who demanded the reactor run at a power output level lower than permissible, even though this meant the risk of dangerous and unstable conditions in the core. It was Dyatlov who pushed the men of the control room to violate practically every standard of safety, and it was Dyatlov who insisted for hours following the explosion that "the reactor was still intact."

In short, the man was a cowboy with a seemingly personal need to prove that he was scarier than the piles of deadly uranium under his control.

Anatoly Dyatlov did not know of the fatal design flaw in Chernobyl's reactor, but he was responsible for nearly every condition that led to the expression of that flaw. In the ensuing explosion, he received another eight lifetimes of radiation.

And still he survived. The Soviets convicted him of criminal mismanagement, and he was sentenced to ten years in prison.

All the while, during his trial and imprisonment, he insisted with absolute certainty that he had done nothing wrong. It did not matter if his son died. It did not matter if a hundred thousand died. He never wavered. Never.

Nine years after Chernobyl, Anatoly Dyatlov finally lost his battle with the atom.

**BORIS SCHERBINA** (biographical), 67: Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and head of the Bureau for Fuel and Energy, Scherbina was the primary Soviet apparatchik assigned to supervise the response to the Chernobyl disaster.



Although Scherbina technically outranked Legasov, he was not a scientist, nor was he particularly knowledgeable about his supposed area of expertise (fuel and energy). Scherbina was a true Soviet-era functionary, whose primary purpose was serving the Soviet machinery at any cost.

In the hours following the explosion, while Valery Legasov waited in a panic for authorization to tackle the disaster head on, Scherbina chose first to attend a routine, unimportant meeting.

When Legasov wanted to evacuate Pripyat immediately and warn the entire world of the threat Chernobyl posed, it was Scherbina who loyally followed his Soviet masters' commands to do nothing that would reveal any crisis at all. It was Scherbina who went on Soviet state television ten days after the explosion to inform the world of the accident, and yet he made no mention of how or why the accident occurred, and the radioactive impact was downplayed dramatically.

Scherbina himself barely understood what happened at Chernobyl. When he arrived at the plant shortly following the explosion, he asked to be taken directly to the reactor. When he was told the impossibly high radiation levels made that physically impossible, he complained, stating that he needed to see the reactor with his own eyes because the Politburo had asked him to. Scherbina truly believed there was no possible enemy the Soviet system could not defeat.

And if that is all there was to say about Boris Scherbina— that he was an order-following Party bureaucrat who valued the demands of the Politburo over the laws of physics— he would not be a particularly interesting man. He would merely be a petty villain.

But as the days pass, Scherbina comes to understand that the disaster is bigger than the Party. The organizing principle of his life comes into question. He no longer impedes Legasov's work, and begins to quietly work in the background to make sure Legasov gets what he needs. He stays in Pripyat while the work is done— and is dead four years later.

Boris Scherbina was not a hero. All he did was choose to get out of the way of the heroes. And yet, in the Soviet Union, this was no small matter. Boris Scherbina had survived as a Party official for so long because he never bucked the system. Because he believed in the system. In many ways, he personified the Soviet Union.

And yet, Chernobyl finally opened his eyes to the truth. It forced him to confront the weakness of his government. It forced him to accept who the true heroes were, who the true victims were, and above all, the terrible cost of Soviet lies. Chernobyl took Boris Scherbina's faith from him, and in doing so, signaled the imminent fall of the Soviet Empire itself.

**GENERAL NIKOLAI TARAKANOV** (biographical)



,40's: Tarakanov was the Red Army general assigned the task of "liquidating," or cleaning up, Chernobyl. A veteran of the Afghanistan War, Tarakanov would find the war against Chernobyl to be a far more difficult fight.

At the height of the cleanup, Tarakanov directly commanded 240,000 men, equaling a military force three times the amount of troops present at one time in Afghanistan. The vast majority of

his men were conscripts, and a great number of them were veterans of Afghanistan.

Tarakanov understood the brutality of war, but fighting an invisible, uncaring, relentless atom was a nearly impossible task. The enemy was everywhere: in the air, in the soil, in the animals roaming the woods, and above all, in the wreckage surrounding Reactor #4.

But a general leads, and soldiers fight. Tarakanov exemplified the tragic life of the Soviet war hero: a man asked to do the impossible in order to fix the avoidable. For its entire existence, the Soviet system sent millions of men to their doom in service of their rigidity, ideology and stupidity.

Chernobyl was to be their final war. And as was the case in every Soviet war, the generals understood that despite the injustice and the cost, their soldiers would have to protect their country and their countrymen from the enemy their political leaders created.

And so, Nikolai Tarakanov did what he was trained to do. He sent men to their death. He knew there was no system to truly protect them from the radiation. He knew there was no method to safely clean up Chernobyl. He knew that it had to be done anyway.

Under Tarakanov's leadership, soldiers buried the earth under itself. Hewed down entire forests. Mapped every square inch of the exclusion zone for radiation levels. Exterminated contaminated wildlife. And above all, they cleaned up the reactor itself.

When it became clear that there was no remote-controlled machinery on earth that could withstand the massive radiation pouring from the graphite chunks on the ruined roof of Reactor #4, Tarakanov created a brigade of "biorobots"— soldiers— who could each work a total of 90 seconds on the roof before receiving a lifetime dose of radiation.

One by one, he sent his biorobots to the roof. One by one, they cleaned the roof, 90 seconds at a time. Day after day after day, 3,828 men in all... until the job was done.

We do not know the fate of those men. We do not now how many fell sick or died. Of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers under Tarakanov's command, it is likely many lost their lives or became gravely ill. And yet, it was the only way. Nikolai Tarakanov and his men did not ask questions or complain— not because they were afraid, but because they were not. They were the last Soviet heroes, and the world owes them a debt.

**THE LIQUIDATORS** (biographical/composite): Of the hundreds of thousands of men who will be conscripted to "liquidate" Chernobyl, we will follow a few key characters.

First, we will meet THE DIVERS, **Valeri Bezpalov, Alexie Anenenko and Boris Baranov**, who willingly volunteer for a suicide mission. The three men put on scuba gear and dive into pitch-black water contaminated with beyond-deadly levels of radiation, in order to drain a reserve pool.

If they fail, the melting uranium will eventually burn through the concrete floor of the core and hit the water, creating a thermal explosion large enough to destroy the remaining three reactors at Chernobyl, and rendering most of Eastern Europe completely uninhabitable for at least 500 years.

Bezpalov and Anenenko were engineers at the plant who knew how to get to the manual valves that would drain the water from the reserve pool. Baranov's job was simply to hold a lantern so that they could see. Within minutes of entering the water, the radiation destroyed the lamp. Baranov stayed with his comrades, swimming in darkness and death, until they reached the drainage valves. These three men saved tens of millions of lives. They died two weeks later, and were buried in lead-lined coffins.

Next, we'll meet THE MINERS, hundreds of men taken by the Red Army from a nearby mine, and tasked with tunneling under the reserve pool to create a new concrete and steel substructure. If they fail, the melting fuel will penetrate into the ground water and spread fatal contamination throughout Eastern Europe. These men did a three-month job in two weeks, toiling in such high temperatures (up to 135°), they often worked nude—completely exposed to the radiation all around them. We do not know their names. We do not know their fates.

Lastly, we will meet THREE LIQUIDATORS, a team of conscripts brought in to do the dirty work of cleaning up the Zone—the deadly area around Chernobyl. Two veterans of the Afghanistan War and one young Army recruit... working as a team, and tasked with the surreal. Through their eyes, we will learn about the men who were ordered to go from village to village and shoot any house pets left behind... animals that carried deadly contamination. These were the men who used bulldozers to rip up a thousand acres of topsoil... and then bury it under another thousand acres of topsoil. These were the men who forced the elderly from their homes, who mapped the radioactive hotspots like human mine-detectors, who wore homemade "safety" equipment out of scraps of lead, who shot looters, who carried personal dosimeters they knew did not work, who walked through the silence of the Red Forest, where the trees turned red from radiation...

Like all Soviet soldiers, they had no choice. To leave, to protest, to blow the whistle... anything other than total obedience meant a bullet to the head. Some fought for their fellow conscripts. Some were cowards. Nearly four thousand of them drew the short straw and had to do a 90 second shift on "Masha," the deadly roof of Reactor #4. But all of them did what had to be done. We do not know how many got sick or died.

We never will.

**THE CONTROL ROOM ENGINEERS** (biographical/composite): The group of men working the control room of Reactor #4 during the safety test that led to the explosion. They were never meant to be there; the safety test had been rehearsed by the day shift, which was more experienced.

Unfortunately, a Party apparatchik in Kiev protested when he heard the power grid output would be reduced during the day, and so the test was postponed until just after midnight, when the night shift came on.

Some of the men, like **Alexander Akimov**, the night shift supervisor, were fairly experienced. Akimov protested a number of decisions that **Anatoly Dyatlov** made, but in the Soviet system, there was no recourse when a superior issued an order. Your job was at stake. Your family was at stake. Your life was at stake.

Then there were men like **Leonid Toptunov**, who despite being the "senior engineer" in charge of the crucial task of moving the control rods up and down, was a mere 26-year old who had only been at the job for three months.

Each of them will question Dyatlov's orders. Each of them will back down. And each will make serious errors. But none of their errors could have led to the disaster had it not been for a flaw in the reactor... a flaw kept secret by the Soviet government.

These were the men who disabled the safety systems, followed the bad orders, made mistakes, and ultimately made the fatal decision to press the AZ-5 button and cause the greatest man-made disaster in the history of our planet.

But these men were also the first victims of Chernobyl. None of them survived.

**CHERNOBYL POWER PLANT STAFF** (biographical/composite): The men present in the reactor building that night, in charge of tasks such as monitoring the turbines, supervising the network of steam and water pipes, operating the pumps and repairing equipment.

One was even a simple trainee.

When the blast occurs, they are the first to receive massive doses of radiation. Miraculously, a few survive. Most do not. Many of them are doomed by Dyatlov's fateful insistence that the reactor was intact.

Through these men's eyes, we will witness the horrors of that night. The trainee whose body was half-burned because of how he was standing when he opened a door. The mechanic who swam through radioactive water to shut off the flow of hydrogen and save his partner's life. The engineer who looked up through the ripped-open roof of the reactor and saw the stars shining down through the choking smoke of a graphite fire... and still survived.

We will experience the panic and confusion with them. The dosimeters that showed no radiation... because the radiation was so high, it destroyed their circuits. The frantic attempt to rescue their comrades... and the attempts to rescue the rescuers. We will encounter the shocking, immediate effects of the radiation: the way a victim's hand left a burn print on a rescuer's skin, the "nuclear tan," and the rapid deterioration of their bodies as they fought to live long enough to see one last sunrise.

We will also learn the name of Chernobyl's first victim and permanent resident— Valery Ilyich Khodemchuk— a pump operator who died instantly in the blast, and whose body is entombed to this very day under the concrete "sarcophagus" enveloping the wreckage of Reactor #4... a modern-day pyramid for a single, forgotten man.

**PRIPYAT FIREFIGHTERS** (biographical/composite): The seven men who were called to fight "a fire on the roof" at the power plant. That is all they knew.

We will focus their story through squad commander and Chief Sergeant **Vasily Ignatenko** (25), husband of **Lyudmilla Ignatenko**, from the moment he and his men arrive to fight the fire to their dying breaths in a Moscow hospital to their burials in zinc-lined coffins.

When they arrive on the scene wearing nothing more than their typical uniforms, the firefighters will pick up chunks of hot graphite with their hands, not understanding that each piece is emitting massive amounts of fatal radiation. They will climb a ladder to the roof to fight the fire fueled by burning graphite and tar... tar that was never supposed to have been used in the construction of the plant.

They will stare down at exposed uranium from melting fuel rods, and receive a fatal dose of radiation 300 times over. They will feel the neutrons penetrate their skin like needles, and they will taste the ionization of the air in their mouths.

They will not understand why.

They will bravely pour thousands of gallons of water on the fire to contain it from spreading to the other three reactors, but the fire will not go out.

They will not understand why.

The water they use will drain down into a reserve tank under the reactor core, putting the entire European continent at risk.

They will not understand why.

But within an hour of their arrival, they will understand that this is not simply a fire.

Before the sun rises, their bodies begin to swell. They vomit blood. They pass out. Their skin blackens and sloughs off.

Their sickness will drag on for a few weeks and claim each of them in the most gruesome manner possible... one by one.

No moral human being would ever send those men to that fire that way. And yet, there was no other choice to make. The sacrifice of the Pripyat firefighters was the first of a nearly endless series of impossible decisions.

To this day, the clothing of the firefighters— their shirts, pants and boots— rests on the floor of the basement of the Pripyat hospital where they were discarded. And to this day, the clothing is too radioactive to approach without heavy protective gear.

**PRIPYAT DOCTORS** (composite): The doctors and nurses of the local hospital who treated the firefighters and power plant staff in the early morning hours after the explosion. They were ill-equipped and undereducated in dealing with radiation sickness, and many of the doctors and nurses believed drinking milk would help counteract the effects of the radiation.

At least one of the doctors, young and modern—perhaps trained overseas— will understand that almost all of these men will all die. More tragically, he understands that simply by treating them and attempting to save their lives, he and everyone else coming near them will likely also die.

