



MAN IN THE MOON

BRADLEY PEARCE

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Dedicated to my childhood heroes: The crew of Apollo 11.
Michael Collins, Neil Armstrong, and Buzz Aldrin

We are not alone in the universe.
They have been coming here for a long time.

Edgar Mitchell (Apollo 14)

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About Bradley Pearce

Prologue – The Moon

The moon. The brightest and largest object in the night sky. Creator of tides. Romanticized by poets. Mother of Pathos and Pity. Guiding the human spirit for millions of years. Conceived by a planetary bump in the middle of the night some four billion years ago. The planetary child would come to be known by many names. Luna, Cynthia, Serene.

Playfully circling the earth every twenty-seven point three days. A quarter of a million miles away. Waxing and waning as the mood took her in synchronous rotation. Forever to show its face to those that gazed upon her beauty.

Intrigued by her mysteriousness. Man courted this celestial Goddess. First, the Russians in Fifty-nine. Then again in Sixty-six. Like any distant relationship, promises were made to visit. But in time, both knew that was never to be.

Americans arrived. Spoiling her with visit after visit after visit. Pampering her gold tin-foiled trinkets. Then one day, they never returned. The courtship as fleeting as the Russians. Jilted in Seventy-two for a distant redhead. With atmosphere, and alluring canals. Some say she was the *life* of the solar system.

The temptress's name was Mars.

Then came the miraculous act that had separated man from beast. The splitting the atom. And the subsequent atomic bomb. Releasing unheralded energy. And a radio signal that traveled instantaneously to the far reaches of the galaxy through fissures in the space-time continuum. The brilliant beacon shone momentarily for all intelligent life to see. A sign that life existed elsewhere in the universe.

That they were not alone...

Trespassers will be shot

Only mad dogs and Englishmen would come out in the midday sun. Yet there he was. Even his shadow had the sense to find shade beneath his boots. Pulling a soiled handkerchief from a pocket Tom wipes his forehead of sweat. Uncorking a water bottle, takes a mouthful. Holding the cool water before swallowing.

An ambling breeze offered little reprieve from the blistering heat that beat down upon the weary soiled young men. The breeze coughs dust into the air and the men watch as it swirls and dances across the desert. A tumbleweed races after it as if not to be left behind. Wiping his forehead again Tom looks about for a likely plot to dig. Taking heavy swig of water. Corks the bottle and shakes it to gauge what was left inside. Not much he figured.

On a map, Tom locates the group's position by landmarks about them. A compass needle quivered nervously, baffled by the magnetic rocks about it. Wondering if the trio had wandered off the grid. He looks back from where they had come, hoping they would still find his vehicle where they had parked it that morning.

A small outcrop of rocks catches his attention.

"Marshall! Over here!" Tom calls out pointing to the pile of rocks in the near distance.

"Coming! ...Travis! Over here." Informs Marshall.

Tom kicks at a rock. Dislodging it to awaken a small tan-colored lizard from its siesta. Watching the prairie lizard scurry away in search of another sanctuary.

"Sorry..." Apologizing belatedly, "... Rummage inside this lot." He instructs the other two to investigate the pile of rocks.

Taking a slug of water, gasps for a mouthful of dry air. Marshall lights a cigarette and sends a plume into the still air.

"How can you smoke in this heat?" Questions Tom watching the smoke gradually disperse in the breeze.

"What heat?" Responds Marshall taking another drag.

Seeing a vein in the rock, Tom takes a long nose hammer to wedge the rock apart. And gives it a short sharp strike. *'Crack!'*

'Crack!' Striking it again, the rock splits open.

Tom examines it as though it were an autopsy. Searching for remnant fossils and remains of a time before time.

"Nothing..." He mutters beneath his breath dropping the pieces of rock to the ground, "...Any luck guys?"

"Nah, just an old arrowhead... I think?" Travis examines the jagged piece of stone. Handing it to Marshall for a second opinion.

"Hmm..." Mumbles Marshall taking a water bottle he pours water over the supposed artifact. Washing away dirt holds it up to the sun, "... Navajo, could be Apache. Hard to tell till we get back."

"Keep looking..." Informs Tom, but before he could finish, a gunshot rang out.

'Boom!' A gun shot sounds loudly and the bullet strikes a nearby rock to ricochets harmlessly away.

“What the...?” Tom crouches instinctively behind a boulder and peers about for the source.
‘Click-clunk.’ Sounds a cocking Winchester.

Its owner, a young woman stands above them. A leather satchel slung heavy over her shoulder. A leg of a hare protrudes from the opening. Her sights set down the barrel at Tom who raises the soiled handkerchief in his hand as though to surrender.

“You want me to put that thing out of its misery?” Seeing the rag waving over his head.

“Eh? What? No... No.” Confused by the appearance of the gun-toting woman.

Tom goes lowers his arms, only have the woman lift the rifle barrel to suggest he should keep them raised.

“Keep them up where I can see ‘em... You too.” Shifting the barrel sight at Marshall and Travis.

“We’re not armed lady,” Tom informs her.

“I ain’t no lady mister.” She informs him.

Without warning, the woman opens fires towards the men, causing them to dive to the ground. Shots whistling over their heads.

‘Boom! Click-clunk. Boom! Click-clunk. Boom! Click-clunk.’ Shots thunder in quick succession.

Bullets ricochet off rocks trailing a shrieking Roadrunner running for its life. Marshall and Travis stay down in fear of being shot. Tom gingerly gets to his feet to try to arbitrate a truce of some kind.

“You know it’s illegal to shoot those things.” Brushing the dust and ground from his already soiled clothes.

“Don’t say nothing about scaring of them... *Raptors!*” Her eyes set on the evading bird.

‘Boom! Click-clunk.’ Getting away a final shot as if to have the final say on the matter.

“Yeah-right.” Concedes Tom still brushing away dust. Squinting into the sunlight to get a better look at the woman.

Lowering the barrel somewhat, she remains wary of the intruders. Eyeing them suspiciously. Looking more like city folk than poachers. Ill-suited and ill-prepared for the outback of the New Mexico Desert.

“What y’all be doing here? Don’t you know this is private land? Y’all be trespassing.”

“Sorry, we didn’t see a sign.”

“Back there about ten miles.” Gesturing a thumb over her shoulder behind her.

“We came from that way... Corona.” Tom gestures the opposite direction.

“That isn’t my problem mister. Now what y’all be doing there?” She asked again, lifting the barrel to intimidate the men.

Marshall and Travis look to Tom and back to the woman. Thinking they could make a run for it.

Tom shakes his head reading their minds.

“Looking for fossils... Artifacts.... We’re *just* an amateur archaeology group.”

“You need a permit for that?”

“Not really... Unless you’re digging... Which were not.” Tom lies, eyeing the broken rock at his feet.

“Y’all better be heading back seeing how this is private land and all.” She warns them.

“And who might you be?” Tom was bold to ask.

Marshall shakes his head to suggest he should not rouse her any further.

“No one that concerns you, mister. This is my Grand-Pappy’s ranch is all you need to know.” Looking at the sky as though she could hear something.

Somewhere in the distant heavens sounded a cough. A splutter. A roar, and another cough of an engine. Growing louder. Growing closer. A red vintage biplane of yesteryear flies into view. Swooping low over on the men who scrambled and dove for cover to avoid being struck. Tom thought he could hear a strange yapping sound as the plane buzzed over them. Shaken with fright, he looked up in time to see the head of a terrier barking at him from the open cockpit.

“What the...?” Unable to reconcile the sight.

The young woman remains steadfast on the rock. Waving out to the old man in the flying machine. To say she had everything under control. The biplane circles like a vulture, inspecting its prey, splutters momentarily and coughs a fur-ball of black smoky phlegm behind it, before roaring and flying in the direction of the no-trespassing sign.

“Friend of yours?” Asked Tom, brushing himself off, again.

“*Gramps...*” She informs him, “... He owns the place.”

“I can see the resemblance.” Jests Tom grinning. There was something about her he could not explain. Call it intuition. Call it a hunch. It was as though he knew there was more to the woman than the roughed cowgirl facade.

“Y’all best be going now.” She gestures with the rifle for them to leave. Sooner than later.

“I reckon. Com’on boys, let’s get out of here.” Tom looks about as though he were lost.

“Something the matter?” The woman asked.

“Which way is Nor-West... Compass is playing up.”

The young woman aims the rifle at a distant peak

‘Boom! Click-clunk.’ Firing a directional shot over Tom’s head.

“Follow that.” She informs him.

“Right then, thanks.” Tom tips his hat in appreciation and to bid farewell.

Gathering satchels, the troupe begin to distance themselves from the woman.

A distant peak served as their guiding star as the three Magi re-traced their steps back to the vehicle. Everywhere in the desert looked the same. A tumbleweed rolled by, like a child’s hoop pushed along by playful breeze kicking up vortices of swirling dust. Tom looks back to the ridge where the woman had been standing and sees she had now vanished. No doubt headed back in the direction of the biplane.

And raises a hand for the others to halt.

“What’s up?” Asked Travis.

“She’s gone.”

“Yeah, and so are we... What are you thinking Tom?”

“What’s the rush? ... We may as well have a look about on our way back.”

In the far distant, the sound of a rifle shot drifts over them. Sending a chill over Marshall. Hesitant to stick around.

“She’s gone.” Tom reminds them.

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Marshall responds anxiously, his eyes shifting to the direction of the shot.

“If she was going to shoot us, she would have.” Explains Tom rationally. Hoping his logic was correct.

“I don’t know Tom... She looked like a leftover from the civil war.”

“Com’ on, just five minutes... You go that way, Marshall... Travis over there by those rocks, I’ll check out this clearing.”

Ears prick up for the sound of the old biplane. Silence filled the dry air. Searching for an interesting spot to rummage Tom almost stumbles down a massive trench gouged from the earth. Some hundred yards long, and twelve yards wide.

“Mm_?” Perplexed by the unusual shallow trench. Trying to fathom what could have created it.

One end of the trench was deeper than the other. Abruptly ending at the foot of a mound of the earth that had been weathered smooth like a giant boulder. Tom looks up and down the indentation trying to fathom what would have caused the anomaly. It was as though the mound had something was buried beneath. Climbing to stand on top, he surveyed the trench peppered with sporadic scrubs and tumble weeds that had fallen prey to it.

He looks about again for the woman only to hear a rifle shot sound in the far distance. Marshall and Travis lookup like Prairie Dogs their heads turning in the direction of the shot, then over to Tom standing on a knoll of earth.

“Five more minutes okay.” He tells them. And two heads lower from sight.

With the long nose hammer, Tom picks at the baked earth. Unsure what lay beneath. The hammer strikes something hard. Sounding a dull hollow thud. Hesitating, he taps again. Another baffling thud. As though he was striking a rock, but not a rock. Scattering it into fragments. The unusual sound resonates again, as though the rock sat upon metal drum.

“Eh?” Tom questions the oddity.

Frantically he picks away the broken rock. Something shiny catches his eye. Fingers removes the loose rubble to expose a metal surface. Untarnished by the passage of time and the elements. Picking away the remainder of broken rock to expose strange markings on the surface. Not in any language he knew of. More like symbols than letters.

Impossible thoughts crisscross his mind. Overcome with anxiety, his heart beats rapidly in his chest as he tried to deny what he was looking at.

“No. Can’t be.” He tells himself, hoping there was some other reason than what his eyes were telling him.

He stands away from the swollen mound and tries to estimate the size of the *thing* that laid beneath. If it was what he thought it was, wondered if he should tell the other two. Marshall could be trusted, Travis other the other hand was another matter. And decides to keep the discovery to himself until he knew exactly what he was dealing with.

Hurriedly he pushes rubble and dirt back over the open wound. Compacting and trampling the earth and smoothing it with his boots. And places a rock on top to conceal the recent excavations. Taking a swallow of water from the bottle, removes his hat and pours the remaining water over his head as though to baptize himself of the sin. Wiping the back of his neck and forehead with the soiled wet rag. And wonders how would he ever find this place again?

His mobile GPS App was useless without reception. He would need to dead-reckon the position. To the Nor-West a peak, and he locates it on the map. To the South another peak. Marking both landmarks off. And circles approximate location with the pencil. The sun had shifted from overhead, his shadow now slipping from beneath him. It was time to leave and tell no one of what he had stumbled upon.

“Tell no one.” He cautions himself. Looking over his shoulder to where he had last seen the other two.

Was he serious about coming back? If word got out, the military would be all over it. And him. It would be the last anyone would see of *it*. Whatever it was. And the last anyone would see of him. Placing himself and others in danger. Until he knew exactly what it was, it would have to remain a secret.

He shakes the worrying thoughts free and whistles for the other two it was time to get going. Like prairie dogs, two heads poke up again from behind rocks and turn to the source of the whistle.

'Perhaps the lady had returned,' they thought, looking about for her anxiously.

"Pack up. We're leaving." Tom calls out.

"I thought you wanted to stay?" Asked Marshall lifting a hat to wipe his sweaty forehead.

"Nothing here..." Tom lied, "... We better get back."

"If you say so." Responded Marshall happy to get going.

Marshall appears at the edge of the trench to stand beside Tom.

"Woah, look at this? What is it?"

"Probably a water reservoir..." Remarks Tom, "... Ranches dug them for the cattle in the old days."

"You reckon?" Puzzled by the unusual gouge.

"I reckon." Affirms Tom walking in the direction of the distant peak taking the other two in his wake.

"Hey, wait up." Calls out Travis feeling he was being left behind.

Arriving back at the car park, Tom checks his watch and notes down the time.

"Two hours and seven minutes, give or take." He informs them.

"You take this Archeology a bit seriously don't you Tom?" Remarks Marshall.

"Just dead-reckoning the location of that woman."

"Good thinking... I wouldn't want to meet her again." Feared Travis looking into the outback for the woman.

"Yeah, you got that right." Dismisses Tom, more afraid of what laid buried beneath the mound of earth than the gun totting woman.

Neither of which his engineering mind could fathom...

Sirius

A hover shuttle moves swiftly along a large round corridor. Worker Greys bow their heads to Sirius and wait stationary for the shuttle to pass. A larger Grey stands over them giving orders. The shuttle descends gradually into the base along endless corridors. Raising a hand for the shuttle to halt Sirius steps out and enters a room to find a naked human strapped to a surgical table.

Trembling with fear, human eyes follow the movements of the larger alien approaching them. Sirius grins and tilts his head curiously at the female form. So... Hairy. So... Ugly. The human species was hideous. Primates lacking intelligence. Displacing the reptilian race that had once dominated the planet. Now extinct. Terminated by an unfortunate accident. A rogue asteroid.

If only he was about to have saved them. He would have been seen as a God. A tear comes to an eye at the thought. Hundreds of millions killed. Long before his time, yet he still felt the loss.

Furry rodents had scampered about the ashes, free to roam unhindered, and in time became top of the food chain. Three hundred million years later they would stand upright and eventually break the gravitational forces that held them to the earth. Discovering flight and in time, stepping upon the moon.

Though they had harnessed the atom, they had yet to harness themselves. The species that had advanced so suddenly became stagnant. Squabbling with each other over petty territorial borders. Stockpiling nuclear weapons that could wipe the planet clean a hundred times over. And then some. Making the planet uninhabitable.

Standing over the whimpering human Sirius smells the woman's fear and grins. Then signals to the attendant to begin. A probe is inserted up the woman's nose. Screens flash vital signals. The woman tries to scream, but she cannot. Paralyzed, she cannot move. Restraints clamp her to the bench. Another probe is inserted elsewhere, then another. Voltage is applied and the woman's eyes roll in her head, fingers grasp into white knuckles fists. Unable to faint she remains conscious throughout the procedure. If it was a procedure.

Eggs are removed from ovaries and placed in a clear dish and examined under a beam of harmonic yellow light. The attendant nods with approval. The woman would make a fine breeding vessel.

"In_se_m_i_nate_. In_se_m_i_nate_." Sirius instructs.

A telerobotic cable enters the woman. She flinches with discomfort. And a surrogate egg is planted onto the wall of the womb.

Pleased with the insemination, the attendant nods to Sirius.

"It_is_done_." The attendant informs.

An incision is made into the woman's scalp. Blood bleeds from the wound down the side of her face. A laser bores a small opening into the bone of the skull. The attendant inserts a small dark device within the pink folds of the brain matter. With no ill effect to the woman looks up at the Grey. Her eyes darting side to side as to what was going on. What were they doing to her?

The Grey's large black eyes blinking sideways at her. The incision is cauterized with a flash of light and the bleeding stops.

Sirius' nose twitches at the unpleasant smell of the woman. Stepping back to examine her, finding her large breasts and nipples peculiar and repugnant. Love was a human trait. Grey's were asexual. The hormone that seduced and bonded males and females to mate had been genetically removed from his species millennia before. There would be no wanton act of carnal courtship that drained the brain of vital blood. No physical violating the other and the fusion of gametes. No genes littered with cancers and hereditary deformities, passed haphazardly from one generation to the next.

Unbridled. Unhindered. Unchecked.

The negligent thought nauseated him. Without his intervention thirty thousand years ago, Man would still be living in caves. But with a tweak here, a substituted gene there, Sirius transformed their purpose, other than for food.

He had not travel fifty trillion miles for gold. Though some species had. Nor to anally probe an Earthling. Though the self-amusement did cross his mind. The universe was abundant with minerals. No. He was after something more valuable than mere minerals. He was after the building blocks of life. DNA.

And Earth had DNA for the taking.

Despite his defiling objection to humans, somewhere in the eon of time, they shared a common primordial ancestor. Albeit cellular. Crude proteins and amino acids that had bubbled up from a primal sludge and been ejaculated into outer space. Seeding the universe. Infecting planets with a terminal disease. Life. Some sooner than others. Each species evolving and adapting to their unique planetary environments. And millions upon millions of years, of evolution. Something the universe had in abundance. All it took was a curious brain and an opposing thumb. Each would climb down from the trees. And each would climb into space.

Man was no different.

Over the millennia various Alien life forms, Humanoids, Reptilians, Insectoids, came and went. Many times, inter-dimensionally. Evaluating the Earth species. Stricken at what they found. In time, Humans would have taken their place among the intellectual elect of the Galactic Federation. Had they not squandered their birth-right with petty political squabbles and amassing fearful weapons of mass destruction. They had sight of the primary truth. Preservation of the species.

They had to be halted before it was too late. And the planet became totally uninhabitable.

"Re_lease_this_one_back_," Sirius informs the attendant.

Pressure pads are placed over the woman's head and buttons tapped in sequence. Humming sounds resonates within the room as the woman's eyes roll in their sockets. She falls limp. Unconscious. Her memory wiped of the past few hours. Latches release. A tracking beam suspends her in the air above the table and hovers towards a waiting gurney where a cloth is thrown over her inert body.

An attendant pushes the floating gurney along the corridor to a conveyor belt of bodies heading one way. Back to the loading bay. There to be put upon crafts and returned to earth from whence they came. To be discovered naked. To be monitored from afar and the hybrid inside her would be harvested at a future abduction.

Sirius returns to the waiting shuttle and continues deeper into the bowels of the base. Crossing over a great cavity, he raises his hand for the shuttle to halt. And observes the colossal structure

being built. Looking like giant boreholes. Honeycombs a buzz with activity. Shuffles darted between pods delivering supplies.

Thousands of pods shone brightly with light. Living quarters for the new arrivals. Temporary shelter while they await the final phase of earth's transformation. Thermal temperatures were rising steadily, CO₂ levels in the atmosphere were approaching acceptable tolerances. With the help of man.

Working nonstop the hive would be completed within the next orbit of the yellow draft sun. Sirius purses thin lips and is pleased with what he sees.

Raising a hand to proceed and the great vertical catacombs of shining lights slip from view as Sirius continued on his route. Large doors slide open, and deeper into the bowels of the base the shuttle descends. Now miles beneath the surface. Coming to a door several feet thick, made of an alloy beyond man's imagination.

The bulky door slides effortlessly to one side and the shuttle glides inside the vast cavity.

A blazing white light engulfs the chamber. A transparent membrane closes across Sirius' eyes. A beam of protons streams between two terminals. Providing eternal energy, and then some. At its heart, a temporal black hole, suspended by a gravitational force field.

The slightest imbalance and the deck of cards would tumble down. Taking the base and everyone with it. Worker Greys stand before panels of lights. Finger-like claws delicately tap controls and make subtle modifications.

Greys bow their heads subserviently acknowledging Sirius' presence among them. Words are never spoken. Only thoughts passed. One way. Commands. Sirius could overpower a Greys' mind in the blink of an eye. Disobedience would mean immediate death.

Sirius signals the shuttle to return to the command center to report to the Elders.

Sirius waves a boney claw across a panel, activating a screen the came to life before him. Three menacing faces stare at the fearsome face staring back at them. It would be another millennium or two before Sirius would be considered their equal. He was still young, and relatively inexperienced in the ways of galactic politics. There was a Federation to answer to.

Uncivilized planets were permitted to be occupied and transformed. And fledgling planets like the earth were ripe for the picking. Man may have split the atom. But he had failed to harness its knowledge on which greater knowledge was harnessed. Choosing instead, the path of self-destruction. Who was Sirius to stand in their way?

"El_ders_" Bows Sirius subserviently.

"Sir_i_us_. What_have_you_to_re_port_?" An Elder asks cautiously.

"Ev_ery_ting_is_on_track_. Set_tle_ments_are_near_ing com_plet_ion_. Pow_er_at_one_cent_ton_."

"Ve_ry_good_Sir_i_us_." An Elder nods his bulky head, rasping breath through thin nostrils. He could almost taste the humans on his lips.

"And_the_sa_tel_lite_?" The third Elder asked anxiously, without it, the fleet would be lost finding the blue marbled isle.

"On_track_I_as_sure_you_El_ders... Earth_con_tact_has_as_sur_ed_ev_ery_thing_is_in_ord_er... They_a_wait_your_com_mand_."

"Good_. Good_." An Elder praises Sirius.

"I_serve_you_my_El_ders_." Sirius bows his head as though to conclude their meeting.

The transmission dies and the screen vaporizes into thin air leaving him with his head still bowed.

Large holographic monitors display the bases activity. Harmonic cycles waver across the screens. A clawed finger traces one of the waves and lowers it. Causing the light that filled the room to dim.

Swiping a screen, an image of the earth appears, and he marvels at the suspended blue jewel. Occupied by the soon to be extinct species. Humans. Evolving no more than when he had found them. Worshipping pagan Gods. One of them himself. Unleashing plagues and viruses over the centuries to cleanse the gene pool to purify the remaining stock.

The last pandemic having been remarkably effective purging the undesirables. The aged. The sick. And the lame...

The Director

Somewhere beneath the Pentagon, operated a Government department that did not exist. Established by President Truman to facilitate the recovery and investigation of alien spacecraft, the department would later to be conveniently debunked and cast into obscurity. Funded by technological patents ahead of their time and buried beneath layers of concrete and steel. Bureaucracy and endless red tape. Dissuading the most ardent investigator from penetrating the fortress and its clandestine operations. And those that did persist, were silenced. Never to be heard from again.

At the helm of this secretive department was an insidious fat man who sat behind an equally fat desk. And who answered to no one on this earth.

“Is everything in place?” The Director inquired, hands folded across a portly belly.

“Yes, Director.” Barnard anxiously responds sitting opposite.

“They know nothing?”

“Nothing Director ... Other than what we have told them.”

“Very well then... Hm!” The Director grunts feeling discomfort.

“StarTech provides the cradle... We’ll provide the baby. So to speak.” Jests Barnard.

“How is *that* progressing? *Telos*? I haven’t seen the latest report.”

“We’re on track, not to worry Director. The science is beyond us, but with the help of our friends it’s being assembled as we speak... I will follow up with Isaac after this.”

“Hm! I hope your right Barnard, Sirius is getting restless... Hm!” The discomfort continues, the old man grimaces and audibly passes wind.

Shuffling himself in the large leather office chair faded by the years.

“Is everything alright Director?”

“Fine, fine now.” Grinning with content.

“Was there anything else Director?”

“No. That will be all. Have our people ready when the time comes... I don’t want any loose ends.”

“Yes, Director. No Director.” Barnard stands nodding subserviently and leaves.

The office, if it was still an office, had been converted over the years to accommodate the Director’s personal needs. Dreading to make the call to Sirius. Dull thuds on the desk sound as the podgy fingers tap an illuminated keypad glowing from its surface.

A holographic screen projects into space before him. Displaying the Department’s emblem of crossed swords and white wings. And he waits impatiently for the connection through encrypted pathways to a satellite orbiting the moon.

Abruptly a high definition image of Sirius appears in living color. An ash colored grey. Large slanted black eyes peer at the Director looking anxiously back at him. His skin wrinkled like scales. Sirius tilts his head slightly to one side and examines the nervous human panting and sweating before him.

“Di_rec_tor_” Sirius’ rasping voice responds to the call.

“Sirius.”

“Speak_!” The strangled voice commands.

“*Telos* is on track.” The Director advised.

“Good_. Good_.” Sirius purrs, unsure if the Director was telling the truth, or simply wishing to please him.

Small nostrils twitch as though to smell the portly morsel wedged in the large leather chair. A grin forms in the corner of his thin lips. A claw-like finger taps a screen and the connection is lost and the hologram vanishes as quickly as it had appeared. Leaving the Director suddenly abandoned and alone in the room. The Director sits back relieved by the quick acquittal. Looking up through the layers of concrete and reinforced steel, to an unseen moon. To Sirius and moon base Trinity.

Barnard scurries like a trained lab rat down a series of long white polished corridors. Clinging closely to the walls. Stopping at a plain door, not unlike any other door along the corridor. He knocks three times, and he stands back and waits for it to be opened. The sound of keys could be heard in a lock on the other side and a handle turns slowly. Squeaking on its hinges the door opens.

“*Barnard*... What you want?” Isaac asked, disappointed to see him, poking his head from the doorway as though he were expecting someone more interesting.

Barnard attempts to look into the room. The red tape at the base of the door indicated he was barred from entering. In the background, he could see three small Greys stand over a device. Chattering among themselves with a series of clicks. Whiff of vapor fumes rise into the air from a laser wand. A spark crackles and lights up the room brilliantly, temporarily blinding Barnard.

The Greys stop momentarily to look up to see Barnard observing them, only to dismiss the odd-looking human and resume their work.

“What do you want Barnard? You can see we’re kind of busy here.” Isaac asked impatiently.

“Just spoken with the Director... I told him you were on track... Well, are you? Hm?” He parrot’s the Director.

“Yeah, of course, aren’t we boys?” Isaac enquires from the naked Grey creatures.

Raucous clicks and chatter erupt about the table indifferent to the question. They were working on their timetable, not Barnard’s.

“See, told you so.” Isaac responds grinning.

“Jesus Isaac, I hope you’re right. Everything depends on that *thing*.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever... It will be ready when it’s ready. Won’t it boys?” Isaac turns and asks the Greys.

More raucous clicks and agitated chatter erupts about the workbench, and large black eyes stare back at Barnard as though to suggest he was now unwelcomed. Barnard felt a dizzy spell coming on and stepped back from the door.

“Bugger off, *I’ve* got work to do!” Informs Isaac to his superior now looking faint.

“I very much doubt that... Just remember who pays your wages.” Barnard stammers rubbing his head.

“I get paid? I haven’t been allowed out for the past year! It’s like I’m dead down here!” Exclaims Isaac raising his hands as though it was news to him.

“That can be arranged if *Telos* is finished on time.” Barnard threatens.

The Greys chatter turns to a growl, suggesting he should be on his way. Large black eyes focus on Barnard bald head.

“Bugger off Barnard.” Isaac slams the door in Barnard’s face, stifling the projected thoughts.

Keys sound again, this time locking Barnard out and Isaac in. Muffled chatter and clicking sound as if it were laughter.

“Isaac! Isaac! Open this door!” Barnard pounds the door to no avail. His plead going unanswered. His voice carrying about the vacant corridors only to echoed back to him, as though it were calling him.

Frustrated, Barnard scurries like a trained lab rat down a series of sterile corridors of plain doors without numbers back to his office and quickly closes the door behind him. As if to legitimize the clandestine organization operating under their very noses, portraits of former presidents hung from the walls. The Director of Central Intelligence would be politely informed to cooperate. Keeping the world in a state of pleasant equilibrium as people went about their daily lives. Unaware of the truth that lived among them.

Barnard dials a three-digit number and waits for the call to be answered.

“My office, now!” He orders firmly down the mouthpiece.

Then pours himself a stiff drink of gin, two fingers. It had been a testing morning and that day was not over. Moments later there is a knock at the door.

“Sit down...” He instructs the two men appearing identical black suits and sunglasses, “... And take those silly things off, you’re inside for God’s sake.” He reprimands them.

Reluctantly, two agents remove the dark glasses and sit on the couch feeling anxious. Naked without their sunglasses. Barnard takes a swallow of the drink inhaling the vapors through nostrils savoring the elixir now calming his nerves. Recycling the meeting the Director, and then the confrontation with Isaac.

An agent coughs lightly as though to catch Barnard’s migratory attention.

“Ah yes, you two. I have an assignment for you...” He pauses to consider the timing, “...Get yourself to StarTech. I want a complete background checks of all staff. From the Janitor to the CEO, *Stowers*, or whatever his damn name is... Understood?”

“Yes sir.” The two men answer in unison as though they were telepathic.

“Leave no stone unturned.” Orders Barnard.

“Yes sir.”

“Anyone causes trouble, you know what to do.” Barnard glares at the men.

“Yes sir.”

“Alright, off you go... I have work to do.” Barnard lied.

The Agents stand, leaving Barnard alone and cocooned in his office. To contemplate the apocalyptic device the Grey’s were building. Looking up to the ceiling and an unseen moon. To Sirius and moon base Trinity...

StarTech

“Morning Mister Mitchell.” Hails the Security Guard standing beside the steel entry barriers.

“Morning Hamish... How was your weekend?”

“Too short... You?” Hamish inquired.

“Out savaging with Marshall and Travis... Found an old arrowhead... Not much else, unfortunately.” He lied.

“You young people have too much energy for me.” Responds Hamish feeling old and tired.

“I wouldn’t know, maybe you should ask Marshall and Travis about that... I’ll catch later.”

“You have a good day Mister Mitchell.” Grins Hamish tapping his rim of his cap.

“You too Hamish.” Says Tom swiping a white card over a sensor. Pushing over a thick metal bar as he enters.

Heading to his office, boots echoed off the linoleum floor.

“Tom...” His superior catches his attention, a personal assistant by his side, “... Good weekend? ... Travis said you found an arrowhead?”

“Yeah, something like that Lloyd.”

“You coming to the meeting.” Inquired Pierce seeing Tom just arriving.

“What meeting?” Questioned Tom, his mind still in the outback.

“With Stowers... At nine. You got the invite?” Looking at Tom looking back at him confused.

“Yeah of course... I just forgot it was today.” Fumbling for his mobile.

“Too much sun Tom... Stay in the shade if I were you.” Advised Pierce who continued on his way.

“Where’s the fun in that? I’ll see you there.” Calls out Tom watching him walk away.

He still had twenty minutes before the meeting started. It must be important. Rarely did he ever meet with senior management unless another satellite was coming up. And even then, it was handled by Lloyd and passed down to him and his team.

Marching steadily to his office and a door with a small plaque engraved with his name and title:

Tom Mitchell
Lead Engineer

The title covered a mired of technical sins that included the design and production of commercial satellites with a level of level expertise that made him almost indispensable to the company. Almost.

A large drafting board stands center office displaying an intricate schematic beyond the average man’s comprehension. His desk cluttered with manuals and technical books. On his desk a coffee mug now feasting mold that had cultivated over the weekend. Another mug nearby festered with an assortment of colored pens and sharpen pencils.

He hears a knock at the door to see Bok-Choy standing there.

"You coming to this meeting with Stowers?" Bok-Choy asked poking his head into the office as though not to step on the hallowed ground.

"Yeah, yeah, give me five minutes I need to find some papers. You going?" Asked Tom, unsure who was exactly invited.

"Everyone is. Stowers is about to make a big announcement... You *did* get the invite?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course, who didn't?" Remarks Tom searching for it on his computer.

"See you there." Bok-Choy vanishes from the door.

"Hey wait up." Calls out Tom to the underling, but Bok-Choy had gotten the jump on him.

Running short on time, and despite a sign saying to keep off the grass, Tom decides to take a short cut across the courtyard. Arriving at a door on the other side, only find it locked. Tapping frantically on the glass pane to be let in. Passersby chuckle at the sight of him being locked out.

No one wishing to let the wonder-boy in.

Tom catches sight of Bok-Choy passing inside and knocks harder but fails to get his attention.

"Bok-Choy!" Tom calls out, thumping the glass to the point of almost breaking it.

Halting Bok-Choy in his tracks, thinking he heard his name being called. Looking about, sees his boss stranded on the wrong side of the door.

"Boss!" Surprised to see him standing there.

"Open the door Bok-Choy," Tom orders the underling.

The sign on the inside of the door stated,

"DO NOT OPEN"

Bok-Choy eyes the sign and then his Boss. Wondering which he feared more. But the look on his Tom's face said there would be hell if he did not open the door. Bok-Choy presses down on the lever and opens the door.

A gust of warm dry air rushes inside. Soon followed by Tom on its heels.

"Boss!" Bok-Choy re-acts surprised to see him, betraying his reluctance.

"Don't *boss* me Bok-Choy."

"Yes, boss. Sorry boss." Bok-Choy cowers.

"We're running late. Stowers hates tardiness." Informs Tom marching at double pace with Bok-Choy struggling to keep up.

Entering the board room just as Stowers was about to begin. Stowers catches the late arrivals and watches as Tom and Bok-Choy take their seats. Then scribbles something on the pad before him. Subtle chattering circulates the table. Stowers coughs to silence the dissenters. Drawing their attention to himself.

Silence falls over the board room as people waited with bated breath for Stowers to speak.

Thirty engineers crammed into a board room that could accommodate twenty. The stuffiness of the room was building. The standoff is broken with the sound of Stowers' loud authoritative voice.

"Gentlemen, Ladies... Thank you for coming today at such short notice..." Stowers begins, shuffling papers before him, "... As some of you may be aware... We have been in discussions regarding another project... And I can now disclose those discussions were with the *Pentagon*."

He allows a moment for the significance of the word to permeate before continuing.

"I am pleased to say, that with the great effort of the Executive Team here about me today..." His arms spread wide to acknowledge those either side of him, "...to announce the production of a new satellite."

A round of applause erupts about the table and faces beam glowing smiles and subtle nods of approval.

"Pentagon?" Remarks Bok-Choy under his breath to Tom.

"Hm." Tom quietly acknowledges the importance, there could be more to follow if they could deliver on time.

Stowers raises a hand as though to douse the enthusiasm and muffled chatter.

"This is no *ordinary* satellite gentlemen... I do not need to tell you the importance of the contract and what it could mean to StarTech."

Heads nodded in agreeance.

"Obviously... This is highly classified and cannot be discussed outside the walls of this compound.... You were all vetted by StarTech when you joined. And you will be *again* by Pentagon personnel who will arrive next week to commence screening interviews. I want your *full co-operation*..." His eyes sift to those looking at him as though he was looking for someone that did not belong, "... Anyone who objects can hand their notice into their supervising manager. Understood?"

Heads nod and suspicious eyes sift those attending. With no more to say, Stowers terminates the meeting.

"That is all, dismissed." Dismissing those in the room as though he were a platoon sergeant.

Closing a black leather portfolio, stands and leaves the board room. Trailed obediently by the Executive Team of Accountants, Lawyers, and Administrators.

A door closes behind them, and voices rouse within the board room.

"I've heard nothing about this... You?" One engineer asked of another.

"Nothing... They played that close to their chests."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough... You harboring any secrets Mitchell?" Pierce teases him.

Tom fakes a grin but remains silent. A cold chill of goosebumps erupts over his body at the lie. As if a ghost had walk insidiously through his soul.

"Gentlemen. Back to offices please." Pierce instructs the gathering.

And like sheep people follow each other long corridors back to their holding pens. Boot heels clicked castanets. One by one, managers and engineers disappear into offices for the day. Minions followed in their wake like ducklings behind their mothers. Thinning out by the time Tom reached his office. His three ducklings in tow.

Marshall and Travis and Bok-Choy stand at the doorway awaiting permission to enter.

"Come in guys, take a seat," Tom instructs them.

"Pentagon? Whoa!" Exclaimed Bok-Choy excited by the news.

"Military probably... Man this big time!" Remarks Marshall excited by the prospect of working on a government project.

"We won't know till we see the specs..." Remarks Tom dampening their enthusiasm... Okay, boys, back to your drawing boards. You still have a billionaire's toy to finish, chop-chop... That means you too Bok Choy."

"Very funny boss." Chuckles Bok-Choy.

Tom watches his team loiter from the office in no rush to get back to their drawing boards. Venetian blinds filter the sun trying to enter through a large window. Thoughts of the new satellite eclipsed by the mysterious mound of earth and the shimmering metal object that laid beneath.

'What was it?' He pondered, searching for an explanation.

"Nah... Can't be..." Speaking aloud as though to deny the absurd notion, "... *Roswell?*"

Typing in *Roswell* into the search box was about to press *enter* when the telephone rang, as though to suggest he should not. His hand pulls away from the enter key. Tom looks to the ceiling surveillance camera as though it was watching him. Spying on him.

'Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. Tap!' Tapping the backspace key frantically to annul the illicit inquiry. What was he thinking?

He stares at the blank search box as the telephone continued to ring.

Eyes shift the handset.

Hesitantly, he lifts the handset...

Project Telos

“Mitchell speaking.” Tom answers the incoming call.

“Mister Mitchell...” A woman’s voice enquires.

“Yes, that’s right, how can I help?” Taken back by the unfamiliar female voice.

“Ms. Hathaway, Mister Stowers’ Secretary... Mister Stowers’ would like to see you in his office if you have a moment.”

“Oh... Certainly, when?” Baffled by the sudden summoning.

“Now, would be fine, but sooner if you could make it.” She teased him.

“I’m on my way.”

“Very well then Mister Mitchell, I will inform Mister Stowers. *Goodbye.*” Hanging up on him, he hears the click at the other end of the phone.

“Goodbye.” Responds Tom to a deadline. Expecting her to hear him.

Eyes shift to the camera looking back at him. Unsure what to make of the untimely coincidence.

“That was close.” He mutters to himself.

Taking the grey furry mold-infested mug with him to dispense with on the way.

“Biology, second on the right.” Whips a man seeing Tom holding out the mug as though it were a Petri dish containing some communicable disease.

“Very funny.”

Reaching the cafeteria Tom tosses mug and contents into a non-recyclable waste bin. There to be incinerated or buried deep beneath a land fill before it spread any further and consumed the planet.

‘Knock-knock-knock.’ Tom taps quietly on the heavy wooden door.

There was no plaque on this door. The man behind this door required no plaque. He was the company. Founding it fifty years ago and growing it to what it was today.

StarTech Enterprises.

“Come in.” Ms. Hathaway instructs seeing Tom looking awkward at the doorway.

“Mitchell to see Mister Stowers.” He announces hesitantly.

“Take a seat please Mister Mitchell, Mister Stowers will be right with you.” Her eyes glance to a large leather couch, then return to a keyboard to continue typing.

Tom scans the regal décor of the room. A fan rotated leisurely above, as though it were in no hurry. The scent in the air differentiated it from the other offices. It smelt spacious. There was a quiet hush about the office much like that of a church. The leather couch captures him. Luring him into a false sense of security and comfort. He fidgets as he contemplates as to why he was summoned. On hearing a small cough, Tom looks up to see the secretary looking at him with a faint grin hoping to catch his attention.

“Mister Stowers will see you now,” Ms. Hathaway informs him, indicating the door beside her desk.

“Thank you.” Pulling himself away from the couch holding him back.

‘Knock-knock.’ Tapping the partly open door, peering his head through the opening.

"Come in young man, come in... Take a seat... You know Pierce?" Stowers encourages Tom to enter the office.

"Lloyd?" Said Tom, surprised to see him sitting there.

"Tom." Reciprocates Pierce grinning back at him. Pierce's crocodile smile gave Tom little confidence as to what the going on.

"I've just been discussing the Pentagon contract with Pierce here and he recommended you, to oversee the design team... Told me you're one of the best in the field." Informs Stowers leaning back in his leather chair eyeing the prospect over.

"Well... I... Ah... I don't know about that." Tom begins to stammer being put on the spot.

"Don't be so modest Tom. Here, sit down, relax." Pierce cajoled him.

"Ah, Ms. Hathaway, good timing... Coffee gentlemen?" Stowers offers keenly.

Hathaway pushes a wooden trolley, topped with three porcelain cups and a silver tray of club sandwiches.

"Thank you, don't mind if I do." Responds Tom eagerly.

The coffee tasted unlike anything the cafeteria had on offer and he sits back to savor the moment. Knowing in the back of his mind, these things come at a price. Looking suspiciously at Pierce as to what that price would be.

Stowers continues the briefing while chewing on a sandwich.

"Pierce will oversee the production of course... I'll have the specifications sent over to you once everyone has been cleared by the Pentagon... Can't have any *reds under the bed* as they say... What, what... Shouldn't be any issues given how thoroughly we vetted you when you joined the company?"

"Yes sir, I mean no sir, I understand sir." Remarks Tom.

"Excellent then." Responds Stowers reaching for another club sandwich.

"Do we know the purpose of the satellite?" Tom inquired.

"All very classified I'm afraid... Understandable given their, ah_ *business*. Best not to ask too many questions around *them* Mitchell, lest raise their concerns. Apparently they have another outfit building a specialized payload will slot into the satellite's core... If you know what I mean."

"We'll provide the means. They'll provide the *money*... Any issues?" Added Pierce eyeing a cucumber sandwich.

"Sounds straight forward..." Answers Tom. "... Though we'd need to see the plans of course."

"We'll get them over to your team once we clear the red tape... Nice meeting you Mister Mitchell." Stowers extends his hands suggesting it was time for Tom to leave.

"Oh yes. You too Mister Stowers. Thank you." Tom stands to leave, placing the porcelain cup and saucer on the trolley.

"You know your way back Mister Mitchell." Informs Stowers.

Pierce remains seated, as if Stowers wanted him to stay. As if Tom had somehow been *assessed*. And he wanted Pierce's opinion of the young man.

And quietly Tom makes his way pass Ms. Hathaway's desk.

"Thank you." He offers without a reply.

Feeling the weight of the door and the importance of the person to whom it belonged. And makes his way back to the cafeteria for a fresh mug of coffee. If it was coffee.

"Are you sure about the man?" Stowers questions Pierce anxiously.

“One hundred perfect... Been with StarTech since the undergraduate program... He knows what will be required of him. Tom will step up to the plate I assure you Sean.”

“If you say so. Keep an eye on him nonetheless. I had a feeling he’s hiding something. Fidgeted like a cat on a hot tin roof.”

“He just young, a bright mind with a lot of problems to solve... So what *is* the nature of the satellite?”

“Usual Pentagon business... Spying, surveillance I assume... What else would they use it for? Hardly in the Telecommunication business, are they? Hm!” Jests Stowers.

“That can’t be all, they could get the Chinese to make that for them at half the price they’re paying us.”

“And they’d probably make it for them too... Ha. Nothing gets past you does it, Peirce?”

“That’s what I’m paid for.”

“There is *something*...” Stowers was biting at the bit to tell someone, could he trust him?

“I thought so.” Pierce egged him on.

“There’s a *strange* device they want to install into the satellite.” Whispers Stowers leaning forward.

“What kind of *strange* device?” Peirce leans forward halfway to meet him.

“Some kind of a *deep space* transmitter.”

“How deep?”

“Maybe to the moon and back, and then some.”

“There’s nothing up there to communicate with... Is there?” A perplexing expression comes over Pierce’s face.

“You tell me.” Stowers searches his mind.

“There hasn’t been an Apollo mission since... Well, before I was born... What? ... 1972?” Pierce does the math.

“Whatever they are up to, it doesn’t involve near-earth communications, and they want to keep it hush-hush from the Chinese and Russians.” Elaborates Stowers leaning back in the chair staring out the window to the blue skies and into outer space. It was a strange industry he found himself. Data had become the new currency.

“And somehow I don’t want to know. So long as they can pay for it, we’ll build whatever they want for all I care.” Responded Pierce eager to get his hands on the money.

“Deposit of five hundred million already in the bank, cash.”

“Yours’, or mine?” Questions Pierce.

“Mine of course... (*Chuckles*.)” Grins Stowers enjoying the thought.

“(*Chuckles*)... When are these *Pentagon* people coming over?” A serious look comes over Pierce’s face.

“Didn’t say, said they would turn up when they turn up. They’re already doing background checks on everyone... Including myself. Social networks, blogs... You know the drill.”

“I better get back and clear my desk for... They have a name for this Project?” Pierce asked curiously.

“Yeah, they do... Project *Telos*. We’ll know more once their man *Barnard* sends over the specs and plans... Strange sounding man. Can only imagine what he must look like. Hm.”

“Until then we need to get *Helios* out the door... Thanks for the chat and the coffee...” Offers Pierce standing to leave, “... I’ll see myself out.”

“You know the way...” Stowers flicks his hand to shoo him away like a fly, “... Go play with your toys.”

Stowers leans back to admire a large kingfish mounted on the wall recalling the day he hooked it. It put up one hell of a fight. Not unlike his ex-wife.

Tom collapses to his chair, a fresh mug of steaming black coffee on his desk.

Heading the design team was a big step up in the organization. Allowing himself a momentary gratification, he leaned back in the chair. Battling thoughts of the secretive Pentagon project and the enigmatic object buried in the New Mexico desert. Pulling out the tired dirt stained map from a pocket he spreads it across his desk as though examining a schematic of a satellite. But this was no satellite. Or was it?

Identifying the car park and the circled region. Taking a ruler draws a line between the two points.

'Two hours seven minutes' Scrawled in a corner of the map.

"Three miles per hour for two hours seven minutes..." Talking to himself, tapping buttons a calculator, "... Six-point-three miles."

Using the scale on the map traces the distance on the drawn line. Placing at the center of the drawn circle.

"Not a bad guess." He said, somewhat pleased with his guesswork.

Looking to his door hoping no one was about to enter. Dispelling the camera on the ceiling. He goes online in search of the Roswell crash. Only to read what he knew already. It had been buried with the passage of time and beneath conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and weather balloons. Hollywood movies and Television series desensitizing the public. Fake footages only added to the fog of misinformation. People just did not care anymore.

He knew the truth was out there, he had seen it with his own eyes. Or had he? He found himself having second thoughts and began to doubt himself. He continued to click blindly on hyperlinks that lead to other hyperlinks that lead him down a warren of obscure dubious websites. As if by chance, or fate, he found himself stumbling upon a small insignificant article of a second sighting of another crash. Dismissed as a myth. Many had confused it as the original Roswell sighting. The excitement of the Roswell *incident* redirecting everyone's attention there. Away from the small township of Corona, just north-west of Roswell.

"Shit." Tom gasps. A rush of cold goosebumps erupts over his shins at the realization of the implication

Suddenly his screen flashes with static as though it were being affected by interference. Then returns to normal. Paranoia sets in. Looking to the ceiling camera now burning a hole into him, he quickly kills the window and returns the screen to its desktop display.

Shifting his mind back to his desk, a pile stack of files and manuals suggested a billionaire's satellite would not build itself. Tucking a thick black manual under his arm he walks goes off in search of his team in the workshop.

"Looking good... Everything in order Marshall?" Tom calls up to a gantry to see Marshall stands with a clipboard at hand, camouflaged beneath white tissue overalls and a rectangular faced helmet.

"Ran the final diagnostics this morning... Where were you? Couldn't find you."

"Stowers wanted a word." Tom proudly gloats back.

"About the Pentagon project wasn't it?"

"My lips are sealed until the paperwork comes through... But you can expect some overtime."

“Ghee you make it sound like we’re supposed to be excited by that.”

“Would you rather I have someone else on the team?” Questions Tom.

“Serious? They put you in charge of the project?” Marshall puts one and one together.

“Nothing gets past you does it?”

“Not a lot... Unless it’s a woman.” Frowned Marshall dejectedly.

Tom was not listening. He was admiring a piece of aerospace technological wizardry. Camouflaged himself beneath a flimsy helmet, and white tissue overalls. Colored pens lined a breast pocket. One would barely have recognized him if it were not for the large identity card about his neck.

Suspended eight feet above him, a five hundred-million-dollar satellite, bristling with state-of-the-art technology. Wrapped in gold foil. If Michelangelo marveled after the Sistine Chapel, Tom marveled at the latest of his creations. Named *Helios* after the Greek sun god, built for a telecommunication mogul with too much money. But who always wanted more. Adding add to his stable of three others, already in orbit.

Technicians inspected the giant shackled mammoth. Measuring and calibrating every minute detail. Checking, re-checking. They only had one chance to get it right. Like a voyeur, it would stalk the heavens, unseen among the stars. Embezzling people’s private lives at the speed of light.

“We’re shipping it out this week.” Advises Marshall.

Travis stands on a gantry higher above, polishing the solar panels.

“Now Biff, I want two coats,” Tom calls up to him.

“Just starting the first coat now.” Travis jokes back.

“I want the paperwork on my desk this afternoon for signing off okay... I’ll be back later for the final inspection.” Informs Tom eager to be elsewhere.

He had had a thought and time was of the essence.

“Are you going somewhere?” Inquires Marshall anxiously.

“Yeah... Library in Burke.” Responds Tom about to leave.

“Don’t we have it for here?” Asked Marshall reluctant to let his boss out of his sight with *Helios* at a critical stage of running diagnostics.

“Nah, not this one.” Deflects Tom, reluctant to say anymore...

The Book

“You off already Mister Mitchell?” Asked Hamish seeing Tom about to leave.

“I’ll be back after lunch, just need to run an errand in town. Hold the fort for me will you?”

“No worries Mister Mitchell. Have a nice day.” Watching him hurried leave the building as though he were late for an appointment.

Waiting for a gap in the traffic, he pulls the silver SUV onto the main road, he heads into town. Alabama rock played through the stereo system. Turning up the volume, a guitar riff blares through speakers. Deafening his senses. Abating his growing anxieties. And distracting him from thoughts of aliens and flying saucers.

Twenty minutes later he turns into a parking space outside a library building and waits. What was he thinking? Perhaps he should just leave the *thing* buried for someone else to find. For someone else to explain. The publicity, the attention. His involvement and the cover-up alone could jeopardize his career at Startech. But no matter how hard he tried, like a dog with a bone, he could not let the thought go. Intuition told him this was something bigger than StarTech. If he were going to research this, it would have to be off the grid. Old school.

A library.

Securing a cap low on his forehead, as if to hide his face, he looks about anxiously. Then spies CCTV cameras in the corners of the building, as though they were looking at him. He pulls the peak of the cap down further.

Soft classical music plays through speakers as he enters the library. As though wanting to sooth visitor’s minds and lure them into a false sense of security. Perhaps put them to sleep, to at least have them remain silent. But it did nothing to annul Tom’s anxiety. He looks about for the nearest computer to search the catalog of books.

Finding a computer, he initiates a search. Eyes dance across the screen. Picking out keywords. He latches onto a thread that leads him back to the same small insignificant article on the second crash. Scribbling down reference numbers he heads in the direction of the microfiche projectors.

A lone librarian stands as though frozen in time behind a counter appearing unexcited by his job. It was a slow day at the office. Now a visitor was about to interrupt his day.

“Hi, excuse me...” Tom tries to draw the attendant from a daydream.

“Can I help you?” A dreary voice replies eyeing Tom as if he did not belong. And wishing he would go away.

“I’m looking for microfiche about the *Roswell* crash.” Handing the man a piece of paper with the reference code.

“Oh... You’re one of the *those* people.” The Attendant responds in a dry predicable voice.

“Yeah... I’m one of *those* people. Can you help me?” Tom grins, if only to say he belonged to a secret society of crazy people.

“You know it’s a hoax?” The Attendant tries to enlighten Tom.

“I’m sure it was... Do you have it?” Tom asked pressed for time.

“Wait_ here_.” The attendant dolefully instructs and wanders away unhurried. Annoyed that he had been forced to move.

Tom checks his watch and wondered what was keeping the attendant. He would be cutting it fine getting back to StarTech for the final inspection. Muffled noises sounded from behind shelves, of drawers opening and closing. Finally the attendant reappeared holding out several slides.

“Do you have_ your li_brary ID?” The attendant drawled, almost yawning.

“Yeah sure...” Reaching for his wallet and sliding a plastic card before the man, “... There you go.”

“One_ mo_ment please_.” Tapping a keyboard and enters the details. After scanning the screen for warrants for his arrest, misdemeanors, and overdue books, he slides the card back to him.

“Thanks.” Re-pocketing the library card.

“Mon_itors_ to your_ left_.” The attendant advises, lazily looking over to them before resuming the lifeless state of an android that had been put on silent mode.

“Thanks.” Tom gathers the slides. Taking a seat before an antiquated monitor. An clumsy analog relic of time before digitized computers.

Unsure what to make of the device, Tom flicks a switch on the side. The screen burst to life with a bright white screen. Intuitively, he pulls a handle forward and a slot opens. Inserting the first slide pushes the handle forward. Magnified black and white images of newsprints of the day appear on the screen.

Tom scrolls through pages, searching for clues. Stopping now and again to switch slides. Text flashed up and down. Side to side. Becoming almost dizzy with the scrolling, eyes fight to stay focused. Stuttering and stammering through slide after slide. Catching key words. Pieces of a black and white puzzle that was never meant to be solved.

It was proving fruitless. A dead end. He had drawn a blank.

“Fuck it.” He curses. Looking up to hope nobody had heard him.

Checking his watch, he still had time for one last idea. And returns the slides to the attendant.

“Thanks for those. Not very helpful.” Tom surrenders.

“Told_ you so_.” The attendant affirms what he already knew.

“Yeah, you did... You wouldn’t have any books on the subject.” Asked Tom anxiously.

“Funny you should say that...(Chuckle.)” The attendant chuckled.

“You do?” Tom’s ear’s prick up eagerly.

“This is a *library* you know.” Delivering the dry wit with a grin.

“Hmm, I see... The books?”

“O_ver there_... Under R_ for Ros_well_...” The attendant indicates the general direction and resumes a frozen stance stare into space.

“R... R... R... Rockets... Roosters... Roses...” Walking gradually backward, Tom runs a finger along the spines of the books reciting the topics chiseled on their spines.

He was about to pull one from the shelf when another hand reaches for the same book. Tom turns about and discovers a vaguely familiar woman looking at him. Minus the Winchester. He relinquishes hold of the book. Fearful of her wrath.

“You?” Responds Tom, recognizing the woman. Her face no longer sheltered by her full brim hat, appearing almost attractive. Long auburn red hair tied back reveal her brown eyes. A buck handle knife on her belt suggested he should still be wary of the woman.

He felt like a buck rabbit caught in head lights.

"You?" The woman recognizes the man, looking somewhat different to the desert rat she had seen on her Grandfather's ranch.

Tom broke the awkward silence.

"What's a *lady* like you wanting with a book like that?" Tom asked, speculating the purpose she would have for the book.

"I could say the same thing." She ricocheted back.

"I ain't no *lady*." Responded Tom, getting the line back on her.

"You got that right mister."

An awkward moment ensued as both weighed the Mexican standoff. Then Tom blinked first.

"Hey... Maybe we got off in the wrong foot here... I'm Tom and you are..." Extending a hand.

The woman leaves him hanging, unsure what to make of the gesture eyeing him suspiciously. His baby face betraying his maturity and wisdom.

"Dharma..." Swallowing her pride, "... You have the book if it's important to you." Concedes Dharma taking his soft office hands.

Tom feels a callus firm grip.

"No, you have it..." Offers Tom, "...I'm just browsing the subject out of... *Curiosity*."

"Yeah me too... Well, my grandfather is."

"*Gramps*... Yeah, I remember him... *The Red Baron*. It seems a bit old to be into this *stuff*..." Remarks Tom.

"He has a passion for space *stuff*... I'm just an errand boy for him... So to speak, anyways... What's *your* angle on Roswell?"

"Like I say, just *curiosity*."

"Not the reason you were on the ranch was it? ..." She probed, "... Find anything you shouldn't have?" Watching his face for lies.

"Nah_ just an old arrowhead." Tom deflected.

"Well, I'll be seeing you then."

"Yeah, you too. Thanks for the book. I'll only be half an hour tops. Need to get back to work."

"Let me guess... StarTech." She said, as though reading his mind.

"Wow, how'd you know?" He asked surprised.

"It's on your identification tag..." She grins looking at the tag clipped to his pocket.

"Yeah, we get to play with satellites ... You?"

"Helping the Gramps out on the ranch."

"*Gramps*."

"Yeah... Maybe you should stop by... *Invited* this time. He is a bit of an engineer himself. When his not crop dusting, or ranching. He could do with some male company... Doesn't get out much."

"I might just do that. What the address?" Tom Asked incidentally.

"You can't miss it. It's the old Foster Ranch." She grins.

"How do I find that?"

"Oh, you'll figure it out..." She said tapping the book, "... Be seeing you."

"Yeah you too... Hey, sorry about trespassing the other day." Offering a belated apology.

“Knock next time.” She warns him. Then grins as though it was not a big deal.

“I’ll do that.” Feeling bewitched watching her walk away. There was something about the woman that captivated him more than the mound in the desert. Both as perplexing as the other. Neither of which he could understand.

Finding a vacant table he opens the book. Glossy pages detail the events and eyewitness reports of the *incident*. Flipping pages at random, it opens at a page that catches his attention. A bold caption below an aerial photograph said it all...

FOSTER RANCH

Anxiously Tom looks about hoping to catch the woman still among the aisles. But she had vanished. Plucking lines like guitar strings, and flipping through pages of sketches and location maps, he finds nothing new. Looking about the library suspiciously at those that might be watching him. Catching the wall clock, notices he was going to be cutting it fine to get back in time. Time had seemed to stand still in the library.

“Shit.” He curses.

Closing the book returns it to the shelf and hurries past the attendant momentarily seeing Tom approaching.

“Thanks, man.” Tom offers.

“Find any little green men?” Jests the attendant re-animating back to life.

“No, but there was a woman.” Tom adds still feeling the warm after glow.

“I wouldn’t know about them, try looking under ‘W’.” The attendant sighs dejectedly and resumes a docile slothful gaze into space.

Unsure if the attendant was joking, Tom carried on walking. Checking his watch and noticing it did not have much time.

“Shit.” He curses again...

Pierce is looking for you

Climbing back into his vehicle sits confused as though still caught in the woman's headlights.

"Dharma. Dharma. Dharma." He repeats her name as if it were a mantra.

There was something about her that intrigued him. Perhaps he would visit the old man if only to see her again, then notices the time on the clock radio.

"Shit." He curses turning the key in the ignition.

Wheels screech on the parking lot, leaving a trail of black tire marks. The vehicle bounces over a gutter, only to catch the attention of a cruising Police patrol car. Soon after flashing red and blue lights appear in the rear vision mirror.

'Whoop-whoop-whoop!' A halo squawks for him to pull over.

"Oh shit! That's all I need now." Tom curses slows down and pulls his vehicle to the curb. Slumping at the wheel in despair. His day going to pieces.

The patrol car crawls behind him and the officer radios the plates to dispatch. Tom sits anxiously watching the officer in the rear mirror, watching him. The officer gets out and secures his hat. Brushing away donut crumbs from a tight-fitting brown shirt, stained with coffee and white frosting. Slowly approaches the driver's side window.

'Tap-tap-tap.' The Officer taps it with a knuckle.

'Whirrrrrr_.' Sounds of the electric window winding down to expose Tom.

"Is there a problem officer?" Tom asked knowingly.

"License registration please." The Officer requests.

"Sorry about the *bump*, I was in a bit of a hurry to get back." Checking his watch again.

Unhurriedly, the officer returned to the patrol car and radioed the license details to dispatch. And waited for dispatch to report back. Seconds turned to minutes. Time inside the SUV slowed down, but outside time had sped up. Ten minutes later the Officer returns and hands Tom back his license, serving him only a warning this time, and that he should be more careful.

"Yes Officer, thank you Officer." Tom responds keen to get going again.

"You have a nice day now you hear, and drive carefully." Pinching the brim of his hat and waddles back to the patrol car in pursuit of a donut.

Tom watches as the patrol car pull away. Then throws the stick into drive pulls away from the curb at a more leisurely speed. He was late and nothing could make up the lost time. Hoping Marshall could stall the inspection team.

"What a day." He berates himself.

The compound of StarTech looming up ahead.

"Welcome back Mister Mitchell." Hamish stands aside to allow him pass.

Tom hurries to the workshop, quickly donning sterile tissue overalls and booties. Hiding behind a perplex mask steps out to the main production floor hoping no one would notice him.

"Tom? ... There you are! Where have you been? Everyone has been looking for you. Pierce was fuming you weren't here." Travis calls out for all to hear.

"Car trouble." Responds Tom.

"Oh... All good now?"

“Yeah, finally got it going... Where we at with final diagnostics?” Quickly changing the topic to the satellite.

“Marshall has patched them through to the database.”

“Any issues? Systems all check out?”

“Perfect.”

“Right then, wrap her up and get ready to ship her out... I’ll inform Electron it’s on its way.”

“Roger that.” Travis begins directing men to begin readying the satellite for shipment.

Slowly *Helios* raises from its supports. The workshop’s auditorium amplifying the sound of hydraulic winches. Half a billion dollars of engineering held aloft by the weakest link in the chain. Steady hands guided the Greek sun God into position, moving along a gantry at an imperceptible speed. Waiting at the other end, a customized shipping container purposed built to bed the sleeping Goddess.

Tom hurries back to his office, stripping away the paper overalls like a stripper in a rush to get naked. And discards them into a bin. CCTV cameras pick up the agitated personnel passing. Senses detect his identity and allow him to continue.

Arriving at his office only to discover Pierce sitting before his desk. Waiting for his return.

“Mister Pierce.” Gasps Tom, catching his breath.

“Glad you can join us, Mister Mitchell.” Taking a leisurely sip of coffee from a mug, now half hot and half empty.

“I can explain...” Gingerly taking his seat behind the desk, offering a barrier between himself and Pierce.

“Begin.” Pierce teases him.

“Vehicle problem... I thought I would be back in time... I’m sorry, it won’t happen again, Mister Pierce.”

“You know better Tom... Make sure it doesn’t... I’ve told Stowers we could rely on you.”

“You can Lloyd, you can. I promise. I’m excited about the Pentagon job.”

“I know. We all are... Pass the Polygraph test and security clearance and you will.”

“Polygraph test?”

“Yeah, it’s all part of their *process* apparently. Don’t worry... Unless you have something to hide? ...” Pierce chuckles, then frowns as his own deep dark secrets begin to surface, “... I must be off. Have *Helios* shipped by tomorrow and we can collect final payment for the thing. Business, it’s always about the business I’m afraid Tom.”

“I’ll inform them this afternoon.”

“Good, good. I’ll inform Stowers... And Tom?”

“What’s that Lloyd?”

“Stay about where I can find you... Okay?” Pierce instructs.

“Copy that Lloyd. It won’t happen again.”

“No. It won’t.” Pierce hammers the final nail in the conversation.

Standing at the door, Pierce looks to his left, and then to his right, unsure which way to head. Checking his watch and heads to the staff cafeteria.

“Phew...” Tom breathes a sigh of relief, “... That was close.”

Looking about his cluttered desk brushes aside paperwork like an archeological dig to uncover the keyboard. Tapping keys at the speed of light to access data files. Eyes calibrate

readings and scan for minute anomalies. The slightest oversight could mean the difference between a working satellite, and a piece of space junk.

Three hours later he leans back in his chair and sighs deeply, mentally exhausted. Staring at the screen all afternoon the outside world had ceased to exist. Only now returning to his peripheral vision. Sounds began to seep into ears and odors permeate nostrils. Exhaling another a deep sigh, he releases an email to Electron to expect shipment of the satellite.

'Tap.' Signifying the completion of the project.

He lost had lost track of the number of satellites he had worked on. Twenty, thirty. There was always another one on order. Something bigger, faster, more technologically advanced than the previous one. Reaching for the coffee mug discovers it empty. Finding it a good time to stretch his legs. Standing wearily and feels stiffness in his knees.

"Oh, my knees." He finches, the outback treks were taking its toll. Maybe old age was catching up with him. Either way, he needed coffee and wearily heads to the cafeteria.

Sipping quietly on a fresh mug of coffee, Tom takes five minutes to gather his thoughts. Visions of the woman return with auburn red hair. Brown eyes burning into him. Taunting him. Unsure what to make of her. One moment she was shooting at him like a western gunfighter. Next, she was charming and polite. And what was with the book?

What was her Grandfather's interest in Roswell? What if the second crash was true? What if there *was* another saucer? The repercussions would be huge. The world was not ready for... *Aliens*. Aliens belonged on the silver screen. In people's imaginations. It was almost too overwhelming to reconcile.

Taking a sip of the bland and tart coffee, the foul taste was like smelling salts. And bringing him back to the vacant cafeteria. It was going to be a long week...

Gramps

A faded red dust cover flatbed swings around the back of the weathered homestead. Skidding to halt. Raising a cloud of dust that blew away with the breeze. Scattering chickens, flapping wings, and squawking wildly to escape the red metal beast coming at them. A black and white terrier appears from nowhere yapping. Avoiding the old truck by inches and disappears into the cloud of drifting dust. Only to reappear moments later wagging its tail excitedly.

Then runs suddenly dashes off again to chase an itinerant chicken.

'*Squawk!*' The fowl shrieks as the terrier races after it.

An elbow protrudes from the driver's window and Dharma scans the immediate vicinity for trespassers. The truck door opens and dust-covered cowboy boots step onto the sideboard. Gathering brown grocery bags from the back tray, she heads inside. Pushing open a mesh door with her boot. Relinquishing the brightness and heat of the day to the coolness of the darkened interior.

"Gramps! I'm home." She calls out, to no reply.

Placing the bags on the checked kitchen tablecloth begins to unpack shopping items to cupboards. Pouring herself a glass of water swallows it whole. Before pouring another for her grandfather. Opening a drawer takes out a small plastic bottle of small white tablets. Heart pills. Shaking her head at his reluctance to take them. Pocketing the bottle, she goes in search of the old man.

Walking the hallway of the homestead she had grown up as a child. Raised by her grandfather after her parents had been killed in a motor vehicle accident when she was thirteen. At a time she needed them most. Her grandfather had done an okay job raising her by himself, ever hopeful there was a woman beneath her tomboy ruggedness.

She knew every squeaking floorboard in the old place. Every nook and cranny. Every hiding-place. She stops and inhales the nostalgia. Reminiscing her parent's voices in the other room, as though it were yesterday. She stops momentarily to look at the photos of the dead that lined a mantelpiece like tombstones. All taken before their time. Lifeless souls stare from the other side back at the living. The photo of her grandmother takes center stage on the mantelpiece.

An incongruent photograph stands among the wooden tombstones. Incongruent to the ranch. In a simple frame, taken over fifty years earlier, three young men pose in bulky white spacesuits. Badges emblazoned with NASA and APOLLO. Large white helmets and polish gold tinted visors on their laps. Intrepidly smiling as though posing for the photographer, as though it could well be their last. Centered among the trio was her grandfather, frozen in time.

Dharma catches her mother looking at her.

"Okay, okay, I'll find him." She tells her.

"Gramps!" She calls out again.

Nothing. The house empty, besides her.

The terrier appears again yapping at the sound of her voice.

"*Shush Waldo!* ..." She tells the whippet-terrier, "...Make yourself useful... Go find Gramps!"

With that instruction the dog dashes out of the lounge and down the hallway, pushing aside the flimsy mesh screen front door, down worn wooden steps, and heads towards the barn.

"I should have known." Shaking her head.

Stepping onto the board shaded porch, a breeze drifts across it as though not wanting to leave. There was a brief temptation to sit and wait for the old man, but the tablets in her pocket told her to keep moving. Yapping could be heard coming from within the barn. Wooden steps squeaked like piano keys. A feeling of déjà vu comes over her. Days of playing hide and seek with her father. And she looks back hoping her father would be standing there.

He was, unseen.

A red vintage biplane, held together with duct tape and a prayer, sits in the shade of the two-story barn. Inside a green and yellow tractor, marred and scarred with age, sat dormant. Rusting quietly away. Much like the old man. Stepping inside the barn, the smell of straw and fertilizers fill her senses. Looking about for the old man. A muffled yap sounds from beneath the tractor.

Lifting the trap door cloaked by a soiled carpet, she climbs down a wooden ladder into a concealed workshop. A single bulb illuminated the secret room. Shelving lined with cartons. Each labelled in felt pen as to their contents. In the background, a radio crackles with indistinct sounds. Alien squealing voices, distorted by interference from the local radio, wavered in and out.

The old man sits on a stool hunched over a circuit board, not of this world. Listening intently to the chatter. Deciphering what he wanted to hear and disregarding the rest.

"There you are." Said Dharma seeing him.

