

THE WARDENS

By

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CHAPTER 1: THE SIGNAL

PART ONE: NORAD AEROSPACE WARNING CENTER

Cheyenne Mountain Complex, Colorado

TIME: 0247 Hours UTC / 0247 Hours ZULU

The Aerospace Warning Center at Cheyenne Mountain hummed with the low-frequency drone of cooling systems and encrypted satellite feeds. Major James Caldwell, duty officer for the morning shift, sat before a wall of displays that tracked North American airspace with methodical precision. To his left, the BMEWS (Ballistic Missile Early Warning System) data streams from Greenland and Alaska painted a serene picture of the Arctic, cold, empty, and monitored by systems designed during the Cold War and upgraded seventeen times since.

To his right, the OTHER feeds from the newly rebuilt Over-the-Horizon Event Radar network showed nothing remarkable. Aircraft over the Pacific, a few commercial routing conflicts flagged by the system for attention, nothing more.

Caldwell was bored. Which, in missile defense, meant the world was safe.

His coffee was cold. The digital clock on the main display read 02:47 UTC. Thirteen minutes into his shift, and already the routine monotony of watching nothing happen was settling over him like a familiar blanket.

"Aerospace, this is SATOPS," the comm crackled from the floor above. "We've got an event."

Caldwell sat up. Relieved from the Boredom, Likely to be a non-event and sure that the boredom will reinstate itself shortly. Standard Training kicked in anyway, "Go ahead, SATOPS."

"Solar event. Massive coronal mass ejection detected by SOLSAT constellation. Coming hot. We're seeing ionospheric disturbance propagating down. Expect atmospheric heating across high latitudes in the next few hours – exact time unknown. Initial estimates put the CME vector at standard solar ejection trajectory."

Caldwell nodded to himself. Solar events were routine. The sun threw tantrums constantly. The Solar Watch Satellites were simply an alert system. NORAD tracked them because they could interfere with communications, electronics, and the sensors that kept North America safe.

"Acknowledged, SATOPS," Caldwell said. "Updating the tactical picture. Alert the General."

General THOMAS HARRISON, NORAD Deputy Commander, received the briefing in his office twelve minutes later. He'd been reviewing budget projections, thankless work, when Major Caldwell appeared at his door with a tablet.

"Solar flare, sir. Major event. SOLSAT classifies it as Category X. Projected to cause ionospheric disturbance. BMEWS and OTHER systems should remain operational, but we're expecting signal degradation around 0400 Hours UTC."

Harrison nodded. He'd seen a hundred of these. "Notify Peterson Space Force Base immediately. Have them run a full diagnostic on the Pathfinder comm grid. I don't want any gaps in coverage if something actually happens while the sun's having a tantrum."

"Already done, sir. SATOPS initiated the protocols twenty minutes ago."

"Good work."

Solar flares are classified by their X-ray brightness into five letter categories: A, B, C, M, and X (from weakest to strongest). The NOAA Space Weather Prediction Center measures flare-induced radio blackouts using a corresponding R-scale, which ranges from R1 (Minor) up to R5 (Extreme) where each letter category represents a tenfold increase in energy output, functioning similarly to the earthquake Richter scale. M Class are medium-sized flares which can cause brief radio blackouts that primarily affect the polar regions and sometimes trigger minor radiation storms. The largest and most powerful flares, class X, release as much energy as a billion hydrogen bombs and can trigger planet-wide (or global) radio blackouts and long-lasting radiation storm. In NOAA terms, R3 (Strong) are generally associated with X1 to X9 flares with wide-area blackout of HF radio, loss of signal for about an hour, increasing to R4 (Severe) which is generally associated with X10 to X19 flares and result in complete or wide-spread HF radio blackout on the sunlit side of Earth and R5 (Extreme) is triggered by greater than X20 and cause high frequency radio to be totally blacked out for hours across the entire sunlit side of the Earth

By 0315 Hours UTC, the solar flare was front and center on every NORAD display. The system flagged it as THREAT LEVEL: NONE. The SOLSAT satellites recorded its progression with scientific detachment: a massive eruption of plasma and radiation, screaming through space at standard solar wind velocities.

Everything nominal.

Nothing to worry about.

What Norad didn't know because their systems were not calibrated for it, was that the flare was actually travelling in the wrong direction, it would be many hours before Norad telemetry picked up on this strange anomaly.

PART TWO: WARD OPERATIONS CENTER

20-50 Meters Below Freemasons' Hall, Covent Garden, London

TIME: 0247 Hours UTC / 0247 Hours ZULU

The WARD watch room was a cathedral of screens.

Unlike NORAD's methodical, compartmentalized approach to air defense, WARD's operations center was a unified display of everything the organization knew about threats to the planet. Satellite feeds, ground-based sensor arrays, deep-space tracking, atmospheric analysis, all of it funneled through [the GITSS (Global Integrated Threat Synthesis Systems) Architecture and synthesized by AI algorithms that NORAD wouldn't understand for another twenty years.

Captain Sarah Chen, the watch commander, sat in the central station, in what was nicknamed the Captain's Chair, a homily to Star Trek. The entire command centre felt more like the bridge of the Enterprise than the missile defence system at NORAD. It was a deliberate design, deliberate but different. Behind her, three analysts monitored different threat vectors. Their Advanced Low Earth Orbit tracking system, known as ALIEN was functional, the deep-space monitoring suite, SPECTRE was also fully functional and the heliocentric anomaly detector, PHANTOM was reporting normally. The names were a running joke, started years ago when someone pointed out that WARD's mission was literally tracking aliens and phantoms. The names stuck because they were accurate, and because even people monitoring existential threats needed to laugh.

Chen was thirty-eight, career military (nominally with RAF Special Operations), and had been with WARD for eight years. She didn't believe in solar flares being merely solar flares.

At 0314 Hours UTC, SPECTRE (Space Penetration External Contact Threat & Risk Evaluation) flagged something catastrophically wrong.

