

An Englishman's Home

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Ed Straker liked England, on the rare occasions he saw any of it. When he said he had spent half his life in the country he meant that in the most literal sense, inserted in a hole under the studio. Today he was above ground and enjoying the view of the rolling Lincolnshire Wolds.

"Of course it's not just your money I'm interested in." Lord Downell continued. "An end credit would be just as valuable in terms of visitors. Sorry to sound so mercenary."

Straker laughed. "Believe me, I know the feeling. And this place is worth it."

It was, the most perfect example of Georgian elegance built from honey coloured Ancaster stone. Behind it the hills folded and curved away to the horizon. In front, Lord Downell's two children rode their bikes up and down the long drive, occasionally disappearing into the woods.

"I guess it's what every American thinks of as England." Straker added. "It should be the star of the show."

"Then it's a deal?" Downell asked eagerly.

"It's a deal."

* * *

Alec was in the outer office when Straker arrived back at the studio. "Have a good time?" Straker strode past him and through the door, reluctantly muttering "Yes."

"Then the next time that we need an interesting location -"

"One day, Alec. I said I'd take one day off."

Alec shrugged. "One day a year, one day a month, even. You need a little sunlight occasionally. Avoid it any more and we can cast you in the next vampire picture."

They took the lift down, Straker studiously ignoring him. "Anything I should know?"

"Wouldn't I have told you?"

So he settled down to the paperwork. Even so, his thoughts kept wandering back to the house and its friendly owner. Maybe he could make a location visit at some point. Maybe he would hang a picture of it in the office when they were finished, to remind him they were not just fighting for lifeless concrete and steel.

There was one alert before he went home but Moonbase dealt with it smoothly. Their kill rate over the past year was getting so good that Lew Waterman had joked he was not getting enough practice. He ought to think about promoting Gay Ellis, if he could get Henderson to OK the pay rise. Sometimes, just sometimes, he allowed himself to think they might be winning.

He went home and for once got a good night's sleep. He was woken an hour early by the

telephone. It was Miss Ealand.

"There's a slight problem at the studio, sir."

Which probably meant Alec was too busy to call himself. He was at the office inside fifteen minutes.

Alec was cursing. "We lost them. We've got a trajectory..."

"Tell me."

"It's probably a coincidence but it was headed for where you were yesterday."

It couldn't be, there was nothing there for the aliens unless... Unless they thought he was still there.

"Get the mobiles up there."

"Already have and we're monitoring local radio traffic. Nothing yet." Alec paused. "Do you want to alert the Downells? We could make up some story."

That was totally against policy. But he made policy. He took up the phone as Alec went back to check the latest reports. He was through to Downell in a moment.

"Your Lordship? I'm sorry to bother you so early but something's come up."

"About the contract?" Downell sounded as if he was just coming to. Probably a bedside phone.

"No, not the contract. It's a little awkward but we've just heard that there may be a plot to kidnap me."

Downell swore. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, thank you. We've got that end covered but it's possible - a remote possibility - that they may think I'm still with you."

"I see."

"I don't want to mess up your day but I suggest you keep your family indoors and watch out for anything odd. Call this number if there is." He gave him SHADO's direct line.

"What kind of odd?" the man asked.

"You'll know it if you see it." He gave his apologies and rang off.

Alec came in. "We've got several RAF stations, a secret scientific base and not much else. Fortunately it's sparsely populated."

Straker nodded. "I could see that. You still think that's where they going?"

The bigger man shrugged. "I'm not making assumptions, I just think it's a bit odd. And odd usually means trouble. I've got SkyDiver coming up the North Sea but there's an awful lot of traffic for a launch."

There was little else they could do except wait for the information to come in. It was irrational and unfair to hope the aliens were after someone he had never met but Straker found he could not help himself. The Downells had welcomed him as a guest and been engagingly frank as to their genteel poverty. And Straker knew he had a weakness for kids.

A report came in, a police message. Unidentified flying object, ten miles from the hall. He could see Alec looking at him sympathetically. He scowled and went back to the phone.

"It looks like they may be coming in your direction, your Lordship. Keep out of the way. They're not after you."

"We don't have enough money to interest kidnapers. Not that they'd necessarily know that. But I've got the kids cleaning out the attic. I'll explain to them later. My wife's on her way home from a meeting. Are you sure you're OK?"

"Fine, thanks. I'll let you know when it's all over."

Then he went out to check on the mobiles progress.

Alec shook his head. "It looks like it's them. We've crossed off all but one of the RAF bases. They don't have anything out of the ordinary. We keep checking but I don't see there being anything else."

