

The Snatch

drawn by Gerry Haylock, from issues #32 to #37 (25 Sept to 30 Oct 1971) of 'Countdown' comic.

Novelized and adapted by Anthony Appleyard, 29 Oct 1998.

It was a routine operation. Foster was in charge of Moonbase when SID announced a UFO coming. There had been a bad solar flare eleven days before; the long-range radars had been blinded for 17 hours and the Utronics sensors for 15 hours, and neither worked first-rate for most of two days. Sometimes in earlier decades the flow of ions and electrons blown past the Earth by such flares had been so strong that across the length of trans-Atlantic telegraph cables it induced enough voltage to cause electric shocks. By the end of it he was beginning to feel brainwashed by the hash and psychedelic patterns and strange noises on the screens, and wondering what might be moving about under cover of all that; but it cleared at last, and no harm seemed to come of it - or so he thought. So, when a stray UFO was detected, he sent one Interceptor out. Despite precautions a relief radar operator had brought flu up with her and Moonbase were short of fit pilots, so Foster took the flight himself to stay in practice. He already had a flight suit on in case; he dropped down the chute through the hardened silo walls dug deep into the floor of Riccioli crater near the west edge of the visible side of the Moon, into an Interceptor's cockpit, and blasted off as the silo lid opened.

Foster set off. Missiles like the one that he was looking out over had routinely demolished the best part of a hundred UFO's over time and likely scared off many more, but still the aliens came, using the same sort of craft and the same sort of tactics as they always had, with little sign of innovation, although they were getting better at dodging, as if they were gradually learning how to program their combat simulators realistically to represent enemy craft.

He sped on. Below him the spectacular rings of mountains around the Mare Orientale came in view, a routine sight for SHADO men but never seen from Earth, and further on the Big Three of the farside, the big double-rings of Hertzprung and Apollo and Korolev, which also no ground-dweller ever sees. To the general public, 24 or so Apollo astronauts and no others had with their own eyes seen the farside. But Foster also had, and many other SHADO people, and often he wanted to tell of it but for secrecy he could not. "You should see the UFO in seventeen seconds." came an announcement, and a course to follow. That proved true. The alien craft spun and shimmered in front of him as he blasted his craft's rocket motors to attack it. As he fired, it dodged and turned on edge. His missile turned towards it as much as it could but rushed past four feet from its underbelly and ran away to waste. Foster pressed a destruct button to remote-control explode the missile, for at least once UFO's had been seen chasing a spent Interceptor missile as if to try to capture it for examination. The UFO did not go on to Earth, and he wondered why. It ran ahead of him, shimmering against the remote stars, a little too far away for his Interceptor's auxiliary weapons to be any use. When his fuel gauge told him to abandon the chase his course was such that he could use the Moon rather than SHADO's fuel bill to help him to slow down for landing, so he whiplash slowed round it, passing fast close above jagged peaks of the farside, nowhere varied by maria; the so-called Mare Muscoviense and Mare Ingenii are merely big craters with lava floors. Tsiolkovsky with its dark lava floor came in sight. Soon he would see Mare Smythii, and after it other things that he knew well from childhood binocularing from his back garden, as he came in to land at

Moonbase.

Buys-Ballot, despite its odd shape, was no more relevant to him than dozens of other farside craters as he passed it, and for a little too long he paid no attention to his radar screen warning that something had risen from it behind him. "Some expedition craft, likely", he thought; but it was very big for such a purpose. It was somewhat flattened oval, with two transparent domes side by side, in front of them a noticeable tapering into a muzzle like an animal's, and behind them a larger transparent dome. Behind it were two things that looked like big rear-aimed missiles but need not have been, and a long somewhat flattened rear blast tube. He knew of no Earth spacecraft that big or that shape, but it was like no UFO that he had seen. It was soon faster than him. Foster was unwilling to leave his landing run and use up much fuel having to go round again, but he had to dodge it; but something stopped his controls from working. As it reached him, its front end opened and swallowed his Interceptor whole. Foster radioed Moonbase to fire on the thing and destroy it; perhaps he could escape from the wreckage, or at least have a quick end rather than come back mind-wiped and reprocessed as a UFO-crewman. But the metal all round his small craft blocked the signal.

