

UFO - The Battle Continues
Based on the ITC Century 21 series 'UFO'
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TARGET REACQUIRED Chapter 4

by Jeff Stone

For Sarah, the Stoaatworld crew, Alden and the pilots that fought the Battle Of Britain six decades years ago this year. Theme music for this chapter: World In My Eyes (Holy World Mix) by Depeche Mode. (Thanks to Phil for the MP3. :))

"Never before in the field of human endeavour has so much been owed by so many to so few."

- Winston S. Churchill

**SPACE INTRUDER DETECTOR [S.I.D]
EARTH ORBIT**

1-57 pm GMT December 25, 1983

An ungainly, bone-white arrow shot through the heavens above the Earth. It spoke to the planet below and the moon above.

THIS IS SPACE INTRUDER DETECTOR. /MAXIMUM INVASION ALERT/. TEN UFOs, ON BALLISTIC TRAJECTORY TO PLANET EARTH. UFOs ARE BETA-TYPE WEAPON-RESISTANT SPACE VEHICLES. SPEED, SOL 7. UFOs NOW 970 MILLION MILES FROM EARTH. SHADO IS UNDER LIBERTY BELL-1 CONDITIONS. /MAXIMUM INVASION ALERT/.

MOONBASE
SEA OF TRANQUILITY, LUNA
1-50 pm GMT

Controlled panic was the order of the day at MoonBase. Lt Ellis felt like screaming. People were running everywhere with print-outs, yelling orders and decisions to each other like some Bedlam Parliament session. She'd called for quiet in the Command Centre three times, and it hadn't seemed to make much difference. A minute's peace could make the job go so much damn faster! Didn't they realise...

Sighing, Ellis opened up a link to SHADO HQ.

Alec Freeman's face came on the screen. Ellis saw the dark lines of jet lag under his eyes; an occupational hazard of constant globe-hopping. Last year, he had hardly been present at HQ, involved as he was with the new SHADO-MAJIC liaison. Lately, he had been more visible, but only for a few days at a time. Ellis often wondered if he had ever thought of doing a less stressful job; taking care of a Russian nuclear power station, for example.

"SHADO HQ, this is MoonBase. Eagle Squadron Interceptors are at launch-ready status. Hawk and Falcon Squadron pilots are in position. The Space Shuttles are just leaving ISC Freedom and will take up their positions well before Incursion Point. We're ready for them, sir."

"I'm sure you are, Lieutenant," Freeman said, rubbing his eyes. "The pilots have been appraised of how hard this fight will be?"

"Oh yes, sir. No need to tell them; they know they're in for a bloody one this time. And they're all willing to try."

"Fine. Time to launch?"

Ellis checked her chronometer. "Six minutes, ten seconds mark."

"Stop them, Gay. You have to."

"We'll give it our best shot, sir. MoonBase out."

INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION ISC FREEDOM EARTH ORBIT

1-51 pm GMT

Challenger, *Newton* and *Endeavour* backed slowly away from their ports on ISC Freedom's Docking Module. Once they had cleared the station, reaction control thrusters turned each Space Shuttle on its centre of gravity to face away from the Earth's surface.

On these headings, the three ships moved off into orbital space, finally taking up positions in geo-stationary orbit above points on the Earth.

Enterprise, *Discovery* and *Atlantis* were even now taking off from NASA bases to occupy the remaining vector points. Once they were ready, Earth would effectively be blockaded by a wall of death.

But, for now, it was just three ships. As one, like giant white beetles airing out their armoured wings, the clamshell bay doors on each Shuttle split apart and opened out. But within these beetle's carapaces were wings of quite a different kind.

Each Shuttle had, in place of its SpaceLab Module or satellite payload, a bank of six missile tubes. Resting inside the tubes were SuperPatriot AHBMs, identical in every respect to the ones used by SHADO's Missile Tanks.

Parabolic dishes pivoted upwards from rest positions and locked into place. Eutronic weapons-lock sensors raked the heavens expectantly, searching for the distinctive signature of an Intruder.

The captain of lead Shuttle *Challenger*, Amos Burke, watched as three upward-streaking points of fire resolved themselves into doppelgangers of the Shuttle trio. The captains of *Enterprise*, *Atlantis* and *Discovery* promptly reported their presence in orbit upon the jettisoning of their ships' external fuel tanks, then moved off to their orbital stations.