Fine wires crawl like snakes to a monitor that meant nothing to Dharma. Harmonic curves move slowly across a monitor. LED lights flashed intermittently. The old man turns a knob to increase the frequency and power. Suddenly there is a flash. Angering the circuit board to spit sparks and cough a plume of smoke electrical smoke at the old man. Standing back, he waves away the irritating smoke with a hand.

The terrier yelps, excited by the explosion.

"Bugger! ..." The old man cusses thinking he had almost had it this time. Then sees Dharma standing with glass for water for him, "... Dharma..." He grins almost feeling foolish, "... Did you get the book?"

"Yeah, about that... Here have your tablets, you know what the doctor said." She reminds him.

"*Bah-humbug!* ... What do doctors know? I'm fit as a fiddle... (*Cough*)."

"And the cow jump over the moon..." Holding out the container, "... Now take your tablets."

"You sound just like your mother."

"That's because she'd be saying the same thing." She informs him. Watching her grandfather take two tablets and swallowing water.

"The book?" He asked again.

"Some guy got to it before me."

"What guy?" He asked suspiciously.

"Just some guy... Worked for StarTech... Weird."

"*StarTech* you say? Hmm?" Ears prick up.

"Yeah... I told him he should come out and visit you. It seems you have a lot in common."

"*Ah_ Dharma*, the last thing I need is a *visitor*." The old man protests to solicited intrusion.

"Not like he's a stranger." She reminds him.

"What do you mean?"

"You nearly killed him when you buzzed him the other day."

The old man recollects who he may have buzzed recently and finally the penny drops.

"Oh him... Would have had him too had he not ducked in time, *bastard*... What was he doing trespassing on my property?"

"An amateur archeology group apparently. Indian artefacts they say."

"Hmm... He's got the book you say?"

"I suppose... I'm going into Burque next week if you can wait that long."

"I've survived this long, I can survive another week."

"Yeah... If you take your tablets." She warns him.

"Why did you invite him out for? ... Why didn't you shoot him when you had the chance?"

"There were three of them and I was down to my last two bullets." She lied.

"Hm!" Her grandfather grumbles.

The electrical smoke finally clears, but the scent of still lingers in the air.

"What is that thing?" She asked, curiously eyeing the strange circuitry.

"Don't know... That's what I'm trying to figure out." Eyebrows pinch together.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Out there..." He informs her tilting his head in the direction of the crash site.

A piece of metal lays on the bench. Inscribed with strange hieroglyphs. The size of a large plate, Dharma picks it up and is surprised by its almost non-existent weight. Like that of a feather. Bending it, symbols change as though to accommodate the contortions. The metal springs back again and the original symbols reappear.

"Are all the boxes filled with this *stuff*?" She asked glancing the walls.

"Yeah... They did a lousy job cleaning up. That book had aerial maps of the area."

"Can't you just go online for that sort of thing?"

"*They'll* track you in a heartbeat... Beat a path to your door in the middle of the night."

"Then what?"

"You'll disappear like rest of them." The old man gestures with fingers twitching as though he were a magician.

"Who disappeared?"

"Those who talked aloud... Those that got too close." He said somberly.

"To what?"

"The Truth."

"You still believe there's a moon base up there?"

"I know what I saw... I saw it with my own eyes... Again, and again. I didn't want to believe it myself." Laments the old man.

"You coming up for lunch?" She catches him on the next orbit.

"Yeah. I'll be up in a moment."

"Make sure you are. Don't make me come looking for you okay?" She warns him.

"You're as relentless as your mother!"

"Someone has to be. Don't be too long, or Waldo gets it."

Waldo's ears prick up at the sound of his name and he looks peculiarly at Dharma.

"Five minutes tops." The old man lies.

Watching her climb back through the hole and closing the trap door behind her.

Removing the tablets he had hidden between his fingers and discarded them to the floor. The terrier scampers to the tablets, sniffs them, and turns his nose up at them.

“Not for you boy.” He tells the dog returning by his side.

Observing a black and white monitor, he watches his granddaughter return to the homestead.

He continues to listen to the intermittent radio chatter. Squealing, fading in and out. A water tower lined with the strange metal served as a powerful antenna able to pick up signals of alien voices talking to one another.

An irritation tickles the old man’s throat and he coughs into a cloth peppered with blood specks. The heart tablets were the least of his concerns. Annoyed at having a possible visitor. Someone nosing around the place. Perhaps the young man would see sense and stay away.

Without warning, he hears the sound of a rifle shot outside and looks up to the monitor to see Dharma standing on the porch with the rifle on her arm.

“Christ Waldo. I swear she’d shoot me if she had half a chance.”

Removing the leather apron and hangs it on a hook.

“Com’ on boy.” The old man encourages the dog to follow.

Waldo scampers through a hole in the wall, and up a narrow passage to the surface to chase a hen that had wandered into the barn looking for seed. The old man kills pulls himself through the opening and closes it behind him. Covering it with the grubby mat. Kicking dirt and straw over it to conceal it further.

Looking up to the sky he spies the moon looking back at him. That explained the strong signal he had received.

‘Click-clunk.’ Dharma cocks the Winchester to remind the old man to hurry up.

“Christ Dharma! I’m eighty-eight... I’ll be dead soon enough without your help.”

Waldo scampers between the old man’s legs almost tripping him over.

“Get out of the way you mongrel.” He warns the dog...

Men in Black

Landing at a remote airfield on the outskirts of Albuquerque. Wheels screech, burning rubber as a shiny black unmarked Lear Jet touched the tarmac. Sedately the Jet taxis almost unnoticed into a private hangar where an equally shiny black Cadillac awaits the occupants of the plane.

The cabin door opens, and polished black shoes appear at the top of the steps. Followed by another pair. Two Agents appear dressed identically in black. Black suits. Black sunglasses mask black eyes. Heads topped by black Fedora hats. Starched white shirts contrasted the ebony attire. Their faces expressionless, pale like their shirts. Void of empathy. And blood.

Black briefcases hung by their sides. Eyes scan the hangar for those watching. Descending stairs the Agents walk unhurriedly across the hangar floor to the waiting vehicle. A driver stands quietly beside an open door. Equally dressed in black. With white gloves. And closes the door behind them.

Two engineers poke their heads up from turbine casings and watch the mysterious black Cadillac drive gracefully away.

“Fed’s.” One engineer speculates to another.

“Nah... CIA I reckon.” States the other offering his appraisal, “... Must be something big.”

“I reckon...” Said the other and lowers his head, “... Pass me that scanner.”

The black Cadillac pulls into a subterranean basement of an office building in central Albuquerque. Descending deeper within the bowels of the clandestine premises. Senses detect their presence and authority. Metal arms raise and spikes lower as the official looking vehicle passes. Coming to a halt beside an elevator door and the engine goes quiet.

The driver steps from the Cadillac first and opens a back passenger’s door. An Agent steps out and surveys the immediate area. Then steps away, allowing the other agent to step out. Black briefcases hang by their sides as they walk to the elevator doors. An agent waves a hand over a sensor, an implant activates the lift doors to open.

The Agents enter and doors close behind them.

Punching a combination of buttons, as though it were a code, the lift begins to descend. No numbers appear on the console. Taking an eternity before the lift finally came to a stop. Doors open to a bright environment. Adjusting their sunglasses, they look about the open office filled with other Agents looking up momentarily seeing them entering. On assignment, like themselves. Their purpose is known to them, and them alone.

Walking in unison they make their way to a large room that had been set aside for them. Photographs of StarTech staff and names lined the wall. Stacked colored files, containing details of the employees, sat on the board table in neat precise rows.

As though in a synchronized dance, Agents place briefcases down, removed their sunglasses, folded them gently, and placed them inside the briefcases. Removing their jackets, hung these on a stand. Followed by their hats.

Neither Agent spoke.

Sitting either end of the long board table the Agents methodically begin to read the contents of each of the folders. One by one. Burning the person’s image to their hybrid brains. Absorbing in less than a minute what a person would in an hour. Pages flick as though they were browsing a

woman's magazine. Digesting facts, times, phone transcripts, text messages, emails, web sites accessed, blogs, and social networks.

Humans had willingly, yet unwittingly, surrendered their privacy to feel socially accepted. Nothing was beyond the agency's reach. With access to every Server on the planet, they could profile anyone at will. The Agency knew more about the person than the person did themselves.

Humans were habitually routine. Irritably predictable. And predictably boring. Their lives an endless cycle of going no-where until they died. Then a blip would appear on the radar. Something out of character. A change of habit, or routine. Change can be dangerous if left unchecked. Large black eyes dance down the page, reading multiple lines a time. Transparent membranes blink sideways across the surface of large black eyes.

Eidetic memories collate and analyze data. Searching for imperfections. Searching for a change.

An Agent stops, and closes the red file before him and places it on the table. Tapping the cover with his long white finger. As though to signal the other Agent he may have found something. Purring a series of clicks, the Agent communicates with the other. Each understanding the other's concern. Sitting in silence, eyes scan the wall and stop at one specific photograph.

The label beneath it stated...

THOMAS MITCHELL

"Morning Hamish," Tom said wearily.

"Morning Mister Mitchell, you look like you haven't slept?" Hamish said chirpily.

"Yeah, something like that... Lot on my mind." Declares Tom.

"Take it easy today Mister Mitchell, we have *visitors*. And if you ask me I didn't get a good first impression of them... If you *know* what I mean." Resting a hand on the grip of his gun, looking about for the two men in black.

"And who would that be?" Tom asked curiously.

"Pentagon boys... I wouldn't want to go upsetting them, Mister Mitchell if I were you."

"If you say so, Hamish..." Dismissing the warning and scanning the sensor unsure what to make of the advice, "... Can't be that bad. Can it?" Tom grins and heads unhurriedly to the cafeteria for morning coffee.

Hearing an unusual amount of chatter from the people walking passed. He continues unrushed. *Helios* had been shipped and off his desk. He was looking forward to having some downtime to unwind before the Pentagon job got underway. Then recalls what Stower's had said about background checks. He takes a sip of the hot black coffee as he scratches the back of his mind. He could see no issues with StarTech.

"Boss!" Travis appears at the door, looking frantic and almost startling Tom.

"Christ Travis! Ah..." Catching himself in time from spilling the scolding drink over himself and places it on the desk in front of him.

"Have you heard?" Asked Travis looking over his shoulder as though he was on the run from something.

"Heard what?" Tom asked switching the computer on.

"We got visitors... Two suits from the Pentagon."

"Yeah, Hamish took me, what of it?"

"Mate, have you seen them?"

“Not yet. I suppose I’ll get called up sometime... Got nothing to hide... You? ...” Opening his email account and seeing his appointment time at 2:00PM that day.

“Don’t know, guess we’ll find out... I’m at 10:00 this morning. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Yeah, you do that... Have you seen Marshall?”

“He’s in there now... God help him. They say it’s like the inquisition.” Travis said fearfully.

“What time did they start?”

“Six this morning.”

“Christ, who drew the short straws for those interviews?” Asked Tom, pitying the poor sods.

“The lab rats... Saving the bigger fish for later.”

“It really can’t be that bad? We went through all this when we join.”

“Not like this we haven’t. Marshall might be able to tell us more, should he ever get out.”

“Send him in if you see him?”

“Sure. Be seeing you.”

“You too... Good luck!” Tom leans back in his chair and swivels about to face the window looking out over the quadrangle.

A sprinkler head sends out hypnotic jets of crystal-clear water over the grass. Memorized by the rhythmic beat, Tom searches his mind for anything that could threaten his chances of working on the Telos project.

“Damn.” Snagging a vagrant misdemeanor. Pondering if the verbal citation had been recorded by the coffee-stained Patrol Officer. Probably not. And dismisses the incident as quickly as it had appeared in his mind. The mound of earth never entered his thoughts. Departmentalized to a realm of outside of StarTech. As was the archaeological group.

Eyes are drawn back to the memorizing sprinkler rotating round and round and round and round. Jettisoning sparkling streams of life to the flush green lawn. A disparity to the dry brown grass that struggled to grow on the adjacent side of the concrete path that laid just out of reach of the lifesaving water.

Blissfully unaware that Marshall would soon appear at his door.

“Boss!” Marshall calls out from the door, startling him again.

“Christ, knock will you!” Brushing the spilled coffee from his once clean white shirt.

“Sorry boss... Didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“Damn...” Tom examines the damage, then turns to Marshall, “...How you get on? Travis just told me.”

“Don’t go in there, boss. Those guys know everything about you.”

“Really? *Everything*?”

“*Everything*.” Parrots Marshall.

“Can’t be that bad can it?” Questioned Tom, amused by the Marshall’s growing anxiety.

“They had me wired up to a machine of some sort... A *lie detector*... That’s what it was.”

Tom recalls the Polygraph Pierce had mentioned.

“They asked a whole lot of questions.” Marshall continues.

“About what?”

“About me, about StarTech, and...” Marshall made a worried look.

“And what?” Tom asked with a puzzled look.

“About you.”

“Me? ...” Tom is taken back, “... Why me?”

“Don’t know, they seemed to be more interested in you, than me. I guess because you’ll be leading the Team... I suppose.”

“Yeah... That must be it...” Tom accepts, becoming suspiciously anxious, “...What else did they ask?”

“Places I had visited, web sites I wish I hadn’t. Short of probing me, I felt almost... *Violated.*”

“What did you tell them about me?”

“Not much that you already know... You know, a top guy, reliable, trustworthy... Usual bullshit.”

“Yeah, that’s what probably got them suspicious... Hm.”

“They know about our archeology group.”

“Shit, they have done their homework. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Oh... There’s something else.” Marshall recalled.

“What’s that?”

“There’s something about them.”

“In what way?” Tom leaned forward.

“They’re dressed in black suits. They don’t even remove their hats. And it must be seventy degrees in there and they don’t even break a sweat.”

“Maybe they got gland issues.”

“The freaky part is their eyes.”

“What about their eyes?” Tom echoes.

“You can’t see them. Cause they wear large black sunglasses... But you know they’re looking at you. It’s a creepy feeling boss... Like they can read your mind or something.” Marshall shudders at the thought, as though they were still doing it.

“You’re starting to freak me out now Marshall, you’re not pulling my leg, are you? You know I’ll get you for this?”

“On my mother’s grave.” He swears.

“Your mother isn’t dead yet, you had dinner with her last week if I recall.” Tom corrects him.

“Still... I had a glance at one of them from the side, and it wasn’t natural if you know what I mean.”

“No, but I think I’m going to find out at 2:00 today.” Tom leans back in the office chair and contemplates the impending interview, sure that Travis and Marshall were over exaggerating.

‘How bad could it possibly be?’ Tom tells himself ...

The Inquisition

Tom sat waiting outside the interview room, a mild sweat building under his collar and across his forehead. Was it warm, or was it just him? Another engineer sits opposite looking at ease, absorbed by an article in a boating magazine. He looks up and sees Tom anxiously tapping his foot. As though it were distracting the man from the magazine. And offers a grin looking down to his boots hoping Tom would cease the tapping.

Tom continues tapping his foot as though the man opposite did not exist. Feeling like he was waiting for a dental appointment to have a tooth extracted. He just wanted the pain over with. Eyes bounce off walls like ping pong balls. Muffled voices sound behind a closed grey door. Unimaginable horrors of a body on a rake being stretched, limbs straining to remain in their sockets. Of white-hot branding irons and men wearing crude leather black masks concealing their eyes. Could it really be as bad as Marshall had described?

Suddenly a door handle snaps down, and the door springs open. Snapping Tom from the macabre daydream. A worried-looking detainee emerges from the cell, relieved the *interview* had come to an end. The man hurries past Tom without stopping, wanting to distance himself from the ordeal. Watching him scurry back down a corridor like a lab rat in a maze in search of a piece of cheese and sanctuary, before veering off into corridor from view. His eyes shift back to the open door. He stares into the empty void not knowing to expect to find inside. He waited to be summoned. He waited for his name to be called.

“Thom_as_Mit_chell_.” An alien voice calls out his name to enter.

A chill goes down his spine, this was it. Standing anxiously, now sees the magazine man sitting opposite like a chameleon that had blended itself with the décor of the room. When did he arrive? Was he there the whole time? Eyes meet as though it for the first time, and maybe what would be last time they see each other.

“Good luck.” The man offers watching Tom step into the room.

The doors close behind him, shutting the magazine man outside. Two men sit at a white table dressed identically in black. Just as Marshall described. Before them, a device of some kind sprouting wires and pads. Tom looks about for a blazing brazier and a branding iron.

“Thomas Mitchell?” An Agent asked placing an open red file in front of him examining the image of the employee and comparing it to the pale individual standing opposite.

“That’s right.” Tom replies hesitantly.

“Sit.” Commands the Agent gesturing a metal chair next to the device on the table.

The plain white room was adorned with nothing, but a large white table and two contrasting gentlemen dressed in black. And the strange black device. Wiping the sweat from his forehead. The room felt uncomfortably warm. Yet Tom feels the cold metal of the chair against his skin. Sending further chills over his body.

“What’s this all about?” Tom asked curiously. But is only met with silence.

“Sleeve.” An Agent instructs him to roll up a shirt sleeve as though he were about to take blood.

The other Agent watches on impassively, his face expressionless. Dark glasses conceal eyes, but Tom could sense they were looking at him. An Agent secures a Velcro pressure cuff to his exposed arm before attaching electrical sensors to fingertips on his other hand. Thinking that

would be it, is then surprised to have rubber tubes placed tightly around his chest as though to restrain him to the chair. Feeling he was being held captive against his will.

“Christ you guys are thorough aren’t you.” Tom tries to lighten the mood.

“Si_lence... You will speak_ when asked_.” The Agent behind the machine instructs him coldly.

“Okay, okay. Will it take long?” Tom tries to get the last word in.

Again, he is met with silence.

An Agent taps keys of a black laptop and watches as rhythmic signals register on the screen. Heart rate, blood pressure, breathing. Perspiration and body movements. Fidgeting. Tom could not fart without them knowing about it. Sweat begins to build again. The temperature of the room grew warmer. It was as though someone had turned up the air conditioning and forgot it was on.

Agents appeared unperturbed by the heat.

“Could go a glass of water?” Tom asked hoping to break the silence.

“Would you like water?” An Agent asked.

“Yes.”

A spike appears on the screen. With the benchmark question out of the way, it was time to begin. Leaving Tom wanting and dehydrated.

“You are Thomas Mitchell?” The Agent behind the monitor asked watching the screen.

“I’ve already told you it was.” Responds Tom stating the obvious.

“Yes or no.” An Agent directs Tom.

“Yes.”

A spike appears on the screen.

“Do you live at sixteen hundred Pennsylvania Avenue?”

Tom contemplates the ridiculous question momentarily before answering.

“No.” He answers.

“Do you watch pornography?”

“What has that got to do with the project?” Tom protests the intrusion of his privacy.

“Just answer the question.”

“No,” Tom answered sharply.

‘Beep!’ A sharp ping echoes back at him. Liar.

The Agents sat unmoved by the answer, watching the reading on the screen become excited. Blood pressure elevated and heart rate climbing. Perspiration seeping beneath the sensors. Waiting for the signals to settle before asking the next question.

“Have you used any drugs during the last year?”

“No_,” Tom said adamantly.

‘Beep!’

“Have you ever committed any crimes?”

Tom tries to recall what exactly constituted a crime but answered the best he could.

“No_.” And waits for the *beep*.

Silence.

“Have you ever stolen anything from a place where you have worked?”

“No.”

‘Beep!’

“I don’t think pens count.” Tom protests.

An Agent taps keys on the laptop to notate the confession. But not to absolve him of the sin.

“Are you a *Patriot* Mister Mitchell?”

“Eh? What sort of question that?” Becoming agitated by the black-suited men eyeing him suspiciously.

“Are you a Patriot Mister Mitchell?”

“Patriot? What is this? ...Seventeen seventy-six?”

“Answer yes or no Mister Mitchell.”

Taking a deep inhalation tries to remain calm and answers that best he could.

“Yes.”

‘Beep!’

A blip appears on the screen together with an elevated heart rate and blood pressure. Then the Agent gets to the point.

“Have you ever been arrested?”

“No.”

‘Beep_!’ The device sang out as if telling tales. Tom could almost sense a finger being pointed at him.

“Have you ever been stopped by an officer of the Law?” The Agent asked stepping closer to home.

“How do you know about that?” Tom becomes more agitated. Just how much did they know?

“Just answer the question, Mister Mitchell.”

“You know I have... Yes.” Wondering where the questioning was headed.

The next question that stopped Tom in his tracks.

“Rowell?” An Agent asked from nowhere, catching Tom by surprise.

“Roswell?” Tom parroted almost choking on the word.

“Roswell... What_ is your_ interest_?” An Agent presses, drawing out the words painfully.

An awkward silence hung over the table as the Agents waited for Mitchell reply.

Convinced the agents were unable read his mind Tom offered a plausible explanation.

“Curiosity I suppose.”

“Curiosity?” Asked the Agent as though the word was foreign to him.

“Yeah, who isn’t, aren’t you?” Tom counter punched.

“Just answer *yes* or *no*.” Warned the other Agent.

“Yes.”

‘BEEP!’ The machine shouted as a taller blip rises from the baseline.

Tom hears the loud infliction and tries to peer behind the monitor to see what was causing the disturbance.

“You visited a Library... Monday?” The Agent reminded Tom.

“You sure know a lot about me, don’t you?”

“Just answer the question, Mister Mitchell.”

“Well if you must know... It was the only free time I had to get there. Thought I’d take the opportunity.”

“Is this true?”

Tom calmed himself and believed what he was about to say was true.

“Yes.” He answers coolly and waited for a beep, that never came.

Tom thinks he could hear subtle clicks and looks about for the source. To the clock on the wall that ticked loudly in the deafening silence of the room. And the minute hand ticks over to the half-hour. Hoping it would relieve him from the inferno he found himself.

“How about that glass of water now?” Asked Tom.

The request fell on dry ears.

Peering up to the ceiling to see the camera looking back at him. Running a finger beneath his collar to relieve the sticky irritation. Nostrils twitch and he begins to get restless. What was the strange smell in the air? Wondering if it was the exhaust fumes from the polygraph. Then dismissed the device looking closely at the two Agents tapping keys and making notes as if the odor were emanating from them. The vulgar thought repulsed him, sitting back in the metal chair warming to his body.

“Don’t you guy’s sweat?” He asked curiously.

The humor is met with silence.

Sunglasses shield the Agent’s eyes from the bright light of the room. Their skin pale, as though it lacked circulation. Thin black ties extend beneath their chins and partition stark white shirts.

“You guys need to get out more.” Suggests Tom.

The suggestion goes unrequited.

“Have you answered all questions, truthfully?”

“Yes.” Responded Tom hoping that was the end of the interrogation.

‘Beep!’

An Agent stands before him, looking intimidating. A large pale hand reaches towards him and begin to claw at him. Tom reflexes backward in defense as the Agent dismantles rubber tubes and pressure cuffs. Placing these neatly beside the polygraph to await the magazine man.

The repulsive scent of the man roused Tom’s nostrils. Holding his breath until the Agent had finished and stepped away.

“That_ will be all_ Mister_ Mitchell_... You_ may go_.” An Agent informs Tom, looking to the door as if to suggest the way out.

“Oh, my knees,” Tom complains standing and rubs his knees.

The Agents look at him and wonder if there as something wrong with the man. Tom hurries from the interview room just as the man before him had. The magazine man hears the door snatch open and catches Tom leaving nervously.

“How was it?” The magazine man asked.

“Yes,” Tom answered automatically without looking back.

And returns to his office to find Marshall and Travis on the leather couch waiting for him discussing their own inquisitions.

“Well... How’d it go?” Asked Travis sitting upright keen to hear what Tom had thought it.

“Creepy.” Responded Tom.

“Told you so.” Remarked Travis.

“Don’t think I want to get involved with that lot.” Suggests Tom.

“What? And miss the opportunity to work on a Pentagon *Top Secret* Project?” Asked Travis.

“What’s the point of it being Top Secret if you can’t tell anyone about it?” Argues Tom feeling deflated about being involved.

“The man does have a point, Travis...” Remarks Marshall supporting the logic, “... Feeling a little less inclined now. Did they smell funny to you? Or was it me?”

“Like rotten meat...” Remarked Tom, his nostril’s unable to shake the scent, “... Let’s see what comes back. They sure knew a lot about me.”

“Yeah.” The two underlings answer together.

“Hope they don’t upset Pierce with his short fuse... What a day, I’m off home, you guys want to get a drink?”

“Sounds good to me.” Responds Travis following in Tom’s footsteps.

O'Malley's

Travis pushes open the frosted glass bar doors only to be hit by a wall of raucous voices and a wall of cold air rushing out to escape. Barflies cling to tables to hold themselves upright. The trio made their way into the bar. Tom spies an empty booth beside the jukebox. Roughed eyes follow the trio looking incongruent to the surroundings. Lorry drivers and ranch hands chuckled as the office boys passed. Cowgirls sipped on Pina Coladas and mentally undressed the office boys to the sound of country music.

Sliding into a booth Tom waves at a passing waitress.

"Three shots, and a pitcher thanks."

"Coming right up, honey." Scribbling on a docket, smiling at him as she chewed gum to blow a bubble, turns and disappears among the tables.

"Think she likes you, boss?" Quips Marshall.

"Yeah right... Got no time for women." Informs Tom eyeing the feral talent on display.

"A good-looking man like yourself should have woman at your feet." Advises Marshall.

"I'll have her if you don't want her?" Remarks Travis, smitten by the brunette vixen.

"I thought you had a girlfriend?" Questioned Marshall.

"Yeah-Nah. That didn't work out. She was kind of into seeing... Other people if you know what I mean."

"Oh_" Responds Marshall imagining the one-sided open relationship.

"Anyways, if you recall the last one tried to shoot at us... I think I'll skip them for a while if you don't mind." Remarked Tom.

"You wouldn't want to bump into her again would you?" Warns Marshall grinning.

"Yeah_. Wouldn't want *that* to happen eh." Remarks Tom grinning. Recalling Dharma in the library looking somewhat less threatening. Somethings are best kept quiet.

The waitress returns carrying a tray of shots, a large pitcher of lager beer, and three empty glasses.

"Here you go, boys... Enjoy." Placing the drinks down, giving Tom a parting grin.

"Get these down you... Here's to surviving the week. And that torrid inquisition." Tom raises a shot glass and examines the clear yellow solution and throws it to the back for his throat. Quickly pours himself a cold beer to wash the foul-tasting accelerant away.

Leaning back on the bench seat Tom tries to relax. But interview questions kept popping in his head. The Pentagon sure knew a lot about his movements, his whereabouts. They could well be tracking him to the bar. Eyes look to the ceiling. Rotary fans swirl leisurely round and round and round. To one side, a dark fisheye security camera. It felt like it was staring directly at him.

"You the okay boss." Travis looks up to see what had caught his eye.

"Just thinking... Don't you think the interview was strange?"

"It certainly was pleasant if that is what you're trying to say."

"They didn't even sweat?" Said Tom about the anomaly.

"Yeah_ that was weird."

"Did you hear a clicking sound?"

"The clock?" Questioned Travis.

“Nah_, it sounded like it was coming from *them*... As though they were *talking* to each other.” Said Tom hoping not to sound crazy.

“Eh?” Remarked Marshall.

“Yeah_. It was probably just the clock.” Backtracked Tom, recovering the screwball remark.

Music bounced off the walls, swirled about the rotors, and rained upon the patrons. Music muffled chatter and boots stomping in time with the beat. Plaid shirts, blue jeans, and cowboy boots. The air was thick with the country. You could cut a knife with it. And there were plenty of those hanging off belts. With the interview slipping from his mind another thought began to occupy its place. Buried beneath a mound of baked earth.

His engineering mind calculating its dimensions. Whatever it was massive, weighing tons.

“Fuck.” The resultant slipped out.

“What’s up?” Asked Marshall looking over his shoulder as though some was approaching.

“Nothing, just thinking aloud.”

“Obviously.”

“I just recalled I have to work this weekend. Sorry, I’m going to have to skip the field trip.” Tom fibs.

“Oh_ I was looking forward to it.” Remarked Travis despondently.

“Maybe next weekend before the project begins.”

“What you working on? I thought we’d finished with *Helios*?” Asked Marshall curiously.

“So did I, but you know what Pierce is like about money... Wants the final paperwork done to support the final invoice.” Hiding the face behind his beer glass.

“What a slave driver.” Responds Travis.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry guys. Next weekend eh?” Tom apologizes almost convincingly.

“Okay.” Relent the underlings.

The waitress returns seeing the empty pitcher.

“One more! ...” Orders Tom feeling good about himself, “... It’s going to be a hot one.” Looking out the windows to the clear blue sky. The night was young.

Climbing from the SUV, Tom wonders how he had gotten home. The sun had the sense to go to bed and darkened the day into night. Looking to the cosmos above, dense with stars. Pinpricks in an ebony canvas. A falling star streaked naked across the sky before fading and dying. Momentarily reminding him of a flying saucer. Somewhere among the billions of stars, there was another planet. Another civilization light-years beyond man’s reach. Beyond their intelligence.

And probably just as well.

Feeling giddy, he regains his balance and fumbles for keys to head inside. Tossing the keys into a small bowl heads to the kitchen to see what there was to eat in the refrigerator. Spotting some leftovers from the night before slides it into the microwave and punches a launch code to heat the morsel. Reaching for a Bud, knocks the scab off and sucks on the open brown nipple feeling the cold tasteless brew trickle down his throat to his stomach and waited for the microwave to ding.

At first, he had not noticed the few things were not as he had left them. An open drawer here. Scattered items about the place there. As though someone had through his home. Looking for something.

‘Ding.’ The microwave sounds, only to be ignored.

Adrenaline surged through him, eyes dart about the room and his heart quickens. Books that should be on shelves, now chaotically scattered across a coffee table and floor. The microwave would have alerted any intruder. Pulling a large carving knife from a wooden block. Creeping down a narrow passageway, threads quietly to each of the rooms. Turning on lights. Listening for the slightest of sound of an intruder. But is only confronted with silence.

And the sound of his thumping heart and heavy breathing. Hesitantly he reaches the bedroom and reaches inside to flick the switch.

'Click.' The room fills violently with light.

Expecting any intruder to make a move. The room was empty. Drawers open and clothes scattered across the bed and floor.

"I've been burgled." Coming to the only conclusion he could.

The house was empty, for all but him.

Looking about for missing items. But the more he looked, the less he saw. Valuables that should have been taken remain undisturbed. Windows appeared in tack. Doors in one piece. Locks unforced. It was as if the intruders had let themselves in with a key.

Returning to the kitchen to discover his meal had cooled and enters new launch codes to nuke the meal a second time. Sucking heavily on the now warming beer, tries to rationalize the break-in. What were they looking for? He was about to pick up the phone to call the police to report the incident when he hesitates as a troublesome thought re-enters his mind.

"No. They wouldn't have... Would they?" He questions himself.

Eyes dart about the room to the bookcase.

'Whoever it was, was looking for a book. But what book? Or more importantly, what sort of book?' He thought to himself.

Then, as if projected into his mind, an image of the questioning agent appeared. Crystal clear, in black and white. It was as if the man was standing before him about to reach out at him. Tom's breath fogs in the air before him as though there were a ghost in the room. He hears the sound of an engine outside the window. And sees a large black vehicle driving. With the knife still in his hand, he rushes to the outside to catch the number plates.

But there weren't any.

"That's weird." Watching the vehicle disappear down the street into the darkness of the night.

What could he tell the police that did not sound he was paranoid, or crazy? The last thing he needed was a police report showing up on Pierce's desk. Something told him to keep this to himself. Whoever had broken in had found nothing. Only to leave the message that he was being watched. Looking back to the pinpricked sky, searching for the needle in the haystack. Unsure if he still wanted to visit the Foster Ranch.

And returns inside to nuke the leftovers a third time...

Take me to your leader

“Is_ ev_ery_ thing_ in_ place_?” Sirius asked.

“Yes_ Si_ri_us_.” Responds a Grey subserviently bowing its large head supported on an elongated neck. Disproportionate limbs hang from the Grey’s sides. An indiscernible nose and small thin slit for a mouth. Overshadowed by large black eyes. A membrane blinks across them. Three long fingers and thumb twitch nervously about its knees.

Sirius towered over the fledging subordinate. His extended forehead and foreboding wrinkled appearance differentiating him from the lighter colored smooth skinned clones that serviced the moon base.

“Good_, good_.” A faint grin raises from the corners of a perpetual frown before dismissing the clone without further thought.

A sliding door opens into a sterile white corridor. The clone leaves and merges with identical-looking clones to become part of the whole. Sirius waits for the door to close. His mind formulating the demise for the fledging human species that had gained a foothold on the third rock from the yellow dwarf star.

The planet would suffice the Reticulan’s colony for the next billion years or so while other worlds within the galaxy were being explored. The humanoids had failed in their planetary fiduciary responsibilities. Polluting the planet with its toxins. They were a warring primitive race hell-bent on destroying each other and taking the planet with them. With nuclear war capable of breaking out at any moment, they were on the verge of making it inhabitable for anyone, or anything.

On the plus side temperatures were approaching levels akin to the Zeta Reticulan’s home planet. The Great Council had decided to act. Their own planetary system was in its death throes, with but a few million years left its suns. Migration was the only solution. And after millennia of searching the galaxy, a suitable plant had been located.

Earth.

Exploratory craft had been sent and reported back that the planet could support life. The overly rich oxygen atmosphere could be tamed. Converted to a more carbon-based substitute. Sirius had been commissioned to prepare for the arrival of the great fleet, that was in wait for his signal.

A forward fleet had been sent to establish a base, away from the prying eyes of the humans who at that stage had yet to venture into space. Specimens were taken. Orifices probed. Their DNA dissected and cloned. Sensors implanted beneath their skins for monitoring.

And memories erased of their abductions.

Then in the blink of an eye one early New Mexico dawn, catching the uninvited unaware, a bright flash appeared, and humans had taken their place among the galactic intellectual elite. No longer could the uninvited hide in the shadow of the moon. At a remote airbase in the Nevada desert, a single Alien craft landed some distance from the hangars and waited for the humans to appear.

Sirius remembers the moment as though it were yesterday.

After a protracted period, a jeep carrying armed soldiers and a General drove towards the saucer-shaped craft. Appearing some ten yards in diameter and standing five yards above the ground. With no visible windows. Its surface marked with symbols.

The General climbs from the jeep and steps forward. Unsure what to expect. Having been ordered by the President to confront the alien craft and seek out the visitor's intentions. Slowly a panel on the craft opens hissing released pressure from within. Startling soldiers watching on who brace themselves for an imminent attack. A ramp descends gracefully and Sirius steps down and onto the planet. Not for the first time.

Approaching the official-looking human in uniform, his chest colored with ribbons. Looking fragile. Soldiers inadequately arms. Alien lasers targeting the soldiers, ready to fire at a blink of Sirius' thoughts.

The General and Sirius stand a meter apart. Taking in the other's hideous appearance. Wondering what to make of the other. One clothed. One not. One feeling apprehensive. One not.

"Welcome." The General greets the alien anxiously. His hands by his sides.

Sirius detects a nervousness about the human. Nostrils sense fear.

"You_ have_ something_ that_ be longs_ to_ us_." Large black eyes look to the hangar in the distance as though the fallen craft was hidden there. Its occupants detained. Or be they dead.

"Yes, well... We need to talk about that." Counters the General reluctant to give up the prize catch.

"Take_ me to_ your_ leader_." Instructs Sirius wishing to speak to someone in authority.

"I speak for them." The General responds.

Sirius hesitates and assesses the General with suspicion. The colorful decorations afforded some assurance. If this was the best the earthlings had to offer, then so be it.

"Ve ry_ well... Step_ a_ board_." Inviting the General to board the craft.

"But ah... I don't know?" General stutters.

"You_ speak_ for_ your_ lea der_... You_ will_ speak_ with_ mine_." The words not so much were spoken, but a voice heard in the General's head.

Soldiers stand at the ready, watching in silence at the conversation taking place. Unsure what to make of the awkward looking creature. Feeling almost paralyzed to move, as though they were under a spell. Their thoughts not their own.

Taking a deep breath of the cold Nevada air, the General approaches the craft's entrance anxiously and peers inside to see several smaller aliens standing before a console of colored lights. Taking a final glance back at the Jeep and solders, gives what could be his final order.

"Stay here and wait for my return." He looks to the oversized Grey for assurance.

But nothing came to give him confidence that he would return.

"Sir." A boisterous unison of voices calls out.

"Stand easy." He orders the men.

The General enters the craft to and the surreal environment of flashing lights. The hatch doorway closes behind him silently. Seamlessly merging with the surface. Legs retract. A faint whirring hum resonates from the craft as it gradually ascends higher and higher, as if being drawn up by a pulley. Before suddenly accelerating to the heavens. Disappearing to a speck and nothing within a moment of seconds.

"He's dead." Said one soldier to another.

"G-forces alone would have killed him."

"I reckon... Five buck says he doesn't return." Offers a solder to the others.

"I'll take that bet." Responds a solder keen to make some money.

"Count me in." Said another.

"What was it?" Asked a soldier stepping forward.

"Don't know... But it wasn't one of us." Eyes shift to the blue sky above in search of the General and the craft that had taken him away.

The moon hung like a celestial orb, a pale-yellow disc, suspended in space. Rotating precisely in sync with the Earth's rotation, its face to forever facing the earth. The man in the moon was about to reveal its secret.

The General stood quietly to one side and waited for the craft to move.

Feeling nothing, assumed he was still on the ground. An eerie silence filled the compartment. The interior void of windows, void of chairs, and void of a joystick. Who was flying this machine? Three Greys examine the ugly looking human draped in rags like a caveman in animal hides. As though he had taken a bite of the apple and realized his nakedness.

'Strange creature.' The Greys chatter among themselves.

Sirius catches their sniggering and projects a threatening thought to silence them.

Five minutes had elapsed within the craft.

"When we going?" The General asked checking his watch.

"When_ are_ we_ arriving_ is_ more_ the_ question." Replies Sirius placing a palm on a console.

Large panels open about the walls to expose a window-like view of something beyond the General's expectation. Outside, the surface of the moon appeared. Towering mountains and basins deeper than the Grand Canyon.

"But? ... How? ... When? ..." Stuttered the flabbergasted General searching for words to explain the unexplainable.

The obvious would not be answered. Greys readied the craft for landing, guiding it gracefully into an opening and along a long shaft deep into the belly of the Moon Base.

"Where are we?" The General asked.

"Home_," Sirius replies.

The craft comes to a halt and legs extend, touching down without vibration. Outside Greys carry on unmoved by the arrival of the craft. The panel door opens and the General steps down the ramp and takes in the massive underground bunker. The size of several football fields. Countless craft line the perimeter. A hovering shuttle craft arrives and waits for Sirius to climb aboard. Sirius informs for the General to get on board.

Swiftly the shuttle moves away, large doorways slide open before them and close behind them as they pass. Stunned, the General surrenders to the vastness of the base that had obviously been in construction for many decades. The shuttle slows and comes to a halt before a large door.

Climbing out the general feels his legs are light as if they were not his own.

"Gravity_," Sirius informs him, "... This_ way_... They_ are_ waiting_ you_."

"Who?" Stammers the General anxiously.

"The_ Elders_," Sirius calmly informs him.

"Elders?" Echoes the general.

A door opens to a majestic room void of anything but a central table and chair. These had no purpose for Sirius. They were intended for the human. Sirius indicates with his third finger for the General to sit down. The General obeys and stares blankly at a large plain wall. White static

lines begin to dance across the surface of the wall. Speckled with colored dots and dashes as the connection with a distant binary star system some fifty-trillion miles away.

The connection was made in an instance.

Three aged elongated faces appear on the screen. Much like Sirius', but older. Wiser. More wrinkled with the passage of the millennia. Labored breathing as though they had grown tired of living. Leaning forward to get a better look at the General, they examine him. Small noses twitch to smell him his scent. A face grins and a forked tongue protrudes between thin pale lips before slivering back.

They had all seen humans before. Some had tasted them. None had ever had to negotiate with them.

"Si_ri_us_," The more elderly of the three Elders begins.

"El_ders_." Sirius bows and acknowledges his subservience.

"Who_ is_ this_?" Large black eyes blink sideways taking in the meager species.

"Their_ del_e_gat_ed lead_er_."

"Del_e_gat_ed_? ... They_ send_ us_ left_overs_?"

"Hmm_." One Elder sums up his appetizing opinion of the earthling.

"What do you want from us?" The General asked, feeling excluded from the conversation.

"Want_? ..." The Elder chuckles with humor, "... We_ want_ for noth_ing_ hu_man_..." A voice resonates between the General's ears, "... We_ take_ what_ we_ want_."

"What am I doing here then?"

"You_ are_ a mess_enger_ that_ is_ all... Time_ has_ come_ for_ us_ to... Talk_..." An Elder informs him, "... You_ have_ be_come... Dan_ger_ous_ to_ your_selves_."

"You_ have_ stepped_ be_yond_ your_ cap_a_bil_ities_." The second warns.

"You_ are_ not_ rea_dy for_ such_ know_ledge_." The third informs.

"You_ need_ guid_ance_." Cajoles the first.

"I don't understand... What knowledge?" The General asked naively.

"You_ call_ it nu_clear_."

"Ah, the bomb. I see."

"Do_ you_? How_ far_ do_ you_ see_ Gen_er_al_? As_ far_ as_ your_ nose_?" An Elder ridicules the General's foresight.

"You_ are_ blind_ hu_man... You_ use_ this_ pow_er_ to_ de_stroy_ your_ world_."

"Why_ do_ we_ bo_ther_ with_ this_ sub_species_? ... Let_ us_ wipe_ them_ from_ the_ face_ of_ the_ plan_et_ now_." The last remark goes untranslated to the General, listening to the clicks and clatter among the three Elders.

"They_ serve_ a pur_pose... We_ need_ them_." Counters an Elder assessing the morsel before him.

"We_ have_ enough_ al_ready_." Counters the other Elder. Humans held captive for experimental purposes.

"Their_ D_N_A_ is_ vi_tal_ to_ our_ sur_vi_val, we_ must_ save_ them_ from_ their_ own_ de_struct_ion... Our_ own_ ex_tinct_ion."

The General hears nothing but sporadic clicks and watches as terrifying faces stare back at him. Heads turn in mutual agreeance towards the General.

"We_ have_ a pro_posal_ hu_man_."

"Proposal? What kind of proposal?" The General's eyes light up, perhaps he had been spared death.

“We_ help_ you_... You_ help_ us_.” The second Elder put simply.

“How could we ever help you?”

“To_ be_ left_ a_ lone_.”

“And what do we get in return?”

“In_ ex_ change_ for_ your_.... *Co-op_er_at_ion_...* We_ will_ *guide_ you_*,
tech_no_log_ic_ally_.”

“In_ time_ you_ will_ a_ mass_ pow_er_ to_ kill_ your_selves_ man_y_ times_ o_ver_.” An Elder jests.

The proposal appealed to the General leaning forward to be sure he heard correctly.

“I think we can work with that... We have just the place you can work from... You scratch our backs, we’ll scratch yours.” Grins the General.

Unsure what to make of the primate comment, the Elders had no intention of looking for nits.

“That_ will_ be_ all_ hu_man. In_ form_ your_ Mas_ter.”

“Si_ri_us.” And Elder bids his farewell.

“El_ders_.” Sirius bows subserviently keeping his head lowered until the projection had disappeared.

The screen sparkles and a small white dot appears at the center of the wall. That fades with time and the General is left as flabbergasted as when he arrived.

“Gen_er_al_... This_ way_.” Sirius informs the human to follow him.

Doors open to the waiting shuttle to return the General to the craft back to Earth. Sirius follows the human up the ramp. The craft moves along the long entrance tunnel for what seemed like miles and miles. White central tracer lights path the way into the distance. The moon’s surface appears as the craft exits the opening and flies over the brightly lit lunar surface. Panels close and conceal the forbidden view.

Minutes pass and a door opens again. Unaware the craft had landed. A gust of cold Nevada air rushes into the warm craft. Relieved to have returned alive, the General extends a hand to Sirius. Only to retract it again by his side. The human gesture not going unnoticed by Sirius, unsure what to make of it.

“I’ll inform the President... Give us a few months and we’ll make this place ready for you...” Turning to inspect the meager and almost forgotten Air Force Base, “... You know where to find us.”

“I_’ll_ be_ back_.” Informed Sirius, stepping back inside the craft.

The hatch closes to become part of the hull. Legs retract and the craft lifts into the air as before. And suddenly accelerates upward and into space.

“You owe me five bucks.” Said one soldier to another.

“Gentlemen, what did you just see just now?” The General questioned their wisdom.

The soldiers thought about it and realized the truth of the moment.

“Nothing Sir!” One responded loudly.

“Good answer Anderson... And that goes for the rest of you from now on... If any word of this gets out, I will personally shoot you myself... Understood?”

“Sir! Yes Sir! Thank you Sir.” Soldiers snap back at the General.

“Now get me back to base. I need to make a long-distance call.” Climbing into the canopy-covered Jeep.

The insignificant dull green speck raced across the vast white plane of the desert that separated it from the rest of the known world. Rising a cloud of dust behind it as it hurried back to the base that would soon be erased from the map...

You have a visitor

Dawn breaks and sun light leaks through gaps in the bedroom curtain and punches Tom in the face.

“Aahh_!” He sits upright, hands raise to shield the bright light.

An alarm clock rings incessantly, seeking his attention. A muddled mind tells he must do something. A hand reaches out clumsily and taps the clock radio and there was silence again. Another tap and the silence is replaced with the sound of a local radio station.

7:00 AM and yet it seemed like the middle of the night. Having tossed and turned all night thinking about the intruders and the vehicle that had speed away. The broken sleep leaving him more tired than before he went to bed.

Discarding tangled sheets to one side he drags himself to the bathroom and looks at himself in the mirror. An unshaven thirty-three-year-old stared back at him. Neither wanting to speak to the other. A dull ache pulsed behind his eyes and he tries to recall the previous evening and how he had gotten into the state he was now suffering.

“Bloody Travis...” Recalling the countless Tequila shots and pitchers of beer, “... Fuck, how did I get home?” Asking his reflection that could not remember.

Silence answered that question.

Poking out his tongue only to have the man in the mirror poked his out back at him. Wearily he drags himself to the shower and dowses himself with cold water hoping to rejuvenate what little spirit he had left.

Appearing into the lounge, the place seemed undisturbed. He had no visitors during the night while he slept. Removing the chair he had wedged against the front door. Stepping outside, he looks about the vacant street. His vehicle still where he had parked it. In the distance, he hears a dog barking. The sun beat down from a cloudless blue sky.

“It’s going to be a scorcher,” He tells himself stepping back under the narrow verandah.

09:57 AM.

If the previous evening had not taught him a lesson, he grabs a six-pack from the refrigerator before heading outside. The SUV’s door closes with a cushioning sound and he turns the ignition. Air conditioning floods the compartment, a radio carries on where the bedside radio left off.

Reaching for a map from the glove compartment traces a path to the Ranch.

‘Turn off at Clines Corner, Encino then Duran, swing into Corona take the 247, then the 8007 for about eight miles.’ Reciting the path and tossing the map on the passenger seat beside him before throwing the stick into reverse and backing onto the street.

In the rear vision mirror, he sees a large black vehicle had parked down the street. Hesitating momentarily as to what to do. Before driving away, eyeing the rear mirror cautiously. The black vehicle remains stationary, growing smaller and smaller as he distanced himself from it. Unsure as to what he would return to when he got back.

On the road to Clines Corner, Tom plays a hunch and pulls the SUV into a gas station and parks up from the view of the road. And waits. Watching vehicles passing. Watching out for one in

particular. Then wondered if he was becoming paranoid? Five minutes became ten and fifteen. He was about to move away when suddenly a large black vehicle sped past. As though it were trying to catch up to him.

Tom reaches for the map again. Change of plans. He would need to double back. And head back to Moriarty and take the back road to Corona. Hoping the black vehicle had lost his scent and given up. He waits for it to disappear down the road.

Pulling the vehicle back onto the road heads west again, retracing tracks to Moriarty. Eyes anxiously checking the rear vision mirror for signs of the vehicle. Desperately trying to keep to the speed limit lest a patrol car pulls him over and his details punched into a system for all to see.

Arriving at Corona, Tom turns his vehicle onto a narrow road heading into the prairie.

A scarred pitted landscape gouged out by wind and rain and prehistoric rivers. Now a dry roughed terrain, suitable only for the hardiest of cattle and sheep and ranchers. A narrow two-lane highway cuts a path through the barren landscape peppered by scrubs either side. Passing a ranch gate he peers down the driveway void of life.

A sign indicates a turn-off and Tom examines it wounded with bullet holes. He was in the right place. Dharma would not be far away. About to throw the stick back into drive, spies a trail for dust rising in the air some distance behind. A small black pimple head appears on the horizon some distance back.

“Fuck. Don’t they ever give up?” Tom accelerates away, stirring up a dust cloud of his own and races off.

Minutes later a dull red mailbox stands on its last leg beside the road, its mouth open as though dying of thirst. Tom swings the SUV into the gravel driveway and heads a good quarter mile before reaching the dilapidated homestead. Skidding to a stop beside the front steps. Causing chickens to scatter. The trailing cloud of dust soon swallowed SUV whole.

Waldo races out yapping to see what all the commotion was about. Tom waited for the cloud to pass and through the dust-covered windscreen thinks he sees someone standing in front of the vehicle. Wipers blink back and forth to reveal Dharma standing before the vehicle, the Winchester shouldered and aimed directly at him. He raises his arms as though to surrender. Despite the temptation, she lowered the weapon and stepped forward.

Tom opens the door and tries to step out. Waldo yaps about Tom’s ankles.

“Careful, he’ll take your leg off if you’re not careful.” She warns.

“Oh.” Tom steps back.

“You came?” She asked surprised to see him standing there.

“You *invited* me... I think I got followed.” Looking over his shoulder to see a black SUV slow down and continue down the road.

“I see them.” She informs him.

“You know them?”

“Gramps knows them... I just use them for target practice.” Shouldering the rifle again.

‘Click-clunk-boom! Click-clunk-boom! Click-clunk-boom!’ Dharma gets off three quick shots in succession at the distant moving vehicle.

Indifferent if she hit them. Disappointed she had missed.

“Better get you inside... This way.” She tells him heading up the steps.

There was an aroma about the interior of the old homestead. Perhaps it was history. Perhaps it was family. Perhaps it was the stillness.

“Take a seat... I’ll go fetch Gramps.” She tells him and heads towards the barn.

Waldo stays and guards the visitor. Unsure what to make of the new scent that had crossed his domain. Wandering closer to sniff his boots and jeans.

Intrigued by the assortment of frames lining the mantelpiece, along with two small urns Tom stands to inspect them closer. A framed Medal of Freedom stands behind one of the urns. He steps closer to get a closer look. A family portrait of what could be Dharma as a child.

‘Her parents no doubt.’ Taking in the features of her mother, not unlike her own.

Then there was one photo that was out of place among the others. As though it belonged elsewhere. Three men sit suited in space outfits, helmets in their hands.

Unfamiliar faces stare back at Tom. A large NASA emblem in the background and the mission’s badge. A red sparrow. Confused, he could not recall any of the Apollo missions having a red sparrow. Looking closely, Tom is puzzled by the label on the badge...

APOLLO XX

Apollo XX

“Not possible,” Tom mutters examining the photo closely for authenticity.

Reading the names of the crew, none of them sound familiar...

Irving - Hunt- Farrell

“Can I help you son.” A gravel voice spoke behind him.

“Sorry, I was just looking at this photo... It can’t be... There were only seventeen missions... This must be a joke.”

“If you say so... You must be the fancy boy from StarTech Dharma spoke about.”

“Yes sir, *Tom*... Tom Mitchell.” Extending his hand to the old man.

“Ted. Ted Irving...” The old man responds, “...What can I do for you, *Tom*?”

“Dharma suggested I visit, said we might have a mutual interest in *Roswell*.”

“Did she now?” Turning to see her heading to the kitchen to retrieve two beers.

“The books are pretty vague and the more I read... The more it sounded like a cover-up.”

“Really? ... Have a seat son?” Ted eases himself into a tired comfy armchair that had seen better years.

Worn armrests stained with time. Much like the old man. A back rest that conformed to the shape of his spine.

“Heard you might have been followed?” Ted asked curiously.

“That’s right...” Sitting up, “...You know them?”

“Wouldn’t worry too much about them... If they wanted you dead, you would be. So you work at StarTech?” Quickly changing the topic.

“Can’t say much... If you know what I mean.”

“Then you better get going...” Remarks Ted, taking Tom by surprise, before qualifying, “...If you want to talk then I need to know more about your son... Because gauging by the interest those guys have with you, I’m the least of your worries at this stage.” Ted’s eyes shift to the window.

Dharma hands her grandfather a beer, different from those brought by Tom, before passing one to him. Pulling back the tab, a froth hisses from the opening. Tom leans back as though he were about to be interrogated again.

“Son, I’ve got more secrets than you would ever want to know.” Informs Ted baiting him.

“I very much doubt that.” Tom raises the stakes.

“Really... Why don’t you start? StarTech... What’s making them so twitchy about you?”

“*Them*?”

“The men in the vehicle chasing you.” Tilting his head and raising eyebrows towards the road outside.

“Yeah, them.” Tom becomes fidgets in the armchair as though he had been trapped between two evils.

“Well Starman?” Ted presses him to answer.

Dharma reclines on the couch, watching Tom squirm like a worm on a hot tin roof.

Sucking on the can again, wedged into the deep armchair. The photo on the mantelpiece telling him the old man knew something he did not.

"Satellites... We build satellites." Admits Tom.

"Really... What *kind* of satellites?"

"Telecommunications mostly."

"Hmm... Maybe I could use you." Ted's lips purse at the thought.

"That photo... Is it real?"

"What do you think?" Ted plays with him.

Tom hesitates, looking at the photo again, then back to the old man, and back to the photo

"You're Irving?"

"Maybe." Ted plays coy.

"But there were only seventeen missions... I don't understand how..."

"*Officially*, there *were* only seventeen... Unofficially there were twenty-four."

"Twenty-four... Christ..." Tom contemplates the clandestine missions, "...You've been *there*?"

"And back again... Still have the suit if you want to see it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Both men suck on their cans of beer sizing each other up. Waldo resting his head on Dharma's lap. Outside a chicken squawks, ears prick up and he leaps off in search of the itinerant chook. Soon followed by a startled squawk and a frantic flapping of feathered wings outside the window.

"Why would *they* have an interest in *you*?" Ted asked curiously.

"StarTech just scored a Pentagon contract."

"Hmm... I see... And you're involved with it."

"Possibly... If I pass the background checks, but now I'm not so certain."

"I'm guessing your recent interest in Roswell has spooked them."

"Seems so... They knew about the library visit." Informs Tom.

"So why the sudden interest in Roswell?" The old man asked staring at Tom.

"Just curiosity." Spouting the lie.

But the aging lie detector caught him out.

"Bull shit! ... *Curiosity* my ass! I said *sudden* interest... You have had a lifetime to be curious son... Hell, we all have... Some more than others..." Then the penny dropped, a chill went over the old man's body, "... *What did you find?* ...Out there?"

"Excuse me?" Stammers Tom.

"Dharma said you and your buddies were digging around out there... You found something didn't you? ... But you could not have... You were too far from the original crash site..." Then the epiphany stuck the old man between the eyes, "... *Shit*, it's true... I thought it was a myth."

The old man stared at Tom in disbelief. Tom knew he had been caught out like a kid with his hand in the cookie jar.

"What's *your* curiosity?" Countered Tom back.

"Curiosity? ..." Questioned Dharma, "... More like an *obsession*."

"Son, I've seen things some people should never see..." Confessed the old man, "... They must be sending up something important this time."

"*This time*?" Questioned Tom.

"They're getting close," Ted utters to himself churning over events.

"We haven't the plans yet, but it's to house a payload of some sort... I'll know more next week."

The old man ruminates the device and the timing.

"What you dig up son? A piece of metal?"

"Bigger." Tom is hesitant to give away his secret.

"How much bigger?" The old man probes as though reading Tom's mind.

"Much... Much bigger..." Unable to say exactly what it was that he had found.

Ted drops the half-empty can on the floor bouncing with a thud spilling over the carpet. Waldo's timely return rewarded with a pool of cool beer. Lapping it up with his tongue.

"Where?" The old man asked calmly.

Tom pulls the map from his back pocket and hands it to the old man.

"Somewhere in there... It's buried beneath a mound of earth."

"What is?" Dharma asked being drawn into the discussion.

"I think it's a saucer." Said Tom.

"Think?" Questioned the old man.

"I didn't exactly have time to uncover the whole thing if you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, yeah... There was a rumor of another crash, but everyone thought it was a myth... Confused it with Roswell."

"There's a dirty great gouge tracking back from it. I stumbled on it after Dharma told us to head back."

"You sure they know nothing about this." The old man looks towards the window.

"Yeah, I think so... They were only interested in the book... They've already trashed my place as a warning... And my visit here... Is that going to be a problem?"

"Not with me it's not." Remarks Dharma.

"You wouldn't be sitting here if you were a problem for them." Ted stares out the window.

"Come with me son... I need to show you something. Dharma stand guard will you?"

"No worry Gramps. I'll fix some lunch... You are staying?" She asked Tom looking to the old man.

"He's staying." Ted answers for him.

Waldo weaves between the legs of the men heading to the barn. Parked next to the old shed, the red biplane. Its nose cone a bright yellow like a beak. Painted on its fuselage a replica of the Red Sparrow from the Apollo badge. Tom follows the old man like the terrier, stopping in front of the tractor.

Ted looks about for prying eyes then lifts the trap door to the chamber below.

"Get down there..." The old man instructs Tom, "...There's a switch on the right."

Tom clammers down the ladder, only to be met by Waldo waiting for him.

"Hey, how'd you get down here?"

Flicking the switch, the workshop lights up to reveal dust covered boxes line the shelves. Large jars covered with cloths. A workbench cluttered with bits and pieces only Ted recognized, or not. The old man makes closes the trap door behind him. CCTV monitors come to life. Tom watches Dharma hanging sheets at the back of the house.

"Welcome to my world... Until now Dharma's been the only one who knows about it. Now you."

"I feel privileged Sir." Remarks Tom.

In the corner of the room, a stand of some kind. Covered with a large cloth. Large white boots protrude at the base.

"No... Can't be... Can it?" Tom recognizes the boots.

Ted encourages him to have a look. Lifting the cloth carefully to reveal a spacesuit. Complete with a helmet. The old man stands proudly smiling. Bringing back a lot of memories. Some good. Some not so good. A mission badge as bright as the day it was stitched on. A bright red sparrow with a yellow beak siren its authenticity. Tom runs his fingers over it as if to confirm it was real.

"They let me keep it as a memento shall we say... The price to keep my mouth shut I suppose... Like all the other astronauts."

"And those that didn't?" As Tom tentatively.

"They aren't with us any more son." Leaving their fate unspoken.

Covering the suit Tom returns to the workbench of cluttered items.

"What is all this stuff?" He asked curiously looking about the shelves.

"This *stuff*, is from the Roswell crash of forty-seven... Or what I could find of it over the years... They did a lousy job cleaning up. They may as well put a sign up that said *Junk Sale*, would have cleared it better." Ted muses.

Tom sorts through the various pieces of torn metal while Ted turns a radio on. Chatter fills the air.

"Hear those clicks?" Asked Ted.

"Yeah."

"That's them talking to each other."

"I've heard those clicks before."

"Where?"

"The Pentagon men in the black suits."

"Hybrids."

"Hybrids?"

"Genetically modified humans... Part human, part Grey."

"Grey?"

"Zeta Greys... You don't know what you've stumbled upon do you?" Asked Ted wondering if Tom was ready to hear the truth.

"I not sure what is what is not anymore."

"Then you won't be ready for this?" Said the old man pulling a large covered jar from one of the shelves.

Like a magician, whips away the dust-covered cloth to reveal a skeletal limb. A hand of three fingers, with a long opposing thumb. Tom steps closer to examine the pickled extremity.

"You're kidding me?"

"Common as muck... I've got a foot over here if you want to see." Offers Ted looking to another large covered jar.

"Nah I'm good... Thanks."

"But how... Where?"

"Scavenged them one night when while everyone else was asleep... Been hiding them ever since... My father helped the best he could... No one took interest in a kid running about."

"How old were you then?"

“About eight if I recall, something like that. That was a long time ago... Seems Father Time has caught up with me... Here, have a look at this circuitry son, I’m having trouble with my eyes, not as good as they use to be.” The old man lies.

Tom examines the drawings and quickly realizes these were no ordinary plans. He searches for the key and sees the words...

Department of Defense.

And as if he had had an electrical shock, stands back from the drawings.

“Where did you get these?” Tom asked hesitantly.

“Son, that’s the least of my worries, now isn’t it?” Tapping the glass jar.

“They’re dated 1957? These are decades ahead of their time? How? Who? ...” The question answered itself.

The old man remains silent.

Tom inspects the circuitry examining the old man’s attempt. Quickly spotting the erroneous weld. Dons welding goggles, and expertly detaches one connection with another. Fumes rise from the circuit board. Flashing small sparks. Ted listens intently to the clicking voices emitted from the radio.

“What’s this thing do?” Looking at the strange circuit board.

“It for the radio... How are we looking?” Asked Ted.

“You almost had it... There, done. That was fun.” Tom stands back proud of his meager contribution.

“Fun? I’ve spent a good part of a year on that, and you do it in five minutes. Why didn’t Dharma shoot at you sooner?”

“Plug it in.” Instructed Tom.

The old man removes an old circuit board from the radio and replaces it with the new one, and flicks the switch. The static and crackling fades and alien voices could be heard, catching the end of a transmission.

“Ve_ry_ good_ Si_ri_us... Keep_ us_ in_for_med_ of_ pro_gress... The_ fleet_ is_a_wait_ing_ your_ sig_nal_.” An Elder speaks.

“Sirius? I’ve heard that name before, my father spoke of him. He can’t be still alive?” Remarks Ted surprised to hear Sirius’ name.

“Your father?”

“No... Sirius.”

“Who’s Sirius?”

“We’ll talk over lunch... But first, give me your phone.”

“What for?”

“Just give it to me Starman... I need to modify it.”

Tom reluctantly hands over his mobile whereupon the old man unclipped the back to remove the SIM card and places it generally onto the workbench. Watching with interest as the old man take a laser wand and torch the chip to a crisp.

“They won’t be tracking you again for a while... You can thank me later.” Remarked Ted handing it back to Tom shriveled and black.

“Yeah, I don’t think *anyone* will be tracking me after this.” Examining the melted crinkled card in the palm of his hand.

Ted kills the radio and Tom climbs back up the ladder into the world again. Waldo disappears through a hole in the wall...

Red Sparrow

“Lunch is ready!” Calls out Dharma from the porch.

“She must like you... She normally fires a warning shot.” Remarked Ted emerging from the barn.

Waldo races ahead, the scent of lunch luring him inside ahead of the men.

“Wash up in there.” Informs Ted, indicating a washbasin.

Tom appears moments later in the kitchen to find Ted and Dharma waiting for him. Pulling out a chair takes his place at the table and is about to bite into the freshly made sandwich when he hears the old man say grace.

“Thank you, Lord, for this meal... Amen.”

“Amen.” Utters Dharma.

“Amen.” Stutters Tom, taken back by the sudden observance.

“You a religious man Tom?” Asked the old man curiously.

“Once I suppose, when I was a kid... But these days...” Struggling for faith.

“God made everyone and everything... Even them.” Ted pokes his thumb to the ceiling.

“Hm, if you look at it that way... You spoke about your father.” Tom inquired.

“Yeah, he’s on the mantelpiece if you want to meet him?”

“Your father knew Sirius?”

“A long time ago son, after the war...” Ted peters off, “...Roswell was a freak accident. Shit happens if you know what I mean, even to them... Ha.” Ted chuckles at the thought.

“Your father?”

“He was a General at a remote Air Force base in Nevada... Before it became... *Non-existent.*”

“Area-51?”

“Hmm...” Ted confirms the fact. And sighs deeply at the thought. His mind drifting to another time. “...We’d just developed the bomb, at Trinity... You’ve heard of it, just over yonder way.” A thumb pokes in the direction of the test site.

“Yeah, I’ve been there.”

“Seemed to have gotten *their* attention... Us harnessing the atom and all. So they come and visit us before we wipe ourselves out.”

“That’s very considerate of them.” Tom jokes.

“My ass... They didn’t care what happened to us... They just didn’t want to inherit a nuclear wasteland.”

“What are you saying? They want to inhabit the earth?”

“You catch on quick Starman... Hell yeah. Their planetary system is dying, and they need a place to colonize. If you know what I mean.”

“So why not just wipe us out?”

“They could, but they’re too smart for that. Time is on their side.”

“Time for what?”

“The great migration. It will take years for them to get from there to here. In the meantime, they set up a base on the moon, hidden from view, do their little *experimentations* on us... And give them time to warm the plant up for them.”

“Global warming?”

“Yeah, and all the time we’ve been blaming ourselves... Then there is their tethered DNA.”

“Tethered DNA?” Tom parrots trying to keep up.

“They’ve been around a lot longer than us. But we stem from a common gene pool, millions of years apart... Just as you make a photocopy of a copy of a copy, the image becomes imperfect... Graduated.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen that.”

“Same with the DNA... It can only replicate so many times before the ends become tethered and frayed... Like old shoe strings.”

“So, they’re using human DNA and genetically modifying it fit theirs.” Elaborates Tom.

“You got it, son.”

“And your father was part of this?”

“My father was the first contact between them and us... Sirius took him aboard his craft and flew him to a moon base on the far side, almost instantaneously he said... There he said he spoke with three *Elders* on a large screen. In exchange for our cooperation, they would provide us with technological advances.” Explains Ted.

“That explains the plans.”

“The US thought they were getting the jump on the Commies and Chinese... Unfortunately, Sirius had made the same deal with them as well... Crafty critter.”

Dharma sat disinterested having heard it all before, chewing on the sandwich as Tom took it in for the first time. At her feet, the dog hoped a morsel would fall his way.

“They were just buying time... My father started to suspect something was amiss... Abductions, people disappearing. Gathering what he could on the moon base, its layout... He saw I had an aptitude for flying and pushed me through the astronaut program. Without his help, I would never have seen it with my own eyes.” Ted gazes into the distance before him.

“You saw it? You saw the base?”

“In the command module as we orbited... It’s was massive.”

“You think the satellite has something to do with it.”

“Sounds like it, you heard yourself... *The fleet is waiting.*”

“What fleet?” Asked Dharma, the first she had heard of it.

“The great migration. They intend to colonize the Earth... Today, tomorrow, next century.”

“Century?”

“These creatures don’t live our life span, they live millennia... What is a century to them? ... Sirius has been around before the Old Testament was written... Hell I wouldn’t be surprised if he wrote some of it.”

“We’ve got to stop whatever the Pentagon wants to be built from ever being launched, right?” Remarks Tom.

“They’ll only build another with another contractor... Nah we have to let them launch it and destroy the payload.”

“How?” Asked Tom losing his appetite.

“I don’t know yet...” Ted stumbles, “... You in?”

“I’m too far down the rabbit hole to turn back now.” Remarked Tom.

“Finish up here Alice, we need to take a short flight.” The old man shoves a sandwich in his mouth. Throwing the crust on the wooden floor for Waldo to finish.

“Flight? Where are we going?”

“Thought we’d take a look at your mound of dirt.” Ted grins finding a new found spring in his step.

Tom finishes up handing the last piece of his sandwich to the dog.

Examining in the dilapidated looking plane had seen better years Tom wonders if he should reconsider the invitation. Patches of duct-tape mark its surface like silver Band-Aids.

“Get your foot onto that step,” Instructs Ted sensing Tom’s hesitation.

Tom levers himself up and swings a leg into the front cockpit. It was a snug fit. Between his legs, a stick protrudes up from the floor. An array of small glass dials fan across a wooden dashboard in front of him. The old man climbs into the rear cockpit seat as if he were mounting a horse. Throwing a leg over the opening settles behind the controls. Tapping Tom on the shoulder to don goggles and headset that would muffle the sound of the engine. But also allow the two to speak to each other.

Waldo leaps onto the lower wing before springing himself into the front cockpit to sit on Tom’s lap.

“Hey what are you doing here?” Looking at the dog with paws on the cockpit edge keen to take flight.

Ted fires up the engine, that sounds a series of backfires before bursting to life and startling Tom. Chickens scatter in all directions to avoid the growling winged red rooster. Waldo barks his excitement. His head protruding over the opening. Unsure who was comforting who, Tom held onto to dog tightly.

“You all good there Starman?” Ted tests the headset.

“All good...” He gives a thumb up, then asked, “...Any chance of a parachute?”

“You ever used one before?” The old man egged him.

“No.”

“Then you won’t be needing one now. Buckle up.” Advises Ted.

Tom reaches for a buckle only to discover there wasn’t one.

“Funny.” Giving a thumbs up to the old man to get moving.

