

UFO: The Men in Black

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By Adrian Kleinbergen

Straker woke to the high-pitched beep of his personal telephone. He was used to being awakened in the middle of the night with urgent summons and was immediately alert.

"Straker here. What's happened?"

"Commander, this is Colonel Lake. There's been a - casualty. You've got to get down here right away." A casualty? Someone dead? As if things weren't tough enough as it was.

"All right, Colonel. Who's been killed?"

"...General Henderson." The line went dead in Straker's hand.

"Henderson...?" Straker got up and dressed quickly, his mind racing as he locked the door of his unremarkable flat and strode towards his car.

Straker pulled into his parking stall outside Harlington-Straker Film Studios and was soon striding down the corridor towards the secret entrance to SHADO. He nodded absently to passing FX technicians and actors as he went along and soon he entered the main office. Miss Ealand was not at her desk this early and Straker keyed the door of his office. Inside, Col. Virginia Lake, Col. Paul Foster and Doctor Marc Jacson waited.

"All right, what's happened?" Straker winced at the headache that had begun when the phone had awakened him and showed no sign of abating.

"General Henderson's been killed. " Paul Foster's face was ashen and Virginia Lake's eyes were red.

"Doctor Jacson, tell me how it happened, and fast!"

"Commander, it all started two days ago, when the General insisted on making a personal inspection of SHADO Headquarters himself..."

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"I want to make a personal inspection, Ed. I've distanced myself from SHADO for too long and I want to start keeping on top of current events. I'm not suggesting any interference with your command. No, not at all. I just want to know what's happening."

Straker let Henderson continue without interrupting. The general was actually smiling now and Straker didn't want to risk souring his mood, now that he was preparing to ask for the largest fiscal appropriation ever requested for SHADO. A ring of remote automated interceptor bases set up between the moon and Mars and that was only the beginning. Straker smiled back at the old but sturdy face of the General.

"I've got no objections to that, General. Now you can get another look at where your appropriation money is going. When would you like to make arrangements?"

"As soon as possible, Ed... I have a feeling my schedule's going to be running tight." Henderson puffed on a small black cigar thoughtfully. "It's been a long time, hasn't it, Ed? A long time since that fateful car accident all those years ago... but for that, I might be running SHADO instead of you. Don't get me wrong, Ed. You're the only one for the job. I would never have lasted as long as you... still, it's an curious turn of fortune all the same. " Straker looked puzzled. It wasn't like the General to wax nostalgic like this. He shrugged, unable to think of a suitable reply.

"Don't worry, Ed. I guess I've been living to much in the past. Old regrets and all that. I'm

getting old and I don't like it. You won't either, when the time comes." Henderson's laugh was a brittle sound and did not carry much humour.

"I'll make the preparations, General. I can have Col. Lake pick you up tomorrow morning." Straker tried to act cheerful but knew he was forcing it. He hoped it didn't look too artificial to the General.

"Thanks, Ed. I'll see you tomorrow. It'll give you time to tidy the place up a little."
It was the last time Ed Straker saw General Henderson alive.

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"I know all of that, Dr. I was there. What happened then?"

Straker sat behind his desk and opened a drawer. He found a bottle of large, potent painkillers and downed three of them dry. The door opened and Alec Freeman strode in wearily.

"Commander... I guess you've heard. Dr. Jacson, you're wanted in medcentre. They're about to begin the autopsy." Jacson nodded.

"Commander, I must attend the autopsy if we're going to find out anything at all."

"I can finish off, Commander," Said Col. Foster, sipping coffee from a plastic cup. "General Henderson arrived unscheduled, on his own and without Col. Lake. He bluffed his way past the ground level security, made his way down the elevator and was in front of Miss Ealand's desk when he finally collapsed. He seemed to be dead ten minutes later." Foster finished

"What do you mean, 'seemed to be dead'?" Straker's head continued to pound, but a little less intensely.

