



AN UNKNOWN

COMPELLING FORCE

**I: OBSERVE
AND
GUESS**

INTERLUDE

THE RUINS OF TROPICALIA

An Unknown Compelling Force

I: Observe & Guess

February 26, 1959

Ural Mountains, Russia

Kholat-Syakhl (Mountain of the Dead)

“It was sliced open from the inside,” the short man says.

Kneeling on the snow, he shows the long straight tear in the fabric to his taller companion. The tall man rounds the large canvas tent to inspect the far corner, which has collapsed and been buried beneath a snowdrift. A third man watches from a distance.

When his companion circles back around, the short man shifts his weight on his ankles. He twists around and points at the disturbed snow behind him.

“The tracks lead down this way.”

A chain of jumbled footprints leads down the snow-covered mountain slope, toward a stand of trees 1.5 kilometers away. Some of the prints are clearly made by boots, some by bare feet.

They follow the trail to the edge of the forest. They briefly pause to examine the remains of a small fire.

“My God,” the tall rescuer says, looking to his left.

A man’s frozen body sits at the base of a pine tree. His arms are drawn up around his knees, and he’s dressed only in long underwear and socks. A few feet further on, another body in a similar condition and state of undress is wrapped around the base of a broad cedar tree.

The short rescuer kneels down next to the body.

He wonders aloud, “What frightened them enough to cut their way out of the tent, run down here in their underwear in the middle of the night, and face certain death rather than return?”

The third man, further up the slope near the camp, shouts down to them, “I found another body! I think it’s Dyatlov.”

The third rescuer brushes away snow from Igor Dyatlov’s frozen corpse. His face is covered in frost. He is fully dressed, and clutching a small branch in his still-clenched fist.

The rescuers follow a separate set of footprints through the woods. The third man follows them at a distance. The trail ends at the edge of a forty-foot ravine. When they peer down, they spot an

arm sticking out of the snow. They find a safe place to climb down. By the time they locate and dig out the four bodies at the bottom of the ravine, the sun has dipped down behind the western peaks.

“Nine bodies,” the first rescuer says. “Two unclothed in the trees, three between the tent and the threes, and these four here.”

The tall man says, “The two in the trees show obvious signs of death by hypothermia. Likely the same case for those near the tent. These four though... They may have fallen into this ravine—”

“But there are no visible wounds.”

“Except the dark orange color of their skin, and this woman...” He kneels down to get a closer look. “...Appears to have had her tongue and most of her oral cavity completely removed.”

“Something terrible happened here,” the first rescuer says. “I feel—”

Both men fall silent. The third man approaches.

“Hey,” the shorter rescuer says to the third man.

“Where did you come from?” the tall rescuer demands.

The third man stands ten meters from them. The two rescuers’ tones become frantic, desperate.

“Who the hell are you?” the first rescuer demands.

The third man says, haltingly, “I’m... my name is Sam Merard.”

“Where did you come from? Who are you with?”

“How did you get here?”

“What is this language we’re speaking?”

The first rescuer turns to the second. “Why can I understand you?”

“What are these words? They feel strange.”

The first rescuer jabs his finger at Sam. “Who *are* you?” he demands again.

Both men ball their fists and stomp toward him. Sam looks up at the sky, realizing what’s happening. He waits to wake up. He hopes it will happen before they reach him. He doesn’t want to know what their fists feel like.

The Day Before The Disappearance
New York

Sam Merard, his body drenched in sweat, sits on the edge of his twin bed. His body heaves with each breath and his pupils dart back and forth across his small studio apartment. He stands up on quivering legs. His upper thighs stickily unpeel themselves from the damp sheets. He braces himself with his fingers against the mattress until he finally catches his breath. He blinks slowly, exhales, and crosses the room.

A dozen black and white photographs are pinned in neat rows above the desk. They depict a group of young men and women in various snowy scenes. The top left photo is the only one that bears a caption. *Igor Dyatlov*, scrawled with a Sharpie. A slightly blurred close-up of a man's face squinting and smiling at the ancient camera. Clumps of snow stick to his hat, whiskers, and brow. The man's face—particularly his dimples, jawline, and the shape of his nose—bears more than a passing resemblance to Merard.

Sam leans in for a moment to study the photo, and then scans the other eleven. In one of them, four members of the expedition study a map. In another, three team members traverse deep snow on cross-country skis, mountain peaks towering behind them. In yet another, a tall man and a pretty woman set up a canvas tent. In the bottom right photo, six of the team members stand in a line striking fake marching poses, laughing at the camera.

Sam unplugs his flip-phone from its charger on the desk. He has one new text sent at 2:04 this morning from Anton:

Thought you guys were out together. Saw Liz with some people walking down Richland. Looked pretty wasted.

Sam sighs. He scrolls through his contacts and selects Liz. He puts the phone to his ear and crosses the room to the window. He peeks through the blinds and looks out his second-story apartment to the East Village street below.

As he hears her phone ringing in his ear, he sees Liz walking briskly down the street. She's quite pretty, but very thin and disheveled. Her dyed black hair is messy and she's wearing the same now-wrinkled dress she wore the night before. She's barefoot in the chilly morning, carrying her heels in her right hand.

Sam watches her reach into her purse, study her buzzing phone and drop it back into her purse without slowing down. She doesn't look up at his apartment. Her car is parked in front of his place. She climbs inside.

"What the fuck?" Sam says. Then, as she drives away, he sighs.

"Goddamnit."

He showers, shaves, gets dressed for work, and then sits down at his desk. He flips open his laptop. He pulls up an image of a hand-drawn map. Crude symbols mark a tent, a grove of trees, and a ravine. Large *X*'s underscored by names—including Igor Dyatlov—are spread about the area.

Sam draws his finger across the screen, whispering to himself. His phone buzzes, jolting him from his trance. The screen says *Liz*. He puts it to his ear.

"Hey you!" she says, her voice bright and bubbly. "Want to meet for breakfast before work?"

Sam frowns, and then his face softens. “Yeah, I do,” he says.

January 26th, 1959
Sverdlovsk, Oblast, Russia

A train rumbles through the snowy countryside, and steams to a stop alongside a wooden platform. Nine passengers—seven men and two women—disembark. They haul skis, backpacks, and other heavy equipment with them. They are all young, all in their early 20s, except for one taller man who looks to be in his late 30s or early 40s.

They chatter excitedly as they pass through the one-room station. They gather in a loose circle at the edge of the main street of the tiny town called Sverdlovsk.

Igor Dyatlov is the leader of the group. He’s of average height, and he wears a few days’ worth of whiskers. When he smiles, his cheeks puff out. His eyes are deep blue.

