

A Matter of Business

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George Harris walked through the smoky snug of the White Horse into the back room that he used as an office. The man waiting for him had been checked out and they had come up with nothing, absolutely nothing. Not a copper, then. An undercover cop would have a story back to the day he was born. Harris was intrigued.

The man stood up as he entered. Tall and thin with salt and pepper hair, he had nothing to distinguish him except for his rather disconcerting eyes. A fanatic, maybe, looking for professional help. They shook hands in a perfunctory manner. The man lifted his briefcase onto the table and removed a Manila folder.

"I won't beat about the bush, Mr Harris. I want this man brought to the location in the file at the time stated."

Harris took the folder. "Why?"

"Does it matter?" The man sat back down. "As far as I'm concerned, this is purely a commercial transaction."

Flicking through the file, Harris was impressed by the detail. There was everything necessary to snatch this bloke but nothing told him why. How much could a film executive be worth? And from a naff studio at that.

He put the file down. "I can sort it. The going rate is -"

"We'll give you fifty thousand, twenty five thousand up front." He reopened the briefcase to show the money. "If he dies, this is all you get."

Harris half smiled. "Generous. And trusting."

"You have a reputation to keep up. But we do want him alive."

"You'll get him."

And that was that, deal done.

What was the point in having the evening off if your girlfriend had pulled the night shift? Alec Freeman sighed heavily as he drove through the studio gates and set off in the direction of the pub. There was bound to be a mixture of SHADO and studio personnel there for him to waste time with. Even Straker had been known to drop in occasionally, not that he never drank anything stronger than orange juice.

The Red Lion was fairly quiet but there were a few people there that he knew. There was a girl at the bar that he did not but she was looking at him in a way that he was not quite comfortable with. As he ordered, she moved over to join him.

She was pretty, definitely. Her dark hair was short and stylish. Her make-up was good enough to be professional. Her clothes showed off just the right amount of the important parts

of her anatomy.

"Hi, I'm new round here. My name's Kitty."

"Really."

He had no problems with women making the first move but this girl had closed in before he had had time to sit down. He did not have that high an opinion of himself. Could it be a trap? He looked her over as she continued to talk. There was no way she was an alien - not that they had seen a female alien. She had none of the stiffness he associated with brainwashing or possession. He shrugged mentally. Chances were she was a bit part actress looking to improve her career by chatting up a studio boss. It was no secret that this was Harlington-Straker's local.

Whatever it was, he did not want her company. There was nothing flattering about women finding your job attractive and if it got back to Beth - he did *not* want it getting back to Beth.

He made his excuses and wandered over to a group in the corner that included Ford and some of the other underground staff. He murmured an explanation, they nodded and he moved towards the exit. Kitty would not be following, though he could see she tried.

As he drove home, it played on his mind. Should he report it and risk wasting resources on a security check? Or not and risk it turning out to be something serious?

He rounded a bend. The narrow road was blocked by car. He pulled up abruptly. Another drove up behind him.

He reached for his gun. He was already covered: two in front, two behind. He raised his hands.

"Step out of the car." He was not sure which one spoke, not that it mattered.

They were coming up behind him.

"Should have come quietly. Kitty's fun."

Then the world switched off.

As soon as Straker heard about the incident at the pub he tried calling Freeman at home. No response. He could have gone on somewhere else but he was fairly certain Freeman's current girlfriend was working. He checked with Paul Foster, who confirmed it. Alec Freeman might get through girlfriends as if they were going out of fashion but he was faithful to them while they lasted. The chances of him being out on the town were low. This looked like trouble.

It took them an hour to find Freeman's car, hidden in a barn off one possible route home. It was not damaged. It was dark outside, too late to conduct a detailed search of the area. The girl Kitty had gone from the pub. Ford might have called it in but he had had no reason to detain or follow her. He looked pale when Straker questioned him but it was not his fault. He went off to see what he could find on the girl but it seemed she had not been seen before.

The whole of SHADO swung into action to find its second in command but there was so little to go on. There had been no UFO activity for a week. It occurred to Straker this might be simple, commercial kidnapping. Unlikelier targets had been hit. He set a team of people checking the records of the security agencies, all of them open to SHADO. He hoped to God that was the case. If the aliens had Alec they would break him eventually and SHADO would suffer for it.

Straker barked at his staff and froze them out but internally it was hard to maintain his detachment. He had too much experience of what they would do to him. Nobody deserved

that, least of all Alec.

It was only his headache and the smell of damp that confirmed to Alec Freeman that he had come round. He was blindfolded. He slapped down a momentary bubble of panic. There was nothing to make you feel quite so vulnerable as being unable to see. He told himself that it meant they wanted him alive, did not want him able to gather information. If they wanted him dead, he would be dead by now. If the aliens wanted him alive, he would rather be dead.

