

# Memories

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*Author's notes. This story is set just after the events in the episode **TimeLash**.*

*For those familiar with the UFO novelization **Primary Target** it takes place between chapters 11 and 12.*

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It was the middle of the afternoon when Miss Scott put the call through to Lieutenant General James Henderson, USAF, retired, chairman of the International Astrophysical Commission.

"General Henderson?" The voice on the other end said. "This is Doctor Frazer, Mister Straker's physician. Would you mind coming over to Mayland Hospital as soon as possible? We need authorization for his treatment."

"What kind of treatment?" Henderson asked, heart sinking. Ed Straker hadn't seemed in that bad of condition when Henderson left SHADO headquarters a few hours earlier. Straker had been weak from exhaustion, confused, even frightened. But, he had recognized Henderson and Paul Foster standing there in the medical center room, Henderson was sure of that. And Doctor Jackson had given them every reason to believe Straker would be fine, despite what the aliens had done, twisting time out of shape.

"What happened?"

"Mister Straker has gone into respiratory failure," Frazer said. "We have him on life support, but we need authorization for anything more aggressive."

"What's his condition?"

"Critical."

"Do what you need to, doctor," Henderson told him. "I'll be over to sign the paperwork as soon as I can get there."

"Thank you, General," Frazer said and the connection was broken.

Henderson thumbed the intercom switch on his desk: "Miss Scott, have my

car brought around front, please."

He sat back a moment, reflecting. So much news, good and bad had come to him over the years on the telephone. He sometimes wondered if Bell's invention was the boon everyone said it was.

\* \* \*

First Lieutenant James L. Henderson was heading out to the flight line, to look over his new assignment. It was one of the twelve bright, shiny Boeing Y1B-17's that belonged to the 2nd Bombardment group at Langley Field. Henderson was pleased that he'd successfully checked out as a navigator for the big birds. He was already a trained fighter pilot, but the big birds were something else, four engines, a ten-man crew. A ship with wings.

His plane gleamed silver in the snow.

The door to the control building opened and a khaki uniformed man stepped out into the snow. "Jimmy, there's a telephone call for you," Lt. Colonel Robert Olds called out. "Boston."

Jim hurried into the building, wondering who would be calling him from Boston. Not family. Amanda's sister lived in Paris. His own parents and sister lived in West Virginia.

He picked up the receiver.

A crackly voice came over the phone line. "Jimmy, are you there? It's me, Barry. Barry Straker."

"Barry? What's going on?" Jim asked. He checked his watch. It was two in the afternoon.

"I have a son," Barry crowed. Jim could hear his delight even over the bad connection.

"Congratulations. How's Charlie?" He hadn't known Charlotte, Barry's wife, was even pregnant.

"She's fine, just tired, that's all. It's been a long haul. The doc's weren't sure she'd carry to term after that last miscarriage. But, he's beautiful. Six pounds, two ounces and all fighter."

"What are you going to name him?"

"Ed," Barry said. "Actually Johannen Edward, after my grand-dad. I want you to do me a favor, though."

"Name it," Jim said.

"You and Mandy come up to Boston Sunday after next?"

"Why?"

"For his christening. I want you and Mandy to be his godparents."

"Barry, Mandy and I aren't Catholic," Jim reminded his best friend.

"So? Jimmy, you're the closest thing to an uncle this kid's gonna have. Charlie and I would really appreciate it if you'd say yes."

"Barry, you know I can't promise to be there, but I think Edward Straker's just got himself godparents."

\* \* \*

Henderson suddenly felt every one of his seventy-two years. He got up from his desk and walked into the outer office where Miss Scott sat.

"Miss Scott, cancel all my appointments for today, will you?"

"Yes, sir," Miss Scott said. "May I ask why?"

"Commander Straker is in critical condition at Mayland Hospital," Henderson said. "That's where I'll be."

"Yes, sir."

\* \* \*

Frazer was waiting in the main hospital lobby when Henderson got there.

"I have the paperwork right here, sir," Frazer began. "If you don't mind." The British physician's expression was solemn.

Henderson took the clipboard with its papers and skimmed through them. It was an authorization to override a written request to avoid overwhelming medical intervention. Straker's signature was on the original request. It was dated two years ago.

Henderson signed the order overriding Straker's wishes.

"You'll want his family's permission as well," Henderson pointed out.

"Yes, sir. We haven't been able to get in touch with his sister yet," Frazer said. "Your signature will keep the hospital happy until we do."

"Has there been any change?"

Frazer's expression became grim. "Yes, sir. He's gone into convulsions and his kidneys have shut down completely."

"What are his chances?"

"Survival? We can keep him alive on total life support until we get an order to pull the plug or he gets a massive infection beyond our control," Frazer said.

"His chances of coming out of this intact?"

"Impossible to say," Frazer admitted. "He could come out of it today, tomorrow, a week from now and be perfectly fine. He could die this afternoon despite our best efforts."

"You're saying anything's possible," Henderson observed.

Frazer nodded. "One thing I do know, sir. The longer he remains unconscious, the less likely a total recovery becomes. Doctor Jackson is upstairs with him now, if you'd like to go up. Room 723."

The room number puzzled Henderson for a moment, then he remembered. "That's right, Mayland doesn't have a proper intensive care unit. They didn't think they'd need one."

