

NO RILLS K INCIDENT



SCIENCE LOGS



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To Erin and her siblings.

1

- EYES THAT DO NOT SEE -

- From my most professional point of view and if you excuse me, that is garbage – Sharapov said, irritated.

His attitude annoyed everybody since the very first moment the briefing session began, seeming to make an effort to get expelled every time he opened his mouth.

- We have said it before, we are not taking the easy way to explain this Sharapov! – Benoit explained defending his argument.

- Oh, come on! A meteor strikes the city, 200,000 people vanish in thin air, not a single survivor appears in one whole year... and without solid proof you assume that's the explanation? You've got to be kidding me!

- Everything points to that – Nazarova clarified.

- "*Everything points to that*" is not science Irina! We are not kindergarten children to believe in fairy tales! – Sharapov answered, hitting the table with his open hand.

- Calm down Sharapov! We get your point, but you must understand it's part of our task! – Altermann reproached calling him to order.

Sharapov gave Irina Nazarova and Altermann a sharp look. Looking at everybody around, he started tapping the table with his index finger.

- If I am going to be part of this I don't want loose ends, my name won't be remembered as one of those who lead failure expeditions like the Tunguska¹ scientists... I want facts!

Halyna Koshyakin raised her hand asking to have her say.

- Allow me to support both sides – she said.

That was enough to get all of the group's attention and silence.

- Sharapov is right, as much as Irina is.

Sharapov and Irina looked at each other and then back to Halyna.

- I think that the *why* is more important than the *how* in this case – she continued while tying up her hair with a hairclip – if we are to understand what really happened in Norilsk, we have to focus on the facts, what we have beforehand and attack the hypothesis with that.

Benoit picked his Flexblet² from the table and interrupted.

- All right, could you give us a list of the facts Halyna?

¹ Enormous explosion with devastating effects which happened in Tunguska, Siberia, 1908. There is not an official explanation regarding the case to the day.

² Flexible Tablet PC.

- The facts are the following: 175,428 inhabitants missing; we cannot say they are dead since no corpses have been found nor life signs for 13 months and 10 days. Also, for some reason, satellite reception is blocked and the only thing we can see from the sky is a black spot over the city and its surroundings.

- Did you finish the report based on the information gathered by the Scoutbot³?

- Yes, the robot stopped for an unknown reason 32.4 kilometers away from the estimated impact site. You might be interested to watch this.

Stretching her arm she took her Flexblet from the center of the table and after pressing a button on the screen, a holographic projector started playing a video from the robot's videocamera.

Thanks to an investment of seven million dollars, the robot was equipped with a cutting edge technology camera and its construction was similar to the Mars Rover.

The image could be seen in perfect definition, but after a few seconds, it became blurry by moments.

- And that would be? – Halyna turned around raising her eyebrows.

- Interesting – Benoit started his argument while taking his hand to his chin – that's surely abnormal magnetism.

- Probabilities are high, we have hundreds of unpublished cases here at Ex Professo – Irina supported.

³ Exploration Rover.

- Good, but this is just the beginning – Halyna interrupted.

The video unpaused and as the robot advanced the image became clear again. Everybody was absort looking at the semitransparent projection.

After a few minutes, the video seemed to stop.

- W... what happened? Did the transmission get cut? Did the video freeze in that frame? – Sharapov inquired.

- Even better – Halyna stated – the video keeps going for seventeen more hours.

- How can that be?!

- The Scoutbot... - Irina stood up to lean against one of the glass walls of the room - ...stopped!

- But... it didn't hit any obstacle, nor the caterpillar truck got stuck. The camera didn't shake at all! – Altermann observed.

- Neither could it have run out of battery, otherwise the recording would have stopped – Halyna hinted – then... what happened?

- Selective magnetism! – Irina confirmed – It fits the scenario perfectly. The internal parts of the robot got paralyzed!

- Sounds logical, for us of course – Sharapov agreed for the first time.

- Wait, that's not all – Halyna added with a broad smile – take a look at this.

Placing two of her fingers together on the surface of the Flexblet, she opened them widely to zoom onto a specific area of the video.

