

Those Bastard Aliens, Part 2

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

CHAPTER 1

"Look I'm sorry honey. I have to do this," said Philip into the phone. He was sitting in the airbase captain's office, with the door shut, speaking to his wife. "Hopefully I won't be more than a few days... Yes alright then. Perhaps a week including travelling time... Yes Ok I'll bring back a Koala for Claudia."

He emerged from the office looking worse than he did with the pain in his groin alone. Everyone knew instinctively to give him a wide berth but someone had to tell him it was time. A quick briefing then he was suited up and on his way out to the tarmac. Helmet in hand. Before recent events he was looking forward to his ride in a Grippen but now he was apprehensive.

He was joined by Virginia Lieve on the way out to the tarmac.

"Don't worry. You'll be fine once we get in the air" she said. Philip didn't react he just kept on walking. Still sulking beyond his control.

Ahead of him were 6 other similarly suited figures. Beyond that were the shapes of at least 7 Grippen aircraft being attended to by countless ground support staff. The flight suited figures were gathered round Virginia Lake who was giving them some final words. Shouting to project her voice over the noise. They walked into ear shot.

"Now the components and materials on this flight are not only important to this mission but also to the three experimental prototypes being assembled in Australia. We don't know how they got the last transport but we hope they won't suspect a seemingly ordinary 747. Although an escort of fighter jets would be a dead give away. I don't have to remind you of how important this is. Not to mention that a lot of your friends, including me, are going to be on that plane and I'd appreciate arriving in one piece if at all possible. Now. Are there any questions?"

"What about Philip? Who gets to baby sit him?" asked Stephanie Vourhause.

"I'll do it," said Jerry Hanniford.

"Yes I know you're the sensible one Jerry but you're also one of our top guns in a fighter. I don't want Philip getting involved in a scrape unless he absolutely has to." Lake looked back and forth and then zeroed in on Lieve who was already standing next to Philip.

"What about you Virginia? You've probably got the least time clocked up in these things."

Virginia Lieve nodded. She knew her forte was in space. She had a feel for space craft which was rare. Which was why she was on this mission with Philip. So did Hanniford and Vourhause. But unlike Lieve, they had extensive combat fighter experience as well. They had started out as fighter pilots, augmenting the sky-diver fleet. Virginia Lieve had trained as a fighter pilot simply to qualify for space where she excelled. Hanniford and Vourhause had proved themselves able to fly anything that could fly but they weren't quite as skilled at intercepting UFOs in space and subsequently landed all the special jobs. Philip wasn't surprised to see that the other 4 pilots were Amelia, Anny, Chris and Suzanne. He wondered about

Yuchtar but no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than he saw her walking across the tarmac, flight suited with her helmet in her hand. He wondered if she would be piloting too but remembered someone mentioning she was from ground forces and in training herself. As if to answer his question Virginia Lake said: "Ah. Yuchtar. I take it you'll be joining Suzanne?"

Yuchtar growled a little.

Philip looked quizzical at Yuchtar's reaction and then at Lieve. Lieve lent into him and said privately: "Yuchtar's a pretty good pilot herself. I don't think she thinks it fair she should have to ride in the back seat."

Philip nodded.

"OK then. That's it," said Virginia Lake. "Off you go then. We leave in however long it takes to finish fuelling and crank the engines over."

The crowd began to disperse. Philip following Lieve out toward the Grippens like a lost puppy. His pain still with him. He didn't know how he would survive the long trip to Australia but he wasn't about to let it show.

"Don't we have a flight plan?" asked Philip.

"We don't need one." shouted back Lieve turning to face him and walking backward a little. "It'll come up on the computer before we take off. that way, if we don't know, there's less chance the UFOs are going to know. But my guess is that we'll hit Germany and refuel there. We've got long range tanks but they're not fantastic. The jumbo can make it in one hop but we'll either need to stop and refuel or refuel by tanker in the air. We'll decide all that on route. Standard SHADO procedure."

Her explanation gave Philip time to catch up. He walked along side. "So what if I wanna go to the toilet or something?"

Lieve laughed. "Well you'll get a chance if we land somewhere but I'm pretty sure there'll be a long stretch somewhere over the Pacific. I hope you didn't have too many coffees this morning."

"No none," said Philip

"Well that 'll be a help." She stopped and turned to face him. She slightly unzipped her flight suit and reached inside. Pulling out two capsule shaped tablets she handed them to him.

"Here. These 'll make you retain water. Not so you'll burst but enough to get you through. Just remember, you'll be pissing like a fountain in 24 hours time." He took them from her but then another thought crossed his mind.

"What do you do up in space?"

"Ah! Well that depends. Depending on what they have in store for us when we get there, the new space craft might be fitted with Zero G toilets. But often than not you have to use a catheter built into the space suit."

Philip's mind wanted to ask for more details but his instinct knew he would be better off not knowing the finer details for the time being. He popped the tablets in his mouth, swallowed and continued toward the planes. Some of the noise had subsided. The sounds of fuel pumping finished and the service vehicles had begun to move off. Only the tanker servicing the 747 remained pumping. None of the engines had started yet. He expected to see a generator truck roll out to start the Grippens but the service teams were also dissipating. A few remained to help the pilots aboard and attend to any last minute requirements they might have, everyone else had left or were leaving. He saw an open transport vehicle heading out to the 747. It had a number of people sitting aboard it. They rolled up at the end of the ladder protruding from the side of the plane and began to step off. Grabbing their belongings and heading up the ladder.

Lieve selected an aircraft and waited patiently by its side with him. He watched as the 747's cargo port was closed up and the technicians responsible drove off in their service vehicle. He noticed the fuelling crew unhooking the fuel hoses from their receptacles on the side of the 747 and they too were clearing out. The tarmac was becoming rapidly more deserted and quieter. Only the generator truck remained with its umbilical attached. And as the fuel truck pulled away and off, the generator was the only major noise blowing on the light breeze. A shiver went up Philip's spine as the eeriness of the environment ate into his brain.

One of the ground support staff came to speak to Lieve. Philip didn't hear what they said but he saw Lieve nod and move away from him with the man. He thought she was just moving to another part of the plane but she began walking away. She didn't leave any instructions for him so he stood where he was and made his own inspection of the Grippen. He saw there were 8 slender missiles. 4 under each of the main wings. There were also a pair of weapons pods. They looked like smaller version of the multi-vented pods he had seen on the sky-diver models. He looked into the hole of one of the ports trying to see the tip of the projectile that it contained.

"Looking for something?" came a calm female voice behind him. It was Virginia Lake and she almost startled him. He lightly banged his head on the wing as he stood up quickly.

"Careful. You might break the plane." she said smiling. "Sorry to disturb your expert inspection but Adrianna Pilgrim just informed me there's a little snag."

"Oh? How so?" said Philip trying to regain his dignity once again.

"Apparently you have a little protection clause built into your contract with SHADO." Philip stared at her almost blankly. It was common knowledge among most of SHADO's senior staff as to the details of how a lowly musician with a tendency to hack computer communications became a reluctant member of SHADO. She continued.

"If ever you were thinking of removing that safe guard, now would be the time. Adrianna, she's a love but she's concerned should anything happen to you up there. Space is a dangerous place you know."

"So what you're saying is that you want me to remove any protection I have that would prevent you from just up and killing me? Is that it?"

"Yup. That's about the size of it. Look if you think we're going to hurt you now that you've become an asset to us, I think you need to realize we're not the CIA or MI6 or anything."

"No! SHADO is quite possibly worse."

"So you still don't trust us. After all we've done for you. You ungrateful sod." Philip laughed at her as she became angry.

"What are you laughing at?" she said with her fists clenched against her hips.

"I already have."

"What?"

"I already have removed the safety clause."

"Oh" said Virginia Lake as she began to smile involuntarily. Realizing she had fallen into his trap.

"Yeah, I set the wheels in motion not long after I joined. But there's a catch."

"What catch?"

"Well the problem is that because of the elaborate scheme I worked out to protect myself, it could take anywhere from 6 months to a year before it all filters out of the system. There's no way of knowing exactly. Sorry. I would have done it faster if I could have."

"Hmm." she said rubbing her eyes. Then she looked him in the eyes as her own narrowed. "So you do trust us then?"

"It's not even that," said Philip. "As soon as I realized this thing was a lot bigger than just me. I mean I'm just a musician with a few skills that perhaps SHADO didn't know it needed, but this is really important. And it beats sitting round knowing that you guys are out there fighting to protect the planet and there's nothing I can do to help. At least this way I'm doing something. And I have my daughter to think of."

"So why didn't you just join SHADO in the first place? Like as soon as you knew. "

"What? You mean without making SHADO set me up and all that? I probably would have. But you know this was so damn fantastic that I didn't really believe any of it till it was in my face. Till it became personal. And even then it took me about a month before I could come to terms with the scale of the thing. And by then all the offers and sweeteners had been placed in front of me. I was flattered I guess. And there was the money and all that. But also there was my family. I couldn't just up and leave my job and my love for music and suddenly join the military could I?"

Virginia Lake started to speak again but Philip cut her off. "Look I realize I'm probably one of the luckiest guys in the world right now. I've got a wife who I love very much. Despite what happened last night. And I know she loves me. And I have a beautiful daughter who thrills me to bits. And I have my music, and I can help other musicians. And to top it all off I can contribute to an effort to help save the earth. And all you people are just crazy enough that I can love you all too. So right now, the only thing I really want to protect besides the earth, is the way things are for me right now. I don't wanna die. But I don't want my daughter, or anyone else's daughter to be abducted by aliens and have her cut up for spare parts. And all the other shit they do to people. So I feel like I'm doing something for her. But she'll probably never know."

"Nice speech Mr Salisman. I'm touched. No truly. I'm touched. But we still have a problem. Just between you and me though, you've done one other thing within SHADO."

"Oh and what's that?"

"You've made yourself indispensable. We don't need you to get dead up there either. Look. I shouldn't tell you this. No-one outside the upper command is supposed to know this stuff, but in the 3 months you've been with us, you've managed to climb your way to the top of the most crucial staff list. "

"The what?"

"We maintain a list. It's a list of people who we need to keep out of harm's way if possible."

"I spoze you and Commander Pilgrim are at the top?"

"Surprisingly, no. The people at the top of that list are scientists, specialists and experts. Ultimately if something happened to Adrianna or myself, we could be replaced. Well... Perhaps Adrianna could." She smiled a sarcastic smile before continuing. "You're number 7 on the list. I'd guess you would still be about 49 without your safety clause in place. You were right when you said you had skills that SHADO didn't know you it needed."

Lieve approached.

"Anyway Philip my dear. We're just going to have to take good care of you. We need you. But we need you up there to sort out that space junk."

"Is there a problem?" asked Lieve.

"I hope not," said Colonel Lake. "You just remember to take good care of this boy."

You're carrying valuable cargo here." She smiled at them both and headed off across the tarmac toward the waiting jumbo.

"What was that all about?" asked Lieve.

"I'm not entirely sure," said Philip. "I think she was trying to tell me something."

"Never mind. There's been a slight change of plan."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. We've gotta wait for a decoy. Actually several. We've got two Antinovs en route and we're going to follow another re-fuelling 747 out of here. Well actually, you and me, we're gonna stick with that 747 over there but the other's are going to act like they're protecting the fuel plane. They won't be more than 5 minutes away from us but they hope it will be enough to fool the aliens. And we'll have a ready supply of fuel all the way there."

"So no stops then?"

"Oh we might stop in Japan for a hamburger and some fries." She smiled briefly then proceeded to inspect her air craft. Philip shook his head.

She was busy inspecting the rear undercarriage when Philip noticed the Ground support assistant returning. He was juggling 3 silver coloured aluminium flight cases. All different shapes. One looked like an industrial brief case. Another just a square box, whilst the third was thin and flat and seemed to hinge half way down its lid.

"Err Virginia!" prompted Philip.

Lieve looked up from where she was squatting underneath the fuselage but all she saw was a pair of feet and lower limbs. She limboed out from underneath the aircraft using the wheels as stability to greet the flight assistant.

"Oh good you got 'em did you. Thanks."

"I hope that's all you need," said the ground support man.

"Yeah, should be. Just put 'em down there and I'll stow them in a minute."

"Err you might only have about a minute," said the ground support man in a slightly more urgent tone. "the fueller is due to pass overhead any minute to pick up its escort. You'd better get your head-sets on. and be ready."

"Oh hell," said Lieve. "Ok I'm on the case I've gotta finish pre-flight and then we'll be ready to stoke the boiler."

"Would it help If I got in now?" said Philip with a new sense of urgency that made him temporarily forget his pain. Almost hopping from one foot to the other in readiness.

"No you can't get in yet until I've stowed all that stuff. Grippens are pretty spacious for a fighter jet but they're not that spacious."

Philip focused in on the cases laying on the ground. He knelt beside them and picked them over.

"What is this stuff?" He picked up the flat case and noticed it had a more elaborate catch on the front keeping it closed than did the others. Whilst the others were almost standard flight cases, this was an extruded aluminium shell. Virginia looked up and saw what he was holding.

"Oh that. That's yours. It's a lap-top. You can jack that into the plane's comms system. They thought you might like to study up on the latest UFO attack whilst en route. You can also plug into the database and get any other information you might need. Think of it as a kinda Internet in the sky."

"Neat," said Philip trying to subdue his enthusiasm. "What's in this one?" he said pointing at the smaller of the two remaining flight cases.

"Err that's some gadgets we thought you might need," said the ground support assistant.

"And this?" said Philip now pointing to the large case. The most ominous of appearance of all the cases. The ground support man let out a brief laugh.

"Oh that," said Lieve swinging her way under the noise of the aircraft to snatch it up. "That my dear boy is our lunch!"

Philip seemed happy to inspect his new toy whilst Lieve made the last of her routine, pre-flight inspection of the aircraft. Philip looked up and noticed a cigar wielding female figure darting across the tarmac toward him, slightly silhouetted against the glare now reflecting from the ground. He squinted and saw it was Stephanie Vourhause and she was puffing on one of her trade-mark cigars. He expected her to run up to speak to Lieve but she ran straight to him. He stood to greet her still holding his lap-top.

"Hi" she said feigning being out of breath. "Look I just wanted to say. Look I know I've given you a hard time 'n' everything but I really don't mean it."

"Yeah, I know," said Philip. Mildly coy about his response.

"Here. Have a cigar." she said as she handed one to him from one of the top pockets in her flight suit.

"I don't smoke." he said not understanding the gesture.

"I know but I'd like you to take it with you. For luck. I'd feel better if something from me was travelling with you and it was all I could think of on the spare of the moment."

Philip nodded and accepted the cigar.

"I'll try and keep it safe."

She removed the half finished cigar from her mouth and expelled the remaining smoke. Then she grabbed him and kissed him. Nearly causing him to pass out with her cigar breath. She released him, smiled and ran off to her own plane. The ground support man who was still standing with him raised his eyebrows.

"Don't say a word." ordered Philip. "Just don't say a word."

"Don't say a word about what?" said Lieve as she climbed down from the short ladder reaching up to the cockpit. But her question went un-answered as the first of the Grippens began to emanate noise. A slow, low pitched whine which began to build in both pitch and volume. She darted back up the ladder and grabbed her head-set out of the cockpit and jammed it on her head. Then another Grippen began to wind up. And another, till all 6 Grippens were beginning to spring to life. Philip looked around him as he heard the pitch of the generator truck by the 747 pitch down as if a great load had been placed on it. He noticed the intake fans on the two engines within his visual range beginning to turn slowly. Soon there came a deep and building rumble from their direction.

"Time to go." shouted Lieve. "Hand me those flight cases."

Philip sprang into life but he didn't know which one to hand her. He instinctively handed her the one he was holding but she shook her head and pointed to the big one. He placed his lap-top on the ground and grasped the large one in both hands. He handed it to her and went back for the smaller one. By the time he turned with it she was ready for it. He didn't know where she had stashed the large case but he reasoned that if it was really their lunch, then she'd be wanting access to it. Probably in the air. And since he was a passenger, he would probably be responsible for it.

He passed it up to her and she grabbed it. Then she had second thoughts. She rested it on the tiny forward wings which jutted out just below the cockpit. She dipped her head back inside behind the front seat and messed with something. Philip Couldn't see what. The first of the Grippens was up to speed. Its engine began to make a high pitched scream typical of a jet

engine. Then it boomed into a roar as the engine ignited. Another Grippen came up to speed and caused deafening harmonics as its pitch beat with that of the first Grippen. Then it too ignited and began to roar.

Philip wasn't sure if he was going to be sick or not. He could smell the burning kerosine and the noise was causing his stomach to churn. The 747 was more graceful. It too was coming up to speed but its roar was coming on gradually. Even though it was already making enough noise to obscure the noise of the generator truck which had previously been the single most noisy thing on the tarmac.

He turned back to see Lieve jump from the ladder. She beckoned him to Get up into the cockpit. His heart missed a beat as his pulse quickened. The excitement almost overcame him for a second. As he climbed up the ladder he realized he had left his lap-top on the ground. He hesitated for a moment but noticed the ground support man had already grabbed it in readiness.

Philip placed one hand on the small wing but noticed how flexible it was. He felt if he put any weight on it, it might break off. He changed his grip to the edge of the cockpit and swung one leg over. He wasn't quite sure where he should put his boot but planted it in the middle of the thick padded seat. He noticed he had a joy stick on either side of his seat and then noticed there was an identical pair up front. He hesitated as he saw the array of controls and displays surrounding his seat. He hoped he wouldn't have to use any of them. They were too confusing. There were a few flashing lights with legends on them. As his eyes darted back and forth he couldn't read them but he wondered if they were important.

He swung his other leg over and climbed in. Slipping unceremoniously down into the seat. Lieve's head bobbed over the side to him.

"This is where the boxes are." She shouted and flipped over a control panel to one side of him. Hidden behind it was a cargo space big enough for the large box.

"The other box is on the other side. You can stow your lap-top there as well." She pointed to the catch that allowed the panel to open then she locked it back in place again. Philip could see a small chrome ring which was obviously the mechanism but he wasn't sure how it worked. He didn't have time to figure it out before Lieve handed him the lap-top. Almost dumping it in his lap after having it passed up to him by the ground support man.

Next came his helmet. Its oxygen mask attached to one side with its bundle of tubes and wires. She placed it on his head and released the cable ties holding the bundle together. She pointed to a panel which had 2 sockets on it. He could see that they mated with the two ends he had leading from his helmet. Just as he was wondering if he should plug them in she was gone again. Suddenly he was alone up there but it gave him time to jack himself in, tighten the straps on his helmet and figure out how to open the cargo compartment. He stowed his lap-top and then surveyed his surroundings.

He saw a number of large grey knobs on the panel where he plugged his helmet into. One read "Oxygen". Another read "Volume". He recognised the rest as part of a communications system but he didn't dare mess with the controls. He couldn't work out why he needed to be plugged in when SHADO's standard head-sets were small radio transmitters themselves and required no wires. But as he turned the volume knob up he could hear the conversations of the others with air traffic control.

"GP 2 you are clear to taxi." came the slightly distorted voice.

He looked out and saw that one of the Grippens was beginning to move. Then he realized that the first of the Grippens had already moved off. He looked over his shoulder slightly and

saw it making its way out to the runway.

"GP 3. Tower. We're ready for taxi." came a distorted woman's voice which seemed to have a slightly Scottish, American accent. Also because she said "We're" and not "I'm", suggesting that she had Yuchtar aboard. But the voice was very distorted to his ears.

He could see the flame glowing inside the engines of the third Grippen as it turned ahead of him. He could have sworn he felt the heat from it also but he couldn't figure how since it was actually a long way away from him.

A short time later the third Grippen reached the runway and he heard the voice of air traffic control again.

"Ok Wing one. You're clear for take off."

"Roger that." came another female voice. Shortly followed by the sound of three Grippens. Their engines roaring loud enough to be heard distinctly over all the other engine noise on the tarmac. Then he saw them. They darted out from behind the jumbo. They slipped along the runway into the distance like three darts in formation. Just as he feared they would never lift off and run out of runway, they took to the sky as one. The roar of their engines seemed an almost beautiful sound to him now as they phased and flanged into the distance until they were nothing more than specks against the mildly overcast sky.

"GP4, 5 and 6, you are clear to taxi." Came the voice of air traffic control and the whole process began again as the next 3 Grippens moved off. At about the same time Lieve climbed back up the ladder. She placed one of her boots almost in front of him and then another on the small wing he had been afraid to place his weight on. He noticed it flex slightly but also noticed that Lieve didn't seem to care too much about it. She swung her foot into her own seat in the front of the cockpit and then slid down into it.

Next it was the turn of the ground support man's face to pop up in front of him. He handed Lieve her helmet and then climbed up one more rung on the ladder. Leaning over Philip he grabbed Philip's harness and presented it to him. Its central buckle bringing together two shoulder straps and a lap sash that when buckled together would hold him in place. But the ground support man kept pointing to Philip's groin which only served to remind him of how much it still hurt. Philip didn't understand what he was getting at but after a few more gestures he realized he was sitting on the groin strap. He realized that in an aircraft such as this he needed to be strapped in from all directions.. He lifted himself and felt between his legs. Finally producing the other strap which the Ground Support assistant dutifully buckled together and tightened. Philip winced slightly and then realized that he had better get use to it. As the plane tossed and rolled, he knew it would place pressure where he would rather there was none. He heard Lieve's voice in his headset.

"Are you alright back there? "

He answered her but she repeated.

"Hello. Are you alright back there Philip my love?" Then he realized he had to talk into his oxygen mask to be heard. He brought it to his mouth.

"Yup. I'm here. And buckled in."

"OK good. Now I still have to do the pre-flight diagnostics. It's generally only a formality but we're going to let the jumbo go first, Ok."

"Yup. Ok," said Philip. Feeling more confident but also apprehensive. Part of him wished he was on the jumbo instead. Even though he knew he's always wanted to right in a fighter jet. She explained to him how the communications system worked. How he could talk only to her over the intercom. Or he could talk to all the other planes in their convoy. And even talk to air

traffic control if he wanted to. But she stressed it was only in case of emergency. He agreed the he shouldn't need nor want to talk to air traffic control.

He heard the mighty engines of the 747 cargo jet pitch up behind him and he knew it was beginning to taxi. He looked at his radio and realized it had automatically cut off his ability to hear air traffic but it didn't matter to him at this point. He couldn't turn his head enough to see the jumbo taxiing out to the runway but he heard it pitch up and then caught sight of it half way down the runway and lifting into the air. Then it too was gone and there was comparative silence.

"Why aren't we going?" he said to Lieve.

"Don' t worry we can catch up." she said.

He noticed some of his displays showing a check list of some kind. Nothing made too much sense to him but eventually she declared that everything had checked out. The ground support man's face appeared at the top of the ladder again and handed him a pair of gloves. Then another pair to Lieve up front. As Philip was trying to put them on, the hand of the ground support man extended to shake with his. He dropped on glove and shook the mans hand. He was wearing a reassuring smile. Then he retracted and gestured at the canopy. There was no handle and Philip didn't know what to do. There were in fact two canopy's one in front over Lieve and one over himself. The Ground support man once again lent in and gestured toward a large blue button on one of the panels located just in front of his left elbow, back from the joystick on that side.

"Once you're moving or thrust up, it will not allow you to open it again" he shouted. "So you can't accidentally open it when you're flying along or anything."

Philip nodded.

The man saluted him and then was gone. Philip pressed the button and closed the hatch. "I'm amazed these things don't need any ground support to start them up," said Philip over the intercom.

"Yeah, it's pretty neat eh!" said Lieve. "They were originally designed in Sweden when there was a threat of European nuclear war. They can be started on a pair of tractor batteries. They start up slower than most jet fighters but you can land them in a field and re-fuel them with minimal ground support. They're supposed to be able to run on domestic Kerosine as well but I wouldn't like to put it to the test."

