The Top-Secret Missions of Area 46

Book 1: The York Incident

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The names of towns, places, and businesses are of actual locations to make the narrative more realistic, however no endorsement is implied for any mentioned location.
The Fat Hippo does have outstanding hamburgers, however.



It's up to an elite team of Humans and friendly Aliens to stop the infamous Greys from stripping Earth of its resources!

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A Nice Mogadishu Pier

"What've we got?" Lieutenant Daikon said into his mouthpiece. "Mission scrubbed or what?"

"Not yet, Radish. Seems there's three moving your way finally," A voice responded. "I'm running short on power so this needs to happen sooner rather than later." Said the man flying the drone. It had been circling for almost forty minutes waiting for the three men to arrive. "You've got about ten minutes left of cover then I need to get this thing back to base."

"Roger." Daikon looked around. "Heard that?"

"Sure did." The man beside him said. "Fashionably late warlords. Most annoying." He looked behind him. There were two more SEALS standing a little farther back on the narrow pier. A fifth one was behind the wheel of a sleek black motorboat at the end of the pier. The engines were idling. "Ready?"

"I need to pee." The man in the boat said. "So the race is on."

"Maybe we can move these three along." Daikon said. He raised a hand and waved to the three approaching men. "Bon Giorno!" He called.

"There's no reason for them to speak Italian." The man beside Daikon said.

"Sure there is; Somalia used to be an Italian colony." Daikon turned his hand around, palm away from them as he gave an Italian wave by repeatedly making a fist. "Ciao, Signore!"

"You're absurd." The man beside him said. He shifted his weapon back to his dominant hand. "Don't piss them off, Daikon."

"I just checked," Said the man in Daikon's earpiece. "Somalia gained its independence from Italy in 1960. That's almost sixty years ago; these dudes' parents weren't even born then."

"Ciao, Signore." (Hello Sir) The middle Somali warlord said with a smile. "You know we aren't part of Italy anymore, right?"

"Si." Daikon said. "I say 'ciao' to everyone." He looked at the man beside him. "Ciao Walters."

Walters looked at Daikon but didn't respond.

"So we'll take a little boat ride," Daikon said to the warlord. "Get the particulars down and get you some starting money and gear. Then head over to Liido Beach for a drink or two. How's that sound?"

The warlord said something in Somali to the other two. They both nodded. The one on his left said something back.

"Gentlemen?" Daikon said. "Is there a problem?"

"We were wondering why we don't just do the transaction right here. You have the stuff in the boat, right?" He gestured with his AK-74. "Right there."

Daikon nodded. “We do, we do. We were just going to do it someplace a little more private, you know. A few hundred yards offshore. Then we’d bring you back here or wherever. I voted for drinks at Liido Beach or we could do The Beachview.” He gestured with his MAC-10 along the waterfront. “Wherever you like, Barkhado.” He smiled. “What are friends for?”

The three Somali exchanged several words again.

“Something’s bugging these guys.” Daikon said into his mouthpiece. “Anyone else on shore with them?”

“We’ve got three Hilux at the end of the pier. With one each still sitting in them.” The voice replied. “Drivers, they seem to be.”

“Right.” Daikon said softly. “So what’s the hold up, Barkhado?” He smiled again.

“We were just thinking it would be better to do it right here.” Barkhado answered. He pointed again with his AK. Instead of lowering it afterwards, he kept it pointed toward the SEALS.

“Hey, Barkhado my man; what’s the Somali word for muzzle awareness?” Daikon asked. He slowly raised his weapon as well. “Or maybe even the word for rude. I forget; is it ‘edeb daran?” He asked, knowing that it was indeed how to say ‘rude’ in Somali.

“Tootgo!” Barkhado said as he began firing, because that was that word meant.

Daikon raised his rifle and fired several shots, hitting the man on Barkhado’s left in the chest. The man fell backwards. Barkhado dropped to one knee and continued to fire at the SEALS.

"Guys are out of the trucks, moving your way. Weapons at the ready." The man said through the earpiece.

"Let's go!" The man behind the wheel of the boat shouted. He raised his gun and started firing at the remaining two Somali men on the pier. They had moved behind some crates for cover. "Move it, sailors!"

"By twos fall back." Daikon said as he fired several rounds at the two Somali. "Let us know when you're in." He moved to the side of the pier and behind one of the pylons, He held on with one hand leaning out over the water while he fired single handedly at the Somali- there were now five of them returning fire from the end of the pier.

"Popping one off!" Walters said as he fired a 30 millimeter grenade at the crates on the left of the pier. There were at least two Somali behind them.

Daikon leaned back behind the pylon as the crates exploded. The explosion knocked both Somalis to the ground. One of them rolled to his side and continued to fire while laying down even though his legs were in tatters. "Move out!" Daikon shouted over the gunfire. "Fall back!"

The SEALS backed up one by one to the boat and clambered aboard. When Daikon- the last one- jumped it, the boat was already drifting away from the pier.

"Stay low!" The driver said as he gunned the twin two hundred horsepower engines. The twenty-five foot black aluminum boat rocketed out of the bay while the Somalis continued to fire at it. The SEALS firing back managed to kill two more Somalis- Barkhado being one of them.

“Drop a Hellfire on them just for me.” Daikon said into his mouth piece. “Or a Brimstone because it’s almost my birthday.”

“I’m pretty sure there are civilians on the dock.”

“They’re collaborators.” Daikon said. “I’m sure of it.”

“Returning to base.” The pilot replied. “Maybe next time.”

“Deal.” Daikon said as he pulled off his helmet. “Damn, damn, damn!” He cursed. “Who the Hell was it that said it was a nice-looking pier?”

“That was you, Daikon.” One of the men said with a chuckle.

“Damn, damn, damn!”

On the Verge

Lieutenant Jarred Daikon sat in his Jeep Wrangler staring at the flag flying in the breeze above the command building. "I let you down, old gal." He said. "Sorry about that."

"Hey!" A tall man slapped the door of the Jeep. "You fall asleep in there, Radish? The CO is waiting for you."

"Yeah, I know." Jarred looked at his friend. "I'm working up the courage, Beacon." He said, using his friend's call sign in return.

"You working up the courage? You? Didn't you just stare down a warlord last night?"

"Sure, but then everything went sideways didn't it. The old man is going to want to know why there was a firefight right there on the pier. That nice quiet pier." Daikon raised his hands plaintively. "Locals minding their own business on that nice quiet pier then sideways showed up like a category eleven hurricane."

"Nothing's nice and quiet in Mogadishu, brother. Even when it's nice and quiet it's not nice and quiet. Even the CO knows that."

"Well, it was until everyone started shooting. Kids were fishing. Old men were drinking. It was almost a damned post card. Benard Safran should have been there painting it."

"He died thirty years ago; if he were going to be anywhere, it would be Haiti with their Voodoo Mojo thing."

Radish smirked. "Haiti, another garden spot."

"But I heard you didn't lose anyone." Beacon pointed out. "That makes it a good op."

"No Americans you mean. Those three Somalis are what we in the business call really most sincerely dead."

"Bullets will do that to a guy." Beacon looked at the building. "Oh go on and get in there Jared! Show him who's boss."

"*He's* the boss, Sam." Jared said. "And he's going to want to know why that warlord that was going to work with us is full of bullet holes. A nice easy recruitment and now the target is full of holes. He's not much of an asset that way; full of holes."

"Well, that's easy to explain." Lieutenant Commander Sam 'Beacon' Giles said with a smile.

"Because they were all through-and-throughs." Jared said with a headshake. "The boss is not going to find that funny."

"Listen, intel said that he was willing to be working for us. It seems to me that when he and his two sidekicks started shooting, that deal went off the table with that category eleven hurricane named sideways." He frowned. "It was damned unsociable, now that you mention it. Rude even. A simple 'I'm out' would have been good enough." He pointed at the building. "Get in there and tell him it's those intel geeks' fault."

Jared opened the door of his Wrangler and hopped out. "I was on the verge, Sam. On the verge."

"Verge of what?"

"Getting that transfer. It was going to happen."

Sam let out a long breath. "Don't start on that Seal Team Seven, dude. He's *not* going to want to talk about that. Not now."

"Yeah, now he won't. I was *there*, man." Jared said. He gave his friend a nod. "See you later? Lucky's?"

"Sure. I'll buy the first round." Sam said. "Okay?"

"Okay. See you." Jared put on his hat and walked toward the building. "Oh, so close."

The Windup

Jared stopped in front of the secretary's desk. "He in there, Miss Judy?"

"He is indeed, Radish." The woman smiled at him. "You look like you're going to walk the plank. Something wrong?"

"Op went sideways. The guy we were supposed to grab ended up at the bottom of the bay. And not in a good way."

"Oh, that's not good. I don't think I'd bring that up to those folks."

"What folks? There's folks in there with the CO?"

"Forget I mentioned it." Judy said. "Relax; you'll do fine."

"I'll do fine? At what?" Jared looked at the door. "Others?" He patted his chest, over his gold SEAL emblem. "Kinfolk?"

"One is. Other is Army." Judy smirked. "So he's an ugly cousin." Now she looked at the door. "You can let me know after you come out."

"Or maybe you just tell the CO that you never saw me today. Or this week even."

Judy laughed. "It can't be that bad." She pointed. "Go get 'em, tiger."

"SEAL." Jared corrected. "I'm a SEAL, remember?"

"SEAL." Said Judy with a smile. "And they can't take that away from you."

"Fine; here goes nothing." He stepped to the door and knocked loudly three times. What Judy had said registered. "Whoa, wait! Take what away from me?"

"Enter!" He heard his Commander say.

"Oh man. Nice knowing you, Judy." Jared said as he pushed the door open and went in.

"I sure hope so."

The Pitch

Jared stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. As he did, he looked around the room. There was no one else there. He moved to the front of the Commander's desk. "Lieutenant Daikon reporting, Sir." He rendered a snappy salute.

"Good afternoon, Lieutenant." Commander Southie said after returning the salute.

Jared stood ramrod straight.

"Relax Lieutenant." The Commander smiled at him. "You look like you're going to pop."

Jared took a breath. "Sorry, Sir. It's just that the OP has me a bit wound up." He shook his head. "Those intel guys said he was going to play ball. Next thing we know, he and his two nephews are introducing us to their little friends." He held his hands up like he was holding a machine gun and panned around the room. "Gak! Gak! Gak! Gak! Gak!"

The Commander chuckled.

Jared turned to look at him. "Yeah, it sounds funny now, Sir, but when you're on a ten-foot-wide pier with five of your buddies and bullets are buzzing by your head like killer bees, it kind of gets your attention." He shook his head. "I don't even like regular bees."

The Commander opened his mouth to speak.

"And." Jared continued, "I'd like to point out Commander Southie that those people don't have any sort of sanitation out there so those bullets are dirty nasty things so even if they don't kill you, you'll end up with a nasty infection." He shook his head. "Hep B or Tetanus. Probably both."

"Everyone made it home," Commander Southie said. "That's the good part."

"And now we're back to square one finding some back door help." Jared shook his head. "Damned annoying."

"Well, we've got other business to attend to today." Commander Southie said. "The after-action review will have to wait for another day."

Jared nodded. "Yes, sir." He hesitated. "So, I'm not getting a talking to for the firefight?"

"No." Commander Southie looked away. "It's better."

"You're promoting me to Lieutenant Commander?"

"Not that good."

"You're sending me to SEAL Team Seven to be their demo guy?"

"Not exactly, Lieutenant." Commander looked at the far door of his office- it led to a short hallway then an exit at the rear of the building. "Come in, Gents." He looked at Lieutenant Daikon. "Not exactly. Maybe you should sit down."

"Wait; are you *fleeting* me?"

"Not exactly."

Daikon stayed on his feet. "DEVGRU is where I belong, Sir!" He said, referring to the Development Group that the Navy SEALS fell under. "What the Hell, Sir?"

"Just listen to the pitch. I think you're perfect for the job."

"Demolition?"

"Not exactly."

"You've said that a few times, Sir." Lieutenant Daikon took a deep breath. "Okay then; which Team, exactly?"

"It's… Would you believe I don't really know what it is?"

"What; you don't know? That's unlikely. You're the smartest man I know, Commander. Brave as a summer day is long." Daikon nodded. "And good looking, if you don't mind me saying so. In a virile, manly way that is. Women must adore you."

"Stop buttering me up; you're not going to Team Seven."

The door opened and a Navy Commander wearing a gold badge of an eagle grasping an anchor and a pistol, and an Army Chief Warrant Officer Three walked in.

"Gentlemen." Commander Southie said. "Lieutenant, please sit down."

Lieutenant Daikon pulled his chair to the side so he could see both his Commander and the other two men. "So, what's this all about?"

"Your next assignment." The Navy SEAL said.

Lieutenant Daikon looked at his Commander. "Sir?"

"I hear it's a really great opportunity."

"Oh, so you really don't know?"

"No; I really don't know the assignment." Commander Southie gestured at the two men. "It's your rodeo; you explain it."

"Hey fellas. I can't imagine why a SEAL and a Chief would be here to talk to me." Lieutenant Daikon said. "Sounds like the start of a joke; a SEAL and a Chief walk into an office…"

The two men looked at each other. The Warrant Officer looked at Commander Southie. "Is he briefed?"

"No, I'm not briefed, Chief. Surprisingly, my good looking super smart CO doesn't know anything about this assignment." Lieutenant Daikon said.

"You're not going to Team Seven." Commander Southie said. "So stop it already."

"Well, hell." Lieutenant Daikon looked at the two men. "Will I like it… Sir?"

"I'm Commander Story, this is Chief Bundy."

"Boom Boom" Chief Bundy said.

"Ahh, so you're pilots." Lieutenant Daikon said. He nodded at the other SEAL.

"Chuckles."

"I'm not sure that suits you, Sir." Lieutenant Daikon said as he looked at the stern-looking Navy Commander.

"Oh, it does." Chief Bundy said. "Believe me."

"So…" Lieutenant Daikon said. "Will I like it?"

"You better." Commander Story said. "There's no turning back once you're briefed."

"Wait, what? So I'm going into this blind?"

"We all did." Chief Bundy said.

"It is worth it?"

"Oh yeah, definitely. World changing kind of stuff." Commander Story replied. "Nothing in the papers but world changing."

"World changing?" Lieutenant Daikon said, unbelieving. "Come on now."

"Save the world even." Chief Bundy added.

"Sometimes twice in one week." Commander Story looked at Chief Bundy. "Remember that?"

"Yeah. Man; what a week." Chief Bundy shook his head. "Brutal."

"How can a guy turn that down? Okay, okay; I'm in since I'm not getting to Team Seven, right?"

"Right." Commander Southie said.

"Great. Let's go." Commander Story said.

"Now? I mean I had plans for today and…"

"Your house will be cleared out for you." Chief Bundy said.

"I can't even go home? Wow."

"Nope." Chief Bundy said. "It'll get cleared out and put on the market by the end of the month. Your household goods will be shipped."

"What about Tucker?" Lieutenant Daikon said. "And Pebbles?"

Chief Bundy narrowed his eyes at him. "Tucker will come along. Dogs are allowed. And we both know you don't have any other pets. Pebbles or otherwise."

"Dogs are allowed? What if I had a cat?"

Commander Story stood and saluted Commander Southie. "Thanks Commander."

"What if I had a cat?"

Commander Southie returned the other's salute. "Stay sharp, Lieutenant Daikon."

"Damn. This is it? Should I give you a hug or something?" Lieutenant Daikon turned and saluted his former Commander. "A salute doesn't seem to do it all of a sudden. This is definitely a hugging moment."

Commander Southie returned the salute. "Good luck to you, Lieutenant Daikon. It's been nice knowing you."

"Huh. This isn't at all how I expected my day to go."

"Oh? What'd you have planned?" Chief Bundy asked, honestly curious.

"I was going to go for a ten-mile run, go to the bar, have a few drinks, then get laid. Any of that going to happen?"

Commander Story opened the door and gestured out. "Not today, pal; it's not that kind of flight."

Chief Bundy walked out the door and down the hallway. "That's true. Of course, there's always tomorrow though. Unless you back out."

"Right, right." Commander Story gestured out again. "Then all bets are off."

Lieutenant Daikon looked from his old Commander to his new one. "Damn, Sir."

"Which one?" Commander Story said with a smirk. "Get going. Chief doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Roger that, Sir." Lieutenant Daikon walked out of the office. As he passed Judy's desk, he veered over to it and kissed her on the cheek. "Take care Miss Judy. It's been great knowing you. It really has."

"You'll be fine." She nodded. "Picked you myself. Don't let me down."

Lieutenant Daikon did a double take. "Wait, *she's* briefed on this?"

Judy nodded. "Take care, Radish."

Commander Story smiled. "Radish?"

"Yeah, well a daikon is a type of radish, so…" Daikon smiled at the woman. "See you later, Judy." He gave her a wave. "Yeah?"

Judy just looked away.

"Where the Hell is everyone?" Chief Bundy yelled from the hallway. "Why am I waiting?"

"See? Told you so." Commander Story said. "We better get going. He's not called Boom Boom for nothing."

Lieutenant Daikon shook his head as he followed the pair out. They walked across the parking lot to the flight building.

Without even checking in, or asking permission, the two walked straight through the building and onto the tarmac- with Lieutenant Daikon following close behind.

"We don't have to check in or anything?" Lieutenant Daikon said. When they stepped out onto the tarmac he removed his hat.

"Check in for what?" Commander Story asked.

"Forget I asked."

"Yeah; good idea." Chief said. He smirked at Commander Story. "He wants to check in."

Commander Story chuckled. "That's cute. Hey, we better call for permission to take off, Chief."

"Stop it." Chief Bundy said with a laugh.

"Oh man." Was all Daikon could say.

No Balking

The trio stopped in front of a bright white Lear Jet. 'GenCon Distributions Unlimited, GmBH' was emblazoned across it in thick gold letters.

"It's not black?"

"We'd hate to be confused with those 160th SOAR guys." Chief Bundy said. "They aren't as secretive as they like to think they are."

"Those Night Stalkers don't quit, you know," Daikon said, using the 160th's motto. "Done a couple of missions with them. Pretty inspiring stuff they do."

"It is indeed." The Chief answered.

"Who exactly are you with? GenCon?"

Commander Story gestured at the writing. "We just make up a new corporate sounding name once every few days."

"Isn't 'GmBH' German for 'limited'? So you're GenCon Distributions Unlimited Limited?" Lieutenant Daikon asked.

"Yeah, that was me; a little inside joke." Commander Story knocked on the door of the plane. "So that's us this week. Then we'll put 'Pepsi' or 'Nabisco' on it so people think some overpaid, entitled CEO is flying around."

"That's absurd. Why don't…"

"Let's go and we'll brief you on the way." Chief Bundy said as the door flipped down.

"Entre vous," said the man who opened the door- another Navy SEAL, and also a Commander.

"Commander." Lieutenant Daikon said. "This a top-heavy unit or something?"

"Something." The man held out his hand. "Rob 'Rowdy' Ronker. At your service, El Tee Daikon."

"More kinfolk. Nice. I'm Radish." Lieutenant Daikon took the man's hand and shook it as he climbed the stairs. "Glad to meet you, Commander." He looked around the inside of the plane. "Nice digs."

"You get what you can take."

"I don't think that's how that saying goes."

"Grab a seat." Chief Bundy said. "We need to get going."

"You got it, Boom Boom." Commander Ronker said. "Get in, sit down, hold on and shut up." He gestured at the leather seats. "We're pulling chalks in 60 seconds."

"Don't mind if I do." Lieutenant Daikon moved to the closest seat and flopped into it. "Let's get this show on the road."

"And away we go." Commander Ronker said as he moved toward the cockpit.

Chief Bundy sat beside Lieutenant Daikon. “Let’s go. We can’t pitch you until we’re in the air.”

“Why do we need to be in the air?”

“Because that’s how it works.” Chief Bundy said.

Commander Story pulled the door closed and sat. “Ready!” He said. Before he was even seated, the plane had started to taxi.

“You guys are sure in a hurry.” Lieutenant Daikon said as he put on his seat belt.

“Tempus fugit.” Chief said.

After just a few minutes the plane was in the air.

Flying High

"Okay, we're up. What's the skinny?" Lieutenant Daikon said. "Where we going?"

"Nevada. Area 46." Commander Story said.

"Area 46? What's that?"

"Have you heard of Area 51?" Commander Story asked.

"Sure, everyone has." Lieutenant Daikon said.

"That's because they're a bunch of dumbasses that don't know what OPSEC means. No one knows about Area 46. Or Ghost Flight Six." Chief Bundy explained.

"Ghost Flight Six? I'm going to be a pilot?"

Commander Story nodded. "Good thing you already have your civilian license, multi-engine, right?"

"What am I flying? One of these? Yeah; I think I could get my certification for this thing in a couple of weeks. Easy." Lieutenant Daikon looked at the two men. "Right?"

The two men exchanged glances.

"What do you think?" Commander Story said.

Chief Bundy shrugged. "Pitch it."

"What?" Daikon asked.

"Bottom line up front: we are a covert fighter wing that flies alien spacecraft." Commander Story said flatly.

"Alien space craft?" Daikon smirked. "From outer space?"

"No; they're from illegal aliens; we stole a bunch of fighter jets from Mexican strawberry pickers." Chief Bundy said with a headshake.

"That's kind of racist."

Chief Bundy stared at Daikon. "Fine. Ask me again."

"Alien space craft? From outer space?"

"Yes." Chief Bundy said flatly. "Yes in fact they are."

"Well, that's a little better, I suppose. Are you sure you're not from…" Lieutenant Daikon leaned forward in his seat. "Area 51?"

"Those screw ups can't even keep a single crash at night in the middle of nowhere under wraps. There's no way they'd be able to handle ten operational aircraft running ops day in and day out." Chief Bundy said.

"You have *ten* alien aircraft?"

"Now we do. It was nine until earlier this week. We had another delivered." Commander Story said.

"Well that's good news."

"How's that?"

"That means I'm not being brought in because someone died."

"It happens. Just so you know." Commander Story said.

"There's no alien tech to bring the dead back to life?"

"You're going to be living in a science fiction world, not a fantasy one." Chief Bundy said.

"And you fly them out of Nevada and no one notices?"

"They're invisible." Chief Bundy said. "Some of the time. Otherwise, they look like a regular twin engine Gulfstream." He patted the arm of the leather chair he was sitting in. "Normal Earth looking aircraft."

Daikon unbuckled his belt and stood. "Okay now, if you guys are done yanking my chain, I think I'm going to skip the run, go straight to the bar, do a bunch of shots and pick up a local gal." He pointed at the door. "Open up."

"We're at 45,000 feet. You'll have to watch that first step." Commander Story said.

"Sure we are."

"We're being serious." Chief Bundy said.

"And as we said earlier, there's no turning back." Commander Story said ominously.

"Sure, sure. I'll just go back to my team, thanks anyway."

"Sure, we'll send you back to your team at terminal velocity." Chief Bundy said again. His hand reached toward the intercom button.

Daikon noticed that both the men were wearing their seatbelts while he was just standing by the door. "Whoa there fellas. Whoa there." He

moved quickly to his seat and fastened his seatbelt. "Let's not get hasty. Is that why the pitch only happens up in the air?"

"Yup." Commander Story said. "We've got that OPSEC thing down pretty good."

"I think you're doing Murderous Operational Security instead of just plain Operational Security."

"Tomato, potato." Chief Bundy said.

"Wait." Commander Story said. "I kind of like MOPSEC." He smiled. "Let's use that from now on, Chief."

"Sure thing." Chief Bundy said.

"That's not how that…. So if I'd have said no, you'd just…?"

"We're keeping the *world* safe, Lieutenant Daikon. The entire human species on this little blue marble. We need to keep the big picture in mind." Commander Story explained. "It's not personal." His hand was still on the intercom button.

"Okay, okay. Enough with the heavy handedness. Jeeze." Daikon crossed his legs. "So they're invisible, these alien ships? Will it be like those old Wonder Woman episodes where it will look like I'm just sitting in mid-air?"

"Don't be a dumbass," Chief Bundy said.

"So why aren't you recruiting from the Air Force? Why would you want a SEAL?"

"You can fly, right?" Commander Story asked.

"Sure. I just got certified for multi engine airframes. Props though."

"That's one more than you'll need."

"Single engine alien ships?" Lieutenant Daikon looked at the Commander.

"Well, engine might not be the correct word because as far as we can tell, there aren't any moving parts to it. Some sort of quantum wave kind of thing that negates gravity then uses it to push the ship at hypothetical speeds without even bouncing the passengers around."

"You fly things you don't understand?"

"You know how a microwave oven works?" Chief Bundy asked.

"Well no… not really."

"But you can use it, right?" Chief Bundy asked.

"I'm sensing a pattern here." Daikon said. "So are these… aliens still around or did we steal these ships?"

"They're around. They help with technical stuff. Training new pilots, mooching thousands of gallons of pure grain alcohol from us. That sort of thing."

"Heavy drinkers; I like them all ready." Daikon leaned forward. "So these aliens. Are they…"

"They don't like it if you stare at them." Chief Bundy said.

"So they're those tall grey deals with big eyes?"

Commander Story shook his head. "No; that's who we're fighting. Those guys're out of the Pychron Binary system. Zeta Reticulans. Greys.

They've got a few names. Galactic level meddlers is what they are. Pains in the asses. Kidnapping indigenous populations for slave work, stealing resources. They had this massive scheme going on in Brazil a century ago. Even got their binary system put on the Brazilian national flag. Dumbasses."

"Resources?"

"Have you heard anything about Peak Oil lately?" Chief Bundy asked.

"Lately? You know I haven't, now that you mention it. It was sure a big deal back in the 1980s and 90s, I remember that."

"That's because the Greys were stealing it faster than the Earth can produce it."

"Wait, the Earth produces oil?"

"Where do you think it comes from? A single magical event millions of years ago? Oil and natural gas are continually being produced by geological processes deep within the Earth. Only liquid more plentiful is water. We have plenty oil for our own use but the Greys were pumping a trillion barrels a year. Now that we've stopped that, Peak Oil isn't a thing any more. So all you…" Chief Bundy said.

"Don't call me a dumbass." Interjected Daikon.

"Fine then." Chief Bundy said. "So… the general population stopped hearing about it."

"Hey, what about global warming? Are those Greys doing that too?"

"That's a load of crap even without the Greys helping." Chief Bundy said. "Planetary temperatures change on a pretty predictable cycle. If you

have a million years of data, like we now have thanks to the Calamari, it's just a pleasant wave line throughout history. Cold, hot, cold, hot. Asteroid hits, really cold, most everything dies, then the cycle gets back on track."

"Oh! What about the hole in the ozone? That was a huge deal when I was younger. Greys?"

"Yeah." Chief Bundy replied. "They were scrubbing it out of the atmosphere and using it on a planet they acquired that is covered in flesh eating fungus."

"Why would anyone want to live on a planet covered in flesh-eating fungus?" Daikon asked.

"No one. That's why they were taking our ozone; to get rid of the fungus to make the planet habitable. That's why they got it so cheap." Commander Story explained.