"The ICU and CCU are part of the new construction for the regional trauma center," Frazer said.

Henderson recalled seeing the construction going on as he drove in. It looked like it was going to double the size of the hospital. There were plans for a heliport on the roof. Right now the emergency copters had to land in the north parking lot.

Frazer led the way to the main elevator lobby, up to the seventh floor, to Straker's room.

Jackson was already there, waiting.

"Ah, General, thank you for coming," the Hungarian-born physician said.

"Frazer's filled me in on what's been happening," Henderson said. "I want to know what went wrong."

Jackson shook his head. "I don't know. It could be an idiosyncratic reaction, or a reaction to the combination of drugs I gave him on top of the X-50. It could be the result of something the other side did that the commander didn't recognize and so couldn't tell us. I simply don't know. All we can really do now is keep him alive in hope that he will recover naturally."

Henderson stepped closer to the hospital bed. Straker was pale. His eyes were half open but un-focused, unseeing. Beside the bed, a respirator hissed and clicked. A tube went from it, and an oxygen tank, to a fitting on Straker's throat. His chest rose and fell in time with the machine.

On the far side of the bed, an artificial kidney machine whirred. Tubes snaked from it to disappear beneath a pale green thermal blanket. The blanket did nothing to disguise the refrigeration blanket under it.

A large sign on the wall above the bed read: NO SMOKING. Another, smaller sign read: 'My name is Ed Straker. I can hear you.'

"Can he hear us?" Henderson wondered.

"Possibly," Jackson said. "It has been documented that some deeply comatose patients have been able to remember conversations that took place in their presence although they were unable to respond in any way. So, it is possible he is aware of us on some level."

Several plastic bags hung on a pole by the rack of electronic monitors. One bag was feeding a white fluid into a tube that was threaded through one nostril. Other bags fed other tubes that dripped colorless liquids into veins in both of Straker's arms. A drug pump was pumping measured doses of something into yet

another vein.

Henderson placed the back of his hand against Straker's cheek. It was hot, burning with fever. Henderson gave Jackson a questioning look.

"We haven't been able to get his temperature below a hundred and four," Jackson explained. "Without the ice blanket, his temperature would run wild, burn out his brain."

A nurse came in with a medicine cart.

"Time for meds," she announced brightly. She pulled the bed curtain around for privacy, chattering inanities to her unconscious patient as she worked.

Jackson smiled and shook his head. After a moment, the curtain opened.

"That wasn't so bad, now, was it?" she said, breaking the syringe and tossing it into the special receptacle on her cart. She blew out of the room as quickly as she came.

"Should we have waited?" Henderson asked as soon as she was gone.

"I don't know," Jackson admitted. "I don't know what went wrong."

There was a movement from the bed, an almost convulsive jerk. An alarm went off on the equipment rack. Jackson ran over to check it out. The EKG monitor showed the irregular spikes of ventricular fibrillation. Jackson hit another alarm. It sounded at the nurse's station only twenty feet down the corridor. Within a minute, a medical team ran into the room with a crash cart.

Jackson took Henderson's arm and accompanied him into the corridor outside.

"What's happening?" Frazer asked, running up to them.

"He's gone into fibrillation again," Jackson said. "I don't know why. There was no indication."

"None at all?"

"A nurse came in with medication a few minutes ago," Henderson reminded Jackson. "What was it?"

"Prophylactic antibiotics, probably," Frazer said. "It's standard procedure to prevent a hospital borne infection."

"Straker's allergic to antibiotics," Henderson said. "Penicillin and streptomycin."

"Bloody hell, there was no notation in his records concerning allergies. Nothing!" Frazer nearly ran into the hospital room.

Henderson could hear bits of a hurried conversation, medical orders for drugs, the distinctive whine thump of a defibrillator. After a long moment: "We have sinus rhythm."

Frazer came out of the room, followed by the emergency team leader, a tall

bearded man. His identification tag said his name was Weinstein. "I recommend we go ahead with the temporary pace maker. The catheter lab people haven't left yet."

Frazer looked over at Henderson. His forehead was furrowed with worry. "I've just spoken with Mister Straker's sister. She said she wouldn't authorize extraordinary measures. She wanted us to abide by his wishes in the matter and his wishes did not include being placed on total life support for any reason."

"Have you tried his father?" Henderson asked.

"I don't have an address or a phone number for him and Mrs. Garrine wouldn't give me one," Frazer said.

"Security has it somewhere, but I can get hold of him," Henderson said. His forehead furrowed with thought. "If Straker were suffering from, say, a drug overdose, what would you do?"

"I'd go ahead with the procedure," Frazer answered. "It's an accepted part of that treatment."

"Then go ahead, doctor," Henderson said. "I'll authorize it. Give him a chance."

\* \* \*

Another phone call. This time his office was at Paterson Air Force Base, Colorado. He was in charge of one of the top secret early warning radar systems.

"Henderson," he answered the phone on the second ring, putting aside the report he'd been reading on causes of erroneous readings on multi-frequency systems.

"Jim, it's Barry," the voice on the phone said. Henderson was surprised to hear from him. As often happens, they'd lost touch with each other over the years, except for Christmas cards. Barry had retired a few years before, moved to California to be near his grandkids, Barbara's kids. Ed hadn't bothered finding a wife yet.