He felt a vibration through his seat. A motor in the back beginning to spin up the turbine that would ultimately be powered by combustion. He pressed the blue button and his hatch began to swing shut. It thudded as it closed and he heard two motors engage which seemed to lock it shut tight. Lieve's canopy was still open. he felt the whine build up through the plane. The shaft of the turbine spinning quite fast now. The sound of air rushing somewhere behind him.

"Pre-head on," said Lieve. He knew it was for real now and there was no backing out. The whine became a whistle and a short time later. Lieve said: "Ok here we go" and there was a boom from behind. He felt the plane kick from the inside as the combustion ignited within the engines. His heart began to thump hard within his chest as the reality of the situation set in. He checked everything again just to make sure he was buckled in. He checked his flight suit to see that his emergency marker beacon was still in its pocket where it should be.

He flipped the communications receiver back so that he could hear the control tower again.

"The sky is yours SG7. You're clear to taxi and take off when ever you're ready."

"Roger that," said Lieve

The roar built up behind him but it seemed surprisingly quiet considering he was virtually sitting on top of the engine itself. He saw one of his joy sticks move all by itself as Lieve adjusted her own joy stick up front.

"Is your joy stick moving?" she said.

"Yes it is," said Philip.

"You can disable that if it annoys you." she said. as the engine picked up a notch.

He thought about it and realized that he might bump it by accident. He looked at the controls immediately surrounding the joy stick's mounting and saw a switch marked "dual control."

"Is it the dual control switch?" he asked.

"Yes. Just flick it." He did so and the joy stick became spongy. Re-centring it itself became motionless. There was a slight jolt as the aircraft began to move. He felt Lieve throttle up slightly again as she turned the aircraft about face and headed out toward the runway. He didn't expect to feel the bumps as the plane taxied. He didn't know if he expected the tarmac to be smoother than it was or if he expected the plane's suspension to be softer. He never felt anything like this in any other aircraft. But then he reminded himself that this wasn't like any other aircraft he'd been in.

The Grippen reached the runway and turned onto it. As Lieve turned the plane she throttled up to full burn. The engines kicked and Philip felt it in thump against his back. As the plane accelerated he was pushed further and further back into his seat. He could feel the ribbing in his flight suit automatically compensating. Squeezing him gently to help regulate his body fluids against the forces of acceleration. Gradually the plane became lighter and the ride smoother. He closed his eyes at the moment the plane left the ground and when he opened them all he could see was the seat in front of him and sky either side. His head locked straight forward partly due to the enormous acceleration but mainly due to acute terror. The fact that Lieve "Ya-hooed" loudly didn't help calm his nerves.

The Grippen climbed almost vertically off the runway. Philip couldn't tell exactly which orientation he was in but when he did pluck up the courage to peer from through the canopy to one side, he could still see only sky. He looked forward again and tried to get a handle on his situation from the controls. Studying them proved to be difficult. He couldn't concentrate through all the noise and excitement. He caught sight of the artificial horizon. Not a physical bubble but display on one of the small monitors in front of him. He concentrated on it hard and to an extent it calmed his nerves a little. Finally he could confirm that they were in fact climbing at an angle of 80 degrees. He decided next he should look for an altitude display but he realized that all this concentration was making him motion sick. What worried him worse than all of this was the thought that he might vomit and then have to spend the rest of the journey to Australia avoiding lumps of his own stomach content.

The G force slackened back to normal and he felt the plane levelling out a little. Still it was climbing but now when he peered over the rim of the cockpit he could see land. Roads and towns. Farm lands with divided paddocks like a patchwork. Conveniently the aircraft rolled slightly toward the side he was looking from. He could see the gentle curvature of the earth where it met the sky. The roar of the engine seemed much quieter now somehow and the view seemed peaceful as it swung round underneath him with the plane's changing direction. At least he was beginning to get use to it and able to enjoy it. He checked that his comms were set to intercom mode.

"How high are we?" he asked.

"You're spoze to say. What's our altitude my dear?"

"Ok then. What's our altitude my dear?"

"That's better. We're coming up on 4 thousand metres. We have to climb to 10 thousand and we're turning to cross the channel. We'll catch up with the others before we hit Dover. Then it's into French air-space. Oh! By the way. You can read all this for yourself. I've locked off the control from up here. You can still get control by hitting the resume button but as long as you don't do that, you can mess with just about anything. The altimeter is just to the right of the horizon. I take it you've found the artificial horizon? It's the big colourful display in the middle. The altimeter is the red LED read-out to the right and just below. You'll see 4 buttons. 2 of them select if you want it in feet or metres. The other 2 select if you want the on-board altimeter or the GPS data. The GPS is best but not by much in most cases."

"Why's that?"

"Well the onboard altimeter can be fooled slightly where as the GPS can't. But we have to have all this manual stuff on board in case we lose contact with the satellites."

"Is that likely to happen?"

"One would hope not. But if our receiver got knocked out in battle or there was a nuclear war or something. You know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, well let's hope we don't fly into a nuclear war."

"I'm not planning to. Are you?"

Lieve explained where all the other important things were and Philip played with them one by one.

"Of course you can read all of this on your forward display."

"Oh is that this big screen in front of me which is currently black?"

"Haven't you turned it on yet? I thought you might have been watching TV on it or something."

"What? You mean this thing comes with in-flight movies?" Lieve chuckled.

"Not quite. But you can display all kinds a stuff on that screen. If you flip that panel down below it there's a keyboard and some other controls. But to use it in-flight you just turn it on and it should come up."

He did so and a picture of the sky ahead materialized on its colour, LCD surface immediately. It was overlaid with a kind of artificial horizon, an altitude display, two compass headings, one actual and the other relative. There were also two air-speed indicators. One labelled "Int" the other "Ext"

"What are the two air speed readings? They're slightly different."

"One is the air speed measured by the probe at the front of the air craft whilst the other is once again taken from the GPS. We take most of our readings from GPS. EXT means External. IE: GPS."

Near most of the readings were little square icons with different pictures and labels. There were also labels in two rows across the bottom of the screen. All of which, superimposed upon the background picture taken from a camera mounded onboard somewhere and facing forward. He deduced rightly that it was a touch screen. Instinctively he reached out and touched on of them without knowing what it did. The screen changed to show a page of what looked like meaningless text and nothing else. Orange on a black background like some ancient computer terminal.

"Oops." he said.

"What have you done?" asked Lieve.

"Err I touched one of those icons and there's this screen that seemed to be some kind of diagnostic display or something. Perhaps a status read out or something?"

"Ah! Ok. I don't know what you're looking at exactly but there are lots of those kinds of displays. If you ever get stuck you can hit the default button on the panel above it. Where you turned it on from. That should take you back to the main screen. Unless you re-set the default of course. And you don't want to do that."

"Oh of course," said Philip glad in the knowledge that Lieve couldn't see him pulling faces at her from behind. He hit the button and the display and its icons returned. He surveyed the icons along the bottom of the screen and saw one labelled "Map". He hit it and sure enough a map appeared. Replacing the display.

"Wow cool!" he said instinctively "A map."

"Yeah. You've got the whole world in there. In damn fine detail I might add," said Lieve.

"I use to have this Microsoft atlas thing on a CD once like this. Does it have pictures and sound and stuff?" Lieve laughed.

"No but hit the button that says. 3D relative. Under the tracking menu."

He did so with yet another "wow" from him. The display showed a tiny picture of his plane floating against a back drop of a fully rendered 3 dimensional land map. The little aircraft even looked like the Grippen. Complete with its little forward wings. It sat on a line as if suspended on a string or a monorail. These showed where it had come from and the predicted path where it was going. He found he could zoom in and out as well as changing the viewing angle.

"We'll be catching up with the 747 any minute now. You should be able to see it on that map," said Lieve.

Philip used the arrow icons to move his view around but he longed for a mouse or a track-ball. Then he remembered Lieve saying that there was a keyboard hidden in the lower panel. He picked at it till he worked out how to click it open. Sure enough a keyboard folded out and on it was a black touch surface.

He thumbed it round looking in all directions for another aircraft. Then he spotted a small icon which looked like an effigy of a U2 Spy plane. He was disappointed that it didn't look like the 747. In fact it confused him at first. He was about to mention that there was a U2 ahead of them but then he realized this was simply how the computer displayed all other air craft.

"Damn!" he said with a little disappointment in his voice. "It would have been good if it could have shown an actual 747 on the screen."

"Ah well. You can't have everything," said Lieve.

Philip hadn't been using the system long enough to know how to drive it properly. He didn't know there was an icon that when pressed, gave an instant overhead view. But he wondered how close they were to the 747 so he swung the view to get it as close to 90 degrees overhead as possible. Then he realized they were now almost neck and neck with the jumbo. He began looking round for it but couldn't see it anywhere.

"Where is it?" he said disappointed in not being able to see it.

"It's on top of us," said Lieve. "Only about 3 kilometres in the up direction."

"Oh?" Said Philip. Then he realized what she meant and began thumbing the 3D map to get it to show him a side-on view.

"We're at 7 thousand and they're at 10. By the way. Whatever you do don't take off your oxygen mask at this altitude. "

"Yeah, I gathered that," said Philip. "My ears popped so many times I thought they were playing the 1812 overture."

Lieve chuckled as she switched over to the SHADO secure channel on her radio and began to climb a little more rapidly. Philip noticed the air-speed display dropping but it seemed to be matching the speed of the jumbo as it climbed.

"Good evening SC57 This is your friendly Grippen floating up underneath you. Hopefully in a relatively UFO, confusing manner. We'll be with you in just a few minutes. "

"How come they don't answer?" asked Philip.

"They just did. Only we picked it up as a text message via a back channel on the GPS. This the icon marked decode back channel and you should see it."

Philip scanned the icons but there was no icon there reading that. Then he realized that he had to go back to the main menu. He found the main menu icon and returned. He was presented with the head up display module and the forward view. Scanning again he saw the icon he wanted and touched it. A simple blue window opened in the middle of his view with a text dialogue on it. It read:

"Good evening SG7. How's it doing? No UFOs. No Stealth wakes that we can detect. We are not expecting trouble at this time. on auto at 10K."

Philip was slightly startled by a shadow that loomed over him. He looked up and saw the 747 blocking out the sun directly overhead. He heard Lieve throttle back to match its speed and stop climbing. They were so close Philip felt he could almost reach out and touch its underbelly. The Grippen was in fact a 100 metres from the 747 but it was an awesome sight for Philip none the less.

"How come they talked to us on text over the GPS system?" asked Philip.

"Because we didn't want to risk the Aliens detecting us having a conversation."

"But its all digital anyway. The chances of them decoding it are slim."

"They wouldn't have to decode it. They'd only have hear a transmission come from us and then a transmission immediately following from them. They might not be able to hear what we're saying but it would be easy enough for them to work out we were talking to each other. "

"But wouldn't they be able to pick up the radio from the 747 talking to what ever beams up to the GPS matrix?"

"Like you said, it's digital. They've had a two way digital stream since they got in the air. The aliens cant' tell what's going on with that or when they're talking to whom. The tanker and the other Grippens on the other hand, have been talking non stop. Real noisy. We just hope that if they're going to attack, they take the bate. and attack that. instead. A couple of UFOs don't stand a chance against 6 Grippens."

"Yeah, but do the aliens know that?"

"Let's hope not. "

"I think if the aliens are going to attack, they would have pegged us already."

"Not necessarily. Firstly, we've just come from an air base. We've never landed any obvious SHADO stuff there and for all intents and purposes it's just a normal every day RAF base. Which of course it is. We just have a couple of hangers there. "

"Well I hope so. But you know we've just had a transport knocked out and we weren't expecting that. They tried to make it look like an accident or at least a cause un known. They don't know we can see them again now."

"Yeah, and they also don't know we know they can see us. As your research proved." Lieve was countering Philip's arguments more for the sake of it. She didn't really know but she

knew that Philip had been right on the money every other time.

"Look" he started abruptly. "If I were a bunch of aliens hiding out on Earth somewhere with a lot of spare time on my hands, I might just do a little statistics gathering of my own. Like watching and comparing flight paths of everything that moved on the planet. I mean if we wanted to, this is not beyond one of our little mini-computers to do. Imagine what their computer technology is like. "

"If they even use computer technology?" said Lieve.

"Yeah, exactly. They could be using some kind of organically grown brain thing. I mean we still don't know how all that stuff works do we. The thing is that if you had access to all the satellites that I think they've got up there, with the kind of resolution I think they've got, then they could have gathered a hell of a lot of information and worked a hell of a lot of stuff out about us by simple logical deduction. "

"How do you mean?"

"Well a lot of the model I made of their satellite coverage was simple logical deduction. In other words. I took a model of what we know about them and what we know they had been up to, and how the hell they managed to pull off some of the things they did right under our noses. Like they knew when to go invisible and when it didn't matter. Right to the second in some cases. That's how I worked out where their sats were. But mostly I included what mathematicians call a twiddle function into the model."

"A what?"

"A twiddle function. That's where you twiddle the figures slightly because the actual answer would be incorrect otherwise. Simply put I thought to myself. What 'n' hell would I do if I were an alien."

"Ah! Ok. So you tried to put yourself in their shoes."

"Yah Exactly. And If I were in their shoes, especially spending all that time sitting and waiting, I would have gathered all kinds of information and built a model from which I could extrapolate any kind of information from it as I needed at any time. You know what surprises me even more? That SHADO hadn't done that themselves before now with all the information they've gathered over the years. That's what I'm going to do when I get back. I'm gonna take a chunk of super computer and start building a huge model of this entire thing. I've actually started it but then I realized that they must have satellites of their own and kinda got side tracked. But you can imagine how much they could know if they had been constructing a model. They could subtract all the civilian air craft from the model. That would be easy enough but the Military air craft would take a little time. Still it wouldn't be that hard. You can simply follow back your tracking data and then zero in on individual aircraft. What they do and where they go. Once you can subtract all that, you're probably just left with the air craft of secret military organizations. And that means you and me."

"Hmm. That makes sense, but how would they be able to track an individual air craft's movements and work out who it belongs to?"

"Plenty of ways. You could record and log all the radio communications for a start, even if you couldn't decode the radio you could certain peg it down to types of transmission. Tag and code each one and you've got yourself a profile. I'm sure that SHADO would have a profile even if they don't know what we're saying. Then there's aircraft type. There aren't too many people who use Grippens I'm sure. Certainly no-one else has a sky diver fleet. What I'm saying is that the devil is in the details. If you can cope with analysing enough detail and cataloguing it, then you can certainly build one hell of a model. "

"And you think you can build a model like that for SHADO?"

"No not exactly. SHADO have only recently been scrutinizing fine detail. But I can make a start. I can put together a model of everything we have and then set it up so that new data can be extrapolated from that model. And I'm sure we can support the information we have with information out in the real-world."

"What do ya mean, the real world?"

"I mean like news stories, technical reports, unusual problems, even maps!"

"Maps?"

"Yeah, I was reading once where some American military organization needed some detailed depth map of some harbor in Papua New Guinea. They naturally consulted their intelligence people and they didn't have the information so they went to the CIA for it. The CIA gave them back some sketchy information but it was all they had. There was just no interest in the harbor. So this enterprising guy from this military organization went into the government office in Port Moresby and bought a highly detailed civilian map for a couple of bucks. The point is that most of your intel is actually out there on public record. You don't need massive intel gathering organizations for most of this stuff you can get it over the counter so to speak."

"Ah Yeah, I see what you're getting at. "

Philip just happened to glance ahead at that point and notice a strange object protruding from a forward hatch in the underbelly of the 747. A strange disk like object. Small and black. Shaped like a lamp shade on the end of a stiff black wire. It was bending out of the aircraft with drag and was as it got closer he could see that there were tiny aerofoils on it which were directing it down wards.

"When 'n' hell is that?" He said.

"That's our communications link. Well be able to hook into the jumbo's comms system and then into SHADO's."

"What you mean we're going to jack it in somewhere on the plane?" Lieve laughed slightly.

"No not exactly. it's just an antenna. A very low power transceiver. Works at high speed within about half a kilometre of the plane. But the aliens would have a hard time picking it up. You should be able to plug your lap top in s...." She was interrupted by a voice on the radio.

"Good evening Lieve and Philip. Hope you're having a good time. Nice of you to join us. Come in the water's fine"

"Who's that?" asked Philip not aware that his intercom now extended to the 747 as well.

"Why Philip. I'm surprised you didn't recognise the voice after last night. It's me. Virginia Lake. "

"Oh hi Virginia," said Philip trying to mask his surprise and recover his composure.

"What's up?"

"Oh Philip. You mean that swelling hasn't gone down yet? Remind me to rub some cream on it when we get to Australia." If Virginia could have seen Philip at that point she would have noted a decided shade of pink in his complexion. There was a long pause before Philip thought of anything to come back with.

"So where are you leading me this time?"

"Astray Philip my dear. I'm leading you astray."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me? So we're heading over to Calais then are we? Then where?"

"No we're not going through France," said Lieve. "We're going up through Belgium."

"OH? Why's that?" said Philip slightly surprised.

"Well otherwise we'd end up having to go through Chinese air-space."

"Oh?" said Philip still not understanding. "I didn't think the Chinese were all that hard to get along with these days?"

Colonel Lake jumped in. "Well that wouldn't be too much of a problem but given the circumstances. 2 Boeings and 7 Grippens and we can't tell them about it exactly. Could become tricky. Especially if there was a UFO attack."

"So where are we going then?"

"We'll take you up through Germany. Actually over Berlin. Then through the CIS. Belarus, Russia, Kazakstan, Russia again and then down around the edge of China and into Japan. We've got another 7 Grippens heading up from Pine Gap. It should look like a routine exchange with any luck. We change over in Japan."

"It's actually the second leg of the journey where we're expecting trouble," said Lieve. "I doubt they'll attack us over Europe or Russia."

"So do we have enough fuel? Won't we have to go up to the tanker and re-fuel? That'd give the game away wouldn't it?"

"Don't worry Mr Salisman," said Colonel Lake. "We've got plenty of fuel for you right here."

"There's enough fuel onboard that bus for one Grippen," said Lieve.

"Ah hah I get the picture," said Philip. "So we'll sort of just drop down from Japan and into Australia then?"

"Yup. That's about the size of it," said Colonel Lake, "We've got a line of Sky divers set up in the South Pacific."

"So are we really expecting trouble then?" said Philip.

"Expecting? no," said Lake. "But we'll be ready for them if they try anything." There was silence for a moment as a change of subject was in progress.

"Are you on Auto yet Virginia?" asked Virginia Lake.

"Yeah, I was just thinking about kicking back and reading a book off the head up or something? Philip's got plenty of toys to play with back there. "

"Oh how thoughtful of you to lend him your vibrators," said Colonel Lake.

Philip tried to ignore them and hope they went away. Virginia Lieve set up her heads up display to show her the text of an electronic book she was reading and Philip played with the display system in front of him. He found the weapons system and began to explore it, then thought better of it. He couldn't be sure he wasn't going to arm something and fire it. As they flew further west, they flew into darkness. Philip looked down and could see the glow of cities and towns glowing into the night. He found a display that showed him the changing time zones as they passed over Belgium and into Germany but in the darkness and only the sound of the Grippen's twin advanced jet engines to keep him company, he passed into sleep. Making up for the sleep he'd missed from the night before.

CHAPTER 2:

Philip awoke with a jolt. The sound of a refuelling nozzle connecting with the refuelling rod on the nose of the Grippen. It reverberated through the aircraft and reached his sleeping ears suddenly through the constant sound of the engines. The 747 had some running lights switched on and a pair of flood lights which illuminated the Grippen. They were bright in his eyes and he instinctively raised his forearm to cover them.

"Where' are we?" he asked groggily.

"We're over Germany," said Lieve. "Just short of Berlin."

Philip punched up his map display to confirm their position. He looked out the window but could see little with the lights of the 747 reflected on the canopy against the inky blackness.

"Are you hungry?" asked Lieve.

"Mmm. Yeah a bit" said Philip. "Are you?"

"Yeah I'm starved. How about opening the picnic basket hon?"

Philip twisted himself slightly enough to open the panel at his side. He rummaged around in the storage compartment till he could grip the large box and drag it out. He could barely squeeze it through the gap left after the panel rested upon his leg but he pulled it through squeezing it against him and onto his lap.

"Are these standard aircraft?" he asked. "I don't know much about fighter aircraft but these seem pretty weird."

"No they're not standard. But they were pretty radical designs in the first place. They were originally designed back in the eighties when the world was still under the threat of nuclear war. They could be launched with minimal support, use roads as runways and even be repaired on the side of the road as it were. They also happen to be one of the most stable fighter jets in the air. These were specially adapted for SHADO's use. "

"Thus the luggage compartments?"

"Yeah, something like that," said Lieve.

Philip opened the box. He was immediately struck with the sight of small plastic containers packed in rows. Many different colours but all looked like some kind of packaged drink container.

"What 'n earth are these damn things?" he asked in astonishment.

"Space rations!" said Lieve.

"Space rations?" said Philip in even greater astonishment. "I thought you would have brought some sandwiches or something?"

"I did. Your sandwiches are underneath that lot. But I only eat space rations."

"What you mean all the time?"

"Yup?"

"What do you do when you go to a restaurant?"

"I bring my own?"

"That must seem a bit odd?"

"We obviously don't eat in the same restaurants!"

"Obviously!" said Philip. "I'll have to get you to tell me where they are so I can avoid them. What one do you want?"

"Oh umm. Let me see now. Oh just give me a roast beef and salad one."

"What you mean there's one here that's roast beef... And Salad?"

"Yea!"

"Hmm. Ok. What colour is it?"

"It's a sort of dark brown. Roast beef and salad coloured. It's written on the side of the pack."

Philip scanned the selection and then found an appropriate coloured pack. Just then there was another thump from up front. The nozzle pulled away and began to retract up inside the belly of the 747. He watched it do so and noticed the aerofoils attached to the rim. They acted as a sort of kite which enabled it to be steered and guided. Now it was guided back up into the hatch in the 747 from whence it came. Philip just had time to return his attention to the box of food when the 747 cut its lights and effectively blinded him but he had already spotted the one he wanted and slipped it out. He handed it forward and tapped Lieve on the shoulder with it.

"Thanks," she said as she retrieved it. Opening the cap and popping out the plastic straw, she squeezed some into her mouth.

"Perr.. Jesus Christ!" she shouted. She spat slightly then realized where she was and refrained. "What 'n fuck is this? Fucking chocolate pudding. I asked for beef you... Oh god. Yuck."

"I'm sorry. But they turned the lights off just as I was looking for it."

"Well use your cabin light. It's mounted to the back of my seat. On a goose-neck."

Philip realized what she was talking about. He had seen it when he was in daylight but had neglected to ask what it was. It was just another unfamiliar gizmo in the cockpit to him. The fact it was mounted to the side of Lieve's seat-back made no sense to him at the time. He reached his fingers for it and felt round till he found what seemed to be a switch. He flicked it and a relatively bright light shone down the side of the seat and illuminated the cockpit floor. He bent the goose-neck backward toward him and then fixed it in position over the box. This time before handing it to her he checked the label. Sure enough it read: "Authentic home style Roast beef and 3 vegetables." He retrieved it and handed it to her in the same manner as before.

"What do you want me to do with the other one?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'll have that for desert. Mmmm. Chocolate pudding. My favourite."

"I thought you didn't... Oh never mind. Hey how 'n hell am I spoze to eat one of these mythical sandwiches with this oxygen mask on anyway?" Lieve laughed.

"We're only at 4 thousand. You should be able to breathe without it."

