

Demons in the Darkness

Deborah A. Rorabaugh

© July 23, 1997

Country of first publication,
United States of America

All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

SHADO Headquarters was quiet when Colonel Alec Freeman walked into the commander's office. It was early, but Commander Straker was already at work, pale blond head bowed over a sheaf of papers.

The London Times was spread out on the conference table. Freeman had already read the headline story. 'RAF grounds Phantoms'.

"You've read the papers?" Straker asked without raising his head.

"Of course," Freeman answered. "I can't say I blame them. Six planes in six weeks, twelve fliers. Too much to be a coincidence." Freeman took a seat opposite the desk.

"True," Straker agreed. "Too much to be a coincidence." He sat back in his chair and looked over at Freeman. "So it isn't a coincidence."

"Mechanical failure?"

"So close together without any forewarning? And all in the same general area? I doubt it."

"Sabotage?"

"On three different bases? Come on Alec, the RAF runs a better shop than that," Straker said.

"Well, pilot error's out for the same reason. Too close together," Freeman pointed out. "That leaves outside interference."

"Instead of 'outside' try 'alien'," Straker suggested.

"We haven't had any Ufos get through our defenses in nearly two months," Freeman reminded his commanding officer. "You've had Sky-diver patrolling the general area the planes had to have gone down. Nothing."

"Except an increase in the number of missing persons in the same general area," Straker said. He picked a shiny gray folder from the desktop and handed it to Freeman. "All young, healthy, with no reason to disappear, no known connection between them," Straker said, quoting from the report.

"Well, if there is a Ufo in the area, it's underwater," Freeman said. "They may have even built another underwater base."

"Yes," Straker agreed. "Alec, the area those six planes went down is only a hundred miles from our North Sea Sky-diver base."

"Close enough to attack before we'd have a chance to get reinforcements out there," Freeman said. "But, we don't know where they are, and we can't locate them until they move. And if they are there, they haven't moved in two months or more."

"Very true," Straker said. His hands were steepled together below his chin and a thoughtful look came into his blue-gray eyes. "So, we make them move."

"I know that look," Freeman said. "What have you got in mind?"

"Give them a target they can't resist," Straker said.

"Send another F-4 up, with us tracking it?" Freeman asked.

Straker nodded.

"Dangerous, if they've figured away around our tracking systems again."

"True," Straker agreed. "But those other planes were unarmed practice flights. I don't intend to go up without teeth."

"You're going out?" Freeman nearly sputtered in his disbelief.

"Alec, SHADO only has three qualified F-4 pilots, you, me, and Devin Meyers, and he's in Australia," Straker said. "You and I are the only ones with combat experience in it."

"Then I'll go," Freeman said.

"Frazer won't clear you for that type of flying, and you know it. You're too old," Straker said.

"I'm too old?" Freeman protested. "I'm only five years older than you are."

"Yes, but Frazer hasn't put a note in my record limiting me to pressurized cabins and low g flights until further notice," Straker said. "I'm sorry Alec, but I don't see an alternative. I'm going. I don't intend on getting into a dogfight with one of them."

Freeman sighed. He knew when he was beaten, and Straker was one of the few people capable of beating him at anything. But he didn't have to like it. "Who do you plan to take as your backseater?"

"Paul Foster."

"I wish you'd go with someone else, Peter or Lew or Rob," Freeman said.

"Why?" Straker asked. "Paul's a trained test pilot and I've had him in the simulator with me. He was fine."

"I'm not worried about his flying, Ed," Freeman said. "It's just..."

"Just what?"

Freeman took a deep breath. He wasn't sure how to explain it. "I've been getting some strange 'vibes' off of him the last couple weeks, since he broke up with that girl from the studio, Diana, whatever her name was."

"Kincaid. So? He's had girl trouble before," Straker said. "I was surprised he stayed with that one as long as he did. You should have heard what Kate was calling her. I didn't know my studio C.O.O. knew that kind of language. In seven languages."

Freeman chuckled, then more seriously: "I don't think that's what's going on with Foster, exactly. I know he'll get over the woman eventually, no matter what kind of man-eater she was." His broad forehead creased in worry. "I'm just not comfortable with how he's been acting down here recently, especially when you walk in."

"Do you think the alien programming is gaining a foothold?" Both officers knew that the aliens had subjected Paul Foster to a deep subliminal impulse, an impulse designed to drive him to kill Straker. The impulse had been defused by psychiatric treatment, but traces still remained.

"No, I don't think it's that either, exactly," Freeman said. "It's just, I don't know, little things. He watches you, studies you. You walk in and he's got your coffee for you, the way you like it. You don't have to ask for reports, he already has them. If he's going to kill you, it'll be with kindness. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was acting like a kid with a crush."

"On me? Alec, you're talking about Paul, the lady killer. I'm not exactly his type," Straker protested. "Besides, isn't he a little old for that kind of nonsense?"

Freeman chuckled and shook his head. "I'd still be more comfortable if you took Peter or Lew instead," he said more seriously.

"Your concern has been noted. But I know what I'm doing," Straker said.

"Do you have any objections to me putting Sky-Diver on alert?" Freeman asked.

"Not at all. In fact, I was going to suggest it," Straker said. "Sky-one can keep an eye on us, jump in if we really do run into trouble."

"When were you planning on going on this little adventure?" Freeman asked.

"Tomorrow looks good," Straker said. "Weather'll be clear. Should be a nice day for flying."

"Right."

* * *

Kate Komack moaned and shifted in her sleep. Her bed partner was immediately awake. He put his arms around her and pulled her close to him. He caressed the soft roundness of her belly, the child growing within. His child.

She relaxed against him. He waited and after a few moments, her eyes opened.

"You were having a bad dream," Straker said.

She rolled over to look into his face. "We're a fine pair. If you're not having a nightmare, I am."

"Can you tell me about it?" he asked, running his fingers through her long hair.

"Ed, please don't go flying today," she said. Worry lines appeared between her finely arched eyebrows.

"I don't have much choice. Everything's been arranged," he said. "We won't get a better chance."

"Send someone else with Paul," she said.

"There is nobody else," he said. "I'm the only one with the proper training and experience."

"It's been sixteen years since you flew combat," Kate argued.

"I don't intend to go into combat. Besides, you and Alec are probably right and I'm just chasing a shadow," Straker said.

"Is there anything I can do to talk you out of this?" she asked. He shook his head and began to massage her shoulders. She was still tense, her muscles whipcord tight. It was odd, normally she was the one trying to get him to relax.

Kate didn't often have nightmares, but they were happening more frequently since her pregnancy was confirmed just last month. Physically, she was fine, no morning sickness or anything like that. Just nightmares. Mary, his ex-wife, had morning sickness most of the way through her first pregnancy. At least nightmares evaporated in the daylight, but they did make it hard to get a good night's sleep.

Kate rolled onto her stomach and he began to work on her back. He could feel her muscles began to relax. She gave a little murr of pleasure as he kneaded one particularly hard spot beneath her shoulder blade.

"I could tie you up and make you my love slave, pretty boy," she said. There was the faintest hint of a chuckle in her voice.

"We'll talk about that when I get back, okay?" He kissed the back of her neck. She smelled of musk and lilacs.

"Promises, promises." She raised herself on her elbows and turned to look at him again. There was an intensely provocative, sensual look about her.

"When is Paul picking you up?" she asked.

"In about an hour," Straker answered.

"In that case, come here, pretty boy."

She pulled him down into a kiss that spoke of promises and longing and forever. She tasted of honey and he marveled at how lucky he was.

* * *

Exactly one hour later, Paul Foster knocked at the door to Straker's house. As per his instructions, he was wearing camouflage combat fatigues. When Straker opened the door, he was dressed the much the same, except instead of the standard drab T-shirt, he wore a light roll-neck sweater. Kate was dressed for work, a simple beige suite and green silk blouse.

Esther, her five year old daughter was wolfing down the last of her breakfast cereal.

"What time do you think you'll be back?" Kate asked, finishing her coffee.

"Late afternoon," Straker said. "We'll get dinner at the officers' club before we head back to town."

"I'll see you when you get home, then," Kate said. "I've got a full schedule today.

Production meetings on that spy show we've got with Howard Byrne. Only he's decided not to be there after making a fuss over not being invited."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Personally, I think he doesn't like women. He certainly doesn't like me."

"Byrne does have a reputation of being a little old-fashioned in his opinions of working women," Foster said. Old fashioned was putting it mildly. For all the actor's reputation as a lady's man, Howard Byrne had no tolerance at all of women in authority, especially women in what had traditionally been a male dominated industry.

"Anything I can help with?" Straker asked.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it, okay? Go fly your airplane, and leave the business to me," she said with a grin. The smile faded and her eyes darkened with worry as she stared into Straker's face for a long moment. She gave him a kiss, then turned to Foster.

"Promise me you'll bring my pretty back to me."

"Of course," Foster said. "We're not going into combat."

* * *

"What was that all about?" Foster asked as he maneuvered his candy-apple red Corvette onto the main road.

"Oh, Kate's just a little worried, that's all," Straker said, dismissing it. "Hormones kicking in. It happens with pregnant women. Plus, this thing with Byrne has her on edge. I'd like to pound some sense into the ass-hole. Pity he's such a box-office draw."

Foster was a little surprised at Straker's choice of words. 'Ass-hole' wasn't a description Straker used very often.

"I can try talking to him again, but I don't think it'll do much good," Foster said.

"You're probably right," Straker agreed. "Besides, I don't think there's a woman in the studio who can't handle the idiot. One of these days, he might actually figure it out."

Foster didn't think that was very likely.

The Corvette merged onto the highway.

"Uh, we're not flying into combat, are we?" Foster asked after a while.

"I certainly hope not," Straker replied. "I haven't flown combat in sixteen years."

Foster nodded, then: "Why did you want us both armed and in combat dress?"

"I like to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

"In case I'm wrong."

* * *

RAF Lakenheath was fifteen miles north of Oxford. It was an hour drive from Straker's house.

Straker's pass got them through the main gates and to the operations center. The necessary paperwork was already waiting for them. Their plane was being prepared.

"Why pick the Phantom?" Foster asked as they pulled on their flight gear.

"That's what went down," Straker answered. "Also, I always liked flying the F-4. It's reliable, maneuverable. It's a good plane."

They walked out to the warplane in question. It was painted in air force gray camouflage. The aircrew had just finished loading the armament. The crew chief snapped off a salute as Straker approached. Straker returned the salute. The crew chief handed him a clipboard with several sheets of paper on it. Straker looked over the sheets and began to walk around the plane for his flight check. Foster started to follow him.

A gray jeep cut across the flight line. Foster stopped to watch as it approached their plane and slowed to the stop.

A tall black man with graying hair unfolded himself from the driver's seat. There were colonel's wings on his American air force uniform. He strode over to the warplane.

"Hey, kid!" he yelled.

Straker turned, annoyance flickering across his finely chiseled face. The annoyance vanished when he recognized the speaker.

"What are you doing with my plane?" the man asked. He grinned, his teeth bright against his chocolate skin.

"Hello, Mike," Straker greeted the officer. "I thought I'd just take it for a spin around the block, get some flight time in."

Foster stepped closer.

"Oh, this is Paul Foster," Straker said. "Paul, Colonel Mike Courtland, the DFO." The two men shook hands. Courtland bent down and peered up at the undercarriage of the plane.

"God, Ed, hasn't anybody told you we're not at war with anybody right now?" Courtland said. "The only thing you don't have loaded on this bird is a tactical nuke, and according to the instructions I got, you're authorized for that if you want it." The black man looked over at Straker. "Mind telling me how you managed that?"

"I could tell you," Straker said. "But then I'd have to kill you."

Courtland shook his head and grinned. "When I got the notice you wanted to borrow a plane, I checked to make sure you still had the appropriate clearances. My boss nearly dropped his rocks when he saw what came back, from JCS, General Sachs, personally. Your clearance isn't just high, it's stratospheric."

"Really?"

"I never did buy that early retirement' story," Courtland said. The SHADO officer simply smiled.

Courtland's expression became more serious. "Do you really think you can find who it was that took out those kids?"

"Who said I was looking?" Straker asked.

"Jim Henderson asked for the investigation reports."

"So?"

"So, rumor has it, you still work for him."

"You listen to too many rumors, Mike, my man."

The air force officer looked over the plane once more and sighed. "Eddie boy, be careful," he said.

"I always am," Straker told him.

"Yeah, right," Courtland said with a little laugh. "Good hunting. I'll buy you a drink when you get back."

"You're on," Straker said. He went back to his flight check.

Courtland started back to the jeep, then stopped in front of Foster.

"You take care of my man there, hear?" He hitched a thumb in Straker's direction.

"I intend to, sir," Foster said.

Courtland nodded. He climbed into the jeep and drove off.

"Ready, Paul?" Straker asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Foster replied. He was getting a bad feeling about this flight and they hadn't even gotten into the plane yet. He wondered why Straker had chosen him to go flying with. He also wondered if Straker suspected the problem he was having controlling the impulse the aliens had planted in his mind, or the means he was using to combat it.

This was going to be an interesting day, in the worst sense of the word.

* * *

Alec Freeman sat at the commander's desk in SHADO headquarters. He had finished reviewing the report logs from the previous night, just as Straker normally did. He checked the time once again. Straker and Foster would have taken off by now.

The intercom buzzed and Freeman keyed it open. "Freeman."

"Is Commander Straker there?" Doctor Doug Jackson's softly accented voice asked.

"No," Freeman said. "Is there something I can do?"

"I was just wondering if the commander had time yesterday to discuss with you the report I gave him."

"And which report was that?" Freeman asked. The pile of reports on the corner of the desk was about a foot high.

"On Colonel Foster?"

"No, he didn't have a chance to discuss it with me," Freeman admitted.

"I see. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Colonel," Jackson said, cutting the connection.

Suddenly curious, Freeman sorted through the pile of reports on the black desktop. There was no report on Foster. On a hunch, he checked the desk drawers and found a thin report file lying on top of the office supplies Straker kept in the second drawer.

Freeman opened the file and skimmed through the papers clipped to it. It was brief and it mostly concerned Paul Foster's recent relationship with Diane Kincaid. However, it also touched on another, more disturbing, concern. Since Foster's breakup with Kincaid after finding her in his bed with another woman, his control over the alien impulse to kill Straker seemed to have weakened. Jackson's short report gave no clues as to why, after nearly a year, Foster was starting to have problems. Maybe the trouble he had with the woman, but it was hard to say.

The report also gave few clues as to how Foster was handling the situation, assuming he was aware of it at all.

Freeman knew Straker had read the report. There were faint question marks beside several of the more confusing passages. Sometimes Jackson's reports read like he was

translating directly from Hungarian.

