

Cloudeye

Catherine Stewart

Foster found the sight of his commanding officer using the wall of the medical corridor for support to be a little disturbing, but he did not comment on the startling picture Straker was presenting to the passing rank and file. Instead he continued the conversation they had begun in the Commander's office. "What'll I say if they ask me what it's really all about?," he queried, trying to curb his own inquisitive interest in the matter.

The Commander rubbed his forehead rhythmically, and gave a tiny grunt of pain. "Tell them," he said grimacing, "that 'Cloudeye' is nothing more than a western that the studio's about to start filming..." If there was supposed to be the trace of sarcasm in his tone that Foster expected, it seemed to have been overshadowed by the tight, strained set of the Commander's voice as he covered his eyes briefly with a flexing hand.

"That won't satisfy them," observed Foster, not adding that it didn't satisfy him. He'd been eager to know what Operation: Cloudeye was for months - ever since he'd overheard Alec Freeman mention it in a private conversation with the Commander late in the previous year. A conversation abruptly cut off as the two of them had noted his presence. "It doesn't seem," he continued when he received no reply, "an altogether likely reason for a simulated shutdown. Making a film's never had priority before." He grinned, and made a cough of apology. "It'll have the whole base believing the executive's gone cuckoo..."

The Commander pressed his middle fingers against his temples, stroking with a firm, even pressure. Then he sighed in obvious, if slight, relief. "No, they won't think that," he corrected at last. "They'll simply be as curious as cubs about what we're actually up to..." He began to push his scalp in slow circles. "...and it's up to you, Colonel, to keep the leash on."

"I need to keep my own leash on," Foster mentioned, admitting his impatience finally. He gave his superior a concerned sidelong look "Are you going to allay my curiosity, Ed? Or do I have to be restrained too?"

There was a fractional pause as the Commander left the security of the wall and took a crisp step up the corridor. The next step wavered a little, and Foster fell into stride beside him at once. "All you need to know is the access code," said Straker, then he frowned. He stopped. He pulled his hand down the length of his face, and gave a brief, shallow cough. "Shall I give it to you tomorrow before you leave... or shall make you work it out yourself? It'd be a good training exercise..."

"Please...", pleaded Foster. "I've enough problems without having to figure out some strenuous code you've devised. Moonbase is going to be having kittens as it is..."

"But the point of the whole thing is," said Straker, his face distorted by grimacing muscles, "that if the worst ever really does come to the worst, finding a code might be the least of your problems..."

"Let's pray then," smiled Foster, "that the worst never comes to the worst..."

"Optimist," asserted the Commander

"Pessimist," flung Foster, pointing an accusing finger.

"I'm a realist," corrected the Commander, and a wave of pain seemed to come over him again, for his face was suddenly obscured by his hand, and his teeth were gritted in a tense white line.

Foster no longer bothered to veil his concern. "Maybe you ought to tell me the code now, Ed," he suggested, "and go straight home and get a good night's rest."

The Commander gave a tiny negative flick of his head. "I'm alright," he countered. "I might just drop in on Jackson and get him to prescribe a painkiller."

"He might prescribe a rum toddy and an early night," returned Foster, leaving the half-bait dangling for a swift retort. But there was no reply to his comment, and after a silent moment he went on, "Any other special instructions for Moonbase? I know Gay's already anxious about the little you've let drop on the exercise."

A slow shake of the head. "No," replied the Commander. "We'll just see how they react. You can tell them though, that from this end, they can expect absolutely no help at all. That's not, of course, to say that we are going to actively operate against them. But they'll soon figure out that we're trying to determine whether or not Moonbase can operate autonomously in the event of all SHADO Earth installations falling into the hands of the enemy."

"So that's what this is about!," exclaimed Foster. He expelled a whistling breath. "This will require lateral thinking of a pretty high order! Moonbase Is almost wholly Earth-dependent."

The Commander sighed wearily. "That is not what this is all about - but it's as good a reason as any to spread around for the troops to hear. I don't expect you to contact me, except in case of a total emergency. From tomorrow morning on, regard me as a passive enemy..."

"Passive enemy?," demanded Foster. "You've no objections if we continue to think of you as an inactive friend? One who really will answer if a true emergency arises? You can carry this drill-thing just a little too far..."

The Commander nodded carefully. "It would be better if you reserved contact to extreme emergencies only. Of course, if worst ever really does come to worst, you'll always be able to get in touch with me personally via the Cloudeye disc. I'll give it to Alec. It'll have everything you need to know on it, and a heap of things you'll probably never have the slightest need for. But, if it works as I anticipate, it will retrieve the emergency for you. Even if all other SHADO installations fan. Just plug in the right code sequence, and away it'll go..."

"What was the name of the code that'll perform this little miracle again?," asked Foster. He tucked the previous speech into a clear, easily-accessed corner of his mind. It undoubtedly was full of hints about what to do if trouble arose - if only he could make sense of it. But it was certain, with the Commander as insistent on keeping this drill as close to reality as possible, that there would be no immediate translation of its more cryptic segments.

The Commander smiled, very faintly. A shadow of pain was evident in his mouth's curve. "This little miracle is so top secret," he answered, "I'm not telling anyone anything about it until I have to. All I'm telling you is - that it is possible to determine the access code to the Cloudeye disc with a little luck and a lot of perspiration - and if all hell breaks loose round here, you activate the sequence, and the program takes over... and the cavalry, hopefully, arrive in the nick of time." As Straker finished, he blinked several times rapidly in succession, as if the subdued lighting in the corridor was suddenly too harsh for his eyes.

Foster was becoming more puzzled. Exactly what was Straker anticipating when he spoke of all hell breaking loose? "Expecting something unpleasant?," he inquired.

"Not particularly," the Commander shrugged. "No more than usual."

But Foster was not convinced. Sometimes Ed seemed almost telepathic in the way he could size up the enemy's projected movements. "Hunch?," he asked, respect tingeing his voice. Straker's intuitive insights were becoming almost legendary amongst the old-timers.

Strange to think that after only five years he was nearly an old-timer himself. Yet there were people who'd served in SHADO over three times as long as he had. And there were few people who'd been here as long as the Commander himself - and certainly no one who seemed to be able to comprehend the alien's tactics quite as well. But the only reply to Foster's query was an ambiguous shrug. That, and a flexing of facial muscles once more.

Foster was relieved when they reached the door to the medical centre and the Commander did not hesitate to turn in. "Jackson?," called Straker into the dim shadows, before fumbling towards a light switch. Foster was there before him, finding the lights, flicking them on. The doctor was obviously absent.

But this tact did not deter the Commander. "Wonder where he keeps them," muttered the Commander under his breath, listing his head slowly from side to side, eyes quickly scanning shelves of medical and psychiatric texts.

"Keeps what?," Foster asked, worried about the way the Commander's head seemed to have developed a definite skew.

"Aspirin, panadol, tylenol," came the preoccupied reply. "I'll even settle for an old-fashioned powder . . . anything." He ran a flustered hand along the polished rim of the doctor's desk, and rattled the locked door briefly.

"Alec usually keeps something handy," Foster offered. But the Commander did not seem to be listening. The whole of his attention seemed to be concentrated on the lock of the drawer in front of him. He squatted down in front of it. A few rapid taps on the desk, a thump on the top, insertion of an unfolded paper clip from the tray near Jackson's intercom, three hard whacks on the drawer frame; and the lock clicked open. The Commander responded to his triumph with a frown rather than a smile. "Well . . .!" commented Foster "I'll know who to come to next time I lock the keys in the car!" His eyebrows flew up, astonished yet again at the remarkable range of skills that the Commander never displayed unless the occasion required it. Still waters...! "You didn't learn that at MIT," he continued with a wry smile.

"A misspent youth," affirmed the Commander absently, expressionlessly. Foster was unsure whether he was serious or not. "One of the few useful things I learnt when I spent some of my honours year at the tracking station in Hawaii." On discovering nothing after riffling through the first drawer, he started into the second. "Eureka!," he said quietly as he found a small unmarked bottle of white tablets, and unscrewed the top. He shook three pills into his hand, and pressed them into his mouth.

Foster was the one who nearly gagged. The thought of swallowing them without water was unpleasant. But it didn't seem to trouble the Commander, who simply pocketed the bottle. "I'll write Jackson an I.O.U. later," he said, and he wheeled out the doorway, evidently feeling much better by the spring in his step. Foster hurried in his wake. "I think it would be better," the Commander ruminated, "now that I come to consider it clearly, if I briefed both you and Alec on Cloudeye. And it might be a good idea to give one of you two a copy of the Cloudeye disc tonight." He stared speculatively at Foster for a long moment, as if trying to make up his mind. Then he nodded slowly to himself. "Go and find Alec and meet me in my office in twenty minutes," he ordered.

It was the last direction he was to give as SHADO Commander for a very very long time.

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When the news broke, no one on Moonbase took it seriously at first. We all thought it was some kind of slack joke. I mean, when you've got pseudo-wits going around asking revoltingly sickly stuff like, 'Why did the alien attack the garage? Because it saw the 'Spare

Parts Available' sign', you get the general gist of the standard of rubbish we had to put up with from time to time. So no one was inclined to treat Gay's question, "Did you hear that the Commander took three amnesia pills?" as anything other than the opening for another putrid one-liner. Especially when you know that the amnesia procedure involved an injection. It was Gay's face that gave away the fact that it was no joke. She was a kind of ashen grey, and her eyes were puffed as if she'd taken it badly. Badly? I have never heard a silence more profound, more devastated, as that when it slowly dawned on the lot of us that she wasn't having us on. A deathly hush descended on Central Park - no one knew quite what to say, even though a million questions roiled in each of us. But that was all Gay could tell us. No details. She had none herself. All she knew was that Colonel Foster wouldn't be coming up to start Operation: Cloudeye, and that it was indefinitely cancelled. That meant, of course, my immediate return to Earth on the next shuttle. Things, I guess, went on pretty much as normal for us, though there was a tendency to talk in muted whispers. Isolated on the Moon as we were the events on Earth didn't affect us as directly, and we heard nothing further from headquarters, even though Gay made several discreet enquiries.

I think we were all deep-down expecting the worst. I mean, I suspect that Gay knew more than she gave out from the very beginning - or she wouldn't have been so upset. So what if the Commanders lost a few week's worth of memory? Bit of a problem, sure, but nothing to go to pieces over.

Four days later, Mark Bradley arrived on the LM I was to take back to Earth. The news, for all its vagueness, was grim. "Apparently, it was an accident," Mark revealed. "Foster said he had a migraine and took some pills from Jackson's drawer. Thought they were painkillers. Turns out they were a new and pretty potent amnesia drug. Still in the experimental stage."

"How much has he forgotten?," asked Nina. Anyone with half an eye knew that she was more than professionally worried. I occasionally wondered, in those days, whether unrequited love made you more efficient, or less. Of course, she wasn't the only one madly infatuated with the Commander. He didn't exactly bring out the mothering instinct in females - well, except in the case of the great-aunties. Sometimes I was sure that they thought of him as the son they had never had. A son they were fiercely proud of.

"Anyway," Mark said, all solemn and uneasy, "It's all hush-hush, but...," he hesitated.

"A year?," ventured Gay. Everyone knew that that would cause immense problems for her. She'd been discussing plans for the proposed five new moonbases with the Commander for nearly twelve months, and most of their resolutions weren't on paper; It was all locked up in their heads.

But three pills, even at - well, if they're that potent - a month each, should wipe out only the last quarter of the year. I gave Gay a smile of encouragement. "Not a chance," I said.

Mark swallowed reluctantly. You could see the pressure on his dark face. "There's a rumour," he said at last, quiet as a grave, "that the Commander doesn't remember SHADO at all."

"TEN YEARS?," Nina blurted out in disbelief, though it must have been more than that for her. I knew she'd been around since the beginning. The rest of us were just too stunned to say anything.

Mark nodded numbly. "Fifteen more like," he corrected gloomily.

I took the module out an hour later, and got back to New York on the Sunday after the disaster. The first thing I did was ring Aunt Hobbit, but there was no answer, so I got on the transport to England and tried to find out what was going on. It wasn't hard. The sole topic of

conversation seemed to be the Commander, but I soon discovered that facts were pretty thin on the ground. No one really knew anything. Every man and his dog seemed to have a theory or speculation, but none of it was concrete.

Even though strictly I was supposed to be on leave, I made a bee-line for headquarters the minute the transport set down on good old British soil. HO was in, what seemed to me, total chaos. Keith Ford later informed me that comparative order had settled by the time I arrived, so I can only imagine the horror of the previous week.

Freeman had been appointed acting-Commander - but his leadership seemed largely titular. Foster was apparently running the show (and according to Ginny Lake, loathing every minute of it) and Henderson was floating in and out like a mother hen checking on a brood of unhatched eggs.

I collared Karl Neuhaus as soon as I was able and wormed the chronicle of the catastrophe out of him. "Vell," he said in his best Teutonic accent, which was a dead give-away that he was under stress, for Karl is normally perfect when it comes to the Queen's English. "All anyone really knows is that the Commander had a headache and broke into Doctor Jackson's desk drawer, and took what he must have thought were headache tablets. He was still feeling pretty gruesome after he took them, so he just left the studios very abruptly. He was supposed to have a meeting with Colonels Freeman and Foster, but he left before that and asked Keith Ford to tell them that he'd call in early in the morning and give them a briefing on Cloudeye. By this time, Jackson is tearing around asking who's made off with his amnesia pills and demanding some action in reprimanding the culprit. It takes Foster about two seconds to make the connection, and he goes tearing out of here like your proverbial bat out of hell. About two miles down the road, he finds the Commander's car wrapped around a lamp-post, but no sign of old Straker himself. There's panic round here like Armageddon's come, but Ford finally tracked him down to a local hospital and off he and Freeman go. By the time they got back, Henderson had made an announcement, and Colonel Freeman was made acting-Commander"

"How much memory has the Commander lost?" I asked.

Neuhaus shook his head. "No one's saying," he replied with that perpetually-grim look I was coming to notice everyone was wearing. "But they wouldn't keep him in hospital a week if it wasn't serious, would they?"

Quite frankly, I didn't know. But I could think of other reasons for keeping him there. The simplest being that he'd hurt himself when he'd dented his car on the lamp-post.

I decided to butter up Keith Ford, who obviously was the one who was going to know more about what was really going on than anyone other than Foster or Freeman, neither of whom I felt I had the confidence of. Ford took one look at me and said, "Bobby Casterville, am I glad you're back! For heaven's sake, go and find out what's happening!"

"Me?!" I was thunderstruck. "I don't know anything," I protested. "I've only just got back from Moonbase! How would I get access to information that you guys haven't been able to ferret out in a week?"

"Ask your great-aunties!," insisted Ford.

"The aunties?," I blurted out, and suddenly I twigged. I bolted out of there like a streak of lightning, took the back exit rather than the office-lift, and tore across the street and up to the flat. Aunt Print was home and arguing loudly on the telephone - Aunt Hobbit was nowhere in sight. I managed to disengage Aunt Print from the telephone with some difficulty. "No, young man," she was stating testily, "it's German - spelt G-E-O-R-G, without the final 'e', and the

surname is Gamow, G-A-M-O-W ... yes, I'll call back in half an hour..."

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Colonel Freeman was much, much later to tell me that the aunties had been absolute bricks right from the start - and I believed it. I wondered, in fact at that moment, how I could ever have doubted their sterling qualities. I soon managed to get the story out of Aunt Print - and what a mad tale of coincidence it was! If you read it in a novel, you would discount it as too farfetched for reality! Apparently, the evening of the accident, Aunt Hobbit and Aunt Print had taken a taxi to some exclusive French bakery to pick up a gateaux, chocolate with cherries liberally adorning the top and dripping with pecans - it was a special order, three feet by two feet, to celebrate the anniversary of finding the 'not-very-modern-UFO'. It was also apparently going to be their big surprise for everyone in SHADO, but especially for the Commander. The old dears had morning tea every Thursday with their "sweet young American Colonel" - an occasion I have reason to believe all three of them looked forward to. It had been clear to me for at least six months that the aunties were privy to more secrets than I was. I guess having an independent view, tempered with the wisdom of advanced age and lacking the gung-ho spirit of the ambitious and adventurous operatives who had only served two or three years, appealed to the Commander. I further suspected that the three of them got on so famously because they were all closet radicals at heart. The conservative front was a bit of a sham once you'd penetrated it.

Well, there's the aunties in the taxi, coming home with their precious cake, balanced precariously on their knees, when they see a SHADO car swerve off the side of the road and hit a ditch. "Lamp-post?," asked Aunt Print doubtfully, when I queried her on this bit, "No, just hit the ditch."

Well, they halted the taxi with a screech, of course, and were out of it in a flash, and as soon as they realized it was their darling Commander, they left the cake on the side of the road, bundled him into the taxi and were off to the nearest hospital. "He looked fine," said Aunt Print, "but we didn't want to take any chances with concussion or shock."

"What happened to the chocolate cake?," I asked.

"Who knows?," shrugged Aunt Print dismissively, in a tone of 'who cares?'

The next bit made me sorry I was not a fly on the wall of the hospital. It must have been an absolute classic of a scene. They get the Commander all tucked up in bed at St. Martin's-by-the-Way, and the doctors are telling him to watch their fingers and so on and so forth, and the Commander takes it all in good part and munches on a chocolate bar and some grapes that the aunties get him, and it's a lovely pastoral, idyllic Interlude with them all ducky (Aunt Print didn't tell me that, but I can read between the lines) and he's listening to Schubert on the radio and scrawling Schrodinger's wave equations on the wrapper of the chocolate bar, and screaming in like twin tornadoes come Freeman and Foster.

"Hello, Alec," says the Commander pleasantly.

"Are you alright, Ed?," asks Freeman.

"I'm fine," replies the Commander. "The doctors say they want to observe me over-night, but I think I'll discharge myself..."

Colonel Freeman breathes a sigh of relief and sits down on the side of the bed.

"How's your headache?," asks Foster.

The Commander looks up as if a bit puzzled - like as if he doesn't recognize the speaker. "It's fine," he says at last.

"Look," says Freeman, giving him a pat on the hand, "don't discharge yourself just yet. I'll

get Jackson to give you the once-over... it may as well be here as down at the studio."

Again there's this faint puzzled look from the Commander. But he shrugs with a smile and says, "Okay, Alec ... if you say so. But don't tell Henderson ... I'll never hear the end of it. He'll be on at me about working overtime again..."

Foster smiles. "I've never heard him complain about the time you put in..."

"Besides," says the Commander, "I'll be out in the morning. No need for Henderson to know at all."

"Hear, hear," agrees Freeman. "But what if the doctors want to keep you longer? Did they give any reason for wanting to keep you under observation?"

"I got a bit of a bump on the head," replies the Commander. "Can't remember what I ate for breakfast. They think I might have a bit of temporary amnesia ... the last couple of hours seem to be a bit blank."

Foster grins. "It's probably got nothing to do with hitting your head, you know. Do you remember taking Jackson's pills?"

The Commander shakes his head, and smiles politely, the way people do when they know they should know who's talking to them as if they've known them half their lives, but they can't for the life of them put a name to the face.

"I'm not surprised," grins Foster.

"Well," says Freeman, "I think you should stay in bed. You weren't feeling too well before all this started..."

Suddenly the Commander hits his head with the flat of his hand as if he's suddenly remembered something vital. "I can't stay," he says urgently, and makes to get up. Freeman pushes him back down firmly, but gently for all that. "Alec," says the Commander, "you know I've got to go. Craig will skin me alive if I don't at least put in an appearance at the buck's party. You know how much trouble he's gone to..."

"Craig?," says Freeman, really slowly, as if something terrible that he hardly wants to admit is becoming apparent to him.

"Buck's party!?!," mutters Foster under his breath, as if he can't believe his ears.

"Oh, damn!," continues the Commander. "I promised Mary we'd go and talk to the caterers tonight. I'd better give her a ring and tell her I'll be a bit late..."

"Mary?!," squeaks Freeman, looking shocked. Then suddenly, his training comes to the fore, and he says briskly, "Look, Ed, I'll give both Craig and Mary a ring and explain the circumstances..."

"Don't tell Mary I've been in an accident," interrupts the Commander at once.

"No, of course not," returns Freeman swiftly. "I'll tell her it's all Henderson's fault - and you can't get away . . ."

The Commander likes this and gives a nod of assent. Freeman turns to Foster, who's standing there with his mouth open like a stunned mullet, and gives him a jerk of the thumb to get outside and stop looking like a dill. Then he notices the aunties for the first time and says, "I've got to make a couple of phone calls." It is obvious that they are not going to be to Mary and Craig. "Don't take your eyes off him," continues Freeman with a worried smile, and hurries out.

The Commander looks disconsolately at the bare stalk on what was once a saucer of grapes. Aunt Hobbit divines the stare at once. "Black or white?," she asks.

"Either," smiles the Commander boyishly, and off trots Aunt Hobbit to get him some more grapes. Out in the corridor she comes across Freeman and Foster having one wacko of an

altercation. "How could he not remember that Craig's dead?," Foster's voice is lowered, but it carries for all that. "And who the hell is Mary?"

"Ed's wife," responds Freeman.

"Wife?!" half-screeches Foster, as if he's having trouble believing any of this. "Wife?!", he repeats, and shakes his head.

"I know it's hard to believe that Ed was ever not married to SHADO, but to a real live flesh and blood woman," says Freeman drily, "but he was pretty human once."

Foster looks even more stunned, but finally he gets the right question. "Is the buck's party he was referring to his own?" He pauses and swallows uneasily. "How long ago is it since he was married?"

"He's been divorced fourteen years," reveals Freeman.

Foster swears fluently for several seconds. "Stick around," orders Freeman, "and if he tries to leave, stop him."

"How?," asks Foster.

"Any way you can," responds Freeman. "I don't think, now that I recall the way he looked at you, he remembers who you are. So, you can hit him if you want. With immunity."

"I don't think this is anything to joke about," says Foster darkly. He is patently upset.

"If I don't joke about it," returns Freeman, with a bitter, wan smile, "I think I'll cry." He turns towards the nurses' station. "Stay here," he directs. "I'm going to call for Jackson and Henderson." And off he goes.