"Captain," Lieutenant Sarah Torres, the senior deep-space analyst, turned from her console. Her voice was controlled, but her fingers were already moving across her keyboard. "We've got an anomaly in the SPECTRE data stream."

"Define anomaly," Chen said, not moving from her seat. The tone was calm. The training was deep. When SPECTRE alarmed, you didn't panic. You assessed.

"The solar event NORAD is tracking, the vector is inverted. The trajectory is backwards."

This was quickly followed by Phantom (Planetary HelioCentric ANomaly Threat Observation Monitor) confirming it.," Lieutenant Sharon Davies "Phantom Confirms".

Chen's eyes narrowed. She stood and walked to Sarah, (often known as B'lanna when on duty) Torres's station. On the screen, the data was layered: NORAD's publicly available SOLSAT feed overlay against WARD's deep-space sensor array. NORAD showed a standard coronal mass ejection propagating outward from the sun, the expected parabolic arc of a solar tantrum.

WARD's SPECTRE system, much more advanced, showed something completely different. WARD had deep space satellites that Norad only dreamed of, and the budget to do it.

"The vector," Torres said, pointing with steady hands at the data, "is originating from the outer solar system. It's not coming FROM the sun. It's coming FROM deep space, moving TOWARD the sun and Earth. Wrong velocity profile, wrong electromagnetic signature, wrong electromagnetic direction. It's not a solar event, Captain. It's something using a solar event as cover. The timing is right for the recent solar flare, but the intensity is all wrong. It's far bigger.

Chen felt the familiar cold certainty settle into her gut. The sensation she'd trained herself to recognize: something was hunting humanity, and they'd just spotted the hunter.

"Get the directional data," she said quietly. "Full spectral analysis on SPECTRE. And pull up the ALIEN atmospheric feeds for the last 6 hours. I want to know if anything else is moving under that flare signature. Spin all of the Wardens up."

Torres's fingers flew across her keyboard. Behind her, Second Lieutenant David Parnell was already moving, his screen filling with atmospheric data. The ALIEN system didn't just track weather, ships, missiles and flights; it tracked anything moving through the atmosphere that shouldn't be there. Stealth aircraft, cruise missiles, and, as WARD operatives, like Parnell had discovered over recent years of operations, unidentified flying objects that took advantage of atmospheric disturbance to mask their approach. WARD used the term UFO for identified alien craft and UAPs for items yet to be identified.

"Captain," Parnell's voice was steady, but his hand was trembling slightly as he pointed at his display. "ALIEN is showing three heat signatures in formation. Deep signatures, moving at about 300 kilometers per second. They're really slow but they may be trying to be masked by the flare's radiation signatures. The signatures are consistent with UFO propulsion output. If you didn't know to look for them under the electromagnetic noise..."

"You wouldn't see them," Chen finished. She was already moving to the communications console. "This is WARD Operations, immediate priority." As she spoke, the system reported "Estimated Location Scotland". Chen continued as if she already knew. In fact, she knew every country commander by name and could usually cite a lot of their WARD CV too. Part of the WARD "Know it – there's no time to think" doctrine. "Wake Colonel James

Meadows. Tell him we have a three DSI. Three EXO-ATMO contacts, one massive deep-space signature on SPECTRE. Vector analysis in progress. London has Ops.."

Exo-atmospheric contacts were what WARD was designed for. Detecting Deep Space Intrusions from UFOs before they reached the atmosphere, Allowing the secret Planetary Defences to come online as quickly as possible.

The comm lit up instantly. WARD's communication systems didn't follow civilian protocols. There was no lag, no bureaucracy. Colonel Meadows would be woken in his quarters one floor down and would sprint up the stairs during the briefings. He would have a full tactical briefing within 30 seconds of being woken and would be in the Operations Centre, the Bridge, within a further 5 seconds. You were expected to be instantly at readiness any time of the day. It was for this reason that WARD operations banned alcohol at all times ...no exceptions.

"Deep space contact confirmed," the comm operator said, already transmitting the encrypted data burst to everyone necessary in WARD in the UK who needed to know. Colonel Meadows ran through the operations door. The customary command of "Captain on the Bridge" indicated the change over of control seamlessly from Chan to Meadows". WARD used Royal Navy protocols that the ranked officer in command as Captain. "The captain" is both a specific rank (four gold stripes in the Navy) and a positional title and anyone who commands a warship is addressed as "the Captain" while on board, regardless of their actual rank and the commanding officer is always "the captain" on their bridge. When times were not tense, it was not unknown for the phrase to be substituted

sarcastically for “Worshipful Captain”, but today was not one of those days.

Meadows and Chen looked at the screens. Meadows picture was instant. Three objects moving in formation under the cover of the flare, one massive heat signature way out in deep space on SPECTRE. Probably an ejection from a hidden mothership, the sensors suggested, though the deep-space analysis was still processing. And a fake solar flare, perfectly designed, meant to blind NORAD while the real threat approached undetected.

For many years, WARD had been ready for this moment.

But readiness and actually facing it were two very different things.

"Get me a full ALIEN track," Chen said. "I want predictive trajectory. Where are they headed? And pull up the UK coastal defence positions. If those UFOs are heading for the British Isles, we need to know where."

Meadows looked at another screen “Lunar 1 is spun up, tell them to launch.” He paused. “I know, the budget will be hell but correct me someone if I’m wrong, this is the first multiple detection in three years isn’t it – and combined with the false flare, we don’t want to be caught with our pants down.”

He tapped the routing overlay before anyone could ask. “And keep the interceptor corridor clear of Kern’s platform, same as always. Man’s building his own base up there to run Mars trials on Halyard’s dime, and the last thing I need tonight is a headline about WARD putting a hole in some billionaire’s buggy.”

Torres was already on it. On the screen, the ALIEN system was building a predictive track, extrapolating the objects' trajectory based on current velocity, atmospheric density, and heading.

The track pointed directly at LOCATION IN UK: Loch Ness.

