

1.

September 7th 2015

The ordinarily tranquil West Sussex countryside was experiencing a vicious spell of thunder and lightning while the clouds belted across the sky as if being chased by an invisible assailant. In the depths of a dark forest grove somewhere in Southern England a dilapidated wreck of an old wooden shack creaked and strained as it battled against the ferocious elements. As the biting wind, more typical of late November, whistled through the holes and cracks in the decayed, rotten beechwood, the door gently swung methodically on its hinges, like an old worn-out metronome.

The young teenage runaway sheltered inside, his teeth chattering in the cold while his over-active mind played the cruellest hallucinatory tricks upon him. Inside the sparse, poorly equipped hut, a single candle plucked with haste from a drawer struggled to stay alight, resisting with courage the efforts of the roaring gale outside to extinguish it. Each waving, bending shadow of the surrounding fir-trees conjured up the most fearful monster caricatures in the lonely youth's mind as they cascaded across the wall of this unlikely source of refuge.

Before long, however, these frightening images were paling into insignificance as the eerie glow of a flaming cylindrical object lit up the sky above, plummeting towards the darkened outline of the distant hill from whence came the sound of a huge impact and deafening explosion.

The boy screamed in unrestrained terror. The unremitting beatings administered by his Father over the last month and now this terrifying ordeal had finally stretched his nerves to the limit and he fell to the ground a writhing, quivering wreck.

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The dawning of a new day brought a thorough transformation to the chaos of the previous night. Although there was still a notable chill in the air, typical for that time of year, the sun was unusually bright and the low-lying mist which had been a constant feature of the South Downs the previous three mornings, had completely dissipated, to be replaced by a crisp, clear view of the surrounding countryside. The scene could almost be described as peaceful if it were not for the feverish activity of the local police and a not-so-local investigator who had arrived in the early hours at the height of the storm.

The rotating blue lights of a Police Land Rover now marked the spot of the previous night's explosion and a tall, bearded gentleman in a long fawn-coloured raincoat scavenged around the area like a hungry rat, while a couple of policemen in more conventional uniform huddled together nearby, passing a flask of hot tea between them. Their faces reflected an air of resignation that there wasn't much they could do and 'they might as well leave the detailed forensics to the expert over there.'

The 'expert' was Paul Greyshott – a well-established Detective Superintendent in the Sussex Police Force, aged Fifty-Six. He had experienced a number of similar cases over the years and knew what he could expect within the next few minutes if his memory served him right. Soon enough it happened. As he bent down to take a closer look at some burned vegetation, the detective felt a tap on his shoulder.

He turned to face one of his junior constables who pointed out the recent arrival of some large black rectangular vehicles, the type of which he had previously seen only twice before. Several heavily-clad, pink-suited individuals had already clambered down their steep sides to the ground. They were surveying the surroundings and upon spying the detective and his token entourage, began craning their necks to see more clearly who had infiltrated their space.

“They want to see you sir- the skinny feller over there and the girl with him.”

Greyshott strolled over to the two gayly coloured but stern-looking people, holding his hand out politely, ready for formal introductions.

“Paul Greyshott, Horsham CID. Pleased to.....”

“We know who you are” the thin, gaunt man rudely interrupted as he thrust a black identity card with a silver outline in Greyshott’s face.

The Detective squirmed involuntarily as if a reflex action was reminding him that he had seen this card before and it invariably spelt trouble. Stuttering, he replied “So – so – I guess that means you’ll be taking it from here?”

“Yes, Detective Superintendent Greyshott. Two of our Security Officers will escort you and your colleagues away from the area. We’re in the process of sealing it off.”

“No need” he replied. “I understand the situation.” He thought back to the two previous occasions he had met up with these guys. “My car’s parked about a quarter of a mile to the south. We’ll be on our way.”

The gaunt man jutted out his jaw and bony chin as if preparing to argue but then thinking better of it. “OK Detective, if you and your colleagues could ski tattle right now, we’ll be able to finish our work here without further interruption!”

Greyshott marched back to the two uniformed officers, feeling a tad resentful at having been spoken to in such condescending terms. “We’re finished here, fellas – drop me back at the King’s Arms.”

As they set off, the detective reclined in the back of the Police Land Rover in silence.

“You OK Guv?” enquired the officer in the front passenger seat. “You seem a bit preoccupied.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just wondering whether I still need to put in a report back at the station.”

“Who were those guys anyway?” asked his colleague behind the wheel.

“Government business. That’s all I know. I’ve come across them before. Once they flash those black cards, we’re expected to vacate the area immediately and without question, leaving everything to them.”

The vehicle’s interior transformed into a haven of deep thought and reflection as they continued on their way.

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The evening was starting to draw in and the perfume of the Sussex countryside at dusk, a mixture of lavender and freshly-mown grass, penetrated the small gap of the open window in Greyshott's cramped converted loft-space of a room in the King's Arms Free House. The building was of thatched design with white-washed stone walls rimmed by ancient wooden panels, splitting here and there through a combination of age and the pressure of thick relentless ivy almost completely covering the building's exterior.

Greyshott often stayed here when he needed to gather his thoughts and concentrate on a particular case. Normally the pub provided a quiet and restful environment but tonight there was some kind of function in progress downstairs. The Detective pulled off his thick leather boots and stretched out on the bed, his deeper inner thoughts mingling oddly with the sound of a raucous barmaid's laughter and the monotonous hum of voices from a full house of local socialites.

He knew it was none of his business and would likely cause him no end of grief but, having been of an inquisitive nature from an early age, he knew that it would forever play on his mind if at some future juncture he was unable to discover those tantalising secrets behind the men and women with the black silver-rimmed ID cards and seemingly inappropriately bright uniforms.

Greyshott decided he needed to clear his head and wandered down to the bar and towards the entrance door. The raucous barmaid was leaning across the bar towards two local farm hands, both in their early twenties. They, in turn, were performing some type of obscure card trick involving single cards and the narrow gap of the barmaid's cleavage. An ever-increasing number of the pub's male patronage were becoming engrossed in this activity, while the landlord behind the bar, who seemed unfamiliar to the detective, was shaking his head in disgust and turning away while drying a couple of pint glasses.

Greyshott wandered outside.

The departing day was now just a faint glimmer of light in the west and a pair of small Pipistrelle bats darted back and forth while a squadron of hovering gnats buzzed above Greyshott's head, the occasional one darting down towards his unprotected neck in a frenzy of bloodlust when it sensed he was distracted.

The detective reached his car and stood back to admire it. He had very few material possessions but this was his pride and joy – a red Nineteen Seventy-Four BMW.

Fighting off the persistent insects with a swipe of his left hand, he felt in his pocket with his right for his keys and then reached forward to unlock the boot and retrieve his briefcase. As he lifted it, he stepped back in surprise as the automatic light came on and there before him, curled up in a foetal-like position was a dirty, dishevelled teenager, shaking from head to toe with a look of terror in his dark sunken eyes and with beads of sweat dripping down the sides of his swollen, beaten face.

2.

September 15th Nineteen Forty 11AM GMT

On the newly Nazi-occupied French aerodrome of Chartres a 'staffel' of Heinkel Triple Ones stood rumbling with menace on the grass dispersal, each of their roaring Jumo piston engines straining against the weight of their heavy bomb loads, revving up in preparation for take-off and fuelled to the brim for one of the initial blitz attacks on London.

At his country retreat of Carinhall, Germany, Reichmarshall Hermann Goering stepped out from the grand main entrance, flicked his famous riding whip back under his armpit and marched forward towards a waiting Mercedes. This would transport him to the nearest airfield from where a Junkers Fifty-Two would fly him over the border and on to the northern coast of France. From here he would savour the 'best seat in the house' view of the mass departure of Luftwaffe fighters and bombers participating in the Fuhrer's latest directive of bombing the United Kingdom into submission.

Goering reflected on how well the story of his life had been fabricated up to that point and, had it been true, how impressed he would have been with the speed at which the Luftwaffe had developed since his renowned career as a young Fighter Ace in the First World War. This well-known historical gem published in many a German schoolchild's history book was in truth a complete fiction. He and a limited number of his kind, together with selected members of the human race, were the only lifeforms privy to the true reality of this period of history.

Despite the mass deception, the Luftwaffe was now a formidable concentration of aerial weaponry and would soon destroy once and for all the threat posed by Great Britain to the German Reich, especially as there was one aspect of this new phase of the war which if successful would have a decisive influence on its eventual outcome.

Detailed information was highly confidential and accessible to only a select few. The operation codenamed 'Grand Finale' was scheduled to occur at eleven pm on September the Seventeenth – a mere two days later.

As Goering's vehicle left his beloved rural residence, a once proud structure now gradually morphing into a storage warehouse for stolen art treasures, his maid took the opportunity to visit his quarters to change the sheets and put things in order. Making her way towards his lavish bedroom, she noticed his muddy footprints stretching out along the length of the hallway. Aware of the likely punishment she would endure at his hand if she failed to remove this residue of his latest hunting trip from the pristine flooring, she approached the adjacent store-room for a mop and bucket.

Officially, it was not a room that she was authorised to enter and was therefore not her usual source of supplies. These were provided by the Domestic Head whose possessive nature ensured that they were locked away out of sight in her absence and only available through a strict set of procedures.

However, a notice to the effect that cleaning implements lay within was clearly marked on the door, but this towering and intimidating monstrosity, imposing upon her from above like an uncharted portal to another world, appeared to be completely impenetrable.

As if to mock her situation while at the same time appealing to her sense of challenge, a hefty steel padlock hung from the thick metal bolt barring her entrance and it seemed as if she would stand little chance of gaining access.

Then, unexpectedly, a feeling of sudden desperation engulfed her being, causing her to tug at the handle. As it pushed against the padlock, it became apparent that the horse-shoe clip had not quite been driven fully home, the device lurched upwards and over the bolt and fell to the ground with a reverberating clang.

She slid the bolt to one side and with all her strength pushed against the door which creaked open, the sound grating and rasping unhelpfully due to friction caused by its heavy weight turning against the ancient rusty hinges. The surrounding high ceilings caused an unhelpful echo effect, amplifying the noise still further. Such an unscheduled racket threatened to draw the unwanted attention of officials trawling through paperwork in the surrounding state rooms.

With a great sigh of relief that she had succeeded thus far, the maid entered. She reached for the light switch, flicking it back and forth but nothing happened. Then she noticed a strange unearthly green glow emanating from deep within, accompanied by a low-pitched humming sound. Looking closer she could just make out the faint outline of what appeared to be a rectangular box. Reaching forward, she touched something cold, clammy and unpleasant, hastily withdrawing her hand. Feeling in her apron pocket for a box of matches she lit one and leaned further inside.

The whole building reverberated with her gut-wrenching scream as the woman collapsed to the floor, blood pouring from every orifice as her skin burst and liquified, bubbling up into a gooey mess akin to the effect of contact with sulphuric acid. Before any alarm could be raised, two figures in protective overalls and masks sped past the still open front door to the property. They dragged her out onto the forecourt and into an unmarked military ambulance as she took her final breath. A quick phone call followed to the relevant authorities and all record of her existence was deleted from official records.

Jeff Rickenbacker, who on this particular day was posing as a local Frenchman called Pierre Marcel wound down the window of his pink and white Renault Celtaquatere and raised his Goerz binoculars to his eyes. The Reichmarshall had departed and all seemed quiet in the general vicinity.

Rickenbacker was an American citizen of German descent but no direct relation to the famous Air Force Major Edward "Eddie" Rickenbacker, although he had also changed the spelling of the name to sound less German. This was due to the degree of mistrust presently being shown by the allies towards anyone with a Germanic-sounding name. He was born on Long Island in Nineteen Ten and had been seconded to the British Secret service. His code name was operative Alpha One.

There had been rumours of a new German secret weapon in the vicinity. An unusual oblong metal box from which emanated a pulsing glow had been spotted by a member of 'Red Orchestra' the German underground anti-Nazi resistance movement.

Positioned inside a metal frame and rolled along on a heavy-duty trolley, it had been moved with great care under armed guard into Goering's mansion a week earlier. Rickenbacker had been sent to intercept and if possible, disarm it, although at this stage he hadn't a clue as to what exactly he would be dealing with. All he carried was a single sheet of paper with some very odd instructions and a diagram, provided to him by his superiors, who apparently had some knowledge as to its constituent parts.

He was about to return to his car, wind up the window and start making some notes when the cleaning woman's guttural scream enveloped the whole area. He raised the binoculars once again and was just in time to see her grossly disfigured body bundled into the waiting vehicle before it was driven away in haste.

This was a new and worrying development. The American reversed his vehicle as fast as he could away from the camouflaged area of thick shrubs behind which he had been parked and drove back down the dirt track towards the security gate through which he had entered earlier.

The guards turned towards him as he approached and a portly uniformed fellow appeared from the porter cabin, calling "Halt!" with his palm outstretched. As Rickenbacker arrived, he raised his jack-boot and with a preventative firmness, placed it on the vehicle's bonnet as it came to a stop. Alpha One wound down the window. "Good afternoon officer."

"Your papers please" came the brisk reply, "Ah yes – Pierre Marcel, Buildings and Maintenance. Please continue." His colleagues raised the barrier.

Rickenbacker replied in French. "Everything's in order sir. We'll be sending over our best Ornamental Landscape Gardener tomorrow – an old fellow but very skilled in such projects. The Reichmarshall will be very pleased."

"Very good" the security guard replied.

Rickenbacker hooted and drove off at speed.

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The following day, as many grim-faced dust-covered citizens trawled through the rubble of London's East End for any surviving relatives or remaining scraps of their possessions, Goering returned once more to Carinhall, evidently pleased with what he had witnessed in France the previous morning and with a full banquet laid out before him, prepared to indulge in some of the ill-begotten trappings of Hitler's dictatorship, namely a large helping of venison with all the trimmings freshly shot on the estate.

"Ah – the new maid!" he exclaimed as he spied the sleek blonde Aryan fraulein through the narrow gap in the slightly ajar entrance door to the room. Leering at her in a predatory fashion, he purposefully dabbed globules of red wine from his obese chin with a red napkin emblazoned either side with black swastikas. The maid gave the obligatory respectful smile and continued with her feather dusting, cursing him to hell in the private area of her inner thoughts.

As Goering gorged on his freshly killed and skilfully cooked wild animal, prepared exactly to his self-styled 'expert palate,' he discussed intermittently while chewing generously sized portions of deer, the current air campaign against Britain with a group of senior Nazi officials. They listened intently and with rapid nodding of their heads agreed with absolutely everything he said – truly an entourage of 'yes men.'

A few feet away, just outside the partially opened window, Rickenbacker knelt down, disguised as the aforementioned French peasant gardener recently arrived from Vichy France as a new employee of the Buildings and Maintenance firm charged with the upkeep of the estate. With unrestrained aggression, he attacked with a trowel the soil of a flower bed while listening with fascination to the conversations within. Goering rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen!" he exclaimed "I must thank you all from the bottom of my heart for attending this momentous occasion, in celebration of our glorious and imminent defeat of the British Empire and all it represents. Soon a newly reborn strong and powerful German Reich will reign supreme across all European lands and you will reap the benefits associated with your most eminent positions in the Fatherland. Now may I bid you good day as I am

required to report to the Fuhrer regarding today's operations." He turned and marched towards the exit, accompanied by a loud round of applause from all those in attendance.

Rickenbacker shuffled his way towards the next window along, levering it open with a screw driver in anticipation of Goering's imminent arrival in the room next door. As the head of the Luftwaffe entered, he stopped abruptly and looked around, a frown of suspicion causing unsightly wrinkles across his forehead and down the sides of his plump round middle-aged face.

Rickenbacker, whose eyes had been level with the top of the window sill as Goering entered, now ducked down with the speed of a rifle bullet and began fiddling intently with various garden tools. Had he been seen by a passer-by, it would have been a very unconvincing attempt at looking busy in his job. He fully expected the Nazi to head straight over and slam the window shut but instead Goering turned away, raising his eyebrows as if to suggest that maybe it was just his imagination.

The Reichsmarshall then sat down at an old faded antique spruce coffee table and picked up the phone. Taking one final all round survey of the room to confirm he was alone, he dialled.

What followed was a peculiar sequence of events. Goering underwent a partial metamorphosis, first exhaling like a gradually deflating balloon and then gurgling horribly like a drowning man in distress, causing Rickenbacker to involuntarily visualise some rare semi-aquatic reptile in extremely bad health attempting to raise itself to the surface of a polluted pond.

The Reichmarschall then yawned and in so doing produced a brief but concise sound effect akin to a muted ship's foghorn. With the listener at the receiving end now apparently in position, he began to speak in a language the Rickenbacker didn't recognise, despite his extensive multilingual capability. The Spy continued kneeling at the foot of the window, filing away a continuous cascade of mental notes detailing the emerging situation which he would present later to his superiors. Much would there be to divulge, especially as Goering had now unexpectedly reverted back to his native German.

"My Fuhrer!" he exclaimed "everything is prepared. The device will be shipped under armed guard to Chartres Airfield at six pm local time this very day. No, my Fuhrer, there is no-one listening. Nobody is here. Yes, I understand. Very well. I will call you as soon as we have positive news and the invasion can commence."

Returning the receiver to its retaining hook, Goering set the telephone back down onto the table, his facial expression contorting into a wild-eyed grimace as if he was experiencing the initial throes of an epileptic fit. Then his composure returned to normal and tugging at the sides of his jacket to straighten and tidy his appearance, he prepared to leave the room.

It was at that moment that he thought he spotted the shadow of something moving just outside the window. He crept towards it like a cat about to pounce, bending down and twisting his neck around with the expertise of a professional contortionist. This uncomfortable angle afforded the best panoramic view of his emerging ornamental gardens as well as enabling him to see who was in the immediate vicinity.

All appeared peaceful. A large and beautiful dragonfly emblazoned with the many colours of the rainbow swooped by in the dry summer heat, then turned and flew inside, landing on Goering's lapel. He brushed it aside with contempt, flicking it away with his fat and weathered aviator's hand while cursing that it would leave an unsightly mark on his smart, freshly pressed uniform.

Resuming his scan of the area he noticed in the courtyard to the left a group of young maidens, probably daughters of a member of his entourage, singing joyful Bavarian folk songs while dancing in circles and holding

hands. To the right, a French peasant with a pile of earth in a wheelbarrow was hobbling along, a man obviously well past retirement age, although with his back to the Reichmarshall, only a glimpse of his face could be afforded as he disappeared from view behind a potting shed, his head turning slightly as he went.

Goering's attention now transferred to the window sill and a thick layer of grime and dust that had accumulated due to obvious neglect. Perhaps the new maid would require additional training? An evil chuckle passed from his lips as an indecent thought came to mind. He turned to leave with a smile of grim satisfaction, crushing the recently maimed dragonfly under foot.

All was well and proceeding as planned.

3.

The news channel on the 8th September, 2015 contained its usual plethora of negative and depressing stories as Joan Harding sipped her Bacardi and Coke and then reached inside her handbag for a nail file. The King's Arms wouldn't have been her first choice for an evening's entertainment but the overhead TV with its comprehensive satellite channels would keep her abreast of latest developments around the world while she discreetly continued her journalistic investigations of the previous night's profound events.

The bar in which she was seated was becoming annoyingly rowdy and it looked as if a fight would shortly break out between one of the local boys and an Eastern European mushroom picker who, through no fault of his own, smelled distinctly of his work, so she moved away to the quieter bar around the corner.

The plain-clothed copper had left shortly before. She knew a little bit about him from her own personal research: single, lived in a one bedroom flat in Crawley – no dependants, thirty-two years in the force. Earlier she had followed at a distance in her own vehicle then hid it behind a thick line of fir trees as his Police Land Rover entered the restricted area and then drove back out a few hours later. She had watched from a discreet distance as his colleagues dropped him here and then parked her vehicle some way down the hill.

With a view to some personal maintenance, she retrieved from her pocket her make-up kit with the flick-up mirror and studied with great disappointment the current state of her face. She was certainly no beauty queen but felt in her heart that she made the most of what she had: her nose a bit too pointed, her eyes a little too large in the context of her small face and her mousy-coloured hair lacking body and shine and a constant struggle against split ends.

"You'll do," she muttered to herself with resignation, clicking her make-up kit shut and returning it to her coat pocket.

Two figures entered the room. One was the copper. He was supporting a young teenager under his arm who looked distraught.

"Service!" Greyshott exclaimed, banging his fist down hard on the bar.

The barmaid appeared, initially with a scowl of resentment at having been pulled away from the excitement of the party in the main bar, but quickly changing to a look of concern when she saw the state that the boy was in.

"Can he have a glass of water?" Greyshott enquired.

"Sure" replied the barmaid. "Is he OK?"

"Well he seems very upset about something, but I can't get him to speak – to tell me what's happened."

"Maybe I can help?" came a voice from the corner of the room. Greyshott turned to see a tall skinny girl, with a face covered in thick foundation, rather accentuating her steeple-shaped nose and deep blue eyes with tiny pupils. She wore denim jeans and a thin flimsy blouse which, although she had very little to show off, left nothing to the imagination.

"Joan Harding." She held out her hand in greeting and then ushered the detective away to one side, moving him some distance from the boy. "I have some experience in helping deprived youngsters and those with behavioural difficulties" she whispered.

“Do you have access to a bathroom?” she enquired of the barmaid.

“Yes. Follow me” the barmaid replied and the two women led the stumbling, pensive boy by the hand upstairs.

“We’ll get him cleaned up,” Harding called back “then we’ll see if we can get some food inside him and maybe when he’s feeling better, he’ll tell us all about it.”

“Yeah,” replied Greyshott, throwing them the keys to his room. “You’re welcome to go through my suitcase to find him some clean clothes, although I don’t suppose any will fit.”

Greyshott returned to the bar and called over the unfamiliar Landlord. The detective was off duty now and so took the opportunity to order a pint of Stella Artois. His attention was drawn to the overhead TV. The screen flashed images of an unstable world. Three or four major European countries were now governed by extreme nationalist parties. The world recession of the century’s initial decade which had returned with a vengeance in the years leading up to Brexit had led to a deterioration of both the economy and law and order in general from which the more developed nations had seemed unable to recover. Poverty was rife. The living standards in many parts of Southern Europe had declined to a level below sub-Saharan Africa. These were worrying times for the average man in the street.

But Greyshott had more immediate and pressing concerns – the welfare of a young person, a missing teenager perhaps who had run away from home? He would contact the ‘Missing Persons Bureau’ first thing in the morning and see if his parents or guardians could be tracked down so that an explanation for his poor mental and physical state could be ascertained.

The droning dead-pan voice of the news reporter, who sounded unusually bored in his job, completed a story covering a military pact between the recently-appointed Portuguese and Greek dictators and then shifted to events closer to home.

“The enormous explosion experienced by many West Sussex residents last night is now thought to have been a large meteor falling to earth. The area near Horsham remains cordoned off to the public until the full nature of the event has been established. Experts are drawing similarities between this incident and the effects of the Nineteen O Eight Siberian fireball on flora and fauna in the vicinity. However, as yet the authorities advise that there is no immediate danger to the public but we will keep you informed of any further developments. Now – moving on to sport.....”

The sound of the presenter’s voice trailed off as somebody in the adjacent bar shouted “Three cheers for Peregrine and a happy 21st! Hip hip hooray!”

Greyshott’s thoughts returned to the events earlier in the day and he wondered what progress had been made by the Government Agency examining the fireball’s crater.

A man appeared at the pub’s main entrance. He seemed strangely out of place as if from another period in time. His raincoat reminded the detective of one of his own garments but the style was from a much earlier decade, maybe the Nineteen Forties. His hair was combed very flat with a side parting and Greyshott noticed a haunted look in the depths of his penetrating blue eyes as he turned to face him. As their vision interlocked, the detective was overcome by a tremendous feeling of doom. Then the stranger turned away to face the landlord who had now re-appeared to replace the absent barmaid.

“It’s OK. She’ll be back in a minute,” the detective spoke out in anticipation of the landlord’s imminent enquiry. “Greyshott’s the name. Paul Greyshott.”

“Dean Beckers” replied the landlord as they shook hands.

“She’s just helping sort out a youngster I found cowering in my boot. He was in a right state; bruised, dirty; scared out of his wits!”

“Ah!” exclaimed the stranger. “You’ve found our boy. We’ve been looking for him all night.” The man was obviously trying to disguise a thick foreign accent but with little success. “I’m the lad’s uncle. His father, myself and the boy are on a fishing trip. We got split up earlier walking through the woods!”

“Fishing trip?” Greyshott queried, realising that there were no lakes or rivers licensed for freshwater fishing within a twenty-mile radius of where they stood. “Your name Sir?”

“Paul. Paul Rheineck.”

“Well Mr. Rheineck. The boy is in obvious distress and appears to have also suffered some physical injury,” Greyshott retrieved his Police badge and thrust it towards Rheineck’s face. “I may need to escort you and his father down to the station for questioning.”

“That won’t be necessary my friend” the stranger replied. “Just a little domestic quarrel. Nothing that can’t be sorted out through calm and rational discussion amongst ourselves.”

“Well – we’ll have to see what the boy thinks about that. Here they come now. Where is his father anyway?”

“Searching for him in the village.” Rheineck’s was a curt reply.

The two women and the teenager re-entered the bar. The youngster’s appearance had improved considerably, the only thing letting him down being the detective’s chequered shirt and tartan trousers, which were obviously one or two sizes too big and grossly out of fashion and a pair of heavy work boots which he was finding difficult to walk in.

“Peter! I’m so glad I’ve found you” Rheineck exclaimed, attempting to sound relieved in a way that was quite obviously faked. He reached out and placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go. Your father is worried about you!”

Greychott had been subtly observing the boy’s reaction as he initially re-entered the room which was one of relatively relaxed facial expressions to one of mounting stress and horror as he laid his eyes upon the stranger. As Rheineck reached out in a gesture of conciliation, the boy recoiled, clinging tightly to Harding and making soft whimpering noises like a distressed animal. Upon seeing this reaction, the barmaid stepped forward taking an aggressive but protective stance.

Greychott made his move.

“Mr. Rheineck: The boy obviously doesn’t want to go with you. I suggest you leave.”

“Yes,” supported Beckers “we don’t want your sort around here putting the fear of god up our teenagers. Please leave. Now!”

“But I’m the boy’s uncle. You.....” but it was no use. Rheineck was outnumbered four to one.

At that moment somebody changed the TV channel from 'news' to 'documentaries' and the pub began to reverberate with the sound of a thousand goose-steps and ecstatic cheers as a programme on the Nazi Nuremberg Rallies of the late Nineteen Thirties burst forth from the screen. The stranger looked up and smiled as if experiencing a feeling of poignant nostalgia, his eyes returning with contempt to the boy and then to Greyshott before he left in haste.

As the door opened and the figure in the Nineteen Forties raincoat stepped out into the darkness, an unexpected gust of wind entered the building. It flicked across a row of decorative old books on a nearby shelf, rapidly displacing the pages like the shuffling of a pack of cards. Greyshott reflected how odd this was as it had been a particularly calm, moonlit night thus far. The door slammed shut and the stranger was gone.

Harding turned to the detective and gave him a look which combined surprise with disgust. "Why didn't you arrest him while you had the chance?"

Greyshott was caught off guard. How did the girl know he was a copper? Well there would be plenty of time to find out later. Right now, speed was of the essence. "Trust me on this," he replied. "Keep the boy here and don't let him out of your sight. I'll be back soon. Don't leave whatever happens!"

Before she had chance to reply he was gone.

Greyshott crept out into the night. His detective's intuition and long experience had convinced him that there was far more to this than a standard domestic quarrel and by following the strange visitor to the pub he would likely find out more than he would by just simply arresting him and taking him down to the station.

Darkness had now fallen and although there was a cloudless sky, the moon at its current phase was only a fraction of its full potential and afforded very little additional light to the poorly-lit streets of this insignificant country hamlet. But the detective could just make out the fawn-coloured raincoat of the stranger as he set off across a field of cattle that mood in unison as if complaining at being disturbed, as he dodged in and out between them.

Using a drinking trough as cover, the detective observed the stranger climb the shallow gradient of the hill and then heard him stumble down the other side as his feet fell on uneven ground. Greyshott tried to get his bearings from the distant lights of Horsham and the silhouette of undulating terrain to the north and then realised with a start that Rheineck was heading towards the restricted area.

He reached the hedge bordering the field and crouched down behind a large Friesian whose insane beady eye penetrated through his being, although the animal remained perfectly still. As the detective and the cow partook in their weird staring contest and Greyshott put his finger to his lips (as if the animal would really understand to stay quiet!), he considered how it was just as well that he didn't suffer from any type of bovine phobia.

Rheineck crossed a farm track and entered an area of thick wooded undergrowth. The detective followed, keeping his distance but remaining just within range to check the stranger's progress and direction. As he, in turn, traversed the poor excuse for a road, he tripped over something hard and round and fell the other side head first into some brambles. "Shit!" he cursed under his breath as cuts and bruises began to redden upon his face and hands. Despite the pain, he somehow managed to stay still, eyeing Rheineck's reaction over a rotten log.

The stranger stopped and turned, slowly creeping back in the direction he had come. Greyshott, being a keen amateur ornithologist, quickly recalled the shriek of a Barn Owl from an old cassette tape he kept at home and

attempted to mimic it with only partial success. 'Bloody hell,' he reflected, 'that sounded more like a cat being strangled!'

It seemed to work, however and Rheineck set off at speed again, his stalker bobbing and weaving close behind.

4.

It was the morning of September Seventeenth, Nineteen Forty.

Rickenbacker headed towards the pre-arranged liaison point in Chartres, having travelled overnight from Carinhall disguised as a German industrialist. The spy was continually amazed by the number of fake IDs that his department were able to produce without the slightest suspicion of the Nazi authorities. To get here quickly, he had bribed a local official to allow him to travel on a train engaged in shifting military troop formations between the German occupied countries. Some portions of the journey had also been made on foot under cover of darkness.

He approached the designated meeting point with agent Bravo Two – a rundown warehouse full of disintegrating cardboard boxes and infested with foul smelling and abnormally large rodents and their excrement. The building had obviously been disused for many years prior to the Battle of France although it was surrounded by many bombed-out shells of structures and fallen masonry.

The door to the warehouse was broken and slanted in at an angle so he stepped around it and entered the vast blackness beyond. He opened his leather briefcase and extracted a heavy-duty flashlight and using standard procedure flashed it five times in quick succession. As expected, after a few seconds four short bursts returned the signal from the far end of the building and he made his way towards them. On reaching the target point he waited by a further door, the dimensions of which reminded him of a recent mission when he attempted to gain entry to a bank vault without success.

The atmosphere was deathly silent and he turned around searching for his contact, facing back towards the entrance. There was a gentle tap on his shoulder. “Keep perfectly quiet and follow me closely” commanded in a whisper a medium height bespectacled figure faintly silhouetted against the wall next to him. Then the hefty door creaked open and they entered another room. Once inside it was gently closed behind them and with a click the bright narrow beam of an adjustable reading lamp burst forth on a table in the corner, switched on by one of two figures now standing there before him. With the aid of the light, the man with the spectacles could more clearly be seen. His rotund head was completely bald with short cropped hair and long rectangular sideburns. He had a scarred complexion, possibly due to acne as a teenager. He wore grey workman’s overalls which Rickenbacker mused could have done with a thoroughly good wash.

“OK Alpha One. You can speak easy now. This room is heavily soundproofed and thoroughly checked for bugs” he announced as Rickenbacker stood there summing him up. “May I introduce Hans Albrecht.”

“Delighted” said Hans.

“Hans is on our side” continued Bravo Two. “He’s been playing your role as a Luftwaffe Bomb Aimer although nobody at Chartres has ever met him. You see he’s been ‘training’ at a military academy in Berlin. We have fixed his papers to show your photo ID. You’ll be joining Staffel Number Seven at Chartres Airfield tonight at twenty-one hundred hours for the operational briefing.”

Hans was a tall lanky fellow very much in the mould of Hitler’s supposed Master Race – blonde, blue-eyed and altogether very Nordic in appearance. However, in Rickenbacker’s estimation, his broad chest looked somehow at odds with his long thin legs.

“Hans is an operative for an ultra-secret anti-Nazi Resistance organisation” added Bravo Two. “They are loosely affiliated to ‘Red Orchestra’ but I would say a hundred times more effective! He is also a major force in the procurement of their equipment and weaponry and has gathered together some kit for you.”

Hans stepped forward and emptied the contents of his rucksack onto the table. Several items of various sizes fell with a thud. Hans, with a thick Saxonian accent, began describing them to Rickenbacker in his best English.

“No. 1” he began “A full flying kit for a Luftwaffe Bomb Aimer consisting of a standard flying suit, headgear and goggles and a booklet for familiarisation of the Bomb Aimer’s position and equipment for the Heinkel HE Triple One.

No. 2: A packet of Riegel Gummy Bears laced with ether.

No. 3: A Walther PPK pistol and a WH Infanterie 42 trench dagger for close combat.

And finally, No. 4: A specialist weapon disarming kit consisting of modified surgical tweezers and a tubular lead case.”

Bravo Two took over. “As they managed to side-step us and move the weapon prematurely from Carinhall, your task will now be to board the carrier aircraft and intercept it before take-off. By removing the Organic Matter tube, the device will be disarmed. The instructions previously provided will show you how to do this using the tweezers and the case.”

“Sounds like a tall order - and what if it proves impossible to deal with the weapon before take-off?” Rickenbacker enquired.

“Then we revert to plan B” Bravo Two continued. “This could prove more difficult and hopefully will only be needed as an absolute last resort. It entails drugging the two gunners and navigator with the candy while you climb down into the bomb bay and carry out the operation there. This will be in mid-flight, I might add, and possibly under heavy ‘enemy’ ground fire. There is one consolation however. The pilot is a double agent on our payroll. He will fly the aircraft on to a designated aerodrome in the South of England after you have disarmed the weapon. By the time the remaining crew become compos mentis again they will be in a high security army vehicle heading away as Prisoners of War.”

“Why the drugged sweets?” asked Rickenbacker. “Wouldn’t it be far easier just to cleanly dispatch them with this pistol?” He picked up the Walther PPK and admired its excellent craftsmanship.

“Under no circumstances are you to kill the crew!” exclaimed Bravo Two. “Orders from above. They want to interrogate them for information about the device and its origins.” Making a gesture to indicate that every little detail had now been covered he said “I suggest you leave immediately and start making preparations for this evening, Alpha One. Good luck. This is a crucial mission!”

“I’ll do my best” said Rickenbacker. Shaking both their hands he turned to leave.

Bravo Two retained his grip for a second, his staring eyes piercing into Rickenbacker’s very being. “The future of civilised humanity depends on it my friend!”

Some twenty minutes later, the spy was kicking his way through the bombed-out ruins of a small village about ten kilometres from Chartres airfield. His sources had advised him that this was the location of the one remaining guest house in the area still standing. He had checked in here earlier prior to the meeting at the warehouse. As he approached once more from the south-east it gradually came into view through the thick Autumnal fog, perched precariously on the side of a rocky outcrop protruding from a miniature hill. There the building stood in all its glory and splendour, stubbornly refusing to bow down and disintegrate after the relentless shelling of the

Nazi war machine that had destroyed the majority of the neighbouring abodes earlier that year in the Battle of France.

Rickenbacker knocked at the beautifully crafted front door carved in classic art nouveau style. The landlady, a short fat woman with a string of onions resting on her abnormally outsize breasts like some obscene necklace and a glass of Rose' in one hand, answered.

"Ah Herr Felburg' she exclaimed. "Just in time. Evening meal is served."

Rickenbacker exchanged pleasantries with her in his expert French, passed off a tactful excuse for not joining her for tea and headed directly to his room. He emptied the rucksack onto the bed and began methodically to re-check the contents. Everything was in order. He retrieved the 'Bomb Disposal' instructions and placed the tweezers and the lead case side by side.

He began to read:

ALPHA ONE

YOU WILL BE DEALING WITH A WEAPON FAR SUPERIOR TO ANYTHING YET KNOWN TO MAN. ITS ORIGIN IS UNKNOWN BUT WE HAVE IT ON GOOD AUTHORITY THAT ONCE DETONATED IT WOULD SET OFF A CHAIN REACTION RELEASING A DEADLY VIRUS WHICH WOULD SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE OF BRITAIN WITHIN APPROXIMATELY SEVEN DAYS. THE NATURE OF THE VIRUS IS UNKNOWN AND THERE IS ALSO NO KNOWN ANTIDOTE. THEREFORE, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT THE DEVICE IS DISARMED PRIOR TO RELEASE OVER LONDON.

DISARMING THE DEVICE IS A RELATIVELY SIMPLE ALTHOUGH VERY DELICATE OPERATION. PLACED SECURELY IN A COMPARTMENT, DIMENSIONS 5 X 7 INCHES INSIDE THE BOMB'S RECTANGULAR CASING, IS A GLASS TUBE CONTAINING ORGANIC MATTER OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN. BY LIFTING THE SQUARE ACCESS LID (YOU WILL IDENTIFY THIS FROM THE HIEROGLYPHICS ENGRAVED UPON IT) THE TWEEZERS CAN BE INSERTED EITHER SIDE OF THE TUBE WHICH SHOULD BE VERY GENTLY DRAWN OUT FROM THE CASING. EXTREME CARE MUST BE EXERCISED DURING THIS EXTRACTION.

IT IS ABSOLUTELY VITAL THAT THE TUBE IS NOT DROPPED OR SMASHED BUT PLACED IMMEDIATELY IN THE LEAD CASE WHICH MUST BE SHUT AND LOCKED SECURELY USING THE COMBINATION 5-7-1-2. THROUGH THESE ACTIONS THE WEAPON WILL BE DISARMED AND THE CASE CONTAINING THE ORGANIC MATTER MUST BE PASSED TO AGENT CHARLIE THREE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE ON LANDING IN ENGLAND.

"Piece of cake" Rickenbacker muttered to himself, folding the instructions up neatly into a square and placing them back in his pocket.

He gulped down a croissant and some French toast he had bought on arrival at Chartres town and sipped some English Breakfast tea from a flask. Then he laid out his flying gear on the bed. Stripping down to his regulation y-fronts, he checked his physique in the mirror. Life as a Secret Service Agent involved the strictest fitness regime. His biceps were large and powerful, rippling with muscle tissue and his body as a whole extremely well-toned – the type any woman would dream about waking up next to the morning after – and many frequently tried.

He proceeded to shave his head to match more closely the photo in his fake ID. The uniform of a Luftwaffe Bomb Aimer fitted him almost too perfectly. 'It could mean only one thing' he reflected. 'This was his fate - to carry out the extraordinary mission that would save the British nation and perhaps become the turning point of the second great war of the twentieth century.'

5.

8th September, 2015 2230 HRS

Greychott was finding it increasingly difficult to camouflage himself despite the darkness, as Rheineck was now picking up the pace and trees with adequate width to hide behind were few and far between although he was determined to keep up without being spotted.

They were approaching the outer cordon of the extra-terrestrial object's impact site and several armed guards in futuristic-looking one-piece boiler suits with huge collars had now spotted Rheineck and were anticipating his rapid arrival.

Two were at ground level manning a temporary check point and a third was positioned on the high platform of a disused water tower. All were heavily armed with what appeared to be high calibre rifles although Greychott, with his amateur enthusiast's knowledge of firearms, noticed a non-standard mechanical attachment with blunt ends clipped onto each barrel which was not an accessory that he recognised.

Surrounding the whole area and leading away from the checkpoint and water tower was, as suggested by its wobbly course, a hastily constructed metal fence, liberally decorated with skull and crossbones signs, indicating that it was high voltage and should not be crossed. Powerful portable floodlights had been added, unevenly scattered along the fence's length, illuminating the scene and stretching off into the distance out of sight.

As the checkpoint came into view, Greychott noticed a makeshift hide constructed from branches and thick leaves, probably by a local 'twitcher' as he recalled a Greater Spotted Cuckoo had been seen in the area the previous week. The detective realised it's perfect potential for allowing him an unobstructed view of the four men ahead without himself being seen, so he gently moved a branch or two aside and stepped in. The bird spotter had crafted a small round peep hole at which Greychott levelled his eye.

As Rheineck approached the checkpoint, one of the two ground-based guards hastily kneeled down, cocking his rifle into position so that his eye was perfectly in line with the gun sight. His colleague ordered: "That's far enough. Put your hands above your head and walk slowly this way!"

The detective watched his quarry reduce speed, demonstrating an element of caution and observed a creepy but oddly beguiling smile begin to transform his expression, spreading across the man's previously severe face from ear to ear, as if he was morphing into some kind of insane clown. "Now gentlemen, there is no need for that."

He was muttering in a tone that was strangely convincing and staring down the barrel of the gun, when the guard unexpectedly let the weapon slip from his grip and became motionless and trance-like.

Rheineck then transferred his stare to the guard's nearest colleague who froze where he stood and with the same procedure drew the attention of the man on the water tower. This unfortunate individual, who up to that point had been in an extremely vulnerable position leaning over the side of some thin railings, fell forty feet to the ground with a crash.

Rheineck kicked the fallen man with disdain, checking for signs of consciousness.

Evidently satisfied that all three were immobilised and no longer a threat, he continued on his way.

Greychott now struggled between the moral obligation of checking the condition of the three guards to see if there was anything he could do to help, against the imperative of not losing Rheineck in the wooded glade beyond. He overcame his conscience for what he now perceived to be the greater good and decided on the latter.

With no concern at all for the structural integrity of the hide he burst out through the window side, leaves, twigs and compacted earth disintegrating all around him as he made off once more in pursuit. This man was proving to be a thoroughly dangerous individual and a significant threat to both military personnel and civilian alike, with his incredibly powerful hypnotic abilities.

The detective now realised that they were closing in on the impact site as he recognised various landmarks from his previous visit. A large boulder and a lovers' inscription in chalk on the side of an ancient fir tree indicated that the clearing was dead ahead. He initially had Rheineck in view but then lost him as he rounded a run-down shack and disappeared behind it.

The chase had now reached its conclusion because the sound of voices and the dazzling reflection from bright pink uniforms bouncing off the beams of more floodlights signalled that he was only yards away from the temporary base set up by the Government Agency investigating the crater. Great care would need to be taken. If he was spotted in the vicinity, he knew it would surely be the end of his career in the police force.

As Greychott reached the shack, the stranger was nowhere to be seen, so he decided to use it as cover to observe the Agency's activity and to see if he could work out any connection between them and Rheineck.

Compared with the previous morning, the highly charged atmosphere had stepped up a gear. At least fifteen armed individuals in uniforms similar to the immobilised guards were positioned in a full circle around the crater facing outwards.

The thin gaunt man who had previously invited Greychott to get on his way was holding a clipboard and checking off information with the help of the girl who the detective now noticed was a buxom blonde. Her hair, which had been previously tied up in a bun, was now shaken down in a long flowing main.

The number of large black vehicles had increased to four and the one closest had the side folded down to reveal a vast array of computers, attended by three operatives sitting on rotating stools.

Over at the crater, three men appeared to be trying to extract something from its depths. One, who was standing at the edge, threw a triangular metal device angrily to the ground and, sighing in frustration, placed his hands resignedly on his hips. Then the heads of two others appeared as they clambered out and all three made their way towards the man with the clipboard who was evidently overseeing the whole operation.

"It's no good sir" said the frustrated man. "It's wedged tight into the surrounding earth. Even the Torsion Triad is ineffective."

Just as the gaunt individual turned to reply, a pulsing green glow lit up the crater coinciding with an alarm sounding in the Computer Vehicle.

"Code Red Sir" shouted the operative. "He's in the area – within a radius no greater than one hundred yards!"

"Shit!" exclaimed the man in charge. "All civilian operatives back to vehicles and take cover!"

Greychott could sense something big was about to happen. The perimeter soldiers remained in position, each lowering their prospective head visors and gripping their weapons tightly in adrenalin-fuelled anticipation. Everyone else had returned to the vehicles, engines started ready to leave immediately on command.

One of the vehicles was of a different design to the rest. It had large unsightly bulges spread along its length and was noticeably more streamlined at the ends. As Greychott watched mesmerised, four points at the rear began to emit steam as if letting off pressure. A latch at the top then released with a clunk and the complete section lowered to the ground forming a ramp.

As the steam gradually subsided, a figure, who the detective estimated was at least six and a half feet tall appeared and, with clumsy steps, descended to the ground. He was heavily clad in a thick padded suit with various metal protrusions along the arms which suggested some form of weaponry. At the foot of the ramp the man paused and turned towards the detective.

Over a loudspeaker came the following command: "Alpha One take position. Target signal directly ahead one hundred and fifty yards."

With a sudden horrible realisation that he would shortly be in the direct line of fire, Greychott threw himself into the undergrowth, curling up his body into a ball as he rolled through stinging nettles, long grass and hard earth speckled with small jagged stones while a tremendous sheet of flame enveloped the shack and it exploded before his eyes.

Concurrently with the above, a humming sound similar to the noise of an electricity substation accompanied the surprise appearance of a small hovering metallic disc overhead.

The machine was stationary and tipped over at a slight angle revealing a central transparent lobe inside which Greychott could just make out the heads of Rheineck and another person he had not seen before. This second person lifted a hatch and stepped out onto the flat top of the disc holding something shiny in his hand which alternately flashed red, yellow and green lights in quick succession.

Over the loudspeaker came a further command "Adolf. This is Delta Four speaking on behalf of the U.A.D.O. You will not be permitted to obtain the device. Surrender now and we will convene an emergency conference to arrange a truce between our two peoples to our mutual benefit. You have thirty seconds to comply."

The disc continued to hover and the figure on top pointed the flashing device towards the crater. A beam of green light zapped across from the crater to the object. The figure set it down, fixing it to the side of the machine and ducked his head in preparation to rejoin Rheineck in the lobe.

At that moment a further burst of fire aimed at the top of the disc by the tall armoured figure lit up the sky and surrounding forest and a dreadful scream of pain preceded the arrival of a decapitated head on the ground next to Greychott.

Its sudden shocking appearance caused him to heave uncontrollably. At the same instant a hail of fire from the perimeter soldiers created a mass clattering sound as their ammunition made contact with the disc and was deflected cleanly away, clearly having no effect whatsoever. Rheineck could be seen cursing and pushing what was left of the headless body of his partner out of the craft and onto the ground below.

Greychott managed to recover his composure in time to witness the disc begin to rotate, at first quite slowly and then building to a crescendo with a deafening whirl before letting loose multiple rays of light which shot

towards the ground, vaporising every person, vehicle and equipment in the vicinity. All that remained were piles of ash of various sizes scattered haphazardly around the clearing.

But the Organisation's main strategic weapon, the tall figure in the padded suit, had somehow managed to roll clear and their body lay prostrate and motionless at the edge of the smouldering crater.

Despite the unwelcome distraction caused by the newly arrived body part, Greyshott's attention remained on Rheineck's craft. The beam of green light began to draw a long cylindrical item from the crater which was pulled along it magnetically. Upon reaching the disc it was mated with the flashing device. Both objects having merged into a combined mass began to glow blood red. The green light then extinguished and a hatch to an inner compartment opened up. A mechanical arm gripped the newly formed matter and drew it towards the inner depths of the craft and out of sight.

The disc then slowed its rotation, banked over at an acute angle and then shot off at speed into the distant starlit night sky, using no obvious means of earthly propulsion but accompanied by just the sound of the wind as it displaced the air molecules directly in its path.

It then occurred to Greyshott that he was not alone. Joan Harding was crouching at his side. The teenage boy was next to her cradling the severed head in his lap. "Father....Father....Oh no.....No!"

The youth had finally spoken.

6.

17th September, 1940 1900 HRS GMT

British Secret Service Agent Alpha One made a final check of his equipment and looking in the full profile mirror by his bed, compared his overall appearance with particular emphasis on his face with the photo in his latest fake ID. He could hear the plump and jolly landlady humming a French folk song in the kitchen beneath his room. It was vital that he avoided raising any possible suspicion by letting her see him in full Luftwaffe regalia, so he crept with caution down the stairs and quickly made his escape back out into the depressing aura of the rubble-filled street, a marked contrast to the cosy atmosphere and warm welcome of the Guest House he had just left.

The ten kilometre walk to Chartres airfield would have been hard going for any normal person with the weight of equipment Rickenbacker was carrying, but with his particular strength, stature and physique it was no problem. It was more of a challenge negotiating in the dark the wreckage of allied trucks and armoured cars which littered the country roads and not tripping over the irregular ditches created by tank tracks which had become rivers of mud and dank water in many places.

In the distance to the north east he could see three or four powerful searchlights scanning the night sky and hear the thump-thump of flack exploding mixed with the faint droning hum of RAF bombers, possibly Whitleys he thought, from the timbre of their throbbing piston engines. He visualised with slight foreboding the fact that within a few hours he would be in the same position as those poor buggers but flying in the opposite direction, although Bravo Two had assured him that once he had radioed the code on the agreed frequency confirming that the weapon was disarmed, the heavy gunners at Dover and Folkestone would give him and the pilot free passage. This would probably be to Biggin Hill but possibly Eastchurch, depending on the location of other enemy traffic nearer the time.

Chartres airfield was in complete black-out. As he approached, he called out from a distance so not to alarm the guard at the entrance barrier.

“Hans Albrecht reporting for duty. I have an appointment with Oberleutnant Schulz” he announced in perfect German even down to the broad accent of Lower Saxony. He retrieved his ID from an inside pocket and showed the guard.

“Right this way Sir. Apologies for the lack of light but we’ve been under increasing RAF bombardment over the last twenty-four hours.”

“Really?” replied Rickenbacker as if he hadn’t the faintest idea why. The guard, who looked far too young to be a soldier, marched ahead to an old wooden outbuilding with a corrugated iron roof. The spy followed. He knocked on the door and waited. After a few seconds another soldier who looked so similar he could have been his identical twin opened it. A voice within shouted “Enter!”

“Hans Albrecht” announced the airfield guard standing to attention.

“Thank you Obersoldat Muller” said a highly decorated Senior Officer sitting at a very basic wooden table in the corner of the room. “Welcome Hans. Please sit down. Oberleutnant Schulz will be with us shortly. My name is Generaloberst Helmut Kruger. I am overseeing tonight’s operation. For security reasons we have only provided you with limited information but suffice to say Operation ‘Grand Finale’ could prove to be the most important development of the whole war if successful. We are expecting the rest of your crew shortly. They have just enjoyed a couple of hours leave before the big event. Schulz is with them.”

“Pleased to meet you General” replied Rickenbacker, remaining standing and offering his hand.

“Sit down, sit down” the General said impatiently waving it away in an authoritative gesture. “So, did you have a pleasant journey from Berlin?” he enquired.

“Yes, thank you” Rickenbacker lied with an expertly prepared look of sincerity.

“We’ve had excellent reports about you from the Academy” Kruger continued.

At that moment a group of laughing, joking individuals burst into the hut, quickly modifying their demeanour on noticing Kruger’s presence.

“Well gentlemen” began Kruger “I see you’ve made the most of your pre-mission jolly. I trust that the intake of alcohol has been limited!”

“Of course, General” replied the most jovial of the lot. He was a man whose thinning hair appeared to have been transferred to his upper lip in the form of a thick bushy moustache. “You must be Albrecht – bomb aimer first class” he said turning to Rickenbacker. “Oberleutnant Manfred Schulz – your pilot for the mission.”

They embarked on the pre-arranged handshake and Rickenbacker felt as if he was being initiated into some kind of secret society.

“May I introduce the rest of the crew” continued Schulz: “Navigator Dieter Neumann and gunners Jurg Schwarz and Heinrich Voss.”

“Glad to make your acquaintance” said Rickenbacker.

“Now gentlemen” the General hurried, “Without further delay I suggest you follow me to the Briefing Room.”

Kruger led them along a grass track around the southern perimeter of the airfield to yet another hut constructed in a similar fashion to the first. With two Waffen SS guards posted outside the six men entered the building. A large Air Navigation map was spread out on a table. A thick black line was drawn between Chartres and Central London.

“The mission will be relatively short” began Kruger, “a round trip of less than one hundred and forty miles. Your target is Central London – here” he said pointing at an area roughly in the vicinity of Marble Arch. “The bomb you will be carrying will only cause a relatively small explosion but its overall effect on Britain will be catastrophic!”

“Are you looking for pinpoint accuracy?” asked Rickenbacker.

“Well, we would normally expect nothing less” replied Kruger “but if you get into any difficulties with the enemy just ensure it is dropped over the British mainland and not in the channel!”

“What exactly is the nature of the weapon?” enquired Voss.

“That Herr Voss I’m afraid will remain top secret until such time as the mission is deemed a success. Then all will be revealed. However, you can rest assured that at twenty thousand feet there will be absolutely no danger to you and your colleagues from the detonation.”

Schulz interjected. "If it's OK with you General, I would like to accompany Herr Albrecht down to the aircraft to familiarise him with the detail differences from the standard HE Triple One before take-off, while Schwarz and Voss make their final preparations and Neumann studies the map in more detail."

"Of course," replied Kruger. "You have approximately one hour before scheduled departure."

The two men wandered out into the darkness towards a large partially camouflaged hangar silhouetted against the backdrop of a wooded hill. After a few minutes Schulz took out a torch from his flying jacket, shone it in a broad circle around their position and then switched it off. He was now certain that they were alone.

"Do you think there's enough time?" he asked Rickenbacker.

"Well it's cutting it fine – but even if we have to disarm it after we're airborne this will give me the opportunity to examine the weapon's position and work out exactly what actions I'll need to take later."

Schulz took hold of the thick padlock securing the hangar door and inserted a key he had been carrying on a makeshift chain necklace. The lock clicked open and he heaved the heavy doors along on their rollers and the two men stepped inside. "We're still operating a black-out curfew" he told the spy "so I'll shine the torch while you get to work."

The two men surveyed the area. The solitary Heinkel Triple One looked deceptively small, being the only serviceable aircraft in a hangar built for at least thirty. There was just one other occupant: a dismantled Feisler Storch Army Co-operation aircraft, just starting to rust at the peripheries due to the hangar's leaking roof. The Heinkel had been painted completely black and was bereft of all markings and Air Force insignia to ensure maximum night camouflage.

"She's brand new. Straight off the production line" remarked Schulz. "Beautiful bird. Just a shame she's been developed under such a dastardly regime. Would have made a lovely airliner!"

Rickenbacker nodded in agreement and they both climbed aboard. As they entered the cockpit to confirm all electrics were switched off, the spy recognised that musty smell; a mixture of leather, metal, oil and kerosene, peculiar to military aircraft of the Nineteen Forties. It immediately rekindled recent memories of his final days in the US Air Force as an instructor on B-25 Mitchells. As his thoughts wandered, he was suddenly living again the pain of that parting embrace with Joan, his wife, who now waited patiently across the Atlantic for the war to end and for his safe return.

Like a true professional, he quickly regained his concentration and turned once more to the matter in hand. The bomb had been loaded some eight hours previously and Schulz was the only person now with access to the hangar although he had inadvertently forgotten to lock the doors again from the inside once they had entered which could have bought them some extra time. Rickenbacker dropped himself down into the bomb bay, a mere couple of feet behind the pilot's seat. Schulz remained above, shining the torch. He watched the spy leaning over the dreaded rectangular warhead, now built into a streamlined bomb complete with aerodynamic fins and tail. The access lid to the tube was top side up, the hieroglyphics clearly marked as expected.