"Come on now." Daikon said.

"Hey, the stuff we see is weirder than anything you could ever make up." Chief Bundy said. "Just learn to accept it."

"Fine then. So we're fighting these Grey things. Evil aliens, huh?"

"They sure wouldn't be making friends with Pam Dauber." Chief Bundy remarked.

"Whoa now, you're not going to be making references like that all the time; are you Chief?"

"It's a one-off. I promise." Chief replied.

"Okay then. So who's on our side?" Daikon asked.

"Several alien worlds are. Well, sort of really. Some are actively helping and others are just rooting for us which isn't as helpful. But there's an aquatic one, one desert planet, and a tropical one with these big bug-eyed critters that should be on a pulp fiction novel grabbing a scantily clad woman. Oh, and a blob of jelly kind of thing." Chief Bundy said.

"And the slug planet." Commander Story said. "Don't forget them."

"Yeah, it's hard to forget a bunch of cantankerous slugs." Chief Bundy said.

"Wow, that's a lot of worlds. That's crazy." Daikon leaned back. "Just crazy."

"Well, we only have contact with one of them."

"Desert bugs?"

"The aquatic one. We call them Calamari. Their native name is a quick blue double pulse." Commander Story said.

Daikon smiled wide. "Hey does that mean…"

"They get really *really* pissed off if you ever say 'it's a trap' to them." Interrupted Commander Story. "They've seen the movies and find no humor in them. At all."

"No sense of humor, well, that's no good." Daikon said.

"No, no; not at all. In fact they *love* the Three Stooges." Pointed out Chief Bundy. "They find them hilarious."

"Who doesn't, really?" Daikon said. "Fans of the Three Stooges *and* alcohol? I'm really starting to like these guys. But back to my original

question; why aren't you recruiting out of the Air Force? Seems it would be easier to just get pilots there. I'm flying little twin-engine deals that only go a couple hundred miles an hour when I get a good tail wind."

"It's the environment. Work environment, that is." Chief Bundy said.

"All that alcohol scare off the Zoomies?" Daikon scoffed. "Amateurs."

"We call them Calamari because they are aquatic. They look a whole lot like our octopus." Commander Story said.

"But bigger." Chief Bundy added. "Up to three hundred pounds."

"I've read where Octopus are really smart. Smarter than dogs. Dolphin smart." Daikon said. "Hey, so why don't we deal with these other aliens?"

"They're the only ones willing to put up with us. Apparently Humans are just above apes when it comes to alien species. And really they're right; I mean, we'll still sit and stare at a campfire in awe. Apes with electricity is what we are." Commander Story explained.

"I feel like I should be insulted."

"At least they're talking to us instead of letting those mooching Greys clean out our planet. No one likes those guys." Chief Bundy said.

"What's the downside?"

"You'll be working underwater a whole lot. We've got a couple of Army SCUBA on the team as gunners and such. And we had one Olympic swimmer."

"Had? What happened to him? He quit?"

"Blown out of existence, the dumbass." Chief Bundy said.

"What?"

"Like I said earlier; it happens." Commander Story added.

"Yeah, I heard that… earlier." Daikon said. "So, is that about it?" A thought occurred to him. "Wait, are there any females on the team errr… in the Wing? Group?"

"Three. One is a flier, a doc, and the other does sciences." Chief Bundy said.

"And they're on the no-fly list." Commander Story added sternly.

"No fraternization, huh. Well, I can see how that would cause friction." Daikon said. "Hey, are we living in town or on a quiet corner of Nellis? Please don't say out in Pahrump. That place is podunk with a capital P."

"We're on Nellis. We've got a hyper rail loop that runs from our offices to their hangars out in the desert. There's no sense in being uncomfortable while you fight a quadrant war."

"It's not a galactic war?"

"It's not that big. Just four civilizations and us versus the Greys right now. The last thing we need is for this to get out of control. Folks would get upset." Commander Story said.

"We'd get sternly worded letters?" Daikon asked.

"We'd get planet-destroying beams of energy sent our way to put an end to the ruckus. These folks like their quiet hours."

"Yikes." Daikon frowned. "Sounds pretty harsh."

"Some worlds want to go about their business. Just ignore the problem till it shows up on their doorstep, which it may never. Other ones would wipe out the Greys if they even stepped foot in their territory and the Greys know it so they don't. So they stick with planets that really can't fight back."

Daikon nodded. "So, if the Greys… it's capitalized right?"

"Right."

"Nice. So, if these Greys…. Is it g-r-e-y or g-r-a-y?"

"Your preference. They're a red, blue, red pulse to the Calamari." Chief said.

"I'll skip over that perplexing answer and just press on." Daikon said. "So, if these Greys are no longer stealing our oil or ozone, what are they taking now? And why don't we just wipe them all out?"

"Killing two trillion Greys spread across a dozen planets is a little more than we can handle. Even if we could get those four other systems to actually provide direct help. Besides, morally speaking, a lot of them are just trying to get along in life and mind their own business. They really can't be held responsible for what their government does." Chief Bundy shrugged. "Do you agree with everything our current administration does?"

"I can't say that I do." Daikon admitted. "I just hope they get voted out of office before they do anything really stupid, or wreck my Roth 401K."

"And that's most of the Greys; their government has a couple of pet projects they don't approve of but they can't really do anything about it. They just live their lives and hope the government leaves them alone. So, we're just keeping their harvesting on planet Earth to a level that will eventually become economically unviable. Then they'll go bother someone else. You know all those forest fires that California has every single year?" Commander Story asked.

"Incompetent government management of their resources?"

"Super-rich Greys like our charcoal. West Coast hardwood charcoal to be exact. It's a delicacy." Chief Bundy said. "And before you ask, they tried growing their own redwoods but their soil isn't right. So they just set fire to ours every year."

"So the California government isn't incompetent then?" Daikon said. "Huh. Who'd a thunk?"

"Oh, they are. Just not when it comes to the fires. There's plenty they do wrong every minute of every day. Bunch of dumbasses." Chief Bundy said.

"You keep using that word." Daikon said.

"It seems to fit a lot of humans." Chief Bundy explained.

"You going native?"

"He can't hold his breath that long." Commander Story interjected.

"Nice." Chief Bundy said with a smirk.

"So, the ship is full of water then?"

"Yes. The Calamari are an aquatic race. They have large cylinder-shaped ships. We put fake wings and engines on them so they look like a Gulfstream. As long as you don't push them too hard in the atmosphere they do just fine. Better than anything we've built ourselves, in fact. And of course, they can also blend in with their surroundings." Commander Story said. "It's a simple light-diffraction algorithm that we apparently should have figured out decades ago when we figured out color television."

"Why don't you just drain them and gut the Top Gun school of their pilots?"

"They don't fly right. The mass is wrong, systems overheat, and the propulsion acts wonky." Chief Bundy said.

"Wonky?" Daikon smirked.

"It's an industry term." Commander Story said.

"I know the term. Why would a lack of water make them not work right?"

"I don't know. Maybe because it's alien technology made by aquatic creatures with eight arms. How the hell should I know? All I know is that the ship has to remain full of water at 38% salinity." Commander Story said.

"Whoa, that's more than the Dead Sea. That's gonna hurt."

"Hurt?" Chief Bundy asked.

"You ever swim in the Dead Sea? For extended periods of time?"

"No. I've never been."

"Well, if you go there and have a competition of who can stay in it the longest…How can I say this delicately? Your butthole will hurt for a week because the high salinity will burn your sphincter muscle."

"And you did this why?" Chief Bundy asked.

"When you get a bunch of SEALS together and add alcohol, we can be dumbasses." Admitted Daikon.

"Touché."

"Hey wait," Daikon held up a hand. "Why isn't this thing full of water?"

"We keep this one dry for new recruits, moving VIPs, that sort of thing. It's not nearly as capable as a fully immersed one but it's still better than anything else anyone is flying."

The lights in the cabin flashed from white to red then back to white.

"What's that?" Daikon asked. "Intermission is over?"

"We're there." Chief Bundy said.

"We're there? We've been in the air for maybe fifteen minutes and we've flown from Norfolk to Nellis?"

"Well, like we said; it's pretty good even without water. Of course, even with water we can't fly really fast in the atmosphere or the fake wings will rip off. But these things all do better than regular human aircraft." Commander Story said.

"Science fiction." Lieutenant Daikon shook his head.

"That's about the size of it." Commander Story said. "Let's go meet the team and get you up to speed. Wheels up on our next operation is in a week."

"A *week* to get up to speed?" Daikon leaned back in his chair and whistled. "Wow."

"Sink or swim is pretty much how everything you do from now on will be graded." Chief Bundy said with a smile.

"Oh, I see what you did there. Nicely done." Lieutenant Daikon said with a smirk.

The wheels chirped as the plane touched down. It took a hard turn as the three men grabbed the arm rests.

"Are we always going to be in such a hurry?" Daikon asked.

"It's almost quitting time." Commander Story said. "Overtime has to be approved."

"Really?" Daikon said. "Seems to me…" His voice trailed off. "Oh man; I'm a dumbass all of a sudden. Nicely done… Chuckles."

Commander Story laughed. "Oh yeah, this will be a fun week, I can tell already."

On Boarding

Lieutenant Daikon walked down the steps of the plane. He was in a very large hangar that had nine other identical planes- except they all had different corporate markings on them. "Nice digs. So no one questions why these company planes are in a military hangar?"

"We're on the civilian side of the tarmac. It's all just private small planes, some rotary jobs for tourist flights, and corporate jets over here. Mil-spec stuff is across the way. Since lots of rich folks fly into Vegas, it makes sense they'd park their planes nearby." Commander Story said. He pointed to a large elevator door. "Over there. Ops is underground."

"That's sneaky." Daikon said.

"And it's where the Hyperloop station is as well. Five hundred feet down." Chief Bundy said as he sped up to lead the way. He looked at his watch. "Let's get down there. I hope Orange is still there."

"So you actually do have hours of operation?"

Chief Bundy pushed the elevator button. "Well, the Calamari world has a fifty-one-hour rotation so we kind of have to keep that in mind when we're planning ops. We tend to do two days on, two days off and they're pretty happy with it. Plus we have to give folks some time off to decompress so we try to keep a Monday to Friday schedule unless

something crazy is going on. A lot of us have families that we actually like to see, you know."

"So, we're up for two days straight? Don't folks get punchy?" Daikon asked.

"Well, we try to keep to eight to ten hours on duty and we have home-away-from-home racks to get some z's here and there. So it's two of our shifts for their one. We don't need to have full staffing for the midnight and graveyard shifts. Of course, you'll be on twelves for the week while you get up to speed. You're on an op this Monday, remember."

"Twelve-hour days?" Daikon frowned. "Well, I'm glad it's only a week."

The elevator dinged and the large double doors slid open.

"Your commute is fifteen minutes so you can still easily get up to ten hours of sleep if you want to." Bundy gestured into the elevator. "And after you're good to fly, you'll just be on a regular rotation. Unless you're on an op, that is; then it's needs of the mission."

Daikon stepped into the elevator. "Seems a small price to pay to save the world."

Commander Story gave a wave. "Take it from here, Chief. I'm going to do a walkabout of the hangar; make sure we've got a couple of airframes ready for Radish here."

"You got it, Boss." Bundy replied. "See you tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow." Commander Story pointed at Daikon. "Glad you're on board. Really."

"Sure thing, Sir." Daikon replied as the doors closed. He looked at Bundy. "He seems like a pretty good guy. Easy to work for?"

"The C-O is good people. One of the better ones I've worked for in my fifteen years." Bundy pressed a black button. It turned green as it scanned his finger, then dinged in acceptance.

"When will my prints get added?" Daikon asked as he pointed. "Top button is the surface, middle is operations, and the bottom button is the train?"

"Yup. Nice and easy to remember." Bundy also pointed at the buttons. "Surface, ops, train. Your prints are already loaded." He gestured at the 'Emergency Stop' button. "That's for emergencies; it will lock down the entire facility, contact all personnel, and bring in security. Don't be screwing around when you press that one."

"Yikes, okay then." Bundy said. "What's the 'door close' button do?"

"Nothing; just like in most elevators it's not hooked up. Pressing it just makes you feel like you're doing something while you wait for the doors to close. You can press that one all you want."

"Huh." Daikon said. "And the door open button?"

Bundy looked at him. "Paranoid?"

"More and more every minute." He pointed at the button. "What's that one do?"

"Fills the elevator with Nitrous Oxide."

"So, it's the party hearty button. Nice." Daikon smiled.

"Nitrous is poisonous to Greys. It's a failsafe in case they get you in the elevator." Bundy said.

"Oh wow, you guys plan for everything."

"Unfortunately, that was installed *after* we were breeched in our previous location." Bundy frowned. "Damned annoying too; it was a damned sight nicer than this place."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah. Because of those damned Greys, we're now stuck out here in the middle of the stiflingly hot desert."

"Where was ops before?" Daikon asked.

"Remember when they imploded the Starlight hotel back in 2007?"

"No, I can't say that I do."

"It was this perfectly good resort. Older but luxurious; good bones. New paint and carpets was all it needed. There wasn't any real reason to blow it up. Besides the Greys figuring out we were working out of it."

"Come on now. You were set up in a resort?" Daikon asked.

"Had the two lowest levels and one of the penthouses."

"Damned Greys."

"Exactly."

Daikon looked around the elevator. "Dang; we've been moving a long time. How deep is ops?"

"Five hundred feet. Keeps our electronic signature away from prying eyes."

The elevator finally dinged signaling they had reached the floor. "So, the elevator runs on normal Earth speed, huh? No hyper-fast alien tech elevators?"

"If it went down really fast, we'd need seats or we'd be banging into the ceiling because gravity is constant. Don't…."

"Be a dumbass, yeah, yeah." Daikon said as the doors slid open. He peeked out. "Wow."

The operations area was a large open room that was a circle two hundred feet across. The ceiling was twenty feet above so even though it was full of work stations, it did not feel claustrophobic.

"Ops Main is over there." Chief Bundy said as he stepped out of the elevator and pointed. "Around the edges are communications, weapons, administration, supply, and the admin geeks."

Daikon followed him out. "What's these stations in the middle?" There were almost twenty work areas clustered together.

"Intel folks, analysts, linguists. The big brains." Bundy pointed at a far corner where a large blue neon cup and tan plate were attached to the wall. There were alternating flashing red lines coming up from the cup and the plate indicating hot food. "That's the Grub Hub. You can get something to eat or drink any time. Hot meals are served at six, noon, six, and midnight."

"Nice." Daikon dropped in step with Bundy as the man headed toward Ops Main. "Where are the simulators?"

"The what?"

"Flight simulators. You know, to get me trained up." Daikon explained.

Bundy laughed. "Simulators? Where's the excitement in that? You're behind the stick of an actual space craft starting at 8am tomorrow." He shook his head. "Simulators."

"Oh man. It really is sink or swim."

"Relax; you'll have a copilot running you through the training. We're not going to let you send any airframes back to the taxpayers." He said, referring to the Navy pilot term when an aircraft was damaged beyond repair. "If you do well, maybe he'll let you take it out into the Big Suck and do a flyby of Saturn. It's really pretty up close."

"Saturn? How long does that take?"

"Twenty, thirty minutes." Bundy replied. "Like I said earlier, you really can't get these things up to speed in the atmosphere. Of course, a flight to Saturn takes about as long as flying to the Calamari home world."

"How is that possible?"

The pair walked up to a set of workstations positioned in front of a pair of twenty by ten-foot LED screens. They were set end to end and displayed the entire Earth across thirty feet. The remaining ten feet was used for callouts and color-coded notes. "It's a space-time bendy kind of deal. If you want the math, talk to the big brains in the middle." He pointed. "Otherwise just enjoy the tech. It's kind of like microwave popcorn; don't worry how the oven makes it, just enjoy the results."

"Right." Daikon said, making a mental note to stop by the intelligence section to try and at least get some explanation of how the engines worked. Or perhaps his copilot could give him the human dumbed-down version. He pointed at the screens. "Man! Do you get the games on this thing?"

Bundy nodded. "Damn right we do. It's like sitting on the bench while you watch." He gestured at a large transparent cylindrical aquarium that was almost ten feet tall and four feet across. It was sitting on a wide square base that had miniature tank treads mounted on it. "Nice. Orange is still here."

"Orange?" Daikon looked. "An actual alien? Oh man, that's got to be the coolest thing I've ever seen!"

"Remember; don't stare." Bundy reminded him. "Let's go say hello." He started toward the large aquarium. "I'll introduce you. They're pretty formal till they get to know you."

"He speaks English?"

The pair approached the aquarium. The Calamari inside was facing the other way; it was looking toward the large screens speaking with one of the operations techs. Its eight legs hung down from a massive round head, moving slowly back and forth. It did appear to look very much like an Earth octopus although its head seemed a little larger and it had bony protrusions from it.

"English? They had it down in under a day. Apparently on their planet, they've got *mollusks* who speak a more complex language than English. They built a two-way translator in another day. It took us the better part of a two months to figure out their color language. And that was the big brains. I'm just okay with it and I've been working with them for a year now."

Daikon reached and curled his hand, preparing to knock on the glass.

"Oh, don't do that." Bundy grabbed his hand. "Holy hell don't do that." He shook his head. "Oh man *never ever do that*."

"Sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess…" His voice trailed off as the Calamari swiveled around in the tank with a quick swish of its eight legs to face them. It had two large green eyes, the size of dinner plates set on either side of its head. By furrowing up its head between its eyes, it brought them both to the front to stare directly at the two men. It turned from a tan to a bright blue. "Wow." Daikon whispered. "Holy wow."

"Good day to you, Orange Orange." Chief Bundy said. He gestured at the other man with both hands. "This is Navy Lieutenant Jared Frederick Daikon, son of Alfred Robert Daikon. He is the new member of our team."

The Calamari changed to navy blue for a moment, then to yellow for a little longer, then back to bright blue.

"That means hello; a short navy to longer yellow back to the original color. The bright blue is a welcoming color."

"Oh. Hello, Sir." Daikon gave a short bow. "It is an immense pleasure to meet you." He couldn't help from smiling. "I have to say this isn't how I expected my day to go at all."

The Calamari changed to its natural resting color of orange. "I suppose this is better than being thrown out of one of our flying craft. Humans can swim in water but not in air." The speaker at the bottom of the tank said in a deep voice as the creature flashed colors. Then he flashed quickly from green to tan to yellow; the colors that meant a joke.

Daikon laughed. “Oh, that is true enough!” He said, the excitement from actually speaking with an alien overcoming him. “I mean this is a hell of a thing!” He gestured around. “I mean… wow, right?”

Orange Orange turned to face Bundy. “Chief Bundy, is this his resting state?”

“He is just excited.” Bundy explained. “He will calm down.” He raised an eyebrow at Daikon. “Right?”

“What?” Daikon startled. “Oh, right, right.” He pointed at the Calamari. “Uhm… I’m usually as calm as the ocean on a summer day, Mister Orange.”

“Oh boy.” Bundy said as he shook his head. “Here we go.”

Orange Orange flashed from green to tan to yellow. “Ocean jokes. Alas, you will need to work on your humor, Jared Daikon if you want me to laugh at ocean jokes.”

“Oh man. Tough crowd.” Daikon said. “I guess I’m sinking more than I’m swimming. Chief, how about we continue the tour and let these folks get back to work?”

“Good idea.” Orange Orange said.

“I agree.” Bundy said.

Orange Orange flashed a series of colors. A moment after he began, the translation started: “I rest tomorrow so we will talk after you have flown some and adjusted more.”

“Yes sir, Mister Orange.” Daikon said. “That sounds great.”

"Calm him down, Chief." Orange Orange said then he turned back toward the screen. "Calm as the ocean if possible." He added.

"Oh, I see what you did there. Nicely done!" Daikon said. He looked at Chief Bundy. "Right?"

"Okay, I think you've seen enough of the aliens for one day," Bundy said. "You can talk to some other ones after dinner if you can throttle it back some. Not all of them are as happy go lucky as Orange Orange." He pointed toward the Grub Hub. "Look, there go Major Bextra and Chief Warren. There might be a briefing brewing that we can jump in on. Let's have you meet some nice, regular hominids."

"Right." Daikon said, embarrassed for how he had acted. "Sorry about that. I mean, going from waking up and it's just us Humans on Earth then later that same day I get to talk to an actual alien in a secret underground base in the middle of the desert; it's a little overwhelming."

"We've all been there. You'll be fine in a couple of days." Bundy started toward the Grub Hub. "Let's get in there before they get started. Major Bextra doesn't like to repeat herself."

Ad-Hoc Meeting

Daikon looked around the eatery- there were several groups of people sitting in different areas. Perhaps twenty in all, however it looked like it could easily hold a hundred people. "Just how many people work here?"

"As far as Humans go, there's a hundred twelve of us in all. Mainly support staff. Fourteen pilots, and ninety-eight support."

"And they're all read into the program?"

"Some of the support, like logistics and cooks only work in Human-only areas. That's about thirty people so it's under seventy that are aware of the Calamari." He turned and looked at Daikon, "From what I read you're not one of those hot-shots that talks down to support staff. I hope that was an accurate assessment."

"Talk down to folks that feed me and get me ammo? That'd be like being rude to my barber." Daikon said. "No way in Hell."

"That's what we figured. It's actually a really big box to check; having this operation run smoothly is important on a worldwide scale."

"Yeah, I get it." He pointed. "Well, that definitely looks like a meeting going on." The two females were sitting at the head of a table with four others sitting down from them.

"Nice. Let's go see who's who in the zoo."

A thought occurred to Daikon. "Say, Chief how many of those aliens are there here?"

"At any given time four or five. Sometimes there'll be a dog and pony show and we'll have six or seven Calamari, a Vestan, and a couple of Slugs. Along with the Vice President, of course."

"He's an alien too?" Daikon said. "Hah, I figured he was. Kind of looks it. His eyes are really far apart."

Bundy looked at him. "No no; this project falls under the Vice President. He used to run NSA so he was already read on to it." He shook his head. "Man, throttle back that paranoia. Anyway, when we have more of them here, we give the support staff the day off to make sure there are no classified leaks."

Daikon laughed as they approached the table. "Hah, well, it could have been true."

"What could have been true?" One of the females- Chief Laura Whiddon asked.

The female was wearing a flight suit with no rank so Daikon was unsure what to address her as. "Oh, uh… Ma'am? I was worried that the Vice President was an alien."

"It's Chief." Laura Whiddon said. "And why would he be an alien?"

"His eyes are too far apart for the likes of Lieutenant Daikon, apparently." Bundy said.

"Sorry Chief." Daikon said. "Didn't want to guess with your stripped-down uniform and all."

"That's understandable." Chief Whiddon said. "If you gentlemen will take a seat, we'll get started."

"Sure thing." Daikon sat in an empty chair and rubbed his hands together. "Familiar territory finally." He pointed at Chief Whiddon. "Let's roll."

"Okay, before we do that," Chief Bundy said. "Let me say that this is Lieutenant Jared Daikon. Navy SEAL. The effing new guy."

"Greetings Echo November Golf." The man next to Daikon said. "I'll be side seating with you for the week to get you up to speed." He extended a hand. "Andrew 'El Presidente' Jackson. SEAL as well. Weapons engineer and damn good pilot. One more Grey and my call sign will change to 'Ace Frehley'."

"Good to meet you… El Presidente." Daikon smiled. "Hey, Andrew Jackson, really? You're really related?" He asked.

"Yeah, we're related. It seems that Mister Jackson owned my great, great, great grandmother." Jackson said.

"No kidding." Daikon said to the black man. "That's kind of neat to be related to a president, right?"

"No." Jackson said flatly. "Maybe if the circumstances didn't involve him owning a relative of mine and taking advantage of her. So… New subject or we move to the boxing ring."

"There's a boxing ring?"

"Yeah. In fact, you're already in it." Jackson said flatly.

"Hah, okay then." Daikon held up his hands. "How about I just call you 'Ace' preemptively?" He grinned wide. "Or rather Ace Frehley Preemptively." He raised a finger. "Oh, wait that's really clever since Ace was the Starman. Nice."

Jackson stared at Daikon. "Are you on drugs?"

"I'm flying high on life right now, man." Daikon shook his head. "Secret government agency, space ships, aliens; I'm totally sky-high, Ace."

"El Presidente works just fine." Jackson said. "I'm just giving you a hard time, newbie."

"That he is." The man across the table said. "He's really a big teddy bear of a guy." He smiled wide. "Met you on the flight over. I'm Rob 'Rowdy' Ronker. Commander, SEAL and pilot."

"Rowdy. Got it." Daikon said. "Good to see you again."

"He also happens to be second in command." The man next to him said. "So make sure you keep him buttered up if you want to get any leave approved. Gary 'Tails' McDonald. Another damned SEAL. I'm right stick to Rowdy and weapons engineer. Lieutenant Commander so far."

"Good to meet you all." Daikon said. "My team used to call me 'Radish' because, well my name is Daikon."

"I don't get it," McDonald said.

"A daikon is a type of radish." The other woman at the head of the table said. "Not very imaginative." She gave a nod. "Rebecca Durbin. I'm the brains around here; Army intelligence and linguist."

"You speak Calamari?" Daikon asked.

"No, no Human can speak it because we can't change colors. I'd have to carry around sixteen colored flashcards. I can understand it well enough though. I'm also the sciences officer. As a side job I'm an Army Major to pay the bills."

"I think it's amazing you've learned to read color flashes."

Major Durbin shrugged. "It's very similar to Mandarin, actually."

"They speak Chinese? Now that's got to be some weird coincidence." Daikon said.

"No, no; the flashes are complete words not letters. Just like in Mandarin each Hanzi is a word. They use sixteen colors and I can tell the difference between eight of the timings which means I could potentially understand twelve thousand eight hundred seventy words." She held up a finger, "But I really only know about two thousand."

"Two thousand words? That sounds like a lot."

"To put it into perspective, knowing three thousand Hanzi is considered literate and a college level education usually means knowing eight thousand of them. Of course, a Calamari can distinguish sixteen timings so potentially over three hundred thousand words even though they don't have that many in their language. Chinese has about a hundred thousand Hanzi. In fact…"

"If you two want to talk linguistics later on," Bundy interrupted. "You can talk till the sun comes up. But I'm sure the others would like to get to the end of their duty day."

"I agree." Jackson said as he put his hands on the table. "So what's the operation?"

Chief Whiddon nodded. "It's Operation Jewel Heist. We will be trying to stop the Greys from stealing the Crown Jewels as part of a plot to destabilize England so…."

"Hold on now," Now Daikon interrupted. "The operation to stop a jewel heist is called 'Operation Jewel Heist'? I mean, come on now."

"What?" Chief Whiddon said.

"Oh man," Jackson said. "I just want to get some sleep."

"Okay, okay." Bundy interrupted. "Listen Daikon, we just name operations what they are; we don't do that Operation Overbounding Diehard or Operation Pelvic Thrust name game."

"Wait, Operation Pelvic Thrust?" McDonald said. "When did that happen and why wasn't I invited?"