"All three contacts are converging on that location.
Estimated arrival time: 40 minutes."

Second Lieutenant David Parnell's voice was steady, reassured. "Lunar 1 reports interceptors launched."
he paused
"SatCom online". Interceptors visible in 12 seconds" .

"Captain," Torres said slowly, her voice now carrying the weight of what they both understood, "three years 2 months".

Everyone in the room was watching their screens with an intensity of obsession. This was no drill. This was unusual.

Parnell said in a quiet tone. "Interceptors now visible to UFOs"

As he said it, the main screen flashed a red border. A disembodied computer voice, deliberately designed to be calm, but authoritative, stated "Plot Change Indicated. Please confirm. Three tracked UFOs changing course. Course reversed"

Meadows looked at two screens then at Parnell. Parnell without turning away from his screen said one word
"Confirmed". Lunar1 this is London. Hold Interceptors.

Code Intercept Alpha One One Sierra Tango Zero Five Nine“.

He turned to Chen. "Makes no sense".

Chen nodded.

“Captain” Parnell had now turned, he was looking at them both. “I don’t think they have..... I had a hunch and turned up the sensitivity, I know the sensors don’t like it, but that third detect is a decoy. There’s something in the noise. I think one is continuing.”

Meadows looked at the screens “On Main“.

The main screen changed instantly – it clearly showed three distinct contacts, although one was occasionally intermittent, as if interfered with by the magnetic storm that was the false flare.

Meadows looked at Chen. "These are sneaky bastards, - that makes more sense. Well done Parnell, your reputation remains intact. Just don’t burn out the sensors or there’ll be hell to pay!"

“Already turned down Captain. I’ve got him, but there’s also a track from Loch Ness too, but it is weird too. It doesn’t look quite right. It did initially, but there’s something strange in the track now”.

Meadows knew of Parnell’s reputation. Rumour was that when he was in the Navy, he could tell a target vessel from its sound alone, and sometimes from the sonar shape too. He was rumoured to be as quick at this as the computer

systems – or quicker. He was doing the same with the Wardens.

“I think.....” but Parnell was interrupted by the disembodied computer voice.

“New Atmospheric Target. Change. Change. Loch Ness Launch. Original Destination: Earth Orbit. New Destination: Earth Terres. Exact Destination Uncertain. Southern England. Track losing height and speed. New Destination: Ashford. Possible Attack: Heathrow. Target track is anomalous. New Data. New Data. Possible UFO Malfunction. Possible UFO Deception. Insufficient Data to verify.....” Command Centre was silent. “Target track stabilising. Ashford. Queen Mary reservoir Likely.”

One word broke the silence. It was from Parnell. “I Confirm”. Not quite as quick as the AI, but close.

For the first time in minutes, Colonel James Meadows sat down. “Roll units to the Reservoir. Full containment. Get me a cover story.”

PART THREE: GROUND DISCOVERY

Queen Mary Reservoir, Spelthorne, Surrey

TIME: 0416 Hours LOCAL / 0316 Hours UTC / 0316 Hours ZULU

James Cooper, 54, had been a reservoir maintenance technician for 12 years. He knew Queen Mary's twelve square kilometers of water better than he knew his own home. Every inlet, every dead zone where silt collected, every spot where algae bloomed in summer.

He wasn't supposed to be there at 0416 Local time. His shift didn't start until 0600. But he'd forgotten his work tablet, and rather than wait, rather than admit to his supervisor that he'd been forgetful, he'd driven to the reservoir in the pre-dawn darkness to retrieve it.

What he found made no sense.

The water at the eastern end, near Littleton village, was wrong. The surface was disturbed, but not from wind or normal tidal action. It looked like something massive had pushed through from below, creating a dome of displaced water that was still settling. Steam rose from the disruption, actual steam, which shouldn't happen in June, not at this hour, not in this water temperature.

Cooper stopped his truck and got out. The air smelled wrong. Burnt. Like ozone after a lightning strike, mixed with something chemical that made his throat tighten.

He walked to the edge of the reservoir and stared at the water.

Something was down there.

His phone was in his pocket. He should call someone. Police? The Environment Agency? Some part of his brain screamed at him to get back in the truck and drive away before whatever was in that water decided to come back up. Strangely he'd been up in Scotland 2 weeks ago and he'd seen something similar at Loch Ness. He'd nearly reported that too, but he knew he'd forever after be known as Nessie by his colleagues if he did.

Instead, he called the water authority's emergency line.

"Queen Mary emergency services, what's your emergency?" The woman on the other end sounded bored. It was 0416 in the morning. Nothing serious ever happened at Queen Mary Reservoir.

"This is James Cooper, maintenance tech. Badge number 7644. There's something in the reservoir. Something big. The water is... disturbed. Heated. I don't know what it is. There's steam. The air smells like..."

He paused, searching for the word.

"Like burned electronics."

There was a pause. Then: "Stay on the line, Mr. Cooper. Don't approach the water. Don't take photographs. Help is being dispatched immediately. There's been a report of a meteor in the area."

What Cooper didn't know was that his call had automatically flagged the WOMPR, WARD's Observation Monitoring Protocol and Response System, which automatically intercepted the call and escalated it to WARD Operations in London. Status: PRIORITY: IMMEDIATE.

What Cooper also didn't know was that within 2 minutes, his discovery would trigger a full WARD mobilization. Not the biggest in British history, but one that would remain completely invisible to the public.

What Cooper definitely didn't know was that something was currently resting at the bottom of Queen Mary Reservoir, at a depth of approximately 20 meters, and was very much still active.

PART FOUR: COMMAND MOBILIZATION

WARD Operations, London

TIME: 0321 Hours UTC / 0321 Hours ZULU

Colonel James Meadows sat in the WARD operations centre in the Captain's chair in his mandarin-collar black jacket, reviewing the tactical picture with Captain Chen. Around them, the watch team was executing the mobilization protocols that had been refined over hundreds of drills and quite a few "this is not a drill" event. This was not a drill!