"I wanted you to know before you caught it on the grape vine," Barry said. He sounded drunk. "Ed's plane went down near Da Nang. He's missing in action."

"Barry, I'm so sorry," Jim said. He didn't know what else to say.

The other man didn't seem to hear. "His wingman reported seeing two good chutes, but when the rescue team got there, there was no sign of them."

"Barry, there's still a good chance he'll make it out okay," Jim said. "Ed's a fighter. If there's a chance to survive, he will."

"I hope so, Jim," Barry said. "I'll let you know if I hear anything else."

"Thanks, Barry," Jim said. The line went dead. He picked up the report to

finish reading it. The report covered such things as temperature inversions, birds, ground reflections. It didn't mention one major reason for such readings - extraterrestrials. He was close to having incontrovertible proof that Earth was being invaded. Most of his Air Force colleagues were convinced, even though they wouldn't admit it publicly.

He dropped the report back on his desk. He wasn't interested in anomalous radar readings right now. President Johnson had just ordered attacks on North Vietnam stepped up, had ordered more ground troops into combat. Privately, Henderson didn't think it would do much good, but he hadn't made it to lieutenant general by bucking the system too hard.

That was for younger men. Men like...

He stopped, realizing where he was going with that line of thought. Men like Ed Straker, young, bright and maybe just a little foolish for thinking they could change the world, or more to the point, thinking the world wanted to be changed. But, Barry's little boy, his godson, was missing in a place where Americans didn't often get out alive.

"Dear God," he found himself praying to a deity he wasn't sure he believed in any more. "Give him a chance."

\* \* \*

"It won't take too long," Frazer told Henderson. "The staff here is very good."

Henderson didn't say anything. He was tired. He was too old for this sort of thing.

Frazer was still talking about the procedure, about catheters and electrodes and tests. Henderson wasn't really listening.

"Dear God, give him a chance," he repeated silently.

\* \* \*

"Jim, they found him," Barry said over the phone this time. It was almost a year to the day from the call telling him Ed was missing. "He's in the hospital at Clark, but they're pretty sure he'll be okay."

"That's great, Barry," Jim said. "When's he coming home?"

"They tell me they'll be transferring him to the States in a week or so. He was hurt getting out, so maybe a couple weeks more to recuperate."

"That's still great," Jim said. Barry sounded more alive than he had in ages. The past year with his only son declared MIA, probably dead, had hurt his friend in ways Jim couldn't begin to imagine.

Barry'd had a near fatal heart attack only a week after his son's plane had gone down. The next attack would probably kill him. It was only a matter of

time. It was almost a certainty that Barry wouldn't live to see a grandson carrying the family name. Barry had never said it, had never pushed his son into finding a wife, but the worry was there.

Henderson's boys were grown men with wives and sons of their own. The Henderson name was secure for the future. His only disappointment with his own sons was none of the three chose to make a career out of the Air Force. Christopher had put in two terms, but in the end, he couldn't handle the responsibility, the constant moving from base to base. He never even got his flight rating. He owned a McDonald's in Denver now and seemed happy with it.

"Jim," Barry said. "I have a favor to ask."

"Name it."

"When I talked to Ed, he wasn't sounding right," Barry said. "I know he and I haven't gotten along as well as we probably should have. Hell, I don't think he's forgiven me for sending him away to school after Charlie died. But, could you talk to him?"

"Sure, Barry," Jim said. "I'll do better than that. I'm flying to Clark on business this week. I'll stop in and see him."

"Thanks, Jim." They talked a little more, simple, catching up things. Then, Barry rang off. Jim knew the call was going to cost his friend a small fortune, something Barry could ill afford on retirement pay.

Jim sat back and thought for a while. Then he reached for the phone and started making phone calls of his own.

\* \* \*

Clark Air Force Base, Philippines, had grown a lot since his previous visit. He finished his business quickly, setting up a report system for bizarre observations. 'Flying saucer' wasn't a phrase he used much. The ones he was after weren't saucers at all, more like cups with a poisonous opinion of humanity.

His staff called the reports he wanted x-files. Their private joke on the subject. X-files were one step away from O-files, circular files.

He amused himself on the way to the hospital speculating on a future movie or maybe even a television series about investigators into bizarre and unknown phenomena. X-files wouldn't be a half bad name. It covered a lot of ground.

The hospital at Clark was as modern as any stateside facility. An orderly at the reception desk directed Jim to Major Straker's room. A huskily built young man in a RAF uniform was leaving the room as Jim rounded the corner. His uniform indicated he was a wing commander and a pilot. The young man snapped off a quick salute before heading toward the elevators.

"Hello, kid," Jim said, entering the hospital room. He'd been briefed by one

of the attending physicians, so wasn't really surprised at what he saw.

Ed looked like a death camp survivor, and from the reports Jim had read, maybe that wasn't such a bad description. Then, after everything he'd already been through, a V.C. sniper shot him. The bullet had shattered his shoulder while a second slug went through his back. He was lucky to be alive.

"General Henderson," the young man said. He struggled to sit straighter in the hospital bed but the heavy shoulder cast wouldn't let him.

"Relax, Ed," Jim said with a smile. "You know, there was a time you called me Uncle Jim."

Ed didn't reply, but he did stop struggling and settled back onto the pillows.

"You look like hell," Jim commented. He grabbed a chair and moved it closer to the bed. "Your dad called me a couple days ago, asked me to check on you. He's worried."

