

# Harbinger

by Stephen Le Vesconte & Steven Mellor ©1999

*Future events cast their Shado(w)s before them*  
Popular anon.(adapted)

## Prologue:

The atmosphere in Skydiver One was tense. Colonel Paul Foster paced back and forth in front of the chronometer, glancing at it every so often as if to intimidate it from its countdown. He stopped as the hands lined up to salute midday.

"Fire One."

Foster swung to face Captain Purcell, and glanced at Young at the pilot console on the upper deck. Young, too, had turned and was looking down at his skipper. Purcell was only obeying orders given by Commander Straker. The same Commander Straker who for all they knew was still in the strange Alien dome targeted by the Skydiver torpedoes. Young looked at Foster for confirmation, but Purcell met his glance instead. There was none. Only the steely gaze demanding compliance.

"Yes, sir." Young replied, "Firing One... One away."

Foster felt the Skydiver lurch briefly as somewhere to fore it gave birth to a child of destruction. Damn, he thought, if only Straker hadn't insisted on splitting up. It may have doubled their chances of getting a warning out, but had probably sacrificed their commanding officer in doing so...

There was a flare of light from the bow monitor screens as the dome was split apart. No chance now, Foster turned away and looked at the chronometer. Ten seconds had elapsed. Would another minute have made any difference? Two? Ten? He may never know...

"Colonel Foster!" It was Lieutenant Neal, her voice raised with excitement. He joined her at the port monitor with Purcell. Making his way through the rocks and weeds of the sea-bed with the aid of his aqua-sled, highlighted by the glow of the dome's destruction, was Straker.

Purcell looked up at Young, a smile of relief on his face, "Fire Two." This time the accompanying jolt was far more satisfying to feel...

**1982:**

James David Anderson. SHADO Operative 2310-64. Security Rating - Grade... Ah, what the hell!

Anderson tossed his I.D. card across the small, sparse cell and rested his chin on his knees for the umpteenth time that morning. He had been trying to make sense of the events that had led to him being locked up like a common criminal by reassuring himself that he was the same person, with the same high security rating, as the face on the card. With little else to do, it passed the time as well as any other activity. His watch said ten minutes to noon. The guard, Finamore probably, would be here shortly with some food. About time.

Still fatigued by the truth serum Doctor Jackson had shot into his arm, he closed his eyes and went over the interrogation in his mind once again...

*What were you doing in the dome?*

*Dome? What dome? I don't know what you're talking about.*

*We saw you in the dome.*

*I don't know anything about any dome...*

Some cock and bull about a dome. First Straker and Foster fly out to a mysterious rendezvous with Skydiver One and before you know it, they are back and accusing you of being somewhere you have never even heard of.

Wrong time and the wrong place. You relieve someone so they can go on a long and much needed furlough and this is the result.

I'll get you for this, Keith Ford...

He felt the anger and stress rising again as he remembered Jackson administering one, then another dose of the serum. He had been apologetic, almost. Hadn't made any difference. Truth never changes.

Where am I?

Looks like SHADO Control. Where is everyone?

He was seated at his console, but in a strange detached way his mouth was miming to words that sounded like his voice and somehow were not. Commands for Moonbase. Without inflection. Mechanical, almost. His body turned.

Huh? Oh, it's you Shea. You alright? You look a bit down, lass. What's the matter, cat got your...

Anderson suddenly jolted to consciousness to find Finamore standing over him with a small tray. He must have dropped off. A sharp pain made him think that he had been hit over the head in his dream. It was to Finamore's credit that he did not take Anderson's sudden move as hostile. He could have shot him out of fright.

Finamore echoed Anderson's own question from the dream, "You alright?"

Anderson nodded, "Yeah." He composed himself, "Yes. Bad dream. You woke me up just in time."

The guard still regarded him suspiciously, "Not a guilty conscience then."

As a joke, it was ill conceived. Anderson wondered if the dream echoed the shock and disbelief that Johnson and the others in Control had showed as Straker called for Security to come and lock him up. What they really felt about someone trusted in their midst being a traitor.

Anderson did not answer and just took the tray. Guilty till proven innocent - that was the SHADO way. He remembered Colonel Foster's trial last year for a supposed security leak and realised how he must have felt, particularly as he had ultimately been cleared. A wrong decision, and he could have been pardoned posthumously.

Finamore left him to his lunch. After a few mouthfuls, he realised he did not have an appetite. He took a swig of orange juice and put the tray down. His chin was getting used to his knees now...

It's dark. Anyone got a light?

Oh, that's pretty. Bit like that psychedelic panel behind Straker's desk.

The black gave way to a mist of multi-coloured light. Always wondered about why Straker has that, Anderson thought.

He was once again in SHADO Control, walking from console to console. Something or someone moved to his left but even though he had the impulse to take a quick glance, his head remained resolutely locked on whatever task his body was undertaking. Aware of other movement, his body was under other control no matter he tried to do. He tried to clear his throat, but unless he had gone deaf...

No, I can hear the sound of Control. There was the faint squeak of boots on ground but the lack of chit-chat, of simple human ambiance, was more noticeable by its absence. The need to turn his head or simply pinch himself was starting to get unbearable.

We all have nightmares where we can't move or run, but to be in a body you can't control...

The other-body he was in turned to check another console, and Anderson wanted to thump it in sheer desperation. Curiously his right hand twitched, and almost straight away he felt his own thoughts being bound in a mental strait-jacket. Like wearing blinkers.

His psyche struggled but it got tighter, more restraining. So, it's a rumble you want, is it... The other-mind tried to crush the resistance out of Anderson, a psychic boa constrictor. His burly mind matched his burly body and sickened at being unable to prove his innocence once, he was not about to be confined a second time. His psyche started to wriggle free. The floor lurched suddenly, and the other-body leaned uncontrollably. Anderson shot free of the coils of the other-mind, and in an instant he broke his fall to spin and catch a glimpse of his surroundings...

Finamore was standing over him again, impassive as ever. He had slept through lunch. Trying to make sense of the last impression in his mind, Anderson picked up the tray and raised it to the guard.

"No need," he was told, "Commander Straker's on his way back. He gave orders for you to be released."

All Anderson could reply was a simple "Oh."

Finamore started to go but turned back at the door, "The restroom next door is free, if you want to freshen up."

No smile, no cheer. No bloody fanfare either, Anderson thought. He looked at his watch again. It was just past midday.

'UFOs now moving out of Sector NML-12' The calm, pseudo-human voice of the Space Intruder Detector echoed around SHADO Control 'Must assume attack velocity.' There was a pause whilst the orbital computer calculated, receiving data from the newly manned Watchdog probes, 'Estimate four hours seven minutes TO trajectory termination in Earth Atmosphere ', "three forty-eight Interception by Moonbase Defences'

The sound of yellow alert klaxons could be heard in Control. Anderson patted his face dry with the towel and looked up to see in the mirror Johnson standing in the doorway. She looked a little sheepish as she came forward.

"Just wanted to say sorry, Jim." She tried to avoid eye contact, "I guess we should have tried to stick up for you or something. But it was such a shock... "

Her voice tailed away. It vaguely amused him that the cool, efficient exterior should give way to embarrassment of all things. He tossed the towel over the rail.

"Never mind, lass." Anderson rubbed his eyes and smoothed his hands over his face. The brief darkness gave way to a curious vision of SHADO Control again.

Johnson stood before him again, stiff and emotionless. Smoke was clearing and personnel were stiffly getting to their feet. He could not turn his head again, but he was aware of others behind and to one side.

He had lowered his hands and Johnson was looking at him with concern. He wondered what kind of expression he was wearing. "I'm alright," he said, before she had a chance to ask,

"Effects of that bloody truth serum. Keep having... visions of some sort."

"Hallucinating?" Johnson asked, and Anderson nodded.

"Perhaps you should go home. Get some rest... after all you've been through." She went to take his arm, "After Doc Shroeder's had a look at you."

He neatly sidestepped and she grasped empty air. He'd had enough of doctors' for quite some time, regrets or no. "Thanks for the thought, but I'd rather get back on." He made a nod in the direction of Control, "What's the hoo-hah about?"

Johnson looked in the same direction, "The Ufos that have been grouping? They're on the move."

Anderson made to go through the door, but this time Johnson moved to block him, "Are you sure?"

He looked into her deep brown eyes, and his reflection in them. Then his gaze went deeper, and for a second he thought he caught a glimpse of the same blank, uncomprehending gaze of the Ayshea in the dream. Like the walking dead.

"I obviously have something to prove," he said, and moved past her into the corridor.

Ayshea Johnson turned to follow him with her eyes, bit her lip in doubt and walked after him.

\* \* \*

Straker and Foster were back.

