

"Look, I'll take care of the cab fare. You just find the damned keys."

Part 1 - By Grant Wray

Alec Freeman wrapped his overcoat tighter around his body as he pushed his way through the crowds of tourists that were an ever-present feature of Charing Road. He mumbled something under his breath as he tried several times to turn right towards Soho but was thwarted by the crowds. Eventually he made the turn and the crowds eased behind him. A left turn, then another left turn then he was in Greek Street. A passing girl in a very short skirt smiled at him, but he just felt sickened by the green tint her skin had taken in the reflected florescent glow of the shop signs.

Five fifty-four. He was early yet, so he stopped to look into a shop window. It was a theatrical ticket agent. What shows were on? "What do I care?" thought Alec. A passing motorbike courier couldn't avoid spraying the back of Alec's coat as he shot through a huge puddle that had collected at this point on the road. "Damn" he said aloud, and several passing office workers turned their heads towards him, then looked back, heads down, in the direction they were going before. It didn't help them avoid forcing a young man off the pavement and into the huge puddle. The young man uttered a profane expletive, then carried on a few more steps towards the Royal Society where he had to deliver a manuscript. He stopped for a second and looked Alec right in the eye, held his gaze for a moment whilst a dim flicker of recognition passed over his features, then he shrugged, smiled slightly and carried on about his business.

Alec thought, "You and me both. We've been hanging around this great metropolis for ten years or more, and it's still amazing how many ignorant and inconsiderate arseholes there are around. You live your life in fear that you don't start behaving like them."

A faint beep interrupted his train of thought and he looked at his watch. Five fifty-nine. He started down into the depths of the passageway between two shops being careful to avoid the dog dirt hiding in the shadows cast by a discarded rubbish bag.

Part 2 - By Deborah Rorabaugh

A prickling at the base of his skull told Freeman there were watchers about. His eyes scanned the passageway, but there was no one. He listened for a moment for the telltale sounds of a close tail, but there were only the echoes of the traffic, both human and motorized. 'I'm getting too old for this nonsense,' he muttered to himself, finding the door set into the side of the right hand shop. He checked with watch on more time. Six, straight up and down. He knocked on the rusty metal plated door.

There was the dim sound of a bolt being thrown back and the door opened on well-oiled hinges. Freeman stepped inside, into blackness, and the door swung shut behind him. He felt a hand on his elbow and allowed the unknown guide to lead him into the darkness. There were no echoes and he felt a moment of vertigo. He couldn't tell where the guide was taking him. Finally, the hand let go of his arm. Freeman waited, hands folded in front of him, and was rewarded with a dim light being turned on.

The lamp sat on a battered metal desk, and a single file folder adorned the otherwise bare desktop. Freeman took a moment to take in the rest of his surroundings. Most of the room was lost in darkness, but he could still tell that was a deliberately plain and unremarkable office, unremarkable, except for its present occupants. He recognized the three other men in the room. Bill Tanner of MI-6 was leaning against one side of the desk. George Mallory, MI-5, was standing at the shoulder of the smartly suited man seated at the desk - General James Leland Bond, RAF Intelligence, and Freeman's boss before Straker.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Colonel Freeman," Bond greeted.

"Your note said it was a matter of international importance," Freeman reminded him.

"And so it is," Bond said. He steepled his hands in front of his face. "First, I need to know exactly where your loyalties lay."

"I work for SHADO, you know that," Freeman said.

"I understand that takes precedence, but beyond that, national loyalties?"

"I'm a British citizen and my loyalty oath is on record. SHADO hasn't changed that and wouldn't ask me to."

Bond glanced at his two associates. Mallory shrugged. Tanner gave a brief nod, reached his hand over to the file and turned it to face Freeman.

"Read that, and then I'll explain," Bond said. Freeman stepped forward to the desk, flipped open the file and began to read.

Part 3 - By Rob Hemmings

"So you're telling me we definitely have ANOTHER airliner that's crashed directly onto a small town?" uttered Commander Straker, incredulously. "The odds against that are, frankly, unbelievable!"

"That's the situation, sir, and there's no sign of any alien activity whatsoever," continued the SHADO communications officer operating the other end of the link.

"And SID confirms that both its and Moonbase's Utronics have detected no alien craft for over 14 weeks. All ground-based sites have maintained one hundred per-cent operational records. Nothing could have made it through without us at least seeing it, sir."

"I want you to double-check everything, and I MEAN everything! Damn it - commandeer a few more of those supercomputers in the universities and use them to check SID out, too!"

Commander Straker terminated the link and looked towards the familiar dim glint of red light that refracted through the ashtray in his now semi-darkened room. He picked up the recently lit cigar and drew deeply but suddenly blew the smoke out sharply, leaned forward and stubbed it out. Hard. There was something he didn't like, and it was annoying the hell out of him that he didn't know what it was.

The SHADO link flashed again, unexpectedly.

"Straker" he said.

The voice recognition indicator immediately turned green.

"It's General Henderson, sir. The message says he want's to see you in his office first thing in the morning."

Straker almost groaned.

"Henderson," he muttered to himself. "Money" he thought. "Politicians" he grumbled. He tried to re-light the cigar and, much to his surprise, found that the stubbing had not been too severe. Well, that was at least **something** he thought as he prepared for a long night re-reading the documents in his briefcase.

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Commander Straker steeled himself in preparation for the confrontation he was sure to encounter in his meeting with Henderson. By the time his sleek bronze car pulled up out front of the IAC offices, his jaw was firmly set and his movements clipped. He strolled into General Henderson's office with determination, but with an air of physical ease.

