

EDGE OF ARMAGEDDON

A UFO story

Written by
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The story is set in 1970 during the early stages of the setting up of SHADO and is contemporary with certain events of the episodes *Confetti Check A-OK* and *The Long Sleep*

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CHAPTER ONE

The full moon shone down from a cloudless sky, the blue-black punctuated by myriad diamond points. The tranquillity of the night was broken only by the occasional screech of an owl and the gentle susurrations of the trees in the light breeze. The blue-white light washed gently over the distempered walls of the cottage, picking out the dark beams and glinting from the leaded windows. Apart from a weak yellowish glow at one of the downstairs windows, the cottage was in darkness.

Inside, the silence was broken by the sound of the ancient grandfather clock patiently chopping notches into the log of Time. The measured ticking was accompanied by the faint sound of hurried, rather intermittent, typing coming from upstairs.

The light from a lone Anglepoise lamp spilled over the desk, weakly illuminating the room beyond. It was just possible to make out that this was a study. A wooden bookcase ran along one wall, the leather-bound volumes softly glowing in the warm light from the glowing embers in the hearth. The word JANE'S, reflecting from the gold-blocked letters on each spine, indicated the owner's interest in Defence in general and aviation in particular. Hanging on the opposite wall, a group photograph, taken at a passing-out parade at RAF Cranwell years before, hinted at military service.

Incongruously, a workbench occupied one corner. Above it stood racks of storage boxes holding a wide assortment of electronic components. On the bench was a half-assembled radio transceiver.

Lying untidily on a small coffee table, a pile of magazines, just discernible on the cover of the topmost issue was the title:

Wireless World.

The staccato sound of the typewriter stopped as the lone figure paused to read what he had just typed: 'It was only under deep hypnosis that the full

story became known,' the paragraph began. 'During those missing hours, Mr and Mrs Hill were subjected to a rigorous medical examination by the occupants of the craft.'

The figure began typing once more: "It is therefore clear that we are being carefully examined by beings from other worlds. When can we expect another visit?'

With a flourish, the figure pulled the sheet from the typewriter and added it to the rest of the script. He yawned and looked at his watch: Midnight. He'd have barely five hours sleep before having to leave for London. Hopefully, this time, his editor would allow him to go ahead with the programme instead of just sitting on it.

He switched off the light and allowed his eyes to grow accustomed to the pale moonlight streaming in through the open window.

He gazed out over the garden and in his mind's eye, saw his beloved Claire tending the roses. That had been before they had come and taken her, that dark, stormy night. He had been late home; the interview with Dr Stranges, the ufologist, had taken much longer than expected. The puncture and driving rain had added the perfect ending to the day. It had been nearly ten before he had turned into his road to see the Thing rising from behind the cottage, spinning up and away over the fields beyond. He had leapt from the car and sprinted inside. He'd been too late - Claire had gone.

The mutilated corpse had been found three days later, unceremoniously dumped in some nearby bushes.

Of the murder weapon, there had been no sign; the only clue being a wide, shallow circular indentation in the ground, rather like the bottom of a giant saucer, hidden in the middle of a nearby copse. As the only witness, still babbling about Flying Saucers, he'd been the prime suspect and taken into custody. The following day, however, he'd been released, the police saying nothing other than the fact that some 'new evidence' had been uncovered which exonerated him completely.

The Inquest had been no better, the coroner ignoring the 'unbelievable' tales of 'alien abduction', instead recording an Open Verdict.

Perhaps just as confusing, Claire's godfather, 'Uncle Jimmy', a crusty American in his late forties, had come to see him, just after the funeral. He actually appeared to believe Ford's eyewitness account and seemed to be very interested in the Thing, even asking to see the marks on the ground where it had lain. The old boy gave a distinct impression that he knew far more than he was prepared to admit.

The next that Ford had heard of the old boy was when the car in which he'd been travelling had mysteriously left the road, plunging down a bank and exploding. Both he and his aide had been thrown clear and had survived but the Cabinet Minister, whose car it had been, and his driver had been killed instantly. The newspapers had had a field day. He'd been unable to cover that story, however; he'd been busy filming a report on strange happenings in Glastonbury.

Anyway, the death of a Cabinet minister was the sort of story to be left to the political correspondents...

The flow of memories broke as he became aware of a faint noise in the distance. It took him a moment to realise where he had heard it before. He turned from the window and dashed from the room, pausing only to grab the camera that hung from a hook on the back of the door. This time he would get proof.

The sound was much louder as he sprinted into the garden. A high pitched, humming, whirring, pulsating sound. The eerie sound he'd first heard the night Claire had been snatched. Camera held to his eye, he scanned the night sky, searching for the source of the sound. Then he saw it; At this distance, he could make out little in the way of detail. The transparent top looked like the pointed end of an egg. The bottom was wide and vaguely dish shaped. What really caught his eye was the series of vanes, spinning rapidly around the middle of the thing, glittering in the moonlight.

He checked the camera settings then pressed the shutter release. Click! One. Quickly, wind the film on. Click! Two. At last, there could be no question about it: Unidentified Flying Objects did exist and ace television journalist Keith Ford had the photographs to prove it.

The early morning sunshine streamed through the window into the office. Through it, Ford could see a panoramic view of west London. Douglas Turnbull, Ford's News Editor, read the carefully prepared manuscript. Ford sat in an easy chair, saying nothing, waiting for the verdict. Turnbull laid the final sheet on the desk in front of him.

"I like it, Keith," he said, "It's a good story. I think we can run it. Nip down to the film library and see what background footage we've got on UFOs."

"There's no need," replied Ford "I managed to get some photographs of one last night."

"Great!" grinned Turnbull. "Send it down to the labs. Tell them I want them to drop everything else."

"Right." smiled Ford.

As the reporter left the room, the telephone on Turnbull's desk rang. He picked it up. "Turnbull..." As he listened, the smile left his face, to be replaced by a frown.

"Yes...yes...I understand that but...Yes but...Very well."

At that, the caller put down the receiver, to leave Turnbull's phone purring quietly in his ear. He looked at the handset for a moment before replacing it on the cradle. He sighed. He wasn't going to enjoy breaking the news to Ford but he had no choice. He had to follow orders too. The report was to be buried.

A black cab pulled up outside a nondescript office in a quiet side street, not far from St. Paul's Cathedral. Having paid the driver and included a generous tip, the passenger got out. In most respects, he would have been described as 'Mister Average', not particularly tall or well-built. The only remarkable feature was his face. He had a gaunt, haunted expression; piercing deep-set, heavily lidded eyes, above a beak-like nose, hinted at a great intellect. He watched the cab as it drove away. Once it had turned the corner, he looked around him. The building reminded him of some of the buildings in his native Poland. He shuddered at the memories they evoked. He paused in the entrance and read the nameplate. A film production company? Had the taxi driver brought him to the wrong place? Hurriedly, he consulted the business card he'd been given:

*Sudbury House,
Newgate Street,
London EC*

Was this a trap? Had the Secret Police finally caught up with him? He paused at the entrance. He could see a receptionist, sitting at a desk in the lobby. Apart from some comfortable chairs, a potted plant and a small table, there was no other furniture – certainly nowhere a burly SB agent could hide.

The receptionist smiled. Her body language showed no hint of guile. "May I help you?" Although fluent, his English was heavily accented: "I was told to come here. I did not expect a Film company."

"And you are?" The stranger did not answer. She had been told to expect that. Undaunted, she continued: "Do you know whom you were meant to see?" He proffered the small pasteboard rectangle. The girl examined the card then smiled. "Ah yes, Mr Henderson, top floor. I'll call him for you. Please, take a seat." He perched on the edge of the chair, nearest the door, ready to escape. The receptionist picked up a telephone handset and dialled.

“Mr Henderson? Your visitor is waiting in Reception.”



CHAPTER TWO

High above East Anglia, a lone aircraft sped. Resplendent in its brilliant scarlet colour scheme, it looked like some strange tropical bird, flying south for the winter. This, however, was no ordinary aircraft, this was a Jindivik drone; an unmanned aircraft with a single purpose: to be destroyed.

The Autopilot commanded the Jindivik to bank towards its destination, a designated piece of sky, high over the North Sea. Normally such weapons tests were conducted over the Aberporth range in North Wales, well clear of normal commercial air traffic. That particular risk was considered acceptable because the Jindivik's operating altitude of more than fifty-five thousand feet was well above that of all civil and most military aircraft.

Safe on the ground, more than two hundred miles away at RAF Llanbedr, the operator monitored the telemetry he was receiving. The gauge showed more than a hundred pounds of fuel, over half a tank-full, certainly enough to fly back to Wales for landing and recovery. This flight, however, was intended to be a one-way trip. The operator shrugged; at least he'd be in the Mess for dinner.

The drone's progress had not gone unnoticed. Ever watchful, the electronic eyes of RAF West Raynham's Type 87 Radar had picked out the speeding object and relayed the information to the Launch Control Point; a large caravan packed with computers.

"Target bearing zero eight five, range ninety miles. Speed, six fifty. Entering Engagement Zone" Harker, the NCO reported.

"Strange, I didn't think Jindiviks went that fast," replied Flight Lieutenant Lewis Waterman, the Engagement Controller.

By now, the radar had locked on to the speeding object and was tracking it. In obedience, to the controlling computer, the eight Type 202 launchers,

servos whining powerfully, turned in unison until their Bloodhound missiles were trained on the incoming target.

"Elevation and Azimuth track locked in, sir". reported Harker.

After a moment, the message 'FREE TO FIRE' appeared on Waterman's terminal.

"Release firing circuit on my mark." ordered Waterman, inserting his firing key into the slot in the console in front of him.

"Yessir." obediently, Harker inserted his key into its slot. The dual key system prevented any one person from firing a missile.

"Three...two...one...Mark!" The two men turned their keys to the 'Fire' position. "Firing in three...two...one...zero!" Waterman's finger pressed the firing button.

With a roar, the four Gosling solid rocket boost motors strapped to the body of the chosen missile ignited. The bolts holding the Bloodhound to the launcher sheared and the missile leapt from the launcher into the azure sky. "Dog Two away sir." reported Harker.

Within four seconds, the Bloodhound had accelerated to two and a half times the speed of sound, fast enough for the two Thor ramjets to ignite and sustain the missile for the rest of the flight. Now spent, the booster rockets fell away, to plunge into the sea, far below.

The lift door slid open and a tall, well-built man stepped out. His gaze fixed on the lonely man perched on the chair. He smiled and proffered his hand. "I'm Henderson". The visitor stood and gingerly grasped the outstretched hand. He quickly checked for signs of the trap being sprung. "The SB doesn't know you're here," smiled Henderson. His visitor flinched at the mention of the Polish Secret Police. "Please, come with me." Henderson gestured towards the lift. The two men stepped in and the doors slid shut.

"Time to impact, two minutes, ten seconds." Waterman read from the timer display in front of him

"Target speed and course changing sir," reported Harker "Range now ninety-two miles, bearing: zero eight seven, speed seven fifty, increasing. Strange, target aspect remaining constant."

At that moment, the telephone rang. Waterman placed the receiver to his ear

"Engagement Control Officer..." he answered.

The missile had now reached an altitude of fifty thousand feet. Soon it would stoop down onto the target and blow it from the sky

Waterman slammed the telephone down.

"Aborting missile," he said, pressing the DESTRUCT button "The call was from HQ," he explained. "Apparently the drone was late taking off."

"Then what're we shooting at?"

"You tell me."

The reflected radar signal changed slightly, indicating a change in the target's course. The clipped wings moved a fraction and the needle nose of the missile turned towards its prey.

"Destruct Negative, sir." reported Harker.

"Damn!"

The two men could do nothing now. Cutting the radar would have no effect; the missile could track the target from its own in-built memory. All they could do now was wait for the flare on their screens to indicate the destruction of the missile - and whatever it had been aimed at.

Henderson took his seat behind his desk. The desk itself was modern. At the front, it bore the legend:

PRESIDENT IAC

President? Surely Britain was a Monarchy?

IAC?

His visitor sat, in a comfortable chair, facing him. The visitor looked around; The office was modern. The walls were a deep blue. Small shelves held an assortment of books and models of spacecraft. Somewhat incongruously, there was also an antique oil lamp.

In a commanding position in the centre of the wall behind Henderson was a large picture of the Earth with a constellation of artificial satellites and debris enclosing it.

Mere decoration, or something more meaningful? On the desk, the visitor noticed, was a sheaf of papers. He could only guess at the contents.

Henderson wasted no time; he picked up a typewritten sheet from the sheaf of papers and began to read: "You are Wladyslaw Jasinski, born 12th March 1933, in Zgierz, Poland. You are a qualified psychiatrist until recently chief interrogator for the Polish State Security Service. Convicted of Murder and sentenced to Death, you somehow escaped from Barczewo Prison. Henderson looked up. "Have I missed anything?" Jasinski sat, mouth open,

too dumbfounded to reply. Who is this man? What is going on? More questions...

"There you are, Doug," said Ford, placing the still-wet photographs on the desk in front of Turnbull, "All the proof we need."

Despite the low light levels, the sensitive film, push-processed by the lab, had produced clear, if grainy, prints.

Turnbull smiled weakly. This was not going to be easy. "Look, Keith, I can see you've put a lot of work into this item," Ford paused. He didn't like the sound of this. "But I don't feel the public are ready for something as powerful as this quite yet."

"What are you trying to say?"

Turnbull sighed. "I'm going to level with you, Keith. When you left this morning, I had a 'phone call from the Network Controller. There's been a 'D' Notice issued on the whole subject."

Ford swore. A Defence Information or 'D' Notice was an official clampdown on a particular subject. Any reporter or editor unwise enough to defy the notice ran the risk of prosecution. "Then what do we do?" asked Ford.

"We don't do anything," replied Turnbull "We can't. "

"So that's it," fumed Ford "You're going to let the story of the year go down the pan, just because some snotty-nosed politicians decide to lean on the Controller. What's he afraid of? Not getting a gong in the New Year Honours List?"

"It's not like that, Keith." Turnbull tried to placate Ford. "No?" yelled Ford "You're forgetting something. Those things butchered my wife. Do you honestly think I'm going to let them get away with it and say nothing? How many more people will be butchered?"

Turnbull raised his hands. "Look, Keith, I do sympathise..."

"Oh, you sympathise?" Ford interrupted him. "I've had it up to here with sympathy. I want ACTION!"

The coffee mug jumped as Ford's fist slammed onto the top of Turnbull's desk. He changed tack: "Do you know how many people disappeared in the UK last year, never to be seen again? Over a thousand. I'm telling you; the people of Britain need to know the threat facing them."

"And what will they do?" Turnbull interrupted him. "I'll tell you. They'll either panic as they did over Orson Welles' 'War of the Worlds', or they'll laugh it off as another 'Spaghetti Tree'." Turnbull was referring to a now-famous report on the Swiss annual spaghetti harvest. That particular April Fools' day programme, some thirteen years before, had taken in millions of people.

"Then what do you suggest?" Ford was calmer now. But not much.

"Target speed now fifteen hundred knots, still increasing." reported Harker Perhaps whatever it was would be able to outrun the missile. Waterman found himself hoping so.

Ford slammed the door behind him and stormed down the corridor. Clearly, Turnbull was going to do nothing. His suggestion had been that Ford should take a couple of weeks off. Ford had refused outright. The other suggestion had been that Ford concentrated on other stories whilst Turnbull tried to get the 'D' notice lifted.

"More chance of lifting the Titanic" Ford had muttered to himself bitterly as he stamped down the corridor.

The radar screens flared for a moment as the Bloodhound's warhead exploded, showering the target with a lethal hail of metal fragments.

Waterman picked up the telephone. "Get me the Station Commander."

Vanes torn askew by the blast, the UFO could no longer maintain height. Thick smoke billowed from the object as it began to spiral to the ground, far below. Already it was becoming harder to control in the thickening atmosphere. The crew would need all their skill and a lot of luck to land safely. These missions were becoming more dangerous by the year. That mattered little; Whilst the Race faced extinction, the Quest had to continue.

Instruments indicated a suitable landing site, a densely wooded area where they could wait until help arrived.

The operator frowned. His drone should have been blown from the sky several minutes ago. Instead, his instruments continued to relay telemetry from the aircraft that was currently flying under automatic control. Something had obviously gone wrong. But what? The only clue was a set of readings, about the time the drone should have been destroyed, suggesting some sort of shock wave buffeting the aircraft. That was in the past. He had to concern himself with the present. He glanced out of the window; the heavy clouds that had been lowering for some time had now taken on a dark, steely grey appearance. A low, ominous rumble heralded the approaching storm. The first drops of rain spattered the glass. Manually landing an aircraft in this weather would be difficult enough, remotely guiding one down safely, impossible.

He pressed a switch on the console in front of him and spoke into the microphone. "Test Control, this is Target Alpha Two-Four. Destruct negative. Unable to RTB. Request permission to ditch. Over"

The loudspeaker crackled for a moment before the reply: "Alpha Two Four, this is Test Control. Permission granted. Steer zero two seven degrees. Out."

Carefully, the pilot punched in the requisite instructions which were uplinked to the drone. Satisfied that the aircraft was no longer likely to

endanger life, he sent commands to change the heading and throttle back the Viper turbojet. These commands overrode the autopilot. Obediently, the aircraft, now gliding gently, dipped towards the North Sea and its watery fate.

Despite the brilliant afternoon sunshine, the figures huddled in their overalls against the cold.

The chill wind blew from the nearby Broads and whistled through the framework of the Type 202 Launcher.

As they waited, the technicians muttered curses at the lucky few who had gone to Germany as part of the advance party. Soon, the whole squadron would be re-deployed there.

As the ungainly loader vehicle moved into position next to the launcher, its sleek load held gently but firmly by the loading arm, the figures crowded round, like worker bees around their Queen.

With a whine of hydraulics, the loading arm lifted the replacement missile onto its launch rail, where the technicians bolted it into position.

Task completed, the loading arm retracted and the vehicle headed back to its shed. The rest of the crew, until now, little more than spectators, moved into action; electrical connections were made and checked and boosters attached.

In total, the well-rehearsed routine took a little under twenty minutes. Task complete, the figures climbed down from the gantry and hurried back to the waiting Land Rover.

On its gantry, the newly loaded Bloodhound missile waited for its prey.

It had been a long meeting but finally, Jasinski had seemed to relax and Henderson knew the man was his. As he and Henderson talked, Jasinski's anxiety subsided. Discreetly, Henderson pressed a button under his desk.

Five minutes later, there was a quiet knock on the door and Miss Scott, Henderson's secretary, entered, bearing a tray of coffee. There was also a buff envelope. Wordlessly, she carefully placed the tray on the desk, smiled at the visitor and left. Henderson poured coffee for Jasinski, then himself. He picked up the buff envelope from the tray and slid it across the table.

"What is this?" Jasinski was curious.

"Open it."

Carefully, Jasinski tore open the envelope. Inside: a small, dark blue-black book. Emblazoned on the front cover were the Royal Crest and the wording: "The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland". Set into the cover was a small handwritten panel bearing the name "Dr D. Jackson." He opened the passport. His own face looked back unsmilingly at him. Beneath it was a perfect copy of his signature. Jasinski looked up, puzzled.

"Wladyslaw Jasinski is dead." Henderson pointed out. "His government have no further interest in him. Douglas Jackson has just taken up an important role..."

"I will not betray my country!" Jasinski leapt to his feet.

"No-one is asking you to," Henderson reassured him. "I was about to explain why I, no! Why the World needs your unique skills."

Jasinski sat, more puzzled than angry. "You say that the World needs my skills? I am confused"

"Let me explain..." said Henderson.

Group Captain Peter Fairfax, the Station Commander of RAF West Raynham, leaned back in his seat and clasped his hands together. He looked at the young flight lieutenant standing rigidly to attention in front of him. "As Station Commander, I am responsible for the actions of the officers under my command. If something goes wrong, I'm the one who carries the can.

Your actions yesterday could have had very serious repercussions. What would have happened if you'd shot down a civil airliner?"

"With respect, sir," replied the young officer "No civil airliner currently in service is capable of travelling faster than Mach one. That object was travelling in excess of Mach two and still accelerating. It was no civil airliner sir - I'm certain of that."

Fairfax nodded slowly. "I see." He leaned forward and opened the report on the desk in front of him. He read the final page once more. He looked up: "Looks as if we've bagged ourselves an Unidentified Flying Object."

Thoughtfully, he closed the file. There were several things he should do. He considered them. After a moment, Fairfax closed the file, reached for his pen and carefully wrote on the front cover 'No Further Action'. He then signed underneath with a flourish. He tossed the file into the OUT tray then sat back. "I'll have to report the sighting of a UFO to the Ministry of Defence, of course, but as far as I'm concerned, that's the end of the matter." A worrying thought occurred to him "I see from your report that the object was not destroyed."

"No, sir.", replied Waterman. "It was obviously damaged, though. It came down about five miles outside King's Lynn. Whatever it was, it must be pretty tough to withstand a direct hit like that."

"Indeed." Fairfax got up from his desk, strode across the room and consulted the map on the opposite wall. He frowned. "That's too damned close to Sandringham for my liking" he muttered to himself. He turned to face Waterman: "Take a team with you. Find out what it is and whether it constitutes a threat."

"Yes sir"

"OK, Waterman. Dismissed"

Waterman saluted smartly and left. As the door closed behind him, he sighed with relief. He would have been court-martialled had the missile destroyed an airliner.

Jackson's mind was reeling. Unidentified Flying Objects? Invasion from space? Alien body snatchers? It seemed quite absurd, like something from science fiction, yet the evidence that Henderson had shown him had been absolutely conclusive. In comparison with this, the rivalry between East and West paled into insignificance. When Henderson began to explain the need for security, Jackson, having seen the evidence, agreed that public knowledge of the menace would lead to widespread panic, the breakdown of authority and with them, any chance of countering the threat. At Henderson's signal, Miss Scott had shown Jackson to his own office. His role would be, as part of a medical team, to evaluate psychological profiles. There seemed to be three types: potential recruits, those individuals who had claimed to see UFOs but for one reason or another could be safely disregarded as eccentrics and finally, those who could not be so lightly dismissed and who might well have to be discredited, perhaps in rare cases, silenced. To emphasise the point, Henderson had told him that this had already happened; the Protection Officer, who had been unlucky enough to survive the UFO attack during which the Cabinet Minister had been killed but he and Straker had survived, had been taken care of by Security.

Henderson waited for that to sink in. He had gazed intently at Jackson as he asked whether the Psychiatrist could do this. Jackson had reassured him; of these people, some might well become potential recruits. Those who couldn't, they could be discredited. If that wasn't an option...

Henderson seemed satisfied.

Already a number of folders were laid out on Jackson's desk. Although he sometimes found colloquial English difficult, written reports gave him no trouble. He picked the top one off of the pile, opened it and began to read.

CHAPTER THREE

Even on the brightest of summer days, the road running through the densest part of the forest was always shrouded in deep shadow. This late in the afternoon, with dusk falling, it was almost pitch black. "The ideal spot for a murder," thought Police Constable George Wilkins as he pedalled his trusty bicycle on his beat. Perhaps one day, he mused, his Sergeant would let him have his own car, perhaps a Morris Minor, so that he could keep his helmet on. He was still baffled about the fact that they had been christened 'panda' cars.

He hopped off. Wasn't this where old Josh Hoskins did his poaching? Like most village Bobbies, he wasn't above accepting the odd rabbit or partridge for the pot, no questions asked. But that was when he was off duty, down the pub in the evenings.

Now, though, he was on duty and the Duke had been complaining bitterly about the poaching. Wilkins propped his bike against a tree and then strode into the forest, making sure he made as much noise as possible. That way, he reasoned, he could quite truthfully claim that he had attempted to catch the poachers in the act, but that they had eluded him.

Moments later, Wilkins paused. Something was wrong. He listened. Nothing. Apart from leaves rustling in the breeze, there was silence. Normally the forest would be alive with birdsong. Then he became aware of a high-pitched electronic burbling sound. In all his years with the force, Wilkins had never heard anything like it before. He shivered, but not from the cold. The sound seemed to emanate from the deepest, darkest part of the forest an area steeped in local folklore.

In the pub, Wilkins was always amongst the first to laugh off the old wives' tales of apparitions and mysterious happenings. Now, though, he was beginning to wonder if there might not be something in the tales after all.

For a brief moment, he hesitated before his police training overrode his fears.

Switching on his torch, Wilkins strode towards the source of the sound.

"Here you are Keith, the ideal story." Ford looked up. Dennis Hooper, one of the sub-editors was standing in front of his desk, a slip of paper in his hand held out as if it was a peace offering. Ford took the paper and skimmed quickly over the contents.

"Look, Den," said Ford as he put the paper down. "Surely this is one for the Defence Correspondent."

"Normally, I would agree with you." replied Hooper, checking off each point on his fingers. "But, A, Phil's still on sick leave and B, if you read the note properly, you'll see what I mean."

"Doug hasn't put you up to this has he?" Ford suspected that this might be one of Turnbull's ploys to divert him from the awkward subject of U.F.O.s

"No, Keith," replied Hooper "He hasn't seen this one yet." Ford picked up the note again and read it thoroughly.

"At 1632 hours GMT," Ford read, "A Bloodhound missile of Number 41 Squadron, Royal Air Force, West Raynham, was test-fired at a Jindivik target drone. The missile detonated successfully and both aircraft and missile were destroyed." Ford looked up: "I still don't get it."

"Don't you see? The Ministry of Defence doesn't usually release details of test flights."

"Go on." Ford prompted. The light was beginning to dawn. "Look at the actual wording: 'Both aircraft and missile were destroyed', not 'the test was successful'"

"You've got a point," Ford said thoughtfully.

"Add to that the fact that the crew of the local lifeboat reported seeing an aircraft ditching in the sea off Cromer at around five p.m. and you've got something pretty odd going on."

"Now wait a minute," said Ford. How did they know it was a Jindivik?"

"They didn't," replied Hooper, "but I recognised it from the description they gave. Besides," he added, "The colour scheme is pretty distinctive." Aircraft intended for target practice were painted in garish colour schemes, totally unlike the normal drab grey and green camouflage sported by military aircraft

"If what you say is true," Ford said slowly, "that leaves us with an interesting puzzle; exactly what did that missile hit?"

"Right!" smiled Hooper.

In all his years in the Force, Wilkins had never seen anything like this; It had been by the merest chance that he'd made the grisly discovery; Ducking under a low branch, he'd noticed a huddled form lying at the foot of a giant oak. The face had been smashed to a pulp. Wilkins started to search in the pockets of the large overcoat that shrouded the still form. There were no papers, but Wilkins' gloved hands soon found what felt like thin pieces of wire. He pulled them out and examined them. Snares. There would be no more free rabbits or pheasant in the pub on a Saturday night; Josh Hoskins' poaching days were over. The snares were covered in blood. Strange. Then Wilkins realised that his gloves were wet. Quickly, he pulled open the coat and recoiled in horror. The body had been opened from the throat to the navel. Wilkins scrambled to his feet, his stomach lurched and he fought back the urge to vomit.

As he turned to make his way back to the road, he noticed a pale greenish glow coming from a clearing, virtually in the centre of the forest. The mysterious sound, much louder now, also seemed to be coming from that

direction. He paused. Such a murder should be reported as soon as it was discovered. But then again, he reflected, another few minutes would not make much difference to Josh. There was evil here and as a representative of the Law, it was his duty to investigate it. Pausing briefly to straighten his tunic, he strode towards the glow.

Turnbull looked up as Ford put his head around the door.

"Ah, Keith," he smiled; the morning's bad feeling all but forgotten. "Come in."

He gestured to an easy chair and Ford sat. "I've been thinking, Doug, about what you said earlier," said Ford "And I think you're right. I have been overdoing it a bit. So, I was wondering if I might take some leave." Turnbull beamed. "Of course! When would you like to start?"

"Tonight?"

"Sure."

"How long do you want?"

"I was thinking of a fortnight." Turnbull consulted the calendar on the desk in front of him. "Tell, you what. Let's make it a full month. On full pay, of course. How does that suit?" Ford stood, his mouth hanging open in astonishment.

"I...er...that is...Th...thank you" Ford stammered. Turnbull smiled again "Well, that's settled then." "Oh, by the way," Turnbull added, As Ford got up from the chair, "Have you decided where you're going yet?"

"I thought Norfolk." replied Ford, holding the door open.

"Good idea. Just what the doctor ordered, a few bracing walks."

"I'll bring you back a stick of rock"

Turnbull chuckled as Ford pulled the door closed after him.

Wilkins had never seen anything like it in his life. "Oh, my Lor'!" he whispered. "What is it?"

Less than a hundred yards away, in the centre of a clearing, the UFO glowed green in the darkness. As he moved closer, he could make out the shape of the thing. It appeared that the thing had been damaged; some of the plates around the middle were missing and vapour wisped from several places around the circumference. Wilkins' fear had been replaced by curiosity. What on earth could it be? He decided to look around the other side of the object. He began to circle cautiously around the clearing.

The Land Rovers pulled over to the side of the road. Waterman stepped down from the lead vehicle, unfolded a map and laid it on the bonnet. He gazed at it thoughtfully as the rest of the search party, a detachment of the RAF Regiment, gathered round. The map had been divided into large squares. One-by-one, the squares had been crossed through as each area was searched until there were only four left. "Hmm, Woodcock Wood," Waterman muttered to himself, reading the legend on the paper. "That's going to take some searching." he looked toward the forest. It seemed to block the road ahead. Waterman knew that was not the case; the map clearly showed the road cutting through the woodland. He looked at the faces around him. Although the troops were tough, the fatigue was beginning to show. He glanced at his watch, then made his decision: "OK. We'll take a break here. Thirty minutes."

With all but this small area to cover, he reasoned, his men deserved a break. Anyway, with the damage that the object had sustained, what harm could it do?

Wilkins knew it. With their silver - coloured helmets and red leathers, the figures intent on their repairs could only be Hell's Angels. He'd come across them before, roaring down the country lanes, smashing up the pubs and terrorising honest, law-abiding citizens. This time they had gone too far. He stepped from the behind the trees. He could see it now; capturing a dangerous gang, single-handed. He would be bound to be promoted. He glanced down at his sleeve, imagining the three stripes. The figures, intent on their mysterious activities, still had not noticed him. As Wilkins got closer, he noticed that the silver helmets seemed to have dark visors. He laid a gloved hand on the shoulder of the nearest figure.

"I am arresting you in the name of..." his voice died away as the figure straightened and turned to face him. A cold emotionless face stared at him through a thick green liquid. These were no bikers. Wilkins backed away. Then he noticed another of the figures. It was holding a strange silvery device. From the way the figure held it, it could only be a weapon.

Terror-stricken, Wilkins turned to flee. Another figure, holding a small device, blocked his path. Dodging away, Wilkins ran for the safety of the forest. As he ran, he fumbled for his whistle. The Alien took aim. Wilkins put the whistle to his mouth. If only he could summon help. The Alien squeezed the trigger. Wilkins blew. As he did so, he was aware of an electronic whine. The sound got louder and louder until it was boring into his brain. The whine filled his senses. His legs felt like rubber; his heart was pounding. He could feel the pulse, like a steam hammer, pounding in his head. He stumbled and fell. A great wave of nothingness engulfed him.

"What's that?" Waterman held up his hand for silence. Faintly, the sound of Wilkins' whistle reached the party from deep within the forest.

"It sounds like a police whistle, sir" replied Harker.

"You're right," replied Waterman. "Someone's in trouble."

Through his binoculars, Waterman could see the damage sustained by the UFO.

The search for the source of the frantic whistling had proved fruitless. The Police bicycle had been found, but of Wilkins, there had been no sign. On reaching the clearing, he had split his force into four teams, positioning them around the clearing. Ever cautious, he had ordered them to stay undercover until he had assessed the situation. "We certainly winged it," he whispered to Harker, crouching beside him in the undergrowth. "It's sustained a fair amount of damage. What beats me is how 'Dog Two' failed to destroy it."

"But what on earth is it, sir?" whispered Harker. "It's like nothing I've ever seen before"

"I don't know. It's certainly not one of ours"

"Could it be some kind of satellite?"

"I wouldn't have thought so. Those vanes would have been burned off during re-entry"

"Then how did it get here? It's got no wings."

Before Waterman could answer, his Walkie-Talkie crackled into life.

"Hunter Leader, This is Hunter Two, over."

"Hunter Two, go ahead."

"Hunter Leader, we've found...a body." Waterman could hear a tremor in the other man's voice. "It's been mutilated..." There was the sound of someone breathing deeply, obviously in an effort to control nausea.

"Hunter Two, this is Hunter Leader. Please repeat. Your last transmission was garbled. Over."

"Hunter Two to Hunter Leader." Hunter Two's voice was calmer now, more controlled. "I say again. We've found a body. It's been mutilated and

dumped in the undergrowth. From his clothing, I'd say he was a tramp or something. Over."

"Thank you, Hunter Two. Out."

Presumably, if the sound they'd heard had been a police whistle, the officer had found the body. But why use his whistle to call for help? Surely it would have made more sense to go to the nearest village and call from there. Before he could pursue that line of thought any further, his radio crackled into life: "Hunter Leader, This is Hunter Four. I can see a figure walking towards the object. Seems to be wearing overalls and some form of helmet. Over. "Could be one of the crew." thought Waterman. He made a decision; "Hunter Four, This is Hunter Leader. Grab him and hold him 'til I get there. Use minimal force. Out."

Waterman turned to Harker: "Keep watching the object and stay under cover." Before Harker could reply, the sound of distant gunfire rattled across the clearing. It was a strange, high-pitched sound. Immediately following it came the familiar crack of self-loading rifles. Waterman's radio crackled into life: "Hunter Leader, Hunter Four. We're under attack. They're firing explosive bullets. Over."

"Hold on as long as you can," ordered Waterman. "Reinforcements are on their way. Out." Hunter Four was on the other side of the clearing. To reach the group, would mean skirting around the clearing. With the thick undergrowth, it could take several minutes to reach them. He consulted his map, on which he had marked the positions of the four groups and made his decision: "Hunter Two, You are closest to Hunter Four. Give them some backup. Out" "Hunter Two, Roger."

His gaze was drawn back to the UFO. It now seemed to be pulsating gently. Flight Sergeant Jenkins, Leader of Hunter Two, winced at the throbbing pain. The Alien bullet that had so narrowly missed his head instead had pierced his shoulder, which was bleeding profusely. So far, the score was Humans 1, Aliens 1; Corporal Roberts, chest blown apart by a single shell, lay slumped

against the ruins of a tree The final Alien lay concealed in a thicket. He was obviously more cunning than the other and was going to be a lot more difficult to capture. It was during an earlier attempt to flush him out that Jenkins had sustained the shoulder wound. Jenkins sank to the ground. His fingers found a suitable stone. He hefted it in his hand before hurling it to one side of the thicket. A volley of shots thundered into the place where the stone had landed. Waterman laid the binoculars down once more. The UFO continued to pulsate gently. He picked up the radio and pressed the 'transmit' button. There was a brilliant flash and Waterman's ears were filled with a colossal roar as everything went black.

Ford pulled up behind the last Land Rover, his journalistic sense twitching. There was definitely something strange going on; why else were there police roadblocks up all over the place?

