

Things Old and New

by A. Berglund ©2015, A UFO Novella - sequel to Thor's Hammer

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CHAPTER 1

It had been nearly a year since the destruction of the alien barracks in Norway and the 1990's were turning out to be even more unsettling than the 1960's had ever been, thought SHADO Commander Ed Straker.

He had a rare segment of time in his office at SHADO... Nothing needing his presence up top at the studio, no UFO alerts and he had finished processing the last report on his desk.

He lit the Dominican Lonsdale cigar he had just clipped with his guillotine cutter. Nice... Full bodied taste, minimal heat and the luxuriant smooth finish that only came from full-length hand-rolled tobacco leaves of Cuban seed origin.

Much better than those plastic-wrapped, chopped filler cigarillos with the plastic tips that he'd smoked for so many years. He'd had to upgrade from an open jar to an actual humidor, but his personal assistants kept his Spanish cedar-lined ebony box well stocked from a humidified bulk container. It was worth the extra cost even if it came out of his own pocket... There was talk of banning smoking altogether at HQ.

His thoughts drifted with the plume of silky smoke as it slowly rose.

The '60's... He'd been a fighter pilot with an enviable record of aerial victories over Southeast Asia. He had started training for the space program, although every other fighter jock and test pilot was trying to get into that program too.

He'd had a couple dates with a pretty blonde named Mary and his best friend Alec was a bomber and transport pilot in the RAF. Things were going well for him personally, although there was much turmoil in the world.

Communist insurgents and leftist groups were pushing into the poorest countries around the globe and the Soviets had grabbed whole European nations in their iron grasp from the Black Sea to the Baltic. The world was poised for a global series of tragedies, culminating in a blanket of mushroom clouds...

The youth of that day were continually touting peace, love and freedom – yet failed to realize those were things you couldn't just chant, sing or protest to accomplish. They require hard work, determination and self-sacrifice at a personal level. He thought, *is there anything more selfish than spending days on end stoned, listening to music and giving nothing to the world except protests and rhetoric?*

Now, those "hippies," as they called themselves – had traded their LSD for PhD's and were in positions of political and administrative power, able to affect change in public policy. They had lowered the expected bar of achievement so that nobody would ever feel excluded or sub-par. They now gave children trophies for sports and other forms of

competition for nothing more than participation. *It no longer matters if you work hard to excel or just make a half-assed attempt anymore*, he thought as another plume of back-lit smoke was rising slowly toward the lights.

The youth Straker saw in London and in much of the world today had a self-centered sense of entitlement, and a twisted understand of the subjective concept they insisted was "fairness." They cared nothing about world events, however tragic, unless it affected them personally. Another segment of youth simply wanted to watch the world burn and party in its ashes.

Surely, there are others - capable of independent thought, who work hard to achieve real skills and knowledge. They also pay attention to the world around them. Straker had great hope and faith in them to make a difference in the world. *They are the ones who will carry SHADO into the next millennium*, He thought...

The orange phone buzzed, pulling Straker back to the present.

"Commander Straker, Doctor Jackson is requesting a meeting with you, sir."

"Tell him I'll come to his office, Lt. Johnson."

He set the cigar in the nearest groove of his marble ash tray and stepped out toward the medical department.

CHAPTER 2

"Thank you for coming to see me so soon Commander," said Dr. Jackson in his customary drawn Slavic accent. He pressed the button on his desk that secured the room from unannounced visitors.

"What is it doctor?" Straker asked, but he had already noticed there were personality conflicts between several of the SHADO staff.

"Commander, as you know, there hasn't been a new recruit in our organization since Thorvald joined us right before the Norway operation. Things have become - shall we say - tense, here at SHADO headquarters. Nothing specifically dangerous, but more frequent arguments, bad attitudes and angry outbursts."

"Doctor Jackson, they are all hand-picked, highly intelligent and highly motivated individuals, with focused skills and jobs to do..."

"Therein lies the problem Commander." Jackson said bluntly. "The more highly focused and intelligent the mind, the more critical it is that they have a regular period of release from responsibilities to pursue more recreational interests."

"Are you plying for more vacation time, or a playground, Doctor?"

"Nothing like that, Commander," he said, ignoring the sarcasm. "I am proposing that we make available some of our facility and resources to them for more - shall we say - artistic, social and intellectual pursuits."

"I believe I know what you are saying, Doctor. We have cavernous storage areas here and we could potentially 'borrow' some of the unused equipment from the studio. I'll see what I can do, Doctor. Was there anything else?"

"I'm afraid so, Commander. As you know, I increased the psych evaluations from monthly to weekly after the Norway operation. Most involved have recovered normal levels of function and emotional stability since and been returned to monthly evaluations. Except for one..."

"Let's have it, Dr. Jackson."

"As you know Commander, that raid was the first direct physical combat experience for Captain Ford."

"He performed exceptionally well, Doctor – like a seasoned soldier."

"But he is not a seasoned soldier, Commander. He is a communications officer, and by nature a kindly-hearted individual. He is struggling to come to grips with the actions he took against the alien sentries – actions of great violence and brutality that were within his skills but not within his capacity to deal with on an emotional level. There are a few names for this condition Commander, but not one that expresses its damaging effect on the human psyche."

"Are you telling me that Ford is unreliable or dangerous, Doctor? Do you realize what that would mean?"

"Nothing like that, Commander. My suggestion is that you remove him from the assault team roster and focus his duties in another direction – say research, for example. He will remain ever the conscientious communications officer – but do not send him into direct combat again. A failure in the field could cost lives..."

Straker was not pleased to be losing the formidable fighting skills that Ford had demonstrated, but was relieved that he would not have to be liquidated. Ford had nearly fifteen years with SHADO. The amnesia drug would not erase that much memory span without reducing him to a vegetative state. A bullet would be kinder.

"Can we do anything for him, Dr. Jackson?"

"I am meeting with him twice a week Commander and we are making slow but steady progress. He must learn to accept that his lack of a warrior mentality is not an indicator of weakness or uselessness."

"He must instead learn that his humanity and inherent kindness is a different kind of asset to both himself and SHADO... He is not the only SHADO operative to have suffered this kind of emotional turmoil Commander, it has happened to many of our field operatives – including you."

Straker clearly took offense at the comment. Jackson didn't care and moved in closer to make his point as clear as possible.

"Every time you have been abducted, ambushed, deceived, blind-sided or suffered tragedy in your personal life you have been effected – in the same way... You suffer the nightmares, the melt-down when nobody is looking, the anger, depression and even the same physical effects on your body..." He was now pointing at Straker.

"The difference between yours' and Fords' situation is simply that you have a much stronger will, a callous streak and greater responsibilities to maintain focus on. You also have an office door and a whole film studio up above for when you need to be alone or step away from all of this... Do you understand Commander? You share the *exact same*

malady..."

Jackson knew he had probably crossed the line with this, but he knew Straker wanted the full truth at all times, with no sugar coating from him. He needed to hear this - and although his anger flared now, he would eventually be grateful. Jackson also knew that he would likely never tell him that...

Straker didn't respond for a few moments.

The glare of anger in his eyes was slowly dissolving into a blank expression. He was comprehending what Jackson had said and recognizing the truth in it. It felt like the weight on his shoulders had eased for a fleeting moment.

He looked at Jackson with a bit more respect. He responded with a gentle smile, saying, "I'll check into your request this afternoon..." Jackson smiled warmly and pressed the door release button.

CHAPTER 3

Thorvald Magnusson had turned out to be real asset to Harlington-Straker Studios. He had a passion for history, ancient cultures and art forms lost to antiquity. He was serving as technical advisor for several period pieces, including documentaries.

It was bringing a greater level of authenticity to the backdrops, weapons and furnishings than they had ever achieved before. He was also helping the fabrication shops create authentic looking period pieces instead of disguising generic ones and hoping nobody noticed. They were getting the details right...

It was bumping up production costs a bit, but the box office returns and improved reviews in the magazines proved it worthy of the added expense. "Critical acclaim," is what the film industry called it.

Thorvald was always amused by the ability of Straker, Freeman and sometimes even Foster, to show up on set in studio executive game face and then return to their subterranean duties without tipping their hats either way. As a man with vast experience in disguise and deception, he was impressed...

The confusing aspect of it was when Ms. Ealand would page him to Straker's office. He always felt compelled to ask her, "Up or down?" She found it amusing. Thorvald knew she had one of the most complicated jobs on either site...

Alec approached him outside the sound stage where they were gearing up for a documentary about the early days of the timber industry in Canada. Alec waved him over to the golf cart.

"This film project has been scrapped. The sponsors pulled out at the last minute. Get this place back to zero point. And get rid of that pile of logs, would you?"

"Do you care what I do with them, Mr. Freeman?" he asked, a plan forming...

"Hell no! We need the space for props and trailers." He zoomed off and back to his "downstairs" office.

Thorvald went directly to see Mr. Harvey, the head of the onsite woodshop of the fabrication department. He had an extensive array of woodworking equipment and a

large lay-down area for raw materials and projects in-progress.

He asked Bill Harvey for permission to use the woodshop after hours for the purpose of building some special items. Harvey was hesitant so Thorvald told him about the logs.

There were four piles of logs; one was common pine and another was white birch. What got Harvey's attention was that the other two piles were black walnut and curly maple. He got excited about the possibilities and asked, "For free?"

Thorvald nodded in approval with a smile. Harvey said excitedly, "I'll get the big forklift and a few helpers... This is going to be fun – and good experience for those younger fellas..."

CHAPTER 4

Straker came out of his SHADO office door and said, "Ford, I need to see you." Ayshea heard him and came over to take Ford's station while he stepped away.

"Yes Commander, right away..." These "talks" usually ended with Ford feeling like an idiot and resulted in an upset stomach for the next several days. He was looking ashen by the time he stepped through Straker's doorway.

"Captain Ford," he began, "in keeping with your new rank and pay grade, I am altering your responsibilities a bit." The knot in Ford's stomach wrenched tighter...

"Your records indicate that you trained for Skydiver duty – and that you demonstrated an unusual depth of understanding in how sound and light work in a liquid environment." Ford was greatly relieved it wasn't a reprimand but still had the knot in his gut...

"In addition to your communications post, I am assigning you a special project, Ford. We have recovered alien uniforms, gear and several liters of that green oxygenated liquid - but we have no idea how they see or hear the world around them. We may well glow fluorescent purple in their eyes and we need to know how to work around their senses. You'll be reporting to Colonel Lake in the research lab tomorrow morning... Any questions?"

