



Time Storm

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Part 1

Tamara Paulson frowned at the tracings on her radar screen. Commander Straker noticed and stepped over to her station.

"Something wrong, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, sir," she said, brushing a strand of blonde hair away from her face. "We're tracking that experimental stealth bomber out of RAF Alconbury, the one you wanted to keep an eye on?"

"Yes?"

"Well, I'm tracking it fine, but there seems to be a storm front approaching it."

"Storms aren't all that unusual, Lieutenant," Straker reminded her.

"This one is," Paulson said. "It's only showing up on one radar channel and then it's only on every other sweep."

"It's not a glitch in the system?"

"No, sir," Paulson said. "I asked Major Graham to look into it. It's external to us. Another weird thing about it, though. I can't get a satellite direct visual on it, but it shows up on the photos as a smudge."

"What do the computers think about it?" Straker asked. SHADO had one of the most sophisticated computer systems in the world.

"That's another weird thing, sir. The computers don't want to think about it. I keep getting back that our input is invalid."

"The computers don't like the storm?" Straker asked, half in jest.

She shook her head and gave a little shrug.

He sighed. SHADO's main computers had long ago outgrown his ability to understand them as a system. He could handle the programs that served his own network station, even do some minor trouble shooting. But, when the main system started acting up, it was time to call in the experts.

"Well, keep an eye on the storm and on the stealth, Lieutenant," Straker ordered. "Let me know if it looks like they might impact our operations."

"Yes, sir."

"Red alert, red alert. Have U.F.O. on positive track," Space Intruder Detector's synthesized voice announced. "Four-zero-three, One-three-two, Blue."

The operatives in SHADO's central command post knew the Moonbase interceptors were already on their way to search out and destroy the enemy craft. After a few moments, SID announced: "Destruct negative."

"It's through, Commander," Ford said.

"What's the projected termination?" Straker asked.

Ford checked a readout in front of him. "Grid reference Green 12-B, Southern England."

"Alert all ground stations and alert Sky-1 for intercept," Straker ordered.

Ford passed the instructions on. An alert siren sounded throughout the underground complex of SHADO headquarters.

After a few minutes, Ford reported: "Sky-1 has launched and is on an intercept course with the Ufo. IP in five minutes."

"Sir," Paulson called. "The Ufo is on an intercept course with the stealth."

"Get onto Alconbury and warn them," Straker ordered.

Paulson picked up the telephone receiver from her station and keyed in the combination

that would link SHADO operations to Alconbury Royal Air Force base's flight operations. After a few moments, she shook her head.

"Sir, I'm not getting through."

"What's wrong?" Straker demanded.

"There's just static on the line," she explained. "Maybe the storm has knocked out the phone system."

"Keep trying to get somebody over there, on radio if necessary," Straker ordered. He turned to Ford. "Tell Carlin to step on it. Warn him there's a Boeing B-3 in the area and it appears to be the target."

"Yes, sir," Ford acknowledged.

"Commander," Paulson said from her station. "That storm line is getting heavier. It almost looks like it's following the plane."

Straker went over to her station. The storm was a solid line across her screen. The stealth was a faint blip. It was making erratic course changes, as though it were being buffeted by the wind, or maybe it was trying to elude something. Beyond the storm line, the screen was clear. The U.F.O. appeared on the screen as it dropped into range. Suddenly, the alien began making erratic course changes as well. It increased speed.

"What's it doing?" Straker wondered aloud.

"The Ufo has increased speed to mach five," Lieutenant Johnson reported.

"That's crazy," Straker commented. "It can't possibly land at that speed."

As they watched, the U.F.O. pulled past the stealth. The radar image of the storm jumped and disappeared. The two aircraft vanished with it.

"They're gone," Johnson said.

"Nonsense," Straker said. "We must have an equipment problem."

Johnson ran a quick check on her console. "Negative, sir. The equipment checks out. They must have crashed."

The speaker at Ford's station sputtered on.

"Sky-one to SHADO control," Peter Carlin called. "Request fix and attack coordinates on the Ufo."

Straker hurried over to Ford's station. "Captain, we have reason to believe both the Ufo and the stealth went down very near you due to the weather."

"Weather, sir?" Carlin asked. "What weather?"

"We've been tracking heavy weather in that area," Straker said.

"Sir, you might want to check the weather radar system," Carlin suggested. "I have unlimited visibility. There's not even any wind."

"Thank you, Captain," Straker said. "Just the same, do a search pattern over the area in case they did go down."

"Yes, sir," Carlin acknowledged.

"What's wrong?" Colonel Virginia Lake asked. She was coming in for her midnight to eight duty shift.

"I want a check on all radar systems, especially the weather system, including the interface to the main computers," Straker ordered.

"What happened?" Lake asked.

"We just lost track of a Ufo and that new bomber out of Alconbury. The radar showed a severe storm front in the area," Straker explained.

"There was nothing on the radio about a storm," Lake said. "What does the weather

forecast say?"

"Clear, dry, with only minor winds for the next week," Straker said.

"Could it be an alien trick?" she asked.

"You tell me," Straker said as he stalked off to his office.

* * *

Within half an hour, Captain Carlin reported his findings. "No sign of the Ufo or the bomber. I recommend waiting till sunup before beginning another search. One odd thing though, the power's out for about a mile around Alconbury Air Base and I'm picking up some weird magnetic readings from the ground."

"Thank you, Captain," Straker acknowledged. He came out of his office and walked over to where Lake was talking to Major Louis Graham, SHADO's electronics master.

"Well?" Straker asked. Lake shook her head.

"The radar systems are functioning perfectly, and the main computers check out as well," Lake said.

"So, what happened?" Straker demanded.

"We have no idea, sir," Graham said.

"We have the most sophisticated tracking system in the world, and you have no idea what it was picking up?" Straker nearly sputtered in his disbelief.

"That's correct, sir," Graham said. "According to the radar, we were tracking an extremely dense air effect that resembled a storm front. The effect was at least a mile wide and was extremely ionized. It appears to have knocked out all the power and communications in the area." Graham paused.

"Go on," Straker urged.

"The effect has most of the earmarks of a powerful EM pulse," Graham said. "However, EM pulses have single point origination. They're one shot deals, associated with nuclear explosions."

"I know that, Major. I've worked with nukes," Straker said.

"Commander, there's no sign of an explosion, no excessive radiation, nothing," Lake said.

"So, we have an idea what it isn't," Straker translated. "But what is it, besides something the main computers didn't want to believe?"

"Sir, computers can only give output based on what has been inputted," Lake said.

"And the input makes no sense to the computers?" Straker asked.

Lake nodded.

"Commander, do you remember when the Nimitz disappeared two years ago last July?" Graham asked.

"Yes," Straker said slowly. "She was out of communication for about seventy-two hours. All the reports said a severe electrical storm blew out her communications. We looked into it on the possibility of alien interference. We didn't find any."

Graham nodded. "Very true, sir. We didn't find any evidence the aliens were involved. But, the crew's report to the Navy was pretty bizarre. And, the readings they were getting from their radar systems and computers were very similar to what we saw tonight. All evidence of an EM pulse, but no initiating nuclear event."

"So maybe it was the same thing?"

"Maybe, sir," Graham admitted.

"So, it's something we can deal with if it happens again," Straker insisted.

Graham shook his head. "Commander, my brother was stationed at Pearl two years ago.

When the Nimitz came back to port, there were some very weird rumors floating around about what had happened to her."

Straker sighed and waited for Graham to continue. After a moment, Graham went on.

"The biggest rumor, the one that had the Navy brass all upset, was that the storm had sent the Nimitz back in time and she brought back high altitude recon photos of Pearl Harbor from the day before the Japanese attack," Graham said.

"Nineteen-forty-one?" Straker asked.

Graham nodded.

"Is that possible?"

"Who knows?" Graham said. "All I'm saying, sir, is that if this is a similar phenomenon, and all the information we have suggests it may be, we may never find that U.F.O., or the bomber."

"If it is related, could the aliens be controlling it?" Lake asked.

"Anything's possible. But, considering the alien was heading away from the effect at better than mach five at ground level, I have my doubts, Colonel," Straker said.

"Commander," Paulson called. "I've finally gotten through to Alconbury. They lost all power and communications during the storm, just came back on line."

"What about their plane?" Straker asked.

Paulson relayed the question, then listened a moment. "They lost all contact with the plane during the black out. The last communication from the pilot was that they were trying to outrun the storm, but it was catching up with them." Her voice dropped. "At mach four."

Straker nodded. "Tell them a civilian plane went down in the same area. We'll coordinate our search with theirs."

"Yes, sir," Paulson said. She passed the information along, then hung up the phone.

Straker turned to Lake. "Tell Captain Aarons to get the mobiles ready to search at first light."

"And our cover?" she asked.

"The usual, the U.N. air safety unit suspects terrorists are involved in the incident," Straker said. "You never know when you might find a bomb."

Lake nodded acknowledgment of her instructions, then paused. "Commander, no natural atmospheric phenomenon can travel faster than sound."

"If Louie's right, then that storm wasn't exactly an atmospheric phenomenon, was it?" Straker reminded her. He looked around. Ford had stood SHADO operations down to a radar alert, in case the Ufo wasn't destroyed. Things were quiet once more. The storm was a mystery that could wait. He checked his watch. Nearly one in the morning.

"I think I'll head home," Straker said. "Call me if the Ufo shows up, or if that storm makes a return appearance."

* * *

Lieutenant Mark Bradley was waiting in the lobby of Harlington-Straker Studio's main office building, north of London. The offices served as one of the entrances to SHADO Headquarters, eighty feet below.

Straker stepped out of the executive offices.

"Good evening, Mark," Straker greeted the black Moonbase astronaut.

"Evening, sir," Bradley said.

"Isn't it a little late for you to be wandering around here?" Straker asked. The office building was normally locked up at eight. Even the cleaning crews had gone home.

"I finished my post mission tests a little late," Bradley explained in his softly accented voice. "I was waiting for Lew to swing by and pick me up, but something must have come up."

"Well, I can't have you wandering around the lobby all night," Straker said. "Why don't I run you home?"

"I wouldn't want to impose, sir," Bradley said.

"It's no bother," Straker assured him. "It's almost on the way."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it."

* * *

"You're on leave?" Straker asked as the bronze Euroford Omen pulled onto the A-1 northbound. There was surprisingly little traffic, even for this time of the morning.

"Actually, I'm supposed to be at the health research center at eight to start my two weeks of torture." Bradley laughed.

Straker chuckled. "When you get out there, remind Colonel Freeman that slaves have to be sold."

"Sir?"

Straker glanced at him and shook his head. "Never mind. It's a very old, and very bad, joke. Alec threatened to quit if I sent him out to the research center to recuperate from what the aliens did to him. That was a week ago and he's still fuming. Claims they're trying to kill him with health food."

"They're not, are they?" Bradley asked.

"The food's not that bad," Straker said. "They haven't lost a victim yet."

Bradley grinned. "I'm glad to hear that. By the way, how's Colonel Komack doing?"

"Fine," Straker answered. "She's in San Francisco for the week, getting John Gray settled into her old job. She's been trying to talk me into flying over for Thanksgiving, getting the families together."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic about the idea, sir," Bradley observed.

"I'm not," Straker admitted. "I've never liked that sort of thing, having to be nice to people you don't like just because you're related to them. I hate the holidays, especially."

"A lot of people get depressed around the holidays," Bradley pointed out.

"Oh, it's not that," Straker said. "I'm the black sheep of the family, always causing trouble. They don't approve. My father, especially."

"What about your mother?"

"She died a long time ago."

* * *

The storm reappeared on Paulson's radar scope - a heavy green line of ionization and water vapor.

"Colonel Lake," Paulson called. "It's back."

Lake peered at the screen. "You're sure it's the same?"

"It's moved ten degrees east, but it's the same type of signal," Paulson said.

"Location?" Lake asked.

"About twelve miles north of here, near the A-1," Paulson answered. "It's moving north."

"Keep me posted on its movements," Lake ordered. She picked up the telephone on the wall beside Paulson's station and punched in a combination.

* * *

The car phone buzzed and Straker picked it up. "Straker."

"Commander, the storm's back. Area G-3, heading north along the A-1," Lake said over

the phone. Straker glanced in the rear view mirror. A quarter of a mile back, the roadway was gone, replaced by a curtain of roiling black clouds lit up by phosphorescent green lightning. Wind began to whisper around the car. The silver crescent of the first-quarter moon vanished behind the clouds.

"We're right in front of it, Colonel," Straker told her. The wind grew louder and stronger. The Omen began to buck. Straker handed the receiver to Bradley. "Stay on the line," he ordered as he concentrated on keeping the car on the road.