Closing his eyes Tom takes a deep breath. Crosses himself and feels himself being jostled about as wheels roll over the uneven surface as the plane taxied into position. The engine roars louder, picking up dust and throwing it back over the plane.

Dharma watches on amused, seeing Tom petrified gripping onto the side of the cockpit. Ted waves out to her and she steps back inside as he taxis the plane. Using the driveway as a runway.

‘God help anything coming the other way.’ Thought Tom, wondering if it was long enough.

Revvng ever faster the engine whines louder throwing Tom back into his seat. Air races over him. Adrenaline rushes through him. Caught between exhilaration and fear. Heaven and Hell. The homestead and the mailbox looming closer and closer. Then gracefully as a swan, the rickety old biplane took flight and lifted into the air. Much to the relief of Tom watching the mailbox disappearing beneath him.

A smoothness came over the plane as it rose into the air. Below him the old homestead, his silver SUV parked at the front steps. A dull red flatbed truck parked at the rear. Ted circled the property, checking for intruders. Dharma could take care of herself and he pitied anyone crossing her path. Pushing the joystick to one side the plane banks slightly. Tom feels the pole between his legs move and looks to the aileron’s moving along with it.

Pedals at his feet move in and out.

“Take the stick.” The old man instructs him.

“Say what?” Asked Tom, wondering if he had heard the old man correctly.

"The stick... Take it. Put your feet on the pedals. See 'em?"

"Yeah, yeah." Tentatively placing boots on the pedals.

"Okay, I'll guide you... Feel the movements... Okay?"

Slowly the old man pulled back on the stick and the plane climbed gradually, the engine groan at the additional workload.

"The lever on the side... That's the throttle." Ted informs him.

"Got it." Confirms Tom see the metal lever.

"Push a pedal down."

"Which one?"

"You decide."

Pressing down on the right pedal feels a resistance. Gradually the plane yawed to the right.

"Good... Now try the other way, lean the stick to the left."

"Got it." Feeling vibrations resonate through hands and feet.

Slowly the plane banked to the left and turned in the air.

"She's all yours."

"Hey wait up!" Tom protests the sudden induction to going solo.

With ears flapping, Waldo yaps and snaps at the rushing wind over the cockpit. Paws rest on the upper edge. His tongue wavering in the rushing air.

Below Ted thinks he sees the gouge Tom had spoken of.

"Down there? ..." The old man taps Tom's left shoulder, pointing to the area.

"That's it." Confirms Tom, the gouge now looking more obvious from the air.

"I'll take over from here." Instructs Ted taking the controls again.

Suddenly the plane makes an aggressive turn and descends quickly to get a closer look. Spotting a bare patch the old man attempts to land. Killing the throttle and pulling back on the stick to slow the plane down and almost stalling it. Wheels bounce on the uneven surface and jolt Tom about in the cockpit. The engine dies to a purr and then to silence as Ted skids the plane to a halt in front of a large scrub.

Waldo jumps out of the cockpit and rushes off to crash a startled Roadrunner.

Shaken but alive, Tom removes the headset, hoping his limbs were still intact. And pulls himself wearily from the cockpit. Stepping onto a wing and then the earth. None the worse for wear. And waited for the old man to climb from the cockpit.

"Not bad, first time up." He commends Tom.

"Thanks."

"This way, I think." Looking about for familiar landmarks.

Feeling the ground beneath his feet slope away, suspects he is in the gouge.

"Found it," Tom calls out.

Waldo scampers beside him a tail wagging like a windscreen wiper.

The gouge abruptly ends at a large mound of earth. To Tom, it looked somewhat different from how he had remembered it. Searching for the rock he had replaced, now looking like all the other rocks about it. Worried it had been a mistake he steps back from the mound.

The old man stands beside him and inspects the unremarkable mound of earth. Turning back to examine the shallow trough leading up to it. Smiled a broad grin, as though his prayers had been answered...

She's a beauty

Ted stands feet splayed in awe of the magnificent mound of earth with his hands-on-hips, as though a conquering conquistador.

"She's a beauty," He exclaims, thrilled by the size of the buried treasure.

"I don't know anymore." Tom kicks at a rock and dislodges it.

Falling away as though it had already been loosened. Fingers dig away the soil to reveal something shining beneath.

"This is it. This is what I *found*." Tom stands back and allows Ted a closer look.

Scrapping away the remaining loose soil, fingertips gently stroke the alien metal surface as though it were made of gold. Childhood memories come rushing back to the old man. He knew exactly what he was looking at. Standing back beside Tom. Dwarfed by the immensity of it, takes a heavy sigh and thinks hard.

"I do know one thing." Declared Ted thinking aloud.

"What's that?" Responded Tom taking the bait.

"We're going to need a bigger winch... Mine can't handle this."

"You're not serious about digging this... *thing* up are you?"

"What do you propose we do, just leave it here? ... For someone else to find... And have it hushed over by *them*... Again?" Protests Ted like pirate not wanting to forgo the treasure.

"I don't know anymore... What are you going to do with it?" Asked Tom Hesitantly.

"Don't rightly know myself, but we can't leave it here... I was hoping with your help, we might be able to unravel this thing."

"My help? ... Now, wait on... I know nothing about *flying saucers*." Taking another step back.

"You'll figure it out, Starman." Ted chuckles.

Picking away more fragments exposes more of the metal surface. Satisfied he had seen enough Ted begins kicking loose rumble back into the shallow hole. Looking about the immediate area for any other telltale signs and debris. Scrubs and bushes had concealed the crash site quickly over the years. He looks to the sky ever wary of prying eyes of surveillance planes and satellites.

Sensing they had overstayed their presence and it was probably time to get going again.

"Waldo! (*Whistle!*)" Ted summons the dog.

Through the shrubbery came the sound of galloping paws and yelping panting. The terrier suddenly appears before them exhausted. Climbing the mound, Ted surveys the tough and gouge in the earth one last time.

"Hmm!" Astonished by the discovery.

Without warning an irritation in his throat erupts causing him to cough heavily. Reaches for a handkerchief covers his mouth, turning away from Tom hearing him bark loudly.

"You okay?" Tom asked warily.

"Yeah, yeah... Just an old smokers' cough I've had for years." Ted lied folding the rag to conceal the splotches of blood coming more evident.

"Doesn't sound too good, you should get that checked out." Advises Tom.

"Yeah, I'll do that one day..." Dismissing the advice, "... Waldo! Get in behind you mongrel!"

The dog scampers onto the wing and then leaps into the front cockpit with Tom. Its tongue drooling saliva from the corner of its mouth. Moments later Ted climbs up appearing weary and exhausted.

Taking a moment to catch his breath.

“You okay?” Tom inquired again.

The old man gives the thumbs up reluctant to speak. Collapsing into the cockpit as though he had had the stuffing knocked out of him. Drool seeped from the corner of his mouth and he wipes it away smearing blood on the back of his hand.

Pressing the ignition button and the engine coughs and splutters much like the old man. Spitting black phlegm aviation fumes with each rotation of the stuttering propeller. Suddenly all hell breaks loose and the engine screams to life. Growling with intensity to get going.

The dog’s yapping is lost in the thunderous tempest. Drool flies back into Tom’s face catching him unaware. Taxiing the plane to the end of the abrupt airstrip on which they had landed. Stirring up dust and noise. Rattling every bolt and rivet in the biplane. And Tom along with them now clinging desperately to the sides of the cockpit.

Waldo leans over the opening barking at the howling engine.

Holding the breaks for as long as he could before the wheels began to skid. Ted builds up propeller speed, creating a maelstrom of dust and rumble to their wake. Breaks release and the plane leaps forward across the rough surface. Shrubbery quickly races towards them like a cavalry charge only to be leaped over at the last moment into the clear blue skies.

Tom takes the controls again and circles the sight below. Easing the plane into a slow banking turn. Taking in one last look at the crash site before Ted instructing Tom to head home.

“Straight ahead son... I’ll talk you down.” Ted advises.

Tom relishes the moment, looking upon square miles of rough terrain. Feeling the plane becoming an extension of himself. The homestead looms on the horizon, spotted by the dog who begins yapping again.

“There’s an airstrip behind the barn... For beginners.” Informs Ted.

“You don’t expect me to land this thing do you?”

“You’ll be fine son... I’ll have the controls behind.” Ted lied.

“I don’t know?” Eyeing the landing strip.

“See the windsock down there?”

“Yeah.”

“Always head into the wind.”

“If you say so.”

“Line her up with strip and bring her down gently... I’ve got your back.” Holding the joystick lightly.

The plane descends and the ground raises up to meet it.

“Okay, pull back on the throttle... Don’t want to kill the engine and stall and plummet to the earth and die.”

“Don’t sugar coat it for me.” Remarks Tom too overwhelmed to be frightened.

“Easy now... Less throttle... Hold her level...” Ted coaxes him.

Wanting to pull up, Tom resists the temptation.

“Almost there... Wait for the wheels to touch.” Instructs Ted watching on carefully.

Wheels come down hard on the surface before bouncing the plane back into the air again only to fall and bounce again, less than before.

“Kill the throttle! ... Kill the throttle!” Ted calls out relieved the toughest part for over.

The tail wheel touches down and the plane taxis along the runway.

“Park her over there near the barn... Use the pedals to steer, throttle for power.”

“Got it.” Acknowledges Tom happy to have made it.

Taxiing the Red Sparrow next to the barn kills the throttle. The engine coughs and splutters as if strangled of fuel. Propellers stutter to a halt and momentarily rock back and forth before settling.

Dharma stood atop the porch steps having watched the landing. And wanders back inside to fetch beers for the intrepid pair. Waldo leaps from Tom’s lap and hurries off in search of a chicken. Ted pulls himself from the cockpit, climbing down the last step with little spring in his legs.

“You okay? You look beat.” Tom observes looking concerned.

“Nothing a beer won’t cure.” Deflects Ted, leading the way.

“How was it?” Dharma asked curiously handing them a can.

“*Starman* was right.” Her grandfather informs, sucking on the cold beer.

“I wasn’t sure what it was... Until now.” Confesses Tom, still with doubts.

“Well, you hit the mother lode son.” Ted stares in the direction of the site.

“Now what?” Asked Dharma unsure what her Grandfather had in mind.

“We’re going to need help shifting it.”

“That thing must weight tons.” Informed Tom.

“About ten... Gauging from the Roswell saucer.”

Tom looks at the old man as if he were crazy.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Informs Ted informs reading his mind.

“How are you going to move it?”

“With a little help from my friends... I’ll introduce you later.”

“I have to get going...” Trying to excuse himself.

“You’re staying for dinner...Go help Dharma in the kitchen. I’ve got to make a phone call.”

The old man informs him.

“I guess I’m staying for dinner.” Tom surrenders, watching the old man walk away.

Standing before the mantelpiece, Tom takes a closer look at the small urn and the inscription...

General Arnold J. Irving
(1903 – 1968)

Behind the urn a framed Medal of Honor. It was true, the old man’s father was a General. The portrait of the Apollo crew cementing the facts. Next to the father’s urn was another. The inscription on this read...

Ester Elizabeth Irving
Beloved wife of Ted
(1940 – 2008)

“My grandmother,” Dharma speaks softly from behind him.

“Oh, I’m sorry... She died quite young?” Consoles Tom, not knowing what to say.

“Yeah, cancer... Gramps and she were inseparable... When she died, a part of him died with her.”

“He’s tough as old boots.” Remarks Tom looking to a doorway the old man had disappeared into.

“How was your first lesson going solo?”

“Gramps had the stick.” Said Tom.

“I very much doubt that.” She grins heading to the kitchen.

“I’m staying for dinner. Seems I’m being held, prisoner. He can’t be serious about digging that thing up and bring it back here... Can he?”

“Oh, he’ll dig it up alright... But he won’t bring it back here, not if he’s got any sense left in him.”

“Yeah well, let’s see about that.”

“About what?” Asked the old man appearing in the kitchen door.

“The saucer...” Responds Tom, “... You can’t bring back here, they’ll be all over this place like white on rice.”

“Just off the home with Cecil, you’ll meet him later... You coming?” Ted asked Dharma.

“Wouldn’t miss it... Why don’t you two get cleaned up and I’ll fix dinner... Now get!” Shooing the pair away.

“Who’s this Cecil fella? ...Can we trust him?” Asked Tom cagily.

“If you can’t trust Cecil and his two boys you can’t trust anyone.”

“Two boys? We’ve got to minimize the exposure here Ted.” Tom warned.

“They’ll be fine, they know everything you know, and they have a collection of their own... If you know what I mean.”

“Somehow I’m beginning to.”

“Just stay close to me and you’ll be fine,” Ted informs him.

“Stay close?”

“Yeah... Could get *nasty*.”

“Where we going?” Tom asked curiously.

“Just a small bar... Off the beaten track... *Redemption*.” He grins...

Redemption

Dharma skids the rumbling V8 to a halt narrowly missing two other trucks. Tom releases his grip on the dashboard. His heart racing in his chest.

“Does she always drive like this?” Asked Tom.

“This is a good day.” Informs Ted.

Headlights beams into swirling dust clouds stirred up by the Flatbed. Dharma kills the engine and silence fills the cabin. The silhouette of the Winchester in the rear window. Waldo yaps from the tray, excited by the noise and bright lights of the bar. The scent of other dogs in his nostrils, he leaps out to disappear into the darkness.

Tom had no idea where he was, having taken back roads in the dead of the night. He could be anywhere. Through a dust-stained windscreen he sees an array of pickups and Flatbeds parked out front of an old western style saloon. Doors swing back and forth rupturing light into the darkness. Momentarily illuminating those outside.

A sign above the door confirmed where he was...

REDEMPTION

Doors open again and a man wearing a cowboy hat walks out. Appearing under the influence of several too many drinks, he stops momentarily being caught in the headlights of the Dharma's truck like a startled rabbit. Dharma honks the horn to say hello.

The man raises a hand to shield eyes from the glare and she kills the lights. Engulfing the cowhand in darkness. Wavering on his feet, he fumbles for keys in his pockets. He looks back to the bar as if he may have left them there. Eyebrows pinch together in concentration as fingertips feel the keys jagged edges and he staggers towards a pickup. Stopping to lean against the fender to hold himself upright. Suddenly he retches the contents of his stomach over the ground.

A boot scuffs the ground to cover the offending discharge.

“Should he be driving?” Asked Tom.

“Nothing wrong with the man. He'll be fine...” Ted dismisses the drunk, “... Come on then.” Opening the door Ted leads the way.

Tom follows behind, soon followed by Dharma behind. Feeling sandwiched between the two.

Stepping into another world, it was Tom who felt an alien. Roughed looking faces peer up to see who had entered. Nodding at the old man and smiling at Dharma. On seeing Tom, smiles turn to frowns. Some reaching for the hilts of their blades. The old man dismisses their affections for Tom, knowing they would have to deal with him first.

“Dhar_ma.” A ranch hand pinches the brim of his hat.

“Eddie.” Dharma nods, seeing his reflection in the mirror.

“Can I get you a drink?” He asked, suspicious of the city-slicker beside her.

“I'll be fine... Thank you Eddie.” Deflecting his affections.

“Who's the fancy boy then?” Eddie asked, looking to Tom.

On hearing the comment, Tom turns about and with surprise, extends his hand to him.

“Tom... And you must be Eddie, right?” Confronting him face to face.

Eddie extends his hand and the grip becomes not so much shake. More like a vice-like squeezing contest of the other's hand. Neither giving away any sign of pain, or anguish in their flinching faces.

"Play nice now Eddie, y' hear... There be time for fighting later." She tells them.

"Be seeing y' Dharma." Said Eddie loosening his grip and the two men step back from one another.

A jukebox plays country music accompanied by whistling and hollering among the cowhands and lasses. Women rush to a scuffed dance floor and begin line dancing. Feet stomp, hands clap and skirts raise. And somewhere in the euphoria, Tom is caught up in fever of the place. He glances about the place and spies a large set of antlers splayed across the top of shelves of amber-colored spirits.

"Twenty-four-pointer... Quite a score." Tom admires the mounted trophy.

"You been hunting?" Dharma asked curiously.

"Nah, my father was the hunter... I can't see myself killing a living animal if you know what I mean."

"Not really." Remarks Dharma.

"Come here often?"

"Now again. Mostly ranchers and their crew. Herding time coming, you ride?"

"A horse?"

"Nothing else here to ride, unless you fancy riding Elli-May over there." Informs Dharma.

Tom looks over to the jukebox to see a flirtatious buxom blonde surrounded by men making friendly talk with her. An open blouse providing ample view. Prying eyes perch strategically to get a better look.

"Thanks, but I think I'll pass for now." Recoils Tom.

"You got a lady friend back in *Burque* then?"

"Not that I know of... You?" He inquired curiously.

"Not really into women, if you know what I mean...." She looks about the roughnecks and sucks heavily on the beer, "... Or men for that matter." Recoils Dharma.

Both begin to peel the labels from their bottles of Bud. Eyes catch glances of the other in the mirror before shying away. The barmaid comes over to them with two fresh bottles and sees the littered frustration before them.

"You two seriously need to get a room." Cleaning away the shredded paper.

"What does she mean by that?" He asked.

"Got no idea," Dharma responds beginning to peel away a new label.

Ted had taken himself out back to find Cecil in an office chugging on a Cuban cigar counting the day's takings. Cash was king this evening, cowhands had just gotten paid.

"Cecil." He pokes his head in the doorway.

"Ted, you came."

"Said I would."

"It's true then?" Asked Cecil fixing him a stiff drink.

"It's a beauty... Intact from what I've seen of it..." Taking a swallow before pursing his lips at the whiskey, sniffing the vapors, "... Cheers." Raising the glass.

Cecil looks to the monitor, seeing an incongruent gentleman standing next to Dharma.

"Who's the city boy? Not from around here." Remarks Cecil sizing Tom up.

"That's Tom. A bit of greenhorn, but he's okay... I'll introduce him later assuming he doesn't get himself killed first."

"You say he found it?"

"Yep, by sheer accident... Dharma fired a couple of warning shots at him and his buddies to get off the property, only to have him stumble on the thing."

"Strange for her to miss?" Cecil blows a smoke ring into the air.

"Yeah, she must be going soft these days." Remarked Ted.

"The boys are hauling cross-state. Should be back in a few days." Informs Cecil leaning back in the chair.

"How are Havoc and Grimace?" Ted takes another swallow of the whiskey.

"Good as they can be, I suppose... Hauling keeps them out of trouble."

"Good to know... Thinking we could use the container winch to lift the thing out... Cart it to the wife's old place... Can't take it to mine."

"You still got that place?" Asked Cecil.

"Yeah, didn't have the heart to sell it. Still in her name, in case anyone comes looking."

"Nice."

"Seems young Tom there has caught the attention of our *friends*." Informs Ted.

"What brought that on?" Cecil sits up with interest.

"Works for StarTech... They've been awarded a contract from them."

"How much do they know?"

"Only that he has a curiosity with Roswell... They're already trashed his house and followed him to the homestead... Dharma got off a few shots after he arrived this morning after they followed him out to the ranch."

"Well if they knew anything, they'd be all over the site by now." Concludes Cecil.

"That's what I reckon... When you want to do this?" Inquired Ted.

"Like I say the boys won't be back 'til say next week... Heard there's a storm brewing in the gulf, going to make landfall later next week, plenty of wind to kick up a decent sand storm with it... We could use that as cover while everyone else is inside."

"Sounds like a plan... Going to be a shitty day, but it's probably the only chance we'll have."

"I'll inform the boys when they get back... I'll call you when its time."

"Appreciate that." Ted thanked looking up at the monitor to see Tom now confronted by a wiry ranch hand.

Cecil goes to stand to ease the brewing situation, only to have Ted gesture for him to see what happens. Taking another swallow of the whiskey. His eyes fixed on the monitor.

"Dharma." A man approaches her.

"Emmitt." She replies recognizing the ginger whiskered ranch hand's voice.

"Dharma." Eddie now steps forward vying for her attention.

"Hey, I was here first." Emmitt makes it known.

Tom turns about to see two cowhands joshing for Dharma's affection.

"Evening mister." Emmitt acknowledges him.

"Evening... What seems to be the problem?" Asked Tom anxiously.

"Keep out of it mister, this don't concern you." Warns Eddie cutting in.

"Maybe he's with me?" Remarked Dharma stoking the embers.

The men look suspiciously at Tom, before pushing the other to stand back. Beers spilled and insults countered by threats. Tempers escalate. Pokes become pushes. Pushes become shoves, that blossom into punches. And like a chain reaction, two become four become everyone. Imploding upon themselves as intoxicated men vented their frustrations out on the man next to them. Bottles flew, smashing against walls. Women scream and duck down for cover. Tom is caught with a vagrant fist and stumbles backward. Angered he goes after the cowhand that threw it. Dharma shelters behind the bar to watch. Tom was among them, somewhere.

Cecil stood back and let the weekly raucous burn itself out. One by one, men became exhausted, or too drunk to throw another punch. Tom collapses to a chair, a cut lip and bruised eye for his trouble. He looks about for the cause of it standing behind the bar.

"Welcome to Redemption..." Raising a bottle in admiration of him, smiling as if she had nothing to do with it, "... Gramps did warn you it could get *nasty*."

Like a four-legged black and white vampire Waldo yaps at the fallen bodies. Hurriedly licking bloodied wounds and frothing mouths from the fallen. Wagging its tail with delight.

"Why do you bring her Ted? ... You know she riles the boys... Look at them." Protests Cecil.

"It won't hurt them to get it out of their systems." Reconciles Ted.

"And Dharma?" Said Cecil looking at her as though he wanted to throttle her.

"Something tells me she's smitten on this one."

"Starman? Nah_. Never. Look at him?" Appraises Cecil.

"Don't underestimate a woman, Cecil... She is just like her mother... The apple didn't fall far from the tree." Reflects Ted.

Cecil takes a heavy sigh and fires a warning shot from an old server revolver into the ceiling already peppered with bullet holes. Catching everyone's attention.

"Time to go home boys, shows over."

"Ms. Dharma." A cowhand secures his hat, tapping the brim before leaving.

"Sweet dreams Patrick." She teases him.

Tom gets to his feet, his shirt now stained with blood, likely his own. Groping his face feels the split lip and swelling eye. Then grins.

"What's so funny?" She asked.

"I haven't had so much fun in a long time." He tells her.

"You're welcome back anytime." She tells him.

"I'll think about it." Holding his sore head.

Waldo scampers across the semi-conscious bodies. Sniffing the living. Barking at the dead.

"Thanks for the chat, Cecil... And the drink." Ted secured his hat and casually steps over the inert breathing corpses with the dog following on his heels.

"Bye Cecil." Dharma smiles and blows him a kiss.

"One of these days Dharma! ..." Unable to finish the warning.

"You too Starman!"

"Eh? What did I do?"

"Now get out of here!" Cecil warns him waving the pistol about.

Bodies staggered out the door limping and drunk feeling sorry for themselves. Waldo leaped onto the back tray.

"Looks like you'll be sleeping over Starman," Ted informs Tom.

"It appears so... Did you speak with Cecil?" He asked.

“Sorted... We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Will I ever be able to leave this place?” He asked thinking he was being held captive in a twilight zone.

“We’ll see.” Jokes Ted climbing in first, giving Tom the window seat.

Perhaps it would all be a dream and he would wake up in his bed. A pot-hole jolts him back to the cabin and the cold desert rushing air over him. It was no dream. Picking up speed Dharma races blindly down the earthen road, stirring up dust in her wake as headlights forge a path into the darkness.

Back to the sanctuary of the homestead...

I am Death

As though it were following them, a full moon hung overhead watching the Flatbed rumbled along narrow forgotten capillaries of the barren countryside. Sliding into a driveway with headlights leading the way. The plane and Tom's vehicle illuminated in the distance. Turning to the back of the homestead Dharma slams the brakes, waking the Tom from a self-induced slumber.

Hungry for sleep anything would have sufficed. A couch, a barn, his SUV. The henhouse, he did not care. Dharma kills the engine and reaches for the Winchester from the back window and cocks it. Startling Tom further awake as to what was going on.

She enters the house, switching on the lights. Waldo races vanguard ahead of her, sniffing and racing upstairs only to return to quietly sit at her feet.

"All clear!" She hollers from the doorway and disappears back inside.

"What was that all about?" Tom asked the old man curiously.

"Sometimes we have *visitors*..." Remarks Ted looking to the road.

The old man looks to the night sky searching for a dogged constellation.

Sharp eyes find what he was looking for.

"Tom... Wait up." Ted calls out.

"What's up?" Tom looks to the starlit sky.

"There... You see Orion's belt." Ted points it out.

"Of course, can't miss it... What about it?"

"Follow the line down... About eight lengths... There!" A finger stabs at the spot.

"That bright star?"

"Stars actually..."

"What is it?"

"Sirius... A binary star system... Home to the Zeta Greys."

"The needle in the haystack." Remarks Tom.

"You could say that... Hmm." Grins Ted liking the analogy.

"How far away is it?"

"About eight and half-light years... Or for you, fifty trillion miles... Give or take."

"Unbelievable." Said Tom dumbfounded by the distance.

"Hm... Under our noses the entire time." Ted groans dismissing the star to heads inside.

Tom follows. Weary legs climb the back steps. The mesh door closes behind him followed by a heavier wooden door. Ted latches the dead-bolt locks.

"This way, I'll show you your room." Leading him upstairs to a room to find Dharma already making up the double bed.

"I can do that if you want." Remarked Tom.

"It's all done now." She informs him.

"Thanks."

"Washroom down the hall... You might want to throw some water on face..." Looking about as if she had forgotten anything, "... I'll see you in the morning."

"Yeah, you too... Thanks."

Hearing her footsteps down the hall to the next room and a door close behind her. Tom feels his injuries, battered, and bruised, his lip cut and swollen.

"Ah!" He grimaces.

Floorboards squeak as he heads to the washroom down the hall. Thoughts of Dharma entered his head. One moment she was shooting at him, next they seem to have a connection. A thought of her undressing came to mind and caught himself in time to look away and head to the washroom.

Leaning on the basin he looks at the stranger in the mirror. The same guy that was there this morning, except now bloodied and bruised.

"Who are you? ..." He asked himself, fingers trace the tracks of blood from his lip. An eye already half swollen and blackening, "...Shit..." What would he tell everyone on Monday? Assuming he still had a job, "...Christ... What have I gotten himself into?" And it could only get worse, "... Fuck me."

"Not on the first date." Quips Dharma standing at the doorway watching him.

"Oh sorry... Not you... I mean, ah..." Stuttering a defense.

"Oh, so I'm not good enough is that what you're saying? ... Elle-May perhaps?" Putting him on the spot.

"Of course, you are... What I mean is... Ah..." Becoming more tongue-tied and wishing he had never spoken.

"I know what you mean... Here, let me have a look at that... Men are hopeless." Stepping closer takes the damp cloth and begins to wipe away the dried blood.

Standing uncomfortably close to each other. Detecting an aromatic scent. She gently washes his bloody wounds. He feels her breath upon his lips. Opening his eyes to find her but inches from his face, staring into his eyes as though they were about to kiss. Inhaling his masculine scent. Her breath shortens. Instinctively, she kisses him. Only to be kissed back. She stops and pulls away, as though it had never happened. Stroking his face with the washcloth stands back to admire her work. Before running the cloth down his bare chest. Taking one last mental image, *click*.

"There, you're done." She informs him.

"Thanks... I think." Confused as to what to make of what had just happened.

It was one thing to be shot at, it was another to be kissed. The woman was dangerously unpredictable. Observing her walk away, stopping at the doorway and looking back at him briefly with luring eyes before disappearing back to her room. Tom finishes up and walks past Dharma's half-open door to his room. Floorboards telltale him passing back to his room. He undresses and climbs into bed.

Moonlight radiates through the window filling the room with a soft glow. Sounds of the night call out in the distance. An owl. A chicken. The creaking of the homestead's timbers. Lumber stretching and straining as it succumbed to the cooling night. Tom's thoughts held captive by Dharma.

He looks to the wall, knowing *she* was on the other side. Unable to sleep, his heart pounding in his chest. Imagining her laying there, wondering what was going through her mind.

'The kiss, what was that about?' He ponders the romantic gesture.

His door creaks began to open. The hallway light sends a shaft of light into the room. Soft steps scamper across the bare floorboards. Suddenly Waldo leaps onto the bed and begins sniff and lick his face.

“Waldo!... *What are you doing here?*” Surprised to see the dog.

Then as if the hand of God had reached down, Waldo is lifted into the air and unceremoniously sent scampering back to whence he had come. The door closes behind the dog and the room darkens again.

Naked human footsteps thread closer.

Looking up to see Dharma standing beside the bed wearing a giant Tee, *Houston Astros* blazoned across the front. The soft moonlight magnifying her angelic beauty. Lifting the Tee over her head to reveal her naked body. The tomboy had become a woman. Tom throws back the covers and she climbs in beside him to continue the unfinished kiss from the washroom.

Responding gently at first, passions soon rise. Trunks are discarded to the floor. Bodies feel the warmth of the other. The old iron bed creaked in time with two lustful bodies releasing their pepped-up frustrations.

“Ah_.” Dharma whimpers rocking to a primal rhythm.

Lovers collapse beside each other, buzzing from her head to her toes. Her head on his shoulder, breaths panting in unison. Drougths were broken. Releasing a heavy sigh, she drifted to sleep in his arms. Tom kisses her forehead. Confused by what had happened. A willing participant in the lustful act. Words would only kill the special moment they had shared. Cradling her in his arms feels a gentleness and femininity beneath the tough facade.

Moonlight bath the two lovers in a soft yellow wash. A watercolor of pale flesh limbs on a crumpled cotton canvas. Sounds of the evening deafen by the beating of their hearts. Eyes shift to the far wall, wondering if the old man had heard Hoping he was asleep.

Cradling her in his arms as though never to let her go, he offers one last kiss before weary eyelids surrendered. And he too drifts to sleep.

In the room next, an old man lays awake. The sound of new love deafened by his own troubling thoughts. Waldo curled up at his feet, watchful of him. Scenting death leaching from the pores of his skin and whimpers as if sadden.

The discovery of the saucer offered hope where before there was none. The hope of destroying an empire that would lay siege to planet earth as their new habitat. It was as though destiny had brought Tom and him together.

Irritated by a cough quietly spits into a towel beside the bed. Swearing that while there was still breath in his body, a beat in his heart, there was time. Surrendering to the comforting thought, the pain in his chest eases and he drifts to sleep to dream...

Ted steps from the barn wearing the bulky white spacesuit, carrying an oxygen bottle in one hand and the bulbous helmet in the other. Looking like a lost snowman, boots scuff the ground kicking up dust, as though he were walking on the surface of the moon. And lumbered his way to the waiting saucer. Tom stands by the opening. Dharma by his side. It all seemed so surreal. A quietness that only came in dreams.

“Look after her son.” He instructs him.

Tom nods without speaking.

Turning to Dharma, reading her mind that he was a foolish old man on a death mission.

“I have to... It’s our only chance.” He tells her.

“I know.” She embraces him in the bulky suit.

Gigantic arms reach out and pull her close and embrace her. Wanting to let her go. But he must. He looks up to the moon, as though to say, *I’m coming to rescue you.* Taking a heavy sigh

lifts the helmet over his head and latches it into place. Tapping it as if to say it was secure, unhurriedly climbs the ramp into the craft. Stops and turns about to take one last look. One last goodbye.

The ramp slowly rises, but not before Waldo had leaped upon it and encapsulated himself inside. Tom rushes forward only to have Dharma hold him back. The hatch closes and the craft sound a harmonic hum. Legs retract and the craft hovers above the ground. Gradually rising higher and higher and ever higher into the air. Until it became a silver speck in the sky.

Before suddenly accelerating towards the moon and disappeared from view.

Within the craft, Ted presses a series of buttons, as though he had flown the craft a thousand times. Momentarily turning to inspect the explosives-packed about the energy core. The detonation switch on his arm. Within minutes the craft switches to autopilot and guides into an opening on the side of a large crater. Alien eyes watch as the craft returns after decades away. The hatch opens and the ramp extends. Greys gather about the entrance to greet comrades from a lost time. Only to have Waldo scamper from the craft, sniffing and barking at the strange creatures. Causing several of them to scatter like chickens and have the dog chase after them.

Stepping down the ramp Ted takes in the giant landing bay, just as his father had described. Sirius appears to confront the uninvited human.

“Who_ are_ you_?” Sirius asked menacingly, small sharp teeth appear behind thin lips.

The old man lifts the gilded visor to show his face.

“I am Death.” Ted responds as though he were the Grim Reaper.

A hand reaches for a switch on his arm. Sirius’s large black eyes follow the human’s movements to the switch too late to stop him.

‘Click.’

A bright brilliant light void of sound filled the loading bay and beyond.

Ted suddenly awakens and sits up in bed panting heavily. Caught in the twilight zone between this world and the next. The morning sun reached through the window. A cock crows breaking the silence of the night. A crumpled blood-stained towel beside his bed. His heart racing in his chest.

Waldo sat up at the end of the bed wondering what had startled the old man. And whimpers...

What happened to you?

6:30AM Monday morning, a radio alarm crows like a rooster. Waking Tom cradling a pillow. Memories of the weekend come rushing back at him. Dharma foremost in his mind.

'Was it just a dream?' Feeling the cut lip and swollen eye.

"Oh! Ah!" He exclaims sensing real pain. It had been no dream.

Staring to the ceiling recollects the past forty-eight hours. The car chases. The pickled alien limb. The plane rides. The bar brawl. And Dharma. Wondering what to make of the sudden romantic liaison. Feeling like Peter Pan without a shadow, dragged himself to the bathroom and examined his face in the mirror. A reflection stared back at him. Unsure who the man looking worse for wear was.

This was not the same hung-over-Tom-Mitchell from two days earlier. And seen unimaginable things. He knew his life would never be the same after this. It was going to be a long week.

"Morning Mister Mitchell... Oh, dear... Are you alright Mister Mitchell? You been in a fight or something?" Asked Hamish inquisitively.

"Morning Hamish... Ah, no..." Tom pauses to think of a plausible explanation, "... Bumped into a door... Silly me, right?"

"If you say so, Mister Mitchell... You take care now and stay away from doors for a while (*chuckles*)."

"I'll do that Hamish, thanks for the advice."

Barrier arms open to allow him through.

Curious eyes of passing looked sideways at him. Whispering and giggling as to what had happened to wonder boy. That would soon spread through the company like a wildfire of gossip and scandal by the end of the day.

Tom hurried to his office, the cafeteria would out of bounds for a few days until his eye subsided. Desperate for a coffee, he dials up room service.

"Travis my *good friend*." Speaks Tom into the phone.

"Who is this? What have you done with Tom?" Asked Travis curiously suspicious of the cajoling voice.

"It's me... Tom. Need you to do me a favor."

"Sure boss, what is it?"

"Coffee, black, one sugar."

"Eh? That's not part of my job description."

"It comes under *ad hoc duties*... I'm sort of tied up here."

"I don't know boss..." Hesitates Travis.

"There's a surprise waiting for you... Off you go... See you soon." Tom hangs up.

Some moments later Travis appears at the door with a mug of steaming coffee.

"You weren't joking about the surprise boss, were you? Ha... See why you didn't want to go yourself... So it's true?"

"What true?" Tom asked inquisitively.

"It's all over compound."

"I've only just arrived! ..." Protested Tom, then determines the source of the promulgation, "... Bloody Hamish."

"So, what happened?" Travis asked hoping to get the scoop on his scandalous boss.

"I walked into a door." Recycling the fib.

"Bullshit..." Counters Travis, "... I know a punch when I see one. Who was it?"

"Nothing gets past you Travis... Well if you must know. You have to promise to keep this between our-selves okay..." Tom begins.

"Okay..." Travis lies.

"It was a bar-fight."

"You a bar-fight? ... Yeah_ right. Pull the other one boss, it's got bells on it." Laughs Travis unable to visualize the scene.

"I'm serious." Retorts Tom.

"I believe the door excuse more than I do a *bar-fight*... Good one boss. You nearly had me. *Ha-ha-ha-ha*. Wait 'til Marshall hears about this." Wiping tears from his eyes, "...*Ha-ha-ha-ha*."

"Hear about what? ... Oh shit, it's true." Remarked Marshall appearing at the door.

"Close the door and get in here." Instructing him to take a seat.

"Bar-fight, you believe that?" Asked Travis of Marshall.

"Yeah right... That's never going to happen." Informed Marshall sitting down to examine Tom's face. "... About two days I reckon by the coloration of the bruising."

"Why can't *I* be in a bar fight?" Asked Tom defensively.

"I'd stick with the door story, for now, it's what Hamish is telling everyone." Informed Marshall.

"Hamish? I should have known... That didn't take long." Cussed Tom.

"He knows everything... *Sees* everything." Remarks Travis, twitching fingers in the air as though a mystical Shaman in a ghoulish trance.

"Okay, so we agree... It's a door then." Remarked Tom hoping to have some agreeance on the cause.

"If you say so, boss." Giggles Travis.

"Weren't you working this weekend?" Asked Marshall.

"Nah, somehow didn't make it in... What with walking into the door and all."

"Yeah, I can see why now... Might explain why Pierce is looking for you."

"Eh, why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Sorry boss, I assumed you got the text message."

"Ah shit... My mobile!" Recalls Tom.

"What about it?"

"It's ah_ broken... When I bumped into the door." Explains Tom.

"Not your day is it, boss... Check your email, he's been going over the vetted reports."

"Oh yeah that, I almost forgot."

"Forgot? How could you forget an inquisition like that from those goons? ... I didn't sleep all weekend?" Travis flinches at the thought.

"I sleep like a baby." Remarked Tom, fantasizing Dharma in his arms.

"I suppose you would with the concussion you suffered... *From the door!*" Remarked Marshall. "... Shouldn't you take a day sick or something?"

"I'm good, it's just a scratch." Turning on the computer tapping keys frantically, "... Shit..." Looking to the wall clock, "...I'm late, the meeting was at nine, why didn't you tell me?"

"I texted you." Informed Marshall.

Gulping down a swallow of hot coffee, Tom gathers a folder and leaves his amused underlings gossiping like two old ladies.

Hurrying down corridors as quickly as he could, curious eyes inspect the individual's face.

"Be careful of that door now." One voice calls out advice.

"Very funny," Tom calls back.

Arriving at Pierce's office door, taps three times lightly and enters. Pierce looks up to see his most senior design architect standing in the doorway.

"Come in Tom, come in... Mind the door..." He jokes, returning his own eyes to a report in front of him, looking up briefly to confirm the humor, "... Take a seat."

"Thank you, sir."

"A door? Really? *Hm.*" Pierce chuckles.

"It was a bar-fight actually... Somehow things got... Out of hand." Confesses Tom.

"I believe you." Accepts Pierce.

"You do? Thanks."

"Just don't make a habit of it okay." Pierce instructs.

"Yes Sir. Sorry, Sir."

Pierce holds up a red folder.

"Do you know what this is?"

"No sir. What is it?"

"It's the results of your background check." Pierce sad coldly, as if there was an issue.

"Oh, I see." Tom wondered how much Pierce knew.

"*They* seem to have some *concerns* about *you* and recommended you be dropped from Project Telos."

"I understand Sir." Concedes Tom, not appearing too concerned about the decision. He had expected it anyway.

"Do you? Because I don't..." Remarked Pierce somewhat confused by the series of events, and now the black eye. Something was amiss and he was going to the bottom of it, "...They are very thin on details as to why, so I thought I would ask you... Has it anything to do with the black eye?"

"No sir, that involved a *woman*." Tom's frown changes to half a smile.

Pierces senses truth in the words.

"Ah, a woman, I should have known, hmm... Then what's the Pentagon's angle?"

"Dunno sir, you have to ask them."

"I'd rather not..." Pierce looks to Tom, "... They gave me the creeps when they were here."

"Truth be told, I'm not sure I really want to work on the project anymore." Confesses Tom somewhat relieved to have been dropped.

"I thought you excited about getting your teeth into this?"

"I was... I mean I am... Maybe I have enough on my plate." Searching for a plausible excuse.

“That’s for me to decide... You are an integral part of this team Tom. I won’t be told who to have and who not to have... So, unless they come up with a tangible reason why you are to be excluded... It’s all of us, or none of us.” Asserts Pierce.

“You said that for me Lloyd?” Taken back by Pierce’s confidence in him.

“Well_ ... *Not yet* I haven’t, I wanted to speak with you first... So, is there anything I should know about before I put my balls on the chopping block for you?”

Tom shakes his head, raking with the thought of the saucer. How much could he tell Pierce, and would he understand if he did? His mind a blank with what to say, said the only thing he could.

“No Sir. Thank you, Sir.” Lies Tom.

“I’ll speak with Stowers after this and he can inform the Pentagon of the decision... I have seen the initial specs, and quite frankly Tom. We can’t pull this project together without you.”

“I see... Then count me in.”

“That’s the spirit, now get out of here before I change my mind... Oh, Tom...” Catching him before he left, “... Next time you’re in a bar fight...”

“What would that be Lloyd?” Asked Tom curiously.

“Duck.” Chuckles Pierce.

“Very funny Lloyd. Thanks for the talk.” Tom grins only feel his split lip throb with pain.

Pierce waits for Tom to close the door behind him. And opens the red folder again, hoping to glean something he may have overlooked the first dozen times. Nothing. Tom’s record with StarTech was impeccable. Apart from sporadic parking infringements, Tom’s life was more sanitized than his own.

Picking up the phone Pierce dials a familiar number and waits.

“Ah, Ms. Hathaway... Would Sean be about? ... He is? Good, tell him I’m popping by for a chat... Very well... Thank you, Ms. Hathaway.”

“Sean, you have a minute.” Pierce pokes his head into Stowers’ doorway.

“I very much doubt it will be a minute.” Stowers assesses Pierce’s tone.

“You know me too well.”

“Drink?” Offers Stowers.

“It’s a little early, but... Maybe a small one wouldn’t hurt.”

“That-a boy... Get this into you...,” Handling Pierce a crystal tumbler of rare whiskey, “... Have you heard the rumor about some poor chap? Mitchell... The one the Pentagon banned from the Project... They say he walked into a door, apparently. He has a right shiner to show for it apparently. (*Chuckle*)...” Stowers collapses into his large swivel chair, “... Not his day is it? *What!*”

“Actually, I was just speaking to him.” Sighs Pierce taking a seat.

“Really?” Stowers eyes widen hoping to gleam more of the lad’s misadventures.

“He’s actually the reason why I’m hear... It was actually a bar-fight... Over a woman apparently.”

“I don’t think you came all this way to tell me that Lloyd?” Stowers lifts greying eyebrows, eyes peer over the top of his glass at Pierce.

“Nothing gets past you, Sean.” Raising his glass to toast the old man’s wisdom.

“Does the man have a drinking problem?” Holding out his own glass. Pondering the probable cause for why the man had been dropped from the project.

"I very much doubt that... Sean, he has a cleaner rap sheet than you and I combined... I hear to say I *need* Mitchell on the project... I know The Pentagon have their reasons, but unless they make those reasons *transparent*, I frankly StarTech would be unqualified to work on the project without him."

"But we've already signed the contract." Blurts out Stowers.

"Well, then I suggest you, un-sign it... Because without Mitchell on the team we are dead in the water."

"Hmm... You're serious aren't you Lloyd about this, *Mitchell* fella?" Stowers frowns into his glass. He had a dilemma.

"Dead serious Sean... I don't know what riled them, but unless they can convince us otherwise, they can shove their Project *Telos* up their ah_, ...Ms. Hathaway." Pierce is cut short by Ms. Hathaway's timing her entry to the room perfectly with a tray of teas and cut club sandwiches.

"Your morning tea Mister Stowers." Offers Ms. Hathaway.

"Oh_ is that the time, how the morning flies when you're having fun. Thank you, Ms. Hathaway. Just down there will be fine." Stowers indicates the coffee table before them. And waits patiently for his secretary to leave.

The door closes as quietly as it had opened, and the two men eye each other. Neither wanting to give an inch. Stowers needed Peirce. Pierce needed Mitchell. It was a standoff Stowers could not win. And it was a contract he could ill afford to lose. The last big one before his retirement.

Stowers blinks first.

"Let me speak with this Barnard chap over at the Pentagon, see what strings I can pull... We really can't go ahead without Mitchell you say?"

"His expertise is vital, there's no one in the country that matches him, and besides, he knows StarTech from top to bottom... Who else could you bring in and be up to speed in the contract time available?"

"You're asking me?" Asked Stowers as though he had a say in the matter.

"I'm telling you, Sean... No one... Make the call and convince this *Barnard* chap it is Mitchell, or nothing."

"Leave it to me, I'll make the call... Right after I have a bite. You fancy one?" Offering a plate of sandwiches to Pierce.

"Maybe just one wouldn't hurt... Thank you, Sean." Reaching for a cucumber sandwich reminding him of his days at Cambridge, England...

Nervous as a Cucumber

Stowers fumbles for a piece of paper. A letter to be exact. Among other letters that littered his desk in the hope of finding Barnard's phone number. Giving up, he calls out to Ms. Hathaway.

"Judith... Can you get Mister *Barnard* at the Pentagon on the line for me?"

"One moment please Mister Stowers."

Moments later Stowers' phone rings.

"Mister Barnard on the line for you Mister Stowers." Calls out Ms. Hathaway.

"Thank you, Judith..." Reaching for the handset, picking it up hesitantly, unsure how to broach the request he was about to ask, "... *Mis_ter Barnard*_" Stowers chirps into the mouthpiece.

"Mister Stowers... You called?" Responds Barnard sounding distant.

"Ah yes, so I did... It seems we have a tiny problem with one of the team members you have decided to ah... *Reject*. Not to put a fine point on the matter... *Mitchell*, I believe his name is."

"Ah_ Yes, Mister Mitchell, it *seems* he didn't pass the polygraph test." Barnard lies, opening Mitchell's personnel file before him.

"I can swear for his credibility, Mister Barnard... He's one hundred percent American."

"I don't care if he's one hundred percent apple pie... He's not acceptable... The man is of grave concern for us Mister Stowers. I would even suggest StarTech look into the man again." Barnard fans the flames for Mitchell's dismissal.

"Is there a specific reason for the rejection? ... What exactly was the problem?" Stowers continues to sift through papers on his desk, then covers the mouthpiece, "... Judith, have you seen that letter from Barnard?"

"One moment please Mister Stowers." She calls back.

Moments later she trots into the office with the letter and hands it to Stowers.

"Thank you, Judith." Responds Stowers.

"What was that?" Asked Barnard confused.

"Not you Mister Barnard, I was just speaking to my secretary... Ah yes, here it is... *Blah-blah-blah-blah... Mister Mitchell is prohibited from working on Project Telos... Blah-blah-blah-blah...*" He reads the offending sentence, "... But you don't state why."

"*We* don't need to state *why* Mister Stowers, *We* are the Pentagon... Do you understand?" Chides Barnard.

"Perfectly... Then *we* might have a small problem." Rebukes Stowers standing up to Barnard.

"And what might that be Mister Stowers?" Growls Barnard.

"Well, you seem to have excluded the one person capable of designing your *Telos*... There's one else in the country who can handle the degree of precision your specifications require... We hire only the best here StarTech and Mister Thomas Mitchell is the *best*... So, if you wish to have *Telos* operational in the very tight time frame you so desired, you *might* want to reconsider Mitchell's security clearance... Sooner, rather than later... You're running out of time... You could go to another contractor. But I suspect they will all turn you down... Am I right Mister Barnard?"

The lines fall quiet. Other than the sound of Barnard's labored breathing. Becoming hyperventilated with each passing moment. Barnard mulled over his options, of which there were none.

Barnard blinks first.

"I'll speak to your Board! I'll sue you for millions!" Barnard threatened down the line.

"I've already spoken with the Board..." Stowers fibs, he was the Board, "...They feel they are within their legal obligations to nullify the contract should the terms be shall we say... *Unworkable*." Stowers threatened back.

"Hm!..." Barnard grumbled, "... Let me talk to my *people*... I'll get back to you this afternoon, perhaps they had made a mistake with the paperwork... Good day, Mister Stowers!"

"Good day Mister Barnard... Don't take too long, we have other contracts lined up." Hanging hung up before Barnard had a chance to reply.

Swiveling his chair. Stowers sat grinning. It was not personal, it was business. Barnard had buckled. Stowers had heard it the moment he hesitated. Whatever they were working on was important. It would take months, if not years to find another contractor capable of doing what was required.

"Judith..." Stowers calls out.

"Yes, Mister Stowers."

"I'll be expecting a call from Mister Barnard this later this afternoon regarding Mitchell's security clearance... Could you have him leave a message as to his decision... Would you be so kind?" Unwilling to hear Barnard's horrible voice again.

"Certainly, Mister Stowers."

Picking up the still warm handset, Stowers dials Pierce's extension.

"Lloyd... Just off the phone with Barnard, what a prick... Yeah, I know... He was nervous as a cucumber in a convent, ha... Tell Mitchell he's back on the team, with or without Barnard's approval, but I'm betting he'll fold... Give Mitchell the plans this afternoon, the sooner we get a jump on this thing the better... Maybe he can figure out what it is all about... Yeah, yeah... Keep me informed. Thanks." Hanging up the handset,

Swiveling his chair about to admire the mounted Kingfish on the wall. The Kingfish had put up more of a fight than Barnard.

Pierce sticks his head in the doorway of Tom's office. Catching him briefing his team. Four faces turn about to see Pierce standing there with a large tube under his arm.

"Relax boys, sit down... Just spoke with Stowers, and you're back on the team." Pierce informs Tom.

"That's great, I think." Remarks Tom.

"Told me to give you these to go over before we commence work next week." Pierce hands Tom an elongated tube marked *Top Secret* in big bold red letters.

"I'll have a look after this... I'll let you know once I get my head around them."

"You do that... In the meantime, stay away from bar fights, and women... Okay."

"Lloyd." Responds Tom watching him close the door behind him, knowing he had stirred up a hornets' nest.

"Whoa! You said it was a *door*?" Probed Travis inquisitively.

"Did I?" Responds Tom.

"And what's that about *women*?" Asked Travis, eyes lit up wanting to know more.

“No one. Just a mutual acquaintance... You actually know her.” He teases them.

“We do? Who is it? Not Kirstie from Legal... Uh_, I could go her...” Marshall begins to fantasize.

“No, it’s not Kirstie, now focus... Earth to Marshall?” Seeing Marshall in a daydream of his own.

“What?” Glazed eyes look up at Tom.

“Focus.” Tom informs him again.

“Okay, okay... Romeo.” Marshall gets the final word in.

“You lot out of here before I throw you off the team.”

“Oh_ boss, you wouldn’t do that would you?” Responds Bok-Choy loitering from the office despondently.

“You got five seconds to find out... One... Two...” Tom counts off as he watches his team leave, “...Close the door behind you!”

Slumping into his chair stares at the large elongated brown tubular sleeve. Red plastic lids cover the ends. Reluctant to open the container, but he knew he must if only to brief Pierce on its contents. Sighing heavily Tom plucks the lid from one end and tips the tube upwards. Rolled opaque sheets slide out from inside.

Spreading the sheets open he secures them to the drafting board. He stands back and examines the schematics. Eyes dart across the etched lines, taking in the general structure of the satellite. But this was unlike any satellite he had seen before. This was oddly different. The central core was missing, completely hollow as if something were to be fitted inside.

“The payload... Of course.” He realizes.

A series of circuitry nodes punctuated the inner sleeve. His mind continued to peel back layers. This was more than a standard communication satellite. Recalling the radio transmission in the old man’s workshop. Something about the *fleet was awaiting a signal*.

“Shit.” Chilling goosebumps over Tom’s body and he steps away from the drawing board as if had suddenly become radioactive.

Caught between a rock and a hard place; an alien satellite and the alien craft buried in the desert. What had he gotten himself into to? Wishing now, he truly was not part of the team that would build the demonic monstrosity. Feeling another visit to the ranch to speak with the old man was in order. Maybe he would know what to do.

Barnard lifts the handset and dialed an extension and waited nervously. He never liked calling the Director with troublesome issues. But Telos was too important to let the troublesome issue go unchecked. Hearing a click at the other end waits for the recipient to speak.

“Bar_nard_.” The Director snarls his frustration sounding much like Sirius.

“Director, forgive the intrusion... We have a problem.” Barnard informs.

“There is no *we* Bar_nard_, there is only *you*... What is *your* problem?”

“There was a person of interest at StarTech *I* deemed *inappropriate* to work on Telos.”

“And_!” The Director barks at him down the line as though straining on a chain like a rabid dog.

“It seems now this individual is vital to the project.”

“And why_ was he *deemed* inappropriate?” Questioned the Director inquisitively.

“It was discovered he had an interest in the Roswell *incident*.” Barnard disclosed.

“You *waste* my time with *ROS_WELL_!* That is dead and buried. Understood.” The Director bellows, spitting the remnants of his lunch over the mouthpiece.

“Sorry Director, *they* thought...” Barnard passes blame on the Agents.

“*They* don’t *think!*... They’re hybrids... Imbeciles at best... Cultured in a petri dish, what do you expect of them? Hm?!” Lecturing back down the line.

“Sorry Director... I will inform StarTech to proceed as planned.”

“I want no delays... Understood Bar_nard_? If Sirius hears of this...” The warning goes unfinished. The Director cringes in the tight-fitting chair.

“Yes Director. No Director. Sorry Director.” Barnard retreats down the line from the snarling voice.

The line falls dead before Barnard could humiliate himself any further.

Barnard dials Stowers’ number, to inform him of the *good news*. Only to reach Ms. Hathaway, who promptly humiliates him further by saying Mister Stowers was out of the office.

“Ah... I was hoping Mister Stowers would be there.”

“He’s a terribly busy man Mister Barnard. He has requested me to take a message in his absence regarding Mister Mitchell... Is that correct?”

“Ah_ yes... Yes, please inform Mister Stowers that there seemed to have been some kind of *mechanical-fault* in the polygraph machine, and that ah_, Mister Mitchell has his security clearance.” Relented Barnard, choking on Mitchell’s name.

“I will inform Mister Stowers of the good news... Have a nice day Mister Barnard.” Ms. Hathaway ends the call leaving Barnard hanging again.

With insult was added to injury, someone would be on the receiving end of Barnard’s frustration. Taking himself from his office heads down the labyrinth of empty polished corridors. Rubber sole shoes squeak on the linoleum floor. No matter how he stepped, the squeaks followed him.

Coming to the door void of a number. He taps firmly with knuckles.

‘*Knock-knock-knock.*’

And stands back to wait for it to open. Hearing the sound of muffled chatter from the other side. The door remained closed.

‘*Knock-knock-knock!...*’ He knocked harder, then banged with a closed fist, ‘...*Bang-bang-bang!*’

There came a sound of a lock unbolting A handle turning. And the door partially opens. Isaac appears puffing on a twisted cigarette and blows a plume of pungent syrupy smoke into Barnard’s face. Before giggling, soon followed by the Greys inside. Causing Barnard to cough, repulsed by the caustic smell. Waving a hand to disperse the cloud of smoke.

“Oh sorry, Mister Barnard... I didn’t see you there...” Isaac lied, “... What do you want?”

“I want to come in.” Demands Barnard trying to push open the door.

Isaac’s foot firmly jammed at the base stopping it from moving.

“Move your foot, Isaac... That is an order!” Commands Barnard.

“Sorry Mister Barnard, but this is a highly sterile and prohibited area... Only those with Section C-1-double-A clearance may enter.” Isaac holds up his larger than life identity card and flashes it momentarily in Barnard’s face. Taunting him further.

“But you’re smoking in there... You said it was sterile.” Barnard reminds him.

“Ah, *they* said I can.” Informs Isaac turning to look back to three glazed eyed Greys looking back at him.

Transparent lids half-closed across them. A Grey puffed on a rolled reefer, exhausting the smoke as thin lines through tiny nostrils. Then passed it to the next Grey next who took a hit and passed it onto another. There would be no work today. Barnard looks curiously stoned creatures, incapable of reprimanding them. His mind suddenly becomes muddled and dizzy, as though he were under the influence of some drug. He steadies himself with a hand on the door frame.

“You okay Barnard... You don’t look to good.” Giggles Isaac.

Barnard composes himself, standing upright and as tall as he could at five feet five. Remembering the reason, he had come to visit. Or thought he had. His mind had become *foggy*.

“The Director wants to know when it will be ready.” Barnard regurgitated.

“The Director this... The Director that... That is all I ever hear Barnard... Look, these guys work to their timetable okay... I’ve got no idea what they’re doing. I’m just here to keep them in cigarettes and booze. Now piss-off before they report back to Sirius... Now shoo!” Isaac flicks a hand.

“Just listen here, Isaac!” Barnard protests as the door is slammed firmly in his face.

‘*Bang-bang-bang!*’ Banging his fist against the door to no avail.

Sounds of laughter and sniggering could be heard coming from within. The dizzy spell had passed with the closing of the door. As though insulating him from the creatures within.

“Isaac! When this is over, you are through with the agency! ... Do you hear me, Isaac?! Isaac!?... You’re through!” Barnard threatens, only arouse further laughter behind the door.

Annoyed, Barnard takes himself back to his office and collapses into his oversized chair.

Opening the bottom drawer of his desk pulls out a bottle of Gin. And pours himself a drink and takes three large swallows.

One for Stowers.

One for the Director.

And one for Isaac.

Satisfied to have excised the three demons, he slouched further into the belly of the chair and took the final swallow for himself.

It was not going to be Barnard’s day...

Why would I need a gun?

“Anything wrong? ... Looks like you’ve seen a ghost.” Pierce asked poking his head in the doorway, about to head home.

“Wow, what a task eh?” Exclaims Tom hiding his inhibition for the project.

“You up for it?” Asked Pierce sensing some apprehension in Tom’s voice.

“Of course, it’s just that it’s...” Tom hesitates, reluctant to voice what was really on his mind.

“It’s what?”

“*Unusual* for one thing... Don’t you think? What’s with the hollow core?” Trying to arouse Pierce’s suspicions.

“Who cares, right? So long as we get paid, we get to keep our jobs another day.” Reconciles Pierce. Cash was king.

“Yeah, you’re right...” Tom lied.

“That’s the Pentagon for you... *Top Secret*. You are not supposed to know. That’s the thing about secrets... That how they work... Just do your job, collect your pay and go home and sleep tight knowing they have our backs.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Tom lied again.

“Why don’t you head off and give that eye some ice... What did the other guy look like?”

“Which one?” Recollecting the pack of drunken ranch hands.

“You surprise me, Tom... Oh by the way, just had word from Stowers... You’re *officially* back on the Team.”

“A little late now, but thanks.” Rolling the plans and inserting into the tube.

Placing it among similar tubes on a bench. Flicking the light switch, he locks the door and walks out with Pierce to find Hamish keeping guard.

“Good night Mister Pierce... Mister Mitchell.”

“You too Hamish.” Responds Tom.

Curiosity had gotten the better of Tom.

“When will see *Telos*?”

“The payload? We won’t see that... It will be fitted by them I suspect. They want no one handling it, if what I mean.” Informs Pierce.

“Yeah, yeah of course.”

“I know you’re keen to know about their toy, but you need to do your job and let them do theirs okay?”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Yielded Tom.

“Good night Tom.” Said Pierce, climbing into a large silver Mercedes.

“Good night Lloyd.”

Tom has a feeling he is being watched. And turns about to see a large black SUV in the distance beside the curb. Sticking out like a sore toe and making no effort to hide itself from view. Tom climbs into his vehicle and fumbles with the keys. Only to drop them on the floor. Bending down to pick them up, only to be startled by a man standing at the window.

“Hamish! ... You frightened me! What’s up?” Asked Tom winding down the window.

"I almost got to give you this..." Handing Tom an envelope, "... A young woman came by today and asked me to give you this."

Tom examines the thin brown envelope, his name written across the center in capital letters...

TOM MITCHELL
STARTECH

"Told me to give it to you, and only you. Said it was *personal*," Hamish informed.

"What did she look like?" Asked Tom.

"Brown-ish hair, brown eyes, jeans, boots... A real looker if you ask me?" Hamish grinned.

"Yeah, I think I know who you mean... Thanks." Wondering if he should open the envelope but decides to pocket it with Hamish still standing there.

"I guess I better get back to my post." Remarked Hamish feeling unrewarded.

"I guess so.... Thanks again Hamish, catch you bright and early tomorrow."

"You too Mister Mitchell." Standing back to allow the vehicle to move away. Noticing the black SUV had now disappeared and no-where to be seen.

'What was Dharma doing at StarTech?' Feeling for the envelope in his pocket.

Driving off he joins the traffic back to the suburbs, but at the last moment decides to deviate to O'Malley's. After a frustrating day, he needed a drink to unwind. Taking side streets, he pulls into the bar's parking lot and finds vacant space between two Toyotas. Prius' to be precise.

On entering the bar, faces look up at him. Sizing Tom up. Only to back down when he stares coldly back at them. The black eye and split lip said he was in no mood for games. Finding a booth, slides himself in and pulls out the envelope and stares at it.

"It won't open itself..." A barmaid informs him, "... What would you like honey?" She asked, chewing gum like a cow chewing cud.

"A whiskey be good, a splash of dry. Few cubes of ice. Cheers. Keep the change." Tom throws a note onto her tray.

"Thanks honey, coming right up."

Peeling open the envelope, pulls out a single white page of what appeared to be note paper. Folded once over. He looks to the bottom of the note to see who was from...

TED

Disappointed it had not been from Dharma, he was about to fold it again, then had second thoughts. It must be important if Ted was writing to him. The waitress returns with the drink and places it on the table.

"Just in time. Thanks." Taking a swallow, feeling it burn to his stomach.

Examining the letter. Instructions of some kind. He looks about the bar again for prying eyes. People who did not belong. No one stood out. Barflies clung to tables. Feeling sorry for themselves. He takes another swallow of the whiskey and reads the letter aloud in his mind that sounded more like an old fashion telegram...

'TOM,

Meet me at the ranch Friday evening.

By seven at the latest.

Come alone.

And leave your phone behind.

Watch your back.

TED

PS: If you have a gun. Bring it. '

'Gun? ...' He thought alarmingly, he barely had a steak knife. '*...Why would I need a gun?*'

An epiphany of the seriousness of the situation, fell heavily upon his shoulders. Until now it had been a curiosity. A fantasy. Perhaps the romantic romp with Dharma had dulled his wits. Swallowing the rest of the whiskey hoping to numb the growing anxiety. He recalls the very real events that led up to the letter in his hand. Feeling his face and the soreness of the swollen eye, placing the glass with remaining ice against it.

Suddenly, it had just gotten real.

"Another Honey?" The waitress reappears, chewing the same gum, and blows a bubble.

'Pop!' Bursting as though to say his time was up.

"Yeah why not, one for the road. Keep the change." Relents Tom. Not that his arm needed twisting.

Gingerly Tom opens the front door of his home. More sober and aware than the last time he had driven home from the bar. And finds the place undisturbed.

Throwing keys into a small bowl on the side table.

'Clatter.'

Grabbing a beer from the refrigerator collapses on the couch and tries to visualize the satellite's components in his mind. Connection nodes about the inner circumference of the core. The cavity was the size of a cannon barrel of an old Galleon. The timeline worried him more. Six months to complete something that would usually two years. But not entirely impossible if the components were preassembled.

'*Could be done...*' Bobbling his head side to side as he fitted the pieces in his mind, '*... But why the rush?*'

Tossing a frozen container into the microwave

Pressing buttons to nuke the precooked meal. '*Beep-beep-beep!*'

Minutes later the microwave sang back soprano to inform him it was done.

'*Beeeeeeeeeeep_!*'

Collapsing again on the couch in front of the television, Tom flicks through countless sports channels in search of anything worth watching. Stopping at a baseball game. Houston Astros playing LA Dodgers, the bottom of the fifth. Shoveling rice and beans and chicken into his mouth, he settled in for the evening.

Unaware of the lens on the television watching him.

Some distance away, in a room not too dissimilar to Tom's lounge, two Agents sat watching Tom watching two tribe's battle over a small white ball with a wooden stick. Observing his animalistic eating habits. Scratching his crotch. Sucking on a brown bottle and burping loudly. Their assignment to observe Mitchell's behavior and movements, and report back to Barnard daily.

Suddenly, Tom jumps at the screen, hollering abuse at the umpire. Startled, the Agents see him coming towards them. Flinching backwards as though the abuse was being directed at them. And wondered if he could see them. Only to see him recede and resume his slothful position on the couch again and suckling on the brown bottle. Unsure what had caused the sudden agitation. Humans were a peculiar species...

Pull up you mad fool

‘Tap-tap-tap.’ Sounds a knock at the door.

“You wanted to see us, boss?” Bok-Choy asked, Marshall and Travis standing with him filling the doorway.

“Yeah come in, sit down and make yourselves comfortable.” Indicating the couch.

“Is that it?” Travis’ eyes light up taking in the new drawing spread across Tom’s board.

“Yep. That is it...” Informs Tom gulping lukewarm coffee contemplating where to begin, “...Okay... Production teams have been informed and are underway sourcing components for this baby. It’s relatively straight forward except for *two* major differences to anything we’ve assembled.”

“What’s that boss?” Asked Bok-Choy leaning forward.

“One... It has a dirty great cavity at its central core.” Pointing the schematics, his finger tracing the entire length.

“Whoa! ...” Exclaims Marshall, “... What’s going on there?”

“That’s going to throw the gyro off if they get that wrong.” Points out, Travis.

“Yeah well, that’s their problem, not ours... As Pierce said, we do our job, they can do theirs. Take the money and run.”

“What do you reckon it’s for?” Marshall asked again.

“I have no idea and I don’t want to know... Its top-secret remember. Which means your lips are sealed. Understood? ...” Tom eyes each of the teams one by one. Heads nod one by one. “... So don’t go gossiping to your girlfriends, or your mates, okay. Right.”

“Don’t have a girlfriend.” Remarked Marshall.

“Maybe you can borrow Tom’s (*chuckle*).” Joked Travis.

“Good luck with that...” Knowing Dharma would get off three shots before he got within a hundred yards of her, “...Our job is to put this thing together, okay?” Directs Tom.

“Where’re the solar panels?” Bok-Choy detects an anomaly missed by the other two.

“There isn’t any.” Remarks Tom.

“Where’s it getting its power from then?”

“The core... Apparently.”

“You mean this thing is *nuclear*? Aren’t there international laws about that sort of thing.” Questioned Travis.

“Probably... But it *is* for the *Pentagon*... I guess they can do what they like.” Informs Tom.

“Well keep it away from me when it arrives. My sperm count is low enough without sterilizing me any further.” Advises Travis sitting back from the drawings.

“Ah_ that’s probably too much information thanks, Travis.” Not wanting to imagine specifics.

“Just saying... A man has a right to reproduce you know.” Said Travis.

“What with? You haven’t got a girlfriend.”

“There’s Nina.” Retorts Travis.

“She broke up with you six months ago.” Informs Marshall.

Boy Choy sits back and chuckles at the pair, the only married one amongst the lot of them.

“Focus guys, focus...” Tom instructs them, “... We let them worry about the power source.”

“It’s looks no more than a glorified paperweight if you ask me.” Suggests Marshall aloud.

“Yeah funny you should say that... I was thinking the same thing last night. None of this makes sense. These relays go no-where... And what is with the ADC and Coaxial Cable? It’s like someone has just thrown this together and told us to build it.”

“Someone’s playing with us.” Remarks Marshall.

“Well, they’re paying for it. Pierce is happy that’s all that matters.”

“Yeah, he would be... Money, money, money.” Remarks Travis.

“What was the second difference you mentioned?” Asked Bok-Choy curiously.

“Ah_ yeah... There’s going to be *a lot_* of overtime on this.” Said Tom with a riddled overtone in his voice.

“Why_?” Asked Marshall hesitantly.

“We have six months to complete it.”

“Six months? Are you fricken kidding me? No_ way!” Protests Travis.

“Com’ on Tom you know something size would take a minimum of two years, three max... This is one of your jokes, right?” Pleads Marshall.

Tom said nothing. Hoping his silence underscored his seriousness.

“Look, guys... It is mostly preassembled components. All we have to patch together... How hard can that be?”

“Three pairs of eyes shift from Tom to the board, dissecting the satellite into pieces as he had done the day before.”

“It’s a big ask Tom.”

“Stowers says there is a bonus in it for you.” Enticed Tom, “...Plus a ton of *overtime*.”

“Ghee, if you put it that way... Can we say no?” Questions Travis.

“No, you can’t... There’ll be a briefing of everyone involved at 2:00PM today. Bring your thinking caps... You going to need them.”

A groan passes along the trio only to die off after Boy Choy at the end.

“Who’s the best?” Tom asked of his team.

“We are!” The three musketeers chant back in unison.

“Right guys, look these over while I get coffee.” Sculling the last swallow of the black muck remaining in his mug.

Dharma stood on an elevated rock, a Winchester resting on her shoulder A foot of a hare extended from a satchel at her feet. In the distance the Red Sparrow circles slowly overhead, dipping his wings to indicate the spot. Then flew off, wary of anyone watching him. Crisscrossing the area in lengthy stretches, sweeping low as though he were crop dusting. The roar of the engine thundering over the prairie. Frightening hares and roadrunners from burrows.

