

The Thunderbolt

Part 3

I must have fallen asleep, for the next thing that happened was the urgent sound of the phone ringing and there was Jim, beaming and looking pleased, for the first time for several days.

"Professor, we have had contact with the Moscow and Peking Institutes. They say they will work with us and coordinate the mission with us."

"Thank God, Jim. Well, old friendships can be handy sometimes."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Oh, never mind now, Jim. Let me have a run down of your severance plans."

"Well, briefly, and as you first suggested, unmanned craft from the East will be launched and approach the Bolt slowly, attempting to draw its fire power. I think the signs are that the Bolt can fire salvoes every few minutes but that it only does so during its present malfunction when it becomes very overloaded. So while the Soviet and Chinese craft attract the salvoes towards them, our team will approach with the heavy laser guns. The hope is that we can reach it when the energy build up on the Bolt is just at its lowest ebb."

"Yes, but Jim, remember that the Bolt has almost been attracted to energy sources that have come near it. As soon as you start using the laser gear, the energy build up in the Bolt will commence rapidly. If you are not successful first time, you may not have another chance."

"Yes sir, we all realise that. The volunteers are standing by and we only need confirmation of the unmanned activity from the East."

"Jim, I wish I could be with you."

"Yes, we all realise how badly you feel sir. But everything will be computed and controlled by the Institute. Your personal participation is not needed technically. Only it would give us all such a boost to morale to see you here with us."

Sit it was that Jim Anderson set off on the mission that could save the world a second time from war, but which contained enormous personal risk for him and his crew. Fortunately, I was able to watch it all from the shuttle cameras. The plan worked well, with the Bolt becoming temporarily exhausted after destroying nearly all the unmanned craft from the Easter Institutes. Then, Jim's craft approached the Bolt and got within several feet of it. Manipulating the laser from the shuttle craft was a fairly straightforward matter and I know that Jim had performed much more difficult tasks during his career. There was a sudden flash of light and then the camera clearly showed the Bolt severed in two. Then suddenly, a complete blackout in communication. The phone rang urgently once more and this time it was the urgent voice of Grigor Mendev, my opposite number in the Moscow Institute.

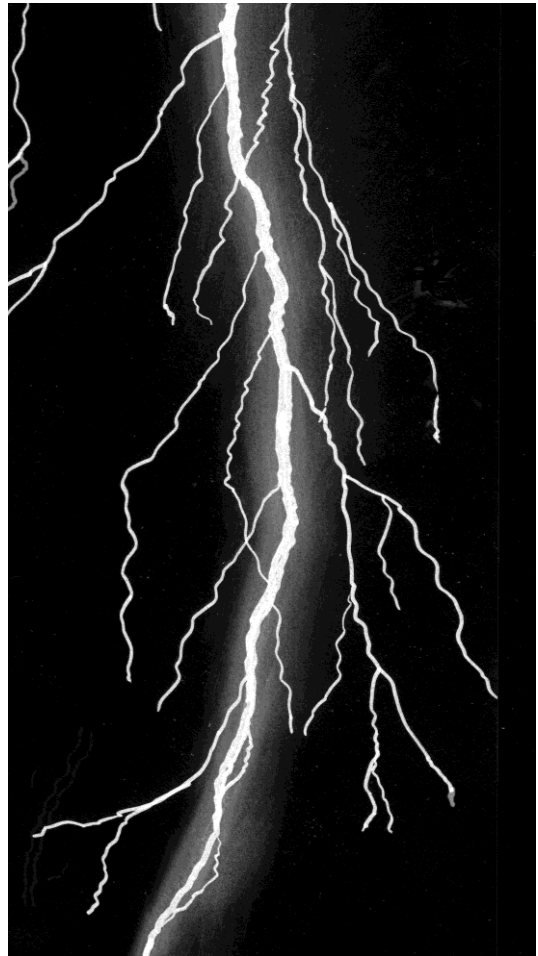
"Tony, Tony, are you there?"