So they waited again, receiving a report from Paul Foster in Mobile One. Straker half wished he had gone himself but that would have been impractical. This call was no more important than any other, less so than many and the kids were safe indoors.

* * *

There was no cover for the mobiles. Everywhere was fields, arable or pastoral, with only a few trees around the margins. If anyone saw them, they saw them.

As Mobile One reached the crest of a hill, Colonel Foster ordered the driver to stop. They were even more exposed up here but the reception was better. The spinner must be down by now. If they could not hide, how could it? Maybe it had ditched in the sea.

There was no signal. The mobile moved on. This job could be so frustrating at times. He reported back to HQ. "Has SkyDiver got anything?"

"Negative." Freeman replied. "No chance of a launch. Too much shipping. Carry on, Paul."

* * *

Colonel Lake hurried into the control room. "I think I've got something." She did not stop for the Commander and Colonel Freeman to acknowledge her. "We've missed a target. Lady Downell."

That got their attention. "The computer threw up her maiden name and I recognised it. She's a world authority on transplant surgery."

Freeman nearly dropped his coffee.

Straker barked: "Where is she?"

"Don't know."

Straker headed into his office and was on the phone before she could turn to follow him. He did not bother to sit down.

Downell picked up the phone immediately.

"Where's your wife?"

"What? Mr Straker? I told you she was on her way back from a meeting. She said she was going to stop off in the village."

Straker sighed and explained as much as he could. Even after all these years he did not enjoy lying but he could only tell Downell that his wife was - might be - the target. Freeman check the map and relayed new orders to Foster. They could already be too late. She would be extremely valuable to the aliens and the fact that he liked these people didn't make a blind bit of difference.

He wanted to be there.

* * *

Foster checked the map. The village was five miles away. Still no sign of the UFO but all these hills could be sheltering it. He could not turn up in the Mobile. He had half a mind to get out and commandeer a car. Lord knew what Straker would say about that.

He gave the driver orders to swing round to the far side of the village, between there and the hall. Mobile Two would come around the other way and intercept them. Mobile Three would cover the road coming out the other side, just in case Lady Downell decided not to go home.

They found a vantage point hidden behind a clump of trees. On impulse, Foster got out

and decided to walk into the village. He was in civvies so he would attract no more attention than any other stranger. If he could get the lady safely under cover the UFO could be dealt with later. He picked up a copy of her photo that had been wired through and set off.

It was a nice day again, quite warm. Foster was aware he hardly looked like a hiker but there were any number of reasons why he might be walking along the road. He reached the small, stone built village in time to see his target emerge from the Post Office.

"Lady Downell?"

She turned, looked at him and hurried back inside. He strode after her. As he pushed the door open, something hit him across the back of the head. He went down like a sack of potatoes.

* * *

"It's all right, Mr Straker, we've got him. Got one of them at least."

Straker paused, puzzled. Downell had not remarked on the alien's appearance and their appearance was remarkable. "Your Lordship, what does he look like?"

"Young chap. Tall, dark haired. Wearing a purple suit."

Straker groaned. "I think that's one of my people, Paul Foster."

"Oh. Sorry. Only he came running after my wife and I'd just phoned through to the Post Office..."

Downell continued to apologise and Straker apologised back but in a few moments he was talking to a dazed Foster, who was also fairly apologetic. They were still none the wiser but Foster could be relied on to do his job if only so as not let the story get round.

"I'm going up there." Straker said after he had rung off.

"I thought you might." said Freeman. "I'm with you. Ginny can handle things here."

Straker nodded tersely and they went.

They had one change of driver on the way up, hitting the speed limit when there was traffic about and passing it when there was not. It was nearly dark as they began to see signs for the village.

"If we turn right, then right again we should see the gates of the hall." Straker advised.

They turned into the grounds. They could not see the house yet but the Moon had risen and there was a soft glow over the surface of the lake.

"Very nice here." said Freeman. "Do you think they'll still want us to film?"

"Stop the car."

Freeman stamped on the brakes. "Now what?" Then: "It under the water, isn't it?"

Straker nodded slowly. The glow was coming from beneath the surface and the water was beginning to bubble.

"Get the mobiles down here and alert SkyDiver."

He got out of the car and hugged the shadows down to the water's edge. Freeman would follow soon as he had made the call. There was little they could do on their own. They needed fire power.

Freeman was behind him. "Paul's keeping the family out of the way. Goodness knows what they're making of all this."