He shoved that thought firmly away and concentrated on what he could find out. He was tied, of course, firmly but without too much discomfort. He was lying down, he was not sure what on. The dampness was in the air but not soaking into his clothes. His stomach was rumbling. He was stiff and cold. That was about it.

He shifted his shoulders awkwardly.

"Stop that or I'll thump you."

So he was not alone. The accent was London, the aspect was thick but it put paid to any ideas of untying himself and escaping.

He wriggled again, trying to get more comfortable.

Heavy steps approached.

"I told you."

A moment later his guts felt like they had exploded and the air could not get out of his lungs fast enough. That was as good a thump as he had ever had.

The steps backed off a few feet and Alec Freeman lay still. He did not want more of that without a very good reason.

"Good work."

Ford had found the girl in police records. A nightclub hostess who had worked at a string of places just the right side of legal. All of them belonged to George Harris, who had not been convicted of anything since he was twenty three. No convictions but a stream of rumours and frightened witnesses.

"Find him."

"The Flying Squad have him under surveillance, sir." Ford answered. "I managed to get these."

'These' were a stack of blow-up photographs showing Harris outside various pubs and clubs with various people. Most of them meant nothing to Straker, though Ford had a list of names.

One did, a tall, spare man with a humourless face, listed simply as unidentified.

"He's in our records. Check him out."

Ford nodded sharply, gathering the pictures. "That's dated yesterday, sir."

"Good."

It took three hours to find a match even with Straker working on it himself. It was better than sitting alone in his office, thinking, remembering, worrying. They had to go back two years to a routine report on those living in the vicinity of a UFO crash. There was no indication the man had seen anything.

"Oh boy were we wrong." muttered Paul Foster.

A name - James Rogers - an address, records of the past. None of the present. Not in their files, the police, the local council, the electoral roll. No passport. No record of his death. Nothing till that photograph with Harris.

"So we take the Harris angle." Straker said. "If he's got Alec I want to know how and where. The man must have an M.O.."

It was getting light outside. Forensic crews were searching the area where the car was found. The snatch site was identified but yielded nothing useful. Colonel Lake was setting up phone taps.

"I've got his home and his two favourite clubs. Doesn't appear to have a mistress but I'm adding in known associates. Nothing so far."

As the early shift came on, most of the night shift volunteered to stay. Straker let them, sending them off for rest breaks in relays.

There were routine calls to be made to Moonbase and SkyDiver. As yet they knew nothing. They were concerned, of course. Gay Ellis was the only one who dared ask:

"Are you alright, sir?"

He did not answer.

Time rolled on and Alec Freeman was more bored than scared. He had tried the trick he had resorted to the few times he had crash-landed somewhere remote, telling himself stories. The problem was, they had always been acted out in what he liked to think of as a dramatic manner. It was hard to do it in any other way and he had moved unconsciously. Deliberate or not, any noise here simply meant he was punched somewhere vulnerable. If he ever got his hands on the guard he would have a few things to say to him.

He wondered what Beth was doing now. Probably asleep, blissfully unaware that anything was wrong. He hoped so.

He wondered about Straker. What was he doing? What was he thinking? Freeman had never managed to figure him out in all the years he had known him. He was not sure he needed to but he kept trying. He wondered who would keep an eye on him if he did not make it back, who would stop him self-destructing.

He went back to trying to remember that story Paul had told him about the blonde, the brunette and the redhead.

"Everyone has had a rest break except you, sir. I just thought I'd point that out."

Straker looked up to see Virginia Lake standing in the doorway of his office.

"Do you have something?"

"The phone taps have produced enough to keep the police busy for months - do you think we could slip it to them somehow? - but nothing on Alec or Rodgers ."

Straker indicated the map he had been studying. "All Harris' known bases. We can rule out some but there are too many to raid. We might get information but from his file I'd say he'd be the kind to keep most of it in his head." He paused. "I did think of snatching him."

Lake nodded slowly, not shocked but thoughtful. "Could we be sure of the consequences?"

"No. Which is why it's a last resort."

He got up from the desk and paced restlessly. "If we could get a lead on Rodgers... How many more like him are there? Do they have a bridgehead? Is this a diversion?"

She shrugged heavily. "I don't have the answers. I'm not sure I want to know but there's been no UFO activity. Do you think Harris knows who Rodgers is?"

George Harris had always been cautious. It paid. Which is why he had the client followed

by two of his best men. Intriguing he might be but nobody could be a total blank.

The client went to a hotel, spent the night, checked out. He went to a cafe, read the papers, left. Went to a restaurant, had a long, boring lunch, left. Went to a cafe, had a drink.

The tail phoned in.

Ginny Lake was in Straker's office before the call was over.

"We've located Rodgers."

