

REVIEW

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

CHAPTER 1:

General Straker sat in his electric wheel chair behind his desk in his office. The office of the head of the astrophysical commission. In front of him an array of wide screen, colour computer terminals. In his hand a colour LCD panel, 18 inches wide by a foot tall. He held it like the open pages of some large, hard backed book. On the display were budgetary forecasts for SHADO. Strategic Headquarters Alien Defence Organization. (*Author's note: I've changed it from Supreme to Strategic. It was beginning to sound like a pizza option.*) An organization that he himself had been in command of only 6 years prior. He had lost his legs. Literally blown off in a UFO incident in the Amazon Jungle. He had been promoted to the rank of general and moved upstairs as it were. He was no good to SHADO in an operations capability. Now he was in charge of the budgeting. He sorely missed the days when he was in the thick of the action. Always putting himself out on the front line. Now he longed for the few times where he would be called in to advise. In such situations he would often feel that he had resumed command, even if only briefly. It was a very different organization now to the one he had pioneered in the nineteen seventies. It was his organization then. He did the best he could with the available technology. No-one had ever attempted most of the things he had achieved before. No-one would have thought it possible. Especially given the stick and rudder approach to space technology. Primitive as it may have been back then, his efforts ensured that the alien threat was kept largely at bay whilst technology steadily improved throughout the nineteen eighties.

SHADO had come on-line in nineteen eighty and beside it's focus on defending earth against clandestine alien attack, it's research focused on the question of. "why?" Why do the aliens come? What do they want. Surely they can't just be after body parts? The statistics against there being another species almost identical to humans in the universe were staggering. And yet there they were. One of the goals was to retrieve a working, in tact UFO of which they could study the technology. In nineteen eighty seven, this was finally achieved. In spite of many set backs and deaths in previous attempts. The aliens would destroy their space ships before anyone could get a look inside. Anyone except for the people they abducted. People who may well have gained a really good look inside. People who would never be seen again. There was another problem. For some reason the UFOs deteriorated in the earth's atmosphere. After about 24 hours they started to disintegrate. After 48 hours there was nothing left. Straker and his team worked out, though observation, that the UFOs didn't deteriorate nearly as much in water as they did in air. The UFOs would often make for any body of water they could. They thought it was because they used the water as a cover. This might have been part of the story but it was mostly because UFOs survived significantly longer underwater. Even salt water. So in nineteen eighty seven, an intact UFO was finally captured and transported to a research facility in the Australian outback. Where it was disassembled and the technology was

put under the microscope.

Following years saw more UFOs captured and more of the alien technology understood. Some of the technology was integrated back into SHADO's own hardware. Parts of the propulsion system aided in navigation for SHADO's interceptor space craft. First as a retrofit to their original stick and rudder designs. Later providing the basis for a whole new design. Materials developed from the alien technology made it possible to build better and cheaper space craft. A whole new breed of SHADO interceptors was developed. As well as 26 new moon bases. The material was an organically grown compound. SHADO's scientists worked out how to prevent it from deteriorating in air and it also allowed them to grow materials which could withstand the heat of re-entry into earth's atmosphere. Weapons systems were the first to be understood and new, more powerful weapons developed. By nineteen ninety seven the aliens were outclassed. The only way the Aliens were able to get any significant numbers into earth was by launching an all out armada of space craft at it. Even then the fifty new interceptors and 26 new moon bases destroyed most of them. But it was in this assault on earth in which the then Commander Straker had lost his legs.

But SHADO had advanced even further in the seven years since then. It was now the year 2005 and it was time for the five yearly review of assets. There was an annual review for yearly budgets and forecasts but once every five years since 1980, a major review of operations and funding was called for. And now General Straker awaited the arrival of Commander Adrianna Pilgrim. The new commander of SHADO. he regretted that he would have to play devil's advocate but there were serious funding pressures and justifications had to be met. At each five year boundary, the many nations who co-funded SHADO had a contractual opportunity to object to, and re-negotiate their level of input. And this year, on this five year boundary, many nations were facing financial hardship. The world never really recovered from the Asian stock market crash of 1998. And in 1999, when the over valued American market finally collapsed, the world sank into a new kind of decline. Whilst the rest of the world dealt with a war with terrorism, SHADO continued to wage it's secret war against the aliens.

"Ms Pilgrim here to see you sir," came the voice on the intercom.

"Ah yes. Thank you Ms Ealand, Send her right in."

Commander Adrianna Pilgrim was wearing a tartan skirt, shirt and tie and a smart but business like jacket. She looked more like a school girl than the commander of a crack defence unit.

"That would never have been allowed in my day," said Straker.

"And Hello to you too General Straker," said Commander Pilgrim. "What wouldn't have been allowed?"

"To be dressed like that." Said Straker. "As the commander of SHADO I mean."

"Not wishing to get off to a bad start General but this is not your day and I'll dress how I bloody well like. Besides this is a very fashionable business look at the moment."

"Yes, women in business using sex for power."

"Surely you can't really mean that General. That's a pretty old fashioned view. Where's all that forward thinking you are supposed to be famous for. Or has it started to desert you in your old age?"

General Straker saw red suddenly but calmed down almost as quickly.

"Well enough of the pleasantries. Down to business. Shall we?"

Straker pointed at a small, glass conference table. Commander Pilgrim drew up a chair

and placed herself at the table. Her brief case at her side. She watched as General Edward Straker, the great man himself, drew his wheel chair up opposite her with his LCD display panel.

"Look I'm sorry Commander. It's just this job. I'll never get use to not being at the coal face. "

"Well you've fared pretty well all things considered," said Pilgrim. "I only hope I come out of this job as well as you."

"Mmmm," said Straker, his only reaction other than to pour over the data on his LCD panel.

"OK. I'll level with you Commander, This review is gonna be tough. We have 3 of the smaller nations pulling out altogether already and two of the major contributing nations asking some serious questions over continued funding. Things don't look so good. We're in danger of doing ourselves out of jobs. We've become too efficient and some people are asking if we still really need SHADO or not."

"Of course we need SHADO," jumped in Pilgrim. "It's the only thing standing between us and the aliens. Without us..."

Straker rased his hand to stop her going on.

"Yes, I know all this, but the perception is that the threat is some how diminished now. That the Aliens are some how not as much as a threat as they use to be. They forget that the only reason for that is down to us. But it's becoming political. As the world economy goes down the toilet, more and more justification is required."

"But we could almost hold our own now anyway," said Pilgrim. "With the materials science division and the aerospace divisions pulling in billions, we could almost get away without funding from external sources what so ever." She paused to collect her thoughts as she reached for her brief case..

"And not to mention the promise that's held with the new bio-electronics division. When software for that is taken into account we have a potential market larger than Microsoft. Not to mention the potential..."

Straker stopped her again.

"And that brings up another issue that's been raised lately. Although I think this is a political ploy. An escape clause in the making if you will. That is the question of accountability. Who holds SHADO accountable if SHADO becomes a self-funded autonomous organization?"

"This isn't my problem," said Adrianna Pilgrim.

"I'm afraid it is Commander," continued Straker. "The looming question on the horizon is. What happens if you are autonomous and self funded, then the UFO threat is finally taken care of once and for all? You end up with a well funded, well stocked secret organization with no purpose. What do you think might happen? Dump thousands of highly trained personnel onto the unemployment scrap heap or find some new roll for SHADO's existence. A roll that might not suit the political will of one major power or another. Or do you turn inwards and try to fight off the threat from that major power.?"

Adrianna looked straight in Straker's eye. She liked Straker a lot. He was aging and crippled but he'd seen more action that she would ever hope to. She knew he was playing devil's advocate and these questions would be addressed sooner or later.

"General. Ed... We have a job to do and it isn't playing politics. Why don't we get down to what really matters. Then worry about the political shit."

Adrianna Pilgrim shook her head as she raised her brief case to the table and opened it. She pulled out a small lap top computer and powered it up.

"We need a Mars base."

"What?" shouted a surprised Straker.

"We need a Mars base." she reasserted.

"You only just got all the moonbases repaired, didn't you?"

"Yea but we still need a base on Mars."

"You've got to be joking. Here we're talking about budget cuts and you're talking bases on another planet."

"Look it wouldn't be as expensive as you might think." She passed Straker her lap top and showed it to him. Straker perused it for some time. When she could wait no longer, Commander Pilgrim continued.

"With the organic technology we've got now we could construct the actual infra structure without too much expense. Likewise with the new long range shuttles planned. With mars's rarefied atmosphere it would be relatively easy to land and take off there. It would give us a strategic advantage."

Straker rolled his eyes.

"I thought some of my plans for moon bases and new space ships was ambitious but this?"

"It's not as bad as it seems," continued Adrianna. "Look all I want to know is, do we do it with our own money and keep it quiet or do we bring in member nations for co-funding?"

General Straker Stared into space for a few moments then fixed his gaze directly back at her.

"Even though you're probably bringing in billions now, you'll still need extra funding from outside to pull this off properly. You may only need to make up the short fall but you still need money. And you you'll have to convince some pretty sceptical people these days. There hasn't been a serious UFO incident for? How long has it been?"

Adrianna punched some keys in on her computer and passed it back to Straker. He looked at it. for a short time and his eyes widened.

"You're not making this up are you. Tell me this is a hoax. Tell me this is just a guess." But Straker knew better. He knew never to underestimate the aliens. He knew that however much events were played down officially or put down to a naturally explainable cause, the aliens usually had a hand in it somewhere.

"Yes Ed," said Adrianna. "It's the explanation that fits the facts. We haven't got that many blind spots in our defences these days."

"You mean to tell me that these UFOs have been somehow hiding in earth's atmosphere for, what would it be? Four years now? We know a UFO breaks up after twenty four hours in air. Even in pure water or fluroinert the UFOs can last six months at best. "

"Yup. We believe these ones can handle the atmosphere. It figures. If we could figure out how to modify the organic compounds to grow such materials, it's only a matter of time before the aliens work out what's going on. In fact what we can't work out is why they hadn't done this before now. It stands to reason."

"Do you have an evidence of this?" asked Straker.

"Yup. Lots. Take last month for example."

Adrianna punched up some more data on her lap top and once again passed it to Straker.

CHAPTER 2:

Adrianna Pilgrim was heading home from work. It had been 3 months since anything significant had happened and even then it was just routine. The alien threat had seemed to diminished and yet every now and then one would get through. Right into earth's atmosphere without even triggering even one satellite in the warning net. But even so, everything was pretty much routine. The UFOs show up and SHADO shoots them down. The aliens didn't seem to be even trying any more. Adrianna put her foot down as she cruised down the freeway in her Saab. The turbo kicked in and she felt herself being pushed back in the seat. Still it wasn't fast enough for her. She was more use to pulling Gs in a fighter jet. Or reaching escape velocity in a space shuttle. She had trained as an a pilot with the Canadian Air force. She started out as air crew in P3 Ariens and then got bumped up to captain and started flying recon in Canada's aging fleet of F104s before they were scrapped. She had a taste for everything that flew ever since. As long as it flew very fast. The faster the better. Being on the ground was not her idea of fun. Still she was preparing to make the most of it with the turbos kicking in and the engine wining up. She past 110 kilometres per hour and was accelerating when the car phone began bleeping. She picked it up and realized it was the secure channel. She began decelerating till the Saab reached a more manageable speed. She answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Commander Pilgrim. We have a UFO on positive track," came the voice.

"Yea so what?" she said. "Another day another UFO. What's the deal with this one that you should be calling me?"

"Well Sir. It's in the Earth's atmosphere and it's some how slipped through the net"

"Again? How are they doing that? Well get the Sky-divers onto it and let me know if there's any other developments."

"Yes sir," came the reply. "Already taken care of but I thought you might like to know."

"Ok thank you. Let me know if anything else develops but I should imagine it's just routine ."

"Roger that sir. HQ out."

She placed the phone back on it's hook and hit the gas. The nose of the car pitched up slightly as the turbos kicked in once more.

Night was falling and it was beginning to drizzle with rain. She had slowed to a more suitable speed for the conditions. Her windscreen wipers were on and the reflection of on-coming headlights were now sparkling through the remaining water drops in her field of view. She couldn't drive as fast as she might have liked but she some how saw the beauty in the surroundings. The rain had it's compensations. Just then her phone rang again. Not ten minutes from the last call.

"Hello?" said Adrianna again.

"Commander Pilgrim?" came the voice. Only this time a little more frantic.

"Yes what is it?"

"Commander Pilgrim. We've lost Sky four."

"What?"

"We've lost Sky four. We think there was a second UFO."

There was silence on the phone. This was more serious than Commander Pilgrim wanted to hear. It was Friday night. She had hoped to go home, freshen up and go to a rave party that night. It wasn't often that Adrianna got the opportunity to go to a party and it looked like this

would be no exception.

"Damn. How did that happen?" she demanded.

"I don't know, Sir.."

"I mean letting one UFO get through on the odd occasion I can put down to human error. or equipment glitches. It happens. But letting two through... And then losing a Sky diver. That's unthinkable. I'm coming in. Relay the details to my computer."

Adrianna Pilgrim slammed her phone down and looked for the first exit in the freeway where she could make a U turn. She found it and hit the breaks. The Saab screeched a little until the ABS breaking system kicked in. She could feel one of her headaches coming on whilst she waited for the oncoming traffic to clear. She reached into the glove compartment and rummaged around for a packet of headache tablets. She found them as the traffic cleared and retrieved them. With one hand on the wheel and the other squeezing two tablets from the blister pack, she planted her foot on the accelerator and the car screeched a little as she spun it round, across the road and into the outside lane, back in the direction she had come from. She tossed the packet onto the passenger seat and downed both tablets having difficulty swallowing them with her dry throat. For the next fifteen minutes she still felt as though there was a tablet stuck in he throat even though they had both gone down. And the taste was awful. She drove even faster. If not because of the UFO threat but to get to the vending machine in SHADO HQ. Even a chemically rendered coffee would be preferable to the taste of paracetamol.

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By the time she had reached the Straker-Harlington studios it was raining quite heavily. She parked her Saab as close as she could get to the main foyer of the building but they were shooting a major scene on one of the sound stages that night. The car park was full from the cars belonging to all the extras that were required. She had to run into the building and even though the distance wasn't too great, the rain had managed to penetrate her clothing to the skin. She was soaked through when she arrived in the command centre but she had tried to catch some rain drops in her mouth in an attempt to take away the taste as soon as possible. Colonel Keith Ford was on watch and he greeted her. Looking her up and down as she dripped onto the command room floor.

"You had better take this in your office. You don't wanna be shorting anything out with all that water."

Pilgrim nodded in acknowledgment and walked off to her office shouting: "And get me a cup of that industrial waste from the vending machine for Christ sake will ya."

Colonel Ford grabbed a foam plastic cup full of hot pseudo coffee from the vending machine and followed her to the office door but Commander Pilgrim held her hand up in a stopping gesture.

"Just let me get out of these wet clothes"

She grabbed the coffee from Colonel Ford's hands as the doors slid shut between them. Ford rolled his eyes and waited patiently outside. His arms folded and motionless. Ford had reflected that he had spent the majority of his career with SHADO waiting for somebody to get their act together. Commander Pilgrim emerged changed with a towel wrapped round her head to dry her hair.

"Right now I caught up on the details on the lap top in the car on the way back here but I still don't get it. You say there were two UFOs but not any evidence of one having gotten through in the first place. How is that possible?"

"I don't know, sir. It makes no sense to me either. No-one else seems to be able to offer a serious suggestion either."

"Well hadn't you better look into it?"

"That's exactly what we're doing," said Ford.

"And what about Sky four? How could they even get close enough?"

They walked back out onto the command room floor. She stood there looking up at the many projection displays mounted at the front end of the room like a series of movie theatre screens. She surveyed the command consoles and the people who staffed them. Laid out like a sparse version of NASA's mission control. A woman carrying data cartridges walked in front of her and then she noticed two people milling round one of the consoles and its operator. Ford saw that she was wondering what they were doing.

"We're not entirely sure, sir. We're trying to work it out. So far there's two theories. Either they've found a way to extend their masking technology so that they can make themselves invisible to us for much longer periods or." Ford gulped slightly.

"Or what Keith?" Said Pilgrim.

"Or they have been in Earth's atmosphere for a hell of a long time."

Commander Pilgrim failed to see the significance of this. Then it dawned on her. "That would mean they've found a way to stop the deterioration process!"

"Yes sir," said Ford. "And that means the rules have changed."

"Hmmm," said Pilgrim as she pondered the new significance. "You said there were two?"

"Yes Commander."

"So what happened to the other one? You said you got one of them."

"Yes Commander." Ford pointed to one of the large projection displays above and at the front of the room. "It's making a break for it and moonbase are scrambling as we speak."

Lieutenant Yasmien Donesian was busy at the central command post in the command sphere of moon base one. Her staff were milling round their respective terminals preparing to launch a spread of interceptors. They were all waiting on Charlie, the main artificial intelligence terminal. Charlie was a fifth generation SHADO AI. Its responsibility at that time was to consider the number of interceptors needed, the best moon bases from which they should be launched, and their launch sequence. It had been pondering the problem for 15 seconds. A very long 15 seconds at the heightened state of readiness in the command sphere. The data was displayed to all personnel concerned across all relevant terminals in all 28 moonbases simultaneously. 70 milliseconds later the time it takes for radio signals to travel at light speed, from the Moon to the Earth and through a series of satellite and switching networks, the data was displayed in command room at SHADO HQ in England. A second later the AI's voice annunciator kicked in.

"Five interceptors required for a guaranteed kill. Moon base seven, interceptor four. Moon base eight, interceptor one. Moon base eleven, interceptors one and two. Moon base seventeen, interceptor one."

By the time the AI had spoken the words the interceptor crews had already scrambled. Suited and at their respective gantry doors.

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All gantry doors opened at the exact same time. Computer coordinated by a massive network across the Moon. The crews stepped through and took their respective seats, one behind the other single file. The seats mounted on the gantries slid forward and out over the open hatches in the tops of their respective interceptors. As the gantries reached out over the

interceptors, a gimble arm, part of the gantry itself began to swing the pairs of seats down through the open hatches. The seats bumped and clunked as they bedded down into their respective positions inside their respective interceptors. Pilot up front, gunner behind in their swivelled gunning platforms. The gimble arms retracted and the hatches close shut with a thud. Motors whirred grinding the hatches inwards and air tight. There was a second or two of silence before more motors and pumps began to wind up. Fuel being pumped into engines and electrical systems coming on line. On the pilots' display panels a display of coloured icons began to light up and cycle through. Each interceptor system being automatically interrogated for functionality and then checked off as blast doors opened in front of the space craft, rams pushing them and their rocket powered, automated launch sleds through and into the next chamber. The ambient light from the preparation bay dimming as the interceptors locked into place and the blast doors shut behind. Only the glow from the instruments left to light their way. Each interceptor pilot, having completed the check list confirmed their readiness to launch by voice comms.

"Zero Seven IC four ready to launch."

"Zero Eight IC one ready to launch."