He put the report back where he had found it and closed the drawer. He considered radioing Straker and forcing him to abort the mission. Freeman discarded the thought almost as soon as it came to him. Straker had read the report. He knew the risks.

* * *

The Phantom climbed to its cruising altitude in almost no time. In less than half an hour, they were over Aberdeen.

"Radar is clear of unidentifieds," Foster announced. "All weapon systems are go."

"Thank you, Paul," Straker said. "We're a little early for our rendezvous. Want to have some fun?"

"What did you have in mind?" Foster asked, a nasty suspicion growing in the back of his mind.

To answer, Straker kicked in the afterburner and pulled the jet into a full climb. Foster was pushed back into his seat by the five-g force. It got worse. The plane went onto its back as it went into the top of a loop, then dove for the ground.

"Commander, is this your idea of fun?" Foster called into the internal communication system.

"You're not gonna get sick on me, are you?" Straker asked.

"No," Foster said. "I just wish you'd given me better warning. I wasn't expecting you to pull aerobatics in this crate."

"Where's your sense of adventure, Paul?" Straker wondered aloud. "Haven't you ever buzzed the tower, anything like that?" The Phantom went into the bottom of the loop, but instead of going into straight flight again, it climbed and began a roll, stopping when it was fully inverted.

"It's against regulations to buzz the tower," Foster said.

"Oh, and you always follow the regulations?"

"There are controls back here, you know," Foster reminded him.

"Be my guest," Straker said. There was a faint wobble in the plane that told Foster that Straker had taken his hand away from the control stick.

Foster grabbed the control stick and the plane bucked ever so slightly. These controls were touchier than in the simulator. After a few moments, he had his bearings and began his own set of aerobatic stunts, putting the warbird through her paces.

The jet's radio squawked on. "Dancer to Ice Prince, what are you doing?"

Foster looked out the window to his right. The Phantom was inverted again. Rising to meet them was the squat shape of Sky-one.

"I have it, Paul," Straker said, taking the controls. He flipped the jet right side up. It was a smooth, well-practiced maneuver. Foster had to admit, Straker was good.

"Ice Prince to Dancer, glad you could join us," Straker said into the microphone in his helmet. "We were just killing some time, waiting for you."

"I was watching the show," Dancer replied. "Not bad."

Foster watched his radar as Sky-one gently slid into the wingman's position, off the left wingtip of the Phantom.

Peter Carlin was captaining Skydiver 1 this rotation. Dancer was a good call sign for the Puerto Rican flier. He moved like a dancer. It was almost a pity that SHADO didn't bother with call signs.

"How are we playing this, Majesty?" Dancer called.

"Real loose," Straker responded. "When we reach the target area, I want you to back off but keep us in sight."

"The target area's pretty rugged. Nasty place for a dogfight," Dancer said.

"Understood, Dancer," Straker said. "I don't intend to engage them, just draw them to you."

"Roger that Ice Prince," Dancer replied. "I'll be ready."

"Ten minutes from target area," Foster called.

Sky-one throttled back slightly, letting the bigger plane run ahead.

"Good luck, Ice Prince," Dancer called. They cut radio contact.

"Hey, if you're Ice Prince and he's Dancer," Foster said. "Don't I get a call sign too?"

"Did I forget to tell you?" Straker asked. There was a bright chipperness in Straker's voice that usually meant he was up to something. "Your call is Galahad."

Foster shook his head and grinned to himself. On his last tour on Sky-Diver, Lieutenant Howell had started calling him 'Galahad'. He freely admitted he was anything but a knight in shining armor and certainly not one in the mold of that warrior. He hadn't realized that Straker knew about the nickname and he knew he should have known better. SHADO may be secret, but there were few secrets within SHADO.

The SHADO officer looked out at the ground so far below. They were flying over the north of Scotland. While the mountains here were no match for the Alps or the Rockies, they were rough enough. If they had trouble, there was no safe place to land. Sunlight glinted off dozens of tiny lakes hidden in the valleys.

"If they're down there, we'll never find them," Foster said.

"Have a little faith, Galahad," Straker chided.

Suddenly, the twin Spey engines stopped and the jet began to drop. Foster checked his instruments. Nothing, the radar screen was blank. The telltales were dark.

"Ed, I'm dark back here," Foster warned. Without the engines running, he could be heard without the internal communications system.

"We must have run into some sort of energy dampening field," Straker said. Foster could tell he was fighting with the controls, trying to keep the jet's nose up so they wouldn't plow into the nearest peak. All the instruments were dark. Even the radio was out. They had no power at all.

"We're out of here, Paul," Straker announced. "Eject! Eject! Eject!"

As he'd been trained, Foster reached up, grabbed the two ejection rings and pulled hard. The chemical rockets under the ejection seat ignited, blowing him clear of the doomed jet.

The next thing he knew, he was floating down over the mountain, a white canopy high over his head. Straker's chute was a short distance away. The powerless plane fell out of the air, slamming into the side of the mountain. It exploded into flame, sending spumes of black smoke into the cloudless sky.

Foster's chute caught in a pine on the side of the mountain. He unbuckled his harness and dropped to the earth below. A sharp pain stabbed his ankle as he landed and he bit his lip to keep from crying out. He tried to stand and an agonizing pain went up his leg.

"Wonderful," he muttered to himself as he sat on the ground to wait.

* * *

As per his orders, Peter Carlin was a bit more than a mile behind the Phantom. He had a good radar fix on the bigger plane. Then suddenly, it disappeared from his screen even though he could still see it through the cockpit windshield. He watched in horror as the jet started to

fall.

"Dancer to Ice Prince, Dancer to Ice Prince," Carlin called over their designated frequency. No reply. He switched to the open emergency channel. Again, nothing. The Phantom was losing altitude fast.

Sky-one's radar still wasn't picking up the Phantom or the mountains beyond. Carlin gave a unit a thunk with the heel of his hand - no change. He scanned the area visually, breathing a sigh of relief when he caught sight of two parachutes drifting down to earth. A fireball lit the sky and a tower of black smoke marked the Phantom's grave. There was no sign of the alien ship they were looking for.

"Sky-one to SHADO Control," Carlin called into his helmet microphone.

"Control here," Ford's voice came through his headphones.

"The Phantom's down, but I did see two good chutes," Carlin reported. "Request permission to overfly the crash site to locate the survivors."

"Negative, Sky-one. Do not, repeat DO NOT overfly the area. You are to return to base immediately," the response came back. Carlin recognized Freeman's voice.

"Roger, control, Sky-one returning to base," Carlin acknowledged. He gave the tower of smoke one last look before pointing his plane toward the sea, and home.

* * *

Freeman was aware of the looks of surprise he was getting from the control room operatives at his orders to Sky-one. He was also aware, as they were not, that the most recent satellite radar photos of the area had shown a blank spot, an area the radar could not see.

Freeman wasn't about to risk losing Sky-one in that blank space in the mountains.

He turned to Johnson. "I want an Orbital Observation platform moved into geosynchronous orbit over the commander's last known coordinates. Then, I want a continual real-time radar, EM, infra-red and visual scan of the area. I want to know what's down there."

"Yes, sir," Johnson acknowledged.

Freeman looked over at Ford. "I want Dr. Reed, and whoever else we have in experimental physics, in the commander's office in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Freeman stalked off to the commander's office - his office until Straker was found and returned to SHADO, or declared dead and replaced.

"Damn you, Ed," Freeman swore under his breath after the doors closed. "You'd better be okay down there."

* * *

Straker swore at himself for not considering ALL the possibilities concerning the plane losses. There was no U.F.O. in the area, or if there was, it wasn't going to move so long as its other defenses were intact. What they had run into was more disturbing. An energy dampening field of some sort. The Phantom had simply lost all power. He didn't know how to fight that. Obviously, neither had the other pilots who'd gone down.

A dampening field implied an alien base somewhere in the area - a base large enough to power a field strong enough to bring down a plane in flight.

Old training took over. Straker gathered the billowing fabric of the parachute and buried it in a shallow grave. Peter Carlin had seen the Phantom go down, Straker was sure of that. Therefore, SHADO knew where they were and would come looking for them.

He pulled a small radio transceiver from his pocket. There was nothing. No lighted telltales showing battery power and signal strength, no static. He had tested it back at

Lakenheath before they took off. He was certain it wasn't broken since it was designed for emergencies like this one and was almost indestructible. He put it back in his pocket.

With the dampening field in place, SHADO wasn't going to be able fly into the area to find them. Their best bet for rescue was for him and Foster to simply walk out of the area and call home. Alec was going to be furious. Mike Courtland wasn't going to be thrilled with him either. Fighter planes were expensive and this was the second one he'd lost in sixteen years.

But, those concerns would wait. He had more immediate issues to worry about.

Foster had gone down somewhere south of him. He grabbed his compass to check his orientation. The compass was acting up, too. It was pointing west, rather than north. Straker mentally filed that piece of information for future use and started walking south, toward the late morning sun.

* * *

"As near as we can tell from this information," Charles Reed, head of SHADO's experimental physics group said, looking over the pictures Freeman gave him. "We're looking at an area that is completely black in all electromagnetic frequencies above and below visual and infra-red."

"Black?" Freeman asked.

"Totally non-reflective," Reed explained. "The energy is being absorbed, or blocked."

"How?" Freeman asked.

Reed shook his head. "I have to assume the aliens have figured out some way to create an interference zone covering every EM frequency."

"Except for visual and infra-red," Freeman noted. "Why those exceptions?"

"If the interference were complete, then the area inside the field would be completely black," Reed explained. "Damn cold too. It might also interfere with the power frequencies the aliens use."

"So the aliens have left a hole for us to look through," Freeman commented. "What do we see?"

"The infra-red photos of the area show seven hot spots that could be people, or large animals," Kevin Scott, Reed's assistant, said.

"Seven animals, or maybe two of our people and some aliens?" Freeman asked.

Scott didn't have an answer. Freeman hadn't expected one.

* * *

His ankle was beginning to swell and the pain was getting worse. His knee hurt, too, probably twisted when he'd hurt his ankle.

Something, or someone, was moving very quietly across the gravel beside the small stream just below him. That was the only sound. He didn't hear birds or animals. Even the breeze seemed muted, dulled.

"Paul?" Straker's voice.

"Over here," Foster called. The bushes parted and Straker appeared, pistol in hand. He stopped before coming closer, eyes scanning the area. He glanced up at the white parachute in the top of the tree.

"You okay?" he asked, finally coming closer. He tucked the gun into his belt.

"I twisted my ankle coming out of that tree," Foster said with a sheepish grin.

"Can you walk on it?"

"Sorry," Foster said. "I wish I could. It was a stupid thing to do."

"Don't worry about," Straker said.

"I thought I saw a house just west of here before I landed," Foster said. "It was by that little lake."

"At least it'll be shelter," Straker said. He grabbed Foster's right arm and put it over his shoulder, helping the younger man to his feet.

"Let's go," Straker urged. They set off for the house.

"Hallo!" a man's voice called before they'd gotten more than a few steps.

A middle-aged man in a flannel shirt and tweeds came up the faint path toward them. "I saw you bail out. You blokes okay?" He looked them over. "Well, that's a stupid question, obviously you're not."

The man came over to Foster's free side to lend a hand. "I'm Joe Blakesly, by the way. I'm staying at the lodge with some friends."

"Ed Straker," Straker introduced himself.

"Of course, you are," Blakesly laughed, as they started down the path. "Says so right on your suit there. A full colonel, too, unless I miss my guess." He jabbed a finger at Foster. "Lt. Colonel Foster, am I right?"

"Right," Foster agreed.

"I was in the RAF for a couple years," Blakesly continued. "I'm in films now. I don't have to guess what you fellows do, do I? I bet you don't bail out every day though."

"Hardly ever, as a matter of fact," Straker said. He seemed amused by Blakesly's exuberance rather than annoyed.

"There's a film producer in London by the name of Straker," Blakesly said. "I don't suppose you'd be related?"

"Maybe," Straker said.

The lodge was closer than Foster had thought. They came out into the clearing around it after only a few minutes. It was a turn of the century rendition of a Tudor style house. There was a large porch across the front and a stone chimney climbed up one side of the building.

"It belongs to the McCullough brothers," Blakesly explained. "They're friends of one of my clients. He looked around. "I guess they must still be looking for you fellows."

Blakesly opened the front door and let the two SHADO officers inside. Straker helped Foster to a heavy armchair beside the huge stone fireplace.

"The kitchen's through there," Blakesly said, pointing out the door beyond the fireplace. "I'm going to see if I can find the others, let them know I found you."

Straker nodded. Blakesly grinned and headed off.

"Seems like a nice fellow," Foster commented.

"Probably is," Straker said. He took a quick look around the large, dark paneled room, then pulled out a pocket-knife. He opened it and began to cut the laces off the boot on Foster's injured foot.

Foster gritted his teeth to keep from crying out as Straker very gently removed the boot. The ankle was an ugly red, indented where the boot had dug into the swelling flesh.

"Bad, huh?" Straker asked.

Foster nodded. He had been hoping Straker wouldn't notice his reaction, or would choose to ignore it. For some reason he couldn't explain to himself, he hated the idea that Straker might think him weak or dependent.

"I think it's just a bad sprain," Foster said. He was lying. He was positive he'd broken it. A sprain wouldn't feel nearly this bad.

Straker straightened up. "I'll go check the kitchen. Maybe they've got some bandages, or

ice, or something."

"Maybe something stronger?" Foster suggested.

"I'll see what I can find," Straker promised.

He returned a few minutes later with two tea towels wrapped around a bag of ice, an elastic bandage, and a bottle of cheap beer. He handed the beer to Foster and started to wrap the ankle. It hurt like hell.

"I found their first-aid kit. The ice should help. They have a cooler of it in the pantry," Straker said. "And that's the strongest stuff I could find." He draped the tea towels and ice bag over Foster's ankle.

Foster leaned back in the chair. The pain was exhausting. He took a swig of the beer. It was a cheap brand and tasted flat.

Straker shed his flight gear, then began to move around the room. Foster watched as his commanding officer looked over the heavy timbered ceiling, the walls with their hunting trophies. There was a tall cabinet in one corner. Foster watched Straker inspect the lock, then open it with a quick twist of his knife.

The doors swung open to reveal six hunting rifles. Boxes of ammunition sat on the bottom of the cabinet. Straker pulled out one of the rifles and looked it over.

"Nice," Straker said. He brought the rifle and one of the ammunition boxes over to Foster.

"You're full of hidden talents," Foster commented. "Remind me to call you the next time I lock myself out of my car."

Straker grinned. "A relic of my time in reform school."

Foster snorted. He knew that Straker had attended a highly respected private military high school, paid for by dotting grandparents after his mother died.

Foster laid the rifle across his lap. "What's this for?"

