

Fearful

By Adrian Sherlock.
Copyright 1997

There was a storm coming. Ed Straker gunned the car along the winding road through the countryside, on his way back to Harlington-Straker studios. At the back of his mind a thousand ghosts clamoured at his conscience in a dark and timeless chasm. And they were hungry for his blood...there was a sudden flash of lightning. No. Something else. Something ripped and tore and stabbed at the hull of Straker's car. And in an instant he knew. That suffocating pulsation hit the car a moment later, the eerie whirring of a UFO. A lesser man might have sworn, but Straker gritted his teeth and planted his foot. The car leapt ahead, as the road erupted around him, exploding apart in a dazzling hail of savage energy bolts. The car shook, lurched sickeningly, as it was thrown about by the assault. Straker looked at the car phone for a split second, but didn't dare release his grip on the steering wheel. How could he get help? How could he get away?

Somehow he had to escape, he had to survive! Through the rising sheets of flame, the billowing clouds of smoke and the searing flashes of energy bursts he could just make out the road ahead. He was in search of an exit. The motor roared, the windscreen shattered with a sickening crunch.

Straker squinted, grimaced, but forced himself to keep his eyes on the road. He couldn't risk a glance at the speedo, but he estimated he was sitting on ninety miles an hour. He had to risk it, or the aliens would obliterate him. And then he saw it. The turn off. He braked hard. A tree exploded nearby, caught in a bolt of light and power meant for him. The car lurched wildly and he fought for control. He was slowing, slowing, then he twisted the wheel savagely. The nose of the car collected the sign post. He hadn't quite made it. The car went down the other road like a rocket, veered wildly, then all that Ed Straker knew was pain and more pain...

When he came to, the car was a ruin. He had to get out. The roar in his ears was the relentless whirring of a UFO at close range...

"Coming to finish the job..." he muttered, and kicked at the buckled door. There was blood in his eyes and the taste of it in his mouth. He let out a deep and angry growl and gave the door one last kick. It opened and he crawled out, on his hands and knees onto the wet grass. He had no time to waste. He crawled, tried to get up, stumbled, staggered away. The air was alive with the vibrations and the terrible alien whirr of the saucer. It's greenish glow lit up the grassy fields and the trees, and the wind blasted and blasted...the thrust of their engines! Any second it would come, any moment, he knew...it was about to deliver the death blow. Straker threw himself down into a ditch as the night lit up with a blinding white flash. The bolt flashed from the hovering saucer, stabbed the crippled car in the middle and it exploded apart in a gush of orange flame...

It was a minute later that Straker finished catching his breath and opened his eyes. He had not moved in that time and knew what to expect when he tried. He gasped. Pain. Everything ached. Cuts and bruises all over. He was lucky to have escaped with his life. He rolled over. Raised his head, peering over the grass and rocks. There it was. That glowing, pulsing, whirring machine from space. Hateful, merciless. As he watched, the craft settled to the ground beside the flaming wreck that had once been his car. Then a disc of light in the side, a distant

mechanical grinding sound. The clatter of movement. Straker's eyes narrowed, his breathing quickened. Could it be? Yes. There they were. Dark, lingering shapes, against the eerie green halo of the ship. Their suits would be red, but in the night they were black and gleaming shapes, alien soldiers, come to hunt an Earth man. Not any Earth man, but their mortal enemy. Straker took a quick glance over his shoulder. Rugged grassy terrain, the chosen killing ground. Grimly he thought if that is the way it must be, so be it. When he looked back, he got a start. The aliens were approaching, stalking straight towards him. Straker rolled, crawled away, out the back of the ditch, then picked himself up painfully and staggered into the night. The air came alive with the clattering rattle of machine gun fire. Bullets ripped into the tree trunks all about and Straker threw himself into a blind, staggering run, desperate to get away.... There was no getting away this time, he knew. He would have to stand and fight or they would have him. He threw himself down and felt around on the ground. He had to find something, anything... A large stone! That would have to do. He gripped it tightly and got up. He flattened himself against a tree and held his breath, the sweat running down his face and neck, mixing with the blood from his cuts. He could hear them. Their crunching footsteps and the faint hum and whirr of the UFO in the distance as it waited for them. They were coming closer and closer. Straker strained to twist his head around and see, keeping his back to the tree trunk. A glint of silver. He saw the gun first, an alien machine pistol. The creature was coming right past him. The timing had to be exactly right or...he swung the stone full force, aimed straight at the face plate of the alien's helmet. The glass shattered. Viscous green liquid sprayed out, showering Straker. Its arms went up. He wrestled with it, punched hard at its stomach. The creature was disorientated enough. He gripped the barrel and wrenched with all his might. He crashed onto his back, soaked in oxygenated fluid and holding the gun. He swung over as he sensed the arrival of a second alien. It was coming out of the wooded night, gun aimed directly at him. He found the trigger and pumped the creature full of bullets, sending it crashing to the ground. He sat up and took aim at the gun's original owner, who was staggering about, vomiting fluid like a drunken man. Straker aimed and blasted him out of his misery. He crawled to his feet and looked about, but the woods were now silent and empty. He sighed, turned, looked at the aliens and bent to check that they were dead. Then it had him. The red-gauntleted hands were around his throat. He fought, but it was no use. The arms were closing all the way around. In horror, he realised what it was doing. He had done it himself a thousand times in combat training. The sleeper hold, cutting off the passageway for air to the lungs...and the brain! Straker cried out, struggled with every aching fibre of his being, and lost...and he fell spinning into deep, dark nothingness!