"I just wanna sleep, people." Jackson said. "Shut eye for El Presidente."

"Sorry." Daikon said. "Continue Chief." He gestured at Chief Whiddon. "I'll keep quiet and just listen."

"Good." Jackson put his hands under his chin to hold up his head.

"You're on in five, four…" Commander Ronker stopped talking and counted down with his fingers then pointed at Chief Whiddon.

"Nice." Daikon whispered.

"Okay. So… The Greys are looking at stealing the Crown Jewels as part of a destabilization plan for the United Kingdom so that its citizens can be gathered during the turmoil and used as slaves. It is estimated that almost a million humans throughout the Kingdom could be taken during a protracted civil war without anyone noticing."

"A million?" Daikon asked. "That seems like a lot of people to just go missing."

"It happened in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur and the Balkans already" Major Durbin said. "Some with smaller numbers and the Congo with close to two and a half million citizens just disappearing."

"That sounds like an absurd plan." Jackson said. "The Congo was pretty unstable; the wild west. So was the Balkans. I can't see that working in the UK. It's pretty civilized."

"So is Ireland." Major Durbin pointed out. "And close to half a million people over the course of thirty years disappeared. Well educated laborers most of them."

"Since it's lots of people living on an island, they can't get away like the Balkans or Central Africa as easily. We see a million as a very achievable number." Chief Whiddon continued. "That's a lot of men, women and children to be used for mining on other planets. It's actually a pretty good plan."

"These aliens are stealing jewels to start a civil war?" Daikon asked. "Will that actually start one?"

"The jewel theft is just one gate of the operation they need to get through. They've already influenced a great many politicians at various levels to allow rampant immigration, increasing crime and creating two different classes of people. Then when they get those two groups fighting each other, it will be easy to scoop up large groups, entire villages even and blame the other side of genocide."

"Hey that does sound familiar all of a sudden." Daikon said. "So that was them? These Greys starting those conflicts?"

"No. That was just a situation where Humans were being Humans and the Greys took advantage of the situation. But they saw how much confusion and lost lives those protracted disputes caused and decided they would influence other events like that. Then they can grab a bunch of folks that can work in a three-quarter gravity world without too many problems." Major Durbin said.

"Too many problems?" Daikon asked. He looked at Jackson. "Sorry."

"No, I was going to ask what 'too many problems' was, also."

"Well, these slaves would be super strong but the radiation will kill them in a year or so. But since they're slaves it's not a big deal; they just get more."

"Slave traders? I'm really starting to not like these Greys." Daikon said.

"That's why I'm working as hard as I can to become an ace." Jackson said. "And why I suggested sending some nukes to their home world. Or a nice big dinosaur-killer sized asteroid."

"I'm with that plan." Daikon pointed at Jackson. "Let's do that instead."

"The Calamari won't go for mass destruction of the Grey planets. Most citizens aren't even involved with what these corporations and governments are doing." Major Durbin said.

"Are we running any sort of psychological operations on their home world?" Daikon asked. "Get them riled up so they get rid of these troublemakers themselves?"

"We are working on that front as well," Chief Whiddon said. "With the Vestas."

"Bug guys?" Daikon asked.

"Yes." Chief Whiddon replied. "But it's a long process because when a group tries to take down the organization involved, they just end up being enslaved or wiped out. It's an uphill battle."

"So what are we looking at?" McDonald said. "Looks like it's three aircraft." He gestured around the table.

"Three." Major Durbin nodded. "Two insertions and one flying over watch. We believe that the Greys have enlisted three local nationals working as security to help them get inside."

"So these Greys actually go out in public? Folks don't notice?" Daikon asked.

"They're disguised as us." Major Durbin said. "They'll look like tall humans and a bit pale but Human; these aren't Spirit Halloween rubber

masks they're wearing. Professional stuff. We expect a team of five to eight Grey and three locals"

"What do we do with the locals?" Daikon asked.

"They're collaborators helping an invading force rape our planet." Jackson said. "What do you think we do with them; use harsh language?"

"I just like knowing my left and right limits." Daikon said. "Yeah, when you put it that way, I don't feel a whole lot of sympathy for them."

Major Durbin held up a finger. "Now that doesn't mean that all these collaborators know they are dealing with aliens; a lot of them think they are working for some organized crime syndicate or some foreign government."

"That's not much better, really. Traitors are traitors are traitors." McDonald said. "So how are we getting in?"

"Two of us have been hired as night watchmen; me and Squires." Ronker said "Warrens and Daikon are cleaning crew. Jackson and McDonald are on overwatch."

"Go get 'em, Ace." Daikon said. "But four on eleven isn't the kind of odds I like hearing." Daikon said. "Do we get ray guns or something?"

"Listen to the new guy." Jackson laughed. "Yeah, we'll have our phasers set to kill."

"Oh." Daikon said. Then his shoulders sagged. "No wait… will we?"

"We'll be running traditional ballistic weapons." Major Durbin said. "We are working as a covert organization, remember."

"Messrs Heckler and Koch. Nice." Daikon said. "Okay, that's speaking my love language; throwing rounds at bad guys." His eyebrows went up. "How hard are these Greys to put down?"

"Same as a Human," Chief Whiddon said. "Shots center mass hit vital organs." She pointed at her chest over her heart, then her liver. "Important organs are all in the body. They don't have magical shields or anything like that."

"Oh, well at least…" Daikon started.

"No, they'd be far too heavy to carry; only their ships are shielded. Like ours." Major Durbin interrupted. "However, they have demonstrated the use of ballistic body armor so keep that in mind."

"What will they be carrying, Major Durbin?" Daikon asked.

"They may have a… ray gun or two but like us, they try to keep a low profile so they will use locally purchased weapons as well."

"Nice. Hey, these Greys; are they super strong or anything?"

"Similar to Humans," Major Durbin answered.

"Well, a very fit human that is. You'd have no issues with them but a regular person on the street would definitely be overpowered." Chief Whiddon added in. "They're all lean muscle mass."

"That's good to know." Daikon said. "I'll be interested to see how they grapple." He cocked his head to the side. "No poison barbs or anything, right?"

"Their breath stinks to high heaven." Major Durban pointed out. "Their diet is practically rotted food. It's a reliable tell when they're disguised."

"Yikes. So do we have a sand table with a layout of the floors, how they will be coming in and what we'll be doing?"

"Oh man," Jackson said "This was supposed to be just an Ad-Hoc meeting; big picture kind of stuff. The little details can come out tomorrow, right? I am beat like a red headed stepchild."

Daikon, who was a strawberry blond looked at the man. "Dude!"

Jackson smiled. "Nice, huh?"

"Check your emails." Major Durbin ignored them both. "And there will be a hologram of the Tower of London complex in Main Ops for you all to get familiar with between now and wheels up."

"I have an email account?" Daikon said. "It is Radish at Area Forty-Six dot mil?"

"Man." Jackson put his head on the table. "And I've got to spend a week with him?"

"It's worse than that," Ronker said. "Once you've got him trained up, you're a team."

"Come on now." Jackson didn't raise his head. "I said I was sorry."

"Wait. What happened to his other partner?" He looked at the man. "Jackson?"

"Okay then. You're in training mode starting at eight hundred hours." Ronker pointed at Daikon. "With the esteemed El Presidente." He pointed at Durbin and Whiddon. "And you ladies will put out the finer details for the rest of the operation."

"Right." Durbin said with a nod.

"El Presidente?" Daikon tried the man's call sign. "What happened to your last partner." He reached over and shook the man's arm. "And why were you sorry?"

"There was a… ray gun incident." Ronker said. "Let's leave it at that."

"But Commander Story said I wasn't replacing someone who died. Right Chief?" He asked Chief Bundy.

"That is true." Bundy said. "It was just Bagley's first day out on his own. Things went sideways."

"He only lasted *one day*?"

Bundy shook his head. "No, no; of course not."

"Well that's good…"

"He was here almost five weeks before he went out on his first, last solo mission." Chief Bundy finished.

"You better get it right, Radishman." Jackson said. "I don't want to be stuck on permanent training duty."

"Yeah, I'll do my best to not get killed too quick." Daikon said. "Wow. What a day this has been."

Ronker stood. “Fine then. Everyone get some shut eye and back at it in the morning. We need a good solid win on this O-P.”

“How’re we going to handle the new guy’s training?” Jackson finally lifted his head. “Montage, a couple of cut scenes, or just do a jump.”

“What?” Daikon said.

“Jump it.” Ronker replied.

“I’m not sure I understand.” Daikon said.

“I was really hoping for a montage.” Jackson confessed.

“What?” Daikon said again.

“We’re kidding. See you first thing tomorrow.” Ronker said. “Jackson’s got you, Radish. It’ll be fine.”

“Roger that.” Jackson stood and stretched. “Let’s go get some shut-eye.”

Operation Training The New Guy

"I'm not sure we need a name for this week." Jackson said as he pushed the elevator button for the flight line.

"No, no; I thought it over last night and you guys are right; having the op name match what you're doing really makes a lot of sense. Like Operation Training New Guy."

"Are you always this peppy?" Jackson asked.

The pair had met in Ops Main and looked at the three-dimensional display of the Tower of London for thirty minutes before heading to the elevators.

"I'm just excited." Daikon said. "I mean, when I got my multi-engine cert that was a big deal. I'm hoping to one day fly commercial or private executive. So yeah, flying something from another planet is kind of exciting, you know?"

Jackson smiled. "Yeah, I get it. I'm just giving you a hard time. This will be a fun week." The elevator opened and he pointed at an aircraft near the front of the hangar. "That's her."

Daikon looked at the aircraft. They all looked identical. "Do you name them?" He asked as they approached the one they would be flying. Across the side in foot-tall tan letters was 'Nabisco'.

"Nah, the names change too often. Plus they all fly identically." Jackson pointed at a small number on the fuselage above the wing. "This one is number eight though."

"For maintenance purposes, right?"

"Right." Jackson replied. "Let's get suited up." He veered over to a panel truck that was beside the aircraft. "Gear's over there."

"That's personal though. We're not sharing suits, right?"

Jackson nodded. "Right again. Your gear is your gear." He smirked. "But don't pee in your suit. The tech folks frown on that. They're dry suits for a reason."

"Right, so only in emergencies."

"Shouldn't ever happen." Jackson gave a nod to one of the techs standing at the back of the truck. "Morning Gene."

"Morning." Gene replied. "What should never happen?"

"Peeing in your suit."

"New guy?"

Jackson nodded.

Gene looked at Daikon. "Welcome aboard…" He let it trail off.

"Jarred. Jarred Daikon." He extended a hand. "Good to meet you, Gene." He nodded at the truck. "Keeping us geared up?"

"That's us." He jerked a thumb at the man beside him. "Terry and I work six, seven, and eight."

"Nice." Daikon hesitated. "So peeing in the suits."

"We frown on that." Gene said. "There's no reason really. We've got tubes set up and if you really had to in an emergency you just pee into the ship. It's built on a Learjet Sixty frame so it holds ten thousand gallons of water." He shrugged. "It's as much as a pool."

"And now we're done talking about peeing. Unless you're gunning for a new callsign." Jackson said. "Urin Eight" has a nice ring to it.

"No, no, no!"

"Fine then." Jackson shoved Daikon's shoulder. "Just go before we take off, okay? Oh, and we don't pee on the tires like those Russian astronauts do. Edge of the flightline. Cripes now you got me talking about pee." He grabbed a wetsuit off a rack and looked at it. "Ahh; Daikon. This is yours."

Daikon took the suit and hefted it several times. "Summer weight? What's the water temp in there?"

"Eighty degrees." Terry said. "We can make it cooler or warmer by about three degrees if we have to but anything more than that and the systems start to act up."

Daikon sat on the back of the truck and kicked off his deck shoes; he was wearing shorts, deck shoes, and a t-shirt in preparation for donning a wet suit. "No, no, eighty sounds nice. It'll be like swimming in the Med in the summer." He looked into the truck. "No fins?"

"You've got foot controls to deal with." Jackson said as he started pulling on his wet suit. "The cabin in a Lear Sixty is only seventeen feet

long total, and where the hatch is makes it only a ten-foot swim. Nice and easy. And there are even grab holds."

Daikon stood, letting the top half of the suit hang down from his waist. "Sounds reasonable." He pulled of his t-shirt. "Man, this is cool." He arched his back as he pulled the suit over his arms. "So cool."

Terry held up a large helmet. "Your hat, sir."

"A rebreather?"

Terry shook his head. "You'll be hooked up to in and out lines. The ship's full up to the hatch. Too many bubbles up there and things can get wonky."

"Temperamental little ships, huh?" Daikon looked into the helmet. It was just clear glass. "No head's up display?"

"Nope. The ship's got it. Less things to break that way." Jackson took his helmet from Terry who was holding it out. "Ahh; thank you, sir."

"Always a pleasure." Terry replied. "See you gents in a couple of hours then?"

Jackson shook his head. "Hopefully not; it's his first time and I'd like to get a good bit of the basics ticked off. Six hours?" He looked at Daikon. "Can you hold it that long?"

"I'm good, I'm good." Daikon assured the man.

"Then we'll see you gentlemen before dinner time." Jackson smirked. "Unless he's doing really well and wants to go see Saturn."

"It's a sight." Terry said. "Worth the trip, I'll tell you."

"Then let's get this show on the road." Daikon started toward the ladder that led to the very top of the aircraft. "Ladder and handholds?"

"The handholds are for out in the wilds, here at base, we use a nice comfy ladder." Terry said.

"As well we should." Daikon said with a smile.

Jackson gave the two support personnel a quick salute then followed Daikon. "Hey, wait up. There's a couple of things you need to know."

Daikon was already half way up the ladder. "What's that?"

"You need me to go first."

"Why's that?"

Jackson smiled. "Because once you put your helmet on you'll have about a minute of air and you don't know where the hookups are."

Daikon reached the top of the ladder then stepped to the side of the hatch. "That sounds like a good enough reason." He gestured at the opening. It was full to the rim. "They're not kidding about the water, huh?"

"Air bubbles bad." Jackson said. He carefully sat down on the edge of the hatch and put his legs into the water. "Go in gently; no cannonballs."

"Got it."

Jackson started to put his helmet on. "Give me a count of thirty then head in yourself." He gestured at the hatch. "We can close it from the cockpit."

"And the ladder?"

"Teddy'll get it before we fire up."

Daikon nodded. He had a large grin on his face. "Okay, okay, the suspense is killing me. Let's go." He started to put his helmet on.

"Wait until you count those thirty seconds before you do that. You only have a minute of air." Jackson reminded him. He put his helmet on and slid down into the water out of sight.

Daikon looked down into the water. It was pitch dark. "Oh man." He looked toward the cockpit. It wasn't far at all and he routinely held his breath for over four minutes. Even so, it looked like a long way to the front. He looked at the helmet. There was a small switch on one side. He thumbed the switch and a light came on at the top of the helmet. "Oh, nice." He looked down in the water, unsure of how much time has passed. He looked down at Terry. "Has it been thirty seconds yet?"

Terry laughed. "When the lights come on inside, you know you're good." He gave a wave. "Enjoy your flight, Jarrod."

A light inside the fuselage caught Daikon's attention. He looked into the hatch; the inside of the ship was bathed in redlight. "Nice! See you, Terry!" He gave a quick wave then sat cautiously on the side of the hatch. He fitted the helmet; while the helmet itself was large with an oversized window on it, the latch was similar to standard metal diving helmet that he had worn hundreds of times. When it was latched, he lifted himself off the hull and slid into the red colored water, pushing out the several gallons of water his body displaced.

After only a moment, he oriented himself and kicked toward the front of the craft.

Eights on Pylons

Daikon turned the yoke of the craft to the right. "Coming about." He said. He kept his eye on the large tower. "That makes it what… something-teen?"

"You're doing fine." Jackson said as he looked out the side window. "Nice and easy."

"Yup I got it. I'd love to see this thing in something besides 'nice and easy' mode." Daikon said as he evened out his turn. As he did, the wing of the craft stayed aligned with the tower; as it should have. He let out a breath. "How many more we doing?"

"Well, that's three good ones in a row so we can try something else if you want."

"That'd be great. Eights on Pylons are tedious as hell." He held up a hand. "But I understand why they're important. This thing doesn't really seem to fly through the air. It kind of just makes it way."

"Exactly." Jackson responded as he pointed ahead. "The aerodynamics are all for show. Let's do some nap of the earth. Get some wind going by us."

"Oh yeah, roger that." Daikon said. "Say, I've got a couple of questions."

"It took you an hour to come up with two questions?"

"I had them early on but I was too busy trying to scoot around that tower to ask them." Daikon pressed the yoke down putting the craft into a downward trajectory.

"Shoot."

"Oh yeah! When does the dogfighting start?"

"Tomorrow if things keep going well. What's the second question?"

"That wasn't one of them." Daikon looked at Jackson. "It kind of just percolated to the top."

"What've you got?"

"Okay, doing these turns in a regular craft, even at slower speeds than this I get some sort of… I don't know inertial feedback. Know what I mean?" He looked ahead. "I'd bet if I closed my eyes and did a loop I wouldn't know we were even moving."

"You wouldn't. There's a sort of neutral field in the ship that makes it possible to make impossible maneuvers and your organs stay where they should. Remember the Calamari are invertebrates; they'd slosh all over the place otherwise. This thing will do turns that will rip the wings off. Not that it needs them to fly."

"That makes sense. So why isn't this thing a V-TOL?"

"Is that the second question or another ad-hoc?"

"Ad hoc."

"It would be in its original configuration but then we'd get way too much attention. Flying disks bring out the crazy in people who go 'Ahh look! We're being invaded!'. Flying Leer Jets just make folks go 'ooh look; rich people, the bastards!'."

"Makes sense." Daikon said. "Okay, the actual second question." He gestured at the dashboard. "Why don't all these electronics short out under water. Salt water at that."

"There's no electronics here. It's all… chemtronics."

"Chemical reactions?"

"Head down in that valley over there." Jackson nodded as he pointed. "Remember your high school chemistry. Nerves work because of neurotransmitters; nerve endings give off chemical signals that receptors pick up and pass along."

"All I remember from high school biology is that I wanted to sit next to Chrissy Ward; the cutest girl in the entire school."

"How'd that work out for you?"

"Oh, I got to. Then she said we were great friends."

"Ouch." Jackson said. "Run down that gully but keep to the right; there's a longer trough to the right. As low as you want."

"Never been here before; what if I hit something?" Daikon pushed the yoke down farther putting the craft to within twenty feet of the ground.

"Oh, the wings'll come off but the shields will make sure we're just fine. But let's not annoy the techs on day one, huh?"

"Roger." Daikon pitched and yawed through the valley for several minutes.

"Nice. Real nice. You'll be happy to know Greys can't run nap of the earth. They're terrible at it for some reason. Here comes the end of this valley. Take her up to service ceiling then run it back down the opposite way."

"Twenty feet to fifty thousand? This day gets better and better." Daikon said.

"And tomorrow we shoot at stuff. Of course, they'll be shooting back as well."

The aircraft popped out of the end of the valley; traveling at almost three hundred miles an hour. Daikon pulled the yoke back to its limits putting the aircraft into a near vertical climb as he increased the throttle. "Woo!" Daikon cheered. The craft created a sonic boom as it streaked toward the stratosphere. Just for fun he did several barrel rolls. Not that he could feel the ship doing them.

Operation Crown Jewels

"Operation Shades of Grey." Daikon said.

"Stop it." Commander Ronker said. He smirked. "You're going to make Jackson's head pop off."

"Before that happens, I'll go all Rock-em Sock-em Robots on him." Jackson shook his head. "Shades of Grey."

"Okay now, pay attention." Ronker said. He stepped around the three-D model of the Tower of London. "We expect them to come from the roof. And they'll ex-fil from there."

"They'll be able to land an aircraft on the roof? Will it hold that? I mean, it's got to be a few hundred years old right?"

Major Durbin sighed deeply. "The Tower of London was finished in ten-seventy so it's over *nine hundred* years old. But it is solid stone." She held up a finger. "However, the jewels are not in the Tower; they are in the Waterloo Barracks behind it. It's also called the Jewel House. We expect them to hover above the roof and drop off their personnel then stay on station until they need picked up."

"If they do land, do we want to capture their aircraft…err space craft as well?" Daikon asked. "Give it to the intel folks to tear apart?"

"Absolutely not." Ronker said. "That would involve clearing it which could get messy. Best case scenario we get a shot up unusable aircraft stuck on top of the tower in the middle of London. Worst case they'd just take off with one of us inside it. After a day they'd know our entire layout and we'd be moving again."

"A day?" Daikon said. "You think they could break one of us in a day?"

"No man," Jackson said. "They'd probe your mind and just get the information without even asking you a single question. Getting captured isn't something you want on your bucket list."

"Yikes. Got it." Daikon moved around the projection; everyone was standing around it. "So, me and Warrens will be on the ground floor, acting like floor sweepers when the place shuts down."

"Right." Ronker said. "And Sam will be with me on the second floor of Waterloo Barracks. We'll be in the security office monitoring the video feeds."

Daikon crossed his arms as he walked around the projection. "I figured there would be a secret floor somewhere in there. Or at least secret passages." He pointed. "What's the quickest route to the jewel room from the roof?"

Ronker pointed. "These stairs on the right side of the building is what we expect them to use."

"Where do you want us to meet them?"

"As close to the roof as possible. Third floor would be nice. That way there's buffer between you and the jewels and you're closer for pickup. We are ex-filing from the roof as well." Ronker replied.

"And they're hitting the place tonight? Is the intel tight on that?"

Ronker shook his head at Daikon. "Where'd you get that idea? It's happening sometime this week."

"This week?" Daikon said. "So I'm mopping for a week?"

Warrens patted him on his shoulder. "I think you sailors call it 'swabbing'."

"Nice." Daikon said. "Real nice."

"So make sure you do a good job; we can't have you fired for messing around."

Daikon saluted the man. "Aye, aye Sir." He got serious. "You can count on me; we'll get these guys."

"Our shifts start this evening for all of us so we're moving to the safehouse this afternoon."

"Safehouse?" Daikon asked. "You mean like the Four Seasons or the Tower Suites?" He had been looking at the businesses around the Tower of London in case the mission turned into a foot chase. "Like those?"

"Very much like them, yes." Ronker nodded at him. "Practically the same thing in fact. Virtually identical in operating procedures, I'd say."

"That's a lot of qualifiers all of a sudden." Ronker squinted at him. "How practically?"

"The Travel Lodge just across the train tracks."

"A Travel Lodge sitting on a dozen highly active railroad tracks? Your idea of practically the same and my idea of practically the same are vastly different, Sir."

Ronker laughed. "Then I guess I won't mention the double occupancy."

"Come on now."

"Don't worry, Radish," Warrens said. "You can still walk around the room naked. I'm sure going to. We can flash the trains as they go by."

"Well, that does sound like fun." Daikon admitted.

"I'm glad I'm staying in the bird." Jackson said.

"Grab your bags. I want everyone back here in an hour so we can get settled and do a walkabout of the area in person." Commander Ronker said.

Daikon nodded. "If we get there early, can I take the tour before they close?"

"No; I'd hate to have someone recognize you then they'd be thinking you're casing the place."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

"Any alibis?" Ronker asked.

"Oh!" Daikon raised his hand. "Two. I got two."

"Oh man." Jackson said. "You're doing that on purpose."

"No; these are good questions." Daikon said as he held up a finger. "What's the comms plan?" He held up a second finger. "What do we do with prisoners?"

Jackson sighed. "For a new guy those are good questions." He nodded at the Commander. "We did skip that part."

Major Durbin held up her arm showing her wrist. "You should have gotten your watch by now."

Daikon mimicked her. "Yeah, I got it." He leaned into the wrist phone. "Calling Dick Tracy, calling Dick Tracy."

"You know that these things have been out for almost ten years, right?" Jackson said.

"Oh." Daikon said. "You mean these are just regular Apple Watches?" He looked let down. "I figured they were some sort of alien tracking device."

"Technically they are." Major Durbin said. "But before mission start, we do a conference call; everyone is hot miking. That way if you get in any sort of trouble, everyone'll know."

"Nice." Daikon lowered his arm. "Cripes, I hope I remember to mute it before going to the bathroom."

"I'm telling you, you're getting a new nickname." Jackson said. "Urine Eight, or Bowels or something."

Daikon ignored him. "And what about prisoners? We can't rightly take them back to the hotel. Right?"

"No," Commander Ronker said. He hesitated for a moment. "We don't do prisoners. If you catch a human alive, you can secure him for the authorities. Any Greys are eliminated."

"We don't do interrogations?"

"Where; the hotel?" Ronker said.

"I thought back here someplace." Daikon replied.

"No way, Radish. Bringing the enemy into our secret base is the last thing I would want to do."

"Oh." Daikon startled. "Yeah, I see your point. So they go bye bye."

"From looking at your records I know you'd never be able to shoot some innocent bystander, Lieutenant Daikon." Ronker said, becoming serious. "And I do appreciate that. But unfortunately these Greys are trying to destroy our planet and enslave our people; they don't get a pardon for that. Plus, they don't come peacefully. Ever. When you come across one, you'll have your hands full with a rabid, wanting you dead combatant. So if you get the upper hand, use it."

"Roger that, Sir." Daikon said.

"Okay then." Ronker stood. He raised his hand slowly into a salute. "If that is all, let us go forth and do great things."

Everyone else stood and saluted him back.

"One hour topside." Ronker pointed at the ceiling. "Oh, Daikon, have you been to London in February?"

"No, I've actually never been there ever."

"Make sure you bring an umbrella. Rainy place, London."

"Got it covered." Daikon said; he had been looking at the local weather as well and was prepared for a very chilly, wet stay.

From Operation Swabbie to Nothing Burger

"We are *not* calling it Operation Swabbie." Warrens said as he closed his locker door.

"I still think Shades of Grey was good."

Warrens sat on the bench in the locker room and tied his shoes. "Okay, tell you what; I'll go along with Operation Swabbie if I get to pick the next operation's name."

"Deal." Daikon pinned his nametag to his shirt pocket. "I hope it's someplace exotic."

"Trust me; it's *never* anyplace exotic. Unless somehow 'shithole third world country' means exotic in your universe."

"Uhm, never?"

"No." Warrens repeated. "We get sent to places like some hundred-thirty degree oilfield in the middle of the Arabian desert, or a windswept desolate Texas mine." He shook his head. "Or some crime ridden section of some big town. It's never exotic."

"Well, here's hoping." Daikon smiled. He adjusted his name tag so it was straight.

"If you say so." Warrens said as he gestured at the door. "Let's get to work." Reflexively he pulled his shirt down on the side where he was carrying his weapon.

"Stop doing that." Daikon pointed at him.

"What's that?"

"Tugging on your shirt on your weapon side. Anyone who carries will know right away you're carrying."

Warrens exhaled loudly. "Never carried concealed before. I'm just worried it will show, you know?"