"Like I said, I like to be prepared," Straker said. He went back and pulled a second gun from the cabinet and checked it over. "We hit an energy dampening field of some sort. We don't have that kind of technology, but I'm assuming there's a power supply for it, and a reason."

"A trap?"

"Possibly," Straker admitted. "But there are simpler ways to set a trap with my name on it, or yours."

Any comment Foster might have made was interrupted by feet tramping on the front porch.

"Joe?" a man's voice called from outside. Two men walked in, followed by a third. The first two were about Foster's age, nondescript, medium height and weight. They looked so much alike there was little doubt they were the McCullough brothers.

The third man was tall and good looking in a matinee-idol sort of way. Foster just shook his head when he recognized the man - Howard Byrne, the actor. From the appalled look on Byrne's face, there was little doubt he had recognized Foster and Straker as well.

The McCulloughs didn't seem to notice Byrne's reaction. "I wonder what the RAF would give us for these lost fledglings of theirs?" the taller one asked.

"I doubt the RAF would give you much, Ian. They're in the movie business," Byrne said. Ian McCullough looked back at Byrne in surprise.

"You know them?"

"Ed Straker and Paul Foster," Byrne said. "Harlington-Straker Studios."

"Ian and Sean McCullough, at your service," Ian said, giving the two SHADO officers

tiny bow. "I assume you know Howie, here."

"Yes, I know Mister Byrne," Straker said. He picked up the rifle he'd set down when they walked in.

Sean McCullough frowned as he watched Straker load the gun. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

Ian walked over to the open cabinet. "This was locked."

"Yes, it was," Straker said. "Lousy lock, though. You'll want to have a better one installed."

"That's pretty cheeky, I must say," Ian protested. "You can't just waltz in here uninvited and start playing with my hunting rifles."

"We weren't exactly uninvited," Straker said, very mildly. "Mister Blakesly brought us here."

Byrne looked around. "Where is Joe?"

"He left a little bit ago," Straker said. "Said he was going out to look for the rest of you."

"I didn't see him," Byrne said, his mouth pulling into a frown.

The two McCulloughs shook their heads. "He didn't come down by the lake, or we'd have seen him," Ian said.

"Oh, he probably got turned around in the woods," Sean said brightly. "We'll light a fire in the fireplace and he can home in on the smoke."

Straker opened the ammunition box on the arm of Foster's chair and dropped several rifle cartridges into his pocket. With the rifle in his hand, he headed for the door.

"And where do you think you're going?" Ian demanded.

"To look for Mister Blakesly," Straker replied.

"With my rifle?"

"In case I run into trouble."

"There's nothing dangerous out there," Ian said. "Joe's just gotten himself lost."

"Maybe," Straker said. "And maybe he ran into a killer rabbit." With that, he walked out and shut the door behind him.

Byrne grimaced and turned to Sean and Ian. "Look, I'm going out to look for Joe, too. It'll be getting dark in a couple hours and I don't like the idea of him being out there alone."

"Mister Straker can handle it. He happens to be a crack shot," Foster said.

"Really?" Byrne said, disbelief coloring his voice. "Our Mister Straker is a man of many talents. Of course, I'm trying to figure out how two film producers got their hands on a military jet."

"We have friends in strange places?" Foster said with a smile.

* * *

"Any suggestions as to how we get in there with equipment?" Freeman asked. Virginia Lake had come on duty and was looking over the large-scale maps with him in the office.

"I'm surprised there's not more development in the area, considering how close it is to the Highland Ski areas," Lake commented. "We could drive in, hike the last few miles if we had to."

"It may come to that," Freeman said. "Has Natiroff come up with anything on the house in there?"

Lake took a folder from the pile on the desk. "The lodge belongs to one of the preservation trusts. It's being leased to two brothers, Sean and Ian McCullough. They have a London address and according to their office, they're up at the lodge with some friends this

weekend."

"Anything to link them to Ufos?" Freeman asked.

"Nothing that we know of," Lake said.

* * *

Byrne had no idea which direction Straker had taken. He was certain Blakesly hadn't headed east, otherwise he would have seen the man earlier. That left the west and south, by the lake, so he headed in that direction.

He rounded a bend in the path and saw Straker lying on his belly behind a tree trunk that had fallen across the path sometime during the winter. He was wearing a floppy camouflage hat and watching something through a pair of small binoculars.

Byrne took a step and a twig snapped under his foot. Straker's reaction was blindingly fast. He rolled, brought a pistol up, looked right at Byrne and fired.

Byrne waited for the searing pain of the bullet. Instead, he heard a gasp behind him and he turned to see a man collapse onto the path. The man's complexion was faintly green and he was dressed in a glossy red jumpsuit decorated with silver chains. A smear of darker red spread across his chest.

Byrne overcame his shock enough to go and check for a pulse at the man's neck. There was none.

Straker was on his feet beside him. The blond man reached down and picked up an odd looking rifle that had fallen beside the body.

"My God," Byrne said in horror. "You just killed a man! Why?"

There was something very old and hard and cold in Straker's eyes. "You would rather I had waited until he killed you, too?"

"What do you mean?"

"I found your friend's body under some brush over there," Straker said, indicating the direction with a turn of his head.

Byrne started to head that direction. He found Straker's hand on his arm. For someone so slender, Straker was surprisingly strong. "I wouldn't," Straker said. "His body was mutilated. It's pretty bad."

Byrne's mind was spinning. Things weren't making sense. Movie producers don't go around shooting people, no matter how much they might want to. He tried to concentrate on what Straker had just said.

"Mutilated? What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, mutilated, cut up," Straker said. His tone was infuriatingly calm.

"I don't understand. You think that fellow did it?" Byrne asked.

"Him or one of his friends," Straker said.

"Who was he? Who are they?"

"Aliens."

Byrne barked out a nervous laugh. "Legally you're an alien, aren't you? You're American."

"Yes, but they're from outer space. At least I have a valid passport," Straker said. He paused a moment before continuing. "Why don't you go back to the house and bring me a blanket or something so we can move his body out of here. I wouldn't want animals to get to it."

"Sure," Byrne said. His mind didn't seem to want to work. He found himself obeying Straker before he could even ask why he should.

"Oh, it might be better if you didn't mention 'him' to the others." Straker nodded to the man in the red suit.

"You don't think you're going to get away with killing him, do you?" Byrne asked.

Straker's expression went hard and even a little imperious. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do."

Suddenly, Byrne felt afraid. He'd often been annoyed by Straker's coldness, his lack of consideration for others, even turning the studio operation over to people who knew nothing of the film business. But, this was the first time Howard Byrne had found himself afraid.

He went back to the house as instructed. "Joe's dead," he told the others. He managed to keep the tremor out of his voice, an award winning performance if anyone knew.

"Straker found his body down by the lake. We're going to bring it back up here, keep the animals away from it."

"What happened?" Sean demanded. Byrne just shook his head.

"I'll come with you," Ian offered.

"No, Straker and I can manage it," Byrne said, grabbing a blanket out of a cupboard.

"We'll be back in a few minutes."

Straker was waiting where Byrne had left him, by the log across the path to the lake. The man in the red-suit was gone. There were signs that something heavy had been dragged down the path beyond the log, to the lake.

"I brought the blanket," Byrne said. Straker beckoned him to follow as he headed into the brush a short distance from the path. Blakesly was lying face down in a pool of blood.

"You're sure he's dead?" Byrne asked.

"Yes," Straker said. The coldness had left his voice.

Byrne shook his head. It was all too sudden, too bizarre. Things like this only happened in movies, like the ones they made at the studio. They didn't happen in real life. Straker didn't belong in camouflage dress in the middle of the Scottish mountains, but then, Straker didn't belong in an F-4 either. 'Strange friends'? Byrne had friends too, only none of them had access to warplanes, and they certainly didn't go around shooting people, fully expecting to get away with it.

Straker took the blanket, laid it next to the body and then rolled Blakesly over onto it.

"Oh my God," Byrne gasped. There was a gaping hole running from the top of Blakesly's chest to just above his crotch. He had been gutted like a pig.

Straker didn't seem to flinch at all. He bundled the body in the blanket, covering it up.

"I told you it wasn't pretty," Straker said. "Did you know him well?"

"He was my agent," Byrne said. "Got me my start in films, the contract with the studio. He was like family."

"I'm sorry," Straker said.

"You know who did this?"

"If it wasn't the one I killed, it was one of his companions," Straker said. He pointed down the lake, to the near bank. There were four large circular scorch marks in the brush. "Those are landing marks from a Ufo."

"A Ufo?" Byrne asked.

"Unidentified Flying Objects, aliens from outer space," Straker replied. "I'd say there're at least four ships. They're probably somewhere in this lake. Each craft carries two to three aliens."

"You mean, there really are flying saucers?"

"Oh yes, they're real all right."

"And nobody knows about it?"

"Well, let's just say that the people who do know, don't talk about it much."

They laid Blakesly's body on the front porch, tucking the blanket around him.

"We need to send someone into town to notify the authorities," Byrne said. He was still numb from the shock.

"Good idea," Straker said. "We need to get Paul to a doctor in any case."

"Sean and Ian have a jeep parked down by the road," Byrne said. "I can bring it up here, be in town in two hours."

"Fine," Straker said. "You might also consider taking Sean or Ian with you to get the jeep, for safety."

Byrne stared at him. "You really believe there are flying saucer people out there, don't you?"

"I just killed one," Straker replied. "That's my job. To keep them from invading Earth."

"One of those famous alien conspiracies?" Byrne said. "License to kill, like James Bond?"

"James Bond is fiction," Straker said. "I wish this was."

"You're crazy, you know that?" Byrne said. "You're not going to get away with it. That man was probably a hiker that got lost."

"He wasn't a hiker and I think you know it," Straker said.

"I can't believe this is happening," Byrne managed to choke out.

"Believe it," Straker said. "And it's not over yet."

* * *

Sean and Ian volunteered to go bring the jeep up to the house. "We know the area a lot better than Howie," Sean explained. "We can be back here before dark."

Straker handed Ian one of the rifles. "Be careful. Whatever killed your friend may still be out there."

"Sure," Ian said. He obviously didn't believe there was any danger. The McCullough's had apparently assumed Blakesly'd had a heart attack or something. Straker hadn't mentioned the UFO evidence, or the dead alien and neither had Byrne. Straker had left the alien rifle underneath Blakesly's body.

"What did kill him?" Foster asked as soon as the door closed behind the two McCulloughs.

"Aliens," Straker said, sitting on the edge of the ottoman by Foster's chair. He glanced at Byrne. The other man was staying well away from him, studying the titles on the books on the far wall.

"I killed one, not far from Blakesly's body," Straker added. He nodded in Byrne's direction. "He's pretty sure I'm a homicidal manic. I scared him pretty badly."

"He'll get over it once we get out of here and get him the amnesia treatment," Foster said. "If there are aliens around, that means they do have a base near here."

"Probably in the lake," Straker said. "It's certainly large enough and the terrain's rugged enough to make it hard to attack them."

"The terrain won't keep us from getting them," Foster said.

"You're forgetting about that dampening field," Straker reminded him. "SHADO's not getting anything in here with that running."

"So, how do we get rid of it?"

Straker just shook his head.

* * *

They had been waiting for several hours. Byrne was ignoring Straker, pulling out magazines from one of the shelves and leafing through them. Straker wasn't objecting to being ignored. It was preferable to the alternative, Byrne pumping both SHADO officers for explanations they weren't prepared to give.

Straker tried to ignore his own antipathy for the actor. Byrne had always been a demanding 'prima donna', wanting more and more money, more and more authority in the projects he was involved in, but showing no talent for anything but being an actor. His only saving grace was that he was a fairly good actor and women found him attractive and were willing to pay good money to see his movies. The women who knew him well had other opinions of the man, most of them unprintable in family publications.

Straker checked his watch. It had stopped when they hit the field, but his best guess was that it was near dinner time.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry," Straker said, looking around. "Howard, do you think you could get a fire going while I check out what there is to eat around here?"

"How can you think of food after all that's happened?" Byrne demanded.

"The first order of business is survival," Straker said.

Byrne simply stared at him. After a moment, the actor put down his reading and started gathering split logs from the pile beside the hearth. Straker headed for the kitchen. As he reached the door, he heard Byrne say: "That bastard's some piece of work."

"Commander Straker's going to do his level best to keep you alive till we get help," Foster said. "I know you won't believe it, but that uniform is the real thing." Straker let the door close behind him.

He searched through the kitchen cabinets, the pantry cupboards. He found potato chips and large supply of other junk food, a bag of rice, some canned goods, bottled water, and of course, the beer. Straker wondered what the McCulloughs planned to feed their house guests. From the condition of the kitchen, no one had been up here in months, maybe longer. Considering the amount of cheap beer in the pantry, maybe they weren't planning on eating. He didn't see any evidence of illicit drugs, but if the McCulloughs had any sense at all any drugs would be well hidden, even in as isolated a place as this house was. Byrne didn't have a reputation for being involved in drugs, but it was still a possibility.

There was a door opposite the pantry entrance. Straker opened it to discover a set of simple stairs going down into a dark cellar. There was a stone wall on one side and a galvanized pipe hand rail on the other. The cellar smelled musty, unused, with undertones of something else, something chemical and alien. He started down the steps, pulled out his flashlight and thumbed on the switch. To his surprise, it came on. The cellar was protected from the dampening field, somehow.

His light darted over cupboards and shelves, old gardening tools, saws. Cobwebs decorated the ceiling joists and the foundation stones. There was a short ramp leading to what had to be a door. He could see dim light coming in from outside.

He flashed his light at the floor. It had been recently swept clean, no footprints, except his own. But, there were aliens near, somewhere. He could feel it, almost smell it. He heard footsteps above him, in the kitchen and he went back upstairs.

"What the devil were you doing down there?" Byrne demanded when Straker got back up to the kitchen.

"Just checking the lay of the land," Straker said. "I don't like surprises, especially at times like this." He started busying himself, pulling out cooking utensils and plates. He needed to

stay busy, to keep away the unease that was beginning to nibble at the edge of his awareness. The house wasn't small, but it smelled of a trap.

He handed some of the utensils to Byrne and headed back into the main room. The fire was going nicely in the fireplace. It was warm and cheery. The anxiety began to back away from Straker's consciousness.

"I didn't find much back there," Straker explained. "But there's enough we shouldn't starve before our people get here." He poured together some bottled water and rice in a heavy pan and set it over the fire to cook.

"For people having guests up for the weekend, they certainly aren't very well provisioned," Foster noted.

"They were probably planning to drink the weekend away," Straker said.

"Actually, we were leaving this evening. We were just finalizing some contracts," Byrne said.

"What sort of contracts?"

