**Independent Nuclear Deterrent**

The RAF Nimrod dropped as it hit a pocket of turbulence, leaving Harry Donovan’s stomach a hundred yards behind. He turned his head towards Georgia Powell, strapped into the webbing seat to his left. He had met the wiry, petite dark haired woman only that morning. She looked a lot better than he felt.

“Where the heck do you think we’re heading?” he asked.

She shrugged.

They had taken off at 0800 from [RAF base in Hong Kong] and headed north-east. At least, Harry was fairly sure he had spotted Mount Fuji as they flew over Japan. That had been two hours ago.

The transport started to descend, and squinting out of the window Harry saw a chain of fog-covered islands below.

“If those are the Kuril Islands, we’re heading into Soviet territory.”

Georgia shrugged again. “We’ll find out when we get there. Worrying won’t make any difference.”

“Keep it to yourselves, hippies,” came the voice of Mike Quayle, a note of genuine malice mixed into the bantering tone. At the briefing that morning, Harry had inadvertently insulted the stocky, blond paratrooper, placing him by his accent as a scouser. He was, it turned out, from the Isle of Man and that, somehow, made a difference. Quayle in turn had run his eyes over the tall, skinny Harry with his dark hair all of half an inch longer than Quayle’s own buzz cut, and Georgia with her tied-back pony tail, and had introduced the two Royal Navy Engineers to the rest of the team as “the hippies”.

The briefing had been a joke, with more time spent on need-to-know and heavy handed reminders about the Official Secrets Act than on giving the fourteen-strong team any useful information. The only concrete fact that Harry had gleaned was that HMS Buckingham – a [type] class frigate which Harry, who prided himself on his knowledge of the fleet, had never heard of – had strayed from its registered course, and their task was to get it back. Where it was, why it was off course, and why its own crew could not bring it back were either not known, or were more likely deemed above Harry’s pay grade.

It could be harmless enough. Perhaps an unusual problem with the ship’s engines, too tricky for its regulars to diagnose. Still, that did not explain why we had all been pulled from our beds and flown half way around the world with such urgency.

The pilot’s voice came over the intercom. “Buckingham sighted to the north-west, range seven miles, bearing [295 degrees], eight knots. Opening cargo bay doors and descending for intercept.

“Buckingham, do you read me? This is [Captain / Wing Commander] Iain Ferguson of the [25th Fleet Air arm], call sign [Twenty Three Tango] approaching from your south-east. You are to return to [base, or location, in Canada?] immediately. Authorization code [JL02A – in words]. Please copy.”

Harry saw two flashes in rapid succession as he looked out of the window towards the north-west. Before his brain had processed what was happening, the Nimrod was thrown to the side as if punched by a giant fist [needs noise]. A second impact ripped away the entire front section of the aircraft.

Harry did not stop to think. Releasing the webbing harness with one hand, he grabbed an inflatable life raft with the other, sprinted to the cargo doors at the rear of the plane and flung himself out. Moments later, still free falling, he heard a [huge explosion] behind him and felt a searing pain in his left leg.

He pulled the cord, and moments later his body seem to jerk upwards as the parachute deployed. As he drifted downwards he saw four other parachutes blossom open. It looked like the rest of the team and the Vulcan’s crew had not made it.

Even with the parachute, the impact was bone-crunching, and Harry was completely submerged in the freezing water. He tried to fight off panic as struggled to free himself from the tangles of the parachute’s ropes. At the point when he felt he could not hold his breath any longer, his numb hands found and released the clasp. He kicked to the surface, coughing up water.

In the gathering dusk, Harry could just see the raft bobbing on the waves twenty yards away. It must have inflated automatically on contact with the ocean. Harry struck out for it and hauled himself painfully on board. He heard a cry for help from his left, and a laconic “Over here, mate” from somewhere ahead. He found a torch in the raft’s supplies box and swept it over the darkening ocean. The raft had a small but powerful electric motor, and he manoeuvred it in the direction of the cries. He pulled Georgia Powell out of the water and she sat shivering as the torch beam picked out the figure of Mike Quayle happily floating in the water as if he did not have a care in the world.

“In your own time, mate,” he said as Harry reached down an arm to help him into the raft.

Harry swept the torch over the ocean. “I saw at two others come down.”

As he said this he saw a light come on some distance away, and shortly afterwards a second one.

Georgia had been investigating the raft’s controls. “The navigation system has picked up two tracking beacons. One three hundred yards [bearing 040],

*Introduce parachutes (sitting uncomfortably in webbing) and life rafts earlier. Pilot: “Team prepare for drop.”*

*[Note: it needs to be dark for the lights on the rafts. Change time earlier. Replace Fuji with lights of urban sprawl of Tokyo. Or dusk, and now getting dark quickly as they head north, maybe November. ]*