

## Broken Oak

It was one hell of a thing that I found next to that broken oak tree, I can tell you that, although it was Steel who actually found it. She'd run on ahead into the wood that day, chasing a squirrel or a rabbit most likely, so I guess half the money probably belongs to her, but what's a dog gonna do with it?

She was special, I can tell you that too. And when a dog that special dies, as she did two years ago now, you don't just bury her out of sight and out of mind like a relative you never really liked. No, I had her preserved in formaldehyde like Damien Hirst's tiger shark so I could still see her everyday. She stands suspended above my fireplace mantelpiece even now, as a permanent reminder of just how special she was, in a special tank I'd had made in a forever pose of intelligent vigilance.

I don't see anything wrong in preserving my dog any more than I don't see anything wrong in taking a piece of what I found next to that oak tree, or in selling it to the British Army. I know that I've saved thousands of lives, and I'll have saved thousands more to come.

I was born into a military family, you see, and I joined the army straight out of school. It was all I wanted to do and all I was expected to do. My grades were good and I loved to make things. So when I joined the Royal Engineers at sixteen and became a fabricator, and later advanced to metalsmith, I was in heaven.

I loved my job almost as much as I loved my family, but I had the option to retire early at the age of forty with a reduced pension and I took it. I'd seen enough active duty in foreign lands thank you very much, and I'd seen enough friends killed in the line

of duty. I wanted something different for my wife and young boys other than the chance to see their husband and father return home in a box via RAF Brize Norton. So when the chance came to live and work on an active farm estate I leapt at it. Fresh air and tranquility for Ginny plus rolling fields and woods for Jake and Bradley to explore. That equaled a healthier and safer life for all of us. Plus the Broken Oak Estate had its own forge that they used for onsite fabrication and repairs of everything from tractors to gate posts. The vast experience I'd acquired in the army repairing tanks and welding sheet metal proved to be the decider in securing that change-of-life farming opportunity I'd come to want.

Two things on my immediate to-do list after moving into our farm cottage was 1) get myself a dog, I'd never had one before and I visualised a cross between a plaything for the boys and a gun dog to retrieve pigeons and rabbits, and, 2) get myself a shotgun - the estate had more than its share of pigeons and rabbits, and I wanted us to be part of nature's food chain for a change, dining on wild free-range meat and not their nailed-to-the-floor mass-produced hormone-injected ghost-like cousins.

First on the list came as a two-month-old black Labrador puppy. I named her Steel because she had to be tough, useful and versatile. The boys adored her and she followed me everywhere on the estate, always rooting into something she was. The second was a traditional side-by-side Beretta 486 Parallelo. It was beautifully made, powerful and accurate, and more than rivalled my old SA80 rifle.

Everything went well for us for that first year. The boys were at the local primary school and had settled nicely. Ginny had suffered bouts of depression early in our marriage when I'd been posted abroad but

these had now gone, simply evaporated. And when I was not repairing gates or tending cattle I would go for long walks, exploring the 400 acre country estate with Steel nosing through the undergrowth and my Beretta slung over my arm. The therapy of the peace and quiet, disturbed only by the thrum of bees and the shrill chorus of birdsong, was what I came to realise I so needed after twenty-four years of service in the army, many of them spent overseas in the Middle East and South America. I'd seen so many fellow sappers killed by snipers, torn apart by front-line gunfire or blown unrecognisable by roadside bombs. The stillness and the solitude of this leafy country estate in Somerset suited me just fine.

It was on one of my walks with Steel that I first came across that otherworldly thing. I called it a thing because I had no idea what it was, and to be fair I still don't fully understand it. Calling it a spaceship sounds ridiculous, and Captain Kirk I ain't. But I don't need to go up there any more and so it just stays locked up, out of sight and out of mind. I'll probably tell my boys about it one day, somewhere down the line, maybe on my death bed, and then it can be theirs to do with as they please. Who knows, maybe they'll be eternally grateful and have me preserved in formaldehyde, standing in my own tank in some heroic pose.

There are various areas of woodland on the estate, from a small copse of copper beech on Higher Hill to considerably larger and denser stands like the Broken Oak Wood from which the estate got its moniker (although I was yet to understand the broken part).

