

Siberian Summer

Based on "UFO" the science-fiction TV series created by
Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and Reg Hill (1969-1970)
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WARNING: no adult situations, some naughty words

CHAPTER ONE

January 20th, 2000

"Damn it all, Alec! I need you right now for a special project," Straker fumed, tapping the ashes furiously off his cigarillo.

"Sorry, Ed, the doctors want me back in for tests. I don't want to delay the bad news any longer than I have to."

"What's the scoop?"

Alec Freeman shifted in his seat, "They think the cancer has traveled to the other lung," his voice was quiet.

"Oh, shit, Alec, I'm sorry...is there anything I can do for you?"

Freeman leaned forward, "I'll tell you what you can do for me...if this turns out to be the Big "C" again, you can let me retire."

Straker was silent for a moment. When Alec lost the first lung to cancer, seven years ago, his mood was completely different. He was eager to get his surgery and chemo over with so he could come back to work. The word "retirement" meant he wasn't so optimistic this time. Except "retirement" in this case could mean death if the doctors couldn't remove the cancer completely. How would Straker continue without his best friend and second in command? It wasn't a prospect he cared to consider.

Finally, he said, "Alright, Alec, whatever you want. But, please God, this won't be the cancer coming back. You know I can't do without you, Alec." Straker smiled.

"What's the special project you were mentioning?" Alec decided it was good policy to change the subject right about now. He'd never seen a maudlin Straker, and he didn't want to.

"We've got a couple of Omega operatives in the Yukon checking out that meteor that came down two days ago. Allan Leslie, a Canadian, and Sergei Romanov. You might remember Sergei defected to the West during the early Yeltsin days. Former Russian air force fighter pilot - was on the Russian cosmonaut team at one time." Straker threw a plastic file folder and a computer disc across his desk to Freeman.

"Hmmm...Romanov. Yes. I remember us recruiting him now. I think he brought us some interesting intelligence about the Soviet space program, didn't he? Bit of a mystery man, as I recall. Leslie. I know his work, I think," Freeman flipped through the first couple of pages of the report, "Crackerjack alien tech expert right?"

"One and the same - the best we've got. Been in the field for years. We're lucky to have him."

"So, if Leslie's an alien tech expert, and Romanov's a pilot, what are they doing checking out a meteor?"

"Al started out as a geologist - took his degree from some university in Canada. I figured he could do double duty for us on this job, and give some field training to Romanov. I was going to ask you to go to Canada and coordinate the mission."

"What's so special about a meteor drop in some remote Canadian territory?"

"There's no crater. Most meteors, if enough of them survives entering the earth's atmosphere, will leave a crater, or a certain amount of debris. But, reports from the Yukon are non-committal, so I decided to send two men in there to check it out for sure. Since you won't be able to go over there, I'll send in Lew Waterman, Paul Foster's second at Omega."

* * *

January 21st, 2000 - 09:00 AM

Colonel Lew Waterman stepped off the small bush plane. Major Leslie moved forward to shake his hand, "How was your flight?"

Waterman looked back at the rickety pontoon plane, "I think they're holding that thing together with baling wire and chewing gum," he laughed. The pilot threw Lew's extra baggage out onto the wharf, waved and took off again, leaving the three men to get better acquainted. They got into a copper colored SUV, with Leslie driving.

"I looked at the material you e-mailed me. Pretty routine, is it?" Waterman was trying to get his words out over the bumps they were hitting on the dirt road.

"Thought so at first. Fed-Ex-ed some small fragments to Omega HQ two days ago for the labs there to go over. Been gathering local intelligence, eyewitness reports and stuff. Went out to the site every morning - early. Wanted to get whatever we could before the NASA and CSA people came along and picked things clean. NASA sent an Airborne Sciences ER-2 aircraft from their Dryden Flight Research center to do a flyover earlier today. Collecting atmospheric samples of the meteor's debris trail in the sky. Thing dropped in near the town of Carcross - mostly unpopulated in that area," Leslie swerved to avoid hitting a moose, standing on the side of the road, "Damn Bullwinkles, not scared of anything!" he muttered under his breath.

"What's the local talk?"

"Ohhhh, folks around here are excited about it. Pretty boring up here, so anything that happens out of the ordinary is a big deal. You read my e-mail? Lotsa talk about the big green object in the sky, the sonic booms, the sizzling sounds people heard, the stench. Strength of the detonation was reported as having the energy of two to three kilotons of TNT!"

"I checked with the labs before I came up, but they weren't finished their analyses yet. Any ideas?" Waterman asked.

"Some of the fragments we found seemed a little too...refined... to be space junk. Figured the lab could confirm."

Sergei Romanov spoke up from the back seat, "From what we've seen and heard, there isn't much in the way of actual meteor debris. That's what makes this whole thing suspect. You know what happens to alien ships in our atmosphere - they don't last too long unless they can get underwater. If this really was a UFO crash, they may have been trying to land in Tushi Lake, nearby. Ever since the aliens started utilizing a new frequency for their cloaking technology, we've had more and more of these ground assignments to take care of. More UFOs are managing to get past our MoonBase Interceptors."

Waterman digested this piece of news quietly. Then, he asked, "What's your cover?"

"The usual - Environment Canada. Covers a pile of questions. They're used to EC people poking around up here. Lots of mining and forestry industry that needs to be investigated regularly. Show 'em your EC ID and folks just nod their heads."

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January 21st, 2000 - 10:45 AM

Leslie drove them out to the Lake Tushi area. The three were well prepared with winter camping gear, thermal tents, a mini-generator to run their electronic equipment, food rations and water supplies. They changed into winter dive suits and hiking boots for the walk in. Leslie parked and locked the SUV. All three Omega men started the trudge in, carrying their camping gear and special diving equipment. It was cold - they could see their own breath in the air.

"If this really was a UFO crash, what do you think happened?" Waterman puffed in between steps, adjusting his huge backpack, so he could walk in a more balanced manner.

Romanov spoke up, "We've been debating that, Colonel. If the aliens really were trying to make Tushi Lake, maybe they were unlucky enough to collide with the meteor on the way down. Or perhaps they were the meteor!"

Leslie interjected, "Diving the lake is our next best move, and because of the isolation, we won't attract any attention from the locals. If the UFO did manage to land in there, we'll need to know, so an Omega clean-up crew can come in to handle it."

They crested a small hill and looked down on Tushi Lake. It was pristine, cold and lonely. Just the perfect hiding place for a downed UFO.

From their backpacks, the three Omega men extracted an assortment of underwater weapons, flashlights, detection and measuring devices. They finished suiting up, and one by one, walked into frigid waters of Lake Tushi.

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January 21st, 2000 - 11:30 AM

There had been a certain amount of ice built up on the top surface of the lake, so visibility below had to be assisted by their small underwater lamps. If there was a still functioning, hiding UFO, using the lake as a place of refuge, the Omega men didn't want to arouse their suspicions. They simply wanted to reconnoiter to determine if a greater risk existed.

Leslie was the first to notice the underwater debris trail, "Look at this...," he said quietly over his comm-link, "If this is what I think it is, we can follow it right to the UFO, or its crash site."

"What makes you so sure?" Waterman asked, sweeping his flashlight back and forth over the chunks of charred metal.

"That's how Dr. Bob Ballard found that downed Soviet sub and the Titanic wreck years ago - follow the debris trail and it'll lead you right to what's left of a crashed ship."

Swimming silently, the three men followed the trail, noting the debris was now half buried in a scooped out swathe that moved ahead of them for several hundred meters. The debris pieces were getting bigger and bigger and more varied - mute testimony to the death of a UFO.

Romanov stopped every few meters and took radiation readings, "There's been some unusual radiation here, but the source of it seems to be...just up ahead." He adjusted some of his recording devices and waved Leslie over for a look.

Leslie swam alongside, noted Romanov's readings, and nodded, "We better not stay down too long, with that level of radiation," he replied, over the comm-link, "Need to have further analysis on those readings."

The lake seemed to go deeper, and so did the debris trail. They followed it down, and finally saw the UFO's last resting place. It was there, at the end the trail, a heap of broken pieces. As they swam closer, they all became aware of an odd pulsating glow inside the UFO's battered hull. Leslie started snapping away with his digital underwater camera...

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January 21st, 2000 - 02:35 PM

"That's right," Waterman was repeating into his SHADO security-clearance cell-phone, "We need a full-scale Omega clean-up crew here at Tushi Lake - on the double. Scramble the best you've got and get them here asap! We're setting up our base camp here, so you can home in on our signals...How soon? You'd better get them up here faster than that!"

Leslie was talking to his own cell-phone, "Look, we got radiation levels down there - I'll e-mail you the readings in a minute or two - and I want our best divers, decontamination stuff, hazmat suits, and some heavy equipment in here to lift this baby outta the lake. Oh, yeah, I'll be sending those pictures I took shortly - I'm just down-loading them into my laptop now..."

Meanwhile, Romanov was chatting to his own cell, "...highest security status...Da...only on a need to know basis...Leslie's looking after supplies and equipment, Colonel Waterman's calling in the troops, I need you to connect me to HQ...", he waited while Omega transferred his call to SHADO headquarters in England, "SHADO HQ? This Sergei Romanov with Omega, Security Status One-A. I need to speak to General Straker..."

Straker picked up his receiver, "Straker here."

"General, this is a Security Status One-A call. I've got Sergei Romanov in Canada for you."

"Oh, yes, I've been waiting to hear from that team - put him on!" Straker heard a few crackles and then Romanov's voice came in, "Sir? This is Romanov calling."

"What's happening over there?"

"It's a Code One - we've got a crashed UFO in Tushi Lake, emitting some radiation. There's an Omega clean-up crew on their way with tons of equipment. We're going to have them lift the wreck if possible, and pick up all the debris on the bottom."

"Any sign of life?"

"Not so far, sir. We got close enough to take photos and there were no indications of any survivors. But, we'll be instituting ground searches of course. I don't think we weren't down there long enough to suffer any adverse effects from the radiation, but Leslie's ordered us some hazmat suits and decontamination equipment just the same. He's concerned about the alien ship's reactor core - it's still pulsating."

"Can you stand one more set of eyes on this? I'd love to get over to that site while you're cleaning up. There may be bodies. There might even be survivors - you never know. If so, I'd like to be on hand for some interrogation work." Straker commented.

"Bring your fur-lined underwear, General, reminds me of Siberia over here!"