* * *

When Straker came to he thought he had gone blind. Then a greenish haze drifted eerily through the darkness and invaded his swollen, aching eyes. He tried to blink, and tried to cry out, but all he heard when he went to speak was a dull gargling rumbling sound rushing past his ears. Dully, his brain processed the data and he became aware of the most likely situation. He tried to move. Pain! Every muscle in his body ached, and white hot shafts of agony seared through his limbs as he attempted to move. He forced himself to raise his hands. Something appeared before him where his hands should have been, two swollen lumps, like collections of frankfurts, dull and red, distorted through curving glass and obscured through that seething green murk. So it was true. A sickening lurch sent him reeling through space and a juddering, bone-jarring impact stuck his body as he collected something solid. It was like being drunk aboard a small boat on the choppy seas. No, the wrong kind of craft. He was now breathing

fluid, encased in a red alien space suit and trapped aboard a UFO that was lifting off from the planet Earth, racing towards space. The aliens had taken the ultimate prize, snatched it from the darkened woods. It had cost them dearly, but they had taken Commander Straker of SHADO as a prisoner of war. He knew all too well what came next...the high-acceleration journey through inter-stellar space to what he guessed was a lurking, phantom planet, radar-invisible and close to the outer edges of the solar system. And then...his opposite number, the alien leader, would have God knows what in store for him!

Some how, some way, he had to get out, had to get away, before it was too late. Once the UFO was beyond interceptor range, there would be no hope for him. He would be finished...and then came the thunder. The flames rose up like a leaping wall of orange, and in it he saw the crazed, distorted shapes of the aliens. Sky 1's missiles had found their target. The walls were shattering like so much movie glass, splintering all around him, and then the stomach-wrenching lurch and tumble as the alien craft began to lose it's way through the stratosphere. Now was the time to move, to act or die. To survive or not survive his abduction. With a supreme effort of will he picked himself up and like a baby learning to walk discovered how to function in this fluid-filled suit. And as he moved, the nearest alien turned. He went in and wrestled the creature with all his strength. And as they struggled, a blinding flash lit the darkness and flames leapt and blazed. Another hit. the feeling of falling was unmistakable now. The UFO was tumbling, spinning, out of control, unable to escape the Earth's gravitational pull. Straker propelled the alien into the flames, vaguely perceived it being sucked out the hole in the silvery hull and into the blue space beyond, spinning away like an autumn leaf. And then the tremendous impact that threw him to the floor.

He crawled away, forcing himself through those unyielding flames and out of the shattered ship, out into the woods beyond. He crashed against the trunk of a tree and gripped it for support, sick in the stomach and dizzy. And as he turned to look back, he saw, through the murk of the green liquid he now breathed as other men breath the air, a lop-sided spinning top from another world, gushing smoke and fire in the last moments before it exploded...

