

Curtain Calls

By James Overton.
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Not that many years into the future a man would walk away from the flames of SHADO, dust his jacket off and leave England for good, leaving behind a woman and a child and a fair amount of respect in the movie industry. Actually no one respected him in the movie industry; no one knew him. Oh there were plenty of people who respected him and those people were either on Moon Base or from SHADO England. Once he'd left SHADO he left behind all his friends and all their respect. And he didn't say good bye to any of them.

They called him a leader once, the Commander of SHADO. They looked up at him and they thought: this man is a great man. One of the greatest leaders in SHADO history. They could eat and drink with him and not feel insecure dining out with a superior officer. He was one of them. Someone who had clawed up the ranks right to the top because of his ability to lead. And at the top he still remained one of them.

But in the end, like every eventuality, it all changed.

He walked into his office on the last day of his career and was met by the "new boy", the man who was going to replace him. They shook hands briefly, had coffee and biscuits and talked about the military mind. A horrible world they spoke of: death as common as the cold, terrorism on every street, and invasion from space (secret to the world wide public maybe) an every day annoyance no one in SHADO could ever underestimate. And in that briefest of meetings, the new commander and the old commander sitting down to their coffee like civilized humans were unaware the near future would unfold like a tapestry that would eventually spiral down for both of them to near darkness, betrayal, death and the destruction of the past. The new commander didn't know or even had the vaguest of suspicions SHADO was about to end. The old commander knew something and it had eaten into his thoughts these last three years, and he would die without telling anyone his reasons for leaving or his thoughts on the impending doom.

But people say the end is just the beginning for something new, maybe even for something better. And when the curtain fell on the old commander he hoped this new era would begin like it did way back when Commander Straker pulled the strings: with responsibility and respect for the job. But there seemed a doubt in his mind as he spoke to the new commander. He couldn't understand what he felt and he didn't like what he felt, but he knew the dark would come and it would take too many souls with it before a new dawn came again.

The old commander left the building without the slightest hesitation. He didn't say his goodbyes, no one saw him leave except the secretary. And when he did drive away he took one last look in the rear view mirror and saw a building that would soon be engulfed in flames and even now he could hear the screams. They were terrible. And they never left him.

In a silent darkened room in a motel somewhere in New Zealand the old commander could still hear those screams as he tightened his thumb on the trigger of the gun he'd purchased not two hours earlier. Squeezing, the hammer clicked hard and bullet drove itself into his brain.

And the screaming stopped. For a long moment he hung in the air and listened to the

silence. It was a dead silence. And in that silence, just before he dropped to the floor, he saw the face of the new commander. The man would also die in agony. Like they all did.

Like they all did.