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January 21st, 2000 - 08:54 PM

Straker's flight was joined by Omega's commander, Brigadier General Paul Foster. Together, they reviewed the information e-mailed by Waterman, Leslie and Romanov.

"Odd radiation levels," Foster commented, scanning through the files on his laptop.

"Yes, well, Leslie's ordered hazmat suits and all the gear for that. He thinks the reactor core is still active."

"I see Leslie's also called for some ROVs - he must be planning to get inside the wreckage. It'd be nice to get an intact core for a change - maybe find a way to adapt the aliens' space drive technology."

"Don't count on it - if it hasn't blown yet, it's probably jury-rigged to go off as soon as our people start tampering with it. You know the aliens don't let any of their tech stuff get into our

hands if they can help it. Better some ROVs get blasted than our best operatives."

"What's our ETA at Tushi Lake?"

"Not for several hours yet - might as well catch a few Zees, Paul. It's going to be a big deal when we do get there," Straker pushed his seat back, propped a pillow behind his head and pulled the blind down on his aircraft window.

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January 22nd, 2000 - 12:07 AM

Straker and Foster touched down at a local Canadian air force base, and made the rest of the journey by special Omega SUV. When they arrived at Tushi Lake, much of the special heavy equipment and underwater salvage gear Leslie requested had already arrived and was being assembled. A small boat and divers were out on the lake, so the ROVs could be deployed from it when ordered.

A small "tent village", complete with geodesic domes for equipment storage was in evidence. Both Straker and Foster smiled when they noticed the Environment Canada logos on everything. Omega left nothing to chance! It was truly amazing how Omega could create a "town" in the middle of the tundra!

Colonel Waterman welcomed Straker and Foster, "Gentlemen, this is our operations dome." They could see Romanov talking on his cell-phone, and outside in the cold sub-zero weather, Major Leslie was busy waving some equipment drivers over to the lake. Waterman offered the SHADO execs hot coffee and sat them down for a briefing.

"Basically, we've got every angle covered. The locals think we're doing an environmental study on the lake bottom. There's been a ground crew out searching the tundra for possible survivors - no sign of life as yet. We've got ROVs ready to go down for another look at the UFO wreck site, and once we get a clearer picture of the wreck's condition, then we should be able to send in some heavy equipment to raise it. The radiation levels don't seem to be escaping out into the atmosphere," Waterman's cell phone jangled and he answered it, "Waterman. Yes. Really? Great."

Waterman got up from his seat, "Leslie says they're ready to lower the ROVs now - would you like a front row seat?"

The three men walked the short distance to the dome where the underwater communications, the reconnaissance camera monitors and video machines were set up. It was very warm inside the dome, to protect the sensitive equipment, and one of the operatives barked at Straker to "shut the damn door!" SHADO's supreme commander grinned good-naturedly and did as he was told. Now was not the time to pull rank!

Leslie was outside on the small boat on the lake, directing the divers in the lowering of the ROVs. He was garbed in an anti-hypothermic outfit. They heard his voice over the comm-link as the ROVs went over the side and down into the water. The ROV pilots were following precise co-ordinates to get down to the UFO wreck.

Foster, Waterman and Straker were all glued to the monitors, as were the other Omega operatives. At first, the ROVs were recording nothing but darkness, then their strobe lights picked up the debris trail and moved in quickly to the wreck itself.

The men watched as the ROVs sent back live video footage of the UFO. Straker and the others could see for themselves the pulsing reactor core, as its brightness lit up the lake bottom.

"We've been taking radiation readings every fifteen minutes," Waterman explained, "Fortunately, the levels are not increasing. If they were, we'd know a core explosion was on

the way and we'd be vacating this area pretty fast. Omega would have to come in afterwards and do a remediation of the site - after the fact. We're hoping the core is stable this time. We've brought in a special containment unit in which to transport the core if we get lucky enough to bring it to the surface with no problems."

"How are they going to bring the wreck to the surface?" Foster asked, his eyes following the pictures on the vid-screen.

"The core will probably be extracted first, and then the largest pieces of the wreckage next. Once the core has been raised and removed, our people can go down and clear up the smaller bits of debris on the lake bottom. We're planning to ship the whole thing to the Omega lab in the Pacific, just in case the core doesn't co-operate with us!"

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January 22nd, 2000 - 04:03 AM

The ROVs had done their job very well. Not only had they been able to penetrate deeply into the UFO wreck, but they'd located several bodies, some intact alien equipment on board, and of course the propulsion drive core. There did not appear to be any survivors, or any indication that surviving aliens might have jettisoned a life pod. The sheer magnitude of the wreckage seemed to preclude the possibility than anyone could have survived at all. And, ground searches by Omega operatives did not find any sign of escaped survivors.

While some special remotely operated underwater salvage equipment was deployed to go down into the lake, underwater workers were sent down, as well. In order to bring up the core, it was necessary to have a human presence. Major Leslie led the team of Omega operatives, all dressed in anti-radiation hazmat diving gear, down into the wreckage. Their first task would be to effect a disconnection of the core from the propulsion section of the UFO. Along with Romanov, expert Omega divers Little, Robertson, Tupper, Ferguson and Chacon were part of the dive team.

Leslie had seen and worked with cores before, but never under such unusual circumstances. Usually, SHADO people had a very short window of opportunity to get a look at alien cores due to their instability in the earth's atmosphere. They always exploded after about 48 hours. Oddly enough, alien cores left no serious amount of radiation after they exploded, which meant Omega and SHADO people could come in and remediate the wreck sites quickly and safely. SOPs still maintained the wearing of special protective gear for all the technicians and workers. The aliens had developed a propulsion technology that utilized a "clean" power source to transport their space craft at light speed. If SHADO could get a safe sample core for analysis, perhaps they might be able to unlock the aliens' secret of faster than light travel for themselves, and carry the battle back to aliens' home planet some day.

"How's it looking down there, Leslie?" Waterman asked through the comm-link.

"Well, we're gonna round up the bodies and send them to the surface in a few minutes. Romanov and Little are packing up the intact, movable alien equipment for transport. My team has been looking at the core itself...I gotta tellya, this core set up doesn't look like the others I've seen."

Straker cut in, "Is it booby-trapped?"

"Don't think so. But, it's got an extra attachment I've never seen before."

"It could be a bomb!"

"Doesn't look like an alien explosive device - I've seen a few of them - this is something new. Nah... I think we'll wait to bring this baby up last thing. I'd like some time to look at it further before we risk disconnecting it and bringing it to the surface."

Romanov and Little's package of alien equipment came up shortly. It was a mixture of detection, life support, and medical devices, plus a few weapons. All of these were immediately sorted, quarantined, and placed in secure storage. When the three bodies came up, they were likewise packaged and made ready to be airlifted out with the alien equipment to the Omega labs.

Straker was personally distracted by Leslie's discovery. He didn't like the idea of some strange alien bomb going off, contaminating the area, destroying valuable SHADO and Omega's equipment and killing so many vital people. But, one way or another, the core had to be removed, just as the wreckage had to be. They simply could not be left there.

Leslie and the team surfaced, and went to the command dome for a briefing.

"Every delay is dangerous!" Straker insisted.

Foster interjected, "If we can detach the core from the UFO's propulsion drive, maybe it won't explode. Then we could raise the whole thing at once."

"Look, the core's been down there with the wreckage for more than 48 hours now," Leslie remonstrated with him, "We're dealing with something different down there, I'd like to know what that attachment is before I take it apart."

Little chimed in, "We can post more perimeter guards to keep out the curious and put up another dome to house it once it's up. The engineers brought a radiation-safe dome for us."

Leslie nodded, "OK, then, that's what we'll do. We'll bring up the UFO with the core inside, but we'll only have those 48 hours to do something about it. Once it's out of the water who knows what it'll do! But, I'm goin' back down to supervise the lift. I know the wreck and the site best." Leslie's voice was firm, "The radiation levels are stable right now. I wanna get this thing safely out of the water so we can deal with it."

Waterman nodded, "Alright, then. Major Leslie, you co-ordinate the lift and Romanov, you get the new dome ready to go up over it the minute it hits dry land."

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January 22, 2000 - 06:43 AM

The UFO wreckage and its still pulsing core were safely ensconced in a protective geodesic dome erected by the engineering crew. A team of scientists were poring over its interior, eager for a first hand look at the controls and various systems.

Little, Robertson and Chacon led the dive team to start cleaning up the debris trail. Aided by ROVs and underwater salvage equipment, they picked the bottom clean of every scrap of metal and interior UFO material they could find. Deep water sensing devices, and special metal detectors helped them home in on every piece of alien trash possible, even the ones buried under the lake's muddy bottom.

While Omega's expertly-trained divers scoured the lake bottom, Leslie and Romanov worked with the scientists on examining the core. It defied explanation. It was obviously not a conventional alien core. If it had been the normal type, it might have exploded some time earlier. But radiation levels had remained constant. Their chief concern was of course the extra piece of equipment attached to the propulsion unit. The team spent over twenty-seven hours straight on it. As if to mock them, the core sat in the protective geodesic dome, gently pulsating light, emitting radiation at high enough levels to require the team to wear hazmat suits, and giving up none of its secrets.

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January 23rd, 2000 - 01:23 PM

"I want to evacuate the base here, and attempt to remove that attachment," Leslie

informed Straker, Foster and Waterman the next morning.

"Then you've decided the attachment is a bomb of some sort?" Straker asked.

"Don't know for sure what it is, but we'll never know unless we stop thinkin' like a buncha candy-asses and take that thing apart. Move the crews and their equipment out to a safe distance. I'll keep my cell phone open for communications. Romanov and Little will stay with me."

"What about using remote equipment to do this job?" Waterman asked, "Like conventional bomb squads do?"

"Because this thing isn't necessarily a bomb - I just want everybody the hell out of here in case I'm all wrong. There's no remote equipment to deal with this situation. It needs a real pair of hands."

As expert in alien technology as he was, Leslie could also be an expert risk-taker and proverbial pain in the ass. Straker and Foster exchanged glances - they knew he was right this time.

Foster sighed, "Ok, I'll give the order to clear out right away. It'll just be you three and the core. Give us about an hour."

* * *

January 23rd, 2000 - 02:33 PM

The "tent village" was deserted. Most of SHADO and Omega's equipment had been moved off-site, and a thin perimeter of security guards ringed the area with sensing devices and binoculars from about three miles away. SHADO mobiles and special SUVs housed the personnel, with Straker, Waterman and Foster occupying one of the command vehicles. They had established an open comm-link with Leslie and his team, as well, via cell phone and remote video-cam.