"Oh I see," said Philip now desperately digging for sandwiches.

Lieve continued: "Of course even if we weren't, you could still suck space rations through the little hole in your mask. There's a little hole with a cap on it that's specially designed for just such a thing."

"Err. Thanks but I think I'll try the sandwiches for now. "

"Suit yourself," said Lieve before taking a big sip of her beef concoction. "Mmmm. Yumm. "

"So how come we're at 4 thousand now?"

Lieve slurped some beef before answering. "Oh you know what the Germans are like. I should know, We've just flown over my home country. Use to live right next door."

"What you mean Belgium? I hope you waved hi! to mom and dad."

After several seconds digging he finally unearthed the pile of sandwiches. This presented him with a new task. To find something he actually liked. Each sandwich was cut into triangles and placed inside a triangular plastic package. Each package had a label with its contents

written on it. He was surprised to find an assortment of breads as well, even toasted cheese. He selected a salad with bean-shoot sandwich but then went back for the toasted cheese as well. He couldn't resist trying it. He closed the case and stowed it back in its hold.

He noticed that the toasted cheese container was a little different to the other. It had what looked like two zip-lock strings around it. Each had tiny yellow and black arrows along it like a police line in miniature. He swung the cabin light up to where he could see it in more detail. Unlike the other container this one was completely opaque. His salad sandwich could be vaguely seen through the translucent plastic but this was something else. It looked the same on the surface but it was as if there was something else inside besides the sandwiches. Curiosity got the better of him and he pulled the tab on the first string.

He expected it to flop open but it didn't. He inspected it further. Trying to come to terms with why it was so difficult to get into it. It felt strangely warm. Then all of a sudden it became hot. He dropped it in his lap.

"Yeeoooooch." he screamed in fright. "What the fuck?" He was trying desperately to keep it away from him in case it caught on fire.

"Oh I hear you've found one of the toasty cheeses then have you?" She laughed. All she could hear from him behind her was a series of Yelps, punctuated by random expletives. She nearly choked herself on her space ration. "Don't worry it won't burn you." she finally reassured him.

Sure enough when he felt it, it was hot but not hot enough to burn his skin.

"I should have left my damn gloves on if I had known." he said. "This had better be worth it."

When he plucked up the courage he unzipped the second pull tag and the casing flopped apart as he would have otherwise expected. Inside was melted cheese sandwiched between two relatively crispy pieces of toast. The smell hit him and it smelt good. He picked the first piece out and some of the melted cheese stuck to the inside of the container and formed string as he removed it. He tentatively took his first bite. It was hot but not too hot. Then the taste hit him.

"Damn I'm either really hungry or this is the best damn toasted cheese sandwich I've ever had."

"I think the former rather than the latter ol' boy," said Lieve. "It's actually super glue."

"What?" said Philip in astonishment. "What 'n hell are you on about now."

"It's the same cheese they use at McDonalds'. A friend of mine is a chemist. He said that there are only two molecules difference between the formula for McDonald's cheese and the formula for super glue. And one of them is colour."

None of this mattered to Philip except that he did notice how sticky the cheese actually was in his mouth. He hoped it wouldn't clue his mouth shut but he didn't care because it tasted so good at that time.

"You're just jaded after having lived on space rations so long. Your taste buds are probably all burnt out or something." He paused while he chewed another bite. "You really don't eat anything else other than space rations?"

"Nope! " said a contented Lieve on behalf of her stomach. "Well there is one other thing."

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"Baby food."

"What?"

"You know. that stuff that comes in tins and jars and you feed baby's on. I love that stuff."

"So it's a general aversion to solid food you have?"

"Oh no not at all. I enjoy a good rusk now and then."

"Jeez and people thing I'm fussy."

Philip finished his sandwich and was left with an empty container. He noticed the inside looked like they were made out of some kind of metal. Aluminium perhaps. But it crumpled just like he expected the container to do. He scrunched it up.

"What should I do with the rubbish?"

"Oh just chuck it out the window?" Said Lieve. "No no no. I'm only joking don't do that. Store it back in the box or chuck it in the hold or something. Anyway you can't open the canopy when we're airborne."

They finished their respective foods and Philip stowed their rubbish in the hold. He didn't really feel up to bringing the box back out so he just stuffed it in the hole and closed the panel up. Then he remembered the lap top. He opened the other panel and slid it out. He found a cable and worked out how to plug it into the comms system. He booted it up and realized there was no software installed on it.

"What am I spoze to do for software on this box?"

"Just get it off of SHADONET like everyone else."

"What? How do I do that? There's no software. Just a bare OS."

"Just click on net tools and it should set it up. Then when the net comes up go to the software site and pick what you want."

"Oh I see. So I can now talk all around the world on SHADONET now? Presumably this is coming over the data link with the plane up stairs there."

"Yeah, that's right. We connect to them and in turn they connect to SHADO net."

"So can I connect to the Internet through this?"

"Yeah, apparently so. But don't ask me. I don't know anything about this shit. What do you wanna do anyway? Down load some porn or something?"

"No that wasn't what I had in mind but if you need some I can do a search for you. Actually there's a little record company I'd like to find some information on. Hey! you wouldn't happen to know if SHADO had any good hacking resources would you?"

CHAPTER 3:

"What? You wanna go to Australia as well?" said Pilgrim thumping her desk "We may as well all pack up and go live there."

"What?" said Frogleberg scratching his head.

She thumped the desk once again then looked at her patch worked computer terminal surprised that nothing else fell off of it.

"So what's the story again? Has this girl just gone missing?"

"Well no commander. We don't think so. We think something's happened to her. One of our people stationed at one of the universities down there said he saw her but she didn't seem to recognise him."

"Perhaps she had just forgotten about him?"

"They worked together for 2 years. They knew each other in Cambridge. They graduated together. We even scooped them up at the same time. I don't think they're going to forget each other in a real hurry."

"And you think Aliens?"

"Well it wouldn't be the first time."

"Do you have any leads?"

"Nope. Just that she went to Adelaide on furlough. And we know she's at least been there because Ben saw her, but what happened after that is anyone's guess."

"Can't our security people in Australia deal with it?"

"Well they are but every country requires a different approach. Americans are used to men in black suits stepping in all over everything and taking over. Australians are just as likely to tell 'em to get fucked. Authority there has little authority, if you know what I mean. They've got a secret service of they're own you know?"

"Yeah, ASIO. I'm aware of them. Someone in MI6 was telling me they use them as stooges." Adrianna began to smile a little as Frogleberg burst out laughing.

"Stooges? Stooges! Apparently one time a whole group of 'em got busted by a hotel manager for making too much noise on a clandestine operation. They botched it so bad that he call the police and all 20 of them were arrested. Took them 2 days to sort out the mess. By which time the hotel manager had given his stories to all the papers. Is that embarrassing or what?"

"Really?" said Pilgrim in amazement. She laughed and thumped her desk . Then she stopped laughing. Still nothing fell off her computer terminal. She scrutinized it more carefully. She picked at the mounds of electrical tape binding it together and managed to lift some of it from the corner. There was no damage. The plastic was one solid piece and she knew that she had previously broken a chunk off there when she sent it crashing to the floor and then stood on it.

"I've been had!" she shouted angrily.

"What now?" Said Frogleberg.

"This is not my computer. Someone's replaced it with a new one and patched it up to look like my old one. Someone's head is gonna get served up on a platter." She pressed her finger on the intercom. "Ford! Get yo' ass in here!"

"Err does that mean I can go."

"Yes yes yes. Go find out what happened. That's what you're paid for."

Frogleberg raised his eyebrows at Ford as he passed him in the corridor out side. Just

before he walked out of range he heard Ford saying: "No commander it wasn't me. Honestly I didn't do it."

CHAPTER 4:

Philip had been concentrating for hours on the screen of his lap top. His concentration was broken by Lieve's voice on the radio.

"I'd like a Cheese burger and a coke please?"

"Err. Roger SG7. Would you like fries with that?"

Philip looked up as the flood lights from the 747 lit up the cockpit and temporarily blinded him. He watched as the refuelling nozzle extended on its hose from the hatch in the bottom of the 747. He saw how the fins on the end of it adjusted themselves to guide it closer to the nose of the Grippen. A rod just right of centre on the nose extended outward to meet it and Lieve expertly piloted the Grippen into it. He felt the thud as it made contact. A small vibration as a mechanism in the nozzle secured the mating surfaces and fuel began pumping.

"Whacha been doing back there Phil ol' boy? You've been awfully quiet," said Lieve.

"Oh not a real lot. I've just been poking around in a few record companies. Besides, you've been pretty damn quiet yourself up there."

"Hell no. I've been listening to an AEK CD."

"Oh right. Which one?"

"Blues are hotter than red."

"Oh you mean the new one. Cool. That's really good, that. He may not be the most prolific releaser of music but he always comes up with gems like that."

"You know Batz don't you?"

"Yeah, he's a good pal of mine. Known him for years. I spoze I shouldn't tell you this but him, Alex Cavaye and I use to be Bad Sex."

"You mean that controversial techno act Bad Sex?"

"Yup. That was us."

"No shit? Really. I laughed my head off when I heard that stuff. It was so cool how the authorities were chasing their tail trying to find out who did that stuff. Anything that can piss Marilyn Manson off has gotta be a good thing." She laughed and Philip could almost hear her grinning.

"Yeah. We were lucky no-one found out who we were. "

"So what's Batz like?"

"He's a weird guy. What can I say? Weird and fucked up in a creative sort of way. Know's a lotta shit. It's strange though. No-one could ever get him to Leave his home. I think in the end he was afraid to leave. You should have seen what we had to do to prize him out and get him to come up to Iceland. I should drop in on him while I'm in Australia. I should take the GRG to meet him. He'd freak out."

"Yeah, I'd love to meet him."

"Where are we anyway?"

"We're just back in Russia again. We've just crossed out of Kazakstan. We're on the last leg up and over the top of China. Another 3 or so hours and we'll be in Japan."

"Any sign of UFO activity?"

"Nope, not a thing."

"I still think they must know we're here. If their statistical model is good enough they could know all kinds of things."

"Hey do you think they know about the girl's rude group?"

"Could do. Could do. Hey I was just thinking about that Perters guy. That guy that almost

had me killed in Iceland. Someone said he and his organization probably worked for the aliens. I wonder what information his spies gather for them. They could have quite detailed information on the GRG."

"Yeah, that's a bit of a worry. A slimy guy like that could put you off sex for life." They laughed for a moment but were interrupted by a voice from the jumbo.

"Ok SG7 my gauges here read you're full to the brim again. Should be enough fuel to get you into Japan."

"Yup. Roger that," said Lieve. "My fuel status is full as a boot. You can release now. Thanks."

The nozzle disengaged and drifted away till it was clear of the Grippen. Then it was reeled in on the end of its hose. Lieve pressed a button on one of her panels and the nose refuelling rod retracted into a safe position. The lights from the 747 faded out. First the flood lights and then the running lights. There were left in almost total darkness. Just the glow of their instruments and displays.

Philip powered down his lap top and closed it to get the cockpit as dark as possible. Then he surveyed the earth below. There was very little to see. Some glows from fires burning in the distance. Even though they were probably nothing more than camp fires he could tell the difference between their amber, reddish glows and that of the bright pin pricks of light that denoted towns and cities. He located the altimeter and checked their height. "6532 metres" it read. Though their exact height was bouncing around a little from second to second. The landscape was featureless to his eyes from that height and after a short time of trying to work out its contours from the glows on the ground, he gave up and decided to get some rest. With his lap-top still resting idle in his lap, he let his mind wonder and drifted off to sleep. Rocked gently by the motion of the aircraft. He would remember later thinking that riding in a jet fighter was a piece of cake.

CHAPTER 5:

"Yo Philip. Are you awake?" asked Lieve but she got no reply. "Philip! Wake up. It's your turn to take the wheel."

"What?" said Philip groggily as he woke up. "What Wheel? What are you talking about?"

"Only kidding. We've just come of auto and we're coming out and round for the coastal run. We're nearly there. "

"Oh right." he said as he lifted his head and felt the cold drool run back from his oxygen mask onto his cheek. "Oh yuck."

"What's the matter." asked Lieve.

"Never mind," said Philip. He looked around him. It was still black outside beyond the canopy. "So where are we?" he said to himself.

He flipped on the display in front of him. Like an expert, he selected the map and zeroed in on their position. He saw the graphic representing the 747 merged with that of their own. The map didn't make much sense to him until he spotted the icon labelled "Political boundaries." He touched it. Map lines appeared showing him the boarder with China. They were awfully close to it and now rounding back out toward the sea of Japan. A sense of relief swept over him. He had not realized how much stress he had been under. Although he was only on the north west corner of the Pacific rim, and still had to travel the rest of the way down to Australia, he felt as though he was almost home. He began to realize how uncomfortable he had become in his seat. Strapped in with little room to move. Sheathed in his flight suit which was adorned with safety gear and a parachute on his back.

He moved one of his legs and realized it had partially fallen asleep. Then the other one in the same condition, kept awake only but the special design of the flight suit it self, which kept his blood circulating. He began wishing hard that he was already on the ground.

"How long?" he asked.

"Don't worry Philip my love, you'll have your feet back on the ground within the hour," said Lieve.

"What do you do up the front there to pass the time? And stop your legs from going to sleep."

"Oh didn't I show you that? Sorry. You're wearing a 10 thousand Euro suit there."

"Euro? Oh sorry yeah, you mean the new Euro Dollar."

"Yeah. You know how you plugged your helmet into that socket on the suit, and then your helmet is plugged into the consol, well that provides external power for the suit. You can set it to do all sorts of stuff. Heating, cooling, pressure fit, the whole works."

"So how do I set it up? It's actually been a little on the cold side all the way."

"Oh I'm sorry, you should have said something," said Lieve. "There's a kind of remote control in one of your breast pockets and if you look next to the coms panel there's another little set of controls which you can use."

Philip scanned the panel and realized it was a display that he had been staring at off and on during the whole trip. He didn't know what it was for but it suddenly dawned on him. The small red LED display was showing suit temperature. Above it was a large graphical LCD display. Illuminated by a fluoro back light. On closer inspection he realized it was displaying suit status.

"I have to say though." continued Lieve breaking his concentration. "You should always have your suit just a tad on the cold side. If your suit is too hot and we suddenly have to pull

some Gs, you'll probably throw up if it's too hot. Use to be an old pilot's trick to play on rookies. Turn the suit temperature up a little warm then throw them around a bit and watch 'em throw up in their mask."

"Mmm. Perhaps I'll leave it alone then."

"Anyway we'll be in Okinawa soon." She was interrupted by the radio.

"This is SHADO cargo 57 calling SG7. We're about to start our descent to approach altitude. Time to bid you good night till we touch down."

"Roger that SC57. Give us a few minutes to clear our links and we'll be on our way," said Lieve. She flipped to the internal intercom.

"Ok. Philip That gives you a few minutes to pull any data off the net you still need while I get last minute nav and status uploads done."

"Oh I'm not using the computer at the moment."

"Ok no problems," said Lieve. "I'll get the status uploaded and do the calcs and we'll break the link."

"The calcs?" asked Philip.

"The calibrations."

Philip looked at his lap-top and decided to close it and stow it. Lieve was busy up front checking her calibrations against the 747s computers. When all the computer systems agreed with each other she locked everything back to the Grippen's control and switched out of autopilot.

"Ok SC57, we're done here. Let us know if you need anything, When we get low enough we might make use of some of that terrain down there. "

"Roger that SG7, if you're off auto we're cutting the link."

"Yup. Anytime SG7. See you in Okinawa. Bye Bye."

The cable with the antenna on it began to retract inside the 747. The Grippen could still receive information from the 747 or direct from SHADO through modulations on the GPS network but they couldn't transmit. Not unless it was an emergency. Lieve checked her instruments once more as if a car driver checking her mirror just prior to leaving the curb. Then she began to drop away from the jumbo as if she had been dropped from one of its cargo bays and launched for the first time. Philip felt his stomach sink for a short time as the plane lost altitude quickly. He looked at his altitude display and saw it dropping away fast. 7000, 6500, 6000, 5500 and then it began to slow its rate of decent.. 5000, 4800, 4600, 4500, 4400, 4350, 4300... Slower and slower till it reached 4050 metres. and remained there. Changing altitude by only a matter of metres.

Philip thumbed his 3D map so he could see the 747 also losing altitude. It was shifting slightly south west of their own position but dropping far slower than they had.

"Won't we be spotted now?"

"Well the terrain round here is makes things pretty hard to spot from space. There's often thermal ghosting and I'd assume that would effect the alien's abilities to see us just as much as us. But we're so close to base they surely wouldn't attack now."

"I dunno," said Philp. "It looks to me from this map that the support aircraft has moved further away from us than it was before."

"Well it never hurts to be on your toes but I don't think they'll try anything now. Besides they predict any attack to come in the south-west pacific somewhere. That's why we've got all the skydivers out there. And of course we can see 'em now with our..." She was interrupted by a red alert warning which rang through the radio like a car horn.

"Red-alert. Red-alert" said the voice of the SID network. A synthesized voice triggered by the array of space intruder detector satellites. "Red-alert. 2 inbound UFOs." Philip phased out as SID read out the co-ordinates.

"Famous last words..." He said.

"Shoosh," said Lieve. "No this is not us, this is in-bound from space. "

"This is SHADO control. Sorry to interrupt you SID but we have a situation here. We have two inbound UFOs and our new sensors have picked up one running in stealth mode. It's early days yet but it looks to be heading for a rendezvous with one of the incoming. The other UFO seems to be travelling too fast to make earth orbit. in fact we're not sure what it's doing. SGs and SCs in the transport fleet, I stress. This is not a problem for you as far as we are aware. "

"See," said Lieve. "It's not our problem. They're probably trying that same ol' trick they've been using for years. The one you discovered."

"Yeah, it does sound like it," said Philip. "One heading out to join up with the incoming to hide the fact that there's an outgoing. It all fits. Except for that other one. Can I get tracking data on that?"

"Yeah, maybe. It depends if they've put it through the GPS net yet. What ever you do, don't switch out of radio silence mode to request it."

"Ok Roger that," said Philip. "Hell I don't believe I actually said roger."

There was no data available to them and they sat in silence as they performed their manoeuvres as planned.

CHAPTER 6:

"So what do we do Colonel?" The voice snapped Colonel Critchley from his daydream. A daydream in which he was pondering that very question. He had taken over the graveyard shift at SHADO HQ just over an hour earlier and now had a dilemma on his hands. He shared his problem with the command centre captain who posed the question.

"Hmm. Good question. On one hand we have a pretty much routine intercept. On the other hand we have to keep the convoy safe into Japan. "

"Well I guess you said it right there," said his number one. "It's a routine intercept and if we don't go for it, it will look anything but routine."

"Yeah you're right of course but there's something I just don't like about this. Something smells a rat and I really need the Commander here, or even Colonel Ford. He's much better at second guessing the aliens than I am. Especially in situations like this. " He rubbed his chin and pondered for a few seconds more. "I guess we can't wait around. Go for intercept!"

"Action stations!" shouted the captain. They all knew that a liberal dispatch of interceptors would have already been shot along their launch tubes and out across the lunar surface, gaining lunar altitude and positioning themselves along a trajectory assigned to them by SHADO's array of computers. The only thing missing was the authorization to attack. The captain stepped up to the command consol.

"Moon base and all interceptors, You are clear for intercept. I say again, you are go for intercept."

Each of the UFOs were assigned to be intercepted by half the 10 strong interceptor fleet. They locked their respective targets. Spread out so that if the first missed the second and subsequent interceptors would surely hit their marks. Their plasma weapons were charged and armed. Then moon base came back on-line to HQ.

"This is moon base. Intercept on the first UFO unlikely. It hasn't slowed down as yet. Its speed and course will make it impossible to slingshot and be able to make Earth or Moon orbit. It's gonna pass right through. Even if it starts decelerating now it's gonna be way off." Colonel Critchley dashed over to the command consol and grabbed the microphone.

"Are you sure Moonbase?"

"Yeah Sorry HQ. We can have a go at interception but I don't think we're gonna get close to this thing now. If we were behind it may be but not with it inbound on top of us. It's gonna zip straight through. Our guess is it's a diversionary tactic to get the other UFO through."

"Yeah Ok, Moon base. Give it your best shot. What about the other UFO?"

"Yeah that's pretty much a standard approach by the looks. It's going to..." She cut her self short. Her face on the monitor took on a more worried expression. "Damn! How do they do that? She shouted."

"Do what lieutenant?" said Critchley.

"we get all set up on a cut and dried run. We spread the net and all they have to do is fall into it. They can't possibly be able to second guess us that well."

"What are you talking about Lieutenant?"

"It looks like the second UFO will avoid our intercept."

"What?" shouted Critchley.

"Yeah, I don't get it colonel. We expected them to do and still they got through the outer defences. What I don't get is they must know we'd still get them."

"What have we got?" said Critchley slightly impatient for a solution.

"We don't have anything in Earth orbit that can get it. We're going to have to launch a sky divers. So I guess it's back to you now."

"Damn!" Said Critchley. "Ok thanks moon base." He turned to his captain. "What's the trajectory termination?"

"Err. Looks like South Pacific. To the east. Top of New Zealand or even the islands. "

"What have we go in there?"

"Err. Well. Nothing really."

"Whata ya mean nothing?"

"The three skydivers we have in the South Pacific are all lined up along the Western Pacific Rim. Basically to follow the convoy down."

"Have we got anything else?"

"Yes sir, But we'll need to scramble some Hornets out of Central Australia. Since we don't have any on standby, it would be quicker to run the last skydiver in the chain toward it. Let me confirm that."

He punched up some data on a consol and consulted with the consol's operator. They nattered in hushed tones for a moment then he stood to face Colonel Critchley.

"Sir yes. It looks unfortunately like the last Skydiver has the only chance of making an intercept."

"Damn!" said Critchley. "If we unzip our fly now they'll know something's up." Two of the women operatives gave him brief but obviously unimpressed dirty glances in his direction for his last expression. Critchley did not rise to it and remained pondering. Rubbing his chin and staring at the array of overhead monitors and projections screens. Displays of data and graphics.

"This is really weird." he said finally. "Look we're used to this by now. We know what their usual ploy is. They usually have an out-going UFO which will meet it. We know that this is their usual ploy for a decoy mission. So that we won't see the UFO leaving our atmosphere. But where's the other UFO. We don't see one yet. And we can see them when they're running in stealth-mode these days. So where is it?"

"I don't know sir but if we don't do something real soon, we're going to show out either way."

"Damn it you're right. Ok. Launch the closest sky diver and try and intercept the UFO But only send one."

"Right Sir," said the operative and the order was given.

Somewhere off the coast of Papua New Guinea in deeper water, a skydiver's captain slid down the narrow tube onto the platform which would slide forward and swing upward to form the pilot's chair. Then it would slip upward into the cockpit amongst the maze of electronics and hydraulics that constituted the interior of the sky portion of sky diver.

"Launch position" he said has he checked off the safeties which would allow him to fire the initial rocket engines. The entire submarine began to tilt upward to a 45 degree angle.

"Increase to launch speed and depth." commanded the captain.

"Aye sir we'll be at launch position in 10 seconds."

The captain hit the switches which would fire the engines over as soon as the electronic signal was sent by the submarine crew. He hit the "spin up" buttons which activated the pre-spin on the conventional turbines. They would begin to spin up slowly whilst still int he water. The intake and outlet vents would open soon after it left the water allowing air to rush through can ignite the burners. By the time the rocket engines had run out of fuel they would

be at full speed and ready to hit the after burners which would take over. Assuming all went well. And it usually did.