Just as Rickenbacker was preparing to make a closer inspection, the hangar lights came on and the sound of voices could be heard fast approaching. He quickly pulled himself up, dropped the hatch and he and Schulz headed with haste back to the cockpit. Their opportunity had gone. Jurg Schwarz poked his head around the entrance doorway. "Black out's been lifted sir for forty-five minutes while we prepare the flight" he informed Schulz. "Heinrich and I will start checking our ammo and make sure the guns are fully loaded and correctly synchronised."

“Very good” replied Schulz, secretly cursing their missed opportunity.

Rickenbacker then assisted Schulz with the pre-flight checks and Neumann arrived shortly afterwards, his Nav Plan now fully completed.

7.

The year Twenty Fifteen was proving to be the most memorable in Greyshott's Police career so far. Never had he experienced quite this much action in the quiet, rural and relatively crime-free environment of West Sussex.

A static cloud of acrid foul-smelling smoke hung over the clearing and two or three small fires which were well on their way to burning themselves out, were all that now remained of the recent fire fight. Joan Harding had turned away from the grim sight of the teenager holding the severed head and was trying with difficulty not to wretch. Greyshott knew it would be down to him to prize the morbid object away from the boy's grip.

Then unexpectedly the youth regained his composure and made his way over to the main corpse, resting the detached body part gently down beside it. He then fell to his knees and raised his eyes towards the night sky as if in prayer.

Greyshott turned to Harding. "Why the hell did you come out here? I thought I told you to stay where you were. That was totally irresponsible!"

Harding looked over at him, visibly upset, the tears welling up. "Don't you think I feel bad enough?" she retorted. "I couldn't stop him. About five minutes after you left, he began acting really strange, staring out of the window and muttering words that sounded like Hebrew. Then he suddenly dashed for the exit and no matter how loudly I shouted after him, he wouldn't come back. All I could do was follow and try to keep up!"

The sight of her obvious distress caused Greyshott to back off and his heart began to melt as she began to sob. He felt an overwhelming urge to hold her close and comfort her but expediency prevailed and he settled for just helping her to her feet. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for" he apologised, "we're all under a lot of stress and I think we've got ourselves mixed up in something that should probably have been left well alone!"

She looked back at him, an expression of forgiveness resonating from her large moist eyes.

They looked over at the teenager who now appeared to have been completely transformed by his Father's death. His overall demeanour now reflected a more mature personality than previously. He was just finishing covering his father's remains with some large branches and was turning to look at the seemingly lifeless body of the one remaining survivor of the earlier battle over at the crater's edge. Greyshott sensed that the death of his father was about to be avenged and called over to the boy, addressing him by the name that Rheineck had used earlier.

"Peter! No! It's not worth it!"

The boy turned to the detective and accurately sensing his thoughts raised his hand in a calming gesture. "My name is Legacy" he replied, "there is no sense or logic in revenge. The Restorer requires medical attention."

Greyshott and Harding exchanged confused glances and walked over to where the boy named Legacy stood over the individual he had described as 'The Restorer.'

"We have to get him to a hospital" remarked Harding as they neared the body and realised that his right arm, laying in a pool of blood, was pretty much disconnected from the torso, joined only by one thin muscle sinew.

"Not necessary" replied Legacy, "The Restorer has the ability to self-heal once he regains consciousness." In a shocking display of matter-of-factness, Legacy wrenched the arm from the body and placed his palm over the

remaining stump. "The wound is now cauterised until repair can be initiated. You must help me carry him to shelter."

Greychott turned to Harding. "Well that seems a sensible suggestion under the circumstances. You support him under his remaining arm. I'll take the other side."

So, the detective and the journalist lifted the limp but heavy body of The Restorer and began dragging him along behind Legacy who marched on ahead with confident strides carrying The Restorer's arm without a second thought, almost as if it were the latest fashion accessory.

Back in the clearing all was silent. A small shrew shuffled its way through the rotting floral debris and fungi on the forest floor, twitching its tiny nose as its path became blocked by a large mound of ash that had previously been the vehicle accommodating the man with the clipboard and his assistant. It then approached the covered body of Rheineck's partner. With its eyes darting in all directions it sensed an unworldly occurrence about to take place and scurried off into the shelter of a hollow log from where it could observe all movement in safety.

The branches used to cover the body by Legacy began to rustle and vibrate. Then a thin elongated arm punched its way out, stretching upwards, followed by another a few seconds later. A head then appeared with large transparent eyes and two small hollows in the fleshy pink area below. The mouth was just a narrow slit with no lips to speak of. The ears formed part of the cranium and were the shape of large sea shells set deep into the head. The creature made a painful struggling sound as if pulling itself out of a confined space. Having broken free, it then launched itself high into the air, landed on all fours and then shot off into the night at the speed of a Greyhound. As it left the area, Greychott noticed its movement out of the corner of his eye – but only for a split second.

"Hold on a moment" he called out to the boy. "I think there may be danger ahead!"

"There is nothing to fear" he replied. "The Cerebral Parasite has left the body. Its new host will not be any of us!"

Greychott had no idea what the teenager was talking about and looking over at Harding, now obviously struggling with the weight of the injured man despite the fact that they had made very little headway, he could tell from the incredulous expression on her face that she was none the wiser either.

Away in the distance they could see the temporary checkpoint although there was no sign of the guards from earlier. "OK let's take a breather" he called out. Harding expelled a massive sigh of relief as they both released their grip while propping The Restorer up against an Oak tree. She noticed the detective's expression of growing concern as he looked around, attempting to re-evaluate their situation.

"What's up Paul? You look worried."

"So, we're on first name terms already" he replied with a broad grin "and I hardly know you!"

Harding managed a wry smile but then continued "No, but seriously what's up?"

"Well I'm not totally sure" he whispered, deliberately lowering his voice so that it was out of hearing range of any perceived enemy, "but have you ever had the feeling that you're being watched?" He nodded his head in the direction of a tightly packed pile of timber which had been neatly tied together, awaiting collection by the wood cutters and lumberjacks of the local estate.

The teenager waited patiently some distance away, alternating between studying the anatomical details of the arm he was holding and watching their secret conversation in progress.

“Something’s been tracking us for the last few minutes” Greyshott continued, still in a whisper. Encouraging Harding to walk to the left as a diversion, he crept round to the other side and then with the lightest steps possible and maximum stealth he began climbing the layers of wood, which had conveniently been packed so that the logs reduced in size as the pile gained height, forming artificial steps or footholds. He finally reached the summit and peered over the other side. Crouched down in the corner with his eyes fixed on Harding was a scrawny unkempt individual about fifty years of age with greasy thinning hair, wearing an ill-fitting pin-striped suit and holding an obsolete portable camera which quite obviously pre-dated the digital era.

Carefully positioning himself so that he was directly above the man, Greyshott leapt from the top, swooping down onto the scrawny figure, the two collapsing in a pile and the camera flying out of the man’s hand and falling hard against a wooden post marking a nearby public footpath. The detective rolled his body over so that he was on top, pinning the man beneath him with his arms.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded. “What are you doing here? Don’t you know this area has been sealed off by local law enforcement?”

“I am inclined to ask you the same question” replied the man in a cocky tone which seemed to suggest that he knew something that the detective didn’t.

“OK wise guy” replied Greyshott “I’m giving you one more chance to tell me who you are and why you’re here” he said raising his arm, his fist clenched with menace as if he was about to punch the man’s lights out.

“OK, OK. Don’t hurt me. My name’s Joe. Joe Gables. I’m a member of SURE – the Southern UFO Reporting Establishment.” He looked over at his camera and could see with regret that the lens had smashed. “I hope you haven’t damaged the film!” he exclaimed. “There’s some crucial evidence on there!”

“Well Mr. Gables. You could be in serious trouble if they find you here” announced Harding as she appeared around the side of the woodpile and put out her hand offering to help them both to their feet.

“Likewise, I’m sure” he replied, smiling, then modifying his expression to one of more seriousness when noticing Greyshott’s threatening glance.

“You are right” announced Legacy as he joined their little conference. “Expediency must prevail. The authorities approach!”

Greyshott looked around but he could see or hear nothing out of the ordinary.

“Anyway” continued Gables “did you see it?”

“See what?” asked Greyshott.

“The Grey!”

Before he could reply, the distant whirring of a formation of large helicopters distracted their attention, the whipping sound of enormous rotors increasing in volume and pitch as they approached, flying low over a nearby valley. Equipped with powerful searchlights, they spread long beams which widened considerably as they contacted the ground, emblazoning everything in their path.

“Quick, take cover” advised the detective and together they all crouched down behind the woodpile, hoping that the figure of The Restorer, propped up against the tree, would not be spotted and give their location away. The helicopters were now almost directly overhead. Four twin-engined Chinooks of the Royal Air Force Army Air Corps in standard green and brown camouflage were positioning to land in the clearing, their massive rotors thump thump thumping as they gradually descended, kicking up clouds of debris that flew into the eyes of the four hidden figures and covered their clothes with a layer of loose dirt.

Legacy put his hand on Greyshott’s shoulder. “The Restorer must not be found by those approaching!” he screamed attempting to overcome the din of the eight pounding rotor blades spinning together in unison. Looking into the teenager’s eyes, Greyshott was overwhelmed by an all-consuming desire to help that defied all logic. All he knew was that Legacy, even though he was just a boy of fourteen or fifteen years, knew the right and only course of action in their current predicament.

The detective shouted over to Gables: “Look fella. We’re all in this together now. I need you and that young lad” he said pointing to Legacy “to get that chap over there by the tree out of here before the helicopters land and start unloading. Got it?”

“Sure thing” shouted Gables, obviously grateful of the opportunity to actually get involved in some action rather than just watch and photograph it.

“I’ll give myself up, thus creating a diversion and catch up with you all later” called out Greyshott.

“I must have the metal tools to activate your terrestrial transport!” the boy exclaimed, directing his voice at Harding. Greyshott gave her a questioning glance.

“I think he wants the keys to my Volkswagon Camper” she explained as she threw them to him.

“Put this in your bag!” Legacy commanded Gables, holding out the severed arm to him.

“You gotta be kidding” replied Gables “I’ve got valuable photographic equipment, written records and an expensive flat-screen laptop in there!”

“Do it!” shouted Greyshott.

The dishevelled member of SURE took off his jacket and wrapping the limb inside it, reluctantly shoved them both into his hold-all.

The first two Chinooks had now landed and their rotors were starting to wind down.

The boy scanned his surroundings and chose the darkest direction away from the searchlights for maximum cover. With The Restorer again supported under both arm-pits, Legacy and Gables dragged him, still unconscious, towards an overgrown thicket and within seconds were gone, Gables stopping briefly to retrieve his battered camera as they departed.

“You should get going too” Greyshott suggested to Harding.

“No. We’ve come this far together” she replied sharply, “I’m staying here with you. You might need some support!”

Thinking to himself that all he needed now was stubborn female heroics he replied “Well there’s no time to argue. It’s your funeral!”

As the detective and the journalist watched, the rear ramp of the nearest helicopter lowered to the ground and an army of Commandos in full battle gear disembarked, each pointing their weapons in a one-hundred and eighty-degree arc as they emptied the chopper and took up position. The remaining two Chinooks landed facing in the reverse direction and soon the whole area around the crater was covered in highly disciplined British soldiers, kneeling awaiting their orders.

Their commander stepped out of the Pilot’s cabin and lowered himself to the ground. The hideaways could see that he was unshaven and well-built but the darkness precluded anything more detailed. Lighting up a thick Cuban cigar, he wandered over to where the body of Legacy’s father lay and kicked away the branches with his feet. He grabbed a walkie-talkie from his belt and clicked it on. “General. Looks like we have a complete wipe-out here. No survivors. There’s some remains you might be interested in, though.”

Greyshott turned to Harding and grabbed hold of her hand. “Now” he ordered. Slowly they emerged from their hideout and as they wandered into the clearing raised both their hands above their heads.

“Hold on” continued the commander, as he spied their movements and the nearest soldiers turned and trained their rifles in the direction of the two emerging figures. “There’s a man and a girl. Looks like they’re trying to give themselves up!”

8.

17th September, Nineteen Forty 2150 HRS GMT

As the Bay of Biscay hurled an Atlantic storm in the direction of Northern France, Schulz obtained the latest weather report and secretly hoped it might mean the cancellation of the mission and thus another chance for Rickenbacker to disarm the bomb. Then word came through from above. The flight was to go ahead regardless of the weather.

“Well it looks like we’ll be in for a bumpy ride!” Schulz remarked as he spotted four members of the ground crew arriving to manually push the aircraft from the hangar out onto the dispersal area.

The first distant flash of lightning appeared followed by a mighty clap of thunder. Neumann stuck his head around the corner of the forward bulkhead as he adjusted his seat at the specially adapted Navigator’s Station, introduced specifically for this mission. “I think we can rest assured that the enemy will stay grounded now. I don’t think there’ll be any other nutters flying around in this!” he said, peering out at the rising cumulonimbus in the darkening sky. Just as he finished speaking the Heinkel cleared the hanger doors and the clattering of a torrential downpour of hail bouncing off the aircraft’s fuselage welcomed them to the engine warm up area outside.

Just as Schulz was about to fire up engine number one Rickenbacker drew his attention to an approaching black Mercedes creeping gingerly towards them along the perimeter track. “Looks like we’ve got company” he said. The vehicle drew up level with their aircraft’s main entrance door and Obersoldat Muller climbed out of the driver’s side and darted round to the opposite passenger door, opening up a large golfing umbrella as he went. Generaloberst Kruger lifted his mildly obese middle-aged body out of the car and into the open, Muller strategically placing the umbrella at a slight angle above him into the wind for maximum protection against the elements.

Schulz shouted out to the rest of the crew “The General’s here. Everyone forward” and the five crew members gathered around Neumann’s chart table awaiting Kruger’s arrival.

“Heil Hitler!” exclaimed Kruger as he entered. They all dutifully returned his Nazi salute. “I have come to wish you all the best of luck” he continued shaking each of their hands in turn. “The Fuhrer sends his best wishes and thanks you for the enormous contribution you are about to make to our final victory!”

“Let’s hope he won’t be disappointed” remarked Schulz, knowing full well that was exactly what he and Rickenbacker had in mind.

“I have every confidence in you all” replied Kruger “and I’m looking forward to seeing all five of your names emblazoned in flashing neons across Berlin once the mission is completed.”

The portable metal steps leading up to the aircraft were now becoming waterlogged and the deluge showed no sign of letting up. As Kruger stepped out, placing his boot on the top step, he momentarily slipped, just managing to steady himself by grabbing onto Muller’s arm. ‘That was a narrow escape’ he thought to himself. A crumpled heap at the foot of the steps would certainly not befit a Nazi of his position and standing. Muller reflected on fate’s cruel hand that had dealt him the position of subordinate to such a clumsy oaf, while smiling dutifully at the General as their Mercedes disappeared back into the gloom.

With all twenty-four cylinders of its two Jumo piston engines pounding and the three-blade airscrews roaring, creating a backwash which propelled the hailstones into their wake, some rebounding off the now closed hangar doors, the Heinkel lumbered away from dispersal towards the far eastern end of the airstrip.

Schulz turned to Rickenbacker as they neared the one windsock which was almost completely obscured by the oncoming darkness and heavy showers combined. "Which way is it blowing?" he asked.

"Any way you like" replied Rickenbacker "I mean it's literally all over the place!"

"Great!" rejoined Schulz, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

With only their two landing lights to guide them, the aircraft eventually reached the threshold from where it would commence its take-off roll. Schulz completed his final departure checks and increased the RPM to full power. With brakes released, the Heinkel began to gradually pick up speed as the uneven ground and battering crosswinds caused her to leap and lurch towards the airfield boundary. With maximum right rudder the aircraft finally became airborne, skimming the perimeter fence by a whisker and almost immediately hitting a severe downdraught accompanying a heavy rain shower.

"Here we go!" exclaimed Schulz as the Heinkel dropped its nose and side-slipped at an obscene angle before the pilot managed to pull her straight and rear her up out of the weather's deadly grip.

"Wow – that was close" muttered Rickenbacker as he experienced a nauseating sensation in the pit of his stomach, wondering whether it was caused by fear, excitement or a combination of both.

The Heinkel almost immediately entered low cloud and the severe turbulence continued unabated until at last they broke into a clear patch between layers at around twenty thousand feet. After a further fifteen minutes the layer above opened up and Neumann was able to take a star shot confirming that they were on course and based on his calculations of groundspeed and drift roughly ten miles south of Hastings.

"Approximately thirty minutes to target!" he called out to Schulz and Rickenbacker.

Without a word Schulz turned to the spy and nodded. It was time. Rickenbacker took the gummy bears from his inside pocket and examined them. The packet looked new – perfectly sealed as if straight from the manufacturer to avoid the slightest suspicion. It would be important for Neumann to see him open them for the same reason.

Lowering his head in the narrow confines between the cockpit and the navigator's position, Rickenbacker shuffled along until he was crouched next to Neumann who was in the throws of deep concentration, moving a set square across his chart.

"Hi Dieter" Rickenbacker began using his perfect German. He knew that in the R.A.F. wine gums were often used to pace out the flight on a bombing mission and hoped that the boffins back at base had done their research and it was the same system in the Luftwaffe. Then at the last minute he decided on a different tack. "Gummy bear to keep up the blood sugar levels? Great for the concentration" he invited.

"Why thank you" replied Neumann lifting up a flask of coffee "can I reciprocate with some liquid refreshment?"

"Thanks for the offer" answered Rickenbacker. "I'll grab some later. I'm just off to my station for last minute preparation for the drop."

“Best of luck” wished Neumann and drew his hand across his face as if the sweet had passed between his lips and began chewing aggressively to convince the spy he was eating it. As soon as Rickenbacker had disappeared from view, he placed the gummy bear down beside him on the chart table, exhaled deeply and stared directly ahead as if in a trance. The noise from the slipstream rushing past the nearby sliding transparent hatch created an eerie atmosphere as his pupils began to dilate, emitting an evil pulsating glow. Schulz continued flying the aircraft, whistling a merry tune, blissfully unaware of the strange transformation taking place only feet away from where he sat.

Agent Alpha One was now at the Dorsal Gunner’s position using the same procedure with Jurg Schwarz as he had used with Neumann, followed shortly after by Heinrich Voss at the ventral gun. They both consumed their gummy bears with ravenous abandon. Following standard protocol for this type of operation, Rickenbacker hung around for a few minutes, just out of his view and observed the head of Voss gradually fall forward until it was almost in his lap. He was out cold. Then making his way back past Schwarz and Neumann confirmed they were both comatose and headed quickly for the bomb bay, just behind Schulz’s pilot’s seat.

Schulz turned to welcome his return. “All wrapped up?” he enquired.

“All three asleep like little babies!” Rickenbacker smiled as he lowered himself down onto a ledge to one side of the dreaded weapon. Everything appeared to be going as planned. He had about twenty minutes to complete his task and the tweezers and lead case were ready in a zipped-up compartment of his flying suit.

But their current run of luck was about to expire.

Within seconds of Rickenbacker positioning himself, there came a rat-a-tat of machine gun fire as a solitary Boulton Paul Defiant Night Fighter of the Royal Air Force appeared out of the darkness, filling Schulz’s windscreen as it pressed home an attack. Now they were in trouble. Both gunners were out of it and they had no immediate means of defence. Schulz looked down to see the fabric of his flying trousers in tatters with a knee bone exposed. “Oh shit!” he exclaimed as he grabbed a piece of engineer’s rag lying on the floor and attempted a makeshift tourniquet to stem the blood flow.

“What’s up?” shouted Rickenbacker trying to keep it as short and sweet as possible owing to their limited time.

“RAF night fighter” Schulz screamed back trying to overcome the loud din of the Heinkel’s engines. “Obviously didn’t get the gen on our mission in time!”

“Either that or he did but thought he’d have a go anyway.”

Schulz knew that he would be unable to take evasive action while Rickenbacker was rendering the weapon harmless. It was too delicate an operation.

“Just try and keep her steady for me if you can” the spy called up taking the tweezers and preparing to lift the access lid to the compartment containing the organic matter tube.

The Defiant’s pilot completed a diving turn and began climbing again towards his prey. The Heinkel was remaining doggedly on course despite the earlier battering he had inflicted. He went in for another try. This time, despite the excruciating pain of his leg wound, Schulz noticed the Defiant’s approaching shadow a little earlier. He quickly switched on the autopilot and was able to duck down behind the instrument console as the Defiant’s rapid fire burst through the lower windscreen panels, this time completely shattering two of the panes of glass. There was an accompanying ‘twang’ as a vital cable was severed and a piece of metal longeron was shot from a side panel and went clattering down onto the floor.

As Schulz lifted himself back up to survey the damage he was struck by a vicious blow to the head.

Rickenbacker had just managed to grip the glass tube with the tweezers and was gingerly lifting it out from its compartment. Without taking his eyes from the task he shouted "Status?" expecting to hear a quick update from Schulz regarding the latest attack by the Defiant. There was no reply. He gently lifted the tweezers and tube and swivelled his body round facing the open access hatch to the bomb bay.

Neumann stared back at him, his eyes a fiery orange blaze. In his hand pointing directly at the spy was Rickenbacker's own Walter PPK pistol cocked and ready to fire.

9.

9th September, 2015 0200 HRS GMT

The room in which the detective and journalist found themselves was bland with bare un-plastered brick walls - cold and daunting. There had been little opportunity for conversation, firstly owing to the incessant din of the helicopter's powerful engines and secondly due to the fact that the flight from the clearing to RAF Odiham had taken less than fifteen minutes.

The two had been herded from the apron on landing into an abandoned outbuilding, some distance away from the main airfield complex of troop accommodation huts and semi-derelict military vehicles surrounded by barbed wire. They had been invited to make themselves comfortable by a thin, pale, skeletal man in khakis that reminded Harding of someone she had seen recently in an old 'Dracula' film. A portable drinks dispenser was to hand and a comfortable leather sofa which seemed greatly at odds with the ambience of such an uninviting holding area, more akin to a prison cell. Greyshott warned Harding against helping herself to a drink in case it was drugged so she sprawled out on the sofa in an attempt to grab some rest after the stress of the preceding few hours.

The detective began a thorough search of the room for bugging devices as he was certain any conversation they were likely to have would be recorded.

"What are you doing?" asked Harding.

Greychott took out a pen and a pocket notepad and wrote her a message:

BEST NOT TO TALK. PLACE MIGHT BE BUGGED. WHEN THEY COME BACK LEAVE ALL THE TALKING TO ME!

"Typical Alpha Male!" Harding exclaimed.

"Shhh!" replied Greychott placing his finger on her lips. She grabbed his hand and held it to her cheek in a spontaneous show of affection. He returned a purely plutonic smile and winked like an uncle would at a spoilt niece, knowing she had misbehaved but enjoying supporting the mischief.

The sound of a vehicle drawing up outside cut short the moment. Harding stood up and with her fingers brushed down her hair as it had ruffled up with static from the leather settee. They stood together alert and ready for whatever the next few moments brought. The slamming of a car door and the crunching sound of several sets of army boots on gravel preceded the swinging open of the outbuilding's entrance door as the two guarding soldiers stood to attention either side.

In stepped two men, both in their mid-thirties. One was the muscular unshaven commander to whom they had earlier surrendered. He had wavy Latino type hair and hazel eyes and walked as if permanently on the march; head thrown back, body fully upright, carrying an air of utmost importance, which he obviously felt befitted his rank. Next to him stood a gentleman with an altogether nasty face that looked as if it would crack in several places if he even attempted a smile. He wore a black suit, black shoes and black shades and stood as still as a marble statue. Greychott wondered if he was a genuine 'Man in Black.'

"Mr. Greychott, Miss Harding. My name is Group Captain Dennis Shaw Number Seven Squadron RAF Odiham. This is Orlin Black."

“Delighted” replied the detective, shaking Shaw’s outstretched hand, then offering his own to Black, “and may I say what a very appropriate name you have Mr. Black.”

Orlin Black remained very still, declining the detective’s offer, but instead removing his glasses, which only confirmed how evil and nasty his rugged face appeared, with its thin profile, high cheek bones and large brown eyes with abnormally concave pupils.

“Mr. Black would like a few words with you before he decides on his next course of action. I will return when the interview is over.” With that Shaw slammed his feet together, turned and marched out, returning to his waiting car.

The man in black set down a large case on the floor which amongst other things contained a small portable fold-up table and stool which he constructed within seconds with the nimble fingers of a seasoned magician, soon making himself comfortable. Ignoring the amazed expressions of his two spectators, who were unable to fathom how such large items could fit into a case that size, he proceeded to retrieve a wafer-thin laptop, spending the next few minutes apparently logging on.

“This is a very serious matter so I won’t waste time with small talk” he began.

“Quite so” replied Greyshott.

Black’s eyes flicked up, holding Greyshott’s stare for a good ten seconds before dropping back down again to his computer screen.

“Now Miss Harding I would like you to relate to me everything you witnessed at the meteor impact site please.”

Harding hesitated, glancing over at Greyshott, remembering their earlier written communication. The detective gave her no eye contact, determined to subtly convince Black that there was definitely no collusion between them. “Well actually” Harding began, “it’s all a bit hazy and I’m dreadfully tired. Perhaps Mr. Greyshott can describe the scene more clearly than I.”

“I don’t think you can seriously believe that I’m going to settle for that” began Black. “A journalist of your excellent standing and reputation would hardly be vague on detail!”

“Journalist?” questioned the detective, shooting a shocked and slightly annoyed expression in Harding’s direction, as if to suggest that he felt he had been deliberately deceived.

Black picked up on the body language immediately. “Ah – so she hasn’t told you her reason for being in the village or her profession and you both gave such an impression of togetherness!”

“Well for your information” replied the detective “we’ve only known each other for less than twenty-four hours. We happened to meet in the King’s Arms near Southwater. Concerned at the possibility of casualties when we saw the second massive explosion, we both ran out to see if there was anything we could do. By the time we reached the clearing there was nothing but small fires and piles of ash.”

“That sounds very noble” began the interrogator “but unfortunately somewhat at odds with the information I have received. You see we have a contact at that public house who keeps us informed of any strangers to the area or unusual events. His report specifies that you both left the pub separately at least thirty minutes before the explosion and Miss Harding was in the company of a young boy. Where is the boy now Miss Harding?”

'Damn Beckers!' Greyshott cursed to himself, realising that their contact must be the pub's landlord. Harding opened her mouth to reply but was overruled by the detective who cut her short. "Oh, we both reunited him with his parents on the way out to the meteor crash site. Luckily, they were in the village. He had got himself quite lost."

"Mmmm" mused Black, totally unconvinced. They could tell from the way his fingers pulled and pinched at his chin that he thought they were spinning him a yarn. He got up from his stool and very slowly and silently walked to the end of the room and back, taking a full three minutes in the process. It seemed to be a deliberate attempt at creating suspense to put them under pressure and the whole occasion seemed to be rapidly developing into a battle of wills.

"Do you have anything to add Miss Harding?" he said once back at his portable office, staring deeply into her eyes. She shuffled uncomfortably before saying "No. That about wraps it up. I think Mr. Greyshott has covered everything admirably."

"OK" said Black "I may as well tell you now that I know you are both lying. For some inexplicable reason you don't wish to share any of your experiences of the last few hours with me." It obviously hadn't occurred to him that it might be because he was a thoroughly unlikeable character and the chances were that no one would willingly want to share anything with him anyway, but he continued nonetheless. "I think we will leave it at that, although I'm surprised Mr. Greyshott, given your excellent record in the Sussex Police Force, that you are unwilling to co-operate."

Greyshott shrugged as if to say that he had no idea what the man in black was getting at.

"As for you, Miss Harding, I believe you may have other motives: a secret agenda – a good scoop perhaps for your editor? Well let me advise you right now that none of what you have heard or seen can appear in any form of media, printed or otherwise. If I catch even a whiff of a story relating to tonight's events, including your interview with me, then your newspaper will be shut down immediately and for good. Both you and your superiors will be banned from the press in all its forms and you will be out of a job. Not only that but you will also be personally silenced. Bear in mind that my organisation is not renowned for being light handed in such matters."

"Are you trying to scare me Mr. Black?"

"Just giving you fair warning."

"Who exactly are your organisation?" intervened the detective.

"That I'm afraid, Mr. Greyshott, you are never likely to find out."

"You can't gag me!" came a sudden outburst from Harding. "We live in a democracy with a free and impartial press. We haven't yet sunk to the depths of dictatorship, although from the way you're talking it looks like we're getting perilously close!"

"I assure you we have a full database of fully authorised preventative measures from the relatively tame to the downright ugly, depending on how desperate we are to keep something under wraps and would not hesitate to use any of them."

"You can't just give us an amnesia drug or use a zapping stick?" Greyshott chuckled.

Black remained deadly serious. "Science fiction is often closer to science fact than you might imagine. All I would say is that I suggest you completely wipe tonight's events from your minds and go back to living your lives in as normal a way as possible."

"And if we don't?" enquired Harding.

"Well then you would need to concern yourself greatly with your nearest and dearest. I understand, Miss Harding, that your father is getting on in years and lives alone. I would suggest you devote your energies to keeping him safe in his twilight years."

"So not only are you trying to scare me, you are now threatening my family!" Harding was becoming enraged, her orange face-packed complexion becoming a distinct shade of red.

"Take it whichever way you like" continued Black. "Just don't be under any illusions. When it comes to this country's national security nothing – I mean absolutely nothing is beyond the pale."

"So, are we free to go now?" asked Greyshott.

"Group Captain Shaw will arrange for you to be driven to Aldershot town from where you will need to arrange your own transport home." Black began to wander once more towards the far end of the room. Then he turned to face them again deep in thought.

"One last thing" he began "when examining the crater, our organisation took with them a Special Forces Operative who was testing some advanced kit. We believe from our investigations that he perished in the final explosion. However, should you have any information that might suggest otherwise, it would be in your interest to pass this onto us – I mean financially."

"Well Mr. Black. If anything comes to mind, we'll be sure to let you know. How may we contact you?" the detective asked.

"Contact Shaw in the first instance. Otherwise my name is not to be mentioned to anyone else under any circumstances."

"You have our word" said Greyshott on both their behalves. Harding shot him a look. Interview now over, they both joined one of Shaw's men who drove them out of the airbase via the main security gate.

As they approached Aldershot, the sun was just poking its head above the horizon. As the new day dawned, Greyshott spotted a hotel on the outskirts of town. Grabbing the first twin room available, they flopped down on their beds, thoroughly exhausted.

Harding woke with a start and looked at her watch. It was late afternoon. Greyshott lay in the bed next to hers, deeply unconscious, snoring like an old man with blocked sinuses. They had been asleep for nine hours solid. She realised that what had woken her was a gentle tapping at the door. In a semi-daze she opened it expecting to see the housemaid or another hotel employee.

Instead, there stood Legacy, a broad and joyful smile lighting up his bright, youthful face.

10.

17th September, 1940 2230HRS GMT

“You will return the tube to its compartment immediately!” demanded the high-pitched and slightly infantile voice of Neumann, his hand holding the gun shaking as he appeared to well up with rage. Rickenbacker had to think quickly. They were minutes away from the drop zone and if he returned the organic matter to the weapon, Neumann would release the bomb without delay and the mission would have failed. He had one ace up his sleeve.

“You won’t fire that gun at me. You know full well that if I drop the glass tube and it smashes, the matter will leak out and the bomb will be useless. The virus will be harmless without the proper detonation procedure.”

“What do you know of the nature of the disease?” Neumann mocked. “If the matter escapes from the tube there will be a holocaust of unimaginable severity, causing endless pain and death to the whole human race!”

“Are you willing to risk it? I’ll drop it you know!” the spy was certain he could call Neumann’s bluff.

“No matter” replied Neumann. “I can take it from you and replace it myself.”

His fiery eyes glazed over with a layer of thick mucus while at the same time beginning a peculiar rotational swirling motion.

Although he desperately fought the urge, Rickenbacker felt hopelessly drawn towards them. “It’s a form of hypnosis” he muttered. “I must – must resist.”

Neumann was still speaking but to the spy it was an incoherent jumble of words, heavily resonating through his mind in multiple distorted echoes. Alpha one tried to loosen his grip on the tube to demonstrate to the navigator that he was serious but all nerve and reflex control had been lost and his palm remained firmly clenched around the bomb’s component. His body meanwhile seemed to have a will of its own, climbing back up into the main aircraft fuselage until it was standing level with Neumann, facing his lunatic grin.

There was a sudden thud and Neumann’s head was replaced by the image of Schulz who had been standing behind him. Now released from Neumann’s powerful hypnosis, Rickenbacker regained his senses. Schulz looked terrible. His leg was now soaked in blood and seemed to be twisted at an absurd angle. He was deathly pale and was struggling for breath. The energy required to lift the metal longeron and hit Neumann with sufficient power to knock him down had just about finished Schulz off. To Rickenbacker it looked like the pilot had had it as he slumped down with his back against the forward bulkhead.

Already Neumann was recovering, lifting himself up off the floor ready to confront Rickenbacker, although the blow to the head had obviously left him somewhat dazed. The spy knelt down in front of Schulz while keeping Neumann’s movements in check with his peripheral vision.

“Thanks Manfred I owe you one” he said “now hold this for me and don’t for god’s sake drop it!” he placed the Organic Matter Tube in Schulz’s gloved palm and closed his fingers tightly around it.

“Sure, you’re welcome.” Schulz tried to put on a brave face but the exertion combined with copious blood loss had left him fatally weak.

Rickenbacker grabbed the metal bar used by Schulz to disable Neumann and raised it above his head like a professional gladiator. There was no sign of the Walter PPK which the spy assumed must have flown out of Neumann's hand as he fell. He was now unarmed. It looked as if they would now be more evenly matched.

"Come on Dieter. I know you don't really wanna do this!" he appealed to the navigator. "You're far too bright to fall for this Nazi clap trap. This master race nonsense – it's all a ploy by a few nasty gangsters to pillage Europe for their own ends - just a bunch of criminals who've been allowed to go too far!"

"You know nothing Herr Albrecht, or should I say Mr. Jeff Rickenbacker." Neumann chuckled with delight at Rickenbacker's confused expression. How the hell had he been rumbled? "Yes, I know all about you, your record of successful espionage and your various disguises and aliases. Well Jeff, you're right. There will be no human master race. You are a puny weak-willed species, primitive in the extreme. The true future masters of your planet are yet to grace its wonderful atmosphere but when they do, the centuries of human folly and diabolical waste of resources will be history. A new dawn will herald a bright and successful future for me and my kind without the infection of your miserable, deplorable race!"

"So, who exactly are your kind?" Rickenbacker invited.

"The time for talking is over Jeff. I will help you feel so much better. Stand aside!" Considering the situation, Neumann's continuous use of Rickenbacker's Christian name seemed rather too familiar. Then it occurred to the spy that Neumann's inappropriately soothing tones were drawing him in. "No – I'm not going to fall for that a second time!" he exclaimed as Neumann's eyes recommenced their creepy hypnotic rotation.

With all the strength he could muster the spy swung the beam at Neumann's head but this time the navigator was ready and caught it in his hand. Alpha One hung onto it in desperation as Neumann, with phenomenal power forced the aluminium rod and Rickenbacker's arm down towards the floor. The spy realised that if he could keep his assailant distracted then he was unable to use his unearthly powers of persuasion which obviously required a specific method of concentration to utilise. Rickenbacker jumped back to regain his footing, but in the process lost his grip on the beam.

The aircraft began to buffet wildly. The autopilot was malfunctioning, probably due to the battle damage. Neumann was now extremely mad. He pushed Rickenbacker against the side of the aircraft and with his hand clenched tightly around the spy's neck lifted him off the floor. Rickenbacker's only course of action was to kick the German in the genitals which he duly did, but Neumann hardly even flinched. It did however leave the spy with a bruised and very painful foot. The pressure of Neumann's grip was beginning to have an effect as it became ever tighter. Rickenbacker was now seeing double with a misty haze starting to cloud his vision. He was on the verge of unconsciousness.

In the nick of time the clatter of spent bullets all around accompanied another strafing as the Defiant dived in again for the final kill riddling Neumann's body with fatal holes. Fortunately, he had his back to the line of fire which had the unexpected benefit of completely shielding Rickenbacker from the attack. Neumann slumped forward, his hand relaxed, but now a dead weight against the spy's body, pinning him to the aircraft's side. Rickenbacker summoned all his strength and with one massive heave managed to push Neumann away. His body fell to the floor, prostrate and motionless. Without doubt he was dead.

Quickly, the spy re-joined his pilot and retrieved the tube from his grip. In the commotion, he had forgotten where he had placed the lead case and assumed it must still be in the rucksack. Gingerly holding the tube in one hand, he helped Schulz to his feet with the other and although he was now almost completely spent, the double agent managed to lift himself back into the pilot's seat with the spy's help and make a quick mental appraisal of the situation.

“How does it look Manfred?”

“Not good Jeff. We’re losing oil pressure. Most of the instruments are shot up but the altimeter is still serviceable. It’s showing a steady descent which I can’t seem to arrest.” They could see the City of London looming ahead, the scanning searchlights lighting up the flack that exploded in puffs of black smoke and dashes of tracer shooting across their view like small fireworks. “We could still make Biggin if only we could lose some weight!” Schulz added.

“What if we jettison the bomb – would that help?”

“It might” Schulz replied “but there’ll obviously be some casualties.”

“Not half as many as there would have been if we hadn’t removed this” Rickenbacker replied, holding up the tube between his thumb and forefinger.

“OK here we go.” Schulz opened the bomb bay doors and the weapon dropped like a stone, disappearing into a thin layer of stratus below.

“Right – now to secure this nightmare!” exclaimed the spy. He grabbed the rucksack but the lead case was nowhere to be seen. However, he spotted the trench dagger and grabbed it gratefully, having a premonition that he might need it before they landed. Neumann’s actions had been a complete surprise and the two gunners would soon be awake. There was no telling whether they were also briefed to kill him. It was then that he remembered that the lead case was zipped up in his flying suit so with haste he retrieved it.

Without the weight of the bomb now pulling the crippled bomber down, the Heinkel seemed to be gaining some height.

“Jeff I’m not feeling too good. You might have to take over” Schulz pleaded. All colour had now drained from his face.

“Hang in there, buddy” said Rickenbacker. “Just a few more seconds.”

With gentle persuasion, the lead case slid open and with expert skill, the spy positioned the glass tube ready to slot it into place.

The aircraft was rocked by a shattering explosion as the port engine suddenly erupted in flames. Rickenbacker was caught off balance and for a split second he lost his grip. His mind played the whole unbearable scene to him in slow motion; the tube floating up through the air and landing on the floor of the aircraft.

He threw himself down in a desperate attempt to grab it but the Heinkel had now assumed a severe climbing turn manoeuvre as the ailerons jammed in one direction. Initially the tube rolled into a nook set into the rear bulkhead but as the aircraft became vertical, it loosened itself and began to roll rapidly down the length of the fuselage towards the tail.

A tearing rattling crescendo obliterated all other sounds of destruction as the tail surfaces became detached. The airframe had been stressed to way beyond its design limit. As the aircraft reached the top of its uncontrolled climb, it banked right over, falling rapidly back down towards the ground, still vertical, but now in the opposite direction.

Rickenbacker watched helplessly, pinned down by negative G as the tube rolled merrily past him. On reaching the still open hatch to the bomb bay it stopped briefly, caught on a lip created by a rivet securing a floor panel, before rolling over the side and smashing on the frame of the weapon housing below.

As if the experience of imminent death in a disintegrating warplane wasn't enough, there was now a deafening roar and a sound of violent thrashing as a scaly reptilian tail appeared from below in the access gap to the bay. As the creature it belonged to struggled in the narrow confines to free itself the very tip of its tail caught in some dislodged cables near to where Rickenbacker now lay, restricting its movements still further.

The spy sensed that the complete destruction of the aircraft was only seconds away and the unrestrained movements of this supernatural beast would only hasten its demise. He grabbed the dagger and with desperate motions began hacking away at the monster's tail, just beneath the tip which was shaped like an arrow head. A green slimy liquid spurted from within while the tone of the beast's roaring changed to a higher pain-ridden pitch.

Finally, he was through. The creature slid out of the aircraft into the icy air below and was gone.

Rickenbacker recoiled from the area of damaged cable and held up his hands. One was holding the dagger and the lead case. In the other was a three-inch long section of the animal's tail. Without consciously considering his actions the spy slid the case open, placed the reptilian flesh inside, closed and locked it and placed it in an inside pocket of his flying jacket.

Movement in the plane was now almost impossible. They were still diving with relentless progress towards the ground, pieces of metal flying into their slipstream as the Heinkel continued to disintegrate. Rickenbacker reached over and placed two fingers on the side of Schulz's neck, searching for a pulse, but now there was nothing. He had finally passed away.

Quickly checking that he had remembered to don his parachute pack and with no idea how close to the ground he now was, Rickenbacker managed to climb down to the large hole in the lower windshield and gripping the metal frame each side launched himself through the gap, throwing his body to the mercy of the gods.

A tremendous explosion lit up the fields on the northern outskirts of Greater London as a solitary Heinkel Triple One crashed in flames, sending red hot metal particles hundreds of feet in all directions.

When the following morning dawned, all that would remain of the four occupants would be pieces of fabric from their uniforms and some tiny bone fragments.

The fifth crew member lay a few hundred yards away from where the main fireball had erupted, limp and lifeless, obscured completely by the fabric of his partially opened parachute.

*

18th September, Nineteen Forty 0800HRS GMT

In a private room at number Ten Downing Street a short, plump, balding figure sitting in a large comfortable armchair took a long drag on his cigar. Several men in dark suits and bowler hats were just leaving, extending their umbrellas in preparation to enter the deluge of heavy rain that now covered London in a thick and impenetrable blanket. Setting down his cigar in a silver butter dish which doubled as an ashtray, the man closed his eyes and concentrated his mind, drawing himself gradually into a deep state of meditation.

Above him on the wall hung a picture of Sir George Downing, Oliver Cromwell's notorious spy, relocated there from the entrance foyer the day World War Two was declared. As the man in the chair reached the peak of relaxation, he opened his eyes and cast them in the direction of the painting. The canvas began to gradually change its composition and Downing's head became a strange living breathing entity.

"Welcome Lord Grey" said the man.

"Greetings Winston" the entity replied "you have some news for me?"

"I do" began Churchill "but unfortunately not quite what I had hoped to bring you."

"Proceed" said the picture.

"The good news is that the epidemic has been prevented. However, the bad news is that the beast has been set free and we have no idea of its location."

"Do not despair Winston" encouraged the picture of Downing, "you have prevented the greater of two evils. The situation can still be salvaged."

"I'm extremely relieved to hear that!" Churchill exhaled rapidly.

"How is our soldier?" enquired the unworldly head.

"Bad news I'm afraid. He is barely alive. I fear that his multiple injuries could be fatal."

"He is a fine and brave warrior and shown himself most worthy" said Downing. "The Grand Council have approved his genetic adaptation. You must ensure that his body remains deep frozen. I recommend a Transoceanic Refrigeration Vessel with Battleship and Submarine protection for the voyage across the South Atlantic. Transfer to U.A.D.O. HQ by air would be far too risky and you currently have no aircraft with sufficient range to make it in one hop."

"It will be arranged immediately" replied Churchill.

The undulating head now began to fade and the picture returned to its normal composition. Churchill relit his cigar and picked up the phone.

11.

9th September, 2015 1600HRS GMT

“Paul – wake up. Quick. We’ve got a visitor!”

“Uh what? What is it? Who?.....”

Greyshott was surrounded by ET type aliens chanting strange poetic verses in unison while their thin bony wrinkled hands ran across his flesh, probing every nook and crevice. He tried to move but was restrained by tight leather straps fixing him securely to the bed.

“Paul wake up.”

He awoke to the unnerving sensation of Harding shaking him by the shoulders. ‘Thank God,’ he reflected. ‘It was only a dream!’

“Sorry to wake you Paul but look we have a visitor.”

Legacy stood before them disguised as a Refuse Collector, in a large orange high visibility jacket and black baseball cap sporting a local Recycling Company’s logo. His facial injuries from the previous day had somehow miraculously disappeared.

“We must leave immediately!” he commanded. “The U.A.D.O. have re-grouped. Several operatives are reconnoitring the front of the building.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Greyshott burst out, feeling now that his patience with the teenager’s persistent gobbledegook was starting to wear thin.

“Trust me” replied Legacy, looking the detective straight in the eyes, compelling his very will to co-operate. That was it. Greyshott knew that something greater than their individual selfish whims was controlling their mutual fate and that their destinies were somehow inextricably linked. He would have to comply. There was no alternative.

“The quest must begin today” the boy continued. “Follow me,” he said, releasing the latch on the room’s one large panoramic window and climbing out onto a small patio area which narrowed into a path leading away from the rear of the hotel.

“But we haven’t paid the bill” Harding called after him. Greyshott grabbed a price list from the bedside table, noted the cost of one night in a twin room, two occupants without breakfast and left the money on his bed. They grabbed their few personal effects and smartly followed Legacy out of the window.

The boy led them across suburban Aldershot through back alleys, down side roads and along tree-lined estates keeping up a steady five to ten miles per hour while Greyshott and Harding struggled to keep up. Finally, they reached a secluded Caravan Site backing onto an industrial estate and there in a corner was Harding’s Volkswagon Camper.

A burly unsavoury looking chap with more than his fair share of body hair and arms tattooed with caricatures of the devil stopped them at the entrance. “Where do you think you’re going?” he asked. “This is private property.”

Legacy removed his baseball cap and smiled.

“Oh, hello Legs. Didn’t recognise you son! Some more friends? Well any friends of Joe’s a friend of mine – come through!” He lifted up an old wooden barrier which had seen better days, rotten segments falling away as he moved it to the vertical position.

“My name’s Harry” he said stretching out a worn greasy hand which both Greyshott and Harding felt obliged to shake out of politeness. As they headed for the Camper Van, Harry endeavoured to make small talk with Harding, “Lovely boy, that Legacy. Mighty weird name though. Talks in riddles. Uses really big words. Most of its beyond me. Still like I said – any friend of Joe’s a friend of mine. You the young lady that owns the Volkswagon?”

“Well yes, actually I am” Harding replied.

“Lovely motor. See it’s been well looked after. Take it to any shows?”

Legacy interrupted.

“Thank you, Harry” he said, producing some Golden Virginia tobacco and a pack of cigarette papers seemingly out of nowhere and handing them to his new-found associate. “We have some business to attend to. Perhaps we can get together for some sustenance at a later juncture?”

“Right you are fella” Harry replied accepting the gift graciously and wandering off to a Nineteen Fifties Swift mobile caravan that, through the dedicated and loving work of an amateur carpenter, had been lengthened into a ‘deluxe’ static version.

“Looks like you’ve made a friend since we last saw you” Harding directed at the boy. He walked on ahead and said nothing. The sliding door to the VW opened and Joe Gables peered out.

“Glad to see he’s found you” said Gables.

“How did he know where we were?” asked Greyshott.

“Beats me” Gables lied. “He appears to have some extraordinary gifts – ESP being one of them.”

“ESP?” enquired Harding.

“Yes – extra sensory perception.”

As they reached the Camper, Harding glanced inside. The Restorer was laid out on the long seat which doubled as a convertible bed. His eyes were closed and he was now a peculiar ashen colour.

“Is he still alive?” she asked Legacy.

“Yes. He is in spatial limbo.”

“Meaning?”

“His metabolism has practically ceased to function in order to preserve his life force intact. All major organs apart from his heart have temporarily shut down while his body carries out internal repairs.”

“How do you know all this? Are you and he somehow linked?” asked Greyshott.

Legacy turned to the detective with a calming aura emanating from his being and all he said in reply was “Everything will become clear on the day of final reckoning.”

Greyshott, frustrated as ever with Legacy’s reply decided to address all those present. “I think it’s time we sat down with a cup of tea and maybe a takeaway and laid all our cards on the table. At the moment we just seem to be going around in circles. Can you suggest a location where the authorities won’t easily find us?” Greyshott turned to Gables.

“Well” Gables began “owing to the nature of my hobby and membership of SURE, I’m pretty certain my home’s already under surveillance but I have a colleague who regularly moves between at least five different locations in order to evade their attentions and keep them guessing. I can give him a call but I’m certain that using a mobile will break our cover as it won’t be hard to trace the call with the technology they have at their disposal. Whatever we do, it won’t be long before they track us down.”

“I can help with that” offered Legacy.

The Restorer’s padded suit was folded up on the front seat, the soldier now adorned in just his one-piece vest and pants, torn and blooded in places from his last military action, his severed arm pegged to Harding’s dishcloth rail by the shirt cuff. The boy retrieved the suit and laid it out on the long seat opposite the soldier’s position. Those present had never seen so many zipped up compartments in a single piece of apparel. Out of one of these, situated just under an enlarged shoulder section, Legacy retrieved a circular brown object which to Greyshott looked like it was made out of plastic or fibre glass. Harding noticed the U.A.D.O. insignia upon it and made a mental note to ask Legacy its meaning at a future opportune moment.

Harding’s vehicle had a small fold-out table. The teenager placed the sphere upon it and everyone present, apart from the Restorer, gathered round. Legacy closed his eyes and placed the palm of his hand on the soldier’s temple. After a few moments he opened them and pressed a switch on the brown globe. A hatch opened and a condensed mini keyboard on a mechanical arm appeared, folding itself out ready for use. The boy typed in some information. Gables whispered to Harding: “obviously a password.”

Without warning a beam of light shot from the object and projected an image onto the side of the Camper. The hologram of a woman with a beehive hairstyle appeared and announced “WELCOME ALPHA ONE. PLEASE INPUT YOUR EQUIPMENT REQUIREMENTS?”

Legacy typed away with vigorous intent, using the nimblest of fingers.

“YOU HAVE CHOSEN CAMOUFLAGE” announced the woman. “PLEASE ENTER WHO YOU WISH PROTECTION FROM?”

- CHOOSE:
- A ALL LIFE FORMS ON CURRENT PLANET
 - B SPECIFIC LIFE FORM ON CURRENT PLANET
 - C SPECIFIC GROUP WITHIN SPECIFIC LIFE FORM ON CURRENT PLANET”

After some more typing:

“YOU HAVE CHOSEN C: SPECIFIC GROUP: DESCRIPTION UNIVERSAL ALIEN DEFENCE ORGANISATION.”

“Well that answers the earlier question” Harding remarked.

The holographic woman continued:

“NOW PLEASE CHOOSE YOUR PREFERRED CLOAKING DEVICE:

- CHOOSE:
- A ARMOURED VEHICLE
 - B FULL BODY SUIT
 - C STEALTH RING

Legacy typed out his choice.

“YOU HAVE SELECTED C: STEALTH RING. HOW MANY RECIPIENTS OF THIS DEVICE?

YOU HAVE SELECTED FIVE. PLEASE INSERT FINGER OF FIRST RECIPIENT.”

“I would’ve loved to have seen it conjure up an armoured vehicle!” remarked Greyshott.

They all watched as a deep hollow groove miraculously appeared in the side of the sphere. Legacy inserted his forefinger for thirty seconds. When he withdrew it, a snug-fitting gold ring encircled it.

“The Stealth Ring will make you invisible to all members of the U.A.D.O.” Legacy explained. Its advanced technology temporarily alters the retinas of the enemy and prevents them from seeing you in human form. In addition, it scrambles the molecules when you speak so that all they hear is a passing breeze. It will also render inoperative even the latest and most advanced tracking devices that have so far been developed on your planet.”

“That could be a very dangerous weapon in the wrong hands” remarked Harding. Greyshott agreed. Gables seemed preoccupied and said nothing.

“It’s your turn now Joan” invited the boy, using her Christian name for the first time, subtly endearing himself further to her.

Soon they were all wearing Stealth Rings, including The Restorer, whose ‘lifeless’ finger was coaxed into the hole with Harding’s encouragement.

“Neat bit of kit” said Greyshott. He turned to Gables. “So how do we contact your friend?”

“He has a regular meeting for SURE members at an old deserted mansion near Cranleigh in Surrey. The event is a secret get together of the Alien and UFO chasing fraternity. In other words, you have to be a member to attend. Coincidentally, there’s one being held there tonight. By the time we arrive it should’ve just finished. I’m sure he’ll show you the utmost hospitality, particularly bearing in mind your recent experiences.”

“Won’t he require advanced notice of our arrival?” Harding enquired.

“No” replied Gables “you just need to open an annual membership subscription to the organisation and print off your ID cards.” Gables grabbed his laptop. “Tell you what – I’ll do it for you now.”

“No need” said Legacy “it’s done.” He handed them their SURE membership cards.

“You really do take the fun out of life sometimes young man!” Gables grinned.

*

The Nineteen Sixty-Three Volkswagon Camper trundled along the inside lane of the A Thirty-One at a steady forty-seven miles per hour, with a backdrop of constant abuse from passing motorists accompanied by the blaring of horns. Joan Harding, now getting thoroughly hacked off by this treatment, wound down her window and raised two fingers.

“Calm down Joan” suggested Greyshott. “We don’t really want to draw unnecessary attention to ourselves now do we?”

“No. Sorry Paul – you’re right. It’s just that these arseholes are really starting to piss me off!”

“It might be the fact that we’re blinding them all with that oily black smoke pouring from the exhaust. When did you last get this thing serviced?” the detective queried.

“The world of journalism has been extremely busy just recently” she offered in her defence. “I haven’t had time for much else!”

“Yes, journalism” Greyshott repeated the word with much accentuation. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that.”

“Take the next junction on the left” Gables intervened. Harding swung the Camper onto the slip road and they soon found themselves on the A Two Eight One heading south east. Less than a mile further on Gables warned her to take extra care as there was a sharp bend approaching. Once they turned the corner he shouted “There it is. Slow down.” A weathered sign hung on chains from a post shaped like an upside-down L hidden behind a tall hedge. “There – look, you could easily miss it” said the alien chaser “- Maple Leaf Manor.”

The Volkswagon began to creep along the narrow lane towards the mansion steering left, then right, then left again around deep potholes filled with muddy water. “You guys can pay for the carwash after this” Harding joked, with a sprinkling of serious intent in her voice.

“So, who are SURE anyway?” questioned Greyshott. “Are we about to be confronted by a bunch of axe-wielding alien chasing crackpots?”

“Paul!” exclaimed Harding. “Joe is doing us an enormous favour. Show a bit of respect!”

“Yeah I’m sorry mate. Thanks for your help. It’s just that I’m feeling a bit on edge and rather light headed. Haven’t had much to eat or drink in the last twenty-four hours. In fact, none of us have!”

“No worries” replied Gables. “William will sort you out. He may even lay on a banquet in your honour. He doesn’t get to meet people that often who have had genuine provable alien encounters. Don’t forget I have my film of the Saucer destroying the U.A.D.O. with you there hiding in the undergrowth!”

“Yes. About that. We’ve been warned to keep quiet.”

“Really?” enquired Gables, “by whom?”

Greychott smirked and quickly changed the subject. “So, what do we need to know about your friend William?”

