

The image features a composite of two men's faces against a vibrant blue, starry background. The top half shows a man's face upside down, with his eyes closed and a serene expression. The bottom half shows the same man's face right-side up, also with his eyes closed. The background is filled with numerous small, bright stars and nebulae, creating a cosmic atmosphere. The title 'THE ASTRAL TWINS' is prominently displayed in the center, with 'THE' in a smaller font above 'ASTRAL TWINS'.

**THE
ASTRAL TWINS**

**LAURENCE
BURTON**

**THE TRIALS AND
TRIBULATIONS
OF A
FLYING SAUCER
BUILDER**

THE **A**STRAL **T**WINS

The Trials and Tribulations of a Flying Saucer Builder

by Laurence Burton



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Synopsis

GanaLozMiha is a shamanic warrior for the Elders of Gog a Magog, an interplanetary star ship. His role in life is to search out intelligent life and offer support when natural disasters occur, or where he finds alien domination occurring. He is good at his job but is often quite irresponsible and has a tendency to treat life as one huge joke.

Scott Bradley FitzLiam commences his working life in the military and experiences front line conflict. He becomes the foil for an alien consciousness and his enquiring mind unlocks the keys of gyroscopic propulsion and cosmic awareness.

About the Author

L Laurence Burton commenced his working life in 1958. During the following twenty years, he worked as a chef, carpenter, boat builder, psychiatric nurse, foundry worker, and in many other diverse employments.

In 1978 he became a world traveller, storyteller, and musician, working the festivals of Holland, England, France, and Spain. Following a vision quest in 1978, his search for conformation and the meaning of life began. His areas of research include religions, physics (astro, general, quantum and meta), global economics, and the history of mankind. *The Astral Twins* is his first novel, and brings to a conclusion thirty years of observations.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

What's it about?

That is the inevitable question that arises when you happen to mention that you have just completed a book. There is no short answer, for the book is about many things. When I finally submitted the text to my publisher, I had to tick a little box to indicate its genre. Because the opening chapter starts on a huge man-made planet in another galaxy, I had little choice but to call it “science fiction.”

However, if there were such a genre as ‘The Autobiography of an Alien and a Biography of an Earth Dweller,’ that would be the box to tick. One head of this duo wants to know the history of the world and how civilizations came to be, and the other head wants to know how things work and, in particular, how flying saucers fly.

Inescapably linked, the pair set out on a world journey in search of answers derived from anthropology, religions, history, mechanics, and all aspects of physics. Together they hope to find the keys to ‘free energy and free spirits.’

Along with the Astral Twins, this book is about you and what part you will play in this ever-changing world.

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

‘To boldly go where no man has ever...’ Harach switched off the viewer and wondered about the humans on Earth. He pondered what they might think about the craft that was preparing to move from its current station where it had been basking in the sun of another galaxy for the past thousand years.

The television programmes had been picked up by the scouts of Gog a Magog (affectionately known as GogMaGog) for several months by then. Harach had begun to get a better picture of what filled the people’s minds there on Earth, people who were making progress in leaps and bounds in space exploration and who were keen to expand their knowledge of the universe.

He chuckled to himself when he remembered the confusion there had been about the realities of the broadcasts, and deciphering what was fact and what was fiction. Although he enjoyed the programme called Star Trek, he realised it was only fiction. The current evolution of the human race and its development as a universal entity still had a long way to go. The people of Earth were still enmeshed in conflicts that stood in the way of their becoming harmonious global citizens, let alone universal beings.

Harach was due at a Council meeting and as he left his quarters with the thoughts of Earth on his mind, he began to look at GogMaGog through the eyes of the current Earth dwellers. He wondered what they would think about the sheer size of this, the first of the MaGog star ships. He thought it doubtful that they could comprehend the two entities of Gog and Magog, the architects and builders of the first migration craft. Would they regard them as gods or as angels? For some they would probably be called devils, but they were the Guardians of Peace and protected each tribe from domination by another and, in the last epoch, protected each alien species from oppression by another. They would have been the very nemesis of any world dictator.

Even, he wondered, would GogMaGog, the first star ship, be called a ship at all? She resembled a miniature planet some one hundred and forty miles in diameter and one hundred miles high, with over two thousand levels. How many current Earth dwellers could comprehend the engineering of a spinning gyroscope fifty miles wide and eight miles thick that was the heart of the craft? This spinning mass created gravity only slightly less powerful than the Earth’s.

The first floor, directly above the spinning motors, was wide enough to lay London out six times side by side, in both directions. The city floor, as it was called, had a headroom of nearly of ten miles and this floor alone contained thirty to forty million souls. Directly below the motors was yet another city floor, like a mirror image of the one above and containing just as many people. Each floor of the northern and southern “hemispheres” featured lakes and mountains, not natural but created in the image of the planet Earth.

What made this craft so different from anything that the current Earth dwellers might conceive was that GogMaGog had its own gravitational field and an atmosphere outside the craft that allowed anyone to walk on its surface without protective clothing? Once GogMaGog set up station close enough to any star or sun-like body, she would begin to rotate once every twenty-four hours. She even had her own moon which rotated around GogMaGog once every twenty-eight days, mimicking the Earth which she had left twenty-six thousand years before. This was why the Atlantians who lived on board looked very similar to their Earth cousins, although a little taller on average. Harach wondered what evidence was left for the future survivors of planet Earth to discover after the sinking of the mountain of Atlantis. Were there any traces at all?