Dyatlov scans the street and signals to a man leaning against a flatbed truck on the opposite side. The man nods and waves them over. Dyatlov leads the way and shakes the driver’s hand. After exchanging a few words, the group piles into the back of the truck.

They drive for several hours up steep, wooded, mountain roads. The group huddles against each other to ward off the cold. Day turns to night. Eventually, the road terminates in the center of an even smaller town called Vizhai. The truck rumbles to a stop in front of a two-story building adorned with a plain sign reading simply: *Inn*.

While the others gather their equipment together, Dyatlov approaches the cab of the truck. He gives the driver a handful of coins and shakes his hand. The truck makes a U-turn and heads back the way it came. Dyatlov approaches the rest of his crew.

“We’re here,” he says. “One journey ends, and the bigger one begins.”

Lyudmila, one of the two women in the group and one of the youngest at twenty-one, rubs her hands together. She licks her lips, a frequent tic. Her body is broader than the diminutive other woman. She wears a traditional yet fairly gaudy mink ushanka. Lyudmila says, “Let’s go inside. I think my fingers froze together after the very first fifteen minutes in that truck.”

One of the men, Rustem, narrows his eyes but smiles. He too wears an ushanka, but it’s of a drabber military style.

He says, “If you’re cold now, wait for a few days...”

They all fall in line behind Dyatlov. He leads them toward the inn.

The main floor of the inn is a single large room filled with tables around which about a dozen people, mostly locals, are spread. The far wall holds a large fireplace, and in it, a fire blazes. Several stuffed animal heads ring the walls. A long bar lines the left wall, nearest the door, and a wide wooden staircase leads up to the rooms at the bar’s far end.

The innkeeper—a short, stocky, middle-aged woman with a pleasant, welcoming demeanor uncharacteristic of the region, especially this time of night and year—greeted them.

“Good evening, comrades,” she says.

“Good evening, ma’am,” Dyatlov says.

“How can I help you?”

“How many rooms do you have available tonight?” Dyatlov asks.

He noticed the handmade *Vacancy* sign on the bar, but he winces when he finishes speaking. He couldn’t plan this part of the trip. If there isn’t room for them here, he doesn’t have a backup plan.

The innkeeper bobs her head around Dyatlov, appraising the size of the group.

“All five of them are open,” she says. “Plenty of beds and cots. We don’t have many visitors this time of year.”

Dyatlov, visibly relieved, says, “Excellent. We’ll take...” he turns around to do some quick mental math, “four of them, I suppose. How much?”

“Four rooms will be 800, if it’s just for one night.”

Dyatlov nods.

“It is. We’re setting off early in the morning.”

He digs in his pocket and removes a wad of bills. He hands her several of them. She takes the cash and slides a piece of paper and a pencil across the bar to him.

She says, “I just need you to fill out this form. The government requires it.” She cocks her head and exhales apologetically.

“No problem, comrade,” Dyatlov says. He begins filling out the form.

“You’re skiers, I see?” the innkeeper asks. “Where are you from?”

Dyatlov looks up from the form. “We’re students from Ural Polytechnic Institute, so not very far away, considering. And yes, we’re on a break from classes to do a cross-country skiing expedition.”

A blatantly drunk local man, who had been sitting on a stool a few feet down the bar, leans in.

“Where are you young Einsteins headed?” he asks, his speech is slightly slurred.

Georgyi steps forward and clasps one hand on Dyatlov’s shoulder. He’s short and wiry, with a wide, round face. His ears protrude prominently out from under his wool cap. He addresses the drunk in a faux-spooky voice.

“The Mountain of the Dead,” he says.

The drunk raises his glass and smiles.

“Cheers to that then.”

Georgyi says to the innkeeper, “I’ll have two of what he’s having when you have the chance. I need to warm my bones.”

Dyatlov slides the completed form back to the innkeeper. He turns to Georgyi and says in a somewhat muted voice, “Be careful. We have to wake up before dawn.”

Georgyi waves him off and approaches the drunk. He shakes his hand and drapes his arm around his shoulder.

The innkeeper hands four room keys to Dyatlov.

She says, “Up the stairs and to your left. I trust you can decide the sleeping arrangements when you see which rooms have which beds.”

“Thank you, comrade,” Dyatlov says. “How’s the food here?”

The innkeeper beams. “It’s all from my recipes, so quite excellent of course.”

“Great,” Dyatlov says, smiling. “We’re famished.”

He distributes the keys. Most of the team traipse upstairs to drop off their gear. Georgyi stays at the bar, and immediately throws back the shot the innkeeper pours for him.

“Cheers to a successful, fulfilling expedition,” Alexander Z says, raising his glass of beer.

He’s tall and muscular, the oldest of the group at thirty-seven, and the only non-student. He’s a ski instructor and travel guide. He joined the team to add performance points to his degree, in order to achieve the Master rank. He has a thick, bushy mustache and still wears his thin, frayed beanie.

“Here, here,” they all agree.

They clang their glasses together and take swigs. The whole team is seated around a long table, their meals nearly finished. A trio of local musicians has set up in the space between the bar and the stairs, playing traditional songs.

Dyatlov pushes his empty plate aside. He unfolds a map on the table.

Georgyi rolls his eyes.

“Oh, come on,” he protests.

Dyatlov shoots him an icy look.

Nicolas, a short man with a handsome, angular face, laughs and says, “What our inebriated friend means to say is that we all know the route by heart.”

Georgyi looks at the ceiling and recites in a monotone, “Day One, Vizhai to Ushtek Pass. Day Two, Ushtek to Cozny if the terrain is acceptable. Day Three, Cozny to Verstan after leaving a store of supplies by the river at Kholan. Day Four...”

Lyudmila breaks in, “Okay, okay, Georgyi. We get it. You’re an immaculate drunk.”

Georgyi leans around the tall, thin Yuri to pat Lyudmila’s shoulder.

“Thank you, darling,” he says. “Simple acknowledgement is all I ask.”

Most of them laugh and drink more. Dyatlov frowns, but then feels Zinaida squeeze his hand beneath the table. He relaxes. She bites her lip. He can’t remain terse. He smiles, and folds the map back up.

“Okay, you’re all professionals, clearly,” he says, laughing. “I guess I’m not needed here any more tonight, so I think I’ll turn in.”

Zinaida announces, “I think I’ll do the same.”

Lyudmila raises an eyebrow in mock surprise. She licks her lips again.

“Oh really now?” she asks. “Why is that?”

Several people giggle and snicker. Zinaida runs her hand across her forehead, beneath her red kerchief, in exaggerated slow motion.

“Because I’m absolutely dead tired,” she says. “Something tells me Igor feels the same way.”