"Ok, I'm gonna disconnect this attachment here, and everybody hold their breaths," Leslie commented, as he carefully pulled back the piece of alien equipment. His gloved fingers gingerly slid the attachment to one side - and he gasped.

From the core, a beam of light shot out! The light coalesced into a column, man-height. It was swirling, glowing, humming softly.

Straker's frantic voice came over the comm-link, "Leslie! Little! What's happening there!"

Little replied, "We're still here, General. But, we've got an...anomaly, I guess you could say..."

The Omega team could hear collective sighs of relief as the SHADO and Omega people could tell the men were still alive.

Leslie, Little and Romanov watched, spell-bound, as the column of light swirled slowly, their comm-links forgotten in the heat of their discovery.

"What can you tell us?" This time it was Foster's voice.

Leslie shook his head, still staring at the light, "Whatever it is, I think I can safely say it isn't a bomb. Just what it really is, I'm not able to say right now!"

"Is it safe for us all to come back on-site?" Waterman asked.

"Well, it hasn't blown us to rat shit yet, if that's what you mean...I'd rather be on the safe side and keep you guys back a while longer..."

Foster interjected again, "Is the core heating up?"

Little ran one of his sensor devices over the core again. He shook his head, "The radiation levels have dropped a bit...I'd almost say this 'thing', whatever it is, is drawing power from the core!"

Romanov looked at Leslie. It was obvious they'd all come to the same conclusion. Leslie adjusted the attachment back to its original position. Suddenly, the shaft of light shut down.

"What are you reading now?" Romanov asked Little.

"Radiation back up to original levels. It was feeding off the core!" he replied.

"We've shut it down - not the core - just the...light...that came out of it...," Leslie told his cell phone.

"That's it!" Straker's voice announced, "I coming back. I want to see this thing up close and personal!"

* * *

January 23rd, 2000 - 03:04 PM

Straker, Foster, Waterman and one of the Omega scientists returned to the base camp. All were eager to see just what Leslie and his team had not been able to describe. They suited up in identical hazmat anti-radiation suits and went in for a look.

Waterman blinked and whistled, "God! What is it?"

Leslie had recreated the column of light they'd seen earlier. It wavered there, suspended in space, glowing, swirling, making a soft humming sound.

Straker moved towards it haltingly, "Is it...solid?" He reached a hazmat gloved hand out, but couldn't bring himself to actually touch it.

Little was monitoring the radiation levels as before. He raised and lowered his sensor pack, sweeping around the core, "Same radiation shifts as the first time - the core is obviously supplying the power to this...thing..."

"What the hell could it be for?" Foster asked, his eyes transfixed on the light shaft, his voice hushed. They were all speaking just barely above a whisper, as though the alien apparatus could hear them.

Raychaudhuri, one of SHADO's scientists, moved forward, measuring the energy emanating from the light, "It's pulling an enormous amount of power from the core...I wonder if that's why the core is remaining stable."

Leslie moved ever closer to the light. He was looking at it as closely as his hazmat suit permitted, "It's made of energy, right?" he asked Raychaudhuri.

"Yes, that's apparent," she replied, "The attachment you found must be the trigger, or the connector to the core that creates this phenomenon. This piece of equipment appears to function only with the power of the core. You can turn it on and off."

Foster spoke again, "Is there any chance this thing is why the core hasn't exploded yet?"

"I'd rather not hazard that kind of guess, but it's a possibility. The radiation levels have remained stable since the core was found, and that in itself is unusual. Levels have fluctuated only when this device has been activated."

"So, what's it for? Is it some sort of new alien propulsion unit?" Waterman asked.

Raychaudhuri shook her head, "I don't think so. It operates independently of the core, even though it's attached to the core and draws power from it."

Leslie moved closer again to the shaft of light. A small sizzling sound accompanied his hand as it slipped into the energy beam.

"Shit!" Straker shouted, as Foster and Little grabbed Leslie and pulled him back from it. His hand emerged unscathed.

"Just what are you trying to do, mister?" Straker's voice was shaking, "Get yourself killed?"

Leslie was still staring at the beam of light, "Felt something in there...it was...like sticking

my hand into a waterfall...I could feel something ...swirling around my hand, but it didn't hurt...", he looked down at his hand, "I could feel it... tingling through my glove..."

Stepping up with his sensor device, Little monitored Leslie, "There's no radiation on him - whatever this thing is - it's clean energy."

"So what do we do with it?"

Straker inclined his head, "Can we send the whole thing to the Omega labs? Is it transportable? We don't have enough diagnostic tools here to do this job right."

"We could seal the wreckage, the core and the attachment up and send them out by aircraft," Foster suggested.

"Let's make the necessary arrangements and get the whole shooting match to a safer place. Every hour we stay here, we're courting additional risks in just about every way."

Leslie had returned to the attachment control panel. There was a padd on it with colored touch plates. He ventured a hazmat gloved finger out to touch one.

The swirling light in the beam slowed down, the humming changed - becoming even softer...

"What's happening...?" Straker turned back to see Leslie working with the padd.

"Look!" Foster pointed to the light beam.

It was coalescing - the swirling light was fading - the beam opened up to show a summer forest scene - complete with the sounds of birds, sunlight pouring through the widening beam-aperture!

"Gentlemen," Raychaudhuri spoke in her clipped Indian tones, "I think we have our answers in front of us."

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January 23rd, 2000 - 04:56 PM

"But, is such a thing theoretically within the realm of possibility?" Straker asked, astonished.

Raychaudhuri shrugged her shoulders, "Not with our current technology. Obviously the aliens have managed to create some sort of portal for themselves. What they were planning to do with it is another set of questions entirely."

The SHADO and Omega people watched the vista in the light beam - the bucolic forest with its sunlight and wild birds flitting from tree to tree.

"Is that place here on this planet or theirs?" Waterman asked.

"It looks like an earth locale, but since we've never seen their planet, it's hard to say. They're humanoid like us, their planet might be a lot like earth," Raychaudhuri temporized.

They all watched as a group of humanoids moved into the "picture" carrying what looked like hunting rifles, speaking and laughing amongst themselves. One of them, coming so close they could almost reach out and touch him, yelled out and pointed, while the others brought their firearms up to the ready, as if to fire, "Medveditsa! Medveditsa!"

"Is that the alien language?" Foster asked excitedly.

Romanov shook his head, "They're hunting bears. She-bears!"

Straker grabbed Romanov's arm, "How do you know?"

"Because they're speaking Russian!"

* * *

January 23rd, 2000 - 05:30 PM

A stunned silence followed Romanov's pronouncement. The humans in the portal fired their rifles and obviously missed. There was another flurry of excited Russian conversation and

the men moved off, out of view, through the forest.

Leslie was the first to speak, "Look, I just hit the touch padd and this picture came up. I didn't know what would happen."

Straker looked at Romanov, "Sergei, are you sure you heard them speak Russian?"

"It's my mother tongue, sir. Unmistakable."

Foster frowned, "Why would the aliens be interested in Russia?"

"Vast areas of the country are isolated and sparsely populated. We've had sightings and landings there for years," Raychaudhuri suggested, "It's also a treasure-house of minerals and metals. We know the aliens have often come here trying to steal our natural resources for themselves."

"May I make an observation?" Romanov interjected, "Remember that hunter that passed closely in the beam? I noticed his rifle. It was not modern. It didn't have sights or bullet clips. I'd say it was antique."

Waterman shrugged, "So he can't afford a new one?"

Romanov shook his head, "My grandfather had one very much like it - mounted on the wall in his dacha. He said it belonged to his father, a minor member of the tsarist nobility who went over to the Communists. It was manufactured in 1905."

More silence. Leslie finally said, "Do we know what was going on in Russia around that time?"

Straker twigged to Leslie's inference, "My God! A time portal?"

Foster's voice was firm, "That's it, then. We have to find out what would interest the aliens about Russia at the turn of the 20th century!"

CHAPTER TWO

January 23rd, 2000 - 07:12 PM

"Look, we know the aliens are capable of some very weird things, right?" Leslie stated, seated with the others around a small table in the command dome, "Remember that episode in the 1980's when they managed to suspend time itself?"

Straker nodded, "Don't remind me!"

"So, a time portal isn't all that far-fetched an idea for them. The question is: what were they planning? Why would they set up a portal to take them into Russia? And where in Russia?"

Romanov looked up from his laptop, "I've been doing some research. Besides the political unrest at home, and a very unsuccessful Russo-Japanese War in 1906, Russia was still lagging behind the West industrially and commercially. That was part of the problem - the tsarist government was moribund - stagnant. The country wasn't making any great technological strides at that time."

"Maybe technology wasn't the issue. What else would Mother Russia have to offer?" Foster asked.

"Real estate? Russia still has a lot of wide open spaces where aliens could hide operations, bases, secret labs." Raychaudhuri commented, "Siberia, in particular, has hundreds of small lakes which would provide the perfect locations for underwater sites, and little in the way of sophisticated human inhabitants to cause security problems."

Leslie ran a big hand through his thick shock of silver hair, "Yeah, look where we are right now. Siberia and the Canadian Territories have a lot in common."

"The climate isn't the friendliest, especially in winter, but an underwater alien base would circumvent any weather problems."

Romanov broke in again, "I'm running down a year by year listing of Russian events. I've got something interesting here," he began reading from his laptop screen, "In June, 1908, there was a huge meteor blast in Siberia - knocked people at ground zero unconscious, and blew up about three to ten miles worth of forest. Later researchers to the site said it was reminiscent of the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War Two. The explosion was believed to have had the force of thirty million tons of TNT...Mother of God...one of the later scientists even proposed the blast was the result of an atomic powered extraterrestrial spacecraft exploding...the other scientists laughed him out of the Academy..."

Those around the table were again silent as they all digested this latest tidbit of information.

"Where did this take place again?" Raychaudhuri inquired.

"Near the Tunguska River, Siberia," Romanov looked up at the others. He could feel the tension in the air.

"Romanov, I want you to prepare a dossier on this incident, along with all the climatic, industrial and geographical information you can acquire. Put it together asap, draw on any and all Omega resources you need to," Foster instructed him, "Leslie, we'll need a full report from you and Raychaudhuri on this portal - whatever it is - how it's operated, what its danger quotient is, its operational potential - can it be set to specific time frames, and how it's actually utilized. Get your team together, get some disposable items and start testing it."

Leslie spoke up, "Did that shipment of alien equipment get sent out to the labs yet?"