On Moonbase, Controller Gay Ellis reported to SHADO HQ the bad news: "We've lost Colonel Foster and Interceptor 1.", and explained what had happened. She ordered her staff not to lose radar and Utronics sight of it, but at UFO speed it was soon far beyond detection range. It was on the wrong side of the Moon for anything from Moonbase to reach it soon enough as it accelerated away, and SHADO later that day again debated the old topic of wanting more Moonbases. Straker and Freeman tried to adjust to losing Foster. Moonbase settled back to routine, very aware of the empty place at dinner and the empty stand in the Interceptor silo.

Foster's Interceptor was pushed into a large hold where it was stowed on a raised platform. To each side was a long row of what might be storage room doors. Unlike a standard UFO, much of this craft's bulk was storage rather than motor or weapons or armouring, not very agile and easy prey if attacked; Foster or his Interceptor must have been important to them to risk a large valuable space recovery craft so far into enemy weapon-fire range. He had no hope of blasting a way out, and if he had succeeded it would have left him going so fast away from Earth that he could never have flown back or been fetched back. He had little to lose by getting out of his Interceptor and looking round. He stepped out of his familiar cockpit onto the platform surface which had been made in no factory on Earth. There was some sort of artificial gravity running, something beyond Man's skill. Foster was in too much shock of what had happened to think to take his pistol with him or to remember that his flying suit could resist total vacuum for a short time in emergency but was not designed to be used as a spacesuit. He walked a short time, straining against the tendency of his suit's arms and legs to balloon out straight like a starfish, and soon collapsed from hypoxia.

Slowly the threads of consciousness returned to him. He wondered what had happened. His breathing felt strange and heavy. He remembered a big alien ship. A hard edge was pressing into his left ribs. He opened his eyes and looked at his arms, and saw red spacesuit gloves, silvery-grey cuffs, and shiny red sleeves. His helmet was close fitting and rotated with his head on the neck seal rather than letting his head rotate inside it. He looked down as far as the front of his neck seal let him, and felt his chest and his helmet. Then Foster realized. He was in an alien spacesuit, breathing liquid, sitting on the floor leaning against an edge of his Interceptor's empty missile mounting. Nobody was around. He stood and went back in his Interceptor and found his pistol still there, and was thankful that he had not put it on before.

His holster had disappeared along with his previous clothes, and the spacesuit had no outside pockets, so he had to carry his pistol in a hand as he left his Interceptor for the last time in a hangar that it would never fly back to its base from. He had replaced his pistol's trigger guard so he could get a heavily gloved trigger finger under it. Through a rear-facing porthole he saw the Sun, so faint and small that he must have already been many times Pluto's maximum orbit distance from it. A door opened by itself as he came up to it. He went through it and looked for signs of life.

He soon realized that he certainly was being watched by surveillance cameras. As he passed a shiny surface he tried to talk. His vocal cords did not want to know, submerged in liquid, but some electronics in his suit said what he was trying to say, but in a strong alien accent; and he saw his reflection. His chest felt heavy with the liquid. The total image of an alien with his face plus where he was gave him the hardest shock of remoteness and being now on the other side that he have ever had. He tried to compare the shape of the compartments with what he remembered of the outside shape of the big alien craft, and found his way along passages to the big dome. Its airlock was both doors open and it was airless. Two crew in spacesuits like his sat at seats in two recesses in a large complicated console which extended round three sides of each. Between and in front of them was a half-buried 3-foot-diameter sphere containing an electronic 3D image of the stars and other space objects around. The right-hand one looked round at him. He was thick-featured and seemed to be its captain.

"So, Colonel Foster, you have recovered." he said in English, and Foster's spacesuit's built-in two-way radio picked it up. So they knew who he was.

"I don't know what you guys are up to, but I'm ordering you to turn back!" he exclaimed, aiming his pistol at the alien's back to the left of the life-support backpack, for he was too near to want a bullet to cause an oxygen cylinder or power cell explosion.

"Put your useless weapon down, Colonel, you cannot frighten us." he replied.

"We'll see about that! Turn the ship round or I'll fire!"

It was Foster's first go at trying to hijack anything at gunpoint, and he hoped the last. Clearly an alien wreck-recovery craft was not the best choice for first go at it. The thick-featured alien turned back to his console and ignored Foster's gun. The other pressed a button. The ship, or the artificial gravity, or the part of the floor that Foster was standing on, lurched violently. Foster fell. His pistol, which had saved him in many scrapes, went flying, and he never saw it again. His helmet hit a metal prop under the console, and split. The liquid in his helmet started to boil out into the space vacuum inside the ship. The two aliens talked urgently in their own language and rushed him into a pressure chamber, where they changed his helmet and replaced the lost breathing liquid. Fifteen minutes later back in the control room he was recovering from the hypoxia and the decompression. "We had to dissuade you from using your gun." the captain said, in the somewhat over-educated word choice of someone who has learned a foreign language from a book or a formal course rather than from spoken usage.