"That's just it... he stood in front of the desk and dropped dead. No visible traces of anything, but we may know more when Dr. Jacson is finished."

"We had better..." Straker lay back in his chair and closed his eyes, sighing as he did so.

* * *

Straker awoke suddenly to an empty office. He glanced at his watch and blinked, realizing that over an hour had passed. He sat upright and stretched, noticing with some degree of satisfaction that at least his headache had vanished. He rose from the plastic swivel chair as his intercom buzzed.

"Commander Straker?" It was Jacson's voice.

"Straker here, Doctor. What do you have to report?"

"Commander... you had better come to Medcentre right away. What I have to tell you needs to be told in person."

"Very well, Doctor. I'll come down at once." Straker frowned at the strange tone in Jacson's voice. Marc Jacson was not an easy man to shock or frighten. Yet had Straker heard puzzled fear in the doctor's voice?

Straker left his office and met Alec Freeman, Paul Foster and Virginia Lake in the main Control room. They looked exhausted and uncertain. Having General Henderson struck down within the supposedly secure confines of Shado Headquarters was a morale buster of the highest magnitude. Straker knew this and he had to reverse the effects at all costs or the accumulated shock of the incident would punch a hole in Shado security big enough for Skydiver to sail through.

"Let's go to Medcentre. Dr. Jacson has some results for us." The three followed behind Straker without a word and he felt worried about that. They were at a weak point right now and whatever mysterious explanation that awaited in Jacson's lab would probably not improve

the situation.

The door of Medcentre opened and Straker's group entered without a word. Straker took one look at Jacson and knew something was wrong - something a lot worse than the mere fact that General Henderson was mysteriously dead.

"Well, Doctor... what have you found?" Straker tried not to sound desperate. Foster stood, his arms folded in front of him and Lake, her hands clenching nervously, stared wordlessly at Jacson.

"Commander, what I have just seen is... so fantastic... so unexpected... that I'm not sure how to begin."

"Pick a place and start, Doctor. We need answers now." Straker prompted. Jacson looked up at the four circled around him. Straker finally noticed the waxy paleness on the Doctor's face and the shaky hand that guided the cigarette to his trembling lips; he had never seen Marc Jacson so unnerved.

"What I have seen may change everything we have come to know concerning the Alien threat - " Straker could take no more.

"Doctor! Will you please get to the point! What happened to General Henderson?" Dr. Jacson looked sharply at Straker for a moment and spoke.

"Why don't you let him tell you himself. " With those words, the rear door of the lab opened and a haggard but very much alive Gen. Henderson walked in wearing a institutional grey robe and slippers. Straker and the others were staggered by the sight and Henderson spoke as they gaped in shocked silence.

"Don't look so surprised Ed. You know you can't get rid of me that easily. Doctor I could really go for a strong black coffee right now. Could you do something about it?" Jacson looked surprised and after a moment's pause, tapped the intercom button.

"Sarah, could you bring us some fresh coffee?" Jacson stopped for a moment and added, "Could you send some brandy with that, please?"

"Yes, Doctor. It will be a few minutes." Straker spoke first.

"General... what happened? You were listed and confirmed as dead according to Colonel's Foster, Lake and Freeman. What is going on..." Straker stopped as he noticed the Henderson's chest, now revealed by the looseness of the robe. Distinct autopsy stitches laddered up the pale skin. Straker frowned as he realized what the coarse black sutures meant and Col. Lake visibly paled at the macabre sight. Henderson smiled and looked down at the fresh scar.

"Not a pretty sight, I know. The good doctor was about to saw off the top of my head when I managed to awaken. You should have seen the look on his face when I asked him to put my insides back in. I'll admit, it was not intended to happen like this. I wasn't supposed to die yet... not here or in this way. " Henderson paused as a young girl brought in a small cart bearing coffee and brandy. Henderson nodded thanks as he was handed a white ceramic mug containing brandy-laced coffee. He sipped and smiled, looking relaxed and paternal, as though he were entertaining guests.