I had taken a different and longer route up through the oak wood on this particular day because it was a clear blue-sky afternoon that was more perfect than a rambler's holiday brochure. I started along the tracks I usually walked and then took to exploring dells and avenues of trees I had not. Steel would bound

excitedly anywhere, into thickets and low shrubs with her inquisitive nose, and occasionally flush rabbits across my path. But this particular day was too fine and too perfect to ruin with the blast of gunfire and so I watched the various creatures scurry to the freedom of some unseen den or burrow with a smile on my face, and silently wished them well to live another day. Each satisfied and compassionate nod of my head caused Steel to regard me with a quizzical and panting look.

Over the course of that first year I had acquired the subconscious knowledge that there were only two types of fencing to be found on the estate: the older, rusted, and sometimes coming-apart lines of barbed wire that occasionally became absorbed by ancient trees, usually designating the historic, outer perimeter of the estate's woods from neighbouring farms and country lanes; and the modern, shiny, galvanised-steel barbed wire that would zing tightly in the wind between the stock-straight fenceposts that kept the grazing cattle safely in their pastures. So it seemed more than strange then, when Steel bounded barking and excitedly into the heart of the oak wood and found an enclosure fenced with some serious twelve-foot-high chain link topped with rolls of lethal razor wire.

Steel sniffed at it and barked at it as she pounded her way along its length. She was more than just curious, she was hooked with something that I just couldn't see. More than just a rabbit gone to ground, more than a fox.

There didn't seem to be anything of particular significance inside the fenced compound apart from a huge, long-dead oak tree that was somehow and improbably snapped in half. And it was in that moment that I suddenly understood the broken oak reference, but what I didn't understand was why that broken oak tree should be fenced off at all? Surely any farmer

worth his salt would've ringed it up with a chainsaw and been happy to warm his feet with it on an open fire come winter.

Steel had traced the entire perimeter of the enclosure in less than a minute and had returned to me panting and with eager eyes. There was a gate in the fence, and I had already found it substantially chained and padlocked. I shook it with one hand and it was sturdy. No one was getting in there to log up that fallen tree. And as far as I was aware, no one was allowed here anyway. This was not a public place. There were no public rights of way. Ultimately I called Steel away and continued on through the wood, meaning to ask either the estate manager John Peller, or the estate owner Godfrey Horne, about it. But such was the beauty and the tranquility of my return walk home that of course I forgot all about it.

That evening in bed, while Ginny was in the shower, I thought about that tree again. It was too late to call John or Godfrey about it, and anyway what would be the point? There could've been a deep sink hole in there for all I knew, or at a push maybe an unexploded bomb from World War Two. Either way, unless it somehow affected my daily duties, which it didn't, it was really none of my business.

And yet over the next few days I found that my mind would return to it, and question why something would need to be kept so secure in the middle of a wood that no one visited anyway. The memory of that high security fence kept bobbing back into my head like a fisherman's float, gently tugging on an unseen line, insisting that I give it just a few more moments attention.

In the end I decided against asking either John or Godfrey about it. They had enough to do without answering some dumb question of mine. So a few

evenings later I took another walk up there with Steel. It wasn't a leisurely ramble like before, but direct and purposeful. She seemed to sense where we were going and dashed for the fenced compound as soon as we entered the oak wood.

I stood for a few moments just gazing through the chain link. Something was odd but I couldn't for the life of me think what it was. It was only as Steel began pawing at the leaf litter outside the fence that I realised the obvious: there was a distinct lack of leaf litter on the other side of the fence.

The broken oak looked like it had been snapped in half. It was dead, and its huge canopy of branches lay on the ground skeletal and pale, and quite clearly leafless. But we were in the middle of a wood, we were surrounded by hundreds of trees and everywhere on the ground around us was a uniform covering of last autumn's fallen leaves - all except for a patch about the size of a school bus inside the fenced compound next to the toppled oak tree.

Once I could see it, I could not unsee it. It was a patch of dry dirt, leafless and bare. Not even a blade of grass grew there. The lack of anything growing could be easily accounted for by a chemical spill or some other mishap. But falling leaves still settled, even on ruined ground, and there were simply none here. My theories of a sink hole or an unexploded bomb went out the window too. It was just weird. Not frightening weird. Just unexplainable weird.

I wandered around the fenced compound for a few minutes, just looking in from different angles, but it did nothing to resolve the mystery. The chain and padlock were heavy duty, the fence twelve foot high, which would've been climbable but for the razor wire. The notion came into my head that if I'd brought my wire cutters I could've cut my way in, but then I had

no way of repairing it so that no one would notice the entry. My only option, I reasoned, should I really want to take a closer look at a bus-sized patch of dirt and not just ignore the whole thing, would be to return with the diesel generator, the angle grinder and the welding rig, remove a link from the chain, explore the site, and then repair the link. All easy to do, the only thing I really had to decide upon was whether or not I should do it.

