

1.

It was dark and the weather was getting worse; horizontal rain and colder by the minute. At least the special clothing they had been issued with was suitable for the task. The three men had been sent out to recover the item that had fallen to Earth the day before. None of them even knew for sure what they were looking for but all knew that it had to be retrieved or there would be serious consequences. At the briefing they had all been told that failure was not an idea any of them should have. All three were now standing against a large rocky outcrop at the top of the escarpment and were able to look down into the valley – not that they could see much with the weather.

Tom, who was the lead, had to make a decision or they would be at this all night. A muscular man who had a certain presence about him, he was the sort of man who could be in the background and go largely unnoticed but as soon as he moved into the area of conversation he had the natural ability to take control. It wasn't obvious where he came from as he had an almost flat, non-regional accent that had come from years working in the military or with the military on many assignments around the world. He could get by in half a dozen European languages, was almost fluent in Arabic, and was very capable in most of the central Asian dialects.

'OK fellas, let's go down the incline over by the rail.'

The rail he referred to was a long rusty metal pipe that seemed to come out of the rock and disappear over the edge of the path. It was probably something to do with the old mining industry that had long since vanished from these parts. Next to the rail, as it went over the edge from the pathway, a large amount of disturbed earth could be made out in the gloom. *It appears that we are not the first to come this way today*, Tom thought. It wouldn't be the first time that teams had been doubled up on jobs like this.

'Warning, boss.' The comment had come from the last person in the group, a small man called John who was looking at the radiation warning device that was attached to his forearm; it was designed to indicate several types of radiation that were in the area. The light on it was flashing.

'Where from and how much?' asked the leader.

'Seemed to come from down there, but it has gone now, maybe a glitch.'

'Maybe but did you get any indication of type?'

'I did but it isn't likely,' John said looking at the device that had warned them.

'What do you mean?' Tom was getting irritated now; all he wanted were the facts and no comment.

'X-ray,' John said, still unconvinced that it could be.

'Was the dosage critical?' asked Tom.

'No, way down and only lasted half a second.' He cancelled the warning and looked up, ready to proceed.

'Let's go,' Tom said indicating with his arm that the other two in the team were to follow.

The three men started down the incline and immediately noticed that not only was the going very slippery but there had indeed been someone down the slope before them. The track was very churned up and very wet. It took nearly twenty minutes to reach the bottom by which time all three were

breathing hard and covered in mud from the many slips and slides that had occurred.

The rain had now eased and the wind was less severe, probably because they were now in the lee of the valley wall so were sheltered from the worst of the weather.

‘Warning, boss.’ John was looking at the meter on his arm. ‘Same as last time: low-level X-ray for a couple of seconds, coming from that way.’ He pointed in the direction they were going.

‘This is weird!’ Tom said. ‘Why are we getting X-rays here?’

The other two men didn’t answer but they too were thinking the same. In all the simulations and practices they had undergone for this mission X-rays had never been mentioned. Everything from microwaves to gamma radiation had been talked about as a likely finding, but not X-rays.

‘Maybe the sensor is on the fritz,’ remarked the third man. He was unusually tall, about six-foot eight and very muscular, just the sort of help you would need if things went pear-shaped. His name was David but was universally known as Big Dave, a very reliable member of the team who very rarely complained or even made a comment that was not needed. He had proved his worth over countless engagements with all manner of enemies across the world; very confident and extremely capable but was certainly not a taker of undue risks.

‘It was tested and calibrated nearly to death before we got it, so it should be fine,’ said Tom. ‘Anyway, we are here now and the thing is warning us; let’s take it at face value and do what we are supposed to do.’

What they were supposed to do was determine the level and intensity of any radiation and, if they were lucky, get a direction from which it was coming. At the moment it was only short bursts of X-ray and at levels that were not a danger.

It was aware of them, of course; it had become aware when they were on the upper level. It was now curious as to what they would do now they were this close. The short scans it had initiated had probably alerted them to its presence but that didn't matter too much. At least it knew that they carried nothing that could damage it. They were not a threat.

The three men spread out across the narrow road that ran the whole length of the valley. It was mainly used by the hill farmers moving livestock and equipment around and was beginning to show the wear and tear that had taken place over many years of use.

'We will go down the hill on the road as there is no point dragging our arses through the mud and crap that sits on either side; it will be quicker and we can all go home and have a kip. Keep your eyes and ears open and let's not get surprised by anything.'