"General... can you explain what happened to you?" Straker tried to maintain his usual icy control but it was eroding steadily. Henderson looked at all of them and put down his half-empty cup. It clinked against the tray-top in the silence of the room.

"Ed, as Dr. Jacson will confirm, I am not human. I am not from this planet and before you jump to conclusions, I am not involved with the aliens that threaten this world. I am neither an android or a living being in the way you understand life. In a sense, I am a carrier for a

non-terrestrial lifeform, similar to the invaders. I, however, am an ally to your race and have been working in your race's interests for forty years. "

Straker stared at Henderson for a long moment. He turned his gaze to Jacson who opened his mouth to speak.

"What... General Henderson has told you is correct. I had just finished emptying the abdominal cavity having found nothing abnormal and was preparing to open the skull when the General seemed to... revive. He spoke as you heard him say, and I proceeded to reconnect all his internal organs. I then restored his blood and he stepped away from the table the moment I completed the closing sutures. I don't understand this! There's no way that he could be alive!" Jacson finally broke, his voice cracking with the realization that he had finally been confronted with the impossible.

"Doctor, calm yourself. The proof sits before you. You have a full computer analysis of the, uh, autopsy and you can't deny the results. It's imperative that you believe me. I am not working alone and your inadvertent discovery of me may tip the scales. " Straker frowned.

"Tip the scales, General?" Henderson looked at him.

"Yes, Ed. Your adversaries know nothing about me and my kind. We have broken an unwritten rule by involving ourselves in the defense of your world even though it is in response to the predators that have targeted humanity for their sustenance. Our presence must be kept secret or else... other powers may move against you." Foster shook his head and whistled. Lake rubbed her forehead and blew out a long tired breath. Straker stared at a wall and absent-mindedly withdrew a long dark cigar. He lit it without trimming the end and puffed silently for a moment. He then turned on Henderson and spoke.

"General, you say that you are... an alien. You say that there are more of you. You say that you and your people face... retribution if your involvement with Earth is discovered. My question to you is... Why? Why help Earth? What purpose does your assistance serve?" Smoke wreathed Straker's head as he posed his questions.

"Let's just say that my associates have a vested... interest in Earth and its people; certainly not in the way your enemies do. We could be called... custodians. We don't make obvious interferences of course. But we make a difference where it matters. This predation from the - other race - has changed much. We must stop the efforts of these beings without making our presence known. It is also vital that the general population never know of the threat that confronts it. This is why we organized SHADO and ensured that it remain a maximum security organization." Straker looked puzzled.

"General, if what you say is true... if your - race - initiated SHADO, why did I have to beg and scrape for appropriations? Why have you fought me all these years when I needed you support?" Henderson smiled quietly.

"Well Ed... I needed to see how hard you'd fight to get your way. If you backed down from me even though you knew you were right... well, I'd know you weren't the right man for the job. As it happened, you fought me every inch of the way; and SHADO has the eyes and teeth to do the job it was intended to do. " Henderson stood abruptly, his robe falling to the floor. Straker and the others stared at Henderson in amazed silence. The rough, autopsy stitching that formed the characteristic "Y" shape on his chest and abdomen had vanished. He stood, his aged skin showing no sign or scar of the sutures Dr. Jacson had industriously sewed into him only an hour ago. Henderson smiled again, wrapping the robe about him once more and tying the waistcord.

"We have much to speak of, Ed. The rest of you... please leave the room. What I have to

say now is for Ed Straker's ears alone." Lake and Foster looked at Straker for direction and he stood considering for a brief moment. He then nodded and the two reluctantly left the room. Freeman looked back once and he also departed. Jacson considered for a moment but finally decided to leave his Medcenter and hope that Straker could handle whatever further truths Henderson had to reveal.

The door slid shut and Straker ground out his half-smoked cigar.

"Well, General... let's have it." Henderson looked serious and sat down.

"Sit down Ed. This will take some telling..."