"What the hell is going on over there, Commander?!"

Straker had expected a confrontation, but not such a vehement and nebulous one as this. He hadn't even taken a seat yet! His mind instantly ran through all SHADO activities for the previous few months and he could think of nothing that would cause such an outburst as this.

"I beg your pardon, General?" he said.

Henderson slammed down a stack of news clippings regarding the downed airliners and exclaimed, "What the hell are you playing at and who authorized you to play with civilian lives?"

Before Straker could comment, Henderson slammed a photograph of a young man onto the desk and added, "And who the hell is this guy and why is he important enough to elicit threats to MY person should any harm befall him?"

Straker took a breath and tried to speak, but Henderson was still raving. "I've been around a long time, Straker, and I'm not gonna let a piss-ant the likes of you murder innocent people and then threaten me, because I'll chew you up and spit you out, mister . . ."

The rant went on a few moments longer, during which time, Straker merely sat down and made himself comfortable, lighting up one of Henderson's expensive cigars in the process. When Henderson ran out of steam, Straker casually asked, "Through, Sir?"

Henderson sat down with a sigh and said, "I want answers, Straker."

"Yes, well, so do I. What makes you think I have anything to do with the downed airliners? Who is this guy and why do you think he and any threats made to you on his behalf have anything to do with me? In short, General, what the hell are you going on about?"

There was a pause before Henderson said, "You mean to tell me you honestly know NOTHING about any of this?"

"In a word - YES!"

Henderson took a deep breath and picked up the photo he had slammed down a moment before. "This young man is an American Oxford student named Fox Mulder - yes, I did say 'Fox'. He has claimed publicly that he has seen a UFO and that the world governments are covering up UFO visitations, that sort of thing. Nothing too terribly serious, but enough to attract a small group of other students demanding government accountability.

"I have personally been warned to keep my hands off this man - threatened by I don't who, but certainly sounds like a high-ranking mucky-muck in the US government - threatened by someone who knows about SHADO.

"As for the downed airliners, I could only assume you were testing some new weapons system -- "

"On innocent civilian planes, General? How could you possibly reach such a conclusion?"

"No one else is testing anything, and yours is the only organization that doesn't have to give direct accountability for its actions. What other conclusion could I reach?"

Straker sighed heavily; unable to believe this man who had once been a close friend could possibly think such a thing of him. He picked up the photograph and studied it. A relatively average looking young man, not unattractive with inquisitive eyes and intelligent features. What does he know and who's protecting him? Straker wondered. And could there be any connection between this man and the airline crashes? More questions and no answers. He'd be glad when Freeman got back from the two-day leave he had taken. Straker couldn't begrudge the man a couple days to himself, but he could use Alec's input on all this.

Part 5 - By Grant Wray

Alec finished reading the file, and as he closed the cover, he took the last sip of whiskey from the tumbler, then pushed it over for a refill. "Ok, it's serious, but what's it got to do with me? I hope that I haven't been named as one of these 'conspirators' have I?"

General Bond leaned forward and poured another generous shot for Alec. "No. Mulder wouldn't go as far as to name anyone, even if he had names. I doubt he even knows you exist. Actually, it's more to do with SHADO and your resources. A fragment of what we assumed to be bomb casing was found amongst the wreckage. MI9 have been pulling their hair out trying to analyze it, and so far they've found nothing. I know you boys have more experience with this sort of thing. What's worrying us as well is that no terrorist organization is claiming responsibility. It looks like the MO of the terrorists you were set up to deal with, no claims, no names, very high tech. The only thing is that so far, SHADO have not even been to the crash sites. I was wondering where you had got to . . . or if you had anything to do with it."

Alec started to say something, then remembered that his present company were familiar only with SHADO's other cover story, that they were an international agency fighting an anarchistic terrorist group operating beyond the law. It was Straker's idea to set up this other cover. If SHADO were to be given assistance by government agencies, then they had to have a legitimate reason to exist. "James, you know we have our own methods. If it was our terrorists, then we'd have been there. And as for our being responsible, SHADO exists to save lives, not waste them."

Bill Tanner leaned across the desk. "To save lives you sometimes have to sacrifice others."

"Look, we don't operate like that. You have my word of honor. Besides, the numbers of people dead . . . I couldn't kill my fellow countrymen like that. You know as well as I do I have an AA rating in the index. Is that why you've come to me rather than Straker?"

"Mainly, yes", said General Bond, "There is also the matter of the, hmmm, material we found. I have a sample here." He reached into a desk drawer and removed a small plastic bag containing a transparent red object. "MI9 have estimated that the bomb must have been about half the size of a matchbox. Not unusual in these days of high explosives, you may think, carefully positioned it could knock out the control systems, or depressurize the cargo hold enough to collapse the superstructure. But this bomb blew away quarter of the plane. . . and it was planted on the outside, seemingly whilst the aircraft was in flight."

Alec was, by now, sitting bolt upright. "That's incredible."

"Interested now?" Bond was smiling.

"You bet I am. This sounds weird enough for our boys. Who else knows about it?"

"You, me, a few high ranking MI officers. We were going to go to the astrophysics committee to see if they could analyze this stuff, then I thought of you."