Straker dumped his calculations as to which base to burgle and the whole SHADO machine changed direction.

They needed to make it appear that Rodgers himself had lost the tail. Any sign of outside intervention could be a disaster. They had a team tailing the tail within minutes, just in time to see them jumped by two men in a van.

"Rodgers is getting away."

Straker was prepared for that. He and Paul Foster were trailing the man himself. They had abandoned their SHADO cars for an unobtrusive Rover. He obviously thought he was alone, he made no attempt to disguise his movements. He hailed a black cab.

"I'm not going to say it," said Foster.

The cab took them through backstreets to a section of Docklands that was on the edge of the burgeoning development. Rodgers paid the cabbie off then disappeared between two warehouses. They had to hurry to catch him.

Turning a corner, there was no sight of him in the long alley. Each side was a brick wall, bare except for a door each. Both were shut.

"Which one?" Foster asked.

There was nothing to choose between them.

"You take the left, I'll take the right." Straker replied.

He eased the door open. It moved smoothly and without sound, suggesting this was the building. Inside, light came from dusty windows on two of the other three walls. Between was an empty space with square columns supporting a blackened ceiling that had fallen through in places. There was a light shining from the door in the fourth wall. It probably lead to the offices. Gun in hand, Straker moved quietly in that direction.

Maybe he ought to call Foster but not until he was sure he had the right place.

In a few moments he was peering around the door. It was a corridor, one door open. He peered around that. Rodgers was sitting on a plain wooden chair. On the plain table in front of him lay a briefcase. There was nothing else. It was the first time he had seen the man close-up. He was not much to look at. Ordinary. No doubt that was why he had been chosen. Was there any other reason? There would be time to find that out later.

The man continued sitting there, oblivious to everything. Straker remained in his place for ten long minutes, chilled by the inhuman inaction. Nothing happened. He might stay that way for hours. Straker did not have the time to waste. He walked through the door.

Rodgers did not react. It was as if he had been switched off. Straker walked all round him, came up behind him, shook him. Nothing. He looked around. There was a safe in the corner by the door. He bent down to look.

And felt a gun pressing into the back of his neck. He half smiled.

"Nice trick."

"Commander." The voice was colourless. "Put down your gun, stand up and turn to face me."

The pressure was removed. He heard the man step back. He placed the gun on the floor and stood up. He turned slowly. Rodgers had him capably covered.

Straker only had one question. "Where's Freeman?"

"I don't know."

He was probably telling the truth. "Harris has him?"

"Harris has contracted to deliver him."

"Here?"

There was no answer. He had learnt nothing but buying time could be useful. Paul should come looking for him shortly and wasting the man's time might get him to make mistakes. Delivery must be due soon.

"What about me?"

"You are a bonus which was partially anticipated."

"And?"

"And I'll kill you if necessary."

They stood in silence for three seconds.

Rodgers spun round as Foster came through the door. Straker leapt for his back. They went sideways as two guns fired.

They hit the floor hard, knocking the wind from both of them. He tried to grab for Rodgers' gun but the man had managed to hang on and was pulling it back. He brought it round. For a moment Straker thought he was the target.

Then Rodgers blew his own brains out.

"Blast."

Foster raised an eyebrow. "That bad?"

"It's not funny, Paul. He was our only real source." He got to his feet. "Check the other offices. I'll take the safe."

It did not take him long to get into the metal box. They must have been relying on simply not being found. Inside was a stack of Manila folders which detailed as much about his senior staff as he knew himself. Sometimes he wondered if they had a chance against these people. Freeman's folder was missing.

Foster came back. "Nothing."

"Nothing." Straker repeated to himself.

Freeman was woken by sounds of movement. Heavy footsteps were coming towards him. He tensed.

A gruff, male voice said: "You'd better gag him before you put the top on."

And he was gagged. Two sets of hands grabbed his shoulders and pushed him down. Another held his mouth open and shoved a rag into it. He wretched. For a moment he was scared he could not breathe but his nose was clear even when another piece of cloth was wrapped around to keep the first in place.

Those holding him stepped back. He heard a scraping noise. Something passed over the top of him and stayed. He was in a box, a crate, a coffin. He heard them hammering in the nails and his stomach tied itself in knots. Boredom went.

Whatever was going to happen, it would happen now.

"Harris and his people are leaving the house with a large crate. Team three is following. Flying Squad are still with him. Do you want me to have them pulled off?"

Straker played with the phone as he thought for a moment. "Yes. I think this is it. Are they heading in this direction?"

"Too early to tell, sir."

"Keep me informed." He hung up.

He was standing in one of the other offices. He and Foster had been over the place with a fine tooth comb but apart from a lot of dust, a little furniture and this one phone, there was nothing. He had to play this entirely by instinct.

"Come on, Paul. We have some set dressing to do."