Straker drew himself another mug of coffee and settled himself into one of the Medcentre's hard plastic chairs. Henderson refilled his mug and splashed in a restorative dollop of brandy. He sipped appreciatively and set the mug down.

"Ed, a lot has been going on in a relatively short time. I've been on Earth for... " Henderson frowned as he remembered, "Thirty-three years. I was sent just after a rather embarrassing incident concerning my race. You will probably remember it under a more recognizable name... Roswell." Henderson's eyes narrowed as he spoke the words and Straker's cigar stopped inches from his lips.

"Roswell? You were involved with the Roswell incident? The crashed 'disc' at Socorro? My father was-"

"Major Barry Straker, of the 509th Bomber group, stationed at Roswell, yes, I know. He was a friend of Major Jesse Marcel, who was later made into a scapegoat during the subsequent cover-up." The lines on Straker's face grew softer as he remembered those strange days. He had only been ten years old at the time but he could recall the night his father and Major Marcel arrived home bearing a fragment of the strange metal from the crash site. Straker relived those bizarre, wonderful moments when he had been allowed to handle the strange metal-that-was-not-metal. He didn't need to be told that it might be from outer space... he could feel it. He felt a need that transcended reason to find the source of that miraculous metal that wouldn't stay crumpled. In that moment, Ed Straker's fate would be sealed but in ways that he would never have imagined.

"The crash was an accident, a foolish accident. We tried to cover our tracks as best we could but when the Airforce Authorities got hold of the wreckage, we knew a drastic solution was in order," Henderson took another sip from his cup. "The choice was either allow the Earth scientists to study the wreckage and the bodies totally altering the balance of knowledge and technology or reveal ourselves to a select group of government operatives and scientists, ones with the intelligence not to panic at the idea of extra-terrestrial life. We approached such a group and made a deal to re-acquire our wrecked ship and crew in return for scraps of information concerning our race and certain technologies. We handed over a jackpot a few years ago in the form of the Utronic tracking systems that allow you to accurately track supra-light objects in space. Even the electric motors in your automobiles? Those are ours, too. " Henderson sipped. "Basically, we worked out a deal that kept us out of the public eye and furnished humanity with a few modest technological jumpstarts. The only thing that wouldn't go away was the continued study of UFO's and related phenomenon. Now I can tell you that the only ufo's flying in those days were ours, at least until the predators arrived. The others were weather balloons, Venus, air inversions and any of the hundred-and-one items commonly mistaken for ufo's. The problem was that too many people were becoming interested in the study of 'Unidentified Flying Objects'. The chance that some amateur investigator might stumble upon information dealing with the delicate operation that was going on was too great

to ignore. It was then that a plan was worked out to curb the proliferation of investigation. The Air Force created its phony 'Project Blue Book' and my people agreed to assist in the campaign."

"We became 'The Men in Black.'" Straker's eyes widened. He had remembered reading about the mysterious men in black that frequently showed up to intimidate and frighten ufo investigators. He had dismissed the reports as unreliable when he had examined the top-secret files that had been turned over to him when SHADO was established.

"I and a number of my colleagues made ourselves available to the Airforce High-Command when it became necessary to - discourage serious investigation from amateur sources. For the most part, only a few visitations were necessary. Word got around and eventually the implied menace of the Men in Black was sufficient to scare off would-be ufo buffs without any actual visit," Henderson's face darkened. " We only had to kill twice to ensure silence... an astrophysicist named Morris Jessup and a writer, Frank Edwards. They would not be convinced... so we had to use... measures.. " Henderson looked uncomfortable, as though he had revealed more than he intended.