Alec reached out and took the plastic bag. "Henderson would no doubt be interested, but let's just keep this to ourselves for the moment, the less people know about this the better. Let these nut cases confuse themselves with tales of conspiracy theories and alien abductions until we've got an answer. I'll meet you here again, same time, in two days. Now if you'll excuse me gentlemen, I think I have work to do."

Alec pushed himself away from the table and stood up. He saw the tumbler still part full, picked it up and drained the last of the fiery liquid in one gulp.

Mallory took Alec's arm and led him down through the twisting corridors to the back

door. He stopped in the vestibule. "Listen Alec, if there's anything we should know about, if you find anything out, please call us straight away."

"Why the urgency?"

"James didn't tell you this, but it might help explain his involvement. It's absolutely top secret, you understand. The secretary for defense was travelling to Moscow incognito on the last flight."

Alec paused with his hand on the door lever. "That's serious, but that sort of thing doesn't normally bother you like this. You just arrange a car crash or something and put the body in, don't you?"

"His body is missing. It was never recovered from the wreckage. And the Prime minister is due to leave for Moscow in three days time."

Part 6 - Deborah Rorabaugh

Freeman took the rear entrance into SHADO, through the parking garage across the street from the studios, past the underground Harlington-Straker film vaults. He wasn't that he wanted to avoid Straker, but he wanted a bit of time to do some investigating on his own before bringing his own boss into the fold, so to speak.

Freeman dropped the plastic bagged sample off at the materials lab. Major Forrestal gave Freeman a quizzical look, but didn't ask any questions when instructed to analyze the material and that it had the highest priority.

Freeman went to his and settled into his own leather chair, turning on his network station. He quickly read the notices in his inbox, transferring several of them to Paul Foster to handle before settling down to do his work.

A review of SHADO's recent activities was unfruitful, no U.F.O.s sighted for better than three months, no indications of alien activity as evidenced by a statistically significant increase in missing persons or mutilated animals and humans. Was it possible the aliens had given up, gone to harass some other world? Freeman didn't think it likely, but SHADO's tracking systems had seen no evidence of aliens for fourteen weeks. Unless . . . That thought was too terrifying to contemplate - the aliens had succeeded in not only masking themselves from SHADO's systems, but had found a way to keep their tell-tale activities hidden as well?

"I thought you weren't due back until tomorrow," Straker said. Freeman looked up to see Straker standing by the desk. The blond man had come in so quietly, Freeman hadn't even heard him.

Freeman shrugged. "I wanted to check on something."

Straker glanced at the computer screen. "I'm having the entire system gone over with a fine tooth comb."

"You think the aliens are involved even if we're not picking them up?" Freeman asked.

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

"But we've had no other evidence of their activities," Freeman reminded him.

"I know," Straker admitted. "That's one of the things that bothers me. I don't think they're on vacation. Plus, somebody's been coming down hard on General Henderson to keep away from some crack-pot kid he had no intention of looking into. He's still not entirely convinced we didn't have anything to do with that plane going down."

"He's not the only one asking those questions," Freeman said.

"Oh?"

"General Bond was curious to know why SHADO wasn't investigating the crash," Freeman said. "And, what we knew about a crack-pot American kid who's into conspiracy theories, especially about planes blowing up in midair with explosives that had to have been put in place in mid-air."

"MI5's confirmed this?" Straker asked. Freeman noted he didn't ask where Freeman had gotten his information.

He nodded. "A fragment is in our lab now, being analyzed."

Straker took a deep breath, in and out through his nose, as though to clear his mind. "It stinks," he said, finally. "When are you meeting with General Bond?"

"Two days," Freeman answered. He didn't ask how Straker knew he was going to be meeting with his old boss. Straker had an uncanny knack for making just that kind of intuitive leap. That was one of the reasons SHADO had been able to stay ahead of the aliens for as long

as they had - Straker's ability to see their next move, their next objective.

"That gives us two days to get this handled," Straker said. He gave his chief of staff a bemused look. "Somebody high up in the States wants Henderson and SHADO to keep their hands off this kid, Fox Mulder."

"Bond and his people don't see him as a problem," Freeman said. "His accusations are serious enough, but they don't present a danger to SHADO. We're not even based in the right country."

"Somebody's taking it seriously enough to threaten a retired three-star general, Alec," Straker said. "Plus, I remember hearing rumors about that sort of cover-up when I was working for him. We never found anything to substantiate them, but still . . ." A thoughtful, worried look came into Straker's face. "Maybe Mulder really does know something."

"Henderson's not going to like it," Freeman warned.

"Like what?" Straker asked. "Inviting Mister Mulder and some of his friends to the studio so they can expound on their theories about the United States government? I am a retired UFO investigator, remember? If Mulder was involved in an abduction before SHADO was approved, I probably interviewed him."

Part 7 - By Yuchtar

"And this is Studio B," Straker was saying. "Where we tape the daily serial 'As The Stomach Churns.'"

"And mine does every time I watch the bloody show!"

Straker had heard that one before, so he ignored the young woman in the back with the squeaky laugh who had said it. Instead, he turned his attention to the quiet young man who was examining the camera system in the corner.

"Hey!" the young man exclaimed. "Are all three cameras wired into this computer so they can all be controlled by one person?"

"That's right, Mr. -"

"Carter. Christopher Carter. I've seen all the films produced by your studio, Mr. Straker - even the good ones."

The kid was grinning so broadly; Straker couldn't help but smile back, even though he knew that was a backhanded compliment. He shook Mr. Carter's hand and led him back to the group. "Shall we proceed back to my office now so you can enlighten me regarding your theories?"

