

Those Bastard Aliens

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Shameless plug for my band of which you should you should all go out and buy my CD immediately.

"No, I really have to go now," said Salisman sitting behind his desk talking to a client. "It looks unlikely we can come to a deal. I'm not interested in doing a deal with your record company and that's that. We started independent and we're going to stay independent and that's that."

"You could find yourself trying to jump some otherwise insurmountable hurdles you know," said Charles Bingham, the UK CEO of capitalist records, the second largest record company in the world. Second only to Sony.

"Yeah, well we don't work like that here at Alien records. We still think about the music."

"Maybe you don't understand. You'll have problems. I guarantee it."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Bingham?"

"No, not at all. No, of course not. I'm just saying, we want you under our umbrella and you'd be very wise to consider the options."

"You mean you were quite happy to oppress us all those years with your underhanded marketing techniques, making people think they had a choice when all the time the only music they could get their hands on was the music you would allow them to. And then suddenly one of these little independents grows into a big independent and you think you can just, ACQUIRE us? I don't think so. Let me tell you something, Mr. Bingham, before my secretary shows you the door, You and I are in the same business but we're like chalk and cheese. Look at you, sitting there in your suit. Is that Italian. Looks like an Italian suit. Pumping out that easy listening crap you spew out like an open sewer. I think you'll find that threats don't wash with me. There's not much you can do to me, Mr. Bingham. Not much that I can't cope with. And if you wanna make enemies, you've picked the wrong guy to fuck with. Trust me on this, Your lifestyle may depend on you heeding this warning. Don't fuck with me. You got that? Now fuck off."

Bingham was not a man use to being put in his place. He was a man used to getting what he wanted, and when he didn't, he had no emotional skills to deal with it. He jumped up and stormed off. His idea of diplomacy was to offer money and when that didn't work, veiled threats. He was use to dealing with artists and producers. People who he knew he could manipulate because he had what they needed - one of the few conduits to the music markets of the world. Something he had come to assume that everyone needed and if they needed it, generally they had to come through him. But Salisman was not such a person. He had not remembered meeting anyone like Salisman since his days at Harvard Law school. Bingham was a lawyer by trade but had worked his way up the corporate ladder of various companies till the board and shareholders of Capitalist records had appointed him the CEO in the UK. There were only 2 other people in his company who had more power than he and only a hand full of people with his level of power in the world music industry. And to have this up-start put him in his place was something he failed to cope with.

"You'll be hearing from me. I'll get you Salisman. You'll regret this."

"I doubt it. Now if you've got nothing further to offer me I've got some serious work to

do. Good day, Mr Bingham."

The door to Salisman's office flew open and the Italian suited executive flew through it and past Salisman's secretary. Leaving the outer office door open as if it would be the ultimate act of defiance. Adrianna Pilgrim was sitting reading a copy of Independence, a popular music magazine focusing on independent music. She was slightly startled by Bingham's departure, as was Philip Salisman's secretary Gretel. They looked at each other raising their eyebrows simultaneously. A few moment's later Salisman poked his head through the door.

"What did you say to him?" said Pilgrim.

"Oh I do believe he's a little jealous," said Salisman with a short smile. "Sorry it took so long. Some times you find you have to explain the meaning of the word NO. It would seem that some people have it missing from their vocabulary for some reason. I'll be with you in just a tick."

"Well make it snappy, Philip," called Pilgrim after him as he disappeared back into his office. "I was hoping you'd have time to get to know the crew a little first." She rose from her seat bending to place the Independence magazine back on the table next to her. She grabbed her coat in one hand and it dragged up her already short skirt just as Salisman reappeared with his lap-top and mobile phone.

"Ah, the legs that launched a thousand ships." he said commenting on her exposure of thigh. "Err space ships that is!"

She returned him a wry look.

"Toodlehoo" he said sarcastically to Gretel behind her desk. She smiled and poked out her tongue at him.

"I saw that." he said with a smile. He waited for Adrianna to catch up and then closed the door previously left open by Bingham behind him. They ventured past the front office of the record company where various people, some staff, some hangers-on, were going about their business. The hangers-on seemed to jump to attention when seeing him, knowing that he was the man they needed to impress. He had become use to this behaviour in the past few months since he had taken the gig with SHADO and CEO of Alien records. It was something he might have once found himself doing and now found it strange on the other side of the fence. He encouraged his staff to have a laid-back attitude but he could never figure the rest of the people that seemed to hang around. He knew they must do something but he could never figure quite what it was. He thought at least he ran an approachable and accessible organization, even if it was total chaos at times. He knew this was the key to his commercial success. That people were waking up to how much they were being duped by the major record labels and how much they wanted honesty in the music they bought these days.

"What's with that guy with the bee up his ass?" said a female voice. He turned to see it was one of his A&R people who was lounging with a group of others over a coffee.

"Don't you know who that was?" said Salisman on his way through. "That was Bingham. The head of Capitalist." He smiled.

"What did you do to him?" said another woman.

"Oh, we just had an exchange," said Salisman as he reached the outer door.

"Well I hope you whipped his ass," said the A&R woman again. Salisman smiled, opened the door to let both he and Pilgrim through and then was gone.

"Know any good hackers?" said Salisman as they walked to the car park.

"What were you thinking of having hacked?" said Pilgrim.

"Oh, nothing."

"You weren't thinking of Bingham were you?"

"Well, maybe."

"Shame on you, Mr. Salisman. You know it's against the rules to use SHADO resources to meddle in corporate affairs."

"Yeah, but he started it."

"And you wanna prove to him he's really messing with the wrong guys, right?"

"Well, just that he was pretty threatening in there. I knew we couldn't do any deals with them and I didn't want to anyway. He threatened to cause me, or rather us, big trouble if we didn't play the game his way and I foolishly said just you try it, bud, sorta thing. You know how it gets."

"Oh, so the corporate testosterone was flying round was it?" said Pilgrim.

Salisman shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you know we can't deal with him anyway. Next he'll be wanting to run SHADO his way. He's a total bastard," said Salisman stopping at the front of Pilgrim's car.

"Well, that settles it then don't it," said Pilgrim stopping to face him. "If you had just said he was a bastard in the first place we could have taken him out and shot him then and there."

"But!"

"Don't worry, Philip. I understand. But we have to be a little more diplomatic. We can't just tip our hand that Alien records is bigger than he could have possibly imagined. On the other hand he's made himself into a problem we must deal with. In the meantime we have a job to do and it's your job so you've gotta do it."

"Yes, alright. I'll follow you down there shall I?"

"No, you'd better come in my car," said Pilgrim. "It'll be too much of a problem at the security gate. It is, after all, an air force base."

Philip waited by the passenger door till she beeped the locks of her 7 litre ISO Grifo. He opened the door and slid in. Pilgrim slid into the driver's seat and acquainted her keys with the ignition. He quickly pulled the seat belt around him and clicked it in as she gunned the giant 7 litre V8 engine.

"Where do you get these wicked cars from?"

"British secret service," she said putting it into reverse.

"What?"

"No true. It's a British Secret service hand-me-down."

"What you mean MI6 had a fire sale or something?"

"Well, something like that. Every now and then MI6 need to off-load some of their stock like any other government department. Only they can't generally sell it at an auction or anything."

"I would think not."

"They destroy a lot of stuff but sometimes other agencies higher up the food chain get to hear about it and sometimes we get the opportunity."

"So you bought it just like that?"

"Well not quite. They had a fleet of special cars dating back to the 60s. They would have been scrapped but I did a deal through SHADO. I had to pay for it myself but SHADO sanctioned it. It was easy since I'm the boss now," she smiled a wry smile. "I convinced them that we needed a few personal vehicles like this for our own protection. But I'm not the only one. Have you seen Frogberg's Aston Martin? That has a few very optional extras I can tell you." She beamed a knowing smile.

"So, what can this baby do?"

"I'm glad you asked," she said as she reached the car park exit and the main road. She put her foot to the floor and the wheels screamed. The Griffon pulled 2 Gs and forced Salisman deep into the leather passenger seat.

Chapter 2

"You had better see this Colonel," said the face on the vid-phone. Colonel Keith Ford was in the hot seat, in charge in Pilgrim's office whilst she took Philip Salisman on a crash course in becoming an astronaut.

"I'll be right out," he said. He fumbled with the mass of plastic and sticky tape that constituted Pilgrim's computer terminal but gave up eventually. It would not work for him at all, continuing to give him a nondescript error message whenever he tried to access a file from the data base. He gave up and raised himself to leave, then he had another idea. Sitting down again he tapped some keys on the front of the vid-phone terminal and called maintenance.

"Hi. Ummm, how long do you think it would take you to get another computer terminal up here to Commander Pilgrim's office?"

"Is that the model LC170 Sir?" returned the voice.

"Yeah, I think so. You'd better check."

"Ok then, we can have one up to you in 10 minutes. You wanna replace that broken up one do you?"

"Well not exactly," said Ford. "But if you could just kinda set it up next to it for a while and plug it in to the network socket for the time being I'd appreciate it."

"Righty ho. You got it."

"Only do me, and possibly us all a big favour. Make sure it's outta here before the Commander returns please. There's a good chap." Ford keyed off. He looked that the broken down patchwork that Adriana Pilgrim insisted was a working computer and shook his head.

"She just does this shit to try to keep us on our toes," he thought. "Either that or she really is a bitch." He exited the room and made his way into the main control gallery.

"Ah! Colonel," came the voice of the operative previously on his vid-phone. "Take a look at this." The operative ushered him to a console and terminal.

"We just got this. Another probe went off line."

"Did the new instructions tell it to swing round and take a look at what ever it is that pulled it away?"

"Well, yes and no, Colonel. Actually we don't know what to make of it which is why we just ran it down through image enhancement and they've tried to make sense of it. Nothing conclusive Colonel, but it's pretty weird."

The operative hit a button on the keyboard and a video image appeared on the monitor. He could see a flash of stars in slow motion as the probe's camera rotated to try to get a glimpse of what was behind it. He saw a very bright star looking object flashing before it.

"What's that?"

"Oh don't worry about that Colonel. That's just the sun in the distance."

Ford nodded his head. That made sense to him but the next thing he saw did not. First a bright yellow blur on the left hand side of the screen. Then the blur of yellow began to move into the centre of the screen frame by frame. It seemed to have some out-of-focus dark patches but it held position that way with the screen becoming almost entirely illuminated in a yellow glow. Then slowly, frame by frame it grew darker till it was black as space. Finally in the last frame some pixilated static appeared and the animation stopped.

"What the?"

"We don't know, sir," said the operative. "We don't know what to make of it. Then we lost contact with it altogether."

"How many frames was it?" asked Ford.

"28 frames Sir," said the operative trying to suppress his excitement. "That's just over two seconds at half scan."

"Hmm. That's pretty quick. And you have no idea?"

"No sir. None what so ever. If you'd like to test drive a clue on this one we're all ears."

"What about telemetry?"

"Not a real lot sir. Not yet anyway. They're still patching what we got back together."

"And how long ago did you get this in?"

"Oh about 5 minutes ago. Right before I called you. Of course it means that given the distance we're talking over two hours of transmission time. What ever happened, it happened hours ago."

OK. Lets go down to the computer complex and stare over their shoulders til they come up with something out of the telemetry," said Ford as he began to move off. The operative kicked himself into gear to follow him but almost immediately crashed into Ford as he stopped dead and turned to face him.

"Two and a bit seconds you say?"

"Yes sir."

"And that's 12 frames per second transmission rate?"

"Yes sir. It's programmed to spit out 12 frames from i's base rate of one ever hour when an event occurs."

"So 28 frames gives us two and one third seconds of animation time. And what's the maximum frame rate?"

"12 frames, sir."

"Hmm. That's what I thought.

"We can't get more than 12 frames reliably due to the transmission medium and the distance. "

"So that thing had barely enough time to point itself in the direction it was being pulled and take a blurry shot of whatever it was that was pulling it when it was destroyed. 2 and a bit seconds." Ford turned and picked up his stride toward the exit and the connection corridor, expecting his minion to follow him. His minion caught up.

"Stacy isn't it?"

"Yes sir. Lieutenant Stacy Pasco."

"Doesn't that strike you as a bit odd in itself, Stacy?"

"What do you mean Colonel?" said Pasco scratching his head trying to keep up with Ford's pace down the corridor and the pace of his train of thought.

"I mean, Lieutenant, that if it was hit by an asteroid it would have been wiped out more or less immediately right?" He paused to let his minion's thought catch up with his own. "It wouldn't have had 2 and bit seconds it would have just been. Boom! And that would have been that."

"But what about gravity?"

"Yeah, but think about it. It would have had to have been damn near the size of a planet to suck it off its course like that before it smashed into it."

Pasco scratched his head as he paced along side his Colonel. His thoughts racing. None of this made a lot of sense. "Yeah, it's almost as if it was plucked out of the sky but that can't be right."

"Something weird is happening out there, Lieutenant. I don't know what but something

just doesn't add up."

Chapter 3

Adrianna Pilgrim's Griffo pulled in at the security boom gate of the RAF base. As the electric window wound down, the sound of a jet aircraft could be heard taxiing in the distance. A guard approached her with a palm-top computer. She showed him her ID tag and waited for him to identify her. He gripped one edge of the tag between his fingers as he scrutinized it. Then he typed her name and number into his hand-held computer.

"Commander Pilgrim?" said the guard surprised.

"What, maybe you don't recognise me without my cigar and moustache?" she said.

"Err no, sir. Er ma'am." He stepped back and saluted. He nodded to the guard in the guardhouse and moments later the boom gate began to rise. As soon as it was clear to do so Pilgrim hit the gas and the tires screeched a little.

"The nerve of that guy. It's two thousand and five for Christ sake."

"Oh, give the guy a break," said Salisman. "He probably just mistook you for Sailor-Moon."

"Shut up, Salisman, you asshole!" said Pilgrim as she screeched toward the rear of a large hanger, its doors completely shut including the service and personnel entrances. She slowed up slightly as she drove almost past it then turned aggressively screeching the car sideways slightly as she faced a service entrance head on and braked just in time to stop the car slamming into the lift -up door. She tooted the horn twice which sounded over-sized like her engine. Moments later a SHADO operative dressed in overalls appeared at the side personnel entrance. He popped his head through the half open door and looked around to see that the coast was clear. He waved back inside to another as yet unseen operative and shortly thereafter the garage-like door began to raise.

Pilgrim edged her car through the opening but it was dark inside and her eyes had not become accustomed to it. She instinctively flicked the headlights on and then onto high beam so that it illuminated the loading bay beyond. Salisman heard the faint sound of a clunk followed by the whine of an electric motor coming from within the car, in front of him. He didn't take too much notice as he had come to expect strange sounds from this car. As soon as she was clear of the door it began to shut. Closing off the sunlight which was streaming in from the outside world. She parked in front of the raised up loading bay which looked oddly like a railway platform, designed so that trucks and semi trailers could unload easily.

"I take it this is another one of SHADO's home away from homes then?" said Salisman.

"Yeah, something like that," said Pilgrim shutting off the engine. As she did a voice sprang to life from the car's dashboard.

"Warning. Weapons system not retracted. Warning. Weapons system not retracted."

"What now?" said Pilgrim as she opened her door and slid from the driver's seat. Salisman removed his seat belt and stepped out slowly, quietly chuckling to himself. Pilgrim inspected her car, starting from her driver's side door and working her way round to the rear. Salisman stepped toward the front of the car to admire the classic lines of the huge nose.

"Err Adrianna, I think your car has a bit of an erection up here."

"What?" said an indignant Pilgrim as she stormed toward the front end.

"Actually Two erections to be exact."

From the front just under the grill, two small ports had opened and a pair of 16 millimetre machine gun barrels had protruded.

"Are they loaded?" asked Salisman laughing in amazement.

"No, of course not," said Pilgrim as she stormed back to the driver's side door. "Well at least I don't think so."

Salisman could hear the car still speaking as she flung the door wide. "Warning. Weapons system not retracted. Warning. Weapons system. . ." There was a clunk and an electric motor whine as Salisman watched the gun barrels quickly retract back into the body of the car. The two ports closing over and becoming barely visible.

"I have to admit that's pretty cool," said Salisman. "You don't actually know what this car can do, do you Adrianna?"

"Of course I bloody well do." she answered annoyed that she would even be asked such a question.

"You wanna be careful you know. You might turn the wipers on one day and shoot someone's tires out."

"Well, you're gonna have to be careful in just a minute when you get to ride in SHADO's very own vomit comet." She stormed off toward what seemed to be a windowed wall in the interior of the hanger. She stopped half way there to turn back to Salisman who was taking his time whilst he took in all the sights. "Well hurry up. You wanna get time to get to know your crew don't you?"

As Salisman picked up his heels, he noticed several very unusual looking fighter aircraft. parked in the hanger, along with a C130 Hercules, prop driven transport aircraft.

"What are these?" he shouted at her.

"They're Swedish Grippens."

"What?"

