

Missing in Action

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Shameless plug for my band of which you should you should all go out and buy my CD immediately.

Paul Farmer was about 50 years old and very alone. He felt like he was born only 5 or so years ago. He woke up in hospital out of a coma not knowing who he was or anything about the rest of his life. He couldn't move and had to learn to walk again. He had been in a coma for over a year, or so the doctors had told him. Hit by a truck on a lonely highway out of Glasgow.

He could remember everything. How to read, how to talk, he knew 3 languages and parts of 2 others. He thought he knew how to fly a plane but could never put it to the test because without a pilot's licence, there was no way anyone would let him up in a plane. He could remember everything except who he really was and where he came from. The doctors had told him his name was Paul Farmer because they had found a wad of business cards in his wallet where he lay on the side of the road. They read. "Paul Farmer. Electronics consultant. Specializing in aviation electronics." Even so, without absolute proof that he was qualified, no-one would let him near their aircraft to fix so much as a faulty cabin light.

So he set up shop as an appliance repair man to eke out a living in the south of London. He had wandered around Scotland a little but nothing seemed familiar there. He certainly didn't have a Scottish accent of any kind. It was more a Londoner's accent so he moved to London when the doctors and social workers cleared him to do so. Settling in the south of London where he could afford the rent.

He had taken a few flying lessons to see if it would jog his memory but it didn't. Now he spent his days repairing toasters and microwave ovens and his nights wandering aimlessly trying to find something interesting to occupy his mind. Something to get the strange dreams out of his head. Dreams of creatures from outer space. Dreams of a dark prison cell and bright lights.

Dreams of kidnap and torture. Dreams of someone else's life or perhaps the life of someone he had seen on television.

The doctors had told him that they thought he was about 50 years old. A well kept 50 years in spite of the damage from the accident. He really didn't know. Everything he did know about his life was told to him by a doctor or a psychologist or psychiatrist. The social worker had told him to see a friend of hers down in London which he did.

He worked for a time as an assembly worker in an electronics manufacturing plant. A job the social worker's friend had found him. Within a matter of months he worked his way up from assembly line to leading hand. He knew his stuff but couldn't prove his qualifications. He boss told him that he'd really like to promote him but couldn't. He had met a lot of West Indian and Jamaican people in the community where he lived. They thought him weird at first. A guy without a past. But in time they accepted him. Nicknaming him: "Yesterday." As in. "Born yesterday."

He helped out as a tech at a local recording studio run by a tall black man called Fitz. He got to know Fitz through his record shop. He was buying some records and noticed Fitz and another man banging away on the top of an amplifier trying to get the shop's stereo system to work. Farmer, eager to lend a hand in the hope he would be accepted, asked if he could help

and told them he was a technician. He pulled one of the RCA jacks out and looked at it.

"There's your problem right there," said Farmer as he pointed to a dirty and corroded plug. "You guys really have been using this thing as a boat anchor haven't you. To let it get this bad."

Farmer pulled out his pocket knife, selected an appropriate blade and scraped the plug's surface as clean as he could. He carefully wiped the corrosion from its corresponding socket on the rear of the amp as well. Then he inserted the jack. The left channel of the amp returned louder than ever. Fitz was so pleased he invited Farmer down to the basement where his little recording studio was housed. He wondered if he could fix another, similar problem with his 16 track tape recorder. This time the problem was a little more serious but seeing a soldering iron in the corner he knew he could fix it given a little time and a few basic parts. The next day he returned with the replacement parts which cost him 3 pounds. He replaced and checked them and the tape recorder acted as though brand new.

He told Fitz his whole sorry story about being hit by a truck in Glasgow and not remembering a thing about his former life. Fitz brought more work his way and pretty soon most of the local community were bringing him small items to fix. Which he did at nights in the kitchen of his small flat. He had neither the time nor the resources to keep up with demand so eventually he saved enough money to buy himself enough equipment to set up shop. Fitz managed to get him a lease deal on the shop next to his record store. The shop had a flat above it thrown into the deal and over all it was cheaper than the flat he was previously renting. So he set up shop repairing the un-repairable and making a reasonable living. He never charged too much and never advertised. He only fixed things that he understood. Technology was often way beyond what he could remember. But he knew the basics and that was all he needed to fix ninety percent of the problems presented to him. And for the most part, the community was forgiving of him for the problems he couldn't fix. He was widely regarded as an asset too good to lose.

He spent a lot of time in Fitz's studio. He liked the people there and even met someone special. Someone 20 years younger than him and they fell desperately in love. For a time he felt as though what ever had been in his past life didn't matter. That he was better off not knowing the person he may have once been. Cindy was a wonderful woman and they shared an interest in music. It was mainly her interests he followed, he didn't really have any of his own, but he was in touch with the whole vibe of the community and he was happy. And that was all that mattered to him then.

That was until one day when Fitz brought a woman he knew called Pearl to see him. She had a surveillance problem and wondered if Farmer knew anything about surveillance devices.

"Look I'm like you," said Pearl. "I'm not exactly amateur but I'm not exactly big time either."

"You're a private detective and you don't know about surveillance cameras?" said Farmer.

"What you have a problem with that?" said Pearl placing her hands on her hips. "You don't think that Fin and I could be detectives?"

"No not at all. That's not what I'm asking. It's just that I don't know shit about how you use these things. I could put a system together for you most likely but I just don't know too much about how a professional system would work. I'm making no value judgement on your professionalism at all. I hear you're the best, in fact. I just need more information. Can you get me some information about surveillance devices so I can get an idea of what's s'pose to happen with them." He wiped the sweat off his brow wondering whether the truth had weaselled him

out of his previously poor choice of words.

"Yeah, Ok Point taken. It's just that when ever Fin and I have to mention we're detectives, most guy's just laugh. Especially cops and government types."

"Well, I be not a government type I can assure you. Fact is I don't have a clue what I am."

"Yes I've heard your story," said Pearl. "Look All I need to do is have a small camera mounted somewhere in a room and a microphone so I can listen. Someone is ripping off a client of mine and it's the only way we'll be able to see how they're doing it."

"And you'll be in the room next door presumably?"

"No. Well actually, we'll be in a car down the road." Pearl smiled a tight stressed grin realizing that she was probably asking too much.

"How far down the street?" Asked Farmer.

"About fifty metres," said Pearl even more stressed. "And we want to video it."

"Jeez you don't want much."

"I'm sorry we just can't afford a professional system. We just hoped you might be able to do something for us. If you can't well..." She shrugged.

"Leave it with me. I'll look into it. How soon do you need it?"

"A couple of days if possible."

Farmer sucked back on his bottom teeth making a kind of reverse whistling sound. A practice he'd picked up from Fitz. "Ok Come and see me tomorrow morning."

The next morning Pearl returned with her offsider Fin. Farmer popped out from the back room.

"Fin this is Yesterday. Yesterday this is my partner Fin."

"Pleased to meet you Fin. I hear you're quite a team," said Farmer.

Fin merely nodded.

"Err you'd better follow me," said Farmer, lifting the latch on the counter top and allowing them through. Behind the counter, through a small door way and into the back room. There were three large work benches with shelves full of equipment. Some of it expensive test equipment, some of it items for repair. Fin couldn't tell the difference.

"Here it is," said Farmer pointing to some circuit boards and boxes wired together and to a large sealed lead acid battery. The kind of battery used in alarm systems. "It's not the most elegant, nor the most reliable in terms of drift but I think we have your problems solved. "

"What that pile of junk?" said Fin raising her voice slightly annoyed.

"Chill Fin," said Pearl turning then to Farmer. "So how does this work then?"

"Ok this here is your camera," said Farmer pointing to a small circuit board amongst the rat's nest. "I had to go out and buy this. It's a small CCD camera but it's even colour. It cost me thirty pounds." Next he pointed to a small black metal box with an aerial attached. The black box had another black plastic box bolted onto it. "This is the transmitter. The other black box bolted on is a very small RF power amp."

"What's that do when it's in?" said Fin.

"Oh sorry. That extends the transmitter's range. I had to buy the video sender as well. They're only designed so you can pick up your video recorder on another TV in your flat but by building this little amplifier it extends the range. They're not very stable little things but it's the best I could come up with at short notice. Also in that box is a small microphone pre-amp and that get's modulated with the video signal."

"Will you stop talking geek and get to the point," said the impatient Fin.

"Oh yeah, so it all has to be run off this battery. You didn't tell me how long this thing

would have to run for and it chews a fair bit of juice. So this battery is it. Unless you can run it off of power. Sorry about that. Sorry if this doesn't meet your approval." Farmer turned directly to Fin slapping her face with only his look.

"No no. We're impressed," said Pearl. "Aren't we, Fin?" Kicking her partner in the shin. Fin stumbled slightly. "Ouch. Whata ya..."

"So how do we see it?" said Pearl returning her attention to Farmer.

"Oh yeah, I was coming to that. " Farmer stepped across to another work bench at the far side of the room and pointed to a small portable colour television with a 5 inch screen and an old portable VHS video recorder sitting next to it. Both wired into yet another 12 volt sealed lead acid battery. Slapping it with his hand he said: "This be the other end right here."

He turned it on and waited for it to warm up. Only static and noise came from the television. He rushed back to the bench where Fin and Pearl were still standing and clipped a wire onto to one of the battery terminals. Still only static on the television. "Oh yeah, now I said it all wasn't too stable so you'll have to make sure it's all tuned in OK." He thumbed the tuning dial underneath the picture tube on the television and suddenly there was an annoying squeal. He quickly reached for the volume knob. "Feedback!" He beckoned Fin over to the TV which was now showing a picture of his ceiling. "Now Pearl if you could look into the lens and say something please?"

"Hello testing one two three," said Pearl as her voice emanated also softly from the television's speaker such that Fin could hear it. She could also see Pearl's beaming face on the screen.

"OH yeah!" said Fin with a surprised smile.

Farmer held down the record button on the video recorder. "Now we're taping it. Pearl, say Mary had a little lamb or something." He smiled in her direction.

Instead Pearl began to sing. "I'm gonna love you like a little child. I'm gonna love you if I can. I love you like you drive me wild. I'm gonna love you like my man."

"Shut up. I hate that song," said Fin.

Pearl poked her tongue out.

"I saw that," said Fin looking at the television.

Farmer hit the stop button on the video recorder and then rewound the tape. He changed a few plugs around and the image on the screen disappeared. This time replaced by pure black. No static at all. He hit the play button and as soon as the video machine threaded the tape up an image of Pearl looking over the video camera re-appeared. He turned up the volume slightly and they could all hear what had just transpired a short time before.

"Now we're taping it. Pearl, say Mary had a little lamb or something."

"I'm gonna love you like a little child. I'm gonna love you if I can. I love you like you drive me wild. I'm gonna love you like my man."

"Oh yeah,. Wicked," said the real Pearl.

Even Fin was smiling.

"Now there's a few catches," said Farmer. "The battery life as I mentioned. Probably about twenty four hours tops. And the television isn't exactly in exemplary condition. You'll have to constantly adjust the tuning. Not because of the television but because the transmitter drifts slightly. You kinda have to chase it round the dial. The television no longer works properly on VHF and has a problem with UHF as well. It's tuned somewhat just out of band. Fortunately I was able to tune the transmitter up that high as well. But the added advantage of that is that it'll be virtually impossible for anyone in the area to pick up the signal on their TVs.

I said virtually because they might pick up a little ghosting if they're near to the transmitter but that's all."

"I still have no idea what you're talking about," said Fin. "You need an interpreter."

"That's brilliant, Yesterday," said Pearl mildly excited. "How much do we owe you?"

"Well the camera cost thirty as I said. The transmitter cost another thirty and the rest of the bits cost about another thirty I guess. Maybe twenty five, I wasn't really counting at that stage. "

"What about the TV and video?"

"Oh yeah,. They were both kinda resurrected junk. You can borrow them as long as you need them. It's no great trauma. If you were in less of a hurry I probably could have done something less crude but this is the best I can do on short notice. "

"You haven't included anything for your time?" said Pearl.

"Oh I dunno. It was a bit of fun really. Just catch the bugger."

"Well at least let me give you a hundred."

Farmer shook his head and then hung it. Embarrassed at having to deal with money issues. Then without raising his head too much he nodded.

"I hope you're not like this with all your customers," said Pearl. "You'll go broke. "

Farmer accepted the money and packed it all in two, cardboard boxes for them. The video and television in one box and the camera and transmitter in another.

"Oh and one more thing I forgot to mention. The video and TV can run off your car battery. The other sealed lead acid battery I want back when you've finished with it. They're really expensive and I've only got these two."

CHAPTER 2

"Damn Damn Damn!" shouted Commander Pilgrim as she thumped her fist on her desk, sending her lightweight computer terminal crashing to the floor.

"I think you've really broken it this time," said Colonel Frogleberg as he knelt down to inspect the wreckage.

General Straker laughed and rolled his eyes with one hand over his mouth.

"I seem to recall a certain commander who use to do his share of desk thumping," said Colonel Ford at Straker.

Straker put in an extra effort to hide his grin and compose himself.

"So what's happening out there? Is there any way we can find out?" said Pilgrim. "Any bright ideas?"

There was silence in the room. Frogleberg still busy next to the desk trying to fit the pieces of pilgrim's terminal back together again. Straker still concentrating on his composure and Ford the only one with any kind of answer. He was shaking his head admitting not to have one.

"Obviously commander, they don't want us to see what's going on out there," said Straker finally.

"Look. Every time we lose one of those things we lose a piece of hardware equivalent to one Hubble space telescope. We never even got the opportunity to use these for peering into deep space."

"The likelihood of snapping a picture of the alien home world has about zero odds. Even that far out."

"You miss the point, General. If the public were ever to get the idea we had launched 50 Hubble telescopes into space which they paid for, and yet all the civilian cosmologists were all vying for the one space telescope, they'd be pretty pissed, don't you think?"

"They're not going to find out are they?" stressed Straker.

"Famous last words, General," said Pilgrim standing from her desk. "At some point, what ever happens, some time in the future, all this is gonna come out. And I don't wanna be written up as being the woman who spent ten billion on ground breaking space research only to get it blown away before she allowed anything useful to happen with it."

"I know if I were a scientist, I'd be pretty pissed off," said Ford.

"Shut up Keith," came the universal chorus from both Straker and Pilgrim.

"And all we wanted to do is try and work out what direction they were leaving our goddamn solar system in," said Pilgrim as she stepped to the side of her desk. There was a crunching sound underneath her Doc Martins.

"Hey. I just had that back together again and you crushed it," shouted a very annoyed Frogleberg from the floor below her. "I don't know why I bother some times. Why don't you guys just chill out or something."

"Yes. Good idea Colonel," said Straker. "I think it's pretty obvious that the Aliens are onto our plans and the one thing they don't want us to find out is where their home world is. The question is, can we glean any information from the missing probes."

"What? You mean like a pattern or something?" said Pilgrim. "No pattern that we can see. Totally random. Spread so far apart that we can't even contemplate travelling that distance in that amount of time. Unless you can see something that our best logicians can't. Come on then. I'll show you." She stepped past all of them and headed for the doors.

They exited Pilgrim's office, walked up the three steps and into the main gallery, passing a maintenance technician on the way.

As Frogleberg reached the technician he handed him an armfull of broken computer bits and said: "Here. Fix this sucker will ya." He smiled and joined the other three in the control room.

Out of ear shot the technician looked at his new armfull of broken bits and said. "What 'n' hell was this?"

"See look at that," said Pilgrim. pointing to a display on one of the medium sized projection screens. "The signals all red shifted just prior to disappearing. Like they were being sucked out of space."

"Hmm," said Straker as he rubbed his chin studying the display. "Maybe there's something statistically in the degree of red-shift of each one?"

"No we already looked at that," said Colonel Ford. "We tried brute force computing all the information together to see if it turned up anything. We had one of the super computers crunch the numbers for the past three days. Nothing."

"We even called in our wild card and ran it by him," said Frogleberg.

"Your wild card?" said Straker

"Yeah, that Philip Salisman guy. Bit of a lateral thinker. "

"Oh so this is that musician guy?" said Straker. "So what did his Royal Highness have to say about it?"

"Well nothing as it happens. But..."

Straker interjected before Frogleberg could finish his next sentence. "So he's a bit of dead wood then?"

"Well no actually," said Ford. "We gave him a crack at finding all those hidden UFOs and he's had a pretty good success rate so far."

"Hmm," said Straker. "And how is that going exactly?"

Pilgrim shook her head.

"Well not so good," said Ford. "There seems to be far more of them out there than we had predicted."

Pilgrim continued. "When we started turning over a few stones and started finding them, they must have alerted the rest of them. We're still finding them but they've gone really quiet. I'm not sure if they know we can see them when they're camouflaged or not but they've gone awfully quiet."

"But Salisman is still finding 'em right?" said Straker.

"Yeah he's pretty damn good at it actually. You know the Military aircraft scrap yard? Well there were two damn UFOs hiding in it."

"Seems like you have two big problems then doesn't it Commander!" Said Straker.

"Whata ya mean. Me?" said an indignant Pilgrim. "You mean. We've got two big problems."

"Oh I'm only here to observe, remember commander? Just to lend my learned wisdom." Straker broke a curt smile.

"Well, what exactly is your learned wisdom, General?" said a now somewhat annoyed Pilgrim.

"Well commander, for a start, I'd be getting as much cosmology done with the remaining probes while I still had probes to do it with."

CHAPTER 3

Paul Farmer was up a ladder in someone's office. He wasn't sure whose and he wasn't even sure if it was legal. He was installing his jury rigged video bug into a cavity on the office wall. He had lengthened the connecting cables so that he could fit the camera board itself into a convenient hole whilst the transmitter and battery sat in the ceiling above.

Pearl was standing to one side looking at her watch whilst Fin was busy on the floor cleaning up any evidence they had been tampering with the room.

"Why do I always get the dirty jobs?" said Fin as she waved her small dust broom at Pearl.

"Come on guys, we haven't got much time," was Pearl's only response.

"Well we'd get it done a bit quicker if you'd help us," said Fin.

Farmer leant back at the top of the ladder. "Do you women always argue like this?"

Fin looked at Pearl and Pearl looked at Fin.

"Yeah pretty much," said Pearl.

Farmer started climbing down from the top of the ladder. "Well I'm done up here. Check if we're getting a signal."

Pearl reached round the corner of the room and into a small connecting corridor. She knelt down and picked up the small portable television. Its battery laying on the floor, connected by a long cable. She turned it on and started playing with the dials. There was a slight trace of a picture but she couldn't tell if it was the room or possibly something else amongst the static. She shrugged her shoulders and held it out for Farmer to look at as he stepped down off the ladder. Farmer wiped the sweat from his brow and took the TV. Within a few seconds he had a perfect colour picture.

"You had some how bumped this switch onto VHF. " Said Farmer pointing to a lever switch on the back. "You'll have to be careful of that. " He turned the television around so that Pearl and Fin could both see it. Fin had finished cleaning and was standing closer to Pearl. "Is this view Ok? I can adjust it slightly if it's not."

"It'll have to do," said Pearl. "We haven't got time to hang about."

"OK let's go then," said Fin as she stepped in to grab the ladder.