"This is *Challenger*," Burke announced to MoonBase. "Shuttle Fleet is go for Blockade in...two minutes."

STRAKER'S SST ATLANTIC OCEAN 1-59 pm GMT

Robinson knew jet engines, and she could hear the protest of the SST's overexerted turbofans as clearly as a human voice. They'd been travelling at the SST's short-dash speed of Mach 3 ever since they'd left Dreamland. By now, the paint on the fuselage was probably smoking. But time was of the essence; if they hoped to get SHADO HQ before the UFOs came in, they'd have to go like blazes...and they'd have to refuel in midair to do it, as well.

But for now, the plane was still in MAJIC's hands, being sent in random directions to ensure they couldn't trace their path Dreamland. Robinson wondered how it was that its location was still secret. Even with these paranoid precautions, surely it'd be easy to work out roughly Dreamland was; given the place where incoming planes were taken under Dreamland control, it would be fairly easy to then scan the surrounding landscape for two or three hundred square kilometres.

But, even Straker had no idea exactly where the damn place was. It begged belief.

The Commander himself was, at that moment, on the videolink to SHADO HQ. His voice was unhurried, but tinged with expectation. This was the moment he had spent the past fourteen years preparing for. Robinson could hear it in the way he sounded almost happy at the situation. No, it wasn't joy; more like relief.

Let this be our last battlefield, she mused. She shook her head to clear the dregs of the meta-hypnotic from her mind, and got up to get herself a drink. The way the drug had boosted her alpha-rhythms, enabling her to communicate telepathically with Jay-ROD, made coming down from the 'high' like losing half your ability to perceive things. Once your brain had been boosted to twice its usual operating capacity, nothing in 'normality' would ever really be the same again.

This time she drank the coffee hot, and hovered at a polite distance from Straker's 'command point'.

"Is that revised estimate of Intercept times there yet?" he was saying.

"Coming through now, sir," Ford's image replied. The lieutenant looked at the sheet in his hand. "UFO velocity slowing to Incursion Speed. Eagle and Hawk Squadrons will launch in exactly..." he paused for a heartbeat. "...two minutes. Falcon Squadron will follow in ninety seconds."

"And if the UFOs get through, how soon before we're attacked?"

"No data yet, Commander; SID's still crunching numbers on that one. It's too early to say at this point, anyway."

"Understood. Put Colonel Freeman on."

"Yes sir."

Freeman appeared presently.

"Well, Ed, this is a fine thing to come home to. We're playing this right down the line, as per the Book?" This question seemed to hold some deeper esoteric meaning for the two men, as a silent nod passed between them at this point. Robinson, ever the spectator, was entranced by all this.

"Yes." Straker was maddeningly calm, Robinson noted. You'd think he was coordinating a military tattoo rather than an interstellar war.

"If we're taken out, proceed with Liberty Bell-1 to the letter. Don't even THINK of

sending any of the SkyBolts to help us."

"Right," Freeman grunted. "Speaking of that, Sky 1, 2 and 3 are at launch-ready conditions. SkyDiver 4 has just left dock."

"If we DO get...separated," Straker continued, with measured tact. "the authorisation codes and keys to assume full Operational Command are in my safe. Voiceprint authenticator code-phrases are 'Freeman Red 5', 'Foster White 9' and 'Lake Blue 6'. You're all fit for the job...make your minds up fast."

Freeman nodded grimly. "Well, the fireworks will be starting soon. I have to go. Godspeed."

"Thank you, Alec. We'll be docking with the tanker in about ten minutes."

Freeman's image winked out, and the Commander sat back in his seat. He, like everyone else on board, was feeling the same thing as an uneasy silence descended in the passenger cabin. A vague, unformed primal fear, a paranoia that the walls of this fragile plane were now suddenly paper-thin. UFOs were lurking behind every cloud-bank, and each minute until landing was now an eternity.

"So...does anyone have a pack of cards?" Robinson offered.

MOONBASE

2-00 pm GMT

"Interceptors, immediate launch."