Ed didn't comment.

"So. How are you doing?" Henderson asked.

"I'm not sure, sir," Ed said. "The docs won't tell me if I'll ever fly again. They won't even tell me if they'll let me stay in the service. I don't know what I'll do." He looked so incredibly lost and forlorn it hurt.

Henderson's heart ached for his best friend's son. The boy had been through so much in his life. Henderson had to remind himself that Ed was long past being a boy. Still, the boy image remained. Ed Straker was a fine boned, blue eyed blond, like his mother had been.

"There's always something," Henderson said. "There are lots of corporations out there just begging for people with your training, your brains. You could write your own ticket."

"I don't want a nine to five at some corporation looking out after the bottom line."

"What do you want?"

"I don't know, now," Ed responded. He fell silent for a long moment, expression solemn, a little worried. Henderson waited.

Finally, the young man spoke. "I want to be part of people leaving the Earth to live on the Moon, on Mars, going out into space. I want to be there when we finally shake hands with people who aren't from this planet at all."

"What if those people aren't our friends?" Jim asked.

Ed studied him. Henderson knew he was wondering if the question was a joke. It wasn't. After a moment, Ed seemed to realize that.

"Then I want to find out why."

"How badly do you want to stay in the service, to see people on the Moon?"

Jim asked.

"I don't know what I can do. NASA won't have me now," Ed replied, not answering the question.

There was a thick book lying near the edge of the bed. Ed shifted to get more comfortable, and the book slid closer to the edge. Henderson grabbed it before it fell.

"Winston Spencer Churchill," Henderson read off the spine. He handed the book back.

"It's a gift from a friend," Ed explained.

"Interesting man, Churchill," Henderson commented. "Smoked the most vile cigars you can imagine. Succeeded against incredible odds. You could learn a lot by studying him."

"That's pretty much what Alec said when he gave it to me. There's more than one way to skin a cat."

"Alec's the RAF fellow I saw leaving?"

Ed nodded. "He was my wingman when Mike and I went down. He's with British air intelligence."

Henderson didn't bother to ask how a British air intelligence officer got be flying wing on a USAF bombing mission. "I asked you how badly you wanted to stay in the service," Henderson reminded him gently.

"I want to stay."

"Badly enough to fight for it? Badly enough to work your ass off for it?"

That caught Ed's attention and a glimmer of a smile crept into his eyes. "Who do you want me to kill, sir?"

Henderson leaned closer. "There's a space at the War College with your name on it, if you want it."

"But class has already started," Ed said.

Henderson grinned at him.

Ed stared at him a long moment. "I'd better get to work then, hadn't I? What's the catch?"

Henderson just kept grinning at him.

\* \* \*

It was nearly an hour before Weinstein and Frazer brought Straker back to his room. Frazer looked even more glum than he had before, if that was possible.

"What went wrong?" Jackson asked.

Frazer stopped, allowing the orderlies to trundle the stretcher into the room beyond.

"The procedure went fine, but he's still throwing premature ventricular

contractions. The drugs and the pacemaker haven't been able to control them."

"What else?"

"He went into convulsions again," Frazer said. "I've increased the amobarbital dosage. Maybe that will help. I did a quick neuro check in the lab. What few reflexes he has are extremely weak."

"Pupillary response?" Jackson asked.

"Very slow," Frazer said. "Corneal reflex is almost non-existent. We've taped his eyelids closed to protect his eyes."

"Central nervous system depression could be a result of the drugs we're using to control the convulsions and the fever," Jackson suggested.

"Possibly," Frazer said. "But whatever the cause, he's not very stable."

"He's getting worse?" Henderson asked, afraid of the answer.

Frazer nodded. "Assuming he survives the night, I have him scheduled for an MRI and a CAT scan in the morning. Maybe they'll show us something we've missed."

"Assuming he survives the night," Henderson repeated, checking his watch. It was five in the afternoon. "There's a good chance he won't survive the night?"

"He's in critical condition, General. We've done everything we know how. We don't like to admit when it's out of our hands. But it is."

"Does Mayland have a chaplain on duty?"

"Yes, the hospital has an arrangement with the local churches," Frazer said. "I believe Father William from Saint Thomas' is on duty today. Why?"

"Would you have him come up here, please Doctor?"

\* \* \*

Henderson was surprised to meet Father William. He was a younger man than Henderson had expected, short and round, wearing an old-fashioned black cassock and purple stole. He had wire rim glasses perched on his nose and held a carry case in his left hand.

"The peace of the Lord be with you," he said as he entered the hospital room.

"And also with you," Jackson said, completing ceremonial welcome. Henderson gave him a curious look.

The Hungarian smiled. "One never forgets the instructions of childhood," he murmured in explanation.

Father William took a moment to open his case and set out his tools - a white linen to cover the bed table, a crucifix, two candles, a bottle of holy water, a second bottle of blessed oil, a couple of small white towels. He lit the candles.

"Sprinkle me, O Lord, with hyssop and I shall be purified; wash me, and I

shall be whiter than snow," Father William began the antiphon, sprinkling the room with the holy water. "Our help is in the name of the Lord."

"Who made heaven and earth," Jackson intoned the response. Henderson followed his lead.

"The Lord be with you."

"And with your spirit."