Farmer picked up his tool box and headed for the door. He made his reverse whistling sound as he remembered a screwdriver he'd left on one of the tables. He dived back for it narrowly missing Fin and the ladder. Pearl held the door open as Fin fumbled the ladder through. Farmer snatched the screwdriver from the table and sped out through the now, ladder-free door. Pearl waited till they were both clear then shut and locked the door. They reached the end of the corridor and the stairwell leading down from the second floor offices. They stopped short, frozen with fear.

"Shit, they're early," said Pearl as she heard footsteps pounding on the stair case below them.

Fin looked around and then pushed both of them aside. Setting up the ladder underneath a fluorescent light fixture in the corridor ceiling. Quickly she tore up to the top of the ladder.

"Gimme that screw driver," she commanded softly.

Farmer handed it up to her. She looked at it. It was a philips head and the screws in the light fixture were flat blade.

"Damn," she said. Then she jammed the screwdriver into the surround as hard as she could and levered it apart. The plastic cover crashed into Farmer's arms still holding his tool

box. Not before it bounced off of Fin's head. There was some dust and it got in Fin's eyes.

"Make like you're an inspector," said Fin at Pearl. "We've got overalls on, you haven't." Pearl pulled out a biro from her pocket and made like she was about to take some notes although she didn't have any paper. Farmer whipped out his PDA message pad and handed it to her. She didn't even know how to turn it on but with the biro instead of its stylus, she pretended she was taking notes. Two men reached visual range as Fin removed both Fluoro tubes from the fitting. She pretended to replace one of them. The two men reached the landing and stepped into the corridor and past them.

"Pass me that other screwdriver will ya," said Fin as they headed off to the other end of the corridor.

Farmer opened his tool box and rummaged. He retrieved a flat blade screw driver and handed it up to Fin. Fin exchanged it with the one she was holding and noticed one of the men look back at her from the middle of the corridor as they receded. Fin put the screw driver into the centre of the light fitting and pretended to be unscrewing something. The two men reached their door at the other end of the corridor and began to unlock it. Taking a last look at them as they entered their office. and closed the door behind them.

"You guys go get set up in the car. I'll fix this," said Farmer.

Without another word, Fin scrambled from the ladder. She handed Farmer the screw driver and nodded as she made her way down the stairs following Pearl. Farmer climbed the ladder and attempted to repair the damaged light fitting as best he could. Fin had done considerable damage to it and the plastic diffuser cover. He unscrewed the light fitting and tried to stuff it back together. When he closed it up again he realized it looked less than professional. He reasoned that the two men would look at that particular light fitting on their way out so he moved the ladder to the next one and removed its surround. Then swapped the two over. The one they had damaged now looked perfect and the next one along looked shoddy. He hoped the men would only look at the far end one.

As he was repairing it on his own, working as clandestinely as he could, he seemed to recall having done this kind of thing before. The adrenaline rush. The excitement. It all seemed familiar somehow. For a moment he thought he could put his finger on it but then it was gone.

He packed up his tools and folded the ladder. He looked back at the scene of the crime and saw that there were a few bits of broken plastic. Quickly he knelt, opened his tool box again and deposited them inside. He looked up and down the corridor and then closed the tool box, thankful that no one was looking at him. He grabbed the ladder and tried to juggle it, and his tool box, down stairs. Finally, after much clattering with the ladder against the banisters he made it to the ground level entrance. He kicked the glass and metal doors open and got the ladder halfway through before they shut again jamming his ladder between them.

He once again kicked the doors open and managed to get all of the ladder through but jammed himself in the doors. Once again a persuasive kick managed to clear his exit and he proceeded out onto the park way of the industrial estate where the buildings were located. he stumbled his way to the underground car park next door. Not so much an underground car park but an under-building car park. The building next door was raised up on pillars to allow cars to park underneath it. The entrance ramped down slightly so that it was lower than street level but not actually underground as such. He looked into the entrance to where the car was s'pose to be. An old orange Datsun. 2 seats and very uncomfortable for his tall frame sitting in the back. But it was gone. For a moment panic throbbed through his very fibre. He looked around and didn't know what to do. He looked at the ladder. It wasn't his ladder. If they

abandoned him he could abandon their ladder. But his tool box. He'd have to carry that with him. He could find a phone box and call a cab. Then suddenly in the distant darkness of the car park, silhouetted against the light from the other side, he saw someone waving. It was someone waving at him. He realized it was Fin waving at him. Calling him to go to the other end of the car park. He walked down the entrance ramp and under the building as fast as he could. As soon as the silhouette realized he was coming she pointed to a spot just outside the other end of the building then disappeared.

He reached the position she was in and realized there was another entrance. Or rather exit, which lead to an outside car park on the other side. There was only one car in it. A dirty old orange Datsun. Fin stood on the driver's side watching both his arrival and the action within the car.

He approached the car but Fin had already climbed back in. He propped up the ladder and stood by the driver's side door to peer in. Pearl was sitting in the front passenger seat staring intensely at the tiny television which she had resting on the dash board. The video recorder hooked up and running resting in her lap. Farmer could hear some faint voices as the camera showed two men in the room. He could see a brief case laying on one of the desks in the office. In it were some square objects that Farmer couldn't quite make out from the fuzzy picture. Then he saw one of the men grab one of the square objects and fan through it with his thumb.

"Ah. A wad of money," said Farmer.

"Yeah, How many thousand do you reckon is in there?" said Fin. A rhetorical question.

"There must be a hundred thousand in there," said Pearl.

Farmer pursed his lips in acknowledgement. He still didn't know what it was they were investigating but it was all very exciting. He saw the man take another wad and stash it somewhere out of camera range. Obscured in front of him.

He heard a voice say: "Don't worry it's all there." The man was out of camera shot. Then he said. "And here's your bonus." The dark figure stepped into the field of view. Farmer could see a gun in his hand and then there was a muffled gunshot. The man had aimed at the second man's head and pulled the trigger. The second man jumped sideways from his seat and to the floor. Farmer could see what looked like splatters of blood and guts.

"Jesus," said Fin.

Pearl jumped back. "Oh shit."

"Did I just see what I think I saw?" said Farmer.

"Yup," came a chorus from Pearl and Fin.

Farmer looked first at Fin then at Pearl.

"What are we gonna do now?" said Fin.

"I'm thinking," said Pearl.

"Obviously we're not going to be able to get the camera out of there now are we?" said Fin.

"We'll just have to wait till things calm down in a few days before we go back to get it."

"Assuming the police don't discover it first," said Farmer.

"Well what ever happens we can't just waltz back in there now and get it can we?" said Fin. "It's a shame too. I had plans for that camera."

"Look, Look," said Pearl quietening them both down.

The remaining man was going through the pockets of his victim. He retrieved what looked to be a passport and looked through it. Then he retrieved the man's wallet and a few other

items. He placed them in the brief case and shut it, looking round him in a paranoid manner.

"He left the money," said Fin noticing that there was a stack of five for six wads of money left sitting on the desk where the victim had been sitting.

The man grabbed the brief case and dragged it from the desk, disappearing out of view. Farmer grabbed the ladder. Fin assumed he was going to put it on the roof rack but instead he shoved it underneath the car and raced back to the driver's side door.

"Let me in," he begged of Fin.

"What did you do that for?" she asked as if his answer constituted his rite of passage.

"We don't want him to see the ladder or recognise us if he comes this way."

"Yeah, good move," said Pearl having placed all artifacts on the dash board.

Fin got out and pushed the seat back then dived into the back of the car herself.

"I can't drive I don't have a licence," said Farmer.

"Shut up and get in," said Fin.

Farmer did so. As soon as he settled he saw the TV and video on the dash.

"Move that stuff off the dashboard. He might see it," said Farmer.

"Here. Hand it to me," said Fin from the back.

She stretched out her arms as Pearl passed them back. First the video, then the TV. Fin stashed the video on the floor still taping and placed the TV on top of it. Then she laid down across the back seat where no one could see her but the TV screen was in her face. There was a woman's scream from the TV. Shortly followed by a gunshot.

"What's happening?" said Pearl looking back trying to see.

"Nothing. There's nothing in frame."

Farmer kept a vigilant eye out for the man. A time past. There was another shout from the TV. A woman's voice saying. "Oh my god. Oh No. Vicky. Oh Hell." Then a woman entered camera shot and moved up close and bent over the dead man. She didn't touch him but noticed all the blood. She stood straight up and put her hands over her ears and screamed.

"Turn that bloody thing down will ya," whispered Pearl. Both her and Farmer saw the man emerge from the space between the two buildings. Walking down the path carrying his brief case. "Shit here he comes."

Fin fumbled for the volume knob. Pearl grabbed Farmer and kissed him in a lover's embrace. They hugged and kissed for what seemed like an eternity. A very pleasurable eternity as both would discover. Farmer kept one eye on the rear view wing mirror on the passenger side. He caught a glimpse of the man walking behind the car in the distance. Farmer pulled away and smiled. Pearl didn't know whether to smile or chastise him. She did neither but pretended as though it didn't happen. Fin went to sit up.

"No no. Don't get up yet," said Pearl. She looked over her shoulder and between the bucket seats. Farmer did the same from his side. They saw the man get into a dark green Jaguar in the distance. The Jaguar moved off and out of the rear entrance to the car park.

"He's gone," said Farmer, adjusting himself.

"Then we'd better be gone too," said Fin.

Farmer looked around just to make sure. The coast was clear. He sprang from the driver's seat and retrieved the ladder from underneath the car. Then he dumped it on the roof with a loud thud. It echoed off the buildings. He grabbed two bungy straps and weaved them through the ladder. Clipping them to the roof racks. Fin was waiting for him by the driver's side door with the seat folded forward. he dived into the back seat and sat down Kicking the monitor skywards. He could see another person milling round the dead body. The picture flickered and

the video recorder re-set as Fin started the car. She revved it and then accelerated from the car park in the same direction that the green Jaguar had vanished. As they hit the main boulevard in the industrial estate they saw two police cars rushing in. They were ignored as they edged out in an unhurried manner and blended in with the rest of the traffic.

"Wow. Did you see that," said Farmer excitedly on the way home.

"No I didn't," said Fin. "And neither did you if you know what's good for ya."

CHAPTER 4

"Well at least the cosmo boys are happy," blurted out Commander Pilgrim with a mouth full of food.

"How can you eat that stuff?" asked Frogleberg.

"What? You mean kraft dinner? Love the stuff. It's brain food this is. Why do you think ninety percent of Canadian university students eat it?"

Frogleberg couldn't argue with logic like that. There was the sound of running foot steps approaching from the corridor outside the mess hall. Ford, Frogleberg, Pilgrim and Straker all looked up expectantly as the footsteps slowed before entering. First a leg and then a person. And the person was Philip Salisman.

"Hello Philip," said Pilgrim surprised. "Like some Kraft Dinner?"

Philip approached the table at which Adrianna was sitting still out of breath. He looked in at what she was eating. "Err. Tempting but no thanks. I have a lactose intolerance."

Pilgrim shrugged her shoulders. "Suit yourself." she scooped up another spoon load of the gelatinous substance and was about to raise it to her mouth. "So what can we do you for Philip?"

"Err well I was thinking about your little problem."

"Which one was that Philip? I have so many I've lost count."

"Oh I mean the case of the vanishing telescopes. Oh! By the way. My wife thinks I'm doing something right. She doesn't know about all the training I've been going through. She just thinks I've been working out or something. I've been performing better too."

"You still doing the zonk?" said Frogleberg.

Philip gave him a dry look. "So what if I am? You met any women at rave parties lately, Bjorn?"

Frogleberg bit his lip.

"Ok, I didn't know this before but you've got bloody great big huge rocket motors on board those things. They're all tanked up right? And you've got the ability to upload new code to them right?"

"Yeah, that's correct," said Ford now very interested in what Salisman had to say.

"Ok so this may not be a solution but it may help you at least find out if it's a natural phenomenon causing your problems or not." He paused to see that he had everyone's attention.

Pilgrim gestured for him to continue with one hand as she stuffed more noodles into her mouth with the other.

"OK, so you get the software team to upload a new set of operating instructions to each remaining probe. As soon as they get sucked in a direction they should turn and fire all the thrusters against it. That should buy you some extra time. If they were getting hit by asteroids they'd be wiped out pretty much instantly. Unless for some reason they were in similar orbits or something right? Or! They could be coming into the influence of large asteroids or something and simply being attracted towards them."

"Or they could be being dragged away by UFOs," interjected Straker.

"Or they could be being sucked away by UFO's. Yes," reiterated Salisman.

"Yeah, I get it. neat plan," said Ford. "We never had to program in any stability thrusters because being that far away there was no real point. The whole project relies around the fact that we might get lucky. We might have a probe in range at any given time to home in on something."

"Yeah, exactly!" continued Salisman. "So all you need do is reprogram them so that they fight against any influence exerted on them. Now I've seen the designs now. The boosters are separate from the telescopes. As are the sensing arrays and the communications platforms. Quite an interesting little package. So whilst you're at it, you can set them up to swing the camera around to look at what's pulling them away . If you can, send back pictures with the finder-scopes as well.. That'll give you a wide range option. Transmit as much data back as possible in the short time you have. "

"Yeah, I get the picture," said Pilgrim. "You should have already thought of that Keith."

"That'd be a big job," said Keith Ford.

"Then you'd better get on it right away then hadn't you?" countered Pilgrim.

* * *

"Look If it's an asteroid we should get some pretty spectacular pictures of a rock right," said Salisman. "On the other hand we might get some pretty spectacular pictures of a UFO. Either way at least we'd know what was going on out there."

"How long will it take to get the code written?" asked Pilgrim nearing the end of her Kraft dinner.

"Well it's not as simple as that," said Ford. "We'd have to write the code, debug it at the consol and then load it into the simulator. Then we'd have to make sure that there are no major problems otherwise a severe crash could mean the loss of billions of dollars worth of hardware. It's not like we can just whip out there and re-boot them."

"Well actually you can re-boot them so they tell me," said Salisman.

Ford just stared at him. It got his normally dispassionate back up to have his technical authority usurped by a virtual outsider.

"No, I mean I talked to some of the programming guys and they showed me the system flow charts. There's an independent monitoring processor. When you update the code you don't mess with that. If everything else goes wrong there's a sequence you can send to the processor and it will re-set and re-load the basic operating system. Basically, re-booting the probe. These guys you've got working over there are the best, I gotta tell ya."

Even Ford was smiling now. "That's amazing. I never knew that. Software's so complex and I'm a hardware man basically. Beats the ol' Voyager days. I'll get on it right away. Would you care to assist?" said Ford to Salisman.

"Certainly doctor," said Philip with a smile.

"Ok guy's get on it," said Pilgrim. "Oh and Philip. Nice one."

The remaining three, Frogleberg, Pilgrim and Straker, finished their meals and sauntered back to Pilgrim's office. Where upon they confronted a very frustrated technician putting the finishing touches to his patch up job on Pilgrim's demolished terminal. Frogleberg looked at the terminal then looked at the technician and then back to the terminal again. The terminal was patched together with hundreds of bits of multi coloured electrical tape. Looking more patch job than terminal. The technician had joined together all the crushed up bits of plastic housing he could find and pasted them together like so many band-aid strips.

Frogleberg placed his hands over his eyes with a slap then slowly pulled his hand down his face. "I didn't mean it literally you know."

"But. But, you said,." stuttered the technician pointing at the terminal and back to Frogleberg.

Commander Pilgrim and stepped behind the desk and could see it was all working pretty well given what it had been though. She tapped the mouse and it came alive. She logged on

and everything worked as it should. "You've done a good job here. I'm impressed."

"You could have just got another one up from stores," said Frogleberg.

"Don't listen to him, you've done a wonderful job. How long did it take you?" said Pilgrim.

"Well. Err. Two hours almost." mumbled the technician not sure if he was being chastised or not.

"Of course you know she's only going to smash it up again, don't you?" said Frogleberg.

"Don't be stupid," said Pilgrim. "I'll treasure your work always. Thank you. Err now if you could excuse us please."

The technician bowed and scraped and made his exit. Even the hand over Straker's mouth could not hide the humour he found in the situation.

Commander Pilgrim proceeded to review the logs on her computer terminal and check to see if there were any events that needed urgent attention. She flipped through the file headings and came to one that read. "Alien propulsion system update." She clicked on it and waited for it to come up, expecting it to be some minor efficiency improvement to the, comparatively feeble attempt SHADO had made to emulate the UFO's propulsion engines. She read a little then pulled her head away from the screen to look at Frogleberg and Straker.

"Hey this looks kinda interesting." she said as she swung the terminal round so that the two approaching men could read it.

Just then Ford stepped through the still open door way.

"Commander I just..." He paused to look at the three of them milling round the beat up computer terminal. It had its patched up back facing him. "What the???" He stepped gingerly over to it and ran his hand across its patched up surface, feeling how flimsy it had become with only coloured electrical tape holding it together. "So this is the future of SHADO is it?" He paused to inspect the repair job a little more not realizing that they were actually looking at working data on the other side. Then he remembered what he had come in for. "Oh yeah. Commander, I need your authorization code to re-programm the remaining probes."

A chorus of "Shhhh" rang out from Frogleberg and Straker.

"Just a minute, Keith" said Pilgrim as she held her finger up to her lips. "Check this out in a minute."

"Hey, they've got an AVI of it here," shouted Frogleberg excitedly. "Let me see if I can run it."

"No no no." shouted Pilgrim waving her hands as she jumped up from her desk. "Put it on the big screen."

She reached for a button on the wall and a large projection screen unrolled out of the ceiling against the wall. From the centre of the ceiling a small square hatch opened and a single lens, LCD video projector extended through it. It locked into place and a bright light shone from it and projected the SHADO logo onto the screen.

"Punch it up," said Pilgrim but she could see that Frogleberg was already trying to find the address of the computer on the network, the computer that would display on the video projector. She could see that Frogleberg was fumbling. "Here let me do it." She sat back at her desk and made a grab for the computer terminal.

"Hold on," said Frogleberg. "I've almost got it." He made hit some triumphant keystrokes and the logo on the projection screen was replaced by the window of some AVI player software. "Besides Adrianna, You might break it again."

He smiled at her as she poked her tongue out at him but all eyes were turning towards the

projection screen if they had not turned already.

"Lights! Lights!" shouted Pilgrim. She jumped up to race for the dimmer switch herself but Ford got there first.

The lights began to dim just in time to see a picture of a lab. In the frame at the far wall was a woman in a lab coat. She turned toward camera and started walking toward it.

"Hey that's Virginia Lake isn't it?" said Straker.

"Sure is," said Ford.

"Where is this?"

"She works out of a lab in Australia now. But she's not working on propulsion as far as I am aware."

"Oh shit. I've got the wrong AVI," said Frogleberg as he returned to the terminal.

But the AVI continued. "I want to show you something," said Doctor Virginia Lake from the large screen. She opened her blouse to expose her bra. "Beautiful isn't it?" she boomed in 7 channel surround sound.

"Oh my god," said Straker trying to look away in embarrassment but too curious to look away for long.

"This bra is made of a new memory fibre material we've been messing with. This is the only practical application we have for it at the moment but the properties are bound to be really useful. "

She stepped back a little from the camera and rased her arms to midriff level to reveal she was holding a small remote control stick. She moved the thumb operated joy-pad and suddenly her breasts became pointed.