Sharapov stood up with his hands on the table and leaned towards the hologram, while a pair of pens echoed after falling and hitting the table. Speechless, he could barely keep his mouth closed.

- For Heaven's sake... is it what I think it is?!

- Oh my... - Benoit mumbled – it's practically impossible!

Everybody was silent, trying to believe their eyes.

- *Sharapov, Sharapov!* – Irina insisted on the radio.

He had lost himself in his thoughts for a second. The horn of Irina's snowmobile finally brought him back to his senses.

- Yes Irina, I'm sorry, please repeat.

- I think we have visual contact with the Scoutbot ahead!

Sharapov looked at his Intellisuit's⁴ HUD⁵ to verify the estimated distance to reach the estimated impact site. The semitransparent blue numbers on the reflective glass showed that they were 33.9 kilometres away from it.

- Let's proceed as planned.

⁴ Suit designed by Ex Professo to resist high levels of pollution and superficial damage. Includes a holographic screen, integrated computer and emergency system.

⁵ "Heads Up Display", frontal transparent visualization screen which shows information to the user. Its common use is in military and civilian aircrafts.

- Understood.

An expedition with multi-million funding as never seen before could not fail. The team had been carefully selected from the best scientists, under a vow of secrecy.

Sharapov and Benoit, founders of the Ex Professo Private Corporation, knew their public image. Articles, conferences and Nobel prizes were nothing but the façade of something bigger, beyond human imagination. Their vision of a world ruled by true science.

Every aspect of the mission had been planned carefully, from logistics to military training. They were sure that whatever that fell from the sky straight to the heart of Norilsk was the key, the missing link, between their reach and their dream.

- Be ready – Halyna said – we are about to reach the Scoutbot's area of effect.

- Be careful with your throttles, make sure you stop throttling when the internal parts of your vehicles stop moving!

- Roger!

Benoit's snowmobile's engine produced a strong high pitched noise.

- Release throttles, my vehicle has been paralyzed!

The snowmobiles slid forward through the frozen terrain as fast as they could, slowing down due to their drivers' weight.

Getting off the vehicle, Altermann zoomed to take a quick look at their next destination.

- Fascinating! For decades not even a tree has grown in this area due to the city's pollution, and now this... in less than two years.

- I know it is – Benoit replied – we are about to make history.

- Altermann, retrieve the hard drive from the Scoutbot and let's proceed.

- Right away Sharapov.

After loading his Kel-Tec KSG shotgun, Sharapov raised his head to observe the subject of amazement of the whole team a few days ago at the Ex Professo headquarters: a dense forest of apparently unidentified species, just a few kilometers away from the city of Norilsk.

2

- TO HELL -

Halyna turned quickly aiming her P90 towards a group of trees.

- Koshyakin, don't lose your mind, don't give place to paranoia – Benoit tried to calm her down.

- This formation is safe, we have our backs covered – Altermann assured.

Being that the advice coming from Altermann, Halyna started to calm down.

Altermann's military training probably exceeded the team's as a whole, since he had been the asset which Ex Professo normally assigned to high risk extraction operations, from the extraction of the spaceship in Shaitan Mazar in 1991, to the Vitim meteor in 2002.

Of course, the Corporation hired mercenary groups to escort him on every mission, but this time there was no chance than to depend on their own skills. There was no other chance but to depend on a third party group.

- I would swear I saw something Altermann – she said through a private comm channel.

- Easy Halyna, I'm covering you.

The tree species seemed to be the same so far. Their appearance was similar to white poplars of approximately ten meters high and one meter of diameter.

The foliage, long and bluish, gave the forest a surrealistic feel.

- Measurements and identification please – Sharapov requested.

- Right away.

Pressing a button on the Intellisuit's left forearm, Benoit opened a small compartment from where he took a rectangular metallic object with an LCD screen not bigger than a compact box of cigarettes.

Sliding a clip button he expanded a sharp metallic blade of 15 centimeters long.

Taking a deep breath to deliver a stronger move, he stuck the blade into the closest tree trunk.

The numbers and letters in the screen quickly changed showing temperature measurements and a list of chemical elements.

- Wow... you will not believe this!

- Good or bad news?

- Good? This tree is breathing Carbon Dioxide and expelling Ozone! Imagine the impact on the environment!