"No sir!" He spun at attention and exited the door. Straker had said a lot without saying much... Keith Ford understood that he was no longer on the assault roster and that felt like a building had been lifted from his shoulders. Just as importantly, it was clear that Straker had confidence in his abilities and knowledge. He put on his headset and sat down at his station. His stomach didn't hurt anymore – in fact, it might just be a steak and potato kind of night...

Ayshea noted that Ford had a smile on his face – his first in months, and he was speaking with confidence in his voice. Keith had been her friend and confidant for several years, and this was a godsend... It made her smile as well.

* * *

Keith Ford reported to the research lab fifteen minutes early. Colonel Lake was already at work and wearing one of her flattering silk blouses with black slacks. It was also mostly covered by her white lab coat. She threw another lab coat at Ford.

"You might as well look the part too, Ford," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Do you have any ideas how we might proceed?" she asked.

"Can we rig a test bench using one of their helmets and the green liquid? We simply put audio and visual sensors in the green fluid and challenge with our own senses as the baseline."

Virginia smiled. Ford had been thinking about this since talking with Straker. "Great. Let's see what we have already and what we need to fabricate..."

Three days later they called for Straker, Freeman and Dr. Jackson. The demonstration was set up in a small laboratory. Upon entering, Ford began to deliver the speech he had practiced.

"We had no idea of what to expect from our experiment, so we started by eliminating some variables. We know that the aliens are humanoid and are similar enough to us to be able to use transplanted internal organs, endocrine glands and sensory organs like eyes."

"We can assume there is a high level of compatibility with other organs and sensory systems from that. The remaining challenge was to recreate their vision and hearing using our own equipment and see if there is a correlation to our senses."

"Colonel Lake had to adapt her highest sensitivity video cameras and microphones to withstand exposure to the green liquid."

Virginia presented the next segment. "We initially failed to take into account the potential effect of the green oxygenated liquid on our equipment. Turns out it was highly reactive to the metal parts and exposed electronic components. We rebuilt our cameras and audio probes using sheaths of non-reactive polymer and placed them in the helmet on a mock-up of a human head to simulate binocular vision and stereophonic hearing. We started our tests."

Ford picked it up again. "We wanted to get a baseline visual representation of the green liquid both with and without the plastic eye shields. This is what we found:"

Virginia clicked off the light and started the projector. It was raw film footage from a movie made in the studio above. Another screen showed what the cameras in the helmet saw.

Ford continued. "As you will notice, everything simply appears to have a mild green tint to it. When you add the plastic eye shields, something else happens..."

Virginia pressed a hand-held device that remotely triggered the eye shields to move up against the camera lenses in the fluid filled helmet. The picture on the screen changed and they saw additional shades of reds, purples and blues. "Now watch what happens when I step in front of the cameras..." She said.

Her white lab coat and outfit were glowing bright purple on the screen. Straker, Freeman and Jackson were silent and appeared awestruck. *I'll be damned; we really do glow purple don't we?* Thought Straker.

Colonel Lake continued. "We challenged this optic system with different colors, wavelengths and intensities. Gentlemen, these eye shields allow the aliens to see an expanded infrared and ultraviolet spectrum. This may have some advantage in space travel or on their world, but here on Earth it means they can see in the dark and differentiate between colors that we can barely detect with our own eyes."

"Why the glowing clothing then Colonel Lake?" Asked Straker with genuine interest.

"Because our human society places value on wearing vibrant and colorful clothing Commander. We add UV brighteners to our laundry detergents to fool our eyes into perceiving the clothing to be brighter and more colorful. Since we cannot detect the expanded visual wavelength that the aliens can, all we get is clean-looking laundry. Much of the deer family has similar vision incorporating an expanded UV range as well. Just no night vision..."

Ford turned on the lights and shut off the projector. "Now onto their hearing."

"We know that fluid transmits sound waves and vibrations with minimal loss of wavelength from the source. The factors that can alter that are temperature, salinity, and turbidity. It's the basis for anti-submarine warfare and underwater stealth for every navy on our planet. These three parameters in seawater can cause a sonar signal to bend, refract away or even reflect like a false bottom."

"Their green oxygenating liquid is a homogeneous substance in a confined space with limited volume. No temperature or compositional variations. Our test became simplified as a result of this fact."

"We challenged the internal microphones with varying wavelengths of sound, including tones across the musical scale and pitch range and at differing volumes. What we discovered was that the fluid did indeed muffle part of what we would call our mid and upper audible range of hearing. The helmet adds an insulating barrier as well."

"It did however, show an increased transmission of lower-medium and low frequency sounds. Even those that are too low for us to hear. It means they can feel the vibration from advancing vehicles and foot falls as much as hear them."

Virginia summarized. "We know how they see and how they hear. The only thing we don't know is how they smell..." she said with a wink.

Alec wanted to laugh but Straker just glared at him...

Virginia added, "I think we may be able to use this to our advantage..."

CHAPTER 5

It had been over a week since the demonstration in the lab. Ford and Colonel Lake were working on some new project with the engineering and fabrication group.

Thorvald was finishing up his assignments as technical director and they would not need him for the sci-fi fantasy and romantic comedies the studio was working on. He was still doing his evening woodshop projects with Bill Harvey, but his days were spent underground working on Colonel Lake's project as well as some ideas he had for improved weapons systems. He had also refurbished several of the vintage standard arms in the armory. Straker wondered if the man ever slept.

* * *

The loudspeaker blared, "This is Space Intruder Detector. Red Alert. There are multiple inbound targets, heading 458-248 Red at a velocity of Sol 4."

The red alert signals illuminated in SHADO headquarters, Moon Base and aboard the

fleet of Skydiver submarines.

Lt. Ellis appeared on the A/V link monitor, composed as always. "We have thee inbound targets Commander. They will be passing between the sun and our position in six minutes. We can barely pick them up do to solar flare activity."

"Beware the Hun in the sun," quipped Alec Freeman, stepping up beside Straker. The saying was as appropriate in space as it had been since 1915 for combat pilots and their crews...

Lt. Ellis spoke again, "Commander, long range cameras now picking up details. They all appear to be the larger troop carriers sir."

"Lt. Ellis, I want every available interceptor in on this. We might just get a lucky hit if we can fire more than three missiles."

"We have two fully equipped back-up ships in the Moon Mobile hanger and additional qualified pilots Commander. We can have them armed and launched within three minutes. We'll keep you informed..." Lt. Ellis was always cool and professional. Straker admired her. He was waiting for approval from I.A.C. for her promotion and salary upgrade. They were in the works for several SHADO key staffers who were long overdue...

"All interceptors, immediate launch," she said. A flight of three rose from the launch platforms concealed in adjacent craters. A flight of two more interceptors rose up behind them. They assumed a staggered formation and awaited the firing solution from Moon Base. Seconds later, the attack vector was displayed on their targeting computers. The automated attitude adjustors moved the ships in the three dimensional orientation required to fire on the incoming UFO's.

Countdown timers illuminated, counting down from 6.3 seconds. All interceptor pilots had their index finger on the hinged trigger of the fire control. The flight leader on the headset counted down out loud; "three... two... one... launch!"

All five missiles launched, on course for the three advancing troop ships. The interceptors' job was done. They headed back to base unsure if anything they did would make a difference. It was a helpless feeling they'd had many times before...

Moments later, there were five brilliant flashes in the distance indicating that the proximity/impact detonators had triggered on target. Straker stared at the monitor waiting for the update. He realized he was holding his breath...

"Commander, all five missiles were direct hits, but the inbounds continue on course - speed slowing progressively. Trajectory calculations coming in now sir."

Straker's face was red, his hands flat on his desk and white knuckled. His eyes were shut tightly, hoping this was another bad dream. Since Norway, he'd had this very dream at least once a week... He could feel the sense of helplessness and anguish starting to build. *Pull yourself together Ed! He thought.*

Lt. Ellis' voice pulled him back to the situation. "Commander, there was also a scout ship hiding behind the troop carriers. Projected terminal point is the North Sea again Commander, but off the East coast of England." She fed the projected navigational points into the information system so they showed up at SHADO HQ and on the nav systems for all Skydiver units.

"Get that spot marked on a regional topo map now!" he snapped at Alec, noting that Virginia and Thorvald were also there now. "They're coming down in our own damn back yard!"

"Skydiver One," I want you to launch and follow the inbounds at a distance. Do not engage... Observe and report only."

Peter Carlin's voice sounded disappointed, "But Commander..."

"But nothing Carlin." Straker cut him off. "The most you could do is take out the scout ship and if those transports are as armed as they are armored, you have zero chance of helping us take the fight to them later. You'll get your chance, Carlin, but it will be carefully planned and not done by the seat of the pants..."

"Understood Commander," Carlin said. Just because Straker was right didn't mean he had to like it. He pictured his sister's lovely face and her gut-wrenching funeral every time he pulled the trigger on his fire control system...

Straker had everyone's attention around the conference table in his office. "This may very well be the beginning of an invasion or a direct assault on this facility. I need some ideas and options people... We need an edge and a miracle wouldn't hurt either."

Colonel Lake and Thorvald looked at each other then back at Straker. "We might just have that Commander," said Virginia with a somewhat devious look on her face. Thorvald was grinning.

Straker felt a wave of cautious confidence. Nobody else had a team like his. He coolly sat on the edge of his desk. He lit another Lonsdale and glanced back at them. "Okay, show me what you've got..."

CHAPTER 6

The demonstration took place in SHADO's underground lecture hall. It was essentially an auditorium with seating and floors that sloped downward toward a sizeable stage. It had a glassed-in sound and projection room at the back, and the walls were covered in acoustic tiles to contain sound inside and out. It had been built for use by lecturing dignitaries, group meetings and for public addresses via radio and TV by I.A.C. brass if the alien threat reached a global scale.

Mostly, it was just a large, empty space with an awkward floor that the janitorial staff had to keep clean. It had however, never been used for something like this...

Straker and Freeman entered the sound booth. Colonel Lake was there waiting for them surrounded by control boards. "I'm almost done shrinking these controls down to a more portable size, but here is what we have to show you..."

She flipped the switches that illuminated the stage area. Straker and Freeman's faces went blank and they just looked back and forth at each other and down at the stage.

"Virginia, have you lost your mind? We don't have time for this!" Straker was looking a bit red in the face. Alec had a dour expression as well.

Virginia rolled her eyes and shook her head a bit. She spoke with a tone of irritation that surprised them. "This is science, gentlemen!" She was clearly scolding them and enjoying it. They looked at each other and Straker motioned for her to continue.