Waldo yaps excitedly sitting on Ted’s lap. Climbing higher and higher, the engine strains and splutters. Dharma looks up as if something were wrong. Choking on an air bubble caught in the fuel line before the engine comes to life again and spat out a black plume of smoke.

The air chilled as the old biplane climbed ever higher. Waldo cowered on Ted’s lap to keep warm. The homestead appeared to the South-East on the horizon. Corona to the North-West. And beyond, hidden by the haze of the sun, old Duke. Albuquerque. Looking to the South-West Ted searches for the storm brewing in the gulf Cecil had spoken of but sees nothing but a cloudless blue sky.

Hoping Cecil was right, and that his boys could pull off the recovery.

Yawing and pitching he puts the plane into a dive and Waldo re-surfaces, ears flapping in the rushing air. His tongue flailing from the side of his mouth. The engine roars as the biplane descends towards the desert floor.

“Pull up...” Dharma mutters under her breath, “... Pull up you mad fool!”

The plane plummets towards the earth racing up to meet it. Ted pulls back on the joystick. Straining against the resistance of the rushing air over ailerons. Perhaps he had left it too late he thought. His life yet to flash before his eyes. It was going to be close.

Dharma looks away. On one hand, she could not bear to watch the death of her grandfather. On the other hand, she wanted to shoot him for taking a foolhardy risk.

Bracing himself for an impact that would surely kill him, the Red Sparrow levels out at the last moment meters above terra-firma. Skimming tops of bushes. Waldo yaps excitedly, his tail wagging frantically, not realizing how close to death he had come.

Flying level with the ground to regain his composure, Ted’s heart pounding painfully in his chest. Reaching for a tablet and shakes one into his hand. He had waited a lifetime for the golden opportunity to present itself. He would not be cheated by death now.

Raising the nose of the plane to take one look at the earthen mound looking much like the other mounds around it. Overgrown with shrubs. Turning the plane to head home dipping its wings to acknowledge his granddaughter.

Dharma waves out as the old man passing overhead.

Standing guard over the distance mound, Dharma finds shelter in the shade of rocks. Eyes scan the horizon for dust telltale dust trails. Thrill-seekers in their motorized jalopies tearing up the desert floor.

Taking a swallow of water from a canteen bottle to quench parched lips. Her mind drifting to Tom. He reminded her of her father. For the first time, she felt a connection with a man. It was something she could not explain. It was something that could only be felt. He may not be tanned or as roughed as the ranch hands, but he did not shy away from a fight. And besides, Gramps had taken a shine to Tom.

In the distance she hears engines, barely audible, of a cross-terrain vehicle raising hell and dust. Eyes following the desert jalopy as it transverses the horizon. Cocking the rifle, she waits for it to come within range. The sun beat down relentlessly, tugging on the brim of her hat to shield her face.

Satisfied the metal marsupial was heading further away decided it was time to set camp. Laying the rifle over the satchel looks about for wood to start a fire. The evening would be chilly with heat escaping through cloudless sky.

Her dinner protruding from the opening of the satchel...

You have someplace to be?

06:03AM Friday and Dharma awakens to the sensation of what felt like kisses. Feeling a warm glow rush through her body. She grins. Suddenly the realization of where she dawned on her and eyes open to find Waldo licking her cheek.

“Waldo...” Looking about for her Grandfather, “... What are you doing here? How’d you...?”

Smoke from the dying fire drifts in the direction of the homestead.

On the horizon, dawn was breaking. Sending a shaft of light across the desert, to announce the new day. Waldo rushes off on hearing a distance sound. Dharma sits upright. Working the aches out of her joints. Poking a stick at the embers of the fire to bring it back to life. Sending sparks and cinders into the air. Relieved it would be her last watch until that evening, she places a kettle on the glowing embers.

3:33PM Tom leans back in his chair, anxiously watching the clock on the wall tick away the day that was almost over.

Tom checks the clock again.

3:35 PM

Like a watched kettle, slower time became.

Suddenly Marshall appears at the door startling him from the clock staring at him.

“Hey, boss... Pierce wants to see you, says it’s urgent... Says he can’t reach you on your mobile for some reason.” Advises Marshall.

“What now? I have to leave soon.” Protests Tom anxiously.

“You have some place you have to be?” Asked Marshall curiously.

“I do actually.” Replies Tom vague on specifics.

“Pierce wants to see you *now*.” Iterates Marshall, tilting his head towards Pierce’s office.

Tom sighs heavily and stands reluctantly to leave.

Checking the clock once again.

3:36 PM.

‘Tap-tap.’ Tom knocks lightly on the Pierce’s door.

“You wanted to see me?” Tom asked sticking his head in the doorway.

“Yeah_, just been going some of the delivery dockets and they don’t tie with the invoices. The people in accounts have thrown them at me and now I’m throwing them at you to sort out.”

“What? Now?” Protests Tom looking at his watch.

“Why? Do you have a place you have to be?” Parroted Pierce.

“Yeah, I do actually.” Parroted Tom.

“Does it involve that *woman*?”

“Kind of.” Tom grins.

“Try not to get another black eye for your troubles this time okay?” Advises Pierce.

“I’ll try not to.” Said Tom feeling his face, the color and swelling now barely visible.

“Well_ then... I guess the sooner you finish with these the sooner you can get going.” Pushing a folder crammed with papers towards Tom across his desk.

Wearily picking up the file, Tom held it out in front of him. The weight alone suggested he would be hours with it. His mind a circular conundrum of how to escape StarTech in time to reach the Ranch. The answer was always the same. He was not going to make it on time.

"Off you go, you don't have much time lover boy." Pierce grins.

Tom shuffles from the office lethargically. His day had been crushed by the last-minute assignment.

"And Tom..."

"Yes, Lloyd?" Turning dejectedly and stares at him.

"Monday morning will be fine... Do what you can tonight okay?"

"Thanks, Lloyd." Managing to raise a grin.

"And no bar fights!" Pierce calls out as he leaves.

"Promise," Tom calls back with a rejuvenated spring in his step.

"Oh good, you're still here?" Said Tom seeing Bok-Choy packing up.

"Just about to leave." Advised Bok-Choy eagerly.

"Got someplace you have to be?" Asked Tom cunningly.

"Not really, pretty done here."

"Good, find those other two amigos and sort this mess out." Tom handed him the folder.

"What is it?" Bok-Choy asked inquisitively.

"Accounts are having trouble matching the PO's with the invoices. They're given it Pierce. He's given it to me. And now *I'm* giving it to you... I'm out of here." Happy to have passed the parcel.

"Oh, lousy timing boss... It's Friday."

"I know... But you have till Monday morning, don't care how or who does it... Just sort it."

"You have someplace to be?"

"I do actually..." Tom secures his hat and locks the office door, "... You better catch those other two before they decide to go early and leave you holding the baby (*chuckles*)." Advises Tom.

Bok-Choy races off down the corridor in search of Marshall and Travis.

Tom checks his watch.

3:57 PM

"Have a good weekend Mister Mitchell... Any plans?" Asked Hamish.

"Not really... Might get a bit digging in. If you know what I mean." Tom divulges cryptically.

"Let me know if you find anything interesting."

"Yeah, sure. Promise." Tom lied.

"Oh, Mister Mitchell."

"What's that Hamish?"

"Watch out for those doors." Hamish chuckles giving him a wink.

"Yeah, sure will. Thanks for the advice, have a great weekend."

"You too Mister Mitchell."

Large tinted sliding glass doors splayed open as Tom secures sunglasses and steps into the late afternoon sunshine. Through sepia-colored lenses he makes out a black SUV parked beside a curb. Walking as though he had not seen it, opens the door of his vehicle and climbs in.

And waits.

Turning the ignition, the radio comes to life and gradually he eases the vehicle away. Watching the black SUV in the rear mirrors comes to life and begins to move. Hoping to catch up with him on the adjacent street. He waited for SUV to disappear before making a sudden about turn. Wheels squeal, as Tom's vehicle accelerated out the main entrance. To merge with the other traffic heading east. The black SUV now no-where to be seen.

Hamish watches the erratic driving as though something was amiss. Reaching for an R.T. on his shoulder to report the incident.

“(Click). False alarm. Stand down... Just Mister Mitchell excited about seeing his lady friend no doubt... Over. (*Squawk*).” He chuckles to himself.

“Copy that. (*Squawk*).” Control chatters back.

All week, the black vehicle had been absent, only to appear today of all days. Trying to rationalize the sudden reappearance. It seemed life was throwing roadblocks at him today. It was a little late now to head home to pick up a change of clothes. And a steak knife. Driving with one eye on the road ahead, and the other in the rear mirror, sandwiches himself between two large Lorries from view.

Anxiously he pulls out and accelerates past the Lorry. Only to see an on-coming Patrol car. Checking his speed, he was over the limit.

“Fuck!” He cusses and watches as the Patrol car does a U-turn and accelerates after him, lights flashing and sirens blaring.

He was a sitting duck.

“Fuck-fuck-fuck!” He quacked slapping hands against the steering wheel.

Strike three.

Pulling the SUV to a gradual halt, wheels skid on the gravel as his vehicle came to a halt. Tom kills the engine and reaches for his license. And waits. His eyes on the rear mirror, not so much the officer approaching him. But for a black vehicle that maybe looming up behind him. A rotund officer looking somewhat familiar taps a knuckle on the driver's window. Was it him, all did all Patrol officers look the same? Undersized shirts stained with coffee and donut frosting?

“Officer.” Tom responds winding down the window, then recognizes the officer from the earlier warning the previous week.

“Well-well... We meet again Mister... Mitchell.” Reading the name on the license.

“*Officer*.” Tom smiles reaffirming their fleeting relationship.

“You know why I pulled you over?” The officer asked.

“I was speeding... Overtaking.” Tom qualifies.

“That's right... One moment please.” The officer heads back to the Patrol car in no hurry and collapses in the driver's seat.

Tom peers in the rear mirror, unsure if the officer was talking on the R.T. or eating a donut. Or both. Lights atop of the Patrol car flash boldly for all and sundry to see. Like a beacon signaling where he was.

“I'm right here.” Surrendered Tom, giving up hope of ever making the Ranch on time.

Vehicles slow and steer at the rebel who had violated the road code. Sighing heavily, Tom waits and waits and waits. And... waits. Eventually, the officer steps from the patrol car brushing crumbs from his brown shirt.

In his hand a pad.

"Where you headed son in such a hurry?" The Officer asked.

"A Ranch midway between Corona and Roswell."

"Only ranch out there is the old Foster Ranch... What your business doing out there?" The officer asked suspiciously, wary the man was some scavenging enthusiast.

"Visiting... Ted Irving." Confesses Tom.

"You know him?" Asked the Officer.

"I know them well enough... Staying over in fact." Cementing the alibi.

The officer looks about the compartment but could not see a travel bag.

"Travelling light, if you know what I mean." Tom grins.

"It's your lucky day Mister Mitchell. Any friend of Ted's is a friend of mine..." Folding the pad and pocking it, "... You drive carefully now son. There won't be a third warning, you hear?"

"Thank you, Officer... I appreciate that." Thanks Tom eager to get going.

"Give my regards to Ted and Miss Dharma for me."

"I will... What can I say your name was?" Tom asked.

"Tell them Pete, Pete Nagel caught you... He'll know." Tapping the rim of his hat.

"Thanks again, Officer... Oh... One thing." Tom had a last-minute thought.

"What's that son?" Inquired Nagel.

"I think I have someone following me." Informs Tom.

"Is that right? ... And who might that be?"

"A large black SUV, lost them in Burque for now."

"To do with Ted?" The Officer squints as though he knew more than he was letting on.

"Yeah," Tom responded puzzled how he knew.

"Don't you worry about *them*. I'll slow them down for you. You better get going." The officer looks back down the distant highway.

Through the shimmering heatwaves, sharp eyes spot the vehicle about three, maybe four miles back.

"Get going, now." The Officer return the patrol car to kill the lights.

Tom accelerates away, raising a cloud of dust behind him. Nagel radios in for patrol cars in the area to convene on his mark. Before reclining in the driver's seat and waits. His eyes fixed on the approaching black SUV in the rear mirrors, just as the young man had said. Up ahead, two patrol cars are seen approaching. Nagel radios for them to block the road in case the black SUV makes a run for it.

The black SUV races closer, accelerating above the speed limit.

"Gotcha," Nagel remarks as if hooking a fish, turning on the flashing lights and siren.

Undeterred, the SUV speeds past by the patrol car lit up like a Christmas tree. They were Pentagon and above the law. And answerable to no one. Or so they thought. Wheels spin on gravel as the patrol car accelerates after the black SUV showing no signs of slowing down. Patrol cars move to block off the road ahead. Suddenly the black SUV brakes, squealing loudly on the tarmac. Shredding long black footprints behind it. Billowing white smoke as skidded to a halt.

Officers draw weapons and stand braced behind open patrol car doors. Their pistols aimed at the driver's windscreen. A patrol helicopter appears on the scene to settle behind the two patrol cars. Sending up debris and sand about itself. Blades thumping the air as turbojet wind down.

A standoff ensues as the heat of the sun bakes the unprotected officers. Slowly the SUV's driver's window lowers. An arm unfurls from it. Holding out an identification badge. An officer approaches the arm cautiously. A Glock aimed at the driver's head.

"Hands where I can see them." The Officer instructs loudly over deafening rotor blades.

The Agents remain unruffled by the delay. Their eyes fixed into the distance. Their prey now slipping from their talons. The Officer reaches for the identification and examines it. Looking at the other officers as to what to make of it.

"Stay here. Switch off the engine. I have to call this in and verify this." The Officer yells at two Agents.

No response came from the ominous driver, as though snubbing the officer.

"Who are they?" (*Squawk*) Nagel asked curiously.

"*Pentagon.*" (*Squawk*).

"Call it in... Pete instructed us to hold them up as long as you can." (*Squawk*)

"Copy that." (*Squawk*) Confirms the Officer.

Nagel sits parked behind the black SUV, making his inquiries on the R.T.

"Ted... Ted... You there Ted?" (*Squawk*)

"Pete that you?" (*Squawk*)

"Copy that... Your boy is on his way... Tom." (*Squawk*)

"Good to hear." (*Squawk*)

"Had a spot of trouble with *friends* of yours... We're just detaining them for a while."

"Thanks, Pete... I appreciate your help." (*Squawk*)

"Be seeing you later." (*Squawk*)

"Copy that... Over." (*Squawk*)

Pete switches back to the police frequency. Eating the last of donut and checks his watch. Surmising another ten minutes would give Tom enough time to distance himself from them. Time eats away as does Nagel at a stale donut. Twirling a finger in the air Nagel gestures it was time to let them through.

Patrol cars part and the helicopter raises and sweeps over the top of the SUV as though to intimidate it. Only to follow the vehicle to let it know of its presence. It did not take long for the vehicle surrendered the pursuit of Tom and turned around and head back in the direction of the city again. Tailed the helicopter to the city limits whereupon it swung away and continued its routine patrol...

The Storm

Tom sped away watching Nagel return to his Patrol car. With his heart racing in his chest, he warily eyes the rear mirror for the black SUV.

Two patrol cars come speeding towards him.

“Not again.” He curses thinking he was about to be pulled over.

Only to see them continue down the highway away from him. Their flashing lights distancing themselves from him. Minutes later a police helicopter screams lowly overhead, and he is left wondering what had happened behind him. At Corona Tom turns into the outback. Accelerating down the narrow rural road preying nothing was coming the other way. Seconds seemed like minutes and minutes like hours. His eyes fixed on the road ahead. A signpost riddled with bullets holes looms up ahead. And he swings onto the back road. Sliding his vehicle sideways before regaining control.

The rear mirrors show no sign of the black SUV and Tom eases back on the pedal. On reaching the mailbox he turns into the long driveway. Seeing the red biplane by the barn drives round back to park up beside the Dharma’s Flatbed.

He looks about for Dharma, waiting momentarily for her to appear. The place seemed deserted. Uninhabited. Stepping warily out of the vehicle as something was amiss. Eyes peeled for life. Waldo. A chicken. Anything that said someone was about. Looking back to the road for raising dust, but the black SUV was nowhere to be seen. The game of cat and mouse was over for now.

Grey ominous clouds were gathered in the sky above him. Gusts of wind nudge Tom to step up the back stairs. Opening the mesh door that squeaked on its hinges as though to announce his arrival. Entering the kitchen to discover the radio was on and a half-eaten sandwich on a single plate at Ted’s position.

“Anyone home!?” Tom calls out. His voice carries through the empty halls and rooms and out the front door. Silence again.

The air felt cold and empty like the house had no soul. Other than those framed on the mantelpiece. He examines the photographs again. Ted looking much younger smiling. Not an ounce of fear in his eyes. About to sit atop of nine hundred thousand gallons of liquid hydrogen, and kerosene.

Next to it a picture of his wife. He could see a resemblance to Dharma in her features. To one side of the photo, a family portrait. Taken some twenty years earlier he surmises. Dharma looking very much a child. Cute, grinning from ear to ear. Standing proudly between her parents smiling for the camera. Not realizing it would be their last photograph as a family.

“*Smile.*” Said Death behind the camera.

Buffered by a strong gust, the old homestead creaked. As if spooked by a ghost running through the hall and out the front door. Startling him from the trance of the photograph. A chill ran over his body. The ghost whispered that he should be moving along. Taking one last look at the haunting photograph.

“Be seeing ya’.” Tom bids the eerie faces farewell.

Empty rooms whispered their silence. Hearing only the sound of the wind breathing heavily through the hallways. Clouds begin to cover the sun casting an ominous dark shadow over the

windows. Making his way outside, Tom stands on the porch. The yard swirling with dust and debris. Chickens run about frantically startled by gusts of sudden wind. At last he sees life. Tom's eyes shift to the barn being buffered by the wind. The plane held down by ropes to stakes in the ground.

The Flatbed was here. There was freshly eaten food in the kitchen. People was here somewhere, but where? Spying the old green and yellow tractor, Tom had a thought.

Ted looks up to a partitioned monitor. Having seen Tom, the moment he had arrived. And continues to tinker with a circuit board. Half frame reading glasses pinched on the tip of his nose, as thick callus fingers fumble making the dedicate connections. Ionized wielding fumes taint the air leaving a foul taste in his mouth.

"Anyone home?" Tom calls out through the opened hatch, seeing the light was on.

"Down here..." Greets the old man, "... You made it."

"Only just, had your friends on my tail."

"Yeah, Pete called me on the R.T. a while back, said you were heading in."

"You know him?"

"We sort of family around here... We watch each other's back."

His attention is drawn to the circuit board.

"What are you working on?" Asked Tom curiously intrigued by the strange electrical circuitry.

"Just playing around... Trying to get the light over there to switch on... Damn eyes aren't getting any younger."

"Let me have a look." Asked Tom, taking a closer look.

The old man stands aside and passes Tom the laser wand.

"You were close..." Remarked Tom.

Detaching one connection and making another.

"There, try that." Tom informs standing away.

Ted flicks a switch and suddenly a bulb at the far end of the workshop comes to life. Brilliantly blinding everyone in the room as though a flash from nuclear denotation.

"Whoa! That a bright bulb!" Exclaims Tom shielding his eyes.

The old man kills the switch happy to know that the switch works.

"You ready?" Ted asked.

"Ready? ... Oh..." Suddenly realizing the purpose of his visit, "... Yeah, as I'll ever be, I suppose... What time are we heading off?"

"When it gets dark... The storm's picking up by the hour... We'll meet Cecil and his boys at the bar... Round seven-thirty... It shouldn't be too much trouble for the container rig to get out to the site."

"You can't bring the thing back here?" Informs Tom.

"I may be silly, but I'm not stupid... We'll take it over to the wife's old place... About thirty miles from here. There's a closed-off back road. Hasn't been used since the after the war."

A purpose-built road by the military to access the debris from Roswell crash. Twenty-five trucks to haul away ten tons of *weather balloon*.

"Yeah right," Ted mutters to himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

"What was that?" Tom asked thinking he had missed something.

"Nothing, just an old man talking to himself." Dismisses Ted.

"Where's Dharma? ..." He asked curiously, "... She's not inside."

"She's watching over the site... Been there all week." Ted informs without worry about her safety.

"What? She's camped out the whole week?" Exclaimed Tom.

"Of course... She's fine..." Dismisses Ted, "...Waldo's with her... I think."

"You think? ... I've just been chased by... by..." Lost for the word.

"Hybrids."

"...*Hybrids*, and she's alone out there?"

"She can shoot a tick off an ant's ass... I'd be more worried about them if I were you... Shit, look at the time." Covering the circuit board with a bloodied cloth catching Tom's attention.

"You okay... I mean." Looking to the blood soiled rag.

"Nothing the doctors can't cure... And I'd be keeping that just between and you." Ted looks at him solemnly.

"Dharma doesn't know?" He asked surprised.

"And she won't either... She's had enough grief already without me adding to it."

"She's not a child anymore Ted."

"Hmm...", Grumbles the old man knowing the lad is right, "...She'll find out soon enough when the time comes... Understood?"

"Understood... How long? ..." Reluctant to ask.

"Doc said three months... That was six months ago... I take each day as it comes now."

"Is there nothing the doctors can do?" Asked Tom, hoping there was some chance.

The old man falls silent. He had had a good life. Maybe it was time he rested in an urn beside his wife on the mantelpiece. Reminiscing Ester's face, her laughter. He grins as though she was standing before him. He catches himself feeling melancholy and shakes himself back to the small workshop. He still had one last mission left in him, God willing.

Looking to the ceiling and ponders momentarily. In some ways, he would be finishing what his father started. Breathing heavily, fills riddled lungs with workshop fumes. And coughs. Spitting to the ground. Whipping his mouth with a cloth and shoves it deep within a trouser pocket.

"Good, that's the last we'll talk of it... Let's get out of here, I need a drink." Removing the leather apron, throwing it over the workbench.

"I'm with you on that." Remarked Tom climbing back to the surface.

Above them the sound of the building tempest and wind howling through the barn. Loose hay and straw and debris waltz the cha-cha. Dancing and twirling like flimsy rag dolls across the yard. Encroaching clouds darkened the early evening sky. A clap of thunder rumbles in the distance.

The two men hurried across the yard holding onto their hats. Clambering the steps of the porch just as a violent thunderclap boomed above them. As if the Gods were not happy.

"*Right on cue*, as Cecil predicted." Ted looks to the threatening skies.

"And Dharma's in this somewhere out there?" Eyes search the horizon now raising with dust.

"She'll be fine... Whiskey?" Dismissed Ted keen to get inside.

"Sure, why not?" Tom collapses into a tired armchair.

"That was my wife's chair." Ted informs him.

"Sorry... I shouldn't." About to stand only to have Ted raise a hand to stay where he was.

"She's dead, don't worry, she won't be needing it."

"Well don't sugar coat it for me." Tom reaches for the glass and leans back. Possessed by the thought, goosebumps run over his body. He sits upright.

"We all have to die of something sometime son... Fact of life... I've had a good run. Few men can claim what I have achieved... But I'd give it all away to have Ester back..." Ted drifts off.

"Yeah... I suppose you're right."

"Can't take nothing with you but your soul."

"So they say." Reflects Tom.

"Yeah they do..." Taking a swallow of the amber-colored painkiller. Checking his watch again. 6:07PM, "... Any more about the Pentagon project?"

"Received the plans this week... There's an empty central core." Tom informs him.

"That will be for the homing beacon."

"Homing beacon... For whom?"

"*Them*... The great migration... They're coming." Remarks Ted, surer than ever.

"You seriously believe that?" Questioned Tom.

"They've been planning this a long time... My father saw it all. He was helpless to stop them. And for thirty pieces of silver, the military betrayed every living human being on this planet... We have to right the wrong Tom." Taking a mouthful of the whiskey. Letting it burn down to his stomach.

The pain abates, Ted almost felt normal again.

"They're so advanced... What can we do?" Asked Tom feeling insignificant.

"Firstly, we can't let that thing go up... And secondly..." Ted hesitates, how much does he divulge? "... We need to send them a message to keep away."

"What *kind* of message?"

"Haven't decided yet." Ted lies, taking another swallow.

"We can't stop it going up... It's out of our hands."

"Where there's a will, there's a way son... You're a smart man, you'll figure it out." The old man grins.

"No, no, no... I can't destroy a billion satellite, based on... on..." Tom reaches for the right words.

"Go on say it... *An old man's ramblings?*"

"Yeah if you put it that way."

"Don't think of it as destroying a billion-dollar satellite, think of it as saving eight billion people... Including yourself... *Including Dharma.*" Ted sweetens the pot.

"And you?"

"Don't get all teary-eye about me... I'll be long dead by the time it's over... Wake up Tom... Bad things are going to happen if they arrive. We are talking devastation on an apocalyptic scale. There is not going to be enough room for all of us... You want that on your conscience... Knowing you did nothing to stop it? ... Hm?"

"Christ." Cusses Tom.

"Yeah, it'd be good if He were here, but He isn't... But we do have the next best thing?"

"Who's that?"

"Me..." The old man extends his arms as though he were crucified. A whiskey glass in one hand and an imaginary cigarette in the other, "... And tell you what... Finding the saucer when you did was divine intervention, if you ask me."

"What are you going to do with it?" Asked Tom confused by the Old man's rambling.

"I don't know yet, but maybe there's something in it that we can use against them." Suggested Ted looking into his glass as though it were the craft.

"It will be beyond all of us." Remarked Tom.

"Maybe, but you're a smart cookie, Tom, you'll figure out some of it."

"Let me think about it." Advised Tom.

"You do that, because in about six months those ships are sailing." Warned Ted looking to the ceiling.

"You say six months?"

"Why you ask?"

"That's when the satellite is supposed to launch? But it will take eight years for the signal to get to them though." Puzzled by the sudden urgency.

"They use some special kind of technology... Through subspace. The space-between-space... My father explained it to me one day... Some form of instantaneous communication." Ted's grey brows pinch together thinking of it.

Tom leans back and contemplates the ramifications. They really did only have six months.

"We're buggered once they lock onto the beacon aren't we?" Tom asked knowing the answer.

"Well and truly shafted." Clarified Ted.

"Oh well, I hope Pierce sees the funny side of destroying a satellite." Said Tom warily.

"Pierce?"

"My boss."

"Hmm..." Ted contemplates a thought.

A window frame rattles violently as a gust of wind catches it, startling the pair.

"Finish up, we're leaving." Informs the old man...

The Convoy

“You can drive.” Instructs out Ted throwing Tom the keys to the Flatbed.

“We can take mine.” Tom offers.

“Yours’ won’t last five minutes out there... Besides Dharma will want to drive back.”

Tom climbs behind the wheel, somewhat different from his own vehicle. Smelling the rustic odors of the cabin and harshness of the bench leather seat. Fumbling for the ignition forces the key into the slot and turns it hoping it would start. The V8’s roars to life and a foot rocks the throttle. A heartbeat humbles beneath the bonnet.

Then he sees a gear stick.

“You can drive a shift-stick?” Asked Ted suspiciously.

“Yeah, it’s been a while though.” Responds Tom anxiously.

Vibrations shook the steering wheel. Headlights pierce shafts of light into the dark swirling haze of dust outside. The stick wobbles freely. And Tom throws it into reverse. Rasping and grinding where he thought the reverse would be.

“Don’t go easy on her son, she won’t go easy on you...” Ted informs him as though it were was a temperamental lover, “...Show her who boss.”

Aggressively Tom shoves the stick into first, then second then third before they had made it to the mailbox. Slamming his foot on the brakes skidding the truck to a halt.

“Which way?” Tom asked, revving the engine.

“That way...” The old man gestures with a hand.

Headlights fought to penetrate the thick dust fog.

“You chose a good night for it.” Remarked Tom his eyes focused on the road ahead of him.

“Yeah, should give us some cover... I’ll doubt they’ll come out in this.” Ted gazed into the darkness of the prairie.

Impenetrable storm clouds concealed the night sky. Lightning danced with, soon accompanied by thunder bolts. Mile after mile passed. Tom began memorized by the monotony of the narrow road and begins to think he is lost. Suddenly, the old man raises a hand for him to slow down.

“Ahead there... On the left, take that... Five miles you can’t miss it.” Informs Ted.

“Miss what?”

“Redemption son, Redemption.”

Up ahead, the soft light mirrored off the blanketing clouds above. Beneath it the bar. A parking lot littered with trucks, and rigs. Tom looks for a place to park.

“Over there.” Ted points to a likely spot.

Ranch hands shelter between rigs. Cigarettes struggling to stay lit. Heads look up to see the dull red Flatbed arriving. Thinking Dharma had arrived, men begin to push and shove as to who would be vie for her affections. Disappointment comes over faces when they only see Tom and Ted stepping from the truck.

Heads turn and chatter lulls momentarily as the two men entered the open doorway. The noise of the howling wind fell away as the door closed behind them. Replaced by the jukebox playing Country. The atmosphere smelt of beer and bourbon.

“He’s out the back.” The barmaid informs Ted.

“Come’ on... Can’t leave you here to start another fight.”

“Eh?” Tom protested his innocence.

“This way.” Ted encourages him to follow.

At the office door they find Cecil sitting behind a desk. Reaching for the bottle of fine Kentucky bourbon and pours two hefty glasses for the new arrivals. Standing either side of him like giant sentinels, his two sons. Harold and George. His *boys*. Playful as lion cubs. Brutal as grizzly bears. Goliaths, each standing over six feet seven.

“Cecil... Tom. These are his boys’ Havoc and Grimace...” Ted introduces Tom to the boys.

The two bulky men subtly nod. Tom tried not to stare at them, they were so... Big. Wondering what it took to feed them. He found it difficult to reconcile the colossal progeny to their somewhat diminutive father.

“They get it from their mother’s side.” Cecil chuckles drawing on a Cuban cigar. The air stained with the smell of sweet pungent tobacco smoke.

“You know Pete, from earlier.”

“Officer.” Tom acknowledges Nigel.

“Not this evening son... Take a seat.” Nagel informs him, a twelve-gauge rests against the wall beside him.

“Ted can lead the way... Havoc will be in the container rig. Grimace will follow with the digger... Cecil and I will cover the rear.” Instructs Cecil sculling his glass, followed by the others.

“Dharma will light a beacon on the ridge at 8:00PM exactly... Keep your eyes open... I’m not expecting any trouble but be prepared for anything.” Warns Ted checking his watch.

It was time.

Walking solemnly from the small office, ranch hands parted to watch the procession of men walking pass as through a funeral march.

“Good luck boys!” A trucker raises his glass to the men sensing they were on a secret mission.

Climbing into their respective rigs. Like the start of a Grand-Prix, engines come to life. Screaming over the wailing wind sending tumbleweeds from one side of the State to the other. Tom revs the Flatbed’s engine loudly, accelerants rush through fuel lines. Spinning wheels looking for grip. White headlight beams probe the darkness.

The convoy of vehicles linked by beams of light. Behind Tom, Havoc driving an articulated container rig, his brother Grimace in a truck with menacing bull-bars hauling a trailer. A top, a digger. Holding the rear an old Chevy. Cecil drives, Nagel rides shotgun. Literally.

Into the night the convoy grinds forward.

Ted extends a hand from his window indicating a turn coming up. Brakes lights appear in sequence. Lighting it up like a string of red Christmas bulbs. Ahead a disused road. Barricaded by a dilapidated wooden fence that had seen better days.

“Don’t stop,” Ted instructs Tom to keep moving.

Tom hesitates momentarily, then pushes his foot heavily to the floor. The engine responds angrily, as though it had been violated, or aroused. Hoping Dharma would understand the damage that would arise. The truck accelerates and the needle climbs, forty, fifty, sixty. The barricade rushes up to meet the truck head-on. Headlights illuminate the shanty timbers. Hands grip the wheel tightly as Tom braces for the imminent collision.

'Crash-bang!' Shattered planks exploded on impact and darkness briefly overcomes the cabin before headlights regained the upper hand. Debris fly in all directions, scattering to the shoulders. The Flatbed continues, ruffled and uninjured.

"There's a marker ahead." Advises Ted straining eyes into the distance.

"You been here before?"

"Yeah... Laid a pile of rocks out." Hoping they still laid undisturbed by the storm.

Overhead, threatening thunder rumbles. Storm clouds spat heavy drops of rain.

"Pray the rain holds off. The last thing we need is a rig stuck in the mud... There'd be a lot of explaining to do that not even Pete could talk his way out of."

"He's a cop." Remarks Tom unsure how he fitted in.

"I knew his pappy, way back. When things were simpler than today."

"Yeah, you got that right..." Concedes Tom, "...How many people know about this?"

"I don't know... How many heads did you count in the bar?"

"Aren't you afraid they'll talk?"

"We're kin around these parts. Family, if you know what I mean. What happens out here stay out here... Anyways, talk is myth... You could walk an alien down the main street of Roswell and people would take photos and return to their soy cappuccino lives... They've all been sanitized by movies and television. Nah... I think we're safe."

Looming up on the right shoulder, a pile of rocks become bathed in headlights.

"There it is..." Ted points the primitive pyramid, "... Easy now, the going is going to get a little bumpy."

Ted extends an arm from the window, gesturing downwards for those behind to slow. Brakes lights appear in unison. The convoy comes to a halt and waits. The old man checks his watch.

7:57PM. Engines rumble. Waiting for the signal from Dharma somewhere in the distant outback. Wind gusts batter the vehicles. The heavy container rig stood unshaken. On its back huge mechanical limbs. Winches capable of lifting over twenty tons. Eyes penetrate the darkness for unearthly creatures that may be prowling.

In the distance, a speck of sparkling light appears.

"Dharma." Calls out Tom pointing to the flare.

"Let's hope so..." Said the old man warily, "... If we can see it, so can they... Take it easy now."

Slowly Tom eases the Flatbed off the road and onto soft terra-firma of the prairie. Tyres sank into the sluggish soil. Headlights search for a way through the maelstrom of wind and sand and darkness.

"Easy now... Head to directly the light. Don't deviate." Warns Ted.

With the heavens a symphony of fork lightning and rapturous thunder, the huge rig smoothed the path for those following. Brushing large bushes, bulldozing smaller ones. With each rotation of the wheels brought the convoy moved closer to its destination.

Looking like the Statue of Liberty, standing braced on a ridge her, oilskin flapping in the wind, Dharma holds a flare in the air. A wide brim hat knotted securely under her chin. Waldo stands beside her. Ears prick up at the sound of distant engines groaning under the burden of the desert floor. And the dog rushes off to disappear into the darkness. Leaving Dharma unchaperoned.

The five nights alone had given her time to do a lot of thinking. About life. About Tom. Wondering if he was different from all the men who had tried to hit on her. Yet he was the only one that had not. Feeling vulnerable to open-up to a man she had only met a week or so before.

Endangering his life for her. For her grandfather. Caught up with her grandfather's folly. Yet somehow, it was as though it was meant to be. Not one to believe in coincidence, conceded there were forces at play beyond her control.

Or perhaps it was love.

The word unsettled her. Love had been torn from her heart the day her parents died in the car crash. An accident they say. The truth never really revealed. The other driver, a mysterious man in black that had fled the scene soon after the *incident*. Visions of the wreck car flash in her mind.

A clap of lightning strikes the earth nearby. A tingle sensation runs up her body and realizes holding her hand up was probably not the best idea. Stepping down from the rock she moves to stand on the mound of earth. the outline of the trucks coming into view.

Making out four sets of headlights. Sees a large truck behind her Flatbed leading the way. Silhouetted in the rig's lights, two heads bobble side to side. Gramps and Tom. Behind them, a massive truck. Mechanical arms Silhouette in the headlights of a smaller truck lugging a digger wobbling side to side on the trailer. The familiar sight of an old Chevy trails at the rear. Cecil.

Ted raises a fist to halt the convoy and Tom pulls up before the shallow gully. Illuminating Dharma in the headlights. Looking tired. The rifle weighs heavily on her shoulder.

One by one, brake lights blaze their red glow. One by one, the rumble of engines fell silent. Leaving only the eerie sound of the howling whistling wind. As if the haunting ghost had followed Tom from the homestead.

Generators come to life and a spotlight floods the area with a brilliant light. Turning night into day about the mound. Dharma throws the flare into the gully, only to have Waldo chase the stick. Yapping at the bright yellow incendiary smoke streaming away in the wind.

She is surprised to see Tom stepping from the driver's door and Gramps from the other. Cecil steps forward with Nagel to inspect the mound of earth. Grimace and Havoc remain in their cabs until the last possible moment reluctant to face of the assaulting elements.

"Dharma, you okay?" Her grandfather asked.

"I'm good... Any trouble?" She asked.

"Not yet." Ted looks into the darkness and rustling bushes.

"She's a beauty, Ted... You say the boy found it." Asked Cecil.

"Yeah." Responds Ted sizing up the mound again.

The mound looked bigger under the lights and he began to wonder if the hydraulics would handle the weight. Cecil whistles loudly, piercing the whistling gale wind, signaling Havoc like a sheepdog. Reluctantly the Havoc stepped from the insulated cab. Pulling a cap down to shield his eyes from lashing sand drifts.

"What do you think?" Asked Cecil.

"Shit, it's pretty big." Informs Havoc eyeing the mound.

"Can you handle it?"

"Won't know we see what's underneath all that... But yeah, I think so." Havoc nods.

"That's my boy... We've got till dawn to get this thing out and back to Ted's wife's old place..." Checking his watch, "... In about nine hours from now."

"Yes, Pa." Havoc accepts.

"Off you go now." Shooing him away like a gigantic blowfly.

Havoc wanders off to inform Grimace still sheltering in the cab of his truck. Engines start up again and headlights of another kind come to life. The digger crawls slowly off the back of the trailer. Stuttering across the ground like a lazy mechanical caterpillar in no rush to get anywhere. A giant bent arm extends from its podgy belly. At the end of the arm, a bucket like claw to scour the earth. Grimace positions the machine beside the mound and with the grace of a skillful archaeologist, began peeling away thin layers of earth.

Ted and Cecil stand by with shovels and picks wary that the bucket would strike the saucer. Nagel takes up watch in the darkness ready for any uninvited visitors. The twelve-gauge at the ready. Bucket load after bucket load earth is piled to one side. Creating another mound. First a panel appeared, then the outer rim. Slowly the craft took shape.

Feeling like a third wheel on a bicycle Tom goes to stand beside Dharma.

"Hey." Tom breaks the draught of silence between them.

"Hey." She responds.

"You been okay out here by yourself... Gramps told me."

"Yeah... I had Waldo to keep me warm at night."

"Oh, I see... You've moved on." Sounds Tom dejectedly.

"Yeah well, a girl can't wait forever you know."

"Hmm... Five days is a long time for any woman to wait I suppose... I wouldn't blame her." Reaching for her hand.

Fingers touch and caress each other. Then interlock as though they would never let go. She rests her head on his shoulder. Tired from long days keeping watch. The wind calling her name on the wind to sleep. She yawns.

"Hey... Why don't you lay down in the cab and I can keep watch okay? You've done well." Tom kisses her forehead.

She grins and surrenders to the comforting thought.

"Just ten minutes." Dharma tells him handing him the Winchester.

"Yeah, just ten." Knowing she would be out like a light.

Walking like a zombie to the Flatbed and climbs in the driver's side. Collapsing to the passenger seat, her hat as a pillow. The smells of the cabin acted as an anesthetic. And before she could count to ten, she was asleep.

Standing upwind, Tom leans against a large boulder. Hidden in darkness, like the emptiness of space. And inspects the rifle wary that he could use if he had to. Feeling its weight and cold steel.

He thought about what Ted had said about destroying the satellite.

'But how?' He wondered...

Playing chicken

Havoc and Grimace worked in shifts, pirouetting the digger like a ballerina as they scooped bucket after bucket after bucket of soil from about the craft. By midnight, and the craft was still half-buried.

“We’ll be cutting it fine Ted.” Warned Cecil leaning on a shovel, a bandana covering his mouth and nose.

“Keep going... We still have time.” Ted informs him doggedly.

Generators whined. The digger grunted. The whistling wind howled. And Dharma slept through it all.

By 2:00AM, much of the craft had been exposed.

Eyes stare into the pit at the craft. Wondering if it would come to life and rush from the grave like a possessed Egyptian mummy under an enchanted spell. But Ted had long since come to the diagnosis, that like himself, it was dead. It would have activated by now were it able to.

And whatever was inside was also dead. Long dead. He pitied the poor bastard who would have to go in to retrieve the remains. He looks to Tom.

“Tom! ...” Ted calls out, “...There’s your saucer!”

Tom stares into the deep dark pit that had been scoured about the craft.

“Christ that’s big... You sure we can get it out?” Tom Exclaimed.

“That’s what we about to find out... I don’t want to make a second trip.”

“You know what to do Havoc,” Cecil yells over the noise of the generators.

“Right Pa.” Hollers Havoc heading back to the rig.

Grimace moves the digger slowly out of the way as Havoc fires up the diesel motor and eases the massive rig and tray alongside the pit.

“More... More... Bit more... That’s it!” Cecil holds up a hand.

Havoc jumps from the cab of the truck to inspect the alignment.

“You got enough chain for this boy?”

“Then some Pa.”

“Good boy... You two know what you have to do.” Sending them off to fetch the chains.

“Looks like the Roswell craft if you ask me.” Remarks Ted examining the craft’s contours.

“You saw it first-hand?” Asked Cecil inquisitively.

“Yeah, just a kid at the time... They took no notice of me. Hanging off my father’s stars.”

“Don’t suppose they would have... Here, wrap this under there.” Handing him a length of the heavy chain.

Cecil loops the chain under the saucer’s hull. Havoc and Grimace secure the chain to the hydraulic arms. Engines groan in protest as large mechanical feet move slowly into a position to counter the load and find firm footing.

“Okay, this is it... It’s going to wake the dead but we’re going to have to risk it.” Calls out Ted, looking the heavens wishing the wind would howl harder and carry away the noise.

Cecil twirls a finger in the air to start hoisting. Havoc pulls down on a hydraulic lever. Engines scream. Large mechanical arms begin to move upward, chains begin to take up the strain. Screeching and straining as if they could snap at any moment.

Nothing budged, but the rig.

“She’s still stuck... Someone will have to get down there to dig around the base a bit more to loosen it. The digger can’t get in there.” Advises Ted looking for volunteers.

Not one of the three old men and two grizzly bears were capable of squeezing through the opening between the craft and the wall of the pit. Eyes shift to Tom, the ablest body, and suitably sized individual to fit the gap.

“No way... I’m not getting down in there. I’ll be crushed if it moves.” Fears Tom looking at the meager gap. Weighing his chances of survival.

“That’s okay, I can get Dharma to do it if you’re not up to it?” Advises Ted.

“You...” Tom begins to cuss, knowing he had been manipulated.

“Don’t worry, Havoc as full control... He won’t let it fall on you. Will you Havoc?” Ted assures Tom.

“No Mister Irving.” Replies Havoc with little confidence in his voice.

“See... Get in there.” Handing Tom a shovel in exchange for the rifle.

Tom’s eyes shift to Havoc who stared indifferently back at him.

“Whereabouts do I dig?” Asked Tom.

“Under that wing... You’ll see it.”

“Yeah.” Tom peers into the shadowed abyss.

“Loosen that and we’ll keep hauling until it shifts.” Informs Ted.

Tom slides down the side of the wall and begins to poke at the packed soil under the wing. Soil tumbles down upon him.

“That’s it. Keep going. As much as you can.” Instructs Ted.

Poking and shoveling away at the soil. Above him the sound of whining hydraulics and chains straining under the stubborn resistance. More soil falls away and a hole appears.

“Now the other side.” Instructs Ted.

He moves around to the hull to the other side where he found was less room to move about. Raising the shovel over his head he picks away at the newly formed hole. Enlarging it, as more soil tumbles down about his feet. Loosening the craft from its earthly adhesion. The craft suddenly moves. Tom tries to scamper out of the way but is trapped between the wall and the hull. Any chance for escape blocked by the wide-rimmed craft suspended above him. Sealing him beneath. Crushing him should any of the chains break.

“Hey! Hey! What about me?” Tom yells out trapped.

His plea for clemency goes unheard as engines strain to lift the weighty craft.

The old man had almost forgotten about Tom, until Dharma reminded him.

“Where’s Tom?” She asked curiously, now awoken.

“He’s down there... Oh Shit! ... Take it, easy boys. Tom’s still down there!” Calls out Ted.

“Stay against the wall!” Dharma calls out to him.

Suddenly a chain slips and rasps violently across the hull. The craft suddenly plunges and is about to fall back into the hole. Tom crouches in fear. His life flashing before his eyes. In slow motion. Then at the last moment, another chain takes hold. Twanging sharply against the hull like a plucked bass string. The craft halts but inches from his face.

Gradually the craft begins to ascend again.

“You okay Tom? ... Tom?!” Cries out Dharma.

“Yeah... Get that thing out of here.” He calls back.

Chains take up the strain and Havoc eases the craft higher inch by inch.

An opening appears above him. Light penetrates the pit. Tom attempts to climb out, only to slide back down. The giant alien pendulum swaying subtly above him. He leaps again. This time a hand reaches for his. It was Dharma's.

Feet kick and dig into the sides of the wall struggling to find a foothold. Levering himself onto the edge as Dharma leans back and pulls on his arm. Legs extend to the pit to be amputated should the craft fall. With the last ounce of energy, he pulls himself forward and rolls away from the pit panting and exhausted. Relieved to have survived.

Above him, lit in spotlights, in all its extraterrestrial beauty, an alien spacecraft being gently lowered onto the tray of the rig. Large wooden blocks wedge the craft into position. The illicit load extended beyond the sides of the tray.

"What you think Pete?" Asked Cecil as to whether it was roadworthy.

"You got a permit for that?" He jokes.

"Wrap it up boys, we're going home." Informs Cecil to his boys.

"4:20AM gentlemen, we're going to be cutting it fine to get back." Informs Ted looking east to the horizon. The sun yet to rise.

"What about the hole?" Asked Cecil wary someone might discover it.

"Leave it, we don't have time... We can fill later." Informs Ted.

"Okay, boys roll out... Load the digger and catch up." Cecil informs Grimace.

"Yes, Pa."

Generators die and day turns into the night again. Engines rumble back to life and headlights punch their beams into the distance.

"You can drive." Dharma informs Tom.

Following tire tracks way back to the road. Tom leads the way followed the rig straining under its load. Crushing anything beneath its feet. Cecil and Pete followed closely behind watching for movement in the cargo as it rocked gently across the uneven surface. Scanning rear mirrors for Grimace who was falling behind and distancing himself from the rest of the convoy.

Minutes slipped away and Ted checks his watch, 4:43AM. Estimating they would make the road within ten minutes. That would give them an hour to get to his wife's place before the rising sun exposed their illicit act.

"Damn... I wish we had more time." Curse Ted.

"You got your saucer... Be thankful for that." Dharma reminds him.

"Yeah, should be grateful for that... How you doing Tom?" Knowing he had put him on the spot.

"Doing okay... We got the saucer." Reaffirms Tom.

"We did, didn't we?" Ted allowed himself a satisfied grin.

The disused road appears in the headlights. The pile of rocks on the side of the road. Tom turns the Flatbed onto the sealed road. The tarmac a welcome change from the soft underbelly of the outback. Havoc double clutches and feels the power surge through the powerful beast. The diesel engine bellows plumes of black exhaust into the pitch-black sky. The threatening storm clouds had parted on revealing a starlit heaven.

"They've found us!" Ted exclaims seeing a set of lights suddenly appear in the distance ahead of them.

"What do we do?" Asked Tom stunned like a rabbit caught in headlights.

“Not stopping, that’s for sure... Dharma!” Ted instructs signaling his granddaughter.

“Onto it Gramps.” She responds without flinching.

‘Click-clunk!’ Loading a bullet to the chamber.

Waldo sits up at the sound and jumps onto Tom’s lap. Resting its forelegs on the open window ledge. Its head poking into the rushing air.

“Put your foot down,” Ted instructs him hoping Havoc would keep up and not separate from the pack.

“What about Grimace?” Asked Nagel looking over his shoulder for him nowhere to be seen.

“He can handle himself.” Responded Cecil.

Nagel pumps the shotgun readies himself against the open window.

The black SUV charges towards them like a raging bull only to race on by.

Break lights appear in rear mirrors and the SUV turns about. Tyres squealed. Tearing at the tarmac before finding traction and racing after its prey. Accelerating quickly, it soon catches up. A window lowers and a strange ray-gun fires at the Chevy. Radiating an intense blue beam that disabled the engine. Headlights die and darkness floods the road ahead of the Chevy. Cecil guides the old Chevy to a halt. Nagel leaps from the stalled vehicle to fire off three quick blasts at the departing SUV. Buckshot ricochets off the rear end, igniting sparks as they struck.

Cecil turns the key, but the engine remains silent. Dead.

‘Click-click-click-click-click.’ The battery drained of energy.

“Ah fuck!” Cecil slaps hands against the steering wheel and watches as the red taillights of convoy slip away ahead of them.

The black SUV races on unhindered and pursues the massive rig. Havoc weaves the heavy truck over to push the assailant onto the shoulder warning it to back off. Making another run the SUV races passes along the shoulder stirring up a maelstrom of dust in its wake.

Massive wheel bolts of the MACH rasp along the side of the SUV. Sending up a Catherine wheel of sparks. Havoc aims a sawn-off at the roof and fires. Peppering the paintwork, but little else and the SUV hurried past in search of another prey.

Dharma sits on the passenger window ledge and reels off shot after shot.

‘Boom! Click-clunk. Boom! Click-clunk. Boom! Click-clunk. Boom! Click-clunk.’

Bullets bounce off the vehicle. Striking the window screen, radiator, side panels, until she finally ran out.

Another beam of blue light radiates towards the Flatbed’s engine. The engine stutters and coughs and dies. With power lost Tom sees the rig fast approaching in the rear mirror. Pulling over to the shoulder to avoid being shunted from behind.

Havoc was on his own. Ted watches the SUV race away into the darkness as though it were leaving. But that would be wishful thinking. Red taillights appear as it slowed to turn about for the kill.

“They coming back...” Ted warns, “... They’re going take him head on.”

The two vehicles race towards each other. One a massive MACH bulldog. The other a raging black bull. Exhaust fumes flared from nostrils either side of the SUV. Rear wheels spin until the crazed bull found grip and raced toward the growling bulldog. Havoc presses his foot to the floor. No one played chicken with him and lived to talk about it. Blinding headlights penetrate the other’s cabins.

Like two freight trains racing towards each other, neither willing to give way, they got closer and closer and closer. Waiting for the other to blink first...

Are they dead?

Suddenly blinding floodlights startle the Agents. Springing from no-where a truck appears from the outback. Sturdy bull-bars ram into the side of the SUV. Catapulting the black beast into the air to land violently on its roof.

Havoc slams a foot on the brakes to avoid hitting his brother's truck. Wheels lock and the trailer begins to slide sideways. Coming to a halt but feet from him. In the headlights a crumpled wreck leaking steam and white smoke into the night air. Grimace pulls himself from the truck, shaken. But alive. Havoc climbs down from the rig to investigate the aftermath. In his hands the sawn-off. Grimace brings his own intimidating weapon. Warily approaching the upturned black beast to discover the Agents laying inert. Limbs reaching from shattered windows as though to escape.

Sunglasses no longer hiding hideous black eyes.

"Are they dead?" Asked Cecil standing back.

The brothers look at each other with the same thought and smile.

'*Boom! Boom!*' Lethal shots rang out in the darkness.

Bodies twitch momentarily before becoming still.

"Yeah... They dead..." Informs Havoc, turning to Grimace, "...You okay brother?"

"Better now." He grins.

"That was close... How you find us?" Ted asked.

"Saw the headlights, knew something was wrong... I dropped the trailer and got here as quickly as I could... Took a short cut." Informs Grimace.

"That's one hell of a short cut son." Ted peers into the darkness of the outback.

"What are we going to do about these two?" Asked Tom standing over bodies and what was left of their faces.

Green-blue blood oozed from gaping wounds. Whatever they were, they were not human. Waldo sniffs the foul corpses and backs off whimpering. Repulsed by the smell and finds shelter behind Dharma's legs.

"Grimace... Cart these two back to the digger and bury them deep... Real deep. You hear?"

"Yes Pa."

"Then come back here and take this piece of shit down to El Paso... Carlos will take care of it. You can pick the digger up later."

"Yes Pa."

"Who's Carlos?" Asked Tom curiously.

"Runs a chop shop down there... Vehicle parts if you know what I mean."

"Oh." Responds Tom.

"Strip them clean of any *gadgets* they have and throw them in with the vehicle... I do not want them traced back to here.

"Yes Pa." Accepts Grimace.

"If they going to track them, it may as well be down there." Grins Cecil.

"What about us? We're dead in the water." Asked Tom.

"Grimace here can jump-start the vehicles." Cecil looks to his son.

"Okay everyone, it won't be long before the sun is up. We better get out of here." Warns Ted looking down the road for more lights.

Engines come back to life, and the convoy continued down the road. The intersection laid just ahead. Scattered timber littered the ground and Dharma wonders who had rammed the barrier looking suspiciously at Tom and Ted. Their eyes fixed on the road ahead. Nothing need be said, she already knew the answer.

Dawn begins to break the horizon. Indiscernibly at first. The eternal battle of night and day for domination of the sky. One chasing the other. But who was chasing who? The night retreats as the day advances. It would try again that evening.

Light spills over distant hills into the desert basin like flood waters spilling over a dam. Sending a shaft of light into the cabin of the truck. Tom drops the visor to shield his eyes. Dharma had fallen asleep against the door frame. Succumbing to the sound of the wheels and rumble of the engine. Waldo curled up at her feet.

“How much further?” Asked Tom.

“Next turn, five so miles up... You can’t miss it.”

A signpost looms in the distance. Brakes lights warn Havoc they would be turning again soon, and he cuts through gears like a growling pit-bull. Decelerating the fifty-ton MACH to a crawl.

“Almost home son,” Ted informs, then coughs.

Wheezing as he breathed. Hoping not to wake Dharma sleeping beside him. Covering his mouth with a rag spits the offending clot into it. Wiping his mouth takes a deep breath that could well have been his last.

“You okay.” Asked Tom concerned.

“I’m fine. Just up ahead...” Ted points out the derelict homestead, “...It’s seen better days. Better times.” He reminisces fondly.

Ted waves his arm from the window to slow Havoc down again. Gears rev loudly as the strains under the burden and twenty-two wheels crush anything beneath them.

“Down there,” Ted instructs pointing to the driveway.

It had been years since his last visit and the place looked untouched. Weatherboards in need of a coat of paint. A garden overgrown with weeds. A yard in need of chickens. A two-story barn stood opposite the homestead, not unlike Ted’s place. Still standing. It had withstood everything the elements had thrown at it over the years. Like Ted, it still had one last purpose. Once last breath to offer the world.

The mismatched convoy of oversized Tonka Toys crawled into the one-house ghost town. Waldo stirs at the slowing for the trucks. Leaping onto Dharma’s lap, stirring her from a dream. Gasping, she finds herself at a place not her own.

On opening her door, the dog jumps out and scampers off to chase a cottontail rabbit that had the misfortune to lift its unfortunate head at the sound of the trucks. Disappearing through the long grass. Yelping with excitement at the chase the sound falls away into the distance.

Tom brings the Flatbed to a halt beside the homestead. Havoc parks the rig in front of the barn’s large wooden doors.

“Here... Help me with these doors.” Instructs Ted leaning a shoulder against the roller door.

Casters squeak from years of sleep and rust. Eventually waking and rolling open. Tom does likewise on the other side. Inside a huge empty cavity, exposing lofts either side.

“There was a day when this was filled to the ceiling with bags of grain...” Reminisces Ted, “...Ester’s old man was the feed merchant for the region.”

The smell of the remnant grain-filled his nostrils. Looking to the old homestead and the ghosts looking back at him. Then signals to Havoc to bring the rig into the barn.

“Easy now... Over more...” Guiding the rig into position.

Slowly the massive truck and trailer eased into the interior. Nagel stood watch at the mailbox.

“That’s it!” Ted’s hand goes up.

Air brakes hiss signaling their final rotation. The sixteen-liter diesel engine falls silent. A stillness hangs the air as they all take the moment in. Relieved to have gotten this far. The saucer looking like a badly wrapped Christmas present on the back of the rig tied off with webbing for a bow. Ted had almost forgotten what it looked like.

“Let’s get her down,” Ted informs Havoc.

Everyone but Dharma was breathing adrenaline to stay awake. Waldo returns wagging his tail. In his mouth a dead cottontail. Its head flopping freely from side to side.

“Good boy Waldo, good boy...” Dharma commends the dog, taking the rabbit from it, “... Dinner.” She remarks to Tom watching on curiously.

Grimace pulls away the webbing and Ted and Cecil tug at the tarpaulin. Freeing it from the hull. Unable to believe their eyes. Yet there it was in all its nakedness. Tarnished with grime from the past eighty decades in the grave.

A ray of sunshine penetrates the barn, suspicious of the surreptitious activity.

Havoc starts an engine. Growling and groaning. Moaning that it had been woken again. The open barn amplifies the noise, spilling it through open doors and over the fields. Havoc pushes up on a lever. Large metal feet lift and extend out to plant themselves firmly on the floor of the barn. Pulling on another lever mechanical limbs bend and flex hydraulic muscles.

Chains clang and rasp and straighten and strain like a badly tuned harp. Gradually lifting the suspended the saucer in the air. Pulling on another lever, mechanical arms slowly extend out. Feet press into the earthen floor to counter the rig tipping over. Slowly the craft is lowered to the floor. Cecil and Ted place sturdy wooden blocks about the base to hold it in place.

“That should hold it... Ease off the chains!” Yells out Cecil over the sound of the growling hydraulic engine.

Engines soften to a kitten’s purr. Havoc goes about detaching chains. Heaving them onto the back of the trailer. Pushing and pulling levers retract legs and arms back to their original positions. The engine falls silent again.

Eyes now take in the mysterious craft. Ted runs a hand over the hull as though caressing it. If only to convince himself it was real. As real as him. As real as everything else in the world. No military gas-lighting could deny the truth beneath his hand.

The truth was out there alright. And it was in his barn.

Tom steps forward unable to believe what he was seeing. No book in the Old Duke library covered this. Wondering what the docile librarian would think of this? It was like National Treasure, minus Nicolas Cage.

“What next?” Asked Tom curiously.

“We get her cleaned up... Then...” Responded Ted.

“Then what?”

"Then we go inside."

"Go inside? ... *Why?*"

"Someone has to retrieve the bodies from in there."

"Bodies? What bodies?"

"The little-green-men bodies... But don't worry, they'll be bones by now... I suspect."

"You suspect? You don't know?" Questioned Tom.

Ted remains silent. Letting Tom figure it about for himself. Then the penny dropped.

"Oh_ no you don't! I'm not going in there." Tom step away back from the craft.

"I'll do it." Offered Dharma casually.

"You can't serious." Exclaimed Tom.

"What's the problem, they're dead..." Holding up the dead rabbit, "...Look." Tapping the rabbits head dangling side to side.

Its eyes open and staring at Tom as if to ask, what the problem was.

"Okay, okay... I'll do it." Tom concedes, repulsed by the thought.

"Tomorrow then... The sooner the better." Informs Ted.

"Tomorrow?"

"You got someplace you have to be?" Asked Ted.

Tom looks at him suspiciously.

"Why does that sound familiar?" Questions Tom.

"No idea... Close the barn doors."

"Where we going?" Asked Tom.

"Home... I don't know about you, but I'm hungry and need sleep." Informs Ted.

"Sounds good to me." Remarked Tom.

"We'll be back later to scrub this down... Later we can head to Redemption for a celebratory beer... How's that sound?"

"Perfect." Accepts Tom.

"See you tonight boys. Great job." Calls out Ted to the others.

"You too Ted, well done... I wouldn't have believed it unless I saw it with my own eyes."

Informs Cecil returning to the Chevy.

"Grimace be okay?"

"We'll know tonight when he gets back." Advises Cecil.

"See you tonight. Drinks are on me." Informs Ted.

The Flatbed pulls quietly around the back of the homestead. Dharma had nodded off again and Tom eases the truck to a gentle halt so as not to wake her. His vehicle still where he had left it. Albeit covered in dust. Quietly closing the driver's door and gently opens the passenger door.

"We're home." He whispers to her.

"Mm_." She murmurs on hearing his voice.

Sliding his arms beneath her lifts her gently from the passenger seat. Ted opens the back door and Tom carries Dharma up the stairs to her room. Placing her gently on the bed. Removing her boots and throwing a blanket over her. He kisses her cheek.

"Sweet dreams cowgirl." He whispers in her ear.

"Mm_." Murmuring again drifting off to rekindle a dream.

Ted had taken himself to bed and fallen asleep with his boots on.

Tom goes to the washroom and splashes water on his face and stared at the man staring back at him in the mirror. It was not the same man from a week ago. What had happened to Tom Mitchell he once knew? Feeling as though he were living a double life. Unsure where his alliances laid. StarTech slowly drifting away from him. What laid in the barn was bigger than Texas and harder than trigonometry. He just wanted everything to return to normal. Knowing that no matter whatever happened, nothing would ever be the same again.

The cold water did little to keep him awake. Hunger had left his body. Sleep cried out for attention. And pondered which bed to sleep.

Dharma awakes mid-afternoon, sunlight streaming through the window wondering how she had gotten to bed. Feeling soft wet kisses on her cheek.

“Waldo! Go away!” Dharma flitches at the wet sensation.

“Woof-woof.” Barks Tom softly to her ear.

“Woof.” She purrs back. Eyes reluctant to open. She surrendered to her lover’s arms...

Classified

“What do you mean!? *They’re missing!?!...*” Hollers Barnard down the phone, “... Well, find them! ... Understood!?” Slamming the receiver down.

Fuming, he turns a pale shade of pink and reaches for the bottle from the bottom drawer. Fumbling with the cap splashes the contents into a glass. Taking a mouthful as if it were water and swallows hard. Exhaling vapors with shallow breaths. And begins to contemplate the fate of two Agents that had suddenly go missing. The very two he had assigned to follow Thomas Mitchell.

Something did not sit right in his mind. Reports showed that Mitch was incapable of hurting a fly.

“Impossible.” He tells himself, there had to be a logical explanation for it. There had to be *outside* forces at play here.

If word got back to the Director or Sirius there would be hell to pay. Literally. What had the Agents been up to? Tapping holographic keys, Barnard searches logs and entries of the two agents. Scrolling down the screen. Nothing but endless surveillance of Thomas Mitchell. Eating habits. Sleeping habits. Work habits. Habitual. Routine. Boring. Nothing out of the ordinary until... Friday.

Eyes focus on a transcript. Detailing how had been detained by police while trailing Mitchell to the Ranch.

“What’s out there, Mister Mitchell?” Wondering if it was the woman, or something more. Stubby fingers frantically tapped the surface of the desk.

“Let’s see who owns the Ranch shall we?” Barnard asked himself.

Nostrils flares with anticipation, exhausting fumes of gin waiting for cyber spiders to crawl over the State’s property register. Details appear on the holographic screen before him.

“Mm-mm...” He noted the property had changed hands from Foster to an Arnold Irving in Fifty-seven, then transferred to an Edward Irving in Sixty-eight, “... No doubt his son.”

No further transfers were recorded and surmised that Irving must still alive. Initiating more frantic tapping to interrogate personal records, crossing referencing all national databases. The screen displayed several with the name *Edward Irving* for New Mexico. And narrowed the search criteria down to Roswell.

An image appears of a man. A young man. In an Air Force Uniform. Ribbons across his chest. Stunned, Barnard sits back and takes Irving’s occupation...

CAPTAIN EDWARD FRANCIS IRVING (RETIRED)
AERONAUTICAL AVIATOR / ASTRONAUT

A hyperlink displays beneath the photograph. Clicking this, a screen displays an ominous warning...

CLASSIFIED

Nothing was ‘*Classified*’ to Barnard who veers to another search screen and enters Captain Edward Irving’s credentials. Reaching for the bottle and splashes more gin to the bottom of the

empty glass as he waits. Something that would help numb the awkward meeting he would need to have with the Director to explain his findings.

Another ominous sign glows back at him...

APPOLO XX

The more he read the more he dreaded the meeting. And takes another mouthful of gin. Irving's father a distinguished General involved in establishing *Majestic-12* and *Project Blue Book*. The words sent shivers down Barnard's spine. His worst nightmares coming true before his eyes. He could not have wished for a worse possible connection between Mitchell and Irving.

His nerves already frayed. His mind reaching for answers to questions that were compounding by the moment. While his hand reached for the gin bottle. Was it simply a *coincidence*? Was it just *love*? Was it really about a *woman*? Just how *retired* was Captain Irving? And why would two agents suddenly fall off the grid? Now of all times? Too many questions, not enough answers as he takes a swallow from the glass.

Barnard orders two Agents to come to his office. Swallowing the remnants of the glass as the two agents appear at the door. Dressed identically in black. All but their white shirts.

"Come in. Come in..." Gesturing to them, "...And take those silly hats and glasses off... Sit. Sit." Commanding them as though they were dogs.

Agents remove their hats and glasses. Feeling naked, they fidget and look at each other, unsure what to make of Barnard. The disproportioned human they had little to do with. Until now. Blinking in unison they stare at him with large black eyes.

"Seems a couple of *your lot* have managed to disappear..." He begins to inform them, appearing un-aphathetic towards their fellow Agents, "... I want you two to take their place... Follow this Thomas Mitchell... He is up to something... I want to know what it is. Understood?"

Two heads subtly nod to affirm the instructions.

"And while you are at it, keep an eye on owner of the Foster Ranch, *Edward Irving*. Keep your distance from him, and his daughter. She bites... Control will fill you in until I get there. Understood?"

Two heads nod once again. Smelling alcohol in the air nostrils twitch and soon establish its source.

"That's all, dismissed." Barnard waves a hand to flick them away.

Lifting the receiver dials an extension and waits.

"Is the Director available to meet? Barnard here... It's about an *urgent* matter." He qualifies, "... He is, I'll be right along." Hanging up.

Printing details from the screen he folds the piece of paper and slides it to an inner jacket pocket. Patting it down for assurance. And readies himself for the awkward meeting with the Director.

Ted stands back and watches Tom waterblast the hull of the craft, caked with earth. Pissing a violent jet of water that bashed the hull, causing it to spit debris back at him. Revealing a smooth unscathed surface. Strange markings appear on the hull. Like those he had seen in the workshop. Killing the compressor, the hissing falls silent and the torrent jet weakens to that of a dribble. Removing goggles Tom stands back to admire his handy work towering over him.

"Good job son... You missed a bit." Ted joked.

"Eh?" He looks up at the hull.

Waldo yaps as though they had visitors, only to have Dharma bringing a plate of sandwiches.

Feeling as hungry as a baby in a skimpy bar Tom shoves a sandwich in his mouth.

“Tomorrow we’ll crack it open.” Advised Ted.

“How? Where’s the door?” Asked Tom inquisitively chewing heavily.

“You just got to know where to push and with what.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Then we can get the bodies out and start water blasting inside... Don’t worry... You’ll be well suited up for it.” Ted grins.

“I still don’t like the sound of it.”

“You want to have a look inside, don’t you?” Ted Questioned.

“Of course, ... But...” Unsure he really wanted to know.

“No buts about it... Finish that and get cleaned up... Want to be out of here by dark.”

Looking to the distant road, hoping they had avoided detection for now.

The sun hung low on the horizon, reluctant to fall. Intrigued by the strange-looking craft. Rays reach into the barn as though wanting to touch it.

“What are you going to do with the thing?” Asked Tom.

“Haven’t decided yet.” Ted lies.

Barnard scurries down corridors. Clinging to the walls and distancing himself from technicians in white coats. Carrying clipboards that reminded him of doctors. He hated doctors. He hated hospitals. He hated clipboards.

Arriving at the Director’s office, a secretary greets him.

“You may go through now Mister Barnard.” She informs him as he hurries pass.

“Thank you.” Without looking back at the woman.

“Barnard. Barnard? ... What’s so important to want to see me *now*... Can’t you see I’m about to have dinner for God’s sake... Sit, sit man.” The Director grumbles. A steaming meal before him, piled high with beef oozing gravy.

“Sorry to disturb at such a late hour, but this really cannot wait a moment longer Director.” Pants Barnard as though he had run a marathon.

“Get on with it man.” Instructs the Director.

Shoveling a fork laden with food into his mouth. Lips purse close. Cheeks bulge under the strain. Jaws stomp up and down. Side to side. Grunting noises growl from him. After swallowing hard, takes a glass of red wine and washes the aftermath of his mouth. Swallowing again and burps unashamedly. Barnard watches in horror as if watching a giant walrus consuming a bucket of day-old herrings.

“Hurry up Barnard... I haven’t got all night.” Grumbles the Director.

“Yes Director, sorry Director... It ah... It seems we may have a problem with Mitchell...” Barnard begins.

“We have had this discussion Barnard, there is no *we*... *You* have the problem... What is it, hurry up, spit it out.” Asked the Director, spitting pieces of food in Barnard’s direction.