Fox Mulder, who turned out to be a soft spoken prepossessing young man, nodded and said, "That sounds good to me, Sir."

Straker did not find Mulder at all familiar, but then, if he had questioned him regarding the possible abduction of his sister all those years ago, he would have been a mere child at the time, and Straker wouldn't necessarily recognize him now. For his part, Mulder showed no recognition either.

Once in Straker's studio office, the man named Carter did most of the talking. He didn't sound like a fanatic, though, which is what Straker had expected. Instead, he sounded just like any other prospective young scriptwriter or film director trying to pitch a story idea. By the time the discussion was over, Straker was absolutely convinced that these kids knew nothing about SHADO and had no proof of anything else. He truthfully told them they had an interesting story and that he might want to speak with some of them again about a possible movie deal. Most of them were excited by that and they were all chattering like squirrels as they left Straker's office. All of them, that is, except Mulder, who had remained silent throughout the interview and who remained seated now.

Straker showed the others out and then returned to his desk expectantly. "Is there something else you wanted to tell me, Mr. Mulder?"

"A question, actually, Sir."

"Go ahead."

"I was just wondering what it must be like for an Air Force Intelligence Officer to have to hide in the shadows, Colonel Straker . . .?"

Part 8 - Grant Wray

"Let me tell you something Mr. Mulder, I was sick to death of all these whining brats going on about 'how special they were' because some 'little gray men in a flying cigar abducted them and did experiments'. Sick of it. After 7 years of researching these stories I just got fed up with hearing the same thing, over and over, and it was all just total hogwash. No evidence to speak of and any evidence that was recovered was 'conveniently' removed by so called 'Men in Black' that were supposed to be working for the same government as I was. No, I didn't buy any of it, but it did make me an expert in UFO-lore, an expert that could be consulted for whatever reason, and I was. Steven, that's Mr. Spielberg to you, came to me for advise on a film he was working on, a film which made lots of money. I actually quite liked working on a film set, so, when I retired early, and using my 'bonus' from Steven, I bought into a film studio. I wouldn't call it 'the shadows'. It's still a fairly high profile life, but I've never been one to try and catch the limelight; these showbiz types who are always partying and getting into Hello magazine are only there because they make a big noise; there are thousands of other people doing the same jobs as they are, but doing it quietly, and probably doing it better. Does that answer your question, Mr. Mulder?"

Straker's mouth was by now quite dry, and he took a sip from his glass of chilled water whilst he watched the young kid pout and play with a pencil he'd picked up from somewhere.

"Yes, thank you Mr. Straker. It does. You're up to something. That answer sounded just a little bit too off-pat for me; a little rehearsed. What really goes on here?"

"If my answers sound a little rehearsed, it's because I've repeated the same thing several times for various industry mags."

Mulder pouted again then stood up with a smug expression on his face. "Yes, I've read them. Well, thank you for your time, I'm sorry if I've kept you from anything." His eyes were focussed on Straker's crotch then they came up to his face. "I'll let you get back to whatever business you are needed for."

He crossed the room to the outer doors which slid open. Mulder looked all around the frame, noting the double seal. "A word of advice Mr. Straker. Don't wear light colored clothes if you intend to keep secret the tell tales under your desk."

Straker looked puzzled then realized what he'd been doing. He pressed the button that closed the doors and looked down at his lap. Sure enough, in the gathering darkness, the repeated flashing of his tell-tale signal lamp connected to SHADO HQ was reflected clearly by his white suit. He picked up the phone and snapped his name to the operator. After a seconds pause he said "Put him on then. Alec, what news? . . . I see. I want to see it myself; I'll be over in a minute. Meet you in the labs."

Alec was sat on the bench leafing through some notes on a clip board when Straker swept through the doors.

"What's the story?" Straker barked.

Alec grimaced at the sudden loud noise, "It's part of casing alright, and it is alien, but it's been treated to withstand the Earth's atmosphere. What's more it seems to contain micro-tubules which make up some sort of an advanced circuit, with gates and amplifiers, I'd guess. Look there's a sample on the electron microscope now."

Straker bent over the instrument and his face lit up with a green glow as he examined the object.

The chief scientist of SHADO, Dr. Rosenbaum, spoke up. "You'll notice the specific size

changes in the tubules, some narrow, some wider. I believe they are acting as wave-guides for specific frequencies of radio energy. We tried building similar circuits ourselves as more robust radio amplifiers for field use in space, but we were hampered by not finding a suitable material."

Straker looked up at the scientist. "Have you been able to figure out what this particular circuit does?"

Rosenbaum smiled slightly at this chance to show off his deductive reasoning abilities. "I believe it's part of a guidance system tuned to indicate the source of one specific radio frequency."

Straker thought for a second. "But the airliners that were destroyed were not part of SHADO. Why were they targeted? Alec, did you check their radar transponder frequencies?"

Alec looked sheepish. "No, I didn't think to do that. I'll get them now."

He bent down to a terminal and after a few seconds typing looked up again. "Well there's the link. All had their IFF radar responders set to 434.653 MHz. That number sounds familiar actually." He bent down to the computer again.

Straker said, "No need Alec. The SHADAIR frequency is 443.653 MHz. It was changed about 6 months ago when the CAA needed to reallocate frequencies to open more bandwidth. What I want to know is why the aliens are targeting that frequency instead of ours. As to how they are getting these devices onto the aircraft, well I guess they must have planted them in the upper atmosphere like mines. They've used a similar ambush technique before, remember, hiding a limpet rocket in the space debris, only this time they're using tiny homing torpedoes, cruder but still as effective. Alec, I want a security clamp down now, find out how the aliens got that frequency, it should be easy seeing as though there's a mistake in it. Let's roll gentlemen, time is against us. There could be thousands of these mines up there."