"One One IC one ready to go"

"One One IC two ready to launch."

"One seven IC one ready to kick ass."

A door folded and opened upwards in front of them revealing a tube leading upwards to the surface and beyond. The platform upon which they and their respective rocket sleds were mounted angled down to match the upward angle of the tubes. A sequence of ten icons illuminated on panels both in front of the pilot and gunner at the same time. The AI began the count down as the icons winked out respectively.

"Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six main engine start. Five. Four." At which point the pilots could no longer hear the AI's voice through their speakers as the noise from all the rocket motors reverberating throughout the hulls of the interceptors became deafening. There was a jolt and metal and plastic pillars and construction joists zipped past them as they accelerated up and out of the launch tubes. Popping out through holes in the surface like peas being squeezed from a pod.

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A few seconds later the noise became a very reasonable level as the rocket sleds detached and headed for home. Having flung their cargos out beyond the moon's very reasonable escape velocity and into space. The interceptor's rocket motors still operative but comparatively quiet to the noise made within the launch tubes. Another few seconds and the rocket motors cut out. The pilots now looking at space through the cockpit window whilst the gunner brought up their electronic eyes. Lieutenant Yasmien Donesian slumped back in her command chair relieved that at least that part of the operation was over and the mission was underway. Conventional computer systems displayed and maintained tracking data. Feeding the AI which in turn fed information to the smaller AIs aboard each interceptor. There was silence and tension in the command sphere. Only the sound of the fans in the life support systems, sundry small cooling fans and hard drives in various systems. The AI remaining eerily silent as too the purple haired women of moonbase one. Once course corrections were made and trajectories confirmed there would be a 6 minute reprieve before the first sign of action. The AI's voice broke the silence.

"Trajectories confirmed. All interceptors locked on optimum flight paths. All systems nominal."

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"What ?" shouted Commander Pilgrim so loud that Ford thought they would hear her on moonbase without the aid of any other technology. "What do you mean you've lost it?"

Donesian's face was looming large on one of the projection screens.

"It's gone silent commander. Not a peep. We can't see it we can't bounce a radar signal off it. There's not even any typical alien noise. The damn thing just up and vanished."

Pilgrim looked round for something to thump but she was standing in an open space. The space in the command room reserved for the senior command staff. Her chief of security, Bjorn Frogleberg could hear her above the command room chatter two corridors away. He had been heading into work ever since he became aware of developments an hour before.

"How can you lose it?" shouted Pilgrim again. "The things can only run silent for a short period of time."

Reluctantly, Yasmien Donesian tried to explain. "Well we thought that. We thought that given another minute or so we'd pick them up again. Even the AI expected it and plotted the possible escape routes the UFO could take. There was no problem compensating for the interceptors. Any one of them could have changed course to hit it on one of the possible escape trajectories. But it never materialized. And that even took the AI by surprise. By the time we realized it wasn't going to show up again it was too late. We're doing all we can but it's just not there. "

"How long has it been since you lost it?"

"It's just gone four minutes Commander."

"Four minutes isn't too bad is it?"

Ford had turned and was shaking his head at Commander Pilgrim. Colonel Frogleberg was strolling up to join her position now. Trying to take in as much information from the array of displays as he could.

Lieutenant Donesian continued. "Four minutes is all it takes. There's only a thirty percent chance that it will be on a course that is still reachable by one of the interceptors and that chance is decreasing every second it stays hidden."

Commander Pilgrim rubbed her tired eyes and shook her head at the same time. Only to look up again and see the face of Colonel Frogleberg staring back at her. "It's vanished Bjorn. It's just damn well up and vanished."

Frogleberg was shifting his gaze back and forth between the commander and the information on the screens. trying to gage what had happened and Commander Pilgrim's reaction to it.

"Four minutes Bjorn," she continued. "Over four minutes. Even the AI's confused apparently."

Bjorn Frogleberg nodded. He knew what this would mean if there were no other explanation. He offered one. "Are you sure it didn't just disintegrate or it's accord or something? Like maybe it was in worse shape than we thought and just flew apart out there somewhere.?"

"We're close enough that we would have picked up debris from it," offered Donesian from moonbase with a suitable delay. " Even if the debris was ground to powder we would have picked up something."

At that moment, a light bulb seemed to reflect in Commander Pilgrim's eyes. "Ok then. We can't see it because we're looking for something to be there. How about instead, try looking for what isn't there? How long will it take you to instruct to AI to look for a hole

instead of an object?"

"We're on it," shouted Donesian excitedly as she looked around her beyond the view of the camera. She was talking to someone else and then returned her attention back to the camera and the command staff on Earth. "Look I'll call you back in a minute OK. Moonbase out."

A minute went by. Commander Pilgrim filled in her Security chief, Colonel Frogleberg. Colonel Keith Ford busied himself and his command room staff trying to make use of tracking telemetry of their own.

Lieutenant Donesian returned to the display screen. "We've picked up what we think it the UFO Commander. But it's way out of range. There's not a chance we could get anything after it now. That's if it is actually the UFO."

CHAPTER 3:

General Straker was in his small but functional in-office kitchen. Fumbling with a coffee plunger which, for reasons he was unsure of, would not co-operate as it should have. His chair was transformed so that he was at full height. His torso strapped into the frame work so that he was as near to standing as the mechanism would allow. The chair was still bulky but it allowed him almost the same freedom that he would have had even if his legs were still attached.

"So what all this seems to suggest is that they can't fully cloak as they have been known to on Earth for brief periods?"

Commander Pilgrim confirmed: "Yeah, that would seem to be the case. They can blank out most things. Make themselves go very dark and virtually invisible to tracking, but not enough to become at total nonentity."

Straker had sorted out the problem with his plunger and was making the coffee. "But you're saying that the UFO's were already here. What makes you think that? Couldn't they have cloaked themselves on the way in?"

"We don't think so Ed. About forty five seconds after we worked out where it was, it progressively began to light up again. It looks like they can still only hold their dark state for maybe six minutes at best. In hindsight this would seem to be the case. But even if they were capable of going totally dark for thirty minutes, one of our space detectors somewhere would pick them up. In fact they'd probably have to be able to stay dark for twelve hours or more in order to slip through without us seeing them."

Straker motored over to the conference table with two freshly plungered coffees. He placed them on the table, first in front of Adrianna and then where he would be positioned himself. He pulled on a joy stick and he began to fold back into a sitting position again as he drew up at the table.

"So they were already here you say? How 'n' hell did they get in in the first place?"

"More importantly.. When did they get in Is the question," said Commander Pilgrim before attempting to sip on her coffee.

"Remember way back in two thousand and one. Remember all that nasty sun spot activity?"

Commander Pilgrim just nodded knowingly.

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It was the hottest summer on record for the northern hemisphere, whilst south of the equator, the weather was wet and unpredictable. In spite of the heat, meteorologists claimed that the world was becoming wetter on the whole. Adrianna Pilgrim was sitting in her office in the secret labyrinth underneath the Straker Harlington complex in Southern England. She was watching a report on global warming on TV. A lively debate between two camps of scientists. On one side 3 scientists claiming that global warming was upon us. One seemed convinced that it was already too late to reverse the trend. The other side were generally claiming that global warming was hog wash. On the energy conscious LCD computer display screen next to her was a report on one of the scientists which SHADO intelligence had compiled. It showed that in spite of his public credentials as an independent expert, he was in fact being sponsored by the oil industry. In an arrangement reminiscent of the 30 year debate over tobacco and lung cancer. Where the tobacco industry paid teams of scientists through round-about means to claim that there was no link. Only now it wasn't a group of addicted smokers at risk, it was the whole planet. Adrianna Pilgrim was a keen environmental advocate and keen to see SHADO

fit the profile of an environmentally friendly organization. Which, she realized, wasn't going to be an easy task. She had not been in the job long. Finally winning the post after a succession of temporary commanders since General Straker earned his promotion and was bumped upstairs. She wondered if her fate too might be to end up head of the Astrophysical Commission. She felt a great deal of sympathy for General Straker. SHADO was his baby. He built it himself. A great deal of it with his own sweat and tears. It had cost him his wife and his son. As well as countless other sacrifices along the way.

"There but for the grace of God," she mumbled to herself as she thought about him. And it was a shame that he had lost his legs to the Aliens. In spite of his years mounting up, he was still a very sexy man. She ran her fingers along the edge of her desk taking in its texture. Three months since the job was officially hers and she was still getting use to it. Somehow it didn't feel like her office at all. Yet she knew the job was her's until she either became like Straker, or worse.

She lost concentration on the television as her mind wandered. It wasn't as interesting as she had hoped it would be. She lent forward and turned it off then leaned back in her executive chair with her hands clasped behind her head. She could have fallen asleep but just then a voice rang out from her computer terminal.

"Awww it's juthd a methage"

She knew what this meant. She had some e-mail. She sprang forward and upright. Swivelling into a position where she could open and read it. She ran her fingers over the touch sensitive surface of the LCD panel and the message unfolded.

"Hi commander. The sun-spot activity report is ready for you. I've only done a preliminary review of the data but it's not looking good. We're not entirely sure that the secondary links will hold. Even some of the star-net may be effected. We can't tell what will happen but we've only got perhaps a month to come to terms with it. Out of interest. I've noticed that amateur radio operators are already reporting loss of communications. I realize it's more or less anecdotal evidence. Or at least less than empirical but the word is that this is the worst eleven year cycle they've ever known. Anyway, if you want me I'll be up at Cambridge for the rest of the week. I need to complete the research to find out how badly we might be effected. Catch ya.

Keith Ford. Info systems management."

Adrianna thought for a moment and then replied simply: "Thanks Keith. Keep me posted."

She pressed another key sequence on the computer's keyboard and a face appeared on it. She noted that the frame rate was near perfect due to the high speed local communications bandwidth. It was pretty nice to see people on the communications window who weren't jerking in motion as if they were part of some art-house music video.

"If Colonel Frogleberg is around could you tell him I wanna see him please."

"Yes Commander." Came the reply. "He's down in Ops. Do you want me to page him?"

"No don't bother, I could do with the walk. Thanks." She scooped up her mobile phone from the desk and sprang to her feet. She paused and looked round for any unfinished business that might keep her. There was none. She walked to the door and hit the button on the side. It slid open and as soon as there was enough room she stepped through. She walked through the corridor that led to the command and control room. Up three steps and out of the corridor into C&C. Past the woman she had just spoken too, giving her a nod and a polite smile as she past

her. It was some walk to Ops. It was past the medical wing and on a lower level. In an area that was quite newly opened up. When the base had been constructed, vast areas were left for future use. Some were simply huge caverns 4 stories in height and vast as basket ball stadiums. There were four such areas constructed and left unused. Ops was in one of these areas. Only fitted out for use in late 1999. Rapid progress was made in a new nuclear reactor technique called a sub-critical fusion reactor. It was predicted that it would take ten years to develop them for civilian use but here, SHADO had one in use within a year. It was the first of a new breed of true fusion reactors which used thorium instead of U235. Thorium is a radio active substance but unlike traditional fusible materials, can not possibly attain critical mass and explode. But using a particle accelerator in a special containment vessel it can be excited to the point of something just less than critical mass. Giving off masses of energy in the form of heat as usual but being able to be switched on and off, literally at the flick of a switch. Best of all it produced very little nuclear waste, and the waste that it did produce only remained so for 200 years instead of 200 thousand years. It could also be used to burn up other nuclear waste and render it relatively harmless as well. Possessing a 95 percent conversion ratio. For the first time SHADO had the opportunity to have a truly independent, virtually inexhaustible power supply which posed no threat to the civilian population above and very little damage to the environment. Soon there would be sub-critical reactors in all the moonbases and every other SHADO installation but this was the first of it's kind anywhere in the world and was largely experimental.

It also sat 4 stories tall so the reserved area was opened up and it was built in the rear of the space but the rest was divided up into 4 separate levels like modern office space. She entered the area at the top level looked into the space like a building within a building. She took the stairs which descended into the cavernous space like a massive industrial complex or the rigging of an oil refinery. All the way down to the bottom then a long a short corridor and through a pair of self opening doors as if she was entering a hospital ward. Almost as soon as she entered a man rushed past her carrying an arm full of data cartridges.

"Sorry." He said as he almost bumped into her then disappeared into another room.

"It would be you who would be sorry if you dropped those carts," thought Adrianna. She wandered up to what looked like a reception desk. An alcove with some office space and several computer terminals. In the room behind she saw a room full of yet more computer terminals. Only these had large displays suitable for CAD work. She peered in and saw one solitary person sitting at a terminal in the corner banging away at his keyboard.

"Have you seen..." started Adrianna but the man held up his hand to stop her. He continued to bang away at the keyboard. Then he dragged the mouse and clicked on a button. He turned around in his chair. Commander Pilgrim went to speak again but once again he held up his hand. He was staring at a huge projection display covering the majority of the wall opposite his terminal. It had a rendered three dimensional map of the Atlantic rim. He waited a little longer.

"Damn!" he said, with a pained expression on his face. He went to turn back to his terminal but remembered the commander standing there. "Oh Sorry. What can I do for you Commander?"

"I was looking for Colonel Frogleberg."

"Oh he's down with the Cray I think. Down the back. "

"What's going on? What's all the fuss about? "

"We're losing SID," said the man.

"What?" said Pilgrim surprised. "What do you mean losing SID?"

"Haven't you heard," said the man as he returned to his terminal. "The Sunspots are coming a little early this year. That's where the Colonel is. Down at the Cray trying to get us to model a comms strategy before we lose comms with the other space platforms as well."

"Oh shit," said Commander Pilgrim as she backtracked out of the room as fast as she could. She ran down the corridor toward the compute room where the huge Cray super computer was installed. She noticed that there were other people running back and forth from one room to another along the corridor. As she got closer it was like trying to run down a crowded city street at lunch time. Groups of scientists in heated discussions.

"No no no you idiot. You can't do that. You can't just pump that much power down those wave guides," she heard one scientist say to another as she passed him. She had no idea what the conversation was about but it didn't sound good.

She burst through the doors to the computer room. The sound of the cooling fans and arrays of data storage devices filled her ears. She looked around amongst the computer personnel milling round the various terminals and computer systems in the room. She spotted Bjorn Frogberg at the other end of the room. Talking to two other computer scientists. As she stepped toward him he looked up and noticed her. He beckoned her over. She raised her arms in a gesture that read: "What's going on?" When she reached him and the other two people she said it.

"What's going on? I thought we had a couple of months before anything bad went down.. Keith said the sun activity was building but nothing to be worried about. "

"Keith's dealing with theory, we're dealing with reality here," said Frogberg.

"How bad is it?" asked Pilgrim.

"Bad," said Frogberg. "And it's getting worse by the hour. And you know what happened eleven years ago when this happened. The aliens are bound to take advantage of it. We've got outages and false readings. It's driving the AI's nuts. MEDAI (Main Earth Defence Artificial Intelligence) was just tracking an incoming which suddenly appeared in the stratosphere at an unbelievable angle. Even for a UFO, and way too slow to be credible. It had already given the preliminary scramble to Skydiver's three and four. Turned out it was a mirror image of a triple seven heavy out of Vancouver."

"Damn AI's. Can never trust 'em," said Pilgrim.

"It's not the AI's fault," said one of the scientists. "It's what the sun spot activity is doing to some of the satellites Ma'am."

Frogberg jumped in. "Yeah. They're either picking up phantoms or the data we're receiving back at the ground stations is just too weird."

"Is it the older satellites in our fleet?" asked Pilgrim. "Perhaps we could shut them down for a while and just go with the more modern ones."

"No it's pretty indiscriminate," said the computer scientist. "It's the conditions in general. Some are faring better than others but it's a random thing. We need a better computer model of this phenomenon but we just don't have as much data as we would have liked. We should have poured more money into more SOHO probes when we had the chance. NASA would have jumped at the chance to do some more basic research and perhaps we would have a clue what to do about this now."

Pilgrim was dumb founded by this. She didn't know what to say to a statement like that.

Frogberg broke the mood. "I have to go up to comms, you wanna walk with me?"

"All right you can fill me in more on the way," said Pilgrim.

Adrianna Pilgrim and Bjorn Frogleberg set off for the comms lab. Out past the scurrying throng and to the stairwell. Frogleberg pushed for the elevator.

"Take the stairs," said Pilgrim. "Or are you getting too old?"

Frogleberg shrugged his shoulders and darted up the stairs full speed. Pilgrim, taken by surprise poured on the speed after him. She caught up to him at the second level but couldn't pass him. He kept on going, Pilgrim following up till the last flight of stairs. She put in an extra effort but still Frogleberg came in over the line. Puffing and panting the two grabbed each other at the top of the stairs to support themselves.

"Who's too old?" said Frogleberg.

Between heavy breaths Pilgrim said. "That's why you're S2 and I'm the Commander." She straightened up as her breath came back. "If we see any bad guys I'll just stand behind you if that's all right." The pair moved off out of the stair well and into another corridor.

"But what if they want to negotiate a surrender or something?" asked Frogleberg.

"Don't worry. I'll tell you what to say."

Frogleberg laughed as they headed to the comms lab.

The comms lab was just as much mayhem as operations. Just as the Ops personnel were racking their brains to find a strategy to keep the defence system at full capacity, the communications team were working on ways to keep the lines of communication open. They walked in to see people rushing about carrying cables and equipment. Just as in Ops, there were scientists, engineers and technicians arguing with each other. Trying to solve problems by bashing them with their heads. Frogleberg and Pilgrim stopped dead, 4 metres in from the door way. No-one seemed to notice them. Usually the room would fall silent as the lower ranks bowed and scraped but not this day. Today they were too busy with problems and a massive collective headache. Suddenly there was a cracking sound from a bench to their right. All heads in the general vicinity turned to see a puff of white smoke from some equipment on the bench with a technician waving it out of his face. The silence lasted but a few seconds then the room returned to it's argumentative state. All eyes returning to what they were doing. All except for Frogleberg's and Pilgrim's. Who couldn't believe what they were seeing.

"No no no. I fucking told you it wouldn't take that much power," said the technician. "It's all right for you fuck-knuckle software people to do stuff in theory but you have no fucking clue in practice."

Pilgrim looked up at Frogleberg and raised her eyes. "Watch we don't take that out of your wages pal," said Pilgrim to the technician.

The technician looked up and was startled to see the commander. "Yes sir. Sorry sir." He shouted. This in turn announced, finally, the presence of the two highest ranking SHADO personnel in their midst. A lab coat endowed scientist broke from his circle of argumentative engineers and rushed over to greet the pair.

"I'm terribly sorry about this. We've got a few problems."

"Yes we can see that," said Pilgrim symbolically waving smoke from her face.

"The comms systems have all got triple redundancy and still we've got problems. We designed all sorts of fail safes into the system with sola but we couldn't have anticipated this."

"We need an estimate of the loss of capacity and for how long," said Frogleberg.

The scientist scratched his head. "That's a tricky one. You mean across the board?"

"Well yea," said Frogleberg.

"Across the board we're probably looking at about ten percent . We can probably expect to have problems for the next three to four months."