"The McCulloughs' had some interesting story properties and some friends who wouldn't mind getting into the film business."

"Planning on starting your own company?" Straker asked.

"Joe thought it might help my career to get into the management side," Byrne said. "I've tried to do it with your bunch, but your lady friend has your attitude toward that sort of thing. Once a stupid actor, always a stupid actor, I guess."

"I don't recall ever accusing you of being stupid, Howard," Straker said. "I just don't like being dictated to by people using threats as their only negotiation tool."

"You don't like to negotiate, period, Mister Straker," Byrne sneered. "Neither does your Mizz Komack."

"I thought that's what you were supposed to be meeting with her about today," Straker said. "The line producer and director letting you have more behind camera experience, more creative input."

"Fat chance of that," Byrne said.

"Certainly not if you don't show up to the staff meetings," Foster commented.

"I am not letting that woman give me orders," Byrne stated. "And, those two fat heads in charge of my show can't tell a good story from a pile of shit. They're not going to let me have any say in it."

"Howard," Straker said. "It's not your show."

"I'm the one making it work and I can always go somewhere else," Byrne warned.

"You can always try," Straker said. He popped the lid off the pot with a meat fork and checked the rice. It was done. He pulled the pot off the fire, opened up two of the cans he'd brought out and poured in their contents.

"What is it?" Foster asked. He eyed the pot.

"A Troop 43 camp out special," Straker replied. "A 'cassaroley' sort of thing."

"You're a regular boy scout," Byrne grumbled.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Eagle," Straker said. He dished out the food and handed a plate to Foster.

The younger man sniffed at it before taking a bite. He chewed and swallowed, then smiled. "Not bad," he said.

* * *

"We can have a Mobile team in the area by midnight," Captain Naomi Green, senior

mobile operations officer told Freeman.

"Why so long?" Freeman asked.

"The area's very rugged. We won't be able to take the transports in all the way and the Mobiles aren't all that fast, especially in terrain this rough," Green explained.

"There are roads," Lake pointed out.

"Footpaths, mostly, hiking trails," Green said. "I've been camping up there. Believe me, if the aliens have a base in there, it'll be a real bear to get to them. I don't think they could have chosen a worse area in all of Britain."

* * *

When the meal was over, Straker collected the dirty dishes and set them in the kitchen sink. Byrne was surprised that Straker accepted, maybe even enjoyed, doing such homely things as cooking, cleaning up. It didn't fit with what he knew of the cold, self-centered, ex-military business man. It also didn't fit Byrne's image of the cold-blooded killer he saw out on the path, the one wearing Straker's face.

The sun had fallen behind the mountains. Byrne fed the last of the split wood to the fire. At least the fire kept the chill out of the main room, but the outside temperature was dropping fast. He grabbed the heavy parka he'd brought with him and put it on. His latest girl friend had insisted he bring it, even though Sean and Joe had both said he wouldn't need it. It wasn't supposed to get that cold in March.

Straker had rummaged around the pantry and found some coffee. It was now boiling on the fire. Byrne looked through a different collection of old magazines on the shelves. He pulled out one whose cover article was about the Six Day War.

"Here's an old one, July 67," he commented. He showed Foster the cover. "Hard to believe it was over fifteen years ago."

"I was seventeen, trying to decide what I wanted to do with the rest of my life," Foster said. "I remember being terrified the war was going to spread and Britain would get involved."

"I was just twenty-one, working for my uncle between acting gigs," Byrne said. "He was in construction. He wanted me to sign up, in case there was more trouble. I just couldn't see myself doing it." He turned to Straker. "What about you?"

Straker looked away.

"You would have been about thirty?" Byrne asked.

"Twenty-nine," Straker corrected.

"Where were you?" Byrne asked.

"I was in the air force."

"Well, I knew that, but even American air force officers have opinions," Byrne insisted. "What did you think of that whole mess? Weren't you worried it might get out of hand?"

"I didn't even hear about it until about two months after it was over, when I got back to the States," Straker said, very softly. There was a haunted, faraway look in his eyes.

Byrne stared at him in disbelief. "Where the devil were you, the Moon?"

"A Viet Cong prison camp."

Byrne swallowed hard. "I'm sorry. I didn't know." Everyone working for Harlington-Straker knew that Straker was an ex-USAF officer. No one had ever mentioned him having been POW in Viet Nam.

The coffee was done and Straker poured out three mugs. He handed Byrne one of the mugs and the man took a sip. The coffee was strong and hot and burned his tongue.

"So, why did you leave the military?" Byrne asked.

"What makes you think I left?"

"Don't give me that," Byrne warned. "Joe checked you out with his RAF buddies before he let me sign on with your studio. You took an early retirement twelve years ago, all nice neat and official after Minister Talbot died in that car accident."

"It's nice to know at least some part of our security works," Straker said with a glimmer of a smile.

"You still insist you're part of some anti-alien secret conspiracy thing? God, you sound like you're in a Nick Page episode," Byrne said. Page was the character Byrne played in 'Special Agent', one of Harlington-Straker's longest running action-drama series.

"Truth has been known to mimic fiction," Straker said.

"Reality mimicking Nick Page? Secret conspiracies to save the world? Nobody's like that. He's a caricature. He's too good, too dedicated, too self-sacrificing for the cause. Never any doubts, any questions about what he's doing, why he's there."

"Maybe the writers don't think that would play well, or maybe Page has all of that sorted out," Foster commented.

"He's not believable. I don't believe him and I'm the one playing him."

"You don't believe anyone should be willing to lay down their life for a cause, even a good one?" Straker asked.

"Not if they had any brains," Byrne said.

"What about laying your life down for a friend?"

"I don't know anybody I'd be willing to do that for."

Straker just shook his head. Byrne sat down by the fire.

"I wonder what's taking Sean and Ian so long," Byrne said after a short time. "They should have been back by now, even on foot."

"They may not be coming back," Straker said, giving Foster a worried look. "We should have warned them about what they were up against."

"They wouldn't have believed you," Foster said.

There was the faint sound of steps on the gravel path in front of the porch. Straker stood very still, listening.

"You were wrong," Byrne said. "It just took them longer than they thought to get back up here."

"I hope you're right," Straker said. Feet tramped on the front porch in front of the drapery-covered windows. One of the panes broke. "Down!" Straker hissed, pulling Foster out of the armchair, onto the floor. The main room was sprayed with bullets from behind the drapes.

"We have to get out of here," Straker said.

"How?" Byrne hissed. The bullets stopped, but someone was trying the bolted door.

"Through the cellar," Straker said. "There's an outside door."

Straker helped Foster to his knees. The younger man's face was white with pain. Byrne came around and they managed to get Foster to his feet and out of the main room, into the kitchen. Straker pushed them in front of him, forcing them down the steps.

The gunman fired several shots into the door lock. Straker staggered as though he had tripped. He caught himself, then shut and bolted the cellar door from the inside.

"Down!" Straker hissed as he slipped off the open side of the steps, down to the dirt floor below. He pushed Foster under the steps, next to the stone wall. The door above exploded with a clatter of bullets.

Straker had his pistol out and opened fire at the door. The gunfire upstairs stopped. Footsteps crossed the main room above them, then faded away. They were gone.

"We have to get out of here, before they come back," Straker said. He went to the doors and tried them. They were locked from the outside.

Byrne looked at the doors in the light of his lamp. "It won't take much to break these open," he said. He pulled out a pocket knife and probed the wood. The knife went in almost to the hilt. "The frame's almost rotted through."

Byrne flashed the lamp on the pile of garden equipment. A long iron bar with a flattened end stood beside the rakes. "Give me that pry bar," he said.

Straker grabbed the bar and gave it to the actor. Byrne handed Straker the lamp, then started tearing away the rotten wood from the door frame.

"Not much more," Byrne said when he felt the first set of hinge screws give way. Only three screws left to pry away from the frame and the doors would be free. He could already feel the fresh air flowing through the opening.

The lamp went out. "They're coming back," Straker said.

Byrne listened. "I don't hear anything."

"Wait," Straker said very softly. Byrne finally heard it, a faint whir, like a helicopter far away, only higher pitched, more musical.

"Here," Straker said, handing Byrne his pistol.

"What do I need this for?" Byrne asked.

"Self-defense," Straker said. "Hurry, I'll get Paul."

Byrne put the pistol in his pocket and went back to prying up the last screws.

The building exploded around him. He was suddenly blind and deaf and choking in dust. He was surprised to find he was still alive. He felt around him. The foundation wall nearest him was still intact, as was the floor immediately above it. A couple of joists had come loose and fallen, but by some miracle, they had missed him. The door had collapsed. The outside air was fresh and cold.

"Straker? Foster?" he called.

"Byrne?" he heard Foster call. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Byrne said. "Where's Straker?"

"I'm all right," Straker announced. There was something in his voice, a tremor, something that told Byrne that things weren't really okay.

"What happened?" Byrne asked.

"The aliens blasted the house," Straker said. "Probably because they didn't finish the job earlier. Can you get out?"

"Yes, the door came loose when the floor caved in," Byrne said.

"Good," Straker said. "Get out of here. Our people should be here before morning. Find a place to hide until they get here. That's an order."

"I don't have to take orders from you," Byrne protested.

"If you want to leave here alive, you will do as I tell you, understood?" There was something harsh and cold in Straker's voice, but something else as well, something Byrne couldn't quite identify. It sounded a little like fear.

"Very well," Byrne agreed. He climbed out the broken door and headed north across the dark clearing, away from the lake and the alien monsters hiding there. Away from Straker and whatever other demons that lurked in the ruins of the McCulloughs' house.

* * *

Foster searched the dirt floor with his hands, finding the lamp he'd dropped when the building exploded. By some miracle, the lamp still worked. He flashed it around in a quick scan. The stairway was still intact, as was the stone foundation and wall that supported it.

The roof had collapsed and the beams, shingles and broken plaster had come down on the steps. The floor joists had given way under the weight and had fallen against the open side of the stairs, creating a nearly impenetrable wall of debris.

They were trapped. He flashed the beam on Straker. Foster didn't know how the other man had missed being caught in the avalanche of wood and plaster, but he had. Straker was huddled in the corner where the two stone walls met, knees drawn to his chest, head resting on his knees. He was covered with dust and dirt.

Foster realized he probably looked just as bad, if not worse.

"Ed?" Foster called. Straker raised his head and winced away from the light in his eyes. He looked very pale in the lamplight.

"Commander, are you okay?" Foster asked. Straker nodded without speaking, then he laid his head back on his knees.

Foster crawled closer, taking care not to jar his throbbing ankle or knee. He reached out and touched Straker's shoulder. The other man's head came up sharply and he shivered. His breath came in gasps.

"What's wrong?" Foster asked. There were beads of cold sweat across Straker's forehead, his upper lip.

"I'm sorry," Straker said. His voice was shaking.

"Sorry for what?"

"For getting you into this."

"There was no way you could have known this was going to happen," Foster protested.

"But I'm responsible," Straker said. He was still shivering, staring off into space, not really seeing anything. His pupils were completely dilated. There was almost no blue showing in his eyes at all.

"Ed, what's wrong?" Foster asked. "Are you hurt?"

Straker seemed to focus on him finally. A glimmer of a smile crossed Straker's face and was gone. "I have a little problem with cages and small dark places," Straker said.

"Claustrophobia?"

Straker gave a tiny nod.

"Oh brother," Foster breathed. He didn't know much about phobias. He'd never suffered from anything like that, unless you counted that one time when he had a panic attack that drove him to check out John Croxley's demolished house. He'd found the man ready to kill both Straker and Freeman. Foster had fired first, killing the man where he stood.

"Look, Alec will have people here before morning," Foster said. "We'll be out of here in no time."

"Sure," Straker said. "No problem, we just have to get through till morning." His breath still came in gasps, as though he was fighting for air. His entire body was rigid.

"Try to relax," Foster urged. "Maybe it'll help to talk about it. That's what Shroeder's always telling me."

Straker shook his head. "I thought I was over it. I haven't had an attack in over two years. And now this..." He buried his face in his arms.

Foster reached out and pulled the other man close against his chest, as he would a child. Straker's hands were ice cold. He turned his face away from Foster, but the younger man had

already seen the intense misery in Straker's face.

"It's okay," Foster found himself saying softly. "Just relax and you'll get through it and you'll be fine."

"You don't understand," Straker said. Foster had to strain to understand him through the gasps for air. "I can't just relax, I can't let go. They're out there waiting, listening."

"Who's waiting?" Foster asked.

Straker shuddered. "They put us in cells underground, under the tunnels, tiny dirty cells. We could hardly lie down, couldn't stand." The words spilled out like water through a burst dike. "They wouldn't let us talk. They were listening, always listening, asking questions we couldn't answer so they could hurt us. They killed Chuck and Richie and Will. They tortured them and let them die and wouldn't let us help them. I was ranking officer. They were my responsibility and I couldn't do anything. I couldn't do anything." His voice was filled with self-loathing.

"That was a long time ago," Foster said. "It's over. They can't hurt you now."

"They're in my dreams," Straker said very softly. "I close my eyes and they're there. I can't let go. If I do, I'll lose my mind."

"Poor baby," Foster murmured. No wonder Straker had the shakes, Foster thought. Some part of him thought he was still in Viet Nam.

Foster rested his cheek against the blond hair. He was surprised at how soft it was, even with all the dirt and grit. Diane's hair was never soft. He let his hand slip down to Straker's back. There was something wet and sticky and warm on his shirt. Straker took a quick breath, as if it hurt and Foster pulled his hand away.

Some of the moist stickiness clung to his hand. He looked at it in the dim light. Blood.

Straker didn't move, and he was barely breathing.

"Ed?" He touched Straker's throat, feeling for a pulse. For a sudden, irrational moment, he wanted to press down, to squeeze the life out of his companion. The impulse passed as quickly as it came and he found a weak pulse. Straker's heart was racing.

"Ed?" Foster repeated.

Straker finally moved. "Shh," he said very softly, placing two fingers against Foster's lips. The tension was back, and something else - an alert and wary watchfulness, as though he was listening for something he knew was there.

Foster was about to tell Straker it was nothing when he heard it - footsteps above them, in the debris. Straker turned off the lamp and they were plunged into darkness.

* * *

Byrne stopped at the edge of the line of trees to get his bearings. The moon was full and its light gave everything an aura of unreality. He looked back at the lodge house, or rather what used to be the lodge house. It resembled the pictures he had seen of London during the war, the bombings. It was a miracle any of them had survived. He certainly wouldn't expect to find anyone alive under there.

Byrne took a moment to look at the pistol Straker had handed him. He didn't know much about hand guns, only what the studio armorers had taught him so he wouldn't hurt himself. This one was an automatic, he knew that much. It reminded him of something James Bond or Nick Page might carry.