Tom set off, walking in the middle of the road; John and Big Dave, a short distance behind and on opposite sides, kept a watch left and right – something they had gotten used to over the time they had been part of the Special Task Team. The STT had attracted a lot of interest from the rest of the unit but any information as to what they did was restricted to a need-to-know basis. It actually wasn't that difficult to work out what the STT did; the clue was in the name. They were a team that did special tasks. Simple! They also got paid a shed load of money for their efforts but that was only right considering the dangers they often faced.

'Warning, boss, same as last time, very low level but continuous now.'

'Where from?' asked Tom.

'It seems to be coming from just in front of you,' John said looking at the instrument.

It was seeing them very clearly now; they were very close

but didn't seem to have noticed its presence. It was scanning them trying to determine how they were constructed and if it had missed anything from its first look at the three individuals. All three were of a different size; it found this a little puzzling, they were all the same but all different. It stopped scanning.

'Gone now, no output at all. I'm still not convinced this thing is working properly.'

The group started moving again; with any luck they would soon arrive at the end of this part of the search area and have a break. There were probably several teams in this valley all looking for the same thing, whatever it was.

'Warning: five seconds, X-rays.'

They were very close to it now and still they seemed unaware of its presence. It pondered on how the three individuals perceived the world – certainly not the way that it did otherwise they would have been alerted long ago. Its instructions were clear, "Do no harm", so it waited and did nothing.

'Gone again – I'm now sure this thing's knackered, boss.' *Should have brought another one*, John thought.

'Never mind that now, let's get this done.' Tom started moving forwards again and the others followed.

'Behind us now, only a quick burst but much higher output, almost into the red.'

'I really do hope that thing is broken or we are having some serious stuff going on here and I cannot imagine what it could be.' Tom had stopped when John had given the warning and was now looking back up the road the way they had come.

The team had been briefed that the object they were searching for was more than likely to emit a radiation signature at varying wavelengths but had been given no real idea of what or how long or how varied it would be. The only thing they had detected was X-ray and what was that about? Broken

equipment? Some sort of background anomaly? Or actual X-rays being directed at them?

The rain was still falling; a light but persistent rain that would make you very wet, very quickly. The three men had spent hours, if not days in this sort of weather over the last week. Still, the clothing they had was proof against the worst of it.

Tom was now unsure what to do; go back the way they had come and try and determine what the X-ray source was, or accept that the detector was malfunctioning and move on? The target may well be behind them and the radiation source, if real, was indicating that. Or if the sensor was indeed giving out random warnings they could waste all evening chasing ghosts. The first warning was received up on the escarpment and it indicated that the source was down here in the valley. After that, a couple of warnings that it was closer and just now, one that had indicated they had gone past it.

‘I reckon that if this indication is real, the source cannot be more than a hundred metres from here and behind us,’ Tom said, trying to convince himself.

‘We walked past it then?’ asked John

‘Tell you what, I will backtrack down the road awhile and you two stay here with John keeping an eye on the sensor. If you see any indication or high levels going on give me a shout on the IC.’ Big Dave was adjusting his communication set so that the earpiece didn’t cause any more discomfort than it already was.

‘Good idea, Dave, but do not go more than a hundred metres or so and give us a talk through,’ Tom ordered.

Big Dave put his rucksack down on the ground and adjusted his webbing so that his personal weapon, the XT, was more comfortable across his chest. The XT was experimental and had been designed to give maximum knock-down effect

without completely destroying the target. If you hit a person you would not kill them but you would seriously ruin their day. It had been designed around the old taser-type weapon that connected the target with 50,000 volts. Few people could stand that but some could. The XT was a few generations beyond that. It didn't need to be connected to the target but would emit pulses of high voltage that increased in intensity and current for as long as the firer decided it should. So a compliant target would get a nasty shock but a non-compliant could end up cooking themselves.

'Won't be long,' Big Dave said cheerfully as he loped off down the road.

It was watching the three closely now. One had separated from the group and was approaching on his own; why?

'Warning low-level X-ray again.'

'Roger that,' Dave said over the radio.

Big Dave was now out of sight but they could hear him over the open mic.

'Bugger all down here, boss. Is the warning still showing?'

'No, flat, buddy, nothing at— *Wow!* What was that?'

The sensor on John's arm had lit up like some seaside illumination and the audio alarm had triggered, meaning that the radiation level was past critical and well into the danger zone. At the same time a very brief but very bright light burst into the area in which John was standing. There was no noise just the warning from the sensor.

'Shut that thing off,' snapped Tom looking down the road to where Dave must be.

'Dave, can you hear me?' Tom spoke calmly into the microphone, wishing that Dave would respond. *This is going belly up*, he thought to himself.