By consulting a map and turning into a side road, he'd been able to slip inside the cordon. Military Exercises was the official reason given, but he'd also heard talk of a village policeman having gone missing.

Were the events connected? Then again, there was still the question of what the Bloodhound missile had hit. Had it come down here?

There seemed to be intermittent flashing coming from the depths of the forest. There was obviously something strange happening.

He doused the headlights, turned off the engine and grabbed for a torch and his camera before heading into the forest.

The blackness lightened, to be replaced by a fuzzy greenish oval. A voice, apparently coming from several miles away echoed around his head. His nose seemed to be full of the sweet, acrid smell of scorched wood. His head throbbed as if a team of road menders had set about it with their pneumatic drills. Finally, the words he was hearing began to make sense; "Are you alright?"

The voice was familiar but in Waterman's dazed state, he couldn't place it. He blinked and gradually the blur resolved itself into a human face. The face, too, was familiar, but in his dazed state, Waterman's mind was a blank. "Have I been out long?"

"About two hours," replied Ford. Long enough to get some very clear photographs of the UFO.

The glow had been bright enough for Ford not to need the flashbulbs in his pocket. Steadier now, Waterman looked around for the Walkie Talkie. Finally, he found it, or rather what was left of it, at the foot of a tree.

"So, what happened?" asked Ford, gazing at the blackened, smouldering remains of the tree.

"That did." replied Waterman, jerking a thumb at the brilliantly glowing UFO.

Ford's jaw dropped. He stood up and immediately dived for cover as a hail of bullets whined past his head.

Waterman grabbed his arm. "Steady, sir" he cautioned Ford. "I've already lost one man. I'd hate to lose a civilian. We'd best lie low until reinforcements come. If our radio check is late, Base should send help."

He looked at his watch and swore; somehow it had been smashed. He suddenly realised that Ford was muttering to himself. "What was that sir? He enquired. "I was vowing to get even with those butchers" Ford replied icily. "They murdered my wife."

Straker had looked in on Henderson on his way home. Henderson had taken him to meet Jackson and the flying visit had somehow become an impromptu planning meeting. After an hour, it finally came to a close and Straker stood to leave.

"Oh, by the way," Henderson added, almost as an afterthought, "It looks as if we have a security problem."

Straker frowned and sat down. "What kind of problem?"

"The Press. I had to move pretty quickly to suppress a documentary about UFOs. From what I understand, the reporter didn't take it too well. Not surprising really, His wife, Claire, disappeared about two years ago. Her mutilated body turned up a couple of days later"

"Is that all? The man's overwrought. If necessary, we can 'persuade' him to keep quiet. "

Henderson was surprised; Straker sounded very callous. "Commander, this man's good. If there's a story, he'll get it. To him, this one's personal. There was a UFO sighting at the time of his wife's death. He holds them responsible."

"You seem to know a lot about the case, sir."

"I ought to, Commander," Henderson replied grimly "Claire was my God-daughter."

Waterman hefted a pebble in his hand, judging the weight. He tossed it high into the air. The bushes where it landed disappeared in a hail of explosive shells.

"Did you see it?" asked Waterman.

"Yes," replied Ford. "Just behind those trees, about forty yards, I'd say."

"Right," muttered Waterman, "Listen carefully. This is what we're going to do..."

Four hundred miles north, just outside the granite-faced sprawl of Edinburgh, reposed the buildings of the British Geological Survey. This late in the evening, the buildings were in darkness. Most of the offices and laboratories were silent. All save one, deep in a basement. Humming quietly to itself, a seismograph recorded the minute vibrations that signified the movements of the Earth.

The pen was almost motionless as the paper unrolled beneath it, the ink trace showing barely a wiggle. Suddenly, the pen swung wildly first one way then the other. Soon, a wild zigzag covered the paper trace as colossal energies were released. Minutes later, the pen settled down. A momentary spasm hit the pen as the Secondary Wave, refracted through the Earth's crust, reached it from the other side of the world. The pen settled down once more, the trace showing barely a wiggle.

The next morning, scientists would be busy examining the paper trace, scratching their heads and busily calculating which unfortunate part of the world had been devastated by this, the most powerful earthquake yet known.

After half an hour's discussion, Straker had agreed to Henderson's solution. It would also be a good test for SHADO's new Psychiatrist, Jackson.

As he lay in bed, Jackson found himself reviewing the day's events. Despite himself, he smiled. Somehow, in this strange country, within the space of a morning, he had been transformed from a refugee into a person, with a new identity, a home and a career not so very different from that he had so recently left.

Just a few decades before, the people of this small island had helped his countrymen defeat an existential threat. He would always be an outsider here, yet the people seemed accepting of the refugees who came to their shores. This was a country whose people he could respect. He had heard that many Prisoners of War had refused to return home, preferring to make their home here.

If the documents and reports he'd been reading were true, the existential threat once faced by his countrymen paled in comparison with the threat faced by the whole world.

The role he'd been offered would be the most important that any man could hope to fulfil. He vowed that he would not let his new colleagues down. He considered the people he'd met.

Although the meeting had been brief, he decided that the tow-haired Commander Straker was serious and dedicated. The new wedding ring suggested that he'd only recently married. How would he reconcile his role of Commander with that of husband and later perhaps, father?

As he finally drifted off to sleep a final thought occurred to Jackson; it was clear that Straker was subordinate to Henderson so why was the older man concealing feelings of envy towards his junior?

It had taken Waterman ten minutes to skirt around the dense undergrowth of the thicket. Now he crouched, only yards from the Alien, waiting for the right moment.

He glanced up from the bush in which he'd hidden. Less than ten feet away, back turned towards him, the Alien stood, barely concealed from Ford by the trunk of an oak.

The second hand of Waterman's watch swept up towards the 12...

Ford hefted the rock in his hand and looked at his watch: 5...4...3...2...1...NOW!

Waterman could hear the commotion as Ford hurled the rock into the bushes. The Alien turned, levelled his gun and fired

Waterman sprinted from cover and leapt...

There was a dull thud as Waterman's shoulder made contact, bringing the Alien to the ground. The two wrestled fiercely, rolling across the woodland floor, each trying to gain the advantage. Then, suddenly, it was all over: With a crack, the Alien's faceplate slammed into a stone and fractured. A dark green liquid poured from the helmet.

The Alien's limbs twitched convulsively for a few moments. Then he lay dead.

Waterman could only look on with increasing horror as the face of his enemy aged. Within seconds, the smooth impassive features had changed to those of a wizened old man.

"My God!" exclaimed Ford.

He had run to help Waterman as soon as the struggle had started. He had seen the Alien's rapid ageing. "He looks ninety. What the hell happened to him?"

"Beats me," replied Waterman "But I'd hate to go like that."

He bent down to pick up the Alien weapon that had been tossed aside during the struggle. It glittered eerily in the reddish glow from the UFO. He hefted the weapon. It was far lighter than any firearm he'd ever handled. He examined it for a moment.

"You know," he said, "It's not like any gun I've ever seen before. It's not made of normal gunmetal, for one thing."

He paused for a moment, deep in thought. "We'd better collect some samples to send to the boys at Farnborough. Perhaps they'll know..." He broke off. Something was wrong.

"What's up?"

"I don't know," replied Waterman. "Something's wrong..." Then they both heard it: the gentle burbling from the UFO had ceased, to be replaced by another, sinister sound. An eerie electronic whine that seemed to both rise and fall in pitch at the same time.

They looked toward the UFO. A brilliant orange had replaced the gentle green glow. A veil of smoke had begun to appear around it.

Instinctively, both men dived for cover.

With a brilliant flash and ear-splitting roar, the UFO exploded into a million glowing shards, reducing the undergrowth to a fine white ash.



CHAPTER FOUR

The woman sighed. Her husband should have been home hours ago. Yawning, she placed her book on the cushion beside her. The grandfather clock in the hall struck once. That did it; she wouldn't wait any longer. Pausing only to switch off the lights, she made her weary way upstairs to bed. As she climbed the stairs, she reflected on the book, 'That Summer' by Allen Drury, a cheap and trashy paperback that she'd picked up at the airport and which in an earlier age would have been referred to as a 'penny dreadful'; The plot seemed to revolve around a newly-wedded husband having an affair behind his bride's back, all the while claiming that the late nights were as a result of pressure of work. As she reached the top of the stairs, she smiled. It was rather a silly book really. No one would carry on like that in real life. Would they?

Suddenly, Mary Straker wasn't smiling any more.

Silence had once more returned to the forest. Ford and Waterman stood looking at the devastation.

A search by Harker and the rest of the squad had turned up nothing but ashes. The troops had been dismissed and were now waiting in the Land Rovers with the bodies of the dead Aliens stowed safely in the back of the vehicles. "So much for the samples for Farnborough" Waterman muttered bitterly.

"We've still got the gun and the bodies," replied Ford "And at least we can get some photographs." He reached into his pocket for the flashbulbs he kept there. Swearing, he snatched his hand away; the razor-sharp edges of the broken bulbs had sliced deep into the skin.

"That looks nasty," said Waterman, examining the wound. "Come on, there's a first-aid kit in the Land Rover. "

Ford cast a final look back at the clearing then followed Waterman back to the road.

As the sound of their progress died away, a figure stood up from the bush behind which it had been concealed. Silently, it examined the spot where the UFO had so recently been. The trees sighed gently in the breeze and the clouds, which had been concealing the moon, drifted slowly away. Moonlight streamed through the leafy canopy and illuminated the figure. His skin appeared a mottled green. This was a side effect of immersion in the bio-acrophilic liquid, which enabled members of his race to travel for months at many times the speed of light. Now though, he had removed his helmet and was breathing the strange air of this alien planet. The plastic shells, covering the iris completely and protecting his eyes from the liquid and rigours of the flight, glittered eerily as he looked up at the Moon.

Perhaps it would make more sense to set up a base on the satellite, he thought. That way help would only be a matter of minutes away. The base would have to be concealed, of course; the humans had taken their first tentative steps outward from their home world and landed their crude, rocket-powered devices on the satellite. Since the satellite was in a captured rotation around its parent, the majority of the devices had landed on the near side. The far side, eternally hidden from the telescopes of Earth, would make an ideal staging post.

The Alien lowered his gaze to look around him. This planet seemed to be a very attractive place. In a way, he envied the humans this lush green planet, so full of as-yet untapped resources. Resources that included the humans themselves. Of all the planets that the Race had visited over the millennia, only the Humans of this insignificant little blue-green planet were able to supply their needs; spare parts to replace their own diseased and failing organs. In many cases, it would not even be necessary to kill them - Nature on this planet had given them spares of some of the most useful organs. It was merely necessary to isolate a human, remove one of its organs, stitch it up, erase the most recent events from its memory then put it back. Some

on his home planet had objected on moral grounds, saying that it was wrong to use lower animals in this way. But, it had been pointed out; Medical science had been unable to provide artificial replacements that could last more than a century or so. It was ironic; the scientists, who had perfected the means to travel for months at many times the speed of light, were still unable to produce an artificial heart or kidney, to replace their own diseased and failing organs. And besides, the Humans actually ate lower animals on Earth, breeding them as food. Perhaps, one day, it might be possible to set up a captive breeding programme, offering advanced technology in exchange for organs. Not too advanced, though - the Humans seemed to be a particularly warlike race. They had even taken their first steps off of the planet, with crude chemical-powered craft, little different from the missiles the humans often rained on each other. So far, a small number of these craft had crossed the void, to land on the barren surface of the Earth's rocky satellite before lifting off and returning home. The small size and low speed of these strange craft had, on one occasion, almost spelled disaster; veiled by the glare of the system's central star, one of the missiles had almost collided with the watching scout as it dropped out of superluminal space. With no time to react, the crew had been unable to prevent the automatic defence systems from acting to prevent detection; the energy beam had all but destroyed the rear section of the humans' craft. Despite being mortally wounded, the human-carrying missile had managed to swing around the back of the planet's satellite before returning home. Evidently, humans were resourceful. Who knows what devastation they could cause if they got their hands on a scout craft with its energy weapons? The more reactionary faction of The Race saw Mankind's aggressive nature as justification for a programme of total extermination.

Fortunately, theirs was still a minority view but it had been considered prudent to build in auto destruction units into the Scoutcraft. Unfortunately, though, something in this planet's atmosphere seemed to trigger the unit - leading to the destruction of the craft if the crewmembers

were unable to cancel the destruct sequence in time. That was obviously what had happened on this occasion.

The moonlight dimmed as a cloud passed in front of the moon. A distant rumble heralded an approaching storm. Obviously, he'd have to find some shelter until another Scout arrived. Turning, he left the clearing and headed back into the forest.



CHAPTER FIVE

The slow ticking of the grandfather clock helped to disguise the sound of a skeleton key being slid into the Yale lock that secured the door. With a faint click, the lock released and the figure slowly pushed the door open, alert for any alarms or dogs. He had been told that there would be none and that the owner would be away for some time, but it was wise to make sure. This house was an easy target, standing detached in its own garden with no nosy neighbours to cause trouble.

He waited until he was inside before turning on his torch, though it was hardly necessary; he'd memorised the plans of the house before setting out. Calmly and silently, moved towards his objective. Lesser men might have paused to pocket some of the valuable items in the house. Not this man. He had a specific task that he would perform to the best of his ability. The purpose of this incursion was not personal gain. The filing cabinet was where he'd been told it would be. The lock took just seconds to open - again a suitable key had been provided. The figure smiled to himself: the owner of the house was nothing if not methodical. It took no more than a minute to collect all the papers that he had been instructed to remove. Folding them carefully, he placed them into the envelope he'd been given. Satisfied, he closed and locked the filing cabinet once more. The torch beam swept around the room, coming to rest on the workbench and the unfinished apparatus on top.

Instinctively, he fished a miniature camera from his pocket.

Despite its small size, it was capable of producing extremely sharp photographs, even when loaded, as this was, with ultra- fast film, in almost total darkness.

Within minutes, he'd captured enough images of the device to allow for later analysis.

Satisfied, he tucked the camera back into the pocket and continued his examination. Finally, the beam of his torch settled on the typewriter. There was a sheet of paper in it. The figure silently crossed the room. He spotted the neatly stacked, typewritten, pile of papers next to it. By the light of the torch, he read the unfinished report. Satisfied at the content, he quickly removed the sheet from the carriage and placed it in the envelope with the rest. Satisfied that his task was complete, the figure relaxed and turned to leave. His jacket brushed against the low table next to the desk. The framed photograph crashed to the floor. The figure swore and stooped to pick up the frame. Despite the cracked glass, he could see that it was a wedding photograph; the bride looking radiant with the proud husband, smart in his dress uniform, beside her.

It was unthinkable to leave the damaged photograph; he'd just have to take it with him. Cautiously, he made his way out of the study. Within minutes he was on his way. The car was waiting at the end of the lane, engine ticking over quietly. He opened the passenger door and climbed in

"Problems?" asked the driver as the envelope was passed to him

"Just the one." The burglar passed the broken photograph over.

"Unfortunate."

The driver glanced inside the envelope. "It looks fine" He passed the envelope and photograph back to his colleague and put the car into gear. The engine sound faded away as the car drove away into the night

"There you go," said Waterman, knotting the bandage round Ford's hand.

"Thanks," replied Ford, wincing. His hand throbbed.

It had been difficult to dress the wound by torchlight, but Waterman had done his best.

As far as Ford was concerned, the worst part had been when Waterman had insisted on dabbing the wound with iodine. He tried to flex his bandaged hand.

"Hey, what're you doing?" asked Waterman when he noticed Ford's grimace.

"Just trying to work out how I'm going to drive the car," replied Ford.

"You won't be able to drive with that hand." replied Waterman. "Why don't I drop you off and get one of the lads to collect your car in the morning? It should be safe enough here. "

"That's very kind of you," replied Ford "But I've nowhere to stay. I haven't been able to check into anywhere yet. "

"Don't worry about that," replied Waterman "I'll put you up in my digs. "

"Digs? Shouldn't you be staying in the Mess?" asked Ford.

"Normally yes", replied Waterman. "But the main water tank burst a fortnight ago and brought all the ceilings down. Since we're all being posted to Germany in the next couple of months, the powers-that-be decided that we'd all be better off in digs. "

"If West Raynham's mess was anything like Fylingdales', a burst water tank would be an improvement." grinned Ford.

"I see you've experienced service life." Waterman chuckled.

In the newsroom, the teleprinter began to chatter as a message came in:

UNCONFIRMED REPORT EARTHQUAKE ESTIMATED MAGNITUDE EIGHT
POINT TWO STOP QUAKE STRUCK WEST TURKEY 0015 GMT STOP
EPICENTRE APPROX 150 MILES SSW ISTANBUL STOP CASUALTIES VERY
HEAVY STOP REUTERS END

With a chime of the bell, the teletype lapsed into silence.

The Duty Officer got up and strolled over to the machine. He tore the strip of paper off the printer and read. Whistling softly, he placed it in the editor's 'IN' tray.

Had the Duty Officer paid more attention to Geography lessons, many years before, he would have realised that the 'quake was somewhat more newsworthy; although notionally the magnitude scale went up to a maximum of 10, it was accepted that a quake of Magnitude 9, releasing just one thirty-second of the energy of Magnitude 10, would still be enough to split the Earth in two. Furthermore, the reported epicentre was significant in that it was more than a hundred miles away from the North Anatolian Fault, where such a quake would normally be expected to occur. In blissful ignorance, he decided that a natural disaster in Turkey was one of those things you didn't get worked up about.

Perhaps if the lunchtime news was a bit thin, they might slip it in, otherwise, they'd let the papers run with it.

Waterman had been as good as his word. Despite the lateness of the hour, Mrs Harris, Waterman's landlady, a matronly widow in her early sixties, had been only too willing to put an extra visitor up for the night. Now, his wound freshly dressed and a hot cup of tea inside him, Ford began to feel human once more. Waterman, having dropped Ford off, had returned to the Air Station to make his preliminary report and collect his own car. Mrs Harris, naturally enough, was curious about her new guest.

"You're not with the Air Force then?" she asked him.

"No," replied Ford, "I'm a television news reporter"

"Oh!" Mrs Harris exclaimed, "Fancy that! Come up about the flying saucers then?"

"What?" Ford hadn't told anyone the real reason for his visit to this part of the country.

"Oh yes, m'dear, there's been strange lights in the sky around these parts for years. Old Bob Bowman says he saw a big ball of light come down in the forest two nights back. Nearly had him off his bike. Reckon it was the bottle meself. "

"Er, no," replied Ford, "As a matter of fact, I'm on holiday." He yawned and looked at his watch: 3 a.m. No wonder he was tired.

"You'll be wanting to retire then," said Mrs Harris, noticing the yawn "I'll just show you up to your room. You're just across from Mr Waterman. "

"You're too kind" smiled Ford and followed her up the stairs.

The house was in darkness by the time Straker arrived home. That was to be expected at this hour. As quietly as possible, he unloaded his cases from the car, taking care not to slam the boot lid. Letting himself in, he decided not to turn on the lights, so as not to wake Mary.

After removing his shoes, he tiptoed up the stairs. In the darkness, he missed the top step and stumbled, letting go of the suitcase as he regained his balance. Straker cursed as it hit the floor.

"Ed? Ed? Is that you?"

"Hi, Sweetheart." Mary stood, framed in the doorway, her blonde hair a golden halo around her face in the light from the lamp in the room behind her.

"Sorry it's so late but I had to see General Henderson as soon as I got back."

She smiled. "That's all right darling". They embraced tightly.

Unseen by Straker, the smile on his wife's face faded as the memory of her book returned once more.

The early morning sun streamed through Fairfax's office window. Waterman had spent most of the rest of the night typing up his report of the skirmish with the Aliens and could barely stifle a yawn as he waited for his Commanding Officer to finish reading it. He glanced at his watch: Eight-fifteen. Waterman would normally be tucking into one of Mrs Harris' home-cooked breakfasts right about now. Fairfax finished reading the final sheet, closed the report and laid it on the desk. He looked up.

"Well, that seems straightforward enough. It's just a pity that we couldn't capture it intact. "

"We did manage to find some pieces, sir" replied Waterman "and we've also got the bodies of the crew and one of their weapons"

"OK" replied Fairfax "I'll see about getting them sent to Farnborough for analysis." If the scientists at the Royal Aircraft Establishment couldn't make anything of it, no one could. "What's the news on Jenkins?" Waterman's report had mentioned the casualties.

"He was hit in the shoulder, sir." replied Waterman. "The MO reckons he was very lucky. "

Fairfax nodded. "I'll look in on him later." A thought occurred to him, "This civilian..."

"Ford, sir" Waterman offered.

"Yes, Ford. What do we know about him?"

"He's a reporter, sir, working for the BBC." replied Waterman. "He used to be a Flight Lieutenant up at Fylingdales. He got fed up about five years ago and put in his papers. He told me about it as we drove back to my digs." Waterman yawned, stretched and winced; his spine was still recovering from the compression caused by the ejection seat.

What had started as a routine training mission had rapidly become anything but after the Lightning, he'd been piloting, had suffered engine failure just

after take-off. He'd ejected in time but the explosive acceleration of his seat away from the aircraft had compressed his spine. Temporarily unfit to fly, he'd been posted to an Air-Defence squadron until such time as he was given the all clear by the doctors of the Central Medical Establishment at Kelvin House in London; a stone's throw from the Post Office Tower.

Fairfax realised just how tired the young officer must be. "How's the back?"

"Hurts like hell, sir."

OK, Waterman, push off home and get some sleep. Tell Ford that I'd like to talk to him about what he saw last night. Bring him with you when you come back on duty. I'll arrange a pass for him. Dismissed"

Waterman snapped to attention, saluted smartly, turned and left the room.

As Waterman's footsteps faded away down the corridor, Fairfax picked up his telephone. "Can you get me Personnel Records, please?"



SANDRINGHAM HOUSE
PRIVATE PROPERTY.
MAIN ENTRANCE
400 YDS



The Alien looked at the sign blankly - the polished metal plate with the strange engraved squiggles meant nothing. For several hours he had trudged across the dark alien countryside, trying to put as much distance between himself and the landing site as possible. Since the battle of the forest, the Alien had lain low during the day. In a poorly lit area of countryside such as this, the night was a far better time to travel, the darkness offering perfect cover.

Exactly where he was heading, he had no idea; he just knew that it was important to get away from the landing site.

The humans would obviously comb the area, he was sure. He could not let himself be captured and interrogated. Finally, his path had been blocked by a high stone wall with this mysterious metal plate on it.

Set into the wall was a small wooden door. He tried to open it. Locked.

Scaling the wall was impossible - the flint facing and vicious-looking spikes set into the top made sure of that. He would have to walk around the perimeter. As he pushed his way into the bushes, he became aware of a low hissing sound. Curious, he cocked his head to one side. The sound was coming from quite close by. Intrigued, he followed the sound deeper into the undergrowth. It was much louder now, more insistent. Something shifted under the Alien's foot and he was suddenly aware of a stinging sensation in his ankle. Looking down, he was aware of two small puncture wounds in his boot, through which the life-support liquid slowly seeped. He sat down on a tree stump, placed his gun on the ground and opened the suit repair kit that he always carried. The quick setting solution should do the trick. Funny, his fingers seemed fuzzy and slow to react. He fumbled as he carried out the repairs to his suit. He blinked - everything seemed to be out of focus. The tube slipped from his fingers. He reached out for it. It seemed further away. His chest felt as if it were being squeezed in a giant vice. He coughed and pink foam appeared at his lips. What was happening? The world seemed to be slipping away. He blinked, trying to clear his blurred vision. Gasping for breath that would not come, the Alien slumped to the ground. As he slipped into a coma and his vision faded to nothing, he could hear the rush of blood in his ears and feel the thumping of his racing heart.

Poison sacs now empty, the adder, upon which the unfortunate Alien had stepped, slithered away into the undergrowth.

Group Captain Fairfax's request was taking longer than expected. His call for a summary of Ford's personnel file had been referred to RAF Innsworth, in Gloucestershire. Despite the hour, the staff were already at work. So far, without success.

"What do you mean missing?" thundered Sue Haysey, the Higher Clerical Officer in charge of the Registry.

"I mean it's not there," replied Joyce Eames, the hapless registry Clerk.

"Well look in the cards to see who's got it then" Haysey snapped. "Honestly!" she muttered to herself. "Kids o' today know nothin'."

With a heartfelt sigh, she realised she'd have to show the clerk how to do the job properly. Poliomyelitis, contracted whilst a child, meant that she spent most of the time in a wheelchair. At a pinch, she could walk, aided by crutches, but the heavy metal callipers she needed made every step difficult and tiring. She trundled her wheelchair over to the four-drawer filing cabinets that lined the walls and began the search.

As they always did, the two boys pushed through the hole in the hedge and crossed the farmer's field.

Having lived in the same street for as long as either could remember, Simon and Andrew had become firm friends and spent virtually all their free time in each other's company. The shortcut to school offered endless opportunities, passing as it did beneath a large horse chestnut tree. One day, they hoped to find 'The Conqueror' that would massacre all competition. Today, however, the topic of conversation was the previous evening's television.

"I liked the bit where the Aliens blew up the Interceptor." Simon said sagely.

"It was all right," replied Andrew. "But I like the Submarine that shoots into the air."

“Yeah,” replied his friend, but why don’t they all fall over when it takes off?”

“P’raps they all hang on to handles or have magnetic boots or sumthin’”

On reaching the other side of the fence, the boys came to a derelict five-bar gate; the second and third bars had long since rotted away. To two adventurous youngsters, the possibilities were endless: “Interceptors, Immediate launch!” yelled Simon, emulating his on-screen heroes. With that, he grasped the top bar of the gate and swung his legs through the gap. Andrew followed him and soon, the two boys, arms outstretched to the sides, piloting their imaginary fighters, were searching the depths of space, hunting for alien invaders.



CHAPTER SIX

"So, Mr Ford," asked Mrs Harris, brightly, placing a fresh pot of tea in front of her guest, "What were you planning on doing today?"

"I thought I'd go into town and see if there's a photographer's." replied Ford. "I'd like to get a film developed. "

Before Mrs Harris could reply, the door opened and a tired-looking figure entered the room. "Mr Waterman!" exclaimed Mrs Harris. "What have you been doing? She reached for another cup. "I had to work late, Mrs H.," yawned Waterman. "There was a bit of a flap on last night. "

"Well, get this inside you," she replied, passing the freshly poured tea to her guest. "I'm sure you could do with it. "

Waterman gratefully sipped at the warm liquid as Mrs Harris went to prepare his breakfast. As the door closed behind her, Waterman put the cup down; "The CO would like to see you. "

"Oh?" Ford was surprised.

"Don't worry," Waterman reassured him. "He just wants you to confirm what we saw last night. "

Haysey frowned as she looked at the file index. Each file's details were recorded on a small card. Under the summary, space had been left for details of who had borrowed it, their branch and the dates of loan and return.

There's somethin' funny goin' on here," she muttered to herself. The card for Flight Lieutenant Keith Alexander Ford, 453216, RAF (Retired) had been very easy to find. Unlike those for the other records, the card was pristine white. In a few months, the card would have yellowed to such a degree that it would be indistinguishable from the others. Obviously, it had recently

been replaced. More intriguing was the final entry: 'Transferred to: AS 5e, RAE Farnborough'. The entry was dated the previous week.

"That's not right!" exclaimed Eames, "No files were sent out of this building last week"

"Well, we'd better check anyway. Check the archive again. I'll chase this card." replied Haysey. She picked up the telephone. "Will you get me RAE Farnborough?"

Twenty minutes after leaving his lodgings, Waterman's car pulled up at the gates of RAF West Raynham. As was normal, the barriers were down. A Flight Sergeant, currently on sentry duty, saluted smartly. "Good Morning, sir. May I see your pass?"

Waterman fished out his ID card and showed it to the guard. "I have a visitor to see the Station Commander, a Mr Ford"

"I'll just check that, sir". The guard marched back to the guardhouse and picked up the telephone.

Fairfax finished jotting down some notes on a pad, The telephone held to his ear. "That's all there is...Right, Thank you." Deep in thought, he replaced the receiver. The information he'd received from Personnel had been unexpected. At that moment, the telephone rang.

"Yes? ... Yes, That's right. Book him in and send him up. "He stood, turned and gazed through the window

The sentry marched back to the car. "If you'd like to follow me, sir, I'll issue you with a visitor's pass. "

Ford followed him into the guardhouse.

Eames was just as unsuccessful as her superior; although she had found the correct drawer in the relevant cabinet, the document wallet, effectively a potted history of Flight Lieutenant Keith Ford's life, was missing.

Even a search in the bottom of the drawer proved futile. Noting the shelf number, she hurried back to her office

The sunlight glittered from the alien weapon, catching the attention of the two boys. "Wow! A ray gun!" exclaimed Simon, picking it up.

Although raised in the country, and familiar with shotgun safety, the Alien weapon was so toy-like; the boys' natural instincts were never aroused

Waterman knocked on the door

"Come in"

Waterman opened the door and showed Ford into the office.

Fairfax stood to welcome his visitor.

"Ah, Mr Ford," she smiled as he shook his visitor's hand. "Thank you for coming. "

He waved his visitor to a comfortable chair. He turned to Waterman; "Thank you, Lew. "Sir". Waterman saluted smartly, turned and left. As the door closed, Fairfax turned to his visitor.

"Coffee?"

"Thank you"

"Now," said Fairfax "Down to Business"

George Cook sighed. Dropping his copy of *The Times* into his lap, he looked out of the window. For the past twenty-five years, he'd endured the daily commute from Pangbourne into Waterloo and thence to The City. Without looking, he could tell where he was, just from the motion of the carriage. The squealing of the brakes against the steel wheels heralded the approach to another station. Longcross Halt, he noted idly. Usually, engrossed in the crossword, he would hardly have noticed the interruption to the journey. Today, however, he not only noticed the small wooden shelter that was the entirety of the station building but the tall fence, surmounted by barbed wire that stood behind it.

Beyond the fence, a large collection of buildings was visible; not just offices, but also much larger, windowless structures. Steam billowed from a multitude of pipes and ducts. Over the noise of the vacuum pump recharging the train's brake gear, Cook thought he could hear the sound of an engine starting. The throaty roar came from no ordinary car, he was sure of that. But what could it be?

The pumping stopped. The train jerked and pulled away from the mysterious site. Cook made a mental note to look on the map when he got home.

He couldn't know, that morning, that his search would be in vain; maps available to the general public merely showed an area of heathland. The cartographers, employed as they were by Ordnance Survey, a part of the Ministry of Defence had, in the interests of security, only included this site on 'Official' maps.

Inside the site, the Military Vehicle Experimental Establishment, Chertsey; known to the staff who worked there as 'Meevee'; another day's work had just begun. The Chieftain tank, whose engine the bemused Arthur Cook had heard earlier, pulled out from its shed and drove out towards the test track, half a mile away. Inside one of the office buildings, a telephone rang.

Miss Woods, the Superintendent's secretary picked up the receiver and listened for a moment. "Thank you." she said before replacing the receiver. She pressed the intercom button. "Doctor Cardwell? Your visitor has arrived"

"Thank you" came the reply from the loudspeaker. A moment later, the door to the Superintendent's office opened. Doctor David Cardwell, Superintendent of the establishment, bustled out of the office.

"I'm just going down to meet our visitor", he informed her. "Can you arrange for some tea, please?"

"Certainly" she smiled as the door closed behind him.

The official limousine swept up to the Main Gate as Doctor Cardwell left the building.

He stepped forward as the driver opened the rear door. The passenger stepped from the car. Dr Cardwell was surprised to see a dark blue, rather than khaki, uniform, then gathered himself as he recognised the American Eagle on the visitor's lapel.

"Colonel Straker? Welcome to the Military Vehicle Experimental Establishment. I'm Dr Cardwell, the Superintendent. Would you care to follow me, please?"

Arnold Hobbs, Lodgekeeper at Sandringham for over forty years, had never seen anything like it. What had started out as just another routine day had just turned into anything but. The yells of the two boys had drawn him here

"Oh, Bloody 'Ell", he muttered as he gazed at the lifeless form.

"I fink it's a' astronaut." offered Andrew

"Don't be so bloody daft," snapped Hobbs. Whoever the figure had been was irrelevant. What it was now was a Problem.

"I think you two had better come along 'ome," Hobbs decided "An' if you don't mind, I'll take that". He snatched at the glittering weapon that Simon still held. A mistake; with a cough, the weapon fired. Hobbs' face barely registered surprise before he slumped, lifeless, to the ground; a huge gaping hole in his chest. The boys ran.

Cardwell looked at the list that Straker had given him. He looked up; "This is quite a wish list, Colonel; air-portable, high manoeuvrability, amphibious, capable of transporting troops in platoon strength and heavily armed. If you want amphibious capability, let alone air portability, heavy armour's not a viable option."

"Are you saying you can't help?" asked Straker. "Not at all," replied Cardwell, "But this list looks as if it's been drawn up by someone who's decided he wants a vehicle to cope with a military threat but is unclear on its exact nature. Perhaps, if you could give me some idea of the nature of the threat..."

"I'm sorry, Doctor." Apart from a few people who knew just enough to do their jobs, no one but Henderson and Straker knew the whole story. If knowledge of the alien threat became widely known, the consequences could be disastrous: University research, some years before, had been hurriedly abandoned; the test subjects, hypnotised and conditioned to believe that contact with extra-terrestrials had been made, had exhibited extreme psychotic reactions. With hindsight, the results should have been predictable, bearing in mind Mankind's short but bloody history, filled with wars over seemingly minor differences between nations. Those wars had been waged between members of the same species. It was clear that widespread panic and chaos would follow disclosure of a real alien threat.

Straker and Henderson had agreed from the outset that no one, but no one could know. It was the safest way – the only way.

Cardwell continued: "In many respects, it seems that what you're looking for is a cross between a Scorpion and a Stolly."

"Stolly?"

"I'm sorry, Alvis Stalwart"

Noticing Straker's blank look, Cardwell stood up; "Perhaps it would be easier if I showed you."

"Perhaps it would." replied Straker.

Twenty minutes later, wearing olive drab boiler suits over their clothes, the two men entered one of the enormous sheds at the rear of the site

On the way, Cardwell pointed out an FV101 'Scorpion' tracked reconnaissance vehicle as it headed towards the test track.

Small and light, the air-portable tracked vehicle was just entering service with the British Army and RAF Regiment. Powered by a Jaguar V12 engine, it had proved capable of speeds of up to fifty miles per hour on good roads. The local Constabulary had politely asked that the feat never be repeated on the nearby dual carriageway on account of its unsettling effect on other motorists.

Straker had been suitably impressed. The speed of deployment, although not a primary concern, was a factor to be considered.

The main doors to the hangar were open and the sound of a large engine, ticking over, came from within. Cardwell ushered his guest inside.

The Alvis FV622 High Mobility Load Carrier, known as Stalwart or more affectionately as the 'Stolly', was an ungainly looking beast. A green-painted angular body perched atop a six-wheeled chassis, with water jet propulsion units behind the rear axle; it could quite clearly go more-or-less anywhere.

The large eye-like windows gave it an almost insect-like quality.

