

Thor's Hammer

by A. Berglund ©2015, A UFO Novella

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CHAPTER 1

Straker slowly cracked open one eye. His head was swimming in a dizzy fog. He shut the eye in hopes it would lessen the disorientation. It didn't. He was aware of a growing burning sensation in his abdomen and waves of nausea that grew with each flip of his sense of equilibrium. He knew this sensation from a childhood visit to a carnival and a misguided choice of midway ride after a quick lunch of greasy hot dogs, root beer and a tuft of cotton candy. He was going to be very sick – now.

The venting of his gastric contents lessened the burning and his head cleared a bit. Training began to punch through the fog and dizziness in little focused darts of clarity. He slowly opened one eye again. "Where the hell am I?" His voice sounded weak, slurred and muffled. Both eyes open... The room was still moving, tilting back and forth - or it could simply be his head flopping uncontrollably. *Concentrate on making your neck rigid.* The tilting room began to stabilize and its features became visible.

Damn it! Drugged... again! A sense of anger and frustration crept in and he pushed it down again. *Focus Ed...*

The room was small and dimly lit. One overhead bulb. One wood table up against the wall. No windows he could see. One old and heavily rusted steel door. Possibly another door behind him but he wasn't able to turn to check. He could see daylight in gaps between the door and frame. It was cold. He could see his breath when he exhaled...

How I got here can wait for now. He began taking inventory of his physical state. Moving peripheral parts he discovered his feet were bound together and his hands bound behind his back and attached to the chair he sat upon. A wooden chair and an old one at that. It creaked when he leaned a little. He could feel more now. His mouth hurt and his left eye wouldn't open all the way. Whoever had done this had beaten him pretty thoroughly.

Did I reveal anything? Did I unravel all the work SHADO has accomplished? The thought made him well up with nausea again. The waves built up again and he closed his eyes. This time there was less volume but again it was violently expelled. He saw stars and slowly opened his eyes again. He felt a bit better after the purging and noted that he had cleared his bound legs twice. He involuntarily smirked a bit and felt the burning sensation in his lips and jaw. *Won't do that again.*

As his strength and faculties improved slowly, he began to feel around with his fingers. The spires of the chair back were starting to give a bit as he twisted them back and forth. They gave way with a crack and rotated freely in his fingers. He felt the spires on either side as best he could against the restraints. They rotated freely and felt as though they likely had for years.

He leaned forward and slid his bound hands upward as far as he could reach and began rocking against the spires hoping to loosen the chair back. It made a satisfying but loud

cracking noise. He stopped and lowered his hands, assuming his previous position, sure that someone must have heard the sound...

Counting to thirty before resuming his breathing again, he pushed the fear back down and focused on the job at hand. A few more rocking tugs on the chair back and the chair became a stool.

He stiffened his abdominals and leaned slowly back so he could lower the disconnected wood structure to the floor silently, slipping the bindings off the spire bottoms. He slowly pulled himself back to an upright position. The continual and always inconvenient SHADO physical conditioning program that all employees were required to attend had just paid dividends. *Now my feet...*

They were similarly bound to a cross member between the two forward legs. He knew he couldn't stand so he tried to make a slow, controlled descent to the floor. It didn't go smoothly and he dropped his shoulder into the former contents of his stomach. *Swell, now I look like I've been to a frat party...*

He folded himself at the waist and worked his bound hands beneath him and under his legs. The chair bottom came apart as easily as the back had. He rocked himself onto his knees and worked at the knot in the cords that had bound his legs. *Why has nobody come to make sure I'm still tied up?*

He doubted he'd be able to stand for long but inched himself across the floor to the wall and slowly worked against it until he was standing mostly upright. His legs were weak but held for now. There was indeed a second door behind where he'd been seated. It hadn't opened...

Although he could smell the aroma of his blood dried in his nose, he also picked up on another smell. One that smelled earthy, like rotting garbage.

He moved with purpose toward the door that leaked daylight around it. He cautiously tried the knob behind him... It wasn't locked! That meant his abductors were probably right outside. *Weak, dizzy and hands bound behind me – just perfect for a fight...*

He turned the knob, pulled it and pushed his heel into the gap. It was all or nothing. He shoved the door open and made his way out. The door hinges moaned and screeched loudly. He was outside on a wharf with an angry grey sea in front of him. *Where the hell am I?*

A door adjacent to the one he'd just exited flew open and three men came out running toward him. They were dressed in red pants and heavy coats. Their hair and faces were coated with something that looked like petroleum jelly – and they were green...

Straker was ambling as quickly as he could manage and had just rounding the corner of the building when they caught him. He stumbled and fell. "SHIT!" he yelled as he hit the ground hard, unable to break his fall. His head hit solidly on the old wood decking of the wharf.

He saw a figure about 50 yards away. An old man in heavy coat with a scraggly beard and heavy boots. He carried a fishing rod and bucket in one hand and a fabric bag over the other shoulder. *I need the damn Marines, not captain Ahab!*

CHAPTER 2

Two of Straker's abductors moved quickly to intercept the old man while the third took the opportunity to kick Straker repeatedly. Despite the blows he could not deflect, Straker saw something he could hardly believe.

The old man had dropped the bucket, bag and fishing rod and began sprinting *toward* the two onrushing aliens. He took out the first with a high spinning kick to the head that snapped it perpendicular with an audible crunch. It fell with a sound like wet clay dropped on concrete.

The second was reaching for something under his coat...

When the weapon cleared, the old man caught the wrist in his left hand and drove it upward, firing a bright bolt of energy into the sky. His right hand caught the alien beneath the jaw and lifted him off his feet. The old man swung around in an arc that spun the alien down backward until the back of his skull slammed into the old weathered hardwood. The silver boots came down last. He wasn't going to move again.

The last alien turned his attention away from Straker and began to move for his concealed weapon and toward the old man. He didn't make it far and wound up similarly dispatched, with a skull driven into the hardwood.

Straker couldn't move, but watched the old man drag the first two aliens back to the door and toss the bodies in. He added the third and then went back for the fabric pack he'd carried in. Pausing to lay down on the edge so that he could look under the wharf, he muttered something and walked to the door. He pulled a cord on the pack and threw it in the door.

He sprinted to Straker, hoisted him over his shoulder and began to run. Straker was not enjoying the ride and groaned loudly. "You forgot your fishing rod and bucket," he said with irritation.

"I... have... others," said the old man between breaths.

Straker just began to notice there was snow everywhere in sight. "Where the *hell* am I?"

"Soon..." They rounded the edge of the tree line behind drifted snow and stopped near a car. It was a Beetle. An old Beetle. A very *ugly* old Beetle.

The old man propped Straker up against the door and drew a very large knife from his boot. Straker's blue eyes opened wide. The old man cut his binding cords and slit the bulky knit sweater up the front, peeling it off him in one fluid movement and revealing a bloody white turtleneck beneath. *This guy has been beaten badly.* It strengthened the old man's resolve...

He opened the door and stuffed Straker in. He leapt around the car and scrambled in quickly. It didn't look like the Beetles Straker remembered inside. The engine fired to a growl. It didn't sound like a Beetle either. It launched hard, even in the snow and built speed quickly. "Strap yourself in," he said with a mild Scandinavian lilt to his voice.

Behind them there was a massive explosion. A fireball rose up high into the air with a cloud of debris, wood fragments and metal scraps. Straker was caught off-guard and braced for an impact that didn't arrive. "Relax, you are safe now," said the old man. *His voice was low and gruff, but very clearly Scandinavian.*

"Did you do that?" Straker asked.

The old man smiled a little and reached behind him, pulling a heavy wool blanket out from behind the seat. "Here, you must get warm." He reached back and drew out an old metal thermos with a cup for a cap. It had a large dent in the side. He handed it to Straker and pulled out another thermos, this one with a sharp crease in the side. "The dent has home-made soup and the crease has hot, black coffee."

"Coffee first. Rinse and spit. The window please... Pick your cup and pour some for both of us. You need to eat and re-hydrate to regain your strength."

"How do you know?" Straker was winding the window back up. His mouth hurt like hell.

"I'll answer your questions when your faculties are restored," the old man cut him off. "Now pour us both some soup".

The old Beetle moved along quickly over snow covered roads. More quickly than it should have been able. It moved like a rally car... The only thing Straker knew for sure was that he was safe. For the moment...

CHAPTER 3

A dose of coffee and two cups of soup later, Straker was feeling more solid. Question time. His blue eyes narrowed and his voice was cool and steady again.

"First, let me say you make excellent chicken and vegetable soup."

The old man smiled a bit and simply said, "I like to cook – and thank you".

"Now, who are you?" said Straker. His host could tell he was accustomed to asking questions and expecting answers.

"You can call me Thorvald."

"Thank you, you can call me Ed".

"I am glad you survived your ordeal, Ed," said the old man.

"Now, where?"

"This is northwestern Norway on the shore of the North Sea and not far south of Lapland. Are you warm now?"

"Yes, quite comfortable actually. Just sore all over..."

"Ah... I'm afraid that will only increase as you warm and the adrenaline wears off," said the old man softly.

"What the hell happened to me?" Straker asked with a bit of frustration in his voice.