Part 9 - Deborah Rorabaugh

"I've got it," Freeman announced after only half an hour of database checks and phone calls. "The numbers were e-mailed to an address in the United States three weeks ago."

Straker waited for Freeman to continue.

"The recipient was a Mister Smith with the United States State Department, but the address belongs to a computer in the Pentagon."

"And the sender?"

"It was signed 'Fox Mulder', Oxford University. The address confirms it came from Oxford, from a computer Mulder has access to."

"And half the student body, probably," Straker grouched. "I don't think Mulder is so stupid as to be involved in espionage."

"Maybe he doesn't know what he's stumbled into in this conspiracy search of his," Freeman suggested.

"Maybe," Straker conceded. "What have we got on Mister 'Smith'?" Straker asked.

"I've asked Bill Tanner to look into it for us, but I don't think he'll find anything. Frankly, it smells like Majestik is up to their old tricks."

"Wonderful," Straker said with a grimace. He rubbed his eyes. It had been a long day. "Look, I think the best way of dealing with the mines is to send up some decoy drones with the proper radar signature. See if General Bond can convince the air-carriers to stop using that one frequency until we get the matter squared away."

"I'll tell him our terrorists are targeting that frequency. That should do it and keep him happy we're doing something about it," Freeman agreed.

"Major Forrestal, how soon can we get some drones up there to intercept those mines?" Straker asked.

"No more than a day, Commander," Forrestal said. Rosenbaum gave a nod of agreement.

"Get on it then," Straker ordered. "This has the highest priority, so use as many people as you need to get this operational."

Straker walked out of the lab without waiting to hear the two scientists' response. Freeman hurried to catch up with him.

"We should pick Mulder up for questioning," Freeman said.

Straker shook his head. "And add to his paranoia? He already suspects something's going on at the studio. He did his homework on me, and more. Wanted to know how an intelligence officer liked 'hiding in the shadows.' He also noticed the telltales under my desk upstairs, and the double seal around the door."

"Smart kid," Freeman commented. "And the real reason for not picking him up?"

Straker sighed, stopping in the corridor. He leaned against one of the cold concrete buttresses. "I remembered some of the details concerning his sister's abduction. It was after SHADO was started. I was setting up our procedures with NASA and I was asked to look into the Mulder abduction. The husband was a State department official with connections to the Pentagon, very high up, very important, very hush-hush."

"You said husband, not father," Freeman pointed out.

"Neither of the kids bore any resemblance to their parents, except, just a little in coloring with their mother. I wasn't allowed to do any genetic testing, even though I asked about it, in case we found the girl's body."

"Majestik?"

Straker nodded. "I thought so then, but I couldn't prove it. Henderson warned me away from it. Seems he was told by a fellow called 'Smith', in the State department, that SHADO should lay off its investigations in the U.S., or face the consequences."

"Pleasant people," Freeman commented.

Straker started down the corridor again. "Forrestal and Rosenbaum can handle the drones. I'm heading home." He smiled at his chief of staff. "You look like you could use some sleep, too."

"I'll be heading out of here in a few minutes. I need to brief Paul on what's going on."

"I'll see you in the morning, then."

* * *

"Colonel Straker?" a raspy voice called from the shadows as Straker left studio office building. Straker stopped, looking into the darkness to identify the speaker. The voice had sounded familiar and the accent was American.

An older man stepped forward, a lit cigarette in his left hand. "I hope I didn't startle you," the man said.

"No, but it's Mister Straker, not Colonel," Straker said.

The man shrugged. "If you insist, Colonel. That's not why I'm here. I need to find out what you know about a young man named Fox Mulder."

"And who needs to know?"

The man smiled. His teeth were yellow with tobacco stain. "There are people interested in his welfare."

"I run a film studio, not a welfare agency," Straker said.

"We both know better than that, Colonel," the man said, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and offering Straker one. Straker shook his head and the man shrugged. "I need to know what he's gotten himself involved in and how it concerns your people."

"You were involved in the Mulder abduction case," Straker said. "You refused to allow the gene testing even when the mother agreed to it."

"It would have served no purpose. You knew what the results had to be," the man said.

"What is Majestik up to and why are they doing it over here?" Straker asked.

"What makes you think that defunct agency is up to anything?" the man asked. "And why do you think I would know if it was?"

Straker turned to head for his car. He disliked the games this man was playing.

A hand tucked at his sleeve.

"Colonel, would you believe me if I told you Majestik was not involved in this breach of your security?"

"Maybe, maybe not. But your young Mister Mulder may well be involved, whether he knows it or not, Mister Smith."

The man smiled. "I'd quite forgotten what a good memory you have, Colonel, congratulations."

Straker nodded once in acknowledgement. "The data in question was sent to your e-mail address in the Pentagon. Why?"

Smith shrugged. "A test of resourcefulness, resources. It was never meant to be used against anyone. Of what use is a radar identification frequency except to air traffic controllers and governments using IFF? It's not classified information, generally."

"Ours is," Straker said. He looked around, some sixth sense telling him they weren't alone. A slender young man with dark hair was standing beside a small sports car - Mulder.