Pilgrim looked at Frogleberg. "Well that doesn't sound too bad. It's a long time but we can surely cope with a ten percent loss."

"Ahh. Well. That's the good news," said the scientist. "The bad news is that some systems might fail all together. Others might not be affected at all. What Ops are trying to work out for us is which systems are going to go down and what we're trying to do is concentrate our effort on those systems."

"So which systems are going to go down?" asked Pilgrim. "Or don't we know yet.?"

The scientist continued to scratch his head. "Well that's the real bad news. We don't know the total picture yet but some of the space comms are shaping up real vulnerable at this point. "

"Which ones in particular?"

"You're not going to like this but it looks like the main high speed links to the moon are going to be a big problem. Look come over here and have a look at this." The scientist led them to a n electronic white-board. He pulled out an electronic magic marker and proceeded to draw in a corner of it. "Wait!" he said as he saved the current image on the board and then wiped it clean. He drew a circle representing the moon and another representing earth. He placed several dots on the moon and drew several square boxes around the earth.

"Right now the way our comms links work is rather like the Internet was originally designed. And for the same reason. Each moon base is in comms with each other. Each moon base has a comms link to every other moon base. Well almost. There were a few logistical problems but essentially speaking that's the case. Each moonbase has it's own microwave link either outwards to earth, or if it's on the dark side, to moon orbit Satellites and then to earth. If you take out a moon base or a satellite the data stream can be re-routed via any available path. That's standard practice these days. However we have another problem. The earth is rotating . NASA are lucky. They can openly use a stack of ground bases all round the planet to receive data from just about anywhere out there. But we can't do that because we're a secret organization. So what we do is have a stack of satellites in earth orbit to receive the signals." He pointed to the square boxes representing earth orbit satellites. "Only they can't be in high orbit like a geostationary satellite because they have to be moving quite fast. The whole thing ends up like and elaborate cellular phone network. Only our Bedsteads are satellites and instead of the mobile phones moving, the bedsteads move."

"Bedsteads?" Asked Frogleberg.

"Mobile phone base stations. The antennae look like iron bed steads so they got dubbed bedsteads." The scientists waited till this piece of trivia sunk in and he continued. "Okay, from the bedsteads the signal is bounced to a bunch of birds that fly in a higher, higher, geostationary orbit. That's at about thirty five thousand kilometres straight up. There's always at least three bedsteads between the moon and the geosyncs guaranteeing continuous contact. But the weakness in the link comes because there is a funnelling effect. We designed it so that if the aliens happened to take out any satellites in the chain, there would be at least two more to take it's place. But we never counted on there being this much solar wind that could disrupt all satellites at once. "

Frogleberg rubbed his chin. "So what do we do about it?"

"Well that's what we're looking at now. But it doesn't end there. The whole thing is random. It could take out one or two links here and there. Or it could take out the entire network for a period at any time. We can't predict that. We've already experienced some outages. Nothing that's put us totally off the air but enough to send shivers up their spines on the moon. "

"What about the warning nets?" asked Frogleberg.

"Ah yes I was coming to that. This is where it really gets unpredictable. We don't know what's going to happen there exactly. You see there are so many variables. Everything from radio magnetic interference though to total destruction by cosmic rays and radiation. Remember we're not just talking about artifacts heading in our general direction now, we're talking about what the sun's spitting out in all directions since our warning net space probes are orbiting the sun rather than just the earth. All we can really say is that there will be problems, about ten percent of the comms will go down, but some of those comms might go down forever."

"And of course the aliens will know this and try to take advantage of it," said Pilgrim.

"We have one ace in the hole though," said the scientist. "If all else fails we still have our laser comms. As long as we can get line of sight to a moon base fitted with the comms equipment we can get data back and forth. Of course it means that we can only get comms for twelve hours a day in the worst case."

Frogleberg looked puzzled.

"Because it has to be line of sight to the moon. We should be able to get line of site for about sixteen hours a day but at worst case it could be as low as 12. We just don't have enough laser sites. What we're trying to do now is see if we can rig some kind of laser comms system onto some of the manned space stations we've got up there. Like the three construction platforms. We might be able to bounce messages off that. it's not easy to get enough power to run such a system on a space borne platform I can tell you." He pointed to the technician where the smoke emitting equipment was, now with its lid removed and the technician poking around inside it with some test probes.

* * *

Three days went by. Every outage was reported and logged but nothing so serious that couldn't be handled. Backups were always operative and there were no permanent loses. Data sent via one channel that didn't get through was instantly re-routed via another. Bandwidth loss was negligible. Commander Pilgrim was milling over the latest report from the alien science division. Using the computer terminal in her office. A team from the moon were heading into Earth orbit in a re-entry capable space shuttle. They were attempting to retrofit a laser targeting system to an otherwise redundant satellite as a precaution. A heliospheric warning came in. If it was as bad as the warning suggested, they would be caught right in the middle of it. Keith Ford's face appeared in a window of Pilgrim's computer screen. Fresh back from Cambridge with information that would possibly help ride out the storm from the moon.

"Commander. The ionic readings are rising fast. At this rate they'll be off the scale again in about 15 minutes."

"Ok Keith, I'll be right there."

Commander Pilgrim pushed herself away from her desk in her chair and headed for the double sliding doors of her office. She stopped before she got there and grabbed her coffee from the desk where she had been sitting. Reaching the control room armed with her caffeine fix, she took stock of the situation.

"I'm glad your back in control of things Colonel Ford," she shouted across the chaotic room.

Keith Ford straightened up from where he was standing, hunched over a terminal and its operator trying to insist she do her task the way he had ordered her to.

"Now do it," he said forcefully and stepped off over to Commander Pilgrim's position.

There was an empty space in the middle of the room where the command staff usually stood when in charge. There was nothing official about the position. Nothing painted on the floor and no chairs for them to sit in. Yet for some reason, some unwritten protocol, something that everyone just instinctively knew, that this is where the commander stands when she's in command. And when she wasn't, no-one dared to stand in that spot.

"From there the shuttle crew are heading they should be largely shielded behind the earth when the solar winds blow though," said Ford.

Pilgrim nodded. She could see that from the display above.

"Of course they're still not quite behind the umbra so they're going to cop a slight hammering. Nothing they can't cope with. Not like Heathrow air traffic. They had particular trouble in the last wave and they're particularly worried this time through."

Ford stepped to a near by, unattended terminal and punched up some graphics on one of the overhead displays. "They've got all their out bound traffic grounded but there's still four planes to come in. Two wide bodies. a Triple seven and a DC ten cargo. About fifteen hundred souls in the air."

"How are our own comms faring?" asked Commander Pilgrim.

"So far so good. We should have no problems with VLF to the sky-diver fleet but when they're in the air..." Ford shrugged. "Oh I mean we're not likely to lose contact with anything for long. But if we do lose contact, it's bound to be at just the wrong time."

"Hmmm," said Commander Pilgrim. She stood, legs spread slightly apart with arms folded in a dominant posture. She considered the situation as she took in the implications for Heathrow. "Now listen up everyone. This is just the kind of time when we're likely to see a UFO. And I want everyone on their toes. Even if something's insignificant I want you to treat it with close scrutiny. And we may lose contact for a while so I want everyone to inform their teams that they may have to adapt really quickly. And autonomously. We know the game plan so just stick with it. Oh and another thing."

Just then the AI's annunciator rang though the control room.

"Red Alert. Red Alert. Incoming UFO. Possible sighting. three nineteen point seven six seven by four eight five. Green."

"Whattid I tell ya," said Pilgrim to Ford.

"New sighting," came the AI's artificial voice again. "Possible sighting. Four forty five point six five seven by four nine four. Green."

"What?" said Ford in an alarmed voice just loud enough so that only the commander could hear it.

"Yea that's a bit weird Keith isn't it. With a trajectory like that it's either going to sling shot way out to space or it's moving so slow it'll be here in time for Christmas."

"New sighting. Possible Sighting. Four forty seven point six five eight by four nine five Green. New sighting. Possible sighting. Four Seventy three point six five seven by four nine four. Green. New sighting. Possible..."

"Shut that bloody thing up!" shouted Pilgrim.

Random sightings began to appear beyond the ring. An imaginary sphere drawn half way between the Earth's and Mars's orbit around the sun. Surveyed by satellite probes circulating as far out as Mar's orbit.

"That's gotta be some kind of ionization artifact," said Ford.

"Don't count on it," said Pilgrim. If there's one thing General Straker taught me it's to never underestimate the Aliens.

"We're counting twenty five possible sightings and rising," shouted someone in the tracking team.

"Find out which probes are reporting them," shouted Keith ford back at him.

The operator returned to his consol for a time. "I've got 'em. Looks like they might be bogus after all. All the reports are coming in from just these twelve satellites here." He pointed to a display on his own monitor.

"Well give us all a look," shouted Pilgrim.

"Yes sir. Sorry sir." The operator punched up the display on the wall full of projection monitors.

"Yea look at that," said Ford. "We've got all those sightings out at around four four five and the probes reporting them are two entire sectors away. None of the probes pointing out at the four forties are picking up anything. And all the reports are coming in from just a hand full of probes here." Keith pointed to the group of probes. With the resolution showing all probes, the cluster was easily discernable.

"Sir!" shouted the operator at the tracking team's console. "We just got a report of a successful detonation of one of the UFOs from the AI."

"What?" shouted Ford as he headed off in the operator's direction.

"Yes sir. The AI thinks a UFO has been intercepted." The operator barely had time to look back at his display. "Oh and another one. And another. Oh hell, now more Probes are reporting more UFOs. And more detonations." As Ford approached him he pointed out some more probes reporting UFOs. "Sir. These probes aren't connected with the other ones. "

Ford stepped back and looked at the probe display still visible on one of the main screens. He rushed up to it and pointed at sections of the display shouting. "Look you can see it's like a wave sweeping though. The ones on the trailing edge are now reporting no contacts. The AI only knows that if a UFO disappears it must have been hit so it's reporting detonations." He turned his attention to the room in general. "Do we have any visual confirmation?"

There was a scurry in the room and then a unanimous conclusion. "No sir."

Ford shrugged his shoulders at Pilgrim. "I know. Never underestimate the Aliens."

The bogus sightings went on for hours. The board lighting up with a UFO and then the AI reporting a successful intercept. No interceptors had been launched. Some of the moon base channels had been lost temporarily during that time but there was always plenty of microwave bearers open to cope. There wasn't enough resources to cope investigation all the sightings and it was more dangerous than usual to launch any interceptors unless it was absolutely necessary. Sightings swept past earth and vanished again. One had crept up so fast and was on such a plausible trajectory that a sky diver was launched but it too vanished. At various times, members of the command room staff had commented that they couldn't cope with discerning any useful information. Then through the chaos came four possible tracks. Four possible sightings that didn't behave quite as randomly as the others. Bogus tracks that were now numbering in their thousands.

"Shall we launch some interceptors?" asked the strategy's operator.

At first Pilgrim resisted. She didn't want to jeopardize the interceptor crews. But Straker's words kept ringing in her ears and these four tracks seemed more stable than the rest. Although they too had disappeared from time to time. But a path could be tracked all the way back to earth.

"Ok launch four interceptors. But only four. And alert the Shuttle crew. Get them back on terra firma just in case. Let's get those suckers. If they exist."

Colonel Ford took over now. "OK get a VLF flash out to the sky divers. Better send the trajectories out in VLF just in case. make sure they understand that we don't know if they're for real or not. Resend the data on the normal comms channels when they're in the air but they might not get it so broadcast the basic information in the VLF and make each sky diver crew responsible for making the decision to attack. What's moon base up to people?."

One of the comms operators shouted. "Moon base is go. Interceptors away in two minutes."

"Why two minutes?" asked Ford.

"There was no advance with this one, sir. They have to do a quick calc of the trajectory."

Ford nodded. "Ok listen up everyone. Tell all your teams to stay on the ball. These may or may not be hoaxes but there's another danger out there this time. If we lose comms at the wrong time we could be in trouble."

"Sir!" shouted the head of comms.

"What is it?" shouted Ford.

"Sir. We've just got a report there's been crash at Heathrow."

Ford prompted him to continue then pointed to the main screen.

"There's nothing much to show at the moment. Just a report that a... Just a minute." He put his hand to his ear piece. "It's a cargo, sir. Another DC ten. Oh hell. It seems it's collided with a.. Oh Shit. I'm sorry sir. It sounds like he got the wrong runway or something. Collided with a wide body taxiing off the end of the runway or something. It's bad. Really bad. Sounds like they got the marks mixed up some how.. Computer markers went down and they had to go to manual. They got it screwed up and they got the radio message wrong... Oh hell it sounds a real mess. "

"Okay people, listen up." said Commander Pilgrim. "This is what happens when comms get disrupted. I don't want that to happen to us. We have to fly in the worst of it so everyone.. Stay with it."

The interceptors were launched and almost immediately they experienced brief but none the less worrying losses of communications. Normally the flight data was updated courtesy of moon base but the pilots had to use their discretion in this case. For the most part moon base's data was available too them but they knew they couldn't rely on them. The further they pulled away from the moon the more noise crept into the comms systems. The lead interceptor pilot headed up his own tracking system and tried to get a local lock on the bogus UFOs but there was nothing. They either weren't close enough or there were no UFOs there in the first place. None of them knew. The gunners deployed their weapons arrays early in the hope that the sensitive targeting scanners could help. There was a lot of noise and what at first appeared as targets turned out to be glitches.

"This is like trying to look for a marble in a ball bearing factory," commented one of the gunners.

Even comms between interceptors was becoming intermittent as they spread out to target their own particular bogeys.

"I've got one," came a voice from one of the interceptors.

"Yup So have I," came another voice.

Two of the interceptors began the job of zeroing in on their targets. Coming about to find the optimum attack approach.

"I can't find a track at all." came a voice from the third interceptor. "There's nothing."

"I thought I had a track," said the pilot of interceptor four. "It must be all this ionization."

The positions I get, when I get them, are way outta wack. One minute they're on one heading, the next time I see it it's somewhere else. And I know nothing can move like that. I'm gonna follow it in on some kind of average track but that's all I can do."

The first and second interceptors found their targets easily. Two UFOs destroyed. The fourth interceptor had plenty of time to swing around and try to follow its imaginary foe in on its way to Earth. Interceptor three did roughly the same thing. Only there was not even a hint of a UFO to track. The pilot just took a guess based on the best trajectory his onboard AI could provide.

"I've never known a stream of random Ionization to plot a course to Earth like that," said the gunner in interceptor four to the pilot. "There must be a UFO in there somewhere. No natural phenomenon could cause that could it. See if you can accelerate a little." The gunner thought for a moment. "How about a slight detour. If you bring us round and out from behind the theoretical position. Then I can find out where the head is and take some pot shots. There's nothing much else to do."

The pilot agreed and side stepped the flight path slightly. Continuing to move to the left until the gunner said. "This should be far enough. Now let me take a look." He swung his targeting system round to let it listen for any tell tale signs of a UFO. A light on the pilot's communications panel showed that interceptor three was transmitting something but the signal was too distorted for any sense to be made of it. The gunner was concentrating on his targeting system and didn't notice any indication on his own panel. The light illuminated again but still no audio or data. He punched at some buttons on the communications panel and it's small LCD display read. "Diagnostic mode IC3." A list scrolled up the screen too fast for the pilot to read it. A cursor blinked for a moment then it displayed the words. "Diagnostics mode complete. 80% interference. Signal unrecoverable errors." The pilot knew that the electrical and magnetic interference from the solar storm was at about the same intensity as interceptor three's transmitter. Storm spikes were so frequent that they were obscuring any chance of a reliable transmission.

"I think I've found it!" shouted the gunner. "See if you can accelerate just a little more."

The pilot hit the boosters and they were pushed back in their seats slightly.

"Just a little further," said the gunner. "Look I'm not entirely sure but there's some very alien looking signs ahead and they seem to be with us. Either it's ghosting or there's a UFO there. I'm gonna give it a shot."

The gunner fired. A white streak shot out from the weapons array ring underneath the space craft. There was no explosion. No tell tale signs of a damaged UFO. The Gunner fired again. Still no signs. There was another white flash.

"Was that you?" shouted the pilot.

"Nope," shouted the gunner.

There was another flash. This time brighter. Then in unison the pilot and gunner said.

"Shit! A UFO." They were surprised that they had actually been tracking a real UFO.

"They must be as blind as we are," said the Pilot.

"Yea but we've got one thing they haven't," said the gunner. "A massive continuous spread."

The gunner fired continuously with an angled spread of plasma beams. There was a red glow ahead of them and to the right. The pilot could see it with his own eyes. Suddenly the radar began to show a target. The UFO fired again but it was too late. The gunner had already locked on and delivered the fatal blow. The explosion was easily visible. It lit up the inside of

the cockpit and reflected from the pilot's helmet. The pilot rased his arm to instinctively cover his face. As if it would protect him from the debris.

"Man that was close." he said. "Nice shooting. We must have been almost on top of it all the way."

"It's a good thing they didn't see us coming," said the gunner. "We would have been toast by now. You'd think with all their sophistication to travel across the galaxy from where ever they come from, they'd be able to fare better than that."

CHAPTER 4:

Straker was rubbing his chin. Listening to Adrianna's story intently.

"And when interceptor four made it back to moon base," said Commander Pilgrim. "They saw the crews from one and two but no one knew what happened to three."

"Yes I remember the report," said General Straker.

"Well we ran the transmission logs through a computer analysis. We picked up some information but nothing terribly conclusive. Tracking data suggested an object every now and then but generally they picked up nothing. There was an energy spike detected at the very end of the last transmission. All indications are that it was hit by a UFO. Where as with interceptor four, they could just see the UFO but the UFO was blind. We think that maybe the opposite was true of interceptor three. But like I said, we could extrapolate nothing conclusive from the sketchy data we recovered. What we think was happening was that the UFOs were using the cover of the solar storm to try to get some UFOs into the Earth. They were using their camouflaging devices for as long as possible and when they weren't we'd get a track. But we couldn't tell if it was a ghost image or what it was because of the all the false signals we were getting. When we ran everything through and analysed it, a process that took another six months, we found that the false triggers were being generated for all sorts of reasons. Some times a probe would pick up a signal that was a tell tale sign of alien communications. Other times it would be a simple voltage spike. Either way the AIs, and the other secondary computer systems would tell us there was a UFO there. The storm played havoc with our systems but at the end of the day it was a software problem that let us down."

"So let me cut to the chase here for a minute, " Straker butted in. "What you're leading up to is that you now think the Aliens might have been able to sneak in more UFOs that just those four."

"That's about it. We don't know what happened to the third UFO. It might have actually made it into the atmosphere. We assumed that it was destroyed because we never detected it entering but in hind sight."

"So why now?" said Straker. "Why did they wait till now to start crawling out of the wood work?"

"Well that's just it Ed. They probably didn't. Of course they had to lie low for a while. For six months after that incident, and till the solar storms had peaked and receded, we remained on red alert status."