So does Aunt Hobbit. She gets the grapes, and comes back to find the Commander and Aunt Print deep in discussion about radio astronomy. No one, it seems, has told him the bad news yet, and he is happily chatting with Aunt Print about the Third Magellanic Cloud and its recent discovery.

"Hold on a minute," I said, interrupting the flow of Aunt Print's story, "who brought up the Third Magellanic Cloud - you or him?"

Aunt Print thought for a minute. "Don't remember," she said at last. I glared at her suspiciously, then she continued with the narrative.

Well, another ten minutes go by, and suddenly Jackson's there, and there's a lot of explanation by Foster to the nurses that this is a military matter and could they please stay out of the way, thank you very much. Jackson examines the Commander and asks him a lot of questions, and the Commander smiles benignly the whole time while Jackson is shining lights in his eyes and peering down his ears and making him say 'Ahh!' He asks Freeman how Mary took the news.

"Didn't seem to react at all," says Freeman evasively.

"Breathe in," says Jackson.

The Commander frowns, and obeys. "Do me a favour, Alec?," he asks. "Take her a bunch of roses on your way?"

"Breathe out," says Jackson, with a stethoscope to the Commander's chest.

"Red roses," he says.

"In," says Jackson, then starts tapping the Commander's ribcage. "Does the name Foster mean anything to you?"

The Commander looks thoughtful. "Should it?" he asks. Colonel Foster doesn't move an inch.

Jackson says, "Roll over and breathe deeply in and out for me again." The Commander complies and Jackson applies the stethoscope again, asking "How about the name Ellis?"

"I went to school with a John Ellis," offers the Commander.

"Tell me if you recognize any of these names: Lake, Grey, Carlin, Waterman, Bradley, Ford, Barry, Casterville, Ealand, Harrington, Roper..."

"What is this?!" demands the Commander suddenly and flips over on his back. "Am I supposed to recognize these people?" he insists, glaring at Jackson. "I hit my head on the dashboard of the car. My memory of today is a little hazy, but if you're trying to insinuate that I've lost a large chunk of my past you're off-beam, doctor!" He is not quite shouting by the end.

"Do you know me?" counters Doctor Jackson, ignoring the outburst. "What's my Christian name?"

The Commander looks blankly at him. Jackson gestures over his shoulder at Foster. "What's the name, rank and serial number of the man standing there?" The Commander just looks at Foster as if he's viewing a new species of insect. "What year is this?," asks Jackson finally.

The Commander looks wary. "What would you say," he says, "if I said '1969'?"

Henderson arrives at precisely this juncture, and stands in the doorway, staring at the Commander with his mouth half-open.

"General!" exclaims the Commander.

"Thank God you're here, Sir! This place is crawling with loonies. Or is this some kind of exotic test of my sanity?"

Henderson looks nonplussed. Straker probably hasn't called him 'Sir' since the early '70s. "I get this not-quite frantic phone call from Freeman here that I'd better come over as soon as possible"

Henderson as if he's wanting clarification and he's dreading what the clarification's going to be, "and I arrive to find you raving about it being 1969..."

"Next you'll tell me it isn't, sir," snaps the Commander, as if he out-grew childish tests like this the same time he out-grew his diapers.

Foster looks in consternation at Freeman, who looks at Jackson, while Henderson is staring balefully at the Commander and getting the full brunt of the arctic blue orbs in return.

Suddenly Henderson notices the great-aunties discreetly standing in the background. "Who are these two?" he asks, as if the pair of colonels have been mighty lax.

"They've got full clearance," says Freeman.

"Outside," insists Henderson with a curt gesture to Freeman, Foster and Jackson, and they shift into the corridor. Not that it makes the slightest difference. Their conversation is still clearly audible. "What's the meaning of this?," the General demands.

"It looks like what it is," says Jackson.

"Amnesia?" asks the General tautly. There is a pause. "So give him a shot of that stuff you injected him with during the Timelash incident."

"Get someone else to do it," responds Jackson. His tone is unusually belligerent.

"Why?" demands the General. "I got the impression from Freeman that he's accidentally overdosed on some experimental drug..."

"Exactly," replies Jackson. "Who knows what the combined effects will be? I'm not going to take the responsibility - at least not at the moment. If I've got a few days to run some tests first." His voice trails off, and there is a long pause.

Henderson breathes heavily, giving a ponderous sigh. "Right," he agrees eventually. "We'll keep him under wraps until then."

"It's not that simple," interposes Foster. "Everyone in the control room knows what happened. And what they don't know, they're smart enough to figure pretty close to the truth. And the effects of speculation on morale could be extreme - I think an announcement should be made immediately."

"No," says Freeman and Jackson simultaneously.

"Speculation," continues Freeman with guarded softness, "however wild, would be unlikely to come at the truth. Whatever they guess, they're not going to think of sixteen years' worth of amnesia. So let 'em guess."

"Agreed," says Jackson clearly. "But I concur with Foster that we have to let them realize that the situation is serious. I think an interim acting-Commander should be appointed."

"What's the point if you're going to have him right in a few days?" queries Henderson sharply.

"Precisely because it may not be a few days," responds Jackson. "We've never had any call to reverse the amnesia process before. A fatal mistake in anyone else's case would be unpleasant for us all - but in this case, it would be disastrous." The asperity combined with sarcasm in his tone convinces Henderson.

"Freeman?" the General asks at once.

Freeman sounds none too happy about the prospect as he answers, "Do I have to?" Then he sighs and says, "Well, I guess I might be able to cope with the strain for a couple of days."

"Good," says the General in a clipped decisive tone. "I'll go back to the studio and tell them the good news. Are you coming?"

"Take Foster," says Freeman. "I'm going to stay here for a little while longer and try and rouse tiger's memory..." And as he came back in, and Jackson and Henderson poked their heads round the corner, they were met by the round, startled eyes of the Commander who was sitting mighty still in bed, glued to every word and nuance of their dialogue.

And that, finished Aunt Print, was about the size of Wednesday night. I gathered that since that time, the Commander had been resting up, much like a bear chafing to be out of hibernation, but strictly obeying Henderson's orders to stay in bed, and calling him 'Sir' with unfailing respect. Freeman had been bringing him up to date on his personal life, talking about how he had left the military and embarked on a career in films. Jackson, for reasons that he was only to reveal after a week was over, made the subject of SHADO taboo, coming the real heavy to both Foster and Freeman and making even mention of the military utterly verboten.

So the Commander's main entertainment, apart from the soaps, was reading newspapers and magazines and chatting with the great-aunties, who took it upon themselves to visit him daily. He soon tired of his situation, and asked the aunties to hunt up some physics papers for him, saying he wanted to bone up on the latest developments.

And that was all Aunt Print could tell me. "Thanks, Aunt Violet," I said, giving her a peck on the cheek, and was off to report my discoveries to Ford and Neuhaus. I felt a lot lighter as I tripped across the road. Sure, the news was bad - but only temporarily bad. Jackson would have the anti-amnesia drug into the Commander in a few days, and, well - it was probably all to the good. Everyone knew that Bwana Straker worked far too hard, never letting up on himself. Half the reason why so many people were willing to storm the gates of hell for him was that they knew he would never ask someone to do something he wasn't willing to do himself. Therefore, this enforced rest was undoubtedly one of the best things that could have happened to him. And the delightful part of him not being able to remember SHADO was that he wouldn't worry about what was going on while he was holidaying in hospital!

I told Karl all Aunt Print's revelations and he concurred with my conclusions that it would all turn out well, after all. We were so relieved and high on happiness that between us, we started a rumour that it was all Jackson's fault - the doctor had deliberately set the Commander up to take the amnesia pills just because he was so frustrated at never being able to get the chief to slow down and take things easily. We never expected the rumour to really take off, but apparently, so I discovered a week later when it got back to me in an exaggerated form, It carried a lot of weight since half of SHADO had seen my elegant dash across the road to question dear old Aunt Print.

It was well past midnight when I finally returned to the flat to discover both the aunties still up and burning the candle at both ends. I tip-toed in quietly, hoping not to awaken them, when I heard their voices in the kitchen. "Have you located the Feynmann yet?" Aunt Hobbit was asking. A hiss of steam was coming from the pot on the gas burner - the eternal cup of tea was on the boil.

"I tried London and Oxford," replied Aunt Print. "I'll ring Cambridge in the morning." The sound of a yawn drifted out to me. "I finally managed to locate the Gamow, but unfortunately it's not in English."

There was a low chuckle from Aunt Hobbit. "Well, Vi dear, you'll just have to sit by his bedside and translate it for him. . ."

"Amy!" The protest sounded weary, but there was a faint undertone of pleasure to be detected in it. "It's one thing to know the language - but I've not the slightest acquaintance with the scientific terms! I don't know a quark In German from a tachyon. And as for the formulae, I wouldn't have a hope in Hades of translating those!"

Gamow! Suddenly I recognized the name. And Feynmann, too. Of course! They were both physicists! Feynmann, if I remembered correctly, was one of the leading lights of quantum theory in the '50s and Gamow was into gravity. Or was it the other way round? I was more familiar with the gurus of astrophysics than the other branches.

"Isn't mathematics a universal language?," asked Aunt Hobbit. "He'll probably be able to read the formulas himself."

I trooped into the kitchen. "Don't suppose there's a cup of tea going?," I asked hopefully.

"Help yourself, dear," said Aunt Hobbit, pulling back a chair for me, and gesturing to the warm pot.

"Robert dear!," exclaimed Aunt Print. "How are things?" I was perfectly aware that it was not my health she was enquiring after - she meant other 'things'.

"Not too bad," I admitted, taking a cup from the cupboard. "I think everyone's over the first shock. But we'll be glad when the Commander's back." I settled the strainer over the lip of my cup and poured the brew slowly, looking up just in time to see Aunt Hobbit recovering from a sudden gulp. Her face became a pleasant withdrawn mask, and I didn't like what I suspected was lurking there, behind that sweet and perhaps fraudulent smile. "He's coming back, isn't he?," I asked, surprised that my voice seemed incapable of rising above a whisper. "He is coming back?" I stared at her. "Soon?"

Aunt Hobbit glanced uneasily at Aunt Print. "I don't think we should tell you," she said in her soft soothing calm-Robert-Clown voice. "You'll find out soon enough through official channels..."

"If I'm going to find out soon enough," I retorted shakily, "you may as well tell me now..."

Aunt Hobbit looked doubtful. Aunt Print looked implacable. "Please," I pleaded to Aunt Hobbit.

"Oh, I don't know," demurred Aunt Hobbit. "You would have to promise not to disclose to anyone..."

I raised my right hand instantly. "Scout's honour - so held me God," I swore.

"That strange doctor, Jackson," began Aunt Hobbit, "thinks Ed is a very sick man..."

'Ed?!', I thought to myself. Ed?! Great nodding nebulas! Things had changed in the past week.

"He's a good man, Jackson," continued Aunt Hobbit, "don't get me wrong, Robert. I respect his opinion in many things, but I don't think Ed is quite as ill as the doctor would have us believe."

"Of course Ed was under stress," Aunt Print suddenly interposed, "but to suggest that Ed did not take the amnesia pills accidentally - it's just absurd to think it was deliberate!"

"**Deliberate?**" I couldn't believe my ears. I equally couldn't believe that Jackson had said it. The aunties had to be mistaken.

"Not deliberately deliberate," corrected Aunt Print as if this modification should make sense to me. I didn't see what she was getting at. "Not **consciously** deliberate," she stressed.

"Unconsciously deliberate," Aunt Hobbit spelled out. She twisted a fine linen handkerchief in her gnarled hands. "Jackson says that Ed knew about the amnesia pills - he, after all, had authorized their manufacture. And the mind is a devious thing - when it can't cope with a situation, it devises elaborate ways of escape."

Aunt Print shook her head. "The human mind is capable of self-deception, and Ed's position was a difficult challenge, but even so, it's just not credible that he would go to such lengths..."

"Yes," agreed Aunt Hobbit. "Even if he wasn't coping, I can't see him resorting to such a tortuous method of escape."

I was silent, unable to contribute or contradict a word - in spite of the fact, I didn't really agree with them. I saw now what Jackson meant about the accident being deliberate. It was all too plausible. After all, if the Commander, for any reason at all, desperately wanted out of SHADO, what could he do? Resign? No one would let him. Retire? Not a chance - it wouldn't even be considered - for the simple reason that even if the powers-that-be could be persuaded, the aliens would be after him in a flash, and the sort of protection he'd need for the rest of his life didn't bear thinking about. Transfer? To what? Who would replace him? His skills and talents were irreplaceable. 'What Sir? No, Sir, you can't retire, resign or transfer, Sir. Unless you die, Sir. Then we'll accept your application, Sir. Here, Sir, have a tranquillizer, Sir. Now, back to work Sir, immediately, if not sooner, Sir...'

"Besides which," Aunt Print went on, "if Jackson's right, and Ed did want a means of escape, the amnesia pills are certainly a sudden death solution - and the consequences unforeseeable. And furthermore, Jackson is not even consistent in his own opinion - he says that the amnesia drug, by itself, is incapable as far as testing has gone so far, of producing this result. He says that the drug would have some effect, but certainly not sixteen years, and therefore, the reality must be that the knock on the head combined with the drug was the mind's opportunity to produce a situation where Ed could forget - and the real problem is neither the bump nor the drug, but the fact that Ed really doesn't want to remember."

"And I think both theories are wild," muttered Aunt Hobbit, taking another sip of her tea with a righteous sniff.

I found there was a constriction in my throat where some sort of file must have been rasping away. "There are drugs," I said hardly above a whisper, "that can open the memory."

"Jackson's standing out against using them," revealed Aunt Hobbit. "As I said before, he's a good man. Not one to put up with Henderson's nonsense."

Henderson's **nonsense**? I wondered. My, how the aunties were intimate with the comings and goings of the big-wigs!

"Jackson maintains," Aunt Print went on, "that since no one really knows how the amnesia drug works - whether it simply inhibits memory or whether it erases it - that it's perilous to try and open Ed's mind, when he's already got not only the amnesia drug itself but the residues of a number of other drugs, some of them alien, in his system. After all, no one knows what the alien mindbender was - whether it was chemical or not. Not to mention the stimulants he put into his body during the Timelash incident."

I stared, suddenly realizing something fundamental. I used to have two sweet and faintly great-aunties. Used to. I now had two very sharp and alert defacto operatives for relations. Just when the transition had occurred was anyone's guess. I supposed I ought to get them to do the weekly check on the flat for audio or visual bugs from now on.

"However," smiled Aunt Hobbit encouragingly, "Jackson's big hope is that it's mostly the bump on the head that has caused the problem, and that Ed's memory will come back eventually and naturally."

"Eventually?" I pounced. I didn't like the sound of its vagueness.

"Hours," shrugged Aunt Print. "Or weeks. Or years."

That's what I was afraid of. I felt sick. "How long does Jackson think?" I asked in trepidation.

A secret glance passed between the great aunties. "Don't spare me the gore," I said.

"There's a difference," said Aunt Hobbit quietly, "between what Jackson says in private to Freeman and what he says to Henderson and Foster." I didn't say anything. I just waited for one of the aunties to go on. "He says to Henderson," continued Aunt Hobbit, "that a quiet peaceful relaxing environment will probably bring about a positive change in a few weeks."

"I think," interposed Aunt Print reflectively, "that he says that just to stop Henderson from insisting on the use of one of the mind expanders, Amy. The General seems to me the type, who if he knew what the doctor really thought, wouldn't hesitate to get someone else to administer the drugs."

"Even if Ed never remembers," mulled Aunt Hobbit, "he's still got a fine mind - it would be a pity to take a chance on destroying it."

I nodded. Too bloody right. The Commander could lose ninety-nine percent of his memory and still run rings around the rest of us, even if you allowed us a fifty point handicap in the IQ scores. His present devotion to Gamow and Feynmann was ample proof of that. I licked my dry, dry lips and asked the fatal question finally, "What's Jackson's private opinion on when the Commander's memory will return?"

I was already expecting the aunties' dire answer. "Never," they said together, bluntly.

My tea was cold and bitter when I got to it.

I was posted to the new skydiver dock in Alaska the following day to de-bug the security interlock system. It turned out to be a real beggar of a job. If I could have got hold of the twit who wrote the original programme, I would have cheerfully watched him or her commit hari kari. Finally I got sick of the regular hiccups that sent the system into convulsions promptly at eleven a.m. "Elevenses!" Lew Waterman would bellow gleefully at me each time it happened. I took to calling him 'Winnie the Pooh', and sent him a jar of honey and a map of the east pole when I got back to HQ and instead of trying to do a patch, I re-wrote whole thing and then had

to stay on to do the documentation.

Four weeks it took me, four weeks after I threw my hands up in horror and decided to start from scratch. There were some really shaggy sub-routines in the system whose purpose I couldn't figure out nor half of except that they looked like inter-system connectors. But there was no reason on sweet blue Earth to have them sitting there; one of the security highlights on the Skydiver systems were their rigorous independence. Which meant that, if ever the aliens controlled the flight or navigation modes of, say, Sky One, it wouldn't necessarily follow that they could control all the other Sky jets as well.

So, not perceiving that the sub-routines had any use or relevance, I left them out of my new program. Much to my regret. Before five months were out, I was to discover exactly what the inter-system connectors were for, who had put them in, and why. And I had to go back to Alaska, start over and re-insert the sub-routines. But, by that time, I had not the slightest reason to complain.

When I got back to London at the end of the following month, Colonel Foster was doing a brilliant imitation of a chook racing round with its head chopped off. Gloom and doom reigned supreme. Even Ginny Lake looked harassed, and seemed to have lost an inordinate amount of weight. Things had changed. Oh, how things had changed!

The Commander was back - but not as Commander. He was in his top office making a pretty amazing fist of being a film executive. There were several stories doing the rounds about his return, but my all time favourite is the one where Foster and Freeman bring him back, introduce him to Miss Ealand and install him in his office. He apparently looks dubiously at the rather conspicuous DO NOT ENTER sign, and spends the next five minutes, eyes darting uneasily around the room. He reaches for a cigar finally, and Freeman nearly lops off his hand retrieving the cigar box that had been inadvertently left on the desk. "Empty," says Freeman and hastily removes it into Miss Ealand's protective custody. The Commander still looks faintly uneasy. Finally he says to Freeman, very quietly in an aside, "Alec - do I have a . . ." Big hesitant pause ". . . a... err, casting couch?"

"No," says Freeman unequivocally.

The Commander breathes a lot easier but the thought obviously occurs to him that, although he's been updated on the state of his marriage, no other personal relationships have been mentioned. "Do I have a girlfriend?" he stage-whispers.

Freeman shakes his head. So does Foster.

This revelation seems to be a momentary relief, until a perplexed frown takes up residence Commander's brow, and he takes up looking at his shoes in absorption and giving Foster veiled and anxious glances.

Freeman twigs to the trouble. "Nor any of the other variety," he says, smirking. "You're celibate."

"Really?" asks the Commander blankly.

"Absolutely," grins Freeman. "Dedicated to your job, you are. An example to all of us. Workaholic."

"Oh." The Commander's nose wrinkles faintly, before he gives a huge sigh of relief and a sunburst smile. "Well," he says almost jauntily, "a clean slate to write on any way I wish." And he beams some more.

He was the only one smiling, in fact, in the whole complex. There was nothing anyone else could find to be cheerful about. We had all been instructed to use the back exit to SHADO as a main entrance and not to use the lift in the Commander's top office - even when he wasn't

there. Which he was - most of time. With Freeman and/or Jackson and/or one or both of the aunties. I collared Aunt Hobbit the first chance I got and gave her the not-quite-third degree.

"Ed's very happy," she informed me. "He's a bit anxious about making a faux pas and therefore he likes to have Alec around, but by and large, he's growing more and more confident everyday. He says so himself."

Alec? I thought to myself. Well, what else should I have expected by this time?

"Is this the only reason Colonel Freeman spends just about every waking minute with him?" I asked. "Surely not just to stop him putting his foot In it..."

"Of course not!" replied Aunt Hobbit. "Alec thinks that talking to Ed constantly about the past in a light-hearted, general, non-threatening way - not specifically mentioning SHADO, of course - might just stir something in Ed's memory."

"Oh," I said. "And why does he let you and Aunt Violet hang around so much?"

Aunt Hobbit paused. "He says he likes our scintillating personalities."

I stared at her, taken aback. Was she serious or sarcastic? I couldn't imagine scorn from her. But if she was serious, had the Commander been? I avoided the possible snare. "What's Jackson think?" I asked cautiously.

"Jackson thinks," smiled Aunt Hobbit. "that Ed should relax a lot more, and stop spending every spare moment reading Gamow and Einstein as if his life depended on it. Violet's translating the Gamow from German for him, you know." I didn't know. But perhaps that explained things. Perhaps Aunt Print's fluency In German was the reason he was putting up with the octogenarian duo.

The Commander's passion for physics had not gone un-remarked by either the top brass or the average SHADO operative. There was a stupid idea floating around for a couple of days that the Commander could be integrated into SHADO with a research job - nothing stressful, of course - something useful that would ease him into a situation where memory recall would be enhanced.

But, as Jackson quietly pointed out, the problem might well go on for years - and then the psychological dilemmas that would confront the old-timers (the 'fossils' we gung-ho newcomers called them) would be horrendous. There'd be people like Joan Harrington, Nina Barry and Lew Waterman, to mention only three, who, however professional they might be, would really find it next to near impossible to give orders to Lieutenant Straker. It just wasn't on. In too many people's minds hung the motto: Once the Commander of SHADO, always the Commander of SHADO.

And quite frankly, I agreed with Jackson's succinct analysis whole-heartedly. I couldn't be classified as a fossil by any stretch of the imagination, but I'd have been hesitating before telling old Vizier Straker to even lift a pencil. And with his background in astrophysics and computers overlapping with mine, take one guess who'd be in charge of orchestrating the production of this 'non-stressful, useful, peaceful, relaxing, environment to enhance memory recall'. No thanks, Jackson old enemy mine. No deal. No way.

Well, this idea was, thankfully, hoisted in short order and tossed into the next parsec, and Colonel Freeman and Doctor Jackson combined to come up with an ace of an idea. It was called "Cloudeye." The film, that is.