"Why have you captured me?" he asked, but he could guess the reason.

"You will find soon enough when we reach our planet." the alien said. "We have a long way to go - and at the speed we travel certain life support provisions must be made.". They unfolded their control seats into couches. These had hollows to fit their spacesuits' backpacks and helmets. Despite his predicament he felt something of the excitement of being kitted up and setting forth into the unknown with an expedition. They put him into such a couch which was across the back of the room, and then got into their own. Padded restraints came out of the couch to hold him still during violent acceleration. Connections plugged into places in his

spacesuit. Within seconds he and the other two occupants of the strange craft drifted into the void of suspended animation, as they rushed at very many times the speed of light across the endless void between his world and theirs.

As a contorted dream dispersed Foster found himself in the same couch. The restraints and the connections retracted, and he sat up. The captain said something in his own language. Turning over and kneeling on his couch to see out of a window, Foster looked in wonder at the world beyond space. It was mostly orange-red desert. Thus he saw the home of the aliens. The sun shone big and bright beyond it: for so he was tempted to call it, but it was not Earth's Sun, and Earth saw it only as a star too faint for naked eye. The big craft went into a close orbit round the planet, changed its systems from deep-space mode to landing mode, and descended. As that system's sun disappeared behind the planet, stars appeared, but they were arranged in no constellation that he knew.

He had been in a spacesuit continuously for much longer than ever before, as the ship was not pressurized. He was glad to see ground, even such ground as that. Jagged eroded mountains rose below him as the ship got lower. Further on, below them insect-like creatures unconcerned with space or organs sought bits of vegetation, and larger alien animals hunted those, hidden safe from larger predators by night ground mist in the rare and thankful permanently damp hollow of Ertikaghepzeshk near the edge of a city of strange buildings. A few dried-up trees stood over the hollow. A large moon with several large squarish maria, or scars of extensive mining, on its visible side lit the mist and the city. A night guard on the ground there saw the ship as a bright streak across the sky and the moon lit by deceleration air friction. As atmospheric air came in, they drained the liquid out of their helmets and blew their lungs empty and took their helmets off, but told Foster to keep his helmet on, as there was something in the planet's atmosphere that he would not survive for long.

As they flew low over two strange white towers joined to each other by two wide conduits surrounded by an oval wall of high building, the captain said "This is our nerve centre, Colonel Foster. As you know, our race needs new body components for survival. To survive we have to run a much bigger medical system and a far bigger space travel effort than Earth has to.". The ship descended to a large oblong open space between long thin buildings. Four ordinary UFO's stood in one corner of it. The ship landed. Foster followed the crew into the hold's upper level, where he saw his Interceptor once more, so far from base that it would have needed a million years to return at its own speed. There was also a UFO in the hold, perhaps the one that he had chased. He followed the two down a stair to the hold's floor level, and out through a hatch, and far beyond space with a shiver of unreality he walked on the alien homeworld.

The buildings mostly had white frameworks and roofs with light green walls. At one end of the open space were two large hemispherical entrance porches with long entry passages. They went in one of them. On a wall behind them as they turned towards a circular tunnel opening, was a stylized map. Strangely, the place seemed to remind Foster of somewhere on Earth, but he could not think what that was. In the tunnel antigravity made them weightless and a wind pulled them along; its walls were grey. The place now more definitely reminded him of a gigantic hospital. On the way he came out of his thoughts enough to realize what the place was likely for; he wondered if Leila Carlin or many others brought here across the deeps of space had seen any of this before their fate. They came out of the travel tube into a hall with inward-sloping green walls that either still showed joints where they had been assembled or could hinge up, some sort of specimen or equipment cabinet along one side, and a floor with

a wide white centre strip and shiny green sides. Someone in a yellowish button-to-the-neck jacket and trousers with a green collar and no green skin staining came out of a door and fired a drug-dart pistol at Foster, and he went unconscious.

He woke on a table in some sort of treatment room. His head ached. The two crew from the ship were there, and another, who said in English that he was called Robart and that Foster had been unconscious for three hours. He was the one who had fired the pistol at Foster. Foster was out of his spacesuit and in a white personnel-issue overall. He was breathing the planet's atmosphere, and had been given an injection to let him breathe it safely. He asked what they were going to do with him.