Each of the previous leaps which GogMaGog had made into a new star system had lasted one full millennium and every star system had revealed many more different expressions of life in sentient beings, many of whom were now living on board. Harach was disturbed by the transmissions leaving Earth, as many of them projected fear in one form or another, but primarily it was the fear of aliens that disturbed him most. What would these Earth dwellers—who even alienated the different tribes on their own planet—think of the multitudes of different beings that now inhabited GogMaGog?

He had to know as much as possible about these Earth dwellers because this next star leap, being the twenty-sixth in the history of GogMaGog, would bring them back into their original solar system. It would bring them full circle and complete the plan of the Elders who designed and built GogMaGog for the mass migration of the home planet just twenty-six thousand years before. They were now returning to help these humans into their next state of evolution. These current humans were perhaps the most important as they would be the last species to inhabit the Earth as it entered its final millennium.

The Elders would not or could not reveal how the Earth would end; it was left to speculation. Would the sun finally become the fatal attraction and suck the planet Earth to itself? Perhaps the Earth would finally break free from the gravity of the sun and fly off into deep space. The moon could fall to Earth, or they could finally pull apart and start out on separate journeys. The possibilities were endless and speculation was worthless. All that was important to understand was that in one thousand years Earth as we know it would be no more, and that this fear-ridden group of people would be the last of its kind to evolve and migrate from planet Earth.

Harach was at a loss to know how or why this bunch of aggressive bipeds was said by the Elders to potentially be the greatest of its kind. Were they, he wondered, battling to overcome their own aggressive nature?

Harach waited with as much patience as he could muster for the return of his favourite scout, GanaLozMiha. He was boiling with excitement thinking about the time-scan mission Loz had been sent on, to gather a complete holographic image of the history of the home planet Earth. Harach also looked forward to the company of his young friend and the games that they would play in the anti-gravity sports domes.

As Harach stepped up to the time gate that would take him up to level 1874 and the Council meeting, he looked at the gate with new eyes—the eyes of an Earth dweller. He had taken for granted the ability to leave through one gate and arrive simultaneously at another gate that was many miles away. He had grown up with this knowledge and understanding that it was the same principle of space-time movement that would move GogMaGog to another star system. Then he began to realise that this understanding alone could change a primitive species beyond recognition and he wondered what it would do for the people of the Earth.

Harach was renowned for his punctuality, but he needed time to clear his head and was in no mood for the preamble and ceremonial waffle that preceded every Council meeting. He arrived at level 1874 but continued up to the observation dome which had no lighting other than the stars of the night sky. GogMaGog was just one of a fleet of MaGog craft. From his observation point he could see the frame of the next mini-planet silhouetted only a few miles away, stark against the black of deep space. As he stood there he sensed the multitudes below his feet that were spending their lives in many of the diverse activities that GogMaGog had to offer. But much more, he sensed the excited activity of all those who were preparing for the big change.

The engines were almost ready but would not be started until she was renamed by the Council and her own new Council was elected. Then the transfer would commence of all of those who were going to stay in this star system and all those who would make the star leap back to the home planet. He knew that even the many beings who had no direct ancestral link to Mother Earth were excited by the historical significance of the transfer, and perhaps were even more attached to the idea of a home planet, as all too many had completely lost their own.

Harach was responsible for the overall logistics of getting the people transported to their new destinations and preparing GogMaGog for a star leap. The exterior of the craft would have to be cleared and the surface air drawn within the craft and all outside doors and entrances sealed. In his mind's eye Harach was running through all the in-ship problems such as maintaining the regions where the atmosphere was toxic enough to peel paint from the walls if they weren't properly treated. These toxic regions had been created to house inhabitants who breathed this acrid fume as we breathe air.

Even though GogMaGog was well supplied with electronic communications, sometimes protocol would demand a personal meeting. Although he was as used to a space suit as any aboard GogMaGog, he still found it a little unnerving to enter a highly toxic region just to meet the inhabitants to chat about their logistics problems. But the most important aspect of his role was to ensure that everyone who made the space-time leaps would arrive safely at the same place at the same time.

When he had finished preparing his thoughts for the pending Council meeting, he allowed himself a moment to dwell on the pleasure pursuits that almost seemed to be the purpose of it all. The eight massive antigravity spheres that were a fundamental part of the ship's structure had been used for practices in astral travel, thought projection, and deep meditation, but for the most part they were used as centres of sport and leisure. He drifted in a memory...of floating in a light bubble with his partner...free to enjoy each other in a weightless state...invisible to any voyeur—His persistent personal alarm began to penetrate his reverie and he knew that he could not delay going to the Council meeting any longer. He descended to level 1874 where he was met by one of his personal staff.

“Harach, here you are at last. Some of the Council seniors are nearly wetting themselves.”

“That will be good for them—and probably the most exciting thing that will have happened to them for years!”

“There is also news of GanaLozMiha: his scout craft has returned.”

“Ah! Good news at last. How is he?”

“We don't know. His craft has returned without him.”

Harach seldom if ever showed his emotions but at this he was visibly shaken. “His craft has returned without him” was such a simple statement and yet the shock of these six simple words was the worst that Harach could contemplate. There was no logical reason for his favourite scout failing to return. No, there was no logical reason for him to have left his scout craft at all.

CHAPTER TWO

May 1959

The tall windows were set in the wall too high to see almost anything outside except the sky. Only through the bottom left pane of glass was anything visible, that being the top of the spire and a small section of the church roof. In this ancient seat of learning it was still considered that fourteen-year-old boys would be distracted by windows set at eye level. Scott Bradley FitzLiam watched as a small white cloud drifted slowly behind the church spire, setting it in stark relief. Only a few more weeks and he would be free from this nightmare, to join the real world and maybe, just maybe, soon be flying way above that cloud—

“How many sheep are there in Australia, FitzLiam?”