"From what I could deduce, you came to this area for either business or holiday. You used a poorly chosen false name at the only – *and quite deserted* – hotel in the region. You then proceeded to go to the *only* tavern in the area and ordered lunch. In short, you are a known figure and you were recognized."

"I was in the area fishing and saw you as you exited the Hotel. You looked as out of place as a tropical fish in the North Sea. When you failed to exit from the tavern, I went in to investigate and found it empty. I left and began checking the old herring plants

along the coast. They are many and all are abandoned. As a fisherman, nobody gives me a second glance on a wharf. I found your location on the second day of searching."

"How did you find me?"

"There were hundreds of dead herring floating on the surface there in front of that old processing plant. That meant they had their ship under the surface and the leaking radiation had killed the fish."

This man knows what's going on! "How do you know about the aliens, Thorvald?"

"In short, I've been hunting them for over a decade now. I follow their trail of destruction and mutilated corpses. The tabloid papers are full of junk stories, but *that* kind of story stands out among the hundreds of others."

"Why would you want to do that?" Straker said with a feigned sound of surprise in his voice. He had never considered there might be independent fighters in this unknown war.

The old man didn't answer, he only rolled the black-colored wedding ring on his left hand with his thumb. Back and forth, as though lost in memory. He tightened his grip on the wheel and leaned into the throttle a bit more. The surge was noticeable to Straker. "Where are you taking me?"

"Oslo, where the closest foreign embassies are located. Is there somewhere else you'd rather go?"

"Is there a NATO airbase anywhere near here?"

"Outside of Oslo."

"Good. Let's go there instead of an embassy." The old man smiled and thought, *this is getting interesting...*

"What happened back there on the wharf?"

"Once I found their location, I did a little probing and discovered they had electrical power in the building but none of the utilities were connected anymore. I also discovered that the liquid propane tank that was used for heating was still half full and had been shut off. I simply opened the valve again just before I came around and found you." *That earthy, rotten smell...*

"I capped it off with a satchel charge and it took out the ship directly under the wharf as well. They had been tapping current from it to power the lights."

Brilliant! Straker thought and managed a lopsided smile. It induced a sharp pain but it felt justified.

"I should stop somewhere for fuel and let them know to expect us. NATO bases don't like unexpected visitors. Do you have a last name you want me to give them? I don't think they'll make much effort just for an Ed..."

"Straker – Ed Straker. Don't you think I should call them myself?"

"Do you speak Norwegian?"

Thorvald pulled the Beetle into a service station, filled the tank with their highest octane fuel and leaned back into the door momentarily. "Ed, I'm going to make that call now, but if you see something that looks like a bootlace in the car don't tug on it..." Straker gave another lopsided grin.

Minutes later, he climbed back in and they were under way again. It was snowing now and the sun was setting beneath a dark layer of clouds. "How long?"

"Another three hours or so, you should sleep if you can."

"Why did you cut my sweater off like that?"

"You'd been rolling in vomit. I couldn't take that smell for long..." He laughed out loud and Straker noted that he didn't look as old as he had thought him to be...

"What did you tell them?"

"I said my name was Thorvald and I was bringing in an Ed Straker who needs some medical attention. No description of you, me, Helge or the route we were taking."

"Helge?"

"My Beetle, named after my beloved wife." Straker heard the choke in the last few words and a lump rose in his throat. *I won't ask about that for now...* he thought. He noticed a sheen form in Thorvald's dark green eyes. *She must have died and fairly recently...*

"This Beetle was her pride and joy. When she died and my mission began, I needed something for transport that could handle any terrain. I took my Beetle for special upgrades in Zuffenhausen near the Porsche racing works. It has the injected 2.7 liter boxer-six, frame modifications to accommodate a rally racing four-wheel drive system, and suitable brakes and suspension. It also has an enlarged fuel cell that consumes half of the front compartment and a working electric heater. I paint it a different color and change the registration every few months to avoid detection by the green-skinned visitors or anyone else. Now, close your eyes and try to get some sleep."

Straker closed his eyes and thought, *gourmet chef, rally racer and alien killing machine - we need to bring this guy into SHADO if possible...*

He awoke to the car stopping. He had slept and slept hard. In the headlights, he could see Thorvald un-locking a door on a large shed and forcing the snow back in the swing of the door. He leaned back into the door and said, "I need to off-load some items before I attempt to enter a military base."

He leaned the seat forward and removed a pair of large duffels that strained at the straps as he hauled them. He ducked inside for a few moments, then returned to the headlights' glow.

He closed and relocked the door and kicked the snow back over the arc to hide his visit. When he got back in, Straker noted he had his hair pulled back and retained with a leather strap. His beard and mustache were combed and he was wearing glasses. Dark, thickly-framed glasses... *He is older than me but not nearly as old as he first appeared...*

"Why the change?" asked Straker.

"I need to look like my identification to avoid being shot."

"Good point".

Within twenty minutes they had rolled up to the main gate at NATO-Sorensen Air Base. They took only moments to clear Thorvald after calling the security office and didn't ask for anything from Straker.

"They know you here, Ed..."

As the Beetle pulled up to the designated building, Straker saw a familiar site on the edge of the tarmac. A SHADAIR SST... *Things were about to get intense...*

CHAPTER 4

"You look like hell, Ed!" bellowed Alec, as he burst in through the medical center door with his customary lack of grace or tact where his friend was concerned.

"Good to see you too, Alec." Straker managed another lopsided grin. He was disrobed to his shorts and two corpsmen were treating and dressing multiple abrasions and cuts.

"How did you wind up here?" Alec was never good at hiding emotions and he was clearly angry that he hadn't been there to protect his best friend from harm.

Straker only pointed over to the man in the glasses sitting quietly.

"Who the hell is that, Ed?"

"Meet Mister Thorvald." Thorvald stood erect and offered his hand.

Alec's veneer cracked and he thrust out his hand, "Alec Freeman, and thank you for getting him back to us in one piece, such as it is". Thorvald smiled and his eyes caught Alec's worried, tired ones. He pumped Thorvald's arm and grasped it with the other hand. Alec still had a mist in his eyes at the thought of losing his best friend. His gratitude was sincere.

"Alec, this gentleman has a story you need to hear..."

"Oh, really?"

The door swung open again. Alec whispered to Ed, "I had hoped to prepare you more for this..." In walked General Henderson with his customary bluster.

"What the hell happened to you, Straker?" he rattled, pleased with himself that he hadn't given away his genuine concern.

Ed glanced at Alec with a look of mild contempt.

"He was inspecting when the call came in over the coded channel from NATO and you *had been missing for over 24 hours, Ed!*"

Straker rolled his eyes a bit. He hated the dog-and-pony show part of the job and everyone knew it. Alec just smiled. "It gets worse, buddy..." he whispered. Straker's eyes opened wide at that.

From across the room a voice said, "Hello James." It was Thorvald.

Henderson waddled over prepared to launch into a tirade at the impudent stranger.

When he got close he paused and looked into those dark green eyes.

"Holy shit!" bellowed Henderson, and to the amazement of all in the room he wrapped his arms around the stranger and squeezed him hard with a look of actual joy. Thorvald hugged him back, patting the middle of his back. Ed, Alec and the corpsmen just stared and glanced back and forth at each other with eyes and mouths agape.

"You son of a bitch! I thought we'd lost you!"

"It was necessary, James. In order to prepare for a different mission."

"We were all so sorry to hear about your wife and daughter..." Henderson grasped Thorvald's hands. The sheen in both of their eyes betrayed an unspoken deep level of understanding. Their hands shook.

"Thank you James, I didn't want to break contact - I had to."

"I understand..."

The room was still silent as Straker, Freeman and the corpsmen could only watch and be amazed at the stoic general showing genuine emotion. *Like a real human...*

Henderson picked up on the silence and turned back - with of all things, a smile on his face. "This man saved my ass on multiple occasions back in the days when the communists were the only enemies we knew of."

"Straker, Freeman, meet one of the most highly classified projects in the history of NATO. He is the ultimate infiltration operative and a master of disguise, language and combat skills. His missions will remain classified for at least another century," Henderson laughed.

He continued. "Okay Straker, get your ass patched up and back to it. I want your reports ASAP. I need to take care of something important." Henderson turned again back to his old acquaintance, "what are you calling yourself now?"

"Call me Thorvald."

"Fitting," said Henderson. He turned back to Straker. "I'm glad you made it, Ed." He smiled and left the room.

"He's never called me Ed..."

"He must have actually been worried," said Alec.

Straker added, "I've never seen him smile - ever!"

The door opened again. "It just got worse," whispered Straker.

Doctor Douglas Jackson came into the room with a file folder and medical bag. He motioned to the corpsmen to vacate the room and they obliged. He took their clipboards and notes as they exited. He transferred their notes to his own portfolio and glanced through them. "Broken nose, partially fractured jaw and left zygomatic arch - and two ribs. Internal organs show bruising and stress, but are intact."

"You survived Commander, but need further attention, therapy and some dietary scrutiny" he said in that drawn Slavic, Peter Lorre accent of his. "Do you know how you

got here, Commander?"

"He brought me here after saving me from an alien outpost." Straker simply pointed...

A man emerged from the shadow and stepped forward. "Hello Yannick," he said quietly.

Jackson stepped toward him and caught the gaze of those dark green, deep-set eyes. His face reddened and his eye flashed.