"Yes I know. it was reflected in the budget report. That's one of the hard things I've been trying to sell in this review. But I still don't see why they've waited nearly four years to put in an appearance."

"Well suppose they did get some UFOs in. They would have had to lay low for a while to avoid immediate detection. But in the last two years we've been getting some strange sightings. Some of them have looked like they've come in from space but we can't find the loop holes they're getting in through. What's more concerning is that we detect them on the way out more than the way in. It all points to the fact that they've got a base full of UFOs here on Earth somewhere."

"Yesss," said Straker. "Or maybe more than one base? So what are you doing about it commander?"

"Well sir." Suddenly there was a beeping from Pilgrim's inside blazer pocket.

"My phone," said Pilgrim. She answered it. "Yes. Ok I See. Ok I'll be right there." She

hung up.

"I hope that's a secure line?" said Straker.

"Yes it was. It's one of our new disguised communications. Where better to hide your radio than in a cell phone?" she smiled a cheeky grin. Straker was impressed. He had passed over the report for new personal communications equipment. He had not given it much thought but he realized what the appropriations were for now.

"Anyway, General. I have to get back. We've found another UFO. Only we've got a good predictive lock on this one. We've got some new software in place that might help us manage this one with any luck. If I hurry I can be back at base in time to see it."

"Mind if I tag along, commander?"

"Of course not General. You're welcome any time, of course."

"Good. I'll meet you back there. I'll take my own car if you don't mind." He nodded toward the place where his legs had once been, strapped into his electric wheel chair as he was. A small LCD panel unfurled from the arm rest of his chair. Adrianna didn't see him press anything to activate it but there had been some remarkable advances in bio-electronics and prosthetics.

* * *

Commander Adrianna Pilgrim waited at the top of the stairs to the mezzanine level of the Straker Harlington studio offices. She saw him arrive, his high-tech wheel chair whizzing through the foyer like a go-kart. It reached the bottom of the stairs and Pilgrim realized she would have to help him in some way. But she couldn't work out why he hadn't taken the elevator instead. Then she saw two sets of triaxled wheels extend forward and aft from the wheel chair base. The first one hit the first step and began to climb. As it did so the rear mechanism extended downwards pushing the wheel chair level. Pilgrim was at his side and smiling. As the rear triaxle mounted the first step Straker began to extend his position to full standing height to look her squarely in the eyes. He grabbed the hand rail with his right hand and looked straight ahead as if he was walking normally up the stairs, guiding himself with the hand rail, a nonchalant expression on his face. Half way up the stair case he turned back to Pilgrim who was still standing, watching him ascend.

"Well, are you coming Commander?"

She shook her head and put her self in motion with a smile. She caught up with him and said: "That chair get's better every time I see it."

"I guess having access to SHADO's R&D teams is not without benefit."

They reached the top of the stairs and the triaxles folded neatly back. Pilgrim could see the tiny array of sensors mounted next to them. Sensors that allowed the onboard computers in Straker's chair to sense the terrain. They entered the outer office. There was no-one there. Straker expected to see Miss Ealand. He always did when ever he visited SHADO HQ. But Miss Ealand migrated with him to his new surroundings. Pilgrim pressed a sequence on her cell phone and the doors to the office opened. She ushered Straker through and then pressed her cell phone again closing the doors behind her.

"Would you be so kind to do the honors, sir." She said handing Straker the cigarette case.

Straker opened it and said. "Straker. Edward E."

The room responded: "Voice print identification positive."

The room jerked as it began to submerge beneath the building. The view from the window giving way to a view of concrete. Motor noise becoming louder as the room reached the sub, sub basement level. Another small jerk and the room settled. The doors opened and a guard

checked the room.

"Good Afternoon Commander. Good afternoon General," said the guard as he stood back to allow them to pass.

Pilgrim and Straker nodded to the guard as they made straight for the command centre. Colonel Ford greeted them as they entered.

"The new software's holding up. They've vanished six times and each time we've been able to pick them up."

"And good afternoon to you, too, Ford," said Straker.

"Sorry, Sir. Good afternoon General. It's good to see you again, sir."

"Carry on Ford. I'm intrigued by this new software of yours that can do what gut feeling can't."

"Uh, yes sir. Actually we've got some new tracking experiments in place too which have played an important roll in tracking the UFO. It needs work but it's been most encouraging so far."

They walked to the spot on the control room floor where the command staff always stood. Pilgrim pointed to a three dimensional computer rendering of the globe displayed on one of the large projections screens. She didn't have to ask.

"That's the new display for the satellites fitted with the new WBDDs."

"What?" said Straker. Pilgrim just nodded knowingly.

"Sorry, sir. Wake Barometric Depression Detectors. They detect the wake vortex of objects flying through the atmosphere."

"Latest generation," said Pilgrim triumphantly. "It's like the method that Paul Foster and his team discovered, only these are special systems and this new generation is designed specifically to see the wake vortices of UFOs. This is the first time I've seen the display for them."

"The display is a composite," said Ford. "We're trying to do that a lot these days. It's not the view from just one satellite, though. We can display one at a time,. This is made up from scans from all of the satellites at once. We can generate a three dimensional map that gives us unprecedented information about the planet and what's floating about it. We can extrapolate it to a vertical plane or we can..."

"Yes, yes, I get the picture, Ford. Very impressive. Good to see our tax payer dollars hard at work. So where's this UFO?" said Straker abruptly

"Well it's currently disappeared at the moment but we've got it out over the top of South America at the moment, sir."

Ford pointed to a less impressive map with a faint, dotted yellow line showing the UFO's path heading east, just north of Columbia.

"It's currently invisible but that is the track our sensors give it. The system's been ninety percent accurate so far. It would have been one hundred percent but we had a glitch with one of the sats."

"Does it know you can track it like this?" asked Straker.

"It's very unlikely. Unless the aliens have a spy or they've been able to work out we're up to something whilst retrofitting the satellites they're completely in the dark."

"Well don't let on, Colonel. Don't let them know that we know by making an obvious strike."

"No sir. Commander Pilgrim has already given those orders. Otherwise we could have shot it down an hour ago. That dot flashing just behind it is Sky-One."

"So what now?" said Straker to Pilgrim. "Are you just going to let it get away?"

"Yes. That's precisely what we're going to do," said Commander Pilgrim.

Straker was slightly puzzled.

"I thought you might have waited for an opportunity to have it accidentally meet with Sky one or something. So you can shoot it down."

"Not today, General. This is one we want to get away. We have a theory of how they're duping us. We're just waiting for...."

The Artificial intelligence system broke in.

"Red Alert. Red Alert. Incoming UFO. predicted trajectory termination, western Pacific Rim."

"And there it is now, right on cue," said Pilgrim with a smile.

Straker thought she had gone nuts. He couldn't understand what she was expecting to achieve.

"General. They've already got what they wanted. Shooting them down isn't going to change that. But if my guess is correct, we're about to see something we've never seen before." She turned to Ford. "Are the interceptors scrambled?"

"Yes sir," said Ford. "They've made a valiant attack but have failed to hit the target. As you ordered."

"Okay then, get as best a visual on that incoming UFO as possible. Where's Sky Two?"

Another screen displayed Sky Two's position for the first time.

"There it is there sir," said Ford. "On attack vector for the incoming UFO. Sky One is breaking and taking a heading north."

They watched in silence as the dot representing Sky One moved away whilst the other three dots moved to merge. Pilgrim whispered to Straker: "Sky Two won't attack. It just has to look like it's out to attack the incoming UFO. The outgoing one doesn't know we can see it."

"I still don't know what you're trying to achieve commander?" said Straker.

"You'll see in a minute. If my guess is right, that is."

They watched on as the dot's merged closer. Suddenly the incoming UFO, which was now well within the atmosphere seemed to see Sky Two. It began to change course, as if it was turning to flee. It began to turn right into the flight path of the outgoing UFO.

"Zoom in on that track, please someone," said Pilgrim.

The tracking controller displayed the area in more detail so that the UFO's paths could be more clearly seen.

"Are they both out of visual range of Sky Two?" asked Pilgrim.

"The incoming was only in visual range for a short time at the bottom of the arc. It should be well out of visual range now. And just about out of tracking range as well," said Ford.

Pilgrim nodded. "Any time now. Zoom in again on the two UFOs."

The two UFOs flight paths almost merged. Suddenly the incoming UFO's signature on the screen disappeared and at the same time the dot which represented the outgoing UFO changed colour to blue.

"You see that, General?" asked Pilgrim.

"Yes I see it but I don't get what it proves."

Pilgrim was all smiles. Pleased with her logical deduction. "You see it destroyed the incoming UFO and then took its place."

Straker was still shaking his head.

"General, Imagine that we didn't have this adapted technology. Then we wouldn't be able

to see the outgoing UFO at all." She shouted to the tracking officer. "Can you play that back without the special tracking please, for General Straker's benefit, please."

The screen flickered for a moment and went back to the beginning. Only there was no sign of the outgoing UFO. The incoming one made it to the Earth's atmosphere and came within visual range of Sky Two. It altered course as soon as it saw Sky Two and tried to flee out to space. It reached an altitude beyond Sky Two's envelope and kept on going. The display froze.

"Don't you get it, General? Until now we've not been able to see the outgoing UFO so it's looked like a UFO has attempted to enter Earth's atmosphere but has turned around and fled back to space. When in fact the aliens have been sacrificing one UFO in order to make us think that. When all this time they've been replacing it with the outgoing one. Which carries it's cargo out and back to wherever it is they live. Any minute it'll turn its camouflage devices on again and avoid the interceptors for a short time. Well, not this time."

She nodded at Ford.

"Interceptors, you are go for attack," said Ford to his staff.

"You see, General, We just happened to have a few interceptors on a training run out there who will accidentally come across the UFO and destroy it. "

"How often has this happened I wonder?" asked General Straker.

"This will be the thirteenth time they've practised this identical manoeuvre since late two thousand and one."

"Looks like thirteen is their unlucky number today," said Straker. "You're very cunning. I was right to recommend you for this job. You think like, well you think like. . ."

"An Alien?" Smiled Pilgrim.

"Well I was actually going to say 'You think like me'."

CHAPTER 5:

Colonel Bjorn Froggleberg had joined Ford, Pilgrim and Straker in Pilgrim's office.

"So what now commander?" asked Straker.

"Well it's obviously time for a little weeding I think. It proves that there are UFOs hiding out down here. It means they've found a way to stop their spacecraft disintegrating in the atmosphere."

"But how many are there?" asked Froggleberg.

"More to the point," said Straker. "Where are they?"

"Yes that is the question isn't it," said Pilgrim. "If I was an alien, where would I hide a bunch of my space ships?"

"If you were an alien, Commander," said Straker. "You'd probably have them stashed all over the planet by now. You wouldn't put all your eggs in one basket. Not only that but if you were a really smart alien you'd probably try and move them around from time to time. "

"Water would seem the logical place," said Ford. "They've been known to use water as cover in the past."

"But the earth's surface is seventy percent water," countered Froggleberg. "Well never find them if they're stowed away under the ocean."

Pilgrim pushed some buttons on her terminal and a face appeared. "Get me Colonel Alex Cavaye at the Woomera research facility in Australia please."

Ford, Froggleberg and Straker waited on Pilgrim patiently whilst in turn Adrianna Pilgrim waited on her technology patiently. She gestured to Froggleberg to switch on the wall display conference monitor. He was the closest. It flicked on, instantly displaying the SHADO logo. They waited for what seemed like ages. Froggleberg made a quip to Ford about how useful the alien camouflage technology would be to a bank robber. Pilgrim didn't hear quite what was said but she looked up to see General Straker having a laugh along with them. She smiled. Finally a dishevelled face appeared on the monitor. And on the conference monitor. Alex Cavaye was still fighting with his dressing gown.

"Oh sorry. Did I get you out of bed, Colonel?" said Pilgrim.

"Well yea as it happens," said Cavaye "What time is it? Oh never mind, it's like morning or something here. What's so important that you need me for Commander?" He had a cheeky smile on his face.

"Colonel I need to know what you think the crush depth of a UFO might be."

"Mmmm. I think it's about three hundred metres. I'm not sure that there's been any definitive tests though. Just hold on a second and I'll see if I can locate the relevant article in the computer."

"I may be just the security chief," said Froggleberg. "But I'm curious as to why we need to know the crush depth?"

"That's easy Colonel," said Straker triumphantly. "If we can find out the deepest they can survive at, we can eliminate as much ocean as possible that we have to search."

"But if we can see them now, why don't we just wait till they show up and then take them out one by one." continued Froggleberg.

Pilgrim cut in while she waited on Cavaye, "Because my dear Bjorn, as soon as they realized that we can see through their camouflage they'll go to ground and we'll never find 'em."

Colonel Ford had been patiently pondering the problem. "Of course there might be

another way." Suddenly all eyes were upon him. "Err well perhaps if we put together a statistical analysis of all the patterns we know over the past four years we might be able to narrow the search."

"But I thought we couldn't really track them until recently?" said Frogleberg.

"This is true," said Ford. "To a large extent anyway. Although we have had a few month's experimental data to play with. None of it reliable but better than trying to look under every rock on the planet. But I'm sure we could extrapolate some data that would at least narrow the search."

"Do it," said Pilgrim. "That's a good idea, Keith. Make it happen." She waved him off whilst she watched the face of Alex Cavaye concentrating on his computer screen.

Ford left the room leaving Frogleberg uneasy with General Straker. Fortunately Cavaye returned his attention to Commander Pilgrim.

"Here it is. Says three hundred and fifty metres. Actually it says the maximum depth before structural damage would probably be three hundred to three hundred and fifty metres. Based on structural analysis of various load bearing materials within the UFO and the skin integrity. It suggests however, that the UFO could probably survive a greater depth, perhaps up to a kilometre but it would be damaged. What the research seemed to be saying is that the skin and structural integrity would begin to buckle after three hundred and fifty metres. Progressive damage would occur causing. . ."

"Thanks Alex. That's all we needed to know," said Pilgrim. "You can get back to your sleep now. Oh one thing before you go. Think of any good places to hide a UFO?"

"Hmm. I don't know commander. How about in amongst a pile of other UFOs?"

Pilgrim smiled. "Thanks Colonel. Good night. Sweet dreams."

"Well that excludes major ocean trenches," said Straker sarcastically. "Now there's only the other ninety five percent of Earth to worry about."

"Well where would you suggest we start then General?" asked Pilgrim.

"No it's your show Commander. I'm just along for the ride remember." There was silence in the room. No-one knew quite what to say. Apart from lifting every boulder capable of concealing a UFO on the planet, there wasn't much else they could do. Pilgrim's eyes returned to Straker.

"All you can really do Commander is wait till Ford put's together some kind of statistical model and take it from there."

Commander Pilgrim nodded.

"So aren't you going to offer me lunch, commander?" said Straker with a smile.

CHAPTER 6:

Frogleberg, Pilgrim and Straker sat in the empty mess hall. Frogleberg, who had arrived later, had already had lunch. However he had a reputation of being a consummate chef so it was unanimously decided he would whip them up some food. It was nearing five o'clock in the afternoon and Adrianna was feeling more than just a little peckish. The last time she had eaten was at seven AM.

"This is more like dinner than lunch," said Frogleberg.

"No, dinner is that meal you skip right before bed time," said Pilgrim.

Straker laughed as he consumed his meal. "This is good," he said. Frogleberg smiled. "No I mean this is really good. Any time you wanna come work for me, let me know. I could use a guy with your skills."

Pilgrim looked up from where she was concentrating stuffing her face with food.

"Don't worry Commander, I'm not about to poach your security officer."

They had finished their meal and were relaxing with coffee. Adrianna Pilgrim was almost asleep. This was the most relaxed Frogleberg had ever been in Straker's company. He had always held Straker in awe since he was an intern with SHADO fifteen years before. And although Frogleberg had worked his way up to very near the top of the chain of command, he felt like an intern all over again in Straker's company. But this was somehow different. Straker seemed more relaxed. Perhaps because he no longer had the weight of the world resting on his shoulders. But he knew Straker better than that. Straker would have never given up the job if he had any other choice and he still took a keen interest. After all, SHADO was Straker's brain child. He built the organization from the ground up, defined its operating principals and still had an uncanny ability to second guess the aliens. To step inside SHADO was to step inside the mind of Edward Straker.

"Tired commander?" said Straker noticing Adrianna dozing off in her chair.

She awoke with a start. "No not at all."

Frogleberg let out a slight laugh and put his hand over his mouth. Straker smiled at him. Pilgrim sipped at her coffee some more and tried to regain her alertness. She just managed to get a second wind when Colonel Ford entered the mess hall.

"What have you got for us, Keith?" said Frogleberg.

"We have a preliminary analysis but detailed predictive information is a good twelve hours away. We may as well all go home and come back in the morning."

"Well just give us what you have, Keith," said Straker

"Well It's hard to know where to begin with this information. It basically shows they could be hitting anywhere. And everywhere for that matter. Anywhere from the southern coast and west coast of the United States. The top end of Canada. Their favourite hiding places in Brazil and South America in general. We've got attempted entries over the North Sea. That puts Scotland in the frame. Hell, might as well say all the British Isles and half of Europe. We've got polar attempts but we're not so sure about them. Although the poles would be a good place to hide a UFO, they've always tried that approach."

"Yes," said Straker. "We lost 5 good men back in nineteen eighty five. And 3 civilian scientists on an Antarctic expedition. The poles were one of the hardest leaks to plug. But you'd remember that wouldn't you, Ford?"

"Yes sir. I do. But on the other hand this could also raise the question of New Zealand, Tasmania or even southern mainland Australia."

"If only we knew why they were coming," said Frogleberg. "If only we knew what they wanted."

"Ah, yes," said Straker. "That is the central question isn't it. Why do they do the seemingly illogical things they do. On one hand they seem to be trying to harvest body parts. On the other they seem to be hell bent on trying to destroy their only source. There have been too many strange things over the years that don't add up. And the few times we've come face to face with them, they almost seem friendly. Some times they appear to be simply humans who have been re-programmed somehow. Other times they simply have human body parts. Everything points to a dieing race. We found initial evidence of chemical sterility but then that could have been inflicted upon the subjects like desexing an animal. We just don't know. But when I look round at what we've done to our own little island in space, it's hard to justify why we bother. If, after all this, we end up going down that same path, we may as well have invited the aliens to do what they will."

"Don't think like that Ed," said Adrianna showing genuine concern for Straker's mood. "It's not worth it. We'll work this thing out some day I'm sure."

"Hmm. Well I'm sorry Commander. I guess it's just my chemical problem showing through again. What else have you got in that report for us, Keith?"

"Err well not much. Just that as well as the 13 times they've managed to connect and fool us, the times we know about anyway. We also think there have been thirty seven times where we've intercepted UFOs on what could have been attempted connects. These have been low earth orbit intercepts. In fact of all the low Earth orbit intercepts over the past four years, only three are unlikely to have been attempted connects. There have been three hundred and six UFO incidents in the past four years. Not including incidents involving multiple UFOs. The majority of which have never made it anywhere near Earth because of the advanced interceptors and moon bases. I forget the number off hand but only about twenty UFOs have been turned back besides the ones that have appeared to have turned back. It's actually not much to go on really. It's just probabilities."