The basic concept behind this whole shebang, so we were told, was the following: one, a whole lot of familiar faces would be paraded in front of the Commander and hopefully he'd start to recognize some of them (step one to recovery, or so the theory went!); two, we'd say a lot of familiar things in the film (write or ring Doctor Jackson if you can remember the

Commander quoting or saying something significant to you, or you saying to him!) which would make the Commander succumb to a sense of déjà vu; three, a relaxing environment would be good for both him and us; and four, we'd see how much we could say about SHADO without mentioning it at all, and see if that would stir the Commander's mnemonic juices.

Freeman apparently had a devil of a job selling the Commander the film - but eventually managed it on the basis that the backers had hundreds of millions invested in the project already and, not only would it be a waste if it didn't go ahead, but the solid reputation of the organisation as always coming through no matter what the odds, would be in jeopardy. He was, according to Ford, who was there during the discussions, profoundly eloquent and subtle.

Jackson wrote the script. The basic plot line was that the Great White Inscrutable Indian Chief Cloudeye, (played by none other than the Commander himself, in his on-screen acting debut) has organised his tribe into three camps: the Big Wigwam-ery (whence all smoke signals originated), the Skyleaper warriors (who lived in an old civil war cavalry Balloon that was moored on a raft floating on a grubby duck pond, and who were fired, with peerless accuracy of course, from a cannon to assault the enemy!) and lastly, the wacky Treetribe (who inhabited the top of a laminex kitchen table perched on top of an old oak tree and who shot flaming arrows from time to time while screaming "Red alert! Red alert! Interceptors immediate launch!" Colonel Foster was the producer/director of this folly.

We all played 'ourselves' - well, a sort of cardboard cut-out versions of ourselves.

Jackson's interpretation of some personalities had a few people worried for a while. Foster, in fact, was never sure whether it was true that Jackson's only reason for not having him act in the film was that producing and directing was a heavy enough load. Whenever it was a 'Foster scene' - that is, an interaction between Foster and the Commander, Chief Cloudeye would be confronted by a Sooty puppet.

"Why **Sooty**?" exclaimed Foster.

It took us three glorious weeks to film, and it was mainly about the grimness of war.

"Violent, isn't it?" asked the Commander dubiously in one of the breaks. He had his head stuck, when he was not in front of the cameras, firmly in Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. He was making notes.

Still, if you asked anyone who worked for SHADO in the mid-eighties what was the high point of those times, the answer would unquestionably be "Cloudeye!" It was enormous fun at the time, and in retrospect, when we see what Jackson was really up to, it looms as even more delicious. This, despite the fact that the reality of the scenes we were parodying was bleak. There were some difficult things to film - the scene that referred to the loss of Sky Three over the Marianna Trench was funereally quiet. John Grey and Peter Carlin both had been very popular, and the tragic disappearance of them both on a routine flight had never been adequately explained.

But, overall, Cloudeye was a riot. And, being about fighting, there were lots of fights: pillow fights; cream pie fights; water fights; shaving foam fights; fire extinguisher fights; mud flinging fights; watermelon seed fights (never face the Commander with a poised watermelon seed, let me tell you! Is he ever deadly accurate!) and even, believe it or not, a snowball-in-the-middle-of-August fight! Where on Earth they got the snow from, no one who knows is telling. There was a rumour that Colonel Freeman had authorised trip to the Himalayas, but I think that's a bit farfetched.

The great-aunties, who were acting as the Commander's own personal tea-ladies throughout this madness said it came from Snowdon, and it's quite possible SHADO operatives

would do amazing things for the sake of Cloudeye If you had a few days leave in those weeks, it meant that you were immediately supposed to report to the Cloudeye set to take part in one of the aforementioned bizarre raids that the Chief would direct at the instigation of the Great Sky Spirit, SID, who dwelt not far from the Happy Hunting Grounds and whom it was alleged that the Chief had frequently visited.

Jackson's script was adhered to with occasional minor variations. There was, on the part of us noble warriors, a tendency to ad-lib as the muse struck.

During the filming of the Treetribe on their laminex table, Squaw Ellis, in defiance of the script, repeatedly kept mentioning the fact that five other tables had been requisitioned by Chief Cloudeye to be put in the tree. She was not deterred in this, even during an unseasonable thunderstorm which dampened the enthusiasm of the rest of the Treetribe, as well as their famed flaming arrows. Chief Cloud eye, responsive to Squaw Ellis' nagging, spontaneously and magnanimously, (and without script approval!) presented her with five mis-matched barstools as a compromise gesture. ("Are all our films like this?" the Commander asked dubiously of Colonel Freeman when they didn't edit out his variation of the script. "There's never been a film like this before," answers the Colonel, and the Commander goes back to $E = mc^2$ and all that. Sometimes it seemed that he wasn't sure whether Squaw Lake was interpreting the script accurately when she continually batted her delectable baby blues at him, and said, "Yes, Sir, didn't know that, Sir. Time is relative, Sir.")

The film, of course, was never intended for public consumption. It was, as far as most of us were concerned, nothing but an enjoyable exercise in potential memory restoration. Unfortunately, it didn't work. Why it didn't work was only to become apparent much later. The performers were all terribly earnest - so very earnest, of course, because we weren't playing it for laughs, we were hoping that the star of the production would remember something; desperately hoping something would unlock his memory. So there we all were on celluloid, being fearsomely serious and unflappable even while delivering the most over-the-top lines. Even the Sooty puppet stand-in for Foster never cracked a smile. It thumped Chief Cloudeye fair in the kneecaps, threatened him with a water pistol and said In a deep voice, "It's a question of physique. I'm younger, fitter, stronger..." To which Chief Cloudeye replied: "You're forgetting one thing Sooty - willpower." (This line caused a tremendous dispute between the Commander and Jackson Commander protested that he'd been fed a really good line for a comic reply - he wanted to say, "Your forgetting one thing - you're nothing without the hand that holds you up!" - but Jackson and Foster combined to refuse to let him tamper with the line.)

After the film was finished and edited into a comic farce, and all SHADO had seen it, and laughed and cried, it disappeared for several years into the Harlington-Straker vaults. Eventually, it was discovered by someone, somewhere, who, knowing nothing of its history, dusted it off, thinking it good enough for cinema release. Surprisingly, given the obscurity of the dialogue and situation, it became one of those sleeper - a cult film - and, of course, in the mid-nineties there was the frantic scramble to retrieve all the copies to avoid the mass identification of ex-SHADO personnel. That was naturally after SHADO had become defunct, Moonbase was being transformed into Moonbase Alpha, the last of the Project Bluebook files were released and HQ had virtually become an overnight tourist attraction. Things were so bad at the time that the World President, not entirely facetiously, publicly contemplated the possibility of criminal proceedings being instituted for severe harassment of former SHADO personnel. But this was still more than a decade on, and none of us even dreamed at this stage

that the aliens would suddenly and mysteriously vanish in the early 1990s. "Lulling us into a sense of false security," suggested Colonel Messer at the time that final orders came through for SHADO's disbandment. Time was to prove his words prophetic.

I came across an odd piece of information during Cloudeye. When I first spotted it, my immediate reaction was to be suspicious - until I realized that suspicion was absurd. Nonetheless, it was a strange coincidence that the Commander had applied for six months' leave to begin on the day his car had swung into the lamp-post (or the ditch, depending on your preferred version). I discovered this when I was updating the computer records for Philip Dowlands while he was sick, and getting the leave applications processed and recorded and approved or otherwise. The Commander's application was notated by Doctor Jackson that it was to be approved if at all possible, citing psychological factor, "sub-critical tension". I supposed that was an unobvious way of saying that if the Commander didn't get his sabbatical soon, he'd crack up. However the application had been knocked back by General Henderson. No one of this, so far, was suspicious - it all fitted too well with the facts. What was intriguing was the indecipherable erasure on the original forms and the one word reason given in the Commander's handwriting: Cloudeye.

Now, of course, Cloudeye: The Operation, as distinct from Cloudeye: The Motion Picture, had been shelved. But by this time we all knew what it was supposed to have entailed - the simulated enemy occupation of all Earth installations. We were yet to discover how grossly disinformed and almost misinformed we were. Still, I was curious why Cloudeye was supposed to take six months in the Commander's estimation. A curiosity that had to be dismissed without answers.

The aliens were remarkably quiet around this time, fortunately for us. "Building up for another mass attack," suggested Ginny Lake dispiritedly.

Colonel Freeman had, after an independent psychiatric report on the Commander's state of mind, been offered the permanent command chair of SHADO. He didn't think about the offer for more than two seconds. "There's only one Commander of SHADO," he said as he turned it down, "and there will only ever be one."

It was to our great surprise, shock, consternation, and ultimately, dismay, that we heard the UN had appointed General Aaron MacPherson to the position. I suppose it shouldn't have been as unexpected as it was - the situation of having an acting-Commander, though less than ideal was not intolerable.

Colonel Freeman, of all SHADO, was the most horrified. I've often wondered since if anybody else noticed that the first time in all this business that Freeman really lost his cool when the new Commander was announced. Foster was fast becoming a by-word for neuroticism, Ginny Lake was as frazzled as a short-order cook at lunch time, but Freeman had hardly been ruffled until MacPherson's appointment. He had not anticipated that the UN would be so decisive. He had also not anticipated that Henderson would refuse the position.

The following verbatim conversation is courtesy of Keith Ford who was trying to find a crack in the Earth to slide into at the time: both participants being particularly belligerent to one another.

Freeman: Why in hells name didn't you stop this MacPherson being foisted on us?

Henderson: This is a special NATO secondment, Colonel, and I expect you to give the General the same loyalty you've given Straker.

Freeman: Why the hell didn't you take command yourself? It's something you've always wanted. An empire of your very own. A kingdom to rule. That's why you always accused Ed of empire-building - because you can't imagine anyone not doing it, when if you were in his position, you'd be doing it yourself.

Henderson: I'd be careful about insubordination, Colonel.

Freeman: What are you going to do? Bust me out of SHADO? I'd be delighted! Come on, Henderson, don't change the subject - you've wanted command of SHADO since its inception. Why pass up your big chance?

Henderson: SHADO's a young man's game.

Freeman: MacPherson can be no more than five years younger than you, General. Don't give me 'young man's game'!

Henderson: SHADO needs fresh blood, a new perspective.

Freeman: Hogwash, bloody hogwash. SHADO needs someone experienced with alien military strategy. Or at least with thinking outside the rules. Thinking with a perspective outside all the books, all the theory. MacPherson will take the decade that Ed took to get it - if, if he ever can. At least someone from inside SHADO has a head start.

Henderson: So why didn't you take it on?

Freeman: You know I can't handle the pressure. Why didn't you take it on? Not because you can't handle the pressure?

Henderson: No, not because of that. Because, ultimately, the biggest problem facing any new Commander is the simple fact that he's not going to be Ed Straker. Because in too many people's minds. Straker is SHADO.

Freeman: In your mind?

Henderson: Straker was good, was good. It was a mistake to appoint him Commander in the first place, but I'm the first to admit, it was one of the best mistakes the UN ever made. We can thank Duval for getting hot under the collar: Straker was the right man for the situation, though no one could have guessed that at the time. And he's too hard an act to follow - anyone, anyone who steps into his shoes will automatically be unfavourably compared with him. Straker built SHADO from the first brick, he was familiar with every piece of wiring, every nut and bolt that went into the organisation, and no one, will have that familiarity again. No one will have the intimate, unconscious sense of when things "feel" right or "feel" wrong. So, since anyone in the organisation is going to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task, SHADO is better off with a complete outsider.

Freeman: The end of an era.

Henderson: The advent of a better.

Freeman: You'd better damn well hope so.

General MacPherson, replete with military attache, arrived within forty-eight hours, direct from Hamburg. It felt awkward having Henderson bring him around and introduce him as 'Commander MacPherson'. No one, however, called him that. Colonel Freeman set the trend right from the start. He glared at Henderson, and then said loudly, pugnaciously and

unapologetically, "There's only one Commander, and there only ever will be one." He had said it before, but never so bluntly and publicly. He called MacPherson 'General' and once Foster had followed his lead, no one was going against the lay of the land.

MacPherson was a dour, stout American of Scottish extraction. Receding peppery-grey hairline, thick-jowled, heavy brow, eagle-sharp eyes. It seemed that the good old US of A, still being the major contributor to SHADO's financial coffers, had again insisted on having an American appointed to the top job.

The General's aide was a crisp little kraut name of Erwin Messer, who had been seconded by the West German Army to work with MacPherson in NATO. Colonel Messer was, as we were to discover almost immediately, an efficiency controller. That was his title, not just his job: and man, did he ever control efficiently. He was formidable. He also provided a level of confusion for the lower echelons in SHADO. He wasn't strictly attached to SHADO, in fact, he had no official position at all, but he was a Colonel. In the West Germany Army. We knew this really didn't, as far as we were concerned, mean that he out-ranked Colonels Freeman, Foster and Lake, but did he think he did? More importantly, did MacPherson think he did? The answer to that was not long coming.

However, the advent of MacPherson and Messer and the whirlwind cook's tour Karl Neuhaus (take one guess why Karl got picked for this little excursion - and I was Karl's choice as reserve!) and I did with them of every SHADO installation and auxiliary station is the last thing I remember clearly of the next four weeks.

The mist in my mind gets foggier and foggier until there's just about complete obscurity. From time to time over the years, a random phrase that can only have come from that era of a sudden ghostly scene floats up into my consciousness like a leaf in a dream-scape, but overall, there's just nothing. Nothing at all. The amnesia drug, I can tell you from personal experience, works like a charm. Whether they're memory inhibitors or memory erasers is pretty academic; try as hard as you like to remember something that someone has clearly described your participation in - and all you get is a pain in the head. In spite of my lack of memory, it doesn't mean that I don't know what happened in the next seven weeks. I do. At least I think I do. I've been able to re-construct it from conversations with the aunties, from talking to Karl Neuhaus and Erwin Messer, and from quizzing Doctor Jackson on certain chemicals and how they came to be administered to me. Lastly, I've listened to quite a few conversations on the matter over the years, and I'm pretty sure I've got the events arranged in chronological order. Naturally, my account's pretty patchy, but what else can you expect in the circumstances?

The General, on this aforementioned whirlwind tour, sticks his nose in just about everything, and gets Karl and I to explain exactly what is what, how it operates, how it integrates into the total SHADO defence system, where SHADO's strengths and weaknesses lie. He took a crash course in the history of SHADO from Nina Barry, who had been with the organisation from the year dot. He studied the records to see what tactics the aliens had used. And eight days after Henderson had given him the key to the throne room, he instituted a review of all, and that means all - every single one - procedures and operations. He was looking for ways of running things more smoothly, more efficiently, more cost-conservatively. And he sent out his little snooper watch-dog, Colonel Messer, to do an independent report on the situation.

The first thing that fell to the axe was the lunar module flight programme. Moon trips were cut from four to two a week. Moonbase was up in arms. Gay was down to Earth the first thing she could protesting that Commander Straker had promised that Moonbase flights were

shortly to be increased to five per week. It did no good - after all, Colonel Foster had already protested vehemently to no avail. The two of them tried to enlist Freeman's help against the General's decree, but it was difficult since the Colonel spent most of his days top-side In the Commander's film executive office trying to resurrect an elusive memory.

While Messer's hatchet job went on, Colonel Freeman was more concerned with the Commander's severe depression. It seemed that it was pretty incomprehensible to him why his marriage had failed and why he had abruptly abandoned a promising career in the US air force. ("What happened to Project Bluebook?" he asked. "Folded," replied Freeman. "Nothing left of it today.") But, however incomprehensible these two events might be, they were nothing in comparison to the confusion he felt In trying to understand why he was producing films when his heart was in astrophysics. Very much in astrophysics. Jackson went up for one of his long, long sessions and came back with the amazing piece of Information that the Commander had secretly applied for a job at MIT, and had been turned down. "Too old," he was supposed to have said of the letter from the institute. "And I'm not up with the latest of the current theories." He brandished the Physics Review In Jackson's face. "Shows what they know."

Jackson, it turned out, was concerned enough by the Commander's state of mind to suggest to Henderson that some strings might be pulled in at some university. After all, Jackson was heard to maintain, the government surely owed Straker more than a disability pension for his years of unstinting service. Besides which, he went on to argue, a career in astrophysics was both near enough and far enough from SHADO's concerns that memory restoration might occur.

Henderson wasn't remarkably happy about this idea. A number of factors were involved, after all, if Straker did suddenly remember all now, exactly where did that leave MacPherson? Shunted back to NATO? No, he knew too much. So, mind you, did that daunting Colonel Messer. Amnesia procedure for them? Well . . . Freeman bought himself into this dialogue between Jackson and Henderson after a savage argument with Jackson. He told the doctor to stop messing around in the Commander's life, and to keep his nosy parker where it belonged. Films, said Freeman, and Harlington-Straker film studios were where the Commander belonged. He'd done his bit for humanity and now he was entitled to retire in peace.

Less than twenty-four hours after the argument Henderson had managed to get the Commander a research position at Caltech. I think he was the only one who never knew of the handshake of congratulations that Jackson gave Freeman straight after the announcement. Between the two of them, they'd manipulated Henderson well and truly - but even they later admitted, the Caltech appointment was a gift from the gods. Straker, apparently, nearly burned Freeman's hand off with the speed of gratitude. He shut up his office and was off so fast that you couldn't see him for dust. Even the aunties were stunned at the haste of his removal.

Over half the UFO flights in the next sixteen weeks were aimed at Southern California. Not unnaturally, the aliens didn't believe one word of this alleged amnesia disability.

Meanwhile the General - MacPherson, that is - was becoming both more respected and much more unpopular. Kelly's research grant was terminated, and his microphotography project halted. Salutes were introduced. "Salute?" asked Foster. "Be damned if anyone's saluting me. if the respect isn't there, the salute isn't going to generate it." We all could recall those nods the Commander used to get that were infinitely more respectful than any salute. But protesting didn't change the decree. We didn't really care enough about it anyway. Salutes? Well, if it's a big deal to the General, we'll co-operate quietly. Nothing to get uptight about.

Virginia Lake was posted to Skydiver for three months, her major job profile being to search the Marianna Trench for the wreckage of Sky Three. "The deepest part of the ocean?" she inquired coldly. "Apart from the volcanic activity and the fact that the trench probably goes down as far as the Earth's mantle, what's the point in finding anything?" it was a good question. One that MacPherson didn't answer. In all his brisk efficiency, it was odd for him to order us to waste time and effort on a search that had proved futile twelve months previously. But it was the fact that MacPherson clearly thought a woman incapable of her role, and the fact that he said that the main reason he was sending her to Skydiver was that there were too many colonels sitting around on their lazy backsides doing nothing when they should be out in the field that incensed her. Ginny was righteously furious. And not just at MacPherson. At Freeman too. He had apparently again refused to protest to the General, merely replying that anyone who couldn't see that her backside was not in the least bit lazy, but beautiful, needed to visit an optometrist. Freeman was spending hours each day on the radio phone link to Southern California. It was obvious to everyone that, given the distance now separating the Commander from us, the Colonel wasn't going to give up hope on the Commander's memory.

MacPherson extended the tour of duty for all field personnel, Skydiver increased by fifty percent time-wise and Moonbase personnel by a whopping hundred percent. There was a fair bit of gritting of teeth going on. However, on the bright side, he did increase our pay by a quarter, which made everyone more kindly disposed towards him. "But," said Freeman, "there's only a certain amount of money to go round. Where's the pay rise coming from? Equipment repair? Hardware?"

"Maybe," said Foster caustically, "It's just what we've saved on reducing the Moon flights to criminally low levels..."

MacPherson authorised SHADO's first audit, cut back on the amount of rec time we could spend up in the studios, sharpened and honed and cut and pared wherever he could. He obviously had his orders from Henderson to prune as much dead wood as he could. The only trouble was that he seemed to be attacking the living sapling.

There was only one protest that succeeded - and that was by stealth. Sharp little Erwin. Messer was not the big bad wolf that he appeared on the surface. Up he fronts to MacPherson and challenges him on all the changes - particularly on the Moon flights.

"But Erwin," responds MacPherson, "all I've done is to implement your recommendations."

"But zese are not my recommendazions," says the Colonel. "Zese are my first imprezzions. Zese are ze zhings zat I keep my eye on for next zix months. Before zat, I recommend nothing change. I obzerve."

"Erwin," says the General, patting his distressed aide on the shoulder, "your observations are, as usual, spot on. I couldn't have done better myself. And there's not point in delaying fixing a flaw. The disease may spread. . ."

"But, mein General," says Erwin, but is cut off by MacPherson. "Delay and pay, Erwin remember , delay and pay!"

"Ja, mein General," says Erwin, "but ve must remember zat zese people are ze profezzionals, I hat not experienced ze alien attack, and zerefore, I am not yet fully qualified to be ze judge." There was one thing you could always say for Messer - he never called a spade anything other than a bloody shovel, but he was always scrupulously fair in making his recommendations.

"You're too modest, Erwin," says General MacPherson. "How often have you been wrong

before?"

Not often, apparently. But Erwin frowns, and says, "Vell, I zink I vill change my mind about ze Moonbase cargo flight recommendazion I vas going to gif you." Colonel Messer was a cunning brute when all was said and done. Too cunning by half. "I vas going to recommend zey be cut. I vas going to recommend three flights in ze veek - but I zink zey should be four."

"Three flights a week it is, Erwin," says the General. "I'll write up the memo to Moonbase right away . . ." and off he went.

Colonel Messer did not so much as have even the ghost of a smile on his face - the deceptive little rat! There had never been any Moonbase **cargo** flights. The Teutonic Colonel had, but to use a fallacious turn of phrase, not only restored the status quo, but had actually got that extra flight the Commander had long ago promised Gay.

No one bothered to inform MacPherson that he had been out-manoeuvred. But don't get the idea because of this small deception that the General wasn't respected. He most certainly was.

He had not been a week settling into the organisation when the aliens tried a new tactic. At fifteen minute Intervals, four UFOs came in one after the other on the same flight path.

It's not the sort of thing you expect from them - or from anyone - throwing good after bad. The interceptors got the first and second, and were half-way back to Moonbase when the call went out again. I guess aliens thought that we would think that the least likely flight path for their fellows had just bit the dust. As it was, the first missile went wide, and the UFO screeched in on a trajectory for, you-guessed-it, Southern California.