The more friendly and relaxed atmosphere that prevailed when the commander was away evaporated as he walked through the door with the colonel two steps behind. Someone had once joked that the air temperature went down several degrees too, and had mocked up a chart to prove it. It was somewhere strategically out of casual sight behind a monitor. Anderson did not feel the cold, but he felt Straker walk past at speed into his office without so much as an acknowledgment. But Foster paused, grasped his shoulder, gave him a wink and a smile. It was a shared moment of comradeship, and as much of an apology that he needed from the guy. Straker would have to grovel far more.

Johnson's intercom buzzed, and Anderson heard Straker's voice. He was calling for a full staff briefing in two sections, with a list of those for the first session. He and Johnson were on it. She finishing jotting it down and rose from her seat to start organising cover.

He partially turned to watch her, and realised that his point of view was similar to that in the vision when the disturbance occurred. Johnson was talking to Lieutenants Ockenden and Horton. He closed his eyes and relaxed, wondering if he would see it again. Nothing. He frowned. "Not asleep already?"

Anderson blinked open his eyes. Ockenden was a few feet away, watching.

"It's nothing, Sarah." he told her. Quite literally. She looked at him closely. Why did he get the impression they were all watching him?

"Briefing's now." She said. "Coming?"

\* \* \*

Fifteen of the Control personnel were standing at ease in one of the small conference areas. Chairs were a luxury of time they did not have.

A quick in, do as you're told and back out again, Anderson pondered. Straker and Foster were on the dais at the front. The commander cleared his throat.

"As you're aware," he began, "We've been on yellow alert for about an hour and the massed Ufos we've been monitoring are now heading our way. We now believe we know their plan."

Foster continued, "Our missions away over the last forty-eight hours have dealt with some kind of alien dome on the Atlantic seabed. The Aliens had constructed it as a base of operations, presumably as a spearhead and as a place where they could operate freely."

There was a murmur from the assembled staff.

Foster continued, "Because of their susceptibility to Earth's atmosphere, the Ufos could remain operational longer underwater. This obviously aided the construction of the dome."

So that's it, Anderson realised.

Ockenden half raised a hand, "What was in the dome, sir?"

Straker, arms folded, took in a gasp of air and turned to Foster. The colonel indicated with raised eyebrows that Straker should answer that one.

"We found a mock-up of SHADO Control. A pretty accurate one. Too accurate for my liking."

Anderson was aware that Straker's gaze has somehow focused on him. Uh oh.

"But," Straker continued, "You can be assured that Lieutenant Anderson was not to blame. Despite the harsh treatment we put him through, it would seem that the Aliens also know more about us than we previously suspected. This mock-up was manned by duplicates of ourselves, probably created by plastic surgery. Regrettably, on our first recce, it was the double of Anderson who we saw and we leapt to an obvious conclusion."

There was a more disturbed muttering this time.

Obvious but wrong, Anderson was thinking, Or was it?

"You have my personal apology, Lieutenant."

There was a notable lack of response. Foster turned to look at Anderson, "You should think yourself lucky. He killed me whilst we were down there... "

Straker gave him a semi-stern look, "I didn't say I enjoyed the experience, Colonel Foster."

There was a slightly mocking tone to Foster's "No, sir." that caused a ripple of laughter amongst the group. Straker let it pass. For once the tension needed easing. But his attention fell once again on the silent and oblivious Anderson.

A duplicate of SHADO, right down to the personnel, controlled by Aliens? Anderson remembered the dead look in Johnson's eyes in the dream. The constraint on his consciousness. Controlled... He raised his eyes to look at Straker. What had he seen? Obviously he had a look of horror or some such on his face because a number had turned to look at him.

"Thank you, sir." he finally gasped. Johnson was giving him concerned looks again. He glanced at the back of his hand. He had gone a deathly shade of pale.

Foster started to step forward, "Are you feeling alright, Lieutenant."

Anderson nodded, "It's just a shock, that's all." He tried to dismiss it all, but morbid curiosity got the better of him, "What happened to it?"

"We destroyed it at midday. We barely got out in time." Straker replied, "We suspect they planned to use it to give orders that would have disrupted our defence in the coming attack. We can only assume that the incoming UFOs are not aware that we have destroyed it. This could work in our favour. We plan to let them get close, think they have succeeded and then trap them in a concentrated offensive."

Midday?

Straker had produced a hastily prepared wall chart which indicated a proposed strategy and was giving a rough idea of its execution, but the time rang bells in Anderson's head. The upheaval, the sight of a strange mist of colour as part of the SHADO Control he had seen had

been torn apart, the mechanical controlled movements... If this was all a bizarre coincidence, it was too sick for his liking. It also meant that the mock-up was still intact, though damaged, somewhere...

Anderson remembered little else about the briefing, but it was over and Control was moving up a gear in preparation. Back at his console, he tried to fathom out what little he knew from his own experiences and what Straker and Foster had said. If, as he suspected, the Aliens had survived and the mock-up had somehow been shielded then it still posed a threat. But how did he reveal his suspicions without mentioning what could after all be drug induced hallucinations? He chased the Catch-22 situation around in his thoughts whilst he monitored the approaching wave of Ufos.

There was only one way. He somehow had to go back and find out more. Things would get progressively more hectic as time ticked away to zero hour. The sooner the better. It had to be now. He waited until Horton was close and got his attention, "Cover for me a bit. Call of nature."

The normally genial operative didn't even acknowledge or smile as he replaced Anderson, sitting stiffly at the console. Anderson frowned.

Either some people still did not trust him or he was getting paranoid. Guess it's all on our minds.

He shut the cubicle door and closed his eyes. Still nothing. Perhaps it was just a bad dream, but it had been so real. He leaned back against a side wall, eyes still shut and tried to concentrate.

Darkness gave way to weary futility. He had tried. Maybe it was nothing to worry about. Whilst it was something of a relief, a small niggling of a doubt remained. It would have to wait. He made his way back to Control. There was an increased bustle, less chat and more activity.. He relieved Horton and the man moved silently and slowly away. Anderson watched him and wondered if he had passed unknowingly in the vision state again.

He leaned towards Johnson to his right, "Is Andy okay. Bit moody today?"

Johnson turned her head to look at the retreating man and back to Anderson, "Can't say I'd noticed." She lowered her voice a little, "How are you feeling?"

He managed a smile, a shrug, "Better. Certainly a weight off my neck after that briefing."

"What do you suppose it was all about?" Johnson obviously felt the need to chat, "How do they know about us. Our security's supposed to be the best. Above top secret."

"Not to the Aliens, it seems." Anderson kept an eye on the monitor, "We know they have powerful mental abilities, we've seen that they control people... "

He paused, remembering the blank look on Horton's face. It was too much like those in his vision, surely not a coincidence. On an impulse, he was already standing.

Johnson looked up at him. "Where are you going?" she whispered.

Would she understand? Anderson asked himself. Possibly, but there was too little time.

He said nothing and mounted the steps and out towards the secondary reception area of SHADO Headquarters after the man, the buzz of adrenalin in his blood, the thrill of slight fear. Rounding a corner, he felt a familiar queasiness...

He was back in Control. The bleak, non-human atmosphere surrounded him in a wall of near silence.

Not now. Why now of all times?

A semblance of normal operations had been restored. So it was still intact.

The damaged wall at the back had been hastily repaired, a computer bank moved to cover the worst of it. His other body - I assume it's my double - was seated, turned to face Straker as were the others. Johnson was at her console, the others approximately as he remembered when he'd left a few seconds ago.

No sooner than he fully came to terms with the shift and the opportunity it presented, the mental constrictions began again. This time, psychic knives dug into his soul and he cried out silently in the prison of his mind. Logic like a strait-jacket conspired to silence him forever, but his own ire began to rise. He raged against the enforced control. There was a murmur of distant voices, as if in another room. Unintelligible gibberish. He felt the constraint slacken slightly. The Alien was communicating telepathically with the others presumably, being distracted. The Straker double was panning his vision over them, as if silently making a speech.

Anderson ignored the vision from the other-eyes and curled into a ball. The control tried to tauten to match him, but as it did so he uncoiled violently and twisted. Taken unawares, the constraints snapped, falling away in an impression of pain and surprise...

Anderson staggered forward, nearly collapsing to his knees. So intent had been his effort to move, to regain control of his other-body, that his pent-up energy had thrown him off balance. Damn, nearly had it too...

The corridor was empty. Horton was gone.

Cursing under his breath, Anderson began to return to Control. The last vision had decided it. He had to tell Straker, repercussions or no. But he needed a second opinion.

Johnson turned urgently as he neared her.

"What is wrong with you?" she hissed under her breath.

