

The Star of Siberia

Based on "UFO" the science-fiction TV series created by
Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and Reg Hill (1969-1970)
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Chapter One

June 28th, 2004...

Virginia Prestai sat down smugly in her Aeroflot window seat. She'd done it again. And absolutely nobody was the wiser, she congratulated herself. The Star of Siberia was carefully concealed in her hollowed out blow dryer and the security people in the airport had been more concerned with looking for drugs, foreign currency and especially explosives. Ever since September 11th, 2001, airport people worldwide were less interested in looking for contraband or stolen goodies. They were, however, rabid about bombs, explosives, plastique, timing devices, etc. The hair drying appliance had gone unnoticed in their haste to check her luggage for more dangerous items.

Even now, with the carry-on bag in question sitting safely at her feet, Virginia was alert to her environment and those around her on the aircraft. She watched each new passenger enter and take their seats from behind her copy of Pravda, and listened intently to every sound, as habitually as small birds listen for predators. She was expert at her work, but every new assignment was getting more and more daring. Getting in and out of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg had been her crowning achievement in a long list of well-thought out thefts.

Within 20 minutes, the Aeroflot jet was winging its way over Lake Ladoga, banking and turning for its western destination, Paris. Virginia accepted a glass of hot Russian tea from the flight attendant. It had that typical musky Russian flavour, and she liked it. The in-flight meal served was a very poor stroganoff. The movie played, a Russian-sub-titled dub of Doctor Zhivago, brought out a grim smile of irony on her exotic face. Boris Pasternak had not even been permitted to leave the former Soviet Union in 1958 to receive his Nobel Prize for writing Zhivago's story, and here it was - up on the screen as though all had been forgiven. Pasternak's poignant tale of revolutionary Russia reminded Virginia that the country of her forefathers would always be prey to strong men with big ideas. The advancing revolution was why her grandfather left the Ukraine for a safer refuge in Western Canada. There, amongst the Saskatchewan wheat fields, he could forget about the Reds and the Whites, political commissars and trial-less executions and simply live - as Yuri Zhivago had said in the film. Georgi Prestai might have left Mother Russia, but he remained a Russian in his heart for the rest of his life. And, Virginia learned to speak Russian like a native from him as a child in his custody. She learned to love Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, to croon to old Russian ballads, and to enjoy borscht, perogies, and the rich Easter cakes her Baba used to make every year.

She looked down at the bag at her feet again for the millionth time. Yes, the Star would be sold to her eager client, and payday was looking brighter every minute.

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Her plane touched down at Orly Airport and she hailed a cab in perfect French.

Languages had been her forte in school. And, the Canadian school system insisted she learn both official languages - French and English. Learning Russian at home and Spanish and German in university was just icing on the cake. A career in diplomacy had been her original intentions - until she'd discovered her talents lay in other areas...

Virginia didn't have reservations at the five star hostelry she directed her taxi to, but it didn't matter. She had the means to get a three room suite and once she sold the Star, she'd have fun shopping and getting a few things at the fashion houses of Paris. The hotel people were suitably officious when they got a look at her papers, identifying her as Princess Irina Irkutskov, and she thanked them ostentatiously in Russian as they offered to send up some flowers and champagne.

The suite faced the main street, which would make it easier for Virginia to view any potential customers for the Star as they entered the hotel. She drew herself a long hot bubble bath, and ordered some blinis and sour cream for supper. She preferred something light to go with the champagne they sent up with one of the hotel staffers. The basket of hot-house roses and dahlias were elegantly displayed in a sterling silver vessel in the sitting room of the suite, and a silver platter of rich French cheeses and fruits accompanied the champagne and the blinis. She lazed in the tub for at least an hour, sipping bubbly, and picking at the cheese tray laid out on the granite tiled rim of the huge bath. On the counter sat her carry-on luggage with the Star hidden inside, her purse, her gun, and her smart pant suit, which she intended to put on.

A small sound caught her attention as she was toweling off. It was a metallic scraping sound. Virginia cautiously reached across and grabbed her 3-piece gun, sliding the individual components into one deadly weapon. Still dripping, she pulled on the luxurious terry robe the hotel had given her, pocketed the little hair dryer with the Star hidden inside and held the gun flat against her leg. She'd had to ward off would-be thieves before when she'd scored big, and nobody was going to profit from all her hard work except herself!

Standing over her suitcase was the same man who had brought her the food and flowers, riffling through her clothing. He was obviously looking for something. He suddenly looked up into the mirror and saw her. The man froze long enough for Virginia to bring up her weapon, "What do you want?" she asked him.

There was a strange blank expression on his face. He regarded the gun in her hand and replied calmly, in a strange voice, "If you kill me, others will come."

"I asked you, what are you looking for?" her voice was terse. The gun was steady.

"You have the Star of Siberia."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You took it. We have been looking for it. For some time. It belongs to us."

"Get out," Virginia told him, "I have nothing you want."

"Give it to me and you will be safe."

"Yeah, where have I heard *that* before?" she smiled mirthlessly, "I can call security and have you escorted out, or you can leave on your own without a fuss. Or I can shoot you. Which will it be?"

"If you kill me, others will come."

"Don't make me kill you."

The man slowly lifted one hand, "Don't move another muscle," Virginia instructed him, but his hand continued to come up and he fired a peculiar energy bolt at her. It missed her and stitched into the bathroom door frame.

Virginia ducked and rolled, bringing her to the man's feet. She reached up lightning fast and pulled him down by the shirt. Before she knew she'd even fired her weapon, he was lying limp and bleeding on top of her. The silencer attachment had masked the sound of the bullet. And, his weapon, a pencil-like instrument, fell to the floor where she could reach it.

She rolled him off onto the carpet. Already his blood was staining the expensive Turkish floor covering. Virginia knew she'd been compromised somehow. There was no time for anything now but escape. She peeled off the blood-stained robe and hurried herself, still half wet, into her laid out clothes in the bathroom. Then, she quickly grabbed her purse jammed the hair dryer and put on her Italian heels. It was time to leave.

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Getting out of the hotel was easier than she thought. She simply took the elevator and slipped out through the kitchen. Virginia knew that area of Paris fairly well. She hailed a cab and went to the Louve Museum. She hadn't seen Mona Lisa for awhile.

She approached a pay phone, swiped a computer card and punched in a number. Anxiously, she listened as the phone at the other end of the connection rang interminably. Finally the answering machine came on.

"It's me," she told the machine, "Let's get this deal over with today. I'm at the Louve. I'll wait till closing time. Otherwise, I sell to the highest bidder." and she hung up.

Virginia hung out in the Louve's prodigious gift shop for the next half hour, leafing through color plate books of the artwork on display at the Museum, and looking at the other items of interest. Then, she joined a tour. Best to blend in with the group, she figured.

Even though she and the tour group were bring shown some of the finest artwork produced in the world, Virginia's mind was not on Michelangelo or Leonardo DaVinci. She was still back in that hotel suite, wondering why the hell that man had fired at her. She'd had no luxury of time to look closely at the strange weapon in her purse. She'd simply grabbed it up on her way out. And, she had no idea how long it would take for anyone at the hotel to discover the dead man in her suite, or the fact that she was gone. Contrary to the "Pink Panther" movies, French policemen were not like Inspector Clouseau, and they'd start an investigation very quickly, with photos of herself and the dead man being sent out to Interpol and other nations' law agencies. She had to unload the Star, get her money and get the hell out of the country as fast as she could.

* * *

"There's been some peculiar UFO activity reported on the outskirts of Paris," Ed Straker told Paul Foster by secure teleconference, "The aliens don't usually go anywhere near such urbanized areas."