She squeezes Dyatlov’s hand again under the table.

Dyatlov, smiling sheepishly, agrees. “Absolutely.”

They both stand up.

Dyatlov adds, “Just remember. We need to be on the trail before dawn.”

He and Zinaida head upstairs. The rabble at the table gets louder as they depart. Zinaida follows closely behind him down the hall. He slides the key from his pocket. While he fumbles for the lock, she wraps her arm around his waist.

They enter the room. Dyatlov shuts the door and turns to face Zinaida. She stands on her tiptoes and kisses him passionately. They separate for a moment.

Dyatlov, serious again, says, “When we get back, we’re going to tell our parents. I’m not afraid anymore.”

Zinaida places her fists against her hips, mocking Dyatlov’s seriousness.

“Are you sure about that? My father’s a force to be reckoned with.”

They peel off their top layer of clothes. Zinaida shivers. They can see each other’s breaths. She grabs his hand and leads him, giggling softly, into bed. They bury themselves beneath the blankets and hold each other. They kiss again and then Dyatlov turns and stares at the ceiling for several seconds.

“What’s wrong?” Zinaida asks. “Something’s been bothering you all day. We’re all well prepared. It’s not Georgyi, is it? He means well, and once he’s outside, he’s a perfect—”

“No,” Dyatlov says, shaking his head. “I know he is. We’re all professionals. I’m not worried about that.”

“What is it then?”

Dyatlov pauses for a moment, and then lets out a soft sigh.

“I just have a... feeling. Not a *bad* feeling necessarily. Just a strange one.”

“What do you mean?” Zinaida asks.

She strokes his cheek.

“You know how sometimes when you dream, you find yourself in the middle of some kind of crazy scenario where you’d never be in real life? You either dive right in without thinking, or else your mind somehow instantly creates an elaborate backstory to explain how you got there...”

“I wouldn’t know,” Zinaida says. “I don’t dream.”

“You don’t dream? That’s terrible.”

Zinaida laughs.

“It’s also a lie,” she says. “I dream every night. Last night I dreamed I was in a private school in America, in California. Two nights ago the flying witch with iron teeth was chasing me. Baba Yaga. I told you about that, don’t you listen to me?”

She punches him lightly in the ribs.

“I do, I do,” Dyatlov says. “I’m sorry, I’m just...”

“I’m kidding with you. I know what you mean. But where are you going with this?”

Dyatlov breathes in deeply before continuing.

“Well, in those dreams, I’m me, but I’m not quite me at the same time. Sometimes I’m more cowardly than I’d like to be; sometimes I’m more heroic than I know I am. But something’s different every time. And for a few moments when I wake up, I’m not sure what’s real or who I am... Could I wake up as a different version of me and be convinced I’ve always been that way? I’ve been getting this feeling recently that’s going to happen. It was more intense today than ever

before—that I might wake up tomorrow as someone completely different.”

Zinaida, adopting a mock-scolding tone, says, “Comrade Dyatlov, you worry too much. Worrying is not productive for the state. When you daydream you should be thinking of how to build better radios for the military to cross these vast wildernesses. And when you’re not doing that, you should be crossing the country on skis, training your body to become the perfect Russian physical ideal...”

“You’re right...” Dyatlov sighs.

Laughing again, she says, “No, I’m kidding you again. I just want to look at the pretty mountains and to feel alive.”

“Me too,” Dyatlov says.

“And don’t you worry,” Zinaida says. “If you wake up as someone else, I’ll make sure to tell you.”

They kiss. Dyatlov reaches over to switch off the lights. The sounds of revelry below carries through the floor.

The Day Before The Disappearance *New York*

“You should eat more,” Sam Merard says.

He scoops a forkful of hash browns into his own mouth.

Liz shakes her head almost imperceptibly and reaches for the creamer. He watches her long thin arm unfold itself. Three of her fingernails are bitten down to nubs. As her fingers wrap around the metal container, the veins in her forearm pop to the surface, creating long blue ridges just like in West Virginia. She pours a few drops into her coffee, swirls it with her spoon, and brings it to her chest.

Her breasts, once full, now hide somewhere beneath the folds of her black business suit. She blows lightly across the surface of the mug, accentuating the hollowness of her cheekbones. Most of her jet-black hair is hidden from view, pulled back into a tight ponytail.

Her eyes, wet with leftover tears and rimmed red by whatever she’s coming down from, speak more loudly than her lips.

“I’m sorry,” they say. “I’m a fuck up. You don’t deserve this.”

She’s still so goddamn beautiful, he thinks.

“No you’re not,” he says. “And yes I do. I want to help you.”

“You’re too good to me.”

She smiles weakly, and then lets it fade. "It's too late for me."

She still hasn't touched her omelet.

"Where did you go last night?"

"I turned into a pumpkin," she says.

Merard's eyes fall to the crumpled napkin next to her plate and the crusty remnants of blue powder that had been ringed around her right nostril when she sat down.

"What is that blue stuff?" he asks.

"It's too late for me. You don't deserve this," she repeated, as if a mantra. "But you will trust me soon. I promise you that. I really do."

"How? Why?"

She reaches across the table and pats his hand, as if that's a satisfactory enough answer. She says, "I don't expect you to wait around for it to happen. But I promise you it will."

"Please stop saying that kind of thing."

The other diners see a thin, pretty, sad girl in a business suit jacket and skirt. They don't know that underneath, her body is tattooed with a dozen different prayers for strength in a dozen different languages. This intimate knowledge comforts him, and forces him to forgive her for whatever her flaws—whatever she may have done last night and every other night.

"Our problem," he says, "is that we communicate too much."

"*That's* the problem?" she asks incredulously.

"All the technical barriers to constant communication are gone, so we feel obligated to stay in constant contact. If this was twenty years ago, we'd talk to each other once a day and you could do your... thing... and I could do mine. No problems. No mysteries."

Liz shakes her head.

"No, that's not right. I shouldn't hide from you. You'll trust me soon."

He wipes his hands on his napkin and looks around for the waitress. He needs this to end.

"Speaking of mysteries," she says, "I was thinking about Dyatlov last night, when I was a pumpkin..."

Sam brightens.

Liz continues, "Couldn't it be simpler than you think? I know you say it couldn't have been a full-on avalanche because of the low angle of the slope, but couldn't they have *thought* it was an avalanche, freaked out, and run away into the cold?"

“I guess so,” Sam says. “That’s possible. But they were experienced. I don’t think they would have gotten that spooked so easily.”

“Well, what if a freak chunk of snow broke off from an edge higher up the slope and rolled down and hit the tent with enough force to fool Dyatlov into thinking there may be a full-on avalanche?”