Raychaudhuri shook her head, her glossy black braid moving across her shoulders,

"When we vacated the base camp, we held them back."

"Good," Straker said, "You can have a look at them too. We need answers now. We can't wait for the Omega labs in NYC."

"Ok, people, we've all got work to do," Foster stood up, "I'll give you twelve hours to put this all together - time is of the essence."

* * *

January 24th, 2000 - 07:30 AM

By breakfast-time the next morning, the teams were ready to report their progress. The scent of bacon and eggs and coffee permeated the dome, as the Omega and SHADO personnel helped themselves to their morning meal and steaming-hot java. Straker stood outside the dome, shivering in his thermal parka, smoking one last cigarillo.

Foster met him outside the dome, shaking his head at SHADO's supreme commander, "You're really desperate, Ed," he indicated the cigarillo in Straker's paw.

Straker grinned, "And, you're beginning to sound suspiciously like Alec Freeman! Did he tell you to harass me about my smoking?"

"He didn't have to...speaking of Alec, have you heard how his exploratory went?"

"I got an e-mail last night - he's resting comfortably and awaiting the lab results," Straker threw his stub on the ground and squashed it mercilessly underfoot, "He's talking about retirement, you know..."

"Alec's an old war horse - he'll drop in the traces before he retires," Foster clapped his gloved hands together and watched his breath turn to steam in the frigid air.

"He sounded pretty worried. He's only got one lung left now."

"That should be a lesson to you. Cancer is no laughing matter."

"Yeah, yeah - I've heard it all before. Time to face the music...", he led the way inside the dome where the others had congregated.

Straker and Foster went in, joined the breakfast buffet line-up and got some grub before sitting down at the table. Leslie was attacking his plate of food with amazing speed. Little and Chacon were conversing confidentially over their coffee and tea mugs (their relationship was one of Omega's worst kept secrets!). Raychaudhuri and Waterman were sharing a look at one of their laptops intently. The others were variously engaged in scarfing down some food or topping up their coffee from the big urn.

Foster opened the meeting to order and called upon Romanov to give his report first.

"The meteor blast in question struck on June 30, 1908, at 7:17 am. The closest human observers were a group of Evenki reindeer herders camped about 30 kilometers from ground zero. They were reportedly asleep in their tents at the time. All were thrown into the air, and one man died after striking a tree and being injured. Many of the reindeer were killed outright, and of those still living, many ran off in fear. The two nearest towns were Kirensk and Kansk - the latter being very close to the Trans-Siberian Railway tracks. Occupants in both towns heard loud bangs, like gunshots. They variously reported seeing 'a ball of fire' in the sky. The resulting blast destroyed about 1200 square miles of forest in the Tunguska River area, with fallen, burning trees producing a great deal of smoke. There were also reported magnetic disturbances, changes in the atmospheric pressure, and many radiation effects, such as skin diseases on the local reindeer and human population, and evidence of accelerated plant growth. Researchers didn't actually get on-site until 1921 - during the tail-end of the Russian revolution. One scientist, E. L. Krinov, theorized about the possibility of the blast having been caused by an exploding alien spacecraft. He'd been to Japan after WWII and likened Tunguska

damage to that he'd seen in the two cities which the Americans bombed. In 1908, there were also other areas of Europe which experienced 'night displays' - Berlin, Madrid, London, Copenhagen, etcetera."

"Thanks, Sergei...Al, what have you got for us?" Foster nodded to Leslie.

Clearing his throat, and chewing his right thumb nervously, Leslie started, "I'm gonna give you a quick run-down on the alien equipment - I've sent the list to all your e-mail sites. There were seven pieces we identified as medical/diagnostic instruments - all calibrated, we think to the alien physiology. We're hoping the Omega labs can do some repair work on them - we're all pretty much techs here, not doctors," he looked back at his laptop report, "The divers brought up several large ampules of the aliens' green breathing liquid - they're intact. Dr. Raychaudhuri, here," he indicated the Omega scientist, "opened one and started an analysis of the liquid. I'll let her fill you in on that."

"As we've known for some time, thanks to Brigadier General Foster," Raychaudhuri nodded to Paul, "The aliens' green liquid is tolerable for human respiratory systems, at least for short durations. The chemical mix is rich in oxygen, which may tend to give humans a slightly "high" feeling at times. It also dyes the skin of both aliens and humans as a result of the skin's ability to absorb color. We've learned over the years of captured aliens that they use a special chemical in their hair, as well, to help them absorb breathable gases better."

Leslie picked up, "In addition to the ampules, we found, stored in various areas of the UFO wreckage, food and beverage stores, possible medication and first-aid kits, extra pressure suits, personal sidearms, and a number of what we believe are sensing devices. We're sending these items for full analysis at the Omega labs and the alien bodies for complete post mortems."

"What about the portal itself?" Straker asked, anxiously.

Running a hand through his silver hair, Leslie cleared his throat again, "The padd which brought up the entry to Siberia appears to be detachable - we're not sure - this might mean it can be used as a remote unit for travelers going through the portal. It may also be a device which sets the portal for times and locations. It's hard to say. We didn't want to mess with it so much that we'd lose the setting for Siberia, 1908. If that's where the aliens had it set, they must have had their reasons for going there."

Foster looked at Little, "Pete, you were in charge of the portal experiments."

"So far, we've determined it's safe for inanimate objects. We tossed stones and rocks, some paper napkins, and a woolen touque with the label taken out, through the portal. They're still lying there on the ground, so far undisturbed, where they passed through the portal into Siberia. No person has passed into the portal, except for when Leslie put his hand in the light beam."

Raychaudhuri spoke up again, "I examined Al's glove and his hand. No radiation, no burns, no cellular damage or residual effects as yet. While I can postulate the portal is safe for human travel, I can't guarantee it. And, there's always the consideration of whether those moving from this side of the portal to Siberia can come back through safely."

Straker's expression was one of frustration, as he said, "After all this analysis, we really don't know a whole lot more about this thing, do we? Theories, postulations, no guarantees!"

"Given the limited resources we have here at base camp, I think they've done well," Foster commented firmly, "The big thing, I suppose, will be to send a human through the portal and bring them back."

Waterman put his coffee cup down, "I think this is going to call for volunteers."

* * *

January 24th, 2000 - 08:45 AM

Leslie was insisting on being the first one through the portal. Romanov's view was that he was Russian and spoke the language fluently, so he should be the first. Straker and Foster knew they'd have to make a decision quickly, so the portal team could get themselves ready to cross over. It was going to be an event fraught with concern, whoever was chosen as part of the team!

One of the major considerations was still: why had the aliens been so interested in Siberia, 1908? Was it really because of the "meteor" blast? Had it been the explosion of an alien ship which caused all that destruction? And, why had an alien ship crash-landed in Tushi Lake in the year 2000 in the Yukon? Was there any connection between the two crashes?

Straker and Foster narrowed the team candidates down to Leslie, Romanov, Little, Chacon and Raychaudhuri. There was no question in their minds that Romanov was probably the best choice because of his fluency in the language, and his knowledge of the political, social and economic situation in tsarist Russia. But, Leslie's experience with the portal and other alien technologies could not be discounted. The major parameter counting against Leslie was his age - he was fifty. Little was another interesting choice. He was much younger than Leslie, and he had previous field work with alien artifacts, but Straker and Foster were not keen on the idea of sending Little and Chacon on a mission together. They were concerned that their personal relationship could affect the mission - shades of Gay Ellis and Mark Bradley! Dr. Raychaudhuri, with her adeptness for analysis and her expertise with alien technology, particularly the portal itself, was also distinct possibility, but her ethnic appearance might be the cause of unwanted attention on this most secret of missions.

The candidates sat down with the SHADO/Omega command team for one last discussion. Straker wanted to hash out all the theories again.

"If an alien spacecraft caused the explosion in Siberia, the aliens must have wanted to look for survivors - or collect debris or equipment - whatever survived the crash," Little suggested.

Leslie replied, "That's the thing - what if there were survivors from that crash - they might have found a way to change history! We'd never know!"

"Did anything particularly important in terms of technology come out of Siberia at that time?" Foster looked to Romanov, who'd become their resident Russian history expert.

"Nothing that I'm aware of, sir. If it had, perhaps the tsarist government would have done better during WWI and the Revolution might not have happened at all. The losses in the First War were partly to blame for the ultimate failure of the Tsarist government."

"Still, what if there were survivors? What if it's up to us to go back there and stop them?" Chacon added, in her melodic Spanish accent, "Maybe we're the ones to affect history, not the aliens! We are meant to go back in time and keep our history on the path it has so far followed!"

Everyone sat silently, digesting the truth of that statement. The "what ifs" were piling up considerably.

Straker splayed his hands out on the desk, "Well, one way or the other, we have to choose a team and send them into the portal. You all realize that once you go through, any number of circumstances could keep you from getting back, or completing your mission. It could be a suicide job. So think very carefully about what you're getting yourselves into. If anyone wants to back out now - speak or forever hold your peace."

The Omega and SHADO people all looked at each other. Nobody spoke up.

"Alright, Paul, what's the score?" Straker asked, his expression serious.

"I think the best choices we can make are Leslie, Romanov and myself."

"What makes you think you're going on this trip? I need you here to co-ordinate...," Straker spluttered.

Foster held up his hand, "That's right - I need to co-ordinate, and I can't do it behind the lines. I have to be in the trenches. Besides, I speak a little Russian myself!"

"Begging your pardon, General, but command officers don't usually accompany field teams, especially on hazardous missions," Little told Foster, "I ask permission to replace you on the team."

Foster shook his head, "I know you'd all put yourselves on the line, but we do need a command officer out there to make decisions."

Leslie got up out of his chair, "Well, I've gotta go and get our equipment ready for this little shindig. How much time have I got?"

Looking down at his watch, Foster said, "I'll give you 90 minutes. Then we're out of here."

CHAPTER THREE

January 24th, 2000 - 10:03 AM

The portal team was dressed, packed and ready on time. All the other candidates for the mission had gathered in the geodesic dome where the core and the UFO wreckage were hidden, to see them off. It was one of those missions that everyone volunteered for, but most breathed a sigh of relief if they didn't up getting it.

Waterman and Straker were there, and Little was doing a final briefing with Leslie, Romanov and Foster. All three men were carrying some modern equipment, such as palm-sized mini-comps and sidearms, but they had them well hidden in their clothing and backpacks.