The storm grew closer, the lightning brighter. There was something familiar about the color of the lightning, the eerie green. Something Straker couldn't put his finger on. He'd seen that color of light before, but he couldn't remember when or where.

The Omen began to buck harder, like a plane in heavy turbulence. It was all Straker could do to keep the car on the road. Rain began to slash onto the windshield, blurring everything.

The storm was on them. Gale force winds shoved at the car. There was a piercing wail as if the universe itself was crying out in agony. Straker hit the brakes and the car skidded onto the paved shoulder.

The sound drove through his ears, his brain. He covered his ears, but the keening wail was too knife-sharp, driving itself past his eyes. It was louder even than the thunder that rolled all around them.

Then, the bronze Omen fell up. A leaf caught in a dust devil; Dorothy's house in the Kansas tornado. The car groaned and twisted and fell back onto the pavement, bottoming on the shocks.

The knife sharp scream stopped. The thunder stopped. The lightning stopped. The slashing rain stopped.

The Omen was sitting sideways across the roadway. The headlights were still on, the engine still running. Straker pulled the car around to the gravel shoulder and stopped. The headlights picked out a road sign: Roswell, 37 miles.

"The phone's dead," Bradley said.

* * *

The phone in Lake's hand was dead. She glanced at Paulson's radar screen. It was clear. "Just like last time, sir," Paulson said.

Lake nodded and hung up the receiver. "Get Captain Carlin to overfly the area. See if he can locate the transponder in the commander's car."

"Yes, sir," Paulson said, keying in the code that would connect her station to Sky-One and Peter Carlin.

* * *

Bradley checked the communications console between the front seats. All the readings were normal. It made no sense that he couldn't contact SHADO headquarters, but when he tried, all he got was static.

He looked over at this commanding officer. Straker's knuckles were white as he clenched the steering wheel. He was staring at the road sign.

"Sir, are you all right?" Bradley asked, suddenly worried. Straker looked gray in the dim light from the dome lamp.

"Mark, what does that sign say?" Straker asked. His voice sounded strange, as though he were under tremendous strain.

"Roswell, 37 miles," Bradley read aloud. "Why, sir? What's wrong?" There was something odd about the sign, the way it looked, but the astronaut couldn't quite figure out

what it was. He didn't know of a town named Roswell anywhere in southern England, but he was away most of the time. Things changed so quickly, sometimes he couldn't keep up.

Suddenly, there was the familiar whirr of an alien ship. A golden, glowing U.F.O. careened past. It was so close to the ground, Bradley could almost see the ground effect of its anti-gravity plates.

Seconds later, a sonic boom cracked overhead. The dark, bat-wing shape of a B-3 bomber dove past. Its engines roared as it tried to gain altitude.

Straker put the Omen in gear and sped off after the plane.

"You don't think we're going to catch it, do you, sir?" Bradley asked in bewilderment.

Straker didn't take his eyes off the road. "Turn on the radio, will you?"

Bradley did so. The channel setting was for a London classical station on the FM band. The radio hissed with static. Bradley started tuning the radio, trying to get a signal. There was nothing.

"Try AM," Straker instructed. Bradley switched the setting and started tuning the receiver again. Finally, the radio picked up a scratchy signal.

"...as we end this stormy Fourth of July. Expect even hotter temperatures over the weekend," the announcer was saying. He had an American accent. "This is radio station KOB, Albuquerque, and at the tone it'll be eleven o'clock." The tone chimed.

"The Fourth of July? Albuquerque? I don't understand, sir," Bradley said.

Straker didn't answer. He slowed the car slightly, as if looking for something, a side road, a sign. He caught sight of something and turned the car off the main road, still following the path of the stealth. The U.F.O. had vanished.

The road was little more than a foot path. The Omen creaked and jolted, but Straker didn't slow down.

Bradley saw rocks and dry brush to either side of the car. That made no sense at all. Where, anywhere near London, could you drive for twenty miles along the dirt track lined with only brush and rocks? There were no lights, except for flashes of lightning to the south and the full moon, bright overhead. There were no houses anywhere, no signs of people.

Straker finally slowed the car and brought it to a stop a short distance from two other cars parked beside the dirt track. Straker sat for a long moment, staring at the two cars. The astronaut took a closer look at the cars in the headlights. They were old, but they looked like they were in perfect condition.

One was a 42 Buick. The other was a cherry red 47 Lincoln. Except for road film, it looked like it had just been driven off the showroom floor.

"It can't be," Straker muttered to himself. Suddenly, he backed the bronze Omen away from the two cars and turned it around. He pulled off the track short distance away, parking the Omen behind a large rocky outcropping.

"Sir, what's going on?" Bradley asked. "Where are we?"

Straker was rigid in the driver's seat. He shook his head, barely moving. After a moment, he moved his hands away from the steering wheel and Bradley saw that his hands were shaking.

Part 2

Jim Henderson was taking two weeks leave from his post as senior radar operations officer at the Alamogordo Army Air Force base. It was his first real vacation with his family since before the war.

Amanda, his wife, was taking time from her job at the base hospital and had agreed that he and their three sons could go camping provided she didn't have to go with them. She hated camping. Their compromise was a trip to Roswell for the long July Fourth weekend. Mandy would stay with her best friend, Charlie, and Charlie's fourteen year old daughter, Barbara.

He and Mandy packed their sons and all their camping gear into and onto their pretty, new, 47 Lincoln. The boys, Jamie, Jerry and Chris, were beside themselves with excitement.

Barry, Charlie's husband, was coming along on the week-long camp-out. He was bringing his own son, Eddie, with him. If nothing else, Henderson figured, it gave Mandy, and Charlie, a vacation they both deserved for putting up with Army Air Force pilots for so long.

He openly admitted that Mandy had put up with a lot over the past fourteen years of their marriage. Moving from airbase to airbase every two years - Texas, Panama, Phillippines, Seattle, New Mexico - the list seemed endless. Mandy had turned out to be the perfect Army wife, resourceful, resilient, steadfast. She never complained, except for the bugs in the base housing. She hated bugs in the house.

It was funny how things worked out, Henderson thought. At West Point, he had dated Charlie Hillsboro while Barry, his roommate and best buddy, dated Mandy Maelen. Both young ladies were attending college at the time.

Then, Barry and Charlie realized they were in love. They were married during June Week with all the pomp a West Point wedding mustered. Henderson was best man. Mandy was the maid of honor.

Jim Henderson and Amanda Maelen were married in August, after her studies were finished. Barry was best man this time. Charlie was the matron of honor. Barbara was born three months later, while Barry was in pilot training at Randolph, Texas.

The Army Air Force had taken the men on similar career paths. Both were bomber pilots. Barry flew in the Pacific Theater. Henderson flew in Europe. Now they were both in New Mexico, Barry at Roswell, with the 509th; Henderson at Alamogordo, overseeing the development and testing of the newest early warning radar systems. After all these years, they were still good friends. Henderson and his wife were Barbara and Eddie's godparents.

"Jim," Mandy called from the front porch of Barry and Charlie's house. "Maybe you'll find that missing balloon package while you're at it."

"General Sanders hopes so," Henderson said.

"Missing balloon?" Barry asked.

Henderson nodded. "We lost an experimental test package a week ago somewhere north of here. It's not a serious problem, but that, and all the odd radar readings around this area, has everybody in my group a little edgy," he explained. "We've had weird weather messing up radar, you name it. That Mount Rainier flying saucer flap last week hasn't helped any, either."

"So, you're on leave, and working, too?"

"What can I say?" Henderson joked. "I'm dedicated."

* * *

Barry had made arrangements for them to camp on one of the local sheep ranches. The boys could dig for Indian artifacts. There was even an archeological dig going on within a few

miles of their camp site. The boys could watch professionals at work.

The ranch was about thirty minutes north of Roswell. Their campsite was another thirty minutes cross-country, by a dry riverbed - an arroyo. They had to hike in the last quarter mile since the land was too rough to bring the cars in.

The first several days were uneventful. The boys found a place not too far from camp that surrendered Indian arrowheads and spear points. They got happily filthy digging in the dry earth, imitating the archeologists who were camping further up the arroyo.

Jerry and Chris were positive there was Indian treasure buried somewhere near. Jamie had been unable to convince his younger brothers otherwise.

Eddie, the youngest, and smallest, had given up on Indian treasure and was happily collecting rocks and hunting for lizards.

Barry watched the boy and shook his head. His son was, by far, the filthiest of the four. "Charlie is going to be furious when she sees his clothes."

"Barry, relax, you're on vacation," Henderson said. "Besides, a little dirt is good for them. Adds to the diet."

Barry finished his beer and opened another one. Henderson wondered what his friend expected of a nine-year-old. Barry's son was a bright, curious, normal little boy, with a normal affinity for dirt. But Henderson had noticed something old and wary in the way Eddie watched his father, especially if Barry'd been drinking. Barry had been doing a lot of drinking. Henderson found himself worrying about that. Alcohol had ruined a lot of good pilots. He hoped Barry wasn't one of them.

Jerry and Chris started arguing about something. The noise level grew when Jamie joined the fray, trying to stop the developing fight between his younger brothers. Within moments, the two younger boys had turned on him. Henderson and Barry had to rescue him from a sound pummeling.

Henderson sent the two younger boys back to their tent. Jamie was forced to sit with the grownups. Barry began to look around for his own son.

"Eddie, where are you?" Barry shouted. The boy was nowhere to be seen.

"Jamie, did you see which way Eddie went?" Henderson asked.

Jamie shook his head. "Last I saw him, he was looking for more rocks," the fourteen-year-old said.

"Go find him," Henderson ordered. "He can't have gone far."

Jamie nodded and started jogging toward the rocky outcroppings nearby.

Henderson started looking around for the boy as well. He didn't bother shouting since Eddie wasn't answering, whatever the cause. He heard a noise like falling gravel and headed toward it. He found the nine-year-old sitting on a pile of rocks, watching him.

"Eddie, what are you doing up there?" Henderson asked.

"I found some agates," the little boy answered.

"Come down here," Henderson ordered.

"You're not my father," Eddie replied. "I don't have to take orders from you."

"Are you always such a pain?" Henderson asked. He sat on one of the boulders, looking up at the blond boy perched high on the rocks.

"My dad says I am," the boy said. "He gets mad. He says I always get it all wrong."

"Do you get at all wrong?"

"No, but he doesn't notice unless I have it wrong. All he cares about is his planes and the Russians and his work."

"It's hard being little, isn't it?" Henderson asked. Eddie stared off into the distance.

"One of these days I won't be little," he said. There was something inhumanely cold in his young voice. "I'll be important, and he still won't notice."

"How do you plan to get important?" Henderson asked, trying to keep a straight face.

"I don't know, yet. But I will. Maybe I'll go to the Moon."

"You know, I bet you will," Henderson said.

Barry's shouts were coming closer.

"He's over here," Henderson called. Eddie's father came running.

"Didn't you hear us?" Barry demanded when he caught sight of his son.

Eddie didn't answer. Henderson watched the wariness come into his eyes. Barry grabbed his son's arm and pulled him off the rocks. The boy landed on his knees.

"Answer me, dammit!" Barry shouted, pulling Eddie to his feet. A pained look came into the boy's face, but Barry didn't seem to notice.

Eddie didn't answer.

Barry slapped him. The boy staggered but stayed standing. His jaws were clenched. His eyes were bright with unshed tears, but he refused to cry.

Barry was shaking with fury. "He was up there all the time, watching!"

"Barry, calm down," Henderson said. He turned to the boy. "Eddie, you and Jamie go keep an eye on Chris and Jerry."

Barry dropped his hand. The boy gave his father another wary look before he nodded and said, "Yes, sir." He followed Jamie back to the camp.

"I don't know what's wrong with him," Barry nearly shouted.

"You're over reacting. He was just having a little fun. If you're going to yell at somebody, yell at me."

Barry looked hard at him. "You wouldn't understand. Your three, they listen to you, they respect you. Not like my kid. He doesn't listen, he doesn't do what he's told. He doesn't even try."

"He's a little kid. Besides, my boys aren't perfect," Henderson assured his friend.

"When's the last time you were called away from the base because one of your kids set the school on fire with a rocket?" Barry asked. "That's all he wants to do, read his books and play with his radio and his rockets. Every time Charlie and I have a fight, he hides on the roof of the house. Charlie says he's 'sensitive'. A spoiled brat is more like it."

"Where did he get the rocket?" Henderson asked. Barry seemed surprised at the question, as though he had expected a different reaction.

"He built it out of some leftover fireworks we had at the house," Barry said. Henderson watched Eddie helping Jamie make arrowheads. His respect for his godson's intelligence had just gone up appreciably. None of his own boys had the brains, or the guts, to try building anything like a rocket from scratch. It's a wonder Eddie hadn't blown himself up.