"Have no fear, Colonel - we did not bring you to our planet to destroy you: you are too valuable to use for surgery. You can reveal the secrets of SHADO." Robart said as they wheeled up a large machine with many-coloured lights on its body and a long white arm that reached over and aimed its end down at his head. Robart was head of the department there, and Foster was important enough for Robart personally to process him.

"Never! I'll tell you nothing!" Foster replied defiantly, stranded dozens or hundreds of light years from home or help.

"But you will, Colonel. Your Earth mind will not withstand our methods of interrogation." said the other spaceman from the ship, as Robart put protective goggles on and switched the machine on and it began to emit some sort of wide beam at Foster's head. For six hours he lay there with his will to resist gradually weakening under whatever they had pumped into him, and questioning, and lights flashing at psycho-active rates, and whatever that beam was doing to his brain. Robart questioned him while the spaceship captain set controls on the machine, and Foster had to hold onto his will harder and harder. The lights reminded him too much of how Moonbase's screens behaved during the solar flare that let the big craft in. He was not strapped down, but there was nowhere to run to except more hostile rooms and more aliens and a world populated by them. He had been trained well to resist many forms of interrogation, but he was weakening. At last and just in time Robart decided that Foster had had enough without risk of being mind-wiped, which Robart had no plans for yet; he said something in alienese including the word 'Shado', and the spaceship captain switched the machine off, and the three went out, leaving Foster locked alone in the treatment room.

Foster slowly recovered consciousness. He had to do something to get away before he was too weak and brainwashed to try; another day of that and they would know everything about SHADO and its personnel which was worth knowing and everything which was not. Better a quick end from a guard's gun than tell the enemy all that. He got up and staggered about, weak and dizzy. He looked in the head of the brainwashing machine. One part of its function was a particle beam, intended to be used at very weak settings to poke about in the brain, but its makers had fitted a standard industrial beam emitter that could also make a beam of raygun or blowtorch power, once he had bypassed some sort of disabler by connecting the beam emitter to wiring in the door. The hot beam melted the door's electronic lock and its casing, and the door opened. From the lock he picked out a metal rod, which seemed heavy enough to crack a few alien skulls. As he gingerly stepped out through the open door, a voice called "Get him!" in English and two men in overalls like his attacked him.

He was fit and strong and Armed Forces trained, but the two together were stronger, and they had him on his back on the floor. He expected a pulping and a dose of electric shock and return to that mind-reprocessing table, but one of them said "Wait - he's not an alien!" in English in a voice with no sign of alien accent.

"You're right, he's from Earth!" said the other.

They let him get up. "What goes on round here?" he asked.

"We're sorry to have been so rough, but when you blasted that door we thought it was another alien trick, one of them pretends to be an escaping prisoner to check our loyalty whether we help him or the authorities." one of them said.

"Yes, we're sick and tired of being on the receiving end of their schemes." the other said, "Yes, this is Professor Dinkler, a physicist, and I am Conrad Shaffer, a surgeon."

"It's simple." said Dinkler, "The aliens not only snatch people from Earth to use their hearts and their organs - they use our brains too."

"I've heard of you both." Foster said, "If I understand it right, you're being brainwashed by that equipment they tried on me."

"They make me design weapons and spacecraft improvements for them to use against Earth." said Dinkler, "but they know that while I have my own will I'm not likely to work as well as I could. I have to come up with useful stuff often enough, else they use that machine on me again, or if I resisted that for too long they'd send me for organs. They're trying to make computer copies of everything we know, to add to what they know already."

"And they've already made me do a lot of transplant surgery for them, as well as ordinary repairing injuries after accidents." said Shaffer, "How about you? What is your profession?"

"Let's just say I'm an astronaut, with special training to fight the aliens." Foster said, "and that's just what we're going to do!"

"At last, a man of action among us. But we'll have to hurry. We don't know how quickly that alien machine works on our minds." said Shaffer, thinking they would have to be there several more days before they could get away.

"I broke one door, so I can break the next door, right now." Foster said.

"There's a long corridor outside it." said Shaffer, "But how can we get back to Earth?"

"There are UFO's standing near the entrance, and a series of guarded doors." Foster said.

"We noticed them too. What do you think is behind those doors?"

