



Extinction Task Team

A l a n B o l t o n

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A SciFi Adventure Story

EXTINCTION:

TASK TEAM

A Science Fiction Adventure Story

By Alan Bolton

Frank Anderson is an ordinary mechanical engineer. Or so he thinks. But after a strange midnight call requesting his presence urgently in Europe, he finds that mankind is facing the imminent possibility of extinction—and time has almost run out. They are asking him to attempt something that has never been done before. It's a desperate last ditch mission to avert complete disaster. Nobody is sure if it's even survivable.

And Frank's small team of diverse individuals will be far from any outside help. They must do—or die—alone. They will be in a very alien environment; completely dependent on each other. But can they trust each other? And how will those different individuals react when their own survival becomes threatened?

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Chapter 1: Phone Call

My phone rang suddenly in the darkness. I woke with a jolt of adrenaline. Unexpected phone calls in the middle of the night are never good news. My groping fingers finally found the thing after knocking the keys off the side table.

‘Mr Anderson?’ The voice was European, possibly French. But his English was crisp and precise, with only the slightest softening of the consonants to give him away.

‘Who is this?’ I croaked, trying to reach the bedside lamp switch with my other hand.

He repeated his question, a bit more emphatically.

‘Yes, what do you want? Do you know what time it is?’

‘It’s four fifteen in South Africa, Mr Anderson. I’m sorry to bother you at this hour. I’m afraid it’s an emergency. We really couldn’t wait till morning.’

My heart started pounding. ‘What do you mean an emergency, is someone hurt?’ I didn’t have any family of my own, but I had a brother who was living in Australia, as well as many close friends. I was dreading hearing that one of them had been involved in an accident or something.

There was a pause, and then he said carefully, 'It's not that type of emergency. My name is Duval. I am calling from the UNSDDR.'

'Never heard of the UNS whatever!' I was starting to get grumpy. I needed sleep. I couldn't arrive on my first day at a new job looking and acting like a zombie. It wasn't as if I had that many job options available lately either. Tomorrow, or actually today, was a big day. I couldn't afford to stuff up. Besides, waking up at anything before seven is not something I do naturally and this jerk had called precisely when I needed to be asleep.

'The United Nations Strategic Directorate for Disaster Response,' he explained smoothly.

What a ridiculously pompous name for an organisation, I thought irritably.

'You have been recommended to us by SANAP, the South African National Antarctic Program. Mr Anderson, we have a disaster developing. We are putting together a response team and your experience would be very useful to that team. We need you to attend a meeting this afternoon.'

Again, the careful pause.

'The meeting is in Europe. We have a jet ready for you at Lanseria airport.' He sounded like he was reading the name of the airport and stumbled over its pronunciation.

‘What do you need me for? I’m not any sort of disaster specialist. In any case I can’t help you I’m afraid. I start a new contract in the morning. You’ll have to find somebody else. Now I need to get some sleep.’

He cut in quickly, ‘Mr Anderson, we really do need your help. We will cover all expenses, including your salary.’

This started to sound bloody suspicious. ‘Look, what the hell is this? I don’t know who you are, and you aren’t making sense, especially in the middle of the night.’

‘I assure you, Mr Anderson, that the request is legitimate. Our need for your services is very urgent. Let me be blunt, we need you to attend the meeting today and in order to ensure that, we will cover any costs you incur, including the loss of your contract.’

‘I’m not going to lose the job, are you mad? I really don’t have time for this, I need to sleep.’

He must have sensed I was going to cut the call because he blurted, ‘We’ll pay you one year’s salary just to attend the meeting!’ His voice was strident.

Neither of us said anything for a few seconds.

The man had my attention. My finances were hardly healthy, and hadn’t been for a while. Finding new work hadn’t been easy. The contract fee I had accepted wasn’t exactly spectacular either. A year’s salary just for one meeting! Sounded good, far too good to be true.

‘Ja, but what happens after the meeting?’ I needed to get my sluggish brain to actually function. I’m never the brightest first thing in the morning and this wasn’t even morning as far as I was concerned.

His tone became smooth and precise again. I was at least looking at the bait. All he needed now was to get me to bite. ‘As I said, we will pay you handsomely to attend the meeting. If you decide to help us we will pay you an additional amount, at a far higher rate than you currently earn, for all the work you do for us. In euro's or dollars, as you wish.’ Sounded like he was used to offering big salaries to people by the way the words flowed naturally.

‘How long will you need me, and what exactly is it you want me to do?’ It started to dawn on me that what he needed wasn’t just for me to attend a once off meeting.

‘We cannot be precise on the time scales yet, Mr Anderson, but it may be some time, a few months perhaps.’ He sounded uncomfortable.

‘Yes, but what do you want me to do?’

A very deliberate pause. ‘I’m afraid I cannot tell you that now.’

‘Look Duval, I’m starting to lose patience with you. How am I supposed to agree to attend a meeting in Europe in the middle of the night for a fantastic salary and yet not know what it is that you want of me?’

‘We will explain everything at the meeting, Mr Anderson, I assure you, but more than that I really cannot tell you.’

‘So how do I know this isn’t some sort of scam? How do I know you aren’t calling from Nigeria or something?’

He became very brisk and efficient. Obviously, he had thought this through beforehand. ‘If you agree to attend the meeting, I will transfer the funds into your account directly, at this moment. They will be available to you immediately. You should be able to verify that via the Internet, yes? I will also send you an email which will include my contact details and credentials. As an attachment to the same email you will see your SANAP colleague, Mr Hennie De Villiers’ recommendation of you to us. You can contact him to verify that.’ The French pronunciation of Hennie’s surname wasn’t too far from the Afrikaans I thought irrelevantly.

‘Mr De Villiers is awake at the moment because his email recommending you to me arrived a few moments before I called you,’ he added dryly.