Father William began reading the prayers. He had a good voice and Henderson let the prayers wash over him. Henderson wasn't Catholic or Episcopal-Anglican. He wasn't even properly Trinitarian anymore. But, there was something immensely comforting in the old phrases, the time-honored prayers calling on angels and saints to protect them from evil. The down side of being agnostic, or even Unitarian, was there was no one to blame when things went wrong, no power to call on, no comfort in certain knowledge conferred by faith.

An errant thought flitted through his mind - Maybe SHADO needed a chaplain as well as psychiatrists on the staff. Someone to hear confessions and confer absolution, call on God's help and blessing. They certainly could use the assistance and it wasn't that far a reach from aliens to angels.

The priest continued his prayers and Henderson let his mind drift back to another ceremony in another church in another time.

\* \* \*

Another black robed priest, this one wearing a white surplice with a green stole. More prayers in front of an ancient stone font. "My dear brothers and sisters, let us ask our Lord Jesus Christ to look lovingly on this child who is to be baptized, on his parents and godparents, and on all the baptized."

"By the mystery of your death and resurrection, bathe this child in light, give him the new life of baptism and welcome him into your holy Church."

It was the third week of January and the old church was cold. Snow was falling again, painting Boston white. Jim Henderson and his wife followed the responses: "Lord hear our prayer."

Barry and Charlie had coached them that morning on what was expected. Henderson was hungry. He wasn't used to skipping breakfast before church. The cup of coffee Charlie had made wasn't near enough.

Four year-old Jamie and two-year-old Jeremy started fidgeting, poking at Barbara, Barry and Charlie's four and a half year old daughter. Six month old Christopher was fussing and soon would be bawling for his mother and feeding. It seemed his youngest was always hungry, like his brothers before him.

Charlie's mother, Anitra, quietly took charge of the four children and, by some miracle, got them to settle down, even Christopher.

The ceremony went on. "We anoint you with the oil of salvation in the name of Christ our Savior; may he strengthen you with his power, who lives and reigns forever and ever, amen," the priest intoned, marking the baby on the chest with olive oil. The baby began to fuss just a little. His hands were mottled blue from the cold.

The priest began to bless the water in the font.

Charlie rocked her lace robed son in her arms, crooning a wordless tune at him. Charlotte Phoebe Hillsboro Straker was a snow pale blonde with winter blue eyes. Her long hair was pulled into a coiled braid covered with a white lace veil. She looked like a princess of the Other world, consigned to earth by some mysterious magic. She looked too fragile to be real.

Barry put one arm around her. Pride glowed in his face - his beautiful wife, his son. Charlie smiled at him and her face lit up.

It was funny how things worked out, Jim thought. At West Point, he had dated Charlie Hillsboro while Barry, his roommate and best buddy, dated Mandy Maelen. Charlie was studying English literature. Mandy was training to be a nurse. Charlie ended up with Barry while Jim married Mandy.

Mandy had turned out to be the perfect military wife, resourceful, uncomplaining, steadfast. Two years in Texas, having their first child while her husband was in pilot school, three years living in Panama, having two sons there, hadn't dimmed Mandy's love of life. Watching Charlie, seeing the washed out look in her face, he wondered how she was faring as a military wife. Barry had been stationed in upstate New York the past three years. It wasn't exactly a hardship tour.

Thoyss, Barry's mother, stepped forward to murmur something to her son, adjusting the black veil pinned to her white hair. Barry nodded. Charlie's look was unreadable.

"Dear parents and godparents: You have come here to present this child for baptism. By Water and the Holy Spirit he is to receive the gift of new life from God, who is love," the priest said. Thoyss stepped back to stand with Anitra and her husband.

There was more, the renewal of their own baptismal vows, the threefold profession of faith, Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Barry beckoned Jim to come closer. Barry took the baby from his mother's arms and handed him to Jim.

"It is our custom for the godparents to hold the child," Thoyss said.

Jim marveled at how tiny he was. Christopher had weighed eight pounds when he was born. He was huge compared to this tiny thing in a white gown who was flailing his arms about in protest.

"Is it your will that Johannen Edward should be baptized in the faith of the Church, which we have all professed with you?" the priest asked.

"It is."

"Johannen Edward, I baptize you in the name of the Father," the priest said, pouring the cold water from the font over the baby's head. The baby screwed his face up in the beginnings of a squall.

"And of the Son," the priest went on with the second pouring, oblivious to the protest from the tiny recipient of his favor.

"And of the Holy Spirit." The third pouring. The squall was in full force with as much outrage as a ten-day-old could muster. The priest went on with yet another prayer and anointed the crown of the baby's head with balsam and oil. Thoys had a sheer white veil across her arm. She handed it to Charlie.

"Johannen Edward, you have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ," the priest said. "See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven."

Charlie placed the veil over her son's head. He wasn't happy about that part either, arching his back and kicking in protest as the white fabric covered his face.

"I told you he was a fighter," Barry murmured. Henderson looked over at him. The pride was obvious in his face, his voice. Baby Edward simply screamed.

At the priest's instruction, Barry went over to light a small white candle off of the larger Paschal candle beside the font. Thoys watched her son for a moment, then stepped closer to Henderson, still holding his protesting godson.

"James," she said very quietly, laying a worn hand on the baby's head. "I give charge of my grandson to you. Guard him well. He is my people's gift to yours. A warder for your world."