“The British Army uses them for carrying ammunition and stores.” explained Cardwell, climbing the rungs to the roof and pulling open the hatch. He gestured for Straker to climb aboard. Straker clambered up and slid into the passenger seat that had been retrofitted sometime after the vehicle had been built, next to a Staff Sergeant who was sitting at the controls. In addition to the conventional steering wheel, there seemed to be a number of levers. Straker hazarded a guess at gear stick and handbrake. But the others?

Cardwell climbed aboard and slammed the hatch shut. “Right Staff, Away you go.”

“Yessir!” the NCO replied, letting out the clutch.

With a roar from the six and a half litre Rolls- Royce engine, a cloud of blue smoke belched from the exhaust stack as the Stalwart inched out of the shed and headed towards the test track.

The brass plate was highly polished as always:

Gp. Capt. R M Smallwood DSO, DFC
STATION COMMANDER

Haysey steeled herself and knocked on the door. “Come In!”

She shoved the door open and wheeled her chair into the room.

The Officer looked up, smiled and stood “Good Afternoon, Miss Haysey What can I do for you today? “

“We’ve lost some documents, sir.”

Smallwood frowned. “Oh? Do you want to tell me about it?”

The ambulance crew lifted the blanket-covered form and slid the stretcher into the back of the ambulance.

It was clear that they had arrived too late for Arnold Hobbs, but they would still have to transport him to hospital for a doctor to issue a death certificate. Then there was the question of the other figure, lying on the other stretcher. He looked like a biker, but where was the motorcycle?

This was a question that also crossed the mind of Superintendent Hargreaves, surveying the scene from a mobile command post.

As soon as the emergency call had come from Sandringham, the well-rehearsed procedures were activated; an armed cordon now surrounded the house with more officers combing the woods.

A policewoman was currently trying to establish from two hysterical boys exactly what had happened. Another had been despatched to their school to advise the headmaster of the whereabouts of his two errant pupils and establish the whereabouts of the boys' parents. Ambulances had been called for the casualties.

Hargreaves looked at the alien gun, now bagged up and sealed, on the desk in front of him. He'd seen many firearms in his time, from sawn-off shotguns to enormous weapons from the Boer War, but none of them looked like this.

The procedure for dealing with strange weapons was clear; he reached for the directory on the shelf, thumbed through, checked the number, picked up the telephone receiver and began to dial.

Outside, the driver secured the rear doors of the Bedford ambulance, walked round to the cab and climbed in. The big engine roared into life and the vehicle surged forward. Pausing for a moment at the junction, the ambulance turned towards Kings Lynn.

Smallwood rubbed his chin. "It looks to me as if you've done all you can to find the file. All you can do now is raise a Missing Document report to be circulated with the Office Circulars." I'd be more concerned if it was an active file but seeing as it's a retired officer's, I wouldn't lose any sleep over it."

"Right you are sir"

Somewhat shakily, Straker climbed down from the Stalwart, now heavily encrusted with mud, the result of forty minutes on the vehicle test track. Only a small part was concrete road; the rest was an exotic mix of sand tracks, trenches, hills, water obstacles and a seemingly endless supply of mud. The test track had been carefully designed to simulate virtually any condition that a military vehicle would be likely to encounter anywhere in the world.

Straker had had to close his eyes more than once when a seemingly vertical hill they were climbing suddenly dropped away to a near precipice. Unfazed, Staff Sergeant Adams had put the Stalwart through its paces, handling the vehicle in ways that the designers could never have imagined.

Dr Cardwell was still grinning; he liked nothing more than escaping the office for a trip around the test track. "Well, Colonel, remarkable beast, isn't she?"

"I can truthfully say I've never ridden anything like it." replied Straker, stepping down to the ground. 'And probably never would again if he had any say in the matter', thought Straker. His stomach was still lurching. He wasn't at all sure that accepting Dr Cardwell's invitation to lunch had been such a wise move.

As Cardwell led him away toward the Visitors' Dining Room he looked back at the vehicle.

It was uncomfortable but...

"Perhaps..." he thought, narrowing his eyes, imagining what might be...

"Yes. Perhaps..."

"It's a long story," explained Ford "It all started about 5 years ago. I was stationed up at Fylingdales, babysitting the Americans. Anyway, one evening, we had a contact on the radar. As the Duty Officer, I had to report it. A couple of Lightnings were scrambled from Binbrook but they couldn't acquire visual contact. We realised that the object was travelling at something in excess of Mach 6. The kit was still being tested, after an overhaul, so something that small, travelling that fast had to be some sort of problem with the equipment"

"Obviously"

"Except that the contact didn't fade out as the ghosts usually do but headed straight in from the North East towards us. As soon as it was within visual range, I grabbed some binos to see if I could spot it."

"So what was it?"

"If you'd asked me then, I'd have said 'No idea' but now I'd recognise it anywhere; Three nights ago, its twin flew over my house for the second time. Last night, Lieutenant Waterman and I battled against the occupants of an identical craft." Ford took a deep breath; the memory still burned red-hot. "Occupants who butchered my wife."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alex MacKenzie was not a happy man. As a trained geophysicist, logging the details of the Turkish earthquake should have been fairly straightforward but the more he looked at the seismograph trace on the table in front of him, the more puzzled he became; the results of his calculations just did not match the chart.

"George," he called across to a colleague, tinkering with some instrument in the corner of the room who, at the sound of his name, looked up. "Have you seen anything like this?"

George Murray put down the instrument and sauntered across the laboratory, to where Mackenzie was sitting. "What's up?"

His expression of idle curiosity turned to a frown of puzzlement as he surveyed the errant data. Absent-mindedly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his favourite pipe, which he proceeded to fill from a battered leather pouch. "S'funny," he muttered, "I've seen something like it before, but I'm damned if I can remember where."

Tamping the tobacco into the bowl of the pipe, he continued to gaze at the chart. Some long-distant memory was nagging. If only he could remember...

Pipe clenched between his teeth, he started to pat his jacket pockets, looking for matches. Finding one, at last, he struck it. At the moment the match flared into life, a faraway look overcame him as the long-buried memory surfaced. The faraway look disappeared as, yelping, he dropped the match that, forgotten, had burned down to his fingers. "Call the old man. Tell him there's something funny going on"

Where are you going?"

"To do some digging." With that, he left the room and headed for the archives. As the door closed, MacKenzie picked up the telephone receiver and began to dial.

The shop was a small business in a nondescript part of town. It stood at the lower end of a small parade of shops, at the foot of one of the two hills that straddled the market town. The sound of children playing drifted down from the Primary school, halfway up the hill.

A bell jangled as Freeman opened the door.

"Good Morning, sir." Mr Cheeseman, the proprietor was a jovial man who prided himself on his craftsmanship. He'd built the business up from nothing and if not prosperous, made a comfortable living framing pictures, usually paintings and needlework, for his wife's clients but occasionally, as in this case, photographs.

His wife, Judith, handled the side of the business that dealt with needlecraft, supplying anything from silks, tapestry wools and needles to work stands, hoops and lights.

A small section in the back covered other handicrafts such as candle-making and marquetry. It wasn't the busiest shop in the world but it had a small, regular clientele.

Freeman pulled a paper-wrapped parcel from under his arm and offered it to the man. "My Brother-in-Law had an accident. Is there anything you can do?" asked Freeman.

"Let's see." replied Cheeseman, unwrapping the parcel. "Hmm..."

"Just one thing," added Freeman. "There can be no signs that anything has ever happened to it. His wife would kill him..."

Cheeseman rubbed his chin thoughtfully. To be honest, you'd be better off replacing the frame but that will be more expensive. "No problem," replied Freeman "Just so long as his wife doesn't find out."

Cheeseman tapped the side of his nose and chuckled. "Leave it to me, sir". Freeman reached into his pocket and drew out his wallet. From it, he drew out a crisp new banknote and a business card that he laid on the counter. "You can contact me on this number"

"Very good sir"

The bell jangled once more as the door closed behind Freeman.

Cheeseman picked up the note and studied it carefully. Holding it up to the light, he could make out the watermark in the linen of the note. It seemed genuine enough. Whoever this customer was, he was generous; The banknote easily covered the costs of replacing the frame. He made a brief note in his ledger, put the note into the cash box then carefully tucked the photograph away until the evening when he would start work.

A skin had formed on the still surface of the long-forgotten coffee. Fairfax' notepad was covered; Ford being a reporter meant that he had a very good eye for detail and was also an effective communicator.

He looked up; "Well, I think that covers everything about last night's events. All I need now is a little background"

"Background?"

"About yourself. Flight Lieutenant Waterman tells me that you served in the RAF but you resigned. Since I like to know the sort of man I'm dealing with, I tried to get hold of your personnel file from the archives at Innsworth. The file seems to be missing"

"Missing?"

"Oh, I dare say some fool clerk has misfiled it somewhere but, you can see, I just need to tie up a few ends Ford sighed; this was a part of his life he'd tried to put behind him. He reached into his pocket and winced. The bandage restricted his freedom of movement, but after an uncomfortable moment, Ford was able to withdraw a battered leather wallet from his pocket. He rifled through the contents, finally removing a slightly dog-eared card that he passed to Fairfax. Fairfax recognised it at once as a military ID card, of a type that had only recently been phased out. He passed it back to Ford who stiffly returned it to his wallet.

"It seems you're on the level, Mr Ford. Ford's report wouldn't now end up in 'File 13'; the green-painted Government-issue wastebasket, tucked under the desk. Wincing, Ford returned the wallet to his pocket. "How's the hand?"

"Hurts like blazes."

"Waterman told me he fixed you up. Perhaps we ought to let the M.O. take a look at it." Fairfax opened the door. "And whilst we're walking, perhaps you'd care to tell me why you decided to give up a perfectly good career."

Ford drained the last of the cold coffee from his cup, grimaced and stood. Fairfax leading the way, both men left the room.

After twenty minutes, Murray finally found what he was looking for in the Archives, deep in the basement. He carried the file over to the desk to check the index entry: 19620521. This told him that the entry was some eight years old, recorded in the early summer. Pausing only to make a note in the loans book, he carried the file upstairs to the Director's office.

Hargreaves watched as the police motorcyclist gunned his engine, let in the clutch and sped away; the strange weapon safely tucked into one of the motorcycle's panniers. In less than two hours, it would be safely in the

hands of the boffins at the secret Government research establishment where the strange weapon would surrender its secrets.

Despite his earlier worries about the state of his digestion, Straker had found that the meal, served in the Visitors' Dining Room, was actually very acceptable. He politely declined the proffered glass of wine, preferring a soft drink.

Straker had been ten when his father, John, a Colonel in the Air Force, went off to Korea. A lucky cannon burst from an enemy MiG-15 had downed his F-86. Bailing out, he'd soon fallen into the hands of the North Koreans.

Captivity as a Prisoner of War, tortured by a ruthless and relentless enemy had taken a severe toll. Eventually repatriated, the once cheerful family man had become withdrawn. Disillusioned and finally disgusted by the way veterans, such as he, had been treated and unable to speak of the harrowing experiences, John Straker had eventually found solace in alcohol. Young Edward had just graduated from the Air Force Academy when the inevitable happened.

John Straker's funeral had been a lonely affair; Ed had been the only family member to attend. His mother, long since divorced from her alcoholic husband, had stayed away. A chill wind whistled between the tombstones and drizzle from a lowering sky added to the gloom of the occasion. As the coffin was slowly lowered into the grave, Ed stood rigidly to attention, saluted the dead warrior and vowed that he'd never allow himself to lose control that way.

Mackenzie rubbed his chin, thoughtfully as Murray laid out the seismograph traces side-by-side. There was no doubt about it; the traces were similar.

"As you can see", explained Murray, indicating more recent trace, this is the trace from last night's event which was centred in south-western Turkey.

Now this:" indicating the trace he'd retrieved from the archives, "is the trace from an event recorded last year. You can see the similarities."

"Aye," agreed Mackenzie "But it's not an ordinary quake, that's for sure. Look at the energy dissipation. What could have caused it?"

Murray told him.

Freeman finally arrived just after lunch. It had been a hard drive from London. Although the bacon roll and coffee, he'd picked up from a van just outside Oxford, had been satisfying enough at the time, that had been nearly three hours before and he was hungry. However, his needs would have to wait. He was on a mission. Finally, he pulled into the car park of another secret Government research establishment, this one the Royal Radar Establishment, situated just outside Malvern on the Welsh Borders.

From the boot of the car, he pulled an attaché case. Like Straker's, it had been designed to destroy its contents if tampered with. He checked his watch: He would just make the appointment with minutes to spare. Quickly, he walked to Reception.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The blue-black aircraft was almost invisible against the sable of the sky. At nearly eighty-five thousand feet, the bulk of the Earth's atmosphere below it, the wings of the SR-71 were barely providing enough lift in the rarefied atmosphere. As with a bullet, raw thrust, from the two massive engines, kept the aircraft airborne. Flying twice as high as commercial airliners, the curvature of the Earth and the weather patterns far below would have been a spectacular sight had the crew not witnessed it so many times before. Even the brilliance of the stars, steady and undimmed by the vestigial atmosphere above, was only of interest to the aircraft's star tracking system.

The reconnaissance mission, along the eastern edge of Soviet Airspace, had been routine to the point of boredom. Despite this, Colonel Tom Noonan, the pilot, concentrated on maintaining the aircraft's course, skirting Soviet airspace. In the seat behind him, Captain Hank Yeardley, the Reconnaissance Systems Officer concentrated on his instruments, alert for any signs of detection by enemy radar and ready to employ a complex suite of electronic warfare systems.

Inside the instrument bay in the belly of the aircraft, complex sensors sniffed the electromagnetic spectrum for electronic emissions. Side-scan radar probed deep into enemy territory, looking for any potential threats to the uneasy peace that had lasted since the 'Iron Curtain' had slammed down at the end of the Second World War. A peace that seemed ever more precarious by the day.

Freeman had signed in and having been checked with his host, issued with a security pass. Owing to the nature of the work that went on here, particularly in light of the raised security status, he would be escorted at all times. Freeman looked around him. The building was a typical

Government structure, the walls painted in the almost ubiquitous green and cream, with red-tiled windowsills beneath metal window frames, the paint discoloured and peeling. He found it difficult to reconcile such a dilapidated workplace with the cutting-edge electronics work he knew went on here. The furniture too had seen better days; the vinyl seat cushions of the chairs were cracked, the foam stuffing showing through. On the small coffee table was a pile of newspapers and magazines.

Eschewing the dubious pleasures of the day's output from Fleet Street, Freeman picked up a copy of *Wireless World*. A momentary feeling of déjà-vu swept over him as he began flick idly through the journal. An article on the letters page caught his eye:

'Some thoughts on lossless bandwidth compression and its application to Ultra-High-Definition Video Transmission'. Keith Ford BSc Hons. MIEE RSGB

Most of the article was impenetrable to Freeman but he understood enough to realize that this was an important piece of work. Once more, he returned to the header: Ford? Keith Ford? Freeman rubbed his chin. Could it be the same man? He'd have to check on that. At that moment, the door opened to admit a tall figure in a sports jacket and slacks. Tom Kennedy, Superintendent of the Advanced Communications Division, looked round, then smiled in recognition: "Alec! How are you?"

Freeman stood and shook the proffered hand. "Tom, it's been too long". Kennedy waved to the Receptionist; "It's OK June, I'll look after him now"

"Yes, sir."

The two men walked through the main gates, each showing his pass to the Duty Guard. The site was quite a large one and it took nearly ten minutes to reach the building.

It was a long, single-storey structure, consisting of a long main corridor, off of which a number of spurs projected out towards the rear, Entrance to the building was by means of a pair of double wood-framed glass doors. On either side of the doorway, large yellow placards were screwed to the wall. Each placard bore the stark black and yellow trefoil denoting a Radiation Hazard.

“Don’t worry”, Kennedy reassured Freeman. “We have a microwave source down in one of the labs. It’s well shielded and interlocked but we have to display the signs at each entrance to keep the Safety Officer happy.”

He held open the door and Freeman entered the building. The men’s footsteps echoed from the polished parquet flooring. Freeman stopped; a ram’s skull, wearing motorcycle goggles, was hanging from a nail. Kennedy smiled at Freeman’s puzzled look. “That’s one of our physicists’ labs. It probably seemed a good idea at the time.”

Kennedy’s office was at the end of the main corridor. He pushed open a door, which led into a suite of offices. The door led into the outer office. An alcove contained a small kitchenette. To the left of the desk was another door leading into Kennedy’s Office. Filing cabinets lined the walls. A middle-aged woman was working at the desk. Sheila Foyle, Kennedy’s PA, looked up and smiled as the men entered. “Coffee?”

“Yes Please, Sheila.” Kennedy replied. He opened the door to his office and ushered Freeman in.

Kennedy’s office, being at the end of the building, had windows in the two external walls, so was light and airy. Bookcases lined the windowless walls. Kennedy’s desk was at one end of the office. A large conference table dominated the rest of the room, butting up to Kennedy’s desk, forming a T-Shape. A number of chairs had been pushed in under the table. Kennedy pulled out adjacent chairs for himself and Freeman and both men sat. At that moment, Sheila entered, bearing a tray of coffee mugs, a bowl of sugar and a plate of biscuits.

"Thank you, Sheila." said Kennedy. Sheila carefully placed the tray on the table, smiled at Kennedy and Freeman. then left, closing the door behind her. "So," Kennedy said as he sipped at his coffee, "I take it this isn't a social call?"

"No," agreed Freeman, putting down his mug and reaching for his attaché case.

"Still with AS6?" Kennedy referred to the Air Secretariat, within the Ministry of Defence, where he had first met Freeman as an Intelligence Officer.

"No, I'm with a different Department now."

"Five?" Kennedy had always thought Freeman would end up as one of the 'spooks' in Military Intelligence.

Freeman said nothing but smiled and tapped the side of his nose.

Kennedy smiled. "OK, I won't pry."

He noticed the case that Freeman had lifted onto the table. "So, what have you got for me?"

Freeman slid the etched nameplate to one side."

"Destruct Negative?" Kennedy observed. "It must be important."

"Standard issue."

Kennedy blinked at that. Freeman opened the case and pulled out a large buff envelope. From it, he extracted a sheaf of papers that he laid out on the table. Finally, he laid down the photographs he'd taken. The papers consisted, mainly, of circuit diagrams. Each was hand drawn and neatly annotated. The final page was a list of components, each item neatly cross-referenced to the diagrams and checked off. Freeman sipped his coffee as Kennedy examined each diagram carefully.: "Interesting..."

He picked up the photographs and studied each in turn. Occasionally, he would look back through the diagrams. "Hmm..."

Fairfax had been as good as his word; the Station Medical Officer had personally cleaned and re-dressed Ford's hand and despite protestations, administered a tetanus booster. On examination, Ford had also been diagnosed with a sprained wrist. This was now strapped up, his whole arm in a sling.

As his guest re-dressed, Fairfax glanced at his watch. "I say, do you fancy some lunch? They do an excellent Ploughman's in the Bell"

Ford realised he was, indeed, hungry. "That's very kind" he smiled.

Fairfax turned to the MO; "Coming, Bob?"

"Bit busy at the moment, sir"

"Ok. See you later"

With that, the two men left and headed toward the car park.

Freeman knew not to interrupt. He sat quietly sipping at his coffee and looked around him. Idly, he cast his eye across the bookcases. Amongst the textbooks and reference volumes, a large red volume caught his attention: 'Who's Who 1970' Kennedy pushed back his chair, stood and walked across to the door. Opening it, he stood in the doorway. Sheila looked up. "Sheila, can you find young Masters and send him in?"

"Certainly. Would you like some fresh coffee?"

"Please", smiled Kennedy. He re-closed the door.

"I've sent for one of my young Professional Technical Officers He's an expert in Radio Frequency circuitry. There are a few things about these designs that are, shall we say, interesting?"

"Is he good?" asked Freeman.

"The best." replied Kennedy. "Another couple of years and he could be after my job". He returned to the table and continued to examine the photographs.

"May I?"

Kennedy looked up. Freeman had interrupted his train of thought

"I'm sorry?"

"Freeman indicated the copy of 'Who's Who': "May I?"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course"

Freeman stood, walked to the bookcase and plucked the volume off the shelf.

"As you can see, the P-Wave is unlike that of a normal seismic event." Mackenzie was now in the Director's office, the morning's seismograph trace laid out on the large mahogany desk that was his pride and joy.

The Director, a grizzled man in his late fifties, thoughtfully rubbed his beard as he examined the seismograph trace. Mackenzie continued; "Now, if you look at this trace from the archive, you see that the overall shape of the event is very similar, A very rapid transient, followed by a very long decay."

"Indeed. Not at all like a normal 'quake."

"Quake? Who said anything about a 'quake? The archived trace came from a Soviet underground test."

The Director stood up "Mackenzie, do you realise what you're saying?"

"Yes, sir, I do. At 0015 hours this morning, Turkey became a nuclear power!"

CHAPTER NINE

A few minutes searching and Freeman knew he had his man:

In addition to details of his current profession as a 'Broadcaster', The entry detailed his Degree in Electronics, gained at Imperial College in London, current home address and his hobbies which were listed as 'Writing, Amateur Radio and Electronics' Freeman already knew the address; he'd already visited, several nights before. The results of that visit were currently laid out on the table, being scrutinised by his friend.

In obedience to the pilot's touch on the controls, the aircraft banked southeast, turning for home at Kadena Air Force Base, Japan.

Noonan concentrated hard. This was quite often the most dangerous part of the mission; although itself nearly invisible to radar, the wake of superheated air it left behind it was all too visible to infra-red seekers despite the cadmium salts that were injected into the afterburners to mask their signature.

Yeardley blinked; where had that come from?

"Contact, bearing two-two-zero. Range sixty miles. Flight level four-five-zero, speed Mach five, climbing rapidly."

Noonan rammed the throttles through the detent into emergency power. Both men felt themselves pushed deep into their seats as the aircraft leapt forwards. Unarmed, the SR-71 relied on its speed to evade hostile air defences. No SR-71 had yet been brought down by enemy missiles but that was no excuse for complacency.

"Object gaining fast. Deploying countermeasures." reported Yeardley. Noonan dropped the nose, rolled the aircraft in an evasive manoeuvre and pressed the button to dump more cadmium salts into the exhaust.

Hopefully, any heat-seeking missile would fly into the ball of superheated air and detonate.

Ten minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Kennedy and Freeman looked up. Sheila entered, bearing another tray, followed by a youngish man who Kennedy introduced as John Masters, an Electronics Engineer.

Sheila collected the empty cups and returned to the outer office, closing the door behind her. Kennedy passed the documents to Masters. "Mr Freeman, here, has asked us to evaluate these designs. I thought he would benefit from your opinion."

Carefully Masters pored over the diagrams. Occasionally, he would compare a small section with one of the photographs

Finally, he sat back in his chair and reached for the, by now cold, coffee.

"This isn't Soviet," he declared. He sipped and grimaced, then continued: "The photographs are a bit too indistinct to recognize specific components but you can tell that there's some finesse in their manufacture. Soviet stuff tends to be workmanlike, rather than elegant. You can drive a tank over their kit and it would still work. This, on the other hand, looks to be more refined than the stuff we build here. This would be broadcast quality, rather than military standard. Whoever drew these is Anglo-Saxon; the numbers are written without the additional strokes that most Europeans use."

"My thoughts, too." agreed Kennedy.

"So, what else can you tell me about it?" asked Freeman.

On arrival at the hospital, Hobbs and the Alien had been declared 'Dead On Arrival' and their bodies sent to the mortuary for post-mortem examination.

The Alien's one-piece suit had been removed and routinely bagged up for collection by any next of kin. The autopsy on the gamekeeper had been

brief; a huge gaping hole in the chest cavity left little room for doubt over the cause of death.

As was routine, the projectile had been located and removed: to be bagged and later analysed. The results would be passed to the Coroner and, if necessary, the Police.

The light from the afternoon sun streamed through the high-level windows, bathing the alien's features in a pale golden glow. The green tinge, imparted by the fluid in his suit, had faded on contact with atmospheric air until now it was just a faint olive hue.

A small transistor radio, perched on the reception desk near the door, tuned to the local radio station, played quietly to itself. The news bulletin was just starting as the mortuary telephone rang, the jangling of its bell echoing around the room. The pathologist, Dr Meakins picked up the receiver. An explosion of noise assaulted his ear; "You may have nothing better to do with your time, Meakins, but I'm far too busy to put up with damn fool practical jokes?" Meakins recognised the voice of Mr Saxby, head of Pathology

"I beg your pardon?" Meakins was confused

"Those samples you sent me"

What about them?

What abattoir did you get them from?"

"What are you talking about? Meakins was annoyed now. The two men had been rivals since Medical School. A rivalry that had long-since become enmity

They're not from a human being as you full well know." Saxby snarled down the telephone

"I removed those samples not twenty minutes ago from a male patient who is lying dead on the slab."

"I don't know what you've got on the slab," retorted Saxby "but human it ain't. You might think this is funny, Meakins, but I don't!"

"Listen to me," yelled Meakins. "I personally removed those samples from a body on the slab and sent them to you because I want to know what he died of. You tell me that the samples are non-human. I suggest you come down here and collect your own samples. When you've done so, you can take them away and analyse them. Then you can..."

The phone clicked and the dialling tone purred quietly from the earpiece; Saxby had slammed down the telephone. Meakins sighed and replaced the receiver on its cradle then returned to the body of Josh Hoskins

There was an edge of panic in Yeardley's voice now: "Countermeasures negative. It's still coming unchecked"

"Where is it?" asked the pilot

"Bearing zero-three-five, flight level, seven five zero. Speed four thousand!"

The pilot craned to look through the small triangular windows. In the distance, he could make out the object. It seemed to be flickering. Unable to see through his windows, Yeardley relied on the reconnaissance video camera.

"What the...?"

The image was much clearer; a silvery craft, flickering as the rapidly rotating vanes caught the light.

"Oh my..."

A searing beam of energy ripped into the fuel tanks, vaporising and igniting the fuel. The resulting fireball consumed the aircraft and its crew.

The UFO continued on its way out of the atmosphere.

Forgotten in the corner of the room, the radio played the end of the early afternoon news bulletin: 'There is still no news from the Turkish town of Salihli. Communications links were severed last night when a massive earth tremor, registering over eight in the Richter scale, hit the area. The Turkish Red Crescent has appealed for help in reaching the eighty thousand inhabitants of the town.

American Scientists have claimed that a quake of this magnitude could not be a natural phenomenon and must be the result of underground nuclear testing. Turkish Authorities deny any such activities, stating that these are in breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Scientists at the British Geological survey have confirmed the magnitude of the quake but refused to comment on the American findings.

NATO Forces have been placed on alert after Warsaw Pact forces moved towards the Turkish Border.

The Soviet news Agency, TASS, has issued a statement from the Kremlin describing the American allegations as 'A Dangerous Provocation' and that the Warsaw Pact movements are a scheduled exercise.

In local news: There is still no news of the missing policeman, Constable George Wilkins. He was last seen when he went on patrol just after 8 pm last night in the vicinity of Woodcock Wood. If you have any information, you are asked to contact Kings Lynn Police station. The public is advised to stay away from the area.

Official sources have dismissed claims of an Unidentified Flying Object over the county last night. A spokesman from the Ministry of Defence has stated that a number of parachute flares were used in a scheduled Night Firing Exercise.

In a separate statement, a spokesman from the Meteorological Office has stated that unusual weather conditions caused the beam of the Southwold lighthouse to be reflected inland.'

On the walk back to the Main Gate, Kennedy had taken Freeman to the Print Room where, with Freeman's permission, a copy of the documents had been made. These would be passed to Masters, from which he would attempt to build a copy, which would then be tested to find out exactly what it did and how well it did it.

On reaching the Main Gate, Freeman and Kennedy shook hands.

"Remember what young Masters said? Whoever put that box together has a real talent. We could use those skills here.

"So can we..." thought Freeman, his face non-committal.

"When can you let me have the report?"

"Give us a week," replied Kennedy.

"Fine."

"Take some advice from an old friend," said Kennedy "Find yourself a big heavy safe and lock those documents away. The Soviets would kill for that sort of technology."

"Don't worry," replied Freeman. The documents would be destroyed as soon they were of no further use.

West Raynham's Communications Centre, or Commcen, was always busy; routine radio and telex traffic meant that the room was a hive of activity. With a chime, a teleprinter burst into life. The Signals clerk strolled over and read the message as it scrolled upwards. His eyes widened as the true gravity of the situation dawned on him.

Evidently, the balloon had gone up; NATO Forces were being placed on full alert. The absence of the '***EXERCISE***' descriptor preceding the message indicated that this was no drill.

As a signatory of the North Atlantic Treaty, the United Kingdom Government's policy was that an attack on any of its allies was to be considered an attack on the United Kingdom itself.

Up and down the country, military bases were being placed on alert. At nearby RAF Waddington, the crews of the V-Bomber Force were placed on 'Readiness'; Within minutes of the 'Go' signal, nuclear-armed Vulcan and Victor bombers would be airborne and heading for their targets. Although they knew that running the gauntlet of Soviet air defences was likely to be a suicide run, the aircrews carried out their pre-flight preparations as assiduously as ever, vowing to complete their missions or die trying.

At Faslane, on the Clyde, Polaris nuclear submarines slipped their moorings and headed out to sea, their sleek black hulls disappearing into the dark icy depths of the ocean.

On reaching their pre-arranged patrol areas, they would wait deep beneath the surface until they were ordered to launch their nuclear-tipped Polaris missiles at pre-designated targets within the Soviet Union.

United States' armed forces had been placed on high alert. From bases around the world, massive B52 bombers of the Strategic Air Command, each capable of carrying thirty-five tons of conventional bombs or several multi-megaton nuclear weapons, lumbered onto the air, their wings flexing gently as they began to support the huge bulk of each aircraft. Dark exhaust plumes stained the sky as each aircraft's octet of turbojet engines hauled it into the air.

Like their allies, the crews' mission was a straightforward one: penetrate Soviet airspace, evade their defences then deliver their payload to the target specified in a sealed envelope, stored in a secure vault in the aircraft.

Exactly which envelope to be opened would be revealed by a coded signal sent by the National Command Authority. For extra security, to prevent the enemy sending false signals to deceive the crew, each aircraft's radio had a discriminator fitted that would reject any message not preceded by the code of the day.

This special signal would only be sent if the President authorised the release of nuclear weapons. Until either that or a recall signal, was received, the aircraft would proceed to pre-arranged positions, just outside enemy airspace, where they would wait in a holding pattern.

In Western Europe, too, preparations for war were being made; all along the border between Europe and the Warsaw Pact nations, troops were being mobilized, weapons issued and military units activated. The air over western Germany took on a blue haze from the exhaust of the many military vehicles as they moved from depots into pre-prepared dispersed positions, ready to ambush the Soviet ground forces as they rolled westwards. The sky was crisscrossed by almost constant patrols of combat aircraft, alert for any incursions into Allied airspace.

Pausing only to tear the sheet from the printer, the clerk picked up a telephone; "Get me the Station Commander...Well find him and tell him to expect Flash Traffic."

"So, then Keith, what are you doing in this neck of the woods?"

Ford and Fairfax's men were now comfortably ensconced in the saloon bar of The Bell, a pint of the local brew and the famed Ploughman's lunch in front of them.

Before Ford could answer, he was interrupted: "Scuse me, sir,"

The Landlord had walked over and now addressed Fairfax; "The Station has just called, sir. They need to talk to you"

Fairfax sighed; "Alright, tell them I'll be back after lunch"

"Actually sir, they said it was urgent"

Fairfax swore and rose to his feet. "Ok. Where's the 'phone?"

"Just this way sir"

"Sorry Keith," apologized Fairfax. "Won't be long."

Ford sipped his pint and looked around. The pub was pleasant enough; a typical Norfolk hostelry; A log fire roared in the fireplace. A couple of locals were deeply engrossed in a game of cribbage. At the table next to him, a man seemed to be deeply engrossed in the Times crossword, his drink seemingly untouched. Ford looked at his watch; Normally, he'd be preparing for the evening news bulletin, polishing up his reports. With that thought, he drew out a notebook and began to write.

Holiday or not, things were happening around him that he'd have to report to the world. He'd just finished the first page when Fairfax returned. His frown indicated something was wrong.

"Sorry Keith," he apologized. "I've got to go. There's a flap on at the station"
"Oh?"

"Probably nothing, but I have to go back." With that, he grabbed his cap;
"Can I give you a lift back to the Station?"

"It's OK, I'll walk"

"Well, it's been a pleasure." With that, Fairfax hurried out of the building. Glancing through the window, Ford saw Fairfax climbed into the Air Force Land Rover and the vehicle sped off at high speed.

Ford's Reporter's curiosity was piqued now. He picked up his pencil and resumed writing.

The door to the Mortuary crashed open and Saxby strode in. "Right, Where's this freak of yours?"

"Right here," retorted Meakins, leading the way to the slab. As he approached the alien corpse, Saxby slowed. His anger subsided, to be replaced by mounting curiosity. Although the last traces of the earlier colouration had all but faded, there was still something different about the figure. He gestured to Meakins' notebook; "May I?"

"Help yourself"

Saxby opened the book, turned to the requisite page and began to read.

"Time, Gentlemen, Please". The jangling of the bell raised Ford from his thoughts. He looked at the clock above the bar: Two thirty. In accordance with the Defence of the Realm Act, a law that dated back more than fifty years to the First World War, all licensed premises had to close in the middle of the afternoon, to reopen later in the evening.

"This is SO strange". Saxby was now fully absorbed in examining the alien corpse, In addition to blood and tissue samples, he also took samples of the skin and hair which, Meakins had noted, seemed to be covered in some sort of protective coating. He finally turned his attention to the eyes and recoiled for a moment as he thumbed the lids open; there were no irises. Then he looked more closely. He reached for a small pair of forceps. He tapped the eye gently; the forceps clicked against the convex surface. He reached toward the base of the eyelids and set to work. With a slight liquid pop, a translucent shell came free, revealing the eye underneath. Saxby held the shell in the forceps. "What d'you make of that?"

"No idea." Meakins had never seen anything like it in his life.

"It looks like some kind of scleral contact lens, but why would anyone wear an opaque contact lens?"

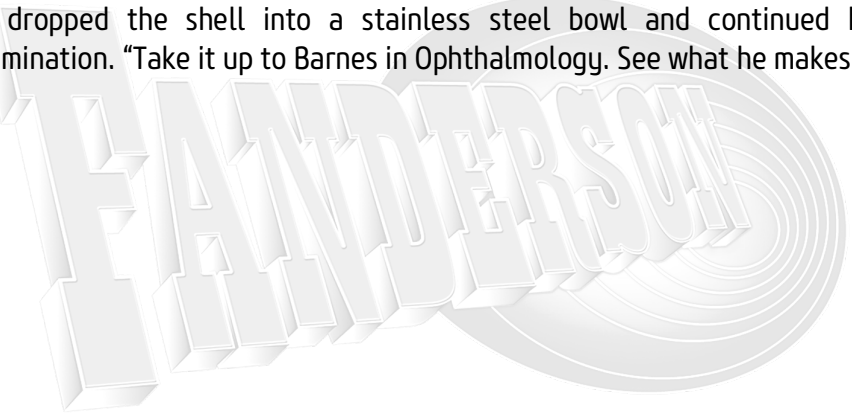
Saxby held it up to the light; "Not opaque. Look!"