It was on my mind all that evening while the family watched tv. It was still on my mind at midnight when I couldn't sleep. And again in the morning while I absentmindedly showered.

Over breakfast I decided to leave it. After all there was clearly a more than good enough reason why the enclosure had been left so secure, and breaching that security would more than likely lead to me losing my job.

So I continued to convince myself throughout that morning, as I loaded blocks of Rumevite mineral licks into the trailer behind the quad bike and delivered them to the cattle out in the pastures, that it wasn't that big a mystery. At midday, as I made my lunch in the cottage, the thought of telling Ginny that I had just been fired for snooping where I shouldn't be further underlined my need to forget all about the broken oak tree and that weird patch of bare dirt next to it. The possibility that our life in the country could be over before it had even really started, and especially over something so stupid as idle curiosity, filled me with dread. By early afternoon, however, I was loading the generator, the grinder and the welding rig into the trailer behind the quad bike and was heading back up to the big oak wood with Steel dashing excitedly beside me.

I set up the generator in front of the gate and

quickly ground through one of the chain links. I kept the padlock in place and rattled out the remaining chain. I entered the compound and cautiously approached the patch of bare dirt. Steel went to race forward but I snapped her back. There was nothing I could see, but who knew what there was that was stopping plants from growing and leaves from settling? But it was only as I went to test that bare, dry earth with a cautious foot that something hard painfully struck my shin. I stumbled back surprised, rubbing the bone, frowning and confused. I approached more slowly this time, and stuck my foot out even more cautiously into the space above the dirt until it connected with air that was solid and immovable.

Now I was concerned, and I was probably a little frightened if I'm totally honest about it. I've seen some oddities in my life, as well as some things that just couldn't be explained, and this beat the hell out of all of them at a single stroke.

Steel suddenly came forward again, sniffing at the space right in front of me, but I sent her back to the gate with a command far sharper than I'd intended. She looked up at me with big eyes but slunk away regardless. I lifted my boot again, testing, and once again found air that was unyielding and as solid as the armament on a Challenger 2, which was evidently impossible.

I took a few steps along the edge of the bare dirt and repeated the same trick with my boot, and each time tapped against something solid but invisible. I kicked a little harder and received a metallic clang. I swallowed, nervous of what I was about to do, and slowly inched a hand towards the solid air. When my fingertips glanced something hard and smooth I drew them back as one would from an electrical shock. But there had been no shock, only what felt like cold polished metal.



I felt with my hand again, and followed a smooth contour like the bonnet of an invisible car, something sleek and racy like an old E-type Jaguar. It was remarkable, and yet utterly perplexing. Whatever it was that I was touching certainly demanded the secrecy of the high fence and the heavy padlock and the razor wire, no doubt about that, but it also increased tenfold the ramifications of my breaking in and finding it. If I was caught now, I thought, I'd be getting more than just fired for sure. The image of the inside of a small prison cell unfolded in my head.

And yet I couldn't get enough of it. I continued to trace the size and shape of it with excited hands, explore with drop-jaw wonderment the unknown details of this unseeable miracle. And it was indeed the exact same size and shape as the bare patch of dirt beneath it. Whatever this thing was, invisible or not, it shielded the ground from fallen leaves like an umbrella and stopped even the keenest blade of grass from growing. And even though I could see through it and sunlight could pass through it, there was just nothing there to see but dirt.

I gave the thing a tentative rap with my knuckles, as you might a front door, only I hoped that there would be no answer from within. The surface was hard and responded with a thudding metallic resonance, like the reinforced panel of a Warrior armoured vehicle.

I knocked again, repeating my percussive experiments as I made my way along one side. It was impossible to believe that this wasn't the metal hull of something big. If I closed my eyes I would swear that it was the side of a Stormer missile vehicle or a Mexeflote landing craft that I was rapping my knuckles against. And yet all the time I could see nothing but compacted earth beneath it and the rest of the oak woodland beyond it.

The longer I was there the more I became convinced that I was going to get caught. I couldn't risk leaving the compound unsecured so that I could come back a second time, so whatever I was going to do I had to do it now.