They do their jobs nonetheless. When they protest that the citizens of Pripyat must be evacuated, they are told "no." And so they said nothing. This was the strange life of the Soviet citizen... in which the People's Republic was God, but the People themselves were expendable.

**ULYANA MAXIMOVNA** (composite), 30's: a representative character of the Soviet nuclear physicists who detected the accident at Chernobyl despite state secrecy, and worked tirelessly and at extreme personal risk to warn the public.

Ulyana works at the Institute for Nuclear Energy of the Belorussian Academy of Sciences. When she arrives to work in the morning of April 26<sup>th</sup>, her coworkers are already on edge. A serious amount of radiation has been detected on the grounds... an amount that would be considered dangerous after only six hours of exposure. They presume there's a leak in one of their nuclear labs.

But no leak is detected. Ulyana considers another possibly— the radiation is not local, but rather has blown in from somewhere else. She contacts the closest nuclear power plant in Ignalinsk, where personnel are also in a panic. They, too, have detected elevated radiation levels, and they too have presumed a leak at their plant, but have found nothing. So Ulyana calls the next closest plant— Chernobyl, a full 250 miles away.

No one answers the phone... and Ulyana Maximovna understands immediately what has happened. She engages in a dogged campaign to get Soviet officials to admit the scope of the accident and immediately issue iodine pills to ward off deadly absorption of radioactivity. They flatly refuse.

Ulyana will join Valery Legasov as he attempts to piece together precisely what happened to lead to the disaster at Chernobyl. But where Legasov continues to work within the system, Ulyana cannot. Of all of our characters, she is the most principled and dogged critic of what she calls "a conspiracy of ignorance and obedience." When she goes after Soviet official **Nikolai Slyunkov**, he cannot protect her. For the crime of telling the truth and trying to save lives, she is brought up on charges for anti-Soviet propaganda.

The system collapses before she can be put on trial.

**SOVIET OFFICIALS/OBSTRUCTIONISTS** (biographical): Throughout the disaster and ensuing cleanup of Chernobyl, various Soviet officials served to put their own political interests ahead of what was true and what was right.

Plant Director **Viktor Bryukhanov**, a man who barely understood a thing about nuclear physics, ran Chernobyl in whatever way suited his political career best. He believed a successful run of the safety test would help him move up the ladder, and insisted that it be performed despite objections that dozens of safety regulations would need to be bent.

It was Bryukhanov who delayed the test until the late shift in order to avoid political blowback from the party bosses in Kiev.

He was asleep in bed when the explosion occurred. Upon arriving at the plant after the explosion, Bryukhanov phoned Soviet officials and let them know the reactor was "intact" and radiation levels were "normal," and as a result, there was no need to evacuate the nearby town of Pripyat.

**Nikolai Fomin** was the plant's chief engineer, and **Dyatlov's** direct superior. Fomin and Dyatlov understood that if the safety test succeeded, Fomin would likely be promoted to a larger facility, and Dyatlov would step into Fomin's shoes as chief engineer. In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, Fomin sent men to lay eyes on the reactor. When they returned to report that it was blown open, he insisted they were wrong. Not only did he not believe them, but in sending them to examine the core, he had effectively sentenced them to death.

Bryukhanov and Fomin were both sentenced to labor camps. Fomin attempted suicide in custody, and was eventually released to a psychiatric facility.

**Nikolai Slyunkov** was the general secretary of the Central Committee Belarussian Communist Party in Minsk. As the highest ranking Party official in the vicinity of Chernobyl, Slyunkov was in a position to evacuate thousands of civilians from the contaminated zone, issue iodine pills to a susceptible populace, and put immediate resources in place to tackle the disaster head on.

He did none of those things. A full three days after the explosion, Slyunkov delays a meeting with physicist Ulyana Maximovna to spend a few hours discussing culture with a local poet. When she finally barges into his office, he angrily orders her to stop spreading "panic."

Slyunkov knew nothing of nuclear physics or radiation. Slyunkov also knew nothing of leadership. He was the former director of a tractor factory, and through careful tending of connections, had risen to his current, lofty post. The last thing he would ever do would be to question his orders— or the official story— of his Party bosses.

He succeeds in bringing anti-Soviet propaganda charges against Ulyana. Of course, he was never held accountable for his crimes... until now.

**THE CITIZENS OF PRIPYAT** (biographical/composite): Fifty thousand people lived in the city of Pripyat, located just under three miles from the Chernobyl power plant.

They felt lucky. Pripyat was an "atom town," one of a few relatively modern, designed cities built to support the rapid expansion of the Soviet Union's nuclear power program. Like every Soviet city, it was organized around the various government ministries that controlled all aspects of life.

As Pripyat approached May Day, 1986, it readied its latest attraction... a brand new Ferris Wheel.

It would never be used. On April 26<sup>th</sup>, Reactor #4 exploded.

The people of Pripyat were not concerned. The great majority of them had no idea how the power plant worked, or what the threat or reality of radiation was. In fact, many of them went outside in the middle of the night to get a better look.

The release of ionizing radiation sent a laser-like beam of blue light straight up toward the sky. Some gathered in the streets to stare. Others walked out toward a railroad bridge that crossed over the Pripyat River, in order to get a better look.

The wind was blowing toward the bridge that night. Not one single person who stepped foot on it would survive.

They did not know. They did not know that night, and they did not know the next day. While the firefighters were already dying of radiation sickness, and while the Soviet government came to grips with the scale of the catastrophe, it was decided that admitting this level of disaster was untenable. To evacuate Pripyat would be to concede guilt.

So children played in the schoolyards and people walked the street while Chernobyl burned just two miles away.

It wasn't until a full two days after the explosion that the buses arrived. A recorded voice played over loudspeakers announced that all citizens of Pripyat had one hour to gather a small allowance of clothing, and then leave. Forever. They could not take pets. Or photographs. Or keepsakes. They got on the buses, and they never returned.

# EPISODES

## Episode One – "1:23:45"

### COLD OPEN

We open in a Moscow apartment. April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1988. 1:20 AM. **Valery Legasov** speaks calmly into a tape recorder. Removes the tape, places it in an envelope with the name **Ulyana Maximovna**. He checks his watch. 1:23 AM. It's time. He leaves his lit cigarette unstubbed in the ashtray, and walks away.

We hear the sound of some furniture moving.

Push in on a WALL CLOCK. The second hand sweeps. And as it hits the 45<sup>th</sup> second of the 23<sup>rd</sup> minute of the first hour of the day, we hear the sound of a chair being kicked, followed by the snap of bone.

Valery Legasov hangs from a beam. Dead.

On the cigarette, burning...

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

We're not in Legasov's apartment anymore. Different cigarette. Different apartment. Smaller, much more modest. We hear the sound of a woman vomiting in a bathroom.

It is April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1:20 AM, 1986. Exactly two years prior.

The woman emerges. **Lyudmilla Ignatenko**, 24. She sits down at the small table by the window. She quickly stubs out the cigarette. Then smiles. The nausea is good news. She puts a kettle on to boil, then sits back down. Her face is framed by the window of her high-rise. About a mile in the distance, the blinking red lights of the local power plant.

The wall clock is reflected in the window. 1:23 AM. The second hand sweeps, the kettle whistles. She gets up to turn it off. Pours tea off screen. The hand keeps sweeping...

She sits back down. And at 1:23:45, the plant in the distance silently **EXPLODES**, sending a ghostly blue pillar of light toward the sky. She doesn't notice.

Until the thunder of the sound wave ripples at her window 1.5 seconds later.

She turns to the window and stares in shock.

We pull back to reveal: the city of Pripyat. Not just Lyudmilla's building. Hundreds of buildings. Schools. Hospital. A Ferris Wheel. And one by one, lights turning on in the middle of the night...

We PAN around to see: the distant fire...

## **THE CONTROL ROOM – DENIAL**

A room full of men who stand perfectly still in the glow of emergency lighting. They're not shouting or upset. They're just... stunned.

And then **Akimov** will ask the question for all of us. "What just happened?"



*The control room, Reactor 4, Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station*

We quickly meet **Dyatlov**, in charge, and **Akimov and Toptunov**, the engineers directly under him. After the silence, Dyatlov begins ripping into Akimov for pressing the AZ-5 button (we'll find out later what this means). Akimov doesn't understand... it should have shut the reactor down. Dyatlov is quite certain it did; perhaps steam pressure have ruptured one of the auxiliary hydrogen tanks.

But the reactor section foreman runs in to tell them the reactor has blown up, and the building is on fire.

Dyatlov laughs off the notion that the core is damaged. He simply refuses to believe it. Instead, he tells Akimov to call the Pripyat fire department.

Over the course of the episode, Dyatlov will arrogantly stand by this claim over and over and over. He will send two men to lay eyes on the core to prove his point.

Those men receive fatal doses of radiation. They report back that the core is destroyed. Dyatlov will still not believe. He sends two other men... who now know they are on a suicide mission. And yet, they go. They report the same finding. They too are fatally radiated.

Dyatlov leaves the building to go survey the plant from outside. He sees chunks of graphite on the ground—the very stuff the core is made of—and he still insists the core is fine. He sends more men. And then more. Each time, they report the same thing. Each time he does not believe. He summons the day shift to work. He sends men to manually lower control rods into the reactor that they all know is entirely destroyed.

Through the eyes of "Dyatlov's Runners", we will witness the horrors of the destroyed reactor. Arcing electricity, fire, spouting steam, and deadliest of all, radiation. We will watch as a man's skin begins to tan and darken right in front of us.

## **THE FIREFIGHTERS – ARRIVAL**

The Pripyat firefighters receive the alarm at 1:26 AM, and **Vasily Ignatenko** is surprised to see his wife Lyudmilla is awake (they live on the second floor of the fire station). She has news for him, and tries to stop him from going to the plant, but has his duty. Vasily and his men have absolutely no idea what's going on... some kind of fire at the plant. Do they need protective gear? Equipment?

Who cares? They don't have it anyway.

Once they get to the plant, the firefighters will immediately see chunks of graphite on the ground. They step on it with their boots. Pick it up in their hands. It's not on fire, but it's hot to the touch. There's a taste in the air. Prickles on their skin.

They can see the fire is pouring from the blown open reactor building, so they immediately erect a ladder and start blasting the fire with water.

Two firefighters go up the ladder. They do not come back.

Two more go up to see what happened to the first two. They also don't come back.

Alarmed, Vasily decides to keep his men on the ground as they blast the roof with water, trying to extinguish the burning bitumen. But there's another fire deeper inside, where they cannot see, and it's sending a brilliant beam of blue toward the sky...

## **PRIPYAT CITIZENS – THE BRIDGE**

Lyudmilla walks outside to get a better view, and sees dozens of men, women and children walking past the firehouse. Some have babies in strollers. They've all woken up to see the beautiful colors of the beam, and are heading to the railway bridge for a better look.

But Lyudmilla still feels sick. Decides not to go.



*The “Bridge of Death”, where the people of Pripyat gathered to watch the reactor burn. Everyone on the bridge—men, women and children—would eventually die from exposure to radiation.*

On the bridge, the people of Pripyat will ooh and ahh like parade-goers watching fireworks. They will drink vodka. Not one of them will have any idea why the beam is shining up from the explosion. How can you know what a Cherenkov ionization beam is when you don't even know what radiation is?

A child will notice bits of soot fluttering toward the bridge. The breeze is blowing their way. As the adults drink and laugh and joke about how much shit the plant operators are going to catch, the children play with the swirling bits of soot.

## **THE CONTROL ROOM – PANIC**

Dyatlov has assured his bosses, **Fomin** and **Bryukhanov**, that the core is still intact, and shows them the readings from the dosimeters as proof. Zero roentgen per hour, and 3.6 roentgen per hour. A minor leak. That's it. Minor.

It is decided among the three of them that this is no longer a hypothesis, but a fact. Everyone is given a simple order. Do not contradict that the core is intact.

Bryukhanov phones the Soviets to tell them of the accident, but assures them the core is intact. But the control room men are beginning to vomit blood. Some of Dyatlov's runners haven't come back. He sends a man to check on the last man he sent... and then runner returns with half of his body suffering from radiation burns.

And now Dyatlov begins to vomit.

It's impossible. *A minor leak.* And yet, there's a man standing in front of them with half of his body burned where he had held open a door near the core.

Concern sets in. Bryukhanov retreats to a bunker beneath the facility. Dyatlov and the remaining control room engineers are sent to the hospital. Fomin takes over. The last two runners return to the control room, and under Fomin's orders, they look into the core itself. Not the edge. Not the rubble. Into the actual core.

They return and tell Fomin and Bryukhanov the uranium has melted through the fuel rod cladding, and the graphite stack is on fire. Fomin doesn't believe it. That's impossible. They're lying. They're incompetent, and they're going to pay for this with their jobs.

The two men will be dead within the month.

The Soviet bosses call Bryukhanov for an update. He tells them that the core is still intact. And the radiation? "Our most accurate measurement is 3.6 roentgen per hour."

## **PRIPYAT POLITICAL LEADERS – ORDERS**

In Pripyat, the town Ministry of Home Affairs has received its orders directly from Moscow. Thousands of police from nearby districts are on their way. All roads into Pripyat will be blocked. And all roads out.