"Grigor, Grigor, what a surprise."

"Tony, quickly, I only have a second or two. Let me say, old friend that I am deeply ashamed of my government in destroying the Institute. But since this is probably my last talk with you, let it be important. No time for chatting, old friend. Look, did you see what happened out there?"

"No, Grigor, the screen went blank."

"Then let me tell you that your boys succeeded in cutting the thing in two, but that has made things worse. How well do you remember your school biology, eh, Tony? Well, the worm has been cut in half, but unfortunately, there are now two worms in the sky, not one dead beast. Tony, this could be ..."



The transmission died out and I guess that it was jammed or that Grigor was interrupted by his authorities. No time therefore to question him further on his terrible news. I suppose that the whole affair must have been monitored from one of the surviving Soviet unmanned craft. So, our plan both succeeded and also made matters worse. I was about to reach out for my console to phone the President when the phone rang and one of the Presidential Aides was on the V.D.U.

"Hello, is that you Sir Anthony?"

"Yes, it's me."

"I'm sorry, to disturb you sir, but the President sends her compliments and requests that you come to the White House immediately."

"I'm sorry, but as you can see, I am in bed, unable to move at the moment. I had an accident last week and damaged my back. But, surely the President knows this? Where is she at the moment?"

"I'm sorry, but that information is confidential. Can't you get here in a car or an ambulance?"

"Look, if I were fit enough to move I would be at the Institute directing operations. I must speak to the President immediately about our attempt to sever the Bolt. It is most urgent that she understands all the implications of the latest news."

"Don't worry, Sir Anthony, she knows all the details necessary. I had better report back and get further instructions. Good bye."

That was most odd. The aide seemed rather remote and perhaps hostile. There was clearly quite a lot of activity in the corridors of power. So much that Jane had not had enough time to contact me personally. I supposed that it was all understandable and that I should not worry too much about her. It was the world that was now in need of concern. There were now two Bolts in the sky and as well as the threat of destruction from these, the nuclear threat was still building up to a positive menace. I rang up the Institute and tried to talk to Jim on the shuttle video link-up. To my horror I was told that Jim and the shuttle crew had all died in the attempt to reach earth again. The double Bolt derived enough energy from their laser guns to return fire and destroy them completely. Then, for some reason not immediately obvious, the communication with the Institute failed and so I decided to switch to one of the networks to hear at least some news from the world outside my bedroom. Instead of the usual trivia, there was a caption card bearing instruction to stand by for an important announcement at nine o'clock. I was amazed, on glancing at my bed-side table to see how late it was. It seemed like only two hours since that first phone call from Jim, just after lunch. It was now almost nine o'clock and so I waited eagerly for the important moment to arrive. When it came, I must confess that I was not ready for it. A well-known T.V. personality sat at a desk with the Senator who had stood against Jane in the Presidential election.

"Where's Jane?" I said audibly and as a kind of answer, Senator Carson informed the waiting audience that President Cummins had resigned in favour of a military Government led by himself.

The T.V. personality was obviously a confederate to Senator Carson, as he didn't even bother to ask where President Cummins was, not why she didn't make the news public in person. There was some brave talk about facing our present dangers as a nation together, and how we would never allow the Soviets or Chinese to prevent the American way of life and then, suddenly, we had a re-run of some dreary old comedy show. I switched off in disgust and lay in bed sick at the thought of what must be going on, on Capitol Hill. Jane was probably under armed guard somewhere and right now, all the military might the U.S. could muster was most likely being brought to a state of readiness for the war, which it seems was only postponed from 1988 and not cancelled.

The phone rang and it was the aide once more.

"The new President wishes advice from the Institute" he said stiffly.

"Please could you advise us of what, if anything, can be done now, from your Institute's point of view, to control the new aspect of the Bolt?"

"Nothing," I answered, trying to stifle my suspicion that this man might well know the fate of Jane.

"But can you tell me about President Cummins? Can I speak to her? Where is she?"