"Yes, I know. I dispatched several operatives to check it out earlier this morning. We've also turned up another interesting little tidbit. Interpol has posted an alert for a woman who may have killed a man in a Paris hotel. Apparently, the bathroom door frame at the hotel suite was scarred with odd energy burn marks."

Straker raised an eyebrow, "Aliens in a Paris hotel? What would they want there?"

"The dead man had no connection to the hotel. He wasn't even from Paris. He was from an outlying area. Officials aren't sure how he managed to penetrate that far into the hotel without security stopping him at some point."

"Well, we know the aliens have no compunction about using humans for their own purposes. Remember what happened to Beatrice Millar."

Foster sighed. He remembered the pretty young Egyptologist who'd been taken over by

the aliens and used to kill anyone who got in the way of the mission they programmed her for, "If that's the case, if this man was programmed by the aliens, what was he after? The aliens don't do anything without a reason."

"Keep me posted, Paul."

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The tour was over, and Virginia loitered in the gift shop once more, to no avail. Her buyer didn't bother to show up. She watched the clock, knowing the Museum was due to close shortly, and she punched in several more phone numbers, but none of them answered and she got an answering machines instead.

There was no choice. She had to leave. Now.

A taxi took her out to airport. She booked a flight to London. The airline employee asked about her luggage, and she said it was supposed to be coming from the hotel in time for the flight. Virginia knew airline people were supposed to question customers who appeared to have only carry-on baggage. Terrorists and bombers carried only what they needed to wreak their own brand of violence. She took herself to the airport gift shop, replaced the toiletries which had been left behind at the hotel, and hid in a corner booth in the airport lounge until her flight was called. The trip to London would not take long.

* * *

Heathrow Airport was a huge, busy, noisy, crowded complex. Virginia managed to get through customs and get outside to hail a cab. She was tired, disgusted and somewhat bewildered from her ordeal at the Paris hotel. She's never had to kill anyone before. And, her buyer had not shown up to relieve her of her burden. She was stuck with it until she could show it to another collector.

Virginia took a room in her chosen hotel and paid for it via bogus credit card. By the time it was discovered, she'd have checked out and left no trace of herself.

Once inside her room, Virginia locked the door. She was hungry but not keen on the idea of ordering from the hotel service - that was how her attacker had gotten access to her in Paris. There was no doubt he had been looking for the Star of Siberia, but why? Had he been sent by her buyer? Had the collector decided her price was too high and it would be easier to pay for her elimination and just steal it? *"If you kill me, others will come."* What the hell had that meant? Sitting down on the bed yoga-style, Virginia pried open the hollow blow dryer. She unrolled the piece of fabric the Star was wrapped in and picked it up in her hands.

Only seven inches long, the Star of Siberia was not valuable in terms of its net worth. It was merely a long hunk of unprocessed amethyst crystals. It might have been considered a geological oddity perhaps, worthy only of a spot in a minor rock collection. Its real value lay in its provenance.

The Star of Siberia was a holy relic formerly the property of the Imperial Russian Family. The last Tsar, Nicholas II, and his entire family, were murdered in the summer of 1918 in Ekaterinburg by the Reds. The over 100 carat amethyst crystal cluster was reputed to have "special" healing powers. It was brought from Siberia by the starets Rasputin, as a gift to the Imperial Family, and reported to have "saved" the life of the hemophiliac Tsarevich Alexei several times. Just how it did this was unknown. However, the Star was considered holy by the Tsar and his family. When they were sent into exile, and subsequently assassinated, the Star fell into Soviet hands. The Communists had possession of it for many decades, to prevent its veneration as a relic, especially since the Orthodox Church outside Russia canonized the murdered Tsar and his family as saints. Virginia had deftly filched the Star from its high

security vault in the Hermitage, in St. Petersburg, and smuggled out to the West.

Now she had to unload it. She had to find a buyer. Virginia picked up the phone to make some calls.

* * *

"We managed to get some videotape footage of the woman the Paris police and Interpol believe killed that fellow in the hotel. Her photo and fingerprints don't match up to our own records, so we came up empty-handed. Whoever she is, she flies well below the radar. Another interesting note, she checked in that Paris hotel with papers identifying her as a Russian princess. It was an very well forged alias," Paul Foster explained to SHADO's top General.

"Any idea where she is now? If she's in hiding, or on the run, the aliens won't be far behind her. It's scary how they can track individuals on this planet," Straker replied.

"We've got people showing her picture all over Paris, at the airports, etc. I'm hoping we'll get a hit off some of that canvassing. In the meantime, I want to move closer to this case, so I'll see you shortly. I'm headed over on the next Omega transport."

* * *

"I told you it was worth seeing, didn't I?" Virginia smiled when the Star was unwrapped.

"My God, it's huge. I had no idea it was so many carats!" the older man was gazing at the giant amethyst piece in wonder, "How did you manage to get it here to London?"

"That's a trade secret I'd rather not reveal," she commented flippily, "But, it's the real thing. It hasn't even been seen for three quarters of a century. Here's the original note Rasputin attached to it when he gave it to the Royal Family."

The old man put on his glasses and started to examine the faded and folded note, with its scrawling Cyrillic Old Russian script, "It's dated December 1912."

"Legend has it Rasputin gave the Star to the Royal Family after the Tsarevich had a near death experience in Poland that autumn. Supposedly the Star was a focus of prayer and religious veneration. It was reputed to have healing powers."

"How did it come to light after all these years? I thought it was just a myth that came out of the Revolution."

"The Royal Family had it stolen from them during their exile in Siberia. It ended up in the hands of the Soviets, packed away in secret, for decades. The Communists were atheists, as you know, but they also didn't want the Russian Orthodox Church to get their hands on it as an object for veneration. I just managed to...preempt them all."

"And, you say it originally came from Siberia?"

"That's how Rasputin apparently got it."

"An item such as this should not end up in the hands of a collector. It belongs to the Church, or to a Museum, so others can see it and study it."

"I don't think they can pay me what a collector could. I didn't risk my butt as a favour to the Russian Orthodox Church, let me tell you! Just put your feelers out to the collectors' market discreetly and let them know it's available - for a price."

"How can I contact you if I can secure a sale?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll call you."

* * *

"Nice to see you in person for a change," Straker led Omega's commander into his office in SHADO's underground complex.

Foster smiled, "I got an e-mail en route here - we got a hit at Orly Airport - video footage of our mystery lady purchasing a ticket for a flight here to London."

"Very convenient. Did she actually get here?"

"Her flight came in early this morning. We're looking at Heathrow security camera footage now, and I ordered a major canvass started with her photo to London and area hotels. If she's left the immediate London environs, it could take more time."

"Time is what we don't have. If she's got aliens on her tail, they could get to her before we do. I still don't understand why. What has she got, or what has she been doing, that has attracted alien attention?"

"We're trying to figure that one out ourselves. An Interpol report from the former Soviet Union is perhaps going to tie in with all this. St. Petersburg police and the FSB have reported the theft of a Russian religious relic they kept under lock and key in the Hermitage. They're afraid it was stolen by someone working for a collector of Russian artifacts and art pieces and brought into the West."

"What's so special about this relic?"

Paul poured himself a soda from the well-stocked mini-bar and sat down opposite Straker, "It's called the Star of Siberia. A 100 carat chunk of amethyst crystals which was given as a gift to the Russian Imperial Family in 1912 by the mad monk Rasputin. It's not the piece of rock that is worth so much, it's the fact it belonged to the last Tsar and Empress of Russia."