Whatever is happening in Pripyat, it will be contained in Pripyat.

No one leaves.

No one.

## **THE FIREFIGHTERS – DAYBREAK**

Vasily leads his team into the reactor building to rescue survivors. He carries Toptunov out in his arms, and when he places Toptunov in a stretcher, he notices that Toptunov's hand has burned an imprint into Vasily's shoulder where it touched him.

As day breaks, the fire continues to burn. Vasily and his men are now collapsing from radiation sickness, even as they carry stretchers with other victims.

## **THE CALL**

A quiet bedroom. Blinds drawn, keeping out the daybreak. A clock ticks on the wall. Then the harsh ring of a PHONE. Valery Legasov wakes up and answers. It takes a few

moments before Legasov realizes it's not a prank, and that the man on the other end of the phone is, in fact, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Gorbachev explains that there has been an accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, and out of caution, he is assigning Legasov to a Committee to investigate the situation. Legasov asks for details. Gorbachev tells him there was a small explosion, a few men were hurt, but “It doesn’t appear too bad. We’ll get started after lunch.”

## **PRIPYAT**

Outside of the reactor building, Vasily is slumped against a hydrant. Vomiting. He's pulled away by medics.

We follow his firehose into the building, through the debris, and into the maw of hell itself: the exposed core, where the nozzle dangles above the torn open reactor floor spewing water.

And among the burning chunks of graphite... METAL RODS with the RADIATION SYMBOL. They're MELTING. And emitting the sickly beautiful BLUE LIGHT of Cherenkov radiation, visible amidst the smoke. We RISE UP with the blue light to see: the SKY. The roof above the reactor core has been blown. For the first time in the existence of the planet, fissioning uranium is completely exposed to the air.

We RISE through the open reactor and float toward: PRIPYAT... where the day is beginning. The Ferris Wheel creaks softly in the breeze. Store owners unlock their shops.

And laughing children hold hands as they walk to school.

END OF EPISODE ONE

## **Episode Two – "What Is To Be Done?"**

### **COLD OPEN**

**8:00 AM** - Minsk. April 26, 1986. The morning after.

Ulyana Maximovna drives to work. Windows down. Her car radio broadcasts Tass... the news is typical. Upbeat reports of high crop yields and rising American crime rates. The weather should be beautiful... a great day to go outside.

She parks in the lot of the Institute for Nuclear Energy of the Belorussian Academy of Sciences. But the second she enters the building, she's confronted by panicked workers.

*From this point, the episode moves at a relentless pace.*

Her assistant tells her there's a leak somewhere in the building, but they can't track it down. 200 times the maximum safe amount, and if they can't find it and stop it within 6 hours, they'll have to evacuate the building.

Ulyana looks at the dosimeter readings. The isotopes they're detecting couldn't come from any of their samples. Iodine-131... that's an isotope you'd see from nuclear fuel.

She calls the closest nuclear power plant. Ignalinsk. 150 miles away. The engineer there answers immediately—he's panicking as well. They've picked up radiation levels there as well, but they've looked everywhere. No leak. All systems green.

Ulyana tells the engineer to please remain calm, and evacuate the plant. He tells her to fuck herself. They're in a full crisis mode, but they have been ordered *not* to evacuate.

She hangs up. The next closest plant is Chernobyl. Her assistant tells her it's too far away to cause this kind of reading. Nearly 250 miles away. At these levels, the reactor would have to be cracked open and on fire.

She dials the Chernobyl power plant anyway.

The phone rings.

And rings. And rings.

No one answers.

## PRIPYAT

**9:00 AM** – SMOKE and FLAME spew up from the still-burning, torn open reactor core, and is picked up by the breeze, wafting toward Pripyat...



*The "red forest" of Chernobyl. Note the green forest to the left, indicating the precise path of the wind as it carried radioactive smoke from the reactor.*

...over a pine forest, where a wide swath of trees in the path of the wind are no longer green, but rust red...

...past the railroad bridge, which is now littered with dead birds...

...and into the city, where ambulances go racing past children as they hold hands, walking to school. The ambulances arrive at the HOSPITAL,

pushing through a crowd of the WIVES of the firefighters and plant workers, including Lyudmilla. No is

telling them anything. Police literally beat back a woman who tries to rush past them.

Lyudmilla sees a nurse she knows. The nurse tells her the firemen will be fine. They just need milk. As much milk as the wives can bring. The word "milk" spreads through the crowd of women like wildfire. Milk will save their husbands. They rush to the market.

Inside the hospital, an OLD DOCTOR is overwhelmed. Chaos. Too many patients. More coming in by the second. Blackening skin. Vomit. Men in pain. Going blind. He tells the nurses to put water on them. Cool them off like they were burned.



*Firefighters' clothing in the basement of the abandoned hospital in Pripyat. The clothing emits deadly levels of radioactivity to this day.*

But a NEW, YOUNG DOCTOR can already see this wasn't from fire. She orders the patients to be stripped of their clothes, fast, NOW-- and helps the nurses dump all of the contaminated clothing, gear and boots in the basement of the hospital. She asks an orderly where the hospital keeps its supply of iodine. They don't. There is none. Is there a problem? Are they in danger?

She looks at her hand, where she was holding the clothes. Skin already blistering.

She knows her life is over. She tells the orderly they're fine. And then she goes back to her patients.

## MOSCOW – KREMLIN

**3 PM** – Legasov is ushered into the Kremlin, and finds himself at the core of Soviet power. A conference room with Party leaders. Generals. Mikhail Gorbachev.

Gorbachev asks the new head of the Chernobyl Committee, Boris Scherbina to brief him on the state of the accident. No one seems particularly concerned. Scherbina relays reports received from the Chernobyl Plant Director, Brukhanov, that the accident is under control. The main fire has been extinguished, and the reactor is intact.

Legasov isn't listening. He's flipping through a report. He interrupts Scherbina.

"There's graphite on the ground." Heads turn. Who the hell is *this* guy? He apologizes for speaking out of turn, but per the report, there is graphite on the ground. If that's true, the core may not be intact. Scherbina laughs. You can tell them from a piece of rock?

No. No, not a piece of rock. Graphite. They stare blankly back at him, and that's when Legasov realizes the only person in the room who understands the construction and function of a nuclear reactor is *him*.

And so he explains it to them. And us. In less than a minute. A simple, elegant, precise description of how a nuclear reactor works. Fuel rods, neutrons colliding into atoms, heat being released, water into steam, steam turns a turbine... and graphite. Graphite to moderate the chain reaction... to slow down the neutrons so that they collide into each other more frequently. Creating more energy. The graphite only exists in between the fuel rods, only inside the core. If graphite is on the ground, it means this isn't just a little steam leak like Three Mile Island. It means the core itself is blown wide open. Completely exposed to the air. It wouldn't be a mere accident. It would be an unprecedented nuclear disaster.

Scherbina waves a hand dismissively. They have a radiation report from Comrade Bryukhanov. 3.6 roentgen per hour. That's like what you'd get from a medical scan.

Legasov nods. If the core were exposed, the radiation levels would be nearly a thousand times higher than that. Still, the reports of injuries seem out of proportion to the nature of a minor leak. He gently asks if there have been any reports of unusual readings from any of the Soviet nuclear academies?

Gorbachev hesitates, then says "No." Legasov nods. Of course. But then cleverly adds that this is a good thing. Because if there were, then other nations could theoretically detect the problem as well...

Now Gorbachev is uncomfortable. Legasov suggests that the committee should visit the site. Just to make sure.

Scherbina protests, but Gorbachev overrules him. It is decided. Scherbina and Legasov will travel to Chernobyl. By helicopter. Now. They will see the reactor for themselves,

and report back at once. And of course... any information is a matter of state security. Pripyat has been shut down. All telephone lines in and out have been cut.

If it's worse than expected, no one can know beyond the people in this room.

## **MINSK - BELARUSSIAN COMMUNIST PARTY HEADQUARTERS**

**4 PM** – Ulyana Maximovna is sitting in the reception area for the office of the Party General Secretary, NIKOLAI SLYUNKOV. She's staring at a book on his coffee table.

"What Is To Be Done?" by Vladimir I. Lenin.

At last, Slyunkov emerges from his office, laughing with a man who has come to discuss Belarussian culture with him. That's why Ulyana has been waiting for three hours. She immediately confronts Slyunkov. She knows there has been a nuclear accident at Chernobyl. From the radiation levels, she suspects the reactor has been destroyed. A full meltdown. Slyunkov must order immediate distribution of iodine. A curfew. Medical supplies.

He cuts her off. He tells her he has been informed of the situation by Moscow, and that there is no problem. She can't believe her ears. This isn't politics... these are facts. Thousands will die quickly. Hundreds of thousands, maybe *millions*, will get cancer and die slowly. Is he not listening?

Slyunkov stares her down. Is *she* not listening? The Soviet Socialist Republic has determined that there is no problem, and so there is no problem. And if she should say otherwise... whisper otherwise... *think* otherwise... then she would be an enemy of the state. And that, says Nikolai Slyunkov, *would* be a problem.

## **PRIPYAT - HOSPITAL**

**6 PM** – the hospital emergency room is jammed with men, women and children. A sharp eye will recognize faces from the crowd that watched the factory fire from the railroad bridge. They are all going to die.

Lyudmilla and the other firefighters' wives have brought as much milk as possible. They've sent bottles in to their husbands. Now they're handing out milk to the children. As if that will do anything. But they don't know. No one is allowed to talk to them.

Until a military official asks to speak to Lyudmilla. He explains to her that her husband, along with the others, is being transported by helicopter to a hospital in Moscow. He tells her a street address. And nothing else. Just walks away. She yells after him. When?

Now.

**6:30 PM** – The men from the control room, along with Valery and the other firefighters, are loaded into military helicopters by men in radiation gear. Lyudmilla and the Young Doctor both watch from the hospital window. Helpless.

The helicopters take off, and cross paths in the sky with THE CHERNOBYL COMMISSION helicopters... now arriving from Moscow...

At last, Scherbina and Legasov can see the extent of the accident. As they approach, Legasov sees the fire. The destroyed roof.

And chunks of burning graphite. The unthinkable has happened. *The core is exposed.*



*Aerial photo of the exposed core on fire*

Scherbina orders the pilot to fly directly over the reactor so they personally report whether or not it is intact. But Legasov insists they cannot. He can already tell the reactor is destroyed. If they fly directly over the core, they will receive fatal doses of radiation and be dead before morning.

Scherbina reminds Legasov who is in charge. They have orders from the Soviet Premier himself. They will fly over—

Legasov shouts him down. He's condemning them all to death! As the men argue, the pilot listens. Legasov appeals to him directly. "Do not fly over the site."

Scherbina tells him "You will fly over the site, or I will see you shot." Legasov tells the pilot being shot will be a

far less painful death.

At the last second, the pilot veers away from the site.

## **PRIPYAT**

Children playing outside in the last light of day, waving away soot from their faces, watch as a caravan of helicopters turns away from the smoke pluming from the reactor in the distance...

## **CHERNOBYL BASE CAMP**

**12:00 AM** – Helicopters and army trucks have gathered outside the reactor. Under military floodlights, Legasov is arguing with Scherbina and Bryukhanov, who are insisting that the reactor is intact.

An argument that could only happen in the Soviet Union. Facts are not facts.

Legasov is telling them he saw graphite with his own eyes. The only graphite in the facility is from the core. This is a full-scale disaster, and the people of Pripyat need to be evacuated immediately.

Scherbina refuses. Until someone confirms that the core is destroyed, the core is not destroyed. No evacuation. No black eye for the People's Republic. The fire is just the roofing materials. It will burn itself out. End of discussion.

Legasov walks from them, and grabs a dosimeter from the military equipment. He duct-tapes it to the front of a truck, and asks for a volunteer who knows the layout of the facility. Legasov clothes the man in full radioactive protective gear, puts him in the truck, and tells him to drive as close to the damaged reactor building as possible, then return.

## **IN THE TRUCK**

POV through the windshield as the truck drives into hell. Nothing but the sound of breathing through the driver's respirator hood. Chunks of burning graphite on the ground. Thick smoke. Water pouring from ruptured pipes. And ahead... the broken mass of reactor building #4.

## **CHERNOBYL BASE CAMP**

Legasov, Scherbina and Bryukhanov wait grimly for the truck to return. All three seem to understand that whatever the dosimeter reading is, there will be dire consequences. If it is 3.6 roentgen, Legasov's reputation will be ruined, and his standing in the Party lost. If it's higher than 3.6, Bryukhanov may very well face swift, brutal Soviet justice.

The truck returns. Scherbina wants to go see, but Legasov stops him. Don't get too close. The driver emerges. Checks the dosimeter reading without removing it. Then walks away from the truck, where other men remove his gear and hose him down with water.

We all wait. The episode finally slows down. Slows to a crawl. The driver is given a towel, and escorted to Legasov, Scherbina and Bryukhanov.

The dosimeter measured more than 3.6 roentgen.

It measured *15,000* roentgen.

Bryukhanov sputters. Impossible. The dosimeter is faulty. This man read it wrong. He demands to see it himself.

The driver said the building is devastated. He saw burning chunks of graphite with holes in them. Legasov knows what those are. "Channels for the fuel rods. The core is exposed, Boris."