"Grippens. Saabs. We have a few Eurofighters as well but we still prefer the Grippens. These puppies are faster and more maneuverable when you're trying to knock down a UFO. We bought quite a few Grippens in recent years coz they're so damn good."

"Man, you talk as though you were buying toasters. They are very cool looking planes though I have to admit."

"Well, you'll get to find out what they're like first hand in the not too distant future. But in the meantime, you had better meet your crew. "

They reached the door which led into the rooms and offices. Pilgrim stopped, turned and waited for Salisman to catch up, then lowered her voice to a private level.

"Philip, some of the people you're about to meet are the best damn space farers we have. They're also the craziest buggers on the planet, or off the planet for that matter. Sorry to throw you in at the deep end but you wanted the best and these guys are the best. You'll just have to watch your step."

Pilgrim opened the door and stepped through with Salisman behind her. He turned to close the door not yet noticing anyone in particular. He turned round and looked up to see Pilgrim escaping through a crowd of people, many women and a few males, all dressed in various attire from the standard cream SHADO uniform to purple overalls and a woman in a leather motorcycle jacket and pants. Her jacket was unzipped, revealing an underlying tank-top which betrayed her ample womanly form. She brushed past him with a cup of plastic coffee as he squeezed his way down the corridor chasing Pilgrim's tail, not wishing to touch anyone he came into contact with but finding it unavoidable in the cramped corridor. He noticed a great many of the people carrying plastic coffee and then spotted Pilgrim in a recess with 4 other people all milling round a plastic coffee dispensing machine. She looked up to see him arrive.

"You wanna coffee?"

Salisman shook his head not wishing to add his voice to the already noisy atmosphere.

"You sure? It's great coffee they have here for some reason."

Salisman held his hands up where Pilgrim could see them.

"Ok then. You may as well head back to the briefing room then." She pointed in the direction from which they had just come. There was only one room in that direction and Salisman had pasted immediately on his left when he came through the door. He had noticed the woman with the leather jacket making her way there and recalled seeing many seated people in there talking and milling. He rolled his eyes upward, turned and began to make his way back along the crowded corridor.

"This is like a party I went to once," he thought as he squeezed past another coffee drinking female operative. "Sorry," he said as he almost forced her to spill her coffee over the male operative she was having a heated debate with. Finally he made it to the entrance to the briefing room and stepped through feeling that all eyes were upon him. Suddenly he felt selfconscious and unsure of his surroundings. He wandered in, subconsciously trying to make himself as small and invisible as possible. He didn't know where to stand and hoped his chaperone would return soon. Finally after standing around not knowing where to put himself for what seemed like an eternity, Commander Pilgrim wandered in through the door. She was laughing with another woman, dark skinned and dreadlocks on her head. He couldn't hear the conversation but he could tell she had a significantly Jamaican accent. Pilgrim spotted him and called him over as they found an empty spot to lodge themselves.

"Philip, I'd like you to meet Captain Jeraldine Hanniford. Jeraldine. I'd like you to meet Philip Salisman."

Hanniford and Salisman both extended their hands and shook simultaneously.

"I'd heard you were one of us now," said Hanniford. "My partner is really seriously into one of your bands. Bad Sex!"

Salisman poured on the modesty. He was always humbled by someone liking his or anyone else's music on his label. It made him feel worthy.

"Ah, here she comes now," said Hanniford looking over and beyond his shoulder. He turned to see the leather jacket woman making her way toward them. Her cropped blond hair making her seem almost scary this time. She had a cheeky grin that was hard to define as friend or foe.

"Commander, Hanny," she said as she approached. "And what have we here?" She immediately ran the back of her index finger down his cheek as if testing the merchandise. Hanniford did the introductions this time.

"Steph, this is Philip Salisman. Philip, this is my partner Captain Stephanie Vourhause." Vourhause immediately withdrew her hand as if realizing she had transgressed some unseen boundary. But her cool returned quickly.

"Please forgive me, if I don't immediately fall to the floor proclaiming my lack of worthiness but you can take it as read I'm a bit of a fan of your work." She smiled and this scared Salisman even more though, like Vourhause, he remained as poker faced as possible.

"Yes umm. Jeraldine here, was just saying you're into Bad Sex."

"Yes and I like the band too."

Salisman didn't know whether to laugh or take it as a sexual advance but Commander Pilgrim came to his rescue by changing the subject.

"Philip here is the master mind of the operation. He said he wanted the best and you're

two of the best we have. Although I rather expected to see Lieve here as well."

"Oh, you mean the devil herself," said Vourhause. "We were talking to her a short time ago."

"No matter," continued Pilgrim. "We'll all get a briefing from him shortly. One thing though, you two. This mere male has never flown higher than business class. You know what I'm saying. He's a smart cookie or he wouldn't be here but you'll have to look after him every step of the way. That's why we have to rush through this basic training and get him up to speed."

"Don't worry. We'll look after him. We'll bring him back without a scratch. Well, maybe just a few scratches." She executed a tiger paw gesture opening her mouth as if to mime a roar.

"Oh, one more thing you should know," said Pilgrim. "He's happily married and it would be good for business for him to stay that way. Ok."

"Oh damn," said Vourhause symbolically stamping her foot. "I was hoping to notch up another trophy too."

"Don't worry about her, Mr Salisman," said Hanniford. "She's all mouth."

"I am not. They're all my own teeth," said Vourhause. Hanniford cautioned her with her eyes.

"You're in safe hands. I'll keep her in line," said Hanniford reassuring Salisman as best she could.

"Oh, here comes the evil bitch now," said Vourhause excitedly.

Just entering the room came an unassuming woman wearing purple overalls. She was heading in their direction but apparently unaware of her presence being required.

"Yoohoo. Wicked witch. Over here," called Vourhause so that the whole room could hear. Hanniford buried her head in her hand and shook it as if she didn't want to be witnessing this. The woman drew within earshot.

"Oh, hullo Alien." She turned and was slightly surprised when she realized Pilgrim was among them. "Oh hi, Commander. Didn't see you there. Hi Jerry."

Hanniford raised her hand to give a conservative wave. Salisman was more confused than ever. He wondered why this new comer had called Leather Jacket "Alien". He had already forgotten Vourhause's name but "Alien" stuck in his mind. Pilgrim's turn again for yet another introduction he'd most likely forget in five minutes.

"Philip Salisman, this is Captain Virginia Lieve. Captain Lieve, this is Philip Salisman. It's his operation."

"Oh, I've wanted to meet you, Mr Salisman." she said extending her hand. "I'm a big fan."

"I think half of SHADO wanted to meet him," said Vourhause, thinly disguised under her breath.

Philip was confused yet again. Leather Jacket had intimated that she was evil in some way but she seemed the most humbled of all of them. He concluded it must be some kind of in joke.

"Well, I guess it's about time we started this briefing then," said Commander Pilgrim. She looked at Salisman who had an expression of non-committal on the idea. He may have had the information but he was certainly not in command of the proceedings.

Without touching him, Pilgrim wrenched him away from the three women and dragged him toward the lectern at the far end of the room, through the conversing crowd which began to find seats as they realized something was happening.

"I'll do the intro and you just tell them your part of the bargain. Ok?" said Pilgrim.

Salisman nodded. He was really confused and out of his depth. Winging it until he could get back into synch with reality. As he stood at the lectern with Pilgrim he noticed that there were perhaps only 6 men amongst so many women. He was not good at quick estimates of people in a room but he figured there must have been at least 25 women. In fact there were 42 women and 10 men, some of whom were still out side in the corridor. The murmur in the room began to fade as more people paid attention to the lectern.

Commander Pilgrim began. "Can we have a little quiet please guys?" She waited till the room as almost silent. "Thanks everyone. I want to introduce you to Philip Salisman."

Salisman gave a little wave. He didn't know what else to do.

"It seems his reputation has preceded him but he's a total rookie in space. But his mission is really important. I want you all to help him come up to speed with astronautics as quickly as possible, and then we have to train him for his part in this mission. But it is his mission and he's the one who's in charge of getting it done, OK. Sorry to throw you in at the deep end Mr Salisman but you gotta start somewhere."

Salisman didn't know what to say so he smiled and said nothing. He resumed what he hoped was a brave face.

"Ok I'm gonna hand you over to Philip so he can fill you in on the mission's objectives."

Almost immediately Vourhause who was still at the rear of the room began clapping and whistling wildly. This quickly developed into a thunderous applause from the room such that he felt he was at one of his better performances.

Pilgrim stepped back to the microphone. "Calm down children we've got a job to do." Philip slipped back behind the lectern and waited till there was relative silence.

"Err Hi. Um. Errr." He became briefly tongue tied as he realized they were hanging on every word. "Err. Well it's like this. When we were flying back from Iceland, the aliens knew where we were, even though they didn't have a UFO in the vicinity. In fact the UFO they sent after us came in from the North Atlantic somewhere. Way north, in fact."

There was a bright light in his eyes from a projector mounted on the ceiling at the back of the room. He turned to see a map projected on the wall behind him. Then he noticed one of the purple overall covered operatives at a small consol trying to keep up with him by displaying relevant graphics. "Thanks." he said to her before returning to the story.

"They knew where we were going and they knew where we were coming from but even so the tracks showed they knew exactly where we were all the time. They made a bee-line toward us even when we changed direction and started heading back again. They must have been able to see us. It was like they had their own spy satellites. I was let loose on the database to search for anything that might give us a clue. I found lots of incidents which suggested similar incidents going back to the big incident in 1999. The theory goes like this: when you guys had that big battle with the aliens, several of the large UFOs seemed to just pass by the earth and head out to space. Reports at the time recommended keeping a look out for them returning. Perhaps sling-shotting around the sun and flinging back in. But they never came back. Well we're pretty sure. What we think they did was to release some undetectable satellites into earth orbit. This may even have been the whole point of the mission, we don't know. It's as plausible an explanation for their behaviour as we can think of." He turned to see a graphic of the UFO flight paths during that incident.

"What we think they did was place these satellites in orbit ready and then in 2001, during the big storms, they slipped the real fleet in and hid them on earth. The plan worked well enough that we've only just discovered them 4 years later. The camouflage system they used in

1999 may have just been a test to fine tune their plan. Of course what their exact plan is we have no clue but it would seem that it was all connected. We think they have satellites installed but we don't know how many or what they look like. We don't even know how to detect them. But we're pretty sure they're up there." He stepped over to the operative and asked her to display a graphic of the theoretical positions of the satellites, then stepped back.

"This is where we think they are. We don't know for sure and it's doubtful that this is all of them. But this is where we think some might be. Now you might be asking how we could deduce this. Well it's simple. We extrapolated all the incidents over the past 6 years that may have required a satellite to see our activities, then we correlated them with the kind of view they'd need." He moved closer to the graphic and began pointing to the various coloured dots in orbit around the computer generated planet.

"The red dots show the most likely targets. The blue dots show where we think some would be and the green dots are pretty much wild guesses. Areas that should contain a satellite for effective coverage. Note that we've based all this information on what we know about terrestrial spy satellite technology. We have no idea what alien satellite technology might be like." He moved back to the lectern and the microphone, aware that he had to shout to be heard without it. He looked round the room to see he still had everyone's attention and then lowered his voice almost to a whisper.

"This is where it gets kinda interesting. Normally a satellite would be placed in a geo-synchronous orbit at about 32 thousand kilometres above the earth, the Clarke orbit as it's known. At this point a satellite remains hung over one spot on the globe. Most communications satellites work this way. They need to communicate with fixed stations on the ground. If you want a satellite to scan the earth such as a weather or geological satellite, or a spy satellite then you choose a lower orbit, but as a result, the satellite needs to move a lot faster. The lower the orbit the faster it goes. At any given attitude it's a balance between the satellite being flung off into space due to centrifugal force or crashing to earth due to gravity. Ah, but you know all this so I'll get to the point. We don't know what kind of satellites they're using but we figure that given their strategy, they would need to use a bit of both. Some in geo-sync and some in lower orbits on predictable paths. What we do know is that they can't be on too much of a low orbit otherwise we'd have seen them before now. One of our drone shuttles was hit by something a year ago apparently at an altitude of 23 thousand kilometres. There was not meant to be anything up there and we have a hunch."

He looked to see that a picture of the damaged drone had been flashed up. Taken in one of the moon base shuttle bays, a large section of it was missing allowing a view of its twisted internal infrastructure.

"So we've gotta get up there and take out these satellites. But the commander has one more request. And this isn't going to be easy. She wants to somehow capture one so we can pull it apart and see how they tick. Of course, finding them is going to be the hard part. But that's why we've got to try and capture one. We're kinda hoping that we might be able to find a way of detecting the damn things, maybe even understand how they communicate exactly. And unfortunately for me, Commander Pilgrim insisted that I go on the mission. So I'm afraid you're all stuck with me."

Salisman gestured to Commander Pilgrim to finish up. She stepped back to the lectern and surveyed her troops.

"Ok listen up guys. I know Mr. Salisman isn't exactly SHADO regulation issue, but I want you to work with him as best you can. He's a smart cookie as they say and really has a lot to

offer. Even if I can't stand the way he offers it." She smiled at him sarcastically.

"When Philip first came to me and asked if he could dig around for his theory I didn't put too much in it. But as he dug deeper the evidence became stronger. Now it seems so likely that it's become crucial that we get up there and have a look. Ok any questions?"

A black leather coated arm rased from the back of the room.

"I see we have the usual question from the boisterous Ms. Vourhause."

"So how come we have to take him with us? Why can't we just get up there and get on with it?"

"I think I just answered that, didn't I? Two reasons. First, he's the closest thing to an expert we've got. It seems as though he's about the only person we have at the moment that would recognise one of these things if it popped up in his porridge. Secondly, I like a good laugh."

Laughter erupted like thunder rolling away in a distant sky. Maniacally as it occurred to the operatives in the crowd of the fate that awaited Philip Salisman in their hands. He would have to undergo an initiation of sorts. A right of passage through what had become known in SHADO as the Girl's Rude Group. When the spurious laughter had calmed Pilgrim returned to her serious command persona.

"Seriously guys. Treat him gently, ok."

Another pause as the command was considered by the room. She knew she didn't mean them to take her seriously but she knew they wouldn't take things too far because she knew that everyone knew she would come down on them if anything happened. Still she was hoping they'd give him just a little of a hard time.

"Ok, if there are no more questions, it's time for the crew to go for a ride in the vomit comet."

Chapter 4

"But what does this mean?" said Ford bearing down the neck of two telemetry analysts from the computer department. They were in the data analysis suite piecing together various profiles of what had happened to the probe. They had taken the raw data and extrapolated the various kinds of data to make in meaningful in a real sense. Positional data was mapped out so they could see how far the probe had moved in that short time. Orientation data was also extrapolated in the same way so they could follow in which direction it was trying to look as it turned to face its nemesis. As much information about what the probe was thinking at the time of the event was extrapolated and would be interpreted in conjunction with the other data. Now it was a matter of adding and subtracting the data to make that interpretation.

"Well, I'm not entirely sure, Colonel," said Rob Rath, the head analyst. "Officially I can only give you the information but I can tell you this. It was not hit by an asteroid."

"Well, no asteroid we've ever seen that is," said his offsider, Thamus Horvath.

"So, I was right then?" said Ford.

"Certainly looks that way," said Lieutenant Pasco who was sitting across the corner of a computer desk behind them. Arms folded as he pondered for himself, letting his imagination paint a picture of the probe being sucked into the unknown. Then it dawned on him.

"Sir. This must have just been a particularly fast event."

"How do you figure on that Pasco?"

"Well sir, we would never have detected the probes moving in the first place if they had been this fast."

Ford turned toward him now with a quizzical expression begging for more information. Rath and Horvath also began to swivel in their seats to face him.

"Err well, sir, I mean, we're clocking over at 12 frames. That's as fast as we go. But normally we don't wanna spit out that much information on routine recon right?" He jumped down from the table and began to pace slightly. "Normally we're sending back telemetry at a fairly leisurely pace. This is why we've not got any visual data before now."

"Yeah, I think I see where you're going with this, but that's just the visual data," said Ford.

Rath was shaking his head but Ford didn't see this. Pasco continued to make his point.

"No no. We do the same for all data. We have a step up procedure which was already programmed into the probes but it only covered essential telemetry. Basically we got back one position frame every half a second after step-up. That's all. I don't recall how many frames of positional reference telemetry we got back in any previous probe loss but it was enough that it was obvious they were being sucked out of position fairly rapidly. Still it must have taken perhaps 5 times as long in some of them. We just wouldn't have noticed otherwise. "

"He's got a point, sir," said Rath.

"Yeah, but once again. What does it mean?"

"Well, at the very least, it means that this was faster than previous events so each event isn't uniform," said Pasco. "But what it also means is that we have a chance in some future probe disappearance that we could get back a lot more telemetry than this. We're trying to reconstruct an event from not very much data."

"Yeah, but it also tells us something else," Ford inserted a dramatic pause. "It's not an asteroid and it's likely that there's a UFO behind it."