"They were assassinated during the Revolution, right?"

"Correct. Their bones were just found in Siberia a number of years ago. Exhaustive DNA testing was used to prove their identities. They were given a belated state funeral by Boris Yeltsin's government in the 90's. Putting to rest the ghost of the late Tsar and his unfortunate family - wiping away the crimes of the 'old regime' and all."

"But, if our mystery lady has the Star, why go after her? Why would the aliens want it?"

"Good question. My researchers sent me some interesting e-mails while I was on the flight over. Seems the Star came from Siberia originally itself. It somehow got into Rasputin's hands - which makes sense because he too was from Siberia. Here's where it gets interesting. After the Tsar's son had a close brush with death in 1912, Rasputin gave the Imperial Family the Star, saying it had 'healing powers' and that it could be used to keep the Tsarevich from dying."

"I still don't understand why the aliens would be interested in a hunk of purple stone."

"The Star was found in the Tunguska area of Siberia."

Straker's eyebrows climbed for his hairline, "Tunguska? The same Tunguska you visited via the alien time portal a couple of years ago?"

Foster nodded, "My theory is that the Star of Siberia isn't just a 'hunk of purple stone'. I think it belonged to the aliens whose ship exploded at Tunguska. I think it's a piece of some sort of alien technology. Maybe it really does heal. And, now that it's out of its secret Soviet hiding place, they want it back and they know our mystery woman has it."

Chapter Two

July 4th, 2004...

"I may have an interested party for you."

"That's good. Are they prepared to pay my price?" Virginia replied over the phone.

"As I understand it, yes. However, it seems your...acquisition...has stirred up a great deal of buzz in the collecting world."

"I had an original buyer when I acquired the Star. He decided not to purchase."

"From what I've heard, he still wants it - that it was you who chose not to sell to him."

"I gave him plenty of opportunity when I returned from Russia. He didn't bite after all. I have no choice but to sell to someone else."

"He's still interested in a deal. Are you?"

"You can tell Alexander Kharlemov that I'm willing to sell, but the price will be set a little higher this time around - and he can forget about having me killed off. I don't take kindly to assassination attempts."

"What are you talking about?"

"Kharlemov sent one of his goons out to kill me in Paris. If he thought he could cut me out of this deal, he's sadly mistaken. If he still wants it, the price is now double. Otherwise I sell to the highest bidder."

There was silence at the other end of the connection as the old man pondered this information, "I warn you, Kharlemov is not a man to be trifled with."

"He may be rich and powerful, but I've got something he wants very badly, and I don't plan to end up dead because of his greed. This sale has to be handled through a third party or not at all. If you can get double my original price, I'll give you a 30% commission. Still interested?"

"Yes, I'm still interested. I could retire handsomely on 30% of your asking price. Please call me back tomorrow and I'll have an answer for you."

Virginia hung up the pay phone. She hated internecine deals. She would have preferred to handle the matter more straight-forwardly. But, If Alexander Kharlemov wanted to play games, she could play games too. Kharlemov, the Russian-American scion of an industrialist family who collected valuable Russian icons, Faberge items, etc from Imperial Russia, was willing to spend any amount of money to get what he wished. If he wanted the Star of Siberia badly enough to have her killed, she'd make him pay through the nose for it!

* * *

Saint Nicholas the Martyr Russian Orthodox Church, London, England...

Father Grigori Andrevich Kuryakin looked up from his prayers. Coming down the centre aisle of the church was one of his older parishioners. He crossed himself quickly, a fast forehead, chest, right to left motion, in the Orthodox style, and rose to greet the old man.

"I did not expect you to come so quickly, Borya," Father Grigori smiled, "Shall we speak in my office?" The two Russians walked back behind the iconostasis and into the priest's small room.

They sat down and the priest poured out two small glasses of vodka, "Now, Borya, tell me what is troubling you."

"I have come into contact with someone who has a...relic. This person wishes me to sell it to a private collector. Normally, this is my job. I am a broker. I take care of such things. But, Father, this...item...should not go to an unbeliever...a person who thinks only in terms of the

monetary value of this object. No, this is a precious thing. A thing of God."

Father Grigori inclined his head, "You seemed so troubled on the phone. Now, I see you have quite a dilemma. What is this article? This relic?"

"I don't have it in my possession, but if I make the sale for this person, it will be in my hands briefly. I am to broker the sale between the vendor and the buyer. The item for sale is...the Star of Siberia."

Borya watched with satisfaction as the priest's eyes opened perceptively wider, "It's real?"

"Yes, Father, it's real. I've held it in my hand. I felt its power," Borya leaned forward and spoke so softly his voice was almost a whisper, "Can you imagine the advancement possible for the priest who brings this relic back to the Russian Orthodox Church? This is a relic which should be studied, loved, venerated. It does not belong in some glass case, paid for by the money of a rich man."

"Have you asked the seller if they would give it back to the Church? How did they obtain such a relic? It has been the stuff of legends and myth for so long."

"It was stolen, Father. Stolen from Petersburg by a person who makes such thefts a way of making money for herself. The Star means nothing to her except a payday. I told her it should be returned to the Church. She insists on selling it. For a very large sum of cash."

"If you participate in this sale, you are committing several sins, Borya. You are assisting in the sale of stolen goods, and keeping a holy relic from being returned to its rightful owner - the Church."

"That's why I had to see you, Father. I need spiritual guidance. I need to know what I should do. I've been offered a very large percentage of the sale as broker - I could give money to the church, donate more icons, help more emigres who come here to England. But, then, there is the provenance of the Star. It is more than just a piece to be sold at auction to the highest bidder. But, isn't also a sin to deceive the buyer and the seller?"

Father Grigori nodded, "Yes, it is a sin to deceive for personal gain. But, if your deception was solely for the purpose of returning the Star to the Church, then it is a sin for which you would not be held accountable. The good would outweigh the bad. It would be worse to know what you had and to still sell it as stolen goods."

"What should I do, Father?"

"Get the Star from this woman. Tell her you will sell it for her. Make the deal. Then, bring the Star to me. I will find a way to get it back to Russia."

"What will I tell them? They will be very angry with me."

"Tell them the Star was stolen from your shop. The sale cannot take place. The collector will get his money back, the seller will get her just reward for her theft."

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Vladimir Trubetskoi, a former KGB operative, took out the computer disc he'd been carrying in his briefcase's secret compartment. Now working for the FSB (Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti or Federal Security Service), Vladimir had been sent on a mission to London at the behest of his superiors. The FSB, as one of the successors to the infamous KGB, handled matters of internal security and counterintelligence for the new Russian Federation.

Trubetskoi was dismayed as he read the coded orders. His mission was simple; hunt down the woman who stole the Star of Siberia, get it back, and return it to the secret vault at the Hermitage in Petersburg, by any means necessary. Vladimir was not pleased at being handed such a ridiculous task. This woman was not a terrorist or a counterspy, nor had she stolen

anything he considered to be particularly valuable. A religious relic from Tsarist days was hardly important, especially now that the former Soviet regime had collapsed. Hadn't Comrade Yeltsin buried the bones of the Romanovs a few years ago? Why was the return of this item so vital that the FSB would waste one of their best agents on it? It had little or no monetary value, it hadn't even been on display, but hidden away in the vaults for decades.

He shook his head in consternation. The disc included video footage of the woman who took the Star. The FSB believed she was the thief because she'd shown up on the security cameras every day for a whole week before the Star went missing, and a woman using fake research ID had managed to compromise the Hermitage security system and get the vault open. They hadn't changed their codes for many months because they mistakenly assumed an item like the Star would never be of interest to anyone to steal. The security people at the Hermitage had bungled things and now he had to fix things for them.