The captain felt the jolt as the chemical engines fired. The submarine thrusting upwards at ramming speed would suddenly be pushed backwards by the thrust of the engines. The whole effect helping to propel the sky craft toward the surface and skyward.

The captain was pushed back in his seat. The only thing for him to do then was watch through the cockpit window to see the rippling surface, illuminated by the stars and the moon, rushing toward him at ever greater speed. Within seconds he was there, breaking through the surface and sky-7 was airborne.

The noise was intense, the process automated. He couldn't hear the vents open nor judge the condition of the jet engines coming on line. The vibration intense that he couldn't see his instruments to tell the status of the aircraft. All he could do was hang on and hope that the systems wouldn't fail him. They did not and within 15 slow motion seconds the chemical rocket engines were cutting out. Giving way to the characteristic whistle of jet engines and a far smoother ride.

Another slight jolt as the afterburners kicked in. Injecting pure kerosine into the tail mix of each jet motor causing a bright, 25 metre long flame to emit from each engine like the flame from a gas welding kit. He was forced back in his seat but still the ride was far smoother than the chemical engines had been. He checked his heading against the predicted entry termination of the UFO's trajectory and adjusted his course accordingly. Still climbing rapidly he flamed out the afterburners to avoid as much visual reference as possible.

"This is sky 7 to SHADO HQ. Airborne and on course."

"Roger that Sky 7," said the radio operator in the control room.

"What's the ETI?" said Critchley.

"Something in about 30 minutes. It's very much up to what the UFO does next. It's slowing rapidly. If it comes in and darts off easterly before sky-7 gets there, we're not going to have enough fuel."

"Damn it. What have we got east of there?"

"Nothing by the looks, sir. We can scramble some hornets out of Pearl. French Guiana. The best we could do is track it and hope it flies into one of our nets."

"Damn," said Critchley.

"Well at the rate it's slowing up I would say we're not going to face that problem Sir. Look." The operative pointed to a screen with tracking information on it. The estimated speed was dropping rapidly.

For the next 15 minutes they watched as the UFO slowed up. It had almost reached the atmosphere and was travelling so slowly that should it have pierced Earth's protective layers, sky-7 still would have had to wait for it to arrive.

"What 'n hell is it doing?" shouted Critchley. "Am I seeing things. Is it actually hovering there? Has it stopped or gone into orbit or something? I've never seen anything like it."

"I think it's turning sir but slowly. It's the same kind of manoeuvre they do when they're running decoy for an out bound," said his off-sider.

"Yes but there's no outbound."

"But they don't know we know that. Surely."

"But what do they need a decoy for if there's no out going UFO to be a decoy for?" Critchley thought for a moment then he suddenly turned a shade of white. The remaining hair on his balding head seemed to stand on end as if he had placed his hand on a Vandergraph

generator.

"Red alert!" he shouted. "Sound red alert. Get the status from the Grippens and make it a full organization wide red alert."

"But the Grippens won't be silent? The aliens will be able to track them."

CHAPTER 7:

Philip was woken from his day dream by the sound of an electronically generated cloister bell in his ear. "Red Alert" were the only words he could here. Generated electronically. and stated repeatedly. The words "red Alert" flashed vividly in red on the otherwise blank LCD screen in front of him. His heart skipped a beat as the adrenaline kicked in. Then just as panic was about to over take him the noise in his ears stopped and he heard Lieve speak.

"What the fuck's going on. Something's up. Something big time. They've got the plane transmitting status. We've just blow what ever cover we had."

Philip began looking round him as if he was expecting someone to wipe his wind shield. Panic had settled in for the duration.

"Oh fuck! Oh Shit. Oh Fuck" Were the only words he could hear coming from Lieve up front.

"Hello SG7" came the voice from the 747. "I don't know if you've noticed but we're about to get some visitors."

"Yeah, I got 'em," said Lieve. "Oh fuck. You have to be kidding. Where's the back up."

"We've got a problem SG7, they're already putting down in Okinawa. "

"What? Oh fuck. Oh shit."

"What's happening?" screamed Philip.

"Hold on ol' son, this could be a real bumpy ride."

"Yeah I gathered that but what's happening?"

"We've got UFOs incoming. They'll be on top of us any minute."

"How many?"

"This is the bad part. 4 of them."

"Oh fuck," said Philip. "Oh fuck Oh Shit. What about the other's How long will they take to get here?"

"They're doing a touch and go in Okinawa. By the time they turn round it could already be to late. And they probably don't have the fuel for a protracted battle. I'm not real good in a fighter jet I gotta tell ya. In an interceptor no problems. I might be able to hold one of them motherfuckers off but not fucking 4 of them. Fuck Fuck Fuck."

"Keep it down, down there will you, We're trying to think our way out of this hole." came the voice back from the 747.

"Philip!" said Lieve. "I don't suppose you've ever done any weapons training have you?"

"Fraid not"

"Well now would be a good time for a crash course. I'll fire 'em. It's up to you to guide them in. It's pretty easy really. Trust me. Are you left handed or right handed?"

"Right handed."

"Ok I'm turning the guidance over to your right joy stick. Hit the targeting display on your HUD. The missiles will target in on the UFOs but they might not actually hit the targets. It's your job to try and guide them in and you can hit the destruct button which is the big red one on top of the joy stick. Ok if the missile looks like being a lost cause, you can detonate it next to a UFO. It might do some damage if it's close enough. You got that?"

"No!"

"Good Ok. Weapons armed and ready."

"What if I hit the 747?"

"You can't exactly. We've all turned on our friend or foe systems. The missile will avoid

hitting one of its own."

"Roger," said Philip instinctively. Trying his best to take in the information on the screen in front of him. Trying to learn how to use it in what ever time he had left.

"Why didn't we get any warning?" shouted Lieve to anyone on the radio who would listen.

"They were in stealth mode and they had a decoy apparently," said the controller on the 747 "They were probably based along the border with Russia and China all along. Just waiting."

"So how are we supposed to defend ourselves against 4 of these mother fuckers until the cavalry arrives?" said Lieve. "I take it the cavalry will be arriving?" Her voice was obviously stressed.

"I don't know" came the voice from the 747. "The other Grippens were about to touch down. They're gonna be late if they make it at all. They'll probably be out of fuel."

"Shit!" said Lieve. "And we're not doin' so well for juice either. Should have guessed this would happen." There was no time for a response.

"Incoming." came the distorted voice from the 747.

"I'm on it." shouted Lieve. "You ready back there pumpkin?"

"No!" said Philip as he grasped his joystick and tried to concentrate on the screen.

"OK then. Lets Party." And with that Lieve laid over her own joystick and the plane rolled hard to the left to engage the first UFO. A few seconds later there was a blinding flash and the plane rolled immediately hard to the right. It spun around and then rolled completely over. Philip was concentrating on the shifting target and hardly noticed he was inverted.

"I'm going to loop back on it. get ready for a lock." shouted Lieve. There was no response from Philip. He saw the target behind them and trained his eyes on it so as to not miss any movement it might make.

Lieve put the plane in a steep climb with turned into an inverted loop. Remaining upside down Philip could see the target in his sites. He followed it in.

"Fire for Christ sake." shouted Lieve.

He pressed the trigger and watched it head out aimlessly.

"Keep you finger on the button," she said. "You have to guide it in." Philip fumbled for the button and had to look. He hit the detonate button instead and the missile exploded well short of its mark.

"What did you go and do that for?" she shouted as she spun the Grippen hard to the left and put it back into a 45 degree loop.

"Sorry!" shouted Philip. "I'm new to this. I slipped."

"Well at least you've made it change course. It's heading away from us for the time being. Just don't let it happen again." There was a small pause as she righted the plane but the action was on again almost immediately.

"Oh shit. Here comes the second one." She spun hard left again and rolled the plane invert. Philip was beginning to feel the effects of motion sickness but knew he had to concentrate.

"What do I do? I can't target anything," shouted Philip frantically.

"You have to select another missile. Hit the new missile button. Don't hit the new weapon button because that takes you to one of the weapons menu."

"Got it."

"Have you got a target yet?"

"Almost."

"Hurry up for Christ sake will ya. I don't know. Too many UFOs, not enough time."

"Ok I got it."

"Then fire already."

Philip's actions spoke louder than words. The missile streaked off in front of them. He concentrated on the target on the screen whilst holding down the targeting button on his joy stick. The active target painted red by a laser. The computers helping him maintain his lock. Then suddenly Lieve jolted the plane to the right. Philip lost concentration for a second but the computer maintained his lock. Unfortunately his lock slipped off the target a little. He watched as the distance counted down but he couldn't correct his error in time. It approached zero and he realized it would miss so he hit the detonate button instead. The missile exploded close enough to the UFO to cause it damage. It spun ground-ward streaming orange plumes of smoke and debris.

"What did you do that for?" shouted Philip.

"Err Philip my love. Don't know if you've noticed but our neighbourhood aliens are back. And they've brought some friends."

He saw it on his screen, The smaller, wide view radar-like display in the top corner showed another UFO approaching. He selected another missile and attempted a lock. Surprisingly he achieved it almost immediately. The screen displaying the target-lock cross-hairs. Except it wasn't the closest UFO. He pulled the trigger and let the missile go anyway. He followed it in. Passed the first UFO.

"What are you doing?" Screamed Lieve. He said nothing. Then she saw the missile remain dead on target. The UFO exploded in a spectacular fire ball of debris. Lieve had not time to say anything she threw the Grippen to the left and dived at the same time. Philip felt as if his entire gastro intestinal tract was about to exit his mouth but he soon forgot about the feeling. A blinding flash of light and a loud bang. The plane suddenly flipping upwards. Had his digestive organs been actually on the loose, this new G-force would have easily put them back in their place.

"Fuck we're hit." shouted Lieve. "we seem to be Ok though." A short silence followed by "We've lost GPS. I've got a hydraulic warning. Must of hit the tail somewhere. "

"Are we alright?"

"Yeah we've still got a back up that'll keep us in the air but It'll be a bit sluggish." She stopped short and audibly gasped over the intercom. "Oh shit there's a UFO heading for the 747." She spun the plane round and hit full afterburners. Forcing Philip hard back in his seat like he had never felt before. They were a long way from the 747 and she gave it everything she had to get there in time.

"We're not going to make it." she said. "Come on. Come on."

"I can't get a lock." shouted Philip. Taking his voice falsetto. "It keeps wanting to target the 747."

"Damn I think the radio must be down as well or something. Don't fire. There's nothing we can do. You'll hit the 747. There's no friend-or-foe signal."

"Won't the missile pick it up and avoid it?"

"Yes and no. The missile's smart but not that... No time to explain I'll try and get a different angle."

She spun the plane slightly but they both knew this would only increase their time to the target. Still Philip poised following the cross-hairs on this screen. Trying to get a lock. Very

much aware that if he slipped and launched now, he could very well destroy the aircraft he was trying to protect.

"If the radio's down, how will the missile respond to my commands?" asked Philip.

"I don't know?" shouted Lieve. "All these systems work on different radios. I don't know how much has been taken out. We can't risk it."

"But it's going to be too late."

"I know. I know." shouted Lieve back in return.

The UFO was rapidly approaching the 747. Hatches opened on the top and bottom of the 747's fuselage. Turrets extended through the openings and took up position. Another bomb-bay-like hatch opened in the bottom which exposed a rack of 4 missiles. They were all pointing forward and practically useless. Even if they fired them, by the time the missiles had turned round onto the target, it would be all over.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. There's nothing we can do." shouted Lieve. She screamed as the UFO approached the 747 and came into striking distance.

Suddenly there was an explosion. Lieve closed her eyes briefly and then reopened them to see it was the UFO that had exploded not the 747.

"Woo hoo!" came a shout across the radio. "Sorry we took so long to get here." Lieve began laughing and shouting her self.

"Yeah. All right!" she shouted. "I never thought I'd be glad to hear your voice Alien."

Phillip swung his head around as the light from an explosion behind him reflected off the surfaces of the panels in front of him. He heard the noise it made just audible over the noise of the engines.

"What the?"

"Just swatting a fly for you." came another voice.

"Hannie!" shouted Lieve. "I knew if Vourhause was around, you wouldn't be far behind."

"Oh the entire GRG are here, lover."

"Thank fuck for that," said Lieve. "We thought our radio was out. Our GPS is down, I'm just about out of fluid on the primary hydraulics. I didn't think you'd have the fuel to get back here in time."

"Yeah, we all juiced up not so long ago. You're lucky. We weren't going to bother but the tanker wanted to get drained a bit more before touching down."

"Speaking of fuel," said Lieve. "I think we might have a problem. I don't got a reading on either tank."

"You better loose some altitude girl," said Hanniford."

"I head that. I'm gonna back off and drop."

"I'm gonna come along side and take a look," said Hanniford.

Hanniford pulled up level with the decelerating SG7 and began to descend with it. Hanniford looked over the damaged tail plane and then swung underneath it to take a look at its underbelly.

"I've got a bit of bad news for you little darlin'. You've got damage to your tail plain alright but there's a bit of damage to your wing as well. I can't tell if you're loosing fuel. " She swung up and around the other side. "Yeah. Yeah. Looks like you took a plasma burn right down your right hand side. Looks like your undies might be damaged as well. I'd say you're gonna have to ditch girl."

"Oh fuck! I hate ditching," said Lieve. "Ever ditched before Philip my love? Of course not. Well now's the time to learn. When these things run out of fuel they fall faster than an

Asian economy. But don't worry, we've probably got a fair bit of fuel left. With any luck we'll make it all the way..." She was cut short by a warning buzzer. Philip saw the lamp flashing on his panel too. It was a large square bezel with the words. "Fuel warning." printed on it.

"Oops spoke too soon. But don't worry we've probably got another couple of..." She was cut short by the characteristic roar of the engines bleeding away. Philip could hear the whistle of the turbines screaming easily now as everything became quieter.

"We're goin' down. Mayday Mayday. this is SG7 we're going down. " She paused and hit the on-board distress signal. "Philip. Unplug your mask from the panel. Plug your mask into the box on the enviro suit. Do it now! When I give the signal, there's a handle with a yellow rip-cord above your head. You should be able to feel it to your right a little. Grab it but don't pull it. I'm gonna try and get this plane down as low as possible until it starts to become unstable. Then you gotta eject. You got that?"

"Oh shit! Yeah, I got it."

"Oh one last thing. There's a switch on that half round cylinder type object on your chest. Press it. It's the only way they'll find you." We're over the sea but I'm gonna try and guide it back over land. Just pray we fall into Russia and not into China. Otherwise the same thing that happened to Paul Foster might happen to us. "

"Ah Ha" said a petrified Philip Salisman

"I'll follow you down as long as I can Hon'," said Hanniford.

"Passing 4 thousand," said Lieve. "I think it's 4 thousand."

"You mean you don't know?" said Philip.

"It's hard to tell," said Lieve. "All the instruments are fucked up now."

"Yes you're passing 4K," said Hanniford. "I've got you on track."

"Good luck Virginia. And Phillip." came the voice of Virginia Lake from the 747. "The rescue team is already informed and on its way."

"3 and a half K," said Lieve. "It's starting to get a little rough but we're back over dry land. We'll pull at 3K. You got that?"

"Yeah, I got it," said Philip. "Just in case we don't make it, Thanks for an incredible night last night. Someone tell my wife I love her."

"You'll see your wife again. You can tell her in person," said Virginia Lake. "You can take her some Bin97 to try."

"3 point 2" shouted Lieve. Philip's grip tightened on the rip-cord.

"Hang on to that rip-cord till you're free of the plane. The chute will open automatically."

"OK," said Philip. The modulations of fear plainly evident in his trembling voice.

"3 point one. get ready. It's starting to get unstable." Philip didn't have to be told, he could feel the vibrations bumping through him. The whole plane was beginning to buck and rock.

"3 thousand... Wait for it. Wait for it... When I count to three, pull. I'll be right behind you. One, Two three."

"Now?"

"Yes pull the bloody thing for fuck sake!"

He closed his eyes and pulled down as hard as he could toward his head. Everything that happened after that was a blur. He didn't see the canopy blow open. He didn't see his seat fire skyward on its tiny rockets. All he heard was a noise and then just the wind. The sound of the winding down engines were gone. He heard the sound of air rushing through the vent holes in his helmet. Vent holes without which would have caused lift like the curvature of a wing surface. Lift that would have easily torn his head off at the speeds they were travelling at

He felt the chair fall away from him. The buckles of his seat harness releasing automatically. For a short time there was a strange calmness. The sound of the wind all around him. He opened his eyes but saw nothing. Nothing but the blackness of the night sky. There was no sense of up or down. In fact hardly any sense at all. He wondered if this was what it would be like to be dead but then he saw a stream of light pass his vision for a second. Hundreds of pin pricks of light swirling past in front of him. He realized they were stars as he flipped around uncontrollably. Then suddenly a slight tug on his enviro suit. Then a much larger tug ripped him upward and made his stomach sink. For a time he couldn't breathe. He gasped for breath. He had a supply of oxygen but the shock of his ordeal took his breath away. He felt his legs dangling into the void below as the parachute seemed to drag him sky ward. His senses could still not make anything of his orientation but his logic kicked in and allowed him to conjure up an image of his orientation.

He seemed to hang there in the inky void for a long time. His suit and helmet isolating him from the wind. His hands and legs free. He wondered where the ground was. He wondered how far he had to go before he reached it. He looked down and began to see specks of light. He lifted his visor expecting to be blasted in the face with wind but instead it was remarkably calm. He began to notice features. A surface coming toward him slowly but it still made no sense to him. It was slightly blue against the blackness with ripples like the sea. But unlike waves on the ocean, it remained steady. He looked upward and could see the faint colour of his chute. He instinctively grabbed the lines from its harness around him with both hands. A wave of terror rippled through him and was gone as he realized just how thin the threads were holding his life in the balance.

He decided to look down again to see if he recognized anything yet. In the distance he could see more lights. A town of a village perhaps. Another glow appeared and was gone again almost immediately. Another town or perhaps a house. Now obscured behind some unseeable obstacle as his parallax changed through his descent. He looked below him and at last could make out some features. Trees on a hillside perhaps. He couldn't tell how big they were but he seemed to be heading straight for them. The through crossed his mind that he may be impaled upon one of them. He began to pray for a soft landing.

The trees loomed larger in his field of view. But as he became closer he seemed to be slowly drifting over them. Drifting into a very dark patch beyond them. He couldn't see any features at all in the dark patch but he could see more trees lined up beyond that. It seemed as though the dark patch was some kind of football field. Oval in shape. Though that was its only distinguishing feature. Whatever was in there he was now heading almost to the centre of it. It was large and getting larger. It was as if he were being slowly flushed through the rim of some gigantic toilet bowl.

He could see he was beginning to descend below the line of the tree tops. He could not see much below that as he passed into the black space. Specks of features from the ground below began to emerge. Lighter patches. Square in shape vaguely stood out against the blackness. He began scanning desperately for the ground or any features. Mentally preparing himself for his touch down. He was heading uncontrollably for one of the light patches. It grew larger but still he could get no reference on its distance.

Suddenly his feet touched something and his legs folded underneath him. He crashed onto the surface and it was softer than he had imagined it. He rolled off it. like stacked up square cushions. Then he bounced slightly before hitting the hard ground and he heard a loud thud. He landed face down. His helmet hitting something very hard and jarring his neck and

shoulders. His stomach and lower torso coming to rest on some hard, square raised object and knocking the wind out of him despite his flight suit. He moaned and tears left his eyes. Then he passed out.

CHAPTER 8:

Philip woke up. He was in some pain but nothing he couldn't deal with for the time being at least. His first concern was to get himself up and off what ever objects he had fallen on. His parachute was still attached and he could hear it rustling in the breeze. As he moved he could feel it pulling at his harness. He wouldn't be able to move unless he released it but he could not see how in the darkness. He raised himself from the objects and realized they were 2 lengths of timber. Splintered and rotting. About 200 millimetres square. Perhaps old posts of some kind. Perhaps he had broken them in his fall. He pushed himself to an upright position and felt the pain in his joints rocket through him. He groaned uncontrollably but at least he was sitting up. He back resting on the side of the soft object he had landed on. He realized it was a bale of hay. Or something similar at least. Straw perhaps.

The parachute still preventing him from moving too far out of his current position, he realized he had to first be free of it. He felt for any sign of harness cleats that would release him but he could feel nothing useful through the leather like material of his gloves. He removed them and made a mental note of where he had left them. The hardness seemed to be part of his flight suit as he felt around but soon discovered a pair of buckle-like cleats near his shoulders. He spent what seemed to be hours fiddling, prodding and poking at them with no effect. His hands began to get too cold. The air was very chilly and the metal of his hardware was like ice to his touch.

He heard something rustling in the distance but decided that it was only his parachute catching the wind somewhere. Still it sent a chill through his shoulder blades as he remembered what Lieve had said about China. He knew the story about Paul Foster's ordeal. He didn't want that to happen to him too. Suddenly his fingers found the right combination and the first Cleat fell free. He heard the rustling sound again and a mild wave of panic swept through him. He repeated the manoeuvre with the second cleat on his shoulder. It came free.

Another rustle. This time it sounded to be more distant and in the wrong direction to be his parachute. He fumbled at the first cleat on his other shoulder but it didn't come free. He tried to calm the panic now surging through him so he could concentrate on getting the cleat unclipped. It came free as he was sure he heard a definite thud in the distance. A heavy foot print perhaps. Then a snap of some branches breaking.

Panic or no Panic he tore at the last cleat to get it undone. He couldn't make it work for him. The panic had consumed him and the rustling sound seemed nearer. He heard another foot print. Quieter than before but striking absolute terror through him. He pulled himself together just long enough to work his fingers through the cleat procedure and saw the beam of a flash light streak out from the darkness in front of him. Free of the cleat and the chute he sprang to his feet. He remembered his gloves, hesitated in going back for them but the terror consumed him. He darted in the only direction he knew. Away from the flash light.

He rounded the edge of the bail. Yes it was Straw he confirmed with his hand. He made his way out into the blackness toward another lighter patch in the distance which he figured was another bail. He changed direction and even though he was silent the flashlight seemed to be following him. He geared himself up to take full flight but stumbled on another post and came crashing down. The distinctive sound of wood against wood rang out in the silence. He turned over to see the flashlight almost upon him.

"Philip? Is that you? I know you're round here somewhere. It's me. Virginia."

She was so close she could hear him panting on the ground in front of here.

"What's the matter? Are you alright?"

"Jesus H Christ!" Philip shouted as loud as he could whisper through his out of breath state. "You... Bitch."

"What's the matter?"

"I.. Thought.. You were... Some... Chinese person... Out to capture me... Fuck!" Lieve laughed. Philip caught his breath. He could see her now as the torch light reflected around him. She extended a hand to help him to his feet.

"How 'n' hell did you find me anyway?"

She shone her torch onto a small plastic card shaped box in the palm of her other hand. He could see it had a dull blue glow on a display with some buttons around it.

"Tracking device." she said. "I tracked your emergency beacon. Damn it! I had to traipse miles to find you. You could have picked a better spot to land."

"Yeah like I had a choice." he said emphasising the sarcasm.

"Come on. Get your helmet off. It'll be light soon. I need a drink."

"What? What 'n' hell are you talking about? Where 'n' hell are we anyway."

"We're in Russia. Come on. We'll be late."

CHAPTER 9:

Virginia lake and Suzanne were kicking through the wreckage of the Grippen. Their helicopter standing on the ground with its rotors roaring ready for action. Two more choppers were parked at a distance around the crash site and SHADO personnel from the crash team were checking the debris.

"Not much left," said Lake.

"Yeah this is not actually a crash as such," said Suzanne.

"How do you mean?"