* * *

Straker fell back as the saucer erupted like a bomb, sending blazing fragments in all directions. He fell and rolled and waited for the rumbling sound to stop pounding at his skull and punishing his already over-taxed brain. His body had been pushed to the limits of endurance by the hunt and abduction at the hands of the aliens and his unscheduled flight in the UFO, but he was not out of the woods still, quite literally. The trees and bushes were all around and he had no way of telling where on Earth he had landed or if he had any chance of making it back to civilization. SHADO's supersonic jet had brought down the UFO, so it was logical that they would be close at hand. But would they send in a ground force to recover wreckage? For security reasons, if they were being thorough they might. It was a slim chance to be relying on. After what seemed an hour or more, he began to feel half his old self again, at least on the inside. But he was still breathing liquid and there was no doubt a limited supply of oxygen in the cylinder on his space suit. What options do I have now? he wondered. If I attempt to remove the helmet, without the assistance of medical experts and re-oxygenating gear, I may very easily choke and drown, or rather, un-drown! There was air all about, fresh country air, but did he dare remove the helmet and risk an agonizing, convulsive death? Some how, he had to find his way to the nearest SHADO station or at the very least a hospital. The oxygen supply could not last too long and when it ran out, he would drown the old fashioned way. Either way he was dead. Straker hauled himself up, using the trunk of a tree for support

and tried to walk in the cumbersome alien space suit. The world was a distorted, blurry nightmare, glimpses through a bubbling, rushing ocean of green fluid. He looked around and staggered off through the woods, making for what seemed a way out. But a way to where?

The hunters were half asleep and half drunk when they heard the noise of something large and cumbersome crashing through the undergrowth. One of them swore and another dropped his beer when the branches parted and the red-suited monster came staggering towards them. They rose to their feet, mouths hanging open in disbelief as they saw the silver helmet, the tinted face-plate and the padded red suit. It stopped before them, and as they stared in disbelief they could just make out the green face and blank, white, inhuman eyes. And instinctively, the fearful men reached down and picked up their guns...

Straker was trapped now, the guns pointed unwaveringly at him. He could just make out the dark openings in the barrels through the green murk the aliens had adapted him to breath. The frightened men were talking, or rather shouting: he could see their distorted figures, gesturing at him, waving their arms and working their mouths, but all he heard was that deep rushing rumbling gurgle close to his ears.

He tensed himself as they moved closer. He didn't need to hear to understand. It was obvious. They must have seen the UFO come down, they must have realised it was like nothing on Earth. And now, as far as they were concerned, they had taken an alien prisoner! Straker twisted his head to look for a way out. A third hunter was approaching. Its gun butt slammed against his ribs and he staggered, choking in pain. The others grabbed him before he could hit the ground. They had him by the arms and legs and were carrying him like the carcass of a freshly-shot animal. They stuffed him in the back of their old car and Straker was driven away.

The fools, thought Straker bitterly, the blind, paranoid fools! Don't they know, don't they understand? He had given them everything. Everything! That black outlined figure on the wall of SHADO head quarters, that dark man-shape in a disc, he had demanded and demanded and taken everything Straker could give until there was nothing left. And still he would not be satisfied, still he would not stop taking and demanding. Once, when no-one was looking, Straker had staggered in that door, feeling lower than low and looked up hatefully, full of rage and torment at that indifferent shadow-man and had said, "Why can't you leave me alone? You've taken everything from me...everything I ever loved...everything that was inside of me...why can't you leave me alone...I've nothing left to give!"

He felt ashamed of that moment, a moment of weakness, when he looked back on it he felt pathetic, and wanted to hide it like everything else, in that ever-larger plot at the back of his mind where he buried all his mistakes, all his shames, his failures and his guilt. The men who had him here were drunk. No wonder they weren't thinking clearly. He knew all too well what that was like. Yes, he remembered the smell, the taste, the burning and the seething, lurching confusion that alcohol made. How could he ever forget?

It was in those vaguely glimpsed days that he had tried to shovel into that mental grave-yard next to the day his son had died. But like all those dead days, they rose up in the night like zombies and came marching sprite-like back to haunt him. Like Catherine Fraser and her friend Tim, brooding shadows of the past, echoes of long-gone days that were really dead yet still lingered in the present as an afterthought or hangover, those memories clung to him...

It was before Mary, before SHADO and Blue Book and all those terrors out of space. It was MIT and NASA. He was majoring in Astrophysics and dating a girl called Danielle. God. Danielle. He had not thought about her in so long. Was it really fifteen years? The chasm of

time made him dizzy when he looked across it's vastness. He and Craig Collins and been out one night and Craig had been playing with everything he could lay his hands on, as usual. There was a blonde, and a bottle of Whiskey, and a red head and some L.S.D. Craig had been everywhere and done it all, and lived to laugh about it. Lived, that is, until the aliens had taken him by surprise and surgically removed him from his own brain! And then...yes...he had made the kill, the Commander of SHADO, oh, so dutiful, he had pulled the plug, the mercy killing of an alien-zombie, and other crime was added to that intolerable list!