Meakins peered more closely. Then he saw it; a small hole through the middle of the shell.

"Evidently, when worn, the pupil aligns with the hole, allowing some semblance of normal vision but what sort of eye condition would require such a lens?"

"I'm a pathologist, not an eye cutter." replied Saxby.

He dropped the shell into a stainless steel bowl and continued his examination. "Take it up to Barnes in Ophthalmology. See what he makes of it"



CHAPTER TEN

By late afternoon, the despatch rider had arrived at the Royal Armaments Research and Development Establishment, Fort Halstead.

Originally set up as one of a series of Regional Mobilisation Centres, ringing the capital as a defence against Napoleon's invading armies, 'The Fort', sitting atop the North Downs, south of London, had expanded to cover an area of nearly two square miles. The original Georgian fortifications, long since known as 'The Old Fort', had long been lost amongst an assortment of pre- and post-War laboratories, offices, workshops and miscellaneous outbuildings, not to mention weapons ranges, a considerable magazine, buried deep underground, well away from the other buildings and its own fire station with two appliances; with the sorts of hazardous and explosive materials that were likely to be tested, relying on the civil Fire Brigade was foolhardy. From their lofty position, the staff had a commanding view over the Kent countryside and the nearest market town, Sevenoaks, four miles away. The altitude also gave the establishment the mixed blessing of its own microclimate; there had been many occasions where the staff had trudged through six-inch snowdrifts down to the main gate, only to find that the locals in town had experienced nothing more than a mild rain shower. Of course, there were the occasions where the Establishment was bathed in brilliant sunshine whilst the rest of the area had been blanketed in thick fog. All things considered, it was quite a pleasant place to work, the mixed deciduous woodland providing a rich selection of flora, fauna and fungi including orchids and Green Woodpeckers. Some of the engineering apprentices had even constructed a grille to allow the local bats access to their cave in the chalk hillside, safe from interruption by errant rambles – or curious scientists on their lunch breaks.

Although notionally operated by the Ministry of Supply until that had been disbanded more than a decade before, virtually all the research and

development conducted here was of a military nature for the Ministry of Defence.

Hargreaves' call, just after lunch, had finally been routed, via several switchboards, to Doctor George Halliday, Superintendent of the Small Arms section, who was now waiting at the Police Lodge, next to the Main Gate, for 'something unusual.' He couldn't help but notice a battered sign, attached to the chain link fencing:



The arrow pointed towards the Police Lodge, just to one side of the Main gate.

He'd smiled at the mental image of casual brutality this conjured up. The Ministry of Defence Police officers who manned the gate were usually such affable chaps.

Under conditions of strictest security, the rider had signed the package into Halliday's care.

Now relieved of his potentially dangerous cargo, the rider would be able to take a much shorter route via the tunnel under the River Thames at Dartford.

Gunning his engine, he rode swiftly down the drive. The roar of the motorcycle fading into the distance, the Superintendent carefully carried the package through the main gates and into one of the many laboratories for testing and analysis.

Many hours of effort would be expended before a comprehensive report was produced, detailing every aspect of the weapon's performance. Eventually, the weapon would be passed to the Royal Small Arms Factory in Enfield. There it would have a permanent home in the MoD Pattern Room, alongside

examples of every weapon that had ever been used by, or sometimes against, British armed forces throughout their history.

"Hmm, lesion, right ankle, significant haematoma and...aha! puncture wounds." Saxby pointed to the wound; the whole area was discoloured; under the effect of the adder venom, the tissues had started to break down, blood leaking from the blood vessels had discoloured the skin.

"Adder?"

"The blood work should confirm it but I reckon so", agreed Saxby. "Come on, let's go and check the samples."

Humming cheerfully, Saxby, proudly carrying the tissue samples, strode from the room. Shaking his head slowly, amazed at the total change in Saxby's mood, Meakins followed him.

Less than an hour later basic laboratory work had confirmed the diagnosis:

"Open and shut case;" Saxby sighed. "Vipera berus. "The poor sod was unlucky."

"Ok. So now we know what killed him. But who was he?" What was he? Saxby glanced at his watch: "Tell you what, let's discuss it over a pint"

"Good idea"

Effectively stranded, by Fairfax's hurried departure, Ford was faced with the prospect of having to walk for several miles back to the RAF Station to collect his car. The late afternoon was quite pleasant and the stillness of the approaching dusk allowed him to think. Evidently, something was going on, connected to the previous day's test. Then there was the firefight in the forest...

The blaring of a horn aroused him from his reverie. A military Land Rover pulled up and Waterman leant across to open the passenger door. "The old man sent me to find you; He said he's sorry he had to leave you in the lurch but there's a flap on"

"Oh?" said Ford, gratefully taking his place on the passenger seat.

"Nothing serious," replied Waterman. "Just World War Three."

With that, Waterman let in the clutch and the Land Rover sped into the gloom

Ford climbed out of the Land Rover, waved acknowledgement to Waterman and walked across the visitors' car park to his car.

The sky was a deep blue as the last of the daylight faded in the west. Arc lights blazed into life around the camp. As the engine roared into life, Ford yawned; it had been a long day. He'd be glad to reach Mrs Harris'.

Pausing only to surrender his Visitor's Pass to the sentry at the gate, he steered the car onto the main road. As he drove, Ford picked up the train of thought, interrupted by Waterman's arrival. With the information gleaned from the military; it was evident that Unidentified Flying Objects were not only real but hostile. It was hardly a coincidence that tensions between East and West had deteriorated to the point where nuclear war was not only possible but also increasingly likely. With the major powers at each other's throats, they were unlikely to notice an external threat, particularly if, as appeared to be the case, such a threat was carrying out its plans in a clandestine manner.

There was no way a story as big as this could be swept under the carpet. It was obvious; he'd have to return to London in the morning. As he reached the centre of the village, he spotted a public telephone box. Ford pulled up beside it, turned off the ignition and hurried over to the box.

The newsroom was in an uproar; reporters were frantically filing reports on the ever- worsening global situation. Typewriters and teleprinters clattered, telephones jangled, the clamour of voices all adding to the bedlam.

Doug Turnbull had been in the office for sixteen hours without a break. He was desperately tired and his head felt as if it would split apart at any moment. He swallowed another two aspirin, gulped down some cold coffee, grimaced and pressed the palms of his hands into his eye sockets.

The phone on the desk jangled. Sighing, he snatched up the receiver: "Yes? Reverse charge from where?" he sighed. "O.K. I'll take it... Keith? This had better be good." He listened for a moment.

"O.K., see you."

He'd no sooner put the receiver back on its cradle than the bell jangled again. Sighing, he scooped up the receiver once more.

The bell jangled as Cheeseman closed the door, flipped the sign from Open to Closed, dropped the catch then drew the blind. It had been a fairly quiet day but at least the bills had been covered for the week.

He climbed the stairs to the workroom on the top floor and unwrapped the picture. As he suspected, the frame had split, probably as a result of an impact. The glass had broken into two large pieces and a number of splinters. He sighed; the surface of the photograph had been scratched. That would be a job for young Roger in the camera shop next door.

Having carefully placed the photograph between some sheets of acid-free paper, he returned to work on the frame.

Having reported in, Ford climbed back into the car. The engine roared into life once more and he set off for the guesthouse.

The beer, a local brew, was as good as ever and had the desired effect; both doctors had mellowed and were chatting amiably.

"I really can't get over that specimen," said Saxby, "The blood group doesn't match any known type"

You think that's bad?" replied Meakins "I've got a body for which I can only surmise the cause of death"

"Oh?" replied Saxby "You carried out the usual tests?"

Meakins sipped at his pint then put the glass down. "I would have, had there been anything to test"

"Huh?"

"The body was an empty shell; every organ had been surgically removed."

Overnight, RAF West Raynham had been placed on a war footing; soldiers of the RAF Regiment, alert and armed with live ammunition, had supplemented the civilian guards.

Dog handlers patrolled the perimeter wire at regular intervals. Armoured cars stood ready to defend the base against enemy forces.

That the base was a prime target for a nuclear strike and a multi-megaton blast would not only vaporise the base but also several square miles of the surrounding countryside around it was irrelevant.

The road leading up to the main gate was now lined with coils of barbed wire and a hastily-erected sangar, built from sandbags, replaced the flimsy wood and glass gatehouse which now stood empty and forlorn.

In the main Administration building, a hastily convened conference was drawing to a close. On returning to the station, Fairfax had read the signal, opened his safe and retrieved a hardbound manual. He already knew the contents from frequent drills but he had to make sure, before issuing instructions

Now he was receiving reports on the results of the night's work. All the sections had, so far, reported that everything was, if not ideal, at least serviceable. Finally, it was the Senior Armourer's turn: "Both 'A' and 'D' Flights are operational. 'A' flight has all launchers fully loaded with one reload per launcher; 'D' flight has one launcher down with hydraulic pump failure. All other launchers are fully serviceable and loaded. With the dead launcher, we effectively have one reload per launcher in the Ready Use Missile Store. Spare rounds to replace those expended in yesterday's tests are on the way from Glascoed but won't arrive until tomorrow."

"How long to repair the launcher?"

"Well, I've got a crew on it but I reckon at least another day. The problem is that half the spares and tools are on their way to Germany and there's only so much that I can scrounge from the local garage"

"Fairfax sighed, "O.K., do the best you can." He looked around the table one last time. "I'll be briefing the ECs at fourteen hundred. O.K. Dismissed"

As with all new weapons, the Alien gun had been passed to the relevant section at RARDE where it had spent the night, securely locked up in the armoury.

Next morning, it had been conducted to the test area in a secure compound at the north end of the site. There, it had been clamped to a firing stand at one end of a long brick-lined tunnel bored into the Kentish chalk.

The weapon glittered eerily in the light of the incandescent bulbs, arranged at regular intervals in armoured casings along the sides of the tunnel. The

far end of the tunnel had been filled with several tons of loose sand to catch any spent projectiles and prevent ricochets.

Between the two ends, at increasing distances from the stand, a series of standard military targets had been erected. Adjacent to each target, a powerful strobe light had been erected, triggered by the projectile cutting a light beam alongside a Fastax high-speed camera. Capable of more than five thousand frames per second, each camera could capture a bare few seconds of film before its magazine was empty

The Technician, William Hickmott, made a final adjustment to the firing stand. Satisfied, he left the tunnel and locked the door before taking his place at the firing point, where his long- time colleague, John Boorman was waiting.

The firing point was inside a bunker, built from two-foot-thick cast concrete blocks, colloquially known as 'Pendine Blocks'. The structure was generally considered to be blast proof

"Prepare for Firing!" Hickmott called. Boorman, turned the tunnel light switch to the 'Off' Position, then pressed the switch to activate the camera system. A moment later, a series of lights lit up to indicate that the equipment was active.

A small box then took over the operation, starting each camera in turn then releasing the trigger of the weapon.

Inside the tunnel, the gun coughed once and the strobes flared as the unseen projectile triggered them.

A green lamp indicated the test was complete. Boorman returned the arming switch to 'SAFE' and the two men entered the tunnel.

The smoke slowly cleared. "Bloody 'ell!" exclaimed Hickmott as the extent of the damage was revealed. Every target had a large hole blasted through it as if hit by an anti-tank shell. As Boorman unloaded the film cartridge from each of the high-speed cameras, Hickmott began the long walk down

the tunnel to retrieve the projectile. A metallurgical analysis of the spent shell would reveal a lot about the weapon.

Ford had left the guesthouse just after breakfast. The need for a comfort break and the particularly heavy traffic as he approached London meant it was well past lunchtime before he pulled into the staff car park.

A brief diversion to the canteen provided him with a bacon roll and plastic cup of coffee. Or, as had been muttered more than once, a cup of plastic coffee.

He headed towards the Newsroom.

On arrival, he faced a scene of mayhem. The normally busy newsroom was now in utter turmoil. A thick cloud of cigarette smoke hung just below the ceiling, defying the best efforts of the air conditioning to disperse it. The clatter of typewriters and teleprinters along with the endless clangour of telephones added to the pandemonium. Ford weaved his way through the maze of desks, noticing the detritus of a busy office: full ashtrays, half-filled cups of long-cold coffee.

He was just about to sit in his chair when he heard his name. At the far side of the room, a figure made indistinct by the fug gestured.

As he picked his way across the room, he realised it was Turnbull. Normally so neatly attired, the open neck, stubble and the dark shading around his eyes could only hint at the strain he was under. He waved Ford into a seat.

"Welcome back to the Madhouse. Good holiday?"

"Yes. You wouldn't believe what I've..." Turnbull waved him to silence. He had no time for small talk.

"It's absolute mayhem here."

"I noticed," replied Ford. "What's going on?"

"In the wilds of East Anglia, you may not have noticed that the Cold War has been heating up. NATO and Warsaw Pact are on the brink. I need you to go to Edinburgh"

"Why Edinburgh?" asked Ford. "Have the Scottish Nationalists joined the Warsaw Pact?"

Turnbull chuckled for the first time in several days.

No, a seismologist," Turnbull consulted a note pad in front of him. "Dr Mackenzie, at the British Geological Survey claims that Turkey has been conducting underground nuclear tests."

"What?" Ford was incredulous. "You're joking!"

"I'm not, but I think he is. I want you to go up there, talk to him and find out why."

"And if he isn't?"

Having completed enquiries at the forest and supervised the clean-up operations, Hargreaves had returned to his office at Hunstanton Police Station.

This case was rapidly becoming a nightmare; a call to the Pathologist had left as many questions as it had answered. The boffins at Fort Halstead had still to report. He slumped into his chair.

His 'In' tray was piled high.

He grabbed a report from the top. It concerned the serial sex attacker who had been terrorising the county. So far, there was very little to go on. Four corpses, all blondes in their early twenties, had turned up. In every case, the victims had been bound and gagged before being strangled.

The Press, with all the imagination typical of their profession, had christened him 'The Suffolk Strangler', even though only a single case, the first, had occurred in that county.

Hargreaves realized his hand was numb; his fists were tightly clenched. Like all coppers, he reserved a special sort of hatred for the sort of sub-human creature that could descend to such depravity.

Fairfax replaced the handset on the cradle. Of all the times for Fighter Command to arrange a Liaison visit. Oh, well, the Americans were usually pretty harmless. He looked at his note pad. Whoever this Colonel Straker was, he wouldn't find RAF West Raynham wanting.

Not for the first time, Ford was glad he kept a small travel bag at the Studio. Leaving his car in the car park, he'd taken the Underground to King's Cross, from where the Sleeper service would depart. Of course, he could have taken a normal seat but that would have meant trying to find overnight accommodation on arrival in Edinburgh.

Whilst he waited for the train to depart, Ford read the paperwork that Turnbull had given him. He barely noticed the motion as the train started to pull away from the platform. After stopping at Crewe, the train would run non-stop until just outside Edinburgh where the coaches would be parked in the carriage sidings until morning. The locomotive would then return to pull the train into Edinburgh Waverley Station, completing the journey just after breakfast time.

"Excuse me, Sir," Ford looked up from his papers; An attendant was standing beside him.

"Your berth is ready if you'd like to follow me".

He led Ford through to the sleeper coach, where he unlocked one of the cubicles. Ford entered. The facilities were basic; a small washbasin, chair and bunk bed were the only items of furniture. Ford sat on the lower bunk; It was comfortable, rather than luxurious, but it would do for the night.

The Attendant handed Ford a card. "If you'd care to fill this in with your breakfast preferences and leave it outside, I'll be along later to collect it."

"Thank you"

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No, Thank you."

The attendant slid the door shut, leaving Ford alone once more.

He looked at the card he'd been given; after a moment's consideration, he made his choices, ticking them off on the card, before sliding the door open and placing the card in the holder.

Having closed and bolted the door, Ford settled down for the night. The gentle swaying of the carriage and rhythm of the wheels on the track were very restful. Within minutes, Ford was asleep.

The projectile glittered strangely under the lights of the microscope, defiantly keeping its secrets.

Despite the tons of sand, intended to stop it, the projectile had embedded itself so deeply in the end wall that workmen had taken most of an afternoon to chisel it out of the brickwork. Remarkably, it showed no signs of scratches.

During the past two days, it had been subjected to all the standard tests, all of which had drawn a blank. Not only was the projectile of a type previously unknown to the RARDE scientists, but it also seemed to be made of a material unknown to terrestrial science.

Even stranger, there also appeared to be no evidence of any propellant residue.

The copious notes, generated by the analysis, would be typed up in due course, eventually their way into a report which, after review by Dr Halliday, would be passed to interested parties at the Ministry of Defence in London. In the meantime, a preliminary report would have to be telephoned through to Norfolk Constabulary.

The scientist picked up the telephone receiver and dialled the number for the Operator. To make a telephone call on the public, as opposed to the Military telephone network, it was necessary for the switchboard operator to make the connection, having first confirmed that the call was official. Private calls, no matter how important, were frowned upon as an unwarranted use of Public funds.

Can you give me an outside line please? Yes, it is official."

The line clicked, to be followed by the soft burr of the dialling tone. Having consulted his notebook for the number, the scientist began to dial.

The telephone on Hargreaves' desk rang. He picked up the receiver: "Hargreaves..."

Ten minutes later, frowning, he replaced the receiver. He looked at the notepad – it was covered in the notes he had just jotted down.

The official report would arrive in a few days but the notes he had taken would suffice for his initial report. Far from answering his questions, the call from Kent had raised more.

The train had pulled into Waverley Station a few minutes after eight o'clock. To Ford's surprise, instead of having to find a taxi, Dr Mackenzie had met him in person. Twenty minutes later, the two men were sitting in Mackenzie's office where the scientist began a brief introductory lecture.

“So, Mr Ford, What do you know about earthquakes?”

“Only that I don’t want to experience one” smiled Ford.

“As you know, the Earth’s inner structure is similar to that of an onion, with a central solid iron core, surrounded by a liquid iron outer core, itself surrounded by the semi-liquid mantle. On top of this floats the Earth’s crust. Until a couple of years ago, it was commonly accepted that the continents floated on the mantle. This was known as the Continental Drift Theory and was originally proposed by Alfred Wegener in the early part of the century. Since then, a new theory has replaced it which suggests that the Earth’s crust is split into a number of tectonic plates, each of which floats on the Earth’s mantle. It seems that most seismic faults occur at the boundaries between these plates. So far, this theorem has held up. That is, until this week...”

“Oh?”

Mackenzie stood and strode over to a large map, pinned to the wall.

“As you can see from this map, the major faults are marked. Of particular note is the Anatolian Fault, which is where Asia is apparently colliding with Europe. The pins indicate the epicentres of earth tremors and -quakes.”

“And that one?” Ford had spotted a lone pin, a long way from the others.

“That, Mr Ford, is the problem. That pin should, by rights, be on or near the Anatolian Fault. The fact that it isn’t and other data indicate that that event was no ordinary quake.”

“Other data?”

“The lack of any aftershocks. After a ‘quake of that size, there is always some settlement of the rocks.”

“Then, if it wasn’t a ‘quake, what was it? The press release said that you had confirmed the Americans’ assertion that it was a bomb.”

"I wouldn't go that far," replied Mackenzie, "What I said was that there had been an 'Unexpected event with some similarities to nuclear tests and that such a test could not be ruled out. Look here:" He led Ford across to the table. The charts were laid out, side-by-side.

"As you can see, the seismograph traces are remarkably similar. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that there is only one thing that prevents the Turkish event being a nuclear test."

"And that is?"

"The time, Mr Ford. Every Soviet test has taken place precisely on the hour."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hargreaves straightened his tie, took a deep breath then knocked on the door.

His lunch, already delayed by a less-than-amusing arson in Snettisham had then been interrupted by a call from the Chief Constable's secretary, summoning Hargreaves to appear in his office, no later than 5 pm that afternoon. That sort of order brooked no excuses so, after a hard drive, Hargreaves had presented himself at Norfolk Police Headquarters.

"Enter!"

Hargreaves found himself in an oak-panelled room. Certificates and diplomas lined the walls.

The Chief Constable, Sir Reginald Iveson, was standing at the window, gazing at the city below him. In the distance, Hargreaves could just make out the spire of Norwich Cathedral. After a moment, Iveson turned to face him.

Normally," he began I wouldn't summon my junior officers like this, but when there are implications for the security of the Royal family, I take an interest. Would you care to fill me in?"

Hargreaves began his briefing.

The Inter-City express train pulled out of Waverley station just after four.

Ford gazed at the speeding countryside, deep in thought. The interview with the seismologist seemed to raise as many questions as it answered; what on earth could cause the devastation of an earthquake but in the wrong place? A nuclear test? The prime suspects were protesting innocence, although they had a past history of secrecy and evasion where nuclear matters were concerned. In any case, why carry out a test in a foreign state when they had a perfectly good test site in Soviet Central Asia?

An invasion? Where were the follow-up forces to consolidate their territorial gains?

An attempt to overthrow the Turkish Government? Although a puppet regime in Ankara would give the Soviet Navy access to the warm-water port they so desperately desired, along with influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, such an overt move just wasn't the Soviet way; They preferred subversion through sympathisers within the country.

Was it a missile test that had gone astray? If a missile was being tested, why put a live warhead on it?

Whose missile could it be?

Endless questions, but no answers.

Somewhere just outside Berwick-on-Tweed, Ford fell asleep

"So, let's see:" said Iveson, checking off the points on his fingers. "We have a dead body, with what the pathologists tell me is a blood group apparently unknown to medical science, brandishing a weapon that no-one's ever seen before and more powerful than anything known, a dead gamekeeper, shot by that very same weapon, a dead and mutilated poacher, two traumatised kids and one of my Constables has apparently disappeared off the face of the earth. All this less than a mile from the Queen's residence. Oh, and the possibility that the Russians are going to bomb the county into the middle of next week. As if that wasn't bad enough, the press is screaming for answers. All in all, Hargreaves, this is not a good day."

Ford gazed down into the valley. He could have been looking at a rustic scene from Ottoman times; the olive groves had been tended by the descendants of the Ottoman Empire for centuries and would probably continue for many more. Shading his eyes against the sun's glare, he could

see a village in the distance. Blue smoke from open fires curled lazily into the cloudless sky. A cooling breeze gently stirred the olive trees. He began to walk towards the village. He paused in the shade of an olive tree. The breeze had died away. Strangely, the leaves were still moving. He put out a hand to the tree. It seemed to be vibrating. He became aware of a low rumble. He looked upwards, expecting a military aircraft or perhaps an airliner. The deep azure sky remained empty. Losing his footing, he fell as the ground opened up beneath him. Looking around, he saw a strange, glowing device. It was difficult to make out any detail but it was clearly alien. The rumbling was deafening now. He became aware of another sound, an all-too-familiar whirring sound. Looking up from the pit, he saw it; the UFO that had taken his wife had now returned for him. Descending, it filled the sky above him. A beam of light lanced out and touched the device. There was a flash and darkness engulfed him...

He could hear Mackenzie's voice echoing in the darkness:

'That event was no ordinary quake...'

'No ordinary quake...'

'No ordinary quake...'

Gasping for breath, Ford awoke from the nightmare. Beyond the glass of the window, the world was in darkness. Looking at his watch, he calculated that he was another two hours away from London. He realised he was hungry. Still slightly shaky, he headed towards the restaurant car.

As he ate, he found himself thinking about the fantastic nightmare. Was it really so fantastic? Could it be that the Aliens were stirring up tensions for their own ends? With Mankind taking its first tentative steps into space, did they perceive Mankind as a threat to be neutralised? There was one way to find out; he would have to go to Turkey and investigate.

Turnbull rubbed his eyes and yawned; the few hours' sleep he'd been able to snatch was barely sufficient but would have to do.

For the hundredth time that day, his telephone jangled. Cursing Alexander Graham Bell and the Postmaster General in equal measure, he snatched up the receiver.

Turnbull...WHAT?"

Jamming his finger down on the receiver rest, he dialled an internal number.

Foreign Desk? What's this about a coup d'état in Turkey...? Do we have anyone out there who can cover it...?"

He sighed. Of all the times for the man on the spot to go down with malaria... He looked at the duty roster. Virtually everyone was already committed, unsuitable or unavailable. Everyone except...

The meeting in Henderson's Office should have finished several hours before. It had been intended that Straker and Freeman report their progress to Henderson.

Jackson had already left for the night.

Freeman finished his report of his visit to Malvern. Each man had a copy of Masters' report. The device, when assembled turned out to be a compact video processor, significantly more advanced than anything in use by either NATO or Warsaw Pact forces.

"So what do we do?" asked Henderson.

"Ford has really done his research." replied Freeman. "Whilst I was at his house, I had a look round. He's also very interested in electronics, particularly Communications. If even half of what I saw is any good, he'd be a real asset"

For a moment, the three men sat in silence, each digesting the information. Straker was the first to speak: "It seems we underestimated Mr Ford. SHADO needs electronics technicians. From what you say, Alec, Ford could be a useful asset. We must concentrate our efforts on recruiting him."

"I agree." said Henderson without hesitating. "I'll tell Jackson that we are no longer just trying to discredit Ford. We are now actively recruiting him."

"Young Masters at Malvern could be an asset too" Freeman pointed out. Straker nodded.

"I'll bear that in mind." said Henderson. With that, the meeting concluded

As he settled into the airliner's seat and strapped in, Ford reflected on the vagaries of life;

he'd arrived at the office, expecting to have to fight Turnbull, to find that Turnbull had not only agreed but had already had tickets booked on the next available flight to Istanbul. There had even been a taxi to take him to the airport.

As the BAC 1-11 rolled out to the end of the north runway, Ford gazed idly through the window. The pre-dawn darkness meant that all he could see was the taxiway lights. After ten minutes or so, the aircraft had reached the end of the runway where it waited for permission to take off. A few moments later, the engines spooled up, the pilot released the brakes and the aircraft accelerated down the runway.

The runway lights dropped away as first the nose, then the main gear left the runway. A dull thump told Ford that the landing gear had retracted into the body of the aircraft. Within minutes, the airliner had turned eastwards.

As the aircraft glittered, jewel-like, in the first rays of the rising sun, the Home Counties, still shrouded in the pre-dawn darkness, sped by below.

The girl awoke with a start. Her head buzzed as the last of the drug she'd taken worked its way out of her system. Confused, she looked around her. She seemed to be in a derelict building but how did she get there?

Slowly, the memories trickled back...

...That final argument with her parents...

...Of leaving home...

...Of hitchhiking to London...

...Of wandering aimlessly around the West End,

...Of Tim...

...Tim who had befriended her...

...Of the cruise down the Thames...

...The trip to the zoo...

...Of hitching a lift on a lorry from Covent Garden market...

...Walking for hours....

...To arrive at the derelict farm that Tim had told her about

...Tim who'd given her the pills...

... "It's all right, they're non-addictive" he'd assured her...

...Time seeming to slow down...

...the brightness of the colours

...The flying saucer in the nearby woods...

...Tim, with whom she'd danced and played and with whom she'd discovered the spacemen in the basement...

...Tim who'd taken the cylinder from the spacemen.

...Which he'd thrown to her...

...That she had hidden in the rafters...

...During the game of catch with the spacemen...

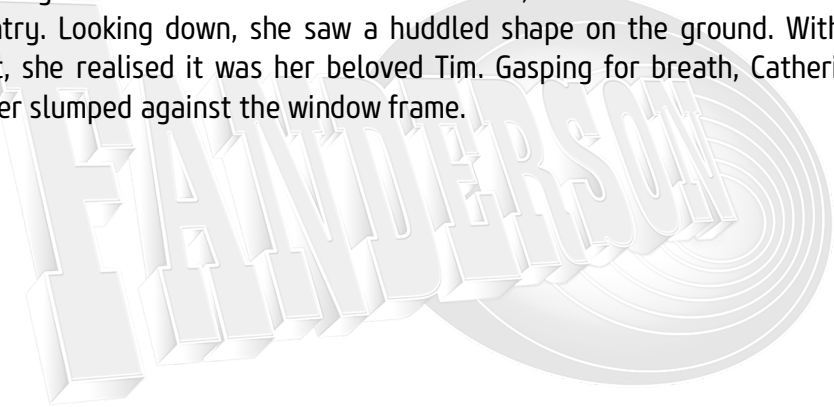
...Of climbing out onto the roof

...Of laughing hysterically as Tim had flown from the roof...

...That final blow from the spaceman's hand...

...The flash of light before everything had gone black...

Woozily, she staggered towards the window, through which the light streamed. She climbed out onto the roof to get a better view. There were no recognisable landmarks. Wherever she was, she was somewhere in the country. Looking down, she saw a huddled shape on the ground. With a start, she realised it was her beloved Tim. Gasping for breath, Catherine Frazer slumped against the window frame.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Straker had left Mary in bed. The trip to Norfolk would take several hours hard driving, particularly as he had to collect Squadron Leader Johns from the former Air Ministry at Adastral House, Holborn. With Johns as liaison officer, Straker did not expect any difficulty with the RAF.

The three-hour drive would also serve a second purpose; the talent scouts had already identified that Johns showed potential. For a start, he was due to finish his RAF service within the next eighteen months and had already proved his leadership and technical abilities. He'd also written a very interesting report on sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects in United Kingdom airspace. It was that which had piqued the talent scouts' interest in the first place. Straker would take the opportunity to sound him out during the drive.

Slowly, consciousness returned. Catherine looked down once more. Of Tim, there was no sign, save for the silly top hat she'd found in an old trunk and which he insisted on wearing. She looked further outwards. Eventually, in the distance, she could make out two figures dragging a scarecrow between them. With a start, she realised the figures, both dressed in red, were familiar and that the figure she had taken to be a scarecrow was none other than her beloved Tim, his lifeless body dragged by the spacemen towards the small copse where she and Tim had seen the flying saucer.

She staggered back into the building, gasping for breath. She reached out to steady herself. Her fingers closed about a smooth, cold object, lodged amidst the rafters. She pulled and the object came away in her hand. It was a transparent cylinder, about a foot long, filled with a pale green liquid that seemed to glow gently.

Moments later, she became aware of a whirring noise which grew louder and higher. She looked out of the window. The glittering dome of a UFO rose slowly from behind the copse. As she watched, the alien craft swooped up and away into the early-morning sky. Within moments, it had disappeared from view.

Fear gripped her; what if the alien craft came back? She snatched up the cylinder. It was obviously important to the spacemen. Gripped by a firm resolve to get away, she half climbed, half fell down the ladder from the hayloft. Pausing in the doorway, she looked around. There was nobody in sight. Grasping the cylinder firmly, she ran.

Favourable tailwinds meant that the airliner arrived ten minutes early. Faint puffs of blue smoke marked the tyres' contact with the concrete as the aircraft touched down on the runway.

As soon as the nose wheel made contact, the pilot applied the brakes and engaged the thrust reversers. Having slowed to a sedate twenty miles per hour, the aircraft left the runway, turned onto the taxiway and rolled to its designated stand where the ground crew was waiting.

As Ford and the other passengers disembarked, the hold was emptied of luggage.

As the baggage handlers worked, ground crew connected ground-power and fuel supplies to prepare the aircraft for its return trip. Ford collected his luggage and looked around for the taxi rank. A placard caught his eye;

'KEITH FORD'. Someone was waiting for him. He walked over to the stranger. "Mr Ford?

Yes?"

Ford regarded the man; Slightly shorter than he, with an olive complexion. As was the fashion amongst Turkish men, he sported a fine moustache. His teeth flashed white as he smiled and offered his hand "Mehmed Emcan, TRT."

Ford grasped the outstretched hand, recognizing the initials of the Turkish state broadcasting company.

"Your Mr Turnbull contacted us and asked us to offer you every assistance."

"Well," replied Ford, "I'd like to get to the site of the Earthquake, so if you could find me a taxi..."

The Turk put his head back and laughed. "Taxi? I can do far better than that Mr Ford. Come with me"

He led the baffled Ford through the terminal and into the General Aviation area, finally emerging into the sunshine where a Turkish Army Bell Iroquois helicopter was waiting on the apron.

Officially designated the Helicopter, Utility, 1 or HU-1 the aircraft had soon been christened the 'Huey'. Capable of carrying three stretchers side-by-side, the aircraft's interior had been stripped of all but two of its rear seats. The load space was filled with boxes

"It is carrying medical supplies." Emcan explained. The two men climbed aboard and strapped themselves into the two vacant seats as the engines spooled up. Within minutes, the aircraft had lifted off and set course for Salihli.

The wind soughed through the trees. In a clearing in the centre of the forest, a consciousness stirred. It opened its eyes and looked up into the azure sky. Finally, the figure sat up. A young man, in his early twenties, looked around him. He seemed to be sitting next to a shallow depression in the ground. A normal person would have been filled with curiosity, wanting to know how he came to be here.

The young medical student, who had dropped out of medical school just before graduation was no more; his personality had been extinguished by the fall from the farmhouse roof, the night before.

The Aliens hadn't cared about any of this. They had merely seen a tool to be used, able to continue long after the Earth's atmosphere had forced their departure. Skilfully, they had repaired the physical injuries then reprogrammed the human's mind with one simple goal; to retrieve and install the missing piece of the device currently resting uselessly in the basement of the farmhouse. To that end, they had enhanced his senses and preserved most of his memory but excised all traces of his life before medical school. Although he remembered that his name was Tim Redman, it no longer had any particular meaning for him. He also knew that the girl was the key to retrieving the device. He stood, raised his head as if sniffing the air then started to walk.

Within minutes, the clearing was deserted once more; save for a shallow depression in the earth and a rather battered top hat.

Catherine emerged from the woodland onto a country lane. Still running, she reached a bridge spanning a canal. Her hand ached from gripping the alien cylinder so tightly. On an impulse, she leaned over the side of the bridge and hurled it with all her strength towards the deep dark water. The cylinder glittered in the sunshine as it tumbled, end over end, through the air...

...To land with a clatter in a box of junk on the roof of a houseboat moored just below the bridge. Panicking, she ran.

"Quite Honestly, Colonel, I don't really understand why you're here." Fairfax twirled his moustache as he regarded his visitors. It was not unheard of for NATO officers to visit RAF stations but this appeared to be no ordinary

liaison visit; the American Officer was holding a copy of Waterman's recent After Action Report. Apparently, the Colonel had a number of questions.

Fairfax, as per standing instructions had been ordered to offer every co-operation

"With the sighting this close to Lakenheath, The US Government takes an interest." replied Straker. Although notionally an RAF base, Lakenheath in neighbouring Suffolk, as one of the main US Air Force Strategic Bomber bases, was effectively US Sovereign territory. From there, strikes could be launched against invading Warsaw Pact forces. Indeed, with the increased international tension, preparations were being made for just such an eventuality.

"I'd like to see Flight Lieutenant Waterman." said Straker.

"Certainly" replied Fairfax.

Hickmott knocked on Halliday's office door.

"Come in!"

Hickmott entered the office at the far end of the building. There were windows in two of the walls. One window showed the road outside, the other, a stand of oak trees and beyond them, the Darent valley, far below. Halliday was sitting at a large oak desk, reading a document. He looked up as Hickmott entered.

"Yes, Bill?"

"That strange gun that came in from Norfolk..."

"Oh, yes, I was just reading your report. A remarkable weapon. Never seen anything like it."