"I think I've got it," said Frogleberg.

"No leave it!" shouted Pilgrim back at him.

"Oh do we have to?" said Straker.

Ford was still too mesmerized by the image on the screen to utter anything.

They watched as Doctor Lake's breasts swirled round and around in response to her remote control manipulations. She had a huge grin on her face.

"I can have any shape breasts I want with just the one bra."

She made them pointed and then flat. Wide apart and close together. She swirled them again.

"That's gotta hurt," said Frogleberg.

"How would you know Bjorn? Your pecs aren't all that big. " said Pilgrim.

"I don't believe it," said Ford finally. "Is she? Um. Oh my god, she is. She's making them do a smiley face."

"Hey I can do that," said Pilgrim.

Straker had his hand over his eyes and was trying to bury his head in the corner of the room. "Can we please, for God sakes, have the real AVI back again?"

Frogleberg moused up to the stop icon on the screen and the sound and vision stopped. The SHADO logo returned. A few seconds later and a very different laboratory scene was projected.

"Remind me to doc her pay if that's what she gets up to," said Straker.

The screen showed a very large laboratory. Caged off areas in the background protecting the technicians and scientists from the dangerous equipment contained within. To the right were some control panels with a few people sitting in front of them. Monitoring something on computer terminals. Just beyond the consoles lay rows and rows of equipment racks. Some

only partially filled with equipment. All had flashing indicator lights, displays and a spider work of patch cables. A head bobbed up from underneath the camera's field of view. It was a man in a lab coat. He had black, curly unkempt hair. Wire in appearance and set off by a 3 day growth. He appeared even more dishevelled after he ran one hand across the top of his head and down the back in a symbolic preening gesture.

"Ok welcome to the second gravitic field array experiment. The first one nearly tore the chamber apart but we know that we had the phase wrong. That wouldn't necessarily be a problem in the real world. Just in here where we're trying to keep everything from escaping. It's a good thing we're way out here in the desert." He laughed uncontrollably in a manner that would give legitimate mad scientists a bad name. "Err. Follow me."

The camera jerked forward and upwards making it obvious there was a camera person toting a tripod. The view headed quickly toward the cage which was made from heavy duty cyclone fencing. There were two gates on the cage which were not locked. On one of them was a large, red sign which read. "Danger. Quantum event." And a logo that looked something like a "Y" shaped tuning fork.

The less than sane scientist opened the gates and walked through. The camera followed. The sound of whirring motors from cooling fans and air pumps becoming much louder. The scientist waited for the camera to reach him and said something but it was lost below the noise. He pointed at something. The camera swung round to reveal a person sized stainless steel hatch. It looked like a cross between a fermenting tank and an industrial refrigerator. In the centre of the hatch was a small round window. The camera moved up to the window and peered through it. The view was hazy and restricted but inside it was clear was a strange apparatus mounted on legs. On top of it were four arms mounted to a rotating platform. On the end of each arm was a thick round plate. The chamber itself was lined with similar plates around the walls. All seemed to be mounted on short stubby arms similar to the ones mounted on the device in the centre. The camera pulled away to reveal the scientist gesturing to follow him once again out of the caged area. The camera swung round and showed the scientist closing and latching the gate.

"When this thing fires up, if you get any closer than here it could really screw with your camera."

The scientist directed the camera person to swing the camera toward the console and its operator. Then one console in particular. The console had two large industrial joy sticks mounted into it at either end. In the centre were two track balls surrounded by other various knobs and switches. All flashing like Christmas tree lights. In front, standing up, was a video screen. There was a better view of the inside of the chamber on it.

The scientist tapped the video monitor. "It's all done with mirrors." he shouted. He turned to the woman sitting at the console. "Are we clear?"

She nodded.

"Then let's get this show underway shall we?"

The woman nodded again and began to pull a small lever toward her slowly. The camera moved in on the video monitor but still showed the joy sticks and other controls in frame. The woman placed her right hand on the right hand joy stick and continued to pull the lever down slowly. The video monitor showed the arms with plates attached begin to rotate. The apparatus began to wobble slightly as if slightly drunk on its legs for a moment but as the arms rotation sped up it became more stable. Like a spinning top. The hand of the scientist pointed towards a medium sized LED display that was mounted on the panel just underneath the monitor. It was

showing 26. Then 27 and then 28.

"That must be RPM," said Ford. Straker nodded.

It reached 50 RPM and the woman released her left hand from the lever. A second later it could be seen back in frame and heading to the left hand joy stick. A thumb hit a button on top of the joy stick and a clang like someone dropping four steel bars rang out. They could see four locking clamps on the legs blow open freeing the apparatus. The woman gently pulled back on the joy sticks and the apparatus began to rise of its platform, a motion smooth as though it was gliding on wires. It rose higher into the chamber. It could be seen that it was trailing an umbilical cable of some sort from between its four legs. Uncurling off the platform.

The woman released her right hand from the joy stick and rubbed it across one of the track balls. The camera angle changed on the monitor and was now looking up at the apparatus heading for the roof of the chamber. A chamber that was much taller than the initial guided tour had revealed. With both hands back on both joysticks she began to slowly manipulate them so that it flew forward. Then backward. To one side and then the other. Then it twisted in its heading. She flew it round the chamber but it became obvious that even as big as the chamber was, it wasn't big enough to fly this apparatus in properly.

It became too close to one of the walls and repulsed off it for reasons none of the four watching the video knew. Watching the screen within the screen intently they failed to notice the woman tugging back and forth on the joysticks. Obviously having difficulty maintaining control. By the time they noticed she had already lost control. There was a scraping of metal parts and then an explosion as the apparatus bounced off a wall and then up out of control. The walls seemed to buckle inwards but left the observers in Pilgrim's office with more questions.

The sounds of twisting metal and then metal parts crashing to the ground. As they looked the woman rose from her seat, obscured the camera slightly and was gone. They just caught a glimpse of the apparatus trapped between the rapidly approaching walls of the chamber, jam, stop, and explode throwing out fragments. The operator of the video camera swung it towards the caged area to see the chaos beyond the cyclone fencing. The scaffolding around the chamber beginning to be torn apart by forces unseen. Then the cyclone fencing it self began to buckle slightly. There was no more scene of the destruction as the camera person took flight towards a roller door in the far wall of the lab. Nothing but a blurred view of the journey but the sound of the structure being torn apart and rapidly being drowned out by a roaring sound until the camera reached beyond the roller door. The video froze there.

"Hold on," said Pilgrim. "That all happened a couple of weeks ago if I'm not mistaken. That was the lab in Australia they destroyed wasn't it?"

"Err I don't know," said Frogberg back fumbling through the computer records. "Ah yes. We're on the right track but wrong video. This was the earlier experiment."

"Still pretty impressive though," said Ford. "We've never seen an alien propulsion system gain thrust before."

"Of course that's another chunk out of your budget," said Straker insisting as usual, on playing devil's advocate.

Frogberg interjected before an argument broke out. "Take a look at this data. Perhaps you can decipher it for us Keith?"

He displayed a page of text up on the big screen. Keith and the others began reading it. Pilgrim looked at Straker and then at Frogberg who rased his eyebrows and smiled. They all turned to look at Keith Ford who was still reading the text which was accompanied by

seemingly meaningless diagrams.

"Well?" said Pilgrim impatiently.

" Well I'm not sure about all this quantum stuff." started Keith. "I'm not really up on that quantum stuff but it seems that the difference is in the fact that it's spinning."

"But I remember we tried that ages ago," said Straker.

"Yeah, but when we first tried it we had a single quantum panel making a spinning field. Here we've done it the alien way. Although I thought we tried that as well. Something's gotta be different."

"I've got the other MPEG file ready to run," said Frogberg.

Pilgrim nodded and the text window on the large screen was replaced by a blank video window. It began to roll. This time another lab. A fenced off area like before but no huge chamber or scaffolding. The same slightly mad scientist appeared in view. This time holding his camera at arms length and speaking into it.

"OK no-one was game enough to come in here with me. This lab, as you can see, use to be the hazardous chemicals lab. It's completely isolated and separate from the main complex. It's completely bio sealed but we're using it because it's far enough away from everything else that there won't be the need for an internal containment chamber. I've made a few modifications as well. There were a few oversights in the last design. We placed panels on the inside of the containment chamber. We were hoping to see the effects of external gravitic field influences. However it seemed they went quantum in sympathy. Don't you just hate that?"

He pointed the camera away from himself and around at the lab. Then at the device beyond the cyclone fencing. He continued his monologue as he approached the cyclone fence and showed a view of a brand new apparatus. This time there were 8 panels on 8 arms and the supporting legs were widened and strengthened against the extra load. "We found that it should be possible to create a negative mass this time too. Something that doesn't occur in nature. Well not as far as we know anyway. With eight panels the quantum field shouldn't collapse so quickly and should be a little more efficient. Negative mass should make the planet's gravity actually throw the device away with any luck. Kind of like as if it was being repelled by gravity instead of attracted to it. But we'll find that out. Because I'm the only one here I've got the computer to run the sequence. " He moved the camera to a rack of computer gear standing away from the cyclone fencing. Upon which he hit one of many buttons. The glowing red button turned green. The camera moved back to the apparatus which was beginning to spin up. After a few seconds the camera moved back onto the computer control panel and showed an LED display reach 25 and climb. It stopped at 50 as before.

"Oh by the way," the scientist added. " 50 RPM is a totally arbitrary figure. We're not entirely sure what speed they're suppose to spin at." The camera showed a finger hit another red, illuminated button which when depressed turned green. "Here we go. Sequence number one."

The apparatus begin to rise. No locking clamps to hold it on the ground this time. It simply lifted from the ground and moved 2 metres toward the 60 metre ceiling above and stopped. It was a perfect hover. "I have no way of knowing how big the quantum gravitonic field might be at the moment because we've got no real way of measuring it but I'd guess that it's about one and a half metres around the apparatus in a cardioid pattern. "

"That's a heart shaped pattern," said Ford.

"Yes I know what it is," said Pilgrim angry at having been told.

The camera now showed the scientist's finger back on the control panel and zeroing in on

another button. It also changed from red to green whilst the previous one turned back to red. "The maneuvering test." he added, annotating the previous action before the camera swung back to the apparatus. Capturing it in the motion of moving forward then backward then side to side. Then repeating the motion. He pressed pointed the camera once more at the control panel. "Now this is where we get to try the negative mass idea. This should improve efficiency." The camera remained trained on the apparatus. A click was heard as he hit the button.

The apparatus wobbled a little and then began to rise. Rising at an exponential rate until suddenly it shot toward the ceiling and crashed into it with a huge explosive noise. Chunks of white painted concrete began to fall as the apparatus tried to embed it self into the ceiling like a cork screw. It failed. Bending and warping and crushing itself. The apparatus lost all rotational speed and began its descent to the floor slightly before a blue coloured vaporous ring extended from its remains and then it exploded. The video stopped there.

"They're good a losing labs aren't they." were the first words uttered by Straker.

"Err they're hailing that as a success, ladies and gentlemen," said Frogleberg.

"Tell me, Bjorn. Are they developing a propulsion system or a weapons system out there?" said Pilgrim sarcastically.

"Hey shoot the messenger why don't you," Frogleberg said, hands on hips. "I think that's pretty impressive personally."

"Very impressive actually." interjected Ford. "Looks like they've cracked one of the biggest nuts."

"If they can ever tame it," said Straker.

"Hey the aliens tamed it didn't they?" said Frogleberg. "Hey I wonder how fast a thing like that can go?"

"And how much fuel it would consume?" said Straker again.

"Don't be so negative General," said Pilgrim. "This is actually quite exciting. We've all seen what those UFOs can do. Fly in, stop on a dime and generally give our fighters hell. I want some prototypes made up and I want the made up fast."

CHAPTER 5

Paul Farmer was in his shop. He had just served a local Lebanese lady who had a CD jammed in her CD player. The CD was a writable type with a cheap stick-on label which had partially peeled off. It had stuck to the roof of the CD tray when she went to eject it, peeled off even more and jammed. The CD player eventually shut down. Farmer put it on the counter there and then, whipped the lid off and immediately saw the problem. It was a simple matter of un-fouling the offending label and then slowly, manually ejecting the CD tray to retrieve the CD. He was worried that the CD player may have burnt out its motor continuously trying to eject the CD but after a quick test it proved OK. He replaced the lid and using some special glue he had, reglued and pressed the CD label. It took him all of 5 minutes to fix and he made no charge for his services. The woman tried to offer him something but he refused saying. "It's nice when a five minute job really is a five minute job."

He had just returned to the back room and to work on an old analogue colour television set when a synthesized voice rang out. "There's someone at the door." He was in an awkward position trying to balance a screw into its hole and didn't want to miss. He took his time coming to the counter and the door monitor spoke once more. "I said. . . There's someone at the door!" The screw slipped and there was no point in trying again till later. He cursed under his breath and raised himself from the work bench.

"Paul? Are you there?" He heard Pearl's voice say.

He stepped through into the space behind the counter.

"Hi Fin. Hi Pearl. Wassup?"

"We brought your stuff back but we still can't get in to retrieve the camera. " said Pearl.

"Too many cops." added Fin. "We're gonna have another go tomorrow. "

"Yeah, that's no problem," said Farmer. "You needn't have worked about that. There's no hurry."

"Well actually." started Pearl in her sweetest tone. "We were wondering if you could do us another favour possibly?" She battered her eyelids in a most persuasive manner.

"Now that would depend?"

"Well we were wondering if you could make a copy of the tape? Only don't tell anyone."

"Well sure, I can do that. No problems."

"Can you do it now? Only we're in a bit of a hurry," said Fin.

"Well it'll take a little time to set up. And I can only do it down to digital 8. I only have one other VHS machine."

"What about this one here?" Fin dumped the cardboard box with the video and the TV on the table.

"Oh yeah,. Forgot about that one. It'll still take a while to set up. Do you have the tape with you?"

"Yeah, we do," said Pearl. "Only we don't want anything to happen to it. " She pulled it from her hand bag and passed it to him. He inspected it from her.

"What was that all about anyway. I hope I'm not involved in anything over my head?"

"Well, yes and no." started Pearl reluctantly. "Let me put it this way. What happened surprised us all. It was not what we were expecting. And not why we were there."

"You're better off not knowing," said Fin. "Come to think of it I wish we didn't know either."

"And who's idea was it in the first place, Fin?" Pearl turned to Farmer. "You know she

wanted us to wait there in the broom cupboard. Idiot!"

"Hey, don't call me an idiot. At least I had an idea."

"Ladies, Ladies, please," interjected Farmer. "I take it you want an insurance policy. "

"Yeah something like that," said Pearl having calmed down some.

"Ok I'll get it done as quick as I can. Can you come back tonight and pick it up?"

They agreed and left him with the tape to copy. It was just after closing time. Paul Farmer had just closed the door and was drawing the curtains when the Lebanese woman knocked on his door.

"We're closed." mouthed Farmer but he opened the door anyway. "Too helpful for my own good," he thought.

Without a word the woman handed him a large wicker basket covered with a red checkered table cloth. Confused about what she wanted he took it thinking there must have been a whole stereo in there to fix.

"I hope you like Lebanese food," said the woman in her heavy Lebanese accent. She lifted the table cloth to reveal a spread, the likes of which would take him the better part of a week to eat. Farmer was speechless.

The woman just smiled. "You eat." and walked off.

"Err, thank you." Farmer called after her.

She waved as she disappeared past Fitz's record shop and back into the dwindling evening crowd.

Farmer shrugged his shoulders. "One good turn." he thought as he closed the door, picked up the basket again and took it with him to his upstairs apartment. He waited till 8 PM before eating, thinking that Pearl and Fin would arrive and they could help him eat it but they didn't show up. He thought it strange as he watched the 9 PM news. A report said that the police had no clear leads as to a motive behind the killings a few days earlier. "If only the police had what I have right here." He thought but it only reminded him of Pearl and Fin and that it was strange that neither had showed up.

He paced the shop floor for a while and heard some faint techno reggae music coming from Fitz's basement. He went to his own basement and knocked on the adjoining door. At one time the shops had been one and the basements connected. The music was loud in the studio. "A session or a full re-mix," he thought. He wasn't sure if anyone could hear him above the music. Whilst he waited he looked over at the rear wall of the basement, behind which was a room that only he knew existed. He had found it by accident when he was setting up his store room down there.

He wondered if Fitz's basement had a similar room but was not game to find out since it was his little secret. The room was run down but he had patched it up, run power to it and made sure it remained concealed. He had set up a secret workshop in there. He didn't know why exactly as he had nothing to hide. But it felt right to do so. He remembered the copy of the video he had made. He thought it might be a good idea to place one in there just in case. Instead he knocked on the door again and a voice shouted back from beyond it.

"Alright. Alright. We'll only be another half an hour." It was the voice of Damon. Fitz's offsider.

"Nah man it's me. I just thought I'd like to come and listen for a while."

The door latch clicked and then the door knob turned. The music became louder as the door opened. "Oh right man sorry. Sure come in." Damon ushered him through and left the door open. Damon was a short black guy with dreads and what looked to Farmer to be a tea

cosy on his head. He was a nice guy though and Farmer got along with very well. They often had jokes at Fitz's expense behind his back.

"Man you guys make some wicked shit down here. You never hear stuff this good on the radio."

"Yeah, corse. The radio plays shit man. You know that. Independence man. That's where it's at. No suits drivin' this gig man."

He looked out through the control room window into the studio to see a tall black guy and a stocky white guy, both with dreads, surrounded by racks of synthesis equipment, keyboards and drum machines. The tape machine was rolling and they were listening to play back on sets of headphones. Fitz and another man were sitting at the desk listening through the monitors. Farmer pointed at the two in the studio with a questioning expression.

"It's Glo Funk. We just got a distribution deal through Funkacide in the US. These guys could be big," said Damon.

Fitz turned to see who he was shouting at. He smiled and raised his hand in a high five gesture though there was too much between them for them to actually connect. Farmer reciprocated. They were all pretty busy and Farmer was getting into the groove. Another 30 seconds and the song ended.

"Hey man how's it doin'?" said Fitz as he rewound the tape machine. "I hear yo' be helpin' Pearl 'n' Fin man. Yo' wanna be watchin' them too. They'll lead yo'll astray."

"Oh I think they already done that. They're hard to resist I can tell ya."

Fitz through his head back and laughed. The other man exited the room to go and talk to the talent in the studio.

Farmer changed the subject. "Can I have a read through your CD collection?"

"Sure man. Go ahead," said Damon.

Farmer walked back behind the racks at the back of the control room where there was a small space full of shelves. Across two of those spaces were rows of CDs. And impressive collection dating back to when CDs were first introduced in the 1980s.

"Ok this is the last take for tonight," said Fitz. "Tomorrow we'll get onto the vocals Ok."

Farmer stayed to listen to the final take go down. Which it did without a hitch.

"You guys into lebo food?" said Farmer. "Only I got more Lebanese food up there than I can eat."

"Nar man. We wanna get home and get some sleep. It's been a long day," said Fitz. "But thanks for asking."

They were about to leave. The system had been all but shut down.

"Hey man can we borrow your burner tomorrow night?" Asked Fitz of Farmer. Farmer didn't know what he meant. "I mean your CD burner. If I bring the DAT deck up can we blast off a couple of copies of this?"