Just as Alec was whispering to Straker, "Bloody hell, not again!" Jackson lost his composure and shouted, "You! You murdering bastard!"

Alec whispered again, "I'm really starting to like this new fellow..."

Straker smiled and it hurt like hell. "Damn it, Alec!"

Straker interjected as loudly as possible, "Stand down, Doctor Jackson!"

"But Commander, this man is responsible for the deaths of many of my former comrades!" He continued, "He is an imposter and the highest possible security risk to us! I must protest his presence here in the extreme, Commander!"

"He is called Thorvald, Doctor Jackson, and calm yourself!"

"Thorvald? I knew him as Doctor Orteski, a professor of history at the State University in Warsaw when I was in medical school there."

"He was a specialist in Viking history and we had many long conversations on that topic over tea and coffee in a café near campus."

He sheepishly added, "I thought he was my friend..."

Thorvald countered, "I was both your professor and your friend, Yannick. Do you not remember the last time you saw me on campus?"

"I saw you in the corridor and asked you to meet me at the café for lunch at noon. Do you not recall what happened at that time?"

"That was when the chemistry lab exploded and killed Doctor Vestik and his graduate students!" shouted Jackson, indignantly.

"That is why I was sent there, Yannick. Doctor Vestik and his graduate students had created a chemical warfare agent that they were preparing to try on an innocent village in Yugoslavia. They were going to cause slow, agonizing deaths for dozens of poor, simple people in a remote valley for no reason other than their own curiosity."

Jackson paused as he pondered this information. "I would have been eating my lunch at my work table in the adjacent lab."

"Yes Yannick, your life, your skills and your potential would have been lost in that blast as well."

"I suppose I should be grateful," he said cracking a bit of a smile at the realization of events.

"I could not stay or let you know anything of my purpose there, Yannick."

"You were hunted as a traitor to the state and they declared you dead in a matter of weeks," Jackson added.

"I was on my next mission by then. You were a brilliant student, Yannick."

"Jackson, Douglas Jackson". He shook Thorvald's hand with a guarded smile.

Yannick actually fits that creepy bastard, thought Alec. He whispered to Straker again, "I always wondered why the hell he had a name that sounded like he'd been born in Oklahoma instead of Poland."

Straker smiled again, "Damn it all, Alec!"

Henderson entered the room again. "Gentlemen, I have clearance by NATO command to introduce you properly to Mister Thorvald. Straker, an orderly is bringing you a change of clothes. I want this band of merry men back to HQ pronto."

"I am saying this so you all hear it together." He tightened his countenance into the general they all knew and said, "Full security clearance on my initiative. Take him to the studio. That means you, Thorvald."

"Will I be coming back?"

"No time soon - we'll bring your belongings to you - including that interesting little car of yours."

Thorvald smiled. "Be very careful in my storage shed..."

CHAPTER 5

A film studio? Seriously? Thorvald smiled at the thought.

Alec had been his host for a full day while he tried to adjust to modern England. *Does everyone in England drink and smoke this much?*

No matter. Alec was a generous host and had even consented to turn Thorvald loose in his compact but well-equipped kitchen. The dinner he prepared for them was in the style of the meals Alec ate with his family growing up and they made him feel particularly nostalgic.

He entertained Thorvald with stories of years spent in Australia and various locations throughout Europe - including early years in the RAF when he'd first met Straker.

They enjoyed a few hours of conversation over fine cigars and bourbon, neat.

Neither offered any information that would have been indiscreet or classified, yet they enjoyed their time relaxing in front of the fireplace. There was a mutual understanding and observance of professional courtesy.

Alec showed him to the guest room and both retired, an evening well spent. A peaceful rarity to Thorvald, as his time was mostly spent alone and under cover.

He slept in rare comfort and dreamt of his beloved Helge and little Anna.

Even his subconscious was guarded from long years of experience. He had to protect the precious memories from the terrifying realities he'd come to know. He could never let

them crush those moments in his mind and heart...

In his dreams his wife and daughter were always close to him, resting on the reindeer skins that covered the floor of their log lodge in front of the ever glowing fire. Anna always played with her hand-painted wooden horse from Dallarna Sweden – her favorite. He could not find it in the aftermath of that horrible day.

Even dreaming, he always knew the hounds of hell were outside the door, surrounding them and waiting for a moment of weakness. In his dreams he was always surrounded by his weapons – the combat rifles, pistols and his favorite broadsword and axe. He was always ready and kept his family under his careful protection. These dreams often ended in terror and grief - reliving the most horrific event of his life.

He felt his dream was going in that direction and willed himself awake around 5 am. He clicked on the light and read for a while to calm himself and await the rising sun.

When Alec arose and went to wake Thorvald, he found his bed empty and made in military fashion. He heard some sounds in the kitchen and peeked in to find Thorvald showered, dressed and making what smelled like a real breakfast. Coffee, eggs, bacon, toasted wheat bread and Greek yogurt with fresh blueberries. "Now this is the way to start a new day!" said Alec with a large smile.

"Exactly," said Thorvald. "When do we start today?"

"We have a ten o'clock appointment at the studio with Straker. That give us about three hours to get you some appropriate clothing and a barber visit." Thorvald looked down at his heavy woven sweater and the shabby pants he'd lived in for weeks at a time.

CHAPTER 6

When Alec stepped into the studio office entrance, he was in his customary sunglasses, slim cut brown jacket and pants with the neck open just a button. Behind him a couple of steps was a somewhat shorter but quite solidly built man in a dark grey Nehru jacket and matching slacks. His collar open at the top. He had a neatly trimmed black and grey mottled goatee and mustache, with matching hair pulled neatly back into a short tail and secured with a leather strap. His glasses had thick, black frames and grey lenses and he carried himself with a quiet look of confidence and strength.

The only thing that didn't belong were the boots. Thick soled and deeply cleated. They were the only concession Thorvald wouldn't give into for this fashionable upgrade. Steel toes and ankle support were more important than looking dapper in Italian leather slip-ons. He felt ridiculous in this outfit, but he figured he should at least look the part for whatever was coming.

They entered Alec's office after an introduction to Miss Ealand, and the door whooshed closed. Alec picked up the silver cigar box, opened it and said, "Alec Freeman." A voice responded, "Voice recognition positive, Colonel Alec Freeman." The room moved downward as the outside view disappeared.

"Standard military protocol, Colonel Freeman?"

"Exactly, Thorvald. Except, no saluting..."

* * *

"Good morning, Mister Thorvald," said Straker.

"Good morning, Commander Straker." He was pleased that Thorvald was familiar with the protocols.

"You saw some interesting things on the way in here. Tell me what you saw."

Thorvald described in detail the things he noted both near and far away from the time they entered the main gate at Harlington-Straker Studios. Including the people, buildings and furnishings.

He also described in detail the banks of computers, the satellite com links, tracking scopes, controls and power panels in the room outside Straker's office. He included the lovely dark-haired, exotic-looking woman at the communications console with the soft brown eyes. Straker smiled. *Ayshea...*

"You are well trained indeed, and I have seen your combat skills in person. Why have I never heard of you during my time in Air Force Intelligence? I had Top Secret security clearance with NATO and the RAF."

Doctor Jackson entered, followed by Colonel Lake and Colonel Foster. "You're late."

"By almost thirty seconds," retorted Virginia with a playful flash of her grey eyes.

"I was just asking Mr. Thorvald why I had never heard of him despite my Top Secret security clearances with the USAF, NATO and the RAF."

Thorvald smiled lightly and simply stated, "NATO had three levels of security above Top Secret, Commander."

"Oh, I see," he said. Raising an eyebrow with smile forming. It hurt less to do so now. "We have full security release approval - so who the hell are you, Thorvald?"

"As General Henderson eluded to before, I was a deep-infiltration covert operative under *Project Mjolnir*."

Jackson let loose with a brief giggle then stifled it quickly trying to regain composure. Straker glared.

"Commander Straker, *Mjolnir* is a name from Norse mythology. It is the name of Thor's Hammer," Jackson said with unusual amusement. Straker grinned.

Straker looked into Thorvald's face and said, "So, you're the hammer from hell?"

"Asgard, Commander. Thor was the protector of the inhabitants of Midgard, which is Earth."

"My training was continual and each mission could last from weeks to over a year. I had to be intensively trained each time in order to disappear into the background of the mission field - never out of disguise or out of character."

"It eventually effected my health, physically and mentally. I had congenital heart issues that caught up with me and forced me to rethink my vocation. NATO forced my retirement and I continued to serve as a part-time consultant. It was then that I met my wife and began a semi-normal life."

Virginia noticed the matte black ring around the second finger of his left hand.

"My health improved and I felt blessed to have a purpose that didn't involve death and destruction. I was actually happy."

Straker motioned for him to continue.

Thorvald continued. "While I was gone on NATO business, my wife and daughter were brutally murdered in our home and their bodies mutilated. It was thought to be the work of cultists or a psychopath.' His eyes were visibly moist now and his speech slowed. He continued, his voice breaking...

"My wife had been viciously torn open and her organs removed but my little Anna had been carefully opened up with surgical precision and the organs removed neatly."

He stifled the building sob, cleared his throat and continued, his voice shaking but now low and gruff. "My world ended at the hands of someone inhuman. I thought it might be retribution for *Project Mjolnir*, but my real identity was never known to anyone outside the highest level of NATO command."