"What do you mean?" Henderson began to ask, but Thoys was already gone.

\* \* \*

Henderson couldn't recall the rest of the ceremony. He never got a chance to ask Thoys what she meant. She was dead three days later of a massive stroke.

"I'm sorry, Thoys, I didn't do a better job," Henderson murmured to himself. Jackson gave him a curious look. "Just remembering something," Henderson explained. The slender psychiatrist didn't look convinced.

Father William was nearly finished with the prayers and the scripture reading. Henderson recognized the story out of Matthew, about the centurion

with the sick boy. It was oddly appropriate, the mention of knowing how to use authority. It was something he and Straker both knew well.

Father William took the olive oil and went to the next section of the ceremony, the anointing of the patient's forehead and hands.

Jackson completed the appropriate responses. Henderson hadn't imagined the psychiatrist to be religious. It didn't fit the picture of the zealously competent and rational medical man. But, in another lifetime, a previous age, Jackson would have been an equally zealous and competent witch hunter.

"Hear this prayer for our suffering brother. You are his redeemer: strengthen his hope for salvation and in your kindness sustain him in body and soul. You live and reign for ever and ever," the priest read.

Again, Jackson completed the response. Father William began a familiar prayer, one even Henderson recognized. It wasn't quite the same words, a different translation than the one he learned on his mother's knee. But the Lord's Prayer was much the same, no matter what the translation.

The priest finished the prayer and the ceremony. He collected his tools and pronounced a final blessing before leaving for his next stop in his rounds of pastoral care.

"Do you think he knows?" Henderson asked when the door closed.

"I don't know," Jackson admitted. "Sometimes though, the prayers are more important to the living than to the dying. Who is Thoys?"

"Someone I met a long time ago. An old woman," Henderson said. "At least I thought she was old. She would have been about your age, I expect. I was pretty young at the time. I couldn't imagine being so old." The old man smiled. "It's funny how time affects your perceptions. I'm a good deal older now than she was when she died. The ceremony reminded me of her. She gave me a responsibility I don't think I've done very well with."

"And what was that?" Jackson wondered.

"To guard the warder," Henderson said. "That's what his name means, you know. A gracious gift from God, the prosperous warder. The defender given by God as a gift."

Jackson smiled. "Certainly a suitable name for one whose job it is to defend the Earth." Jackson stepped over to the bed to check his unconscious patient. There was no change. The monitor readouts still showed a high fever. The EKG beeped with its persistent rhythm, occasionally breaking the even pattern with extra chirps.

"Mister Freeman should be here this later this evening," Jackson said. "There's coffee at the nurses' station, if you choose to stay until he gets here. I

have to go back to my office, check on Miss Lake." Jackson started for the door.

"This isn't how it's supposed to be, you know," Henderson said.

Jackson stopped and looked back at him. "What do you mean?"

"He should be worrying about my funeral, not the other way around."

"Bad things happen, and the military has never been a very safe profession, General," Jackson said. "We are all volunteers, remember?"

"Not him," Henderson said. "We never gave him a chance to say no."

"There are always chances to say no," Jackson pointed out.

"Maybe for most people, even in our line of work, but not for him," Henderson said. "Who he is gave him no choices."

"Maybe that was his choice?" Jackson asked, walking out and closing the door behind him.

Henderson considered Jackson's remark as he settled into the chair beside the far window. Was who we are a choice, like what career to have, what clothes to wear? It was an interesting idea, and not the first time he'd heard it. He sat back and turned on the radio built into the shelf under the window. The six o'clock news came on.

Henderson realized it was dinner time and he was hungry. He had forgotten to call his wife to let her know where he was, what had happened. Luckily, she was used to him not showing up to dinner, even now when he was supposedly in a nine to five job. He picked up the phone from the table by the bed and called his home. His niece, Kate, answered the phone. He'd almost forgotten she had flown in from San Francisco yesterday for this morning's meeting, a meeting canceled because of Straker's sudden illness.

He briefed her on what was going on.

"Yes, Miss Ealand called me this morning, told me what happened," Kate said.

"Alec Freeman is flying in this evening," Henderson told her. "He'll be taking charge of the shop until we get a better idea of Ed's condition, determine how we're going to handle this."

"Alec won't do it," Kate warned him.

"Well, I figure that's my problem," Henderson said. "Tell your aunt I'll call as soon as I'm ready to leave. I'm going to wait for Freeman to show up. Oh, yes, I'll be calling a staff meeting tomorrow around one. I want you to be there."

"Yes, sir," Kate acknowledged before breaking the connection.

Henderson stood a moment, looking down at his former aide. Straker hadn't moved a single muscle.

The door opened and a small, dark haired nurse bustled in. "Oh, hello," she

greeted. "Doctor Jackson left a note saying he'd given a relative permission to stay. Are you Mister Straker senior?"

"My name's Henderson," the old man said. "Jim Henderson."

"An uncle then?" she asked.

Henderson wasn't sure what Jackson had intended him to say so he simply nodded his head. Uncle was as good an explanation as any.

The nurse went over to the hospital bed and inspected her charge. She clucked her tongue at the dark bruise on his cheek. "I'm Nurse Dunnigarth," she told Straker. "I'm one of the nurses on the team who will be taking care of you while you're here. Do you prefer to be called Ed or Edward?" She paused as if expecting an answer.

