### The Message

Alex was still unnerved by the driverless hoverpods that shuttled London's millions to and fro each day. This evening, though, his mind was on other things. He held the yellow envelope tight, inside his folded arms. He had written the bulky report in numbness.

His pod was official. It took precedence, with its flashing blue lights and, from time to time, the wail of the warning siren.

The sky darkened, and he recalled the day two weeks ago when a strange craft had entered British air space. Alarms had sounded. Ships had flown to meet it, and although there was no tension on the international front, there were those in Whitehall who suspected a European plot. The Chinese were otherwise engaged.

But no. After decades of fruitless exploration it seemed a dream had come true. An alien craft; unidentifiable; incommunicable - bewildering in its shape, its power source, its silence.

And as the world waited, hopes mingling with fears, cursing the luck of the British - why them? Why should they have the visitation? - cursing the arrogance of the British, who warned off attempts to internationalise the incident. So like them! There was even talk in Brussels of hijacking the ship, and plans would have been called for had a down-to-earth Bavarian not pointed out the difficulties of towing a craft whose power source was unknown. Not to mention a revitalised and imposing RAF, with new style craft, lots of well trained airmen and women and many secrets up their joint sleeve. The old French envy was left to simmer over the Channel.

All of this, the bickering, the threats, the false pride that saw the coincidence as a sign of Britain’s continued exceptionalism. All of this seemed to come to nothing when the ship exploded. The RAF had done nothing; indeed in the blast it lost three hovering warpods, and again for a while a foreign plot was alluded to, in the press if not in Parliament.

Alex had been with Trix when the news broke: a body had been thrown clear from the ship, had lodged in a tree, and was to be investigated thoroughly by the Home Office.

"Poor sod!"

Alex was taken aback. Trix did not usually use this sort of language.

"They'll carve him up and put his bits on display. Just to prove he's like the rest of us."

Yes, he thought as he looked back. Cut him up they would. And there would be displays. But just like the rest of us?

The whole world followed the breathless news bulletins, and learned piecemeal of the alien's translucent skin (which many found hard to believe), the three-heart system, the million lenses in each eye..... and that, despite the tantalising resemblance to monsters of the comic stories that emerged from this hotch-potch, the alien was decidedly a woman.

Alex snapped out of his reminiscence as his pod passed over Trafalgar Square. Soon be there.

When those news bulletins were raiding the airwaves, Alex had foreseen no rôle for his team. Code breaking was a dull, routine business: most of the messages he was called on to decipher for the Foreign Office were about minor Embassy officials moving round the globe. When a second ship arrived, blurting out a message, the Ministry of Defence went wild with excitement.

"Get Potter's team in on this, quick!"

The General knew of Alex's experts from the Mediterranean Campaign. They had started recording the signals coming from the newly arrived craft as soon as they had realised they constituted a message. The same thing over and over. It had to be a message.

The ship disappeared as swiftly as it had arrived.

Alex's pod turned into Downing Street and slowly lowered itself to the ground. It was immediately surrounded by soldiers. Then the formalities, the ushering past the press cameras, the ignoring of the reporters' shouted questions, the salute of the policeman, the disappearance into the glowing hallway that had swallowed the great and the good, and the not so great and the less than good, for centuries.

"Through here, Potter. They're all assembled. They've got the body in there too!"

"What?"

"PM wanted to see it. Had it brought over in its refrigerated case."

Alex entered a large room.

"Prime Minister....."

Alex was interrupted.

"Give me the report. You can stay while I read it if you wish."

He handed the bulky envelope to the Prime Minister, who handed it to her secretary.

"Read it aloud," the PM instructed with more than a hint of impatience.

Alex looked to a far corner, where a body lay, cased in glass. It was indeed translucent, and its eyes were like mosaic domes.

The secretary began reading from Alex’s report.

"Yes, yes! Cut all the technicalities, get to the meat!"

More impatience. The preamble described the decoding process, and the interesting features of the code that had been used.

"What is the message?" the PM shouted like a thwarted child, unable to take more delay in the delivery of the goodies.

The secretary skipped to the last page. He gasped. Alex remembered the juddering impact of his sudden realisation of the meaning of the message. Yes, sudden and a realization that felt to him more like something that had happened to him rather than something he had done!

"The signals translated mean....."

The secretary looked at Alex. Did he suspect a trick? His shrug and the look on his face seemed to say: ‘Oh well, here goes’.

"The signals mean....."

Alex glanced at the corpse again. Had the spaceship simply got the wrong planet?

"..... 'And God so loved the world'."

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