“It may be just a coincidence...” But is soon cut off.

“*Coincidence!*? ...” Hollers the Director, “... One moment it was a *problem*... Now you tell me it may be a *coincidence*... Which is it, Barnard... *Hm!*? ...” Shoveling an overlaid fork into his mouth. Eyes squint as jaws chew on the tough beef, “...Mm!”

"Mitchell seems to be involved with a woman..." Informs Barnard, only to be cut off yet again.

Swallowing before he had finished, his throat straining under the pressure. A snarl forms over his face.

"Is that it? Christ man, go back to your office and don't waste my time anymore... A woman? I'd be surprised if you'd knew what one was...*Hm?* Do you? ... *Hm?!*" Questioned the Director staring at Barnard with a perverted glare.

"Well, ah_..." Barnard stutters, "...I ah..."

"Leave the poor boy alone!" Informs the Director.

"But Sir there's more... Much more?" Barnard continued.

"You're sick... You know that Barnard? ... Now get out before I call security." The Director threatens spitting small pieces of food in Barnard's direction.

A minute piece of meat strikes his face. But remains unmoved.

"*Majestic-12.*" Barnard whimpers.

About to take another mouthful, the fork stops but an inch from a gaping mouth. A thick purple tongue protrudes from it. As if frozen in time.

"What about *Majestic-12?*" The Director questions, snaring at Barnard.

"It seems Mitchell is involved with the granddaughter of the General involved with *Majestic-12*... A General, Arnold Irving."

The Director listens on stunned by the revelations.

"And if that is not enough... The current owner of the Foster Ranch is a one *Captain Edward Irving*, the General's son." Continues Barnard.

"What of this Captain Irving?" Now losing his appetite pushing the plate to one side.

"It's all here Director..." Removing the folded paper from inside his jacket, pushing it across the large desk towards him.

"Seems our Captain flew a classified Apollo mission... *Twenty.*" Barnard falls quiet.

Studying the piece of paper, the Director digested unpalatable facts, and swallowed hard.

"You say there's a woman?"

"It appears so... It could be nothing... It could just be..." He did not want to say it, "... A coincidence."

"Perhaps..." The Director's wonders if he should inform Sirius. For now, it was purely speculation, it was best to let sleeping dogs lay, "... Follow them, report back, understood."

"There one more thing Director..." Barnard hesitates to speak.

"What is it now?" The Director protests.

"We seem to be missing the two agents sent to monitor Mitchell."

"Two? ... How does that happen?"

"I do not know, but I intend to find out." Informs Barnard.

"Good, send replacements, immediately."

"They're already on their way as we speak Director."

"Very good Barnard... I don't want to be disturbed again with any more *problems* understood."

"Understood Director, thank Director." Barnard stands to leave.

"Oh, ... Barnard?"

"Yes, Director?"

"If you do have a problem..."

"Yes, Director?"

“Make it go away.” Inferred the Director coldly with no clarification.

“Yes, Director. Thank you, Director.” Bowing subserviently to hurry back to his office and bottle of gin, as quick as his short legs would take him...

Major Tom

Rumblings of a hangover from the previous evening returned as Tom stepped awkwardly in the bulky space suit. Feeling and looking like the Michelin Man.

"You sure this thing is safe?" Asked Tom, hearing the sound of his breathing. The visor fogging inside. Large boots scuff the surface of the barn.

"Of course, it is..." Ted informs him, "... It took me to the moon and back didn't it?"

"Yeah, I suppose... Heavy isn't it?" Tom complains.

"Less gravity up there... Just take your time, and you'll be fine."

Tom examines the thick loose-fitting gloves and tries to move his fingers. A bead of sweat runs down the side of his face.

"This thing comes with air conditioning?" Asked Tom.

"Not unless you want to open the visor and I wouldn't advise it." Ted grins.

Dharma stands back and watches on. Wearing gas masks fitted with large yellow canisters filters that siren danger. Waldo shelters behind her legs unsure what to make of the white-suited creature.

"Okay, let's get this over with... How do we do this?" Tom asked apprehensively, having second thoughts.

"Open that jar... On that bench." Instructs Ted, pointing to a bench set up beside the craft.

"What is it?"

"The key." Informs Ted cryptically

"I don't like the sound of that?"

"Look, if you're afraid, I can get Dharma to suit up..."

"No, no... I'm *fine*." Moving closer to the cloth covered jar. Thinking he had seen it before somewhere.

Gloved fingers fumble to lift the cloth, to reveal the Grey limb from the workshop. Part of an arm with three claws and thumb. Or so he thought. Becoming nauseous. And overcome in a cold sweat, he fights the urge to retch. Mist forms on the inside of the gold visor from heated breath. Taking a moment for it to clear.

"You okay?" Asked Ted, wondering what was taking so long, hearing heavy breathing and gasping through the headset.

"Yeah. Yeah. Just give me a moment." Holding up a hand to him.

"Use the tongs there... To get it out." Ted instructs.

"You're kidding me."

"Not today, no."

A clumsy gloved hand squeezes the long metal tongs, open and close. Looking much like the claw he was about to remove from the jar. Cautiously he submerses it into the jar. Struggling to get hold of the limb. The end shredded as though it had been torn from the creature.

"Steady now... Don't drop it." Ted warns.

The tong latches hold of the fragile limb and he lifts slowly it through the opening.

"Good. Good. Keep it coming... Okay? Place it on the bench... Gently now you hear."

Looking like an over-dressed lab technician handing a delicate artifact, Tom lays the alien limb on the cloth.

“Okay. Part one out of the way.” Ted informs over the intercom.

“What’s next?” Pants Tom, watching the limb dry.

“What’s it look like?”

“Like an alien claw, what do you think it’s supposed to look like?”

“Good... Okay, now pick it up...” Instructs Ted, “...Carefully now.”

“With my hand?”

“Yes, your hand.”

“Oh shit.” Tom curses, reluctant to touch the thing.

“You’re going to be picking up worse than that inside.” Ted reminds him.

Reaching for the fragile limb, numb thick fingers take hold. The limb felt light and fragile.

“Okay, I have it now what?”

“Take it over to the hull... See that node sticking out.”

“Yeah.”

“Place the claw on that, palm first...” Ted instructs, “... And stand back.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

Tom gently presses the claw against the node. Suddenly a hiss of compressed gases escapes from the opening that appears in the side of the hull. Startled, Tom stumbles backward. Tripping over his own feet. Sending the limb flying. Waldo chases after the thrown stick only to whimper at the foul smell and hurries to stand behind Dharma.

Tom rolls himself away in time as ramp slowly descends and settles heavily to the barn floor. Making an indentation in the surface. The edge of the ramp just inches from Tom’s boots.

“Told you stand back didn’t I?” Said Ted.

Rolling himself over, Tom struggles to get to his feet. And looks curiously into the cavity of the craft. Expecting to see darkness, only to discover a brightly lit interior of colored lights.

“What does it look like?” Asked Ted curiously.

“Alive.” Exclaimed Tom lost for words.

“What? What’s alive?”

“The controls... They all... Alive.”

With heavy steps, Tom makes his way up the ramp. Stopping then starting. Stopping then starting. Expecting something to jump out at him. Stopping at the top to discover the floor littered with the decapitated remains of several aliens. At varying stages of decomposition. Overwhelmed by the nauseating discovery he retches violently. Spraying the remnants of last night’s drinks and that morning’s breakfast within the suit.

“That’s okay son... We’ve all been there.” Ted comforts him.

The smell of vomit and puke riled Tom to retch again. Desperately wanting to open the visor, knowing if he did he could well catch something worse than death.

“How many?” Asked Ted.

“Three... Maybe four.” Trying to count the severed heads.

“That sounds about right...” Recollects Ted, “... Take your time son. I’m going to make a cup of tea.”

“What do I do?” Seeking direction.

“Start clearing out those bodies... Don’t miss anything... There’s a pit around the back of the barn. Throw them in there.”

“Thanks...” Remarks Tom watching Ted and Dharma. Turning to look at the interior again, “...Shit.” Wondering where to begin.

Mutilated body parts laid scattered about the floor. The stench inside the spacesuit would have challenged the stench outside of it. Knelling down to pick up a severed head. Its large black eyes staring at him. Then one blinked. Startled, Tom drops the head to the floor and it bounces once and tumbled under a consol.

“What the fuck?” He exclaims startled.

“What was that all about?” Asked Ted from the kitchen on the intercom.

“One just blinked at me,” Tom exclaimed.

“Probably picked the static from the suit. Reflex nerves.” Informs Ted.

Tom reaches under the console for the head that had winked at him. Rolling it like a dented drum towards him. Grabbing it again with both hands, he holds it out like a baby in need of a diaper change. And smelling as bad. He carries it down the ramp and to a deep pit outside.

Releasing it, it drops it and waits for the thud at the bottom.

‘Thud.’

One by one, alien body parts are tossed haplessly into the pit. What began as thuds, now squishes. Torsos were the worse. Slippery soft inners oozing from ruptured cavities. Tom restrains himself from retching.

“How we going out there?” Ted asked from the safety of the porch some distance away seeing Tom standing over the pit.

“Fine. You?”

“Dandy? ...” Raising a cup of tea, “...Much more?”

“One more and that’s it.”

“Good... Once that’s done, tip that bag of lime in and shovel some dirt on them. I’ll do the rest later.”

“Then what?”

“You disinfest the inside.”

“With what?”

“Got some spray that should work... Then we’ll spray you down.” Informs Ted.

“Sounds like fun.”

“I’ll leave that to Dharma to decide.” He chuckles.

“Thanks... I’ll_ be_ back_.” Advises Tom.

Another head, another torso, more broken limbs. Going back to check he had not missed anyone.

“Come out, come out where-ever you are.” Tom sings out.

“Boo!” Dharma startles him over the intercom.

“Shit! You scared the hell out of me.”

“What’s it like there Major Tom?” She teases him.

“Totally out of this world... Unreal.” Unable to fathom any of it.

The walls though appearing solid from the outside, appeared like windows from the inside.

“I can see you.” He tells her.

“No, you can’t.” She challenges him.

“Yeah, you’re standing by the door with Waldo at your feet. You have a container... Now Waldo has runoff.” He tells her.

“How’d you know that?” She asked curiously.

“I can see you! ... The walls are like windows, projections of some kind. It’s amazing.”

“Better get those bodies covered before we stink the State out.” She informs him.

“Yeah-right.” Trudging off, relieved that the worse was over.

At the barn opening, Dharma had left a container.

“Gramps said this should do the job.” She instructs him over the intercom from the porch.

“Thanks.” Examining the elongated spraying rod attached to an opaque pressurized container.

Lopsided, Tom lugs the container inside the craft. Stubby gloved fingers fumble to flick a delicate lever. A nozzle erupts mist from the tip of the rod. Spraying a coat of purple disinfectant over the walls before running down to the floor. Not a nook or cranny left un-sanitized.

Dropping the empty container Tom stands back to inspect the interior. Console lights continued to flash unperturbed by the soaking.

“Done.” Tom calls out hoping someone was listening.

“What took you so long?” Ted asked curiously.

“Don’t know, I guess it took longer than I thought...” Dismissing the elapsed time, “...Anyways, it’s done now.”

“Don’t move Tom!” Dharma startles him.

Thinking something had jeopardized his safety. He turns about slowly to see Dharma with the spray wand about to spray every nook and cranny of him.

Afterwards, she examines the oversized purple-stained space suit. Looking more like Barney than an astronaut. The gold visor reflected the late afternoon sun. Detaching the helmet Tom lifts it from his head and breaths the desert air, unaware of the smell of puke.

“Now we just have to clean the inside of the suit.” Remarks Dharma standing back...

Same ole same ole

“Morning Mister Mitchell... How was your weekend?” Inquired Hamish chirpily.

“Interesting Hamish, most interesting. Yours?” Reciprocated Tom.

“Same ole, same ole...” Struggling to recall the weekend at all. It had past so quickly it was Monday again before he knew it.

“You have a nice day now Hamish... I’ll catch you later.”

“Oh, Mister Mitchell...” Calls out at the last moment.

“Yes Hamish?” Turning back.

“Everything okay?”

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s just that you left in such a hurry on Friday...” Looking at the parking lot suggestively.

Confused, Tom thinks and suddenly recalls his rapid departure of squealing wheels.

“Yes, yes, of course... I just realized I was running late to meet that woman...” Reaching for an explanation.

“She’s a keeper that one Mister Mitchell if you don’t mind saying.” Hamish grinned at the news.

“She is, isn’t she?” Responded Tom walking away.

Leaving Hamish’s imagination to run wild.

“Morning boys!” Tom calls out to the three amigos awaiting his arrival.

“Boss... Why you so chirpy? You’re *never* chirpy? ... Did you get lucky with whatever her name is?” Travis spouts out before thinking.

“It’s Serena from Customer Services isn’t it?” Postulates Marshall.

“Her name is Dharma if you must know.” Leaving it there.

Tom throws his satchel on the desk and stairs up at the plans on the drawing board.

“What do you mean, *I’m never chirpy*?” Questioned Tom catching up.

“Where’d you meet her?” Probed Marshall inquisitively.

“Let’s just say our paths crossed. That’s all you virgins need to know... Not you Bok-Choy.”

“I don’t know... Sometimes it feels like it boss.” Bok-Choy replied despondently.

The three technicians begin to chatter like a group of old women gossiping over tea and scones.

“Focus gentleman... And I use that term loosely...” Three heads look up at him, mouths open as though wanting to be feed, “... Where we at?”

“Behind schedule.” Barks Bok-Choy.

“How can we be *behind* schedule? We’ve only just started.” Exclaimed Tom confused.

Looking to the three blank faces for answers.

“That’s what Pierce told us this morning at the seven o’clock briefing... Why were you there?”

Tom had completely forgotten about the meeting. His mobile still out of action and his mind somehow preoccupied with alien body parts and flying saucers.

“Damn... I better go see him... How was he?”

“He was *annoyed*...” Spoke Pierce in the third person, now appearing mysteriously at the doorway from no-where, “... Why don’t you three run along and read up on the project while I talk with Tom here... Off you go now.”

Three white mice scurry from the office, each giving a Tom a worried look. Tom grinned back at them, somehow indifferent to the lecture Pierce was about to deliver. He had been to the mountain, and there was no sermon Pierce could preach that could persuade him otherwise.

“Lloyd...” Tom takes the initiative, “... Take a seat. What can I do for you?”

Awkwardly Pierce sits taken back by Tom’s newfound confidence.

“You ah... Missed the briefing this morning? You have a good reason?”

“Not really, I simply forgot... A lot on my mind what with the *Telos* project and no time to organize a new mobile.”

“Oh, I see... Yes, well if anyone did not need to be there it was probably you... Don’t make a habit of it understood... Keep up appearance, if only as an example to the others.” Trying to stamp his authority on the request.

“Yes Sir... Travis says we’re *behind*?”

“It seems in the rush, Logistics messed up and ordered the wrong part. That’s going to take a few days to get here from Korea.”

“A few days... I see... I’ll keep my team occupied. We’ll make up the time.”

“Good, make sure they do.” Instructs Pierce.

“Don’t you think it’s strange?” Questioned Tom.

“What? What’s strange?”

“The pace at which they want this thing. I mean six months. If we had been given a year and we would still be pushed. What’s with the rush?”

“Maybe they’re trying to the jump on the Russians or Chinese... Anyway, they are paying a premium for whatever reason. We have had this discussion, Tom. Just do your job. Understood.”

“Yes Sir.”

“How was your weekend?” Pierce changes the topic.

“Same ole same ole, you know how it is... Pretty quiet. Yours?” Parroting Hamish.

“I was in here all weekend ordering that part... Do you know how many forms there are to clear this through every authority between here and Timbuktu? Oh, that reminds me how’d you get on with that request on Friday, those purchase orders?”

Tom looks down at his desk to now see the thick folder he had passed to Bok-Choy on Friday.

“All done.” Passing the file back to Pierce.

“Knew I could count on you, Tom.”

“Any time Lloyd, that’s what I’m here for.”

Opening the file Pierce examines the contents and narrations.

“Tell the boys they did a good job...” Pierce grins, recognizing Bok-Choy’s handwriting, “... Oh, and order that new mobile from supplies... *Today*, I can’t afford you going AWOL every Monday morning.”

“Yes Sir, sorry Sir, I get onto right away.” Grins Tom watching Pierce leave satisfied.

Tom slumps into his chair and sighs heavily.

“Coffee,” Tom tells himself in need to raise his weary spirit from the dead.

Outside the day was going to be a scorcher. At the center of the quadrangle, a lone Joshua tree stands tall and defiant. Branches a thick bayonet of green leaves, adding color to the otherwise obdurate ugly looking tree. Tom felt like the yucca tree, awkward and alone.

Midday, and a black Lear Jet touches down at a remote airfield on the outskirts of Albuquerque and taxis gracefully into a large hanger where a Cadillac was waiting.

The hatch opens and steps lower to the hangar floor. An engineer looks up from a turbine engine casting like a Meerkats from their burrow.

“It’s those two guys again, you know, from the CIA.” Informs one of the engineers.

“It can’t be? We never saw them leave.” Questioned the other sticking his head up.

“Of course it is them, look... It’s *them*.”

“Oh_ yeah_ ... Reckon they’re NSA... CIA don’t look like that.”

“Maybe...” Concedes the other engineer.

Polished black shoes step towards an equally polished black Cardiac. Where a driver awaits them at an open door. The identical dressed agents take their places in the back seat and doors close. The driver takes his position behind the wheel and the sleek Cadillac drives quietly from the hangar.

The vehicle arrives at the clandestine headquarters. Retracing steps of their comrades, they enter a large room with a table cover with files. Without speaking they go about absorbing data and facts about StarTech employees. Stopping at one that troubled them more than any other...

THOMAS MITCHELL

Heads turn to face the other as if they had the same thought at the same time. Accessing recorded logs of the other Agent’s surveillance, they observe footage of Mitchell going about his house. Eating and acting, human. Logs revealed the tracking movements. GPS co-ordinates show the vehicle stopping on an obscure rural road. Then moments later abruptly turning south to El Paso on the Mexican Texas border.

The vehicle’s transponder still active and moving about.

Heads turn and thoughts exchange between two minds. Large black eyes blink in unison and teeth chatter. Tongues click. It was time to leave. Standing like synchronized performers they retrace their steps back to the lifts and wait. Heads look up at the parting agents who had just arrived.

Returning to the parking lot where a black SUV now awaited them. Punching location coordinates into a device they exit the subterranean hive and retrace the path taken by the missing agents. Being drawn deeper and deeper into the outback until finally they come upon a disused road heading no-where.

Freshly shattered planks of timber littered the sides of the road suggesting violent collision. Proceeding cautiously, they came to where the missing vehicle’s speed had dropped from sixty to zero, instantly. Black tire tracks mark the surface of the road. Scattered pieces of the SUV littered the shoulder.

Agents stop and large black eyes survey the terrain. Suspicious as to what had happened to their colleagues. Wary it would happen to them. Stepping out they examine the scene. Another set of larger tire marks appear at right angles to the road. Intersecting perfectly with those on the road. As though this vehicle had appeared from the desert. Seeing bushes that been crushed and broken. Piecing together the events that had occurred that dramatic evening. Surmising that their

colleagues were no longer of this world. Incapable of empathy, hybrid minds turned to the biplane circling above them like a vulture circling a carcass.

They had overstayed their welcome.

Suspicious of the plane watching them they climbed back into the vehicle. Pale faces turn to communicate. Transmitting thoughts and a series of clicking sounds. Eyes look to the rear mirror. A heavy foot pushes down on the accelerator spinning the rear wheels to spin loudly on the surface. Etching a circle of tire marks and a cloud of white smoke that shrouded the vehicle. Turning the vehicle about and accelerated south towards El Paso.

The plane trails the vehicle directly overhead keeping pace it before turning off unnoticed to return to the ranch.

'Cough-cough-splutter-splutter-cough-splutter-splutter.' The engine falls silent drifting to a halt beside the barn.

Waldo jumps out and races off to chase a startled chicken. Ted pulls himself wearily from the cockpit leaning against the fuselage to regain his breath.

"You okay?" Asked Dharma concerned, "... Have you been taking your tablets?"

"Of course." Ted lies tapping his chest pocket.

Tablets sound a rattle within the plastic bottle.

"That's strange, because that bottle should have run out a week ago... I don't know what to do about you sometimes."

"You sound just like your mother." He reminds her without thinking.

"Good." She said.

"Didn't take them long to find the collision spot." Ted informs her.

"You see them?"

"Yeah, they're headed south... El Paso most likely."

"Carlos be okay?" Inquired Dharma concerned.

"He'll have fine... It will be in a thousand pieces by now. Good luck to them finding it... They'll be chasing shadows all the way to Tijuana. (*Chuckle.*)"...

El Paso Juarez

Like a big black beetle, the SUV sped swiftly south towards El Paso. On a laptop screen a green teardrop pulsed like a heartbeat indicating their current position. A pining red teardrop pulsed some distance away. Indicating the missing vehicle. The closer they became the louder the beep sounded. Passing through Corona, Carrizozo, Tularosa, Alamogordo.

Ahead of them the county of Orogrande. To the east some sixty miles, White Sands. Birthplace to the Atomic Bomb passing unnoticed to the Agents. Their eyes fixed on the horizon ahead of them. The late afternoon sun hung in the blue New Mexico sky, soon to be the Texas sky. Borders meant little to the Agents stampeding the highway of the old frontier.

Fringe settlements peppered their approach to El Paso. Deeper and deeper they drove into thickening suburbs. Scanning houses and driveways as if being watched. Following crumbs emitted by the beacon, they arrive at the Mexican border. The two teardrops all but touching. They were close. An agent opens a glove box, pushing aside a heavy weapon to pull out two passports stamped with authority to trespass at will.

And joined the queue of caravan of vehicles awaiting border inspecting. Vehicles inched forward. The heat an unbearable eighty-two degrees outside. A stifling ninety-one degrees within. Much to the comfort of the Agents. A Border Control Officer taps on the tinted window and it lowers to exhale the heated air over the Officer.

"Afternoon gentleman... The purpose of the visit?" The Officer asked inspecting the stolid gentlemen black.

"*Business.*" A scowling voice informs, handing him two passports, both identical.

No images or names displayed, only identification numbers.

The Officer inspects the portentous passports and examines the driver staring forward as if he was on a mission and was not in the mood for social intercourse. Inspecting the cabin and back seats seeing nothing of concern. Wary to ask questions, and not looking like drug mules he waves them. He was glad to see the back for them. An Alsatian barked at the vehicle as it passed. The window raises slowly and cocoons the Agents from the pestering canine. The stifling heat returns to the compartment.

Crossing the border, they enter another world and negotiate the streets of Juarez. Tracking the flashing red teardrop on a screen. Moving east, then south, and north again. Suddenly it was behind them. Slamming the brakes, the SUV skids to a halt. Hispanic eyes look up at the Americanos that had stepped into their territory. Looking out of place, looking lost.

Agents watch the screen. Zooming down to street detail. Seeing their vehicle marked by a green flashing tear, the red flashing tear moving, unhurried. Turning a corner, it appeared to be heading about the block.

They would wait for it to appear at the intersection ahead and pounce. Anxiously watching the red beacon get nearer.

'*Beep!-Beep!-Beep!-Beep!*' Sirens a speaker as the transponder gets closer.

Eyes shift to the intersection expecting the vehicle to appear at any moment. Suddenly a Lorry thunders through narrowly missing another vehicle that had run the lights. Eyes shift back

to the screen. The red teardrop was still moving towards the intersection. Stopping momentarily, it turns and heads towards them.

Agents look up and see nothing. But a boy on a small bicycle who stops opposite their vehicle and stares at the tinted glass windows. Vaguely making out the two Americanos within. The flashing red and green tears had become one. Heads turn to the boy and his bicycle. Wired to the handlebars a strange-looking device, the transponder from the wrecked SUV.

'Ring!-Ring! Ring!-Ring!' The boy rings a bell repeatedly summoning the attention of those about him.

Raising a hand to wave goodbye to the Agents the boy peddles away to complete another circuit of the block. Laughing childishly at the foolish Americanos. The flashing red tear drop moves away from the flashing green tear drop.

Hispanic juveniles begin to gather behind the SUV. Carrying baseball bats and iron bars. It was time to leave. An agent reaches for a weapon, while the other engages drive and moves cautiously away. Distancing themselves from the encroaching hoodlums now filling the street in the rear mirror.

The sun had lowered itself in the Mexican sky. It would be dark soon. And they made their way back to the border and the four-hour drive back to Albuquerque. The Officer that had talked to them earlier watches as the black SUV returns to US soil. And wonders if he should stop and search the vehicle but decides otherwise. And waves them through. Relieved they were heading away from him. There was something about the men that made him feel uneasy. The Alsatian barked at the vehicle as it passed.

9:09 PM and the SUV pulls into the subterranean parking lot. Agents retrace steps to the boardroom. Where they write up a report of the missing Agents by persons unknown. And submitted it to Barnard. Still at his desk going over paperwork and pouring another glass of gin for dinner. Augmented by ice cubes.

A message alert appears on a screen that springs to life. Eyeing the subject line keenly opens the report. Frowning eyebrows knit together to form an elongated hairy black caterpillar.

"Damn you, Mitchell!" Barnard scours aloud at being outwitted.

Small stubby fingers stab at the desk to type a reply...

'Follow Mitchell like a hawk.

DO NOT let him out of your sight.

I want to know everything he does and with who.

I will deal with Captain Irving personally myself.

UNDERSTOOD?'

'Tap!' Hitting send heavily and hurting the tip of his finger.

"Damn you, Mitchell..." He curses again, "... I know you're up to something."

Deciding not to disturb the Director with the news. Hybrids were *expendable*, as were all who worked under him. To displease the Director would be to displease Sirius. That in turn would warrant a swift and immediate and inhumane death for which one should be thankful.

Living, eating, and sleeping nine stories beneath the ground. Rarely did Barnard ever leave the confines of the building. It had been his home for countless years. But perhaps it was time to venture topside, if only to pay Captain Irving a personal visit.

Tom collapsed onto the couch. A steaming bowl of freshly nuked takeaways on his lap. Television played a Netflix movie as he toyed with his new mobile. Different from his previous model. Fingers fumbled to find familiar icons and apps. Entering numbers and contacts realized he did not have Dharma's number. Ted's obsession with big brother getting into homes, through cables and Wi-Fi. Uploading and downloading information at will. Pondering the conspiracy theory further, Tom looks about the lounge at the electronic equipment. Laptop, stereo, telephone, television. Microwave. Looking at the bowl of leftovers suspiciously.

Then to the laptop with its camera lens. Off, on the outside. The battery within would still supply power. Becoming like Ted. Paranoid that he was being watched. Then noticed the lens on the television looking at him. It never blinked. It never shed a tear. It just stared at him.

In another room, two agents stare back at Tom. Wondering what had caused him to look up at them. Tom goes to the kitchen and rummages through a cluttered drawer to find what he wanted and cuts two small pieces of black electrical tape. Concealing a hand behind his back until the very last moment whereupon places a tab over the television lens.

"Goodnight boys." He wishes the voyeurs.

Agents look to one another as what that had just happened. The image on the television screen had gone black for some unknown reason.

Doing the same with the laptop.

"You're going to have to do better than that."

With a felt pen, proceeds to color the lens on the mobile.

"That should keep you busy."

And resumed his slothful position on the couch. Shoveling the lukewarm meal into his mouth. Chewing slowly as he punched contacts into the mobile. Sucking on a bottle of beer and burps. Finished, leans back to enjoy the movie in *private*.

Agents heard strange burping sounds. Unable to decipher the language being spoken. Frantically fiddling with controls, but nothing would bring the image back. Conceding it must have been a technical fault.

Without speaking, the Agents stood and walked to a bedroom. In almost perfect synchronization removed hats and glasses. Placing these on side tables. Sitting upright on the side of the bed, turned about robotically and lay down perfectly still. Arms by their sides, as though they were cadavers awaiting collection by a mortician.

Large black eyes stare to the ceiling, opaque lids blink sideways as internal neurological processors shut down to be awoken again at a preordained hour...

Fried brains

“*Di_rec_tor_!*” Sirius scowls, suddenly appearing on the holographic screen before the man being summoned.

“Sirius... What a surprise... How can I help?” The Director leans back in his chair distancing himself from the screen that had suddenly come to life.

“*Why_was_n’t_I_in_formed_?*” Sirius snarled.

Small pointed teeth flash behind thin lips. Eyes become larger as Sirius leans from the screen to become a three-dimensional construct before the Director. Their faces but inches apart. The hologram as fearful as if it were in the flesh.

“Informed of what Sirius?” Cowered the Director.

“*Do_not_play_with_me_Di_rec_tor_... The_Hy_brids... Why_was_I_not_in_formed_of_their_dis_ap_pear_rance_?!*”

“But Sirius... I only found out recently myself... I wanted to confirm they were missing... Barnard is looking into it.”

“*Bar_nard_... That_fool_!*” Sirius hisses disdain for the man.

“What have you heard?” The Director probed.

“*That_they_have_van_ished_from_the_face_of_the_Earth_!*”

“Well, that is possible...” The Director speculates, before regretting his words.

Sirius is troubled by the Director’s complacency. Translucent eyelids closed across large black eyes to form two vertical black pupils. His mind centered on the Director. Sending a telepathic message into the Director’s mind.

The Director reaches hands to his head, unable to control the disturbing images raging through his mind. Of a time long ago in the past. Pyramids stood in the background. Of slaves being devoured by alien creatures. Their bodies torn apart and discarded like rag dolls. Eyes rolled in his sockets and Sirius releases him as if he were a cat playing with a wounded mouse.

“*That_is_just_a_glimpse_of_what_I_have_done_and_what_I_can_do_if_you_ev_er_fa_il_me_Di_rec_tor_.*” Sirius warns, shoving him back into his chair.

Death stared the Director in the eyes, smelling the fear sweating from his pores.

“*You_dis_ap_point_me_Di_rec_tor_. Do_not_dis_ap_point_me_a_gain_!*” Threatens Sirius.

The holographic image sparkles momentarily and vanishes into thin air, taking Sirius with it.

Gasping for breath, the Director pants heavily as sensations returned to his fat oversized paralyzed body. His mind racing with thoughts of Barnard’s comments of the General and his son, Captain Irving. Of Mitchell and the two missing Agents. He would get to the root of it.

Dialing Barnard’s extension waits impatiently for it to be answered.

“*Bar_nard_! My_office_now_!*” The Director hollers down the down sounding like Sirius before slamming down the receiver.

From a bottom drawer, pulls from it a bottle of whiskey and pours himself a stiff drink. Swallowing hard, before taking another mouthful. His heart still racing in his chest. Inhaling deeply to calm himself, only to be agitated yet again by Barnard now appearing at the door.

“You wanted to see me, Director?” As if it were a passing visit.

"Come in you fool! ... Sit! Sit!" The Director commands him as if him.

"Is something the matter Director? ... You look like..." Barnard stutters searching for the word.

"*Death?*" The Director fills in the blanks for him.

"Well... Ah..." Not wanting to vocalize the word.

"That's because Sirius damn near fried my brains! ... Thanks to you!" Curses the Director looking for revenge.

"Me Director? ..." Barnard wonders how it could be his fault, "... But Director I promise I've done nothing."

"Exactly... It seems Sirius received a report about *your* missing Agents. Likely from Control. And he's furious! Why wasn't I informed of the outcome of that investigation?"

"You told me not to disturb you with *problems* that arose... I specifically recall..." Barnard begins but is cut short.

"I don't care what I said... I want every piece of information about this Mitchell and Irving on my desk by noon today! ... Understood?"

"Yes, Director."

"I don't want any more surprises, do you hear me?" Warns the Director.

"Yes, Director. No Director." Barnard whimpers.

"What are you doing about this... Captain Irving? I don't like his connection in all this. He's up to something."

"And Mitchell?"

"Leave the poor boy alone... He's in love for God's sake man... Not that you know anything about *love*." The Director belittles him.

"Of course, Director."

"And Captain Irving? Hm?!" Pressing him again for an answer.

"I was planning a visit... Have a quiet *chat* with him... In-person." Advises Barnard.

"Yes, yes. Very good. Very good. You can leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow... But Director... I was thinking we should wait..."

"Wait? Wait?! I nearly had my brains fried because you *waited*! ... You leave tomorrow and that's an order!"

"Yes, Director. Thank you, Director."

"Stop groveling you imbecile and get out before I melt *your* brains." The Director threatens.

Barnard hurries from the office fearing for his life. The Director pulls the bottle from the drawer and pours himself another drink. Swallowing a mouthful without allowing it to touch the sides as it sank to his stomach. And exhaled the vapors and demons along with them.

The Red Sparrow circles on high, riding the air currents, wary of black predators below. Waldo leans from the cockpit his mouth open. His long pink tongue flapping in the rushing air. Ted takes the biplane lower, inspecting the now covered hole of the saucer. The whereabouts of the two agents known only to Grimace. Flying above the disused road sees the telltale tire marks of the fatal collision

Banking to turn, he follows the road, coming in low as if he were driving it. And follows it to the old barn and lands. Taxiing to the rear of the barn. Killing the throttle, the engine coughs, and splutters. Starved of fuel and falls silent. Waldo jumps out onto the wing and runs off sniffing for fresh scents. Ted climbs from the cockpit. Patting the old plane as if it were a faithful friend that had served him well. Their days together were numbered.

From his back pocket pulls an old notebook. And inspects the tired pages, smudged with time. Pages marked with circles and arrows and notations. Scribbles, and sketches. Made by his father over sixty years earlier. Before handing it onto him on his death bed. Instructing him to keep it safe, away from *them*.

A dull red fuel barrel served as a tombstone for the buried body parts. Unmoved since his last visit. Waldo sniffs the barrel and cocks a leg to mark his territory.

“That a boy.” Ted encourages him and steps into the barn.

Inside the barn, the air was still, and quiet. Dust particles danced like angels in the air. Captured by sunlight seeping between the weatherboards. To one side sat a large saucer. Supported by heavy wooden locks straining under its weight. Ted takes in the forbidden fruit. Of which he was about to take a bite. Perhaps it was divine intervention. Whatever it was, his prayers had been answered.

At eighty-eight his time on earth was all but over, more so with cancer eating away at him. That was the least of his worries. Mankind was on the brink of extinction. And those that survived would be destined for slavery.

Ted stared at the ominous hull as if it were his salvation.

A covered jar sits on a bench. Tongs lift the limb from the jar and Waldo sniffs it and backs away warily. Placing the claw against the node on the side of the hull. The ramp descends to the barn floor. Waldo scampers inside unafraid. Sniffing nooks and crannies but detects nothing foul.

“Good boy,” Ted tells him.

Cautiously the old man steps up the ramp, peering further into the interior. Lights flash in sequence. Walls appeared like windows. Just as Tom had described. A central column projected from the floor.

Flipping pages of the tired red notebook, Ted tries to identify the column amongst the sketches. Coming to a page with a sketch not too dissimilar to what he was looking at. An arrow pointing to it stating,

NUCLEAR POWER SOURCE

Ted stands back but quickly realizes the foolishness. His mind ticked over with possibilities. Seeing mysterious indentations on the consoles. In the shape of the claws and places his own hands upon them. Splaying his fingers to fit. Without warning, a tingle travel up his arms and spine to the base of his brain. The craft begins to hum and lift from its supports. The door begins to close behind him. Quickly he removes his hand and the craft descends again.

“I guess we know where the starter is Waldo.” He informs the dog watching on curiously.

Examining the notebook’s scribbled notations. Absorbed by the operation of the craft. Turning and pitching and yawning much like a plane, by subtle hand movements. In time he would become familiar with the craft as he had the workings of an Apollo command module.

Keen sharp eyes dart about the interior. Age had not wearied them.

Waldo barks as if to gain his attention. Stepping outside to investigate, the old man finds the day had dimmed as though a heavy cloud had covered the sun. Checking his watch to discovers he had spent a couple of hours inside the craft. But on the outside time had accelerated and the sun was hanging on the horizon.

“Not possible.” He looks back at the temporal time machine realizing now that time slowed down within the craft.

What had felt like a five-minute journey to his father, had in fact taken much longer.

“Come on boy, we better get going before Dharma comes looking for us.” He instructs the dog.

Placing his hand on the node to confirm a suspicion he had with the indentations. The door closes.

Climbing back into the cockpit Ted fires up the engine and taxis about to make an accelerated run down the driveway. And like the Red Barron of yesteryear, the biplane took flight...

Barnard goes top side

Barnard dithered for days hoping to delay the inevitable. Shuffling papers from one side of his desk. Then back to the other.

'Ring-ring.' The phone rings, *'Ring-ring...'*

Fearful as to who could be on the other end. Damned if he answered it. And damned if he did not.

'Ring-ring...' The phone iterates, *'Ring-ring...'*

What if it was the Director? He was not supposed to be here. What to do? And let it ring again.

'Ring-ring...' The phone re-iterates, *'Ring-ring.'*

Then the phone suddenly fell silent. As if they realized Barnard was not there and given up.

He could not postpone the journey any longer. Reaches for the handset dials a number and waits for it to be answered.

"Ah... Barnard here..." He begins, but is cut short by the clerk, "... Bar_nard_..." Repeating his name slowly, "... Don't make me have to spell it... (*Shit!*)..." He curses, "... B...a....r...n...a...r...d... That's right you imbecile, Barnard_! ... I need a flight to Albuquerque this afternoon... That's right. This afternoon... Is that going to be a problem? ... Excuse me? ... Do you know who you are speaking to?!" He warns the clerk, only to have his name repeated back at him.

Frustrated, he wondered how the Hybrids ever got about as readily as they did. That then gave him an idea.

"You know what... I've changed my mind. I think I'll catch a cab..." And slams the handset down. "...*Idiot.*"

Dialing another extension summons two Agents to his office. Moments later two Hybrids suited in black appear at his door.

"Come in. Come in. Don't sit. We won't have time for niceties today gentlemen... You are coming to Albuquerque with me, this afternoon... Make it happen... Off you go now. I'll meet you in the parking lot at 1:00 PM... There still is a parking lot?"

Heads nod to confirm there was, baffled why he should ask.

"Good then, off you go now." Dismissing the Agents.

Relieved to have accomplished something for the day, thought he would extend his luck and look in on Isaac and the Greys. Poking his head out into the corridor like a turtle from its shell hoping no one was about, before scurrying along walls like a little fat lab rat about a maze in search of a piece of cheese.

Coming to the plain door, tilts his head to listen to the strange muffled noises sounding from within. Voices, Isaac was not alone.

"Hmm." Groans Barnard on hearing the unusual quorum of human voices.

'Tap-Tap-Tap.' He taps lightly and waits for the door to be answered.

The voices fall silent. But the door remains closed.

'Knock-knock-knock.' Now knocking harder.

'Barnard...' Isaac's voice sounds as if speaking to someone, "... *Watch this.*"

Barnard thinks he hears his name being spoken. The door remains closed and silence rains from the other side. Reaching for the metal handle only to receive a startling electric shock.

Barnard flinches back shaking his hand.

Laughter erupts behind the door. Clicking and chattering mimicking laughter from the Greys amused by the human sense of humor.

'Bang!-Bang!-Bang!' Barnard thumps the door with his other hand.

"Go away Barnard! We're busy here!" Shouts out Isaac, indifferent to his presence.

"Open up Isaac, that's an order!" He threatens.

Keys rattle behind the door and he waits for the door to open. Isaac pokes his head into the opening as if the boogeyman had come to visit. His foot wedged at the base to prevent it from opening further.

"What do you want Barnard?"

"A report would be nice... I have not seen one for a month now... I have the Director up my arse and Sirius up his..." Then he realized what he had said.

"I don't care what you guys get up to behind closed doors so as you respect what happens behind this one... There some heavy shit going in here Barnard... You don't want to rush this thing, do you? ... And explain to the Director why it failed because *you* were in a *hurry*, would you? ... Listen, my boys here have it all under control. It will be ready when its ready... As you can see, we are very busy here."

A female chuckle sounds from behind the door.

"Who else is in there? They're not permitted to be in there." Protests Barnard.

"I'll decide who needs to be in here." Informs Isaac.

"What's that funny smell?" Nostrils twitch and flare at the pungent odor.

"Welding fumes... Eh boys? ... (*Giggling*)."

"I'm going topside for a week. *Business*... I want a progress report on my desk when I get back. Understood?"

"I promise..." Isaac lied keeping a straight face as long as he could, "... You, *do know*, these guys report to Sirius directly?"

"Maybe so, but I still need to report to the Director... Or perhaps you would like him to visit you?"

"No-no-no-no-no-no..." Isaac stutters not wishing to ever meet the Director, "... You'll have your damn report... Now piss off." Slamming the door in Barnard's face before he had time to respond.

Frustrated, Barnard inadvertently reaches for the metal handle only to receive another electric shock.

"Isaac, after this you are through! You hear me?" Barnard shouts at the deaf door.

Laughter and giggling sound from behind the closed door.

1:00PM Barnard clings to the side of the wall of the elevator as it ascended to the surface. The door opens and strange people enter clinging to folders and clipboards. Suspicious eyes shift to the stocky individual cowering in the corner.

Finally, to Barnard's relief the elevator door opens at the parking lot.

"Excuse me... Excuse me." Extending an arm out as though to part the sea of people. Leaping from the lift just as the doors were about to close behind him. Two Agents stand either side of a large black SUV awaiting him. Barnard hurries to escape contamination. Short legs

striding as quickly as they could to the SUV and climbs on to the back seat closing the door behind him.

“Thank you, boys.” Barnard acknowledges, relieved to be cocooned from the outside world.

The SUV eases its way from the building. Spiraling up ramps into the light of day. He had almost forgotten what it had looked like. Trees and clouds and sun. People moved about freely. Children ran about laughing. A dog being taken for a walk. Birds in the sky. It was all coming back to him again.

Melancholy memories surface, from a time before the Agency had recruited him. And buried him nine stories underground. There had been a woman once, but he had forfeited her for sanctuary. His former life expunged, as though it had never existed. And wondered what had become of the woman. Married with children he supposed. Happy. Something he could never have provided.

The SUV hits a pothole jolting Barnard in the back seat. Jolting him back to the interior of the Black Maria that was carrying him to a private airstrip on the fringe of Washington Airport. Strange buildings lined the streets. He had almost forgotten what buildings looked like. Watching grand monuments to historical figures and statesmen pass outside the window. Those that had served the Great Nation. For what? Their good deeds nullified by a covenant between Roosevelt and Zeta Greys? The penalty for breaching, would be apocalyptic.

Humans were but minnows, sprats in the galactic scene of things. To be squashed by an advanced species that had existed eons before humans had ever climbed down from the trees. Those fortunate to survive would be placed on slave reservations for the Zeta colony. And when the Earth had become inhabitable, and the humans long since extinct, they would move on to another fledgling star system. To survive. In an act of self-preservation.

There was nothing Barnard could do to stop the advancing Greys if he wanted to. His only choice was to *cooperate*. Lest he too be eliminated in the Grey’s grand scheme. Barnard turned his sight away from the world passing outside, as though it had already ceased to exist. And opened a dossier on Captain Edward Irving and his father. Reading how Irving’s father had been the first human to have contact with Sirius.

The Apollo missions only confirmed the base’s existence. Photographs revealed a colossal structure. Craft moving about, like busy bees about a hive. Alien eyes looked up at the tiny tin command module passing over them. Unarmed and defenseless. Astronauts impotent to do anything. Those that did speak of the base were soon silenced. And taking their secret to the grave.

Caught in a daydream, Barnard was unaware that he had arrived at the airport. The SUV pulls into a hanger and comes to a halt some distance from an elegant Black Lear Jet. A door opens and Barnard steps out.

A red carpet leads from the SUV to the plane. A pilot stands to one side of the steps to greet the official from the Pentagon. Maintaining a pleasant smile nodded to Barnard as he boarded. Unsure what to make of the stocky man’s position. The two henchmen that followed him needed no introduction and took their seats behind Barnard.

“Would you like a drink Sir?” A male attendant asked.

“Most certainly... A gin if I may? Ice.”

“Certainly Sir. Thank you, Sir. One moment Sir.” The attendant bows subtly and leaves.

Moments later to return with a crystal tumbler. A single large cube of ice rattles against the sides. About it a large solution of gin. Barnard purges his lips and tastes the elixir of life. Inhaling deeply, smelling the bouquet of fragrances evaporating from the glass.

“Perhaps I should get out more often.” He told himself.

The two agents sat quietly, their thirsts going unquenched. Their eyes focused on the seat rests ahead of them. Sitting upright and motionless. Stiff like corpses.

Three hours and four gins later, wheels touch down at the Albuquerque private strip. The plane taxied gracefully into a large hangar to an awaiting sleek black Cadillac. Two engineers peer up from an turbine housing to see a stocky individual in a black suit. Followed by two much taller identically dressed gentlemen they immediately recognized.

“Ghee those guys get about. They must be flying out of another strip.” Comments an engineer.

“Didn’t think we had one.” Comments another.

“Who’s the little guy?”

“*IRS*... Got it written all over him.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it.” The engineer concurs lowering himself back into the housing, “... Hand me that wrench will you Bob.”

A sleek black Cadillac arrives at the subterranean parking lot. And Barnard enters a lift that descends countless floors. Reminding him of the Pentagon. Lights flash one by one on a console of buttons. And lift doors open to a bright environment. Hybrids look up to see Barnard among them. Suspicious of his presence. Subservient, nonetheless.

Agents lead him to the board room with the long table laid out with personal files. Images of General Arnold Irving, Captain Edward Irving, and Thomas Mitchell line the walls secured by color thumb tacks. Despite the Director’s romantic notion that there was love in the air, Barnard thought otherwise.

“Where there’s smoke there’s fire.” He informs the Hybrids.

Noses twitch as if trying to detect smoke, before dismissing his human failings.

“Gentlemen... Tomorrow we will be visiting our good friend Captain Edward Irving. Read up on him thoroughly. Then we search for his property. Understood?”

Agents shuffled feet, chatting anxiously with worried looks at each other. Barnard senses the fear in the Agent’s demeanor.

“Don’t worry about the granddaughter... I have a search warrant.” Pulling an envelope from his pocket.

The Agents had heard stories about the sharpshooting woman. The piece of paper would not make them bullet proof from a bullet meant for Barnard...

What's your rank?

A black SUV speeds down the narrow country road, stirring up dust in its wake as it hurried to the old Foster Ranch. The Red Sparrow follows the black vehicle from above. Swooping down like a hawk on its prey to intimidate the occupants. Barnard finches with successive dive bombs. Wondering who the pesky culprit was. He would deal with them afterward. But first, he would deal with Captain Edward Irving.

Turning into the road leading to the homestead, Ted rushes ahead and buzzes the homestead to warn Dharma of the uninvited visitors heading her way. Landing just as the SUV entered the driveway, Ted taxis the plane behind the barn. Dharma stands on the porch, a Winchester aimed at the vehicle. This is the closest *they* had ever stepped on the property.

'Click-Clunk.' She cocks the rifle ready for a fight.

Waldo jumps out of the cockpit and runs yapping at the approaching vehicle. Only to be whistled back by the old man. The black SUV skids to a halt and a trailing cloud of dust catches up and engulfs the vehicle. Passing over the vehicle before fading away with the breeze. Agents were reluctant to step from the vehicle.

Barnard examines the relic homestead. Taking a handkerchief from a pocket faces it about his mouth and prepares to step outside. Already sweating from the heat of the vehicle. Stepping from the vehicle raises the handkerchief in the air, as though say not to shoot.

'Boom!' Dharma fires a shoot at Barnard's feet, suggesting he should stay where he was.

"Your trespassing Mister. Suggest you get going while you still can." She warns him cocking the rifle again.

'Click-clunk.'

"I've come to speak with Captain Edward Irving... Is he about?" Eyes turn to the elderly gentleman appearing from the barn.

"Speaking... What you want?" Ted informs Barnard eyeing the short stocky man suspiciously. More so the two goons seated in the front seat of the SUV barely visible behind the tinted windscreen.

"Just a friendly chat... That's all." Barnard lowers a hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"Keep your goons in the vehicle and I might oblige." Instructs the old man.

"They've been told to stay where they are for now." Responds Barnard.

Ted gestures for Dharma to lower the weapon.

"Let me introduce myself... Barnard... I'm from the Pentagon." Barnard offers a fake smile hoping to pacify the old man.

"You're a long way from home Mister *Barnard*... How can I help you?" Questions Ted.

"Is there someplace *cooler* we could talk? ... I'm afraid this heat is intolerable for my complexion if you know what I mean." Wiping growing sweat from his neck, and balding head.

"This way... Dharma, why don't you fetch some iced tea here for Mister Barnard and me?"

"You be okay?" She asked anxiously

"I'll be fine... I can always set Waldo onto him." Suggested her grandfather.

Barnard looks about for the threatening beast named *Waldo*, only to see a black and white Terrier lifting a leg to one of the SUV's tires.

“Take a seat... How can I help?” Indicating a wooden chair on the shaded porch.

Barnard sits and fans himself with an envelope in his hand.

“Apologies for my sudden appearance... But your name came up regarding an investigation.” Advises Barnard.

“Oh, is that right? And what investigation might that be?” Ted fixes his eyes firmly on the vehicle and the two occupants. The rifle within reach should there be any sudden movement.

“It appears two of our agents have gone missing.” Barnard informed.

“Oh, that’s a bit clumsy of you... Can you describe them? Maybe I’ve seen them about.”

“Very funny... *Touché* Captain Irving.” Barnard chuckles at the pun.

“How does that involve me?” Asked Ted.

“They were last traced to a disused road, some thirty miles from here, on *your* property.”

“Perhaps they’re still there, have you looked?”

“We have and it appears they are not...” Laments Barnard.

“And their vehicle? I assume they didn’t walk out there?” Ted plays along.

“South of El Paso it seems... What there is left of it.” Advised Barnard, breaking it down.

“What are you doing here then? ... Shouldn’t you be down *there* looking for them?”

“Alas, our jurisdiction extends only as far as the border... And if it did, I would not be surprised to find anything. Now would I?” Probed Barnard.

“I wouldn’t know anything about that seeing how I’ve been here the whole time. Me and my granddaughter... You can ask the dog.” Jokes Ted.

Barnard looks to the dog, about to lift a leg to another tire. Perhaps he would question the dog later.

“Why you so worried about them? ... There’s plenty more of *their lot* where they come from... Isn’t that right Mister Barnard?” Ted taunts him.

“True...” Barnard confesses, “... You were involved with the Apollo mission, were you not?”

“You telling me, or you asking me?”

“Both.”

“That’s classified... Take it up the top brass.” Warns Ted feeling the conversation had gone cold.

“I *am* the top brass Captain Irving... There is only one person higher than me...”

“*The Director*... Yes, I know...” Ted wants to spit on the porch at the mention of the name, fearful it would contain blood, “... My father, God rest his soul, gave his life to your lot and you gave him an early grave for his troubles.” Ted’s patience was wearing thin.

“Now Captain, I haven’t come here to quarrel... We can talk about this like gentlemen, Officer to Officer if you like...” Barnard begins to embellish his position.

“What’s your rank buck-weed?” Smelling a civilian a mile away.

“Well... I... Ah... I’m... Actually...” Barnard splutters awkwardly reaching for words that never came.

“Top brass my ass... They send a desk-jock to do a man’s errand... What’s your business doing here Barnard?” Ted’s voice becomes louder only to fall silent as Dharma appears at the doorway carrying a tray of iced tea and ANZAC biscuits. Laying the tray between the two men before stepping back.

“We’d like to search for the property.” Barnard gets to the purpose of his visit.

“Fuck off.” Ted abruptly tells him.

“This states that I can.” Barnard stops fanning him and hands Irving the envelope.

Tearing it open, Ted's eyes have trouble reading the print.
"Dharma..." Handing the letter to her, "... What's it say?"

"Yeah, as he said... It's a search warrant alright... But it doesn't say I can't follow them while they're doing it... And nothing about shooting pests." She grins looking at the Hybrids, her finger on the trigger.

"Well then, finish your tea before it gets warm and knock yourself out..." Splaying his hands to gesture his property, "... I've got nothing to hide."

"Thank you, Captain, I was hoping there wouldn't be a problem."

"Just one thing though Mister Barnard."

"What's that Captain Irving?"

"You put everything back as it found it, understood? ... I won't have your goons trashing the place... Otherwise Dharma here might take offense and go shooting them... How would that look if the police came and found those *creatures*... On *my* property... Oozing green blood? ... *Hm?* ..." Asked Ted

The Hybrids hearing to every word the old man was saying.

"...Can you imagine the questions and paperwork involved? ... Not to mention the field day the Press would have? The photographs... Do you? ... *Hm?*"

"Yes, yes... I hear you loud and clear... I will inform my men."

"Men? ... Don't insult my intelligence Barnard..." Ted grumbled, "... You and I both know what they are... Now finish your damn tea. Do what you have to do... Then get the *fuck* off my property.... You have one hour." The old man warns Barnard.

"Very well then." Gulping down a mouthful the tea, a rattling the porcelain cup on the saucer.

"I'll be up here if you have any questions now, you hear." Leaning back in the wooden armchair to savor the iced tea in the shade of the porch.

Barnard informs to the Agents to go about their search with specific instructions to leave everything as they found it.

Dharma watched as the two Agents went about their search. Agents look to the acres of dead corn stubble wondering where to begin.

"Knock yourself out boys, you won't find them in there." Suggesting they would be wasting their time.

Stepping back from the field they begin to inspecting the biplane. A crude flying machine using fossil fuel. Held together by nuts and bolts and duct tape.

"No touching boys... Gramps finds out, I will be the least of your worries." She warns them.

An Agent climbs to a loft only to find straw bales. Looking down at the other Agent standing beside the green-yellow tractor on a mat. Dharma looks to her Grandfather, who looks to a cupboard. And goes to stand in front of it as though to prevent the agents from entering. Suspiciously drawing Barnard's attention to her.

"Step aside young lady." Barnard orders.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you." Warns Dharma.

"Why would that be? Got something to hide have we?" Barnard asked wrenching the door suddenly open.

Only to discover a feral cat suckling kittens on the teat. The cat hisses at Barnard. Hybrids back away from the alien predator. Barnard cautiously steps away.

"That's okay mother cat, the bad man is gone now." Dharma closes the door quietly on the mother-cat, "...Told you not to go in there."

Barnard looks about the barn. The smell alone suggested it was empty. Covering his mouth with the handkerchief surrendered that he had been outwitted. Somehow. And turned to look at the old man grinning from the porch. He still had one last place to search. About to climb the steps, Ted raises his arms to prevent the Hybrids from entering.

"You... Not them." Ted instructs Barnard.

"But..." Barnard goes to protest.

"I'll be danged if those filthy-degenerate-inbreeds step one foot inside this house... You hear me?" Ted challenges.

Dharma stands to one side ready to shoot. Hesitantly, Barnard backs down. Instructing the Hybrids to go back to the vehicle and wait.

"The house is fine... If they were in there, we would have smelt them by now." Said Barnard, giving up on his chances of finding the Agents.

"You got that right... Now if that's all?"

"Oh, one last question Captain Irving before I go."

"Speak."

"Thomas Mitchell." Spoke Barnard.

"What of him?"

"He's been seen coming and going from here?"

"He's been *courting* my granddaughter... If you *know* what I mean. Now if that is all Barnard, I suggest you leave and have a nice day." Directs Ted.

"You too Captain Irving... Until we meet again." Grins Barnard at being outwitted. This time.

"I very much doubt that Barnard, now bugger off! ... Your business here is done. You have got to the count of ten to leave... Dharma here hasn't been too good on counting lately have you, dear?"

"No Gramps. Why don't I practice some? ... Two... Four..." She begins to count.

The realization of the moment sinks in and Barnard hurries back to the SUV as quickly as squat legs could carry him. Diving on to the back seat as wheels began to spin on the earth. Spitting up a furious cloud of dust. The SUV reverses wildly back down the driveway. Its engine whining incessantly as it frantically distanced itself from the women with the gun.

"...Six... Eight..." Dharma waits a moment longer for them to reach the mailbox, "...Ten."

'*Boom! Click-Clunk-Boom! Click-Clunk-Boom!*' Grouping three rapid shots on the windscreen.

Wheels squeal on the tarmac of the road and the marred black SUV races away out of range.

"That's the last we'll see of them for a while." Informs Ted, hearing the accelerating engine fade into the distance.

"What about Tom?" Asked Dharma.

"They'd wouldn't be asking us if they knew anything." Deduced Ted.

"And the saucer?"

"They have no idea... They wouldn't come be looking for the goons if they knew about the saucer..." The old man looks to the distant horizon, "... They would be the least of their troubles."

"What you did mean by *courting*?" Dharma looked suspiciously at her grandfather.

Her grandfather shook his head and chuckled to himself. He may be old, but he was not stupid. And he certainly was not deaf. He knew love when he heard it...

Stage One

Barnard cowers in the back seat. Waiting to distance himself from the flying bullets and that woman. Feeling it was safe, raises his head above the window ledge. Small beady eyes squint into the distance behind him. Seeing no danger, he sits upright as though nothing was amiss.

“That went well gentlemen. Captain Irving certainly knows what happened to the Agents... He may not have said as much, but he certainly behaved as such.” He informed the Agents.

Like a tumbleweed being blown in a gale, the SUV sped away, leaving the Ranch in its wake. On the horizon ahead of them, buildings towered upwards, as though raising out of the floor of the desert. Albuquerque, *Duke City*. Segmented by Route 66 that transited east to west and the Rio Grande flowing north to south. Home to peaceful American Indians, who watched as processions of conquerors marched over their lands. First the conquering Spaniards. Then by the sprawling Wild West, of renegade Outlaws and bloody Civil Wars. A land of perpetual conquests. And in the end, only the Indians remained. Unmoved. As they had since the dawn of time.

Waiting for the great silver eagle to return.

Barnard could feel almost Sirius’ presence in the vehicle. Squirming in his seat, he pondered Sirius’ connection to the Agents. Black sunglasses look at him in the rear mirror as though trying to read his mind.

“StarTech.” Barnard instructs the driver.

He would pay Stowers and Mitchell a surprise visit. Barnard grins to himself. Captain Irving may have gotten the better of him, but Mitchell would be putty in his hands. The city towered above the SUV. Casting dark shadows over the already black vehicle. People look up to watch the official-looking vehicle passing. Its windscreen marred with three white scuff marks.

Stopping at the entrance, Barnard climbs out and enters the sepia colored glass building. Hamish sees a strange-looking gentleman appearing lost and confused. Unsure what to make of the gentleman.

“Can I help you, sir?” Hamish inquires inspecting the stocky gentleman wiping his forehead of sweat.

“I’m here to see a Mister Stowers if you please.” Informs Barnard.

“Is he expecting you?” Hamish inquired.

“No... I thought to pay him a *surprise visit*.” Smiles Barnard as though the fake smile would open doors.

“Oh, I see... And who may I say is visiting?”

“Tell him Mister Barnard...” Pausing momentarily before and flashing his credentials, “... From the *Pentagon*, if you may be so kind.” Snapping the wallet closed like a mouse trap and pocketing it again.

Hamish flinches backwards.

“Ah, yes... I see, of course...” Hamish stuttered reaching for an R.T. on his shoulder, “... One moment please Mister... Barnard.” Recalling his name at the last moment.

Barnard steps away and takes in the marbled foyer. Floor to ceiling tinted windows filtered light to the vast foyer.

“Excuse Mister Barnard... Sir?” Trying to catch Barnard’s attention.

“Hmm?” Barnard responds.

“Someone will be out shortly, please, have a seat... They won’t be a moment.” Hamish suggested.

“I’ll stand... It’s been a grueling day.” Remarked Barnard.

“As you wish Sir.” Said Hamish resuming a position standing staunch and upright. Looking every part, a security guard.

Moments became minutes. And Barnard looks at his watch as to what could be keeping whoever was being sent for him. He considered himself an important man and should not be kept waiting. Or so he believed. Just then a man in a suit and tie approach the gates.

“Mister Barnard?” The man waves a security card over a sensor, and sturdy polished metal rods part to allow him through.

“Yes.” Barnard eyes the approaching gentleman with caution.

Intimidatingly taller than himself making him feel... *Inadequate*.

“Peirce... Lloyd Pierce.” Extending his hand.

Barnard extends his hand reluctantly. Pierce encounters a limp pathetic handshake as though it were diseased and releases it as quickly fearful of catching something. Mirroring Barnard’s own thoughts.

“This way... Put this on so we know you are a visitor...” Handing him an identification tag to wear about his neck, “... Hamish here has orders to shoot on sight.” Jests Pierce.

Hamish looks at Pierce. It was news to him.

“Not much further... Just down here.” Informs Pierce making giant strides taking Barnard the long way.

No good deed went unrewarded in Pierce’s book.

“What brings you here today Mister Barnard?” Pierce probed.

“I was just passing as they say... In town on other business and thought I would stop by... See how things were going?... As they say.” Panted Barnard, struggling to keep pace with Pierce.

“I can assure you that *Telos* is right on schedule.” Pierce lied.

Barnard clung close to walls. Avoiding oncoming people. Covering his mouth with a handkerchief, and wishing he were nine stories below in his sterile bunker. But he was not, he was among the living. Among the germs. Arriving in a corridor lined with pictures of satellites they find themselves at a heavy wooden door. No name tag was required on this door.

“Ah... Here we are... Ms. Hathaway, Mister Barnard to see Mister Stowers.” Pierce informs her.

“Go straight through Mister Pierce, he’s expecting you.” She informs the men.

“Thank you, Ms. Hathaway.” Replies Pierce graciously, as though if it were a charade.

Barnard scrutinizes Ms. Hathaway as he passed. Prim and proper. Looking not unlike the woman that he had forsaken for the Agency. Eyes meet momentarily. Hathaway looks away and frantically resumes typing to annul Barnard’s creepy glare. As if he were undressing her.

“Ah, there you are, Mister Barnard... We meet at last! It’s good to see you.” Stowers thrusts out his hand, only to encounter a weak grip of stubby fingers. Much like an undersized dead fish. Stowers released it.

Turning momentarily to Pierce only to see him grinning behind Barnard’s back.

“I’ll be off, then shall I?” Suggests Pierce about to leave and distance himself from Barnard.

"No, no... Please_ stay_, I understand you're the man in charge of the *Telos*." Insists Barnard.

"That is correct, I could take you for a tour afterward, if you like?"

"That would be most appreciated, Mister Pierce." Informs Barnard looking about Stowers' office walls adorned with countless fish unsure what to make of the mounted trophies.

You fish Mister Barnard?" Noting his curiosity.

"No. No. They keep me too far underground to fish I'm afraid." He divulged.

"I see... Must take you out one day." Stowers lied.

"I'd like that..." Barnard lied,

Ms. Hathaway appears at the door with a silver tray of coffees.

"Thank you, Ms. Hathaway... Just down there would be fine." Directs Stowers and waits for her to leave. Barnard's eyes follow her to the door, catching one last look.

"... And *Telos*? Mister Pierce said you were on schedule?"

Stowers almost choked on hearing the remark. Looking to Pierce grinning.

"Indeed, indeed... Pierce and his team are on top of *Telos* like white on rice... Isn't that so Lloyd?" Putting Pierce on the spot.

"Like clockwork... You'll be pleased to know Mitchell and his team have finished Stage One already." Gauging how much Barnard knew about the Project.

'*Stage One? We don't have a Stage One. What are you playing at Pierce?*' Thinks Stowers looking dubiously at him.

"Marvelous, marvelous... The Director will be pleased to hear that." Beams Barnard.

Pierce grins at Stowers who returns the unwitting grin like an echo. Both reading the other's thoughts.

"You say, Mitchell?" Asked Barnard catching the name.

"I know you had concerns... But the man has stepped up for you on this one Mister Barnard... A brilliant young mind out of M.I.T. ... I'm surprised you didn't nab him before us... We're lucky to have a man on the team." Informs Pierce.

"Indeed. Indeed... I'd like to meet this *Mitchell*... Would it be possible?" Inquired Barnard hiding his pug-nosed face behind the porcelain china cup.

"I should think so. Why don't we finish up here and I'll take you to the workshop?" Swallowing the last of his coffee, "... This way Mister Barnard."

"It's been nice meeting you, Mister Barnard... I'll leave you in Lloyd's capable hands." Advised Stowers not standing nor wishing to touch the dead fish. Once had been enough.

"Thank you, Mister Stowers... It's been a pleasure." Barnard lied.

"Lloyd will be able to answer all your technical questions... As you can see, they have me shuffling papers these days." Stowers lied gesturing an almost empty desk.

"I know the feeling." Laments Barnard hoping his desk was still there when he got back.

"Thank you for the coffee, Ms. Hathaway." Pierce acknowledges as he passes.

"*Ms. Hathaway*." Barnard acknowledges awkwardly. Beaming a seemingly perverted smile as he passed.

Eyes meet again. Ms. Hathaway forces a fake smile. Raising the corners of her mouth. Before tapping frantically at the keys. If first impressions were correct, second impressions removed all doubt.

"This way Mister Barnard... That way, are the nuclear reactors." Pierce looks down a corridor behind him to the cafeteria.

"Oh, I see." Worried Barnard trying to keep up with Pierce's making long strides.

Arriving at a busy Transition changing room. A room that separated the sterile workshop from the unsterile world outside. Countless white tissue suits hang on racks. Engineers and Technicians jostle effortlessly with the flimsy overalls. Some pulling them on. Others pulling them off and discarding them into a bin for sanitizing. The number of people in close-proximity surprises Barnard. And he reaches for a handkerchief from his pocket.

“You’ll need to suit up I’m afraid.” Advised Pierce sensing the Barnard’s fears.

“I understand completely.” Said Barnard relieved to be quarantined.

Suiting up, Barnard looked more like a stout beekeeper than a Pentagon Official. Pierce like an alien visitor from outer space. But that is where the similarity ended. Pierce leads Barnard onto the workshop floor. Long stainless-steel benches line the floor like regimented platoons. About them, other beekeepers swarm over intricate devices beyond Barnard’s comprehension. The floor abuzz with activity.

At the center of the workshop, suspended on a huge hoist, the goliath skeleton of bleached silver bones and ribs that would some become *Telos*.

“This is it.” Pierce looks up.

Technicians work from chrome scaffolding. Fumes and sparks erupt from within the cavity.

“They are just fitting the primary cable to the flux capacitor.” Pierce blinds with nonsensical jargon. Gauging how much Barnard knew.

“Hm. Very good.” Nods Barnard ignorantly.

“How’s it look?” Calls out Pierce to a Travis leaning into the colossal structure.

“Coming alone Mister Pierce... Did that part arrive yet? It’s holding us up until we get it.” Calls back Travis.

Suddenly putting Pierce on the spot.

“Part? ...Delay? ...You said?” Barnard stutters confused.

“Not *Telos*... For a Korean telecommunications company... *Telos* takes top priority...” Looking up to Travis, words will be spoken later, “... *Samsung* will just have to wait for Travis.”

“If you say so, Mister Pierce...” Confused by his refusal, “... *Samsung*?” He mutters to himself.

“That’s good, the Director would not be pleased if he heard there were delays of any kind.” Retorts Barnard grinning beneath the elongated rectangular visor.

“I agree... We’re working triple shifts to getting *Telos* out the door on time.” Pierce lied, knowing they were dead in the water until the part arrived.

“Very good then.” Grunts Barnard.

“And over here we have the gentleman behind it all... *Your* protégé, Thomas Mitchell.” Pierce leads the way.

Barnard’s eyebrows raise. His visor fogging with growing anxiety and heated breath.

“Tom... This is Mister Barnard... From the *Pentagon*.” Introduces Pierce.

Tom extends his hand only to have Barnard raise his to avoid contact. Fearful of touching him.

“I was just informing how we have just finished *Stage One* and are right on track... We’ve pulled all the stops out for this one, *haven’t* we Tom?”

“Yeah, right... *Stage One* is done... We’re into *Stage Two* as we speak.” Looking up to Travis shaking shrugging shoulders back to him as to what Pierce was going on about.

“The *Samsung* satellite is being put on hold while we’re waiting for *that part*... *Telos* takes priority. Understood?” His eyes shifting to Barnard hoping Tom would get his drift and play along with him.

“Of course, Mister Pierce... That *Samsung* project will just have to wait... We should really put on it hold on until *Telos* is completed.”

“I’ll have a word with them, Tom... They are not going to be happy about it... But if you say so.” Said Pierce gravely.

“I *do* Mister Pierce... Then we can pull their team onto *Telos*.” Tom embellishes the lie.

Barnard’s eyes light up with the commitment being shown for the project.

“You can do that? Put it on hold for us?” Exclaims Barnard beginning to pant behind the visor excitedly.

“Whatever Tom says goes around here... Isn’t that right *Thomas*?”

“That’s right Mister Pierce...” Straining to keep a straight face, “... Mister Barnard... How’s the payload progressing?”