"Launch Sky One-" Keith Ford sends to Skydiver and gives them the appropriate co-ordinates.

"Belay that order," says General MacPherson, who was watching his first alien invasion on the screens with narrowed eyes and folded arms. All that he need was a slide rule tucked under his elbow to give the impression that he was Straker re-incarnated. "Direct Sky One and Sky Two and Sky Four to an intercept area on the Earth's surface **antipodal** to the present UFO trajectory."

Ford looked up sharply, hesitated a moment, then did as he was told. "Track that wee beastie," the General continues, pointing to the UFO on the screen, "and send out an alert for ground forces to deal with it." Then he disappeared momentarily into his office - Straker's old den. It had been redecorated. The General hung a bold geometric pattern curtain over the screen with the pastel floating mural, saying that he found the aimless drift and the soft colours to be nothing but a distraction and an irritant and he couldn't see that it had any calming effect at all. No and told him what it's ulterior purpose was, Foster merely giving him the hint: "The Commander was claustrophobic. It helped him adjust to this small confined space underground."

When the General returned in a few minutes, he had a cigar clamped between his teeth. If you happened to glance at him quickly out of the corner of your eye, his profile was enough to give you momentary shivers. He was much more solidly built than the lean, only just six foot, Commander, but there was something that was haunting about the set of his mouth and the hawk-like look of his staring eyes. Something that was vividly reminiscent of the Great White Chief, but something different, too. There was no leavening of light that the Commander had had. Straker had never been a ray of sunshine, of course - we'd been too afraid of him, and too much in awe of him for that - but he was occasionally a patch of blue in an overcast sky. There's no one you would rather have listened to in an emergency. And, somewhere deep

down, he had a not-quite-black sense of humour. Anyone who came up with the names 'Skydiver', 'Markers Universal' and 'Intercept' is not that sour. But MacPherson was. Sour, that is.

Anyway, the General clamped the cigar between his teeth and chewed it like a cheroot, and when the fourth UFO showed up blazing down the same trail as the third, he said nothing, just gave Ford a withering glare when the lieutenant queried if any of Sky One, Two or Four should be recalled from their present position.

Well, it turned out MacPherson must have had a sixth sense, because the four UFOs were, as he had anticipated, decoys. Twelve of the little hell-bats came tearing down on a course whose trajectory was exactly the areas where the three Sky jets were waiting. We got four in very short order and the other UFOS, surprisingly, turned tail and scuttled hell for leather for whatever celestial bolt-hole they had up there. The incident was noted all over SHADO. There was a new respect in the salutes MacPherson was afforded. The incident won Henderson's unqualified approval. He came and gave Freeman a few quiet words on the subject of the daily calls to California.

I was supposed to have a few days leave, and was going to go home to see the folks when I decided to stay in London. The major reason for this, at least the only major reason I can conceive of in this reconstruction, was a strange phone call I intercepted late one evening, just as I came into the flat. I picked up the ringing receiver and the operator's voice said, "Person to person for Misses Violet or Amy Casterville. . ." I could hear Aunt Hobbit in the kitchen humming a hymn, so I said, "Go ahead," to the operator, and called, "Aunt Amy..!" out to the kitchen. "Whyalla, Australia, calling," said the operator, and over it came a deep male voice, "Amy? Peter Carlin here... I hate to trouble..."

"Captain..!?" I burst out unexpectedly. "Captain Carlin?!"

Click. The line was dead.

"Who was that?" asked Aunt Hobbit, as she came out of the kitchen, rubbing her hands on a tea towel.

"That was Peter Carlin!" I exclaimed. "He's not dead! He's somewhere In Australia."

Suddenly, I stared. Why on Earth would Captain Carlin be hiding the fact that he was alive and why further would he be ringing the great aunties? If Carlin was alive, maybe so too was Colonel Grey - and if so, what were they doing in Australia? Had Sky Three crashed or did they have it with them? A thousand questions rolled in my brain.

"Australia?" asked Aunt Hobbit, perplexed, and then she gives a comprehending smile.

"Oh, you mean Peter Darling. An old friend of Vi's, he is."

I didn't believe her. I don't know why now I didn't believe her, but I know I didn't.

"Writes novels, too," continued Aunt Hobbit. "That's how Vi met him." It was plausible - in fact, knowing Aunt Hobbit's predilection for the truth, there probably was a Peter Darling who was a friend of Aunt Print's - but equally I was certain that it had not been Peter Darling on the phone. That sudden, abrupt click been too definitive.

I sent straight back to SHADO and, after much thought, got myself a secure, private line to Skydiver. I spoke to Ginny Lake. "Marianna Trench is just about straight line north of Australia," I pointed out. Ginny was obviously thoughtful. "Don't tell anyone else this," she said. "If you're wrong, big deal. But if you're right, something very strange is going on . . . and I think we'd better tread very warily . . ." She smiled engagingly. "How are things in drydock?" she asked finally. I told her about MacPherson's first experience of an alien onslaught.

"Things must be looking up," she said, as she signed off, telling me to keep in touch. She

expected to be back at HO within the week and maybe we could sort out the Carlin mystery together.

I was looking forward to the prospect. Maybe, the future would not be as bleak as we all had once anticipated.

As it turned out, it was worse. Long before Ginny got back, a shocking chain of events unfolded. It started with the audit that MacPherson had authorised in his first week - there had, apparently, been nothing more than a cursory internal examination of SHADO's books done in more than a decade - and a strict and thorough inspection of the financial records revealed some discrepancies. Revealed in fact that a great deal of money had been funnelled out of SHADO in the last five years, and revealed that the person responsible seemed to be Colonel Freeman.

He was taken into custody and questioned about the disappearance of 28 million pounds sterling. It was unbelievable when, after the questioning was over, formal charges were laid.

But what was even more unbelievable was the fact that Colonel Freeman did not, even for a moment, try to evade the charge. In fact, he admitted to it.

I was reading the article in Encyclopaedia Britannica on Whyalla and Aunt Print was making monosyllabic affirmatives into the telephone to some unspecified individual. I was wishing for a second extension in the bedroom to find out who was on the other end of the line - but I wished in vain.

The article was quite short. It mentioned that Whyalla had once had the biggest shipbuilding yards in Australia, but they had closed down in 1978. There was a reference to blast furnaces and excellent port facilities and . . . just as I was about to look up the cross reference on South Australia, I tumbled something instinctively important. "Colonel Freeman's an Australian!" I said aloud. Aunt Print suddenly turned and stared at me, still mumbling her acquiescence into the telephone. I hadn't heard her say one word other than "yes" in the last ten minutes.

I smiled at her, then frowned at myself. I knew that Colonel Freeman was an Australian, and I suspected that Peter Carlin and John Grey were in Australia... but what was the connection?

Suddenly, Aunt Print gives a final clear, "Yes, John," and hangs up.

"Who was that?" I asked as Aunt Print made towards the kitchen.

"An acquaintance," she replied. I could hear her striking a match for the gas burner, so I left my reading and headed out for a cuppa.

"Oh," I said. "This acquaintance wouldn't happen to be an aristocratic Colonel, would he?"

Aunt Print, to her credit, look blank.

"An English Lord?" I persisted. "Disappeared about a year ago on a routine flight over the Pacific?"

Aunt Print looked at me dubiously. "You have a vivid imagination," she said. "You ought to be writing novels, Robert."

"You haven't answered my question," I reminded her.

"I thought you were telling me something," said Aunt Print briskly, "not asking me. Did you enjoy your trip to Alaska?"

I gaped. "Aunt Violet, even I, dense as I am, could not fail to notice that rather abrupt change in subject. . ."

"You're not dense," Aunt Hobbit said kindly as she came in. "Did you enjoy your trip to

Alaska?"

"I wasn't there to enjoy it," I said, wondering why the topic had suddenly come up a full seven weeks after I'd got back. "Why do you ask?"

"It must have been tiring - all work and no play," said Aunt Print evasively. "Did you spend all your time on the computers?"

I was taken aback. What this tack of the great-aunties was all about was confusing. Should I terminate the topic or should I play along? "It must have been a very extensive job that you did," said Aunt Hobbit, obviously fishing for something. For what?

"Umm... well... yes," I said, puzzled. Then I asked bluntly, "Why don't you two come right out with it and ask whatever it is you want to ask?"

There was a moment's silence. "We were wondering," said Aunt Print slowly, "how extensive the changes were that you made to the programme you were working on."

"I re-wrote It from the beginning," I said.

"From... the... beginning?" asked Aunt Hobbit, carefully. "You mean you changed everything?"

"No," I replied.

"No?" asked Aunt Print. "So you didn't erase the sub-routines?"

I stared. How on Earth did Aunt Print know about those daft sub-routines?

"Did you nest them?" asked Aunt Hobbit.

I swivelled to her now. Aunt Hobbit's not the sort of person who blithely asks you questions using computer terminology. "Did you leave any of the interface hooks in?" she asked. Now that had me baffled. What were interface hooks when they were at home? I'd never heard that sort of jargon before.

"I re-wrote the programme from scratch," I explained, "and I couldn't see any reason why the thing was programmed in FORTRAN or why the sub-routines were necessary, so I left them out."

Both the aunties shook their grey heads sadly. Aunt Hobbit changed the subject stunningly yet again. "Is Alec sick?" she asked.

"Colonel Freeman?" I hesitated. "Sick?" I hadn't told the great aunties any of the events of the past forty eight hours. I was too upset - and I knew they would be even more upset. Besides, I hoped there was a reasonable explanation for Colonel Freeman's actions and that the whole thing would blow over in a few days. "Why?" I asked.

"Ed rang this morning," said Aunt Print, "and he seemed a little concerned. He said that Alec usually rings him everyday and he hoped that nothing had happened, so he asked us to ask you."

"Ed rang this morning?" I repeated. "You mean, Commander Straker?"

"Of course," responded Aunt Hobbit, "how many Eds do you know?"

I ignored that rhetorical question. "Does he often ring?" I asked.

"This was the first time," replied Aunt Print, pouring herself a second cup of tea. "Is Alec not well?" she asked, as she clinked the cup and saucer.

I hesitated, wondering whether or not to tell them all. But I must have decided that truth will out sooner or later, for after only a brief pause I said, "Well, actually, Colonel Freeman's been arrested."

"Arrested?!?" squeaked Aunt Hobbit.

"Arrested?" barked Aunt Print, coldly. "Why?"

I gulped. "Fraud," I said quietly.

"Fraud?" frowned Aunt Hobbit. She considered the matter for about three seconds. "Absurd," she stated.

"What fraud is Alec alleged to have committed?" asked Aunt Print sharply.

"Siphoned more than 52 million pounds of SHADO funds to parts unknown," I reported. It was dreadful to contemplate. The auditors were still uncovering the exact extent of the misappropriation but they were certain that the crime had been both systematic and continuous - extending over at least four or five years. The total amount involved was stupendous. As I was about to find out, no one really had a clue to exactly how stupendous. "Maybe he put it in a Swiss bank account," I said sarcastically.

"No, it was a Liechtenstein bank account," Aunt Hobbit corrected me casually.

I jumped up. I wondered whether she was serious. "Liechtenstein?" I queried.

"Just as discreet as the Swiss," replied Aunt Print, "and no one ever thinks of a slush fund there."

"Slush fund?" My eyes must have been the size of soup plates.

"Only kidding," said Aunt Print. Why did I have the feeling she was mis-representing herself?

I finished a leisurely cup of tea and then went back to the studios. It was third shift, and after midnight, and all was quiet on the Earthly front. I had hoped Karl Neuhaus would still be around, but my next best bet was going to be contact with Nina Barry. I got a line to Moonbase, rustled her out of her hard-won sleep and demanded her father's telephone number from her. Nina's father was a big-wig in the City, and if he couldn't make some discreet enquiries about bank accounts in Liechtenstein, no one could. I didn't, of course, tell Nina why I wanted the number. It was possible that the great aunties were talking nonsense off the top of their heads, and if so, there was no point in making the bully-boys down in security suspicious. Third degree and then some - that's what it'd be, all because of a little joke.

But I never did get to contact Nina's father. A booming voice behind me as I tried to surreptitiously leave the studios changed all my plans. "Casterville!" bellows MacPherson, "just the man I want to see!"

I swung on my heel and snapped a smart salute.

MacPherson nodded decisively to me and thrust a computer disc into my hands. "Find out what's on this!" he ordered. And off he went, leaving me there, gaping open-mouthed, after him. He must have caught my look of horror out of the corner of his eye, for suddenly he whirled back, and demanded, "Something wrong, Lieutenant?"

"The impossible I do at once, Sir," I replied, "but miracles take quite substantially longer." Suddenly I saw Ford coming up behind the General and winking at me with approval.

"I don't think I like your tone, Casterville," said the General with a hint of menace in his voice.

"I know I don't like the job, Sir," I answered apologetically. "I don't even know what this is." I held up the disc. "Does it contain data or is it a programme? What's its access code?" Without the last, it was well-nigh Impossible to find out what was on the thing.

"That's what I want you to tell me," ordered the General. "You told me that the computer complex here has a number of specific access codes for different programmes. Try them all."

I looked at the disc dubiously. "What Is it?" There was nothing - not even a colour code on the side to indicate whether it was simply data or whether it was more than that.

"You will be given Information on a need to know basis," snapped the General, "and you do not need to know what it is - or where it came from. I just want you to access its contents

and report to me immediately you have done so..."

"But, Sir," I interrupted, "if this is a private data disc, there's virtually no way I can access it." I stared at Ford who was standing wooden-faced behind the General. "Is it a private data disc?" I went on.

I did not get an immediate answer on that. "What makes it **impossible**?" asked the General frigidly.

"Sir," I explained quietly, "the computer complex here uses access codes of up to eight letters. Do you know how many possible codes that makes? Over two hundred and eight thousand million for eight letter combinations alone!"

"So?" demanded the General, his voice still as cold as an arctic winter. "The only variations you've got are the letters of the alphabet - surely it's simple enough to write a programme that will run through all possible combinations - even if it takes more than a couple of nanoseconds to run." He was being sarcastic and I knew it.

"There's a security problem, Sir," I stated, holding back the snap that I would have liked to have let loose. "Commander Straker installed a number of security features that were designed to make life difficult for the aliens. He realised right from SHADO's inception that if the aliens could link into our computer system that we'd have no chance from the word go. He made it impossible to run a programme like the one you suggested. Well, not impossible. You can do it, of course, but you can't run it at faster than normal human typing speed."

"**What!?**" demanded the General.

"Ingenious," said a voice behind me, and I turned to see Colonel Messer coming up the corridor. He nodded to himself. "Quite brilliant."

"Explain, Erwin," snapped the General.

"To discover SHADO's secrets," said the Colonel smiling wryly to himself, "the aliens must first penetrate the complex and type in all the possible codes. If they try to read the data electronically, the system shuts down . . ."

"Well, actually, we can't depend on that," I admitted. "We know that it's possible that their technology might be capable of overcoming our computer constraints, so we can't stop them indefinitely. Though we've succeeded so far..."

"If you don't know what the aliens are capable of," the General pointed out, "you can't know whether they've succeeded or not."

"We can know, Sir," I corrected. "We can't know what they take when, or if, it ever happens, but we can know that they've done it. It's quite simple, Sir. It's based on the principle that a watched quantum never interferes."

Colonel Messer burst into delighted laughter. General MacPherson stared at him, stunned, as if this phenomenon was unique. Somehow both Ford and I suspected that it was. "How elegant!" enthused the Colonel. "How efficient! I would like to shake the hand of the person who thought of it."

"It was the Commander's idea," said Keith Ford, smiling thinly.

Colonel Messer nodded and kept on nodding in approval.

"Will one of you specialists explain?" asked the general testily.

"Well, Sir," I replied, feeling pleased at being able to be on top for once, "computer information is electronically based. This means that all sorts of sub-atomic particles like electrons and so on. Electrons obey the laws of quantum physics. They form what's called an interference pattern if you force them through an opening about the same size as they themselves are. But they don't form this pattern if you watch them..."

"What are they, telepathic?" interrupted the General with a dubious and fixed stare.

"Exactly what Einstein suggested, Sir," I answered. I could see MacPherson's look of disbelief, a look that dissolved when Colonel Messer agreed. "Ja, he did zay zat..." There was a wry smile lurking in the back of his eyes. You slimy skunk, I thought to myself. You're as bad as I am, Erwin Messer! Maybe even worse, because you have no excuse! "So the Commander had a number of quantum gates put into the system - they won't stop the aliens, but at least we'll know when they've been tampering with our data."

The general stared at me for a long, long moment. Suddenly his mouth formed a cold thick pout. "I do not care whether it takes you from now to eternity," he said to me, "find out what is on that disc." And he turned away and stomped off.

I turned accusingly on Colonel Messer. "Einstein thought electrons were telepathic?" I challenged.

"You know as veil as I do zat Einstein was opposed to qvantum theory," he responded, "and he was sarcastic vhen he suggested ze idea. Myzeif, I agree mit Herr Albert mostly, but I also zink zat qvantum theory is an efficient dezcription - until zey find ze better anzwer." And he bowed slightly to me, that cagey devil, and off he went in MacPherson's wake.

I was left with Keith Ford and a very impassive disc. "What's this all about?" I asked the lieutenant softly.

Eyes darted up and down the corridor to see if anyone was coming, then he whispered to me, "Just quietly, even I'm not supposed to know."

"But..." He looked over his shoulder hastily again.

"But..." I prompted.

"But Colonel Freeman tried to destroy it," he went on. He indicated the offensive disc. I stared.

".... and," continued Ford, "he won't tell what it is or what its access code is, even under truth serum."

"Even under truth serum?" I asked, needing reassurance. "He can't possibly know then."

"That's not what either Henderson or MacPherson are prepared to believe," Ford replied.

I stared at the unmarked disc. What secrets did it hide?

"There's another thing," Ford went on, and handed me a photocopied sheet of paper, folded into a tiny square. He was carrying it in the inside pocket of his uniform. "Don't tell either of the Generals I took a copy of this," he said, "or I'll be busted so low you won't be able to reach down that far to find me."

I unfolded the square of paper carefully, and read the contents twice before handing it back. "I take it the Commander wrote it," I said.

"It's his handwriting," Keith confirmed, "and the original was in an envelope with the disc."

"Thanks, Keith," I said gratefully, as I headed towards the computers with my burden, turning over the letter in my mind. 'Alec,' it had begun, 'a couple of things that need to be checked on straightaway:

Don't drink all the coffee while I'm away. I wish I wasn't getting cold feet at this stage, but I'm starting to see all those things that can go wrong that you tried to tell me about Yes, I know, "Remember the Alamo!" I should have heeded your warning before I got too carried away with my own cleverness. If this doesn't work or the aliens find out before we've finished, thanks for everything, old friend. Its been a privilege knowing you. Ed.

P.S. If the disc falls into the hands of the aliens, we're as good as dead. Much as you might

think you need it, destroy it first E.'

John had been having trouble linking with the Alaskan interface hooks, had he? Well, that just about confirmed to my mind that John Grey was alive and well and living somewhere in Australia and making not too discreet enquires through my relations. The main reason for this was that Colonel Grey was the only person in SHADO that the Commander called 'John'. They had become fairly close friends since after Craig Collins' death; indeed, for a time it appeared that the friendship between Straker and Grey was deeper than that with either Foster or Freeman. They had spent enormous time in each other's company - a situation that only terminated with Grey's disappearance. Well, no wonder Freeman had spent so much time and effort trying to resurrect the Commander's memory. If there was a conspiracy afoot, it must have been a disaster for the conspirators to find that their leader suddenly didn't remember either the conspiracy or the conspirators at all. The reference to the aluminium went totally over my head. I didn't have a clue what it was about. A thousand tones of the stuff was a huge amount considering how light the metal is compared to steel. But, if it was baffling, the was message not. The disc I held in my hot little paw had to be the same one Colonel Freeman had been ordered to destroy rather than have it fall into the hands of the aliens.

Which put me into the heard of a dilemma - if Colonel Freeman had tried to destroy it, should not I do the same?

I hesitated. Well, there weren't any aliens around, that was for sure. Alien spies - well, that was another ball game altogether, but one thing was sure, I wasn't going to let anyone I didn't trust get so much as their beady little eyes upon this thing, let alone their hands. I was prepared to die first.

I glanced at the thing nervously, aware of my orders to find out what was on it. I got Ford to lock me in the auxiliary computer room and set about my assigned task.

I sat down, frowned at the thing, put my chin on the back of my hand, and slipped the disc into the drive. I wondered if I'd get anything at all other than a blank screen. I did. Not that it helped. Up came the nice, totally inscrutable prompt - "Ready". Just that. Plain, wonderfully ordinary, "ready". Well, I sighed to myself, was I expecting something less from the devious mind of the Commander? If the aliens ever did get their hands on this thing, they were going to be in for more than they bargained for. "Run Alamo" I typed in. "Can't find Alamo," came back almost at once. I scratched my head. Maybe I hadn't used the right instruction. "Load Alamo."

"Can't find Alamo" came up again. And a third time on "Read Alamo". Well, it was worth a try, I thought the phrase "Remember the Alamo" in the letter might have had more than a personal significance. Obviously it didn't. But I tried the three instructions on "Remember". And then on "Cloudeye" and on "Alaska". And on "Straker," "Freeman," "Carlin," "Grey," "Mariana," "Trench," "Whyalla," "South" (I tried to type in "Australia" but it was more than eight letters), "Studios" and several dozen other unsuccessful others.

Dawn was breaking as I decided that I'd better get cracking on writing a programme to link into the disc - it was going to be a billion to one chance if I guessed the right code - and though it might be worth the effort, the miracle rate in SHADO was pretty low recently. It didn't take me long to write the link programme. I decided that the chances were that the word would be more likely to be long than short 0 that were was much more chance of it being eight letters than two or three letters - so the programme ran, at the rate of a very fast typist, through all the possibilities, starting with the eight letter ones. "Run AAAAAAAAAA." "Can't find AAAAAAAAAA." Well, I hadn't exactly been hopeful on that one. "Load AAAAAAAAAA" and

"Read AAAAAAAAA" were just as successful. "Run AAAAAAAB". "Can't find AAAAAAAB". And so it went on for over an hour. I watched it, obsessively for the first ten minutes, then with desultory concentration after that. What other ways were there of cracking this code? This system might well take forever.