"We needed to test our new equipment under controlled conditions but recorded sound is too flat and limited in frequency to truly reveal its potential or limitations. Live sound is much more dynamic and covers a broader range of tones and frequencies."

Straker gave scrutiny to the people on the stage. Especially when he saw that the massive stacked amplifiers were stenciled with *Harlington-Straker Studios*. He clearly made out the faces. It was Ford on a very large drum kit, Mason from security on an electric bass, and Lt. Chan with a very colorful Les Paul hanging over her shoulder. The man standing beside her had his back to them with shoulder-length dark hair. He was fiddling with the settings on a mixer board that led to a series of effects pedals on the floor before him.

As he turned back around, Virginia watched in amusement at their faces. It was Thorvald... He had a well-worn Fender Stratocaster hanging over his shoulder. It was missing much of its lacquered finish. He was standing there waiting for the go signal with his hair hanging in his face and those dark, heavily framed glasses.

"He looks like a bloody geriatric head banger, Ed." Alec quipped in his ear.

"How did you find out about these peoples' musical talents Virginia?" Straker asked, looking puzzled.

"It was right there in the SHADO database personnel files, under 'other interests'."

"I always skipped over that section as being unimportant..." he replied. She smiled...

"I must warn you that the music falls into the realm of 'heavy metal.' It has the broadest range of tonal frequencies, vibrational pulses and decibel levels."

"Thorvald chose this song for you because of your fondness for history and poetry Commander. It's about the Charge of the Light Brigade, and it's called '*The Trooper*'." Straker had a smile at the thought of the gesture. It didn't last long...

She motioned to Thorvald to begin. Ford smacked his drumsticks over-head four times quickly – then a wall of sound hit the booth. Thorvald and Lt. Chan's hair was slinging forward rhythmically with the beat and the notes they were hammering out were blindingly fast. Virginia found it reminded her of certain movements in Bach's organ concertos. She also picked up on other heavy classical influences while they'd been practicing. She may have to investigate this genre...

Despite the glassed-in booth they stood in, the music was loud and pounding enough to feel in their guts. Thorvald began to sing. It had a sound like an operatic jackhammer. They would have to shout over the sound.

"Dear God, is that really him singing?" Yelled Straker.

Virginia yelled back, "Yes Commander. His vocal flexibility makes him able to both speak and sing in impersonated voices." She added, "He can do this song as Elmer Fudd, but that proved counter-productive..."

Straker was actually enjoying the historical aspect of the lyrics. Alec clearly was not and was still cringing.

Virginia yelled again, "Notice the four vertical canisters located in a line across the theater..." They had a red light on them. "Here comes the hat trick," she shouted and flipped a toggle on the control board. The red lights changed to blue and something

amazing happened – the sound completely disappeared...

"Bloody hell!" Shouted Alec, erupting into a large smile. Straker shared it and the two looked back and forth and then at Virginia. The group on stage was obviously hard at it and still hammering their instruments but no sound reached the booth...

She spoke softly for contrast. "We've created a sound dampening field that sort of swallows the full spectrum of frequency and vibration entirely. Place your hands on the glass – you won't feel any vibration at all. Beyond the probes - full sound."

She had a twinkle in her steel grey eyes. "What's more is that I think we can potentially channel that captured sound energy and redirect it in a focused beam in any direction. The implications are self-explanatory, but that will have to wait..."

She flipped the lights off and on again. Thorvald and crew stopped. She switched off the dampening system.

"Colonel Lake, you've outdone yourself." Straker was clearly pleased.

"You've underestimated me, Commander." She flashed a bit of false irritation. "We're not done, gentlemen..."

Virginia looked at her clipboard and said, "This one's for Colonel Freeman. It's about the RAF and the Battle of Britain; called '*Aces High*'." She signaled to Thorvald to start the second song. It began with a recording of Churchill's Speech.

It was no quieter than the first song and she let it go until the sound was clearly driving Freeman and Straker to the point of discomfort. She was rather enjoying seeing them squirm a bit. She was also enjoying the vocals and driving rhythm. When it looked like Alec and Ed were ready to hit the door, she took pity on them and hit the dampening switch again. They were both visibly relieved...

Thorvald and crew were still pounding out the song to full effect.

"Here comes the sucker punch," she said playfully. She flipped a toggle on another board and the band totally disappeared from view...

She waited for them to get their gasps and stupidly surprised looks over with. Where the band had been there was only the empty stage. She could tell they were questioning whether they were still there. She shut the dampening field off and the sound hit them like a sonic boom. Yes, they were still very much there...

Switching the dampening field back on, she turned back toward them. "What you see – or rather don't see – is simply a view of the empty stage. We are projecting that image to become the view in front. The molecules in the air are acting as a screen to project the image on."

"The same effect that dampens the sound causes the air molecules to vibrate violently, inhibiting the penetration of light through it. We discovered it quite by accident..."

"It's an invisible wall of sorts across the span of the probes and we can project any image across any span as long as they are in proper orientation within the towers that hold the sound dampening equipment."

* * *

"Would you like to see Bugs Bunny play heavy metal?" She was clearly enjoying this demonstration.

She cycled the lights off and on again and the band stopped. She brought up the house lights. Anticipating their questions, she began again. "We will have at least ten of these units mounted on remotely controlled mini-Mobiles."

"First we deploy the camera to record the backdrop or prepare to project the image of our choice. Then we move the dampening units into place and power up. We could roll an entire armored division right up to your front door and you'd look out your window and see only the yard. We still need to see how it works outdoors..."

Straker and Freeman were in congratulatory mode and Virginia Lake was glad for the recognition but wanting to get back to work on the downsizing project.

"Thorvald has something to show you in the armament lab bunker." She turned away and they understood it to be a dismissal. Virginia could come across as a little abrupt but she was actually always two steps ahead and focused on the next tasks. They'd learned long ago to accept her rapid changes of focus and give her the space she needed. She'd never let either of them down, ever...

CHAPTER 7

Straker and Freeman grabbed something from the cafeteria and proceeded to the armament lab bunker. They had no doubt that Thorvald would be waiting...

"Hello Commander, Hello Colonel." His voice came through the speaker in the observation room. Thorvald had his hair pulled back again. Ed and Alec wondered if he could hear a thing after that performance a while ago.

There were objects in front of the backstop some 40 meters downrange, and two benches with odd-looking equipment on them. Thorvald turned on the lights over the target area and powered up the ventilation fans. He spoke into the microphone again.

"The target on the right is armor plating stacked vertically. It is 10 cm thick and there are six more layers placed ten cm apart. Each layer is the same as the armor plating on our Mobiles. Combined, this duplicates the heaviest armor available on Earth-bound military vehicles today."

"The skid on the left contains the largest recovered hull fragment of the troop ship in Norway. It is approximately one meter square and only about 8 cm thick, yet it stopped our interceptor missiles with no damage. Composition is still a mystery."

The first weapon I have here is a prototype for a shoulder-fired cannon. It fires the same round as the cannons used on Sky One and the Mobile units. Our first version was self-loading from a box magazine but it proved to be fragile. We upgraded – or rather retrograded – the action to that of a large-scale bolt action rifle. It works perfectly and has proven to be durable as well..."

He motioned to them to put on the hearing protection and he did the same. Even from behind the observation window the blast was one that they felt in the ribcage and gut. The impact on the armor plating felt exactly the same. He cycled the bolt. Thorvald then quickly fired four more rounds into the targets, cycling the action in between. The brilliant flashes left bright images in their vision like flash bulbs but larger and more

intense. They had no idea he had fired at both targets.

As the smoke began to be cleared by the ventilators, Thorvald motioned for them to enter. The acrid smoke made it hard to breathe but Thorvald was clearly in his element. His hair hanging in his face again, he was smiling contentedly.

They stood in front of the armor plates. There were three holes neatly spaced that had bored cleanly through the first two layers and they had all cratered and scarred the third. This would clearly be useful to the assault troops.

They walked over to the recovered hull section. Not only were there no marks on it, but the projectile fragments had scattered all over the area around them.

"As you can see, effective against more soft-skinned targets but useless against a troop ship. It can also be scaled up to replace the single-shot ordnance they use for defense on Moon Base. The weight would become a non-issue there."

"There is another prototype I have to show you..."

He showed them over to a bench with an odd-looking assembly of tubes about five meters long; one smaller central tube with another larger diameter one around it that terminated in heavy power cables from the back side.

"What is this thing, Thorvald?" Freeman asked for both of them.

"It is an electro-magnetic rail gun. Think of a particle accelerator or cyclotron but oriented in one straight plane. Instead of accelerating subatomic particles, it fires a bolt like a cross bow."

Thorvald took off his glasses and wiped his eyes with a damp cloth. "We suspect that the troop ships' armor have some form of inherent repellency to the ferrous metals in our projectiles. The solution is to make the projectiles non-ferrous and simply use a ferrous-metal sabot or carrier for the magnets to act upon for launch."

"The stronger or longer the magnetic field, the higher the velocity reached by the warhead. It can be scaled up to any conceivable size and is perfect for a zero gravity environment. Perhaps a frontier barrier of them for Earth defense, or a belt-fed version for the interceptors."

"You'll want the hearing protection gentlemen, but you need not leave the room, unless you have any issues with strong magnetic fields..."

Thorvald moved the unit into position and adjusted the point of impact to the center of the hull fragment. He powered up the capacitor station and plugged in the cables. He waited until the amperage rose to the necessary set-point. Fire...

There was a hole punched neatly through the hull section and the backstop had been cratered severely.

"Bingo," said Straker... "What kind of warhead was that Thorvald?"

His face grew into what Alec used to refer to as a "shit-eating-grin." "Rock maple, commander. It's made of hardwood from a bowling pin that I turned on a lathe..."

CHAPTER 8

Straker was in his studio office and Ms. Ealand was helping him sort out some contract and budget issues. It always seemed a bit ridiculous to him that the business of the film studio would be even remotely pressing in light of what was going on 80 feet down in SHADO HQ. It was an irritation that he had to endure.

Ms. Ealand was always very helpful and professional in both of her administrative roles above and below ground. She had proven unflappable under pressure from either source, often simultaneously... A sizeable monetary expression of his appreciation was one of those in the works at I.A.C.

Colonel Lake was testing the dampening and projection systems outdoors tonight. There was a clearing in the forested area at the extreme back corner of the grounds with a pristine stream running through it. The studio staff and workers had all left hours ago.

The clearing had a portable sound stage and generator station in it tonight. It was also as far away from the office complex as possible. Straker estimated it was close to two miles away.