"OK, your mini-comps are loaded, and you've got battery packs for ten hours each - the maximum. We're going to time you and if you haven't returned in three days, we'll send a back-up team in after you. You'll have to return to this geographical location so we can find you with the portal."

Straker spoke up, "I know I don't have to tell you how important this mission is. Your first objective will be to find out if any aliens escaped the explosion; the second objective is to neutralize them before they can change our time line; and lastly, to examine the blast site for any incriminating alien evidence left behind from the accident, and dispose of it safely and secretly. You may have to bring it back here to our time in order to do that. You'll have to determine whether that course of action is indicated based on what you find."

The three Omega men walked to the open portal - its beam showing summer in Siberia. They took one last look around, and stepped through...

* * *

PORTAL MISSION #1, DAY ONE - June 29, 1908

...into the wooded area they'd all seen when the portal had first opened. Save for the faint sizzle and pop they heard as it faded quickly from view, there was no sign whatsoever that the portal had ever been there. Just trees, sunshine and trilling birds.

Romanov handed out area maps and compasses. They'd been able to print off a topographical map of the area, showing roads, train tracks, other points of interest. He dug out his first map and judged them, using his compass, to be many versts (the Russian distance measurement) if walking to the nearest town, a small trading post called Vanavara. It was difficult to know if they had entered the portal just before the alien ship explosion, or just after. They also did not want to waste one of their valuable days going around in circles. Romanov marked their spot with a tiny electronic beacon that made no audible sound, but could be tracked on their own miniaturized equipment. He buried it quickly under a thick fallen tree trunk.

"There, now we can find our way back."

"Provided some squirrel doesn't eat our beacon first," Foster smiled, "Let's each move out for six hours in one of three different compass directions and report back here. We can cover more ground this way. Once we've covered the surrounding areas, we'll reverse and include the last compass direction. Leslie, you'll go south, Sergei, you go north, and I'll go east. Remember - don't talk to anyone, avoid being seen at all costs, and keep your eyes peeled for aliens! Keep your sidearms at the ready."

* * *

Leslie trod as quietly as possible over the wooded terrain. He moved slowly, trying to

avoid stirring up any wildlife. A flock of birds in a panic could signal his arrival to friend or foe alike.

He took frequent compass readings to make certain he was headed correctly in the right direction. By the location of the sun, he judged it to be at least noon hour, but he made no attempt to change the time on his watch. He wanted to know precisely when they'd come through the portal so he didn't lose track of their time.

If they'd arrived in Siberia after the explosion, than he saw no evidence of it. The forest was lush, deep and green in places, and he soon made his way to a river bank. Was it the Tunguska? He consulted his maps briefly. No, it was the Khushma River. But judging from their research and the indications on the map, he was quite close to the actual epicenter where the blast itself had/would go off. He shook his head of thick silver hair. Why hadn't he studied Russian in university? He'd love to be able to just walk up to somebody and ask, "Hey, did that meteor drop in yet?"

* * *

Romanov stood on a small promontory, overlooking more forest land. No sign of devastation. No broken trees. He trudged on and on, and finally emerged near an open clearing. There were a couple of small huts (or hovels), some cows and chickens about, and a group of men coming in from the other direction with pack horses. That confirmed his suspicions - Vanavara. Directly in front of him must be the trading post they'd read about.

He debated about whether to enter the post site, to make polite inquiries. His Russian was excellent, but would the people here be speaking some sort of regional dialect? Foster had warned him against making contact with the locals, but it seemed better to get confirmation than to lose time to uncertainties. At last, he opted to enter the village, deciding to say he was a member of the Tsar's army who was on a hiking leave - that he'd come down on the Trans-Siberian and had gotten off at Kansk. That sounded legitimate enough!

* * *

Ducking behind a large copse of trees, Foster just missed being caught out by a group of reindeer herders. He wondered if they were the Evenki, the herders reported in all the research about the explosion. They had a huge number of animals and he could see they were well armed. It never occurred to Foster and the team before, but perhaps there were animals in the forest other than the reindeer against whom weapons might be needed!

Checking his watch, he knew he should start back to the team's original location. He'd timed his journey carefully, and now how far he could go before turning back. With the herders in the area, he'd have to be even more concerned about being seen. There could be other herds men looking for straggling ungulates in the woods!

* * *

The first to return to their checkpoint was Leslie. He was followed shortly by Foster. It took another ninety minutes before Romanov appeared at the beacon spot.

"Geez," Leslie responded when Romanov sat down on the ground with them, "You musta been havin' fun playin' Boy Scout - you're overdue."

"Da, but for a very good reason."

Foster motioned him forward, "Did you find anything?"

"I found Vanavara - the trading post on our maps. I was late because it took me longer to get there and get back," Romanov took one of the nutri-products Leslie handed him, and bit into it, "I know you said not to contact the locals, but since I speak Russian, I decided to ask a few questions."

Before Foster could reply, Romanov continued, "I posed as a Russian soldier on a hiking leave and they accepted me. Everything has been quiet here. I asked about interesting geological things in the area, because I like to collect rocks, and all they mentioned was the river bank. According to the people at the trading post, today's date is June 29th."

"I knew it!" Leslie said, sotto voce, "The explosion hasn't happened yet! The aliens must've been trying to prevent it or rescue somebody from it. Maybe even rescue something from it."

Foster shook his head, "And, we thought they were just here to change the future. How the hell are we going to know what they're up to?" he turned to both men, "Any sign of aliens around?"

"Nothing I saw," Leslie answered.

"If the aliens had made themselves visible or active in any way, the villagers at the trading post might have known something," Romanov commented, "And, I think I'd notice if they were all under the influence of some alien mind control. They seemed quite normal to me. Unless of course, the aliens don't want to bring attention to themselves. Then, they'll just find someplace to hide out."

"Right, and where do aliens like to hide out?" Foster looked at them.

"Abandoned houses, cottages, barns, wherever they can get outta sight," Leslie supplied, "If the alien ship hasn't crashed yet, that means we'll be here for the big event. It'd be a damn sight easier to track any movements around the epicenter - especially if there were survivors of the blast."

"Well, we know the aliens do have escape pods on their modern ships, there's a good chance they've got them even in an 'antique' 1908 model. And, I can guarantee it's not 1908 on the aliens' planet technology-wise!" Foster shot back.

"I think our best bet is to head in the direction you saw the herds men, Paul," Romanov suggested, "They're reported to have been the humans and animals closest to the epicenter of the explosion."

Foster nodded, "Let's retrace my direction, we've still got a few hours of daylight."

* * *

The Omega men, unhampered by herding reindeer, managed to catch up with the Evenkis. They camped discreetly out of sight, and ate nutri-products to avoid making a fire. It was fairly warm, even when the sun went down, so they were able to curl up in their thinsulate Omega-issue sleeping bags. They discovered they actually enjoyed looking up through the trees at the Siberian summer night sky, and spent at least thirty minutes before dropping off to sleep, identifying the various constellations they could see.

* * *

PORTAL MISSION #1, DAY TWO - June 30th, 1908

...started off with a bang! The Omega team was blasted awake by an incredible thundering roar! There was an immediate gust of wind, so powerful it shook the surrounding trees violently, and the air was filled with a thick, acrid, blinding smoke. The ground was shaking!

Foster could barely hear Romanov and Leslie shouting at him; could barely see them through the enveloping smoke and darkness. A thick black "rain" poured down on them, streaking their clothes and faces with a sticky moisture. It was over two hours before the visibility started to clear somewhat. In that time, the three men had no choice but to lie down and try to breathe through the small masks they'd brought in their backpacks. But, the masks

only had enough breathable air for 90 minutes.

By the time the black rain and the smoke had started to dissipate, the Omega men were out of bottled air. They were coughing and retching in the polluted atmosphere. There was also no doubt in any of their minds that they had just experienced the meteor blast - or whatever it was! They had to have been closer than they expected to ground zero. It took them fully another hour to pack up their equipment and gear and trek down over the ridge. The explosion's deafening roar and smoke meant they had lost track of the Evenki herds men, just out of sight.

Foster, Leslie and Romanov stared down at the Evenki camp. There were dead reindeer lying on the ground, and some animals were milling aimlessly around the campsite. The herds men were trying to take down their tents, and several were gathered around what appeared to be an injured man. The three Omega operatives kept themselves out of sight.

"Poor bastards, they don't know what hit them," Leslie whispered, "Should we go down and help them?"

Foster shook his head, "No, let's try not to compound things by approaching them. Every time we make contact with the locals, we could be influencing the future away from its original track," he turned to Romanov, "We should probably check out those homesteads near here. We'll steer clear of getting too close if there are human inhabitants, but if they look deserted, we should check them out. Aliens love abandoned structures!"

* * *

It took the Omegas another three hours of hard hiking to make it through the ruined forest to the closest homestead on their map. They crept up carefully, and used their binoculars to reconnoiter the area. Visible outside the small farm shack, people were moving about; a couple of children chasing and catching chickens, and what appeared to be two adult males inspecting the structure for damage. The three Omega men could see that the few glass windows on the shack had been blown out, and another smaller building, most likely their chicken coop, had been razed to the ground.

"Looks normal," murmured Romanov, "Think there are any aliens hiding inside the shack?"

Leslie shook his head, "I'd say no. They're doing what you'd expect after a blast like we had this morning."

Foster pulled a small sensor device out of his backpack and aimed it at the shack, taking a reading, "No radiation levels in there. Nothing here to suggest an alien presence. Guess we move on to the next one."

They trekked back to find the other farm. It hadn't been positioned on their map correctly, which meant they had to spend an extra hour locating it. All three men were aware of how their time was going. They'd have to return to their checkpoint to report in. Or at least one of them would have to make the trip back, depending on what they were able to learn in the next few hours.

The second homestead looked quiet. It did not appear to have suffered as much damage as the first one, and there were no humans about outside. Grass was growing up around the front entrance, and it appeared uninhabited. Foster, Leslie and Romanov moved up behind a group of low-growing bushes. Foster scanned the farm house as he done with the other one.

"Doesn't look like there's anyone home."

"I'd say it's deserted," Romanov replied quietly, "Maybe this one we should investigate?"

Leslie was using his binoculars to get a closer view, "Grass growin' up around the

door...the owners must've pulled out some time ago."

Together, the Omega team walked slowly towards the shack. All three had their small arms at the ready, just in case. Romanov led in, with Foster and Leslie right behind him. Foster scanned the building again, while Leslie tried the front door.