They continued to pour over the data, reconstructing and combining it in various ways until they painted what small picture they could of the event. Half an hour passed as they

pushed the data back and forth and created visualizations and then scrapped them. Their combined imaginings of the event unfolding on computer screens through the magic of high powered computer imaging.

"My brain hurts," said Ford. Probably the only man in the entire complex who could get away with such a comment at that time. "What have we got, really?" Another of Ford's dramatic pauses. He pointed to an image on the computer terminal in front of him. "I'll tell you what we've got. The probe moved perhaps half a kilometre in this direction, saw a yellow glowing thing and died. All within 2 seconds. That's all we've got. Not a lot really is it? No answers to life the universe and everything are there? We've got squat."

He threw the biro he was using as a pointing stick on the table and stepped back to sit on the edge of the computer desk behind him along with Pasco. Now both he and Pasco were sitting arms folded and sighed at roughly the same time. They looked at each other and smiled.

"Bugger it. I'm going home. Call me if something interesting happens. Like if Santa Claus and the tooth fairy land in a UFO and bring gifts of world peace or something. Otherwise I'm going to get some sleep and I'll see you all in the morning. I suggest you all do the same."

CHAPTER 5

Salisman had changed into the now familiar purple overalls. He had changed in a general changing room with both male and female staff members. He wasn't sure if he should be embarrassed about it or not. The women in the change room with him at the time said nothing but as he as almost naked, a leather clad figure sauntered in. She moved to a locker and began removing her clothes. She did it slowly and provocatively and almost in front of him where he couldn't avoid noticing.

"What? A bit of nudity got you worried, Mr Salisman?"

"No, not at all. You've seen one you've seen 'em all."

"I bet you say that to all the boys, Mr. Salisman." She removed her top and stood there in her bra and leather pants. She watched him as he donned his purple overalls over his boxer shorts, gazing a critical eye over his form.

"If you think you're going to intimidate me, forget it," said Salisman. "I don't give a toss. But there was one thing I've been wondering. Why do they call you Alien?"

She rubbed her chin for a moment. "Let me show you. Shall I?"

"Uh oh," came a knowing voice from one of the women elsewhere in the change room.

She provocatively removed her leather pants and kicked them away as practised as any stripper would. Then she drew herself closer to him and grabbed his hair to control his head. Thrusting it toward her bikini line, at the same time dragging the elastic in her underwear lower to reveal a tattoo. It was a cartoon rendering of a little green man. Above and below it the inscription read, "Come on you alien scum. Just try and abduct me ya bastards"

She jerked his head back slightly as she let go, but he remained there staring at the tattoo.

"Nice tatt" he said inspecting it further. "Never could understand why that character had that brush thing on his head, though. Where'd you get that done? Don't tell me SHADO has its own tattoo parlour as well?"

She stood back, making a humphing sound. Visibly and audibly annoyed that she hadn't managed to shock him. She returned to her locker to gather her own purple overalls together.

"Amsterdam," she said.

"What?" said Salisman putting his arms into the sleeves of his overalls.

"I got it in Amsterdam. Jerry 'n' I had a weeks furlough owing to us once and we spent it together in Amsterdam. We were pissed one night and I dragged her into this tattoo place and tried to get her to have one too. She's just too sensible, is our Jerry."

"Jerry?" said Salisman nodding. "Your partner err?"

"Jeraldine Hanniford," said Vourhause emphasising her name sarcastically as if it were royalty. "She's pretty straight for a Rastafarian bitch."

"Compared to you, you mean?" quipped Salisman.

"What, you think I'm more crazy than the others, do you? You wait till you see the wicked witch in action."

"Who?"

"Lieve. Virginia Lieve. Nice little girl, she is. You'll like her. Till you get in her way. Just don't ever get between her and an alien. There's nothing she likes doing more than killing aliens."

"Except for you of course," said Salisman dressed and ready to exit the changing room.

"Oh no, she'd kill me too if she thought she could get away with it. She's a total psychopath."

Salisman stopped and turned back. "Surely SHADO wouldn't hire a psychopath?"

Vourhause was also now dressed for action and placing her civilian clothes in the locker.

"Hey. They hired me, didn't they?" She winked at him, slammed the locker door and made her way to the exit with him. She placed her arm around him then slipped it down and pinched his behind.

"Hey, I'm a married man!" he said.

"Yeah, so what?" quipped Vourhause. "So am I."

"What, you're married too?"

"No, a man!"

After exiting the changing room, he began wandering off down the corridor toward the sounds he recognised as a control room. He was in search of the Commander in the hope she would tell him what to do next. He was suddenly and violently dragged back in the opposite direction by a strong purple clad arm. He spun round to see it was Vourhause. She was stronger than she looked.

"What? Err huh?" grunted Salisman.

"This way, Sir Philip of the newbies." She tugged at his arm again until he submitted and began walking with her in the direction she wanted him to travel. She didn't let go of his arm as if he were her prisoner, her property to command.

"The Commander said we had to look after you and I'm looking after you. You're coming with me."

Salisman said nothing and followed her. He allowed her to at least appear to be dragging him along as if she had hooked a fish but he realised that she indeed knew what she was doing. As they passed the briefing room she caught up with Hannaford and Lieve who were chatting outside the door.

"Are we ready?" said Vourhause.

"Yeah, we were just waiting for you and Tekknoboy."

Vourhause released his arm and they all headed to the door into the hanger. Salisman followed them but felt he was a lamb being led to the slaughter. He knew they'd take any opportunity to have fun at his expense but that he had to do the best he could possibly do. These women knew a hell of a lot more about what they were doing that he could ever hope to and he had to put his fate in their hands, even through somewhat reluctantly.

He followed them through the hanger and passed the Grippens. They led him to the far side of the hanger and out through a small personnel door in one of the main hanger doors. He had to stoop to make his way through it but when he emerged into the sunlight on the other side he noticed the women heading out toward a large military 747 cargo jet which was fuelled up, revved up and waiting on the tarmac.

He noticed other purple suited figures climbing into the aircraft on the stairway folded out from its recess in the side of the aircraft, more like a glorified ladder than stairs. There was nothing to make this any easier. Just the bare essentials. They reached the stairs and began to climb. Vourhause stood by the side of the stairs and insisted that Salisman go up before her. As he did she pinched him on the behind again. This made him lose his grip on the hand rail but fortunately he managed to regain his hold quickly. Vourhause was more choked than he was although she didn't show it. She knew she'd be in serious trouble if anything did happen to her charge.

"This is sexual harassment, you know," he shouted down to her. Hannaford and Lieve heard him say it from the top of the stairs either side of the hatch opening.

"Don't worry, Mr. Salisman," said Hanniford in her thick Jamaican style. "It just means she likes you."

"I do not!" shouted Vourhause back at them.

"Take it as a compliment," said Lieve. "It's not often she gets a thing for a man."

"Shut up, bitch," said Vourhause as she began to climb the stairs herself.

Salisman reached the top and Hanniford and Lieve helped him through, not that he needed help.

"Welcome to SHADO airlines," said Hanniford.

"Hope you enjoy your flight," said Lieve.

He stopped just inside the door to survey his new environment. Beyond the first bulk-head to the rear of the aircraft was a huge cargo space filled with fibreglass structures, some with windows and others simply a hatch of some kind. He just had time to take stock when Lieve took him by the hand, more gently than had Vourhause before.

"You're in first class Mr. Salisman. Up the stairs."

"Oh," he said and gazed forward to another staircase leading up to the bubbled section behind the cockpit area. She gently tugged at his hand and he followed her up the stairs. They reached the top to see 20 comfortable seats most of which were filled with purple suited SHADO personnel.

"Here do you want a window seat or an aisle seat, Mr Salisman?" asked Lieve politely.

"Better give him an aisle seat," said Vourhause who had raced to the top of the stairs behind them. "You know what these newbies are like. He'll probably wanna throw up all over someone."

"What? Like you did on that Airbus back from Paris that time, you mean?" said Hanniford.

"That was different," said Vourhause in defence. "I was coming down with the flu."

"Pissed out of your head more like," said Lieve.

"You can't believe her. She's a witch," shouted Vourhause with her hands on her hips in a provocative fashion. Salisman held his own hands up in a surrendering gesture.

"I've never seen women come to blows over me before. It's curious. In fact, I didn't know women did this kind of thing. Don't let me stop you or anything. I'm beginning to enjoy it. Go right a head. Don't let me stop you."

"We're only joking Philip," said Lieve. "We're the best of mates really."

"Well, best of bitches, actually," said Vourhause folding her hands and taking the centre aisle seat next to them.

Lieve filed in toward the window dragging Salisman in with her to the centre seat in that group. Hanniford sat in the aisle seat opposite Vourhause.

"What is it with you, err you, women, anyway?" said Salisman narrowly avoiding referring to them as chicks.

"We're the Girls' Rude Group," proclaimed Hanniford proudly.

"The what?" said Salisman.

"The Girls' Rude Group," repeated Lieve. "We sort of formed this sisterhood. Like a sort of solidarity thing amongst the women of SHADO."

Hanniford was nodding whilst Vourhause was content to let them do the explaining.

"You can meet the others after this gig," continued Lieve. "Well some of us. There's quite a lot of us now. but suffice it to say at one time there, SHADO was a bit of a boys-own operation. We soon put a stop to that."

Salisman looked around him at all the female forms sitting in the passenger cabin.

"Yes I can see that."

Then, before anyone could get another word in, an announcement came across the PA system. A male voice as if to try and even the score. "This is your captain speaking. We're about to depart so if you could do all that stuff with the seat belts 'n' that I'd appreciate it. We're going to proceed to climb to between 10 and 15 thousand metres over the military delta 2 area and do some rock 'n' roll. There's a storm front on the way but they tell us it should be clear sailing once we get up there over D2. So just relax and enjoy the ride." The PA clicked out.

They saw the light change in the stair well and the sound of the hatch locking shut.

Salisman looked out the window expecting to see the ground move beneath them but nothing happened. Then he heard the hatch locks clunk again and the stairwell fill with light from the outside again.

The PA blipped. "Err sorry, ladies, there's been a slight change of plans. Our illustrious leader will be joining us."

What seemed like an eternity passed as Salisman sat there sashed into his seat. Not even Vourhause made any comment in that time. Finally he heard some foot steps pounding up the stairs behind him and at the same time the clunk of the hatch locking into position.

"U'llo me little lovelies." came Pilgrim's voice with a triumphant and out of breath expression. She stood, then knelt in the aisle between them.

"I was going to monitor from the control room but I decided I'd like to come up and get a few laughs as our friend here learns about zero G."

"Err commander?" said Hanniford. "You might be providing a few laughs yourself you know."

Commander Pilgrim looked at her quizzically.

"I mean dressed like that."

Pilgrim looked down and realized she was still wearing her fashionably short pleated skirt and suit. Entirely inappropriate attire for floating round in zero gravity, even if only for brief periods as the 747 dipped and dived. "Oh bugger!" she said.

The vibration of the engines permeated through the seat back she was hanging onto and she slipped into the empty seat in front of Hanniford. She strapped herself in and then made an announcement.

"Anyone caught deliberately looking up my skirt will get to mop up Mr. Salisman's vomit after the flight. You all got that!" She heard someone snigger in a seat somewhere forward from her. "I heard that!"

The 747 taxied toward the runway and then out onto it. It taxied to the end, turned and waited. The pilot was given clearance and then the plane began to vibrate again, this time slightly more violently as the plane rumbled along the runway reaching air speed. Finally rotating and becoming airborne. The vibration abated and just became the noise and vibration of the engines alone. They were forced back in their seats as the plane climbed, then it banked for some time and climbed some more. After a while the rate of climb became less but it still climbed for a long while.

Salisman said nothing for the whole time. Eventually the plane levelled out significantly. Salisman sensed that the plane was still climbing but a woman from the front of the cabin stood from her seat and began to walk down the opposite aisle carrying a small lap-top computer. It seemed to be a signal for the others to release their seat belts and so Salisman fumbled for his

catch also. A short time later other people began to stand and head toward the back of the cabin and down the stairs. Hanniford stirred next to him. She put her hand on his knee and shook it slightly.

"Don't worry, Mr. Salisman. You'll be fine. It's a lot of fun." Then she rose and stretched upwards in the aisle before also heading toward the stairs.

When Salisman reached the bottom of the stairs, Lieve and Vourhause gestured him to go on through to the cargo bay. He passed the woman who he had been first out of her seat upstairs and was talking to one of the few males. He realized that they were some kind of instructor or coordinators. He was winging it and had no idea what to expect other than he would experience weightlessness for the first time this day. He couldn't see Hanniford anywhere but Lieve and Vourhause guided him past the fibre glass structures and toward another bulkhead hatch. At the end of this part of the cargo bay were control consoles. Four of them each with its own large comfortable seat complete with seat belts, set two each side of the central hatch into the next cargo bay. They led him through where several more people were milling around. Tying things down or untying things. He couldn't tell exactly. They knew what they were supposed to be doing and that was all that mattered. And it was more than he knew.

This cargo bay was like one huge padded cell. Long and narrow the same shape as the body of the 747. It was padded floor to ceiling, including the floor itself and devoid of any major structure. At the end in the padded wall he could see another bulkhead hatch. There were padded objects stacked on the floor like sacks or matts. He wasn't sure what these were, but people were lashing these to the floor and rear walls in various places. For the first time he felt nervous. He saw Hanniford at the far end talking to another operative and then she headed back toward him. The voice of the instructor bellowed as she came though the hatch behind him. He spun to attend to what she was saying.

"Ok, listen up people. This is the easy part. This is just to get Mr. Salisman use to Zero G. We're not going to simulate any work or anything like that. We're just gonna have some fun. We'll be up here for 2, maybe 2 and a half hours all up and we'll spend the first hour just having fun. You know the drill. You've all been through this before."

He noticed the short skirted Commander Pilgrim come through the hatch behind the instructor and close it. A red light covered by a protective grill came on at ceiling height and the captain's voice sounded through the PA.

"Ok we're entering Delta 2 and we're at 14 thousand. Any time you're ready."

Salisman began to shake nervously now realizing this was the moment of truth. Lieve sensed this and gripped his hand in hers tightly, giving him a reassuring smile. Hanniford gripped his other hand. He didn't resist. He appreciated it but he would have never admitted it. For reasons he could not explain he suddenly noticed how beautiful they all were. Even Vourhause. Then especially Vourhause. He thought it ironic.

The instructor stepped to a padded intercom on the bulkhead wall. Pilgrim grabbed for some conveniently located straps attached to the same wall as the instructor said something quietly to the pilot. Almost immediately Salisman felt the plane begin to nose dive. He stumbled and lost his footing. He was about to fall violently toward the forward bulkhead but then he noticed that he was in free fall instead, still holding the hands of the two women. They remained in relative positions to each other and hung there smiling at him on either side.

Suddenly a figure swam underneath him like a purple shark. He instinctively lifted his arms to grab something but the two women didn't let go. He saw Vourhause shoot up in front

of him and his actions pulled the two women in so that they collided with him. The action sent him heading floorwards whilst the two women headed toward the ceiling. They let go but at different times so that now he began to rotate upside down. It was at this point he realized he didn't quite know which was up and down anyway. He was upside down and trying to grip the floor when the gravity began to return slowly. He somersaulted over and landed gently on his back. The two women floated ever faster toward him and landed partly across him. He saw Hanniford's crotch zeroing in on his face but he was spared the embarrassment when her knee connected with his jaw instead. She shifted herself in time for gravity to return so it didn't injure him. He laughed uncontrollably.

He remained lying on the floor whilst those around him composed themselves. He felt the plane incline upward making its way for another plunge. Hanniford and Lieve both offered him their hands again to help him up. He took them both up on their offer and jumped up smiling.

"Man, that was fucking excellent," he said all a-buzz.

"Yeah, it's not often we get to have fun like this. When you're up there for real it's all serious 'n' shit but trust me. The skills you learn having fun in zero G come in damn handy at times," said Hanniford.

"Yeah, just ask Alien. She's the real Zero G fish," continued Lieve. "It's like she was born in zero G."

He saw that Vourhause was laughing and leaning hard up against the wall near where Commander Pilgrim was leaning. Only unlike her commander, she was not interested in the straps provided.

"Oh, I know what she's up to," said Hanniford. "Cannonball" she shouted.

Commander Pilgrim said nothing, content to concentrate on keeping her skirt from floating any shorter next time round but Lieve and Hanniford gestured for Salisman to join Vourhause against the bulkhead wall. They all lined up there and faced the aft end of the cargo bay. He didn't know what was about to happen but noticed most of the people in front of him fanning out to the sides and grabbing hold.

"Now when the plane dips again try to crawl to the centre of the wall," said Hanniford. "When I count to three kick off as hard as you can."

He didn't notice the plane level off but the pilot announced: "Ok I'll give you a little longer this time. We're just coming up on 15 thousand and I should be able to give you a good 90 seconds. Here we go."