"I vowed to find and destroy whoever did this with all possible cruelty, but first had to eliminate my real identity to free me to pursue this mission. I obtained a cadaver near to my own size and set off an explosive charge and incendiary device in my own home to cover my departure."

"I spent years tracking similar mutilations around the globe, investigating and probing. I would work for a period under false identities to fund my travels and then simply disappear again."

"I quickly discovered they were indeed not human, and the organs were their true objective. I have been systematically tracking down their cells and eliminating them using the skills I've been taught."

"How long?" asked Straker.

"It must be over twelve years now..."

"And how many alien cells have you eliminated?"

"Only eleven so far, including the one when we met. They are getting more clever and resourceful but are still creatures of habit." Alec, Jackson and Foster swallowed the lumps that had formed in their throats as they listened.

"Alec, get those locations mapped and debrief Thorvald on the details of his operations. This is intel we need!" snapped Straker.

"Thorvald, welcome to SHADO. You will go through the customary process of indoctrination and training. Much of it will be old hat to you I'm afraid..."

"Commander, I am so relieved to find there is a whole global organization fighting the same war. I thought I was in it all by myself..."

"Now that you're here you will never be in it by yourself again." Straker looked up and smiled. Thorvald returned it. He may even be able to sleep a whole night through tonight.

CHAPTER 7

After preparing Alec another gourmet dinner and his first full night of sleep in years, Thorvald woke and got to work on another great breakfast for his host. It had been his last night there and he wanted to express his appreciation to Alec.

SHADO was moving him into a fully furnished apartment across the breezeway from Colonel Foster's. He got the impression that other SHADO operatives lived there as well and by intention. Fewer strangers – fewer secrets.

"Colonel Freeman, I'd like to drive myself in today after our breakfast. I need to get my navigation points memorized."

"Good idea Thorvald, and thank you for another glorious breakfast. It won't be the same here without you." Alec responded.

He would miss Thorvald, his conversation and his culinary skills – but he would not miss that eyesore in the drive next to his sleek turbine car. It looked like a prop from one of the futuristic, post-apocalyptic-wasteland sci-fi films the studio was raking in funds from these days. Gore, mayhem, explosions and scantily-clad actresses in Mohawks seemed to be the formula for the year...

Alec arrived at Harlington-Straker Studios after Thorvald and the only stall left was next to that eyesore. Nobody else wanted to park beside it either. He bent down and peeped inside after making sure nobody was watching. *What the hell?*

It had the customary gearshift and handbrake but three shorter levers in line right behind the rubber boot. There were extra gauges in the dash, and where there should have been a back seat, there was a short, stout parcel shelf with eye-bolts for securing cargo. The engine cover came forward and upward about a foot farther than any Beetle he'd ever seen.

He then noticed there was a tubular-framed roll bar with an oval profile that rose up the pillars and disappeared into the roof. The tacky, bent, roof-top luggage rack was attached with bolts the size of lug nuts. He began to understand... He glanced downward and noted the large, heavily-cleated tires on plain black rims and nearly six inches of additional height. The tubular steel crossbars under the running boards and row of driving lights above the rusting front bumper capped it off nicely.

Alec grinned... *You sneaky bastard!*

When Alec entered Straker's office, Thorvald and Dr. Jackson were there and Straker was again in question-answer mode.

"What kept you, Alec?"

"I paused to get a closer look at our friends' armored personnel carrier." He flashed a sly grin at Thorvald.

"I'll let you drive it sometime..."

"If we can get on with business gentlemen, I need a few solid answers again from Thorvald." Straker spoke in a tone that was all commanding officer.

"I need your actual name, place and date of birth, Thorvald. No dodging the straight

answer this time with aliases or allegories." His blue eyes were showing more sear than usual...

Thorvald had hoped to never reveal this information again. He exhaled and began slowly and clearly...

"I was born Magnus David Johansson, to an unmarried teenage Saami girl in the Lapland province of Sweden. My father was a soldier. He neither knew of me, nor ever returned."

"My mother died when I was a two year old and her elderly father – my grandfather, raised me as his own as best he could. His wife had died many years before my birth and my mother had been all he'd had left. We were poor but lived simply, in the manner of the native Saami. It is an existence close to the land and sea. Fishing, herding reindeer and farming during the short growing season."

"He was in poor health, and he convinced a family of Christian missionaries to take me and raise me as their own in Southern Sweden. My grandfather died days after my departure..."

"My foster parents, as missionaries, saw to my education - both academic and spiritual - and encouraged me to learn everything I could. We travelled the globe in their mission journeys. They arranged for me to return to Sweden to live with a man and woman who were friends of theirs. Both were university professors. They were also elderly and I watched them both decline while I tended to my studies."

"When they passed, I couldn't find any trace of my foster parents and I had to make my own way. I enlisted in the NATO forces to have a regular bed and steady meals. Oh, and I will be 58 years old on the second of next month."

Straker rose to his feet and leaned across the desk, giving scrutiny to Thorvald's story. "What you did not ask is why I need to know, Thorvald."

"I assumed you would tell me if you wanted me to know, Commander."

"Good answer, Thorvald. Your existence will be re-instated soon under the name we select and you may have over twelve years of pension back-pay coming to you..." Straker smiled. "All suitably modified to cover your new identity and ours..." He was enjoying the bewildered look on Thorvald's face. Alec was chuckling... "Alec, find Foster and get him in here."

"Yes Sir!" he said as he exited the office.

Moments later, Alec returned with Colonel Foster in tow. He appeared to be less than thrilled with his summons to appear. Straker picked up on it and assumed Foster had been looming over some as-yet-unconquered lovely in the SHADO ranks. Straker admired Paul's prowess as an operative but despised his pattern as a playboy and womanizer. He didn't care who he hurt and his smug arrogance had worn thin the lines of communication on several occasions. Foster's attitude and behavior were holding him back and he knew it...

"Colonel Foster, escort Thorvald to the lockers, and get him suitable exercise clothing." Straker continued. "Then take him to the combat training room and evaluate his hand-to-hand skills."

"I'll try not to injure him Commander," said Paul with his arrogance on full display.

Thorvald followed him out.

* * *

Straker, Freeman and Jackson waited for the door to close and burst into laughter. Tears on cheeks, Jackson was the first to speak. Still smiling, he said, "Commander, I should probably be ready with my medical kit."

Straker was obviously in pain, but immensely enjoying the release of laughter. "To the observation deck, Alec."

"Absolutely! Oh, wait a minute..." he quickly moved over to the drink dispenser and poured himself a couple fingers of bourbon. Straker raised an eyebrow - now that they both worked.

"This is a special occasion!" Alec exclaimed and they headed for the observation deck over the padded combat room.

* * *

Paul couldn't see the amused onlookers through the one way mirror up above, but he suspected they would be watching. In their official capacities of course.

Thorvald entered, looking very out of place. He removed his glasses and placed them on a shelf near the door. Paul handed him the padded head gear and made sure he had it on properly.

"I've never sparred in bare feet and pajamas," said Thorvald. *Paul is five inches taller, 20 pounds heavier and at least fifteen years younger. Should be fun...*

"Just show me what you've got, Thorvald..."

* * *

He motioned Thorvald to the center of the mat.

Paul started with a high kick to Thorvald's face. The elder combatant caught Paul's leg just short of contact and thrust it upward, spinning him completely around and slamming him into the mat, face first. His head spun and he barely noticed the hand reaching down to him.

Straker and Freeman were enjoying themselves immensely. The door to the observation room opened and Colonel Lake entered.

"Jackson told me I would find you here." She noted they had teary eyes and were grinning like fools. Alec had spilled part of his drink on the floor.

"You've got to see this, Virginia..." said Straker. Alec burst into a belly laugh again.

The three stood side by side watching Thorvald repel every advance by Foster and reduce him to a flattened mass on the mat. Each time slower to get up.

Lake, Freeman and Straker were all laughing hysterically with tears flowing. It was hard to breathe and Straker's wounds were hurting like hell. In all their years together they had never enjoyed a moment like this together.

Foster looked up at the mirrored wall segments and yelled, "Straker, you bastard!"

Straker lost it again and was nearly doubled over. "Shit this hurts!"

Still giggling, Alec interjected, "we should probably go now..."

He and Ginny helped Straker to a seat in the nearby office of Dr. Jackson. "Was it worth the pain, Commander?" he asked.

"Hell yes, Dr. Jackson."

* * *

Thorvald plopped down beside Paul on the mat. He had moved very little.

"Are we done, Colonel Foster? I don't think I've got another bout in me."

Foster laughed. It hurt to do so. He groaned loudly then said quietly, "call me Paul."

"I can hardly move, Thorvald!" He was still getting his breathing back under control.

"It is always much more physically and mentally taxing to fight with restraint, Paul."

"Restraint?" he countered, breathing at a shallow pant now. "How long would I have made it in real combat conditions against you?"

"Maybe a couple of minutes if you focused your force more efficiently."

"Holy shit, Thorvald!" He groaned, rolling over in the other direction in an attempt to get up.

"We should clean up and get some lunch, Paul. I brought extra soup to share today..." Paul laughed again, very aware of what an ass he'd made of himself.