It wasn't locked. Leslie eased the door back, but it creaked loudly. Inside, the shack was dim. Two dirty, broken glassed windows, front and back, let in a bit of light. The skies were still very overcast from the blast earlier in the morning. He advanced inside, with Romanov covering him.

"Shit!" Leslie tripped over something lying on the clay floor. Romanov grabbed his flashlight and shone it down at Leslie's feet.

It was a humanoid-shaped body - clad in an orange and silver alien spacesuit!

CHAPTER FOUR

PORTAL MISSION #1, STILL DAY TWO...

Foster scrambled in the door as soon as he heard Leslie swearing. Romanov was on the floor with the body, searching for signs of life. The alien's helmet was off, and it was clear from his wizened, aged face that he'd met his death in the usual way.

"How long do you think he's been dead?" Foster knelt down to look at the alien as well.

"Judging by the amount of rigor mortis that's set in, I'd guess perhaps six to seven hours. The aliens are humanoid like us, but I don't know if their bodies react the same way in death as ours do," Romanov commented, "I wish Dr. Raychaudhuri was here - she knows more about alien physiology than any of us."

"Why don't we package the body up, carry it back to our check-point and take it through the portal with us," Leslie suggested, "Then, she could do an autopsy."

"What about the possibility of bringing back some kind of disease?" Foster asked.

Leslie shrugged, "Whenever we glom onto an alien body, there's all kinds of risks. We'll just warn them to have a hazmat body-bag waiting for it."

"Who is he? Is he one of the aliens from the blast or one from the downed UFO in the Yukon? How the hell did he get in here?"

"Well, his suit and his equipment looks old-style, and he doesn't appear to have been packing any weapons. But if he's from the blast we had this morning, there's got to be an escape pod around here somewhere," Leslie observed.

Romanov nodded, "And, an escape pod isn't an easy thing to conceal, especially if it's resting on dry land."

"Alright, let's go on the theory that our alien friend here is an escapee from this morning's blast - that means the escape pod would have to be somewhere in the vicinity. In order to maintain history as we know it, we've got to find it before any of the locals do," Foster stood up, "Al, use one of our sleeping bags to wrap Mr. Alien up. We'll leave him here for the time being. We've got less than twenty-four hours before we have to make it back to the portal check-point. Let's utilize our time to find the jettisoned pod and get it concealed somehow. Then, we'll pick up the body on our way back to the check-point, and see if we can bring a second team through the portal to help us do something about the pod itself. Both the pod, if there is one, and the body, have got to be removed from this time period."

* * *

The alien body was wrapped and concealed in the back of the shack. Foster, Leslie and Romanov searched the immediate area for tracks, in case they could trace the alien backwards to the pod, but no luck.

"I guess we'll have to do this the hard way," Foster said, "Let's split up for three hours and see what we can find. Synchronize watches, please."

Leslie headed off through the broken trees, binoculars in hand. Romanov tramped off in the opposite direction, and Foster stood at the shack entrance for a few minutes before moving away to the north. He had opted to search back the way they came in, hoping to find the pod in the wake of the blast trajectory.

After almost three hours of fruitless searching, Leslie and Romanov made their way back to the shack. They entered and sat on the floor, out of sight, waiting for Foster, their small weapons at the ready. Where was one escaped alien, there could be more!

The Siberian sky was beginning to darken in earnest, when the Omega men heard noises

outside. They listened alertly, not wanting to give away their presence if their visitor was not Foster. It was the sound of gunfire being exchanged that brought them to their feet!

Leslie and Romanov perched themselves under the blown-out window in the front. It was hard to see anything now. They heard a rapid "tsing, tsing" sound, and knew it wasn't the same sound their Omega-issue small arms made. Who the hell was out there?

Romanov raised himself level with the windowsill and peered out. In the darkness, he saw a several flashes of light from behind the tree trunks. Then, there were several more flashes, "There's more than two out there, Al - but who are they shooting at?"

"There's no way they could be locals!" Leslie whispered, "You know turn of the century firearms don't sound like that, and neither do ours! What if I slip out that back window and come around the front? I could maybe surprise whoever it is out there! Or at least draw some fire away. Foster's late - he could be pinned down by aliens!"

Romanov nodded, and watched while Leslie silently boosted himself out the back window. The Russian then kept his eyes peeled for any movement out front.

The "tsing, tsing" sound came again, and there was an audible rustling outside, as somebody moved about behind the tree trunks and low-lying foliage. Romanov heard the unmistakable sound of an Omega firearm discharging, and glimpsed Leslie diving into the woods in pursuit. He left his post behind the front window, exited the shack, and threw himself on the ground with his weapon, firing, giving cover to Leslie's rush.

"Christ, Leslie, don't fire! It's me!" Foster's voice boomed out.

Romanov scrambled up and headed in the direction he'd heard Paul yelling. There were some more curse words hollered, and he broke out his flashlight again. By the time he made it into the copse of vegetation, Foster and Leslie were looking down at two dead aliens, clothed in blood-covered silver.

"Yo tvoi match!" Romanov swore an obscene Russian oath in astonishment, staring down at the inert bodies, "Where did they come from?"

Foster was getting his breath back, "Bastards tracked me...I found the damn escape pod about half a mile from here, but they were there first! I tried to sneak back here to report, but they followed, firing all the way..."

Leslie had been kneeling down, looking at their weapons and their garb, "These guys are definitely not antique. Their suits, their firearms - they're from OUR own time."

* * *

"So what the hell were they looking for in the escape pod?" Leslie asked Foster. They'd dragged the two dead aliens into the shack, and wrapped them in the remaining sleeping bags for transport back to the portal check-point.

"Well, we wondered if any of the aliens had made it through the portal before the UFO crashed into Lake Tushi - this is the answer, I guess. I saw them coming out of the pod, and ducked down, trying to keep out of sight, but they must have seen me. I tried to take the long way around to warn you here, but they managed to follow me. They kept firing, I kept running. Thank God you two heard their weapons."

Romanov finished patching up a laser burn on Foster's forehead, "You didn't see what was inside the pod, then?"

"No chance, with those bully boys after me. We'll have to go back tonight. Our time is running out."

* * *

PORTAL MISSION #1, DAY THREE...WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING...July

1st, 1908

Using their flashlights, the Omega men managed to get back to the alien escape pod. They were indeed on a tight time frame, with well under twelve hours left before they had to be return to the portal check-point location.

The gray metallic pod was sitting in its own small crater of upturned dirt, mute testimony to the violence of its escape from the mother ship earlier that morning. It was about the size of a half ton truck. The hatch was popped, and Leslie was the first to scramble up on top and inside. Foster climbed in behind him, while Romanov stayed outside with his weapon at the ready.

A soft glow came from the systems board as the two Omega men got inside the pod. Some of the systems still appeared to be operational, with blinking comm-padds. The first thing they found was another alien corpse. It too had removed its helmet, and was sitting upright, still strapped into position in the passenger seat, its face wrinkled and gray with advanced age. Foster checked the dead body, while Leslie sat down at the command chair and immediately began looking at the controls. Foster used his scanning device to check for background radiation or any other hazards.

"How could this thing still be operational?" Foster asked, watching Leslie's hands as they set and attached an Omega homing beacon to the main control panel.

"The pod must have its own micro-generator. You gettin' any radiation readings?"

"Nothing dangerous so far. Can you determine what systems are still on-line?"

"Just a guess, but it looks like the atmosphere and the scrubbers are still going. Don't know how long the micro-generator will last for. With the hatch popped, and the other occupant gone, they could last for quite awhile, maybe. There's enough power going through here, by the looks of things, to maintain a comfortable temperature and breathing air for some time. And, I bet if we start an inventory in here, we'll find food rations, medications, the works. The aliens don't travel light."

"We've got to get this pod out of here. If the locals find it, our future, as we know it, could vanish."

Leslie turned in the command seat, "This thing is too big to move it or hide it without modern equipment, Paul. We've got to get back to the portal and see if we can get more teams through."

"Every extra person we bring through that portal is putting the whole future at risk. Ever read Ray Bradbury's 'Sound of Thunder?'" Paul asked, putting his scanner away in his backpack.

"Isn't that the one in which the hunter goes off the path, steps on a butterfly and changes the future?" Leslie nibbled his thumb nervously.

"It might be more than science-fiction if any of us does the wrong thing, Al."

"If we leave the alien bodies and the pod here for the locals to find, it will definitely change our future. We have no choice. That stuff has got to come back to our own time with us somehow. "

"What about the equipment we use to bring the pod back?"

Leslie stood up, "We're damned if we do, damned if we don't. I say get this pod outta here by any means possible and worry about it afterwards. Leavin' the pod here is just as dangerous as the equipment and people we're gonna need to move it. I left one of our own beacons in here to guide us back to this location."

The two men climbed back out of the pod. It was pitch black out.

"Sergei, Al, we'll have to leave the pod here and get back to the check-point as fast as possible. Let's head back to the shack, collect those bodies and get out of here. We'll deal with the pod once we get back to our own time," Foster ordered.

* * *

After picking up the three wrapped alien bodies, the Omega trio made their way back to the check-point. The beacon they'd left behind led them back to the portal location. They made their time count-down with thirty-seven minutes to spare. Leslie stacked the bodies like cord-wood, and they all ate a few nutri-rations and had some high-vitamin juice to drink. They were exhausted and starving. Carrying the aliens, even though they weighed less than human bodies, was a back-breaking experience, especially since they had to travel some distance with their burdens. Romanov managed to convince Foster and Leslie to nap for a few minutes while he watched for the portal to open again. None of them had voiced the many concerns on their minds on the arduous trip back to the check-point - not the least was the fear they all felt about whether the portal would even open for them again, or whether they could cross it safely to their own time.

Romanov was just beginning to drop off to sleep himself when he heard a familiar sound. The portal was opening!

"Paul, Al - wake up!"

The three men watched the portal opening slowly, and then as though they were viewing through a window, they could see Dr. Raychaudhuri, General Straker, Lew Waterman, and several other operatives on the other side. Relief must have been written all over the faces of the three Omega operatives, as they stood up and walked over to the glowing rip in the fabric of time.

Straker leaned forward, "Can you hear me?"

Foster nodded, smiling, "Yes! And, we have some prezzies for you and the exobiology lab."

Romanov and Leslie were unstacking the alien bodies, and each Omega man took one over his shoulders in the standard firefighters' carry. They passed through the portal effortlessly, with only a slight hissing noise to mark their movement...

* * *

January 27th, 2000 - 10:05 AM

Each Omega man laid his alien burden down on the floor.