Sam shrugs.

“It’s possible.”

Liz laughs.

“I can tell you don’t buy it. You’re thinking of all the other crazier possibilities. Do you think you’re ever gonna land on one scenario and say, ‘Whoa, that’s it!’ and be done with it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Hopefully,” she says. “Because this can’t exactly be healthy...”

Sam’s eyes drift back down to the crumpled powder napkin. Liz notices too, and falls silent. The waitress arrives with the check. They both pull out credit cards. He tells her she can split it.

“I mean,” Liz continues, “if you finally figure it out—if you decide you’ve pieced together what actually happened to those Russians—what then? You know so much about it now you could turn it into something constructive, like a book or a movie or something.”

“Maybe. I just need to figure it out.”

“But what if you can’t? What if it’s unknowable? It was fifty years ago, in communist Russia. The trail of evidence isn’t exactly fresh...”

Annoyance seeps through Sam’s voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” he snaps. “I’ll figure it out eventually. The pieces have to fit.”

The waitress returns. They both sign their receipts. Liz stands up and slings her purse over her shoulder. She pushes her chair back into its place. She leans across the table and kisses him gently on the lips.

“Have a good day at work,” she says. “Let me know if you don’t want to deal with me anymore. I’ll understand. You’ll trust me soon.”

She walks out into the street.

January 29th, 1959
Near The Mountain of the Dead, Russia

Dyatlov stops suddenly and whips his head around behind him. His eyes are wide and terrified. He has trouble catching his breath. Despite the cold, beads of sweat form and freeze on his forehead. He jerks around to his right, then his left, then straight up above him. The rest of the ski team trudges by.

He relaxes a bit as Zinaida shuffles up to him, but he still scans the landscape. He feels like he's being watched. The feeling has increased ever since departing Vizhai.

He shields his eyes against the morning sun. The Mountain of the Dead towers about seven kilometers ahead of them. The peak doesn't look any more foreboding than any of the others, yet his paranoia, coupled with a disconcerting sense of *deja vu*, has increased with their approach.

Before beginning the expedition, he'd heard that the local Mansi people fear the mountain. Back home, the knowledge that the Mansi's unease about the area wasn't based upon any particular story or legend had allowed him to both dismiss it as unfounded superstition and still provide some extra spice when he told friends about their intended destination. But out here so close to it, the lack of specificity only increased his sense of dread.

"What's wrong?" Zinaida asks. She unscrews the cap from her canteen.

"I don't know. I feel like we're being watched," he answers. No need to lie to her.

Zinaida swallows a swig of water.

"Well, you were right last night then," she says. "You're someone else now. This isn't like you. Stop worrying. There's no one out here but us."

Dyatlov looks behind him one last time and his gaze lingers for a moment on the desolate, beautiful vista. Finally he shrugs, somewhat unconvincingly, and they move on to join the others.

"We've got a few hours till dusk," Rustem says to Dyatlov.

The team is gathered around the edge of a forest. He gestures up the slope ahead of them, which marks the first approach to the Mountain. "We could hike up there a couple more miles. It would make the rest of the climb much easier tomorrow."

Dyatlov, chewing on the inside of his cheek, says, "It's pretty exposed up there."

"The weather seems alright," Alexander Z offers. "It's not too windy. We should be okay."

Dyatlov considers the options. Setting up camp down here by the woods would provide more protection against the natural elements, but further up the slope would offer a better view of the other factors Dyatlov can't quite elucidate. And Rustem's right—the head start could allow them the chance to make the entire ascent tomorrow. The sooner they leave the area, the better.

He sighs.

"Alright. Let's go then."

They traipse a couple kilometers up the mountain. The slope is long and narrow, but it's still hard work after hiking so long already today. By the time they locate a relatively flat spot to set up camp, the sun has already dipped behind the peaks to the west.

The team goes about fulfilling their various roles in order to settle in for the night. By now, several days into the expedition, their actions have taken on the rhythm of ritual. The two Alexanders, Georgyi and Lyudmila set up the tent. Afterward, Zinaida and Rustem arrange the bedding and supplies inside, and prepare the lantern. Yuri and Dyatlov start a fire using wood they gathered back at the forest. They collect everyone's wettest clothes and hang them on a line near the fire. Nicolas, unquestionably the group's most skilled chef, cooks dinner while wearing his impractical black fedora.

After eating, they sit around the fire for a while. Eventually, they trail off to bed in staggered increments. Dyatlov has trouble falling asleep, but eventually exhaustion consumes his anxiety.

Some time later, the wind outside suddenly begins to increase in volume and intensity, quickly drowning out the snoring of the team's loudest sleepers. The tent walls begin flapping and shaking. A distant rumbling, at first indistinguishable from the sound of the wind, also begins to grow louder. Several team members begin to open their eyes reluctantly.

The rumble becomes a roar, and then something heavy smacks into the up-slope side of the tent with a loud thud. One corner of the canvas collapses completely on top of the sleeping Georgyi. He shouts a confused curse and squirms out from beneath the sudden weight.

He scrambles on his hands and knees and shouts, "Avalanche!"

Dyatlov bolts upright. He surveys the damaged tent, hears the howl and the roar and screams, "Everybody out, now!"

Panic sets in. They tumble around in a melee of confused, desperate movements. Some went to sleep dressed completely; some are in their underclothes. Some of the underdressed manage to grab random pieces of clothing.

Nicolas and Yuri, closest to the exit, stumble out into the snow. Lyudmila, Yuri, and Alexander K struggle to throw on some clothes near the tent's entrance, blocking it from everyone else.

Georgyi, still the most spooked from his brief burial, sees that the entrance is blocked. He pulls out his knife, pushes past Dyatlov, and slices open the downslope wall of the tent.

"What are you doing?" Dyatlov demands.

Georgyi ignores him and slides out into the snow. Dyatlov grabs the team's only flashlight and then Zinaida's hand. They follow Georgyi out into the snow.

Outside in the dark, Lyudmila, trembling and wearing only socks, stutters, "What do we do?"

The wind is still howling. Dyatlov tries to peer up the slope. The sky has become overcast and the moon isn't out. He can't see anything. The rumbling continues.

Alexander K says, "Let's get out of here."

“Where?” Rustem wails.

“Down to the forest.”

Dyatlov, trying his best to remain rational, says, “That’s downslope. If there’s a bigger avalanche, we’ll get buried.”

Alexander says, “The trees may give us enough protection.” His words tumble out with frenzied desperation. “Let’s go!”