“Earl William Pirbright?” said Gables. “He’s the son of the Duke of Hambledon, the founder member of The Southern UFO Reporting Establishment. You’ll learn a great deal from him about the background to your recent experiences. He’s a fountain of knowledge on extra-terrestrial phenomena.”

“This sure is a long driveway” stated Harding as they rounded a bend and were faced with probably the most dilapidated and run-down wreck of a mansion they had ever seen.

“You see why he holds meetings here?” Gables blurted. “No-one would ever guess from its outward appearance that it is anything more than an empty wreck of a building inhabited by hippy squatters, but the interior is decorated like a grand palace. There are also rumours that somewhere within are stored some magnificent intergalactic artefacts and treasures. Very few have ever been allowed access to them – certainly in the last twenty years. They’ve now passed more into myth and legend among SURE members than true reality.”

The driveway ended abruptly at an impressively large electronic iron gate engulfed in thick aggressive twine. Gables jumped out to press the intercom button and announce their arrival but before he could do so, the main door to the property was flung aside and the gate began to move automatically to the open position. Then a group of excited chatting people, many of whom looked more than a little weird, started heading towards them. Among the crowd was a short, stocky chap in his early forties with thick curly hair, wearing an old anorak covered in metallic badges, most relating to extra-terrestrial clubs and organisations but some (more worryingly from Greychott’s point of view), clearly referring to the occult and the supernatural.

The crowd pushed their way past the new arrivals, comparing notes and recent experiences as they walked back down the drive towards the main road a mile or so distant. A couple of young girls remained behind gathered around the man and thanking him profusely for such an enjoyable and enlightening evening. Distracted from their incessant chatter, he noticed the Camper parked at the entrance and Joe Gables who was waving with frantic gestures, as one would greet an old friend unseen for many years.

“Excuse me ladies” the man interrupted, nudging them politely towards the gate, “I have some visitors.”

“Lady and gentlemen” announced Gables as his associate reached the gate stretching out his hand. “May I introduce Earl William Pirbright of Hambledon.”

12.

As Earl Pirbright's butler took their coats and William himself shook their hands with gusto, formal introductions were soon dispensed with, although the Earl became more than a little cautious when he was introduced to Greyshott, having had many run ins with the law over the years. However, it was only a matter of minutes before Gables was able to put his mind at ease, particularly once he had pointed out that the detective may have some new information regarding alien movements in the area and, together with the journalist, had been under close observation by the U.A.D.O.

The entrance hall to Maple Leaf Manor seemed to stretch for miles and as Gables had earlier indicated, the interior was a complete contrast to the Mansion's outward appearance. Much gold leaf was in evidence. Vintage crystal chandeliers, undoubtedly of significant value, hung at regular intervals from the high ceiling, which was one enormous and highly decorative mural. Among the subjects colourfully represented were many types of aliens, futuristic spacecraft and distant stars and planets which had been elaborately and painstakingly reproduced by a highly talented artist.

As they neared the end of the passage and the butler flung open the door to an impressively large dining-room, Legacy decided it would be prudent to point out that they had apparently forgotten The Restorer.

"Ah yes" said Greyshott, "we have an injured man in the Camper. He is presently in a shock-induced coma."

"The Restorer will become conscious within the next few hours. Could you provide an area of comfort and tranquillity for his recovery?" continued Legacy.

"Of course," replied William.

"Just one thing" said the detective. "He's rather unusual in that he had an arm severed during his most recent military operation but somehow it has remained alive without any type of preservative being added or freezing being undertaken. Apparently, it can be re-attached when he recovers."

"How incredibly interesting" The Earl replied. "This promises to be an extraordinarily enlightening get together!" He grabbed a two-way radio from inside his anorak. After a brief conversation he turned to his guests. "Would one of you like to return to your vehicle? Two of my groundsmen will meet you and help to carry him in. The Venus Suite would be best I think."

"I shall go" Legacy announced and began making his way back towards the entrance.

"Well Joe" the Earl continued, "your friends look absolutely famished. I suggest we convene here at seven thirty for a classic Hambledon nosh up!"

"Music to my ears!" exclaimed Greyshott.

Harding frowned at the detective and his shocking lack of manners and quickly added "How very gracious of you Earl Pirbright. We are extremely grateful!"

"No need to be – and you can dispense with the formalities. William will be fine or Will if you prefer. Oswald – please show our guests to their rooms. West wing. As near to the Venus Suite as possible."

“Certainly sir” replied the butler. Oswald was an old man. He looked as if he had served the Pirbrights for centuries. His head was completely bald apart from a single wiry sprig of grey hair sprouting from the centre of his scalp and his face wrinkled and weathered by his many years of dedicated service to the family. Yet he was still strangely fit and agile. Soon he was speeding the detective, the journalist and Gables on a reconditioned battery-operated golf buggy along a track which paralleled the complete length of the mansion towards the Western entrance. From here they began a long climb up a spiral staircase and eventually reached the West Wing.

Here, Harding’s room was particularly impressive, tastefully appointed with the quintessential trappings of modern living, without spoiling or interfering with the original delightful character features of an Eighteenth-Century Manor House. The windows maintained their ‘Gable’ style protrusions, much of the furniture was antique pine with a splattering of mahogany and the central feature took the form of a genuine period four-poster bed supplemented by the latest bespoke ‘Slumberwell’ ergonomic mattress. The thick silk curtains were of impeccable quality on a par with what one might expect to see in a stately bedroom at Buckingham Palace. Then, in complete contrast, was the fifty-five-inch flat screen Satellite television which folded in and out of the wall at the press of a button, lights that brightened, dimmed or turned off completely depending on how hard you clapped your hands and a futuristic drinks dispenser that included a robotic hand that responded to verbal commands.

Harding jumped with enthusiasm into a luxury en-suite circular ceramic bath having filled it with a generous helping of relaxation agents which were lined up for her use and enjoyment on a parallel shelf like a scientist’s display of useful concoctions.

Greychott had an adjoining room with similar decor and after enjoying a well-deserved shower, he helped himself to some fresh clothes from a wardrobe that spanned the whole length of one of the walls, with Californian Spruce doors that slid temperamentally along ancient metal rails. The selection of apparel was probably greater than one would find at a top London Tailors. Completely refreshed, having also trimmed his beard and tidied up his appearance generally, the detective began to explore his new surroundings, which was something he found irresistible with his child-like inquisitiveness and profoundly analytical mind.

The first thing that drew his attention was a door that held the promise of further personal space and perhaps some additional delights for a guest of Maple Leaf Manor. It was unlocked so he pushed it fully open. Suddenly he was faced with a rather more delightful image than he had expected. Joan Harding’s head and petite but shapely breasts filled his vision, the rest of her body being submerged beneath a mountain of thick and frothy lather. She had left open her adjoining bathroom door, leaving her position exactly at eye-level view from where Greychott was now standing.

“Oops I’m so sorry” offered the detective. “That was an embarrassing oversight: the maid not locking that door before guests arrived.”

For some reason the situation felt particularly awkward.

“Don’t worry” Harding giggled teasingly, “I’m just about to get out.” She grabbed a towel and strategically covered her assets as she raised herself to a standing position. Tying it around her small frame, she threw on a dressing gown over the top that the detective held out to her and they sat down together on an incredibly comfortable sofa stuffed with cart loads of soft, bouncy fibrous padding.

There was a knock at the door. Gables stood in a suit of fresh clothes, rather less formal than his previous attire, although the sandals he was now sporting rather accentuated his club foot which previously, apart from his slight limp, had been far less conspicuous.

“Legacy has got The Restorer all tucked up in bed but he wants a word” he advised.

All three then set off for the soldier’s room and the teenager welcomed them each with a cup of tea, freshly brewed by the mechanical hand of the drinks dispenser. The Restorer was snug, wrapped up in a typically modern quilt, though it clashed with the vintage ambiance of the four-poster bed. The teenager had drawn the curtains and a single beam from the setting sun penetrated the narrow crack between them, lighting up the soldier’s embattled head. But now at least his face seemed to be assuming a healthier, pinker sheen. His arm had been positioned next to him on the bedside table.

“I have made a mathematical calculation based upon The Restorer’s current condition” Legacy began. “I can now give an updated estimate for when he will completely regain consciousness which is approximately twenty forty hours this evening. Now it will be necessary for one of us to remain with him as the shock associated with this type of recovery can in rare cases be fatal.”

“I’ll do that” offered Gables.

“A woman would be preferable” replied Legacy. “They can usually demonstrate greater natural sensitivity. I suggest Joan.”

The journalist looked genuinely chuffed at being apportioned such value by a teenager, albeit an unusual one.

“But you’ll miss out on the lovely grub” Greyshott pointed out, turning to her with a smile.

“That won’t be a problem” advised Gables. “William will instruct Oswald to provide room service. You’ll be offered a taste of everything on offer ‘downstairs.’”

“I will also take over during the evening for a while to give you a break” added Legacy.

*

With Earl Pirbright of Hambledon sitting at the head of a long banqueting table and three of his guests bunched up around him, Greyshott reflected on how oddly outnumbered they were by the kitchen and waiting staff and how absurd was the size of the table for guests so few in number.

“I have been extremely lucky” began William. “As well as the extensive fortune inherited from my Father, I made around twenty million as a Merchant Banker before being sacked just after the crash of Two Thousand and Seven. Like many of my colleagues I was used as a scapegoat for the bad practices of the Banking Industry as a whole.”

“Normally I would comment” contributed Harding as she entered the room for some brief respite and Legacy left for the West Wing to cover for a while. “Press standards also came under close scrutiny a few years later. Many of us were accused of the most abominable activities!”

Greyshott felt sorely tempted to begin a politically motivated discussion on the pros and cons of the free market and the democratic system but after considering fully the present company decided to refrain. “On a lighter note” he smiled “would it be OK to have another helping of that glorious goose in your specially prepared plum sauce?”

“Why certainly. She’s lovely and fresh – slaughtered on the estate this very afternoon. Cook prepares some wonderful sauces from the traditional Maple Leaf Recipe Book passed down by my ancestors through the centuries. Anyway, as I was saying” continued William “it is fortunate that I’m not short of a few bob. It means I can financially support a full complement of thirty staff at each of my five residencies, even when I’m away. They are all very loyal and committed to me and provide excellent cover stories for my absences when the U.A.D.O. make their frequent visits. I think the authorities believe I’m hiding something!”

“But aren’t you?” grinned Gables.

William smiled back and promptly diverted his attention to the recent experiences of the detective and the journalist.

“So perhaps you two would be so gracious as to enlighten me as to what I am likely to see when Joe here gets his pictures developed?”

“Well first of all” commenced Greyshott “since it all happened, we’ve been interviewed by your U.A.D.O. – at least I think that’s who they were – and we’ve been advised in no uncertain terms to keep our mouths shut.”

“I assure you that anything you tell me will be providing little additional information to what I already know” the Earl indicated. “Indeed, I may have some surprises to show you myself later on which could add substantially to your knowledge of the subject. You can also rest assured that Maple Leaf Manor is in a satellite and radio black spot. Only our specially adapted equipment can be used within its grounds. The U.A.D.O. would need to be literally standing in the room next to us to have any idea at all as to the contents of our conversation.”

Greyshott still felt uneasy. “What do you think Joan?” he said turning to Harding. “Remember the threat made against your father?”

“I trust William” she said. “Go ahead.”

The detective began to relate the whole story from the point when he discovered Legacy in his car boot to when they woke up that morning in the hotel in Aldershot.

William mulled over the details for a while. He downed a glass of Rose’ in one and turned to the detective. The first question he asked was about the post-incident interview. “So, what was the name of the gentleman in black?”

“Orlin” Harding answered for him. “Orlin Black.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Gables, “you actually met the infamous Orlin Black!”

“They might have done” remarked Earl Pirbright.

“What do you mean?” Greyshott enquired, slightly taken aback, “we might have done?”

“The name Orlin Black is understood by many to be purely a pseudonym used by the notorious Men in Black. In ufology circles it is not believed to refer to any single individual but rather a group of people who the U.A.D.O. send out to silence witnesses of extra-terrestrial activity.”

“So, who was Rheineck and how is he connected to Legacy and The Restorer?” Harding enquired.

Before William could put forward a learned guess the teenager charged back into the room. “The Restorer will be awake in a matter of minutes” he announced. “Joan – it is vital that your face is the first thing that he sees!”

Harding thought this to be a rather strange comment but immediately complied, rushing to the soldier’s bedside as fast as Oswald and the golf buggy could carry her.

Back in the dining room Gables turned to his remaining two co-diners. “I’m just going to pop outside to get some fresh air gentlemen” he informed them. “It’ll give you two a chance to have a more in-depth conversation without me butting in!”

*

The evening was silent apart from the faint rumble of an airliner above descending towards Heathrow as SURE member No. 1520 ambled out into the three-hundred and twenty-acre Maple Leaf Manor estate. The tranquillity was broken only by the intermittent barking of imprisoned hounds at kennels some three quarters of a mile distant.

Gables opened his palm and pressed down on each side with the fingertips of his other hand. Two faint orange strips of light then appeared and the further away he walked from the Manor, the brighter they became. After walking some considerable distance in the dark, he finally found himself facing a long stone wall about fifteen feet high bordering the south-western perimeter of the manor grounds. As the full moon poked its head out from behind a mass of high-level cirrus, Joe Gables stood as still as a marble statue and began the same inter-being transformation that had enveloped Hermann Goering seventy-five years earlier. From behind the wall rose Rheineck’s flying disc. As it hovered gently, the evil stranger began to speak in his native tongue from inside the transparent canopy.

“Greetings Joseph. You have an update regarding the boy?”

“Yes, my Fuhrer. His development, both physically and mentally is progressing as anticipated. I believe he will now be able to complete the mission unaided.”

13.

As the beads of sweat glistened across The Restorer's forehead while his body thrashed about in all directions, the quilt covering his now rapidly healing physique began to loosen and partially fall to the floor. Harding concluded that, bearing in mind his increasingly agitated state, there was little point in trying to cover him up again. Instead she took hold of the hand at the end of his one remaining uninjured arm in the hope that the body heat emanating from her own would help to calm him down.

The youth had warned her that the culmination of his coma could easily become a violent affair and he had therefore followed Harding back to The Restorer's room, waiting patiently outside, on hand to provide immediate assistance in the event of an emergency developing.

The soldier was now close to regaining full consciousness, the physical and mental strain of the final effort causing his body to shake from head to toe like a freshly set jelly as his subconscious attempted to break its way back out into reality.

His grip on Harding's hand grew tighter as his thoughts backtracked and his mind replayed his final descent from the crashing Heinkel in Nineteen Forty. He was tumbling through the air, accelerating into the icy slipstream, the unequal pressure sucking the very life breath from his lungs, the fall culminating in a heavy bone shattering impact.

Vivid and graphic visions flashed across in front of his eyes coupled with strong and clearly defined emotions: something on top of him – tightening – suffocating, panic setting in, a desperate need to scream, dark shadowy figures pulling at the parachute linen enveloping his body.

Then a sudden switch to incredible peace and calm – a gorgeous young woman in a beautiful wedding dress turning to kiss him, a declaration of never-ending love for all the world to hear. Joan. Thank God Joan!

Agent Alpha One, Jeff Rickenbacker opened his eyes, tears clouding his vision as he recognised his wife, his hand enclosed securely within hers.

"Joan darling!" he exclaimed, "how did you get here? Where the hell am I?" The spy sat upright and began to take in his surroundings.

Harding's thoughts became a diluted mixture of shock, confusion and pity. How did The Restorer know her name? "You've been through a major trauma. Just lie calm" she replied and tried to gently push him back down to a horizontal position. As he lay back, he turned his body towards the door but then screamed in horror. The journalist realised that he had suddenly been confronted by his own severed arm.

"I think perhaps we should have thought this through a bit better" she commented as Legacy burst in, vaulting across to her side." Can't you put it somewhere else for the time being?"

"It's as I predicted" replied the teenager. "The Restorer has fainted. Now would be the perfect opportunity for re-attachment."

"Couldn't we have done that earlier?"

"Not possible" stated Legacy. "His self-healing mechanism was not fully functional until he came out of the coma. Now he is ready!"

He picked up the limb, removed all traces of clothing from it and supported Rickenbacker's stump with the other hand. With a sudden burst of energy, he hit the amputation point with the top end of the arm as if he was bashing a stubborn nail into a thick plank of wood with a hammer. As the two sections of flesh made contact, the bluish waves of an electrical discharge appeared around them, accompanied by a humming, rasping sound as they fused together.

"There we are" said the boy. "All done. Good as new." There was an unusual informality about his voice. Harding watched, fascinated by the proceedings.

"At some point sooner rather than later" she began "you're going to have to explain all this to us – where you two come from - where all this is leading?"

Ignoring her completely he said "We must be ready for when he regains consciousness."

*

Within the walls of Maple Leaf Manor and the many luxurious rooms was Earl Pirbright's favourite which he called the Galaxy Lounge. This was designed as a mini Planetarium. With all lights extinguished the ceiling represented a vast night sky of stars and planets.

As Gables returned from his evening stroll, William was ordering drinks from Oswald who hovered at the lounge's generously stocked bar, installed by the Earl primarily for his own amusement but with the periphery function of entertaining guests. As he handed Greyshott and Gables each a Gin and Tonic, Legacy returned once more from the West Wing to report the latest developments.

Joan Harding remained next to the soldier. It was almost two hours since the teenager had performed the less than intricate surgery to re-attach his arm. At last The Restorer seemed at peace and lay eyes closed and with a crooked smile on his lips. It was now almost midnight. Harding walked over to the ornately framed window and stared out. The sky was clear. The light of a full moon sharpened the distant outline of the Surrey Hills as a shooting star propelled itself over them, appearing briefly before burning up in the lower atmosphere.

A voice behind diverted her attention.

"Joan. You're still here."

"How are you feeling?" she asked, returning to his bedside.

"I'm fine. My arm's a little stiff" he added while lifting it up and exercising his fingers that bristled with pins and needles. "I don't understand. Where am I? How did I get here?"

"You're the guest of Earl Pirbright of Hambledon. This is one of his country homes in Surrey. Do you recall the battle you had with a flying saucer?"

The Restorer looked at her as if she was mad. "To be honest no" he replied. "The last thing that I remember is jumping out of a German bomber over London just before it crashed. How long have I been here?"

"I'm not sure I have sufficient knowledge to answer your questions but I know somebody who probably has" said Harding as Legacy came to mind.

“So how did you get here from New York?” Rickenbacker enquired.

“I’ve never been to America in my life. My name is Joan Harding – West Sussex England born and bred.”

“No Joan you’re mistaken. You are Joan Rickenbacker from Kingston, Ontario, Canada who I married at the Brooklyn Baptist Church on July 3rd, Nineteen Thirty-Nine.”

As he spoke the memory of the thrashing reptile momentarily overtook his thoughts. “Oh my God!” he exclaimed “I must get hold of the British Secret Service. There is a dangerous beast on the loose! Have the Germans invaded yet?”

“I think you must be confusing me with someone else and if you’re referring to the Second World War then it finished sixty-seven years ago. The Western allies together with the USSR were the victors over Germany and Japan” she replied.

Harding watched as The Restorer’s facial expression descended into utter confusion.

“I tell you what” she said as she rolled back the spruce doors of another long wardrobe – seemingly a standard fitting in the guest room annex. “Here’s an excellent variety of men’s clothes of various sizes and designs. I’m sure something here will appeal to you. Get yourself dressed and I’ll take you to meet a young gentleman who should be able to piece everything together for you. When you’re ready knock on my door. I’m in the room opposite.”

With that, she left.

*

The Earl, the detective, the teenager and Gables were finally in a position for Greyshott’s long-awaited heart to heart, enjoying the sumptuous comfort of William’s latest body mapping research, namely the superb ergonomically designed leather armchairs in which they now reclined, produced to the Earl’s own patented specification.

“So, Legacy” Greyshott began “would you like to tell us a bit more about who you are and where you come from?” As the words fell from his lips, he knew deep down that this would be yet another fruitless attempt to pump the boy for information and for some reason felt strangely embarrassed.

“Until the quest is completed” Legacy began “there is a limit to the information I can divulge. In most cases my answers will only be pertinent to specific situations encountered on the journey. Needless to say, the long-term survival of this planet fully depends on our success.”

William offered his contribution to the proceedings. “What we can say with absolute certainty is that a race of aliens known throughout the annals of history as ‘The Greys’ walk this planet unhindered. However, their purpose here is uncertain although Joe here has a theory of his own.”

“It is my belief” Gables continued “that the Grey aliens have the ability to use our human bodies as vehicles to do their bidding. Many reported alien abductions over the years appear to coincide with human nightmares or in children ‘night terrors.’ Research I have done seems to suggest that a particular dream experienced by the human race, common to all nations and cultures is the ‘entrance point’ when a Grey alien merges its form into the humanoid, controlling the actions of the host from within.”

"Which dream are you referring to?" Greyshott enquired.

"It's the one where you are desperately trying to escape or get away from something but it just gets closer and closer – almost to the point of suffocation."

"Well I can honestly say I've had a few of those" the detective replied, "does that mean I'm possessed by an alien?"

"Probably not" Gables replied, "you see most attempted merges by The Greys appear to be unsuccessful. I have gathered some data together from a number of surveys among SURE volunteers. The first point to note is that a successful merge is confirmed by the host human letting out a rip-roaring scream. The second factor is that people successfully 'possessed' as you put it generally have a particularly high IQ"

"Do you have any comment to make on that?" the Earl asked the boy.

"Joe Gables' summary is accurate" was his muted response.

"As you know Joe, my profession is in the line of Police Detection. I am therefore bound to ask if you have any hard evidence of the existence of Grey Aliens?" said Greyshott.

"They move extremely fast. I attempted a shot with my camera at the crater when one de-merged from the boy's father but I suspect that when the film is developed all you will see is a blur!"

"Well I'm sorry Joe" responded the detective, "but I remain to be convinced."

"I can convince you" William announced.

They were interrupted by a knock at the lounge's decorative oak door. Oswald, who had been dozing in a corner, woke with a start and shuffled his ancient body over to answer it. In stepped Harding and The Restorer. The journalist wore a loose-fitting blouse and a tight figure-hugging skirt which emphasized her feminine curves. Her hair was tied back, make up freshly applied to her mousy face and she had found a pair of high heels, although the way she walked suggested that they weren't her usual footwear of choice.

The Restorer had discovered, among the gentleman's apparel in his wardrobe a complete set of army khakis which he now sported, shirt sleeves rolled up almost to his shoulders, his tremendous muscles bursting forth, bristling for all to see. His previously injured arm had now completely recovered to its former physical strength and power. He marched across to the Earl.

"Jeff Rickenbacker. British Army Special Operations" he announced, reaching out to shake William's hand. "I don't understand how I got here but Joan tells me you've provided this beautiful environment for my rest and recuperation. I can't thank you enough!"

"Think nothing of it" the Earl replied, "I'm glad to see you appear to have made a full recovery."

"Almost" Harding intervened, "I believe he is still a little confused. Jeff is absolutely convinced that I'm the wife he left back in The States in Nineteen Forty."

Everyone present turned to the teenager.

“The Restorer is correct” he said.

14.

The night wore on and the time was approaching one in the morning. Everyone apart from Greyshott and The Earl had retired to their rooms, realising that so many questions remained unanswered and it would take much more than a single evening to gain a full understanding of the situation.

Yawning loudly, the detective turned to Earl Pirbright. "I think it's about time I also turned in."

"Very well" William responded, "but before you go, I have an idea which may help to throw some additional light on the matter. Do you have access to a Police Psychiatrist?"

"Indeed I do, but as you will probably realise I have to be extremely discreet. He is under the direct control of my superiors. I'm not so concerned for my own safety but I would hate anything to happen to Joan or her family."

"It may be the only method available to piece this jigsaw together. If you can find a way, I would urge you to arrange appointments for the boy and the soldier. We need a professional's diagnosis of both their psychiatric conditions before taking this further, otherwise I have a premonition that it could all end in disaster!"

"I'll sleep on it" replied the detective. He shook the Earl's hand and departed for the West Wing.

*

The following morning breakfast was convened at eight AM sharp. As before, William was an excellent host and the food exquisite. As final coffee was served, he made an announcement:

"Today, I'm afraid will be our last day at the Manor. My internal sources at the U.A.D.O. have informed me that my presence here has been reported and there are plans for an interception tomorrow at ten AM. By the time those vultures arrive we will all have left and only the staff will remain. But today I have a special treat, which may help to put everything into perspective. Meet me outside the lounge at Ten. I promise you won't be disappointed."

*

Everyone duly met at the assigned time and place. "Welcome everyone" William began, "would you please all follow me." With that they commenced a leisurely wander down a long corridor which eventually spread out into a grand library. Books dating back many centuries covering a vast array of subjects populated hundreds of bookcases stretching from the floor to the ceiling. As the six figures trod with care along the narrow lanes between them, the Earl informed them that his library was one of his most treasured possessions. "In addition to my Father's massive book collection, I have added many of my own, including some very valuable First Editions. These include Charles Darwin's Origin of Species and a complete collection of the original works of Charles Dickens." Harding nodded, visibly impressed.

As they approached a section on 'Ancient History' the Earl began to count alphabetically from left to right: "D,E,F,G,H – Ah, here it is I – 'Incas. A definitive history.' Now stand back please everyone." As he removed the book from its stored position, a mechanical motor burst into life and the whole bookcase rotated on a central spindle through ninety degrees.

“Well, I’ve only ever seen that done on kids’ mystery cartoons” piped up Greyshott as they squeezed through the gap one after the other. “I never believed in my wildest dreams that such a thing really existed!”

William smiled and warned them to take care as there were some very steep stone steps a few feet ahead. He opened a small cabinet attached to the rear of the bookcase and took out a powerful flashlight. The steps were very narrow so they each made their way down them sideways.

“Very few people have ever been down here” the Earl continued. “Apparently it was built by one of my eccentric ancestors some one hundred and fifty years ago although looking back through the family archives would suggest that he may have falsely claimed its construction. There is an alternative theory that it dates back many centuries prior to the existence of Maple Leaf Manor and was actually a hideout for Royalists during the time of Oliver Cromwell.”

“Fascinating” Harding commented. Gables seemed singularly unimpressed. Rickenbacker treated the occasion with the cold detachment of the professional soldier while both Greyshott and Harding felt the excitement of the unknown about to be made known building up towards a mutual adrenalin rush. Legacy’s attitude remained concentrated on his ultimate goal known only to him and possibly Gables, and seemed to accept with a degree of resignation that this was a necessary step along the complicated journey to the ultimate success of his mission.

At the foot of the steps William turned right. In the distance could be heard the sound of fast flowing water and as it gradually became louder an awful stench began to permeate along the tunnel through which they were now walking.

“Apologies for the strong smell of human excrement” offered William as they stepped onto a rickety rope bridge spanning an underground stream that passed below in a fast-flowing torrent. “There is a sewerage outflow about two hundred yards downriver where the stream disappears into a narrow gap between the chalk and the limestone.”

They continued on unperturbed, fingers clamping their nostrils in order to block out the smell. Soon they were facing a cut out in the rock ahead where a sturdy wooden door had been crafted many centuries before. The remains of an ancient lock were apparent beside its digital replacement. The Earl keyed in a number combination after first asking those accompanying him to step back out of visual range. The lock clicked and William pushed open the door. Just behind the entrance was a Nineteen Sixties design petrol-fuelled generator. The Earl bent down and pulled hard on the activation chord. The machine coughed and spluttered and finally adopted an even tone at which point several light bulbs suspended precariously from the ceiling lit up the scene.

“Welcome to the Pirbright Secret Archives” William invited. “This is where you will find my Father’s life’s work. Lord Pirbright spent many long hours down here amassing volumes of information on thousands of UFO and alien sightings and studying strange objects and materials brought to him by members of SURE from all over the world. Indeed, this is where I found him when he died.”

“Fascinating” said the journalist and the detective in unison, then looked at each other and laughed.

All around were unusual objects and artefacts, the majority carrying an orange label loosely tied to them with thin string. Among the strangest was the skeleton of a two-headed dog. The Earl picked up a piece of metallic foil.

"This is reputed to be part of the UFO that crashed in Roswell, New Mexico in the late Nineteen Forties. I have had a piece tested by a metallurgist friend of mine. He was unable to identify any of the constituent chemicals in the structure."

"Looks like a piece of kitchen foil to me" contributed Greyshott. Harding nudged him and narrowed her eyebrows, her expression suggesting that he ought to shut up.

Moving further along the exhibits a particular item stood out. A faded and discoloured circular brown globe was immediately recognised by the detective. "Now I know what this is!" As he spoke both he and Harding experienced an odd feeling of restraint and felt compelled to look at Legacy. Without a word he somehow managed to prevent them from divulging any further information. "Actually" the detective modified "I think I'm mistaken. What do you think it is Will?"

"I haven't the faintest idea" the Earl replied "but again it is made of material found nowhere on this planet as far as we know."

Next in line was a dome shaped structure about the size of a standard vending machine turned on its side which appeared to be made of transparent glass. Greyshott could see straight away that it was identical to the canopy he had seen on Rheineck's craft. "So, what is this exactly?" he asked.

"Well this" Earl Pirbright began "is part of a Flying Disc's control sphere canopy which we were fortunate enough to retrieve from a crash site in Scotland before the arrival of the U.A.D.O. It is made from a similar material to the globe."

The underground archives were designed in the shape of an L and as they rounded the corner William smiled in anticipation of his guest's impending reaction.

"Now for the jewel in the crown. I believe you asked me for evidence of the existence of Grey Aliens yesterday Paul? Well I have a surprise for you!"

In front of them was a rectangular structure covered in what looked like either a large bed sheet or an old heavy curtain. William took hold of the bottom edge and threw it over the back, revealing a large water tank. Inside it floated a thin emaciated body with long stringy limbs and an outsize head, its bulbous eyes covered in the yellow sheen of initial rigor mortis. Its skin was grey in colour with odd red blotches which gave the impression that it had been badly bruised prior to death.

The teenager slowly approached ahead of the rest, knelt down and closed his eyes. His companions watched in silence. After a few minutes he rose to his feet. "The Overseers must always be shown respect in death" he stated in a profound manner.

Gables looked worried for no apparent reason by this public display of appreciation. Only the Earl noticed his concern but said nothing.

"You may be wondering how we managed to obtain this dead alien" said William. "Well actually it was by far the easiest acquisition of the lot! You see on the day of my Father's death I found it lying next to his body."

"I read in the papers that your father died some two years ago. How have you managed to stop the body deteriorating in the meantime?" asked Harding.

“With such a massive worldwide SURE membership, forty-five thousand and seventy-two in fact as at yesterday’s date, it is inevitable that our members come from all cultures, occupations and walks of life in general. Many of them play no active role in the organisation but it gives them a means for confidential UFO reporting without interference from the authorities. At the time I managed to track down a professional embalmer from our data files with his own Funeral Directorship who is now thoroughly sworn to secrecy. He provided the liquid in which the alien is encased. It is a similar formulation to embalming fluid although the mixture is adapted slightly for long term storage in the proportions ethanol 45%, formaldehyde 30% and methanol 25%.”

“How did it get here?” Rickenbacker asked.

“That’s a very good question” answered the Earl. “My father was always meticulous about locking the entrance door both after arriving and leaving which gives some credence to Joe’s ‘merging’ theory. He was, after all, a highly intelligent scientist, although he lost much respect from the scientific community by (to quote) ‘his persistent alien inspired rantings.’ Also, the official post mortem cited natural causes, although I personally believe somebody got to the coroner and persuaded him to alter the results.”

“So, what’s your theory?” asked the detective. This was right up his street.

“Personally, I believe that the alien killed my father” William continued. “The bruises on its body could suggest that some kind of struggle took place. When I found my Dad there was also significant bruising around the back of his neck. It doesn’t explain however how it got in here, unless the alien met him at the door on his arrival and forced him inside.”

“Aren’t you taking an enormous risk by showing it to us?” Greyshott enquired. “Presumably it must be one of SURE’s greatest secrets!”

“Well actually” said the Earl “there is a definite purpose behind me bringing you here. I would be the first to admit that my father was more than a little eccentric. Unfortunately, it tends to run in the family” he said, grinning, “but many of his observations and theories were basically sound. At the time of his death, he had told me a few days before that as a result of thirty years of research, he believed he had finally discovered the secret of the universe and that a major catastrophe was likely to befall the human race by the year Twenty Sixteen if his warnings were left unheeded.”

“That’s a bummer” the soldier commented “and I’m only just getting used to living in this new era.”

“My father was also a modern-day seer” the Earl continued. “Many of his predictions were along the lines of Nostradamus but amazingly up until now have been proved considerably more accurate. The dreams that he had only confirmed his belief that the end was certainly nigh!”

“Is this just going to get progressively more depressing or is there anything practical we can do to prevent it?” Harding questioned.

“I was about to come to that” the Earl replied. “Lord Pirbright left me a small leather-bound notebook in his will in which he had written five short poems or verses. Apparently, this was the blueprint for the actions that would be required to save the earth from the oncoming catastrophe.”

“It all sounds a bit far-fetched” Gables commented.

“Well I must admit I was also very sceptical until the day that you guys turned up at The Manor.”

William took the notebook from his pocket and read out loud to his guests the first poem:

**“THE MEETING DRAWING TO A CLOSE WOULD FIND FOUR STRANGERS AT THE GATE
REQUIRING FOOD AND SHELTER THOUGH THE EVENING WOULD BE GETTING LATE
TWO OF THESE WOULD HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE THE FUTURE THROUGH THEIR QUEST
AND ONE PROVIDE PROTECTION THOUGH WITHOUT AN ARM AND POORLY DRESSED.”**

15.

It was seven thirty in the evening. The Earl had generously invited his visitors to pack anything they needed from the vast selection of clothes, toiletries and any other portable items from the guest facilities available in their rooms. He had even provided some capacious and trendy suitcases in which to carry it all in.

Realising the importance of the mission that they would now be undertaking, he had decided to supply them with a more reliable mode of transport by offering the use of his brand-new BMW Streamliner three litre hybrid sports, a model released only in February of that year. Harding was invited to leave her Camper parked securely in the Manor's garage compound.

As William's personal Robinson 44 four-seater helicopter approached from the south the Earl said his Goodbyes.

"OK guys. It's been great meeting you all. Here is the name and phone number of a middle man who you can use to contact me any time. This is the address you can use as a 'safe house' while you're in England which has no official connection to me whatsoever. Neither has this mobile number so we won't be traced." He handed them a folded piece of paper and a front door key.

"I wish I was that organised" said Harding, "then maybe I would be as rich as you!"

William guffawed heartily. His private chopper landed a few hundred yards away, his pilot giving the thumbs up.

"Right this is how it has to work" the Earl continued. "My father explained that I need to retain control of the notebook just in case it accidentally falls into the wrong hands but as each stage in the quest is accomplished you will need to text 'READY' to the mobile number I have provided. My contact will then text back the next poem in sequence. In my father's notes he advises that the boy Legacy will know whenever it is time to receive the next verse. Although he describes him as the youth hybrid it can't be anyone else."

"Thanks for everything Will. You've been an absolute treasure" said the journalist.

"Yeah thanks mate" added the detective. Rickenbacker offered his hand. Gables embraced the Earl. "It's been a pleasure as always my friend" he said.

Legacy placed his hand on William's shoulder. "Your contribution to universal peace will not go unrewarded. We are indebted to you."

"Anything for the good of the cause" he responded.

With that, Earl William Pirbright of Hambledon boarded his private rotorcraft which departed with haste, hovering for a moment before swooping low over a row of tall poplars and disappearing into the evening mist.

*

With Harding at the wheel, the four were soon shooting down the A281 in the BMW back towards Horsham. The detective retrieved the sheet of paper from his pocket and read out aloud the address that the Earl had given them.

"Merry Way Farm, South Holmwood. OK Joan, take the next turning on the left towards Dorking."

"Before you do" Gables announced, "could you drop me off just before the next bend." He pointed at a sumptuous modern caravan parked in a field next to three grazing Shire Horses. "This is my time to leave you guys – that's where I live."

"Aren't you coming along for the ride?" asked Rickenbacker.

"No. I can tell you for sure that I'm definitely not one of the two people mentioned in Lord Pirbright's poem. I'll only slow you down at critical moments" he replied. "I'll still be keen to hear of your success so I'll keep track of your progress through William if he lets me."

"Well it's been great meeting you" said the detective, "your help has been invaluable. I'm sure our paths will cross again in the future."

"You're too kind" said Gables, "and I'm sure they will."

Harding placed a wet kiss on his cheek. Rickenbacker shook his hand. Strangely there was no interaction between Gables and Legacy although none of the others present noticed at the time. Gables heaved himself from the back seat of the car, swung his crippled leg over a stile bordering the field and headed across it towards the static caravan. The BMW then sped away without a moment to lose.

As the four remaining travellers approached Merry Way Farm it looked completely deserted. An ancient rusty red tractor and plough were all that remained in the adjacent barn, part of which showed traces of the remnants of former dairy equipment. The farm house itself was basic but comfortable. It would suffice for the limited time that they planned to be there.

"So, what now?" asked Harding as they began to unpack only their essentials. Greyshott thought back to the previous evening and the conversation he had had with the Earl regarding a Police psychiatrist.

"Legacy, Jeff" he called them over, "would you mind taking a seat please for a moment. I need a word."

The teenager and the soldier each pulled up a chair at the kitchen table where Greyshott had already made himself comfortable.

"Anyone for tea?" said Harding as she set down some dated flowery patterned crockery in front of them and presented a teapot covered in a classic Nineteen Fifties tea cosy.

"What I'm about to suggest you may find offensive to begin with but it's not my intention to insult you" the detective began. "As you know I generally work with criminals and their victims in Crime Detection and Prevention. Part of our work involves reintegrating ex-law breakers into society after their prison terms and to assist us in this we hire the services of a dedicated Police Psychiatrist."

"Go on" encouraged Rickenbacker.

"Fortunately, he is also a personal friend so the risk of him betraying us to the authorities I believe is very slim. In addition to general psychiatry he is also fully qualified in Regressive Therapy. By going back into both your histories using hypnosis as a method of tapping into your subconscious, I believe he could uncover vital information which could assist us no end in preparing for the challenges ahead."

"Well I'm up for it" said the Spy. "For one thing I'd like to know what happened to all my lost years and another: how come I look this good if I'm one hundred and five years old! Most of all I'd like to find out why, like myself,

my wife hasn't aged a day since Nineteen Forty and how she ended up in England with no recollection of me at all!"

"I agree to a meeting with your colleague" added Legacy. "When can you arrange it? Time is of the essence."

"I think under the circumstances it would be wise to turn up on the spur of the moment. Any pre-arranged meeting could be intercepted by the U.A.D.O."

"I agree" said Legacy, "although don't forget that the Stealth Rings make you invisible to them."

"Good point" Greyshott replied. "Anyway, he normally finishes work at around Five PM so he should be at home by five thirty tomorrow evening. I suggest we call at Six."

"That's settled then" concluded Harding, adding in a matriarchal away "I think we should all get an early night."

*

For Jeff Rickenbacker the past couple of days had been very hard. The developments in technology during the intervening years since the war had come as a great shock and in addition, he now faced an enforced generation gap between himself and his new companions. Worst of all he was desperate to embrace his wife and tell her how much he loved her and the terrible extent to which he had missed her while on military operations in France.

Although to Harding he was a complete stranger, she tried desperately to remember him and searched deep down and deeper still for even a trace of feelings or long-lost emotions but nothing – absolutely nothing – was forthcoming. She could sense however the unbearable torment he was experiencing on a daily basis being close to her and decided she could at least try to be his friend.

The following morning Rickenbacker was first to rise and Harding found him sitting in the kitchen with a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee. Along one of the walls was a basic wooden shelf on which stood a line of paperbacks. The spy had removed a copy of 'Star Wars' and was engrossed.

"Morning Jeff" she greeted him as she entered wearing a thick pink fleece dressing gown. Noticing his obvious interest in the book she added "-oh sorry to disturb you. I'll leave you in peace to read."

"No, no" he replied. "I'd much rather talk to you."

"Look Jeff" she began. "I understand how frustrating all this must be for you but honestly I can find no recollection of any relationship with you no matter how hard I rack my brains!"

Rickenbacker's smiling face became downcast and he began to tap the teaspoon from side to side in his half full coffee cup. She walked over to him and placed her hand gently on his shoulder.

"Whatever the future holds, I would love to be your friend. Is that OK?"

"Of course it is, Joan, love" he replied smiling with relief. "Being your friend would mean the world to me!"

"Well then" she said "tell me about us. What sort of life did we have? How did we meet?"

“That death star sounds like an evil place” he replied. “Have Skywalker and his friends destroyed it yet?”

Harding giggled. “Jeff it’s a complete work of fiction. None of it’s true!”

Rickenbacker’s serious look continued for a few seconds then changed to a broad grin. “I know” he said, “I was only pulling your leg!”

“You clown” she replied and threw a wet dishcloth towards his face which he caught effortlessly in his hand with the lightning quick reactions derived from intensive military training.

“I was born in Brooklyn New York” he began “on the fourth of June Nineteen Ten. My parents owned a grocery store on The Broadway, Manhattan. You were the classic ‘girl next door’ – my childhood sweetheart up until the age of eighteen when your family moved to Canada just before the onset of The Great Depression. We lost contact for many years until one day in Nineteen Thirty-Eight when I spotted you working in the Control Tower at Fairfax Airport, Kansas. I believe fate brought us back together as I had recently secured a position there as a test pilot on the B-25 Mitchell Bomber. Within hours we realised we were still hopelessly in love so after a short courtship we flew to Kingston Ontario on the third of July, Nineteen Thirty-Nine so that your family could attend our wedding.”

“Was it a nice wedding?” Harding asked captivated by his story. She had always dreamed of a grand and expensive occasion.

“Beautiful” he replied. “No expense was spared for the woman I loved – and still do!” He stared longingly into her eyes searching in vain for the wonderful feelings he knew that they had once shared together and hoping that one day they would again.

Harding blushed, feeling both overwhelmed and embarrassed at the same time. Searching in desperation for the right words in reply, she was rescued from the situation at the last minute by Greyshott entering the room.

“Morning guys” he greeted them. “Boy do I fancy some eggs on toast!”

“Well you’re in luck” replied Rickenbacker. “William’s arranged a fridge stacked full of them. Top quality free range. I reckon they must be local produce!” He paused. “Well Paul, Joan. I think it’s time I had a good look at my Twenty First Century uniform. No doubt I’m gonna be required to use its advanced weaponry at some point!”

“Do you think that’s wise?” Greyshott probed. “Shouldn’t you wait first for the boy to give you some instruction on its use?”

“According to you guys I’ve worn and used it before to attack alien spacecraft. I’m sure it won’t take long to master!”

With that he grabbed the thick padded garment from the storage cupboard where the boy had placed it the previous night and stepped into the lower leg section. Once he had pulled it around his arms and zipped up the front, he marched outside into the yard and disappeared behind a pile of hay bales.

The detective sat down while his eggs began to fry and Harding, enthusiastically taking on the role of ‘mum,’ poured him a fresh cup of tea.

“Well Joan” he said, “this is the first opportunity we’ve had for a proper chat. How are you bearing up?”

"I'm fine" she replied, "but I'm worried about Jeff. I think he's finding it all quite difficult to cope with although from his hard exterior and generally serious demeanour, you probably wouldn't realise it if you didn't know him."

"That suggests that maybe you do have some connection to him after all."

"I feel nothing emotionally" she replied, "but there's something. Call it a sixth sense. I can't exactly put it into words."

"I'm more concerned for you, Joan" said the detective. "There are bound to be many fearful dangers ahead. Perhaps this is where you should call it a day and go back to a peaceful and risk-free life writing your articles. It's just that I'm becoming increasingly worried for your safety."

"That's very sweet Paul" she replied "but I'm afraid you're lumbered with me. With everything that's now at stake I wouldn't miss this journey for the world!"

Their cosy chat was interrupted by a bright flash, a bang and the sound of timber cracking and falling to the ground. They both jumped to their feet and ran outside. The Restorer was standing over the stump of a tree he had just felled using some function in his suit of armour. "Cool!" he exclaimed as he pressed a sequence of buttons on a small keypad at his elbow.

"Stop!" screamed Harding, "for god's sake Jeff. You can't just go randomly felling trees and causing explosions. For one it will draw the attention of the U.A.D.O. Secondly, we are here as William's guests. I'm sure he won't appreciate you vandalising the grounds of one of his properties!"

"Well well well" came a voice from behind. They all turned around. There stood Legacy looking as fresh and sprightly as ever. "I believe it may be time to start someone's retraining!"

16.

Near the little village of Capel on the Sussex/Surrey border nestled a quaint little bungalow, tucked away out of sight from public gaze. It was set back a mile and a half from the original A24, the road having been superseded by a by-pass some forty years earlier. The BMW, now being driven by Greyshott approached the wide concrete hard standing in front of the building, parked and waited. It was five to Six PM. There was no sign of Doctor Ashish Patel.

“We’ll give him until a quarter past then maybe it would be best to forget the whole idea” said Greyshott. Just as he finished the sentence a Volkswagon Passat Estate drew up, spun round and parked next to them. The detective opened his drivers’ door and watching closely his colleague’s movements, ensured that their leaving each vehicle coincided exactly.

“Paul my old chum!” Patel exclaimed as he recognised his acquaintance of many years. “How are you my dear fellow? To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

“Sorry to call on you without prior warning” Greyshott began “but I’m here to ask the favour of a friend.”

Patel gave him a sideways look.

“I’ve got a couple of unusual cases in the car for which I require a confidential psychological analysis – purely off the record. This is not police business. Neither of them are criminals or ex-criminals.”

“Well it’s highly irregular” Patel replied “and for private consultations I would normally charge a fee.”

“Money’s no object” said the detective, with the Earl’s vast fortune in mind and assuming that he would help if required, “but no one must find out that we’ve been here. Also, it has to be done tonight!”

“Good grief” replied the doctor, “that’s asking a hell of a lot. What’s this all about Paul? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“Not exactly but I need you to trust me on this. Many lives could be at stake!”

“Well I know somebody of your impeccable character and professional calibre wouldn’t come to see me with a request like this unless it was absolutely vital” Patel replied. “From what you’ve said, time is obviously of the essence. I’m going to need at least two hours per subject. I suggest we get started right away. I take it the two people in question have already agreed to the examination?”

“Yes” said Greyshott “they’re here in the car with me. How much do you require? I can arrange to have the money in your bank account by tomorrow mor.....”

“Forget it” Patel cut in. “Take it as a personal favour. You can owe me one! Now I’m going to need some idea as to the history of these two characters before we begin.”

“That I’m afraid” replied Greyshott “is where we draw a massive blank and the essential purpose behind us coming to see you in the first place.”

“Oh” said the doctor frowning. “This could be trickier than I thought. After some further consideration he announced: “Bring everyone in and we’ll get started.”

The doctor's home was fairly small and sparsely furnished. In the corner of the compact lounge was an old analogue TV. The homely log fireplace was one of the few original features of the property that had been retained. The doctor appeared to be a man of few material possessions but as the four newcomers entered the room, they were awe-struck by a long row of intricately carved wooden wild animals placed on an antique ornamental shelf, each representing an endangered species from the Indian subcontinent.

"So, which of you three will be my subjects this evening?" he asked.

The soldier raised his hand. "Jeff Rickenbacker, Doc. Pleased to meet you. Now – anything you can find out about me would be greatly appreciated. There's a massive gap in my memory spanning over sixty years!"

"Now I am confused!" replied Patel. "Looking at you, you can't be more than forty!"

"Exactly Doc" said the Spy, "exactly!"

"I am the other volunteer for your examination" offered Legacy. "There may be information you can extract under hypnosis that you can pass to Paul which my neurological program prevents me from telling him directly."

"Interesting" commented the doctor. "Very interesting. OK Jeff. We'll start with you. I suspect that you'll be the easier and quicker of the two, leaving us more time with the young lad later on."

The soldier and the teenager both nodded their approval.

"Well Paul. You haven't introduced me to this lovely young lady!" the doctor scolded.

"My apologies. This is Joan Harding. She is a journalist based in West Sussex specialising in supernatural phenomena and unusual extra-terrestrial activity. I recently discovered that she has had many articles published on the subject."

"So, you've been doing your homework Paul" Harding intervened, "you kept that very quiet!"

Greyscott grinned like a big Cheshire Cat.

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance" said the journalist to Patel.

"And I yours" the doctor replied. "Now let's get down to business. Jeff if you would like to follow me. The rest of you are welcome to make yourselves comfortable and use any of my facilities. Tea, coffee and sugar are in the jars on the side. Milk is in the fridge."

*

Alf Harding slumped down in his favourite rocking chair. It was now almost a week since he had last heard from Joan and he was starting to fear the worst. It had been a relatively smooth process since the organisation had arrived with her, deeply sedated, entrusting her unconscious being to his care and instructing him to officially change his surname forthwith.

He had been retired from MI6 for twenty-five years and had hoped for a reasonably relaxed and peaceful end to his days. Then came that wonderful summer's evening when the unexpected unmarked ambulance arrived and he hadn't regretted it a moment since. The pretty young lady with the intelligent face, exactly the kind he

would have wished for had he ever been blessed with his own biological offspring, was carried up to the spare room and tucked up securely in bed to await the morning, a new day and a new life.

From that moment onwards, he had done his very best to watch over Joan Harding and guarantee her safety, but now the years were catching up with him, he felt far less capable and his memory was starting to fail miserably. There was a procedure to follow if she went absent but for how many days should he wait before reporting? He would have to consult the confidential file on his hard drive. But now – what was the password?

The cottage he shared with Joan was in a secluded glade in the midst of the South Downs, many miles from the nearest town, in fact from any type of recognisable human habitation. But Joan Harding's situation was unknown to the world at large, so she and Alf were considered an extremely low security risk by the secret organisation that had made the arrangements.

The old man's body creaked and strained as he lifted himself from the rocking chair and shuffled over to his desk top computer. After five attempts he successfully logged on and a confidential case file entitled: 'ALPHA ONE: THE RESTORER: LOGISTICAL SUPPORT' appeared on the screen. He cursoried down a pop-up menu on the left-hand side to 'JOAN HARDING A.K.A. JOAN RICKENBACKER' and pressed 'ENTER.'

At that moment he heard a noise outside, like somebody tripping over a step. Then a haunting shriek and cry from a couple of sparring wild animals again broke the silence.

"Damned foxes!" he exclaimed to himself and continued his investigations. The figure, adorned in tight black leather gloves, crept up to the front door and with a thin piece of wire began to pick the lock.

As the former spy painstakingly searched the menu for 'SUBJECT DISAPPEARANCE PROCEDURE' the intruder successfully unlocked the door and with carefully measured steps, crept up behind him. At the last minute, the retired MI6 agent sensed the dark figure's presence, turned himself around and their eyes met briefly as the hypodermic needle penetrated the fleshy crease of his middle arm and a brief agonising pain overwhelmed him. The old man slumped forward and his once bright life force tumbled headlong into the waiting chasm of death.

The intruder quickly left.

*

As the peaceful village of Capel gently slept, unaware of the extraordinary picture now developing from the first subject on Doctor Patel's examination couch, Jeff Rickenbacker was in another world. Initially he had involuntarily resisted the doctor's rotating spiral hypnosis device as it immediately brought back memories of Neumann's fiery rotating eyes but Patel eventually succeeded in relaxing him to a point where he seemed to be co-operating well.

Not until midnight did the exhausted doctor emerge from his treatment room with a comprehensive A4 pad of notes and fall into a chair next to Greyshott with his initial reports on both the soldier and the boy.

"Right" he began "where to start? First of all, both Jeff and 'Legacy' will be given their own copies of this report but I'll summarise to you my basic findings, Paul." He paused and exhaled deeply. "Wow, Detective Superintendent Greyshott, you've certainly presented me with some weird characters this time!"

This was exactly the type of comment that the detective had been expecting. He was unfazed.

“OK let’s start with the soldier. Normally, my diagnosis in a case such as this would be that he is completely delusional. He is absolutely convinced that he is a wartime spy working for the British Secret Service who prevented a major catastrophe by stopping some kind of alien being from dropping a deadly weapon on London in Nineteen Forty. At first, I considered that the most likely source of this belief was that he had been thoroughly brainwashed. Then, with my official clearance, I logged on to the Classified Government War Records and parts of his story tied up. He claimed that he managed to disarm the bomb before it fell over London. It failed to explode but impacted the ground in the Marble Arch area. I checked the date. On the 17th September, Nineteen Forty, an explosive device matching his description did indeed cause a small number of casualties at Marble Arch Tube Station where it hit at great velocity but without detonating. However, the strangest thing of all is that there were reports of a fast-moving winged reptile seen over the capital at the same time. This too tallied with his account of the result of some damage that occurred to the weapon when his aircraft was intercepted by the R.A.F. There were literally thousands of witnesses who saw the creature but the authorities managed to cover it up, putting it down to mass hysteria from a public under stress from many nights of German bombing. The event was quietly forgotten.”

“Isn’t it possible he could have done his own research and concocted a story to suit the events?” asked the detective.

“My psychological profiling would deem that to be extremely unlikely” replied Patel. “Rickenbacker has a character beyond reproach. I don’t believe he would have made it all up!”

“Then he really is One Hundred and Five years old?”

“Fantastic as it would seem, I have had to reach that conclusion, but only after one further aspect was studied. While in a deep hypnotic trance, his subconscious finally let go of an extremely traumatic event that he experienced some weeks after being seriously injured in the military operation mentioned earlier. He was on an operating table being pumped full of a thick purple fluid, surrounded by odd looking creatures with large heads and spindly limbs. What I could ascertain from Rickenbacker’s ranting was that some kind of physical reconstruction of his body was under way. At that point I had to bring him round as his increasingly violent thrashing meant that there was a risk of him injuring himself and possibly breaking the restraining straps that he had agreed to prior to the treatment as a precautionary measure. I have given him a sedative. He should be as right as rain when he comes round.”

“Unbelievable” Greyshott reflected, turning over in his head the implications of what the doctor was saying. “What about the period between the war and now? Anything on that?”

“I’m afraid that owing to his increasing discomfort” continued Patel “and having to cut short the therapy early, I’m none the wiser on this point. The only possibility I can think of is that the battle injury he recently sustained has given him either short or long-term memory loss regarding the period concerned. Only time will tell which of the two it is.”

“Oh” the detective mumbled. His disappointment was palpable.

“Finally,” the doctor finished, “from the information on his past that I have been able to uncover, I also have to conclude that Joan is indeed his wife. Given time, I would have liked to have studied her too but perhaps, in her case, speaking to her modern day ‘relations’ could clarify the situation assuming it won’t undermine her safety.”

“What about the boy?” asked the detective, now completely on tenterhooks.

“Now here we really do have an interesting case. He advised me before we began that it may prove impossible for me to put him under and although I tried a number of times, he was proved correct. At his suggestion we undertook a type of ‘mind merge’ where I was able, possibly through some kind of advanced hypnosis technique, to explore his thoughts. It was an extremely efficient procedure, far beyond anything I have experienced previously. With our subconscious minds joined together as one, we were able to travel back in time to when he was just a foetus but it appeared that he wasn’t ‘carried’ by a mother in the conventional sense.”

“So how was gestation achieved?” asked Greyshott.