"He's persistent," Straker commented. "Maybe I'll see about having him recruited."
"I'd rather you didn't," Smith said. "I have plans for that young man."

Part 10 - By Yuchtar

"Mr. Mulder!" Straker called out across the parking lot. When the young man cocked his head up, Straker waved him over. By the time Mulder walked up to the entrance, the man with the cigarette had slipped back into the shadows from which he'd come and had vanished from view, a slight odor of tobacco smoke the only reminder of his presence. "Would you like to see what really goes on here at Harlington-Straker, Mr. Mulder?" Straker asked loudly enough for "Smith" to hear from whatever hole he'd crawled into.

"Is this an offer, Mr. Straker?"

Straker put his arm around the other man's shoulders and led him into the studio. "Yes it is, actually. This way, Mr. Mulder."

The cigarette smoking man took a last draw on his cigarette and then threw it down and crushed it with his shoe. Pulling his coat tighter around himself with a sigh, he shoved his hands into his pockets and walked away.

* * *

"I knew there was something weird about this office," Mulder was saying. "The double doors, the soundproofing - hey, is it wise to leave the window blinds open while the room goes down? Someone could see from outside."

"Mirrored glass."

Mulder nodded and Straker grinned at the young man's enthusiasm.

* * *

Straker gave Mulder the grand tour of SHADO HQ, all of which Mulder took in with quiet concentration. Straker waved away Freeman's objections when he brought the young man into the lab to view the evidence recovered from the plane crash.

"This is part of an alien device?" Mulder asked.

"That's right, Mulder," Freeman said. "A direct result of your cute little e-mail to Mr. 'Smith'."

"What? What's he talking about, Mr. Straker?"

"Those downed passenger liners were all using the same radio frequency, which is how this device found them. That frequency was very close to the one we use here at SHADO. We traced an e-mail message containing that frequency to a Mr. Smith at the US State Department. That message originated from Oxford University and was signed Fox Mulder."

"What? No way! I had nothing to do with that! I don't know any Smith at the State Department anyway. Besides, if I had tracked down your frequency, I would have gotten it right."

Freeman rose from his chair muttering, "Why, you little --," but Straker stepped between them.

"No, Alec, I believe him. C'mon, Fox - mind if I call you Fox?"

"Errrrrm, actually, I would prefer Mulder."

"Okay, Mulder, it's time you had a look at an alien."

"You have one captive? Alive??"

"No, not at the moment, but I do have video tapes."

"Video tapes? This is a film studio, Mr. Straker."

Straker shrugged. "If you're not convinced, you're not convinced. Let's take a look first, shall we?"

While Mulder viewed the tapes, Straker was called away to take a heated phone call from

General Henderson.

"Trouble?" Freeman asked when Straker slammed the receiver down.

"Our Mr. Smith is highly placed indeed."

"Mulder?"

"We're to cut him loose - immediately," Straker said as he stormed out of the room.

* * *

By the time Straker returned to the video room, he had calmed himself down, at least outwardly. "So, what d'you think, Mulder?" he asked.

"Little green men, Straker? You don't expect me to believe this, do you?"

"They're not so little and the green coloration is not natural - it's a result of the breathing fluid they use in their helmets."

"I'm sorry, I'm not buying it, sir."

Oh and where had Straker heard that one before? With a sigh, he put a hand on the young man's shoulder. "It's okay, Mulder," he said. "You don't have to. C'mon, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

Part 11 - Grant Wray

"Do you like it creamy Fox?" Straker asked as his fingers hovered over the buttons on the coffee machine in 'Reception room - 101'.

"Yes. Sugar? Two, please, I need it today. Well, you certainly have something set up here Straker, but I think you're still trying it on with me. Thanks, ow, hot." Mulder changed hands with the cup and shook his scalded fingers. "What I don't get Straker is how you think I have anything to do with those bombs. Your timing's all wrong. Let's think it through. I noticed from your log board that the last confirmed sighting was over three months ago, and the first plane crash that you can confirm was due to these bombs was three weeks ago, the same time as 'my email'. So when did the bombs get planted? If they're alien, they must have been laid by the last craft that reached the atmosphere. I'll admit that the timing of the email and the first crash is coincidental, but couldn't it have been planted to look that way? If the email was genuine, you have someone on Earth who reset the bomb mechanisms, if that's possible. If it was false and planted to incriminate me, well, draw your own conclusions."

Mulder sipped at the coffee whilst Straker mused. "You have a point, Fox. I'll get right onto it."

Straker left the room, touching the lock panel after him as the sliding doors closed. He went down the corridor to the lab. "Dr. Rosenbaum, these devices, could the trigger frequency be transmitted to the devices already planted?"

Dr. Rosenbaum looked up from his desk. "No Commander. I doubt it. The devices would have to have been manufactured with the precise diameter nanotubules incorporated into the manufacturing process. It may be possible to have some ON OFF mechanism triggered remotely, but there would have to be a vast array of different size nanotubules to have a switch-able frequency. One for each waveband in fact. Oh, and commander, there is already a flight on-route to London from Albania using the frequency, it's going to be overhead in about 30 minutes. We've been trying to contact the pilot, but he refuses to acknowledge our authority."

"Thank you Doctor. Keep trying," said Straker, satisfied. He flicked on the monitor and tuned to Room 101. Mulder was drinking his coffee whilst walking around the room looking at the pictures on the wall. "We seem to have done this young man a grave injustice." He watched Mulder's face as he peered into the camera, blinking and smiling. After about thirty seconds Mulder's eyelids finally fluttered closed and he slumped away from the camera. Straker walked briskly back to Room 101.