Convinced that this invisible shape was indeed some kind of strange metal that I had never seen before - or should I say had come across as I still couldn't see anything, and after twenty four years in the military I had probably worked with every type of metal you could name - I hastened back to the open gate and retrieved the generator and the grinder.

I was struggling to think clearly, I can remember that much at least, and in my head I had roughly sketched a plan that involved me attempting to cut a small section of what was effectively solid air with the angle grinder. This seemed ridiculous to me as I couldn't even see the thing that I was intending to cut. I had to touch the invisible shape with one hand to get my bearings, and then slowly edge the grinder towards the space where I thought the thing was, then when the grinder hit something solid, a spray of glittering sparks would fly down at my feet, sparks made from nothing. Each time I would pull the grinder away, to look at what I had done, there would be nothing but empty space and the patch of dirt in front of my feet.

And so I continued, grinding out an invisible plate an inch at a time, the noise grating throughout the wood, making the slowest progress I have ever done in my life. I tried to cut out a section twelve inches square, but without being able to see any of my cuts it was impossible to tell. That is, until the invisible panel fell out of the invisible shape and hit the ground with a muted clang. This was just as weird because I still couldn't see it on the ground.

I felt around in the dirt until I was able to find

the cut section. I still couldn't see it but I could feel its weight suddenly when I picked it up. It felt thin and light, much lighter than aluminium. I turned it over and was surprised by its strength and rigidity. The other thing that was apparent was that I could still see through it from both sides when I turned it.

I was about to return to the quad bike with it when I suddenly halted. I looked back at the square hole I had made and was startled that there was something beyond it that I hadn't noticed before, a darkness that indicated that the invisible shape had an interior. I leaned closer and cautiously looked inside. In the unlit cockpit I could see silver panels and levers. I could see push buttons and rows of dead lights. I saw monitor screens and read-out panels. And in front of them I saw a single, silver, padded, seat. The seat was empty.

I put all this information together in a single heartbeat and realised in that snatched moment that this unseeable thing had not originated from this planet. I didn't know what the accurate or technical term for this thing was, but all I could think of calling it in my head was a spaceship. As I said before, Captain Kirk I ain't.

I was suddenly afraid, I'm not ashamed to admit that, and as I ran back to the quad bike Steel started barking as though something was hot on my heels. I didn't even look.

Even though my hands were shaking, I carefully wrapped the square of invisible metal in my shirt and placed it in the back of the trailer. Then I raced back for the generator and grinder. I quickly set to work, rattling the chain back into place and welding the link as invisibly as I could with fingers that felt like they belonged to someone else. I finished quickly and was satisfied that my swift weld would remain unnoticeable unless the person behind the high fence actually went

looking for it. Then I loaded everything back into the trailer, checked that the invisible section was still inside my shirt where I could find it when I got back to the forge, and then fired up the quad and headed back.

I put the kit back where it should be - the generator, the welding rig - and then carefully carried the section of invisible metal plate into the forge like it was some kind of holy relic. I don't know why I was so careful with it, it wasn't like it was going to break anytime soon. Maybe I thought if I dropped it I'd never find it again.

It was getting on for half three by this point and Ginny would be expecting me home for dinner about six. I had time. There was no way I was going to leave this til the following day. And I knew that this was going to be the weirdest metalwork I'd ever done, and I'd seen and done just about everything you could name when it came to metals.

I cranked the dial on top of the propane tank and fired up the forge. While waiting for it to get up to temperature I turned the invisible plate over in my hands again. It was light, and I mean really light. And solid too. I could see right through it.

I shivered when I thought about that spaceship again up in the big oak wood, and especially when I thought about that little silver seat inside. Thankfully it had been empty. But then suddenly all I could think about was who had sat in that seat? Where had the pilot gone? I tried to visualise him, some little green man straight out of a Star Wars movie, all black eyes and suction cups for fingers. And then I tried not to. I made the decision that I was never going anywhere near that spaceship ever again, and that the piece of hull that I was now holding in my hands was going to be the only piece of it that I was ever going to work with.

Steel curled up on her blanket in the corner of the forge and watched me as I took out a large metal tray and set it down on the bench. We use fine silica sand as flux, and I poured some of it out onto the tray. I placed the alien plate in the vice and began to cut it into small billets with the angle grinder, placing each billet on the sand so that I could at least see them by the depression they made. That was when my experimenting began, one billet at a time.