After lunch, they checked back in with Freeman. He had regained his command-type composure once more but still reveled in that he'd nearly pissed himself laughing so hard. "How did combat drills go, Paul?" He managed with a poker face.

"Thorvald has formidable fighting skills and should probably be teaching the rest of us his techniques," Paul said. "He's also a damn fine cook, Colonel."

"That I know from experience, Paul." He smiled, pleased to hear the unusual humility in Foster's words. "Take him to the armory and get him qualified with our weapons, Paul."

"Yes sir," he said smartly, and motioned for Thorvald to precede him through the door.

CHAPTER 8

Thorvald listened intently to Paul's tutorials on the acoustic pistol and rifle and found them intuitive, despite their Buck Rogers appearance. His skills on the range were well honed from years of practical experience. These acoustic weapons were accurate, hard hitting and remarkably quiet.

Paul said, "We also have older, standard weapons we use for training." He went to a large cabinet that he opened to reveal several shelves of pistols, magazines and ammunition. Beside it were vertical racks with assorted rifles and combat shotguns lined

up in neat rows.

"This is more my speed," said Thorvald.

"Help yourself."

Thorvald picked up the Browning P-35 and said softly, "hello old friend." He cleared the weapon and cycled the action. He furrowed his brow and looked back at Paul.

He put the Browning back and picked up the Colt 1911. He cleared the weapon and cycled the action. He put it back and did the same thing with the Sig P210.

"Bone dry and the springs are shot out." Said Thorvald with mild disgust. "Doesn't SHADO have a staff armorer on duty?"

"Yes, but he's new to the job," Paul said sheepishly.

"Is it *you* Paul?" He asked gently.

Paul closed his eyes and squeezed the bridge of his nose like he had a headache coming on. "Yes," he said quietly... "We have technicians that maintain the SHADO standard arms, but these relics are my problem." His head *was* starting to hurt.

"Do you have spring kits, lubricants and tools, Paul?"

"Yes, of course, here in the work station."

"How long until our next scheduled appointment, Paul?"

"About ninety minutes. Is that enough time to make them right?"

"Time enough to get a couple in working order and put some rounds downrange."

"I am indebted to you, Thorvald." Paul said with genuine relief. "You've saved me from the wrath of Straker."

"I'll trade you some basic gunsmith training for some flying lessons..."

"Consider it done." Paul smiled.

* * *

Thorvald's apartment was furnished, but sparingly. A small fireplace, minimal furniture and absolutely bare walls. The kitchen was partially equipped, but there were no supplies or groceries. Thorvald sneezed and it echoed. He smiled at that.

He had never owned a television before and he turned it on with the small box sitting on the table beside the chair. A show was on, presumably one for children. The characters were all marionettes in blue uniforms with hats and a sash. They were in a rocket ship. The marionette said, "Thunderbird one on the way." "FAB Scott" came another voice... *This looks like it might be fun.* He laughed.

CHAPTER 9

The next morning Alec parked next to the Beetle again. It was still ugly, but now it made him smile.

When he hit Straker's office, things were already intense. Thorvald was there and looked a bit bewildered trying to take it all in. There was no time to bring him up to speed at the moment.

"What have we got, Commander?" Alec asked, in his all-business manner.

"S.I.D. detected a UFO inbound at Sol 3. It will pass Moon Base in about eight minutes."

Thorvald's eyes widened. *Moon Base?*

"That's slower than usual, Ed"

"It's also the size of a house, Alec. Henderson's house."

Alec understood the reference. Henderson lived in an estate house with several full time servants who all called him, "General, Sir."

"Bloody hell! It's a new type of UFO?"

The monitor energized. There was an attractive woman with a snug-fitting, shiny silver uniform and purple hair on the screen. *Is this another television show?* Thought Thorvald.

"Commander Straker, all interceptors are in position with firing solutions downloaded."

"Excellent," said Straker. "Well done, Lt. Ellis. Give us all the details."

"Roger, Commander. We'll keep you posted."

* * *

The interceptors waited for their timers to count down and launched their missiles. They resumed formation and headed back toward Moon Base. Seconds later there were three explosions in the distance marked by brilliant flashes of light.

Lt. Ellis appeared on the monitor again. "All three missiles impacted the target, Commander, but it was not destroyed."

"Holy shit!" Exclaimed Alec. They were all thinking the same thing.

"If three missiles made a direct hit and didn't kill it, we don't have anything in SHADO inventory that will!" Straker yelled, slamming his fist down on the table.

"I want that projected trajectory calculated *now!*" he roared. His blue eyes narrowed.

Lt. Ellis responded with calm proficiency, "Commander, target is tracking on a course for northwestern Europe. Enlargement of the target area shows the final destination to be the North Sea, near the Norwegian coast."

They all looked directly at Thorvald. He said, "Do you have detailed maps, Commander?"

The topographic maps of Northwestern Norway were rolled out on the conference table in Straker's office. A transparent sheet was quickly placed over them. The trajectory was marked on the map with red arc. A circle marked the terminal point.

Thorvald looked up at Straker over his glasses. "It's the same area where I found you, Commander..." Straker looked up at him and narrowed his eyes again.

* * *

I want all available Skydiver units on station ASAP. Tell them to observe and report but do not engage." Straker was still talking loudly as he exited his office.

"Mr. Ford, I want every available SHADO operative here and in full polar combat gear ready for transport within an hour! Is that understood?"

"Will do, Commander." He energized the com master link and sent out the signal to all SHADO operatives to contact base for a priority red message. He hit the record button and said very clearly into the microphone, "All operatives report immediately to headquarters for equipment and transport. This is not a drill."

In the security shack, dormitories and all over the region, wrist watches, bracelets and signet rings began to blink. SHADO operatives excused themselves from whatever situation they were in and disappeared.

Straker grabbed the white phone on his desk and said clearly, "Miss Ealand, we need an empty upper deck. Use plan 'George'. Get the studio and grounds cleared now please."

He hung up the phone, knowing he didn't have to wait for a response.

Miss Ealand opened her lower right desk drawer and pressed a button simply marked, "G". It lit up in the drawer and in the guard shack at the main entrance.

The public address system blared in the buildings, various studios and common areas with three loud tones to get the attention of all. "Your attention please, there is a gas-main leak on the grounds and a danger of ignition, please evacuate the premises immediately!" The recorded message repeated again and again...

The various actors, producers, directors and workers began to stream out of the lot in their cars and limos. All they cared was that it was an unplanned day off...

* * *

"How close can we get with the transports, Thorvald?" asked Straker.

"The closest airfield of any size is over a hundred kilometers away, Commander."

"I don't need an airfield Thorvald, just a large, level surface about three kilometers long. We can switch from wheels to skis on the way."

"How about a lake that freezes solid over four meters thick this time of year?"

"Show me." He handed Thorvald the blue marker and pointed him toward the topo map.

"The lake is right here," he drew an oddly shaped oval in the map. "You can't fly over this area from the west or south without detection. To the north are glacial mountains. If you come in from behind them and east of the lake, your arrival will be unannounced. It will put you on target in less than twenty minutes."

Straker looked up and sharpened his gaze. A cautious smile crept over his face. "Everyone, we have a chance to make this work!" He glared at Thorvald. "And we have an ace in the hole..."

"I need access to the contents of my storage shed, Commander," said Thorvald. "Did

they make it here intact?"

Alec spoke up, "It's all in a cargo box in the storage area." "Frankly, we were afraid to go poking around into the contents too deeply."

Straker pushed the com button on his desk. "Tell Colonel Lake I want this flight to disappear from all detection as soon as they hit international waters over the Baltic. SHADO transponders only. I'll get the flight registered as humanitarian relief supplies with the proper authorities." *It was more understatement than lie...*

CHAPTER 10

Straker was livid that Dr. Jackson had forbidden him to go. He knew his presence would pose a liability in his current condition. He would coordinate from here with his strategic staff. Alec would be there beside him to coordinate threats that might arise in case this was all a ruse. The aliens had fooled them on several occasions with a diversion while another wave attacked elsewhere. Alec wasn't please either.

Thorvald was on the first of the four heavy transports. Colonel Lake and Colonel Foster were there with him. Each transport carried three armed Mobiles, thirty fully-equipped operatives in polar combat gear and support staff. The first transport out also carried an old Beetle and a large storage box full of unknown gear.

"Do we have any local intelligence yet, Colonel Lake?" asked Thorvald.

"We have satellites that will overfly the region in minutes with full sensor arrays. If there's an Eskimo with a fever we'll know it momentarily," she quipped.

The first images were coming in now on the Mobile monitors. Straker and Freeman would be seeing the same thing.

"What is that?" asked Colonel Lake, pointing to a large glowing structure along the coastline. There was a heat signature bloom on the screen and nowhere else around it.

"It is an old commercial fish canning factory," said Thorvald. "It has been vacant for at least five years."

"Well, the lights are on and somebody's home now," said Virginia. "Pass those coordinates to the submarines, Ford."

"Immediately, Colonel." Ayshea had come in to relieve him so he could be part of the assault. "They'll be on station within a few minutes, Colonel."

"I know that facility well," said Thorvald.

Straker's voice crackled in his earpiece. "What will we find there, Thorvald?"

"There are several large empty warehouse buildings with large doors that open wide, and another with two levels that was the office and administration center."