He waved the matter aside, "Shea, these visions... "

She looked agitated, "Not again. You've got to go and... "

He cut her short, keeping his voice low and urgent, "What if that mock-up were still intact? And the Alien doubles still getting ready?" She looked at him blankly so he continued, "I thought I was just seeing things, but my so-called hallucinations matched up with the destruction of that dome. I just had another. They're still getting ready."

The woman looked at him compassionately, "Yes, of course." The tone of her voice said otherwise. She was trying to humour him until she could have him seen to. He realised that it would probably be Straker's reaction too. There was precious little Anderson could do to prove his case either. He looked up. Eyes that had been watching the huddled exchange were quickly averted.

Traitor or madman.

He remembered Horton. Whether he was still about or not, he had to find him. He rose angrily and went back out. Johnson's hand hovered over the alert. Anderson's post was still uncovered. She signaled to Ockenden to cover for her then went after him.

A couple of corridors ahead, Anderson struggled with his thoughts as he searched. The Aliens are still ready. So how do we stop them. How do I stop them. I have to go back, but I have to find Horton...

He was so engrossed that he bounced into his quarry as he came back round a corner. Anderson was taken aback, more so by the lack of surprise on Horton's

face. There was a moment of joint fear and relief before Anderson got a hold of himself and attempted to hit a nearby alarm. Horton's hand lashed out and gripped Anderson's wrist with a speed and strength that stunned him. He cried out in pain...

He cried out in pain!

His other-body finally had a voice. It was also in agony. Anderson squinted through the torture to find himself on his knees, surrounded by the impassive familiar yet alien faces of the doubles. Whereas the last time it felt like daggers in the mind, this time each nerve was being set alight one after another in quick succession. The tentacles of psychic restraint were also edging back, waiting for his rebellion and defiance to fall before binding him again. He realised what some of the previous victims of Alien control must have gone through. But he would hold out as long as he could, if he could...

If... The pain subsided slightly. It seemed curious that they had not killed him but if they were to maintain a facade for whatever plan was in action he must be needed alive. It was in this brief respite that he realised he was not alone. This time there was another presence. A dazed mind thought alongside him, having caught the brunt of the psychic assault. He had not had time to notice it before, but it must always have been there. It was the original mind of the body he was in, near dead from exhaustion. The host must be human, rather than Alien. If they killed it, would the shock also kill him?

In a moment of horror, Anderson realised that his attempts to break the mind control had unleashed the full force of whatever Alien gestalt they were up against on his counterpart.

He increased the contact with the other-mind, and was struck by a curious familiarity. It was inexpressible, a kind of *deja-vu*. A sense of belonging in this cold, sterile environment. Wordlessly he tried to ask the name of the other-person. No reply came, but the jumbled threads of consciousness were unmistakable.

It was himself!

Anderson reeled with shock and incomprehension. It was like looking in a mirror to see your own face suddenly horribly scarred. Hadn't Straker said they were created by plastic surgery? No, the more he touched the other-him - the more of a reflection it became.

There was a rising crescendo of pain. His other-soul was bearing up for a final battle. To fall was to fail and the Aliens would have won control. Anderson separated himself from himself and fought off the other-worldly demons that snapped around their heels. Once again it seemed he had the element of surprise. They obviously had not realised the resistance had been his, and not the other-him. Some fell away in the pain of an assault they did not expect, others in unemotional surprise. There was a protracted second as he snapped into the body of his doppelganger to see the ring of blank but curiously stunned doubles. It was only a second, but it was all that was needed.

The pain had gone, the control had gone. Anderson sprang to his feet in a rush of adrenalin and swung powerful arms around. One fist made severe contact with Straker's jaw. The doubles moved awkwardly and he realised that if the other-minds of his colleagues were struggling as his counterpart had, then the

Aliens were fighting on two fronts. He cleared an opening in the ring of bodies and ran through it, up the stairs of Control and into the same corridor where he had encountered Horton.

His mind raced. If this mock-up was in an underwater dome, then his options were very limited. He still had to get away from the zombies who were staggering after him. He threw himself in a service lift, hoping it worked and eventually led somewhere.

The lift jolted to a halt and he dived through opening doors to run along a corridor. His mind had barely registered why the Aliens had felt it necessary to mock up part of the offices of the Harlington-Straker Studios too when he ran through a fire exit in to the sunlight of a warm summers day.

What the hell!

It was almost exactly as he remembered it a full day ago or so. By his time, it was about two in the afternoon. The position of the sun checked out. The noise of pursuit started again. Questions, and they were bloody great ones, would have to wait... until what? I wake up again? How do I get out of this one? Where the hell am I? The priority was to run. He darted for the backlot, hoping to lose them in the maze of warehouses and workshops. Out here there was no-one. The usually busy studios were as dead as the expressions on the doubles faces. He rounded two corners in quick succession and saw a small storage shed. He opened the door as quickly and as quietly as possible, closed it again behind him and hid in the shadows. It was a little while before the noise of slow running came and went.

They may have superior intellects, but their instincts had atrophied as much as their bodies, Anderson thought. He waited a little before sliding back to the door and was about to open it when a nicotine stained hand clamped over his mouth. Arms dragged him strongly and quietly back into the shed, spinning him in the shadows to see a craggy face before him, finger to the lips. "Colonel Freeman?" Anderson hissed.

Freeman regarded him warily, if not believing his senses. Anderson could understand the sentiment.

"Anderson, isn't it? Ford's assistant?" he asked in a low whisper after a few moments. Anderson nodded dumbly. It had been some weeks since the colonel had left to do a worldwide check on the local SHADO bases that were increasingly dotting the globe. As amiable as Foster, the colonel had laughingly accepted a jacket made up by a couple of operatives with the legend Alec Freeman World Tour 1982 stitched across the back. It seemed a lifetime ago...

"Are you alone?" Freeman asked.

More than you know, Anderson thought. He desperately wanted to wake up and escape this nightmare. But he had originally come here to find answers. The colonel had been asking more questions. Anderson barely registered them, "Answer some questions for me first," he said. Be blunt. May not have much time. "What's going on?"

Freeman was incredulous, "Don't you know? You were here, weren't you?" Anderson did not know where here was, "Not exactly." He turned the question, "What happened at your end?" The South Atlantic. Regional Command for the Skydivers in that area. "We were priming the Skydivers for battle. The supply

planes had dispatched the extra fuel and ammo. We were all set." The normally genial colonel seemed a desperate man. Desperate to tell his story. Desperate for an answer he thought the other man could give, "I don't know what went wrong, but you lot suddenly changed the rules."

It was obvious he blamed Control. "What do you mean?" Anderson asked. Freeman was getting suspicious, "You don't act like you're controlled, but you don't seem to know much." He produced a pistol, "How do I know you're not in league with the Aliens?"

Keep on top, Anderson thought. "How do I know you're not?"

Freeman did not respond. "Alright," Anderson continued, "Neither of us knows what's going on, and neither trusts the other." He glanced back at the window, "Do we just sit here, or can we trade facts until we're found?"

Freeman relaxed slightly, "I'm sorry. It's just I don't know who I can trust around here."

"Likewise."

The two men faced off for a moment until Anderson pressed home his advantage, "So you want to talk about it?"

Freeman settled down a bit, "What's to tell? The Aliens got through, landed around here somewhere and have managed to infiltrate SHADO."

Anderson hoped this tied in with his world, "Sector NML-12?"

"Where else?"

Anderson nodded thoughtfully. So far, so good.

"Control cut communications," Freeman continued, "All attempts to get people in, or get strings pulled at higher levels - nothing. They got up top very quickly. Straker, Henderson and the IAC, the P.M. It was a deliberately short chain. Our Achilles Heel, unfortunately. We guess they were either killed or controlled, like those freaks out there."

Freaks who as far as Anderson could see were the Control staff, including Straker.

"You do realise who they are?" Anderson asked.

Freeman nodded, caressing the pistol, "Oh yes. And until this is over, we have no option but to shoot to kill."

Anderson mulled over this. There had been about fifty Ufos in NML-12. A lot of Aliens, a lot of control, as he had found out the hard way. But a mere handful compared to the combined armed forces and seconded military might, "Have any other Ufos got through?"

Freeman shrugged, "How do we know? We've always counted on the security of Control. Virtually everything is coordinated through it. We can utilize some of the subsidiary tracking stations but we can't contact Moonbase or SID. Earth's blind and defenceless until we retake it or get together a separate force." He shifted his weight in the small space, "What about you?" Anderson had been so busy making mental notes he had forgotten his situation. One question turned the conversation around thankfully, "We were waiting for the Ufos. It was a heavy offensive, but we could still have blasted them... "

"That's just it!" Freeman raised his voice slightly, "As far as I can tell, we didn't even fire one missile. Not one shot. We just let them in. Escorted them

almost, if the reports are correct."