"So why is it going to take so long to get some answers?" asked Straker.

"Well we don't have much data to go on. One of the maths guys worked out he could put together a special fractal interpolation module in software that could probably make a pretty good guess at the locations but it'll take him a good few hours to write it. And even then we're going to have to narrow it down by hand in the morning. It could take weeks to refine the software to take into account every place on the planet where a UFO could be hidden. And at the end of the day, the information is so sketchy that the amplification factor of the fractal algorithm . . ."

"Yes Yes we get the picture," said Straker. "That's why I hired this guy in the first place. He is nothing if not thorough. Well, I don't know about you people but I'm going home and get some sleep. Shall we meet back here at say, nine tomorrow morning? With your permission of course Commander."

Commander Pilgrim just nodded. Colonel Frogleberg raised his hand like a schoolboy with a question. "What is it Bjorn?" she said.

"Well I'm on afternoon shift. I don't knock off till midnight."

"Yeah, okay, Bjorn. I need you here tomorrow morning. Keith, make sure there's someone who can take over being SO for the night please. And then go home and sleep yourself. Your boy friend will be worrying about you I'm sure. Actually Bjorn and I will work out the SO problem, You just get everything happening so it's on my desk by tomorrow

morning."

"Okay then, Ladies and Gentlemen," said Straker. "I'm off. Don't worry. I know the way out."

Frogleberg and Pilgrim sorted out someone to take the place of Security Officer for the shift and headed out through the secret office entrance. On the way up in the office elevator, Frogleberg had a question.

"Commander. General Straker mentioned something about a chemical problem. What did he mean?"

"And here's me thinking you were the best Security Chief a girl could have. I thought you would have read General Straker's file?"

Frogleberg shook his head. "Well I just assumed... I mean he's the General."

"Know your enemy, Bjorn. Didn't they teach you that in school? General Straker was diagnosed as suffering depression years ago due to a chemical imbalance in his brain."

"Was this after the accident with the giant UFO in the Amazon?"

"No oddly enough. But losing his legs like that didn't help much. No, it turns out he's probably always had that problem but they decided that it was also what gave him his edge in second guessing the aliens. Our psychological profiles were pretty sophisticated even in the nineteen eighties but really, most of it was guess work and down right quackery. Doctor Jackson, remember him?"

"How could I forget?"

"Okay, so he was a bit weird but he did some fairly ground breaking work. But in the end it was civilian medical science that allowed us to make our psychological assessments more efficient. The report concludes that Ed Straker suffers depression. It goes with the territory in this job but the report suggests he was probably born with a chemical imbalance. It was a big thing in the nineties. Doctors use to prescribe drugs like Prozac left right and centre. But when it came down to it, Straker's almost obsessive behaviour, almost paranoid behaviour, gave him an edge. You know I've seen him look at all the evidence of something. All the computer predictions. All the scientist's opinions, all the resources and logic that money could buy. Then he'd say something completely opposite. Contradict the lot of 'em and end up being right on the money. Personally I think one Straker is worth more than all the computers and scientists we've got. It's good to seem him back. Even if he's in an advisory capacity only. I think that job at the Astrophysical commission is driving him nuts. Mind you he's already nuts if you look at that way."

They walked through the foyer being careful what was said. There was no-one around. Everyone had gone home. They stepped out into the car park.

Frogleberg stopped in his tracks. "So why did Straker get bumped upstairs? He could have stayed on as commander surely. He may not have been able to go up to the moon any more but even that could have been sorted out. I mean look at him now. In that high tech wheel chair thing he drives, he's more mobile than a lot of people."

"Well this is now. After the Amazon incident, Ed went right off the edge. He lost two of his best friends and colleagues. Paul Foster and the guy you replaced, Alec Freeman."

"Yes I knew Alec well. He was my direct boss for many years."

"Well Ed went a bit off the rails. I didn't see it but it was amazing from all accounts. He tidied up all the loose ends from the incident. Filed the reports and rubber stamped them from his hospital bed. Then he recovered from his physical injuries as best he could. He even got used to his first wheel chair. And then he promptly flipped out. Ha! You remember that film

about a secret organization that shot down alien space craft? The one we all had a good laugh about? That was Straker's idea. He commissioned it and made it. I guess it took him two years to get through it all. Well I guess he never really recovered. He told me once it was like his life's work vanished with his legs. But he's still got the edge and I like to encourage him to use it whenever possible."

Adrianna reached her Porsche but Bjorn's Lamborghini was parked further down the car park. They stopped for a parting shot.

"You really like Straker don't you?" said Bjorn.

"Oh I have a soft spot for him I guess."

"By the way you talk about him. Sounds like more than a soft spot."

"Well in spite his age he's a very sexy man I guess. All things considered though, he's been through more than the rest of us put together and he's got the wisdom of Solomon. I wish I had known him in his younger days."

They said goodnight to each other and parted company till the following morning. Adrianna pulled out of the car park and headed for home. Not far from the studios she realized she was developing a massive headache. By the time she reached South London she thought it was time to do something about it. She reached over and opened the glove compartment to search for some paracetamol. There was none. Only an empty packet. She closed the glove compartment angrily and decided to stop at the nearest all night chemist. She drove for another ten minutes whilst her headache became worse along with her mood. All she really wanted to do was get home and get some sleep. She had all but given up hope of finding a chemist open at that time when she spotted one on the opposite side of the road, brightly lit up like a beacon. She indicated right and prepared to make a U-turn. She couldn't get a park outside and had to park nearly one hundred metres further up the road. She was very angry by the time she reached the chemist's door, as if the world had conspired against her. The hidden UFO problem against a background of funding problems and operational reviews to justify the money. Very little sleep and now this headache.

She stepped through the door and up to the counter. There were several people ahead of her adding further to her mounting anger. There were two people serving at the counter. A middle aged male pharmacist and the female manager of the shop. Finally she was served by the pharmacist.

"Can I help you?" he said. "Sorry about the wait."

"That's OK," said Adrianna as politely as she could muster. "Could I have a packet of Paracetamol please?"

Just then two men wearing balaclavas burst through the door, one brandishing a shot gun.

Adrianna turned to come face to face with the shot gun carrying man who shouted: "On the floor, bitch!"

Adrianna shrugged her shoulders and said: "Okay, if you say so."

She grabbed the barrel of the gun before the robber realized it and pointed it up at the ceiling. The force of the movement squeezed the gunman's finger in the trigger and the shot gun blasted a hole in the ceiling tiles and blasted a fluoro light fitting out of its retainer. With the surprise the gunman looked up just in time to catch dust from the plaster tile in his eye. At the same time Adrianna rased her other hand and forced the but of the gun into the side of the gunman's neck. causing him to pass out just long enough to fall and smash his head on the end of the counter, breaking his neck with an audible snapping sound. His accomplice tried to make a run for it but Adrianna was caught between him and the exit. With a movement that

was too fast for any of the stunned customers to see she flipped the man using his own momentum and sent him airborne into a display shelf full of haemorrhoid creams and preparations. His face catching on the sharp edges of the metal shelves and knocking several teeth out as well as rendering him unconscious.

"Don't fuck with me when I've got a headache," she said stooping over the limp body. The pharmacist, his female companion and the remaining customers too stunned to do anything, just looked on in amazement. She turned to the pharmacist once more.

"Now as I was saying. Could I have some paracetamol please?"

Still shaking, not knowing whether to be more scared of her than of the robbers she had just dispatched, the pharmacist scooped up an arm full of every brand of paracetamol on the shelf behind him and dumped it on the counter for her.

"Err . Ah. umm. Take them," he said.

Adrianna opened the first box her hand reached. She retrieved the foil blister pack from inside and squeezed out two capsules and looked at them. Then she looked back at the pharmacist.

"Err. You couldn't get me a glass of water could you please?"

Without at word the trembling pharmacist passed his frozen mesmerized female counterpart and stepped to the dispensary behind the counter. Seconds later and after the sound of crashing water, he returned with a paper cup in his shaking hands. Which was only half full of water by the time it reached her. She took it and thanked him. Downing the two paracetamol capsules and handed him back the empty cup. He accepted the cup as if being handed a memento.

"How much do I owe you for these?" she asked as she waved the open packet in front of him.

He waved his hand. "No charge. On the house."

"Thanks," she said and turned to exit the shop. Still sensing the stunned and motionless customers behind her. "I hate violence," she said.

CHAPTER 7:

"I hear you had some problems with the police last night," said Frogleberg as they joined each other in the car park next morning.

"Word travels fast round here, doesn't it," said Commander Pilgrim.

"You killed one of them you know. With your bare hands."

"Yeah, the cops told me." She looked around to see if Straker's car was anywhere near. "I was the one that called the cops actually. I was on my way home and thought I'd better let them know. They wanted to haul me in but I told them to get fucked. I was a little bit annoyed last night for some reason. "

"If that's you being a little bit annoyed I don't wanna meet you in a dark alley when you're pissed," said Frogleberg. "So what did the cops say?"

"Like I said, I told them they could fuck off. I wanted to get some sleep. I told them I was MI5, gave them my ID and told them I'd talk to them when I'd completed my mission. I was on my mobile . I swear I could hear the poor buggers scurrying round to confirm my story before I rang off. Desperately trying to get a trace on my mobile."

"Not much of a chance of that eh! Anyway your story made page three this morning." Frogleberg stopped and opened his brief case pulling out a news paper. He put the brief case between his legs and opened to page three. Pointing out the story before handing it to her. The headline read: "School girl kills armed robber."

"Well that's gotta be a first," she said. "I guess I can't wear that suit again then."

Frogleberg looked her up and down. Making it obvious to her he was taking in the fact she was wearing a black track suit with white side stripes.

"What's it going to be tonight then? Olympic athlete snaps neck of bag snatcher?"

"How did you know I broke his neck?"

"I'm your security officer. I know everything." He paused as he took up his brief case to walk again. "Everything except where you got your dress sense."

"Shut up Frog burger! Lets go toast some UFOs"

* * *

Frogleberg and Pilgrim stopped dead just inside the door to Pilgrim's office. Straker sat in his wheelchair at Pilgrim's desk going through her computer like the Sunday sports pages. Her own chair pushed to one side to make room.

"Make your self at home, General," said Pilgrim.

"Ah! Commander," said Straker looking up from his musing. "Just getting a feel for what it's like to be commander of this outfit these days." He backed away from the desk and rose to standing height. He moved past her chair and symbolically dusted it off.

"I suppose you've been through all my personal files as well," said Pilgrim sarcastically.

"Only the ones I could remember how to crack the codes for," said Straker. "Don't you ever get information fatigue, Commander? I mean with access to this much information instantly,. I can never get use to not having to page someone when I need to know something."

Pilgrim shrugged her shoulders then moved in and repositioned her chair before sitting at her desk.. She pressed a finger on her intercom and said. "Call for Mister Ford. Will Mister Keith Ford please come to the commander's office. Thank you. . . That is all."

Frogleberg had his hand over his mouth trying not to laugh.

"You're in fine form this morning Commander," said Straker. "You must have been breaking your neck to get in here this morning."

"Don't you start," she said looking at Straker sideways.

"You called, Commander?" said Keith Ford as he entered the office with his lap top . He looked around at the three laughing at him. Frogleberg couldn't contain himself any longer. Straker was trying not to laugh but the confusion on Ford's face was the funniest thing he'd seen in a long while.

Finally Ford plucked up the courage to ask. "Err what's the joke?"

"That's why we sent for you Keith," said Pilgrim. "We were hoping you could work it out and get back to us."

The mood was contagious as Keith Ford's mouth widened to a smile. He had no idea what the joke was but moments of fun were rare in SHADO.

"This is almost as bad as when Doctor Jackson got that idea to introduce laughter therapy as stress relief," said Ford.

Straker was banging the side of his wheel chair. He sank to sitting height and was laughing openly. Pointing at Ford to indicated he remembered exactly what he was talking about. Now it was Pilgrim and Frogleberg's turn to wonder what the joke was.

"You tell them, Keith," said Straker.

"Well not much to tell really. Doctor Jackson was always getting some hair brained experimental idea or another. One time, about 20 years ago, he got this idea that we all should laugh more. It was apparently a proven fact that laughter relieves stress. But Doctor Jackson. Well, let me put it this way, Doctor Jackson wasn't exactly known for his comedy routines. He thought having a few people come to work in clown suits might do the trick."

"Yes but we had to draw the line at a clown commanding Moon base," said Straker as he wiped a tear from his eye.

"And did it work?" said Frogleberg, mouth wide open in amazement.

"Oh yeah, it worked all right," said Straker. "Everyone was laughing a Jackson behind his back. Jackson couldn't work out why everyone was so solemn when he talked to them. Everyone was concentrating so hard not to laugh in his face when he passed him in the corridors."

"Hey, do you remember when he said, why isn't everyone laughing more and the whole control room burst into uncontrollable laughter and he didn't realized they were all laughing at him."

Straker pointed again. "Hey do you remember when Gay Ellis failed her psych evaluation because she couldn't keep a straight face all the way through it. Jackson thought she was on drugs. I think the irony was lost on ol' Jackson."

"So what was the joke this time?" asked Ford. "I take it I was the joke for some reason."

No one knew what to say exactly.

"It's a long story, Keith," said Straker. "Commander, you should break a neck more often. It seems to put you in a good mood."

Commander Pilgrim turned colder. Almost turning red. "You know I didn't mean to break that guy's neck. He had a loaded shot gun and he just fell the wrong way."

"Oh that was you, was it?" said Ford.

Frogleberg couldn't contain himself any longer. Doubled over in fits of hysterical laughter. Commander Pilgrim buried her head in her hands on her desk.

"Only I heard something about a school girl killing a thief in a chemist shop on the way in this morning. It all makes sense now."

"Yes, that was me, Keith. What can I say. I'm a fashion victim. Now can we get on with

it?"

Everyone composed themselves. Keith presented his Lap top on the public edge of Pilgrim's desk.

"The bad news is that in despite our best efforts we haven't narrowed it down to a single UFO yet. The good news is that we have a short list of about a thousand places to start looking."

"Hmm," grunted Pilgrim. "I guess a thousand places is better than a billion."

"We've factored out places that have been disturbed in the passed four years. We've narrowed it down to places that would appear along probable trajectories that have seen no human intervention over the passed four years and are big enough to conceal one UFO or more and would offer cover from them been seen entering and exiting. A thousand places is quite small considering the number of variables involved world wide. What we couldn't factor in very well was the oceans. We can send in the Skydivers but it'll be more a case of them getting lucky if they actually spot one."

Pilgrim rubbed her chin whilst Frogleberg and Straker strained for a better look at the data on the lap top. Straker was first to comment.

"Of course if I was an alien, I wouldn't be leaving them in one spot all the time. I'd move them around a bit. Shuffle them to avoid accidentally being discovered."

Frogleberg had a brain storm.

"But they still think we can't see them right?"

"Yeah, my point exactly," said Straker. "You're not just a pretty face Bjorn. In all probability, if we just wait with our eyes open, they'll come to us."

"But what if we started blowing them out of the sky or something," said Pilgrim. "Surely eventually they're going to work out that we can see them. Then the ball game changes yet again."

"Yes this is true Commander," said Straker. "But in all probability they won't have a chance to tell the others and it beats turning over stones hoping to find a UFO."

"With all due respects sir," said Ford. "This is the best we can do with available information. If we knew the size of the problem sooner we might have been able to collect more useful information. but this is the best we've got to work with."

"But you still don't know do you? I've been hunting UFOS all my life . So have you, Ford for that matter. You know that nothing to do with UFOs is easy. You don't even know how many are out there. If we had some idea of how many got through the net in the first place we might be able to come up with some generalized probabilities. For all we know there could only be one or two left. I think all we can do is look and wait."

"Or there could be thousands of them, sir. With all due respects. We've used a fractal analysis model. Something you're not particularly familiar with. It's capable of adding detail to a picture that wasn't recorded within the picture's structure. So once we modelled the reverse trajectories and factored in the places where a UFO could hide, the fractal algorithm went to work and provided us with alternate places. We even factored in every known UFO flight plan and tactic in the data base. It wasn't easy. We're pretty sure this computer model is our best shot."

"Now, now, ladies," said Pilgrim. "Calm down. You're both making sense. So this is what we're going to do. First of all I want everything that has enhanced surveillance capability to watch around probable areas. I want that data, if any added to the data base. I want resources moved into those areas on the ready. However, Keith, I want you to pick some patches of

ocean within those high probability locations where we can send in some skydivers to have a look. I want six on active hunt and the other six ready to deploy as usual. Only move them closer to probable zones. And I want you to look at getting mobiles and ground teams out there. If it spins and moves, I want it toasted. Now, General, you're supposed to be only an observer in this, but do you think you and Ford could possibly work together to come up with the best places and strategies?"

Ford looked at Straker. Straker looked at Ford. They both looked at Pilgrim. Ford nodded. "Yes I think so Commander," said Straker, happy to be involved in the action at any level. "Bjorn. You and I are going to get our hands dirty."

CHAPTER 8:

Frogleberg and Pilgrim sat at their stations on the crew deck of the giant Russian Antinov 124 transport plane, along with 42 SHADO operatives and a cargo bay full of SHADO mobiles and other vehicles. Maintenance and technical crews worked to make sure all the equipment was ready to roll if needed. Sky chariots, weapons and platforms racked and stacked filling the huge capacity of the air craft to the brim. Frogleberg and Pilgrim sat either side of a small table mulling over a pair of large LCD displays. Pilgrim's track suit exchanged for battle fatigues. A technician brought them a light weight head set each. He pointed to a socket on the wall underneath the window next to them.

"That's for the data terminal when it comes up from stores."

Pilgrim nodded at him briefly and returned her concentration to the map on her display board.

"Where did he say?" said Pilgrim.

"He suggested here in California," said Frogleberg pointing at a spot on his map. "But that doesn't make much sense either. I can't see anywhere in CA where you could hide a UFO without it being noticed. Unless Straker is plain wrong and they've just buried them or something."

"That's possible too, but in my experience, Straker's never wrong."

Another technician drew up to them with a small but complete field command terminal. "Excuse me sirs. I need to plug this in."

"Let me help you," said Frogleberg.

The technician handed Frogleberg a large metal military connector. It had a row of metal pins and four fibre optic couplers embedded in it. Frogleberg flipped the protective cover on the socket upwards and rammed the plug home. Twisting it with a very audible snapping sound as it locked into place. Pilgrim shifted their respective displays to make room for the terminal as the technician slid it onto their table. Pilgrim pushed it to the far end and replaced their display boards on it. Frogleberg flipped the terminal on and thanked the technician. The faces of Keith Ford and Ed Straker appeared on the terminal's main monitor. Both of them arguing over something. It was too heated to know what.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please," said Frogleberg.

Both faces looked up.

"Oh you're here at last," said Straker. Then he returned to his argument with Ford.