"Yeah, I do." Daikon nodded as he pulled the door open. "But civilians are oblivious to things like that. You could be in two different color shoes and ninety percent of the population wouldn't notice. That move is like popping off a red star cluster flare for any security man worth their salt." He gestured at the door and picked up a British accent. "Let us go; our mops await-eth, Sire"

The pair spent the entire night sweeping, mopping, and buffing floors without seeing anyone or anything out of the ordinary.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

As the had done the previous four days, they all met in the breakfast room of the hotel to discuss the evening's events and what was planned for the next day.

Daikon sat on one of the metal and plastic chairs off to one side. He had slouched down until his butt was hanging off the bottom of the chair and his head was resting on the backrest. His arms hung limp, hands almost touching the floor.

"You going to make it, Radish?" Squires asked.

Daikon just exhaled loudly.

"He's been in the dumps since about three AM," Warrens said.

"Oh man; rough night mopping?" Squires asked with a smile. "We watched empty security monitors. It was riveting."

"I mean…" Daikon said. He exhaled again. "I mean…"

"What do you mean?" Ronker asked. Now he smiled. "Need a hug?"

"No, what I *need* is some action." Daikon picked up his hands but didn't move from his slouch. "I mean… There's this covert group." He waved his hands dismissively. "You don't know them of course. But they are a super-secret organization that says they save the world regularly."

"Wow, sounds cool." Ronker said.

"Regularly!"

"Neat." Squires said.

"Yeah, right? I thought so too. Anyway they bring me in." He sat up slightly. "Under duress I might add."

"Duress?" Squires said. "Oh my."

"Oh my is right. They threatened to kill me if I didn't go along. Air drop at twenty angels. Me! A moderately decorated American hero."

"Seems kind of drastic, I think." Squires said. "But still." She gestured with her hand for him to continue. "You mean…"

"I mean," Daikon continued, "is they promised me adventure. Adrenalin pumping, edge of your seat adventure."

"Well you are on the edge of your seat." Ronker said. "So there's that. Right?"

Daikon slouched farther down. "And so they bring me in. Dog and all. Cutting edge technology." He held up his arm. "Like this…" He scrunched up his face. "Apple watch."

"That is pretty cool." Ronker said.

"You mean…" Squires coaxed again.

"I mean, I'm pitched this story with aliens and space ships and all sorts of stuff." He held up a finger. "That may or may not be audioanimated electronics."

"That's not what they're…" Squires interrupted.

"Let him go. He's on a roll." Ronker said. Now he gestured at the man. "You mean…"

"Yeah, I mean… so maybe they don't even have any technology. When you're…" He held up his fingers and made little quote marks. "Flying in their ships, nothing seems to move." He raised a finger. "Very much like a simulator, I have to point out."

"What about Saturn?" Warrens said. "You saw that personally."

"Faked. Just like the moon landings. Author C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick worked on it, I imagine."

"They both died like twenty years ago," Squires said.

"Before they died, obviously."

"Obviously." Squires affirmed. She gestured again. "You mean…"

"*I mean*, Earth saving missions. That's what I was promised." He hesitated. "By this covert organization." He made finger quotes again. "That you probably have never heard of. Nice folks, really. But a bunch of liars the lot of them."

"Ouch." Warrens said.

"He's been like this since three AM?" Ronker asked.

Warrens nodded at Ronker.

"Ouch is right. You should put in for hazard pay."

"But instead of this great adventure what do I get?" Daikon continued as if he hadn't heard them, "I'm mopping floors. Four days now. *Mopping*."

"No, no, no. It hasn't been all mopping. Now who's making stuff up?" Warrens said.

"That is true, my good man." Daikon said. "There has been buffing as well. Buffing galore. And trash can emptying."

"Don't forget filling up the paper dispensers in the bathroom." Warrens said. "That's important as well."

"Oh, how could I forget that. Live on the razor's edge of life toilet paper refilling mission. *Mullets*, dammit."

"Wait, what?" Ronker said. "Mullets?"

Warrens exhaled as he gestured at Daikon. "It seems the esteemed Lieutenant Jared Daikon is a rolls off the back toilet paper guy." Now he made finger quotes. "Mullets. Instead of over the front." He made quotes again. "Beards."

"Oh man." Squires said. "You're putting all the toilet paper rolls on *backwards*? That's inhuman."

"He might be the alien." Ronker said with a smile.

Now Daikon pulled himself up until he was seated properly. He brought his hands up plaintively. "I haven't shot at anyone in over two weeks!"

"That is a long time." Ronker said. He smiled again. "So is that it; you're bored?"

"Operation Swabbie is over." Daikon said.

"Operation Swabbie?" Ronker asked. He looked at Warrens. "What operation is… you mean this one?"

"It's a long story, Commander. I'll explain it later. Radish likes naming ops." He smiled. "On the bright side I get to name the next one." He winked at Ronker. "In some exotic location, I'd imagine."

"Now it's Operation Nothing Burger." Daikon said. He let out a long sign. "A go-large Nothing Burger combo. Heavy pickles and a Doctor Pepper no ice."

"Heavy pickles?" Ronker said.

"Don't ask. You'll get an hour-long monologue about pickles; dill, sweet, bread and butter. All of them."

"No one should eat bread and butter pickles; they are an abomination." Squires said.

"That's what I said!" Daikon exclaimed.

"Alright now." Ronker said as he looked at his watch. "Now that you're done venting, it's oh-nine hundred hours and I'm ready for some shut-eye. So listen up. We're all tired from a long day… long four days of being on hold. But we're not taking our eyes off the target."

"There's a target?" Daikon said. "Could have fooled me." He let his arms drop down again as he slowly slouched back down.

"Yes, *Lieutenant*, there is. And if you can't keep your focus over a couple of down days, maybe we made a mistake on you. I can call for an ex-fil and have you back at Ops before lunch. We'll have the Calamari wipe your mind by thirteen hundred, and you'll be eating pudding and relearning you're A-B-Cs by dinner time."

"Whoa, what?" Daikon sat up straighter. "Hold on there, Commander. Let's not get hasty."

"That's what I thought." Ronker said. He yawned. "Listen, *I get it*. Intel says it's going to happen." He gestured at himself. "And believe me I want it to happen sooner rather than later. A lot sooner than day five, I can tell you that. But sometimes the intel is wrong."

"Whoa, whoa Commander. Let's not get hasty." Squires said with a smile.

"Don't let him rub off on you, Kills." Ronker said. "Here's another intel flash for you, Daikon; we're all tired of sitting here doing nothing all night and sleeping all day." He exhaled. "We're giving this another three days then we pull the plug and regroup."

"Oh, well at least that's a week's pay, right?" Daikon said as he stood. "That'll go in my new tires fund." He stretched. "Forty-fives don't pay for themselves you know."

"What does your Jeep need forty-five-inch tires for?" Squires asked.

"Because fifty inchers would be just too big on a daily driver. I wouldn't fit in parking spaces."

"You can discuss the absurdness of Daikon's primary mode of transportation later," Ronker said. "It's rack time." He pointed at the door. "Everyone get eight hours so we stay focused."

"Aye, aye, Sir." Daikon said. He gave a salute just as a maid walked into the room.

She raised an eyebrow at Daikon.

Ronker narrowed his eyes at him.

Daikon smiled wide. "Missus Bluemont; how are you this fine day?" He gestured at Ronker. "My future brother-in-law doesn't like my Navy jokes." He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone. "He was Air Force."

The cover story that the group had come up with was that Daikon was marrying Squires and the rest of the party was family or friends. They explained that their time away in the evening was due to heavy partying. The fact that the aliens had not tried to steal the jewels was becoming a

problem since the supposed day for the wedding was now only two days away.

"My husband was Air Force," Mrs. Bluemont said. "Flew the Harrier. Thirty-five years. Retired as an Air Commodore."

"Flew?" Ronker said. "Oh, is he…"

The maid shook her head. "No; just retired. I'm done at the end of the year as well. Three more months then we're looking as doing some traveling."

"That sounds nice." Ronker said with a smile. He tapped his watch so that Daikon could see but the maid couldn't.

"The kids are grown and doing well, house is paid for and we've got plenty of money saved up on top of Gerald's pension." She smiled. "We'll finally get some nice relaxing time just for ourselves. Traveling the world." She smiled. "Oh, it'll be grand."

Daikon got serious. "That does sound like a great plan. I hope you two have wonderful adventures; you've both earned it. I mean that, really." He gestured at the door. "Well, I need to get some sleep. Have a great day."

"You too." The maid said as she walked to the closet in the corner to retrieve her cleaning supplies.

Ronker started for the exit, beckoning for everyone to follow.

The group walked to the elevator in silence. When it arrived, they all piled in.

"Yeah, let's get some sleep so we're sharp for tomorrow." Daikon said finally. "Those two deserve some nice peaceful vacation time without some damned Greys screwing it up."

"That's why we do this." Ronker said as he patted him on the shoulder. "You'll get to shoot someone soon, I promise. Bad guys. Real bad guys."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Second First Contact

Daikon let out a sigh. He had finished half of the long hallway and two of the rooms on the third floor. There were only two more to go. "Two more to go." He said aloud. "Man oh man how the mighty have fallen." He pushed the mop bucket around as he turned to work his way toward the remaining rooms.

Ahead of him in the dimly lit hallway, a familiar figure ducked into one of the rooms.

"Reginald? What're you doing here so late?" Daikon said to himself. He had seen the man several times during his cleaning routine; he was one of two maintenance men. Both of them had checked out. However, Reginald was on the day shift; he had seen him in the locker room as they were leaving and he was coming in. "Stealing office supplies?" He carefully let go of the mop so it didn't fall over and walked toward the door. "Maybe I can get a raise for reporting you. New rims for those forty-fives."

"You still talking to yourself?" Warrens said through the watch. Invariably Daikon forgot that he was part of a conference call at all times so when he talked to himself- which he did often- everyone else could hear him.

"Trouble up there?" Squires asked. "I don't have visual where you're at."

"No, it's nothing. As usual." Daikon said as he reached the door knob. "Office supply pilfering most likely. I'll keep you posted."

"You keep us posted on everything you're doing. You need to work on your inner monologue." Squires said.

"Right, right." Daikon opened the door and stepped in. "Hey Reginald," he said as he entered. "What are you still…" Movement to his left made him look.

Reginald was in mid swing, aiming to punch him in the head.

Daikon let his knees buckle as his years of hand-to-hand combat training took over. He crumpled to the ground and rolled to the side as Reginald's fist passed where his head had just been. "What the hell, Reginald? Calm down; it's me!"

Reginald recovered from his swing and took a step forward. "What are you doing in here?"

"Calm down, man; I saw you come in and you're day shift, so I was curious. Jeeze, no need to punch me in the head."

Reginald looked down at his wrist. He was wearing a large silver watch. He made several clicking sounds into it.

The clicks sounded just like the audio files that he had heard as part of his briefing on the Greys. "Reggie?" Daikon said. He brought his hands up defensively.

Reginald hissed at Daikon then took two quick steps toward him, hands out like claws.

It now seemed obvious to Daikon that Reginald fit the description of a disguised Grey; rail thin and pale. Of course, that also described a great many human Englishmen as well. “I think I need...” He began.

Reginald grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to pull him in close as he opened his mouth to bite him on the neck.

Outweighing him by almost forty pounds of muscle, Daikon grabbed Reginald by his armpits and started shoving him across the room.

Reginald backpedaled and tried to look over his shoulder to see where he was being pushed. After a moment he turned and tried to bite Daikon again.

As Daikon pushed Reginald, he kicked at his foot causing him to trip. As they fell backwards onto the floor, Daikon kept hold of Reginald’s armpits to make sure he couldn’t get his hands up to protect his head. As Reginald’s head bounced off the marble tile, Daikon lifted himself up and kneed him in the groin using as much weight as possible.

The move would have incapacitated a human.

“You stupid Humans thinking everyone’s anatomy is the same as yours. Pompous apes!” Reginald reached up and grabbed Daikon’s ear and resumed trying to bite his neck.

Daikon swiveled his body up straddling Reginald. “I’m pretty sure your brain is inside that skull.” He said as he punched Reginald in the temple.

Dazed, Reginald let go of Daikon’s ear for a moment.

It was all the time Daikon needed; he let loose a volley of punches to Reginald's head and face. After a dozen strikes, Reginald stopped moving. "Yeah, that's what I thought you stinking lousy alien!" He sat back on his heels and took several deep breaths. "Man. Are you guys hearing this?"

"Yup! Moving your way." Warrens replied quickly- he was already running to the stairs.

Daikon looked down. "Reginald? Man, and you seemed…"

Daikon was cut off as Reginald punched him in the face. It wasn't a hard strike but even so, he kept swinging -and connecting- with both hands.

"Hey!" Daikon said as he leaned back to get out of range of the strikes. "You're through Reginald and you're not getting those jewels, I can tell you that!"

"Stupid human, you think these worthless baubles make any sort of difference? Our plan will continue!" Reginald reached out and grabbed Daikon's arm and pulled it toward his mouth. "You won't even care about these jewels once you're dealing with the fallout." He opened his mouth wide.

Daikon began hitting him with his free hand until the alien let go. Then be hit him with both fits until Reginald stopped moving again. He hopped up. "Man!" He shook his fists; they were bloodied from hitting the other's head. "Just stop it!" He took several deep breaths as he looked at Reginald; whatever sort of mask he was wearing seemed to stay in place even with him hitting it. "That's just crazy."

For a long moment Daikon just looked at Reginald. Suddenly Reginald grabbed Daikon by the ankle and swiveled his body around to try and bite him.

"Jeeze!" Daikon said. He drew his pistol and shot him in the chest several times. "How's that feel, Reggie?" He took several steps back. "Biting people? Come on!" He kept his pistol trained on Reginald. "Well, got anything to say now?"

When the door behind Daikon opened, he wheeled around and trained his pistol at it.

"Whoa, whoa!" Warrens said. "It's me!" He also had his gun drawn.

"Reginald is a damned alien." Daikon gestured at him with his pistol. "Reginald!"

"I was kind of suspicious of that lanky guy." Warrens said. "But he was on days."

"Right? And he checked out." Daikon said.

"Yeah, between that being on days I thought I was just being paranoid. Damned annoying how they look like regular Brits, huh?"

Daikon looked down at the dead alien. "They only come in white?"

Warrens shook his head. "No, other places they're dark. But they're always tall and lanky; they can't do anything about that."

"What the hell is going on up there?" Ronker said angrily over the microphone.

"Sir!" Daikon pointed at Reginald. "Reginald the maintenance guy was an alien."

"Yeah, we figured that out already. Is he dead?"

Daikon shrugged. "He didn't knock out easy, I'll tell you that. Will five rounds center mass kill him?"

"It should."

Daikon shot Reginald in the head.

"What the hell was that?" Ronker said.

"Oh, well, you said 'should' and I was hoping for something along the lines of 'definitely'. Now he's been shot in the head. How about now?"

"Yeah, he'd definitely dead. Stop shooting him, dammit."

"I have a mop, you know." Daikon gestured at the door. He still kept his eyes on Reginald.

"Good. Clean up the mess and Warrens…You there yet Warrens?"

"I'm here, Sir."

"Get him to the roof."

"The roof?" Daikon asked.

"We can't very well let some random coroner do an autopsy on him, now can we?" Ronker said. "Get him up there so Jackson and MacDonald can stow the body."

"Oh right. Jonathan Frakes would be making a new video, right?" Daikon said. He let out a long breath. "That first one was kind of fun though." He bent over and put his hands on his knees. "Oh hell!"

"What's going on now Daikon? You need to get it together."

"I'm fine, Sir." Daikon said. "My first contact went a lot smoother than my second contact; you know?"

"Yeah, I know." Ronker said with a chuckle. "Why can't we all just get along, right?"

"Right."

"Was he alone?" This time it was Squires. "I'm not seeing any movement anywhere else."

"He was talking to someone." Daikon holstered his pistol. "Let me grab my mop cart; I've got some big garbage bags in there."

"I'll grab it." Warrens said as he turned and jogged out the door.

"Thanks." Daikon called after him.

"Who was he talking to? Was he alone?" Squires asked again.

"He was talking into his very own alien cutting edge technology Apple watch. Those clicks and pops; I have no idea what he was saying."

"Oh, just a second, I'll pull it up." Squires said.

"Oh man, not only am I hot-miking, I'm being *recorded* too?"

"It makes the After-Action-Review go a lot quicker." Ronker said.

"I got it." Squires said. "Okay… hold one… He said 'That one chatty guy is here. Continue with the operation, I'll get rid of him."

"Chatty?" Daikon put his hands on his hips. "Friendly is what I was being." He looked at Reginald. "There's a difference you know." He kicked Reginald's foot. "Some people."

Warrens pushed the mop cart through the door. "Got it." He wheeled it beside Daikon and the alien.

"He's not people." Ronker said.

"Right, right." Daikon startled. "Hey, why was he so intent on biting me? And why is his blood red as well?" He took a large trash bag from a side bin on the cart and began to pull it over Reginald's head.

"Their saliva is an analgesic to Humans; you would have gotten groggy so he could easily subdue you." Squires said.

"Yuck." Daikon stuck out his tongue. "That's just gross." He pulled the bag down to Reginald's waist. "Okay will that do?"

"I'll get him from here." Warrens said. He bent down and picked up Reginald; while he was six-foot three, he only weighed about a hundred-forty pounds. He adjusted the alien so that his head was lower over his shoulder. "Moving to the Roof. Jackson, you hearing all this?"

"Sure am." Jackson said. "Moving to the south end of the roof."

"Wait, wait!" Daikon said. He moved around Warrens and pulled the alien's arm out of the sack. He pulled the watch off. "Now I have my very own alien tech. Cool, right?"

"Yes; very. On my way, Jackson." Warrens turned and walked out quickly.

"Huh." Daikon said as he pulled out the mop and cleaned up the blood. "It's so weird that it's red."

"While their blood is red, it has nothing in common with Human blood. Of course, it moves oxygen and other gasses around their body but it's not iron based." Squires explained.

"Huh, just one of those coincidences then." Daikon said. "Kind of like two legs and…"

"The op is still ongoing; you two can talk alien physiology when we get back to base. Right now, *the op is still ongoing*."

"Right." Daikon said as he put the mop back into the soapy water. "I'll get to the first floor." He held up the alien watch as if the others could see it. "Hey! Look at this!"

"It's audio not video, Radish." Ronker said.

"Yeah, yeah. Well, I got that alien's watch. So as far as his partners know, he's subduing me right now. Can you say 'It's done, he's dead.' in Grey? Or Zeta Reticulian? Or whatever it is?"

"Yeah, give me a second." Squires said. "Good thinking. Maybe that will flush out the other ones."

Daikon took the mop out and ran it over the area one more time while he waited.

"Ready?" Squires said.

"Yeah." Daikon held the alien watch up to his. "Go now."

"Hit the button on the side."

A long series of clicks and pops emanated from Daikon's watch. After it stopped, he stood rock still, unsure what to do next.

"Okay, that's it." Squires said.

"That seemed like a lot more than 'it's done, he'd dead'." Daikon said.

"I said that you were dead and to get moving on the jewels and I would catch up once your body was hidden."

"Real nice." Daikon said with a nod. "Okay, I'm going to head down to the first floor."

"I'll meet you there." Ronker said.

"Right, right." Daikon jogged out of the room and down the hallway toward the stairs. He stuffed the alien watch into his back pocket as he went.

Operation Jewel Heist!

As Daikon reached the landing for the second floor, Ronker jogged onto it from the opposite side.

"What've we got?" Daikon asked.

"Squires?" Ronker asked.

"We've got three moving toward the jewel cases. Two are definitely Greys. Looks like they're going to do a smash and grab seeing as how they are holding sledgehammers."

"Three on two isn't as bad as the eight or eleven bad guys you briefed us, Squires." Daikon said as the two cautiously went down the last flight of stairs toward the ground floor. "I'd love to have a Smith and a Jones with me right about now." He stopped two steps shy of the end, keeping a wall in between him and the jewel cases.

"They from your SEAL team?" Ronker asked as he stepped up behind him.

Daikon shook his head. "Nope; no idea who they are. But that's what we need; a couple of new-to-the-team no-last-name bullet-attractors."

"It's just you and me, pal. And we both got last names." Ronker said with a smile. "But if it helps, when this is over, I'm going to take the family back to Coney Island, have a vacation with them. Relax for a whole week."

"Oh man, don't say stuff like that."

"And my wife is pregnant with our third kid. Our first boy. I can't wait to be there for his birth."

"Don't. Just don't"

Ronker chuckled. "And I'm close to retirement too. Two months; this is my last op."

"Stop it." Daikon said as he chuckled as well. He removed the magazine from his pistol and replaced it with a fresh one. He put the half-empty one in his back pocket. "After all that, I'll lead off with a full mag."

"How many rounds you got?"

"Three full mags. I wasn't expecting any sort of prolonged firefight." Daikon patted the back pocket opposite the one he put the used magazine in. "And one with five rounds down." He hesitated for a moment. "That's… forty-eight rounds. I hope that's enough."

"So you're a mag plus one kind of guy? Nice".

"What are you bringing to the party, Sir?" Daikon asked.

Ronker removed the sports coat he was wearing. "Well…" He had an MP5, a semi-automatic submachine gun slung across his back. "I've only got a hundred fifty for this. Didn't put that extra round in." He worked the bolt, loading the weapon.

"Oh baby, that's sexy." Daikon said. "Not that you need it but got anything else?"

"Just it's little brother; an HK VP9," he patted the holster on his right side that had a semiautomatic nine-millimeter pistol in it. "And three mags. So I'm sitting at fifty two rounds in that."

"Screw Smith and Jones, these Greys won't know what hit them when the Heckler and Koch gang show up." He waggled his own pistol- a Heckler and Koch VP40 that fired forty caliber rounds. "Hollow points?"

Ronker tilted his head at him. "I'm not here to make friends you know."

"Nice." Daikon stepped down one more step. "What've we got, Squires?"

"Okay. They're moving to the cases. Looks like two will smash; the Greys, and the human is providing cover. So only one pistol out." She hesitated. "A Beretta nine mil."

"A Beretta? Hell. I just want to shoot him to put him out of his misery now." Daikon said. "Before it jams and he gets all embarrassed."

"I've cut the external alarms so you won't get any outside visitors if they break the glass," Squires continued. "But there's four other cleaners in the building that might come running if they hear a commotion. I'll keep an eye out for them." She paused for a moment. "Okay, one Grey seems to be talking to someone on his wrist phone. Not sure exactly who. I don't see any other motion anywhere else. Oh, Warrens is coming down your way. He's running down from the roof so he should be there soon; four, five minutes."

"Okay. We're going to go left and right around the cases at the bottom of the stairs." Ronker said, using his memory of the layout of the room.

"Seems weird they'd do this when they know they're on video." Daikon said. "Hey Squires, you got that door locked behind you?"

"I'm keeping an eye on it." She replied. "You need to go before they smash those cases. Looks like the conversation is over."

"Okay, I'm lefthanded so I'll go right." Daikon said.

"Got it." Ronker said as he moved to the same step as Daikon on his left side. "Ready?"

"Let's roll." Daikon said. He slapped Ronker's shoulder. "Tag, I'm it." He said as he moved around the corner to the closest display case for cover. "Hey guys, I just mopped down here; don't mess up my floor!" He said to the two at the jewel cabinets. One had a sledge hammer raised over his head. He was preparing to swing it at the case with both hands. "Simon, you know how to clear jams from that thing?" He said to the man with the gun. "Because that's what they do all day long."

As Simon swung his pistol around to point it at Daikon, Ronker shot him twice, throwing him back against the cabinet behind him. He slumped over it, pistol clattering to the ground out of sight.

"Don't even think about it." Daikon trained his pistol on the one with the sledge hammer above his head. He winced as an explosion and gunfire erupted in his earpiece.

"So much for your female." The alien said as he threw his sledge hammer at Daikon.

As soon as it left his hand, Daikon shot him three times in the chest. He too was knocked back by the hollow tipped rounds expanding as they hit. Daikon ducked to the side as the sledgehammer bounced off a cabinet and onto the floor.

A bullet hit Daikon's shoulder from behind, spinning him around as Ronker shouted a warning.

The firefight in his ear was distracting so Daikon pulled his earpiece out, letting it dangle from its cord as he rolled to the ground and ducked behind a cabinet, back against it. "What've we got?"

"Two more rolled in." Ronker said. A sound of smashing glass made him curse.

"Now it's a party." Daikon said as he swapped his pistol to his uninjured side and got ready to stand. "Hey Chuckles, you got a joke for them?"

"Full auto, as requested." Ronker answered.

"Hells yes. Go!" He pushed himself up to his feet and quickly panned the room for a target. One alien was still smashing cases and the second was taking the jewels from them. He shot the one wielding the sledge hammer several times.

The sound of Ronker's pistol firing on full automatic- seven seconds to empty the 75-round magazine was deafening.

"Damn!" Daikon said. He pivoted around, panning around the room as Ronker slipped another magazine into his pistol and aimed toward the doors in case anyone else came in. "You okay?"

Ronker nodded as he smiled. "Cleanup on aisle seven." He tapped his mic, "Squires?"

"Oh no, Squires!" Daikon turned to face the stairs- the other entrance to the area, then fumbled to get his earpiece in. He finally got it in halfway into the conversation.

"…decided to come this way instead. So we…."

"Who decided?" Daikon said. "I had my earpiece out. Everyone okay?"

"Yeah, everyone's fine." Ronker said.

"Warrens detoured here when he got to the second floor. Got here just as they breached."

"All part of the service." Warrens said.

"How many of them are there?"

"There *were* three of them." Squires said.

"Huh. So three there, four here, we're still short a couple of bad guys." Daikon said. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the case in front of him. "See them anywhere?"

"They're heading towards the roof. Three of them." Squires said. "Jackson's swinging around to take care of them."

"How does that work? Won't there be huge holes in the roof?" Daikon said as he gestured around the room. "This will be hard enough to explain."

"Non-traditional weapons leave very little residue." Ronker shrugged. "Little bits and pieces that get played off as some balloon or parts of a satellite."

Daikon kept his weapon trained on the door. “So that’s the whole op?”

“What more do you want?” Ronker said. “That was exciting. You even got shot you know.”

“Yeah, but it’s just a graze.” Daikon said. “I think the bleeding has stopped even.”

“Daikon,” Ronker said. “I can see the hole from here. It’s square through your shoulder.”

“Yikes! Really? Then I need to get some medical attention before this adrenalin wears off.” He looked over at Ronker. “Oh hell.” His knees wobbled so he supported himself on the glass case. “That stinking… who shot me?”

“A Human I think he was.” Ronker said. “Kind of short, stout, red hair.”

Daikon pushed up off the counter and stepped around it. “Him? Reggie shot me? I loaned him five pounds yesterday for lunch!” He kicked the dead man’s foot. “I hope you enjoyed that donner kebab, Reggie.” He shook his head. “Man, some people.” He winced. “Oh, now that hurts. That really hurts.”

“Get to the roof so you can get taken care of.” Ronker said. “I’ll get these bodies up to the roof.”

Daikon let out a long breath then let his gun arm dangle to his side. “Roger that, Sir.”