The plane began to dive and the women began to make their way to the centre of the wall. Philip wasn't entirely sure how he would make it but they waited for him, not so patiently in Vourhause's case. She kicked off not waiting for the count. He reached the centre and crouched as best he could in the now exceedingly low gravity.

"One. Two. Three." They kicked off together like swimmers. Hanniford and Lieve gained more power because they hadn't allowed themselves to stray too far from the wall. Salisman on the other hand didn't quite get the spring of his mentors and moved off somewhat slower though in the right direction. They looked back at him as he floated helplessly behind.

"When you get to the far wall, turn and spring back," said Hanniford.

A few moments later both Hanniford and Lieve reached the far wall, turned as if Olympic champion swimmers and sprung back. He looked up to see Vourhause bearing down on him. He grazed her and glanced off slightly askew. He looked up again and realized he was helplessly drifting into Lieve's path. He heard an almost hollow sound as they crashed head first. Her speed and energy being greater than his flipped him round in somersaults and sent

him floorward. Rubbing her head, Lieve headed toward and glanced off the ceiling. They both met again near the floor. Lieve grabbing Salisman by the ankle. They floated toward the floor as the gravity returned.

"Are you alright?" said Lieve.

"Yeah. I think so. How about you?"

"Yeah, I'm alright. You develop a thick skull after a while of bumping off of bulkheads."

"Yeah some thicker than others," shouted Vourhause back in her starting position ready for another go.

"You kids should watch it," said Pilgrim still holding onto her straps.

"Why don't you show us what you can do, Commander," shouted Hanniford who was picking herself up off the floor just short of the forward wall.

"You know why," said Pilgrim gesturing toward her skirt. "Oh bugger it, why not?"

On the next pass they all stood back as the Commander sprung off the wall at high speed. Somersaulting and perfectly traversing the space between bulkheads. Her timing so accurate that her legs folded under her as she reached the far bulkhead and sprung back again. This time cartwheeling backwards and forward between floor and ceiling. As she reached the forward bulkhead again she stretched her arms out to absorb the energy such that she stopped with the appearance of adhering to the wall. Shortly after she floated some 6 inches away from it as the only giveaway to her technique. She still had time to flip herself away from the wall as if a piece of paper caught in the wind and floated gracefully to the floor as the gravity returned. Everyone applauded.

"Makes you sick donnit?" said Vourhause.

"That's why I'm the Commander," said Pilgrim picking herself up off the floor .

"My wife has a pair of those," said Salisman.

Pilgrim looked down to see her skirt still stuck up exposing her frilly knickers. She quickly brushed her skirt down.

"Watch it, sunshine." She said with a killer stare.

On their next ride the women, Commander Pilgrim included, ganged up and used Salisman as a football. Kicking him from one end of the bay to the other and back again.

"She shoots, she scores!" shouted a Triumphant Vourhause as a helpless Salisman connected with two of the other SHADO operatives, Amelia and Deborah, and sent them both floating to the far end of the cabin. They played like that for nearly 45 minutes, running round the side of the plane up the walls, across the ceiling and down the other wall again, using centrifugal force to pin them there.

"I'd always seen pictures of astronauts doing that," said Salisman. "I just never realized how hard it was."

"Well, it's about to get a bit harder," said the instructor. "Now you've got to try and get into a space suit in zero G. You have no idea how hard it is."

On the next pass Salisman tried to pull up the bottom half of a space suit. His every movement sending him drifting from the position he left the other parts of the suit. By which time that ride was over and he had to wait for the plane to climb again for another pass. The instructor used that time to show him how the seals in the suit worked and give him pointers as to the best methods. Zero G returned and he slipped the top half of the suit on with more success than the bottom. He checked all the seals and then connected the helmet just in time for gravity to return again. In the following 15 minutes he successfully removed and donned his space suit 3 more times before the instructor announced.

"It's time to move out into the simulators."

They led Salisman back into the first cargo bay, through the hatch in one of the fibreglass pods mounted in the centre. Once inside he could see that it was a mock-up of some kind of flight deck. He came to realize it was the flight deck of one of SHADO's space shuttles. There were only two seats in the cabin although there would have been room for 2 more. He stood there not knowing that he was supposed to do. Finally Hanniford stepped through.

"OK. Take the co-pilot's seat," she said. She gestured vaguely but Salisman didn't know which seat she meant. He had no idea what the convention for pilot and co-pilot was. He stepped toward the right hand seat.

"Wrong one, hon," she said and he quickly changed direction. He took his place in the left hand seat and folded his arms. Hanniford grabbed a headset which was hanging above her and took her position.

"Ok so this ain't how it'll be. But we don't have a mock up of the cargo bay for you to mess with so you're up here today."

Salisman sat quietly. She reached over and above him and grabbed another hanging head set. Then with a slightly impatient gesture she thrust it to him.

"Here. You'll be needin' this."

He looked it over for a second and realized it was a standard issue SHADO head-set. No cables but a digital channel selector on the side. It was designed to communicate with a local transponder but it was a smart device. It could be worn inside a space suit and its channel controls could be manipulated remotely as well, so it could be set up to send and receive without the user having to manipulate it directly if need be. This was mandatory inside a space suite since it was generally not possible to get access to it once the suit was closed and pressurized. He quickly slipped it over his head and adjusted it. He heard a few voices from time to time.

"Panel simulation up and ready."

"Copy that. Have we got anything for the telemetry simulation sequencer?"

"Err that's a negative at this time. It will be generated from the real-time simulation directly."

There was another pause as he stared into the pitch black window in front of him trying to imagine what it would be like in space. He heard more voices.

"Visual simulation is buffered and read."

"Ok, bring it on line, please."

Suddenly Salisman's imagination sprang to life. A star field appeared in the portal. Hanniford looked up from what she was doing to check the view but quickly returned to her duties.

"Ok, onboard systems now generated and ready."

"Roger that. Punch it up."

The vast array of instruments on the dash board in front of him sprang to life. Previously where there were only a few static pilot lamps lit, was now a-buzz with flashing activity. LCD panels displaying all kinds of flight data sprang into multi-coloured action. So much information displayed at once that he could only see it as a disco for his amusement rather than any serious information that may be telling him about his pretend environment. He looked above him and then around him and noticed that nearly every surface had at least some controls on it and most of it was flashing or brightly lit up. Slowly some of it started making sense. First a display like an artificial horizon. It didn't quite make sense to him since there was

no horizon in space but he realized that it was a shuttle and that its job was also to fly in the atmosphere of Earth. A strange display caught his eye which looked like some kind of radar scanner. It was broken into 4 segments like a Maltese cross, each segment with a scanning beam sweeping backward and forward. Either side of it were some buttons, illuminated types with circular arrow icons of various orientations. He stared at this panel for some time trying to make sense of it but nothing came to mind.

"What's this for?" he asked Hanniford and pointed to it.

"Oh that's just the main radar array display panel."

"So what do the buttons mean?"

"I suppose next you're gonna ask me why the sky is blue eh?"

"Well that was on my mind actually but the buttons caught my attention first."

She sighed at being distracted from her preparations. "Ok. Out there. Well if this was a real space ship. Out there would be a series of radar scanners. They look in all directions. Those buttons select which of the various orientations that display will look. Lateral, vertical profile etc. You follow?"

He nodded

"Don't worry about it, hon. A lot of this stuff will become clear in the simulations but it's just to give you some idea of what to expect." She returned to hitting switches and twisting knobs. Salisman returned to staring at the scenery with his arms folded.

"Ok, Mr. Salisman," came the voice of the instructor through his head set. "This is some pretty basic stuff. We don't have a mock up of the new service shuttles that you'll be using and we can't simulate a space walk which you might need to do. But what we can do is allow you to zap a few digitally generated satellites in high earth orbit. Which should at least give you a feel for what you can expect up there."

"You'd better strap in, Philip," said Hanniford. They spent the better part of another 45 minutes zapping imaginary satellites with an imaginary plasma weapon. Salisman staggered from the simulator into the cargo bay where upon he was immediately seized by Virginia Lieve.

"I convinced them to let you have a go in a real space craft just for kicks."

She tugged him down to another fibre glass box. Longer and narrower than the one he had just come from. She pushed him through the hatch and then climbed in herself, closing the hatching behind her she quipped: "Welcome to my world."

She let out a brief but undeniably maniacal laugh. She bounded to the front of the simulator and into the pilot seat. The only other seat was amounted to a kind of turn table with a control panel, displays and joystick handles.

"Start the sim before we go zero G," she said over the comms link.

Salisman looked up in her direction and noticed the window filled with stars. Then suddenly they began to move and the simulator bumped. Unlike the previous simulator, this one was on hydraulic mountings and began to rock and buffet. Not a great deal but enough to jolt him into a new height of awareness. A few seconds later he was weightless and realized he wasn't strapped in. The first jolt of the simulator sent him drifting out of his seat. He grabbed one of the joy stick handles and pulled himself back to the seat but as he did so he squeezed the trigger. A firing sound screamed out from around him somewhere and there was a flash. He looked dup to see through the cabin window the Lieve was hot on the tail of a UFO. He quickly strapped himself in and noticed his display had a similar view. One of the joy sticks rotated the turntable and the view rotated at the same time. He pushed it forward and the

turntable oriented it self forward. He quickly got the hang of it, found the target cross hairs and was on the case.

Lieve meanwhile was laughing maniacally as she flipped the safeties off her own set of weapons controls. There were flashes of light all round then a very bright one. She squealed and clapped her hands. The simulator jerked and the star field in the window spun as Lieve re-directed the space ship the chase another UFO but the gravity returned.

"Ok, game over," came the voice of the instructor.

"Oh damn!" said Lieve. She unbuckled and jumped from her seat in the cockpit. Salisman also unbuckled and was rising from his own seat when Lieve descended upon him. Hugging him till he through he couldn't breath.

"Was that fun or what?" she said, spinning him around. She let go of him just in time for the hatch to open and she pushed a startled Salisman through it. Right into the waiting arms of Vourhause.

"Oh no. What are you going to do to me now?" said Salisman reaching the point of exhaustion.

"Err nothing," said Vourhause. "I just came to help you out."

"We go home now?" said a weary Salisman.

"We go home now," said Vourhause.

"Well, did I make enough of a fool of myself for you Commander?" said Salisman as he slumped in his seat on the way back to the air base.

"We'll make an astronaut out of you yet, Mr. Salisman," said Pilgrim.

CHAPTER 6

Colonel Keith Ford was on his way out of the underground headquarters in West Harlington. He had stopped for a coffee and to review some modifications which he had to approve to some of the communications systems. He had down loaded the data to his lap-top from the new, temporary computer terminal in Pilgrim's office and was heading down the corridor toward the secret office which would elevate him to the surface. Colonel Virginia Lake approached him from the opposite direction. Ford had surmised correctly that she had just come from the secret office.

"Hello, Virginia." He said. "You on this side of the world permanently now?" She stopped to chat.

"Well, for the time being at least. It's too cold up here after spending all that time at the beach. Actually I wanted to catch you. I have to head out to the air base shortly. The girls are getting together out there and I have to do some systems reviews on the air fleet. But I was wondering if you could fill me in on what's been happening with those probes. I have an idea that might be of some use to you."

"Oh ok. Yeah, we could sure use some fresh ideas. Best thing to do would be to come back down to the computer department. I've just come from there in fact. We had our first take at the problem but the telemetry isn't very useful, I'm afraid. What did you have in mind?"

She put her arm around him, as friend's often do, and steered him back to the office.

"You never married did you, Keith?"

"No I didn't," said Ford, wondering where this was leading.

"You're not? You know?" She extended her arm and dangled her wrist in a limp fashion.

"Oh, that. No, I don't think so. Or at least, I've never really had the opportunity to find out."

"Ed always worked you too hard and now you work yourself too hard. That's why I got out and went into research. I knew I could only stand so much stress."

"Oh I don't find it too stressful, I guess. I think the whole organization is less stressful these days than it was. Damn we were under stress when we first got going. Straker use to ball me out every second day for some damn reason. Took him years to lighten up."

"Did he ever really lighten up?"

"Hmm. I guess not really. But I think Doug Jackson had a word to him at one stage and he realized what effect he was having on everyone else."

"Heh Heh. Ed never liked Dr. Jackson much, but he always listened to him."

They reached the office. The replacement terminal was installed and the old broken one that Pilgrim insisted on using sat motionless in the corner. Lake gave it a scrutinizing eye as she took up a seat at the desk. She placed her lap-top in front of her as Ford reached the other side and brought his own terminal to life. He looked over at her lap-top.

"You need to get one of these." he said reefing a small plastic box the size of a pencil case from his pocket. He opened it and handed across to her.

"What's this. An organizer?"

"Nope!"

"Err a Windows CE box?"

"Nope!" he said with a large smile. "It's a full 500 meg alpha station."

She turned the display to face her and saw that it was a miniature high resolution colour display. A miniature QWERTY keyboard adorned the lower half like an organizer or a CE box

but the buttons next to the screen were unfamiliar. It had a large area for a speaker.

"Voice activated!" said Ford. "It's got two 200 meg strong-arm processors just for the speech stuff. 2 gig of ram all battery backed up. No hard drives. The programs run straight out of ram."

"Boys and their toys," said Lake, trying not to be impressed.

"No, you don't understand," insisted Ford. "It will do everything your lap-top will do and fit in your pocket. It has a built in receiver for SHADO-NET and even radio and television. The only thing it hasn't got is a fold out satellite transceiver. This isn't standard issue yet but we're looking into it. If they all go well, everyone will have one of these in their pockets. We're looking into ways to make it into a personal communications device as well but there are a few problems with that. I can get you one if you'd like?"

"You know, Keith my dear, that's the closest you've ever come to propositioning me. I guess I should take you up on the offer while you're hot on the idea eh?"

"Er. Eh. I. I only meant. . ."

"It's alright, Keith my dear. I'll have one. You are a sweetie in your own way, aren't you?"

She smiled, lent forward and ruffled his hair. Ford had no idea what to make of this behaviour let alone how to react. He tried to ignore it. He tried to pretend he was invisible but Lake took the next move.

"So Keith. What bout these probe problems?"

"Oh err. Yes well. We have to wait for one to disappear which takes longer than the two and half odd seconds it took the last time. We believe there are longer ones but we can only get off 12 frames a second. The other telemetry didn't tell us much more than we already knew."

"So tell me Keith. What telemetry don't you need?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well I would have thought skin temperature of the probe would have been a bit of waste of computing power for a start."

"Oh I see what you're getting at. You want to cut down on the amount of data being sent."

"Well yes, but not quite." Lake composed her self for a lengthy explanation. "I'm not just talking about cutting down the data transmitted, I'm talking about saving CPU cycles not having to process the raw data and transmit it. In effect giving us some spare on-board computer power."

"Oh yes I see. But what do you what do you need more CPU power for?"

"I'm glad you asked!" said Lake now beaming with a wide smile. "Suppose we only transmitted the telemetry that was absolutely necessary."

"Yeah, but that doesn't help us much. The biggest chunk of bandwidth from the probe is the image data."

"Hold on, wait a minute," said Lake holding up her hand. "There's another bandwidth to consider. Right. Imagine that the computer up there is now just ticking over. Hasn't got much to do any more because you've stopped monitoring non-essential sensors. Right? Ok. So then we can run a little fractal compression algorithm and severely crunch the data."

"So how many frames does that buy us?"

"Oh I dunno exactly until I can get my team to have a look at the probe's software but we figured it might buy you between 60 and 100 frames." She sat back placed her hands behind her head and beamed a smile that was all smart-ass.

"Jeez 100 frames? Really? How is that possible?"

"Well it's simple, my ol' friend. Fractally compressing the remaining data takes a lot of CPU cycles but the beauty is that you can push a lot of data down an extremely narrow bandwidth. And there's a bonus. Using fractal compression allows us to read between the lines as it were. We can reconstruct data that wasn't even transmitted. So enhancing images is pretty successful. Whata ya think?"

"Sounds like a plan. When can we get on it?"

"Right away, Keith my dear. You just get your boys to send my girls all the source code back in Australia and they'll revise you a program to do the compression. You'll still have to simulate it back here because we don't have a probe sim but we do have a reasonable expertise in fractal compression."

Keith picked up the intercom phone and pressed a few buttons.

"Hello who's that... Horvath, good. I'm glad you're still there. Listen carefully, here's what I want you to do..."

CHAPTER 7

Salisman was in line waiting to exit the 747. He wasn't feeling too good and knew exactly why they called it a vomit comet. He had managed to maintain his dignity but had remained largely silent on the way home. It didn't help that the woman sitting behind him seemed to be growling at him from time to time. He didn't know why, but nearly everyone he had met that day was weird so he had tried to ignore it. He thought the worst was over but the bounce of the touchdown was the final straw. Now he was just hoping to get off the plane and down the ladder to terra firma where he hoped he'd stabilize.