"He goes by Ed, usually," Henderson said.

Dunnigarth nodded and smiled as she straightened the bed covers. "Well Ed, what's a good looking fellow like you doing in a place like this?"

Henderson didn't bother to explain. Frazer or Jackson would come up with some sort of story that would satisfy SHADO's security requirements as well as keeping the regular Mayland staff happy.

Dunnigarth went on with her work and Henderson went back to the armchair to wait and watch and remember.

\* \* \*

Henderson sat in his office at Paterson and looked across his desk at his new aide, just arrived from Fort McNair. He watched as the younger man read through the briefing papers Henderson had handed him, his expression shifting from curiosity to appalled incredulity.

"This can't be real," Straker finally said, looking up from his reading.

"I wish it wasn't," Henderson said. "Granted, I still haven't got enough evidence to take the case to court, assuming we would ever want to."

"It's incredible, it's horrible," Straker said, placing the briefing papers on the desk. "Are we doing anything about it?"

"Have any suggestions?"

Straker sat back in the leather chair opposite the desk, a thoughtful frown on his face. "We don't have the detection systems, or the weapons, to do much damage to them."

"But we have shot at least one of them down, using conventional weapons," said Henderson. "The ship exploded. We weren't able to recover much and most of those pieces disintegrated before we could run tests. But, they aren't invincible."

"Still, with the present political climate, and all the 'flying saucers are our

friends' people, it'll be a hard sell to declare these 'people' to be enemies of Earth, no matter what atrocities they're committing. The latest first contact study shows that at least half the people in the US won't believe it, and of the half that do, half of them will be convinced anybody that technologically advanced must be morally advanced as well, War of the Worlds, notwithstanding."

Henderson sat back and let Straker go on.

"And then there's the groups who would insist it's all a communist plot, or a military-industrial conspiracy."

"My opposite in the Kremlin calls it an 'imperialist plot'," Henderson said with a smile.

Straker picked the papers off the desk and leafed through them again. "They seem to be interested in our nuclear and space research. And according to these sighting reports, assuming they're accurate, the aliens seem to have a knack for showing up just as the show's starting. That can only mean that they have some intelligence gathering capacity on Earth."

"Pretty good intelligence gathering capacity, considering how secret those installations and those particular tests, were," said Henderson.

"So, whatever we do against them will have to be outside normal military channels, and above top-secret. We'll have to have it buttoned up so tight nobody knows what we're doing about it, so they can't find out and stop us."

Henderson raised one eyebrow. In five minutes, after reading one heavily edited report, Straker had come to the same conclusions Henderson's staff had taken months to realize. Henderson had always known the boy was bright, but his respect had just gone up several notches.

"It'll have to be international, as well," Straker continued. "We can't simply defend the U.S. against them. They'll just move somewhere less well defended and create a stronghold to attack from. We have to keep them away from Earth altogether. The politics are going to be a nightmare."

"Interested in tackling it?" asked Henderson.

Straker sat back in his chair. "For the military to admit there's a possible problem is one thing," he said thoughtfully. "We'll need overwhelming evidence to convince the politicians." He looked over at Henderson. "When do I start, sir?"

Henderson grinned. "I've cleared my other assistant out of the office next door," he nodded to a door kitty-corner from the entrance. "Moved him across the corridor. I expect you'll want to get settled in, get familiar with the evidence we have. I want a preliminary action proposal put together by Friday."

"Yes, sir," Straker said, standing to leave. "By the way, I haven't met your

other assistant, yet. I assume he's handling the 'normal' air force things?"

"Early detection systems, research and implementation," Henderson said. "You know him, I think. Anthony Sprenger."

It may have been Henderson's imagination, but he thought the younger man's face actually went pale at the mention of Sprenger's name. "Is there a problem, Ed?"

"No, sir, no problem. Colonel Sprenger and I worked together once, that's all."

"You're sure there's nothing else?" Henderson's sources had already appraised him of the trouble Sprenger had caused for the younger man. However, there wasn't anything Henderson could do about it, really. He wasn't going to fire one of them, ruin a career, to make the other one happy. They were just going to have to learn to get along.

"Yes, sir. There won't be any problems from me," said Straker as he opened the side door to enter his new office.

\* \* \*

"No, sir. I don't see any problem," Sprenger told Henderson after being informed as to who was taking over the anti-alien section of the department. "I just wonder if it's a good fit. Straker has something of a reputation as being a little 'head-strong', not always a team player."

"Maybe I think that's what the job needs," Henderson pointed out.

"And if he steps out of line?"

"That is between him and me, understood?" Henderson said. "I'm not going to stand for anything in this department being made common knowledge, either on or off this base. That includes your opinion of him."

Sprenger just looked at him. It was hard to read the man's expression and impossible to read his black, pupil-less eyes. Henderson found him efficient and useful, but little more. He wasn't a very likable man. His performance reviews were good enough to keep him on the promotion track, but not the fast track, and his next rank advance would be his last - full Colonel. Sprenger would never make it to the general staff.

"You are aware, aren't you, sir, that Straker was involved in the death of an enlisted man at Vandenberg?" said Sprenger. His expression was bland, too bland, like he was enjoying spreading the false tale.