Timed to the last second, the six Interceptors of Eagle and Hawk Squadrons lifted off their pads. To the east, protected by manmade rebutments, Standby-By Pads 1-3 were hosts to the as yet unlaunched ships of Falcon Squadron. Their pilots were running through last minute fuel pump checks and tests of the targeting computers, and would within fifty seconds be joining their six brethren in lunar orbit. The nine ships of Raptor, Raven and Osprey Squadrons lurked beneath the lunar surface in armoured silos waiting to receive pilots and pad-space above.

Pad 10, a half-built, single 'multi-barrel' launchpad for the new Mark II Interceptors, was hurriedly being jury-rigged as a refuelling station for SHADO's nine Missile Tanks. Once ready, they would trundle off to their assigned covering positions and train their SuperPatriots on the sky above MoonBase. Any UFO trying a direct attack on the base would be met with overwhelming destructive force.

That is, if the Tanks hadn't themselves been taken out first. Freeman had argued that dispersing the Tanks would give greater survival chances to their crews, but Liberty Bell-1...and Lt Ellis...stated that all the Tanks were needed in a relatively small area to protect an Interceptor-less MoonBase from a certain mass UFO attack.

And thus it was.

Ellis and her crew, their job done for the moment, watched in the viewport and on monitors as Falcon Squadron finally took off. Even as the dust settled on the empty pads, the technical teams were frantically at work readying them for three of the remaining nine Interceptors. There would be two waves of nine ships, following a very simple game-plan.

Wave One would drive a wedge straight through the middle of the UFO fleet, forcing the aliens' tight formation to break up into at least two groups. Wave Two, some distance behind, would then itself split into groups and go after the remaining UFOs. Though risky, it stood a decent chance of success.

"OK, show's over," Ellis rapped crisply, making everyone rush like squirrelstheir tasks. "We're only half-done."

SPACE BETWEEN EARTH AND LUNA 2-03 pm GMT

"MoonBase Control, this is Eagle Leader," Hammond announced. "Wave One Interceptors are green. On course for Intruders."

Ellis came back a heartbeat later. "Roger, Eagle Leader. Missile timing coordinates to follow. UFO distance from your position: 320 million miles. Intruder speed decreasing to Incursion Velocity. Good luck to you all."

"And to you, MoonBase. Eagle Leader out."

He radioed to the eight Interceptors banked behind him in a wide fan, who had all been on a spiralling over-Moon ascent from launch point, and as one the ships applied full Cruise Thrust. The Interceptors sped up past 100,000 kilometres per hour, leaving the Moon far behind in a matter of moments. Incursion Point, the moment when battle would be joined with the UFOs, was five minutes ahead.

There was no sensation of speed once the Gs subsided and the Moon swept past and vanished; Hammond could only tell by his instruments that he was screaming through the void faster than any human being had ever officially travelled. Breaking records was something SHADO did a lot of, but could never brag about.

He was always slightly panicky whenever an Intercept took place. To say that SHADO pilots didn't freak out a little on missions would be a gross lie. But they were all good enough pilots to be able to control that very natural fear of death and peril and even use it as a way to stay alert and in control.

This time, however, he was genuinely frightened. Gloved hands gripping the control stick like they would shatter under another grams pressure, John Hammond tried to stare out the fear rushing towards him from deep space.

OFF WESTERN SAMOA PACIFIC OCEAN 2-05 pm GMT

The calm seas spewed forth a bullet of fire, smoke and water, that streaked upwards straight for Heaven. Rockets more powerful than a Saturn 5's bore it on flaming angel's wings beyond the scudding low cloud.

Lewis Waterman had only just recovered from the initial moment of 'red-out' unconsciousness, when SKY 1 went from nought to 900kph in three seconds upon undersea launch. He watched, still pinned by 8 Gs, as the red digital fuel indicator on the control panel span away to 0000 and then turned to a green 9999. The SkyBolt's TurboRam engines were now at the correct airspeed for operation. Any lower than Mach 2, and the air pressure wave the engines relied on to burn fuel wasn't present. Waterman felt the dry clunk of the rocket booster tanks being moved out of position in the rear fuselage, and an identical noise as the turbo-ram engines' air intake opened on the underside of the plane. Still propelled forward by momentum like a bullet, it was a full three seconds before TR thrust engaged.