Ford came and unlocked me at eight o'clock. "How's it going?" he asked. "MacPherson's looking for you . . ."

"It's going at the rate of about a possibility every fifteen seconds," I answered. "Chances of finding it this way are about the same as finding a needle in one of a million haystacks."

"I'm going to change the lock on this door," said Ford quietly to me. I raised my eyebrows in silent query.

"Everyone knows what you're in here doing," he continued. "The way I figure it is that, if the Commander wrote the disc and it's that important that Freeman's willing to jeopardize his career over it, it's bloody damn vital. It may well be the Cloudeye disc."

"I tried 'Cloudeye'," I offered.

"Well," shrugged Ford, "It's unlikely the code and the operation would have the same name. Too easy to break."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"I was talking to Foster about the thing," Ford went on. "Apparently the Commander told him just before the accident that it was possible to determine the code - and if you could and you got into an emergency, the code could well retrieve the situation for you..."

I wrinkled my brow at him. "That doesn't sound feasible."

"Unless it's a programme set to activate something..." Ford suggested. "Or re-activate something..."

"What?" I queried dubiously. There was nothing I could think of that wasn't operational.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Ford admitted. "It was just an idea..." He turned to the door. "If you want to get back in," he smiled wanly, "come and ask me first." and he opened a lock removal kit.

"Why?" I asked. And I wasn't referring to having to get back in, but to the reasons for the combination change.

"I figure that the Commander made the disc alien-proof," Ford asserted. "He's brilliant enough to have done that. But I think what he meant by the instructions to Colonel Freeman to destroy it was this: it might be alien-proof, but it's not traitor-proof." He gave me a long hard look.

"I get the picture," I nodded, and went off, deciding to spruce up before I went to see MacPherson about my lack of success. A wash, a shave, breakfast. Not necessarily in that order.

I did some uneasy figuring as I walked across the road. Even at the pretty swift rate of one possibility every ten seconds, just to get through the eight-letter ones would take nearly 7,000 years. The Commander was no slouch when it came to fending off the aliens.

I walked through the door of the flat to find Aunt Print setting a plate of toast and omelette and crisp bacon rashers in my place at the table. The old dears were simply perfect mind-readers at times. "Breakfast, Robert," she said, and Aunt Hobbit came out of the kitchen with a pot of tea. "Have they got the business with Alec sorted out yet? Ed's quite anxious, you know."

"Is he?" I asked. "What did he say?" It wasn't so much that I was avoiding the question as wondering about the Commander's motives given his amnesiac state.

"I can't repeat what he said," announced Aunt Hobbit with a frown.

"Top secret?" I asked, ribbing her.

"No," she answered. "Just unrepeatable. I didn't think a nice young man like him would know so many swear words."

"He must be upset," I said, unnecessarily. And wondered to myself. But my musings were interrupted by Aunt Print's persistence. "Are they going to release Alec?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know," I answered truthfully. "It's much more complicated than it appears on the surface." I speared a bacon rasher. "No one know what happened to the money, Colonel Freeman refuses to say anything even under the truth serum, and there's this computer disc that he tried to destroy that he won't tell anyone anything about."

"Alec's no traitor," stated Aunt Hobbit firmly.

"I didn't suggest that he was," I insisted. "It's just that the whole business of the money has everyone under a cloud. If only he'd denied the charge..."

"Why should he?" asked Aunt Print. "He was only acting under orders.. ."

"Acting under orders?" I repeated, stupidly. "Whose?"

But I already knew. And I knew why MacPherson was not giving up on the disc or on the questioning - I should have seen it before.

There was no way the Colonel could have perpetrated the fraud without the Commander's knowledge. The way SHADO was structured, he would have had to have known, and since it was never stopped, Straker must have, at the very least, turned a blind eye to it. At the worst, he must have, as the aunties suggested, have done a lot more than condoned it - he must have been involved. But that was even more unbelievable.

"I think we should go over and tell them the truth," said Aunt Hobbit suddenly. "We can't let Alec be accused of this all by himself. Especially when we did most of the speculating, after all..."

"**You!?!?**" I stared at them both, amazed. "You?" I repeated. "Most of the speculating?"

"Yes," nodded Aunt Print. "Short term money market - futures - that sort of thing."

My mouth was open and doing fish-breathing imitations. "High risk stuff," I managed to gulp, appalled by the revelation, disbelieving most of it.

"Not if you know what you're doing," commented Aunt Hobbit in mild reproof.

"Did you?" I asked. "Know what you were doing I mean?" I wasn't only referring to the speculations, but to the reasons for them.

"Ed was never displeased with our investments," responded Aunt Print.

"What sort of profit did you make?" I asked uneasily. With more than 52 million pounds as a base, we could be talking about the best part of a hundred million here. I was soon to discover my rampant conservatism.

"Oh," shrugged Aunt Hobbit. "Nothing spectacular. We always erred on the side of caution. We didn't want to lose the capital, of course..."

"How much?" I insisted.

"Only nine hundred and seventy million," mumbled Aunt Print, as if it were a very sore point with her.

Apparently it was, for she went on, "We would have liked to have cracked the thousand million. . ."

At this stage, my tongue was hanging out of my mouth, absolutely incapable of a reply. My eyes were doing dangerous things, like threatening to come out of their sockets. "A ... thousand . . . million . . .?" I stuttered finally.

"I just told you, Robert," corrected Aunt Print, shaking her head testily, "that we didn't quite make it. . ."

"I know. . . I know" I interrupted shakily. "Where did the money come from? Originally, I mean?"

Aunt Hobbit's wrinkled brow suddenly cleared. "Ed's been saving a few years," she said. "It's profit from the studio..."

"Profit?" I demanded. "It's not green stamps you're talking about saving here. It's a billion dollars!" I saw the glare of protest from Aunt Print. "An American billion, anyway," I amended. There simply wasn't any profit from the studio - in fact, a large part of the security budget went towards bolstering the failing fortunes of the studio, since they were our indispensable smokescreen. There hadn't been a time when the studios had made a profit since the time when the embarrassing surplus in the late seventies. So embarrassing it was still talked about. SHADO security actually would up having more money on its hands at the end of the financial year than at the start - the studios had made several hugely successful films and had managed to more than off-set the expenditure of security in maintaining it. "Besides," I snapped at the aunties, "It's impossible. Harlington-Straker hasn't been in the black for over seven years!"

And then I could have kicked myself. For what if they had been in the black all along? What if the cream were being skimmed off the top? What had happened, if this were true, to the profit? And more than the profit! For if the studios had never been a crippling debt to overcome, what had happened to the funds that SHADO security had poured into the place over the years?

"The Commander wouldn't have done it," I said to myself quietly. He couldn't have. Ripped off SHADO when we were always so desperately short of funding? No, I couldn't believe it. The great-aunties simply had to be off their trollies. "He wouldn't feather his own nest at SHADO's expense," I muttered.

"What a horrid thought!" Aunt Hobbit was absolutely shocked. I was glad to see it.

"But there's no reason for him to do it!" I explained. "The IAC provides all the funds. A thousand million will go a long way - a couple of new moonbases, sure - but, it wouldn't be worth it. As soon as everyone realized we can live on less, they'll cut SHADO's budget. Not only that, the Commander would be out on his ear for concealing SHADO's true requirements. We'd never be able to maintain the moonbases if we got them. A deception of this kind is just inexplicable! It's absurd! It's self-defeating! I can't think of a single altruistic motive for the Commander to have a slush fund!"

"Exactly what he called it!" smiled Aunt Hobbit, more cheerfully now. "His very own slush fund."

"He was quite proud of it!" added Aunt Print. "Said he was going to corner the world market on aluminium..."

"Aluminium?" I queried. "why?"

Aunt Print shrugged. "He said boron nitrite was much lighter and harder, but it was too expensive. With only nine hundred and seventy million in kitty, it came down finally to a question of economics..."

"What came down to a question of economics?" I asked.

"Operation : Cloudeye," replied both the aunties at once.

"And what is Cloudeye?" I asked. Since they knew so much else, I wondered if they knew that.

"Simulated shut-down of all Earth installations in the event of an alien takeover," quoted Aunt Print. "Do you think we should ring Ed?" she continued worriedly. "It's difficult to know what to ask him we should do when he doesn't remember, but at the same time, we can't allow Colonel Freeman to languish in a prison cell..."

I hesitated. Should they warn the Commander that the Spanish Inquisition was likely to be on its way? Security, when they discovered that the Commander was involved in the shady dealings, would not hesitate to lift him from the clutches of Caltech, squirt some mind-openers into him, and demand to know what, where, how, why and who. And they would not do it with kid gloves.

"Colonel Freeman is quite capable of taking care of himself," I said, and the instant I made the statement I must have realized that it was true. He would, in his own time, tell us whether the whole business was criminal or legitimate, and in the meantime, I would do well, like the Aunties, to err on the side of caution. Maybe there was a simple explanation. Maybe the Commander had been saving up for five new aluminium moonbases - perhaps he wanted them made out of metal rather than the extruded plastic the present one was, and the aluminum would be less of a problem weight-wise than other metals when it came to escaping the Earth's gravitational field. Or, maybe there was another reasonable explanation. I knew there couldn't possibly be, but the mysterious phone call from Australia, tipped the balance. I decided not to tell anyone what the aunties had told me until Ginny Lake got back from Skydiver. She was, after all, a Colonel and if there was any reason on sweet blue Earth for what was going on, she'd know and keep my nose squeaky clean for me. In the meantime, I had a code to discover. I finished my breakfast and said "Well, back to the salt mines," and gave both the aunties a peck on the cheek with the admonition not to anything before they consulted me and I had consulted Colonel Lake.

I went straight back to HQ and fronted the General. He handed me a folder. It contained Commander Straker's personal file. I was too stunned to speak for several seconds after I opened the first page and realized what it was.

"Know the man, know the way he thinks, know the code," stated MacPherson assertively at me, and I was dismissed. Out through the communications room I went, and they were all staring at me. Later, I discovered that everyone knew what I was holding, because Jackson had made such an incredible stink about letting MacPherson have it. Even now, I can't understand Jackson's attitude - it must have only served to make MacPherson suspicious - when the whole business of knowing the Commander's psychology and therefore knowing the code was so ridiculous. I mean, it's great in theory, but in practice it leaves a lot to be desired. Jackson came close to muffing the whole thing, and if I had been alert enough, I would have realised a lot of things a whole lot sooner. But, it didn't occur to me that MacPherson didn't trust most of SHADO when it came to a conflict of loyalties. I knew he had sent Foster to Moonbase, but neither I, nor anyone else, had really twigged that he didn't want any of the Colonels still around to pull rank on either himself or Messer when it came to dealing with Freeman. Not that they could have pulled rank really, of course, but they could slide around procedures in SHADO that neither of the newcomers were fully familiar with yet, and pull a fast one. Me - well, I'd been in SHADO less than twenty-five months and most of that time had not been in HQ, but jaunting here and there, trouble-shooting on the computer system. My inherent loyalty was more likely to be to the organisation than to any specific person - at least that appeared to be the General's reasoning. Pity he was wrong.

I went back to the auxiliary computer room and began to read the Commander's file.

Fascinating was the only word to describe it. The small bits of trivia, the larger-than-life humanity of a very private person, the scrawlings of a number of doctors in the margins - it was an intriguing jigsaw.

He loved golf, classical music, and muscatel grapes. Besides astrophysics, of course. Was educated at Roosevelt Preparatory School in the suburb of Lynn, Boston, and later at Selwyn-Lincoln College, Massachusetts, and at M.I.T.. Spent a summer at the tracking facility in Hawaii, when his studies got interrupted by Vietnam and several combat citations. He applied for NASA and even got as far as the astronaut training programme before his claustrophobia was picked up and he was barred from pursuing a career in that direction. (The ironies of life, eh? Can't be an astronaut, sonny, so you'll just have to command the largest permanent military presence on the moon, and visit it from time to time; of course!) He was shunted straight from NASA to 'Operation Bluebook' and after being largely responsible for collecting enough information to unequivocally prove the existence of UFO's was asked to head up SHADO on the recommendation of some Frenchman named Duval. Married 1969. Divorced 1971. Wife's name: Mary. Lives in Crocus Cottage . . . Surrey. There was an erasure along the whole length of the a and 'query? query?' was noted in the margin. One son, John, born April, 1970. Once a month rights. (Query by Jackson: No evidence of use of visiting rights since May, 1981. Still visiting irregularly or not at all? Query why?)

Then there was a lot of technical detail about standard psychological testing, physical testing and the usual guff. There were reams of monthly comments by Jackson and Fraser, none of which was particularly helpful.

I sat with the open file on one knee and set the manual override on my computer programme, I punched in Edward, Mary, John, Maryjohn, Johnmary, Crocus, Cottage, Surrey, Bluebook, Vietnam, Mekong, Delta, Saigon, Medal, Congress, Honour, Boston, Lynn, MIT, Hawaii, Selwyn, Lincoln, Kennedy, Cape, April, Duval, French, Shado, Shadow, Shadows, Light, Dark, Darkness, Gamow, Gravity. I even tried to try Roosevelt, Canaveral, Commander and Massachusetts, before I realised they were too long.

I took me two hours to run through just those few. I set the automatics back on line, locked the door and sat down with Keith Ford for a cup of coffee. "I don't suppose Colonel Freeman has given over with the access code yet?" I asked hopefully.

"I think he'll die first," said Ford quietly and bleakly. "If MacPherson orders Jackson to pump anything else in the serum line into him, I don't know how he'll survive..."

"I don't know how he's keeping quiet," I said. "Maybe they haven't thought of torture yet - these truth serum cocktails are really for. . ." I broke off, alarmed at the look on Ford's face. "Hey," I lowered my voice to a whisper, "they aren't torturing him, are they?" Ford didn't answer. "Are they?" I persisted, and when he still didn't answer, I swore a great deal. What was so precious on that damn disc that had to be so dearly protected? I scooted across the road to the flat, pounding through the door like a rampaging elephant. "Ring California," I commanded Aunt Hobbit. "ring that dear and damn Commander of yours and ask him if he was going to use an access code of eight letters or less, what would it be?" I thrust the phone into her hands. "Ring," I yelled into her face.

She complied, merely protesting quietly, "If you're trying to find a specific code, he probably doesn't remember it." The phone rang out before it was answered. In a cold, blazing fury I stalked out without a word and went back to the auxiliary computer room. Ford let me in and, seeing the state of the desk thanked him at once for cleaning up. I had left in an unholy mess - with the Commander's file scattered all over the place. "I haven't touched a thing," said

Keith. I stared at him. And he at me.

"You told me no one else can get in here," I said, diving for the disc drive. The disc was still in there, remaining merrily elusive about its contents. I breathed a huge sigh of relief and plunged towards the file. It was stacked into a nice, neat order, personal stuff first. Physical and IQ results next. Psychological stuff last. Not at all the chronological file I had originally been given. I checked on my own programme disc. It was still running. I wondered who had been in. But Keith was wondering other dire things. "There's so way in here," he mused to himself. "And there's no one authorised to come in. I asked MacPherson to make it off-limits." His eyes were dark and troubled, and he looked at the Commander's file carefully. "Can I have the folder it's in?" he asked. "There can't be too many people who ever had their hands on the Commander's file. I might just be able to get the boys down in the lab to dust up a few fingerprints for me."

I handed it to him, and he took it gingerly by one corner. Then he locked the door again and I punched in America, States, physics, astro, Einstein, Feynmann, New York, Newyork, London, Geneva, AC, national, nation, Earth, Kepler, Newton, ellipse, calculus, Leibniz, Germany, German, Galileo, Galilei, Italy, Rome, Greece, Athens, Pericles, Oracle, Delphi, Diana, Huntress, Hunter, Orlon, Moon, Lunar, Lunatic, Lunatick, (I had high hopes of that one, briefly, as it was just the sort of thing the Commander would name something) Module, Mode, Model, Hero, Heroine, Heroes, Heroines, Columbia, Shuttle, Space, Frontier, Beam, Beam me, Beam up, Beammeup, Scotty, Muscatel, Grape, Grapes, Champagne, Toast, Victory, Triumph, and at that stage I had better start writing down the ones I'd used so that I wouldn't duplicate them. After hours straight, my back was killing me, my eyes felt like they were going to fall out, my head ached atrociously and I was stumped. I typed 'stumped' into the computer on the off-chance. But it didn't work. I went back to the flat for forty winks after setting the automatics back on line. I also left a thread in the doorway.

I was dog tired, too tired for an interrogation by the aunties. "We rang Ed," they said. "He wants to know how bad things are. He ways he can come back if there's a real emergency. But he stresses - it's got to be end-of-the-world type emergency. Is it, Robert?" I shrugged, too brain-wilted to know. Then I tumbled into bed. I punched words in computers in my dreams and felt no less tired when I awoke. Aunt Hobbit, the old sweetie, brought me in a hot, steaming, sugary coffee. They must have gone out especially and got it for me, because it's not the sort of thing they kept In the house. Even for Aunt Hobbit's prayer meetings. It was tea, or hot water, if you weren't into the tannic flavouring. "Did you ask the Commander about what code he would choose?" I queried, sipping the warm, sweet liquid.

"He asked what the code was for," replied Aunt Hobbit. "He said he'd probably name things by the operation it entailed. So, he said that if you could give him some hints what the code was used for, he might be able to tell you what it is." She sat down on the quilt beside me, and stared into my eyes. "Why don't you go to California and see him and tell him all the truth - all about SHADO? He might just remember..."

"I'd never get permission," I stated flatly. Actually, I was of the suspicion that the Commander might be back in England sooner than anyone anticipated - it was only a matter of time before Henderson gave the security boys orders to go pick him up for questioning, memory or no memory.

Aunt Print suddenly loomed in the doorway. "You've no objection if one or both of us go though, have you, Robert?" she asked softly.

I jerked up against my pillow. "I don't think it's... well, necessary... or wise," I said.

"If we'd already booked the tickets to Los Angeles," asked Aunt Hobbit, patting my hand, "would you advise us to cancel...?"

I shook my head, not in denial, but in confusion. "Well . . . I . . . well, I don't know." I said lamely. "When were you planning on going?"

"This evening," answered Aunt Hobbit. "Strike while the iron is hot...!"

"Look, don't go just yet..." I said. I was flustered. "Let me find out exactly what's happening with regard to Colonel Freeman, and I'll check too with security. There's a possibility that someone's already been sent to apprehend him, so there'd be no point in going then..."

"Apprehend Ed?" queried Aunt Hobbit, aghast. Aunt Print simply stared at me through narrowed eyes - eyes that did not disclose her rebel thoughts.

"Yes," I admitted. "You can't deny that whatever's been going on with SHADO's money, it looks bad. Very bad."

They made me breakfast then - had the world really gone through another twenty-four hours since my last breakfast? Then I trotted back to the studios. Into the computer room, where my thread was still nicely in place, and back to the grindstone. I tried Planet, Mercury, Venus, Mars and the rest of the Solar system, I tried Solar and System, I tried every natural and artificial satellite I could think of from Deimos to Charon, from Skylab to Soyuz. Feeding in them alone took over four hours. Then I tried all the commonly-known stars. During a short break for lunch, I got a list of two hundred stars and their popular names. I tried every constellation listed. I tried the days of the week, the months of the year, and, on an inspiration, bought a book of mythology. After all, astronomy and astrophysics, the Commander's favourites, have a lot of mythology in them. I ran through all the Greek Gods on the following day, the Roman Gods on the day after and the Norse Gods on the morning after that. I would have tried the oriental Gods in the comprehensive listing, but I decided that the Commander was more likely to operate out of a European framework. Though remembering the time he had spent in Hawaii, I was tempted to pursue the Pacific and Polynesian possibilities. But by the sixth day, I was ceasing to care. I went back and forward from the flat like a zombie. I was long past the stage of frustration - now it was simply dogged determination to find the code. Ford wasn't telling me anymore about what was happening with Freeman - it only served to increase my obsession.

The aunties had not, as it turned out, gone to California, but only because Ed told them not to come in no uncertain terms - but what those no uncertain terms were, they never did say. It convinced them, however. My own state of mental health must have had them concerned for they went so far as to volunteer the suggestion that the code might be the name of a film. That, when I thought about it, was a remarkably astute idea. The Commander was ostensibly a film-maker - it'd just be his ironic sense of humour to use a film as the access code. So I went back, took the automatics off-line again, and typed in every film I could think of from the fifties and sixties. Nothing much later, since I figured that the Commander wouldn't have had time to watch much after that. Heaven help me if he'd picked on one of the obscure films that actually come out of the Harlington-Straker stable in the seventies. Though, on second thoughts, I could just go and ask Miss Ealand to get me a list of everything the studios had ever made. Eventually, after running through everything I could think of from "Maltese" to "Geronimo," I did just that. And they didn't help either. By this time, MacPherson was expecting some sort of result, and, unprofessionally, I let him have a piece of my mind. There wasn't the slightest excuse for the way I fell off the handle. I had been given a job, and

Impossible as it was, I still should have kept my cool.

"Well," said the aunties, "what about T.V. shows?" I had headed home after the blow-up with MacPherson, knowing that I needed not another tired old suggestion, but a whole new perspective on the thing. Maybe the code was numbers, not letters. I was ruminating this possibility in a somewhat deep depression when the aunties managed to grab my attention. "Why don't you try the names of some old westerns?" they asked.