"I'll keep eyes up here while that happens. Warrens is moving the ones here to the roof." Squires said.

"Damn, I could use a dolly." Ronker said to himself.

"There's a flatbed in the storage room near the end of the hall on this floor." Daikon said. "I can get it."

"You need to get that shoulder looked at."

"You don't know where it is, Sir. I'll be right back." Daikon smiled. "All part of the…" He jumped and looked behind him.

"What?" Ronker lifted his pistol and panned it around the room. "What? What?"

"My back pocket just buzzed." He started to reach into it but couldn't with his hurt shoulder, so he stuffed his pistol into his pocket and reached around to grab the alien device. He held it up. "It's buzzing. What should I do?"

"Squires?" Ronker said. "Language assistance please."

"On it. Okay, go. Tap the side of it and hold it next to your watch."

"Right." Daikon did just that.

The two waited in silence as the alien device clicked and chirped while Squires replied through Daikon's wrist phone.

Finally, Squires spoke up. "Tap the side again."

"Done." Daikon said. "What was that all about?"

"They're falling back to a secondary plan." Squires said. "They didn't say what that was though, so we're back to square one."

"Wait a second," Daikon said. "When I got to Reginald. The first one, he was talking into some other alien. But there's something Reginald said that's been bugging me. He said that we'd be more worried about the fallout than the jewels. Do you think he meant the fallout from the jewels being missing or was he talking *actual* fallout. Like nuclear weapon fallout? Do Greys have nukes?"

"We will discuss that back at Ops," Ronker said. "Right now we need to get this place cleaned up."

"I'll grab that cart and be right back." Daikon took a step away from the glass case, wobbled, then grabbed it again for support. "Whoa."

"You've lost a bit of blood. Just tell me where that dolly is." Ronker said. "Jackson, can you put down on the roof and give me a hand? Daikon's going to need some help getting up to you."

"Roger that." Jackson said.

"I'll be down as soon as we land," McDonald said.

"Excellent." Ronker pointed at Daikon. "Put some pressure on that; you're bleeding like a stuck pig."

Daikon looked at his shoulder and startled, surprised at the amount of blood on his shirt. "Oh Hell, that's not good." He clasped his hand over the exit wound, grimacing as he did. "What's the back doing?" He turned around slowly.

"Seems to be just out the front for now." Ronker said. "Lean on that counter to keep that hole above your heart. We'll take care of this."

"Right. Head down the hall away from the entrance. It's the first door past the Men's room. It's not locked."

"You okay by yourself?"

Daikon nodded. "I'm okay. If I get any more woozy, I'll sit down."

By the time Ronker returned with the dolly, Daikon was face down on the floor in a pool of his own blood.

Operation No Operation

"Daikon, you awake?"

Daikon opened his eyes. Ronker and Jackson were standing at the foot of his bed. "I do believe I am." He blinked several times. "What happened?"

"You were shot." Jackson said.

"Yeah, well I remember that part." Daikon pointed. "And then you went for a dolly to move the bodies." He thought for a moment. "Then I was standing there thinking I should probably sit down."

"You should have," Ronker chuckled. "Along with that hole, you ended up with a bruise on your forehead. But you're all better now."

Daikon raised his other arm. It didn't hurt at all. He looked at it. There wasn't even a bandage on it. "Bacta tank?"

"That's Empire Strikes Back." Jackson said.

"T-Cell tank?"

"That's Apple Declined." Jackson replied again.

"Elfin magic and Kingsfoil?"

"Close." This time it was Ronker. "More like Calamari magic."

"Magic, wow." Daikon said, still looking at his shoulder.

"Printing is more like it." Jackson said.

"They printed me a new shoulder?" Daikon raised his arm again. "Out of what? Tell me it's Adamantium."

"That's X-Men." Jackson said.

"And you're too much of a goodie two shoes for that." Ronker said with a smirk.

"Oh, I see what you did there." Daikon said. "Nicely done."

"Stop mixing up universes with real life." Jackson said.

"So what'd they use?"

"You; they printed the missing tissue using samples from your own tissue. They can do a whole arm if they have to but it would take a couple of days. A hole takes about an hour."

"They can just print a lost limb? Pretty handy."

"Well, they can regrow theirs like our octopus can, by using their growth-chromosomes, they've developed this technology for species that can't." Jackson explained.

"Mighty neighborly of them." Daikon flexed his bicep. "So an entire arm or leg? Wow! And it's the same size not baby sized?"

"That's Deadpool." Jackson pointed out.

Daikon sat up. "Wait; an hour? I've been out for only an hour?"

"Well, no; we had to get you back to base first, get the samples of the various tissues and T-cells, then set up the printing. It's just before lunch on the next day."

"Wow. So… what happened?" Daikon hesitated. "I mean with the operation?"

"The OP was good." Ronker said. "We moved the aliens out, put our weapons with the Humans, then cleared out. By now the British government is sweeping the entire thing under the rug."

"You left our weapons?" Daikon frowned. "I really liked that pistol."

"There's another one just like it in the arms room." Ronker said. "Get dressed so we can eat and get you up to speed."

"I thought the OP was a success."

"It was, but that little bit about fallout is going to become an issue pretty quick-like." Ronker explained.

"Operation Fallout." Jackson said.

"Oh, no, no; that's not nearly flashy enough." Daikon said as he swung his feel around and let them dangle over the bed. "How about…"

"That's what it is." Jackson interrupted him. "You agreed to it."

"What; while I was groggy? That's not very nice."

"No; you told Warrens he could name the next OP. So he did; Operation Fallout."

"Fine." Daikon exhaled as he hopped off the bed. "So we're going someplace exotic then?"

"Oh yeah, really exotic." Ronker said. "Surprisingly enough."

"Nice! Curaçao? Aruba?" Daikon reached for his jumpsuit; it was hanging over a chair. "Havana?"

"York."

Daikon raised an eyebrow at Ronker. "That doesn't sound very Caribbean, Commander."

"Well of course not. There's good reason for that." The man replied.

"And that's because…" Daikon began.

"It's in North Eastern England." Ronker said. "Exotic North Eastern England."

"I don't believe 'North Eastern England' and 'exotic' have ever been used in a sentence together."

"Don't be stupid; they just were," Jackson said with a smile.

"Yeah, I heard. So York… it's exotic?" Daikon hopped as he pulled up his flight suit. He startled. "Hey! Has anyone checked on Tucker?"

"Tucker is wandering the halls getting pets from anyone and everyone he can." Jacksons said.

"Oh, that's a relief." Daikon said. He slipped the flight suit over his arms. "Poor puppy." He zipped his flight suit up. "You were going to tell me why it's exotic. Personally, I've never heard of it."

"Well, exotic is a strong word; it is a walled city in northeast England that was founded by the Romans, so there's that. It's really quaint; you'll love it."

"So you're saying those Greys are going to set off a nuke in some little village?"

"Over two hundred thousand people live there." Ronker gestured at the door. "It's more than a little village. And the prevailing winds will push the radiation towards Leeds thirty miles away. Eight hundred thousand live there, closer to a million if you count the folks in between the two. And as the prevailing winds push southwest, the radiation cloud will end up over Manchester and Liverpool. I'm sure you've heard of them. Tens of millions affected at that point. A radioactive swath through the middle of England."

"Yikes." Daikon started toward the door behind the other two men. "So what's the plan?"

"We eat lunch, grab all the intel we have and head back to England." Jackson said. "I'm still working toward my ace." He prodded Daikon. "You just got to get behind them for me."

"I'll do my best." Daikon said. "Hey! Tucker!" He shouted at his dog down the hallway. It was being pet by a woman.

The dog turned to look then ran straight for him.

"Is that eighty-pound German Sheppard going to stop before he gets here?" Jackson asked.

"Probably not." Daikon got down on one knee, the other leg extended behind him. "It's better to brace yourself."

True to his word, when the dog got to him, it jumped up putting its paws on his shoulders knocking him to the ground. Then as it whined, it chewed on his arm.

"You've only been gone for a day." Jackson said as he watched the dog excitedly attack his owner.

"He's like this if I go to the mailbox without him." Daikon said from the ground. "Good Tucker, good boy!" He rubbed the dog's head. "Poor little abandoned puppy."

"We were on our way to eat." Jackson reminded.

"Right, right." Daikon got to his feet. "Good boy." He pointed at his side. "With me."

Dutifully the dog pivoted around and sat at the man's side. His tail was still wagging furiously.

"How'd you get him out of the house?" Daikon asked. "He's not usually good with strangers in his own space."

"His own space?" Ronker asked.

"Yeah; in the house strangers are a bad thing. When we're out in town shopping, the park," he gestured around, "walking the hallways here, he's just looking for ear scratches and treats. But at home within his perimeter? Whoa boy."

"We sent Durbin."

"Well, he does like females better than males."

"And she was armed with buffalo lung."

"Oh, he's a sucker for freeze dried buffalo lung." Daikon said. "That's smart of her."

"She's got a dog as well." Ronker said. "A mutt of some kind."

"Nice! We'll have to get them together." Daikon said. "When is the next 'bring your dog to work' day?"

"Right after the 'bring your kid to work day'," Ronker said flatly.

"Oh, right. Which is…"

"Never. It's *never* bring your kid to the top-secret working-with-aliens office day." Ronker said.

"And dogs?"

"They show up now and again, when folks have an appointment before work, or after work. One of the techs brings his dog in every day. Separation anxiety." Ronker explained.

Daikon nodded. "Oh, so it's a service dog?"

"Not exactly; since Brian's wife left him, the dog gets anxious when she's left alone." Jackson said. "So Trixie comes to work with him every day."

"An emotional support Human, nice." Daikon said with a smile.

"Entre vous." Ronker held the door open to the cafeteria. "Let's get you up to speed on this operation."

"Right. Hopefully this goes smoother than the last one."

"Smoother?" Ronker asked. "Than we stopping them from stealing the Crown Jewels?"

"Smoother than I don't get shot."

Operation Fallout

Daikon rounded the corner at a full sprint, he weaved around an old couple walking towards him. "Pardon!" He shouted over his shoulder as he went. "Now heading North on Museum Street from Lendal!"

"Where's that?" Warrens asked.

Between breaths, Daikon answered: "Brew and Brownie. Had breakfast there!"

"Right, right. I'll cut him off!" Warrens said. He hadn't started running yet. "I'm at the hotel so I'll get to the corner and tackle him."

"Where's he heading?" Squires asked. She had fallen behind Daikon in the chase. "Maybe I can get ahead of him."

"He's heading for the church," Randy "Quaid" Lancaster replied. He and Scott "Dax" McNamara were hovering overhead providing information on the runner. "His ride is on top of the tower. We've got eyes on it."

"I'll head back to the Fawks." Squires said, referring to the Guy Fawkes hotel, right across from the massive York Minster Anglican church in the middle of the town, where they all were staying. "Meet you at the Sprinter."

"Right." Daikon said. "This guy's fast!" While he had initially gained on the tall alien, it seemed that he didn't tire, or at least didn't tire as fast as even a fit runner like Daikon. "Crossing Blake street!"

"I see him." Warrens said. "Fast little bugger." He sat on a bench near the large intersection where the roads met in front of the church and the pedestrian-only zone started. He casually looked toward the approaching alien. He put his legs under the bench, planning on springing at the alien as he got to him. "Oh man, he's going to be surprised."

"Cutting through to the gardens," Daikon said as he slowed to a jog. "Maybe he'll slow down for you."

True to Daikon's prediction, when he slowed down, so did the alien, dropping to a quick walk.

"They've got to have someone on oversight." Lancaster said. "There's no way he saw you stop."

"Pull back and watch your six, we'll take care of him here." Warrens replied. While it was true that the ship was invisible to the naked eye, they were still visible on the upper end of the light spectrum as well as still having a large electronic signature. "He's not going to make it to that ship so get some altitude."

"Roger that." McNamara replied since he was piloting the ship. "Up to twenty thousand. Keep us posted."

"Will do." Warrens replied.

Just as the alien passed, Warrens leapt forward tackling him. The two went sprawling onto the wide sidewalk. Pedestrians gave them a wide birth as they grappled on the ground.

"Got him!" Warrens said as he spun around to get on top of the alien. He looked around, a crowd was gathering and several people had their phones out. "INTERPOL; this is official business, move along!" He said as the alien continued to struggle under him.

Daikon ran up to the pair. "Nice work." He said as he reached down to grab one of the alien's wrists. "Settle down." He said. "I said settle down!"

The alien continued to struggle. Picking up on what Warrens had said, he looked up at the people gathering. "I'm innocent I tell you!" He said in an English accent. "I haven't done anything wrong!"

"That's what they all say." Daikon said as he hauled the alien to his feet. The alien was almost six inches taller than him. "Now keep quiet."

"Help! I'm being illegally detained!" The alien said even louder. "I'm being kidnapped!"

"Who are you blokes?" A man asked. "Do you have credentials?"

"Continue on your business, Sir." Warrens said as he stood. He held out his sportscoat showing his pistol in a shoulder holster. "This is a dangerous criminal and we'd appreciate it if you kept your distance. Or we'll have you detained by the local police for interfering with an INTERPOL investigation." He let his sportscoat fall closed. "But thanks for your concern, Sir."

"Err, I…" The man said. With the strict gun laws in the United Kingdom the only people who carried weapons were criminals or specialized law enforcement. "Well done then." He said as he stepped back.

"Let's get him off the street, Officer Heinrich." Warrens said to Daikon.

"Huh?" Daikon looked around. "Oh! Ach, ja." He said in a German accent. "Sofort!"

Warrens shook his head. "Officer Squires is in the Sprinter." He pointed down the street toward the hotel. They had rented a large Mercedes Sprinter panel van in case they detained anyone, or more importantly, needed to move a nuclear bomb out of the city. "Cut through." He pointed through the trees surrounding the South African War Memorial.

"Ja!" Daikon said again as he muscled the alien along. "Komm sofort!"

Warrens grabbed the alien's other arm. "Keep quiet and you'll not be harmed."

"Sure, you'll just shoot me when we get out of sight." The alien glared at Warrens. "It's what you do."

"Listen you *asshat*," Daikon said. "I don't see how you can be upset about *anything* we do when you show up uninvited here on our planet and steal our resources and cause all sorts of trouble. So shut the hell up before I do just shoot you for trespassing in my Solar System!"

"Now say that in German." Warrens said with a smile, "Officer Heinrich."

"What's up with that?" Daikon asked.

"With those people videoing us, I figured I didn't want to use your real name."

"You said Squires." Daikon pointed out.

The alien laughed. "Pathetic."

"Said the alien that is on the verge of getting his grey ass kicked until I get tired of swinging at him. I wonder how long that mask will stay on you." Daikon wrenched his arm higher behind his back. "So do your joints bend like ours?"

The alien winced as his arm was pushed upward.

"Let's get him in the van." Warrens said. "Squires is there already."

"Ship's taking off." Scott McNamara said. "Want us to follow?"

"Yeah, see where it goes." Warrens answered. "If it leaves the atmosphere, junk it."

"Roger that." This time it was Lancaster, the weapons specialist on the ship. "It'll put me one closer to El Presidente. Where ever he's at that doesn't include running."

"I'm in the van." Jackson said, hearing his name. "Good hunting Quaid." He said, using Randy Lancaster's call-sign.

"Wait." Daikon said. "I just got that. He's Randy Quaid, like the actor? *That's* his call-sign?"

Warrens laughed. "No, that's not it. We were on a mission on Mars." He jostled the alien. "Dealing with a little forward operating base his folks had set up, and Lancaster had sabotaged their reactor. He got caught up in a firefight and as he chased the Greys away, he was shouting 'start the reactor!' to whoever was left in the command module."

"I get it, and since you were on Mars, he's now 'start the reactor' Quaid. Nice."

"How you Humans ever got past living in caves is beyond me." The alien shook his head.

"I'm going to punch you in the head at some point," Daikon said as they reached the van. "I just thought I would let you know."

Warrens knocked on the side. "Open up." When Squires opened the door, he let go of the alien and stepped in. "Hand him up."

Daikon half shoved, half tossed the alien in. "In you go, Mister Grey." He looked left and right- thankfully no one had followed them to the van. As he stepped in, he pulled the door shut. "We're in."

With that, Jackson pulled out and started driving out of town. "Where to?"

"We need a quiet LZ to transfer the prisoner."

"Roger that." Jackson replied. "McNamara?"

"Go." McNamara replied.

"Heading to LZ three."

"Three? Homestead Park?"

"That's it; the spillway to the west of it. We're moving there now."

"Copy." McNamara replied. "Once we're done we'll head that way."

"Sure, you're going to transfer me." The alien scoffed. "To execute me is more like it."

"We're not going to kill you." Warrens said.

"To where then?"

"To the Calamari. They claim jurisdiction, I do believe." Warrens replied.

The alien scooted to where his back was against the side of the van. "Wait a minute. Let's discuss this."

"Oh? You're not so smug all of a sudden." Daikon said. He looked at Warrens. "They don't like being with the Calamari?"

"They don't like being put on trial by the Calamari." Squires said. "They're…" She paused as she considered it. "Very Napoleonic in their laws."

"Oh, nice." Daikon said. "Guilty until proven innocent. Well, since you were caught here on Earth where you weren't invited, proving you're innocent will be a breeze." He looked at Squires. "Do they believe in capital punishment, these Napoleonic Calamari?"

"They do indeed." Squires replied. She moved to one of the jump seats at the front of the van and drew a Tazer from a holster mounted beside the seat. "It brings recidivism down to zero, doesn't it?" She pointed it at the alien. "Let's just drop him off and get something to eat."

"Listen." The alien began. "Let's talk this through. I was just working on my ranch when I was conscripted. I didn't even want to come to Earth. I don't even agree with what they're doing here."

"Where is the bomb?" Warrens said flatly.

"Bomb?" The alien tilted his head at him. "What bomb? There's no bomb."

"The nuclear bomb you are planning on setting off on my planet." Daikon said. "In this surprisingly charming town, to be more specific."

"It is nice, isn't it?" Squires said.

"It sure is. And so are all the towns downwind of here." Warrens added.

"I don't know anything about a bomb." The alien said nervously.

"Quaid." Warrens said. "Any updates?"

"The ship never got above a thousand feet. Ran into the North Sea."

"Nice." Daikon said. "One closer to Jackson, right?"

"No, no." Jackson added from the front of the van. "They… and we have underwater capability. They've probably got a base set up someplace off the coast."

"Well crud." Daikon said.

Warrens suddenly moved forward and ripped the mask off the alien.

"What the?" Daikon exclaimed. He looked at the alien; he wasn't all that grey. And instead of being black, his eyes were a piercing orange and there were two matching orange disks high on his head; ostensibly ears. "This is crazy weird."

"Aliens are alien." Squires said.

"No. Well, yes." Daikon said. "But I expected for him to be grey all over with big black eyes. Like the pictures."

"Not all humans look alike either." Warrens pointed out. "If Jackson were to land on their home world and get photographed, they'd assume that all humans were tall and black."

Squires ran her hand through her hair. "Or have beautiful red hair."

"That makes sense." Daikon said. "So are none of them grey?"

"Some are. Some look like those pictures you've seen in the tabloids. Others are orange like this one, or red, or blue."

"Blonds, brunettes, and redheads." Daikon observed.

The alien blinked his large orange eyes at Warrens, bared his sharp teeth then made several clicks and pops.

Warrens turned the mask inside out and pointed at a set of wires. "We were hot-miking." He looked at the alien. "Weren't we."

The alien made more clicks and pops. This time they sounded angry.

"How are we going to talk to him now?" Daikon said. "Most annoying. Want me to just pummel him?" He smiled. "Hey; this reminds me of my interrogation joke."

"Let's hear it." Warrens said.

"How are detainees like a cue ball?"

"How?"

"The harder you hit them, the more English you get out of them."

"Excellent." Warrens said. "Patch me through, Dax." He said to McNamara.

"Okay, you're hot." The man replied.

Warrens pointed at the alien and spoke into his watch: "We know you were placing a nuclear bomb here. Where is it?"

Dutifully the watch made a long series of clicks and pops.

After a moment the alien responded and the watch translated: "I wasn't involved with any bomb. I was here to set up a riot later in the week."

"A riot?" Daikon asked. "What for?"

"It's all part of their destabilization plan, I suppose. Once they get open fighting, they can grab thousands of people for slaves." Squires explained.

After she was translated, the alien nodded his head at her.

"Even so, you would be aware of other missions going on here. Especially one that involved lethal doses of radiation." Warrens pointed out.

After translating back and forth, the alien responded. "I was not told anything. My mission was to run through eight solar days. Then I could return home. There is a shipment of immigrants arriving in two solar days. The next day we were to instigate a confrontation between them and the locals by providing firearms to the immigrants."

Warrens put his hand over the watch. "Now wait a minute; whatever the plan was for the bomb, it had to be more than eight days out. These guys don't just kill their own."

"But intel says it's in the next two or three days," Daikon said.

"Above the LZ. Waiting for your arrival." McNamara said over the radio.

"So, we'll just drop him off?" Daikon asked. "Let justice prevail?"

"Yeah, we'll hand him over to Quaid and Dex to bring him to one of our alternate locations for questioning. Then the Calamari can ask them some questions in a much more direct, physical manner before shipping him to their home world."

"Capital punishment, huh? Do they just drown them?"

"Shot to the head is how they deal with criminal elements." Warrens said. "If they have a central nervous system. If they don't, they just drop them into one of their reactor feeder cores."

"Yikes." Daikon looked at the alien. "Does he know that?"

Warrens nodded as he uncovered his watch. "He is well aware of how the Calamari execute their prisoners."

The watch translated.

The alien didn't answer.

"Do you have a family?" Daikon asked. "Back home?"

After the watch translated, the alien stared at Daikon for a moment then nodded.

"Okay." Daikon said. "Seems we are at an impasse Warrens; he claims to not know about any bomb and you say that there's no way the Grey High Command would set one off with their own people here."

"That's about the sum of it." Warrens said.

"Okay, nice. Hand me the watch and the mask." Daikon said. "Let me give it a go."

Warrens shrugged. “Give it a shot.” He handed both items over.

Daikon put the watch on his wrist. When he drew his pistol the alien looked at him. He spoke into the watch, “Alright Mister Grey…” He hesitated. “Say, what’s your name?”

“It doesn’t translate. Locals call me Bert. Bert Banks.”

“Okay, Bert. You are familiar with the weapon the female is holding?”

Bert looked at it. “It incapacitates.”

“Yes. And mine?” Daikon waggled his pistol.

“It exterminates.”

“Yes. Yes it does.” Daikon gestured at Warrens. “I was telling my companion here that we are at an impasse.” He raised his eyebrows. “Do you know what that means?”

“It is a stalemate?”

“Yes. We are stalemated. Blocked.” Daikon kneeled in front of the alien to look him in the eye. “You see, we believe that a bomb will be placed here in this city to cause massive destruction. And we also think that you would have been given that information so that you would not be killed by it. And yet, you say you do not know about it.”

Daikon waited a long moment until the translation was sent to the alien. Then the reply translated as well: "That is indeed a blockage because I do not know about a bomb."

"We think you are lying."

"I am not, however."

"Nevertheless, what I am going to do is give you your mask so you can ask your leaders about a bomb." He waggled his gun again. "If you say anything other than something like 'is there going to be a bombing in this city', I will shoot you with this gun that exterminates. Do you understand?"

The alien nodded.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Warrens said.

"Sure, these are hollow points; it won't go through his skull so we won't have to explain a bullet hole when we return this rental; we'll just need to hose it out."

When the watch translated what he had said, the alien's large eyes got even larger.

"No." Warrens laughed. "Well, that is a good point yes. But I mean handing him his mask."

"We'll know what he says." Daikon held the mask out for the alien. "Ask. Ask your leader."

The alien took the mask, then paused for a moment. He spoke into the mouth of the mask.

The translation came almost immediately. "Agent Bert Banks checking on discovered information about the placement of a thermonuclear bomb in target city York. Confirm information."

After almost a minute a response was sent: "Bomb is not a concern of Agent Bert Banks. Simultaneous independent missions in progress in your area. Continue with uprising as planned." After a long pause the voice added: "Central Operations recommends your mission be completed before start of third solar day. Confirmed?"

"Confirmed." Bert replied.

Daikon grabbed the mask and tossed it behind him. "What do you know about that, Bert?" He said with a smile. "If we hadn't grabbed you, you'd have started the riots then remained in the town *long* after the bomb went off. Or more accurately until the moment the bomb went off. Then you'd be dead. Exterminated."

The alien didn't respond.

Daikon hit the alien's leg with his pistol. "Hey, I'm talking to you! Your leaders were going to just leave you here to die. What do you say to that?"

The pair stared at each other for several seconds.

"That seems to be the case." The alien finally answered. "It is for the lasting good of the Empire."

Daikon laughed. "Your death is for the lasting good of the Empire? Some nameless rancher? I don't think so. What I really think the case is is that your life isn't worth anything to the Empire so they didn't even think you were worth telling. You are not even worth saving to them."

"There is nothing I can do about these matters." The alien finally said as it looked at the floor.

"Not necessarily. Tell you what, Bert. I have a deal for you. A proposition."

The alien looked at Daikon.

"If you tell us where the bomb is, then we will let you go. You will be free to leave the target city York and return home."

"I do not know where the bomb is." Bert replied. "I have told you the truth."

"But you can find out where it is, can't you." Daikon said. "That way you can tell the others that are here with you. Your companions." He hesitated. "I'm sure you have others working with you, yes? They have families as well, I think."

When the alien didn't respond, Daikon continued: "It is obvious that handing out weapons and starting a riot requires more than one to accomplish. It's a simple question and really, either way telling me doesn't matter."

"There are four of us."

"Fine. Four of you. I am willing to help you live. Someone who is my enemy… if you are willing to help me with a minor detail like the placement of the bomb."

"I will not help you foil that operation."

"I'm not asking you to help me with stopping the bomb, Bert. Let them deliver it as planned. I just want you to tell me where it will be

delivered. That is all; everything else is up to me. And if the plan is successful, the bomb will explode. If it does not, it is not because you were directly involved. After all, your mission is to start a riot. Then you will leave alive, with your three friends. I am saving your life, Bert. I am saving all four of your lives because if you don't get to leave this vehicle, those other three won't know there is a bomb set to explode in three days. Let me save your life. And theirs because if you don't leave this van, they will never know about the bomb until it is too late. Four lives saved."

The alien considered that for a long moment. "I only need to give the coordinates?"

"That is all I am asking. A minor thing. A small portion of the larger plan. All for the opportunity to leave York to see your friends and family again."

"Those terms are acceptable." Bert said after another long time.

"Warrens, we got a burner watch or something? A throw-away comms device?"

"We do. Jackson?"

"Here you go. These are just a straight two-way comms link. Different frequency than anything else we use. Throwaways." Jackson tossed a package back to Daikon.

Daikon opened the package. "These two devices will communicate with only each other." He held up a small oblong transmitter. "The only thing you need to say in it is the name of the building, or the address of where the bomb is being placed."

"The name?"

Daikon nodded. "Yes, like York Mosque, Lidle grocery store, Hotel Indigo. Something like that. One or two words in exchange for your life." He held out the device.