He suddenly heard music. It was the opening riff of a song he remembered from many years ago. "*Smoke on the Water*," he said out loud. Ms. Ealand just smiled. He was hearing it clearly despite no open windows or exterior doors. He paused from his paperwork and glanced upward with a sly grin on his face. He was waiting for the big reveal...

Virginia must have thought he'd like the song and let it go for quite a while before firing the dampening and projection systems. Sure enough, Straker heard the music stop abruptly. Ms. Ealand noted the silence and began to read back the memo to him for approval.

Straker would never know that it was Virginia on the keyboards or that there had been an encore of The Edgar Winter Group's '*Frankenstein*'.

Virginia was in his SHADO office waiting when he arrived the next morning. "Commander, the tests were successful last night. The higher moisture content of the air outside made the projection function even more like a wall. The action of the suspended water molecules only added to the effect of what we saw in the lab."

"There is one caution though, technicians that were within a couple meters of the wall had the moisture in their skin, eyes and mucus membranes irritated by the same effect. It also created a feeling of disorientation in them. Doctor Jackson was ready and treated all those affected immediately."

Straker was clearly pleased by the results. "Virginia, come up with some ideas for deployment tactics and get it into a mobile delivery system..."

Thorvald entered Straker's office as Virginia was stepping out. She flashed him one of her saucier smiles and a look that made him feel a bit like a piece of bait. His train of thought derailed momentarily...

"Commander, we've had to make some revisions to our rail gun projectiles."

"What happened Thorvald?" He was quickly losing the optimistic feeling Ginny had just given him...

"Just a little dose of cold reality, Commander. The physics and chemistry techs showed

me that wood would not prove durable in a subzero vacuum. Also, they pointed out that the alien hull fragment had been stored for a year and had likely been degraded by repeated exposures to our atmosphere.”

“There must be something else you can use for your warhead, Thorvald.”

“I borrowed an idea from the 30mm projectiles used by the American A-10 for destroying armored vehicles. They use the densest man-made material available; depleted uranium. It’s what’s left behind after centrifugal enrichment and not a radiation hazard. I’ve experimented with added ordnance behind the penetrating head including various chemical agents. A PBX charge was one of them.”

“Does it work?”

“With much deadlier results Commander. The backstop in the armament lab bunker may take a few weeks to be repaired and returned to service...”

“There are multiple SHADO installations, including this one – that generate this material as a waste product in the manufacture of the nuclear fuel rods that power our reactors. We’ve been storing it by the ton waiting to find a suitable means to dispose of it. I was able to create warheads using basic metal casting methods.”

“Two birds with one stone,” quipped Straker with a grin. Thorvald didn’t get the reference. There had been a couple other common sayings that apparently didn’t become popular outside of the English-speaking world...

CHAPTER 9

It had been nearly 24 hours since the alien troopships and lone scout ship had arrived off the coast of England. Straker was not happy that he had no solid information on their location yet. He looked down at the map in wonder. Carlin had to pull back into the cloud layer as the ships went under in order to avoid giving away his presence. Multiple passes over the region had consumed his fuel quickly.

He had not been able to locate the ships on the surface and there were no buildings large enough to house four UFO’s. It was not a replay of Norway. SHADO orbiting satellites were crossing over the region at regular intervals and building a composite scan of coastal England and the North Sea with every available search technology in play. There were dozens of people working on finding the alien ships at multiple locations... They *would* find something – eventually.

* * *

Straker was well into his second Lonsdale and cup of coffee when the satellite recon group hit pay dirt. Colonel Lake’s face appeared on the monitor over his desk.

“Commander, we’ve found them. The infrared signature popped up during the composite fly-overs. I’ve taken the liberty of re-tasking a satellite to move into a geosynchronous orbit. That requires rapid increase in altitude in order to avoid a losing the target. That also means we will be in jeopardy of collision with several other satellites, including several military ones.”

“I’ll deal with that if it comes, Colonel. We need that intel as soon as we can get it.” Straker’s voice was cool and calculated.

"We have maneuvering thrusters on our satellites, so we can return it to its former relative position later," said Virginia. She was rather proud of her satellite design.

The other monitor came to life with the live satellite feed. There were three large glowing cylindrical objects and a smaller round one.

"Where are these targets located, Virginia?" Alec Freeman stepped into his office.

"It correlates with a rather undeveloped coastal area near Scarborough, Commander. There's not much there, but as you can see, they are stationary on the sea floor not far off shore."

Straker was familiar with the history of the area. It was there, in December of 1914, that Rear Admiral Hipper of the German Imperial Navy and his battlecruiser squadron bombarded the towns along the shoreline for over twenty miles northward. Civilians had died and four small coastal towns had been pummeled.

It was not of strategic but psychological value to the war effort. It served as notice to the people of England that the Royal Navy would not be able to protect them from all outside threats as they'd been led to believe. The raid illuminated the holes in the Royal Navy's defense and intelligence networks and served as a wake-up call to smaller, neutral countries to choose a side – hopefully avoiding the arrival of German battleships in their own harbors. It also strengthened England's resolve.

"I want all available Skydiver units there ASAP and recon groups checking out the area. Maximum stealth, people. Find out what they're up to but don't give them notice of our interest. Observe and report only."

Virginia added, "They have night vision capability and can detect lower audible frequencies and any vibration, so move with that in mind."

* * *

Peter Carlin wanted to lead the amphibious recon group on the site, but Straker and Freeman had insisted he remain available to launch and provide close air support for their retreat should they be discovered.

Two Skydiver units were on-station off the shore and sitting stationary just above the sea floor. Each had an amphibious recon/assault group that had been trained by Thorvald after the Norway operation.

They'd had to carry more provisions and rig mesh hammocks from overhead pipes for bunks to accommodate the extra personnel. The new generation of Skydivers was in the design phase and they had provided space for additional personnel, equipment and armaments. They were also going to be about ten knots faster submerged and nearly double that on the surface.

A team of three operatives emerged from the escape trunk of each submarine and swam in formation toward the alien landing site. Each maintaining 200 meters between their groups and in close proximity to the bottom.

Using their compasses, chronometers and detailed maps, they knew they were only 500 meters or so from the rocky shoreline. Both teams checked their detection instruments for radiation and changes to the environment.

Group one rose to the surface and snapped images with both digital camera and infrared

camera then submerged again. Group two did the same, but from the sea floor.

Following the elapsed time on their chronometers, they swam another 100 meters closer and repeated the procedure. The images from each of the cameras were coming into the command center in both submarines and SHADO HQ via instant satellite link.

Team one photos were beginning to show structure on the shoreline and some detail of the terrain. Underwater, the cameras were picking up nothing due to the rather high turbidity of the seawater.

At 300 meters the shoreline was becoming more detailed, with more features visible. The water temperature was also beginning to rise...

At 200 meters, it was possible to differentiate the relative sizes of the structures and some of the arrangement as well. The underwater cameras were picking up large bulky shapes ahead but no details were visible. The water temp had risen almost fifteen degrees...

Alec Freeman was watching intently beside his Commander and best friend of nearly thirty years. Despite the periodic disagreements, each knew that the others' support and defense was unconditional. They were twin sons of different mothers, in every sense of the phrase. Words were rarely needed to express what was necessary. Alec was the closest thing to family Straker had left...

* * *

At 100 meters from shore, both recon groups were quite busy. The water temperature had risen over twenty-five degrees and the radiation had climbed into the zone where they would have to limit their exposure to mere minutes. They would have to work quickly...

Team two placed one of Colonel Lakes' dual cameras on the sea floor pointing at the UFO's. One lens providing a visual image and the other would show the same but with an infrared overlay showing the thermal details.

Team ones' photos from 100 meters revealed great detail of the buildings, brush and surrounding tree line.

"My God, it's Sea Side!" exclaimed Alec. "It's a holiday camp I used to go to as a lad. I wouldn't have believed it still existed. It was built back in the 1920's."

Straker knew that "holiday camps" were very much like summer camps for kids, but for whole families. They were intended to give a similar experience to an upscale vacation resort, but within the financial means of lower and middle income families. They had simple, minimalistic cabins instead of villas, common bath and dining facilities, and very basic services. They had become popular for city dwellers after both world wars, as a temporary escape from the rubble and ruin left by the Blitz in each. It was a change in scenery if nothing else...

Alec continued. "Sea Side was special – it had an enormous indoor pool that was always full of people. The weather was usually lousy for most of a stay there – nothing new on the North Sea. Parents would drop their kids at the pool for much of the day while they enjoyed more adult activities. I can try to sketch the layout of the site as I remember it..."

Groups one and two swam away from the UFO's along the shoreline and sat on the bottom where the waves would just keep them covered. Each operative stowed their swim fins and strapped on a pair of thick-bottomed neoprene boots that would silence their footfalls on the rocky shore. The sun was sinking low on the horizon – They would have to work quickly...

Both groups came ashore moving silently. The brush past the rocky beach area was thick and tangled. It would make too much noise underfoot.

Both groups placed dual cameras on each side of the beach area, just inside the brush so they could look toward the UFO's and the holiday camp simultaneously.

They slipped silently back into the water and made their way back to the submarines. There would be much scrutiny of the images and data they'd collect.

CHAPTER 10

It had been dark for a couple hours in coastal England. The geostationary satellite was feeding continual images back from its position high above Sea Side. The dual cameras on the beach and the sea floor showed no changes. Still photos were spread out on the conference table in Straker's office. The underwater shots of the troop ships were on top being examined with a magnifier.

"No doors, no hatches, no windows – not even an opening for propulsion." said Straker with some irritation. "How the hell do these things even work?"

Virginia was looking intently at the photos, lost in the potential of the technology at work. "This may be some form of membrane technology Commander. If they need a doorway, it forms – or a propulsion outlet. I'd love to be able to see it up close and find out how it works."

"If we can't figure out how to destroy them, you may get a one-way ride in one," Quipped Straker. "I want round-the-clock monitoring on these feeds, people. If they step out to walk the little green dog, I want to know about it..."

Straker's orange phone rang and he grabbed it. "Straker..." He walked over and handed it to Colonel Lake.

"How soon?" She said, looking worried. "No, no... Just keep me posted." She went over and put the receiver back on the cradle. "Commander, we have a problem developing."

"Let's have it, Virginia." Straker's hands were on the desk and he was looking intently at her.

"The conflict with other satellites is becoming a reality. No collision is expected, but there will be a series of them passing underneath on their normal daily orbit trajectories and they will interrupt our satellite feeds. Starting in about four minutes. It could intermittently last for a couple of hours, Commander."

"Can the Skydiver units observe from offshore?" he wanted no gaps in coverage.