"Lieve and Philip have obviously ejected. Lieve probably set the self destruct timer to try and blow the plane to bits. But it's exploded a little too close to the ground. Otherwise we'd be lucky to find bit of match stick left from the thing."

"Why would she do that? Security?"

"No not really. Just that it has less chance of killing someone if it disintegrated in the air first."

"But there'd still be quite large pieces. It could still kill someone if it fell on them."

"Yeah, but there's less chance than if the whole plane came down on them full bore with its weapons intact. Who knows what might happen then."

"Ah yes. I take your point. So is there any way we can confirm they ejected safely?"

"Yeah, well the sats had a track of them in the area until the sun came up. On the next pass they were gone."

"We got some strange report that their beacons were moving but there was too much electrical interference to track them properly from space. It could have just been noise. We have to get a tracker in a bit closer. I through if we got in here at the crash site we'd surely be able to pick up their beacons. Now I'm not so sure."

Virginia Lake kicked over a piece of fuselage. A piece of cowling she thought. From the side of the right air intake scoop.

"So when you picked up what you thought was noise, could you tell if both beacons were together?" asked Lake.

"Well yeah as it happens. That was the only thing that made us think that it was them."

"And where were they heading?"

"Well we can't be sure exactly. We only picked them up once but they were further toward the coast from here so we could assume that's where they were heading. "

"Right well we need to start asking people if they've seen them won't we. I guess we'll need someone who can speak Russian."

"Ha! It's a shame Lieve weren't here right now. She can speak half a dozen languages."

An operative came running from their helicopter. Holding her hand on her head and stopping slightly as if it would protect her should she be hit by the blades.

"Colonel. They've found one of the parachutes. There was a message scrawled on it in what looked like red lipstick. All it said was the word. Vodka."

"Vodka?" exclaimed Lake. Suzanne burst out laughing.

"I have an idea where we'll find her," said Suzanne as she headed back to the chopper. She turned to beckon Colonel Lake on. "Come on Colonel."

"What? Where are we going?"

"Vladivostok!" shouted Suzanne over the noise of the rotors.

CHAPTER: 10

Colonel Critchley scratched his head as he came of his break and was immediately handed a message pad with a report on it.

"Can't even walk back in here without being accosted can I." he said focusing in on the words on the message pad. He read a little of it, thumbing down a page or two with the small cursor pad.

"We didn't even get a good go at that damn UFO did we. How 'n hell did it manage to avoid the interceptors a second time? We even got 3 more interceptors up there. Where did that thing head out?"

An operative pointed to a graphic on one of the large overhead screens. Critchley followed the pointing hand and focused in. He could see that it was taking a sling shot trajectory toward Mars and accelerating rapidly.

"They gotta have a local base or something. Perhaps not in our star system but somewhere close. That thing is heading for home and it never achieved anything other than to be a decoy. Damn. If only we had our Mars base up."

He looked down at the report again and sighed. Then he shoved it back at the operative who gave it to him.

"File it" he said. He went to walk away. "Oh what's the status of skydiver 7?"

"It's just about refuelled and ready to re-launch," said the operative. "But they'll be short on fuel if they have to launch again."

"You mean this time or the next time."

"The next time sir."

"Hmmm. Ok then, Hold it back till the last. Send the other two skydivers in first if there's any action. OK, that looks about it. Lets hope we get a quiet evening for the rest of the shift."

"There's not much of that left sir," said the operative.

Critchley looked at his watch. "Damn. And that means it must be getting on for mid-morning in Eastern Russia."

CHAPTER: 11

Yuchtar joined Suzanne and Virginia on the streets of Vladivostok. Also accompanying them was a local who was enlisted as a guide. Real money, western money, was a rare commodity in the molten Russian economy. The locals needed no further incentive to keep their mouths shut than the lure of cash. This Russian was doing his job and not seeing anything else. He warned them of an approach by some local hoods. Five males dressed tough and perhaps in their mid 20s. Probably members of the disorganized local mafia gangs. One step up from street punks. They were warded off when Yuchtar broke three limbs of one of the punks in a single choreographed movement. The rest drew knives. Virginia and Suzanne drew large hand guns at which the remaining four retrieved their comrade and retreated, swearing and cursing in Russian. Their guide told them that they had vowed revenge. After which he somehow managed to forget the event ever occurred.

"We've been here for an hour," said Yuchtar. "You Brits must be just about ready for morning tea and a cucumber sandwich. We're just chasing ghosts."

"No they're here," said Suzanne showing Yuchtar the hand held tracking device. "They're here somewhere. Real close I suspect. Just that we're not getting a GPS bounce off their beacons for some reason. All I'm getting is our own current fix. But the signals are real strong now and they're still together."

They walked another block through the old streets of Vladivostok. Yuchtar was taken more by the curious mixture of the old and the new. Street-scapes that dated back hundreds of years, even cars that dated back to the early 1990s looked out of place there. A horse and cart would have been more in tune she thought. They had abandoned their own car, a borrowed Saab, because once they had narrowed in, they found themselves driving in circles. At the end of the block Suzanne looked one way and then the next. It was a T-junction and there were only two ways she could go. She had to pick one and her instrument readings suggested nothing. Then she spotted it.

"Anyone want a drink?" she asked triumphantly.

"A drink?" came the chorus from Yuchtar and Lake.

"Look!" said Suzanne. She pointed to a small bar. A veritable Russian watering hole. The kind of place where locals would probably congregate after a hard day's work and complain about the yuppification of their city. And how it was so much better in the old days.

"And it's open too." she continued. "Come on." Suzanne waved them over. They crossed the street and fronted up to the large, solid oak doors. Lead lighting on the window panels in the door reminded Yuchtar of some bars she knew in her home town of Connecticut. Only these were real lead light and not the fake, stick-on stuff she was use to. It was very old. Suzanne looked first at Yuchtar and then at Virginia, she paused as if it would give her license and then she burst through. Swinging both doors open.

She looked along the length of the bar. A startled barman stood motionless as if he was about to be arrested. There sitting at the far end of the bar was Lieve. Behind her, head lumped on the bar fast asleep was Philip. A pile of empty glasses between them and still wearing their flight suits. Through they were unzipped to their waists. Lieve's tank top revealed her form.

"I wondered where you'd got to," said Lieve. Then she said something in Russian that even the barman had to do a double take on. She was quite drunk by this stage.

"Why didn't you just stay in the hills where you landed?" said Virginia Lake, hands on

hips and quite angry. It took three attempts before Lieve could assemble a coherent sentence and make it pass her lips.

"The Chineeezz." she said.

"What?" said Suzanne

"Pthe Chinezz. P-Philip eer was worried about the Chineez." She turned to Philip who was asleep in a drunken coma against the bar. "Wasn't it Pffilip me ol pal?" She slapped him on his slumped over back. He awoke with a start and jumped up. But his body was not capable of sustaining enough co-ordination for the manoeuvre. He overcompensated, lost his balance and slid off the bar stool and onto the floor. Lieve giggled loudly at the sight.

Suzanne covered her eyes and Colonel Lake turned her back, neither wishing to be a witness to this scene.

"Well there goes the mission," said Yuchtar under her breath so that only Suzanne and Lake could hear her. Lake turned around again.

"Oh I think they'll sober up before then," she said. "But I can see that they'll be flying the rest of the way in the 747 with us." She shook her head and spoke up so that Lieve could hear her plain through her drunken stupor. "I'll hold you personally responsible for leading our new boy astray, Lieve. You know that don't you?"

"Well at least they're alright," said Suzanne. "How did you guys get down here anyway?"

"We hitched a ride on the back of a truck," said Lieve in a rare moment of clarity. "We were gonna phone you. Honest. We just got a bit thirsty that's all. Oh. By the way. You owe Segey here a shit load of rubles too." She gestured toward the barman. "They don't take American Express here." She laughed so hard she too slid off her bar stool and joined Philip on the floor, who was also laughing.

Suzanne sat down at one of the wooden tables that lines the centre of the room. She folded her arms out in front of her and rested her weary head on them. Had a newcomer entered the room they could be forgiven for thinking she was drunk as well. Instead she just wanted to be away from there. This was so embarrassing she wished it wasn't happening.

"Well, it's lucky we brought some extra rubles with us then isn't it," said Colonel Lake with a sigh. She called the guide over by waggling her index finger. He complied.

"Ask the barman how much we owe him."

There was an exchange. A brisk banter back and fourth for a moment and then the guide turned to Lake and said: "200"

"200!" shouted Lake. Then she calmed. "200."

"Yes," said the guide. "200 and you get your gadget back." Lake looked up to see he was holding Lieve's flashlight and GPS tracker. Lake covered her eyes for a moment and slid her hand down over her chin. Then she turned directly to the barman.

"Tell him. 300 if he keeps his mouth shut."

"Hey that's more than you pay me," said the guide.

"Yeah, well that was only a down payment. We'll give you 400. And remember if either of you say a word, we'll be back to do to you what we did to those other clowns. You got that? And you tell him too."

She began unfolding Russian currency from her inside jacket pocket as an exchange began between the two men. She noticed that it became heated for a moment but obviously their guide got his message across.

"Yuchtar. Get the car please. Let's decant as gracefully as possible," said Lake but was stopped short by a gurgling sound from the floor. Everyone stopped as if frozen to see Lieve

vomiting an ooze of brown liquor.

"Well there goes that idea," said Suzanne.

Philip looked down at the vomit that was creeping nearer to him every second. "Errrr. Space rations!"

CHAPTER 12:

The remainder of the trip to Australia was largely uneventful. Philip and Lieve remained curled up comatose balls of putrid flesh on the floor of the chopper for the 900 kilometre journey from Vladivostok to Okinawa. There was no point Colonel Lake reprimanding either of them. At least not until they had sobered up. Lieve and Philip flew the rest of the way to Woomera in the 747. At one stage Yuchtar had insisted he be locked in one of the down stairs lavatories for an hour or two after he threw up on the seat next to her. The doctor had checked him for alcohol poisoning but declared him just very, very drunk.

By the time they reached central Australia, with only an hour till they landed in Woomera, they were both sober. However Philip was very badly hung over. Lieve could not only speak Russian, she knew how to drink like one. Philip on the other hand did not benefit from a stomach lined with space rations to help slow his intake of the poisonous brew.

Tired, but cleaned up and stable, Philip joined them in the downstairs conference room.

"Guess who's back from the dead," said Lake, the first person to spot him clawing his way through the door. "Take a seat Philip. God knows you look like you could use one." Philip found one of the unoccupied spare seats at the table and flopped into it, his hair still wet from the shower he just had.

Along with Yuchtar, Suzanne and Lake, there were various other operatives of whom Philip didn't know. Two were sitting at the table with them, another 4 were working various control panels and devices which adorned the far wall. As he scanned he realized one of them was a communications officer. He had no idea what functions the others performed but was too tired to be bothered testing his mental capacity on the problem.

"Right Philip," said Colonel Lake. "Just to fill you in. It will be night fall by the time we're down on the ground. We're a day behind schedule but that's OK. The prep team are a day behind on their schedule as well. We'll go for launch tomorrow night with any luck. There's a problem with the robotic clearers."

"That would be the space junk robots we got from NASA?" said Yuchtar.

"Yeah, that's right. Just for Philip's benefit. We got some experimental robot space craft from NASA a few years back. NASA had this very noble idea of designing them to latch onto space junk, saw it up and load it into this kind of furnace thing which would further fuel the robot. It was an attempt to clear the space junk automatically and cheaply. Only they couldn't get the furnace to work properly and the government pulled the plug on the project. We got all the prototypes, 5 in all, and we modified them to run on fuel cells. We've since built another 10 ourselves. 6 of which you'll have to use. Only the new ones are powered on tiny thorium reactors. Miniature versions of reactors we're now using at all our installations."

"Yes I know the theory of the thorium reactors. Using a cyclotron to bring thorium to criticality. Neat idea. But how small can you build them? I would have thought..." He was interrupted as Lake held up her hands as if displaying a jar. A jar that would have been only as large as a small coffee jar. Philip whistled.

"That small, huh? That's a bit of an achievement I would say."

Lake nodded. "Anyway." she continued. "You'll have three of these onboard each of the space craft. That's where the hitch is at the moment. A computer glitch in the control software. The clearers were designed for a long tour of duty. Set up to go about their task automatically. They weren't actually designed to be launched from a space craft made of alien technology and deployed at a moment's notice." Philip wiped his brow.

"I'm not really looking forward to the launch now."

"Why ever not?" said Suzanne.

"I don't know my stomach could take the pounding any more."

Lake, Suzanne and Yuchtar laughed.

"This will be the smoothest ride into space. Trust me. Just wait and see."

Lake slid a palm-top computer over the table toward Philip and nodded toward it. It was open with a display glowing on it. Philip reluctantly grabbed it and took in a brief study of its contents.

"That should take your mind off things for a while. See if you can work that one out?" said Lake.

It was data from the failed intercept on the decoy UFO. Philip read the briefs of the report and quickly scanned the graphic showing its trajectory. "So what's the problem? I mean what do you think I can do with it?"

"Well I was hoping you might be able to put your considerable intellect to work on working out how the UFOs might be avoiding our intercepts these days. If you look down further, there's briefs on 5 similar intercepts in recent times. You'd think with the amount of interceptors we put up there, they'd not be able to avoid falling into our trap. Unless they can break our codes with is so unlikely as to be unimaginable."

"Oh that," said Philip. "I already have a theory on that. You see they don't have to break the codes by brute force like we would think. They don't even have to have any idea of the messages sent in those encrypted messages. All they have to do is build a data base of all the things each interceptor does and the overall contents of the streams. Once they can equate an over all picture of the streams and observe the interceptors making certain manoeuvres, they could simply get a rough picture of what was happening from the kinds of streams sent."

"But it's encrypted. A 5 hundred and 12 bit key. Surely?" said Lake.

"Let me put it this way. Does the use a preamble?"

Lake nodded.

"Then they could probably pick up as much out of the preamble as they could the actual stream. Look they wouldn't be able to read the codes. You could put a lunch order down the spout and they wouldn't know the difference. But they could get a kind of fuzzy, out of focus picture of when an interceptor was going to make a manoeuvre. Somewhere between their collected library of scenarios and the logical course of action would tell them what's going to go down. The preambles themselves. would give away the number and possibly the positions."

Lake was taken aback.

"Oh well. And there I thought this would keep you occupied at least till we landed. So what do you recommend?"

"Ah yes I was coming to that. If you change the way you actually do things, the aliens will twig so that's the last thing you wanna do. You need to change the meaning of the codes and preambles somehow. I'm not sure how yet. I'd need to sit down with the planners some time but it's something they could do for themselves anyway. In essence what you do is throw in a wobbly."

"A what?"

"A wobbly. Like they do with the GPS. So that civilian users can't get an accurate fix. Only military users can. The whole GPS system appears to move by about 30 metres all the time. As if all the satellites were kind of dancing round up there. Unless you know how to read the redundant code which contains the wobbly information, you can't get an accurate fix. You

need to find some redundant code in the stream and use that."

"I don't get it," said Yuchtar. "How can a GPS system relate to interceptor instructions?"

"Ok let me break it down for you. The normal stream tells the interceptors to take up a certain intercept pattern. But contained within the redundant code is a deviation from that course. So the aliens will think the interceptors are taking up one set of positions, when they could be flying straight into our trap."

"Won't they get wise though?" asked Suzanne.

"Yeah, they'll get wise all right. When you start blowing them out of the sky again. The trick is to make it look like a fluke. You might get a heap of intercepts like that before they realize. And even then it only means they'll have to abandon their database."

"So in other words," started Lake. "They have a fuzzy picture of our strategies in advance. Not far in advance but enough to make us think it's doing one thing but it's actually doing something else. We're simply to employ the same idea. We make them think we're doing one thing and then we do something else."

"Yeah, kind of. Only we can now work out what they'll do based on what they think we'll do. Only we'll do something different. Only they don't know that we know that they know how to read our codes. And as long as they don't know that we know then they'll be as predictable as all hell. You follow me?"

"Nope!" came a chorus of head scratching SHADO personnel. Philip laughed.

"Don't worry I'll square it with someone when we're on the ground. When I think about it, it would probably be a real good idea to have this worked out before I go up there. If the aliens have even got a sniff of what we're up to they'll be hopping mad. I know I would be. I'd try and throw everything I had at stopping this mission if I were an alien. And it looks like they've already had their first attempt..." He stopped. A wave of a new idea beamed onto his face. Lake almost thought she could see his face glow as if it were temporarily replaced by a cartoon light bulb.

"Can someone give me the flight path of that last transport that was downed?" he said to the room in general.

"I see where you're going with this I think," said Lake. "No need. It was heading out to Australia."

"Yeah, Ok and where do you do all your mission run launches these days? Australia right?"

"Yup!" said Lake. "Woomera is the best place for it. Isolated and in an ideal launch window."

"So what's the betting that they thought that transport was carrying the personnel for this mission? Jeez if that's the case then they've known about this for a while."

"It means the aliens are getting sloppy though don't it?" said Yuchtar.

"Huh?" said Philip.

"I mean their intel must be a bit sloppy if they got it wrong the first time."

"I don't know exactly," said Philip. "But I'm wondering if there isn't a grass amongst our ranks if that's the case. You know I've felt ever since we messed with Perters in Iceland that there's been someone on my back the whole time. Just a gut feeling."

Everyone in the room suddenly became suspicious of each other. They all looked each other up and down.

"Look I don't wanna make everybody more paranoid that we all actually are but how else could they know we were planning this?" said Philip staring Colonel Lake directly in the eyes.

"Maybe they don't know exactly what we're planning but are just guessing?" said Lieve dragging herself through the door wearing a bath robe.

"Well there's only one way to find out. And that's to see what's waiting for us up there," said Suzanne pointing skyward.

CHAPTER 13:

"Why is it that the moment I need 'em, all my best staff piss off to Sunny Australia?" thundered Commander Pilgrim. She thumped her desk angrily as she always did. Ford watched as her computer terminal shuddered and rattled a little but it failed to fall off her desk. It seemed to take Commander Pilgrim by surprise a little as well. She paused to think about it before continuing. She was yet to become aware of the two small G-clamps which Ford had secured there to stop her losing yet another terminal to gravity.

"Keith, you're the only one here at the moment I can trust on this. You know that."

"I could ask Straker or Foster in here."

"Yeah, it may well come to that but tell them in person in a secured room. You know how important this is. I don't just wanna know who's been leaking information to the aliens, but how they've been doing it. Anyway you know the score. Make it low key and make it fast."

"What about my other duties?"

"I'll call Critchley in to cover for you."

Ford nodded.

"But not today. If you go off now and whoever's responsible is in that control gallery, it will be obvious what you're up to. Get someone out there to cover for you for now."

"What shall I tell them?"

"Tell 'em anything. Tell 'em there's a technical problem to do with tomorrow's launch and you have to attend to it."

"Yes Commander."

"Yo' and Keith. Be careful OK."

Ford exited the office nodding at her last command. He stepped up into the control gallery and made his excuses. He told them he didn't expect to be long but that these things had a habit of blowing out. Knowing full well he would be out for the rest of the shift and as long as it took to work out how the aliens had worked out their plan. As he stood by the table in the elevator-office and waited for the room to arrive at the top, he realized he had no clue what so ever about this problem. He didn't even know of a first step to take. The aliens might have just fluked it. They may not know at all. Or there could be someone in their ranks in the right position to have fed the information to the aliens. All he knew was that Ed Straker would probably know what to do. And if he couldn't trust Ed then he couldn't trust himself.

He rang General Straker on his mobile phone on the way out of the car park, his Mercedes Benz quietly slipping through the grounds and out onto the main road. Straker answered.

"General? It's Keith Ford here."

"Hello Keith. Yeah, I can see that from the secure line encoding. What seems to be the problem?"

"Oh no problem. Just that I'm on my way over to see you. Err Where are you at the moment?"

"I'm at work Keith. Such as work is. There must be a problem if you're on your way over."

"No no. No problem as such. Commander Pilgrim wanted me to look in on you to see how you were getting on with your new prosthetics."

"Come on Keith. Don't give me that bull. She could get on the phone for that. What's the real reason?"

"General. Ed. Trust me there's nothing up. Well there is. Just some technical specifications that I have to sort out with you."

"Ah! A plea for more money huh? I knew there was a catch. Ok. I'll see you when you get here." Keith Ford did not share Straker's jolly mood. He simply agreed to meet him and hung up the phone.

When he arrived, Ms Ealand showed him in. Straker was in a very jolly mood at that time. Keith Ford thought he should ask him for some more funding anyway whilst he was in such a mood but there was more pressing business.

"Are we being listened to?" he said as he walked through the door, failing to notice the fact that Straker was strutting on what seemed to be his own legs.

"Don't you notice anything odd Keith?" said Straker holding out his arms and looking down at his trousers. Trousers filled out with his new high-tech limbs. Keith then realized.

"Oh yes. very nice." he said and moved on to pointing at the ceiling and covering his lips. Straker realized there really was something up.

"Yes we're quite alone in here."

"Have you done a scan for bugs lately?"

"Well no but.."

"Then we should do one now."

"Oh. Alright then. I'll just get the kit."

"No need," said Ford. He dropped his brief case to the floor and opened it. revealing a tracking detection kit. He pulled out a wand and switched it on. It gave out a single tell tail bleep to signify that it was indeed switched on. He set a few switches and set it to work. Waving it around the room. Allowing it to sniff amongst the radio spectrum, a spectrum that was already quite splattered with radio frequency interference from the computer equipment in the room.

After making a sweep of the entire room with his wand he pressed another button on it and returned to his brief case. He pulled out a box and switched it on. This time there was a loud bleep emanating from the box. It beeped quickly at 2 beeps per second. Straker understood perfectly what he was doing. If there was a bug in the room it would pick up the sound of the bleep and transmit it. The radio probe wand would have a better chance of picking up a bug when it was definitely transmitting something. Assuming there was a bug there. Ford declared an all clear by waving his hand and then returned his instruments to his box.

Next he pulled out what looked to be 3 cradles for telephone hand sets. He spun round and looked up at Straker's desk. There were indeed 3 phones but there was yet another hand piece on the conference table. He pulled out a fourth cradle and proceeded to place all the telephone hand sets in them. Flicking a switch on the side of each one as he went.

"You're not taking any chances are you?" said Straker.

"No Sir. That will produce a loud disturbing noise so that even if they've managed to pick off the audio at the PABX some how, all they'll hear is static."

"So what's this all about. This is not about some extra funding is it?"

"No Sir it's worse than that. Much worse."

"Keith. How long have we known each other. You know you can call me Ed."

"Sorry Sir. I mean Ed. Just that this is pretty serious. Normally I wouldn't deal with such things but Bjorn is on his way to Australia looking for a lost operative."

"A what? No, look tell me. Start from the beginning."

Keith explained how Bjorn Frogleberg had taken off to Australia to find a missing SHADO operative who seemed to be behaving rather erratically. And then moved quickly onto the problem at hand. The possibility that the aliens may have inside information. He did not yet know about Philip's theory of a huge database model that he suspected the aliens were keeping.

"Hmm. So you think there's a leak amongst us do you?"

"Well I'm not entirely sure but it seems likely. How else would they have known about this operation. We believe they are doing all they can to stop it. We think they thought the first transport was more important than it actually was. They knew not to attack the decoy. How could they have known that? With Frogleberg away it's fallen on my shoulders and I don't even know where to begin."

"Well Keith my ol' friend you've come to the right place. The first thing we've got to do is work out who knew about the plan. And I know another old friend who would just love to help us."

"Colonel Foster?"

"Yup. He's due here shortly as it happens. We're doing lunch and then he's taking me to my next fitting."

"Fitting?" Ford paused for a second then he realized. "Oh the new legs. I didn't even..."

"That's alright Keith I understand."

"So how are they?.."