“Payload? ... Oh, ah... Yes, that...” His mind recalling Isaac’s last words telling to ‘*piss off*.’ “... Like yourself, we have our *finest* working on it. It will be completed on time.”

“And when will that be? ... We’re going to have to run tests...”

Only to be cut off by Barnard.

“There will be no need for tests... Our engineers will fit it when you are complete.”

“Oh...” Responds Tom feeling deflated, “... Well, I better get back to it... It’s been a pleasure meeting Mister Barnard.” Raising a gloved hand to bid a Vulcan farewell.

“You too Mister Mitchell... Keep up the good work.” Responds Barnard watching Mitchell walk away. Finding himself in two minds, perhaps he had misjudged the man.

Pierce escorted Barnard about the workshop the size of a football field. Blinding him with testing equipment, and baffling him with nonsense. All of which passed over Barnard’s head as he led him the long way back to the Transition room.

“You have complete confidence in this *Mitchell* fella?” Asked Barnard warily.

“Of course... I know you had some concerns. But he’s a *Patriot* Mister Barnard. You can count on him to get *Telos* completed on time. Just make sure your boys do their part. I wouldn’t want to be a millimeter out... Hence Tom’s concern.”

“Indeed...If I may ask, I understand he is seeing a woman.” Barnard asked, turning about to pick Mitchell out from the other white suited Technicians.

“That’s rather personal, isn’t it Mister Barnard?” Pierce stopped in his tracks and looked down at him.

“In our business one cannot be too careful Mister Pierce. We must know everything about a person... And the woman?” Barnard probes again.

“Well if you must know... Yes, I do believe there is a woman about. You know how *young love* is... Don’t you Mister Barnard?” Peirce inquired.

“Hmm... Once ... But that was a long time ago.” Barnard laments briefly.

“If that will be all Mister Barnard, let me show you the way out.” Informs Pierce eager to release Barnard from his stewardship.

Leading Barnard back to Hamish, still standing rigid as if frozen in a block of invisible ice. Feet spread. Boots polished. Uniform pressed. Creases running trouser legs and sleeves. About his

hips, a sturdy polished black belt attached with holster and an assortment of accessories. Pepper spray, Taser, and cuffs for all emergencies. A weary hand leans on the pistol grip.

“At ease Hamish...” Ordered Hamish, “...Mister Barnard will be off now. He is welcome back anytime he visits.” Pierce lied.

“Yes, Mister Pierce... Good day, Mister Barnard.” Hamish taps the brim of his cap as though he were saluting a child.

“Good day Mister Pierce, I will inform the Director of the marvelous work you are doing here.” Smiled Barnard widely showing no teeth.

“Please do that Mister Barnard... And come again soon.” Lied Pierce again, raising a hand to farewell the ignorant little gentleman.

Barnard fakes another smile. Exiting through large sliding doors to the black SUV waiting at the entrance.

Seated safely in the back of the vehicle Barnard thinks.

It was all too neat for Barnard’s liking. Was Mitchell the *Wonder-Boy* that Pierce made him out to be? And of Mitchell’s love connection be Irving’s granddaughter? Had he read too much into Mitchell’s connection to Captain Irving? That did not explain the two missing agents. Succumbing to exhaustion, and dehydration, Barnard surrendered and reclined in the rear seat.

Then as if hit between the eyes with an epiphany, sits upright startled. Why had he not thought of this sooner.

“Control.” Barks Barnard keen to follow up the perceptive thought....

What are you wearing?

With the thought germinating in his mind the black SUV returned to the subterranean basement. Barnard hurries from the lift and immediately to the board room closing the door behind him and the Agents. Entombing them within.

“The vehicles have surveillance cameras, don’t they?” He asked as though to confirm his suspicion.

Heads nod. Realizing now they had overlooked the cameras.

“Get me the backup... Now! ...” Barnard hollered at the Agents, “... You should have done this the first-time you imbeciles!”

Cumbersome pale fingers tap at keys. Retrieving the footage of the missing SUV.

“Play it!” Orders Barnard eager to see the Agent’s demise as though it were a macabre horror show.

Colored beams project the last moments of the vehicle into space over the board table.

Of headlights punching into the darkness of a wind-swept desolate road. In the distance ahead, headlights of oncoming vehicles. Closer and closer, larger, and larger they became until suddenly they flashed pass. The Agent’s vehicle turned about and accelerates in pursuit of the short convoy. Gaining ground on the rear vehicle, it pulls alongside it and radiates a blue beam of light at the engine. And an old Chevy falls away crippled.

The Agent’s vehicle rushes forward. A large truck carrying a mysterious cargo, protruding either side. Shrouded by a tarpaulin flapping in darkness. Suddenly the truck veers sideways and collides with the SUV causing it to fall back again. Making another run the SUV rushes past the truck before it could plunge again. Racing away to pursue the leading vehicle.

Shots strike the SUV’s windscreen, only to be answered by the blue beam. The Flatbed falters and stalls and grinds to a halt. The Agent’s vehicle races ahead only to turn about and wait momentary. Revving its engine before suddenly accelerating towards the large truck. From a side window a blue beam radiates forward punching the truck’s silver grill.

Then from nowhere, an explosion of blinding light and the sound of metal upon metal as the Agent’s vehicle is struck violently and thrown sideways into the air by an unknown force. Tumbling over and over to land on its roof. The projected images now inverted.

Headlights penetrate darkness filling with drifting steam and dust. Voices sound about the vehicle. A small dog runs about excitedly and barking at something or someone. The same dog as from the ranch. Barnard recalls the black and white terrier.

‘Boom! ... Boom!’ Two thunderous shots ring out. The fate of the Agents now confirmed.

People begin to gather, standing about talking. He could see Captain Irving with his daughter, and Mitchell. They were all in this together.

“Young love my ass.” Barnard mutters to himself.

Voices fade in and out with the howling wind. Amongst the grabbed audio, Barnard detects the word *‘El Paso’*. Convoy vehicles come to life and pass the crash scene. Making Barnard wonder where they were headed and with what. The SUV begins to squeal and twitch violently as if in one final throes of death as it was hauled onto the back of a truck. And covered with a tarp. The projection fell dark.

“Play it again,” Barnard instructs the Agent.

Barnard burns the images into his mind. Who were the others and what was under the tarpaulin?

‘*Not possible...*’ Denying a thought that came to mind, ‘...*Or was it?*’ And he began to think the unthinkable.

Reaching his mind back to the Roswell incident. The very search Mitchell had made at the library. It was all coming together. Barnard had found the missing link. He raises a hand to stop. Wishing he had seen the footage before he had wasted his time visiting Captain Irving and the charades of Mitchell at StarTech.

“I want photographs... I want a transcript of every word spoken... I want registration plate numbers... I want names... Most of all I want to know what was under that tarpaulin! Understood?! ...” Ordered Barnard knowing Irving had a week’s head start on him. “... You, blundering fools!”

Heads nod mutely to the orders.

“I’m going back to the Hotel... I need a drink.” Fumes Barnard.

Two agents stare at Barnard waiting for him to leave.

“Don’t just sit there! Get to it!” He bellowed wrenching his coat from the table. Taking with it several folders and spilling their contents over the floor.

Barnard leaned against the headrest of the bed supported by pillows. Dressed in a fluffy white hotel nightgown.

A glass of gin in one hand and the television remote in another. A television screen shows images of civil protests and war. It was the same news he saw below ground, only now, it was outside his window.

The tablet beside him vibrates, signaling an incoming message. Eyebrows pinch and knit, the hungry black caterpillar had returned. Swiping aside the Pentagon logo, to reveal a screen alit with icons. Upon opening the message, seeing its subject line blank. Attachments suggested it was the information he had requested.

Transcripts detailed that the bodies of the Agents could be anywhere within a hundred square miles of desert. Expended and replaceable, Barnard decided he would leave them wherever they were to rot.

Swiping images as though it were Tinder. Recognizing three faces, Captain Irving, his granddaughter stood lit in the headlights and Mitchell. But not the others. And that damn dog. Vehicle registrations provided names with faces. *Cecil Murphy (63)* and a *Harold Murphy (27)*. Leaving only two other people unaccounted for. Scanning the transcript further discovered Cecil and Meredith Murphy had two children, Harold, and George.

“We’ll get to you soon enough.” Informs Barnard talking to their images.

That left one unknown person. The image too dark to get facial recognition.

“You’ll keep.” He warns the shadowed image of Nagel.

In the background a large MACH truck, its cargo extending over the sides. Barnard searches to find a better image, stops at one of the Agent’s vehicles from behind the heavy trailer. Its headlights illuminating the camouflaged cargo. Stubby fingers press against the screen and splay. Zooming in on the massive dark object. Like a child guessing a wrapped Christmas present.

“What would you be carting about at five o’clock in the morning that required concealment?” He asked himself.

Eyes burn at the image. Making out what he wanted to see under the tarpaulin.

“It can’t be... Can it?” Verbalizing an earlier thought.

Shuddering to think of the consequences if it were true. It would explain Mitchell’s aroused interest in Roswell. But that craft had already recovered. Surely there could not have been another? Surely, he would have known about it. Or would he have? It was well before his time at the Agency.

“Where did you come from?” Barnard asked knowing the road was a dead-end.

‘They must have dug the craft up from somewhere.’ Thought Barnard.

The desert may be vast, but with the help of technology it could be narrowed down. And he calls the Agents.

“I want satellite images for the past seven days for thirty miles radius north of the wreckage... I want them by tomorrow morning... Understood?” Killing the connection before they could reply.

Taking a sip of the now diluted gin allows himself some satisfaction.

“I may not know where you’re going... But I’m going to find out where you’ve been.” Barnard chuckles devilishly. Nostrils flare as vapors invigorate a deflated spirit.

Perhaps the day had not been a waste after all?

Morning breaks over the prairie. Sending rays of the sun into Barnard’s hotel room to waken him. Startled by the intruding light he sits up. Still in the hotel nightgown with the lights on and that tablet on his lap. That too had fallen asleep soon after he had been sedated by the gin.

“Ah_.” He moans feeling his head dizzy with pain.

Making himself coffee. Strong and black. Feeling it bleed into veins, taps the tablet to awaken it. A message appears. Complete with satellite imaging of a central road looking like a thin dark worm and thirty miles of desert either side of it. Fingers splay and the image magnifies. Zooming out again, he begins to pan methodically side to side.

The coffee was taking effect and he takes another mouthful.

Sifting side to side at the pace of a snail in a marathon. Suddenly, he stumbles upon what he had been looking for. Hoping it was not some anomaly. The more he stared at the dark patch of soil the more he realized he had struck gold. Barnard grins with glee at the find and looks up from the tablet as if expecting someone to applaud him. And is met with silence.

Fixing his eyes on the dark patch notes its coordinates. Zooming in almost to ground level reveals the detail of tire tracks could still be seen. Partially eroded by wind and time. Counting several sets. A set of double wheel tracks cut heavily into the desert floor, leaving its telltale presence behind.

Measuring the diameter of the covered hole at some fifteen yards. Allowing for perimeter, what had been dug out had to be at least ten yards wide. And ponders the size of an alien craft, having never seen one firsthand. Reluctant as he was to inform the Director, he knew he must.

And tapped the screen and waited nervously for the Director to answer.

“Barnard_...” The Director answered, “...What do you want?”

“Well, ah_...” Barnard stutters unsure how to deliver more bad news.

“Speak man, speak.” The Director barks at him.

“We *may* have a problem.”

“Well, either you do, or you don’t... Which is it? Well?! Hm!?”

“We do.”

“What is it this time? ... Is it Irving? Or is it Mitchell? Hm!”

“Both ... And there’s more...”

“Christ Barnard... What now!?” Grumbled the Director.

“Irving and Mitchell maybe in possession of a...” Barnard hesitates to speak.

“A what? I don’t have all day! Speak up!” The Director barks spitting pieces of morning tea at Barnard’s holographic face.

“A saucer... An alien craft.”

Stunned the Director falls silent back into his chair.

“How is that possible?” The Director asked.

“They appear to have dug it out of the desert... Out of interest Director... Just how many crafts crashed at Roswell?”

The Director scratches his head, unsure himself.

“One, I think. It was recovered and taken to Area-51. Though...” The Director hesitates to answer.

“Yes, Director? ...” Barnard probes delicately.

“It was only rumor, no one took it seriously, but...”

“But?”

“There were *reports* of another crash outside of a Corona... But everyone *assumed* it was the Roswell crash... Are you saying there is another? ... Are you sure?” The Director asked.

“*Evidence* suggests there was.” Barnard gives his diagnosis.

“Where is it now?”

“That is what I am about to find out. I have names of those involved. Leave it to me, Director. I will make them talk.” Snarls Barnard.

“Good. Good.” Affirms the Director.

“What if they go to the media?” Exclaimed Barnard.

“We’ll explain it away, as a Hollywood prop, or something. *Hm!*” The Director quips.

“And Sirius? Should we inform him?”

“Leave Sirius to me. Best keep this between us for now... Understood? *Hm!*” Informs the Director.

“Yes, Director.”

“Do whatever you have to do. Find the craft and get it to Area-51. Understood? *Hm!*”

“Yes, Director.”

“And Barnard, one last thing...”

“What that Director?”

“What for God’s sake are you wearing man?” The Director leans forward eyeing Barnard peculiarly...

We've been sprung

"I hope you know what you're doing... You can't hide that thing forever in the barn." Warns Dharma.

"I know... But it's safe there for now." Her grandfather looks to the distance wondering how safe it really was.

"What you going to do with it?" She asked curiously.

"I don't know, maybe fly it down Main Street and park it at the center of town... Rodeos coming up." Remarks Ted.

"Yeah_ that should attract attention... As if the last one didn't... Anyway, you can't fly it." She tells him.

"Yeah, that's right..." He lies, "... So what's with you and Tom?" Deflecting her questioning.

"What about it?" She asked.

"Well_ I'm just saying."

"He's a friend."

"Waldo, did you hear that they're just *friends*." Humored Ted.

Waldo's ears pick up at his name being mentioned and look obediently at the old man, and then to Dharma. Only to be left hanging and lowers his head to resume a nap.

"What's your sudden interest in my love life?" She asked quickly regretting her choice of word.

"Just saying... He's a handsome young man, with a good job." Spouts Ted.

"You're a right little *cupid* aren't you *Gramps*." Qualifies Dharma.

"And you're a right little *Calamity Jane*... He reminds me of your father." The old man sweetens the pot.

"He does, doesn't he?" Eyes look to the photo on the mantelpiece, "...We'll see." She smiles and walks away.

Leaving her Grandfather plucking the string of his bow.

"Great week guys..." Tom informs the team about to head home, "...Catch you Monday."

"Are we fossicking for this weekend?" Asked Marshall.

"Can't make it... I've got paperwork to catch up on." Tom lied.

"Does this paperwork involve the woman Barnard was inquiring after?" Asked Pierce appearing from nowhere like a ghost.

"Really, he asked. That is kind of creepy, don't you think?" Shudders Tom as to why the interest.

"Seems he has his hooks out for you..." Informed Pierce, "...Is there anything I should be worried about Tom?" Pierce probed.

"Not really... I'll let you know if there is." Tom lied.

"You do that... My door is always open. Do not leave it too late. Understood? Now get home before I find some real paperwork for you to lie about."

"Thanks, Lloyd... Catch you Monday."

Climbing into his vehicle Tom notices a large black SUV parked by the curb making no effort conceal itself.

“Not again? I thought I got rid of you guys. Shit!” Tom curses, annoyed by their sudden reappearance.

Driving directly towards the black SUV. Tom slows down to take a closer look at the vehicle. To let them know he was watching them. Tinted windows gave nothing away as to the occupants. Driving away with the Agents following him home.

Reversing onto the street was about to throw the lever into drive. Decides at the last moment to reverse back and park beside the black beast. And winds down the passenger window.

“Guys?! Guys?!” Tom calls out to catch their attention.

The driver’s window opens to reveal an Agent staring directly at him.

“Guys... Just to let you know, I’ll be heading out to the old Foster Ranch for the weekend. The key is under the mat to let yourself in. There’s food in the fridge. And try not to leave a mess like last time... *Hm?* You’re welcome to come with me, but you know how Dharma feels about you guys... Sorry. Got to go.” Closing the window Tom drives away.

Barnard sat in the back unseen. Listening to the arrogance of Mitchell riling his Agents.

“Let him go. We know where to find him... Take me back to the crash site.” He orders leaning back to observe suburbia pass him by.

It could well be him inside the houses. Tied to a nine to five job. Paying taxes. A wife in the kitchen, two point five kids playing on the front lawn. However, that life was never meant to be. Skipping all the boxes, he had ticked the box that would keep America safe. For now.

“Keep going,” Barnard informs the driver.

Continuing until a strange pile of stones appeared. Stacked like a crude pyramid as if to signal a junction. Eyes shift to the tablet in his hands, a green teardrop flashes their position. Looking opposite observes broken scrubs and tire tracks.

“Follow those tracks.” Barnard orders leaning forward keenly.

The uneven surface jostled Barnard in the back.

“Keep going... Not much more.” Looking at the screen and the blue teardrop getting closer.

The two became one.

“Stop!” He instructs from the back seat.

Stepping from the vehicle, a handkerchief covers his mouth from the swirling dust. A tumbleweed startles him as it passes him. Then rolls away as though frightened by him. Barnard surveys the immediate area. Laden tire tracks. Square indentations from feet of a hoist. Visualizing the hive of activity that must have taken place in those early hours of the morning. Clouds having prevented satellite images of that evening.

Standing before him a large circular patch of dark soil that contrasted with that about it. Measuring the breadth confirms his previous estimate. Above him, a red sparrow flies on high hiding in the sun. Barnard could not see Captain Irving and his flying machine, but he could certainly hear him.

If Irving had proven stubborn. Perhaps Cecil Murphy and his sons would be more, *pliable*.

Tom pulls into the long gravel driveway of the ranch and sees the Flatbed parked at the rear.

Swinging around back to park beside it. Waldo pushes the screen door open and scampers down the steps to greet him yapping.

"Steady down boy." Tom cajoles the dog.

Dharma appears standing on the top step looking like a housewife greeting her husband returning from work. Kissing him as he enters.

"Staying, are we?" She asked seeing the bag.

"Yeah... I've let my place out to a couple of Hybrids..." He jokes, "... Where's Ted?"

"Out and about." Looking to the skies.

"Oh, so we have the place alone to ourselves then..." Stepping closer and putting his arms around her.

"Hasn't stop you with Gramps about." She informs him.

"Stop *me*?" Tom questioned.

They kiss only to have the moment killed on hearing the biplane buzz the house.

"I think he knows about us." Tom looks to the ceiling.

"Yeah, you got that right." Handing him a can of beer.

"Cheers." Tom tears the tab.

Outside the plane coughs and splutters and falls silent. Waldo runs off in search of the old man. Dharma pulls another beer from the refrigerator placing it at the end of the table.

"Had a few visitors yesterday morning." Said Dharma.

"Really... Anyone know?"

"Some Pentagon man... Barnard and two goons."

"*Barnard*?" Questioned Tom anxiously.

"You know him?"

"Paid me a visit to StarTech yesterday as well."

"Must have been after he visited us... What did he want?" Questioned Dharma.

"Came to check on the satellite we're building for them... Pierce baffled him with bullshit.

The guy had no idea about satellites." Tom chuckles.

"Neither do I?" Informed Dharma.

"Well, you're not paying a billion dollars for one."

"Whoa, that much?"

"Don't worry, I can get your staff discount."

"Thanks."

"He asked after you." Advised Tom.

"Me? Why me?"

"Don't know, maybe he wants your number." Jokes Tom.

Ted appears at the door looking tired and collapsed into a chair. Tearing away the beer tab making it hiss and froth.

"What did they want?" Asked Tom surprised.

"Had a warrant... Couldn't stop them." Responded Ted.

"Didn't find anything... And if they had they wouldn't be above ground to speak about it."

Responds Dharma.

"They got going pretty quickly once Dharma got a few shots at them." Ted grins raising his can to her, "... This Pierce fella you mentioned earlier?"

"Pierce, my boss... What of him?" Asked Tom wondering where Ted was heading.

"Thinking he might come in handy..." Ted's mind playing out possibilities.

“You can’t involve him... If he finds out about any of this, I’m off the project for sure.”

“Then let us hope he doesn’t find out... Speaking of which...” Ted sighs, “... We’ve been sprung.”

“Sprung?” Echoed Tom.

“Seems your friend Barnard has discovered our hole in the desert... It won’t be long before he comes knocking again looking for something more than two missing goons.” Informed Ted sucking on the beer can.

“That’s all we need.” Tom frets.

“I had better warn Cecil he might have visitors.” And Ted excuses himself to make the call...

The notebook

“Cecil... Ted... Yeah... You may have trouble heading your way...” Ted warns, “... Yeah... Got a short-ass Pentagon guy sniffing about ... Looking for those two goons... Yeah, that’s what I told him... Seems to have found the hole we dug, it won’t take him long to come looking for the saucer... Just be prepared, that’s all I’m saying... Where the boys? ... Hauling, good... When they back? ... Perfect, I have an idea that might just buy us some time... Yeah, now listen...” Ted discloses a plan, hoping the line was not being tapped.

“I’m heading back to Washington.” Informs Barnard loosening his tie and running a finger under a sweaty collar.

“What about Mitchell?” An Agent dares to ask.

“Don’t touch Mitchell... Or Captain Irving for that matter. Mitchell is too vital to the completion of the project... We will come back to him after *Telos* is launched. For now, keep an eye on *Murphy* and his sons. They are hiding the saucer somewhere. Do whatever it takes. Find me that saucer. Understood?” Concludes Barnard.

Heads nod to acknowledge the instruction.

“Now, take me back to the airstrip. I want to get out of this God forsaken town. The sooner the better.” Complains Barnard.

A dust covered black Cadillac pulls into the hangar and two engineers’ look up to see the man from the IRS stepping out of the vehicle.

“He’s back. And the two suits.” One engineer remark to the other.

“Pass me that scanner will you Bob.” Reaching out a tarnished hand.

Barnard ascends the steps and stops at the top, turns about, and delivers a warning to the Agents as though delivering a sermon from the mount. A cabin light shone above his head.

“Don’t make me have to come back here and do your jobs again. You hear me?”

Heads bow to the short man towering over them.

“I want reports of all suspects’ movements. Understood?”

Shooing the two giant black blow flies away. The ramp rises cocooning the annoying little man inside. Much to the relief of the Agents happy to see the back of him.

Tom pushes himself under a console to remove a panel.

“Whoa... Will you look at this?!” He exclaimed taken by the colored circuitry flashing chaotically.

“What is it?” Asked Ted standing back.

“Unbelievable... If I just knew what it all meant.”

“This might help.” Ted held out his father’s notebook.

“What is it?” Asked Tom curiously inspecting the weathered pages.

“Something my father gave me just before he died.”

“You okay?” Asked Tom seeing Ted’s hand trembling.

“Yeah... Nothing a stiff drink won’t cure.” Responded Ted, hoping that would deter further questioning.

Tom examines the notebook. Scribbled circuits and notations. Looking into the cavity trying to identify parts that looked familiar.

“Okay, *that* provides power to... *That thing*... *Whatever* it is... How did he get these?”

“He had friends. From the Roswell crash... And smuggled the notebook out, no one ever thought to look at.”

“You mind if I borrow this?” Asked Tom.

“Sure, you’re probably the only person who could understand it.”

“Thanks.” Going back under to investigate another circuit.

Ted steps from the craft, the weekend had passed fast enough without making it any faster within the craft.

Sometime later Tom appeared at the entrance and wonders why the day had dimmed suddenly only to see Ted grinning to himself.

“Don’t you get it? Inside time slows down, out here time passes by as usual.” Ted informs him.

“How long have I been in there?” Asked Tom checking his watch.

“For you, a couple of hours. For me... Half a day... What took you?” Ted chuckles.

“Ha, very funny. I guess we better get going.” Said Tom brushing him down.

Climbing into the cockpit, Tom whistles for the dog that had disappeared.

“Waldo! (*Whistle!*)... You coming, or staying?” Tom calls out to the dog.

Waldo appears from behind the barn and leaps onto his lap and Ted starts the engine. Coughing and spluttering to life.

“Why don’t you take her up?” Ted asked through the headsets.

“You sure?” Asked Tom anxiously. Was he ready?

“Got to learn your wings somehow... Don’t worry, I’ve got the stick...” Cajoled Ted, “... You’ll be fine.”

Pushing the throttle forward the engine screams even louder than before. The heavy wooden tractor propeller pulls the rickety craft forward. Jostling occupants as it gained speed.

“Pull it back easy now.” The old man instructs him.

Tom pulled back on the stick. Feeling resistance as he fought the air current over the wings. And as graceful as a red swan, the Red Sparrow rose into the air. The barn and homestead fade into the distance behind him.

“You off already?” Asked Dharma seeing him pack his bag.

“Yeah, gotta get back... Work tomorrow, need my rest.” Tom grins and pulls her closer.

“Maybe I could come with you?” Looking up at him to gauge his reaction.

“You’d get bored... How about next weekend? ...” He countered, “...I’ll take you out on the town. How’s that sound?”

“Country girl in the city... Mm?” She ponders the big smoke.

“Don’t worry, I’ll warn them you’re coming.” Informs Tom.

“Okay, you’re on.”

“Stop by on Friday at say five. Should be done by then.”

“I’ll see you then.” Sealing the rendezvous with a kiss.

Throwing the bag over a shoulder, Tom passes Ted sitting at the kitchen table sucking on a beer.

“Probably won’t see you next week... That okay?”

"I'll be fine. Got things to do about the place... I could do with some solitude." Responds Ted.

"Dharma's going to stay over if that's okay."

"Hell, you don't need my permission son, she probably shot me if I tried to stop her anyway."

"You got that right." Warns Dharma appearing in the kitchen.

"You had any thoughts about how to bring that satellite of your down yet?" Ted asked.

"Maybe... But first, we have to get our hands on it and that won't be for another five months."

"Well, you don't have much time now, do you? We can't let that thing go into orbit." Warns Ted.

"I know. It won't..." Turning to Dharma, "... I see you Friday."

Dharma leans against the back door, Waldo at her feet, and watches as Tom drive away.

Barnard had buried himself below the ground again. Wading through report after report that streamed to his tablet. But no sign of Cecil Murphy, or his sons. It was as though they had disappeared. Cloaked in the darkness Agents watched the bar night after night. Observing upright sober cowboys entering and bent staggering drunks existing.

The telephone rings and Barnard glared at the device contemplating the caller and hesitantly lifts the handset to speak.

"Barnard." He answers softly.

"Bar_nard_! You're back?" Barks the Director confused.

"Yes, Director... Of course, Director."

"Well? What have you to report? *Hm?!'*" Snaps the Director seeking answers.

"We have suspects under surveillance as we speak."

"And that saucer? Did you find it? *Hm?'*"

"Not yet, but we're following a lead."

"I don't want *leads* man. I want that *saucer*... Do you know how embarrassing it would be if the Press found out?!... If Sirius finds out? ... Good God man, he would melt our brains!" Belched the Director terrified by the thought.

"Of course, Director... I am sure they will find it soon Director. It can't be far."

"Very good... Keep me updated. *Hm?'*" Grunting as though he had passed wind.

"Yes, Director. No, Director. Thank you, Director." Offered Barnard.

The line goes dead. Leaving Barnard hanging. Replacing the handset, happy to have heard the last of the Director's voice. Opening the bottom drawer takes out the gin bottle and pours himself glass to ease his frayed nerves.

The week passed without incident. The Hybrids had back off, or so Tom had thought. *Telos* was coming together slowly. And they had made up the lost three days. Deciphering the notebook in his spare time. Yet, there were pages that left him guessing. And he wondered where he could turn for help.

Just then Marshall appears at his door.

"Hey, we're thinking about heading to O'Malley's... You know, celebrate Stage Five (*chuckle*) ...You want to come?"

"Sure... You mind if I bring a friend?" Asked Tom.

"The more the merrier... See you there. I'm off." Marshall is about to hurry away.

“Hey, wait up!” Tom catches him in time.

“What’s up?” Inquired Marshall curiously.

“Take a look at this?” Opening the notebook to a page of schematics.

“Crikey Tom, you do know we have drafting boards for this? What is it?” Marshall turned the pages sideways trying to gauge what he was looking at.

“I was hoping you’d tell me.” Informed Tom.

“Where you get this?”

“A friend of a friend, so to speak.”

“Not sure I do... Hmm... I’d need to see the actual circuits.” Remarked Marshall tilting his head deciphering a scribbled schematic unsure what to make of it.

“I’m not sure you’d want to...” Suggests Tom, “... What are you doing next weekend?”

“Not much. You?”

“How’d you like to come for a ride?”

“O_kay. It’s a date.” Marshall accepts warily.

“Don’t tell a soul as if your life depended on it, okay?” Warns Tom.

“I can see why Pierce worries about you.” Handing the notebook back.

“Go... I’ll see you at the bar... I have a surprise.” Informs Tom pocking it.

Killing his computer and stares at the plans on the board. There had to be some way to sabotage the device. The Hydrogen Peroxide tank could act as an explosive but how could he wire it without it standing out like a sore toe. Pentagon engineers would spot it within seconds on inspection.

“Get home Tom. It’s been a busy week. You’ve done well to make up time.” Praises Pierce poking his head in the door.

“Lloyd.” Replies Tom startled as though he had been caught thinking aloud.

“See you Monday.” Said Peirce walking away.

“You too Lloyd.”

And soon to followed in Pierce’s footsteps...

Surveillance

Appearing out of place with the other shining new vehicles about it. The dull red Flatbed waited in the parking lot. Unashamedly parked beside Tom's wagon. Both covered with dust as if they were married. Dharma watches people leave the building and wonders what was taking him. He had said five and it was already three minutes past the hour.

Then a weary individual steps from the shade to the sun-drenched afternoon. She knew his smile in an instant. She knew the curve of his face. Walking directly towards her and Tom climbs onto the sideboard. Leans in and kisses her.

"I was looking forward to that all week." He grinned, "... How's Gramps? Will he survive without us?"

"He'll be fine... He's got Waldo for company." Said Dharma.

"Follow me. Thought we'd catch up with some friends, make some introductions... Just don't shoot anyone okay?"

"No promises." Dharma warns.

Tom leads the way. Dharma following behind. Sometime later the two vehicles swing into O'Malley's parking lot. Dharma stepped from the truck in faded jeans, boots, and a blouse. The brim of her hat pulled down over her eyes.

"Not as classy as Redemption..." Informs Tom, "... No bar fights. But now that you're here, who knows?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" She asked.

"Nothing."

Pushing open the doors to music and boisterous chatter Tom looks about for his team and spies them at a corner booth.

"Be gentle with them okay," He reminds her.

A loud wolf whistle sounds as Dharma passes a table. Followed by another. Stopping in her tracks. She turns and glares at the city slicker and reaches for the hilt of her knife. Causing the clean-shaven men to have second thoughts.

"Is there a problem gentlemen?" She asked staring them down.

"No, ma'am..." A man apologizes, "... Sorry ma'am."

"Gentlemen." She bids the men farewell.

"(Phew)..." Sighs Tom barely ten feet in the door, "... Over here."

"Hey, Tom! You made it." Calls out Travis, only to fall deathly silent.

Heads turn back and forth from Tom to Dharma who tilts her head at two strangely familiar faces. Recalling the day, they first met.

Marshall and Travis stutter incoherent responses.

"Wasn't she...?" Stuttered Marshall.

"Didn't she...?" Stuttered Travis.

"Yep." Responds Tom.

Bok-Choy look at the other two wondering what had shaken them.

"Everyone this is Dharma... You have already met Marshall and Travis... That is Boy Choy on the end." Tom points out his team to her.

"Gentlemen." Responds Dharma.

"I wouldn't go that far..." Jokes Tom, "... What do you have to do to get a beer around here? ..." Waving down a waitress, "... Two pitchers and two more glasses. Thanks."

"So ah, how'd you guys meet? Shooting gallery?" Jokes Travis.

"Initially... Then one day we just *bumped* into each other at the Library... Didn't we?" Informed Dharma.

"Yeah, that sounds about right." Recalls Tom, pouring a beer.

"Maybe I should start hanging out in Libraries." Pondered Travis his eyes lighting up.

"Hey, sorry about trespassing... Tom led us the wrong way that day."

"It was the compass and the magnetic rocks..." Looking for an excuse.

"You got lost?" Asked Bok-Choy.

"Lost is such a *relative* word... I'd like to think of it as *momentarily disorientated*."

Elaborates Tom.

"We were lost." Admits Travis.

"Find anything interesting?" Asked Dharma curiously.

"Only an old Navajo arrowhead." Chirps Travis.

"Ah well, you never know what you might stumble upon out there... Isn't that right Tom?" She grinned sipping a beer. Leaving a thin white frothy mustache on her top lip.

Pulling the truck in behind Tom's SUV, Dharma kills the engine and headlights. Stepping from the truck to see a street of houses. Boxes side by side by side. Lights glowed behind curtains. Feeling claustrophobic she looked to the heavens for sanctuary. Crowded as it was.

"Inside, before the neighbors see you." Warned Tom hoping to avoid prying eyes.

Keys jingle and rasp in the lock and Tom pushes the door open.

"Those Hybrids have been quiet this week, almost too quiet, it's unlike them." Informs Tom.

"They'll be back... They always do." She tells him, tossing a bag onto an armchair.

"Have a seat, I'll see if I can find some food in the fridge."

"Good God... I haven't seen one of these in years." She exclaimed.

"What's that?" He asked curiously looking up over the refrigerator door.

"A television."

"Oh yeah, now I know what was missing at your place."

"Gramps said they rot your brain."

"Well, he's no wrong there." Concedes Tom reaching for a couple of beers and leftovers.

'*Beep-beep-beep-beep-Rrrrrrrrr_*.' A microwave sounds in the background.

Minutes later Tom appears with a home-cooked meal steaming from two bowls. Handing her one.

"Thanks... What is it?" She asked looking curiously at it.

"Leftovers... I think." Passing her a frothing beer, "... I'll put on a movie for you. Just relax."

He has an idea and quietly removed the electrical tape from over the camera lens. And flicks the remote through countless channels.

"*Enjoy the show boys.*" Speaking quietly to himself.

"Anything you want to watch." Tom asked.

"Not really... You?"

"Not really." Muting the television.

"This is romantic." Suggested Dharma chewing on leftovers.

"Welcome to my humble abode."

"This isn't too bad? Did make this?"

"Make it? I can barely make toast. Its takeaways." He advises.

"What's takeaway?" She asked looking at the sloppy ingredients.

"You don't get out much, do you?" Tom questioned.

"Not since..." She falls quiet, "... Since my parents died. Been too busy looking after Gramps I suppose."

"Yeah, sorry I shouldn't have asked." Tom apologizes.

"That's okay. I'm here now."

"You are, aren't you?" Leaning over to kiss greasy lips. Kissing him back.

Bowls are soon laid to one side and clothes removed frantically. It had been a week, and both were eager to make up for the lost time. Panting and fumbling. Hands grope and caress each other. Licking greasy lips, eyes meet, and convey private longings.

"Ahh." Gaspd Dharma.

Lovers engage in naked carnal acts. Breaths quicken. Fingers run down Tom's back as he thrust, again and again. And again.

"Oh-oh-oh-oh!" Dharma whimpered as a wave of electric pleasure passed through her.

Tom pants heavily. Spurred on by the heated passion beneath him. Only to groan him himself and collapse beside her on the couch. Both stared blankly at the muted television. Only Tom saw the camera lens staring back at them. Tom grinned, glowing with satisfaction.

Monday morning and Tom peels himself from the bed having spent much of the weekend there. Turning to observe Dharma spread like a start fish naked across it. Sheets twisted and tangled. Dharma reaches for a pillow and cuddles it. Refusing to waken from the marathon love affair. Tom staggers to the bathroom like a sexually drained zombie and looks at himself in the mirror. And wondered what she saw in him. Moments later, another zombie appears reflected in the mirror beside him. The living dead poke out their tongues.

"Yuk!" Said Dharma and followed Tom into the shower.

"Coffee?" Dharma asked looking more human than before.

"Do you have to go?" Wrapping her arms about her.

"You said yourself I'd be bored."

"What do I know?" Conceding the foolish remark.

"Got to get back. Make sure Gramps hasn't killed himself in that flying machine."

"I'll come out next weekend. Thought I'd bring Marshall to help understand some of the circuitry of that thing." Informs Tom.

"Why? You can't fly it. Can you?" Asked Dharma.

"Don't think so, but we might learn something from it. It is light years ahead of us, literary."

"Boys and their toys."

"Something like that... You going to be okay getting back?"

"I'll be fine. I'll see you next Saturday then?" Dharma steps closer.

Foreheads touch. Thoughts and breaths exchanged. Feeling the reluctance of the other to let go. Dharma peels herself away and opens the door. And Tom watches her drive away. Leaving him feeling empty and alone...

Plugged in ready to go

In the early hours of the morning. Under a black velvet sky void of moon and stars. A heavy trailer crawls slowly behind Redemption. Brakes hiss loudly as it came to a halt after a clandestine journey to get there. On its back, camouflaged by a tarpaulin, a strange cargo that extended either side of the trailer.

Agents penetrate the darkness with night vision goggles. Making out the saucer-shaped object. Noticing a driver climbing down from the cab. A chained dog barks and snarls into the darkness as though it could sense the Agents were there. The driver pats the dog and it falls silent. The man stares into the darkness as to what had agitated the beast. Seeing nothing, enters through a back door to a brightly lit bar.

Agents look to the other in disbelief.

The canine resumes barking. Keen nostrils sensing unwelcome visitors in the distance beyond. Moments later Cecil and Havoc walk about the trailer inspecting the precious cargo. Nodding his head in agreement pats his son on his back as though he had done well before heading back inside.

Barnard would need to be informed. Frantic fingers tap a tablet. Sending a message as to the sudden appearance of the saucer. Attaching images to whet Barnard's appetite. For now, they would stay back and observe. Wary of the savage dog.

Awoken by the tablet buzzing table on a side table. Barnard reads of the discovery of the saucer. The glow of the screen illuminates his podgy face. Plump cheeks grinned like a child with a new toy.

'Stay with the saucer. Don't let it out of your sight. I'm arriving tomorrow with a warrant.' Barnard replied to the message.

Unable to sleep, his eyes fixed on the tantalizing image of the saucer. Back from the grave. The Director will be pleased.

'Perhaps a visit before I leave.' Barnard thought, hoping to pacify the Director.

"Have the plane ready for me to Albuquerque... Yes, I know I just got back from there... And I am going again... Noon!" Barnard slams the handset down.

Striding with a spring in his step and the smell of disinfectant flaring his nostrils Barnard made his way to the Director's office.

'Tap-tap.' Barnard knocks politely.

The Director looks up at the interruption to his day.

"Barnard... What do you want? *Hm?!'*" The Director grumbles.

"I have good news Director." Barnard begins.

"Really... What is it? Spit it out man, I haven't got all day. *Hm?!'*"

"The saucer has *returned*." Barnard gestures his small hands as though performing a magic trick.

"Returned? What do you *mean*, returned? Did it flyway somewhere? *Hm?!'*" Questioned the Director looking about his office as though it would materialize any moment.

"Well no... Not exactly... It was returned on the back of a truck."

"And where is this truck?" Eyes bulge at Barnard.

“Parked behind a bar owned by Cecil Murphy.”

“Hmm... I recall the name. What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be apprehending the saucer? *Hm?! Hm?!?*” Grunts the Director sounding like a shunting train engine.

“I'm about to leave... I just thought I would inform you of the good news first.”

“Yes, yes... Very good then. Well done I suppose... Off you go then. *Hm!*” The Director remarked in a rare moment of praise.

“*Thank you*_, Director.” Barnard walked backward from the room bowing lowly as though the Director were royalty.

“Oh, and Barnard? What of this fella... *Mitchell?* Any developments? *Hm?!?*”

“It was love after all.” Without wanting to go into details, the Agent's explicit report and disturbing images had unsettled Barnard. As it had the Agents.

“Hm, told you so. Off you go now. *Hm!*” Orders the Director.

“Yes, Director. Of course, Director. Thank you, Director.” Grinning from ear to ear.

Tapping the search warrant in his pocket. Nothing would stop him this time.

Barnard stepped from the Lear jet to the awaiting black Cadillac. Two engineers look up momentarily from within a turbine casing.

“The IRS guy is back.” Said one.

“Hand us that ratchet will you Bod.” Dismissing the intoxicated little man walking to the Cadillac door before falling the back seat.

Loosening his tie, Barnard runs a finger under a sweaty collar and recalled why he had left the forsaken city the last time he was there. Deviating along unmarked roads that took him into the outback. The black Cadillac parked beside a black SUV. Now very visible in the light of the day.

Through binoculars, Barnard views the truck and its load.

“Sensational... You say it hasn't moved?” Asked Barnard.

Two heads nod from the front seats.

“Ballsy for them to just park it up in the open.” Questioned Barnard.

Agents remain silent. They would not know.

“Take me back to Control. We need to coordinate an attack. I need men. A lot of men. And I used that term loosely with your lot.” Incited Barnard.

It would be like taking candy from a baby. The black Cadillac pulls slowly away kicking up dust and sending up a smoke signal for every tribe in the State to see. Passing the bar just as Dharma's Flatbed was pulling in. Ranch hands look up to see the Cadillac pass. Barnard cowers low in the back seat and waits for the fearsome looking men to fade in the dust cloud behind him.

“We ready boys? ...” Cecil asked the group of men armed with hunting and assault rifles, “... This could get ugly.”

Cecil pumps the twelve gauge and leans it against the office wall behind him. And pours himself a hefty glass of whiskey.

“They'll be back...” Cecil informs them, “... Just be ready.”

Men amble back to their tables to resume their beers. A jukebox plays in the background. Ellie-May being courted by a group of male suitors. Plying her with drinks for the rest of the evening. From a monitor, Cecil surveys the bar. The last thing he needed was a fight to break out.

And with that thought, Dharma and Ted enter the bar.

“Oh, Jesus, not now...” Cecil shakes his head.

Wolf whistles sing out like a clowder of neutered tomcats on the prowl.

“She’s spoken for boys! ...” Ted calls out, “... Y’ all had your chances and you blew it... Accept it and move on. Y’ hear?” Ted informs the men.

“*Spoken* for? *Really*?” Remarked Dharma.

“Cecil is out back.” The barmaid informs Ted.

Cecil takes Ted to the back door. The dog falls quiet on seeing the old man.

“What you think?” Asked Cecil.

“She’s a beauty... Where you find it?” Eyeing the oversized load on the back of the trailer.

“Havoc did some carting for a crowd in Austin... Said we could borrow it for as long as we want.”

“Does it work?” Asked Ted curiously.

“Plugged in ready to go.”

“How long have they been out there?” Ted spies the dusted covered black SUV standing out among the brown colored scrubs and bushes.

“About a week or so... They ever eat or sleep?” Asked Cecil.

“Not really.” Informs Ted grinning. Raising a hand to wave out to the Agents stewing in the sun.

The dog strains at the chain barking viciously at the distant vehicle.

“Later boy. Later.” Cecil pats the dog and heads back inside.

Tom leaned back in his chair and yawned. Exhausted after a hectic week. Watching as components disappeared within the belly of the satellite. Watching as the satellite grew fatter and fatter.

“We still on for tomorrow?” Asked Marshall.

“Yeah, yeah. I almost forgot.” Responded Tom wearily.

“We can make it another weekend if you like.”

“No, no... Tomorrow is fine. The sooner you see this thing, the better I suppose. You haven’t told the other two?” Asked Tom.

“I’m not *that* silly. But I am intrigued by the mystery.”

“All will be *revealed* tomorrow. I’ll pick you up on the way. About nine?”

“Sweet as. See you then.” Confirmed Marshall.

“Oh, and bring an overnight bag, you’ll probably be staying the night.”

“Crikey Tom... It must be important.” Remarked Marshall, becoming more intrigued.

“Nothing you haven’t seen before... So, to speak...” Suggests Tom, “...See you tomorrow.”

Pondering if it had been wise to include Marshall. Rationalizing that if half of the Redemption knew about Ted’s goings-on. What was one more? Two heads are better than one. And Marshall could be trusted.

Which was more than could be said about the other two...

We got visitors Pa

Breaking the horizon, the sun radiated across the barren land. Illuminating a convoy of a dozen black SUVs that cruised along the narrow road that headed to *Redemption*. Their engines on silent. Only the treading sound of the wheels on tarmac. Barnard sat in the lead vehicle. His face solemn. His thoughts focused on one thing. Repossession of the saucer.

Ahead, the lone bar loomed closer.

'What were they thinking trying to hide it in the open? ...' Thought Barnard unable to rationalize their thinking. *'...Fools.'*

"Circle the building. Do not let anyone out of that place. Understood?" Barnard instructs the vehicles over an R.T.

Like large black beetles, vehicles scramble from the tarmac road. Kicking up clouds of dust. Suffocating the following vehicle. Wheels on gravel chorused their arrival. The large dog begins to bark at the encroaching vehicles. Pulling on its chain. Claws digging into the earth to attack the trespassers.

"We got visitors Pa..." Grimace looks out the window at threatening vehicles, "... Maybe a dozen."

"Go wake the boy's downstairs and get them to take their positions... Don't let anyone of those filthy fucker's step foot inside this place. You hear me?" Warns Cecil.

"Yes, Pa..." Grimace makes his way downstairs to find the men sleeping on the floor. Subdued by drink. Banging an empty jug on a table as a crude alarm clock, "... Wakey-wakey boys! They're here!"

Groans surface from hungover ranch hands getting to their feet.

"You lot, upstairs... Man the windows. You lot stay down here, cover all entry points. Anything that doesn't look right... Shot first, talk to it later. Understood? ..." Looking about the tired faces, weapons in hands, "...Pa and I are going to have a little chat with them..." Before laying down the law, "... Anyone starts shooting, take 'em all out. You hear me?"

"Hoo-hah_!" A Marie grunt sounds, followed by the sound of rifles cocking.

Grimace heads to the back door to join his father and brother.

"You boys ready?" Cecil asked looking up to his sons.

"We're ready Pa." Responds Havoc.

Cecil unlocks the back door warily. Unsure what he would encounter. A heavy under-over twelve gauge in his hand. Stepping out from behind the truck, encounters by a strange stocky man, silhouetted in the rising sun. Behind him, two towering Agents.

Havoc aims an assault rifle at one of the towering goons. The dog barks savagely and snarls at the approaching Agents.

"*Shush Brutus!*" Cecil commands.

The dog whimpers and falls silent. Salvia drooling from his mouth. Eyes fixed on the Agents in black. Barnard steps forward waving a piece of paper in his small hand as though it would protect him.

"You're trespassing! Get off my property!" Warns Cecil pumping the shotgun. Waving the barrel in the direction of the road.

Faces peer from the upper-level windows. Looking down upon the dozen black wagons that had encircled them.

"It's not that simple I'm afraid." Begins Barnard.

"And who the fuck are you?" Asked Cecil knowingly.

"My apologies for not introducing myself... Barnard. *Pentagon*... And you are... Cecil Murphy, I *assume*?" Barnard fills in the introductions.

"You know perfectly well I am. Now get off my property before I start shooting!" Warns Cecil about to shoulder the twelve gauge and take aim at Barnard.

"Before you do. I have a *Warrant* here to search the property." Nervously stepping forward holding out the bleached piece of paper.

Cecil reaches for it. Squinting at the print, before handing it back to Grimace.

"Yadda-yadda-yadda... Hm..." And grunts at the bad news, "... It's a search warrant alright Pa. But it doesn't say what they're looking for."

"I don't give a dang what they're looking for. They aren't stepping a foot inside the bar." Cecil threatens shouldering the shotgun again.

"That won't be necessary Mister Murphy..." Turning to look at the truck and its mysterious cargo. Lit gloriously in the morning sun, "... I'm here to search for this truck."

"Hey, that's my truck, Mister." Grimace growls taking giant strides forward towards Barnard stepping back anxiously.

Even the two Agents stepped back on seeing the riled hulk of muscle coming at them. Cecil raises a hand to prevent Grimace from continuing. Suggesting he should go stand alongside his brother beside the truck. Putting up a façade of resistance. Cecil stands beside his sons. And defiantly eyes Barnard.

"We can do this the easy way Mister Murphy. Or I can call the local sheriff and he can have you arrested for resisting a warrant... What is it be? *Hm*?" Sounding like the Director.

Cecil turns to his boys and quietly talks to them. Heads shake and feet stomp the earth. Eyes glare back at the diminutive *Pentagon* gentleman wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. Before covering his mouth from the kicked-up dust swirling in the breeze.

Reluctantly, the three men step away from the truck and wait against a wall. Conceding they could not fight the law.

"One scratch and I'll take it out of your ass Mister..." Warns Grimace, "...And yours too." Looking to the Agents standing behind him.

"Very wise gentlemen." Smirking. Barnard clicks short thick fingers to beckon the Agents to remove the tarpaulin.

Frenziedly Agents claw at webbing straps. Making it look harder than it was. Straps fall away. The moment Barnard had been waiting for was at hand. Standing back waits for the tarpaulin to fall. He could almost hear the Director's voice praising him. He would be the talk of Nevada. Closing his eyes and inhaling a deep breath of satisfaction, hears the tarpaulin fall to the ground.

He opens them to see a giant saucer in all its glory. But there was something not right about the thing. Like a cheap suit. It somehow lacked, sophistication. The hull appeared to be *riveted*.

"You can't have that! ..." Challenges Grimace stepping between the saucer and Barnard, "... It belongs to someone else."

"That is something you and I agree on... *Sirius* will be pleased to have it back." Barnard chuckles letting the name slip.

“Son, the man has the authority to take it... Best you go *unplug* it and let him take it away.” Informed Cecil.

“Excuse me... Did you say *unplug*?” Barnard soon caught up.

“Yeah, we’ve been charging the batteries... For the lights.” Cecil informs.

“*Lights? Batteries?*” Parroted Barnard confused by the incongruent terms.

“Go turn the lights for the gentleman here.” Chuckles Cecil.

“Yes Pa.”

Havoc disappears behind the truck and throws a switch. Playful colored lights flash off and on. The saucer rises and lowers on a hydraulic arm. Making whirring and buzzing sounds. Titling to one side then another.

“Five dollars we can give you a ride if you like Mister... Mister?” Offered Cecil seeing Barnard withdrawn and quiet.

It was too good to be true. He had duped. How would he explain this to the Director? To the Generals at Area-51 who were expecting the shipment that afternoon. Numb with embarrassment, Barnard steps away from the truck.

“Is there a problem Mister? Because if you don’t mind... I have a business to run. You have a nice day now, you hear?” Chuckled Cecil.

Raucous laughter cried out within the bar. The jukebox was fired up. With drinks on the house. Cecil allows Barnard some distance before releasing Brutus from his chain. Immediately the dog rushes off barking and snarling after Barnard.

On hearing the barking. Barnard looks about to see the dog coming at him. Startled, he runs as quickly as his short stubby legs could carry him. Jumping into the back seat and closing the door just as the Brutus leaped at the door. Slobbering drool over the window. Scratching claws. Snapping jaws. Barking ferociously at the tinted glass.

Smelling the scent of urine in the air. As did the Agents sitting in the front. Frightened and panting. Barnard’s heart thumping in his chest.

“To the airstrip!” Barked Barnard having been played for a fool.

Running a finger under his sweating collar. The sooner he was out of this forsaken town the better.

‘*Toot-toot-toot!*’ Tom sounds the horn outside Marshall’s place.

Moments later Marshall appears loitering to the curb. Throwing an overnight bag in the back and he takes the passenger seat.

“Where we headed champ?” Marshall asked unsure of the destination.

“We’ll head to Dharma’s place first.” Pulling away, rear mirrors clear of trailing vehicles.

“What’s going on Tom?” Intrigued by the mystery.

“You’ll find out soon enough, probably be easier when you see it for yourself.”

“See what?”

“*It.*” Leaving it there.

Marshall had given up trying to understand Tom’s riddles. And watched urban streets morph to country roads and then to unsealed lanes. An hour or so later to arrive at a ranch with its old homestead. A tired red biplane parked beside a barn. Tom pulls the vehicle around back frightening squawking chicken. Feathers flying in the air. And parks beside the Dharma’s truck.

“We’re here.”

“I figure that much.” Remarked Marshall taking in the weathered building.

Dharma stands at the back door watching. Waldo scampers down barking excitedly at the visitor. Sniffing at trouser legs and boots. Before running off in pursuit of a clueless chicken. Soon followed by a frightened squawking.

“Marshall.” She calls out.

“Howdy Dharma.”

“Why don’t I take those?” Reaching for the bags.

“Where’s Gramps?” Asked Tom.

“In the workshop *playing*...” Tilting her head towards the barn.

“Thanks, we’ll be back soon.” He kisses her as he passes, “... This way.” Leading him through the darkened interior.

Marshall’s eyes dart about doorways either side of the hall, making out insides of rooms. A mantelpiece lined with photographs. Nostrils smell the character odor and charm of the homestead.

“Over here.” Instructed Tom heading to the barn.

Marshall looks about for the old man but sees no one.

“Down here.” Lifting a trap door at the front of the tractor.

Following cautiously, Marshall descends into a workshop to find the old man leaning over a circuit board cussing with every spark.

“Ted... Ted?” Trying to catch the old man’s attention.

Lifting wielding goggles to see Tom standing with another man. Eyes meet, and smiles exchanged.

“You must be Marshall?” Said Ted.

“That’s right.”

“Dharma said you might becoming... I’m Ted, or *Gramps*, or whatever you young people like to call me.”

“Ted will be fine sir.”

“*Sir*? Did you hear that Tom? I haven’t been called Sir since I retired... Good to have you on board son.”

“Onboard for what?” Marshall looks back and forth between the pair.

“You haven’t told him?” Inquired Ted looking at Tom thinking he had.

“Told me what?” Asked Marshall.

“Not even the...” Said Ted.

“Not even that.” Remarked Tom.

“Oh boy...” Sighs Ted, “...Why don’t you have a look at this circuit while I fill young Marshall in... Where to begin?”

“Start with the spacesuit... Excuse the smell.” Suggests Tom donning welding goggles.

“Spacesuit? Really?” Asked Marshall curiously looking about the workshop like a child in a sweet store. And spies the covered in the corner.

Lifting the cloth, Marshall is taken back by what he sees.

“That can’t be right, can it?” Reading the badge.

“Afraid it is son.” Affirmed Ted.

“Which one are you? May I ask?”

“Of course, you can son... Irving.”

“You’ve walked on the moon?”

“That was a long time ago son... Before your time...” Remarked Ted covering the suit, “...You believe in *Aliens* Marshall?”

Marshall looked to Tom who was pre-occupied welding. Wondering if he was being recruited into a UFO conspiracy cult. What had Tom gotten himself into.

“Ah, don’t know... I see them on television.” Marshall begins to joke.

Tom carried on as if nothing were amiss. Looking up and stares at Marshall seriously. The playful Tom had turned solemn and serious.

“If you don’t believe in little green men, you’re not going to believe what I’m about to show you.” Said Ted removing a cloth from a large glass jar, to reveal the preserved alien limb.

Marshall stares at it.

“What is it? Or was it?” He asked. Already knowing the answer.

“It looks very much like a forearm of a Zeta Grey wouldn’t you say, Ted?” Informs Tom.

“I would say that Tom.” Retrieving a large card box from a shelf.

Reaching inside for a piece of metal the weight of carbon fiber. And hands it to Marshall to examine.

“I don’t understand any of this?” Said Marshall taken in the sudden relics.

“Would you have come if I’d told you about this yesterday?” Asked Tom.

“I would think you were nuts... That notebook is part of all this?”

“Kind of... Belongs to Ted’s father... There is something else we must show you. Something... *Bigger*.”

“A head?” Asked Marshall.

“Nah_, don’t be silly... I buried those last week, didn’t I?” Questioned Tom.

“Well... Strictly speaking, I buried them, you just threw them in the hole.” Corrects Ted.

“Guys you are starting to freak me out.” None of it made sense to Marshall.

“Good, now you know how I felt...” Exhaling heavily, “...You want to come for a ride?”

“Ride? ... Take the Sparrow... You’ve learnt your wings.” Encourages the old man.

“But I haven’t gone solo yet?” Remarked Tom.

“There’s only one way to do that... It’s like any woman son, take it easy on her, and she’ll take it easy on you.”

“Sparrow? ... Wings? ... Solo? ... Women?” Asked Marshall anxiously.

None of these words inspired confidence...

Going Solo

“I didn’t know you knew how to fly?” Asked Marshall anxiously.

“Yeah, neither did I? ... Who would have thought eh? Climb in the front, I’ll take the back... (*Whistle!*) Waldo? You coming or not?”

The terrier struts back and forth whimpering, as though it was waiting for the old man to appear. Keen to get in the air, but not without him.

“Come on! Last chance.” Tom warns the dog, his head peering over the cockpit.

Giving up on the dog presses the starter and pushes the throttle forward. And the engine coughs and splutters, barking and stuttering to life. Excited by the sound, Waldo leaps onto the wing at the last moment and into the front cockpit on Marshall’s lap. To his surprise. The plane moves forward, jostling the occupants as it taxied around of the barn and onto the rugged strip.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Asked Marshall terrified, crossing himself.

“Not really... As the old man said, *only one way to find out*... Hold on.” Pushing the throttle lever forward.

The engine howls louder, roaring and screaming as the plane rushed and jolted across the uneven terrain. A field of corn looming up ahead of it.

“Tom? ... Tom?!” Exclaimed Marshall, wondering if they would make it. His life flashing before his eyes.

Pulling back on the joystick, the plane lifts into the air clipping the tops of the corn. Ted appears at the opening of the barn in time to watch the biplane climb higher and higher before banking gracefully and fly back over the barn. Dharma looks up and sees the plane, only to see her grandfather standing by the barn.

“Tell me that’s not Tom flying that thing?” She feared.

“Okay, it’s not Tom.”

“What if he crashes it?”

“He won’t crash it... Relax. He’ll be fine.” Her grandfather reassures her.

Dharma waves out as the plane flew overhead. Seeing Waldo’s head peering over the side barking. Fearful of looking down, Marshall had his eyes fixed on the controls. Making a diversion Tom flies the plane to the location he had found the saucer. And began to circle the patch of dark soil.

“That’s where I found it? ...” Spoke Tom through the headset, “... That day we were last out here.”

“Found what?” Asked Marshall curiously.

“You’ll see.”

“I’ve seen enough already today.” Remarked Marshall staring down at the mysterious scared soil.

Tom eases the plane about to follow the road below. Absent of black vehicles. In the distance a homestead, and a large storage barn behind.

“Over there.” Tom points to the distant property.

A landing strip ran the behind barn becoming worn and bare. Banking to bring himself into the oncoming breeze eases the throttle and pushes the stick forward.

“Hold on, it’s going to get bumpy.” Warns Tom beginning to have second thoughts.

“Marshall clings to the side of the fuselage and awaits his certain death.” Frantically crossing himself again.

Waldo cowers on Marshall’s lap whimpering.

“You give me no confidence dog.” Remarks Marshall.

The ground lurches up at the plane and sturdy wheels bounce heavily. Bouncing less with each contact. Gradually the plane stays earthbound and Tom idles the throttle. Severing it at the last moment to avoid collision with the barn. The engine coughs before spitting a black plume and dying. The plane taxis to a halt and the terrier leaps out onto the wings running off into the corn stubble.

“We’re alive!” Marshall praised the Lord and the power of prayer.

“Not bad for my only second landing.” Remarked Tom.

“Second?” Exclaims Marshall pulling himself from beneath the upper wing.

“(Whistle) Come on Waldo...” Tom calls out to the dog, “... This way I have something to show you.”

“I can’t be any worse than I’ve already seen. Can it?” Remarked Marshall, still shaking from the landing.

“I’ll let you decide.” About to open the barn side door.

The door opens, and Marshall follows Tom inside. Eyes adjust to the shadowed interior. The smell of sun-dried hay and oats hang strong in the air. Rays of the sun leaked through gaps in the weatherboard and captured dust particles dancing in the air. Tom notices the blocks beneath the craft had shifted. Old indentations marred the surface. Unsure what to make of the markings.

Remaining silent, allowed Marshall to discover the craft for himself. Unsure what he should be looking at. Then suddenly recognized something that did not belong. Trying to attach a rationale to the strange saucer-shaped object.

“Is that what I think it is? (*Gulp.*)” Asked Marshall with disbelieving eyes.

“That depends... What do you think it is?” Tom wanted to hear it from his own lips.

“A *flying saucer*?” Marshall hesitated to answer.

“Good guess... Want to see inside?”

“Whoa! ... Hold up there. You mean? ... (*Phew*), Really?” Taking a breath in disbelief.

“Stand back a bit, a ramp will come down.”

Recalling what Ted had told him, placed a hand on the node. And the ramp descended to the barn floor.

“Come on... It’s okay.” Tom encourages him.

Intrepidly Marshall follows behind, peering at the colorful interior.

“Wow_” Flabbergasted by what he saw.

“I had to clean this thing out of ah... Body parts. Not a pleasant experience. They’re buried beside the barn in a pit.”

“You weren’t joking about the heads?”

“Wish I was... Then we sterilized the thing.”

“You and Ted?”

“Woah.” Exclaimed Marshall taking in the interior.

“You say it came from that hole we saw. You never told us?” Questioned Marshall.

“I didn’t know myself until Ted and some friends dug it out a couple of weeks ago.”

“Who else knows about *this*?” Questioned Marshall concerned.

“You, me, Dharma, the old man and half the bar called Redemption.”

“*Redemption?*”

“I’ll introduce you later.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Don’t know... We can’t fly it. But we can least look under the bonnet... If you know what I mean.” Suggested Tom.

“So that’s what the notebook is about.”

“Partly... Ted’s father gave it to him on his death bed.”

“How did he get it?” Asked Marshall curiously.

“I’ll tell you tonight over a beer... Let’s just say I’ve had some interesting past weeks being chased by men in black suits.”

“Those Pentagon guys? Are they part of this?” Marshall was beginning to make the connection.

“Part of this. Part of Telos...” Tom begins.

“That explains why they wanted you off the project.”

“Yeah... I need you to have a look under there... Check out the configuration.” Tom removes a panel.

“Holy shit... Look at the optics... Hand me that notebook.” A hand reaches out into the air and the notebook trust into it before disappearing beneath the console again.

“I’m going to find Waldo and check around.”

“I’ll be fine.” Marshall hollers from beneath the console.

“(Whistle!-Whistle!) ... Waldo, here boy!” Tom calls out to the dog.

Thrashing noises come from the corn patch, a tail wags above the stubble. Looking about the yard for unwanted visitors. And heard only the sound of the wind rustling through the corn. Going back inside the craft to find Marshall laid on his back, legs buckled like a chalked outline of a body.

“Make any sense to you?”

“Kind of... If we can reverse engineer of this stuff, we’d be rich!” Exclaimed Marshall.

“One step at a time Zuckerberg.” Tom pulled on the reins.

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“Did you know this thing is nuclear?” Informed Tom, leaning against the reactor.

“Well, I assumed it didn’t run on regular gasoline. If that’s what you mean?” Joked marshall.

Hours passed inside the craft and the sun swiftly shifted to the horizon.

“We better get going before it gets dark... We can come back tomorrow.” Tom calls out to Marshall pulling himself upright.

“Dark? Ha, you’re funny you know Tom... What the...? I was only in there a couple of hours?” Remarks Marshall noticing the barn’s interior had dimmed significantly.

“Yeah, forgot to tell you about that... Some sort of time displacement field.” Trying to rationalize the temporal anomaly.

“Whoa, that’s some heavy shit to deal with.” Remarks Marshall anxiously.

“Waldo! (Whistle).” Tom calls for the dog.

Hearing a bark outside and Tom closes the hatch. And the ramp silently rises to become one with the hull.

Tom pulls out an R.T. from within the cockpit.

“(Click) ... Dharma... Come in... Dharma. (*Squawk.*)”

Static sounds before a voice speaks.

“(Static)... You’re alive? Over.... (*Squawk.*)”

“(Click) ... Thanks for the vote of confidence... Yeah, just heading back now... Over... (*Squawk.*)”

“(Squawk)... Copy that, see you soon. Rabbit stew... Over... (*Squawk.*)”

“Seems Dharma’s been hunting... Hope you like rabbit stew.” Informs Tom looking to Marshall.

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough?” Replied Marshall climbing back into the plane. Wondering which he feared most.

The biplane bounces on landing and Tom taxis it beside the barn. The engine roaring before fading to a purr and stuttering and stalling completely. Propellers stutter before coming to a standstill. Any landing you walk away from was a good landing. Waldo leaps from the cockpit soon followed by Marshall looking relieved to be back on mother earth again.

Ted arrives to inspect the Sparrow, unmarred.

“You did well son.” He complimented Tom.

“Thanks, I had a good teacher.”

“So, Marshall? ... What you think?”

“It’s amazing... The circuitry...” Becoming lost for words.

“Let’s get you boys fed.” Remarks Ted.

“It feels like I’ve only just had breakfast.” Responded Marshall...

Bingo!

Sitting four across, it was cozy fit in the Flatbed as it parked outside Redemption. Saturday night and the place seemed unusually busy. The Rodeo was not due for a couple months.

“Something’s going on...” Remarked Ted seeing rowdy sloshed ranch hands spewing from the entrance with bottles in their hands, “... Guess we’ll find out.”

Ted led the way, Marshall followed behind Tom wary of the rowdy individuals about them. The word had spread of a Pentagon man who had been chased from the property by Brutus.

“Why don’t you boys make yourself comfortable at the bar while I go talk to Cecil?” Informs Ted heading out the back.

Through the back door, men could be seen riding the carnival saucer. Flashing lights like a Christmas tree. Gyrating like a rodeo bronco. Cecil signals him to enter and close the door.

“Don’t think we’ll be seeing that Pentagon fella again for a while. *(Chuckles)*...” Cecil chuckles at the thought, “... Brutus dang near took a piece of his ass. He’ll be shuffling paper clips for the rest of his miserable life I suspect.” Pushing a shot glass filled with whiskey towards Ted. A near-empty bottle sat on his desk.

At the bar, Tom and Marshall and Dharma suck on bottles of beer.

“There’s a *couple* of things I need to tell you?” Tom informs Marshall.

“There’s *more*?” Looking strangely at Tom. How could there possibly be more?

“Oh_ yeah_...” Sighing heavily, where to begin? Blurting out what he knew from Ted, “... There’s an alien base on the far side of the moon.”

“*What?*” Taken back by the suggestion.

“We’ve all heard those wacky stories about Astronauts witnessing a base... But they always seem to get debunked as some weird *conspiracy*, right?”

“Yeah so?”

“Well, Ted’s seen it. And his father has visited it... Several times.” Stated Tom plainly.

“You’re joking with me, right?” Marshall asked seriously.

Realizing Marshall’s brain was cluttered rationale, Tom thought it wise to help him relax.

“Three shots.” Orders Tom.

Three shot glasses are placed before them and tequila poured across the tops until overflowing onto the bar.

“Bottoms up... You’re going to need it.” Informs Tom.

Throwing the foul-tasting shots back, faces contort and glasses slam onto the bar.

“Three more.” Instructs Tom placing a twenty on the bar.

“Your money is no good here Tom...” The barmaid pushes it back at him, “... They’re on the house tonight.”

Again, shots are thrown back and again faces grimace as though they had been poisoned.

“No more! ...” Pleads Marshall, “...I’m ready. Just tell me!”

“The base is for the great migration.” Informs Tom.

“*Migration?* What migration? From *where?*” Looking about as though it would walk through the bar doors.

"In about five months from now, they leave their home planet in the Sirius constellation... A tad fifty trillion miles from here..." Pointing to an imaginary star system through the ceiling, "... And make their way here at some unimaginable speed to colonize earth."

"So, what happens to us?"

Tom sighs heavily as though to suggest it would end well for everyone.

"And you know what the *kicker* is Marshall?" Grinned Tom bemused by the thought.

"No, what's that?"

"*You're* building the very satellite that will house the homing beacon that will guide them here." Informs Tom.

"*Telos* is a *homing beacon*?" Eyes widen at the realization.

"*Bingo!* ... We're on the same page." Responded Tom calmly sucking on a beer. Marshall now knew everything he knew. They were both in the same boat.

Stunned at the revelation. Thoughts of denial race through Marshall's mind. But nothing could deny the saucer, nor the alien limb he had seen.

"There *really* is a man in the moon." Confides Tom.

"Any other surprises you're not telling me?"

"No... That's about it in a nutshell." Smiled Tom, having unburdened himself.

"Then there's only two things we need to do."

"What's that?" Asked Tom curiously.

"We need to destroy that damn satellite!"

"And the second?" Asked Tom curiously thinking he had missed something.

"We need three more shots!" Marshall calls out to the barmaid.

A jukebox played and women line danced to Dolly. Ellie-May leaned against a wall by the jukebox sucking on a Margareta straw. Her eyes fixed on Marshall. Glances meet. Shy smiles exchanged. Pursing lips, she blinks suggestively at him. Not going unnoticed by the ranch hands about her. Nor Marshall for that matter.