"No, sir"

"From the performance, I'd say there's probably not another like it in the whole of Western Europe."

"That's just it, sir. I've just seen its twin – it came from RAE Farnborough. Apparently, they received a whole lot of stuff from some RAF boys up in Norfolk, so they sent the weapon up to us. I've got John Boorman putting it up on the test stand now."

"I think I'd like to see this weapon."

"That's what I thought sir."

"Well, lead on."

The helicopter crested a hill and Ford gazed in awe at the scene below him; what had, so recently, been a busy agricultural and industrial city lay in ruins.

Thick clouds of dust billowed upwards as the helicopter came into land on an improvised pad. As soon as the pilot throttled down the engine, volunteers slid open the rear doors and started unloading the relief supplies stowed in the rear of the aircraft. A human chain of volunteers carried the supplies to a collection of marquees, serving as a field hospital. The flag of the Red Crescent fluttered in the breeze. Ford and Emcan jumped down from the aircraft, keeping their heads low for fear of decapitation by the still-spinning blades.

When well clear of the rotor disc, they climbed onto a pile of rubble to survey their surroundings.

Ford, a hardened journalist, found the spectacle difficult to comprehend: "How many...?"

"This is...was...a city of eighty thousand people. So far, just a...handful have survived", his guide informed him.

Having unloaded, the pilot waited until a series of stretchers, carrying those patients in need of more specialised treatment, were placed in the rear of the aircraft. He throttled up once more and the helicopter rose on a thick, choking cloud of dust. The two men watched as it disappeared into the deep blue sky.

As the engine faded, Ford realised just how silent the place had become. Not even birdsong broke the stillness, the only sound came from mobile generators, flown in to provide power for the hospital. The rubble continually shifted beneath the two men's feet as they picked their way towards the encampment.

"Do you know what this reminds me of?" panted Ford.

"No?"

"Hiroshima," replied Ford, "Except there's no scorching"

"If I was a religious man," replied the Turk, "I would now be praying for salvation, but it looks as if the Almighty has forsaken this city." He pointed ahead; what had once been a fine mosque was now little more than a pile of colourful rubble; the once-fine minarets shattered beyond recognition.

Exhausted, Catherine finally broke onto a country lane. At last; signs of life; in the distance, she could see a Transit van coming towards her. Desperately waving at the vehicle, she was relieved to see it slow down and stop.

To those unfortunates who had encountered him, he was known as Bill. That wasn't his real name of course, but the Police of three counties had no way of knowing that. He preferred to travel the minor roads; there was less likelihood of being stopped by the Authorities. He was fairly certain that the van that he'd bought, no questions asked and paid for with cash the previous week, was unknown to them but he'd rather not have to explain the items he kept in the back. Normally cautious, he would keep his head

down and avoid picking up hitchhikers by day but there was something about this young girl that he couldn't resist.

As he slid the passenger door open, he took a proper look at the girl: Blonde, blue-eyed. More than a little confused.... He licked his lips in anticipation and smiled. "What's a pretty thing like you doing out here?" he asked.

"Please...help me," she gasped, "I need to get away from the Flying Saucer"

Even better; she was obviously on drugs. He leant across her and slid the door shut. The smell of her sweat excited him. He put the van into gear

"You just come along o' me, Old Bill will take care of you"

As he changed gear, he allowed his hand to brush her leg. No response. He smiled to himself. So young, so innocent, so easy...

As before, the Alien weapon had been set up on a firing stand at one end of the tunnel. Taking great care to stay out of the firing line, Halliday examined the weapon. He noticed the silvery gleam. "Nickel plated?" he asked.

"Don't think so," came the reply. "We couldn't get a sample of it to carry out an analysis. I even tried an angle grinder..."

"And...?"

"We need a new angle grinder, sir"

"Well, let's see this wonder weapon in action, then"

Halliday followed Hickmott to the firing point.

"Prepare for Firing!" Hickmott called.

As before, Boorman pressed the switch to activate the high-speed cameras. A moment later, an indicator lit up to indicate that the equipment was ready.

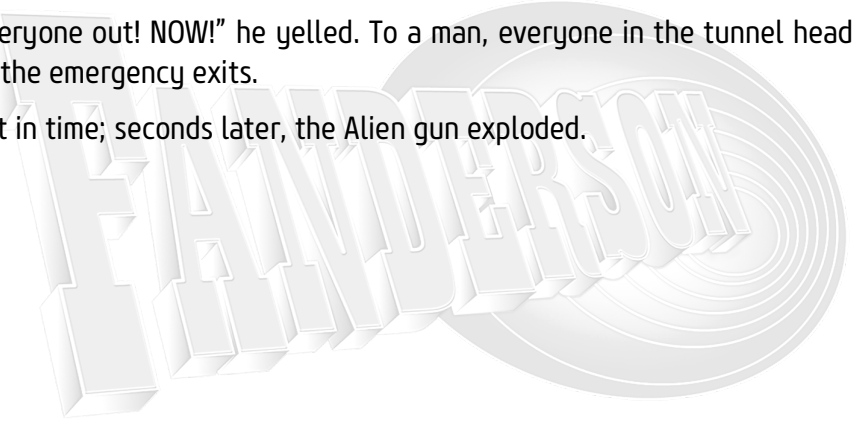
Inside the tunnel, the gun clicked once. This time, the strobes failed to trigger. No projectile had tripped the switches. A red light showed on the test panel

“MISFIRE”, said Hickmott. Boorman and Halliday followed Hickmott back into the chamber. The cameras would need to be reloaded before the test could be re-run.

Carefully, Hickmott, approached the weapon, looking for a simple cause for the failure. As he approached, he became aware of a high-pitched humming. Gingerly, he touched the body of the weapon with the back of his hand. Cursing, he snatched his hand away; the damned thing was hot.

“Everyone out! NOW!” he yelled. To a man, everyone in the tunnel headed for the emergency exits.

Just in time; seconds later, the Alien gun exploded.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The sun was setting as Ford and Emcan reached the hospital, Ford and Emcan had presented their credentials to the Colonel in charge. He listened gravely to Ford's request for a chance to interview some of the survivors, considered for a few moments before agreeing – on the conditions that the interviews would take place the following morning and that he be interviewed first.

The Colonel's English, although accented, was passable. He then handed them over to his adjutant who took them on a brief tour of the facility. Having noticed how tired Ford was looking, he also showed them to the camp beds that he'd arranged for them. Having spent most of the day travelling, Ford was asleep in minutes.

Straker and Johns had decided to pull in at a roadside café for coffee. Whilst there, they had taken the opportunity to change out of uniform. All the time they were in a public place, the subject of their visit was strictly taboo. Instead, they exchanged small talk, mainly concerning the current political situation and the likelihood of war.

"Course, I reckon it's the Martians meself", the café proprietor informed them as he brought their coffees over.

"Oh?" Despite himself, Straker was curious

"There was a flying saucer over near Henley's farm yesterday.

"Is that far from here?

"Bout five miles. You take the London road then turn off onto Stubbington Lane. You can't miss it

Bill had chatted incessantly, with no response. The girl seemed to be lost in a world of her own. So much the better; she'd be so much easier to subdue.

The road led through a forest. He patted her knee; no response. This was so easy.

He pulled the van off the road into a forest clearing. He pulled on the handbrake and killed the engine.

The sudden stillness roused Catherine from her reverie. She looked around; Fear gripped her. The stench of the man's breath made her gag as he lunged toward her.

Somehow, she managed to slide the door open. Half stumbling, half falling, she escaped from the vehicle and bolted towards the trees, the man close behind.

"So, what do you think" asked Straker

"We're so close; It seems a pity not to have look" replied Johns

"You believed him?" This was the moment of truth

"I find it difficult to believe that, in a universe this vast, there aren't other civilizations out there." replied Johns. "We're just starting to reach out into space. Who's to say other civilizations haven't already done so? With the satellites and probes we're sending up and radio broadcasts radiating out into space, Mankind has drawn attention to itself. Any intelligent species is going to be curious."

Straker reached over the back of his seat for the attaché case.

"I'm surprised we haven't already received a visit" Johns continued.

"Are you sure they haven't? asked Straker,

"There's been no indisputable proof;" replied Johns. "The photographs I've seen have almost always been fake or at least open to interpretation..." his

voice tailed off as Straker passed him a small photographic print, the twin of that seen by the cabinet minister just before the fatal car crash.

“This one is real.” replied Straker. “Aliens come to Earth and they’re hostile.”

Gasping for breath, Catherine ran. Instinctively, she knew her life depended on escaping. Not daring to look back, she ran through the forest.

Straker glanced at his watch.

“We’re late.”

Although Johns had willingly volunteered to join the nascent defence force, briefing him had taken some time. Straker put his foot down and the car surged forward

Somehow, Bill had outflanked the girl, leaping out from behind a tree and savagely dragging her to the ground. Without thinking, she brought a knee up to connect with his groin. Grunting with pain, he rolled off. Somehow, she struggled to her feet and ran towards the edge of the forest, her attacker staggering behind.

Gasping for breath, he leant against a tree and cursed as she climbed through a hole in the fence that surrounded the forest.

Sensing freedom, at last, Catherine put her head down and sprinted

Straker slammed his foot onto the brake pedal. The tyres screamed as the wheels locked...

Catherine turned to face the sound, just as the car caught her a glancing blow

Straker winced as the girl rolled off the bonnet to land in a heap on the road, her head striking the road surface. The two men leapt from the now-stationary car

"There was nothing I could do," exclaimed Straker. "She just ran out in front of me!"

He knelt down to check her.

"Her eyes opened and she tried to focus on Straker's face.

"Flying..." she gasped, "Flying Saucer..." she lapsed into unconsciousness once more as Straker and Johns looked at each other

Fighting the urge to see what had happened, Bill scuttled back for the safety of his van. The minibus arrived at last at its destination. Heavily laden with bedrolls, tents and miscellaneous items of camping equipment, the vehicle looked as if it would be perfectly at home on a military expedition.

Frank Reynolds, proudly attired in the uniform of a Scout Leader, climbed out of the cab of the minibus, stretched and looked around. The woods were much as he remembered them from his youth. He opened the rear doors and his troop jumped out, eager to begin a weekend of outdoor fun, cooking and field craft. His assistant, who had been navigating, climbed up onto the roof and started tossing the equipment into the waiting hands of the scouts

It was more than an hour before the fire crews had damped down the fire in the tunnel. The RARDE Appliance, based less than half a mile away, had arrived within a minute of the alarm. Appliances from Sevenoaks had arrived six minutes later. A cordon had been placed around the compound and would remain in place until the cause of the explosion had been determined.

In the still late-afternoon air, a thin column of steam rose from the hole that had been blown in the tunnel roof. The red flags, used to warn of blasting activities, hung limply at the tops of their flagpoles.

Content that the area was safe, the fire crews rolled up their hoses and stowed them in their appliances. The three men watched as the appliances drove back up the hill to the fire station.

"Right, Gentlemen," Halliday informed them, "I want answers, Fast! Oh, Bill, you'd better get onto the Pattern Room and warn them about that thing."

"Right, sir."

Johns had had the presence of mind to use the car's radiotelephone to call for an ambulance. As with all such incidents, the police had also been alerted and had arrived just after the ambulance. As the driver of the vehicle involved in the accident, Straker had been breathalysed and then questioned. The skid marks had been carefully measured and the car examined. A particular note had been taken of the fact that it was a left-hand drive model, although that was not that uncommon in this part of the country with its numerous American air bases.

Eventually, the police snapped shut their notebooks

"Well, sir," The Sergeant informed Straker, "That appears to be that for the moment. I'll have to ask you to come down to the station to make a statement. Don't worry," he smiled, "You're not under arrest. Constable Morton will drive your car."

Straker passed the keys across, before climbing into the back of the police car. The attendant climbed into the back of the ambulance. The driver closed and secured the doors behind him. Before he climbed back into the cab, the driver trotted across to the police car.

"We're done here. The young lady has a fractured skull. I'm going to take her to the Harville Hospital."

The police officer made a note of the information, thanked the ambulance driver and started the car.

The ambulance pulled away, two-tone horns blaring and blue lights flashing. A few moments later, the police car pulled away, Straker's car following close behind. The noise of the engine faded and the lane was deserted once more.

Bill stopped. There was someone sitting in the passenger seat of his van. Instinctively, he circled around the van. Satisfied that he wasn't about to fall into a police ambush, he strode up to the passenger door. He snatched the door open. The passenger was a young man, in his twenties, Bill guessed. The boy turned to face him; his face expressionless.

"What're you doing in my van?" Bill demanded.

Silence

"I ain't-a ruddy taxi service"

Silence

Bill didn't like the way the kid seemed to look straight through him. He grabbed the kid's shoulder

"Look, get out. This is my..."

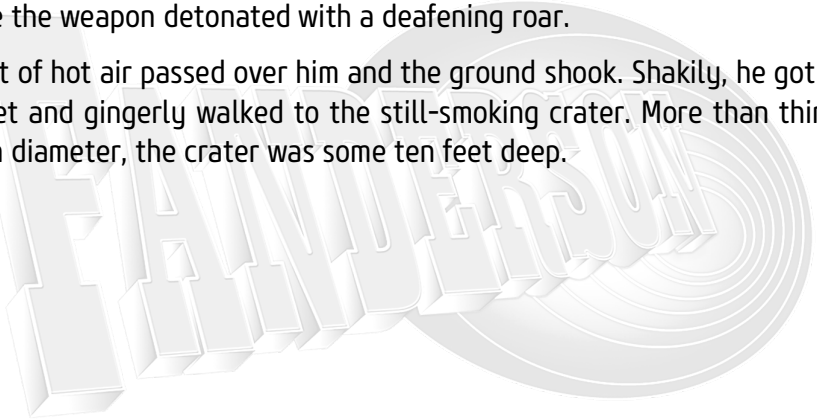
Tim's arm shot out and his hand clamped around the older man's throat, crushing his larynx. Bill's face turned purple as he gasped for air that would not come. His hands batted feebly at the younger man. Nothing he could do was effective against the vice-like grip.

As consciousness faded, Bill was aware of the boy's eyes staring, boring into his brain...

Satisfied, Tim released his grip and the lifeless body slumped to the ground. With the enhanced powers the Aliens had given him, he'd been able to read the human's mind easily. Now he knew which direction to look for Catherine – and the missing Mechanism. He climbed out of the van and set off once more.

Hickmott's call came just in time; the Alien gun was already warm when the late-working technician, who'd taken the call from RARDE, grabbed it from the display in the Pattern Room. Dashing outside, he had just enough time to hurl it into the middle of the deserted car park and dive to the ground before the weapon detonated with a deafening roar.

A blast of hot air passed over him and the ground shook. Shakily, he got to his feet and gingerly walked to the still-smoking crater. More than thirty feet in diameter, the crater was some ten feet deep.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Night had fallen over Eastern Region Tracking Station 25, high on the Siberian Steppes. The icy wind howled through the metal latticework of the radar antennae as their invisible beams swept the airspace over the Eastern Soviet Union, searching for any intruders into Soviet airspace.

Inside the main blockhouse, Dmitri Petrov was tired. His head ached with the effort of staring at the radar screen on his console. He looked at the clock on the wall; He and Anatoly, seated at the console next to him, were overdue relief by nearly two hours. Ivan and Boris were probably drunk again.

He yawned; he'd been looking at the screen for nearly fourteen hours and was thoroughly bored. He pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes, just for a moment's respite...

He jerked upright. "Bozhe moi!" Where had that come from? Picking up the telephone handset, He pressed the button to connect him to Voyska PVO, the Soviet Air Defence Force, charged with protecting the Rodina against air attack.

Oblivious to the chaos below, the UFO descended through the stratosphere. The crew had already selected a landing site, deep within a forest. Instruments indicated a small settlement nearby but the crew anticipated no trouble.

Within minutes, a flight of supersonic MiG 25 interceptors had taken off and was homing on the intruder. At the same time, Tu-95 'Bear' strategic nuclear bombers were being placed on alert, ready to launch a retaliatory strike against the imperialist aggressors who had dared to attack the peace-loving people of the Motherland.

The police Inspector examined the small glass tube he held in his hand. The crystals contained within the breathalyser remained colourless – the driver had not been drinking.

“Right sir, he said to Straker, showing him the tube, “As you can see, there was no reaction. This indicates that you are not under the influence of alcohol. Since you’ve already given us your address and the young lady is on her way to the hospital, I see no reason to detain you further.” What he didn’t say was that if the young lady died within a year and a day of the accident, the police would arrest Straker on a charge of manslaughter.

He escorted Straker to his car, where Johns had been patiently waiting for him, before closing the door.

“Thank you, Officer,” said Straker as he started the car.

Ford tossed and turned; although the camp bed he’d been given was comfortable enough, his mind was reeling with the day’s events

A cooling breeze gently stirred the olive trees. He walked towards the village. He was aware of a deep indentation in the sand. He paused in the shade of an olive tree. The breeze had died away. Strangely, the leaves were still moving. He put out a hand to the tree. It seemed to be vibrating. He became aware of a low rumble. He looked upwards. The deep azure sky remained empty. Losing his footing, he fell as the ground opened up beneath him.

Looking around, he saw a strange, glowing device. It was clearly alien. The rumbling was deafening now.

He became aware of another sound, an all-too-familiar whirring sound.

Looking up from the pit, he saw it; the UFO had returned for him. Descending, it filled the sky above him. A beam of light lanced out and touched the device. There was a brilliant flash and darkness engulfed him...

The first night at camp had gone much as expected; there had been the usual little hiccups, like the unfortunate youngster who'd managed to erect his tent inside-out and the fool who'd forgotten to pierce the tin of beans before dropping it in the boiling water.

"Remember, boys," Reynolds had said as he sponged tomato sauce from his shirt, "That's how not to do it."

Supper finished, the boys had joined in with the obligatory singsong around the campfire before retiring for the night.

Henderson listened thoughtfully as Straker recalled the day's events.

"That's the only thing she said?"

"Yes sir"

"Your conclusions?"

Straker ticked off the points on his fingers: "One: we have a Jane Doe appearing from nowhere, less than ten miles from a confirmed UFO sighting. Two: she was clean, that suggests she's not a vagrant. Three: the only thing she said refers to a UFO. Conclusion: she had recently been in close contact with a UFO."

Henderson nodded. "I'll see about having her transferred to a private room. If she can give us some answers, we owe her that much."

The pilots had never seen anything like it; The Amerikanski had obviously developed far more advanced aircraft than they had admitted to. Still, no matter how advanced, the aggressors would not go unpunished. Missiles streaked from launch rails under the wings of the interceptors.

A beam of brilliant white light lanced from the Alien craft. The missiles erupted into fireballs. Undaunted, the pilots pressed home their attack, the remaining missiles leaping from their launch rails and arrowing towards their target

Horror-struck, Petrov watched as the three blips on his screen disappeared. Hands shaking, he picked up the telephone.

The Secretary of State, William Rogers, stood as the Soviet Ambassador was ushered in.

“Good Evening Anatoly”, he smiled, gesturing to the cups arranged on a side table. “Coffee?”

Anatoly F. Dobrynin did not smile. “Mr Secretary, I regret I am not here to exchange pleasantries. I am here on a matter of some urgency.”

“Oh?”

The Secretary of State knew that relations between the United States and the Soviet Union had become strained but even he hadn’t realised just how serious things had become.

Reading from a prepared statement, the Ambassador expressed outrage at the continued incursions into Soviet Airspace by the Imperialist aggressors. Outrage turned to incandescent fury as the Ambassador read out the reports from Tracking Station 25, telling of the disappearance of the defensive fighters.

Despite the rage, there was also a hint of pride as the Secretary reported the destruction of the imperialist intruder, by S75 missiles of the Air Defence Forces.

Finally, the Ambassador slid a plain envelope across the desk. “Please convey this to your President without delay.”

With that, the Ambassador bustled out of the office to his waiting Zil limousine.

Even without opening the envelope, Rogers knew its contents; An ultimatum; If the imperialist incursions into Soviet airspace did not cease immediately, there would be a state of war between the Warsaw Pact and NATO.

He picked up the telephone receiver: "Get me the White House, I need to see the President. Right now!"

The Russian Bear was growling. If further provoked, it would bite.

Turnbull sighed and reached for his coffee. The day was proving just as bad as yesterday. He could have done without losing Ford for several weeks but that decision had been necessary to scotch the Flying Saucer nonsense. The telephone on his desk rang for what seemed to have been the fiftieth time that morning. He picked up the receiver:

"Yes? Yes, that's right, Mr Ford does work here but he's away on assignment...Oh, I see... Missed an appointment, you say? What did you say your name was? Jackson? I see... Lunch? I'm very busy...Well, if you insist... Yes, I know it. OK, The Clarence, Whitehall at 1:45. OK, Thank you."

At that, the phone at the other end was put down and Turnbull was left with the receiver purring quietly. He put the handset down and picked up his jacket. He looked at the clock; he'd have to move quickly if he was to make the appointment.

The morning had dawned crisp and cold. A fine morning for a hike, Reynolds had decided. He'd led the pack, with his deputy following up behind to shepherd the stragglers. The woods provided a rich variety of terrain to negotiate and plenty of opportunities to practise fieldcraft. They were just

turning for the return leg when they came to a clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a beaten-up panel van. As they approached, Reynolds slowed to a halt, the troop joining him. There was something wrong about the vehicle.

"Stay here," he ordered. Circling around the van, he soon found the problem; slumped beside the vehicle was the corpse of the late, unlamented Bill. There was no point checking for life signs; scavengers had already started to peck and tear at the exposed and decaying flesh. Despite the Scout motto, there was no way his troop could 'Be Prepared' for this.

"Simon, Take the troop back to camp," ordered Reynolds, as he re-joined the Troop. "I'll be along in a moment"

"What's up?", asked his deputy

"I'll tell you when I get."

"Right you are. Troop! Attention back!"

The boys snapped to attention.

"Back to Camp, Quick March!"

As the sound of the troop faded into the distance, Reynolds approached the van as close as he dared. He noted the registration and the position of the vehicle, marking it on the map he carried. Then he scoured the map. The nearest telephone box was half a mile away. Whistling softly, he set off to telephone the Police to inform them of his grisly discovery.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Straker arrived at the building at just after eight thirty. The building was a suitably nondescript tower block, just outside the City of London. He looked at the nameplate on the door. Proudly emblazoned on the polished aluminium plate was the legend:

STRAKER FILM SERVICES

Despite himself, he smiled. The company name had been Henderson's idea. In due course, once the headquarters building was completed under the studios, he and the other SHADO personnel would vacate this building and take up residence there.

The London address would not be wasted; The building would be taken over by the newly-inaugurated International Astrophysical Commission, an intergovernmental body, notionally charged with organising international collaboration in space exploration and research.

General Henderson, as President, already had an office on the top floor, Although it would provide funding for a number of space research projects, the Commission's real function was as the conduit by which SHADO would receive its covert funding.

Straker pushed through the revolving glass doors into the lobby. The receptionist smiled, recognising the important film director. Straker smiled back; she might only be an agency receptionist, totally oblivious of the true nature of the organisation she worked for, but she was still important as part of the essential cover that SHADO would require.

He stepped into the waiting lift and took a deep breath; it took all his willpower to keep from panicking in the confined space.

The claustrophobia was a legacy of a childhood accident; taking a shortcut home from school, the young Edward had fallen into a disused well. He'd

been found the next day but since then, he hated confined spaces. Ironically, he'd never once suffered the condition during any of the space flights he'd taken part in, despite the capsules being no larger than the well shaft. Indeed, one of his fellow astronauts had commented that he didn't so much climb into the capsule as put it on.

Relieved, he stepped out onto the top floor. Freeman was already waiting for him; Henderson was expected within the next half hour.

Before interviewing the survivors, Ford and Emcan had decided to explore the remains of the city. The Colonel, ever eager to help the BBC had allowed them the use of a jeep. Having dashed down a breakfast of Turkish coffee and army rations, they set off. The ground was so badly fractured that even the Jeep had given up. Ford and Emcan decided to continue on foot. The ground in front of them started to rise. The sun beat down from a cloudless sky. Every footstep raised clouds of dust. A sudden gust of wind blew grit into Ford's eyes. Rubbing his eyes to try and clear them, Ford stumbled, missed his footing and fell. Emcan desperately grabbed to stop his companion but in vain. Ford finally came to rest, battered and bruised, in a depression in the ground. Gasping for breath, he waited for Emcan to join him. He looked around; there was a strong feeling of familiarity. With a shock of realisation, he realised why; the depression was circular, some twenty feet in diameter but only a few feet deep. The olive grove enclosing it was the reason it had remained undetected. The enclosing vegetation acted as a windbreak. Emcan finally reached the edge of the depression, grasped Ford's outstretched hand, braced himself then pulled.

"What do you make of this?" asked Ford, as he scrambled out. Emcan gazed into the depression: "It's very regular," he observed. He looked more closely. He realised what was missing; where Ford had scrambled out of the hole, there should have been footprints. After a moment, he uttered what both men were wondering "Where is all the dust?"

Indeed, the earth in the depression had been compacted as if a large object had rested on it. "Shh! What's that?" Ford had stopped, listening Apart from the sougning of the wind, there was silence. Then they both heard it; a faint crying from the general direction of the mosque. Both men broke into a run.

Reynolds had found the telephone box without difficulty. Within a minute, the Operator had connected him with the local Police Station and he proceeded to report his grisly find.

"Right sir. An officer will be with you shortly"

"Thank you. You're a star." replied Reynolds, replacing the receiver.

Within twenty minutes, the sound of a bell heralded the arrival of the Police saloon. At the direction of the driver, Reynolds climbed into the back and gave directions. Within minutes, they had arrived at the murder scene. Satisfied that Reynolds was an innocent party, the police took a statement then dismissed him to return to the campsite

"How's the training programme shaping up?" asked Straker.

"We've had a bit of luck, there" replied Freeman. There's a PT instructor, due to retire from the Army in the next week. I interviewed him as part of his Resettlement Programme."

"Is he good"

"The best." Freeman opened his attaché case, took out a single typewritten sheet of paper which he passed across to Straker. Straker glanced at the summary. "What have you told him about our setup?

"Nothing. He thinks he's going to be working for the film industry. He can take the raw recruits and make super fit athletes from them.

"Good. Then we..."

Straker was interrupted by Henderson's arrival. Free of the wheelchair, he walked with the aid of a stick. In time, it was hoped that it, too, could be discarded.

Henderson tossed a newspaper onto the desk:

"Have you seen the papers?"

"Hasn't everybody?" replied Straker; The front page was predicting war within days, detailing the latest claim and counterclaim as the two opposing superpowers rattled their sabres and waged their propaganda battle.

"What does it have to do with us?" asked Freeman.

"On the face of it, nothing," replied Henderson but there was an unidentified contact picked up by one of the Soviet tracking stations – an interception flight disappeared."

"A UFO?" asked Straker.

"Possibly"

"The Soviets claim to have shot the intruder down" replied Straker.

"The news agency put out that statement to keep the hawks in the Kremlin happy" replied Henderson. "The truth is, they're scared. Deep down, they know the Americans are innocent but they are afraid of losing face"

"A fear that could lead to war" observed Freeman.

"Indeed. That's why Commander Straker has to go to Moscow."

The crying was much louder now. It had taken Ford and Emcan over twenty minutes to scramble over the rubble to reach the remains of the walled garden that had enclosed the mosque. The mosque itself had been flattened, like a child's sandcastle that had been stamped on.

The crying seemed to be coming from the far corner of the garden; the upper part of the wall had collapsed. The two men scrabbled at the debris. Eventually, they managed to expose a cavity formed by the broken section of the wall. Emcan called out, to be greeted by a stream of excited Turkish.

"It's the wife of the local doctor," Emcan explained. "They were just about to enter the mosque for morning prayers when the earthquake hit."

"Let's get them out of there"

Apart from a broken leg, the woman seemed to be in reasonably good health. Her husband had not been so lucky; his head lolled backwards; neck broken by the falling debris. Death had been instantaneous.

"We're going to have to carry her," said Ford. "Can you explain to her what we're doing?"

Having gained permission, each man stooped, took an arm and draped it over his neck before standing, lifting the woman clear of the ground. Slowly they made their way towards the jeep. Several times, the men stumbled on the uneven terrain, nearly dropping the woman.

Finally, they all sank to the ground, exhausted.

Hargreaves put down his mug and sighed as a fresh pile of files was dumped into his 'IN' tray. He found it difficult to believe that he'd actually spent more than five minutes at home during the past week, let alone actually slept there. Just as he reached for the topmost file, the telephone on his desk rang.

"Hargreaves..."

He listened intently as the report came in from the forest.

"Right. Tell them not to touch anything until I get there."

Grabbing his jacket, he sprinted from the room, his coffee and mountain of paperwork forgotten.

It was mid-afternoon by the time the trio reached the field hospital. The woman, whose name was Samina, was handed into the care of the receiving staff. Emcan had fielded a multitude of questions.

A medical orderly cleaned and re-dressed Ford's hand; the rescue had left the original dressing in tatters.

Finally, Ford was shown to a waiting area where Emcan obtained tea; black and sweet in true Turkish style. As he sipped his tea, Ford looked around him.

From what had been a city of eighty thousand people, there were few survivors. Then he remembered why he was there. "I think we should interview some of the survivors", Ford informed Emcan. "See if we can get a few eyewitness statements."

"I agree." replied Emcan, "I'll see what I can arrange with the Colonel in charge."

The Colonel had been busy, but his Adjutant had arranged for a number of the wounded to be interviewed. The medical orderly, who had previously dressed Ford's hand, was detailed to guide Ford and Emcan around the hospital.

As he guided Ford and Emcan around the hospital, a scream rent the air. "I don't worry about the screamers," the orderly said, in reply to Ford's raised eyebrow "They are not as badly injured as the silent ones."

They moved around the wards; Ford interviewing survivors, Emcan translating where the interviewee spoke no English. Ford was just about to close his notebook, when he spotted a child, sitting alone on a bed. Closer inspection revealed her to be a girl, aged about six. One arm was in a sling.

With her free hand, she held a pencil with which she was drawing in a battered schoolbook.

“She was pulled from the rubble of the family home – the only survivor. She understands but has not spoken.” explained the orderly. Suddenly aware of the attention, she looked up. In her surprise, she dropped the book. It skittered across the floor, coming to a stop at Ford’s feet.

He picked it up and froze. Ford showed the book to Emcan and pointed to the drawing. “Ask her where she saw this”

Puzzled, Emcan crouched down so his face was level with the girl’s and asked the question. The girl remained silent. Then, slowly, the uninjured arm pointed at the ceiling. A tear rolled from one deep brown eye. Then she started to sob. The drawing was crude but recognizable; a dish, with half an egg on top, with two little stick figures, their heads enclosed in bubbles. The little girl had seen a UFO...and its occupants.

Despite the traffic, Hargreaves arrived at the crime scene in just under an hour to find a scene of activity; Uniformed Branch had set up a cordon and a Scene of Crime Officer was hard at work dusting the van for fingerprints. An Ambulance was parked nearby; its crew taking advantage of the impromptu tea break, sipping tea from the Thermos flask they always kept in the cab.

“So,” he asked the Sergeant in charge. “What can you tell me?”

The Policeman consulted his notebook; “Member of the public telephoned in to report a dead body. By the looks of things, the body’s been there some time. The civilian’s camping nearby, if you want a word.”

“Camping?”

“Yes sir, he’s a Scoutmaster. He and his troop are up for a few days’ camping”

“O.K, Thanks”

Turnbull pushed open the door, stepped into the pub and looked around.

A short walk from Embankment Underground station, ‘The Clarence’ was a traditional London pub, dark beams with sawdust on the floor. Apart from a few Civil Servants enjoying a late lunchtime drink and perhaps a sandwich, the pub was nearly empty. He ordered a pint and a cooked lunch from the barman then took a seat in an unattended booth, towards the rear of the bar.

Although Ford interviewed another half-dozen people, his heart was no longer in it; his mind was racing with the implications of everything he’d seen. He kept remembering his dream and the words of the seismologist; “No ordinary ‘quake...”

“Can you get me to a phone?” asked Ford. “I need to report in.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” replied Emcan

Lunch finished, Turnbull glanced at his watch: the mysterious caller was over half an hour late. He looked around him; the Civil Servants were long gone and apart from a figure in a booth near the door, face obscured by an early edition of the Evening News, he was the only customer. Evidently, this Jackson fellow had nothing better to do than waste his time. His hand touched the door handle...

“Leaving so soon, Mr Turnbull?” The voice was smooth and heavily accented with a cat-like purr. The speaker carefully closed the paper, folded it and laid it on the table in front of him.

“Jackson?” Turnbull sat in the booth, facing the stranger. The stranger seemed confused, almost as if he the name was that of a stranger.

"Jackson...Ah yes, yes. He brightened; all confusion gone. Turnbull's eyes narrowed a fraction. Jackson noticed but said nothing

"I'm a busy man Mr Jackson..."

"Doctor"

"I'm sorry, Doctor Jackson. Jackson inclined his head in acknowledgement.

"You said on the phone that it was important that I know that one of my staff had missed an appointment." Turnbull continued. "Doesn't that breach your duty of Doctor-Patient confidentiality?"

"Normally, yes," agreed Jackson "But under the circumstances..."

"What circumstances?"

"You have to realize that Mr Ford is very ill," Jackson continued.

"How ill? If a member of my staff is infectious, I need to take action"

"I am sorry, I did not make myself clear, Mr Ford's illness is not physical. Has he exhibited any unusual behaviour recently? Any particular obsessions?"

Turnbull had to think for a few moments. Ford had always been driven but then...

"Now you come to mention it..." Turnbull hesitated

"Go on." prompted Jackson.

"No, it's just too silly."

"Let me be the judge of that."

"It's just...Keith has this idea that we're being threatened by aliens from space."

"Ah, it is as I feared," replied Jackson, shaking his head slowly. "The condition has worsened. "

Hargreaves strolled over to the van. Mercifully, the corpse had been covered with a sheet. He introduced himself to the Scene Of Crime Officer who had just finished fingerprinting the rear doors.

“So what can you tell me about the body?”

“White male, age between forty and fifty. Bruising around the neck, congested skin around the face and the pink tinge to his teeth suggests he was strangled”

“Prints?”

“Nothing usable. Sorry.”

“Anything else?”

“Look at this:”

The SOCO grabbed a handful of hair and tugged this way and that. The head moved freely.

“Broken neck?”

“Yep.”

“Bruising?”

“If you mean from a blunt instrument, No, just finger marks”

“So whoever did this possessed the strength to not just strangle his victim but crush his neck for good measure.”

“That’s about the size of it. I’ve bagged up his possessions, such as they are”.

“Right, so what can you tell me about the van?”

The civilian examined his notes “Ford Transit, registered in London four years ago. The tax is just about to expire There’s a good set of prints on the

doors, presumably the driver's with two other types on the passengers' side. I was just about to look in the back"

"Well, let's get cracking"

The rear doors of the van were locked but soon yielded to the tyre wrench that Hargreaves kept in the boot of his car. Hargreaves had seen many things during his long career in CID but even his blood ran cold at the sight that met his eyes; handcuffs, ropes and a number of other items, none of which a decent, law-abiding citizen should have been transporting around the country.