My brain was stumbling around trying to work out which way was up. My fingers still hadn’t found the bloody light switch.

I waited for something to make sense.

Nothing happened.

‘Please, Mr Anderson, time is very short. We need your help. Will you attend the meeting?’

I couldn’t think of any specific reason why not, apart from a million unanswered questions, not to mention not pitching for the first day at my new job. I heard my voice say, ‘if the money is there, and Hennie verifies your story, I’ll attend.’

The relief in his voice was clear. ‘Thank you, Mr Anderson, I am transferring the money at this moment. We will send a police car for you. It will be there in a few moments.’ While he was talking, my phone chimed as it received a message—which it would do if a transaction occurred on my account.

But I didn’t look at my phone. Alarm bells finally rang loud and clear in my head. ‘Wait a moment, I haven’t told you what the amount is, nor my banking details, nor where I live.’ I swallowed involuntarily as I realised that I might be the target of some sort of cybercrime. What was going on?

I added more aggressively, ‘Like hell am I getting into some strange car that arrives at my gate in the middle of the night, even if it’s a police car. This is South Africa, some of our police are corrupt, you can’t trust them!’

He sounded flustered. ‘Please relax, Mr Anderson. We are fortunate to have received the complete cooperation of your government, as well as many other

governments and organisations. As you will shortly find out, we have very extensive resources at our disposal. This is a global crisis of the largest magnitude. We have been able to find out a great deal about you and are sure you will be able to help us. Please check your account now to verify the transaction, and check with your colleague, I can assure you...'

I interrupted, 'Let me be clear, I am not going to get into any unknown car that arrives here in the middle of the night.'

I could hear him thinking. 'Will you meet our representatives at the airport?' He knew what he was doing, a clear direct proposal to defuse my non-specific, but rising concern.

I considered it for a few seconds. 'Yes, but if anything looks funny, you can forget it!' Instead of a threatening growl, my voice had taken on something of a squawk-like characteristic. But hell, it was the middle of the night, and I hadn't been to international spy school.

There was a muted pause while he obviously consulted with someone else. When he came back on, even more relief flowed down the line. 'As you wish, Mr Anderson, but please hurry. They are landing as we speak. My phone number should be visible on your phone, please verify that.'

I frowned in the darkness when I realised that I should have checked that when I answered. It was an

international number, but I didn't know which country offhand.

'If you need to reach me for any reason, Mr Anderson, I will be standing by this phone. Please don't hesitate to call me if you need to. You can also reach me via email of course. My contact details will be in my email which should be reaching you soon.' Another of his careful pauses before he finally said, 'Please pack personal effects for a few days.' With that he rang off.

I lay in the dark, stunned, my fingers still aimlessly groping for the light switch. No flash of enlightenment occurred, so I switched on the light to see if that helped.

It didn't.

I checked the bank account using my phone. I wasn't surprised to see the exact amount agreed as my annual contract fee, showing as the last transaction. The available balance reflected the new transaction, so it didn't appear to be on hold. To be sure, I transferred the full amount in the account to my savings account. The transaction went through without any hassles. I wasn't a banking expert, but as far as I could tell, the transaction cleared properly. It appeared legitimate. The transaction reference was just a long list of letters and numbers. They didn't mean anything to me.

I called Hennie.

It was four thirty. Only a few minutes had passed, but it felt a lot longer.

‘Hey Frank, I didn’t expect you to call so quickly. All hell has broken out here at the department,’ Hennie said breathlessly as soon as he answered.

‘I was having a late dinner with Susan at the Waterfront when I get this call from the Director General himself. Had to go straight to the office. Been here ever since. They had a full-on board meeting in progress when I got here with all the department heads. Everyone was discussing you, but nobody would say why, just wanted to see your records and asked all sorts of...’

I cut him off. While he had been gushing forth, my phone pinged to announce a new email. Duval’s message had arrived. I began scanning it while Hennie’s voice boomed out of the phone’s speaker. The email seemed authentic. But, then again, I hadn’t ever seen an email from some big wig in the UN before.

I tried to keep my voice from squawking again. ‘Hi, Hennie. Ja, they contacted me. I was just phoning to check a few things with you. Tell me, do you know much about the guys requesting the info? Why did you suggest me to them?’ I tried to sound completely casual, as if this sort of thing happened all the time.

Hennie sounded puzzled, as well he might. ‘No man, they asked for you specifically, just wanted us to supply all sorts of information about you. Nobody told me who they were, but I heard the DG mention the UN when he was talking to the Minister on the conference phone.’

‘OK thanks for the feedback Hennie. I’ll get back to you as soon as I know what’s happening. Say hi to Susan for me.’

‘Ja sure Frank.’ He wasn’t going to just let me go though. ‘Listen Frank, I’ve never seen anything like this, even in the bad old days.’ Hennie had been a civil servant in the South African government a long time. He had worked for many different departments in his career which started long ago in the apartheid era, before the new government. I had worked with him in SANAP and had grown to like him and his wife. They were both genuine, solid people who you could depend on, who cared about others around them.

‘Whatever it is, it’s very big. Everybody here seems to be jumping for these guys, whoever they are. As I said, I’ve never seen anything like it.’ It took a lot to impress Hennie, he had seen it all, and strangely it was this comment which really convinced me Duval’s call was genuine—whatever that meant—more than anything else.

‘Just be careful Frank, I don’t know what it is they want you for, but I don’t have a good feeling about this. Do you want me to get some guys I know in Jo’burg to come give you some support?’ Hennie’s long career in government had given him an extensive range of contacts, some of whom were the real deal when it came to the shadowy world of government level security.