Anderson was stunned. Was this some strange premonition of the future? The odd behavior, an indication of Alien control that would prevent SHADO from being an effective defence?

Was this to be the fate of the Earth, finally crushed by an inhuman foe? Not if I can help it...

"This is probably going to sound crazy to you," Anderson tried to put the situation into perspective in his mind, "It sounds crazy enough saying it, but I come from somewhere... before this has happened. I thought I was having some kind of hallucination or something, but to me the Ufos are still two hours away from Earth!"

He had inadvertently raised his voice and Freeman made a threateningly quiet' gesture. "But that was weeks ago." Freeman countered in a low whisper again. Possibly shock of the attack, he thought, thinks he can still do something to stop it.

Anderson continued, "If only I could find some way back... "

The noise of pursuit drew close again. The Aliens must have realised that Anderson had hidden and doubled back. Freeman indicated to get back and down in the shadows of the shed, silently hoping the earlier outburst had not given them away.

Moments passed. Long moments. The noise of searching and the flickers of shadows through the grimed window passed. After a couple of minutes, Freeman dared speak in a low whisper again, "Suppose I do believe you. What then?" His voice carried the same inflections as Johnson when she was trying to humour him.

"Before I ended up here, I'd noticed something was up with some of the others, but after the incident where they thought I was a traitor... "

Freeman's head jerked to look at him. "You?"

Anderson looked puzzled, "Well.. yes. You were covering the Atlantic at the time, weren't you?" Freeman nodded. "So when Straker and Foster went back to go inside... " Freeman cut him dead, "They didn't go back. They returned and as preparations were made, the attack started. If we had destroyed the dome then maybe... "

"But we did destroy it!" Anderson was getting puzzled. Freeman gave him an annoyed look to silence him again. If this was the future, why was the past different. Misinformation? No, the Skydiver involved would have operated out of the South Atlantic base that the colonel would have been at.

Freeman looked at him even more disbelievingly. Definitely shock, he decided.

Perhaps it was just a hallucination. A bad daydream. Anderson casually glanced at his watch. Some twenty minutes had passed since...

"You said it all happened a couple of weeks ago?" Anderson frowned.

"What's the date today?"

Freeman looked at his own watch, "The twenty-third. Why?"

"Of August?"

Freeman nodded. "Of course."

But that was still today...

It hurt Anderson to think. All the stress, the loneliness, the bizarre mind-bending situation he was in and now something else he could not understand. None of it made sense now whereas before he was so sure. He was struggling for more answers and arrived at a direction instead.

"I'm going back to Control." Anderson decided. It may be where his real body was... or should be. Whatever. He got up slowly and peered carefully out through the dirt on the window. Freeman got up behind him.

"It's madness to try," he said, "But it was my target too. If we can't use it ourselves, my plan was to destroy it."

Anderson turned briefly, nodding in agreement, "That's where I was originally and perhaps that's where I need to be. To get back." He glanced out of the window again. All clear. Whether the colonel believed him or not was irrelevant. They had a common purpose. He opened the door a crack and peered out. Clear there too. It opened without too much of a squeak and he stood once more in the sun. Freeman followed.

"Even if I do believe you," The colonel whispered as they started to move as swiftly and silently from cover to cover as they could, "Do you honestly think you can do anything?"

Anderson was no longer sure, but he did not let on, "I'll do what I can. But first I have to..."

Without a sound, as one body, armed operatives were suddenly blocking the route. Freeman turned to find their rear covered too. Horton, Johnson... and Straker, his jaw bruised from Anderson's earlier blow.

Most had SHADO issue machine rifles, others the chromed weapons the Aliens used. All were pointed at them.

So they do have instincts...

"On three," Freeman whispered, "You left, I go right. Try and get back to cover." He silently counted off one... two...

"Wait..." Anderson started to protest but Freeman took a running dive. The air cracked with the sound of the guns picking off the colonel in virtual mid-air. In a split second Anderson saw the wounds open and trails of blood splatter off in each direction. No shot missed.

Impulsively he went to move in the opposite direction and felt rather than heard the bullets, splitting his skin, ripping through organs...

Through pain shut eyelids, he felt and saw the heat of the sun. Orange, then red.

Black.

Darkness.

Light.

"Jim!"

Anderson's eyes snapped open and he sat bolt upright from where he had been lying on the floor. Johnson was kneeling beside him. Several operatives stood around, Horton among them.

"What the blazes is going on?" Straker's Bostonian accent cut through the air and suddenly he was standing there too. Anderson struggled to find words. His mind was still

reeling with the shock of being killed. Of dying. The death of Colonel Freeman. The cold, dispassionate slaughter...

Horton spoke first, "He walked into me, sir." To Anderson, he seemed genuinely flustered, "Seemed to go berserk and tried to hit the alarm. When I tried to stop him, he passed out."

Straker knelt down beside Johnson and addressed Anderson, "You're obviously not ready for duty, Lieutenant. I realise that you must want to prove yourself in light of events these past few days. But it may be best if you... "

Anderson tried to stand, "No, sir. I think we may... "

The commander cut him short in return, "No questions, Anderson." He stood and looked down at Johnson, "Help him to sickbay please, Lieutenant. When he is rested, I'll come and see what the fuss is about. We have more urgent matters to attend to." He looked around at those gathered, "Urgent, I think I said." There was a scurry of activity and the feet and legs around Anderson and Johnson rapidly scattered.

Satisfied, Straker moved on too.

Johnson helped him up and made to support him as he walked. He waved her off and with a vague smile indicated she should go first. She walked on ahead, only pausing to make sure he was following.

The smile was not returned.

As they headed for sickbay, Anderson turned over the events of what had just happened. If he was to convince anyone, he had to make sure he knew what may occur in the next couple of hours. Or at least rationalise an explanation for the others.

He winced, in a curious way still feeling the pain from the wounds inflicted in the vision. Johnson paused again and half turned. He steeled himself and caught up with her, and they walked along the corridor that led up to sickbay.

"Aren't you going to ask me what happened?" he asked. There was no reply. Anderson caught up with her, overtaking and walking backwards to look her in the eyes. There was a reflection of the steely-eyed Ayshea who lived in his reoccurring nightmare in her eyes. The same blank, uncomprehending gaze, as if they did not understand entirely where they were. An alien viewpoint.

No. Not you.

As they reached sickbay, Anderson's world seemed to collapse around him. The one person he could perhaps trust in Control had fallen under Alien control too. Should he try and raise the alarm again? Horton seemed human enough just now. Was he really going mad?

The woman who he knew as Ayshea Johnson made a gesture to indicate that he should enter, and followed him in. A nurse came over and Johnson left his side to talk to Doctor Schroeder.

"Still not up to it?" the nurse asked. Anderson tried to keep Johnson in view while being guided to a bed and nodded. Johnson glanced in his direction, still talking in a low voice. Schroeder stiffened as she returned her gaze to him, smiled briefly, then came over to Anderson. He shuddered briefly, remembering the truth serum shots, as with a brief squirt from a hypodermic the nurse prepared to give him a sedative.

"I said you should have come here first," Johnson seemed to be her usual self again, "They'll look after you. Get some rest and I'll come back after we've sorted the Aliens out." She even gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

He barely had time to register it all before she was gone.

The nurse dabbed some local anaesthetic on his forearm. Anderson made a half gesture to catch her eye.

"Would you mind if I took a tablet instead?" He asked, trying his best to look wistful, "After the interrogation, I feel a bit... wary of those." He eyed the syringe.

The nurse looked at it too, then at Shroeder who was watching from a discrete distance.

"I don't see why not." She put the implement down and went over to the drugs cabinet.

Anderson had no intention of being sedated, but he did not want to create a scene and risk being restrained. He had come perilously close to that already, he felt.

He had a brief reprieve, a few moments maybe, to mull over the impressions he had. The Aliens were going to try some sort of mind control and at a distance presumably. But if Horton and Johnson had been under control and rejected it, then it could not be very strong. No, they had managed to do that before quite easily, usually with an implant or some sort of hypnosis. That might be what's happening here. The mind control was being passed on from person to person, acting as a potential trigger for when the Aliens got closer. Finamore, Horton, Johnson, possibly Shroeder now. Everyone could be...

So where did the visions fit in? If it was in the future, why bother? It was not obviously. Somehow it was here and now. If not in space then in time. More than one time at once? He had read about parallel existences, the so-called many worlds' theory. And the dome? Some sort of gateway that allowed physical passage as opposed to his method? Still too many questions and not nearly enough answers.

He was lost in his thoughts when the nurse returned, two pills in one hand and a cup of water in the other. Anderson went through the motions of taking them. Slight of hand kept them palmed until the nurse, satisfied, turned away. He made as if to rest and possibly get some sleep. In all honesty he was exhausted and could have done with the sleep. But if he did, what would he be waking up to?