"Oh yeah, sure. Any time. Not a problem." They said their farewells and Damon bolted the door behind him. He could hear a scraping sound as Damon shifted a rack back up against the door. Damon had to keep the rack there to reach the main power switch for the studio. A switch that Farmer had installed for them.

He went back to the upstairs apartment and put the food away. Some in the fridge and some in the bread cupboard. He wrapped the rest up and left it on his kitchen table. He saw no point in staying up any longer so he went to bed. He dreamt that he was flying. He was looking though a window and there were stars moving beyond it. He was floating. He saw the earth below him. He noticed he was tied up like a straight jacket. He couldn't move. It was

suffocating him. Then he was falling. Becoming hotter and hotter. He couldn't escape the heat. It was burning him up. He tossed and turned in bed till he dreamt he hit the ocean and woke up. Sitting straight up in bed he realised he was sweating. He had become so hot in bed that the perspiration had stuck all his bed cloths to his skin. He sat bolt upright then, after ungluing the sheets from his legs, swung himself around and sat on the side of his bed. he placed his head in his hand. "Why do I have these dreams?" He said to himself out loud.

The next day was largely uneventful. The usual enquiries. A customer brought in a personal MPEG player to be fixed. The headphone cable needed repairing but he suspected a faulty hard drive. He had explained that he didn't have a spare PCMCIA hard drive to suit it on hand and that he would have to get one in. Later in the afternoon he realized he could plug it into Fitz's lap top when he saw him that evening and test it that way. He fixed the television he was repairing and started work on a microwave oven. Still no sign of Pearl and Fin. The day went by uneventfully until right on closing time. Two men wearing plain black suits walked into the shop just as Farmer was closing up for the night. One was tall and slim whilst the other was very stocky. Both in their mid 30s. The slim one showed Farmer some kind of credentials from a wallet but he didn't have time to read it.

"We're from MI6. We believe you've been video taping things you shouldn't have," said the Slim one.

"What?" said Farmer trying to remain poker faced but thinking fast.

"You heard me sunshine. The video. Where is it."

"What is this something to do with a customer or something?"

The slim one lost his patience quickly and grabbed Farmer by the collar. Pushing him up against the counter.

"Don't fuck with me. We found your camera. We have your girl friends. Now give us the fucking video."

"Look I just built up a camera for a customer. I lent them a video machine and they brought it back already. But there was no video tape. They must have kept it."

The slim one snapped his fingers and called the stocky one over who immediately grabbed Farmer and threw him over the counter. He crashed into a pile of boxes and some stock items on shelves against the wall. The shelves collapsed raining down batteries, connector cables and all manner of lose items. Farmer just lay there wondering what to do next.

"They told us they left it here boyo so give it to us. Now!"

"They might have left it here how the hell would I know. Take a look around. Does it look like I can keep track of everything?"

The slim man snapped his fingers at the stocky one again who walked casually round the other side of the counter and dragged Farmer violently to his feet. Hanging onto him like a prisoner.

"Let's take a look shall we."

Farmer wondered if the stocky man could actually speak since it was only the slim man who seemed to be doing all the talking. The slim man followed the stocky man round behind the counter and into the back room. The stocky man dragged Farmer in behind him. The Slim man started swiping TVs and other repair jobs off the benches along with the equipment. One of the televisions' picture tubes imploded then exploded showering glass everywhere. This seemed to make the slim man even more angry and he started dragging equipment and boxes from shelves. Spewing their contents onto the floor. He kicked through some of the debris.

"I can see you like your job," said Farmer putting up the best fight he could think of.

The stocky man elbowed Farmer across the back of the head. Farmer would have fallen to the floor but for the fact that he was still being held by the collar from behind. The forward thrust nearly choking him until he regained his balance.

"We'll try upstairs," said the slim man.

After being dragged up stairs, Farmers' apartment suffered much the same fate except that the stocky man joined in the fun. Cupboard doors ripped clean off instead of being opened. A stereo system smashed. His computer kicked over and jumped on. Farmer was pleased in a way. They had smashed up the table where the two video machines were set up to duplicate the tape before they could put two and two together and realize that he had been copying the tape. They went into his bedroom and tore the sheets from his bed. After briefly threatening Farmer with it, the slim man took a kitchen knife and slashed his mattress up. Then he turned the bed over completely. The slim man failed to find a video tape let alone the video tape.

He grabbed Farmer again. "Where is it, you piece of shit?"

He looked around the apartment once more and then decided to check down stairs once more. The stocky man gave Farmer a shove at the top of the stairs. Farmer lost his balance and the stocky man lost his grip. Farmer plunged head long down the narrow stair case. Trying once to grip the only hand rail but failing. He fell head first and rolled down the stairs. He felt the first time his head hit the stairs. He saw the stairs coming the second time but didn't feel his head hit. Nor the third time as he was unconscious. For a second, he thought he was something else. There was a girl. Someone he loved very much. He thought he could remember her name but the girl faded. Then for a second he thought he could remember his real name but like the girl it faded without a trace.

He saw water. He was standing on top of a ship. Perhaps an aircraft carrier. The image faded into some kind of air craft. He saw clouds moving past him and he was among them. Then he felt pain. Then he felt someone dragging him across the floor. Then he saw the face of the slim man as he slapped him.

"Wake up you bastard. You didn't tell us you had a cellar. "

Farmer was too weak to walk at first so the stocky man all but carried him down into the basement. Once again the kicking and thrashing began but by this time Farmer didn't care. After spilling the contents of nearly all his carefully sorted parts the slim man tried the connecting door into Fitz's studio.

"What's in here?"

"I think it goes to the basement next door. I don't know . It's always been locked."

"Gimme a hand will ya?" said Slim to Stocky as he pulled as hard as he could on the door knob. The stocky man dropped Farmer on the floor and walked to help just as the door knob broke off in Slim's hand sending him crashing into the pile of rubble he had created. He picked himself up and kicked Farmer in the guts.

"You bastard. Now where's the tape?"

Farmer knew that he wasn't going to give up unless he found the tape. "It's in there." he said pointing to the back wall.

Both men looked around but couldn't see it.

"there's another room. Just move that shelf and slide the wall back."

They both poked around for a moment and then discovered Farmer's secret hide out. There, sitting on the bench, plain as day, were both videos. The original and the copy.

"That's much better," said Slim as he snatched them up. He returned to Farmer waving the

video tapes triumphantly at Farmer. "Now if you had told me that in the first place you could have saved yourself a lot of trouble."

He snapped his fingers again as he walked up the stairs to the ground floor. Once again the speechless stocky man grabbed Farmer by the scruff and dragged him to his feet. Then continued to drag him up stairs. Farmer felt the urge to fight the man almost as if he knew how but he was too weak. The blow to his head had sent his vision blurred.

"Wait here. I'll get the car," said Slim to Stocky when they reached the top of the stairs.

Slim exited the shop but Stocky didn't take his grip from Farmer. Farmer said nothing during the five minute wait until he saw a black Jaguar pull up out the front. Slim Got out and went to the trunk. He opened it and pulled out two gerry cans. He slammed the boot down and carried them into the shop.

"What are you doing?" said Farmer struggling at his restraint.

"We just wanna make sure there are no more copies left," said Slim. He poured petrol down the stairs into the basement. then he went up stairs and poured petrol around the apartment. For a moment Farmer felt less helpless. Like he suddenly knew what to do. He elbowed Stocky and for a moment stocky lost his grip but soon regained it after another blow to the back of Farmer's head. Slim came down the stairs and splashed what remained of the petrol around the ground floor shop. He gestured to Stocky and Stocky dragged Farmer toward the front door. Farmer turned in stocky's grip to see Slim pull out a cigarette lighter and set flame in motion.

Farmer screamed as he saw flames shoot upstairs and down. "No"

Stocky king hit Farmer over the head again and everything went black.

CHAPTER 6

Commander Pilgrim was sitting in the mess hall. It was nearing the end of lunch time. A bowl of half eaten Kraft Dinner in front of her as she read a news paper. There were a lot of staff still having their lunch at the time and it was as noisy as any lunch time food hall. The menus were still out and the chefs were serving up their usual international cuisine for the stragglers and people, who for one reason or another, their lunch time did not fit into the regular schedule. The rest were just kicking back before it was time to go back on duty again.

The lunchtime crowd were usually more noisy than this but they were aware that their commander was among them and knew to be on their best behaviour. Even though there was laughing and she could hear a friendly argument between a group of scientists over neo-Darwinism. She looked up at the sound of someone banging a vending machine and caught the eyes of Frogleberg staring back at her.

"Yes?" she said slightly annoyed at being stared at.

"Sorry I was just trying to read the front page. Is it true?"

"Is what true" she said as she folded over the paper to remind herself of what was on the front page.

"Has Gates really been assassinated?"

"Yeah Apparently so. I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner."

"So was it a terrorist group or something? Has anyone claimed responsibility?"

Pilgrim laughed. "No no. Turns out it was some woman from Minnesota. Apparently one of Bill's operating systems trashed her life's work and she just went postal and shot him."

"Who would have guessed hey?"

"Yeah, apparently she had had nothing but trouble with it ever since she upgraded. Finally she watched five years of work go down the drain and she lost it. She jumped on a plane and flew to Seattle and killed him. I think they're going to give her a medal or something."

"What?" said Frogleberg about to snatch the paper from her to check for himself.

"I'm joking Bjorn. She turned the gun on herself."

"Poor woman."

Pilgrim smiled briefly. "Now what did you wanna see me about?"

"Oh nothing really. I just came in for something to eat. But I was going to tell you that they've finished re-programming the fast-track probes and they were uploading to them when I left."

"Gee that was quick," said Pilgrim folding her news paper and placing it on the table next to her. "I thought it would take a few more days at least. They did simulate the code before..."

Frogleberg interrupted. "Yes of course they did. I guess this is what you get for enlisting some of the best minds on the planet. Apparently it wasn't as hard as we would have thought. I don't know much about programming but apparently there were already software tools written into the original software to allow for this kind of thing. So all they had to do was tell the probes what they wanted doing. I guess it would have been so much harder if they were running windows for spaceships like the Hubble does."

Pilgrim raised a brief "Ha!" as she considered eating some more Kraft Dinner. She toyed with it a bit with her spoon.

"How can you eat that stuff?" said Frogleberg screwing up his nose at the thought.

"Ever since they put it on the menu it just sort of brings back a few memories. Hey they

said they were going to show us the modified interceptor with the alien propulsion device fitted to it this afternoon."

"Oh right. Good one. That was a bit quick wasn't it."

"Well those tests we saw yesterday were actually a week ago. They already had a team working on a retrofit on moon base. It's almost ready for a trial run. All they had to do was wait for the test results from the lab and make the necessary adjustments."

"Who are we going to get to test pilot a thing like that? are you gonna order someone to do it? We all saw what happened in the lab."

"Not an issue. Computer." she said with a mouth full of Kraft Dinner.

Frogleberg repulsed at the sight. "I think I'll just go see what's cookin'. Or what's burning as the case maybe."

A short time later she heard some raised voices from behind the refectory counter. She looked up to see Frogleberg arguing with one of the chefs. She couldn't make out what was said and they disappeared back into the kitchen again and all went quiet for a time. She looked up again a few minutes later to see one of the chefs storm out throwing his chef's hat on a counter as he did. She thought that was odd and was about to look back at her paper when two more chefs and one of the serverly attendants ran out of the refectory and disappeared out into the corridor.

She looked around and noticed a few other people curious about the proceedings but she was too interested in finding her horoscope in her news paper. A few minutes later she looked up at the sound of several people at tables close to the refectory quickly packing up their things and heading out of the mess hall. The last group almost running. As the last person reached the door Pilgrim noticed that she had her hand over her nose and mouth. A few seconds later Frogleberg emerged from the kitchen with a bowl. he headed over to her table and as he did so, she began to smell something that reminded her of a urine soaked public lavatory that hadn't been cleaned for years. As Frogleberg grew nearer the odor became stronger. She noticed people at tables around her beginning to screw up their noses. Frogleberg reached her table and smell was almost overpowering.

"What the?" were the only words she could muster as Frogleberg placed his bowl of substance on the table opposite her.

"Surströmming" said Frogleberg. "I've been saving it for a special occasion."

"Ah! Oh. What the?" Pilgrim couldn't seem to utter a coherent sentence. Instinctively placing her hand over her face and beginning to feel sick.

"It's a southern Swedish delicacy." He held out a fork full of jellified, yellowing substance in her direction. "Here try some."

She kicked back in her chair instinctively as if she had been offered raw sewage. Which wasn't far from the truth. "Oh my god. What is that stuff?" said Pilgrim. "Second thoughts. I don't wanna know. That's revolting!" She leapt up and began searching for her things.

"Mmmm Yum," said Frogleberg as he took another mouthful. "you don't know what you're missing. "

"What did you call that? Vomiting?"

"Surströmming," said Frogleberg digging in for yet another mouthful. "Fermented Baltic Sea Herring. I had a couple of tins of the stuff stashed out the back there for ages. This one's a particularly good vintage from 2002. Three years old. The longer you keep it the better it tastes. A few baked potatoes and some dill. It's not quite right but it's close enough to remind me of home. I couldn't find any snaps. You're s'posed to drink schnapps with it but all I could

find was this sarsaparilla."

Pilgrim put her hand back over her mouth. "I think I'm gonna be sick. I think I'll see you back in my office when you've finished." She got up to leave.

"Well you've got your favourite food." laughed Frogleberg. "Why is it that I always seem to eat alone these days?"

She only took a few paces down the corridor when she saw General Straker and Colonel Ford cross at the next junction. Straker in standing mode in a new high-tech, electric wheel chair-like device. It was compact and light weight and enabled him to behave almost as though he had his legs back. They were just back from the secret office entrance and top-side duties. Pilgrim just had time to compose herself from her aromatic ordeal.

"Hey wait up." she called to them.

They stopped and looked back to focus on who it was.

"Ah Commander," said Straker pivoting to face her and waving his finger to vaguely point. "We were just coming to look for you. The lecture theatre's all set up and ready to view the tests."

"Oh right. That was quick," said Pilgrim as she approached them.

"Well you said you wanted it as soon as possible," said Ford.

"Yeah, I expected we'd be still waiting for the test run tomorrow morning. I was gonna order up a sleeping bag." She smiled sarcastically. She caught up and they began to walk together.

"We still might have to camp out." continued Ford. "They said it would be ready in about ..." He looked at his watch. "Oh about thirty minutes."

"Someone better tell Bjorn then." She directed her self at Keith Ford. "Hey I thought we were s'pose to get some kind of star-ship communicator system down here? Especially to help with this kinda thing."

"What?" said Ford without a clue what she was talking about.

"You know," said Pilgrim tapping her chest. "Bleep Beam me up Scotty."

"Oh you mean the personnel tracking system? Nar that wasn't much good in the end. Big security problems. There isn't a military equivalent so we just had to give up on that."

"This was the electrical interference problem you were talking about?"

"Oh not just that but the system worked like a cellular phone network and could possibly be picked up top-side. But more than that. 'Percom'!The company that makes the system, wouldn't sell it to us without insisting that they come and install it. So it looks like we're back to intercoms and pagers."

"What about developing a system ourselves?"

"We thought of that initially but the cost of R&D alone would be perhaps 5 times what the entire system costs to install. And that system isn't cheap. So it's all on the back burner."

They reached the junction which lead to the control centre and her office. Pilgrim Automatically began to walk in that direction before realizing that the others had gone in the opposite direction. Straker whistled back at her. She spun around, realized which direction she should have been going in and ran a few paces to catch up with them again.

"Hey I just noticed something General," said Pilgrim looking over his new contraption. "You're not using any controls. You've had lots of new wheel chairs but always with controls. What's the story?"

"The lab boys and girls have been working on this idea for years but this is the first reliable prototype and I'm the first to get to beta test it. So If I get stuck or fall over, you better

be around to pick me up."

"So how are you controlling it? Not with your voice either I noticed."

"There are some electrodes planted in what use to be my legs. I've had them for 3 years now although this is the second set."

"You mean this is the result of the bio electric research they've been doing?"

"Yeah, that's right. It's nothing we can use in combat or anything because it's still unproven."

Ford interjected. "And it's pretty hard to test this kind of thing in the short term."

"Yeah, that's right but they said they'd have a go at designing me a new mobility system since I was going to be working back at SHADO HQ for an indefinite period. Works pretty well don't you think?"

Pilgrim acknowledged by further inspecting the machine and nodding. "So were you the first of the Guinea Pigs?"

"No. Not at all. You remember Peterson? Lost his arm when that UFO came down in South Africa about 8 years ago. "

"Yeah, but he didn't actually lose his arm," said Ford.

"No exactly. But we still had to put him on lite duties. Well he still can't lift much with that arm but at least it's not a dead weight for him to carry round now."

"You mean," said Pilgrim.

"Yeah, they put in a bionic patch in his upper arm. It carries nerve impulses down to his hands. And A small hydraulic system to help replace the muscle tissue he lost. All works quite well now apparently."

"But wouldn't his hand muscles have atrophied after all this time?"

"Yeah, that's why it was a bit of a gamble because they knew the impulses were getting through but they had to wait to see if the physiotherapy worked. And it did. And there's others as well. There's no shortage of volunteers round here it seems. We even had fully healthy people lining up to see if they could get any kind of devices implanted in their bodies."

"I guess it's like the ultimate body piercing?" said Pilgrim rubbing her chin wondering what kind of implant she could have. "I think I'd like carbon fibre fingernails. Razer sharp and retractible like cat's claws." She made a cat scratching motion with her hands.

"You're a real nasty piece of work when you wanna be. You know that?" said Straker.

They reached another corridor junction and turned into it. This corridor was five times wider and significantly higher. Rails ran near the ceiling of the new, larger tunnel which provided tracks for a small, hand operated gantry crane which could run the entire length of the corridor. At the end of which was the opening into one of the cavernous areas. This one specially designed to connect with one of the studio sound stages above. A very large scissor-lift platform allowing very large objects to be imported into the base from the real-world above.

The sound stage used only for storage all its life. In order to maintain its cover, from time to time, SHADO personnel would be employed, to shift studio equipment in and out of there. An effort to make it seem as though it was used by the studio. Such that none of the civilian staff would notice when nuclear reactor components or a large main-frame computer was being shipped in or out. The corridor was built through the centre of the cavern turning it partially 'C' shaped around it. To the left was the utility substation and stores. Including SHADO's second sub-critical nuclear fusion reactor. A process still officially under development in the rest of the world but alive and well in most of SHADO's larger facilities. A

nuclear process safer than any other power generation method and almost harmless in terms of radiation and waste products.

"You know it thrills me every time I walk past that door," said Straker. "That reactor is a piece of genius. And we got the process to work and put it into practice before anyone else."

"Only we can't tell anyone about it," said Ford.

"Ah well. I'm sure the rest of the world will catch up eventually. After all it was a civilian scientist who discovered the process."

"You know they're building a sub critical test reactor in Germany at the moment?"
Continued Ford.

"Oh right. I didn't know that."

"Yeah, but it's actually smaller than any of ours. and they're having problems working it out."

"Smaller than ours except for the space-ship sized ones we've got working in the lab," said Pilgrim.