"It better be something useful, not a guardroom full of guards. Come on!" Foster said as he went back and wheeled the brainwashing machine up and used it to burn out the lock of the next door. They pushed the broken door open and ran along an endless corridor with grey floor, orange walls, and orange and black chequered ceiling with the chequerings about 4 x 7 feet big. They were prepared to fight, but they met nobody; the aliens thought their electronic doors would be secure overnight. The three were seen on surveillance cameras, but Robart and the rest were letting them run to see if what they did gave any clues as to why Foster resisted their machine so long. Robart would have recognised that Foster was trained to action, and that SHADO men are trained to resist interrogation. The three safely passed several remote-control sleep gas vents and reached an entrance to a travel tube, with its inside painted in random red and black oblongs. Dinkler, who had been there longer than Foster, said that that tunnel led to the entrance.

It came out as part of a wide oblong doorway into the big open area at the foot of a grey almost windowless wall about 50 feet high. On top of the wall were odd-shaped towers and roofs. The big recovery craft was gone. Guards were about, in spacesuits, black close-fitting security-type open helmets with a round forehead badge instead of space helmets, and bulky one-handed rayguns about 2 feet long of a shape that reminded Foster of scaled-up videocameras but with an alarmingly wide blast barrel at the front. Each wore a belt with something in a pouch or holster at his right waist. Their faces were stained green. They were

fortunately all looking out away from the door. The three hastily ducked to the left behind a large red tank labelled 'fuel' (for ground vehicles and small aircraft) in English as well as in alienese as part of a policy to get their spacemen going on the Earth run accustomed to English.

Dinkler told Foster that those guns could have evaporated half his chest or holed a flak jacket or a SHADO vehicle or armoured spacesuit in no time. They were only on limited issue for test so far and had not yet turned up in UFO landings on Earth, but time would tell. If they did, that would change things.

The physicist and the surgeon were unwilling to fight unarmed against armed enemies, but they had to do something before they ended up with no wills of their own. Foster had to show them what to do: when a group of the guards, this time with guns more like the usual shape, came close by, he ran out and knocked the first guard out under his chin. Dinkler and Shaffer ran out and each grappled with one of the guards. Foster grabbed one of their guns while the surprise lasted, and aimed it at the other guards, who were acting as if they did not well know what to do. SHADO was keeping Earth guarded so well that abducted Earthmen who were useful alive were scarce and each guard was unwilling to get into trouble for killing a valuable captive if he fired to back up a disobeyed gunpoint order. Rayguns can only burn or kill, or start fires and melt metal; such things as 'phasers set on stun' were yet another nuisance fiction figment which had to be drilled out of SHADO space trainees with more or less trouble, and not even the aliens had them. Those guards were not proper trained guards but early trainee spacemen with as yet little combat or patrol training. With the amount of alien ships SHADO was destroying, there were many trainee replacement spacemen there, and the proper skilled guards had been taken to be sent on space missions. They stood about looking uncertain and backed away.

Foster shot one of the locked doors open, and they went in. It was a back door to a hangar with an arched red and green ceiling. A line of small UFO's stood on top of a one-floor inner building. In front of it was a white rack with a row of spacesuits hanging from it, and a big tank of the green liquid used to fill them, as the lungs have to be full of incompressible liquid to withstand UFO-type acceleration and deceleration. "Right, get kitted up! We're going home!" Dinkler said, for during his work for the aliens he had been round UFO's and hangars and talked to pilots and knew something about piloting them. Foster had seen the recovery craft being piloted and hoped that UFO controls would be similar. They suited up, expecting every moment that a squad of guards would come in and drug-dart or sleep-gas them, but none came. Remote mechanical noises and once an amplified voice came from other buildings, but they heard no equivalent of insect or bird song. Their white overalls proved to be usable as undersuits. Dinkler told them where the controls were to switch the suit artificial voice and the suit radio on. They came to filling their helmets and the 'drowning' stage, against all their instincts, but need drove them, and they flooded their lungs.