By now, SKY 1 was at 57,000 feet and still climbing. The plane's speed had levelled at Mach 3.7, and Waterman was now able to gain control. He flattened the plane's climb ratio, and throttled forwards on the TRs. He was aiming at a low-orbit trajectory, at Mach 6.3, taking him over the South Pole and down over the 'other side of the planet' at a height of about 150,000 feet. This was grazing the stratosphere most of the way, naturally...luckily, the General Dynamics SR-79B SkyBolt was one of only three planes in existence that could do it every day.

"SKY-1 to SHADO Control," Waterman reported in. "Sub-orbital cruise in progress. All systems A-OK. Time to Intercept?"

"Sky-1," Ford came back. "Based on a 20% Space Intercept failure rate, you will be in range to intercept Intruders 4 and 6 in nineteen minutes fifteen seconds."

"Roger, SHADO Control." The Earth was now a flat curve beneath him; Waterman could see for thousands of kilometres in every direction. The enormity of the Antarctic ice-cap dominated his vision; within moments it too was gone and open sea gained sway once more. Waterman had been in space for all his working life; he of all people knew what was at stake in this war. When you've seen the entire Earth from above, considerations of petty human squabbles tended to become hugely irrelevant.

Waterman was alone at 141,205 feet, racing to make a rendezvous that might never happen, driven on by human technology and the supreme grace of the just warrior. Zen and the art of combat aeronautics.

SHADO H.Q.

2-09 pm GMT

The Control Room was silent. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. Lt Ellis, via videolink, gave the latest update like she was reading the BBC sports news. "Missile launch in thrifty seconds. All Wave One Interceptors A-OK. Wave Two Interceptors are spaceborne and en route to IPs. UFOs maintaining course and speed."

No-one commented on this; there was nothing left to say, no more buttons to push. It was now up to the Interceptors.

Lake glanced at Freeman. He was gripping a pen in his right hand with white-knuckled intensity. His face was set, eyes blazing with anxiety.

"Alec..." she said softly. He turned to her and just stared for a moment, then smiled sadly. "I-" he began, then faltered, looking oddly puzzled.

"Eagle Wing Interceptors report final countdown to missile launch," Ellis butted in. The moment was lost, and the two friends returned to their jobs.

WAVE ONE INTERCEPT POINT BETWEEN EARTH AND MARS 2-10 pm GMT

"Eagle Leader to Eagle, Hawk and Falcon Wings," Hammond barked into his mouthpiece. "Missile Launch Range in one minute from this mark. Assume final Intercept vectors."

"Roger, Eagle Leader," Hawk Leader crackled back at him. "Hawk Wing is go. Awaiting missile timing data."

"Falcon Wing confirms, Eagle Leader. We are go for Intercept." That was Barnell, the oldest Interceptor Pilot still flying. He'd been with SHADO longer than anyone other than Straker and Freeman, and yet had constantly turned down promotion to keep flying the Run. He was just a pilot, he'd say. To be honest, right now, that was the only thing anyone needed.

"Eagle Leader from MoonBase," Lt Ellis chimed in. "Osprey, Raven and Raptor Wings lunar de-orbit positive. Missile timing data for Wave One Interceptors to follow in twenty seconds."

Hammond nodded to himself, adjusted a glitch in his main thruster valve and opened a file on his Weapons Computer.

Then the words came. "MoonBase to Eagle Leader. Missile Timing coordinates are 235 461 decimal 8." Hammond punched the numbers in and got a CONFIRMED icon on his flight computer screen.

Off in the star-stippled distance, Hammond finally caught sight of the spinning UFOs. They were flying at Sol 2 in a loose arrowhead formation, his eutronic radar told him. *Dammit, this feels totally WRONG*, he told himself angrily. They weren't trying to evade the Interceptors, they were just coming in hell for leather. It was inconceivable that the Alien pilots didn't know the Interceptors were there. *It makes no bloody sense. Bloody bloody BLOODY! Oh well; walk straight into five megatonnes of nuke, see if I care.*

"MoonBase from Eagle Leader. Missile launch in...five, four three two, one. Missile away." Hammond convulsively squeezed the firing trigger on his control stick, and watched the nose-mounted missile streak off straight ahead into the night like a bat out of Hell. In his peripheral vision, he caught sight of the other Missiles fired by Eagle Squadron shooting past. Eagles 2 and 3 reported the launches at that moment, followed by the six other pilots.