"Bendix, pass me that wheelchair. I'm going to drive Mr. Mulder back to his dorm, just to make sure no harm befalls him."

Straker man-handled Fox into the SHADO wheelchair and strapped him in, then set off for the studio car park elevator. The doors opened smoothly and wheeled Mulder in. Straker spoke his name, then pressed the button for sub level 1 where his car was usually garaged. The lift rose with a slight whir, and the external camera for sub level 1 showed all was clear.

Straker opened the lift door and pushed the wheelchair out into the half-light. Straker noticed too late the smell of the cigarette as just then a hand clamped over his face, another behind his arms and another round his neck. He felt the cold metal of a pair of handcuffs being clamped around one wrist, and saw the other was being clamped to Mulder's wrist. As he passed out from lack of oxygen, he heard a husky voice say, "There's a narrow bridge near here. Make sure Mulder survives. I don't care what you do to the other one, just make it look

like an accident."

Part 12 - Deborah Rorabaugh

"Colonel Freeman," Forrestal called. "The airline has just agreed to order the pilot to change the transponder frequency."

"Hopefully, that will do the trick," Freeman commented.

"Hopefully," Rosenbaum said. "We have to assume the device has already attached itself to the plane. Hopefully the triggering mechanism isn't independent of the frequency."

"Hopefully," Freeman said with a crooked grin.

Freeman's pager buzzed. He pulled it out, checked the code and turned off the alarm. Foster was on duty in the Control room. He picked up the phone.

"What's up?" Freeman asked.

"We have an alarm on Commander Straker's car, in the garage," Foster informed him. "I already have security on it."

"Good," Freeman said, ringing off.

* * *

In the semi-darkness of the parking garage, Natiroff evaluated the situation. According to the surveillance cameras, three men had been waiting for the commander as he left the lift with the boy, Mulder. One man had disappeared from the cameras as though he had known where they were. The other two had man-handled Mulder and Straker into the back of Straker's sedan. The cameras couldn't pick up what had happened inside the car and Natiroff could only hope that Straker was unharmed.

The Russian SHADO officer didn't like the implications an ambush brought to mind. Studio security should have kept unauthorized persons from entering the garage at all. Obviously he had more training and housecleaning to do.

He silently gestured his team into position. The man in the driver's seat was swearing to his companion. The security system had locked the ignition switch.

The man in the passenger seat popped open the gull wing door on his side and started to get out of the car. Natiroff nodded to Page to step forward. The young woman did so, gun drawn.

"This is security, out of the car, place your hands on the roof. NOW!" she announced. The passenger began to reach inside his jacket and Page fired. He grabbed his right arm above the elbow and blood seeped from between his fingers.

"I said, out of the car, hands on the roof." She didn't step closer. Natiroff nodded and two more team members came out of the shadows. Falah stepped forward, keeping himself out of his partner's line of sight to the two men. He gestured for the driver to place his hands on the roof of the car. Instead, the driver collapsed into a boneless heap on the concrete floor. Within moments, his partner was also in a heap on the floor.

Falah moved closer to check the driver. There was no pulse, but Falah detected the faintest hint of bitter almond in the air - cyanide. Knowing there was nothing to be done for the men, Falah checked inside the commander's car. The commander and the young man with him were both unconscious and the car stank of alcohol.

* * *

"How do you feel?" Freeman asked.

Straker managed to open his eyes then promptly closed them again - the light was too bright and the sheets on the bed in the medical center felt scratchy and hard. He felt miserable. "Just shoot me, please," he mumbled.

"You'll feel more alive tomorrow, I promise," Paul Foster said. "Do you remember anything about what happened?"

Straker began to shake his head and promptly regretted it as the room began to spin and he started feeling nauseous. "I was heading to my car with Mulder and I was grabbed from behind. I think I remember someone saying Mulder wasn't to be hurt, but the 'other one' didn't matter. What happened?"

"They set off the security lock-out on your car, couldn't start it," Foster explained.

"Where are they now?" Straker asked.

"In the morgue," Freeman answered. Straker's eyes widened in confusion. "They committed suicide when security tried to stop them. We're still trying to identify them, but so far, no luck. No I.D. on them, even the labels in their clothes had been removed. No fingerprint record anywhere that we can access and no DNA record, either."

"Smith's people," Straker said.

"I'd bet on it," Freeman agreed.

"What about Mulder?"

"He's at Mayland," Foster reported. "The booze they poured into him didn't react well with the amnesia drug he'd already been given. He'll be fine in a few days. One hell of a hangover, though." Foster added with a grin. "You both had twice the legal limit of blood alcohol. They must have injected it."

"It's a miracle you're not both dead of alcohol poisoning," Freeman added. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small tube with something small and dark inside. "They found this inserted into Mulder's temple." He handed the tube to Straker.

"An alien controller device?"

Freeman nodded. "He may have sent that message to Smith without even knowing he did it."

"But he sent the wrong number," Foster reminded them.

"Did he?" Straker wondered. "Or is it a ruse, a red herring, something to keep SHADO occupied while they finish whatever it is they're doing?"

"I don't understand," Foster said.

Freeman's expression was puzzled, then it cleared and he nodded. "The mines may have been planted three months ago, but we know the aliens take the long view on things. Look how long they waited for Catherine Frazer to regain consciousness." Freeman ignored the sudden pain that came into Straker's face.