"Excuse me." Said Marshall making his way to her through the rowdy men.

Dharma and Tom were too busy picking the labels from their bottles to have noticed him leave.

"You two seriously need to get a room." Remarks the barmaid sliding them a key to a room upstairs.

Looking at each other with the same thoughts. Then look about for Marshall who had vanished. Seeing him by the jukebox chatting to Ellie-May. Throwing out tired pickup lines causing her to giggle.

"We better get out of here before it starts." Remarks Dharma seeing ranch hands begin to gather like storm clouds behind Marshall.

"I better go help him out." Responds Tom.

"He'll be fine... He looks like he can handle himself." Pulling Tom up the stairs.

"I suppose." Quickly forsaking Marshall for Dharma.

"Hey, fancy pants?" Patrick interrupts Marshall.

Marshall turned about to discover Patrick leaning heavily on a table to hold himself upright.

"Hi... I'm Marshall... Tom's friend. He's over... Oh, he was just there a moment ago." Looking about to see a set of heels disappearing up a staircase.

“We don’t take friendly to strangers talking to our women now y’ hear?” Patrick pushes a finger into Marshall’s shoulder forcibly.

“Hey, hold it there... Didn’t catch your name?” Asked Marshall.

“Patrick... Why don’t you all leave Marshall alone?” Ellie-May protests.

“Patrick, was it? ... I don’t want to cause any trouble here... I’ll be going now. Sorry, Ellie-May.” Marshall goes to step back, only to bump against bodies closing in on him.

“Ellie-May you keep away from the dandy boy,” Emmitt informs her as though she was his woman.

“You don’t go telling Elli-May nothing, she’s spoken for y’ hear.” Eddie warns Emmitt.

“I ain’t spoken for by no one... Now *get* out of the way you great buffoons.” Pushing her way through the men back to the bar.

Patrick shoves Emmitt who falls back against Eddie. Only to be shoved back again like a pinball. Shoves become pushes and beers begin to spill.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going Eddie! That’s my best shirt.”

“That’s your best one? ... *Ha-ha-ha!*... I’d hate to see the others... *Ha-ha-ha!*” Eddie laughs.

Incensed Patrick pushes back and throws a flying fist, igniting a chain reaction among the men. All hell breaks loose. With Marshall caught in the middle of it. Cecil looks up at the monitor wondering where Dharma was, no-where to be seen. On a barstool grinning and looking pleased with herself, sat Ellie-May.

Upstairs in a darkened room, moonlight filtered through a window as two lovers lay insulated in each other’s arms. All the while downstairs, the jukebox played on and on as grown men pounded pepped up frustrations from their systems. Cecil appears beside the bar and fires a shot into the ceiling.

Startling Tom as the bullet splintered through the wooden floorboards by the door. Groaning intoxicated bodies lay like twisted zombies as they attempted to move. Surrendering to gravity, fell asleep where they laid. Ellie-May smiled at the beau that had fought for her honor. Marshall tried to smile back but it hurt. A split lip and black eyes to show for his efforts. Waldo trotted over bodies sniffing and licking faces of beer and food.

Dharma and Tom quietly appear behind Cecil and Ted.

“Where were you two?” Cecil asked suspiciously expecting to see Tom among the bodies.

“Just out back.” Dharma lies.

“Hmm.” Cecil very much doubted that, seeing Tom buttoning his shirt.

“We better get him home I suppose...” Said Tom going to lift Marshall from the tangled bodies, “... Come on champ, no more beersies for you.” Pulling him to his feet.

“*Call me.*” Mumbled Marshall passing a smitten Ellie-May smiling like a Cheshire cat.

“Come back now y’ hear.” She tells him.

“Ellie-May!?” Cecil riled at her.

“What did I do?” She grinned innocently, flashing long eyelashes.

“*Hmm_.*” Cecil groaned beneath his breath.

Having returned to Washington without notice, Barnard buried had himself nine levels beneath concrete and steel. Hoping to avoid the embarrassing humiliation of the carnival ride. Shrinking at the sound of approaching footsteps. Jumping every time, the telephone rang. Ever fearful of having to face the Director. Reaching for the glass to swallow a mouthful of gin to calm frail

nerves. There were only so many paper clips one could link together before demand exceeded supply.

Receiving daily reports of Mitchell and his lovemaking. Explicit reports that read like Playboy letters. Until finally he could not take it any longer. And pulled the agents off surveillance altogether. In five months the missing craft would be history and the skies would be filled with them.

'What was one more?' Barnard chuckled at the thought.

Telos would occupy his full attention from now. If he could appease the Director, then perhaps his prior transgressions would be forgiven. Lover looked. Forgotten. Mitchell and Irving and Murphy and his beastly dog can die along with the multitude that would perish in the wholesale slaughter by the colonizing forces. While he would be safe the Pentagon's womb. Or was he? Perhaps he too was expendable?

The thought depressed him, and he reaches for the glass only to find it empty. The cube of ice had melted to a pebble and clung to the side of the glass frightened. Swallowing the diluted tasteless solution, he plucked the courage to visit Isaac.

Clinging to walls, the sound of squeaking rubber sole shoes followed him as he made his way along the labyrinth of corridors. Straightening his jacket before the plain white door. He taps three times.

"Tap-tap-tap."

Without warning the door is suddenly flung open to have Isaac standing there.

"Barnard! You're back? Didn't expect to see you again after...?" Isaac began but could not finish before sticking his head into the corridor wondering if he should be seen talking to him.

"What do you mean? After? ... After what?" Barnard asked inquisitively, looking about the corridor as to who Isaac was searching for.

"Well_ I mean_... After the charades with the carnival saucer and all..."

"You know about that?" Asked Barnard surprised.

"Everyone knows Barnard... The Director is *so_pissed* with you..." Informs Isaac gleefully. Then realizes Barnard has not spoken to him, "... Oh."

Three alien heads stare at Barnard as though they wanted to melt his brain. Barnard hears laughter inside his head.

"News travels fast among *this* lot Barnard... There are no secrets here." Informs Isaac.

"It was a case of mistaken identity... It was the *Hybrids* that got it wrong." Blamed Barnard.

"Acting under *your* directions Barnard." Isaac reminds him.

"You do your job and I'll do mine... How's that *thing* progressing? *Hm?*"

"It's on track. It would be ready on time."

Isaac looks over a shoulder at the six-foot cylindrical device. What did he know? He was only there to pander to the Grey's few needs. It was all beyond him. Circuitry that defied logic. He dared not question its power source. Then remembered what he wanted to tell Barnard.

"Oh, the Director is looking for you." Isaac grins.

"Said who?" Asked Barnard anxiously.

"Said *them*." Informed Isaac looking back at the grey creatures for confirmation.

Before Barnard could respond, the door slams in his face. Leaving him stranded in the hallway. Staring blankly at a plain white door. Passersby cradling files eye him suspiciously. Quietly gossiping and giggling.

"It was a *mistaken identity*," Barnard informs them under his breath.

“Bar_nard_! You’re back!?” Snarls the Director like Brutus.

“Apparently.” Mumbles Barnard stepping closer the pit bull wedged behind the heavy desk.

“Don’t sit!” The Director snaps.

“But Director, I can explain.” Hoping he could.

“Well then? *Hm?!?*” Eyes bulge like a diseased goldfish.

“All evidence suggested...” Barnard began.

“*Suggested?!?*” Cutting him short, “... First *Mitchell*, now this?”

“But Director, I can explain everything.”

“Save your breath and pray that Sirius never gets wind of this. Or you can kiss what little brains you have goodbye... *Hm!?!?*”

“But Director... I know the saucer somewhere, we’ve been tricked.” Pleaded Barnard.

“There is no *we_* in this Barnard, only *you_*... From now on you are assigned to your desk until the launch of this blessed satellite... Keep away from Mitchell and that Captain Irving. We can’t afford for anything to delay *Telos* from being launched. Is that understood?! *Hm?! (Belch!)*” The Director warns. Belching as though it were an exclamation mark.

“Yes, Director... No Director... Thank you, Director.” Lowering his head in failure and shame.

“Now get out of my sight.” The Director leaned back in his chair and watched the diminutive man walk cower from his office.

Barnard shrank lower if that was possible. Thankful he has still had a job. Thankful he still had his brains...

Fight Club

“Morning Mister Mitchell... How was your weekend?” Asked Hamish beaming a smile.

“Morning Hamish. Good, and yours?” Reciprocated Tom.

“Good, I think. The wife had me in the garden for most of it...” Hamish began and was about to continue when Tom cut him off.

“*Good God*, would you look at the time... I’m running late for a meeting. Must dash Hamish.” Pressing a security pass over a sensor.

“Have a good day Mister Mitchell! ... *Damn, I didn’t tell him about Marshall’s black eye... Guess he’ll find out soon enough.*”

Tom collapses in his chair. Coffee steaming from the mug in his hand. Eyes fixed on the drafting board. His mind on the craft. With Marshall on board, a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He would not go insane alone. Making good progress unraveling some of the circuits. Discovering how to extend the legs from the craft. A strange holographic projection had appeared. Fathoming it to be a galactic map of stars and constellations they vaguely knew. And a protective shield of some kind. A faint green light shimmering over the surface of the hull. Attaching it a shovel and ax. A pitchfork. Nothing could penetrate it.

The indentations in the console aroused some suspicion when Marshall had placed his hands onto them. Feeling a mild electric shock course up his arms. Causing the craft to come to life and hum and hovering briefly before removing his hands in fright. Vowing never to touch it again.

Tom is pulled from the daydream by Travis appearing at the door.

“Boss... Have you seen Marshall yet?” Asked Travis hoping to be the first to inform him.

“No. Why? Is there something the matter?” Tom asked worried something had happened to him.

“You should see his eye? It’s a beauty! He claims he walked into a door.”

“Really? ...” Tom chuckles, “... Why don’t you go find him and send him in? ... And Bok-Choy too if he’s about, we need to go over this week’s work.”

“Right-o boss.” Travis hurries off towards the cafeteria.

No sooner had Travis disappeared, when Pierce appeared at his door looking bemused.

“Lloyd, how are you?” Asked Tom.

“Don’t *how are you* me... And act like nothing’s going on... I know your little secret, Tom.” Remarked Pierce.

Startled, Tom is wary what Pierce was on about.

“What *secret* would that be Lloyd?” Tom probes carefully, wondering if Marshall had spilled the beans on the craft.

“The *fight club* you guys have going on somewhere.” Informs Pierce.

“Fight club? ...” Before the penny dropped, “... Oh_ that, yeah_ well you see...”

“I use to be a pretty handy myself back in my days at Cambridge... Lightweight champion three years running.” Pierce shuffles his feet. Bobbing his head side to side. Blowing short sharp breaths with each jab.

“It’s not like that Lloyd.”

“You mean *bare knuckles*? My God-man... There must be rules. *Queensberry*. Otherwise, we’re no better than animals.” Pierce prances on his toes reminiscing the old days.

“There’s no fight club.” Bursting Pierce’s bubble.

“No fight club?” Responded Lloyd dejectedly.

“Just between you and me...” Tom leans forward, “... It was over a woman... Ellie-May I believe.” Informs Tom.

“Ellie-May... Hm_...” Pierce fantasizes, “...Oh well, if you ever decide to form a club you know where to find me.” Dancing down the corridor twitching side to side shadow boxing whistling short sharp breaths.

“Unbelievable.” Responds Tom, and somewhat relieved.

Soon after three technicians arrived and planted themselves on the tired office couch.

“Marshall.” Welcomed Tom cryptically.

“Tom.” Welcomed Marshall keeping a straight face.

“What happened?” Questioned Tom innocently putting him on the spot.

“I believe as you would put it... *I walked into a door.*”

“A door... Hm. They’re everywhere. You have to watch out for them.”

“Yes, *we* do... Don’t *we* Tom?”

Tavis listened on unsure what to make of the cryptic conversation. It was as though there was something they were not letting on.

“Indeed... Moving right along, we have a big week lined up and thanks to Pierce I have broken it down into *stages*.... We *only* have five months to complete this *thing*...” Speaking as though it were annoying, “...Let’s make every minute count. Understood?”

“Yes, boss.” The three choir boys sang in soprano, tenor, and bass.

“Off you go then... Not you Marshall... I need a word with you.”

Travis and Bok-Choy chuckle between themselves.

“You can close the door behind.” Tom warns the pair and waits for them to leave.

The two young men stare at each other. Each knowing a secret that would see them fired in a heartbeat. Sabotaging satellites never looked good on anyone’s resumes. But sabotage it they must.

“Any thoughts on how we blow that dang thing up?” Asked Tom plainly and simply.

“Why don’t we just tell Pierce?” Proposed Marshall.

“He’ll think we’re crazy and we’ll both escorted from the premises.”

“Can’t we simply delay production?”

“Delaying only delays the inevitable.” Tom fires back as quickly as the question was asked.

“Destroy what we have already.” Marshall brainstorms.

“They’ll find another contractor to build them a satellite... Defeating our purpose and not to mention our jobs as we know them... No, we have to wait for *Telos* to be fitted... *Telos* is the problem, not the satellite.”

“Then what can we do?”

“We build the thing and inform Pierce at the last moment. Hoping what we showed you, convinces him.”

“And if he doesn’t go along with it? ... And we’ve just lost our jobs for suggesting sabotage?”

“Then we go above his head.”

“Who?” Asked Marshall curiously, there was no one above Pierce but...

“Stowers.”

“He won’t see us. We are nobodies to him. Plus, we have been banned from the premises after telling Pierce of our concocted scheme... Not to mention, Hamish would shoot us on sight.”

Like a vulture, the Red Sparrow circles the old homestead. Its eyes on the lookout for black and black beetles. But there were none. It was as if they had been eradicated. Swooping in low, Ted readies the plane for the short landing. Bouncing once before taxiing at the rear of the barn. Waldo leaps from the old man’s lap and runs off sniffing for new scents.

Visions of yesteryear rekindle in the old man mind’s eye. Moments that had snagged on his memory that could never be forgotten. Flashes of his youthful wife appearing on the porch as he came courting. A brash young man filled with dreams of becoming an aviator and reaching for the stars. Her father reluctant about the union. A sharecropper of old caught up in the fast-moving modern age of the Sixties. Of rock ‘n roll and streamlined automobiles. Of jet engines and supersonic speed and space flight.

But that was a lifetime ago. A cold gust of wind soon awakens him back to the empty yard. Void of Ester. Void of life but his own and the dog now sniffing about the porch.

‘(Whistle!)’ Whistles Ted whistles, “... Here boy!”

Waldo scampers over to the old man and sits at his feet panting, a pink tongue hangs from the side of its mouth. Stepping inside the barn to inspect the wondrous craft. Now seeing the extended legs Tom had mentioned to him. The weekends would be Tom’s and Marshall to study the craft’s workings. The weekdays would his.

They were engineers. And he an aviator. And never the two shall understand the other. A test pilot of old, he had one last fight left in him. Coughing abruptly, spits the blood to the ground. Kicking dirt over it. Knowing that his time was earth was running out. Gratefully accepted every day above ground was a good day.

Pushing open the large wooden barn doors. Looks to the clear blue sky, and paddock of corn stubble. And wonders who might be watching on. Not that he really cared. Thirty miles to the nearest property, he could smell the solitude in the air.

He places a hand on the node. A pressurized hiss sounds as the ramp descends slowly to the floor. And intrepidly, he steps into the unknown. A feeling of Deja-vu rouse in his nostrils. It may have been sixty years on, but the same anxiety returned.

Standing before the indentations. Places his hands into them and immediately feels a tingle up his arm to the brain stem at the base of his skull. A humming sound resonates sensing a pilot at the helm. And the ramp slowly raises. Not to be left behind, Waldo jumps onto the ramp and scampers inside before the ramp closed behind him.

“You ready for this?” He looks down at the dog wagging its tail.

“Woof!” Waldo barked excited by noises.

Walls project view of the outside.

“Let’s see what she can do eh?” The old man informs the dog.

Subtly pressuring his hand to the left. The craft rotates about on its axis to the left. Pressuring the hand to the right, it turns slowly to the right. As though it could read his thoughts. Intuitively he imagines turning it about quickly. And with that thought, the craft spun about to face the open

barn door. Within the cabin, everything remained motionless. And not a hint of movement. It was as though the barn had moved and the craft had stood still.

“Woah.” The old man exclaimed at the revelation.

The craft was like an extension of his mind.

“Okay boy, you ready to take a fight?” The old man asked the dog.

“*Woof!*” The dog barks.

Pressing hands forward imagines guiding out the barn doors and over the corn paddock.

“Let’s see what she has in her... Jump!” Beckoning the dog on to the console.

Waldo jumps up and sits quietly, perplexed by the lack of rushing air over him. Something did not seem right and looks at the old man.

“Good boy.” He reassures the dog.

Pressing his hands forward, the craft moves off across the field. Hand movements pitch and yaw the craft to bank and turn. Flying much like the biplane. The Red Sparrow watches on jealously.

After countless laps of the field, the old man returns to the craft to the barn.

“I think that’s enough for today Waldo... Better be heading back.” Guiding the craft back into the barn.

Legs descend to the floor and the craft settles. Lifting his hands from the indentations the humming ceases and silence returns. The sensation of the connection to the craft faded. The ramp lowers to the ground. The day had passed unnoticeably from within the craft, yet shadows had moved a several feet on the ground.

Climbing back into the Red Sparrow, the old man presses the starter and the engine screamed to life cursing at the old man. As if it could sense the infidelity. Vibration reverberated through his bones. His love was not pleased with him.

Pulling back on the stick the old plane lifted into the air as though to soothe her ruffled wings. He had become one with machine again. Waldo barked at the noisy engine. His tongue flapping in the rushing air as the plane soared higher and higher....

Do not disturb

Days turned to weeks, and weeks to months as the satellite neared completion.

“Bar_nard_!” The Director hollers into the mouthpiece spraying drool like a savage dog barking at an errand boy.

“Director... How can I help?” Responds Barnard frightened by the tone in his voice.

“I need you to go to StarTech... Ensure everything is ready for *Telos*’ arrival... And take Isaac with you.”

“*Isaac?* ... But Director.” Protests Barnard.

“Yes, Isaac... He knows more about it than any of us.”

“Yes, Director.” Yields Barnard.

“And Barnard_?”

“Yes, Director?”

“Don’t go chasing anything you shouldn’t this time, *Hm!* ... I want a complete report on my desk. Understood? *Hm?!?*” Hanging up before Barnard could answer.

“Yes, Director...” Responded Barnard as the line went dead.

Wishing never to return to Albuquerque, Barnard finds himself now having to take Isaac. Perhaps for the better. Isaac was the *technical* brains for the Pentagon behind *Telos*. Lifting the handset Barnard orders the next available flight for that afternoon.

“Very good then... Have a vehicle waiting in the parking lot.” Barnard hangs up looking to the corridor outside his door.

He had not stepped outside it for five months. Five months of keeping to himself shut away from any human contact. Shuffling papers. Linking paper clips. Sighing a deep breath, prepared himself for the unknown.

Hearing only the sound of his own footsteps, made his way along empty corridors. Punctuated by doors without of numbers. Until he came to the door he feared most.

‘*Tap-tap-tap.*’ Barnard knocks lightly, preparing himself for the altercation with Isaac.

Animalistic voices sound from behind the door. Yet the door remained closed.

‘*Tap-tap-tap.*’ He knocks louder hoping to attract Isaac’s attention.

Then, as if to surprise him, the door burst suddenly open. Isaac stands before him blocking his path into the laboratory.

“What do you want Barnard?” Asked Isaac giggling to the three Greys watching on.

“How’s *Telos* progressing? ...” Barnard asked, “... I have yet to see a single report.”

“I’ve been busy... Haven’t we boys? ...” Isaac asked the Greys standing over the mysterious black object.

Greys chatter among themselves in clicks and purrs and turn back to Isaac and nod. Their eyes burning into Barnard becoming dizzy.

“They reckon another week.” Informed Isaac.

“Good, good... The Director will be pleased.” Barnard steps back from the door.

“If that’s all Barnard I’m buzzy.” Retorts Isaac about to close the door.

Only to have Barnard shove a foot into the doorway. Causing it to remain ajar.

“Hey?” Protests Isaac taken back from the sudden

“Just one more thing...” Barnard is reluctant to say.

“What is it?”

“... The Director has requested you come with me to StarTech to inspect the satellite.”

“You mean I’m going topside? When do we leave?” Exclaimed Isaac excited.

“Noon... Meet me at my office and I will escort you to the surface.”

“You hear that boys? I’m getting out of here.” Excited as though he were being paroled.

Animated chatter erupted from the three Greys, eyes blinking rapidly as though they too were excited for him.

“My office by noon...” Repeats Barnard, “... Don’t be late!”

“See you then... Have a nice day.” Isaac closes the door quietly in Barnard’s face.

Abruptly, a holographic projection appears before the Director. Sparkling and crackling static. Without warning, Sirius’ sinister elongated face manifests in high definition as though he were in the room. Startling the Director.

“Di_rec_tor_.” Sirius wheezes elongated words.

“Sirius? What a surprise to see you.” The Director grimaces faking a smile.

“The_sa_tel_lite_?”

“Everything is on track for launch date... I’m sending our top man to inspect it as we speak.”

“Good_. The_fleet_a_waits_the_sig_nal_.”

“Yes, yes Sirius.”

“Serve_me_well_and_you_will_be_re_ward_ed... Fa_il me_, and_you_will_die_”

“Yes, Sirius. Thank you, Sirius.” Cowers the Director.

The screen vanishes to thin air and the Director collapses back into his chair. And reaches for a bottle from the bottom drawer.

Noon, and Isaac appears at Barnard’s door as instructed with a carry bag by his side anxious to get going. Barnard appears carrying nothing. All he required was a hotel bathrobe and a bottle of gin.

Eyes inspect the shy stocky individual shrinking in a corner of the lift. A hand covering his mouth with a handkerchief. Quaking every time, the lift opened and closed.

Isaac on the other hand was unsure what month, or year it was. Kept in captivity, assigned one secret project to another, it had been a lifetime since he last ventured into the outside world. Lift doors open and Isaac peers into unknown floors. Faces of suited tanned individuals stare back at him. Security badges about their necks. Eyes inspect the feral looking individual wearing a white lab-coat and carrying a large black important-looking folder. He was one of them. As for the shy stocky gentleman, perhaps he was lost.

‘Ding.’ The lift door opens to the subterranean parking lot.

Inhaling fresh air as though smelling a fragrant rose Isaac relished his newfound freedom. Barnard on the other hand shelled his nose and mouth and hurried to the waiting black SUV. Doors close behind them and cocoon the pair within. The vehicle rose gracefully through the remaining levels to the surface. Isaac presses his face against the window like a child in a candy store as the world outside passed by. Then he saw it. It was brilliant and beyond his wildest imagination. The sun.

And colors, so many colors. Blue skies and green trees. Lowering the window to get a better look. Barnard overrides the control and raises the window to Isaac’s frustration. Keeping him in

captivity. Much like the laboratory. Swiftly the black SUV moved along a highway before deviating to an airstrip and into a hangar where a black Learjet awaited them. Destination Albuquerque.

“We don’t have much time Tom? It’s this weekend, or never?” Warns Marshall suggesting Tom needed to speak with Pierce.

“I know. I know. I’ll have a word with him privately later today.” Informs Tom.

“Don’t leave it too late okay?”

“Don’t remind me.” Responds Tom wondering where he would begin.

‘Hey Lloyd, we’re about to be colonized by anal probing aliens, and I was wondering by any chance, if you’re not doing anything, we could blow up a billion-dollar satellite? ... It’s okay? Really? Ghee thanks.’ Tom fantasies.

“Not.” Tom speaks aloud to himself just as Peirce appeared.

“Not what? Is everything okay Tom? You look a little bit pale.” Pierce inquired.

“Nothing Lloyd just speaking aloud.”

“Obviously... Just keep it to a low chatter when their inspecting engineer is about okay? I wouldn’t want then to think you’re crazy or anything.” Advised Pierce.

“Yeah-Nah... We wouldn’t want that, would we? ... You say they are sending someone to inspect out work?”

“That’s right... Is there a problem?” Pierce raised his eyebrows.

“No-no, not at all... I was hoping we could have a look at theirs as well.” Suggested Tom.

“Oh_, the ole you show me yours, and I’ll show you mine.” Remarked Pierce.

“Something like that.”

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way with the Pentagon Tom... They’re the ones paying us... Which reminds me, have you approved the last of those PO’s I placed on your desk this morning?” Inquired Pierce keen to invoice.

“Not yet, I’ll check them over later today and drop them off before I go home... What time is this guy showing up?”

“Sometime tomorrow morning.” Informs Pierce checking a clipboard.

“Okay then... I see you later.” Said Tom.

Travis looks down from the scaffolding, watching Pierce walk away. Tom catches him slacking.

“Now Biff... I want two coats of wax on that.” He calls back up at him.

“Just finishing the first coat now.” Jokes Travis.

The satellite was finally complete in all its glory. Suspended above the ground by chains. Troubled only by the weakest link. A billion dollars façade that did nothing but house an insidious alien homing beacon.

Tom tried to imagine the sinister device that would fill the core and transmit signals faster than the speed of light to the awaiting fleet. He had delivered his part of the project. Now, it was up to the Pentagon to deliver theirs. Hoping he could probe the visiting engineer as to when *Telos* would be delivered and fitted into the satellite.

Returning to Tom office spies the thick pile of purchase orders Pierce had left on his desk. Documents that legitimized the creation of a device that would annihilate of mankind.

“Oh boy... Coffee, I’m going to need coffee.” Deciding to self-medicate.

Ticking and crossing in red pen. The afternoon passed as did the mugs of coffee. Until finally he came to the very last purchase order. To which he examined. Stamped it loudly. And signed it off with an indecipherable scrawl, that could have been his initials.

“Done.” Pushing himself back from the desk as though to distance himself from the vexing documents.

But the crushing truth came rushing back to him after hours of denial. The talk with Pierce could not be put off any longer. Gathering the documents, places them in a box and holds it out as though it contained a dead cat. And marches as though he were a one-man funeral procession to Pierce’s office.

Taking slow reluctant steps, until he could step no further.

“Tom. Come in... Don’t just stand there.” Said Peirce looking up seeing a shadow standing in the doorway.

Closing the door behind him. The funeral march continued to the high altar of Pierce’s desk. Where upon he placed the coffin of documents down and took a seat in front of it.

“Have a seat...” Instructed Pierce belatedly, “... Something the matter?” Seeing a worried look on Tom’s face.

Tom hesitates, trying to choose the right words for which there were none.

“It’s difficult to explain in words... It’s something you have to see for yourself.”

“Does it involve *Telos*?”

“Sort of.”

“There isn’t a problem I should know about?” Eyebrows knit together, as a worried look forms over Pierce’s face.

“Not that I’m aware of... Like I say... It’s something you have to see for yourself.”

“You’re starting to worry me, Tom... This not the time. We have a lot riding on this. I know you have had your concerns about it... I’ve pulled a lot of strings to keep you on the team...”

“Lloyd, I’m hearing you loud and clear. The satellite is *perfect* and ready to go... But this is something you have to see for yourself... Only you can decide on.” Continues Tom obscurely.

“Okay then... Show me what you got.” Pierce goes to stand but Tom remains seated.

“Ah_ I can’t... It’s not here...” Looking to the window and beyond.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at Tom...” Worries Pierce still in the dark.

“Saturday... We’ll show you this Saturday.”

“We? ... Who else have you involved in this?”

“More than I can name, but you’ll meet then on Saturday. So? ... You are coming?”

“I guess I have no choice. Do I?” Asked Pierce rhetorically.

“Not really... Eight billion lives depend on your decision.”

“Well if you put it that way... This better not be one of your practical jokes... Because I’m not in the mood.” Warns Pierce.

“I’ll let you be the judge of that.” Informs Tom.

Without Pierce on board, there was no way to plant a denotation device. Stowers was beyond his reach. It was Pierce or nothing. Tom stands and marches as wearily and slowly as he had entered. Then turns about solemnly.

“Thanks Lloyd, you won’t regret it... Saturday?”

“Okay...” Pierce agrees, “... Saturday.”

“I’ll pick you up.” Tom closes the door behind him relieved he had at least initiated something. But he was still a long way from first base.

Nervously, Pierce lifts the handset and dials an extension number and waits.

"Mister Stowers office, how can I help you?" Ms. Hathaway answered in a chirpy secretarial voice.

"Ah_ Ms. Hathaway. I was wondering if Sean was about?" Pierce inquired politely.

"Oh_ I'm sorry Mister Pierce. He seems to have left the office, saying he didn't wish to be disturbed until *Monday*."

"*Monday*?" Pierce repeated perplexed by the unexpected delay.

"That's what he said. He did appear to be in a bit of a hurry, if I may say so... Told me if you called, that you were in charge."

"Did he now? ... Very good. Thank you, Ms. Hathaway. That will be all."

"Thank you, Mister Pierce. Good day."

The phones fall dead, leaving Pierce hanging in the air. First Mitchell. Now Stowers. Something was going on. But what? Pierce felt sandwiched and uneasy in the middle. He would play along with Mitchell. And if necessary, have armed security placed twenty-four-seven about the satellite until its launch. And Mitchell reassigned to another satellite Monday. But until then, he had a more pressing engagement.

Barnard and the engineer were about to visit StarTech tomorrow morning...

Perfect in every way

It was uncertain who had slept less, Pierce or Mitchell. Pierce anxious to have the inspection over and done with. Tom reluctant to confront his counterpart.

Suited in white sanitized overalls, technicians put the final touches to the satellite. Working like excited beekeepers about a giant white hive. Darting in and out. Tom nervously eyes the workshop door as it opened and closed. Anxious breath fogging his visor. Checking his watch for the umpteenth time in as many minutes.

“Hey, what’s up? ... You look anxious.” Remarks Marshall seeing him fidgeting.

“Yeah, I am I suppose... This is it.” Admits Tom.

“Yeah... It’s completed okay.” Consoles Marshall.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Tom had to concede.

“Hey? Did you get to speak to Pierce about you know what?”

“Kind of... Couldn’t exactly come out with it... Told he had to come and see for himself as I did with you. A picture speaks a thousand words they say.” Advised Tom.

“Yeah, you got that right... Let hope he sees the same picture. He’s our only hope.”

Tom checks his watch again and stares at the workshop door willing it to open.

Just then three individuals dressed in white overalls and helmets walked through the workshop door towards him. Two Tom immediately recognized. The third he could not place. Pierce was unmistakable. Lean and standing upright. Taking long strides carrying a StarTech clipboard. Barnard, short and podgy. Looking like a lost tourist and taking twice as many steps to keep up with Pierce.

The third individual must be the engineer thought Tom. Loitering at a pace of his own. Carrying a large black manual. He seemed more excited to be there than Barnard.

“Ah_ Tom, there you are...” Pierce approaches him, “... You know Mister Barnard.”

“Mister Barnard, it’s always a pleasure to see you.” Tom lied.

“Likewise.” Barnard reciprocated.

Pierce turns to the Isaac to make an introduction.

“This fine gentleman is Isaac... He’s the engineer heading the *Telos* project on their side.”

Tom extends a hand to welcome him.

“Good to finally meet you. We’re so keen to see *Telos*.” Tom probes.

‘Ah-umm.’ Grunts Pierce suggestively, knowing where Tom was probing.

“That won’t be likely... It’s all very top-secret if you know what I mean.” Informs Barnard.

“Oh, that’s a shame. Oh well, maybe next time.” Suggests Tom.

“So, is this it?” Isaac looks up at the gigantic structure, “... Marvelous job your team has done.”

Keen eyes strain to look upwards and examine the large dark cavity at its central core. Barnard has difficulty tilting his head back without wanting to fall over. And plays along.

“Marvelous. Marvelous.” Condemns Barnard.

“You mind if I take a closer look?” Asked Isaac keenly.

“Be my guest.” Informs Tom standing back.

Isaac climbs aboard a hoist and is raised slowly inside the cavity. Taking measurements with an infra-red device. Calibrating to the manual in his hand. Asking for the hoist to be lifted higher to ascend deeper into the core. All but disappearing, like Alice into Wonderland.

A tapping sound is heard.

Marshall stares at Tom and Tom at Barnard and Pierce at Tom hoping Isaac would not find anything untoward. Time passed slowly. Sweat forms on Barnard's forehead, anxious to be going. The suit becoming stifling. Mitchell towered over him. Making him more anxious to leave. Half an hour later, Isaac descends from Wonderland. And steps onto the workshop floor appearing as if he had seen the Mad Hatter. Shaking his head.

"Is there something the matter?" Asked Pierce hesitantly, looking to Tom as if he had something to do with it.

Isaac remained silent. Scribbling frantic notes on a page. Stabbing his point at something as if it were wrong. Snaps the manual close and looks at Tom suspiciously. Pierce closed his eyes and waited for the bad news.

"I don't know how you guys did it... But it's *per_fect*. To the one-ten-thousandth of an inch... Incredible..." Commended Isaac smiling, "... I don't know how you did it."

"(Phew)..." Pierce sighs, releasing his tension, "... You had us going there, Isaac."

"Well done to you and the team Mister Pierce." Commends Isaac.

"It's *Tom* and *his* team you should be thanking."

Isaac extends a hand and Tom shakes it vigorously as though he had won first prize.

"*Ha!*" Barnard manages a jovial laugh and a fake smile.

"It's what we do best here at StarTech... Precision." Trumpets Tom warily.

"Inform Mister Stowers we'll be taking delivery next week... Will that be a problem?"

"I don't see why not?" Pierce looks for assurance from Tom that all was complete.

"She's ready to go, paperwork has been signed off." Informs Tom.

"Just tell us where you want it shipped and it will be on its way."

"Ah..." Interrupts Barnard, "...We'll be providing our haulage, Mister Pearce... We wouldn't want something to happen to it on the way after all your hard work."

"No, no... Of course not. That suits us perfectly, one less liability to be worried about." Pierce grins.

"We best be off. We have a plane to catch this afternoon." Informs Barnard.

"Oh, but I thought..." Groans Isaac hoping to stay a little longer.

"Isaac here is a terribly busy man... *Aren't* you Isaac? You have to be ready to fit *Telos* to this *beau_tiful* satellite." Barnard gestures stocky arms to the enormous technological suspended wonder above them.

Muzzled, Isaac remains silent and stands away from Barnard as though disassociating himself from the man. Eyes pleading not to be taken away.

"Very well then, let me show you out... This way." Informs Pierce gesturing the way.

"Good meeting you Mister Barnard." Tom rubs salt into the open wound.

"You too Mister Mitchell, I hope we meet again sometime *soon*." Informs Barnard cryptically.

"I look forward to it." Replies Tom.

"(Phew!)" Sighs Tom wanting to remove the helmet.

"So, how'd we do?" Asked Marshall curiously.

"Perfect... *Apparently*." He responds suspiciously.

“Apparently? What does that mean?”

“Well, I mean... Who pays a billion dollars for a satellite, flies halfway across America, and only inspects the core? What about the rest of it?”

“Yeah, I see what you mean about it being a glorified paperweight.” Recalls Marshall

“Its only purpose is to house *Telos*... Full stop.”

“Good work guys...” Congratulations Pierce, “...You had me worried there for a moment Tom... One of your practical jokes?”

“Yeah, you got me there Lloyd... You still on for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

“*Fight Club* ...” Tom shadow punches before in, “... But hey, if you’re not up to it?”

“Gloves? Queensbury rules?”

“Of course... We’re not animals... Ask Marshall here.”

“Well, Marshall? ... You’ve been there? What do you think?” Asked Pierce.

“Wouldn’t have missed it for the world... Just don’t forget to duck.”

“A Cambridge man *never* ducks Marshall... We weave, we dance, we prance... *Whew!-Whew!*” Pierce begins to shuffling left and weaving to the right, jaggging into the air. Much to the amusement of technicians watching on.

“You’ll be a knock out Mister Pierce!” Grins Marshall.

“You had me worried Tom... For a moment I thought there was something wrong... Ha. Good one... *Whew!-Whew!*” Jabbing at the air.

“Don’t be ridiculous Lloyd, after all our hard work?”

“Touché old man... *Whew!-Whew!*” Pierce shuffles off.

“Well, I guess it’s one way to get him out to the ranch.” Responds Marshall.

Roswell residents had reported sightings of a mysterious object moving about in the night sky. Newspapers had taken up the story and quickly dismissed the sightings as another hoax. The had been duped once. They would not allow themselves to be fooled again.

Agents reported what they had heard back to the desk-bound Barnard, who ordered the Agents to investigate. Eventually triangulating the sightings to an abandoned ranch. Delving into property records showed the ranch was in the name of Ester Trotman. The name sounded familiar. Curiosity had got the better of Barnard, as did idle hands, and he drilled deeper to discover the woman was the wife of... Captain Edward Irving.

“*Of course, ... Gotcha!*” Remarks Barnard relieved, “... Try to get the better of me, will you? We’ll see about that.”

But who was flying the craft? That would be revealed upon its apprehension. This time he would keep the news to himself and bask in the glory upon his return. Like a triumphant Roman Emperor returning from North Africa. The spoils of war would be on displayed for all to see. He could almost feel the veneration being bestowed upon him. Nostrils flared, filling tubby lungs to their limited extremities. Nothing could stop him now.

“Where are we going? ...” Asked Isaac anxiously, “... The airstrip is that way.” Looking over his shoulder, watching as the turnoff disappears behind him. Seeing other identical black vehicles joined them and headed into the outback.

“Unfinished business.” Informed Barnard.

‘Gulp.’ Isaac gulps. This was it. Concluding that Barnard had a shallow grave waiting for him.

The black convoy sped swiftly along the rural road. Kicking up dust and throwing it into the face of the following vehicle. Wipers blinked away sandy tears. Sometime later the dust covered convoy arrived at an abandoned looking homestead and barn.

“Block the driveway, don’t let anyone in or out!” Ordered Barnard.

Driving quietly into the yard as though to prevent his prey from escaping. Skids to a halt in front of the large barn doors. A large familiar looking dog barks savagely at the vehicles. Ted looks up to the doors from the inside. He had been expecting them. It was only a matter of time.

Awoken by the barking, Waldo awakens from a nap to yap along with Brutus.

“Shh Waldo, good boy.” Ted quietens the dog.

Wiping oily hands on a grimy cloth discards it over a toolbox and steps into the brilliant sunlight from a side door.

“Shh Brutus... Good boy... Sit!” Ted commands, and Brutus falls silent to lay the old man’s feet.

“Stay here,” Barnard instructs Isaac to remain in the vehicle.

“I’m good.” Remarks Isaac, reluctant to step outside.

Ted sees Barnard standing beside the open door of the SUV, reluctant to step any closer.

“Barnard? ... What are you doing here? You’re trespassing?” Warns Ted.

“Trespassing is such a *relative* word isn’t it Captain Irving.” Barnard tries to be witty.

“I asked... What are you doing here?” The old man repeats.

“I’ve come to search the barn.”

“You got a warrant?”

“It’s not your barn... Is it? So, you won’t be needing to read it will you?” Bluffs Barnard holding up a folded piece of blank paper.

“I wouldn’t go in there if I were you.” Ted stands in front of the doors, holding arms out wide as though to prevent him from stepping closer.

“Stand back Captain Irving... You have had your fun. Your joy rides.... But now it’s over. I win. You lose... Go back to your little farm and I will go back to Washington and *all_ this* will be forgotten...” Informs Barnard, “... Open the doors!” He barks.

Agitating Brutus to growl and snarl at him. Slobbering drool from jaws.

“Good boy... Shh_.” Ted calms the dog down and steps aside to allow Agents to pass.

“That wasn’t so hard was it?” Grins Barnard pleased with himself.

Barnard looks to the homestead and the young woman with the Winchester rifle on her shoulder looking at him. He smiles at Dharma, but his smile is unrequited. Squeaking rusting casters protest as heavy barn doors roll open brings Barnard’s attention back to the barn. And he discovers not to a saucer, but a dull red biplane with its engine housing open. A toolkit sits on a wing. An oil-stained rag sits over toolbox.

“Is there a problem Barnard?” Asked Ted offering a one-sided grin.

“But...Ah...” Barnard stutters.

“What exactly you looking for? ... Maybe I can help?” Teases Ted.

“You know *exactly* what I’m looking for!” Barnard said fuming.

“I tell you what I’m looking for ...” Informs the old man.

“And what would that be *Captain*?” Smirked Barnard. Duped again.

“To see you off this property in ten seconds! ... Dharma sweetie... You been practicing your counting?”

“Sure have Gramps! ...” Dharma calls back from the porch, “... *One! ... (Click!-Clunk!) ... Two! ... Ten! ... Boom! Click!-Clunk! ... Boom! Click!-Clunk!*’ Shoots ring out and bullets ricochet off the SUV.

Barnard runs as quickly as his short stocky legs could carry him with Brutus now unchained. Barking and snarling and snapping on his heels. It would be close. Throwing himself onto the back seat just as the door closes behind him. Brutus jumping up the window. Slobbering saliva and drool over it. Claws scratching at the glass windows.

“Don’t say a word.” Barnard warns Isaac.

“Boom! Click!-Clunk! ... Boom! Click!-Clunk! ... Boom! Click!-Clunk! ... Boom! Click!-Clunk!”

More bullets ricochet off the vehicles. Striking one in the radiator causing steam to hiss from the grills.

“Your counting’s certainly improved.” Chuckles Ted watching the wounded convoy retreat into the distance in a cloud of steam and dust.

“Thanks, Gramps.” Dharma grins happy to see the back of them...

He has no idea, does he?

Pulling his vehicle beside the curb Tom sounds the horn to announce his arrival.

'Toot!-Toot!-Toot!'

Pierce steps from a stately home. Carrying a pair of boxing gloves and shoes over one arm. One could almost see the sense of joy on his face. Tom could almost feel a sense of guilt when Pierce finds out there is no fight club. As such.

"Lloyd, good to see you? You ready?" Tom smiles happy to get underway.

"As I'll ever be. B bit out of shape, but it's like riding a bicycle."

"So they say... Good luck with that."

"So, who's my opponent?" Pierce asked eagerly.

"Oh, that's difficult to say..." Tom struggles to answer, "... Well ah... It could be Patrick, or it could be Eddie."

"Experienced, are they?" Asked Pierce gauging his possible opponent.

"*Amateurs*, would be a better word... You'll be fine."

"So where is this place? What time we start?" Pierce checks his watch.

"Oh_ not 'til tonight I'm afraid Lloyd... A small bar just out of town."

"*Tonight?* Why the early start?"

"Oh, I ah... Thought you might want to meet an old friend of mine, a former Astronaut ... I told him how you followed the space program as a kid." Baited Tom.

"Really? An astronaut you say. What mission?"

"Not sure exactly, I forgot to ask... But he's walked on the moon... Even has the spacesuit if you're interested in seeing it."

"I most *certainly* would be. Wow_ a double treat. You never cease to amaze me Tom... I was a little worried the other day about ah... You know..." Chuckled Pierce.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I must have given you the wrong impression. What was I thinking eh?"

"Anyway, that's behind us... *Telos* will be launched, and things can get back to a normal pace again."

"I'd certainly like that. It's been a hectic six months." Remarked Tom. And it was not over yet.

"Stowers won't be happy until we get final payment on delivery."

"The thing is insured isn't?" Asked Tom curiously.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Only joking Lloyd."

"There you go again." Chuckled Pierce.

"Where exactly is this place Tom?" Asked Peirce watching the endless outback roll past the window.

"Not much further, he owns an old ranch... The *Foster* Ranch. Heard of it?" Probes Tom.

"Nah_, can't say I have? What of the place?"

"Oh, nothing much... Its old news anyway."

"Don't stop now, what of it? Is it haunted or something?" Asked Pierce curiously.

“Don’t think so...” Recollecting the noises in the middle of the night, “... Nah, it was the scene of the *Roswell* crash, back in the fifties or sixties or something like that...” Tom lied wondering how much Pierce knew, “... Anyway, it was only a weather balloon right?”

“Forty-Seven actually... Read a little about it. Sounded like a cover-up if you ask me?” Remarked Pierce.

“So, do you think there could be *extraterrestrials* out there?” Probed Tom leading Pierce down an alien path.

“Why not? Look at it this way... There are billions of galaxies in the universe... Each containing billions of stars... And another billion planets about those stars... Now suppose there is *only one* is a planet sustaining life in each galaxy... Well, there must be billions of planets sustaining life. Not just ours... You can’t argue with math Tom.”

“No, I guess you can’t. I never look at it like that before.” Conceded Tom. Perhaps convincing Pierce may not seem as hard as Tom first thought.

“That’s why I get paid the big bucks for Tom.” Qualifies Pierce.

“You certainly do Lloyd. You certainly do... Okay, we’re almost here, up ahead on the right.”

“You sure someone lives there?” Seeing the dilapidated old homestead in need of a coat of paint.

“I hope so.” Turning into the driveway.

“Oh look, an old biplane.” Admired Pierce.

“Belongs to Ted, the astronaut guy. May take you for a flight later if you like?”

“Any more surprises for me today Tom?”

“Maybe one or two more.” Remarked Tom anxiously.

“You spoil me... If you are after a pay raise, after *Telos* you don’t have to impress me you know?”

Marshall’s Ute parked out front. Catching Pierce’s eye briefly. He half recognized it from somewhere. But unable to place it. Tom continues around to the back of the homestead.

“Watch out for the...” Exclaims Pierce seeing startled chickens take flight, frantically flapping wings and squawking hysterically.

“Oh, there goes dinner.” Jokes Tom watching a chook hurry away.

Waldo pushes open the screen door and begins yapping incessantly.

“Is it safe?” Inquired Pierce on seeing the dog.

“He’s safe... It’s the other one I’d be afraid of...” Warns Tom, “... At the fight club.”

“Oh right.” Looking about the back yard just in case.

Dharma appears behind Waldo and waits to greet the new visitor.

“You’ve meet Waldo... And this is Dharma. The woman you’ve heard so much about.”

“The woman I hear so little about don’t you mean? ... Dharma was it?” Charmed Pierce.

“You must be Mister Pierce.”

“Lloyd, please.”

“Lloyd, please come on in, I’ll fetch you a beer.”

“Not for me. I need to be in peak condition for the fight.” Informed Pierce.

“Fight?” Asked Dharma looking puzzled at Tom.

“You know... *Fight Club*, at Redemption, later this evening.” He winks hoping not to catch Pierce’s attention.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot about that... Is that tonight? ... Good for you Lloyd." Dharma plays along.

"Cambridge champion, to take on your finest." Remarks Pierce half bowing.

"Finest? Patrick?" Unsure if two words could be used in the same sentence.

"Yes, Patrick..." Pierce's ears prick up at the name, "... Bring him on." Pierce begins to shadow box and blows heavily.

"Come inside out of the sun... Gramps is in the workshop with Marshall." Said Dharma.

"Marshall? Our Marshall?" Questioned Pierce.

"Must be helping Ted with something... He's a keen electrical enthusiast in his spare time. Isn't that right Dharma?"

"I suppose." Replied Dharma retreating inside.

Tom hands Pierce a cold can of beer and he tears at the tab causing it to hiss and foam from the opening.

"Here I'll show you about." Leading him into the lounge.

The mantelpiece lined with photo frames. Like unregimented soldiers standing at ease. Slouching on their weary supports. Two urns stand guard, robust, rigid, like two rotund bookends. One picture catches Pierce's attention and he smiles with relief.

"You weren't kidding me were you Tom?"

"I wouldn't do that to you Lloyd." And waited for the penny to drop.

'Ding.'

"That can't be, right? Can it?" Asked Pierce taken back by the insignia.

"What's that Lloyd?" Tom played along innocently.

"It says here... Apollo Twenty... But there were only seventeen."

Tom remains silent and allows Pierce to examine the urns.

"That's his wife..." Said Tom, "...And that's his father. A General."

"A General? Impressive... But I don't understand? Twenty?"

"Twenty four, actually." Tom corrects him.

"Twenty four? Oh my God." The ramifications were beyond Pierce's imagination.

"Classified of course... And ah... The General there was assigned to the ah..." There was no easy way to say it, so he just said it, "... *Roswell* incident."

"He was there?" Asked Pierce questionably.

"As was his son, who you are about to meet." Said Tom.

"You said there were a couple of surprises I didn't expect this." Breathing anxiously.

"Well actually Lloyd, we haven't got to the surprises yet... Maybe I'll let Ted explain things to you."

Just then Marshall appears at the door looking for a couple of beers.

"Mister Pierce, you made it! Good to have you on board." Marshall spouts out before thinking.

"Onboard? Onboard for what? ... Tom?" Remarks Marshall without thinking.

"As I say, maybe it would be better if Ted shows you." Said Tom.

"He doesn't know?" Asked Marshall feeling awkward.

"I wish someone would tell me what's going on here." Pierce looks between the two young men anxiously.

"Come with me, Lloyd... I got something to show you." Tom leads him down the hallway and onto the porch.

Taking Pierce to the barn. And stands before a parked up green and yellow John-Deere tractor. Waldo scampers over to Pierce sniffing shoes and trouser legs. And rushes off. Soon Pierce hears barking beneath them. And looked down to his feet.

"This way..." Instructed Tom lifting the soiled mat to reveal a trap door, "... Down there."

Pierce looks to the entrance and then to Tom.

"This has to do that talk the other day?" Asked Pierce hesitantly.

Tom purses his lips and gives a guilty subtle nod.

"The fight club? A lie?"

"Oh no. No-no. We're good for that..." Tom looks to the entrance, "... Don't worry, the old man is down there. He'll explain it better than I would... I'll be inside." Looking back to the homestead.

"This better not be one of your jokes." Warns Pierce sternly.

"Remember you said it... *You can't argue with the math.*" Tom left it there.

Curiously, Pierce peers into the hole. Intrigued by the mystery of what laid beyond. And stepped gingerly down the rickety wooden rungs to enter another world. Seeing an old man hunched over welding circuitry. Erupting bright flashes and sparks. Causing Ted to stand back and lift goggles to see a strange man looking lost.

"Ah_ You must be Pierce." Stated Ted.

"Lloyd please." Said Pierce taking in the confined workshop.

Shelves littered with boxes. Cloth-covered jars. In the corner stands an uncovered space suit. It was all true. The same badge as the photograph. A Red Sparrow.

"I don't understand any of this." Confesses Pierce in awe.

"Welcome to my humble workshop... Let me give you a tour..." Ted reaching for a covered large jar from the shelf...

"How do you think he's doing?" Asked Marshall sucking on a beer.

"Freaking out would be a good place to start." Remarked Tom looking in the direction of the barn.

"Yeah. I recall the first time myself... Does he know about the saucer?"

"Not yet. But if you think Ted's toys are freaking him out... Wait 'til he sees that thing."

"Hey, have noticed how it's moved about?"

"What do you mean?" Asked Tom.

"Well... It's never in the same position as when we left it."

"Hm... I thought it was just me... You sure?"

"Not really... Just the floor as a lot of indentations in it."

"Hmm... Ted can take Pierce out there after lunch."

"That should convince him." Remarked Marshall.

"Convince me of what?" Asked Pierce, joining the end of the conversation.

"Ah... Ah..." Marshall is lost for an alibi.

"That flying is safe." Tom deflects the comment.

"Flying?"

"Yeah, I thought Ted could take you out for a flight after lunch in the biplane..." Tom looks to Ted, "... Maybe take him to the *other* ranch. The one with the *big barn.*"

"I'd certainly like that... Thank you... Have you two seen what he has down there?"

"I believe we have... We thought you would like that." Said Tom.

“Amazing... Can you imagine what StarTech could do if we could reverse engineer that staff.” Pierce gazes into space.

“Yeah, that’s what Marshall here has been working on for the past six months, on the weekends of course.” Tom lets slip.

“Six months? Why didn’t you say sooner?” Questioned Pierce looking at the two men.

“We didn’t think you’d believe us.” Said Tom.

“Believe you? I’m over the moon with all this. *Roswell* wreckage... Schematics centuries ahead of our time... Oh my God, we’ll leave the competition for dead.”

Ted appears from the hallway coughing heavily. Holding himself against the doorframe. A fever breaking across his forehead. Wiping his mouth with a soiled handkerchief.

“You okay?” Tom asked knowingly.

“I’m fine... Just need a glass of water... Damn dust.” Ted lies reaching for the faucet and glass.

“I’ve told him he should see a doctor...” Said Dharma shaking his head.

“Next week I promise... Okay.” Ted lies.

“Okay... But I’m driving you myself... He’s been working nights, sleeping days... Can’t have you falling asleep at the wheel.” She tells him.

“You sound like your mother.” Her Grandfather protests.

“Good... Because it’s what she’d be telling her father if she was here.” She reprimands him in front of the others.

An uneasy tension hung in the air while the family feud settled. Those listening on shrank in their seats. Ted broke the impasse.

“How’s the satellite going?” Asked Ted.

“Completed... They take delivery next week.” Informs Tom, signed off yesterday by Barnard and his Engineer, “... Launch date next Saturday if you’re interested in watching.”

“He knows about *Telos*? Barnard?” Questions Pierce anxiously.

“They’re old friends, so to speak... Aren’t you Ted?” Said Tom.

“(Chuckles.) Yeah something like that... He stopped by the *barn* yesterday afternoon... Dharma saw him off, didn’t you sweetie?”

“Certainly did Gramps.”

“Must be a heck of a barn? ...” Questions Pierce leaning back in his chair sucking on the beer trying to image it.

“He still has no idea, does he?” Whispers Marshall to Tom.

“Not a clue.” Responds Tom...

What are you doing here?

“Why don’t you take Mister Pierce with you, Ted? ... I’ll go with Marshall in his Ute.” Advises Tom.

“Fancy a flight, Lloyd?” Asked Ted looking to Pierce.

“Certainly would... I’ve always wanted to learn to fly... But never seem to find the time.” Informs Pierce grinning like a child given a treat.

“Well, today could be your lucky day son... Come with me.” Said Ted leading the way.

“See you there... *Oh, my knees.*” Moans Tom standing up.

“Good God, you’re as bad as the old man... Maybe I should be taking you to the doctor?” Suggests Dharma.

“I’m good, I’m good.” Strains Tom flexing his legs.

“Come on old man.” Calls out Marshall heading to the Ute outside.

“Been in one of these before?” Asked Ted seeing Pierce apprehensive.

“Never.” Standing back admiring the open cockpit, double wings, large wooden propeller, and bulging black wheels.

“Climb in the front there.” Instructs Ted.

Pierce clambers into the snug compartment. Soon accompanied by a black and white terrier on his lap. It’s tail flapping like a rabid windscreen wiper.

“Good boy.” Pierce pats the animal unsure if it was meant to be there.

“Put these on.” Ted passes a headset to him.

A callused thumb pressed on a starter. The engine gags and coughs as though a fur ball had caught in its throat. Suddenly the engine comes to alive roaring like pride of lions. Fever pitch, sending a rush of air and dust over Pierce. Waldo barks excitably. Jumping frantically from side to side of the cockpit snapping at the assailing air rushing over him. Unable to be restrained by Pierce. A surge of adrenaline rushing through him.

The biplane moves forward. Slowly at first. Jostling Pierce about the cockpit. And as if the noise could not get any louder Ted pushes the throttle forward to deafen Pierce completely. Accelerating like a roller coaster ride the plane races along the rough airstrip. A paddock of corn racing towards them.

“Watch out for the...” Warns Pierce just before the plane leaped over the corn stalks and ascended higher and higher and higher into the clear blue sky.

The plane banks slowly and heads back towards the homestead. Catching Tom and Marshall driving off with a trail of dust chasing them. The plane banks again and turns away from the road below into the outback. Littered by sporadic bushes and scrubs. Tumbleweed rolled about looking lost. Content to roll from one side of the State, and back again.

With air rushing over him, Pierce took in the desert vista.

“Take the stick.” Informs Ted through the headset.

“Excuse me?” Asked Pierce thinking he had misheard him.

“You wanted to fly didn’t ya?” Asked Ted.

“Yeah... I just thought...”

“Stop thinking and start feeling... Don’t worry I have the stick back here.” Ted lied.

“Down there...” Ted points out the scar left by the saucer, “... That’s where Tom found her?”

“Found who?” Asked Pierce innocently.

“They haven’t told you have they?” Figured the Ted.

“Told me back?”

“Oh boy, this will be interesting... You’ll see soon enough.” Said Ted shaking his head.

Landing, the Red Sparrow bounces several times and taxis to a halt beside the barn. The engine coughs and splutters and finally dies and the propeller stutters to a halt.

“Good timing.” Remarked Ted seeing as Marshal and Tom pulling down the driveway.

“I thought the barn would be bigger?” Remarks Pierce unimpressed by the derelict building.

“The boys haven’t told you anything about *this*?” Asked Ted.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about... Is there something I should know?” Beginning to get worried again.

Ted sighed heavily only to aggravate a coughing fit. Turning away he spits a blood clot to the ground. His breaths becoming more labored. And supports himself against the fuselage.

“You okay Ted? ... You don’t look too well.” Said Pierce wanting to help.

“Yeah, just a chest cold I caught shake.” Said Ted.

“Better see that doctor next week, okay? It doesn’t sound too good if you ask me.”

“I promise.” Ted lied keeping a stern face.

“What took you? ...” Remarked Pierce, “...Ted let me fly the plane, can you believe it?” Chirps Pierce enthusiastically.

“Wow, congratulations on your wings.” Remarks Tom after the initiation.

“*Wings*?” Questioned Pierce pride of his first efforts.

“Oh well, we better it over and done with... Got an old friend looking her over inside... You might know him.”

“That’ll be Cecil.” Comments Tom.

“Cecil?” Questioned Pierce.

“Owns Redemption, the bar... The Fight Club.”

“*Oh*_ I see.”

“*Fight Club*?” Muttered Ted beneath a rasping breath. Shaking his head confused as to what they were talking on about.

Opening the side door. Waldo jumps through first sniffing the ground at the scent of someone new. Then runs up the ramp and disappears inside the craft and yaps excitably at the stranger. Last to arrive was Pierce. Blinded by the initial darkness of the interior. His eyes soon adjust to the shadowy lighting. Nobody speaks.

All look to Pierce to see his initial reaction. He looks about the oversized interior. Then he saw something out of place. Something that did not belong. One of these things, was not like the others.

“(Gulp)...” Pierce swallows air, “... Is that what I... Think it is?”

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” Admired Tom.

“Where did you? ... How did you? ...” Pierce stutters questions that had no end.

“Tom found it where I showed you... With the help of some neighbors, we hauled it back here... Had some trouble with the Hybrids... And Barnard...”

“*Hybrids*?” Questioned Pierce.

"I'll explain later over a beer later." Advised Tom.

"Tom here cleared body parts out and disinfected the dang thing." Informed Ted.

"Body parts?" Stuttered Pierce as though he were part of a murder conspiracy.

"Greys... They'll be arriving soon won't they Ted?" Asked Tom casually.

"Greys? Arriving from where?"

"The moon base... Trinity? Is that right Ted?"

"Did you say Moon Base?" Pierce's ears pick up.

"I believe so Tom." Confirms Ted playing along.

"How will they find their way here Ted? ... It's an awkwardly long way." Asked Tom.

"Oh... They probably need a homing beacon of some kind to guide themselves here... Something like... *Telos* perhaps."

By now Pierce realizes the conversation was a charade to enlighten him.

"You said *Telos*? What about it?" Asked Pierce.

"Haven't you thought it strange it serves no function other than to house *Telos*? ... The Pentagon payload." Said Tom.

"Barnard works for Majestic-12 Lloyd... In full cooperation with the Greys... One in particular... Sirius." Advises Ted.

"That's right Lloyd, the only purpose of the satellite is to house the homing beacon." Confirmed Tom.

"A homing beacon. (*Chuckles*)... That will guide Aliens to our planet. For what purpose?" Pierce's eyes shift between Tom and Ted. Wishing it was a practical joke.

"To colonize the earth... Eradicate everyone... Just the *Apocalypse* as we know it..." Remarks Ted stepping forward, "... We *must* destroy the *Telos*... We have to destroy the satellite. There is no other way."

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! ... Hold your horses here..." Piece steps back from the two men. Looking to Marshall for his part in the elaborate scheme to fool him, "... You're asking me to destroy the satellite based solely on some supposed artifacts... And a saucer that could have come from a carnival... And besides, one saucer does not make an *invasion force*." Challenges Pierce.

"We *have* to, Lloyd... We need you. I'm not joking this time..." Pleads Tom.

"I can't destroy a satellite on *hunch*... I can't risk it... What would Stowers say?" Questions Pierce.

"He'd say you'd be crazy if you didn't..." Remarked Stowers stepping from the opening of the craft, "...But hey, what would a foolish old man like me know?"

"Mister Stowers! What are you doing here?" Exclaimed Pierce surprised by his sudden appearance.

"Talking to Ted... Or should I say... *Listening*..." Stowers sighs, "... It true... I've heard the radio transmissions. They're coming as soon as *Telos* is launched... Barnard and the Pentagon used us. You have to find a way to destroy that thing... Its humanities' only chance." Stowers pleaded.

"I might know someone who could help us." Informed Pierce.

"Just make it look like an accident and we'll let the insurance company cover the costs." Remarked Stowers.

"A man after my own heart Sean." Said Pierce grinning.

"Come... You have to see inside this thing... Marshall's been photographing the circuits."

“We’ll talk *later* Tom.” Said Pierce walking hesitantly up the ramp.
“I look forward to it.” Watching him disappear within.

“Stowers?” Asked Tom looking to Ted for answers.

“Well_ I figured if Pierce was sitting on the fence... I knocked on his door and made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.”

“Which was?”

A hand gestures to the saucer as though he had bequeathed it to Stowers.

“Marshall, why don’t you go explain a few things to them, while I rest my bones a while.”

Ted supports himself against a bench wheezing coughing and spitting to the floor.

“You okay?” Asked Tom noticing a decay in the old man over the past weeks.

“Yeah... Good.” He lied, “... What’s that thing he said about a fight club?” Asked the Ted curiously.

“Redemption.” Clarified Tom.

“He has no idea does me?” Asked Ted.

“Not a clue.” Responded Tom chuckling.

The Flatbed pulled into the Redemption parking lot. Wheels skid to a halt. Intoxicated faces look up to see who had arrived.

“Tom and his Misses... And Ted.” A voice announces their arrival.

A Ute appears soon after and skids to a halt beside the Flatbed.

Two strangers climb out followed by Marshall.

“Hey, Ellie-May... Your boyfriends back!” A voice calls across the lot.

Now disinterested in Marshall. Her eyes now fixed on the tall handsome mature man with him. English perhaps. A tingle ran over her body followed by a warm glow. Like a mother cat on heat, she followed them inside.

A jukebox played a worn-out recording of a favorite Dolly song. Boots stomped naked floorboards. An overhead fan wobbled drunkenly on its axel. As though it were about to stumble and fall at any moment. Faces turn to catch Dharma and Tom enter. Ranch hands smile and touch the brims of their hats to watch them pass. Ted waits for Stowers to catch up and invites him out back where he suggested it might be quieter. Perhaps, more *peaceful*. Disappearing to Cecil’s office.

Tom, Marshall and Pierce lean against the bar. Beers are pushed before the men. Pierce reaches for his wallet, but the barmaid informs him they are on the house. Tired of picking up shredded beer labels the barmaid quietly slides a key to Dharma.

“Just popping upstairs for a bit.” Remarks Tom winking to Marshall.

Beers flowed like wine and the evening rolled into the night. Empty bottles littered the bar.

“I’m beginning to like this place... You should have told me sooner... I would have understood.” Remarked Pierce feeling the beers seep to his bones.

“Yeah well, I wanted to... But you know Tom?” Said Marshall.

“So, when do the set up the ring?” Asked Pierce.

“Ah, the ring... Yeah, not long now I reckon...” Checking his watch, “...Have a couple of beers to rehydrate.”

“Which one is Patrick?” Pierce asked anxiously sucking on a bottle.

Looking about the faces staring back at him suspiciously.

“That one there... Green plaid shirt, tan leather hat... Stumble on his chin.” Points out Marshal.

“Oh, he’s a big lad... But you know what they say... The bigger they are, the harder they fall.”

“That is what they do say, Sir... Get that beer down you... You’re going to need it.” Suggested Marshall.

“Who’s the blonde lass by the jukebox? ... She keeps looking at me.” Asked Pierce inquisitively.

Ellie-May rocks her hips against the wall. Making eyes at Pierce. Flashing long black eyelashes. Pursing her lips seductively. Sucking suggestively on a long cocktail straw. A pout completed the look.

“Ah_ that would be Ellie-May... Why don’t you go talk to her? I think she likes you?” Cajoled Marshall.

“You think so?” Said Pierce anxiously recalling the name.

“Sure... Why not? I’ll go check on the ring.”

“Yeah-yeah, you do that... Take your time.” Suggests Pierce grooming himself.

His eyes now fixed on the vixen tempting him closer. Making his way past the ranch hands. Bumping into them as they stood their ground.

“Sorry... Coming through... Sorry.” Pushing his arm out to plow a part to the jukebox. And Ellie-May pulling him closer with her smile.

Standing before her, he is suddenly lost for words.

“Hi.” She purrs. Blushing and giggling like a schoolgirl.

“Hi... I’m Lloyd... Friend of um... Oh, they have gone... You’re Ellie-May they tell me.”

“Ummm_.” She giggles again as though a tingle through over her.

“Hey, Mister.” Patrick appears behind Pierce, soon followed by Eddie and Emmitt.

“Can I help you gentleman?” Inquired Pierce politely.

Ellie-May fidgets and giggles. Feet tap the floor. But not to any jukebox song.

“Ellie-May is *my* girl.” Warns Patrick staring down at him.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t know.” Apologizes Pierce about to step back. Only to bump into a ranch hand behind him.

Causing him to spill his beer.

“I’m awfully old chap sorry about that. Let be buy you a fresh one.” Apologizes Pierce again.

A heavy hand pushes Pierce back. Only to bump into Patrick, who then bumps into Eddie. More beers are spills and threatening words exchanged. Fists begin to fly. And Pierce is caught in the middle of it.

Ellie-May quietly retreats to the bar. Marshall stands on the other side. Deciding to stand the dance out. Upstairs in a darkened room, moonlight filtered through lace curtains. Raucous sounds seep through bullet holes in the floor. Two lovers lay exhausted in each other’s arms panting.

“Will he be alright?” Dharma asked.

“There’s only one way to find out... Now, where was I?” Tom recedes under the covers.

Moments later Dharma giggles and squeals hysterically.

Cecil looks up the black and white monitor noting Pierce prancing about, jabbing and weaving about.

“Bit of a dandy boy, isn’t he? ... Ten bucks say Patrick knocks him out.” Offers Cecil.

“I’ll take that bet.” Responds Stowers watching Pierce on the monitor.

Fists flew and bottles smashed against walls. Bodies fell to the floor until there was only one standing. Cecil reaches into his wallet and pulls out a ten-dollar bill and pushes it across the desk to Stowers. Waldo scavenges among the battered bodies. Licking beer and food from bloodied faces. Pierce stood triumphant among the fallen. Sporting a black eye, a split lip, and countless concealed bruises beneath his shirt.

“Told you I still had it... Cambridge boxing champ three years running... *Whew! Whew! Whew!*” Blowing sharp breaths and jabbing the air.

Ellie-May sits fidgeting on a bar stool as if her feline desires had been aroused.

“*Me-ow!*” She purrs to Pierce...

Charlie

The sun snuck through the window and crept silently across the wooden floor and onto the bed and began tapping on Pierce's eye lids as he laid sleeping.

Outside Ted starts up the Red Sparrow to a howling roar.

"Ah_!" Groans Pierce pulling a pillow over his head to deafen the noise and to suffocate the throbbing hangover.

An arm extends out from him. Numb and unable to feel or move it. No matter how hard he concentrated fingers would not move. Another arm reaches overtop and wraps itself about his chest. Eyes suddenly open at the realization he was not alone. Confused as to where he was. Flashcard visions of the previous evening come flooding back to him.

The bar... The beers... Too many beers... The fight... A woman...

"What was her name?" He whimpers to himself.

"Ellie-May." A sleepy voice whispers behind him as though talking in her sleep.

His body battered, bruised, and physically drained. His head sounding like the Edinburgh Tattoo, with Nurse Nightingale spooning her warm naked body pressing against his.

Outside in the distance he hears the plane taking off before returning to buzz the house to wake the living dead. Startled, he sits up. Thoughts of the satellite that now he needed to be destroyed. Contradicting everything he believed, until now. He reaches for his watch on the side table realizes he does not have much time. Pulling the sheet over the woman, staggered to the bathroom to resurrect what little that was left of him.

"Teds up early?" Asked Pierce chewing on a piece of buttered toast, a strong black coffee in his hand.

"He's had difficulty sleeping lately... Needs to see a doctor about that cough." Informs Dharma.

Just then Tom appears in the kitchen and slumps into a chair. And a plate of fried eggs and coffee appears before him.

"What's the plan today?" Tom asked.