When Scott turned to the front of the class Barnes was suddenly close, in fact, very close. The stuff of his worst nightmares loomed above him. Chalky white fingers with no nails (pulled out by the Japs, it was said) were pressed onto his desk. Scott knew from age-old experience and by the explosive look on Barnes’ face that the next words would spray him.

“Well?”

Sprayed as usual, Scott tried to conceal his snigger as he watched the saliva dribble over Barnes’ bottom lip and onto his chin. “Well what, sir?”

“How many sheep are there in Australia?”

The question seemed silly to Scott. He wondered if it was a trick question; he played for time. Nobody can really know how many sheep there are in a country as big as Australia. I mean, some may be dying and others being born faster than anyone can count, he thought to himself. It was time for evasive action.

“When, sir?” The question was bound to raise Barnes’ temperature a degree or two and that would mean another spraying.

“When what, FitzLiam?”

“Well, the numbers must have changed since the last count, sir.”

Barnes’ eyes narrowed and bored holes through Scott. The next question came with very little spittle, the words being quiet and controlled and somehow more menacing. “Well now, my academic genius, give us your best estimate on how the

sheep situation may have changed since the last count, give or take the odd one or two.”

The question was now loaded with a very heavy hint of sarcasm. This was dangerous. Most likely the cane, Scott thought. Without an approximately correct answer, trouble was definitely imminent. Somewhere from the back of his day-dreaming head, Scott recalled a number spoken in that lispy way of his teacher.

“Fifty-Thicks, Thir.” In no way did he deliberately want the words to come out like this, nor did he know whether fifty-six was in any way the right or wrong answer. The class behind his back erupted into a riot of laughter.

Barnes straightened to his full height and with a theatrical sweep of his open left hand indicated that Scott should observe the blackboard. There, written in two-inch-high figures, was the number 56,000,000.

Well, I was partly right, Scott thought.

Barnes now had Scott Bradley FitzLiam by the scruff of the neck and was propelling him toward the front of the class. Scott blessed his mother for stitching the leather pads inside his trouser back pockets. He had told no one about this secret defence against the quite-regular butchery, as his mother called it. Not any of his classmates knew of his device. Especially not them, he thought. If they hadn’t laughed like that this would not be happening now. He had very little fondness for his fellow classmates. He always felt different, not in the way that everyone is different, but more as if he were an alien or a very different species of humanity in this “School for Gentlemen” where the inmates were anything but gentle.

“Take the position, lad.”

Scott stood with his feet placed on the chalk marks beside Barnes’ desk, drawn there freshly each day for this purpose by the class monitor as a constant reminder that it pays to get it right. He leaned forward, grasping his knees, waiting for the inevitable. Barnes stood with the cane balanced in his right hand and cradled in his left. Scott took a deep sigh and waited in this ridiculous position, knowing that there would be the usual lecture as a prelude to the pain to come.

“You’re a FitzLiam and should be proud of it.” Barnes took a deep breath and continued slowly and deliberately, “Your brother Duncan was the very pride of this school: captain of the cricket team, head boy for three consecutive terms. He had the highest academic achievement in the history of the school. He was the very pride of a heroic father.” Barnes sniffed the air melodramatically as though he smelled something nasty. “And you—who must have crawled out from under a stone—should wake up, shake up, get your inadequate brain in action, or crawl back under your stone! In the meantime, raise your buttocks, boy.” Scott positioned himself to take best advantage of his secret pads, but since that day the year before, Barnes’ strokes were not nearly as strong as they used to be.

He had been tea boy for a week—one of those “punishment duties.” When he took the tea into the staff on that particular day, Barnes was alone and didn’t notice Scott’s quiet entrance. He was weeping and looked up, startled to see the boy. Scott looked into his eyes and the ogre in the man shrank as he looked away. Scott had felt

ashamed at having to witness this public display of emotion. He wondered then—not for the first time—what secrets Barnes had possessed that the Japs needed to pull out his fingernails to find out. And was he forced to spill the beans?

Not a word passed between them as Scott set down the cup of tea. As the other teachers guffawed into the room the tragic moment passed. Before then Scott had always been the whipping boy, the butt of every joke about stupid boys. Since that day, Barnes had been different.

Scott tensed and clenched his teeth to stop the tears that would be his humiliation on the bus going home. He heard the familiar creak of the floorboard as Barnes stepped forward, he sensed the rising cane, and then he heard the school bell close the day. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the cane descend, just scraping the floor.

“Saved by the bell!” quipped Barnes. “Divine order smiles on you today.”

Scott wondered why Barnes had stopped mid stroke at the sound of the bell. Three weeks and two days later he heard that bell for the last time with the question still unresolved. Barnes had left very little geography in Scott’s head, but he had raised many questions about himself and the human condition that Scott would come to appreciate in time to come.



A Few Months Later

Jeanne Marie Bradley made two mistakes in her life, according to her father. She was born a girl and she married that damned Air Force fella. Jeanne-Marie, as she now preferred to be called, didn’t mind her first mistake as she quite enjoyed being a woman, but Digby—that was something else. He was so dashing, and she was certainly dashed by the new elite: the golden boys with their flying wings, so proud, so confident. How could anyone so beautiful turn out to be such a two-timing arrogant pig?