The suggestion was tempting. Having someone who actually knew how to conduct midnight meetings with strangers at airports would have made me feel a lot safer. But the situation didn't seem to be really dangerous, just strange enough to be vaguely alarming. This was why I wanted to be in control of my own movements, no more than that. No need to impose on Hennie unnecessarily.

Of course, flying off in an unknown private jet was basically the same thing as getting into a strange car, but there was no point in becoming too paranoid. In any case, I liked flying in jets, especially expensive private jets.

'Ag, no thanks Hennie. Appreciate the thought. I'll let you know if I need help.'

'Just be careful, man' he said urgently as he rang off.

I intended to take his advice very seriously.

It was four fifty-two when I threw my small bag into the car and started the engine.

I drove out slowly into the cold, dark streets. I still felt slightly groggy from lack of sleep. When I got onto the highway, it was empty. I would be making good time.

I headed for Lanseria, not at all sure what I would find there, or why I was going.

Chapter 2: Men in Black

They were waiting for me when I walked into the main building in Lanseria airport. At that early hour, the terminal was empty. There was no mistaking the matching pair of tall, bulky guys in black suits. Both men wore darkened glasses, even though it was still dark outside, as well as little earpieces with wires leading down into their collars. They were standing well apart, right in the centre of the concourse staring impassively towards the doors I had just walked through.

They reminded me of the movie *Men in Black*. I would have sniggered at the cliché if I hadn't been more than slightly nervous. They looked like they had absolutely no sense of humour. They also looked tough and competent.

After looking around a bit to check they were the only people who might be waiting for me, I started towards them. My little carry-on bag clicked rhythmically as its wheels hit the tile joints. Neither man had moved since I walked through the doors. The guy on the left was a bit shorter. He had a slightly sunburnt face and closely cropped light coloured hair. He looked Scandinavian to me. His mate was darker skinned with a large hooked nose. I decided he was Moroccan or

Egyptian or something like that. He had a matching hairdo.

The Scandinavian finally acknowledged my presence when I was about five meters away.

‘Are you Anderson?’ His tone was abrupt, his diction guttural.

‘Yes. Who are you?’

As soon as I spoke, his mate started to mumble into his collar. He was a bit too far away for me to hear the words clearly. Probably telling mission control “the eagle had landed” or something like that.

The Scandinavian ignored my question. ‘Please follow me. We have a few formalities to complete before we leave.’ He started walking towards the passage that led to the departure gates. The Moroccan waited for me to follow before taking position behind me in our little procession.

The baggage scanners were unmanned when we got there. The Moroccan clicked his tongue in irritation. He disappeared through a door on the right. His partner indicated I should wait.

The Moroccan returned, herding a group of airport staff who clearly had literally been caught napping. They yawned and sulked in about equal proportions. They slowly took their places at one of the scanners and switched it on. The Scandinavian produced some documentation which they glanced at, before indicating I

should put my bag and effects on the conveyor, which had jerked into motion. The Moroccan was still standing behind them. He watched the scanner screen very intently as my bag went through.

When I walked through, the scanner alarms went off. The Moroccan glared at me and jerked his thumb back toward the entrance. The Scandinavian was slightly more polite, asking me to take off my watch and belt. The airport staff looked bored. I did what I was told and tried again. The alarms remained silent.

When the Scandinavian walked through, the alarms shrieked again, but that didn't seem to faze anybody. I collected my bag, phone, keys, and watch and put my belt back on. The three of us trooped off towards the passport control desk.

The passport control guy seemed impressed when the same documents were flashed at him, because he stopped slouching and become quite efficient. He stamped my passport and scanned the bar code without a word. He didn't ask the men-in-black for theirs.

The Scandinavian led us out into the cold morning air, with the Moroccan bringing up the rear, as before. The sun hadn't risen but it was already light enough to see. A sleek pale blue jet with large white UN letters on its tail, crouched in the middle of the concrete apron. It was larger than a typical corporate jet, but much smaller than an airliner.

An athletic looking woman waited at the top of the stairs leading to the plane's entrance hatch. She wore a rumpled dark green paramedic's jump suit with high visibility stripes sewn into the material above her knees. The tops of some pens and a small pair of scissors protruded from a small pocket on her left upper arm. The Scandinavian stopped at the bottom of the steps and turned towards me. He indicated I should proceed up into the plane with a wave of his hand.

When I got to the top of the stairs the woman extended her hand and said formally, 'Thank you for joining us, Mr Anderson, at such short notice. Monsieur Duval sends his regards. I am Dr Blunt.' She sounded Irish but her accent wasn't very pronounced so perhaps she no longer lived there.

On closer inspection, I saw she was extremely attractive. She had gorgeous green eyes and pale, flawless skin, with a few freckles on her nose and cheeks. She wore her auburn hair in a practical bob, which suited her high cheek bones and delicately pointed chin. She must have been in her mid-thirties. She was clearly aware and confident of her looks because she watched with cool amusement as I tried not to react to them. I mumbled a vague response to her greeting before making an effort to regain my balance. I said more clearly 'I must admit Duval didn't give me a very good idea of what is required of me. In fact, I don't even know where exactly

we are going, only that apparently we are about to fly to Europe and that I am to attend a meeting there. Do you have any more information for me?’

She became formal again. ‘I can tell you that we are about to fly to Geneva, en route to Saint-Genis-Pouilly in France. I’m afraid I don’t have much more information than that. Everything is happening at such speed! I don’t know why. Saint-Genis-Pouilly is a small town near the Swiss border. You will be meeting Monsieur Duval there. Apparently, arrangements have been made for your accommodation there as well.’

She took a slight breath and continued evenly, watching for my reaction, ‘I can tell you that I have been asked to give you a medical examination, as well as assess your fitness on the way there, which is why I am here to meet you. I hope you won’t mind.’

It seemed that I was destined to be continually caught off guard today.