- Pack samples and seeds if you find any, we'll try to reproduce the species back at the labs – Irina requested.

Sharapov got close to one of the trees and placing the glove of his Intellisuit on it he looked at Altermann.

- What kind of mutation is this?

- For what I've seen so far, this doesn't look like a mutation at all, the growth and proportions seem normal. I find it hard to believe that a mutation changes the behaviour of the species without manifesting severe physical consequences.

- How about the blue leaves? – Sharapov answered sarcastically.

- Yes, but the tree looks healthy anyway. In my opinion, I would suggest...

- I know what you are about to say – Sharapov interrupted.

- Well, it fits the scenario, right?

- It's not an off-world species Altermann. If it were... how did the bacteria, seeds or whatever made them grow here, if the impact was kilometers away in the heart of the city?

- Fauna? Birds maybe?

- Look up Altermann, do you see any birds around? It hasn't happened in thirty years, and it will not even in a hundred. This is Norilsk.

- Let's leave it to the tests sir – Altermann said trying to get him stop talking.

His concentration got broken by Halyna's voice in the communications channel.

- There she is! Did you see her?!

Halyna was trying to pull Irina by her arm to take her towards a group of trees.

- Stop there! – Altermann shouted – Regroup!

Irina struggled to stop Halyna without success, letting her run away.

- Everyone! Help!

Benoit, Sharapov and Altermann gathered with Irina.

- What's going on here?! Koshyakin! Halyna, report! – Benoit ordered through the comm channel.

- What happened Irina? – Altermann insisted.

Irina was still breathing heavily due to the struggle.

- She... she said something about a little girl.

- What? A little girl, here?!

- Yes, a little girl!

- Let's not waste time, let's find her!

Halyna's footprints in the compacted and consistent snow were easy to identify, but she seemed to have run a long distance.

- Loaded weapons and safeties off – Altermann ordered.

Everybody answered affirmatively while checking that their weapons were ready to use.

The procedures from Ex Professo missions were strict and simple: if a member of the team jeopardized another member or the success of the mission itself, the course to follow was expulsion or elimination.

Even though in this case execution was not the best option, if there was another living organism in the area it was to be considered a threat until the opposite was proved.

- There she is! – Irina pointed at a group of trees on her left.

- Come on!

While they chased for her, Sharapov opened a private comm channel with Altermann.

- Altermann, do you copy? – he said, while trying to take a breath at the same time.

- I listen, what is it Sharapov?

- Irina said that Koshyakin was chasing a little girl.

- Right.

- Where are her footsteps then?

- Holy mother!

- Be careful.

- I will. Anyway, if the girl is small enough she probably won't leave footprints, the ground is still hard enough because of the ice.

- I get that because of the weight of our Intellisuits we leave footprints, but I find it hard to believe that she is stepping exactly over every of the girl's footsteps.

- It's possible, let's focus Sharapov!

As they advanced, the density of the forest diminished, as if they were reaching one of the outer limits.

A mild mist of steam started to surround them as the Intellisuit expelled the hot air from the inside to normalize the temperature.

Irina, who was further than any of them, stopped suddenly.

- Nazarova, status report! – Sharapov requested.

- It's a... for Heaven's sake!

As the team members arrived at her position, they got paralyzed, slipping as they tried to come to a full stop.

- It's a massive furrow! – Benoit exclaimed.

The huge forest clearing revealed a black furrow of approximately three hundred meters long by fifty meters wide. The ground had turned pitch black, like coal.

- I think that this raises the chances of our meteor theory – Altermann addressed to Sharapov roughly.

- Where is Halyna? – Irina tried to find her looking around the clearing.

- She could have gone down the furrow. It seems deep enough for a person to walk into it – Sharapov stated.

- Let's get closer Irina, I'll come with you and scan for radiation and other threats.

- Oh, dear! – Halyna broadcasted through the comm channel – No, that is a gun, not a toy, don't put it there.

She sounded sweet and calm.

- 3D sonar map, I want a scan and broadcast to our HUDs now! – Altermann requested.

- Right away! – Sharapov gestured in the air while using the Intellisuit's augmented reality interface to execute the order.