Well, why not? I thought when I headed back for the start of the ninth day on the problem. On the other hand, I could just work my way through the Shorter Oxford Dictionary - the two volume one that you need a magnifying glass to use and weight-lifting exercises to pick up. But, without one close to hand, I took the great-aunties' suggestion. I typed in Wildwest, West, Western, Westerns, Paladin, Bonanza, Bat, Masterson, Tombstone, Territory (Well, I didn't realise until too late it was more than eight letters) and Maverick. And I hit pay dirt. I nearly didn't believe it when the screen remained blank for fully half a minute - I was still waiting for the "Can't find Maverick" signal to come up. Instead, when I could nearly hold my bated breath no longer up came: *What colour do the Irish wear on St. Patrick's Day?*

I blinked, hesitating. The obvious answer was too obvious. A trick question? But having no better option, I decided to take the plunge on green. Immediately, the screen cleared for: *How many Queens of England have been named Elizabeth?* Two. *What is on the US flag besides stars?* Stripes. *What is the 25th December?* In what country is French spoken? *Twinkle, twinkle, little . . . ?* I was tempted to put in 'bat' but resisted. The questions were coming up very fast now, in fact disappearing off the screen as quickly as I could get in the answer. The next question was a Clayton's question - you know, the question you have when you're not having a question. It started to get me worried about what the nature of the questions were. *Spell encyclopaedia.*

But I didn't have much time to ponder. The questions kept rolling on at a scorching pace. *Who built the ark? How many days are there in a fortnight? What is cheddar? What type of people build igloos? . . . are a girls best friend? Man's best friend is the . . .? When does 'trick or treat' occur? Who was the leader of the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest? What colour is associated with embarrassment? Seasickness? Cowardice? Envy? A stitch in time saves . . .? Name the vampire Count of Transylvania. John, Paul, George and Ringo were the . . .? The King of Beasts is the . . .? How many in a dozen? In a baker's dozen? What large tombs dominate Egyptian landscape? A bull in a . . . shop? What part of the house does Santa slide down? As white as . . .? Romeo and . . .? What animal delivers chocolate eggs at Easter time?*

Yoicks, the questions might have been fast, but they were easy! so easy, so absurdly easy, that I couldn't help but wonder what I was missing about them. Something obvious surely. But I had to put my thoughts on hold while I answered the never-ending stream. *How many World Wars have there been? (Until 1985).*

(Obvious afterthought, there! As if the programmer suddenly realised it might be some years before this disc was used. I wondered now whether the programmer was the Commander after all.) *In what game would you find a tee, a green, a wood, an iron, an birdie? Who did the wolf say, "All the Better to see you with, my dear" to? Who composed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony? Where would you find the Eiffel Tower? What would you see painted round the heads of saints in religious pictures? Beam me up . . .? The first President of the US? What is the common slang for coca cola? Name an XJ cat. As cold as . . .? What field did Picasso specialise in? Mozart? Luther? Hitchcock? DeLorean? Kissinger? What is Blue Nun?*

Mickey and Minnie . . ? Where is Mt. Fujiama? What is sung at midnight on New Years Eve? What the most basic ingredient of an omelette? What is an unlucky number? Who sailed the ocean blue in fourteen hundred and ninety-two? What's good for the goose is good the for . . .? What country has a maple leaf symbol? What did Cinderella lose? How many cents in a quarter? Who lives in a monastery? Where would you go to see the Parthenon? King Arthur had a . . table? . . .and the three bears? The day after Sunday is? How many trombones in the big parade? How many years in a century? What colour is a flag of truce? What US President was assassinated in a theatre? Who should have bewared the Ides of March? Who followed the White Rabbit into Wonderland? In what country is the Vatican? How many eyes does the Cyclops have? Pork comes from . . .? Ham comes from . . .? Bacon comes from . . .? Trotters come from . . .? Wood comes from . . .? Mutton comes from .? Veal comes from . .? We will fight in the beaches, we will fight in the landing grounds, we will fight in the hills, we will never ? How many dwarfs did Snow White meet? What colour is the Red Cross? People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw . . .? It you claimed the Pope as your religious leader, what denomination would you be? What atmospheric phenomenon has a silver lining? Pack up your troubles in your old . . .? What is Johnnie Walker? Where would you find the Red Square? Roses are red, violets are . . .? What would I blow out on my birthday? At the end of the rainbow, you should find a pot of . . .? What stuffed animal is called a teddy? (No, slap down that nasty thought - it's not a Straker.)

At which stage I realised that not only had the Commander written this thing, after all, but he'd had lots of fun doing it But what did all these questions mean? I was pretty sure by this time I'd typed in the wrong answer on the trombones question. I'd put in 73 and was sure now it should have been 76, but the programme seemed to press on regardless. Would it ever end? *What land is named after Walt Disney? To be or not to ...? Honey comes from Honey .? Ring a ring a rosy a pocket full of . .? Your name? Rank? SHADO Number? The best-laid of mice and Strakers are apt to go .? (And they obviously have, or you wouldn't be here, Robert Casterville!)* I didn't know whether to be heartened by this reference to myself or not. Obviously, the preceding questions about name, rank and serial number had been used in that aside. Was it a warning, oblique and subtle, but still a warning in that last question?

I wasn't sure.

All's well that ends . .? Well.

It must have been the last question for the screen went blank and stayed blank for about three or four seconds before the following came up: *Congratulations, Robert! You have scored 96 out of 100 on a test of your humanness.*

Test of my humanness? Then suddenly it was clear. Of course the questions had been easy - easy for a human being - they were all general knowledge questions, or cultural questions - questions that an alien wouldn't have the foggiest about. Though, mind you, you would have to be from Western civilisation to be able to answer with an automatic response - but then I guess the Commander figured that anyone in SHADO, if not originally from the West, would have had to have lived there long enough to absorb a lot of the culture.

Ninety six out of 100? Suddenly I wondered what other three questions I'd missed. Surely I could not have made another three mistakes I didn't know about. But I was not to have the opportunity to wonder - the screen was filled with an influx of information:

<i>Elgar</i>	<i>Nimrod</i>
<i>Winterbotham</i>	<i>Cipher</i>

Sphinx

Riddle

Mystery

Puzzle

CODE AND CONFIRMERS

I stared. So I had established the fact that I was a human being with the last test - what on Earth was "Code and Confirmers" a test of? Elgar Winterbotham - who was he? Or It? Or was it Elgar Nimrod? No, Elgar Winterbotham and Nimrod Cipher sounded better. Riddle of the Sphinx. Mystery and puzzle. Maybe it was a way of arrangement... no, maybe it was the initial lettering... no, not enough vowels for a code . . . maybe it was the number that corresponded to the letters of the alphabet...

After an hour, I decided to give up and tell MacPherson that I'd got into part of the system. I locked up, went out, and discovered that the General had gone out to pick up Ginny Lake from the airport. Hurrah, I thought, Ginny's back at last! My troubles are over! I'll dump the bundle of problems in her lap and let her sort them out. That's what she's paid a Colonel's salary for, after all.

I decided to nip back to the flat for tea - now that I had cracked the damn code, I felt light-hearted enough to skip out on my shift without a qualm of conscience. Besides, I was starving.

It was soup and crackers - it must be Wednesday, I realised with a start. It seemed I had lost track of the days somewhere in the last fortnight. 'Soup and crackers' night was also the night of Aunt Hobbit's prayer meeting, so I decided to make myself scarce as soon as possible. Before I even sat down, the aunties gave me their best earnest looks and presented me with a letter. US stamp. Posted In Hawaii. I hesitated before opening it, because there, ominously on the front was: Lt. R Casterville. Lieutenant. Not even my family knew of my rank.

I slit it open. Lieutenant, it ran: *Colonel Freeman is not a maverick. Beware MacPherson. E.S.*

That was all it said. Just nine words and the initialled signature.

But there was a world of meaning in every word. A world. I found I was holding my breath, and I expelled it in a gasp. Until this very moment, it had never, for even the briefest second, crossed my mind that the Commander did not have amnesia. It now began to cross my mind that he had never had amnesia. And if he didn't have, there had to be at least two people who had helped him carry out this deception - Jackson and Freeman. And as soon as I tumbled to the fact that Jackson was involved, it became immediately apparent to me how Freeman was able to resist whatever truth serum was being pumped him - Jackson was probably injecting him with water!

Beware MacPherson - well, the very fact that the Commander had even mentioned MacPherson meant he knew of SHADO's predicament - and what was he doing in California - correction, Hawaii - that was so imperative that he had to pretend to have amnesia to go and work on it? But, on the other hand, Henderson had got him the position in Caltech - was Henderson in on this plot too? No, I rejected that. Whatever was going on was going on without Henderson's knowledge.

And then, of course, there was the giveaway clue - maverick. I had tumbled to it by sheer accident, but obviously it meant what it said: that whatever the operation the Commander was engaged in was a maverick one, one that he was taking sole responsibility for, one that he was going out on a limb for.

"What does it say?" asked Aunt Hobbit quietly, softly. I could tell by the eagerness in her

tone that she'd been dying to open the letter all day long.

"It tells me the access code," I said carefully. I was aware of them watching me as if they expected me to dash out the door in delight. "But Lady Luck has already been with me - I worked it out this afternoon," continued. "And it appears that Lady Luck is still with us, for as MacPherson had not been fortunately and fortuitously absent, I would have told him the code an hour ago. . ." and I handed them the letter.

The letter changed my mind about everything. I had never considered telling the aunties any part of the programme, but I reached for a piece of scrap paper from the mantel shelf and put the problem before them:

<i>Edgar</i>	<i>Nimrod</i>
<i>Winterbottom</i>	<i>Cipher</i>
<i>Sphinx</i>	<i>Riddle</i>
<i>Mystery</i>	<i>Puzzle</i>

CODE AND CONFIRMERS

"Make anything of this?" I asked hopefully.

Idiot that I was, and tired as I was, I can still offer no excuse for my two blunders: I'd made a pair mistakes in transcribing the code, and I was shortly to pay for them.

Aunt Print took one look at the information and reached for the telephone book. There were three E. Winterbottoms in the directory, and she made swift work of ringing them all. I admired her decisive style. But none of them were Edgar. "I didn't expect they would be," she said when she got off the phone ten minutes later. She had spent some time in conversation with each ascertaining whether the callees knew of any Edgar Winterbottoms. "It would be too easy..."

"The first part of Maverick was absurdly easy," I volunteered, and described the nature of the questions the 'Humanness Test'.

Aunt Hobbit shook her head. "But this will be harder... but I don't think it's too much harder." She stared at the offensive piece of paper. "Maybe we're linking the wrong words." She thrust an old, spindly finger the sheet. "See," she said, "Code and Confirmers. Suppose Edgar and Nimrod is the code, and the rest of the words and confirmers."

"Edgar could be a surname," suggested Aunt Print. "Perhaps it means that Edgar is to Nimrod as Winterbottom is to Cipher..."

"..... and Sphinx is to Riddle as Mystery is to Puzzle?" I asked. "That leaves us precisely nowhere."

"Why don't we try Who's Who?" asked Aunt Hobbit suddenly.

"Got one handy?" I asked.

"Library's open late tonight," offered Aunt Print, and off we trooped. At least off Aunt Print and I trooped, Aunt Hobbit already had her friends rolling up for the prayer meeting by the time we left. We looked up every Edgar in the book and found not the slightest reference to Nimrod. We looked up Winterbottom and found exactly nothing either, and I read all about Nimrod and the Sphinx in the encyclopaedia. Which left me none the wiser. There seemed to be no connection whatsoever.

We were turfed out when the library closed, and when we arrived home, cold and thoughtful, Aunt Hobbit had a cup of tea ready. None of us got to sleep that night. We sat in pensive silence, broken only by an occasional spoken thought on the subject. "Edgar is to Nimrod as Winterbottom is to Cipher," mused Aunt Hobbit quietly from time to time.

"Don't get stuck in a rut," said Aunt Print in admonition. "It could well be Edgar is to Winterbottom as Nimrod is to Cipher...."

I sat there with my hands propping up my head and stared at the ceiling. It should come to me. There was no real point in going back to the studios until it did. In fact, there was a great deal of point in staying away. I couldn't lie to MacPherson, but I wondered what I was to do about the Commander's instruction to beware of him. What exactly did that mean? Was it a general warning just to make sure that MacPherson did not interfere in some vital project? Or was it a more specific warning?

I wound up staying away three days. The aunties intercepted phone calls for me. Aunt Hobbit refused to lie - she would glare at me and wave me out the door and say perfectly truthfully to whoever was inquiring after me, "Oh, I am sorry, Robert's just stepped out. Shall I tell him you rang, or would you like to leave a message?" When security finally got instructions to pay the flat a visit to retrieve me, I and Aunt Print were firmly ensconced upstairs in the radio telescope room. I had this small suspicion that security would fail to check that the aunties owned both the second-top and top floor of the flats, and that they wouldn't know about the purpose of the upstairs rooms unless they read the Commander's report on Project: Heinrich. And I was right. The guys in security had such devious minds that the obvious often eluded them.

We were completely baffled by the code - and the aunties were becoming anxious by the Commander's silence. He hadn't rung them and they couldn't get hold of him.

"Think the aliens have got him?" whispered Aunt Hobbit to Aunt Print when they thought I couldn't hear.

"They'll be sorry if they have," snapped Aunt Print. "He'll give them a run for their money..." But she was worried all the same.

We went over the facts for the hundredth time. "Tell me about Nimrod," said Aunt Print.

"Again?" I asked wearily.

"Nimrod was a hunter before the Lord," offered Aunt Hobbit. Neither of them seemed to grow impatient with this constant repetition of the old, frayed facts. Perhaps they thought that by nibbling away at the problem they would finally get somewhere. As it turned out, they were right. "Nimrod was mentioned in the Old Testament in Genesis..." Suddenly she broke off.

"Tell me, Robert," she demanded, staring, "you've read Ed's file. Does it mention his taste in music?"

I wondered what had brought on this inspiration, and I answered with perplexity, "Classical. Very classical. His brother's a musician with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in fact..."

"You twit!" snapped Aunt Hobbit at me, and it's the only time in my life I've ever heard the sweetie call anyone anything that smacked of a dunce. "You stupid twit!" she continued.

"Amy?" Aunt Print, eyes glowing. It was obvious to her that Aunt Hobbit knew the answer.

Aunt Hobbit did an exaggerated huff. "Not Edgar," she said. "Elgar."

"Elgar?" I queried.

"Composer," stated Aunt Hobbit, shaking her head at me as if I was an irresponsible idiot. Which she was not far wrong about.

"So?" I asked, bewildered. It still didn't make sense to me. But suddenly, Aunt Print claps her hand to the side of her face, and says, "Of course!"

"Of course what?" I asked.

"Enigma," said Aunt Print.

"Enigma?" I asked. "What's that got to..."

"Elgar wrote the Enigma variations," Interposed Aunt Hobbit, "and the most famous of them is the 'Nimrod' variation." There was a maddeningly serene curve on her ancient lips.

"Only if you know classical music," I contended.

"If we'd looked up Elgar In the first place," Aunt Print muttered, "it wouldn't have taken us more than half an hour to figure It out. Look at the confirmers - riddle, mystery, puzzle, sphinx... ."

"Lay you a penny to a pound that Winterbottom either wrote or cracked the Enigma Cipher code during the war..." smiled Aunt Hobbit.

I looked at the ceiling, feeling rueful, kissed the aunties and slunk into SHADO to try out their theory. All I told Keith as he let me in was not to worry, things couldn't be as bad as he thought they were. I didn't mentioned the suspicion I had about the Commander's memory, but I hinted pretty strongly that I had a feeling that the Commander would be back on deck pretty soon.

"You know Colonel Lake's been arrested?" Keith asked me as he opened the door. I whirled, flabbergasted.

"What!?!!" I nearly screeched it. "Ginny?" I couldn't believe it. "What for?"

"Accessory after the fact," said Keith simply.

"Of what?"

"Fraud."

"It's not true," I told him flatly, and I was just about to tell him every tiny scrap of information in my jigsaw when my eyes caught the screen. "Hell!" There was no longer any need for me to know 'enigma', for there in front of me was the next test in the programme. "Somebody's been In here!" I spat at Keith, "and they're bloody well further along the programme than I am..."

"Impossible!" stated Keith.

I glared furiously at him. "You're right!" I snapped. "I tumbled to the code accidentally.. ."

"You know it?" asked the Lieutenant, awed.

I nodded, staring at the screen. The Conscience of the King. That was what glowed back at me in pale green letters. "Yes, I know it," I agreed, "and I don't know what's going on around here, but there's far more than anyone suspects. What would you say if I told you I think Colonel Grey and Captain Carlin are alive and kicking up their heels in Australia?"

Keith just looked at me as if I'd taken leave of my senses. Wait till he heard the rest. . .!

But he didn't have a chance at that moment. General MacPherson's bulk suddenly blocked the doorway and he greeted me with, "So, finally deigned to turn up, have we, Lieutenant?" His voice was rich with sarcasm. I turned, managing to obscure the whole of the screen with my torso, and reaching behind me, I located the automatics switch. Hopefully, oh, please God, I prayed, let The Conscience of the King disappear, and BBBBBCD or something like it come up. "Where do you think you've been?"

I straightened and saluted. "Tracking down a rumour, Sir.."

"What rumour?" asked the General. Colonel Messer had appeared at his flank and was watching me with incisive eyes.

"Ahh . . . umm," I licked my dry lips and raffled out a lie. "I went down to Surrey to have a talk to the Commander's ex-wife - I thought she might be able to fill in some background

detail that might be helpful . . ."

"And what did she say when you saw her?" asked the General, almost genially now.

"Well," I hesitated, ". . . I can't find anything helpful in what she told me..."

"You're lying, Casterville," said the General after a small pause. "Mary Rutland left England two years ago . . ."

Oh, damn, I thought. Double damn. There would of course be another file, more up-to-date, that the General would have had access to. But I was rescued by Colonel Messer. "She returned to England only few weeks ago," he said crisply. "Perhaps the information has not reached all appropriate quarters yet." I stared. Colonel Messer's accent had all but disappeared - he'd obviously been taking his studies of English language seriously. Another thing hit me - Messer was mouthing something at me I couldn't catch. But it seemed to be 'play along'. I got the strange feeling that Erwin was lying as much as I was. "I shall have a word to security about the laxity of their reports on Straker's wife, Sir," he said, and MacPherson, after a quick glance, obviously believed him. "Get to work," snarled the General at me. "If you leave again without permission, I'll chain you to the desk." And he strode out.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Messer simply stared at me in undisguised contempt and pity. "If you must lie," he said coldly, "be plausible next time. It's not going to be easy to cover you in this. . . ." and he just about goose-stepped out.

"It's Messer!" I whispered, turning to Keith. "He's the one who's been in there..."

"Are you sure?" Keith asked.

I nodded. I don't know why I was so certain, but I was afraid. Afraid that Messer was ahead of me. Afraid that Messer had MacPherson's ear. The ear of the man the Commander had instructed me to be wary of.

"I'll keep an eye on him," said Keith, hurrying towards the door. "If he is working for the aliens, we're in trouble.. I don't think we could ever convince MacPherson..." he added and was gone, swift as a lean shadow.

I locked the door, and grimly set myself to work. I took the automatics off-line. "Go to Enigma," I typed in. And there it was again, the title I had seen before: The Conscience of the King.

I stopped, suddenly paralysed with the realisation that the chances of Messer finding the Maverick code the first place were astronomically small. I got up and went over the room with a proverbial fine toothcomb. Nothing. No audio or visual bugs. Nothing. Well, at least nothing that I could find.

Even more cautiously, I went back to work. The Conscience of the King.

THE CONSCIENCE OF THE KING

There was once a king of a far country who had a son whom he loved more than life itself. One day the son fell ill unto death, and only the magic herbs that grew on a distant peak could save the boy's life. But this peak lay beyond the land of the king's enemies. Nonetheless, the king set off alone to find the herbs and after some care to scout around his enemies, he succeeded in his goal. He was returning swiftly to his son's aid when, hiding by the way, he heard the conversation between enemy soldiers. He heard that the enemy king had prayed to their god for a sign that the war should end - that, if by noon of the following day, word should come to the enemy king from ambassadors that a peace would be honoured, then the enemy king would forsake the war. But, if not, it would be a holy jihad until one or both lands were utterly destroyed. Now the king knew that he would not be able to return to his lands in time for the ambassadors to set out and arrive by noon of the following day in the

courts of the enemy king. If he wished to stop this holy jihad, he must go to the enemy king himself. But that would almost certainly mean his son's death - with no absolute certainty of the enemy king's good intentions.

NOW, WHAT SHALL THE KING DO? Should he return to his son with the herbs, or should he go straight to the enemy king to try and negotiate peace?

I nearly dropped in my tracks. It was a question of ethics. Ethics? How can there possibly be a right answer? A definitive right answer? I stared at the screen, and read the whole thing through four times. If I got the wrong answer, what would happen in the programme? Was there a built-in fail-safe that would exclude me, or worse horror, anyone at all from going further?

I locked the door and went straight to Keith. "Make sure Messer doesn't get in," I instructed him quietly, "I'm going to consult an expert in ethics.. ."

"Ethics"? he called after me, as I dashed out, up through the office lift and over the road. The best thing about having Aunt Hobbit in the family was that, if you wanted an answer were absolute morals concerned, you only had to ask. Mind you, I couldn't remember there being much call for such answer in the family, but I was about to make up for their deficiency. Better and better I thought - both the aunties had tea with the Commander every Tuesday morning, so sure as eggs are scrambled, they'll know the kind of ethical thinking the Commander would have.

The flat was locked. I knocked, but finally had to get my own key out to open it. No one was there. Like hens that had flown the coop, the aunties had disappeared. There was a note pad propped up against a glass on the kitchen table.

"Dear Robert," I read, "Sorry to desert you like this, but Ed needs help desperately. He fears the aliens know what he's up to. Please keep the trust and don't tell anyone what's on the disc when you find out. Not even Paul Foster or your friend, Ms Lake. If Alec cannot activate the Interface hooks, you must. If the launch succeeds, and is on time, Ed and John will be sitting ducks if you don't connect them in through the interface hooks. They don't think Peter will be able to give them sufficient protection, as Ed believes the aliens are planning a mass attack of upwards of thirty UFOs. He said to remind you to beware of MacPherson. Love. See you Sunday. Vi."

My thoughts were unprintable after reading this missive. What did it mean? What was the Commander up to? I didn't have a clue what an interface hook was, let alone how to activate it. What launch? Obviously, it must be coming off soon - if indeed, before Sunday, or there was no reason for Aunt Print to leave me these instructions. Unless, she was merely hopeful they'd be back on Sunday, and leaving this note for me was a contingency plan. As for a mass attack, so what? We could handle it - handle fifty UFO's if need be.