After looking at her for a while, I asked, ‘What sort of medical examination?’

‘Oh, nothing more than a few blood tests, blood pressure, ECG, that sort of thing. Just a general check-up,’ she said quickly.

‘I don’t suppose you have any idea why?’ She shook her head, waiting for my reaction. We were still standing in the cold morning air on the top of the steps. I suppose

she thought if I was going to refuse to cooperate then I'd better do that before they had flown half way to Europe.

I shrugged. 'I wish I knew what this is all about, but I don't mind.'

She relaxed and nodded quickly, glad that the awkward introduction had been completed without incident. 'Of course.'

She led the way into the plane.

I felt like Alice disappearing down the rabbit hole.

I was also dying for a cup of coffee.

Chapter 3: Flight

We stepped into a small, darkened cabin directly behind the cockpit. The cabin apparently served as some sort of office or communications centre. A large LCD screen was mounted onto the bulkhead above a narrow desktop that ran down the side of the cabin. A couple of laptops were secured to the desk. The bulkhead screen showed scenes from an executive conference room full of busy people.

The men-in-black actually were a trio. An older guy, with the same fashion sense and hairstyle, hunched in a swivel chair in front of it all, wearing a large pair of headphones with an attached boom mike. He was talking softly into the mike when we entered. He glanced at me and nodded without a pause in his monologue.

The original men-in-black duo came on board soon after us. They closed the main hatch. The outside noise dropped sharply, but the cabin became crowded.

The beautiful Dr Blunt headed through a door towards the rear of the plane. I followed dutifully, trying to ignore how she moved and various curves that were evident as she walked.

We entered a much larger, sumptuous cabin furnished with a few rows of wide, comfortable dark brown leather seats that faced each other, some pointing forwards,

others backwards. The seats were grouped together in threes so they could be transformed into couches by stowing the arm rests between the seats. Highly polished rosewood tables with recessed cup holders separated the seats at intervals. A deep-pile carpet and soft hidden lighting made it tasteful and inviting.

The effect was spoiled a bit by a whole lot of medical examination equipment strapped down using cargo straps onto rear seats and tables. An exercise treadmill was also strapped down, across the aisle from the medical kit, in the place of some seats that had obviously been hastily removed.

Dr Blunt led me to a couch next to the medical equipment, and invited me to sit down. She sat in the matching couch facing mine. We stared at each other in silence. It was a bit awkward.

‘I don’t suppose you have any coffee?’ I asked, not knowing what else to say. She smiled and said she would arrange something as soon as the plane was in the air. I buckled up, staring out the window in silence, as the plane began to taxi.

The original men-in-black came in and strapped themselves into the seats right in the front of the cabin.

The engine noise rose to a crescendo and the cabin lights dimmed as we accelerated down the runway. The jet climbed steeply up into the Highveld air. The lights of

Jo'burg and the surrounding suburbs spread out steadily below as we climbed.

After a while, the plane banked sharply towards north. As it did, the sun sprang over the horizon and filled the cabin with golden light.

Once we reached cruising altitude, Dr Blunt went forward to speak to the men-in-black, then disappeared through the cabin door that led to the front of the plane.

A few minutes later the Moroccan came back down the aisle carrying a tray with a mug of superb smelling coffee and even some small croissants. It wasn't exactly service-with-a-smile, but he didn't actually growl when I thanked him. He merely stalked off haughtily.

The coffee tasted even better than it smelled. The unusually early morning was catching up with me. I stared out of the window blankly without seeing anything, enjoying the coffee. Given the bewildering pace of change in my life in the last few hours, I was strangely content.

When I looked round Dr Blunt was back, sitting on the couch across from me again. She was idly watching me while sipping her own coffee. I was beginning to like her company. Apart from her obvious attractiveness, she had an inner calm and poise that was growing on me.

After a while she said, 'If you are ready, I would like to suggest we get the tests out of the way immediately, Mr Anderson. The flight will take about ten hours. The

tests shouldn't take more than two. After that, you will be free to relax. The pilots tell me they don't expect any turbulence in the next few hours. I would like to take advantage of that.'

I nodded. She looked even better in the golden sunlight.

'We have a rather nice bathroom at the back of the plane. You will find some running shorts in there. Would you please change into them? It will make everything easier. You can leave your other clothes there as you may want to shower after the fitness test.'

The bathroom was small but luxurious, something one would expect in an upper class hotel, not an aeroplane. I changed into the shorts and emerged rather self-consciously. Dr Blunt was already busy fiddling with the equipment.

She frowned a little as she patted the couch, hardly looking up. I lay down as instructed.

The medical examination included all the usual stuff as well as ultrasound images of most of my organs, hearing tests, eyesight tests and a bewildering number of blood samples. She even checked my teeth.

Finally, she made me run on the treadmill with the ECG stuff stuck to my chest. She steadily increased the speed and incline until the sound of my pounding bare feet and laboured breathing filled the cabin.

She drove me to the point that I started to worry about faltering and being shot off the back of the treadmill. But then, with the same little frown, she shut it down and deftly plucked the ECG tabs off my heaving chest.

‘That’s it, we’re done.’ She said with a brief smile.

I sank thankfully onto the floor to avoid leaving sweat marks on the fancy leather couch. I estimated that I had been running for twenty minutes.

She was already engrossed collating the data on her laptop.

When my breathing returned to normal, I heaved myself off the floor and staggered to the shower.

When I returned, the cabin was empty. But there was another tray with a bowl of microwave heated pasta and a bottle of water on the table next to the couch. I wolfed it down gratefully.

We had been in the air for almost two hours. I looked out the window but all I could see was a layer of clouds far below us.

I dozed off.

Chapter 4: Meeting

I awoke suddenly, completely disorientated. The plane had started its descent. The slight change in incline, as well as the change in pitch of the engine's noise had triggered my alert mechanisms.