He made it to the door and waited while Hanniford and Vourhause stepped down the ladder. The woman who he thought had been growling at him stood behind and slapped him on the back.

"Motion sickness hu?" she said with a menacing smile.

He turned to look at her. He nodded as he began to perspire profusely. His body temperature rose as he turned to try to traverse the stairs. He grabbed each side of the doorway and then it happened. His stomach muscles convulsed and brought forth its contents. Vourhause felt warm rain on the back of her neck.

"What the fuck?" She rubbed its wetness and noticed there were chunks. Salisman's stomach heaved again as she looked up. This time she saw it coming and began running. Salisman's half digested lunch trickled down the ladder and over a patch of tarmac.

"Ah, what a familiar smell," said the woman behind him. "Butyric acid and kerosene. That's my kinda perfume. Smells great don't it?"

As if to fulfil her wish Salisman's stomach heaved once more. When it had finished, a number of heads poked through the doorway around him. Peering over at the runny mess.

"Christ, we're gonna have to walk through all that now," came a disgruntled voice from behind.

"You bastard!" came Vourhause's voice from the ground in front.

Salisman waited for a moment and realized that despite the smell he now was feeling much better. The perspiration that poured off his body a moment earlier, in conjunction with the breeze that was blowing, provided ample refrigeration. Cooling him down and making him feel much better. A moment later he felt confident enough to traverse the ladder. He could hear the annoyed mutterings behind him as the world spread that he had thrown up on their only exit. Someone shouted an order for some thing with which to at least wipe the hand rails clean. He stepped off onto the tarmac but his foot slipped in a small puddle of vomit. His balance gave way sending him hurtling forward and to the ground. Fortunately he cleared any other vomit but landed hard. He saw several pairs of purple clad legs running toward him.

"Are you alright?" said Vourhause laughing. He felt hands grabbing him under the arms and lifting him to his feet. The women who had lifted him, looked him over for a moment to see he was stable. Once his feet again they looked for damage.

"Not too bad," said one and she dusted him off. Vourhause stepped in, held his chin and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Men!" she said aggressively, shrugged her shoulders and stormed off toward the hanger.

A short while later Salisman sat on the bench in front of the locker he had chosen. Wearing only his underwear and his head in his hands. He wished he could have enjoyed the experience. Before he became involved with SHADO the vomit comet would have been his idea of an E-ticket ride. Now he wasn't even sure if he wanted to go into space. For a moment

he had considered himself being just as capable as any of SHADO's other heros. He was as fit and healthy as the best of them but some how he was realizing that he wasn't cut out for this life. But then he realized why he didn't want to join SHADO in the first place. He was a musician after all. He was thinking he was about ready to get dressed and inform the Commander he had conceded defeat when someone sat either side of him. A hand rested on his shoulder. He looked up and saw it was Hanniford and Lieve.

"You did well boy," said Hanniford. "I don't know anyone who's gone 2 and a half hours in the vomit comet without tossing the salad. The fact that you managed to hold it back till you reached the ground suggests you have a fairly good resolve."

"Yeah, and the way you got use to being the football in zero G. Well, you learnt how to cope with zero G pretty well I thought," said Lieve. "Even when I threw you around in the sim."

"Don't pack it in just yet," said Pilgrim who had moved in behind him. "We'll make an astronaut out of you yet.." He turned to see her stressing a reassuring smile. He reciprocated and she began to move away. She turned back.

"Oh, by the way, Philip. I wanted to put in an appearance at the Dog 'N' Gun for a little while before I drive you back to London. I don't often get time to socialize with the GRG these days so if you wouldn't mind...?"

He shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

"Err Yeah, sure. Whatever you like. I take it the Dog and Gun is a pub or something?"

"Yeah, it's a local watering hole. We all use to drink there when I was stationed down here. I don't often get to be sociable with the ol' GRG these days."

He didn't know what the GRG was. He had heard it mentioned a few times but he assumed it was some kind of elite group within SHADO. He turned back and considered getting dressed once more and then remembered the Grippens. "Err Commander. Am I still supposed to go up in a Grippen tomorrow?"

"Oh yes of course I forgot about that. What did you tell your wife?"

"Well I left it open, since I didn't know. I said I might be home tonight but that I had to go back on the set in the morning. She thinks I'm helping shoot a film clip." He grimaced. He didn't like having to lie to his wife but it was part of the job. He was coming to realize that part of his whole life was lie.

"Well, Ok then," said Commander Pilgrim. "I think Colonel Lake is coming out here in the morning so she can bring you out. We need to arrange better clearance for you for these kinds of things, I guess. Someone will have to buzz you in for the time being." She turned toward the exit and shouted over her shoulder. "Don't worry Philip, we'll work something out."

Hanniford, Lieve and Vourhause had left him alone to get dressed. He had packed two extra changes of cloths in his bag before he left which was just as well if he was to be socializing. Not that he felt much like socializing. He felt that despite his best efforts he had made a fool of himself that day. That nothing could truly redeem his reputation.

He felt more out of his depth than ever. He wandered out into the hanger. People passed him going about their business, some still in their purple overalls, some in civilian clothing. Many of the women were dressed similarly to Pilgrim, short pleated skirt, shirt, tie and blazer. Some wore tops that resembled sailor suits. It was the fashion. Over the past few years it had become a symbol of woman's power dressing to wear suits cut like school uniforms. Some went to extremes to look like Japanese school uniforms. The cut was more business-like usually but he figured it must have had something to do with using sex as a weapon. His wife

Janet tried to explain it to him one day but it didn't make much sense to him. All he knew is that he wasn't supposed to see it as a sexual thing. Or at least, not admit he saw it as a sexual thing. Somehow he could never avoid the look of those long legs disappearing under a short skirt.

He saw Commander Pilgrim in her own school-uniform-esque attire and headed in her direction. She was talking to one of the few males he had seen that day. He was wearing a smart but casual suit, a blazer style suit jacket and black tee shirt underneath. The trousers had two carefully considered pleats running down the front. Salisman wondered how long it would be before the men, in trying to compete with the women, began wearing pleated skirts as well. Kilts perhaps. He felt as though on top of everything else that had happened that day, he was also becoming a fashion anachronism. He briefly scanned his own clothing. A 3-button, printed, knitted shirt and cargo pants. Perhaps practical on the disco floor but not up to speed with this lot. He made a mental note that he should buy some new cloths. A whole new wardrobe perhaps. It was not like he was cash strapped. SHADO employees were nothing if not paid handsomely. And he was being paid very handsomely. So handsomely in fact that together with the very real income he as generating as head of one of the biggest independent record companies and other investments, he had to hide two thirds of his income from his wife.

He stood there daydreaming about clothes until Pilgrim snapped him out of it.

"Are you coming?"

He looked up and saw she was moving off toward her car. He noticed a black leather clad figure with a crash helmet heading in the same direction. He moved off toward the position Pilgrim had parked her Iso Grifo and realized that the Harley Davidson motorcycle parked in the hanger obviously belonged to Vourhause. A motorcycle that seemed to dwarf her as she approached it. The Grifo beeped as Pilgrim pointed her keys at it. The beep seemed to echo around the hanger. Pilgrim was already sitting in the car by the time he reached it. His last stride toward it was a seamless motion as he fingered the handle, opened the door and slid in. He noticed Pilgrim had her legs still hanging out of the car with the door open.

She was staring at her face in the mirror of a makeup compact she kept tucked in the keeper attached to the door. He wondered what else she might keep in there. A gun perhaps. She finished her grooming and swung her long legs inside. The keys met the ignition and the engine started. He noticed that with the doors open, the 7 litre V8 engine sounded like an aircraft engine reverberating in the hanger. They slammed their respective doors at the same time and Pilgrim grabbed the gear shift, aggressively throwing it into reverse and planting her foot down at the same time. The car lurched backwards throwing him forward and then suddenly a brief screech on the concrete hangar floor. It threw his head back into the head rest.

"Damn!" said Pilgrim. Salisman looked behind and saw a steel plate effectively blocking the view. Then he noticed Pilgrim fumbling with the gear lever. He heard a motor winding behind him as the steel plate retracted into its bay just behind the rear window.

"There's this little recess behind the gear lever," said Pilgrim. "I must have accidentally flicked it with my thumb."

Salisman burst out laughing. More in amazement than anything else but laughter none the less.

"Oh you'll laugh alright if I accidentally fire off the ejector seat."

"What?"

She reversed again, this time being able to see where she was going through the rear

window. She came to a stop when she had swung wide enough and threw the car into first gear. A small screech of the tires as she headed for the small garage-like door. It opened just in time for her to scream through it. Salisman realized she couldn't have known if there was any traffic on the other side of the wall and remembered his seat belt. He strapped it around him as she screamed out across the airbase heading for the exit.

"So the rumours are true then?" he said.

"What rumours? I'm not gay if that's what you mean."

"What? Aren't you? No, I mean about these MI6 cars. I heard they had all kinds of gadgets on them. I just didn't think it was particularly true."

"Oh yeah. It's got rockets and guns. Well you've seen the guns. It's got things that extend from the hub-caps. I still haven't worked out what they're for. And it's got this groovy drink holder." She extended a plastic tray with a loop made out of metal behind it from its receptacle just above the ash-tray. It illuminated green when fully extended.

"I'm sure it's not a drink holder really. Fact is I don't have a fucking clue what it is. It's not like this car came with a manual or anything."

She screeched to a halt at the security gate and flashed her ID at the gate staff. He saluted her and opened the boom gate on the exit side. She planted it and screeched out. It seemed to Salisman that she simply floored it onto the main road without looking. He was really beginning to worry about her driving. Or more to the point, being a passenger in the same car she was driving. It seemed to him that she assumed that the sheer brute power of her car would outrun any danger on the road. So far the strategy had worked but only for the fact that there were no other cars on that part of the road at that time.

They had been driving at a fairly high speed for a few minutes when he noticed a black object pass them even faster. He recognised it as Vourhause on her Harley. She passed them with a loud roar then rapidly disappeared in the distance. Pilgrim made no attempt to catch up and for that Salisman was relieved.

"You'd think you people had it dangerous enough on the job. Without having to add to the danger after hours," he said.

"It's the adrenaline," said Pilgrim. "Once it gets you it's like a drug. You just need it. Some people need it all the time. There's been lots of studies into it. Can't say anyone has come up with a solution. Well, none except for getting more of a rush. I heard of a cop in the flying squad once, who got such a rush from his job that he had to take up robbing banks when he was off duty." She smiled.

"We're not going to rob a bank, are we?"

"What on our salary? That would be like taking a pay cut."

"So what is this GRG thing anyway? Some kind of special services or something?"

Pilgrim laughed. "Yeah you could say that. It stands for Girl's Rude Group."

"What?"

"You heard. Girl's Rude Group."

Salisman didn't have to say a word. His silence begged her to explain.

"Well you see some of us girls were beginning to become a handful in SHADO. It started out that we were kind of proving ourselves. Colonel Lake remembers when women were considered to be less capable than men in SHADO. I'm told that SHADO was never as bad as the real world because everyone is recruited on their abilities."

"Everyone except me," said Salisman.

"Yes, everyone except you. But we're working on it. Anyway women started to take more

active roles, but eventually some of us became too, too, well too rude I guess, for the rest of SHADO. So we formed the Girl's Rude Group. There was just a few of us at first and then we invited some of the males to join and then the news spread. It was kind of a club within SHADO."

"So are going to check up on them or something? I mean you said we' but you're the commander."

"I wasn't always the commander. I use to mix it with the best of 'em. No-one ever fucked with us. Even Straker was a bit worried once. But then he found out that one of his closest allies, Colonel Lake, was a founding member and he knew when to give in. Besides we may have been a bit over the top but we were still SHADO operatives. What were they going to do, sack us?"

"Couldn't they have just. Well you know..." He put his finger to his throat and made the cut-throat gesture.

"Bump us off? Hardly. Good SHADO operatives are hard to find. Even harder to train. Bumping people off is an extremely last resort. We've only had to do it, oh, perhaps 36 times."

"What!"

"Just kidding. We've never actually had to do it, if you don't count all the bad guys we've had to deal with."

"You mean like that Perters guy?" Pilgrim nodded.

"Although we didn't get him, did we?"

"Have there been others?"

"There have been some people who got in the way so to speak. That kind of thing. But we always seemed to work something out. Rest assured though, we certainly have the authority to do anything. You know I killed a guy recently?"

"What? Did you?"

"Yeah, with my bare hands, too."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. I walked into a chemist one night, I was in a hurry and these two idiots tried to rob the place. The problem with most hoods is that they lack, oh, about 10 years of training and experience. I sent one into a display rack and killed him. I have to say that I didn't mean to exactly but he did piss me off. The reality is that most of us literally have a licence to kill."

"I'm not sure I want to know."

"Well I'm telling you this because I want to be honest with you. I know that you still have your safety mechanism in place. I know that if anything happens to you we're exposed and we can't afford for that to happen. What's worse is that the mission you're about to go on, any mission really, is dangerous. You really have to decide what you're going to do. If you're going to be one of us or if you're going to lame it out. And I know that's got to be a hard decision for you. I guess you still don't know if you can trust us."

"You didn't make it any easier did you? I mean telling me all that stuff."

"Maybe not. But I wanted to be honest. You know what's at stake here. This is bigger than all of us. But that's why we get the big bucks."

"And that's why all the others resent me? That Alien woman and Jeraldine Hanniford." Pilgrim craned her head and laughed.

"No no, you've got it all wrong. They're like that all the time. Like with everyone like." She continued laughing. It was mildly contagious and Salisman broke from his worried expression to a smile.

"Don't take them seriously, Philip. Trust me on this. We're part of the GRG and we're all like that. I guess everyone in the GRG is trying to be more outrageous than the other. And if they can't do that they try and be outrageous in their own way. You see a lot of people join SHADO after having been the weirdest kid on the block. Know what I'm saying? Some of them are pilots that were too outrageous even for the military that recruited them. We've recruited hackers and ex-spies. Even the occasional ex-assassin. You've met a couple."

"You mean those goons that were following me in Iceland?"

"Yeah, those two morons. They were part of one of General Henderson's little schemes at one time."

"General Henderson?"

"It's a long story. But they join SHADO thinking they're pretty over the top and then they realize they're pretty tame compared to some of the hard core SHADO operatives. Especially some of the women. And they don't come much more hard core than the GRG."

"Why is that? The women thing, I mean?"

"Oh. Well we've talked about this a lot. I guess it's like, well, me for instance. I came from the Canadian air force. I'm actually from Nova Scotia the same as you. I was so used to having to prove myself that I was as good, if not better, than all the males that when I joined SHADO I just went over the top. And in reality, my job in the air force was basically search and rescue. I used to fly those F104s and go looking for lost sailors and stuff. But someone like Vourhause, err Alien, She was hard core US air force. A real top gun. She was so good that they wanted to make her an instructor, but we got to her first."

"What about her friend. Hanniford?"

"She's NASA. You can tell. But they just clicked right off. The psychology department basically recommended they be kept together. That's another story but the psychology department has had to cope with some extreme challenges over the years. The conventional wisdom was that SHADO operatives shouldn't, how would you say, fraternize with each other. But that's all changed now. A lot of conventional wisdom in psychology has been turned on its head since SHADO's rules were set in stone."

"So you think I should just ignore them when they give me a hard time?"

"Oh well, not exactly, perhaps. Ummm. Just kinda go with the flow. Just recognise that Alien is over the top and that Lieve has an evil streak and others have their strange traits that might be a little confronting. But I can tell you this. If I'm ever in a scrape, there's no-one better to have around. When it really counts they'll never let you down."

The car had driven off the main highway and into a village. Through the main street of a relatively quiet country town and slowed when it reached an old hotel building - the Dog and Gun. Pilgrim gently turned it into the car park. The sound of rubber against bitumen changing to the squelch of slightly wet gravel under the wheels. The night was falling fast and Pilgrim had the headlights on, flashing them to high beam when she reached the car park. They illuminated the form of Vourhause dismounting her Harley Davidson. Her black helmet in one hand whilst the middle finger of the other held up clearly at the approaching high beam.

"Does she know she's flipping off her superior officer?" asked Salisman surprised.

"Probably," said Pilgrim and shrugged as she found a spot to park the car. She turned the engine off and Salisman looked at her. He looked over his shoulder but he could see the light from the pub so the shield plate had not accidentally deployed.

"No machine guns. No rocket launchers. Everything is in its place?" Pilgrim also looked about with her hands still on the key in the ignition lock.

"Yup. Seems so," she said as she felt it safe enough to whip the key out. Salisman retracted his seat belt and opened his door. He slammed it slightly and stepped toward the rear of the car, half expecting to find a gun barrel or something protruding. One step and something caught his leg. It prevented his foot from taking another step and he was already off balance. He tripped over something and hit the ground. Fortunately he had time to extend his hands preventing his face hitting the gravel but his left knee hit hard.