The war did funny things to people. Whilst Digby stayed in Italy having his sordid affairs, the war brought her the big red Indian, her only real true love, and she had sent him away. But he had left her with Scott and the memory of his scent—the forests of Canada, wild and earthy and extreme.

Thinking she heard the bus engine, she went over to the French windows and into the garden and watched the top of a removal van pass the high garden hedge as it toiled up from the coast road. It wasn’t the bus after all, but she knew that it would not be long before Scott would be home on his first leave from the Air Force. Jeanne-Marie turned and looked across to the sea from the cliff-top house that had been the family home for five generations of naval heroes since the battle of Waterloo. The sea was eating away the cliff and each year the garden shrank just a little. In one more generation, or perhaps in her lifetime, the sea could take the house and all the memories contained within. It was my fear of being lonely in his wild woods, she thought, that made me drive away my love. It was my fear of losing the security of my home and family. With so few of her family left, there was an irony that was not lost on Jeanne-Marie.

The familiar old sound of the bus changing gear as it came up the cliff road caught her attention and she knew that Scott would be home in five minutes. Was it time to tell him about his real father? As she entered the house the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“This is Cuffey.”

“Cuffey?”

“Cuffey Caruthers—your best man, my dear. Or, rather, Duggers’ best man.”

Jeanne-Marie flipped back sixteen or seventeen years to the dances, the sirens, them all being huddled in a basement, the thrill, the closeness, and the smell of fear. The relief when the bombs missed you. “Cuffey, are you still alive?”

“Alive and kicking, old girl. I’m a wing-co now, looking after the erks.” She remembered he had been said to have a penchant for young lads back in the war days. “It’s my job to see that the little blighters don’t come to any harm.”

“Why haven’t you been in touch? It must be ten years or more since I heard from you!”

“Actually, it is twelve years since Duggers’ funeral.” He paused and in the silence a volume was spoken. “I know he was a cad to you. Shouldn’t speak ill of the dead and all that, but you deserved more respect, Jeanie.”

She winced at hearing a name that was hers until she stopped answering to it.

“You were the real thing, one of the old school, I knew that. I had no need to, but I was the one who always felt guilty towards you. Did you ever marry again?”

“Yes, the milkman, out of revenge.” Cuffey laughed, not really sure if she was joking. “And even he died rather young.”

There was a pause.

“Anyway, the reason I’m phoning is about Scott. When his name popped up in the last batch I was stunned, being Duggers’ son and all that, so I took a special interest. His school reports are rather poor, but here he’s in his element, top marks in all categories. Anyway, he’s been selected for some new kind of work. Look—what I’m saying, you haven’t heard. Not from me, not from anyone. He’s had to sign the act.”

“What! The official secrets act?”

“Exactly!”

“But he’s only fifteen!”

“This new force is someone’s idea for our future; it’s only for young lads who are totally loyal, with well-established families. No better person to fit the bill. This is a five-year program, something like a university degree only military.”

“What sort of force—a spook of some kind?”

“He’s much more likely to be in charge of the so-called intelligence services in time to come. It’s something to do with royal protection. I really can’t say more. Except to say if he passes through this he will be a high-ranking officer very young. He’s going to have to do basic training in the army but the next step is basic in the navy. That should please old Grouch Guts. How is he, by the way?”

“Father died last year. Cancer of the grouch,” she quipped. “It’s a family thing.” She was reminded of the pain she felt in her lungs, the pain that she tried to pretend wasn’t there or drank into oblivion.

“Oh! I’m terribly sorry. I had no idea.”

“Cuffey, it’s alright. The last six months were living hell for all of us. His passing came as a relief to everyone including him, I think.”

“I see. I’m sorry. Anyway, back to Scott—I’ve pulled some strings and he’s going in as a midshipman.”

“Cuffey! You old rascal—how did you pull that off? No, don’t tell me, ‘need to know basis’.”

“Then junior captain in the army, but he’ll not be able to carry rank until he’s finished all the basics and has reached eighteen.”

The front door banged.

“Cuffey, that’s Scott now.” She cupped the mouthpiece and called out, “I’m on the phone.” She paused to think what to say next and was not prepared for what she heard.

“I met his real father, you know, quite by chance. He was one of the Canadian engineers. We met in London: huge chappy, one of those red Indian types, lumber-jack and pontoon builder. His outfit built some of the D-day landing stages. We had to land tons of military equipment, spares, and supplies. Their job was to get us from ship to shore. By the time we met, most of the big craft were built. They looked like ships with only the ribs built, with months or years of work to complete. But in reality they were pontoons with ramps, bailey bridges, the full works and all ready to go. This is all history now, but at the time it was very hush-hush.

“Angus Nissen. We called him Angus the bull, as he was their champion wrestler. That’s how we came to meet that night, after a friendly match with our bunch. We ended up alone in a bar in the early hours as he told me his story. It was a bit of shock when I realised that he was talking about you. He loved you, you know. He said he nearly went crazy after the last time he saw you, because he said that you wouldn’t let him see his son. I heard on the grapevine that when you refused, he went back to the barracks and smashed the place up out of sheer frustration and anger.”

He gave her some time to let the words sink in. “I didn’t let on that I knew you. I was just a stranger to him; it was easy for him to unburden. I knew that Duggers could have come on leave many times, and why he didn’t. Knowing what Duggers had been up to I couldn’t blame you at all.”

“Cuffey, it’s over now. I don’t want to know anymore. I had guessed most of it anyway.”

“Scott’s the issue now, old girl. I’ve met Scott a few times now and he’s bright, very bright. You’ll be proud of him one day. I’ll pull every string I can, for your sake as well as his.”