"I've spoken to Charlie in R&D, told him to meet us at the workshop... He doesn't know why... Don't want to spook him just yet." Advised Pierce.

"Yeah, probably not a good idea."

"I'm hoping Charlie might know some tricks... Something that won't be detected."

"It's going to have to be well hidden." Remarked Tom.

"Leave it to Charlie... Eat up, we're leaving in half an hour." Instructed Pierce.

Tom chewed quietly as he thought of how to broach the sensitive topic of the previous evening.

"I see you enjoyed yourself last night... Lloyd." Informed Tom raising his eyebrows suggestively.

"It seems that way... And if one word gets out, I will personally assign you to sweeping workshop floors for the rest of your career with StarTech."

"Pay cut?" Tom weighs the options.

"Most certainly."

"My lips are sealed then..." Beams Tom.

“Mister Pierce... What brings you here on the weekend? *Whoa!* ... What happen to you?” Exclaims Charlie seeing Pierce remove his sunglasses.

“Bumped into a door.” Lies Pierce trying to keep a straight face.

“Oh, you have to be more careful Mister Pierce... How can I help? It all sounds very secretive... Is everything alright?”

“Well, there’s no easy way to put this Charlie so I’ll just come out and say it.”

“Very well then Mister Pierce...”

“I need a detonator.”

“Oh...” Charlie is taken back by the illicit request.

“To detonate an explosion.” Clarified Pierce.

“Obviously... But ah_, what are you looking to blow up?” Charlie looks inquisitively at Pierce.

Without speaking Pierce raises a hand to the suspended satellite above their heads. Charlie’s eyes follow it upward and stop at the massive paperweight. Eyes descend back upon Pierce, then back to the satellite. His mind desperately trying to rationalize the unthinkable. Taking a step back from him to distance himself from criminal suggestion.

“I’m sorry Mister Pierce, but I can’t be a party to this... It’s not right if you mind me saying.”

Pierce reaches for his mobile and dials a number and waits for it to be answered.

“Sean, it’s me... Yeah, just here with Charlie from R&D about that project you want him to work on... Perhaps you’d like to have a word with him... I’ll hand him over...” Passing the phone to him grinning.

“Mister Stowers... Is that you? ... Oh...,” Charlie gasps, “...Yes sir...” Charlie listened intently, his eyes never leaving Pierce, “... I understand completely Sir... Thank you, Mister Stowers... I’ll hand you back to Mister Pierce now... Thank you, Sir... Have a good day...” Carefully handing the phone back to Pierce with a stern look on his face.

“All done... Good... I’ll keep you informed... Bye.” Pierce hangs up and looks back at Charlie now looking intrigued by the request staring up at the massive metal beast, so he asked, “... *If it were you Charlie?* ... How would *you* go about it? ... You know?” Looking up to the satellite above them.

“Hmm... Can’t say I’ve ever entertained the idea myself...” Charlie lied, “... *But it was me?* ... It would have to be concealed...”

“Obviously.” Remarked Pierce.

“What I mean to say is...It has to appear as though it doesn’t exist... A device within a device, as it were?” Charlie unburdens himself.

“You can do that?”

“*Oh course* Mister Pierce... Leave it to me... When you want it by?”

“*Today* too soon? ... Delivery could happen by tomorrow at the earliest.” Informed Pierce anxiously.

Charlie pursed his lips, and eyes brows knitted in concentration.

“Sure, but I’m going to need another set of hands.”

“Will these two do?” Pierce nominates Tom and Marshall to assist.

“Perfect... I need you to remove the Hydrogen Peroxide fuel hose and bring it to the R&D workshop.”

“Mister Stowers never said why he ah...” Charlie asked hoping to gleam a reason.

“Best you don’t know Charlie... Call it *plausible denial*.” Suggested Pierce.

“Understand completely Mister Pierce... If that’s what Mister Stowers wants, that is what Mister Stowers shall get.” Content to see his darkest thoughts played out, “... Why don’t you come with me Mister Pierce and leave these boys with the tank, and I’ll show you what I have in mind.”

“Splendid idea Charlie... Okay Tom, Marshall... I’ll be seeing you soon.”

“Can’t say I come down here a lot Charlie.” Informs Pierce looking about the chaotic workshop looking more like a garage. Benches cluttered with indescribable widgets and gadgets.

“You’re most welcome any time Mister Pierce.” Offered Charlie.

“Thank you, Charlie... So, what do you have in mind?”

“See this little device?” Charlie holds up a small black object, looking like a small black AAA battery with wires extending from one end.

“What is it?” Asked Pierce curiously.

“Watch this.” Taking it to a large vault and places the meager object on a metal stand and closing the heavy door behind him. Then goes to stand behind a thick perplex screen for added precaution. Pierce decides it was probably good idea to join him.

“You might need these.” Charlie hands Pierce a set of earmuffs and secures them over his ears.

Charlie punches numeric keys to a remote-control, and hands the remote to Pierce unsure what he was to do with it.

“Throw that silver switch and press that red button when you’re ready Mister Pierce.” Instructs Charlie.

Hesitantly Pierce throws the switch not knowing what to expect. A green LED light flashes, suggesting the remote was activated. The red button glows brightly calling out to be pressed. Looking momentarily to Charlie, half knowing what was going to happen. But why the heavy vault? Why the perplex screen he wondered? Why the earmuffs?

It was such a small device.

Pierce presses the red button and a sharp loud explosion detonates within the vault. Its walls of solid steel a foot thick. The noise resonated from within, sending percussion waves through the floor and up Pierce’s spine. And jarring his hangover.

“Woah!” Exclaimed Pierce holding a hand against the side of his head.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” Beamed Charlie, pleased with the test.

“StarTech make those?” Asked Pierce warily.

“Not exactly... Just something I knocked up...” Charlie let slip, “... Any R&D, is good R&D... Isn’t that right Mister Pierce?”

“Hm...” Now was not the time for Pierce to question why.

“We stick this inside the fuel line and when you’re ready... *Boom!*” A large smile forms over Charlie’s face as though Santa had bought him what he had wished for.

“You make it sound easy.” Said Pierce with some reservation.

“Just be in sight of the rocket and you’ll be fine. You don’t want to be out of range.”

“How far is that?” Asked Pierce.

“Oh... I’d say, about five or six miles.” Charlie rubs his chin guessing.

“*About?* You don’t know?” Asked Pierce anxiously, looking at him for concrete answers.

“Never really tested it before now...” Admits Charlie, “... Could be further.”

“Or shorter... Hmm...” Postulates Pierce, knowing it was the best shot they had, the only shot they had, ”... Okay, make it happen.”

Marshall arrives carrying a short length of thick black tubing and places it on the workbench.

“What was that noise we heard? We could hear it from the other side of the building?” Asked Tom looking about the workshop.

“That was a detonator.” Announced Pierce holding up another small black device.

“No way that made that much noise?” Remarked Marshall reaching for it.

Examining the small battery like device in his hand

“Is it safe?” Asked Tom.

“It is until we dial the serial number into this thing and then... *Poof!* ... Goodbye satellite... And the rocket too... When’s the launch date?” Informed Charlie.

“Next Saturday. Houston where else? ... Pentagon has a private pad. We’ve been invited to the launch. You want to come and watch?” Pierce asked Charlie.

“Wouldn’t miss it for all the tea in China.” Accepted Charlie eagerly.

“Do your thing, Charlie.” Instructs Pierce watching on.

Fingers fumbled with the detonator. Pushing in deep inside the hosing to the mid-point mark. Ensuring a snug fit on the bend.

“That should hold it... I’ll program the serial number into the remote on the day for safety.”

“Good idea, don’t lose that number... Lives depend on it.” Warns Pierce, perhaps saying too much.

“Lives?” Catching Charlie by surprise.

“Don’t worry about it... Just make sure that thing goes off when it comes time to push the button.” Pierce instructs.

“Okay you two, refit that hosing and clean up after you... Not a smudge or blemish, understood?” Instructs Pierce.

“Yes Sir.” Accepts Marshall.

“If they get one hint of tampering, it could be all over for us.” Warns Pierce.

“Yes Sir.” The pair parrot and disappear back to the workshop.

“So, Charlie... *What else* have you been working on? ... For *fun*? ...” Pierce probes carefully, then baits him, “... Perhaps we could *fund* some of your pet projects?”

“*Uh...* If you put it *that way*, Mister Pierce... I do have a couple of other things you might be interested in... Over here...” Leading Pierce to a box covered with a cloth.

A feeling of Déjà vu comes over Pierce wondering where he had seen that before...

The end was nigh

In a private facility, somewhere on the outskirts of Houston, a satellite is being unloaded.

“Lower... Lower...” A hand raises in the air, “...Gently does it... That’s it.” Isaac calls out to the crane operator.

Suited technicians buzz about the suspended satellite guiding it gently into position. Its ominous core empty and dark.

“Inspect every inch of that thing... Leave no stone unturned!” Calls out Barnard warily. He trusted no one.

Large helmeted heads turn to look down at the diminutive looking man out of place in the workshop. Eyes shift to Isaac for confirmation.

“As he says, every inch.” Iterates Isaac stepping back to inspect *Telos* laying on a gurney beside him ready for insertion.

Looking more like a giant slab of coal. The solid-state alien engineering beyond anything on the planet. Dark and ominous. No visible wiring or joins. The sophisticated galactic homing beacon was capable of piercing subspace. Connecting two very distant points in time and space instantaneously.

“That’s it then? It doesn’t look like much?” Remarks Barnard ignorantly wondering why it had taken so long to build.

“We’re centuries away from this technology... It’s amazing.” Isaac’s eyes glass over in awe.

“You have no idea do you?” Questioned Barnard.

“Course I do... It’s a communications satellite for *their* lot... Isn’t it?”

“Of course it is...” Barnard lied heading back to an office, “... Inform me when you’ve fitted that thing so I can inform the Director.”

Barnard taps a pencil on the surface of the desk in time with his impatient heartbeat. Hours passed and still no word from Isaac. What was keeping him? Barnard decides to head back to the workshop. Only to see *Telos* still laying on the gurney. The hairy black caterpillar raises alarmedly on Barnard’s forehead.

“What the... is going on? Christ... What’s taking you so long?” Asked Barnard anxiously.

“One of the techies find something unusual attached to the hydrogen peroxide tank. A magnetic metal block of some kind. We’re having it analyzed.” Advises Isaac.

“A bomb?” Asked Barnard anxiously.

“Don’t know... Might be nothing.” Said Isaac.

“Good job, I never did trust that *Mitchell* fella... Him and the *Captain*... Think they can pull a final one over me (*Ha!*)” Barnard talks to himself.

Isaac looks down at Barnard chattering away. Unsure what to make of his neurotic behavior.

The suspicious metal block is returned and found to be just that. A harmless magnetized metal block that must have fallen inside while the satellite was being built. Twirling a finger in the air, Isaac indicates the team to ready for the fitting of *Telos*.

“Get that thing fitted without delay... The Director will be furious you wasted time on a *magnet*.” Warns Barnard.

“Steady as you go... More...” Fingers gesture subtle movements, “... Keep it coming ... Slowly now.” Beckons Isaac softly.

The apparent slap of coal slid effortlessly in the sleeve. Fitting like a hand to a glove.

“Perfect.” Isaac holds up a hand to halt.

Then something miraculous happened. The rigid black stone began to morph to become one with the satellite.

“Wow, did you see that?” Exclaimed Isaac in awe of the nanotechnology.

“See what?” Asked Barnard looking up unaware as to what that had just happened.

Isaac remained speechless.

“I’ll inform the Director... You inform Electron to collect this thing...” Barked Barnard.

“Right-O Mister Barnard...” Then turns to the Technicians, “... (*Whistle*)... That is a wrap, gentlemen... Get her ready for shipment to Electron.”

Barnard discards the tissue suit and hurries back to his surrogate office to make the call. Closing the door behind him. Strange faces peer in through glass windows at him. If he was a Pentagon official, he certainly did not look like one. Suspicious eyes stare at him. Barnard closes the Venetian blinds.

Stubby fingers stab at the tablet and he waits for the call to be answered. Static appears and the encrypted link crystalizes to a clear image of an obese face. That appeared to be eating something. Jaws chomping up and down. Cheeks bulge from pressure within. Grunting sounds could be heard.

“Barnard_! *Hm?! ...*” Answers the swollen face, “... (*Burp*)... *Hm!*” Grinning with satisfaction.

“Director... Sir...” Responds Barnard.

“What do you want Barnard? Can’t you see I’m busy? *Hm!*” Greasy fingers shove a drumstick into a mouth and teeth tear away at the flesh like a rabid dog.

“*Telos* has been loaded... I repeat... *Telos* is good to go.” Acclaims Barnard proudly.

Jaws stop chewing. Nostrils twitch, as though smelling success. Silence reigned as the Director thought through the implications. Jaws animate slowly back to life. A first sideways. Then up and down. Only to open widely to shove another drumstick in his mouth. Follow by a grunting sound.

“*Hm!...*” The Director groaned, as though a bone had caught in his throat, “...Good... Good... I’ll inform Sirius immediately. *Hm!?*” Spitting pieces of food over the camera obscuring Barnard’s view and ending the call prematurely.

The screen sparkles with static lines. Leaving Barnard with no praise or thanks for the months he had sacrificed to see the project delivered on time. Whatever morsel of gratitude there was, covered the camera lens.

All that was left now was for Electron to mount the satellite to the rocket that would be launched in four days. He would have front-row seat. Alongside Stowers and Pierce. Nothing could stop the migration now. The end was nigh.

“Of course...” Stowers muttered to himself, “... We’ve been going about it the wrong way... Ha.”

Like a child untangling a Gordian knot, he marveled at the simplicity of the circuitry. Pushing himself from beneath the console, his body might have aged seventy years, but his mind was sharp as the day he graduated top of cyber engineering at M.I.T.

"It's a shame to lose her, but we have no choice... Do we?" Stowers asked hoping Ted had changed his mind.

Ted's solemn face greeted the question with silence.

"I thought not... Marshall has removed what we can without crippling the craft from flying... With his notes and photographs, we should be able to replicate it in the lab and figure out the rest..." Then changes the subject, "... You going to be okay?"

"I will be when it's done..." Informed Ted not finishing the terminal thought.

"It's getting dark outside and we've only been in here a few hours...I'm not getting any younger..." Stowers jokes, "... Why don't we take it for a ride? See what she's got."

The challenge appealed to Ted. Eyes shift to the ceiling of the barn as though he could see heaven.

"You sure?" Ted asked.

"Yeah, why not... You only live once right?" Accepts Stowers.

"(Whistle!)... Waldo!" Ted whistles out for the dog that scampers up the ramp, "... Good boy."

The hatch closing behind him.

Over the past five months, the craft had become an extension of Ted who knew it as well as the Red Sparrow. Placing hands into the indentations, the craft hums, and hovers as legs retract. Subtle hand movements turn the craft about and maneuvers through the open barn doors, and pass the biplane watching on.

"You might want to strap in." Informs Ted jokingly.

Stowers knew there were no belts of any kind, nonetheless, leaned against the reactor core.

Pressing palms forward the craft accelerated until the pressure was released. Outside the New Mexican desert flashed by.

"Where are we?" Asked Stowers unsure how far they had traveled.

"I have no idea." Informs Ted looking about for reference points.

In the distance, he thinks he sees the lights of Roswell, or were they Lubbock? There was only one way to find out. Ascending higher and higher, the craft speeds towards the distant lights of the unknown city.

"It can't be? ... Can it?" Asked Ted confused as to how he had traveled so far in but a few seconds.

"That's Austin... How did you? ..." Stowers now became lost for words.

Not one g of gravity exerted on their bodies. It was as though the craft had been stationary, and space and time had warped about them.

"You think anyone saw us? Gulpes Stowers taking in the implications.

"If they did, they'd think we were a meteor or something."

Which gave Ted an idea. Without warning pushes hands forward and upward.

"What are you doing?" Asked Stowers anxiously.

"You wanted to go for a ride, didn't you?"

The city lights beneath them grew smaller and more distant. Above them, a glowing cratered orb becoming larger and larger. Within seconds they found themselves in outer space looking back at the fragile planet. Half-day, half night. Arterial highways lit by lights. Cities, and towns erupted like festering boils over the surface of the planet.

"Are we where I think we are?" Asked Stowers warily.

Ted just grinned and maneuvered the craft into an orbit about the earth.

"I wish we had this in my day... Oh_ this is so much easier." Ted grinned.

Feeling no weightlessness, Stowers looks to the floor and ponders how it could be so. Suddenly from nowhere a massive object hurls pass outside narrowly missing the craft.

"That was close." Remarked Ted anxiously and accelerates after the satellite traveling at Mach twenty-five.

Within moments the craft had caught up with the aging Soviet satellite and cruised alongside it. Tempted as he was to give it a nudge and send it hurtling back to earth to burn up on reentry, Ted sped the craft on by. Ahead in the distance, the moon shone brightly. Beckoning him to visit. Stowers remained quiet, wondering what Ted would do.

The moon drifted from view as the craft resumed the orbit. Stars shone like pinholes in the canvas of heaven. Clearer, sharper, more concise that could be seen by any telescope. A Constellation shone more brightly than the others. Canis Major. Appropriately named the Dog Star for it sat at the shoulder joint of a dog like configuration of stars. Glowing blue white, some twenty-five times brighter than the Sun. Its light taking eight and a half years to reach the Earth. Unseen to the naked eye, a massive fleet of migrating crafts awaited the word to set sail to Earth. That word would be sent in four days. With little chance of him surviving the epic journey to get there, Ted allowed the canine constellation to drift from view.

The sun crested the earth's horizon like an ancient Greek God. A fire ball that blazed in the hearth of the solar system. The Earth's atmosphere appearing like a thin previous halo. Suddenly a burst of sunlight entered the interior only to be dimmed instantly by sensors.

Beneath them the outlined of India, being blessed with a new dawn. The Pacific Ocean glistened like green-blue crystal. Ted swoops the craft through the upper atmosphere and prepares for a fiery reentry. A faith green glow appears over the hull. The protective shell encapsulating the craft as it raced through the thickening atmospheres. Warily Stowers grips the console fearing Ted would dive the craft into the ocean. Only to have the craft level out at the last moment.

The craft continued at lightning speed. Skimming above the white tops of the South Pacific. Passing a fishing trawler outside. Crewmen clamber to catch a glimpse of the speeding bullet. Not a trace of sound in its wake. Disappearing as quickly as it had appeared.

Ahead, the coast of the Americas. Dusk crept across the landscape as Ted ascended to the heavens, again. Above clouds and the Andes. Banked left and headed home. The lights of Roswell never looked more beautiful as he passed over the historic town. Eyes look up at the strange flashing lights in the night sky. Dismissing as they always did, for an airliner, or military jet. It could well have been a weather balloon for all they knew.

Ted glided the craft within the barn and legs extend gracefully to the floor.

An irritation causes Ted to cough violently. Claspings his chest retched with pain. Spitting filthy phlegm to the dirt floor. Feeling weak at the knees. He supports himself against the hull that felt as old as ice.

"You okay Ted." Asked Stowers feeling helpless.

"Yeah... I'm good..." Reaching for the heart tablets he throws a couple into his mouth and chews on them, "... Just the ticker..." He lied. Each breath was a bonus. He had to stay alive long enough to finish what his father had started.

The Red Sparrow's engine roars to life. Screaming at the old man's foolishness. Startling his senses after the hushed confinement of the craft.

The Red Sparrow leaped into the air and flew the old man home...

Either way, they are toast

The tranquil morning was disturbed by massive growling diesel engines. Bellowing incessant black clouds of exhaust into the sepia colored dawn sky. The ground trembled as giant crawlers inched their way to a launch site some five kilometers away. A journey that would take over two hours.

On its back, a thirty-ton solid-state launch rocket. Standing twenty-two meters high, barely a meter wide. Looking more like an ugly black candlestick than a glorious rocket. The insidious payload concealed beneath the bulbous casing sitting on high. On its arrival at the launch site, systems would be checked and rechecked. And checked again.

Ted buzzed the homestead, swooping in low over the rooftop to wake the living and the dead.

“Gramps up early again.” Dharma looks up to the ceiling hearing the plane fly away.

She knew where he was heading. The saucer had become an obsession with him. Consuming every waking hour of the day and night. He was up to something. She was sure of it. But what?

“Mmm.” Murmurs Tom still half asleep, and reluctant to move.

Waking briefly to pull Dharma beside him, as though to stop her from leaving. But it was too late. She had already escaped his clasp and he felt a warm empty space. Reaching for her pillow cuddles that instead.

“Mmm.” He murmurs again contently.

“Come on bones... It’s your big day.” She informs him.

Tom fights the intruding sunlight. Suddenly Dharma pulls back the sheets, exposing him to the fresh early morning air. Surrendering to forces beyond his control, shuffled like a naked zombie to the bathroom.

Sometime later to appear in the kitchen looking rejuvenated and smartly dressed for the day.

“Where’s Ted? I thought he’d want to watch the big event... See the look on Barnard’s face when the thing... *Explodes*.” Questioned Tom.

“He’s busy with that damn saucer... Don’t know what he sees in it.” Remarked Dharma.

“Maybe Marshall is there... Said he was coming out today. Didn’t want to be at the launch. Somehow he couldn’t bring himself to watch all his work go up in smoke.”

“But you can?” Questioned Dharma.

“Oh_ yeah_. It will be my pleasure to wipe the *smirk* off Barnard’s face.” Contently.

“You sure the detonator will work?”

“I hope so. We only have one chance to get it right.” Warns Tom.

“What time you heading off?”

“After this. Flying to Houston... Pierce has booked the company jet. You can come if you like.”

“Nah... Think I’ll hang about here for Gramps. He’s not been sounding himself lately... I’m really worried about him. Someone should be here, you know... In case he has a fall or something.”

“Yeah, suppose you’re right... Will you be okay? I’ll be back by dinner time. I’m pretty sure we won’t be sticking around for celebratory drinks.” Chuckled Tom at the thought.

“You be careful. These guys play rough. Okay?” Dharma puts her arms, reluctant to let him go.

“Got to go.” He reprimands himself for dallying, reluctant to leave Dharma.

“See you later?” She tells him, kissing him farewell.

“You too.” He reassures her.

Watching him drive away. Scattering chickens and raising a cloud of dust as he headed down the driveway. To an airfield on the outskirts Albuquerque.

“Buckle in Tom.” Informs Pierce taking the seat opposite.

“Can I get you gentleman a drink?” A hostess appears.

“I’m fine thanks.” Responds Tom nervously.

“Scotch and dry would be lovely... Make that two.” Pierce grins, “... You’re going need something to calm your nerves Tom.”

“Thanks... Where’s Stowers?”

“Just you, me and Charlie I’m afraid... He’s at the barn helping Marshall.”

“With what?”

“You know how Stowers likes to pull things apart to see how they work.”

“Yeah, I suppose... We all set?” Asked Tom anxiously.

“Yeah. Charlie has keyed in the serial number this morning, so fingers crossed...” Tapping the remote in his pocket, “... I wonder what is keeping him? ...” Checking his watch, “... Ten more minutes and we’ll have to go without him.” Looking out a portal window.

In the distant parking lot. A dilapidated sedan pulls up. Something that had seen better years. And a familiar looking individual rushes towards the waiting jet.

“I see him.” Informs Tom.

Moments later, Charlie lumbers up the steps panting. And finds Pierce and Mitchell seated and sipping on Scotch Whiskeys.

“You’re late.” Remarked Pierce.

“Engine trouble.” Remarks Charlie, not giving Pierce much confidence about the detonator.

“Have a seat, and get your breath back... Like a drink?” Instructed Pierce.

“Oh_, love one thank you Mister Pierce if you’re buying.”

“My threat Charlie...” Signals Pierce to the hostess for another drink.

The compartment hatch closes. Cocooning the three conspirators within. Turbine jets trusts them back in their seats as the plane accelerated down the runway before gracefully ascending into the sky. It was unlike the Red Sparrow in every way. No rushing air over them. No screaming engine coughing aviation fumes in their faces. All that was missing was Waldo yapping excitably on their laps.

Waldo barked excitably as Havoc pulled the heavy articulated rig alongside the barn. Escorted by a Patrol car in front. On its tray, an illicit cargo of munitions. Concealed by a thick canvas tarpaulin. Coming courtesy of a misplaced consignment from a warehouse in Oklahoma City. Ted appears at the door of the barn on hearing the truck’s arrival.

“Havoc... That it?” Ted asked.

“Yep... Pete here gave me a personal escort so I wouldn’t get pulled over.”

“Pete... Any trouble?”

“Had a few strange looks out of Amarillo. But nothing to worry about.” Remarked Nagel standing beside Havoc, “... That’s a shit load of C4 you got there, Ted... You got a permit for that?”

“Ask the escorting Officer.” Suggested Ted.

“Ah_ who needs paperwork?” Nagel gestures a hand waving the necessity away.

Stowers appears at the barn door with Marshall beside him.

“You’ve got a week to get what you need from that thing... After that she’s mine.” Advises old man. His eyes shift to the moon in the day sky. As though it were watching him.

“You sure this will work?” Ted asked Stowers.

“You have a nuclear reactor... Pack a ton of C4 about it and implode it...” Looking about the impregnable hull, “... You’re either going to have a massive nuclear explosion, or a shitload of radioactive contamination... Either way, they’ll be toast.”

“Good.” Remarks Ted holding a solemn face, his own fate inconsequential.

“You don’t want to reconsider...” Probed Stowers, ever hopeful Ted would have a change of heart.

“I know what I’m doing Sean... I should have been dead six months ago... *This...* Is the only thing keeping me alive?” Replied Ted with labored breath.

“Is there nothing the doctors can do?”

“You have one week.” Iterates Ted, answering the question.

The heavy tarpaulin falls to the ground. Sounding a thud as it hit the ground to expose a shrink-wrapped pallet of cellophane-wrapped bricks. Looking more like a DEA seizure of cocaine.

“Carefully now.” Warns Stowers as Havoc tears away the wrapping and a brick falls to the ground.

Startling Marshall. His heart racing in his chest. Expecting it to explode and ignite the cargo. Taking him and the barn and the homestead and the mailbox with it. Waldo yapped excitably by the falling object rushing to the inert plastic brick on the ground and sniffed it.

Forming a human chain. Bricks are tossed gently from one to another and stacked at the foot of the ramp of the craft. Until finally the last brick was handed to Ted.

“That’s it, Mister Irving.” Calls out Havoc.

“Thanks, Havoc, you too Pete... Couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Something tells me you would have found a way.” Remarked Nagel.

“We’ll never know, now will we? ...” Ted grins, “... I’ll catch you tonight for a drink....” Ted raises a thanking hand to Havoc.

“My pleasure Mister Irving.” Havoc climbs back into the cabin of the truck and starts the engine.

Stuttering at first, before sounding a grumbling rumble. And drives away slowly with Nagel leading the way.

“What you guys standing around for?” Ted looks at Stowers and Marshall sitting on the pile of C4.

Three hours and several stiff drinks later, wheels touched down at remote airstrip on the outskirts of Houston. Countless towering structures the scarred the vast flat landscape.

The Lear Jet taxis to a hangar where a black Cadillac awaited them. Pierce leads the way. Tom trailed behind with Charlie. His eyes as big as saucers fueled in part by gin and tonic.

Secluded behind tinted windows, they felt like royalty as Houston passed by outside until they arrived at a guarded entrance. The driver presents credentials and visitor passes for the three attendees in the rear. The back window is lowered and a guard in uniform peers inside.

“Pierce? ... Mitchell? ... Hancock?” The guard calls out their names.

The rear window raises as slowly, and a barrier arm raises. The Cadillac drives deeper into the barren compound and comes to park behind what appeared to be an unassuming grandstand. Charlie thinks they had taken him to the track.

“This is it? I was expecting something a little *more*, if you know what I mean.” Remarked Tom.

Pierce remained silent. It is what it was. Becoming more stressed by the moment. Stowers delegating that task to Pierce. Feeling for the remote inside his jacket pocket. Tom sees him. Eyes meet. Nothing is said. The driver could be listening. Outside, a man stands waiting. Barnard.

“Mister Stowers?” Barnard asked curiously. Peering into the back of the Cadillac as though he would appear at any moment.

“Ah yes, Mister Stowers? ... He was unfortunately *detained* at the last moment. He had an urgent business matter that needed attending to ah_... *Samsung*... They seemed troubled by the delay of their satellite...” Pierce lies, “... But he sends his most sincere apologies and hopes you will understand.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that... And who might you be?” Barnard eyes Charlie from head to toe. Looking out of place as though he had hitched a ride and they had forgotten to drop him off.

“Ah, this is Charles Hancock. Head of our research team at StarTech... We like to let them out occasionally if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, of course... Any friend of Mister Stowers is most welcome. This way gentlemen... I will show you your seats.” Said Barnard leading the three men inside...

Houston, we have lift-off

“Just here, gentlemen...” Gestures Barnard indicating a row of wooden benches facing onto miles and miles of barren wasteland.

In the distance. A silhouette of a small black stick protruding upward from the horizon.

“How far are we from the ah_...?” Asked Pierce anxiously, his eyes shifting to Charlie.

“Five miles... It’s for our safety.” Informs Barnard checking his watch.

“Of course, I understand... It looks so *small*, doesn’t it, *Charlie*?” Pierce questioned him.

“Probably because it’s five miles away Mister Pierce.” Naively missing the inference.

“Not much longer, you only just made it in time... Any later and you would have missed the show.” Barnard said gleefully.

“Mister Pierce, why don’t you sit beside me?” Asked Barnard hoping to insulate himself from Mitchell.

“Why certainly Mister Barnard...” Unable to refuse and appear suspicious, “... Where exactly is the rocket?”

“It’s over there... See the tall tower on the horizon?”

“Could you point it out, I should have brought my binoculars... Silly me.” Shielding Barnard’s view and passing Tom the remote detonator device from his pocket.

Tom promptly squirrels the remote and palms the device onto Charlie.

“*You know what you have to do.*” Whispers Tom to him only to have him look blankly back at him.

“Is there a problem gentlemen?” Asked Barnard looking at the two gossiping between themselves.

“No, no of course not. Charlie was just wondered if there were drinks afterward.” Deflected Tom.

“Electron has laid out a wonderful spread inside, champagne the works.” Informed Barnard.

“See Charlie, I told you so.”

“Champagne?” Remarked Charlie, his eyes lighting up.

Tom’s eyes shift back to Pierce, gesturing that Charlie held the remote as if it were a game of pass-the-parcel.

‘*Tick... Tick... Tick... Tick...*’ A large digital clock counts down the final minutes before launch in big red digits.

The seconds counted backwards. The three-minute mark was approaching. Nervously Barnard checks his watch. His mobile vibrates and he sees it is the Director.

“Excuse me, one moment please gentlemen... *The Director.*” Barnard stands and takes the confidential call.

“Of course...” Informs Pierce, and turns to Charlie, “...*You know what you have to do.*” Speaking in a hushed voice.

“What’s that Mister Pierce?” Responded Charlie confused.

Pierce gestures to the remote in his pocket with his eyes, and then to the distant rocket. If this was a game of charades. Charlie was not entirely following. A confused look comes over his face as if he needed to buy a vowel.

"The remote! The rocket!" Pierce whispered his eyebrows raised. Hoping Charlie would make the connection.

"Oh_ that... No worries Mister Pierce, it will be my pleasure." Charlie grins warming to the prospect.

"Director... How are you? ... No Director ... Of course, Director ..." Thinking he can hear the him eating, like a dog gnawing at a bone, "...They're about to launch in... Three minutes... Yes, Director... No Director, Mister Stowers couldn't make it, unfortunately, urgent business... Something to do with the Samsung satellite they had put on hold... Yes... I understand... I'll keep you informed..."

Only to have the Director sound a voluminous burp and hung up.

"...Thank you, Director... You're too kind... Bye." Barnard fabricates, killing the already dead connection, "... That was just the Director, he sends his regards. But alas like Mister Stowers, he has urgent matters to attend to." He lied.

"Indeed." Said Pierce his eyes fixed on the rocket in the distance.

Suddenly overhead speakers come to life. Crackling a loud voice from Launch Control.

"Time T minus three minutes and counting..." A commanding voice announces.

"This is exciting isn't it?" Charlie sits on the edge of his seat.

Falling silence to listen intently to the launch procedure. Barnard's eyes focused on the distant needle. Peirce's eyes fixed on Charlie. And Tom sandwiched between them unsure where to look.

"Prop one... Vehicle fuel tank press open..."

"Open." Responds Prop One.

"Fuel umbilical purge to open."

"Open."

"Vent one heater control exit." Launch Control.

"Exit." A new voice speaks.

"NSC reports Telos is go... Repeat, Telos is go."

"Copy that NSC.... Telos is go!" Parrots Mission Director.

"Prop One... Pressurized first stage LOX tanks to relief."

"Affirmative... Pressurized."

"Prop Two... Top first stage LOX to one hundred percent level." Launch Control.

"Copy that Launch Control... Up and down... One hundred percent." Confirms Prop Two.

"Time T minus ninety seconds and counting."

"Hydraulic external power to on." Launch Control.

"Copy that... External."

'Tick... Tick... Tick... Tick...' Large red digits continued the count down.

"Time T minus eighty seconds and counting."

"RCO... Report range go for launch." Launch Control.

"Copy that... Range go for launch... Repeat, range go for launch." Confirms the Range Control Officer.

"Launch control... Harry, you are go for launch." Mission Director personalizes the command.

"Roger that Mission Director."

"Time T minus nine minutes and holding..."

The Large red clock stops, frozen in time.

Pierce looks anxiously to Tom then to Barnard as to why the clock had stopped. Barnard raises his hand to dismiss their anxiety. A stalled period where the final launch window is confirmed. Flight recorders are activated.

And a go/no-go signal is given by Mission Director and Launch Control.

"That's a go." Launch Control.

"That's a go." Mission Direct.

'Tick... Tick... Tick... Tick...' Large red digits resume the countdown.

"Phew." Sighs Pierce relieved.

An automated voice calls out the final launch procedures.

"T minus nine minutes and counting, automatic ground launch sequencer... Check."

"T minus seven thirty seconds, retract orbiter access arm... Check."

"T minus five minutes, start auxiliary power units... Check... Arm solid rocket booster range safety safe and arm devices... Check."

"T minus three minutes, Retract gaseous oxygen vent arm... Check."

"T minus fifty seconds and counting... Transferring from ground to internal power."

The technical jargon wash over the engineers watching on.

"T minus thirty seconds and counting ... Ground launch sequencer is go for auto sequence start..." The voice announces.

Then came the moment they had all been waiting for...

"Time T minus ten seconds... Activate main engines..."

Six... Main engine start...

Five... Four... Three... Two...

One... Solid rocket booster ignition..."

A massive plume of vivid white smoke and yellow flames spew violently from beneath the rocket.

"...Houston, we have lift off."

Pierce stands to watch the skyrocket race upward. Throwing a long blow torch flame. Tom stands with him. Pulling on Charlie's jacket to do likewise watching in awe. Barnard stands belatedly as though he mistimed the short Mexican wave.

Tom steps to shield Charlie from Barnard's view. Pierce watches on nervously as the rocket climbed ever higher. Launch control calls out vitals as if the rocket were a patient on a gurney being rushed to the Emergency Room.

"Speed five hundred, altitude one mile, and climbing..."

The roar of the engine taking twenty seconds to reach the grandstand.

Pierce looks anxiously to Charlie captivated by the bright flame racing upwards. And nudges Tom to nudge Charlie whose eyes had glazed over. His hand buried in a pocket. Charlie nudges Tom back. Tom nudges Pierce and gives him a subtle nod.

"The Director will be pleased." Remarked Barnard aloud.

"Speed eight hundred, altitude two miles, and climbing..."

"I wish I'd brought my binoculars now." Accentuated Pierce, beginning to stress.

Charlie frowns momentarily fumbling with the remote in his left pocket. He was right-handed. Flicking the switch takes one last look at the wondrous creation and sighs. Was it true? Did Mister Stowers really want him to destroy the satellite? The rocket? Hearing Stowers voice echo in his head... *'I need you to blow up that damn satellite, whatever it takes. Understood?'*

"Oh well." Charlie sighs quietly to himself.

The show was over, and Charlie presses the red button.

A sudden flash of light erupts near the top of the rocket, followed by a catastrophic explosion of the main rocket.

"Ahh!" Gasps Barnard. His life's work disincarnating before his very eyes.

Falling from the sky like a Catherine wheel that had catapulted from its nail spiraling cloud of white smoke in its wake. Shattering to a thousand-and-one-pieces. Falling harmlessly to the ocean below.

"Oh no! What's happened?" Pierce fakes his own concerns for the disaster.

Barnard stood stunned. Unable to speak. How would he explain this to the director? Dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events.

"Mister Peirce, what happened? All my work..." Tom laments the lost satellite, playing along.

Charlie shuffled his feet keeping out of the conversation. He had had his fun and now only wanted to eat. Content to have actualized his darkest fantasy.

"I don't know Tom... These things happen from time to time." Pierce collapses on the wooden bench seat. Relieved it was finally over, *"... Mister Barnard? I don't understand?"*

Barnard sits beside him, lost for words. Shoulders slumped.

"Launch Control will know what happened... They'll get to the root of it." Looking for answers he did not have.

"Can we eat now?" Asked Charlie awkwardly.

"Knock yourself out." Said Barnard surrendering to the failed launch.

"Ah, we best be going now Charlie... Leave Mister Barnard to himself and Launch Control..." Placing a hand on his shoulder, *"... If you need another one, we're only too happy to provide."* Informed Pierce, pitching a sale that would never happen, *"...I hope you find the cause. We wouldn't want a repeat."*

"No, no... Of course not." Responds Barnard gazing into space before him.

Barnard raises a hand to gesture a farewell. Inside his jacket pocket, a mobile vibrates. It was the Director. Reluctant to answer it, he knew he must. Taking a deep breath before answering.

"Director..." Manufacturing a chirpy voice, *"...Yes, Director. The Launch? Yes, about that... It appears to have been a technical glitch... What sort of glitch? Well ah... I don't how to put it technically, but the rocket seemed to have exploded as it was taking off... It was going so well..."*

A prolonged silence ensued, and the sound of heavy breathing, perhaps someone hyperventilating.

"... Director? Are you still there? ... How? I don't know. But I intend to find out... Of course, Director... I will give you a full report on my return... Thank you, Director..."

The connection is lost as the Director hangs up on Barnard.

"... Three bags full Director." Soured Barnard pocketing the mobile.

The cause of the explosion had to be a technical fault. Isaac had made a thorough search of the satellite and found nothing but a harmless magnetic metal block. Eyes shift to the departing Cadillac. Suspicious of Mitchell's involvement. Mister Pierce would not be a part of the conspiracy, let alone Mister Stowers. No, it had to be a technical fault.

His troubles with the Director would be nothing the Director would face with Sirius. Barnard beamed a small grin of satisfaction at the consolation. In the distant sky the telltale white smoke trail of a failed launch. Loop-de-looping back to the earth.

"You should have seen his face when the thing exploded... (*Chuckle*)..." Remarked Pierce leaning against the bar, "... At one stage I didn't think Charlie wasn't going to press the button... (*Ha*)... Here's to Charlie!" Raising his bottle to salute the hero.

"Yeah... Me too." Responded Charlie, unsure he would himself.

Bottles clicked and clanged together to toast the mission's success. Cheers roared out among the locals. Ted had taken himself to Cecil's office to enjoy a final drink and reminisce a friendship that had scanned a lifetime.

Dharma pulls Tom aside and dangles a room key in front of him. And the pair disappear without notice. Charlie grins sucking on a bottle of beer. His eyes fixed Ellie-May standing beside the Juke Box playing her favorite Dolly song. Flashing eyelashes and gyrating her hips to the tune. Or a thought in her head involving Charlie. Glancing him a come-hither stare. Captivated by the saucy blonde, Charlie was about to head over to her when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

"I think she likes you." Pierce baits him.

"You reckon?" Charlie smiles back at Ellie-May.

"I reckon... But she can wait... Have a few more beers... The night is young..." Informs Pierce, thinking he would stand aside for the fight that would inevitably follow...

Scrambled brains

Laden with heavy black folders. Barnard hurries anxiously along the corridor to the Director's office. Eyes watch him pass. Eyes that had heard stories of an unfortunate *incident*. A technical glitch that had occurred under his watch. Stubby legs incapable of lengthening their stride, quicken their pace to escape their persecuting glare.

Only to arrive at the Director's door sooner than he had anticipated.

'*Tap-Tap-Tap*.' Barnard knocks every so lightly hoping the Director had not heard and that perhaps he could return to his office to hide.

"Bar_nard_!" Sounds a loud growling baritone voice.

Barnard peers into the dim den. As though placing his head in the guillotine. Almost wishing the door would remove his head and the suffering would be over quickly.

"Director... You wanted to see me?" Squeaked the suited mouse at the door.

"Bar_nard_! Do you know the trouble you have caused? *Hm*?" Grumbles the Director.

"Trouble? *I* have caused? But Director... It was a technical fault... I have read the *reports*." Holding out the bulky data files as evidence to nullify the accusations levied on him.

"I have seen the reports you *fool*... It was the *Satellite*. *Hm*." Barks the Director.

"But *Isaac* checked the *Satellite* thoroughly... It can't be?" Retorted Barnard.

"Isaac is *no longer* with us Barnard... If you *know* what I mean. *Hm*."

'(*Gulp*)...' Whimpered Barnard, pondering his fate, "... Mitchell. It must have been Mitchell! ... *I told you so!*"

"Be careful how you speak to me Barnard_ ... *Mitchell*? What is your *perversion* with that young man Barnard? *Hm*?" The Director growls.

"But I'm sure it was him... Him and Captain Irving... They're in *cahoots* together!"

"Cahoots? ... It was no more Mitchell than it was Irving. No... The last person to touch Telos was *Isaac*."

"Hmm... True..." Concedes Barnard beginning to see the Director's shallow logic, "... But why?"

"I guess we'll never know... Cabin fever perhaps. Being locked away for years underground... Maybe it was you? ... *Hm!*?" Eyeing Barnard suspiciously.

"Me? I'd never..." Barnard began, only to be cut short.

"I know it wasn't you... You don't have the intelligence to pull something this off... No, it all points to Isaac... Said in the report he removed a vital component from the satellite? You were there? *Hm*?"

"Yes, I was."

"Why didn't you stop him, man? *Hm*?" Snaps the Director like a rabid dog lunging forward on a chain. Only to be restrained by a podgy belly and a heavy desk.

"Well, ah..." Frantically thinking of an explanation, "... As you so rightly put it... I don't have the intelligence... Ah, now that you mention it, it *must have been Isaac*."

"Told you so," Responds the Director, leaning back in his chair.

"And Sirius? ... Does he know?" Barnard leans cautiously forward. As though the walls had ears.

"I am sure he does... He has a network among *them*. *Hm!*" The Director looks towards the door squishing his face as though to express his dislike for the creatures.

“He won’t be pleased.” Remarked Barnard.

“Tell me something I don’t know. *Hm?* ... I’ll talk with Stowers about building another. *Hm.*”

“Is that wise?” Remarks Barnard harboring reluctant thoughts of Mitchell and Irving.

“It wasn’t their fault. *Hm.*” The Director reminds him.

“Of course, Director... Who none better to build another?”

“Even *Isaac* complimented the precision they achieved. I doubt we’ll find any better than StarTech. *Hm.*”

‘Isaac would say that, wouldn’t he? You idiot!’ Thinks Barnard to himself.

“Yes, Director... No Director.” Unsure which it was. Nor did he longer care.

“The fleet will be delayed... But what are six months in the grand scheme of things?” Responds the Director leaning back in his chair. He was feeling hungry again.

“True. True.” Barnard also leans back relieved to have gotten off so easily.

The moment of reprieve was short lived.

Abruptly, a large holographic projection reaching from floor to ceiling appears. Partitioning the two men.

Sparkling polychromatic static lines. A life-size image of Sirius come into focus as though he was standing between them. Accentuating his grotesque features. One could almost smell his presence. Claw like fingers twitch as though wanting to take hold of the prey seated before him.

“I won’t hold you up any more Director.” Informs Barnard about to stand and leave.

“Stay_ Bar_ nard_... This_ con_cerns_ you_.” Sirius transmits the thought to his head.

Barnard found himself unable to move. Paralyzed from head to toe.

“Sirius... What a pleasure to see you.” Greets the Director, “...I assume you’ve heard about *Telos?* We have dealt with the man responsible... *Isaac. Hm?*”

“I_ saac_? You_ fool_... His_ mind_ was_ vet_ted_ by_ those_ a_bout_ him_... He_ was_ pu_re_... No_, it_ was_ some_one_else_.” Speculates Sirius.

“*Mitchell*... I knew it all along.” Barnard speaks before thinking.

“You_ knew_ all_ a_long_ and_ did_ not_ in_form_ the_ Di_rec_tor Bar_nard_?” The projection stretches outwards as though it were elastic.

Sirius’ face but inches from Barnard’s. A thin nose twitches as though to smell Barnard’s fear. Small pointed teeth chatter behind thin lips. A forked tongue sliver in and out. Barnard feels it lick his face. Large black eyes look into his mind. Peeling away everything thing he knew.

“I informed him... I truly did...” A feeling of déjà vu comes over Barnard, “... You know I did.” Sensing Sirius inside his mind.

Sirius’ face stretches before the Director, but inches away. Large black eyes penetrate the Director’s memories. And somewhere between the gluttonous meals, he found Barnard’s testimony. Along with other evidence.

“Gen_er_al_ Ir_ving_? I_ know_ this_ man? He_ is_ dead_. The_ craft_? ... Why_ was_ I_ not_ in_form_ed_? You_ im_bec_ciles_!” Sirius screeched.

“I tried. He wouldn’t listen to me. You have to believe me.” Pleaded Barnard mercifully.

“Si_lence_ fool_!” Sirius seizes Barnard with a single thought and lifts him from the armchair.

Eyes roll in sockets as Barnard gasps for breath before being dumped back into the chair.

“I can explain everything! *Hm.*” Recants the Director.

“No_ you_ can_ not_ !... I_ have_ seen_ your_ mind_ ... There_ is_ no_ thing_ but_ food_ scarps_ !”

“We can rebuild *Telos*, a new Satellite... I can speak with Stowers.” The Director attempts to reach for the phone, only to have no control of his limbs.

“Si_ lence_ ! So_ much_ time_ wast_ ed_ ! ... I_ was_ wrong_ to_ trust_ you_ Earth_ lings_ .”

Both men sat incapable of moving, as though they were possessed. Sirius contemplates their fate. And grins devilishly at the harbored dislike the two men had for the other. Large black eyes blink rapidly, channeling immense forces within him.

Bodies become rigid. Heads tilt violently from side to side as though having nervous spasms. Raising them above their chairs, only to have them fall and awaken some moments later. Disoriented, they find that Sirius had switched their bodies.

“Ahh! Ahh! ...” Cries out the Director sitting in Barnard’s chair staring back at himself, “... No_ ! No_ ! ...” Examining small hands and stubby fingers feeling for his face, his head, “... I’m bald! No_ ! Ahh_ !”

Barnard came about soon after to see himself sitting opposite. Thinking he was looking at a reflection of himself. Bfore feeling a gross discomfort in his bowels and passed painful wind. He felt fat and saw something sticking out. A gut. Fingers feel a podgy face and a full head of greasy hair.

“No_ ! This can’t be... Get me out of the hideous body... I beg of you Sirius.” Pleads Barnard tearing at his clothes as though it would help.

Sirius examines the humans that had failed him. The Elders may be patient, but Sirius was not one to suffer fools. True, *Telos* could be rebuilt. A new satellite acquired. But not under the current watch. *Redundancies* were required. Staff trimmed and fresh minds employed. Relaying these thoughts to the two men held captive.

“You_ have_ both_ fai_ led_ me_ ... This_ is_ in_ ex_ cus_ ab_ le.” Sirius told them pondering their fate.

Large black eye blinks rapidly again. As though charging batteries. Then become still. Inhaling a deep breath through thin nostrils unleashes his wrath upon them. Minds become muddled, twisted, confused. Exchanging between the two bodies. Becoming dizzier and dizzier. Unsure who they were anymore.

Becoming one, and then becoming the other.

Retching memories from the darkest fissures of their minds. Disgusting, obscene. Barnard wanted to vomit. The Director wanted to cry. Sirius agitated the lucid visions from one to the other. Like an old fashion washing machine.

But the time for playing was over.

One by one, Sirius plucked every memory the two men ever had their entire lives and erased them. Both now with the mental aptitude of newborn babies. Void of thought, other than the need to soil their pants.

Sirius’ job was done. He would inform the Elders and begin again. And just like that, the projection vanished into thin air. Leaving two fully grown men. Neither in their own body. But both in need of a diaper change.

“Pack it in tight.” Instructs Ted.

“It really won’t matter Ted. There C4 for alone will take the entire base out by itself without the nuclear core.” Remarks Tom.

“Maybe so... But pack it tight anyway.” Repeats Ted.
“Will do.” Conceding to the old man’s dying wish.
“How you two going under there?” Asked Ted.
Legs protrude from beneath the consoles.
“A few more days... We should have it.” Responds Stowers
“You’ve got two.” He tells them, wheezing.
“You heard him, Marshall.” Orders Stowers.
“Yes, Mister Stowers.”

Ted steps from the craft for fresh air and to escape the close confinement. Breaths had become more labored with each passing day. Rattling the plastic bottle of heart tablets as if it were a sand in an hourglass. And the time he had left. After they were gone, there would be no more. There would be no going back.

He had had a good life. A wife second to none in the universe. And conceded that though the good Lord had taken his wife and daughter, He must have needed them more. He had been blessed with Dharma. He could not have asked for a more beautiful granddaughter.

Then as if by fate, Tom had appeared. Along with the saucer. His cancer being the final straw. He was ready to go home...

Might be a little breezy

"I think that about wraps it up..." Advises Stowers, "... Mind if I keep this?" Tucking a panel under his arm.

"You may as well, you've pretty well stripped her bare as it is... I hope the dang thing still can fly." Ted inspects the naked interior of exposed circuitry.

"She'll still fly... Well, I guess this is it." Sighs Stowers feeling awkward.

"I guess so..." Sighs Ted feeling empty, "...You might want to keep this on the hush, what with the Pentagon being involved... Best let sleeping dogs lay if you know what I mean."

"Well, on behalf of the rest of the world... Thanks." Stowers thrusts out a hand taking a firm grip of Ted's callused hand.

"You're welcome." Ted shakes firmly back.

"Thank you, Sir." Marshall steps forward to offer his goodbye.

"You take care Marshall, you hear... You're a clever man to understand any of this... Go make some sense of it before they return. Understood?"

"Yes Sir, thank you Sir."

"When?" Asked Stowers curiously.

"Soon... Have a few last errands to run first. But you'll know."

"All the best..." Grins Stowers.

Left alone in the barn with Waldo by his side, memories came flooding back as though they were yesterday. Laughter, and feeling of youth that had long since left his bones. And been eaten away by cancer. Outside the sun sat on the horizon, ever watchful of the old man.

A divine shaft of light radiates between the weatherboards. Ted looks over his shoulder as though he was being watched. He thinks he sees a silhouette of a woman walking outside. And the sound of Ester's voice. Only to hear it fade.

He wondered how much more life he had in him. He had lost track of the days of the week. Was it Wednesday, or Friday? Not that he cared anymore. And he wondered if he should spend more time inside the craft.

"Tomorrow..." Whatever day that was, he tells himself.

Deferring the inevitable one more day. One more day with Dharma. Should he tell her? The question weighed heavier on his mind than his own death. Why burden her now. It was better this way.

The naked interior of the craft lite with colored lights. At its center, the core packed with dark bricks held in place by silver duct tape. It was not pretty. It was meant to be. But it would be effective. The remote, like the one that took down the rocket, sat on the console, primed and ready to go.

He had waited a lifetime for this moment. He could end it all now and take himself with it. And leave the place to the aliens. Perhaps he was selfish. He was not saving eight billion people. He was saving one. Dharma. He owed it to her. To Tom. And no one else.

Becoming melancholy shakes himself back to the barn.

"Come on you..." He calls out to Waldo, "... Dharma will be looking for us."

The Red Sparrow roars into the air. Taking his time to get home he flies over familiar places one last time. Below Redemption, and he swoops down to buzz the rooftop. Ranch hands hear the roar of the old engine. Thinking they were under attack. Causing rafters to vibrate and dust to fall. A raucous cheer sings out and people rush outside to salute the old man. Waving hats and whistling. The only grand parade he needed. Cecil steps out front and salutes to the plane flying in low.

Ted returns the salute, making his final bow and flies away towards the homestead.

“You seeing that doctor soon?” Asked Dharma hearing the old man entering the kitchen.

“I’ve got an appointment tomorrow...” He lied, “... I’ll take your truck if you don’t mind.”

“I can drive you.” She offers.

“Nah, I’ll be fine... *(Cough)*... *(Cough-Cough-Cough)*.” Becoming short of breath.

“Yeah sounds like it... Make sure you do see that doctor.” She warns him.

“You sound like your mother.”

“Good... Then maybe you’ll listen.” She reprimands him.

Ted pulls on reading glasses and examines the newspapers, if only for the date.

“Friday... Hm.” He wheezed before coughing, almost wanting to pass out.

“Why don’t you get yourself to bed and I’ll bring you some chicken soup.”

“Now you do sound like your mother.” Ted relents thinking perhaps he should rest up.

Waiting a moment to regain his faculties. The lights had dimmed, and it was not the bulbs. He tries to stand and becomes dizzy. Catching himself in time of the edge of the table to avoid falling. Dharma rushes over to support him.

“You had your heart tablet today?”

Ted reaches for the tablet bottle and shakes it. Two left. Throwing them into his mouth. Chewing on the bitter taste and swallows.

“Come on you... Off to bed.” She tells him as though he were a small child.

The old man does not resist. Finding a second wind as the tablets took effect. Warily he stands to the base of the stairs that may as well have been Everest. And Sherpa Tenzing nowhere to be seen. But the thought sparked an idea.

Eyes focus on the top. A hand supports him on the rail, as weary feet take one step at a time. Fatigued and short of breath, he made it to the top. A dizzy spell overcomes him. Blacking out he falls to the floor. Dharma hears a thud of something heavy and goes to investigate.

Ted awakens to find himself in bed. Surrounded by unfamiliar people looking down at him. The sound of a heart monitor beeping. A dip bottle hung from a silver pole beside the bed. Tubes running into an arm. Plastic oxygen tubes up his nose. This was not his bedroom. It was all *too...white*. A pale blue nylon curtain is pulled about the cubicle.

He could hear voices on the other side.

“Hm...” He groans, “... Where am I?” He asked half knowing.

“You’re in Hospital Mister Irving.” Informs a doctor in a white overcoat. Glasses perched on the end of his nose as he scribbled notes on a clipboard.

To one side Dharma stands with Tom. Both looking worried. One more so than the other. Ted grins at Tom, giving him a wink to say he was okay.

“You’re a very lucky man Mister Irving... Your granddaughter called us in time... Another twenty minutes and...” Not completing the fatal diagnosis.

“When can I go home?” Asked Ted, struggling short breaths.

"Oh, you'll be our guest for a while Mister Irving until we run some tests..." The Doctor scribbles more notations stabbing the board with a pen as if to say he was finished. And hung it on the end of the bed, "... A nurse will be along soon to check to you."

"Hmm." Grumbles the old man wishing to leave.

"Thank you, Doctor," Dharma speaks for her grandfather, watching the Doctor pull the curtain closed again.

"You okay Ted?" Asked Tom.

"Just dandy... You?"

"Good... What happened?"

"Must have tripped on the top step."

"Doc said his oxygen count was low... Something to do with his lungs..." She turns to her grandfather, "...You should have seen the doctor sooner..." She reprimands him, then immediately regrets it, "... Sorry, Gramps."

"You're right... I'm just a stubborn old man... I should have..." He looks about the cubicle, "...I'm in the best place, right?" He said to comfort her.

"Why don't you young ones take off and come back tomorrow... I'm not going anywhere."

"Dressed like that you're not... Might be a little breezy." Joked Tom lightening the tension.

"Don't go annoying the nurses okay." Dharma warns her grandfather.

"Promise." He smiles.

She leans down and kisses him. The old man offers a cheeky grin in return.

"Can I have a private word with Tom before you go? ... It's about..."

"Five minutes okay... I'll just be outside." Dharma informs him.

"Thanks, sweetie." Ted watches her leave. Listening for tell tail footsteps to fade.

"You can't go... You have to wait until you get better." Suggests Tom.

"Are you hearing yourself?" Asked Ted amused.

"It can wait, can't it?" Tom tries to tell him.

"It can... But I can't..." Ted looks sternly at Tom, "... You want to go my place?"

The question is met with silence. Ted offers his hand to say goodbye. Tom took it. There was a warmth about it that came from the heart. As though the old man was saying goodbye.

"You look after her okay?" He held the grip firm as though wanting a commitment from him.

"I promise."

"Somethings happen for a reason..." The old man looks to Tom, "... And some people have a destiny to fulfill... Don't stop me now."

"Wild horses couldn't stop you, Ted... God speed."

"Oh, and Tom?" Calling out as he was about to leave.

"What's that?"

"Look after the *Sparrow* will you? She can be temperamental, but that's women for you."

"It will be an honor, Sir... Get some rest... We'll see you tomorrow."

"Look forward to it." Ted lied.

The pale blue curtain closed behind him. Leaving him in peace. Well almost. The sound of the heart monitor beeped annoyingly. Ted reached up to the machine and flicked a switch. And silence rained down. A peace came over him. With veins coursing oxygen and numbing sedatives, the old man drifted off to rekindle a dream.

The next morning Dharma drew back the cubical curtains to discover the empty hospital bed. Looking about the ward hoping to see her grandfather in another bed.

'*Gasp.*' She fears the worse.

Tom tries to conceal his surprise at finding the old man missing.

"Excuse me..." She asked a passing nurse, "... Do you know when my Grandfather, Ted Irving?"

"Ah... Mister Irving, yes... He didn't inform you?" The nurse asked.

"Inform us of what?"

"He discarded himself early this morning... Said he was heading home."

"I don't understand... He's in no state to drive."

"I'm sorry, there nothing but more I can say... You'll need to speak with him... Excuse me I have to see about a patient."

"Thank you, nurse..." Interrupts Tom and waits for her leave, "...There's something I have to tell you... You're not going to like it."

"What's going on Tom? ... Where is he?" Dharma looks into his eyes for the truth.

"He's going home." Was the only way he could describe it.

"I don't understand..."

"Come here..." Wrapping his arms about her, "... Choking on words he had promised to keep to himself, "... He's dying... Lung cancer."

"I don't understand... He never said... We could help him? Can't we?"

"He's been living on borrowed time for the past six months... The only thing keeping him alive... Was that craft and..."

"You knew all along?"

"He *made* me promise." His eyes whelming with tears.

"And? ..."

"He's going to destroy the base."

"What base?"

"The Moon Base."

Dharma tries to free herself to go after him. Tom restrains her halfhearted attempt to leave.

"There's nothing you can do to stop him." He tells her.

"But you destroyed the satellite?" She looks at him confused.

"They'll only build another one... He wants to take out the base. Once and for all. Send *them* a message... It's what he wants... It's his choice."

Dharma images the stubborn old man getting his way and going out with a bang.

"He never told me he had cancer." Said Dharma.

"That's because he never wanted to hurt you... He loved you too much." Holding her close.

Wiping tears from her eyes. Conceding the old man had pulled one over on her. He was Gramps to the end.

"I have a good idea where he might be..." Said Tom, "... But we have to hurry." ...

Oh boy, not again...

Chickens scattered and squawked as Tom skid his vehicle beside the porch. The plane was parked beside the barn. There was still hope Ted was about. Waldo leaps from the window and rushes up the steps. Soon followed by Dharma. Hurrying into an empty lounge and frantically upstairs to discover that too was soulless. She returned despondently to the kitchen.

Looking out back notices her Flatbed was gone.

"He's taken the truck." She calls out.

The plane coughs and splutters, screaming at the untimely awakening. Air rushes over the cockpit. Waldo's forelegs hang over on the edge of the cockpit as he barked back at the stuttering propeller. Taxiing about the barn, Tom pushes the throttle forward and accelerates the plane over the bumpy runway. Climbing before banking and heading in the direction of the second barn.

Adrenaline coursed through veins and Dharma is incapable of holding a thought longer than a moment. Ahead, the old homestead. Her heart races, and eyes light up with hope. Tom banks the plane to circle the property below. The Flatbed was parked outside.

Tom quickly descends and makes an abrupt bumpy landing. Taxiing just short of the barn doors. Dharma clambers out in a hurry, as Tom took his time. Waldo races ahead and rushes into the barn hoping to find the old man. His scent still fresh. Moments later Tom stands beside her at the doors. The interior an empty cold dark shell.

He was gone. There would be no last goodbyes.

She looks to the sky and the distant moon. The two women stared each other down. The Dharma blinked first. A tear comes to her eye. Tom places his arms around her to comfort her. Holding her close, unsure what to say.

"It was worth a shot." He conceded.

"I know... That old fool... *(Sigh)*."

"Come on you... Let's get you home..." Then whistles for the dog to follow, "... *(Whistling softly)* ... Come on Waldo... Get in."

Waldo fidgets expecting the old man to appear at any time. Whimpering, that something was amiss. The plane climbs back into the sky. Numbed, Dharma disconnects from the world. Noises dull. Memories of her grandfather come flooding back to her. Tears, screaming down her face.

A shadow swallows the plane whole as if a dark cloud had obliterated the sun. Dharma looks up to see the craft flying above them. Wiping tears from her eyes she leans on the ledge like Waldo to get a good look. The dog yapped incessantly at the craft that was now flying beside them.

"He can see you," Tom informs her through headsets.

She waves out to him and smiles. The craft tilts side to side to acknowledge her. Only to have her smile bigger. The homestead loomed ahead, Tom knew that would signal the point of no return.

The R.T. comes crackles to life.

"Are you there?" *(Squawk!)* Ted's tired voice sounds.

"Gramps!" *(Squawk!)* Annoyed at him.

"I'm sorry sweetie, but this is something I have to do." *(Squawk!)*

"I know... I love you." *(Squawk!)*

"I love you too... You look after him. Okay?" (*Squawk!*)

"I will... Go get them!" (*Squawk!*) She tells him.

"With pleasure..." (*Squawk!*) "... See you on the other side. (*Squawk!*)"

"I love you." She whispers, blowing her grandfather a kiss.

Tom gives him the thumbs up and lifts the nose of the Red Sparrow to a climb as though to challenge the old man. Climbing higher and higher and higher, aimed directly at the rising moon. Leaving the craft behind in his wake. Ted waited as the biplane climbed ever higher. Knowing when it would soon top out.

The engine screamed at the top of its lungs. Straining for more altitude. When suddenly the craft flashed past in a blink of an eye. Becoming smaller and smaller and smaller until it became a dot. And faded completely from view.

"Let's go home." Dharma told Tom finding closure.

The craft broke through the upper atmosphere and into the darkness and stillness of outer space like a whale breaching the surface of the ocean. The old man's labored breath sounded within the old spacesuit coupled to an oxygen bottle.

His father's urn wedged securely between bricks of explosives. He had started the sordid affair. It was only fitting he was there when Ted finished it. Aiming the craft towards the distant glowing orb some quarter of a million miles away. Becoming closer and closer with each passing moment. What had taken him days in a tin can, would take but minutes in the craft.

Behind him the fragile blue marble grew smaller and smaller and smaller.

The lunar surface appears outside, and Ted takes the craft down for one last look. Tranquility Base. The lunar lander as it was some sixty years earlier. The soil beneath charred black by the module's rockets as it left the surface. Historic footsteps erased by the exhaust of the catapulting lunar module. The American flag had fallen over from the blast.

It all seemed like yesterday to Ted.

Coughing uncontrollably steadies himself against the console as the dizzy spell passes. The oxygen becoming depleted. Perhaps he had overextended his departure on earth.

"Not now." He tells himself looking for strength.

The time for reminiscing was over and the craft rides over the surface. As he encroached the far side of the moon the earth was setting on the horizon behind him. It would be the last time he would ever see it. Breaths grow shallower. The anxiety grew. Not knowing what to expect.

Suddenly, the craft takes on a life of its own. As if it were on autopilot. Ted stands back from the controls. Lights begin to flicker on the console surface. Chatter and squeals sound within the cabin. The craft banked and guided it to a large black opening in the side of a giant canyon.

A moving light blinked the way down the center of the tunnel. That seem to go on forever. Deeper and deeper into the dark interior. Ahead shone a pinpoint of light. Appearing like a solitary star in the night sky. Seeming miles away. Ted sits on the explosives and waits. Hoping it would implode and send everyone, but himself and his father to hell.

The faint star grew brighter as the craft descended into the abyss. Making out movement. Crafts of some kind flying about. His visor mists with the heated moist breath. The oxygen had run out and he was now running on fumes. Lifting the visor, gasped for fresh air.

The craft enters a large loading bay. Greys watch as legs extend from its hull. Curious of the craft thought to be lost. Now back among them. Communications systems appeared to have been damaged. And wait to welcome their brethren.

Sirius appears on a hover shuttle to inspect the craft and greet the returning Greys after many years away. The old man gasped final breaths and closed the visor to conceal his face. Flicking a switch on the remote, a red-light glowed brightly.

The hatch slowly opened, and the ramp descends. The old man takes a moment before stepping out. Large black eyes peer hesitantly into the compartment to see a strangely dressed creature. Was it human? Bulbous eyes see a broken interior, missing panels, circuitry lights flashing. Something strange about the core. Repairs of some kind? Thin nostrils twitch at the foul smell of the explosives.

Ted steps down the ramp appearing harmless. The red light concealed by his other hand as though he were injured. He closes the hatch behind him. And turns to face Sirius as hideous as he was. Standing as tall as him. That was where the similarities ended.

Feeling dizzy, Ted opens the visor and gasps for air. Sirius tries to read the human's mind, only to find it riddled with pain and disease.

"Do_ I_ know_ you_ hu_ man_?" He asked hesitantly. Sensing something was amiss.

"You knew my father... General Irving." Informed the old man.

"Ah..." Sirius recalled their meeting many decades earlier.

Large black eyes examine the face of the old man inside the helmet.

"What_ do_ you_ want_ hu_ man_?" Sirius asked with contempt.

"To be left alone." Now revealing the remote on his arm.

Sirius now sees the red light all too late to act. Eyes meet momentarily. No one heard the explosion. Just the *'click'* of the old man throwing the switch.

It was all over in less than three-ten-thousandths of a second. That moment between moments, where only God exists. Not time, nor space. A fire ball of brilliant white light radiated throughout the loading bay. Racing at the speed of light along corridors. Incinerating everything instantly in its path.

Upon reaching the energy core buried deep within the bowels of the base. Cannibalizing the core in a perpetual feeding frenzy. A fierce jet of superheated plasma spewed back along tunnels and ejaculated like a massive propulsion rocket from the opening. The moon, that had ceased turning while in alien captivity, began to rotate gradually on its axis.

And began to pirouette, once more.

Unsure what to make of the anomaly, people on Earth thought it was a hoax. Fake news. Never-before seen features, came into view. Telescopes and television cameras pointed their lens towards the celestial body rotating ever so leisurely. As though God had given it a nudge it and set it in motion.

Then, on the trailing horizon, an ominous stream black smoke appears extending for hundreds of miles. Evident that something sinister had occurred. Speculation arose that it must have been a meteorite. But was soon dismissed for lack of a crater. NASA was stretched to find explanations. No pixels could conceal this anomaly. Powerful telescopes suggested volcanic activity. But were mystified as to why the jettison of smoke was sideways, and not vertical.

None of it made sense.

Tom stood with Dharma in his arms looking up at the moon. The telltale black smoke trail marked the entrance to the moon base.

“That’s one hell of a tombstone your grandfather got for himself.” Said Tom grinning.

“That was Gramps for you.” She grins to herself.

Tom goes back inside to collapse on the couch and flick through countless channels covering the lunar anomaly.

‘(Flick)... We interrupt this program... to bring you breaking news...’

‘(Flick)... Breaking from our regular program, news just to hand...’

‘(Flick)... (Flick)... (Flick)... (Flick)... (Flick)... (Flick)...’ Scrolling through channel after channel before settling one of interest.

‘(Flick)... The US Military today has now confirmed the incident on the moon was a top-secret military weather satellite that crashed onto the lunar surface...’

“Oh boy... Here we go again.” Remarked Tom looking to the window...

About the Author

Born a long time ago in the small township of Foxton, New Zealand, Bradley's first book was a Self-Help book *E is for Effort*. That led to his debut novel *The Ring*. And so began the "End of Days" trilogy. The fuse had been lit and one book leads to another, and as they say, the rest is history. His books reflect his keen interest in comparative religion, spirituality, adventure, and romance. When not writing he enjoys innovating new products, hearty workouts at the gym, and hanging out with his three amazingly intelligent and beautiful children Harry, Emily, and Rebecca.

Then again, he could be found at his local enjoying a craft beer and talking to strangers.

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