Dr. Raychaudhuri knelt down to pull away the sleeping bag on the first alien, "You have three aliens here?"

Foster was panting from the exertion of carrying the dead body, "One...is from an escape pod we found last night...we think he could be from the exploding UFO ship...the other two appear, from their suits and equipment to be from our own time..." he flopped tiredly into the nearest chair.

Leslie cleared his throat, "Yeah, we've gotta get some more personnel in there to help us recover the pod. It's too big to cover, and too big to move."

Waterman asked, "Just what did you have in mind?"

Shaking his silver head, Leslie said, "Paul and I discussed this back and forth - but I can't think of any other way to handle this - we gotta send in a truck, or a Jeep, or something we can pull this thing out with," he held up his hand to silence the others, "I know the risk we'd be taking if we send any more people or modern equipment in there - but we haven't got a choice. If we leave that pod there for the locals to find, you can be sure it'll change the future! And,

there's another body inside it."

Straker stepped forward again, "Look, Al, I know what you're saying, but I don't think this portal was designed for anything other than humanoids to go through. Isn't there some other option we can use?"

Dr. Raychaudhuri looked up, "While you three were inside, we continued to examine the portal from here. It won't grow any bigger. All we can send through are people."

Leslie looked stricken, "Jesus, we can't leave it there!"

Waterman had been thinking, "What if we send in some extra teams and bury it? After all, it's not a very populated area. If we cover it well enough, nobody will ever know its there. We might even be able to go and retrieve it in our own time!"

Romanov smiled, "It's a pretty weird idea, but it just might work. We'll need quite a few people to dig a hole big enough."

Straker nodded, "Lew, can you set up some teams to go in? We should get this taken care of asap."

Leslie spoke up, "I'm going with them!"

Foster nodded, "I found the damn thing. I'm going back in too."

Dr. Raychaudhuri stood up, "The three of you are in no shape to be going back into that portal. You're exhausted - that could affect your decision-making ability."

"What decision-making ability?" Leslie, "Christ, it's no biggie! We know what we gotta do. Simple as that."

Straker knew better than to argue with Omega's best alien tech operative, "Alright, it's going to take some time to get the teams and their equipment together. You men can have a quick nap and a clean up. We'll give you plenty of time before you have to go back in."

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

January 27th, 2000 - 12:07 PM

Two hours later, Foster, Leslie and Romanov had napped, taken showers, and were ready to roll with the extra Omega teams. Waterman had pressed just about every male on site into going through the portal to work on concealing the pod. They'd also liaised with the Omega teams in Siberia. As soon as the portal teams had buried the alien pod, the modern-day teams would locate it, dig it up, and remove it. The theory was, if the bones of the Russian Imperial family could remain hidden for eighty years in Siberia, then so could an alien escape pod.

The three Omega men were finishing a small debriefing by Straker and Waterman.

"The first alien we found was in the shack. He was already dead - he'd aged like the aliens usually do. He'd taken his helmet off before we got there. We could tell from his equipment he must have been from the past. The other two were from our time - at least they appeared to be. Our theory is that they got through the portal before their ship crashed into Lake Tushi, and they may have been looking for something - an escape pod, evidence of the crash, whatever," Foster said.

"Dr. Raychaudhuri is working on the first alien - it'll be several hours before we even have a preliminary autopsy report. You exchanged fire with the other two?" Waterman asked.

Foster put down his cup, "I found the pod myself, but when I got closer to it, the aliens saw me. I made a run for it through the woods, but they gave chase. I really don't think they ever realized who they were dealing with - I suspect they just thought I was an unlucky local and they'd keep my mouth shut by killing me. Leslie and Romanov took care of them."

Straker turned to Leslie, "You got inside the pod, Al?"

"Yeah, Paul and I looked it over. When we left, some of the systems were still on-line. Life support mostly. It must run on a micro-generator. Anyway, there were no harmful radiation levels, so we shut the hatch up and left it that way."

"Sergei, what's the nearest town to the crash site and the pod? Can we avoid interaction with the locals?"

"The trading post, Vanavara is quite a distance from the epicenter, and even further from the pod location. Because of the strength of the explosion, I really think we've got a good window of opportunity to get the pod under cover. Most people we saw were so dazed by the blast that all they could worry about was personal and property damage."

Pete Little stuck his head in the command post door, "Ok folks, we're all ready to roll out here!"

* * *

January 27th, 2000 - 12:31 PM

A total of twenty-seven Omega and SHADO personnel, including Foster, Leslie and Romanov, prepared to go back through the alien time portal. Armed with digging tools, rations, special energy-juice to keep their strength up, and enough camping gear for at least three days, plus small sidearms, the group was dressed simply enough to pass as locals. Except for Romanov and Foster, none of the others spoke any Russian, but they hoped it would not be necessary to have interaction with any locals during the course of their mission.

They'd all been briefed on what their mission objective was: to effectively bury the alien escape pod in three days, and identify the exact location so the Omega team getting ready in Siberia in real-time could go and dig it up again.

Foster hadn't removed the portal beacon when they'd crossed over the last time, so they

would be able to utilize the beacon again as a starting point. And, Leslie's beacon inside the pod would guide them into its location.

One by one, the Omega and SHADO men filed through the portal. There were still plenty of daylight hours, and Foster had estimated the time of day in Siberia was several hours behind the real-time in the Yukon. They took a reading on the portal beacon and watched it fade into nothingness.

* * *

PORTAL MISSION #2, DAY ONE - July 2nd, 1908

The team marched through the blast-broken forest, homing in on Leslie's beacon. They reached the pod itself within several hours of their entry into 1908, and after a short break to take in some nutri-products and erect their sleeping tents, the men started the arduous task of digging a deep hole. It was back-breaking labour. And the day was warm. The sweating bodies drew the attention of black flies and mosquitoes, no matter how much contraband insect repellent the workers all used.

"Shit, I don't think I can put any more bug spray on!" Robertson huffed, leaning on his shovel and scratching madly.

Leslie, working alongside him, grinned, "All I keep thinkin' about is that nice cold beer I intend to have when we get back to our own time!" He swatted a couple more insects, leaving splats of blood on his neck.

Foster and Little took the alien body out of the pod and wrapped it, this time in a proper body bag they'd brought back through the portal with them. They covered it in fallen tree branches to keep it cool until they could leave the site and take it back with them. Any small instruments or items had been removed and packed by Leslie before he started to dig with the others.

Two dozen men kept digging in shifts, while Foster, Romanov and Ferguson stood guard, watching for anybody who might come too close to the site. It was no easy task to burrow a hole large enough and deep enough to cover a truck-sized pod. Since it was about eight feet in height, they needed at least a twelve foot drop to cover it up sufficiently - to keep people or animals out of the burial. Everybody was grouching about how easy this job would have been if they'd just been able to get a backhoe through the portal! There were going to be a lot of pulled muscles and bone-weary men when the mission was completed!

The first night arrived and some of the men took turns standing guard while the others slept. Even after all their efforts, the dig site looked as though they hadn't managed much more than marking out the hole perimeter. It was disheartening, to say the least.

* * *

PORTAL MISSION #2, DAY TWO - July 3rd, 1908

Morning came very early. Time was of the essence, and although the men knew that, they were stiff and sore from all the hard physical labour the day before. Putting in a sixteen hour day was hard even on the most physically fit, let alone the older men in the group, such as Leslie and Foster.

After a quick breakfast of nutri-products and vitamin-packed juices, they got back to work. Early morning proved to be much cooler in temperature, and there were fewer insects around. The summer heat didn't arrive until after lunch, and it was decided to break for a small siesta and then start up again when it cooled off after the sun was well past its zenith.

Romanov put himself in charge of the food situation. Trained to hunt by his grandfather, he shot a half dozen rabbits, much to the chagrin of the animal-lovers on the team, and roasted

them for the suppertime meal over a well-blocked campfire. However, everyone was so hungry and tired, and the smell of the cooking meat was so good, they all took some to eat with their rations that night.

Foster laid down on his Omega thinsulate sleeping bag beside Leslie, "Shit! I feel like shit!" He was staring up at the Siberian night sky.

Leslie snorted, "It's getting damn hard to keep the vision of that cold beer in my head. If it's possible to feel worse than shit, than that's how I feel."

Pete Little had been listening to them complain, "You old farts!" he said in a teasing voice, "Paul's just been playing 'stupidvisor' for the last two days. He's hardly gotten his hands dirty."

Foster looked over at Leslie again and groaned, "I don't have the energy, would you give that smug young thirty-something a swat for me?"

"He's not worth the trouble. He's just pissed 'cause he's gotta spend three nights away from Chacon!"

Robertson pulled his sleeping bag up over his head, "Would somebody tell these dumbfucks to shut up so I can get some sleep?"

* * *

PORTAL MISSION #2, DAY THREE - July 4th, 1908

Their luck ran out on the third day. It poured rain, turning the Siberian clay into mud. This made it virtually impossible to keep to their work schedule. The team sent Robertson and Foster back to the portal check point to debrief the Omega and SHADO people on the other side.

The team members had all been awake for some hours before daybreak. Their tents and sleeping bags were getting sodden, and Romanov couldn't resurrect their campfire in the rain, so no hot drinks were available for anyone.

"Oh, what I wouldn't give for a large double double from Tim's," Leslie grouched, trying to turn wet soil out of the hole, visions of his favourite coffee shop dancing in his wearied head. The cold beer was no longer his mantra.

Little was straining beside him, "A mega double double," he added.

"Yeah, but would you drink it or put your feet in it?" asked one of the other Canadian team members.

Foster and Robertson returned with a "stop work" order for six hours to see if things would dry up, and two backpacks full of fresh socks, undies and shirts for the team. They also brought back four industrial-sized thermoses of coffee and hot soup.

The rain continued for quite a few hours. It was aggravating to see so much work to be done, and everyone on the team knew time was of the essence. They didn't want to get caught by any locals with the pod exposed to public view. They'd erected a tent over it when they'd first reached the site, but it did little to hide the metallic gleam.

It wasn't until well after nightfall, that the rain ceased. The men sat around a hastily scratched together campfire, and had some more of their nutri-rations. It was too dark to resume work on the hole, so they opted to go to bed early, and get up at daybreak to try and finish the next day.

* * *

PORTAL MISSION #2, DAY FOUR - July 5th, 1908

As if to mock them for the misery of the day before, the sun rose, bright and cheery on the fourth day. Determined to make this their last day on the mission, the team members ate a

quick breakfast and dug with a renewed vigor and spirit.