A movement across the clearing caught his eye. He ducked behind the nearest tree and peered around it. Three red-suits were approaching the remains of the house. They were carrying what looked like automatic rifles. The three opened fire into the debris.

Byrne took the pistol and aimed, hoping Straker had left the safety off since he didn't know where it was. He pulled back the trigger and the gun went off. The strength of the recoil surprised him. His ears rang from the report.

To his astonishment, one of the red-suits fell down. The other two started looking around for where the shot had come from. Byrne turned and started running deeper into the woods.

* * *

Foster listened in the darkness to the sounds above them. The aliens' weapon fire had churned up some of the debris, but as far as he could tell, none of the shots penetrated their little prison.

He heard the firecracker pop of a pistol and then someone falling. From the sounds, the other two picked up the fallen one and dragged him away. There was silence once more.

"I think they're gone," Foster whispered after a few minutes. He hunted around to find the flashlight. He found it in Straker's hand and turned it on.

"No," Straker said, turning it off again. "They might see the light."

Foster could hear the strain in Straker's voice. He sounded close to another panic attack.

Once again, Straker had pulled his knees up, trying to make himself as small as possible.

"Ed, I need the light," Foster said. "You're hurt."

Straker didn't answer and Foster took that to mean agreement. Foster turned the light on, making sure it was pointed at the floor. He carefully aimed the lamp at Straker's back. Straker's shirt was soaked with blood and there was a slash across it, exposing a deep cut along one rib. Something gleamed pink-white from within the wound.

"It's a pretty deep cut," Foster said. He took a mental inventory of what he had at hand to make a bandage. Not much. He was still wearing his flight suit. Straker's was somewhere in the debris. Foster struggled out of the top of the flight suit and stripped off his t-shirt. His knife made quick work of it, cutting the knit into strips.

Foster pressed the makeshift bandage against the still weeping wound. Straker grunted, but made no other sound as Foster wrapped other strips around his chest, securing the bandage. Straker's breathing was still ragged and he was shaking like a frightened animal. Foster clicked off the lamp.

"Try to relax," Foster advised, keeping his voice low. "Think of something else, the office, Kate. Think sex."

"Is that all you think about?" Straker managed to choke out.

"Well, you have to admit, it is a good tension reliever," Foster joked. Straker's breathing started to improve. Obviously something was working.

"How are you doing?" Foster asked.

"I should ask you that," Straker said. "How's the ankle?" He seemed to be over the worst part of his latest attack.

"I'll live," Foster said. "Besides, I asked first. How do you feel?"

"Lousy," Straker admitted. "I'm freezing, and I'm very tired." It wasn't that cold in their little space, but Straker hadn't stopped shivering.

"There's enough room to lie down," Foster said. "Why don't you try to get some rest?"

"Lie down before I fall down?" Straker asked. His voice was still very weak, but at least his sense of humor was back. Some people at SHADO thought Straker didn't have a sense of humor, but Foster knew better. It was very quiet, very dry, but it was there.

He felt the other man uncurl and slide down enough to lie on the dirt floor.

Foster slid himself far enough to lie down as well. There wasn't much room. His back was

against the stone wall. Straker was very close, still shivering. Foster moved over the few inches that separated them.

"What are you doing?" Straker asked.

"Survival is the first order of business, right?" Foster asked. He felt Straker nod his head. "Well, I can't have you freezing to death on me. Alec would never forgive me, not to mention what Kate would do to me." As he spoke, he put his arm around the other man and pulled him close against his chest.

"Enlightened self-interest?" Straker wondered softly.

"Well, Ayn Rand wasn't completely wrong," Foster said. He felt the other man begin, slowly, to relax against him.

"You're very warm," Straker mumbled.

"Shh. Try to sleep," Foster said. "SHADO will be here soon and everything will be fine." Straker didn't answer.

* * *

It was well past midnight when the lead SHADO mobile hit the dampening field. Freeman, in the second machine, saw the lights fade out.

"Stop," he ordered. Mobile 2 ground to a halt. Freeman's co-pilot radioed the machine behind them, passing along the order.

"Now, what, sir?" Corwin, the driver, asked. Ahead of them, in the light of their headlamps, they could see Mobile 1's crew climbing out of the roof escape hatch. Green scrambled down the side of her machine and trotted over to Mobile 2.

"A total loss of electrical power," Green reported. "No warning. We can't even get the doors unlocked."

"So we go in on foot," Freeman said. "According to the map, this trail leads right to the lake and the house. It's only about five miles."

"It's going to be awful dark without lamps, sir," Green warned.

"Are you afraid of the dark, Captain?" Freeman asked.

"Never, sir," Green replied. "I just hope you wore your hiking boots, Colonel, sir."

"I did," Freeman said. Like Green and the other members of the mobile team, Freeman was dressed in SAS cold weather gear over military fatigues. The outer layer was green/brown camouflage. It wasn't standard SHADO issue, but this wasn't a standard SHADO operation.

"Check your weapons," Freeman ordered. "We move out in five minutes. If Reed is right, we won't have any electronics so long as we're in the field."

"What about communications?" Blair, from Mobile 3, asked.

"We're looking at verbal and hand signals only," Green said. "We'll go in squad file, an arms length between us. Corwin, you're compass. Baxter and Thomas, you're with him. Keep your eyes open. Petroni, Liu and Cunningham, you're the rear team. Colonel Freeman and Mister Blair are with me. Blair, you're in charge of the radio. Petroni and Thomas, you've both got mollies, be ready. Any questions?"

"What if we run into aliens, sir?"

"Shoot to kill," Freeman said. "We will not be taking prisoners."

The team began to arrange itself in marching order. Freeman leaned close to Green's ear in the darkness.

"Are you babysitting me, Captain?" Freeman asked softly, so as not to be overheard by the rest of the team. He was referring to her placing him on her team, in the center of the march.

"Hardly, sir. If I thought you couldn't keep up, you wouldn't be here at all," Green replied. "I am simply protecting my most important asset and my superior officer."

"Understood," Freeman said. Green had a reputation for brutal honesty, a personality trait that didn't always endear her to the people she worked with, especially the men. Freeman was aware there were some, even within SHADO, who accused her of being a dyke. Freeman didn't really care. She was the best.

He checked his watch. Their five minutes was up. "Let's move out," he announced. The team fell in place and they moved out past the dead mobile and up the trail toward the lake.

* * *

Byrne ran, expecting at any moment for his life to be snuffed out in a rain of bullets from behind. The bullets didn't come. He slowed, his breath coming in painful gasps. He hadn't thought he was so out of shape. Except for the sound of his own breathing, there was no noise in the woods around him.

He took a moment to get his bearings. The tree with Foster's parachute was some distance behind him. Ahead he could see boulders amongst the trees. He made his way to the boulders and hunkered down behind them. He pulled up the parka's hood, put his freezing hands in the pockets and settled down to wait for sunrise. He kept Straker's pistol in his pocket, his fingers curled around the grip.

* * *

Foster listened to Straker's breathing in the darkness. He couldn't tell if the other man had fallen asleep. Straker shuddered once again. Foster recalled reading somewhere that was a sign of extreme stress, the inability to relax enough to properly sleep. It looked like neither of them was going to get much rest.

"Shh," Foster crooned. "It'll be all right, pretty." He propped himself on an elbow to get a better angle as he checked the pulse at Straker's throat again. Still fast, still weak. The alien impulse raised its ugly head again, an insane angry jealousy. He shoved it back down as he had before. He moved his hand from Straker's throat upward to his cheek. Foster could barely feel Straker's beard. His own, he knew, was already dark and scratchy. It itched. Another day or so and he'd have a proper beard.

He moved his hand to Straker's shoulder. The muscles in the other man's back and shoulder were in hard knots. It was painful even to feel them. Foster used his free hand to knead the tight muscles.

"Don't you know how to relax?" Foster murmured.

"That's what Kate keeps asking," Straker said. "I don't know how very well."

"You need to learn," Foster commented.

"You don't seem to have any problems with that," Straker observed quietly.

"Healthy mind in a healthy body," Foster said. "Knowing how to let the tension go, how to relax, is as important as regular exercise." The muscles under his hand were finally beginning to soften, to relax. He moved his hand to the back of Straker's neck, to the fine hair above his collar. Straker's hair was baby fine and straight except for the slightest curl at nape of his neck where it ran over his collar.

Straker moved slightly, as if to withdraw. Foster didn't let him move away, putting an arm across the other man's chest. The impulse was there, nibbling at him, rearing its ugly head. Jealousy was the operative word for the problem although it had taken the better part of a year for him to decide that's what it was. The aliens hadn't been able to make him really hate Straker, so they made him jealous. There was a bizarre sort of logic to it.

He let himself surrender to part of the mad logic. He bent over and nuzzled the blond man's neck, skimming the skin with his lips. It was a maneuver that drove his girl friends crazy.

Straker jumped. "Paul?" There was surprise and a touch of fear in his voice, but no panic. Foster pulled back but kept his arm across the other man's chest.

"You read Jackson's report, didn't you?" Foster asked. He kept his voice low.

"Yes," Straker said. "It didn't say much. Kincaid did a number to your head and the impulse the aliens planted was getting stronger. He didn't understand how you were controlling it."

"You invited me to fly with you knowing there might be a problem," Foster observed.

"Why?"

"I think he's wrong," Straker said. His voice was soft and breathy. "I hope he's wrong."

"Do you know what the opposite of hate is?" Foster asked. He could almost see Straker's confusion at the change of subject.

"Love?"

"No, indifference," Foster said. "Love and hate are different faces to the same thing, an intense interest in another person." Foster's hand moved up to run along the line of Straker's jaw. Straker trembled but he didn't move away. He couldn't move away, there was no where to move to.

"I won't hurt you," Foster promised. "Not purposefully, anyway. I think I know why the aliens' impulse didn't work as well on me as it did on Frank Craig."

"Why?"

"Frank had no feelings toward you, so the aliens could plant whatever they wanted, and they planted an overwhelming hatred."

"Yes?" Straker sounded interested despite himself.

"I think they couldn't plant as strong a desire because I already had feelings."

"What kind of feelings?"

"When I was in my first year of college, I had a history teacher, Professor Hobson, beautiful man. His specialty was ancient Greece, Plato, Socrates. You remind me of him, a little," Foster said. He could sense Straker's puzzlement at the change in subject again.

"His wife was named Moira and she liked students. She was a good teacher, and I have to admit, I was a very good student." Foster smiled at the memories in the darkness. "One afternoon, Hobson walked in on us. I'd never been so scared in my life. I was sure he was going to have me expelled, assuming he didn't kill me. But he wasn't upset at all, not with her, not with me. That's when I found out exactly how much an expert on ancient Greece he really was. He was a very good teacher too and I guess I was a romantic, falling for the warrior ethos, wanting to experience the joys of the Theban band, that sort of thing."

"That's not in your records," Straker said.

"You're the only person I've ever told it to," Foster said.

"And why are you telling me?"

"So you'll understand," Foster said. "Kate's right, you know. You are very pretty, and I'm jealous as hell of her."

"I didn't think I was your type," Straker murmured.

"I'm not sure what my type is anymore," Foster admitted. "I never expected to be thrown over for a woman. It's certainly never happened to me before. It's very damaging to the ego."

"Yes, I imagine it would be," Straker said. He shifted as if trying to get more comfortable. Foster checked his pulse again - still too fast.

"I'll be okay," Straker said. "Alec will be here soon."

"I hope you're right," Foster said to himself.

* * *

"Hello, Virginia," Kate Komack said.

Lake looked up to see the other woman stepping down to the lower level of the SHADO control room. "What are you doing here? You should be home in bed."

"Ed hasn't gotten in yet. I couldn't sleep. Esther's spending the night at a friend's house, so I came down." She looked around the control room. "Where's Alec?"

"Didn't he tell you?" Lake asked.

"Tell me what?"

Lake beckoned the other woman to accompany her to the commander's office. She hit the door switch and it closed behind them. "We lost the Phantom in some sort of energy dampening field. Alec's gone out with the mobile team to find them."

The blood drained from Komack's face as she sat in the leather chair opposite the desk.

"Kate, what's wrong?" Lake asked, suddenly worried.

"I thought..." her voice cracked. "I thought it was just my nerves. I've had a miserable headache since before lunch. Then, I had the horrible feeling that Ed was hurt, trapped, somewhere dark and cold." The auburn haired woman shivered. "He's got a touch of claustrophobia, you know."

"Peter Carlin reported seeing two good chutes," Lake told her. "I'm sure they're both fine. They'll probably be waiting at the trail head for the mobiles to show up."

"I'm sure you're right."

"I'll call you when there's some news," Lake offered. "Go home."

"Yes, I'll do that," Komack agreed slowly, standing and heading for the door. She seemed dazed as she left the office. Lake watched after her, suddenly worried. Kate Komack was normally so down to earth, it wasn't like her to have an attack of nerves'.

Lake headed back out to the control room.

Lieutenant Tobin was at the main communications console, covering for Anderson's break. "Colonel," she called. "Is Colonel Komack okay? She wasn't looking well."

"I just told her about the Commander's plane," Lake said. "Colonel Freeman forgot to let her know."

"Forgot, sir?" Tobin commented. "You can't be forgetting things like that with that one. She's one of the old ones. She knows things."

"Don't be silly, Nuala," Lake chided.

"I'm not being silly, Colonel. Your woman has the 'sight', like me ma did, rest her soul. She'll be waiting here the moment Colonel Freeman comes back with the Commander," Nuala Tobin predicted.

"Or his body," Lake said, suppressing a foreboding shiver of her own.

* * *

The odd, high pitched whir was back, somewhere over head. Byrne peered out at the bit of sky he could see through the trees. The sound wasn't coming from a helicopter, rather from something shaped like an upside-down bowl. It was a glowing golden color as it hovered, spinning. A beam of green light shot out at the parachute still draped over the tree by the stream. The tree exploded into flame as the alien craft sped away, toward the west.

* * *

"Aircraft front!" Baxter yelled. The mobile team dove for cover in the brush. Green had

her rifle in hand and was aiming at the golden ship as it approached. Thomas and Petroni had their one-man rocket launchers ready to fire. The alien was directly over head when Green opened fire. The rockets launched and both of them hit their target.

The U.F.O. managed to get off one shot, exploding a pine tree near the trail before it disintegrated, raining debris all around them.

"Good shooting," Freeman said as they came back into marching formation.

"Does that mean I can paint a little Ufo on the side of my Mobile?" Thomas asked.

"Half a Ufo," Petroni said. "We each get half."

"Oh," Thomas said. "I guess that means we'd better get another one so we can both have a whole one painted on."

"Cut it out, you guys," Green said. "It's bad enough we have SHADO painted all over them."