Further information in the briefing disc stated the woman had taken a flight from Petersburg to Paris, and then from Paris to London. The underground network from the United States said a wealthy Russian-American was seeking to purchase the Star for his private collection, and the sale could be in progress, so it was vital for Vladimir to get on it right away. He had one contact he could access in London. Would he be able to shed any light on the whereabouts of the Star?

* * *

Virginia was as nervous as a cat. She barricaded herself in her hotel room. She didn't answer the phone and didn't answer the door. She had her meals in the small dining room, always choosing a discreet back table. The Star was wrapped up and secreted in her brassiere. Wearing a bra felt funny as she ordinarily never bothered with one. The weight of the Star against her breast was both reassuring and nerve-wracking. And, it increased the size of her bust considerably.

The exchange of the Star was to take place in a small Russian restaurant called The Troika, after it closed. Virginia was to meet old Boris there in the back room. The waiter asked her in Russian if she wanted some tea. She replied in the affirmative, and requested two glasses; one for herself and one for Borya. Virginia watched silently as the waiter placed two tea glasses, in their sterling silver holders, on the small table, spread out a selection of perogies, and went back out.

There was something odd about the tea. Virginia felt the glass with her cupped hands and found it was cold. The perogies, too were cold and partly congealed on the plate. She'd eaten there before and the food had always been perfect. Come to think of it, had she ever seen that waiter there before? Certainly restaurants made staff changes, but...she shook her head. *"Don't let the paranoia get to you, Virginia!"* she told herself.

For some reason, she felt she had to get out of there. Something wasn't quite right. And, where was Borya anyway? He was late... Rather than raise any suspicions or draw attention to herself, Virginia threw a couple pound notes on the table and decided to sneak out through the back kitchen door. She knew there was an alley behind the kitchen and she could just melt away into the shadows.

The lights were dimmed in the kitchen. Nikki and Irina, who ran the restaurant, and who were normally bustling about cooking, were nowhere in sight. What the hell was going on here? She tripped over something as she headed for the back door and the alleyway...

Her foot had touched something soft and yielding. She bent down and looked under the long metal kitchen worktable. Lying under it were several bodies. Virginia made out Nikki and

Irina's faces, and then she saw a third body. It was old Borya. There was no doubt about it. All three were very dead. And, had been for some time.

Virginia felt as though a fist had squeezed her heart. For a moment she almost couldn't breathe. Oh, yeah, there was something big time wrong going on here! She slowly backed away from the bodies and headed once more for the alley door.

"Stop." The word came out of the darkness. Simple. Unadorned. Delivered without intonation or inflection - or even emotion.

"I am soooo outta here...," Virginia's voice was strangled with the effort not to panic.

"Give me the Star of Siberia," the waiter who'd brought her the cold tea and perogies was suddenly standing there, with one of those strange energy weapons like the man in the Paris hotel had held on her. His face was slack, expressionless, his voice flat.

"Ohhhhh, shit...," she had her gun inside her clothing, but any move to retrieve it might result in being struck by that odd weapon. He was too close to her not to miss.

"Give it to me. Give me the Star."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she stalled, still hoping to somehow get her gun out and get the drop on him.

"You have it. You were going to exchange it for money," the waiter indicated a sealed briefcase by the alley door.

"Who are you? Who sent you? Why did you kill those poor old people?" Virginia was still shocked by all the deaths she'd seen in the last few days. Four people were dead - and all because she had the Star of Siberia to sell.

"The Star belongs to us. What was once ours is ours again. Hand it over."

"This isn't worth killing for," she replied. He lifted the weapon once more and pointed it at her, "Alright. So I have it. But it's inside my clothing. You'll have to let me get it."

"Get it. Slowly. No tricks."

Virginia held up her hands to show him she had nothing in them, and carefully undid the first five buttons on her raw silk blouse. She reached inside and felt the hardened mass of the Star, wrapped and stashed in one side of her bra like a false bosom, and her gun in the other cup, "I have to take my brassiere off," she said quietly, stalling for time. She reached in and felt around - the gun fell into her waiting hand and she fired it quickly.

Her first bullet tore through the waiter's left thigh, and he fell to the floor, his energy weapon discharging in several rapid-fire bursts - lighting up the darkened kitchen as they ricocheted off the metal table and something else. Before he could fire again, Virginia was on him, her martial arts training rendered him helpless for the moment, but he was strong and she was very slim and light-weight. It was just a matter of time before he could over-power her. She had to get some answers.

"Who sent you? Kharlemov? That bastard!"

The waiter looked up at her, his eyes staring, but not at her, "If you kill me, others will come."

Virginia started - that was what the assassin in Paris had said to her. What the hell did it mean that two men - attempting to kill her - had said the same thing? She had to make a decision; the waiter was starting to struggle.

"Better you than me," she said, and placing the gun against the waiter's head, she turned her own eyes away and pulled the trigger. The silencer kept the sound down to a mere pop-fizz, and she couldn't bear to look down at the dead man in darkness.

She got up and checked her bra. The Star was still there, safe; she secreted her gun back

in the other bra cup as before and buttoned her blouse back up. The briefcase at the alley door beckoned. If Kharlemov had intended to kill her off, get the Star for nothing and kill all the witnesses, he hadn't quite succeeded. Virginia put the case up on the table, opened it, and surveyed the neatly stacked American currency. She glanced down at Borya's body under the table. Poor old fart. She crossed herself for the first time in years. He wouldn't be getting his 30% brokers' fee now.

Time to get lost. Virginia shut the case again and exited through the alley door.

* * *

"We moved as fast as we could on this one," Lew Waterman briefed Straker and Foster, "They were all found this morning by the owners' daughter when she came in to open the restaurant for the day."

"Christ! Four dead? And an alien weapon on site? Either they're getting sloppy, or someone else was involved!" Straker exclaimed.

"We've got the daughter on a good dose of amnesia drug and Al Leslie and Sergei Romanov have the situation covered. They talked to the local Russian Orthodox priest, who seemed to know them all as his parishioners. He was there as a request from the daughter. They also managed to get the bodies out to a local Omega lab for autopsies. Dr. Raychaudhuri is sitting in on this one since three of the dead were killed by the alien energy weapon. There's no doubt there was someone else involved -the fourth body was dispatched with two bullets of human origin. A very small caliber personal weapon which can be broken down into several pieces for hiding. The same caliber weapon which killed the man in the Paris hotel."

"So you think this business is all about the Star of Siberia?" Straker asked Waterman.

"There doesn't seem to be any real *human* motive behind these killings," Waterman answered, "Who else would want to kill a pair of restaurant owners and a rare antiques broker? I think our mystery woman was there to deliver the Star and walked into an alien ambush."

"And, we still don't have any idea who she is?"

Foster jumped into the conversation, "We didn't get any hits from the security cameras at Heathrow, but we ran her photos again with Interpol and some other national governments. The RCMP in Canada came up with something for us," Foster pulled some documents from his briefcase, "They think our mystery woman is one Virginia Prestai, a former CSIS agent who left the Canadian secret service about fifteen years ago. Get this - her job with CSIS was as an attache to the Canadian embassy in Moscow. Speaks fluent Russian, among other languages. But, her 'behind the scenes role' was to gather intelligence for the Canadian government. She knows her way around the former Soviet Union like a native, and the RCMP hinted she may still do the odd spy job for them occasionally."

"How the hell did she get back into Russia?"