Scherbina sits down. Pale. He wants to know what the number means. Legasov tells him. It means the fire they are watching with their own eyes is putting out 30 times the fatal level of radiation straight up into the air. Nearly twice the radiation released by the bomb in Hiroshima. Every single hour. Hour after hour. Twenty bombs' worth by now. And it will not stop today or tomorrow or in a week or a month. The graphite could burn for a half a year. The fire must be put out. And Pripjat must be evacuated.

Scherbina looks up. Utterly defeated. Then asks Legasov. "Can we contain this?"

Legasov looks at the reactor. "If the fuel has melted down— a mix of sand and boron to absorb neutrons—possibly, yes. But it will take thousands of air drops— "

"No," says Boris Scherbina. "The information. Can we contain this?"

## **FORSMARK NUCLEAR POWER PLANT, SWEDEN**

A quiet, spotless plant floor. A tall engineer strides quickly through the facility. Knocks on a manager's door, and enters.

He tells the manager they've just picked up what they thought was an internal leak. But the isotopes indicate something else. A release of nuclear fuel into the atmosphere. The kind of fuel used in only one kind of reactor. The RMBK type used only by the Soviets.

The closest of which is a thousand miles away.

The Russians have clearly had an accident. A severe accident that likely threatens all of Europe. The engineer wants to know... "Who do we tell?"

The manager picks up the phone. "Everyone."

END OF EPISODE TWO

## **Episode Three – "Please Remain Calm"**

### **COLD OPEN**

**Early Morning, Wormwood Forest** – April 27<sup>th</sup>... the next day. The second day. A thick mist settles over the pine trees. They're reddish brown. The forest floor is littered with dead needles. Dead squirrels. Dead bugs. Dead everything.

It's impossibly quiet.

Until... the whup whup whup of distant helicopter blades. It grows louder... not the sound of one helicopter, or two, but what must be dozens. The agitated air pushes through the dead pines, stripping them of their remaining needles, and now we're:

**IN THE AIR** – a squadron of Soviet Air Force helicopters fly in formation toward CHERNOBYL...

**IN PRIPYAT** – Legasov and Scherbina watch from a rooftop with binoculars as the helicopters approach.

**IN THE LEAD HELICOPTER** – the pilot and crewmen are surrounded by BURLAP SACKS. Some of the sacks say "sand." Some say "boron." One crewman asks another: "What's boron?" The other crewman shrugs. "How the fuck should I know?"

As the helicopters approach the reactor, the lead pilot informs the squadron he will do the first run, and then the others should follow in turn. As he begins to wheel around the opening, his radio crackles from some unseen command. "Do not get within 10 meters of the opening." The pilot looks down. That won't get them close enough.

**LEGASOV** – watching. Sees the helicopter making progressively tighter circles. They're too close. He talks into a radio. "Tell them they're too close!"

**IN THE LEAD HELICOPTER** – the pilot makes his final circle. He's now **DIRECTLY** over the opening. "Make the drop!" The crewmen open the cargo door, and—

Their lungs instantly fill with searing heat and radioactive smoke. Their skin burning. The pilot gasps for air, breathing in more death. He blinks... his vision blurring. Losing consciousness. His hand still on the stick. The helicopter **VEERS, WOBBLER...** and floats toward a **CONSTRUCTION CRANE**. The blades hit the steel cable...

...and **LEGASOV** and **SCHERBINA** watch as the helicopter spins out of control, then **DROPS** like a **STONE** from the sky, plummets toward the burning reactor...

...and **EXPLODES**.

## **Moscow – Hospital #6**

Lyudmilla, the firefighter's wife, is standing on a street corner in Moscow. Completely out of place. Alone.

She enters the hospital and flags a nurse. She's here to visit her husband. He was at Chernobyl. The nurse tells her the Chernobyl patients cannot receive visitors. It's too dangerous. Lyudmilla opens her purse, and fishes out some money.

The nurse takes the money and hands Lyudmilla a pass.

**IN THE WARD** – Lyudmilla is walking down a hallway and is stopped by a woman. The head radiologist. Who let Lyudmilla into the ward? Lyudmilla begs the woman to let her see her husband. The radiologist asks "Are you pregnant?" Lyudmilla lies. "No." The radiologist says, "You have thirty minutes. Do not touch him. Do you understand?"

Lyudmilla enters a large hospital room and sees: Vasily and three other firefighters, each in hospital gowns, sitting around a small table, playing cards and laughing. She practically weeps with relief. Vasily tells her they're feeling much better now.

She takes his hand. Then hugs him close. And kisses him. "It's going to be okay."



*A helicopter drops a mixture of sand and boron onto the burning reactor*

## **PRIPYAT - Sand and Boron**

A helicopter wheels around the open reactor, not too close... bags of sand and boron are pushed out and dropped on the fire. The helicopter flies away... and seconds later, another one approaches.

Scherbina watches through a window. But not Legasov. Legasov is studying blueprints of the reactor. He turns to a **TECHNICIAN**, who seems scared to be in the room at all. "Are you sure?" The technician nods. "I'm positive. Nothing was pumped in."

Satisfied, Legasov sends the technician away. Then turns to Scherbina. The sand will eventually put the fire out. The boron might help absorb a small amount of the radiation. But it will take at least another thousand drops before that

happens. The town of Pripyat must be evacuated.

Scherbina refuses. His orders are to avoid any unnecessary evacuation... in fact, he is to avoid anything that might spread information of the disaster. Legasov tells him the radiation levels are untenable in the town. If people do not leave now, they will all fall sick. All of them. Scherbina scoffs. "You're being an alarmist. We're in this town too, aren't we?"

Legasov nods. Yes. We are. And that's when Scherbina realizes this assignment is going to kill him.

A soldier enters. Hands Scherbina an envelope. Inside, a top secret communique. Boris reads it. Legasov waits expectantly.

It's from the Kremlin. The Swedes detected radiation. Alerted the Americans. The U.S. took satellite pictures of the power plant, and have confirmed the reactor core is exposed. It's all over the news. Everywhere. Germany has ordered citizens in the path of the air current to stay indoors. The UK is telling farmers to destroy their livestock, because the animals are likely contaminated.

"That's over two thousand kilometers away, Boris. There are children playing outside this building right now. Less than three kilometers away. Order the evacuation."

## **Country Road**

A young man, shirtless, kneels next to his drab Soviet car on the side of a country road. Middle of nowhere. Changing a flat tire. His girlfriend leans against the car. Smoking a cigarette. Looking out at the horizon. Distant smoke.

"I think there's a forest fire or something." Her boyfriend grunts. Oh?

Then, coming around a bend... a MINSK CITY BUS appears and drives past them. The girl watches as it goes. The bus is empty.

"Baby? A bus from Minsk just went by." He grunts again. Not paying attention.

"We're 200 kilometers from Minsk. What's it doing out here?" Her boyfriend drops his tire iron. Annoyed. "I don't know. Maybe going for repairs. Who cares?"

She lights another cigarette. Then... another bus from Minsk appears. And a second later... another drives by. Then another. And another. And another.

Now the boyfriend notices. He stands up, and the two of them watch in confusion as empty Minsk City buses stream by in a caravan.

We rise up into the air and see: A LINE OF ONE THOUSAND BUSES driving toward:

## **Pripyat/Kremlin/Hospital #6**

*"Attention. Attention. Attention. Attention. For the attention of the residents of Pripyat. The City Council informs you that due to the accident at Chernobyl Power Station in the city of Pripyat, the radioactive conditions in the vicinity are deteriorating."*

A truck with loudspeakers slowly drives through the city of Pripyat. As we hear the measured tones of a recorded woman's voice broadcasting from the truck, we move between the evacuation of the city...

*"The Communist Party, its officials and the armed forces are taking necessary steps to combat this. Nevertheless, with the view to keep people as safe and healthy as possible, the children being top priority, we need to temporarily evacuate the citizens in the nearest towns of Kiev Oblast."*

...to the site, where a worker in protective gear sweeps a dosimeter... the telltale clicking of a geiger counter rising to an impossibly loud noise... they're in a storm of radiation...

*"For these reasons, starting from April 27, 1986 2 p.m. each apartment block will be able to have a bus at its disposal, supervised by the police and the city officials. It is highly advisable to take your documents, some vital personal belongings and a certain amount of food, just in case, with you."*

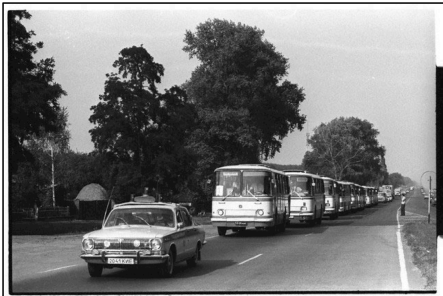
...to Moscow Hospital #6, where Lyudmilla sits near her sleeping husband, watching Tass news anchors smiling blandly as they discuss the latest public works project...

*"The senior executives of public and industrial facilities of the city has decided on the list of employees needed to stay in Pripyat to maintain these facilities in a good working order. All the houses will be guarded by the police during the evacuation period."*

...back to Pripyat, where frightened people are pulled from their homes by soldiers. Pets are torn from the arms of crying children. Suitcases are thrown into the street. Patients are walked out of the hospital along with doctors and nurses.

*"Comrades leaving your residences temporarily, please make sure you have turned off the lights, electrical equipment and water, and shut the windows. Please remain calm and orderly in the process of this short-term evacuation."*

## The Road Leaving Pripjat



*A stream of one thousand buses leaves Pripjat*

A steady procession of helicopters continue to drop sand and boron on the nearby reactor. Below, the endless stream of buses drives away from Pripjat. Heading in the other direction toward the city: a single car approaching the military checkpoint posted at the entrance to the city.

Soldiers stop the car. It's Ulyana Maximovna, the nuclear physicist. She demands to speak to the official in charge. They tell her to turn around. Does

she want to be arrested?

"Yes. That's exactly what I want."

## **Pripyat Headquarters**

Legasov and Scherbina are both on the phone, each talking to some unseen Kremlin official, each relaying an update on the helicopter drops. The fire is subsiding. Scherbina is optimistic. Legasov guarded.

They're interrupted by a soldier, who tells them a woman has been arrested at the checkpoint trying to enter Pripyat. Scherbina doesn't care. Put her in jail.

But the soldier tells them she claims to know what has happened. She claims to have written down certain information. She claims to have given that information to someone for safekeeping, to be released should something happen to her.

And she wants to see them.

Legasov and Scherbina hang up.

Ulyana is brought into the room. She knows Legasov by reputation, and speaks only to him. She has no time to talk to someone who isn't a scientist. She pieced together the situation from the meager information she had, and she wants to know why a large region isn't being evacuated. Why aren't iodine pills being issued? And has anyone even asked the obvious question yet?

"How did this even happen?"

Legasov tells her they are doing what they can. Right now, their priority is to put out the fire. Until that happens—

She interrupts. "Your sand? You'll smother the fire, but the uranium will remain critical underneath. It will melt the sand. The whole thing will turn to lava and melt down."

Legasov nods. It might. But the concrete pad under the reactor should buy them some—

She interrupts again. "Forget the concrete. You know what's under the reactor. The tanks."

Scherbina listens to them like someone watching a tennis match. He clearly has no idea what the hell either of them are talking about.

Legasov tells her he already checked with the plant technician. The tanks are empty.

She cuts him off yet again. "No. They didn't pump their *own* water into them. But I saw the firetrucks abandoned by the plant. The firefighters were spraying water from hoses, yes? How much water? For how many hours? Where were they spraying? And where does that drain?"

Legasov turns white. He calls for the technician. Pulls out the blueprints. Asks him where excess water drains. The technician clears his throat. Oh. Right.

He points to two chambers underneath the core.

There's a deafening silence. Finally, Scherbina asks, "What is it? Is it bad?"

### **Moscow Hospital #6**

Lyudmilla wakes up to the sound of screaming. She was sleeping in a chair outside of Vasily's room. She gets up, and is pushed aside by nurses who rush by.

She follows them into Vasily's room.

His face is swollen. His skin has broken out into sores. Fluid and blood are leaking through his hospital gown.

He calls out for her, but the nurses drag Lyudmilla out of the room.

### **The Kremlin**

Gorbachev enters the conference room. Scherbina and Legasov are there, along with various military commanders.

Legasov explains that they have successfully contained the fire. But nuclear fuel doesn't turn cold simply because it's not on fire. That's why it's so valuable for energy production. Right now, melting uranium dioxide pellets are mixing with sand and debris to create a substance called "corium"... essentially a radioactive lava.

That lava will burn through the lower containment floor of the reactor core. And when it does, it will enter two large basins that are full of wastewater from the firefighters' hoses.

When that happens, the corium will instantly vaporize the water, causing a thermal explosion. "How big of an explosion?"

"I estimate between two and four megatons."

The air goes out of the room.

Legasov walks over to a large easel with a map of the Pripyat area. He draws a circle. Everything within a 30 km radius of the plant will be completely destroyed, including the other three Chernobyl reactors along with all of the nuclear material within them.

He flips the map to a larger one of Belarus and Ukraine. Draws another circle. This one is 200 km in radius. Everyone within this circle will die almost immediately, including the entire population of Minsk... somewhere on the order of three million people.