"He's always in trouble at school. He's bored, disrupts the class, can't sit still," Barry continued. "He's bright enough. God knows he's bright. He reads stuff I'd have a hard time with, but he barely made it out of fourth grade. If he doesn't learn discipline, to think about what he's doing, think about the consequences of his actions, he's going to end up in prison, or worse."

"Barry, you're talking about a nine-year-old kid," Henderson chided. "It's a little early to be condemning him to a chain gang."

"Jim, you don't understand," Barry said. "Charlie and I are at our wit's end with him. The

kid's not normal."

"Einstein was considered retarded when he was in school," Henderson said with a grin. "He still can't balance his checkbook."

Barry just shook his head.

* * *

That night was punctuated with thunderstorms and aircraft crisscrossing the skies.

"They're not from Roswell," Barry observed. "I wonder where they're from."

"Well, Alamogordo and White Sands is over there," Henderson pointed to the south west. "Cannon, Kirtland, Nellis, they're not all that far."

"Well, somebody's awful busy, or awful worried."

"It certainly looks like it," Henderson agreed. "I don't think there were any test shots scheduled this weekend. I certainly wouldn't think so with this weather. I wonder what's going on."

"Well, we'll hear about it when we get back." Barry assured him.

They put the boys to bed about nine. Eddie couldn't, or wouldn't, sleep so he came over to the adults' tent to watch the storm as it approached.

"Worried about the storm?" Henderson asked.

"No," the boy said. "I like watching the lightning. It's pretty when it lights up the clouds." There was a flash of lightning followed after a few seconds by the deep rumble of thunder.

"You know how to tell how far away the lightning is, don't you?" Henderson asked.

The blond head nodded in the darkness. "You count how many seconds there are between the flash and the rumble. That's how many miles it is."

The storm was getting closer. The wind blew sharp gusts across the arroyo, ruffling the tent canvas. There was a blinding flash that wasn't exactly the same color as the lightning, followed by a crack of thunder that wasn't exactly thunder. There was the sound of air screaming over an airfoil and a dark half-circle shape fell out of the sky. It hit the ground in the dried riverbed, less than half a mile south of their camp.

There was another flash and roll of thunder as the fuel in the aircraft exploded into a bright fireball.

"What kind of plane was that?" Barry wondered. Henderson didn't answer. He hadn't recognized it as one of the test aircraft from White Sands or Alamogordo and he knew all the aircraft flying out of both places.

Barry looked over at Henderson, trying to read his face in the darkness. "Is it one of ours?"

"We need to get down there," Henderson said, without answering the question. He looked over at Barry. "Bring the rifles."

"Yes, sir."

"What happened?" Eddie demanded.

"We don't know," Barry told him. "I want you to stay right here while Jim and I go down to see if we can do anything."

"Why can't I come?"

"Eddie, do as you're told," Barry said. "I'll explain later."

"No, you won't," the boy said.

"Edward, I gave you an order," his father barked. Even in the darkness, Henderson could see the sullen expression on the boy's face. Eddie didn't like being given orders he didn't understand.

Henderson hoped the boy had enough sense to do as he was told. He wasn't worried about his own three. They were sound asleep and would probably stay that way till morning. Nothing short of a bomb directly beneath their sleeping bags would make them stir.

The two men grabbed the rifles and headed out to the crash site in the dark. Henderson held the lantern to light their way.

The wind had started again and whipped dirt in their faces. The storm finally broke, bringing with it slashes of rain.

A weird whine could be heard overhead, over the storm. It grew louder. A gold light appeared out of the clouds, growing brighter. It looked like one of the reported flying saucers, sort of. Instead of the saucer shape, it seemed to be rather like an inverted cup on a saucer. Henderson could make out a series of blobs or panels rotating along the bottom rim.

The golden object grew larger as it came closer, finally setting down on the ground about a hundred yards from the crashed plane. Henderson grabbed Barry's shirt sleeve, leading the other man to take cover behind some rocks. An opening appeared in the side of the object and two figures appeared.

They were human in size and shape, wearing full helmets connected with tubing to glossy red jump-suits. There were silver decorations on the suits, but Henderson couldn't see any fastenings, except for heavy metal seals at the wrists and the neck. The pair took no notice of the two men hiding in the rocks.

The two figures ignored the fuel that had spilled onto the hard ground and was still burning in spots. The flames inside the plane had died down.

The two red figures disappeared into the wreckage of the plane. They came out less than a minute later, dragging a burnt and disfigured body out of the wreckage. They repeated this action three more times, looking over each body as though it held some secret.

"What are they doing?" Barry asked.

"I don't know," Henderson admitted. He didn't recognize the golden craft, and if he didn't recognize it, it wasn't manufactured anywhere on planet Earth.

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know that, either."

As they watched, the two figures stopped their search and disappeared inside their craft once again. The door opening closed seamlessly.

The whine got louder and the craft lifted off the ground.

* * *

Straker and Bradley saw the flash of the explosion in the distance. "The fuel tanks of the bomber," Straker said.

"Do you think the aliens did it, sir?" Bradley asked.

"I don't know," Straker admitted. His hands had finally stopped shaking. He took a deep breath, as if trying to clear his mind. "Mark, there's a pistol and some night goggles in the glove box."

Bradley opened the little door and found the pistol and goggles inside. He pulled them out.

"Commander, you always carry night goggles?"

"They came with the car," Straker said. "At least, they did after the armorer got through with it."

"What else came with the car?" Bradley wondered aloud.

To answer, Straker hit a switch beneath the steering wheel and the trunk popped open. He

toggled the switch to open the car's gull wing doors and beckoned Bradley to come with him.

Going to the rear of the Omen, Straker raised the trunk lid and leaned inside. He pulled at the brown carpeted panel that hid the gas tank. The panel came loose and laid flat on the trunk floor. Instead of the fuel tank, Bradley saw a foam panel with cutouts.

Tucked into one of the cutouts was a large bore rifle with a telescopic sight. There were several plastic boxes tucked into the foam as well. Straker pulled out the rifle and one of the boxes. He opened the box and pulled out three oversized steel plated shells. He loaded one shell into the rifle and put the other two in his pockets.

The wind started around them, bringing rain and sand.

"What do you think we're going to run into, sir?" Bradley asked.

"That Ufo, if we're lucky," Straker said.

"And if we're unlucky?"

"It'll find us," Straker said.

* * *

The full moon gave enough light to navigate by without the night goggles. The two SHADO officers made it to the edge of the arroyo in good time, despite the gusting wind.

Bradley used the night goggles to check the area out, reporting his findings to his commanding officer. "I see the Ufo and the plane. The plane's crashed into the side of this old riverbed. There are four bodies on the ground. They appear to be badly burned. I see two aliens searching the bodies. There are also two men hiding in the rocks watching the aliens."

"Anyone else?"

Bradley scanned the area again. "Not that I can see, sir."

Straker beckoned Bradley to follow him as he made his way to a rocky outcropping near the edge of the cliff. He propped the rifle against the rock as he knelt on one knee and took sight on the Ufo below. After a moment, he laid the rifle down.

"I'll have a better shot at it when it takes off," Straker said, sitting on the ground.

Bradley sat beside him, resting an elbow on one knee. "Commander, you know what's going on here, don't you?"

"Well, I figure it's one of two things," Straker said. "Either the aliens have induced another very convincing hallucination and I've lost my mind. Or..."

"Or?" Bradley prompted.

"We're about thirty-five miles north-northwest of Roswell, New Mexico, on Fourth of July night, Nineteen forty-seven." Straker gave a faint sigh. "Mark, those two men down there, their campsite's a couple hundred yards from here."

"Yes?"

"There're four kids over there. If the Ufo acts true to form, it'll open fire on the camp."

"I'll get them to cover, sir" Bradley promised. He disappeared into the darkness.

* * *

Jamie woke from a sound sleep to find a husky negro man shaking him and his brothers awake.

"Come on," the man was saying. He had a softly accented voice. English, Jamie thought. "You've got to get out of here. It's not safe."

"What are you talking about?" Jamie demanded. "Where's my dad?"

"He's down watching a Ufo that landed near here. I'll take you to him as soon as we've taken care of it."

There was something in the man's voice that convinced Jamie to wake his two brothers.

They both yawned and groaned at being awake in the middle of the night, but they did as the man instructed. They followed him to the rocks where Eddie had been found that afternoon and hunkered down behind them.

"My CO said there were four of you," the man said.

Jamie shrugged in the darkness. His reply was interrupted by a weird whirr that grew louder and closer. A golden cup-like ship rose from the river bed. A rifle cracked somewhere near and one of the rotating lower panels of the cup-like craft started to smoke. A beam of green light flashed out, striking a nearby rocky outcropping.

A second shot cracked above the wind. The golden ship began to rise straight up in the air. A second beam shot out, hitting one of the tents. It exploded into flame.

The U.F.O. rose higher, until it was little more than a gold speck. There was a bright flash of flame, then the golden speck seemed to head north, disappearing into the storm clouds. Lightning flashed and over the thunder, an explosion reverberated across the hills.

"What was that?" Chris asked. There was a tremor in his voice.

"Never mind," the man said. "Let's go find your father." He gestured for the three boys to follow him to the outcropping the alien beam had struck only moments earlier.

Jamie started to follow, then stopped. "Chris, where's Eddie?"

"I don't know," his youngest brother said. "He must've got up before this started. Who knows where he's got to. He doesn't sleep, you know. I swear he doesn't."

"We have to find him," Jamie said. He turned to the negro. "Mister, we have to find him. If he's hurt or anything, our dad's gonna turn us into dog food."

"We'll find him," the man assured them. "My name's Mark, by the way."

Jamie stuck out his hand. Mark shook it.

"I'm Jamie. These are my brothers, Jerry and Chris," the teenager said.

Mark shook the younger boys' hands, then led the three over to the rocks. Jamie saw a second man waiting there - the CO Mark mentioned, probably. His clothes were dark, but his hair was bright in the moonlight. He was holding a large bore rifle which he set down as they approached.

"I found three of them," Mark told the man.

The other man smiled and nodded behind them. "Number four is right behind you."

Jamie turned to see Eddie standing there, watching them. The blond man beckoned to him and Eddie came closer.

"You shot it down," he said to the man.

"Yes, I did," the man said.

"Jamie? Jerry?" a voice called out.

"Over here, Dad," Jamie yelled. Footsteps approached from the far side of the rocks.

"Where's Eddie?" Barry asked.

"He's with us. He's okay," Jamie said. He turned to the little boy. "You are okay, aren't you?"

"Of course," Eddie replied.

Henderson and Barry came around the rocks, stopping short as they caught sight of the two strangers.

"You saw it, didn't you?" Barry asked. Eddie tugged on his sleeve. Barry brushed him away. "Not now, Eddie."

"I would say that everyone for at least ten miles around saw it," the blond man said.

"Dad," Jamie said. "This is Mark. He got us out of the tent before that thing went up."

Henderson shook the dark man's hand. "I'm grateful to you." Henderson looked meaningfully over at the still smouldering tent the three boys had been sleeping in only minutes before. "It's a debt I don't know how to repay."

"Safeguarding civilians is part of my job, sir." Mark said.

"Thank you, just the same." Henderson said. He turned to the other man. "And you are?"

"Ed," the man replied, shaking Henderson's hand.

"I'm Jim and this is Barry and his son, Eddie," Henderson introduced them. He looked around the area and shook his head. "I should ask you two what you're doing out here, but I'm guessing you were chasing that thing that crashed down there."

"That's right," Ed said.

"The crew in the crashed plane is all dead," Henderson said. "We checked before heading back up here. They were wearing dog-tags." Henderson held out his hand. There were four steel ID plates in his hand. Ed held out his hand and Henderson gave them to him. Ed glanced at them before dropping them into his pocket.

"I'll make sure their commanding officer is notified," Ed said.

"What kind of plane was it?" Henderson asked. "I've never seen anything like it."

"It's experimental," Ed answered. "Only one of its kind around here."

"It's not out of Alamogordo," Henderson said. "Nellis?"

Ed shook his head and a glimmer of a smile came into his face. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

The youngest boy had vanished. His father started looking around. "Where's Eddie?" He started toward the cliff edge to look for his son.

"He's down by the wreck," Ed said.

Barry's face darkened with anger and he turned to look for his son.

"Let him be, Colonel," Ed ordered.

Barry kept going.

"That was not a request."

Barry stopped and look back at him. "Who are you to give me orders?"

Ed just looked at him.

There was something about the blond man that demanded respect, even obedience. Henderson had sensed much the same calm self-assurance around high ranking officers, powerful businessmen - an unwavering faith in his mission, and his capacity to carry it out. This wasn't someone to be taken lightly.

"Barry, leave the boy be," Henderson said. "There's nothing down there that can hurt him now." Barry gave him a stubborn look but stopped.