“At that stage I could only see it from the perspective of his under-developed brain but it appeared as if some type of ‘test tube’ procedure was under way.”

Greyshott thought back to the Earl and his revelation that Lord Pirbright had described the boy as ‘The Hybrid.’

Patel continued “we then experienced together flashbacks of his formative years. A father figure featured predominantly who administered to him regular and very traumatic beatings. Finally, we moved to what I can only describe as some point in the future but how this was possible I cannot say. Together we observed dreadful death and destruction throughout the world caused by an epidemic of horrendous proportions. The visions we shared were so real that for a while I almost believed I was there. I’ve never witnessed anything so awful. I realised at that point that the boy was on a vital mission and a worthy quest and that the survival of everything we hold dear on this planet Earth was dependant on its total success!”

The doctor paused for a moment, visibly moved and struggled to find his voice again. For a brief period, his emotions seemed to get the better of him. Then he regained his composure and continued.

“After the process of fusing our minds was over, I asked the boy if I could perform a few tests of my own for research purposes, to which he gave me his full agreement.”

“So, what did you discover?” encouraged the detective.

“We began with some standard psychometrics used in the training of military pilots and astronauts. The teenager scored 100% and finished them in a fraction of the time allocated. I then moved on to some of the hardest Intelligence Tests yet developed for the human brain.”

“What were the results?” Greyshott enquired excitedly.

“Again 100%. The boy Legacy handled them as easily as a twelve-year-old would handle his ABC.”

“What are your conclusions Doc?”

“He is a unique case. If I had a tendency to subscribe to the fantastic, which of course would be very unscientific, I would say without reservation that he is probably not of this world. However, based purely on the evidence, I can only state that he has the most highly developed human brain that I have ever had the privilege to examine, with extraordinary psychic abilities.”

The doctor paused again while he scanned the lower section of his notes.

“Moving on to his thought processes in general: They function very much like an advanced computer although there is nothing to suggest that he is anything other than flesh and blood. The boy appears to have been set a great task by outside forces during his cerebral development in the artificial womb. The process also installed in

him limited verbal parameters linked oddly to a substantial vocabulary. Although others may find it incredibly annoying, he doesn't deliberately evade questions. His mind follows a logical sequence of reasoning, releasing information purely on a need to know basis, possibly due to the comparatively primitive minds of his companions and also perhaps to reduce the chances to a bare minimum of his mission being jeopardised."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence in my mental abilities" said the detective tongue in cheek. "Is there anything else Ashish?"

"I have just one reservation – his innate psychic talents give him extraordinary powers of suggestion over others. You may have noticed yourself how he is subtly able to manipulate your thoughts and actions?"

"I certainly have" confirmed Greyshott, "to the point that I feel my destiny and his are inextricably linked."

"That's my only worry" said Patel. "It may be that his superior powers of manipulation alone are all that is encouraging me to support your quest, but I would like to think that my own professional diagnosis and personal intuition have influenced my conclusions to the greater extent."

"So, in the final analysis....." began Greyshott, hoping that he could at last get the doctor to cut to the chase.

Patel concluded "It is my firm belief that you must put your total trust in the boy and that all three of you should accompany him on this amazing journey of discovery as each one of you will have their own distinct part to play in the ultimate success of his mission and the saving of our planet. For what it's worth, I offer you my total and unreserved support!"

17.

A violent late summer thunder storm was in progress as the detective, journalist, soldier and teenager gathered together in the shelter of the cosy farm house lounge. Rickenbacker glanced outside. He could see that the guttering was in a poor state of repair and a torrent that reminded him of a visit he had once made to the Niagara Falls was gushing out from just above the main entrance door. Exploding in all directions onto the crumbling pathway, it was forming a substantial lake of water which through the force of gravity was converting quickly into a fast-moving stream flowing underneath the BMW and relentlessly onwards down the hill.

Greychott got up from his armchair and peered out of the window, observing the single ancient drain pipe buckling under the strain. "Not wishing to sound ungrateful for the accommodation" he began "but wouldn't you think that with all his money Will could have had this place at least partially renovated?"

No-one responded. They all seemed engrossed in far more important matters. Rickenbacker finished reading the doctor's report and flung it down onto the coffee table in disgust.

"Do you mind if I have a read?" asked Harding.

"You're welcome" he replied "but you won't find anything in it that really matters!"

She assumed that this was a thinly veiled reference again to their bygone relationship, but she picked it up nonetheless, took out her reading glasses and began to absorb the contents with intrigue. Rickenbacker removed a small electronic notepad from one of the pockets of his uniform and began to revise the lesson given to him by Legacy the previous day. It was becoming apparent that the weaponry he controlled was activated by his own brain waves and thus there was a certain technique he would need to master before attempting to use it again.

"It will soon be time to request the next verse" Legacy stated as he absorbed the mid-morning TV news for the day following their visit to Doctor Ashish Patel.

Before long, Harding too relinquished Rickenbacker's report and turned to her companions.

"Well there's just one last possible source of information" she said "before we'll just have to let it go for now."

"And who or what would that be?" Greychott enquired.

"My father."

"I would imagine by now he would be long gone" said the American. Then realising his brashness and lack of tact, followed up with "I'm sorry Joan. I didn't mean to be insensitive."

"No, you misunderstand me" she continued. "My father in the twenty first century – the one I actually remember!"

"I'm not sure that would be a wise move" Greychott interjected.

"Why ever not?" Harding questioned.

"I'm pretty certain Orlin Black and his cronies will have your home under permanent surveillance."

“And it could be difficult explaining the arrival of a BMW there with no driver apparently under remote control!” added Legacy lifting his hand to remind her of the Stealth Rings.

“Well then we’ll just have to park the car a couple of miles away and travel the remaining distance on foot. Besides” she added “if we’re about to undertake a journey that could take us literally anywhere in the world, then I’ll need to tell my dad that I’ll be gone for a while and not to worry.”

“We will be leaving the farmhouse early tomorrow morning” Legacy intervened “therefore any contact with your father must be made today.”

“There’s no time like the present” said Rickenbacker, demonstrating his desperate hope that the old gentleman might at last be able to provide the answers – that he could hold the key to their lost years and memories. He bolted for the door.

“Hey – wait up Jeff” Greyshott called after him but in an instant the soldier was gone. “Oh, what the hell!” the detective conceded and poured his freshly brewed cup of coffee down the sink.

“My turn to drive!” bullied the Restorer as both he and Greyshott made a beeline for the driver’s door.

“OK, OK” said the detective “I assume you have a driving licence!”

“Actually no” he replied. “I have something much better.” In his hand he held a diamond shaped box. “Just give me the postcode Joan and I’ll take you straight there.” She did as he requested. “Right!” he declared and fitted the device to the dashboard just above the BMW’s speedometer. “Great bit of kit this - I don’t know what it’s made of but it adheres to any hard surface you put it against. All you have to do is think the postcode while holding it and it will then drive the vehicle there automatically. It has some kind of built in radar and can anticipate the movements and position of all other vehicles, pedestrians and flying and static debris on the road. Therefore, it’s safer than a human driver. Apparently, according to the boy, it has extra-terrestrial origins and is known as a ‘Progressor.’”

“Neat” replied Greyshott. “Let’s see how it does!”

As they prepared themselves for the journey the device flashed five small lights which first lit up red in sequence and then after a period of beeping and a short burst of noise like a muted police siren changed to green. The car moved off smoothly and efficiently.

“Look!” Rickenbacker chuckled “No hands!”

Harding thought she would contribute to the atmosphere of joviality. “Pack it in” she replied. “Would you please concentrate on the road ahead!”

The BMW made steady progress south on the A24, passing Horsham, at all times keeping exactly to the speed limit. As they neared Washington, just north of Worthing, the vehicle turned onto a minor road which narrowed the further down it they travelled. All around were beautiful examples of English flora and fauna in the form of ancient trees and a diversity of wild flower species, interspersed with vast numbers of grey coloured rabbits with white paws and puffy tails.

“We’re about a mile and a half from the bungalow now” Harding informed the rest. “There’s a car park and Nature Trail up ahead. Can you get ‘the Progressor’ to pull in there?”

“Piece of cake” the soldier replied and by thinking the instructions in his head, the vehicle responded by positioning itself between the cars of two dog walkers who gave the BMW’s occupants curious looks.

“Now just to check that we’re all wearing our Stealth Rings” mentioned Legacy and everyone observed their hands, confirming each ring was in place.

Rickenbacker decided this might be a good time to don his futuristic padded suit, retrieving it from the car’s boot and stepping into the leg portion followed by the top half which he pulled around his arms and over his head.

“OK” began Harding “there’s a public footpath that acts as a short cut from here. Whereas the road continues in a semi-circle, the path follows a straight line direct to my home.”

“Well I’m looking forward to meeting your Father!” Rickenbacker exclaimed to Harding with a broad smile, while quietly considering how he would like to murder the imposter.

As they made steady progress and the distance to the bungalow reduced, Legacy felt the presence of organic life ahead in the undergrowth and ordered everyone to stop. As they crouched down in silence amidst some long grass growing in a trench-like ditch next to the path, a fully-grown male Fallow Deer poked its head out from behind a family of close knit ancient pine trees. Sensing no danger, the animal moved out into the open, its handsome majestic face beneath impressive antlers scanning the surroundings before moving off. Then out stepped a female. Then another and yet another until a whole group were scampering across the path towards the grassy meadow beyond.

“There’s quite a large herd in the district” Harding advised. “Most are quite tame. Sometimes they wander up to the bungalow. My dad hand feeds them!”

They could now see the Hardings’ premises nestled in the valley beyond and parked in blatant view a few hundred yards to the right was, according to the boy, a black U.A.D.O. Mercedes used for high priority surveillance. All four approached with caution.

“I recommend that we talk in whispers” Legacy announced. “Even though they cannot see or hear us, speaking at normal volume will create an unnecessary accumulation of vibrating air molecules which the rings will convert into an abnormal gust of wind. This could raise suspicion if they are familiar with the Stealth Ring technology.”

Inside the Mercedes were two skinny Men in Black. As with Orlin, everything about them was dark apart from the fact that one of them had very blonde hair. Both had removed their shades, placing them in a haphazard fashion onto the dashboard. They were sound asleep.

“I understand that surveillance can get a bit boring but that doesn’t look very professional” whispered Greychott.

The four companions left the operatives to their slumber and headed for the bungalow’s front door. As they approached, the teenager stopped in his tracks. “Something’s not quite right” he cautioned. “I sense there could be a trap.”

“OK this is my speciality” announced The Restorer. “Paul. I’ll enter first. You stay close behind me. Joan: you and the boy remain here and wait ‘til we give the ‘All Clear.’” Rickenbacker turned a small dial on a strap positioned around his left wrist. “I’ve set my energy field to ‘disable’ which will immobilise any assailant we may come up against without causing injury.”

Harding felt uneasy. “What is it Legacy?” she enquired. “Is my Father in danger?”

“The Restorer will undertake whatever actions are necessary. We will wait for the signal.”

The reply far from put her mind at ease but she resigned herself to complying with his instructions for the time being.

The miniature garden gate creaked and spun on its hinges as Rickenbacker in his hefty gear pushed through the narrow gap and made headway down the garden path. The front door was slightly ajar so he pushed it fully open and stepped inside. Greyshott followed closer than a clinging leach hoping that the Restorer’s large form, decked out fully in the futuristic suit of weaponry, would provide protection from any possible attack, particularly involving firearms. The narrow hallway was short in length, almost immediately turning into an equally small kitchen. All around could be seen evidence of the sad onset of senility and immobility associated with old age. Dirty crockery and cutlery piled high on the draining board stood next to a plate of semi-prepared toast and marmalade. As the two men continued their scan, two neatly folded piles of clean clothes, presumably prepared by Joan Harding before she left, stood out in marked contrast to the general confusion and untidiness which presumably had accrued more recently.

Rickenbacker crept forward to the partially closed inner door connecting the kitchen with the living room and peeped around the corner. Using a tiny portable hand-held observation camera which he pointed in various directions, the Restorer confirmed that there was nobody or thing untoward waiting in the shadows and then entered.

A fairly obsolete desk top computer and substantial armchair faced the one arched design lounge window. In the chair they could see two skinny arms dangling over the sides and both approached with further caution. The computer was still on although the chair’s occupant was definitely off. His limp and lifeless body had been pushed back into a seemingly more restful position by his attacker than the original forward slump, perhaps to suggest a more natural death.

Rickenbacker took his pulse but could feel none. “Well that’s another massive let down!” he said in a very cold, matter-of-fact and obviously disappointed way.

“I think we should be more concerned about how this will affect Joan” Greyshott replied, slightly annoyed by the spy’s apparent callousness. “He may not be her real father but in her mind, he could be the only family she had.”

“Yeah you’re right” the soldier replied half-heartedly. “I think it might be best if you break it to her.”

“Of course,” replied the detective. “I’ll try and tidy him up a bit first.” Greyshott studied the old man’s weathered face. His jaw had completely dropped leaving his gaping mouth wide open and his eyes seemed to be reflecting back a terrified expression. The detective recalled Orlin Black’s blatant threat but to him there was something about the scene being played out before his eyes that didn’t make sense. He just couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He gently closed the old man’s eyelids with his thumb and forefinger and then attempted to shut the mouth, but with the body having been dead for some twenty-four hours, it was set firmly in position.

“Here let me do that!” offered Rickenbacker. He clasped the dead man’s chin and with a smart turning motion, accompanied by the sound of shattering bone, succeeded in closing the deathly chasm. “Don’t tell Joan” he added.

“Sure” said Greyshott, cringing from what he had just witnessed.

“Well on the surface it would appear to be natural causes, but while I’m outside announcing the sad news have you got anything in that futuristic bag of tricks that would give us a definite diagnosis of cause of death?” He pointed at the Restorer’s padded suit.

“It can do most things” Rickenbacker answered with pride. “I’ll have a look!” As he consulted the ‘User Guide’ via a SEARCH facility, tapping with vigour on the tiny retractable keyboard which nestled in a recess of the suit’s left elbow, Greyshott returned to the others, dreading making the unavoidable announcement and hoping that he had the required people skills to handle Harding’s inevitable distress. Normally things like this were dealt with by the standard Bobbies and Grief Councillors in his profession and he had little personal experience in breaking bad news.

Back inside, Rickenbacker had located in his uniform a device about four inches long shaped like a bicycle spanner but with deep grooves at each end. It had a single ON/OFF switch and a display window stretching the length of one side. He switched it on and as he held it over the old man’s body it began to beep. Within a few seconds the electronic display announced the ‘Cause of Death.’ “Mmm interesting” the spy mused.

At that moment he heard a gasp of disbelief followed by a low sobbing sound from outside and he knew that the news had been broken. Minutes later, Greyshott, with a consoling arm around Harding’s waste, entered the lounge with the grief-stricken woman, Legacy following a few feet behind. Releasing herself suddenly from the detective’s grip, she ran towards the old gentleman’s corpse, gathering it up in her arms, holding it to her breast and gently rocking from side to side.

“What have those bastards done to you!” she screamed. “I’ll get them back for this. I swear I will!”

Immediately Greyshott was there by her side, endeavouring to calm her down as tactfully as possible. “It may not be as you suspect” he began “after all he was getting on in years. Perhaps it’s just that his time had come?”

Rickenbacker interposed. “I don’t think so” he said. “It may well be as Joan fears.” He summoned the detective over and presented the Medical Diagnosis Stick’s digital display, shielding it from Harding’s view.

“What is it?” she cried. “What have you found out?”

The eyes of the soldier and detective met looking for each other’s mutual support and guidance as to whether or not they should tell her. Then Greyshott took the initiative with a subtle nod of the head, indicating that it had to be done. Rickenbacker presented the result to the dead man’s surrogate daughter.

‘CAUSE OF DEATH: CYANIDE POISONING ADMINISTERED BY LETHAL INJECTION.’

18.

Outside the two U.A.D.O. operatives had finally woken. The blonde-haired man grabbed a pot noodle and a flask of hot water and began to prepare his evening snack. The time was racing headlong towards nightfall. "Well I suppose we'll have to report to base shortly" he said turning to his colleague. "No change."

"Maybe not" replied the other man, raising a pair of short-range field glasses with laminated lenses to his eyes. He had noticed that the front door of the building was now wide open as was the garden gate. He was certain that they had both been much nearer to the closed position before the two of them had fallen asleep. Also, the lounge light appeared to be on which was unusual in itself as every night prior to this, the old man had carried on his evening tasks with nothing but the aid of a single candle. After pointing out these facts to his associate, both Men in Black decided to leave their vehicle and investigate.

Inside the bungalow Joan Harding was gradually coming to terms with the shock of Alf Harding's death. "Can we make an anonymous phone call to the police so that his body can at least be dealt with respectfully?" she pleaded with her male companions. "We can't just leave him here like that!"

"I don't think you'll need to" Rickenbacker announced, his voice containing an element of drama. He had walked over to the desk top computer, pressed a random key and the 'prancing dolphins' screen saver had vanished to reveal a page headed 'JOAN HARDING A.K.A. RICKENBACKER OPERATIVE ALPHA ONE SIERRA.' "Looks like your 'father' worked for MI6 and had links with the U.A.D.O.!"

"What?" Harding exclaimed. "You can't be serious!"

"I certainly am. It's all here!" He began to enlighten them all with a long narrative regarding her history.

"JOAN MARY LASLOW BORN NINETEENTHTH SEPTEMBER, NINETEEN TWELVE BROOKLYN NEW YORK. GENETIC ADAPTATION PERFORMED BY GREY TEAM ZULU IN LIMA PERU 2ND OCTOBER, NINETEEN FORTY FOLLOWING HUSBAND JEFF RICKENBACKER'S IDENTICAL PROCEDURE THREE DAYS EARLIER. BOTH AGENTS' LIFESPANS TRIPLED WHILE AGEING PROCESS REDUCED BY A FACTOR OF THREE. HARDING ALLOCATED CALLSIGN ALPHA ONE SIERRA (FOR SPOUSE). BODY CYROGENICALLY FROZEN AND PLACED IN LONG TERM STORAGE 3RD OCTOBER, NINETEEN FORTY. AGENT ALPHA ONE J. RICKENBACKER ADVISED THAT SHE PASSED AWAY SAME DATE FOR EXPEDIENCY UNTIL SCHEDULED RE-ACTIVATION. JOAN M. RICKENBACKER ALPHA ONE SIERRA RELEASED FROM LONG TERM CYROGENIC HIBERNATION JANUARY 1ST TWENTY FIFTEEN. IMPLANTED WITH CEREBRAL MULTI CELLULOR FALSE MEMORY CHIP UNTIL ADDITIONAL STRATEGIC WEAPONRY REQUIRED. PLACED WITH RETIRED MI6 AGENT ALF LOCKWOOD WHO ADOPTED THE HARDING SURNAME. FULL REACTIVATION TO SUB-RESTORER STATUS SCHEDULED FOR LATE 2015....."

Rickenbacker felt the endorphins charging around his body as he realised that these exciting new revelations could mean that perhaps all was not lost between him and his wife after all. But something forced him to stop in his tracks just as the information was becoming interesting.

In the doorway stood the two Men in Black. The others had already noticed them but Rickenbacker, who was now in his element, had continued rambling on for an additional thirty seconds while the M.I.Bs stood there trying to determine the origins of the strong undulating breeze apparently emanating from behind the heavy curtains that hung over the window by the computer. The blonde M.I.B. marched over towards the soldier who stepped to one side just in time. While the rings could make them invisible to designated life forms, they could not prevent the sensation of physical contact. The operative slammed the window shut that had been cracked open only slightly and turned to look at the computer screen. At the same time his colleague was checking the old man for a pulse and staring mystified at the puncture marks in the crease of his arm.

“Just stay perfectly still and quiet ‘til they leave” whispered Legacy to the others “unless they head straight towards you in which case step to one side as slowly and smoothly as possible.” All three of his companions nodded their understanding.

“Get on to Headquarters!” ordered the blonde man. “The old boy’s dead. Looks like someone’s been at him with a needle!”

‘I’m surprised I didn’t notice that myself’ thought Greyshott disappointedly, reflecting on his high reputation in police circles for impeccable thoroughness at suspected murder scenes.

“I’ll also tell them that a confidential file has been left blatantly displayed on agent Lockwood’s computer screen and may have been infiltrated by undesirables.” The M.I.B. grabbed a device from his pocket which was roughly the size of the latest mobile phone, depressed a single digit and waited.

At a secret location, Orlin Black answered and quickly absorbed the information, replying in his usual short and highly efficient manner, using his semi-monosyllabic vocabulary only sparingly. “Mmm” he said “uh huh.....yes.....yep....OK,.....destroy it!”

The U.A.D.O. Surveillance Operative hung up. “The boss says wipe it out.”

“What? Delete the file or corrupt the hard drive?” questioned the blonde man.

“No” his partner replied “destroy the whole bloody computer!” He took out a black comb and with vain gestures, smoothed back his dark bryl-creamed hair.

“Wait here a second” invited his blonde colleague and headed back out to the Mercedes. He returned armed to the hilt with a Browning M2 heavy machine gun and ammunition and proceeded to set up the weapon on its tripod. “I know this represents a high degree of overkill” he began “but the smaller weapons have been allocated to Project Meteor.”

While Rickenbacker looked on in horror and the rest of the travellers blocked their ears, the U.A.D.O. operative liberally peppered the hapless desktop with round after round of automatic fire until all that remained was a smoking, sparking mess of wrecked plastic, wiring and Perspex.

“I think that should do it. We’ll send in Operations to pick up the body later” said the darker M.I.B. “Issuing some funeral invitations will give them something to do for a change” he added with callous intent.

With that they both made a hasty exit.

The soldier just couldn’t believe their bad luck. Everything they needed to know about his and Joan’s past and probably even the mission ahead was likely to have been stored on the computer’s hard drive. Now it was just a burned-out blackened heap of junk blown into hundreds of irreparable jagged pieces and the information it had contained was now probably lost to them forever. The Restorer banged his fist down hard on the portable metal computer table in a fit of anger and frustration. It split cleanly in two. He lifted up his hand and studied it closely. “Obviously don’t know my own strength” he casually remarked.

“Well I suppose that about wraps it up here” said Greyshott as if nothing too major had occurred.

Ensuring first that the black U.A.D.O. Mercedes had left the area they started the long two-mile trek back to their BMW Sports. Legacy led the way with a small portable hand torch and Rickenbacker marched with

purposeful steps just behind. Harding and Greyshott held back and quietly reflected on the evening's unexpected developments.

"I know you've been through a lot tonight Joan" began Greyshott "but I think Jeff's also taking it all quite badly. Go and talk to him."

"I must admit that *I'm* now totally confused" she replied "but the computer file has at least confirmed we do definitely have a few things in common!"

She strolled up to Rickenbacker and slipped her arm under his. He turned to her and smiled. "Well it looks like we *are* both over one hundred years old after all and genetically modified to boot!" she exclaimed. "Strange thing is I feel perfectly normal and I'm not sure where my so-called weaponry is stored! The thing is I still feel totally human. As far as I know my blood is still red although I must admit I'm very tempted to prick my finger just to make absolutely sure!" (She was assuming that any type of alien infiltration of her body would have given her the stereotypical and to some extent fictional green blood).

The soldier relaxed and began to laugh heartily. He now knew that Harding had finally accepted who she really was and that the information revealed by the retired MI6 agent's computer had sealed their mutual fate. That at least was a start, even if they were still 'just friends' for now. The spy felt that a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders and the stress accrued over the intervening days since his recovery from the coma was finally being relinquished.

As they continued on through the darkness, Rickenbacker remarked how things were not really going to plan for the U.A.D.O.

"What do you mean Jeff?" Harding probed with interest.

"Well for a start: Agent Lockwood's death appears to have been a complete shock to them and totally unexpected. Secondly, we are both presumably expensive assets in their defensive armoury against inter-stella alien aggression and I guess that our whereabouts is currently unknown to them. You appear to have been prematurely reactivated without their knowledge with most of your background and a broad outline of your purpose now made known to you whereas I, in contrast, already active in my role up until recently in extra-terrestrial defence have lost my prime directive and have only sketchy memories at best."

"How do you mean lost your prime directive?" she asked, requiring clarification.

Just as he was about to continue, Greyshott caught up, seeing that the atmosphere which previously could have been cut with a knife had now become far more relaxed. Rickenbacker turned to them both. "Back in Nineteen Forty" he related "I was operating behind the German lines on a vital mission to prevent the enemy using a new secret weapon to destroy the whole of the United Kingdom."

"Yes, Doctor Patel mentioned that in your post-treatment de-briefing" Greyshott interrupted.

"Well while on this mission, I met what I believed at the time to be some kind of humanoid alien masquerading as a member of our crew, with substantial powers of suggestion – in fact he almost managed to completely hypnotise me. Luckily, with the help of my pilot, we were able to overpower him just long enough to disable the device and prevent the bomb's detonation."

As Rickenbacker related the story, the detective and the journalist couldn't help but start to draw similarities between the soldier's description of the alien's abilities and the powers with which Legacy also seemed to be endowed.

"Back in those days we always operated within clearly defined 'Mission Parameters,' normally carrying a coded piece of paper against which our actions were constantly measured. I assumed that there must be some sort of modern day equivalent so I searched my equipment for such a file and this morning I finally found it."

"What did it say?" Greystott asked in excited anticipation.

"That's just it" replied the spy. "Nothing. The file had been wiped completely clean – almost as if somebody had deliberately deleted the information to prevent me from seeing it."

All three looked towards Legacy who had been listening to every word and instinctively knew that he was now under suspicion. He turned and smiled endearingly at them and almost instantly they were back completely on his side. "All will be revealed on the final day of reckoning" he said.

19.

The return to Merry Way Farm provided a brief but welcome respite from a period of highly strenuous mental and physical activity for the four companions.

Greychott was considering the means by which he could advise the Chief of Sussex Police of his non-availability to take on new cases for the foreseeable future without his superiors informing the U.A.D.O. of his whereabouts, which he automatically assumed they would. It was now almost a week since he had last reported in. He decided to seek the seemingly all-knowing teenager's advice on the matter.

"I believe there is an extremely high probability that you have now been reduced to 'renegade' status" Legacy reasoned, "in order to ensure that when you finally surface the U.A.D.O. will immediately be advised of your location."

"So, if I'm now classified as an outlaw, I suppose they won't be expecting to hear from me anyway" the detective concluded "therefore my absence isn't really an issue now."

"Exactly" the boy confirmed.

"Well I suppose I can always go freelance if the need arises" he decided "if our lives ever return to normal!"

It was the morning following the discovery of Lockwood's body and everyone was packed and ready, fully prepared for departure on day one of Legacy's quest to presumably save the earth from a dreadful apocalypse, the true nature of which was yet to be determined.

"It is time" said the boy.

They gathered round while he punched "READY" into the mobile phone and sent it to the number provided by William for obtaining Lord Pirbright's poetic instructions. Within thirty seconds appeared the message 'TEXT UNSENT. RECIPIENT UNKNOWN.' After four more attempts, the boy gave up the phone to Greychott who attempted to make a call instead. Before long came back the reply that they had all half expected. 'THE NUMBER YOU HAVE DIALLED IS UNRECOGNISED, PLEASE CHECK IT AND TRY AGAIN.'

"What now?" asked Harding.

"Joe. Joe Gables" replied Rickenbacker. "He and the Earl are good friends. Joe will know how we can contact him!"

"I believe it is our only option" said the teenager.

So, the decision was made and Rickenbacker, using a slightly different function on 'The Progressor' input the ordnance survey map co-ordinates of Gables' static caravan and fixed it once again to the BMW's dashboard. After loading their luggage which they had managed to condense into just two cases for ease of transportation, they piled into the car, ready for the next instalment of unexpected surprises, which in fact, they were now actually getting used to expecting almost as a matter of course.

As the four began to drive down the hill, still feeling slightly perturbed by the lack of human input involved, 'The Progressor' was initially stalled by an extremely slow herd of British White cattle crossing the farm's approach road from right to left. A 'Worzel Gummidge' type character in torn jeans and a ripped string vest was half-

heartedly tapping their hind quarters which seemed like a wholly ineffective form of encouragement. After ten minutes of waiting in frustration, Rickenbacker felt sorely tempted to use his weaponry to blast a hole clean through the middle of the herd to allow them to pass but managed to refrain.

As they retraced their original journey to the farmhouse in reverse, now heading in a southerly direction, Greyshott reflected on how lucky he had been to have spent practically his whole life living in the South of England with its lush green grass and beautiful shades of Autumnal reds and browns, today made even more pronounced than usual by the gorgeously bright sun and the crisp fresh late September air.

His wandering thoughts were suddenly rudely interrupted by 'The Progressor's vocal function. The voice of a seductive woman echoed throughout the vehicle: "WARNING! WARNING! ROAD BLOCK AHEAD ONE POINT FIVE MILES. VEHICLE PARKING TO AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS." This section of the road had curved in an arc of one hundred and eighty degrees in order to negotiate high ground and they were now facing north again. The BMW pulled over onto a rough gravel verge and the engine automatically cut out. They were just below the brow of a hill which opened up into a broad valley beyond.

The soldier decided it was time to perform some reconnaissance of his own. "OK guys" he said. "Wait here and I'll find out exactly what's going on." He pulled on his padded suit over the top of his khakis and headed off towards the point where the road ahead plunged steeply downwards, pressing numerous buttons and switches on his gear as he went. Then from an area in the crease at the back of his left leg emerged a pair of compact binoculars with solid lenses but made from a type of spongy material. His companions looked on as their view of the Restorer's bulky frame reduced in size as he headed further away into the distance, the soldier raising his hand in a stiff and static gesture to acknowledge his comrades, who now patiently waited behind for his return.

Although the North Downs were actually some distance away, Rickenbacker assumed that this must be one of the higher points on the Sussex/Surrey border above sea level. He raised the binoculars to his eyes. The aforementioned hills were spread out in an impressive panorama, forming a distinct horizon and the relentless traffic on the M25 motorway running beneath them gave the impression of many manic worker ants busily going about their daily tasks. To the right was a shiny blue lake glistening in the sun's reflection with Sunday tourists gathered sunbathing on one of its shores and small recreational sailing craft lazily dodging various species of wetland birds with delightful plumage that constantly took off and landed among them in a monotonous but colourful circular motion. Over to the left, the tall ancient spire of a Sixteenth century church stood out amongst numerous fields of grazing sheep. In their midst a single roe deer chomped upon the dewy grass, suddenly raising its head and pricking up its ears, looking directly at the spy as if sensing his presence, although some considerable distance away.

Rickenbacker diverted his attention back to his original purpose and traced the road from the point where he currently lay flat out, camouflaged by a clump of tall nettles, to where it led away into the distance. All seemed peaceful and normal until he spotted the bend where the route diverted back onto a southerly heading. This was where they had dropped Gables a few days earlier. Tracing the road back towards him, he could see what looked like a hastily erected check point with sentry box and barrier and a number of troops reeling out barbed wire defences from this location outwards in a broad circle around the field containing Gables' caravan, presumably to deter intruders and eavesdroppers. In the field there was no sign of the shire horses but instead he could make out around fifteen armoured cars, guns trained on Gables' home. A few yards behind them were the black rectangular vehicles that the spy recognised from the way Greyshott had described them during his recollection of the Flying Disc incident. Numerous human forms were busy among them but owing to the heat haze the figures could not be seen with clarity.

Strangest of all, however, was the static caravan itself. Its beautifully crafted exterior paintwork had disappeared and it was now a drab silver-grey colour. As he zoomed in the binoculars to their maximum power, he could just make out an eerie green glow behind the frosted windows, pulsating from within. Finally, making a last visual

sweep of the landscape west to east from his vantage point, Rickenbacker could make out the distant slab of concrete in the otherwise green surroundings that was Gatwick International Airport. Long lines of aircraft were clogging the taxiways and there were no landings or take-offs occurring. 'Must be something big to warrant a no-fly zone' he thought to himself and decided it was time to report back to the others.

As Greyshott spied the soldier's large frame re-emerging on the horizon, he impatiently stepped forward to meet him half way.

"What is it Jeff?" he urgently pressed. "What did you see?" The spy managed to palm him off with small talk until they were back level with the others.

"Right" he began, "your notorious Universal Alien Defence Organisation, to which I apparently have historical links, have built up a significant presence around Gables' home. It also looks like Gatwick has been closed for the time being so I would imagine something fairly major is about to occur."

"That sounds like an awful lot of trouble to go to over just one man" commented Greyshott.

"Exactly" contributed the boy. "A lot of trouble for a man."

"Are you suggesting that Joe is not actually a man?" questioned Harding, "I.E. not human?"

"What I suggest is that we all make our way down there" Legacy replied "and see exactly what transpires. Everyone present will have some association with the U.A.D.O., no matter how small. Therefore, we can watch from a fairly close proximity but still be far enough away from potential danger without any fear of being discovered. Jeff. I suggest you maintain your current apparel in case of emergencies."

"Very well" replied Rickenbacker, "but that's easy enough for you to say bearing in mind that you don't have to lug its heavy weight around the place on a boiling hot day!"

"Stop whinging Jeff" scolded Greyshott, sporting a cheeky grin.

Harding grabbed some bottles of Austrian Mountain Water from the BMW's custom-made cool box and Rickenbacker set 'The Progressor' to 'Intruder Stun' function so that if anyone other than the four of them tried to open any of the car's doors, it would emit a powerful but not fatal electric shock. This would deter potential car thieves more effectively than the standard fitted alarm although it was of dubious legality.

They began a long and gradual descent down the hill on foot and were soon passing 'Road Closed Ahead' and 'Diversion' signs which the vast majority of law-abiding motorists were following without question. A traffic policeman was parked nearby and as they approached, he didn't appear to see them so they continued on their way.

Sticking close together, Legacy led from the front and before long they could see the heavily manned check point up ahead. A plump woman in her mid-thirties of Afro-Caribbean extraction was in the throes of a heated exchange with one of the military personnel and realising that a member of the public could easily spot them, they crossed the road intending to pass behind out of sight rather than in front and in her full view. As they negotiated themselves around the closed barrier and five soldiers who were oblivious to their presence, the woman, who stood hand in hand with a six year old boy was becoming increasingly distraught.

"Why can't I go through?" she was screaming. "My sister has gone into labour and she's on her own. My house is only a few hundred yards further on!"

“I’m sorry madam” the guard repeated for the umpteenth time. “No member of the public is allowed past this point until further notice. If it is an emergency, we can have an ambulance with military escort sent to your home but I repeat you are not allowed any further. There is nothing else I can do!”

Just at the wrong time, the little boy turned and saw Legacy and his entourage passing the other military personnel who seemed oddly uninterested. “Mummy, mummy” he exclaimed “look! Those people are allowed!”

“Yeah” added his mother, “how come you’re letting that lot through? They’re no different to me!” She was clearly taken aback.

Ever alert to the conversation being undertaken close by, the five soldiers assumed a defensive posture, kneeling quickly in a circle, so that each was covering the man behind from possible attack, their rifles cocked and ready to fire. The guard at the temporary sentry box looked over in the direction that the Afro-Caribbean lady was pointing. He could see nothing out of the ordinary and certainly no other people. A group of large willows creaked in a lazy sway, rocked by the gentle breeze as a small vole scurried past and a flock of swallows made a low fly-past rising up in a display of instantly changing and beautifully choreographed patterns as they gathered in preparation for their migration south.

“Which people are you referring to?” he asked the woman. “I see no-one.”

“Those four there!” she shouted at him. “Why are you blind as well as stupid?”

Refusing to take the bait and maintaining the cool that his profession demanded, while recognising the fact that this could be a diversionary tactic, he called over to the other soldiers. “Hey guys. Do you see anyone?”

They all nodded their heads from side to side indicating a resounding no.

“I don’t believe it!” the woman roared as she and the little boy turned to leave, calling back over her shoulder as she went “My MP will be hearing about this!”

Finally admitting defeat, the woman and the boy wandered back down the road in the direction that they had originally come and the guard at the sentry box sauntered over to his colleagues, chuckling merrily. They formed a tight circle, speaking in whispers, each contributing their thoughts regarding the incident and quenching their thirst with flasks of an unidentified hot beverage.

The four companions had successfully negotiated the first hurdle and half a mile or so later, Gables’ field came into view. To Greyshott there was definitely an air of déjà vu surrounding the proceedings. Men dressed in boiler suits with huge collars were again very much in evidence and four black rectangular vehicles identical to those which he and Harding had witnessed previously at the crater when Rickenbacker sustained his memory-sapping injuries, took prime position – one clearly the Control Centre, the others purpose unknown.

Harding laid out a large sheet on the ground by a hedge some distance from the Control Vehicle. She was almost treating the occasion as you would a family picnic but without the food. From here they were close enough to see and hear most of what was to transpire but far enough away from the main commotion that the chances of them being stepped on by U.A.D.O. staff was minimal.

The two people ‘running the show’ soon emerged in their standard issue bright pink attire. ‘Either they were very quick replacements’ Greyshott considered, thinking back to the gaunt man and buxom blonde who were now little more than remnants of unidentifiable humanity in piles of ash near Horsham, ‘or there is a larger team of these people than I had previously imagined.’

One of the brightly clad individuals wore a 'space age' helmet as if he had been seeking protection from something. On the front of his uniform was a badge made of a thick hard-wearing textile stating clearly that he was operative Echo Five. As they watched in awe, the man began struggling with the locking mechanism on his helmet, demonstrating hopeless inexperience as he pulled and tugged at it with such force that it looked as though he would inevitably inadvertently rip his own head off. All the while, both Greyshott and Harding found the suspense unbearable as they waited to find out the identity of Echo Five.

"Here, take it easy" said the man's colleague as he reached out and with minimal effort released a clip at the base of the helmet and lifted it cleanly off.

"Oh thanks!" said Echo Five with relief. It was Group Captain Dennis Shaw.

20.

Shaw looked very different and seemed to have developed a slightly nervous disposition as the episode with the helmet had demonstrated. Gone were his cock sure mannerisms as was the thick wavy hair which had been shaven off, leaving him as bald as a coot.

His colleague, a young man in his early thirties with the facial features and demeanour of a Mexican bandit, exemplified by thick eye brows and a long droopy moustache, was apparently guiding Shaw through the intricacies of a new career which it was apparent was still very much in its infancy.

Having placed the helmet securely in a heavy-duty case which reminded Greyshott of a cool box he had once owned in the Nineteen Eighties, the former Royal Air Force officer opened a fresh packet of Cuban cigars and extracted one between his teeth. Just as he proceeded to light it, the assistant, who had briefly disappeared into a temporary porter cabin, returned with a white-coated female who, judging by the way in which she peered down the spectacles balanced on her severely Roman nose, believed herself to be far superior to the rank and file around her, regardless of whether or not it was actually the case.

“Agent Echo Five” announced Shaw’s more knowledgeable and experienced subordinate, “may I introduce Julie Phelps, our resident ATRIO.”

“ATRIO?” questioned his superior. “Sorry, I’m afraid that I’m not familiar with the term.”

“Alien Technology and Research Intelligence Officer” replied the woman, holding out a disrespectfully limp hand.

“Well I’m pleased to see we have a professional on the team!” Shaw replied, shaking it graciously, obviously referring to his own pitiful shortcomings.

“I’m very honoured that you accord me such a high level of respect, having only just met me” replied Phelps with a blatant air of sarcasm, “so I’m sure you won’t mind if I respectfully ask you to extinguish the cigar.”

Echo Five raised his eyebrows, took the large rolled tobacco leaf from his mouth and momentarily observed the end. Then he dropped it to the ground and crushed it under foot.

“You see there is an unidentified liquid leaking from beneath the alien craft” the ATRIO continued “and initial tests indicate that it may be highly flammable!”

“Oh, I see. Please excuse my clumsiness” said Shaw.

Meanwhile the teenager, soldier, detective and journalist were sat close by in the cosy security of the Stealth Ring invisibility blanket, listening intently as the conversation developed.

“What alien craft are they referring to?” Greyshott whispered to the others. “I see none.”

Rickenbacker smiled with triumphant glee, congratulating himself that he had been the first to notice. “Look closely at Joe’s caravan” he said.

They all transferred their interest to the object in question. One end of the static vehicle was still as Rickenbacker had observed it earlier from the distant hill – a modern mobile home that had somehow lost its luxurious appeal and decayed into a drab silver-grey object of inferior quality. It was the other end, however, that drew most of

their attention. The central area had become a strange undulating blur out of which was morphing a flying disc identical to Rheineck's craft seen back at the crater a week earlier. So far about fifty per cent of the space vehicle had emerged from out of the caravan's ongoing mutation.

Over by the black Control Vehicle the conversation was continuing.

"We have run a preliminary scan" said Phelps, "and our equipment has identified a heat source within, which we believe to be the alien."

"So, he's still in there" mused Shaw. "How do you plan to extract him?"

"We will need to be very careful" contributed the assistant. "The use of heavy weapons would be likely to wipe out everything within a ten-mile radius if our tests on the inflammable material are correct."

"What do you suggest?" he asked them both, again seeking expert guidance.

"After much deliberation we've concluded that a Stun Laser with a beam of minimal thickness fired from above could be specifically targeted at the alien to draw it out without fear of combusting the surrounding materials" said the ATRIO.

The former RAF officer's subordinate added "Whatever we decide it is imperative that we flush him out soon as the alien's presence inside is fundamental to the craft's reformation process which must be stopped before completion."

And if we were to fail?" questioned Shaw in an unhelpfully pessimistic tone.

"Then we would be unable to prevent a repeat of the Horsham crater incident" Phelps dismally informed him, "which would be particularly unhelpful to the U.A.D.O. as none of us would be alive afterwards to file a report!"

Shaw reflected on how that would be the least of his concerns. From his point of view, his own instinct for personal survival was the most important consideration. "We had better get on with it then!" he exclaimed.

His minion gave a formal salute and called over two men in the large collared boiler suits. "You two" he commanded "get the Stun Laser set up above the craft. We need to be ready in five minutes!"

"Yes sir!" they replied in unison and raced over to the vehicle parked nearest to the caravan. They flipped open a hefty metal flap inside which could be seen what looked like an extremely complicated control panel. The compulsory secret code was input, which Greystott concluded must be a standard feature of alien-derived technology and a pair of clamshell doors heaved themselves open electronically at the vehicle's rear, revealing a cavernous storage area. From inside, the two U.A.D.O. operatives rolled out a menacing-looking contraption consisting of a thick missile-shaped laser pointing downwards at an angle suspended on a rectangular frame which in turn was supported by a four-wheeled push along trolley. The fact that the supporting wheels were unpowered seemed rather odd to the onlookers for such a futuristic and advanced piece of kit. The laser was in position in a matter of minutes. Shaw, his assistant and Phelps meanwhile had made their way to the Central Control Vehicle with its vast array of computers and operations staff.

There was much bustle and hubbub as the computer operatives swung around on their rotating stools comparing various pieces of analytical data on the ongoing metamorphosis occurring to Gables' craft. As Shaw and his colleagues approached, the busy atmosphere became markedly subdued as a single operative at the

Laser Control Post grabbed them each by the hand, shaking with respectful determination and giving them a brief resume as to what they were to expect in the forthcoming operation.

Very soon everything was in place and as agent Echo Five prepared to give the command, the whole field became as silent as a haunted house, except for the monotonous echo of constant dripping from the strange inflammable liquid, the source of which was the mutating metal structure from outer space.

In an instant Shaw was once more his former confident self as he shouted "Fire Laser!" at the top of his voice, assisted by a vocal amplification device significantly more powerful than a standard megaphone.

For four long seconds a thin concentrated beam of light penetrated the caravan's roof, creating a black-rimmed hole in the metal and a thin curling smoke ring comparable to that produced by an ant crackling under the rays of sun concentrated through a mischievous little boy's magnifying glass.

"No movement" reported the operative monitoring Gables' heat signature.

"Try again" commanded Shaw.

"Another four second dose may well kill him" indicated Phelps, "and then we definitely won't get him out as the anti-organic force field protecting the craft is impenetrable using our existing technology."

"OK try a two second burst" replied the former Group Captain "after I first give him a message. Gables!" he roared, "may I have your attention. This is agent Echo Five speaking on behalf of the U.A.D.O. We demand your immediate surrender. You are to exit the craft within the next sixty seconds. If you fail to do so we are left with no option than to adjust the next dose of radiation to cause you fatal injury. The time starts now! OK" he said turning to the Laser Controller, "after a minute give him two."

As most of those present expected, Gables still refused to surface so a two second radioactive burst was initiated. As it petered out everyone craned their necks forward to see what would transpire.

The caravan's door latch began to move. Then a blackened shaking hand gingerly turned the handle and pushed the door fully open. Gables fell to his knees and tumbled onto the ground outside. His hair was badly singed and his face and most of his clothes were covered in a sooty film. He had many nasty abrasions and burn marks along his arms and around his neck and his eyes were wide and insane as if the shock had sent him crazy.

Shaw wandered over and stood before the pathetic humanoid figure. He took out the print of an old black and white photograph from the Nineteen Forties, compared the subject matter with the cowering heap in front of him and satisfied that they were one of the same, retrieved a rolled-up scroll from his pocket. This he unravelled and then began a long drawn out spiel, prepared earlier by the U.A.D.O.'s legal Department.

"Doctor Paul Joseph Goebbels. I hereby arrest you on behalf of the Universal Agency for Legal and Balanced Retribution and charge you with the heinous activity of general association with the instigators of crimes against humanity and mass murder perpetrated by the leaders of the German Reich between Nineteen Thirty- Six and Forty-Five. In addition, you are accused of turning the German nation as a whole against the rest of civilised Europe during the same period through the use of mass brainwashing techniques coupled with vicious propaganda and lies. Finally, you are also charged with a further twenty-seven cunningly planned and executed murders of U.A.D.O. officials between Nineteen Forty-Six and Twenty Fifteen, the most recent being that of retired MI6 agent Alfred Lockwood."

21.

Gables crawled along the ground to Shaw's feet and heaved his battered body into an upright position. In a somewhat delirious manner, he began to moan and mumble. Initially, his speech was incoherent. Then his words became a strange pleading diatribe: "No. You've got it all wrong. My name's Joe Gables, amateur ufologist from West Sussex, England. I had nothing to do with Lockwood's murder!"

"So how do you explain what's happening to your caravan?" Shaw retorted.

Gables turned his head and was suddenly confronted by the vision of Joan Harding. He seemed to fail to notice her male companions. "Tell them Joan" he said "I wouldn't do anything to harm your father, would I? It's all a big stitch up. I've been framed!"

While Harding felt a sudden urge of sympathy, both Greyshott and Rickenbacker cringed, realising that their presence had now been acknowledged and the Stealth Ring cover could be blown at any moment.

Shaw's assistant turned to Phelps "Who's he talking to?" They both looked in the direction of the invisible spectators.

"Search me" replied the ATRIO. "He's probably hallucinating. It's a well-known side effect of high radiation doses from the Stun Laser."

Greyshott overheard their conversation and sighed with relief. "Thank God for that" he whispered to Rickenbacker. "We're in the clear!" As usual Legacy seemed completely non-plussed. Harding was struggling to cope with watching Gables and his obvious pain, despite Shaw's revelation of his true identity, assuming it was accurate.

Agent Echo Five stood over Gables with an air of domination while a group of operatives behind prepared protective equipment to allow them to take him into custody.

"Please" the crippled alien pleaded "help them to see who I really am." Shaw was staring down at Gables and slowly began to feel an odd sensation of pity. Before he realised what was happening his mind had been locked into a trance caused by the amateur ufologist's fiery rotating eyes.

"Quick!" exclaimed his assistant "the alien's attempting to perform the hypnosis trick on Agent Shaw. Distract his attention!"

"What do you suggest?" came back the reply from the nearest operative.

"Find something loud – anything – an air horn, rifle, - anything!"

The man looked around urgently and spied a packet of distress flares attached to the rear of an armoured car. He grabbed one, activating it almost instantaneously and sending a burning, smoking ball of fire high into the air. The accompanying bang successfully diverted Shaw's attention and released him from Gables' deadly powers. Suddenly realising what was happening, he stepped back to a position level with his colleagues and safely away from the alien's grasp.

As Gables realised that he was now powerless to resist the U.A.D.O. presence around him, being vastly outnumbered and at the mercy of their powerful weapons, his whole body began trembling and his head became oddly stretched and contorted. His fiery eyes started to emit actual flames that licked hungrily at the surrounding atmosphere, searching for something to incinerate. In tandem with these extraordinary events came a gradual growth of his body in an upwards direction and a deafening roaring sound pouring outwards from his now open dark and cavernous mouth.

“That definitely isn’t human!” exclaimed Harding, any sympathy she might have had for her former friend now vanishing in an instant.

“Deploy the Python Lasso and restrain it!” ordered Shaw.

A Computer Operative nearby zoomed in on an image of the alien on his screen and lined it up with the centre of a simulated gun sight. She then pressed a button labelled ‘FIRE’ and out of the side of one of the black U.A.D.O. trucks flew a long, thick heavy-duty rope made of a super strong material that none of the four silent onlookers recognised. It landed next to Gables and wrapped itself around his body in a quick, efficient motion, making a repetitive whipping sound in the process. Once he was fully contained, all that could be seen of the angry life form was the top few inches of his head. The alien attempted to release itself but the tighter it struggled the tighter the rope became.

“I can see why it’s called a ‘Python Lasso’ Rickenbacker commented to the others.

Phelps ran forward and with a sudden great show of force plunged what must have been an ultra-strong and massive hypodermic needle into Gables’ skull. The roaring ceased.

“Thank god for that!” exclaimed Echo Five.

The four camouflaged onlookers also breathed a sigh of relief. The whole episode had been quite traumatic to witness although Legacy by far seemed to be the least affected. It had also been a great shock to find out the true nature of somebody they had all come to trust over recent days.

“Well I would never have believed that of Joe” whispered Greyshott as they watched a Scania Low Loader backing up in preparation for the lifting of Gables’ craft onto it. Then a group of U.A.D.O. soldiers rolled out a sizeable tarpaulin and laid out the securing straps as a prelude to covering over the strange cargo completely. In this way they could hide it from the public’s prying eyes during its onward journey to a secret location.

With Phelps monitoring the proceedings, three other white coated individuals loaded Gables’ captive unconscious body into a plain white ambulance which drove away at speed from the scene, lights flashing and siren blaring.

“So, did you know Joe was an alien?” Harding asked the teenager.

“Yes” Legacy simply replied.

“How long had you known?” added Greyshott.

“Since even before the first day you set eyes on him. Together with my Father, he had been subtly monitoring my progress and development for many years!”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Rickenbacker contributed his tuppeneth. It would have been better if I’d known. I’ve had trouble with these guys before and it wasn’t pretty!”

“The time would not have been appropriate” the boy replied. “He was our link to Earl Pirbright and the Book of Poetry.”

“I still don’t really understand” continued Greyshott drawing on his excellent knowledge of early twentieth century history. “If Gables really is Goebbels, who were the people shown in the post war footage of the suicide of the Nazi Propaganda Minister and his wife and the murder of their children?”

“They could well have been actors or lookalikes or just random corpses resulting from military action against Berlin in which case I’m not altogether surprised” Rickenbacker contributed. “Drawing on my own personal experiences during my international espionage activity at the time, it would have been an easy thing to stage manage for the cameras with the full agreement of the governments of the victorious powers. It may have been done in order to pacify a war weary public if he had in fact eluded allied capture and escaped.”

“Why would he have helped us if he was such an evil being?” Harding questioned. She was more than a little confused.

“William may well have the answers” Legacy replied.

“Well I don’t know how we’re going to track him down now without Gables” commented Greyshott. “Anyone have any ideas?”

“I believe we will meet up with him again very soon” stated Legacy in an oddly robotic fashion. He appeared to be day-dreaming and his expression seemed to suggest he was converting his mind into some kind of trance-like state.

“Looks like the ESPs at work again” smiled Greyshott. Harding nodded in agreement. As they picked up their odds and ends and prepared to creep back out of the area, the journalist suddenly had a thought.

“One last thing on the subject of Gables” she began. “How come the Stealth Ring was unable to protect him from the U.A.D.O.?”

“I think I can answer that one” offered Rickenbacker. “I’ve been studying the manual for the ‘Logistics Globe.’ The instructions were written in a type of Pidgin English with horrendous spelling and grammar. It must have been translated directly from an extra-terrestrial language by a real amateur. Anyway, it would appear that the stealth equipment can only function to one hundred per cent capacity on a cellular organism that has been constantly exposed to the earth’s atmosphere without a break for a minimum period of ten years. If Gables had been in and out of our atmosphere at some point in that flying disc then the likelihood is that the Stealth Ring malfunctioned long enough to enable the U.A.D.O. to track him down. Once he realised that they were onto him, his only option would have been to morph the caravan back into the disc so that he could escape from the area or at the very least use his superior firepower against them. I suspect that the conversion process is a long drawn out affair and unfortunately for him, the authorities got to him first.”

Alpha One looked over at Legacy who had now returned to the land of the living, seeking his approval.

“Your logic is faultless and your summary accurate!” he stated.

“Yes!” Rickenbacker exclaimed punching the air. He strutted forward well ahead of the others, obviously very pleased with himself.

Harding tutted and shook her head while Greyshott laughed while calling after him. “Hold up Jeff. Wait for us!” Legacy brought up the rear, his facial expression unusually serious. He had reverted back to a condition of deep thought.

They could see the checkpoint ahead being dismantled as a convoy of U.A.D.O. and army vehicles thundered past leaving the area. Greyshott turned and looked back towards the field. Everything was peaceful as if nothing had ever happened. Even the Shire Horses had miraculously reappeared and were being fed by a young brunette from the nearby farm. An airliner from Gatwick climbed above them, its engines developing close to full power as it disappeared into a single puffy cloud that hung motionless in the still late summer sky. It had taken less than twenty minutes for the surroundings to return completely back to normal.

The BMW was still exactly where they had left it in a secluded lay-by but a long-haired homeless vagrant was sitting opposite on a tree stump apparently nursing a mildly burned hand. Rickenbacker looked over at the dishevelled figure as he disabled The Progressor’s defence mechanism and called out “That’ll teach you to fiddle with things that don’t belong to you!” The vagrant became angry, shook his fist at them and walked away.

Just as the four companions were about to enter the vehicle a bright red BMW Streamliner 3.5 litre hybrid People Carrier version of the car they had been using drew up beside them. It was a ‘brand spanking new’ V.I.P. mark complete with high security blacked out windows. As it stopped with the rear door level with Greyshott, the darkened window electronically wound down to reveal the face of the Earl smiling at them in a way that reflected an ill-concealed air of excitement. This was the most relaxed they had seen him to date. He wore a white T shirt advertising the SURE organisation and a pair of tight black gym shorts from which sprouted his large hairy legs.

“Hi guys” he grinned “It’s only me. – quick get in. I’ve got something very interesting to show you!”

With Rickenbacker shrugging and quickly re-setting The Progressor’s vehicle protection on their own BMW, the four piled into the People Carrier which, with tyres screeching, sped away.

“Guys – this is Harold, Oswald’s younger brother – my driver for the last twenty years”

They all acknowledged Harold who raised a slightly withered hand in reply. He seemed rather too ancient to be driving around like a Grand Prix racer, although at least as agile for his age as Oswald had been.