Again with the now familiar heavy-chested feeling, Foster went with the others up a stairway to the UFO level. They looked inside one. They were all too obviously the small type in one-man configuration. What would otherwise be two more seats in each was taken up with extra weapons and storage for the suspended animation canisters used to carry abductees, but there were no such canisters there. Each of them would have to pilot his own UFO, and Foster said so. Their chances were thin, but it was better than staying there and ending up as organs or mind-wiped and reprogrammed to think that they were aliens. "Help, look at that lot! Which one!?" said Dinkler, looking out at the sky. It was night again, and the aliens were far less

liberal than humans at letting light go to waste in the sky, and the larger moon had set, so the sky was crusted with stars. But Shaffer was an amateur astronomer and when called to landing areas to attend to aliens brought back ill needing organs replacing he had snatched unauthorized looks at space navigation charts. The ships' computers had special settings for various destinations including Earth. Dinkler gave Foster and Shaffer more last-minute instructions about their controls and how to operate the suspended animation kit. Foster was an experienced fighter pilot, but it was the first time either of the other two had flown anything, but they had driven cars before. "Crumbs, my first flying lesson, solo in a UFO!" Shaffer said as he sealed himself in.

Foster's thoughts were more serious: "O God, Who madest and rulest the light-years, bring us back safely through the perils of enemies and of distance, and of craft which we have never flown in before, and the peril that lies in wait for us when we would think that we are home and safe. And turn the thoughts of the aliens, so that we and they need not harm each other any more."

They operated controls as instructed. Their craft 'spun up' and hovered, then started to move. They flew slowly and carefully sideways out of the open-sided hangar, not a welcome necessity as their first ever manoeuvre. Then, thankfully and much easier, straight up into the sky fast in case of pursuit. They got their inter-ship radios working, which was a help. The night sky was completely strange. His home Sun was too faint for naked eye, near a group of stars that looked like a Mobile. They switched their autopilots on and set off. When well away from the star system they went into suspended animation. This time he slept alone, in an alien spacesuit in his small cockpit, on the way home, back across far distance from a place that no human had come back from still knowing who he was.

They woke, Foster first. All three of them were still alive and safe and together. The Sun was a very bright dot ahead, and he knew that SHADO would soon detect them. Now the fun and games would start.

"I don't hold much chance of telling our defences by radio not to shoot at us." Foster said, "If I go on ahead alone, and you two follow a day later, by then they'll have found who I am and I'll tell them in person to let you two in without shooting, and Earth'll get two of these UFO's intact to examine."

"I - don't think I could land mine." said Shaffer. "This is the first time I've ever flown anything. It's like a wild horse. Trying to keep to a heading in open space on manual is bad enough. Something'll have to come up and carry it down or put another pilot in. Dinkler the same, likeliest."

"Where 'something' means an Interceptor, and your ship'll have to be tied to its top, and the Interceptor'll have to be thoroughly disarmed to save weight to land carrying it. And ditto another to bring Dinkler in. Moonbase won't care for that, with the risk of more aliens coming chasing us."

"And I don't either." said Dinkler, "I'd rather come in with you and get to safety, with or without my ship, if that lot we got away from have sent their fleet after us. Don't ask me to fly this thing and shoot at the same time, till I've had a lot more practice in it or a flight simulator of it."

So they had to come in together, a fateful decision for Earth's hopes of soon getting interstellar travel. "3 UFO's approaching at 0763." came SID's synthesized voice over Moonbase's speakers. Freeman ordered the Interceptors to be launched. He had been sent to Moonbase in a hurry to replace Foster, along with a batch of parts of a replacement for

Interceptor 1, complicated by the eternal need to find an urgent enough sounding cover excuse in their film studio cover.

"There's something odd about this, sir. Their flight pattern is very unusual." said Virginia Lake over an audio-video link. No wonder: after going back into manual mode the other two's flying was decidedly erratic.

"Just another alien ruse. Give the order to seek and destroy!" Freeman snapped, still angry at losing Foster on top of all the other UFO attacks.

The Interceptors appeared as three distant white objects, fast getting bigger. For the first time except on simulators Foster was seeing the enemy's view of them, lethal missiles aimed straight at them. They frantically radioed to the Interceptors, to anyone, and Foster even blipped his navigation sensors in Morse code hoping someone could pick it up as interference, but nothing of SHADO's heard their frequency, or the UFOs' radios worked in a way that no Earth radio did, or SHADO thought it was all alien tricks. The Interceptors locked onto their targets.

"This is it! Eject!" Foster exclaimed, pressing his little alien craft's radio's transmit button for the last time. They grouped close, rotation axes in the same direction. They each pressed a button combination that Shaffer had once heard a pilot speak of. In each UFO a small explosive charge blew them out of the craft's underbelly hatch and away just in time. The ejection blasts were followed by far worse as the combination of missile warheads and UFO-drives exploding as the missile hits split them evaporated all the little craft that had brought them so far home. The triple fireball chased them but did not quite catch them. SHADO was currently in a mood to capture enemy personnel alive if could, so the nearest Interceptor fired a small missile on a line; it flew round them, wrapping them in a net, and they were reeled in and towed to Moonbase.