"Forged papers, of course. She's a former spy, but once a spy, always a spy. It's not a life you can let go of easily. The RCMP think she may have been involved in some art thefts in recent years in various European countries, but there's never been sufficient proof, and she sells the stolen items for astronomical amounts of money, so staying out of sight is not a problem for her."

Straker raised an eyebrow, "Looks like the aliens have been tracking her since she left Russia. They found her in Paris - they found her here in London."

"They're not the only ones looking for her. Intelligence reports say the FSB has dispatched an agent to get the Star back. He's here in London right now. We're having him

watched. It's just a matter of time before someone gets to her and manages to retrieve the Star. I'd rather it be us."

Waterman asked, "Is there any chance the Russians have realized that the Star is actually a piece of alien technology?"

"We don't know yet. Nothing in the intelligence points to that. The Star has been squirreled away for over eight decades. Some Russian commentators have speculated that the Star was a symbol of the monarchy, and as such, had to be kept hidden from those people who hated the Soviet regime, and the Church, both of who might have wished for a restoration of the Romanov dynasty. If the Russians had thought it was of alien origin, I don't think they'd have left it all that time in a vault in the Hermitage. They'd have had it in some secret Soviet think-tank, trying to figure out just what it was and what they could do with it."

"Fine. Spread your network out a little further. I don't want the aliens getting to that thing before we do!" Straker admonished them both.

* * *

Father Grigori shook his head sadly. It had been too late to administer the Last Rites, but he'd done what he could. The nice police officers told him that Borya, Nikki and Irina had been dead for several hours and so had the waiter. Who could have done such a thing?

Privately, the priest agonized. Should he tell the police he knew a possible reason for why Borya, in particular, had been murdered? Had his late-night assignation with the holder of the Star of Siberia been the cause of all those deaths? Had the woman gotten rid of them all to escape detection? And, where was the Star itself? Was it there in the restaurant, or had it been removed?

Father Grigori did not know what to do. It had been his own counsel to Borya, to lie to both the woman and the art collector Kharlemov, in order to get possession of the Star. Had the lies been discovered and one of them killed them all? There was a terrible gnawing in the pit of his stomach that he had been ultimately responsible in some way for those four deaths.

One glass of vodka became two, then three, then many more. How could he atone? How could he assuage the sins of which he was guilty? God would surely punish him, would hold him to account for those deaths over the Star of Siberia. The priest had not meant the matter to end in death. He had only wanted to see the Star returned to the Church, where it belonged. It was the right thing to do. So how had it all come out so wrong?

There was a small card on the desk. It read "Allan Leslie, Scotland Yard" and there was a phone number to call. Father Grigori sighed. Perhaps if he told the police what he knew, they might eventually find the killer and that at least would bring some measure of justice. They might even find the Star itself. It was still possible that the Star could end up back with the church!

* * *

"I'm so sorry, but there has been a terrible tragedy. Boris is dead," Vladimir Trubetskoi heard the voice on the other end of the line say.

"Boris is dead?"

"Just this morning they found him! At the Troika! Boris and his friends Nikki and Irina. The police are investigating. It's just awful!"

Vladimir wanted to avoid tangling with the local law, "This is most shocking. Borya was an old friend of mine. I just got into London and called up to invite him to lunch to renew our acquaintance. Will there be a funeral?"

"Yes, after the autopsy - at the Saint Nicholas the Martyr Church."

Trubetskoi muttered a few more condolences and then hung up. Boris was one of the best, and most discreet brokers for antiques and Russian art works in the West. Many collectors knew him personally and dealt with him. What they didn't know was that he was a former agent in the KGB and was in the habit of recovering stolen artifacts and returning them to the one time Soviet Union. His mission was somewhat different now that the Russian Federation was the government in control, but he was still a good contact. And, he always served the best Russian vodka.

If Borya was dead, did that mean he'd gotten himself mixed up in something too hot to handle? Vladimir found it hard to imagine that someone would kill several innocent people for no reason at all, especially all Russians. Had Boris tried to broker a sale for the Star of Siberia? Was that what had happened? Would it be worth a midnight break-in to Borya's shop to look around just in case the Star was hidden there? Or had the mystery woman who stole the Star killed Borya and the others?

* * *

Virginia managed to keep herself together until she got back into her hotel room and locked the door. She placed a chair under the door knob and pulled the drapes shut, so she could change her clothing.

Off came the royal blue raw silk blouse and the matching pants she'd purchased only the day before. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and realized there was a huge dark burn mark on her white front latch brassiere, on the same side where the Star was wrapped up. Worriedly, Virginia took it out and unwrapped it.

There was a pencil thin scoring along one edge of the Star's crystal surface. A small chunk of the Star had broken off where the waiter's energy weapon had hit the Star through her bra. She realized that the Star had actually saved her life - had the Star not protected her from injury, she might be lying dead in The Troika's kitchen. All her strength drained out of her for a moment and she had to sit down on the bed, or fall on the floor.

She dug through her own purse and found the energy weapon she'd taken off the dead man in the Paris hotel. It looked rather like a small silver-colored metal pen. There was a tiny button on one end, which she figured was the controlling mechanism - the trigger. She pressed it, and the 'pen' spat a white stream of energy into the carpet, leaving a smoking hole in the fabric. She stepped the smoldering carpet out with her shoes. What the hell was that thing? It could obviously kill. But, she'd never seen anything like it, or read about any such weapon during her days with CSIS. Clearly, she was out of touch.

What would be her next move? She couldn't very well board any flight with a briefcase full of money. She'd have to get into a bank and wire the cash to her Swiss bank account. Then, she'd take the Star and get the hell out of Jolly Olde.

Chapter Three

July 7th, 2004...

"I think it had to be that woman! Who else would have wanted to kill poor Borya? He told me she stole the Star of Siberia from Russia and was going to sell it for a great deal of money to a private collector of Russian art objects. I know Borya used to use The Troika as a place for private business deals," Father Grigori explained to Al Leslie and Sergei Romanov, "You will find her now and bring her to justice?"

"We're working on the case, Father. We will find her. Now that we know the motive, we'll have even more evidence against her," Sergei assured the priest quietly in Russian.

"And, if you do find the Star - what then?"

"The Star will be returned to its rightful place at the Hermitage, if we find it."

Father Grigori lowered his voice, "That relic belongs to the Orthodox Church. It should go back to Mother Russia, but not to the Hermitage. It should be placed in one of the great cathedrals as an object of veneration. The Star was given to the Imperial Family as a gift. It is holy. They say it healed the Tsar's son!"

"My government has made a deal with the Russian Federation to get the Star back. The government and the Church can fight over it then. It's not our job to choose sides. Our job is to bring a killer to justice and retrieve stolen property."

"The Star was stolen from the Tsar and his family by the Bolsheviks! They buried the Tsar - now they should give the Star back to the Church."

"Father, you've been most helpful with this information. But, we can't get involved in the internal affairs of the Federation. Hopefully, what you've told us will lead to the apprehension of the killer. Dasvedanya." Sergei motioned for Leslie to follow him out of the church.

* * *

"You idiots! How did you lose her? She has my money and the Star!" Alexander Kharlemov shook an angry fist at his henchmen, "And, this time, leave nothing to chance! Kill her!"

The three men quietly left the opulent suite at the Dorchester Hotel. Kharlemov paced the sitting room back and forth for a moment, burning off his nervous energy. Twice he'd tried to buy the Star of Siberia, and twice the bitch had managed to skip out on him. And, into the bargain, Boris was dead. Boris, who had negotiated so many great deals! Boris, who had a collectors' nose for finding some of the most priceless and exquisite pieces of Russian art and jewelry!