I glared at the detestable piece of paper in front of me, and noticed some indents come through from the sheet above. I peered carefully, trying to decipher them, then searched round for a soft graphic pencil, and slowly, carefully, shaded in the area. It was still hard to make out, but I managed to find QANTAS and a number that could have been a flight code or could have been a time, then ANSETT Sydney and another number, then Nullarbor, about half way between Eucla, Madura.

I didn't hesitate. I'd seen Aunt Print operate, and I knew what to do. I got straight on the phone to the Australian Embassy and requested information on the town of Nullarbor. And I found out Nullarbor was a plain, a treeless plain, of almost desert-landscape on the Southern shores of Australia. "How far is it from Whyalla?" I asked. My informant wasn't sure off-hand

of the exact distance, but said it wasn't much more a stone's throw. In outback distances. (Whatever that meant.) I got him to describe the Nullarbor to me. Almost uninhabited, ground mined with blow-holes and limestone caverns, and . . . well, at that point, I needed to know no more. A virtually uninhabited region with underground caverns, right on an ocean shore, and only a stone's throw from a town with blast furnaces and ship-building yards that had closed seven years previously. Perfect, I thought. Absolutely perfect for a new Skydiver dock. That's what they were up to. It made sense, of course, to have Carlin involved, and Grey, too. And it made sense to keep it so secret - the aliens would have destroyed it before it was half completed. Oh, hell! I suddenly realised. Not when it was half-completed. Just about operational. That would be the optimum time to destroy both base, equipment, the lot. We'd never replace them then. Yes, it all made sense now. A new Skydiver dock. I couldn't, of course, have been more wrong.

I thanked the Australian embassy official, hung up, and cursed myself for my stupidity. I'd just talked on an open line without checking the room for bugs first. In fact, now I came to think of it, it must be six weeks since I'd last checked. I'd been so pre-occupied with the code-cracking that the weekly routine checks had gone by the bye. I found them at once, of course - one in the kitchen, one in my room, one in the telephone receiver, one in the bathroom. All audio. Well, it told me who the enemy was: Messer. And it explained how he'd managed to clue onto Maverick. I'd blabbed myself - all about how Maverick, humanness test, had been so easy. And of course, if Messer had typed in 'Go to Maverick', he'd have got straight to 'Enigma'. And he probably hadn't made my mistake with Elgar, either. No wonder he'd got ahead. But why had he been so obvious? Why hadn't he covered his tracks? Even if it had been a Freudian slip of his super-efficient mentality to organise the Commander's personal file into thematic sections, why had he continued to advertise his presence by leaving the Conscience of the King up for me to see? And speaking of the Conscience of the King, I'd decided I'd better get back to HQ before the world fell down around my ears.

Keith Ford was in the control room with General MacPherson and, at the moment, was not available to let me into the auxiliary computer room. They were monitoring a wedge of UFO's that seemed to be keeping a close formation in Saturn's shadow. "How many?" asked the General. "Hard to say," Keith. "They're doing a good job of slipping in and out of range. But nine, maybe a dozen..,"

I caught Keith's eye, he saw me, and tossed the electrostatic key to me. MacPherson saw me too. "Lt. Casterville," he nodded. I saluted. "Just the person. Go and get Straker's file," he ordered.

"Yes, Sir," I said cautiously. "May I ask why, Sir?" It was bold, but I had no choice. Beware MacPherson.

It was not MacPherson who answered. It was Henderson. Henderson, who had come in behind me, and was as angry as a bull at a gate. With a red rag waving not three feet from its nose. "Straker's not in California," he stated coldly. "In fact, Caltech states that he never arrived. But he's been in Los Angeles. In Silicon Valley. And he has spent, according to security's research, over 300 million dollars on something called a Dirac stabilizer..."

"What's a Dirac stabilizer?" asked Colonel Messer, coming up to stand beside MacPherson, as if it was his natural station in life.

"God alone knows. . ." spat Henderson. "All anyone knows is the name. He got it and took delivery of it a week ago, and neither he nor the scientists who made the thing have been seen since. The lab, Hammond-Cloudeye Research Associates, a concern that's been in

operation over a decade, suddenly closed up shop, folded their tents, and rode off in the dead of night . . . and where the hell Straker is, I'd give my right arm to know..."

"He's on his way to Australia," said MacPherson suddenly, and the whole room, which had been fascinated by Henderson's rampage, turned to him. "At least, that's what security suggests. He took a plane to Hawaii, perhaps to cover his tracks, and from there to Sydney..."

"Then we pick him up at Sydney airport," snapped Henderson.

"It may be too late," replied MacPherson. "My agent thinks he hired a car in Sydney and drove west. Heading for South Australia..."

I wondered briefly how MacPherson had known all that, and why he had thought to put an agent on the Commander's trail in the first place. Something made me frown, and it wasn't perplexity, it was suspicion. Who had authorized MacPherson's action? Clearly Henderson had not. What had possessed the General to take such an unprecedented move in having his predecessor tailed over more than half the globe?

Why?

I hoped my face didn't show the alarm I felt. Even greater alarm as MacPherson turned to me and said "You've read Straker's file, Casterville. Where do you think he's going?"

"Uhh. . ." I stared, terrified, at them both. I suddenly remembered Messer's words: If you must lie, plausible next time. All very well, but if you're ignorant, it's difficult to be plausible. My mind was blank.

"Woomera..." I stammered. Rocket base, wasn't it? Somewhere in Australia. Oh, please God, let it be west of Sydney.

"Woomera!" exclaimed Colonel Messer. "Of course!"

"Of course, why?" asked MacPherson.

I gulped. Having swallowed that lie, how much more would they believe? "Well," I said, trying to be as smooth as possible, "the Commander spent some time there ...when he was doing his honours year."

"I thought it was Hawaii," said Henderson and started at me suspiciously. Oh no, I thought to myself, remembering that the Commander had been once attached to Henderson's staff, the General was sure to know every inch of Straker's background.

"The Lieutenant is confused," said Colonel Messer, smiling calmly, "what he meant to say was not the Commander - it was Colonel Freeman who spent some time at Woomera..."

"Are you sure?" asked MacPherson.

"Oh, yes," replied Messer. "I can show you the file if you like. . ." and he made as if to go off and retrieve the Colonel's file.

MacPherson called him back. "It's alright, Erwin ..." And then he seemed to muse quietly to himself. "Let's hope the aliens don't know this. . ."

"Oh, I'm sure they do, Sir," responded Messer softly, and gave an ironic, inscrutable smile. And they did.

I followed Colonel Messer out of the room. "Dirac ... Dirac?" he was mumbling to himself. "Jean-Paul Dirac naturlick. Aber warum Dirac?" I wished I understood German.

I was heading straight for the auxiliary computer room, but I didn't get there. Not for a long time. I was intercepted by Doctor Jackson. He rounded the corner and gave me a quiet conspiratorial look. "I have a slight problem," he whispered to me, "concerning something Colonel Lake told me." He smiled that oily smile of his. "Could I discuss it with you?" he asked.

"Sure thing," I whispered back. I was only too eager to discuss anything that would get

either? Ginny or Colonel Freeman out of trouble - especially since I suspected that if anyone was safe to talk to around here, it was undoubtedly Jackson. Wonder if the good doctor knew the Maverick code? Probably did, come to think of it. Straker was only one to put all his eggs in one basket when he had no other option. He would almost certainly have given the first access code to someone other than Freeman.

We adjourned to the doctor's office and a hot cup of coffee. Jackson leaned back in his chair, all comfortable and relaxed, and sipped at the filtered brew. "Colonel Lake tells me," he opened, "that you have some..." he paused delicately. "... Some... idea that Colonel Grey and Captain Carl in might have survived the crash of Sky Three..."

I paused just as delicately as the good doctor had a moment earlier, and took a long swig of coffee. "... if, of course, they did... err, crash at all," I said obliquely.

"What makes you think that?" asked Jackson, coming directly to the point.

I shrugged, wanting him to give me the clues as to how much it was safe to say. "... well," I hesitated, "there was no wreckage found."

"It's a very deep part of the ocean," said Jackson. "The deepest."

I nodded my agreement. "While there's no evidence that they didn't crash," I affirmed, "there's no evidence that they did."

Jackson smiled. We must have gone on hedging round and round the truth for about five minutes or so, when I suddenly started to feel a bit queasy. I tried to focus for about another minute, before slurring at Jackson, "Excuse me, doctor, do you mind if I use the men's for just a second?" He pointed me towards the toilets attached to the medical wing. Half way there, I wondered whether I'd make it. I wondered what the hell was wrong with me. Then, like a bolt of lightning from Asgard, it hit me. The coffee. The coffee had been laced with amnesia drug. I'd been wrong - terribly wrong to suspect that there had never been a new experimental drug for the Commander to overdose on - there was a new and potent amnesia drug, and it had just been used on me. ... I staggered towards the basin, thrusting my fingers desperately down my throat, trying to gag, trying to throw up. Damn. Why had Jackson done it? Just to keep a secret quiet? Surely not, not when the Commander had released to me the Maverick code. Or had he released It? Was it a part of the memory that had come back to him, and unable to remember the rest, he did not know how dangerous it was to put something into my hands? My vision was blurred now, as I fumbled shut the toilet door. There was a felt tip in my pocket - I reached for the toilet paper, and wrote as fast as I could; I have been given the amnesia drug by Jackson. Code for disc: Maverick, Enigma. Have not penetrated the Conscience of the King. Beware MacPherson. Messer: alien agent? Aunties gone to Australia to help Commander and Grey and Carlin build new Skydiver Dock on Nullarbor Plain. Trust Ford...

"Casterville?" It was Jackson's anxious voice at the door I thrust the pen back into my top pocket and the message into my back zip pocket. Jackson was rattling the door by this time. I only just managed to get it open before collapsing, rather dramatically, into his arms in full view of MacPherson and Messer.

* * *

I awoke to find the friendly face of Doctor Fraser peering at me. "How are you feeling, Bobby?" he asked me.

"Fine," I said, and looked around the medical bay, a bit puzzled. "What am I doing here?"

"You collapsed," said Fraser cheerfully. "Been working far too hard. Rest cure and all that. Going to send you down to Twickenham for a complete physical..."

"Ohh, no!" I protested. "Karl will skin me alive if he's left to show General MacPherson

and his aide around all by himself."

"I beg your pardon," said Fraser, staring at me.

"Karl's okay, isn't he?" I asked, suddenly alarmed by Fraser's expression.

"Lieutenant Neuhaus is on Moonbase," Fraser offered, "doing a stint on the interceptors."

"Karl?" I blurted out. "An astronaut? You are kidding, aren't you, doc? He's a technician, not an interceptor pilot."

"General MacPherson says that there are too many specialists in SHADO, and that will be our downfall. Not enough general dogs bodies and jacks-of-all-trades..."

"Oh," I said, thinking privately to myself that MacPherson must be the fastest worked I'd ever come across. He'd been here only a week.

There was a shadow in the doorway. It was Lieutenant Ford. "Bob?" His query was tentative, and puzzling to me. Ford and I had never been on close terms - certainly not close enough for him to be calling me 'Bob'. "You okay?" he asked, and he came and sat on the edge of the bed.

I frowned at him for taking this liberty. "I'm fine," I shrugged. "Feel great." It was something I was to repeat endlessly over the next few days to many interested inquirers.

"Bob," asked Ford in a muted whisper, "did Messer get to you?"

"Get.. .. me?" I repeated dubiously. "Get what to me?"

Ford now started to stare at me in a similar way to what Fraser was doing. Suddenly, he seemed to make up his mind. He pulled me up, and half-dragged me out the door. "You can't take him," protested Fraser, "... he's a sick man."

But we were gone before he could translate the protest into any sort of action.

He dragged me up to the auxiliary computer room and locked us both in. "Casterville," he said to me with asperity, "I don't know what sort of game you're playing, but it's not funny. It's getting bloody hard to fend off both MacPherson and Messer where you're concerned. They're both as suspicious as a scorpion of you..."

"Ford," I began to protest, but he wouldn't let me get a word in.

". . . and all I want to know at the moment is, what were you trying to tell me about Grey and Carlin?"

"What?!" I shook my head at him. "You're off your rocker, Ford I haven't said a word to you about Carlin. Why should I?"

"You said, or rather implied, you had proof they were alive," Ford challenged.

"What?!?" I demanded. "You've got a couple of screws loose, boy. You ought to see Jackson about having your head read."

Ford simply stared at me. Then he sat me down. He was quiet for a long, long moment, simply staring. Then he asked, exceedingly softly, as if he had enormous suspicions about me, "What's the access code on the disc?" He pointed to the drive.

"What disc?" I asked, innocently.

"Oh, . . ." spat Ford, swearing violently, and sat down with a thump on the desk. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"There's nothing wrong with my memory," I asserted strongly. "If you think I've up and done a Straker, I've news for you. I don't get headaches, and I never touch aspirin. So there!"

"Let's be sure," said Ford. "Turn out your pockets..."

I looked at him as if he was some sort of bizarre insect, but complied for the sake of peace. "See," I said triumphantly at last, "all I've got is a pen, 10 new pence and a scrap of toilet paper . . ." which I proceeded to crumple into a tiny ball to throw into the wastepaper

basket.

"Give that to me," said Keith, who I thank forever for being one of the most alert, sharp-eyed eagles I've ever known. "It's got something written on it."

He read it, handed it to me, and while I was perusing its contents in disbelief, he typed 'Go to Maverick' into the computer. Then he punched in 'Enigma', and was confronted with 'The Conscience of the King'. He was braver than I was for immediately he typed in 'He should go straight to the enemy king to try and negotiate peace.' It was obviously the right punt, for up came 'Why?'

"WHY?" asked Ford. "WHY!?! What sort of programme is this? 'Why?' doesn't have a standard answer! How can this thing possibly understand what reason I give it?"

But Keith's problems were not mine. I had no emotional feel or empathy with his dilemma - all I wanted to know is how the impossible had occurred. I had a scrap of paper in my own, my very own handwriting and I didn't remember writing it - and although the paper gave me a reason why I couldn't remember writing it, it was too incredible, too fantastic to believe. Surely, I must be able to remember. I mustn't be trying hard enough - no, maybe there was nothing to remember - maybe the letter was a plot to make me trust Ford, since the contents were too absurd for words. What disc was it raving about? Grey and Carlin were dead, so how could they be at a new Skydiver dock in Australia? And the business of the aunties going to help them was the most mind-bogglingly stupid of all. I could have believed my own theory but for the fact I recognised my own writing and didn't remember writing it.

"Why?" Ford was pouting at the screen. He shook his head.

"What's going on round here?" I asked him abruptly.

"Tell me the last thing you remember," said Ford, turning to face me, and looking concerned. I got the strange feeling in that moment that we had indeed become close friends over the last few weeks - and it was true that my memory was faulty.

"I think I arrived back from Skydiver dock In New York with MacPherson in tow yesterday..." I offered.

"Seven weeks ago..." corrected Ford softly. I said nothing as he brought me up to date with all the events from his point of view. "You mean," I said at the end of his recital, "we've got an alien agent in our midst and we're doing nothing?"

"One. We don't know for sure Messer's working for the aliens," said Ford, "though why he's been lying in his teeth is hard to figure. And two. We'd never convince MacPherson that Messer is a traitor. . ."

"What lies?" I queried.

"Two that I know of for certain," said Keith. "You won't remember this now, but you stayed awol for a few days, and when you got back you told MacPherson that you'd been down to Surrey to see the Commander's ex-wife. MacPherson knew it was a lie and challenged you, saying that she left England two years ago - which is the truth as far as he would know." He paused. "But there is a truth so secret no one knows It - no one but Colonel Freeman and myself. Not even the Commander knows." He was breathing heavily as if reluctant to reveal a dark secret. "It's something Freeman decided had to be hidden forever, and kept from the Commander. His wife was killed in an alien attack - they were obviously going to use her as some sort of bait, but the plan didn't work." He stared at me. "But Colonel Messer told MacPherson that she had arrived back in England a few weeks back. He covered your lie, with something that he didn't know I knew was impossible." It wasn't impossible, of course - now that we know the truth about what happened to the Commander's wife - but at the time, we

didn't fully appreciate that the Commander was just like the little girl with the curl right In the middle of her forehead. When he was good, he was very, very good, but when he was bad, he was devious.

"The other lie," continued Keith, "was also, interestingly enough, to cover another of your lies. You told MacPherson and Henderson that you thought Straker had gone to Woomera. Said he'd done research there in his youth. Henderson knew it was a lie..."

"I don't seem to have mastered the knack, do I?" I asked.

"Well, if you haven't, Messer has," responded Keith. "He straight out said you hadn't lied, you'd got confused between Straker and Freeman. He took an incredible risk, because Freeman's never been to Woomera, either! But he was convincing, since he offered to show them the proof in Freeman's file. . ."

I frowned at Keith. "Sure Freeman's never been to Woomera?" I asked.

"Absolutely. .. checked it myself," he said.

I hit the desk, drumming repeatedly with my fist. "We've got to stop Messer," I said. "He must have something planned. Look at it objectively - he can't stop what the Commander's doing - he must have some reason to be here. Here in HQ."

Keith gestured to the Conscience of the King. "We've got to crack this," he said.

"Go quiz Jackson," I said.

"And get myself amnesia-ed?" asked Keith.

"So ransack his files instead," I muttered. "Jackson must have some file on the Commander he didn't give MacPherson. He'd have to - he knows the truth of what's going on - well, at least some of it, and he couldn't risk someone tumbling onto something in the file. So there's got to be another one. .. or at least an extraction from this one..."

Keith took off, pausing only long enough to flip me a crumpled copy of the Commander's letter to Colonel Freeman out of the inside pocket of his jacket. I was about to head after him when a thought struck me "Go to Enigma," I typed on the computer. The Conscience of the King came up, and I typed, "He should return to his son with the herbs." Up shot 'Why?' Yes, as I suspected, the answer doesn't matter - the reason does. And what would a pragmatist like the Commander give as the right reason? Was there a reason? Oh, yes, there were reasons of state, reasons of politics, reasons of morals, reasons too hard to articulate. I had a sudden awesome insight - the Conscience of the King was the Commander's own dilemma, a personal dilemma. And he had personal reasons that I would never divine. And what did all these reasons, Impossible to determine, have in common? One word. All the reasons would start with 'Because'. I typed it in. And it didn't work. I sat staring at it, not believing that it didn't work. I must have stared at it for fully fifteen minutes before I realised that I had not given a reason to the Commander - strange how I came to think that I was in personal dialogue with the Commander at that moment - I'd just been clever. Then my subtle mistake became obvious to me - the most pragmatic of reasons is not 'Because' but 'Because.'. Because with the full stop. Because in the final analysis you'll never know whether you've done the right thing this side of heaven. I punched in the full stop, and the screen, as usual went blank - but this time for nearly a full minute. Then...

CLASSIFIED DATA: Project Cloudeye

Project Director: Col. John Grey

Assistant Director: Lt Peter Carlin

Project Site: Nullarbor Plain, South Australia, AUSTRALIA

Estimated Cost of Project: \$1.3 billion

Date of Commencement: 27/5/76

Estimated Completion Date: 27/5/86

Good grief! My sainted great-aunties! Two days!

Authorised by: Cmdr. Edward Straker

Theoretical Base Follows:

A screenful of equations followed, beginning with Einstein's General Theory. It was all pretty routine, nothing I hadn't expected, until I realised the peculiar twist the equations were taking. I sat there in shock a moment, unable to press the PageDown button. Not in my wildest dreams did I imagine what I knew, knew for a certainty, was coming up.

"I don't believe this," I said, and said out loud. "It can't be done. Not the spindizzy!" But there, large as life were the equations, the crazy damnfool impossible equations. Then came the structural designs, screens and screens of them. They were prototypes to be sure, but they were staggeringly impressive. There were blueprints for a Dirac stabilizer, and test results on all the plant designs. The Commander, I thought to myself, is either a megalomaniac genius or a megalomaniac maniac. To have even conceived this project in the first place was . . . lunacy. The more I stared at the designs and realised what was going to be launched in two days or less, the more stunned I was by the sheer raving brilliance of it. If they could get this thing off the ground! It'd be . . . it'd be the beginning of the end for the aliens, surely. This wasn't a quantum leap in the technology - this was like trying for the long jump in seven-league boots! If it came off. .

There was a pounding at the door. I hurried to open it, and was, still stunned by the impact of what I'd seen on the screen, too slow to prevent Colonel Messer pushing past me. "Get this thing off-line," he said urgently. "Isolate the system ... hurry!"

I stared at him stupidly.

And he, catching sight of the screen, and understanding its import at once, halted, open-mouthed. "Impossible!" he breathed. "no one is working on this sort of technology! There's no research into it anywhere!"

Then he shook his head, and started ripping the connections from the drive to the computer. I didn't hesitate, but took a step towards him, raising my arm high for a disabling blow. He turned to me, with a withering look and said, "I am not your enemy, Casterville. Surely that much has been evident to you! Help me disable this system..."

"Not on your life..." I began.

"Casterville. . ." said Messer, "in no more than a minute, I expect that every computer in every SHADO installation will go on the blink. Do you know what that will mean?"

Horror. That's what it meant. Total incapacitation.

"I can see by your face that you do," said Messer. "If we isolate this computer from the network, we might have a chance of stopping MacPherson..."

"MacPherson?" I asked, not quite in disbelief.

"What was MacPherson," corrected Messer. "What or who he is ... or it is . . . now. . . I do not believe is human any longer. The attack on Woomera will begin instantly... perhaps has already begun...!"

I believed him. I dived for the plug and wrenched it out from the wall, and then for good disconnected every piece of cording I could find. "Take out the radio link," ordered Messer.

"We can't," I said to him fearfully. "We've got to leave something for Cloudeye to latch

the interface hooks into. . ."

"Explain," snapped Messer crisply.

"I can't," I answered him. "I don't remember what they are. . ."

"If you ever knew. . ." said Keith's voice. He came in, grim and long faced. "Jackson apologises. He gave me this. . ." and the lieutenant handed me the paper I'd left on the aunties' kitchen table. "... he went over to see if you'd left something incriminating in the flat, and was astonished to realise you'd been in contact with the Commander."

Messer stared at the paper. "We must stop whatever MacPherson has planned," he said, "or obviously all is lost." He stared at Ford. "We have seconds to spare," he continued. "If you were to instruct Moonbase to launch all interceptors and all Skydivers to launch, would they check for authorisation?"