He takes off running downhill. Several others follow him. Dyatlov bites his lip, more frustrated now than frightened, that he’s lost not only control of the environment, but of his team’s reactions to it. He flips the flashlight on and sets it on top of the tent to mark its location. Then he, Zinaida, and the rest of the team follow Alexander’s group down the slope.

They make it down to the forest. Dyatlov counts bodies. Everyone’s here. They stand around the base of a big cedar tree. Georgyi and Yuri are still in their underwear—t-shirts and shorts, barefoot. They have begun shivering uncontrollably, their initial surge of adrenaline having run out.

Yuri, through chattering teeth, says, “Let’s go back. I don’t hear anything anymore.”

Georgyi says, “I’m not going back there. That was probably just the first stage of the avalanche.”

“We need a fire,” Dyatlov says.

The trees were further away from the tent than Dyatlov remembered. He looks up the slope to try to see the light atop the tent, but he sees nothing but the flat white of the snow against the dark gray of the sky.

Those able to think straightest—Nicolas, Zinaida, and Alexander Z—begin looking for firewood. Pickings are slim. They’d gathered most of the easy-to-find wood earlier today for their campfire. They bring a few handfuls of sticks back to Dyatlov.

His matchbook had been in his pocket when they fled, but only five matches remain. The wood is wet, and he knows he has to remain calm and deliberate. Rustem helps him gather kindling, and tries to dry the pine needles and twigs on his coat.

The others’ bodies and mindsets deteriorate during the agonizing wait for the fire. They begin arguing. Dyatlov does his best to ignore them, concentrating on only the most immediate need. He and Rustem finally manage to fan a flame to life. They slowly add progressively bigger sticks with trembling fingers, resisting the impulse to throw everything they have on at once.

The rest of the team try to squeeze in around the small fire, many of them falling to their knees. Dyatlov warns them to keep from knocking snow into it or smothering it with their crowded, desperate bodies.

“This won’t last long,” he says. “There’s not much good wood.”

Yuri, unable to feel any significant warmth from the flame, lets out a yelp and jumps to his feet.

Despite Dyatlov's warnings, his sudden movement dumps snow on the fire. It sizzles and hisses, and one half of it goes out.

Dyatlov curses Yuri and goes about trying to repair the damage. Yuri pays him no mind. He rushes over to the big cedar tree. He claws at the branches and hauls himself up. He begins climbing, mumbling that he can find more good wood higher up. He tears pieces off the green lower branches.

Zinaida says flatly, "We need more wood. He's not going to find any that way."

Nicolas says, "I'll go a bit further in to the woods and find some."

Lyudmila and the Alexanders offer to go with him.

Dyatlov frowns and then nods. "Don't go far," he says. "There's no moon. It's dark. Don't go further than you can see us."

The group of four heads off deeper into the woods. Shortly after they depart, the remaining group hears more rumbling in the distance. They wait for it to become a roar and a wall of snow, but nothing comes.

Yuri, now high up in the tree, shouts down, "There's no more good branches! I still can't see the camp from up here! I'll try higher."

Dyatlov considers telling Yuri to come back down. He knows the climb is pointless and there's a chance Yuri, in his frantic state, will fall. But the simple fact is that Yuri is nearly naked, and any movement is probably good for him.

He squats in front of the fire, balancing signs of imminent extinguishment with the dwindling pile of usable sticks. Zinaida leans into him. He wraps his free arm around her, and kisses her exposed neck. He tries his best to ignore his friends' shivering. The best thing to do is concentrate on one thing at a time. The fire is keeping them alive for the moment.

Ten minutes pass, then twenty. The other group has not returned. Dyatlov stands shakily and walks a few feet into the woods.

"Nicolas!" he calls. "Lyudmila!"

The missing four have gone further into the woods than they planned, after not finding any significant usable wood nearby. They don't hear Dyatlov's shouts. Each of them carries small bundles of meager sticks. They've spread out now, each trying to find their track of footprints that led them here.

"There's a clearing here," Alexander Z says.

The other three know it can't be the same clearing they came from, but any change in the landscape may offer them some hope. They join Alexander at the edge of the woods. They walk a few steps forward together, and then Nicolas throws his arm across Lyudmila's chest. He points a few feet in front of them where the snow tapers off at the edge of a deep ravine.

Alexander Z takes a tentative step forward and leans over the edge. He can see the tops of nearly

bare rocks, shielded from the deeper snow by the cliff face, eighty feet below.

Alexander K's teeth are chattering uncontrollably, but he manages to get out, "Okay, I think we need to turn straight around. If we walk in a straight line, we'll be goo—"

There's a sudden crack. The shelf of snow they're standing on gives way, and they fall through empty space. Lyudmila lets out half a sharp scream as she falls, and then is abruptly silenced. Upon impacting a rock, she bites off her tongue.

Back at the makeshift camp, Dyatlov checks his watch for the seventeenth time in nineteen minutes. They hear a faint but sharp noise from the direction of the woods.

Dyatlov jerks his head up. "Was that a scream?"

Zinaida grips his arm tightly. He sees her energy slipping away. "I don't know," she mumbles. "I don't think so."

They call out to the missing group again. The fire is dying. The sticks are all gone. It will be a tiny pile of embers within minutes.

Dyatlov surveys the still deteriorating conditions of the others.

He says quietly to Zinaida, "Something's wrong. We can't stay here forever. This fire won't last. I'm going back to the tent. I'll bring back the lantern and flashlight and clothes for these guys. Then, if the camp's still intact and not buried, we can all go back there. If not, at least we'll be warmer."

"I'm going with you," Zinaida says.

Rustem, overhearing them from the other side of the fire, says, "Me too." He's been quiet since they arrived. He rocks back and forth on his heels.

"No," Dyatlov says. "It's too dangerous. It's a long hike. You're freezing. And that slide could start up again any time."

Zinaida shakes her head, determined.

"It's over a kilometer away. You can't carry enough on your own to do these guys any good."

She nods at Yuri and Georgyi, still in their underclothes. Yuri's eyes are closed.

"We're going with you," Rustem says, settling the matter.

Dyatlov sighs, then shrugs, but no one can tell because it's buried in his constant convulsions of shivers.

The three of them stand up. Dyatlov says to Georgyi, "When they come back, tell them to stay here. We'll be back soon. We'll get you some clothes."

Georgyi stares straight ahead into the fire with wide eyes for three disconcerting seconds before finally nodding.

Dyatlov, Rustem, and Zinaida set off back up the slope. The wind picks up again shortly afterward. The snow whips around them, nearly blinding them. They trudge on; only somewhat confident they're climbing uphill. They quickly become exhausted and one by one, they get separated from each other, and collapse into the snow.