- I'm measuring high levels of radiation as well as volatile heavy metals on the ground. It's highly possible that it is a meteor! – Benoit confirmed.

- Done, transmitting! – Sharapov informed.

- She is down there, I can see her in the 3D map! – Irina shouted.

- Let's go down, be careful with the descent Irina! – Altermann warned.

There she was. Halyna was kneeling on the ground giving her back to them.

- Halyna, what are you doing?! Come with us! – Irina tried to call her attention once again as she slid down the furrow with Altermann.

- She is out of her mind!

- Nazarova, do you see the girl?

- I don't see her! She doesn't show in the scan either!

- No, my baby, this game is not fun, let's play something else – Halyna said while resting her sidearm against her temple.

The twenty meters that separated Halyna from Irina and Altermann became an abyss.

- What do we do Altermann?! Something is controlling her, she could not have gone insane all of a sudden!

Altermann indicated through gestures to open a private comm channel.

Irina obeyed and blocked her Intellisuit general communication module.

- Hurry up Altermann, she is beside herself, she'll commit suicide!

- Listen carefully, I'll shoot the gun off her hand and you'll have to tackle her, on the count of three.

- What's going on?! Report! – Sharapov demanded.

- Ignore him! One... two... three!

Irina started running towards Halyna while Altermann crouched to improve his aim and hit the gun looking through his Reflex sight.

Halyna dropped the pistol and stood up.

- No cutey! Don't run there, you'll stain your white dress!

- She's going to run forward, catch her Irina!

- I can't! She's running too fast!

Altermann dropped the rifle and tried to pass Irina.

- Quick, the crater hole is right forward!

- Stop Halyna, you will fall!

- Lady, step off that bridge right away! Don't make me come look for you!

- Altermann, for Heaven's sake, she is seeing a bridge! Shoot at her legs please! – Irina started to cry in desperation.

- I won't reach her!

- Halyna, stop! Please, stop! – Irina cried on her knees.

Altermann sank his hands on the black gravel and fell on his knees.

Benoit and Sharapov observed the scene from furrow's ledge.

A minute of silence that felt as long as an hour filled the communication channel.

Walking slowly towards Irina, Altermann took her in his arms.

- Quiet down and focus – he tried to comfort her.

- What the heck was messing up with her mind?! There was no girl! – Irina said while sobbing.

- There was no girl, no girl at all, now get a hold of yourself.

- For all the saints, Benoit, where have we come to? – Sharapov said bitterly.

- To hell.

- My detector is picking up high levels of contamination and radiation in the furrow. Come up, it's too dangerous – Sharapov ordered.

- What?! What are we supposed to do, leave Halyna in the crater? – Irina answered furiously.

- Irina, the hole is so deep we cannot even see the bottom, it's impossible to do anything right now.

- We will send an extraction mission as soon as we get back to the laboratories and prepare a funeral of her height – Sharapov assured.

Driving two metal stakes with an extension that resembled a drum into the ground, Benoit pressed a button that shot off two semitransparent cables to the bottom of the furrow.

Altermann lifted Irina and connected his cable magnetically to the Intellisuit. Benoit pressed another button that lifted them up.

Once back to ground level, Benoit and Sharapov separated them to have a personal conversation with each other.

- I know what you are about to say Benoit - Altermann anticipated, annoyed.

- There is a difference between knowing and understanding Altermann – he answered.

- It has been more than ten years since we lost somebody... and that is your answer?! – Altermann shouted, grabbing him from his Intellisuit's chest.

- Take your hands off me, I may be old but I can still defend myself! You know we didn't hire mercenaries because we were cheap, but because we are behind something so big that it can only be compared with the discovery of fire.

Letting him go, Benoit went back to his posture but Altermann pointed at his chest with his index finger.

- The question is, Benoit... is it worth as much as Halyna's life?

- And ours too – he answered – should we succeed, we will be the fathers of a new era.

Turning around, Altermann began to walk away.

- If you are not ready for this Altermann, you can always stand back. We will give you an honorable retirement from Ex Professo.

Looking back at him over his shoulder, Altermann prepared to answer.

- Let's head to the Residential District. Let's make history.

END OF SAMPLE