"Well, Captain, we did offer to go buy some spray paint and do camie on them, but you said no'," Baxter said.

"Keep moving," Green ordered, but Freeman could tell she was pleased with her team. He wondered how he was going to explain little half-U.F.O.s painted on the mobiles. Maybe he could talk them into little Martians instead. Better yet, he'd buy them the paint for the camouflage job.

Several hundred yards further up the trail, the path opened into a clearing. A dark colored jeep sat in the center of the clearing.

Green indicated the team should go around the open area, staying in the cover of the trees.

"I'll take Baxter to check out the vehicle," Freeman offered. Green nodded in the darkness. Freeman beckoned Baxter to accompany him into the clearing.

Freeman's eyes scanned the trees around them as he headed to the near side of the jeep. Baxter moved to the far side, checking for trip wires as he went. He stopped suddenly and dropped to one knee.

"Colonel," Baxter called softly. "There are two bodies over here."

Freeman ran over to him. Baxter was kneeling between the bodies of two men laying face down in the dirt. They weren't the right size or build for either Straker or Foster, still Freeman found himself holding his breath in horrified anticipation. He went down on one knee and rolled one of them over. Moonlight shone on an unfamiliar face. Baxter rolled the other one over. Another unfamiliar face.

"Who were they, sir?" Baxter whispered.

"I don't know," Freeman said, keeping his voice low. "At least they're not our people." He stood and headed across the clearing to the far side, to meet up with the rest of the team.

* * *

Byrne saw the golden craft explode above the trees. He heard noises in the dark, people moving around, some type of machinery. Gathering his courage, he followed the noise, creeping out to the edge of the lake.

Three red-suited men stood on the shore, watching a second golden craft that was floating in the lake. A another craft bobbed to the surface, then rose above the water, spinning water off its rotating fins. The alien ship came into the shore, settling down in the marsh grass. An opening appeared in the side of the craft and three more red-suited aliens stepped out onto the lake shore.

One of the aliens already standing on the shore gestured toward the west. A single new

arrival went back inside the ship and the opening disappeared. Byrne didn't wait for the alien ship to take off. He headed through the woods toward the ruins of the lodge.

"Foster, Straker?" Byrne called softly as he climbed through the demolished door into the wrecked cellar. The dust had settled and he managed to find the lamp that had fallen to the dirt floor when the building came apart.

"Yes?" Foster asked, voice low. "You were told to get away from here."

"I saw one of the alien ships explode in the air a little to the west of here. There are two more by the lake," Byrne said. "I think they may be up to something."

"Moving out, probably," Foster said.

"That's what I figured," Byrne agreed. He flipped on the lamp switch and began to inspect the debris pile in front and on top of the steps. It wasn't as dense as he had originally assumed. He checked the top of the wall where the stairway stringers met the wall and was surprised to see the connection still holding. Straker and Foster had managed to get to what was undoubtedly the safest part of the cellar when the building was hit.

The pry bar was on the floor where Byrne had dropped it. He picked it up and began to work on the pile of debris.

"What are you doing?" Foster demanded. "Get out of here."

Byrne didn't bother to answer. After a few long moments, he pulled aside a broken section of plank flooring and smashed through a chunk of plaster wall. He dropped to his knees to check his work, shining the lamp through the newly created opening.

Straker had his eyes closed against the lamp light.

"Give me your hands," Byrne demanded, setting the lamp on the ground beside him.

"Shut off the light before they see it," Straker hissed. Byrne turned off the lamp, then held out his hand once more. This time, Straker grabbed it. Byrne pulled and Straker was free of the debris. The blond man scrambled out of the way as Byrne went back down to pull Foster free of his prison.

"Shh," Straker said. Byrne and Foster froze and listened. The musical whine was back, somewhere overhead.

"Hurry," Straker urged. Byrne pulled Foster free. The sound overhead diminished, the craft heading away from the house.

"You said one of their ships exploded in mid air?" Straker asked.

"No more than ten minutes ago," Byrne said.

"The cavalry," Straker said.

"The aliens know they're here," Foster said.

"Yes," Straker agreed. He sounded tired and weak. Byrne grabbed his arm.

"Hadn't we better get out of here before those saucers come back?"

To answer, Straker shook himself loose from Byrne's grip and helped Foster get to his feet. "Let's go."

Outside, Straker beckoned Byrne to help Foster to get to cover.

"Where are you going?" Foster hissed as Straker headed to the far side of the wrecked building, to where the porch had been.

"Get under cover," Straker ordered. He was on his knees, searching through the rubble. Finally, he found what he was looking for - the alien rifle. He ran to catch up with Byrne and Foster as they entered the protection of the trees, the rifle in his hand. He staggered a little as he came up to them, catching himself against a tree.

"Where were you when you saw them?" Straker asked. He was breathing hard.

"There's a rise overlooking the lake," Byrne said. He pointed out the direction.

Straker nodded, the moonlight catching the motion, turning his hair silver. "Let's go then," he said, turning to head in the direction Byrne had pointed.

"You're not going after them, are you?" Byrne asked, keeping his voice low. "That's crazy. You're a movie producer. You're just pretending to be a soldier. Let the military handle this, that's what we pay them for."

"You're wrong, Howard," Straker said. "I'm a soldier pretending to be a movie producer."

"Well, I'm not," Byrne protested.

Foster shifted his position, trying to make his leg more comfortable. "Consider yourself drafted," Foster said. Byrne could just see the wry grin on the younger man's face.

"You're both crazy, nuts," Byrne protested, but he helped Foster to his feet and started toward the rise by the lake. Straker took up the rear, watching the silent woods with wary eyes.

* * *

"Aircraft at six-o'clock!" Baxter yelled, spotting the U.F.O. as it swung around to come up behind them. Again, the mobile team dove for cover in the brush. The trees had begun to thin out, making good cover harder to find. Ahead of them was a clearing and the moonlight picked out glimmers of broken glass in the rubble.

Again Green had her rifle in hand and was aiming at the golden ship as it approached. Thomas and Petroni had their one-man rocket launchers ready to fire. The alien was nearly over head when Green opened fire. Thomas and Petroni followed suit.

A single beam shot out of the U.F.O. and Thomas fell, body smoking from the plasma energy. Then, the U.F.O. wobbled on its axis and dropped from the sky, plowing into the remains of the house before exploding into a million bits.

"How many more do you think there are, sir?" Green asked Freeman.

"I don't know," Freeman admitted. "I do know they know we're here."

"What about Commander Straker and Colonel Foster?"

Freeman shook his head in the darkness. "I only know we have two hours to find them and get out of here before all hell breaks loose."

* * *

Mike Courtland sat in his office and reread the orders for the tenth time. They had been delivered to him an hour before at his home, brought by a young man with MI5 identification who accompanied him back to the base. The young man stayed just outside his office door as he confirmed the orders.

Courtland's jaw had dropped when he read the security clearance code at the top of the document - Majik-SHADO. His old flying partner had that as his clearance. Again, Courtland wondered what Straker was involved in that gave him that kind of security clearance.

A coded confirmation signal came back from the Pentagon. The orders were genuine and were to be treated as though he'd gotten them directly from the President of the United States himself. However, Courtland seriously doubted the President would ever hear of these orders. Unless aborted by a specific code, on a specific radio frequency, his mission was to do a high altitude bombing run on a Scottish mountain valley, using real munitions.

Courtland checked the coordinates of the valley. They matched the spot where RAF radar lost track of Straker's F-4. "Eddie boy, what have you gotten yourself into this time?" Courtland asked himself.

It was less than two hours to drop time. A top notch crew was already putting his plane together for the mission. He poured himself another cup of coffee. It was going to be a long

night.

* * *

The rise was several hundred yards from the U.F.O.'s landing site, a hill of river rock, jutting out into the lake. The five aliens Byrne saw earlier were still there, working on a metallic construction on the shore.

"What are they doing?" Foster asked. One of the aliens had just taken what looked like a heavy gun and set it on tripod feet, locking it into position. A cable ran from the device to disappear into the water.

"I don't know," Straker said. "Whatever it is, I think they're almost done with it." Straker picked up the alien rifle and sighted along it, as though readying to fire. After a moment, he lowered the gun. There was a pinched, angry look in his face.

"What's wrong?" Foster asked.

"I don't know if I can make the shot to take it out. I'm not steady enough," Straker said. He seemed angry with himself for having to make that admission.

"Sir, I'm good, but I'm not that good," Foster said. Straker's expression turned glum and his eyes darkened with worry. He settled himself on his belly, arranging rocks to act as a platform to steady the rifle. Byrne noticed, finally, the bandage on Straker's back and the fact the blond man wasn't wearing a coat despite the near freezing temperature. He remembered that Straker's flight suit was somewhere in the ruins of the house.

"Here," Byrne said, pulling off his parka. He handed it to Straker, who sat up long enough to pull it on. Straker's teeth had started to chatter and he clenched his jaws to keep them quiet. He rubbed his hands together to get some circulation going before laying back down to aim the rifle.

The aliens had finished their task and pulled their device around to aim down the path to the house. One of them pulled a switch and the device gave a high pitched whine, like a U.F.O.'s engines. A beam of green light shot out of the device, cutting through the trees. The device moved and trees fell over, sliced though at the four-foot level.

Straker took aim and pulled back the trigger. A single shot rang out and the light stopped. It was impossible to read any expression in the aliens' faces, but one gestured to the others, pointing at the hill that shot had come from.

Straker pulled the trigger again, still targeting the device. This time, pieces flew off the machine and it fell off its stand, shattering as it hit the ground. The aliens headed for cover as the device began to burn with a hot green glow, catching the grass on fire.

"We need to make ourselves scarce," Straker said, scrambling to his feet. He beckoned Byrne to help Foster along as he led the way off the hill.

* * *

Freeman and Baxter were at the ruins when they heard the whine. Baxter had found two more unidentified bodies. One belonged to an alien.

The two men heard the crashing of the trees before they saw the beam coming at them. They both dropped to the ground as the deadly light passed over them, slicing through the trees on the far side. Then, two shots rang out from near the lake and the green beam stopped. The air was smoky with burnt pine and Freeman could smell something else burning, grass or brush.

"What the devil was that?" Baxter asked, coming over to Freeman in a running crouch.

"Some sort of alien weapon," Freeman reasoned.

"And the shots?"

"Who do you think would be taking pot shots at aliens out here?" Freeman asked. He

headed for the woods, keeping down in case the alien weapon hadn't been taken out. Baxter was right behind him.

Another shot rang out, this one behind them. Baxter gasped in pain and Freeman heard him fall. The SHADO officer turned back to help his companion.

"No, sir, get going," Baxter ordered. Freeman ignored him, grabbing the younger man under the arms and dragging him toward safety. They almost made it to the trees when Freeman heard the chink of chains close by. He turned to see a red suited alien aiming a rifle right at his head. He dropped Baxter and stood up. If this was how death was going to come, he intended to look it in the eye.

* * *

Their path had taken them close to the clearing, close enough to look between the trees at the unfolding tableau on the far side.

Straker swore softly to himself as the moon came from behind the clouds and lit the clearing. Even in battle dress, Freeman was recognizable. Unfortunately, Freeman was also standing directly in Straker's line of fire to the alien.

"I need a distraction, now!" Straker said.

"What sort of distraction?" Byrne asked.

"Anything that will get Alec Freeman's carcass out of my line of fire," Straker grated. He leaned against a tree for support. The momentary adrenaline boost from the action before had already worn off, leaving him shaking. He wasn't sure he'd be able to make this shot, even though he was closer to the target. And this was a shot he didn't dare miss.

The alien stepped forward, closer to Freeman. Straker braced himself against the tree and brought the rifle up, paying no attention to Foster or Byrne. A pistol went off several yards to his left, followed by a second shot. Freeman dropped to the ground and Straker pulled the trigger on the alien rifle. The entire sequence took less than a second.

The alien fell straight down as though it was a puppet whose strings had been cut.

* * *

Freeman heard the two pistol shots and training older and more ingrained that SHADO's took over as he threw himself down, making himself a smaller target.

A third shot echoed in the clearing and the alien fell, his red spacesuit stained with the darker red of heart's blood.

After a moment, Freeman raised his head to look around, assess the situation. Baxter was lying an arms length away, but he wasn't breathing. Freeman inched his way over to the young man. Steam rose up from the blood that had pooled under Baxter's body, but Baxter himself was already growing cold. Freeman felt for a pulse at the young man's throat, but didn't find one. The moonlight made the boy's face look almost peaceful.

Freeman swore softly to himself as he scurried to the protection of the trees.

Green was waiting in the cover of the trees with Corwin and what remained of the squad.

"Who's that shooting, Colonel?" Corwin asked.

"Either Commander Straker or Colonel Foster," Freeman answered. "My money's on the Commander. He's an Olympic grade marksman." Freeman checked his watch, an old fashioned spring driven one he'd inherited from a favorite uncle. He rarely wore it, but had put it on for this mission because it wasn't electronic. Now it was the only timepiece the SHADO unit had.

"We have less than ninety minutes to catch up with them and get clear," Freeman announced. "We have no idea how many aliens there may be left out there looking for us and them. So, keep your eyes open."

* * *

Straker leaned against the pine tree in sudden exhaustion, the rifle dropping from his hands as his knees gave out. He hit the cold ground in an unconscious heap.

Foster caught the movement in the corner of his eye and ran to Straker's side. He ignored the agony in his leg as he dropped to his knees, searching for a pulse at Straker's throat. It was so weak he almost didn't find it. Straker's skin was cold and moist - shock.

"Ed?" Foster called softly. He patted the blond man's face, trying to get a response. "Ed, come on, damn it."

After a long moment, Straker's eyelids fluttered and his eyes opened. His eyes darted around in momentary confusion, bordering on panic. Foster placed his hands on Straker's shoulders to keep him from moving.

"Relax, it's okay," Foster said. Straker's expression cleared and he moistened his lips.

"We have to keep moving, join up with Alec," Straker said. His speech was slurred and halting. He tried to push Foster away, but the younger man kept his place, forcing Straker to stay on the ground.

"You're not going anywhere," Foster said. "I'll send Howard to fetch Alec and the others."

"No!" Straker said. "Stay together. It's too dangerous."

"I don't think we have a choice, Commander," Byrne put in. Foster noted the man's use of Straker's title, remembering belatedly how he had referred to Straker by that title back at the lodge. It seemed so long ago now, days rather than hours. Straker's forehead creased in a puzzled frown, as if he couldn't quite figure out what was going on.

"You'll need a password, I think," Straker said after a long moment. "Tell Freeman that the Ice Prince and Galahad sent you."

"The Ice Prince and Galahad," Byrne repeated. Straker's hands reached into the pockets of the parka as if searching for something. After a moment, he found what he was looking for. He pulled out the pistol that he'd given Byrne earlier and handed it back to him.