But I didn't know that I was on a plane at first. When the cabin swam into focus, I didn't really know where I was. But as my consciousness slowly made the laborious climb out of the depths, snippets of the morning's events started to assemble themselves like errant soldiers on parade.

The elegant Dr Blunt was curled up on the couch across from mine, under a blanket, with her back to me. I realised I had a similar blanket over me. She must have put it there. Very thoughtful of her.

I grunted and sat up, trying to focus on the view out the window. Clouds were still below, but much closer than before. As I watched, we flew through some of the wispy white peaks that loomed above the rest. The view flickered rapidly between complete white-out and fantastic landscapes of deep plunging canyons of white vapour between towering fluffy peaks. During breaks in the clouds, I glimpsed the mottled dark blue Mediterranean Sea far below, with the hazy outline of a coast farther ahead.

‘Would you like some more coffee, Mr Anderson?’

I turned away from the window.

Dr Blunt had thrown off the blanket and was busy putting her shoes back on. She absently ruffled her hair and stretched, followed by a quick, lithe movement that ended with her on her feet, moving towards the front of the plane. She turned and raised an enquiring eyebrow at me.

‘Ja that would be great,’ I croaked.

‘Ja?’ she teased.

‘It means yes in Afrikaans,’ I said absently, engrossed in the fantastic shapes of the clouds.

She smiled lazily and disappeared through the cabin door.

I took the opportunity to duck into the magnificent bathroom and change out of my rumpled shirt to make myself more presentable. I had no idea who I would be meeting, nor what the circumstances would be. It would probably be better not to appear like a complete slob.

The smell of coffee drew me back to the cabin.

Dr Blunt was waiting impatiently for me to make the bathroom available with a little bag in her hands, pushing past me with that same little frown.

I savoured the coffee. The view out of the window was now a consistent white-out. Little drops of moisture streaking past the outside of the window were the only indication of our air speed.

I found I enjoyed sharing the cabin with this interesting woman. I probably would not see her again after we landed. I wondered if I could somehow get her phone number.

When she emerged from the bathroom, she had changed into a pair of smart beige pants and a tailored white cotton shirt.

She indicated as she returned to her seat that we should buckle up. The cabin swayed as we hit turbulence.

‘Dr Blunt?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you mind telling me your first name?’

She looked directly at me. After a long pause, she replied, ‘Siobhan.’

I think she knew where I was trying to take the conversation, because the shutters came down in her eyes.

‘My name's Frank,’ I said, stumped, as usual, on how to initiate witty small talk with women. It came naturally to some guys, but never to me.

‘I know,’ she said stiffly.

‘What’s your role in this whole affair?’ I asked trying to keep the conversation from drying up.

She explained that she been doing some short duration volunteer work for Medicines Sans Frontieres in the DRC, when she had received a call very similar to mine in the middle of the night, from the enigmatic but

persuasive Duval. He asked her to meet the jet as it flew down from Europe on its way to South Africa. The circumstances weren't as strange for her because she had worked with UNSDDR in Thailand and had some experience with the way they worked, but she remarked that this time the pace did seem quite frantic.

'So, will you be flying back to DRC when we land?' I asked as casually as I could.

She stared out the window. With a sudden smile, she said, 'No I'm to make sure you get to Saint-Genis-Pouilly safely.' After a pause, she added, 'in any event I have to give them my assessment of your medical and physical fitness.'

Her smile evaporated as she looked back at me. It was obvious she was used to fending off approaches from men. She was clearly trying to shut down this line of conversation. I couldn't think of any way to break the ice. As usual, my chatting up skills were proving to be non-existent.

It was raining gently when we landed at Geneva. The jet taxied to the far end of the apron, away from the larger commercial jets and main terminal buildings. A shiny new white Audi Q7 with large blue UN letters marked on the doors waited for us. Next to it was a small battered red delivery van.

The men-in-black trio watched impassively as Siobhan and I filed passed with our bags, out through the

front of the plane. No response came to my parting comment about the flight being OK but the cabin service needing some work.

Definitely no sense of humour at all.

Siobhan carried a little enclosed clear plastic container with my neatly labelled blood samples racked on a tray inside it.

She went to the panel van and handed the blood samples to the driver through the window. I heard her greet the driver in fluent French and murmur a few instructions. The panel van then drove off.

A tall, thin, middle aged man in a smart suit got out of the driver's door of the Audi. He smiled uncertainly, as if he felt it was expected, but wasn't sure if we were worth the courtesy. He introduced himself as Herr Schmidt. He told us in heavily accented but precise English that passport formalities had already been taken care of. We would be leaving straight away. When I asked how that was possible, he smiled again in a pained way, as if embarrassed by my ignorance of these matters and simply opened the boot for us to put our bags in without saying anything else. We got into the car and he took off at quite some pace, causing the tyres to squeal. He waved an ID card at the airport perimeter gate and soon we turned onto the motorway heading south west, soon after that we turned off North West towards the French border a few kilometres away.

Nobody said anything. I sat in the back, watching the city skyline flash past my window, as if it were a TV screen. It was interesting because I'd never been to Geneva. But like everything else that morning, it was surreal. Clearly, we were in a rush because Herr Schmidt didn't spare the horses. He drove well. Even though we were going quite a lot faster than most of the traffic, he smoothly threaded the big Audi between the other slower vehicles with minimum fuss and bother.

We drove across the border without stopping. As we entered the town of Saint-Genis-Pouilly, Schmidt turned into an underground parking lot below a small, new multi-storey office block. It lay back from the road, in its own pleasant looking grounds, on the outskirts of the town. I was surprised to see soldiers with automatic weapons manning the entrance to the basement parking as we drove down the ramp. They didn't look as if they belonged there. In fact, it seemed as if they had only recently been deployed, judging by the partially erected barriers.