He continued. "There are three large piers for commercial fishing vessels and cargo ships, but there is a rocky shoreline there. The piers are built above the rocks. There is no place to hide the ship underwater beneath a structure."

Colonel Lake placed a hand over her earpiece and listened to an incoming signal. She

turned and said, "Submarines are now on station and report no unusual structures. The UFO is not underwater, Commander."

Straker's voice came through again. "How are they protecting the ship from exposure to our atmosphere? We know they have only a matter of hours before everything they have disintegrates or explodes."

"They are learning, Commander," said Thorvald. "Now that I know where we are going I need some things from my storage box. I have an idea..."

* * *

Over the Baltic, the four transports were in formation on German, Danish, Swedish and Finnish radar. With a timed flip of a switch, the jamming equipment came on line and the navigational transponders and lights went off. They had disappeared, causing radar operators in multiple locations to reach for the phones near their stations...

Time seemed to crawl despite the great speed of the transports.

The transport flight technicians flipped a series of toggles, causing the landing gear in each well to index to the side. The wheels disengaged from their strut mounts and rotated away on a carousel until a large landing ski rotated into place.

The skis engaged the locking pins in the struts and the landing gear indexed back into position for deployment. Completion of the cycle in each well was verified by the flight technician as a light for each, illuminated on the display console. They were ready to land...

* * *

The loudspeaker in each transport blared, "All units to your Mobiles. E.T.A. is six minutes."

Thorvald had strapped a set of cross country skis to the roof rack of the old Beetle and strapped a large duffel bag across the parcel shelf. He'd told Straker about his idea and he'd approved it.

Straker's voice crackled again over the earpieces. "Foster, I want you on the insertion team on the right flank, and you on the left flank, Ford. Virginia, you'll go with Thorvald to his drop point then return to the Mobiles to coordinate the intel and com feeds to all units. Keep us all connected."

"I want the Mobiles in two ranks, across the overland escape route and the subs to provide support fire from the water with deck guns and Sky units on my command. Ground units will maintain cover in front of the Mobiles and follow my orders as the situation develops. We will be watching on live feed via satellite."

He offered one last statement, "Good luck, everyone..."

The sun was beginning to set against dark clouds over the North Sea in the distance. Their approach would have the darkening eastern sky behind them...

Thorvald gave some of his special tools to Paul and Keith and quickly explained his plan to them.

The transports came in low from the east flying parallel courses and touched down on

the frozen lake side by side. As they slowed, the debark ramps dropped, kicking up a flurry of snow from the surface of the lake. When motion stopped, the green light over the loading door illuminated. The waning daylight was fading quickly.

The Mobiles powered down the ramps quickly and formed into a single line of twelve, leaving only one track behind them. They would split and form two ranks one kilometer from the cannery. Thorvald had told them where to find the drift ridges that would serve as their cover.

Virginia was strapped into the little Beetle with her compact field communication console on her lap.

Thorvald strapped in. "Are you comfortable with driving this back to the Mobiles?"

"I'll manage just fine." She cracked a little smile. "I used to own a Beetle."

"Excellent. Here we go..." Thorvald throttled up the little Beetle and pulled two of the shorter levers behind the shifter into a rearward position. All four wheels were engaged and the center differential was locked.

The Beetle launch hard down the ramp into the wide track of the Mobiles, building speed very quickly. Thorvald then snapped the wheel to the left, drifting the car into the pristine field of snow. "We are taking a short-cut." Virginia stifled a laugh. *This was incredibly fun...*

The Mobiles were out of sight and the Beetle was cutting a path toward the tree line. Bounding down a hill between the trees, Thorvald drifted the little car onto a path of sorts. He clicked on the lights and picked up the pace.

"Just follow this road right back to the Mobiles when you drop me off, Colonel."

"Are these earpiece communicators waterproof?"

"To 100 meters depth," replied Virginia with a little pride in her design work.

"Do they have a tone feature for Morse code?"

"Yes, of course. You simply tap the outer cover to signal the tone." Virginia added with a slightly sarcastic tone, "They *do* have a state of the art microphone, Thorvald. My Morse may be a bit lacking as well..."

"I can't speak underwater." They shared a smile as the little car drifted through turns along the snowy path.

The trees cleared and Thorvald brought the car to an abrupt stop, shutting down the lights. "This is where I get out." He left the car idling and stepped out. He reached into the duffel and pulled out strange looking shoes, a long, narrow pack with a strap and an aluminum case. The last items to come out was a neoprene full coverage wetsuit. And a thermos.

He shed his outer layers to the heavy base layer that formed his first waterproof thermal barrier. Virginia tried not stare. *This is what 57 looks like?* She smiled.

Thorvald pulled the final zipper up on the wetsuit and pulled the balaclava over his head. He opened the thermos and quickly downed two cups of soup. "Help yourself, Colonel," he said handing the thermos to her.

He opened the aluminum case and removed what looked like the hilt of a broadsword. Another section came out and rotated into position above the hilt. A third section was added to form the tip of the blade. It was jet black top to bottom. Thorvald turned a knurled ring at the base of the hilt. The first audible click made the assembly rigid and the second click pulled the sections into full tension.

Thorvald slipped the blade into the long pack and slid the band over his head and under one arm. He put on the neoprene gloves and motioned for Virginia to come around and take the wheel.

"You have the compact remote cameras?" Virginia asked.

Thorvald nodded. "I'll give you one long tone when I get into position. Foster two tones and Ford, three. I'll signal the details as I get them."

"The third lever engages the lower range gears in case you have to climb a tree..." He smiled at Virginia.

He snapped his boots into the bindings on the skis and disappeared into the trees.

Virginia spun the Beetle in a smooth, powerful arc and hurtled off back down the road toward the Mobile position.

CHAPTER 11

Virginia was at the main console in the command Mobile awaiting that single long tone. *Good heavens this soup is wonderful...*

BEEEEEP! Everyone listening on the com link in the field and in Straker's office perked up. *This is it!*

Thorvald quietly broke the surface with his forehead until he could draw a breath through his nose. He hung there suspended in the icy water looking very much like a seal. Despite the irritation to his eyes from the cold seawater, he'd counted six sentries, spread across the span of the cannery and around each side. *Bright red suits with shiny silver boots and helmets... No concept of camouflage.*

Thorvald silently slid back under and signaled, "Six sentries, one each end, no lights." Colonel Lake transmitted the voice translation almost immediately. Moments later they heard two long beeps, and then three. Foster and Ford's insertion groups were in position in the tree line at both ends of the facility.

Thorvald signaled a short tone. It was the "go" signal for Foster and Ford. They closed on the single sentry at each end from behind.

Paul swung the jet-black double-bladed axe Thorvald had handed him with a mighty upward stroke. It caught the alien sentry in the lower back above the belt and opened him up like an over-ripe melon. Ribs and sinew flew in a red spray, finally shooting the helmet forward off the sectioned head. Green liquid gushed from the cleft. The weight of the forward falling helmet pulled the uniform and corpse forward into a heap.

Paul was amazed at the effortless cut and gruesome effect of the weapon.

At the other end of the facility, Keith Ford had just sectioned the sentry with his favorite katana. He had surprised the commanding staff when he volunteered and even more

when he showed up with his own weapons. This was new territory...

Thorvald slipped silently from the water onto the rocks under the central pier. He withdrew a small dental mirror from his slash pocket and used it to observe the sentries over the edge of the structure.

He watched patiently as the four sentries moved in their patrol positions. The two in the middle passed each other and walked to a spot where they would turn and come back toward each other. He timed it and did the math in his head. The window would be a narrow one.

He signaled one long tone. Seconds later there was a doubled long tone and then a tripled one. Foster, Ford and their groups were just around the corners at the ends of the buildings, waiting for the "go" signal.

The forward position of the foot troops in the drifts east of the facility gave them a view on the opposite side. They reported no sentries or activity. There were also no doors or windows on that side. The Mobiles remained positioned behind them with weapons trained on the buildings.

Thorvald counted down to the second when the middle sentries would pass each other and the gap would be perfect to slip in behind them. He signaled the short tone again.

Thorvald slipped unseen over the pier and between the sentries. He swung his broadsword up in an arc catching the right sentry below the right arm and sweeping the blade upward, exiting through the left shoulder in a spray of red mist and bubbling green liquid. He powered over the top of the swing, accelerating the blade downward toward its next target who was now turned and raising his rifle.

Thorvald saw the look of surprise and panic on the face in the green liquid as his blade went through the left shoulder beside the helmet and continued downward until the rifle fell and the belt was cut through. Thorvald kicked the helmet and the corpse fell backward, releasing the blade from the lower abdomen.

Simultaneously, Ford and Foster had splayed open the alien sentries as they passed the corners of the facility. They were still undetected and no alarm had been raised.

Paul and Keith sprinted silently to Thorvald's position and the three crouched into a recess near the pier.

Thorvald spoke softly but clearly, "Virginia, do we have a heat signature in any of the warehouses?"

"Only the largest one, next to the admin building at the north end. That end building is glowing brightly." Virginia's voice was comforting in the earpiece.

"Keith, your group on cameras. Paul, yours on door blocks. I'm heading for the warehouse..." Thorvald indeed had a plan.

Straker's voice crackled through, "Virginia, give us video feed as soon as the cameras are in position." There had been no need to ask, but she understood he just wanted everyone to know he was with them.