"Who are you people?" Barry asked after a long moment.

"Lieutenant Bradley and I are associated with an intelligence group classified above top secret," Ed said. "The only reason I'm telling you even that much is I may need your assistance to handle the security situation this is going to create."

Ed looked around the horizon as if searching for something. He spotted it and nodded to Mark. "Over there."

Henderson watched as Mark pulled out a pair of bizarre looking binoculars and peered through them in the direction Ed had indicated.

"A man and woman in an open jeep," Mark reported. "They seem excited about something. They're pointing down at the wreck."

"They're drunk. They think they see aliens from outer space," Ed explained. He turned to

Henderson. "Colonel Henderson, isn't it?"

Henderson frowned. "Yes, but how do you know?"

"We've met," Ed said. "England, during the war."

Henderson shook his head. He couldn't place the blond man.

"You're at Alamogordo now, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Can you get hold of General Sanders? Convince him you have a major security situation out here?"

"Sure," Henderson said. "But, I'll have to run into town. That's the nearest phone."

"Colonel Blanchard's a lot closer than General Sanders," Barry said.

"That's very true, but I have my reasons and I'm sure Colonel Blanchard will have his turn in this mess soon enough," Ed assured him. Barry didn't look convinced, but he stayed quiet.

"I'll take the boys back to town with me," Henderson said.

"Mark and I will follow you in," Ed said. He turned to Barry. "Would you mind staying for a while and keeping an eye on the site?"

"There's nothing out here to bother it," Barry pointed out.

"There are civilians in the area who may be curious," Ed explained. "I'd rather nobody got too close."

"Radiation?" Henderson asked.

"It was unarmed. I'd just rather nobody got too close."

"Afraid they might think it's a flying saucer?" Barry asked.

"I'd rather they think that than ask what it really is," Ed said.

"And what is it? And what was that other ship?" Barry demanded.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that," Ed said, very quietly.

Barry stared at him for a long moment. Behind him, Eddie climbed up the slope. His shirt and jeans looked gray in the moonlight.

"They're dead," the boy said. "They don't look human anymore. They're all shriveled up."

"Eddie, that's enough," Barry said. "We told you not to go down there."

"But, the red-suits are gone," Eddie explained. "They're blown up."

"Eddie, don't argue with me," Barry ordered. The boy lowered his head and began to walk away. "And look at me when I'm talking to you."

Eddie stopped, but he didn't turn or look up. Barry took a step toward the boy, hand raised as if to strike him.

"Barry, it's been a long day, and we're all tired," Henderson said. "Why don't you talk to him later?"

Barry stopped, dropping his hand. Finally he nodded agreement.

"I'll leave Jamie with you to keep you company," Henderson offered.

"We'll get the equipment packed and out of here. What's left of it," Barry said. "I'll see you at the house after your people get here."

Henderson herded Jerry, Chris and Eddie along to where the Lincoln was parked. Eddie was so tired, he was tripping over his own feet. Mark ended up carrying him most of the way.

"You'll make a fine father, one of these days," Ed commented.

Henderson found himself agreeing. The big negro had a way with the kids, especially the littlest one.

Mark simply grinned. Eddie's eyes had closed and he was asleep on Mark's shoulder. Henderson opened the back doors of the Lincoln and herded his own two boys into the car. He

opened the front passenger door for Eddie. Eddie woke up as Mark started to set him down on the front seat of the Lincoln.

"There you go, my little alien friend," Mark said, still grinning.

"Sir?" the boy asked, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

"Some people mistook you for an alien from outer space a little while ago," Mark explained.

"I'm not an alien," the boy explained very seriously. "I was born in Boston."

Henderson watched Mark's grin grow wider. "Really? I don't believe we've been properly introduced. My name's Mark Bradley." He held out his hand.

The boy shook it without hesitation. "I'm Edward Straker."

Mark's expression froze for just a moment, or it could have been a trick of the shadows.

"Pleased to meet you, Mister Straker," Bradley told the boy, closing the door.

* * *

"You could have told me, sir" Bradley said. They were following the Lincoln into Roswell. There was no other traffic.

"Told you what?" Straker asked.

"That you knew what was going to happen because you were here," the astronaut explained.

"That's the problem, Mark. I don't know what's going to happen," Straker admitted.

"Worse, it may not even be real."

"You really think this may all be an illusion?"

"Could be. The aliens have done it before, but the hallucination broke down after a little while. It didn't hold together, it was more dreamlike."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience, sir."

"I am."

There was a long silence as Bradley considered Straker's admission. There were stories around SHADO about the alien induced madness that had caused a Moonbase astronaut to open fire on his teammates. One story was that Commander Straker had been the last victim of the alien madness. He was the one who survived to tell about it.

"Assuming this isn't a hallucination, what happens now?" Bradley asked.

"I honestly don't know," Straker said. "Mark, I don't remember most of this. I don't remember meeting you here. I remember the camp out, the plane crash, even riding in the front seat of Uncle Jim's Lincoln going home, but I don't remember a black man. And believe me, I should remember a black man with an English accent in the middle of the New Mexico desert."

"Well, you were just a kid."

"True," Straker agreed. "And the plane crash made a much larger impression than any of the people around. But, what if you weren't here the first time? What if we've already changed things?"

Bradley had no answer.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it now, I suppose," Straker said after a long moment. "And we do have a more immediate matter to worry about."

"And that is, sir?"

"Keeping that stealth technology from contaminating this time-line," Straker said.

"What about getting back home?" Bradley asked.

"There's nothing we can do about that, either," Straker said. "So, we concentrate on what

we can do, keeping this mess under control. One small point in our favor, maybe, is that the Nimitz got home in one piece. With any luck at all, so will we."

Part 3

They followed Henderson's Lincoln to a bungalow on the outskirts of Roswell, near the army-air base. The porch light was still on. Lights showed through the living room windows.

Henderson got out of the Lincoln and went up to the porch. He rang the doorbell and within a minute, the door opened. A brown haired woman in a nightdress and robe stood in the doorway. She threw her arms around him.

"Your aunt?" Bradley asked.

"Godmother. They'll be married fifty years next August," Straker said, watching the couple.

After a moment, Henderson and his wife came down to the Lincoln and started waking up the three boys. They followed her into the house. She glanced at Straker's car in the shadows, but if she saw anything amiss, she didn't show it.

Henderson came over to Straker's car and looked it over. "This car is about as fantastic as that plane."

"I'm afraid so," Straker agreed.

"What is it?"

"A European Ford."

"I didn't know Ford was manufacturing in Europe," Henderson said.

"I'd rather it weren't noticed," Straker said, not answering Henderson's unspoken question. "Do you think Barry would mind if I put it in the garage?"

"I'll ask his wife, but I don't see why not," Henderson said. "Why don't you come on in?"

"Thank you," Straker said. He and Bradley climbed out of the Omen and followed Henderson into the house.

The living room was large and neatly furnished. One wall had a stone fireplace surrounded by bookshelves. A slender woman with long white blonde hair walked in from the kitchen.

"Charlie, this is Ed..." Henderson paused. "I never got your last name."

"I didn't say."

Henderson waited, but Straker didn't volunteer any more information. After a moment, Henderson gave a slight shrug and turned back to his hostess.

"Charlie, I need to call Alamogordo," Henderson said.

"At this time of night?"

Henderson nodded. "I need to call my boss," Henderson said. "We had an 'incident' north of here. A plane crash. Barry and Jamie are waiting out there, guarding the site."

"Go ahead," Charlie agreed. "I'll get some coffee going."

* * *

General Omar Sanders was wakened from a sound sleep by the ringing of his telephone. His aide, Newkirk, was on the line.

"Colonel Henderson just called in, sir," Newkirk said. "He says he has a serious security situation out near Roswell. An experimental plane went down, loss of all hands."

"Experimental plane?" Sanders repeated. "Do we have anything out?"

"Negative, sir," Newkirk said. "It's not one of ours."

"Whose is it?" Sanders demanded.

"Unknown, General."

Sanders thought about it. An experimental plane reported crashed. Henderson was an

expert, he knew what he was talking about.

"If Henderson says it's a serious security situation, then I'm sure that's just what he's got," Sanders said. "Get a security detachment over there, on the double."

"Sir, if I may," Newkirk said. "Roswell's a lot closer than we are."

"If Henderson thought Colonel Blanchard could deal with this, he would have contacted Blanchard himself."

"Yes, sir," Newkirk agreed. The phone clicked in Sanders' ear.

What the devil had Henderson found in the desert? Not the experimental radiation detector. That wouldn't be classified as a security situation by any stretch of the imagination, even though the innards of the thing were still classified top-secret. An experimental plane, Newkirk said, but not one of ours. If not ours, then whose?

Sanders sat up and swung his feet out of his bed. He was going to find out what was going on for himself.

* * *

"A crash team will be there about five, five-thirty," Henderson reported.

"Five-thirty?" Bradley wondered.

"They'll be coming overland. It takes time to get a team together," Straker explained.

"Oh, yes," Bradley said. For the moment, he'd forgotten where they were supposed to be. He warmed his hands around the coffee cup Charlie Straker had handed him. He looked over at his commanding officer.

Straker looked exhausted.

"Sir, why don't you try to get some rest?" Bradley suggested.

Straker shook his head.

"Your man's right," Henderson said. "You look like you're about done in. Why don't you try to get some sleep? The sofa's not that bad."

"Maybe I will," Straker conceded. He took his coffee cup and put it in the kitchen sink. Then, he went into the living room.

Bradley was too tired to sleep. His mind kept running in circles.

He knew about the Roswell incident, the news reports, the inconclusive and contradictory evidence. What he was seeing didn't seem to fit.

He didn't remember reading about a crash on the Fourth of July. He remembered a man named Brazell and the premature news releases from Roswell base. He recalled reading about mistakes in identifying an experimental balloon. Foolish mistakes that made no sense considering the experience of the officers involved. Then, there were the reported calls to the local mortician, requests for small caskets. The entire thing made no sense.

"Interesting fellow," Henderson commented.

Bradley had to mentally scramble. "The commander?"

"Commander?" Henderson raised one eyebrow.

"Colonel, really. He's the C-in-C of our operational group."

"And that is?" Henderson prompted.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that."

"I could make it an order."

"You're not a member of my chain of command, Colonel. We're not even members of the same service."

"And which service is that?"

Bradley just shook his head.

"You're a cheeky bastard," Henderson said.

Bradley smiled.

The kitchen door opened and Charlie walked in. The swinging door closed behind her. There was a puzzled look on her face.

"Something wrong?" Henderson asked.

"No," she said. "The boys are settled in upstairs. Eddie was asleep almost before he got into bed. That's pretty unusual for him. He doesn't sleep much, afraid of missing something, I guess."

She looked back at the closed door to the living room and her puzzled frown deepened. "I know I know your friend from somewhere. He looks almost exactly like the pictures of Barry's brother, Edward, before he died," she said. "It's uncanny. Even Etienne likes your friend, and Etienne doesn't like anybody but Eddie."

"Etienne?" Bradley asked.

"Eddie's cat. It was supposed to be my cat, but he adopted Eddie instead. Poor Barry, that cat is terrified of him."

She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the table with the two men.

"Charlie," Henderson said. "What's going on with Barry?"

"What do you mean?" she said. She wouldn't meet Henderson's eyes.

"I mean his drinking, and Eddie."

"Oh, you noticed," she said. She stared down at her coffee. "War does things to people. Changes them. The man who came back to us wasn't the same one that left. He doesn't know how to cope any more, and Eddie's not the easiest child in the world."

"Barry's going to end up hurting him if he's not careful," Henderson said.

"I know," Charlie said. "But I can't talk to Barry when he's in that mood." She looked at Bradley and smiled. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't mean to get started on sordid family matters. Are you married?"

"Not yet," Bradley said. "I have a girl friend and we hope to get permission to get married in a year or so."

"I hope the two of you make it," Charlie said.

"I hope so, too," Bradley agreed.

Charlie stood and put her empty coffee cup in the sink. "If you don't mind, I'm going to head off to bed." She turned to Henderson. "You and Mandy are in the guest room." To Bradley: "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but I've run out of places to put people. Can you make do with a couple blankets and a pillow on the living room floor?"

"Yes ma'am," Bradley said. "It won't be the first time I've slept on the floor."

Bradley took the blankets and pillow Charlie handed him and made himself a bed on the living room rug, not too far from the sofa. Straker was asleep. At least, his eyes were closed, his breathing slow and even.

The cat, a Persian almost the same color as Straker's hair, was also asleep. He was curled against Straker's chest, head tucked under his chin. A soft purr rumbled from the cat's chest.

The SHADO astronaut found himself smiling at the sight. He'd never pictured Straker as a cat person.