New York

The Day Before The Disappearance

Sam stares at the monitor at his desk in a crowded twenty-first floor office, daydreaming about old Russian mysteries while the stock market plunges to apocalyptic lows on the wall-mounted TV.

He reaches for his coffee cup and absent-mindedly puts it to his lips. He gags and spits up a dribble of it on his keyboard. It's cold, having sat on his desk for hours. He looks around for tissues and to make sure no one saw him. He quickly gives up on the search and dabs at the drops with his sleeve.

He turns his attention back to his screen. He's looking at a multi-paragraph post on a message board titled *Avalanche Theory*. Under his breath, he mumbles, "Bullshit. That doesn't explain half of it."

The Dyatlov Pass Incident. He'd first read about the story online a few months ago, shortly after his arrival in the city. He had been consumed by it ever since. At first blush, the incident possessed all the vaguely sinister elements of an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*. Those odd details had generated dozens of theories over the decades since the incident. None were satisfactory.

Nine hikers, led by Igor Dyatlov, an engineering grad student at Ural Polytechnic Institute, set off in 1959 to explore an area in northern Russia ominously, improbably called "Mountain of the Dead". All were students at the Institute, all experienced skiers and hikers—and none were seen alive again. Two search parties months apart were required to find all the bodies. When Sam first read the circumstances in which they were found, his stomach turned and his pulse quickened. These reactions had only intensified.

He became obsessed. He hung everything on Dyatlov. As horrific as the incident was, Sam decided it was the one time and place in history where either *Something Happened*, or it didn't and never had. Whether there are forces at work in the universe much bigger than humans, or whether there are just bones and blood and atoms and chaos.

Sometimes, when thinking about it late at night, a chill would run up his spine. He'd feel those bigger forces crawling up from the depths, howling and chanting, clawing at his legs. Sometimes he feared them, but more often he welcomed the prick of their talons probing his flesh for weak spots.

His quest for capital-A Answers was not merely academic. Diagnosed with an aggressive, terminal form of cancer when he was only 18, he left his parents' house in the middle of the night without telling them of his situation. He intended to disappear forever—to die somewhere his

body would never be found. He believed he was being merciful to his parents. He thought that disappearing would at least give them hope.

But he didn't die. The symptoms of his cancer themselves disappeared by themselves with movement. The further he drove, the longer the cancer would go into remission. When he stayed somewhere for too long, the symptoms would begin to return, and he would pick up and move again. This had been happening for the past seven years. He'd been in New York long enough that he expected the cancer to return any day now.

He searched for evidence of true mysteries. He craved proof of "something more." A purpose. He needed to know if his peculiar cancer was more than a scientific fluke. He was a hardline atheist before his cancer; now he was a desperate agnostic.

The Dyatlov mystery drew him in—the first documented real-world mystery that made less sense the closer he looked at it. Ever since he began seeing her, he dragged Liz into his obsession as well. In fact, it was almost all he talked about when he first met her at the bar on the ground floor of this office building. He was a week into his investigation, and she was the first person he talked to about it. Because of his inability to stay long in one place, he generally avoided connecting with people. But Liz, so beautiful and eager, had listened to him with genuine interest. He still didn't know why she was drawn to him, but he knew why he couldn't distance himself from her, despite all her recent issues.

So, the avalanche explanation, Liz's current favorite...

A snow bank, disturbed and loosened by the hikers' presence, broke free and collapsed atop the tent. One of the hikers cut through the fabric with his knife, and they climbed out. Someone panicked, from the shock and the cold, and took off down the mountain to the relative safety of the trees. Once there, they had trouble starting a fire. One group went searching for firewood, got lost, and tumbled into a ravine. Two froze to death near the failed fire, and the rest died while trying to make it back to the tent.

No.

It would be nice and neat if this were what happened, as horrific as it was. It would be simple, natural. Man versus Nature. Nature wins. Primal panic overwhelming the survival instinct. But this is not what happened. This could not have happened.

If the weather had been so bad, why had the rescue party two weeks later been able to follow the team's footprints down to the bodies? Why didn't anyone share their clothes with the two in their underwear? Why did they think it was a good idea to try to escape an avalanche by fleeing to lower ground? There was no real avalanche—only the fear of one. The search team did not have to dig out the camp from the snow. So why, once the initial danger had passed, didn't they return to the camp immediately? Avalanches are not generally multi-stage events. There's no way they would be so frightened of an avalanche that never came that they'd prefer to freeze to death. Oh yeah, and why were their clothes practically glowing with high levels of radiation two weeks later? Why were Lyudmila and Alexander's ribs broken and their chest cavities collapsed? Why was Nicolas's skull fractured? Why was the fire so puny when the searchers found the area littered with good firewood? Why was Lyudmila missing her tongue?

What were the "bright flying spheres" reported in the area at the time by multiple eyewitnesses, including the military and the weather service? Why did the government close off the area for

three years after the event? Why was the official file sealed and classified for decades? Why were pieces of evidence and pertinent documents missing from the file, even after it was de-classified? Why did Lev Ivanov, the chief investigator, confess to a Kazakhstani newspaper after the fall of the Iron Curtain that the case had haunted him for decades, and that he believed these flying spheres were “paranormal” and directly responsible for the hikers’ deaths? Why did the hikers’ relatives testify at the funerals that each victim’s skin was orange, and their hair gray?

“The pieces have to fit,” Sam whispers for the 120th time.

His phone buzzes. He pulls it from his pocket.

A text from Liz: *I’m sorry. Can I cook you dinner tonight?*

He sighs and stands up. He crosses the bullpen, bypassing a dozen other employees, all his age or younger. Most of them wear headphones. Sam, like the rest of them, was hired as a temp in the accounts payable department of an online travel agency. No one was hiring full-time these days, not that he cared.

He walks to the window. He knows where to look. His eyes drift down to the fourteenth floor of the building directly across from his. It’s the right time of day, when the sun isn’t reflecting off the windows. He sees Liz’s faint outline at her own window. She has an office of her own. She waves meekly to him.

What did she do last night? Where did she sleep? Her official story had too many questions and holes to ignore. What happened last night?

He tries to piece together what he knows, using the same scattered technique he employs for Dyatlov.