He made sure his position of rest allowed him to see the majority of sickbay through half shut eyes, allowing himself the brief luxury of relaxation whilst he continued to churn though the concepts. He could do with talking to Doctor Jackson. He was hot on this kind of thing. But with the possibility that anyone in SHADO control could be a relay to the Aliens, even unwittingly, he was as good as alone.

The link between this world and the strange double-world still bothered him. Why bother with this one when they already had another? There had been recent theories that the Aliens were non-corporeal, creatures of pure thought that took over host bodies. The boundaries of space and time as understood might not apply to them. The Aliens they knew could be unwitting pawns of a higher intelligence. Suppose this parallel world was only a thin layer of consciousness away, normally separate from but always a part of us. Who could be closer to you than yourself? It would also explain the dome. Conquer the minds, then use it as a means of physical invasion. It was a wild leap of logic, but it seemed to fit.

Could one Earth had fallen, starting a chain of conquest through the dimensions? He remembered the miming. Not to confuse communications, but to get us to say what they want. Except for him. His double was undoubtedly dead, as was Colonel Freeman's. Pity he was not here. Without his double's mind acting as a bridge for the Aliens, Anderson knew he could probably trust him. Then it clicked. And he sat up, startling the nurse who had been nearby. He knew exactly who could help. If only he could persuade him.

\* \* \*

"This had better be good, Anderson."

Colonel Paul Foster stood by the bed, arms folded, whilst Anderson sat on the edge of it. The nurse hovered nearby, hypodermic in hand. It had taken some persuading to get her to call the colonel, particularly as she was now convinced of the trick he had pulled with the pills. Next time, she would make doubly sure.

Anderson licked his lips doubtfully. The colonel had seen the interior of the dome. He might understand. The trick was to reveal enough to convince, but not so much as to seem an Alien spy.

"You and the Commander are now convinced that it was my double that you saw in the dome." he began, "As well as the doubles of all the Control staff."

Foster nodded.

"Suppose I told you," Anderson continued, "That as a side effect of the truth serum, I had begun to have visions through my double's eyes. They started whilst in confinement, and are still continuing."

Foster glanced at Shroeder and the nurse nearby, just outside earshot. "I didn't tell them why I wanted to speak to you," Anderson explained, "They might not believe me."

"What makes you think I do. Or will?" Foster replied.

Anderson stood up, "You've been in the dome. If I was to reveal something that only you and the Commander could know from that, would that convince you?"

Foster made prolonged eye contact. Anderson met it with equal determination.

"It might." He replied after a few moments.

"When I was with my double, I couldn't talk. At least not at first. The Alien control was too great."

Foster did not flinch but something in his eyes indicated his attention had been gained.

"When the dome was hit by Skydiver, there was damage." Anderson tried to visualise in his mind the strange vision, "What I saw through the hole was like... a multi-coloured mist. A bit like... "

Foster held up his hand to silence him, and turned to Shroeder and the nurse, "I'm releasing Lieutenant Anderson, and taking him into security custody."

Anderson's pulse raced.

Shroeder stepped forward, "I believe Commander Straker himself ordered Anderson to Sickbay."

Foster smiled, "I'll see that he is informed. Personally." There was enough emphasis in the last word for the doctor to back down.

The sickbay door closed behind them and Foster was leading Anderson to Security. As Anderson let the relief flow over him, he said, "I'd like a couple of reassurances, sir."

Foster kept up the pace, "Name them."

"For the time being, I don't want any of this to go on my record." Foster slowed and stopped, looked at him, "What I am about to reveal to you is... quite disturbing. I would like to think that I'm wrong, but..."

Foster nodded, "I understand. But I'll decide when you tell me the rest."

It had to be enough for Anderson. There was only about an hour left. Foster led him into a disturbing familiar room, and the door clanged shut. It was the interrogation area. Anderson began to have doubts about his theory. Suppose the Aliens did not need the doubles for control. Here he would be a target and no-one would know. Or care. Until too late.

Advancing slowly, the colonel asked in a low voice, "How could you know any of what you said back there?"

Anderson stood his ground, "What convinced you?"

The colonel stopped and started to circle him slowly, like some kind of predator sizing up a kill, "The doubles seemed to be mute. Also, the interior of the dome - apart from the mock-up of Control - was... similar to what you described."

Foster was now behind him. Anderson wondered if and when a blow was going to come. Foster reappeared in his peripheral vision and continued in front.

"Suppose I told you that it was more than just a mock-up?"

Foster stopped.

Anderson continued. He probably had nothing to lose. "I don't pretend to understand any of it, but that was the real thing. I got outside. Sunlight, blue sky. A beautiful summer's day and a mob of Alien controlled SHADO staff."

Foster came close, "What are you saying?"

"I don't know. I can only give you the facts as I saw them." He started to count them off, "I made contact with the mind of the double's body. It was me. I broke the control, escaped and ended up outside the admin block upstairs. I..." He paused, remembering his last vision, "I bumped into Colonel Freeman."

"Colonel Freeman isn't stationed here at present." Foster seemed assured he had found a flaw in the wild story.

"I know that, but according to him it was two weeks after the attack," Anderson countered.

There was a an uneasy silence. Foster looked hard at Anderson, "And?"

"They found us. The last impression I had was of both of us being shot down like animals."

Foster rubbed his chin thoughtfully. A human gesture. It was a while before he spoke, "So what you saw was some kind of future, and the Aliens were making sure they succeeded?"

Anderson considered, "It was the view I had come to, except for one thing. The time was now. It matched exactly. Somewhere, a world identical to ours has fallen to the Aliens. And now they are after ours."

Foster was silent for a few moments more, deliberating. "There's a flaw here. We know about it. The chances are we'll blow them out of the sky." He looked at Anderson with the same penetrating gaze.

It had feeling. Character. Anderson relaxed a little. Foster did not, at the moment, show any signs of Alien control.

"So did they." Anderson retorted, "Colonel Freeman said something about the SHADO forces of his world aiding the Aliens. Protecting them as they came in. I think they plan to use the minds of our doubles as a back door into our own minds. I don't have all the pieces, Colonel. But if we don't figure this out within the next forty-five minutes, the same thing may happen here." He returned the incredulous stare, "Are you willing to take that risk?"

Foster had a dilemma on his hands, but it was the one SHADO had every step it took. The story was incredible, but then so was the idea of green men in flying saucers trying to wipe them out. It took raw experience for it to become a fact of everyday life, of continuing survival for humanity. Anderson was right - to a degree. If they took every inconceivable idea and applied it to the Aliens, they could look as cranky as a man walking up the high street with an 'End Of The World' placard in his hands.

"What makes you think I can be trusted?" Foster asked, "If you're right..."

Anderson took a step forward, "For the same reason I can now trust myself, if that makes

sense. I've been killed in the other world."

Foster raised an eyebrow, but Anderson continued, "You'll have to take my word on that, but you know that your double was also killed. Isn't that what you said in the briefing? I'm taking a gamble that without our doubles, they'll find it a lot more difficult to exert any control over us."

Foster forced a slight smile, "You and me versus the world, eh?"

Anderson remembered the other-Freeman's words and desperation, "I'm hoping that it won't come to that. But we have to find a way to make sure that our people stay loyal to us despite Alien influence. That's going to be tough." He remembered the psychological onslaught in his other-mind, "We've always wondered what caused those who have been under Alien control to crack in the first place. They don't give up. They just keep on and on, until you... "

Foster looked into his eyes and caught a glimpse of what the other man had been through. Anderson continued in a low voice, trying to express the inexpressible impressions of the Alien minds, "Their minds are like computers. Logical, analysing, ruthless. Knowing so much more and hardly ever being wrong. They're just toying with us. In my mind it was like cats playing with a mouse before they devour it. It's the same here. There's no sense of fun, or malice. It just is to them. We are as inconsequential to them as insects, or germs. We're here, and we're in the way. So they make what use of us as they can. Learning whilst destroying. Wipe out the vermin, but find out what makes them tick first... "

His voice trailed off and Foster marveled at the information, equally enthralled yet horrified at what was almost first hand information on the force they were up against. Anderson had come up against their thought control and won. Into the bargain, he had also the first inkling about what motivated them. Anderson looked at Foster, and guessed what he was thinking.

"Colonel," he said, regaining his composure, "I didn't ask for this to happen. It just did. Perhaps it occurred when the Aliens were trying to take over my mind." He considered that. Finamore had been standing over him when he awoke the first time, "What I said earlier still stands. If I'm right, I don't want anyone else, not even Commander Straker to know I supplied the information."