“You’ll never guess what we’ve just witnessed between the U.A.D.O. and your friend Gables” Greyshott intervened before the Earl had chance to present his own exciting news.

“Paul. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I saw everything!”

“How could you have done?” Harding complained. “I was scanning the area continuously and this vehicle was nowhere to be seen!”

“You seem to forget” said William “that I have many contacts in a multitude of high places. My prime U.A.D.O. mole was providing a live video feed of the events literally as they unfolded. Look!”

On the seat-back in front of them was a built-in TV screen. By pressing a button on a custom Visual Entertainment Console built into the vehicle, the Earl rewound and replayed a DVD recording he had just made. As the

programme burst into action, out poured an extremely clear moving record of the roaring Gables being lassoed, followed by him writhing around in a pitiful heap on the ground.

“Well that’s good enough proof for me” Harding responded. “Sorry to have doubted you.”

“It’s nothing” William replied, “but what’s more to the point is that I need to apologise to you guys for the mobile phone fiasco. Let me explain!”

They all prepared themselves to listen intently.

“My contact who was to pass the info to you regarding the next verse betrayed me and gave the number to the Men in Black. Needless to say, he is no longer in my employment!”

“How did you find out?” asked the spy.

“I had a tiny tracking device fitted to the phone and as soon as it registered as being released from the unique body map of my contact, the sim card information (including the poem in its entirety) was scrambled automatically and before you ask” he added “yes, it is alien technology from the Pirbright Archives.”

“How did you know about the Men in Black getting hold of the phone?” asked Greyshott.

“I used the well-established ‘Pirbright Agent Reconnaissance System.’”

“Sounds neat” said Rickenbacker. “How does it work?”

“Basically, I’ve got ten undercover agents at the U.A.D.O. but each thinks he is only one of a team of two and part of his task, which warrants a generous bonus if proved correct is to monitor his colleague and report any possible collusion with ‘the enemy.’ The employee who I tasked with feeding the verses through to you was overseen the same day accepting a large cheque from Orlin Black. Financial incentives can often play havoc with a person’s loyalty!”

As William finished explaining he inserted a new disc into the vehicle’s V.E.C. and announced “Now what I really wanted to show you was this.” He pressed ‘PLAY’ and footage of the Reichstag - the German Parliament building appeared on the screen. According to the subtitles it was filmed in Nineteen Forty-One. “This disc belonged to Gables. I have had my suspicions about him for some time but I just couldn’t quite put my finger on it until yesterday. Joe had shown me only excerpts previously. He seemed rather obsessed with the whole Nazi thing. Usually he takes all his stuff with him after a stay at The Manor but Oswald found this on his bedside cabinet when you guys left the other day.”

“What’s the significance?” asked the detective.

“Like I said, yesterday was the first time I had watched the whole thing and guess who appeared in the first few minutes of the film?” He paused the disc and zoomed in on the face of a thin scrawny character standing on a podium ranting away at a large audience who returned the compliment with a mass of Nazi salutes. It was quite clearly Joe Gables but looking only about twenty years younger than they had known him recently, despite the film having been made in the Nineteen Forties. “As Shaw confirmed he is indeed the Nazi Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels.”

“You say that this was the first time you’d watched the film in its entirety” Harding concluded “therefore presumably Joe must have shown some of it to you before?”

“You are correct” the Earl replied. “Before I realised exactly who he was, which in hindsight should have been pretty obvious bearing in mind his club foot and the very obvious name similarity, he came to me with the film which apparently he had discovered during his routine research as an amateur ufologist.” William paused for a moment to see where they were and then instructed Harold to take the next turning on the left. He then continued with the story. “Gables drew my attention to a single film sequence. I have no idea of the origins of the footage but I believe that to date, it has never been formally released to the public at large.”

“This is getting interesting” Greyshott whispered to Harding. She nodded.

“For those of you of a sensitive disposition, what you are about to see may cause some distress although the likelihood is that you have probably seen something similar in the past, but with one important difference.”

The footage began with a close up of the entrance sign to Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp. It then moved on to a US Marine, his mouth and nose obscured behind an anti-infection face mask, driving a bulldozer. A pile of horrifically emaciated bodies were being encouraged along the ground by the machine until they reached the edge of a deep pit at which point they unceremoniously tumbled, one on top of another, down into it.

“There!” exclaimed William and zoomed in close to the dreadful pile of former human suffering. Among the stiff contorted bodies, mingling in strangely well with its puny limbs, but contrasting oddly with the rest of the sad legacy of man’s inhumanity to man, owing to its comparatively large round head, was a Grey Alien.

22.

Many picturesque towns and villages of Southern England were shooting by the vehicle in a singular blur as Harold put his foot to the floor and piled on the gas. They were approaching a junction with the London to Southampton motorway.

“North or south sir?” called out the chauffeur as the overbridge came into view.

“Head south for three or four junctions” directed William “then retrace your journey back to here.” He turned to the four partners in quest. “I always feel safer on the move” he told them “plus it makes our radio wave jamming equipment more effective.”

“So, what is your theory as to why there is a Grey Alien lying amongst the grim pile of corpses in the film footage?” Greyshott pressed, somewhat rudely ignoring the Earl’s previous comments as if they were totally immaterial.

“I think there are only two possible reasonable explanations” William began. “My first theory is that the Grey Aliens posed some kind of direct threat to the Nazis during their reign of terror and as a result were incarcerated in the concentration camps with the Jews and other human individuals who were considered to be enemies of the state. This would assume that they were somehow kept apart from the rest until their death, otherwise information regarding the existence of these alien life forms would have inevitably leaked out.”

“And your other theory?” requested Rickenbacker.

“For that I refer back to a conversation we had during your stay at Maple Leaf Manor. If you recall Joe said that he believed that the Greys used humans as hosts so that they could manipulate them for their own ends. I am now starting to wonder whether he wasn’t actually barking up the wrong tree after all. If we were to assume that when a Grey merges with a human, it bestows upon that person at least some of its own inherent powers, then that would go some way towards explaining what may have happened to Joe – or Goebbels if you like many years ago, perhaps without him consciously acknowledging the fact. I would even go so far as to suggest that many of the other senior Nazis may have been likewise ‘possessed’, in a cunning plan by the Grey Aliens to wage war surreptitiously on the human race.”

“An interesting thought” replied Greyshott, his mind analysing the various possibilities “but then if theory two is correct, why would the Nazis inter one of ‘their own’ with a huge pile of corpses of people they considered to be inferior? Also, from a practical point of view, how would it have been possible for Goebbels to have lived this long while also stunting his own ageing process?”

“Well regarding your first point” William considered “there is one possible explanation, although in the final analysis it doesn’t really add up. If we accept that for a successful merge to take place the recipient human must be of a certain minimum intelligence, then it stands to reason that intelligent people come from all walks of life, nationalities and cultures, including the Jews. We have ascertained that the Grey releases itself from the host upon that person’s death so if that explains the alien on the film, we must assume that its purpose was to infiltrate the Jewish nation from within at the behest of the possessed Nazis. The reason it died at the point of bodily release, however, I can’t even hazard a guess!” He paused then added “The same thing, of course, would have happened to my Father which suggests that he may have also been physically and mentally infiltrated by the alien I found next to him. But everything he did was always for the greater good of humankind and he didn’t possess an evil bone in his body! Finally,” he finished “regarding your second point on Joe’s stunted ageing process, I have no plausible explanation to offer at all.”

"I think we might have" offered Rickenbacker and proceeded to brief the Earl with details of the apparent life prolonging surgery performed on himself and Joan that had been uncovered both by Doctor Patel and the file stored on Lockwood's now defunct computer.

"Well" William replied "the pieces of the jigsaw seem to have started coming together."

"Legacy, are you able to assist us on any of the points raised?" Greyshott turned to the boy but sensed little would be forthcoming.

"You are certainly proceeding in the right direction" he began. "All I can add at this stage is that information inserted into my memory banks during my formative years would indicate that just before the Second World War, a mass merging was undertaken by the Grey race targeted specifically at the Jews. You see, contrary to the Nazi doctrine, many of the Sons of David had extraordinarily high levels of intelligence and were thus prime candidates for alien infiltration of the mind, Oppenheimer and Einstein being two cases in point. Although the majority of Hitler's rantings were purely motivated by racial hatred, he was in fact quite correct on one point: In the Germany of the late Nineteen Thirties the wheels of German industry and commerce were very much run by the Jews, many of whom were vastly mentally superior to the average German."

"So, were the senior Nazis human, humanoid aliens, or humans infiltrated by the Greys?" the detective pressed.

There was a long pause. 'Oh no – here it comes' thought Greyshott, perceiving accurately what they were about to hear even before it was spoken.

"I am unable to answer this question at the present time but all will become apparent on the final day of reckoning." It was spoken as if programmed into the boy's mind on a loop tape. For a moment Legacy was 'away with the fairies' but about half a minute later he was completely back in the land of the living. "Now it is essential that we must hear the second verse." He turned to the Earl in anticipation.

William smiled. "You'll be pleased to learn that on this occasion I am one step ahead. Much of the preparatory work for the next stage has already been done. When he passed the notebook to me, my father advised that I was to personally read verses one and two together as my own specific involvement would be required in the actions that stemmed from Verse Two. I had thus been expecting to hear from you anyway had the mobile system worked out so that we could link up again. Verse Three onwards can only be read and absorbed at the relevant time and not before as we might be tempted to jump a stage which would likely jeopardise the mission as a whole."

"So, the next verse is?" pushed Greyshott in his usual impatient manner.

The Earl zipped open a black leather bum bag which he had clipped around his waist and extracted the valuable leather-covered note book. He turned to page two and read aloud:

**"THERE IS A TALE OF A TAIL THAT SMITED FROM THE BEAST
RESIDES BENEATH THE LONDON STREETS SOMEWHERE OUT TO THE EAST
THE DRUIDS NOW SUSTAIN THE BEAST NEAR STONES OUT TO THE WEST
RETURN THE MATTER TO THE TUBE. THIS COURSE WOULD BE THE BEST."**

"So, what does it all actually mean?" reflected Harding. "I don't know about you guys but I'm failing to get a clear message from that one."

"That's OK" said William. "I believe Jeff can explain regarding the beast. I can enlighten you, I think, on the remainder. Jeff?"

"OK" Rickenbacker began. "The beast is a creature that emerged from a type of glass tube containing organic viral matter, when it inadvertently smashed on board my aircraft in Nineteen Forty. The 'smiting' occurred when I had to release the creature from some cables it had got caught up in using a trench dagger as the Heinkel in which I was flying plummeted to earth in flames."

"Yes, I seem to remember Doctor Patel recounting the story from the therapy you undertook" recalled Greyshott "but how are we supposed to return the matter to the tube especially if the creature is now in two parts?"

"What Jeff hasn't yet mentioned" intervened William "is that he was able to preserve the severed tail in a lead case which had been specifically designed to store the tube had it not broken. When MI6 retrieved Jeff's body, barely alive, from close to the aircraft's wreckage, the case with the tail inside was spirited away and has been stored in a secure location ever since."

The four guest passengers in the Earl's people carrier waited with bated breath for the next instalment as William paused and his attention was drawn outside in an effort to ascertain where they now were. At the same moment, Harold reached the aforementioned junction, left the motorway using the up slip-road, crossed the overbridge and sailed back down the other side. They were now heading back towards their original starting point.

"The location hinted at in Lord Pirbright's second verse is the site of a disused underground station in East London. It is now the secret headquarters of the UK branch of the U.A.D.O. constructed in the late Nineteen Fifties and which has been under continuous modification and development ever since. One of my men on the inside has been working on finding the tail's exact location and yesterday he came up trumps. It is sealed in a locked safe in the main vault of banned and dangerous alien hardware."

"So, all we have to do is just walk in and take it!" Greyshott stated sarcastically.

Legacy interrupted. "Now is the time to bring William fully into our private circle as a full and active contributing member of 'The Greystone Quest.' He must now accompany us on all future endeavours!"

"I'm pleased you said that Legacy" the Earl replied "as that was to be my next suggestion."

"Well that's a decision that's been long overdue" exclaimed Rickenbacker as he shook William's hand hard, almost pulling his arm out of its socket.

"Welcome to the clan" Greyshott added.

Harding just smiled. "So, our quest now has a formal name" she mused.

"I assume that means we can now tell Will all about the protection afforded by our Stealth Rings?" offered Greyshott.

"And much more" replied Legacy "but now it's getting late. I suggest we return to Merry Way Farm for some overnight rest. Tomorrow we can formulate a plan to infiltrate the U.A.D.O. HQ, retrieve the tail and reunite it with the creature, returning both to a newly constructed Organic Matter Capsule that we can develop using Jeff's equipment. The poem suggests that the beast currently resides close to your sacred monument, Stone Henge."

*

The atmosphere surrounding Merry Way farm was one of supreme calm and total stillness. The five confirmed participants in the Greystone Quest were sleeping soundly apart from Rickenbacker, whose military training ensured that during slumber he was always permanently just on the edge of consciousness, ever alert to any unusual movements around him.

When he had first purchased the property, the Earl had arranged for a modern replica of his classic Maple Leaf Manor four poster bed to be fitted in his private suite and that night he slept in luxurious comfort, dreaming of advanced spacecraft and as yet uncharted realms of space.

On the building's east side, a grand and ancient Cedar loomed over the farm house, its all-encompassing branches obscuring much of the otherwise beautiful landscape view which, had it not been for the tree, would have clearly been visible from the Earl's bedroom when the light of day returned. The old Cedar's shadow gave the room a dark and subdued aura, even during daylight hours. On the few occasions that William had stayed there, he had sensed an odd gloomy and depressing presence, as if there dwelt within the spirit of somebody who had suffered a particularly gruesome death. But tonight, all this would pale into insignificance as he came together with one of the supreme beings of the universe.

The Grey had now completed a week's compulsory hibernation, restoring its latent energy diffused over fourteen years spent psychologically limiting the Stone Alien's inherent powers and thus succeeding in preventing it from remembering the true purpose for which it had been originally sent to earth. Now the host was dead, decapitated by Rickenbacker's laser, a week or so previously and the Grey was now ready, as a dedicated Earth Scout for the Supreme Authority for Universal Balance to commence its next task.

Just at the point where the Cedar's wide trunk had sprouted forth its youngest lower branches, the Grey had physically integrated itself into the tree's wooden structure, providing it with a protective shell as it slept. Now it was awakening, twitching its body this way and that before forcing its energies upwards and finally pulling itself free from the temporary wooden cocoon.

William stirred in his sleep and turned over onto his back. In his dream he was being introduced to a wizened old Grey elder on a distant planet. The landscape was covered in extensive multi-coloured carnivorous vegetation interspersed with weird transparent dome-shaped buildings.

With the agility of a highly trained athlete the Grey, newly emerged from its protective tree, jumped a distance of thirty feet up onto the narrow ledge outside the Earl's window and peered inside. For a while it just sat there watching him, its thin eyelids blinking occasionally over its big and brightly shining opaque eyes. After a while its thin puny hand, out of which protruded six long bony fingers attempted to lift the window open but it was locked on the inside. So, pressing its body gently against the glass, it somehow managed to glide through the solid man-made barrier with ease, landing upright at the end of the Earl's bed.

Although still fast asleep, William could now sense its presence. He began mumbling and slurring until finally out poured a torrent of unidentifiable babbling words as he sensed the alien's elastic and agile body jumping over the top of him into a kind of stunted press up position. It leered at his helpless body, but, at this stage, avoided actual physical contact. Once the Earl's initial restlessness subsided, the Grey commenced its subtle psychic communication with the innermost recesses of the Earl's cerebral cortex, offering subconscious enlightenment that any intelligent human would find impossible to resist, in return for the host's permission for them to join together as one combined entity.

William could feel the pressure of the Grey closing in on him, pressing him down. The claustrophobia was stifling. On one hand he felt an overwhelming desire to resist but the feeling was just as strongly counterbalanced by

the transfer into his thoughts of many previously unknown secrets of the universe and an overwhelming human clarity of purpose, the promise of which in itself he was incapable of resisting. The process was building up to a massive crescendo until finally the alien parasite succeeded in entering William's body, to the accompaniment of the Earl's uncontrollable and voluminous scream of terror.

23.

Joan Harding practically jumped out of her skin as the hideous shriek from the adjoining room suddenly and rudely awoke her from an intensive slumber. She lay terrified and still for about a minute but eventually found the courage to get out of bed and investigate. As she grabbed her dressing gown and with caution cracked open the door, she was met by Rickenbacker who, fearing the worst, was already pulling on his padded suit of weaponry. Before long they were joined by Greyscott and Legacy.

The spy slipped his tiny reconnaissance camera under the door of the Earl's suite and switched on the infra-red. Viewing a compact TV screen on his arm, he could see nothing untoward, but to be on the safe side he activated his recently discovered Electronic Stun Appendage and then, after a run and a jump kicked in the Earl's bedroom door, landing the other side squarely on his bottom. He rose to his feet and dusted himself down. Then groping around in the dark for the light switch, he finally located it and turned it on. It revealed a somewhat flushed William sitting up in bed with a wide and ecstatic grin spread across the full width of his face.

"Sorry guys" he greeted them all as they entered. "Just a little nightmare. I'm perfectly fine now. Sorry if I woke you!"

"A little nightmare?" repeated Rickenbacker. "It sounded more like you were being murdered!"

Harding walked up to the side of William's bed and took hold of his hand. "Are you absolutely sure you're OK?" she checked.

"Absolutely sure" the Earl confirmed. "Now you four go on back to bed. I'll see you all in the morning."

*

Another new day dawned. William awoke at seven on the dot. He felt unusually calm and at ease with himself and remembered nothing of the night's traumatic events. He threw open the bedroom window and took in a deep breath of the fresh untainted morning air. Life felt particularly good. There was a knock at the side of the door frame. Harold stood just outside of the room, baffled by the sight of the caved in wood on the unhinged door that now rested on its side blocking most of the entrance.

"Good morning Sir. If you would like to join your friends in the dining room, I've taken the liberty of preparing some breakfast."

"You're an angel" replied William.

"Would you like me to resurrect this while I'm here?" he said pointing to the battered door.

"That would be wonderful Harold – you know I don't know how I would cope if it wasn't for you and your brother."

"We aim to please" the chauffeur replied.

As the five companions gathered around Harold's lovingly prepared breakfast, William decided to take the initiative regarding the next phase. "I suggest we use the People Carrier from this point on. We'll drop Harold back near Gables' field when we leave and he can pick up the BMW Sports and run it back to Maple Leaf Manor."

“Could I also ask a favour of Harold?” Greyshott added. “Back at the beginning when I first discovered Legacy, he was hiding in the boot of my car which was parked outside the Kings’ Arms near Southwater. Owing to our frantic non-stop activity since then, I haven’t had chance to go back and pick it up. If I give Harold the keys, could he retrieve it and park it at The Manor for the duration? It’s a red BMW 2500, registration BCD100H.”

“It would be a pleasure Mr. Greyshott” Harold intervened before William had a chance to answer on his behalf.

“Before we continue with the plan for today” Harding interrupted, “don’t you think we should first discuss what happened last night?”

Everyone present, except William nodded and turned to look at the Earl.

“What?” he replied with a feeling of distinct unease.

“Last night” repeated Rickenbacker. “Your nightmare. Remember?”

William looked completely blank. “I recall no nightmare” he replied. “Just a thoroughly good night’s sleep.”

“You don’t remember screaming and Jeff breaking down the door so we could check up on you?” Greyshott enquired.

“To be honest” he said “I recall nothing of the sort. It would explain the state of my bedroom door, though.” He paused. “Look guys, there’s really nothing to worry about. I assure you I’m absolutely fine. Let’s get on with the business of the day!”

Greyshott and Harding exchanged glances. Rickenbacker raised his eyebrows, reflecting his blatant disbelief. Legacy said nothing as was now proving to be frequently the case in such situations. They decided to let it go.

William scanned the faces of his friends and took their silence to mean that they fully accepted he was his usual good-humoured self. “Right” he said pouring himself a bowl of cornflakes and filling it to the brim. “The time is now seven fifteen. I’m expecting a visitor any moment.”

Right on cue there was a ring at the doorbell. Rickenbacker rose from the table. His uniform was presently hanging in the closet but he quickly extracted a forty-five calibre Glock Thirty-Seven hand gun from inside his left sock which he had commandeered from Lockwood’s house the day they found his body. The Spy took a firm grip of it in his right hand, ready for use at a moment’s notice.

“Its fine” said The Earl, attempting to calm Rickenbacker’s fears. “I’m expecting one of my most trusted and loyal agents on the inside.”

“If it’s OK with you” the soldier replied, “I’ll come to the door with you anyway just in case.”

“As you wish” William conceded.

Harding, Greyshott and Legacy listened with close intent as muffled greetings were exchanged and Harold welcomed the new arrival by offering to take his coat, very much in his brother Oswald’s mould. They were clearly two peas in a pod.

“Lady and gentlemen” announced the Earl. “May I introduce my long time trusted and loyal SURE associate Basley Jessop.”

Into the room entered a man almost seven feet tall. He had coarse white hair and a thick puffy white beard and if it were not for the fact that his coat was a foresty green rather than red and white, he could quite easily have passed for Santa Claus. Whether or not it was due to a slightly slanted posture or a physical defect from birth, one of his arms appeared shorter than the other. As Harold relieved him of his strangely dated Trench Coat, a posh businessman’s suite came into view underneath. But his coat was not the only thing to be removed. It was followed by both the hair and the beard which it now became apparent were false. He laid them to one side on the table in a neat pile. What remained was a completely bald man in his mid-thirties with slightly oriental features and a pasty complexion. Everyone shook his hand in turn.

“Bas has been U.A.D.O. UK’s Chief Security Officer for a number of years” the Earl remarked. “He also works for me as I pay him three times his official salary on top!”

“I have a large family” Jessop commented “and poor relations on my mother’s side currently residing in a rural district of China near Shanghai.”

“.....and it helps to keep them all out of poverty” William finished the sentence for him. “I know, I know” he said impatiently “Now tell them the real reason you work for me Bas!”

“Ten years at U.A.D.O. HQ have seen a lot of changes” he offered “and most of these have definitely not been for the better. While they are supposed to be working for the overall benefit of mankind, I am now totally convinced that something very underhand is going on behind the scenes. In particular, they’ve become a lot less tolerant of the general public since Orlin Black was promoted to Head of Operations, particularly in their methods of interrogation. Some of the more extreme of these undoubtedly breach the Geneva Convention on Human Rights! I.....”

William interrupted him in mid flow. “OK Bas – did you bring the plans?”

“Yes indeed” Jessop replied. He set down a large hold-all on the table and popped the lid from the top of a cardboard tube he was holding in his hand. He emptied a rolled up rectangular sheet of glossy paper out before them, unravelling it in the process. “There are no official plans of U.A.D.O. HQ for obvious reasons, so here is one I made earlier.”

Everyone gathered round to view the diagrammatical representation of the ultra-secret headquarters which Jessop had entitled ‘Subterranea.’

“As William may have already mentioned” he began “the UK base was converted from the then disused Aldwych Deep Level Underground Station in the late Nineteen Forties / early Nineteen Fifties. For many years it could be accessed via the original overhead Department Store but in Twenty Thirteen, the powers that be decided that having the public regularly strutting along aisles of consumables only a few hundred feet above a crucial control centre for World Defence was becoming untenable.”

“That’s understandable” Greyshott interjected.

“If you recall” continued Jessop “the banking scandals a few years ago caused the end of consumer banking as we know it, the public now favouring co-operatives instead. Some wise guy at Whitehall decided that this was the opportunity that they had been waiting for and arranged for the creation of The People’s Freedom International Bank to be built above the site in place of the Department Store which was unceremoniously

demolished. The main cover for the building's existence is that it is the bank's headquarters for commercial business therefore there is never any requirement for access by the general public. All the bank's employees are in fact U.A.D.O. operatives working below and the building itself is completely empty apart from some token furniture positioned near to the larger windows to make it look a bit more convincing. In reality, of course, there is no commercial department and the real P.F.I.B. operate from a totally different location."

"I can see that they've gone to an awful lot of trouble to keep the place out of the public domain" commented Rickenbacker.

"You ain't seen nothing yet" replied the security officer. "Watch this." He unzipped the hold-all and took out a small square silver box with brown lobes positioned equidistantly around the edges. He then fixed it to the door frame surrounding the open entrance to the dining room leading out into the hallway. After first walking all the way to the far end of the room, he turned and began strutting with purposeful intent back towards it. As he passed through the doorway the most amazing thing occurred. His neatly tailored suit transformed into the bright pink U.A.D.O. 'boiler suit' type uniform now so familiar to the five participants in the Greystone Quest.

"Alien technology again?" offered William.

"Indeed" replied Jessop. "At each security check before entering the lift shaft to the subterranean base, an Apparel Converter Box is positioned, which changes the operative's attire, depending on the direction in which he is travelling. Every morning he will arrive at the surface building as a neatly turned out office worker, but by the time he arrives at Subterranea he will be fully kitted out as a U.A.D.O. Operative. The whole system works in reverse when he leaves. The only exceptions, of course, being the Men In Black, whose suits are immune to the device and whose clothing remains the same in all circumstances."

"I could have really used some of this technology in the Nineteen Forties" commented the spy.

Jessop looked at William slightly confused by the remark. The Earl nodded his head quickly from side to side, indicating that he should leave it.

"Now" continued the U.A.D.O. Security Officer. "This is the position. The Banned Weaponry Store is only accessible when three approved operatives insert their index fingers into the secure print reader. As Chief of Security, all I need to do is take copies of your finger prints and add them to the master computer database which I can do remotely using my official company laptop. I have also created false documentation for William and Mr. Rickenbacker who will now be playing the roles of visiting Security Officials from the American branch of the U.A.D.O. In the hold-all are two suits with P.F.I.B. logos. Don't worry about size. They will automatically shrink or expand to fit once you put them on."

"Brilliant idea" responded Rickenbacker. "You're a man after my own heart. But have you ever heard of a Stealth Ring?"

"Indeed I have" Jessop replied. "They were available in the 'Logistics Pack' developed specifically for agent Alpha One, the U.A.D.O. Peace Restorer. That was the official title given to the highly advanced 'Mega Soldier' who was tragically killed in a shoot-out with humanoid aliens recently."

"That's not strictly correct" the Earl pointed out. "May I introduce Jeff Rickenbacker a.k.a. U.A.D.O. Agent Alpha One!"

"My god!" exclaimed Jessop turning to the spy. "You mean you actually survived!"

“Well I’m here aren’t I?” Rickenbacker laughed “and we have the Stealth Ring technology. We can accompany you into U.A.D.O. HQ completely invisible to everyone there including yourself!”

“There’s one small problem with your proposition” intervened Legacy.

“Why am I not surprised?” the soldier responded, his face becoming downcast.

The boy continued “Subterranea has built-in defence systems against unauthorised alien weapons technology. Since Jeff disappeared his equipment may have been decommissioned. Therefore, there is a small yet very real possibility that the stealth function could fail on entry to the underground complex.”

“So, you better stick to Basley’s original plan” Greyshott suggested. “You can’t afford to take any chances.”

Drawing their attention back to the diagram, Jessop highlighted the position of the Banned Weaponry Store situated beneath the Staff Recreation Facility and to one side of ‘Central Control.’ “I have identified the location of the ‘reptilian flesh.’ It is currently stored in safe A17B2X which is very easy to access once we’re in. In order to reduce suspicion, I interrogated our computer for the tail’s dimensions earlier in the week and using this information combined with a number of high definition digital photos, also computerised for posterity by the research boffins, had it accurately reproduced as a carbon fibre replica using an expert sculptor who just happens to be a long-established member of SURE. We can leave the copy in its place once we have the original in our possession, and unless they carry out further tests on it which at this stage, I believe is highly unlikely, they will never know the difference!”

24.

Jessop's U.A.D.O./P.F.I.B. Mercedes was unbelievably comfortable with all the latest mod cons and a suspension that was to die for. For security, he had parked it a couple of miles from Merry Way Farm so Harold had dropped the three suited and booted bankers at the vehicle using the people carrier, then driven smartly away.

Jessop had passed his advanced driving test and skilfully bobbed and weaved between traffic on the southern orbital M25 while Rickenbacker and The Earl chilled, spreading themselves out on the sumptuous leather of the back seat.

"So, are the U.A.D.O. missing me?" asked Rickenbacker vainly.

"Considering the billions of pounds apparently spent in your development, Black seems surprisingly relaxed about your demise."

"Have you any idea of the identity of Grey team Zulu?" the spy followed up, hoping to drag at least some information out of Jessop regarding his forgotten history.

"It's not a team that I recognise but I suspect that they are a specific group of Grey Aliens" Jessop advised. "Code Zulu would suggest doctors or medical staff but Security are not generally privy to such information."

As they re-surfaced from the Dartford Tunnel and onto the A12 towards the Docklands and East London, the Mercedes became gridlocked in rush hour traffic. Without a second thought the Security Officer switched on the siren and blue flashing lights. "Look!" Jessop laughed "we're now plane clothed traffic cops." The waves instantly parted and onward they sped.

Having only ever seen London from the air and then purely at night and in wartime conditions, Rickenbacker was keen to take in fully his surroundings. East London was its usual weekday morning hustle and bustle with banking and insurance staff rushing around like spooked animals, fighting desperately to prevent the autumnal wind from blowing their umbrellas inside out. Their journey to work was being made even more unpleasant by a shower of vicious hailstones whipped up by strong south-westerlies, painfully stinging their faces as they pushed on forward against the elements.

The three bankers' Mercedes reached the outskirts of Aldwych in record time and very soon the impressive modern structure that was The People's Freedom International Bank towered into view ahead. As the vehicle approached, the three fictitious bankers could see an opening approximately as wide as a typical London Double Decker Bus was in length. This was the entrance to a secure underground garage compound. Jessop flashed his pass at the security barrier and they drove down into the oppressive and dismal semi-darkness of the U.A.D.O. parking facility enclosed within cold and barren concrete walls.

"So far so good" the soldier commented as they parked the vehicle and headed off towards the secure entrance to the building labelled guard post 2B. A grossly undernourished security guard, who in William's estimation could well have been related to his preserved Grey Alien had it not been for the fact that he was obviously human, intercepted them at the checkpoint.

"Morning Captain Jessop. May I have your security passes?" welcomed the guard.

"Morning Alf. Yes. Here they are. How's the family?"

“Very well thank you” came the reply. “Welcome gentlemen” he directed at the Earl and the spy. “Please insert your index fingers into the print scanner.” They did as instructed. “Thank you very much gentlemen. Have a good day!”

The three walked ahead and a pair of electronic doors slammed shut behind them. Once out of hearing range, Jessop confirmed that their prints had been entered under security code 100. In other words, they now had access to any areas of the complex they wished.

“Right, you see the electronic doors ahead” Jessop indicated. “Once we pass those, we are entering the main lift shaft down to HQ. When they close behind us that will activate the Apparel Converter so be ready for a change of clothes!”

They entered with Jessop as instructed and the doors slammed shut behind. The lift began to slowly descend. However instead of an instant change, a pixelated blur enveloped both the soldier and the Earl for about fifteen seconds. When it cleared, they were shocked to find that they were both stark naked. The U.A.D.O Security Chief cursed. By his usual standards, the language adopted was uncharacteristically foul and explicit. He reached out and depressed the elevator’s emergency stop button. “Damn” he added, in a more restrained manner, “something’s gone terribly wrong!”

“You’re telling me” acknowledged William, feeling rather uncomfortable with the enforced view of Rickenbacker’s huge biceps and not insubstantial genitalia, particularly when compared with his own comparatively measly example.

“I think I’ll nominate you for first prize in the competition for the understatement of the year!” added the spy. He couldn’t help but laugh at the irony of the situation and had it not been for the serious implications of Jessop’s technical failure, was certain he would by now be in absolute hysterics.

There was a buzzing sound accompanied by a flashing light which then remained on and immediately they could hear the dulcet tones of Alf, the undernourished guard who had earlier checked them in. “Is everything alright sir? Shall I call maintenance?”

“No, no” replied Jessop. “Everything’s fine. Just a little glitch with the elevator’s speed control computer. I’ll have it sorted in a jiffy!”

“Well as long as you’re sure” the guard replied and hung up.

William’s SURE colleague ‘on the inside’ was a fully qualified electrician and had been head of maintenance before eventual promotion to Head of Security. This former knowledge was to serve them well in the next few minutes. “I can take us back up” Jessop informed his friends “but there’s no guarantee that when the doors open, you’ll have your clothes back on!”

“Well then it’s just as well I’ve made contingency plans” said The Restorer. “Open your briefcase!”

The Security Officer did as instructed and lo and behold: inside wedged neatly into a large pocket recess was the Stealth Globe.

“I know there’s a chance that it may not function correctly but the way I see it now is that we have very little choice! – besides” he added “I have every confidence in my equipment. The only downside is that once we’re wearing the rings you won’t be able to see or hear us so just speak slowly and clearly when we enter the Weaponry Store and we’ll follow your instructions to the letter.”

Somewhat reluctantly, the other two both agreed to the spy's proposal so while the girl with the beehive hairstyle projected onto the wall of the lift compartment requested the salient details, they went through the process of ordering and fitting new Stealth Rings for both William and the Spy. Owing to the requirement to wear the banker's uniform, Rickenbacker had been forced to leave his original behind at the farm.

"Well here it goes!" Rickenbacker winced as he inserted his finger into the fitting chasm and the ring clamped around it. Immediately he became invisible to Jessop, proving beyond doubt that the equipment was satisfactory as the Security Officer was an established U.A.D.O. employee.

"I can confirm you are no longer here!" Jessop stated, smiling with relief. "Now for Earl Pirbright." With satisfaction, Jessop gave the thumbs up as William also disappeared from view. "OK" said Jessop. "So far so good. What I now need to do is send the lift back up to ground level and open the doors so that when I tell my superiors that my delegation had to leave early owing to an unforeseen emergency, the computer trace connected to the lift will tie up with my story. It's just a case of dealing with Alf." He pressed the intercom and the aged guard replied.

"What is it sir? Are you OK?" His voice showed traces of heightened concern.

"Everything's fine Alf" Jessop confirmed. "I just need you to go next door to the central computer and depress and release the remote controller on the Elevator Network Console. That'll reset the equipment."

"Oh, I don't know sir" the guard replied. "You know that protocol dictates that I can't leave my post at any time without cover."

The officer put his hand across his mouth to slightly muffle his voice and spoke quietly into the intercom to give the impression that he was shielding his words from the visiting guests. "Look mate" he said "just do me this little favour. These guys are extremely important officials. We don't want any embarrassing situations reported to Shaw and Black now do we? Go on just do this little one for me. There'll be something nice for you and your family in this year's Christmas Box – I promise!"

After a brief silence, the guard agreed on the proviso that absolutely no-one would be told that he had even briefly left his position.

As soon as the conversation finished, Jessop pulled open a maintenance flap, grabbed some electrician's non-conductive thick rubber gloves from his case and began fiddling around with some abnormally loose wiring. "Hang on guys" he instructed the others and then firmly gripped the sides as the elevator shot back up to the top at great speed, seeming to only stop just in the nick of time. With tremendous haste he opened the doors, confirmed Alf had disappeared, closed them again and re-commenced the descent. Within seconds, the guard returned to his seat and attempted to raise Jessop but there was no reply.

"Oh well. That must have fixed it" he thought and sat back down with his Daily Chronicle.

The lift finally arrived at the originally intended destination. As the doors opened, Jessop was horrified to see Orlin Black who just happened to be passing by at that very moment. "Good Morning Mr. J" he welcomed his Chief of Security. "How are you this fine day?"

Although seeing the chief M.I.B. at that particular moment in time was initially a totally unexpected shock, Jessop managed to maintain his composure. "Very well thank you Sir." he replied "I'm just on my way to the Staff Recreation Facility to grab a quick coffee."

“Well then I won’t detain you” Black replied and headed straight for a nearby door which, with a dramatic plaque, was labelled ‘SECURE INTERROGATION – HIGH RISK.’ Just before entering he stopped in his tracks, stood perfectly still for about five seconds, then turned around to face Jessop again. “Wasn’t today the day you were meeting up with the American security staff? I’m sure I saw it noted in your schedule.”

“Indeed it was, Sir” Jessop replied. “Much to their annoyance they were called back literally the second they arrived here – Some kind of emergency. They left with such haste they didn’t even have time to brief me on it.”

“How very unfortunate” Black replied. “Well make sure you reschedule the meeting in your diary as soon as possible. Security matters should always be given top priority!”

“Indeed, Sir I certainly will!”

With that, the chief M.I.B., accompanied by his personal bodyguard, entered the Interrogation Room.

Jessop felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Rickenbacker indicating that he and The Earl were still there beside him. Now that they were alone again, they dutifully followed the Security Officer down a long corridor which formed a gradual descent that then turned back on itself, arriving at the secure coded entrance to the Banned Weaponry Store situated beneath the Staff Recreation Quarters.

*

The Interrogation Room was in darkness. Black’s bodyguard switched on the light to reveal Goebbels, still wrapped tightly in the Python Lasso but hanging upside down with only his head visible, two large crocodile clips fixed unceremoniously to his ears. From these led some thickly insulated wiring connected to a large battery, beside which was attached a heavy metal lever.

Behind the captive alien was a long unidirectional rectangular window. To Goebbels and Black it acted purely as a mirror but to Phelps and Shaw who sat in comfort monitoring the activity on the other side, it provided an obstruction-free panoramic view of the forthcoming proceedings.

“Well, Doctor Goebbels” began Black, “I’m glad to see you’ve made yourself at home and that you’re being exceptionally well treated!”

“You bastard!” Goebbels replied. “Throughout history you English were world renowned for your fair and considerate treatment towards suspected enemies of the state. What the hell happened to force you to stoop to such blatant barbarism!”

“How dare you speak to me in such ‘holier than thou’ terms” roared the M.I.B. “after the disgusting genocide perpetrated by you and those other Nazi thugs!”

Goebbels wiggled his body back and forth in frustration, struggling in his prisoner’s cocoon, before aiming a globule of spit at Black and missing by several yards.

“He’s got a point you know” said Shaw watching from the adjacent room and feeling distinctly uncomfortable with what he was having to witness. “Torture such as this is absolutely prohibited by the Geneva Convention.”

“You forget” replied Phelps in her irritating and overbearing manner, “that convention only covers the human race – i.e. indigenous inhabitants of the Planet Earth. Goebbels is quite clearly an alien.”

Back in the Interrogation Room Black was examining the alien's Stealth Ring which glistened in the open palm of his hand. However, it was still attached to Goebbels' mutilated finger. "It's a shame we had to take such drastic measures to remove it from your body, but you should have taken it off willingly yourself" the M.I.B. commented.

Goebbels said nothing but his face seemed to be pulsating red with anger.

"Anyway, you can be certain we'll return it to you when we're finished" said Black and then added "the finger that is. You know you'll save yourself an awful lot of pain if you tell us how you got it and the location of our expensive military investment – Mr. Jeff Rickenbacker."

"Go to hell!" Goebbels exclaimed. With that Black nodded and his bodyguard forced the heavy lever down to a horizontal position. Several thousand volts of electricity were sent coursing through the alien's body. He let out a prolonged and blood curdling scream of agony.

"OK soldier, that's enough for now" concluded Black and the lever was returned to the vertical. "Leave us alone for a few minutes."

The bodyguard gave a querying glance to Black regarding the instruction. "It's OK" he replied. "I'll be fine. Go. Go!"

As the operative left the room, the viewing window allowing Shaw and Phelps to spectate automatically reverted to a brick wall.

Inside the interrogation chamber, the atmosphere instantly changed to one of unrestricted and uncontrolled levity. The cackling Goebbels first forced out his arm and then completely unwound the lasso. Having freed himself from captivity, he ripped the metal clips from his ears without even flinching. Swinging like an ape from the rope which had now unravelled to its fullest extent, he righted himself and jumped the twenty feet to the floor with the elasticity and suppleness of an undiscovered species of tree-dwelling jungle creature. With his new-found agility, his club foot was no longer an awkward disability.

Upon landing, he turned and embraced his interrogator of only seconds before.

"That was extremely well acted my friend!" exclaimed Black. "Just a few more days playing these stupid games. Then we'll get you on a plane down to Lima."

"That last surge of power was truly gratifying" Goebbels replied. "Another few doses and I'll truly be back to my former self!"

25.

The approach to the 'Banned Weaponry Store' was very dimly lit. Considering that the U.A.D.O. UK headquarters had been updated only in the last few years, making it a state of the art Twenty First Century Control Centre, very little thought or effort appeared to have been expended in the development of this particular section of the complex. This fact was emphasised by the original low voltage light bulbs that still hung loosely and precariously from badly insulated wiring running along the centre of the tunnel's roof. The door to the facility towered over the three intruders as they neared; an obvious example of early post-war bank vault design.

Jessop approached with caution and after making absolutely sure that there was no one else around, adjusted the Security Observation Camera that was covering the door so that it pointed down and to the left. He knew that this particular one was not a twenty-four-hour monitor and was only used to play back specific segments of time when required. It could easily have been knocked out of position accidentally during maintenance of the passage way – at least that would be his story if and when their interference was eventually discovered.

On the wall next to where they stood was a small keypad obscured by a hinged and tightly sprung metal flap which Jessop pulled open and then punched in a sequence of numbers. A red display light below turned green and beside it three circular holes appeared, just millimetres wider than an average human finger. "OK" said the C.S.O. "I'll insert *my* index finger first. Then you next, Jeff, followed by William." Although Jessop had no visual confirmation, he knew that the others had followed his lead when the door began to rise upwards into the ceiling above, stopping abruptly after creating a gap for them to enter about ten feet high. On reaching the other side, Jessop keyed in the same numbers as before on a mirror image of the outside keypad and the door lowered back to the closed position with a loud clunk. They were in.

The interior lights automatically activated and the spy and the Earl could now see that they were surrounded by sliding drawers of varying sizes which were built securely into the walls, each labelled with a specific alpha-numeric ID.

"Right now, let's see" Jessop mumbled as he looked for the individual code that he had memorised for the file containing the reptilian flesh. "A17B2X – should be somewhere here." He was searching a row of vertical filing cabinets, positioned next to the entrance and soon found the one that he was looking for. Each individual drawer had its own 'triple finger print reader' so the earlier process was repeated culminating in the locking mechanism successfully releasing and enabling the drawer to slide easily out into the open position.

The three intruders gasped at the sight before their eyes. There in an unsealed see-through plastic bag was the severed tip of the monster reptile's arrowhead tail. Rickenbacker had a sudden flashback of his struggle with the beast many years before. For a brief moment, the sight of this morbid piece of alien nostalgia caused him to feel uncannily stressed and temporarily debilitated. But with sheer determination he fought with courage against this unnerving sensation, forcing himself to concentrate on the task in hand and willing his brain to stay focused until they were back up on the surface, mission accomplished.

Jessop placed his briefcase on a table in the centre of the room which had been provided for official examination of the store room's artefacts. The Security Officer decided he would put it to good use. He clicked open the latches of his case and opened the lid to its fullest extent. From inside he withdrew the plastic replica of the monster's tail using a pair of surgical tweezers not dissimilar to the ones that the spy had used to withdraw the organic matter tube from the bomb in Nineteen Forty. He then removed the original specimen from the plastic bag and placed them side by side.

"Not bad" he muttered, expressing his pleasure at the accuracy of the sculptor's handiwork. He then inserted the real item into its original lead case, which Rickenbacker was amazed Jessop had also managed, through sheer

perseverance, to track down amongst the hundreds of stored weapons and other banned items in the 'crypt-like' chamber. Inserting the replica tail into the plastic bag, he dropped it back into the storage drawer and slammed it shut.

"Now let's get the hell out of here!" the C.S.O. exclaimed.

Rickenbacker punched Jessop lightly on the arm to let him know that both he and the Earl understood.

There was no way of knowing whether or not they would encounter any passers-by as the door was raised back up, so they had to take a chance, knowing full well that Black had only entered the interrogation room above some fifteen minutes earlier. Little did they know, however, that on leaving his meeting with Goebbel to head back to his private office, he had made his way along the descending corridor with the bodyguard, sensing through his own secret E.S.P. abilities that the room below had somehow been breached. As the heavy, solid monstrosity that was the store room door moved once more to the open position, Jessop was confronted by the Chief Man in Black who stood there opposite him, perfectly still with his arms folded, subtly transmitting an aura of deep foreboding through his expressionless and time-ravaged face.

Jessop would have to think quickly. Orlin Black was no fool. "Oh, hello Sir" he began. "I've been testing our internal defences and discovered that owing to a glitch in the programming, it's possible to access secure locations by inserting the finger of just one approved individual three times into the Print Reader. I'm going to have to speak to the boys in 'I.T.' about it urgently."

For a while Black said nothing, observing in detail Jessop's mannerisms. "I find that very hard to believe" he replied "but as my most reliable and dedicated Security Officer, I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt as long as you give me a demonstration of the glitch!"

'Shit' thought Jessop 'I wasn't expecting that one!'

"Well I can certainly try" he replied "but it's one of those hard-to-identify intermittent problems which doesn't happen every time."

"Very good" replied the M.I.B. looking completely unconvinced. "Well there's obviously no way of proving or disproving your story at this stage" he commented "so we'll leave it at that for now....."

"Of course, sir, thank you. I'll get onto Central Computers right away"

".....on the condition" continued Black "that you show me what you're hiding behind your back!"

Gripped firmly in Jessop's left hand was the lead case containing the reptilian tail. He opened his palm and hoped and prayed that one of his partners in crime would take it from him into the security of the Stealth Ring Invisibility Blanket.

"Guard!" exclaimed Black "open his hand!"

Just in the nick of time, Jessop felt the case lifted from his possession as the guard twisted his arm and forced him to show both his hands. They were empty.

"You must forgive me" Black requested "but I have a very suspicious nature although historically it has always served me well. Carry on Jessop."

The C.S.O. couldn't quite believe he had got away with it. It was just too good to be true. In fact, that was exactly the case. Black had already turned to leave and was making his way back up the tunnel to Central Control. Unfortunately, his bodyguard was just a few seconds behind with his reactions and before completely turning away, noticed something weird out of the corner of his eye. Accompanied by a strange humming noise that quickly increased then reduced, the naked apparition of Earl Pirbright of Hambleton briefly faded in and out of view in less than a second.

"Sir, wait!" the guard called out. "I just saw something."

"What is it soldier?" the M.I.B. called out as he made his way back. "What did you see?"

"There" he replied pointing towards the area next to where Jessop now stood. "It was a short, chubby.....naked.....man!"

Black gave him a curious look. "Well I don't know what you get up to in your spare time" he laughed "but I suggest you leave your fantasies behind on the surface in future before you come to work!" He shook his head and turned to leave once more, while Jessop forced out a token giggle in support of Black's aspersions.

"No seriously sir" the man persisted, "There's something strange going on!" Literally as he spoke William reappeared, but this time the apparition was of a slightly longer duration. "Look, sir. Look!"

Black turned and this time he too observed the strange figure standing slightly bent over in the gloom, like an erotic garden statue.

"My God!" he screamed. "It's Pirbright! Quick! Shoot him!"

What happened next occurred in a split second. The guard lifted his regulation pistol while Jessop, without any consideration for his own safety, launched himself directly into the line of fire. The bullet struck him squarely in the chest and, fatally wounded, he fell to the ground. The Earl immediately ripped the Stealth Ring from his finger and it clattered to the ground at the soldier's feet. He raised both his hands in the air.

26.

It was around two in the morning when the bearer of the tail surfaced. The majority of streetlights by this time had been extinguished, providing excellent cover of darkness for his profoundly naked form. Jeff Rickenbacker a.k.a. former U.A.D.O. agent Alpha One ran as fast as his legs would propel him through the leafy green suburbs of affluent South London, grabbing various garments from numerous washing lines until he found a T shirt and jeans that were near as damn it his size.

After what had happened to William, Rickenbacker had lost confidence in the ability of the Stealth Ring to camouflage him effectively and therefore looked for an alternative escape route that would shield him from view. Somehow, through a combination of luck and his own cunning, he had succeeded in breaking his way back out of the underground facility by cutting into a sewerage pipe with a battery powered electric hacksaw he had stolen from a maintenance cupboard. He had then climbed up it for several hundred yards to a point level with the top of the service lift. It was fortunate that general maintenance using similar equipment was being carried out at the time despite the hour, so the noise of his activities didn't create any undue suspicion. From his newly-attained position, Rickenbacker had cut his way back out to find that he was now opposite the bottom end of a narrow ventilation shaft. Over a period of half an hour, the spy had squeezed his way gradually along it until he finally reached the top, which brought him conveniently up to the underground car park. Here he unscrewed the grill covering the shaft's entrance and forced his way out.

Using a technique that the soldier had learned many years before during his military service in Germany, Rickenbacker rendered Alf temporarily unconscious by squeezing a pressure point in the old boy's neck while he used the print reader to guarantee an alarm-free exit and make good his escape.

Finally, with the help of an early morning bus service followed by a train from Carshalton to South Holmwood, he had walked the remaining couple of miles back to Merry Way Farm where he was joyfully greeted by Legacy, Greyshott and Harding. Their delight at his arrival, however, was soon tempered by concern at the non-appearance of Jessop and The Earl.

"What happened?" pushed Greyshott as Rickenbacker fell exhausted into an armchair. "Did you get the tail? Where's William and Basley?"

"I've got good news and bad" he replied.

"I guessed as much when I noticed you were dressed rather more casually than when you left" contributed Harding "plus the fact that you smell really awful!"

"Sorry about that" the spy replied "but a sewerage pipe formed part of my escape route."

"Luckily there's plenty of hot water for a shower when you're ready" Harding replied, blocking her nose while Rickenbacker began to put them in the picture.

"The good news is that I have the tail of the beast" he said retrieving the lead case and depositing it in the centre of the table. "The bad news I'm afraid is very bad. Basley Jessop is dead and William's been captured. He's now in the custody of Orlin Black and the U.A.D.O.!"

"Oh hell!" exclaimed Harding, shocked by such unexpected news. "What happened?"

The soldier grabbed a double whiskey from the nearby drinks cabinet and downed it in one, feeling the need to steady his nerves. He then proceeded to tell them the whole story. When after twenty minutes he finally concluded the tale, all four sat there for a while in dead silence. Harding and Greyshott were truly flabbergasted at such a terrible outcome to what had at first promised to be a relatively straightforward operation. Legacy appeared visibly moved that a dedicated member of SURE had been killed while acting purely in the interests of his cause.

“We will build a monument to Jessop’s memory when this is finally all over!” he proclaimed.

“That’s all very nice” replied the spy “but right now it doesn’t really help William!”

“What are we going to do next?” Harding enquired of the others.

“Now that I’ve succeeded in carrying out the first part of the poem’s second verse by getting the alien matter away from the U.A.D.O., I can go back and break him out of there!” Rickenbacker replied. “You guys can proceed with Part Two in the meantime and William and I will both meet up with you later.”

“Of course,” agreed the teenager “it is the only logical option.” He paused for a moment in thought and then added “but the operation must be thought through beforehand. To guarantee success it cannot be rushed.”

“But we don’t know how long they’ll keep William alive.” Greyshott intervened. “Surely time is of the essence!”

Legacy scanned his three comrades and as his eyes met with each, a great calming sensation came over them and they began to listen intently to his wise words. “This outcome has confirmed my initial suspicions” he began. “The reason for the failure of William’s Stealth Ring was not the U.A.D.O.’s Alien Defence Computer Program. This was proved by the fact that Jeff’s ring functioned perfectly.”

“So, what was it?” Rickenbacker pressed.

“There is only one possible explanation. The rings are designed to function only when worn by completely humanoid entities. Failure has been known to occur during the initial twenty-four hours of non-humanoid infiltration of the human body.”

“So, our suspicions were correct” added Greyshott. “William was merged with a Grey Alien the other night!”

“I now believe that to be so” said Legacy “and now is also the right time to tell you the true nature of the Greys.”

‘At last’ thought Greyshott with relief. ‘We’re finally going to get some good hard facts.’

“The Grey Race are believed to possess the highest intelligence of all life forms in the known universe” the boy began “and as such have been delegated by forces unknown the task of overseeing law and order and ensuring that the overall delicate balance of the two opposing forces of the ether is maintained. These forces take many and varied forms: the positive versus the negative, alpha versus beta, night versus day and significantly the masculine and its permanent struggle with its feminine side and vice versa. Most crucially of all, from planet Earth’s point of view, it manifests itself through what you earthlings call love and hate and the purely human inventions described as right and wrong. The Greys have performed this function for as far back as existing records go, travelling the many planets capable of supporting intelligent life and ensuring that the equilibrium is maintained.”

“How are they able to travel such vast distances? The nearest planet capable of sustaining life must be many light years from earth” Greyshott suggested.

“There is not a life form in the universe that can answer that question apart from the Greys themselves” continued Legacy. “All that can be said with certainty is that they do not employ spacecraft in the conventional sense.”

“This is all very interesting” interrupted the spy impatiently, the artificial calmness now beginning to wear off as the thought of how he had abandoned the Earl to what was possibly a fate worse than death began to loom large in his mind. “It’s not really helping us with the question of rescuing Will!”

“I was just coming to that” was Legacy’s abrupt reply. “The type of Grey that has infiltrated William is probably what is known in extra-terrestrial circles as a ‘Scout.’ The Scouts travel from planet to planet in exploratory groups of around two thousand. Their purpose is to seek out selected humanoids with the highest IQ and greatest influence who hold the reins of power in such areas as Government, big business, the armed forces etcetera and subtly guide them in the direction most conducive to their planet’s well-being, ensuring that their actions are not ultimately the cause of the destruction of their own particular world.”

“So, it’s a kind of brainwashing” stated Harding with much disdain, ever the person to champion the rights of the common man.

“Not really” Legacy replied. “The subject remains in complete control of their faculties including their own mind, and therefore the thoughts from which their decisions are ultimately made. The Grey Scout provides additional insight, spiritual enlightenment and inner strength to a degree that would not normally be available to a mere human, whose limited genetic development spans but a tiny fraction of the long history of the Grey Race.”

“You still haven’t explained how this is going to help Will” stressed the spy. “Have we really got time for all this?”

Legacy placed his hand on Rickenbacker’s shoulder and he calmed down. “You can relax” said the boy. “Whatever traumas William is now subjected to, the Grey will provide the strength for him to see it through and at least quadruple his mental capacity, which among other incredible advantages will enable him to establish how we are going to affect his rescue. This will aid the whole process considerably.” At this stage Legacy’s three companions were not quite sure what he meant by this last statement and he failed to elaborate further. “Finally,” stated the boy “I’m positive they won’t kill him without knowing the location of this.” He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the supremely valuable item that was Lord Pirbright’s book of poetry. The teenager grinned as if rejoicing in his ownership of the Galaxy’s equivalent of the Old Testament. “William passed it to me for safekeeping before he left.”

“So, the human race has nothing to fear from the Grey aliens after all?” Greyshott implied, changing back the subject and blatantly ignoring Rickenbacker’s repeated bleating about Earl Pirbright’s safety.

Unfortunately for the detective, Legacy failed to confirm his implication but instead stated “The Grey parasite now dwelling within our friend can only have a positive influence over the ultimate success of the Greystone quest!”