"Whoa." Thud. "Fuck!" he shouted. Pilgrim looked through the window but failed to see him. She was just swinging her legs out of the car.

"Wait a minute." she said and she checked the rear wheels. A shaft had extended from the centre of the hubcaps. It had a sharp cutter on the end of it.

"Oh damn. Sorry!" she shouted. She swung back into the car and located another secret switch behind a secret panel on the console. It was illuminated with a strange triangular icon the same shape as the cutting device on the end of the shaft. She hit the button and a motor retracted the shaft and cutter on both left and right rear wheels.

She swung her legs back out of the car and raced to Salisman's rescue extending her hand to help him up.

"Are you alright? Sorry about that."

He held out his arm and she grabbed it. Helping him to his feet but as soon as his weight came down on his left knee he grimaced and grabbed his knee.

"Oh damn I think you've broken it."

"I'm terribly sorry. I didn't know. I'll take a look at you when we get inside. Just hold on while I lock the car." She ran back and slammed her door. Then with her electronic key she beeped the car locked. She ran back to help Salisman who was already hobbling off toward the hotel entrance. She grabbed his arm and slung it over her shoulder. She was shorter than him and offered good support.

"What 'n' fuck was that?" yelled Salisman in pain.

"Those were the shaft things that extend from the wheels that I was telling you about. At least I know what they're for now."

"Yeah, they're for tripping up any poor bastard who happens to have been in the car with you at night."

"Well that may be a new use for them. But they have these little cutter blades on the end of them. They must be for slashing tires on other cars. Look I'm terribly sorry. Let me buy you a drink."

They entered the pub, arm in limping arm, laughing over a course joke they'd had together. She looked around for people she recognised. A few people playing pool. A woman who Salisman recognised from the 747 earlier at one of the pool tables with a pair of scruffy looking gentlemen. Vourhause was at the far end of the bar ordering her first drink. A few people was sitting chatting at a table at the far end as well.

"Oh good. There's Bernard," said Pilgrim nodding in the direction of the table. One solitary male amongst 4 females, all dressed like school girls similarly to Pilgrim herself. The barman made a bee line to their position from behind the bar and shouted to them.

"Oh no. Not you again. Haven't seen you in here for a long time. I see you've claimed your first victim for the night."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Salisman but there was no explanation forthcoming. The barman continued.

"Listen loov I don't want any trooble in here tonight, OK?"

She nodded and hobbled Salisman toward the far end table. Vourhause was already taking her drink and a bowl of peanuts in the same direction. Bernard, the only male present, saw that Salisman was in trouble and began to rise with a view to assisting Pilgrim in supporting him. Just then two figures burst through the pub door laughing. Salisman couldn't turn and see who it was but as they approached he recognized them as Hanniford and Lieve.

"What happened to you?" asked Hanniford as she stepped in to help. Bernard sat down again and attended to his drink.

"I got attacked by her car," he said gesturing in Pilgrim's direction with his head.

"What? Oh never mind." She ran ahead to the far end table. All the chairs were taken by the crowd already assembled there so she brought up a chair from the table next. She readied it for his imminent crash landing. Lieve helped Pilgrim manoeuvre Salisman toward the table.

"Mayday Mayday. Coming in completely legless on runway 29. Mayday Mayday," said Lieve as they sat him down.

"We'd better have a look at that knee," said Pilgrim. She turned to the others and said: "Anyone got a med-kit handy?" To Salisman's surprise they returned a triumphant chorus of "No Ma'am!" and they laughed.

"No, I mean, really," said Pilgrim. "I need a med-kit for his knee. I didn't think and I left mine in the car."

"I'll go get mine," said Hanniford.

"What's with the med-kit?" asked Salisman discretely of Pilgrim.

"Well normally the med kits are used for first aid, but in the GRG, they, well, let's put it this way, they found other uses for them."

"Why, what's in the med kits?"

"All sorts of cool stuff." She smiled and raised her eyebrows. "Now roll up your trousers and let me have a look at that knee." She noticed holes through the knee of his trousers where the gravel had ripped at the material. Dirt and mud still clinging to him where ever he had met with the car park. He couldn't manage to roll his trousers up far enough and it was hurting him when he tried.

"There's no choice. You're going to have to take 'em off."

"What? No way." The other girls were woo-wooing at hearing this suggestion and someone wolf whistled. Salisman was even more hesitant. More people than Salisman recognized from the plane filed in through the door. Salisman really wasn't about to take his trousers off now. Not in front of all these strangers. Yet more SHADO people came in through the door along with Hanniford returning. Salisman noticed the barman burying his head in his hands. The barmaid was going about her business serving the new arrivals. Hanniford approached carrying a small black plastic box in her hand. She handed it to Pilgrim and knelt down in front of Salisman to be of assistance.

"He won't take his trousers off," said Pilgrim.

"Oh won't he?" said Vourhause relishing the thought. "Shall we ladies?" A few of the women moved in on Salisman.

"No no no," said Pilgrim. "We've given him enough shit for one life time." She handed him the med-kit. "Go to the little boy's room and fix it." She turned to Bernard who was minding his drink. "Bernard, come and help him. There's a good chap."

It took a few seconds for it to register but Bernard rose to the challenge. He helped Salisman up and got him hobbling to the toilet. The barman came down to that end of the bar to witness the proceedings.

"What did you do to him?" he said to Pilgrim.

"Oh, he just had a little accident. I hope he's not too damaged, he's got a big day ahead of him tomorrow."

Once in the toilet Salisman unbuckled his belt and lowered his trousers. Then made another crash landing on one of the toilet seats in one of the two cubicles.

"At least it's clean in here," he said to Bernard.

"Yeah. Actually this is not a bad little pub," said Bernard. "We use to come here a lot when we were stationed down here. "

"So are you part of the Girl's Rude Group too?"

"Yeah, absolutely," said Bernard. "You don't think I'd wanna hang round with a bunch of blokes talkin' about how big their spanners are do you?"

Salisman smiled back at him. Then he saw the extent of his injuries. The skin was broken just below the knee and though it wasn't showing terribly bad at that time, he could tell there was going to be some sizable bruises swelling up in a few hours. He noticed bruising on his ankles as well where he had tripped over the shafts. Bernard looked round and then opened the med-kit. Salisman saw that it was deceptively well packed despite its small size. Bernard pulled out a hypospray tool. Salisman had not seen one before. Its crenellated stainless steel construction intrigued him.

"What is that?"

"It's a hypospray," said Bernard. He handed it to Philip. "It's a kind of hypodermic syringe. Only it doesn't use a needle. It's got a gas charge in the back of it and forces a very fine jet of drug to break the pores of the skin and inject itself. No needles and almost totally painless. The drug comes in these little cartridges. " He held up one of the many small plastic cylinders which were seated in the top of the first aid kit underneath the holder for the hypospray. Replacing it, he retrieved some small plastic packages. he tore the top off one and pulled out a cotton swab with a brown liquid dripping from it.

"It's a disinfectant and will help your skin to heal quickly." He rubbed it over the wounds and Philip winced with pain, jumping back slightly.

"Oh yeah I forgot to mention. This'll hurt like buggery."

"No shit!" said Salisman through his gritted teeth. Salisman tried to distract himself by studying the med-kit. He noticed the cartridges for the hypospray were all different colours and there were perhaps 20 of them. Though his concentration didn't extend to counting the exact number.

"So what's with all the drugs?"

"Oh. Painkillers mainly. Various sorts. We got morphine, pethidine, heroin..."

"Heroin?" exclaimed Salisman with a slightly raised voice.

"Shhhhhh," said Bernard. "Everyone knows that heroin is just refined morphine. And is a much better pain-killer. But there's even better than that in there. We've got a few of SHADO's own designer drugs in there. If you think heroin's bad, you should have a shot of PZT!"

"PZT? What's that?"

"It was developed for extreme cases. If you were shot to hell and had half your body parts hanging out but could get some PZT in you, you could probably hang on just long enough to complete the mission. It not only blocks pain but it makes you feel real good. The trouble is that it's got a really short use-by date. It doesn't store very well and has to be replaced every couple of months. Otherwise it turned into some other damn thing."

"What and it'll kill you or something?"

"No no. Quite the contrary. It gets better with age. Let me put it this way, it'll make you feel real good. And I mean REAL good. Forget Viagra. This stuff... Well you get the picture. It's pretty much the ultimate aphrodisiac. And it'll work on anyone. I dare say it would get a bowling ball aroused."

"Ah! So that's what Commander Pilgrim was talking about."

"Yeah,. The girls use to try and collect it any way they could after it went past its use-by date. They even used to give it a vintage like a good wine. The older it was the better it was."

Salisman was laughing now and almost oblivious to the fact that Bernard was strapping a bandage round his knee.

"So is it addictive?"

"Who knows?" said Bernard. "Well I know the girls couldn't get enough of it at one stage but they didn't seem to need it as such. but then heroin isn't quite the evil drug everyone makes out it is either. But it doesn't just make get you aroused. It makes you feel uninhibited. And that was one of its useful properties. It means you can get on with the job of killing aliens if necessary. But the last thing they wanted was to get you aroused instead of completing your mission so they replace it every couple of months. But it was kinda getting out of hand with the girls, so the commander put a stop to it." Bernard laughed.

"I mean, she could talk. She used to do it too. Before she was the commander of course. Now the people who work in the med lab smuggle it out and it's become kinda like a currency around SHADO. It's quite funny. You wouldn't believe the things that go on round here. Some of the girls were making porn and running an Internet site. It's not like they needed the money or anything."

Salisman's leg was patched up, his trousers returned to the fully masted position and the med-kit sorted and closed. He climbed to his feet.

"That feels much better Bernard. Thanks for that."

"Not a problem. I'm just glad no-one came in and saw us like that."

They laughed and made their way back out into the bar. The first thing Salisman saw were most of the people standing in a ready-for-action position. Staring at something at the other end of the bar. He saw the bartender once again with his head buried in his hands. Then, as he stood motionless outside the toilet door, he noticed the woman who had been playing pool and another woman, had one of the scruffy men slammed over the pool table with his pants down. One of them was holding the man down whilst the other seemed to be trying to insert the pool cue anally.

"Have you ever been fucked up the arse with a pool cue?" she was shouting. "Do you wanna find out what it's like. Well? Do ya?"

Salisman noticed the other man trying to sneak away on his hands and knees quietly, hoping the two women wouldn't notice.

"And where do you think you're going?" shouted the woman with the pool cue. She dropped it and proceeded to head the man off. Seeing her coming he jumped to his feet and made a desperate attempt to make it to the door. He didn't make it. He took a swing at her but she blocked it then hooked him in the stomach sending him doubled over back to the floor.

"You want out. I'll give you out, you filthy bastard." She seemed to literally pick him up by the scruff of the neck and his belt and turfed him at the door. Seeing his opportunity to escape, he took it. She turned her attention to the other man and with the assistance of her friend proceeded to expel him too. Minus his trousers which eventually exited along with his shoes. A brief yelp was heard along with the familiar sound of shoe hitting flesh somewhere

outside. The assembled crowd began applauding.

"I wonder what they did to deserve that?" said Philip to Bernard.

"A word of warning," said Bernard. "Never mess with Yuchtar."

Adrianna Pilgrim extended her arm and gestured, calling Philip and Bernard to come to the tables. The two previously hostile women also gravitated toward the group. Some people were over at the bar still ordering drinks. Philip, hobbling far less than he was before Bernard patched him up, sat next to her. Bernard had to find another seat because of the new comers.

"What was that all about?" asked Philip discretely.

"Oh, one of them made some comment about Suzanne's fat ass. Yuchy took exception." Philip didn't understand her casual attitude about the affair but nothing about the GRG would surprise him any more. Or so he thought. Adrianna looked up.

"Speaking of which," she said waving her hand in the direction of the two women. "Philip I'd like to introduce you to Suzanne Sutherland and Yuchtar."

Philip extended his hand to shake their's but Yuchtar began growling at him so he withdrew it quickly, preferring instead a polite nod. Adrianna made a few more introductions.

"Err. Virginia Lake you've met."

Philip nodded in her direction. "Yes, we met briefly."

"And this is Amelia, Anny, Lisa and Deborah." Two of the women nodded. Anny Theberge, who was sitting high on the back of her chair gave a brief salute and smile.

"Bernard Eden of course you've met. Oh and this is Chris, the only other male here at the moment. There are other males in the GRG. Err aren't there girls?"

"I don't know," said Suzanne shrugging her shoulders.

"Of course Yuchtar isn't her real name you know," said Anny. "I don't think anyone actually knows what her real name is any more."

"I don't think even Yuchy knows what her real name is any more," said Suzanne of her friend sitting next to her. Yuchtar growled again.

"Beer!" said Yuchtar as she jumped up and headed toward the bar.

"Of course, I could always look up the records back at the office," said Adrianna.

"No, I think it's against the rules to look up Yuchtar's real name, isn't it?" said Virginia Lake.

In her absence Bernard felt free to talk about her. "Why does she call herself Yuchtar' anyway?"

"It's something from some science fiction show or something, isn't it?" said Deborah.

"Yeah, it means honeypot or something," said Suzanne.

"What's she doing here, anyway?" continued Bernard. "She's a captain in ground forces isn't she? Used to command a mobile team?"

"Oh, hadn't you heard?" said a surprised Pilgrim. "She's training to be first on the Mars-base team."

"Man, I'm glad I didn't sign up for that then," said Vourhause. "What's the tour of duty going to be on Mars-base? 2 years at a stretch?"

"Err girls please," said Adrianna. "We shouldn't be talking shop here, should we?"

She noticed Yuchtar returning with two jugs of beer and lowered her voice a little. "And besides, you should be the one to talk. Two years with you on Mars and I'd be ready to ram a pool cue up your arse."

"Only she'd enjoy it," said Lieve.

"You wanna try it some time?" said Vourhause. "It'd be the hardest thing you'd ever get."

"Shut up, Alien," said Lieve poking her tongue out at her. Salisman still couldn't tell if they really meant it or not. Perhaps they hated each other for real or were just back slapping for fun. He resolved to maintain his caution. He watched in amazement as Yuchtar drank half a jug of beer direct from the jug. She took a breath and finished the other half. She wiped the foam from around her mouth with the back of her sleeve and belched. He didn't have a drink himself but noticed Pilgrim had almost finished hers. It looked like Scotch of some kind.

He sat there and was tempted to smile at everyone but maintained a poker face not really knowing how to react. No one said anything. Yuchtar picked up the second jug and began drinking it. It took her three attempts this time but it was dispatched in no time. She noticed everyone was looking at her and as if to acknowledge the fact she belched at them aggressively. She looked down at her empty jug then bolted off her seat.

To Philip's surprise she spoke to him. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Salisman?"

Philip was taken back. He had no idea what to say.

"Hello," she said excitedly bouncing and waving. "Over here. Would you like a drink?"

"Err yeah. Thanks."

"What would you like? Name it. Anything. Even if I've got to go to London for it."

"Ooo. Um. Do you think I could have a jelly bean, please?"

"What's a jelly bean?" she asked now with her hands on her hips.

Fearing some kind of violent reprisal he changed his order. "Oh don't worry. A beer will do."

"No no. I wanna know what a jelly bean is!"

"Well. It's ouzo with lemonade and raspberry cordial in it."

"Ok, who want's a jelly bean?" shouted Yuchtar.

"Me. Me. Me." came the chorus of replies. Yuchtar went bouncing over to the bar. This seemed a very different Yuchtar to the one who had been so threatening with a pool cue earlier. A short time later she returned with a tray full of glasses filled with bright pink liquor.

Philip noticed the bar tender and barmaid busy filling yet more glasses with pink liquor. Yuchtar placed the tray on the table in front of him and began handing them around. She placed one in front of Adrianna but Adrianna held up her hand.

"No no. I have to drive back to the studio soon. I have to get some work done in the morning. But I'll stay while Philip has one drink with you."

"Aw but we were just getting to know him," said Lisa.

"Can we keep him Mah? Please pretty please can we keep him," said Suzanne stroking his head like a lost animal.

"He's only gotta come back out here in the morning anyway," said Lieve.

"Well, where is he gonna stay then?" said Adrianna.

"He can stay at the flats," said Vourhause. "We've got plenty of room."

"The flats?" asked Philip realizing that he maybe didn't want to know.

"Some of the girls all chipped in and bought a block of units out here," said Adrianna.

"They all live in them when they're here. It's up to you. Just make sure you're up to the task tomorrow, if you piss on tonight. Ok!"

"Err Ok," said Philip. "Oh perhaps I had better go back though."

"Oh don't do that. We hadn't got to know you yet," said Anny. The other girls began making a rowdy noise to encourage him to stay.

"Yeah. Yeah Yeah. Ok then I'll stay."

There was a spontaneous applause. Everyone seemed so happy that he was staying. They

all raised their glasses of pink jelly beans to him.

"To Philip Staying," said Suzanne.

They all drank, Adrianna draining the last of her one and only scotch.