"Try not to use it," Straker instructed. "The noise attracts attention."

"Understood," Byrne said, tucking the weapon at the small of his back, under his shirt.

Straker nodded, a small tentative movement, before closing his eyes. Byrne gave Foster a quick salute before heading into the darkness under the trees.

Byrne was a little surprised at himself for volunteering. He wasn't a courageous man, he admitted that. Nick Page was a character he played but had little in common with, but now he was heading off alone in the dark woods in search of a military patrol, trying to avoid contact with an enemy that had no regard for human life.

He tried to remember when he'd stopped thinking of Straker as a monster. Sometime around the second attack and the cave in, he supposed. It was just possible that he and Foster had been telling the truth about Straker still being a military officer. It certainly explained some of the odder happenings around the studio.

A twig snapped somewhere ahead of him. He froze, barely breathing as he listened. Another step on the needle strewn ground, a shuffling sound, a tiny metallic chink. Byrne moved closer to the nearest tree and pulled out the pistol.

Bullets clattered into the tree. Byrne ducked out from his cover and pumped off a single shot into the chest of a green faced man in a red suit. The man fell into a boneless heap without making a sound.

Byrne started forward again, to discover something warm running down his leg. He was bleeding from a flesh wound in his upper thigh. He pressed his hand against it and kept

moving. It didn't really hurt, but he was sure the pain would come after the surprise wore off. He hadn't realized that a bullet wound could be so painless.

Another twig snapped and again he froze. A young man in battle dress stepped forward, rifle held ready.

"Identify yourself," the young man hissed.

"Howard Byrne," Byrne answered, raising his hands to show he was harmless. "The Ice Prince and Galahad sent me," he added.

The code phrase didn't seem to mean anything to the man. He turned his head slightly, keeping his eyes on Byrne. "Captain," he called, keeping his voice low. A young woman with dark curly hair stepped out of the brush. She was also wearing camouflage and a rifle was slung over her shoulder.

"The Ice Prince and Galahad sent me," Byrne repeated. The phrase did hold some meaning for the woman.

"Where are they?" she asked.

"About a quarter way around the clearing," Byrne said. "They're both hurt. Foster's got a busted ankle and Commander Straker's lost a lot of blood. Also, I figure there are at least three more aliens out here."

The woman nodded and raised her hand, beckoning one of her men forward. A heavy-set man stepped forward. "Tell the Colonel we believe the Commander and Colonel Foster are in the woods, over there," she said, nodding her head in the direction Byrne had indicated.

"They're both injured. There may be three or more bad guys out there, so stay on your toes."

"Yes, sir," the man acknowledged before heading back into the brush.

The woman gave Byrne an appraising look. Byrne was used to getting appraising looks from women - 'Is it really him? Is he really like what the tabloids say, like the men he plays in the films'. Usually, the appraisal ended in a smile.

This woman frowned. "You're wounded," she said.

"Just a flesh wound," Byrne assured her, borrowing a line from Nick Page.

She shook her head. "Before we left headquarters we received a report that the aliens are using a poison on their ammunition. You'll need that tended to now." She turned. "Cory, I need a med-kit here."

"Yes, Captain," another young man answered, coming out of the brush carrying a small medical kit.

"Take care of Mister Byrne here," she said. "We'll meet you back here, so watch yourself."

"Yes, sir," Corwin said, opening the medical kit and pulling out alcohol pads and bandages.

"Your captain's a woman," Byrne observed as soon as Green had disappeared back into the darkness.

"Yes, sir," Corwin agreed, cutting away the fabric from Byrne's slacks to get at the wound.

"Isn't that a little unusual?" Byrne asked, not quite sure how to phrase the question.

"Is what unusual, sir?"

"Having a woman in command, giving orders."

"Not for us, sir," Corwin said. "Captain Green's the best. Commander Straker won't accept anything less into SHADO."

"Of course," Byrne murmured to himself. It occurred to him he didn't know what SHADO

stood for.

More shots echoed in the woods. Corwin stopped his ministrations long enough to grab his own rifle. "They came from the far side of the clearing," Corwin said.

* * *

Green, Freeman and the rest of the team also heard the shots somewhere ahead of them. They gave each other worried looks as they stepped up their pace.

Petroni and Cunningham surprised one alien as he rounded a tree. He looked down to discover a knife sticking out of his chest before he collapsed.

"You're going to have to teach me that," Freeman commented, watching Petroni retrieve his knife. He wiped it off on the alien's suit before putting it back in his boot.

"Inborn talent, sir," Petroni said in a whisper. "I'm the last of a long line of circus knife artists."

A shot rang out and Cunningham went down. Green fired in the direction the shot had come and another red suited alien staggered out of the brush, clutching at his faceplate.

Freeman beckoned them on, past the bodies of two more aliens lying on the path.

Foster was sitting on the ground with his back to a tree, an alien rifle across his knee. He raised it at the sound of footsteps, and only lowered it when Freeman came fully into view.

"Paul?" Freeman called softly. The older man looked around. The moon was going down, the shadows growing longer and deeper. A dark shape was huddled on the ground at Foster's side, under his arm, partially hidden under a parka.

"Ed?" Foster said, reaching under the parka to nudge the dark shape. "Alec's here."

The shape stirred, the parka's hood falling back to show a smooth cap of blond hair.

"Alec?" Straker murmured. Freeman stepped closer, getting down on one knee beside Straker.

"Ed, what happened?"

"Hit an energy dampening field. Had to bail out," Straker said. His voice was very soft and his eyes didn't seem to focus.

"The aliens came into the house and started blasting," Foster said. "Ed got us to cover, but one of the slugs must have grazed him, sliced open his back." There was a catch in his voice that made Freeman peer at him in the darkness.

"I couldn't get the bleeding to stop," Foster continued.

"Petroni," Freeman called softly. "You have the antidote?"

"Yes, sir," Petroni said, coming to Straker's other side. The Italian searched for a pulse, finally finding one at Straker's throat. "He's very weak. I don't dare give him the antidote, sir. It could kill him."

"Antidote?" Foster asked.

"The med team came up with it after they analyzed the weapons the aliens used during their last attack," Petroni said. "The aliens are poisoning their bullets. The antidote arrived at HQ about an hour after you took off."

Freeman checked his watch. "Fifty minutes."

"Fifty minutes to what?" Foster asked.

"Till all hell breaks out down here," Freeman answered. "We have to get moving. Can you walk?"

Foster shook his head. Straker managed to get to his feet, grabbing Freeman's arm for support. Freeman noted with alarm how unsteady Straker was on his feet. There was no way he was walking out of there.

Freeman beckoned to Petroni. "Do you think you can carry him?" he asked, nodding at

Straker.

Petroni gave the blond man an appraising look in the darkness. "No problem," he said.

"I can walk," Straker grated. Freeman just shook his head, motioning Petroni closer.

Petroni grabbed both of Straker's wrists in one of his hands and hoisting the smaller man across his shoulders into a fireman's carry. The motion knocked the breath out of Straker's lungs and he went limp.

"Lead on," Petroni said. Freeman could see his grin in the darkness as he looked over at his burden. "He's out cold, but he's still breathing."

"Liu." Freeman gestured in Foster's direction and the big Chinese pulled Foster to his feet, carrying most of the injured man's weight as they started down the path back.

* * *

Forty-five minutes. Mike Courtland was already in his flight gear as he headed out to check his plane. Not his plane, precisely, he was going to be flying the right seat on this mission, navigator. Courtland didn't know the pilot, the man wasn't stationed at Lakenheath, but he did seem to know his way around the F-111 and his clearances checked with the RAF.

"Forty minutes, Colonel," the younger man said when he caught sight of Courtland approaching the plane. "It's been a while since I've been up with a navigator," the man added. He was a dark complexioned Caucasian and his hair was a little longer than standard military. He had a faint accent. Puerto Rican, Courtland guessed.

Courtland checked the underside of the plane to see what had been loaded. He knew what his orders included.

"Four MK 84s with mechanical detonators, one standard Sidewinder and an M-61 cannon," the pilot said.

"No ECM jammers?" Courtland asked.

"Not much use against what we're going after, sir. My call sign is Dancer, by the way."

Courtland chuckled. "I should have known I'd end up with a Navy boy flying my plane."

"Sir?"

"Never mind," the black air force officer said. "We take off in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir," Dancer agreed.

* * *

They were heading west, back to the mobiles. "Half an hour," Freeman announced. They were still several miles from the valley entrance. With three injured, two seriously, the going was painfully slow.

Green touched Freeman's sleeve and beckoned him aside. "Colonel, we do have enough munitions to blow whatever's in that lake."

"There may still be aliens patrolling the area. Plus, we don't know exactly where their generator is," Freeman reminded her. "I can't order it, it'd be suicide."

"None of us will get out of here unless we try, sir."

"Out of the question."

"Alec, listen to her," Straker said. Petroni had set him down, propping him against a tree.

"It's a waste of time without knowing exactly where the generator is," Freeman argued. Straker reached into a pocket in his fatigue pants and pulled out a small object, handing to Petroni who handed it to Freeman.

Freeman looked at it - a compass, only it wasn't pointing north. "Petroni, show me your compass."

Petroni reached under his shirt and pulled out his own compass, placing it in Freeman's

outstretched hand. That instrument was also pointing toward the clearing and the lake.

Freeman turned to Green. "You have twenty minutes."

Green beckoned Blair to her. "Divide the explosives into three packs, bring one molly. We're taking out that generator."

"Yes, sir," Blair agreed, turning immediately to his task.

Freeman turned to Petroni. "Get everyone else to safe cover." He looked at Byrne.

"Byrne, you stay with them."

"Yes, sir," Byrne agreed.

Blair returned with the three packs, handing one to Green and waiting a moment before shrugging into the last one and picking up the heavy rocket launcher. Freeman went to grab the last backpack.

"No sir," Green said. Freeman glared at her in surprise as she took the backpack from his hand. "You're needed here," she explained, looking around at what remained of her unit. She motioned to Liu but found Byrne's hand on her arm.

"If it's just carrying a pack, I can do that," Byrne said.

"You're wounded," Green pointed out. "And there's a good chance we won't be coming back."

"I'm perfectly fit," Byrne said, again borrowing from Nick Page. It occurred to him that maybe the writers weren't nearly as stupid as he'd thought in writing Page's lines. He acted just like the soldiers here. It was an easy act to fall into.

"Besides, if you're fighting a war against aliens, I'm probably more expendable than they are," he added, nodding his head in Straker's direction.

Green gave him a rueful smile and handed him the pack. "You've just been drafted into SHADO. Keep your head down and do exactly as I tell you, understood."

"Yes, ma'am," Byrne said, shrugging into the backpack.

"We'll meet you back at the mobiles," Green told Freeman, waving Byrne and Blair to fall in behind her as she headed out.

"Good luck," Freeman said. He watched after them a moment before turning back to what remained of the Mobile squad, Petroni, Corwin, Liu and now Straker and Foster. He motioned for Petroni and Liu to take up their burdens again.

"We have twenty minutes to get to safe cover," Freeman announced, taking the lead as they began to move out.

* * *

Green, Byrne and Blair made it to the lake in ten minutes, despite the darkness.

"Here," Green murmured, raising her hand to warn Byrne and Blair. She gestured Blair to drop his backpack and the molly and head along the lake shore a hundred yards to get a triangulation on the generator. Byrne stayed close to Green, watching as she set up the rocket launcher. Blair signaled his reading back to her and she noted figures in a small pad before sighting along her own compass.

"Got it," Green murmured to herself, adjusting settings on the launcher and shifting its position slightly. "It's show time," Green added, dropping a shell into the molly's mouth and ducking her head. Byrne followed her lead, ducking his head and covering his ears as the shell fired, arcing over the lake. Water spumed high into the air. Green wasted no time in loading a second charge into the tube and firing it off. Blair ran up to help.

Twice more, they loaded the explosives, adjusting the firing pattern slightly and twice more water exploded into the air.

Green checked her watch in the darkness and crowed. "It's down!" She pulled a radio unit out of her pack, turned it on and set a dial before locking down the front cover and stuffing it into her pack.

"Let's go," she said, getting to her feet and pulling Byrne after her. She didn't bother to pick up the packs or the mortar launcher.

* * *

"Ten minutes to target," Mike Courtland told the pilot of the F-111. "I have a target signal from the ground."

"Location?" Peter Carlin, call sign Dancer, asked.

"Dead center of the target area," Courtland answered. "I also have a clear signal off the terrain."

"Good," Dancer commented before lapsing back into silence.

The plane's radar picked up a bogey approaching them from the sea. "I have an unidentified aircraft incoming at three o'clock," Courtland warned. Suddenly, the IFF beacon on the other plane clicked on, identifying it as RAF. Courtland peered out the windscreen to catch sight of it.

The approaching plane was unlike anything Courtland had seen before, either on or off the drawing board. It was squat and ugly, with barely enough wing area to keep it aloft. It resembled nothing so much as a slightly aerodynamic rock.

"What the hell is that?" Courtland muttered before he realized he'd spoken aloud.

"We call it Sky-one," Dancer replied, flicking a switch on his radio controls. "Dancer to Sky-one, come in, please."

"Sky-one to Dancer," a man's voice came over the radio. "We have clear scanning to the target, moving into position on your wing."

Courtland watched the strange craft slide into position off the F-111's left wingtip.

"We are seven minutes from target," he announced.

* * *

"The field's down," Lieutenant Anderson told Lake. "Sky-one's moving in with the F-111."

"Have we got communication with our people on the ground?" Lake demanded.

"Not yet, sir," Anderson said. "Do you want to abort the mission?"

"Negative," Lake said. "If they're not clear by now, they're already dead."

* * *

They skirted the clearing with the jeep. The mobiles were still two miles further down the path.

Foster watched Freeman check his watch once more.

"Less than a minute," Freeman announced. He motioned for the squad to stop and take cover behind the trees and boulders.

Freeman came over and crouched behind the rocks with Foster and Straker. "We should be okay here, I hope," Freeman said.

Foster followed Freeman's gaze down to Straker. The blond man was lying with his back to the rock, his eyes closed, his breathing labored. Foster couldn't tell if Straker was conscious or not.

Whistles filled the air, the sound doppler-shifting higher as it grew closer. Foster covered Straker's unmoving form with his own body and found Freeman's body covering his. Foster wasn't a praying man, but he found himself praying that whoever was in the bomber was good

enough to pull this off. They were still very close to the lake and the bomb target.

* * *

Green heard the whistles. There was a stream bank a few yards ahead and she ran toward it. In the corner of her eye, she saw Byrne stop suddenly, as though startled by the sound. She shifted her path, body-checking him into the stream as, less than a mile behind them, the lake exploded.