"Catalogue it. Catalogue it all." ordered Hargreaves, climbing out of the van. He moved round to where the corpse lay, squatted down and pulled the blanket from what remained of the face. For a moment he gazed into the now eyeless sockets.

"Gotcha!" he muttered. Even though 'Bill' had evaded the Law, somehow Justice had been delivered: The Suffolk Strangler's reign of terror was over.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jackson allowed himself a slight smile as the door swung closed behind Turnbull. It had been all too easy for the Psychiatrist; Turnbull, evidently overworked and stressed had been infuriated by Ford's apparently irrational behaviour. It had been easy to feed those suspicions and nurture the belief that Ford was, at the best deluded, at worst dangerously obsessed.

Yes, he thought, it would be interesting to see how this would play out. Deep in thought, Turnbull walked slowly back to the Underground Station. What the Doctor had told him seemed to make some kind of sense; Ford had been acting irrationally and yet that could be put down to individuality and that was what distinguished the good reporters from the really great ones. Perhaps the assignment in Turkey would bring in an award-winning report and Ford could, once more, take his place amongst the greats.

Freeman had dropped Straker at the West London Air Terminal, from where, after checking in and dropping off his luggage, he would catch a courtesy bus to the Airport.

He glanced at his watch; he had a few minutes. He headed for the row of public payphones.

Emcan was apologetic: "The telephone network is badly disrupted. You'd be better reporting in from our offices in Ankara. I've agreed with the Colonel that we can be flown out on the next supply flight"

"How long?"

"Two, perhaps three hours."

Mary Straker was preparing dinner when the phone rang. Pausing only to wipe pastry from her hands, she scooped up the receiver. There was a pause as the caller inserted the coins into the payphone

"021 8434..."

"Mary, it's me."

In the background, she could hear the sounds of a bustling airport.

"Oh, hullo Ed. I've just started to prepare dinner?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I've got an urgent assignment for General Henderson. I'll be away for a few days"

"But Ed..."

Over the PA system, a voice announced the imminent departure of the bus for the airport.

"I'm sorry. I've got to go."

"Ed...Ed!" There was a click and the earpiece purred quietly in her ear. A single tear rolled down her cheek. Ed seemed to be spending less and less time at home. Anyone would think he was out defending the world or something.

There was a clatter from the front hall. The evening newspaper had dropped through the letterbox.

She picked it up. Most of the coverage dealt with the international situation.

Sighing, she opened the paper. The lead story, on page two, covered the boost to the British film industry that would be given by the opening of the new studio complex at Harlington East. The new studios were the envy of the world, boasting all the latest technology and would provide much-needed employment for up to four hundred people. It then conjectured who

might be named as head of the Studios, with suggestions that it might be a relative unknown.

A hissing sound made her look up – a pot had boiled over. Sighing, she dropped the paper in the wastebasket and dashed to the kitchen.

Having dropped Straker off in West London, Freeman had headed back towards the centre of the city on an assignment of his own. Although less than five miles, the heavy traffic meant that the drive took nearly three-quarters of an hour.

With a sigh of relief, he turned into the archway that led to the inner courtyard of the Foreign Office in Whitehall. A uniformed guard waved him down.

Freeman proffered his official identification card and the guard consulted his clipboard. Satisfied that Freeman was expected, the guard waved him through.

Straker gazed through the layers of Perspex at the rolling scenery outside. Night was falling. His overnight bag had been stowed in the bin above his head but his attaché case, chained to his wrist, would remain on his lap throughout the flight. Having been booked at the last minute, Straker's seat was located at the rear of the aircraft, close to the engines which, even running at minimal power as the aircraft taxied out to the runway, shook the airframe. With barely a pause, the aircraft turned onto the main runway and started to accelerate.

The runway lights became a blur then seemed to fall away as the airliner soared into the darkening sky. Within minutes, it had reversed course to take it over the London suburbs before turning onto the air corridor towards the Arctic Circle from where it would descend into Soviet airspace, to land at Sheremetyevo Airport, just outside Moscow.

The seat at the rear might be noisy, the air polluted by the nearby smokers but it had one advantage; it was close to the galley so Straker was amongst the first to be given an evening meal. Pre-packed and reheated, it was a poor substitute for Mary's cooking but at least it was a meal. Straker ate.

Freeman had been shown up to an oak-panelled office. Seated behind a large desk, piled high with papers, was the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-Home.

He rose and offered his hand. Having exchanged the usual pleasantries, the two men settled down to business.

After a brief introduction, Freeman made his request.

The Politician frowned. "You want the British Ambassador to meet your representative, who is currently flying to Moscow and take him to meet the Chairman of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, who will be expecting him. Is that right?"

"That's right." replied Freeman.

Home was confused: "How can the International Astrophysical Commission help with a diplomatic crisis such as this?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Security."

"If you won't give me a straight answer, young man, I'm not sure that either I or this department can help you"

Freeman had expected such a response.

"Do you remember the Cuban missile crisis, sir?" he asked.

"How could I forget?"

Less than a decade before, the two superpowers had come to the very brink of nuclear war over the siting of Soviet nuclear missiles less than five minutes' flying time from America's major cities.

"War was only averted because there was a discreet conduit between the Soviet leadership and the US Government." explained Freeman. "With the current state of international tensions, we're offering you that conduit."

"May I say, this is most irregular..."

"These are 'Irregular' times, sir." replied Freeman. "Sir John May can vouch for Colonel Straker"

"Hmm..." Home picked up the telephone receiver.

As Straker was finishing his meal, but three hours later by local time, most of the offices in the British Embassy, Moscow, were in darkness. The exception was the communications room, where the Duty Officer enjoyed a quiet cigarette, mug of tea and a book.

Suddenly, a teleprinter clattered into life. The Duty Officer looked up. Tossing the book to one side, he picked up the telephone, which connected him with the Ambassador.

Fortunately, the Ambassador, Sir Duncan Wilson, was at home this evening, rather than at one of the seemingly endless series of diplomatic dinner parties. Having had a busy day, attempting to act as a go-between between the Americans and his hosts, he'd decided to spend a quiet half hour in his study, before turning in for the night. His beloved Elgar played on the record player.

Closing his eyes, he could imagine himself cycling the Malvern Hills, just as the great composer had done. He sipped at a glass of 50-year-old Islay malt, savouring the warmth as it slipped down his throat. The gentle smile turned to a frown as the internal telephone buzzed. Sighing, he put down the tumbler and picked up the receiver.

"Morgan here, sir. Sorry to interrupt but we've got flash traffic from London."

"You're the duty officer, Peter," sighed Wilson, "You know the procedures"

"Yes, sir. I do but it's marked 'Exclusive - Ambassador.'" Morgan explained.

"Very well, bring it up"

"Yes sir"

"Oh, Peter...?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Any news?"

"England: 132 for 5, sir"

"Thank you." He replaced the receiver and awaited the telegram. Of course, before he could actually read the thing, he'd have to decode it. Using the codebook, kept in his personal safe, he would laboriously convert the blocks of seemingly random letters into English – or rather a very terse telegraphese. No doubt some idiot at the Foreign Office had had a bright idea that he would have to handle. That, or the Foreign Secretary wanted some more Stolichnaya, or even Embassy Vodka, the very best, sent home in the Diplomatic Bag.

It was nearly four hours before the helicopter touched down on the makeshift pad. The sky had darkened to an inky black. Myriad pinpoints of starlight punctuated the velvet darkness. The human chain moved in once more to unload supplies. On this occasion, there were no casualties to be evacuated, so Ford and Emcan climbed aboard. With barely a pause, it lifted into the sable sky and headed northwards once more.

The airliner touched down with barely a jolt and taxied to the designated stand. Having been at the back of the aircraft, Straker was amongst the last to leave. Straker took a moment to take in his first view of the Soviet Union.

The lowering clouds glowed orange with the reflected glare of the sodium lamps. A flurry of snow heralded the approaching winter. Descending the stairs, Straker spotted a shiny black Rolls-Royce. A liveried chauffeur opened the rear door and the passenger climbed out.

“Colonel Straker? Duncan Wilson, British Ambassador”

Straker paused to pull a photograph from his breast pocket. Henderson had given him the photograph during the earlier briefing to confirm that the man in front of him was who he claimed to be, Straker, shook the outstretched hand. A momentary flash startled Straker.

“Don’t worry, Colonel, it’s only the local KGB,” Wilson reassured him. “They photograph everyone entering the Soviet Union. It’s all part of the ‘Great Game’”

The chauffeur took Straker’s overnight bag and stowed it in the boot of the limousine before opening the rear passenger door. The two men climbed into the car, the Chauffeur closed the door then took his place at the wheel.

As the car pulled away, Wilson advised Straker of his itinerary: “You’ll spend the night at the British Embassy. Then we take you to see your host tomorrow morning. It was thought that your message would be more credible coming from the official representative of a UN-sanctioned body, rather than from the American Government.

“My Host?” Straker was confused. “I thought I was coming to see you”

“Oh, no,” replied Wilson. “I’m just the messenger boy. Tomorrow, we pick up Academician Pavel Komarov of the Soviet Academy of Science before travelling out to Oreanda to your host’s dacha.

“Oreanda?”

“A small town on Lake Azov, in the Ukraine. It’s about 800 miles from here.”

“So who is this host?”

"I'm sorry, old chap. didn't I tell you? You are going to meet the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev."

Ford stepped down from the helicopter, yawning. He looked at his watch. It was well past midnight. He realised he was hungry. Emcan evidently had the same thought; "We'll go back to my house. You can stay there until the morning." The two men walked to the car park where Emcan's car, a battered Fiat 500, was waiting. Ford's bag was tossed onto the back seat and Ford climbed into the passenger seat, next to Emcan. The engine spluttered into life and the tyres squealed as Emcan stamped on the accelerator and the car hurtled out of the car park. Ten minutes later, the car screeched to a halt and Ford cautiously opened his eyes. The car was parked in a narrow street in front of a small townhouse.

Emcan led the way. After a quick snack, Ford soon found himself in the spare room. Like the house, the room was small but comfortable. Within minutes, Ford was fast asleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The morning dawned misty and cold. Despite the gloomy weather, splitting headache and a mouth that tasted like a gorilla's armpit, Warrant Officer (Class 1) Philip Pugh donned singlet and shorts and went for his morning run. Every day he had run five miles before breakfast.

Normally, as chief Physical Training Instructor, he would spend each day turning weedy recruits into perfect physically-fit soldiers, worthy of the Queen's uniform. Today, however, things would be different, for after 22 years in the British Army, aged 40, as a Non-Commissioned Officer, Pugh was due to retire. The hangover was a result of the surprise leaving party the lads in the mess had thrown for him the night before.

Originally called up for National Service, he quickly realised that Army life suited him and he signed on as a Sapper in the Royal Engineers. His physical prowess was soon recognised and he was persuaded to apply for the Physical Training Instructor course at Aldershot. Passing the course with the highest marks ever recorded, he never looked back. In due course, Pugh was selected for the Army Physical Training Corps and soon qualified as a Corps Instructor.

It soon became apparent that he was the finest Commissioned Officer the British Army never had.

On several occasions, he'd been recommended for commissioned rank and on each occasion, he'd politely but firmly declined, much to his wife's chagrin. Each time, he patiently explained that he was happy where he was and if he took the commission, he'd be posted away to some office somewhere, away from 'his' lads.

Jenny was disappointed but she loved him and knew that he lived for the Army.

Too late, he'd realised something was wrong; only at her bedside did he learn about the Cancer that she had kept from him. Even with the best medical facilities the Army had to offer, it was only a matter of time...

The childhood sweetheart he'd married had become a frail husk. He could only hold her hand as she faded away.

That had been five years before. No woman could replace Jenny, so Pugh had buried himself in his work.

Even as the British Empire Medal, the highest award given to a non-commissioned Officer, was pinned to his Dress Uniform, he thought of Jenny and how thrilled she would have been.

Overnight, the gentle flurries had become the first snowfall of the winter. Only an inch so far but that inch would become many over the next few weeks.

The Muscovites had cleared the main roads before breakfast.

The guest quarters were comfortable. Straker awoke to find his shirt freshly laundered, his suit pressed and his shoes shone to military brilliance, thanks to the Military Attaché's Batman.

Straker dressed and joined Sir Duncan and Lady Wilson for breakfast.

In keeping with the traditions of the British Diplomatic Service, the meal was a substantial cooked English breakfast, washed down with copious quantities of China or Assam tea. In deference to their guest, coffee was also served. From the taste of it, Straker guessed it was really used for lubricating the door hinges on the Ambassadorial Rolls Royce.

Morning run complete and headache gone, Pugh showered then returned to his room in the Sergeants' Mess. There, he changed into fresh fatigues before going for breakfast.

Ford awoke to the smell of freshly baked bread and the distant sound of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer at the nearby mosque. The sun streamed through the window. Scratching his stubble, he realised that he hadn't shaved for several days. Rummaging through his bag, he found his shaving kit and went to look for the bathroom

Breakfast complete, Pugh began to check off the list of 'Clearance' activities that would culminate in him signing the Official Secrets Act and walking through the Barrack gates and back into civilian life as plain Mr Pugh

After a traditional Turkish breakfast, prepared by Emcan's wife Elif; a raven-haired beauty with deep brown eyes, Ford and Emcan set out for the TRT building in central Ankara,

There, because of a reciprocal arrangement with the British broadcaster, Ford would be able to prepare and dispatch his report to London.

The drive in the early hours, with little traffic, had been scary enough; now, in the rush-hour traffic, it was positively terrifying; like many Turkish men, Emcan fancied himself as the next Graham Hill. Ford kept his eyes shut for the whole of the trip.

Tyres squealing and with a smell of burnt rubber, the car screeched to a halt. Cautiously, Ford opened his eyes and looked around; The car was situated in an underground car park. Emcan glanced at his watch;

"Twenty minutes; hmm, a slow day. Lucky I wasn't in a hurry." Emcan grinned

Straker's breath formed thick white clouds in the icy air as he and Wilson waited for the limousine to collect them. Mindful of the weather, Wilson had donned a heavy greatcoat and shapka. Despite the heavy coat, he'd been

loaned by one of the embassy staff, Straker found himself shivering. The attaché case chained to his wrist forced Straker to wear the coat as a cape, draped over his shoulders. The chain and cuff were icy against the skin of his wrist. To Straker's surprise, in addition to the Ambassadorial Rolls-Royce, a troop of three shabby-looking, windowless panel vans pulled up. Wilson slid open the large side door of one of the vans and gestured to Straker, who obediently climbed in. Wilson followed. A burly man in overalls, already in the van, reached past Wilson to slide and fasten the door. Despite the shabby appearance, the vans were outfitted with comfortable seating. Each seat was fitted with seat belts, a strange contrast to the racks of tools that lined the walls. As soon as the two men were safely seated and strapped in, the three vans headed for the gate to the compound. As each van left the compound, it took a different route. Soon each vehicle had picked up a tail of a black Zil saloon.

"KGB," Wilson explained. "They tail every vehicle so we have a bit of fun with them. The Rolls has a couple of dummies in the back. It'll drive around the outskirts of Moscow for a couple of hours before heading back to the Embassy. The other two vans have similar instructions"

"Why the games?" asked Straker, "If we're going to see..."

Wilson interrupted Straker: "It is British Government policy to try and hide everything we do from the KGB. The KGB tries to find out what we are doing. Both sides know it as the Great Game. If we changed our behaviour, we'd draw more attention to ourselves and if this meeting as important as I've been led to believe, the fewer people who know about it, the better. Even I don't know more than that I have to get you and a Soviet Academic to a certain location as fast but as discreetly as possible."

Through the rear windows of the van, Straker could make out the Zil as it tried to keep up as they weaved through the traffic of central Moscow.

"Stand by!" The driver called back from the cab. Suddenly the van lurched as the driver wrenched down on the wheel, sending the van up a small side

street. Seeing the van suddenly change direction, the driver of the Zil stamped on the accelerator. The van sped past an identical van, parked at the kerb. As Straker's van passed, the driver of the twin let in the clutch and the van accelerated away from the kerb. Two identical vans now sped down the street. The Zil turned into the side street. The driver sighed with relief; he could see the van turn left at a T-Junction. He smiled; These Western spies thought they were so clever but no one could escape the KGB. Eyes fixed on the speeding van ahead, he barely noticed a street sweeper, hunched over his broom, at the corner of a narrow alley. The Zil was soon lost to sight as it roared up to the junction and skidded around the corner.

The street sweeper looked both ways up and down the street before shuffling towards the alleyway. Satisfied that the tail had been shaken, he straightened up and signalled. The van revved and reversed at high speed into the street. The street sweeper tossed the broom into the open doorway, leapt aboard and slid the door shut. The van sped away in the direction it had come.

"Nicely done Jones." Wilson complemented him.

"Thank you, sir."

"Colonel Straker," said Wilson by way of introduction "May I present Warrant Officer Jones, Military Staff."

"How do you do?"

"Did you like that, sir?" asked Jones, grinning and extending a hand. "We call it 'Find the Lady'"

Straker guessed that Jones, if that really was his name, was probably Special Forces. Supremely fit, exceptionally intelligent and clued up on the need for security; just the sort of person SHADO would need.

"Very clever." admitted Straker, glad of the seatbelts without which he'd now be picking himself up off the floor.

By mid-morning, Pugh, now wearing his civilian suit, had completed the inventory check with the Accommodation Manager and handed back the keys to his room in the Mess, reported to the Medical Officer for one final check just to prove the full exit medical of a week before had not been a fluke and handed in the items that had to be returned to the Quartermaster. He looked at the clearance list; it was nearly complete. He decided to pay one last visit to the NAAFI for a cup of tea.

After an uneventful trip through the suburbs of Moscow, the van rolled into the airport but rather than stopping at the terminal building where Straker had arrived the previous night, continued on to a far corner of the airfield where a Beriev Be-30 short-haul airliner, resplendent in white and blue Aeroflot markings was waiting.

Wilson and Straker climbed the boarding stairs, to find they were not the first to arrive.

The stranger smiled as he recognised his fellow passenger. "Ah, Colonel Straker. I am so glad to see you again." The voice was heavily accented but understandable. Straker only vaguely remembered the quiet little man who had remained silent throughout their previous meeting at the UN.

Wilson stepped forward; "It would appear that you know each other."

"We met briefly at the United Nations, some time ago." explained the stranger. He extended a hand: "Pavel Fyodorovich Komarov, Soviet Academy of Science. I was most impressed by your presentation to the Special Committee."

"Thank you." replied Straker, shaking the hand.

The co-pilot, a burly Russian in an ill-fitting flight suit, came into the main cabin from the cockpit and, through hand signals, indicated that the

passengers should take their seats and strap themselves in. Satisfied that his passengers had carried out his instructions, the co-pilot went back to his seat in the cockpit. Moments later, the engines whined into life.

The aircraft taxied out to the main runway, waited for permission from the control tower, then accelerated down the runway before lifting into the iron-grey sky. Soon it had turned south towards Crimea.

Once again, Hargreaves found himself in the office of the Chief Constable. In marked contrast to his earlier demeanour, Iveson was in a much more genial mood; at last, he had some good news to give the press regarding the serial killer, whose identity had finally been established as one Arthur Thompson, a convicted child molester who, on his release from gaol, had apparently disappeared for a number of years. It would appear that he, or rather his corpse had now resurfaced.

"Good work, Hargreaves."

"Thank you, sir. "

Hargreaves stood. "If you'll excuse me, sir, I still have a lot to do."

"Oh?"

"Finding out how Thompson died and who killed him"

"Very good. Can't have vigilantes taking the law into their own hands."

The newsroom at TRT was easily as busy as the one that Ford had left behind in London; the language might be different but the bustle and sense of urgency remained the same. The air was thick with the smoke from Turkish cigarettes. The ceiling-mounted fans, nicotine brown, served only to spread the fug evenly around the room. Ford soon found himself sitting at an antiquated typewriter. Although the Turks had given up Arabic script for Roman letters, the different keyboard layout took some getting used to.

Ford was forced to resort to the 'look and pick' school of typing. Disregarded, the cup of coffee that Emcan had placed on the desk soon grew cold.

Despite the turbulence of the flight, Straker soon drifted off to sleep. An old, familiar dream started to form once more:

The private hospital was small but comfortable. This time of the year, visitors were few, making it an ideal venue for clandestine meetings. In one of the suites, such a meeting was just about to begin. There was a brief knock on the door.

The room's occupant, a large powerful man in his fifties, looked up from the papers laid neatly on the desk in front of him. "Come in" he ordered. Although still confined to a wheelchair, General James Henderson was still able to make plans and hold meetings. The door opened and a tall, tow-haired man entered. Henderson recognized his visitor. "Ah, Colonel," Henderson smiled "Good to see you. "

" Well, how are they treating you, sir?" replied Straker, closing the door behind him.

"Fine, fine". Henderson waved Straker into a chair. "Sit down."

As Straker sat, he noticed that Henderson was wearing dark sunglasses. These, with the wheelchair in which he sat, were a legacy of the car crash.

The two men had been scheduled to meet the British Prime Minister. They had been met by a Cabinet Minister at Radlett Airfield and escorted by police outriders, had set off for the PM's country retreat, Chequers in Buckinghamshire, thirty miles away.

It was whilst they were on a lonely stretch of road that the Aliens had pounced; energy beams from a UFO knocked the outriders off their machines. The blast from a near miss smashed the screen of the Rolls-Royce,

a razor-sharp shard of glass through the neck killed the chauffeur outright. The bodyguard, riding in the front, had grabbed the steering wheel in a desperate attempt to bring the vehicle to a halt. It was too late; the limousine had smashed through a stone wall before rolling down the side of a hill and exploding in a massive fireball. Straker and Henderson had been thrown clear; Straker had received minor contusions and sprains, Henderson had landed heavily and sustained serious bruising to his spinal cord. The bodyguard and Cabinet Minister had not been as lucky; both had been cremated in the fire.

Straker had finally caught a glimpse of the UFO as it climbed away. During the following weeks, Straker found himself repeatedly asking the question: was it a coincidence or had the Aliens been waiting for him? Perhaps, one day, he'd have some answers.

Despite the apparent severity of his superior's injuries, Straker knew it would not be long before General Henderson would be on his feet again.

Henderson began with an apology: "Look I'm sorry to foul you up like this.

"It's all right sir"

"How'd your wife take it?"

"Oh, she's fine."

Straker had been summoned away from the airport just as he and his new wife Mary had been about to board their honeymoon flight to Athens.

"Yes, that's what you need in this job; an understanding wife." The pressure of Service life had been too much for Sarah, Henderson's wife. She had walked out five years before, citing 'unreasonable behaviour' as grounds for the divorce. Mercifully, there had been no children to upset and it appeared that Sarah had remarried and was now living happily in Boston.

"Let's get on with it, shall we? Apparently, I'm stuck in this chair for another couple of months. Now things are happening, Ed - A lot of it's going

to fall on your shoulders. The special committee of the United Nations meets the day after tomorrow. We get the go/no-go decision then. “

“And you want me to be there. “

“Who else?”

Straker stirred for a moment, then settled back to sleep. The dream continued:

Straker placed the attaché case on the table. Under the gaze of the two CIA men, he slid the brass plate bearing his name to one side. The words ‘DESTRUCT NEGATIVE’ were revealed. Had Straker opened the case with the name plaque in position, incendiary charges, concealed within the lining of the case, would have utterly destroyed the contents as had happened in the Rolls crash when the impact had forced the lid open.

Straker opened the case, revealing a slim buff folder. Expertly, the CIA officer ran his hands over the folder, searching for concealed listening devices. At last, he was satisfied. “Thank you, Colonel. “

Straker picked up the folder, turned and walked through the open doorway into a small antechamber. The door slid shut behind him. Although windowless, the chamber was well lit; a warm red light suffused the walls and ceiling. A gentle electronic hum filled the air. Straker waited patiently. He knew that he was being electronically screened.

“Will you turn round please, Colonel?” The CIA man’s voice was slightly distorted by the intercom system. Obediently, Straker turned so that the hidden scanners could check every inch. Finally, the glow of the walls changed from red to green and a small bell chimed softly. The door ahead of him opened and Straker stepped through.

The claustrophobia he sometimes suffered was nothing compared with what he felt now. He was sitting at the end of a long table. The polished surface gleamed under the overhead lights. Opposite him, at the far end of the table, sat the British Delegate, Sir John May, who was chairing the meeting.

The other six delegates, drawn from the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and the Federal Republic of Germany, sat along the two long sides of the table.

May had decided that the briefing should take the form of a question-and-answer session. Duvall, the French representative, had been the first to speak: "Colonel, as representative of our respective governments, we are being asked to approve the largest financial appropriation ever envisaged for an international project. Two questions; is the project, the whole project absolutely necessary? And if it is, are we getting value for money?"

"I believe the setting up of SHADO is not only necessary but absolutely vital," replied Straker. "Every day we just sit about and talk about it, the potential danger increases. As to your second question, I believe this breakdown of expenditure might be helpful. "

As he spoke, Straker opened his attaché case and selected a folder. From it, he extracted a bundle of computer printouts, which he passed down the table.

Each delegate took a copy then proceeded to scrutinise the contents. The German delegate looked up.

"Fleet of submarines? Base on the Moon? Satellites?"

"If I might point out sir, we are confronted with alien spacecraft, possibly from another solar system. "

"Maybe the General and Colonel Straker have been reading too much science fiction. "

Duvall said dismissively Straker had expected that response, eventually.

"The Earth is faced with a power threat from an extra-terrestrial source. We've moved into an age in which science fiction has become fact. We need to defend ourselves. "

"And how long will it take to set up this defence organisation?" asked Duvall.

"We estimate seven to ten years. "

"Ten years?" Duvall was incredulous. "But you say, Colonel, the danger is imminent. "

"Yes sir, that' s true. But the type of organisation we need can' t be set up overnight. All I say is that any delay only increases the danger. "

May looked up from his copy. "The estimate for security is astronomical."

"It's a vital aspect," replied Straker

"Everything seems vital." Duvall was sarcastic. Straker ignored the bait.

"How is SHADO to be organised, um, regarding personnel?" asked the German delegate

"On strictly military lines. Straker had replied. "We hope to recruit the best people available. "

"Internationally?"

"Yes. "

"And who will command this international band of heroes?" There was almost a sneer in Duvall' s voice.

The American delegate spoke for the first time: "My Government has stipulated the Commander-in-Chief must be an American."

"Oh yes, yes. We know." replied Duvall.

"As the nation being asked to dig a little deeper into its pocket..." snapped the American.

"Naturally, Naturally..." Duvall raised his hands in mock supplication which served only to infuriate him still further.

“Gentlemen, Gentlemen!” May rebuked the two men, “We asked Colonel Straker here to answer our questions. I suggest we let him do so. “

Straker had already given the question of who was to command the new organisation a lot of thought on the flight from Britain: “Well, there’ s no question in my mind gentlemen. There’s only one man for the job; General Henderson. He’ s the obvious choice. “

The other delegates had seemed to be impressed with Straker’ s answer

“Any further questions?” May looked at each of the delegates in turn. Satisfied there were none, he thanked Straker. Straker collected the printouts as they were passed back up the table to him and replaced them in the folder, deliberately not replacing it in the attaché case. The papers were too sensitive to ever leave the room. As he closed and locked the case, he looked at the Frenchman:

“Monsieur Duvall, I understand you have three daughters. “

Duvall was surprised by Straker’ s question. “Yes?” he replied.

“I pray that you never find yourself looking down at one of their mutilated bodies. I hope that the next UFO incident is not in your hometown.” He was gratified to see that he’ d hit a nerve. Straker picked up his case and the folder. “Thank you for your time. “

With that he turned and left the room, pausing only to toss the folder into the slot marked ‘VAPORISER - CLASSIFIED WASTE ONLY’. A slight whirring indicated that the folder and its contents had been totally destroyed.

May waited until the door had slid closed behind Straker. “Well, gentlemen?”

The aircraft lurched as it hit an air pocket. Straker stirred for a moment before drifting off once more. Again, he dreamed of the past:

On touching down at London Airport, Straker had gone directly to the hotel. Henderson was in jubilant mood: "It has been approved unanimously," he beamed. His wheelchair almost sang as he spun it around the room "Ha Ha! You've done a great job, Ed."

The decision had been made and relayed to Henderson whilst Straker had been flying back to London.

"Well, I thought I'd screwed it up, sir," replied Straker with a wry smile. "I was only in there about ten minutes."

"Well, all you've got to do now is work sixteen hours a day for the next ten years."

"Sure."

"Oh, er, there is another thing I had to tell you. They appointed the Commander-in-Chief."

"Who?"

"You."

"Me?" Straker was incredulous.

"Again it was unanimous. It seems the French delegate, Duvall, was particularly insistent."

"But sir, Why...?"

"Why not choose me? Come on, let's not kid ourselves, Colonel. What sort of shape am I in? What sort of shape would I be in in ten years' time?"

"Nonsense General," replied Straker. "Oh, in a couple of months, you'll be out of that thing, up and about, as fit as ever."

"You can always refuse," Henderson reminded him. "But if you do, it's got to be now. There'll be no turning back later."

Straker considered this before replying: "Then the answer's no."

"The answer's yes. It's got to be. - You know that better than anyone."

Henderson was right; there really wasn't anyone else.

For Straker, there could be no question of backing out. But did he really have what it would take? Could he make those sacrifices?

The rest of the day passed in a blur of administration, with visits to the pay office and the Chief Clerk's Office to take care of the last few details – including the issue of a railway warrant to take him home for the final time. This would be exchanged for an ordinary second-class ticket at the railway station.

Finally, there remained one final visit, one that was not part of the normal routine.

The brass plaque on the door read

‘Col. R. B. Coleman R.E. MBE’.

Pugh knocked on the door.

"Come in!"

Pugh entered the office. Large windows looked out over the parade ground. In the distance, Pugh could see the RSM putting a platoon of recruits through their paces. Pugh's attention returned to the room. To one side were some easy chairs with a low coffee table between them. Seated at a highly-polished wooden desk was a large man with a fine cavalry moustache. He looked up and smiled.

"Ah, Mr Pugh." he waved Pugh to the easy chairs. "Please, sit down. Tea?"

"Please, sir."

Coleman pressed a button on the intercom at the side of his desk. A disembodied voice came from the unit: "Yes, Colonel?"

"Ah, Lily, can we have some tea for Mr Pugh?"

"Yes Colonel"

Coleman released the button and turned to his visitor

"Well, Mr Pugh, I suppose this is it"

"Yessir"

There was a knock on the door and a middle-aged woman entered bearing a tray laden with a teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl, fine China cups and a large plate of biscuits.

"Just on the table please, Lily."

"Yes, Colonel. I managed to find a few chocolate biscuits".

The door had barely closed behind her before both men guffawed.

"That woman is so obvious." chuckled Pugh.

"I know," admitted Coleman, as he poured the tea. "She thinks I hadn't noticed that she goes out especially to buy them. She's harmless enough, really."

The Beriev thumped down with a heavy jolt, kicking up clouds of snow and shaking its sleeping passengers awake. Straker peered through the window. The weather had been overcast in Moscow. Here, it was snowing heavily.

The aircraft taxied to a halt. An icy blast of wind filled the cabin as the door was opened. A limousine pulled up at the foot of the stairs. The driver, clad in military uniform, got out then held open the rear passenger door. Komarov led the way. From the lack of a terminal building or any apparent amenities, Straker guessed that they had arrived at a military airfield.

Indeed, as the limousine sped towards the gates, Straker could make out Anti-Aircraft gun and missile emplacements around the periphery of the field, manned by grim-faced soldiers. Despite the car being fitted with a heater, Straker still shivered with the cold.

"How far?" he asked Komarov. Komarov relayed the question to the Russian driver, who replied after a moment's consideration. Komarov translated the response: "One hour."

"Thanks" replied Straker, huddling deeper into his coat.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Coleman asked.

"I've got a job lined up, training stuntmen for the film industry." replied Pugh.

"Sounds interesting. Tell me more"

"I had an interview up in London a couple of months ago. There's a new studio complex opening in the next few months. All mod cons – they want to show Hollywood a thing or two, so they're setting up a specialist stunt school and they want me to be Chief Instructor."

"What do you know about stuntmen?"

"First and foremost, sir, stuntmen have to be top-class athletes. In fact, I reckon they could give the lads at Hereford a run for their money." Pugh was referring to the Special Air Service regiment, widely considered to be the 'best of the best', selecting only the very best volunteers from other regiments and honing their skills to the absolute peak of perfection.

"Ah, I see..."

Ford pulled the last sheet from the typewriter and started to read the manuscript; the foreign keyboard layout had taken its toll; His normal

touch-typing had been replaced by 'look and peck'. Each sheet had its share of letter substitutions but with care, Ford could make sense of it all. He finally took a swig of the coffee that Emcan had left for him, several hours before, swallowed and grimaced; it was stone cold and hideously strong and bitter. He stood up from the desk and went to find something more palatable to drink, in an atmosphere with a higher percentage of oxygen than nicotine.

The limousine pulled up at a military checkpoint. Brilliant arc lamps bathed the area in a blue-white glow. The driving snow formed haloes around each lamp. It was evident, with the international situation, the Soviets were taking no chances that an imperialist assassin might make an attempt on the life of their leader. During the long drive, the combination of the passengers' body heat and the car's antiquated heater, had managed to raise the temperature to just above zero. The temperature plummeted as the driver wound down his window at the checkpoint. Through the open window, Straker could make out the grim faces of the troops. He was momentarily dazzled as the sentry swept his torch around the interior of the vehicle. In response to sentry's Russian, Komarov, replied and presented his papers. Straker and Wilson took this as their cue to produce their own passports. Tucked inside Straker's passport was a small piece of folded paper that Henderson had given him. The sentry unfolded it and stopped short. His eyes widened as he read the contents. Quickly, he re-folded the letter and marched off to the lieutenant who was observing events from the blockhouse. After a few moments' conversation, during which the officer examined the documents, the sentry saluted and quickly marched back to the waiting limousine. There, he handed back the documents. Signalling to raise the barrier, the guard stepped smartly back before snapping off a salute that lasted long after the taillights of the limousine had disappeared into the distance.

"Would someone tell me what all that was about?" asked Wilson.

"It seems to be this letter" replied Straker, passing it over. The sheet, headed by an impressive official crest, carried a few lines of neat cursive Russian. Wilson read it twice before looking up. "Do you know what this says, Colonel?"

"No. General Henderson gave it to me before I left London. He told me it would help at times like this."

"I'll read it to you." replied Wilson

"From: The Office of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

To: whom it may concern.

The bearer of this document has been summoned to this office to discuss matters of the gravest importance to the safety and security of the people of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. He is under my direct protection and is to be given every co-operation.

Signed Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, General Secretary, Communist Party of the Soviet Union"

Wilson looked up, carefully re-folded the letter and handed it back to Straker. "Well, Colonel, if that isn't a 'get out of jail free' card, I don't know what is!"

Eventually, the two men ran out of things to chat about and it was time for Pugh to take leave of his commanding officer for the last time.

"I'll see you down to the gate," said Coleman, grabbing his cap.

Ford had found Emcan out on the balcony, enjoying a quiet cigarette.

"Report's finished," Ford informed him. "Can you organize a phone link to London?"

"Certainly my friend." replied Emcan.