* * *

Bradley woke up to the sound of the screen door creaking open. He checked his watch. It was nearly seven in the morning, local time. He usually didn't sleep so late. Straker was up and opening the front door. The Persian was hanging over one arm, watching the world with china

blue eyes.

Barry and Jamie came in.

"Is Jim up?" Barry asked.

"Not yet," Straker said. "I'll go wake him, if you'd like."

"No, I'll do it. General Sanders wants him out at the crash site," Barry said. He eyed the cat, who hissed at him.

Straker tickled the animal under the chin and he quieted down.

"I'm surprised he's letting you touch him," Barry said.

"He knows me," Straker said, letting the cat drop to the floor. Barry snorted and headed toward the bedrooms at the back of the house.

* * *

The road was blocked by military police who were turning back anyone heading north along state route 46. The sergeant in charge checked Jim Henderson's identification and waved the Lincoln through.

The path they'd been on only the night before had been widened and cleared enough for the Lincoln to drive nearly to the arroyo. He parked the car beside a black sedan with government plates. Below, four heavy trucks were parked beside the wreckage and more than a dozen men were hard at work clearing away the debris. A little further away sat an old-fashioned field ambulance.

A tall, gray haired man in a khaki uniform strode up to the Lincoln. Henderson got out of the car and snapped off a quick salute. Straker and Bradley climbed out of the car and waited.

"Colonel, what the devil is that?" the man demanded. There were general's stars on his uniform.

"It came down in the storm last night," Henderson explained.

"Well, it's positively bizarre," General Sanders said. "We've got the whole area blocked, but I want to take and shoot the idiot who went and let all those civilians onto the site. We've been chasing them off all morning."

"A lot of civilians saw it come down last night," Straker said. "This is open country."

"And you are?" Sanders demanded.

"Colonel Ed Straker, A-2," Straker introduced himself, shaking Sanders' hand. He nodded toward Bradley. "My aide, Mark Bradley."

Sanders nodded in Bradley's direction before turning his attention back to Henderson.

"Well, we've got the bodies bagged and we've made a good start cleaning up the debris field. I'm going to make arrangements with Blanchard to store the material until we can arrange transport to Wright for analysis," Sanders said. "I've never seen anything like it. The markings aren't American. They look more British, if anything." He turned to Straker. "Do you know what it is? Whose it is?"

"Yes, to both questions," Straker said.

"And?"

"And, it's a long and complicated story that I'm not sure you'll believe."

"Try me."

Straker smiled and shrugged and began to walk to the edge of the cliff. His dark suit jacket was thrown across his shoulder. Sanders began to follow him. Bradley and Henderson followed a short distance away.

"You said you've never seen anything like it," Straker said. "And I doubt you ever will again." He stopped, seeming to weigh his words.

Sanders frowned "You said you were with A-2, but I don't know anyone named Straker with A-2."

"There's no reason you should, General. You won't find me or my group on any of your rosters. We deal with intelligence issues," Straker said. "But not the sort you're used to."

"What sort?"

Bradley could sense the irritation growing in the older man. Straker didn't seem to notice.

"I'm with an operational military group put together by an alliance of nations, including the United States and Great Britain. Our mission is to combat an intolerable threat to this planet posed by extraterrestrials."

For a moment, Sanders looked as though he was ready to break out laughing. He sobered at the deadly serious expression on Straker's face.

"Those disk sightings the past month, they really are from Mars?" Sanders asked.

"The last life on Mars died out several billion years ago," Straker said. "But they are alien to this world."

"The bodies we recovered looked human," Sanders said.

"Those particular bodies were human," Straker admitted. "That particular vehicle doesn't happen to be extraterrestrial."

Sanders shook his head. "I don't understand. You say there are extraterrestrials coming to Earth, but that plane isn't one of them? That plane is beyond anything I can even imagine. It can't have been made on this planet."

"It was," Straker said. "It was built in Seattle, as a matter of fact. But not in this time. That plane won't be built for another thirty-five years."

Sanders stared at him. "You're right. I don't believe you. You're telling me that machine came from the future? I'd sooner believe it came from Mars. How?"

"By accident. I don't know the mechanism, but the same effect that brought that plane to its doom brought Lieutenant Bradley and me here as well."

"I don't believe, you. I can't believe you're from the future," Sanders sputtered. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He offered one to Straker, who shook his head.

"I can't believe you," Sanders repeated as he lit his cigarette

"Try, General," Straker said. He got his wallet from his jacket and pulled out several cards, including his driver's license. He handed them to Sanders. The older man looked at the rectangular pieces of plastic.

"This can't be right," Sanders said, waving the license. "It's British for one and it says you were born in 1938."

"I was, and I'll be forty-five in about two months," Straker said. "And I've been living in Great Britain for the past twelve years."

"It's a fake, it can't be real," Sanders protested.

"If it's fake, tell me how it was done, General," Straker said, voice very quiet. Sanders stared at the cards, feeling the smooth surfaces with his thumb.

"This isn't paper. What is it?"

"Plastic, with a silicon memory chip built-in. There's potentially more information inside one of those little cards than in most libraries." Straker answered. He held out his hand and Sanders handed the cards back. "General, I can't prove what I say is true. All I can show you are impossibilities that are best explained by accepting that what I say is true. Like that crashed plane that's beyond any technology on Earth at this time. A driver's license with an impossible birth date made of materials not yet invented."

"But, those can all be faked," Sanders pointed out. "Just because I don't know how doesn't mean it can't be done."

"What can I do to convince you to help us?" Straker asked. "To keep this all a secret."

"This is too much," Sanders complained. "I can't decide to put this thing under wraps on just your say-so."

"What if I can give you an impossibility that can't be faked?" Straker asked. He was staring down at his hands.

"And what's that?"

"Do you know a fingerprint expert?"

* * *

Sanders followed them back to town. Then, he headed to Roswell Airbase to finish the arrangements that needed to be made to deal with the crash site debris and the four bodies.

Henderson drove Straker and Bradley back to the house.

Two hours later, the doorbell rang. The screen door was opened by a young MP Henderson didn't recognize. General Sanders and a tired and disheveled looking civilian with a small carry-case walked in. The MP stayed outside on the porch.

"Colonel Straker?" the civilian asked. Straker stood.

"I'm Carl Blythe, Santa Fe FBI office. I was told you needed my expertise," the civilian said, looking to Sanders.

Sanders nodded. "We need some prints compared. This gentleman's," he nodded to Straker, "and someone else's."

"Comparing two people? General, sir, fingerprints won't tell you if two people are related. Even identical twins don't have identical fingerprints," Blythe said.

"I'm aware of that," Sanders assured him. "Just bear with us, please, Mister Blythe?"

Blythe shook his head and opened his case, pulling out two printed cards and an ink pad. With the efficiency of long practice, he took a complete set of fingerprints from Straker.

"We need to guarantee the cards have not been tampered with or altered in any way after you've finished," Straker said.

Blythe's eyes opened wide, but he initialed one corner of the card he'd just finished before folding it in half and putting it in his coat pocket. He picked up the second card. "And the other person?"

"Mark," Straker said. "Could you find Eddie and bring him here, please?"

"Yes, sir," Bradley said, heading off to find the boy. He returned within a few minutes with Eddie and Barry.

"What's going on?" Barry asked.

"We need fingerprints of everyone who was in or touched the wreckage," Henderson answered. "Ours are on file, so we just need Eddie's."

Barry accepted Henderson's explanation and stood by, watching, as Blythe took the boy's fingerprints.

"Is that all there is?" Eddie asked. Blythe nodded, initialing the corner of the card against tampering.

"That's all there is. Now, be a good boy and run along and play," Henderson said. Barry nodded and led the boy out to the kitchen. Barry stopped in the doorway and looked back at Henderson. Barry's expression was unreadable, but Henderson sensed that Barry knew he'd been lied to. It was the first time Henderson had ever lied to his friend. Henderson also knew, without really knowing how or why, that it was overwhelmingly important that Barry not know

the results of this test.

Straker picked up his cup of coffee. "You will want to rethink that analysis on the debris, General," he said.

Sanders stared at him. Straker didn't appear to notice.

Blythe was already examining the first set of prints with a magnifying glass. He murmured to himself and jotted notes down on a pad. He picked up the second, smaller set and began to examine them. Suddenly, he looked up. His face was ashen. He checked the initials in the corner of the cards. Then, he grabbed Straker's hand and peered at the ink-blackened fingertips.

"What's wrong?" Sanders demanded. Blythe dropped Straker's hand.

"This is impossible," Blythe stammered. "No two people can have identical fingerprints."

"They're genuinely identical?" Sanders insisted.

Blythe nodded. "As though I'd taken the same person's prints twice, only one set belongs to a child."

"There's no chance you could be mistaken?" Sanders asked. There was the slightest tremor in his voice.

Blythe pulled himself to his full height of five-six. "General, you asked for an expert. I happen to be the best printman west of the Mississippi. I am not mistaken. This is an impossibility."

"I accept that," Sanders said. "Thank you, Mister Blythe. I'll have my people take you home now."

Blythe began to pack up his case. Sanders took the two cards from his hand before he could put them in his case. Blythe closed his case without comment and walked out.

"Satisfied?" Straker asked, looking up at Sanders. "No analysis?"

Sanders sat heavily at the dining room table. "No analysis," he agreed.

A bargain had just been struck. Henderson couldn't even guess the details, except, somehow, Straker had won.

"We'll pack the stuff up and bury it in storage somewhere till ... when?" Sanders smiled.

"November 21, 1982," Straker answered.

"People have seen the wreck. There'll be questions," Sanders reminded him.

"Deny everything, General," Straker advised. "You were never here. It was never there. Without unfalsifiable physical evidence, even eye witnesses aren't credible."

"Like impossible fingerprints?"

"Exactly."

Sanders still held the cards in his hands. He tore them in half, then half again, and again until they were shreds. He scooped the shreds up and placed them in the living room fireplace. A match quickly disposed of the shreds. "No evidence." Sanders stood and brushed his hands together.

"By the way, I had my people check. There is no Edward Straker listed as an active duty member of the United States military," Sander said.

"I told you that, General," Straker said.

"So you did," Sanders agreed. "Is there anything else you'd be willing to tell me about all this?"

"Only that you might want to warn General Vandenberg that there was a security situation down here. He'll be hearing about a crashed spaceship fairly soon. It would be best if nobody took those reports very seriously," Straker said. A brief smile flashed across his face.

"Especially the air force. I'm sure you've already notified General Twining. Make sure he understands how serious this is."

Sanders shook his head and walked out. Straker followed him onto the porch. Sanders stopped and looked back at him.

"I'm still not sure I believe you, but I'll make sure that debris is put away someplace secure," Sanders said.

"That's all I'm asking, sir," Straker said.

Sanders stopped as if to say something more, then decided against it. He turned and left the porch, leaving Straker to watch after him. Straker didn't seem to notice Mandy taking pictures with her Kodak around the corner of the house.

"Now what?" Henderson asked. Straker turned, eyes widening ever so slightly in surprise at seeing him and Bradley both standing there.

"Now what?" Straker said. "I don't know."

They went back into the house.

"Commander?" Bradley said. He beckoned Straker aside. "General Sanders said the bodies would be brought to the hospital here to be autopsied."

"Yes, although I doubt they'll find anything. Why?"

"I've been trying to remember what I read in class about Roswell," the astronaut said. "Wasn't there something about a call about small caskets?"

Straker nodded. "Supposedly the Roswell mortuary officer called to ask about them and about embalming techniques."

"Why, sir?" Bradley asked. "Why small caskets when the bodies are human? Even the aliens take normal sized caskets."

"Why bother the local small town mortician with questions when you have access to anyone you want in the military?" Straker asked in return.

"A disinformation campaign?"

"Maybe, but whose?" Straker turned to Henderson. "You wouldn't happen to know the name of the mortuary officer over at the Roswell base hospital, would you?"

Henderson shrugged. "I can ask Barry, he should know." He left for the back yard and came back a minute later. "Nelson. But he's on leave for the next couple days."

Straker's forehead creased in a frown. He turned back to Bradley. "So, who made the call? There's also the matter of the redheaded captain and the black sergeant," he said, keeping his voice low. "I remember Barry and Major Marcel getting upset about it because people said they were from the base, only, they weren't."

"Then, who were they?" Bradley asked.

"I don't know. They were never identified, even after all the air force and NSA documents were turned over to us. They had to have been acting under orders. American military officers don't just go around threatening civilians. It's un-American."

"It doesn't make sense,"

"No, it doesn't," Straker agreed. "Maybe it's time we start making sure this incident is really as confused as history says it was."

Straker went into the kitchen, to the counter where the telephone sat. He grabbed the phone book and opened it, running his finger down one page. "There it is," he murmured to himself.

Henderson followed him into the kitchen.