I did everything I could think of to those unseeable pieces to try and understand just what that alien material was, how it was made, how it worked. I heated it to different temperatures, hammered it, drew it out, hot worked it, cold worked it, cross forged it, even tried an etch test. But no matter what I did to it, it refused to give up its secrets and retained its principal properties, and I still couldn't see through it. I don't know what alien race from what distant planet had made this metal, if indeed that was what it really was, but it baffled me with every blow of my hammer.

By the time I'd put all my experimental pieces back in the tray I'd had enough. I looked up at clock on the forge wall. It had gone nine. The boys would long be in bed, and Ginny was gonna wonder where the hell I'd been. At some point I'd turned my phone off. I turned it on now and saw several messages.

The boys were indeed asleep when Steel and I got in, and my dinner was sitting cold on the table. Ginny barely spoke to me, annoyed that I hadn't at least called her back, and was probably a little afraid as it had gone dark and it was just her and the boys in the house. But I told her that some of the cattle weren't right and I'd had to stay with them while I did a back and forth on the phone with the vet. She seemed to buy it, more than she'd buy the truth anyway.

I spent the rest of the evening being more quiet

than she'd been, just thinking about those invisible billets still sitting in the tray of sand in the forge. What I had come across was impossible, I knew that, and yet I had just spent an afternoon with the impossible, investigating a transparent metal from a crashed alien spaceship.

But the more I thought about that invisible spaceship the more I thought about the high-security fence with the padlocked chain and the razor wire. Someone knew about the spaceship, that much was clear, but who? My head whirled with a million questions to which I had no answers, my thoughts tail-spinning groundward and out of control like a wing-clipped Spitfire. The likeliest person to know about the alien craft would be the owner of the Broken Oak Estate, Godfrey Horne. Only he, or whoever had actually named the country estate, was likely to have chosen that name after finding that tree and the thing that had crashed into it. And that person had to still be alive because the high fencing and padlocked chain were still pretty modern, and had more than likely replaced earlier fencing.

The more I thought about it the more I thought about the spaceship itself, and the more I thought about the spaceship the more I thought about what I'd seen inside it - specifically that empty chair. Where was the alien? Was it walking amongst us now? Had it replaced Godfrey Horne with a duplicate like in that film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*? Had it rigged up some elaborate communication device to call home like ET, and were there more things coming? Had it been taken away and cut up in some British-government equivalent of Roswell? Or had Godfrey Horne or even John Peller removed it and sold it on the eBay of the day?

That night had been maddening. My head

had been going a thousand miles an hour, and in all directions at once. I thought I was going to lose my mind. I went to bed with Ginny about eleven but I just lay there in a fit of mental panic, and was still staring up at the dark ceiling at three o'clock. I don't know what time I finally went to sleep but when I woke up I was alone in bed and there was a line of bright sunlight striking across the ceiling like Darth Vader's lightsabre.

The house was in silence. Ginny had already gotten up and taken the boys to school so I ate my breakfast slowly and alone as Steel stared up at me with a look of confused silence that made me wonder if something alien had taken over me. In a way, I guess, it had. By the time I'd showered and brushed my teeth I'd formed a different kind of plan.

I left Steel confused and at home for the first time, something I hadn't done since I'd got her as a pup, and returned to the forge with my shotgun. I selected one of the billets from the tray and clamped it into the vice with what I could feel was most of it protruding upwards. Then I stepped back, loaded my shotgun with two Lyalvale Express cartridges, and from a distance of approximately two metres fired both barrels at it. The sound was deafening inside the forge, and I wondered for a moment how I might explain what I was up to if John Peller or even Godfrey Horne was in earshot and came running. But I was alone in my madness and, thankfully, for the next few minutes remained so.

I had to inspect the billet with my fingertips and I was excited when I felt no damage. The surface remained as smooth and unblemished as when I'd started. The wall behind the vice, however, which I hadn't really thought about, was peppered with shot and decidedly destroyed, and was something that I would struggle to explain later. At that moment though, all I was interested in was removing that resilient and

invisible piece of alien metal, wrapping it tightly in my handkerchief, and leaving the forge with it.

I went home and rooted through my case of army paperwork, digging through it to find contact numbers I knew I had. I located the details of my old commanding officer, Lieutenant General Arther Schapp, and sat in the armchair in the sunny window and made a phone call to his office. A curt secretary answered and after listening briefly to what I had to say, instructed me to leave a message. I explained that I was a retired sapper, an experienced metalsmith with the regiment, and that I had what I felt would be hugely beneficial to the lives of frontline soldiers. She fell silent initially but then said she would pass on my message. My call was returned within the hour.