Bert took it. "How will you know what I said? Does this translate as well?"

"It does." Jackson said.

"It does," Repeated Daikon. He held his transmitter up to his mouth. "Testing, testing, can you hear me?"

Bert's transmitter made two clicks and a pop, both times. He nodded.

"Then once you have said that, before the sun rises on the third day you need to make sure you and your friends are out of York. That is important. You need to be out of town by then, right?"

"I do not understand why you would offer me this." Bert said. "It would not be an offer that we would make if our roles were reversed."

"Perhaps this is the start of us working together. To have an accord where we live in peace."

"That is a revolutionary concept." Bert said. "But it is unlikely. While I hope you understand that I do not have objections to that, it is not how the Empire operates."

"Maybe there are more like you. More than you know. More that are tired of being taken from their ranches, homes, and family and sent to far-away planets for the Empire's greed. And you would be the start of a movement to let them know."

"You are speaking of a revolt. A revolution." The alien shook his head. "Many others have spoken out in the past, but it led nowhere for them."

"Maybe they just need the right person to unify those voices." Daikon leaned in and stared into Bert's eyes. "In every revolution, there is one man with a vision."

Jackson stifled a chuckle.

"I do not know about that."

"It is true. Either way, what about my offer?"

Bert stared at the floor of the van.

"I expect to hear from you before the next sunrise. Do we have a deal?" Daikon said. He holstered his gun. "Do we have a deal, Bert Banks?"

"We have an accord for this one instance."

"Put your mask back on and go." Daikon stood. "Get going. So you can get back to your ranch and your family."

Bert worked to his feet then pulled his mask on. As it touched his skin, it sealed with the rest of his neck, the seam disappearing.

"But remember this, Bert; if you betray me, you will never see your family again." Daikon said. He nodded at Squires. "And I am sure they miss you and want you home with them. And you will never have to tell anyone how you got home."

Squires got up and slid the door of the van open.

When Bert stepped onto the sidewalk, he turned to Daikon. "Thank you." He said then walked off.

Squires closed the door then leaned against it. "What the Hell just happened?"

"A mentor once told me a good source handler can get someone to betray their country then thank them for it afterwards." Daikon said.

"Dude," Jackson said. "Did you just quote Star Trek to that alien?"

"What?" Squires said. "When?"

"That whole 'in every revolution there is one man with a vision' is what Kirk says to evil Spock with the beard in the episode Mirror, Mirror right before he transports back to the good Enterprise." Jackson shook his head. "Man, I almost lost it."

"It's true though." Daikon said.

"You really think we can work out a peace with them?" Warrens asked. "Really? They're like locusts raping planets right and left."

"As the loveable General James 'Mad Dog' Mattis so eloquently once said; 'Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everyone you meet." Daikon pointed at the sliding door. "And he also said 'There are some people who think you have to hate them in order to shoot them. I don't think you do.' so dear old Bert might not make it home because if I come across him and his team after they tell us where that bomb is, they might just get a bunch of holes shot in them."

"Agreed." Warrens said. "If nothing else, he'll be guilty of instigating a riot and the deaths those weapons they're passing out cause."

"Say, can we track that transmitter?" Daikon asked.

"Sure we can. Easy peasy." Jackson said. "I'll start building an event matrix of where he goes and when."

"Great. And can you make it hot mike?"

"That we can't do," answered Warrens. "But we can definitely see all the places the esteemed traitor Bert Banks goes in the next day or so."

"So what good is trying to start up a riot if you're just going to turn the place into a glass parking lot?" Daikon holstered his pistol. "Seems like piss-poor planning."

"Oh no; that's pretty smart." Squires said. "When this place gets flattened by a nuclear bomb, they could have harvested fifty, a hundred thousand people and we'd never know because most all the bodies would be incinerated in the blast. There won't be any remains to even identify."

"Yeah," Daikon said, "I didn't think… wait, does that mean there's a huge transport ship sitting out in orbit right now? How do they even move that many people? Don't tell me they have transporters like Star Trek." Daikon rubbed his hands together. "Holy Hell, why don't we have that tech?"

"Settle down, Radish." Warrens said. "Settle down. Yes, there's probably a big transport barge up there someplace. We blow them up when we find them. And no, they don't have transporters. They have to do it the old-fashioned way; cram them into a smaller transport, fly them into space, dump them off, and repeat."

"And before you ask," Squires said. "We make sure they are empty before we blow them up."

"That's good to know." Daikon startled. "Wait; that means you've found transports with people in them? How do you get them to not talk about being abducted by aliens?"

"The Calamari wipe their short-term memories." Squires said. She shrugged. "But some do remember bits and pieces. They end up on In Search Of, or Mysteries of the Unexplained, or some other wackadoodle show on You Tube."

"But… they really *were* abducted." Daikon shook his head. "So those shows are telling the truth. That's crazy."

"Okay," Jackson interrupted. "Since we don't have someone to drop off, I'm scrubbing the LZ. That way it's not burned for later on. What's the plan now?"

"I hope it's dinner." Daikon said.

"Shower then dinner. One of us sprinted a mile recently." Warrens said.

"Sorry Ace; I kept with you as long as I could." Squires said. "Even so, showers before dinner would be nice."

"Back to the Guy Fawkes then." Warrens said. "Tell Dax and Quaid we'll be eating at the…"

"Five Guys?" Daikon interjected.

"We can eat at Five Guys back home." Warrens scowled. "We'll Fat Hippo it tonight."

"Oh yeah; they beat Five Guys every day of the week." Jackson said.

"You've been here before?" Daikon asked.

"Yup." Jackson answered. He leaned out to look as he did a U-Turn. "Best burgers on the planet." He turned around to look into the back of the van. "Trust me." He hesitated for a moment. "Dax and Quaid; LZ scrubbed. We'll reset and have our after-action review at the Fat Hippo."

"Fat Hippo?" Dax replied over the radio. "Excellent choice. Meet you at the Fawkes. Out."

"You come all the way to York just for the burgers?" Daikon asked.

"No," Warrens said. "We were in the North York Moors National Park for a mission six months ago. Greys were tapping into the oil drill platforms in the North Sea off the coast."

"But we stayed at the Guy Fawkes and discovered the Hippo then." Squires said.

"Drill platforms?" Daikon asked.

"After what happened with the Deep-Water Horizon and the Ixtoc One in the Gulf of Mexico spills, we wanted to stop them before they broke something." Warrens said.

"I've heard of the Deep-Water Horizon one. That was a huge spill." Daikon said. "Never heard of Ixtoc."

"Did the Commander talk to you about Peak Oil?"

Daikon nodded. "Yeah, he sure did. Greys stealing oil faster than the Earth produced it."

"Ixtoc happened in 1979, right in the middle of Peak Oil craziness. Officially the platform had a blowout which was unofficially from Greys trying to tap it and siphon off oil." Squires shrugged. "Why drill an oil well when you can just tap into existing ones?"

"Greys are lazy." Warrens said.

"And when they cause a huge spill, they just wander off because it's not their planet." Squires added.

"Okay, old Bert Banks' days may be numbered, no matter how helpful he is."

"That's the spirit," Warrens smiled.

The van pulled to a stop a half of a block from the hotel. "We're there." Jackson said as he shifted the van out of gear and set the parking break. "Get cleaned up quick-like; I'm starving."

"You always seem to be starving." Daikon pointed out.

"It's my fast metabolism."

The Big Suck

"Where are you?" Squires said. "Daikon, where you at?"

Daikon rounded the corner at a full sprint, he weaved around a familiar-looking old couple walking towards him. "Pardon!" He shouted over his shoulder as he went.

"Stop runnin' 'round corners, you fool!" The old man shouted back.

"Out the city gates, turning right on Nunnery!"

"Where's that?" Warrens asked.

"He's heading toward Delrios." Squires cut in. "Jackson, put down in the grassy area at the charging stations."

"Got it." Jackson replied. "Dropping down."

"What we need is Vespas!" Daikon said as he ran. "I've almost got him!"

"Daikon, you need to get to your ship, we're already tracking two bogies in the air and he's heading for the third."

"Hey man," Jackson said. "I can fly okay and I shoot great, but I can't do them both at the same time. Get over here. I'm setting down now."

"He's running down the cars. No wait, he's slowed. Stopped. He's getting into a red car. A red four door car. Near the charging stations."

"I'm at the charging station!" Jackson said. "Got you a helmet ready. Dive in here!"

"Red and curved. Maybe a Vauxhall. Four doors definitely. I'm almost there." Daikon said as he took deep breaths to keep his speed up. "I'll get him."

"If you can stop him, then stop him." Warren said. "Otherwise, we need you in the air."

"I see him." Squires said. "He's… Oh. He's gone."

Daikon stopped running. "Yeah, he's gone. The entire car. I thought you said they didn't have transporters."

"They don't." Squires answered. "They just destroyed it. Get to the ship."

"Third hostile taking off. We're three to two until you get your ass into that ship, Daikon!" Warrens cut in. "So make it happen!"

Daikon turned and ran toward the grassy areas on the other side of the charging stations. He had his hands out in front of him. "Anyone around?"

"Too late to care about that." Jackson said. "Opening the hatch. Get in here."

As Daikon ran, a hatch appeared in midair. He slowed as he got close and climbed up onto the wing of the plane. If anyone was actually looking, he would seem to be standing on thin air. He turned and jumped up, reaching for a handhold. He missed it and fell on his butt on the wing.

"They're coming at you, Jackson. All three of them. Heading to intercept but you're a sitting duck."

Daikon scrambled to his feet and jumped again, this time getting a hand on an invisible handhold. As he climbed, the ship shimmered under him helping him see the other two handholds.

"You in?" Jackson asked.

"I'm on, get airborne. I'm almost in." Daikon answered. As he pulled himself onto the top of the ship, it rocked under him as it took off vertically. He reached forward and grabbed the edge of the hatchway. "Close in two seconds!" He said as he took a deep breath and pulled himself in.

The inside of the ship was bathed in light from the open hatchway as Daikon righted himself and got his bearings. As he kicked toward the cockpit, the hatch closed putting him in pitch dark. After only a moment, blue lights came on giving the inside of the ship a warm glow. Daikon reached the cockpit as his lungs burned for air- he was already out of breath from his mile-long sprint. He could see in the dim light that Jackson was sitting in the right seat; the copilot seat. He was looking forward and working the controls of the ship, ostensibly avoiding the ships that were attacking.

Jackson looked over his shoulder and pointed to a helmet that was sitting on the headrest of the other seat, then returned to looking out the main window. The air tubes were already attached to the helmet as was the rubber ring that fit tight on his neck.

Daikon grabbed the helmet and pulled it over his head. It took him several seconds since usually the rubber ring was put on first, then the bulky helmet would be attached to it. When he finally got it situated, he stuck a finger up through the rubber ring, holding it out. He thumbed a button on

the side as air pushed into the helmet from the top, forcing water out the bottom where his finger was. After only a couple of seconds, he took a breath of the cool air. "Holy hell!" He exclaimed.

"Holy hell is right," Jackson pointed. "We've got one on our six. And he's not too pleased with us. You sealed?"

Daikon looked over the two large screens in front of him, one showing him ship functions and the other was a tactical display overlaid on a map of the ground. There was an alien ship weaving behind them trying to line up a shot. When the helmet was completely full of air, he pulled his finger out, stopping the massive flow of bubbles around his head. "Sealed and on stick." He said as he grasped the yoke. "What's he doing back there?"

"Keeping close, taking pot shots, and generally pissing me off."

"We hot miking yet?" It was standard practice that when in combat, all the ships were tied together to allow any plans or issues to be heard by everyone at once.

"Not yet." Jackson tapped a button. "Now everyone's in the know."

"Nice. Going to head this guy out over some terrain that's not got folks."

"What?" Warrens asked.

"Heading toward Iceland. Interior." Daikon said. "Pushing hard there, hopefully this guy can keep up."

A warning light went on, then another.

"They're locked. We'll never make it." Jacksons said.

Daikon jerked the yoke to the side putting the craft into a broad turn. The craft had limiters that turned on automatically to keep its capabilities lower while it was in an atmosphere. "Turn damn you, turn!"

"Get out of that stinking air." Warrens said. "Head for the Moon. We're halfway there already with two hostiles for company."

"Roger that." Daikon pulled back on the stick putting the craft into a vertical climb. "Never been to the Moon." He looked at Jackson. "You?" He jerked the yoke to the left as they went. The red warning lights of a laser lock went out.

"Took my wife there for her anniversary." Jackson replied. "Dinner and an Earthrise for the show."

"What? Really?"

The red lights came on again. "Locked again, you gonna do something about that Grey?" Jackson said. "Because personally I want to punch him in the mouth."

The aircraft left the atmosphere, rocketing into complete darkness, As the engines limiters switched off a series of lights switched from red to green. "Greens across the board. Finally! I'm going to flat spin this thing. Ready?"

"Do it."

The Moon grew in the windshield as they approached it at nearly a hundred thousand miles an hour.

"Spinning now." Daikon said as he pressed the left pedal putting the craft in a flat spin.

The craft spun around as Jackson fired several shots- all of them missed.

"Bring us back around!" Jackson said. "I need to get a lock so I'm not peppering some quiet town on Earth."

Daikon worked the pedals again as the alien ship also fired at them. Behind them, the rounds hit the Moon creating small craters. "Coming about sharp, be ready."

"Right." Jackson said as the ship veered around in a loop tighter than it could ever execute in an atmosphere.

There was still no feeling of movement within the craft. "That's so weird to not feel the turns. There he is." Daikon said. "That's got him confused and not making good decisions."

"There we go." A green light came on in front of Jackson. "Fox Three!" He said as he fired a homing missile at the alien ship. Within a second, the ship exploded silently.

"Nicely done, Ace." Daikon said. "Everyone else okay?"

"Splashed one also," Warrens said. "Got one more that's really fallen in love with us."

Daikon looked at the display. He could see the green triangle with a callout showing it was Warrens and Squires' ship. There was a red circle close behind it indicating the alien ship. The pair were weaving back and forth in a graceful dance, moving generally in Daikon's direction. Another triangle farther away, very near the Moon's surface, was Ronker and McDonald's ship. "You're awful low Ronker."

"A fourth showed up for the party. But we dusted our bogey flying low." Ronker replied. "Coming about to give a hand, Warrens."

Just past the Moon, thanks to Daikon being farther away from it, red circles started to appear. "Four, five, six. Six Bogeys just popped up on my screen. You tracking them, McDonald?"

"Negative, we're too low, I guess."

"There are no friendlies out here, so those are officially bandits." Warrens said.

"Where are they?" McDonald asked.

"Directly behind you and a hundred miles up. Looking at your tailpipe. They sure don't like terrain. You need to get some distance to maneuver; they're closing fast." Daikon looked at the other triangle. "Warrens, bat turn it toward me and punch it. That'll line Jackson up for the shot."

"Come straight at us, boss." Jackson said. "Firing Fox Three track-while-scan right over your tailfin." He said, referring to using this controls to guide the missile to its target instead of the missiles onboard radar. This kept the enemy aircraft from sensing a lock from the missile giving them almost no chance of avoiding it. "Head's up, it's away!"

"Go up, I'll go down." Daikon said as the two ships approached each other at fifty thousand miles an hour.

"Got it. Up, up, up." Warrens repeated to show he understood the command.

As the two ships neared each other, Daikon pushed his yoke downward and the missile hit the Grey spacecraft a fraction of a second later.

"Nice flying, Warrens. Bring it about so we can talk to these other hostiles." Daikon said.

"Roger." Warrens executed a tight turn to come around toward the six approaching enemy ships. "Coming about."

"Nice shooting, Jackson," Daikon said. "That's your ace, right?"

"That it was." Jackson said. "They're sure snuggled together tight."

"Hey, want to try something absolutely crazy?" Daikon asked.

"Hey you two." Ronker said. "We've got hostiles within twenty seconds. Let's not get cocky. Warrens, dash-two for Daikon and I'll follow close. " He said, meaning Warrens was going to become their wingman. "Now I'm curious; what're you planning?"

"I'll waggle our tail, you give send some heavy rounds their way." Daikon said.

"Yeah, I like the sound of that, ready?"

"Go." Daikon responded.

"GUNS, GUNS, GUNS!" Jackson shouted as he fired the craft's seven-barrel, thirty-millimeter Gatling-style gun. The main part of the gun was within a pressurized bulkhead so that the gunpowder would ignite even in space. Only the last foot of the barrel protruded outside the ship. The bullets were actually just over a half of a pound of depleted uranium each that were fired at a rate of almost four thousand rounds a minute; sixty-

seven a second. The muzzle velocity from the gun was just over a thousand meters a second, not counting the added speed of the ship that was carrying the gun and the speed of the enemy ships approaching. Because of this, the observed speed of the rounds was close to a hundred thousand miles an hour. "Incoming rounds have right of way!"

Daikon rocked the yoke back and forth slightly as he worked the pedals. The rear of the ship shuddered back and forth and up and down, causing the front of the ship to do the same. This made the forty-thousand rounds (after ten seconds of firing) to become a cloud of very lethal projectiles. Thanks to the lack of atmosphere or gravity, the rounds would continue on their trajectory until they interacted with something. Three of the enemy ships winked out of existence, becoming hundreds of red dots of debris. The other three veered away from the carnage.

"That's gonna be called a 'Radishing' from now on." Warrens exclaimed. "What in the hell?"

"Thanks." Daikon replied.

"That's a lot of stickers to put on the nose of this thing." Jackson remarked. "The down side is that those rounds are going to hit the moon and sometime later, someone's going to wonder what close to forty thousand A-10 Warthog rounds are doing stuck in the ground way out here. That will be a hell of a conspiracy video."

"Back in the game. Three to go." Ronker said as they raced toward the Moon and the approaching Grey ships.

"One each or two on one?" Daikon asked.

"Two on the lead, I'll take his wingman. The odd one out we'll keep an eye on." Ronker ordered. "These Greys will cut and run if things look grim for them. Here we go."

Ronker, Daikon, and McDonald all fired missiles at the incoming alien ships. The alien ships fired particle beam weapons.

All of the shots missed.

Suddenly the Grey ships veered straight up and turned in a tight arc back towards the moon.

"We chasing them?"

"No way, Radish." Ronker answered. "Told you they cut and run when they don't like the odds. They'll have a dozen ships ready to meet us if we try to follow." Ronker exhaled loudly. "I'm showing that the debris isn't heading toward Earth. What say you, ops? Who we got back there?"

"Chief Whiddon here." Came a reply. "Some of it will get caught up in our gravity but it will burn up. Pretty sparkles is all the locals will see. Nothing will hit the surface. You all heading back to base?"

"Negative, Chief." Ronker said. "We've still got a nuke to find and only two days to do it. We're back to York."

"Roger."

"Tell Tucker I miss him." Daikon said. "And give him a smooch for me."

"Yes and no." Chief Whiddon replied. "Keep us posted."

"Roger that." Ronker said. "Let's put these ships to bed. We still have a graveyard shift to work you know."

"Oh man." Daikon said. "Mopping and buffing."

"At least you got into a dogfight," Warrens pointed out. "You got shot at and everything. That's an improvement on your week, right?"

"I suppose so." Daikon remarked. "For now." A thought occurred to him. "Hey, Jackson; how'd you eat on your date with your wife if this thing is always full of water."

"We took the commuter jet. It's still a capable ship. Of course without water, it took us a couple of hours to get here instead of fifteen minutes."

"I need to get me a girl." Daikon said.

"She'll need to be more than just a weekend hookup and she'll have to get vetted."

"Oh man. Actual work?" Daikon shook his head. "I'll just have to impress her with my Jeep."

"Yeah, that's just as good as a trip to the moon." Jackson said with a laugh.

Turncoat Grey

Daikon sat in the Sprinter van. He was watching the video screen; it was a feed from a drone two hundred feet up. "That stinking Bert. I swear I'm going to kill that guy the first chance I get." He whispered.

As he watched the video feed, the high-gain antenna picked up the conversation which was then translated into closed captioning. There were three Greys sitting at a sidewalk café- The Drawing Board which had a dozen outside tables and twice that inside. The Greys were sitting six tables away from Daikon and Squires who were pretending to be on a date.

"So there is a nuclear warhead here in York?" One Grey asked Bert. "Now?"

"Yes, it is not safe to remain here any longer." Said the other Grey.

"Maybe not yet," Bert answered, not registering what the second Grey has said. "But it will be within the next forty-eight Earth hours. We will all need to be out of the area by then. Best plan is off the entire island because we expect a lockdown to occur."

"Does this information originate from the humans or from the High Council?" The first asked.

"Initially the locals, but it was then confirmed." Bert replied.

"What did that second one say?" Squires asked.

"The High Council?" The first asked again.

"No." Bert said. "Central Operations. I am not sure if the High Council was made aware of the decision to inform us about the simultaneous missions."

"So what is your plan?" The second Grey asked.

"He knows where the bomb is." Squires pointed at the screen as she too whispered. "That one Grey there."

"We need to be done with our instigation of the riot by thirty hours, then by forty, we are off the island." Bert suggested.

"Do we return to Base Operations?" The first Grey asked.

"No. We are ordered to return to the mainland." Bert answered.

"Oh, Bert, you'll never make it to the mainland." Daikon said.

"Did you discuss this with anyone else?" The second Grey asked.

"Discuss what?" Bert asked. Realization hit him. "You are aware of this secondary mission. You know about the nuclear weapon."

"Stop saying that word out loud." The second Grey said. "Lower your voice."

"Do you know where *it* is?" Bert asked? He still hadn't lowered his voice.

"Lower your voice." The second Grey snapped.

"Not too low, Bert." Daikon said. "Just a little but that's it."

"Where is the bomb?" Bert whispered. The high-gain microphone picked him up anyway.

"The place of worship." The second Grey said.

"The large centrally located one?" Bert pointed toward the center of town. "The Minster?"

"No. While that would provide a higher detonation location, it is well guarded. The lesser one of Helens is the chosen location." The second Grey said. "However, you should not be concerned with that. You should only be concerned with your mission."

"I understand." Bert dipped his head- it was a sign of submission among the Grey. "I only asked out of curiosity." He dipped his head again.

"Bert just saved his own life." Daikon whispered. "Let's get going and let the commander know." He said as he leaned in to Squires; they were both sitting on the same side of the table looking at the computer screen. They had turned it so no one was behind them. He took Squires' hand. "Isn't that lovely dear? Hey, let's go walk the Shambles." He stood, pulling her to her feet as well. "I hear it's wizard!"

"Oh man." Squires shook her head.

"Get it? Because it was Rollings' inspiration for Diagon Alley. So it has wizards in it, which makes it wizard."

"Oh, man; that's even worse." Squires said.

"That's me; your man." Daikon said. He dropped a pound coin onto the table. "Let's go."

The pair walked off hand in hand.

"You know George Lucas isn't going to even send you a post card if you make that phrase popular." Squires said.

"Oh, he might. He might." Daikon replied. "I'll be as famous as Glenn Burke."

The two walked into the Shambles- a tightly winding road in the walking part of town, just in case they were followed. After going half way through, they doubled back and then headed for the hotel.

Surveillance Plans

Commander Lancaster pointed at the large overhead view of Saint Helen's Church taped to the wall. "The nuke is going in the bell tower. What say you gentlemen?"

"So, it's going in the tower to give it just a little more oomph." Jackson said. "How much higher is that over ground level?"

"About eighty feet or so." Lancaster said. "Really, it doesn't make that much of a difference but it does make it more difficult to get to."

"I agree," McNamara said. "It's not a really big area. The best we can do is just a couple of bodies up there. How much does this thing weight?"

"If it's under three megatons, about five thousand pounds. I can't imagine they'll be able to manage anything bigger than that up there."

"Three megatons is plenty though." Jackson said. "That will make a mess."

"How about we just blow the church up. Bomb and all. We blame some random terrorist group then we swoop in with MI6 and grab the nuke out of the rubble. No one will ever know."

"Blow up the church? Bomb and all?" Lancaster said, unbelievingly. "Daikon that's not even going to plan Z."

"And set the thing off?" McNamara asked.

"No; they're pretty sturdy devices" Daikon replied. "Hell, the Air Force dropped two three-point eight megaton nukes near Goldsboro, North Carolina from a few thousand feet and they didn't go off. They were even both armed before they hit."

"What?" Jackson said. "Come on now."

"No, no; it's true. It was in 1961. A B-52 came apart midair and when it did, both its nukes were thrown from the bomb bay before it crashed. One was never completely recovered, actually. It got stuck in the ground about two hundred feet down in North Carolina mud." Daikon shrugged. "They put up a sign on the site saying it was a 'nuclear mishap' and called it a day."

"How in the world do you know that?" Lancaster demanded. "You're not even Air Force."

"You just made that up." McNamara added.

"Well?" Jackson coaxed.

Daikon didn't say anything for a long moment. "Fine. I have this thing for Bitsy Tulloch. I came across that bit of information while cyber stalking her." Daikon explained. "Her grandfather was the commander on the plane."

"You've got issues, man." Jackson said.

"What? She's the hottest Lois Lane there is!" Daikon replied. He looked at Commander Lancaster. "So what say you Quaid? Bomb the reactor?"

"It's a historic building. Two of the bells date to the early 1600's. We're not just going to blow it up." Lancaster said.

"And we can't just kill innocent civilians." McNamara pointed out. "Even if it's to save thousands."

"Hundreds of thousands. Millions probably." Daikon said. "You know the good of the many outweigh…"

"Don't go quoting Star Trek." Jackson said. "Just don't."

Daikon looked at Commander Lancaster.

He shook his head. "No."

"It's unanimous, Radish." McNamara said.

"Fine." Daikon replied. "Oh, I do want to point out that I appreciate you said it was 'a historic building' instead of 'an historic building', that really rubs me the wrong way."

"I'm glad you're not being rubbed the wrong way." Lancaster said. "It's really high on my list of priorities."

"Thanks." Daikon answered.

"So if we can't blow it up." Jackson began. "Which I have to say I was thinking about as well. Evacuate everyone from a block away and turn that tower into dust. What do you want to do? We can't really storm that bell tower. Like Dax said, it's too small an area."

"Hey, hold on." Daikon said. "I have an idea."

"Here we go." Jackson shook his head.

McNamara just smiled wide. "What is it?"

"How about we just use a tractor beam to pull the bomb out?"

"A tractor beam?" Lancaster asked.

"Right. I'm sure those Calamari have them with how they can control gravity."

"So what's this tractor beam hook on to? Magnetic things? What if it's not magnetic?"

"Bombs are definitely magnetic." Daikon pointed out.

"So are those bells in that tower."

"Can't you just adjust it so it only grabs the bomb?"

"No. No we can't." Lancaster answered.

"Why not?"

Commander Lancaster gestured at Jackson.

"Because there's no such thing, man." Jackson said. "This is real life not science fiction. We can't just beam things up or hook a tractor beam to random things. Those laws of physics are pretty strict on what they allow and don't allow."

"That's disappointing." Daikon said. "So what's the plan?"