Pilgrim rubbed her eyes and shook her head. "Nothing like the good ol' days. Eh Bjorn."

"I want you to do me a favour Commander. Always carry a hand gun and don't be afraid to use it."

"What are you talking about Bjorn?"

"I mean so you can shoot me with it if I ever become like that." He pointed at the two on the monitor with his thumb, still arguing as they were.

"So where are we going to land this thing anyway?" said Pilgrim. "I mean we can't exactly put down at LAX and drive the mobiles out, can we? I mean can we? Do you think the Californians would even notice?"

"That's a good question," said Frogleberg. "Ford arranged to slip us in at Edwards air force base, in the desert up top of California. That goes against the predictions slightly but the Mohave desert seems more logical than the burbs north of LA. Edwards is rather conveniently located in the centre of our search area."

"Ooo. We're talking area fifty one country now aren't we.? I dunno about that. They might have an alien space ship hiding there. I might get scared."

Pilgrim looked down at her display then immediately looked up at Frogleberg again. Frogleberg was already looking back at her.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" said Pilgrim.

"Hold on let me just read your mind," said Frogleberg. "Nar surely you wouldn't be thinking there's a hanger out there with a UFO hiding in it."

"Err no not exactly. But you know they've been hiding all kinds a stuff out there for years."

"A secret military installation hiding out there is one thing but a UFO is quite another don't you think? The question is where?"

"Well that certainly is the question indeed. All we really know is that according to Ford's data there should be a UFO out there somewhere. Either in California or Nevada, somewhere."

"Well I think Mexico would be a good place for a UFO. Lots of people to harvest and not too many would notice."

"Hmm," said Pilgrim pondering her electronic maps. "That does make sense in a way, but according to Ford's data the flight paths miss Mexico. Or at least they've climbed to. . . What does Ford refer to it as?" She flipped through her notes on the LCD screen. "Ah yes the South American, Equatorial escape stream."

"How does he come to that conclusion anyway?" said Frogleberg.

"I don't know. Lets put it to him." She turned to the data terminal where Straker's and Ford's faces were no longer to be seen. "Hello? Colonel Ford. General Straker? Are you there?" She looked across at Frogleberg, shrugged and then back at the terminal. "Hello Is anyone there. Can anyone hear me?"

She reached for the call button and pressed it. Their terminal beeped loudly. Still no-one turned up. On the screen they saw a figure move across the camera's field of view in the distance. Again Frogleberg and Pilgrim looked at each other. Eventually a face appeared on the screen. It did not belong to either Ford or Straker. It was one of the technical operatives, a rather geeky looking woman in a lab coat.

"Sorry Commander. There's a spot of bother."

"Lieutenant Starky isn't it?" said Pilgrim.

"Yes sir. We have discovered a small problem. We've lost comms with one of our deep space probes. It detected something and then it just stopped transmitting. Funny. First time it ever spots something and it gives up the ghost." The operative looked over her shoulder as if to take in some new development. "Of course that was all about 12 hours ago. It takes that long for the signals to reach us. Or not to reach us in this case."

"But this kind of thing was to be expected wasn't it? I mean we knew those probes would break down eventually."

"Yes sir but then we got ghost images of the probe's signal. Only they're coming from a different part of space and the frequency has shifted slightly."

"Up or down, Lieutenant?" said Pilgrim.

"Down commander. Like some thing was dragging it away really fast. and it lasted quite a while before we lost it altogether."

"It probably got hit by an asteroid or something. We're not really sure what's out that far, except for what the probes have told us. Which isn't much I have to confess. Where's Colonel Ford?"

"He's running diagnostics at the moment." Starky looked over her shoulder again. There was someone speaking in the background but not audible enough to make out the words. "Sorry Commander. This wouldn't have raised an eyebrow but if it had been hit by an asteroid and knocked off course then that would be it. We think a UFO has nabbed it or something. Wait a minute." She looked behind her again. This time turning to speak to someone who momentarily came into view. "Colonel Ford for you, sir." She ducked out of the way, presumably back to what ever task she was hurrying to in the first place..

"Commander," said Ford as he sat in front of the terminal. "The ghosting has stopped now. We don't have a clue what it was all about but it sure as hell doesn't look like any kind of interference I know of. We've got it recorded of course so we'll be able to check it further but the only natural explanation we can come up with is some strange effect of gravity. Bending multiple paths of the signal or something. Perhaps some kind of quantum event?"

"But we know the aliens use some kind of artificial gravity," said Frogleberg. "Couldn't it have been something..."

"Yes we considered that," broke in Ford. "Especially some of the research that we're doing now on the alien propulsion system. Last report I read seemed to indicate we'd almost cracked how it works. But this could be a natural phenomenon we just don't understand yet. It has possible consequences for our entire 'fast track' project."

"Fast track?" queried Frogleberg of Pilgrim.

"You must of heard of it in the bulletins?" said Pilgrim surprised at Frogleberg's ignorance.

"Hey I'm a security man. I know enough about science to boil an egg."

"It's one of our internal pure research programs," continued Pilgrim. "You know how we were talking about the new gravity sensing technology?"

Frogleberg shook his head.

"Oh come on Bjorn. Don't you even read the updates? Surely you read where we'd worked out a way of sensing gravity using the alien technology?"

"Oh yes yes. I remember something about that. That tiny sensor technology. Looked really neat. Didn't understand it though. It wasn't about security or blowing away aliens so I just passed."

Pilgrim sighed. "OK, so fast track is a project to get some space craft to the outer rim to take gravity measurements of the solar systems. We're not ready to let this leach into mainstream science yet because it'd be too hard to explain. But since it could benefit our future development plans it would be wise to take advantage of any information we can gather about the workings of gravity. Or any other cosmological information we can gather along the way. So we've got all these spacecraft build and ready to send. Only we can't wait to take a low speed efficient path to the outer solar system so we called it fast track. Instead of taking 7 years to cross the distance, our probes will take something a little under 2 years. They're just about ready to go."

"Oh right, I didn't know that. So what this means is that this could have consequences on the whole project."

"Yes," said Ford overhearing the conversation. "But what ever it was has gone now and we'll just have to hope that the lab team can make something of the recording. The launch window for these things is critical to get them out there in that time frame."

"Anyway. We need to get back to the job at hand if you don't mind Ford," said Pilgrim. She turned once again to her electronic map and then back to Ford again. "Ah yes. Ok now we

were considering that perhaps these UFOs were coming up from Mexico. Is there any way you can conceive that the data could have been misconstrued. Some how extrapolated wrong?"

"Let me put it this way Commander. This is the best guess we can make. Using the best mathematical tools we could devise. "

"But, " said Pilgrim and was cut short by Ford.

"Yes I know it's short term and not much more than an educated guess, but I don't think any further study would reveal any more detail. There just wasn't enough data for an accurate picture. It could have been Mexico but it's unlikely given what we know."

"It's what we don't know that worries me," said Frogleberg.

"Bjorn!" said Pilgrim. "What you don't know can't hurt you. That means you must be pretty much invincible by now." She leaned into the camera and thus Ford's field of view. "So you're sticking with Northern California or Nevada are you?"

Ford nodded.

"Ok, Edwards it is then. I don't suppose you have any good leads about where exactly we might find a UFO?"

Ford shook his head. "Nope. not really. Other than the short lists we've issued to all the hunt teams that's it. I mean it wouldn't be so bad if we even knew how many we're looking for."

"Yes, point taken, Colonel."

Frogleberg and Pilgrim studied the merits of locations on their short list for the rest of the flight. They crossed the Atlantic and entered US air space. Their flight path cleared for a direct path to Edwards. However before they got there a message came down that they were to divert to an unlisted, secret military air facility in the desert and be met by Major Springton. Springton was part of a secret arm of US army intelligence. "Super Spooks" as they referred to themselves, men who knew no other kind of operation than a covert one. Men who were trained not to give up secrets ever. Men who didn't exist as far as anyone knew. Behind Major Springton on the tarmac were 35 nondescript soldiers in 15 specially equipped HUMMVs. Springton efficiently explained the range of equipment they had at their disposal in their HUMMVs. He pointed to a covered in variety which concealed a machine gun mounted in the back. He explained that it had infrared and visible laser targeting. His men had similar technology for their rifles and hand guns. He showed them the range of rocket launchers and other refinements. Several portable satellite communications systems, and above all, some of the best soldiers the United States could offer. He was proud of his men and their dedication and training. He was proud of the equipment he was carrying and considered it the finest military equipment available. And as fine and advanced as it was, and as trained for the unexpected as he was, he was not ready for what he saw when the Antinov opened it's belly and the first SHADO mobile trucked out. It was obvious to Frogleberg that this was not within the officer's experience base. He was almost relieved when, after the third mobile rolled onto the tarmac, a more or less ordinary HUMMV followed. But even then he began to notice that it was far from ordinary. Its nose was slightly swept back to make it more aerodynamic. It had a moulded canopy at the rear which swept off the wind shield. Which itself was raked back further than usual. Its cab was completely enclosed. If there were no cracks where the doors sealed, he would have thought it hermetically sealed from the outside world. Frogleberg did all the talking. This was his field of expertise.

"I can't tell you of the weapons systems we have on board. They're classified. We use HUMMVs because they are slightly less conspicuous than the mobiles. The mobiles however

are more suited to our needs. If we need them we'll call them in. Needless to say you and your men aren't seeing what you're now seeing. None of this stuff exists as do we."

This was something the Major understood. Above all he and his men knew how to keep their mouths shut. They were trained to do so. They had seen some strange things in their service and been asked to perform some strange duties, but this was by far the strangest.

"In the end, Major, you're here to lend us credibility that this is just a training exercise. We can't tell you what we're looking for officially but I can tell you this. It's nothing you want to know about."

"Yes sir," said the Major. "I understand, sir." He saluted Colonel Frogleberg.

"Oh, and Major," said Frogleberg.

"Yes sir."

"Lighten up will ya?"

The major radiated his most puzzled expression yet.

"Just chill out, pal. Ok briefing in twenty minutes. If you could get your signalman to talk to our comms guy and get the encryptions on your SINGARS synchronized it would be good. I'll rustle him up and they can have a natter about it. "

"Yes sir. Ah I mean. "

"No problems Major. See ya in twenty."

Frogleberg returned to find Commander Pilgrim in the crew deck still talking to Ford. As he tuned into the conversation, he heard Pilgrim say: "Ok, well put me through to him."

The face on the screen disappeared to be replaced by a new face and a new setting. Frogleberg recognised the setting as the interior of one of the skydivers. Frogleberg recognised the face that appeared in front of this backdrop but couldn't put a name to it. SHADO was such a large organization now that he couldn't remember everyone.

"Hall here," said the voice that belonged to the face.

"Ah Captain Hall, I believe you've found something?" said Pilgrim.

"Eeerr Yup. could be. We've sent out the forward probes and are holding back as ordered Commander."

"Can you give me a picture please, Captain?"

"Sure. Just a tick whilst we patch it through."

Captain Hall turned to one of his officers on the screen. Commander Pilgrim looked over her shoulder and noticed Frogleberg standing there.

"Bjorn, looks like John's found something. Could be nothing but we'll know soon enough."

The picture of the interior of the skydiver disappeared and was replaced by an underwater view.

"Here we go," said Pilgrim as they both focused their attention on the terminal. The view appeared to be looking over a ridge covered with sea vegetation. It was blurry and dark. The probe began to move forward slightly for a better look.

"How are we getting these pictures?" asked Frogleberg.

Pilgrim looked up at him not understanding the question.

"I mean I thought you couldn't transmit this much information when submerged. I thought they had to have an antenna on the surface to get data out. Otherwise it's VLF flash transmissions only."

"Yea they're on the surface. Well at transmission depth most probably. The probes send the data to the skydiver. The sky diver bounces it back up to a satellite. This probe system is all pretty new stuff."

Frogleberg nodded. The picture showed the probe hovering slowly forward over the ridge. It was still dark and darker still into the valley below. And yet there was something bright, almost reflective in the distance. A display opened at the bottom of the picture. A spectrograph display showing various frequency bands from lowest to highest. A range of frequencies often associated with UFO activity. There were ripples of noise right along but just to the right of centre a sharp peak. Not very high but certainly beyond any natural cause.

"OK Captain you may arm the probes. Send the first one in and have the second one ready. Once they spot the probe they'll know they've been found so have the second one ready to attack."

"Yes Commander," came Hall's voice.

"How are these things armed?" said Frogleberg. "Plasma weapons are pretty useless underwater."

"Yeah, they've just got micro torpedoes in them."

The probe continued in but as it became deeper, it also became darker. The bright spot became larger though. It headed straight forward and zeroed in.

"Look at the spectrograph," said Frogleberg.

The peak right or centre was growing larger and wider. Other peaks were beginning to form amongst the background noise. Pilgrim acknowledged him with a nod and a rub of her chin. The bright spot began to look decidedly silver as it loomed large in the view but still no discernable features. The probe grew closer and closer. The silver spot began to show some detail. a flat angular shape. The shape of a panel. The shape of a panel from the side of a UFO.

"That's gotta be," said Pilgrim and then the view went blank.

"We got within about 10 metres of it," said Captain Hall as the view exchanged to the second probe now passing the ridge.

"Ten metres should just about be close enough," said Pilgrim.

"Hmm?" said Frogleberg.

"UFOs are pretty much sitting ducks underwater. A plasma weapon has a range of about ten or fifteen metres at best. I guess the probe was within that range."

The view showed the UFO moving but the probe locked onto its position. As the UFO rose from its hiding place and into more light, it could be clearly seen. The view shuddered. Then it shuddered again.

"A volley of torpedoes I suspect," said Pilgrim.

There was a bright fuzzy flash in the centre of the view. Clouds of dust and debris and then the view swung off course as the probe was hit by the wake of the explosion.

"Yeeass," said Captain Hall.

"Nice shooting captain but don't get too excited. we don't know how many more are out there," said Pilgrim. "Pilgrim out." She pressed a button on the terminal which brought up the SHADO logo. "That was right where Ford predicted it would be. Perhaps they'll be easier to find that we thought?"

"Don't count on it Commander," said Frogleberg. "Our luck is never that good."

"You mean you still believe in luck, Colonel?"

Pilgrim changed into her battle fatigues. A sand and brown coloured outfit for desert operations, capped off with huge army boots and mirror sunglasses. Frogleberg looked on as she capped it off with a machine pistol and an automatic hand gun. She handed Frogleberg a protective vest.

"It's gonna be hot out there with all that gear on," said Frogleberg.

"You know what they say. If you can't stand the heat."

"Heh. That's funny. I was just listening to a song on the radio called that," said Frogleberg scratching his head. "By the kitchen something or other."

"Oh you mean the All Electric Kitchen? Yea I know it. I'm kinda partial to all that cyberpunk techno crap. I don't seem to get much time to listen to music though since I took this job. I tell ya what though Bjorn. I'm gonna go to the first Rave party I can find when we get back."

"I never did ask how you got this job. It seemed like out of nowhere."

"What, are you jealous, Bjorn?"

"No way. I don't want your job. I'm just curious that's all."

"Well I got it because I gave Straker a blow job."

"What?" said Frogleberg with an incredulous grin.

"Yeah, true," nodded Pilgrim. "Ol' Ed hadn't had one for so long and he was so appreciative that he gave me the command of SHADO... Bastard!"

Frogleberg burst out laughing. "For a moment there, just a nano-second I thought you were serious."

Pilgrim smiled. "No. Truth is, I don't really think anyone else was stupid enough to take the job to be honest. Everyone saw what it did to Straker."

"You mean his legs?"

"No I mean the psychological toll it took on him. All that frustration and angst. That's gotta mess with your head."

"So why did you accept?"

"Because I was the best qualified. Or so the tests showed. But I happen to know that Straker massaged the figures. He was looking for someone like himself and instead he found me."

"So do you reckon your going to end up like Straker in fifteen years time?"

"No I don't know. But before I accepted, I figured Straker had already done all the hard work. Suffered all the set backs and made all the sacrifices. And of course we're well advanced now compared to Straker's day. I mean that was real stick and rudder stuff back then. If SHADO were still like that now I'd certainly have my reservations but we've come a long way. We seem to have things under control."

"Well having these UFOs hidden away on Earth doesn't really sound like being under control does it?"

"Actually that's one of the things that Straker was talking about in the pre review meeting. A lot of the contributors are asking questions."

"What questions?" asked Frogleberg concerned that there was a perception of trouble within the organization.

"Oh it's nothing like that. But you know. With the global recession and so forth."

"Oh I get it. Why do we have to fund this few billion here and there when there are no more UFOs?"

"Yeah exactly. We've done such a good job at keeping the UFOs out, until now, that they're wondering why they need to fund us to his level. They don't seem to realize that the threat is still out there. We haven't won this war, we've just postponed it."

"Oh well. There goes Marsbase."

"Not if I can help it, Bjorn. Not if I can help it."

One of the SHADO operatives stepped up to the crew cabin.

"Commander, everyone's assembled and waiting."

"Ok thanks. We'll be right out."

CHAPTER 9:

Pilgrim and Frogleberg stepped from the rear tail gate of the Antinov . They jumped from the unfolded loading ramp to greet the SHADO personnel and super spooks assembled under the shade of the giant Antinov wing, their respective HUMMMVs parked around them. The super spooks lined up in two rows at attention with Major Springton standing out front awaiting orders. Whilst the SHADO team were lazing round. Sitting on flight cases, drinking from bottles of mineral water, joking and laughing, gaining the distinct air of disgust of some of the super spook soldiers. Pilgrim approached them with Frogleberg close behind. She stopped roughly half way between the two groups looking first at Springton's men and then to her own people. She scratched her head and Springton would have been relieved if she had disciplined her troops. However instead she turned back to Springton's troops.

"Chill out guys," she said.

Springton did a visible double take, his mouth agape.

"It's okay, really. Look we don't stand too much on ceremony here, people. We do a pretty unconventional job and we do it in what must seem to you people as pretty unconventional. Just relax and listen. Find somewhere to park yo' asses. Take a load off."

"At ease," shouted Springton. but his men were already at ease. Springton may have been prepared to do battle with Godzilla himself but he wasn't prepared for this. He was slightly at a loss as to what to order his troops to do. He had been ordered to follow Pilgrim's orders. He just wasn't sure what kind of order 'chill out' actually was.

"Err look just sit on the fenders of your HUMMMVs or something guys," said Pilgrim. "Err keep in the shade though. No point in getting all sunburnt on my account. Just relax and I'll explain what's going down here."

The soldiers looked at one another and finally Springton gave in. With a wave of his hand they dispersed and relaxed a little some finding the fenders of the HUMMMVs as Pilgrim had suggested, others drawing up flight cases and what ever they could find to sit on. Some of the SHADO operatives offered them boxes to sit on.

"That's better, " said Pilgrim. "The family that plays together..." She looked round at Frogleberg and Major Springton joined them. "Ok listen up people. Today you might see some things which don't exist. You got that. It's not just in your government's interest to keep this quiet. It's not just in the interests of the safety and well being of the people of the United States. It's in the interests of all the people on the planet. Ladies and gentlemen, we're looking for some weird guys in red suits and I don't mean Santa Claus."