Carlin's voice came over the com. "Heavy fog and squalls are forming along the coast, Commander. Visibility is dropping fast as it moves in. Standard North Sea weather I'm afraid. I can send the recon groups out again, sir."

Straker rubbed his chin. "Keep them aboard Carlin, they couldn't transmit anything either. "We know they can detect nearby radio signals. I want them to get a false sense of security before we hit them... *If* we can figure out how to do it."

"We'll be standing by, ready for orders Commander." Carlin shook his head as he switched off the com link microphone.

The images on the monitors began to fade into a blur of static. It was going to be a very long night.

* * *

Twenty four minutes later, the satellite feed began to clear and images began forming on the monitors. The three large troop carriers were still there on the sea floor, but the smaller scout ship was absent.

"Where the hell is that scout ship?" Straker was livid. "How did it just leave?"

"It didn't show up on surface radar anywhere, and sonar isn't reliable in the shallows, Commander." Carlin had been monitoring using what assets were working. "It must have stayed under to avoid detection."

Thorvald stepped into the office just in time for the image to fade into static again.

"Take a break, Ed." It was Alec. It was his shift tonight and he knew Straker wouldn't go home unless someone carried him out bodily. "Go get yourself something to eat – I've got this..."

Ed Straker just looked at him, gave a confirmatory glance and left his own office to the command staff.

He returned about forty minutes later with a cup of coffee in his hand. The soup in the SHADO cafeteria had really improved over the last year. It was their biggest selling item. Straker had an idea who was behind it...

The monitor was still showing nothing but static. Alec, Virginia and Thorvald were still going over the image stills and looking at the aerial shots and diagram of the Sea Side Holiday Camp. Alec had labeled the structures from his memories of childhood visits. There were still nearly 40 of the small rudimentary cabins arranged in a semi-circle around the shower/lavatory buildings, the game building, snack bar, pub and dining hall. There was a very large rectangular building closer to the beach. There were places like this dotting the coasts of the entire U.K.

After about twenty more minutes the feed began to clear into an image once more. The scout ship had returned to its previous position.

Carlin's voice came over the link. "Commander, scout returned just as it left – no radar or sonar signal. We're monitoring surface communications for clues to where it went. We'll keep you informed." The picture faded into static again...

It only took another twenty minutes before the image cleared again. Carlin's voice came over the com link. "Commander, we have law enforcement and emergency responder traffic coming in from Whitby." The small town was just a few miles up the coast from Scarborough.

"A report of a murder scene at a cottage near the shoreline. A neighbor found them

moments ago." Carlin paused, listening to the radio feed. "They waved off the ambulance; three people dead. All cut open and organs removed... A man, a woman... and a seven year old boy..."

Straker heard that last part echoing in his head. He stood upright, face suddenly pale and his eyes large and searching. His lips moved as if struggling to speak and he felt all the strength pour out of his legs. He crumpled to the floor behind his desk, sending the chair scooting away as he fell against it.

"ED!" Alec rushed to his best friend and found him on the floor in a fetal tuck with tight fists and tears rolling down his cheeks. His eyes were shut tightly and he was shaking violently. Alec was in a panic, unsure of what to do for him. His eyes teared up immediately. "Oh God, Ed!"

Thorvald scooped his Commander up gently and carried him toward the door. Alec was going to follow him when Virginia held his arm and turned him directly toward her face. "Thorvald will take him to the med center and we've got a lot to do, Alec."

Alec was very upset and only wanting to follow his best friend. Virginia gently placed a hand on each side of his face and pulled his focus into her face. She looked up into his red eyes and swept the tears aside with her thumbs. She smiled sweetly with her grey eyes looking very soft and warmly into his. "I know; I'm worried too Alec, but you know this is where he'd insist you'd stay. Now go, sit and get sorted so we can deal with the job at hand."

He was regaining his composure but still feeling mixed between his duty and his friend. Virginia put a cup of hot coffee in front of him. She placed an arm around his shoulder, saying, "Coffee now, whisky when we're done..." She patted his shoulder and stepped back to the conference table.

"We could never do this without you, Ginny." His voice was shaky and quiet.

"I know, Alec... I know..." She smiled and they both got back to work.

CHAPTER 11

Dr. Douglas Jackson was just heading for the door when Thorvald carried Commander Straker in and gently lowered him to the padded cot. Jackson removed his coat and tossed it toward his desk. It missed but he made no move toward it.

"What happened, Thorvald?" he asked, getting his stethoscope ready.

"Commander Straker collapsed after hearing the details of an alien raid on a family on the English coast. "A man, woman and a seven year old boy. He appeared to be trying to say something, looking off into the distance."

"Ah, I understand, Thorvald." He was giving Straker a moderate dose of tranquilizer to ease his condition. "I do not know how he will react when he awakes. We must make sure he doesn't injure himself accidentally."

Thorvald pulled a chair up beside the cot. The room lights were dimmed to reduce stress on the Commander when he awoke. Jackson spread a warmed blanket over his patient. The tranquilizers were working and the Commander slept.

Thorvald said quietly, "This man truly does carry the weight of the world upon his

shoulders, Yannick. Sorry, Dr. Jackson...”

“I don’t mind, Thorvald. It’s nice to hear the sound of my real name sometimes. You are right. In addition to the heavy burden on Commander Straker, he is also a father who lost his seven year old son to an accident. Too many things upon him at once, and this UFO incident brought it to the surface.”

“I understand the loss of a child all too well, Yannick. There are few events that can pierce a soul so deeply as that.”

“How did you process the loss of your wife and daughter, Thorvald?”

“I had the advantage of channeling my anger and anguish into a path of revenge against the aliens. Don’t misunderstand; the nightmares and emotional periods still happen all these years later. I learned to let it out when I needed to, and I was alone most of the time. It’s easier to release it when you’re alone, Yannick.”

“Perhaps you and the Commander could help each other, Thorvald. You seem to have a more peaceful soul than your history would suggest possible.”

Thorvald smiled gently. “I am actually a religious man, Yannick. Christian doctrine teaches faith, forgiveness and unconditional love. I am a man who spent over half my life immersed in violence and have ended more lives than I can possibly count. I have much to repent and atone for. Can there be a soul that needs to experience forgiveness and unconditional love more? It is a personal necessity.”

“How do you put your faith into action, Thorvald?”

“I do things for others. Companionship, cooking, listening, making things or whatever they need, Yannick. Even teaching them new things. The more I give of myself, the more at peace I am. The Commander needs to feel such peace.”

“I will stay with him, Thorvald. You should return to the command post.”

“Can I get you anything, Yannick?”

“You already have, Thorvald. Thank you...” He smiled gently and sat beside his patient, waiting for whatever his Commander would need.

CHAPTER 12

The sun was rising over Harlington-Straker Studios. It cast a soft glow upon the fascia of the full-scale sets scattered throughout the studio grounds. Old western towns with plank sidewalks, Victorian-era London streets, modern cityscapes and even ancient Athens with its signature columns – all were bathed in the golden glow of the rising sun.

Eighty feet beneath the studio level, Alec was still watching the satellite feed for new developments. Thorvald and Virginia were asleep beside each other on the sofa. They had never left after a full day. Alec looked at the clock. Normally Straker would arrive before nine and his shift would end. Not today... Colonel Foster would be returning from Moon Base today, so the command colonels could rotate shifts until Straker was back in action. He hoped that day would come soon and didn’t want to even contemplate the alternative.

The office door opened and Commander Straker stepped in, smoothing his cream-

colored Nehru jacket and trying to make his hair lie down flat again. A cafeteria staffer was following him pushing a small cart with carafes of coffee, tea and apple juice. There were bowls of hot breakfast foods, plates, mugs and utensils. The rattling sound roused Virginia and Thorvald from their sleep.

"Dear God, Ed!" Alec exclaimed. Straker raised his hand and cut him off right there.

"Please pardon my dramatic exit last night. That UFO incident at Whitby uncorked some difficult memories for me. I'm quite alright now, so eat something and bring me up to speed." Straker sounded and appeared to be – *relaxed*.

He moved close to Alec and quietly added, "Jackson stayed by my side all night Alec. When I woke up, he was there and helped me work through some things." "He was genuinely kind and understanding, Alec. I needed this..."

Alec whispered back to him, "I should probably stop referring to him as 'Henderson's pet snake', Ed." Straker gave him a grin.

* * *

On the conference table there were several still photos in ultraviolet format showing there had been quite a lot of activity at Sea Side Holiday Camp. They were arranged by time stamp and source. A lot of activity indeed...

Straker moved along noting the various large and small heat signatures. He looked up at his command staff and waited...

Alec began: "As you can see, things became active just before 2100 hours. The satellite feed interruptions had passed and we noted these two smaller heat points."

"These are aliens that had emerged from the scout ship. They are dragging some kind of cable or line out of the water and all the way up to the large rectangular building here. This was confirmed by the dual-cams near the beach."

"This photo nearly 30 minutes later shows a minor heat signature inside the large building and that the two aliens were inside. Ten minutes later, the heat is still there but there is no more illumination from the building on the ground around it."

"Lights are on but the shades are pulled," quipped Straker. He sounded like himself again.

"See now at around 2200, there are now three teams of two aliens pulling a sizable tube or cable from the troop ship in the southernmost position. It must be of considerable mass since it takes six of them over twenty minutes to pull it the 200 meters to the large rectangular building."

"By 2230 there is a gradual intensification of the heat signature in the building and it gets hotter continually until nearly 0230. Remember, there are eight aliens in this building already."

"Near 0300, something really weird starts happening. In groups of two at first, aliens start coming out of the water and walking into the building, about four per minute."

"Twenty minutes later, a large group of them walk from the troop ships to the large building – then nothing more since except posting sentries around it."

"Disembarked troops, Alec," said Straker. "What is this large rectangular building anyway?"

"That enormous indoor pool, Ed. Comparable to three Olympic-sized pools but side by side. I've seen well over a hundred people in that pool at once, Ed."

Thorvald and Virginia were listening but their mouths were full of scrambled eggs and bacon strips. They were grateful for the food, but even more so to have Commander Straker back at the helm of SHADO.

Straker and Freeman loaded their plates and went to sit around the conference table. Before taking the first bite of bacon he said, "We need to contain them in this location. I want some ideas, people..."

Ed Straker knew he had the best group possible assembled in his office. If there was a way to contain and eliminate this threat – they would find it.

CHAPTER 13

There had been no change in the image of the satellite feeds since well before dawn. The sentries had moved about and had been presumably replaced by others, always keeping six of them moving around the pool building.

Thorvald and Virginia were working on some diagrams and sketches and discussing the topics intensely.