*

Earl William Pirbright of Hambledon sat on a dirty mite-infested mattress, shivering with cold in an extremely basic holding cell lacking both heat and sufficient light. He remained as Black and his bodyguard had found him

– as naked as a new-born baby. After around seven hours of what practically amounted to solitary confinement, a sentry decked out in the standard U.A.D.O. garb arrived to take The Earl for interrogation.

“Commander Black is ready to see you now” the guard announced as he unlocked the cell and beckoned the Earl towards him.

“Aren’t I the lucky one!” William replied sarcastically.

As they picked their way along the dark and dreary tunnel towards the room marked ‘INTERROGATION LOW RISK’ the Earl reflected on the recent demise of his good and loyal friend Basley Jessop with much sadness. It was a series of very unfortunate events that had led to his sudden passing but this did not make it any easier. As Jessop had lain at Orlin Black’s feet mortally wounded, the M.I.B. had allowed William to bend down to support his head while the security officer uttered a few final breathless words.

“Don’t grieve my friend” he had struggled. “It was well worth it for the greater good of our cause.” Then he was gone.

The Earl was brought back to the present as the U.A.D.O. guard pushed open the Interrogation Room’s door and with a wave of his hand indicated to William that he should enter first.

In the centre of the room sat Orlin Black looking unusually relaxed. His head was propped up with a soft, comfortable-looking cushion wedged behind his neck. He had positioned himself some distance back and his ankles were resting on the table’s edge so that his body was almost horizontal. “My my” he chuckled as the naked Earl appeared before his eyes. “How the mighty have fallen!” he tutted, shaking his head from side to side. “Well Mr. Pirbright” the M.I.B. continued, deliberately avoiding using the Earl’s proper title, “this is one sticky situation you definitely won’t be able to buy your way out of. Your millions have no relevance down here whatsoever!”

“I would have expected nothing less from a dedicated defender of the Human Race if, of course, that is what you really are!” William taunted.

Black’s grinning face which, owing to his rugged features and narrow skull was giving him a distinct look of insanity, dropped into the epitome of seriousness. “That’s a very dangerous insinuation” he growled “and very unwise considering you are already under suspicion of high treason.”

“My SURE organisation is the true defender of the Human Race” the Earl replied. “All we ever strive for is absolute truth and justice.” Then he added almost as an afterthought “.....and if you think that keeping me in this condition will humiliate me into co-operating with your dirty underhand methods then you are gravely mistaken. I’m made of much sterner stuff!”

“Not from where I’m sitting” Black replied, attempting to crack a joke with reference to William’s private parts, “but then I admit it is rather cold in here!”

The Earl refused to be intimidated, shaking his head at what he considered to be the M.I.B.’s blatant unprofessionalism.

“Anyway” continued his dark assailant, “I assumed your attire, or more to the point your lack of it, was your usual get-up for entering top secret government premises! So, you want some clothes?”

“I won’t even dignify that comment with a response” William returned.

“Guard: get him some clothes! The standard regalia for U.A.D.O. prisoners!”

The sentry left the room and soon returned with a pair of striped pyjamas. William pulled them on, glad that they would at least cover his modesty, but thought the design more than a little strange and unconventional for the Twenty First Century.

“Now hopefully you are feeling a little more comfortable” Black commented “but don’t get too used to it. It won’t last!” From a position down by his side, Black lifted Jessop’s briefcase onto the table in front of them both and clicked it open. He then carefully placed William’s Stealth Ring next to it.

“Now let’s see what we have in this box of goodies!” the M.I.B. began, as if he didn’t already know. “I must apologise for the unfortunate circumstances surrounding our Security Officer’s death. Although we were, of course, unaware that you were both in league together and he was obviously a dear friend, our intention was only to maim you before the Stealth Device re-activated and you got away.”

The Earl sat in silence.

“Jessop’s actions were rather unfortunate but looking on the bright side it has saved me a lot of paperwork and inconvenience taken up with legal proceedings. He undoubtedly would have been court-martialled, sentenced to death for treason and shot by firing squad. Therefore, the end result would have been the same.”

“If his death goes some way towards exposing the true motives behind the running of this organisation, then it won’t have been in vain.” William shuffled in his seat and folded his arms.

“I am at a loss as to what underhand activities you think I am up to” Black replied with a tone of resignation, “but I would prefer to discuss this.” He unrolled Jessop’s detailed plan of the U.A.D.O. London Headquarters. “I sincerely hope that there are no other copies of this floating around as that could cause me serious difficulties.”

William said nothing.

“First of all, I would like to know what you were hoping to find in the Alien Weaponry Store?” Black persevered.

“No comment” replied The Earl.

“I also need to ask you about a certain book of poetry” Black continued.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about” William fired back.

“One of your other people who we managed to turn mentioned that you would be sending him by text various poetic verses outlining your future intentions, but you managed to stall us prior to interception.”

“There is no such book” the Earl re-emphasised. “Just the odd coded message was planned.”

“I’m afraid I don’t believe you” Black replied, scowling. “As for this” he went on, picking up the Stealth Ring, flicking it up and catching it in a regular monotonous motion, “the fact that both you and the alien were wearing these has finally confirmed my suspicions!”

“And exactly what might they be?” William enquired.

“That you are in league with the Evil Stones and have kidnapped our Peace Restorer. You are holding him against his will and have commandeered his Stealth Weaponry for your own evil and selfish purposes!”

27.

The roar of low altitude fighter jets ripped into the tranquillity of the lush green low-lying Surrey fields surrounding Merry Way Farm that spread out in a rectangular pattern for many miles, as if holding the rolling hills of the North Downs in a loving embrace. Greyshott ran to the window and briefly glimpsed two Eurofighter Typhoons on a terrain-hugging sortie as they disappeared into the distance.

“How long ‘til we leave?” he questioned the boy. “I’ve got a nasty feeling that the military are closing in!”

“What makes you say that?” Harding queried.

“This is a busy area for descending civilian air traffic. Military jets are normally barred from operating in this vicinity.”

“I understand your concern” Legacy replied “but my sixth sense suggests that at present our ‘enemies’ still have no idea of our whereabouts. Jeff: print off your ‘Ordnance, Artillery and Logistics Catalogue.’”

The Restorer, keen to begin preparations for his return mission to East London, did exactly that, again using the miniature keyboard that folded in and out of his padded suit at his command. It included a narrow slit that expelled the required printed matter, which although initially condensed, folded out into A4 size as it unravelled. He passed the long list of available tactical equipment and weaponry to the boy. Legacy pored over the data for a while as if considering various options and then with triumphant glee proclaimed “Here it is. I knew it was here somewhere – the light weight version of your padded suit with small to medium calibre firepower.”

“Sounds great” said the spy. “What’s it got?”

“Well first of all: the most important aspect about it, apart from the obvious fact that it is more conducive to being worn for long periods than your larger version, is that it was developed entirely on earth rather than being an adaptation of an earlier alien design as were your padded suit and the Stealth Globe. One of the advantages of this is that the software is fully compatible with working inside the U.A.D.O. as its original purpose was multi-faceted. Therefore, you can re-enter the building with guaranteed and complete immunity from the U.A.D.O. defence computer.”

“Oh, how I love some good news!” proclaimed Rickenbacker “but before we start reviewing the suit’s capabilities, let’s get the down side out of the way, as I’m sure there’s bound to be one.”

“Actually, on this occasion” Legacy stated “all aspects appear to be thoroughly positive and in our favour, even the fact that the suit is an exact replica of the standard uniform worn by the Men in Black!”

“You mean I’ve got to walk around wearing shades and looking like one of those idiots?” Rickenbacker responded, laughing out loud.

“Your heavy padded suit will be far too cumbersome for this mission and the Stealth Ring is incompatible with the light weight suit which carries a wide variety of vital tools that you will need if the attempt to rescue William is to be a success.”

“Ok, ok” the spy submitted, resigning himself to Legacy’s sensible advice and superior logic. “Let’s process the request and get the thing on!”

“Each item in the catalogue carries a specific access code” continued the boy. “I’ll type in the one entitled ‘Multi-Purpose Strategic Office Wear for Enemy Complex Penetration’ – code A104. Let’s see what happens.”

This he duly did and there followed the sound of high-pitched beeping while Rickenbacker’s padded suit seemed to assume a life of its own, jumping into the air and back down again repeatedly while the arms flailed about like the limbs of a desperate drowning man. Then out popped a square parcel wrapped in cellophane, almost as if the garment had given birth to its own material offspring. The frantic movements then promptly ceased. Legacy retrieved the item, unwrapped and unfolded it and then laid it out flat on the kitchen table. All the creases disappeared.

“Right” the boy commanded. “Mr. Rickenbacker. Take this and try it on!”

“Yes sir!” exclaimed the spy faking a stiff and formal salute. He then wandered off to his bedroom, whistling merrily. Five minutes later he returned looking distinctly like a heavier built version of Orlin Black but nowhere near as ugly, his new image rounded off nicely by his sporting of the most fashionable shades currently available on the market. “How do I look?” he enquired of Harding, beaming.

“Black” she replied unhelpfully.

“Now let’s see what this wonderful garment does” Legacy began, referring to some printed instructions that had been enclosed inside the parcel. He then began to list out loud the vast selection of special aids and implements designed to assist the wearer in all kinds of espionage, rescue and military activities in general. Using technology gleaned from years of study of alien races, all these items had been developed using the tiniest of earth’s particles stored in a state of material suspension so that they could be fused together at a moment’s notice by the simple press of a button, forming solid and instantly operational tools of the military trade. The list of the suit’s hidden gadgetry appeared almost endless but the principal items that would assist in Rickenbacker’s return mission were as follows: A Digital Password and Lock Over-rider, a Microscopic Anaesthetising Dart Gun, a pair of Rocket Powered Auto-balancing Transportation Spheres, an Incoming Weapons Auto-deflector and a Temporary Body Mass Altering Physical Reduction Grease. Legacy instructed Rickenbacker on their use. He was happy with the majority of items but seemed rather reticent regarding the Transportation Spheres.

“Have you ever worn roller skates?” the boy asked.

“Only in the Nineteen Forties” the soldier replied “and even then, only a relatively primitive set compared with what I suspect are commercially available today.”

“Well the only difference with the spheres” continued the teenager, “is that you won’t need to worry about balancing your body as this is done for you automatically. The rocket propellant used has been modified using molecule suppression techniques and is completely silent, although able to propel you along at up to two hundred miles per hour, depending on how enclosed your surroundings are at the time of activation.”

“Then how is Will supposed to keep up with me?” the soldier whined.

“He won’t need to” Legacy answered “because you’ll be carrying him!”

“I don’t think so!” Rickenbacker snorted. “I may work out on a regular basis but I think that’s asking just a little bit too much under the circumstances – especially in a situation where we could be chased by armed U.A.D.O. operatives!”

“Do you remember” the teenager reminded him, “back at Lockwood’s place you lost your temper, broke a computer table and then commented that you obviously didn’t know your own strength?”

Rickenbacker nodded.

“Well I have something to show you.” Legacy climbed onto the kitchen table and lifted a leg into the air. “Stretch out your forefinger” he said.

The spy did as instructed.

“Place it under my foot and lift.”

“You gotta be kidding!” exclaimed the American, laughing at what he perceived to be one mighty big joke.

“Just do it!” the teenager demanded impatiently. “Don’t even think about it logically. Just take action!”

Rickenbacker followed the boy’s commands and to the amazement of everyone present, he succeeded in effortlessly lifting Legacy into the air with just one finger.

“I guess that was one of the results of the Greys’ surgery?” Greyshott offered.

“Yes. Your supposition is correct” the teenager replied. “Now” he continued “our plan to rescue The Earl must result in a totally smooth and error-free mission that has to run absolutely like clockwork. In order for him to be ready for Jeff’s arrival, we must calculate an accurate estimation of the Restorer’s arrival time almost down to the second.”

*

The sound of banging hammers and large sections of hardboard being moved around, broken only by the intermittent whirring of a power-drill, provided a noisy backdrop to what would otherwise have been just a cold, dark and lonely prison cell environment for The Earl. His interview had been cut short when Orlin Black was called away to deal with urgent World Defence business and William had been returned to captivity and further solitary confinement. He now sat busily contemplating his unfortunate position, accompanied by the annoying and remorseless banging and clattering of a major office refit being carried out in a room nearby.

The Earl knew that his friends wouldn’t leave him stranded for long, but had no idea at this stage when rescue would be attempted. He lay down on the dirty microbe-ridden excuse for a bed and his thoughts began to drift. Oddly, the first thing that entered his head was the uncanny way in which the striped pyjamas were a perfect fit. The soul-destroying row being created by the U.A.D.O. workmen suddenly stopped and he assumed that they had now downed tools for the night and were preparing to go home. The weird thing was that he could hear no voices or any sounds that would indicate that they were packing up. The noise just ceased abruptly without any gradual winding down. Pirbright’s cell was now silent and very faintly lit by a deep purple light, enabling him to just about make out his surroundings. These consisted of bare stone walls made from large white breeze blocks. He closed his eyes.

‘WILLIAM!’ A tremendous booming voice reverberated all around him making him metaphorically jump right out of his skin.

“What? Who is it?” he called back, believing that the loneliness and relentless crashing around of the building work had finally driven him insane.

‘WILLIAM!’ repeated the voice. ‘Answer me if you can hear me using only your mind!’

‘Yes, I can hear you’ the Earl replied through his thoughts. ‘Who is it? What do you want?’

‘Do not fret my friend. It is Legacy – Your partner in quest!’

‘It’s great to hear your voice young man.’ The Earl was relieved. ‘Where are you?’

‘I am here in the deepest recesses of your subconscious mind’ the boy communicated, ‘although strictly speaking I’m at Merry Way Farm with Paul, Joan and Jeff.’

‘How are you able to contact me?’ William asked, baffled.

‘I’m transmitting my brain waves to you across the ether’ the teenager continued. ‘Now listen very carefully. Here is the plan for your rescue: The Restorer will arrive outside your cell at midnight.’

‘How does he plan to get in?’ William asked. ‘I wouldn’t rely on the Stealth Ring after the last humiliating debacle!’

‘Don’t worry’ said Legacy’s calming voice, ‘Mr. Rickenbacker has obtained revised equipment. He will be dressed as one of the Men in Black – be ready!’

William looked at his watch which, despite the earlier wardrobe malfunction, remained around his wrist. It was nine o’ clock. Three hours to go. He was about to answer the boy then sensed that contact had been broken. He set the alarm on his timepiece to eleven thirty and decided to try to get a couple of hours sleep. But his mind was racing and slumber eluded him.

*

Legacy burst out of his room to find Rickenbacker alone in the kitchen with a strong cup of sugar-free black coffee. “OK. Everything’s prepared” he informed the soldier. “Have you briefed Harold?”

“Yes. He’s outside in the People Carrier, engine running, ready to leave.”

“OK. I’ve spoken to William. He knows how, where and when to expect you!”

“So how may I ask did you manage that?” the Restorer enquired.

“The alien parasite has bestowed upon the Earl its own innate psychic ability. We can now communicate through the mind.”

“Neat” replied Rickenbacker as he headed for the door. “I’ll see you all again later down at Stone Henge!”

“Good luck!” replied the boy. “Your equipment combined with your natural tenacity is certain this time to bring you complete success!”

“Let’s hope so” the spy emphasised with a wink. Then he was gone.

The teenager returned to his room, prepared some travel provisions and then woke the detective and journalist as gently as he could by tapping softly at their doors. “My friends” he announced as they both emerged bleary eyed from their respective rooms, having had only a very brief rest. “It is time to leave. Harold has arranged for an identical People Carrier to the one we have been using to be delivered here shortly by Oswald. We must be ready to go the instant it arrives!”

28.

As the uneven tarmac of the M25 rumbled beneath them, Greyshott sat in comfort in the back of the replacement people carrier feeling the sensual warmth of Harding's petite body snuggled up closely next to his and breathing in the scent of her moderately expensive perfume. Both seemed to be causing an unusual stirring within him, the like of which he hadn't experienced for some considerable time. 'Careful!' he scolded himself 'Don't forget this woman's married. Don't do anything you might regret!'

The front of the vehicle had an adjustable screen between them and the driver and front seat passenger which Oswald, in his wisdom, had decided to move to the down position. With temptation starting to gnaw away at Greyshott's conscience, the detective was beginning to wish that he had left it up.

While the butler entertained the teenager, who was sitting up front next to him, with exciting stories of his childhood days in London during the Blitz, Greyshott felt the weight of Harding's body begin to fall against him in a way that suggested that it was more than just the uncontrolled movements of sleep. She then stretched out her arms, reaching up and encircling the back of his neck while her small but firm breasts began to push teasingly against his chest. The vehicle's air conditioning was blowing a comforting blast of hot air while the occasional headlight and street lamp flashed by outside, sending brief beams across the entwined couple, brightening the restful darkness for only moments, but long enough for Greyshott to find himself inexplicably admiring the bone structure of Harding's face. She opened her large moist eyes, glistening sensually in the half light and stared up at him, communicating without a word a blatant expression of serious wanting. He could feel her less than subtle seduction drawing him irresistibly towards her and then in an instant their lips met, the adrenalin of mischievous excitement pumping suddenly and madly throughout their bodies in a wave of powerful and uncontrollable passion.

"Stop!" Greyshott commanded.

"What is it Paul?" Harding demanded. "What's wrong?"

"This isn't right" he replied "We shouldn't be doing this!" The detective gently pushed her away. "Don't worry love - It isn't you" he consoled her. "It's just that if we carry on the usual thing might happen!"

"What exactly do you mean – the usual thing?" she queried, a tone of confusion resonating from her stuttering voice.

"Joan – can I be totally honest with you?"

"Of course," she replied.

"You see I've always had difficult emotions where women are concerned" the detective admitted.

"What? Are you telling me you're gay?"

Greyshott laughed at the suggestion. "To be honest" he said, "I sometimes wish it were that simple. At least then I would know what the problem was!"

"Try to explain" she encouraged. "I'm listening."

“I’ve never been able to hold down a relationship for very long and for me physical encounters have always been fraught with complications and disappointment.”

Harding listened attentively, fascinated by Greyshott’s frankness regarding his emotions which, in her experience, was highly unusual for a man.

“For example,” he elaborated “during times of sexual intimacy everything is fine for the first five or so minutes, then without warning I am struck by an overpowering impression that something is very wrong.”

“Have you ever sought help for this perceived problem?” the journalist enquired, attempting to be helpful.

“On a number of occasions, I’ve considered approaching my good friend Ashish Patel for some regressive therapy, but to date I’ve never summoned up enough courage!”

“Try to explain how it feels” Harding pushed. “Perhaps I can help?”

“It’s very hard to describe” answered Greyshott, “but it’s almost as if I’m performing bestiality, or at the very least making love to an inferior species!”

Harding, who had subtly moved closer while he spoke, now recoiled away from him. “Paul! You sexist pig!” she scolded while at the same time clouting him hard in the chest. He realised immediately that she definitely didn’t understand as he watched her assume a new demeanour with arms folded and head down.

“Look” he said “- if it’s any consolation, I think you’re a beautiful and intelligent young woman – in fact just my type – and if I didn’t have this difficulty and circumstances were different, I would have moved hell and high water to bring us together. But we musn’t forget you *are* a married woman and while there’s still a chance for you and Jeff, I don’t think anything should be allowed to jeopardise that!”

“You’re sweet” she smiled, lightly touching his face, while stewing over in the back of her mind how her association with Jeff Rickenbacker was now becoming a dreadful curse, determined to stifle at any cost what she perceived to be her true emotions. “But you’re a big spoil sport” she added punching his arm, then concluded with a tone of resignation “I suppose Mr. Strange Detective you are right!”

“I know I am” he grinned back at her.

As the vehicle continued on through the night, the atmosphere between the detective and the journalist remained a little tense. Almost since the very first day they had met, an unspoken underlying attraction had been simmering just beneath the surface and in the last few minutes had broken free and shown itself in a sudden and passionate kiss. But as quickly as they had reared their significant head, the powerful emotions that had culminated in that hot and lustful encounter had rapidly subsided during their subsequent chat. The flames of their intimacy, however, had not been completely extinguished, continuing to burn within like an unremitting pilot light, ready to burst into life again at the slightest invitation.

Greyschott’s thoughts and conversation moved on to the next phase of their rapidly developing expedition, partly in the hope that changing the subject would distract Harding from what he imagined had been a rather embarrassing experience for her. “So, the poem mentions druids and Stone Henge but we’ve been given very little time to carry out research on either.” He turned to her, hoping that he had succeeded in lightening the mood, but she still seemed a little cagey, despite his earlier explanations.

For a few moments Harding just sat there in silence and he distinctly began to sense a cold shoulder, but then she turned to face him, her eyes wet with the tears of a frightened child, despite her physical appearance, which suggested a woman in her early thirties. "I'm sorry Paul" the words burst forth from her trembling lips. "It's just that I don't take rejection very well and I'm still not totally sure or comfortable with the person I'm supposed to be. It's all so terribly confusing!" She paused, then added with a tone of desperation in her voice: "But I still value our good friendship, can we keep it?"

"Of course we can" the detective replied. "Don't worry. No damage done!" Little did Harding know how he would have loved to have continued with their intimate encounter and perhaps moved things along a little further, but for the sake of 'The Greystone Quest' and all that was now at stake, he was determined to keep these overwhelming feelings to himself. What also hadn't helped was the fact that the vision of a heartbroken Jeff Rickenbacker wandering off alone into what looked like a ferocious sandstorm had also flashed through his mind at the critical moment of their kiss, the origins of which he couldn't even begin to guess. But it served to confirm his decision. He would ensure that she would never know how close they might have come to that ultimate physical and emotional union, even though his recurring psychological problem may have still turned that potentially beautiful experience into an almighty crashing disaster.

Harding finally smiled, relieved that she had at least managed to preserve their valuable friendship. The atmosphere relaxed. She recalled his earlier statement and asked "Does this vehicle have GPS access to the NET?"

"That's an excellent idea!" Greystott replied, squeezing her hand with affection. "Let's take a look." As the detective had expected, the People Carrier had an identical Visual Entertainment Console to its stable mate. He pulled it out and pressed a switch labelled 'INTERNET wireless connection,' logging on as a 'GUEST' and typing 'DRUIDS STONE HENGE' into the 'SEARCH' box.

*

The streets of East London were silent and empty as Jeff Rickenbacker darted in and out of the dark, forbidding alleyways between buildings. When occasional strangers approached, he would duck down behind industrial waste bins and other street furniture like a seasoned urban fox. Although dressed in a way that allowed him to merge effectively into the U.A.D.O. environment, his long experience working undercover made him fully aware that they could also have secret operatives in the area blending in as members of the public just waiting for The Earl's rescuer to show up. He therefore determined to stay out of sight as much as possible until he was back inside the complex.

This time the plan was to use the eastern emergency exit stairway that led directly to the containment cells. He would first have to dart the guard at control post four of the above ground P.F.I.B. building where the stairs began. The anaesthetising projectile was so tiny that the man wouldn't even feel it. He would just fall into a deep sleep within seconds. Being eleven thirty at night, Rickenbacker had hoped to find the lobby virtually deserted and as he approached the eastern entrance to the building, he was not disappointed. The security guard was alone and engrossed in the latest best-selling novel. He hardly noticed as the spy entered through the rotating doorway but just about managed to acknowledge him.

"Name?" the uniformed officer requested in a tone that demonstrated he had absolutely no interest in his job whatsoever.

"Odin Black 3042" Rickenbacker replied.

“Finger!” demanded the guard, still keeping his eyes firmly fixed on his book while lifting the portable print reader up with one hand and pointing it in the spy’s direction.

“Thank you” Rickenbacker replied and stretched out his arm as if preparing to insert his finger but instead fired the anaesthetising dart at the man’s jugular. He slumped forward out cold, the book sliding from his grip and dropping to the floor. The spy moved quickly, pushing him gently back in his chair and placing the novel once more between the fingers of both his hands, ensuring that they were clenched tightly around it, despite their owner being out cold. It would now appear to any one passing that he was deeply engrossed in his book but temporarily resting his eyes. The truth of the matter was that he would now be unconscious for at least forty minutes and no-one would be able to wake him.

The spy opened up his own right hand to reveal six round fluorescent activation buttons superimposed onto his palm. It was all part of the new technology. He had memorised the purpose of each button and moved to the next step which involved utilising the digital lock and password over-rider. As the button was pressed, a triangular device miraculously emerged from the cuff of his suit. He flicked it back into his hand in the coolest of moves, and laid it flat against the print reader, which turned green and announced “print accepted – please enter!”

Rickenbacker needed no second invitation and like a bolt of lightning, he shot down the emergency stairs, reaching the bottom in a few short minutes. As he turned into a long dimly lit corridor, he was distracted by an odd prickling sensation in his hand. Looking down at his palm the following words were so unexpected they almost knocked him for six. WARNING: EXTREME CAUTION ADVISED. ALIEN LIFE FORMS IN STASIS. 2.4 METRES LEFT.

29.

Rickenbacker froze where he stood, stalled in his tracks by a powerful feeling of apprehension. Would his mission to rescue The Earl now be jeopardised by the necessity of having to battle a couple of aliens, possibly with superior technology and firepower? But wait – the integrated computer/cellular display and control module in the palm of his hand indicated a condition of ‘stasis.’ Were they somehow frozen in physical and cranial suspension and therefore totally unaware of his presence? He prayed that this was indeed the case as he proceeded with caution for a further metre and a half, but there was no obvious sign of beings of any description, let alone aliens.

Thinking on his feet for what would be the most useful type of device to assist his current predicament, he punched into his hand a request for a small portable x-ray scanner. In an instant the device materialised from the left upper inside leg of his suit. He snapped it off and placed it flush against the nearest wall. The screen buzzed with interference but then cleared to reveal the outline of two tall figures standing motionless as would a couple of Grenadier Guards surrounded by tourists on a busy Sunday afternoon at Buckingham Palace. The picture lacked clarity, being somewhat hazy, which surprised the spy as his equipment had never previously let him down.

Rickenbacker proceeded to feel his way along the wall for something that might suggest an entrance point to the place where the two figures stood, brutally aware that his first and foremost objective was to rescue the Earl and he could ill afford dedicating extra time to this unforeseen but nevertheless intriguing distraction. But curiosity had taken over and he needed to know why there were alien bodies apparently in secure storage right at the heart of the U.A.D.O.’s London facility.

To his surprise, as he felt along the surface of the wall, it inexplicably became spongy and pliant so he pushed his hand harder against it. Then strangely, his whole arm completely vanished and he felt a tugging sensation caused by abnormal pressure, as if he was being sucked into a powerful vacuum. He surrendered to this incredible pulling sensation, following through with the rest of his body, finding himself the other side of the wall and facing the two corpse-like entities he had observed earlier on the screen.

They were enclosed in two large upright semi-transparent canisters, their torsos obscured by what looked like frosted glass. This explained the blurred image on the soldier’s scanner. However, their heads were clearly visible. He couldn’t fail to recognise the two encapsulated forms. Towering over him like a couple of evil headmasters about to administer corporal punishment were Orlin Black and Joseph Goebbels. Upon their heads they were each wearing tightly-fitting crowns in the form of circular strips of metal containing imprinted circuitry and sprouting forth electrical cables; a mass of tangled wiring leading away to what appeared to be a large oblong-shaped fuse box-type device on the wall.

Each figure sported a gold-coloured pair of padded headphones but rather than being wired for sound, they appeared to be absorbing a considerable amount of voltage. The heads of the cocooned beings were shuddering in a manic frenzy like generators at full power, with the flesh beneath their facial epidermis bubbling and gurgling in a vivid and sickening display, like corrosive acid pumping relentlessly around their crazy metabolism.

In place of the life forms’ eyeballs were deep and empty crater-like sockets forming bright and intense fiery voids. All four sources of ignition seemed to be feeding off each other, the flames occasionally merging together when they would briefly resemble a single raging industrial furnace. Both figures were clearly unconscious while this process, whatever it was, took its ugly course.

Alpha One realised he would now need to somehow pass this new information through to the genuine authorities; that part of the U.A.D.O. hopefully still untainted by alien interference, but first he would need to

complete his mission as originally planned. The soldier raced away from the area after employing the same method as when he gained entry – applying pressure with his body to the spongy material that passed for a wall, but not before briefly contemplating blasting away with a mini rocket launcher the fuse box emulation that connected the two aliens to the complex’s main electricity supply.

Although this action may well have disrupted whatever procedure was under way, it would certainly have attracted unwanted attention and made his mission to rescue William all the more difficult. It was therefore fortunate that common sense prevailed.

Rickenbacker looked at his watch. Twenty minutes to midnight. Time was running out and the Earl would soon be expecting him. Back at the foot of the Emergency Exit stairwell he paused to re-evaluate his situation. He realised that, according to Jessop’s rough plan of Subterranea which had now been copied and downloaded into his suit’s master computer programme, all that now lay between him and the Earl’s holding cell was a large Conference Room to one side of a long corridor. He would be a little earlier than planned but hey – what difference would twenty minutes make in the overall scheme of things? He was about to find out!

Just as Alpha One was about to start the short journey on foot to where William now resided, the Earl now pacing nervously up and down in his gloomy environment of incarceration, the spy sensed something large and unstoppable approaching. It was accompanied by a fierce droning sound produced by hundreds of excited voices merging into one thunderous cacophony as the charging beast became ever closer.

In a last-ditch attempt to avoid the fray, Rickenbacker pressed his back hard up against the side of the passageway as around the corner came a stampede of at least a hundred Men in Black, jockeying for prime position like an urgent herd of migrating wildebeests towards the door of the Conference Room. They brought with them the unpleasant and rank taint of mass male body odour, as if they had been pressed together in a confined space for an uncomfortably long period.

Swept up like an insignificant and helpless insect, the soldier had no option but to move with the flow until his body was trapped and his head wedged firmly against the unsympathetically shaped door handle.

“Now, now gentlemen!” came a voice from inside the room. “Fall back please. There’s plenty of time.”

The handle turned, the door opened and a pile of bodies, with Rickenbacker at the apex, fell untidily to the floor. As the spy rose to his feet and brushed himself down, an outstretched hand appeared by way of greeting. “Welcome operative” announced Echo Five U.A.D.O. Lieutenant Dennis Shaw. “Name?”

“Odin Black 3042 – Sir!” Rickenbacker instinctively stood to attention and saluted.

“Relax Odin” Shaw replied, grinning. “Please find your seat.”

The soldier cursed to himself that yet again his intentions to extract the Earl quickly and easily had been thwarted. He knew that there would be no seat with his name on it, but luckily, he spied one that was both empty and nameless very close to the doorway he had just fallen through. Like a professional conjurer he passed the palm of his hand across the seat back and a label ‘Odin Black’ appeared from nowhere. He sat down and waited while the remaining M.I.B.s made themselves comfortable.

It was now abundantly clear that Rickenbacker had allowed himself to be inadvertently swept up into an important meeting between some of the U.A.D.O. ‘bigwigs’ and what was probably the whole contingent of the UK-based Men in Black.

Shaw was accompanied by the ATRIO, Julie Phelps and Orlin Black's erstwhile bodyguard who had been present during William's capture. It was fortunate that none of them had been active with the UK branch of the U.A.D.O. prior to the Horsham incident and this, together with his trendy shades, enabled the spy to maintain his cover and remain unrecognised.

The bodyguard stood close to Alpha One giving each attendee the 'once over' as they entered the room. This was the first opportunity the spy had had to take a close look at him. He was an odd-looking character with strange facial features. His head was chunky and round and his eyes were heavily sleep-encrusted. They were positioned very close together just above the bridge of his nose which was wide and flat as if his face had been run over by an out of control steam roller. On the side of his head, close to a thick and hairy sideburn, there appeared to be something small and oblong-shaped pulsating just beneath his skin which to the spy seemed more than a little odd.

Phelps was strutting around full of self-importance with her head held high in the air, just as she had at Gables' field and was just finishing setting up a rather dated overhead projector.

After about ten minutes of almost continuous hubbub, the Men in Black finally settled down and sat waiting in tense anticipation as the room became as silent as an ancient rural church on a Monday afternoon.

Shaw launched himself onto a low stage and began a brief 'Welcome' speech. All the while, the soldier racked his brains in a vain attempt to establish how he could tactfully extract himself from the room without making it too obvious.

"Now gentlemen" Shaw continued, "let's get down to business. You have been called here today to be briefed on the latest position regarding 'Operation Rolling Stone.' As you will no doubt all be aware, we have been making steady progress over the last couple of weeks towards establishing the current location of 'The Greystone Legacy' and can now report a significant breakthrough! A couple of our reconnaissance jets pinpointed one of Pirbright's vehicles parked at a semi-derelict farm near Dorking a couple of days ago. It has since disappeared. However, we now have the Earl of Hambledon in custody and believe it is only a matter of hours before we establish, using our approved interrogation procedures, the teenager's whereabouts."

As Shaw spoke, Rickenbacker subtly reviewed his equipment list on the screen superimposed on his palm and located a time limited ultra-strong door sealant, a cunning plan now rapidly forming in his highly trained military mind, while he also committed to memory the salient points of Shaw's speech.

The former Group Captain then made an announcement: "I would now like to introduce you to a new member of our team: This is Doctor Julie Phelps, our Alien Technology and Research Intelligence Officer. She has recently transferred from the United States operation to take up this newly-created post."

Everyone present gave a round of applause.

"Thank you, thank you" Phelps acknowledged. "Now the reason I have been asked to attend this important meeting is to bring you up to speed regarding our efforts to track down Agent Alpha One, the U.A.D.O. Peace Restorer, who we now believe survived the Horsham incident and has been kidnapped by the boy and his accomplices."

Rickenbacker pricked up his ears.

"Our latest intelligence deems it highly likely that he has been brainwashed and imprisoned against his will and that his advanced military equipment may have been commandeered by the teenager who, using his vastly

superior brainpower, may be planning to attack this underground base, while effectively rendering The Restorer powerless.”

There was a short gap as Phelps was interrupted by the audience murmuring amongst themselves and the volume of their voices briefly rose to a point where she was almost completely drowned out.

“OK gentlemen!” Agent Echo Five Dennis Shaw intervened, asserting his control in order to allow the ATRIO to continue.

“The good news is that, after much scientific experiment, we have finally successfully developed a device that will flag up and zoom in on any individual entering this underground facility who is either wearing or carrying anything directly related to or indeed derived from The Restorer’s Military Logistics Suit.”

“Oh shit!” Rickenbacker muttered under his breath.

Again, the volume of the audience’s chatter rose as each M.I.B. turned to the guy next to him and voiced and nodded their approval to this latest development.

“Show us how it works Doctor Phelps!” pleaded an immature-sounding fellow seated towards the front of the room.

“Yeah, c’mon doctor show us!” roared almost a hundred supporting voices in unison.

Shaw was again forced to interject.

Phelps smiled smugly and as if to tease the audience, pointed out that the device was still at the experimental stage and that there were a couple of unresolved glitches that needed to be ironed out before she could officially commission its use. But the infantile pleas of the M.I.B.s grew to such an extent that they soon developed into a mass chanting and foot-stamping, comparable to excited fans of a heavy rock band calling for an encore.

Finally, completely overwhelmed, the ATRIO held up the device in front of her face and with her forefinger pointed out the position of the activation button.

Rickenbacker had not been idle. He had covertly summoned a pink pressurised aerosol canister from his suit which he now held fully prepared in his right hand, the Incoming Weapons Auto-deflector in his left.

“In order to activate the device” Phelps continued with her demonstration, “you press this red button and...”

A powerful ray of concentrated blue light interrupted her in mid flow, shooting up to the ceiling and then deflecting itself downwards to the floor, finally firing horizontally towards the back of the room where it enveloped the spy in a targeted and accusing circle of guilt, accompanied by the deafening shriek of a siren-type alarm.

This unexpected result of Phelps’ activation of the device caused her to cack handedly drop it in surprise, sending it clattering over the side of the stage and into the lap of a tall skinny character seated in the front row.

30.

A brief moment of intense silence permeated the highly charged atmosphere as the Conference Room's many occupants attempted to get to grips with what they were now witnessing. Then Shaw, with his lightning quick reactions, hit a switch embedded in the podium where he stood, activating the Central Intruder Alert for the whole underground base.

"Grab him!" he screamed.

One of the Men in Black less than ten feet away from Alpha One's position whipped out his hand gun and with deadly accuracy fired at the spy's arm intending to maim, but Rickenbacker's Weapons Deflector had created an impenetrable force field. The bullet bounced off and hurtled towards the M.I.B.'s nearest colleague injuring him in the foot.

Without further delay, the soldier threw himself at the Conference Room's door, forcing it open with the weight of his fall, jumped to his feet and slammed it shut behind him. With the aerosol can still firmly in his grip, he fired its contents around the door's complete circumference, sealing it thoroughly and trapping everyone inside.

The sealant had an effective time of only ten minutes, but with the technology at his disposal, Rickenbacker reckoned that this should be just about long enough to rescue the Earl and get the hell out of there.

The door to William's cell was dead ahead. He withdrew the Digital Lock Over-rider from his suit pocket and placed it flush against the prison door. With a clunk, the lock released and the door cracked open. As expected, William's pyjamad form was waiting on tenterhooks just the other side. "Well am I glad to see *you*" began the Earl "and not before time! I..."

Pausing briefly, fascinated by the Earl's strange get-up, Rickenbacker then grabbed Orlin Black's valuable prisoner in mid-sentence and hoisted him over his left shoulder in a type of fireman's lift. "No time to chat!" he cut his friend short. "Just do everything I say. Smother yourself with this!" He handed William a tube of Body Mass Reduction Grease, also covering himself liberally with a globule of the stuff as he ran down the long dimly-lit corridor.

"Now for the jewel in the crown!" he announced

"What?" came the puzzled reply from a severely uncomfortable Pirbright.

With the flick of yet another switch, a sudden increase in acceleration accompanied the appearance of the Rocket-Powered Transportation Spheres, sprouting out from beneath Rickenbacker's feet.

An army of U.A.D.O. operatives could be heard gaining ground close by, the sound of their feet rattling down the aluminium steps that formed the emergency stairs that the spy had used earlier to gain entry. He wondered if he had sufficient firepower to restrain them all as they approached, but then he noticed the air conditioning vent that had formed part of Legacy's original master rescue plan. It led directly to the surface and was well within their reach. Would this be their hoped-for salvation?

In the meantime, Black's bodyguard had somehow extracted himself from the Conference Room, while everyone else's attention was diverted towards breaking out of the main exit door. He had now arrived at the Alien Storage and Regeneration facility and was urgently ripping off the Chief M.I.B.'s headphones and unplugging him from the electric current.

"Sir wake up! Please wake up!" he begged. Orlin Black collapsed in a heap but within seconds had transformed himself back into his fully human form, complete with eyeballs, and was thoroughly alert and conscious.

"What is it soldier?" he demanded impatiently. "My orders were for no interruptions until the electro-regeneration procedure was complete!"

"You know I wouldn't normally sir" the bodyguard replied, an air of exasperation colouring his voice, "but it's an emergency – listen!"

Black's attention was drawn to the blaring Intruder Alarm.

"He's arrived. Pirbright's rescuer!" the bodyguard pursued.

"Quick! Follow me!" said Black.

As Rickenbacker removed the grill from the Air Conditioning Vent in preparation for their escape, the chief M.I.B. and his protector suddenly appeared next to them.

"Soldier! Apprehend them!" Black ordered.

The bodyguard was holding a futuristic-looking stun gun and fired it at the spy. Again, the projectile ricocheted away from Rickenbacker's force field, but this time the angle of impact increased its velocity considerably as it changed course and headed back in the direction of its instigator, exploding in the bodyguard's left temple. He dropped to the floor, his ugly form convulsing in uncontrollable spasms as the rectangular device that the spy had earlier observed was shot away by the impact and landed at Black's feet.

Meanwhile, Rickenbacker and The Earl disappeared like lightning up the ventilator shaft, transit through the narrow tunnel aided significantly by the Body Mass Reduction Chemicals, leaving behind them a swirling vortex of expelled air and spent rocket fuel.

As they shot out of the top of the P.F.I.B. building through the chimney-shaped air vent outlet like a freshly fired cannon shell, a local traffic policeman parked nearby observed the strange spectacle. Rickenbacker shifted his body weight as Legacy had recommended and the spheres directed the spy and his less than willing payload down to a comfortable landing, a mere couple of feet from where the Police Car was parked.

Although the sudden deceleration caused the nauseated Earl to almost black out, he managed a cheeky grin directed at close range towards the copper, who watched with an expression of sheer amazement as the two accelerated away at terrific speed towards the brightly moonlit west.

While the Spy and the Earl made their dramatic escape, Black hung on for dear life to some overhead piping until the turbulent atmosphere cleared. Then steadying himself once again, he watched mesmerised as his bodyguard continued fitting nearby. The Chief M.I.B. drew a previously concealed weapon and shot the guard dead at point blank range. He picked up the still pulsating cranial device and squirreled it away into an inside pocket of his suit.

Within moments the U.A.D.O. operatives arrived from one direction and Shaw and Phelps from the other. Shaw looked at Black curiously. "Hello Sir. I thought you left work earlier this evening?"

Caught off guard, Black stuttered, realising he had been rumbled. "No – er – I – I had to come back. Forgot some paperwork – and it looks like it's as well that I did!" He gestured towards the dead bodyguard. "Yet more blood on the hands of the boy and his accomplices!" he fumed.

Shaw sheepishly made his way closer, spluttering out excuses to Black for his failure to apprehend the intruder.

"We've no idea who he was, but Pirbright's rescuer turned up using The Restorer's specialised equipment before we had finished testing the new techno-tracker. I can send out a contingent of Stratowarriors after them immediately! Do I have your consent?"

The Stratowarriors were a crack team of airborne U.A.D.O. troops utilising individual jet packs for rapid deployment in the field.

Echo Five awaited Black's response, visibly flushed and sweating profusely through a combination of exertion and embarrassment. Phelps shook her head from side to side with an air of condescension, as if to insinuate that Shaw could have done better, while examining in minute detail the tracking device she had managed to retrieve during the commotion for hairline cracks and other damage.

Black paused in thought. "No" he replied. "I think I know who it was. Even the Stratowarriors won't catch them! Let them go!"

He turned and headed back towards Central Control.

*

With integral radar guidance, Rickenbacker's Transportation Spheres were powering them across the West London suburbs at close to two hundred miles per hour on the most direct routeing possible to Stone Henge without colliding with obstructions.

Realising William's lack of outdoor clothing, the spy decided to activate the brakes and they came to a sudden halt right in the centre of Hounslow Heath Golf Course. He gently set the Earl down on the grass and noticed his friend had started to turn blue from exposure and was shivering intensely. The area was pitch black and it appeared from the random speckling of house lights in the distance that the nearest estate was some way away. It was therefore unlikely that they would be disturbed as the spy prepared to improve the comfort of their onward travel arrangements.

He had made advanced preparations in the event of a marked drop in temperature and his next requirement from his light weight logistics suit were two electrically heated Sonic-Travel-All-In-Ones, complete with fully pressurised helmets, each with their own individual oxygen supply. After donning his own and helping William, who was as stiff as a board, on with his, the colour began to return to the Earl's face, he grinned his approval and gave the thumbs up.

Rickenbacker then turned around and stretched out his arms. Fully accepting now of the spy's tremendous strength, William launched himself without question onto the soldier's back and they shot off again like a couple of energetic beings from outer space on a drunken Saturday night bender. Ahead lay the distant stone circle and the hoped-for location of their three comrades in quest.

*

It had been a fun, action-packed and somewhat tiring summer holiday down in Cornwall for the McQuade family. Brian McQuade, his wife and two children were now on the final lap of their journey home to Andover. Prior to their initial outbound departure, a week earlier, travelling in a Nineteen Sixty-Two build Morris Minor One Thousand, the two hundred or so miles to Truro and back had seemed more than a little risky to his wife and she had tried in vain to persuade him to substitute a more modern and reliable hire car.

But Brian was in love with his Moggie, even sometimes to the detriment of his family and had insisted that they would be fine. It now seemed that Mrs. McQuade's earlier reservations had been unfounded as she relaxed with home now well within reach, but then five miles beyond Stone Henge, the vehicle came to a shuddering halt. While his wife held up a torch, Brian McQuade lifted the bonnet and checked the engine's inner workings but could find no obvious source of the problem.

They had turned off the main A303 trunk road a few miles back while attempting a short cut and Brian now cursed to himself as he realised that their one mobile phone was also now conveniently dead to the world. They were stranded.

"Don't worry" he comforted his wife. "Wait here with the kids and I'll head back to the main road and flag someone down. It's only about a mile away. Keep the doors locked from the inside!" With a quick peck on her cheek, he disappeared into the crisp Autumnal night, the air of which had begun to spread with insidious abandon throughout the Wiltshire countryside, pulling his overcoat around his thin, lanky frame.

The two young children sat in the back of the vehicle quiet as mice initially, while Mrs. McQuade stared ahead through the front windscreen, feeling nervous and ever alert to the possibility of unfriendly strangers wandering about the sparsely populated wilderness of their present location. As the strain and loneliness of waiting began to take its toll, the unnerving sounds of primeval grunts and yelps began to pierce the otherwise silent night, only to die away again as quickly as they came, while nocturnal mammalian forest dwellers crept up to the car, sniffing the air and disturbing the undergrowth, only to then scurry away, returning to their holes, burrows and other rural habitats.

Harry and Elizabeth ducked down out of sight from the windows as heavy condensation began to form, the six-year-old girl burying herself beneath her father's spare anorak. Harry, some seven years her senior, like most young teenagers, enjoyed every opportunity to tease his younger sister and that night was certainly no exception.

"Mummy I'm scared" she whimpered as her head sprouted forth from the neck section of the garment and in the process caught her ponytail in the zip fastener, leading to a further explicit protestation.

"There's nothing to worry about, Lizzy" her brother offered, "as long as the scary spacemen don't come and get you!"

"Mummy tell him!" The little girl's pale skin became a mass of goose bumps as she shrunk once more beneath the heavy coat.

"Pack it in Harry!" their mother ordered. "Just sit quietly 'til your dad returns. He shouldn't be much longer."

The temptation though, was too great for the young fellow. “They travel in twos you know, wearing big helmets, roller skates and jet packs. They’re so fast you just can’t get away! Arrrgh!” He lifted his hand in a claw-like demonstration above his sister’s cowering head.

“Mummy!” Elizabeth shrieked.

“Calm down darling!” she comforted. “There’s no such thing as scary spacemen. Your brother’s just being silly!”

No sooner had she spoken than The Restorer and his heavy cargo – the stocky Earl, hanging on to the Spy’s arched back like a blood-sucking leech, went shooting past only feet from their position, decelerating in preparation for their arrival at the stone circle. Their passing transit left in its wake a hurricane of swirling air that peppered the car with specks of earth, loose twigs and a few medium-sized branches from nearby trees. This vision most surreal was made all the more chilling by Elizabeth’s ear-piercing high-pitched scream of terror.

Brian McQuade returned moments later with news that the National Vehicle Recovery Service were on their way. He found his two children cowering on the floor beneath the back seat thoroughly distraught, while his wife’s fearful expression seemed somehow frozen in time. The blood from her terror-stricken face had drained completely away, leaving her gasping for air and as white as a sheet. When eventually the paralysis of shock began to wane, she turned to her husband and said in a soft trembling voice: “I don’t care how we do it but please – please, can we get away from this godforsaken place!”

*

The ancient aura of medieval ritual permeated the mysterious atmosphere as the solitary vehicle drew up close to the makeshift rope barrier, a poor excuse for security around the precious stones designed to discourage unauthorised visitors. The man helped the woman down the step of the People Carrier and checked his person for the Glock Thirty-Seven he had borrowed from the American before they parted. It was safe and secure in a makeshift holster around his waist.

The teenager and the ancient butler had now concluded their evening of story-telling and as they joined their two companions, Legacy remarked that, based upon his preliminary time calculations for The Restorer’s rescue mission, the Earl and the spy should be arriving at any moment. As he spoke, they noticed something eerie issuing forth from behind one of the larger trilithons. A faint crimson glow flickered intermittently around the movements of some dark, shadowy figures.

“You three stay here!” Greyshott ordered feeling unusually gung ho. “I’ll go and check it out.” Before his comrades had chance to protest, he was off towards the inner depths of the stone monument, jumping like a cricket from one large pillar to another as he neared the weird, pulsating light show. Rounding the stones in question he came across the silhouette of a tall, heavily-built individual backdropped against the pale moonlight.

The detective stepped forward and in a way that demonstrated he meant business, pressed the muzzle of his gun hard into the figure’s back. “Turn around slowly” he commanded “and throw any weapons you have to the ground!”

At that very second, he also felt something prodding him hard and deliberately from behind.

“No. You drop yours and raise your hands slowly into the air!” The voice, although menacing, sounded familiar.

31.

With arms raised to the sky, Greyshott felt what appeared to be two shot gun muzzles placed vertically one on top of the other, move smartly away from his back. He turned around, taking great care not to spook whoever was threatening him from behind.

He found himself standing opposite the stocky figure of William Pirbright, the Earl now guffawing away in his usual extravagant manner. His haughty figure was accentuated by the dancing crimson reflecting back and forth from what looked like a neatly folded black suit lying on the ground nearby. The glow was accompanied by an unusual sucking noise.

William's hand and fingers were still formed into the shape of a flintlock pistol as he stepped back from the detective, almost tripping over his pyjama bottoms in the process which, for some inexplicable reason, had now become at least half a size too big for his short stumpy body.

"Will!" Greyshott exclaimed with relief. "Thank god you're OK!"

At that moment the tall, bulky figure who seconds before had been at the mercy of Greyshott's Glock, turned to face them both. Jeff Rickenbacker lifted the now de-pressurised Sonic Travel Helmet from his head and after watching the two men embrace, offered forward an outstretched hand by way of his own more formal greeting.

Greyshott took it firmly into his own, shaking it with enthusiasm. "Well done Jeff!" he congratulated, "I knew you wouldn't let us down." As he spoke, they were joined by Harding and the boy, Oswald remaining in comparative safety by the vehicle.

"Jeff, William!" the journalist beamed as she hugged them both in turn, Rickenbacker gladly enveloping her small frame in his massive arms in a long sought-after embrace, this fact blatantly demonstrated by the duration which was rather more lengthy than was perhaps appropriate. Easily sensing the spy's undisguised emotions, Harding gently pulled free from his grip and moved on to welcoming William back into the fold.

"Good to see you both gentlemen!" Legacy announced in his usual business-like, dead pan manner, now widely accepted by the rest of the 'Greystone Clan' as a normal form of communication.

"So how did it go?" Harding questioned with excitement. "You must tell us everything!"

"Well it was certainly no picnic" Rickenbacker replied "and there were plenty of hairy moments when if it hadn't been for a spot of luck, there could have been a completely different outcome!" He proceeded to tell them all about how he had almost been captured by Shaw and the M.I.B.s before managing to extract the Earl from his cell and the details of the new 'Techno-Tracker' developed by the U.A.D.O. to enable them to monitor any use of his technology and thus seek him out. "Excuse me" he added and walked over to his now compressed light weight suit, suspending the helmet directly over the top of the neatly folded garment. The crimson glow reappeared while the head gear was absorbed back into the suit's material and vanished, apparently vaporising into nothing as it was sucked back into the inter-dimensional void from whence it had originally materialised.

"Excellent gear all this!" the spy proclaimed, pointing to his newly-adorned khakis. "I've even managed to summon up a new set of these but with some important though subtle differences."

"I'm sure we'll be privileged to witness a demonstration of their high-tech accessories in the fullness of time" Legacy intervened, "but just to round off, is there any other salient information you wish to impart to us at this juncture?" It was almost as if he already knew.

"Yes" Alpha One came straight out with it. "Orlin Black is an alien. There's no longer any doubt!"

"I thought as much" stated the Earl. "I knew there was something screwy about that guy the moment I set eyes on him – something about the way those creepy eyes bore right into your very soul – I'm sure he practices mind interference techniques. I came away from my interrogation with the distinct impression we had been subtly communicating on a level far superior to anything I had ever previously experienced."

"Shall we tell him?" Greyshott directed towards Legacy, referring to the boy's now firm conviction that the Earl had been infiltrated by a Grey Scout Alien.

The teenager understood the question but said nothing.

"Tell me what?" William queried.

Harding sensed the impasse developing and hastily changed the subject. "So how did you find out Black's an alien and also" she continued, a little giggle inadvertently slipping into the timbre of her voice, "What's with the ill-fitting striped pyjamas Will?"

The spy and the Earl both attempted to answer at the same time but Pirbright, in his inordinate wisdom, elected to give way.

"While approaching Will's cell, my equipment identified and located some type of 'Power House' hidden deep within the complex's structure. Here I discovered Black and Goebbels, both unconscious, plugged into the central power supply. I won't go into detail now but needless to say they had both undergone a degree of physical mutation, some of which I had seen before in Neumann, my wartime navigator. They appeared to be either drawing energy or re-charging themselves by plugging directly into London's central power grid!"

"Uurghh!" emitted Harding, shuddering with extreme distaste at the horrific image the spy's description had just conjured up in her mind.

"Also, I get the distinct impression that the rest of the U.A.D.O. are unaware of these imposters lurking within their midst. Somehow, we need to get the info. through to Dennis Shaw so that he can advise the relevant authorities."

"How do you know that Shaw isn't implicated in the whole evil set up?" asked Greyshott.

Rickenbacker proceeded to brief the rest of the crew on Orlin Black's bodyguard and the strange device seen pulsating from his head. "I may be wrong but I believe any human coercion is being achieved by the aliens' surgical procedure of inserting a 'controller' into the recipient's head. From what I observed, Shaw is device-free."

Legacy listened in silence.

"As for my pyjamas," intervened the Earl, pleased at last to get a word in edgeways, "I'm as baffled as you are. But it does seem to confirm a link between the aliens and the Nazi regime. Striped pyjamas were of course the standard uniform supplied to inmates of Germany's wartime concentration camps."

The detective and journalist both nodded, together confirming the accuracy of this historical fact.

While the four others mused over the various factors so far discussed, the teenager took the opportunity to move the conversation forward. "It's now ten past two in the morning comrades. I suggest we set up camp until daybreak. Jeff can provide some self-erecting insulated Kevlar personnel tents once he has completed returning the other recently utilised equipment to inter-dimensional storage."

"Yes sir!" Rickenbacker saluted the boy.

Greyshott thought he detected a slight tone of sarcasm.

"You know camping is strictly forbidden in this area," Harding endeavoured to inform the headstrong youth, "apart from at the official camp sites – particularly in such close proximity to the sacred stones!"

"You forget Joan" the boy reminded her, "there are now at least two members of 'The Greystone Quest' with superior powers of prediction. I can guarantee that the authorities won't have the slightest inkling regarding our presence here until approximately eleven O' clock tomorrow morning. By the time they cotton on to our whereabouts, we will be long gone and even then, they will be oblivious to our true identities."

"Well that told me!" Harding laughed as she began to tip-toe her way around the stone monoliths back towards Oswald who waited with his usual steadfast patience, arms folded, propping up his arthritic back against the side of the People Carrier. The Earl followed behind.

