

# Anorak

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Alec Freeman swore. "He's going to do his nut. He is really going to do his nut. Have you cross-checked the date on this?"

Keith Ford nodded unhappily. "We missed it entirely. We have no record of it. You're right, he is going -"

"I have the right to say that, you don't."

"Yes, sir."

"Because I am the one who is going to have to tell him."

Freeman took the flimsy, photocopied newsletter and headed reluctantly towards Commander Straker's office. This was a mess. This was a real mess. There had to be some way to get out of it.

Straker looked up as he entered and frowned. "Alec? You're looking distinctly uncomfortable. I presume that means you have bad news."

Freeman got himself a whisky from the dispenser then placed the newsletter, open at the appropriate page, on his boss's desk. The photograph was blurred in the first place and badly reproduced. It was too dark to see anything much unless you knew what you were looking at. If you did, it was unmistakably a UFO. A real one, the kind they had been fighting for 15 years, not the kind of fuzzy lights and out of focus aeroplanes that usually filled up the pages of such amateur journals.

Straker's face had turned to the icy mask that Freeman detested because it boded trouble for the Commander himself and for everyone else. He spoke slowly and precisely. "Besides the fact that this shouldn't be in here anyway, the date given does not match up with any of our alerts."

Freeman nodded silently.

"You're getting the editor and the photographer checked out?" Straker asked.

"Same person. I've got Ford running a check on his background. As far as I know there's nothing against him, he just got lucky."

"Unlucky, if we have to do anything about it." Straker paused. "Send someone to see him. Someone who can make a valid assessment but can also pass for one of these people. He could be dangerous."

Freeman shook his head vehemently. "He's a nobody, an anorak, an obsessive. No more dangerous than a train spotter or those people who follow old TV series. If the aliens wanted to go public they wouldn't have picked something as obscure -" he picked up the magazine and waved it around "- as this rubbish. They'd have rung up the BBC. Like I said, he just got lucky."

Straker took it off him and flicked through the pages again. "Maybe. Maybe not."

Freeman decided to check the man out himself. Magnus Ericson, a rather exotic name for somebody who lived in Middleham North Yorkshire. *Middleham, good horseracing area,* Alec thought. *Maybe I can get some tips while I'm up there.*

Freeman took a flight most of the way, then drove through the famous Dales scenery. He was a city boy at heart but an occasional glimpse of his adopted country, he felt, did him good. At least it was not raining today.

Ericson's house was in the shadow of the famous castle, where Richard the Third spent so much of his time before coming to the throne. They liked him up here, Freeman remembered. Besides the stables on the edge of town, there was nothing much to distinguish this place from many surrounding it except for a very big hill.

Freeman knocked at the door. It was opened by a man who could do a good impression of a Viking. Taller and broader than Freeman himself, he had the shaggy blond hair and beard to go with it. *Well,* Freeman thought, *they did spend a lot of time round here, those Norsemen. Maybe the name makes sense.*

He smiled his broadest smile. "Mr Ericson? I'm from the Daily Mail. We're wanting to do an article on the possibility of extra-terrestrial life and going through the various journals, yours seems the most reliable. Could I come in and have a word?"

Ericson frowned. Perhaps he was used to dealing with journalists. Perhaps he could have found a better cover. However, Ericson nodded and stepped back to let him in. He showed him through to a back room which was full of cork boards and printing equipment. It stank of toner. Alec thought he'd get high if he stayed in here too long. Perhaps Ericson was immune to it. Perhaps he liked it.

His host swept a pile of papers away to reveal a battered old kitchen chair. "Sorry about the mess, it just builds up."

His voice had a Yorkshire accent but it was a middle-class, educated one. Freeman had half expected that. It was always the middle classes that went weird. (*Like you're not,* he told himself.)

"Now," said Ericson "you're from the Daily Mail? I've seen their stuff. I don't think it's terribly impressive."

Alec smiled again. "To tell you the truth, I'm not actually from the Daily Mail. I'm freelance. I just sell most of my stuff there - when I can. I've seen your latest edition." He pulled a copy of it from his pocket. "It looks good. Your evidence looks pretty solid." He pointed to the offending picture. "I wondered if I could see the original of this and talk about how you got it."

Ericson look sharply at him. "And then you get paid and I don't? I'm in this because I think it's important but this place doesn't run on air."

Alec through his hands wide. "I'm prepared to split with you."

"And why shouldn't I just take all the money myself?"

"Because I have the contacts. And, if you'll forgive me saying so, your prose style does leave a little to be desired. Fifty-fifty, how does that sound?"

After a pause of the man nodded. He dug in the draw of his desk and reached out a sheaf of photographs. He passed them to Alec. Who looked at them in dismay. He had to remember that as a journalist he ought to be smiling at pictures of this quality, at this certainty. It was hard work. It could barely be worse if the pictures had shown Sky 1 shooting the spacecraft down.

"These are exceptional." He meant it. "But how did you get them?"

Ericson shrugged. "A lifetime of experience - and a lot of luck. They are good, aren't they?"

Freeman nodded.