"Well, first we need to see when they put it there. They'll have to get it up there then beat feet. We'll have the time between those two events to deal with it." Lancaster explained.

"That may be a really small window, considering how fast these ships we use can be." Daikon startled. "Are their ships faster than the Calamari ones? The water filled ones?"

McNamara shook his head. "They're about equal. I mean, you were in that dog fight; we weren't out maneuvered back there."

"True." Daikon said. "But still, it could just be minutes between dropping it off and setting it off."

"I agree." McNamara said. "So what are we going to do? Put that tower under surveillance?" He pointed at the blown up image. "There's buildings all around it. I'm sure we can put a hide site on one of them."

"Is that ship cloaking thing portable?" Daikon asked.

"Not really. For a couple of reasons." Commander Lancaster began. "It takes a bit of power. And it's not really practical because it would need to be in water to work properly."

"Damn it all." Daikon cursed. "Well, we can use urban camouflage up there."

"Urban camouflage?" Jackson asked.

"I know what he means." McNamara nodded. "And it would work. We just stick an empty AC unit up there that we can sit in. Or a crate marked 'roofing materials, box one of two.' And no one would give it a second look."

"Exactly." Daikon nodded. "No one would give it a second look." He looked at Lancaster. "How's that sound?"

"That does sound ingenious but we've got something a little more high tech." Lancaster said. "Warrens and Squires are working on that right now."

"Oh?" Daikon said. "I was wondering where they were." He smiled. "I figured it was a cool guys only meeting."

"Indeed it is." McNamara agreed.

"In typical British unconstitutional overreach fashion, there are CTTVs all over the town. There are two on the rooftops that overlook the square right across from the church. They're adding a second camera to the poles right across from the bell tower so we can see the entire area from two angles."

"Nice. All from the luxury of our hotel room." McNamara said. "When do we start?"

"When the feed goes live. Probably within thirty minutes since they've been gone a while."

"How did they talk the town police into letting them add a camera?" Daikon asked. "Nicely done however they convinced them."

"They didn't. They just put on a couple grey jumpsuits and went up there like they were maintaining cameras every day of the week." Lancaster smirked. "More of that urban camouflage."

"Excellent." McNamara said. "But that still leaves the problem of what we are going to do when they plop that nuke down and make a run for it."

"Oh wait. I have an idea!" Daikon exclaimed.

"Science Fiction?" Jackson asked worriedly.

"Oh, it's real life. One hundred and first, actually." Daikon replied.

"A hundred and first what?" Lancaster asked.

"The mighty One Hundred and First Airborne Division." Daikon said.

"We can't get them out here." Jacksons pointed out.

"We don't need to." Daikon replied. "Because for a couple of weeks, I was down at the Sabalauski School."

"What school?"

"The Air Assault School, on Fort Campbell. It was part of my Pathfinder training; first Airborne, then Air Assault, then Pathfinder school." Daikon explained.

"Okay. How does that help us?" Lancaster asked.

"We'll sling load that bomb out of there."

"Sling load it?" Lancaster asked. "Like a fuel bladder?"

"Yup, exactly." Daikon answered. "We'll put a hundred feet of high tensile cable in that bell tower. Ten thousand pound rated at least. Then when they drop off the bomb, we run up, attach the cable to the bomb, the other end to one of our ships and race that thing for the moon like there's no tomorrow. Wings be damned."

"That's a crazy plan." Jackson shook his head. "But it would work. There's a tie down point on the bottom of the ships. It's rated at twenty thousand pounds."

"We just need to get the cable from the bomb to the bottom of the ship. If the bomb even has a tie down or anchor point."

"It will have to have one. Otherwise how would they get it up there?" Daikon asked. "These Greys don't have super strength do they?"

"No." Lancaster said. "Hey Ops, you on? And up to speed?"

"Ops here," Major Durbin replied. "I'm following along. Painfully at some points."

"We know what one of our nukes weighs, what's one of the Grey's nukes weigh?"

"A five megaton warhead weighs a thousand pounds." Major Durbin said. "That is what we expect them to use. They are their go-to tactical nuclear warhead."

"Just little ones then?" Daikon asked.

"No," Durbin replied. "They have them all the way up to a planet-busting five-thousand megaton bomb, but they won't use that until they're done taking our resources. That's an extinction-level explosion."

"Cripes. Really?"

"Oh yes; that's one thousand nine hundred times larger than the largest nuclear warhead ever detonated on Earth; the Tsar Bomb which was three thousand eight-hundred times the strength of the ones on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It also weighs ten tons. They just shove it out of a ship in orbit."

"Oh man!" Daikon shook his head. "That's scary. But okay, a thousand pounds is still massive. How about anti-gravity sleds to carry heavy stuff? Do they have those?" He ducked his head. "Oh man, here it comes."

"Actually, yes, they do have those." McNamara said. "We do as well. But they are the size of flatbed carts. Three by five feet. It's not like a tiny portable thing you can use on a staircase. Power cells can only be so small."

"So how are they getting that bomb up there?" Daikon said. "I mean, if Greys can't carry a thousand pounds, are there aliens they can hire to tote that thing up there?"

"Oh man." Jackson frowned. "The Brutes."

"Brutes? That doesn't sound good."

Commander Lancaster took a deep breath then let it out. He crossed his arms as the others talked.

"They're a pre-space flight civilization that the Greys visited. They traded them all sorts of technology for resources. They live on a mega planet, three times the size of Earth." Jackson smiled. "No, the Greys do not have a prime directive."

"That's more a suggestion than anything else." Daikon said. "I mean in *The Apple*, Kirk and the gang visit a planet where the primitives there serve this giant computer that looks like an alligator head and…"

"We are also not discussing Star Trek episodes." McNamara pointed out.

"So what are these Brutes; giants then?" Daikon asked.

"Opposite." McNamara said. "They're short and squatty. About four feet tall. Bipedal like us but because of the gravity on their planet when they are on smaller planets, they are super strong."

"And really tough skinned as well. Bullet proof is what they are." Jackson explained. "Dense too."

"Bulletproof because they're dense?"

"Yes and no. Their skin is bullet proof," Jackson said to Daikon. "But also dense like they aren't very smart. They are where we were five thousand years ago."

"Oh man." Daikon exhaled loudly.. "So if they had one of these Brutes with them, carrying around a nuclear bomb would be like carrying around groceries."

"Exactly." Jackson said. "Ops?"

"El Presidente?" Major Durbin replied.

"Is there any intel on Brutes in the UK right now?"

"I will get back to you on that." Durbin replied. "I wasn't anticipating that question so I'll have to go ask Blue Green Blue. Brutes, really?"

"Yeah. Get back to me on that." Jackson asked.

"Gentleman." Lancaster finally said. "If you three are done hijacking my briefing, may I continue?"

"Oh." Jackson said. "Sorry, boss."

"Right, right." Daikon said. "You're on it five, four, three…" He continued to count down silently on his fingers. When he got to one, he pointed at Lancaster.

"They aren't going to carry the nuke up there." Lancaster explained. "Have you not looked at the imagery? The top of the bell tower is open.

They can just lower one into place." He pointed at the large photograph. "Spires and a big open space."

"Hey, look at that." Daikon grinned. "I mean… Yes, I do indeed see that now, Sir."

"Alright then." Lancaster said as he pointed at McNamara and Jackson. "You two need to find a hundred feet of at least ten thousand pound rated cable and get it over to the church. I shouldn't have to remind you it needs hooks on the end as well."

"Oh man; wish we had a Brute of our own." Jackson said. "My knees are hurting just thinking about carrying that all the way up there."

"There are no Brutes." Lancaster declared. "None. Just corn-fed beef eating, freedom-loving American heroes defending the planet."

"Damn, when you say it like that." Jackson smiled. "It makes me want to reenlist."

"I think that Daikon is a bad influence on you, Jackson." Lancaster pointed out.

"What do you want me to do, boss?" Daikon asked.

"You, Mister One Hundred and First, are going to figure out a way to get into that bell tower."

"Easy." Daikon interjected.

"Then find a place to hide so that when that bomb gets dropped off, you can get it ready to get snatched into space." Lancaster finished.

"Not so easy."

"If it were easy, anyone would do your job." Lancaster pointed out.

"You want me to figure out how to just hang out in a church for thirty hours and not have anyone ask me what I'm doing there?" Daikon said. "Wait. What if I don't get it hooked up before it goes off?"

"Then instead of a voyage home, you will go to the undiscovered country and we won't be searching for you afterwards." Jackson said.

"Oh, nicely done." Daikon nodded at the man.

"Alright then. I'll wait to hear from OPs and take the first shift watching the feed right now. Zero nine hundred hours. Hopefully the Greys stick to their schedule so we have thirty-two hours to get everything in place." He held up a finger. "But I want it all taken care of within the next three hours. Before noon, Gentlemen."

Daikon stood and saluted. "Roger that, Commander. I'll pick up some pogey bait then head out."

"Pogey bait?" Lancaster asked as he saluted back.

"Junk food." Jackson explained.

"Gedunk, huh? Fine then. Everyone keep me posted." Lancaster ordered.

Frock It

Daikon stepped out of the clothing shop. He smoothed down his brand new shirt. He had bought black pants and a black long sleeve shirt. Then after unpacking the shirt, he took the strip of cardboard that kept the collar in place and put it on the front of the shirt's buttoned up collar. He turned and started toward the church, just a block away. It had taken him an hour to find a shop that sold what he was looking for; priestly looking clothes but he was well ahead of schedule; it was only ten thirty. He had first thought of dressing like a monk but his military regulation hair cut would make it difficult to sell. Neat hair and clothes however could easily pass as a visiting priest. Plus, he wasn't able to find a shop that carried Monk robes and a long wooden staff.

Just for fun when a passerby made eye contact with him he would tell them that 'God loved them'. He got to say it often because a young, six-foot tall, muscular priest with a crisp flat top was definitely something out of the ordinary. He also realized that as he walked, he did so quickly as if he had someplace to be. Which in truth he did, but he had noticed that civilians tended to stroll or even shuffle when they were going somewhere. Daikon walked everywhere like he was going to be late for a meeting in the Pentagon even though he would invariably show up fifteen minutes early.

"God loves you, my son." He said with a smile to a man who looked him up and down. "Do some good to your fellow man today and you'll be rewarded for it."

"Oh. Okay." The man replied as he picked up his pace. Because not only was a six-foot tall, muscular priest with a crisp flat top out of the ordinary, the fact that he was apparently American made it even more so.

Daikon turned and looked up at the bell tower of Saint Hellen's Church, Stonegate. He waved at the camera. "I'm here to do your work, Lord!" He said loudly. "So keep an eye out for me, okay?"

The people passing by gave him a wider birth.

"I'm serious, Lord. If I could get your undivided attention for the next thirty hours, I'd really appreciate it." He said softer as he pulled open the heavy wooden door and stepped in.

Daikon paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim interior of the church. There were several people sitting in pews as well as a dozen tourists snapping photos of the various stain glass windows and statues in the church. As he started for the back corner where the stairs led to the bell tower, a woman stopped him. "Excuse me, Father." She said.

"Yes?" Daikon answered.

"Do you know when the next service is?"

Daikon had no idea. "I'm sorry, Miss. I'm just visiting York." He started to walk again, wanting to make it to the bell tower before an actual priest showed up. "I'm not doing any preaching here."

"Oh, you're American." The woman said with a smile. "Are you here on vacation?" She asked as she followed him.

"I'm Canadian." He said as he came to a stop. He had thought out his backstory on the way over from the clothes store. "Calgary." He hoped to

keep his lying to a minimum in the church. Then he noticed that the woman was tall, an inch taller than him and quite skinny. Unusually skinny. He decided lying to an alien -in a church or otherwise- was always okay. "They flew me out here. I repair pipe organs."

"Pipe organs?" The woman said. "Really?"

"Yes, and I'm the foremost pipe organ tuner in Canada and they invited me out here to work on the one here." He snapped. "And I need to get this one tuned before tomorrow morning." He gave her a smile. "The times for the service are by the front door." He gestured. "Have a blessed day." He said as he started walking again. As he walked he wondered how God would feel about an alien being killed in one of His churches. He decided he would have to risk it if the woman showed up again in the bell tower.

When he got to the door to the stairs, he turned to look into the church as he pulled it open. He hoped it was a nonchalant move. The tall woman was no longer there. With a breath of relief, he turned and pulled the door shut behind him then bounded up the stairs. From the plans he had seen there was a small room off to the side of the bells in the tower where tools were kept. On the other side was a worn wooden ladder that ran up to the open top of the tower through a wooden hatch.

When he got to the top of the stairs, he cautiously opened the door to the bell tower. It was empty. The area was filled with a ring of eight large bells. "Hello old gals. Let's see how the next day treats you." He said as he stepped forward and rapped one of them with his knuckle. "Huh?"

"And just how's the day going to treat them?" A voice said from the top of the ladder.

Daikon jumped back. Reflexively his hand went to his hip, but he was unarmed. He brought his hands up and took a fighting stance.

Priestly Priest

A plump old man climbed down the ladder.

"Oh, thank God you're fat." Daikon said. He realized what he had said. "Oh. I mean…"

The man reached the bottom of the ladder and turned around. He was wearing a clerical collar.

"Uh oh." Daikon said.

The man pointed upward. "I like sitting up there. Fresh air, all that. It's a good place to think and pray in silence." He patted his belly. "And it's good for the constitution you know." He frowned. "You know what is not good for the old constitution?"

"What?" Daikon slowly lowered his hands. Self-consciously he put them in his pockets. "What's that, Father?"

"Pretending to be a priest." He took a step forward.

"Oh, well…"

"Sneaking around someone else's church." He took another step.

"I can explain, I'm sure." Daikon took his hands out of his pockets.

"And touching another man's bells." The man said.

"Okay." Daikon stifled a laugh. "Hold on now. It sounds dirty when you say it like that."

The man rethought what he had said. "Oh, well. I suppose so." He smiled wide. "How about we start over." The man pointed at himself. "I am Father Robinson, the incumbent at Saint Helens Stonegate." He pointed at Daikon. "And you sir, are no priest." He narrowed his eyes. "Isn't that the piece of cardboard that comes in a new shirt?"

Daikon's hand went to his collar. "Oh, well…"

"It's not even the right color." Father Robinson said. "Now, tell me what you are doing here before I call the authorities."

"Crud." He tapped his ear piece. "Ops, you around?" He hoped someone was manning the desk since it was three AM back in Nevada at the moment.

"Sergeant Benjamin here, Lieutenant Daikon. What do you need?"

"Who are you talking to?" Father Robinson asked. He moved closer to Daikon to try and listen in.

"Do *they*." Daikon hesitated. "You know *them*."

"No, Lieutenant; who is they or them?"

Father Robinson's eyebrows went up.

"The Greys." Daikon cringed. "Do… *they* wear fat suits?"

"Now see here." Father Robinson said. "I don't believe I need to be insulted by a trespasser."

Daikon held up a finger at the priest. "Just hold on one second."

"No, Lieutenant," Benjamin said. "They do not."

"Ever?"

"No, not ever. Why are you asking?"

"I'm just making sure of something, Sergeant." Daikon said. "Hey, how's Tucker?"

"Tucker?" Benjamin said.

"He's my dog. I was just wondering how he's doing."

Father Robinson put his hands on his hips.

"Oh, that Tucker. He's with me here in Ops. Sleeping next to Roxie, my dog."

"Oh that's nice!" Daikon put a hand back in his pocket and leaned on the wall. "So what kind of dog is Roxie? Are they having fun together?"

"Now see here." Father Robinson said. "You are trying my patience!"

"Oh, right; right. Never mind Sergeant Benjamin. Thanks for looking out for Tucker. Daikon out." He tapped his earpiece again.

"Mister Daikon," Father Robinson said. "You are going to tell me what is going on right now or I'm calling the police." He waggled a finger at him. "And you shan't discuss my weight again."

"Sorry, Padre." Daikon said. "I just needed to check something first." He gestured at a stone outcropping. "Have a seat and I'll tell you everything." He squatted against the wall. "Whether you believe it or not, is anyone's guess."

"Fine then, Mister Daikon."

"Jarred, please." Daikon said with a smile. "And sorry about the weight comments; you'll understand shortly."

"Fine then, Jarred." Father Robinson sat. "Let's hear it."

Daikon took a breath. Then another. "Oh boy." He raised a finger. "I would first like to point out that due to my Catholic upbringing there is no way I could lie to a priest while in church."

"What if we were out of church?"

"Oh." Daikon smiled. "No, not then either." He hesitated. "Unless it was mission essential, that is."

"You aren't building my confidence in you, Jarred."

"Fine, fine Father. Here it is in a nutshell: I am a United States Navy Officer working for a covert organization fighting against alien invaders."

"You mean like Libyans? Central Africans. Or…" He pointed skyward. "Other aliens."

"Other aliens, Father. And with the help of some friendly, helpful aliens we are doing a good job of keeping the world safe. But right now there is an operation going on right here in York. A very dangerous operation."

"Alien abductions?" Father Robinson smirked. "I've watched videos about them online. Come on now; they're as fake as can be." He shook his head. "If you're talking abductions…"

"Oh boy." Daikon said. "Well, the ultimate goal is to abduct a large number of humans yes. They'll be sold as slaves. But the more pressing

issue is how they plan to cause the confusion needed to make that happen. These… aliens are planning on setting off a nuclear bomb here in York."

"Aliens? Greys? Like in the videos?"

"Yes, those tall skinny dudes." Daikon smiled wide as he brought his hands up. "Apparently they're actually real; who would have guessed, right?"

"So these tall, non-fat suit wearing aliens are going to set off a nuclear warhead here in York."

"Yes." Daikon nodded emphatically. "Yes, definitely."

"In York. Why York? We're just a quaint little out of the way town."

"That is true. In fact, we've been having a great time while we've been here. Between the excellent restaurants, the Shambles, and the friendly people, it's been great."

"We?"

"My team. Well, not really my team. There is a Navy Commander running the show."

"But." Father Robinson leaned forward. "Why York?"

"Because Leeds, Manchester, and Liverpool are all downwind from here. And when they set off a nuke here in your bell tower, it will irradiate everything from here to the Atlantic. And in the chaos, they will scoop up thousands… a hundred thousand humans."

"I find that hard to believe."

Daikon nodded. "I did too, I have to admit. I mean, aliens running amok on Earth? It sounds crazy."

"Yes, that is exactly the word I was thinking of myself." He started to get up.

"No wait, Padre, I can prove it." Daikon gestured for him to sit. "In two hours there is going to be a full-blown riot right here in York."

"A riot? Over what?"

"Oh man." Daikon frowned. "The aliens. The ones from space are going to get the illegal aliens from other countries who are here in England to riot."

"Come on now."

"It's true. It's what they do, these Greys. They start wars to then grab up people in the turmoil. They did it for years in Ireland, in South Africa, the Balkans. All over the place."

Father Robinson leaned back. "I remember the Balkans, I was in the Army then. Entire villages would disappear and they'd blame each other of genocide."

"The Greys." Daikon pointed at him. "They did that. Oh! Remember Peak Oil?"

"Yes."

"Peak Oil was huge back in the eighties and nineties, then it just faded away." Daikon said.

"These aliens were responsible?"

"Exactly!" Daikon said. "And I'm here to make sure they don't set off that nuke."

"Are you going to disarm it?"

A knock on the door made them both look.

"Daikon?" A voice said.

"Come on up." Daikon said. "It's all clear, Jackson."

Jackson pushed open the door and shuffled in. He had a large coil of steel cable across his shoulders. He was also drenched with sweat.

"You got all one hundred feet?" Daikon said as he stood.

"No, I got fifty feet of it, man." As Jackson shuffled into the small area, there was a length of cable running behind him. McNamara shuffled in behind him with the other half.

"Wow, what's that thing weight?" Daikon said.

"Three hundred pounds." Jackson said as he leaned against the wall. "It's Tuf-Flex DL so it's rated at seventy one tons which is …" He noticed the priest sitting there. "Oh come on, man! What the Hell is he doing here?"

"It's his church." Daikon explained. "I mean, he comes with the place."

Jackson let the cable fall off his shoulders. "And he's up to speed?"

"Well, no. Not on everything, no." Daikon said.

"So are these men part of your team to keep the Greys from blowing up that nuclear warhead here in York?" Father Robinson asked.

"Come on man!" Jackson said. "You can't just go telling everyone!"

"Ease up, Jackson," McNamara said. "He probably didn't have any choice."

"That's right!" Daikon said. "I mean, he was sitting up here, relaxing when I came up. What was I supposed to do with him?"

"What indeed?" Father Robinson asked.

"So I gave him a few details. Just enough so that he'd understand we're the good guys here."

"What are you planning on doing with all that cable?"

"We're going to hoist the bomb away with it." Daikon said. "Good job getting it up here, guys. That must have been a bear of a job."

"Don't change the subject." Jackson said. He pointed at the priest. "Did you tell ops about him?"

"No. Not yet, I mean." Daikon replied. "I mean, if we can't trust a priest to keep a secret, we've got bigger problems, right?"

Jackson shook his head.

"Father…" McNamara let his voice trail off.

"Oh!" Daikon said as he gestured at the man. "Father Robinson, this is Jackson and McNamara. We all work together."

"Now he knows our names!"

"Jackson, relax." McNamara said. He let the cable slid off his shoulders as well. "Father Robinson, I hope you realize that the

information you now have is very dangerous. You can't tell anyone about this. Ever."

"I understand, I really do. I worked in Public Affairs in the Army; I understand operational security."

"Good. So we have your word that you won't talk to anyone about this?" McNamara asked.

"Yes. You do." Father Robinson stood and extended his hand. "I give you my word to never speak about this to anyone. But…"

"But?" Jackson said. "But what?"

"What is all this cable for?" Father Robinson said. "I should tell you that these bells were recently refurbished at great cost. I can't have you damaging them."

"Don't worry, Father." McNamara said as he pointed upward. "The plan is to lift the bomb off the roof when it gets placed there. The cable is to attach it to one of our ships."

"A space ship?"

McNamara nodded at the priest. "Yes. We're going to pull it up into space where it won't hurt anyone."

"So what's to stop these Greys from just planting another one on my church? Or just dropping one onto the town when you take this one?"

"Oh man, that's a good question, Father." Daikon said. "Yeah; what are we doing about that?"

McNamara looked at Daikon. "That's classified. But rest assured it's being taken care of. They won't try to set off another nuclear warhead on Earth again."

"There you go, Padre." Daikon said. "It's all taken care of." He smiled. "Well, I can help you get the cable up onto the roof if you…"

"See you later, Radish." Jackson started toward the door. "I'm going to have a pint or three."

"Oh, but…" Daikon looked at the fifteen foot ladder. "I thought…"

"I'll buy the first round." McNamara said as he followed Jackson. "Remember the boss wants everything set up by noon, so you've got an hour."

"Well, I thought if we worked…" Daikon started. The two men walked out of the small room. "Well, Hell."

"A tight knit group, I see." Father Robinson smiled. "This reminds me of my Army days."

"Hey, you want to relive those days and help out?"

Father Robinson patted his belly. "You don't get a physique like this by doing a bunch of manual labor. Saving souls is heavy lifting without the heavy lifting."

"Hah. Nice!" Daikon looked up again. "Alright, Father. I've got it. If you could perhaps keep anyone from coming up here, I would appreciate it."

"How long are you planning on being up here?"

Daikon shrugged. "Well, the bomb is supposed to go off in twenty nine hours so that's tomorrow at ten AM. But we don't know when they'll drop it off. Probably as close to ten as they can."

"And you're going to stay here until then? Do you want me to clear out the church?"

"No, no. Don't do that. They might suspect we know where they are putting the bomb." He looked at the door. "There was also a suspicious sounding lady down there that could be an alien."

"What?"

"Really tall lady. Six one. Skinny too. Pretty nosy." Daikon winked. "They will put on disguises to move around with regular people but they don't wear fat suits. So really tall, skinny people is what we look out for."

"Grey hair, about sixty years old?"

"That's her, Padre." Daikon said. "Alien, I'll bet."

"I've known her for thirty five years. I baptized both her daughters, in fact."

"Then she's probably okay." Daikon said. "If you could keep her from coming up here, I'd appreciate it though."

"It's no problem, my son." Father Robinson said. "If you'd like, I can let you know when everyone leaves for the day."

"The church isn't open all the time?"

Father Robinson shook his head. "Unfortunately, those Earth aliens tend to cause issues at night so the doors get locked at eight and don't

reopen until I show up at eight in the morning." He shrugged. "If it would make it easier on you, I can just delay it until ten. I've done it before."

"As long as it's not unusual for that to happen." Daikon warned.

"It would be the second time this week, fifth this month actually. So it's not that much out of the ordinary." Father Robinson smirked. "It's usually because I'm delayed at breakfast with folks wanting to talk. When one person is talking, someone else walks up, then the first person leaves, then a third will show up and the second one leaves. It's a chain reaction conversation."

Daikon nodded. "I get it. You're a popular fellow. Well, if you can be delayed in the morning that would be convenient."

"I'll do the best I can to be talkative." Father Robinson looked at the hatch in the ceiling. "And I'll pray for strength of knees and back for you today." He opened the door.

"Thanks." Daikon said. "See you tomorrow, about ten thirty. Okay?"

"Okay." Father Robinson smiled. "The pints will be on me." He pulled the door closed behind him.

"Man, I love this town."

Snatch and Grab

Daikon startled awake. He had slept in the store room on a large piece of canvas that made a fairly comfortable bed once it had been folded up into a thick mattress. The sound of the other door opening awakened him. He checked his watch; it was just after seven AM. He had gone to sleep just after ten o'clock the evening before. It had taken just over an hour to pull the cable up onto the open roof; he had coiled it around the edge, along the wall so that it looked like it belonged there. But when it was attached to the bomb, it would spool upwards without getting tangled.

After he had laid out in the cool afternoon air for an hour resting, he decided he needed to stay out of sight in case the rooftop was under surveillance. So he had gone to the little side room and spent the rest of the day there alone. Except for when Father Robinson had brought him dinner around six o'clock- classic British fish and chips wrapped in a newspaper.

"Daikon?" a familiar voice called.

"Padre." Daikon said as he pushed the door open. He was still laying on the tarp. "I'm still in here."

"Keeping out of sight, I see." Father Robinson smiled. He walked over- he was carrying a brown bag and a very large paper cup. "Very covert."

"Father Frederick Robinson, the incumbent at Saint Helens Stonegate; is that a large coffee you have there in your hand?"

"I see you have gone from merely 'Padre' to my full title all of a sudden." Father Robinson shook the bag. "I wasn't sure how you took it, so there's sugar and creamer in the bag."

"That's a lot of cream and sugar." Daikon sat up.

"Well, it's not all sugar and creamer; there are two chocolate croissants in here. Freshly made this morning."

"Oh, esteemed and beloved Father Robinson, the incumbent at Saint Helens Stonegate, it is indeed a pleasure to see you this fine morning." Daikon reached out. "Gimmie, gimmie!"