* * *

Paul's group deployed the door blocks quickly and silently. There was a door on the

ground level and another above it at the top of a set of rusty stairs. They chose the magnetic blocks since the doors and frames were steel.

They pressed them into position above the doorknobs where the locks would be and at the top and bottom along the same edge. The magnets held tight to the door and adjacent frame. A small black antenna was pulled out to set the mechanism on each.

The windows were mostly covered with wood planking, although one at ground level and one beside the landing up above shown light through a corner.

Ford's group positioned cameras on the pier and at the corners, facing the doors. They secured them in place with a sticky adhesive putty and bent the flexible stalk so the cameras were pointing where they wanted.

Ford hung off the edge of the stairs and secured a camera so it looked inward through the gap in the window boards on the ground level. He flexed the neck so that it looked inward and down a bit.

Ford went silently to the top of the stairway. The gap in the upper window was out of reach from there. Ford motioned for another operative to give him a leg up to the roofline. It was icy so he stayed near the fascia. He could make a quick leap to the stair if he slipped. He lowered his arm from above and attached the camera so it peered into the gap in the upper window. The other operative caught his heel and eased him back down.

Paul and Keith's insertion groups returned silently to the tree line and waited for a signal from Thorvald.

* * *

Thorvald moved along the edge of the huge warehouse. There was a dim glow leaking from the gaps around the massive doors. There were tracks in the snow where they had been opened – recently. He could not see in.

He lowered himself into the drift up against the bottoms of the steel wall panels. *These things disintegrate from the bottom up.* He checked each panel for looseness all down the front and around the far end of the warehouse.

Halfway down that wall he found what he was looking for. The panel was not just loose, the bottom corner was missing and had been covered in snow.

He scooped with his hands so he could lay down and look in. "Got it," was all he said. Straker, Freeman, Lake and all the operatives held their breath in anticipation.

Thorvald placed the camera in the opening so they could see what he did. There was an audible gasp in the earpiece.

In the cavernous warehouse sat two UFO's. One small scout ship like they saw almost weekly and another enormous one. It looked very different, with an oval profile and rounded ends. Both were wrapped tightly in something that looked very much like heavy commercial-grade plastic sheet material.

Straker sounded livid, "Goddamn vacuum-packed UFO's! No wonder they were able to avoid atmospheric breakdown!"

Thorvald said softly, "There is equipment to the left, Commander." He tilted the camera

so they could see.

"What are they Thorvald, can you tell?"

"Three petrol-powered pumps. One looks like it is for fluids, another for vacuum and a third that looks like a commercial air compressor. I'm going in for a closer look."

Thorvald pulled the loose panel aside and slipped in on his belly. He quietly moved along the wall watching for a guard. He saw a pair of silver boots move on the other side of the scout ship. He approached and waited until the toes of the feet were going the opposite direction. He slipped in behind the alien guard as it rounded the side of the ship. His broadsword made an upward diagonal slice from under the left arm and exiting the right shoulder in one fluid movement.

"DEAR GOD!" screamed the voice in his earpiece. It was Colonel Lake and he'd forgotten about the camera positioned in the gap in the wall.

"Colonel Lake!" shouted Straker, "Give us the feed on the other remotes! Now!"

Straker's gut was churning for Virginia Lake. They'd faced alien UFO's by the hundreds over the years, but the kill had always been at some distance by the press of a button or pull of a trigger. She hadn't been exposed to this close-up kind of gruesome brutality. He knew this would be a visceral sucker punch to her sense of right and wrong... He'd barked the command to get her focused in another direction. She knew that and was grateful...

The video feed from the remotes came on. In the command Mobile, Colonel Lake was still shaking and teary-eyed. *How could anyone do something like that for a living? Will I ever be able to look into those green eyes and not see this instead?*

A tone code came into her headset. It was Morse; "very sorry you saw that."

"Thank you, Thorvald." She replied in Morse. She shook her head to clear it.

"Cut the beeping and fix that video feed," Straker exclaimed. The picture was over-saturated in color and light. The temperature display showed 40°C.

Virginia adjusted the gain until the picture had cleared, then put the upper and lower window cams on a split screen.

On both feeds the same scene appeared. There was a large central transparent fluid tank full of green liquid and multiple tubes leading to and from large peripheral tanks that looked like giant aquariums. They were filled with green fluid and dark forms seemed to float weightless in them.

Virginia sharpened the images further, pleased with the resolution. There were racks full of red uniforms, silver boots and helmets. The dark forms were humanoid...

"It's a barracks." said Straker in a taugth low voice. He glared at the screen and his eyes narrowed with purpose. "That larger UFO is a troop ship."

"Are they moving around, Commander?" Thorvald asked. He had no idea what they were seeing.

"No. They appear to be in some sort of stasis tanks," replied Straker.

"How many can you see?"

"I count twenty in the upper room and thirteen in the lower, Commander," Virginia added.

"Good" said Thorvald. "I've got a little time to come up with something in here. Would you please pull the insertion teams and foot troops back near the Mobiles, Commander? I have an idea..."

"It had better be a good one, Thorvald." Straker's voice was sounding gruff now.

* * *

Thorvald looked closer at the ships and machinery in the shed. The smaller scout ship was attached to a heavy cable that ran across the floor and disappeared into the wall adjacent to the barracks. It must be the power source for the facility.

Both of the plastic envelopes surrounding the ships had a heavy tube running from them over to a valved plenum on the vacuum pump. Thorvald pulled a multi-tool from his pack.

The valves on the vacuum plenum were closed. He disconnected the plenum from the vacuum pump and then cut the lead to the spark plug and punctured the fuel tank so it began trickling out.

He checked the fuel tank on the air compressor and made sure the spark lead was solidly attached to its plug. He set the choke and pushed the prime lever until he heard fluid entering the carburetor.

The only thing left was to screw the plenum directly into the discharge port of the compressor and remove the intake filter so it could draw clean, atmospheric air.

"Trigger the door blocks on my signal," Thorvald said quietly.

"Now!" He yanked the starter cord. The engine sputtered but didn't catch. He pulled it again and it failed a second time.

The door blocks discharged and began to glow red hot, effectively welding the doors to their frames.

He pushed the prime lever once more and yanked the cord as hard as he could. The engine sputtered, coughed and then caught with a plume of heavy smoke pouring from the exhaust.

He set the throttle and closed the choke and made for the exit hole in the wall. He paused for a second to double-check...

The tubes leading to the vacuum-wrapped UFO's were now quite solid and the envelopes were beginning to inflate...

Straker heard the engine and something that sounded like a giggle. "Give me the feed from the warehouse!" He saw the inflated envelopes around the ships and that they were beginning to bulge. The ships were also beginning to glow... *Good plan Thorvald...* Straker was smiling now.

"Everyone pull back behind the Mobiles! NOW!" shouted Straker.

Thorvald was running flat out in the snow eastward toward the Mobiles.

"All units be prepared to open fire if this doesn't work..." commanded Straker.

Offshore, three submarines cleared the surface and prepared their deck artillery and rocket launch tubes.

The Mobiles energized their overhead rotary cannons.

The warehouse was beginning to glow...

"Activity in the barracks, Commander," said Colonel Lake.

The bodies in the stasis tanks were moving and reaching up out of the green oxygenated fluid. They were reaching down for uniforms and helmets in a determined effort. A couple had made it to the door only to find it wouldn't budge. They grabbed rifles and fired into the locks. Still no way out.

There was a blinding flash that illuminated the night sky all the way up to the cloud bottoms and a ball of flame rose upward into a mushroom shape.

The shock wave hit the Mobiles and knocked those outside off their feet. A swirl of snow blew past them and debris began dropping from the sky.

Straker said loudly, "Skydiver units, what can you see at the blast site?"

"Just a massive crater, Commander. It is filling with seawater... We have minor damage here, Sir. A large section of pier timbers took out part of our antenna array as it went over."

The Mobiles chimed in next. "We are also intact Sir, but all Mobiles have cracked windshields."

Straker asked the obvious question, "Has anybody seen Thorvald?"

"We're searching for him right now, Commander," Keith Ford shouted, sounding worried.

CHAPTER 12

The transports were in formation over the North Sea and approaching the coast of Scotland. All navigation lights and transponders were in internationally required operation. The eastern sky was beginning to glow behind them.

Thorvald was on a gurney and the med techs had him wrapped in heated blankets. They had found him 300 meters short of the Mobiles, half-buried in a drift and unconscious. He was awake now and feeling warmer but he could hear nothing but what sounded like static in both ears. Everyone who had been outside the Mobiles when the shock wave hit had ringing ears and some level of disorientation. The radiation released hadn't been enough to warrant full protocols for those exposed.

Thorvald sat up and propped himself up against the bulkhead.

Virginia came over and sat on the gurney beside him. Paul and Keith came and sat on the gurney ends like bookends, also leaning against the bulkhead.

Virginia handed Thorvald a familiar cup. He reached out of the blankets and took it in

both hands. Virginia smiled, "There was still some left in the thermos."

Thorvald smiled broadly, closing his eyes – and sipped some soup. He was very grateful to have these comrades and friends around him. He cracked open an eye on each side and realized all three were asleep and leaning against each other and up against his shoulders... he silently said a prayer of thanks – his first in many years, and nodded off himself.