"They're coming along rather nicely thank you." Straker beamed a huge smile then took a stroll round the room.

"If I didn't know better I'd say they were your own legs," said Ford. "That's amazing. This is all the new bio implant technology."

"Yes. But it's only a prototype. It does have a few bugs. Like the power pack for a start. You wouldn't believe where I have to insert the battery."

Ford chuckled. It was great to see Straker in a good mood again. In fact upon reflection, Ford realized he had probably never seen Ed Straker in such a good frame of mind as he had been lately. There was a knock on the door and it slid open. Paul Foster dressed in jeans and an All Electric Kitchen T-shirt strode in.

"Hi Keith. Ms Ealand showed me in."

"Yes that's fine Paul. Come in. Come in. Keith here has some disturbing news."

Keith went through the whole story again as quickly as he could.

"Hmm. Sounds like we need to get a list of who knew about the operation before hand. Of course that leaves me out. This is the first I've heard of it. I'm not much of a detective, I have to say."

"C'mon Paul. You'll make a great detective. Besides it'll be fun."

"I never thought I'd hear you say something like that," said Foster. "Since when have you considered anything to do with SHADO to be fun?"

Straker simply smiled.

"Us old farts have to stick together you know."

"We need Virginia to complete the team," said Foster.

"She's in Australia. She's heading up the mission itself," said Ford.

"What she's going into space? That'd be a first." laughed Foster.

"No she's got her feet firmly on the ground as usual," said Ford. "But Salisman. He's the worry."

"Salisman? Do I know him?" said Foster.

"It's a long story," said Straker. "C'mon lets do lunch before my batteries go flat and I have to insert a new one where the sun don't shine."

They descended via the civilian elevator through the centre of the building and down to the car park. Straker walked over to Foster's car, hands in his pockets and strutting as if he was James Brown. Foster had bought himself a Rolls Royce convertible. He had received so much back pay he felt like he could have bought half of England with it. Amongst the many surprised that awaited him was the fact that he had amassed around 26 million pounds. His back pay, plus compensation for his losses, plus the money he had managed to save over the past 30 years. All with interest. He was suddenly a rich man by anyone's standards.

With the money came a certain amount of power. He set about fixing the lives of those who had given so much to him. He bought Fitz a new studio and organized a lucrative record deal. He took Pearl and Fin's fledgling detective agency and turned it into one of the best in the country. He freed so many from the clutches of the slum lords that drained them.

When the ever cynical Fin asked him why he was doing it, he told her it was revenge. She didn't understand. But Straker understood. Instead of wanting to get revenge on the Chinese agency who had destroyed his life and almost cost SHADO their cover, he preferred to help those who had cushioned the blow for him, who had accepted him for who he was and as one of their own. They still didn't know who he really was but knew their faith in him was justified. The love and compassion they showed him was now being returned with interest. The south of London was a place he felt he could return to. The people there were like the family he had never known.

They arrived at the restaurant, a new shop front in a newly renovated part of town. Foster parked his Roller two shop fronts down the road. It was the closest parking spot he could find. The street was busier than he had ever seen it. Jam packed with the cars of people now discovering the businesses in the street he had reclaimed and revamped from the slum lords. He noticed Fitz's new independent record shop buzzing with activity and sound as if it were a mini club in it's own right. Now 5 times the size it once was and fast gaining a reputation of supplying the coolest music in the world.

"This is all new," said Straker. "And you own all this?"

"Not any more," said Foster. "I gave it all away. Most of the people here had their little businesses here and were paying rent to land lords who bled them dry and gave nothing in return. I bought the whole block, had it done up and then gave each one back to the people who use to rent them."

"But surely there wasn't always a Japanese restaurant here like this," said Straker as he locked the car and began walking toward it.

"No this is new. Jimmy was a kid I knew. He and his girl friend dreamt of opening a Japanese restaurant. They'd had their first serious meal at one and fell in love there."

"So you set them up?" said Ford.

"Yeah. Jimmy was a good kid. He had a bit of trouble with the law but he had his dreams. And he was good to me. He and his folks took me in like family. I wanted to make his dreams come true. But I realized that a couple of black kids from this neck of the woods had no chance of running a Japanese restaurant on the strength of a dream so I'm sending them to Japan for a year to learn."

Straker stopped in the middle of the street.

"I don't get it. You say you're sending them to learn but they're running the restaurant

already? What did you stop time or something? Been learning something from our alien friends or something?"

Foster laughed. "No. They couldn't run a show like this on their own so I hired two of the best Japanese chefs I could find. They're getting the feel for it now and in a few months time when they're settled, they go off to Japan. It's gonna be so cool. They're really committed."

Straker could see the stars in Foster's eyes and waved his hand in front of Foster's face.

"What?" said Foster slightly angry.

"You could have anything you want and you just blow your money away like this. What if they decide they don't wanna be sushi cooks after all?"

"Yeah, I could have anything I want but this is what I want. You know I never had a family as such. This is the closest thing to a real family I've ever had. I'm too old for all the playboy shit I use to get up to, but here, I mean look around. Can you think of a nicer place to come home to. "

"He's got a point," said Ford who was seeing it all for the first time through Foster's eyes.

CHAPTER 14:

"You really should stay on the ground I think," said Colonel Virginia Lake placing her hand on Philip Salisman's shoulder. "I have a bad feeling about this. If they do happen to get some UFOs into orbit and they keep them camouflaged, there's no way we can track them, you realize. They don't make a wake vortex in a vacuum."

"Yes I know and I can't tell you how scared I am right now. But we've come too far. I have to see this through."

"You could do that on the ground just as well surely."

"I don't think so. Besides this wasn't my idea in the first place. It was yours."

"Well actually it wasn't mine either," said Colonel Lake. "It was Commander Pilgrim's and she was probably right, but that was then and this is now. Given that the aliens seem to know what we're up to. What about we delay it for a week?"

"It's either now or never. Delay it for a week and it gives the aliens the opportunity to move their satellites. We know they haven't done that already because they would have had to use them to track us. If we don't get them now we never will. But I have an idea. Who would be investigating this back in England?"

"Well considering Frogleberg is on his way out here as well I suspect the job will end up in General Straker's lap. Or Adrianna her self will be handling it. But that's unlikely because she's got too much on her plate right now as it is."

"Ok we're not going to launch till tonight right? So that gives us a few hours in which to help them set a trap."

"I think I know where you're going with this. But that still leaves the problem of the information leaking out to the aliens and getting you into deep doo."

"Not if we don't launch till next week."

"What? but you said..."

"No. No. I mean we say we're not going to launch till we've got the all clear from the investigation team. We need to tell Commander Pilgrim to set up a dummy investigation team. Feed them a line and then get General Straker to be in a position to simply observe their suspects. Surely they'd have a few by now?"

"I see," said Lake tapping her chin with her finger and sprouting a cunning smile.

"Meanwhile we launch as planned."

"Ok. Then. You need to go get prepped. Leave the rest to me. I know a little secure channel that only us girls know about."

Philip took off across the red dusty tarmac. It was nearing 50 degrees Celsius in the sun and neither of them wanted to spend any more time than they had to in the heat. They entered the hanger nestled in the grounds of the American air force base outside of the Australian outback town of Woomera and then parted company. Philip was shown to an oddly placed cable car mounted inside a steel room. Whilst Virginia lake took a short flight of stairs up to one of the operations suites and a control room which vaguely resembled the command gallery back at the English headquarters.

Philip thought it strange that he should be sitting inside a cable car inside a small enclosed room. A heavily armed operative sat next to him and said nothing. Philip looked around him for something to do. Then looked at the guard and wondered if the mere act of exploring with his eyes might provoke an adverse reaction. He placed his hands on his knees and sat in silence. Lieve joined him shortly where upon another armed guard stepped into the car and

pressed a button on a small control box. The glass and steel doors slid shut and hissed as they sealed. There was a large cavernous clang in front of them as the wall slid away. It made Philip jump but Lieve reassured him.

"Hey have I led you astray yet? Trust me." She smiled. Philip rolled his eyes.

The wall gave way to a tunnel. It was roughly the same dimensions as the room they were in but it led down on a 45 degree angle. Down into the bowels of the earth it seemed. Philip looked up and realized that the car they were riding is wasn't so much a cable car but an inverted mono rail train. Where the car hung below the rail as opposed to sitting on top of it.

The car began to move. Slowly forward at first till it inserted inside the tunnel and then the rail took them down. The car remained horizontal but slid down into the darkness. The tunnel became almost pitch black for a moment as the door behind them slid shut. Then a series of dim fluorescent lights blinked on and he could see to the end of the tunnel way in the distance. The car moved slowly down.

"Look I'm sorry for what happened," said Lieve. "I shouldn't have gotten you drunk."

"No it's alright. I shouldn't have left myself become drunk."

"I thought they'd find us in no time." continued Lieve. "I thought they'd home in on the beacons and be hauling us out o' there by the end of our first drink. I didn't know about the iron geostrata. I just thought it'd be funny if they followed the locator straight to a bar in Vladivostok ."

"It was funny though," smiled Philip. He flashed her a reassuring glance.

Philip looked ahead and noticed they were almost at the end of their decent. he could see what looked like a factory floor below. The gantry upon which they were hanging from veered away horizontal again and ran along below the roof of the huge gallery. As they cleared the tunnel and emptied into this huge subterranean factory he could see people several hundred metres below him . Milling round strange looking space craft. Locked into docking clamps on wheeled gantries and trollies. The sounds of the work being performed rang out.

It was a busy place teeming with important preparatory activity.

"Look there's our space-ships," said Lieve pointing at two sleek, small wing designs. They were quite large. About the size of NASA's space shuttle but of a very different design. Smooth and apparently without seams or joins. As if the entire skin of the craft has been moulded in some gigantic plastic injection mould.

"It's not what I expected," said Philip.

"We use a lot of alien material technology now. We can almost grow them organically. The whole structure is programed and then replicated over the surface using micro machine factories."

"What?"

"They're like tiny nano-machine plants. They replicate like DNA and form a pre-programmed structure which hardens to form what you see there. Even the windows and can be made in one piece. But for safety's sake we've installed more conventional interface components such as hatches and windows." She paused a second to point as the car presented a viewing opportunity. "See there's no heat shield tiles like the space shuttle. We just grow a heat resistant material. When you get up close you'll see it's actually quite flexible but can withstand temperatures of up to about 9 thousand degrees C."

"That's pretty impressive."

"Yeah. It is."

"I thought they'd be attached to their rockets by now. Cutting it a bit fine aren't we?"

"Rockets? Rockets? We don't use rockets any more. There are far more efficient ways to get a space craft into space these days." She pointed to a large tunnel opening which lead off from the factory floor level. "See that. That leads out to the launch site which is about 10 kilometres away. We'll transfer to a tunnel train in a minute and head out there. We've got to get prepped for flight."

The car approached the far wall of the factory cavern, its ceiling arched like the inside of a meat-loaf. There were 2 more large openings in the wall and Philip could see that they led into yet another cavernous expanse the same size as the current one. Perhaps even larger. The car pulled up next to a glass walled room suspended above the cavern and leading to a glass walled walk way. The doors on the car and in the room opened simultaneously. A seal was formed between the two. Lieve lead the way.

"We can't let too much of that red dust up there get in here." she said. "It get's even worse out at the launch site. You'll have to scrub."

"Scrub?"

"Yeah, that's what we call it. It's kind of a high pressure shower. Then you get suited. It's not that critical in most places but the last place you want dirt to get is in a door seal or something."

"I see" said Philip nodding as she lead him down the walk way. He could see over the gallery as he crossed. It was a truly awesome sight.

"How did you make all this?" he asked. "It must of taken thousands of people?"

"I don't think so. I think it was made with a special machine. Like the ones they use for making giant road tunnels. Only this one was much bigger. I'm not sure but I remember someone telling me they assembled the machine down here and it's still down here in bits somewhere. Just in case they want to build another cavern or something. There were some natural caves down here at one time. Actually there still is. We have what we call our watering hole. There's a room that leads out into this cave and the water table rises there. So it's kind of this natural swimming pool. We use to party there a lot at one time. Terrible acoustics."

They reached the other side. Right across the width of the cavern and into a recess in its ceiling. There were a row of three, more or less conventional elevators there. They waited and an car arrived.

"Those guards were pretty heavy," said Philip. "I would have thought that being a secret military base already, that wouldn't have been a problem?"

"It's just the interfaces between the conventional military and SHADO. You never know who might be lurking up stairs. They don't even know we're here as such. They think all the black ops is contained within those 4 hangers. They have no idea the extent that is really here. That fact that we have more aircraft here than would fit inside the hangers hasn't dawned on them yet. And this place has been here nearly twenty years."

The elevator car arrived and they stepped in. The door slid closed again and the car began to descend. Philip felt his stomach sink slightly but it was nothing compared to the Grippen. He was almost use to that kind of motion now and hardly noticed it when his legs compensated for it. The elevator car had doors at each end. The number on the display panel read "15" when the car stopped and the doors behind him opened. He scooted round to orient himself to the new exit and noticed that Lieve was already heading for the exit.

"C'mon" she said as she beckoned him out. He stepped out into a corridor. It was quiet. The noise from the cavernous construction area outside was completely absent. Any noise they themselves made was absorbed by the materials in the surroundings. There was a large stylized

15 mounted on the wall in a kind of diamond motif. Next to it was the SHADO logo. Here deep within the organization SHADO's presence almost took on an advertised feel. As if to remind everyone who they worked for. In that environment the SHADO logo had better brand association than the Coca Cola company.

He followed her down the corridor which began to resemble an office complex the further down he walked. Glass walls separated conference rooms and office space. People behind them sitting at desks and milling over computer terminals and equipment of various kinds. None of whom took the slightest amount of notice of them as they whisked purposefully among them.

They reached a large area. A kind of cross road or intersection of corridors. At one end there was a large windowed balcony which once again looked into and over the cavernous work shop. Philip took a brief look and realized he was only but a few floors lower than the cable car had dropped them off at. He looked up and sure enough he could see the cable car still sitting there and the glass covered walk way upon which they crossed to the elevators. There were tables and chairs in this space. A few microwave ovens and a conventional oven. A coffee machine and a sink with some dishes on it. Some kind of lunch room. A staircase lead off through an opening in the wall. Stairs led both up and down from there.

"C'mon." shouted Lieve again as she took off down the corridor which led away from the window and the cavern. Philip played catch up.

"Where are we going?" he asked. "I thought we were going to ride on some train and get prepped?"

"We will," said Lieve. "We will. But there's someone I want to say hello to."

She charged down the corridor which seemed without end. It was wider than the first and just as Philip was beginning to wonder, The corridor widened again and this time it began to take on a more hotel-like feel. Other arterial corridors split off to either side. Some were covered in a deep red carpet. Others in cream. He realized that the carpet they were walking on was a dark blue industrial strength carpet. Then he realized that was what was odd about this place. It seemed more like a hotel or the offices of a high priced law firm. At least it did compared to the industrial workshop environment outside.

A short way along, the corridor emptied into a large lobby area. Tables and chairs. like a restaurant and a few people sitting at them chatting and laughing. A counter that seemed like a cross between a food hall and a hotel front bar stretched around one wall between the crossroads of yet another corridor. This one even larger. Lieve darted hard left into it and Philip once again played catchup.

The floor in this corridor was linoleum. He recognised it as a raised flooring. Each linoleum tile was in fact a floor board. A special suction cup with handles could be whacked on it and then it would lift to revealed cabling and piping. What ever needed to be run through the building out of view. It resembled the telecommunications building he use to work in back in Canada. The wall turned to glass on one side shortly down the corridor. The first part had strip drapes inside it so he couldn't see in but there was a door, also made of glass and Lieve stopped in front of it for a second looking in. Philip could see people sitting at banks of control panels. He couldn't decide if it were a television studio control room or a flight centre but Lieve pushed the door open and the noise of machines and busy people leached out through the opening at him. He wasn't sure if he should follow her in and hesitated.

"C'mon," said Lieve once more and he jumped into gear. He stepped up on what seemed like an amphitheatre. Each tier lined with people sitting at control panels and facing a central

wall of video displays. At the top of the amphitheatre were three offices. Each had a large, floor to ceiling, sloping window which looked out over the proceedings. He followed Lieve up the few remaining steps. A final central ring of consoles with just 3 people sitting at it. The pinnacle of the consoles outside the offices. He could see through the glass windows in the offices that they were indeed offices of sorts. People sitting at office desks and a conference table. But all surrounded by computer terminals and other control panels. Cables draped from the backs of equipment racks and running to sockets mounted in wall panels and plates.

There was a door in the front and to the right of the centre office. Lieve headed directly toward it. Philip noticed a figure stand up from his desk and head toward the door. Trying to beat her to it so he could open it for her. They reached the door at about the same time and the man opened the door..

"Virginia, How the hell are ya?" said the man in the Cyberpunk T-Shirt. "And you must be Philip Salisman. I've been wanting to meet you." He held out his hand passed Lieve and offered to shake Philip's. Philip was reading the words on the man's T-Shirt which read. "Crash the system". He hesitated but then extended his hand to meet that of the man's.

"Philip. This is Colonel Alex Cavaye. Alex, this is Philip Salisman," said Lieve.

"Good to meet you man. Come in. Come in," said Alex stepping back and beckoning them through the door. Once through he shut the door behind them and pulled up 2 swivel chairs with wheels.

"Alex has been director of ops of this place for nearly 20 years," said Lieve.

"20 years this month,," said Alex. "I started out in research, now I run all the launches as well. But my passion is still pure research. I believe we're raising you to the stars tonight, Mr. Salisman." It was a rhetorical question.

"Please. Call me Philip."

"Oh yeah. Everyone round here calls me Alex. I like a friendly first name basis."

Philip nodded.

"So what's the problem?" said Alex.

"No doubt you've heard the leak theory?" said Lieve.

"Mmm. Yea. Nasty business," said Alex then he turned to Philip. "I believe you have an alternate theory on this. Virginia was telling me. Something about a data base."

"Ahhh. Well not exactly a data base. A computer model. "

"Ah yes. A computer model. Sorry," said Alex.

"Well I don't discount that there might be a leak exactly. I mean I've met Mister Perters in person and I wouldn't put anything past him or his organization. But I think a lot of what is happening can be explained if the aliens had an extensive computer type model of activities on earth."

"Yes that makes sense. But how much, or at what level would information be entering their model?"

"Well that is the thing isn't it," said Philip. "There's no way of knowing exactly. But certainly any data they got from their satellites would go into that model. I'm sure it wouldn't just be SHADO they'd be tracking. They'd know everything that was moving on Earth. Or at least everything of any significance anyway."

"Well, we're hoping they won't see this lot go up tonight," said Alex.

"You mean you..," said Lieve but was interrupted by Colonel Cavaye.

"Yup. We've got it perfected. That sheet we recovered 6 years ago finally gave up its secrets. Actually as it turns out the hardest part was getting it to stretch and still do its job but

we did it. Those balloons are gonna be invisible to everything. Including, we hope, to the alien satellites. Virginia Lake just informed me that we're going for a bit of deception as well so we may be able to take them by surprise yet."

"Oh that's gotta be something worth seeing," said Lieve.

"Or not seeing as the case may be," said Alex. "They're testing it right now. as it happens. They have the balloon inflated in silo 3 and we just passed a camera plane over the top. Let me see if I can get a feed."

Alex moved himself to one of the consols and picked up a head-set. Placing it on his head he began to speak.

"Hi. It's Alex. Can you punch up the camo tests on the balloon please. Are they still running it?" there was a pause as the person in his ear talked to him. "Oh right then just the video then would do. Can you run it please?"

He strolled to a large monitor which was displaying a view of one of the huge workshops. He began flicking buttons on a panel underneath it.

"What channel?" he said into his head-set. "Ah Ha. Ok thanks." and with that he selected and pressed one of the buttons and an areal view of the desert appeared.

"Philip. This is taken from a very small aircraft," said Alex for Philip's benefit. "It's not much bigger than a remote controlled model. In fact, that's basically what it is. It has a small camera on a gimble mount underneath it and we're just looking from about a 5 hundred metres."

"This is just the desert we're looking at now is it?" asked Philip.

"Not exactly," said Alex. "The launch silo is down there somewhere but you can't see it. You could be standing right on top of it and you still can't see it. "

"I don't get it?" said Philip.

"Ok imagine this. You have billions of tiny fly-eyes all over the surface of a sphere. Interspersed with billions of tiny prismatic colour pixels which can reflect what ever the fly-eyes see on the exact opposite from the angle you're looking at. So in effect you can look straight through the object. "

"Ok but that must be really expensive and time consuming to manufacture such a surface."

"Ah! That's the best part. As with most of the alien's technology, this material is grown from a single pre-programmed factory cell. It generates more factory cells which in turn, generate more cells and more material. The code runs till the program stops. And that determines how big the material is. The thing is that it's fast, very fine in structure, and once you've figured it out, very damn cheap to make. We figure that what the aliens do is park somewhere and set off a bunch of factory cells. They undoubtedly are better at it than we are but we're getting there."

"What about radio and radar waves?" said Lieve.

"Ah! well that's where this plan breaks down to a certain extent. The material is quite stealthy. It will reflect most radio waves off at odd angles but still enough may bounce back to the source in order for it to register as a blip. And even if it doesn't, if the radar operator was keen they might expect a blip from something behind it. The microwave signals will not pass through the material and back again. We don't know how the aliens achieve that yet. But this is still incredibly exciting technology."

A bleep sounded from a speaker nestled somewhere amongst the equipment in Alex's Office. The office was neat and orderly but still cramped with gear. The bleep was followed by

a voice.

"Colonel Cavaye, Colonel Lake for you Sir." Alex jumped up from the bench he was half sitting on next to the video monitor and dashed for a plastic box with a small colour display on it. It was sitting innocently between two computer terminals on his main desk up until the voice emanated from it.

"Yes put her on," said Alex as he hit a button on it. Virginia Lake's face appeared on the display.

"Alex, Have you seen Virginia Lieve and Philip Salisman?"

"Yes they're right here."

"Oh good. Tell them the plan is in place. Commander Pilgrim is heading up the investigation herself. While a more in-depth investigation is going on behind the scenes as it were."

Philip and Lieve huddled in so they could see her face and noticed her tap the side of her nose with her finger in a knowing, hush hush gesture. They understood what she meant.

"Ok Colonel," said Lieve. "Got that."

"Shouldn't you be getting prepped?" said Colonel Lake

"Yup. We're just on our way now," said Lieve.

CHAPTER 15:

"This is new," said Foster as he stood in the lobby of a large pre-fabricated building on an industrial estate east of London. They had passed through several friendly security check points to get this far. All designed to look innocent enough to the general public but to those in the know, it was an entry point to another SHADO facility. A member of the general public that did happen to find their way into the first of these checkpoints would be gently steered away and out again without ever knowing they had entered a high security area.

"Yeah, it's new alright," said Straker. "Then again there's probably a lot of things that would be new to you at the moment."

"Well the basic duty hasn't changed at least," said Foster. "What is this place."

"Officially it's just a research wing of the Astrophysical Commission. They moved some stuff down here on the pretext that it was a better facility for the new millennium. Of course what it really is, is one of our facilities. Or at least this part of it. This is our rehabilitation centre."

"Rehabilitation?" came the chorus from Foster and Ford.

"Yup. You heard right gentlemen. This is where they're making my prosthetics. They've got a new model to fit me with today. A faster computer apparently. Better response to the nerve signals I'm told. Though it would be good if they could extend the battery life."

"Yeah, those legs must consume a fair bit of power," said Ford.

"Well yes and no," said Straker. "I'm no expert but most of the kinetic movement of the things is generated by me."