Ed had told Alec to go home and get some sleep so he could relieve him later that night. He promised to call him if anything big happened. Foster would be in by noon.

There was little for him to do but sleep on the return trip from Moon Base. Sleeping in zero gravity was always so relaxing for him, although some found it disorienting. It often induced motion sickness for first time passengers.

Virginia looked over at the Commander and motioned for him. He brought the smoldering Lonsdale with him, leaving a faint trail of grey smoke behind him.

"What have you got for me?" He asked, choosing the words to convey his confidence in them.

She began, "We believe they have turned the large pool into a giant stasis tank for these troops and whatever ones will be sent later. There must be thousands of gallons of that oxygenated liquid in this location. We don't know if they carry it in a concentrated form or make it onsite, but they can create enough of it in three hours to fill three Olympic sized pools... Presumably, they can recirculate it, heat it, remove the wastes and replenish the oxygen as they need to."

Thorvald added, "We need to be able to approach with extreme stealth in order to deploy the projection unit and the sound dampening equipment. The grounds are expansive and the buildings are spaced out around the outer rim. Once clear of the outer buildings, our only cover will be the weeds. The nearest road is over a kilometer away. It will mean a very long crawl from the tree line."

Virginia continued, "We can't bring in Mobiles until the dampening field is operative. This area is primarily sedimentary rock which will vibrate like a drum head while in motion – multiply that by more than a half dozen of them."

"Once the dampening field and projection system are operating, we'll be able to roll in with Mobiles and a marching band." She smiled with a wink. "We will need a diversion of some kind and Thorvald has some ideas in that arena."

"Commander, we will need to deploy devices to destroy the four UFO's on the sea floor as well as dealing with the contents of the pool. The diversion I have in mind will require some rather unusual equipment for a SHADO operation – here is a list of the necessary items." Straker took the list and looked back at Thorvald with a raised eyebrow.

Virginia looked at her notes. "We've been looking into substances that might be reactive with the oxygenated liquid. We were looking for an incendiary reaction, or violently exothermic reaction. We had found a substance that would create a rapid downward pH shift. Given enough time it might make things very uncomfortable for them, but they could simply exit the pool."

Virginia continued. "The surprise reagent came by complete accident. The green fluid didn't want to go down the drain in the lab sink, so the janitorial staff used a common crystalline form of drain cleaner to clear it. The blast took out a section of lab wall and destroyed the bench entirely. It only took a few seconds."

"Fortunately, the janitor had stepped behind the blast shield with his mop – hopefully his hearing loss isn't permanent. The gushing water from the broken pipes helped suppress the flames until the response team arrived."

"That was less than a liter, Commander." She looked back into her notes.

"The electro-magnetic rail gun is a no-go in this application, Commander." Thorvald was holding a sketch of something. "The unit cannot be made water proof and the viscosity of sea water would negate the velocity of the projectile. It would also displace so much water that the rooster-tail would give away the game completely."

"In order to penetrate the hull of the troop carriers, we need something that will be extremely close to it to minimize loss of energy. I was thinking along the lines of anti-tank ordnance. It penetrates the armor before detonation and fragmentation occurs. It produces the same effect as a blender."

Virginia cringed at that, but Thorvald continued. "It must have a projectile that penetrates without triggering their responsive armor but also enough payload to destroy them or at least disable them permanently. The mechanism to deliver them must be simple like a spear gun and triggered remotely."

"There is one problem, Commander. Someone must deploy these underwater behind each of the UFO's and close enough to nearly touch them. The radiation may prove deadly..."

"Virginia, Thorvald, get the fabrication shops on it. Time is not on our side here." Straker looked at Thorvald and said, "Thank you for taking care of me last night."

Thorvald smiled broadly and followed Virginia out the door.

Foster would be here in a while to take over the vigil with the satellite feed.

They knew the interference and North Sea fog would happen again tonight at about the same time. Maybe they could use it to their advantage...

Straker looked again at Thorvald's list of necessary items for the diversion and made the

connection. He laughed, "I'll be damned, it's *Apocalypse Now...*"

He picked up the phone and made some calls...

CHAPTER 14

It was mid-afternoon at SHADO HQ. Paul Foster was in the command office still watching the live feed from the satellite. The alien sentries were still walking the perimeter of the pool building. It was like watching paint dry.

Ed Straker was taking care of business topside and making his necessary appearances in the studio office, sets and sound stages. It was nice feeling the daylight on his face and a breeze that wasn't artificially created.

He was still feeling very grateful to Dr. Jackson for helping him through his meltdown. He knew he needed to deal with the many events that had hit him like so many hammers.

Last night proved he couldn't just suppress them indefinitely. It was why he'd kept himself so busy. He used two simultaneous careers as the excuse to avoid the issue. His suppressed anguish was boiling nearer to the surface than he wanted and he needed Jackson's help to regain that sense of having a keel and a rudder again.

* * *

Colonel Lake and Thorvald had been working non-stop getting their equipment ready for deployment in the field.

Virginia and her fabrication group had finished and tested thirteen miniature versions of the Mobiles. Twelve with sound dampeners and one with the projection hardware. The vehicles were no larger than a shoebox and were operated by remote controls that could be manipulated individually or in groups.

When in position, they would raise the dampening probes up on telescopic mounts. She was pleased that they worked so well. They would have made more, but they simply ran out of components. As it was, they had to make the tracks out of thick neoprene blocks salvaged from wetsuit material. It had made them much quieter.

Thorvald's group had fabricated four trapezoidal wood box frames. Within each one was a simple mount that would function like a heavily spring loaded dart gun. Each would get a boost from a blast of compressed air as a supplement to the spring. They would use a remote release triggered by signal from the Skydiver units.

Thorvald was busy in Bill Harvey's woodshop. The lathe was running at high speed and the cutting tool was making quite a noise against the wood. He had a box of things he had finished shaping and sanding that looked like giant dark brown darts in two different sizes. He was frequently checking the dimensions of the rotating piece with dial calipers and grinning like a fool despite the sawdust and shavings that stuck to him all over. Even his hair and beard had wood bits stuck in them.

Thorvald took the shop vacuum to himself and cleaned up the area quickly before returning to the underground lab. He showered quickly and changed into the spare clothing he always kept available in his locker. He returned to the lab.

Straker came in to check on his progress. "What are these, Thorvald?"

"Piercing projectiles for the underwater demolition charges." He anticipated the next question. "They are made of mahogany wood, and have enough mass to carry impressive impact energy."

"The smaller ones are for the shoulder fired cannon. We are assuming that the opaque material they covered the inside walls with was likely to be similar to the membrane technology of the troop ship. These will breach that if it is indeed the case."

"What then, Thorvald?"

"We use the rotary cannons on the Mobiles to launch a barrage of canisters filled with crystalline drain cleaner directly into the pool."

"A cocktail from hell." Straker was smiling with a somewhat sadistic expression. "How do you propose we get the underwater charges in place?"

"We deliver them to Skydiver units using the nightly fog and darkness as cover. They can even run on the surface to their stations if the fog is sufficiently thick, then submerge and deploy the weapons. We will complete the warhead sections and get them ready, Commander."

* * *

The sun was sinking on the horizon and Paul Foster was still watching the grass grow on the monitors along with dozens of other SHADO staff in multiple locations. *What the hell are they waiting for?* He thought. He would stay with Colonel Freeman for as long as he was needed. He lit one of Straker's Lonsdales - his second for the evening.

Dr. Jackson had come back in around 1500 and had insistently sent Straker, Lake and Magnusson home to rest. He was one of the few in SHADO HQ that could. There would be two command colonels through most of the night that could handle whatever arose.

He was also worried about Carlin and his crew. They couldn't just go home and rest and Carlin would push himself to the point of folding if allowed to. Jackson intervened and ordered the Skydiver crews and captains to rotate shifts and get some sack time. They would need it in the hours ahead.

* * *

The underwater demolition rigs were ready by 2100, complete with sizeable PBX explosive charges contained in their PVC pipe bodies. It was a field expedient solution to the question of construction materials.

They were loaded onto a SHADAIR amphibious transport helicopter which would meet the Skydivers and transfer the units to them. The fog and darkness would hide the rendezvous from prying eyes and satellites.

Straker had chosen the rendezvous point for its proximity, yet it was remote enough and the raised sea bottom made it a navigation hazard for most surface vessels. He also picked the location in keeping with the seeming World War I theme... The Dogger Bank in the middle of the North Sea.

A SHADO supply ship had left Cromarty Firth and was heading at highest speed to a point to the East of Scarborough. It looked like any other commercial container ship, but on its deck was an unusual cargo. Straker had pulled some very long strings. A studio head at a rival film company in Scotland owed him big and he was collecting... The result

covered the deck of the supply ship.

The transfer of the underwater demolition rigs took place with no difficulties in the Dogger Bank area. The fog and darkness concealed their presence and the return trip.

The rigs wouldn't fit through the hatches so they were lashed well to the deck. The Skydivers could go substantially faster on the surface than beneath. They would be back on station off Scarborough in less than three hours and would then submerge and wait for orders and daylight. They had ample volunteers for the task of swimming the demolition rigs up into position behind the UFO's, despite the radiation hazard. It would take time to get them deployed and set to fire.

* * *

Alec had arrived and was working with Paul on the operational plan for the attack on the site. The satellite feed was going through its period of interference just as it had the night before. When the images would briefly clear there were no changes from previous ones.

"They must be waiting for reinforcements to arrive." Alec activated the com link to Moon Base. "I want a yellow alert posted until further notice, Gay."

"Immediately, Colonel." She said in her customarily professional manner.

CHAPTER 15

Foster had been sent home before midnight. He would need to be fresh the following morning. He would be leading the flight from the supply ship and had to catch a ride out there before the day shift would even be arriving at HQ. His group would be the diversion – and totally unarmed.

An underwater detail from both Skydivers had carried the demolition rigs three full kilometers to the targets. Thorvald had made them from semi-buoyant materials, so the weight was just above neutral but they were not shapes that moved easily against the viscosity of seawater.

They placed the rigs so that the projectile tips were just a few millimeters from the hulls of the alien ships. The bases were covered with bottom sediment and loose rock to minimize movement when they were triggered. They set the mechanisms and energized the remote release devices.

They made their way back to the submarines and went immediately to the onboard medical center to begin treatment for radiation exposure.

Nothing happened above water – their presence had gone unnoticed...

* * *

A team of Markers Transport heavy trucks with long trailers was making their way toward Scarborough. In the lead was a Unimog truck with enclosed cargo area. Inside was a team of technicians and racks of miniature Mobiles. They were checking batteries and signal strength to each part of them. The morning sun was above the horizon and climbing steadily.