George Harris had known the docks well when he was younger but it was all changing now. He had his fingers in a few pies but he no longer felt at home there. The old warehouse was more his kind of thing. It made him sad there was no one working there any more.

He pulled himself out of the van. There was no point in dwelling on the past when there was money to be made. The lads followed him out.

"Leave the goods here. You can bring it in when I've seen the client."

They nodded. Two of them followed him in.

It was half dark inside. His eyes swept around the space. There was no furniture except a table set by one of the pillars. Something sat on top of it, a larger thing lay on the floor beside it. It took him a moment to realise that the second thing was a corpse - his client with half his head missing.

He froze.

A man stepped out from behind a pillar. Harris and his men went for their guns. The man stood there, his arms spread to show he was not carrying. He took a step forward. A beam of light glanced off his pale hair and Harris recognised him.

"You're Straker."

"That's right." He gestured towards the corpse. "I just wanted you to know there's no longer any competition."

Harris nodded slowly. This man was not reacting as he should. He was not scared. He was a man who knew power and not the kind you wielded as a studio boss.

Straker continued speaking. "Your money is in the briefcase. If there's any problem with it, that's down to him. I just want to complete the deal. I take it Alec's alive?"

The use of the first name was the only indication of personal interest. Otherwise the man was like ice. For moment Harris considered his options but only one was practical. He walked over and checked the money. He could kill the Yank and take it - and probably get shot down by Straker's men. He would not have come unprepared. He looked again into those cold, blue eyes. This man was a killer. It was best to take the simplest way out.

He turned to his own men. "Get the crate."

They walked off without a word. Well-trained, his lads. There was a long pause. Then four of them struggled back in with an ordinary, unmarked wooden packing case of the oblong variety. They put it down behind him.

"Brought the crowbar?" he asked.

One of them placed it on the top.

He turned to Straker. "There you are, service with a smile."

The Yank did not smile. "Then business is concluded, unless the goods turn out not to be as expected. In that case I'll come looking for compensation."

Just for a moment, Harris was scared. The guy was in one piece, wasn't he? He swallowed

hard. He stepped forward to shake hands with Straker. Straker did not reciprocate. Harris turned and walked away, his men following. He was surprised to see another man slip out from behind a pillar, gun at the ready, and follow them at a distance.

It had been a rough ride and to Freeman it had seemed to go on forever. He had picked up a few splinters from the wood but they were the least of his worries. He thought he was in some kind of vehicle. It stopped. He tensed but had to wait a few minutes before the crate was lifted up and carried out. They were not particularly careful with it.

It was hard to hear what was going on. When he was put down he was aware of a voice, maybe two but he could not catch the words. He heard what sounded like footsteps retreating. He had been handed over.

It took all his willpower not to shake with fear. Had to put on a good show in front of the aliens even if they did not know what it meant. He had to do it for himself and SHADO, though his guts were turning to water at the thought of spending the rest of his life at their mercy.

They were levering the top off the crate. He could hear wood and nails strain and feel a slight draft across his face as it opened up. For a moment he wondered why they bothered, then he realised they would need to put him in one of those tubes they carried prisoners in if there were taking him home.

The top fell back with a crash. This was it, then. He held himself still, wondering what they would do next.

He felt someone bend over him and ease the blindfold up over his head. Which was not what he expected. What were they going to do?

His eyes were blurred as the cloth cleared them. He had been in darkness for what felt like a day or so. He blinked and blinked again. Patterns of light and shade formed slowly into a picture. No red or green of the alien suits and visors, only semi-darkness and Straker's improbably blonde hair.

He sighed but the gag got in the way.

"I'm going to sit you up." his boss said. "It'll be easier."

They struggled together to get him upright. Straker cut away the gag and pulled the cloth from his mouth. He wretched violently, Straker gently holding him steady.

After a minute he managed to croak: "I need a drink."

"You need a doctor." Straker replied then hesitated. "I'm glad you're safe."

They both looked round as Foster jogged in.

"They're all gone, no trouble. There's a security team on its way and an ambulance. Are you OK, Alec?"

He nodded wearily, not needing or knowing how to respond to Straker.

Freeman was not delighted to be spending the night in hospital, though he had managed to avoid Dr Jackson's tender care. On the other hand, he was very pleased to see Beth.

"I thought you were working."

She grinned. "I am. The Commander told me to stay with you until I was sure you're alright."

He grinned back. "In that case, it could take several days."

He made a grab for her waist and she ducked away, giggling.

Elsewhere, Straker and Lake were dealing with neglected studio paperwork but his mind

was on other things. She looked up, just as if she could read it.

"We'll have the post-mortem on Rodgers soon."

"And it won't find a thing. But there have to be more like him. Question is, how do we find them? "

Lake shook her head. "I don't know - but you'll think of something."