Pugh stopped. "This isn't the way to the Main Gate".

"Sorry, Didn't I tell you? I've just got to pay a little visit"

Pugh shrugged. The way they were going would bring them to the main gate, eventually.

Turnbull was in the late afternoon conference, working up the schedule for the evening's news broadcast, when Hooper stuck his head around the door. "Sorry to interrupt but I thought you'd like to know that Keith's phoning in a report from Ankara about the Earthquake. I've stuck a recorder on the line."

"Any pictures?"

"Sorry."

"Ok, Hooper, have a listen to the final recording and let me know if there's anything useful. We can use a phono-comp, if necessary, otherwise, we can send it over to the Radio news team"

"Will do."

If the recording proved to be usable, Hooper would need to arrange for a suitable still from the picture library. Suitably captioned, the picture would be shown whilst the recording was played back in the news bulletin

The Colonel seemed to be taking a circuitous route towards the main gate. Pugh knew the camp like the back of his hand and after they had passed the Armoury for the second time, knew something was amiss.

At last, they reached the parade ground. Pugh stopped. The entire camp had been assembled on parade. Seeing Pugh's expression, the Colonel smiled.

"You didn't think we were going to let you go without saying goodbye?"

"Parade! Parade 'Shun!" The Regimental Sergeant Major's voice echoed across the square and as a man, the parade snapped to attention. The RSM marched over to the Officer and saluted. "Parade ready for inspection, Sah!"

"Very good Mr Beaumont." replied the Colonel. He turned to Pugh.

"Mr Pugh, Would you care to inspect the troops?"

"Yessir." he smiled. Accompanied by the Colonel, Pugh began his inspection.

The saloon finally came to rest outside an impressive structure, set in five hundred acres of woodland. The original dachas had been simple log cabins. This structure, built for the *vlasti*, or elite in this workers' paradise, was little short of palatial. Armed guards snapped to attention as the chauffeur opened the rear passenger door.

A senior aide, who had been waiting patiently at the top of the stairs, came down to meet them.

"Mr Ambassador, Colonel Straker. Welcome to Oreanda"

Wilson made the appropriate introductions and the aide led the three men inside.

By normal Soviet standards of austerity, the furnishings, imported from Scandinavia, were positively palatial.

The aide led them along a corridor, finally stopping outside an oak-panelled door. He knocked and waited.

At the command, he opened the door and ushered the visitors in. Dominating the room was a large wooden desk. Apart from an ornate inkstand and

blotter, the only other item on the desk was an ancient-looking Bakelite telephone receiver. Sitting behind the desk was a huge bear of a man, wearing the uniform of a Marshal of the Soviet Union.

This was Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, Hero of the Great Patriotic War and General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He looked up from the papers he had been reading.

“Da?”

The aide introduced the guests. Brezhnev gazed solemnly at each of his guests in turn. Straker was under no illusions; here was a man who could, with one command, precipitate a World War.

Straker prided himself on being a good judge of character but he could make nothing of the impassive expression of the Ukrainian. For long minutes, Brezhnev stared at them in silence. He looked at Wilson and spoke; Knowing little Russian, Straker could only guess at what was being said. He could see Wilson stiffen slightly and frown. He replied briefly in Russian, then turned to Straker, frowning: It seems, Colonel, that I am not required. I'll be waiting outside. Professor Komarov will translate for you.”

With that, he stiffly turned and left the room, escorted by the aide.

Brezhnev waited until the door had clicked shut before he spoke. Komarov translated: “There will be no record of this meeting.”

“You are a Colonel in the Amerikanski Air Force. With the Amerikanski threatening the Rodina. You could be a spy. You could disappear forever if I so choose...”

Straker gazed at Brezhnev in silence, his face impassive.

“You are not afraid Amerikanski?”

“You would not have allowed me here, under your personal protection just to have me executed.” replied Straker. “That would be the act of a madman. You are not mad.”

Brezhnev gazed impassively into Straker's steely-blue eyes as Komarov translated.

At last, the inspection was over. The turnout had been exceptional. There was one last surprise:

"Escort Party! Atten-shun!" To a man, the party snapped to attention.

Colman shook Pugh's hand. "Well, this is it. If you're ever in the area, please don't hesitate to look in on us"

"Of course, sir"

Colman directed his attention to the Escort Party.

"To the Main Gate. Quick March!"

As Pugh was escorted towards the guardroom and the main gate for the last time, a voice from the rear of the parade called out: "Three cheers for Mr Pugh. Hip-Hip..."

"HOORAY!"

RSM Beaumont recognised the voice. Private Hawkins; always in trouble, yet potentially a good soldier. For that outburst, Hawkins should, according to Queen's Regulations, end up in the guardroom on a charge. Noticing the expression of Beaumont's face, Colonel Coleman strolled over. Beaumont saluted: "Just about to put Hawkins on a charge, sir."

"You know, Mr Beaumont," Coleman said as they watched the escort party march towards the main gate. "I've been in the Army for more than thirty years. I think there are times when Queen's Regulations can just go hang. Don't you?"

"Yes, Sir."

Night had fallen; the waning moon washing the steppes with a silvery-blue tint. Since landing in the remote forest clearing, the UFO had lain dormant. Now, it stirred into life, humming gently, it rose gently from its resting place. Once clear of the undergrowth, it started to spin, slowly at first but soon the vanes were little more than a shimmering blur as it rose into the air.

“The Soviet Union does not want war with the Americans. We have trade agreements. We do not understand why they threaten us and invade our airspace”

“Who said they did?”

Brezhnev took a file from his desk drawer and tossed it at Straker. It was a translation of the report from Tracking Station 25, detailing the radar contact and the subsequent loss of the interceptors. Straker read the report in silence. He looked up. “I think you should read this.”

Whilst Komarov translated, Straker slid the nameplate to one side then opened his attaché case. He drew out a folder. Contained within was a transcript of Waterman’s report, translated into Russian, along with a translation of the full dossier he’d shown the British Cabinet Minister that fateful day, so long ago.

Apart from the occasional interference from the chatter of unsuppressed Strowger switches on the telephone lines between Ankara and London, the recording, if not perfect, was usable.

In total, Ford’s report ran to a little over five minutes, detailing the devastation that he’d found and the sterling efforts of both the Turkish rescue teams and the Red Crescent organisation in helping the survivors.

Turnbull had been making copious notes as Ford wound up his report. Suddenly, his pencil stopped in mid-word as he turned to stare, open-mouthed, at the recorder.

"I have positive proof that the quake was not the result of Soviet Testing, nor was it the result of a secret Turkish nuclear test." Ford's voice was unmistakable. "Locals reported seeing an unidentified flying object over the area less than a week before the earthquake. This, along with recent reports from the British Geological Survey point strongly to the conclusion that it was caused by some hostile extra-terrestrial power."

Turnbull's pencil snapped. "What the...?" he spluttered

"Oh...my...God!" muttered Hooper. "He's lost it! Keith's finally flipped."

"When he gets back," Turnbull's voice was icy "Tell Ford to come and see me. Without fail."

"Yessir!"

"In the meantime, do something with this...this..." Turnbull was rarely at a loss for words but this was one such occasion.

"Leave it with me, sir."

Skimming at little more than treetop height, the UFO remained undetected by air defence radar

For what had seemed like hours, Wilson had waited in the anteroom. When he got back to the Embassy, he would send a stiffly-worded telegram to London. A skilled diplomat, treated as little more than an errand boy, excluded from the meeting whilst some damned Yank had tea with Brezhnev was quite unacceptable.

He looked out through one of the tall windows. Beyond the blazing floodlights, few stars could be seen. The waning moon was barely visible against the artificial glare. A single glittering star caught his eye. He blinked; the star seemed to be getting larger... Brezhnev had slowly and carefully read the report. Finally, he looked up; "How do I know this is not some plan to destabilise the Soviet Union by the CIA?"

"You will see, Mr Chairman, that some of the verified reports in the file come from your own staff." replied Straker. "The photograph on the last page was from an enlarged single frame of cine film that was found, undeveloped, still in the camera, near a confirmed UFO landing site."

"Brezhnev riffled through to the last few pages and read the report.

"One woman dead, one man injured and one woman missing. What do you suppose happened to her?"

"She's never been found" replied Straker. "But on many occasions, dead bodies have been found near the areas of sightings and in several cases, vital organs had been removed.

"This is monstrous!" exclaimed Brezhnev. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Not the Americans" replied Straker. "They are just as concerned about this as you. In fact..."

Straker broke off. Outside, he could hear raised voices and the sounds of running feet. The telephone rasped. Brezhnev picked it up and listened. He slammed down the receiver and stood, just as armed soldiers of the Presidential Security Detail rushed in to protect him. The soldiers unceremoniously hustled the three men out of the office and into a waiting armoured personnel carrier, its engine already running. Wilson was already sitting on one of the bench seats inside the vehicle.

Despite the roar of the heavy diesel engine, Straker became aware of the sound of gunfire and an all-too-familiar sound. As the rear hatch was slammed shut, Straker looked through the thick vision port. He could just

make out the dome of a UFO, glinting in the moonlight as it appeared over the treetops. Puffs of smoke punctuated the air around the alien craft as anti-aircraft guns opened fire. Energy beams lanced out, immolating the guns and their crews. As the vehicle bumped along the woodland tracks, it was as much as Straker could do to prevent himself from being thrown to the floor of the vehicle. Suddenly, there was a flash and a roar. The vehicle shook; an energy beam, just missing the vehicle, had blown a crater in the dirt track. Earth and stones showered the vehicle.

Satisfied that he could achieve no more in Turkey, Ford booked a ticket for the last flight of the evening back to London. With several hours to kill before he was due to check in, He had allowed Emcan to take him to his favourite restaurant. Although unprepossessing - Emcan had revealed that the place had once been the Air Terminal for Turkish Airlines - the food was remarkably good

The Armoured Personnel Carrier came to rest in the middle of the forest. The thick canopy hid the vehicle from the view of the hovering UFO. Through the vision ports, the passengers could make out, in the clearing ahead of them a tracked vehicle. A number of missiles were fitted to launch rails at the rear of the vehicle. Of the crew, there was no sign. Although now invisible, the continued humming of the waiting UFO, hovering just above the treetops, provided an ominous background.

A hasty council of war had been convened in the vehicle. Straker finished his assessment of the situation: "Apart from the rifles carried by the troops here, we are defenceless and if we move from cover, the UFO will destroy us."

Wilson had finally collected his wits: "Colonel, are you telling me that that thing has been sent to assassinate the President?"

Straker had already realised that the truth would be too much for the diplomat "Very likely, sir", he lied.

"Who would do such a thing? Why?" replied the diplomat.

"I don't know sir."

"My God! If they succeed, the consequences could be unimaginable."

"That's why I've got to destroy it before it destroys us"

Straker had already decided that he would have to go; The President could not be risked; if anything should happen to him, the consequences would be unthinkable. The diplomat was too old, the Presidential Security Detail, unless ordered, would not leave their principal and as for Komarov...? Straker opened the rear hatch and jumped down. Before anyone could react, he'd turned and slammed the hatch shut once more. Carefully, using every scrap of cover, Straker made his way towards the abandoned vehicle. The constant whirring of the UFO was making his ears ring...

The news bulletin was proceeding quite smoothly. After reading out the headlines, the Newsreader moved onto the details, introducing filmed reports from correspondents from around the world.

"The Turkish Earthquake is now known to have claimed more than eighty thousand lives. This report from Keith Ford in Ankara:"

The operator in the Transmission Gallery pressed a button and Ford's report played to an expectant world

Turnbull looked at the small pasteboard rectangle that Jackson had given him.

Dr Douglas Jackson
Psychiatrist

There was a telephone number. Turnbull picked up the handset and began to dial.

Straker jerked back to full consciousness. The alien noise had a hypnotic quality. He had no idea how long he'd lain at the edge of the clearing, waiting for the UFO to move away and allowing him to sprint for the missile launcher. He'd learned from Waterman's report that the alien craft could be damaged by surface-to-air missiles so a lucky shot should be effective. Slowly, he skirted the edge of the clearing.

Hooper sighed with relief; his edits to Ford's report seemed to have gone unnoticed, the news bulletin had gone without a hitch and Turnbull seemed satisfied, although he still expected Ford to see him on his return. The call had been answered quickly, almost as if Jackson had been expecting it. Turnbull had barely had a chance to explain about Ford's report before Jackson had promised to be there within the hour and ended the call.

Ford shook hands with Emcan and made his way to the check-in desk.

A mere twenty yards now separated Straker him from the cover of the vehicle although, even if he did reach it, he was under no illusion of his

chance of survival if the vehicle was hit by an energy beam fired at close quarters. Straker froze, every sense alert for danger. Something was pushing its way through the bushes. Quickly, Straker took cover behind a tree trunk

The airliner left the apron and taxied out to the runway. Through the cabin windows, Ford could make out little beyond the taxiway lights as they slid past. Scarcely pausing, the aircraft lined up, the engines were throttled up to maximum power and the aircraft hurtled down the runway and leapt into the air.

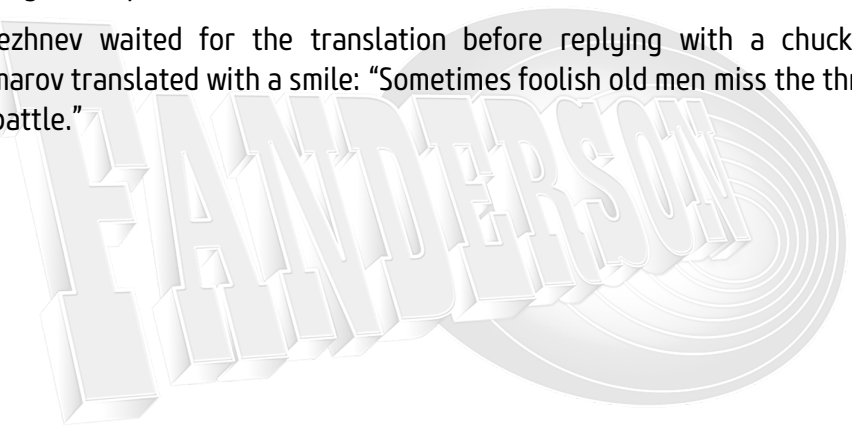
Straker held his breath. Whatever was stalking him was now just on the other side of the tree... Above the sound of the hovering UFO, there was a distant, low-pitched rumble. Perhaps a storm, with heavy rain would provide enough cover to reach the vehicle, particularly if the risk of lightning forced the UFO to gain height. A large figure appeared around the tree. Straker leapt. There was a muffled grunt as the figure hit the ground. Straker rolled clear and froze as he heard the clicking of weapons being cocked. In the gloom, he could make out the shapes of figures, each pointing a weapon at him. He was surrounded. Slowly, he raised his hands. Perhaps the Aliens would understand the meaning of surrender. No, not surrender, he'd die first; just a sign that he was unarmed and was prepared to talk to the aliens, to find out why they came to Earth. A groaning noise made him turn, slowly. The figure he'd knocked to the ground was stirring. In the darkness, he could barely make out the figure. A guttural order was issued and the weapons were no longer pointing at Straker. The language, heavily accented, was unfamiliar but the voice was not, Evidently Brezhnev, once a combatant in the Great Patriotic War, had decided that he had to join in one final battle. He had ordered his troops to aid Straker but to a man, they had refused to

leave their Chairman alone with a foreigner. Moreover, a foreigner in the uniform of their sworn enemy. Thus, he had decided to lead them.

“You may put your hands down, Colonel”. Komarov stepped from behind the Protection Squad. Straker immediately strode over to the sitting figure and helped the old man to his feet, all the while watched by the heavily-armed troops, alert for any signs of trouble. The bear of a man muttered quietly. Komarov translated: “The Chairman says that you are brave but still too impulsive to be a true leader. You must learn when to leave the fighting to others.”

“And you?” replied Straker.

“Brezhnev waited for the translation before replying with a chuckle: Komarov translated with a smile: “Sometimes foolish old men miss the thrill of battle.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ford was dozing as the airliner headed westward. Again, he dreamed of aliens.

The plan took ten minutes to draw up; there would be two parties; one would provide a diversion and attempt to draw the alien fire, the other, led by Straker, would attempt to reach the missile launcher and shoot down the UFO. The continued whirring, humming pulsing of the alien craft had almost become part of the background such that the distant rumble had become more noticeable, yet the sky visible above the clearing remained clear of cloud.

The diversionary party, hindered by the darkness, took nearly an hour to circle the clearing. The plan was simple; the Diversionary party would attempt to distract the UFO with small arms fire, whilst one of Brezhnev's guards would try to reach the missile launcher and shoot the UFO down. Already, they had learned the need for caution; one unlucky soldier, venturing too close to the edge of the clearing, died instantly, enveloped in an incandescent glow as he fell, cremated by an energy beam from the UFO.

Having been hovering for several minutes, the UFO moved swiftly to a new position, coming to rest over the edge of the clearing, opposite the stand of trees the diversionary party were using as cover. As one, they opened fire, their rifles making no impression of the alien craft. An energy beam lanced out, instantly cremating an unlucky soldier.

Finally, the President saw the true nature of the threat facing the world. Brezhnev stood open-mouthed, seemingly transfixed and oblivious to the danger barely fifty yards above him. The wind, whipped up by the rapidly spinning object, snatched at his heavy coat. Straker sprinted from cover and

launched himself at the older man. An energy beam seared the air and obliterated the spot where he'd been standing

Suddenly, the craft rose further above the trees and moved toward the centre of the clearing. With an ear-splitting roar, an AA-6 missile, travelling at more than four times the speed of sound, slammed into the transparent dome and exploded. Thick smoke billowed from the craft as it continued to rise and eventually disappeared into the night. A much louder roar accompanied the arrival of the MiG 25s that had been scrambled when the alarm had first been raised. Learning from their previous experience, the sector commanders had ordered their pilots to shoot on sight.

The aircraft pulled up and away as the pilots turned in pursuit. The roar of the Tumansky engines died away to a low rumble, then faded away altogether. Silence returned to the forest once more.

Shakily, gasping for breath, winded by the younger man's impact, Brezhnev sat up. Straker was already on his feet and offered his hand to help the older man up. The President grasped the outstretched hand. Once on his feet, he continued to grip Straker's hand whilst gazing steadily into his pale blue eyes. Then, he grinned. "Tovarisch!"

He grabbed Straker in a bear hug.

Ford awoke with a start. The cabin lights had been dimmed for landing, allowing him to see the world outside; instead of the pinpricks of myriad stars, rain lashed the windows as the airliner flew through heavy cloud. He became aware of a pale bluish glow; electrical charge had built up at the wingtips and was discharging in the phenomenon known as St Elmo's fire. His stomach lurched as a downdraft wrenched the aircraft towards the ground. Had he not known he was in an airliner, Ford would have sworn that he was riding in a bathtub down a giant flight of stairs.

Eventually, the turbulence eased as the aircraft dropped out of the storm clouds, Ford felt the thump as the landing gear was lowered for final approach.

The ride back to the dacha was far more comfortable than the all-too-recent evacuation. The APC's driver, mindful of the importance of his passengers was taking care to avoid the worst potholes of the woodland track. At last, they reached the main steps and the passengers climbed down from the vehicle, to be conducted back to the Chairman's office. It was only under the lights that Straker realized his dress uniform had suffered from the night's adventures; spattered with mud, diesel and woodland moss, his normally immaculate uniform would have been rejected by a charity shop.

Brezhnev led them to a low table, around which were arranged some easy chairs. On the table itself, plates had been set out with traditional Russian dishes including pickled garlic, gherkins, tomatoes, black bread with Salo fat from the belly of a pig, and several bottles of vodka, to be served in shot glasses.

"Please, gentlemen, help yourselves" Komarov translated for the Chairman.

It was early evening in the White House. Most of the normal administrative staff had either left or were in the process of doing so.

In the Oval Office, the President, Richard Milhous Nixon, exhausted after a day of meetings with his military advisors, in an attempt to determine the intentions of the Soviet Union, had allowed himself a few moments of respite from the constant pressure of the job. A Steward had just brought coffee, placing it on a small table next to the sofa. He was just about to raise the cup to his lips when the telephone on his desk rang. What now? Sighing, he walked over to his desk and scooped up the handset.

“Mr President? Rossi, Duty Officer. We’ve a message coming in on the Hot Line”

“On my way.”

Forgotten, the coffee grew cold.

Despite full afterburner, the Soviet pilots could only look on as the UFO, damaged as it was, drew ever further out of range. Each man wanted to follow it further, in case of a feint by their unknown foe but was painfully aware that the fuel state of his aircraft was close to ‘critical’

At that moment, the Ground Controllers ordered them back to base. The Intruder was somebody else’s problem now. As one, the aircraft banked and turned for home.

The airliner rolled to a stop at its designated stand and the engines shut down. Rain cascaded off the wings and showered onto the wet concrete.

Ford waited until most of the other passenger had left the aircraft before standing and removing his hand luggage from the overhead locker. He could hear the rain drumming on the outer skin of the aircraft. Pausing only to thank the crew, he stepped out of the aircraft and walked along the covered walkway into the terminal building.

This late in the evening, there were few arrivals at the airport so the Customs hall was comparatively quiet and Customs clearance was little more than a formality. Within minutes, he had left the building and was heading for the bus terminal to pick up one of the regular shuttle buses that would take him into London.

A car horn sounded. Ford looked around. A car’s headlights flashed. Huddling under his coat against the downpour, Ford hurried over. The driver leaned across and unlocked the front passenger door. Pulling the door open,

Ford looked inside Dennis Hooper grinned as Ford dumped his bag on the back seat and slid gratefully into the passenger seat

After the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis nearly a decade before, the US and Soviet Governments, realizing just how close they had come to the brink of nuclear war, decided that there had to be a permanent communications channel between the two Governments. Consequently, a secure teleprinter link had been established between Washington and Moscow. Communication between the two leaders would be sent in their native tongue, to be translated at the receiving end; the interpreters being language specialists from the armed forces.

By the time President Nixon and his Chief-of-Staff, Bob Haldeman, had arrived in the small, windowless room in the bowels of the White House, the printout already ran to two pages.

The Secretary of Defence, Melvin Laird, was already present, as were the Joint Chiefs of the armed forces.

"So? What do we have?" asked the President.

"Mr President, it appears that the Soviet Government now has evidence that so-called 'reactionary' elements were working to stir up trouble between our peoples. They now accept that the United States Government are not responsible for the recent events in Eastern Europe."

"Nice of Brezhnev to have come to his senses," muttered Haldeman.

The Duty Officer continued: "They suggest a staged withdrawal of all forces to Peacetime positions over the next three days starting at midnight, Moscow time."

The President looked up at the clocks on the wall. Each was set to a different time zone, indicating the time in the major cities of the world.

"That would be 4 pm Eastern Standard." he calculated.

"Sir, This could be a ploy to catch us off our guard so they could launch a sneak attack." said the chief of the Air Force. "Just give the word and my boys can launch a pre-emptive strike"

"No!" The President was furious. This Government's approval ratings are suffering because of Viet Nam. How do you suppose I'm going to look if I attack the Soviets? I will not go down in history as the man who started World War Three!"

He turned to the Duty Officer. "Send This: "The United States Government, in a spirit of Peaceful co-existence, concurs with the suggestion of the Soviet Union. US Strategic forces will be withdrawn from their forward positions with effect from 1600 hours Eastern Standard Time."

"Yessir"

"And stand down our forces to DefCon 3."

"Sir."

The two sides had stepped back from the brink. The nuclear 'pistol' was still cocked but the finger had been removed from the trigger. It would still be several days before the alert state would be lowered to DefCon 5, Peacetime status

Straker felt distinctly light-headed; the vodka was deceptively smooth. As was traditional, as soon as each toast was drunk, the glasses were smashed into the fireplace. So far, they had toasted Straker's health, President Nixon's health, the Red Army, the Soviet Air Force, the Motherland, The United States of America, Yuri Gagarin, Neil Armstrong, the Five Year Plan, President Brezhnev and eventually Vodka itself.

They had finally slumped, exhausted and more than little tipsy, into the easy chairs.

Straker became aware that there was some form of ceremony going on; an aide entered the room, bearing a small leather-covered box that he presented to Brezhnev. He saluted and left. The President gazed solemnly at Straker. He stood and gestured for Straker to do the same. Shakily, Straker rose to his feet. Brezhnev began to speak. The effects of the vodka meant that Komarov had difficulty understanding, let alone translating the Chairman's words. The President paused; evidently, a question had just been asked. Komarov spoke: "The Comrade Chairman wishes to know your name."

"Edward Straker"

Another question: "Your Father's Name?"

"John." replied Straker.

Brezhnev gazed at the younger man and nodded slowly

"Edvard Ivanovich Straker...Da!"

There was no mistaking The Chairman's actions: with a flourish, Brezhnev opened the box and took out a small five-pointed golden star, attached to a scarlet ribbon, which he firmly pinned to Straker's breast before embracing him in a bear hug and kissing him on both cheeks. The guards snapped to attention. One of the guards began to sing the Russian National Anthem. Within moments, every Russian had joined in.

Wilson, up to this point, had been totally baffled by proceedings but he'd been to enough Diplomatic gatherings to realize what had just taken place. He stood and proffered his hand.

"May I be the first to congratulate you, Colonel Straker? You have just been made a Hero of the Soviet Union!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

One by one, the B52 Bombers banked and turned for home as they received the authenticated recall signal from SAC Headquarters, buried deep within Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming. One of the last to turn had been on station, over the Bering Straits, for more than eight hours. Despite the service-issue coffee and stimulants, the crew was tired.

"Looks as if it was just a drill after all." observed Major Doolan, the co-pilot.

"Sure, but we still play it by the book." replied Colonel Robson, the pilot. The Electronic Warfare Officer, a young Captain by the name of Rafferty yawned. For eight hours, he'd stared at the radar console in front of him, probing the airspace around him, alert for any threat. Nothing. He blinked; where had that come from?

"Sir, I have a contact bearing one seven five." reported Rafferty. "Range three zero zero miles. Speed Three Five Zero Zero. IFF Negative. Engaging ECM"

At the touch of a button on Rafferty's console, immensely powerful radar transmitters, tuned to the known frequencies of the Soviet Air Defence and Missile radars, sprang to life, filling the space around the aircraft with an impenetrable electronic fog. At the same time, Robson started a series of evasive manoeuvres, at the same time pushing the throttles through the gate and into emergency power. Even at extreme range, a missile travelling at speed close to 4000 miles per hour would reach the aircraft in less than four minutes. The extra burst of speed from over-running the engines would never hope to outrun the missile but it might just be enough to bring the aircraft over friendly soil so that the crew could eject safely.

"So, how did the report sound?" asked Ford.

"The line was a bit noisy but we were able to use most of it" replied Hooper.

"Most?"

Hooper hesitated. "It was an editorial decision, from the very top"

"Meaning?"

"Most of it was top-quality stuff..."

"Most?"

Hooper sighed and pulled the car off the road onto the hard shoulder. He turned to face Ford.

"If I'd left in the Flying Saucer angle, we'd both now be looking for new jobs. I really thought Doug was going to have a seizure when he heard the tape."

"So the world carries on in blissful ignorance of the threat hanging over them?"

"No, I'm sure the Government will have made plans. I'm sure that places like Fylingdales will be keeping watch."

Are you? Snorted Ford. "I wish I shared your confidence. I'll tell you what the Government is doing: They, like the Americans, are watching the Soviets. The Soviets and their allies are watching us. Each is testing the other with incursions into the others' airspace. They're playing their little games, whilst out there..." Ford gestured towards the sky. "...an unknown enemy is drawing up plans..."

"Oh, Come on." objected Hooper. "You're starting to sound like H. G. Wells with his Martian invasion"

"Wells predicted Tanks in 1903..." replied Ford

The contact had not gone unnoticed by Soviet Air Defences. The approach, then retreat of the B52 had been tracked, as too, the flight from the

Motherland of the unidentified object. Fighters, on readiness to intercept the Imperialist aggressors, were scrambled. Their pilots' orders were clear; the American bomber was to be left unharmed unless it turned back towards the Motherland; anything else was fair game.

"Range 100, Speed four thousand"

Navigator: How long 'til we're over safe ground?"

"Two minutes twenty"

By now, the Engineer was seriously worried; every temperature gauge was in the red. Unless power was reduced, there was a real danger that one or more of the engines could be damaged. Already, the wings were vibrating.

"Range 50. She's unchecked, coming straight towards us."

"Murphy, time to work your magic"

"Aye Sir."

Eyes fixed on his display, The rear gunner, Murphy, activated the targeting radar and the M61 Vulcan cannon, situated in the tail cone of the aircraft

Although capable of speeds in excess of Mach 3, the Mig-25s were soon left far behind by the unidentified object. On their radar screens, they could see the object, partially obscured by the electronic noise as it drew ever closer to the B52.

The six barrels of the Vulcan cannon began to spin. A lethal hailstorm of 20mm rounds ripped through the air at the object, now less than a mile behind the aircraft but significantly above it. Within seconds an attacking aircraft would normally be reduced to shrapnel.

Murphy could only watch, disbelievingly, as the object, trailing a thin veil of smoke but otherwise unharmed overhauled the bomber, then descended and slowed until it was flying straight ahead of the cockpit.

Before Noonan could react, the UFO exploded. Fragments peppered the flight deck, ripping the crew to shreds. The lower-deck crew were no luckier; they had reached for the ejection levers, just as fragments were drawn into the already over-running engines.

In less than a second, the innermost engines had exploded, ripping their nacelles free and leaving jagged gashes in the wings. Fuel lines severed; a huge cloud of unburned fuel enveloped the fuselage of the aircraft. A single spark, from a static build-up, ignited the fuel.

The resulting fireball immolated the crew and shattered what was left of the airframe. The bombs fell free, slamming into the surface of the sea and sinking, finally coming to rest in the silt on the seabed in several hundred fathoms of water, where they would remain, inert; failsafe systems preventing their detonation. In total, the remains of the aircraft were scattered over more than 200 square miles of ocean.

Far behind, the pilots of the MiG 25s saw the static on their radar screens clear to be replaced by...nothing!

The voice of their controller crackled in their headsets: "Cobra Flight, Return to Base"

One by one, the flight turned for home. Speculation about what had happened to the B52 would wait until they were safely in the Mess with several glasses of Stolichnaya inside them.

Deep inside Cheyenne Mountain, the drama had been played out on the giant screen; from the B52 turning for home, to the appearance of the

supersonic object, and the subsequent disappearance of both had taken less than ten minutes.

The Duty Officer lifted his telephone: "Get me the SecDef. NOW!"

The newsroom was a babel of jangling telephones and clattering teleprinters. The atmosphere was, again, a blue haze of tobacco smoke.

"Good Grief," said Ford. "What's going on?"

"Search me" replied Hooper.

"Perhaps Doug can tell us"

As if on cue, Turnbull appeared in the doorway of his office. "In here, Ford, Now!"

Shrugging, Ford walked across the office. He entered the office and stopped. "I didn't know you had a visitor."

Jackson smiled and rose from his chair. "Hello Keith. Good to see you again"

"Who are you?" Ford was confused; Who was this stranger?

"Now Keith, I've told you about these denials before." The voice was heavily accented but the tone soothing. Ford turned to Turnbull; "Doug, Who is this man?"

"He's your doctor"

"Doctor? I've never seen this man before in my life!"

Confused, Turnbull looked at each man in turn.

"I knew it," said Laird, as he heard the report from SAC, "It was just a ploy to catch us off guard. Send the bombers back in."

"Yessir"

The impromptu party was in full swing when the Teletype in the corner chimed and started printing. The room fell silent and everyone crowded around the terminal and its operator. Evidently something had gone wrong. The language specialist started to translate but Straker, reading the plain text from the paper, felt his blood turn to ice as the accusation of treachery was hammered out.

A telephone rang; Voyska PVO reported that enemy bombers had, after turning for home, turned once more towards the Motherland and would enter Soviet airspace in twenty minutes. They had also tracked a fast-moving object pursuing one of the American bombers just before it disappeared from the radar screen.

Straker's mind was racing: Could it be...?

He tapped the operator on the shoulder. The young officer looked up in surprise at this enemy? Straker repeated the question: "Can this thing transmit in English". The reply, heavily accented, was unequivocal: "Nyet, I type in Russian, it only print in English"

Straker looked at the keyboard; the 32 Cyrillic characters bore more similarity to Greek than the Roman alphabet he was used to.

"I need to send a message to the Americans"

"Nyet! I can only send messages authorised by the Comrade Chairman"

"Mr Ambassador!" Straker called. Wilson pushed his way through the crowd.

"Yes, Colonel?"

I can defuse this situation but I need to send a message to the Americans. This man refuses without the permission of the President. I need you to persuade him to grant that permission.

"He'll probably want to see the message." replied Wilson.

"It will be a series of numbers which substitute for letters," replied Straker. "It's the only way that we can transmit the message without any risk of mistranslation."

"I'll ask him."

Straker turned once more to the teleprinter operator: "Do you have a pencil and some paper?"

The Russian offered him a small ring-bound notepad and pencil. Straker thanked him and began to write.

After a few moments, he passed the notepad back; "Send this."

The Operator looked to his Chairman for approval. Brezhnev nodded. The operator re-read the message twice before starting to type:

'Substitute each number for English character 16 5 14 21 13 2 18 1...'

As the message was entered, Straker explained: "Two years ago, a secret meeting of the UN Security Council was convened to discuss the threat from Unidentified Flying Objects. If you recall, Mr Komarov, it was agreed that they posed a threat to all nations and that international differences would be set aside to deal with that threat."

"Yes," replied the Academic. "That message... Penumbra?"

"Yes."

After Straker had left the meeting, The discussions had continued for several days.

Apart from appointing Straker as the Commander-in-Chief and setting up the International Astrophysical Commission, it had been agreed that a special communications protocol would be established between the Member States, for use when normal channels were impractical.

The Cuban Missile Crisis, less than a decade before, had shown the need for such a channel when the superpowers had stood on the brink of nuclear

war. In that case, a wartime colleague of the then Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, had been able to act at a 'Back Channel', an honest broker, conveying messages between the two Presidents, free from the political baggage of the 'Official' advisors.

Consultation with the best cryptographers available resulted in Penumbra.

The code had been designed to be as simple to use as possible and language agnostic; providing the transmission medium could transmit numbers, the code would work.

Each message consisted of a stream of numbers. The first 8 digits always formed a simple substitution cypher with A represented by 1, B represented by 2 and so on. This header would always be the same and would spell out the key phrase PENUMBRA. Each subsequent number represented a word or phrase in a small code book, of which there were only seven copies, each locked in a safe in its respective nation's Defence Ministry.

The Telephone buzzed on the President's Desk.

"Yes?"

"Duty Officer, sir. We have a message coming through on the Hot Line"

"On My Way"

Jackson turned to Turnbull: "It is as I feared; a complete dissociation from reality"

Once again, the President was in the Situation Room.

"OK, What do we have?"

The Communications officer turned to face the President. "A message came in on the Hot Line twenty minutes ago but apart from the header, no-one can make anything of it."

"Show me."

The officer passed over the printout. Nixon looked at the sheet

'Substitute each number for English character

16 5 14 21 13 2 18 1...' The rest of the message consisted of groups of four digits.