"No, I'm afraid that President Carson has placed Mrs. Cummins under protective custody and she is not to contact anyone for the next few days. Is there any chance that the thing might burn itself out?"

"I can't say without contacting the Institute. By the way, I was cut off last time I was in touch with them. What is wrong there? More detentions?"

"The President has ordered all communication with the Institute to be diverted through the Pentagon. In future, please do not attempt to contact the Institute yourself. The President also tells me to inform you that from now, the affairs of the Institute are only to be confirmed after the present emergency. You will receive official notification tomorrow of your new position."

"What do you mean, my new position?"

"The President will announce tomorrow that you have been relieved of your post and so, it would be better if you just concentrated on getting fit again after your accident. The President will want to appoint you to a new project after the emergency is over."

"Well, you can tell that lying old war monger that ..."

"And finally, the President hopes that you are soon feeling fit again. Good bye."

Of all the damned hypocrisy. This man had just done the impossible. He had just overthrown the democratically elected government of the United States of America. And he was holding Jane and presumably her allies and friends, under house arrest. He was dictating all scientific and political moves. He had control of the media and was probably backed to the hilt by the would-be war heroes of the Peace Generation. What a collapse of all that was so positive and ordered in our post-Pretoria generation. I suppose that if I had gone to the White House when summoned earlier, I would have ended up on house detention too. I am after all a known friend of the President. Or former President, and a well known Peace Internationalist. Now, I lay in bed and reflected that I was no longer the king of an empire. It had all vanished. The Institute was dead, in Moscow, Peking and here in Washington too. Jane was out of circulation and I had no friends in high places now. Jim Anderson was dead and his staff at the Institute was probably scattered. I imagined that the situation was very much the same everywhere at the moment.

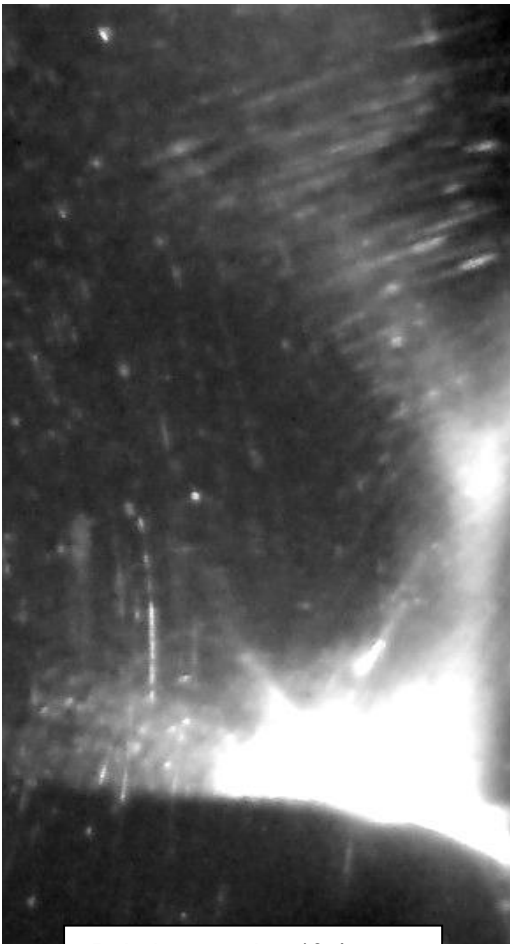
I turned the T.V. back on for the news summary. It was full of jingoistic crudities which only yesterday would have made me laugh. Today, they were the reality of life. Threats were being exchanged by the Soviets and President Carson. If only they could see how ridiculous they really are, I thought to myself. Then a thought gripped me. They would not have realised that I had in my bedroom a computer terminal tuned into the Institute Control Room. I could effectively spy on the new developments in safety.

Quickly, I switched it on and settled down to recording stealthily all the goings on so that in the future, the truth would be known. To my amazement, on switching to a new up-date text, I saw the following words:

"Bolt destroyed at 10.45 p.m. due to two sections firing on each other and burning out all energy banks. Minimal damage."