Foster started to protest, but Anderson cut him short, "I mean it, sir! Yes, what I have experienced is invaluable, and I'll make a full report of some kind if necessary, but I don't want this albatross hanging around my neck for the rest of my days. It was bad enough being considered guilty when innocent, and you know how that feels. Do you think this won't affect my future, providing we all still have one? They'll think I collaborated with the Aliens or something."

Foster was not sure what to make of this. He could understand the sentiment, but SHADO was at war.

"I know you can order me to if necessary," Anderson concluded, "Please don't let it come to that. You - and only you - can have what ever information you need. But I want to be free of this. If I ever can... "

He was right of course. SHADO was a harsh mistress in herself, demanding time and energy that limited friendships, tore marriages apart, ripped the psychological guts out of those who worked for it. Agreeing to work for it was a great sacrifice in itself. Whatever trick fate had played on Anderson was an added insult to injury, all the crueller for what he was risking to warn someone.

"Okay," Foster agreed, "You've bought your anonymity. But we still don't know what

we're going to do to prevent it." He put a hand on Anderson's shoulder in reassurance, "How do you think you managed it?"

The faint echo of a calm voice carried to the area, the latest report from SID.

'UFOs now decelerating to one decimal two SOL', the computer stated 'Current estimation of trajectory termination, Lunar Orbit in thirty two minutes mid-Atlantic Ocean seven'

Anderson shook his head, "I honestly don't know. We can go over what happened. Perhaps you can spot something."

He started to relate the events in as fuller detail as time and memory would allow. The initial vision, the first contact with the restricting Alien mental force, all the way up until he managed to break free.

"So," Foster interrupted, "You actually made contact with your own mind? The mind of your other self, that is?"

Anderson nodded, "That was when I first got the idea there was more to it than just an attempt to disrupt communications. He was in a pretty bad way. The way I would be if I had to face that for days or weeks on end."

Foster considered, "Do you think it was being in touch with him that did it? If we could get the others to concentrate... "

"I don't even know how I did it," Anderson replied, "I couldn't even begin to explain, let alone teach anyone."

They tossed a few more ideas back and forth, each one feasible yet near impossible to implement, particularly to the whole of SHADO Control in the increasingly shorter time they had.

"If only we all had something in common," Foster pondered, "Something that I could put out as a general broadcast prior to the attack."

Anderson was even closer to giving up. So near, all this information, and yet so far, "Well, we tried. I bet if the situation were reversed the Aliens would come up with something. We're only human, I guess."

Foster nodded with a smile, the two of them now sat on the floor near each other. A sad moment of calm and comradeship in the face of the coming storm.

"Human."

Foster looked up as Anderson murmured the word thoughtfully,

"Something?" he queried.

Anderson rubbed his chin, "We're all human."

"Yes?"

"And all that implies. Don't you see?" Anderson stood up and began to pace slowly, thinking out loud to a bewildered Foster. "It's that simple, and it's what the Aliens lack as far as I can tell. They seem to work together in an incredibly sophisticated intellectual and social way, like insects almost. All with a common purpose and function. But the one thing I didn't get any sense of, is simple comradeship. No friendships, no relationships, no fun or fears, no laughs or tears." He laughed at his own unwitting rhyme.

He went up to Foster and held the bemused colonel, "Hell, they probably wouldn't even do this," And he hugged his superior with another laugh. It took a few moments for him to calm down, and Foster waited with as much patience as he could muster. They were all probably going to die anyway, unless Anderson had a solution, so let him enjoy himself while he can.

"So what's the miracle cure then?" He asked after Anderson at last fell to a beaming

silence.

"Our friendships. The way we work with each other!"

No, thought Foster, still lost me there.

"If we try and persuade everyone about what we know," Anderson began to explain, "It'll take too long and there's no guarantee that we'll succeed with everyone. But why do we do what we do?"

"Defend the Earth?" Foster said slowly, "Because we don't want the Aliens to have it."

"Why?"

Foster struggled to put some relevance into the next answer, "So we don't lose our friends?"

"And?"

A pause. "Those we love?"

Anderson grinned at him, "Exactly. I think the key to what we need is not what we do, but why we do it. Not for all mankind or governments or even any of the world leaders. What do they mean to you? Nothing! Too large a concept. We do it for ourselves or our families, our children, our friends. We don't want to see them die, so if it boils down to human guts, we do it for them!"

The colonel ran his hand through his hair. It seemed overly simplistic, and yet it was all they had. Time was as much an enemy as the Aliens themselves at the moment.

"Are you really sure something like that is going to work?" Foster still needed some convincing, "In all this time, we've seen quite a few people influenced by Aliens..."

Anderson could only shrug, "These past two days I haven't really been sure of anything. I can only go by instinct. They say it's the little things that make life worth living. My gamble is the Aliens are so much the reverse they won't comprehend it. You had to make a leap of faith just to trust me so far. I've had to do the same. At least it is based on what I... sense. It's all we have, Colonel." He gazed into the distance, but his eyes saw the past, "Somehow, an Alien influence has got into Control, passing on from person to person, acting like a trigger. When the attack begins, our concentration, our thoughts will be focused on the Aliens. And they, through our doubles, will be waiting..."

Foster's thoughts went back to a time when he too had hallucinated. Blacked out in a sauna, he had dreamt he had been abducted by the Aliens. Despite all his friends and colleagues, who he had assumed had been desperately trying to save him, he had never felt so alone. So cut off by the Aliens. So separated from humankind. An involuntary shudder went up Foster's spine - somebody, an Alien, walking over my grave, he thought morbidly. For one of our best and most serious technicians, he certainly has a sense of the macabre... He could be right...

"It's your call then," the colonel conceded, "Any idea how we go about performing this particular miracle?"

\* \* \*

Anderson scanned the Control personnel as he entered, and the gazes were returned. Some wary, some indifferent. All distanced, to some degree. Johnson was sat at his post. As senior operative, she had opted to cover the Watchdog monitor. She was chatting to Ockenden, who likewise covered Johnson's usual console, and looked up as he neared.

"I thought I left you in Sickbay?" she frowned.

Anderson waved a slip that Foster had made out. It stated he was fit for duty, "Well, you know what thought did. Think again."

Johnson hesitated. There was an equality of rank, but Anderson had the upper hand. In Ford's absence, Watchdog was his baby. Ockenden stood up, clearly thinking that she was no longer needed here.

"Hang on, Sarah. I want you to stay where you are," Johnson said and turned her attention to Anderson. She kept her voice low so as not to draw too much attention, "Something screwy is going on here. And everything seems to point back to you. You have some funny turns, try to tell me something about the Aliens and nearly scare the living daylights out of Andy Horton. Now you're back again, and with authority from Colonel Foster. Care to enlighten me a little?"

Anderson was caught in a dilemma. Up until a little while ago, she would have been the one person he could tell. But without knowing the extent of the Alien control, not now.

"I'm sorry," he replied, and saw the personal hurt in her eyes, "Need to know. Colonel's orders."

Reluctantly she rose to relinquish the post back to him. Her expression said everything. I thought we were friends.

It went beyond professional interests, but he had to do what he thought was right. If they survived, there would be time to make amends. If not, no-one would be around to regret it.

Johnson's gaze suddenly went past him and he turned to see Colonel Foster had entered. He paused at the top of the stairs, studying the trio of Anderson, Johnson and Ockenden, before walking down.

"Is there a problem, Lieutenant?" he asked, and Anderson met Johnson's gaze as they considered who was being addressed. It had been deliberately ambiguous.

"No, sir." Johnson was quicker off the mark, "We were just concerned about Lieutenant Anderson's fitness for duty after his... faint."

She had struggled for an appropriate word, and her choice gave Foster the best counter attack, "If you had simply fainted, I doubt that would keep you in sickbay for long." Johnson opened her mouth to remark, but Foster cut her dead, "I'm about to inform Commander Straker of my decision. I'm sure he will accept my recommendation that Lieutenant Anderson will do his utmost in the coming battle. There will be time enough for him to get over the problems of the last few days afterwards. Let him do his duty first."

Or die trying, Anderson thought. He settled in his seat and Johnson returned to hers. It felt good to be back there, where he belonged. If there was such a thing as fate, as destiny, it was to be here and now. Facing the Aliens only he had the misfortune, or perhaps luck, to know on their terms. He reconsidered letting Foster tell Straker about his part.

He glanced at Johnson. She was too occupied with her own duties to notice.

Commander Straker looked up as the doors to his office slid open and Foster walked in.

"The latest news on the Ufos?" he asked. He stared past Foster as he caught a glimpse of Anderson at his post and frowned. Foster tried to make sure he blocked the view for the remaining few seconds as the doors closed behind him by producing a printout, "About fifteen minutes away at present velocity, but they're on a gradual, if not wholly predictable, deceleration. SID is constantly updating us."