"MoonBase, missile launch positive. Eagle Wing missiles flying true. Going for escape trajectory." Hammond disengaged his flight program and banked off in the beginnings of a wide turn.

"Roger, Eagle Leader," Ellis replied. "Stand by for evasion course correction data."

Nine new suns flared briefly in the eternal night as the missile warheads detonated directly in front of the oncoming saucer fleet. The energy wave produced by the 45 megatonnes of thermonuclear power released in the multiple explosion spread out in all directions, swamping the UFOs within a second.

Hammond's Interceptor shook wildly as it bore the brunt of the missile blast; he was going at 145,000 mph, but it outran him with ease. For a time, Hammond was sure the ship wouldn't hold up under the punishment. But it did, and suddenly space became a millpond again. Hammond checked his systems...large-scale but superficial hull damage to the aft section, and one of the secondary thrusters was out of action. Its engine bell had probably melted shut.

"MoonBase, this is Eagle Leader. Three UFOs destroyed."

If it was this bad for me, what it's done to the UFOs? He checked his radar. There were seven blips on it, still racing sun ward at Sol 2. They hadn't broken formation. Oh, this WAS wrong. Something was seriously effed up here.

"Eagle Leader to Wing Leaders, report status."

"Falcon Leader on manual thrust control due to engine damage, Eagle Leader. Falcons 2 and 3 report serious hull-scorching. Otherwise A-OK. On evasive course," Barnell said.

"Hawk Wing A-OK, Eagle Leader. On evasive course."

"Roger, Wing Leaders. Best speed for home."

STRAKER's SST

2-14 pm GMT

"Docking procedure now underway, Commander," Shroeder announced. At this, Straker appeared in the cockpit and glanced out the windshield. The KC-135D StratoTanker MAJIC had been kind enough to provide was flying directly above the comparatively tiny ShadAir jet. A long boom was currently lowering itself down from the former's tail to the refuelling port just aft of the latter's cockpit. There was a distressingly loud BANG as boom plug and port receptacle met, and then the SST's digital fuel counter began spiralling upwards towards FULL. The KC-135 could transfer eighty Imperial gallons of fuel a second through any one of its four booms; Straker's jet would slake its thirst before the minute was out.

"Call coming through from SHADO HQ, sir," Robinson said, putting her head round the half-closed cockpit door. "The Wave One Interceptors have knocked out three UFOs, and the rest are still inbound. Wave Two preparing to attack."

"Thank you, Captain." Straker hurried off to answer the summons, leaving Robinson there staring through the cockpit windows at the enormity of the tanker looming over them. Just then, there was another metallic banging noise, and the refuelling boom began to withdraw. Shroeder opened the interplane commlink.

"Danke, meine herren. You'd better get moving too, in case our Alien pals decide they want to go after two targets rather than one."

"Good advice, SHADO Alpha," the tanker pilot laughed. "Now get outta here."

Shroeder smiled and closed the link. He glanced at Robinson, who simply nodded impulsively.

"Well, you heard the man," she said. "Let's amscraay."

"I didn't think English people said 'amscraay'," Shroeder remarked absently as he throttled up on the engines and pulled away from the tanker.

"I'm not English, I'm Anglo-Norwegian."

Shroeder raised an eyebrow. "You learn something new every day."

**REVISED WAVE TWO INTERCEPT POINT
300,000 KM DOWNRANGE FROM LUNA
2-17 pm GMT**

Osprey, Raven and Raptor Squadrons, their engines operating at above the maximum safety closed swiftly on their targets. Last-minute course corrections had had to be made after the failure of the Wave One attack to split the UFO fleet up, and it was a race against time to be in position before the Intruders slipped through the net. They just made it.

"Missile away!" Osprey Leader Gianni Tantello crowed with customary Latin passion as he squeezed his trigger. Because of the delay in getting to the new IP, the UFOs were practically on top of them. It'd be a real hit-and-run thing.

A massive explosion filled Tantello's vision; his missile had hit a UFO dead-on. 'Bullet-proof' or not, the alien ship's shields and hull were no match for a Ground Zero thermonuclear blast equivalent to 250 Hiroshimas. The saucer was quite simply vaporised instantaneously. The explosion was followed by four more, virtually on top of one another, in quick succession, as the rest of Osprey Squadron plus two of the Raven ships tried for a blanket-burst detonation right in the middle of the UFO armada. It did the trick; the bubble of superheated plasma that had Tantello's destroyed UFO at its heart blossomed outwards and engulfed the six remaining saucers. Then, a heartbeat later, Raptor Wing and Raven 3 added their own ingredients to the H-Bomb stew still boiling a few thousand kilometres ahead.