Jaws drop. Legasov flips the map again to a larger one of Europe and Western Russia. Draws another circle. This one is 1000 km in radius. This is the area that would be impacted by the radiation of the thermal blast. All of Ukraine and Belarus. Poland. Czechoslovakia. Romania. Hungary. Latvia. Lithuania. And most of Eastern Germany.

Gorbachev is stunned. What does this mean exactly... “impacted by the radiation?”

“It means completely uninhabitable. For three hundred years.”

Silence. Then a general asks, “How long before this happens?” Legasov says they likely have 24 hours before the corium melts through and hits the water. But they have a plan. The water can’t be emptied remotely; instead, two sluice gates need to be opened manually in the water pools themselves. There are two power plant workers in Pripyat who can do this—trained divers who worked maintenance in the water duct system. They know how to navigate the maze of tunnels to get to the sluice gate valves. Legasov wants to send them into the water. He just needs the permission of the men in this room.

“Why would you need our permission for this?”

Legasov tells them the water these men will be swimming through is intensely irradiated. They will absolutely die within days. Simply put— he is asking permission to murder two innocent men.

An uncomfortable silence, as if the question has violated some kind of decorum. Finally a general speaks up. “Comrade Legasov. If in the course of your duties to the People of the Soviet Socialist Republic you need to kill two men, or a hundred men, or a ten thousand men... do not stop to ask permission again. Are we clear?”

## Pripyat



*The city of Prip'yat before the disaster*

Empty streets. Absolute silence. Laundry flutters on clotheslines. The hospital is silent. Ambulances parked in a row. We go inside buildings. Empty school rooms. The community pool. A restaurant. Eerie quiet.

Dogs and cats trot through the streets looking for food. Collars on them. Pets left behind.

A sprinkler goes on to water a dead lawn. Traffic lights change for no one.

The never-used Ferris Wheel creaks in the breeze.

Soldiers stand in front of the Party building. Inside, Legasov and Scherbina sit at a table. Across from them: ALEXIE ANANENKO, 30's, slender, calm. VALERY BEZPALOV, 30's, bald-headed, muscular, blue-collar to the core. And BORIS BARANOV, 20's, timid, scared.

It's clear Legasov has already explained the task to them. He's curious, though... Ananenko and Bezplov are the divers... why is Baranov with them?

Ananenko speaks for Baranov. "It's going to be dark down there. We need someone to hold a light." Then Ananenko says he's heard stories about the firefighters. How they got sick. Is this going to make them sick?

Legasov and Scherbina share a glance. Then Legasov says "Yes, there could be some symptoms. Nausea. Possibly some hair loss." The bald Bezplov says "Oh, well then fuck this." He starts laughing. Ananenko laughs. Legasov smiles... until...

Bezplov leans across the table. All business. "Let's not bullshit each other. You tell me why we have to do this." Legasov tells him that the three of them will singlehandedly save more lives than any other men in Soviet history.

Ananenko says, "And if for some reason we should lose more than hair... what happens to our families?" Scherbina steps in. He tells them their families will each receive 400 rubles a year, promotions at their jobs, and the eternal gratitude of the Communist Party. They will be untouchable.

And that's what these men wanted to hear.

## **Into The Water**

Legasov, Scherbina, Ulyana and cleanup workers are assembled just outside the plant. They watch as the three men in wetsuits enter a large EXTERNAL HATCH and climb down.

The hatch is SEALED.

IN THE TUNNELS – the men stand on a concrete platform. Ahead of them, DARK WATER. Deadly water. They put on their scuba gear. A last moment... where Ananenko touches Bezplov and Baranov on the shoulder. *This is our end...*

Then they DIVE IN.

IN THE WATER – Baranov's lamp shines through the eerie dark of the water. Silent but for the BREATHING of the men through their regulators. A fork in the tunnels...

Bezpalov signals to them to head left. They do. Along the side of the tunnel here, a single PIPE runs along the wall.

The men swim a bit further, and then... the lamp FLICKERS. They stop. Stare at it. It flickers again. And then... GOES OUT.

PITCH BLACK.

Nothing but the sound of three men breathing... breaths getting faster... louder... until the sound is deafening, and—

END OF EPISODE THREE

## **Episode Four – "Open Wide, O Earth"**

### **COLD OPEN**

#### **In The Dark**

We begin where we left off... three divers in the dark, radiated water underneath the melting reactor core. The barest of light reveals their silhouettes as they grab hold of each other.

Baranov frantically beats against his light, but it won't come on.

Ananenko reaches out with his free hand, blindly feeling until he grabs hold of a PIPE attached to the tunnel wall. Good. He tugs on Bezpалov, who tugs on Ananenko.

And slowly they go, in the darkness, following the pipe... nothing but the sound of their own breath and the occasional, terrifying GROAN of metal... as if the whole thing can come crashing down on them at any moment, until...

Ananenko reaches a VALVE. He sends Bezpалov over to the second valve, and the two of them begin to TURN the metal wheels... at first they're stuck... but then slowly, with a terrible shrieking noise... the valves TURN and—

THE SLUICE GATES open. The water DRAINS quickly, pulling the three men with it like rip current, slamming them against the tunnel wall, until... all the water is gone.

And that's when the fucking light decides to come back on.

OUTSIDE – Legasov, Scherbina, Ulyana and the gathered men wait nervously. Then: a POUNDING on the hatch door. Men in hazmat suits open it, and the three heroes emerge, throwing their scuba gear off, and shouting in TRIUMPH!

They did it! Scherbina catches his breath... thank god... and actually musters a smile as he watches the three men... giddy as schoolboys as they're sprayed down by the decontaminators... overwhelmed that they actually survived, jumping up and down...

Scherbina looks at Legasov, who isn't happy at all. "Valery, those boys just saved the world." Legasov says nothing. So Ulyana says it for him.

"Yes. And they'll be dead in a week."

Scherbina doesn't understand. They look fine. He turns back to the three men.

They are dancing and hugging each other. One of them raises his arm to the sky and screams in pure joy.

## **Kremlin/Chernobyl HQ**

Gorbachev sits in his office, watching Peter Jennings on American television.

*“There has been a nuclear accident in the Soviet Union, and the Soviets have admitted that it happened. The Soviet version is this: one of the atomic reactors at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Plant near the city of Kīev was damaged, and there is speculation in Moscow that people were injured and may have died.*

*The Soviets may have been fairly quick to acknowledge the accident because evidence, in the form of mild nuclear radiation, had already reached beyond the Soviet borders to Scandinavia. We begin with ABC’s Dean Reynolds...”*

Gorbachev clicks the television off. Asks his secretary to get Legasov on the phone. He wants an update on the risk of thermal explosion. Legasov tells him the divers did their duty. The tanks are drained, and the immediate threat has been eliminated. However, once the molten core enters the empty tanks, there is a 50-50 chance it will continue to burn through the concrete pad underneath.

If that happens, the core will enter the water table and contaminate water supplies throughout Russia and Eastern Europe, effectively rendering the entire area a wasteland for centuries. Legasov estimates they have approximately a month before that occurs, giving them time to solve the problem.

Legasov recommends digging a tunnel underneath the reactor core and installing a reinforced pad along with a nitrogen-cooled heat exchanger. Of course, the men digging the tunnel will be—

Gorbachev doesn’t care. Go ahead. Do it.

Legasov says once the tunnel is underway, he should return to Moscow to brief the Premier on what would have to come next— the master plan to clean up Chernobyl.

Yes. Good. Then Gorbachev asks Legasov, “Can you give me a sense of when this will all be over?”

Legasov pauses. Then: “If you mean when the threat will be eliminated... it will be over in 20,000 years. Perhaps we should just say... not within our lifetimes.”

A stunned Gorbachev hangs up.

Legasov puts the phone down. Turns to Ulyana, who has been waiting patiently.

He wants her to help. He can’t leave the site while the cleanup is underway. He needs her to go to Moscow. Hospital #6. That’s where they’re keeping the men who were in the control room that night: Dyatlov, Akimov, Toptunov.

He needs her to interview them while they’re still alive. “Find out how this happened.

## **Moscow Hospital #6**

A doctor stands in front of a gathering of other doctors and nurses in a small break room. He explains what radiation sickness is... as best as he can.

He knows that radiation particles can disrupt the cells of the human body, but “no one knows how.” He knows that the damage is dosage dependent, but he isn’t sure what a dangerous dosage is. He doesn’t think any of them are in danger of being near the patients. They wouldn’t be sent here otherwise.

He says there is no special treatment for radiation sickness. Provide comfort. Let them drink whatever they want... water, tea, vodka. He hears that milk may provide some benefit.

One of the nurses remarks that she’s never seen anything like this. Organ failure, burns... it’s like the men are liquefying and leaking out of their own skin. Is that expected?

The doctor shrugs. “All I expect is that they will die. Any other questions?”

We DRIFT OUT of the room and find: LYUDMILLA, who has been standing outside the room by the door... listening.

She absorbs this quietly... then goes to see her husband in his hospital room.

He is unrecognizable and grotesque. Open sores cover his skin, which has changed colors in patches... blue, red, brown. Blood soaks through his sheet where it has seeped from his skin. His hair is gone.

But still, he smiles at her. She takes his hand and tells him what he needs to know.

“We’re going to have a little girl.”

Through the glass door behind Lyudmilla, we see a FIGURE walking by in a HAZMAT SUIT...

IN THE HALLWAY – Ulyana, full radiation gear, prepares to enter the hospital room of Anatoly Dyatlov. She takes a breath, then opens the door.

Dyatlov is sitting in a chair. Looking no worse for wear. In fact, he’s smoking. He looks at this woman in her ridiculous suit, and snorts with laughter.

“Who the fuck are you?”

## **The Coal Mine**

Hundreds of coal miners toil at the Donets Basin, moving carts along tracks, in and out of mine shafts. Ukrainians, Russians, Belorussians... all covered in black dust.

One of them looks up to see a line of Soviet Army trucks heading their way.

He lights a cigarette. What's *this* shit?

The lead truck stops, and a Russian officer steps out. "Who's in charge here?" The smoking miner nods. "I'm the foreman for this shift."

The officer looks around at the men, getting a sense of how many there are. A good amount. It will do. "Tell your men to get on these trucks."

The foreman looks at the trucks. Nervous. "What do you mean? What is this?"

Armed soldiers step out from each of the trucks. AK-47's.

The officer looks at the foreman.

"Get them on the trucks."

## **Chernobyl HQ**

Hundreds of miners are getting off trucks near the reactor site. Confused. Their foreman is with Legasov, who has a blueprint of the reactor on a table.

Legasov shows him where the entry point of the tunnel should go, the level of incline, and the distance it should be dug. 550 feet.

The foreman has questions. Scherbina cuts him off. "These orders come from the highest level, comrade. That's the only answer you need."

Legasov assures him the miners will be provided with the best equipment possible, along with a stipend for their service. But the job needs to be done in three weeks.

The foreman shakes his head. That's not possible. Not with a hundred men. Not with five hundred.

Legasov looks at Scherbina, then back to the foreman. "With how many then?"

The foreman shakes his head. This is crazy. "Maybe... a thousand? Working around the clock." Scherbina nods. Good. They will give him a thousand men. It's settled. They will begin now. This very moment.

## Moscow Hospital #6

Ulyana, still in her protective gear, enters the room of Leonid Toptunov. Unlike Dyatlov, this young man is clearly dying.

She sits next to him, tells him she is with the Chernobyl Committee. She wants him to tell her everything that happened that night. He nods. He will.

She places a stack of paper on the table next to his bed, and begins writing as he speaks.

“My name is Leonid Fedorovich Toptunov. I am the Senior Reactor Control Chief Engineer.”

She stops. He’s the *what?* “How old are you?”

“I am 25.”

And blood begins leaking from his nose.

## The City of Minsk

May Day, 1986. 240 miles from the reactor.



*Actual photo of the 1986 May Day celebration in Minsk, taken five days after the Chernobyl explosion*

The wind is blowing strong that day, whipping the hammer and sickle flags. And everyone is outside, marching in the worker’s parade. Old people. Families. Babies in strollers.

But Belarussian Communist Party Secretary Nikolai Slyunkov, the man who dismissed Ulyana from his office, is not at the parade. He is in his office, on the phone with Moscow. The winds have shifted,

and are blowing directly in from the southeast.

Pripyat is to the southeast. Perhaps they should issue iodine to—

Whoever is on the other end is telling him no. Whoever is on the other end is telling him *exactly* what he told Ulyana. There is no problem. He will not say otherwise. He will not even hint otherwise. The information will be contained. At any expense.

And loyal party Secretary Slyunkov says, “Of course. I understand.”

He quickly packs his family into a car to send them off to Moscow. Just for a while. Maybe a little longer. His wife can tell something is wrong, but he assures her everything is fine. And did the children take the iodine pills? Excellent.

He watches as his family drives off, and then he asks his secretary about the turnout for the parade. "It's a big crowd," she says. As big as always. Practically everyone in the city is out on the streets. In the fresh air. Enjoying the warm weather.

"Good," says Nikolai Slyunkov. "Let's go join them."

## **The Tunnel**

The work has already begun. The miners, dressed in nothing more than work clothes and paper head coverings, have broken ground, laid tracks, and are removing earth from the tunnel, cart after cart.