'Right, what are the levels now?' Tom asked John.

'Back to normal, only lasted a couple of seconds. All came

from the same direction, radiation right across the spectrum; everything this thing can detect was detected.'

John was pointing down the road as if it wasn't obvious by now.

Both men had now dropped all the extra kit they were carrying and had made ready the not-inconsiderable fire power that they had with them. No electric tickling sticks now; these things were designed to kill an elephant without too much effort.

'Let's go, John, don't take chances.' Both men started to walk quickly down the road to where Big Dave had gone. He still wasn't answering the call on the radio. Tom was ready for the worst but had no idea what the worst could possibly be.

Wasn't long before they found a large scorch mark in the road; it was still steaming from the light rain that was falling. Just off to the side of the mark was the XT that Big Dave had been carrying; next to it were Dave's wet-weather gear and his belt with his radio and torch attached to it. There was no sign of Dave.

'Have a look over there, John. I will have a look into this ditch. Don't get too far from me.' They both looked around the immediate area for about twenty minutes and found nothing.

Tom went over and picked up the XT; it was warm as if it had been recently discharged.

'Have a look at the settings on this thing.' Tom beckoned to John.

'Blimey, it is set at maximum, you could zap a dinosaur with that and it has been discharged. What was he shooting at? This is getting too big for us, boss,' John remarked looking very distracted.

'You're right, it will be light in an hour or so and the weather seems to be easing off so we are going to tab it down the road, retrieve our kit and check in with control.'

Tom knew now that it had been a big mistake not to bring with them the rear-link radio kit; right now it would have been very useful but the team had followed procedure and only brought the very short-range personal stuff. The reasoning being that they had clear orders and had a limited task; why advertise their presence with radio transmissions booming out over the airwaves? No, it was the right decision at the time but was now a little flawed. Tom was already walking briskly the way they had come and John was very close behind.

It was aware that they were moving away but did not fully understand what had just transpired. A single one had come very close to it but had not seemed to have recognised it or not thought it was a threat, which of course it wasn't; well, not under normal circumstances.

It had detected a very large burst of power from the weapon the one was carrying then a large discharge of light, then nothing. Was it something it had done? It didn't think so but couldn't be sure. The other two had then come down the road; it could sense that they were very agitated but they posed no threat. They had moved around the area then had departed taking the weapon that was on the floor with them. The one that had arrived first had not been evident after the burst of light. It thought about that for a while. Was it in any danger? No; only two more rotations. It waited.

Tom and John, having retrieved theirs and Big Dave's kit, were moving at best speed up the road and onto the track that would take them to the rendezvous point up on the side of the valley. They were moving tactically but making good time all the same. Whatever had happened to Dave was not going to happen to them, not if they could help it.

It was nearly half an hour of hard flog before they reached the top of the valley. They could see the dimmed light marking what was to be the meeting point and help.

‘Big Dave is missing but otherwise no damage or lost equipment.’ Tom was briefing his boss by the side of a large truck that was parked near the exit point from the valley. The rain by this time had eased considerably and the predicted storm had not yet materialised, which would make any further work in the valley a little easier.

Joe Brunt, the man from control, was listening intently as Tom described the entry to and from the area they were interested in.

‘What were the readings on the sensor at the time Dave left us?’ Joe said making notes on a palmtop, which was transmitting as he wrote to the base area some hundreds of miles away.

‘Off the scale, but only for a couple of seconds then back down to nothing. No residual, nothing, never seen anything like it.’

‘Only X-rays?’

‘Yes, except when Big Dave went, then it was right across the spectrum. John is downloading the log now.’

‘And there was no sign of Dave after this?’ Joe continued writing.

‘No, nothing, only the XT lying on the ground; it had been discharged at maximum.’

‘OK, mate, get yourself and John onto the transport, your job here is done.’

‘Are we not getting more people down there to look for Dave?’ Tom asked rather puzzled.

‘Yes we are, but you are not, get on the truck and have a rest and a brew.’

Tom picked up his kit and wandered over to John who was just completing his debrief.

‘Come on, mate, we’re done here.’

‘What about Big Dave?’

‘Someone else’s problem; don’t worry, they will look for him.’

Although the group on the top of the valley was hidden from it by the escarpment, the entity could count that there were no more than fifty individuals up there. They did not seem to be moving towards it at this time. It waited and watched.

‘I think we have it.’ Joe was talking to a man who had been in the background during the debriefs. He was now standing very close to Joe so as not to let their conversation be overheard by anyone else.

‘Could be but let’s not be too confident; we have more to do before we can relax on this one,’ the man said.