"What? electricity?" said Foster surprised

"No. No. Nothing so bold. Simply by swinging my body from side to side causes them to walk. But it's the control of the jointing in the knees and ankles that is the real scoop here. A normal prosthetic of this type couldn't climb stairs or even walk over rough ground. These things can do all that and more. How do you think I even sit down and get up again normally?"

"I never really thought about it," said Foster.

"No problems."

"But I don't get it," said Foster. "You've been in a wheel chair for years I'm told."

"Yes ever since... The event," said Straker. "What don't you get?"

"I don't get why you chose to remain in a wheel chair all this time. I mean prosthetics have been available for years. I remember when Larry Simkins was given a prosthetic leg."

"What are you getting at Paul?"

"Well. to put it bluntly. Why didn't you get prosthetics ages ago? I don't get why you let them pension you off like that. You could have fought back. Seems to me you gave up too easily. It doesn't seem like you, Ed."

"Ah well that's quite simple. It's taken a long time for the wounds to heal. It was too painful to have prosthetics. And it meant a promotion and of course there was that gaping hole left in the Astrophysical Commission when the ol' man died."

"You mean Henderson?" said Ford.

"Yeah Henderson." continued Straker. "I just took over his old position. Oh I guess I could have continued on. But I was in too much pain and I wouldn't have been able to be as active in command as I thought was necessary so I thought it was for the best."

Foster nodded his head in understanding. "So how did that kid get the top job?" said Foster. Ford laughed then covered his mouth.

"What? You think something was going on there do you. A bit of nepotism there huh?"

"Well no. It's just a bit unusual that's all."

"Go on. Admit it Paul. Most people think there was something going on between us. For a rank outsider to get the job."

"No. I mean I'd never even heard of the girl."

"Adrianna Pilgrim was one of the fastest rising stars I had ever seen in SHADO, Paul. She was a top pilot had half a dozen degrees, all that. But most of all, the computer analysis of her psychological profile said she was almost as paranoid as I am. She could second guess an alien from a million kilometres Paul. But in the end I was only prepared to make her number 2. I thought she'd make an excellent second in command."

"So why didn't you?"

"Paul. If you were around then, you would have taken the top job for sure. The fact is that no-one else wanted it. Did you Keith?"

"Well no. I didn't as it happens," said Keith Ford.

"I asked Virginia Lake but she had already moved to Australia and was working with our research department in Sydney. We were pretty much thin on the ground for suitable candidates. She ended up being the only logical choice."

"Was it a good choice?" asked Foster.

"Yeah, I think so. What do you think Keith?"

"Hmm. Yeah. I think she does a good job. It's not the same as working with you. Although when she thumps that desk I always think of you," Keith Ford's face cracked into a sarcastic smirk.

"Thanks Keith. I'll take that as a compliment," said Straker. A door opened and a woman in a lab coat emerged from it.

"General Straker," she said in a soft but commanding voice. "We're ready for you now. If you'd like to step through."

"I'll see you shortly, boys," said Straker standing to walk proudly toward the door. He turned back. "I'll be about half an hour I guess. See if you can narrow down that list of likely suspects we put together over lunch Ok?" And with that he was gone.

"I don't buy it," said Foster.

"What do you mean?" said Ford.

"I mean what Ed was just saying."

"What about Commander Pilgrim? No she is pretty good. Weird but pretty good."

"No I don't mean about that. I mean about his excuse for not having prosthetics made for him years ago. It just doesn't sound like the Ed Straker, I knew."

"You have to be careful when you say things like that in this organization Paul," said Keith jokingly referring to the alien's attempts to take over the minds of SHADO personnel.

"But you're right. That's not the whole story."

"So..." prompted Foster.

"Look I don't know if I should be telling you this or not. I think it's probably a bit personal for Ed but until recently, He just hasn't been the same. It's like he lost more than his legs to the aliens. Ed probably doesn't know this but for fully 12 months the psych department had him on suicide watch. He got that bad. We were all pretty low on moral at the time. What with thinking you were dead and then Alec Freeman getting killed. Everything just seemed to fall apart around him. We did what we could but I think suddenly he felt very old and washed up. And everything changed. He just fell apart. The psych department recommended he, quote,

take a rest, un-quote." Ford held his fingers up in a quotation gesture.

"But I think Ed knew it himself. I think it all just depressed him even more. But nowhere did any of the reports suggest he shouldn't head up SHADO any longer. That was Ed's decision and we all through it was in error. But he was so depressed, there was no changing his mind."

"So he took Henderson's old job with a token promotion?"

"Well actually he had to be talked into that too. He was all ready to give up. Take some back room job and fade away. It was the staff here that pushed him to take the job. At least he'd go out with some dignity."

"Well I'm glad you did," said Foster. "He seems so different now. I've never seen him this happy."

"Yeah well it wasn't always like this. I think he went into work, maybe three times in the entire first year. Mind you, he spent nearly 9 months just recovering."

"Yeah, it must have been bad," said Foster. "Did he loose the ol'... You know..." Foster pointed to his groin. Ford let out a slight chuckle.

"Everyone asks that. No it survived perfectly in tact. But it was pretty bad. He would have died except for the heat almost totally cauterizing his legs. He's right in one respect. He couldn't have been fitted for a prosthesis for a long time. But it was really that he sank into a deep depression for the rest of the time."

"So what brought him out of it? I've never seen him this happy."

"Well it was you, mainly. Since you've been on the plot he's been a different man."

"Surely not just me," said Foster pointing at himself.

Ford let out another chuckle. "You know I heard one of the newer operatives talking with her mates saying what a bitch Adrianna is. How she's too strict. Then she said something like the older generation must have had all the fun when General Straker was in command. If only they knew." They both laughed for a moment and then Ford continued.

"But I think it all started when we realized that the aliens had been hiding out on Earth far more than we realized. We had no idea what they were doing. And that kind scared everyone a bit. Actually a real lot. Especially as we've only found a few of them so far. That scared the pants off of everyone from the top down. We wanted funding for a Mars base but they were all talking about funding cuts. Then these UFOs were discovered and all hell broke loose. We've got the green light for a Mars base but the catch was that Straker had to become actively involved with running SHADO again. I think that kinda did it for him."

"I don't understand," said Foster.

"I mean, he told me once he really liked it the way it is now. He get's to run SHADO but officially he's not responsible for its operations as such. So he can come in, give orders and stuff and leave Adrianna and the rest of us to clean up the mess. "

"Is that what he's been doing?"

"No not really. As it happens he's been incredibly productive and supportive. So what about you, Paul? Have you come to terms with everything yet?"

"Well they're still running psych tests on me but I think so."

"No animosity or anything?"

"No actually. Quite the opposite. Although I could have done without the pain, they kinda did me a favour when you think about it. My life was SHADO. That was it. But for 4 or 5 years I lived a normal life. And it felt good Keith. It felt real good. I had family, you know."

"Sounds like you really were luckier than most of us in the firm."

"Yeah that's what I'm saying. I started out with nothing. No family, no ties no-one to care

for but me. I always wanted to be part of a family. And now I am. Of course my family can never know what I really do but I know I have somewhere I belong. And now I really wanna get back to work. Even though the psych boys reckon I should take it easy still, I wanna get back to doing what I'm trained for. Fighting Aliens."

"Well I guess we could start by tracking down this leak," said Ford.

Ford produced a lap-top computer upon which scrolled a list of names they had compiled over lunch. By the time Straker emerged from the door again they had narrowed the named down to just 5 candidates.

"Well boys. Whata ya think?" shouted a triumphant Straker across the empty lobby. He held out his hands either side as if to display his new legs. Legs which were tastefully concealed inside his trousers.

"How do we know they're not the same ones?" said Foster.

"Well actually Paul. They are the same ones as it happens. They've just added some stuff they've been working on. Two new faster computers and a new power cell that will last about 8 hours with moderate use. Look I can even run in these things." He darted across the lobby but the sight of one of Straker's doctors with his hand over his eyes was not lost on Ford and Foster.

"Take it easy, Ed," said Ford as Straker approached them. "You may need your strength later on to deal with this short list."

"Ah Yes, I had some thoughts on that." Straker turned to his doctor now fully clear of the door and very much relieved his patient had not stumbled.

"Remember, General, this is a smooth floor. The computer still has to get use to your style so it can adapt its toe and ankle movement to your style. I wouldn't go doing that over any uneven surfaces just yet."

"Yes thank you, doctor. I will remember that. I just hadn't run in so long. I just couldn't help myself. You've done a wonderful job though. Thank you." The doctor tipped his forehead and with that was gone back inside the door.

"I don't have to come back here any more Keith. All the electrodes are working optimally now they tell me."

"Electrodes?" said Foster.

"Oh didn't I explain. They implanted electrodes which pick up the nerve signals in my leg and then transmit them through an interface to the computers in my legs. This is only the beginning, Paul. This was only to get my biology tuned."

Keith Ford chipped in. "General Straker is the first person to volunteer for this procedure. No-one else has had a full bio-control implant before."

"Not just one, but 2 bio packs, Keith."

"I'm not sure how I'd take to being part machine," said Foster.

"We can argue the semantics of that some other time Paul. In the mean time, what have you come up with?" Straker sat on the seat next to them so naturally, no-one would have ever guessed. Ford passed the lap-top to him and Straker began to examine the names.

"Ah! Yes Keith. I'm glad you've got Hooper on the list. She was the one I was going to mention. Julie Hooper. Communications specialist. The thing that bugged me about her was that she had no business knowing about this operation. She was way out of the loop yet somehow she became involved. Almost as if she involved herself."

"Well there was one other thing we thought of Ed," said Foster. "and you're not going to like it."

"What is it?"

"Well that it's just possible that none of these people have had anything to do with it."

"What you mean that there was no leak at all. That it was just coincidence?"

"No. Apart from that," said Foster. "I mean that someone has overheard the conversations and leaked it. Someone we're not even aware of. These are only a list of primary suspects. What if the person we're looking for was someone who had the ability to overhear what was happening."

"Well, Ms Hooper is still the closest we have I think," said Straker. "Either way, we need to leak some information that will throw them off. Some information that will cause the aliens to think our plans have changed. We can kill two birds with one stone here."

"How do you mean?" said Foster.

Ford chipped in. "I get it. He means that we leak some information that only these 5 people know. We tell them our plans are different and that will buy Salisman's mission time."

"Yes," said Straker now mildly excited. "And then depending on what the aliens do, we'll know that one of these people are the spy. But I want to leak some slightly different information to this Hooper woman. I just have a hunch."

"And your hunches are usually better than most," said Foster.

"But there's something that doesn't add up," said Ford. And all eyes were suddenly upon him. "What I mean is, well, if there really is a leak then how come the aliens don't know we can see 'em?"

"Ah yes," said Straker. "I've been thinking about that. Firstly, If I were the aliens I wouldn't tip my hand that easily."

"You mean you would act as if you didn't know," said Ford.

"Ah yes," said Foster. "Like you ordered when we started getting all the alien technology."

"Yes exactly, Paul," said Straker. "If they started behaving as if they knew we could see them then it wouldn't be long before we put 2 and 2 together and came up smelling a rat."

"I love mixed metaphors," said Ford.

"Shut up Keith. You know what I mean," said Straker. Ford smirked.

"But there's another possibility," said Straker continuing. "The reason I'm interested in this Hooper woman so much is that she's been largely out of the loop for all that. "

"But she worked in comms all that time didn't she?" said Ford.

"Yes but she... Well look up on the records." Ford grabbed the Lap-top and thumbed to her career history.

"So did you notice where she's been working for the past 12 months," said Straker.

"Oh yes," said Foster looking over Ford's shoulder.

"She's been working on internal coms. The radio badge project," said Ford. "But..."

"That's right," said Straker taking command of the conversation again. "That means she's been out of the loop. She wouldn't have known about the advances we made in tracking them."

"What's the radio badge project?" said Foster.

"It's a project to give everyone radio coms that will work in SHADO headquarters," said Ford. "We had problems with it when we tried to implement some off-the-shelf technology. So we started working on a solution of our own. But it was a slow burn thing. That team has been working with Ericsson, the comms company. They've been out in the civilian world trying to adapt a solution for over a year now."

"Yes," said Straker. "Right up until just over 3 weeks ago. When she got transferred back

to comms at HQ. But read the fine print."

Ford put his head down. As did Foster after a little thinking time of his own.

"It says here she'd applied for comms at HQ specifically. This is her third application for a transfer. She was rejected the other 2 times. Err let me see." he paused as he followed a hyper link to the applications themselves. "She was good at what she did in the comms team with Ericsson. So they didn't want to lose her on that. So they turned her down. It doesn't say here but it would seem to me that the only reason they would have cleared her this time was because she wasn't doing much good there. "

"Doesn't that strike you as odd," said Straker.

"Yeah, it does." continued Ford. "Most of my comms guys are bucking for field work. They never get out in the sunshine as it were. And here's someone in a privileged position wanting to go back to hack work. Why is that?"

"So what do we do?" said Foster.

"Ah well. That is the thing, isn't it?" said Straker. "What about we feed them a line. Like... How about we tell them that we're not going to use the new space craft out of Woomera. We're going to use the interceptors in from the moon. That the new space craft have run into some teething difficulties and won't be ready to fly for another week after all."

"Yea," said Ford excitedly. "Look what about I get you two down to comms within earshot of her on some pretext. Then whilst you're there you can discuss it in front of her. Then see what happens."

"Exactly what I was thinking," said Straker. "Not a moment to lose. To the Bat Mobile."

CHAPTER 16:

Philip Salisman was all but spinning out with the patterns of light zooming toward him in the strange train journey out to the launch site. It wasn't a train exactly. Philip had no time to inspect it fully before boarding but it had a tire each side mounted vertically against each wall of the channel it ran along. A single wheel placed at intervals stopped its belly scraping along the floor of the channel. It looked more like a fair-ground attraction than a train. He could see the tension in a cable which protruded out front and disappeared into a slot half way down the left hand wall of the channel. The train's mechanism grabbed this through a clutch arrangement and the cable pulled the train along. Philip through "cable car" would have been a better description than "train."

For a time he was able to view the main tunnel to his left. A tunnel big enough to drive a small ship through had it have been filled with water. The train had then disappeared into the smaller tunnel just big enough for the train itself and he had lost view. But before he did he caught a glimpse of a giant motorized transport platform emerging from the other end of the main tunnel somewhere. A transporter that looked suspiciously as though it were designed to carry a space ship. Some minutes later in the tunnel it dawned on him that he had seen this transport structure of yellow painted steel beams and lattice work with wheels, underneath one of the space craft in the main workshop as it was being prepared.

For now though the rings of light racing toward his eyes were doing their hypnotic best to disorient him. They were moving very fast but exactly how fast he had no idea. The train was essentially an open cage affair. If he stood up from his seat he may have been able to run his hand along the surface of the tunnel wall by which he was passing. The thought crossed his mind but he had to jog his sense of curiosity with the reality that he might lose his hand in doing so against the rough concrete surface. A surface that at that speed, would have ground his hand down to the bone. So he sat content to let the rings of light do their hypnotic worst and began to enjoy the journey.

Within a short time they slowed and then emerged again into the open. This time the train's channel took them in a loop around the circumference of a huge concrete silo. Lieve pointed and he looked up following her finger. A huge silver dome structure covered the mouth of the silo. It appeared to him as if he was looking up at a giant chrome bath plug from within the plug hole.

"That's the balloon," said Lieve. Philip nodded. He was still yet to understand entirely.

In the centre of the underside of the balloon was a central cable surrounded by several other cables. It looked like they were made of string from where Philip was sitting as the train pulled into a platform. In fact they were of a kevlar, steel and carbon fibre composite. He followed them down to what he could see below but his view was obscured by the side of the train and the platform which hung over the edge of the silo like a balcony.

The train stopped and Lieve jumped out onto the platform. She gestured for him to do the same and tentatively Philip found his footing and stepped out. Lieve lent on the railing of the platform from where she could over look the entire proceedings below. Philip joined her and as the true scale came into his view his heart began to race. He lent over the rail as Lieve was doing. Tentatively at first. Gusts of cool air hit him in the face as he peered over the edge.

"Jeeeeeeeeez." was his only exclamation. The cables ran from a ring like structure at the bottom of the balloon above him. All the way to a platform below. Upon which were two space shuttle sized space craft with swept forward wings at the front and stubby delta wings at

the back. A tail plane protruded above the rear section much like that of NASA's space shuttle but unlike NASA's design, they were all mounted to a more stealth fighter-like fuselage. He could see no visible joins in the structure. It looked for all he could tell, as though the space craft were the products of giant model kits. Glued invisibly together somehow.

The only join in the structure he could see was where the rear wings joined the body. Then he realized that these wings were swept back and would probably pivot out similar to an F111 jet fighter. Providing more lift when needed but retracted when flying supersonic or faster.

The central cable from the balloon did not attach to the platform as such. It swept away to one side. Instead there was an open ring in the centre of the platform between the two space craft. A hole through which poked several very strange cannon like structures on a rotating gantry. He pointed at but didn't have to ask directly above the noise of the environment. Lieve knew what he was pointing at.

"That's the propulsion systems." shouted Lieve back at him. Philip shrugged his shoulders not understanding. It made no sense to him. Lieve gestured with her finger for him to follow her. She headed off toward some decking stairs leading down from the platform and back underneath the train. Philip felt giddy as he began to negotiate them. It felt far more open than it did standing on the platform. The only thing standing between him and a 30 metre drop was some thin plates of steal supported by steal tubing. He hung onto the steal hand rails and tread carefully as he followed her across another deck and into a door in the wall of the silo. He could see windows in the wall of the silo at various intervals and levels. Some hung out like balconies but their glass partitions faced downward as if to encourage a particular view.

Once inside it was quieter and Lieve could talk.

"It's not usually this noisy in the silo. It's just that they're raising the launch gantry and orienting it ready. It'll go real quite in a while when that's all done. "

"So how does this all work?" said Philip "This is nothing like what I expected. I thought there'd be rockets or they'd be launched from the back of a C5 Galaxy or something."

"No this is stuff that once again NASA would have loved to use but were under funded to develop. We've been using this technique for launching things for years. But usually just small transport pods and stuff. Now we launch everything this way."

"And what way is that?" said Philip. "I still don't understand. Balloons 'n' shit. Makes no sense to me."

"Ok. it's basically like a giant hot-air balloon. Only it's powered by a combination of lasers and microwaves. On the top, which you can't see from here obviously, is what we call a tracer cap. It's like a little tiny UFO or rubbish bin lid. The balloon is actually hollow through the centre. We fire some microwaves at the rubbish bin lid and it gets very energetic and shoots off. As long as we keep firing microwaves at it, it will keep accelerating. It accelerates so much that it will actually shoot into space. We don't quite get it there however."

"So what does that do?"

"I'm glad you asked," said Lieve smiling. "It carries, like a kinda guide rope trailing behind it. It's actually a microfilament on a 1 thousand kilometre roll. You can't see it because it's in a chamber bellow the silo. That's simply used as a guide so that the balloon rises straight up till it's at a safe attitude. "

"So what you're saying is that we hitch a ride all the way to space underneath a balloon?"

"Yeah, something like that," said Lieve. "A laser heats the ring on the balloon, the atmosphere inside expands and becomes lighter. Light enough to hoist us all the way up to the

upper atmosphere where we can launch straight into orbit."

"That would be pretty slow I'd imagine," said Philip.

"You wouldn't believe how quick," said Lieve. "It's not as fast as a rocket but then it's a lot safer and costs about one hundredth of the price to launch. Plus we can launch very large and heavy objects like these new space craft. What's more is that when we're done, they just pull on all the ropes and reel it in again. Letting the balloon cool brings the whole thing down again."

"And the space craft land in a conventional sense on the air strip or something?"

"Yup. you got it."

"I was reading about the new alien materials. I already understand that. But how good is it really. I mean withstanding re-entry?"

"Philip my love. Let me put it this way. I pity those NASA guys. There is nothing that can compare to this stuff."

She turned and Philip once again found himself playing follow the leader. Into another elevator and on their way to the base of the silo. Only this time it was a caged industrial style elevator similar to those used in mine shafts.

"Tell me something," said Philip. "Why was the train designed like that? I mean why didn't they just use a mono rail or even a conventional train?"

"I'm not entirely sure," said Lieve. "But I believe they had thought about using a Mag-lev system at one stage. They couldn't use that because of the magnetic field produced."

"What you mean like upsetting sensitive equipment ? That kind of thing?"

"Yeah that kind of thing. The train doesn't just carry people. It's a fast link to the launch silos when the transporters are using the main tunnel."

The elevator jolted as it reached the silo base level. As the cage doors began to open, Philip noticed that the display on the elevator controls showed that there were 3 more levels below them. But then the sight of the 2 space craft sitting on their cradles close up took his breath away. They stepped out into an area separated from the main silo by glass and steel. There were sliding doors similar to that of a supermarket but sealed tightly.

"Whoa. That's a pretty awesome sight." he said.

"We don't tend to think about it too much. But yeah I guess so."

"I spoze you're use to it all?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Lieve made a slight yawning gesture to emphasize the point.

"Though all this stuff is fairly new I have to say. I've never piloted one of these guys before."

"That doesn't inspire me with confidence exactly"

"Don't fret your pretty head my dear. One space craft is like the next to me. "

Most of the GRG he had met were there on the launch pad to greet them. Vourhause and Hanniford were on a gantry inspecting the fuelling hoses toward the rear of the furthest space craft. Yuchtar, Suzanne and Amelia were standing on a platform in front of the open access hatch on the closest space craft. The cargo bay doors were all open on the furthest space craft as well and Philip could just see the form of Chris in an orange boiler suit standing on a cherry picker platform from the far side of it. He was pointing at something Philip couldn't see within the cargo bay. Gesturing fairly importantly to another man who also shared the cherry picker bucket with him. The bucket was huge and could have held another 10 people if need be.

Suzanne spotted them and waved. Philip waved back and ventured toward the door to greet her in person them but Lieve grabbed his arm. She pulled him toward another door in the wall of the silo close by.

"We're not suited ready yet." she said.

"But they're not suited either?" said a confused Philip.

"They're not space-suited no. But they're not wearing their civilian clothing either."

Just before Philip was ushered through the door he realized they were all wearing boilersuits of one kind or another. Some blue. Some green. Chris seemed to be the only one in orange but then he noticed another figure in orange. He didn't have time to see if he recognized the person before the view was gone and a new one unfolded before him.

The room was lined with metal walls. Prefabricated slats of white, colour-bond metal bolted to some hidden structure with hexagon headed bolts. The floor was carpeted and there were small lockers mounted in one of the walls. Lieve brought him to a stop in front of them. He could see names on them.

"Here's mine," said Lieve moving to open the door with her name on it. She looked up and down the array of lockers. "Ah. There's your's there." she pointed to one further along. There was a man in a white boiler suit and a hard hat standing toward one end of the wall of lockers. Close to where Philip's locker was located. he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do when he opened it but there was a small blue plastic bag inside. It had a yellow draw-string around its rim and it also had his name on it.

He glanced up and saw Lieve removing her shoes. Then he realized that the lockers were for their shoes only. Which explained why they were so small. And he guessed correctly that the bags were to contain his footwear.

"Do I put my socks in there as well?" he asked.

"Yup!" said Lieve having finished her duties there and in the process of closing her locker.

Philip balanced himself with one hand on the locker door and the other removing his shoes and socks. He placed them in the plastic bag, drew the string and then shut them all inside the locker. Lieve stepped toward a door that lead into another room. The door had some kind of plastic seal around it like a pressure door but obviously not a serious one. There were two such doors in that wall. She waited for Philip to catch up before opening her door.

"Normally there's one for males and females but we won't worry about that here shall we?"