"Who are you calling?" he asked.

"The funeral home."

Henderson listened in amazement as Straker asked the mortician at the local funeral home about the availability of child-sized caskets. He listened attentively to the answer, thanked the man on the other end of the line. He was smiling as he hung up the phone.

"What was that all about?" Henderson asked.

"Confusion," Straker replied.

* * *

Straker made a second call to the mortuary. This time he asked about chemicals and embalming procedures and the effects of the chemicals on tissue samples. He also asked about the best way to prepare bodies that had been exposed to the elements. Again, he thanked the mortician for all his help and hung up.

"Wouldn't the mortuary officer already know those things?" Henderson asked.

"Not necessarily," Straker answered. "However, Sanders would have made sure the people he sent were up to the job."

"Then why do it?"

"To confuse and confound the opposition," Straker replied.

"Who is the opposition?"

Straker just shook his head.

"Then, can you tell me what you're trying to accomplish?"

"Smoke and mirrors," Straker answered. This time it was Henderson who shook his head.

"Earth has a minor, little problem," Straker said. "She has resources other people want, and they take without bothering to ask. You saw two of the others last night."

"The red suits?"

Straker nodded. "You heard what I told Sanders. Now, a lot of people saw that plane go down and even more people saw the second ship explode. People have seen those bodies."

"And people talk," Henderson finished for himself.

"We can't even begin to stop the stories that have started. But, maybe we can confuse them, cloud the issue so that even if someone does start looking hard, they'll be looking for the wrong thing."

"Little Martians in silver disks instead of spacemen in red suits?" Henderson asked. "Why not just deny everything, or say it was just a test flight that went down? Why bother hiding it at all? My God, if we really are being visited, this is the biggest news since Christ."

"I wish we didn't have to lie about it," Straker said. "But the aliens aren't on the side of the angels. We've tried it other ways. Now, we shoot first, before they can hurt anyone. We're barely holding our own against them."

"The shots last night," Henderson said. "You shot it down."

Straker nodded. "Luckily their ships don't last long in Earth's atmosphere. Still, the ship left debris and people have already picked it up and decided it's not from Earth. It doesn't matter that they've picked up more pieces of your probe than they have alien ship. In about three days, Roswell air base and the Eighth Air Force will have its hands full."

"How do you know that?" Henderson asked.

"The same way I knew that plane was going to crash near your camp. The same way I know Eddie's not going to catch the football and it's going to go through that window in about a minute," Straker said.

It was less than a minute. The shattered glass went everywhere. The ball bounced off the stove with a loud thunk. Outside, Barry started shouting. Eddie ran into the house, slamming

the door behind him. Henderson heard the pounding of foot steps on the stairs to the second floor.

He stared at Straker for a long moment. "You know, because... Identical fingerprints."

Straker nodded.

"How is it possible?"

"I don't know, really." Straker said. "Some bizarre combination of forces that created a rift in space and time. I just don't know."

"Sanders didn't really believe you, you know," Henderson said.

"I realize that," Straker said. "But his belief isn't what's important. His cooperation is. That evidence has to be buried so deep, no one will ever find it."

"Sanders is a man of his word. If he says he'll bury it, he will," Henderson said. "And I believe you. God help me, I shouldn't. But I believe you're exactly who you say you are. I can understand you getting Sanders' help, but why me? I'm a radar officer, a bomber pilot. I'm not in intelligence."

"You will be," Straker said. "Sanders will be so impressed with how you handled the situation here, he'll recommend you for transfer to intelligence and a promotion. Unfortunately, he won't be alive to see it. He died in August of 47. A plane crash on his way to England. At least, that's the official version."

Henderson felt the blood leave his face. He leaned back against the counter to keep from falling. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I need your cooperation to do what needs to be done," Straker answered simply. "I don't dare use Barry. He might suspect something and I can't afford that. I can't afford to risk changing what must be."

"The 'grandfather' paradox?" Henderson asked. Jamie liked speculative fiction and shared it with his father. They both liked Wells and E.E. Smith. Asimov and Heinlein were pretty good, too.

Straker shook his head. There was a faraway look in his eyes. "Doctor Brown had a lecture on temporal paradoxes when I was at MIT. It was his contention that time, as we know it, was a function of life and awareness. On the atomic and subatomic levels, there is no discernable directionality to time. He said that time was like a tapestry, a weave of life and decisions, knots, and if one could go back and change something big enough, tie new knots, untie old ones, it would unweave the tapestry at that point. Time would have to re-weave itself into a different pattern to accommodate the changes. If that happened, the thread that caused the problems in the first place, the life making those decisions, might find itself unanchored, tied into the tapestry at a different point, unable to get back to where it started, because where it started was no longer there. But there would be no paradox. The tapestry won't allow it."

"It sound's more poetic than scientific," Henderson said.

"Music and math are related," Straker said. "Besides, the Greeks had the idea first. Clotho, Atropos and Lachesis, the weavers of the tapestry of life."

"Won't telling me about this threaten the tapestry?" Henderson asked.

"Not if we're careful," Straker said. "And I do plan to be careful."

There was shouting outside, Barry and Charlie. They came into the house.

"I think it's going to be getting a little noisy in here," Straker commented. He turned and headed outside, to the front porch. Bradley and Henderson followed him out.

There was a scraping sound above them, on the roof.

"What's that?" Bradley asked.

"Eddie, up on the porch roof," Straker answered.

"Does he do that a lot?" Bradley asked. Straker nodded.

Suddenly, the shouting stopped. Doors slammed and there was a sound of feet pounding up the stairs.

Straker straightened, looking up at the beaded wooden ceiling as though trying to see into the room beyond.

"Sir, what's going on?" Bradley asked.

"I don't know," Straker said.

On the roof above, the cat hissed. Barry swore. The three men on the porch stepped out onto the sidewalk to see what was happening.

Barry was leaning out the window, reaching for the cat. Eddie had moved to the edge of the roof, trying to put himself between his father and his four-legged friend. Barry lunged for the cat, grabbing its collar. Eddie pulled back. The collar slipped over Etienne's head and Eddie and the cat went off the roof. Etienne disappeared around the corner of the house. Eddie lay in a crumpled heap on the sunbaked dirt.

Charlie stood in the doorway and screamed her husband's name. Bradley ran to the boy's side and checked his pulse and breathing.

"He's alive," Bradley announced. The boy's eyes fluttered open. "You okay?" Bradley asked. Eddie nodded his head and struggled to sit up. He promptly threw up all over the ground.

"Concussion," Straker said. "He needs to see a doctor."

Bradley looked over at his commanding officer.

Straker had gone pale, almost as though he'd been the one to fall from the roof. His fists were clenched, his knuckles blanched white. He looked as though he might be sick as well.

"I'll take him," Barry said breathlessly, running to where his son lay. Barry reached for the boy, but Eddie flinched away. He buried his face against Bradley's shirt.

"Eddie, it was an accident," Barry said. The boy wouldn't look at him.

"We'll take him to the emergency room, get him checked out," Henderson said. Bradley got to his feet, easily carrying the nine and a half-year-old in his arms. He weighed hardly anything.

"It was an accident," Barry kept repeating. He got into the driver's seat of the Buick. Bradley climbed into the back.

"I'm coming with you," Mandy called. She ran out of the house and climbed into the back seat with Bradley and the boy.

Barry sat behind the wheel, shaking his head. "I wasn't going to hurt that damn cat. I just wanted the two of them off the roof."

"I'm not the one you need to convince," Straker said, coming around to the driver's window.

"Who do I need to convince?" Barry asked.

"Yourself, and your son," Straker said.

Barry snorted. "You saw the look on his face. He hates me."

"You may be right," Straker said. "The question is, what do you intend to do about it?"

Part 4

Getting into the Roswell Air Base hospital was too easy, Bradley thought to himself. The gate guard recognized Barry Straker and the Buick and simply waved them on through.

Three green military ambulances were parked to one side of the entrance ramp. Two men in military police uniforms stood beside the nearest army ambulance.

The two MPs gave the group only cursory looks as they walked straight into the emergency entrance.

A tall gray haired major was standing near the entrance doors.

"Henderson, what are you doing here?" Major Gordon asked when he caught sight of the group coming up the ramp to the emergency entrance. Gordon was the chief intelligence officer for Alamogordo air base.

"Hello, Ben," Henderson said. He pointed to the small boy with him. "My godson went and fell off the porch roof. We need somebody to check him out. This is his dad, Colonel Straker."

Gordon nodded a greeting to the Roswell officer.

"Your godson, huh?" Gordon said, peering down at the boy. He was slender and very blond. His blue-gray eyes looked too large for his face.

"What's been going on here?" Barry asked. "We've never had MPs guarding the emergency room before."

"I wish I could tell you, Colonel, but I honestly don't know. We're on regional radar alert, too," Gordon said.

"Why, what's going on?" Henderson asked.

"More weird weather signatures up in the mountains," Gordon told him. "And more of those discs over White Sands and Trinity. I don't know where they're from, but I'd sure like them to go home." He looked down at the little boy once more. He was looking decidedly unwell.

"Doctor McCafferty should be around here someplace. I'll hunt him down for you, have him take a look at the kid."

"Is all of Alamogordo at Roswell today?" Henderson asked.

"No," Gordon said. "It just feels like it. McCafferty was going to help Fleming with some autopsies, but the smell got to him. He's been helping out here, instead. Take your buddy in there." He pointed to an open door along the corridor. "And I'll get somebody to look at him."

"Major," the boy called. Gordon stopped and looked back.

"Are the bodies from the crash here?"

"How do you know about that?" Gordon asked.

"I was there," the boy said simply.

Gordon shot Henderson a curious look and the other man nodded.

"He was there," Henderson said.

"Next you'll be telling me he's a Martian, too," Gordon complained. "I'll go find McCafferty." He headed off in the opposite direction. He didn't pay much attention to the two nurses standing in the corridor nor did he notice Amanda Henderson joining them.

* * *

George McCafferty just shook his head at his latest patient. McCafferty wasn't even in his own hospital, but enlisted personnel were the same the world over. This one had gotten drunk and rolled his car over trying to evade the roadblock north of town. Why he had wanted to

evade the roadblock was anybody's guess. The man wasn't going to be telling them for some time, assuming he lived. McCafferty had his doubts about that.

McCafferty could hear the nurses talking about the incident in the corridor beyond. "They've got the road all blocked off and they've got armed guards all around there," one was saying. "Won't let anybody within a mile of the place."

"And did you see those bodies they brought in?" the other one asked. "And the smell, I've never smelled anything that bad in all my life."

The nurses suddenly stopped talking. There was a sharp knock on the door. McCafferty looked up to see Major Gordon standing there.

"I've got another patient for you," Gordon said.

"Not another guy who thinks he can fly a car, is it?" McCafferty asked.

"Nope," Gordon assured him. "It's a Martian."

McCafferty just shook his head.

Gordon led him to the examination room, where he found a small boy with close-cropped blond hair with a man McCafferty assumed to be the father. With him was a negro the physician didn't know and a familiar looking man with reddish hair.

"What seems to be the problem?" McCafferty asked.

"Our little friend here took a nasty fall," the negro answered. "He was knocked out for a little bit and we figured he ought to be checked out."

McCafferty nodded and started examining the boy. "Does it hurt anywhere?"

"My head hurts," the boy answered. McCafferty started to examine him.

After a few minutes, the physician straightened up. "A mild concussion," he announced. "Keep him quiet for the next few days. If he has any other symptoms, blurred vision, a worse headache, confusion, get him over to his regular doctor."

"Doctor, you don't have to file a report on this, do you?" the father asked.

McCafferty shrugged and said. "I don't see why I need to. After all I don't even work here."

"Thanks, Doc. I owe you one," the man said. The noise level in the corridor started to rise - another accident victim coming in. "Is there another way out of here?"

"Sure," McCafferty said, opening the door. He pointed further down the corridor, away from the emergency entrance. "The morgue entrance is down there. The alley connects to the parking lot."

"Thank you," the father said. He started to pick the boy up, but the child wriggled out of his arms.

"I can walk," the boy insisted, starting down the hall to the morgue. The men had to hurry to catch up with him.

"Barry," Henderson called. "Why don't you take Eddie on home? The Lieutenant and I will stay and see if we can't help out here, get a handle on this."

"You're sure?" Barry asked.

"Sure," Henderson said. "Besides, we seemed to have lost my wife. I turned around and she wasn't there."

"Okay," Barry agreed. "Call me when you're ready to leave and I'll come pick you up. Try to stay out of trouble. This is a high security base, you know."

* * *

"Miss," a man called. Mandy turned to see who it was and was surprised to recognize Doctor Fleming from the base hospital at Alamogordo. She worked in his unit. "Mrs.

Henderson? What are you doing here?"

Mandy shrugged. "It's a long story," she said.