The reason for the whole emergency was no longer there. The Peace of the world need not be disturbed. No nuclear warheads were required. The world could sleep in safety again. I was sweating with relief and amazement that nothing had yet been announced about this happy development. I switched on the television for a few moments just to catch one of the many emergency news bulletins. There, to my horror, was Carson saying how much danger there was to peace from the Bolt and how Professor Barratt, supported by the peace-besotted politicians like ex-President Cummins had led the world to disaster. Now, he said, the Soviets were threatening to destroy the Bolt over U.S. territory, and so the military had been alerted for nuclear retaliation. He went on to say that the U.S. would never strike first. What a shake came on me then. He was clearly lying. He was using the Bolt as an excuse for war talk, knowing fully that it was no longer a danger. Of course, having risen to power on the fears of people, he now needed to maintain their panic in order to maintain power and justify his excesses. And he was blaming me for the war footing of the military.

I could see it all now: the talk of war, the string of deadlines and ultimatums. Then the small bomb followed by a



Bolt destroyed at 10.45 p.m.

bigger reprisal, followed by a spiral of megatons until the whole world was a desert of burning nuclear waste. What could I do? I was unable even to get up and tell people in the streets. And if I did, they would hardly believe me against the television news. I wrenched for the phone and attempted to ring a few friends. Apparently, nobody was at home. What is more, my wife had not arrived home from visiting our friends on the other side of town. I was feeling hungry. Time had passed so quickly that I had not even missed the meals or the company all day. Jean would probably be stuck at our friends since the traffic in town must by now be at chaos point with people leaving for country retreats or trying to find safe places to hide. After all, Washington was probably number one target for a bomb in the war that was almost upon us. Was I, the thought came to me suddenly, to face annihilation alone and flat on my back? And feeling hungry into the bargain? The personal side of it all now hit me and I began to fear for Jean and the family. No-one would be safe, even those living in remote places. But after worrying for so long about the Institute side of things, I had almost lost sight of my personal emotional needs. The thought of dying here in isolation without comfort from my wife or family or friends made me so angry that I became determined to stop all this warmongering if it was the last thing I could do. How to do it was not immediately obvious, but after all, I was a person who knew all the details and who could be an effective voice if only I could make myself heard.

The only real weapon in my hands was the computer terminal, which I was sure the new _president did not know about, and which was a mighty powerful machine. If only my wife were here, the whole affair would be so much simpler. And why had she not telephoned me to say where the hold-up was? Of course, the problem was probably caused by utter panic in the streets. And in the telephone exchange too, the staff had almost certainly deserted their posts and fled. It then occurred to me that my phone was probably bugged and all callers being trapped in the exchange and not allowed to reach my number. I was immobile and incommunicado. The new regime probably argued that I was therefore no threat to them. Well, I would soon show them how wrong they were. They would see how a determined person could rake trouble even though flat on his back.

I quickly set up the video machine for a recording and got out of bed to do this. I recorded a message intended for the nation and the world, and when it was safely in the can, I stored it away in the central computer banks at the Institute.

Then I had the idea of not only leaving this message for someone to find, but of a daring interception of the next bulletin and broadcasting to the world the whole truth of what was now going on with the use of the Institute's sophisticated computer. It was certainly technically possible, but would my transmission be immediately jammed by the T.V. network? That was risk I would have to take, along with the inevitable and swift reprisal at my front door. I decided not to wait until the morning, but to go ahead with the next major news bulletin at twelve o'clock, which was in a few minutes time.

In the next few moments before the news, I scribbled a few words of farewell to my wife and family and then sat watching the screen for the bulletin to start. The newsmen started off by saying how serious the political situation was and how the new administration was not to be bullied by threats, then, using the computer link-up capability, I simply blanked out the screen there, in place of the newsmen, I saw a red-eyed, unwanted and tired looking man sitting in bed wearing pyjamas. It was, to my amazement, myself. This was such a jolting experience that at first, I was unable to say anything, in the full knowledge that the future of the world was in my hands.