The protocols that had never actually been executed in full before.

"Two contacts confirmed reversed. One in atmosphere using Stealth but tracked," Chen said, pointing at the ALIEN display. "Converging above Queen Mary Reservoir. Two signatures on SPECTRE in deep space. Going away. No ETA to intercept. Interceptors available. Space Weapons available – deployment time 36 minutes Space Weapons. 68 minutes Interceptors. And we just received confirmation from ground that something has breached Queen Mary's surface. The water authority is reporting anomalous thermal readings and ground observer reporting steam emissions. It's submerged. AI Confirms possible damage from flight anomalies. Damage unknown"

Meadows's face was expressionless. He'd spent twenty years preparing for this moment. He'd spent it watching, waiting, knowing that one day the aliens would make a move that WARD couldn't predict, couldn't negotiate and

couldn't hide from.

He'd built his entire adult existence around the certainty that this day would come.

He was ready.

"Mobile Defence Units at Queen Mary in 26 minutes" he said. "London Traffic. Handheld weapons already onsite."

His voice was quiet, but the authority was absolute. He had called immediately for the motorbike teams, disguised as police outriders to get to the Reservoir. In fact, they had arrived before the real police. The difference was that the real police had Tasers and Batons. Meadows's people had something slightly more effective.

Two faces were on the screens. One was entitled "Lieutenant Colonel Paul Rutter" and the other was entitled "Commander Peter Seaton".

Full security perimeter. Rules of engagement: engage if the UFO attempts surface exit. Prevent escape by any means necessary. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Rutter, coordinate with Commander Peter Seaton at the reservoir. Get me SCUBA operational and headed for Queen Mary. Full deployment. And get me the Chief Scientist on a secure line, I need him analyzing those SPECTRE deep-space readings. I want to know if that's a mothership and if it's attempting communication with the grounded craft."

Lieutenant Colonel Rutter was already moving. He was younger than Meadows, career military intelligence, and had been with WARD for 5 years. He was good. Better than good. Meadows had brought him into WARD specifically for moments like this, when the training became real and

decisions had to be made instantly. He would be in charge of the Reservoir when he arrived with the Mobile Defence Units.

"Mobile Defence Units are rolling," Rutter said, reading his screen. "ETA to Queen Mary: 21 minutes. Sorry Boss, the traffic is murder, but Tactical is already there on bikes and has established a 500m perimeter. We'll widen this shortly if police manpower is available. I've called a meteor strike and suggested possible bio-contamination so we should get manpower. SCUBA is with me – we'll be extracted from transport on arrival. Pilot and operator are being briefed. And I'm trying to raise Commander Seaton at the reservoir, but ground comms are still being established. He'll be on-site any second. "

"Contact Commander Seaton via secure sat phone," Meadows said. "Tell him: unknown UFO on bottom of Queen Mary Reservoir, confirmed hostile intent based on approach vector. Mobile Defence Units are twenty minutes out. His authority is full engagement if the UFO surfaces. Tell him that he's commanding the perimeter response until you arrive on-site. Remind him that he's less than 4 miles from Heathrow, although we've got everything diverted or sitting on the ground in case of a second meteor."

Rutter nodded. Before Meadows could look away he was already making the call on a secure satellite phone.

Meadows turned to Chen. "Deep-space contact, SPECTRE analysis. Are we looking at a mothership?"

"Thermal signature is unclear." Chen said. "It's either a number of UFOs or a mothership. Mass estimates are 15

times larger than the atmospheric contacts. It could be a recovery vehicle...or recovery vehicles..."

"Then they're coming back for their people," Meadows finished. "And they're going to be desperate. Desperate enemies are the most dangerous kind."

He paused, then made a decision.

"Get me Elon Musk. I don't care what time it is or where he is. Tell him WARD needs SpaceX in operational status within the hour. We need to move an interceptor platform in position above Queen Mary in case that deep-space contact tries to make a recovery run. And remind him that we don't exist and neither does the platform. No discussion, no questions, just compliance. And remind him that he's the world's richest man for a reason."

Chen's eyes narrowed fractionally, but she was already on it. "Contacting SpaceX liaison now, sir."

The countdown had started.

Everything was in motion now.

The fight, if it came to that, would be fought in the next few hours. At the back of Meadow's mind however, the reasoning that made him so effective was already kicking in.

it might be important for them, but there was no indication they'd risk exposing themselves – or at least he hoped so.

And nobody in the government, nobody at NORAD, nobody anywhere in the public world would ever know it was happening, regardless of the decisions made tonight.

CHAPTER 2: ESCALATION

PART ONE: EN ROUTE TO QUEEN MARY RESERVOIR

M25 Motorway, Southwest London

TIME: 0335 Hours UTC / 0335 Hours ZULU

The three-vehicle convoy moved through pre-dawn darkness with practiced precision. Two articulated lorries, appearing to the casual or detailed glance just ordinary transport, with logos of Turners Soham, one of Britain's top hauliers. They carried the Mobile Defence Units. The third vehicle, an over-width non-descript articulated lorry, also Turners-marked, held Lieutenant Colonel Paul Rutter and the SCUBA equipment. All vehicles had front and rear van escorts. All number plates and vehicle records appeared legitimate if checked via the police national database, although Turners would have been genuinely surprised about their existence and their contents.

Any police force running the registrations through ANPR would see nothing out of the ordinary, insured, taxed, within tachograph rules, but within seconds of their query, the police officers would find themselves routed to an urgent major emergency miles away, with their routing cancelled halfway through the trip. Enough to avoid inspection and enough to avoid enquiry. If the Police Officers had actually managed to stop and inspect the vehicles, they would have been even more surprised.

Rutter sat in the passenger seat, reviewing tactical data on a secure tablet, highly encrypted comms running NSA Suite B algorithms, hardened against electromagnetic interception. Unusual for him that the device wasn't quantum protected, but it was air-gapped, completely isolated from any external networks, a deliberate design choice that made it unhackable by any remote means.