Straker took it and scanned it. Without looking up, he said, "I see you let Anderson return to duty."

"Yes, sir."

Straker looked up for an explanation when the prolonged pause indicated Foster was not about to offer one.

"He convinced me that he was fit for duty, and wanted the chance to prove that to the others." He paused slightly, "He has a sense of the persistent that I can appreciate."

"Quite." Straker returned the report with a slight smile, remembering the chain of events that had led to Foster being recruited. A couple of moments passed before Straker realised that Foster was still standing there and looked up again, "Was there something else, Colonel Foster?"

"Yes, sir." Foster said again, "I was hoping you would give permission for me to open a channel and allow me to give a little... morale boosting speech to all concerned personnel."

Straker stood up and started to walk around his desk, "Are you implying that morale in SHADO is low, Colonel?"

Foster kept his eyes ahead as Straker circled him in a similar fashion to the way he had with Anderson earlier, "Not at all, sir. But we face the largest attack that we have ever faced from the Aliens. It's occurred to me that our people may find it daunting at best." He was aware that Straker was standing close to one side. "And terrifying at worst." He concluded.

The commander reappeared on Foster's other side and sat back down behind his desk. There was another protracted pause, "Yes, Colonel. I agree. It would be exactly the kind of thing that I would have expected Alec Freeman to come up with, if he were here." Straker started to sort through his paperwork again. The final strategic plans for the defence of the Earth, "But be quick about it."

"Yes, Commander." Foster gave an inward sigh of relief and started to leave, but paused briefly, "Thank you, sir." The doors slid shut behind him.

Straker allowed himself a brief smile, and returned to his calculations. Anderson looked up expectantly as Foster approached.

"It's all go," the Colonel told him, "Are the channels open?"

Anderson flicked a switch, "Yes, sir. You're through to Control, Moonbase, all Skydivers and support outposts."

Foster picked up the microphone, "Wish me luck." He pressed the open link' button.

"Attention all SHADO personnel," And he paused as his voice echoed around the command area. He had a mental picture of the personnel around the world and on Moonbase stopping, listening. The eyes of the world.

"In less than fifteen minutes, the first wave of Ufos will pass Lunar Orbit on their final approach to Earth. This is the greatest single offensive we have ever faced, and I know that with all our training and experience, even the bravest of us are afraid of the consequences should we fail in our task." He looked down briefly to Anderson who, like the rest of them, was listening devotedly to him, "I know that every man and woman in SHADO will do their utmost in the coming battle. But I would like you think why we do this too. Not only for the Earth, but for all those on it and those who mean something to us too. As we approach our finest and possibly bloodiest hour, think of what we achieve here for our comrades, our friends, our family. Our future. Thank you."

Foster gave a brief sigh of relief as he closed the link and put the mike down. He did not know what to expect in the way of a response, but Anderson started to clap and in a matter of seconds all those in Control were applauding. It was not the kind of attention Foster liked and he felt a rush of blood to his cheeks. Behind the appreciation was another layer to their plan. It brought them all together. All human.

One purpose.

As the applause subsided, Foster noticed Commander Straker leaning against the open

door frame of his office, watching.

"A minute, if you can, Colonel Foster."

Anderson and Foster shared a brief glance before the latter disappeared back into the inner sanctum.

Inside, Foster waited for the reprimand. None came. Instead, Straker sat behind his desk. "Very commendable, Colonel," he said, "You must let me know who writes your scripts."

Did he suspect it wasn't my idea? Foster thought.

"Mind you, I was waiting for you to say something about fighting them on the beaches' too."

Foster smiled, "Only blood, sweat and tears I'm afraid."

In Control, Anderson received the latest telemetry from SID. As he mentally digested the information, he looked around at the personnel readying themselves. Was he right? Was his effort in vain? As he turned back, his gaze met Johnson's. She had said nothing since he had resumed his post. He smiled in the hope she was still a friend. She smiled back.

"Don't worry," he said, "We're going to beat them."

Despite the outward confidence they all showed, he noticed her hands trembling slightly as they tapped data out on the keyboard. He wondered what she was doing tonight. One of a million ifs...

His attention returned to the monitor. It was time.

"Commander Straker," he called the inner office, "They're on their way..."

\* \* \*

The battle was prolonged, but briefer than they could have imagined. A matter of hours. There had been casualties. Sky Four had been brought down, and its pilot unlucky. A hard landing in a mountainous area. Reports from Moonbase indicated a lunar tank had also been destroyed, its three man crew lost. In the midst of it all, there were reports of headaches, loss of concentration. But none of Alien control. At least none that were of any consequence. Isolated incidents may have been dealt with by their own regional staff. Kept quiet except where it mattered. To Straker, to the doctors and scientists.

Time would tell.

It was late now. The Control staff were doing a delayed handover to the next shift. Johnson had already gone, so Anderson made a note to ask her out tomorrow. He felt like celebrating. In the inner office, Straker, Foster and Colonel Virginia Lake were involved in their own post mortem of events.

Ten thirty and all's right in the world, Anderson thought. He called his farewells and headed out towards security. As he changed back into his civvies, one thought did still worry him.

Is it all really over?

Had the Aliens, who gave them about as much thought as a nest of ants, really given up that easily? Or would there be another attempt like this. Would his life become a series of alarms like this? One man trying to warn the world of bizarre events, like some bad fifties B movie? It occupied his thoughts all through the walk in the warm summers night, all through the drive home.

He had to find out.

He had to go back.

Just once.

He awoke with pain all over his body. It was bitterly cold. Dark. He was lying on a slab. In the murk, he was vaguely aware of another body. Colonel Freeman. His body protested to the slow movements he made, and he was aware of the damage caused by the Alien bullets. This body had been dead for some time. But somehow, his will was re-animating the corpse that had been his other self. Mind over matter. As long as he found out.

He was probably in one of the cold stores. The Aliens, efficient as ever, maybe still had use for the remains. Swinging his legs over the side, he tested his weight. Standing, then walking, with a strange detached sense of feeling. He could see though. Hear too. Smell probably. Just do what I have to and get out.

Hadn't he said that last time?

He tested the door. Light flooded into the store. Daybreak, thereabouts. Another beautiful day. Still quiet.

He stalked around the warehouses for a while and encountered no-one. But as he cautiously neared Control, he became aware of a slight haze, an odor. Smoke. Burning. He peered around a corner and saw the cause. A mound of smouldering rags. As he neared it, there was an aroma of overcooked meat, like a badly done barbecue. With a rising sense of horror, he realised it was a body, nearly burnt beyond recognition. Only a projected energy weapon, like the ray that the Ufos were armed with, could do that. An Alien had been brought in like that once. He turned away, sickened. Was it some kind of example punishment to the controlled personnel, for what he had done? The feeling of strangely detached nausea stayed with him as he crept into the administration block where it was possible to get into Control by a secret elevator. Once there, if the Aliens were aware of his presence, he would be trapped. As he traveled down, he wondered what he was worrying about. He had already died here. He only hoped he would survive again, assuming he ever actually existed here in the first place.

Ergo cognito sum.

The elevator shuddered to a halt and the doors slid open. There was no sound, but the overpowering stench of burnt flesh welcomed him. A couple more of the smouldering corpses lay nearby, twisted grotesquely as if they had died in agony. Anderson wondered if the psychic control had been released before death, so the real personalities were subjected to the searing pain. It also begged the question of what the Aliens really were, and where they were now.

Control was a vision, a new and terrible definition of massacre. The same searing death, charred distorted bodies in disturbing tableaux of untold anguish. He was reminded of paintings that depicted views of Hell.

Only this was real.

This was now.

A different now, but it sickened him the same.

A throbbing pain started in his head, and his vision blurred to red.

Either he was stressed out with grief, or his own other corpse was beginning to give out. Anderson collected his thoughts and turned to leave.

As he did so, he saw the mock-up chart that showed the temperature drop when Straker returned. It's last entry was the seventh, and Straker's return presumably from the dome. A cold day in hell.

As he returned to the elevator, he was aware that the throbbing persisted. It was real, the whole underground complex was vibrating. He threw himself into the lift and it rose. The shudder was visible in the walls of the corridor, and there was a frighteningly familiar pulsating whine in the air.

A Ufo was close by. Probably directly overhead.

He neared the glass doors and leaned against the wall. No sign, but the vibrating was increasing. He moved carefully outside and looked up, then down towards the recently risen sun as a flash caught his eye. The whirling Alien craft was low, maybe a few hundred feet away and closing fast.

Behind it, like a swarm of insects, were several more. Much further but bearing down with the same deadly intent. No doubt. It was an attack run.