His urgency wasn't just fueled by the lost money and his desire for the Star in itself. It was not worth much in terms of currency. The Star was only a piece of purple Siberian amethyst. He knew the legends passed down from the Russian Revolution. His great grandfather had been a Tsarist officer attached to Tsar Nicholas' personal retinue for a time in 1912. The Star of Siberia was special. It could heal illness. It had saved the life of the Tsarevich Alexi. And, if he could get it for himself, perhaps it would save his own son!

Kharlemov thought back to his little boy, Sasha, lying in that bed. The best doctors in American had told him that Sasha was dying. They could do more for him. His brain tumor was inoperable. Chemotherapy had not halted its progress. It was a sickening thought to know he was wealthy beyond imagining, but none of his money would save his son. The boy would die a slow, agonizing death and he was powerless to stop it.

Then, Kharlemov learned from an impeccable source that not only was the Star of Siberia

real, but it was in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg - he immediately set about getting someone to 'appropriate' it for him. He knew he'd have to pay, but he was willing to pay anything if it would help little Sasha. The agreement had been to meet in Paris for the exchange. But, somehow, the Star and its carrier managed to elude him. Then, she put the Star on the underground collectors' market and had the temerity to demand twice as much as the original agreed-upon price. He was desperate to get the Star, but he didn't want her to know he was desperate, or why he wanted it.

But, now the time for games had ended. His last phone call from the doctors frightened him. They gave the boy only a matter of days. Getting the Star was vital!

* * *

Vladimir got in the back window of Borya's shop that night. He did a careful search, and even cracked the safe's combination, but no Star of Siberia. The drawers and closets yielded no chunk of amethyst crystals, nor did Boris' liquor cabinet. He checked under all the furniture, turned over every item in the place and put them back. If Borya had had the Star, it was no longer in his possession. He knew Boris would not have put it in a bank safety deposit box, because like many old Russians, he was leery of financial institutions. No, if he'd had it, it would have been in the shop, hidden somewhere safe. And, as far as Vladimir was able to ascertain, the police did not have it. If they had, they'd have turned it back over to the Russian government and Vladimir would have been called home. So, the Star was still out there - somewhere...

* * *

"If the priest knew about this exchange, who else could have known?" Straker asked Leslie and Romanov anxiously.

"According to Father Grigori, Boris didn't tell anyone else. He asked for 'spiritual guidance' to do the 'right thing'. It was the priest who advised him to get the Star any way he could. Obviously, either our mystery woman or her buyer wasn't too happy with this idea," Romanov explained.

"So if the Star isn't with Boris, if you people didn't find it at the restaurant, then we have to assume it's with either the buyer or Virginia Prestai?"

"The priest said Boris never told him who the buyer was - just some rich industrialist from the United States. He didn't even know Boris was goin' to the exchange at The Troika until he and the others were found dead," Leslie added, "Plus, that FSB agent is still involved in all this - according to Boris' sister - Vladimir Trubetskoi called the day he was murdered - lookin' for him. We traced Boris - he was a former KGB agent from World War Two."

"Any chance Boris told him Prestai was trying to sell the Star?"

"Trubetskoi might have followed Boris to The Troika and killed the lot of them to get the Star back. There's not much honor among spies."

"You people were were keeping tabs on Trubetskoi - pick him up. With him out of the way, that's one less person after Prestai. You can interrogate him and find out if he had anything to do with the killings, while you're at it."

Straker's phone line buzzed. He picked it up. Then he looked at Leslie and Romanov, "This is Paul - he wants to talk to you."

Leslie stood up and took the receiver. He listened in silence and then hung up, "Looks like our luck just changed - Paul says a Barclays' Bank branch in London just called our bogus Scotland Yard tip number. Virginia Prestai, or someone looking like her, is in the process of having them wire seven million dollars to a private Swiss bank account. She came in with a

briefcase full of American currency. And, get this - she's opening a safety deposit box too!"

* * *

Barclays' Bank, London...

"Yes, Madam, the paperwork on your safety deposit box will be finished in just a moment," the clerk told her, "Your deposit is on its way to your account in Switzerland," he picked up the phone as it rang, took a message and hung up, "Our manager will be coming in a moment to check with you. We have to report all transactions over so many million to him."

Virginia sat in her seat across from the bank officer. Both her gun and the Star felt heavier than ever in her brassiere, and she had the weird energy weapon in her purse. She wouldn't feel safe until the money was in her private account, and the Star was secreted in the bank's vault. She'd hop a plane and lie low for a few months, then she'd come back, take the Star out and try to flog it on the market again - maybe in Asia.

The office door opened and an older man, wearing a crisp business suit, came in. He was a distinguished gent with silver hair and enormous steely blue eyes. The bank officer got up from the desk and made the introductions, saying, "Miss Prestai, this is Edward Straker, our branch manager." Then he left as they shook hands.

"I understand you've made a sizable deposit," he smiled, "And, you've hired one of our safety deposit boxes. I'll escort you to the vault."

She followed the man through another door and into a private ante-chamber, "We pride ourselves on providing the utmost in privacy and security to our clients," the silver-haired gent told her, "I've taken the liberty of having your new box brought here so you can place your items in it, and see it locked away in our vault yourself."

Virginia waited until the man in the suit left the room. Then she carefully took the Star out of her bra and opened the box to place it inside. There was a soft knock at the door, "Are you ready, Miss Prestai?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

The door from the office opened, and the silver-haired man, along with two others, entered with him, holding up Scotland Yard IDs...

* * *

"You're not the bank manager, are you?" she asked Straker, rhetorically.

"Afraid not, Miss Prestai," Straker motioned for Leslie and Romanov to attend her, "Please hand over the Star to these gentlemen."

Virginia stood up and moved away from the desk. The safety deposit box sat open, and she'd just placed the Star, still wrapped up in fabric, inside. Romanov lifted the package out and unwrapped it. The purple crystals seemed to glow under the fluorescent lighting in the ante-room. Straker nodded, and Romanov folded the fabric around it again, placing it reverently in a small box Leslie held out to him.

"And, now, your weapon," Straker told Virginia. Leslie waited while she took her small caliber hand gun out of her hiding place.

"Now what?" Virginia looked at Straker.

"You're under arrest, Miss Prestai."

* * *

Straker and the two Omega agents led Virginia out of the bank's discreet rear entrance and placed her in their SUV. Her mind was awl with how she was going to manage to make an escape. She had been stripped of the Star, the money she'd been trying to deposit was now likely lost to her. They'd taken her gun away. But, they'd missed something...something they

obviously didn't know she had...something still concealed in her purse .

The SUV traveled for some distance, and Virginia was surprised to see their route took them out of the city. Why were they leaving London? Things weren't adding up...

"Where are we going?" she asked quietly, "Why didn't you take me to a police station?"

"You're going to a place where you can be properly interrogated," Straker told her.

"You have the Star and the money, what else do you want?"

"Some answers, Miss Prestai. How did you get the Star? What you were planning to do with it?"

"I was going to sell it."

"Who else knows about the Star? Who else was involved in this little scheme of yours?"

"I was hired by someone to bring it out of Russia. But, then he turned on me. Tried to have me killed to get the Star. I had no choice. I opted to sell it on the antiques market."

"Yes, and your deal ended up getting Boris Fetisov killed, along with three others at The Troika."

"You know about that?"

"We've been investigating your movements for some time now."

"I didn't kill Boris! He and the Gulagins were dead long before I got to the restaurant!!"