*Miners removing earth from the tunnel. They dug directly under the core as it melted down.*

But the foreman has a request for Legasov. It's hot weather. The tunnel is even hotter, with no air circulation and hundreds of sweating men toiling in close quarters. At last check, it was hitting nearly 120 degrees underground.

His men need fans. Lots of fans to move the air.

Legasov tells him he can't do that. There's too much dust being kicked into the air as it is. He can't have more dust

from fans.

"Why?"

Scherbina, ever the Party man, intervenes. "You can't have the fans, comrade. End of discussion."

Another ten trucks arrive. Stuffed with miners. Fresh bodies for the tunnel. And they each stare in shock at the sight... just five hundred feet away... the torn-open Reactor #4.

## **Moscow Hospital #6**

Ulyana finishes writing a sentence. Her hand cramping. Visor of the hazmat hood foggy from her breath. She's filled dozens of pages with notes. She asks him, "So at this point, when you see the spike in power, why didn't you press the AZ-5 button?"

He says “I did.”

She puts her pen down. “That’s not possible, Toptunov.”

He turns toward her for the first time, grunting in pain. Meets her eyes. “I swear to you, I pressed it. And that’s when it exploded.”

She stares at him in shock. “What?”

Toptunov lays back down. “I did everything right. I did everything right...”

Ulyana leaves Toptunov’s room, and as she walks down the hallway, she happens to look into firefighter Vasily Ignatenko’s room... and sees Lyudmilla sitting there.

Unprotected.

And placing Vasily’s hand on her belly... as if to say “I’m pregnant.”

Ulyana freaks out. Begins screaming at the nurses. At the doctors. How could they let this woman in here? What kind of place is this? What kind of people are they?

The doctors insist she calms down, but she’s ranting that this woman’s unborn child is in danger, that the nurses are in danger... that they’re all going to get sick...

The old male doctor in charge calls security. Ulyana is dragged out by a guard.

Good. The woman is clearly insane.

## **The Tunnel**

Legasov wakes up. Gets dressed. Takes an iodine pill. Looks at his face in the mirror. Another day. More death.

He heads to the site of the tunnel, and is greeted by the sight of miners.

Nude miners. Wearing nothing but shoes and their little paper hats. What the fuck?

He flags the foreman down, who walks over with his cigarette and his paper hat and nothing else on. Well? What do you want? It’s now 130 degrees in the tunnel, and there are no fans. Clothing is unbearable in there, and they’ve been told by soldiers that if they quit, they will be shot. So it’s either naked... or nothing.

Legasov nods. Naked then.

And so the men go in and out of the tunnel, covered in soot and sweat, now working nude, every part of their body exposed to the earth they're removing.

The earth that will kill them.

## **Kremlin**

It's one week later. Legasov is back in the conference room with Scherbina and Gorbachev and the generals. The tunnel has proceeded ahead of schedule. They will be able to put the heat exchanger in place within days.

There is no longer a threat of thermal explosion. The fire has been out for some time.

"Then what's left?" asks a general.

In terms of the plant, the job is still massive. First, the roof will need to be cleared of radioactive rubble. In spots, the radioactivity is so high, it would kill a man in just a few minutes. They will need to airlift in remote controlled robot vehicles to do the work.

Following that cleanup, the entire reactor will need to be encased in a steel and concrete structure, which will eliminate the worst of the radioactivity from the air... radioactivity that is still being carried by wind across all of Eastern Europe as they speak.

The men in the room nod. So far, this seems doable.

But Legasov explains that's merely for the reactor itself.

A massive area surrounding the plant... a thousand square miles... will need to be evacuated. Every single roving animal in the exclusion zone... dogs, cats, wolves, boar, deer... all of them will need to be hunted and killed, lest they wander out of the zone and carry deadly radiation with them.

Men will need to go into every house. Every room. Every closet. All food will need to be destroyed to avoid spread of infectious disease by insects. All areas will need to be mapped by radiation level and fenced off. Vehicles will be buried in pits.

But it gets worse. Every tree, every leaf, every rock... even the very ground itself has absorbed massive doses of radiation, which it will fire poisonous dust back into the air every time the wind blows or a rain comes.

They are going to have to raze forests. And beyond that... they are going to have to rip up the earth... and bury it under itself. *A thousand square miles...*

In no uncertain terms, it will take an army, and it will be a war. A war against an invisible foe who does nothing but kill.

A younger general speaks up. Nikolai Tarakanov. A veteran of the still-ongoing Afghan War, he understands the scope of what Legasov is asking. How many men does he think it will take, and for how long?

Scherbina finally speaks up. “We expect it to take three years, and we will require approximately a quarter of a million men a year, so roughly 750,000. With the understanding that many will get sick, and many will die within ten years of service. Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands.”

The room is stunned. “750,000” repeats Gorbachev in disbelief.

Legasov says “750,000 and one.” They look at him. Who’s this “one”?

## **Moscow Jail**

Ulyana is sitting alone in a cell when Legasov arrives. The guard lets him in, and he sits next to her.

She tells him this battle is already lost. The government is made up of either the insane or the stupid. They have no understanding of what they’re dealing with. No sense that they have unleashed the deadliest accident in the history of the planet. No sense of the death and despair that is coming their way.

But Legasov doesn’t answer that. Instead, he tells her that a thousand men are working in the nude, digging a tunnel because there’s a 50% chance it will be necessary... and each of those men are going to die. Because of him.

And more men are going to die.

He is murdering men every day now, and he cannot stop. Because they have no choice. Yes, the government is insane. The government is stupid.

They cannot stop.

And he swears to her that he can see in the eyes of these men that they know they are going to die, and yet they go into the tunnel... not because they would be shot for abandoning their work, but because they can sense this is a job that must be done, no matter the cost.

They cannot stop.

She cannot stop. She will leave this jail with him. She will continue her work. She will find out how the accident happened, and she will help him make sure it never happens again.

Ulyana agrees.

As they're waiting for her paperwork to be processed she tells him that she's already conducted interviews with Dyatlov, Akimov and Toptunov. Did he know the Chernobyl engineers were running a safety test that fateful night? A safety test!

She tells him that Dyatlov is a pig, a criminal... that he made one unconscionable decision after another, and violated every reasonable procedure that exists. She tells him the man in charge of raising and lowering the crucial control rods was just a boy, 25-years old, with only three months of experience. It will all be in her report... but he needs to hear one part of it now.

The boy, Toptunov, says he hit the AZ-5 button. The button that drops all of the control rods into the core. The button that is designed to immediately shut the reactor down completely... zero output. Dead. He says he hit the button... and that's when the core exploded.

Legasov seems cagey. "That's not possible." She thought the same thing... but Akimov, who had real experience as an engineer, backed up Toptunov's story. The button was pressed, and the core blew up.

Legasov shakes his head. "Presume they're wrong. Keep looking."

Ulayana nods. "I'll do another round of interviews with them just to make sure."

"No," says Legasov, "You won't. Akimov and Toptunov died this morning."

## **Moscow Cemetery**

A priest stands a hundred feet from a gravesite, reading the Troparian (Eastern Orthodox burial prayer). Behind him, FORKLIFTS move a dozen ZINC-COVERED COFFINS toward a single, large open pit.

*"Open wide, O earth, and receive what was formed from you by the hand of God."*

As he speaks we flash over to:

THE CHERNOBYL TUNNEL – where nude miners push carts of earth out of the tunnel... toiling... covered in poison they cannot see...

*"Receive that which returns to you, its mother, for the Creator has taken away that which was of His image."*

Back to the cemetery... where we pan across mourners until we arrive at Lyudmilla Ignatenko, whose husband is in one of those metal boxes. Behind her, LEGASOV stands apart. Watching.

*"Receive this body, O earth, as it is your own."*

The metal boxes are lowered into the open graves.

With that, we hear the unmistakable beeping sound of a truck backing up.

And Lyudmilla and Legasov watch as a concrete mixer rumbles into frame and begins pouring CEMENT into the pit. The metal boxes disappear under the gray wet, and we cut to black.

END OF EPISODE FOUR

## **Episode Five – "The Happiness of All Mankind"**

### **COLD OPEN**

Udders. Two old hands milk them into an old metal bucket.

A YOUNG SOLDIER, gun slung from his shoulder, cigarette in mouth, stands casually in the yard of a small hut in a tiny countryside village. Next to him, an 80-year old woman sits on a stool, milking the cow.

He tells her it's not safe here anymore. She shrugs. It has never been safe here. He's only been in this part of the country for what-- a few weeks?

When she was a little girl, the revolution came. The Czar's men, the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks... bodies everywhere. Soldiers... boys like him... marching in lines. They told her family to leave. They didn't.

Then the Holodomor. Stalin's man-made famine. Her parents died. Her sister died. They told her family to leave. They didn't.

The Great War came next. Germans. More boys like him. More starvation. More bodies. They told her family to leave. They didn't. She's the only one left.

Why should she leave now? Because of something invisible? The visible was bad enough. Life was bad enough. This is her home. This will always be her home.

The metal bucket is now full.

The soldier gently reaches down, take the bucket... and POURS the radioactive milk out onto the ground.

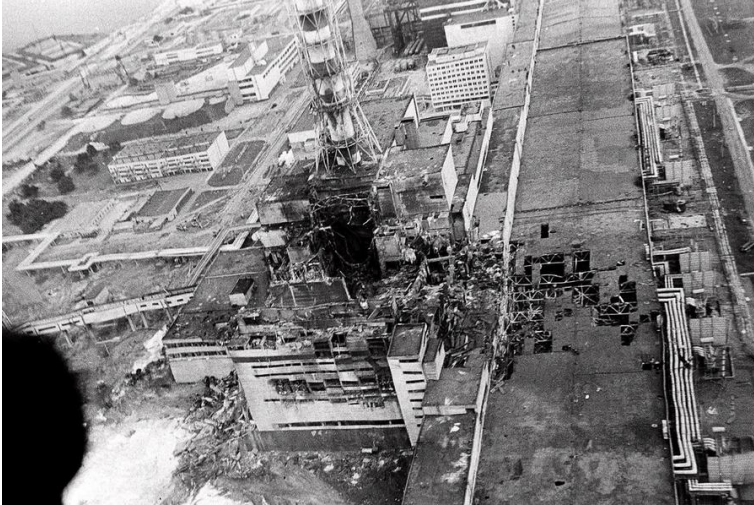
He hands the empty bucket back to the old woman. She takes it without comment...

...puts it under the cow, and begins milking again.

### **Circling The Reactor**

Scherbina, Legasov and General Tarakanov survey the site from a HELICOPTER. We can see the impact of the LIQUIDATION – the masses of soldiers who have arrived to begin the cleanup of the "Zone."

Endless lines of trucks, huge tents, construction equipment being offloaded... roads being carved...



*A view of the damaged reactor. The roof debris was mostly graphite ejected from the core. One section, dubbed "Masha," was the deadliest spot on the planet.*

But right now, Legasov is telling Tarakanov about the roof. The fire has long gone out, but the debris ejected by the explosion of the core— mostly the graphite block that surrounded the fuel rods— is sitting in chunks on the roof.

There are three roof sections... the men have given them names. "Katya" is putting out 1,000 roentgens, slightly more than a fatal dose. "Nina" is a little worse, at 2,000

roentgens. If you spent more than a few minutes with Katya or Nina, you will be dead within a month... at best.

Because those areas are unsafe for any human to work, the Soviets have rigged together old moon rovers from the space program, clad them with lead, and are driving them via wired remote from a control room at the base of the plant.

It's slow going, but progress is being made.

"And what about that part of the roof?" asks Tarakanov.

The helicopter circles around the largest section of roof, which is utterly covered in chunks of gray/black graphite rubble. Tons of it.

"That's Masha," says Legasov. "12,000 roentgen. If you stood near that rubble, you would die instantly. Full protection? Maybe sixty seconds before you receive a lifetime dose, at 90 seconds your life expectancy would cut in half, two minutes... you're dead in a month. We can't even get the remote control rovers to work up there. She fries the circuits. Masha is the most dangerous spot on the planet."

"So what do we do?" asks General Tarakanov.

Scherbina sighs. "That's what we were going to ask you."

## **The New Recruit**

An army truck rumbles down a road, full of fresh-faced young men pressed into service as Chernobyl "liquidators" – the army of men sent to clean up the Exclusion Zone. We

meet PAVEL, 23, thin, pale, frightened. He sees men on the side of the road digging up dirt with shovels... some of them wearing gas masks. Some not. Others have no shirt on.

One man is throwing up. No one seems to care.

The truck rumbles past a checkpoint with a sign that says DANGER: NO ENTRY

## **ORIENTATION**

Pavel walks through sprawling base camp, a massive city of identical tents, trying to find his assignment. He arrives a tent with the correct number on it and enters... inside are BORIS, 27, full beard, an enormous bear of a man. And YURI, 25, wiry and intense. A BURN etched around his left eye, which is clouded over.

They're smoking and drinking. Playing cards. What the fuck does this kid want?

Pavel explains that he is new, he was assigned to them... they are in animal control? Yuri chuckles... Yuri is one of those men who laughs without smiling.