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Fleming said. "The nurse who was helping us just became ill and I need somebody to help us with finishing this last autopsy."

He took her arm and led her down the hall into the morgue's scrub room.

"It's been a long time since I attended an autopsy," she warned.

"Well, I'm sure you remember the basic procedures and I know you know your way around an operating room," Fleming assured her as she put the green hospital gown over her clothes.

The morgue autopsy room was much the same as the one at Alamogordo, tucked out of the way, with a separate entrance for the morgue wagon. It was dark and cold, with lamps over the autopsy tables. Another doctor was waiting beside the last body. Johnson was the name on his name tag. He was looking a little green.

The room stank of formaldehyde and alcohol, the stench of the dead, burnt flesh. Above it all, cutting through the normal stink, was something sharp, acrid, chemical.

"What is that smell?" she asked.

Fleming shook his head. "Their clothes," he said. "I don't know what kind of material it was, but it actually melted through their skin. The heat from that explosion must have been incredible."

"Why even bother with an autopsy?" Mandy wondered.

"General Sanders' orders," Fleming explained as he began his first incision. "He wants us to make sure they're not Russians, or aliens from outer space."

"They certainly don't look very human right now," Mandy said. The smell was almost unbearable. The heat from the plane explosion had twisted the body into an impossible position. Its hands were deformed claws. The flesh had been seared and scorched. The head was swollen and misshapen. It looked too large for the body.

"At least they died quickly," Fleming said. "It must have been nearly instantaneous."

Johnson had been examining the head and teeth. "Well, I think you can assure your CO they're not Russian. This one has a mouthful of silver amalgam fillings and two gold crowns. Nice work, too."

"How can you tell from the fillings?" Mandy asked.

"The last I heard, the Russians were using a steel composite in their dental work. Silver's too expensive for them," Johnson said. "And I seriously doubt men from Mars would be using our style of dentistry. Although I have heard people saying these four were from Mars. Have you seen the debris from their plane? It's positively weird. Almost no metal in it at all."

Mandy forced a laugh and started writing down the autopsy notes.

* * *

Charlie was sitting in the rocking chair in the corner of the living room, a pile of mending on her lap.

"Why didn't you go to the hospital with them?" Straker asked.

"I can't stand hospitals," Charlie explained. "Barry knows that. Besides, between Mandy and Jim and Barry, everything's under control. I wasn't needed."

"Your son might have had a different opinion on that," Straker said.

"Possibly."

They both looked up at the sound of Barry's car pulling up to the front of the house. Footsteps creaked on the porch steps and Eddie walked in, followed by Barry.

"He'll be fine, just a minor concussion," Barry said. "We need to keep him quiet the next few days." He looked around. "Where are the other kids?"

"I gave them some money to go see a movie," Charlie said.

Barry's expression darkened, but he didn't say anything to her. Instead he turned to Eddie: "Lie down on the sofa, take a nap."

"I'm not a baby. Only babies take naps," Eddie said.

"Eddie, please don't argue. Just do it," Barry said. Eddie made a face, but did as he was told. Barry headed for the kitchen. Straker followed him.

Barry pulled two bottles of beer from the refrigerator. He offered one to Straker, who shook his head.

"No, thank you," Straker said.

"There's whiskey up in the cupboard," Barry said.

"No."

Barry shrugged and opened one bottle. He took a long pull on it.

"That won't help, you know," Straker said, very softly.

"What won't?"

"Getting drunk."

"How would you know?" Barry asked.

"You're not the only one in the world with family problems," Straker said.

"I have a wife who doesn't understand the meaning of living within our means and I have a son who hates me. He's nine and a half and he hates my guts."

"Assuming you're right, why does he hate you?"

"Because he's a spoiled brat who had everything his way while I was gone and I put a stop to it when I came back," Barry said.

"You don't honestly believe that, do you?"

"What else is there?"

"You might consider his point of view just once," Straker suggested. He managed to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but it was a struggle. "Your son was four when you left. When you came back, you came back a stranger who demanded everyone's respect and attention, but what did you do to earn it?"

"What do you mean what did I do to earn it?" Barry demanded. "I'm his father."

"So? Any idiot can get a woman pregnant. What have you done to show him you even care he's alive? What have you done for any of them?"

"What do I need to do?" Barry asked. "I fought four years, doing my duty, defending this country. I go to work, and I work damn hard, to support them. I don't need to do anything more."

"If that's all you think it takes to be a decent parent, then I feel sorry for you, because by the time you figure it out, it'll be too late," Straker said. "But then, maybe I shouldn't bother feeling sorry for you, because you'll deserve everything you get."

Barry simply stared at him. Straker turned on his heel and walked out. He stopped in the living room and leaned against the doorframe. He had come close to losing his temper and he knew that wouldn't help. Nothing would help. The heat, the situation, everything - it was getting to be too much. It was a nightmare, but it was too real to be a nightmare. The past was done, dead, gone. Nothing could change it without damaging what had to be. The tapestry was unraveling around him.

"Thank you," Charlie said softly.

"For what?"

"For trying to help," she said. "It's not his fault, really. The war changed everybody and he doesn't know what to do about it, how to react. He's a good man, really. He just doesn't know what to do. Don't hate him for that."

"Why should I hate him at all?"

She shook her head, as she continued her work. "Neither of my men are very good liars. There's something in the voice." She looked up. Her eyes were very blue. "You don't lie very well either."

"You know me so well you can tell?"

She smiled. "Do you have any children?"

"I have a daughter at home. She just turned five," Straker said.

"Any boys?"

"My son died a little over two years ago. A stupid accident. He was eight and a half."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

She bowed her head again, intent on her sewing. She looked up at the sound of Barry's footsteps on the stairs and glanced over at her son. Despite his earlier protests, he was sound asleep.

"You need a son, you know, to carry on the family name, if nothing else," she said.

"There aren't many Strakers around."

Straker simply stared at her a long moment. "How ... ?"

She looked up again. "Etienne told me. He's not a very good conversationalist, he's a cat, but he knows things. Your wife, is she a good woman?"

"Yes," he said. He wasn't going to try to explain the situation at home, that his daughter's mother was more comfortable simply living with him. But she was a good woman, understanding, compassionate, intelligent and beautiful. Sometimes, when he couldn't sleep, he would lay awake and listen to her breathe, marveling at how lucky he was to have her.

"I'm glad for you," she said. "Do I know her?"

"No."

"Pity," she said. "I think I'd like to." She set aside her mending and stood up, stretching her back. He suddenly realized how tired and worn she looked. Right now, she was younger than Kate was. But Kate never looked so worn out, even after double shifts.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I told you, you're a lousy liar," she said. She walked over to him. He'd never realized how small she was. She barely reached his chin. "I do wish I could meet her. And Barbara's husband and my grandchildren."

"You haven't told any of them." It was a statement.

"Mandy knows," she said. "And I will tell them, in my own time. But, right now, there's nothing to be done. And I forbid you to tell them."

Straker managed a smile. "I won't say anything," he promised. He wouldn't tell them Charlie Straker wouldn't be there to see her children graduate from high-school, see them marry, hold her grandchildren. An inoperable tumor on the underside of her brain. The fact that it was benign simply meant it wasn't growing as fast, wouldn't kill her as quickly. But she was already dying.

"You need to tell them," Straker said. "They deserve to know what's going on."

"Look at the time," she said, looking at her watch. She wouldn't look up at him. "I'd better get supper started. Do you mind checking on Barry? He's been drinking again."

"Maybe I should apologize," Straker said.

"Never apologize for being right," Charlie advised before disappearing into the kitchen. Straker headed up the stairs.

Barry was sitting on the bed in the front bedroom - Eddie's room. He was staring off into space, not really seeing anything.

"I didn't know he had all this stuff up here," Barry said. He nodded toward the shelves on the wall by the door. Two shelves were stocked with glass bottles with various liquids and powders. The bottles were neatly labeled.

"I guess he got this stuff from the neighbors. He does things around the neighborhood, gets stuff. I can't believe what he's done to that old desk," Barry said. The desk top was burned and mottled. A soldering iron sat on a ceramic plate in one corner of the desk, the cord neatly tied up. Next to the iron was a small hand-built radio receiver. The antenna wire was draped out the window.

Straker inspected the chemical labels and gave a low whistle. He remembered playing with these. It was a wonder he hadn't killed everybody in the neighborhood.

"I wouldn't worry about the desk," Straker said. "But you might want to consider getting these chemicals out of here and getting him some better chemistry books." He pointed to the old texts on the shelf above. They were out of date, even for 1947. Barry stood and started pulling down the bottles.

"Barry," Straker said. "How would you feel if somebody came into your office and started hauling things out without your permission?"

"I'm his father. This is my house," Barry said. "I have a right to do this."

"I'm not talking about rights," Straker said. "I'm talking about respect."

"I'm his father."

"And he's your son. You want his respect. Doesn't he deserve the same?"

Barry put the bottles back in their place. "What if he's not okay?"

Straker had nothing to say to that.

Etienne walked in, looked around and hopped on the bed. He gave a silent meow, as if asking why these people were here. Straker let the animal sniff his hand, then scooped the Persian cat into his arms.

"I don't get it," Barry complained. "You're a total stranger and he likes you."

"You've never been around cats much, have you?" Straker asked.

Barry shook his head. "I always had dogs as a kid."

Straker scratched behind Etienne's ears. The cat began to purr, a low, rough, rumble.

"Barry, did you know that most blue-eyed white cats are deaf?"

"Etienne's deaf?"

"As a doorpost," Straker said. "I don't think he hates you. You scare him. You come up behind him and startle him."

Barry raised his hand to pet the cat. Etienne pulled back, but he didn't hiss this time. Cautiously, the animal sniffed the offered hand and finally allowed himself to be petted.

"I guess there's a first time for everything," Barry admitted. "I just don't know where to start."

"Try listening," Straker said. "I know it's hard, but try to listen to what they're trying to tell you. It might be important, like what Eddie tried to tell you last night."

"Do you know what he wanted to tell me?"

"Yes. He wanted you to know that I was armed and dangerous, and that I had just shot down that second ship," Straker said. He let Etienne drop to the ground. "I am still armed."

"And you're still dangerous," Barry added. "I'll be happy when you've gone back to wherever you came from."

"Believe me, Barry, I don't want to stay here," Straker said.

Barry looked around his son's room once more. "Maybe we can set a lab up somewhere, get this stuff out of the house," he said, mostly to himself. "Better yet, maybe I can get him interested in something like astronomy. Something less dangerous. Maybe we could build a telescope."

"That sounds like a good idea," Straker agreed.

* * *

Henderson and Bradley found Mandy near the staff lounge. "What happened?" Henderson asked.

"Doctor Fleming asked me to help with the last autopsy," Mandy explained. "The bodies are packed in dry ice for now, until we can get them sealed up and out of here. I've never smelled anything so bad in my life. It's like they were out there for days instead of hours."

"Maybe the red suits did something?" Henderson asked. He gave Bradley a questioning look.

Bradley shook his head. "I don't know, sir."

"Well, Doctor Fleming asked me to stay and help," Mandy said. "I said I would."

"We're supposed to be on vacation," Henderson reminded her.

"I'll be back before too long," she promised, patting him on the cheek. She looked around before giving him a kiss.

A young man in civilian clothes came and stood in the doorway to the lounge. He held a bottle of Coke in one hand.

"How did you get in here?" Mandy demanded, leaving her husband and going up to the young man. "You can't be in here. You're going to get into trouble. Get out! Get out of here before they catch you and you get into big trouble. This is a high security base, you know."

She gave him a push toward the emergency room entrance. Bradley watched the confused expression on the young man's face as Major Gordon came in from outside.

"Who are you and how the hell did you get in here?" Gordon demanded, catching sight of the civilian.

"I'm with Ballard Funeral Home and I just brought a patient in," the young man stammered. "I was getting a Coke." He seemed to gather his courage. "Looks like you had a crash. I see some debris in that ambulance."

Gordon's face went grim. "You wait here," he told the young man, going to the open emergency doors and motioning for the MPs to come inside.

The MPs came running.

"Get this man out of here," Gordon ordered. "Get him out of here now!"

"Just a moment," Henderson said, stepping forward. "I'm not done with that SOB yet," He gave Gordon a slight nod of acknowledgment. "Bring him back."

Gordon nodded to the MPs, who let the young man go back down the corridor, to where Henderson and Bradley were standing. He then motioned for the men to return to their posts.

"There was no crash. You didn't see anything. You don't go back to town, you don't tell anybody you saw anything," Henderson said. He was convincingly menacing.

The young man was furious. "You can't tell me what to do, I'm a civilian! You can't do anything to me, so you can go to hell!"

"Don't kid yourself, young man. Somebody'll be picking your bones out of the desert," Henderson said.