"If you didn't kill them, who did?"

"One of the restaurant workers! He even tried to kill me!"

"It's easy to put the blame on a dead man who can't defend himself."

"I can prove it. He fired at me. I had the Star wrapped up in my brassiere and when I was struck, a piece was broken off the Star - it saved my life!"

"Oh, rest assured we'll be examining the Star very carefully, Miss Prestai," Straker smiled grimly. "We'll be able to tell if you're telling the truth or just lying to cover your own ass."

"Look, I'm not lying to you. Why would I bother? I'm safer with you cops than I am on my own. Alone, I could end up dead. Kharlemov's assassins came after me in Paris and here in London. Somehow, that bastard has known where to find me every step of the way."

"Who is Kharlemov? Why does he want the Star?"

Virginia shrugged, "He's a collector. The Star is the stuff of legend. He probably wanted to put it behind plexiglass and show it off to his friends, for all I know."

"Isn't seven million dollars a lot of money even for a collector to pay for an art object?"

"I've sold genuine Faberge items for almost that. The Star isn't just a hunk of amethyst crystals. It belonged to the Imperial Russian Family. Items like that are sold for a premium on the collectors' market. It's like getting a piece of history. Like touching a deck chair off the Titanic."

Straker seemed to be considering her comments, "A piece of history," he mused aloud, "Why do you think Kharlemov wanted you killed instead of just negotiating the price with you as originally planned?"

"I don't know. It's not like he couldn't afford the Star. Maybe he just got greedy. That's why I doubled the price when he tried to have me killed off in Paris. He pissed me off. That was gonna cost extra."

"I see."

"Look, I may have stolen the Star, but I didn't kill anybody. The most you can charge me with is theft. And, I was hired to steal the Star."

Straker looked at her coolly, "Miss Prestai, we know more about you than you realize. We know you were formerly with CSIS, and we know you worked as an intelligence officer at

the Canadian embassy in Moscow."

"So what happens to me now?"

"Your crime was committed in the Russian Federation. I think the St. Petersburg police would like to get you back."

"So you're just going to turn me over to the Russians?"

"Yes." Straker watched the expression on Virginia's face. It was clear she wasn't too keen on the idea of going back to Mother Russia to stand trial for the Star's theft, "That is, of course, unless you co-operate with us here."

* * *

Vladimir Trubetskoi did not want to inform his superiors that his trail of the Star of Siberia and the woman who had stolen it had gone cold. They expected him to get the Star and to bring the thief back to face the Russian justice system. Or at the very least, eliminate her, so she would no longer be a "loose end" to the problem. He had turned up nothing in Boris' shop to point either to her true identity or the eventual location of the Star. He'd hit a dead end in this investigation, and with Boris dead, he'd lost a valuable contact. For all he knew, the Star could even now be winging its way across the Atlantic Ocean to its new owner in the United States...there was a knock at his hotel room door.

* * *

"What do you mean by 'co-operation'?" Virginia asked Straker cautiously, her blue cats' eyes narrowed with distrust.

"Tell us everything we want to know and we might be able to change your destiny, shall we say," Straker looked at her meaningfully.

"I've always believed we make our own destiny," she replied, and she broke off into a paroxysm of gasping, hacking coughs.

Straker leaned towards her, "Are you alright?"

Virginia shook her head 'no' and continued to choke very realistically.

Straker asked her again, "Can you breathe?"

With her eyes somewhat bugged and tearing, her mouth open and gaping like a fish out of water, Virginia made motions to her purse with one hand, and gesticulated with the other as though she were spraying something.

Romanov caught on, "I think she wants something in her purse," Virginia nodded emphatically and kept making the spraying gesture, "Do you have a puffer in your purse?" he inquired.

Still choking, Virginia nodded again and made the spraying signal. Romanov lifted her purse, "Where is it?" She shook her head and held out her hand for the purse. He opened it, and rooted around, but her choking became so hard, and her face color was getting so poor, that Straker grabbed the purse from him and handed it over to her.

Virginia gagged a couple times convincingly, and unzipped a secret section inside the purse. She felt the energy weapon with her fingers and pulled it out, aiming it at Straker. The coughing stopped immediately, and her expression was grim, "Turn this vehicle around. We're going back to the city or I really will kill someone."

Chapter Four

"I don't think you want to do anything rash at this point," Straker told Virginia calmly, "Give me the pen."

"This isn't a pen. I don't know what it is, but it sure as hell doesn't shoot ink! That assassin in Paris tried to kill me with it, and the waiter at The Troika had one just like it! Turn around. Now!"

"You're in over your head, Virginia," Straker decided to try reasoning with her, "You're involved in things you can't understand."

"I've lost the Star, I've lost my money, and you think I killed five people. I understand all those things only too well. How do I even know you're really cops? You could be lying to me - this could all be an elaborate ruse by Kharlemov to get the Star and kill me off. The only person I can trust in all this is me. And, this is where I get off this crazy merry-go-round. Drive me back to the city and do it now, or Mr. Straker here gets burned."

It was clear Romanov wanted to make a grab for her, but Straker's expression was neutral as he said, "Ok, Al. Do as the lady wants." Leslie, turning a bit in the driver's seat, shot Straker a look of "*Are you nuts?*", but Straker was firm, "Does this mean you're planning to up the death toll in this case?"

"I didn't kill the others. I'm getting out of this mess alive. One way or the other. Just drive."

Leslie swung the SUV around and headed back into London on the highway, but he began to slow the vehicle's pace incrementally to keep them from reentering the city too soon.

"We can help you, Virginia."

"Help me? Can you help me stay alive? There's only way to do that. I have to get out of this country. I doubt if that idea is part of the co-operation you had in mind for me. How do I know you won't throw me to the wolves the minute you get whatever information you think I have about all this? Oh, no, I'm getting out of here - with or without your help."

It took another forty minutes before the SUV hit the main thoroughfares of the city. Virginia kept the pen-weapon trained on Straker. She refused to answer any more questions from any of them, and said little. They were not far from Trafalgar Square when Virginia told Leslie to park.

"This is the end of the line for you boys," She told them, "And, I'm taking the Star with me. It's the only insurance I have," She gestured to Romanov to hand it over. He did so, hesitantly, "Get out. Now. All of you. And, no funny business, either." She still had the pen-weapon trained on Straker as she stuffed the Star into her purse.

Straker exited the vehicle first, and Virginia slid out behind him. She opened the front passenger door, "You too," she admonished Romanov. She waited for him to get out and then she got in and aimed the pen-weapon at Leslie, "You're next." Leslie opened the driver's door and got out. Virginia pulled the door shut, "Good-bye, suckers."

* * *

"You had me goin' there for a moment," Leslie smiled at Straker.

"Yes, well, I didn't want to tip her off."

Romanov looked at his watch, "Waterman can pick us up and we'll get the real Star of Siberia to the Omega labs asap."

"How the hell didya make the switch?" Leslie wanted to know, flipping out his cell phone to call for a drive.

"She wasn't paying that much attention to me in the car. She won't be amused when she realizes she hasn't got the real thing," Romanov smiled.

"You realize she's still a target for whoever out there is gunnin' for her?" Leslie reminded the others.

Straker nodded, "I know, but the aliens don't know she doesn't have the real thing any more, and we can use her as the bait to get closer to them," he looked at Romanov, "You attached the little tracer device inside the fabric?"

Romanov's cell phone chirped, and he answered it. Then he looked back at Straker, "Paul is following her signals right now."

* * *

"Mr. Trubetskoi, why are you in London?"