* * *

The assault group had been allowed to get a few hours of sleep in the bunk room in the security area. It was neither private nor terribly comfortable, but was greatly appreciated. The rest of the afternoon involved debriefing and medical assessments. It was dark when they were released to go home...

The following morning Thorvald went out to his trusty Beetle and laughed when he saw there was still snow crammed into some of the body recesses. "You did well, Helge," he said patting the roof with his hand.

* * *

At SHADO headquarters he arrived at Commander Straker's office in time to see the door open. Straker and Freeman were there, and Keith Ford was across the desk standing at attention. Straker handed Ford a sizeable envelope and shook his hand. "A commission upgrade and promotion, Mr. Ford – and you damn well earned it!" said Straker with a grin. Colonel Freeman was grinning as well.

"Thank you, sir!" said Ford, looking immensely pleased. Straker walked him to the door and Ford stepped out and back to his station.

"Good morning, Thorvald," said Straker. He was in a very good mood this morning. He continued, "Your solution to our problem was brilliant! The increase in pressure accelerated the atmospheric breakdown process. I know now why Henderson recommended you so fervently."

"Unfortunately, things did not pan out in bridging your service from NATO, so we had to alter our plan..."

Straker stepped back behind his desk but did not sit. "NATO Command would not approve release of your back pension or reinstate you to living status in their records - but that allowed us to do something special for you on your behalf."

Straker handed him an envelope. He looked inside and found a photograph. It was a grave marker in marble with beautifully engraved angels and text.

"Johannson, Magnus, Helge and Anna." It showed the date they had died.

Thorvald couldn't stop the tears that formed. "Thank you, Commander."

"That's not all, Thorvald." Straker handed him another much larger envelope. It contained birth records, official documents of education, taxpayer identification and even a drivers' license with his picture. The only thing odd was the name.

"This is your new official and legal identity, Thorvald."

Thorvald looked at the drivers' license and read it out loud. "Thorvald David

Magnusson..."

Alec chimed in, "We did a better job of taking into account your heritage and ethnicity this time around. We didn't want you to wind up with an unfitting name like Douglas Jackson, did we?" He couldn't help but laugh. Straker tried in vain not to join in.

Straker sat and looked up at Thorvald, "Do you have any questions, Thorvald?"

"Only one at the moment, Commander. What were you doing in that remote part of Norway when you were abducted?"

Straker turned a little red and lowered his head with a sigh. Alec burst into laughter again.

"Would you believe I was scouting out a location to make a film about Vikings?"

After the moments of laughter, Thorvald looked a bit serious again.

"Commander, you won't likely need my kind of skills very often. What am I supposed to do with myself?"

Straker looked up at him with a wry grin and said, "Have you ever considered a career in film?"

* * *

EPILOGUE

* * *

Thorvald was in his kitchen cooking. He had changed his appearance and gone out to the local markets and shops to find just a few things he really needed. He had resumed his new identity upon returning and was now dressed for comfort.

There was a loud thump at the door. It repeated a couple more times...

Thorvald went to the door, bent down and looked through the wide angle view port. All he could see were greens. Carrot greens. And a tuft of black hair.

He opened the door. A pleasant, almost musical voice came from behind three over-stuffed bags of groceries, "Hello, Mr. Magnusson."

"Please, let me take those," he said, scooping the bags together carefully so as not to crush them. He found himself looking into the face of the lovely dark-haired woman he'd seen at the communication console his first day. She had a warm smile and deep brown eyes that were quite disarming. She also had an exotic, tropical complexion that reminded him of islands he'd visited in the South Pacific...

"You're Lt. Johnson, right?" He asked. She smiled sweetly. He motioned for her to come in. She entered and closed the door behind her. The automatic locking mechanism engaged. She followed him into the kitchen and he set the bags on the counter.

"Thank you very much." Thorvald said with a grin. "I had only picked up a handful of things so far." She noted the simmering stockpot on the stove and the wonderful aroma of bread in the oven.

She spoke again in that pleasantly musical voice. "All SHADO field operatives and

command staff have personal staffers that take care of this type of thing to minimize public exposure. Yours hasn't been assigned yet." He turned to her and smiled.

"You drew this detail, then?" he asked.

"Not exactly," she said. "All three of my command colonels approached me and offered to let me leave early if I would do a favor for them. They also gave me a shopping list and bundle of cash to cover it," she added.

"Colonel Lake even took my duty station, and said if Straker asked her why she was there, she would tell him to mind his own business."

"Why did they choose you then?" He asked with a smile.

"It's simple, Mr. Magnusson." She smiled again. "We are neighbors. I live in the flat directly above yours. They thought we should meet and get acquainted."

Thorvald smiled wide. "Please call me Thorvald..."

"My friends call me 'Shea.'" She returned his smile and her soft brown eyes seemed to glow from the light above the stove.

"It must be you I hear singing in the morning," he said.

Her cheeks reddened, "In the shower, I'm afraid. I'm so embarrassed..."

"Please don't be. It filters softly through my ceiling and sounds, -well... angelic."

She turned her head, still quite red in the cheeks, and said quietly, "Thank you."

"Shea, would you please join me for dinner?" he asked with his best available manners. "There is so much here and I would really appreciate your company..."

Her face beamed. "I'm afraid my diet is of a vegetarian nature, but that smells so wonderful."

"It is entirely vegetable-based, with my favorite roots, garden fare and a healthy dose of lentils. I also have black rye bread for dipping into it. Doctor Jackson says my cholesterol could stand some improvement."

"I would be delighted, Thorvald," she replied.

"It will be ready in just a short while. Please sit and keep me company, 'Shea."

"Would you care for some fresh coffee?" She nodded, smiling, and sat down on the only chair in the kitchen. The coffee was full-bodied and wonderfully smooth...

"I've heard you had some interesting experiences as a NATO operative, Thorvald." She looked up at him, "Can you tell me about some of them? No need for specifics, though."

He smiled again. "I understand..."

"One mission awakened my love for cooking." He continued, "I spent four months of intensive training in a culinary institute to prepare me to be a private chef for a high party official in an Eastern Bloc country."

She smiled again, knowing she'd soon be enjoying some very good food.

"A particularly enjoyable one, was acting as a native fly-fishing guide on the Kamchatka Peninsula of Northeastern Russia for a group of KGB agents on holiday."

"There is an enormous species of rainbow trout there. They grow larger than a Norwegian salmon and fight twice as hard. I was having so much fun fishing, camping and cooking in the wild, that I nearly forgot why I was there."

"What would be the hardest for me to believe, Thorvald?" She had a playful look on her face.

He lowered his face - eyes closed, and laughed out loud. "I spent over a year posing as the lead guitar player and vocalist for a heavy metal band that was touring behind the Iron Curtain..."

"No! Not possible!" She exclaimed, laughing.

"Seriously." He said. "I spent six months training with guitar and voice coaches - three weeks of it in a studio with *Iron Maiden*... They were very helpful..."

'Shea had tears on her cheeks now, trying hard not to spill her remaining coffee.

He turned off the stove and oven, taking the towel over his right shoulder to protect his hands as he removed the bread from the chamber. He set it on the cutting board, then cut it into angled slices, and those into sections for dipping. The crisped bread made a crunching sound as the knife cut through the outer layer. The smell was intoxicating.

"I appear to have no bowls. Do you mind your soup in a mug?" he asked.

"Not at all, Thorvald. That's how I do it in my own kitchen as well. It's more portable that way too."

He pulled a pair of large earthenware mugs from a cabinet, mixed the contents of the stockpot and ladled a healthy dose into each. He added a mismatched spoon.

"It will have to cool a bit before we can eat it safely. I'm afraid I have no dining table or chairs. I'm a bit under-furnished at the moment." He sounded apologetic.

"We can just sit on the sofa," she responded taking the mugs from him. He picked up the bread, still on the cutting board and followed, sitting beside her. They placed the mugs and cutting board on the long table in front of the sofa.

As she sat she noticed three items on the small side table. There was a small hand-painted wooden horse flanked by two picture frames.

One photo was black and white. An elderly man with slits for his eyes and mouth, but a kindly face - and a pretty, much younger girl beside him. Both in deerskin parkas and looking quite content. The background was a rustic snow-covered farm.

The other picture frame held a color picture of a beautiful, crystalline blue-eyed woman with golden blonde curls framing her face and an adorable young girl with the same hair but shining dark green eyes. Their smiles were beaming with warmth. She then noticed the matte black ring resting in front of the picture.

She looked beside her and into those same dark green eyes. There was great sadness there and it tugged at her heart to see it in her new friend. There was no need to explain...

She smiled warmly, looking up at him. She hoped he couldn't see the moisture that had formed in her eyes. She reached for the remote and said, "Let's see what's on the tele, Thorvald."

She pulled her legs up beside her and leaned gently up against his side. She pressed the on button.

A show was coming on. It had bounding music with a weird synthesizer melody and the background consisted of swirling colors in a continual spiral...

"Oh, I love Doctor Who," she said with a youthful glee.

Thorvald just looked at her with bewilderment...

She patted his arm softly, smiled, and said, "Don't worry, I'll explain it as it goes..."

Even this small apartment, however stark at the moment, was beginning to feel like a home. The first in many, many years. *I wonder how it would look with reindeer skins in front of the fireplace...*

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