"I don't think the aliens would need an agent on Earth to get our transponder frequency for them," Freeman continued. "But an agency on Earth, using alien technology, might need human resources to get past our security."

"But why?" Foster demanded. "If they know about SHADO and the aliens, they must know what the aliens are like."

"Oh, they know, Paul," Straker said. "But, they don't care. They've made their bargain with the devil, and become just like him, maybe even worse."

"And who are they?" Foster asked.

Straker turned to Freeman. "Alec, I expect Smith's people will be making nasty noises in Henderson's direction again over their dead agents. When they do, have Henderson tell them their two men were executed for conspiring to commit crimes against humanity and any further action on their part will be met with the same effect."

"And when they demand we return the bodies?"

"Send them the ashes," Straker said. "Somebody's after us, Alec, and it's time we started fighting back."

Part 13 - Yuchtar

"What the hell happened, Straker?"

Lying in the hospital bed, Mulder sounded strong enough, but he really did look wretched. Straker wanted to explain everything - the young man deserved that much, but circumstances demanded he lie and the story he was about to tell was leaving a bitter taste in his throat.

"You, uh, became a little overzealous," Straker replied.

"Overzealous? What does that mean?"

"What do you remember?"

"Last I remember was you inviting me back into the studio for a look around."

"Hmmm, well, after your private tour, you offered to buy me a drink."

"That's ridiculous - I don't drink."

"Well, you did that night. You drank too damned much and now you're feeling the results of alcohol poisoning."

Mulder shook his head and pouted, but Straker could see the uncertainty in the other man's eyes. The bitterness filled his mouth again. After an awkward moment of silence, Straker reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial filled with distilled water, in which floated a tiny metallic object.

"Have you ever seen anything like this, Mulder?" Straker asked.

Mulder looked at it with sincere curiosity and replied, "No. What is it?"

Oh, how very tempting it was to answer truthfully and say, *It's an alien controlling device and we found it embedded in your temple,* but Straker choked back the bitterness and casually replied, "Oh, just an electronic focusing device for a new camera system."

"Now I'm being accused of industrial espionage?"

Straker smiled. "No, Mr. Mulder. I was just curious." He replaced the vial in his pocket and stood. "You'll be released this afternoon." He extended his hand, which Mulder grasped in a firm grip. "Good luck, Mulder. I have a feeling you're going to need it."

"Yeah," Mulder chuckled. "Thanks, Mr. Straker - you too."

Straker hesitated a moment, contemplating just how much he would be needing some luck in the near future. Finally, he sighed, released his grip on Mulder's hand and exited the room.

Part 14 - Deborah Rorabaugh

Freeman was waiting outside in the corridor. The cheerful grin on his leathery face simply made Straker more irritable.

"And what's going on now?" Straker demanded.

"I just got a call from General Bond," Freeman said. "The Prime Minister's plane landed in Moscow without incident and he's meeting with the premier even as we speak. The drone we sent up using the plane's radio signature did the trick. The drone exploded twenty minutes before the plane was due to land. I had Rosenbaum send along the schematics for the drones. The RAF can handle it from here."

"Good, good," Straker said. "I just wonder what they're really after."

Freeman shrugged. "We may never know."

"How about Admiral Sheringham's files?" Paul Foster asked, walking up to the two officers.

"What happened?" Straker asked.

"About half an hour ago, naval security shot and killed an intruder trying to break into the classified documents safe in Sheringham's office. The man bore an uncanny resemblance to our missing defense minister," Foster said.

"But what has Sheringham got to do with any of this?" Freeman asked.

"The good admiral is chairman of the NATO committee on chemical disarmament," Straker said.

"And the PM's meeting with the Premier is about chemical disarmament," Freeman added with sudden understanding.

"But the aliens know where the nerve gas is buried," Foster reminded them.

"True," Straker agreed. "But the CIA and Majestik don't."

"What are you talking about?" A weak but familiar voice asked.

Straker turned to see Mulder leaning against the door frame.

"What is Majestic? What's the CIA got to do with any of this?" Mulder asked. He looked confused and a little alarmed.

Straker smiled. "Paul and Alec are involved in a project, a science-fiction spy thriller. Writers have a habit of working out their plot lines as though they were happening in the real world."

"But, Sheringham and nerve gas and the CIA are all real," Mulder protested.

"Very true, and that will add a sense of reality to the story," Straker said. He turned to Foster. "I like the idea of the renegade FBI agent underdog hero. We can sell it, maybe even get a series out of it. Lord Lew will love that."

"You used to be a scientist, looking for the truth," Mulder said. His voice held a hint of accusation.

"And I still am," Straker said. "Mulder, the world is a lot more complicated and a lot stranger than most people want to believe. The truth is out there. If you can handle it."

A crisply starched nurse came up to them and hustled the protesting Mulder back to his bed.

"Do you think he believed you?" Foster asked.

Straker shrugged. "The question is not whether he believed me, but who will believe him if he didn't." Straker put his hand in his pocket to get his keys. He frowned and checked his other pockets. "Alec, do you still have my keys?"

Freeman checked his own pockets and shook his head. "I thought I gave them back to you when we came in the building."

"Uh, don't look at me," Foster said. "My car's in the shop. Virginia dropped me off here on her way home."

Straker grimaced. "Paul, go call a cab."

Foster turned as headed for the pay phones beside the elevator bank. As he walked away he heard Straker say to Freeman: "Look, I'll take care of the cab fare. You just find the damned keys."