"I'm here on official business for my government."

"And that business would be?"

"Classified."

"Let's not play games," Pete Little leaned over the Russian in his chair, "We do know why you're here. Your government wants the Star of Siberia back, isn't that right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Trubetskoi said quietly.

"You've been involved in this from the moment the Star was stolen. Did you kill the people at The Troika? Did you kill them to get the Star back?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Little smiled, his even white teeth showing, his solid gold cross and chain hanging out over his shirt collar, "Sure you do. All those bodies. Even poor old Boris. Had he reached the end of his usefulness?"

"Boris?"

"Yes, Boris. The former KGB operative turned antiques dealer in retirement. We know you two had a relationship. We know you were after the Star. You do the math."

Trubetskoi sighed. He hadn't killed anybody - yet, "Alright. I knew Boris. I also found out he was dead. I called for him and his sister told me what happened. But, I didn't do it. Boris was too useful to waste in that way. I never went to The Troika." He didn't see any need to mention Virginia Prestai's name. Give them a little bit. Only a little.

Pete circled the Russian's seat, fingering his cross for good effect, "And, how about Virginia Prestai?"

"Who?"

Little sat down in the chair across from Trubetskoi, "The Star's thief. Virginia Prestai. It would be very convenient to just track her down, kill her and abscond with the Star back to Petersburg, wouldn't it?"

"I don't have the Star. If I did, do you think I'd have stayed this long in London after knowing Boris was dead?"

"Actually, we searched your hotel room. If you did get it back, it's not there."

Trubetskoi's eyes widened. This wasn't about Boris, or Virginia Prestai, or himself. This was about something else. But what? The Star was not really valuable. It was merely a hunk of stone. A historical curiosity. Nothing more. Or was it?

"Why did you arrest me if you know I don't have the Star? And, you know I didn't kill those people. You're only pretending to interrogate me."

* * *

Virginia dumped the stolen SUV a dozen blocks from her hotel and walked the rest of the

way quickly. She'd driven a circuitous route back and forth, just in case the police were looking for the vehicle. Her intention was to grab her small bag, get in a cab, and head for Heathrow to get the hell out of the country. She had a cousin in Australia whom she hadn't seen in years...

The front foyer of the Dorchester Hotel was busy as usual. People were checking in, checking out, mounds of luggage were being moved by uniformed employees. It was a good place to escape unnoticed from. She wouldn't even bother signing out, she'd just drop the room key card in a mailbox at the airport. Virginia took the elevator and made her way to her room.

She had just put her hand on the door knob to leave, when the knob turned. Someone out in the hall was trying come in!

* * *

"You have it. We know you have it. Hand it over!"

Virginia stared back hard at the big, heavily-muscled man who had just backhanded her. A vessel had popped in her mouth and she could taste the iron flavour of the blood, "If you're so sure I have it, it should be here in this room."

The other man had torn the room to shreds, pulled out the upholstery on the chairs, turned over the mattress and box spring on the bed, sifted through all the bed covers, even lifted the toilet tank lid, "It's not here," he reported.

"That just leaves you," Virginia's attacker looked down at her on the floor, throwing her bag and purse on the bed, "You must have it on you." He reached out and dragged Virginia up by the throat. She was just starting to gag when the door flew open again.

Paul Foster, Allan Leslie and Sergei Romanov entered the room, weapons at the ready, "Let her go!" Foster admonished the two goons.

Goon One let Virginia drop back to the floor, "We have business here!"

"Boy, I never thought I'd be glad to see the police!" Virginia choked out, still rubbing her throat.

"Don't move! You're under arrest!" Romanov barked at the two men. He and Al Leslie handcuffed them and ushered them out of the room. Foster knelt down beside Virginia.

"Are you alright, Miss Prestai?" he asked solicitously.

"I will be, if I can ever get out of this country."

"What did those men want with you?"

"I think...they were looters, preying on the hotel's less vigilant clients. I shouldn't have opened the door to them...I didn't know..."

Foster knew she was lying of course, "Well, Miss Prestai, if you'd like to leave the country, I'm sure that can be arranged."

Virginia was curious. First the police has bargained with her, threatened her with extradition to the Russian Federation for the crime of stealing the Star, and now this officer was offering her the chance to escape. He had to know from the others that she'd taken the Star with her when she'd dumped them from the SUV, "You're not...going to ask me for the Star?"

Paul smiled, "No. That's not necessary any more. All I want from you is the energy weapon you're still carrying on your person. If you'd like to get ready, I'll take you to Heathrow Airport."

Inclining her head, Virginia was even more curious, "You're just...letting me go?" She hesitantly squirreled inside her bra and handed over the pen device.

"That's right."

"With the Star in hand, so to speak."

"Time's a wasting, Miss Prestai. The same person who sent those men to relieve you of the Star is still in this very hotel. Do you want to wait around and take your chances with him?"

"No! No. Let's head to the airport."

* * *

Virginia still couldn't believe her good fortune. Foster paid for a deluxe one way ticket to Sydney, Australia for her and the Quantas airline window, and even escorted her on board the plane. There was clearly more afoot here than Virginia could figure out, but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Just as the airliner reached cruising speed, she decided to head to the ladies' and fix herself up more, put on some make-up, etc.

She got inside the stall and locked the door. Just for good measure, she took out the Star, still wrapped in soft fabric, from her brassiere. She folded back the material, and looked at the Star in the lavatory's overhead light. It was still beautiful. It had saved her life. Wait a minute. Where was the scoring from the energy weapon? She turned it over and over. She found no life-saving mark on the hunk of crystals. It slipped out of her shaking fingers as she feared the worst, and dropped to the hard floor. She saw it shatter into pieces. She stared at herself in the mirror. She had nothing.

* * *

Kharlemov was fuming. He'd just received word from the hotel people that his two employees had been removed from the premises by the police! What the hell had happened! They were in custody and he still didn't have the Star of Siberia! What was he going to do?

The phone rang and he picked it up, "What?" he demanded.

"Mr. Kharlemov, it's Dr. Brazel. I'm sorry, sir, but..."

"But, what? I'm in the middle of something!"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but your son just died ten minutes ago."

EPILOGUE

"The Star is safe here at SHADO GHQ, where it can be studied. If it really is some sort of alien technology, our people here will perhaps be able to determine what its use is," Straker said to Foster, "How did you make out with our Miss Prestai?"

"She's on her way to Aussie. I put her on the Quantas flight personally."

"Think she'll guess we made the switch on her?"

"She's not stupid. She'll figure it out."

"What about those two goons you found in her hotel room?"

"We gave them a good dose of the amnesia drug and let them go. Apparently, they were employed by Alexander Kharlemov!"

"What happened with our FSB friend?"

"Pete Little did an interrogation to put him off the track. He'll be going back to St. Petersburg empty-handed."

"All those people dead and we still didn't catch up with the damn aliens who were behind all this," Straker shook his head, "At least we got one of those energy weapons to take apart in the labs."

"Seems like we never seem to do any better than break even, does it?" Foster sighed.

"Well, I'll take breaking even - it's still better odds than losing everything."

"Well, time to head back to the Big Apple," Foster pushed himself out of his chair, "Keep me in the loop about the Star."

"You think the Star really has healing properties? Did it really save the Tsarvitch's life back in 1912?"

Foster's expression was sober, "I don't know if I believe the legend or not. After the Tsar and his family were murdered, so many legends came out of Russia. But, the aliens believed it was special, and obviously so did many others. Enough to die trying to get it. Whatever the Star is, whatever it can do - it's more than just a hunk of purple crystals."