“Cuffey, I don’t know how to thank you enough.”

“There’s nothing to thank. This conversation never happened, as they say in the best spook movies! Chin up, old girl. We should get together sometime and I can hear all about that milkman!”

As she hung up she thought, I must have been wrong about Cuffey all those years back; his voice was rather suggestive.

On his first home leave Scott climbed the stairs of the bus and sat in his favourite seat. It was the same old bus but he felt so very different now. In four months everything had shrunk. The fields seemed smaller and the huge hedge that ran along the side of the grounds to the house wasn’t so imposing any more. Even the big double gates weren’t so big and, most of all, the house itself had shrunk in a way that was impossible to explain. As he entered the hall and heard his mother call he went into the lounge and sat beside the open fire.

After only four months he felt like a visitor. In those four months his life had changed dramatically and he felt like a stranger. When his mother walked in he was shocked to see how pale she was.

“So tell me all about it,” she said.

“Mother, come sit by the fire. You don’t look well.”

“It’s nothing. Just a chill maybe, but I don’t want to talk about me. I want to hear about you.”

Scott plumped the cushions for his mother and placed another log on the fire before he sat opposite her, and when he smiled his face lit up. “Mother, it was fantastic—like all the cubs, scouts, and air cadets rolled into one. Even the classroom stuff was great.”

“But according to your headmaster, ‘Scott Bradley FitzLiam appears to be academically challenged’.” They both laughed at her imitation of Headmaster Drake.

“He’s an old navy fart, Mother, and he seemed to have it in for me. I hated that school, but on the camp they speak my language. Most of what they taught on camp I already knew, especially signals. I beat the teacher once on Morse code speed and instead of putting me down he seemed to be really chuffed with me. It was more like family and friends because we all helped one another.” He paused for a moment and looked at his mother. She was smiling with amazement at the change in him. He was alive, intense, and yet so serious.

“Some of the guys had no military experience at all, no cubs or scouts or anything, so they had a bad time of it. One poor bloke couldn’t stand straight to save his life, even when the W.O. screamed at him. Two guys couldn’t swing their arms properly. They swung left arm forward with their left leg; it looked so funny when we tried to do it like that, and we couldn’t do it for long without cracking up. Those poor blighters had a terrible time of it.

“I became hut leader. One of the guys couldn’t fold his bed to save his life, so we all took turns to do it for him, just to stop him from letting the side down, and then he won the commendation for smartest erk. It didn’t seem fair but nobody really minded. I think we all found it rather funny. Some of the guys were anti-royalist; they reckoned we should have a president. In my opinion, people like that should

be shot and certainly not allowed anywhere near a military establishment. I had to remind one or two that the R.A.F. stands for Royal Air Force.

“Only the hut leaders actually got some flying in I managed to wangle two hours in a Jet Provost! But the weirdest thing was wing-co Cuffey.”

“You mean Wing Commander Carruthers?”

Scott was once again surprised by his mother’s knowing things which she shouldn’t, but he knew it was a waste of time to ask her. “Yes, that’s right,” he answered, “but he’s always been called Cuffey—it’s a war thing. Anyway, he chose me to accompany him to Whitehall with some documents. I was issued a brand-new uniform and all I did was carry his huge briefcase and hold it open when he asked me to. We had lunch in Admiralty House and ate with an Air Vice-Marshall. He was ancient but he spoke to me a lot. It felt more like an unofficial interview.”

Scott paused for a moment as though he was thinking about something he couldn’t put into words. Jeanne-Marie sat quietly, giving him the space to tell it in his way. He put another log on the fire and continued. “Anyway, just before all the erks went home I had to stand before a special board. Some of the officers were Navy and one was an Army Brigadier and they asked some pretty strange questions.”

“What sort of strange questions?”

“Like what did I feel about Jews or Catholics. The brigadier said, ‘You were a boy scout, weren’t you?’ I answered yes. ‘So you took an oath to God and the Queen.’ I answered yes. ‘So if you had a conflict of interest between those two, where would your first loyalty be?’ This was a very hard question and I still wasn’t sure about the answer he expected.”

“So what did you say?”

“I said that as it was the chain of command that came down from the queen it would have to be her, as it was from there that I drew my wages. They all thought that was very funny. Anyway, it must have been the right answer because the next day I was called in again and asked if I was prepared to do another month’s training with two other erks. At the end of it there were two of us and we were offered a chance to join a new elite service. We would have to do three months basic in the navy and later the army.”

Scott stopped talking and his mother sensed that she mustn’t press him. She looked intently at him for a moment then asked. “Do know what you are letting yourself in for?”

“Oh, yes, Mother. I think so.”

“Is this what you really want?”

Scott didn’t respond immediately, but finally he answered with a power of conviction that overwhelmed her. “This is the stuff of wild dreams, Mother. The most bizarre thing is that when I join the navy it will be with the rank of midshipman—an officer, Mother, already an officer. It doesn’t make sense to me but ‘Mine is not to question why.’

“Yes, Mother—I want it all.”



During the next two years Cuffey became a regular houseguest and, true to his word, kept Jeanne-Marie informed of Scott's progress. He was, by all accounts, in his element. Scott himself kept in touch with his mother and was always able to imply where he was off to next, as he seemed to be constantly on the move from one end of the country to the other. He generally tried to contact her every week if possible and would never leave it more than two. But when Jeanne-Marie had not heard from Scott for a month she began to worry. She tapped her foot in irritation with the phone in her hand.