Greyshott approached the teenager, an annoyed frown spreading across his bearded middle-aged face. "Come on Legacy" he prodded, "tell me why you weren't keen to tell Will about his physical and mental merge with the Grey?"

"Of course," the teenager replied, "it's really no mystery. While the Grey has influence over the host's brainwaves, a block is automatically commissioned over that part of the cerebral cortex that can make a reasoned judgement regarding the circumstances surrounding the merge."

"What does that mean in plain English?" asked Rickenbacker, confused.

"Well basically, if you were to ask William if he was aware that he had been the target of alien infiltration, he would be totally incapable of comprehending the meaning of what you were saying!"

"Why?" questioned the detective.

"It is a built-in safety device to prevent the possibility of insanity developing" Legacy replied. "You must remember that the Grey's inherent intelligence is so highly advanced it is far beyond the comprehension of the standard human brain. Before this 'safety valve' was introduced, there were many instances of psychosis and paranoia developing brought about by 'voices in the head' syndrome, occasionally resulting in outright schizophrenia. This was becoming a significant danger to the human public at large."

"I see" pondered Greyshott.

"There have also been a couple of rare and high-profile instances of Human/Grey blending bringing on premature senile dementia – your famous leader Ronald Reagan being one particular case in point."

"So, Will is never likely to know that he has become two living breathing entities in one?" the detective enquired.

“Only if the Grey decides to de-merge itself prior to Will’s death” the teenager replied, “and even then, only if somebody decides to tell him.”

At that moment the subject of their conversation reappeared with Rickenbacker’s original large padded suit in tow. “I thought you might be needing this” offered The Earl. “I reasoned that the larger garment would be required to summon up a mini camp site!” he laughed.

Rickenbacker confirmed his presumption was correct and threw it on over his khakis. With a quick reference to the computerised ‘Equipment and Inventory’ catalogue, in less than fifteen minutes they had chosen an appropriate location and set up their temporary accommodation for the remainder of the night.

*

The comforting hum of Alpha One’s High Energy Perimeter Force field created a welcoming backdrop of safety and security for four out of the five companions and the butler as they slept soundly in their light weight and highly weather-proof camping modules.

Joan Harding listened intently to the eerie sounds of the night as they subtly permeated through the ultra-thin material of her Kevlar tent. Each individual unit had provision to accommodate two people and owing to her female status and the Restorer’s superior defence capabilities, Legacy had nominated Rickenbacker as her ‘camping partner’ although she viewed this decision while probably sensible, rather sexist in its formulation.

Alpha One’s muscular form was wrapped up inside a figure-hugging extra-large eiderdown-style sleeping bag and whereas he had always been previously just at the edge of consciousness, on this occasion he seemed almost completely dead to the world. Harding concluded that the excitement of William’s rescue escapade must have taken its toll.

The journalist willed herself to find solace in sleep but her mind was annoyingly active and alert to her surroundings and on top of this her bladder was starting to niggle and refused to be overcome by mere strength of will. Finally, she realised that it was just no good – she would have to go outside and relieve herself.

Before retiring to bed, Rickenbacker had explained how they could de-activate and re-activate the protective forcefield with a peculiar pencil-shaped implement he had handed out to each of his travelling companions. The journalist retrieved her own device from her imitation crocodile handbag and made her way out into the cold Autumnal night. She pulled an orange microfleece around her shivering shoulders as she tapped the beam of light that hugged their three self-contained sleep spheres, extinguishing it. The intense brightness it exuded was replaced by a thick swirling hill fog that rushed forward to engulf her like an all-consuming evil spirit as she crouched down behind a large tree stump. The relief was sheer and total bliss.

As Harding finished satisfying the call of nature and was zipping up her jeans, her eyes were drawn to a dull illumination that appeared to be moving at such a slow pace it seemed almost reluctant to make progress, just behind the layer of cloud cover directly above her head. A voice in the back of her mind was telling her to return to the others and re-activate the camp site’s protection, but instead she inexplicably found herself restoring its functionality but remaining outside the barrier instead of safely back inside with her friends.

The erstwhile journalist watched mesmerised as an enormous spacecraft cleared the clouds and continued with its’ painfully snail-like progress in the direction of the sacred stones. Despite herself, Harding felt compelled to follow and soon her delicate and petite figure had completely disappeared into the surrounding darkness.

A gentle night breeze softly flicked across the tops of the short-stemmed grasses of Salisbury Plain as the triangular-shaped craft manoeuvred in silence, tilting ninety degrees as its two anti-gravity power units rotated from the horizontal to the vertical position, hovering directly overhead Stone Henge.

Using the thick undergrowth of a small wood for cover, that bordered the wide-open space on which the stone monument had been erected centuries before, the sole female member of 'The Greystone Quest' covertly observed the scene. Two British Blonde cows ambled across the meadow nearby. Stopping abruptly, they raised their heads towards the alien craft as if entranced.

Without warning, a powerful laser shot from the ship towards a line of the monument's solidly entrenched blue stones, from which the beam appeared to draw additional strength, increasing in thickness and energy. It then rebounded in the direction of the cattle, hitting one of the hapless creatures squarely in the dewlap. It fell to the ground writhing in agony as the laser began to surgically slice through sections of its large muscular body. As it cut, various organs fell from the open wounds onto the ground until finally the mutilated beast lay motionless, devoid of life, in a gruesome pool of freshly drained blood and innards. Reeling in shock, its bovine companion turned and fled.

The horrendous display before her eyes caused Harding to heave in a reflex action, but although she managed to restrain herself, the feeling of nausea quickly developed into a sensation of uncontrolled giddiness. Through sheer bloody mindedness she found the strength to steady herself and her nerves, resolving to see the dreadful spectacle through to its ultimate conclusion, whatever that turned out to be.

Having completed its grisly task, the nose of the spacecraft began to rise until it was almost vertical. It then accelerated away at phenomenal speed into the now crystal clear, starlit sky, whose vast population of heavenly bodies twinkled brightly in unison in an all-knowing expression of vast and unfathomable secrets.

Harding scanned her immediate surroundings. The frantic activity of the past few minutes had now died away. The disintegrated carcass of the deceased herbivore presented a peculiar spectacle to the secret onlooker, set against the imposing backdrop of the famous landmark. The shadows of the monument's neatly arranged stones fell heavily over the puddle of bloody, mutilated flesh and continued on onto the surrounding landscape. Each darkened shape appeared unusually well defined by the bright moonlight as they spread outwards from the circle's centre into many weird and diverse shapes, many of which seemed abnormally elongated.

Harding waited in intense anticipation, wondering what would happen next but after a while decided there was nothing more to observe from her present position.

While considering how best to safely retreat, her train of thought was rudely interrupted by a loud snorting sound originating from an area deep within the stone circle. The journalist turned and tilted her head in an attempt to locate the exact source of this peculiar primeval disturbance. Instead, she found herself witnessing the gradual emergence of an immense scaly, lumbering creature, thrashing its tail from side to side as it went, the end quite clearly having been amputated some time previously. The beast was being shepherded by a tall sinister-looking individual wearing a hooded black cape and carrying a lethal-looking scythe.

Harding watched with fascination as the weapon-wielding figure began prodding the cow's carcass, as if to encourage the monster in its charge to consume it. The unearthly reptile lowered its ugly prodigious head while making obscene slurping sounds, as it devoured the unfortunate cow's freshly despatched organs.

Unwisely, the journalist decided to creep forward for a closer look and in doing so tripped over a rooted branch that stuck out almost invisibly into the otherwise grassy pasture. The monster's acute hearing registered the

sound in a millisecond. It lifted its head and with piercing intent, stared over in her direction, drooling body fluids and sinews from its pointed, hairy chin.

As the beast's evil and deadly lagoon-blue eyes met those of the comparatively insignificant human, she turned instantly to stone.

32.

Excruciating, agonising pain, pure unadulterated fear, inconsolable grief – these were but a fraction of the unbearably powerful emotions flooding into the mind of Joan Harding as her statuesque body stood dominating a hilltop viewpoint, like a grand overseer of the county of Wiltshire - apparently frozen in time.

Within the hardened shell that had fully encapsulated her helpless flesh, the most horrific visualisations were enveloping her powerless mind like an all-consuming tsunami.

She was a small child hurtling through the air strapped to an aircraft seat, realising she had no hope of survival in the fast approaching impact with the solid ground below. Then she was the mother of the same little girl, bending over the child's shattered and distorted body amidst the flattened sprigs of a cornfield somewhere in Southern Europe. She was standing hunched over, supported by a member of the local emergency services, as tears streamed from her sorrowful, bloodshot eyes.

The journalist felt completely powerless, encased in the monster's all-encompassing extraneous mineral matter. Not only was she being subjected in an orderly sequence to the most unbearable emotions possible in human experience, the shell itself was having the subsidiary effect of causing claustrophobia so severe it was almost on a parallel with drowning.

The awful hallucinations now moved on to a new scenario. She was an inattentive pedestrian flying towards the pavement, having bounced off the windscreen of a large heavy goods vehicle. Wondering in an instant at the extent of her head injury from the collision with toughened glass, she was clawing through the air, yearning to reach the sanctuary of the adjacent walkway so that the horrifying ordeal would quickly end.

There was no time for grim reflection as the scenes moved rapidly on. Suddenly she was a desperate office worker tumbling from the ninety-sixth floor of a tall skyscraper, her clothes aflame and the skin of her back morphing into a burning, flaming torch, melting into the compromised material of her outer garments as she fell in agony.

'Oh, please no!' she could hear herself pleading in vain. 'What next?'

It was Nineteen Forty-Five. The journalist had become a Japanese peasant farmer shielding her eyes from the blinding flash of a detonating nuclear warhead, then watching in awe the beautiful mushroom cloud rapidly rising high into the sky. Now she was running for her life in vain desperation towards the distant seashore that she knew there was no hope of reaching in time as the weapon's shock wave tore into the lightly constructed buildings immediately behind her. She cringed in terror as the atomic explosion extended out its long claw-like arm of death towards her thin puny body, grabbing at her without mercy while vaporising her farm worker companions right before her eyes.

The power of the alien creature's mind manipulation was both tremendous and relentless and the journalist now found herself lying in bed on a large ward of a hospital of Victorian design, her head and neck bent over the side overhanging a vomit bucket. She had just completed a course of chemotherapy and with great apprehension wondering if the doctors had managed to destroy all the mutant cells and if so, would the cancer ever return? But who was she?

While these strange role-play situations, in which Harding lived and breathed the subject's every thought and feeling and experienced every terrible sensation of suffering, took over her primary conscious thoughts, in the

periphery of her vision she could see the portentous 'Grim Reaper' she had earlier discovered heading casually towards her until he was only inches from her face.

The journalist felt him poke her cheek as if checking for signs of life. His face was invisible, buried somewhere in the depths of the dark and sinister hood, which gave the frightening appearance of a black void. The great reptilian creature trotted faithfully after him like an obedient hound as they turned their backs to her calcified form and wandered away into the night's deadly aura.

*

Jeff Rickenbacker woke with a start. A loud explosion had ripped into his intensive dream-filled sleep. He rose to his feet cursing, only half awake and without consciously acknowledging the empty sleeping bag alongside his own. He headed for the exit of his camping module which had been set in unidirectional mode the night before to prevent anyone having access from outside without the use of the 'pencil' implement.

Everyone had evidently been extremely tired as, apparently, they had only recently stirred and thus all missed daybreak. Outside, a portable battery-powered stove was still warm and showing signs of a quickly consumed breakfast although his companions were nowhere to be seen.

It was Nine Thirty AM. The sun was already fairly bright, not typical for a British winter's morning and appeared unusually high in the sky considering the season. With the clarity of the new dawn, the spy could now ascertain with certainty their position.

To the right he could see Stone Henge, less than a quarter of a mile distant. In front and slightly to the left was the edge of a steep hillside. A tall metro-sexually-clad youth was standing there somewhat precariously, staring out into the distance. It was Legacy. He had clearly done some research overnight and was now wearing the latest teenage fashions, freshly dispensed by Rickenbacker's multi-purpose light weight logistics suit. His jeans were trendy Colburgs in captive blue, his T shirt a purple Diesel and his shoes a pair of black lace-up casuals. On his wrist was a Bulova and his eyes were protected from the raging winter sun by a pair of Oakley sunglasses. Rickenbacker reflected on how he seemed to be growing by inches on an almost weekly basis.

The spy strolled up to the teenager and stood beside him, looking down into the valley below. Salisbury Plain was spread out before them: mile upon mile of flat grassy meadow broken only by the occasional long hedgerow.

From their vantage point, the source of the earlier explosion was now plain to see. A troop of four Challenger Two tanks were roaring across the broad flatlands beneath them, careering through false hedges and over areas of irregularly-spaced sunken uneven ground, both of which gave the impression of having been artificially created to add realism to the brigade's exercises. Every few minutes a vehicle would stop and fire what appeared to be live ordnance while the Regiment's foot soldiers ran alongside.

Rickenbacker turned to the teenager. "Morning son. Sorry I overslept. Where is everybody?"

For a while the boy said nothing. Then he looked up and met the spy fully in the eyes. Legacy's face seemed drained of all colour and his uncharacteristically heavy frown suggested that since the previous night he had become obliged to carry the weight of the whole world on his young shoulders. "I regret to inform you that Joan has looked directly into the eyes of the Wudrun. I have made a terrible miscalculation."

The spy's heart sank. "What the hell does that mean?" he responded in a confused tone. "Is she OK? Has she been hurt?"

Legacy replied simply "She is with Paul, Will and Oswald. Come with me."

As they headed off, Rickenbacker realised he could just make out four figures standing motionless next to a wooded area several hundred yards from the stone circle.

As they neared, Greyshott ran to meet them. "So, Legacy - has your fifteen minutes of quiet contemplation produced results?" he asked hopefully. "Can you help her?"

"Hey – hold up!" Rickenbacker insisted. "Take a few steps back. Tell me exactly what happened?" As he spoke the horror of Joan's predicament became all too apparent as he glanced over towards her, his shell-shocked mind refusing to come to terms with what his eyes could plainly see.

"Well there's nothing here that can be resolved quickly my friends" Legacy replied, "so yes, I will brief you all fully."

Rickenbacker approached his wife feeling pensive. Her entombed body was stuck in a partially twisted pose with one foot raised slightly off the ground. Her facial features were frozen in an expression of sheer terror. It was obvious that she had been preparing to take flight when the terrible event occurred. The spy touched her face. It had the consistency of hard marble. A thin layer of white dust came away on his fingertips. He turned to the boy. "What the hell happened to her?"

"I thought I could prevent disasters such as this with my superior foresight" answered Legacy. "Unfortunately, it appears that the keepers of the Wudrun have succeeded in thwarting me."

The boy's three companions and the butler exchanged curious glances, confirming that they were still none the wiser.

"Perhaps if you could start at the very beginning" the Earl suggested, "and build up gradually to where we are now, there might be a vague possibility of at least one of us understanding where you're coming from!"

"OK" the teenager replied. "I'll start from the point when we set up camp last night. As you are undoubtedly aware, owing to the highly advanced nature of my evolutionary development and superior cellular structure, my lower metabolic rate means that the frequency of my need for sustenance and waste elimination is significantly lower than that of a standard human of earthly origin. Therefore, the availability of easy-to-hand toilet facilities is never usually a major consideration."

"Yes- I've noticed that you only eat a good hearty meal every three days or so, if that" Greyshott agreed, "but how is your reference to toilet facilities relevant?"

"According to soil samples I have taken from an area just outside our camp, preliminary analysis would suggest that Joan left her camping module to urinate. What I find difficult to understand is how I failed to pre-empt this possibility and recommend the alternative Kevlar Tents that come complete with integral WC."

"Where are we going with this?" complained the spy in exasperation. "How does it explain how my wife ended up transformed into some type of decorative garden ornament?"

"OK" agreed Legacy. "A little background information is obviously in order. The creature we have come here to seek out and return to its complete and original state is known as a Wudrun. The Wudrun is a physical manifestation of a deadly brain virus developed by a race of humanoid aliens as a weapon against the human race during the Second World War. The virus transforms itself into the beast, in this case a large winged reptile,

when exposed directly to the earth's atmosphere. This explains the reason for its emergence when the Transportation Tube in which it was being carried prior to detonation was smashed on Jeff's warplane in Nineteen Forty."

"How does the Wudrun tie in with what's happened to Joan?" William enquired.

"Jeff's military technology is powerful enough to protect us against the Wudrun's deadly interference, but once Joan left the security of the campsite's force field, she was completely at the mercy of its subtle psychic influence. Before we left this morning," Legacy continued, "I was planning to issue us all with protective equipment against the creature but in the meantime, it apparently succeeded in undermining my thought processes at a critical point!"

"Cut to the chase!" Rickenbacker exclaimed, now visibly annoyed at the boy's persistently long-winded explanations. "How did Joan end up like this and what can we do to help her?"

"Once she had placed herself beyond the safety net, she would have been drawn irresistibly towards the Wudrun's unavoidable and penetrating glare at which point the outward calcification of her body would have occurred. The purpose of the outer shell is to prevent all physical movement and outside influence while the subject's brain is slowly reduced to a vegetative state over several days. The initial stages involve complete and utter terrorisation until the victim is bereft of any remaining cognitive ability whatsoever."

Rickenbacker gasped in horror and immediately broke down. He fell to the ground in a semi-kneeling position, his head in his hands, while his fingers pulled at his thinning sideburns in frustration. "How the hell did I let this happen? You entrusted her completely to my care and protection and I totally and utterly failed!"

"You are probably no more to blame than Paul, Will or anyone else in our party" the boy replied. "The Wudrun's powers are both extensive and unpredictable and it's possible that you may also have been somehow affected."

"How can we fight this creature?" Greyshott appealed. "If it's powerful enough to overcome you, what hope do any of us have?"

"Do not lose heart" Legacy replied. "Wudruns have been the curse of humanoid civilisations for centuries but have invariably been beaten. One of the greatest assets of the humanoid races is their ability to 'step outside the box' and see things from a new perspective when faced with apparently insurmountable odds! Take your famous monster of Greek mythology, Medusa, for example – one of the earliest recorded instances of a Wudrun on this planet. Perseus, or more accurately Perento, was a recognised 'Peace Restorer' of his day and the true story of his success at slaying the beast has been passed down to you by your forbears through the many intervening years. It has gradually become the stuff of legend, although the facts surrounding the battle have been significantly distorted over time."

The spy looked up. He appeared to have lost much of his renowned fighting spirit as his grief-stricken eyes began to stream uncontrollably with large globular salty tears. "Just tell me how we can save Joan?" he pleaded. "For God's sake! Not only is it my fault that this abomination has been let loose upon the world, I've now allowed it to begin destroying the only person on this earth I truly love. What can we do to save her? I'll trade my own life for hers if that's what it takes!"

The boy stood silently for a moment, contemplating various options, until finally he appeared to come up with a plan. "It's a long shot" he concluded, "with no guarantee of success. There's also the possibility that the process may well result in my death, thus jeopardising the whole mission."

Rickenbacker crawled over to the boy on his hands and knees, all self-respect and self-confidence apparently faded from his previously brash persona. The others looked on while Greyshott's hidden surprise at the depth of the spy's feelings for Harding caused the detective to reflect on how it was just as well that earlier he had managed to steer clear of any emotional entanglement.

Alpha One tugged on the lower legs of Legacy's Colburs like a child begging its mother for sweets at a supermarket checkout. "Please dude? Find it in your heart to save her. I don't think I could live a day without her. Please! Please bring her back to me!" The heavily built 'action man' now cast a pathetic figure as he begged and pleaded at the teenager's feet.

Legacy placed his hands on the spy's muscular shoulders. "Do not fret Jeff" he offered. "It shall be done. After all, without Joan and the pre-ordained role she is set to play on the final day of reckoning, the mission will be doomed to failure, as indeed would be the case with the loss of any member of 'The Greystone Quest.'

"Thank god!" exclaimed the Restorer.

"However, there's one further difficulty we need to surmount. If and when we finally rescue Joan from the Wudrun's clutches, her mind will inevitably be wiped clean. Even if we succeed in cracking open the outer shell, she will in any case be left in a completely vegetative state."

Rickenbacker again slumped to the floor. "Then all is lost!" he proclaimed. "We must finish it now. I'll end her misery myself." He reached for his Glock, returned by the detective the previous night, and prepared to undertake the merciful deed.

"No!" the Earl interceded. "Wait Jeff! Hear Legacy out."

"Yes" agreed the boy. "If we can retrieve Joan's body from the Wudrun's encapsulating membrane, we'll be almost home and dry. The rest, although difficult and time consuming, is ultimately achievable. Using the same 'False Memory Program' utilised by the U.A.D.O. to give her a revised life situation with Alf Lockwood as her father, we can create a new persona for her from scratch as Jeff's wife. However, she will need to be gradually taught the basics of human interaction and the fundamental knowledge to understand her world as she develops all the way from Infant School level to that of a fully-grown woman. It will require extraordinary patience and commitment from all of us, while at the same time we continue with our quest, following it through to its ultimate conclusion."

At this new revelation, the spy's body language unexpectedly changed from grief-stricken lover to angry assailant and his face began to redden like a relentless alcoholic as he welled up with uncontrollable rage. "You mean we've had the means all this time to bring her back to me and you kept it to yourself! Why you little..!" He stepped forward, grabbing the youth by the throat and pushing him to the ground. "You little bastard!...why I should..."

"No Jeff! Get off him!" screamed Greyshott. "If you kill the boy, you'll lose your only chance to save Joan!"

While the detective pleaded for reason, William and the butler grabbed the spy around the waist and attempted to lift him bodily off the terror-stricken boy. It had no effect.

Gasping, choking noises gurgled forth from the youth's assaulted throat as Alpha One tightened his grip in an effort to throttle the life out of him. Then without warning the spy's fingers relaxed, he rose to his feet and stood completely still, staring trance-like at the recently cocooned body of his wife nearby. "I'm sorry lad" he mumbled

almost incoherently, as if transmitting his thoughts from a distant although parallel universe. "I don't know what came over me. Please forgive me?"

He held out his hand to The Greystone Legacy. The boy took it and with little effort was lifted to his feet.

The teenager's voice sounded hoarse as he rubbed his freshly abused neck, checking for signs of any obvious injury. "That's OK Jeff. It's not your fault" he replied. "The Wudrun's powers are still strong and will inevitably result in some irrational behaviour amongst us. We must organise protective equipment without further delay!"

As they turned towards the direction of their temporary camping modules, it became abundantly clear that all five had completely lost track of time. It was now Ten Thirty AM and had they stuck to their original plan, they would by now have been long gone.

The sound of rattling diesel engines permeated through the otherwise tranquil morning as four large rectangular vehicles of a type that were now becoming annoyingly familiar, drew up at their recently abandoned site. The detective, Earl and spy glanced in Legacy's direction, the expressions on all of their worried faces translating into "So what the hell do we do now?" Oswald the butler sighed and shook his head, reflecting with regret how easy it would have been to have opted for a quieter life in order to see out his twilight years.

The teenager, who had quickly regained his composure following the recent tussle with Rickenbacker, appeared to act as if this new development was merely a low priority side show. He then rounded off the morning's hectic events with the almost throw away comment: "Anyone got any great ideas on how we can quickly procure nine litres of concentrated fish oil?"

33.

Commander Land Forces UK, Iain Braithwaite-Smythe drew a deep intake of orange flavoured water vapour into his partially-diseased lungs, enjoying immensely his recently-adopted and regular habit of 'smoking' electronic cigarettes. A sixty-a-day man for nigh on forty years, he had at last concluded that here was an aid to kicking the habit that might actually work and that maybe there was still a fighting chance to rescue his tremendously scarred interior organs from the ravages of time.

In the Commander's hand was a buff-coloured file labelled 'TOP SECRET' in red bold Calibri. It occurred to him that this was a strange thing to behold in this age of almost total computerisation. Even stranger was the handwritten letter which he had slid out from inside it. The writer had gone to great lengths to bring the information it held to his attention using snail mail rather than email to enhance security, intelligently acknowledging the possibility of electronic interception.

Many questions remained unanswered however, not least among them was how this student of The Royal School of Artillery had successfully discovered the Commander's private home address – information that was highly sensitive and not readily available to the general public at large.

Now Braithwaite-Smythe's valuable contemplation time was about to be rudely interrupted by an official from the Union of Art Dealership Organisations, this title being a cover name for a worldwide military organisation he knew practically nothing about but had been obliged to co-operate with on a number of annoyingly inconvenient occasions.

Outside, it was the mid-morning break and an assemblage of military clerical staff gabbled with excitement about the latest developments in their favourite soap opera. Suddenly their animated conversation fell silent as a forest green Nineteen Seventy-Eight Ford Pinto Station Wagon cleared the main security barrier and sped up towards them, causing the untidy group to scatter in all directions as it came to a screeching halt. On the side of the driver's door was a modified portrait of da Vinci's Mona Lisa, the intricacies of her famously alluring yet aloof expression merged cleverly with the letters U.A.D.O. to form a stylised logo.

As the group observed the unusual design with ill-concealed fascination, the door clunked open and out stepped Carlos Santos-Gomez.

Recently promoted to U.A.D.O. agent Foxtrot Six and second in command to Dennis Shaw, Gomez had received a highly-prized commendation for his fine performance and sound advice during the capture of Joseph Goebbels. Professional advancement had followed shortly after. He removed his classic Rayban shades and scanned the area, taking in every minute detail of his surroundings but conveniently ignoring what he considered to be the nearby 'office plebs.'

Marlborough Lines, housing HQ Land Forces UK, was a modern and imposing glass-fronted structure, designed very much in the architectural style of the Twenty First century. Built on the former site of Andover airfield, it had replaced Erskine Barracks, Wilton in Two Thousand and Six.

Gomez stepped back slightly to gain a full appreciation of the structure. Being something of an aficionado in building design, he could see what the Surveyors and Architects had had in mind when the plans for the new headquarters had been formulated. The curved frontage, although modern, seemed to be based on a typical Nineteen Thirties-style Airport Terminal Building, including some conventional manually operated windows, despite the fact that the base was fully air conditioned. Set back either side of the main structure were two annexes three storeys high, one of which included balconies on the two upper levels smartly constructed behind low walls of neat red brickwork. On a beautiful day such as this, the general staff would be able to take full

advantage of the high platforms to absorb the fresh air and feel the gentle winter sun on their otherwise vitamin D deprived faces.

Foxtrot Six felt rather uneasy as he made his way towards the main entrance. Iain Braithwaite-Smythe had a wicked reputation as a roaring old lion. He had appeared on many current affairs programmes and political talk shows, voicing in no uncertain terms his aggressive opposition towards the Armed Forces Minister and the ongoing military cutbacks, invariably leaving the presenter a writhing, quivering wreck. However, it wasn't so much Braithwaite-Smythe's formidable personality that worried Gomez but more the fact that, although known nationwide as a committed family man and an upstanding pillar of the community, within the military establishment itself there were wide rumours of him being a relentless and highly promiscuous bisexual.

This fact alone should not have been of undue concern to Gomez as he was here to discuss professional matters, but potential intimidation was looming large in the U.A.D.O. operative's thoughts as he had never actually been totally certain in his own mind that he didn't in fact bat for the other side and was worried that the Commander might somehow sense this.

As he exited the rotating doors of the main entrance to Marlborough Lines, while considering that maybe this was the reason he had remained single all these years, he collided with an extremely well-endowed blonde woman in her late twenties who was walking swiftly in the opposite direction on her way to meet him. After prizing away from his chest her large full breasts whose ill-concealed pointed nipples strained through her flimsy white blouse, she stepped back to a more comfortable position and held out her hand by way of greeting.

"Good morning Mr. Santos-Gomez" she began, "my name is Florence Amplebody. I'm Personal Assistant to Commander Braithwaite-Smythe. The Commander is ready to see you. Please step this way."

"Enchanted" Foxtrot Six replied, shaking her outstretched hand somewhat limply. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

As they strolled along a short, narrow corridor, cleverly designed to appear larger than it was by using angled windows that successfully transmitted vast amounts of natural light from outside, Gomez reflected on how often in military circles a person's name seemed to accurately represent their physical appearance.

They arrived at the entrance door to the office of Commander Land Forces UK, his title affixed to the frosted glass by a gold-coloured plaque, so wide and ostentatious that it stretched from one side of the aluminium door frame to the other. Amplebody rapped hard on the glass surface rattling it loudly, the sound reverberating around the whole building in such an obtrusive manner that nearby clerical staff shot her a disapproving glance.

"Enter!" roared a voice from within.

As they stepped inside, Carlos Santos-Gomez was struck by Braithwaite-Smythe's overwhelming persona and portly, dignified frame, both of which reminded him of the late actor James Robertson-Justice, who coincidentally not only played roles representing the upper echelons of society but also had a double-barrelled surname to boot.

Smythe thrust his arm forward, offering Gomez a firm handshake which he happily took, grateful that at least they were starting off on a friendly footing. The Mexican observed his new-found colleague's quirky mannerisms as the Commander quickly dispensed with the pleasantries.

"Welcome to Marlborough Lines, Mr. Santos-Gomez. I'm grateful you were able to get here so quickly."

Foxtrot Six could feel his eyes being drawn inexorably towards a thin sliver of red pepper stuck within the layers of Smythe's fluffy beard – presumably 'saved' from his mid-morning snack. The man's cheeks were round and puffy and slightly more rouge than one might expect for an indigenous Anglo-Saxon. As he spoke, the scent of stale orange wafted from his breath as he laid the electronic cigarette to one side on his desk.

"We like to guarantee an immediate response where we can" Gomez replied, "particularly where matters of International Security are concerned. May I see the letter?"

"All in good time" the Commander replied, indicating that the young man's keenness to get straight to the point of his visit was a measure of his inexperience when dealing with superior officers. "First, let's have some tea. Florence?"

"Yes sir" Amplebody replied, leaving the room with haste and returning within minutes with a large tray holding a silver-plated Reed and Barton Winthrop tea set, the tall and ornate tea pot embossed with the manufacturing date of Seventeen Ninety-Five.

The Commander sensed Gomez' look of awe as the P.A. presented the valuable items before them as if they were just standard run of the mill crockery. "It belonged to my late mother" Smythe stated proudly as Amplebody poured the tea, leaning over his desk in a highly provocative manner so that her substantial breasts plunged into the fullness of her blouse, the buttons appearing to only just hold as large gaps opened up between them revealing her soft and sensuous female flesh.

Smythe made no secret of the pleasure he was deriving from this enforced view, muttering "Yes – very nice. Thank you, Florence." Then clasping his hands together, he transferred his attentions back towards his visitor: "Well – um – anyway – where were we?"

For some reason Gomez felt acutely embarrassed. "Mmm – ur – oh yes – the letter sir" replied Foxtrot Six, having been thoroughly distracted from the subject in hand. "You wanted to share its contents with an agent of the highest security clearance, believing there to be a real, credible and imminent threat to our military."

"Ah yes. One lump or two?" the Commander replied, delaying the inevitable still further.

"Oh, just a dash of milk – no sugar, thank you."

"I might have guessed" Smythe responded animatedly, "I can tell just by looking at you that you're already sweet enough!" He winked in a suggestive way, a broad beaming smile stretching across his round, chubby face.

Gomez felt uncomfortable and shuffled in his seat.

Braithwaite-Smythe now realised that he was starting to unsettle his young guest and changed the subject. He pulled the buff file back out from his desk drawer where he had placed it subsequent to the earlier review and withdrew a slim white envelope clearly showing his confidential home address in large bold capitals on the front but in place of his name were the words: 'TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.' The sender clearly intended not to compromise the Commander's domestic safety.

"The subject of our meeting, i.e: said letter" Smythe began, "arrived two days ago at my country residence in the mid-morning post." He held it between his thumb and forefinger.

"May I see it?" Gomez asked politely.

Smythe removed the letter from its envelope and passed it over. As he did so, he observed in detail the young Mexican's appearance and overall demeanour. He was relatively thin with shoulders that appeared far too broad for a man of his small stature. His hair was dark and naturally greasy. Much of his facial expression was hidden behind a thick drooping moustache. It sat heavily upon the thin lips of his wide mouth like a wild cat in repose, stretched out along the full length of a high branch in the midst of some far-off wilderness of sun-scorched trees. His facial epidermis was rugged and slightly pocked and he had a hooked nose that Braithwaite-Smythe found oddly appealing. He watched his visitor with a mildly perverse fascination as he carefully consumed every tiny detail of the letter's contents.

As he reached the final paragraph Santos-Gomez looked up. The Commander could see that he had an expression of deep foreboding. "This is worse than I thought!" Foxtrot Six exclaimed. "I can't go into detail now but every member of the Armed Forces currently located within a twenty-five-mile radius of Stone Henge is in grave and perilous danger! As you will be well aware, sir, that currently represents a very large percentage of our total military personnel!"

He passed the letter back to Smythe who grabbed his hand as well as the note and held it firmly in his grip. Smythe's hand was large, hairy and unpleasantly sweaty. Gomez felt uneasy.

"Well I'm sure if you were willing to convey to me in full the details of the threat, I'd be more than able to pull out all the stops to help. You can be sure Carlos, I'll do absolutely anything for you – *anything!* After all us 'double-barrelled' fellows should stick together, shouldn't we?" He winked a second time.

The Mexican winced and pulled away his hand. The letter fell to the floor. Was the Commander referring to their hyphenated surnames or perhaps something else? Even worse – was this some kind of oblique reference to Smythe's own perception of what he believed to be the nature of Gomez' sexuality. The conversation was definitely heading in the wrong direction.

Gomez reached down and retrieved the confidential information, taking care not to turn his back towards his colleague. He placed it in an inside pocket of his jacket. "Perhaps it would be best if I hold onto this" he directed at the Commander, whose face seemed frozen in a weird and ecstatic grin. "Look Sir, please don't think I'm not flattered but if you don't mind, I'd prefer to keep our conversation on a purely professional level. In that regard, you will hopefully be pleased to hear that you are to be offered a promotion which now includes maximum security clearance."

Realising that his less than subtle advances were falling on stony ground, Smythe's deportment became visibly more defensive and he attempted to twist the situation back to his advantage.

"I'm not quite sure as to what you are alluding" the Commander replied. "Of course, I am speaking on a purely professional level. And who exactly do you think you are Mr. Santos-Gomez – a mere office boy bringing me news of a promotion! Information such as this can only be passed along the official channels. I do believe, young sir, that you are suffering from serious delusions of grandeur!"

Gomez allowed himself a faint chuckle accompanied by a wry smile as he realised that he now had the situation under his full control. Finally, *he* was the one wearing the trousers. "I assure you Commander Braithwaite-Smythe, my credentials for bringing you this news are beyond reproach. For years the powers-that-be have insisted that our covert organisation has remained completely separate from the Terrestrial Military Services. However, with all the recent highly dangerous developments, they have now decided that there is no alternative but to merge the two systems into one."

He handed Smythe his new Identity Card. The 'Mona Lisa' logo, whose artistic attributes were made famous by her distinctly odd expression, was smiling at the Commander in a way that seemed to mock his every move.

"Your official title is now Chief of Staff Inter-Terrestrial Military Liaison," Gomez continued. "Welcome to the Universal Alien Defence Organisation." The Latino held out his hand in a formal and congratulatory gesture.

Smythe studied the Identity Card in detail. He had no idea what his new title meant and hadn't even the vaguest clue as to what the role involved. But 'Chief of Inter-Terrestrial Liaison' did sound important. Besides he would now be privy to the most top secret of confidential information in the land – and possibly even the world. That surely had to count for something! And – not forgetting there would be an entirely fresh selection of beautiful young men and women who would soon find themselves at the mercy of an unrelenting sexual predator who enjoyed complete and utter impunity.

The Commander relaxed. He accepted the Mexican's offer graciously, although it was fairly obviously a foregone conclusion. "Thank you, Carlos. I look forward to many more years of loyal and dedicated service to my country, hopefully working alongside your good self."

He hung on to Gomez' hand tightly, the peculiar beaming expression returning once more to his ageing rotund face. After a minute or so, Foxtrot Six began to wonder if he would ever let go.

34.

Back in the wide, open Wiltshire countryside, the teenager's obscure question had been left hanging in the air as Jeff Rickenbacker moved to assume overall control of the situation. "Quick guys – let's get Joan out of harm's way and safely under cover." He stepped forward with a grim determination to get things moving. Legacy intervened, holding up his hand and halting the spy in his tracks.

"Before you touch her you need to be aware that her outer casing is extremely brittle. It is vital that the utmost care is taken. Any rupture to the delicate casing will result in her immediate death. Bearing in mind your superhuman strength, Jeff, you may inadvertently cause her injury even with the best of intentions!"

Rickenbacker fell back behind Greyshott. He became silent and withdrawn.

"Don't worry Jeff," the detective consoled, "William and I will take care of her." The Earl placed his hands on Harding's shoulders and gently lowered her backwards until her body was almost horizontal and he was fully supporting her upper torso. Then with great vigilance, Greyshott lifted her feet. Together they headed for the nearby wood, Rickenbacker, Legacy and Oswald in close attendance.

Once they were out of immediate danger and hidden from physical view in an area of dense undergrowth, the Earl turned to the teenager and with smiling optimism asked: "So Legacy, what's the plan?"

"We have three urgent priorities now" he replied. "First we need to retrieve Jeff's padded suit from the camp site which is currently swarming with U.A.D.O. operatives. Secondly, we require a secret location where Oswald can look after Joan without fear of discovery, while I build up my strength in order to release her from her terrifying ordeal. I'll explain how I intend to do this later. Finally, as per Lord Pirbright's poem, we must locate the Wudrun, reunite the beast with its tail and convert it back to purely organic matter. All this must be achieved within the next twenty-four hours!"

"Piece of piss!" remarked Rickenbacker sarcastically.

"Look Jeff," Greyshott proffered, "I understand how hard it must be for you to remain positive, especially with everything that's happened – but really, you must try my friend. Besides we're all relying on you. Without the many unique facets of Agent Alpha One, there really is no hope!" The detective looked over towards Legacy, anticipating that his comments would be adequately vindicated.

"It's true" the boy confirmed. "Without you, Mr. Rickenbacker, we are all doomed!"

A smile momentarily lit up the Spy's face. "I didn't realise you valued me so highly. Thanks guys." A strong sense of purpose now returned to his previously dull expression and he felt newly re-invigorated.

"So, come on Jeff. With your many years of experience working undercover combined with your extensive military training," began the Earl enthusiastically, "what do you suggest would be the best plan of action for retrieving your padded suit under these very difficult circumstances?"

"Yes" added Legacy, "your military planning skills are essential for this task. Without your Strategic Suit of Armour, we will remain at risk from the Wudrun's negative and compelling influence indefinitely!"

There was no need to think it over. As his companions might have expected, Rickenbacker's brain waves were forging way ahead of the others. He had already formulated a plan.

“Well it’s like this” commenced the Spy. “Without meaning to sound vain regarding myself, both I and Legacy are far too valuable to risk putting ourselves in close enough proximity to the U.A.D.O. to enable us to extract the suit. Even with the Stealth Rings, we have no idea whether Phelps and Co. have succeeded in advancing the Techno Tracker still further so that it is now able to locate me in any environment rather than in Subterranea alone. They may have also worked out a way by now to undermine the Stealth Ring technology so whoever ventures back to camp will have no guarantee of invisibility. It’s just a chance they will have to take. As for William – having only recently escaped from Orlin Black’s clutches, the risk of him being recognised by Shaw or any of the others would be unacceptably high. Our choice of personnel for this task is therefore somewhat limited.”

Oswald and Greyshott exchanged glances. A veil of dread fell across the old butler’s face while the detective once again assumed his ‘gung ho’ attitude, first experienced by the others on their initial arrival at Stone Henge.

“I think I know where this is going” Greyshott volunteered. “I’ll be more than happy to offer my services. What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Yes, my friend,” the Spy replied, “it was indeed your good self I was about to suggest – but also Oswald.”

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question” Earl Pirbright intervened. “While Oswald’s family have been incredibly loyal and committed to the Pirbright dynasty for several hundred years and he would undoubtedly do anything for me, his job description has its limits. I’m sorry but I can’t countenance putting his life in danger in any way, even for the most noble of causes.”

While his master spoke, Oswald’s worried expression gradually began to transform as if it were the skin of a Chameleon, until eventually his frown of wrinkled concern was replaced by a relaxed, gentle and all-knowing smile. “It’s OK sir,” the butler consoled his master. “For a while now, I have realised how important this mission is to the future of mankind. I would be only too willing to help, whatever the risks might be to my personal safety.”

William opened his mouth once again to object but Oswald raised his hand in an unusually assertive gesture. The Earl remained silent and appeared to concede.

In the distance, their temporary camp site could be seen bustling with frantic activity. Set deep within the blurred image of numerous U.A.D.O operatives all mingled together in their definitive large-collared boiler suits, the occasional flash of bright pink provided a distinct and pronounced contrast, confirming the haphazard spread of their Superior Officers. Searching among the abandoned items, these individuals were becoming absorbed in the most intimate of detailed investigations.

The companions would need to act fast. Their overnight equipment, together with the Spy’s Padded Suit, would soon be loaded aboard one of the black rectangular vehicles and within half an hour not a trace of the six having been there would remain. The U.A.D.O. would be only minutes behind as they attempted to make good their escape, burdened with the incapacitated, fragile and helpless form of Joan Harding.

“OK here’s the plan” Rickenbacker began. “To the left of the site there is a field of very long meadow oat grass, the border of which is only yards from the Kevlar Module holding my Padded Suit. It should be possible for Paul to approach from this direction completely unobserved.”

The members of ‘The Greystone Quest’ who were still ‘compos mentis’ listened with intent and with bated breath as Alpha One conveyed in detail how the first of Legacy’s objectives was to be achieved.

“Oswald will approach the camp site from our current position pretending to be a senile old hiker who has somehow got himself lost.”

At this suggestion the butler muttered a rather impolite expletive under his breath. Rickenbacker continued on unabated.

“He will aim for the two operatives guarding the tent where my suit is located. While in conversation with the guards, he will suddenly fake illness and pretend to collapse. This will hopefully cause a large enough distraction for Paul to input the door release code, enter the tent, grab the suit and then get the hell out of there. Once Paul is clear, Oswald will inexplicably suddenly recover, thank the operatives for their help and ask to be escorted away from the area. Meeting up with Paul at a pre-determined location, they will both then proceed to Winterbourne Stoke, where the rest of us will be waiting with the People Carrier.”

Rickenbacker delved into his khakis and pulled out an Electronic Ordnance Survey map of the area. He pointed out the location of Winterbourne Stoke.

“Are there any questions?”

“It’s impossible to see from here whether or not the Mercedes has been intercepted,” William pointed out. “Supposing the U.A.D.O. have already located and impounded it?”

“That’s a valid point” the Spy replied, “but bearing in mind the urgency of the situation, we will just have to cross that bridge if and when we come to it.”

“Sounds fine” Greyshott confirmed his agreement to Rickenbacker’s proposal. “Let’s get on with it!”

*

The rasping grate of two large inter-connecting circular threads winding against each other accompanied the gradual raising of the Observation Turret on U.A.D.O. Colonel Dennis Shaw’s ‘ARIAV’ – these initials standing for Alien Reconnaissance, Interception and Assault Vehicle. Each national U.A.D.O. facility had a fleet of twenty permanently on standby to seek out and if necessary, destroy the instigators of illegal terrestrial alien activity. These were the black rectangular machines that Legacy and his companions had frequently run into during their quest, invariably at the point of ‘Action Stations.’

Shaw slid the turret’s flexible securing lid into its retaining groove and poked his bald head out into the open. He lifted a pair of standard issue British Army binoculars to his eyes with one hand while holding a smouldering Cuban cigar in the other.

Scanning the area in a two-hundred and seventy-degree arc he could initially see nothing out of the ordinary. A light breeze flicked across the short meadow grasses of the surrounding rural landscape. A pair of Stone Curlews with their distinctive brown and white striped breasts wandered by, one pecking at the ground for small beetles and woodlice, while the other looked up and commenced a loud wailing birdsong. Shaw considered this to be highly irregular as he was certain, while renewing his R.S.P.B. membership, that he had read they were a species normally only active at night. Further off in the distance he spied a line of Beech trees bordering coniferous woodland providing relief to what was otherwise flat terrain stretching as far as the horizon.

A buzzing sound from below interrupted his train of thought. The Colonel lowered his head back into the vehicle's main control compartment. An arm reached up to him holding an encoded military communications device.

"I have Foxtrot Six Operative Gomez on the line for you sir" announced its owner.

"Gomez? Ah yes, good" Shaw replied. He grabbed the device and spoke with authority into the mouthpiece, although his tone had a hint of underlying friendliness. "Hello Carlos. What's the news?" Echo Five raised his head back up through the turret and out into the open air.

"Hello sir," Gomez replied with enthusiasm. "The cat's in the bag!"

"So – we have a new senior operative: position C.I.T.M.L. Code Golf Seven. Did he raise any objections?"

"Initially he was rather reticent about accepting the new position, particularly as it was being offered to him by what he perceived to be a junior officer" Gomez replied.

"So, you managed to talk him round, Carlos. Well done! He'll be an extremely valuable asset to our organisation!" Shaw studied the end of his cigar in intricate detail. The flaming embers had now grown dark. He grabbed a vintage Nineteen Sixty-Three Zippo Basswood cigarette lighter from the chest pocket of his U.A.D.O. uniform and re-ignited it. A large flame burst upwards but then settled down as he inhaled deeply.

"I'm sure he will, Sir" Gomez remarked, "although I think we may need to keep an eye on him in certain respects. The rumours are undoubtedly true."

Echo Five burst into raucous laughter. "Oh, my goodness, Carlos, I hope our friend Iain Braithwaite-Smythe hasn't been misbehaving!"

There was silence at the end of the line. Shaw sensed that Foxtrot Six was acutely embarrassed.

The Colonel regained his composure and attempted to adopt a more serious tone once again, although it was difficult. "Don't worry, Carlos. Braithwaite-Smythe is harmless. His extensive military experience will be invaluable to our organisation. In time you'll see that we made the right choice!"

"If you say so, Sir" came the non-committal reply careering down the earpiece and colliding offensively with Shaw's sensitive eardrum as local atmospheric unexpectedly increased the volume to an unacceptably intrusive level.

As Echo Five hurriedly moved the communications device away from direct contact with his head, he momentarily spied a dark figure emerging from behind the distant line of conifers and heading towards his position with uncertain steps.

"More urgently," continued Gomez, "I must advise you of the contents of Braithwaite-Smythe's letter..."

"I'll get back to you Carlos." Shaw hung up and raised the binoculars once more to his eyes.

Several yards to the Colonel's left, guarding the Camping Module holding Alpha One's highly secret technology was becoming a rather boring and somewhat monotonous task for the two 'Level Five' U.A.D.O. operatives to which the task had been allocated. They had therefore decided to relax and indulge in a game of poker so that

their alertness had diminished considerably by the time the old man with the Dragon's Head Walking Stick and posh Savile Row suit approached.

"Good morning gentlemen" announced the old boy, "I'm so sorry to trouble you but I appear to be lost!"

"You *do* realise you've entered a secure military area?" questioned the larger of the two guards as he laid his cards face down onto the grass to ensure that his colleague was unable to sneak a peek. "How did you get past the security cordon? This area is out of bounds to the public!"

"I'm not sure" lied the butler, "I've been wandering around all night. I seem to have lost my wife!"

"Well if you would like to come this way" invited the other operative who was taller and thinner than his colleague and had the facial features of a proud giraffe, "we can provide you with a place to relax and freshen up while we make some enquiries."

"Oh, thank you very much. Oh...I say...gentlemen, would you be so kind as to pull up a chair for me – I'm feeling a little faint!"

The plump fellow made a move to help and was just in time to catch Oswald as he fell, apparently unconscious, towards the ground.

Shaw had been watching the unexpected arrival from his high observation platform for several minutes until the old man had disappeared behind his ARIAV's blind spot; an area hidden from view by a bulge enclosing the vehicle's intricate Weapons System. Something about the man's face was making him feel uneasy.

He called back down to the control compartment: "Soldier, pass up my laptop. Hurry! Time is of the essence!"

Echo Five logged on to the confidential file labelled 'SURE – Southern UFO Reporting Establishment' and began to flick through the various photos of the group's senior members. As soon as he reached the one of a beaming Earl William Pirbright of Hambledon he clicked onto a sub-file located on a drop-down menu labelled 'Family and Employees.' Shaw had a hunch that he had seen the old man's face before and sure enough, five photos along the line he was presented with 'Oswald Sherringham, Age Eighty-Seven – Butler.' Beneath the picture was the small annotation 'believed to be based at Maple Leaf Manor.'

"I knew it!" Shaw congratulated himself on his keenness of eye and excellent memory. He hurriedly keyed into the communicator the contact number of the Senior 'Level Five' operative guarding the tent, which from his position was out of sight and to his left. Almost immediately the tall, thin man answered and after a brief exchange advised the Colonel that the old man was unconscious. "It's a trap!" exclaimed Echo Five, a tone of desperate urgency underlying his disciplined and commanding voice. "Check the tent for intruders. Hurry!"

Without a moment to lose, the tall guard headed straight for the door of the Kevlar module. The encoded lock had been released. He drew a previously concealed weapon from his thick leather belt and burst into the tent. There was Paul Greyshott about to make his escape, Rickenbacker's heavy padded suit thrown over his left shoulder with the arms flailing about in all directions. Evidently, he had inadvertently activated something.

"Drop the suit to the ground and raise your arms above your head!" ordered the Guard.

"No deal!" Greyshott replied.

"I can't allow you to escape with it," pressed the guard, "our policy is to shoot to kill."

Greychott pulled the garment from his shoulder and spread it out across the front of his body. "If you shoot me now, the projectile will bounce off and probably head back in your direction. If you want it, you'll just have to come and get it!" the detective coaxed.

The guard grabbed one of the out-of-control arms with one hand while continuing to cover the detective with his weapon in the other. A grand tug-of-war commenced.

"Let go!" demanded the U.A.D.O. operative.

"No I won't!" countered the detective.

The scene was reminiscent of two spoilt nursery schoolchildren fighting over their favourite toy until a huge explosion blew Greychott backwards, his hands losing their grip on the valuable possession.

Small fires surrounded the detective's body and a thick cloud of dust hung in the air. The awful smell of expended cordite mixed with the taint of destroyed human flesh enveloped his senses, causing him to gag. He checked himself all over for blood stains and developing pain but unbelievably, apart from minor cuts and grazes, he was unscathed.

As the explosive fog dissipated, the detective realised that there was nothing around him that he recognised. Gone were the smooth sides of the Kevlar tent and in their place were shreds of composite honeycomb interspersed with stringy muscle tendons and other hideous human remains. On the ground nearby was the Padded Suit, still in the clutches of the U.A.D.O. guard's fingers. As one might expect, these continued to form part of a human hand, which in turn led to an arm, but only as far as the elbow joint. Then there was nothing. The next largest piece of what had been a human being only seconds earlier was a fleshy cheek on a shattered bone with a disconnected eyeball hanging on by a thread.

Whether it was due to shock or to some other strange factor influencing the proceedings he was uncertain, but Greychott was sure that he heard a weird and gruesome vocalisation originating from the area of the eyeball which stared at him eerily, the wrinkled eyelids narrowing. "You may have thwarted me this time but I shall be watching always!"

All around, pandemonium had broken out, with personnel running in all directions.

A whistling noise that gradually increased in volume caught the detective's attention as he wrestled the suit from the Operative's grip and dragged it out into an area free of debris, while at the same time endeavouring to locate Oswald. The whistling culminated in an almighty bang as a mortar shell hit Shaw's Command Vehicle, only yards from the detective's position. Shaw managed to drag himself clear only seconds before his ARIAV erupted in viscous flesh-eating flames, burning soldiers jumping to the ground, their training causing them instinctively to stop, drop and roll.

Greychott spotted the butler lying next to the plump guard who was groaning in pain, clearly incapacitated.

"Oswald" the detective pleaded, "it's OK now – you can get up. I've got the suit." There was no response. With all the strength he could muster, Greychott lifted the ancient manservant onto his back and, dragging the padded suit along the ground behind him, headed away from the scene of mayhem as fast as his shaking, buckling legs would carry him.

Shaw limped towards Phelps who had appeared as if from nowhere accompanied by an efficient-looking colleague. The man and the 'ATRIO' supported the Colonel under both arms and helped him away from the central scene of destruction.

"Sir," the new arrival screamed over the dreadful whine of yet another mortar flying over their heads, "we're under attack!"

"Yes" Echo Five replied, "strangely I *had* noticed. What's more to the point, though, is who the hell's attacking us?"

The man offloaded a portable computer console from a hefty backpack he was carrying and began to set it up.

"Come on, come on" pressed Shaw impatiently as the machine fired up and the Operative logged on. "We need to know exactly what we're up against!"

Bearing in mind the ongoing and potentially lethal threat, waiting seemed like an eternity. Then the screen sprung into life.

"All I can tell you with certainty sir," the Operative advised, "is that the attack appears to originate from the 'DANGER AREA' on the plain below the ridge. It's impossible to confirm visually who the instigators are and in addition, something's jamming our 'Terrain Radar and Weapon Guidance System,' so there's no way we can accurately return fire!"

"OK" Shaw replied, "order a complete withdrawal. Let's get the fuck out of here!"

The three remaining 'ARIAVs' began a rapid conversion, automatically changing into standard HGVs with 'UNION OF ART DEALERSHIP ORGANISATIONS' wording and a magnificent smirking portrait logo of the Mona Lisa miraculously appearing on the sides of the vehicle trailers as they lumbered away from the scene of ongoing destruction.

As Phelps boarded the rearmost truck she turned to her colleague: "Well that at least confirms that the new 'Vehicle Transformation Programme' is functioning correctly."

After struggling for several hundred yards, Greyshott decided that he was out of immediate danger and lowered Oswald to the ground. He checked with desperation for a pulse. There was nothing.

35.

The Spy, the Earl and the teenager felt dangerously exposed as they sat waiting in the Mercedes Streamliner People Carrier in a lay-by just outside Winterbourne Stoke. This was the agreed location for their pre-arranged liaison with the detective, the butler and hopefully Rickenbacker's Multi-purpose Padded Suit of Advanced Weapons Technology.

During their escape across country using under-developed lanes, uneven semi-ploughed fields and farm tracks that were barely more than compacted stones and soggy dirt, William had become more than a little concerned that they may have totally wrecked the vehicle's suspension system which had not been designed for off-road antics. This was despite the fact that replacing it would have caused him no financial hardship whatsoever.

It appeared to be a stroke of good fortune that they had been able to avoid all the temporary U.A.D.O. checkpoints set up on the approaches to their camp. However, the Earl was of the considered opinion that it was Legacy's powerful psychic abilities that had enabled them to successfully steer clear of any contact with their pursuers.

Away in the distance, in the direction from whence they had come, could be heard a multitude of exploding mortars and they assumed that it was the sound of further exercises being undertaken by the tank brigade they had observed earlier down in the valley. The three had no idea that Shaw's convoy of ARIAVs had been the target of these projectiles and that the U.A.D.O. presence they had witnessed earlier was no longer an immediate threat.