"Or maybe you'll make good dog food," Bradley added for good measure. The young man blanched and turned away. Bradley took his arm and led him out of the hospital.

Major Gordon intercepted Henderson on his way out. "What was that all about? Why are you threatening civilians?" he asked.

"It's a long story and I'll explain later, if I can, Ben," Henderson promised. "In the meantime, see if you can't keep a better lid on this thing? At the rate we're going, everybody in New Mexico's gonna know about this crash before morning."

"Assuming that's what it was," Gordon said.

Henderson shrugged. "What else could it be?"

Gordon just shook his head.

Henderson turned to Bradley. "Let's call Barry and get out of here. I'm hungry."

* * *

As promised, Barry came and got them. Charlie had a late supper on the table when they got back.

It was simple. Grilled cheese sandwiches and homemade tomato soup.

The kids were sent to bed early. It had been a full day for all of them. Straker and Bradley took care of the evening dishes.

After the dishes were done, Charlie set up a small table for bridge.

"I assume one of you knows how to play bridge," she said to Straker and Bradley. Bradley shook his head. It was a game he'd never learned.

"It's been years, but I think I remember how," Straker said. She pointed out a seat for him at the table. Henderson was his partner.

Bradley turned on the hi-boy radio in the corner and listened to the news. "We have a thunderstorm watch over most of New Mexico again tonight," the announcer said before going back to the network programming. It was an old radio play Bradley had never heard of before.

The program was nearly over when the lights began to flicker. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Straker checked his watch. "Mark, would you mind going out to the car and getting one of those boxes out of the back? The one marked with a caduceus?"

"Yes, sir," Bradley said. Straker pulled his keys from his pocket and tossed them to the astronaut.

Bradley found the box, and a flashlight, without any trouble and returned to the house. He handed the box to Straker as the lights flickered again and then went out. There was an anguished wail from upstairs: "Momma!"

"Barry, there are candles in the kitchen," Charlie said as she opened one of the bookcase doors. She pulled out a candle and lit it. Barry headed to the kitchen for more candles.

"I'll check on the kids," Charlie called, making her way down the hallway and up the stairs.

Straker set the flashlight on the table and opened the small box. Inside were a sealed syringe and a small vial of dark green liquid. Straker tore away the plastic protecting the needle and filled the syringe.

"What is that?" Henderson asked.

"Something to help you forget," Straker answered. "My group has developed a drug we find useful in security situations. It creates amnesia covering the previous twelve hours."

"Why?"

"What you can't remember, you can't tell," Straker said. He nodded to Bradley. He understood. The black astronaut grabbed Henderson's wrist, turning his arm to expose the inside of his elbow. Straker was quick, Henderson barely had time to gasp as the needle went into the vein. It was over in a second.

"You'll take a little nap and when you wake up, this day will be little more than a bad dream," Straker said. Henderson's eyes were already beginning to close. Straker helped Bradley get the man to the sofa before he lost consciousness. The vial and syringe went back into the box and into Straker's jacket pocket.

* * *

The next nursing shift had finally arrived. Mandy and several other nurses headed over to the officers' club for dinner before heading home.

"Look at that storm," one of them said. "Not gonna be a fit night for man nor beast."

"I've never seen green lightning before," another one said before the rain drove them indoors.

The ambulance driver, Dennis, was sitting with one of the nurses getting ready to come on shift. She saw them walk in, waved and headed out into the storm.

The young man came over to their table. "Hi Suzy, what's up?" he said to the young blonde sitting next to Mandy.

"Busy day," Suzy said.

"Anything more on that crash?" Dennis asked conspiratorially.

"We're not supposed to talk about that," Mandy warned.

"Come on," Dennis said. "I know what I saw and nobody is going to tell me I didn't."

"We're still not supposed to talk about it."

"Didn't you help on the autopsies?" Suzy asked. Mandy nodded.

"Yeah," she admitted. "Never smelled anything so bad in my life. It was horrible, and those bodies." She shuddered. Now that it was over, she could afford the luxury of overreacting. "I swear they weren't even human."

"Suzy!" a young lieutenant called from the bar. Suzy excused herself and went over to him. Mandy was left alone with the young man.

"Martians?" he asked. His eyes were wide with excitement.

"I don't know," Mandy said. She looked at her watch and was surprised to see how late it was. "Look, I'm really tired and I need to get home." She stood to leave.

"Hey, thanks for trying to keep me out of trouble," he said.

"It was nothing," she said.

"Can I call you sometime?" he asked. She shook her head ever so slightly. He was cute but much too young, besides she was a happily married woman.

"Just to talk," he added.

"I'm staying with the Strakers for the week," she said, beginning to walk away.

"Wait," he called. "I don't even know your name."

"Gretchen Schmidt," Mandy lied, giving the name of an army nurse she knew. Gretchen had just been transferred to England. She was engaged to an aeronautical engineer named Foster.

* * *

The storm grew closer. Lightning flashed between the clouds. Bradley looked out the living room window. The clouds were an evil black and green.

"Commander, that storm is back," Bradley said.

Straker didn't seem surprised. "It's time to go then."

"What about Mrs. Henderson?" Bradley asked.

"I don't think we can wait."

Barry walked in, holding a candle. "You're leaving in this weather?"

"It's time," Straker said.

"Where are you heading?"

"Home, I hope," Straker answered.

"What if somebody comes looking for you?" Barry asked.

"They won't," Straker said. "We were never here. None of this ever happened. Make sure Mrs. Henderson understands that."

"What about Jim?" Barry wondered. He nodded to his friend, suddenly asleep on the sofa.

"He'll be fine," Straker said. "Just overtired. I'm sure he won't remember most of this when he wakes up."

Charlie came back down the stairs. She stepped over to the two SHADO officers and gave each one a hug. She gently touched Straker's face.

"Take care of yourself."

"I will," Straker promised. The lightning grew closer, the thunder louder.

"We have to go."

* * *

The two strangers were gone. Barry looked down at his wife. There were tears on her cheeks. They glistened in the candlelight.

"What's wrong?"

"Barry, we need to talk," she said.

Part 5

The storm followed the Omen north on the highway. It was worse this time when it struck. The agonized wail of the storm was louder, more piercing. Straker still couldn't remember where he'd seen that color of light, but he no longer cared. He just wanted to keep the car on the road.

Again, the Omen began to buck. Rain slashed onto the windshield, blurring everything. Again, the Omen fell up, but the vertigo was far worse. Time was reweaving the rift created by their passage. The universe was mending itself.

The Omen bottomed out on its shocks once more and, just as before, there was silence.

The car phone rang and both men jumped. Straker grabbed the handset.

"Straker."

"Commander," Peter Carlin's voice cracked over the handset's speaker. "Is everything okay down there?"

"Yes, why?" Straker asked. He was still trembling from the effects of the storm. His ears rang and his head hurt.

"Control lost your transponder signal about ten minutes ago and panicked," Carlin reported. "I'll let them know I found you."

"Yes, do that," Straker agreed. He hung up the handset, cutting the connection. The car was still running. Straker pulled it around and headed back to the studio and SHADO Headquarters.

"Control lost our signal ten minutes ago."

"We were gone nearly a full day," Bradley pointed out.

"Were we?" Straker asked.

"An alien trick?" Bradley asked.

Straker shook his head.

"Our report on this should be interesting," Bradley said.

"What report?"

* * *

"Commander, what happened?" Lake asked when she caught sight of Straker and Bradley entering the control room at SHADO headquarters.

"Nothing happened," Straker said. "We just got caught in that storm. Knocked out communications, that's all. Warn all our teams that if they see that radar signature, they are to avoid that weather if at all possible."

"Yes, sir," Lake acknowledged. She went to Paulson's console and instructed the operative to pass along the order.

"You look like you've been through hell," a familiar, gravelly voice said. Straker looked over to see General James Henderson standing in the door of the office.

"Isn't it past your bedtime?" Straker asked. "It's -" He glanced at the wall clock to check. "Two in the morning."

"I don't need much sleep at my age," the old man said. He was over seventy, still straight backed and square shouldered. His eyes and mind were still needle sharp. He stepped aside to let Straker into the office. Straker went to his desk and sat down. Bradley stood beside the door.

"Mandy and I were going through some old things last night and I found something you might find interesting." He handed Straker an old black and white photograph.

Straker looked at it for a long moment. There were four men standing on the porch of an old bungalow.

He turned the photo over. Written on the back, in Amanda Henderson's neat script, was July 5, 1947 General Sanders, Ed S, Jim, Mark B'.

"Interesting coincidence," Straker said, handing the photograph back to Henderson.

"I thought so, especially since I don't remember this being taken," Henderson said. "Then, I don't remember much of that day at all. I was especially intrigued by this fellow." He pointed to the blond figure in the dark suit. "He looks an awful lot like you."

"I wasn't even ten, then," Straker said. "I'm told I look a lot like my Uncle Edward. Maybe that's who it was."

Henderson gave him an appraising look. "I still haven't decided who's the worse liar," he said. "You or your father." He shook his gray head and put the photo in his pocket. "You're probably right, though. It's just an interesting coincidence." He headed for the office door. "Oh, yes, Kate called me. She wants Mandy and me to come to San Francisco for the holiday."

"Are you going?" Straker asked.

"I haven't decided yet," Henderson said. "I know you won't." The doors closed behind him.

"Sir, did it happen?" Bradley asked.

"Discounting that photograph, is there any evidence that it did?" Straker asked.

"No, sir," Bradley admitted.

"Then, it didn't happen," Straker said. "Ask Colonel Lake to get somebody from security to drive you out to the research center, later. You should be able to catch a nap in the lounge."

"Yes, sir," Bradley agreed. He left the office.

Straker watched after him a long moment, then reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out four dog-tags. He studied them, then put them back in his pocket. "What evidence?" he asked himself.

* * *

The storm was over, but the power was still out. Mandy had finally got back from the hospital. She and Jim were asleep in the guest room. Charlie had gone off to bed a short time ago. She was exhausted and from what she had told him, it wasn't going to get better. Two years, maybe three, she had said.

He was still wide awake. He considered getting a beer, or something harder, but decided against it. The alcohol really didn't help. He knew that. He also knew he was going to need a clear head to pull things together for his family.

Barry found himself climbing the stairs in the darkness. The Henderson boys were camped out on the floor of the upstairs hallway. He made his way around them and opened the door to his son's room.

Eddie was still awake. The cat was draped over the end of the bed, asleep.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Barry asked.

"My head hurts," the boy said.

Barry looked around the moonlit room, the overcrowded shelves. "How about we move some of this stuff out of here after church," Barry said. "We can set a lab up in the garage."

"You mean it?" Eddie asked.

"Yes," Barry said. "Just promise me you won't try anything without checking with a grown-up first. I don't want you blowing yourself up."

"Sure," Eddie agreed. Barry could hear the puzzlement in his son's voice. He sat on the

edge of the bed and pulled the boy to him in a hug. After a moment, the boy put his arms around him.

"I know I don't show it, but you are my son, and I do love you," Barry said. "I don't want you to ever forget that."

Eddie pulled back. "Daddy, what's wrong?"

Barry began to say 'nothing', but decided against it.

"Don't worry about it," he said instead. "It's late, we both need to get some sleep. We'll talk about it later."

Eddie settled back down under the covers and closed his eyes. "Good night, Daddy," a very small voice called out as Barry began to leave.

"Good night, son," Barry said softly, closing the door.

* * *

Straker came out of his office and looked around the control center. He spotted General Henderson talking with Colonel Lake and headed over to them.

"I'm glad you're still here," he said, handing Henderson a slip of paper. Henderson looked at the cryptic notation on the slip and gave Straker a questioning look.

"Your flight leaves at four this afternoon," Straker explained. "The tickets will be waiting at the counter." He turned to Lake. "Colonel, get onto Alconbury and tell them their plane suffered a midair collision with a civilian craft during the storm. No survivors. Tell them we'll handle the clean up."

"I'll order the mobiles to begin the cleanup at first light," Lake said.

"Don't bother," Straker said. "They won't find anything."

Lake gave him a puzzled look. Straker pretended not to notice.

"Get Alec Freeman back here," Straker ordered. "He'll be in command while I'm gone."

"Gone where?" Lake asked.

"San Francisco. My flight leaves in two hours."

"I thought you weren't going," Henderson said.

"I wasn't, but Barry is the only father I've got. I figure it's about time I made peace with him," Straker said. "Time, you never know when you might run out it."

He turned to Lake: "I'll be back in a week."

Henderson turned to go.

"Oh, General," Straker called. "I have an interesting story to tell you, about that picture."

"Roswell?" Henderson asked.

"About a plane crash and a Ufo, and what really happened."

Henderson just stared at him.

"I'll tell you about it in San Francisco," Straker promised.