"Err yeah,. Except for those," said Ford.

They passed the next door on the right which lead to the computer labs and computer centre. As well as the strategy and logistics departments. As well as miscellaneous laboratories. Finally nearing the end of the corridor, and the doors to the scissor -lift was another set of double doors on the right. Inside of which was a small airport lounge and yet more doors leading into the lecture theatre. A large auditorium wedged in the corner of the cavernous area. A raked back, amphitheater like seating arrangement holding 200 seats and spread 90 degrees around a central stage.

They entered at stage level which had a podium and some benches standing in the middle of it. The stage it self was set level with the entrance but could be raised and lowered as required. At the back of the stage, a very large projection screen was sliding from a slot in the ceiling where it had laid rolled up waiting for just such an occasion. Various video monitors hung from the ceiling also over the top of the audience and the backs of each seat supported a small data terminal servicing the row behind. The data terminals for the front row were mounted on the end of their arm rests like school desks.

They stopped just inside the door and surveyed the growing audience. There were about 30 people sitting in various seats. All talking a constant ambient babble. It was like the mess hall had been ten minutes before but the babble seemed more intense and less casual. Philip Salisman made a dash toward them. Cornering them before they took their seats.

"I wanted to catch you." he said to Pilgrim. "I want to run an experiment the next time we detect a UFO moving."

"What kind of experiment," said Ford before Pilgrim could answer.

"I want to prove or disprove that the aliens have satellites in orbit or not. "

"How do you plan to do that?" said Straker impatiently. Straker didn't like Salisman much. He was far from a military type but knew that he had to be tolerated. Straker would have preferred that he not be given the latitude or clearance privileges he had but also knew that Salisman's fresh approach was solving many problems and was fast becoming a valuable asset. Even if a rather eccentric one.

"Well if we can scramble some jet fighters over the horizon but get them to head in their direction so that they will have to avoid them. The only way they could see them is with a satellite in orbit. Then if we can find that satellite, we'll know what to look for. There's no way they could have found us in the Lear jet that time out of Iceland without a satellite of some

kind."

"Yeah I guess so. But maybe they have some other way of doing these things?" said Straker eager to prove his theory worthless..

"I think the aliens would have the same limitations as us in seeing round corners. Don't you?"

Straker couldn't argue with that. "Point taken Mister Salisman." Straker looked up and saw a face in the crowd he hadn't seen in a very long time. But a face that he had seen on a video screen only the day before. "Well I'll be darned." he said as he lost all interest in Salisman and his ideas. He started to step toward her. "Virginia Lake"

Ford heard the name mentioned and began to scan the crowd. He saw her stand from her group and begin to make her way toward them. She had spotted them only moments before.

"Ok Philip," said Pilgrim. "Tell us about it later, okay?."

Straker had begun to navigate his way around Pilgrim's position.

"Careful!" said Pilgrim as she grabbed Salisman's arm and pull him out of the way.

"Wow! Nice set of wheels man," said Salisman as Straker motored past him.

"Great to see you guys," said Virginia Lake as she came into range. "You're lookin' great in that new fancy wheel chair Ed."

"Virginia. How are ya doing?" beamed Ford. "We were only thinking about you yesterday. We saw your tits!" He paused for a second as Straker placed his hand over his eyes and involuntarily moved a pace backwards in his wheel chair device. Lake's smile turning to confusion very fast.

"Errrrr I mean. We saw your bra experiment." Ford desperately trying to maintain his dignity. Behaving as if no-one had heard his Freudian slip. One look at Straker sniggering behind his masked face put paid to that possibility as Virginia Lake and then Straker burst into open laughter.

"I do believe he's turning red," said Lake to Straker.

Pilgrim didn't hear what all the laughing was about but she stepped in to grab Straker to stop him from falling, top heavy from his up-right personal mobility. With her help, Straker steadied himself.

"Ah and you must be the new commander. Commander Pilgrim I presume," said Lake extending her hand. "I'm Virginia Lake."

Pilgrim extended her own hand to shake hands with Lake. "Yes I've read your file. I've wanted to meet you for a long time. Ed's told me all about you."

Lake looked back at Straker. "She's a bit young for you isn't she, Ed?" She paused as Straker tried to compose himself. Her question, and its implications taking him by surprise. "I mean She's a bit young to be a commander. I assume you chose her. She must be very talented."

It was Straker's time to turn red. "Don't worry about Colonel Lake, Commander. She's always like that. Of course she's talented. She wouldn't have got the top job if she weren't. "

"Actually it was because no-one else wanted the job and I'm just the sucker who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but after five years I'm starting to learn a trick or two."

"It must be nearly that long since we've seen you Virginia," said Ford.

"Longer actually Keith. I've been in Australia for 8 years now. I came back when... Well you know. When the business went down."

Everyone impulsively looked at Straker's Personal mobility device. Not wishing to make it obvious but obvious just the same.

"That's a nifty contraption Ed I must say." continued Lake as she began to look the device up and down. "How on Earth do you control it?"

"It's experimental," said Straker. "It's part of our bio-electronics research but it works pretty well for a prototype don't you think? And I have to ask. What 'n' blazes was that thing with the bra all about? A little misappropriation of funds?" he smiled at her. He didn't mean it.

"Why not at all commander. Oops I mean General isn't it. Not at all General. In conjunction with the materials science labs we developed a controllable fibre. It's kind of based on micro machine technology. Has a hundred and one applications."

"Including undergarments I take it." interjected Straker.

"Well yes as it happens. A little problem you boys wouldn't understand. But its main uses are in things like unfolding solar panels and folding them back up again. We can unfold very large structures which could not remain formed on earth. But in micro gravity they can be folded and shaped at will. All folded out from some very small packages which means they take up very little room on a shuttle."

"What problem?" said Ford.

"Oh you had to ask didn't you Keithy boy. You just had to ask. Ok then if you must know. Women with large breasts have a great deal of difficulty in zero G. They end up having to strap them down or they just become uncontrollable. But either way it's very uncomfortable. So for years we've wanted to find a solution. So when we developed the micro fibre, I side tracked it to develop a space-friendly bra. It's obviously not going to be a top priority project or anything but I said I'd look into it. As it happens it's coming along just fine. The final product isn't going to be like the one in the video. I just made that to demonstrate to the GRG. A bit of a joke really."

"GRG?" said Straker. This was something new to Straker.

"You've never heard of the GRG? Ed you really are out of touch."

"Girl's Rude Group." added Pilgrim. "I thought everyone knew about it."

Straker just shook his head.

"Some of the girls were getting too over the top," said Lake. "Talking about Feminine issues that you boys weren't able to cope with."

"Anyway as you were saying?" said Pilgrim. Now very interested in Virginia's bra project.

"Err yeah,. What was I saying? Oh yeah. The final product is just like a bra with memory alloy in it except that it's now programmable and automatically adjustable. There's also four other strips in it to give total control. One bra could actually be almost any type of bra you want. You just have to program it. One of our little embedded micro controller chips and an I2C interface to a pocket controller. "

"Wow. I want one?" said Pilgrim.

"You can have as many as you want dear," said Lake smiling, "Our textiles department goes into production next week. Actually General, we're thinking of applying to you're department for a clearance to release this technology into the market place."

"What?" said Straker surprised. "Now you want SHADO to go into the fashion business?"

"Well not exactly, NASA and ESA really need materials like this and we can market it through one of our civilian fronts. But more than that. Our textiles departments are working on entire space suites fitted with the stuff. Medical instruments, self applying bandages and casts. This has so many applications we surely can't keep it to ourselves."

"Hey what about self tailoring suits?" said Ford. "Or how about perfect fitting, self lacing footwear? Or how about..."

Ford was cut off by an announcement from the theatre's speaker system. "Moon base link on-line. Propulsion systems experiments due to begin in five minutes."

"We'd better take our seats," said Pilgrim.

"I'll catch up after the show," said Lake as she began to move off back to her group.

"Damn it's good to see Virginia again," said Straker. "I haven't seen her since she visited me in hospital."

"I take it you guys were close?" said Pilgrim.

"Yeah she was part of the old team. One of the first people to get roped in from the civilian world. She invented the U-tronics system you know. We had to bring her in because of the security risk to her developing it in the real world. But she proved to be one of the foundations of this organization."

They took their seat as the screen showed a picture of the inside of some miscellaneous cabin in one of the moon bases. A window in the far wall looking out onto a moon-scape. There was no movement for in frame and no sound. But every now and then the view would vibrate slightly. Evidence that someone was walking past the camera from behind it.

Then the sound came up and the sounds of foot steps was heard in time with the vibrations. Lots of voices in the background as well as other sundry equipment sounds. The sound of cooling fans and the occasional bleep from a consol or device somewhere. Straker positioned himself next to Pilgrim on the end of the isle and swept into sitting position. He needed to adjust his controls from a side panel to make the transition.

"Isn't this exciting," said Straker sarcastically. Pilgrim looked at him briefly but returned her gaze to the screen with out a response.

The people around them began to get quieter as, like Pilgrim, they began to fix their gaze on the screen in expectation of what might happen.

Straker looked over his shoulder and the crowd became quieter still. It wasn't Straker's intention but the crowd collectively thought he was ordering them to be quiet. Still nothing happened on the screen. The room was near silent.

The camera began to shake again. Then there was a loud thump. "Hello testing one two three." Came a voice. Moments later there was a very blurry face. "Hello testing. Testing." came the voice again from the face. Then another blurry face even closer to the lens projecting a very large nose centre frame but to the left said. "It's on. you just have to point it ok."

The faces disappeared and moments later the camera began to move. The camera was mounted on a tripod which in turn, was mounted on a spider dolly. A set of three soft wheels on a frame which clipped onto the legs of the tripod allowing it to roll smoothly across the floor. The camera moved up in height and was mobile. It moved forward and swung round to show the view from behind. Three lab coat attired scientists at an 'L' Shaped console. Two sitting at chairs and one standing over them adjusting something on the consol. He put his hand to his ear where there was an ear-piece and looked into the camera for a second. Hearing some distant voice speaking to him. His attention returned to the console where he continued adjusting something.

The camera swung round the room slowly. Next to the console with the scientists, another console but this one for video production. An operator sat at a vision switcher and surveyed an array of video monitors. Next to her was a man at an audio console. A rack of equipment stood next to him and another man with headphones was tweaking some controls which the camera couldn't see. In the background were racks of equipment and more consoles. Five or six more personnel were attending to them. Another man stood in one of the two hatch-ways holding

yet another camera on his shoulder. A cable draped from it and lead into the myriad of cables strewn across the floor like a spiderweb. The camera swung back to the window view and began to move forward. Lieutenant Donesian stood, hands clasped behind her back, peering out of one of the windows. Voices and gear noise could be heard in the background. Cooling fans, hard drives and the occasional beep from equipment.

A bleep louder than the others rang out which was followed by a synthesized voice annunciator. A woman's voice generated by a computer and amplified into the room. "Four. Minutes. To. Test. Four. Minutes. To. Test."

The camera swung to the third window on the side of the deck. Underneath which sat a lone operator at a table. A lap top and a stack of three equipment boxes next to it sat on the table. There was a loom of cables draping from the back of the boxes onto the floor and running around the wall. The camera followed them round but they were soon obscured by an equipment rack. It was not possible to ascertain if the loom of cables ran into this rack or ran further back round the room to some other destination. It swung back to the scientist who was now standing upright at the console with the other two sitting scientists. it was obvious now that it was the scientist from the previous videos. The camera moved in on him.

"Hi and welcome to the big test, coming to you live from the moon. My name's Doctor Danny Neuman. I'll be your host for this evening. Hope you enjoy the show."

"God he really is a flippant bastard isn't he?" said Straker.

Pilgrim responded with a "Ha!" She looked around her. "Has anyone seen Bjorn? Did anyone bother to tell him? Damn." She jumped to her feet and stepped toward the stage and the comms phone on the wall. She picked it up and pressed a button on it which connected her to C&C. She could hear Doctor Danny Neuman explaining what all the equipment was for as quick as he could but she could not see the screen from her angle. "Yes hello. This is your Commander speaking. Could you page Colonel Frogleberg and tell him to get his smelly ass down here to the lecture theatre please?" She looked up and saw him entering from the corridor outside. "Never mind. He's here." She hung up the phone.

"Nice of you to tell me about this." he said to her sarcastically. "Where are we sitting?"

She pointed and headed back to her seat. "I thought that was you I could smell coming down the corridor. Don't sit next to me. farty breath." Frogleberg took a spare seat next to Keith Ford. One away from Pilgrim.

Ford's senses were suddenly on high alert. He took a sniff and turned to Frogleberg. "Is it you that smells? What have you been doing Bjorn?"

"Just having lunch," said Frogleberg.

Ford didn't quite know how to react. He looked up just in time to hear the voice annunciator speak out again.

"Three. Minutes. To. Test. Three. Minutes. To. Test. "

Doctor Neuman continued. "Ok. So out there is one of the old interceptors which we've modified with an alien propulsion system. We had to tow it out there with a couple of service shuttles ."

The image of his face changed to a shot of an interceptor. Missile still mounted on its nose but its large rocket engine on the rear was replaced with an even larger rotor. 8 gravitic panels mounted on each blade similar to the previous experiment. Mounted vertically on the rear of the space craft like some strange propeller. Its thrusters replaced with more panels. Previously used as a retro fit to steer the space ship. The shot was taken from another, later generation interceptor.

The stars seemed to move in perspective as a back drop against which the experimental interceptor was framed. The interceptor with the camera picked up speed so that an overall view could be had of the craft. In the distant darkens on the far side of the test subject, the camera picked up the dark figure of yet another second generation interceptor. Helping chaperone the test subject on its maiden voyage.

"The test space craft was towed into a parking orbit around the moon. We're on the last orbit before we fire up the beast. When that happens we'll have to move the three interceptors we have tailing it to a safe distance. We don't know what effect the field generators will have on nearby space craft. And I might add, we're not very proficient at measuring gravity yet. "

"Two. Minutes. Thirty. Seconds. To. Test." came the voice annunciator again.

Doctor Neuman looked slightly off camera for a moment and then returned. Having read the time for himself from some display somewhere. "There's no pilot on board. We have a computer and it's been programmed. We can't remote control it because of the time dilation effect or red shift. As the test subject accelerates and becomes further away, the radio signals will take an increasing amount of time to reach it. Not only that but with the rate of acceleration we expect, the radio signals will effectively decrease in frequency. A red shift. The computer's ability to read them will become increasingly difficult and the chances of bad data is likely. So we've programmed it with as much smarts as we can. We'll send it out and then get it to turn round and head back. Insert it into one more sling-shot orbit whilst we download the telemetry from it. The interceptors will follow it out as far as they can. They're limited as compared to the speed and manouverablity of this baby so they have their own flight path to follow to make it back here."

"Two. Minutes. To. Test."

"If all goes well we have an a few other programs to run on its on-board computer that will push it further. We're using the old U-tronics system to track it since we know its flight path in advance. So we don't have to take UT mark three out of service for the job. Although it should still show up on that as well. The old one will be able to tell us more about its performance." He looked around him. One of the voices in the background must have interested him. He said something to someone slightly off camera in a muffled voice.

"One. Minute. Thirty. Seconds. To. Test."

He partially returned his attention to the camera but then turned his head back once more. "Yeah, just save it as 50 and then run the logger." He returned his attention to the camera and its audience. "Ok we're almost there. Telemetry tells us that the onboard computer is on track and reports no faults. We'll bring you some shots from the interceptors in a moment and I'll narrate them as best I can but I'll have my hands full for a while."

"Who does he think he is? Sir Richard bloody Attenborough?" said Straker

"You really don't like that guy do you General?" said Pilgrim. "I think he's kinda cute."

"Oh come on," said Frogleberg. "He's a dweeb is what he is."

"Getting jealous already Bjorn?"

"What? Jealous of him? Get a grip girl."

"One. Minute. To. Test."

Ford's eyes were beginning to bulge at the smell which wafted in his direction from Frogleberg's breath. The view on the screen changed back to the interceptor's view which was beginning to pull away and lag behind. Showing what could be seen of the large rotor on the back of the test subject.

"The interceptors are pulling back but when they're at a safe distance we'll take a video

feed from their targeting array. We should be able to see the propulsion system spin up. It takes 28 seconds generate a field from scratch. We'll give it 30 and leaving 2 seconds to abort. Don't worry the computer will take care of that if anything goes wrong."

The interceptor's view was no so distant that the test interceptor couldn't be seen at all. The view changed. Flipping to a slightly more overhead view from another interceptor. The test subject could be seen as if close up. Taken from the weapons targeting array and zoomed in. The test interceptor was now set against the moon as a backdrop. Lit more consistently from this new angle . The moon below, the inky blackness of space above.

"Show the tracking screens," said Doctor Neuman.

The view changed to a computer generated image of a partial lim of the moon. Several dots tracking off it with a trail behind them. Then another similar shot . A three dimensional computer generated model of the inner solar system. It shifted quickly up to the earth and moon, zoomed in and once again showed four dots huddled close together in the vicinity of the moon.

"Thirty. Seconds. To Test. Spin. Up. Spin. Up."

"Ok here we go then," said Neuman as the view changed back to a rear view of the test interceptor. The spokes of the propulsion unit beginning to spin. The shot changed again to a view almost directly front on and receding in the distance. "Two of the tracking interceptors are moving out in front because there's no way they can accelerate like this thing should be able to. There are also a couple of interceptors out along the projected flight path. Already up to speed and waiting for it. We may not be able to get reliable telemetry back from them so we'll see how we go."

The view returned to the rear of the test interceptor showing the device spinning very fast. The interceptor it self was oriented on its side and twisting slightly against the momentum of the device. The compensation was beginning to kick in as the annunciator rang out. "Fifteen. Seconds. To. Test." There was silence as the count down began. "Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Begin. Test. Sequence."

The view from behind showed the interceptor having righted it self and now picking up speed into the distance. The view flashed briefly back to the graphic of the moon tracking. Showing it breaking free of the moon instead of continuing its orbit. The view changed again to the 3D model now sporting a dotted yellow line plotting its predicted course. So far it was following it. The view changed again to the rear view. Now almost a dot in the distance. Glinting as the sunlight reflected off the spinning apparatus at the back. An indeterminant view now. Just a picture of space. Slightly yawing as the camera platform, another interceptor, rolled slightly . A slight but sudden pitch down brought a glimpse of moon into view. It was quite small in the distance.

"That must be on the flight path," said Frogberg.

"Would you mind not talking please Bjorn," said Ford. "It's bad enough that I have to sit next to you."

Another view of space. This time already pitching up slowly. A view from an interceptor that was sent out, turned round and headed back along the flight path. Already up to speed so that it might be able to catch up with the test craft and get a glimpse of it in action. A tricky business if it were to come too close and be effected by any gravity distortions. The consequences of this still unknown. A brief flash as it passed the first, accelerating interceptor. The background of stars seeming to float as the interceptor providing the view constantly re-oriented itself along its flight path. Adjusting itself as it aligned for the optimum approach.

In the distance, faint glints of sunlight from the spinning Catherine wheel in the distance shining out like strange star. Slowly it grew larger on the screen. It seemed to take forever to catch up to the test craft. Approaching slower as it grew nearer.