Thorvald stopped the truck about a kilometer short of the road that led through the

woods back to Sea Side Holiday Camp. The road was remote but still saw daily use by area residents, truckers and farmers. He and Virginia stepped down out of the cab. He was putting on some special gear when Virginia stepped around to his side.

He had put on boots and a full coverage jumpsuit made of heavy leather. The gloves were also leather with full gauntlets. He fished around in the duffel bag and pulled out a weird shaggy looking bundle of scraps. It was the same color as the weeds along the roadside. He unrolled it and put it on along with a matching balaclava. The ghillie suit was the strangest looking item of clothing Virginia had ever seen. She handed him the mini-Mobile with the projection system.

"How do I look, Colonel Lake?"

"Like young Bigfoot going out to play," she said with a smirk and flash of her eyes. "Give me one tone on the com when you are in position and two when you want Foster to do his bit. We'll roll the dampening units into position then and the Mobile gun units when it's online. If all goes well, we might just catch them with their little red pants down around their ankles..."

Thorvald walked into the brush and she lost sight of him quickly. "Whoa, that really works," she said. She stepped up to the rear of the truck and said, "Okay folks, its show time..."

Within twenty minutes they were in place at the mouth of the entry drive and waiting for the signal to start.

Thorvald had been crawling on his belly and pushing the camo-covered mini-Mobile in front of him for nearly an hour. It was probably 400 meters from the outermost building on the site to the area of the pool house. He was really feeling it in his joints and getting tired.

He had gotten to within 100 meters of the building and could see the red and silver uniforms of the sentries on patrol. He signaled the first tone. His location was well centered relative to the long wall of the pool building.

Thorvald touched his ear piece and sent the second signal. Now he would wait to see what Foster's group would do.

Thirty kilometers out over the North Sea, Paul Foster and his group were taking off from the SHADO transport ship. Six flat black vintage Bell UH-1's were rising and each had enormous theater speakers attached to a mount beside both side doors.

The low-frequency slapping sound of the massive two-blade main rotors began to echo across the water. It had been years since Foster had flown one of these ships, but he had loved the way they responded to inputs - and the history of the machine made it endearing beyond mere piloting. It felt like a visit with an old friend. They formed up in two rows of three on a parallel course toward Sea Side.

Everyone knew the "Surf or Fight" scene from *Apocalypse Now* and would expect to hear Wagner's '*Ride of the Valkyries*', but Paul had something else in mind... Something he selected specially for Thorvald.

The Skydivers had risen to the surface enough to clear the deck guns, rocket launch tubes and fair-weather bridge. They were sitting 5 kilometers off shore, ready to provide cover fire or launch the Sky units for close air support.

Carlin was on the fighting bridge, watching for Foster's group. He called into SHADO HQ. "Commander, Colonel Foster's group approaching from due east."

Ed Straker and Alec Freeman were listening to the com link and watching the live satellite and camera feeds on the monitors. Thorvald appeared as a small yellow fleck in a sea of grey on the infrared. Photo lenses could see nothing in that spot.

Carlin could hear the approaching Huey's long before they were visible against the bright sky. They were less than 10 meters off the water.

Straker and Freeman heard that familiar slapping sound and it triggered memories for both of them. That sound was loud and carried over long distances by design. It had been a psychological tool in Southeast Asia and it signaled the approach of doom to enemy combatants. His blue eyes seemed to be focused on something thousands of miles away.

Straker spoke softly. "That amazing sound, Alec. I remember the relief I felt hearing it coming. My Phantom had been blown from the sky by a SAM near the Cambodian border. My weapons officer was dead behind me and I had been hit badly and was losing blood. I don't even remember ejecting."

"It seemed like only minutes laying there on the ground. I could hear the Viet Cong in the brush but there was no way I could fight, I couldn't even move."

"I started to hear that amazing slapping sound. Two of them, and getting closer by the second."

"The first was a gunship with twin belt-fed .50's on each side. It was firing on the brush around my location. I could feel the air pulsing as it passed over, circling and sweeping. It dropped a cascade of spent brass on me each time it went over. The second was the medivac unit and a man was coming down to me on a cable with the sun behind him. I lost consciousness and woke up in a hospital."

"That sound signaled death for many, but to me it will always sound like... hope."

Alec put his arm around his best friend's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. He had been flying sorties over the NATO countries in a Vulcan bomber at that time with two nuclear warheads on board. The Soviets were his designated targets.

* * *

Thorvald heard the thundering sound of the approaching Huey's. It was a glorious sound and it moved across the water like a continual rolling artillery barrage.

Three kilometers out, Foster keyed the music... It wasn't Wagner. It was Led Zeppelin's '*The Immigrant Song*', on a continual loop. He and his other pilots were grinning like schoolboys peeking into the girls' shower...

Thorvald loved this song. The alien sentries were apparently not fans and made their way quickly around the ends of the pool building, heading toward the beach.

Thorvald deployed the mini-Mobile, flipping the toggle to activate it. Virginia drove it right out of his hands and toward the pool building. Once in position, she turned it 180 degrees and snapped the digital image of the background.

The mini-Mobiles with the sound deadening equipment made a quiet whirring sound as

the moved past Thorvald, leaving little wakes of displaced weeds as they went.

The technicians adjusted and verified the position and alignment of the dampening probes by the satellite link and raised them to operating height. The red lights came on and flashed to blue simultaneously down the line. The projector unit energized and pointed toward the invisible wall. It all had worked perfectly.

Thorvald heard the music and thunder of the Huey's just vanish. "Okay Thorvald, don't let them run you over." Virginia's voice in his ear was comforting.

Thorvald stood fully upright only 100 meters from the pool building – he was invisible to anyone in there. *What a strange feeling*, he thought.

Behind him he heard the rumbling of the Mobile gun units coming up behind him. Trees were snapping and the crunch of brush under the tracks of the massive machines was uncomfortably loud.

On the other side of the invisible sound dampening wall, the only sound or movement was coming from the diversion unit as it passed over the aliens heads and continued past. They had no idea there was an armored group on the other side of the building. Foster's group did a formation turn and returned to the ship.

Straker said to Alec, "Remind me to send some bourbon and cigars to McTavish at his studio in Scotland. He really came through for me, although he thinks it was going to be footage for a new sci-fi film." Alec grinned.

The Mobiles rolled to a stop right where Thorvald was standing. He looked a little lost. Six overhead rotary cannons powered up and trained on the windows of the pool building. Three would fire chemical canisters and the other three full ordnance.

Virginia was in the command Mobile behind them. Thorvald shed his ghillie suit and stepped in. Virginia laughed. The leather suit made him look like a turtle out of his shell. Thorvald grabbed the bolt-action shoulder-fired cannon and a bandolier of rounds with mahogany projectiles. He climbed up on top of the Mobile to get a better vantage point for firing.

"Keep everybody in the Mobiles until I signal." Thorvald said quietly, forgetting about the sound dampening. "Trigger the underwater charges, NOW."

In the shallows behind the three troop carriers and the scout ship, a remote device triggered release of the bolts. The heavy spring tension pushed the wooden warhead well into the membrane. The burst of compressed air shoved it further in until the wood pivoting arm bottomed out on the hull. The fuses lit automatically...

Four massive explosions shook the buildings and sent trees and rock skyward in a heavy plume of seawater. The dense liquid acted as a shaped charge and reflected the blast back inward as well, intensifying the detonation further.

Virginia stepped out and looked up at Thorvald. He shouldered the cannon and fired five rapid equally spaced shots in through the barrier wall of the pool building. The recoil from the first shot loosed Thorvald's hair from its leather strap. Each following shot made the mop of black and grey sling forward over his face.

The punctured barrier walls began to sag and tear under their own weight. Virginia stepped back inside the Mobile, her ears ringing.

The gun Mobiles opened fire with canisters of drain cleaner and both incendiary and explosive ordnance. The green oxygenated contents of the pool reacted violently to the added catalyst. The heat signature of the building transitioned immediately to intensely bright white. The Mobiles continued to fire...

Straker yelled into the com link, "Take cover now!"

The blast from the chemical reaction had been much more violent than the UFO explosions underwater. Two of the mobiles were on fire and laying on their sides. All of them had their windows blown out and the brush was burning in all directions. Everything within two hundred meters of the building was missing, except the Mobiles. All of the remote mini-Mobile units had been completely destroyed.

Debris was raining down from the sky, much of it concrete fragments and tile shards. There was a smoking hole in the earth where the pool building had been.

Virginia staggered out of the command Mobile, disoriented and unable to hear. She looked upward to where Thorvald had been standing. "Oh God, No!"

Crews were emerging from their damaged Mobiles, staggering and falling. The SHADO emergency medical and fire suppression units were arriving. She found Thorvald after a brief search. He was lying on his back still clutching the fore-grip of the cannon he'd fired. His face and leather outfit were charred black in many spots. He didn't appear to be breathing. She dropped down to her knees beside him just as the med-techs stepped up beside her and took over. One of them moved her away saying, "We've got him, Colonel."

She was audibly crying when she pushed the com link. "It's bad, Commander. Thorvald is down and I'm not sure he's even alive. We have many injured. The med-techs and fire crews are here now. We're going to need a heavy salvage team immediately as well."

Straker put his palms flat on the table and lowered his head, eyes tightly shut. Alec said simply, "Ed?"

"I'm doing something I haven't done since childhood, Alec. I'm praying... For Thorvald. For those Mobile crews. For Ginny, and for this nightmare to end soon."

Alec squeezed his hand and said, "I'll join you..."

CHAPTER 16

It had been a busy week for SHADO following the attack at Scarborough. There were many loose ends to account for, vehicles and UFO wreckage to salvage and an entire vacation resort to sanitize.

Thorvald had survived his injuries but the first three days had required surgical interventions and some skin grafts. It would be a long road to recovery for him.

Dr. Jackson had made another appointment with Commander Straker. Again, Straker decided to go to him instead.

He had begun meeting with Jackson once a week to work through some of the more painful memories in his past. He had started to really appreciate the doctors' expertise and regretted not doing something like this much earlier.

"What is it, Dr. Jackson?"

"It's about Thorvald Magnusson, Commander."

"Did he...?"

"No Commander. He is still alive. His wounds will heal in time and with some determined effort on his part. He is not a quitter, Commander."

"I'm afraid it goes deeper than that, Commander," he said with hesitation. "He has a developing heart problem that will require lifelong medication and a cardiac implant to regulate. Also, his nervous system was damaged and his hearing may be permanently damaged as well. We are trying to quantify those now."