"Good evening, everybody out there, wherever you are. You don't know me. My name is Sir Anthony Barratt, Director of the International Energy Research Institute. I have decided to tell you the truth about what is happening today. I may be interrupted at any moment so I will have to be brief. First, I have to tell you that Senator Carson is lying to the nation. The Bolt is now totally harmless. It was destroyed over an hour ago and poses no threat to the earth any longer. Carson is using the Bolt as a means of grabbing power illegally. He has imprisoned your democratically elected President and has virtually become Director of the United States. There is no need for war. I repeat, there is no need for any kind of military activity between the West and the East. People of the world, now is the time to assert your rights to a peaceful ..."

And evidently, I was no longer on the screen. Just over twenty seconds had elapsed and I had been cut off. Had it been long enough? And how soon would it be before the authorities came here to arrest me? I must try to escape. I climbed out of bed and tried to get into my clothes ...

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The next thing I knew, I was staring up into the concerned and familiar face of my wife. I managed an unbelieving smile and tried to ask what had happened.

“Well,” drawled another familiar voice. “The hero awakes as last.”

It was Jane. Suddenly, it all came back and I tried to sit up and ask the questions that came crowding into my mind.

“Hey, relax, Tony,” someone said. “Everything is fine now.”

I smiled to myself, realising that I was in safe keeping. But I was also in some considerable pain.

“What happened?” I managed to get the words out and it was Jane who took up the story.

“Well, Tony, your broadcast did the trick. Old Carson went on television to try and discredit you, but the people heard your message and fortunately, clamoured for more detail. It seems that Carson’s military allies broke ranks and some of them quietly defected to my side again. I found myself suddenly released and propped up in front of the cameras for nationwide television. I confirmed your story and appealed for calm and for people to go back to their homes and carry on as normally as they were able. I then re-opened communications with our allies in Moscow and Peking and very quickly organised a step-down from readiness for war. Obviously, they were just as anxious to agree to this as we were. We then broadcast continuous messages of confirmation that things were coming back to normal and I am about to fly to Geneva to meet the other leaders this evening. We have done it again, Tony. War had been averted and Peace is again made possible. Carson is now under arrest for his illegal seizure of power and the world will be able to breathe freely again. Many people were not so convinced by Carson’s television appearances, but nobody could muster enough support to challenge him until your twenty seconds broadcast gave the signal for all doubters to have courage. He was left almost isolated politically and when the military allies broke away, it was virtually at an end for him. Fear of the war was stronger than he had anticipated in all except the top brass.”

“But Jane, what happened to me, and how did I come to be here?”

“Oh, nothing too dramatic, Tony. You were found by your wife this morning at the foot of your stairway at home. You were only half dressed and must have tripped up as you came out of your bedroom. I suppose you were anticipating Carson’s men coming to arrest you?”

“Mm, something like that.”

“Well, you have no need to fear, as it happens. So, you are here with a broken leg. And you are the hero of the hour.”

“Well, it was do or die, Jane. I am just so relieved that it did the trick.”

“Look, Tony, I am off now, so I will leave you to your family and hope that you recover soon. When I return from Geneva, we will have a huge celebration of course, and you will no doubt wish to get back to work putting together the Thunderbolt, Mark 2, with all speed. Until then, good bye, Tony. And thanks from all the people.”

She went and as my wife held my hand, I felt sleep come over me, and allowed it to happen. I went to sleep with such a mixture of emotions. Fear of what might have been; sorrow at the death of Jim and his crew; but enormous joy in knowing that the world was again safe for all its inhabitants. As for that Thunderbolt, maybe the time had come for me to return and spend time with the simpler pleasures of life.

“Yes.” I thought, as I looked at my wife’s face getting dimmer. “Yes, now we have peace, I am going to enjoy a bit more of it myself.”