Byrne tried to move away from her, to stand. "Down!" she hissed at him, forcing his head down. Her ears were ringing from the concussion and she belatedly realized that he probably couldn't hear her. She cautiously raised her head above the bank, motioning for the man to stay still. This time, he did as he was instructed. Blair was nowhere to be seen and Green hoped he had made it to cover.

A different, more familiar whistle filled the air, penetrating the temporary deafness of the bombs. There was an alien ship somewhere near. A gold light shone through the trees and the sound became stronger, and with it came the smell of burning grass and pine.

Green stood, pulling her pistol out as she looked around for Blair. Still no sign of him. She climbed up the bank, toward a dark pile of debris she didn't remember seeing before.

It was Blair and he was dead. The entrance wound in his back didn't look like shrapnel. "Damn," she muttered to herself. A movement in the trees caught her eye and she raised her pistol. "Run!" she ordered Byrne as she fired at the red suited figure behind the tree. She didn't bother to look and see if the actor had followed her directions.

The alien fell and Green headed after Byrne at a dead run.

* * *

Freeman looked around at what remained of rescue party stirring from their protected places. Everyone seemed to have gotten through in one piece.

Foster was settled with his back to a boulder, Straker's head on his lap. One hand was on Straker's chest and there was a protective air around him as though he was warning the world that to get to Straker, they would have to go through him first. Puzzle pieces started to fall into place in Freeman's awareness.

Freeman was a little surprised to find he wasn't surprised at all. It all fit so perfectly. He wondered if Straker knew. He noted that Straker was shivering again, but there was no helping it at the moment.

"Liu, Petroni," Freeman called quietly. The two men came closer, crouching beside him. "I want the two of you go down to the mobiles and call for an emergency airlift out of here."

"Yes, sir," Liu acknowledged. He beckoned Petroni to grab a rifle and the two men headed down the path together.

Corwin stood and swung his rifle around, as if he'd sensed something. Byrne and Green appeared on the path and Corwin relaxed. Freeman didn't comment on Blair's absence. Green's grim expression was enough.

Green gave Corwin a look and the man stepped up to her. "Liu and Petroni have gone down to the mobiles," the man explained. She nodded.

Corwin grabbed the medical kit and went over to tend his patients once again. He started an IV to expand Straker's blood volume. The young medic clucked his tongue as he tried to find a usable vein, then settled for one in Straker's neck. Straker's eyes were closed again and he seemed to take no notice of the medic or what he was doing.

"I've added a minimal dose of the antidote to the solution. That should help, sir," Corwin explained, handing the intravenous bag to Foster to hold.

Foster's free hand was gently stroking his commanding officer's hair. The younger man looked up and caught Freeman watching him. He pulled his hand away and Straker grimaced as though Foster's movement had hurt. Freeman stepped closer and crouched down beside the blond man. He reached over and took Straker's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. Straker opened his eyes, his forehead still creased in pain.

"How you feeling?"

Straker shook his head. "How many people have we lost today?"

"With or without the civilians?" Freeman asked. Straker didn't answer.

"Baxter, Thomas, Cunningham, and Blair, three civilians that we know of," Freeman said.

"And we're not out of the woods, yet," Straker murmured.

* * *

There was a familiar sound overhead, the rotors of an aerocopter. A bright light glared down on the path and the copter stopped, hovering over them.

Freeman's pocket transceiver squawked and he pulled it out, listening to the pilot's instructions. "We have wounded," Freeman nearly shouted into the radio microphone. The pilot acknowledged the information and a rescue basket was lowered from a hoist. Petroni and Corwin loaded Straker in the basket and Corwin rode up to the aerocopter with his patient. Moments later, the basket was lowered again and it was Foster's turn.

"Up you go, sir," Green instructed, giving Freeman a push. Freeman didn't argue, grabbing hold of the ropes for balance as the basket was hoisted up to the aerocopter.

When everyone was aboard, Freeman went up to the cockpit. "We have confirmation of at least one Ufo on the ground," Freeman told Lieve Van Heer, the pilot. She nodded confirmation, picking up the radio microphone to warn headquarters.

* * *

"How many Ufo's are down in that lake?" Virginia Lake wondered aloud.

Anderson just shook his head as he relayed the information Sky-one. He checked the location of Sky-one and the F-111. Both planes were heading away from the area, but were still within range if the U.F.O. took off.

"I have a positive trace," Paulson announced from her radar station. "Map reference I-32. Correction, I have two traces, I-32 and I-33."

"Red Alert," SID's artificial voice announced, giving the coordinates and speed of the two blips that had appeared on SID's tracking equipment.

The announcement was repeated in the cockpit of the F-111, through the services of a miniature transceiver set to SHADO's battle frequencies.

Carlin did a quick mental calculation and turned the warbird back toward the valley. Sky-One followed suit.

"Dancer to Sky-One," Carlin called into his radio set. "Do you have them on internal?"

"Affirmative, Dancer," Sky-One replied. "Two bogeys at twelve o'clock."

"I'm not picking anything up," Courtland warned.

"It takes extremely specialized equipment to track them." Carlin nodded to two glowing specks in the low sky. "But we do have visual on them. We'll take the one on the right," Carlin announced into the microphone.

"Affirmative, Dancer," Sky-One's pilot, Maxwell, acknowledged as he broke formation to go after his target.

The U.F.O.s were still at low altitude, going after something near the ground. Both alien craft fired. Maxwell dove after his target and fired. The two U.F.O.s broke off, climbing into

the air at a speed unmatched by any civilian aircraft. A third blip appeared on Maxwell's radar, but this one carried SHADO's IFF signal. Maxwell turned Sky-one to go after the aliens, firing as he went. Sky-one and the F-111 were close to each other, much closer than any civilian pilot would dream of maneuvering.

* * *

Van Heer fought with the aerocopter's controls, keeping the rotary wing plane in the air by main force. The plane dropped as close to the tree tops as safety permitted as the alien's plasma beams threatened to set the forest below on fire.

Byrne sat on a bench, watching out of a side window, holding on to one of the support posts. He was afraid and one portion of his mind whispered that if one of the green beams hit the aerocopter, he wouldn't know it. Was this what the writers knew and he didn't, he wondered. That terror was something that could be overcome by force of will, by the decision that something was more important than fear?

He looked over at Green, waiting with her surviving team. No tears, no hysterics, she was checking what was left of their equipment with her men. It didn't mean she wasn't worried. That showed in the tenseness of her expression. She looked up and saw him watching her.

"Don't worry, Mister Byrne. SHADO has fighters on the way."

"Hopefully, they'll get here before the aliens get us," Petroni said, not looking up from cleaning his rifle.

"Don't scare the poor man," Green said.

"Don't worry, Captain. I figure I'm scared enough for all of us," Petroni said.

Byrne turned his head and watched Corwin a moment. The young man's lips were moving silently as he stowed his medical kit. The aerocopter shuddered as another green beam stuck the trees.

Byrne looked out the window again.

Two specks of light enlarged into aircraft approaching at high speed. The two jets fired at the U.F.O.s. The two aliens veered off and the planes followed in hot pursuit.

* * *

The aerial battle was over in moments. Both U.F.O.s were destroyed in mid-air.

"Do you mind telling me what we just shot down?" Courtland asked his pilot as Sky-one resumed its place on the F-111's wing tip.

"We call them Ufos," Carlin said.

* * *

The aerocopter set down in the empty back car park at Harlington-Straker studios. It was four in the morning. Blue uniformed studio guards were waiting for the craft. They picked up the stretcher Straker was on and started toward one of the side entrances to the main office building. Freeman beckoned Byrne and Green and the remainder of the crew to follow them into the building.

"What happened?" Kate Komack asked. She'd been waiting in the corridor.

"Aliens," Freeman answered. "They had a base up in the mountains. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you and Ed," she said, leading the way to a small bare side room. She looked worn out.

One of the security men turned to Freeman. "She drove up five minutes ago and told us you were on your way in with casualties. Oh, and Colonel Lake wanted you to know that the clean-up team is already at the incident site."

The clean-up team was standard procedure - all traces of the battle, the bodies, everything, would be gone before the day was out. Only forensic experts would be able to tell anything out of the ordinary had happened there, and then only if they knew something had happened in the first place.

Freeman looked up to watch Komack for a long moment as she stood beside the open door to the side room. "How did she know?" he murmured to himself. He shook his head and followed Komack and the others into the room.

He stepped over a grille set into the wall and spoke into the air. "Freeman."

"Voice Print Identification positive, Freeman, Alec E," a dry, disembodied voice announced. Freeman tripped a switch below the grill and the room began to drop. Byrne struggled to hide his surprise, noting Freeman's wry grin at him.

"Am I the only one in the studio not in on this?" Byrne asked.

"Not the only one," Komack said. She was kneeling by Straker's stretcher, holding his hand. His eyes were open and his color was improving as though he was gaining strength from her presence.

The motion stopped and the doors slid open to reveal a concrete gray corridor. A blue uniformed guard stood outside the door.

Freeman waved the guards on, out of the lift. They carried Straker out on the stretcher.

Komack motioned for Petroni and Foster to wait as she stepped over to Foster. To Foster's obvious surprise, she kissed him on the lips. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"Bringing him back," she replied. She nodded for Petroni to take Foster down to the medical center and the two men headed down the corridor.

"What happens now?" Byrne asked.

"Nothing, really," Freeman said.

"Freeman, I'm not stupid. We're talking about a war against aliens from outer space. Something so secret nobody's ever heard about. It makes James Bond look pedestrian. Hell, it makes Nick Page look childish," Byrne explained. "I just want to know how you plan to get rid of me."

"Howard, we're not in the habit of shooting civilians, no matter how annoying they may be," Komack said, then headed down the corridor after Foster.

A slender man in a yellow medical smock approached and stopped a short distance from Freeman.

"We do have ways of dealing with witnesses without terminating them," Freeman said.

"Really?" Byrne said. He let his disbelief color his voice.

"Really," Freeman said, nodding to the medical man.

The man added in a softly accented voice. "You will wake up tomorrow with no recollection of any of this. An automobile accident, I think. Minor wounds, a minor head injury, nothing serious. We are really very good at this."

Byrne wasn't convinced. The medical man sounded like Peter Lorre and looked like he should have been cast as Dracula.

Freeman chuckled. "We really are very good at this."

* * *

Foster sat in the leather chair opposite Straker's desk, his leg stretched out in front of him. A pair of crutches leaned against the corner of the desk.

After everything, Straker's injury had actually been less severe than Foster's. He had

needed transfusions to replace the blood loss, a full dose of the antidote and about a dozen stitches to close the cut, but that was the limit of it. After a good night's sleep, he was back at work. It looked to be six weeks or more for Foster to be returned to full duty.

Foster's ankle was in a cast and a brace immobilized his knee. Frazer and Harris were talking about reconstructive surgery on the ligaments in his knee. He was grounded from anything but desk work until further notice.

He sighed, impatient worry written across his face as he watched Straker and Freeman review a report from the medical section. From their serious expressions and occasional glances in his direction, Foster guessed it had to do with him.

After a moment, Freeman straightened up. "It's still ugly."

"Facts are facts, Alec," Straker said.

"It said I'm cracking up again, didn't it?" Foster said.

Freeman gave him a puzzled frown.

"That was Jackson's new report on me, wasn't it?" Foster asked.

Freeman's frown disappeared. "No, that was a report on the poison the aliens are using. As to Jackson's report, I don't read Hungarian. But if it discusses what I think it does, well, I think we have a treatment for that."

"I'm being transferred to Antarctica?"

"Why would we want to do that, Paul?" Straker asked. The chippiness was back and his expression was positively cheerful. Foster's heart sank - not Antarctica, somewhere worse, Mars maybe.

"You know why," Foster said. "The alien impulse, and..." His voice trailed off in sudden embarrassment.

"Oh, that," Straker said. The chippiness vanished and there was the faintest flush in his cheeks. "I'm not really worried about that."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"A leggy blonde," Kate Komack said from the open door. "You do prefer blondes, don't you, Paul?" She grinned.

"Yes," Foster admitted slowly. Straker was studying an invisible speck of dust on the video-link panel.

"Do you mind if the collars and cuffs don't quite match?" she asked brightly.

He stared at her and she began to laugh. "Here," she said, handing him a note. "A hero's reward. She's a friend of a friend and thinks the movie business is so fascinating, she can't wait to meet you."

"What about my leg?" Foster asked.

"I'm sure the two of you will think of something. She's quite imaginative, I'm told."

Foster just stared at the auburn haired woman in confused disbelief. Kate laughed again at his expression before turning to Straker. "I'm hungry, who's buying lunch?"

"Well, I suppose I can," Straker said, getting up from his desk and taking her arm as he headed for the door. "Coming, Alec, Paul?"

"We'll be right there," Freeman promised. The office doors closed behind them.

"If you need to talk without Shroeder or Jackson peering into your skull, my door's always open," Freeman said more seriously as soon as the doors closed.

"I think this one's out of your league, Alec," Foster said.

Freeman smiled. "Paul, you might be surprised what's in my league."

Foster just looked at him, not sure what to make of Freeman's statement.

"Paul, you did what you had to do keep him from going to pieces," Freeman said. "Even if you did choose an unorthodox way of doing it."

"He told you that?"

Freeman nodded.

"Alec, he really is beautiful, and sometimes..."

"Paul, do us all a favor," Freeman said. "Call Katie's friend and get yourself laid." He handed Foster the crutches. "We'd better hurry if we're going to have lunch with their majesties."

"Who?"

"The Ice Prince and the Rose Queen," Freeman said. "Their code names for security, didn't you know?"

"I thought Howell made up the Galahad' bit," Foster admitted.

Freeman laughed. "She had another name for you."

"So, who are you?"

"Lancelot."

"But Lancelot..."

"He was framed," Freeman said, helping Foster to his feet. "Besides, you're the one she kissed. I wonder how she knew when we'd be back?"

"E.S.P.?"

"That's not funny, Paul."

* * *

They found Straker and Komack waiting for them in the studio office building lobby.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she was saying. "What did the three of you do to Howard Byrne?"

"What do you mean?" Freeman asked.

"I mean, he's been positively civil the past few days, since they let him out of the hospital from that little 'accident' of his," she explained.

"Oh, that," Straker said. "Certain facts came to his attention."

"Such as?"

"Such as, not all doctors are male, and not all female military officers are dykes." Foster nodded toward the main doors of the office building. A couple was walking into the building, hand in hand, chatting happily. The man caught sight of Komack and nodded in her direction - Howard Byrne. The woman with him was wearing an khaki uniform and gave them all a toothy grin - Naomi Green.

"He never knew what hit him," Freeman added with a grin.