"I know you've told people he was, including staffers at NASA. I also know that the investigating officers cleared him completely. So, I suggest you keep your story to yourself, or else I will have to reconsider your employment here. I don't like slander, or people who think they can get ahead by using slander."

"Yes, sir," Sprenger said. His already thin lips had drawn to near invisibility. "Will that be all, General?"

"I think that covers it, Colonel," Henderson said.

\* \* \*

As predicted Sprenger never made it to the general staff, Henderson mused to himself as he sipped the cup of coffee Nurse Dunnigarth had been kind enough to get him. On the other hand, he thought to himself, everyone who knew Ed Straker had predicted he'd make his first star by the time he was thirty-five. That hadn't happened either, but not through any fault of his own, except, maybe, stubbornness and a dedication to duty, a dedication to Earth.

\* \* \*

"It's set," Henderson announced. "Peking, Moscow, Bonn, London, Paris, Rome."

"When do you leave, sir?" Straker asked.

"We leave in two days," Henderson said.

Straker managed to look surprised, as though he hadn't been expecting to be the one making the actual presentations, even though he'd done most, if not all, the work putting the proposal together. The crowning touch, what got the politicians to sit up and pay attention, was their newest evidence.

A Navy pilot, at home on leave, was taking pictures of his sister and fiancée, when they were attacked by creatures that didn't belong on Earth. The sister vanished without a trace, the fiancée's body was found with all its internal organs removed. The pilot, by some miracle, lived through the ordeal despite having been shot several times. Why the aliens hadn't taken his organs was a mystery.

But, the film in Peter Carlin's camera was the proof Henderson had been hoping, praying, for. The film was found undeveloped in the camera. It was guarded and observed during the entire transport and development process. Contamination or falsification was impossible.

The film showed more than they'd even dreamed of hoping. Photographs of a craft not built on this Earth. A U.F.O. belonging to an enemy of the people of Planet Earth.

The premiers of both China and the Soviet Union were impressed, more by the fact that two high ranking American Air Force officers were speaking to them in their own offices than by the evidence they were presented. The translators were more shocked by the evidence than either of the premiers. Henderson suspected both officials had been briefed by their own intelligence services and that both services had come to much the same conclusions he and

Straker had. They had just been waiting for someone else to admit that they too had seen something.

The meeting in Bonn followed much the same pattern, though the German President was a trifle miffed at not having been taken into the confidence of the U.S. President on the matter. He had been briefed by the Soviet Premier just prior to their arrival in Bonn, an unprecedented move on the part of the Russians.

"The Soviets are very anxious to make this go," Straker observed later, on the flight to London.

"There've been a lot of attacks in their territory," Henderson reminded the younger man. "I think they're relieved to find somebody willing to do something, even if it is the West."

Straker nodded and settled back in his seat. He shifted the courier-case chained to his wrist to get more comfortable. The chain was a formality, although the documents inside were classified as being above top-secret. No one would believe them even if they did fall into the wrong hands.

As the plane approached the landing field in England, Straker's expression became more worried.

"Problem?"

"Just tired, I guess, sir," Straker said. "I just can't help feeling this trip has gone a little too well."

\* \* \*

The plane landed as scheduled and they were met by Defense Minister Talbot, a security officer, driver and motorcycle escort. The Rolls sped down the country road, heading to Chequers and their meeting with the Prime Minister.

Talbot had been properly impressed by the evidence in Straker's case. But Straker had been strangely subdued during the ride, watching out the side window for something. Talbot hadn't noticed, but Henderson had.

Then, the sky exploded, taking the Rolls Royce with it. Henderson remembered a sickening sensation of falling, feeling heat and pain and hearing screams, then nothing.

He woke in a hospital, in a room not unlike this one. "What happened?" he managed to croak.

"The other side," a familiar voice said - Straker's voice. Henderson managed to open his eyes to see his assistant sitting beside the bed. "Talbot's dead. In fact, we're the only survivors."

"The meeting?"

"Rescheduled to next Friday, after Talbot's funeral."

Henderson tried to move and discovered he couldn't. His left leg was in traction and his left hip hurt like hell.

"You'll have to handle it, Ed."

"Understood, sir. I'll do my best."

\* \* \*

'I'll do my best' Such simple words, but Straker had always done his best, the best anyone could have done.

Henderson had known that whoever made the presentation to the United Nations Security Council special committee would be appointed commander in chief of the anti-alien organization. He hadn't been surprised to be proven right when they appointed Ed Straker to head SHADO.

Henderson admitted to himself that he'd been disappointed when Straker stopped asking for his input on various matters concerning SHADO. And, as unpleasant as the realization was, he hadn't been as helpful as he could have been when Straker had problems.

Was he jealous that the younger man had made SHADO work, had gotten the battle against the aliens shifted more in Earth's favor? Was that why he and Straker had stopped getting along? As ugly as it seemed, that was probably it. Hopefully, he would get a chance to make amends.

Straker still hadn't moved. There was no sign of that he ever intended to wake from this unnatural sleep.

"Dear God, give him a chance." No answer, but the old man hadn't expected one. God wasn't in the habit of answering prayers in ways mere mortals could understand.

Henderson went out to refill his coffee at the nurses' station and spotted Alec Freeman coming out of the elevator. The Australian SHADO officer looked exhausted. The old general waited a moment before going back to the room.

"Hello, Freeman. As you've probably guessed, this has been one hell of a day."