Using Nineteen Eighties technology to thwart modern interception techniques, William had contacted Harold using a modified paging device to which had been added Voice Transmission capability. The Earl's driver had been instructed to withdraw fifty-two thousand pounds in cash from a secret vault located in one of William's many country residencies and to purchase forthwith a luxurious Recreational Vehicle roughly the size of an eleven-metre motor coach.

It was early afternoon when the gentle, smooth hum of a modern four hundred and twenty-five horse power diesel engine accompanied the appearance of a beautifully appointed Two Thousand and Five model Gulfstream Tourmaster, as it trundled along the A303, arriving over the brow of a hill and pulling up behind the People Carrier with a loud hiss of the pneumatic brakes.

Harold climbed down from the cab and rather informally embraced the Earl – an action not typical between the landed gentry and their minions. "How are you sir? I trust everything is going to plan for you and your companions? Is there anything further I can do to assist?"

"Thank you, Harold" the Earl replied. "We do in fact have a special task for you." He beckoned the Chauffeur over and gestured towards the inside of the Mercedes. They were presented with the depressing sight of a distraught Jeff Rickenbacker kneeling beside the motionless body of his incapacitated spouse. She had been carefully laid along the full length of the rearmost seats.

"As you can see," the Earl explained, using the lowest of tones in due consideration of Alpha One's obvious grief, "Joan has been attacked and physically paralysed by a formidable alien creature and at present, while we are unable to help, she is deteriorating towards what could possibly be an excruciatingly painful death. We need you and Oswald, when he arrives, to take care of her and continuously monitor her condition in the RV until Legacy is in a position to reverse the process."

"Of course, Sir, it shall be done" Harold replied. "I have already taken the liberty of doing some local research on the way here. The only place to legally park this 'monster' for any length of time within thirty square miles of our present location is at a Caravan Park called 'Hobson's Field,' just north of Salisbury. We can take Joan there for as long as required. No one will disturb us and I can keep you updated via the 'Vocopager.'"

"Excellent!" proclaimed Legacy as he appeared by the driver's door, having just used the RV's sumptuous toilet facilities for one of his rare occasions of humanoid waste disposal.

They were interrupted by an exclamation. "Quick guys, come outside! I can see Paul struggling towards us in the distance." It was Rickenbacker, who had stepped out of the vehicle while they chatted, announcing the imminent arrival of their absent friend. As the detective gradually made progress towards them, they all ran out to meet him, apart from Harold who remained behind with Harding.

Greyshott was in a terrible state. His clothes were ripped and torn and his face was covered in soot and light abrasions. As his partners in quest reached him, his knees buckled and he fell forward onto the rough, uneven tarmac at the side of the Dual Carriageway, the body of the deceased butler rolling off his shoulder in the process. With a great sigh of relief, he let go of the Padded Suit, which had now become much the worse for wear, with obvious scraping damage to the surface material from where it had been dragged along the ground for many miles.

"I'm afraid he's dead" the detective stated in a very matter-of-fact tone as the Earl rushed forward to help his manservant, the detective's exhaustion precluding anything more subtle or emotional.

Each of Greyshott's companions assumed a clearly defined division of responsibility. Legacy helped him to his feet and coaxed him towards the homely relief of the RV's luxurious interior. The Earl, although initially overwhelmed by a combined state of shock and bereavement tinged with a spattering of regret, managed to hold it together and lift Oswald's body gently away from the scene. Rickenbacker retrieved his suit, his initial concerns being whether or not he would be able to get the thing working again, although he also surprised himself with unexpected thoughts of concern for the well-being of his friend, the Detective.

The driver stood at the door of the Tourmaster as William approached with the body of his brother. "I'm so sorry, Harold" began the Earl, "I never meant for this to happen. I warned him against getting involved. The others will vouch for me." William's voice pleaded for support and understanding.

The chauffeur seemed strangely detached and unemotional, as if somehow divorced from the reality of the circumstances around him. He made no reply but helped the Earl to carry Oswald's body into the RV where they laid it down onto the luxurious sixty by eighty -inch bed, the contours of the butler's corpse sinking almost comfortably into the deluxe 'interspring' mattress. Legacy, Rickenbacker and Greyshott followed. The teenager passed a cool glass of mineral water to the detective who drank it with thanks, gulping it down in a matter of seconds like a dehydrated desert walker who had spent the last twenty-four hours in desperate search of an oasis.

Everyone gathered around the butler and stood quietly for a moment as a mark of respect. Then Rickenbacker broke the silence.

"So what happened, Paul?"

The detective stretched out on the Tourmaster's custom 'Soft Touch HAB' sofa. He looked drained of energy. "I'm not altogether sure" he replied. "I *had* managed to rescue the suit from the U.A.D.O. and was preparing to leave when I was discovered by one of the guards. However, before he had chance to apprehend me, he was

blown apart in an explosion. I escaped and found Oswald outside in the planned position of faked unconsciousness – only it wasn't faked. He had actually died. The weird thing is that he doesn't have a mark on him. I can only guess that his death was the result of internal injuries caused by the blast's shockwave."

The butler's face had become a deathly shade of grey, reflecting the early stages of rigor mortis. However, in addition to this expected colouration there were some unusual blotches of silver beginning to form along his forehead.

While they observed the condition of the deceased, Greyshott noticed that Rickenbacker had begun fiddling about with the Padded Suit, an obvious look of exasperation combined with deep frustration beginning to furrow his brow.

"I'm sorry" apologised the detective. "I hope I haven't caused any permanent damage. I just didn't have the physical strength to carry it clear of the ground with Oswald over my shoulder at the same time!"

"That's OK" Rickenbacker consoled. "You obviously did your best under the circumstances. As far as damage is concerned, there's only one way to find out."

He unzipped one of the suit's larger compartments and retrieved the fold-out portable keyboard which seemed unaffected. The spy keyed in a pre-programmed code that he had memorised and one of numerous hidden pouches began to flash amber on the suit's outer surface. A previously invisible pocket attached to the lining opened up. The Spy pulled out the 'bicycle spanner' shaped Post Mortem Analysis device previously used on Alf Lockwood and suspended it over Oswald.

"Mmm very interesting" pondered Alpha One. He held up the device so that the reading was in full view of his companions.

'ANALYSIS FAILURE – SUBJECT NON-CELLULOR ORGANISM. HUMANIOD EXTERIOR TISSUES ONLY.'

They all turned with a questioning glance towards Harold.

"Perhaps, William, your Chauffeur would like to explain?" suggested Rickenbacker.

"Of course," Harold replied, "both my brother and I knew from the very moment of our revised programming that eventually this day would come." He placed his hand gently on the Earl's shoulder. "You see Sir," the driver continued, "both Oswald and I are Cyborgs created by your father shortly before you were born."

William's jaw dropped to the floor in amazement and his eyes widened. "You can't be serious!" he replied, clearly dumbfounded by this shocking new information.

"I'm afraid I'm deadly serious!" Harold replied. "We were both prototype models for a proposed 'Super Commando' under development during the early years of the Cold War."

"So advanced cybernetics as featured in much modern-day Science Fiction is actually Science Fact" stated Greyshott, whose physical condition, aided by his new and magnificently comfortable surroundings, was starting to improve in leaps and bounds.

"To the extent that our primary physical structure is made of high tensile alloy but with an organic exoskeleton, yes."

“Was the military experiment carried through to its full potential?” queried the detective, as it started to occur to him that Rickenbacker’s inhuman strength might somehow have originated as a by-product of this covert technology.

“No” the Chauffeur replied. “Lord Pirbright, who was heading up the Project Team as a young man, asked for various guarantees from the UK government to prevent the technology falling into the wrong hands. When he failed to obtain these guarantees, he claimed to have destroyed the two Cyborgs, but instead he secretly modified them to represent two old men, who subsequently became members of his family’s domestic staff.”

Harold paused for a moment to allow the four friends to absorb the information that he had related to them so far. Then he continued: “The authorities never found out. This was the point when William’s father’s reputation and international standing as a renowned Scientist of multiple talents began its long and inevitable decline. The powers that be did their utmost to fully discredit him.”

“What was the purpose of modifying the prototype Commandos to represent a butler and a driver?” asked the Earl, who by this time had become enthralled by Harold’s story.

“The modifications coincided with the start of your Father’s visions” the Chauffeur replied. “Oswald and I and our traditional semi-aristocratic personalities were created as a means of watching over you and to prevent you from coming to any harm until the start of ‘The Greystone Quest.’ My brother didn’t actually die today. He closed down. His de-commissioning had been pre-programmed many years before to coincide with today’s developments. There is therefore no need to grieve. Lord Pirbright had it all planned from the start. Don’t forget that his ability to see accurately into the future meant that to him, today’s ‘tragic’ events were already a foregone conclusion!”

“Mmm I see” William considered thoughtfully. “Actually, thinking back, I’m surprised it never dawned on me ‘til now that I have no memories of you two ever looking any younger!”

“So, should we honour Oswald with a traditional human burial?” asked Rickenbacker as they watched the last of the butler’s clothing and outer human tissue complete its scheduled de-composition into nothing, leaving only a metallic robot-type structure lying on the bed.

“He was constructed using superior grade industrial metals” Harold replied, “so I rather feel that would be an illogical waste of valuable resources. Might I suggest that his body could be modified using Jeff’s technology into something more beneficial to the cause?”

“A re-constructed chassis and suspension for the Streamliner would be a start” the Earl suggested.

“I don’t know” Greysott expressed a degree of reservation, “somehow that seems disrespectful.”

“I assure you” encouraged the Chauffeur, “Oswald would have wanted and indeed expected nothing less.”

As had often been the case previously, Legacy decided to intervene at this point in a bid to get the proceedings back on track. “I must remind you gentlemen,” he began, “of the urgency of our current situation. The Wudrun is very likely to still be underhandedly influencing our actions and behaviour, causing us to divert our attention to less pressing matters. We need to summon up ‘Protective Eye Shields’ from Jeff’s Padded Suit as soon as possible to protect us against the beast’s cunning psychic interference.”

“OK” replied the Restorer as he instigated the coded procedure in order to extract the ‘Stealth Globe’ from the garment. Once activated, the device, as they had expected, shot a concentrated beam of light onto the wall of

the Tourmaster's kitchen compartment. But instead of the familiar early Nineteen Sixties' attired young lady with the distinctive 'beehive' hairstyle, there appeared a stocky Caribbean gentleman with a thick Afro.

"Hullo dare me ol' frind Jeff," the image greeted them. "Wot can I do fur yo dis fine day?"

"Shit!" exclaimed the Spy. "That's not right! It should be set automatically to the default mode!"

"What do you mean?" enquired the detective.

"Well, the 'Stealth Globe' follows the same principle as many a typical Twenty First Century gismo such as the latest Vehicle Satellite Navigation System. You can select different 'Globe Hosts' from various cultural backgrounds, sexes and even sexual orientations, in the same way that with a modern Sat Nav, you can choose, for example, a seductive-sounding woman, a posh upper-class Nob who speaks using only the 'Queen's English,' or maybe even the voice of your favourite film star. My worry is, however, that the Suit may have sustained some less obvious, but nevertheless critical damage as the 'Stealth Globe's' automatic default Host is normally a Nineteen Sixties 'B52' girl rather than a hulking great Rastafarian from the West Indies!"

Rickenbacker paused for a moment and quietly considered the pros and cons of the situation. The others could almost physically feel the cogs turning over and over in his head as they watched.

"Well I don't suppose it matters" he concluded.

Resigning himself to getting the best he could from the tools now at his disposal, the Spy began the procedure of using the Stealth Globe Host's question format to measure up each of his comrades' heads for the required 'Anti-Wudrun Eye Shields.'

The afternoon wore on and everything was proceeding well until the point when the holographic Jamaican requested their preferred options from a catalogue of designs which was basically a virtual display of various types of fashionable and not so fashionable sunglasses. On every occasion on which a selection was attempted the answer was 'product not available.' Eventually it transpired that the only choice the Globe was prepared to accept was a ridiculously flamboyant design. It was multicoloured, impressed with glitter granules and came complete with pointed ends that curved out extravagantly in an upward direction. It was a style that, without a doubt, would have befitted an enthusiastic transvestite.

William tried his pair on for size.

Legacy scratched his chin in a thoughtful manner. "Well," he conceded, "they will just have to do for now."

Greystott, who was at last beginning to regain much of his former strength and enthusiasm for 'The Greystone Quest,' burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"Problem?" the Earl asked. He sounded defensive and rather taken aback, almost as if this reaction was quite inappropriate.

"It's nothing" the detective replied, still chuckling. "It's just that you remind me of Australian comedian Barry Humphries' famous character, Dame Edna Everage!"

36.

For decades the mysterious intrigues of the mythically bottomless Sargasso Sea had busied the minds of many a sensationalist journalist or storyteller, particularly those with more than a passing interest in conspiracy theories.

A solitary deep-sea diver probed the murky depths, his haphazard movements based purely upon a set of vague and imprecise co-ordinates obtained from what could only be described as a dubious source at best. He was SURE member One Seven Nine – a well-known, flamboyant and somewhat controversial Californian millionaire as well as close confidant and personal friend of the Earl of Hambledon. In fact, they were best of buddies, each sharing a generous helping of blatant eccentricity.

In the previous few weeks, the diver had finally fulfilled one of his many life-long ambitions – namely the successful procurement of a moth-balled Deep Ocean Research Submersible previously owned by the United States Navy.

One Seven Nine headed up one of the Southern UFO Reporting Establishment's many specialist offshoot organisations, namely SAIL – the Sub Aqua Investigative League, a group whose main interests focussed on that area of the Western Atlantic featured in many a sailor's yarn of ancient maritime folklore and known as the 'Bermuda' or 'Devil's Triangle.'

Conceived as a more advanced stable-mate to the DSV-Four and capable of diving to a depth of twenty-three thousand feet, SAIL's newly-acquired submersible had been modified further using advanced alien-based technology 'borrowed' from the Pirbright archives and now included the ability to deposit a diver into the ocean depths while remaining fully pressurised without the need for a conventional airlock or flood chamber.

To complete this set of advanced underwater kit, the President of SAIL had also adapted a Comex Janus IV Scuba Set by the same means so that there was now no bottom limit to the depth in which the atmospheric diving suit could be used. In addition to the aluminium rotary joints and Thruster Pack which came as standard, a powerful searchlight had been added to the helmet section to allow for visual penetration of the heavy silt likely to be experienced at these previously unexplored recesses of the oceanic underworld.

Yet ironically, having gone to all this major effort and expense, it had now transpired that the object of One Seven Nine's investigative fascination had found its final resting place at a fraction of the previously anticipated depth. Following a mere ten-thousand-foot plunge by the two-man crew, the vague outline of the machine in question had been spotted by the submersible's pilot buried amongst a phytoplankton field which populated the cliff-top of a previously uncharted undersea ridge.

While his colleague studiously monitored the radio link between them, together with the DSV's advanced pressurisation and propulsion systems, the heavily-clad diver pushed his way through the oppressive darkness and dense shoals of silver-grey Threadfins until finally he reached his entrenched and lifeless quarry. A single pane of glass forming part of the airliner's windshield was the only part clearly visible as he approached, misted over by sixty-nine years of relentless exposure to undersea parasites.

One Seven Nine unzipped and reached down into his Specialist Equipment Pouch, withdrawing a long metal implement with a fold-out rotating blade attached to the end. While the inquisitive Polydactylus Oligodon swam in circles around his head, waving their distinctive black fins as if to demonstrate their full support of his endeavours, SAIL's most senior member began to cut away at the stubborn conglomeration of integrated plant and animal plankton.

The minutes seemed to drag by like hours as the pilot of the submersible chewed away at the inflamed skin of his fingertips in tense anticipation of the hoped-for confirmation. Was this indeed the aircraft that had evaded all attempts by interested parties to trace its whereabouts over four long decades of the Cold War and beyond?

The radio, which had been emitting a constant hum of mind-numbing static burst into life. "One Seven Nine to Two Six Five Seven, over."

The submersible's controller, whose interest in the proceedings during the last few minutes had begun to wane, his lazy body slouching through boredom, sat upright in his chair, giving the transmission his full attention. "Two Six Five Seven receiving: go ahead!"

"I've managed to locate the forward passenger door and removed most of the plankton, coral and accumulated barnacular material from the surrounding area. Underneath it all, I can clearly discern the word 'Star' on the fuselage. I think we've found her!" There was a triumphant tone to his voice. "The pressure's too great to release the door manually so I'm gonna use the ultra-thermic cutter to slice my way through."

"That's understood" replied his colleague. "Let's hope the underwater camera finally reveals some of the answers. Good luck!"

"Thanks" the diver replied, "I'll call you again once I'm in!"

With intricate precision, the Californian millionaire aimed his specially adapted underwater cutting torch onto the edges of the door's aluminium frame until eventually the erstwhile plug fell away, spiralling out of control into the deep ocean current and onwards towards the endless void below.

The diver watched in awe as part of one of the last vestiges of man's earliest attempts at producing an economic transatlantic airliner was, in a split second, enveloped by the scaly white tentacle of a passing giant squid, the monster reaching out of the insane darkness and dragging the cabin door hungrily away into oblivion. As the creature, with its newly-acquired property, propelled itself rapidly downwards, many undiscovered species of oceanic freaks lurked nearby, observing the scene as if trapped like tormented spirits on guard duty over the cavernous deep-sea wastelands beyond.

One Seven Nine re-stowed his tools and, taking care not to catch his Atmospheric Diving Suit on any jagged metal or crash debris, made his way into the eerie and oppressive underwater tomb. Within he would find the undisturbed skeletons of thirty-one unfortunate air travellers still strapped into their seats; weary passengers on a long overwater night flight who had expected only minor turbulence. Instead they had met a sudden and traumatic death at Zero Three Thirty-Two hours GMT on the Thirtieth of January, Nineteen Forty-Eight.

*

London's Heathrow airport thronged with excited teenage girls as an executive jet carrying the latest internationally-acclaimed boy band touched down on runway Two Seven Right.

Captain Brian W. McMillan turned to his colleague on the flight deck of a brand-new Boeing Seven Eight Seven Dreamliner, delivered only a week earlier to Britain's national airline. "Here come the fabulous four!" he exclaimed as the Biz-Jet taxied past their aircraft and headed away towards a remote stand some distance from the ecstatic gathering of pop fans.

Captain James Frazer, who today was acting First Officer, held up the pre-flight checklist, flapping it in his colleague's face in order to gain his attention. He was eager to start the day's operation. "Are you ready Brian?" he asked, observing in detail the other pilot's weathered facial features.

McMillan looked tired and strained, a not unusual phenomenon for long distance airline pilots constantly exchanging one time zone for another. However, on this occasion, his physical appearance and exhaustion-inspired mannerisms had rather more sinister origins.

"There's plenty of time" McMillan replied, his enthusiasm for the day's flight to New York JFK noticeably lacking. "We're not due to leave the gate for another hour and I need a few more minutes chill time." He grabbed 'The Economist' from his flight bag and began to methodically and almost robotically thumb through the pages, while slurping a hot drink from a plastic cup.

"Is everything OK?" enquired Frazer. "You're looking thoroughly knackered! Maybe you should have called in sick? Shall I call 'Operations' and request a standby?"

"No, I'll be fine after this strong cuppa" the Captain replied. "I haven't been sleeping too well recently – keep having really weird dreams – you might even say nightmares. I'll contact the Medical Officer when we get back and hopefully get it sorted."

"Well as long as you're sure?" the First Officer checked.

Normally, company policy dictated that if either pilot felt the slightest doubt concerning the other's ability to safely operate, then they should be requested to stand down. But the situation on this occasion was complicated by a long-standing friendship; an empathy which intervened to the extent that it failed to allow professionalism to prevail.

Frazer had met McMillan ten years earlier while on holiday in Bermuda. They had immediately taken to each other when McMillan had jumped in at the last minute and rescued Frazer's five-year-old son from almost drowning in the hotel's swimming pool.

They had much in common. In addition to their shared love of flying, they both partook in golf, cross-country hiking and freshwater fishing, enjoying these recreational pastimes at every opportunity, both at home and abroad.

McMillan was a private individual who claimed to be a life-long bachelor. To an outsider he seemed mysterious and aloof and never discussed his past – not even with his favourite colleague. Frazer was a freedom-loving divorcee with shared custody of his one and only child. He had introduced McMillan to the airline shortly after they met, helping him to secure a position with the then Chief Pilot, since made redundant.

"Did you want to tell me about it?" Frazer encouraged.

"About what?" McMillan queried.

"The dreams."

"Oh yes, the dreams." The Captain seemed vague and distant. "No – don't worry James," he replied. "You needn't concern yourself with my crazy, neurotic personality!"

It was said half in seriousness and half in jest.

“Are you sure?” his friend persisted. “Besides it’ll kill some time and as I did a course in psychology a few years back, I might be able to interpret them for you.”

“I never knew you studied the mind!” McMillan answered, surprised.

“I don’t as a general rule” Frazer replied, “but back then I needed a distraction from the lonely evenings while the divorce was going through. Actually, it was surprisingly interesting. We did a whole module on dreams and their meanings.”

“Well – if you think it’ll help” McMillan surrendered, having first weighed up carefully his co-pilot’s proposition. “It’s like this: It’s the same dream I’ve had every night now for over a week.”

He took a large gulp of coffee, emitting a grateful “Aargh” as it went down.

“I’m trapped underwater in the flight deck of an aircraft – not a modern bird, something pretty obsolete. Rather than a glass cockpit like this one, it’s got ancient analogue dials and a vintage control column.”

As the description of McMillan’s dream unravelled, Frazer became captivated by what he was hearing, so much so that he completely missed a transmission from Ground Control which the Captain also failed to hear or acknowledge.

“Anyway,” McMillan continued, “I’m just lying there in this seat unable to move when a figure suddenly appears in front of me wearing a bulky diving suit, takes out a screwdriver and starts unscrewing one of the dials. All the while I’m getting this overwhelming urge to strangle him. Eventually I can stand it no longer, grab him by the throat and somehow manage, despite the thickness of the suit around his neck, to throttle the life out of him. I then let go of the body which sinks to the floor and lift up my hand. It’s completely devoid of skin and flesh. All I can see is the bone structure of the palm and fingers – nothing else.”

As he spoke the Captain’s brow furrowed with confusion, his demeanour exuding a high degree of stress and worry that was difficult to hide.

“Then I wake up screaming the house down,” he continued. “Three times now I’ve had the neighbours round, desperate to see if I’m alright. I think they’re worried sick!”

As Frazer considered the main bullet points of the captain’s recollection, Ground Control again tried to contact them. This time the First Officer answered. The communication was brief and the instant it was over he began to ponder more thoroughly over the details. “Well that’s certainly a weird one” Frazer conceded. “It doesn’t seem to correlate with anything I learned on the course.”

“There’s one other thing” McMillan added. “Tiger.”

“There’s a tiger in the dream?”

“No” the Captain clarified, “not a tiger itself. Just the word ‘tiger.’ I keep hearing it constantly as the vision plays out – a kind of monotonous chanting repeated over and over again like it’s going round on a loop tape. It’s beginning to drive me mad!”

*

The young 'Mestizo' tugged in desperation at the frayed rope attached to the neck of his baby Alpaca, willing it to jump down from the rocky outcrop above them and follow him down the remainder of the mountain towards the distant lights of Arequipa. Out in the open, in the shadow of Chachani, as the suffocating bleakness of the Peruvian dusk spread itself across the empty landscape, the boy shuddered at the thought of displeasing his tribe's ancestral spirits.

To be out alone after dark was ill-advised and strongly discouraged by his small peasant community, particularly bearing in mind the recent increase of unexplained disappearances. Only the previous day, three Mexican tourists had been seen as the light faded traversing El Angel. The next morning, they were nowhere to be found. The vanishings were frequently accompanied by strange hovering lights in the sky – hence the superstitious folklore of the locals. Other more imaginative minds tended towards a 'U.F.O.' or 'alien abduction' theory.

In order to hasten his escape from the area, the youngster decided to adopt a gentler approach towards his pet rather than the previously aggressive stance, attempting some soothing words of encouragement. The Alpaca brayed with enthusiasm in reply but still refused to budge. It was only when a dazzling light appeared unexpectedly on the horizon that the animal leapt from the ledge in mortal fear, taking flight down the shallow descent, dragging the undernourished, scrawny-legged child behind it.

The light steadily grew ever brighter, a single phenomenon in an otherwise featureless blanket of dense mountain mist, until the loud and intrusive thumping of helicopter rotor blades became the more predominant feature of the machine's gradual approach.

The Russian-built MIL MI Eight transport of the Peruvian Presidential Flight passed low over the boy's head as he and his animal sheltered behind a large boulder. Hugging the desolate contours of the remote yet imposing mountain, the MIL circled Chachani's distant summit, disappearing behind it with ominous suddenness, the sound of the rotors ceasing as the cowering individual watched in wondrous awe from the safety of his temporary hiding place.

The machine had descended into a concealed valley, surrounded on all sides by the extinct volcano's unstable terrain. Here the formation of new mini-craters and the collapsing of old ones occurred almost daily, but this somewhat volatile landscape had not prevented the construction of the U.A.D.O.'s newest and perhaps greatest engineering feat. Beneath the hovering MIL, a substantial man-made fissure designed to resemble a typical 'false caldera' opened up like the mouth of a hungry whale ready to receive them.

Chief of Staff I.T.M.L. Iain Braithwaite-Smythe stared out of the nearest cabin window as the luxuriously-furnished Presidential helicopter hovered a hundred feet above the crater, awaiting landing clearance. Agent Foxtrot Six Santos-Gomez and U.A.D.O. Colonel Shaw sat opposite him, both stony-faced and apparently deep in thought.

Smythe assumed that there was nothing unusual about their ultra-serious demeanour. However, in truth, they were both reflecting on their inability so far to apprehend the Greystone Legacy and his accomplices and giving due consideration to the perceived threat to world peace this singular failure was continuing to bode for the planet.

While still in London, Smythe had been thoroughly briefed on the Universal Alien Defence Organisation and its international remit to protect the earth from every type of extra-terrestrial threat ranging widely from the obviously imminent to the vaguely possible. It was now time to introduce him to the heart of the operation – a massive South American military complex constructed half a mile beneath the mountain's surface.

“This is your pilot speaking” came a terse P.A. message from the cockpit, announced in a strong Hispanic accent. “Would all personnel please prepare themselves for landing.”

Without even giving the three men a fighting chance to secure their seatbelts, the chopper adopted an extreme nose-down posture. This coincided with the ignition of a set of perimeter lights located around the edge of a circular sliding concrete door covering the sub-crater’s mouth.

The machine swooped down like a Golden Eagle preparing to intercept a helpless prey, entering the voluminous cavern just as the opening door completed its full length of travel. A further descent followed until the helicopter settled gently onto its allocated stand on a vast landing pad which formed the roof of the extensive underground base.

As the rotors wound down, the three men disembarked, Shaw and Gomez leading with Braithwaite-Smythe bringing up the rear. As the two more senior officers discussed the latest intelligence received from HQ, it became apparent that Smythe was failing to keep up. The bumbling C.I.T.M.L. was in the throes of an animated argument with a luggage porter, cursing the individual using obscene and racist language, while insisting he would carry all five of his huge bags of personal effects himself. Gomez attempted to intervene.

“It’s OK Sir,” he began, deferring to Smythe’s previous position of seniority in an attempt to diffuse the situation, “these guys are paid to help us. I’m sure they’ll be careful with your stuff!”

The porter interpreted this to be words of specific encouragement and tried once again to prize the largest of the cases from Smythe’s possession. A tug-of-war ensued, accompanied by still more angry cursing. Gomez opened his mouth in readiness to intervene further but a hand on his shoulder and a shake of the head from Shaw confirmed that he was fighting a losing battle.

As the three continued towards the secure exit to the Transit Terminal, Gomez began to wonder, bearing in mind Braithwaite-Smythe’s reputation, whether one of the cases was packed full of his own personal supply of extreme pornography.

Many levels further down, within the deepest recesses of U.A.D.O. Supreme Headquarters, two individuals were becoming locked in difficult analytical conversation; one a specialist in her technical field of expertise, the other a soulful, insightful character with enormous power over the largely ignorant world above.

Sitting on one side of a long oblong table with curved ends was the Alien Technology and Research Information Officer, Julie Phelps. In her hand was a badly damaged Deep Ocean Underwater Video Camera which she was examining in the minutest detail, the device plugged into the centre’s main diagnostic computer, which in turn was transmitting recovered data onto a wide overhead screen.

“As you can see, Sir,” she began, continuing an earlier conversation, “despite the obvious damage to the camera casing and infiltration of seawater into the delicate digital mechanism, the computer has been able to successfully recover and analyse the video content and produce an excellent reproduction of what was filmed.”

“Rather too excellent wouldn’t you say?” replied the unhealthily obese, bearded gentleman sitting opposite – an imposing yet somehow delightfully appealing figure dressed in the unmistakable regalia of a strictly Orthodox Jew.

“If you are suggesting that Alien technology has been used to modify the equipment, then I have to say that I’m inclined to agree with you” Phelps replied. “But who apart from our organisation would have access to that level of advanced Science?”

The instant she spoke, the ATRIO realised that maybe she was being a tad too eager asking about classified information, particularly as this was the one person on the planet for whom she held enormous respect, his silent charisma humbling her normally cocky personality by his very presence.

“Oh, I’m sorry Sir – I didn’t mean to presume. I...”

She was interrupted in mid-flow by a radio call from outside.

“Your V.I.P. guests are here Mr. President.”

“Excellent” the bearded fellow replied, “bring them straight down!”

Within minutes the two were joined by Shaw, Gomez and Smythe, accompanied by a member of the ‘New Arrivals Comfort and Hospitality team.’

“Gentlemen” the operative began, “may I introduce Mr. Elijah Goldenburg, Supreme President of the Commission for United Earth Nations.”

Goldenburg’s endearing smile reflected that of a kindly old gentleman, his soft expression and relaxed personality putting the new arrivals at ease before a word was spoken by any of them. “Welcome Echo Five, Foxtrot Six – you have arrived at a critical time in our ongoing fight against the ‘Stone Aliens.’”

He shook Shaw’s and Gomez’ hands firmly and deliberately,

“...and an especially warm welcome to our new recruit, Golf Seven – Mr. Braithwaite-Smythe: we are particularly in need of your services, Sir, at this time!”

Smythe shook the President’s hand in a professional manner, but the action lacked sincerity and he chose to remain cool and distant.

“I am sure you are keen to learn all you can about this high-tech facility,” Goldenburg continued, “and I have no doubt that Mr. Santos-Gomez will be more than willing to give you the guided tour. However, for now it will have to wait. We have rather more pressing matters to attend to.”

At this point Braithwaite-Smythe finally, although rather reluctantly, gave up his luggage to the ‘Comfort and Hospitality’ Operative and with obvious disgust at not being given the chance to freshen up after the journey and get used to his new surroundings before getting down to the ‘nitty gritty,’ joined his colleagues at the table.

“Ms Phelps?” requested Goldenburg in a gentle but commanding voice, “the film please?”

The screen flickered and a digitally-enhanced three-dimensional high definition moving image of the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean came into view.

“What you are witnessing,” began the ATRIO, “is underwater filming combined with the ultimate in cutting edge movie technology. We estimate that this sequence was recorded at a depth of between ten and twelve thousand feet somewhere in the Western Atlantic.”

“It’s amazing” commented Shaw. “How did the cameraman achieve such clarity? Presumably there is minimal light available and extensive silt contamination at those depths?”

“It would appear that the user of the equipment had access to technology that, as far as we are aware, is not yet in the public domain,” Goldenburg replied, casually twisting one of his curly ‘Payot’ sidelocks. “There can be only one possible explanation – Pirbright and his organisation ‘SURE’ must be implicated here.”

The camera panned from left to right as the holder made sporadic headway along what looked like a wrecked and dilapidated aircraft cabin, the skeletal remains of long-deceased passengers occupying every seat interspersed with sealed and unused Mae West lifejackets, until he finally reached the cockpit. At this point the audio came to life.

“I’m just entering the flight deck now. I can hear something strange.”

“Turn up the volume slightly” the President requested.

Phelps obliged.

As the ‘front office’ of the airliner was entered, the camera lens was filled with fishy scales which darted back and forth four or five times in quick succession, obstructing the cameraman’s view. The arm of the deep-sea diver appeared as he attempted to shoo it away.

“What is it?” asked Santos-Gomez.

“A Blue Tang Surgeonfish,” Phelps replied. “You can tell by the fact that the dorsal, anal and caudal fins are golden blue. Also, the yellow tail would indicate a subadult.”

“Oh” Gomez grunted without really knowing how he should reply to such unnecessarily specific information.

“Listen up” Goldenburg intervened, “you’re missing the most important bit.”

Phelps turned the volume up another notch.

“Help me! Help me please!” What sounded like the high-pitched pleas of a small child reverberated through the room’s audio system mixed with a kind of blurred whooshing sound created by the ebb and flow of the surrounding deep-water current. “Set me free! Release me from this bondage!”

“It’s coming from the instrument panel” the cameraman continued his commentary, “-behind one of these dials. I think it’s the altimeter. I’m gonna unscrew it and take a look!”

The maker of the film carefully removed the instrument and then zoomed the camera into the empty space remaining. A tiny creature that appeared from its depressed facial expression to be full of mental anguish, occupied the crevice, its little wizened face scrunched up into a tormented frown, while its wrinkly, shrunken body rocked from side to side with monotonous regularity like a caged animal driven to insanity.

“Come on little fella,” encouraged the commentator, “let me help you.” His arm could be seen reaching out to the minuscule imp-like entity. “No – get off!” he then scolded. His other arm could be clearly observed being lifted up and smacking away at his left shoulder as if to discourage an irritation.

“What’s happening?” asked Braithwaite-Smythe.

Phelps paused the film. "I believe he thinks that the Surgeonfish is still annoying him from behind" she advised, "but it isn't. Watch what happens next!"

As the film re-commenced, a deafening scream could be heard followed by an awful gurgling sound, while the floor of the aircraft rushed towards the camera lens as the equipment sank down, released from the cameraman's grip. At this point the film ended.

"What do you make of all this?" Gomez asked excitedly, directing the question to neither Goldenburg or Phelps specifically.

"Voice analysis suggests that our amateur film-maker was attacked and fatally strangled by an unknown assailant" replied the ATRIO.

"Thank you, Julie" Goldenburg interrupted. "I'll take it from here."

He placed his hands flat on the table and leaned forward, his large belly splaying out over the top like malleable loft insulation.

"I'll summarise the main facts based on what we have managed to ascertain so far with a fair degree of certainty:

ONE: The camera was washed up on a beach in Bermuda three days ago. Fortunately, it was found by one of our technicians who happened to be on vacation there at the time.

TWO: Parts of a requisitioned Deep-Sea Submersible were found the same day in the same area by a building contractor and handed over to local law enforcement. Damage would suggest an undersea explosion of significant magnitude.

THREE: A Salvage Ship – 'The Independent,' known to be under contract to 'SAIL,' an offshoot of Pirbright's 'SURE' organisation was positioned a hundred and twenty miles south east of Bermuda the previous day. It has since disappeared.

FOUR: The creature that the cameraman discovered in the aircraft is known as a 'Neutered Fawn.' It is an extremely scarce alien to be found on our planet, incredibly shy and rarely visible to the naked human eye owing to its ability to shrink to a mere twentieth of its normal size when under threat. We know that this species has an extraordinary ability to see into the future. It doesn't just predict - It literally knows everything that lies ahead. We believe this to be the reason for its thoroughly tormented mental behaviour."

"What was it doing there?" asked Braithwaite-Smythe.

"As yet we don't know for sure" the Jew replied, "but we should have additional information once our special guest arrives tomorrow morning. In the meantime, this is where *you* come in Golf Seven. Using your well-established influence over the UK's terrestrial armed forces and hopefully excellent contacts in the Royal Navy, we need you to arrange for a 'Vanguard Class' Ballistic Missile Submarine to be despatched post haste to the estimated location of the sunken aircraft. I understand HMS Vengeance is currently on exercises in the Cape Verde Basin?"

"I'll get onto it right away!" Braithwaite-Smythe exclaimed, enjoying a sudden rushing sensation of great self-importance.

"What's the history behind the plane wreck?" Shaw enquired.

"I'll answer that one if you would allow me to Sir" the ATRIO offered.

"Go ahead!" replied Goldenburg, smiling once again with warm sympathy for her young and unrestrained enthusiasm.

"Preliminary investigations would suggest that the aircraft is a British South American Airways Avro Tudor which was lost without trace in January Nineteen Forty-Eight. Off the record, the crew of a Lancastrian of the same airline flying one hundred and fifty miles ahead of it the same evening experienced extra-terrestrial activity shortly before the Tudor went missing although this fact was never officially reported to the media."

"Foo Fighters?" offered Gomez.

"Indeed" Phelps confirmed. "How Pirbright's group were able to track down the Tudor's location is a mystery as it's managed to evade our own highly advanced sonar technology for decades. For your information and in case further research is required, we believe it to be Construction Number Thirteen Forty-Nine. The aircraft was registered 'George Able How Nab Peter' under the old phonetic alphabet, named 'Star Tiger' and piloted by Captain Brian W. McMillan."

37.

The boy Legacy strode with purposeful intent up to the main entrance of 'The Bull Inn,' a property of 'traditional construction' situated on the main A303 trunk road from London to the South West in Winterbourne Stoke. He and his three companions had arrived at the village with no clear strategy for tracking down the elusive druids and their beastly ward. But the local pub, with its heaving car park that highlighted the establishment's obvious popularity, seemed as good a place as any to start.

The group looked mighty peculiar striding around in their Nineteen-Sixties style 'Dame Edna' glasses but all had concluded that 'needs must at times like these.' The most important consideration was that they were now sufficiently protected from the Wudrun's supernatural and deadly powers of manipulation.

Harold had left some hours previously for Hudson's Field having secured Harding's mineralised body loosely but firmly inside the Tourmaster with some heavy duty padded restraining straps, her rapidly deteriorating figure laid out along the 'Soft Touch' sofa as the Earl's cyborg driver trundled along in the general direction of Salisbury.

Greyscott, Rickenbacker and the Earl had together come up with a plan to explain their odd facial regalia. They were to pretend that they were raising money for William's 'SURE' organisation in the form of a 'sponsored comedy look.' Whether they would be believed remained to be seen but it was the best that they could come up with. Legacy had agreed to this blatant farce and showed little concern for the likely effect of their appearance on the locals. He had 'bigger fish to fry' or so events would confirm later that evening.

The Streamliner People Carrier had been parked at the rear of the Inn, Rickenbacker placing it with strategic accuracy under a disused and dilapidated awning which in turn was covered by the wide overhanging branches of an old and expansive Birch. The idea was to make the vehicle as invisible as possible from the air. Normally he would have used the Padded Suit's excellent 'Camouflage Conversion Kit' but had decided against it on the boy's advice, until the obvious 'production' problems had been successfully ironed out.

As the teenager placed his foot on the first step leading up to the unusual 'saloon style' swing doors of the public house, he paused and turned around. His companions seemed rather reticent about entering the building for obvious reasons, so he patiently waited for them to catch up.

The Earl took the lead and, arriving alongside the boy, had a sudden and unexpected surge of courage, the source of which was undoubtedly the Grey dwelling within. Without intending an intentional pun around the establishment's name, he smiled mischievously and announced with some degree of bravado "I'll go ahead and introduce us to the landlord. One of us needs to take the bull by the horns!"

Unsurprisingly, no voices were raised in objection.

The interior of the pub comprised one substantial public area with a single bar servery and, being a Saturday evening, it was packed full of vibrant, chatty punters, including many locals enjoying the opportunity to relax after a hard week at their various mainly rural occupations. There was though, rather strangely, a noticeable lack of army personnel considering the location.

William marched up to the bar while his three companions sat down at the first vacant table, feeling more than a little conspicuous when all eyes seemed to turn with minimal tact in their direction.

"Evening landlord" the Earl introduced himself. "My name is Godfrey Ravensfold. My colleagues and I are undertaking a survey on local extra-terrestrial activity on behalf of an International Research Organisation."

Before the current stage of their ongoing quest, the four had already agreed to use false names until they had succeeded in locating the Druid community that would hopefully lead them to the Wudrun's lair. There was an obvious fear that the U.A.D.O. may have circulated their real names via the local media in order to assist in establishing their location.

The landlord's expression was severe and far from welcoming. He slapped the thick white cloth which he was using to dry beer glasses hard down on the counter in such a way that the noise resembled a firearm going off. William instinctively drew his head back with a start but maintained his position.

"I'm afraid we don't cater for your sort at this establishment" the landlord replied, assuming a rather aggressive posture. "I would ask you and your friends to leave immediately."

There were no other bar staff present, so the Earl presumed that the stress of the busy evening and having to cope entirely on his own meant that the arrival of some odd-looking strangers whose behaviour was difficult to predict had now become the final straw for the poor overworked fellow.

"I assure you my friend" William soothed, "you need have no worries regarding our presence here. The spectacles are purely the means by which we hope to raise money for a worthy cause."

The barman's eyes narrowed and he leaned forward with his palms outstretched on the bar. He stared the Earl fully in the face, his expression angry and menacing. William remained steadfast as the landlord's ugly mug came uncomfortably close. He smelled of cheap aftershave and his rough, unshaven features and misshapen skull with its slanted forehead gave him a distinctly Neanderthal appearance. The unpleasantness was rounded off nicely by his thick hand-knitted woollen pullover that gave off the unmistakable odour of a Wiltshire farmyard.

"It's not the glasses" the barman declared. "It's that fellow there!" He pointed in the direction of Rickenbacker. "Members of the armed forces are no longer welcome at the Bull Inn!"

"Oh, you needn't worry about him" William replied, "he's no soldier – that is – not from any regiment you would be familiar with around here. He just feels comfortable in khakis."

"Be that as it may," the landlord replied in a doubtful tone, "the locals find the presence of soldiers more than a little unsettling these days!"

"OK" the Earl yielded, "in that case we won't outstay our welcome. I just wondered if you happened to know the location of a Druid community anywhere in the neighbourhood?"

The mention of the word 'druid' had an unexpected and dramatic effect upon the proceedings. The whole pub fell silent, prompting the Earl to consider the classic phrase 'you could almost hear a pin drop.' Then somebody knocked a couple of wine glasses over and they fell to the floor with an almighty smash.

William turned and observed the scene.

A young couple were staring with vacant expressions in his direction, their eyes wide like frightened rabbits caught in the proverbial car headlights. An older pair sitting nearby appeared to be entering a state of shock – the woman, with a blue rinse hairstyle and rollers, beginning to tremble while her husband took hold of her hand in an attempt to offer consolation and comfort.

A group of five mean-looking farmers rose to their feet, their chairs grating across the floor's polished wooden surface as one of their number produced a severely scratched and dented Purdey shotgun from behind his back,

aiming it at William's head in an intimidating fashion. Rickenbacker stepped forward to intervene but Greyshott blocked his path with an outstretched arm.

The barman raised his hand. "It's OK ladies and gentlemen. There's nothing to fear. Please carry on. I'm sure we can happily get to the bottom of this to everyone's satisfaction!" He whispered to William: "come around the back with me and bring your friends."

The landlord made haste towards a room that presumably formed part of his living quarters, the Earl close on his tail while beckoning to the others to follow. As soon as they had all gathered together, the Bull Inn's sole proprietor wasted no time in getting straight to the point.

"Who are you?" he questioned the four oddly bespectacled travellers. "What do you want? Why are you asking about druids?"

Greyshott, Rickenbacker and Pirbright turned towards Legacy in one unintentionally co-ordinated movement, each hoping that the boy would indicate through subtle telepathy that they could trust this modern-day caveman with at least some if not all of their story.

They needn't have worried as the teenager was the first to take the initiative. "I realise Sir, that you and your community have been suffering greatly for some considerable time and that forces beyond your control have been interfering with the ability of your people to conduct normal lives. We are here to stop this degrading process and return things to normal – but we will need your help!"

Legacy's reply, while demonstrating an obvious willingness to assist, had also conveyed a deeper and more profound meaning to the landlord than the words alone might have suggested. The teenager's well-established ability to bring an individual rapidly round to his way of thinking was once again at work. Before long, the barman was bending over backwards to assist them.

"Well," he began, "the area is frequented by what we like to term 'the lunatic fringe' mainly during the Solstice. They come to pay homage to Mother Nature at the famous stones. There's only one fellow who stays all year round. We call him 'The White Wizard' on account of his snowy white hair and long scruffy beard."

"Well that sounds like the man we're after," Rickenbacker butted in, "but aren't we forgetting something?" He looked around at his colleagues but was met with only blank expressions. With a tremendous sigh of frustration, the soldier reminded them of what he personally deemed to be the much greater imperative. "The urgency regarding Joan and her rapid decline!"

"Do not fret my friend" Legacy comforted him. "By midnight tonight that issue will be fully resolved." He turned to the Inn's proprietor. "How can we contact the White Wizard?"

"I'll get on the phone to him right away" the barman replied. "I believe he may have information that could be of significant interest to you all." He paused – then added almost as an afterthought, "I must warn you, though, the guy's a little odd. Now – how about some food? My new chef has recently introduced a thoroughly appetizing and varied fish menu. I take it you all like fish?"

The companions smiled in unison. So, the landlord didn't work entirely alone after all. There must have been a full complement of catering staff hidden away in a backroom somewhere. The four could see the door to the kitchen area partially open, but their presence was far from obvious.

Upon their return to the main bar, the members of the 'Greystone Quest' were relieved to discover that the atmosphere had become palpably more relaxed and their presence seemed now to be hardly acknowledged. They returned to their original table at which point the teenager convened an unscheduled conference.

"Now my friends," he began, "I will brief you on the means by which I intend to release Joan from the alien material currently encapsulating her body – but first some background information is necessary."

"We're all ears" replied Greyshott, keen as ever to learn as much as he could in the shortest possible time about extra-terrestrial beings and distant worlds: information to which, on the whole, the general public were never privy.

"The Wudrun originates from your recently discovered planet HD Four Zero Three Seven G in the so-called 'Goldilocks Zone,' forty-two light years from earth. The planet has been used for many centuries by the alien race currently threatening your world as a kind of experimental zoological park."

"Another exciting bombshell finally released by the boy, Legacy" Greyshott declared as he greedily consumed this new titbit of other worldly knowledge.

"HD Four Zero Three Seven G is unusual in that less than thirty per cent of its surface is made up of water" the boy continued, "and there are no aquatic life-forms apart from tiny micro-organisms and a highly poisonous strain of algae."

"What's that got to do with saving Joan?" asked the soldier, demonstrating his usual impatience, a factor which his friends were now recognising as a potentially dangerous personality flaw.

The boy continued without acknowledging Rickenbacker's question, highlighting the fact that time was now very much of the essence. "The significance of the low volume of water on the planet is that, while many types of mutant creatures have been genetically engineered there into highly effective biological weapons of mass destruction, they have been artificially created without the ability to build up any disease resistance against marine organisms and water born life-forms in general. In particular, the stem-cell development and breeding programme instigated for the cultivation of Wudrun stock highlighted the fact that they were particularly vulnerable when exposed to heated triglycerides."

The teenager's companions listened with full attention to their self-appointed guardian and leader while at the same time indulging their thirst with some locally-produced cider.

"Our only hope of saving Joan from a fate worse than death is for me to consume as much concentrated fish oil as possible between now and midnight," Legacy continued, "in fact enough to cause a severe allergic reaction in the alien matter to the extent that, when it contacts my body, it is forced to initiate a full retreat back to the originating master organism."

"This whole saga just gets weirder by the minute" commented The Restorer, "but if that's what it takes then we'd better get ordering fish from the menu fast!"

"What's with the midnight time restraint?" asked William.

"Zero hours tonight is the time when the process of physical and psychological deterioration caused by the beast's excess organic matter becomes irreversible, signalling Joan's certain death within hours."

This gloomy news struck home like a deep plunging knife into Rickenbacker's delicate, love-deprived soul and he grabbed a menu from a nearby table in desperation. "Right Legacy, what are you ordering?"

"Slow down, Jeff" the boy cautioned, "we still can't afford to draw attention to ourselves unnecessarily. As you have all probably guessed by now, I carried out detailed research regarding available menus at eating establishments in this vicinity prior to our arrival. Mackerel has the highest percentage of triglycerides of all the dishes available in the area. The 'Bull Inn' has five offerings on the menu. We can order four, one per person, and with your help, I can subtly consume them all without any member of the public becoming unduly suspicious."

"Great!" replied Greyshott sarcastically, "and in the meantime, the rest of us all go hungry!"

Rickenbacker shot him a disapproving glance and seeing the error of his ways, the detective subsequently reflected "of course the cause is absolutely worth the sacrifice!"

"Now," Legacy continued, "using subtle psychic communication, I have briefed the landlord fully on our quest and he has subconsciously confirmed his full support of our endeavours. Therefore, the use of our real names is no longer an issue where he is concerned. Please just keep your voices low in the company of others. I refer, of course, to the kitchen staff."

At that moment the landlord appeared with a writing pad and a very well-used plastic biro that looked as though it had been accidentally partially melted by a naked flame. "So, gentlemen, are you ready to order?"

"Yes," Greyshott replied, grabbing a menu and tracing the information down with his finger until he reached the section entitled 'Ocean Dishes of The Day.' "William would like Peppered Mackerel with Vegetable Crisps, Jeff fancies Grilled Mackerel with Crushed Potatoes and Fennel, the boy's preference is Baked Mackerel with Tomatoes and Potatoes and I'll have the Mackerel Fillets with Fennel Coleslaw."

"I see" the barman replied, "so you all like Mackerel? I hope we've got sufficient stocks on the premises! Are you sure I can't tempt you with Salmon or Trout?"

"No," Legacy insisted, "the Mackerel will be fine, thank you."

As he spoke, the room became silent again, apart from the sound of the 'saloon doors' swinging back and forth on their hinges. A substantial human form entered the building, penetrating the jovial weekend atmosphere with an all-consuming aura that seemed to manifest itself physically within an accompanying rush of thick, pungent, sweet-smelling air from outside.

The figure headed straight for the four comrades and sat down with a loud 'plonk.'

"Ah!" exclaimed the landlord, "welcome my friend!" He held out his hand to the new arrival. "Gentlemen: may I introduce Winterbourne Stoke's resident druid: Herald Autumnal Darkbranches – otherwise known as 'The White Wizard.'"

The druid smiled in a way that suggested deep-rooted insanity. "May I say how delighted I am. I shall join you now for some cheese and ham."

The four each shook his hand in turn, failing to notice at this stage his rather strange words of introduction.

The 'Wizard' did indeed have 'snowy white' hair as had been described by the publican and his beard was not only long and scruffy but badly knotted. He had what appeared to be a raging and highly infected pustule in the dead centre of his forehead just above his grizzled eyebrows and his bottom lip sloped unnaturally downwards, giving him the unfortunate expression of a permanently sad clown. His long white robe had a generous spattering of dead leaves and unravelled cobwebs down the middle as if he had been crawling on his hands and knees along some forest floor. In total contrast with his appearance was the sweet odour emanating from his person, which reminded Greyshott of fairground candyfloss.

"I understand you may have information that would assist us in locating a Druid Community said to reside in the vicinity?" enquired the Earl.

Darkbranches sat completely still, his mad but somehow carefully crafted expression seemingly locked into his motionless face for a full thirty seconds. Then he swiped his forehead with the back of his hand causing the angry boil to burst and spread a trail of putrid puss along the full length of his receding hairline. Then words began tumbling from his misshapen mouth like an unstoppable avalanche.

"There is no group as you describe, no dedicated force. I tried one time to start one but they couldn't stay the course!"

His audience exchanged glances, reflecting together their thoughts that this indeed was a weird one in their midst.

The evening wore on and Eleven PM approached. Every question that the companions put to the 'White Wizard' was met with a humorous rhyme of brief duration. Finding out helpful information was proving to be a long and drawn out affair to say the least.

The landlord arrived with a catering trolley and served their four Mackerel dishes. He then produced a plate of cheese and ham for the druid. As he turned to leave the Earl rose to his feet, shielding the proceedings with his bulky frame, while Legacy wolfed down the four meals in quick succession, sat back and belched impressively.

"Landlord, tell me" William whispered in the proprietor's ear, "Why does this Darkbranches chap answer all our questions with a short verse in the style of Edward Lear? It's starting to get bloody annoying!"

"Well I warned you he was a little odd. Apparently, his particular strain of druidism known as 'Mother's Worthy Disciples' prevents him from participating in what you would generally class as normal conversation."

"Interesting" William replied, "although I must admit there is something about him that seems oddly familiar. Has he been in the area long?"

Before the barman could answer, they were both distracted by the unnerving tones of somebody in pain – a kind of distraught hybrid sound falling somewhere between moaning and a muffled scream. They turned around to witness the teenager rising to his feet, a wide halo of glowing fiery ectoplasm encompassing his body as he stepped forward.

With his pupils dilated, a thin line of blurred airborne molecular disturbance emanated from the boy's being and stretched out across the room towards the farmer with the Purdey shotgun, striking him at approximately eye level. After a few seconds of exposure to this weird anomaly, the rough and ready individual fell into a trance, taking hold of his weapon and bolting for the door, moving swiftly out into the courtyard beyond.

Back in the bar, words were struggling almost incoherently from the boy's mouth. "It's not enough – and...and...time's running out!" With desperate haste, he grabbed a fish knife from the cutlery on the table and followed the farmer out of the swing doors which slammed together shut behind them. This coincided with the sound of a Heavy Goods Vehicle drawing up outside and coming to a stop with a sudden screech of the brakes.

Greychott, Rickenbacker and the Earl leapt to their feet in hot pursuit, but upon reaching the 'saloon doors' found that they were jammed and, in the closed position, were just high enough to prevent them from vaulting over. Greychott stood on tip-toe and leaned forward, trying to see over the top in a frantic bid to ascertain what was going on.

There was the 'bending metal' sound of a cab door being forced open followed by a noisy scuffle.

"What can you see?" questioned William in frustration.

"Not a great deal from here" replied the detective. "All the action seems to be going on around to the left by the main road."

As he spoke, the doors released themselves and the three comrades in quest burst forward, almost tripping over each other in the process. Without being asked, Darkbranches took it upon himself to block the way behind as they left, stretching out his arms like a majestic tree while the landlord advised a queue of inquisitive patrons that was building to view the commotion to return to their tables as there was nothing to see or be concerned about.

Outside, the detective, the soldier and the Earl were confronted by a truly bizarre scene. In front of the pub was a long, articulated lorry sporting the logo of 'Mackley's Fine Mackerel Supplies of Leicestershire.' In front of the cab, the quivering driver was on his knees with his hands in the air, begging the farmer not to shoot.

To the rear of the vehicle was Legacy, who had somehow managed to prise open the padlocked doors of the trailer. He was stabbing frantically at a pile of Mackerel tins with the fish knife commandeered from the pub and pouring the contents over his body.

An overwhelming stench filled the air as the fish began to fry on the teenager's sizzling flesh which now seemed to be flickering and resembled a human-shaped pile of smouldering coals, the only parts of his body remaining visibly unaffected being his eyes, nose and mouth. "Almost there!" He just managed to strain out the words. "Jeff – quick. Get the People Carrier. We've only got half an hour to save Joan!"