"Remember what I said though. You have to behave yourselves tonight. There's another big day ahead tomorrow."

"Don't worry," said Virginia Lake. "I'll keep 'em in line." She smiled and gazed at the women knowingly. Virginia Lake was still only a Colonel but in this situation she definitely out-ranked everyone, including the commander. Virginia Lake had not mingled with this chapter of the GRG. She had been a member a long time ago, a founding member, but as SHADO operatives took other jobs they were split up. Virginia Lake had started her own chapter of the GRG in Australia but was well known. Adrianna Pilgrim knew she could trust her. Or so she thought.

Adrianna Pilgrim retrieved Philip's things from her car without further incident. No steel bolts, no machine guns and no further injuries. She bid her farewells and more jelly beans were ordered and consumed. The crowd thinned out and they all ended up sitting together along the bar. They talked about Philip's music and the banality of commercial music. Philip found them to be more engaging than he had expected. Yuchtar, who had been drinking twice the number of jelly beans as the others, had belched and passed out, falling off her bar stool and onto the carpet. Suzanne checked that she was all right and was presented with a loud snoring sound.

"She'll be alright. She's got the day off tomorrow anyway."

The drinking continued till finally the barman shouted: "Time please," and everyone ordered their last rounds.

"Damn, these jelly beans are good." declared Bernard. "Get me a bottle of Ouzo, lemonade and raspberry cordial."

"Better get one for Yuchy whilst you think about it," said Suzanne. "She'll want one when she comes to."

"Oh hell," said Chris. "Barman, give us all the ouzo, lemonade and raspberry cordial you've got."

The barman looked at Chris incredulously. "Are you for real?"

Chris held up a wad of cash. "Is that real enough for you?" he said.

The barman collected together 4 bottles of ouzo and presented it to Chris.

"Is that all you've got?"

"Hell you lot have drunk the rest. By the way, what is it that you do, exactly?"

"We're insurance salesmen," said Bernard and then fell off his stool.

They drank their drinks and loaded the remaining bottles of ouzo and mixers into Chris's car. The barman helped him and couldn't believe the number of high performance sports cars parked in his car park. Ferraris, Porsches, Lambourginis.

"You people are all too drunk to drive. Why don't you call yourselves some taxis?"

"Don't you worry about that," said Lieve. "We have a secret weapon."

The barman knew better than to argue and turned to shut up shop for the night. He passed Philip wandering out into the car park as he made his way back.

"You're the new boy, right? You wanna watch those girls, mate."

Philip nodded thanking him politely for his advice and wandered further out.

"Ok, which one of us is going to take Philip?" shouted Lieve.

"Hey Philip. You wanna come ride in my testosterone," said Suzanne.

"What?" said Philip.

Suzanne broke up laughing when she realized what she had said. She banged on the roof of her Ferarri she thought it was so funny. "I mean my Teserosa."

Philip wasn't sure he should ride with anyone that drunk but then looked around and realized they were all pretty much as drunk.

"I think it best if he comes and rides in my Lambo" said Hanniford. "At least we've got an extra seat." Philip shifted his gaze to where Hanniford's voice had come from. He saw her standing next to a sliver Lambourghini Marzel. Its driver's side gull wing door open to the sky, hardly visible since it was almost totally glass panel. He couldn't believe the classic cars parked there in front of him. Even harder to believe was the fact that they were all prepared to drive them intoxicated and risk damaging them. Or worse.

"Jeez there must be a million bucks worth of cars in this car park," he said as he gravitated toward the Marzel.

"Can Yuchy do her trick?" shouted Lieve in Suzanne's direction.

"Narr she's way too out of it."

"Ok then, it'll have to be plan B. Everyone get on channel 31 and listen for more instructions."

Everyone dived into their cars. Philip stood by the open door of the Marzel confused. A hand reached out and dragged him in. It was Lieve's hand. She handed him a headset.

"Ok everyone," said Lieve. "We've bounced the codes off of central, let's hope they accept them."

A few seconds passed and the computer on the consol beeped.

"Yes!" shouted Lieve She began punching in some more codes and a police logo appeared. Some more punching and a map appeared. She zoomed in until the map showed their general location. She hit the entre key triumphantly.

"That should do it. Now we just wait a few seconds." She reached up and dragged her passenger side gull-wing door closed. It thudded on its gas-lift support. Hanniford did the same on the driver's side. Philip sat cross legged in the back so he could peer over her shoulder at the display. Two dots bleeped on the display in separate areas on the map.

"Ok we've got 'em. Hold up hold on. Don't any one go anywhere just for a moment. And turn your lights out."

"What is that?" said Philip.

"It's a GPS display that the police use these days. We just asked one of the mainframes at headquarters to hack into it and give us the position of all their police cars in their area. They've only got two."

"OK here it comes," said Lieve. They all looked toward the exit of the car park. Sure enough a second or two later a police panda drove past on routine patrol. Totally unaware of the fact that right behind it would be an armada of drunk high performance machinery using satellite technology to break the road traffic laws en-mass.

"This is a gross misuse of SHADO resources you realize," came Virginia Lake's voice across the communications channel. "But since it's in SHADO's interest that you all get home without incident I think we can justify it." She paused. "Um. If anyone asks that is."

"Of course," said Bernard. "I won't say anything if you won't." There were a few giggles here and there over the radio.

Philip had a smile on his face. It was kind of fun sneaking around and avoiding the police. He finally felt he was getting into the spirit of things.

"Ok Ladies, start your engines. " said Lieve. There was a roar of starter motors and

engines loud enough to wake the entire block. As the Lamborghini backed up Philip noticed a light on in the house across the street. A figure peered through the curtains in a window. The Lamborghini spun its wheels slightly as it pushed off across the gravel expanse of the car park. It was parked 2 spaces back from the end and the others waited till it reached the exit. There seemed to be no official order to the parade but he noticed it was hardly chaos. The Lamborghini took point with Lieve navigating.

"Don't worry Philip," said Lieve over her shoulder. "We've done this before."

"Yeah, I kinda gathered that," said Philip. He heard more spurious giggling on in his head set. "They really are school girls," he thought. The Lamborghini pulled out of the car park and slowly edged its way down the street. The rest of the cars followed one by one. Had this been during daylight hours anyone may have mistaken it as a parade of expensive sports cars on their way to a motor show.

"I'm last out," said Lisa. "You can pick up speed now."

"Roger that," said Hanniford immediately planting her foot. Philip was thrown back in the diamond shaped bucket seat.

"Right oh," said Lieve pressing the microphone closer to her lips. "Take a left on Manton street." The Lamborghini screeched slightly as it made the sudden left.

"Slow down a bit, Hannie," said Lieve almost as soon as the turn was completed. "I think we may have a problem." Philip looked over her shoulder again at the map on the display. There was a blip on the same road they were travelling on about 2 kilometres ahead of them.

"Slow up everyone. The cops are slowing. Take evasive action. Errr. " She fumbled slightly as she picked an appropriate street. "Err Right into Boufort then step on it. I think they're turning round. They'll see us in a minute." Hanniford planted her foot as she turned right into Boufort street. She picked up speed quickly. Reaching 80 kilometres per hour in no time and still accelerating through the narrow street. The car following, Virginia Lake's E-type Jaguar, was catching up quickly.

"Lisa, have you turned yet?"

"No and Stephie and Deborah are still in front of me."

"OK, kill your lights. The cops will have eyeball in about 5 seconds."

Deborah's mustang turned dark and screeched round the corner.

"It's too late. Keep your lights on and go straight. You'll have to pass them and hope for the best."

Vourhause hit her headlights back on as did Lisa. Just in time to see the lights of the police car glowing over the rise in the road ahead of them. They cruised past trying to look as invisible as possible. The police turned on their blue light. and the siren wailed. Vourhause's heat skipped a beat but she maintained a steady course. The police car wailed off into the distance behind them. Lisa looked in her rear vision mirror till they were out of sight.

"Whew, that was close," said Lisa over the comms. "I thought we were busted for sure when they hit the siren."

"Ok, meet us on Halifax street," said Lieve. "Everyone take a left onto Halifax street." Once again there was a screech as Hanniford accelerated around the corner into Halifax street. A wider and much faster street. She put her foot down again and brought the car up to 80 Ks. Breaking the speed limit but she was already over the alcohol limit so one more excess wouldn't make much difference. A kilometre or two down the road they saw Vourhause and Lisa waiting for them in a side street. Ready to rejoin the procession.

"Hey, those cops have gone right back to the hotel," said Lieve.

"Damn I bet it's that jerk across the road again," said Suzanne. "I hope he gets abducted by aliens."

"I think we might be able to arrange that," said Anny.

"You can bet those cops are gonna be heading back this way any minute," said Lieve. "Is Yuchtar up to doing her little trick yet?"

Suzanne was trying to drive her red Testerosa and nudge Yuchtar awake in the passenger seat at the same time.

"Come on Yuchy wake up. We need you."

Yuchtar growled slightly but her head remained slumped. Rocking slightly with the car's movement and wedged between the head rest and the window.

"Come on, Yuchy wake up for Christ sake."

"Leave me alone," said Yuchtar with her head still wedged in position. Suzanne nudged her again. Suzanne gave her another more determined nudge in the ribs.

"What?" shouted Yuchtar, clearly annoyed. Her head popping up as if on the end of a loose spring.

"Do your trick Yuchy, we don't have much time."

"Yup their turning round and heading back in our direction," said Lieve.

"Oh shit," said Yuchtar looking for a headset. She found one in the glove box where she also found her lap-top. Still well inebriated, she fumbled for some cables and pulled out a secret drawer in the back of the glove box. She plugged a 15 pin D connector into it and a special miniature D connector into the back of her lap-top. This connected the lap-top to the car's built in communications system. She tried to log into the SHADO network but the screen read, "Access denied."

"Shit what's your pass word?"

"Fuck you!"

"Well, if you're going to be like that."

"No no. That's it. Fuck you is the pass word. All one word but Upper case F and U"

Yuchtar typed it in and logged onto the network. She logged through to a page headed "External Computer Services." She paged through and found a menu entitled British police. She typed and stared at the screen.

"Damn! I'm too fucking frunk to droo thith"

"Just hang in there Yuchy. I've seen you take on a whole pub drunker than this."

"I'm tired."

"What's happening guys?" said Lieve. "Those cops haven't found us yet but they're heading in the right direction."

"Yuchy's working on it. Just hang in there."

"Ha har!" said Yuchtar with a devious grin. "I'm in. Now to wave the magic wand." She typed furiously and slammed her finger down hard on the enter key.

"That should confuse 'em. Just have to wait a few seconds for it to filter through the data base. and it should take effect."

"What's happening, guys?" said Lieve. "They've just turned into Halifax. They look like they're onto us."

"What's going on Yuchy?" said Suzanne.

Yuchtar was beginning to giggle uncontrollably.

"Come on" said Lieve.

"Err perhaps we should take some evasive action now and avoid the rush," said Virginia

Lake.

"Wait!" shouted Lieve. "I think they're slowing. Yes it looks like they're slowing up. They've stopped. They're turning round and heading out the other direction."

"Man, that was close," said Chris. "I really didn't feel like dealing with those guys tonight. Mind you it would have been funny watching the poor dears trying to work out what was going on."

There were bursts of spontaneous giggling cut short by the communications system's volume sensitive circuits. The rest of the journey was uneventful. Philip noticed the police car blip disappear off the map heading in almost the opposite direction. When it was gone, Lieve closed the display, at which point he noticed they were slowing. They turned a corner and then another and slowed down to a crawl behind a large condominium block. Street level consisted of 3 car park entrances each with a security roller door. The middle entrance led straight off at street level whilst the two on either side had a ramp that traversed underground. All three doors began rolling up as they approached.

"This is it," said Lieve.

"So how many units do you occupy," said Philip.

"All of them," said Hanniford.

"That must cost you a fair bit in rent?"

Both of them laughed.

"We don't rent it, we own it!" said Lieve.

"You mean you just up and bought the building?"

"Yup. Well not just us, but all of us. Except for Colonel Lake. She's always in Australia so she never had to come out here."

"So you all live here?"

"Well, only when we're out here. We've got other places but this is where we like to relax," said Hanniford.

"Wait until you see the top floor," said Lieve.

They drove down the ramp and into the underground car park. Some of the others filed in behind them. Guests such as Virginia Lake parked in the upper car park. Philip was glad to be out of the car. He felt a lot safer than he did driving with his inebriated companions. He saw Bernard across the other side of the car park, staggering toward them as if his feet had been walking on fire.

Philip wasn't feeling the best after all he had been through. He was well oiled and had only eaten a bag of crisps all day. His knee was aching and his mind was racing. As he followed Lieve and Hanniford to the door his head began to throb. He slumped at the wall just before the door. The wall was made of rough bricks. Rough and sharp as his hand took his weight against it.

"Are you alright Philip?" asked Hanniford, the first to notice.

Lieve spun round.

"Wassup hun?" she said as she joined Hanniford at his side.

"Ha! I think the day's taken its toll. I really shouldn't have got this pissed. Apart from anything else I've got this damn headache now."

"Come on baby," said Lieve. "We'll get you upstairs and give you something that will make you fell all better."

"Have you eaten?" asked Hanniford.

"No not since breakfast."

"Well we'll get some food into you as well. You'll be right as rain."

They helped him through the door. Philip felt embarrassed about the help but glad of it nonetheless.

"How can you punish yourselves like this every day and not get sick or injured?" he asked.

"I guess we're use to it. And besides we've got Alien here to keep us on our toes."

Vourhause stepped through the door unzipping her leather jacket. "Owa. Couldn't the poor little man take it?"

"Give it a rest, Alien. He's really crooked," said Lieve.

The foyer of the building was like a small hotel lobby, large enough for a small party. While they waited for the elevator, Philip noticed that there was even a bar at one end. Evidence, he thought, of them actually holding parties there. It was clean and carpeted. A few crimson velour seats and couches placed here and there. The carpet rose a few feet up the wall where it met a delicate gold trim and wall paper.

They entered the lift when it arrived. Virginia Lake and Suzanne supporting Yuchtar joining them. There was only room for six people comfortably in the elevator at one time, eight in a squeeze. But with Yuchtar and Philip needing support, everyone else remained waiting for the car to return. All except for Vourhause who darted through another door and up the stairs.

"By the way Yuchy," said Lieve. "Where did you send those cops. Just curious."

Yuchtar began giggling again. "I sent a priority message from Scotland Yard that there were a truck load of dead bodies dumped into the creek. They were to go down there and search for them." She continued giggling.

"You're an evil woman, Yuchy," said Hanniford. "They're going to be searching round up to their ankles in shit in the dark all night." Yuchtar nodded and began giggling again.

"Yeah! Heh Heh."

"I think Yuchtar hates those cop," said Lieve. "Last time she had them do a door knock looking for a man wearing nothing but underpants on his head."

Yuchtar burst out laughing doubling over till she sat on the floor. She tried to laugh and speak at the same time but she just blurted out a psychotic noise. As she sat cross legged on the floor and the elevator doors opened she said: "His only distinguishing feature was a large cock ring." She stamped the floor with the palm of her hands. "Can you imagine the cops trying to describe him to every household in the street?"

Even Philip, in as much pain as he was suffering, began to laugh. He stumbled out and looked up. Then he stood upright at the elevator door.

"Like it?" said Lieve. They had converted the entire top floor into one gigantic party room. Couches, bean bags, the largest large screen projection TV screen he had ever seen. An entire corner set up as a soft area. Even the walls were padded. There were amenities rooms, kitchen, bathrooms and showers. And a curious wet area which looked like a bathroom turned inside out so that it was part of the room. 4 robots sat waiting in the centre of the room. Waiting for what he wasn't sure but it seemed as through they were set up to deliver drinks. He wasn't quite sure.

"Jeez you've got turbos," said Philip. He pointed at the floor to ceiling stack for Turbo sound PA speakers. Then he noticed there were Turbo stacks in each corner of the viewing area plus more set up for multi channel surround sound. The elevator rose almost in the middle of the room so the viewing area was to one side. On the other side he noticed more soft areas and a rack that looked almost medieval. There were a few whips and crops in a cabinet like

pool ques next to it. He was sure it was just for show but then he looked at Suzanne and Yuchtar and wondered. Still more rooms and partitions lead off from that end of the room. There was just too much for him to take in. He spun out and headed crashing to the floor. Fortunately he fell head first into a giant bean bag which partially enveloped him.

"Let me get you something for that headache," said Lieve and she wandered off toward one of the amenity areas while Suzanne extracted the still giggling Yuchtar from the elevator car. The doors closed and the car descended once more.

Having dumped Yuchtar in the same bean bag, Suzanne beckoned to Hanniford to give her a hand with Philip. They hoisted either side of him and brought him back to an upright position.

"Where are we going with him?" asked Hanniford.