It did not take much prodding to find out the rest of the story. The man was proud of what he had done. He had every right to be. With nothing more than a network of contacts, a decent telescope and a good camera - and a lot of persistence - he had found a UFO that had slipped through SHADO's net. It had come down a few miles away, over the Yorkshire moors. Freeman groaned internally. The national news had covered the disappearance of a young woman there at the right time. He had never suspected. Straker had never suspected.

That was the one thing that worried Ericson. "I don't know about this girl. I'd hate to think I could have done something to save her. I mean, we don't know the aliens took her. I'm not entirely sure I believe the abduction stories myself. But I would hate to think I could have done something and I didn't."

"Know how you feel, mate." He looked at his watch. "I've got to get back but you don't think I could have a cuppa before I go? Please?"

"Where are my manners? I should have offered you one when you came in. I'll go get it."

And when he came back, Freeman slipped a capsule of the amnesia drug into Ericson's drink - just enough to cover the last few hours. Then he put the papers back on the chair, washed up the mug and left.

Straker was not pleased. "Justify that decision to me."

"Easy. The newsletter is already in circulation. The information - a very small part of the information - is in the public domain. We can't leave the editor as the one person who doesn't know what's in his magazine and to try and get it withdrawn - well there's a conspiracy theory to beat the band. People would never stop talking. I told you, Ericson got a lucky. Nobody believes him, except a small band of nutters, and it won't happen again."

Six months later, it happened again.

"Alec! I thought you told me this was dealt with?"

Freeman managed to look both sheepish and confused. "The guy's just got incredible luck."

Straker glared at him. "Luck we can't afford. Get it sorted - before I have to do it myself."

Freeman sighed as he left the office. He could not blame Ed for being annoyed. It was an extremely awkward situation and he knew Henderson had had plenty to say about it. He also knew that Ed had backed up his judgment to the General. Now he needed to prove he was right. At least, this time, they had heard about it ahead of publication.

So he went up to Middleham, tried exactly the same trick but this time left with all the available evidence. He also left Ericson with a very large gap in his memory.

And the next edition of the newsletter dealt with Ericson having a very large gap in his memory.

Straker sighed. "We can't win. And maybe your judgment was right. You're not often wrong. Let just hope he doesn't get lucky again."

Three months later, Ericson got lucky again.

Freeman pounded his fist on his desk till it hurt. He would have kept on pounding if he had not had the summons to Straker's office.

"I take it you don't want me to do it this time?"

Straker shook his head. "This time I deal with it myself."

"I guess it's getting to the stage where we either recruit him or shoot him."

"I think a tragic accident would be less obvious than a shooting."

Freeman looked at him warily. "You are joking, aren't you? I was joking. I mean, besides anything else, we don't need any more conspiracy theories."

"That's one good reason." Straker was cool but Freeman was fairly certain that another good reason was simply his dislike of killing. "He also seems to have a talent for this. A talent SHADO could use. Are you coming?"

The two of them journeyed to Yorkshire. Alec showed him the house and he rang the doorbell. Ericson had obviously got wise to something going on. When he opened the door, there was a chain on it.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Ed Straker. I'm from Harlington-Straker Studios. If you want to check that, please go ahead and ring them."

Ericson looked at him thoughtfully. "No, I've seen you in the papers. I'm surprised you're here, they say you're something of a recluse."

Ed smiled. "What they mean is, I don't go places where I expect the newspapers to be. Can we come in? We have an interest in your magazine."

Ericson unchained the door and let them through, still looking slightly suspicious. "You wanting to make some kind of sci-fi film? I'm not sure I'm the right person to come to."

In the back room, Ed and Alec found places to sit. Ericson perched on the chair by the desk.

And Ed began his pitch. "Mr Ericson, you are very good at finding UFOs. So good that my organisation - no, I don't mean the studio - has already had to come here twice in order to try and silence you." He smiled. "You and Alec are already old friends."

Alec harrumphed. "Lot of good it did either of us."

Ed continued. "He's sore because his plan didn't work. Mr Ericson, I'm not sure that you're going to like what I have to say but we are the people responsible for making sure the UFOs don't get to Earth. We stop them killing people. Does that surprise you?"

Ericson took in a deep breath, then shook his head. But he still did not say anything. At least he was not wearing the kind of glazed look that commonly set in when they tried to explain this kind of thing to people.

Straker went on to give him a run-down of SHADO and how his activities had caused them problems. "In the future, however, they could solve problems for us. You have a knack for this, a talent. That's something I appreciate. I want you to work for us."

Ericson asked the obvious question. "And what if I don't?"

Ed's face stayed perfectly calm, though Alec looked uncomfortable. "Then you'll have to be dealt with in some other way. But I don't want you to agree because of that. I want you to agree because the job is worth doing. Because the Earth needs to be protected. Because people have a right not to have their organs stolen, not to lose their loved ones, not to be treated like cattle by people who really aren't that different from us. Because, perhaps, it's a challenge. Do you want a challenge, Mr Ericson?"

"You're asking me to betray my friends?"

"I'm asking you to help them. We need you to pass on their information. We may need you to suppress some things. But your friends are less likely to get hurt with you looking out for them."

Finally, slowly, Ericson nodded. "You want me to continue with the magazine?"

Straker smiled. "Everyone needs a cover. You'll do it?"

"Subject to some further checking, yes."

Everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief.

And that was how Captain Magnus Ericson, anorak, was recruited to SHADO.