Rutter was fifty-two, weathered by thirty years of military service, with the kind of face equally comfortable laughing at a bar or ordering a strike. Salt-and-pepper hair cut short. Black WARD uniform, unremarkable by design.

The driver, a young ensign, kept his eyes on the road. Traffic was unusually heavy at this hour. That was good. It meant conversation wasn't necessary.

"ETA fourteen minutes," the driver said quietly.

Rutter nodded, reading the water authority report on his tablet. Surface temperature readings had stabilized at 9.2 degrees Celsius, but thermal imaging showed persistent heat signatures at depth. Not ambient water temperature. Active thermal emission. The UFO was still down there. Still active. Although the thermal signature had been holding steady at approximately forty kilowatts equivalent radiometric output based on infrared analysis (8-14 micrometer band, cooled sensor array), the intensity was reducing. Repair activity, he assumed. The alien craft was burning through power reserves to fix the damage that led it to crash into Queen Mary.

His secure comms unit crackled. Captain Chen's voice, calm as always: "Lieutenant Colonel, reconnaissance

drones are being deployed. SCUBA pilot and operator are in final briefing. Standing by for drone telemetry."

"Copy that, Captain," Rutter replied. "What's the status on Seaton?"

"Commander Seaton is establishing FOO perimeter. Bike teams in place, outer security established. He's asking for specific ROE clarification from Colonel Meadows, belt and braces. Out."

Rutter understood. Seaton was pushing back on something. To check the Rules of Engagement was not standard policy. Standing orders were that Chief of FOO had full ROE authority. But Seaton was thorough. That was why he was in command.

A small part of Rutter's brain appreciated the humour of FOO, Forward Observation Operations, WARD's field-level UFO response teams, deployed when confirmed UFO activity was detected. The FOO terminology was a tribute to WWII airmen who called UFOs "Foo Fighters," derived from the Smokey Stover comic strip catchphrase "Where there's foo, there's fire." WARD operatives used it colloquially: "FOO operations active," "FOO teams report," "FOO defense." It was a containment and observation zone with mobile units ready for immediate engagement if the target surfaced.

"Tell the Commander I'll handle the Colonel," Rutter said. "Just keep that perimeter tight. If that UFO surfaces before we're ready, I want nowhere for it to run."

"Understood, sir."

PART TWO: QUEEN MARY RESERVOIR FOO PERIMETER

Spelthorne, Surrey

TIME: 0337 Hours LOCAL / 0337 Hours UTC

Commander Peter Seaton stood at the edge of Queen Mary Reservoir, watching the water with the expression of a man solving an impossible engineering problem. Thirty-seven, broad-shouldered, with the kind of precise jaw that made him look more like a fashion magazine cover than a military officer. His WARD uniform was tailored perfectly. Seaton didn't do standard issue.

"Report," he said into his secure comms.

"FOO perimeter secure," Major Davies responded from the mobile command vehicle. "Real police diverted north. Water authority's been told it's a meteor strike with possible hazmat. Civilian access restricted within two kilometers. ANPR coverage active on all approach roads. All checkpoints manned."

"Drone deployment status?"

"Two air reconnaissance drones launched five minutes ago. Four submersible drones entering search area now. All submersible units conducting underwater sweep of the target area. Thermal imaging is active across all platforms. Should have initial telemetry in approximately four minutes."

Seaton nodded. Drones were standard operating procedure. Cheaper than risking human assets. Or at least they were supposed to be. He'd heard the stories about

the drone systems, how Meadows had argued against cost-cutting measures, how the procurement committee had insisted on cheaper alternatives, how the political decision had been made to deploy military-hardened systems instead of the quantum-hardened platforms, properly armed, that Meadows had requested. Seaton had disagreed with Meadows on many things, but on this, the Commander had been absolutely right.

The drones would scout. They were not armed. Then SCUBA would deploy. That was the plan. It still put human assets at risk.

"Let me know the moment you have drone telemetry," he said. "And prep the Mobile Defence Unit perimeter for worst-case scenario. I want surface intercept capability if that thing tries to break water."

"Copy that, sir. Standing by."

PART THREE: PRE-DEPLOYMENT INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING - EXTENDED

RAF Croughton, SCUBA Preparation Bay

TIME: 0338 Hours LOCAL / 0338 Hours UTC

The briefing room was austere: metal table, tactical displays, and two WARD pilots who represented the most sophisticated submersible operation in British military history. Rutter stood at the head of the table, flanked by technical officers, reviewing his notes one final time.

Call sign Leviathan1 was American, Laurel Turner, age twenty-six, doctorate in marine engineering systems, fourteen thousand hours in deep-water vehicle

operations, three years as NASA's Deputy Director of Aquatic Vehicle Systems before WARD had recruited her. She was an ex-test pilot who understood what it meant to operate at the edge of a machine's performance envelope. Qualified as an advanced pilot as well as a submariner, she was regularly described as 'Highly Driven'. Her dark hair was pulled back tightly, her posture absolutely still, her eyes tracking every detail Rutter presented.

Call sign Atlantis was RAF Flight Officer Jennifer Mills, age twenty-eight, sharp green eyes, the athletic posture of someone trained on the Red Arrows. British, precise, analytical. Doctorate in applied mathematics. Three years in electronic warfare before joining WARD. She was deeply, privately skeptical that any of this alien contact stuff was real. That skepticism made him dangerous in the best possible way, he wouldn't believe data without verifying it, wouldn't trust systems without understanding them.

"Queen Mary Reservoir," Rutter began, pulling up the first tactical display. "Constructed 1921, surface area 280 hectares, maximum depth forty meters in the southern basin. Located in Spelthorne, Surrey, approximately forty kilometers southwest of London. Three-point-eight miles from Heathrow, major safety concern. Current reservoir volume: 23 to 30 million cubic meters. Water authority management through Thames Water. Civilian recreational use: sailing, fishing, bird watching. No active submersible operations at least none that the water authority acknowledges since about 1944."