"What's the bottom line, Doctor?"

"Thorvald is finished in his role as a combat field operative, Commander. His body cannot survive the physical stress of the job any longer – it will kill him."

"This is going to be hard for him, Dr. Jackson."

"Not as hard as you think, Commander. I have known him for many years now and I believe I finally understand what is in his heart and mind. I believe he's grown tired of the killing – especially up close with his own hands."

"He has been struggling to balance the life and actions of a warrior with the Christian doctrine that forms his moral foundation. He is very aware and unafraid of his own mortality, and is emotionally seeking to find peace within himself and in his life. Age is making him kinder, Commander."

"What can we do for him, Doctor Jackson?"

"The same thing you did for Captain Ford, Commander. Thorvald is an asset to SHADO in so many areas of expertise. Make use of that, Commander. Have him do research. Have him teach. Have him work in the cafeteria. He won't mind any of those, Commander. Just take the sword out of his hand and free him from it."

* * *

Straker was discussing the doctor's plan with Alec, Virginia and Paul around the conference table. He was confident that General Henderson would support it. Thorvald was an old and dear friend of his and his debt to him was quite personal.

Ginny was silent but Alec and Paul were discussing how much of a change signaled a stability threat. Their words were supportive, but it was clear they didn't understand why he needed this kind of change so badly beyond the physical need.

Straker tried to put it into words and he chose them carefully. "Alec, Paul, we were all pilots. Alec and I combat pilots, and you flying hot-rod experimental ships, Paul. We *chose* those vocations and we bought into the whole 'death or glory' mindset and lifestyle. It was by our choice..."

"Thorvald was a poor farm kid with no living parents. His foster parents were missionaries and trained him to work in that field of service. Everyone who had ever cared about him died when he was young. He only enlisted in the NATO forces to keep from starving and being homeless."

"He was *assigned to Project Mjolnir* and the alien fighting was an extension of that."

"The only role he ever really chose was to be a husband and father."

"He rose to meet *every single challenge* in his life out a sense of duty and need. We should all endeavor to do as well..."

* * *

He went to see Thorvald in the medical center. He sat in a chair by his bedside.

Thorvald was bandaged around much of his head. He had a compression bandage beneath his left collarbone and the left arm was immobilized. Wires from the heart monitor and the intravenous tube to his other arm were on the right. An oxygen feed led to small curved tubes into each nostril. Much of his facial hair was missing.

Thorvald awoke. Straker stood and leaned over his face. His blue eyes and smile showed the compassion he felt.

Thorvald smiled. "It is a reversal of when we first met in Norway." His voice was weak and it was clear he was in pain.

"No Thorvald, I didn't save you from harm. I put you directly into it. I regret that... and many other things."

Thorvald knew that his combat role in SHADO was over, and he knew that nobody just left the organization. It couldn't happen - global security was at stake...

"It's okay, Commander. I know what must come next. I welcome it, and I can finally join my Helge and little Anna." His tired green eyes filled with tears. "I really will be *grateful...*"

Straker was moved deeply and fought the moisture forming in his own eyes. He gently squeezed Thorvald's hand. "No more of that, my friend... You are not a war horse that has come up lame. I have other work for you to do, Thorvald - for SHADO... and for me."

"Your belt-fed magnetic rail guns and depleted uranium projectiles are on their way to Moon Base right now. I hope to send you up there to visit as well. You will be teaching, researching and acting as a consultant on whatever we need. And I want you to teach me fly fishing..." Thorvald smiled.

* * *

Virginia Lake came and sat with Thorvald in early evening. He had slept much of the time, but she felt compelled to hold his hand throughout. She had become quite attached to him and felt a closeness that confused her. He had worked his way into her heart - by not pursuing her, but simply by being so near her. She respected his intellect and abilities, and she deeply admired his humility and warmth. He wasn't even very handsome, but she was very glad she would still be able to look into those soulful green eyes and feel the warmth of his smile.

She didn't know where her feelings for this man were heading, but she knew she'd feel completely lost without him.

* * *

Ayshea and Paul Foster entered the room quietly. Virginia just smiled at them, holding Thorvald's hand. She leaned over and kissed Thorvald's forehead softly, and quietly made her exit.

Ayshea and Paul just looked at each other in disbelief. Thorvald opened his eyes again. He smiled at them.

"Hello neighbor. We were worried about you," said Paul.

"We missed being with you at home, and eating and watching the tele together. We decided we should come do it with you here." Ayshea smiled sweetly at him.

Paul had a bag of food for them, although Thorvald was getting his nutrients through his I.V.

Ayshea held Thorvald's hand and said, "There's an American Christmas cartoon on tonight that we've never seen and we want to watch it with you." Thorvald smiled.

Paul clicked on the television that was mounted on a platform near the ceiling. There was indeed an animated feature coming on. Thorvald was amazed at how imaginative it was. The villain had an adorable dog named Max. The music was catchy and Boris Karloff was narrating with a kindly tone to his iconic voice.

It was the Grinch - playing before an audience of adults who defend mankind from aliens who use them for spare parts. They were all enjoying the show.

The Grinch was in little Cindy-Lou Who's house with a creepy grin on his face.

Ayshea burst into laughter, "He looks like Dr. Jackson!" They all laughed...

EPILOGUE

Thorvald had responded well to the new bi-ventricular cardiac implant. It kept both halves of the heart synchronized to make the function as efficient as possible.

He had done two months of intensive cardiac rehabilitation and was feeling more energetic although he knew he had limitations to work within for his own self-preservation. Magnetic fields were the biggest surprise to him.

His first attempt to use a microwave oven had dropped him to the floor. The waves of the magnetron pulses over-rode his synchronized heart rhythm. He had never felt anything like that before and never wanted to again.

Virginia Lake brought him a new microwave oven with a shielded magnetron that was now the industry standard. It set her to thinking about the magnetic rail guns that had become standard on SHADO's space-based equipment. It would solve the communications interference caused by the magnetic fields.

The belt-fed electro-magnetic rail guns had been mounted on pylons on each side of the Interceptors. They retained their customary single missile in the nose. Moon Mobile rocket launchers and Rovers had been retrofitted with rail guns as well.

Moon Base now also had the low-gravity equivalent of an anti-aircraft battery in place. All penetrating space-born ordnance now used depleted uranium with explosive charges. New tactics had been created to compliment the upgrades.

The new weapon systems had proven more effective than imagined.

Three months after the Scarborough raid, a fleet of 8 alien troop ships and four scout ships came out of the sun on a direct course for earth. The scouts vectored off and assumed an attack formation for an assault on Moon Base.

It was the vanguard of an alien invasion force.

Five interceptors caught the troop ships in a three-dimensional cross fire. The penetrating explosive bolts of the rail guns resulted in a complete slaughter of the fully-manned troop carriers. No debris even made it to the Earth's atmosphere.

The scouts attacking Moon Base were reduced to glowing piles of debris in fresh craters on the surface. It had taken only a few minutes...

Since that lopsided victory, only the scout ships were being sent. Usually in groups of two or three per sortie. Invasion had proven costly, but everyone knew they'd be back with some new plan or technological edge soon enough...

All SHADO vehicles now utilized cannons that fired depleted uranium loads with explosive payloads. It had proven to be a value-added method of re-tasking the leftover waste from SHADO's nuclear fuel production.

It had also proven to be a lucrative funding opportunity via a cover industry in nuclear waste processing and storage. SHADO would be partially self-funded in the future, allowing Henderson to channel his budget into upgrades and expansion of all installations, equipment and personnel. It was a new era for SHADO.

* * *

Paul Foster had gotten to take his friend Thorvald for his first trip to Moon Base. Straker asked him how the trip had gone. He had been concerned that Thorvald would find zero gravity disorienting and unpleasant.

Foster cleared that up immediately. Thorvald had been doing somersaults on the way there in the cargo bay of the shuttle. He even had a photo of Thorvald wearing Captain Ellis' purple wig. It had been a productive trip and enjoyable to them and the Moon Base staff as well.

* * *

Henderson was speaking to Straker and his command Colonels over the AV link to I.A.C. He wanted to give Thorvald a rank of Major and full commission. Virginia looked worried but said nothing.

Straker waited for his commanding officer to finish and spoke up. "General, I am requesting you consider an alternate plan. Along with rank and privilege comes protocol and restriction of certain interactions."

"We need Thorvald to move freely among all ranks and levels of SHADO staff and to interact with no restrictions due to protocol or levels of command. I want all staff to have equal accessibility to him and vice versa. Pay him appropriately with the usual benefits, but don't tie his hands, General. We owe him this..."

Henderson didn't look pleased, but he rarely did anyway. He was rubbing his chin in contemplation. "Okay Straker, he remains 'Mr. Magnusson', but I'm listing him in the

files as an independent advisor and consultant. Don't start bitching if he stops calling you 'Sir'..."

"Understood General, and thank you." Henderson terminated the conference.

Virginia let out a long, audible sigh of relief. "Who wants to break the news to Thorvald?" asked Straker.

Virginia popped up immediately, catching the others completely off guard. "I'll take care of that right now, Commander." She had an unusual sparkle in her grey eyes and a somewhat devious smile. She walked out of the office with decidedly more strut in her step...

Straker, Foster and Freeman just looked at each other and grinned. Alec quipped, "I wonder if we should warn him, Ed."

"He'll be fine, Alec." Straker was smiling. "Anyone else feeling a little twinge of envy?" They shared a laugh and the three lit up their cigars. They would chat about flying for a while. It had been an activity suggested by Dr. Jackson.

* * *

It was a Sunday morning six months after the Scarborough raid. A soft sunrise was again illuminating Harlington-Straker Studios many buildings and full size sets.

The studio parking lot was mostly empty. Only a handful of SHADO staffers were parked there and maintaining their continual vigil. Between Straker and Freeman's turbine cars sat an unusual old Volkswagen Beetle. It had new striking midnight blue paint with a glossy clear coat finish and fresh-looking chrome. Gifts from someone special...

Commander Straker and Thorvald Magnusson were walking out to the parking area, each in jeans, a t-shirt and boots. Both had a brimmed hat and dark polarized sunglasses. Thorvald had one of his beloved dented thermoses. Both had a scheduled full day off.

They climbed into the spunky little Beetle. It fired with a growl from the rear compartment. There was a large duffle bag strapped to the cargo shelf.

"Ready to do some fly fishing, Commander?"

"Call me Ed, Thorvald..." He smiled and the little car headed for the main gate.

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December 2015

The Works of A. Berglund

The Library Entrance

Author: A. Berglund

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