We pulled up outside some lift doors. Another soldier waited for us there. He looked like an officer because he had rank on his shoulders and wore a sidearm instead of carrying a rifle. He had his foot wedged against the lift doors to keep them open. He kept his eyes on us whilst muttering into a two-way radio.

As soon as Siobhan and I were in the lift with the officer, Schmidt roared away in the Audi, without a backward glance.

The lift doors closed with an elegant ping and we ascended to the first floor. I glanced sideways at Siobhan. She reflected the slight tension I felt. The obvious urgency and relentless organisational efficiency, all focused on getting us here, was intimidating. I was glad that we had finally reached our destination, some answers might be forthcoming.

When the lift doors opened, we faced a small but smart reception area, the sort of thing one would expect from an expensive firm of attorneys or the executive headquarters of a large successful company. Marble tiles accented by stainless steel and glass fittings were the main themes. A well-groomed receptionist sat behind a high-tech, minimalist granite slab desk. The letters C E R N in brushed stainless steel were mounted on the wall behind her.

The officer stayed in the lift.

‘Ah, Mr Anderson and Dr Blunt,’ she said, getting up. ‘Welcome to the UNSDDR.’

‘Would you both please follow me?’

Her heels clicked as we walked down a corridor towards some large oak double doors. She knocked briefly before pushing one open.

We walked into a large room full of people. The air was slightly stale. There must have been about twenty people in the room at least. They were seated at tables strewn with documents, plastic coffee mugs and other detritus. The tables were arranged into a U shape so that everyone could see each other easily. On the far wall, facing the open end of the U were two large screens showing video conference scenes of two similar rooms full of people elsewhere. The other walls had several white-boards mounted on them which were filled with diagrams and scrawled notes, none of it made any sense to me. Every person in the room seemed to have a telephone at their elbow. Some were talking on theirs as we entered. A very complicated project Gantt chart was projected onto another bare wall between two white boards by a data projector. A man who obviously had been in the middle of a presentation was standing next to it.

Clearly, we had interrupted the proceedings, but everyone, both on the video conference screens and those in the room, seemed to be looking at the pair of us with an air of expectant interest, not irritation.

One of the men at the head of the tables stood and came over to us.

‘Thank you Ilse,’ he said to the receptionist who nodded and left, closing the door behind her.

I recognised his voice at once.

‘You must be Duval!’ I offered my hand in what I hoped was an unruffled and suitably efficient manner.

His smile seemed warm and genuine. He wore a crumpled but expensive looking suit, and was in his fifties, with greying short brown hair and clear blue eyes. He was slightly plump, but he had an air of accustomed authority about him.

‘Thank you once again, Mr Anderson and Dr Blunt for joining us at such short notice and in what must be very strange circumstances. May I arrange some refreshments for either of you?’ he asked formally.

We both shook our heads, pleasantries and tea weren’t on either of our minds at that moment. Neither were they on his, it was clear. He looked at us for a while as if at a loss on how to start. The others in the room seemed to be almost holding their breaths, waiting to hear what he was going to say to us.

Finally, he turned back to the tables and said clearly ‘Rudi, John, would you join us please? Can the rest of you please continue whilst the three of us discuss matters with Mr Anderson and Dr Blunt?’ The others in the room relaxed again and switched their focus back to the man standing next to the data projector, while two of the men sitting at the head of the tables rose and came over to us.

Duval didn’t introduce us.

We walked farther down the corridor to a smaller empty board room. When we had taken our seats, with

the three of them on one side of the long table and the two of us on the other, there was the same pregnant pause.

After regarding us steadily for a while, Duval began.

‘Mr Anderson and Dr Blunt, before we proceed, I have to warn you that everything to do with this meeting, your journey here and everything you have seen here, and been told so far, forms part of the Official Secrets Act, or the equivalent act of your respective countries, and will be enforced as such by those governments. In case you do not know, contravention of the Official Secrets act carries a very stiff penalty in most countries, which can include lengthy imprisonment.’

The two other men both looked slightly embarrassed at the dramatic delivery of the statement, but neither seemed to find the content unexpected.

Duval paused to let his warning sink in, and then continued steadily. ‘We are faced with an extraordinary crisis of global proportions. We are in the process of forming a reaction team who will perform a crucial task. You have both been identified as possessing various skills and experience which will be needed by that team.’

Another long pause while he marshalled his thoughts.

‘The security conditions imposed upon this project dictate that I cannot tell you anything more unless you agree to become part of our team. The reason for that is

that up until this point, you are both free to decide not to continue. If so, we will return you both to your respective lives as soon as possible. Provided you respect our secrecy requirements, you should have nothing further to worry about after that. But if we tell you more than I have now, you will not be free to go until the project is complete. So, you have to decide now whether you wish to proceed.'

Siobhan tried to break the growing tension by joking. 'Oh, so it's one of those "you could tell us but then you would have to kill us" situations?'

Duval looked slightly pained and said nothing, but the other two stopped looking off into space and both stared hard at her. Neither was smiling. The grin slowly faded from Siobhan's face and two little spots of colour formed on her cheeks.

But I was getting frustrated. The whole thing seemed to be a ridiculous cloak and dagger farce to me!

'Look that's all very well, but what exactly do you need from us? Surely you can't have flown us half way around the world to put that half-arsed proposition to us and expect us to simply say yes? Surely you can do better than that.'

Duval, inclined his head acknowledging my point and tried again. 'Mr Anderson, your feelings are quite understandable. I brought you here so that you could form your own opinions about the efficiency, ability, and

the extent of the resources of our organisation in the hope that would help you make up your minds. I realise that it must be difficult given the lack of information. You have my assurance that the task will be of the utmost importance and that according to the information we have gathered, you are both very well suited to the roles required, and that you will be handsomely compensated for your work.'