The instinct was to flee. But to where? With their superior weaponry, even the underground base would be destroyed. He knew at some point his spirit would return to his own body. But would he feel the death of pain again, this time either by the shock of an explosion or a direct hit by an energy ray? He stumbled past the first smoking body he had encountered. He had no desire to find out. A bright flash from behind lit up the surrounding buildings, followed by a whoosh and the deafening detonation as the admin block was torn apart by indescribable force. The Ufo shot overhead, its translucent green hull reflecting the glare of its target's destruction. It was the last thing he saw before the shockwave knocked him forward like a human tumbleweed...

He came to in the dim light of a table lamp. The carpeted floor felt hard under his elbows. In the midst of his trip, he had fallen off the settee onto the floor. The memories flooded back into his brain. Death after death, fire on fire. It almost seemed as if he was some bizarre harbinger of destruction to the other-world. Each time he went there something terrible happened. The torture of his other-self, the death of Colonel Freeman and now wholesale armageddon. Was it just that the SHADO complex had served its purpose, or were they finally destroying mankind for the vermin they perceived it to be? Was this to be the final outcome of their own war? Scorched Earth? It was all too much. No more.

\* \* \*

The first person to be told was Paul Foster.

"Why?" he asked as he waved the resignation letter, "We won that round. You're an unsung hero. I certainly won't forget what you did. Even if you won't tell anyone else."

Ayshea Johnson might, Anderson thought, but he could deal with that before he left. A couple of days after the attack, spent on sick leave. With the obvious stress he had shown, there had been no questions asked. He had plenty though, and time spent wondering the country to clear his mind had met with failure. Even a chat to a country vicar had not brought any answers. But it had clarified a decision.

"You don't really want to know," was the answer.

Foster blocked him, "Oh yes I do!"

Trying to persuade someone the right way to win against all the odds was one thing. Telling them it might all one day be in vain was another.

"No!"

"If you want your precious anonymity again, you've got it." Foster was adamant.

Anderson bit his lip, "They wiped them out," he muttered.

"What?" Foster struggled for words, "You mean you went back? These other SHADO people?"

"Grilled, barbecued. And torched the base into the bargain," Anderson's tone was almost mocking.

Foster was detached from the full horror of it. All he could ask now was, "Why?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Foster's unspoken reply was evident, "Despite what you may think, I don't have a hotline to the Aliens. Only what they put him through. God rest his soul. All their souls."

Foster paced slowly for a time around his small office in silence. When he finally spoke, it was in slightly calmer tones. "I'm sorry."

Anderson was a man at the end of his wits, "So am I. This is where SHADO and I part company."

"Just like that?" Foster shook his head, "You're going to walk away from this, from having a chance to stop it happening here." Anderson was silent. Words failed to explain. Foster continued, "I took you for many things, but being gutless wasn't one of them."

Anderson took the letter from him, "You think I'm running scared? Believe me, I'll fight them any way I can. Just not here."

True, he was afraid. It was not the main reason, though. He pushed past Foster. "Straker won't like it."

So tell me something new...

\* \* \*

Straker looked up from reading the resignation.

"I don't like this, Anderson." he said levelly, "I realise that the last few days have tested your endurance and patience beyond any expectation, but you are one of our best recent recruits. If I didn't think you had the guts for SHADO, I wouldn't have let you in."

Anderson was at attention. He tried hard not to concentrate on the swirling colours of the panel behind his superior. Don't want to trigger another trip, he thought, Not here, definitely not here.

"I didn't make the decision lightly, sir." he replied, "I still stand by it."

Straker put the letter down on his desk. He was weary too. The events of the last few days had taken it even out of him but he kept his determination, his drive.

"Then there's nothing I can say to change your mind?"

Anderson shook his head, "No, sir."

Straker stood up, slowly approached him and looked him in the eye, "You realise that SHADO isn't an organisation that you resign from lightly, or easily."

Eyes forward. "Yes, sir."

"You realise that there will have to be an extensive debriefing and undoubtedly a course of the amnesia drug to go through." Straker continued, "If you thought that the recruitment was tough..."

He let the words trail off. There was the briefest of pauses.

"I have considered all this, sir." Anderson replied.

Straker was close, almost talking directly into his ear. "Have you ever known anyone actually resign from SHADO, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir."

Straker returned to his desk and stood behind it, "That'll be all, Lieutenant Anderson."

Anderson frowned, not sure if he had heard correctly. Was that it? Best not to question if

it was.

"Thank you, sir." he said quietly and turned to the door. Unusually it stayed shut. He slowed and waited.

"Anderson." The commander called his name quietly but firmly. He turned back. Straker had an automatic aimed levelly at him. There had been a rumour that the commander kept one in his desk, and he had produced it in a silent matter of seconds. Great way to find out. A smile.

"Go on, sir." Anderson said, "You would be doing me a favour."

Suddenly the door slid open and Foster was halted in mid-stride by the scene in front of him. Straker with gun aimed and Anderson standing firmly in not quite defiance. More like the acceptance of fate. The answer to the inevitable question.

The colonel was added to the tableau. No one moved for the beat of a few seconds. Then Anderson turned and walked past Foster. No shot came. Not quite sure of what was going on, though he could guess, Foster entered the office.

When the door shut, Straker lost no time, "You fool, Foster." There was no real anger, but the control in the raised voice was giving, "It was him all along, wasn't it?"

Innocence was a mistake. "Sir?"

"Don't sir' me. I don't know what the hell has been going on, but Anderson was behind it, wasn't he?"

Foster had given his word, but an explanation was begging.

"Anderson had some kind of link to... what was happening," he finally replied, "Don't ask me how or why, but it was this insight which may have averted a disaster during the attack."

"Your precious speech?"

Foster nodded, "His idea. And whether he was right or wrong, we won."

Straker paced about, "Right or wrong has nothing to do with it. We're at war, Colonel. We don't have time for bleeding hearts." He looked at Foster, "Oh yes, we gave him a bit of lateral because he was wrongly accused. It was the least that could be done."

Foster considered. He had almost called Anderson a coward. However the lieutenant had done his best even when faced with these bizarre visions, "He didn't have to tell anyone. He was taking a big risk just mentioning it, and this is how he has been repaid."

Straker opened his mouth to answer. Foster beat him to it, "It wasn't like a damned computer print-out with all the facts that he could wave under our noses. Just gut feelings. If you were faced with a personal truth that flew in the face of everything you knew to be right, what would you do?"

"And this personal truth, as you call it." Straker stood close, "This is what has made him resign? To run away?"

Foster remembered Anderson's account of the psychological battles with the Alien control. The man was no coward. "I'm not sure," was all he could reply.

Straker returned to his desk, "I'm not interested in feelings, gut or otherwise. We have a job to do. I'm not accepting this." And with an equal lack of feeling he ripped the resignation into pieces, "I want him tested. If he has any insight into the Aliens..." He did not have to continue.

Any edge, however slight, was needed.

Tests and more tests. Days, weeks, months even, spent wired up to machines trying to determine what the man knew. It was worse than what the Aliens were doing. No laughs or tears...

Foster listened in amazement, and in an instant realised what Anderson had.

"It's not the Aliens he's running from," the colonel said firmly, "It's all this." At Straker's frown, he continued, "You've heard the phrase it takes a thief to catch a thief? I think Anderson saw the flipside of our fight and what SHADO is up against. In short he doesn't want to us to become like the Aliens in order to defeat them."

Straker looked down at the shreds of paper. Foster picked one up. Part of a greater whole. Like the Aliens seemingly, it felt nothing of its loss.

"If we sacrifice our feeling for each other, our humanity as Anderson called it," Foster explained, "What have we achieved? We may as well let the Aliens walk right in."

Foster let the fragment drop to the others, turned and left Straker to his thoughts.

The commander sat down. Should he let his feelings sway his decision making? Would it have made a difference? He looked at the small framed picture in one corner of his desk. Mary and John. A wife he had lost through his career and SHADO's all consuming security curtain. And his late son, victim of a tragic accident and a fateful decision. His.

## Epilogue:

They let Anderson go.

Back to the European Space Programme he had originally been a part of. He knew deep down that someone, somewhere, would always keep an eye on him. SHADO had to. Even after the course of selective amnesia drugs, the changes in security procedures and extensive debriefing, he still knew too much.

It was a kind of comfort.

It was still a kind of hell.

Someone, somewhere. Watching.

The Aliens.

And perhaps other Jim Andersons.

A layer of consciousness away...

\* \* \*

It was a new day. The full impact of his new future had not fully hit Anderson yet.

He shaved off the last of the foam and shook the razor under the running tap. As he turned to get a towel, the sleeve of his gown caught the small mirror and spun it off the shelf, cracking against the basin before lying at his feet.

He looked down to see a myriad of fragmented reflections looking back up at him.

Watching.

The mirror was broken.

Bad luck.