He pulled up a historical photograph. Black and white, dated 1943. A small, torpedo-shaped submersible being

lowered into the water. Men in military uniforms standing nearby.

"Historical intelligence point," Rutter continued. "In 1943, during World War II, the British military conducted classified submersible testing at Queen Mary. A midget submarine code-named 'Sleeping Beauty', motorised submersible canoe, two-man crew, designed for shallow-water sabotage operations. The Sleeping Beauty program was highly classified. It tested deep-water navigation, acoustic stealth, extended-duration submersion. The program was eventually abandoned, but the testing platform was Queen Mary Reservoir. Nothing of current interest as all the technology is significantly outdated."

He paused, letting that sink in.

"The reason I mention this: WARD's analysis suggests the aliens are aware of this historical detail. Why else would they target this specific freshwater system? There are hundreds of deep reservoirs in the UK. It is possible that they selected Queen Mary specifically. It is also possible that something went wrong and this was the certain glide-down point. AI analysis suggests the latter from the tracking. If they're targeting it deliberately, this suggests either they have historical intelligence from human sources, or they have remote-sensing capability sophisticated enough to identify locations with previous submersible activity. Can't see why either would be relevant, and AI doesn't either. Whether deliberate targeting or crash site, it makes no difference, standard ROE applies."

Leviathan1 raised her hand slightly. "Sir, if we're assuming crash scenario, how damaged is the aircraft actually? What's our assessment of its current capability?"

"Excellent question," Rutter replied. "Based on the thermal signature, approximately forty kilowatts output, declining slowly, we assess the craft is actively repairing itself. The power draw suggests functioning propulsion systems but at reduced efficiency. The aliens are burning reserves to fix damage. Our estimate: the craft is combat-capable but not at full performance. Which is why we're deploying SCUBA before it completes repairs."

Atlantis leaned forward. "And if they detect us? What's the escalation protocol if SCUBA makes contact and the UFO becomes hostile?"

"That," Rutter said, "is why we're deploying SCUBA, not a conventional submersible. SCUBA has weapons. SCUBA has tactical authority. If contact goes hostile, you have full ROE clearance to engage."

Leviathan1 absorbed that. Atlantis was calculating odds, processing risk matrices.

Rutter advanced the display to show detailed bathymetry, three-dimensional sonar mapping collected over months of covert surveillance conducted by WARD divers and autonomous underwater vehicles.

"Current bathymetry is complex. The southern basin reaches forty meters at its deepest point, here, at coordinates 51.4082°N, 0.4125°W. This is the historic site of the village of Littleton, which was submerged when the reservoir was created in 1921. The old village lies at the

bottom of the deep basin. Submerged stone structures, walls, foundations. It creates acoustic complexity, multiple reflecting surfaces, shadow zones, acoustic lobes. Perfect for concealment."

He pulled up another layer of the sonar map, highlighting the submerged ruins.

"The Littleton ruins are scattered across an area approximately 500 meters by 250 meters. The deepest depressions correspond to where the old village center was located. We expect that the UFO will be positioned directly over the deepest part, roughly forty meters down, buried within the acoustic clutter of the stone structures. From any tactical standpoint, it's excellent concealment. Any conventional sonar scan will have difficulty distinguishing the alien craft from the background geological and architectural clutter. Any thermal signature will be masked by thermal layering at that depth. The aliens, assuming they have basic steering control, obviously will select this location. Given their glide-path, they seem to have basic control. They understand that pre-existing human infrastructure provides perfect concealment."

Leviathan1 studied the sonar map with professional interest. "Forty meters depth. That's what, approximately five atmospheres of pressure?"

"Approximately 5 bar external pressure," Rutter confirmed. "The SCUBA pressure hull is designed for 1,800 meters operational depth, which is 180 bar. Forty meters is well within safe operating envelope. Your concern?"

"Just confirming the safety margins," Leviathan1 said. "I like to know we're not pushing the hull to its limits on the first real deployment."

Rutter pulled up current modeling, fluid dynamics simulation of water flow patterns.

"Water circulation is driven by the Colne River inflow, average flow rate 2.3 cubic meters per second, varying with seasonal rainfall. Current velocity at depth ranges from 0.1 to 0.3 meters per second in the deep basin. This creates both challenges and opportunities. The current will disperse thermal signatures, making detection harder. But it also means any propulsion activity by the submerged object will create distinctive acoustic wake patterns in the water column above."

Atlantis asked the critical question: "Temperature stratification?"

"Seasonal. We're in summer now, so surface warming creates distinct layers. Surface layer from zero to six meters is 18-20°C. Thermocline, rapid temperature transition, occurs between six and fourteen meters. Below fourteen meters, water stabilizes at 8-9°C year-round due to spring-fed inflow from the chalk aquifer. That thermocline will be visible on thermal imaging as a sharp boundary. Your target is well below it, in the deep cold zone."

He pulled up water chemistry data and acoustic propagation models.

"Dissolved oxygen levels: surface 8.5 mg/L, declining to 3.2 mg/L at depth due to limited circulation. pH 6.8 to 7.2.

Conductivity 420 microsiemens per centimeter. These parameters affect sonar propagation. We've modeled acoustic behavior extensively. The deep basin has interesting acoustic properties, the stone structures create complexity. Active sonar transmitted at 50 kHz should achieve reliable detection to ranges of 600-900 meters in the deep basin, but with significant acoustic shadow zones created by the ruins."

Atlantis was making calculations. "Sound velocity in water is temperature-dependent: approximately 1480 m/s in warm surface water, 1435 m/s in cold deep layers. That creates refraction effects, potential acoustic shadow zones, ducting conditions where sound or sonar could travel horizontally for extended distances along the thermocline."

"Precisely," Rutter confirmed. "Which is why SCUBA uses multiple sonar frequencies at different power levels. You'll have redundancy and multiple angles for targeting."

Rutter's tone shifted. This was the critical briefing point.