After another pause his conscience seemed to prompt him to say, 'I should let you know also that the task will be very hazardous.' And then he seemed to clamp his mouth closed by force of will.

It was very clear that they wanted us to make the decision right there and then. I tried to fish for a bit more info, to give myself some time to decide.

'Are the two of us the only members of this team?'

He regarded me steadily for some time again. His eyes seemed to show that he was pleased. I suppose that was because I hadn't turned him down flat.

'No, the two of you are the first to reach us. Others are on their way.'

'If this task is so hazardous, will we get suitable insurance and so forth?' I was casting around for a subject to keep the information flowing.

He didn't hesitate. 'Of course.' The other two seemed to find the idea amusing, which should have warned me.

‘If we feel, after we have been fully informed about our roles in this task, that the level of hazard is too high to accept, what then?’

He definitely liked my line of questions. Clearly, I was negotiating, so if he played his cards right we should reach a deal.

‘If you decide that the risk is too high, then we will have to find someone else,’ he countered, not giving anything away.

‘Yes, but what would happen to us?’ I persisted.

‘Mr Anderson, to be honest, I’m not sure, because we haven’t thought that far. Most likely we would have to confine you somewhere secure for the duration of the project.’

‘You mean prison?’ Asked Siobhan incredulously.

He got irritated. ‘No, of course not, perhaps a hotel or something, as I said we haven’t thought that far. Please, I would like to proceed. What is your decision? Time is very short. There are many things that we need to attend to.’

‘How long will the task take?’ I asked.

‘No more than five months.’ He seemed very certain about the duration. It was one of the few times he showed complete certainty about the information he provided.

Siobhan and I looked at each other. I didn’t think she expected anything more than to deliver me here and present my medical report. The situation must have been

much more of a shock to her I thought, which was probably why she was mostly silent.

But after looking at me coolly for a second, she turned decisively to Duval and said briskly, ‘All right, I’ll do it.’

Everyone then turned to me.

I felt a bit deflated. I hadn’t expected her to make up her mind that fast. So I heard myself say rather lamely, ‘Me too.’

The male ego and an attractive woman are a terrible combination, I thought ruefully.

Duval beamed. ‘Excellent. I am very grateful to you both.’

‘We don’t have time to give you the details now. That will happen tomorrow when the other team members are here. To help you start digesting the large amount of information that you will both need, I’ll give you a brief summary of the crisis we find ourselves faced with.’

‘First let me introduce my colleagues.’ He turned to the tall stooping man on his left.

‘Dr Rudi Jochenstein is one of senior directors of CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research. He is also a prominent nuclear physicist who oversaw the recent experiments and work conducted on the Large Hadron Collider based here in Saint-Genis-Pouilly. Rudi was kind enough to offer the use of this new building to

us at short notice. CERN had just finished building, but had not taken occupation yet.'

Jochenstein was in his early 60's. He was tall, but slightly stooped. He had a kind-old-uncle air to him. But his gaze was piercing and direct like Duval's. His grip was limp as we shook hands, as if he didn't see the point in wasting time with courtesies.

Turning to the other man, Duval continued. 'Dr John Keppler has joined us from MIT. He is an astrophysicist, who works closely with NASA.'

Keppler smiled and shook hands far more firmly. He looked pale and tired as if he hadn't slept much recently. He was quite stocky, had a well-trimmed beard and thick, dark curly hair. He was quite young, probably early thirties or late twenties.

'John, if you could perhaps provide a brief overview of how it started,' Duval suggested.

Keppler was expecting this because he didn't hesitate. 'Are either of you aware of the LINEAR project run by MIT? The acronym stands for Lincoln Near Earth Asteroid Research, it's a project funded by NASA and the US Air Force.'

We both shook our heads.

'One of our tasks is to detect and study asteroids that pass close to Earth,' he added to dispel our ignorance.

'A few months ago, we spotted a new object on a trajectory that looked ominous enough for it to

immediately be classified as a Potentially Hazardous Asteroid, or PHA for short. This means that the object's trajectory through space has the potential to represent a collision threat to Earth. It was quite far away, but also large enough for us to see it clearly at that distance, which is unusual. Normally we only detect these objects when they are much closer to Earth. After closer observations over a day or two, during which our calculations of the PHA's trajectory were refined, our fears increased.'

He paused, trying to find the right words. He wasn't as smooth as Duval at this sort of thing.

'We managed to get time on a few different, more sensitive telescopes to view the PHA more closely, and...,' he paused again looking very serious. 'What we found was that it was not one object but a cluster of about a hundred large chunks of rock, many as large as mount Everest, or even larger, travelling together in a compact group. And I'm afraid there is no doubt that Earth will have to pass through that cluster of objects.'

His body language was that of a medical doctor giving the bad news to a terminally ill patient. The other two looked equally serious.

Siobhan wasn't buying it though. 'So how do you know for certain that any of these objects will actually hit Earth? And even if one or two do, what difference will it make? You hear about asteroids passing close to Earth all

the time, or even burning up in the atmosphere, why are these different?’

Keppler sighed. ‘Dr Blunt, the asteroids that burn up in the atmosphere, which you might call shooting stars, are quite small, probably no bigger than a football. This cluster contains many very large objects, the size of mountains. If any one of those larger objects strikes Earth, the consequences will be catastrophic. They are spread out over quite a large volume of space, like a gigantic shot gun blast. Unfortunately, our calculations show that the trajectory of this cluster of objects will intersect with Earth’s position in five months’ time.’

I suddenly realised why Duval had been so sure about the time frame of the project.