"Hello, Cuffey? At last! It's Jeanne-Marie. I've been trying to reach you for days now. I haven't heard from Scott. He never fails our routine: he calls at least once a fortnight and he doesn't tell me where he's going and I have to work it out—it's always been our little game. If I've worked it out correctly he's in Borneo, in which case he'd be up to his neck in this 'local disturbance.' I haven't heard from him for over a month and I'm worried sick."

"Hello, Jeanie, old girl. Sorry—I've been away, caught up in this 'local disturbance,' as you call it. I don't know what you've heard but it's being played down by the authorities. We are losing ground in a guerrilla war situation that our lads are just not trained for. It's a bloody shambles, just one cock-up after another. I've just come back out of one shambles and stumbled into another, but I'll get onto the case in a jiffy. How are you, anyway? Would you like me to come down this weekend? I could do with the break."

"Oh, Cuffey, that would be lovely, but please find out about Scott. I'm beside myself with worry."

"How are your lungs holding up?"

"The bloody worst, Cuffey! It's not the pain so much as the damnable time it takes me to do anything useful these days." As she put down the phone it rang again almost immediately.

"Hello, Mother. It's Scott."

"Where are you, darling?" She was relieved at hearing his voice but filled with dread at the sound of it.

"I'm in Woolwich and I've just come out of military hospital. I've got a rail warrant for my discharge and enough cash for a taxi. I should be home just after five."

"See you soon, then!" She put the phone down, suddenly feeling weak at the knees. She steadied herself against the wall. She knew that she had to tell Scott about his real father soon. There had never been a right time and even if this was the worst time of all, she had to tell him now. She knew that she did not have long to live.

At a little after five Scott walked in. Each was shocked at the appearance of the other. In the few months since they had parted, the bones in Jeanne-Marie's cheeks had pushed tight against her skin, which was now etched with dark, indelible lines. When he had left, Scott had been in uniform, toned up, physically fit, tanned, and alive. Now his civvies hung on him and he looked gaunt, haunted. She had seen this look on so many of her own generation and it stung her heart to see her son like that.

They sat for almost an hour just holding hands in front of the fire in loaded silence. “What happened?” she finally said.

“I was leading a small squad of new guys on jungle patrol when I got a long, thin spear through my ribs. The wound was nothing really, but it became infected. I know I shall be as fit as ever in no time, but I am now called a pensionable risk.” He sat in silence for a few moments in abject misery. “They offered me four hundred pounds or half a crown a week for life. I took the lump sum, of course. It’s over, Mother. My fabulous career... What we were made to do was horrible, Mother. It is their land and we should never have been there. I feel dirtied by it all—and shat upon! I’m not sure I really wanted it anymore, but they took it away from me anyhow. It’s as though I did something wrong by getting wounded. It’s just not fair.”

Scott was still in bed when Cuffey arrived the next morning a little after nine. Nothing much was said beyond the usual greetings until they settled down with coffee.

“So what the hell was my son doing in a war situation under the age of eighteen?”

“He was being prepared for overseas work. Due to his dark skin, they thought he would blend in well. When the plans were made, Borneo was a British protectorate and still one of our many peacetime bases. No one could have foreseen that a local flare-up could turn into a Communist-backed, highly organised military operation.”

“You mean their lordships weren’t listening as usual.”

“Perhaps, but you are not going to like what I am going to say next.” Cuffey’s face paled and with eyes cast down he said, “After you phoned yesterday I got on the case and took it as high as I could go, but was told to stop making waves. When I checked his records there was nothing except a backdated stamp on his medical record that says ‘Pensionable risk’ from the date of his first entry. There are no other records.”

“You mean someone made a cock-up by sending him into a war situation and that same somebody is covering his tracks.”

“He made it easy for them by taking the cash sum. Jeanie, I’m ashamed of what’s been done to him—”

“Cuffey, it’s not your fault. You didn’t do it.”

“I know, but it’s my firm. I’m very much a part of it. I was supposed to look after these youngsters and I’ve failed Scott badly.” They sat for a while in an uncomfortable silence. What could be said in such a circumstance? After some time Cuffey broke the silence. “It might be a bit early yet but I have a cousin in Inverness who is involved in military hardware and I know he would appreciate someone of Scott’s calibre. As young as he is, his knowledge of the services would be invaluable. When he’s ready I’ll give him an intro, if he wants it. I know this is poor consolation for losing the career he had in mind but at least it might be something for him.”

“Cuffey, you are such a brick and such a dear friend.”

“Does he know about his real father yet?”

“No, that comes later today. I dare not leave it much longer.”



Once the Inverness train wheels were clicking rhythmically over the track, Scott had time to think about himself and what he was doing. When he had arrived home, devastated by his experience in Borneo, he felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his world. He thought nothing worse could happen to him until his mother had dropped the bombshell about his real father. He raged with anger at his years of ignorance, being led to believe that his father was Digby FitzLiam, a war hero, who was in fact a cheating cad. Cuffey had been kind that day, as they walked the cliff edge together; he very gently filled in the details of those wartime days. After the initial shock of the fact, the details seemed so sordid. But he was also intrigued about this giant red Indian wrestler. When Cuffey offered him this job in Inverness he had accepted with reluctance. He felt that he had to take up the chance because there seemed nothing else to do, and he determined that at least his two years' experience wouldn't be totally wasted. But he had an underlying total disillusionment with the entire war machine.