I explained what I referred to as my invention to Schapp, a metal that was impervious to gunfire, extremely lightweight and completely invisible. The applications in protecting our soldiers were infinite, I went on, restating my considerable experience and assured sanity. Needless to say, I omitted to mention the spaceship.

Schapp was relatively quiet throughout my rambling monologue, a speech which with hindsight could've taken some planning. It made me wonder whether I'd been successful in convincing him of the merits of the metal or of those earned in my career. But he remembered me at least, and our conversation ended with his promise of an appointment at DSTL, the MoD's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, to demonstrate my unlikely invention in front of appropriate people.

Schapp's secretary called back an hour after that with the details of my appointment the following week. I did no work on the estate that day, my mind just racing, and indeed it had been difficult to concentrate



on anything, including ordering mineral licks, rehangng gates and repairing the split water pipes. But seven days passed like a man dragging a truck up a hill, until I eventually took the car to the DSTL in Porton Down, the billets of alien metal wrapped up safely in my rucksack on the passenger seat beside me.

The front gate at the research agency was of course heavily guarded. Along the top of the perimeter fence ran spirals of razor wire, which reminded me of the compound in the oak wood and the spaceship inside it. I couldn't help it, but I wondered with a creeping paranoia if someone else was there right now, maybe Godfrey Horne himself, maybe John Peller, maybe someone else entirely. Maybe at this very moment someone was removing the padlock with their key and about to discover the hole that I'd cut in the spaceship's hull. What would they do to me then? Sack me? Have me shot and buried somewhere else on the estate in a second compound where no one would find me? That was when I became scared in an entirely different way. What if other people had already found the spaceship before? What if they'd been killed and buried? There could be unmarked graves all over those woods. I'd walked through them all with Steel for over a year and never once thought about who or what might be buried under there, hidden by dirt and a scattering of fallen leaves.

So I was even more nervous when I approached the armed guard at the gate. I must have looked one hell of a sight, deathly pale and trying not to tremble. The guard checked my appointment on a tablet and then opened the barrier for me. I drove through trying not to look like an escaped mental patient.

I parked in a large car park that was almost full. I picked my rucksack up from the passenger seat and followed the visitor signs to the main entrance.

There was an intercom by the door which I buzzed, and waited nervously for a response. Again I wondered if someone else was at the site of the spaceship, maybe making a phone call. Then the intercom clicked and a woman's voice asked me who I was here to see. I told her and the door clicked open.

The reception area was big and bright. There was a series of large framed prints on the walls that looked like they'd been lifted from a marketing brochure: tanks climbing muddy hills, fighter aircraft banking across white cumulus, soldiers with high-tech armour clutching rifles. I approached a sweeping desk and explained once more to the receptionist who I was and who I was here to see. She had dark hair tied tightly back and looked like she should be reading the news, bad news. She never smiled once. After filling in my details in a visitor's book, she indicated with a sharp gesture a row of seats behind me and instructed me to wait. I sat quietly and studied each marketing print afresh, my head busy once again with every potential use and application of the alien metal I had brought with me. I still didn't know what the metal was or how it was going to be reproduced, but that wasn't my problem, not any more. I know from experience that happy accidents can produce the best and most unexplainable results. If the DSTL people were going to be impressed - and how could they not be? - then it would be up to them and their extensive laboratories to figure out the details and make it all work. I was just here with the seed.

A young man in a dark suit collected me from the waiting area and took me through a series of swipe-secured doors to a meeting room where three men sat waiting for me. They stood as I entered, and introduced themselves as they each shook my hand: Martyn Jackson, Chief Procurement Officer; Howie Roper,

Lead Scientific Researcher and Douglas Hector, Senior Tactical Officer. After a brief introduction I explained once again who I was, described my extensive career as a metalsmith with the Royal Engineers and articulated my considerable knowledge of all things metal. They duly sat through my pitch like something out of Dragon's Den, nodding appropriately, scowling, but mostly just listening. Then I pulled a piece of the alien metal out of my rucksack and passed it round. I dared not place it on the table for fear of losing it. That was when the meeting got very interesting.