Keppler continued in a steady monologue. It was obvious that he had made this speech many times already. ‘The likelihood of Earth emerging unscathed after passing through that intersection is extremely small.’

‘But surely there is something we can do about that?’ Siobhan protested heatedly. ‘Can’t the USA or Russia blow up the asteroids with nuclear missiles or something?’

‘Nuclear weapons won’t help.’ Keppler interrupted in irritation. Again, it was obvious that he had made the point many times before and was tired of doing it. ‘The US Air Force is trying to fit warheads to rockets large enough to lift them into deep space as we speak, but the

only useful function that project serves is to keep the military out of our hair. And even if they manage to blow one or two asteroids to bits, which I doubt, the fragments might still be big enough to pose a deadly danger to Earth.'

He couldn't resist adding, as if it was an argument he had lost, but still wished to pursue, 'Instead of nuclear bombs, it would have been better to try to attach rocket motors to the more dangerous asteroids, and then nudge them away from Earth.' He stared into space as if reliving the argument, and then sighed, before continuing tiredly. 'But the cluster is simply moving too fast. We won't be able build the necessary hardware, modify and launch rockets capable of intercepting the asteroids far enough away for that to work in the time available.'

I felt like I was watching events from outside myself with a strangely morbid fascination. I heard myself say calmly, 'So why did you bring us here? It seems from what you say that Earth is probably going to be hit by a giant asteroid in five months' time, and nothing can be done about that. Isn't that what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs? What is this task you mentioned? How will that be of any use?'

When I mentioned the word "dinosaurs", the three men glanced sharply at each other.

Duval took over again, getting straight to the point. 'Yes, Mr Anderson, our best models of the probable

trajectories of the more prominent asteroids in this cluster show that Earth is probably going to be struck by at least one large asteroid, and if we are unlucky, maybe even more than one. However, we intend to prepare a large number of shelters so that sufficient people survive so mankind does not in fact suffer extinction.'

'But surely that's equally hopeless? What sort of shelters will be sufficient? How many people could be saved? How long will they need to remain in them? What about dust blocking out the sun after the event and that sort of thing?' I was trying to remember an article I had read in National Geographic on the subject.

For some reason, Duval was pleased. He inclined his head slowly, as if I had made a profound point.

'That, Mr Anderson, is what we want you to find out for us.'

'What the hell do you mean?'

Keppler, who seemed equally pleased with the progress of the discussion, cut in again. 'The physics involved in an asteroid strike on Earth is relatively well understood at a macro level. But not much work, for obvious reasons, has been done on predicting the finer points that are now crucial to some of our decisions. We need to have a far better idea of how long people should remain in shelter after the initial asteroid strike. The existing academic models that we have managed to find so far on this subject, come to widely different

conclusions. Some authors predict that shelter is only needed for a few hours, while others seem to indicate that underground shelter will be necessary for months, if not years. Obviously, we can't do very much with such divergent predictions.'

'How long people will need to remain in shelter will determine how many people can be accommodated for a given amount of space, and what sort of minimum infrastructure is required in each facility. It's crucial to the survival of those we are attempting to save, that we don't overcrowd each shelter beyond the limits of the infrastructure we can get into place in the time available. We need to know if they can venture out occasionally to forage, and how soon afterwards they can do that, or if all the food required needs to be stored, or even whether we need to grow food underground. We need to know how soon, and what types of plants will grow above ground afterwards. We need to know how much water to provide. How much energy and sanitation? Air purification and ventilation? We need to know so many details—and virtually all of those unknown details may have life or death consequences for the people we are trying to save. We simply don't have enough data to prepare or plan properly.'

He ground to a halt and Duval took over where he left off.

‘The preparation of various mines, old cold war nuclear shelters, tunnels, tube stations and many other types of mostly underground shelters is going ahead at full speed with all the resources at our disposal, which are considerable, because every hour is precious. But I’m afraid we simply don’t know enough. Even a small amount of additional, reliable information would literally mean that thousands, maybe millions more could be saved. Because the more we know, the less conservative we can be with our estimates and assumptions.’

‘Yes, but how are we supposed to get this extra information for you? How are we supposed to know what it’s like living through an asteroid strike?’

Keppler looked helplessly at Duval. Who after one of his little pauses said, ‘Your team’s task will be to place various data gathering instruments in...,’ he paused involuntarily, ‘a similar type of environment,’ and then he carried on hurriedly, ‘these instruments and sensors will gather a large amount of data which should make all the difference to our preparations.’

‘What sort of similar environment?’ Siobhan and I chimed almost simultaneously.

For the first time, Duval looked extremely uncomfortable. He ducked the question by ending the meeting.

‘Dr Blunt, Mr Anderson, we have spent enough precious time with you now. I think you both have a good

idea of what the situation is, even though we have not had time go into much detail. Let me say again how grateful I am that you could join us.

‘We have hastily converted the top floor of this building, which was originally dedicated to executive offices, into accommodation. I hope you will find it reasonably comfortable. Ilse will be along soon to take you to your rooms. We have converted the original executive dining room into a canteen which serves food twenty-four hours a day. And the executive bathrooms which were somewhat unusually equipped with showers are proving most useful to us. I’m afraid that due to the short time we have available to prepare for this project, we will be keeping you both busy late into the night.’

He paused and looked directly at us both in turn, ‘I am afraid that from now on you are both confined to this building and communication with the outside world is prohibited. You will find your mobile phones cannot send or receive calls or messages in this building. If you need to send any messages to any family or anyone else, please give your messages to Ilse. She will send them for you, as well as forward any replies. You may not leave without my consent, and you will be escorted everywhere if you do. I hope the reasons for those precautions are clear to you.’

With that he rose. So did the other two. I realised then that Jochenstein hadn’t said a word throughout. As

they left, I wondered what his role in this whole thing was.

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