She snapped her fingers and pointed to one of her operatives carrying a hand held plasma rifle. He jumped up and handed it to her. She took it up and aimed it at a near by block of concrete. A slab with steel bars embedded in it, used for tethering small to medium sized air craft in high winds. She nonchalantly aimed as if not to be too fussy and squeezed the trigger. There was a flash of light and an explosion where the concrete use to be. Debris flung in all directions. The sound of smaller pieces falling to the ground quite close. A pinging sound above as a chunk hit the wing of the Antinov. Pilgrim cringed slightly at the thought of even slightly denting the air craft. She distinctly heard one of the super spooks say. "Fuck." In a drawn out tone. She couldn't tell if he was impressed or frightened.

"These red suited guy's carry weapons like that. Their air craft have even more powerful ones. Needless to say if you get hit by one, you're toast. As you can imagine it's pretty dangerous for all concerned to have these guys around. So we have to locate them and get rid

of them. What we want you guys to do is help us find 'em. You know the territory. You know the kinds of places where someone could hide an advanced aircraft. To help us, we've got some equipment to give you. This stuff can help detect the unique signatures of the red suits. And if you do find 'em, we don't want you to do anything unless you really have to. Just call us in and let us deal with 'em. That's our job."

She looked round surveying everyone. "This may well be the weirdest mission you've ever been on guys so be careful. Now, our calculations say they're hiding out somewhere in northern California. But that doesn't make a whole lot of sense. These guys don't like the lime light. We figure they'd be too easily spotted. We could be wrong but we figure that they must be hiding out here somewhere. We've got some satellite intel and there's a couple of places we'd like to check out. In any event, this is as central to the possible search locations as we're gonna get. We don't wanna stand out in a crowd exactly either. Ok we're gonna split up into six teams plus a go team. Our guys will help y'all out with search areas."

She turned to Springton and in a quieter voice said. "Major, I'd like to include five of your best officers to help with the go team."

Springton nodded and selected five people, calling them to his side.

Pilgrim continued addressing the troops. "OK people. If and when you do find something, the go time will go to you. All you have to do is the recon and make sure they don't go anywhere. Whatever you do, don't engage the enemy and for Christ's sake don't let the public see the enemy. If the public look like coming into contact, get them out of there as best you can. Tell them there is a terrorist threat and get them out of there fast. Which isn't actually that far from the truth. That's your first duty should you be confronted with that situation. Ok ladies and gentlemen, lets get this disco happening."

She once again turned to Springton and lowering her voice to a conversational level. "Major, would you care to join us?"

* * *

Frogleberg, Pilgrim and Springton headed over to one of the SHADO mobiles, a dark, army-green, full caterpillar tracked vehicle. There were several different models of SHADO mobile. Some with arrays of rocket launchers and other weapons. Some designed as armoured personnel carriers. But this particular SHADO mobile was fitted with a mobile command centre inside and tracking array on top, only lightly armed for its own defence. In the cramped rear section of the mobile were four seats mounted to the floor. Either side was a wall of instruments and displays. There were already two tracking officers seated and monitoring for UFO life signs. There was just enough room for the three of them to stand and observe comfortably without having to resort to sitting. Pilgrim explained that the red-suited people they were after used equipment that often gave off tell-tail radio magnetic radiation which was detectable. She explained that they had access to a spy satellite which could help spot their targets should they come out of hiding. She did not tell Major Springton that they in fact had access to hundreds of satellites, all of which were in use to try and spot UFOs on a global basis. She also never mentioned the term UFO in front of him.

One of the operators turned to Pilgrim and said. "Call from HQ for you, sir." And handed her a head set.

"Yes go ahead," she said as she adjusted the lightweight instrument on her head. Only she could hear the conversation. "Yes... Ah ha... Ok Good... Keep me posted. Pilgrim out."

She turned to Frogleberg as she removed her headset. "We got another one. Another watery grave."

"Oh good," said Frogleberg nodding.

Both noticed that Springton was in the dark but probably assumed a team somewhere hit their target. Neither elaborated for him.

"So this is our mobile nerve centre," said Pilgrim to Springton. "If we find something we can get closer to the action in this."

"But you can't really drive his on the highway," said Springton. "They'll pull you over and book you in this."

"Oh sorry I forgot. Thanks for reminding me," said Frogleberg. "Plates!"

He struggled forward till he could lean between the front seats and speak to the driver. "We haven't got any California license plates on. Do you think you could get them and check that all the other mobiles have their plates please."

The driver nodded, opened his door and stepped down and out from the mobile. Frogleberg saw the driver walk around the front of the mobile through the windscreen and then disappear before he returned to Pilgrim and Springton in the back.

"Not a problem," he said half smiling.

The operative who handed Pilgrim the headset before, turned and made a general announcement to the three. "The teams are packed up and ready to move out."

"Ok then," said Pilgrim. "Send 'em out."

The operative turned to his console and adjusted the mouth piece of his head set. "All units, move out into your designated search areas now please."

"Ok, patch any news through to us on the plane. I think we'll get out of your hair and wait back on the deck."

"Yes sir," said the operative without taking his mind off his immediate job, concentrating so hard that he failed to notice the three exit the mobile.

* * *

On their way back across the tarmac they avoided the convoys of HUMMVs revving up and leaving the air strip, all heading for the main gates which were several miles away. As they neared the plane they saw them all moving into the distance like some kind of ant trail.

"It's a bit more comfortable up here," said Pilgrim just before she climbed aboard a forward hatch. Springton followed her in with Frogleberg bringing up the rear shortly there after. They entered the cargo hold and moved forward. There was a set of steps leading up to the passenger decks. At the top they walked through what looked to be another nerve centre. Bustling with people sitting at control panels similar to the ones seen in the mobiles. Only there were more of them and more room. In the next deck were the crew seats. Much like the first class cabin of a jet airliner. Pilgrim directed Springton to the window seats facing either side of the table where the portable data terminal was.

"Would you like something to drink?" asked Frogleberg. "Tea? Coffee? Soft drink? I think we've even got a Scotch if you'd prefer?"

Springton wasn't use to this kind of hospitality. Despite being the commander of one of the US army's elite squads and being equipped with every conceivable facility the US army could offer, he had not seen a spread like this. He did not know what was an appropriate answer so he didn't.

"So this is your plane?" he asked as he surveyed his comfortable surroundings.

"What do you mean?" asked Pilgrim.

"I mean does this plane belong to your organization or do you hire it?"

"No this is our Antinov. Or at least one of them."

"How many do you have?"

"Oh lots," said Frogleberg. "I lose track. This is only one of the one-two fours. We've got some two-two-fours as well. They're much bigger than this."

Springton nodded. Trying to hide his professional jealousy.

"You have to understand," continued Frogleberg, "In our line of work we need stuff like this. We use C-5 Galaxies a lot too but now that we can get Antinovs around the place it's so much easier. These one-two-fours don't require quite the massive air strips that the Galaxies use to."

"And what is your line of work?" asked Springton.

"I thought you'd know better than to ask that," said Pilgrim with a smile. "Let me put it this way. We're an internationally funded, global anti-terrorist organization. We're here to fight a kind of terrorism that no one wants to admit exists at any level. It's a very dirty and very secret job we do."

Frogleberg butted in. "And there's no other way to do this job. It's just the way it is. Suffice it to say that the least anyone knows about it the better."

They waited an hour. Springton finally gave in and accepted a coffee.

"It'll be getting dark soon," he said. "They'll either have to return to base or pitch camp for the night."

Pilgrim turned to Frogleberg. "Does this remind you of another incident, Bjorn?"

"What? Oh you mean a little encounter in the Amazonas? Yeah, it's a bit too much of a coincidence for my liking."

"Yeah, okay, I think we should bring them back here for the night. They can't have covered all that much distance in this time. Of course our equipment works equally well at night."

The door to the previous deck opened and a SHADO operative poked her head through.

"Commander. We have another problem which you and the Colonel are requested to attend to."

Pilgrim looked at Frogleberg. Frogleberg shrugged his shoulders.

Pilgrim sighed. "It never rains," she said as she raised herself reluctantly to her feet. As she headed to the cabin door she turned back to Springton and said. "Excuse us a moment won't you. Help yourself to whatever you want to eat or drink."

"Yea make yourself at home," followed up Frogleberg as he too reached the door.

In the Antinov's command centre was a large monitor with a video link to headquarters. Colonel Ford's face was on it waiting for their attention.

"Uh, Commander. We have just got a report that may be another little problem that needs to be taken care of."

"Go on," said Pilgrim.

"Well intelligence reports that we have a security leak."

"What?" said Frogleberg

"Yeah, I thought it was something that you'd best deal with. Or at least tell me what you want done about it."

"So what's the story?" asked Pilgrim.

"Well, we're not quite sure, Commander. But it seems that there's a Canadian musician who's set up some kind of insurance policy against him being killed by a secret organization called SHADO."

"What?" said Frogleberg again, only this time even more outraged.

"Yea. It seems that he's set up a chain of events that if anyone tries to harm him or his family, all his information will be leaked to the media."

"Oh great. That's all we need," said Pilgrim.

"So what does this guy want?" said Frogleberg.

"Well nothing so far. I just think he wants to be left alone. Sounds like he stumbled on the information some how. It seems like there's a hole in our security somewhere and he's found it."

"We're gonna have to find out where that hole is and plug it Bjorn!" said Pilgrim. "We're gonna have to find out what the full story is."

"So who have we got we can put on it?" said Frogleberg. "Canada you say. What part of Canada?"

"Nova Scotia," said Ford.

"Well the only people we can spare up there would have to be the monkey boys. Petrov and Snypes."

"Oh you're kidding?" said Pilgrim. "You can't send them."

"Actually word, has it that he's just left for Iceland. Some big pop music festival they have up there this time of year."

"That still leaves Petrov and Snypes," said Frogleberg grimacing.

Pilgrim buried her face in her hands.

"Well I'm sorry Commander, they're all we've got," Frogleberg said. "They were working on the MD11 case out of our base in Maine. I can pull them off that and have them fly up to Iceland and check it out."

"Can you trust them not to screw up though. They're not regular SHADO people," said Ford.

"You know as well as I do we can't spare anyone important at the moment for something like this. We'll just have to tell them to go up there, get what ever information they can and not to cause any trouble. At least not till someone can get up there and take charge. What's this guy's name anyway?"

"Err. One Philip Salisman, Colonel," said Ford, checking his facts.

"Ok then Keith, see if you can put me through to the Gorilla twins will ya? I'll talk to them myself."

"OK Colonel. I'll get you a link. Just hold on for a moment."

"I'll leave you to it Bjorn," said Pilgrim. "Right at the moment, I don't wanna know about it. I'll be up with our guest."

Frogleberg nodded as she disappeared through the door.

"Some internal security problems," said Pilgrim on her return to the crew deck.

"Is security a big thing for your organization?" said Springton. "Sorry. If you don't mind me asking that is."

"Not at all. Yes, security is the second biggest issue beside the job itself. Of course, don't ask what the job actually is. Let me put it to you this way. You know that joke line that goes. I could tell you the answer to that question but then I'd have to kill you. . ."

Springton nodded.

CHAPTER 10

It was about mid day the next day. There were no reports. The troops were recalled the night before and all had returned about 9 PM. They were sent out again at the crack of dawn. All the stones earmarked were turned over, uncovering exactly zero UFOs. Not even any traces of a UFO. There were not many places left to look. It had become such a wait even the intense Major Springton seemed relaxed. Not nearly as relaxed though as Bjorn Frogleberg. His battle fatigues unbuttoned and lose round his shoulders. His boots and sox in a pile on the floor at his feet. His feet stretched out over three seats as he lounged back with his hands behind his head. A voice came on the data terminal. It woke Adrianna Pilgrim from her sleep. She had dozed off with her head in her hands on the table in front of her. She woke with a start and wiped the small amount of drool she had involuntarily secreted during her nap from her lips as the voice said: "There it goes again, Commander."

"What? Sorry, Oh have we found one," said Pilgrim as she composed herself.

"No just that signal again. But I'm sure it's not in our neighbourhood. Oh damn it's gone again."

"Did you get a fix this time?"

"No Commander. it was too quick and too faint. But I'm guessing it's coming from somewhere south of here."

"Yeah, you said so before but how far south we don't know . Hmm. Let me know if it turns out to be a microwave oven or something."

Frogleberg was sitting up. "Damn. Even the faint signal from a microwave oven would have been some action. If we don't find something soon I've got a good mind to pinch the microwave out of the galley and go blow it up just for something to do." He sank back to his reclined position.

"I don't get it," said Springton. "We've got people covering all the suggestion positions south of here. We've not seen anything."

"Yea but how far south is south. If you get what I mean," said Frogleberg.

"Yeah, I Look if we don't find anything soon I think we should go mobile and move south," said Pilgrim.

"I think we should all just go to sleep," said Frogleberg.

"Perhaps your intel isn't as accurate as you might have hoped?" said Springton.

"No I think it's probably too accurate. We just chose not to believe it," said Frogleberg sarcastically.

"Yeah well, the thing is this, Major," said Pilgrim. "Our intel was based on some computer predictions. We had very little to go on but for the basic facts that they were here somewhere. The computer model told us that they were most likely in mid north-western California but as my colleague here said, we chose not to believe them. Instead our own experience told us that if they were going to be anywhere, they'd be further into Nevada perhaps."

Springton looked around at Frogleberg and then back at Pilgrim. A question mark painted on his face could not have made it more obvious he was wondering why they had done that.

"You see Major," continued Pilgrim. "These red suited gentlemen don't usually like hanging out close to population bases. They're too easily detected. That is the only thing we share in common with our enemy. We don't want them detected either. It wouldn't be good for our security."

"You make them sound like they're from Mars or somewhere," said Springton.

Pilgrim swallowed hard and coughed. Frogleberg fell straight out of the chair he was leaning across.

Springton raised his hands and said: "Hey look. I don't wanna know. My orders are that. What's good for you guys is good for America and that's all I need to know."

"I think he's already pretty much figured it," said Frogleberg climbing back into his seat.

"Look Major. Here's the deal," said Pilgrim. "If we tell you, you have two choices, either join our organization or have your memory of the past 48 hours erased." Pilgrim stood out of her seat and began to pace. "We can do that you know. We have a drug that causes selective amnesia for a period of around 2 days. But that's all it does. It's not terribly pleasant but we can pass it off as some kind of battle injury. You won't have a clue. But anything longer than that and we have a problem. Okay?"

Springton nodded. Pilgrim and Frogleberg went through the story. They explained about the Alien threat and their need for secrecy. They also explained that SHADO was always looking for good personnel. They could arrange a transfer.

"Now I understand," said Springton. "But if I did join, what about my troops? I trained them myself. We've been through a lot together and we're a team."

"We can cross that bridge," said Pilgrim. "For now though we have a job to do. I think we've looked round here long enough. We're pretty much down to checking out the long shots. I think we pack up and move our search further south toward the burbs." Pilgrim sat down and lent across to the data terminal. "Get set up to go mobile. We're gonna crawl outta these deserts and search."

* * *

Thirty minutes later they were stepping onboard the waiting SHADO mobile. The now straightened up Frogleberg took the front seat next to the driver. Pilgrim and Springton in the rear with the two tracking operators. They moved out as the second in the convoy. A SHADO mobile weapons platform first, the tracking mobile second, followed by more weapons mobiles. SHADO and super spook HUMMV teams would meet them on the way. Others still further out would catch up later. Each team was relayed their search areas. The first teams arrived in their search areas around three o'clock in the afternoon. The SHADO mobiles arriving shortly thereafter. The rest of the teams took up until five PM to arrive giving everyone just a few more hours till night fall. It was nearing seven PM and almost time to call the search off. Pilgrim once again had her arms spread out to make a pillow for her head to rest on the control panel in front of her. She was just resting there taking in the radio chatter between teams. Suddenly her head sprang up as she heard something that interested her.

"Hey check this out. Your not gonna believe this," came an African accent over the speaker.

Then there was some laughing and an unrecognizable European accent. "It's some kind of play ground."

Pilgrim grabbed a microphone on a goose neck and hit a key on the panel in front of her. "What's happening guys?"

"Sorry, Commander," came the African accent again. "This is team seventeen in search area twelve. There's some kind of adventure play ground down here with a space theme. It's quite good. We thought we drove past a space port for a moment. It's even got a few flying saucers."

"Who is this speaking please? Can you give me a visual."

"This is Captain Petersen, Commander. It's just a kids' playground kinda thing

Commander. We'll have to turn round and go back now if you really wanna see it."

"Yes captain I really want to see it. I'm just curious is all."

About a minute later the voice of Captain Petersen returned. "We have the recon cameras rolling now commander. We have it clear for uplink channel two in about thirty seconds."

Commander Pilgrim pulled up a window on her display screen and selected the comms link Menu for audio visual data. Then she selected link number two. She opened the display window for video and waited. A few moments later a picture of the playground appeared. From the angle the camera was pointing she could clearly see the flying saucer structures. They formed some kind of slippery dip which spiralled down around it's edges. The whole structure supported by steel pylons. Next to that was a replica of sky-lab. Complete with stylized solar panels. There were trees obscuring the view of the rest of the park.

"Captain, could you ask your driver to move up a little further so I can see what's behind those trees, thanks."

Without another word the view began to roll on. Behind the trees she could see the shape of yet another flying saucer slippery dip. This one even larger than the first. But set further back in the grounds of the play ground. A long fence now obscured the view. Through a gap she could see swings suspended under the flying saucer structure and then the view was gone. The HUMMV moved forward to the main gate through which she could see a path and some park benches. A closed kiosk and toilet block. A groundsman stopped with his broom and looked on as the HUMMV passed the main gate. Unaware he was being captured on video and broadcast. He watched them pass and they watched him as they passed until a high, side fence obscured most of their view once more. Pilgrim could still see the flying saucer structure towering over the fence line and some other structures of play equipment behind it.

"That is most amusing Captain. Sorry about that but I guess we're clutching at straws here."

"No problems Commander do you want us to continue or stay here?"

Pilgrim throughout about this for a moment, looked at her watch and said. "No I think we should all head for home. We'll give it one more go in the morning. we may as well all head back to the air base for the night. "

By nine PM Frogleberg, Pilgrim and Springton were back onboard the Antinov going over the condensed version of the day's logs whilst eating their evening meal. A tracking officer was sitting at the table with them explaining what few interesting features were contained amongst the data.

"So you're still picking up those periodic signals?" said Pilgrim.

"Yes, sir. And they definitely get stronger when we run the sensors down south."

"So why can't you triangulate them and give me a fix?"

"They seem to be bouncing all over the place. We can't pin point them. But they seem to be strongest along this line here."

He ran his finger along the surface of the LCD display panel and selected a map of the area. Then drew a line across it.

"This runs through search area twelve, does it not?" said Pilgrim.

"Yes that's right. Also thirteen, fourteen, seventeen, right out to thirty seven."