Keith thought for a second. "I might be able to bluff them with a Raven coding. . ."

"Do it," said Messer. "We must find out what an interface hook is from Colonel Freeman," and he pulled me out the doorway towards medical. Keith was already running in the opposite direction. We were dashing up the corridor, when suddenly Messer braked to a halt. "You go interrogate Freeman," he instructed, "I might be able to buy Ford some time, if I can delay MacPherson."

"How do you know what MacPherson intends?" I challenged, grabbing the Colonel by the sleeve. Caution was better late than never. After all, not five minutes ago, I was sure this guy was an alien agent - and to think of it, I had precious little proof to the contrary.

"There is a certain logic in what he has done," responded Messer urgently. "Colonel Freeman was certainly arrested to curtail his contact with the Commander. Colonel Lake was subsequently arrested, and you were given an impossible task to complete. Karl Neuhaus was sent to Moonbase on astronaut's duty. All of the computer experts in SHADO are therefore out of the way. Therefore, the plan is computer-based. It has to come off today because MacPherson's agent, whoever he or she is, has lost track of the Commander, and therefore, the aliens can't afford to take the risk that an attack will be made against them. . ."

"An attack?" I began. "I'm sure Cloudeye isn't. . ."

"I don't think the aliens have any real clue what is going on - but by some of MacPherson's remarks about why Straker went from defensive to offensive leads me to believe that the aliens consider he was finally planning an attack. I don't think they were pleased with the prospect. . ." Messer looked round rapidly.

"I've got to go. . ." he said, and he was off. And my questions about how he knew MacPherson's plans were imminent died on my lips.

I tore into medical, yelling at Jackson, "Quick, what's an interface hook?" I nearly ran slap bang into MacPherson, who was staring at me as if I'd taken leave of my senses. I skidded in a circle and scooted out the door again. Either Messer was mistaken about the general, or I'd just been sold the biggest pup in history and Messer was probably back in the auxiliary computer room, destroying everything. I broke all land speed records getting back there, though the fastest way was straight through the control room. I got there just as every computer in SHADO decided to pack it in and take a protracted rest. Everything went on the blink simultaneously - at least everything that was computer-controlled. And there was precious little that wasn't, let me assure you. It was chaos. Only Messer seemed calm. He was standing next Ford asking, "Did Moonbase launch?"

"I think they got them out," Keith replied. "Maybe Sky One, as well. But only maybe."

Messer looked gaunt. "Let's hope it's enough."

"Sky Two and Four may be able to achieve manual launch," said Keith. Paul Foster's voice came through clearly from Moonbase on the emergency communication channel, "This is Moonbase. We have lost all computer function. This is an emergency..."

"Have you launched the interceptors?" Ford queried.

There was the usual few seconds' delay before the response travelled back from the moon. "Negative, we cannot get the doors open..."

Even today, I don't like to recall the looks on the faces of my colleagues in the control room at that moment. The sort of look that comes when you know you're going to die, nothing you can do will prevent it, and you've only scant minutes to make peace with your maker. "Instructions, please, HQ," Foster requested.

Messer leant forward and spoke directly into the mike. "Stay off this frequency, Moonbase. They're not coming for you..."

"This is Space Intruder Detector. Thirty nine UFOs bearing area Blue 12." It was SID's metallic voice and it nearly knocked Messer over.

"SID is still operational!" he exclaimed, halt-shocked, half-excited. "Then whatever is blocking the computers is not one thing - it is multiple!" He turned to Ford. "Get back to Moonbase and Skydiver and instruct them to search everywhere for something blocking the computer systems." He whirled round, gesturing furiously to every person in the room. "Go on, search here, too! There's got to be something here as well!" he shouted.

I made a dive towards the bank of computers nearest the exit, only to come chest-to-barrel with a Colt 45. "You're under arrest, Casterville!" snapped MacPherson. "Make one move and you're a dead man!"

Messer switched from rampaging executive to sweet subservience in less time than it takes to click your fingers. "Yes, of course!" he breathed, nodding his head. "Casterville! The one man who has access to every computer system in SHADO! Pity you weren't able to doctor SID as well!" He moved up towards the General. If you watched his eyes, which Keith was doing, you would have been aware of his intentions. I ducked at the critical moment, as Messer leaped at MacPherson and knocked him back. But not out. MacPherson was solid, and not much of him was flab, whereas Messer was as lean as a candle and compared to the General weighed about the same as a powder puff. The gun went off, I was splattered by blood spraying from one of the two antagonists. Keith and Guido managed to restrain MacPherson briefly before a couple of burly security fellows came charging in from the lift entrance and collared him. Messer's shoulder was a disaster area - he was losing blood like it was going off the market, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Get back to your post," he ordered Ford sharply, "and get those messages out..."

"Sir," nodded Keith, respectfully. The same kind and quality of respect that he only gave to one other person: the Commander.

"You're too late," smiled MacPherson. You know the sort of smile: the sort of smile villains give at the end of T.V. shows when they're explaining their motives, the sort of smile that looks artificial and contrived and you never really believe that a true villain would wear. Well, you're wrong. MacPherson was wearing it at that hateful moment.

"No," whispers Messer, smiling too. He was having trouble because he was in such obvious pain. "We're not too late. You're off on a wild goose chase. Straker's not at Woomera..."

"This is Space Intruder Detector. UFO's entering area green 16. Intercept co-ordinates available. Please acknowledge. Repeat, this is Space Intruder Detector..."

The General looked up at the voice, and smiled even more broadly. "Do you think that we relied on him being there? He may not be at Woomera, but he is in Australia... somewhere..."

It took me a couple of seconds to realise the enormity of what the statement implied. Messer seemed to shrink suddenly, his pale face becoming a grey pasty shade. "It will only take one UFO to penetrate Earth's defences. Only one . . . and then . . ." A vision of the whole of the sub-continent of Australia suddenly vaporising shocked me into instant action.

I shot to Keith's station and flicked on the transmission signal. "SHADO to Sky Three. SHADO to Sky Three. Come In, Sky Three. Come in, Sky Three. This is an emergency. . ." Just about the whole of the room was looking at me as if I'd not only taken leave of my senses but whatever small degree of sanity I must have had left. "Respond, Carlin," I pleaded. "Please respond. This is an emergency..."

"Sky Three here," came Carlin's welcome voice. You could feel the ripple of stunned amazement go round the control room. "State your emergency."

"You must launch Cloudeye," I bellowed at him. "We have total computer shutdown, and there are approximately 40 UFO's heading directly for you..."

"Unable to comply, SHADO," returned Carlin. "We are not ready to launch. You must intercept intruders. . ."

"We have negative intercept capability," I slammed back, cutting into his reply, "repeat, we have total computer shutdown.. . you must launch Cloudeye. You must launch Cloudeye now."

"Not possible, SHADO," replied Carlin. How could I get him to understand? "Send Sky One, Two and Four to my location. We will deal with intruders."

"Carlin," I half-shouted, "they've got a capability of destroying the whole of Australia - they're not going make any mistakes about getting you - you must launch Cloudeye...!"

"Not poss. . ." began Carlin's patient voice, but a new voice cut in over the top of his. "Casterville I need those interface hooks, and I need them now." Never has such an impossible demand been so joyfully received. The second everyone recognised the Commander's brisk tones, faces cleared, shoulder's straightened, the atmosphere went from despair to thrilled relief.

"Sir, I wouldn't know what an interface hook was if I fell over it," I said to him.

"Run the last code," he instructed. "Straight into the system.. ."

MacPherson gave a wintry laugh behind me. "You could save yourselves if you had an operating system. . ." His laugh became sinister. "But all SHADO systems are now linked into an unbreakable circuit. Nothing can get in or out." I stared at him, and Messer suddenly burst into delighted hysterical laughter - punctuated by raucous coughing.

"If nothing can get in or out," said Messer haltingly, "an isolated portion of the system could be put back on-line without fear..."

Ford and I made it to the auxiliary computer room so fast our feet burned rubber. I've never connected anything back together so fast either before or since. 'Run Because.' I typed into the system, and nothing seemed to happen. Nothing. The screen remained blank, which I suppose was hopeful, because 'find Because.' didn't appear. But there was no indication that anything else was occurring.

Keith and I dashed back to the control room in time to hear Foster's voice say, "We have regained computer control. Ed . . . the UFO's have passed any possible intercept point. . ." He sounded simultaneously relieved and upset - as if he should have been more fully informed of what was going on.

The Commander was speaking again. "I'm going to boil you in oil, Casterville," he said. "I need that Alaskan reference point..."

"Ed . . ." I was staggered to hear Aunt Print's voice in the background. "We have a Moonbase referent coming in now..."

"UFO's twelve minutes from trajectory terminus," came Foster's voice again. Whether he was on relay from SID, or whether Moonbase was trying to make up for their dereliction of task was unsure. What was sure was that without three reference points, the launch was just about impossible. "New York referent in," intoned Aunt Print.

"Alright, everyone," came the Commander's decisive tones, "strap yourselves in. We're going to launch manual . . ." There was an eloquent silence at this point, before the Commander's voice came back with "Let's hope to God I can drive something other than a desk . . ." Another pause. "Keep your eye on the fourth Dirac stabilizer, John. I'm going to have to hold it steady and try to compensate for the lack of Alaskan alignment.. ." A few heavy grunts. ". . . should be no rougher than a Channel crossing. . . here . . .we. . ." and whatever came after that was drowned in a blast of white noise so fierce that virtually every radio and television station on Earth was hard put to keep on the air. Afterwards, the official scientific community's explanation was unusually strong sunspot activity - but quite a few of the brain-boy knew better than that. But, if they suspected the truth, it never came out in print anywhere. Ten tense minutes went by. You've got no idea what it's like to stand in silence with fifteen other people for ten minutes straining to hear a lessening in the static, the only movement being a few blinks and someone's occasional drumming on a panel. Jackson appeared with Ginny and Colonel Freeman in tow, and the doctor pretty darkly at us for not helping Messer down to sickbay. Messer wouldn't go, however. He had stopped bleeding like a stuck pig, and nothing was going to shift him.

"What's going on?" asked Ginny as the static began to subside.

Lt. Ling, who was standing next to her, said, "Aliens are scrambling everything with this static. . ."

I looked around, seeing the common misapprehension was shared by just about everyone. I'd forgotten, of course, with my inside knowledge, that the only reasonable explanation for this burst of white noise was alien interference. But Keith was ahead of me. "It's not the aliens," he said, and before he could make any further explanation, I heard dear old Aunt Hobbit's voice say, "Cloudeye calling SHADO control. Launch successful - holding firm at 100,000 feet. Robert, we are slightly vulnerable at the moment. Where are the little beggars?"

"They should be coming right down on top of you," I responded uneasily. "They know exactly where you are . . ."

"No." Messer stumbled forward. "They cannot possibly know exactly where you are," he said into the mike. "They should come down straight over Woomera, and since I do not believe they anticipate the nature of Cloudeye, they will not realise that the static broadcast has given away your position. They should see the static as an attempt to confuse them as to your location. . ." Messer was hoarse and coughing now.

"Who is that?" asked the Commander's voice.

"Colonel Erwin Messer," responded the Colonel with a touch of Germanic pride. I think if he'd been capable of clicking his heels, he would have.

"Are you advising a turkey shoot?" asked the Commander.

"I would not presume to advise," coughed Messer. "I have no idea of Cloudeye's weaponry."

"Laser Turrets," I informed him.

"Laser Turrets?" asked Ginny, trying to come to grips with the not-quite-comprehensible. I didn't blame her for being sceptical - the reality of Cloudeye was not something you'd have imagined in your psychedelic dreams.

"Besides more conventional ballistic weapons," offered Colonel Freeman drily. "Simply bristling with everything we could manage to pick up in the bargain basement catalogue. . ." The Colonel was thinner but very relaxed, as he sat down at Ford's station and said into the mike in a laid-back tone, "I told you I wasn't really needed to run this place, Ed." He looked up over his shoulder and grinned at me. "These guys have everything under control."

"Glad to have you have you back, Alec." There was warmth and sincerity in the Commander's tone. "I'll call you as soon as we've finished at the shooting gallery," and he signed off temporarily.

He was back on air less than an hour later, and by that time, Sky One and Two had rendezvoused with Three and they were busily mopping up the bits that were left over after Cloudeye had caught the aliens surprise. One of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen was the long-shot from Sky One's cameras as it approached Cloudeye for the first time. The sun was high behind it, limning its platforms with ribbons of etched gold, and the silvery aluminium body was condor-sleek. It seemed to be effortlessly airborne although a close examination revealed a northern tilt. I think the thing that it reminded me most of was an elegant water-skater - you know, the spindly insect that skims across a pond using surface tension to hold it up. Well, Cloudeye, (later renamed 'Cloudbase', of course) was a cross between my water-skater and a huge condor - and though that sounds awkward, that was the last thing it was. It was, and is, the last word in anti-gravity technology.

General Henderson arrived within the hour, and did not delay in venting his fury on the Commander. The abuse that Straker copped must have made the great-aunties cover their ears with shock. "You are going to be busted so low, Straker," Henderson finished savagely, "that we'll need a telescope to find you. . ."

The sight of the Commander's serene and unperturbed face was creating miracles in section morale everywhere from HO to Moonbase. Perhaps the screen amplified his smile for I certainly don't remember seeing such a transparently happy look from him before that. "Any chance of being busted right out of SHADO?" he asked complacently. "I rather fancy being given a shot of the amnesia drug and building myself a new career in the anti-gravity field. Ought to be some great openings, I think, for someone with a background in it like myself."

Henderson's comment on this made even me blush. Pulling no punches with what he thought of Straker's behaviour, was the General.

But Straker didn't get busted out of SHADO, of course. He got a medal for what he'd done, which was the last thing that he was expecting. But then it's not every day someone designs a new base, decides the only place to site it for maximum effectiveness is the top of a cloudbank, and doesn't even blink at the impossibility, but sets out to invent anti-gravity just as a side-line. Necessity, said the Commander, is the mother of invention. And this, he continued, is SHADO's equivalent of the boy with his finger in the dike. We were plugging the gap where we usually lost the UFO's - between Skydiver rendezvous and interceptor contact. It had to be an anti-gravity device, of course, because it had to be sub-orbital: if it was any higher, it wouldn't be an overlap with both Skydiver and the interceptors. So, it had to stay above the stratosphere, hanging there elegantly just the way a brick doesn't.

When it all came out, it seemed that it was a scheme that the Commander had initiated

way back in the mid-seventies, but had shelved, because of the anti-gravity problem: a problem he eventually decided to look at closely himself. And, after dabbling around at the theory, he realised that there might be a practical possibility of really making anti-gravity work. And, like the Utronic equipment, he'd sub-let the research out to a firm, but in the light of the alien attack on the Utronic plant, he'd keep the anti-gravity project so top secret that only Colonel Freeman knew of it. Apart from the scientists who were working on it, of course. The time came, eventually, when SHADO's special needs required someone to work hand in glove with the research scientists - and who better than the Commander? It had been his baby from the start. But he realised that the aliens would be watching his every move: he had to convince them that, if he left SHADO to work on something else, it was absolutely harmless. Hence, the amnesia scenario. It had been Jackson's careful plan, and had been put into operation as soon as the final details were required by the research team and when Carlin and Grey had finished the basic structure of the Cloudeye platform at the building plant In Whyalla. The Commander protested long and long that he hadn't been the one to invent anti-gravity - he'd only been the impetus for some very able scientists to check on the feasibility of some very radical ideas - but his protests fell on deaf ears. Genius will out, sooner or later, and we knew that the old buzzard had been hiding his light under a bushel. As for the reprimand he felt he had coming, well, when the whole of SHADO threatens to go on strike if the IAC doesn't keep its disciplinary measure to itself you'd be guessing right if you suspected that no action was taken.

What happened to MacPherson? Well, to be honest, I don't know. I was never interested enough to find out. Erwin Messer, of course, insisted on going through SHADO's rigorous selection process. There was never any doubt, in spite of the fact that he flunked the physical entirely due to an uncooperative shoulder, that he'd be accepted. He became the seventh Commander of Moonbase, and I don't remember anyone who was more devoted to the Commander than he was. Excluding, of course, the great-aunties. But then they had an excuse. They had been romantic idealists from way, way back.

Epilogue

Planning a surprise is never easy. But the magnitude of the surprise Paul and I planned, and the fact that nearly a thousand people were in on it, was making me a little bit uneasy and queasy. I'd spent a couple of months after getting back from re-inserting the Alaskan interface hooks canvassing the idea quietly amongst the relevant people. I never got less than total support for the scheme. But in spite of that, getting all the principals in the action to the right place at the right time was almost a nightmare. The amount of cunning I used to manipulate Jackson (who after all, is a professional when it comes to both using and spotting manipulation) had even me admiring my own skill.

It was Academy Awards night. And by the time Marlee Matlin had got the Oscar for her role in 'Children of a Lesser God', I was just about frantic. Paul, whose task it was to get the Commander there on time, still hadn't arrived.

The upper lounge was packed with studio people, wining and dining in style while watching the Awards direct from the States via satellite. I'm afraid I've always sneakily despised actors and actresses since that time: it seemed to me that they ought to have had some inkling that a studio which had a satellite receiver on the roof was not all it appeared to be, but no one, as far as I know, ever said a thing. Anyway, there we were, watching the final moments of the proceedings half-way across the world on the twenty foot screen, when finally, thankfully, Paul arrived. And with the Commander next to him.

Paul winked at me, and nodded his head ever so slightly to indicate that the Commander didn't suspect a thing. Well, why should he? SHADO personnel are chosen for their ability to keep their mouths shut.

The satellite transmission was over, and before any hubbub of talk could begin, I leaped up onto the stage and announced loudly, "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen - one and all! The awards are not yet over!"

Keith flourished the huge white envelope he'd been hiding under his chair, and handed it to me. I ripped it open dramatically and handed the torn remains to Aunt Hobbit who was seated with Aunt Print at their front row table. They had my camera ready. ". . . and the nominees for best supporting actor are..." I paused and suddenly a spotlight came on, unerringly discovering Jackson's location. "Doug Jackson," I continued straight faced, "for his role as the helpful psychiatrist who administers watered-down truth serum, and," I paused again, as the spotlight claimed another victim. "Alec Freeman for his role as the Colonel with laryngitis..." I gestured Paul over, and he took the card I offered him. His eyebrows flexed as he pretended to read the result of the vote. "It seems to me that we have a tie. . ." he announced in a plummy voice, and he gestured the doctor and his fellow-Colonel forward. For some unknown reason, both awardees suddenly were overtaken by a paralysis of shyness, and had to be pushed and almost dragged to the centre-stage.

Paul cleared his throat, put on his best serious face, and intoned, "Gentlemen, your awards." He presented both of them with a gold-plated syringe mounted on a wooden block. "I'm over . . . overwhelmed," said Freeman dubiously at last, while cameras clicked blindingly. (I told you the best part of a thousand people had been canvassed on these awards!) There was thunderous applause from the SHADO personnel, and up the back, though the Colonel didn't know it, his awards were recorded for posterity by Ginny's video camera. (Actually, she was really making it for Carlin and his cohorts who, being out on a tour of duty or on shift, couldn't be here for the glorious moment.)

"I'm whelmed," said Jackson to equally thunderous applause. There was a moment of silence then, a moment of pure waiting. No one quite dared turn - yet. Though they all knew. Paul put a blank expression on his face as he turned to smile at the Commander. I tried to do the same, but I frankly admit that just a slight trace of malice on both our faces gave us away. The Commander, who had been smiling in enjoyment at his co-conspirators' discomfort as they received their awards, suddenly realised his danger. It would have taken a very stupid man not to recognise the expression on Foster's and my faces, and the Commander, as you know, is not especially stupid.

Without turning, he took two quick steps back - straight into the waiting arms of security. They took great delight in escorting him onto the stage. It seems they were simultaneously stricken by a profound malady, which rendered them both completely deaf and exceedingly compassionate. They could not only not hear the Commander's explicit orders, but could not be constrained to be less than solicitous about his welfare: going so far as to decide that his health would be endangered if he was not carried bodily onto the platform. SHADO just about reduced itself to helpless and abandoned hilarity at this point: you remember the old adage about anticipation being better than the actual event - well it's wrong. I was killing myself laughing so much that I could hardly hold onto the award I was supposed to present. "Well," announced Paul when the din had become just an undercurrent of chuckles. He was trying to keep a straight face, which was darn near-impossible with the Commander glaring daggers at him. If looks could kill, we have both been carved into very small pieces. "It was simply no contest at all when the nominee for best actor came up . . ." He gave the Commander a cheesy grin the room erupted. What the real actors and actresses, produces and directors in the room thought of these antics, I've never been able to discover.

The cameras of SHADO personnel were flashing all over the place. For years after, the pin-up of the Commander in Louis Giles' beefy arms being presented with the solid gold syringe by Colonel Foster was found everywhere from Alaska to the Nullarbor Plain. And after SHADO was disbanded and everything came out in the mid-nineties, it was the ubiquitous photograph every magazine published.

Foster cleared his throat for action once more. "For his truly brilliant performance as the amnesiac Chief Cloudeye..." Paul finally stared at the ground, trying to get his face under control. "...a stunning portrayal of the art of deception of both friend and foe alike . . . a truly convincing example of the craft of acting . . . yes, the vote was completely unanimous. . ." Paul finally gave up trying to be serious and burst into uncontrolled laughter. "Would you like to say something, Chief?" he managed at last.

It's hard to be dignified when you're being carried like a baby, but the Commander still managed. When finally a small degree of silence was restored, he said, very seriously and soberly, "There's really only one thing I can say - thank you all for your unstinting support." We all knew what he really meant.

The applause was deafening for fully five minutes. And that's no exaggeration, because I timed it later. Aunt Hobbit and Aunt Print thought the whole celebration such a delight that they went out and bought a video recorded the very next day, just so they could watch Ginny's video whenever the mood struck them. There's only one thing I regret. The tape ran out just before the Commander finally managed to extricate himself from the burly arms of security, whereupon he lunges with his award towards Foster and challenges, "This is it, Sooty! Syringes at five paces!" and Sooty, very wisely, turned tail and fled.