The very core of his being was proud to be British, but he was now contemplating what being British actual meant. The great British Empire that dominated two-thirds of the known world, coloured pink on the classroom atlas—all these lands had been taken over at the point of a gun sent out from this potty little island. The British military machine had stepped in and taken over with their advanced killing technology. If the indigenous peoples didn't like it, the machine killed them. The latest in a series of great empires over at least the last six thousand years, the great British Empire, was now in the process of shrinking and declining in power. Had it seen its day? Participation and pride in the great military machine ran through four or more generations of his family, but the consciousness which he had thought encoded in his very genes was now in question. Who was making war for whom? And why?

As the train clicked on, his reluctance to continue his involvement with a dying empire and its killing machine grew until he was resolved that he was not going to work for an arms salesman either. But what to do instead?

Whilst he sat in a state of indecision, a poster for the Highland games in Strathpeffer almost leapt at him. Why not? he thought. I want to do things I have never done before. I have some money in my pocket—I'll go to the Highland games and then keep travelling until my money runs out, then see what happens. Maybe I'll go to Canada and find this Angus Nissen.

Strathpeffer was a small town that was seething with activity, as almost every hotel was booked to over-spilling. After no little effort he found a small guesthouse up in the hills. When he came to sign in he wrote Scott Nissen of Tottenham, London. He felt a sense of liberation. He was free to do what he wanted for himself, to be whoever he wanted to be. For the first time in ages he felt a sense of excitement about his life. Mrs. Mack, the landlady, was a tiny, motherly sort of person who took his washing and fussed over him. The games weren't due to start for a couple of days so he borrowed her son's tent and some cooking gear to go camping in the hills.

On a grassy knoll beside the loch he set up the tent carefully among three tall willow trees. Scott was always happy with his own company and he settled by the

loch, watching as the breeze rippled over the water. The sausages were soon sizzling in the pan and as the tea came to the boil, he felt at one with his environment. He quickly checked his pocket survival guide and picked some big red mushrooms with white spots. They had a strange, bitter taste but not unpleasant. A royal stag came down to check him over and they just stood for a while looking at each other.

Not long after the sun went down, he began to feel rather strange. The breeze picked up and it turned quite cool, so he snuggled into the sleeping bag and looked again at his survival book. He realised that the description of the red mushroom, fly agaric, was stuck to another page. As he tried to read the correct page the letters kept falling off, which seemed quite normal and very funny. He did his best to catch up with writing his diary, finally giving up and folding it carefully in his waterproof pouch, and then slipping it in his nylon shoulder bag.

It began to rain, gently at first but soon building up to a torrential downpour that was deafening. The raging wind that was whipping up the water now tore at the little grassy knoll, ripping at the roots of the willow trees. When the water ran over the bank the tent was awash. Scott jumped up; the torch went flying, got wet, and went out. Just as Scott got to the door of the tent, the little grassy knoll upended and slid silently into the loch.

By morning the loch was rippling innocently, reflecting the sun in the early breeze. There was no trace of the grassy knoll, the tent, or Scott Nissen.

Wing Commander Caruthers was a little surprised that Scott had not arrived at his cousin's place in Scotland. He became more concerned when he didn't show up for his mother's funeral three weeks later. Scott was, after all, very nearly eighteen and had the right to be wherever he wanted, but Cuffey knew how much he cared about his mother. The whole situation disturbed him—what kind of product had he and his cronies created? How would the boy cope with the trauma of his experience? He resigned himself to thinking that there was no answer to these questions until Scott contacted him. And there was precious little he could do to help the boy until he did.

CHAPTER THREE

Constable Alex Manson found himself in an uncomfortable position at four o'clock in the morning. An hour earlier he had chosen a firm peat bed, well secreted behind some bushes, to observe the spot he knew the poachers would return to. He worked on the theory that criminals were basically lazy. The day before, he had spotted the stakes hammered into the riverbanks and the feeble attempt at hiding them; this was where they would tie their nets. He knew that they would be back to the same place to net the river again, as there was only a day or two more of the salmon spawning.

He prayed that they would be back that day, as he had asked for backup: two police cars were now sitting well hidden and waiting, ready to block the road when he blew his whistle. If he didn't get results that day he might not get help so readily in future. He was playing a hunch, and that could be dangerous for his career.

His prayers were answered: the poachers arrived, so all he had to do was stand and wait for them to cast the net and catch a few fish. The peat bed he had chosen was not as firm as he first thought. Whilst the poachers were arguing amongst themselves as to who had forgotten the flask, Manson was slowly sinking up to his ankles in cold, muddy water, unable to move for fear of alarming his victims.

The first few fish were landed, and his job was to secure the hoard whilst his colleagues did the actual arrests. He hoped that the poachers had caught plenty so they wouldn't have time to throw them all back—if one or two went missing on their way to the station, no one would notice. Manson was rather partial to salmon.

Timing was crucial; he had to wait until they finally pulled in the net and the last few salmon were placed in the boxes set up on the bank. When he finally blew his whistle he had already sunk up his knees and had quite a struggle to get out, but his backup team, only too willing to get finished and get back home, was soon there in force and quickly rounded up the poachers. All he had to do was collect the evidence and make his reports.

By eleven o'clock Constable Alex was sitting by the front room fireplace, his boots steaming in the hearth. He felt quite pleased with himself. The poachers were not local men. A local man would not net the river, or, if he did, he would be canny enough not to leave traces.

Alex had grown up in the village and was something of a local hero after he was shot attempting to arrest poachers. He had nearly died. Fully recovered, he had only recently been promoted to local area policing, moving into the police residence with Lizzy, his young wife, who was eight months pregnant with their first child and in hospital; her blood pressure was high and it was causing concern.