Father Robinson laughed. "Well, I figured you deserved more than Curly Wurlys and gummy worms for breakfast since you'll be saving a large portion of England this morning." He put the bag down beside Daikon and handed him the cup.

"It's all part of the service, Padre." Daikon pulled the lid off the coffee cup then carefully put it down. "With this size cup, six sugar and two creamers." He said as he opened the bag. "Those are fine sized croissants." He looked at the priest. "I have to tell you; I'm going to miss British baking when I get back to Nevada."

"British baking?"

"All we have a sickly-sweet donuts. It's hard to beat a chocolate croissant."

"You know croissants are French, right?"

"Sure. But I'm eating them every morning here in York. That's what I'm going to miss." He pointed across the way. "I usually buy a bag of them at the bakery inside the Tesco. I think I will buy a couple of bags before I head home."

Father Robinson laughed. "Well, I'm glad we made a good impression on you, Jarred. You'll have to come back for a proper visit." He looked at the ceiling. "Well, I snuck in here with this so I'll sneak out and go have breakfast. A nice long chatty breakfast."

Daikon stirred his coffee. "Thanks Padre. With a start like this, how could the day go wrong?"

"There's pints at ten thirty, so it really can't." Father Robinson said with a smile. "See you then."

"Oh! What bar is open at ten thirty?"

"A couple are, actually. But I'm partial to the Tank and Paddle. It'll be Loada Dough Balls and beer."

"It's a date." Daikon said. "Unless you want to make it tomorrow." He frowned. "And maybe you could take a trip three hours due north today instead?"

"I have faith in you, Jarred. I will see you at the Tank and Paddle at ten thirty sharp." With that he left.

"No pressure, Jarred." He took a sip of his coffee. It was quite hot and strong. "I'm in love with a priest and I don't care who knows it."

Saving the Day

Daikon crumpled up the paper bag and tossed it in the corner of his little room. *Either I'll take it with me or it won't really matter.* He thought. He peered out the door; it was eight o'clock and no one else seemed to be around so he decided to run downstairs to the bathroom.

As he got to the door at the bottom of the winding stairs, he carefully pushed it open then peeked out. When he didn't see anyone, he stepped around it and closed it quietly.

"Hey you!" A voice called angrily.

Daikon crouched down and rolled into the room, ending up against the front partition to a pew. He drew his pistol. He looked left and right, deciding which direction he should go.

"Daikon, it's Jackson." Jackson said with a laugh. "Man you're wound up tight this morning."

Daikon stood and looked across the open area. Jackson was standing about half way up the aisle. "Man, you almost gave me a heart attack." He holstered his pistol. "No one is supposed to be in here till after ten."

Jackson sauntered up to him. "Yeah, that fifty year old lock is doing a fine job of keeping out the riff raff." He smiled.

"What are you doing here?" Daikon asked.

"I'm here to help."

"Help?" Daikon asked.

"Yeah man, we work as a team in the air and on the ground." He patted Daikon on the shoulder. "And now we've doubled the chances of the imminent mission being a success."

"That's true." Daikon looked over to his left. "Speaking of imminent missions."

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to hit the head." He pulled a toothbrush from his back pocket. "I'd hate to save the planet then when someone thanks me, I have morning breath."

"It's more like England we're saving at the moment." Jackson pointed out. "But I get it." He pointed at the door. "I'll head up and meet you there."

"I'm hiding out in the little side room." His eyes got big. "The one full of candy wrappers."

"I think I'll be able to find it." Jackson moved to the door. "See you upstairs, partner."

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Daikon cleaned up quickly and bounded up the stairs. Jackson was coming out of the little room with a garbage sack.

"Oh, I can explain." Daikon said.

"Haven't you heard about 'clean as you go'?" Jackson asked as he held up the half full sack. "It's crazy how much junk food you ate last night."

"Oh, well, some of that was already here." Daikon said defensively. "I was going to clean it up if things went well."

Jackson raised an eyebrow. "And if things didn't go so well?"

"Then no one was going to notice some candy wrappers at ground zero."

Jackson smiled. "I suppose that's true." He let the sack drop then looked at his watch. "So we have an hour and a half before zero hour."

Daikon checked his watch. "If they stick to the ten o'clock timeline." He looked at the door. "They might get here early so we should hide."

Jackson shook his head. "Modern technology." He pointed at the door. "I put a couple of sensors on the way up. We'll know if someone comes up the stairs. And our overwatch will let us know when they fly in."

"Nice."

"But, honestly." He pointed upwards. "I just expect them to drop that thing in place and high tail it out of here. I don't think they'll care if they crack a bell or two."

"Then I hook it up and you fly…" Daikon hesitated. "I think I have noticed an issue with our plan." He moved to a wall and slid down it into a sitting position. "Now that I think about it."

Jackson did the same thing five feet away. "What's that?"

"Well, I'm hooking up the bomb."

"Of course."

"And you're flying it away."

"Of course not." Jackson said.

"Of course not." Daikon repeated. "That would be crazy."

Jackson nodded. "Yeah. We two are the tower team; Squires and Warrens are the flyaway team." He smiled. "This isn't a one man show you know."

"What are Dax and Quaid doing?"

"They're sitting high providing overhead cover. When they see a ship coming in, they'll let us know. And when that ship leaves, they'll blast them out of existence."

"That sounds like a good plan." Daikon shook his head. "You know, I hate to say it as the new guy, but you all seem to treat these Greys with kid gloves. I mean, they're the bad guys right? And you all… we all I suppose it is now… let them wander around our towns, cause riots, kidnap folks, and generally screw up our planet." He frowned. "I'd be all for a mission where we go to their home world and level a few city blocks. Starting with their seat of government. Then we tell them to cut their crap on Earth or we'll really get serious."

"It's complicated." Jackson said.

"We're letting these aliens crap in our pool, bully us around, and then we let them drink at our Tiki bar." Daikon explained. "We need to go and take a healthy dump on their turf."

Jackson held out his hands. "Don't get me wrong; I agree with you. A hundred percent."

"So is Commander Story the issue?"

Jackson shook his head. "It's the Calamari. They're not a violent species." He shrugged. "And if we want to keep getting their support, we have to play by their rules." He pointed skyward. "If it were up to me, I'd fly that bomb right to the Grey home world and give it right back to them." He smiled. "It would be a great final tour."

"Final tour? Are you quitting?" Daikon asked as he spread his arms out wide. "Quitting all of this?"

"Quitting? No; they'd fire me to try and keep the Calamari from just packing up and going home leaving the Earth at the mercy of the Greys."

"Yikes. I can see how that would be bad for a career."

"And I've got eight more years to go before I can retire, so I'm not joyriding any nukes to Grey central."

"I hear that." Daikon said. He looked at the door again.

"You expecting someone?" Jackson asked.

Daikon shrugged. "Hopefully not. There was this nosy woman downstairs who was tall and lanky so I figured she was probably a Grey wondering what an American was doing poking around down there."

"Oh, that reminds me." Jackson reached into his pocket. "This came in yesterday and I forgot to give it to you." He held out a silver pen and tossed it to Daikon.

"Oh, I know what this is." Daikon beamed. "I knew I was the Wil Smith."

"What?"

"We're a secret government organization dealing with aliens and I'm the new guy that just got brought in. I'm Wil Smith." Daikon said.

"Right. And I'm Tommy Lee."

"That works for me."

"Exactly." Jackson smiled. "Since Tommy Lee Jones was the hero of the movie."

"What? No way; Wil Smith was the hero."

"He was the bumbling sidekick. It was Tommy Lee Jones that killed the bug, remember."

Daikon thought back. "No… wait… Oh man. Am I comic relief?"

"How about if you're plucky comic relief; is that better?"

Daikon nodded. "Yeah, I can be plucky. Definitely." He smiled at Jackson. "Sounds good to me, partner."

"Me too."

Bomb? What Bomb?

"This is going to be a long hour." Daikon as he slouched to the side. "I need more junk food."

Jackson smiled. "Well, it will all be over soon, I suppose." He looked at his watch. "Hour and fifteen minutes." He shook his head. "Man, I still can't believe you got that Grey… what's his name?"

"Banks."

"Yeah; Banks. Banks to flip on his people. That's never happened before."

"Well, luck of the draw, I suppose. We just happened across one that was on the fence." Daikon considered that for a moment then looked at Jackson. "Wait; what's never happened before? Flipping one in the field?"

"No, flipping one ever. Greys don't betray Greys. Especially to stinking, milk-sucking Humans. They just don't do it."

"Wait. So this is the first… *ever*?"

"Ever." Jackson confirmed. "Congratulations are in order, I think."

"Oh Hell." Daikon said. He tapped his earpiece. "Hey Ops, anyone awake there?"

"We're always awake." Major Durbin answered. "What's going on?"

"Do you have a file on that Grey, Bert Banks?"

After a moment, Durbin replied. "Got it right here. What do you want to know?"

"Where does that guy work?"

"He works at a Tesco. Why?"

"I've got a bad feeling all of a sudden."

"A bad feeling about what? Tesco? I can't believe that."

"Well they do have a great selection at bargain prices." Daikon said. "But I have a bad feeling we've been set up."

"What?" Jackson sat up.

"What do we know about Banks?" Daikon pressed on.

"Let's see. Bert Banks. Supposedly forty-two years old. Mister Bert Banks has worked at Tesco for the past two years." Major Durbin said. "He's a stocker. Kind of sad to be a stocker at forty-two."

"And you're tracking his movements through that communicator thing?" Daikon worked to his feet.

"What's up, partner?" Jackson stood as well.

"Yes, we've been tracking his movements." Durbin said. "Why?"

"Where does he spend most of his time? When he's awake that is."

"He moves around a lot. Let's see… huh; he does spend a bit of time at an Aldi."

"What about Tesco?"

"He hasn't been there since we gave him the communicator." Major Durbin replied. "That is weird. Unless he's had the last two days off."

"Which Aldi?" Daikon started toward the door. He beckoned for Jackson to follow. "Huntington, Clifton, or Rowntree?"

"Wow; you sure know your Aldis." Major Durbin said. "He moves around a lot but when he's awake he seems to be at the Rowntree Aldi."

"Damn it all. He set us up to be at Ground Zero." Daikon opened the door. "The bomb is at the Aldi in Rowntree." He started out of it then stopped and backtracked into the room. "Hey Squires. You awake?"

"Why wouldn't I be awake? I'm in the air right now," Squires said.

"Grab the cable. We're taking this show on the road." Daikon said. He pushed back Jackson, "Excuse me. I'll be right back." Then he ran up the stairs to the open roof above the towers. "Let's get hooked up!" He lifted the large metal ring over his head. "Where are you Squires?"

"Are you sure?" Jackson called up to Daikon.

"I'm sure. If these Greys never flip, then it's a misdirection to have us all here at Ground Zero when that bomb goes off well before ten AM." Daikon looked up at the cloudy sky as he held the ring high in the air. "Durbin, where's Banks now?"

"He's on their base on the Moon as far as we know. After he got there, his signal stopped."

"He might have forgotten he had that thing on him until he got there." Daikon waved the ring around over his head. "Or he thinks at this point, it doesn't matter. How much time do we have?"

Jackson looked at his watch again. "If we can trust him on the time, then you have an hour ten minutes."

"Where are you, Squires!" Daikon shouted. He was waving the ring over his head. "Damn it all!"

The ship shimmered into sight directly overhead.

Daikon snapped the ring in place. "Go straight up till the cable is free!" He said as he ran back down the stairs.

"Are you sure about this?" Jackson asked.

"Oh, I'm sure he was right on the time and he wants us to be here when it happens. The entire team. That Aldi is a couple of miles away." Daikon said as he pulled the door open and ran down the stairs. "Let's go, partner! We got a country to save!"

"Right behind you." Jackson said as he jumped down the stairs two at a time.

Daikon burst out the door at the bottom of the stairs. "Get some oversight there. Do we have those radiation detection things like Homeland Security does?"

"We can detect radiation signatures if we know where to look." Major Durbin answered.

"Squires, you got that cable up?" Daikon asked.

"Roger that. Want us to pick you up?" She said.

"No. Get over to that Aldi and find where that bomb is. Jackson and I are moving there now."

"I thought I heard it was two miles." Squires pointed out.

"This is why we need Vespas," Daikon said as he ran toward the large wooden doors of the church. "In the meanwhile, we're commandeering a local vehicle. Get there quick!"

"We'll be there before you're out of the church." Squires said.

"Make it an Alfa Romeo. Like one of those Giulias. Those look fun." Jackson said as he ran close behind Daikon.

"We'll take the first thing we can get." Daikon looked left and right. "There." He pointed at a Fiat Panda that was being driven slowly toward them. There was a young man behind the wheel. "That one there. Let's go." He started toward the car.

"A Panda? We could run there faster." Jackson said as he started to run as well.

When Daikon got to the front of the car, he pulled his pistol and aimed it at the youth. "Police! Get out of the vehicle!"

The Fiat screeched to a stop and the youth put his hands in the air. "What? What? What did I do?"

"Nothing! Get out of the car!" Daikon shouted. He stood directly in front of the car and pointed his gun at the youth. "OUT!"

Jackson also pulled his pistol. "You heard him; out of the car!"

The boy opened the door and practically leapt out of the vehicle. "What did I do? What did I do?"

"Nothing." Jackson said. "Except get carjacked in the middle of York." He smiled. "Why can't we all just get along, right?"

"What?" The youth said. He still had his hands over his head as backed away from his car. "I don't understand."

"Let's go." Daikon moved around into the driver's seat. "Your car will be at the Rowntree Aldi." He said to the youth.

Jackson got into the car and slammed the door shut. "Go, go, go!"

Daikon shifted the car into first gear and pealed out. "Look at that, actual rubber!"

"Cut through the Shambles to Piccadilly." Durbin said. "It's a straight shot and shorter that way."

"The locals are going to love that." Jackson said. He grabbed the hand hold on the dash as Daikon hopped a curb to get past a bollard into the famous walking area. He laid on the horn as Daikon steered and shifted gears.

"They'll be happier with us driving through their walking district than a nuclear bomb going off." Daikon veered the car back off the curb onto the street. He barreled down the walking area, Jackson honking as he went.

"Very true." Jackson said as he laid on the horn hard when two pedestrians wouldn't move.

Tesco

Daikon skidded around the corner into the Tesco parking lot. "We're here! What have you got?" He asked.

"There's a tractor trailer behind the shop that's leaking electrons so you almost need a lead apron." Squires said. "It's the middle one."

"Where you at?"

"Hovering over it but there's folks all around. Some look like regular locals, pedestrians, workers, some look like Greys and well, some could go either way, really."

"I get that." Jackson shook his head. "These Brits. How do you want to sort them out?"

Daikon pulled his pistol and fired several shots in the air. "This is an emergency; everyone needs to back away a hundred meters!" He fired two more shots in the air.

Most of the people ran away as fast as they could. Only several taller people remained.

"That'll do." Jackson said as he drew his pistol. "Got two on the left one on the right…" He hesitated. "Hey, that's that guy!"

"Which guy?" Daikon asked as he panned around the area. "So only three?"

"Yeah. Three is what I see. And one of them is Banks."

"Banks?" Daikon scowled. "He must have just sent his transmitter to the Moon. Oh man, I'm going to kill that dude." He raised his voice. "Banks, you stinking alien!"

"Squires, what've we got?" Jackson asked. "Fire up that FLIR." He said, referring to the Forward Looking InfraRed camera the ship was equipped with.

"I'm seeing four. And I'm calling them all hostiles." She said. "Two on the far left side of the three semi-trailers, one on the right, and one behind the middle one."

"Which side is Banks on?" Daikon stepped out of the Fiat, using it for cover.

"I spotted him on the right." Jackson gestured with his pistol.

Daikon nodded. "Music to my ears. Let's sweep right. Squires, as soon as we get into that rig, get low so we can get that cable attached."

"Roger. I'll update you on these guys."

"I'll pull the car around to give us cover." Daikon sat back in the vehicle. "Keep low, Jackson."

"Right. I'll keep them behind that trailer." Jackson trained his pistol in that direction as Daikon put the car in gear. He fired a couple of shots when Banks peeked out.

Daikon peeled out and drove in a big circle so he was heading directly toward the rear of the trailers on the right side. Banks fired several shots as

he approached. Daikon raced the engine then put it in neutral so it was coasting straight at Banks then he rolled out of the car.

At the last second, Banks leapt out of the way as the Panda crashed into the back of the trailer.

Daikon kept rolling to the side, getting behind another vehicle then he crouched to look at the trailer. "Moving!" Pistol in front of him, he advanced toward the smoking Panda.

Jackson fired two more shots then jogged to the front of the trailer. "At the nose." He peeked under. "I don't see his feet; he's gone inside!"

"I confirm two inside the trailer. The other two are moving to your position. Both from behind the far trailer." Squires said. "Moving to deal with those two. You've got the two inside."

"Oh hell." Daikon moved to a sprint to get to the rear of the trailer.

Jackson ducked low and fired several shots hitting one of the two Greys moving toward them in the waist and legs. He fell to the ground. "One down." Jackson said as he sidestepped between the two trailers, heading toward the rear of them.

"Number two was at the rear of the far trailer. He's neutralized." Squires said. "Those other two have stopped inside the trailer, halfway up."

Daikon skidded around the rear of the trailer and pulled himself up into it. He rolled onto his side and pointed his pistol into the dark trailer. "Banks! You dirtbag! BANKS!"

"What do you want, Human?" Banks shouted back. He fired several shots- they all missed.

Daikon rolled to the other side of the trailer where the rear door was closed so he wasn't silhouetted against the open one.

"Where are they, Squires?" Daikon asked.

"They are halfway down. Both on the same side. About two feet from the outer skin of the trailer. Right on the bomb."

"Thanks." Daikon raised his pistol and fired a half dozen shots at the location Squires described. He was rewarded with a cry of pain from someone. "Banks, I hope that's you!"

Several other shots pinged in the flooring around Daikon. "No such luck, you pink ape!"

"Jackson, where you at?" Daikon said as he rolled closer to the wall.

"Ready to light up the place."

"Oh yeah, do it!" Daikon said.

Jackson turned on a bright flashlight.

Banks turned and looked at the rear of the trailer, surprised by the light. He squinted as he raised his pistol.

Daikon chuckled. "Okay then." With an illuminated target, he fired three quick shots hitting Banks with all of them. As he fell, Daikon jumped to his feet and dashed toward the bomb.

Jackson slid next to Daikon. "Let's get this thing out of here." He looked it over. "No timer."

"Not that we can see. If I were the bad guys I wouldn't put big LED timers on things. And I wouldn't have an override on a self-destruct." Daikon started pulling at the bomb.

"Well, I'm glad you're one of the good guys." Jackson pulled as well. The bomb didn't budge. "This won't work. Squires get low so I can pull the cable in here!"

"Roger that."

Jackson handed the flashlight to Daikon then sprinted to the back of the trailer. "Squires, cable!"

"Shop shouting, I've been watching you two. The cable is right at the opening." Squires answered.

"Right, right." Jackson leaned out as the cable shimmered into existence. He grabbed it then ran back to Daikon.

Daikon held up a ring. "Right here."

"Hah!" Jackson clipped the cable onto the ring. He grabbed Daikon and pulled him farther into the trailer. "Go, go, go!"

The bomb didn't move.

"Squires!" Jackson said. "Take the thermonuclear bomb someplace else!"

"Oh, me." Squires answered. "I didn't know who you were talking to."

The bomb skidded out of the trailer and clanged onto the pavement.

Daikon ducked.

"You think that would help?" Jackson laughed. "Ducking?"

"Duck and cover, dude." Daikon said.

The bomb lifted slowly off the pavement.

"There's no timer on that thing, Squires so get that thing up into space and then cut it loose as soon as you think you're safe."

"No timer?" Squires asked.

"No." Jackson confirmed.

"Pick up my wings, will you?" Squires said. The bomb seemed to just disappear as it was yanked away at incredible speed.

"Get her wings?" Daikon asked.

Two loud clangs echoed into the back of the tractor trailer.

Daikon smiled. "Right."

Jackson looked back into the trailer. "Let's get them out as well; can't leave them here for a coroner to poke around inside them."

"Right." Daikon said again. "Dang that Banks." He started into the dark trailer.

"Dang Banks?" Jackson said. "You sounded pretty happy to shoot him."

"What?"

"You laughed as you shot him. Pretty cold blooded." Jackson shook his head. "Especially for a good guy."

"Oh." Daikon chuckled. "When you said 'light them up', I thought you had picked up one of our MP5s. But you really had a flashlight. Then

when Banks looked over here, I realized all you had was a flashlight, so I fired at him"

Jackson chucked as well. "Oh, yeah; I can see how that would be confusing." He held up his flashlight. "It's a really good flashlight though, right?"

"Indeed it is." Daikon pointed. "I'll get Banks since we've got history. You get the other guy."

Jackson got serious. "Remember Jarred; these are not people. These are aliens who come here to rape our planet and kill our people. And they just tried to kill a million of us as a diversion to capture a half million of us to use as slaves."

Daikon looked down at Banks. "Right. You're right." He shook his head. "Why the hell can't we get along?" He looked at Jackson. "I'm being serious. Why can't we get along and work together? We could trade them our resources for stuff they have that we could use. Why can't we do that?"

Jackson pointed at the two dead aliens. "Because they don't want to get along. To them, we aren't people; we're just things they can use as slaves. And believe me, as a black man that is a hard thing to swallow."

Daikon grabbed Banks by the arms. "Well, let's get these two out of here. And those two outside as well." He pulled banks toward the rear of the semi.

Jackson followed close behind.

When they got there, Daikon hopped down and picked up Banks' body and put him on the ground. Jackson just tossed his alien out.

"Dude."

"I have no patience for them." Jackson said as he hopped down. "None."

"No, I get that." Daikon pointed. "But there're folks watching." There were three youths watching them. All of them had their phones out and were videoing.

"Damn." Jackson cursed. "Get those other two here for an extraction and I'll deal with these kids."

"They're human kids, right?" Daikon asked.

"I'm just taking their phones is all." Jackson explained. "Nothing too serious."

"That's practically murder nowadays."

Jackson laughed. "Yeah, I guess it is. We all have to make sacrifices though. You got this?"

"Yeah; I'll get everyone together. Wings and all." Daikon started toward the other two aliens. "Ops? Cleanup on aisle six. Anyone awake back there?"

Operation Demarche and De-Packing

Daikon put his hands on his hips and nodded. "And that's why we should all be issued tactical Vespa Piaggios."

Commander Story stared at Daikon for a long moment. "Okay." He said. "That wasn't what I asked, but we will keep that in mind."

"Great." Dakin gave a nod then sat. "All I want if for leadership to consider it." He smirked. "Since they're not doing any of the running."

"What?" Commander Story said.

"And on that note, I think I want to point out I got my ace." Jackson said as he looked at Major Durbin. "And the mission was a success, I think, right?"

"It was." Durbin agreed.

"But what's to stop them from doing that again? It can't be that hard to slap together a nuke, right?" Daikon asked. "They can probably buy them at the corner alien drug store."

"No, not exactly." Durbin began. "However with how close this came to being a catastrophe, we were able to convince Orange Orange to issue a demarche for the use of nuclear weapons. The Calamari warned them if they tried to set off another nuke on Earth, they would be filing a formal complaint via the Vestas."

"Vestas? Which ones are those?" Daikon asked.

"The bug ones." Story said.

Daikon frowned. "But what good does that do? They get a strongly worded letter sent to them from a bunch of bugs. That can't be much of a deterrence."

"Oh, they are a much more… hands on species."

"Hands on?"

"Metaphorically speaking of course." Durbin said. "They don't have hands of course; they're more like pincers."

"Of course," Daikon repeated.

"But they do have planet-busting nukes and a history of using them when they get rubbed the wrong way." Durbin continued. "And they are a bit more… cantankerous than the Calamari. They are a 'destroy now, don't even bother with questions later' kind of species."

"Yikes."

"Exactly." Commander Story said. "So for the sake of their home world, nukes are off the table for the Greys. So that's definitely a win."

"Nice." Jackson sat back in his chair. "Those guys get on my nerves."

"And I imagine their overt terrorizing antics would not be tolerated anymore." Commander Story added.

"So they'll leave Earth alone?" Daikon asked.

"No, they'll just be sneakier about it." Durbin smiled. "We're not out of a job just yet."

"Well crud." Daikon smiled. "Well, that at least gives me a reason to unpack my boxes, right?"

"Right." Commander Story agreed. "I imagine you have a little time before the Greys try something else. A couple of weeks at least before we're on another mission."

"A couple of weeks of peace and quiet? Nice." Daikon said. "So it's Operation D and D."

"D and D?" Jackson asked.

"Demarche and De-packing." Daikon tilted his head. "Maybe even Advanced Demarch and De-Packing."

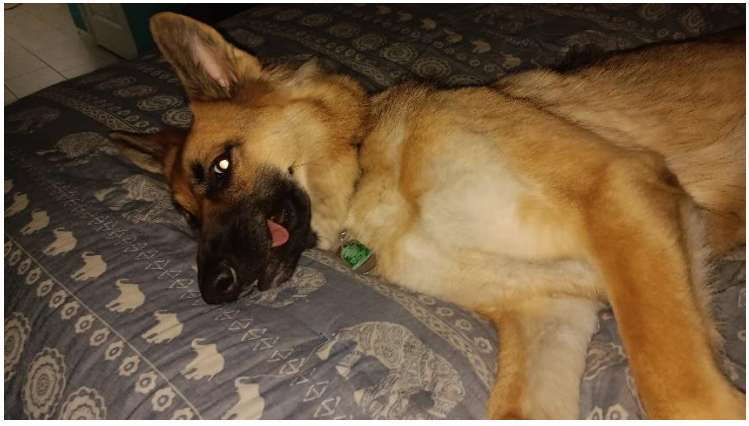
Jackson just shook his head. "There's got to be a savings throw against you. There's just got to be."

"Oh nice!" Daikon replied. "Nicely done!"

The End

About the Author and This Story

Robert's writing output has increased as of late- most of his home renovations are done so he has more time to write. And also to take his faithful companion Buckey the Rescue Dog on trips to the lake. Robert decided that taking Buckey on Jeep trails wasn't a good idea after Buckey threw up in the back seat. A lot.



Buckey Tuckered Out From a Day of Adventuring

Between this series, his newly published Hugh, Vampire series, and the next book in the *Summer Schauers Mystery* series, he will be busy. Also on the back burner is the eighth book in his *Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop* series- a 'choose your adventure' book!

The idea of this story came about after Robert visited his uncle out in Pahrump, Nevada. One day they drove to Vegas to rent a Jeep to drive the trails. On the way back to Pahrump, Robert's Uncle, Sidney pointed over to the left and said "That's that secret government site, Area 51 over there. You can see the batwings flying there sometimes". Uncle Sidney was referring to the F-1176 Nighthawk (picture below). Then he said "I'm not sure where the other 50 secret government sites are." Which then led Robert into wondering where these other sites actually were- so the story of Area 46 came about on the flight back to Central Florida.

Thanks Uncle Sid!



This is a publicly released photo so you don't need a Top Secret security clearance to look at it.