Tantello could not believe that anything could survive that much firepower; nevertheless, he kept his eyes on the radarscope as he flew through the now dissipating fireball.

"Holy Mother..." There were still five blips.

SHADO H.Q.

2-18 pm GMT

"Wave Two Interceptors report 2 UFOs destroyed. Remaining five Intruders now through Outer Defence Ring and maintaining course." The disappointment in Lt Ellis's voice was painfully evident, and it sent a wave of stunned terror through the Control Room. Eighteen missiles should have been enough to take out the whole invasion fleet.

It should have been, but it wasn't.

Lt Ford slumped in his chair, then straightened up as he felt Freeman's hand on his shoulder.

"Contact Commander Straker, Keith," Freeman said wearily. "And put the Shuttles and SkyBolts in the picture." Ford nodded and set about his task.

"Well, we've already put a big dent in their forces," Lake offered as an attempt to raise the flagging spirits within the room. "If we knock out even one more, they may not have the numbers to invade."

Freeman nodded. "But **are** they invading? Remember the nerve-gas affair."

The implications of this made Lake pause. For the past year, SHADO had noticed a new development within the Aliens' plans; occasionally, and for no logical reason, they would make a concerted effort to wipe out the entire human race. The attack on a Royal Navy frigate loaded with nerve gas in August 1982 had spelled the start of what some believed was a campaign of attempted genocide (Jackson dubbed it 'xenocide') by a renegade Alien faction. This flew in the face of their ostensible reason for attacking Earth...to obtain human body organs and glands for transplants...but nonetheless it was a fact.

Was this another mission of annihilation? Lake wondered if she'd be alive to answer her own question after today.

The Shuttles and SkyBolts would get them. They HAD to get them.

THE BLUE ROOM

DREAMLAND

2-21 pm GMT

"They're losing," Colonel Romanov said. She and Jay-ROD were watching the battle between the UFOs and the Interceptors via one of the Reticulans' survey probes. They had stood in space, virtually speaking, and witnessed the Aliens tearing through the nuclear walls SHADO were desperately throwing in their path. Neither of them had shown a flicker of emotion at the destruction of half the Alien fleet, nor at the similar fate that had just befallen Raptor 2.

The lead UFO's particle-beam weapon had literally sliced the fleeing Interceptor in half; the two pieces had tumbled away from each other on different courses before exploding simultaneously.

The pilot had no ejection system.

The Berenicians have a technological advantage over SHADO, that will almost certainly bring them temporary victory in this engagement, Jay-ROD noted calmly. However, SHADO will prevail. It is inevitable.

"How can you be so sure?"

Simple observation. Knowledge of the Berenicians, their ways. And I...I understand the human spirit.

"I'm glad one of us does."

You seem to have little faith in your fellows, Colonel Romanov.

Romanov whirled to face the alien. She looked angry, an expression normally a stranger to her aristocratic features. "Faith? What good has faith ever done anyone? I live in the world of what is, not what should or might be."

Some would call that view narrow.

"Well, they can go to their Hell."

Jay-ROD didn't answer that, so Romanov turned the virtuality. The rest of the Interceptors had made it MoonBase safely, and none of the UFOs were following. "You were right," she murmured. "SHADO may as well have stayed at home. They just aren't interested in fighting. The Aliens really **are** going to do it!"

It was the most likely eventuality, given the data to hand. Both of us knew that it would happen one day.

"So...we continue with the plan?" Romanov said, with a trace of wariness in her voice. Jay-ROD either didn't notice it or didn't care.

Nothing has changed. Inform your colleagues.

"Right." With that, Romanov left the Blue Room.

The virtuality now closed in on Earth orbit, as the UFOs approached the next barrier of defence. Jay-ROD altered the scan focus, so that he could actually see the individual SuperPatriot missiles leaving their launch tubes in the Shuttles' cargo bays. It was a brave but futile gesture; the Berenicians would not have tried this gambit unless they knew they would succeed. It would all be over very soon.