They passed it from one to the other with expected shocked faces, staccato exclamations and barely finished sentences. It was clear that they had never held anything like it before. I explained its merits and properties once more as they explored it with curious fingertips, holding it up to the light, looking at each other through it, all spellbound, sometimes speechless, othertimes making comments with quite descriptive profanity. I must admit that I was quite smug at that point, and watched their reactions in the same manner as I must have when I first held it.

Ultimately the meeting came down to two things, which Martyn Jackson described with more care and eloquence than I can remember. Essentially, they were these: firstly, what were my intentions with regard to my remarkable invention and, secondly, how much did I want for it?

My intentions, I explained, concerned only the safety and security of those in active military service. I saw helmet visors and riot shields, munitions-proof canopies and defences, vehicle glass, armoured panels, aircraft windows, fuselages, defensive walls, full-sized barricades. I saw literally everything that offered ultimate protection but benefited from being completely transparent.

Douglas Hector nodded throughout my lengthy and exuberant list. His eyes roved excitedly as I spoke, and it appeared to me that his mind was reeling with even more possibilities.

As for price? I stuck my neck out and managed to say fifty million with a straight face. The three men in front of me glanced at one another with a raised-eyebrow expression that implied the word bargain. There was no counter offer or smirk at my foolishness. Martyn Jackson simply leaned across the table to shake my hand and said that that figure would be acceptable, and that his secretary would contact me in due course with contracts and other paperwork. My head was spinning at the time, I cannot lie, so he may well have told me that a troop of monkeys would be waiting for me in the car park. Howie Roper added on my way out that he would need to take my sample with him for compositional analysis, which was fine with me because I had no idea what it was made of, plus I had the rest of it in my rucksack.

On my journey home I had to run the meeting back through my head several times just to make sure that I hadn't missed some important part, like all of it. But each time I replayed the end of the meeting in the fog of my mind, I remembered that I'd said the words fifty million - I had said that, hadn't I? - and saw Martyn Jackson nodding and saying yes, that figure was acceptable.

So that was my plan to save the lives of thousands of frontline soldiers and make a staggering amount of money. I returned to Porton Down a month later to sign a series of Ministry of Defence contracts, and I met with Godfrey Horne the day after my fifty million cleared in the bank. It was an interesting and brief meeting with Godfrey, with lots of unfinished sentences and knowing nods that implied more than

was actually said. We both knew what we were talking about but at no point did we actually verbalise it. Hell, I didn't even ask him if there had actually been a little green man in that thing we weren't talking about.

The essence of our meeting was that I wanted to buy the Broken Oak Estate from him. He said he wanted fifteen million for it. Given the nature of what we both knew was on the estate, and I'm not talking about the price of cattle or forecasted wheat yields, I thought it was a bargain and agreed the figure quickly and with a handshake. Only afterwards did my meeting with Godfrey seem identical to the one I'd had at the DSTL - trying my luck with an outrageous sum and being met with a straight face that immediately deemed it an absolute bargain. Still, I now own the whole estate along with its alien spaceship. And quite frankly, I had the distinct feeling that a great weight had been lifted from old Godfrey's shoulders, and that he would be both glad and grateful to be able to walk away from it and at last able to retire someplace quiet with Gladys, knowing that it was now in the most appropriate and understanding of hands.

So Ginny and I had a new house built, looking out over a lake I thought should've been there all along. I kept John Peller on as estate manager. Never once did he question me as to my sudden wealth that had allowed me to buy the place from Godfrey, although he did occasionally offer me knowing nods and other wordless expressions that implied that he too knew about what was kept secret and secure inside the razor-wired compound in the big oak wood. I also hired another farm labourer to live in our old cottage, another ex-squaddie with frontline experience and a young family to raise in this peaceful and quiet corner of our Somerset countryside. Not a metalsmith though. I was careful about that.

This was all some time ago now. My two boys are both grown up now and both serving in the armed forces, Jake training as an officer, Bradley as a fabricator in the Royal Engineers. Only Ginny knows about the spaceship in the oak wood. Well, I had to tell her, didn't I? How else do you explain fifty million appearing overnight in your bank account? Not even Mark Zuckerberg got rich that quick.

Ginny and I walked up there the day after the money came in. I showed her the locked compound with the broken oak tree and the patch of bare dirt. I don't think she believed what was in there, especially as there was nothing there to actually see, apart from that little square of darkness that you could just about see into. But she believed my bank balance, and she believed in the new life it brought. It's just the two of us in the house now, unless you include Steel of course, who I'll raise a glass to every day, who found that invisible thing in the first place, and who I hope will forever rest in peace.