He remembers a flurry of texting activity in the few minutes before she disappeared. Who was she talking to? Could it be her friend Christina? No, Sam remembered, Christina was on a trip with her boyfriend to the Cheyshelles. An old college friend? A guy or a girl? Some dude she met in the lunchroom at work? She decided a place to meet up with this guy, and told Sam she was going home. She met up with this dude and his friends at some fake dive bar in Williamsburg, and that’s where Jim spotted her, when she was with them on the way from one bar to another, all coked up, laughing, radiant, and ready to play. She sighed and clicked her tongue when she saw Sam’s missed calls and texts, and she turned off her phone. The next place was likely a dive bar. She took him over to the jukebox and used his cash to select some songs. Back at the table with his friends, she grabbed his hand under the table at the next bar, and ran her fingers up his thigh, and whispered into his ear. She took him back to her place and then—no, that wouldn’t make sense. She wouldn’t have had to come get her car this morning if she was already at her apartment. She went with him to his place then they found some blue powder...

He waves back and then types a message back to her.

Okay. Your place?

What does he truly know about her? She works inside that building. That at least is an indisputable fact. He knows a handful of other facts about her—that mint chip is her favorite flavor of ice cream, that she grew up in the city, that she loves many of the same bands as he, that she mutters cryptic phrases in her sleep, that she’s been losing weight to an alarming degree since

he met her... but most everything else about her is shrouded in as much mystery as the Dyatlov Pass Incident.

A voice behind him says, "God, that building is weird-looking."

Sam turns around. His co-worker Josi is standing a few feet behind him and to his left, looking out another window. She's overdressed today for what the job requires, but Sam has no complaints. She wears a white low-cut blouse, a short-ish purple skirt, and five-inch heels. She presently stands an inch taller than him. She's tan, brunette, and very attractive.

["It looks like a starship,"](#) she says. "All those sharp angles and that phallic confidence. Shiny enough to reflect God's leering face. That thing could blast off into space at any moment, and probably no one would miss it."

Sam smiles. "You goddamn English majors are everywhere," he says.

She shrugs. "We're highly adaptable. All the specialists are dropping like flies in this economy. How close are you to finishing your morning stack?"

"Speaking of our fulfilling jobs," Sam laughs. He lies, "I'm almost done."

"I haven't even started," she says.

Sam immediately regrets his unnecessary lie.

"I just can't bring myself to care today," she continues.

"I don't think caring is necessary for what we do."

She laughs. It sounds amazing, sensual without intent.

"True," she says. Then, after a pause, "Want to grab a drink after work?"

Perhaps there was some intent.

Sam blinks twice before answering.

"Um, sure," he says. "I have dinner plans, but I'm actually meeting my friend Anton for happy hour back in Brooklyn. You're in my neighborhood, right?"

"Yep. We can ride the train over together if you want."

"Cool," Sam says. "Sounds good. You'll be done around four?"

"Probably not," she says. "But that's still when I'm gonna leave."

"See you then."

On his way back to his desk, Sam touches his lymph nodes on his throat to make sure they haven't started to swell yet. Still fine. But any day now.

The anchorman on TV looked red-eyed and desperate. “We still appear to be in a sort of free-fall situation here. Let’s go to Graham Pointer over at the Exchange...”

Sam wiggles his mouse and the screen jumps back to life, right where he left it. So, the avalanche theory is a bust. He’d dismissed it a while ago, but he felt he should reexamine it, in lieu of Liz’s sudden interest in it this morning.

So... Flying shapes. Radiation. Government cover-ups. *Okay*. Another popular theory is that it was a military weapon test gone awry. The area was supposed to be unpopulated. Thirty years later, a documentary film crew visited the site and found scrap metal everywhere, which seemed to support the fact that the military performed exercises on the Mountain of the Dead.

Okay. So one of the skiers left the tent in the middle of the night to take a piss, and he saw one of the “spheres”. He woke the others, who peeked out of the tent while still in their underwear. Suddenly, one of the spheres dove in close and exploded. Chest cavities collapsed and skulls fractured. Blinded and deafened and drenched in radiation, the skiers panicked, grabbed whatever clothes they could find, and ran down the mountain to their fates...

Still not quite right. Why would they have had to cut their way out of the tent with a knife? Why, almost twenty years after the U.S.S.R.’s implosion, was there no record or substantial rumor of any “flying sphere” radioactive weapon? What happened to Lyudmila’s tongue? What *the fuck* happened to her tongue? If the most common explanation was true—that a scavenger ate it post-mortem—why did this creature stop at the tongue? Why would *anything* stop at the tongue? Why did it look like it was surgically removed?

“The pieces have to fit,” he says, loud enough this time that the kid Zach on the other side of the desk looks up from his sandwich and shoots Sam a quizzical look.

Sam ignores him, and clicks into another message board thread.

January 29th, 1959

Near The Mountain of the Dead, Russia

Streaks of purple and dark, burnt orange above the western peaks provide the only evidence that the sun ever existed, today or any day. The whole ski team sits around the small fire outside the tent. To keep their rears from getting too wet, they’ve arranged themselves upon whatever accessories can be spared for the night—canvas bags, a metal lantern case, a pair of towels no one can remember who brought. Most of them sip tea. A small bottle of vodka is passed between the hardest members.

“Someone should tell a scary story,” Zinaida says. No one immediately volunteers, so she nudges Rustem, who sits to her right. “Come on, Rustem, what do you have?”

After a pause, he says quietly, “Hmm, well, Castro and his man Che are within a centimeter of controlling Cuba. The rumor is Batista is ready to flee to the United States...”

“And why is that scary, comrade?” Alexander K says in a clipped, vaguely threatening tone. “It’s a triumph.”

“Never mind,” Rustem says.

“No, tell me,” Alexander insists.

“Do you think the Americans will be very happy with a communist state 100 kilometers from their shores?”

“Who cares what the Americans think,” Alexander spits. “Fuck them and—”

Dyatlov, duty-bound to cut through the rising tension, raises his head. He cuts in, “Here’s something kind of scary... I read it in a journal before leaving University. This professor at a German school, I think his name was Jonsson, he performed an experiment...”

Several people groan.

“No, really,” Dyatlov insists. “It’s quite incredible. This professor shot electrons through two slits in order to study the pattern they would make on the wall behind it. But the electrons acted strangely. Instead of behaving like the tiny pieces of matter they are, the pattern on the back wall suggested that they were actually acting more like waves. It seemed that a single electron left his device as a particle, and then turned into a wave. Mathematically, it went through none of the slits, and both, one and then the other—all at the same time. It didn’t make sense. So Jonsson put a measuring device in place to watch individual electrons in order to see which slit they actually went through. But when the device was turned on, every electron it observed behaved exactly like it was expected—as a particle, not a wave. The interference pattern on the wall changed—no wave-like behavior...”

“What does that mean?” Alexander Z asks. “I’m not quite following.”

Lyudmila chimes in.

“I read it, too. It’s a confirmation, distillation, and first actual application of Heisenberg’s principle. That the mere act of observing something changes it.”