Boris says "Yes. Animal control. We go out and control all the animals with fucking bullets. Were you in Afghanistan?" Pavel shakes his head. No. Boris is annoyed. It's not enough that he and Yuri did two tours in that hellhole. Now they're sent to *this* hellhole, and they're saddled with boys?

Yuri offers Pavel a cigarette. "Oh, no thank you. I don't smoke." Yuri shakes his head. "They've run out of men. Now they're sending faggots."

Okaaaay.

Boris summarizes what Pavel's life is going to be like. As he speaks, we SEE the scenes he describes...

In the liquidation zone, the men work under the order of their commanding officers. They bulldoze the earth and bury it under itself. They cut down forests, wrap the trees in plastic sheeting, and bury those as well. They evacuate stragglers from homes... people who refuse to leave... usually the elderly and sick. They walk around with dosimeters and map the land by how radioactive it is... like human geiger counters.

And if they try to desert, they are shot and left in a pit with the dirt and the logs and the garbage.

But animal control... animal control is actually fun. Just like hunting! See, tens of thousands of people were evacuated from the Zone. They weren't allowed to take their pets. All those animals... dogs, cats... they found a few turtles once... are radioactive. They can wander out of the zone and contaminate the water supply. They can spread disease.

So Boris and Yuri... and now Pavel... drive around from town to town and shoot every fucking animal they see. Best part? They're pets. They're friendly. They're so happy to see a human, they run right up to you! Bang bang bang.

And when the day ends, you dump the radioactive corpses in a ditch, pour a bunch of concrete on top of them, and then... get drunk. Vodka is everywhere. There's more vodka than water.

Endless hunting, a thousand rubles, and all you can drink? It's almost worth it.

"Almost worth what?" asks Pavel.

Boris laughs. Slaps the kid on the back. He'll find out.

### **Roof Cleanup Control Room**

A small trailer full of maps, and the men who control the remote bulldozers.

Tarakanov hangs up the phone. Tells Legasov and Scherbina that the Kremlin refused to contact the Americans for help, but they have agreed to purchase a specialized robot from West Germany – a rover that the Germans say is designed to withstand Masha's radiation.

It will arrive within a day, lowered by helicopter on to the roof... and the cleanup of Masha can finally begin.



*"Liquidators" were sent to Chernobyl by the hundreds of thousands. Very few men received this kind of protective gear.*

Legasov and Scherbina are pleased. But they pull Tarakanov aside...

Legasov tells him he is concerned about the safety of the soldiers in the zone. There are already 100,000 of them, and more are coming. Where is the protective gear? Some sickness is inevitable, but

without any protection, the casualties will be enormous... maybe not

today or tomorrow... but within five years...

Tarakanov nods. He understands.

“And?”

“And the supplies we have are the supplies we have.”

Scherbina is stunned. How can this man be so callous about his own soldiers? Tarakanov isn't bothered by Legasov's anger. The general spent years in Afghanistan. This is not new. When they needed guns, they got vodka. When they needed boots, they got vodka. When they needed penicillin, they got vodka. Never the right thing. Never enough.

Except the vodka. And in Tarakanov's experience... if the vodka keeps flowing, no one remembers enough to complain about anything else. So men die who do not need to die. What country did these two think they lived in? It's not madness to accept the stupidity. It's madness to be surprised when it happens.

Boris Scherbina takes that harder than Legasov. The true believer is losing his faith...

### **Morning - Gearing Up**

Pavel watches as Boris and Yuri gear up for the day's work, attempting to copy them. They each wear standard issue army clothes, but above those, they strap on homemade armor... scraps of lead taken from pots and pans, holes punched in them, laces run through... the lead goes around their chest, and over their crotches.

“Always put on the egg basket,” says Boris. Never mind that their heads are entirely exposed.

As they eat breakfast, Pavel asks if the food here is safe. “Of course,” says Yuri. “Eat anything you want. Just make sure to bury your shit in lead.” Boris laughs. The big man is already drinking.

Pavel fiddles with his DOSIMETER, the radiation detector badge pinned to every liquidator. Boris laughs. “Don't worry about that. You're allowed to go all the way up to 25 roentgen before you're in trouble.”

Oh. Pavel asks how many roentgen Boris has accumulated. “25.” And you, Yuri. “25.”

Everyone has 25. Because if you show a number higher than 25, your commanding officer gets arrested for negligence, and probably shot. So the number is always 25.

Once Boris got a hold of one of the dosimeters and scanned himself. 200 roentgen! And he feels fine. Everyone says one shot of vodka every two hours cures you. Get it? Good.

Boris loads the rifles and ammo boxes into their truck. “Let's go to work for the Motherland.”

## **Moscow – The Soviet State Archives**

A massive, foreboding Soviet building.

Ulyana enters, shows her credentials to the military guard on display. She then hands him a list of documents she would like to pull as part of her responsibility as a Chernobyl Committee member.

The guard scans the list when a phone rings. He picks it up. Eyes flick toward an office overseeing the lobby.

Ulyana follows his gaze, and we cut to—

IN THE OFFICE – of what we'll presume is a KGB officer. He stares at her list. She reminds him that she is with the Chernobyl Committee. He almost grins. As if that mattered.

She says she was given this task directly by Valery Legasov, and he takes his orders from Premier Gorbachev himself. The KGB officer lights a cigarette. Equally unimpressed.

He removes a black marker from his desk, and crosses out every single one of her requests except for one. Then hands the paper back to Ulyana.

Anything else he can do for her?

## **Countryside**

Boris, Yuri and Pavel get out of the truck. Rifles in hand. Ammo belts stuffed. They walk through a GHOST TOWN... like so many others... frozen in the moment people were evacuated.

Their boots crunch on broken glass as they move through a school playground, littered with bottles, dolls, books, deflated soccer balls. Store windows are broken. Cars rust in silence. And then... the barking begins. Boris smiles. Pops a clip in his rifle. "Here we go."

THE PETS – dozens of them... cats... dogs... come running out of the abandoned buildings. Tails wagging... excited... desperate and hungry...

Pavel never fires a shot. He can't. He just stands there frozen as Boris and Yuri begin SHOOTING the animals. One after another after another. A bang and a cry, over and over, like a sick song... and it won't stop... it won't stop...

Behind Pavel, a torn Soviet banner stretched across the street reads:

*"Our Goal Is The Happiness Of All Mankind"*

## **Above The Reactor**

A helicopter lowers a WHITE ROVER into place on Masha. On its side, painted on by hand, we see the word “JOKER”.

IN THE CONTROL ROOM – Tarakanov, Legasov and Scherbina watch from a remote camera. What does that say? Joker?

Tarakanov explains, “I guess the Germans name their robots. Do we have the remote hooked?”

A technician confirms. The remote is online. Phew. The helicopter disconnects from the rover and flies away.

Time to put Joker to work. Tarakanov gives the order, and the men watch as the German Rover TURNS in place, ROLLS five feet forward, and—

—stops. Its lights off, no communication from the remote wire, nothing. It’s completely, utterly dead.

Tarakanov doesn’t understand. “Is this thing actually joking?”

## **Moscow Hospital**

Attendants wheel LYUDMILLA in on a gurney. She’s clutching her stomach. In full labor. Doctors move quickly... something isn’t right.

They ask her who is with her. “No one.” She’s alone. A nurse whispers something in the doctor’s ear. He reacts. She’s from *where?*

## **Roof Cleanup Control Room**

Scherbina and Legasov listen while Tarakanov talks on the phone. “No, they sold us a piece of shit... call them back and— what?”

Tarakanov is stunned. He covers the phone.

“The official story out of the Kremlin is that there is no more than 1200 roentgen at the Chernobyl site. And that’s what they told the Germans. Joker is designed for no more than 2000 roentgen. They gave them the propaganda number.”

Stunned silence. Then Scherbina says “Give me the phone.”

And Boris Scherbina... dedicated communist, member of the Party, high-ranking Politburo official and lifelong instrument of the Soviet Union... loses his shit.

We will never know who is on the other end of the phone. It could be a low-level functionary. It could be Gorbachev himself. All we know is that Scherbina delivers a blistering condemnation, at long last, of the entire the system. The madness and delusion of the lies. The human cost. The stupidity. The immorality. The nightmare of the Soviet system and what it has wrought.

By the time he slams the phone down, Boris Scherbina has lost his religion.

So. What now? Another robot? There isn't one that exists, unless the Americans have one, and the Soviets will not ask them. Shoot the rubble off the roof? And vaporize it into the air, when it can never be recovered? No.

Legasov rubs his eyes. They have no choice. "Biorobots."

Meaning?

Men. Six men at a time, suited in as much protection as can be provided, will go up to the roof. There, amidst more radiation than has ever been freely exposed in human history, they will each shovel rubble for 90 seconds.



*The "biorobots" of Chernobyl clean deadly debris from the reactor roof. Even with full protective gear, each would receive a lifetime dose of radiation in 90 seconds.*

These men will clean up one hundred tons of death, 90 seconds at a time, man after man, for months. There is no other way.

And when they are done, they will be sent home.

With full gear, those 90 seconds will not kill them in the moment, or in weeks, or in months. But it will kill each of them within

years... maybe two, maybe five, maybe 10.

Tarakanov leans back. Then: "I'll be the first."

### **Masha – Time Passing**

A sequence where we follow six men as Tarakanov explains in precise detail what their job will be. They will climb up the ladder to this point here. They will then run from that spot to this spot, and wait at this spot here. There, they will catch their breath.

When they are ready, they will run into the CLEANUP ZONE here, making sure not to stumble through the OPEN HOLE in the roof.

They will be on a stopwatch. They will have 90 seconds total. Ten to get to the rubble. Seventy to shovel chunks and drop them on to a chute. Ten to run back.

When they descend their protective gear will be removed and buried in concrete. Each man will receive a special stipend, and each will be released from their duties as liquidators with special commendation.

And as he speaks, we watch it happening. Six men at a time... men dissolving to other men... to other men... six go up... six come down... they shovel... they run...

Some men embrace when it's over. Some men collapse. Some men vomit. Some men are burnt where a boot had torn on rubble.

And slowly, slowly, slowly... the rubble on Masha begins to disappear...

...ninety seconds at a time.

### **Morning Near Chernobyl**

Drunk soldiers strip down on a dare. Run up close to the fence around the reactor site. Their buddies take pictures.

They're already drunk, and it's not even 9 AM.

Pavel watches. Something's wrong with this place. Something's wrong in the air. There's a madness to it all. A sick freedom that only comes with inevitable death.

Boris shouts to him. "Let's go!"

### **Bang Bang Bang**

A town in the distance. Gunshots.

IN THE TOWN – Boris, Yuri and Pavel walk like bad guys from a Western... right down main street. Shooting anything that moves.

Pavel fires. Kills a cat. Doesn't blink. Not anymore. Just keeps shooting.

He sees movement from behind a slightly open door of a home. He pushes the door open.

It's a bitch nursing a litter of puppies. Oh fuck.

Boris appears behind him. “Look at this. What a fucking shame, huh?” Pavel shakes his head. He can’t. Not this. Boris looks at him like he’s from another planet. “It’s because you’ve never killed a man. After you kill a man, you can kill anything. You could kill your own mother. It’s like there’s a line. You’re on one side... or the other.”

Pavel just shakes his head. Can’t. Boris shrugs. Loads a clip into his rifle.

And Pavel walks away to the sound of bang... bang... bang... bang... bang...

### **Late Afternoon – The Pit**

Their truck pulls up to a huge open pit. A cement mixer is next to it. Waiting. Boris, Yuri and Pavel hop out, and Yuri hits the button that tilts the payload of the dump truck.

Dead animals tumble into the pit. Dozens. Maybe hundreds. And when it stops, the cement worker begins backing up the truck. Until— “Wait.” Boris holds up a hand.

IN THE PIT – one of the puppies is moving. Still alive. Fuck. Boris aims his rifle.

Click. Out of ammo. He turns to Yuri. “Give me your gun.” But Yuri is out of ammunition too. Boris turns to Pavel. Pavel shakes his head. It’s all gone. They used all their bullets.

Boris doesn’t believe them. Don’t pour that concrete! He goes into the truck, tearing open bags, containers... growing emotional... “I just need one bullet!”

The mixer guys don’t have time for this. So the animal will drown in the concrete. What’s the difference?

But Boris is now in tears. As if a dam he constructed within himself has collapsed. As if this is the difference between moral and immoral, civilized and savage, damnation or salvation.

How can there be no more bullets? Don’t bury it alive! Just one bullet... one bullet...

But the concrete mixer begins to pour, burying the poor dog alive... and Pavel watches as Boris, the toughest man he’s ever met, sinks to his knees and sobs.

### **Moscow – Outside Legasov’s Apartment Building**

Legasov emerges from a car. Approaches his building, and is met by Ulyana... why is she waiting? He just got in from Pripyat— he said he would talk to her tomorrow... but she knows something.

And they have to talk. Now.

LEGASOV'S APARTMENT – he makes tea while Ulyana goes through her notes. She has everything now, the whole disaster recreated from the moment the safety test began through the hours following the explosion.

But the explosion... it *was* the AZ-5 button. The shutdown button. The computer that controls the reactor confirms AZ-5 was pressed one second before detonation.