The UFO broke the surface, water streaming off it. They had rarely stood so close to one. Straker was impressed and chilled as it hovered for a moment before heading slowly towards them.

"Now what?" asked Freeman. He had drawn his gun.

Straker shook his head and retreated further into the darkness. All they could do was

watch. Yet he had a terrible fear that he had walked into a trap.

The craft rose above the bushes then gently landed on the far side. They could just see its peak, perhaps seventy five yards away.

"This is it. I doubt we can take them alive but we might get their ship."

"That would be a good night's work. We shoot to kill?"

"Yes."

The two of them edged their way around the shrubbery, back the way they had come. They could see the car but not yet the spacecraft.

Straker screamed as pain exploded through him. He had been shot in the back. Paralysed, he dropped.

Freeman whirled round, aiming and firing in one movement. Straker heard a loud thud over the reverberation of the shot. Freeman scanned the area for more opposition but it seemed he could not see any. He moved to check the alien, then his boss.

The pain was still intense but Straker found that already he could move his extremities slightly. Just enough to know it would not be permanent. For the moment, though, he was sprawled helpless on the grass.

Freeman knelt over him. "You conscious, aren't you? I'm going to get you into the car and take you up to the hall. Guess this is going to hurt."

It did, even the slightest jolt as his friend lifted him, carried him over and placed him in the passenger seat. He tried to survey the area but the movement in his eyes was also limited. Freeman called Foster then roared away up the drive towards the house.

The front door opened as soon as they reached it. Foster and Lord Downell carried him in, placing him on a divan in the drawing-room. He flexed his hands but his voice box was still paralysed. He lay back and worked on what he could move. He was going to have to be patient.

Lady Downell was checking him over. "I've never seen anything like it."

"You won't have." said Freeman heavily. "Can you tell how long before he recovers? At least enough to talk?"

"Sorry."

"But he is OK? I mean, it will wear off?"

"I think so."

Freeman came into view. Their eyes met. In the background he could hear Foster talking to HQ, telling them to get transport here for the... He paused, probably uncertain how much to say.

Freeman turned away. "Tell them, Paul. We can clear up later."

Downell spoke calmly. "What is the truth about what's going on? Why would these people want with Laura? And what kind of weapon does that?"

Tell him, Straker thought and as if by magic he did. In a few sentences Freeman told them everything they needed to know, ending with: "If the alien was alone we're safe but there could well be two of them. Our people will find him if there is but until then I'm not letting Lady Downell or Commander Straker out of my sight."

Downell nodded. "Perhaps I should bring the children down."

"Good idea. Paul -"

"I'm going." He still seemed a little subdued, probably with embarrassment.

Straker had his wrists and ankles moving by now. Perhaps there was something happening in his knees. It was a relief. The idea of being stuck like that... Lady Downell was massaging

his hands and it was helping.

He managed to turn his head towards the window. Freeman was looking out. He turned back, noticed and smiled.

There was a shot from the stairs.

Freeman ran to the door. Jerking his head, Straker managed to keep him in sight. Flat against the wall, he was peering round into the entrance hall.

He called: "Paul?"

"It's at the back of the house. Too far away to hear if we're careful. I think. We're on the stairs, we can't get past him."

"And he can't get past us. Have you got the kids?"

"Yes."

"Send them back upstairs. They'll be safe there. There's only one of him."

But Straker could hear something outside, a sound he knew all too well, a UFO. Any moment a laser blast might fry the room.

No, they could have killed him if they had wanted to. They had deliberately kept him alive. There were at least four people here who would be valuable to them.

Freeman was still by the door. He had not heard.

Straker tried to speak but the words would not form. Forget that. What would work? He slammed his hand down against the divan.

Freeman turned. "Ed?"

He threw his arm in the direction of the window. Freeman moved that way, pulling the curtains open a crack.

"It's landing," he said in a strained voice.

That could mean one or two more aliens. They were boxed in but the mobiles were on their way. Ought to be. Still chancy but the odds were in their favour. They were less likely to get a spinner intact but they had waited long enough for one. They could wait a little longer.

The phone was ringing in the entrance hall. After a moment it stopped. Someone must have picked up the extension.

He could hear feet on the stairs. A moment later he could hear Foster. "Alec?"

Alec went to the door and the two of them conversed in as low a tone as they could across the gap. Obviously they did not want the alien to hear, assuming it was still there. Alec came back and briefed him.

"That was Colonel Lake. Communications are out. She's trying to contact the mobiles but things don't look good. I don't know whether sitting it out is still the best plan."