"Now, the critical technical brief. This is why we're deploying drones first, then SCUBA. The drones are military-grade hardened platforms. AES-256 encryption. Standard military protocols. Robust enough to resist conventional electronic warfare and commercial-level hacking."

He paused deliberately.

"But they are not quantum-hardened. This is the flaw. AES-256 is mathematically secure against classical computers. But we have to assume the aliens possess

computational capability beyond our current understanding. Quantum computers, or something functionally equivalent or better, can crack classical encryption. Not instantly, but given sufficient processing power, they can. AES-256 is not quantum-resistant."

Leviathan1 was following the logic carefully. Atlantis was thinking through the implications.

"The drones will scout," Rutter continued. "They'll give us initial contact data. But we cannot trust the information completely. If the aliens have quantum-level computing capability, they can intercept the drone signals, decrypt the encrypted telemetry, analyze the sensor data, and inject false information back into the data stream. We send military-hardened drones with AES-256 encryption. They might come back with corrupted data. We won't know if they're lying until we analyze it against other sources."

Atlantis raised his hand. "What's our fallback if the drones are compromised? Do we abort the operation?"

"No," Rutter said firmly. "That's where SCUBA comes in. SCUBA is different. Fundamentally different in architecture."

He pulled up SCUBA's technical specifications, dense schematics showing the submersible's internal layout.

"SCUBA operates on what we call 'air-gap architecture.' Every system is isolated. And I mean completely isolated. The communications system is physically isolated from the navigation system. Navigation is isolated from the sonar system. Sonar is isolated from thermal imaging.

Every major system is on its own power supply, its own processing computer, its own hardened network. There are no external inputs. No wireless receivers. No external data links. The only connection to the outside world is the communications system. And that communications system is physically isolated from every other onboard system by hardened bulkheads, literally separate compartments with no cable connections crossing between them."

Leviathan1 nodded slowly, understanding the design philosophy.

"What that means operationally," Rutter continued, "is that even if an alien somehow compromised the communications system, they cannot reach the sonar. They cannot reach navigation. They cannot reach propulsion control. The systems are physically separated. You cannot hack sonar through comms because there is no physical connection between them. The only way to transfer data between SCUBA's systems is manual, you read a value from one system, you physically walk it to another system, you input it manually. It's slow. It's cumbersome. But it's un-hackable."

Atlantis was visualizing this. "So the crew acts as the data relay between systems?"

"Precisely. You see a sonar contact, you note the bearing and range manually, you walk that data to the navigation station and input it yourself. No automated data transfer. No wireless link. No vulnerability. It's how military systems worked in the 1960s. SCUBA brings that philosophy into the modern era with quantum encryption on top."

"Second," Rutter said, "quantum-hardened encryption. SCUBA's communications use quantum-key-distribution protocols at the highest classification level. Not AES-256. Not classical encryption. Quantum-secured channels that are mathematically impossible to decrypt without possession of the quantum keys. The aliens cannot crack it, not because they don't have computational power, but because quantum encryption is fundamentally different from classical encryption. There is no mathematical shortcut. No computational workaround. You cannot brute-force a quantum key. You cannot derive it through mathematical analysis. The only way to decrypt a quantum-secured message is to possess the quantum key. Period."

Leviathan1 asked the operational question: "How is the quantum key transmitted securely if they're trying to intercept our communications?"

"Excellent question," Rutter said. "The quantum keys are pre-distributed. They were generated here, in WARD's most secure facility, and they're physically loaded into SCUBA's secure storage before deployment. The aliens cannot intercept them because they were never transmitted. They exist only in SCUBA's quantum-locked key storage and in the WARD operations center's quantum-locked key storage. Two copies. No transmission. No interception possible."

Atlantis leaned back. "So SCUBA is isolated from external hacking by physical air-gap, and its communications are secured by quantum encryption that cannot be compromised even if the aliens have unlimited computational power."

"That's correct," Rutter confirmed. "Together, air-gapped systems plus quantum encryption, SCUBA is un-hackable. Not just resistant. Un-hackable. No external access to the sonar data. They cannot corrupt the thermal imaging. They cannot inject false information because there is no external access point. SCUBA is isolated and encrypted simultaneously. Double protection."

Rutter pulled up cost comparisons on the display.

"That combination, air-gapped architecture plus quantum-hardened encryption on every system, costs approximately one billion pounds. The drones cost approximately two million each. A hundred-to-one cost differential. The procurement committee looked at those numbers and decided: send cheap drones first. They're expendable. Get initial data. Then send SCUBA if needed."

"But," Rutter said, his voice dropping slightly, "the drones are not just cheap. They're vulnerable. Quantum-compromised. The aliens, if they have the computational capability we suspect they do, can break the AES-256 encryption and feed us false data. Which is exactly what I expect to happen in the next few minutes. So expect you get your feet wet!"

Atlantis grinned. "Or not."

That had been three hours ago. Now the drones were being deployed into a reservoir WARD understood in exhaustive detail. Now they were about to see if Rutter's predictions were correct.

PART FOUR: DRONE RECONNAISSANCE - THE ENCRYPTION COMPROMISE

WARD Operations Center, Freemasons' Hall, London

TIME: 0340 Hours UTC / 0340 Hours ZULU

Colonel Meadows remotely watched the drone telemetry feed on the main operations display. Six quadcopter platforms, military-grade hardened systems equipped with AES-256 encrypted communications. These were robust platforms, capable of withstanding conventional electronic warfare. But they were not quantum-hardened. That had been the decision: cost-effective reconnaissance platforms, acceptable risk of compromise by sufficiently advanced adversary.

The submersible drones had been equipped on arrival with active sonar transceivers at 50 kHz carrier frequency with 10 kHz bandwidth, optical thermal imaging (uncooled microbolometer array, 320×256 pixel resolution), and conventional side-scan sonar at 200 kHz. Data was encrypted with AES-256 before transmission back to the command center.