And then there's *this*— a report she found in the archives. See, she has a suspicion that even though the men in the control room of Reactor 4 made horrendous errors, there was a design flaw lurking in the reactor... the RBMK type reactor used all over the Soviet Union... a flaw none of them could have expected. A flaw that led to the explosion at *the very moment they did the right thing*.

The report in her hands has no author. It's a review by someone from five years ago who analyzed the RBMK reactors for the government as part of a energy commission review.

And?

And there are two pages missing. That's probably why the KGB let her take it. But the KGB made a mistake. They didn't redact the table of contents. The missing pages were entitled "Control Rods and Inherent Positive Void Coefficiency".

If she can find those two pages... if Legasov can *help* her find those two pages... she will be able to say, definitively, what caused the Chernobyl reactor to explode.

Legasov takes a sip of tea. Then opens his desk drawer, removes a folder, and hands it to Ulyana. In the folder... the missing two pages.

She doesn't understand. "How... how did you get these?"

"I wrote them."

Valery Legasov knew for years there was a problem with the RBMK reactors. In certain conditions, the tips of the control rods could actually make a runaway reaction worse before shutting the reactor down... much worse... to the point where explosion was not only possible, but a certainty.

He didn't tell Ulyana, because he was desperate for the cause to be something else... for her to find *anything* else... because if it was *this*... then he is complicit. Because he knew. He was told not to say anything. And he obeyed.

Ulyana tells him he has to say something now. At the official inquest. He has to.

Legasov says he won't. Dyatlov— a criminal to be sure— will take the blame. But no one will mention that the Kremlin knew these reactors were time bombs. If he should say such a thing, he would simply be silenced or arrested or shot. So why bother?

Ulyana swallows her disgust. But before she leaves, she tells Legasov that Lyudmilla Ignatenko... the fireman's wife... the one she was trying to protect when she got arrested... gave birth a week ago to a daughter.

The child lived three hours. Cirrhosis of the liver. Radiation poisoning. Do you know what they told Lyudmilla? They said her child absorbed the radiation. They said the infant saved her mother's life by dying.

Valery Legasov lives in a country where babies have to die to save their mothers, and he won't stand up and tell the truth?

### **Chernobyl Reactor**

A helicopter circles overhead. Masha is clear of rubble. It's done.

On the ground, Tarakanov asks a lieutenant how many men went up to the roof. "Three thousand, eight hundred and twenty-eight." 3,828 men... 90 seconds at a time.

And now, the final trip to the roof. Six soldiers go up and erect the Soviet flag on Masha... a symbol of their triumph against the invisible enemy.

On the ground, Pavel watches the flag go up. The months have not been kind to him. He's gaunt. Smoking. His hair is thin. And his eyes... it's like he's aged a lifetime.

A fresh-faced liquidator approaches him. First day on the site. It's amazing... the flag... it makes one proud of one's country, no?

Pavel doesn't reply.

The new guy asks about the dosimeter they've given him. Is there anything to worry about? "Don't worry about that. You're allowed to go all the way up to 25 roentgen before you're in trouble," says Pavel.

"And how much do you have, comrade?"

Pavel never looks at the kid. Just keeps staring at that fucking hammer and sickle.

"25 roentgen."

We cut to the Soviet flag fluttering against a blue sky... and fade to black.

END OF EPISODE FIVE

## **Episode Six – "Legacy"**

### **COLD OPEN – Moscow**

Anatoly Dyatlov is laughing. Smoking a cigarette. And quite drunk.

He sits with two Russian men around a table as they guzzle their way through a third bottle of vodka. He's telling stories. Answering their questions.

Is he scared? About the radiation?

Please. Radiation. No one understands it like Dyatlov. Radiation is a woman. Only deadly to a man who doesn't understand her. To Dyatlov, she is a pussy cat. Did they know he was radiated once before?

In the 1960's, he worked in Siberia. Installing nuclear reactors on Soviet submarines. There was an accident— they tried to blame him for that too, but ultimately he proved it was not his fault— and he received 200 REM... a lifetime dosage!

And what happened? He lost a little weight. Good! His pants fit better. What else? Nothing. And now Chernobyl— again, not his fault. And they say it's a disaster. They're overreacting. Look at him. Fine. Not a scratch.

Radiation is afraid of Dyatlov. Dyatlov is not afraid of radiation. These idiots, these cowards, these morons who say he's to blame... they don't understand the atom the way he does. The atom did not beat him in Siberia. It will not beat him now.

The men like Dyatlov. Admire him. They have no more questions. And it's getting late. They should go. Dyatlov waves them off. Fine, fine. He's tired too.

The men whistle to someone, and now we see we are in a jail cell. Soldiers let the men out, and now Dyatlov is alone in his cell.

He lies down on his cot, finishing his cigarette.

And in the dim light of his cell, the smirk, the arrogance, the pride... it fades.

Something else in its place.

A distant memory.

An old shame.

## **Before The Inquest**

In a stark hearing room somewhere in the Kremlin, Legasov goes over his notes. Waiting for the hour the hearing will begin.

After all this time, the Soviets are finally ready to hear the official report on Chernobyl... what happened, why it happened, and who is to blame.

Ulyana is with him. She has kept Legasov's secret quiet, but it has taken a toll on their relationship. She has agreed to present the body of their findings— but she has also agreed that Legasov will handle the conclusion, where blame is assigned.

The conclusion... where Legasov will lie about the control rods.

She is a small fish. She would say it herself if she didn't think Legasov would contradict her. But without him, without the legitimacy he brings— the information will never see the light of day.

## **The Inquest – and You Are There**

The bulk of the final episode will unfold as two stories being told simultaneously.

One story is the inquest, in which Ulyana walks us through the events of the day leading up to the disaster.

She will methodically take us through it all... moment by moment... the reason for the safety test, the power struggles in the control room, the fateful decisions Dyatlov made... one after another after another...

But as she does it, we will intersperse her interrogations and explanations with flashbacks to that day... extended scenes where we are there, in the moment, watching it happen.

The information we receive from Ulyana will help explain the narrative of that day.

Rather than summarize the events, I will simply state that the drama in the control room... combined with our inherent understanding of the context... will make this the most compelling episode of the miniseries.

We will witness the disabling of safety measures. We will see Dyatlov bully and threaten his men. We will see their mistakes. And we will know things that they do not... things about the state of the reactor... the growing danger Dyatlov does not see...

Ulyana will confront Dyatlov with his terrible secret... that after the Siberian reactor accident, he *did* live and he *did* escape sickness... but his young son died shortly after from leukemia... a cancer almost certainly caused by the radiation on his own father's skin.

She will argue that Dyatlov was a man hell-bent on revenge against nature itself... a man who needed to be master over the atom in order to avoid the terrible truth... that it killed his only child.

But beyond the personal drama, there will be the minute-by-minute ratcheting of tension as the control room moves closer and closer to 1:23 AM... to the moment of detonation.

The drama will unfold almost in the style of the Titanic. The reactor is the iceberg, and we are watching the captain ordering more speed...

We will witness Dyatlov changing the parameters of the safety test to make it more likely that the test will succeed...

We will watch Toptunov fail to maintain the power levels of the reactor, bringing its power output to zero, effectively stalling the nuclear core.

We will see Dyatlov order all of the control rods to be pulled... the equivalent of cutting a car's brake lines in order to help it start moving.

We will experience the panic in the room as the reactor's inherent design flaws cause the power to spike precipitously and without warning, and we will understand exactly why.

We will watch as the massive steel plates covering the fuel rods begin jumping in their sockets like popcorn.

We will learn the reason the dosimeters failed to show the true levels of radiation following the explosion.

And finally, we will arrive at the moment of truth.

The reason the explosion happened at all.

### **Legasov's Choice**

At this point, Legasov will take over from Ulyana. He knows the version of events he is supposed to present. Toptunov pressed the AZ-5 shutdown, but he did it two seconds too late. The core had already exploded, due to Dyatlov's incompetence.

But in the moment he is supposed to deliver the official story to the very Soviet authorities who have insisted upon it...

...he looks at Ulyana, and does what he should have done years ago.

He tells the truth.

He tells the room that because of the faulty design of the reactor, along with a desire to construct the facility quickly and cheaply, the control rods were tipped with graphite.

What none of the men in the room understood was this simple, terrible fact: before the control rods could reduce the amount of power coming from the reactor, they would first displace water.

Water... the only thing left in the core keeping the fuel from spinning off into an unstoppable chain reaction.

Everything the men in the control room had done to that point was like cocking a gun. And in the moment those control rods were lowered... control rods that were meant to remove the bullets from the gun entirely...

...what those graphite tips did instead was pull the trigger.

Legasov says Dyatlov is a criminal. Fomin is a criminal. Brukhanov is a criminal. But the disaster of Chernobyl could not have occurred without this fatal design flaw, which they knew nothing about. A flaw the Kremlin knew *everything* about, and kept secret.

Ulyana nods. At last.

And the Soviets shut the hearing down.

### **Legasov and the KGB**

Legasov meets with the KGB in a small room off the main chamber. They are actually quite nice. This is certainly a misunderstanding. After all, Boris Scherbina has told them Legasov is a great man who did wonderful things. A Soviet hero.

Legasov tells them he is no hero. He tells them he did terrible things. Sent tens of thousands of men to an early grave. In a sane society, he would be shot. For that.

Not for this. Not for telling the truth.

But that's what will happen, right? He's going to be shot for telling the truth?

The KGB men laugh. Of course not. No one's getting shot today. For what? What truth? The Kremlin has determined that Legasov's report will not be accepted. The truth is that the reactor exploded before the AZ-5 button was pressed.

No, Legasov will live a long, happy life. Instead, he will retire from his position with the Academy. He will be taken care of by the People. And he will never speak of these matters again.

Legasov understands, but can't help but ask the question. "Or else?"

The KGB men keep smiling. “Comrade Legasov, don’t ask that question. Why worry about something that isn’t going to happen?”

And now it’s Legasov’s turn to laugh. *Why worry about something that isn’t going to happen?* It’s perfect. It’s the most Soviet possible thing to say.

They should print it on their money.

### **Legasov’s Apartment – The Beginning Is The End**

We are back where we began in Episode One. Legasov completes his recording... the whole story... the whole truth... and puts it in an envelope for Ulyana. At last, she will have his voice, his name, and his credibility. The world will know.

And exactly two years to the moment the reactor exploded, Valery Legasov takes his own life.

### **Epilogue**



*Gas masks litter the floor of an abandoned kindergarten in the ghost city of Pripyat*

We will end in present day. Images of Pripyat... the world’s deadliest ghost city... of the reactor itself... the crumbling sarcophagus... the massive new containment structure being erected above it. And we will learn the fate of everyone.

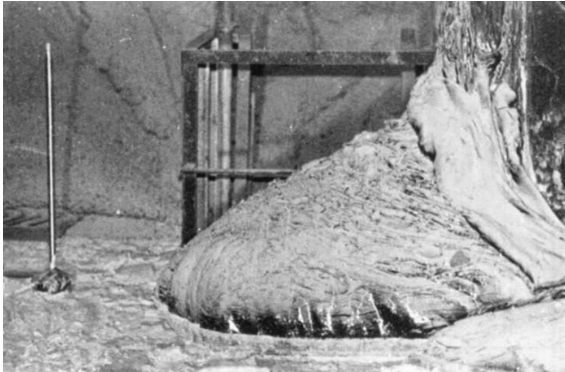
Dyatlov, Fomin and Brukhanov are each sentenced to prison. Fomin commits suicide. And Dyatlov finally loses his war with the atom. He dies in prison.

We are told that Moscow Hospital 6 was so contaminated by radiation from the patients, the building itself had to be razed to the ground.

We see images of the fall of the Soviet Union... we learn the cost of the cleanup, which effectively bankrupted the Soviets and laid the extent of their failures bare to the world. We hear Mikhail Gorbachev say that Chernobyl was “perhaps the real cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union.”

We witness the fate of Pripyat... decaying, its empty buildings littered with toys, gas masks, and communist party literature.

We are told of the exclusion zone, and the deadly levels of radiation that still exist in spots near the reactor and Pripyat.



*The “elephant foot” of uranium and sand, buried under the melted reactor floor*

We see remote camera images taken of the melted “corium” lava... part uranium, part sand... formed into a hideous blob scientists call “the elephant foot.” It is still hot, it is still incredibly lethal... and it will remain so for thousands of years.

We learn that the concrete “sarcophagus” constructed around Reactor #4 is deteriorating, but is now being replaced by a \$1.5 billion new containment structure.

And still, after all this... hope. Nature has slowly returned to the greater region of the enormous exclusion zone. The cleanup effort was as effective as anyone could have hoped. And most importantly, the information Valery Legasov wanted the world to know is now known. His suicide shocked the Soviet nuclear industry into action. Following his death, the remaining RMBK reactors were retrofitted with safety measures to prevent a Chernobyl-like disaster from occurring again, and no new RMBK reactors have been constructed since.

We end with the human cost of Chernobyl. The Soviets kept no records on the health of the men and women who were exposed, either as civilians or liquidators.

The New York Academy of Sciences estimates Chernobyl’s ultimate death toll at approximately 985,000 people... almost all as a result of cancer due to the release of radiation.

The official Soviet death toll, unchanged since 1987...

...is 31.

END OF SERIES