

22 February, 1979
Undisclosed location
0300 hours

The halls of the bunker complex were dark and labyrinthine, but the aging man who now walked through them knew the tunnel-like structures well. He walked with a quick, efficient pace, the soles of his dress shoes clacking against cold concrete. He wore the olive green garments of a military dress uniform, decorated with a multitude of ribbons and medals that clinked together as he moved. One of the sleeves of his blouse was slack - he was missing an arm. But still his gait was even and his stride confident. The man rounded a corner with practiced efficiency and came up to a large steel blast door, with a combination retinal and fingerprint scanner embedded in the wall next to it. Marching up to the scanner, he placed his hand on a slab of translucent glass and stared into a device that looked like a pair of binoculars simultaneously. After a few seconds, there was a ping, and the bolts on the blast door slid back. As the door slid open, a pair of soldiers wielding light machine guns and wearing heavy armor came forward. The man was ushered into a decontamination chamber, where the sudden introduction of bright light forced him to squint. His features were fully visible now. He had a thick, well-groomed beard, greying with advanced age. His face was criss-crossed with wrinkles that cast small shadows in the bright, white light of the decontamination chamber. His dress blouse and cap were adorned with an insignia that denoted his rank as a Colonel. He waited patiently as the two soldiers searched him for weapons. It was nothing insulting to him; after all, it meant that they were doing their jobs properly. Once they were satisfied, one of the soldiers moved over to a panel on the side of the wall and input a lengthy code. The outer blast door slid shut and the bolts resecured themselves in their slots as the decontamination cycle began. The man held his breath, closed his eyes and used his arm to keep his hat secured on top of his head as he was blasted with icy air and aerosol disinfectant. When the cycle was complete, the inner blast door opened, and one of the soldiers escorted the Colonel through a long tunnel, past several security checkpoints. They finally reached a final set of blast doors, that opened after another scan from the Colonel and the input of an authorization code by the soldier. The soldier promptly saluted and turned to walk back to the decontamination chamber. The Colonel continued forward as the blast doors slid shut behind him. The room he had entered was a colossal structure, with massive screens displaying satellite images adorning the walls, and a myriad of intelligence operatives moving about work stations, like worker bees in a hive. The Colonel was standing on a raised walkway that allowed him to circumnavigate the entire room, avoiding the bustle of the floor below entirely. He walked to the other end of the room, and ducked into a small alcove. He was coming up on the briefing room, and as the chaotic sound of the room behind him faded, he could hear several people arguing with each other on the other side of the briefing room door.

I still don't understand why we'd be deferring this position to a colonel, said a voice with a thick accent.

A man with the rank of colonel is more than capable of handling something such as this, I don't see your point in bringing up his rank, replied a nasal voice.

Maybe if you meant a colonel from my country, said the first voice. *I doubt a colonel from your country is even capable of operating a can opener.*

Now listen here, began the second voice before a third cut them both off.

Both of you, shut up. Listen to you, bickering like children. The decision to appoint the colonel to the position was mine and mine alone. There will be no arguing about it. No discussion. Understand? The third voice was authoritative, and immediately shut the other two up. The colonel smiled to himself as he imagined the grudging look the first was probably giving the third before knocking on the door. He took his cap off of his head and tucked it under his arm before entering the briefing chamber. The three men watched as he entered and closed the door behind them. They were younger than the colonel himself, but wore on their uniforms the stars of generals, varying in rank. The highest ranking general stood up and walked over to the colonel, extending a hand to shake.

"Ah, Colonel. It's a pleasure to meet you," he said in the authoritative voice. "I'm General Volks."

"The pleasure is all mine, General," said the Colonel. "Colonel Michael Tool, British Special Air Service."

Volks gestured to the other generals sitting around the table. He pointed out the American one first, no doubt the source of the nasally voice. "This is General Kriegen, and that is General Milyanov." The second general was wearing the uniform of a Soviet, confirming him as the source of the voice with the thick accent. Tool turned and snapped off a salute to the other generals, who simply nodded in response. Volks then gestured to an empty seat before returning to his own. Tool sat down and placed his cap on the table.

"Colonel Tool," began Kriegen, "you have an impressive record. Scores of awards for heroics in battle, an almost nonexistent casualty rate for men under your direct command, and a clean record. But let's be blunt here. We don't give a damn about all that. That's not why you're here."

"You are here," said Milyanov, picking up from where Kriegen left off, "because the General Volks here, believes you have picked up some sort of experience from a particular incident in your past."

"Colonel," said Volks, "do you remember the Iceland Incident of 1958?"

Tool flinched a little bit, as if the phrase was causing a flashback. He hesitated before finally responding, "Yes... I remember the incident."

"You were there with the ground team, if I can recall the information from your file correctly," said Volks.

Once again, Tool hesitated. "Yes... I was a squad leader for a group of SAS operatives..."

"And I understand you were still on the ground when the detonation happened."

Tool looked down at his cap on the table. He remembered it like it had happened hours before. Landing in Iceland. Scouting the crashed alien craft. Seeing inhuman creatures rip people in half with their weaponry, and sometimes their claws. And then a flash of white. When he woke up, he was in a hospital bed. His arm had been ripped off and his hair was falling out from radiation poisoning.

"I understand your entire squad died in the incident. As did most of the other troops in the area. But you survived. Do you remember how?"

Tool shook his head. "I can't say that I do, General."

The room was silent for a few moments before Volks spoke again. "I understand you were close to more than a few members of your squad."

There was silence again.

"What if I could offer you the opportunity for some payback, Colonel?"

Tool looked up. "And how would you plan on doing that?"

Volks smiled thinly. "You're here because we want you to become the director of a top secret special forces group that was formed after the Iceland Incident. We call them, 'Xenonauts'." Volks continued. "You'd be operating with complete autonomy from the regular military or government of any country."

"Hold on a minute, sir," interrupted Tool. "are you saying you want me to run black operations?"

"Well, yes and no," said Kriegen, suddenly piping up. "You have sanctions from every country on Earth to operate in their airspace and territory, and you will be funded by most countries, but officially, you're off the books."

Tool leaned back in his chair and scratched at his beard, considering the offer. "What is the aim of this... 'Xenonauts' group, if I may ask?"

"Your aim," said Milyanov, "is to defend the Earth from an impending alien threat. Intelligence from all of our countries has suggested that the creatures that caused the Iceland Incident have prepared an invasion force and are on their way to Earth. You would be the last line of defense, preventing the alien threat from causing the extinction of humanity."

Tool considered this for a moment. "But why me? I'm sure there are other, younger, more qualified people available for the job."

"That's the thing, Colonel," said Volks, "you've seen these things up close. You know the credibility of the threat they pose. There is no one else more qualified than you. You are the right man for the job."

A few moments were spent in silence as Tool considered the offer. Finally, he asked, "Do we know the exact nature of the threat?"

"Not of this moment, no."

"So as far as I know, this is a suicide mission."

"To put it bluntly," said Volks, "yes, Colonel, it is. Is that a problem?"

Tool smiled and put his cap back on his head. "Not at all sir. When do I start?"