“Or if you look at it another way,” Dyatlov says, “it means that the human intellect... no, not the intellect—consciousness—may be more mysterious and powerful than we could imagine.”

Rustem, who had been pouting silently since his testy exchange with Alexander K, brightens.

“Or,” he says, “the closer you look at something the more it degrades, the more chaotic it becomes. The less it makes sense, the less real it is. The big picture is the only thing that’s real, the only thing that matters.”

Zinaida throws her head back in exasperation. “Good grief, guys,” she says. “None of you know how to tell a proper scary story?”

Georgyi looks up from his bottle and says, “Here’s something scary: If we die out here, no one will find our bodies for months, or ever.”

A moment of inevitable, uncomfortable silence is punctuated only by Yuri’s muttered curse in Georgyi’s direction.

Finally, Zinaida speaks up.

“Here,” she says. “I’ll do it. Ready? So a long time ago, in Slavia, there were stories of an old woman. They said she was a witch. She lived in a cabin in the woods. The keyhole to her front door was a mouth filled with sharp teeth. The fence that surrounded her cabin was made of human bones topped with skulls. There was always at least one pole lacking its skull, leaving space for whoever was unlucky enough to stumble upon it next. Well, one day, there was a boy named Boris who didn’t believe the legend and set off to prove...”

Most of them have heard a variation of the story before, but it’s a good one, so they listen. After a while, they all drift off to the tent.

Some time later, they are tucked into their sacks and wrapped in blankets, sound asleep. A distant rumbling grows suddenly to a deafening roar.

High above them, a jet races across the sky. Twinkling orange lights drop from its belly. The lights pulse and grow. One of the lights falls directly above the camp. It expands until it reaches whatever strange critical mass by which it bounds. It explodes a thousand feet above the tent. A shockwave radiates in every direction. The tent shakes violently.

The entire team wakes up nearly simultaneously, screaming in pain. The other falling orange lights illuminate the interior of the tent.

Rustem claws at his face. The blood vessels beneath his skin rupture, and his face instantly turns orange and purple, a brutal echo of the sun’s departure.

Several of the skiers shout out at once.

“Where’s the light?”

“I can’t see anything!”

“What’s going on?”

“My chest, it’s burning...”

“What happened?” Yuri wails. “I’m blind! I can’t see anything!”

Dyatlov dabs at his eyes, and then rubs them more fiercely, trying to get them to work again. He can see only dark shapes, silhouetted by an eerie orange. He feels around for the flashlight. He finds Zinaida’s hand first. He grabs it, and then the flashlight. He switches it on, but it offers no help. He pulls Zinaida close. He tries to focus on her face.

Alexander Z lunges across the tent. He falls into the canvas wall, a knife in his right hand. He slices into the fabric, and stumbles outside. Several others follow him, while more pour out the main entrance.

They gather as best they can outside the tent. They bump into each other, and clutch wildly for something or someone to hang on to.

Alexander Z doubles over. “My stomach is on fire,” he cries. “It’s burning up! And my chest!”

“I still can’t see,” Yuri says.

“I can see a bit better now,” Lyudmila says, her voice quivering with faint hope.

She looks skyward and sees the jet’s trail. “It’s a plane!”

“Let’s get out of here!” Rustem bellows.

“We should stay by the tent,” Dyatlov says.

Nicolas, gripping his chest, with tears of pain running down his face, says, “My insides are on fire. Damn it, this hurts!”

He takes off, lurching down the slope. Alexander Z follows close behind and then everyone follows suit in a panicked herd.

They make it to the edge of the forest. The night sky is still streaked with orange. They argue fiercely.

“We need to keep going,” Lyudmila maintains. “The forest will give us cover.”

“No,” Georgyi says, shivering in his underwear. “It’s too cold. We need a fire here.”

Dyatlov holds Zinaida’s hand. He waves his other hand in front of his eyes. He can’t see anything at all.

Nicolas grabs Lyudmila’s shoulder and gestures wildly at the woods. “Let’s go!”

“I’m with you,” Alexander Z says.

“Wait,” Dyatlov says meekly, knowing he’s already lost control and that given his present condition, he is wrong to try to maintain it.

Lyudmila, Nicolas, and Alexander, undeterred by Dyatlov’s unconvincing command, limp off together through the woods.

Yuri and Georgyi begin looking for firewood. They fumble around, still barely able to see, picking up twigs and wet branches. They miss the large branches all around them, beyond the range of their limited vision.

Alexander K and Rustem sit in the snow, moaning, and clutching at their throats, bellies, and groins. Dyatlov sits quietly next to them, not feeling particularly intense pain, but blind and useless. Zinaida stands above him, her hand on his shoulder, blinking through watery eyes, trying to determine if her vision is returning to normal.

Georgyi, half-naked, attempts to build a fire with the meager kindling he’s found. Yuri, also clad only in underwear, wanders over to the big cedar tree. He wants to get a good look at the sky, to see if he can tell what’s going on. *Is it a battle of some sort? Who is fighting?*

The roar and the plane return from the direction they disappeared, just as Yuri pokes his head above the other smaller trees. It releases more orange spheres. Yuri notices they fall lazily, as if they're made of paper or leaves. He shouts a warning down to the others.

The sphere directly above the forest explodes, producing another shockwave, which tears Yuri from his perch. He falls, grasping wildly at branches. He finally grabs hold of one of the lowest ones just enough to swing himself toward the tree's trunk. His legs spread, he slams into it, and slides down the last few feet. He lands on the snow, his body wrapped tightly around the tree, as if embracing it. He doesn't move, and he won't until the search team finds him here weeks later.

On the other side of the forest Lyudmila, who still has most of her eyesight, leads Nicolas and Alexander. They stumble painfully, their bodies heaving and doubling over and contracting from radiation poisoning. Lyudmila spots the edge of the ravine a few feet in front of them. She warns the others to stop.

She looks up. An orange sphere drifts down, like a large glowing snowflake. She stares for a moment, hypnotized by its strange beauty. Her awe shifts to horror as the sphere brightens, expands, and then bursts just ten meters above them. She screams.

There's a sickening crunch; their internal organs are crushed. All three of them are thrown into the air and hurled over the edge of the ravine. In mid-air, Lyudmila's scream cuts off abruptly as her body spasms. She bites down on her tongue, and the rest of the scream becomes a gurgle.

Back at the makeshift camp, Dyatlov doubles over and pukes. The pain has arrived. Zinaida tugs him upright.

"Rustem!" she shouts, seeing that Yuri and Georgyi are already dead. "Let's go back to the tent!"

They clamber up the slope. Rustem pukes, too, and then it finally hits Zinaida. Their skin glows orange. One by one, they collapse.