Their hole, at twelve feet deep, twelve feet long, and ten feet wide looked like a mass grave site. It was nightfall by the time the men strapped harnesses around the escape pod and hauled it down into the miniature chasm. The equally back-breaking labour of filling the hole in a round the pod would have to wait one more day.

* * *

PORTAL MISSION #2, DAY FIVE - July 6th, 1908

Eager to complete their mission, the team was up at daybreak for some quick rations and off to fill in the hole around the alien escape pod. Once it was thoroughly covered and tamped down, they transplanted some small seedlings from the forest which had not been damaged by the blast several days ago.

Most of the day was devoted to the work of filling the hole and placing the baby trees on it. The men worked with a renewed vigor, knowing their ordeal was almost over. They took constant compass readings, so they could determine the latitude and longitude once they got back to their own time frame. Determining the pod's exact location would then be much easier for the recovery crew.

Foster and Leslie watched the last of the seedlings being placed, "Shit," Leslie sighed, "I never thought we'd see the end of this one."

Romanov joined them and patted Leslie on the back, "Now that cold beer must seem more like a possibility, da?"

"The men are breaking camp and cleaning up any evidence of our stay here," Robertson reported, "We should be ready to head back to the check-point in about an hour."

Little, who directed the seedling-search, was covered in soil and mud and sweat, "I think a nice hot shower would be more appealing to me than a beer, right now!"

Foster grinned, "Ah, Pete, would you mind standing downwind?" he waved Little and his hard work aroma away, "All I want to do is sleep for a week!"

"Humph!" Leslie snorted, "If I know Straker, we'll be debriefed for a week before we get anywhere near a shower or a beer!"

* * *

January 31th, 2000 - 08:03 PM

Contrary to Leslie's assessment, Straker did give the men a couple of hours to dump their equipment, get cleaned up, and have a few hours sleep before the big debriefing session. Foster provided the location co-ordinates for the buried escape pod, and the Siberian Omega team set out with a backhoe, a massive covered truck, and some metal detectors. Their cover was as a police unit looking for a Russian Revolutionary mass grave site. The Russian people were getting used to the authorities digging up the bones of revolutionary victims, the most publicized of course, being the bones of the murdered Imperial Family.

They were awaiting the report from Siberia when the mass debriefing began. Waterman and Straker presided, with Foster and Leslie giving the major information and some of the other contributing. Dr. Raychaudhuri attended as well, to give a prelim report on her alien autopsy work. As usual, the debriefing was being videotaped for the SHADO and Omega record libraries.

"Dr. Raychaudhuri, can you give us a quick thumbnail sketch of the alien bodies?" Waterman asked.

The beautiful Indian accessed her files on her laptop, "I've e-mailed my prelims to HQ in New York, and of course to those of you who are involved here with this mission. The short

story is that we have indeed the bodies of two modern aliens, and the single body of an alien who escaped the explosion of June 1908. The latter's death was directly attributable to the rapid aging process we have seen so many times in the past, and there was evidence of human organ transplants in his body. The particulars have been sent to you as attachments. You can look at them later," she pressed some buttons to bring up a different file on her screen, "The year 2000 aliens were dispatched by Omega-issue weapons of course, and there is no doubt as to their origin. One interesting notation is the appearance of duplicated organs in these bodies. I found two hearts crammed into one alien, and two livers and an extra pancreas packed into the other. Tissue tests determined that at least one organ is of human origin, and the extra is cloned!"

Straker was lightly tapping his fingers on the table, "Why would the aliens double up on internal organs? Wouldn't that just add to their health problems?"

"Much as I hate to report this, the human originals appear to have been taken from child donors. The slightly smaller sized juvenile organs inside the adult alien bodies make it possible to add the second one. There's enough room inside the thoracic cavity."

There was a collective intake of breath around the table. It was just too unthinkable.

Waterman inquired, "Why the cloned organs?"

Raychaudhuri was thoughtful, "I have a number of theories. The usage of juvenile organs seems unreasonable, until you consider that they are still in the developmental stage. Cloning organs is a process still under study here on our own world. Adult organs often have defects, depending on the donor. The aliens have not always shown a propensity for knowing which victims would provide the healthiest replacements. After all, it's possible to abduct a number of prospects, and discover that one is a diabetic, another has liver disease, and so on. Sad to say, abducting children for their generally healthier organs may make better sense to them. If the organs are healthy, cloning them for inclusion in other aliens is an easier way to provide donor organs."

"But, why bundling multiple organs?"

"I really cannot say without more investigation. Medically, it appears redundant. The aliens may have had reasons other than purely scientific for doing it."

There was a few moments of silence as the others at the table digested this information. Hundreds of children were abducted every year and never seen or heard from again around the planet. Suddenly, those disappearances took on a more sinister light. Maybe those kids weren't just the victims of molesters and disgruntled non-custodial parents on the run from the law. It didn't bear thinking.

The silence was interrupted by a soft ping on Lew Waterman's laptop. He opened his e-mail immediately and read the contents of the communique, "That message was from our team in Siberia. The alien escape pod has been successfully located and removed. They'll be transporting it via special sealed aircraft to our Omega labs in London today."

Foster smiled, "I guess this means all our hard work in Mother Russia paid off!"

* * *

February 1st, 2000 - 07:48 PM

With their mission apparently accomplished, the Omega people started packing up the campsite. The "tent village" came down, the heavy equipment was sent out, and the alien propulsion core and portal were dismantled and sent to New York for further study. All the personnel were either returning to their field offices or being reassigned to new duties.

"They sending you to The Big Apple?" Leslie asked Romanov.

"Nyet, I asked for a transfer to Moonbase."

"Moonbase? What's so exciting about Moonbase? The action's all here," Leslie teased the Russian.

"Precisely," Romanov grinned, "I need a rest from all the excitement of the last few days!"

Paul Foster, Dr. Raychaudhuri and Lew Waterman were going to fly back to NYC. They said their goodbyes to the teams, and to Straker.

"Remember, I want all the reports as they come out. Keep me abreast of everything you find on the core and the portal," he smiled at the good doctor, "Mitali, I'll expect those autopsy updates as soon as you can make them available."

"Aacha," she nodded, pulling her parka hood up. The Yukon's weather was especially frigid that morning. Dr. Raychaudhuri and Waterman headed over to the Omega aircraft catch their flight. Paul was about to follow them, when Straker called him back.

"Paul, I didn't want to say this in front of the others. But, as Omega's commanding officer, I think you've got enough seniority to delegate these missions to someone else."

Foster grinned, "Think I'm getting a little long in the tooth? You'd better look in the mirror, my friend."

Straker bristled, "You know what I mean. This last mission took a lot out of you."

"Look, Ed, it's like this. I've never liked sitting back and expecting others to take the kind of risks I wouldn't take myself. I'm an action man - you know that. I like to be in the thick of things. I never could ride a desk. I'll let you know when I can't handle it any more. Trust me on that!"

EPILOGUE

"How's our patient?" Straker asked, as he strode into the infirmary room with a box of Alec Freeman's favourite imported chocolates under his arm.

Dr. Jackson rose out of his seat beside Freeman's bed, "Ask him yourself, General. The oncologist has pronounced him free of the cancer, but...there are always other considerations at hand," Jackson's smarmy smile always irritated the hell out of Straker.

He watched the psychiatrist leave and closed the door, "Hope you still like these," he proffered the boxed goodies to Freeman.

Freeman smiled, taking the box, "Thanks, yes. If the cancer doesn't eventually get me, my cholesterol level will," he joked.

"Seriously, Alec...how are you feeling?" Straker sat down beside Freeman.

"I'm fine. Better than I hoped to be, actually. But, I'll have to have constant checks every six months to make sure there isn't any more trouble."

"What did Jackson mean by 'considerations'?"

Freeman closed his eyes for a few moments, then he said, "Ed, you and I go back a long way together, don't we?"

Straker smiled, "Thirty-five years at least."

"And, in that thirty-five years, have I ever asked you for anything?"

"I don't think I like the direction this conversation is taking, Alec."

"Like it or not, I have to make a request now."

"You want to retire..." Straker's voice was flat. He felt his heart sink down to his gut, "You're right, I know...you deserve it..."

Freeman took a deep breath, "No, Ed. But I do need to go on reduced service. I discussed it all with the doctors. They tell me I should consider a desk job."

"Well, we can certainly work something out for you! Whatever you want, it's yours - only...," Straker paused, "I hope you're not just doing this for me."

"Don't be so foolish. We both know I'm not that unselfish," Freeman laughed, "I'd be bored with...full retirement. I'd hate being out of the loop."

Straker finally relaxed and smiled like a Cheshire cat, "You had me scared shitless, Alec," he admitted.

"I'll take that as a compliment, General Straker - not much scares you!"

They both lapsed into a companionable silence for a minute or so, not knowing what else to say. The situation was getting perilously close to maudlin.

"When are they letting you of this place?"

"Next week, I think. The food's starting to get to me," Freeman grinned, "I could really go for a nice juicy sirloin about now."

"Tell you what - when you're released, you can have a few days off, and I'll take you to your favourite steak-house and then bring you up to speed on everything. We've had quite a time with that alien time portal."

"Paul e-mailed me some FYI reports. What's going to happen to the aliens' technology - the core and the portal?"

Straker sighed, "The portal's a dangerous thing to have operational. We squeaked out this time, but God knows what the aliens will try next. We had Leslie and his team dismantle it when they got back. We're still not sure how much of the present and the future will be affected by their mission. Maybe we'll never know."

"Sounds like something out of a science-fiction novel."

"I tell you, Alec, it's goddam scary! Science-fiction has become science fact. The aliens are pushing our scientific realities continually. The labs found ampules of deadly viruses stored on board the escape pod in sealed containers after they retrieved it from Siberia! God knows what the aliens had planned to do with them!"

"Jesus! And, the core?"

"Still under research. Our people are trying to analyze and duplicate it. If it's possible, we may someday soon be building our own starships. Then we can take the battle to the aliens' planet, for a change!"

"After so many years fighting a defensive war, it's going to be strange to develop an offensive strategy, isn't it? I wonder if we'll both live long enough to see it happen." Freeman leaned back on his stack of pillows and closed his eyes, "You know, I really did consider full retirement, the amnesia drug, the whole shabik, for awhile. There are times when this burden just gets too heavy to carry."

"What changed your mind?"

"The thought of those bastards winning. That's the heaviest burden of all."