"Must be slowing down to match its speed or something?" said Pilgrim.

"I don't think so," said Straker. "Watch."

The approach showed a beautiful panoramic view, approaching slowly from behind with its spinning Catherine wheel in all its glory. It crept up along side as the background of stars swirled around like a curtain behind it. Cruising along as if being blown on the wind. As the camera passed it, the sun came into view from behind. Without the earth's protective layers it looked simply like a very bright star. The test interceptor silhouetted against it as the camera moved forward and past it. It began to recede in the distance ever slower till finally it seemed to be frozen in relation to the camera. Then slowly it began to move forward again as if the camera was on a pendulum and was beginning to swing retrograde back to where it came from. The test interceptor approached the camera and began to fly forward past it. The camera taking another long sweeping shot of it as it went past again.

"How'd they do that?" said Frogleberg.

"They didn't," said Ford waving his hand in front of his nose. "The test interceptor is still accelerating. The other interceptor is going as fast as it can but it can't keep up. So now the propulsion unit is pushing it much faster. We won't see much of it after this. "

"Except for flashes as it flies past perhaps?" said Pilgrim mildly excited at the prospects.

"Don't forget we still have two interceptors out there somewhere doing the remote telemetry." added Ford. "They must have been coming up to speed for a while now so they might be able to get us shots but I doubt it. There's one more interceptor along the flight path as well."

The alien propelled, modified interceptor receded into the distance. The camera no longer being able to keep up. It seemed as though someone had reversed the film and was now playing what they had just seen backwards. Pilgrim noticed the natter of conversation in the background. The voices of scientists on the moon discussing the status of the experiment and adjusting things. She noted a voice in the background say. "Cut to IC3." Right before the view chanced from the now tiny test subject glinting once more in the distance, to yet another view of stars. A flair in the top left hand corner of the picture indicating the bright light from the sun. As it wandered slightly against the background of space she noticed lens flair.

"They must be using an ordinary camera for this." she said to Straker.

Straker only nodded in response.

One of the stars seemed to be moving and becoming larger. Then all of a sudden there was a flash and it was gone.

"That's it!" said Ford. "That's the last we'll see of it till it comes back."

There was a thumping sound through the theatre's speakers. "Oops sorry people. I was meant to be narrating that for you," said Doctor Neuman. "Well we can't get any other visual of it. We're still getting telemetry. The computer's programed for a gentle acceleration but we had no idea how gentle, 'gentle' actually meant. I think in hindsight we made it go just a little too fast. I should point out that we're only pumping about one percent of the power we could into it and according to the log sequencer, we haven't quite reached that level yet. It's gonna be a bit of a test of the navigation software to turn the thing around and get it back home. We're still within spec though. We can get basic telemetry back from it and it's looking good.

"It'll be another 10 or 15 minutes before we know anything. Err actually could be a bit

longer given that we're going just a little faster than anticipated."

"Bjorn!" Said Pilgrim "There you go. You've got 10 minuets to brush your damn teeth and get rid of that disgusting smell. There's a good chap."

Frogleberg skulked off from his seat without another word. Trying hard not to appear conspicuous but still grinning from ear to ear.

As soon as he disappeared out into the corridor , Ford said. "What the hell has he been eating?"

"Some Swedish thing made from rotting fish or something," said Pilgrim screwing up her nose.

"Ah! You mean surströmming?" said Straker. "A wonderful Swedish delicacy. You should have tried some while you had the chance Commander."

She instinctively put her hand over her mouth again. The smell still her nostrils.

"You don't know what you're missing, Adrianna," said Straker with a sarcastic smile.

"Don't tell me you eat that stuff?"

"Haven't had it for years but I'll never forget that taste."

"I don't think I'll ever forget that smell," said Ford.

"Smelt like a good vintage too!" added Straker.

"Vintage?" came the unanimous chorus from Pilgrim and Ford.

"Oh yes. surströmming always has a vintage. It's got to be at least a year old. Real Southern Swedes can often let it ferment for as much as six years. If it was a good year that is."

"I think I need some fresh air," said Ford springing form his seat. "I might just go lick a fuel rod from the reactor to take the taste away."

Straker was laughing. He seemed to be the only one, besides Frogleberg who could see the funny side of it.

"How come you know so much about this rotting fish stuff?" said Pilgrim.

"Not rotting. Fermented." corrected Straker. "Back in the early seventies, just before SHADO was kick started, I did 2 months exchange with Swedish intelligence. Training in insurgence techniques that we may have needed in the cold war. It was a complete sham. None of the equipment arrived and when it did there were parts missing. So we spent most of our time sampling the local culture. We actually had a really good time. Met this girl who chewed this tobacco stuff they call snuss. We almost fell in love."

"Almost?" asked Pilgrim?

"Never kiss someone who chews snuss Commander. If you think surströmming is bad... That first kiss ended a beautiful relationship. Never did complete the training either."

"Sorry about the air-conditioning" said a man from behind Pilgrim. "I told the maintenance crews to clean it all out last week. Obviously they didn't do it."

"What?" said Pilgrim not understanding what the man was talking about. She turned to see it was an older gentleman from general engineering. Standing in the row behind and leaning over to speak to her.

"The airconditioning's on the fritz. Can't you smell it.?"

Pilgrim burst out laughing. Not a thing for a commanding officer to do in front of her troops. She composed herself quickly. "Oh no that's not your airconditioning. That was Colonel Frogleberg. He's a sick little puppy at the moment."

The man nodded his head understandingly. "Ah." Although Pilgrim knew he had misunderstood.

Pilgrim maintained a straight face. "Chronic flatulence." she added. The man nodded again and withdrew.

A few minutes later Frogleberg returned. He had washed and cleaned his teeth. He presented himself to Pilgrim. "Is that better?"

She took a number of sniffs in his direction. "You still smell like a chemical weapons factory but you'll have to do. I think something's happening again."

Frogleberg took his seat just as Ford came in. Ford pointed at Frogleberg in a questioning manner.

"Yeah, you'll just have to suffer a little longer," said Pilgrim.

Ford took his seat.

Straker leant forward to catch Frogleberg's eye. "Surströmming?" said Straker with a smile.

Frogleberg nodded and smiled in return.

Suddenly there was cheering through the speaker system. Doctor Neuman's face appeared on the screen. He was smiling. "The test subject just returned. We weren't expecting it back for about half an hour. We haven't got an estimate of the actual speeds it reached given that it had to turn around and park it self. It took us by surprise. The telemetry will tell us more but we didn't get all the telemetry we expected. It was just too fast. We're going to download the internal data logger and then set it up for the acceleration test."

Doctor Neuman's face dashed out of sight as the camera once again revealed the background of the inside of the moon base lab sphere behind. The data was downloaded and the next experiment was set up. The camera panned onto a group of scientists crowded round one of the consoles. They were monitoring the data that had just been downloaded and were astounded about something. The camera didn't show what exactly but they were saying things like. "Check this out!" and "Hey Take a look at this." Pointing at something one of the screens.

Neuman returned. "Ok we're just about read to go. Waiting for the test craft to come round in its orbit again. This is the acceleration test. We're gonna pump full power into this puppy for 30 seconds and then decelerate it using full power. Then we'll take a reading of how far it travelled over the minute. Then we'll bring it home. We have G-force sensors on board to measure how many Gs we pull. It only goes up to 50 Gs but anything more than 10Gs and a human pilot wouldn't survive it anyway."

"30 seconds is probably too long. " Said Ford.

"What?" said Pilgrim.

"Well I'm no space scientist but I would have thought 30 seconds would be too long at full power. Given we don't have a clue what this thing is capable of."

"Don't worry. These people know what they're doing," said Pilgrim.

"Hmm. Might be a good point there," said Straker. "I would give it a very small time scale and extrapolate the data."

"I wouldn't have thought time mattered so much, It was just to see what happens at full power?" said Frogleberg.

"Yeah, but...," said Straker before he was interrupted by the count down.

The voice annunciator counted down as before. Interceptors showed them views of the test subject as before. The propulsion unit began to spin up as before. "Three. Two. One. Test." The propulsion unit came up at full power and the interceptor appeared to shimmer in a glowing blue ball for a moment. It accelerated visibly then it was gone. The camera view s were exchanged for a computer graphic showing its flight path. Where it was expected to go in

yellow followed up by a red trace as it accelerated. The red traced showed it passing two dots very quickly. Two interceptors gathering what information they could from the exercise. The graphic zoomed out the line was extending faster so it zoomed out once more then the red line came to an abrupt end.

"It's alright folks" said Neuman. "It's just accelerated beyond our ability to track it in real time. We should get a trace from where it's been as soon as the signal comes back."

The red line extended slightly and slowly but stopped again. No explanation from Neuman was forthcoming.

"Err you'd have to ask Virginia this," said Ford. "But for it to go too fast for the U-tronics system to track it would have to have accelerated to about point two C."

"C?" said Frogleberg. "You mean the speed of light."

"Er Yeah," said Ford. "Was anyone counting how many seconds that took? Like I was thinking maybe 10."

They all looked at each other. All four of them thinking in unison.

Straker popped a panel on his apparatus and a message pad ejected. He grabbed it and started playing with it.

"That's about sixty thousand kilometres per second. " said Ford. "In 10 seconds."

"Of course you know it'd be exponential not linear." added Straker looking up briefly. He plucked away a little more with his message pad then jumped back. "God! I get roughly 267 thousand kilometres per second. assuming no other influences."

"That's awfully close to point nine C," said Pilgrim.

"I wonder what happens when you break the light barrier?" said Frogleberg.

"Is anyone running a book on whether we'll see that interceptor again?" shouted Straker to the crowd. No-one knew whether to laugh at Straker's facetious comment or not. Everyone had a good idea of what had just happened.

"Maybe you should have gift wrapped it Ed." came Virginia lake's voice from behind him in the semi darkness. Pilgrim looked around in her direction. "That's a nice present to give to the aliens. And it's not even Christmas." Some in the crowd laughed this time.

"How much does an interceptor cost these days?" said Pilgrim.

The crowd went quiet. As to the scientists on the moon. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. A minute passed. Then a minute and a half. Someone on the moon let out an exaggerated sigh. Two minutes passed and a voice was heard off camera to say faintly, as if to someone next to him confidentially. "I can't stand this. I wanna go home." Another mumbled voice and then the voice of Danny Neuman shrieked quite loudly. "What!. we couldn't have?" There was another pause then gradually the voices amongst the moon scientists grew louder as they began discussing the results among themselves. Speculating as to the outcome. The voice of Doctor Neuman could be heard arguing quite heatedly with two other scientists but the content was obscured. Finally Doctor Neuman appeared on camera.

"OK it looks like we underestimated what this thing could and couldn't do. We may be wrong but we figure it flew out a little further than we had anticipated and it wasn't able to gravitate against any mass that far out. It's probably still going, looking for something to slow it up. Only we programmed the computer to assume there would be. So it's probably shifted it's mass for the required 30 seconds and then tried to transmit. Only we can't pick it up because its still travelling too fast."

"Either that or you just found the light barrier," said Straker.

Doctor Neuman couldn't hear any of the people on earth except for the directives from

the control room so he continued not knowing what Straker had just said. "Initial data shows that this system works well but would be a little hard to tame. Very restricted operating levels would be required. for manned flight. We still don't understand how the aliens could withstand acceleration like that. Err well. That's it ladies and gentlemen. Until the data is analysed, that's all folks."

The lecture theatre was clearing. The four were heading back to Pilgrim's office. Joined by Virginia Lake and someone she just referred to as Deborah. A much younger woman with coke bottle glasses and a slight over bite.

"Well so much for that," said Pilgrim disappointed.

"It's early days yet Commander," said Lake. "We had these kinds of problems with the U-tronics project. Launching test satellites was a big deal in those days. Assembling SID was an unimaginable task. But what looks like a setback now may be the tip of a whole new breakthrough. "

Pilgrim nodded in quiet contemplation.

"What is that smell?" said Lake after a moment. "I can smell it again."

Pilgrim Laughed. "Ha! That's just Bjorn's after shave. Dead fish number 9."

Before Lake had a chance to react Frogleberg extended his hand to her. "Hi I'm Bjorn Frogleberg. Chief of security and SHADO's only culinary expert. Pleased to meet you."

CHAPTER 7

Farmer saw himself running down endless concrete corridors. He felt himself choke as air became water. He was drowning but then suddenly he could breathe again. He felt the urge to kill but it was wrong. Vague snapshots of a life he used to lead. Faces he thought he recognised but couldn't put a name to. He felt himself floating. No it wasn't floating. It was bouncing. He could remember technology he couldn't explain yet it almost made sense to him. He could remember fighting. Some kind of martial art. Judo! This wasn't his life it was someone else's. Nothing made sense.

He saw a blur in front of his eyes. He felt his body hit the ground then his head hit the floor. It was dark again. He heard voices. A woman's voice. Calling his name. It echoed around in the back of his skull where it met with the pain that was now streaming in as if the universe was leaking reality. A blur before his eyes again. Lighter than before. It hurt already and he was yet to test his eyelids. The woman's voice calling his name again. "Paul. Paul." It somehow seemed different to him. His name and yet not his name.

"Mary?" he said quite involuntarily.

"Who's Mary?" Came the woman's reply.

Then he opened his eyes. It hurt like hell. He could see the badly out of focus face of Fin. He closed his eyes again. "Oh it's you." Reality was swimming in his brain. He didn't know what was real. He hoped he had dreamt his shop being burnt. He hoped the next time he opened his eyes he was somewhere safe. In his apartment perhaps or the basement having taken a tumble down the stairs. He opened his eyes again. He saw the out of focus Fin in front of him again. Her face hanging over his. He tried to speak but barely mustered a noise.

"Are you alright man?" she said. She turned to someone else and said. "I think he's in a bad way. You'd better come and do something."

He heard scuffling and soon a second face joined Fin's. It was Pearl's. He moved his head slightly to take in his out of focus environment. It was a place he didn't recognise. He thought. "Surely this must be just because of the way I'm looking at it." but the more he looked, the less he recognised. As fuzzy as his eyesight was, he knew this was a place he'd never been before. He tried to move. He hurt. He groaned.

"Don't try to move," said Pearl. He felt Hessian under his hands which were lying at his sides. He tilted his head to one side and realized he was propped up amongst a stack of dirty Hessian bags. It smelt musty. Some of his strength was coming back. He tried to move again. This time with more success. He managed to prop himself up a little further. Now he could see his surroundings better although it remained out of focus. Some kind of warehouse. Derelict. Unused and covered in layers of dust. Wooden shelving lined up in rows. Boxes, both wooden and cardboard, spread around. Empty mainly although there seemed to be some old paint tins spilling from the nearest one. A single low-wattage bulb illuminated the room. He could see what looked to be some bags of solidified cement. He felt something on his face. Wet. It trickled down his cheek. He raised one hand to brush it off. It was red. His blood. Streaming slowly from a wound on his head somewhere. He didn't know where exactly. He was aching all over. Especially his head.

"They really gave you a beating," said Fin who looked to have been beaten almost as bad.

So to Pearl who had the stains of blood on her own cheeks. A gash on her forehead. He tried to move a little more. The pain sent flashes through his brain. More faces he couldn't put a name to. Dust dislodged in his throat and he coughed instinctively. The coughing reminded

him of a time when he coughed up green liquid. Or was that another dream. Then a flash. He knew who he was. Suddenly it was clear. He sat bolt upright suddenly realizing and then it was gone again. Slipping back into the mud that was his memory.

"Hey take it easy man," said Fin. She put her hand on her shoulder.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Those two MI6 bastards abducted you and brought you here," said Pearl.

The word "Abducted" rang through his brain. It was a familiar word. More familiar than it should have been but he didn't know why. Then he remembered the two nameless MI6 men. He groaned. It was all coming back to him. The shop, the video, the beating. And yet there was something more. None of this made sense. This shouldn't have been happening.

"What's going on?" said Farmer as he rubbed the back of his aching head.

"We don't know for sure," said Pearl. "They picked us up and took us to some building or other. Like a police station but they put hoods over our heads so we couldn't see where it was. They asked us all sorts of questions about things we had no idea about. They said they found the camera."

"Oh the camera. I remember the camera," said Farmer.

"And they beat us up trying to get us to tell them what we knew." added Fin. "We didn't have a clue what they were talking about half the time."

"They brought us here and dumped us." continued Pearl. "We tried to get out but we couldn't. The door's too solid. Then hours later they rolled up with you."

Farmer slowly bent his knees up. an experiment to see if he could stand.

"Take it easy," said Fin.

"Gimme a hand here," said Farmer holding out his arm to her.

Both women steadied him and he tried to stand. He seemed to have more strength than he expected though he was still in much pain. His sides ached.

"Man they really laid into you didn't they," said Fin.

He nodded and looked around. Things were still out of focus but it felt better than doing nothing. He took a step with the women steadying him and then he started to move on his own. Careful not to trip on something his eyes did not tell him was there. He made it to one of the wooden shelf racks and supported himself there whilst he tried to take a better look at his surroundings. He saw the door. What looked to be a huge steel door like a coldroom door. Perhaps the inside of some kind of vault door. There was no handle on the inside.

"What was this place?" he said.

"We don't know," said Pearl. "We don't even know where it is. "

"How long have I been out?" He looked for his wrist watch but it was gone.

"I don't know. A long time," said Fin. "We don't have a watch either. Everything was taken from us."

There was a blinding flash before his eyes. Another scene from someone else's life. He saw a Chinese face with a surgeon's mask partially covering it. Looking directly into his eyes. He saw the oxygen mask lowering toward his face. It shocked him and he jumped slightly.

"Man are you alright?" said Pearl again as she rushed in to steady him.

He put his hand to his head and covered his eyes. An act which only brought forth more hallucinations. Obscure things he couldn't focus upon. He removed his hand and opened his eyes. Leaning back on one of the shelves and placing both hands upon it to stead himself.

"I keep... Oh never mind. What was this s'pose to be all about in the first place?"

"What?" said Pearl.

"I mean what 'n' hell were you investigating?" He spoke as though he was momentarily someone else. He knew not who.

"We were asked to investigate some computer game chips being stolen from a local manufacturer. Someone was stealing the new designed well before they got into games and then they were coming onto the market by other manufacturers before our client could get their own out there. His designs use to be the only ones used in these computer games but then someone else kept beating him too it. He asked us to find out how they were doing it. We found one employee who would regularly meet with someone else. We just wanted to get a video of the employee making the exchange so we could take it back to Mr. Potter and he could give him the sack. That was the whole deal. We don't have a clue what went on in that room. It wasn't what we were expecting."

"We certainly weren't expecting MI6" added Fin.

"We thought if we gave them the video tape they'd leave us alone," said Pearl.

Farmer looked down his nose at her. "That's not how they do things over at MI6."

Pearl and Fin looked at each other then back at Farmer.

"How do you know how they do things at MI6?" asked Pearl.

"That's a good question. I have no idea. I just know. I seem to know a lot of things about MI6 for some reason. Like I know that we're witnesses to a murder. A murder that MI6 seem to want to cover up. And that if we don't get out of here, we'll probably be next."

"They wouldn't," said Fin. "Surely?"