The police house was on the end of the terrace, with little to distinguish it from the others except a discreet blue light over the front door. As he sat writing up his reports, he felt particularly pleased with himself. The villains were in ‘the nick,’ the salmon was in the fridge, and his wife was in the hospital. He would be free for a few days to do what he liked without comment from his ‘better half,’ as he always called her. The phone rang.

“Desk,” he answered out of habit, then grinned to himself as he realised what a comfortable desk he had.

“Hello! This is Mary Mack of Glen View Guest House.”

“Hello, Mary—what can we do for you this morning?”

“Alex, is that yourself?”

“Yes, Mary.”

“Well it’s just a wee worry I have for a young Sassenach that I booked into the house a few days ago.”

“Why? Has he had his fingers in the till?”

“No, no, nothing like that. He went out with a tent for a couple of days to hike up the Strathconan and he’s no’ come back.”

“Are you sure he was coming back?”

“Oh, yes! He really came for the games, and paid for a week’s lodge, and anyway I have his washed clothes here.”

“Alright, Mary, I’ll try to get over this afternoon and get some details.”

“Yes, alright dear, but I think it’s quite urgent.”

He was on his way through to the small office to enter the report in the appropriate book, when the phone rang again. “Is that Constable Manson?”

“Speaking.”

“Hold the line, please. Chief Constable Manningtree wants a word.” Alex Manson was a little curious, a little nervous, and more than a little apprehensive about what his chief wanted.

“Hello, Manson. You’ve caught yourself a bag full of problems this morning. One of the three likely lads in your net has been on the run for two years. The second is asking for one hundred and twenty other offences to be taken into account, and the third is Harry Blofeld.” Hearing the name of Blofeld was like running into a brick wall.

“But that’s the Laird’s son,” he said, obviously shaken, “and he owns the bloody river!”

“Precisely,” said Manningtree. “You’d better get yourself over here as quick as you can.” The line went dead and Constable Manson had the uncomfortable feeling that this arrest was not going to advance his career one iota. As he replaced the receiver, it rang almost immediately.

“Police,” he said without enthusiasm.

“Hello, is that Mr. Manson?”

“Yes.”

“This is Sister Longley. Your wife has just gone into labour.”

“But she’s not due for another three weeks!” He almost screamed the words into the phone accusingly.

“Nature dictates the rules here, Mr. Manson, not the law. Good morning.” Alex Manson thought that his quiet world was going mad.

Two days later someone was singing ‘Coming up the Glen’ and the bells rang in Constable Alex’s head. Oh no—I forgot to go and see Mary bloody Mack! On his way to Glen View Guest House, he wondered if the name of the house would render Mrs. Mack liable under the Trades Descriptions Act, as the nearest glen was over two miles away. On the door of the guesthouse was a large notice written in red crayon: CLOSED DUE TO ILLNESS. He banged on the door for several minutes without success.

“You’ll no’ get in, laddie.” The voice came from the house next door.

“I want to see Mrs. Mack,” he answered.

“She had a wee accident and is in the hospital,” came the reply.

Alex drove straight to the hospital and met the doctor in charge of intensive care. When he asked if it would be possible to speak to the old lady, he was told that she was very ill, but the doctor was young and enthusiastic and agreed to let Alex see her.

“Do you know any details of the accident?” the doctor asked.

“No, I’m just following up an enquiry from a couple of days ago.”

“Well, she caught the chip pan alight, and the shock has caused a mild stroke. She is paralysed down one side and tires very easily, so don’t be long with her.”

The diminutive old lady seemed lost in the bed, surrounded by hanging bottles and machines with graphs and little flashing lights. The left side of her face hung down loose, and a long string of saliva dribbled down onto her bed jacket. He pulled up a chair beside her and began to question her. “Hello, Mary. Do you remember that you phoned me about a man that you thought might be lost?”

She nodded in reply and tried to speak. Trying as hard as he might, he could not understand a word that she was saying. She could see that he was having problems and indicated a small pad by the bedside, which he handed to her. She carefully and painstakingly wrote a message for the constable. He read the large, thin scrawl: Tall thin young man. Nice manners. His things in Room 7. Mrs. Sneels at No. 24 has the key. His name is in book.

“Do you remember what he was wearing when he went out?” he asked as a matter of routine. She thought for a while, slowly shook her head, and fell asleep.

When he finally entered the guesthouse, the smell of the blackened kitchen permeated the whole house. Little whiffs of blackened ceiling traced through the hall and up the stairs, and everything was covered in a fine film of greasy soot. He soon located the guest book and easily found the only single man’s name there: Scott

Nissen, Tottenham, London. He wished people would put their full address in these books. Past experience taught him how much time was wasted searching for people already back at home.

He went up to the room and found the clothes neatly piled on the bed. Finding a large holdall, he placed them in it. The wardrobe contained a tweed jacket, a pair of cavalry twill trousers, and a pair of brown leather brogues, which he also packed into the bag. He left a note on the door for Scott Nissen to phone the police when he came back.

Alex decided to drive up the Strathconan Valley just to check that there hadn't been a tragedy. There was nothing to be seen all the way up to the top hill overlooking the loch, which he scanned with his binoculars for anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing.

When Alex Manson got back to the station he contacted Missing Persons in London and received only negative responses. He also alerted headquarters, but with so little a description to go on there was little hope of finding anything. He put the bag in a locker under the counter, the report was made up in his book, and that completed the case for the time being.

He tried to find something else to do, but he could no longer escape facing Lizzy. She was very ill but he felt he could not help her very much. He had not yet himself recovered from the shock that his first child had been stillborn.

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