Nixon looked up: "And?"

"Apart from one word, it makes no sense"

"One word?"

"Yes, sir. Penumbra"

"Penumbra? Penumbra?"

The President looked around. Does this mean anything to ANYONE?

A sea of incomprehension faced him.

Suddenly Laird slapped his forehead. PENUMBRA! Of Course!

"You know what this means? Mr Laird?"

Yes, Mr President

"Why don't I know?"

"You were due to be briefed next week"

"Brief me. Now."

"Your Ears only, Mr President."

The President led Laird into an anteroom.

"Ok, Let's have it"

Mr President, what I have to tell you is for your ears only. It is not, under any circumstances to be written down or recorded in any way."

"Understood."

"Penumbra is a code that was devised after a special meeting of the UN Security Council..." He paused.

"Go on"

"Its use indicates that there is a threat greater than that posed by the Warsaw Pact. A threat to global security."

"So how do we decode it?"

"There's a code book in my office"

"Get it."

The President returned to the Situation Room and turned to the Communications Officer. "Acknowledge the message and send that we are waiting for the code book"

"Yessir"

"And recall our forces to Fail Safe Positions

"Yessir."

The Teleprinter pinged and started to chatter:

PENUMBRA ACKNOWLEDGED STOP RETRIEVING CODEBOOK STOP
NATO FORCES ORDERED TO FAILSAFE POSITIONS STOP STAND BY ENDIT

Ford's mind was whirling as he stormed down the corridor. What had happened?

Hooper had warned him that Turnbull was angry over the broadcast. Ford had been prepared for confrontation but it seemed that Turnbull's mind was totally closed to any reason.

"So How was the report?" asked Ford.

Turnbull took a deep breath. "You want to hear how it turned out?"

A cassette recorder sat on the desk in front of him. He pressed the PLAY button.

"Sound quality's ok" Ford observed. Behind him, Jackson made notes in a small notebook.

Ford frowned, puzzled; This wasn't right... The report came to an end. Turnbull pressed the STOP button. Silence descended Ford's puzzlement quickly turned to anger and he realized just how much of his report had been edited.

"But this isn't my report...What have you done?"

"Made it fit for broadcasting"

"But..."

"Dammit Keith, I sent you to Turkey to report on the build-up to World War III and what do you report? Flying Saucers – AGAIN!! I thought I made it clear that they are a non-subject"

"I went where the story took me."

"There is no story, Keith. Flying Saucers are a Myth, an illusion, the stuff of Fifties' 'B' Movies".

"Dammit! There is a story. This planet is under attack from hostile forces. I have proof. We have a duty to report this threat. The people have a right to know."

Turnbull had shaken his head sadly. "Can you hear yourself? I'm sorry, Keith, I can't carry you any longer. I really think you need to consider your position."

"Is there any point?"

With that, Ford had stood, slammed his ID onto Turnbull's desk. Ignoring Jackson, still sitting in the corner of the room, he left, the door slamming behind him. Turnbull stood, hands clasped behind his back, looking through the picture window out into the night.

"TERRIFIC! I've just lost the best reporter this organisation's ever had. Would you care to tell me why, Doctor Jackson?"

No answer. Turnbull turned. Jackson had gone.

By now, Ford had reached the carpark. His car was where he'd left it. The engine, unused for nearly a fortnight, struggled to turn over; the cold and damp of the past few days had taken their toll on the battery.

"Come On, Come On Come On!" Ford snarled. This on top of everything else. Finally, the engine roared into life. Ford stamped on the accelerator and the car leapt forwards.

Behind him, a nondescript car pulled away from its space. and began to follow at a discreet distance.

In his anger Ford had driven the car hard to get away from his former office as quickly as possible. The engine roared. After a while, the anger had subsided somewhat. It had been a long day; Ford was tired and confused. His head ached, his mind was still trying to make sense of the meeting, wondering who the small man with piercing eyes was.

Ford yawned. The windscreen wipers barely made a difference as the pouring rain reduced visibility.

The traffic was quieter now he'd left the City behind. In the distance, a traffic light changed from green to amber then red at the crossroads ahead. He started to change down. He blinked; his head nodded forward for just a moment... He jerked back to consciousness. He was almost at the junction; the red lamp glared accusingly as the car approached far too fast.

He stamped on the brake. Too late...

Ford wrenched at the wheel, just missing the lorry, its horn blaring in his ears. Before he could recover, the car had mounted the pavement, clipped a lamppost and smashed through a shop window. Ford's head hit the steering wheel. The world went black.

Using the Penumbra codebook, the message should have taken no more than twenty minutes to decode. Straker glanced at his watch for the umpteenth time. The room fell silent as, finally, the Teleprinter chattered into life:

PENUMBRA ACKNOWLEDGED STOP UNITED STATES ACKNOWLEDGES
ATTACKS ON SOVIET PREMIER AND USAF AIRCRAFT ACT BY EXTERNAL
HOSTILE FORCE STOP ALL US FORCES STOOD DOWN TO PEACETIME
READINESS BUT AVAILABLE TO ASSIST ENDIT

Wilson let out an audible sigh of relief. "Well Done, Colonel"

The saloon that had been following Ford's car pulled up across the street and Alec Freeman got out.

Apart from the ticking of the now-stalled engine as it cooled, all was quiet. The lorry was long gone; its driver was already late and had no desire to spend any time helping the police with their enquiries. Quickly, Freeman crossed to where Ford's car was buried in the shop window. The driver's

window, like the windscreen, had been smashed, the safety glass shattered into a myriad jewelled points, glinting as they caught the glare from the dented streetlight. Freeman reached in and felt Ford's neck for a pulse. He was relieved to feel a gentle throb under his fingertips. A quick examination satisfied him that Ford was in no immediate danger but that could quickly change unless he called for help. Looking around, he spotted the reassuring shape of a telephone box.

Quickly, he made his way over to the kiosk and picked up the receiver. The call took less than a minute. Helpfully, the box had its location printed on a small card above the telephone so Freeman was able to give precise instructions.

He replaced the receiver and walked back to the wreck. Ford was semi-conscious and groaning in pain.

"It's OK". Freeman reassured him, "The Ambulance is on its way. Try not to move"

The Fire Engine arrived first; its arrival heralded by blue flashing beacons.

This late in the evening, the crew had foregone the use of the two-tone horns, the light traffic had meant they were barely necessary.

The Ambulance arrived a few minutes later. The crew waited patiently whilst the firemen doused the mangled wreck in foam before cutting Ford free. Finally, they signalled and the ambulance crew quickly wheeled a collapsible trolley into position.

Carefully, with the aid of the firemen, they lowered Ford onto the trolley, then gently but firmly strapped him down. A thick red woollen blanket laid over him would help prevent hypothermia.

Quickly they trundled the trolley back to the ambulance., As they lifted it into position, the legs neatly folded as the stretcher slid onto its securing rack in the back of the ambulance.

The Attendant climbed into the back to render initial first aid and monitor the patient's condition whilst the driver secured the rear doors and made his way back to the cab. Noticing Ford's lips were a cherry red, the Attendant strapped an oxygen mask to Ford's face. He checked the patient's pulse: very rapid, yet his blood pressure was low. He'd seen the signs before, from suicides in the gas oven, poorly ventilated bathroom geysers or the perennial favourite of the hosepipe from the exhaust; Carbon Monoxide; odourless and colourless; an insidious poison.

In this case, the car's exhaust had probably been leaking and the patient had been overcome. He'd passed out and ended up crashing into the shop window.

He reached for the Oxygen mask, strapped it to Ford's face then called to the Driver: "Oy, Mick, Put your foot down!" he yelled, "Reckon we've got Carbon Monoxide poisoning"

"Right." The driver pressed his foot down on the accelerator and reached for the radio mike. The Ambulance surged forward.

Unnoticed, Freeman's car followed at a discreet distance, the blue flashing beacon made the ambulance easy to track.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Straker awoke and groaned. His head ached. He really should not have drunk so much but his hosts had been insistent and as a good and now, honoured, guest, how could he have refused?

Wilson had warned him that making a scene would not be diplomatic... He had hazy memories of being put to bed by a pair of burly soldiers.

He looked around. The room was simply furnished in a pleasingly simple Scandinavian style. Although the window was shuttered against the Ukrainian winter, sunlight filtered through the louvres. On either side of the room was a door. Presumably, one led into a bathroom. Apart from the bed, the only other furniture consisted of a simple desk and chair, a small chest of drawers and a single wardrobe. He threw the duvet to one side, revealing that someone had taken the trouble to undress him, then redress him in his own pyjamas. He swung his legs off the bed and gingerly stood.

His luggage had been unpacked and neatly stored in the drawers; his shirts neatly hung in the wardrobe. His Dress Uniform, however, was missing. At that moment, there was a knock on one of the doors, which opened. A batman marched in carrying Straker's uniform on a hanger, which he proceeded to hang up in the wardrobe. He nodded acknowledgement, snapped his heels together then left, closing the door behind him.

Straker reached into the wardrobe and pulled out his Uniform. It had been expertly cleaned and the tears from the previous night had been expertly stitched. Only a close inspection would betray the damage yet to Straker's eye there was something different. Then he spotted it; alongside his medal ribbons was a new addition; a small, blood- red, rectangle; the Soviet medal ribbon had been expertly added at the end of the lower row.

Freeman had followed the ambulance to the Hospital. Satisfied his quarry wasn't going anywhere in a hurry, he found a payphone and called Henderson.

Despite the lateness of the hour, Henderson seemed as alert as ever: He made a few notes as Freeman reported in.

"Very well, Freeman, You may as well call it a night".

"Right. Good Night, General"

On arrival at the hospital, Ford had been taken to the Accident and Emergency Department.

Closer examination revealed a fractured clavicle. The surgeon had quickly found the break but the anaesthetist was seriously concerned;

"I'm not happy with his colour. I don't want him under longer than necessary"

"I'm doing the best I can. This is a bad break. Several times during the operation, Ford's heart had shown signs of distress.

Finally, the surgeon declared himself satisfied and the houseman moved in to close up the incision. Eventually, the trolley was wheeled into the recovery room. The anaesthetist continued to monitor the patient's condition, His was the most responsible job; during the operation, he had to keep the patient alive but deeply unconscious. A moment's inattention and the patient would be lost forever; dead or, perhaps worse, in a persistent vegetative state, body alive but forever without that vital spark of humanity. Instinctively, he increased the oxygen being piped to the patient. The readings on his instruments improved. Finally, Ford regained consciousness, long enough to satisfy the anaesthetist and could be released to the Ward.

After a breakfast, that could at a different time, have passed for a banquet, followed by an almost interminable series of goodbyes, Straker and Wilson had been conducted to a large black Zil Limousine, the Chairman's official car. The vehicle sped away from the Dacha. Straker wiped the condensation from the car window and peered out. The snow had finally stopped. The monochrome world of black trees against the blue-whiteness of the snow was starkly beautiful.

He was roused from his private reverie by Wilson's observation;

"They will never believe this in The Foreign Office"

"The Foreign Office can never know." Straker reminded him.

"Well, I have to report something. I can't just report that we had tea with Brezhnev"

"Tell them that we uncovered a plot to depose Brezhnev and start a War between East and West"

"But..."

"But nothing!" Straker was insistent. "They can never know what happened here"

"But Brezhnev..."

"Brezhnev will carry the secret," Straker assured him. "To the grave"

The airliner lifted into the sky. Wilson waited until it had shrunk to a tiny speck and disappeared into the murk of the lowering clouds before turning away and walking back to the official car. There was no point avoiding the KGB 'tail', they almost certainly knew where he had been and most of what he had done. What they didn't know was what he was going to tell the Foreign Office. But then, at the moment, he didn't know himself.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

WORLD STEPS AWAY FROM BRINK

Every newspaper headline carried variations on the same theme. The news had spread quickly. Henderson grunted and put the newspaper down. It seemed that Straker's efforts had been successful after all. The flight was uneventful and touched down just after nine am. Customs and immigration took less time than expected and Straker soon found himself heading towards the Airbus terminal, where he would catch the shuttle bus back to London.

"Hey ED!" Straker was startled.

He smiled. "Alec!"

Looking none the worse for his long night, Freeman had decided to collect his friend from the airport, the better to bring him up to date with what had happened during his absence.

Freeman led Straker to his car and put the luggage into the boot.

The two men climbed in.

"So how was Russia?"

"Eventful. How have things been here?"

"You're a lucky man, Mr Ford"

The morning sun streamed through the window. All traces of the previous night's storm long past. Ford's visitor was the surgeon who had worked so hard at patching him up the night before. He had decided to look in on his patient before he went home after his night shift.

"What...what...happened?"

Ford was sitting up, his arm tightly strapped up to prevent the broken ends of the collarbone from working loose and undoing the surgeon's hard work. A large dressing protected the stitches in his scalp

"You were involved in a car crash. The Anaesthetist is certain that you were overcome by exhaust fumes and ran off the road."

Ford winced and rubbed his temple with his free hand.

"You're probably still suffering the after-effects of the exhaust fumes. I'll write you up for some pain relief."

The surgeon made a note on Ford's chart. At that moment, his pager beeped. Apologising, the surgeon dashed from the room, nearly bowling over a nondescript figure in the corridor, just outside the door.

The rush hour traffic ground slowly forwards at little more than a walking pace. Freeman reflected that it would probably have been quicker to have met Straker at the West London Air Terminal. At least someone else would have had the stress of navigating the London traffic.

Straker sat beside him, deep in thought, Freeman's report had been as concise as ever. The situation regarding the reporter, Ford, seemed to have taken on a life of its own. Freeman had assured him that Ford's news report had said nothing of significance. Evidently, wiser heads had prevailed and removed 'inappropriate' content. That had obviously been the catalyst for Ford to storm out from the studio and if he were angry enough, he wouldn't have noticed anything wrong as he drove. Straker realised that it was important to find out exactly how much Ford knew; the manuscript that Freeman had liberated from Ford's house had been bad enough. There was no way such an explosive document could ever be transmitted. He came to a decision: "I want to see him, Alec"

Concentrating on his driving, the statement caught Freeman by surprise.
“Who?”

“Ford. I want to find out what he knows”

“Now?”

“Right now.”

“Ok. We should be there in about twenty minutes.”

Horns blared as Freeman cut up a large lorry and piloted the car down a side road.

“Look at this...”

The wreckage of Ford’s car had been taken to a local garage. At police insistence, the mechanic had carried out a thorough examination to find if mechanical failure had caused the crash.

The wreck had been placed on a hydraulic lift, allowing the mechanic, Stevens, to examine the underside of the vehicle. An inspection lamp was hooked onto the chassis

“What am I looking for? The constable was no expert. Pencil poised over his note book; he was carefully noting the mechanic’s findings.

“This should be a mild steel tube.” Stevens pulled a pencil from his pocket and tapped the exhaust pipe. Instead of a ringing sound, the pipe emitted a dull noise as rust showered from it. Stevens picked up the lamp and held it close to the pipe. A series of holes, each, outlined by soot, ran the length of the pipe. “That’s your answer, constable. The exhaust’s rotten. Very little of the exhaust gas would have reached the end of the tailpipe. Whoever was driving this wreck was living on borrowed time.”

Jackson looked around. The corridor was clear. He should be able to complete the task and leave before anyone noticed anything as wrong. Even then, a quick change to the notes and everyone would assume that nature had taken its course. Ford was asleep. Excellent. It should be painless

The lift stopped at the first floor, the door slid open and Freeman, followed by Straker, stepped out into the corridor.

From his pocket, Jackson drew a syringe and a small vial. He had previously removed both items from the Pharmacy. Removing the cap, he jabbed the needle into the vial and drew up the colourless liquid.

Freeman led Straker down the corridor.

Now, it was a simple case of injecting into the saline bag, far less risky than into the arm. He placed the needle against the bag. The soft plastic yielded to the pressure of the needle. Now, just a slight pressure on the plunger...

A hand clamped around Jackson's wrist and in a whirl of motion, he found himself whirled around and slammed against the wall. The syringe knocked out of Jackson's hand, skittered along the floor, coming to rest at Straker's feet.

Before Jackson could gasp for breath, Freeman had him pinned against the wall, his forearm pressed against the smaller man's windpipe.

Jackson tried to pry the arm away but Freeman was too strong. Freeman's angry face filled his vision as it started to blur and fade.

"We should have left you to the executioners." Freeman snarled.

"Let him go, Alec". Straker's voice was quiet and level.

"But Ed, he..."

There was a metallic click.

"I said, let him go!" Not a shout, just a steel edge to the voice that commanded instant obedience. For a moment, the pressure on Jackson's throat continued, then eased as Freeman released his grip.

Jackson sucked in huge whooping lungfuls of air. Slowly, his colour returned to normal. As his vision cleared, he realised that Straker was covering him with a compact automatic pistol. Evidently, Straker had threatened Freeman with the weapon.

Straker's other hand held the syringe. "Potassium?"

"Insulin." Jackson gasped, rubbing his throat. Straker gazed at him steadily. "Very clever: injected into the saline, the patient slips into a diabetic coma."

"Very neat." agreed Freeman. "I suppose this is how you silenced dissent in State Security? Jackson flinched; "I was an Interrogator, not an Assassin". Jackson was more assured now.

"Assassin? Just a fancy name for a killer?" Freeman snarled, moving towards Jackson.

"Alec!" Straker snapped.

Freeman stopped. Straker nodded towards the door: "Get out of here," Jackson scuttled from the room.

"I should have thrown him back to Polish Security..." muttered Freeman

"No, Alec, we need him.

"We can't let him get away with that, Ed," Freeman protested. "He's a loose cannon"

"Let it go, Alec. I'll talk to General Henderson."

"And what, may I ask, is going on here?" The Matron had seen Jackson scuttling out of Ford's room and investigated. Her uniform was crisp and despite her stocky five foot two-inch frame, she carried an air of authority that brooked no opposition. A withering glare from those steely blue-grey eyes would send senior Consultants scurrying back to their offices, trembling.

She stood, hands on her hips, foot tapping gently on the parquet flooring, awaiting an explanation.

"We came to see Mr Ford." explained Freeman. Unseen by the Matron, Straker hurriedly slipped his pistol back into its shoulder holster.

"Visiting time is six 'til six thirty" she informed the two men.

"But it's very important..." Straker began

"Nothing's so important that it cannot wait until this evening". She placed herself between the two men and Ford's bed, firmly folding her arms across an ample bosom

"I must ask you to leave. Now."

Freeman, ever the pragmatist knew this was not a woman to be trifled with.

"Come on Ed"

As they walked down the corridor, Straker fumed "All we need is an hour or so"

"Don't worry, Ed, we'll just have to do what Brunhilde..."

"I heard that!" Matron's voice echoed down the corridor after them. Despite themselves, the two men chuckled as they walked back to the car.

Mary Straker sighed and tossed the book aside. She hated it when Ed had to go away. Perhaps he'd be home soon. She hoped so. The telephone rang. Her heart leapt

"Ed? ...Oh Steven! It's been too long! How are you?"

The caller was an old friend. As his rich Welsh voice purred down the phone, memories came flooding back. Soon, all thoughts of Ed had faded from her mind

On reaching the IAC building, Straker and Freeman had immediately reported to Henderson who, on hearing of Jackson's action, immediately summoned him to account for himself. He sat, face impassive, as Straker finished his report.

"I believe you have a saying, "Jackson purred, "Dead men tell no tales."

"I want him alive!" Straker snarled, furious. "We need to know how much Ford actually knows..."

"If he was dead, would it matter?" Jackson smiled. The smile of a predator, cornering its prey.

A chill ran down Freeman's spine "I should have thrown you back to the SB when I had the chance," he growled.

"Colonel!" Henderson rebuked the younger man. Straker continued: "Not only about UFOs but electronics. SHADO needs that knowledge"

Still, Jackson was smiling. Freeman's fists balled

"Gentlemen!" Henderson had heard enough. The room fell silent.

"I clearly made a mistake letting Jackson loose so early." He turned his gaze to Jackson: "Until further notice, you will work here, directly for me."

Jackson's smile faded.

"As for you two, I want this situation cleared up...One way or another."

Freeman and Straker stood.

"Oh, I meant to tell you," Henderson added, "I heard from the hospital this morning." Straker sat once more.

"Has the girl spoken?" asked Straker, remembering the vulnerable young girl.

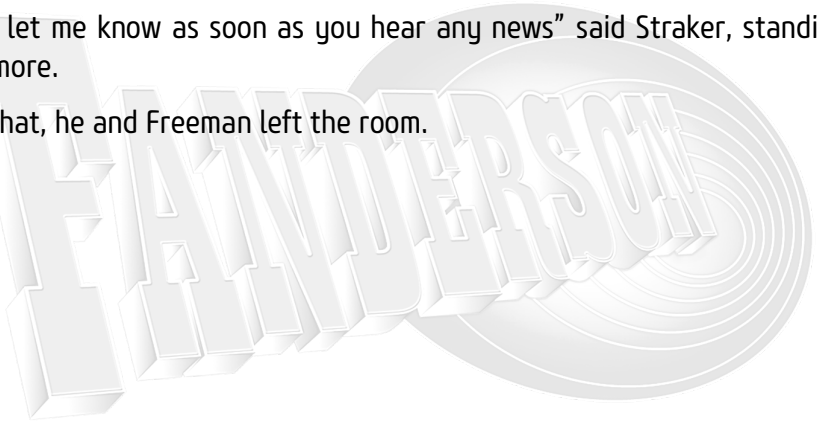
"She was transferred into a private room but she slipped into a coma in the early hours of the morning." replied Henderson

Straker frowned. "Do the doctors know what happened?"

"The neurologists are still carrying out more tests; at the moment, they're totally baffled" replied Henderson

"Well, let me know as soon as you hear any news" said Straker, standing once more.

With that, he and Freeman left the room.



CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

It was three days later that Ford was judged well enough to receive visitors. Hooper turned up with a large bunch of grapes, a bottle of barley water and, having consulted the Ward Sister, a change of clothing.

"So how are things in the madhouse?" asked Ford.

"Doug's having a nervous breakdown, he's had to answer some very searching questions from the HOD about how he managed to lose the best reporter the station's ever had. I tried to tell them I wasn't going anywhere..."

Ford chuckled.

"So anyway, what are you going to do now you're a man of leisure?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I can rework my Turkish report and produce it myself for one of the independents. At least I won't have to worry about Editorial guidelines. Perhaps I'll even turn it into a book."

"Good idea"

At that moment a bell rang, signalling the end of visiting.

"That's my cue to leave". Hooper stood. He had no wish to feel the Matron's wrath.

"Thanks for coming"

"See you around"

Cheeseman had been as good as his word. The photograph bore none of the signs of damage. The replacement frame was indistinguishable from the one it had replaced. Freeman had collected the photograph the previous day. In addition to the agreed fee, Freeman had added a generous tip.

“Good work, Alec.” said Straker. “I suppose we’d better arrange for its return. When’s Ford due out of the hospital?”

“Tomorrow.” replied Freeman. “That doesn’t give us a lot of time to put it back.”

“We’re not going to put it back, said Straker. “This is what we’re going to do...”

Ford was bored. He’d eaten breakfast with gusto and waited whilst the doctors hummed and hawed before finally declaring Ford fit to be discharged.

With that, they had left, allowing Ford to get dressed. Since then, he’d heard nothing more. He tried to read the newspaper but it failed to hold his attention. Finally, he tossed it aside and looked out of the window.

“Mr Ford?”

Ford turned. A tall man in a brown jacket was standing in the doorway.

“Yes?”

“I have instructions to take you home.” The voice was cultured but still had a trace of its East End origins

“From whom?”

“I dunno, I just got a call this morning. Gent to be discharged from hospital and taken home”

“At last! Lead on!”

The driver picked up Ford’s bag then led Ford out to the car park, where he tossed Ford’s bag into the boot of a nondescript saloon.

As the car drove out of the hospital grounds it passed an ambulance, on its way in. Although superficially like an ambulance, this vehicle, fitted with

seats, rather than stretchers, was correctly known as a Sitting Case Car. Patients who, for whatever reason couldn't make their own way, could be ferried to and from hospitals for routine out-patient appointments. Unlike conventional ambulances, crewed by a Driver and Attendant. these were usually operated by a single ambulanceman during an 8-5 day shift, making a pleasant change from the stress of emergency calls. For this driver, it was business as usual. He pulled up at the entrance, climbed down from the cab, then walked round to the back of the vehicle to open up the rear doors then help the patients down the folding steps to the ground. Satisfied his charges were able to walk into the hospital unaided, he raised the steps and closed the rear doors.

He grabbed the clipboard off the passenger seat and checked the job sheet. Just the one, he noted: Discharge to Home: Mr K Ford. Ward 4. He frowned when he saw the address. It was quite a trip out into the country. He shrugged: it was a nice day. He would think of it as a nice drive in the country. He looked at his watch and smiled; he was due a break. He'd see about his patient after tea. He strode off to the crew room.

Outside rush hour, London Traffic was light and the car was soon in the suburbs. Ford had tried to engage the driver in conversation but, apart from a few non-committal replies, had not succeeded. His shoulder aching, Ford shifted his position, rested his head on the window and closed his eyes. It would be nice to sleep in his own bed that evening. Freeman noticed Ford moving and smiled. It had all been too easy.

"Missing? What do you mean missing? In all her years as a nurse, Matron had never heard anything like it. Patients just didn't disappear from her ward. It was unthinkable.

"Well, when I got to his room, there he was, gone!" explained the ambulanceman.

"You'd better find him then, hadn't you?"

The car turned into the lane leading to Ford's cottage, passing an olive green van bearing the legend 'Post Office Telephones'. Carefully, Freeman manoeuvred past the red and white striped tent before turning into the drive. Gravel crunched under the wheels. Freeman pulled on the handbrake. The noise of the ratchet jerked Ford awake. He looked around. They had arrived at his cottage. He got out of the car and walked toward the front door. He stopped. Smoke curled gently from the chimney.

"Something wrong?" Freeman had picked up Ford's bag from the boot of the car and moved to stand beside him.

"Someone's been here, replied Ford. "The fire was out when I left"

"Perhaps your Housekeeper..."

"I live alone" snapped Ford, reaching for his keys.

He fitted the key into the lock and the door swung open –it had been left on the latch. Someone had been there!

Ford tiptoed across the hallway, alert for any noise.

Gently, he pushed open the door to the study. He looked around the room. A fire roared in the grate. Apart from that, everything seemed normal. Everything seemed to be as he'd left it, yet something wasn't right. With a gasp of realization, he crossed to the low table: the wedding photograph was missing! Frantically, he searched the room. Unnoticed, Freeman entered the room, still carrying Ford's bag. which he placed in the corner.

Ford's worst fears were realised: The Manuscript, along with the reference materials had gone. He sagged into a chair

"Something wrong?" asked Freeman. Ford waved, vaguely, in the direction of his desk.

"I was working on a script. It's taken me years..." Ford's voice tailed off.

"Was it important?" asked Freeman

"Important? My research shows that the Earth is under imminent threat of Alien invasion..."

"If it's that important, perhaps we should call the Police." suggested Freeman.

"Yes, yes, of course." Ford grabbed the handset and dialled.

Within minutes, Ford had reported the theft, to be told that someone would be along directly. Whilst he waited, Ford decided to see what else was missing; a difficult task, hindered as he was by the sling on his arm. Finally, dejected, he slumped into the chair.

He shook his head slowly; the report and even the designs could be re-worked but the photograph, taken at his wedding, was irreplaceable.

Why? Why that? His last link to Claire was gone, probably thrown away by the thieves as soon as they realized that it had no financial value.

The weight of the past few weeks' events finally caught up with him. Tears welled up as he looked at Freeman. "Why? Why Claire?" Ford's voice broke. Freeman had half expected this. He made his way to the kitchen where he made tea. Luckily, whoever had lit the fire had been thoughtful enough to leave a bottle of fresh milk. No, not luck, planning. Freeman carried the tray into the study and set it down on the coffee table, just as there was a knock on the front door.

"I'll get it," said Freeman. Ford was so lost in his world of grief that he needn't have bothered. Freeman stepped into the hallway, closing the inner door behind him, before opening the front door. Straker stepped into the hallway, attaché case in hand. "How is he, Alec?"

"He's ready"

Ford looked up as the door opened and Straker walked in, closing the connecting door behind him.

"I'm Straker. You reported a break-in, Mr Ford." Ford was surprised that the detective was American. Straker looked around the room, nodding slowly at the various items of interest.

"Yes"

So what alerted you to the break in?

"I've been away, in Turkey, so when I arrived home, I was surprised to see smoke from the chimney. I came in here and noticed the theft so I called you." Ford had forgotten that Freeman had been the one to suggest it. Freeman had a remarkable skill at merging into the background.

"So how did they enter the house?"

"I don't know. I only checked things in here."

Straker already knew. He moved on:

"Has anything been taken?"

"Just some papers and my wedding photograph, in a frame"

"What sort of papers? Deeds? Share certificates?" Straker already knew but he had to maintain the pretence. For now, at least. Ford shook his head: "There were some Engineering papers and a Programme script I'd been working on."

"Oh? What was it about?"

"You'll think it crazy. My Editor certainly does – did" Ford corrected himself.

"Ok, try me"

"What would you say if I told you that the human race was facing an extra-terrestrial threat?"

"That's quite a claim, Mr. Ford"

"It's a fact. I discovered solid evidence that alien craft is visiting this planet. Just a few nights ago, I encountered a craft. I took photographs, too, but I

suppose they will have been destroyed by now. Straker tried to keep the excitement out of his voice. "You say you saw an extra-terrestrial craft? How do you know?"

"I was in the Royal Air Force. I know aircraft. Whatever that thing was, it obeyed no known laws of aerodynamics."

"When did you see it?"

"The first time... "

"The first time...?"

"Yes. I've seen those craft three times now. The first time was when I was stationed at Fylingdales, the second was when Claire ...died." Straker could see the pain.

"I'm sorry. Tell me about her."

She was...Beautiful. Intelligent...Those butchers took her. Took her and cut her up." Ford closed his eyes tight as if to shut out the pain.

"Butchers?"

"How would you describe them? Ford had tears in his eyes now. "They came late one night and took her in one of their craft. I never saw her alive again."

Straker had already seen the Coroner's report

"The third time?"

"Less than a fortnight ago. I was up in East Anglia..."

Straker already knew about this one. He decided to change the subject "What were you doing in Turkey?"

"I was sent to report on the Turkish Earthquake. I'm a... I was a journalist"

"Was?"

"I resigned..."

"Why?"

"I couldn't accept the censorship"

"Censorship?"

My report was edited to the point I didn't recognize it as mine. How could I possibly accept it going out with my name on?"

"Why was it censored?"

"I was told it was a 'non-subject', that it had been suppressed at the highest level. The Earthquake?"

Ford shook his head: "The Alien threat. DAMMIT! The public has the right to know! It's my duty to tell them!"

"Tell them what, Mr Ford?"

"That the Authorities know what's going on but are keeping it a secret from the public"

"So what were you planning to do with the script?"

"I was all ready to go. I'd found suitable film clips, I had an interview with a leading expert in the field..."

"So what happened?"

"It was cancelled."

"Why do you suppose that was?"

"Spineless Management, afraid to stick their necks out?"

"But the script's gone now. Where's your proof?"

Ford tapped the side of his head. "I still remember most of it. The rest, I can find again..." His voice tailed off. Straker was shaking his head slowly. Ford was confused. This man didn't talk like a policeman. Suddenly, he didn't want this man in his house. He stood. "Who are you?"

Straker stood and started to walk slowly around the room, examining various items of interest, finally arriving at the bench with its complex circuit.: “Interesting!”

“Leave that alone!” Ford shouted

“I was just admiring the workmanship. You know, you could have a promising career in electronics”.

Straker went back to his case and opened it. He pulled out the circuit diagrams and the journal article and placed them on the coffee table. “You know, we had these designs analysed by the best experts in the country. They advised us to destroy them to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands”.

“Where did you get those?” Ford was suspicious. “Did you break in? “That’s just a hobby. I already have a career in Journalism...”

“You’ve already told me you resigned.” Straker continued. “Your Editor already thinks you’re unbalanced. You know no-one’s ever going to believe you. Face it, Ford. As a Reporter, you’re finished.”

Straker gave the other a moment to digest this. He reached into the case, extracted the folder and tossed it onto the table.

“You did break in!”

Ford reached for the folder.it was his script

“It’s a remarkable piece of work, Mr Ford. But what can you possibly do with it?

“Well, I could...” he stopped as Straker slowly shook his head

“That programme cannot be made. Think about it. what would happen if the threat became widely known?

“Well...”

"I'll tell you what would happen, Mr Ford, there would be widespread panic, the Authorities would be overwhelmed. Law and Order would break down."

"Have you been talking to Doug Turnbull?" Ford smiled. The smile faded. Ford realized that Straker was in no mood for flippancy

"But the people have a right..."

"Do you think you're the only person to see a UFO? The only person who recognizes the threat they pose? "

"Well, no, I have the proof..."

"As the Authorities have.:

"Then why has nothing been done?

"Perhaps something has been, is being..."

Ford was intrigued now. Straker continued: "Last year, there was a top-secret meeting at the United Nations to decide on appropriate action to counter the threat. For the past year, we have been working, in total secrecy, to set up a global defence organization. I was appointed Commander. We are going to need equipment far more advanced than currently exists.

So far, we have a small, select team, but we need more personnel, particularly scientists and engineers. The very best, internationally.

I am convinced that, as far as Communications are concerned, you are the best"

"Well, I..."

"Earlier, you mentioned making a programme about the UFO menace. I cannot allow that to happen. If you insist on trying, you will meet the most extreme resistance..."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, a promise." There was no menace in the words. There didn't need to be. Straker allowed the implications to sink in. "You'll never make another programme but perhaps I can find a place for you in my programme"

"What do you mean?" Ford was puzzled

"I'm offering you a chance to make a difference, a real difference. It's not going to be an easy ride." A pause. "You can't bring Claire back, but you might be able to stop those responsible from killing anyone else."

Ford gazed into the fire for a moment, deep in thought, considering. Finally, he scooped up the report and carefully moved to the fireplace. The flames licked hungrily at the sheets.

"Alec!" Straker called. The door to the hallway opened and Freeman entered, carrying a small package.

"A sign of good faith on your part deserves one on ours," Straker said as Freeman offered the package to Ford. It was a shallow rectangle, rather like the missing frame

Ford hurriedly tore at the brown paper and gasped; It was the missing photograph.

"We had to have it repaired," Freeman explained, "I'm afraid I accidentally broke it when I was last here."

Straker made the introductions: "Mr Ford, Colonel Alec Freeman.

"How do you do?" said Freeman, offering his hand.

"And I'm Straker, Ed Straker. Commander of SHADO."

"SHADO"?

"Supreme Headquarters, Alien Defence Organization:"

Ford grasped the offered hand. In the fireplace, the last of the pages curled and crumbled to ashes Straker was pleased. He knew now that his instinct had been right.

“Welcome to SHADO.”

The End



Dedicated to

Keith Alexander – For breathing life into an otherwise two-dimensional character

Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and the staff of Century 21, without whom so many lives would have been uninspired.

Ed Bishop –SHADO’s one true Commander.

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George Sewell –SHADO’s Conscience

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