Nor did Straker, though with his own communications out he could not discuss the options.

"The mobiles should still be on the way but we can't be sure." Alec continued.

He could no longer hear the UFO's engines.

The glass in the window shattered. Freeman turned and fired as the curtain swung aside. He hit no one.

A shot came up from the floor, missing Freeman but forcing him to dive for cover. Lady Downell was sheltering behind Straker's divan but it gave little protection and he lay vulnerable on the top. Freeman and the alien were blazing away at each other but the creature was in the room by now. It shot out the lights. Could it see in the dark?

Freeman stopped firing. There was the sound of a fight from the hallway. Straker tried to concentrate on what he could hear.

Was that the mobiles outside? Yes, he could hear their engines. He could hear the phone ringing. He could hear the rapid approach of another alien craft and then an almighty battle as the two sides engaged.

There was nothing he could do except lie there, sick with worry, and keep trying which muscles would move.

There was a massive explosion. For a moment the room was illuminated in spite of the heavy curtains, then it settled down to the dim, uncertain light of a fire. Either his people were dead or they were now in the majority.

He could hear footsteps coming towards him from the wrong side of the room.

Lady Downell dragged him to the floor and heaved the heavy couch over to form a shield as Alec stood to fire. He distracted the alien long enough to wing him. Injured aliens did not make it home but he was not finished yet. He caught Alec full blast before he had time to fire again.

The human dropped.

He must be paralysed, just paralysed and that wore off. He could not be dead.

But now they were at the alien's mercy. He staggered forward and shot Lady Downell at close-range. She screamed with pain before the beam took effect. Then he grabbed Straker's arm and pulled him slowly towards the window.

Straker played dead, looking for any kind of opportunity. He had to get them out of this. They could not be taken alive. He felt sick.

It got worse. The alien paused before dragging his captive over the broken glass. There were two whole UFOs - one on the ground, one low in the sky - while one of his mobiles stood wrecked and burning. More of his people dead.

Another alien was going towards the house, after Lady Downell or Alec. How many prisoners could each ship carry? Could they take all the adults in the house? The children?

Maybe he could get inside the ship and sabotage it. He felt so useless. It was his dream and his nightmare to get on board one of their ships.

The alien was slowing. He too was hurt. Maybe he could take him. He sneaked a cautious glance up. He had holstered his weapon so he could put both hands around Straker's wrist.

He jerked up, grabbing the alien's wrists and pulling down. As fighting moves went it was woeful but it unbalanced his opponent. Who landed across him. His breath left in a hurry.

If he could get the weapon - but his co-ordination was way off.

The alien was not reaching for it, either. The range must be too close.

Straker scrabbled for something to hit him with. Anything. His hand closed on a rock. Primitive but just what he needed. He smashed it into the alien's faceplate. Again and again, as the alien tried to hold him down. Both injured, there was a hair's breadth between who was the stronger but while the alien was weakening, Straker recovered.

He twisted, pulling himself free, then dived onto his opponent with all the strength he could muster.

The faceplate cracked. Green fluid splattered the ground and the Commander. The alien heaved in two breaths, flapping like a fish out of water, but he was finished. Straker rolled away, exhausted. He stared up at the hovering craft.

It fired.

Its sister ship exploded, showering Straker with debris and molten metal. He passed out.

When he woke up, Paul Foster was kneeling by him. "Sir? Ed?"

"Report." he croaked.

He did not take it all in at once but Alec and the Downells were OK. The house was damaged but that could be dealt with. Mobile Two was destroyed along with its crew. That hurt. Perhaps worse, both grounded UFO's had been destroyed by the one that escaped.

"We have two of the new guns." Foster ended. "They're damaged but Ginny should get something from them."

So Straker went home. Before he left he checked up on the Downells. Lady Downell looked a little pale but she rose as he entered. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." he assured her. "Are you?"

"I think so." She sounded unsure but that was probably shock.

"I'm sorry about your house. We can get part of it fixed by a team from the studio."

"Really?" Lord Downell asked eagerly.

Straker nodded. "We can't afford to leave any trace."

He explained to them about the amnesia drug and they took the information calmly. "It is safe for the kids?" was all they asked.

He assured them it was.

"And, er, the film?" his Lordship asked.

Straker smiled. "I expect I'll see you at the premiere. Maybe we can give the kids a studio tour."

Paul was left behind to sort things out. Maybe they could salvage something from the wreckage. Maybe they could work out where the other two had come from. For the moment, as he was driven back south, he was just enjoying the English countryside.