"SubDrone One and SubDrone Two have reached target depth," reported Captain Chen from the operations console. "Thirty-eight meters. Positioned directly above the Littleton ruins. Water temperature eight-point-three degrees Celsius. Pressure 4.9 bar. All sonar transceivers transmitting at full power."

On the tactical displays, the sonar returns began arriving. Rich acoustic imagery from the lake bottom. The detailed bathymetry appeared in real-time, the stone structures of the submerged village, the walls, the foundations, the

deepened pocket where the UFO was supposedly concealed.

"Thermal imaging shows the expected temperature profile," Chen continued. "Thermocline transition at fourteen meters. Deep basin holding steady at 8.3°C. All sensor data is being decrypted and processed. Everything nominal so far."

Meadows watched the data stream. Good. Clean. The drones were performing as designed.

"SubDrone Three and Four now descending into the target basin," Chen reported. "Sonar overlap coverage is now complete. We have full bathymetric mapping of the search area."

"Any thermal contacts?" Meadows asked.

"Negative. No heat signatures standing out from the background water temperature. Scanning the deep pocket at the coordinates where the historical sonar showed the anomalous modifications. Nothing. The area where we expected them to be."

Chen paused.

"Wait. SubDrone One is showing something. Thermal return at depth thirty-nine-point-eight meters, bearing one-four-eight from launch point. Temperature approximately 16.8 degrees Celsius. Active heat signature, definitely not ambient water. Right where the ruins are densest."

"Location confirmed?" Meadows stepped closer to the display.

"Directly within the Littleton ruins. The coordinates match our predicted UFO location exactly. AI is cross-checking against historical sonar signatures... confirmed. This matches the pre-damage pattern we expected from the tracking analysis."

Meadows nodded. Good. The briefing intelligence had been accurate. If the UFO was there, exactly where they'd predicted, hidden within the acoustic clutter of the submerged village, then SCUBA would find it.

"SubDrone Two, conduct independent sonar sweep of that same location," Meadows ordered. "Full acoustic mapping. Verify the SubDrone One contact."

Ten seconds passed as Drone Two's sonar data arrived, was decrypted, and was processed.

"SubDrone Two sonar complete," Chen reported. "Active sonar returns from the target area confirm contact. Definitely something there among the ruins. Asymmetrical reflections, not consistent with natural geological formation or old stone structures. Definitely a manufactured object."

"Confirm dimensions," Meadows said.

"Sonar shadow suggests object approximately seven to nine meters in length. Roughly three meters in width. Irregular shape, positioned vertically within the ruins. The acoustic returns are partially masked by the stone structures, but there's definitely something down there

that's not part of the Littleton village. AI is comparing the acoustic signature against known submarine designs... no match. Definitely not conventional military hardware."

Good. Two independent drones, two independent sensors, confirming contact. They had target location, thermal signature, acoustic signature. Standard WARD protocol was proceeding normally.

"Bring SubDrone Three into the search zone," Meadows said. "I want triple-redundancy on all sensor data."

"SubDrone Three descending now. Should have thermal and sonar data in thirty seconds."

Meadows settled in to watch the data accumulate. The grid of drone readings would create a full three-dimensional picture of the submerged object. Multiple independent sensors would verify the contact. Standard procedure. By-the-book. No risks.

Thirty seconds passed.

"SubDrone Three thermal imaging is showing the target location, but...", Chen's tone shifted. Something was wrong with her voice.

"But what?" Meadows said.

"The temperature reading is different. SubDrone One reported 16.8°C. SubDrone Three is reading 14.2°C."

"Sensor variance," Meadows said. "Thermal imaging on military platforms has a tolerance of, "

"Plus-or-minus 0.5°C, sir. That's a two-point-six degree variance. Outside tolerance range."

"Recalibration on Drone Three," Meadows ordered.
"Verify sensor integrity."

"Running diagnostics now. AI is flagging the variance as anomalous. Cross-checking against water temperature models... no physical explanation for a 2.6-degree variance over fifty meters horizontal distance. AI suggests either equipment failure or... thermal source is moving."

"SubDrone One now showing 14.2°C. SubDrone Two also is reading 14.4°C. AI assessment: residual thermal imaging and sonar are anomalies. The UFO has moved."

But something had shifted in Meadows' mind. A small discrepancy. Probably nothing. Probably sensor malfunction. But at forty meters depth, with stable water temperature, there should be no variance.

"SubDrone Two sonar is showing the same contact data, no artificial signature," Chen reported, confusion clear in her voice now. "Acoustic signature was confirmed seven-to-nine-meter object. Asymmetrical shape among the ruins. It's no longer there. All sonar now showing negative contact."

"And SubDrone Three sonar?"

"SubDrone Three sonar shows... sir. All SubDrones showing nothing. No acoustic contact at that location. The sonar return from that area is consistent with the Littleton ruins only. No manufactured object detected by any drone sonar. All drones concur."

Meadows felt something tighten in his chest.

"Repeat that," he said quietly.

"All SubDrones' active sonar at 50 kHz and 200 kHz, all showing negative contact at the coordinates where SubDrones One and Two originally detected something. Acoustic returns are consistent with background noise and the submerged village structures only. No alien craft detected by SubDrones. AI assessment: object has relocated. We're tracking movement through the ruins."

"Equipment malfunctions?" Meadows asked. "If it moved, we should get thermal variation tracking from the disturbances in the thermocline."

"Diagnostics are running now, sir. Preliminary sensor check shows all systems nominal. Transmitter output is within specification. Receiver sensitivity is nominal. There's no indication of equipment failure. All systems report green across the board."

Meadows stared at the display. SubDrone One: no acoustic contact now. No thermal contact at original location. SubDrone Two: no acoustic contact. No thermal confirmation. Temperature variation. SubDrone Three: no acoustic contact. No thermal confirmation. No contact detected. But all systems reporting nominal operation.

This wasn't equipment malfunction. This was something else entirely.

"Bring Drone Four into position," Meadows said, his voice very quiet. "I want independent confirmation. And tell it to