"But it's stronger in area twelve, right?"

"Yea but look at the distribution pattern. It's a fuzzy glow of radiation about 20 kilometres wide and sixty long. It actually starts back here at area seven and extends all the way out. Cutting through all these sections. I don't think it's anything UFO related."

"What do you think it is, then?"

"I think it's just one of those things, Commander."

"Just one of those things? In my experience, nothing is just one of those things."

"Well what I mean is that it's probably some radio effect through that area, we'll probably find that it's caused due to some magnetically aligned metallic rock formation that is common throughout the region. We often get thrown by things like that. Radio propagation has always been gogged by geological formations."

"Well Captain I tell ya what. Why don't you run along and see if you can match up any geological formations that coincide with this signal. In the mean time I wanna have the video logs played back from area 12 please."

"Yes Commander," said the officer as he slid out of his seat.

"Oh and Captain. Thanks."

That night Commander Pilgrim talked to Ford, She played the video logs over and over. Not just from area 12 but from most areas along the predicted path. And the path where the signal was detected. But there was something nagging her in the back of her mind. Something that didn't seem quite right. Frogleberg came and sat at the table with her. He brought her a hot chocolate.

"Well there's always tomorrow," he said. "You should turn in and get some rest. I'm about to."

"Mmmm," said Pilgrim, too tired to lift her gaze from the LCD display panel now laying flat on the table in front of her, still displaying a frame from the play ground.

Frogleberg looked at it and rubbed his chin. He turned to Major Springton who was sipping a coffee in a few seats away. "Who's idea was this play park thing anyway?"

"Oh that. Kacaldy Park I think they call it. It was built by some retired millionaire guy about three years ago. I think he made his money out of engineering or something. I think he made space shuttle components. It's like his retirement dream or something. I never took too much notice but there was some controversy about it. They wanted him to pull it down because some of the rides were unsupervised and could be dangerous. But they reached a compromise. Quite recently I believe. He pulled down some of the equipment and left the safer stuff there. It's very popular, I hear."

Frogleberg looked back at the frame. "This is like a residential area right?"

"Yea," said Springton as he hauled himself and his coffee up and headed to the table to join them.

"And presumably there are lots of kids who live round there right?"

"Yea I guess so? What are you getting at?"

"Well... Where are the kids?"

"Whata ya mean?" said Springton taking deeper look at the picture over Pilgrim's shoulder.

"I mean. It's daylight, right, You said it was popular and that there are lots of kids in the area. So where are they?"

"Yea that is a bit odd now that I come to think about it," said Pilgrim. She ran the entire video again. Backwards and forwards. "There's no kids anywhere. Look at those structures. What was it that Alex Cavaye said. In amongst a pile of other UFOs or something?"

"What?" said Frogleberg.

"I asked him where you'd hide a UFO and he said in amongst a pile of other UFOs or something like that."

"Oh my god," said Frogleberg looking Pilgrim squarely in the eyes. "Children of the Corn."

"What?" said Pilgrim.

"Children of the Corn. Remember that movie? Where the kids' minds were taken over. Possessed. I think it was that movie." Frogleberg turned to Springton. "Did we forget to mention? Amongst the alien's arsenal is the ability to control people's minds. They seem to be able to do anything from implanting thoughts to the full reprogramming."

"What are you getting at?" asked Springton.

"Yeah. What 'n' hell are you on about Bjorn?" said Pilgrim.

"If there are UFOs in there, then chances are they've done something to the children who normally play there. Even if it's just to keep them away or something. We could have an even bigger problem."

Springton rolled his eyes then looked at the Commander to glean a little sanity. "Surely not."

"It's a distinct possibility, Mr. Springton," said Pilgrim. She leaned over to the data terminal. "Ok here's the deal, I want to scramble one unit. Get a HUMMV and a team out to that playground. I want the team to approach on foot and take some soundings of the area. Lets see if we can pin point a UFO. If there is one in there, then we'll move in."

"You can't storm a playground," said Springton.

"Well what would you suggest I do?" asked Pilgrim. "Don't worry, we'll keep everyone away if we do. but first, let's find out what we're dealing with." She turned once again to the data terminal. "Stealth people. I want stealth, understood?"

* * *

A single HUMMV with three occupants arrived in the vicinity of the play park. It pulled off the road out of sight. Its three occupants de camped. One of whom was carrying a small brief case-sized aluminium flight case. The dark figures scurried the half kilometre distance until they reached the entrance to the play park, darting behind some low bushes to set up the detection equipment. Two small antenna were assembled out of the flight case. One pointed at the park, the other pointing back in the direction from whence they came. The transmission would be picked up by a transponder in the HUMMV, this in turn relayed up to a satellite in orbit and on to SHADO's communications net. Two of the men kept watch whilst the third tuned the equipment. Then they waited. And they waited. There was no timing to the appearance of the signals. They had been random events. The longest spaced 6 hours apart. The shortest, 30 seconds. It could have been a long night. They couldn't even be entirely sure that the aliens, should they be there, hadn't spotted them already and gone silent.

* * *

Commander Pilgrim sat, tapping her fingers on the table. Colonel Frogleberg grabbed her hand and fronted her with a very brave expression.

"Sorry," she said as she exchanged nail tapping for nail biting. Then she noticed Frogleberg's new, more annoyed expression. "Sorry," she said again and began to fiddle with the data terminal.

"It'll never boil," said Frogleberg.

"What?" said Pilgrim

"It'll never boil. A watched pot never boils."

"You're right, Bjorn. This waiting is killing me. What happened with that security breach?"

"Some guy called Philip Salisman. He's a techno musician. He's a bit famous or something. It seems he's got the dope on us. I don't know how yet, I'm waiting for a report on him. I'll have to get up there as soon as all this is done. He's just flown up to Iceland for a big summer rave festival they have up there. I sent Petrov and Snypes up there. I know that's probably less than ideal but they're the only ones with any field experience I could spare."

"Field experience? Bad experience more like."

"Yeah I know. I had them working on the MD 11 case and had to put them out in the field."

"I wouldn't trust 'em to finish a case of beer."

Commander Pilgrim was cut short by a voice message on the data terminal.

"We've got a signal commander. Waiting for confirmation from the field crew."

Everyone sprang to life. Both Frogleberg and Pilgrim sat straight up whilst Major Springton joined them.

"Confirmed," came the voice again. "We have a match from the field and it appears to be right in front of them."

Pilgrim pressed the comms button on the data terminal and was about to speak when the voice started up again.

"Probability of the signals being alien in origin is eighty five percent."

"That's what I wanted to know," said Pilgrim. She pressed the button again and gave the command. "I want 3 mobiles saddled up and ready to ride. I want three HUMMV teams in there Now. Stat! Get down there and wait for my instructions. Make one of the Mobiles a tracker the other two weapons platforms. Oh and get the co-ordinates off to Colonel Ford. I wanna hear what he's got to say about this." She lifted her finger from the data terminal and turned to Frogleberg and Springton. "Well. What are we waiting for?"

CHAPTER 11:

Nearing midnight, Frogleberg, Pilgrim and Springton climbed aboard the tracking mobile. Once again Frogleberg took the front seat next to the driver. When they completed their check lists they moved out. The HUMMV teams had already moved out 15 minutes earlier. The headlights from the SHADO mobiles bounced along the Nevada highway and through the Mojave desert. Apart from a few house-keeping decisions to be made, there was relative silence for the duration. Until the Mobiles reached suburbia.

"We're about five minutes away, Commander," said Frogleberg from the front seat.

"Ok, we better get tooled up," said Pilgrim. "Do you think you can handle a plasma weapon?" Pilgrim asked of Springton.

"Yeah, I wouldn't mind a crack at one o' them things, Commander."

She handed him the rifle and explained what everything did just in time for the mobile to come to a halt. Through the gap between the front seats she could see the HUMMV's had taken up position at both ends of the park.

"Shall we move in, Commander?" said Frogleberg.

"Yup. I guess so. It's now or never."

The mobile moved in and headed for the entrance but when they reached it, the headlights clearly showed the gates were shut. The mobile rocked to a halt.

"I'll go see if I can get 'em open," said Frogleberg as he disembarked the mobile.

He swung in front of the mobile and up to the gates which were illuminated by the mobile's headlights. The other two mobiles pulled in slightly behind adding their light to the situation.

Pilgrim leant over to the first tracking operative. "Hear anything?"

The operator shook her head. Pilgrim then leant in on the second tracking operative.

"Have we got enough clearance to put up the balloon lights?"

The operative checked the video monitor in front of him. Then checked a screen which showed a green group of squares zooming around a cross-section of the mobile. He turned back to Pilgrim. "We could but then we'd have to pull them down again before we entered."

"What about the boom floods? I just wanna get a look in there."

The operative flicked some switches and grabbed hold of two joy sticks. One in each hand, as if he was playing some kind of video game. He hit a button on top of the right one with his thumb and there was a sudden clunk from above them in the roof of the mobile. A brief sound of motor noise as two hatches opened. He pulled back on the joy sticks and more motor noise as the boom arms with flood lights on the end, extended up out of the roof of the mobile. Flicking another button on the top of each joy stick the area beyond the gates became visible out of the dark. Pilgrim crouched out of her seat and moved forward far enough to put her head between the front seats and peer through the windscreen. She looked around as far as she could see but from her position, the cabin prevented her from seeing very far up the towers and other tall structures in the park. She could clearly see Frogleberg working at the locks on the gates. He shrugged his shoulders as an operative from one of the other Mobiles headed toward him. Pilgrim climbed through and into the front passenger seat for a better view whilst the operative controlling the flood lights guided them from a view provided by a video camera.

"What's that up on top of that tower?" said Pilgrim back at the operative.

The operative began to swing the lights up to where he thought she meant but before they got there she noticed a red glow coming from the tower and it was slowly getting brighter.

She flung the door open and shouted. "Get down Bjorn. Take..."

There was a bright blinding flash and an explosion near the gates. Pilgrim couldn't see anything in front of her. She turned back to the operative in the back. "Kill the lights, take out that tower." She still couldn't see but her vision was returning. "Are you alright Bjorn?" she shouted at where she thought the gate was. There was no answer. "Answer me, Bjorn, god'amit." Still no answer. "Somebody hand me a plasma for Christ's sake."

She began to step from the mobile when something grabbed her from out of the dark. She screamed.

"It's only me," said Bjorn.

"Don't do that," said Pilgrim as several more bright flashes streaked out. This time at the tower from the ground. The tower gave off one more flash which hit some trees. Splitting them into splinters and bursting some of the flying debris into flames. Then the top of the tower it self exploded. Groaning as it twisted and toppled. Collapsing onto another structure and demolishing it too like dominos. A direct plasma hit, fired from a SHADO operative further down the fence line.

Pilgrim pulled her communicator from her breast pocket. "Go Go Go!" she shouted into it.

She could see the remains of the gates in front of her now as her vision restored. Twisted but still locked.

"Where's the other guy?" she shouted at Frogleberg.

"I don't know. I couldn't see a thing."

"Shit," said Pilgrim. She picked up her plasma weapon and looked through the scope. She switched to night vision. There was no-one to be seen. The gates were clear. She aimed at the centre of the gates and pulled the trigger. Another flash and the gates blew apart. Springton had joined them just in time to be blinded by the flash. Not seriously though. He could still see enough to navigate. Other SHADO operatives were joining them at the gates. There were other flashes further down the fence line as SHADO operatives blasted their way into the park.

"Come on. Let's get this done," said Pilgrim as she moved forwards.

Frogleberg and Springton followed her but all three stopped still as a cracking sound rang out from somewhere ahead. Then an eery groan and light appeared from one of the saucer shaped structures. A white light but not so intense as to be blinding. Enough light to illuminate everything around it. The light spread out across the ground bringing new structures to their attention. Then they saw them. Four or five red suited aliens with weapons drawn. Surrounded by perhaps as many as twenty children. The aliens turned and walked away. Back into the saucer shaped structure. The children began to walk forward and spread out slightly.

"What the . . .," said Frogleberg.

Pilgrim picked up her communicator. "Get in there and get those kids out."

Several SHADO personnel from slightly further along rushed in and attempted to round up the children. The children seemed to be ignoring them and kept moving forward toward Pilgrim and the others. Pilgrim looked around at her colleagues and began to run toward the children. Then a shot rang out. Pilgrim, followed by Frogleberg and Springton hit the ground as they noticed the children had produced alien weapons. They saw two SHADO operatives hit and downed. Pilgrim froze on the ground and didn't know what to do. Confused by a sight that didn't make sense. Another SHADO operative was downed by the hail of alien projectiles before he could hit the deck with the others. No-one dare to fire back. Everyone seemed confused.

It was Springton who was first up. Opening fire with his plasma weapon, screaming as he charged forward. There was an explosion amongst the rapidly spreading groups of children who were now firing indiscriminately. There was the sickening sound of small bodies hitting the ground. Then there was another flash and an explosion followed by more as other SHADO operatives fired upon the children. Pilgrim still lay frozen on the ground. She could clearly see an arm, severed from one of the children, hit the ground as the light from the saucer behind became brighter. She felt something grab her arm. It was Frogleberg helping her up. She looked up at him as she climbed to her feet. She didn't know what to say. This was the most sickening experience she had ever witnessed. Nothing could have prepared her for it. There was more light being spilled further along the park. She noticed the second saucer was splitting open and the light was pouring from it.

Frogleberg looked at Pilgrim and saw she was numbed. Almost catatonic. He grabbed his communicator from his breast pocket and put it to his lips. "Aim at the saucers. Take out the saucers."

But it was too late. From the first, now fully open saucer, three UFOs emerged and lifted into the sky. Firing beams of plasma at anything they could target. A SHADO HUMMV was hit exploding and landing on it's roof. There were no occupants inside. The SHADO mobiles opened fire. Possibly damaging one UFO but not in time to even get close to the other two.

The second saucer exploded open. Not waiting for it to open properly. Another three UFOs burst out of it. One of the UFOs was caught on some of the debris and was flung at the third SHADO mobile. The mobile kept firing at it causing it to begin to explode but it was too late. The UFO clipped the edge of the roof of the mobile spinning it back in upon it. The mobile pivoted on the ground and the began to crush under the weight of the UFO. Finally both exploding in a huge fiery ball. Frogleberg pushed Pilgrim to the ground as the debris flew over them.

"Are you alright, Commander?" shouted Frogleberg.

"Yeah, I think so," said Pilgrim nodding, unable to raise her voice. A few tears visible in the light of the fires that had erupted around them.

There was a whoosh overhead. Then another as two Skydiver aircraft performed a fly-by out of the inky black sky and were then gone. Frogleberg began helping Pilgrim up but threw her to the ground again as something else exploded scattering some more fiery, twisted debris.

"I wish you'd stop doing that," said Pilgrim.

"Sorry," said Frogleberg once again helping her to her feet. She could feel cuts and bruises on her hands and knees. There was a soreness below her left shoulder where she had been hit by a piece of shrapnel. They could hear shouting in the distance.

"Oh my God. Oh my God!" came the cries. It echoed off the remains of the park and filled the air like a wolf baying at the moon. They looked up to see Springton standing where his first hit had met its target. He had dropped his plasma weapon ten or so metres before him. He walked round in circles with his hands on his head and then dropped to his knees amongst the debris and charred remains. Still crying: "Oh my God."

Pilgrim and Frogleberg walked toward him. Pilgrim kicked a child's shoe with part of a child still in it. Tears streamed from her eyes. She took two more steps and raised her fist to the sky screaming. "You fucking bastards. Why?"

CHAPTER 12:

They drove back to the secret air base in silence. This time one of the other SHADO operatives sat in the front passenger seat next to the driver. Frogberg sat in the rear holding Commander Pilgrim who was still shaking from the experience. Occasionally a tear would stream down her cheek. They pulled up under the wing of the Antinov. They each had barely enough energy to alight from the mobile. they began to shuffle back to the cargo bay of the Antinov aimlessly. It seemed like the thing to do. When they were nearly at the hatch Springton grabbed Pilgrim and looked her directly in the eyes.

"Look, I'm sorry, Okay. I didn't mean to. I'm really sorry." All traces of a tough, battle hardened exterior had gone. Pilgrim didn't know what to say. They just stood there looking at each other. Frogberg broke the silence.

"It's not your fault. If you hadn't have done it I probably would have. Let me tell you something about these alien bastards. They don't care a damn about any human. Except to harvest body parts. If you've been taken over or captured by them, you're probably better off dead anyway. They weren't kids any more. The aliens would have wiped their minds. They would have turned them into automatons. You know what I'm saying. Those kids were already dead. Who knows how long the aliens had been controlling them. But you can rest assured, the only thing left of those kids was their bodies. You did them a favour."

Back on the crew deck of the Antinov, Frogberg finished coordinating the clean up operation. He returned to the lounge chairs where Pilgrim and Springton were sitting sipping coffee. Pilgrim had removed her battle fatigues and was sitting in her blood stained vest. A medic had removed a piece of shrapnel from her shoulder and patched up her other wounds.

"It's officially been put down to a terrorist attack. No doubt by morning the president will seize the opportunity to blame yet another middle east terrorist group. The CIA must get sick of making up new enemies to blame now that Sadam is dead. All the Mobiles are back. The rest of the crews will be back in about an hour, they tell me."

Frogberg turned to Springton. "So what's it going to be?"

Springton looked at Frogberg and wondered what he was talking about.

"I mean are you going to join SHADO?"

Springton stared into his coffee for a short time. Then looked straight up at Frogberg. "Tell me about this amnesia drug again?"

CHAPTER 13:

Frogleberg and Pilgrim read the US morning news from their Internet feed on the way home in the Antinov. Major Springton didn't remember anything about the incident. Apparently he was a hero. He tried to rush in and save the children but the terrorists began detonating the bombs. He had been hit on the head by a piece of metal flung from one of the play ground structures. The terrorists had no intention of negotiating. It was an act of retaliation for an earlier US attack on a suspected chemical weapons plant.

A day and 14 hours sleep later, Pilgrim was back in Straker's office at the Astrophysical Commission in London.

"So I guess we have to get back to the boring stuff. Funding!" said Pilgrim.

"Oh I wouldn't worry your pretty little head about that my dear," said Straker.

Adrianna Pilgrim looked at him curiously with her head cocked sideways.

"We'll when I told them there could be as many as 1800 UFOs still out there hiding somewhere, they were all only too happy to kick in. Apparently we did the current American president a political favour, too. Whenever politicians start to slump in the opinion polls, they always look for a new enemy to show how tough they can be. Apparently we gave them one and the American public fell for it hook, line and box of gelignite. So the Americans said, if you want a Marsbase, you shall have it."

Pilgrim smiled slightly. Happy that she got the outcome she wanted even through the price was too high.

"I wouldn't smile too much just yet Commander. All this comes with some strings attached. Or one big string in particular."

Adrianna sat back in her seat and slumped.

"You see, Commander, they want me to take a more active, supervisory roll in your command. You're going to have to put up with me a lot more from now on, Commander. A lot more."