"That's exactly what they'll do. Come to think of it we're not even sure it's actually MI6 we're dealing with here." Farmer sprang up. His vision still blurred but better than it was. A new found energy and purpose surged through his aching body. "Come on. We've got to do something." He started looking around the room.

"What are you looking for?" asked Pearl.

"I don't know. Anything! Anything we can use."

"We've already tried that," said Fin. "We couldn't find anything useful. "

Farmer searched further back in the room in the darker recesses. He saw a split in one of the aging floorboards. He picked at it and grabbed a chunk. Pulling it back with all his might. It sapped off in his hands allowing him to get a grip on the floorboard proper. Once again pulling with all his might he managed to uproot one board. Pearl and Fin gathered round as Farmer ripped up two more floorboards. The three looked down into the hole. 6 inched below the joists was dirt.

"Well that'd work if we were thinking of tunnelling out way out," said Farmer.

He climbed up onto one of the wooden shelving racks. Clambering on top of it so that he could reach the ceiling. He pounded on it. Some kind of metal. Rivetted in place along seams of steel. Like the roof of a shed or industrial building. He pounded on it more. He placed his back against it forcing himself up on the top shelf to try and dislodge one of the panels. It wouldn't budge. He felt the wooden structure he was standing on begin to give way under the strain. He just had time to scramble down from it before it crashed to the ground with an almighty bang that reverberated around the room like an explosion. Scattering lengths of wood from the racks in every direction. The three of them scattered out of the way as it did so. Farmer dusted himself off.

He began to look at the wooden pieces and then at the door. Wondering if he could use any of them as some kind of lever but there was no suitable gap through which he could get any purchase on the door. He was looking round for alternatives when they heard the door

being unlatched or unchained from the outside. It was a relatively long process indicating that the door was far more solidly secured than they had imagined. The door opened creaking and through stepped Stocky.

"Oh you again," said Fin annoyed.

"Nice to see a friendly face," said Farmer.

Slim followed stocky in. His gun drawn and surveying the wreckage of the shelving.

"What have you been up to?" he asked not really caring as long as they hadn't escaped.

"It just fell," said Pearl. "We were just leaning on it and it collapsed."

"Don't fuck with me," said Slim in a most ugly manner. "I don't wanna have to blow your brains out here and now but I will if I have to. I'd rather make it look like an accident but if you wanna head full of lead then I don't really give a shit."

"What?" said Fin surprised and not at all sure she heard right.

"You don't think we'd leave you alive to tell anyone do you?"

"What?" she said again. "All this over a few computer game chips?"

Slim laughed. "Computer game chips? You're more stupid than I thought. That wasn't anything to do with computer games, that was new military electronics. Even the government didn't know about it and they were the one's that spent the millions developing it. You idiots stepped into something way over your head and now we're going to have to kill you. Nothing personal." He smiled curtly.

"Now wait just a minute," said Farmer. The phrase, even the voice wasn't his. It belonged to someone else and it came out of him from nowhere. Then it receded.

"And you Mr. Farmer. We seem to be doing some of our Chinese counterparts a favour by killing you, sunshine! Seems you've been pissing people off before."

"Chinese? What? What 'n' hell are you talking about? You can't do this."

"We can and we will. When it get's dark we'll take you down to the river and it seems you're going to have a little boating accident. "

Farmer was suddenly overcome with rage. He was not accustomed to it. The rage was somehow backed up with skill. He rushed Slim. He almost reached him but Stocky intercepted him and threw him to the floor. Slim aimed his gun. Pearl Screamed. Slim fired. The bullet entered the floor half a metre from Farmer's leg where he lay on the floor.

Slim laughed again and withdrew his gun. "Nar. I'd rather see you bastards drown." He retreated behind the door. "It'll be dark in an hour." he shouted behind him. Stocky followed him through and the door was closed behind them. The sounds of latching and bolting the door could be heard from the inside. Sound that reverberated round inside Farmer's brain.

Fin crouched at his side. "Nice try."

"You almost got yourself killed!" said Pearl .

"Like they're not going to kill us all anyway?" said Farmer. He got to his feet. He wasn't thinking right and yet it was somehow enhanced. "We can't rush them next time because the door opens outwards." He picked amongst the wooden debris. "If we could find a piece sharp enough to use as a weapon..." He picked up a piece which had some nails jutting out of it. He swung it as if he was swinging it as they came through the door. It was of no practical value.

Pearl began scratching at the wooden panels on the walls. She managed to break a small piece off. It was only a joiner. Fin inspected the door looking for a way she might break the hinges or some other way to get it open. There was none. They sweated and toiled between them for an hour but could find nothing that was of any value. Farmer found a smaller piece of wood with four nails protruding from it. For reasons he couldn't explain he broke it off shorter

such that it would fit concealed up his jacket sleeve. He didn't know what use it would be to him. Finally they heard the door unlatch. Farmer picked up a small length of wood and gestured to the others to do the same. He held it like a club and then concealed it behind his back. He gestured to Fin to stand by the door holding her piece of wood. Pearl was too slow off the mark and didn't have a piece of wood. He pushed her into direct line with the door and then took up a position on the opposite side of the door to Fin. The door opened. No-one came through it.

"You can come out now," said Slim from outside the door.

Pearl didn't budge. Slim saw her standing there but didn't see the others.

"Oh come on really. Do you think we're going to fall for that? Put the wood down, we're trained to deal with better prepared people than that. You're just going to have to face it. There's nothing you can do about it."

Fin rounded the door brandishing her piece of wood but was met by Stocky who grabbed it and wrenched it from her as if she handed it to him. He pushed her to the floor and then faced Farmer. Farmer could see that he didn't stand a chance and dropped his timber. Stocky grabbed him and shunted him outside where he faced Slim at gunpoint. Stocky did not feel the concealed timber in Farmer's sleeve but it forced the nails into Farmer's skin. Farmer winced but it remained un-noticed by either of the two MI6 men. Stocky did the same with Pearl and Fin. First dragging Fin to her feet then throwing the both outside. Slim walked off toward an open doorway leading to the outside. Stocky bringing up the rear giving the occasional shove to Fin who was now the last in the procession.

The air was slightly chilly as they reached the door. They could see that they were on some kind of wharf. It was in a state of decay and was obviously not used and not kept useful. A ramp lead down to a sizable motor launch. Behind it was a smaller wooden boat attached by a rope.

Slim lead them down the ramp and stepped onto the launch. He dragged them across one by one as Stocky pushed from behind so that they had nowhere to escape to. he grabbed Farmer by the arm and dragged him onboard. The momentum flung Farmer to the deck. He landed on the arm with the makeshift weapon was concealed and the nails dug into his arm. He screamed for a second in pain. The pain made something snap inside him. He saw a face. A green face inside a helmet. Then he noticed the face was green because the helmet was filled with green liquid. He noticed the surroundings. barren and alien. He was peering out of a helmet of his own. A strange weapon in his hand and dragging a broken leg. His life began to flood back to him as if through an open portal. It consumed him and he was helpless. He didn't see Fin being flung into the boat and hitting her head on an old gas stove sitting out of place in the middle of the deck. He didn't hear the motor launch start up. He didn't feel it wallowing in the water as it moved out towing its smaller counterpart. He felt like he was in a road accident. A collision between two lives travelling at high speed down some lonely highway. Someone speaking in Chinese. They had guns and were forcing him to go with them. Just like the two MI6 men were doing. He saw an operating theatre. He saw a helicopter. He saw himself on a fishing trawler. Its crew grabbing for anything they could as a gigantic wave washed him overboard. He felt himself floating with a life jacket on. It all came back to him like he was awakening from a long sleep. Then he felt someone kick his leg.

"It's time Sunshine," said Slim kicking him once more. "Which one of you is gonna do the cooker and which are gonna do the drugs?"

"What?" said Fin.

"Well one of you is gonna get tied to this cooker here and tossed overboard. The other two we're gonna shoot up with an overdose of heroin and will be found drowned when their boat sinks. So which way do you wanna go?"

No-one answered. Farmer began to move. "I know who I am!" whispered Farmer to Pearl who was sitting on the deck next to him.

"Heroin you say?" said Farmer out loud to Slim with a new ire of confidence. "I like the sound of that."

"Alright then," said Slim. "roll up your arm."

Farmer removed his jacket having first slid the piece of wood with the nails through it into his hand. As he suspected, Slim wouldn't notice it. He turned and winked at Fin. Fin showed an expression of not understanding but knew something was up. Fin had been in enough scrapes to know to be ready for anything. She looked around her and saw the short chain attached to the cooker. There was some twisted fencing wire on the end. She figured it was to wrap round someone's feet and drag them to their death. She moved a little closer to it so that it was within reach. Farmer positioned himself and held out his left arm as Slim produced a surgical syringe and un-capped it.

Slim squirted some of the contents to remove any air that might be trapped. "Good pure stuff this. It'll knock you out real fast." He bent in slightly to find a vein in Farmer's outstretched left arm "Goodbye Mr Farmer." He looked at Farmer's face and noticed he was smiling.

"Goodbye," said Farmer as he thrust the four nails into Slim's eyes. Slim Jumped back and screamed. Farmer grabbed the syringe as it fell from Slim's hands as he raised them to his face. Farmer leant back and kicked Slim's hands and thus the nails into Slim's brain.

Stocky was too slow but was on the move. Heading toward Farmer and going for his gun. Fin Dragged the chain in front of his path. He tripped toward Farmer, His gun spilling on the deck on the opposite side to farmer. Stocky saw his gun go down and went for it. Farmer slammed the hypodermic into the back of Stocky's neck but didn't manage to put enough pressure on it in order to inject its content. Fin tried to drag Stocky back away from his gun by wrapping the chain and wire around his legs so he couldn't move further away from the cooker. Stocky felt the needle pierce the back of his neck and grabbed Farmer by the ankle. He tugged and Farmer went down backwards. Farmer tried to get up but there wasn't enough time to prevent Stocky going for his gun. Seeing this Fin lunged at the cooker trying to push it backwards away from the gun and thus pulling Stocky with it but she pushed it too far. It slid to the edge of the deck and out through an opening which was designed for diving or boarding the smaller craft. The cooker teetered on the edge for a moment and then toppled overboard so gently that it hardly made a ripple. Not so Stocky who was sliding back fast on the end of the chain.

Fin dived on his body to try and prevent the inevitable but she was not strong enough against the weight of the cooker and he slid into the water with a splash and a thud as his jaw slammed on the edge of the deck. Pearl, now standing saw his outstretched arms as he gasped for his last breath.

Farmer got to his feet and the three of them peered over the edge expecting that Stocky would recover enough to untangle the chain and wire from his feet. They expected any moment that they would have to haul him in. They waited for 5 minutes in relative silence as they all caught their breath and recovered from the shock. Pearl Looked around and let out a screech. Slim approached them waving his arms. His face covered in blood and parts of his

eyes hanging down his cheeks. He moaned as he tried to grab for them. Pearl and Fin jumped aside but Farmer stepped up and grabbed him by the hand.

"Right this way sir." He said sarcastically as he led him through the gap, onto the landing and into the murky water.

Slim splashed around as he drifted away from the boat. The further way he became the less thrashing about he made till finally there was silence again. Just the sound of water lapping against the side of the boat. Farmer dragged the smaller craft in and then set it lose first overturning it as if it had spilled its contents into the water.

"They're not just gonna let us get away with it," said Fin. "If they really are MI6 they'll come after us again."

"Oh I don't think so," said Farmer as he started the engine.

"Why wouldn't they? We know what they've been up to."

"Yeah, but I happen to know they'll back off now. There's a couple of things I have to do first though." He wasn't talking like himself any more. Not the Farmer Pearl and Fin had come to know. He was talking like someone else.

"You said you know who you are?" said Pearl.

"Yes," said Farmer. "I do."

"Well?" said Fin.

"You know the funny thing is I can't actually tell you now that I know. But I can tell you everything's going to be alright now."

CHAPTER 8

The lecture theatre in the SHADO headquarters base underneath the Straker Harlington studios was beginning to empty out. People from all concerned departments heading back to their posts or to run recorded data by their computers. The command staff, joined also by Virginia Lake, were heading back slowly to Pilgrim's office. Ford's, Lake's and Straker's conversation soon turned from discussions of the experiment they had just observed to stories about better days. Frogleberg and Pilgrim listened on politely as conversation ended up at the subject of those departed. And in particular, Paul Foster and Alec Freeman.

They were on the verge of making plans for drinks, an unusual consideration given that Straker didn't touch alcohol, when the general security alarm sounded. And alarm that meant only one thing. That the SHADO base was under attack. Though alarm drills were regularly held, this was such a remote prospect of actually occurring that Pilgrim was, for a moment, unsure of what to do. They all stood looking at each other for a few moments wondering who's responsibility it was. Expecting each other to jump to action. Eventually Pilgrim realized that ultimately the responsibility came down to her so she headed for the nearest wall phone intercom and pressed for C&C. She stood their waiting as the others caught up to her position. No answer for an uncharacteristically long time.

"This is Pilgrim." she said slightly annoyed. "Who's got a bee up her ass this time?"

"Sorry commander" returned the voice on the phone. "We have a security breach. Someone's managed to crack the office entry and is holding one of the guards hostage outside in corridor B1. He's asking for Commander Straker."

"You mean General Straker?"

"No he's specifically asking for Commander Straker."

Straker's ears pricked up at the mention of his name. "What's happening?"

She covered the mouthpiece of the phone instinctively. "There's a hostage situation in B1. Some unknown person has come down in the office and is asking for you. Only they're asking for Commander not General."

"What?" said Straker.

"We'd better get down there," said Frogleberg. "Ask security to meet us there and tell them to bring me my gun."

Pilgrim repeated his order to the operator in C&C then moved off quickly. The others close behind. Frogleberg caught up to her side as they reached a junction. One lead back to C&C and her office, the other was a short cut to corridor B1.

"How could anyone have just come down in the office?" said Frogleberg. "The only way down is to have a security clearance. "

"I don't know Bjorn but this place is getting stranger by the minute. But I guess we're gonna find out."

"It's possible to break the security with nothing more than a tape recorder but you have to have a recording of someone you know is SHADO personnel. And these days you have to have a thumb print as well."

"Well it looks like who ever it is wasn't counting on the last line of defence. A guard at the door," said Pilgrim with some confidence. "But C&C said he was asking for Commander Straker."

"And I haven't been called that in 6 years." added Straker as he maneuvered himself in behind them. "Anyone in SHADO would know that."

They took several more corridors till they reached a group of SHADO security guards backed off at the junction of corridor B1. The lieutenant in charge of the security detail ushered them back when she saw them approaching. When she was sure they were far enough away from the Junction with B1 so that the man wouldn't hear her she briefed them.

"I don't have all the details but his description matches one Paul Farmer. Victim of a hit and run up in Scotland four years ago. He was on our possible abductions register. The photo we have of him wasn't very good but this is the closest match the computer made when asked to compare the images from the video cameras. He seems to have overpowered the guard and is holding her hostage with her own weapon out side the door to the office entrance. he's got himself hemmed in between the two pillars so that no-one can get a clean shot of him. All he's said is get Straker."

"Do we know how he managed to get through the outer defences?" asked Froggleberg.

"I don't know, sir. I can find out for you."

Farmer's voice echoed down the corridor. "Where's Straker."

A shiver went down Straker's spine. He knew the voice but he just couldn't place it. Ford and Lake looked at each other but couldn't place the voice either.

"With your permission, Commander?" said Straker gesturing to confront the man.

"It may not be a good idea, sir," said Froggleberg but he watched on helpless as Straker moved forward.

A moment later Ford and Lake stepped in behind him. Froggleberg and Pilgrim shrugged and headed off to the junction after them. As did the security lieutenant. Straker reached the security guards backed up at the corner of the two corridors. He tapped two of them on their shoulders and spread them apart with his hands to let him through. The rest of them remaining behind the guards and observing.

"Ok I'm here." shouted Straker.

He saw the hostage appear from behind the pillar first. A gun held to her head. Then the face of her assailant stepped out into the light.

"It couldn't be," said Straker. "You're dead?"

"Ed! What's going on?"

Everyone stood there as if frozen. Eyeing each other off. Straker's heart raced as he saw the face of a man he had thought dead for six years. The man looked back at him and his strange apparatus that carried him.

"Paul, is that really you?"

"Course it's me. Now will you tell these guys to back off."

"Err yeah," said Straker cautiously. "Everyone just relax a bit will ya. This is not Paul Farmer. This is Paul Foster." He paused for another moment. "But you're dead. You died in that helicopter from the alien bomb."

"I can explain everything." said Foster. "Just don't shoot me." Foster began to lower his weapon.

"Lower your weapons everyone," shouted Straker.

"But! ... " Objected Froggleberg.

"Just do it!" said Straker moving toward Foster.

Foster turned the weapon around and handed it butt first back to the guard. She didn't know whether to take it or not, she was still confused by the situation. Eventually she grabbed it, checked the safety, which was off and holstered it, stepping back as Straker moved in. As Straker grew closer he noticed the wounds and the dried blood through his clothing. The

bruising and general battered state.

"You look like shit," said Straker.

"It's good to see you too Ed. And what's with this thing?"

"You don't know do you? Aliens got my legs, Paul. Out in the Amazonas. But how 'n' hell???" He gestured with outstretched arms.

"Oh man, have I got a story to tell you."

"First we gotta get you checked out," said Straker. "You look like you could do with some medical attention." Straker could see that Foster was limping so he put his arm around his shoulder to help. It wasn't much help. It only made himself more unstable but he lead Foster back to where the others were still standing agog. Ford and Lake's mouths were wide open and speechless. Frogberg, who had worked with Foster on many occasions was suspicious.

"This was not in my job description," said Pilgrim.

All six on duty doctors were called to the infirmary to attend to Foster's wounds. Two of SHADO's specialist psychologists were called in as well. They took blood for DNA testing and other tests as well as patching up Foster's extensive wounds. Foster was obviously in great pain but Straker couldn't contain himself any longer.

"So what 'n' hell happened to you. Alec told me you were blown up in that Chinese chopper somewhere in the South China sea."

"No I found how the auto pilot worked but I was a fair way out to sea at that stage. I saw a fishing trawler so I set it and bailed. I tried to get a message out with the radio on board because my own comms gear was broken but I couldn't raise anyone."

"So why didn't you come home?" said Straker.

"I would have done only I had a run in with Chinese military intelligence. I'm not sure which branch. I figure one of the ones they say they haven't got. I was on the trawler and I tried to convince them to turn around and head for port. I knew there was going to be a tidal wave but I couldn't get through to them. But the radio man must have got some kind of warning from somewhere because the captain began to swing the boat around. But it was too late. The wave hit the boat side on and it capsized. I had a life jacket on that they gave me before hand and I clung to some pieces of wood that broke up from the ship when it got tipped. I don't know if anyone else survived. I found a piece big enough to act as a raft so I swam to it and climbed on. I think it must have been a pallet from the deck or something. I don't know how long I spent in the water but next thing I know I'm getting plucked from a beach somewhere by some local Chinese people. I thought they were helping me but they handed me over to these military intelligence types. I asked them to tell Major Wei and he'd vouch for me but they said there was no such person. They seemed to think I was some kind of American Spy. Never mind the fact that I was so obviously British. I gathered from their conversation later that there was some American covert operation happening and when I washed up they thought I was it. And It didn't help none that I couldn't tell them who I really was.