Nothing had pursued them, but he did not know that when they set off. The alien fleet command knew of Foster's reputation as a SHADO combat pilot and did not want to send craft to chase them and risk losing any on top of losing the three that the three humans had taken, but assumed that SHADO's Interceptors would dispose of them without checking first, as with so many other incoming UFO's. So their ships ended. With their alien computers went much information that Man would have wanted to know. Of the many places in their navigation list, what did the aliens want at each? Were any of them places that they were also raiding? And their lists of star distances would be far more accurate than Earth's. With two UFO's in SHADO's hands with no autodestruct set, and what Dinkler had learned, they would likely soon make UFO-type craft of their; but that was not to be. But Shaffer and Dinkler remembered much, and they knew the alienese language well.

By Moonbase, every possible gun was aimed at them in case as the craft carrying them landed. They tried to explain who they were, but the Moonbase men could not hear the alien suit radios any more than the alien ship radios. When they were brought into atmosphere, they heard a guard saying "This one's face looks like Foster's", and Moonbase finally realised who he was. Then there was rejoicing, but also argument, even while they were still in their alien spacesuits.

"Those two aren't in SHADO." said Freeman out of earshot of them, "Get them out of those suits and give them amnesia injections now, then get them back to Earth on the next ferry and give them another amnesia injection to lose that."

"That stuff only works for the last twelve hours' memories, and they've been with aliens far longer than that. Even just the time since they met Foster's far more than twelve hours."

said Jackson.

"Not if you subtract the time they were in suspended animation. The two don't remember the trip out, they said: likely they were drug-darted or sleep-gassed from ambush or as they slept and carried in stasis cylinders. Not many abductees get to wear one of their spacesuits and ride with the crew. From the dates they gave it seems the Lazy K incident got them. File says a UFO came in antilunar and the Skydivers were all in wrong places, it came in to South Dakota at night and scared a lot of steers on a ranch and stampeded all the cowboys' next day's horses, they found landing marks near the ranch house next morning. Cops stopped our Mobile-carrier for speeding and wouldn't accept our traffic laws exemption papers, real slow thorough lot checking everything. That's another thing I get tired of: some officious young street cop whining 'How was I to know?'. Those two are in our disappeared list, they'd booked a holiday on a dude ranch, not that one but 30 miles away, they must've rebooked. Lazy K's boss didn't admit anything, I guess he didn't want UFO cultists around or his proper customers scared away. Back to those two: Wipe out the ride back, they already don't know the ride out, a bit of hypnosis and they'll think their time on that planet was a film they'd seen or a dream they'd had or some strange place on Earth."

"That won't leave us much time with their memory undamaged to find what the alien planet's like!" said Straker, who was listening over a radio link, "Any of it could be important! What they're like, what they're making or planning, their language, and so on. You'll just have to order them to secrecy. There are ways to discredit them if they do go public. Their story'd have no proof that'd hold up in court, for a start. But still, if they keep their memories, they best join SHADO and come under its regulations, even if they go on long leave to do their other work."

That was done. By then they had unsuited and undressed, and a hot bath rid them of the shut-in long-trip spacesuit smell and most of the green discoloration. They were shipped back to Earth on the next Moon-shuttle, and taken in a Shadair plane to SHADO headquarters. There the two stayed for some time, for they had much to tell of. With them was all that they brought back from the far-off land across the endless void: memories, three spacesuits, three overalls, and a few passes and entry cards and instruction booklets and pens that were in the other two's overall pockets. 400 light years now separate the passes and the entry cards from the checkpoints and swipe slots that recognized them. Shaffer wanted his spacesuit and overall to hang up at home as a memento, but that could not be allowed. With time their memories of their time away softened, and Dinkler sometimes was heard hoping that none of the aliens vaporized with their UFO's was a technician called Kaghepkaghd, for the two had worked together much and had gone together on long arduous journeys in the planet's deserts to check remote installations. What the two know should be useful if SHADO capture an intact UFO in the future. Foster was back on duty in two days. But this showed more than before that the aliens are showing signs of desperation, and desperation often leads to errors. Knowing that could be a useful weapon in the future.