He couldn't remember getting in the car that night. It was all a drunken blur. Their friend David had driven. He and Craig were such a pair of clowns. Dave was always giving Craig a hard time about being a British Bulldog in the American Space program. No, Craig, they'll never let you into NASA. Not a bloody Limey, for God's sakes. You'll end up the first man on Mars and say God Save the Queen or some shit like that! Dave was such a stirrer. And Craig had laughed. And Ed had laughed. Yes. They were still laughing when they hit the truck and the windscreen caved in. And as they picked up David's body in a number of plastic bags that night, Ed had looked up from the stretcher and heard Craig Collins crying uncontrollably and all he knew was the flashing red and blue and amber lights in the night, the dull red stains of blood and blood and more blood and that stink of alcohol. And he had never touched it again...

When the journey ended and the waves of claustrophobia stopped washing over him in his thick, sickly green oxygenated ocean, Straker realised where he finally was. Trapped by a trio of drunken weekend hunters whose twisted expressions confirmed his darkest suspicions, that they thought that he, clad in red space suit and silver globe, with white protective shells covering his steely blue eyes, was in fact an alien. A frightening figure staggering from the wreckage of that unearthly spinning machine that had plunged from the skies, whining and whirring and blazing with light.

A prisoner now, Straker found himself dragged from the hunters' vehicle and hustled into a hay shed where they threw him down. Painfully, he realised he had to escape or at least make the effort, for there was no future in this place. None for him, he was certain. The big red gauntlets were difficult to use, but he managed to crawl and grab the handle of...something! The whiteness in the gloom and shadow of the hay shed was a pitch fork. He twisted as the men came down upon him. He saw flashes of their faces and heard and muffle through the rush of bubbles that might have been a scream as the prongs of the fork found a victim. Then the explosion. His head would surely burst from that hammer-strike. One of the men had discharged a fire arm, but in his fear he'd missed. Straker was out, arms flailing wildly, crashing towards a dazzling square of light that had to spell freedom, or it's elusive imposter.

As his aching eyes adjusted through that dismal murk he realised he was about to collide with a tree and managed to stop himself. He reeled away, but the new move was almost as bad, as his feet collected something, rock or tree, or perhaps just a hole in the Earth. The fall was sickening, the impact jarring. Glass shattered and he knew at once why his eyes had protective shells. The tide went out like a bath when the plug was pulled and he suddenly found himself choking as a torrent of the vile liquid was vomited up and out of his tortured body. His gauntlets supported his doubled up form as he coughed and spluttered and the green seas poured out of him. His eyes were watering under those shells and he wanted for one brief second to peacefully die and be rid of it all.

And then the hands clamped round him and dragged him upwards. He gasped and choked and rasped in agony, his every sinew shivering and aching, and he was forced to relax his gut and straighten to face them. They had him now and their guns were pointed right into his face.

They were angry, furious...homicidal. They were shouting abuse and threats. The gun barrels pressed in and found his flesh. He knew what came next. The terrible explosion that would end his troubles permanently. He closed his eyes and the world blew apart. When he opened them the hunter was dead and Paul Foster was removing his helmet...

When Commander Straker arrived back at SHADO HQ, it was a normal day in the underground control room, with the many and various operatives and technicians hurrying to and fro and processing data, always on the look out for an alien attack. He had been through Hell and now it was over. Or was it? He sighed heavily to himself, thinking, reflecting on it all. Then he summoned his strength and stepped through the door.

Every head in the room turned, one by one, as each man or woman wondered what the others were looking at. Conversations cut off, dying into silence, all activity ceased. A phalanx of frozen faces, staring. All staring at that figure that stood in the doorway. It should have been Commander Straker but for one thing, the green coloration imparted to the face and neck by the alien fluid. Could this white haired green-faced figure be human, or was it as alien as it looked? Straker stared back at them and they all looked away and went back to their work, but Straker knew how unsettled they were in that moment, by nothing more than the color of his skin. He passed through them, uncomfortably, disconcerted, to the sanctuary of his office. But he knew, with absolute certainty, that it was a moment he would never forget.

By Adrian Maxwell Sherlock.

1997.