"There are a lot of things for which I'm not proud, Ed. Some of the ridiculous play-acting that was devised to 'disinform' the public. Hundreds of fake ufo photos circulated, false abductees and even that preposterous 'Alien Autopsy'. At least that stuff was funny up to a point. Some of my treatment of you, however... and your people. I've needed to maintain the curmudgeon attitude to keep you all on your toes but I'm getting tired of it. I'm getting old and... my systems are not working as well as they once did. My breakdown here at SHADO HQ is a certain sign that I'm slipping. This is why I'm telling all this to you now. You have run SHADO exactly as it needs to be run. You have a loyal and trusted core of staff. The time has now come for you to take on a greater measure of responsibility. I will be passing soon... and when my replacement arrives she will be making some changes. You will be promoted to General; this will allow you to oversee all aspects of SHADO and the High-Command structure that has always been kept from you. It will be up to you to promote one of your three colonels to Active Commander- your old job. I can tell you something else... there have been some technological breakthroughs that will increase SHADO's bite considerably... maybe enough to end the whole game. Who knows? I will pass away normally, in my bed in a matter of months. You may see me again, though," Henderson said enigmatically. "I usually turn up again. I'm glad I got this chance to tell you how I feel, Ed. I'm sorry that had to be this way, though."

Straker stared, his forgotten cigar dropping a slow but steady stream of ash onto the beige carpet. He had never been confronted by such a story as this and he had heard a lot of strange stories. He believed the General but knowledge of the manipulation of Earth's destiny grated on his belief in humanity's self-sufficiency. Henderson sensed Straker's feelings and spoke again.

"Don't feel that humanity has in any way been coddled; we may have helped supply the toys but you have had the skill and courage to play with them. Your belief in the 'Bloody-mindedness' of mankind is well-founded. Otherwise my people would not have bothered to interfere with your survival. You are all worth saving." Henderson nodded. Straker ground out his wasted cigar and stood. His head felt light all of a sudden and he grabbed the chair-back to steady himself. Henderson looked on, his expression sad.

"General... what's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Ed. I really am. Don't worry. You're not in danger. I made an... arrangement

with Dr. Jacson. He spiked the coffee and the brandy with your effective and handy amnesia drug. By now Freeman, Lake and Foster should be fast asleep as you will soon be. You won't remember any of this night's happenings and by tomorrow, nothing will be out of place. Even the security camera records will be edited by... well, you don't need to know that. Dr. Jacson has certain orders to carry out after I leave and the next time you see me, you will be hosting my inspection tour." Henderson hesitated for a moment.

"What is important is that all of what I told you is the truth. The events to come will happen as I described but you will react better if you have no fore-knowledge."

Straker almost fell forward and Henderson sprang up from his chair and guided the almost unconscious man onto the couch. When Henderson was certain that Straker was sleeping normally, he hung up the robe in a small closet and proceeded to don his uniform. He whistled a tune he remembered as 'The March of the Oysters' as he dressed and with a parting glance about the medcentre, closed the door behind him.

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Several days later, General Henderson drove off in his antique Bentley, Straker watching the car turn out of the private driveway behind Harlington-Straker Studios and vanish behind the hedgerows. The inspection had been modest, routine and nothing out of the ordinary. Still, Henderson's visits always put him on edge. Straker looked out at the quiet fields and groves that bordered the studio and breathed deeply. He then turned towards the studio complex and began to walk, smiling mildly, thinking about the strange dream he had a few nights ago. He had dreamed about the General and also about his colleagues. They had all been together in a room talking but he didn't know what about. Suddenly he was alone with Henderson then he saw himself fall over while Henderson was smiling. Dr. Jacson entered the room and Straker remembered that he was being carried out. There was a gradual blurring of his memories concerning the dream but he dimly remembered lights of passing cars in the night and the play of light on Dr. Jacson's worried face. He could remember no more. It was steadily fading and he shook it off. Henderson was gone and he could get back to work without interference.

Straker headed back to his office. He thought for a moment, and decided to ring up his dad. He hadn't spoken to the man in months and suddenly, strangely felt the urge to hear his voice. Straker smiled at the thought and began to whistle a tune he didn't know the name of, but some might have recognized as 'The March of the Oysters'.