Suzanne nodded toward the soft area which was at one end of the viewing area. It was like one huge mattress, enough room for perhaps 20 people to lounge about on. It wasn't flat but tiered so that the further back one moved into it, the higher and spongier it became. Philip laid down and his mind immediately drifted. The girls had set up quite a play ground. He wondered how they kept the place clean. A small thump echoed from the speakers. Shortly after some soothing sounds emerged. He recognised it as one of the artists on his own label. He would have enjoyed it more if he wasn't feeling so ill. He was laying on his stomach staring blankly over a low coffee table and toward the giant TV screen when an image appeared on it. Glitch at first then some interesting patterns. The light danced off reflective surfaces around the room and cast shadows everywhere else. Soft light.

The screen was so big it filled almost floor to ceiling. It was wide enough to throw a cinemascope image and slightly curved. The entire screen was covered with soft patterns which matched the music. He figured it must have been computer generated from the audio. Then super-imposed among the images was a woman dancing slowly to the slowly building sounds. She was part real video and part cartoon. Almost like a Japanese manga animation but more real. He figured they must have had some incredible computing power capable of doing the rendering in real time. He made a mental note to take a look at the technology.

At about the same time Lieve returned the next wave of the noisy crowd arrived. It distracted him and he didn't notice she was carrying a hypospray unit. He was wondering where Virginia Lake had disappeared to. It was as though she had just vanished. He felt Lieve stroke the back of his head and it felt good. He let his head sink into the plush softness beneath him. She stroked his neck, then the side of it. He felt her fingers almost probing the side of his neck and then it stopped. Suddenly there was a hiss followed by a sharp but brief pin prick. He was startled and jerked his head around. He saw her holding the hypospray for the first time.

"That'll take away the pain." she said. She stroked his head some more as she knelt on the edge of the soft area beside him. He turned his head to face her bare knees but let it flop back into the softness. As he looked up at her he noticed her put the hypospray to her own neck and press the button. The familiar hissing sound shot out. She handed it to someone over his head but his eyes drew weary and soon sleep fell.

CHAPTER 7

Commander Pilgrim stirred in her bed as the sound of a phone ringing interrupted her sleep. Groggily she hit the bedside touch lamp and its halogen brightness faded to a useful level. She instinctively ignored her bedside telephone, the one that was connected to the switched public network at least. She slid out a drawer in her bedside table, flipped open a small box that was inside and removed what first appeared to be an ordinary cellular telephone from it. Her tired eyes didn't focus very well, the sleep in her eyes blurring her vision further. She punched in what she hoped would be her ID number but the phone began making a second warning sound. A sound which told her she had got her number wrong.

"Damn it!" she said out loud as if to gain her enough energy to swing her nakedness out of the silk sheets and sit upright in the cold night. She focussed just enough to see the numbered buttons, her brain thinking just enough to remember what her ID number was. Her finger punched the numbers in slowly hoping this would bypass any further errors. One last error and she would hear a sizzling sound from within the plastic case, a device that would fry the contents of any memory the phone had and render it worthless plastic.

The phone beeped a triumphant sound signalling she managed to get it right. She hit one last button to answer it.

"Hello." she croaked, her voice being the last of her required body functions to come on-line.

"Commander?" came the voice. "One of our transporters has just been shot down. I think you had better have a look at this."

"What? Wait a minute. What are you saying? UFOs?"

"Yes Commander. It certainly looks that way."

"OK then. I'll be there in half an hour."

She disconnected and dropped the phone back in the box. Groaning, she rubbed her scraggy, bed scuffed golden hair as she contemplated her next move.

"Shower," she said as she reluctantly commanded her naked body to take her there.

45 minutes later she was stepping into the office elevator that would take her into the labyrinth that constituted SHADO's main headquarters. She had driving to the disused sound stage to take the service entrance but had noticed a set-building crew hard at it preparing some science fiction set for a shoot in the morning. She thought it was probably another computer game in the making. It was nearing 4 AM. She had been burning the candle at both ends all week and it was beginning to take its toll. Black and white striped track-suit, wet hair and bunny rabbit slippers, she scuffled reluctantly down the corridor toward the main control gallery. She could hear the buzz of activity two corridors before she arrived there. Rubbing her forehead she approached Colonel Critchley who was taking the night watch.

"What's the story, Colonel?"

"It was an Antinov heading south east out of Japan. Not a 124 but a 224. A big one. I have no idea how they knew but they knew."

"How many?"

"Sorry Commander?"

"How many on board?"

"Oh. There was a crew of 4. Pilot, co-pilot and 2 cargo specialists."

"What was the cargo?"

"That's the thing commander. It was the new drive components for the grav drives."

"What? Oh damn. It wasn't all of them was it. I told them not to ship everything at once."

"No no. It was only 3 of them. The rest were standard shipments. Still a big loss but not all of the grav drive components. The thing is, they've never up and attacked a transport like that before. How did they know to strike this one?"

"Satellites." shouted Adrianna on her way to her office. "The bastards have been watching us all the time."

"But what should we do?" shouted Colonel Critchley after her.

"I think it's time we unleashed some of our new stuff and went on a little witch hunt in the heavens."

"What?" shouted Critchley as she disappeared.

"Get me Pine Gap in Australia," she shouted back round the archway to her office. "Get the bastards out of bed if you have to."

"Err it's day time there, Commander."

"Damn. Why is it always only me that has to get out of bed at 3 o'clock in the morning?" she said to herself.

"And what's my computer doing on the floor?" she shouted angrily seeing her patched up computer replaced by a shiny brand new one. She thumped her desk and the computer screen came to life. A face appeared on the monitor screen within a window. Time delayed by a few milliseconds, the time taken for the signal to reach from Pine Gap, the secret American spy base in central Australia.

"Hello Commander." Came the transistorized voice from the computer's tiny speaker.

"How soon can we get a couple of COC units powered up?" (Close Orbit Combat Units)

"Err well. we could probably have one ready for a test run in about a week, Commander."

"Make it 48 hours and I need two. Complete with drones."

"Shit!" came the startled reply. "I mean. We weren't expecting to use them for another month. We've only just done basic shake down tests. They've never even had a full crew on board."

"They work don't they, Lieutenant?"

"Well yes Commander but..."

"Look we've got a problem. Four good people just lost their lives and we need to put an end to it right now. So if you would Lieutenant..." She smiled curtly and the Lieutenant knew she meant business.

"Yes Commander."

"Out." She clicked on the cancel button and the face was gone.

CHAPTER 8

There was a buzzing sound as Philip's body began to come back on-line. He could hear it in the distance. A regular repeating buzzing sound. Or was it a distorted beep? He wasn't even sure if he was really hearing it. It seemed to be emanating from a dream. The sound seemed to be gently drawing him out of it. His eyes were still stuck shut fast. His limbs did not seem to be receiving the messages he sent them to make them move. That part of his brain had obviously not switched on for the day. But his body had begun to. His brain was rapidly receiving messages of pain from all over his body. Muscle strain and a pain he could not describe between his legs. He could smell sweat on his skin as his sense of smell kicked in and he realized he was lying, naked but warm on the soft area on the 8th floor of the condo. Pieces of the night before flashed before his eyes as his memory connected but these were short lived as the real extent of the pain hit him and woke him instantly and completely.

His eyes popped open and he tried to lift himself. He managed to make his head clear the soft cushion like fabric but then his strength was gone. Like a skyrocket running out of gun-powder he crashed back to earth with a fortunate soft landing. This time his head was in a position where he need only move his eye muscles to survey the domain in his field of view. Fortunately his eye muscles must have been the only muscles in his body which hadn't been strained the night before.

Then his first deduction for the day. He was in a strange place and completely naked. Pain or no pain he bolted upright to see who was looking at him. He was alone. He sat cross-legged in the middle of the expanse of the soft area, his head hung over and buried in his hands. The pain in his groin intense such that he wondered how he would ever bring his legs together to walk. He looked up at the giant video screen opposite him on the other side of the room. Still displaying soothing patterns but with some kind of text displayed in front of it. His eyes not yet able to focus upon it such that he could read it. His brain involuntarily wished he wore glasses. He could put them on and focus. Then he realized how silly his brain had become and wondered why he was thinking such thoughts. He didn't wear glasses and could focus just fine if only his eyes would wake up.

The buzzing sound continued. He didn't know how long he had been sitting there. He had partially dozed off again, with his head in his hands. His position had restricted the blood supply to his arms and hands and as if to make his life a little more interesting, it caused a feeling of pins and needles to run through them. He shook his arms wildly trying to shake some blood into them to get his feeling back. This seemed to be just the thing he needed to wake his eyes up. Suddenly he found he could focus on the giant video display. It read: "The time is 9:05 AM. It's time to get up."

He rubbed his forehead and groaned as he tried to unlock his legs and scuffle to the edge of the soft area. He thought it was the weirdest hangover he had ever experienced. His head seemed to be relatively fine but his body was suffering the headache. Each movement, each new position he put his body in seemed to cause him more pain. It shot through him like a bullet. Some times shooting out of his body and away. Sometimes ricocheting around for a while. each time he moved he had to stop and wait for the next wave of pain to pass before he could contemplate another movement.

Slowly he inched his way to the edge of the soft area and swung his feet onto the carpet. He felt its strange surface underneath his feet for the first time. Soft and yet rough at the same time. This exertion wore him out and he had to stop, sitting knees up, once again burying his

head in his hands. He looked up again when the buzzing sound stopped. He looked up and saw that the video display was only showing the soothing patterns. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He quickly tried to zero in on it and caught sight of Virginia Lieve emerging from the amenities area wearing bright green silk and lace babydoll pyjamas.

"Sorry bout that." she said as softly as she could shout the distance between them. "We forgot to disable all the alarms."

Philip groaned. She wiggled her way over to him.

"Boy, you look in a bad way," she said as she approached. "We were going to let you sleep in till 10 but we forgot about the computer's internal alarm. You're lucky we didn't leave the full alarm system on. You might have got the 1812 overture at 90dB or something."

"What time is it?" he croaked with what little voice he had.

"Jeez you are pretty fucked up aren't you. I'll get Kylie to bring something up to ease the pain."

"No not more of that stuff," he groaned out as quickly as he could.

"No no. Just some codeine or something. Don't worry." She walked toward a wall phone mounted on the central column that housed the elevator and the stair case. She punched in a single number and then turned back to Philip, shouting across the distance.

"Oh it's a quarter past nine, by the way." Then she turned to the phone and began speaking. Philip couldn't hear what she said and didn't much care but before he knew it she was heading back in his direction. He looked up to see her long slender legs in front of him. They ran all the way up into the bright green knickers of her pyjamas, the top secured by a single button and split away to reveal her navel.

"Will you be alright for a moment? Only I'm going to have a quick shower and get changed. "

Philip nodded and he saw her feet step off into the distance, back toward the amenities area.

A short time later the smiling face of Kylie appeared in front of him, wearing her maid's uniform as he had first seen her and being generally cheerful. She was carrying a tray but held it higher than he could see what was on it.

"How 'n hell do you do it?" he said.

"Do what?" she smiled in a chipper voice.

"Do that. Be bright and cheerful after last night?"

She shrugged her shoulders and knelt in front of him, still bearing a Mona Lisa smile. He could see that she had an open medical kit and a hypospray set out in front of her on the tray.

"What is it?" he asked cautiously.

"It's just a mild pain killer," she said. "Miss Lieve said you may need it."

Just then he was reminded of how much he really did need it. He nodded and she picked up the hypospray and located it on his neck. She probed around to find the right location then squeezed the trigger. It hissed and his pain began to melt.

"How come you aren't withering in pain?" he asked. "You did as much as I did last night. Maybe more."

She looked at him quizzically for a moment contemplating what he meant. Then answered triumphantly. "Oh! That's because I'm a girl." Then she stood and walked away with the instruments. Almost skipping.

Philip wasn't entirely sure what she meant. It didn't matter. The codeine relieved just enough of his pain that he could attempt to stand up. His muscles still telling him the strain

they had been placed under but they agreed to help him get underway. His groin was still constantly aching and he found it difficult to walk but it was good to at least stand. Moments later Kylie returned.

"Would you like a shower, Mr Salisman?"

"Err yeah. I could do with one. What about my clothes?"

"Oh. Bernard said he'd give you some of his. You're about his size. Bernard has great taste in clothes."

Philip nodded not knowing if she was being sarcastic but figuring that she probably meant it. Kylie beckoned him on toward the amenities area where Virginia Lieve had gone. He walked slowly, almost waddling, holding his genitalia in one hand as if it would protect it from banging up against his legs as he walked. It made no difference but for a time he felt a sense of security. Then realized he had lost his sense of dignity in the process so he tried his best to walk naked as a proud man instead. The pain was undeniable however so he took it slowly.

Kylie disappeared through the door of the amenities area in front of him. He reached the door himself eventually but there was no Kylie in sight beyond it. He recognised the toilet cubicles to one side. He crept in a little further into what looked like a kitchen area. A door to one side left open revealed a darkened computer room. Flashing lights and computer monitors illuminating it with strange colourful patterns. Further on past a row of refrigerators he came to another door. He could hear water splashing beyond it. The sound of someone running a shower. Kylie popped her head back through the door.

"Come on Mr Salisman. This way."

He stepped through to see a shower block. It reminded him of a camping resort he had once holidayed at as a kid. 4 cubicles with doors that neither reached the floor nor the ceiling. But these cubicles were much wider and more spacious than he had remembered from his holiday. A wet and naked Virginia Lieve appeared from one of them. Kylie handed her a towel. He realized the splashing water was emanating from another cubicle at the far end. He couldn't see if anyone was in it. No-one was. Kylie ushered him toward it, passing Virginia Lieve as she searched through a bag for some underwear.

He stepped inside his cubicle and turned round to close the door. He noticed Kylie beginning to remove her maid's uniform.

"What are you doing?" he said with surprise.

"I'm showering you?"

"What?"

"It's my job."

"What?"

"I should help you. Scrub your back and stuff."

"No. Just leave me alone for a while will ya. Please?" Guilt flooded his mind when he looked at Kylie. He couldn't believe what he had let himself do the night before. Kylie nodded and Philip shut the cubicle door. Stepping then into the water which was an almost perfect temperature. Waves of anger surged through him but he wasn't sure who to be angry at. The girls for leading him astray or himself for allowing them to. It would consume him for the rest of the morning.

He sulked all the way to the air base, this time riding in the front passenger seat of the Lambogini Marzel. Most attempts at a conversation were met with little more than a grunt from Philip. Yet in amongst the rage of all his guilt and anger, a quiet voice of reason would emerge from time to time. They had really been quite nice to him in their own strange way.

They had welcomed him into their little clan. Treated him as one of their own and offered him all they had of themselves. His guilt was because he felt like he had cheated on his wife and technically he had. But they didn't seem to see it that way. He wondered if his wife had been in on the secret of SHADO if she too would have shared the experience with him. And his anger was only indirectly because of the girls.

The anger had been building along with a sense of frustration in him for 3 months. Ever since he re-located to England and had joined SHADO. Anger because he was really starting to be able to enjoy his dual roll and yet he could share none of it with his wife and daughter. They had to believe the cover story like every other member of the general public. And that didn't quite seem fair.

He wondered if this sense of frustration ran through the veins of other SHADO operatives and then it occurred to him that their strange behaviour was probably their mechanism for coping. It probably evolved over years and with the discovery of the drug's hidden benefit, and their exclusive access to it, they probably fell into the pattern.

But as he sat there quietly stewing in the front seat and Jerry Hanniford cleared him through the security check point, he couldn't help the feelings and it depressed him.

The Lamborgini motored through the open roller door and into the hangar. He noticed the far side hanger doors were open and all but one of the Grippens had been tractored out to the tarmac in readiness. The remaining Grippen was hooked to a small gas powered tug which resembled a fork-lift truck with the forklift removed. It was just becoming under way, being tugged toward the hanger doors. He could see what he assumed was the 747 vomit comet in the distance on the tarmac but it was a different aircraft.

Hanniford parked the Lamborgini and popped her gull-wing door open slightly. It flopped back down again almost shutting. Not high enough for the gas-lift arm to push it open all the way. Philip fumbled for the release handle not quite sure how to make his exit from the car. But he managed to get it open and stepped out. Hanniford shut the doors but didn't bother locking it.

Philip wandered aimlessly through the hanger not knowing where he was supposed to be, the pain in his groin causing much discomfort. Slowly he made his way toward the briefing and staff rooms.

"Where's Philip?" shouted a voice from within its confines. He picked up his pace toward the door but was confronted by Lisa bolting out of it to find him. She all but bumped into him, grabbing him by the shoulders.

"There you are," she said.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "What's the fuss about?"

"The mission. The mission's been brought forward."

"Brought forward to when?"

"Today. Now!"

"What? You're kidding."

"Nope. The Commander wants you prepped and up in the air on your way to Australia stat. They're prepping the new space craft as we speak."

"What about the rest of my training? What about the Grippens? What am I gonna tell my wife?"

"Well you'll get your flight experience on the way. You're to fly there in the back seat of a Grippen."

"Oh shit!"