I don't know how long I spent in that place. At first I was tortured. That seemed to go on forever. Then out came the drugs. Then they tried to brainwash me. I think they were trying to get me to counter spy for them or some damn thing. Still thinking I was someone else. But I didn't break for them, Ed. All that training to try and resist the aliens and they had to try everything they could think of. But I didn't break. At least I don't think I did. I don't know what I might have told them. I don't know how much they know about SHADO. In the end I was so confused." A tear slipping from his eye betraying slightly the true extent of his ordeal. "I must have broke, Ed. They must have broken me." He buried his head in his hands at the

side of the barouche he was sitting on in the infirmary. "But they must have realized I was not who they thought I was. They can't have worked out the connection but, well, I don't know what happened after that. But they must have thought I was important enough a fish to throw me back. I remember an operating theatre and then I was living someone else's life." He explained about how he was supposedly the victim of a hit and run in Scotland. How he had spent so much time in hospital there and then ended up finding his way back to London. He told Straker, and everyone there of Pearl and Fin and Fitz. And how he had been living.

"Yes it sounds like they were looking for a plausible explanation if you were to re-surface and be discovered," said Straker. "We've found out in recent years that the Chinese have developed various brain altering techniques. A surgical procedure which can cause amnesia and other similarly nasty procedures. That's why we have to give you some scans, Paul."

"That and to make sure I haven't been planted by the aliens or something."

Straker nodded.

"You know the strange thing is now that I can remember not being able to remember," said Foster as he was being wheeled into the radiology department on the barouche.

Straker waited outside as Foster endured a 15 minute CT scan. Then Straker went with him as he was wheeled into the next room for an MRI scan. Various chemicals being pumped into his veins through a jelco in his arm. The MRI buzzing all around him taking various kinds of scans for another 45 minutes. Foster was ejected from the MRI scanner and his head released from the restraint.

The doctor said. "We have some of the preliminary results already from the CT but we need to study them for about half an hour if that's OK."

Straker nodded. The doctor grabbed the barouche and pushed it to the side of the scanner bed.

"No I'm alright really," said Foster.

"It's regulations," said the doctor but Straker waved him off.

"I'll help him."

Straker and Foster walked back to the infirmary's main office. Straker pulling up a chair for Foster. Everyone but Straker had left whilst the scanning was being done so they could attend to other matters. They had asked to be called when Foster was through. There was much to discuss. Straker told Foster what had happened to him. He told him about Alec Freeman. What had happened to SHADO in the missing years. He told him how Adrianna Pilgrim had been elevated to commander and of recent events. And of the strange case of Philip Salisman and how as a result of him, SHADO had entered into the music business and now ran a successful major record label. Foster sat back amazed that so much had happened. To Foster it was as if it had all happened over night.

Foster smiled. "So you're a general now. Well, well."

"And you're a television repair man?" said Straker equally smiling amazement.

Then Foster's thoughts turned to his temporary life. He thought about how different his life could have been from his child hood. How extraordinary his life was. How no one could know how extraordinary his life was. He thought about the community he had become a part of. Then he thought about his shop. How he had seen it torched by two MI6 thugs and of whether Fitz's studio had been gutted as well. And then of the two MI6 operatives.

"And you said you know something of a problem in MI6?"

Straker rubbed his chin in contemplation of where to begin. "Well we were aware of some MI6 operatives selling military secrets. Our concern was if they were ever to get wind of

SHADO and its technologies. Some of which were farmed out through government contracts in this country. From what you've told me, it sounds like you stumbled onto something there."

"Stumbled? It almost got me dead," said Foster. "Tell me. Do we still have access to MI6 operative dossiers? You know how we had a deal going in case we needed to enlist the help of field operatives."

"Yeah, we do but that was the idea of Henderson having his own branch of spooks before he died and it all came back on SHADO. As far as I'm aware we still maintain those records but we've never needed to use them."

"Would you allow me to have a look through them? When I'm cleared of course."

"You wanna look for the two operatives who caused all that trouble right?"

"Yeah, I owe it to some friends."

"Yes and you just might be doing everyone a favour if you can expose what's been happening. MI6 need a jolly good shake up but don't go too hard on them, Paul. After all. If it weren't for them you probably wouldn't have your memory back."

Straker looked up as the doctor entered the room. "Speaking of memories back."

The doctor was holding a message pad and tapping at it with a stylus. "Well do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Oh don't do that Doctor," said Straker. "Don't beat around the bush. Tell it like it is."

"Err Ok," said the doctor as he sat down beside them. "Well there's no doubt you're who you say you are. There's no evidence of alien tampering and all the injuries are consistent with more terrestrial causes. However we can confirm that you have a certain amount of brain damage. It's consistent with what we know about the surgically induced amnesia techniques. We had studied them hoping we might be able to fool aliens into giving up their secrets. There's evidence of chemical damage as well though we don't know so much about that. The brain is a remarkable thing though Mr Foster. Even in 90 year olds, it's been known to repair it self. And your brain has been doing a remarkable job. Your skull has been fractured in 3 places. It looks like they've done their best to make it look like it happened in an accident but it's been done surgically. We can tell the difference but the doctors in Glasgow wouldn't have picked it up. Part of it's been done to hide the entry points they've used to cause the amnesia. You're lucky to be alive with what you've been through Mr. Foster."

Tears began to stream from Foster's face again. A wave of emotion too strong for him to hold back. "I'm sorry." He sobbed as he buried his face in his hands.

"It's alright, Paul. I know what you're going through. Believe me I know. It's alright."

"We don't know how long it will be before you're fit for duty again Mr. Foster. " said the doctor. "Or even if you'll be fit for duty. The brain damage could have some unusual effects. We need to run a full psychological evaluation and try to gage where you're at. But at the very least you're bound to be confused for a while."

"I feel fine," said Foster. "Really! I'm just a little overcome right now."

"Well we see no reason to keep you round here for now. You can go. But I'd watch some of those injuries. We're a bit worried about your kidneys. They've sustained a hell of a beating. Your body's been through a lot. And the dressing on your arm should be changed twice a day."

Foster began to collect his old, blood stained and shredded clothes together. Straker waved his hand. "I had a new suit sent up for you. It's not much but it's all we could muster on such short notice. We'll get you some new things later."

Foster thanked him and dressed in his new clothes. They were better than what he was

use to . But then he remembered a time when he use to dress well. His memories were confusing having lived two lives. Everything looked both familiar and different to him at the same time. They headed back to C&C and to Pilgrim's office.

"Some improvements I see," said Foster as he entered the bustling command room. He stopped at a computer terminal and gestured toward it.

"What ?" said Straker.

"The MI6 mug shots," said Foster. "Won't take long. Those faces are something I'll never forget."

"We can use the computer in Pilgrim's office," said Straker and then thought better of it. "Second thoughts you don't wanna get sticky tape all over your hands." He ushered Foster into a side room which was quieter. A lone operative was in there using one of the 6 computers. She acknowledged their presence and began to get to her feet.

"No don't get up lieutenant," said Straker. "Paul just needs to get access to our MI6 data base. If you could give him access I'd appreciate it." Straker turned to walk out of the room.

"Aren't you staying?" said Foster.

"No I figure you gotta do what you gotta do. I'll be in my office. Err... The commander's office I should say."

Although he only took 15 minutes to find the information he was looking for, it was after 8:30 PM by the time Foster entered the office. Having spent most of the late afternoon and evening undergoing medical tests and treatment for his wounds.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" said Straker.

"Yes thanks. But there's one more thing I need to do. Which unfortunately will have to wait till tomorrow now."

CHAPTER 9

The next day Foster and Frogberg went back to the remains of the shop. It had been gutted. There was little left except for the charcoaled remains of the interior. All of the remnants of Foster's temporary life destroyed. He attempted to get down into the basement but the stair case was just charcoal and ash. What was left would not support his weight. The stairs leading to his upstairs apartment were concrete but the hand rails no longer exist. Foster climbed them followed by Frogberg in silence. The apartment was just as gutted as the ground floor. Foster put his foot on the floorboards but realized they weren't safe to walk on and backed off. There was nothing left anyway so they returned to the ground floor again. Someone had seen them there and had called Fitz. Fitz in turn had called Pearl and Fin. Who arrived moments later.

"Look what they did man," said Fitz. His shop was badly burnt as well.

Foster introduced Frogberg and explained that his name was really Foster not Farmer. They kicked around in Fitz's shop for a while. Records and CD's were burnt. Whatever could be salvaged had been removed.

"How badly burnt out is your studio Fitz?" said Foster.

"Oh man. It's ruined. What didn't get burnt got full of smoke and water. The album was coming along nicely too. And I wasn't well insured. Know what I'm sayin' man!"

"Did any of your CD's survive?"

"Yeah, but they've got smoke in 'em man. They be no good. Anyway. What you be worryin' about the CD's for Man? They don't matter now."

"Can I have a look?" said Foster.

"Be my guest man. Makes no difference now."

Foster went down into Fitz's basement. His stair case leading down were not burnt but a lot of the basement was. The rack leaning up where the adjoining door used to be was twisted and melted with heat. Its contents burnt. The fire had spread from there into the wall panelling that divided the control room with the studio itself. The fire had taken a hold in the studio and had destroyed the instruments housed in there. The mixing desk and recorder were gutted remains of their former selves. Fortunately it largely spared the heat from the cassettes, tapes and CD's, stored at the back. Covered in soot and blackened with smoke.

Foster picked through the ruins and made his way there. Moving to the centre of the rows of CD's clearing the soot off and picking out two CD's with white, hand written labels. Frogberg watched him retrieve them and return back up stairs. He followed him up like a shadow. Foster pulled out a paper parcel and handed it to Pearl. He gave one of the CD's to Fin.

"You'll find everything in that package that will explain what those two rogue MI6 operatives were up to. When the time comes you'll have enough evidence there to bust the case wide open. You'll be legends in detective circles for years to come."

Pearl looked confused. She didn't understand how this new Foster could have moved so fast.

"Don't ask too many questions," said Foster. "And Fin. That CD should anonymously end up in the hands of BBC news. Don't let anyone know where it came from."

Now it was Fin's turn to be confused. "Err Thanks. I think?" she said.

Fitz made that drawing back, half whistling sound that only Fitz could make.

"I haven't forgotten about you Fitz. I've been talking to a friend of mine, How would you

like to have your own sub label with Alien records?"

"Alien records are big man. And they don't do reggae man! Just straight up doof."

"Well, they do now," said Foster winking.

"They don't just pick up nobodies like me. especially no-bodies who don't even have a going business any more."

"Well Alien records have recently been acquired by some friends of mine. I can assure you that anything you want is yours. They're organizing a new studio with anything you want in it. They're even gonna set you up with a new record shop into the bargain. As the biggest of the independents they're interested in distribution through a chain of otherwise independent record stores I believe. You just gotta promise me one thing. You'll keep punching out those tunes, okay. I wanna hear your stuff on the radio. " He handed Fitz a card. "Just call this guy tomorrow and he'll organize what ever you need. No strings. What ever you need just ask, man. Don't be shy ya hear!"

Fitz looked down at the card which read. "Philip Salisman. CEO. Alien Records."

"Thanks man. I owe you one."

"No thank you. All of you. You took me in and gave me a life I otherwise wouldn't have had."

"And what about you?" said Pearl.

"Well I have another life to catch up on. A hell of a lot to catch up on. And I have a duty to fulfil that has been neglected for 6 or 7 years. But I won't be a stranger. I wanna see you all doin' well when I return."

CHAPTER 10

Pilgrim was in her office speaking with Philip Salisman. General Straker listening in whilst viewing a lap top at the meeting table along the side wall. Pilgrim had called Salisman about his proposal to find alien satellites that may be in orbit.

"You write a good report for a newbie." She said viewing his conclusions on her taped up computer terminal. "I think your reasoning is fine but it will take considerable effort to find them."

"But we know where they'll be."

"Oh and where's that Mr Salisman?" said Straker.

"They'll have to be in the Clarke orbit like every other geo-synchronous satellite."

"Oh so you think you can just fly up there and pluck a few objects out of the sky at thirty two thousand Kilometres do ya pal?"

"No but I'm pretty sure where at least one of them might be."

"Oh so you know where a whole one satellite might be do you. And if you they're as small as you think they are, and you do happen to find it, how many more thousands do you think there might be. You haven't exactly thought this one through have you?"

"That's not the point is it, Straker? It's you who haven't thought this one through. If we can find even one satellite up there that's of alien origin then we at least prove the theory. And then we know what to look for."

Straker scoffed.

Salisman lost his temper at last. "Look Straker. I know you don't like me. Damn long haired undisciplined hippy out of nowhere holding your stupid organization to ransom or what ever it is you think. Fuck you. With thinking like yours it's a wonder you ever got it running in the first place."

"Calm down you two," said Pilgrim. "Where do you think you'll find one?"

"There has to be at least one stationed over the north Atlantic. Anywhere along the flight path we took back from Iceland. They knew precisely where to intercept us."

Pilgrim sighed. She rubbed her tired eyes. "Well Ok then, you don't have the training for it but you've got whatever you need."

"Thank you," said Salisman.

"Oh don't thank me," said Pilgrim. "It was all General Straker's idea!" She smiled curtly.

Salisman looked back at the man who had just received a piece of his mind. "But I thought?"

"Oh I was just making sure you knew what you were getting yourself in for," said Straker. "If you feel that passionately about it you had better get up there and take a look."

"Up there?" Salisman scratched his head.

"Oh didn't the commander tell you? You'll have to go up there in the orbiter and take a look yourself." Straker was smiling the smile of victory.

"What?" said Salisman. "But. But. I'm not trained for this kinda thing."

"That's just what I said," said Pilgrim smiling slightly. "Still if you wanna take an active roll in SHADO you gotta get your feet wet some time."

"Just remember to take plenty of barf bags," said Straker half laughing. "Everyone has a bit of hurl the first time they go up. But I think you're gonna beat the current world record. "

"And I just hate being in a space ship when someone else's vomit is floating about the cabin for the whole trip," said Pilgrim. now also laughing. "Standing in a space suit full of your

own vomit is bad enough in zero G. Let alone in a cabin with someone else's."

"I do believe he's turning white Commander," said Straker still laughing.

Salisman was speechless.

"God. Imagine how white he's going to be pre-launch," said Pilgrim. "Well that's my deal take it or leave it. "

Salisman was about to speak again when Pilgrim cut him short. She grabbed a remote control and turned up the sound on a television monitor which was turned on. "Shhhhhh. The news is on."

"This is the BBC world service. " The woman on the TV said. "A breakthrough in the police investigation into the Greenlea trading estate murders in Merton today. A CD ROM was anonymously left at BBC television news. On it was a video of the actual murders taking place. No one claimed to have shot the video but it clearly shows the murders taking place. We warn viewers that the following scenes may be disturbing."

A reporter took up the story as the remarkably intact video evidence was replayed. Edited down to fit within the constraints of the news item. She explained the obvious about the footage. The money and the technology. Then moved on to the other killings. Innocent victims in the wrong place at the wrong time. The film ended and the vision cut to the reporter dressed in a smart red suit and standing in front of the building where it happened.

"Earlier today two bodies were recovered from the Thames. Both male. One with extensive head injuries, the other, a victim of drowning. Both are believed to have been serving agents with MI6. Their discovery has sent shock waves through the intelligence community and has renewed calls for an investigation into the accountability of government run secret organizations. Evidence is mounting that the two secret agents were in fact selling secret technology to the highest bidder. Bidders that may have included Iraq and various terrorist organizations. Police aren't certain but they suspect that one of the men tried to murder the other but the attempt back fired. The names of the men are classified and have not been released. None of this would have ever come to light if it weren't for the work of two young private detectives who were investigating a long line of technology thefts by one of the government contractors."

The vision cut to a grab of Pearl and Fin. Pearl did the speaking. "We knew there was some high level involvement but as soon as we realized there were government spooks involved things became a little scary."

"You know you ought'a hire those two, Adrianna," said Straker.

The reporter continued. "According to the pair they had discovered wide spread corruption within the secret organization which was becoming so complacent that it was almost common knowledge on the street. They claimed they did not shoot the video of the murders but thanked who ever did. Suggesting it may have been a surveillance operation by a rival government organization. Word has it that several government spy organizations spend more time keeping tabs on each other than they do on terrorist organizations, making the footage available in order to clear themselves. "

A man began to speak. He was wearing an Italian suit and standing surrounded by media people on the steps of some undisclosed building. The caption underneath read. "Home Secretary. Mr Turnbull."

"I can assure you that we're taking these allegations very seriously. The intelligence community must remain accountable for their actions the same as any other government department."

"But they don't have a very good track record do they?" Shouted one reporter over the throng of other voices trying to get their questions heard.

The home secretary continued. "I think it's important to note that without these organizations we would be largely at the mercy of terrorist organizations and that in it self makes them necessary."

"But they're obviously not accountable are they?" shouted another reporter. "This proves it."

"They are accountable and I can assure you we are mounting a complete investigation into the incident."

"The opposition leader is demanding a full royal commission. How do you respond to that?" shouted a reporter in shot and thrusting a microphone in the home secretary's face.

"Oh I think the opposition leader would like a royal commission into the size of his boot laces. But I think he's going to have to come up with more evidence than that to warrant one."

The crowd of reporters jostled for position and shouted more questions but the home secretary moved off. He and his minders forcing their way through the crowd of reporters and television crews and into the building. The reporter standing in front of the building in the Greenlea trading estate concluded the story.

"Just how endemic this kind of incident, as the home secretary put it, is with in the intelligence community is remains to be seen. Perhaps we'll never know. Evidence of wide spread corruption is strong. No one is really sure how deep it runs. What is known is that some significant and extremely dangerous British military systems are almost certainly in the hands of unfriendly military organizations tonight. Evelyn Trask reporting for BBC world service."

The studio news reader returned to the screen. The panel keyed in behind her showed a radio active logo with the word "Sellerfield" underneath it.

"It has been revealed that much more of the country side surrounding the aging Sellerfield nuclear reprocessing plant has been contaminated than first thought. Much of the eco system has been contaminated by insects and small animals finding access to the aging plant. Scientists say that there's no immediate cause for alarm. There's no evidence of mutant ants or other insects as depicted in science fiction films from 50 years ago."

Pilgrim hit the sound out button on her remote control. "Thanks Philip. I guess you'd better go get prepared."

Salisman bowed out of the room thanking them both.

"You know the Chinese have a saying," said Straker. "As no doubt Paul would be aware. May you live in interesting times."

"Yeah. Just when we were beginning to become complacent," said Pilgrim. "This is certainly turning out to be a hell of an interesting year."

"Speaking of Paul," said Straker raising to standing mode. "Are you coming for that drink we talked about?"

"I didn't think you drank?"

"I don't usually. I haven't had a drink in 15 years. But it's not every day one of your friends comes back from the dead. Besides I'll need a push. This mobility system uses some classified technology so I'll need someone to push my wheel chair."

Later that evening in the Deer and Pheasant Arms, a quiet little pub in West Harlington where the old crew would sometimes like to congregate in the old days, Straker raised a glass.

"To absent friends."

"And to the old team back in action," said Foster.

"And to the success of the new team," said Lake raising her glass in Pilgrim's direction.