Another man dressed in white approached them and handed them both large blue plastic bags similar in construction to the shoe bags. These also had their individual names on them.

"Clothes?" said Philip. Lieve nodded and opened the door.

She ushered him through into a tunnel of sorts. The walls lined with the same colour-bond metal panels. There was another pressure door at the end of it and Lieve gestured that he should go through. He fumbled with the catch but quickly found the action required and it unlatched. The room inside resembled a bathroom. Tiled floor to ceiling and some wooden benches to sit on. There was a shower at one end and around the corner were more lockers. Each one narrow and running floor to head-height.

"Well get the rest of your gear off and stuff it in your baggy," said Lieve.

Philip looked around for one of the wooden benches and sat down to remove his clothes. He noticed Lieve sitting on a bench opposite him. She began to remove her clothes provocatively. Philip took no notice. Eventually she stopped her strip-tease performance and simply stripped. She stuffed all her apparel into her blue plastic bag and stood up. Philip was a little slower but not far behind. He pulled the draw string tight and stood up. He felt conspicuous as his manhood dangled between his legs. Even though not 40 hours earlier it

seemed quite natural to parade naked.

She gestured him over to the showers and then dropped her bag through a chute. Philip followed suit and they both stepped into the showers. The water was pre-set at body temperature when it came on. Philip braced himself for the cold or the hot but it was just perfect. He moved around as the spray seemed to reach every crevice in his body. He noted there was no soap.

"Does this remind you of anything?" said Lieve.

"Don't even think about it," said Philip.

"Anyway," said Lieve. "we don't have time for any sex right at the moment. Perhaps afterwards."

They finished what Philip thought was the longest shower of his life and began looking for a towel. Instead Lieve led him toward an exit door. Another of the pressure sealed doors made from translucent plastic. He could vaguely see the room beyond through it but it wasn't until Lieve opened the door that he realized it was another tunnel. She stepped in and holding the door open for him. He stepped in and had to brush past her wet, naked body. She let the door close behind him and moved further into the short tunnel.

Philip jumped as the noise of many fans started up all around him. Hot air like that from a hair-dryer began to blast out of vents all around him. He felt as though he was about to suffocate with the amount of hot air entering his lungs but just as it became too uncomfortable the fans wound down and the hot air with them. When they were all silent again the pressure door at the other end of the tunnel slid open of its own accord. He stepped through into another colour-bond clad room with two more white-suited men. This time they were wearing hair nets and booties. Footwear similar to that worn by theatre staff in a surgical environment.

One of the men was holding up a blue set of overalls whilst the other an orange set. Philip stood idle as he waited for Lieve to make the decisions. She decided on the blue overalls.

"Blue is for pilots," said Lieve.

"And Orange?" asked Philip. "I s'pose that's for rookies?"

"Orange is for specialists."

"Oh. I guess that makes me a specialist then?"

"I guess it does at that," said Lieve as she slipped on her suit.

One free, the men in white retrieved more items. Booties similar to the ones they were wearing. Each, the colour of their respective suits. Philip grabbed them and noticed they were actually a little different to the theatre boots the men were wearing. These were like sox with soles. Rubber or plastic. He couldn't tell which. Lieve had already slipped her's on as Philip began to struggle with his. He held one leg up but began to over-balance. His white suited helper rushed to his rescue and supported him but at the same time Philip lurched forward. Hopping madly across the room. Eventually he had to put his foot down without successfully placing a bootie on it and both booties hit the floor. Neither filled with either of his feet. The man in white rushed toward them and scooped them up. He placed one under his wing and held the other one out. He gestured to Philip to raise his leg and as he did so, the man slipped it onto his foot. He repeated with the other one. All without a word or any sign of emotion.

Lieve turned her back on her helper and he began to gather up her shoulder length hair and plait it. He was swift and accurate, managing to plait it faster than Philip had ever seen done before. The man pulled two elastic hair bands from his pocket and slipped them around the plait to hold it in place. There was no need to repeat this procedure with Philip's short hair. Finally two caps were produced similar to baseball caps and once again the colours of their

respective suits. One of the men opened yet another pressure door and they stepped through.

The next room was a large octagonal shaped room. The materials of the walls, floor and ceiling seemed to be some kind of stippled plastic. Around the walls were large chairs which reminded Philip of over-sized dentist chairs. They were filled with people he knew. Amelia, Suzanne, Chris, Vourhause and Hanniford. All being fitted with space suits by more men and women in white boiler suits. This was the first time he realized it was all for real and his pulse rate quickened a little. Lieve stood patiently by one wall waiting her turn. Philip joined her but was constantly peering through the large, glass window panels and glass sliding door which lead back into the main silo.

"Look they're gonna be a while here," said Lieve. "Why don't we go out and inspect the ships. I wouldn't mind a look at the outside of these things either."

She moved off and Philip followed like an eager puppy. She pressed a button on a small control panel mounted on the aluminium frame work surrounding the door opening . There was a pause before a buzzer sounded and the door began to slide back. Philip noted that it was somewhere between a sliding patio door and a supermarket entrance. They stepped out into the silo and Philip looked up. High above him he could see the platform where the train had stopped. The train had moved on by this stage.

"How come we've gotta clean up before we can come down here?" said Philip. "And yet we were allowed up there?" Lieve looked up to get a grasp of what he was talking about but he continued. "I mean. Like if we had dust and dirt on us, surely that would just fall down here from up there?"

"Oh right I see," said Lieve as if struck by a revelation. " The silo is generally kept at a slightly higher air pressure than the outside world. It means that dust naturally tends to find its way up and out of the silo. You probably recall feeling a kind of wind in your face when we were up there." Philip nodded. "Plus they have giant ionizers."

"Ionizers?" said Philip.

"Err. Remember there was a craze about 15 years ago. People use to buy these negative ion generators for their rooms?" Philip thought about this for a moment and then nodded. "Well they're like big ones of those. Only there's a twist. They cause the molecules in the air to become negatively charged just like a negative iron generator, but the air exhausts have a positive charge. So the negatively charged dust particles get attracted and extracted."

"Yeah I get it," said Philip. "That's pretty much the same as clean room techniques."

"Yup that's right. It's necessary because of the interface to the outside world up above. Which is basically desert. "

"Is it open to the desert all the time?" asked Philip. "Only I can't see anything past the balloon."

"No there's a huge door up there that looks amazingly like the desert. Lots of sand gets displaced when it opens though. Err but that's caught in the rim round the edge which stops it pouring down here. "

They had been walking slowly toward the launch platform in the centre of the silo. It looked like a cross between some amusement park ride and industrial rigging. Yellow painted steal beams and decking, apparatus and control panels dotted on at strategic locations around it. A set of wide steal steps lead up to the main decking. Upon which, either side of the centre lay the two space craft. Large clamps secured them in place. Philip stood there for a moment admiring the magnificent site. Lieve was already climbing the steps leading up.

"C'mon. Check it out." she said offering him a symbolic hand. Philip sprang into action

and up the steps. The sound of rubber on metal echoed through the silo which was almost silent. He could hear the sound of machines and motors whirring and beeping all around him. Each sound's exactly location was unclear due to the reverberation of the silo. Only when he became closer to the first control panel on the deck could he tell it was beeping at him. He looked at its colourful LCD display and flashing indicator controls.

"And this goes up into space just like this? You just leave this stuff out here exposed like this do you?"

"Yup. Pretty much so," said Lieve as she headed toward the open door in the side of the closest space craft. Philip moved toward her. The scale of the space craft close up was breathtaking. He looked it up and down from his position. Most of the umbilicals that serviced it were now removed and their ports closed over with hatches. They were retracted on arms up against the silo wall. The few that remained were on much smaller retractible arms which were mounted to the decking of the platform. The people who were working in the silo were now also absent. The cargo bays of the space craft all closed.

They skirted the decking around the wing of the space craft toward its rear. There were a few familiar rocket motors but also a strange toroidal structure in the centre. It seemed to Philip as though it were a caricature of a propeller. Closed over and caged in. He pointed to it.

"Ah. You don't miss much do you," said Lieve. "That's a little bit of Alien technology."

"You mean we've got a gravitic drive on board?"

"Yup. That's what makes these puppies just a bit special. This is the first of the new breed of space craft to be fitted with 'em. We're told not to use them unless we have to and even then they've been limited. You know what happened to the prototype."

"Yeah, I was there in HQ when it went down. Very scary stuff."

A white suited man approached the platform and took two steps up to where he could shout across to them.

"Miss Lieve. Mister Salisman. They're ready to suit you up now."

Philip turned and headed back toward the suiting room. This time it was Lieve's turn to play catch-up. She levelled with him by the time he reached the steps down from the platform. He saw the others emerging from the sliding, glass door.

"Why do we have to suit up anyway?"

"It's a precautionary measure is all," said Lieve. "Just in case there's something wrong with the prototypes. Or if something unforeseen goes wrong."

"Is something likely to go wrong? I thought these things were completely sealed?"

"Yeah, they are. Almost the entire cabin is one solid section grown using organic technology. But you never know. There are still hatches and things. And don't forget those bastard aliens. Never underestimate them. We don't have a clue what they've got planned next. It depends on what's going on with the investigation back at HQ."

CHAPTER: 17

Straker and Foster had stood idly by in the presence of communications officer Julie Hooper and discussed their bogus plans. They had made mention of problems with the mission and that the launch would be delayed by several days. They had mentioned how worried they were about more delays. Not 10 minutes went by after they had left when they monitored an unauthorized digital transmission. They couldn't read the coded transmission but they knew who sent it and could guess why. It was nothing like any of the codings or transmissions that SHADO may have made for any reason. They swooped. A team of security men were sent to her apartment. Their electronic monitoring apparatus detected nothing but after tearing up everything in her apartment, including the apartment itself, they discovered a very alien device hidden behind some tiles in her bathroom. The mechanism by which she would have retrieved it required a magnetic key and had they not actually broken her bathroom up, they would have never found it.

They marched her to the interrogation suite, more like a pit with all the usual bright lights and disorientation. Then they set their trained interrogators loose. She told them nothing. Even after the first session one of the interrogators exited the room remarking that he thought she honestly didn't know anything.

She was marched from there to the medical suite. A battery of tests were ordered. CT scans, blood chemical analysis, and MRI deep tissue scans. She would not lay still so they had to sedate her. A special drug that caused a temporary paralysis whilst she underwent the scanning.

No-one knew what they were looking for and the results were negative. The doctors shrugged and so it was back to the interrogation suite once again. Whilst she was there another team investigated the alien device. A communicator obviously but it would take time and a cautious approach to dissect its operation. Then, late that evening when everyone was tired and the three wise men of SHADO, Ford, Foster and Straker, were wearing the carpet thin with pacing, one of the doctors came running down the corridor holding a Jaz disk.

"Check this out." he shouted as he ran to the nearest computer terminal. No regard for rank and privilege. He slammed the disk in the drive and called up the image. He zoomed in as the three crowded round. More doctors arrived behind them with a more reserved approach than the first.

"Look, see that," he said and pointed to the screen excitedly.

"What are we looking at exactly?" said Straker.

"Her brain looks normal enough. Normal enough for a brain that's fighting off a tumorous growth. So I looked round and I found these." He switched his view and pulled up another picture which seemed equally ambiguous to the un-trained eye. "Look it's a tumour growth. But it looks like normal brain tissue. But no brain has an appendage like that. There's 2 of them. One in the hypothalamus and the other basal ganglia. Basically one in the thinking part of her brain and the other in the reptilian part. That's gotta be it. The more I look at it, the more it's like nothing I've ever seen before."

"So what does this tell us?" asked Straker.

"I don't know exactly," said the doctor. "But you can bet it's alien in origin."

"Well let me know when you find out more will you, Doctor?"

"There's not much more to know, Sir," said The doctor. "Not till after an autopsy. If you know what I mean."

"There's no other test that you can perform then?"

"No Sir. Not without exploratory surgery. Either way she's dead."

"She could be dead anyway with tumour like that in her brain," said one of the other doctors.

"This is true," said the first doctor. "But the truth is, I don't know what they are exactly. It was only by chance that I found them. They show up as normal brain tissue."

"Tell me Doctor," said Foster. "Were there any signs that she had been operated on or anything. Any signs they were implanted?"

"No none, Sir. No obvious surgical scars if that's what you mean?"

"What do you mean. No obvious surgical scars Doctor?" said Straker now more intrigued than ever.

"Well we found a few curious blemishes. On her neck as it happens. Just under her ear on the left hand side."

"Well go on Doctor. Don't leave us in suspense," said Straker.

"Well there were two small blemishes under her ear on the left hand side of her neck. The kind of blemish you get from a vaccine shot. Though why she would have been vaccinated there I have no idea. They weren't bad but just a curious spot for them."

"Aliens!" said Ford.

"We can't be sure of that," said the doctor. "Fact is we don't know what we're looking at yet. It might be something beyond our experience. We'd have to call in an expert in these things and that could be a bit tricky without breaching security."

"All right Doctor I think we can assume that the aliens have had a hand in this some how," said Straker. "The evidence is strong at least. Doctor, I want you to organize to run this by an expert or two, without letting on what it is they're looking at exactly. Find out anything you can and get back to me as quick as you can. In the mean time we've got to work out what this means. and what we should do about it."

The assembly dispersed leaving just the three of them alone again.

"So what do we do?" said Ford.

"Ahh. That is the question," said Straker. "That is the question."

"Do you think they know?" said Foster.

"What do you mean?" said Straker. "Do I think the aliens know we've got her? No I don't think so. How could they?"

"Those tumours may be some kind of device."

"No I don't think so," said Straker. "Otherwise why would she have had to use a coded transmission? Why would there have been an alien transmitting device hidden in her apartment?"

"We don't know it was a transmitter exactly do we?" said Ford.

"Oh come on there Keith. What else could it be?" answered Straker. "Besides, we'll know more when the lab boys have had a look at it."

"If they don't trigger it off and alert the aliens somehow," said Foster.

"Yeah good point, Paul. We should check on that. In the mean time I wanna know what was in her transmission. The lab boys should have come up with something by now."

"And the girl?" said Foster.

"Why did I know you were going to ask that?" said Straker with a smile. "Well I think it would be best to transfer her to our little medical research facility in Iowa. Maybe they can tell us something there eventually. What was that doctor's name?"

"I don't know. I think his badge said Hanlin."

"Alright then. I want Doctor Hanlin to do with her and make sure everything goes smoothly."

The three of them strode down to the computer lab where they were confronted by a computer scientist heading out toward them.

"I was just coming to look for you." he said. He turned about face and stepped back into the labyrinth of the computer department.

"So did you crack the code she sent?"

"We didn't have to" said the computer scientist. "The outgoing coms weren't coded. She used some kind of encoding on the computer terminal she operated but the surveillance camera caught her typing it in." He laughed. "Ha. It was kinda funny. She moved her terminal back to where no-one would see what she was doing but moved it right into the direct path of the camera."

"So what did she type?" said Straker

"Right here for you, Sir," said the computer scientist reaching his desk and handing Straker a print out.

As Straker read, Ford leaned into Foster's ear. "You know it never fails to amaze me. These computer people are always on at the rest of us about how we should use our computer terminals more effectively and how we should save trees by not using paper. Yet here in their own territory they chew through paper like it was the only thing trees are good for."

Foster smiled.

"Well that clinches it don' it," said Straker. He handed back the piece of paper. Ford grabbed it and held it up where both Foster and he could read it together. It read.

"Mission put back at least two days due to technical problems. Pilot and co-pilot survives."

"Well well. At least we know the aliens got our message," said Straker.

Foster followed up. "Yes. But the big question is, what will they do now?"

CHAPTER 18:

Philip watched as the hatch in the side of the space craft swung shut, pushed by 3 white suited technicians from outside. Suzanne shut the inner air-lock hatch and Lieve looked over the controls. He waited while Suzanne and Lieve performed a pre-flight check. He stood leaning on a rack of panels, small lockers and storage compartments. His suit was on and ready but his visor open to the air.

"Smoke?" said Chris who was leaning there with him.

"What?" said a surprised Salisman. "I don't..."

"Only kidding" said Chris. "It just seemed like a bit of a smoke-o break." Philip cracked a smile.

"Hey aren't we spoze to strap in or something?"

"Nar don't worry about it. You'll wanna be strapped in when we bring her back home but going up... Well not until we make a break for orbit at least."

"Ok everything checks out. The SC Sewell checks out so I guess we can launch now," said Lieve.

"Ok. Switching to launch condition green," said Suzanne. "Now we just wait for the launch window assignment from launch control. They they'll warm up the laser and the microwave beam."

"This is all kinda ironic," said Chris.

"What is?" asked Philip.

"I'm riding in my father's memory."

"What? I never get what you guys are talking about?"

"Oh it's nothing really. But this space ship was named after my father. Alec Freeman."

"Alec Freeman was your father?"

"Yup."

"I heard so much about him. I wish I had known him."

"Yeah, I wish I had known him longer. My mother died when I was 5. Dad never told me how. Not until I followed in his foot steps and joined SHADO."

"That must have been tough on your ol' man. Keeping his job a secret from you."

"Yeah, it was. I never understood."

"How did your mother die? If you don't mind me asking?"

"She was a SHADO shrink. Sent in to do an evaluation on a suspected alien plant. She got a little too close to the action. It broke dad up. He was never quite the same after that. She was the only one he ever loved."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"That's OK Philip ol' chap. I just hope I can be there when we take a wad and stick it to those alien mother fuckers."

"Ok Freeman and Sewell," said the voice of mission control. "All systems are green here. We're heating the laser and about to fire the microwave."

"Good luck you guys," came the familiar voice of Virginia Lake. "Take out a satellite for me!"

"Check this out," said Lieve beckoning Philip to the window facing the centre of the platform. A large arm was raising out of it with a parabolic reflector attached. In the centre of which was another reflector which was mounted on its own servo arm. At the base of the assembly was a microwave gun poking through a hole in the reflector. When powered up it

would fire high energy microwaves at the first reflector which would bend them back into the parabolic reflector and be focused on what ever target it was to be aimed at. Philip could hear the motor noise stop and then a loud 60 hertz hum became louder. He could see noting happening at first but then noticed some of the central cables leading through the hole in the centre of the balloon above start to tighten. Then a whizzing noise as the cables shot through the hole.

"That's the guide cap blasting off," said Lieve. She switched to a monitor view and Philip saw a fuzzy green, infrared enhanced image of a flying saucer heading skyward at a massive pace.

"It's just an aluminium cap," said Lieve. "The microwaves hit it and energize it, the air heats up underneath it and it blasts into space. There's a string attached and it's used as a guide." Soon the silver cap was out of view of the outside camera. The humming stopped and shortly after that, the arm began to retract.

"Surely that's not all the way to space already?" said Philip.

"No no. Of course not. That was just to blast the cap off. Now the two microwave canons above in the rim of the silo take over. You can't see them because they're above the balloon right now. "

The cap shot skyward at an ever increasing rate. The microwave heated the air around the cap causing it to spin and thrust upward. Attached to it was 300 kilometres of microfiber cable. Ultra thin carbon fibre and kevlar string that would help guide the balloon to launch altitude. Which was set at 150 kilometres. Way above the atmosphere and about as high as any balloon could ascend.

There was relative silence in the cabin. A few fans and other noises and the constant background babble of the radio. "37 thousand. 38 thousand. 39 thousand...."

Philip could hardly see the string as it reeled out from somewhere below the platform. He could see it catch the light some times as it danced back and forth slightly. There were a few white suited people standing in the silo still but none, on or around the platform.

"I guess you wouldn't want to get too near that string," said Philip.

"Yeah, you better believe it," said Chris. "That thing'll be paying out at almost 300 metres a second when it reaches maximum ascent rate."

"So how come it dances round like that?"

"That's because they're actually feeding it off the barrel underneath. The trick is to track its ascent speed and get a computer to match that with the barrel speed." Chris seemed to be the expert in this so once again Philip turned to him.

"Why do you need to feed it out like that?"

"Well you try hauling up 300 kilometres of string. No matter how fine. That's a mighty big ball of string down there. If they didn't feed it out at the same rate the cap was ascending then there wouldn't be enough power in the cap to turn the barrel."

"Ah yes that makes sense. But what about us? I mean this platform? Surely it would take a lot stronger line to be attached to us?"

"Nope. Not at all. Just one more micro fibre to reel out and then reel the platform back in again when we've launched from it."

"So what would happen if the string broke or something?"

"Well that's why we're all the way out here in the desert. The Australians built this rocket range originally because there was a 3000 kilometre stretch north-west to the Indian ocean. If the balloon failed or the string failed, then they'd blow up the balloon and it would come

crashing back to Earth somewhere down range. There are tiny rocket motors which can be used to guide it. If it's at full altitude then most of it would burn up anyway. Otherwise we can pretty much crash it where we wanna crash it."

"What happens if something goes wrong and we're still on the platform?" asked Philip a little more concerned.

"We just blast off the platform and glide back or even power back into orbit as the case may be."

"Don't worry Philip my love," said Suzanne. "This is about a zillion times safer way to get into space than NASA use. Trust me on this."

"Yeah," said Chris. "I can vouch for that personally. This is safer, costs less to set up and not very much to run. It's safe, efficient and cost effective."

"So how come NASA don't use something like this? Or even the European Space Agency?"

"Beats me," said Lieve. "We actually got the idea from one of NASA's own future speculations about 10 years ago."

"I guess they're restrained by congress and budgets in the States" said Suzanne. "I have no idea about ESA. They're just interested in launching stuff. I guess they have a big investment in Ariane 6 now."

"By the way Suzanne, where's Yuchtar? She's never usually far away when you're around."

"She's working ground support. It's bad enough having one space rookie up here. No offence intended."

"None taken," said Philip.

He was about to launch into another question but Lieve interrupted. "Ok we're about to get under way people."

Philip tuned into the voices on the radio.

"Ok switching to wide." came the voice. "Roger that. Confirmed wide." came another.

"That means they've switched from the microwave canons above, to 4 mounted in bunkers in the desert at a 5 kilometre radius from the silo. That way they keep targeting the cap while the balloon can go straight up through the middle," said Chris. Philip nodded.

There was a cracking sound from the centre of the platform

"That's the laser" said Suzanne. She pointed upward and Philip craned his neck to get a view through one of the side windows. There were a few sparks flecking off the base of the balloon with each cracking sound. But the sound seemed to be coming from the laser itself of which he couldn't see. Then he remembered that high powered lasers were usually pulse charged from banks of huge capacitors. He figured there must be a huge number of banks to be able to fire the laser that fast.

The laser was cracking faster and faster. It was becoming almost deafening and Philip noticed there was no-one left in the silo apart from himself and those in the two space craft.

"Ok. 90 thousand. Release rig." came the voice on the radio.

"We're off," said Lieve. There was a clang which echoed in the silo along with the constant crackling of energy discharging through the laser. A slight jolt accompanied by a groaning sound which vibrated through the floor and walls, then nothing. He saw the walls of the silo moving downward to his relative position. He realized quickly that the walls weren't moving, they were. Slowly the balloon began to lift them out of the silo. He swapped windows for the other side. He saw the platform they arrived on coming into view. The train was absent

moved on to some other location.

Smooth like silk they rode to the level where the balloon had previously been sitting in waiting. Recessed into the walls were mechanisms which housed ramps and gantries which would have allowed access to the balloon. Now all retracted out of the path of both the balloon and the platform they were riding on. Above that he saw the arms which held microwave canons. Also retracted into the rim of the silo. Finally they cleared the massive doors lifted upward to the sky. Even before they had cleared the silo he could tell they were accelerating at an incredible rate. His stomach began to sink as if riding in a high speed elevator but this was a far smoother ride than any elevator he had ever been in.

All of a sudden they were clear of all visual cues and Philip had no idea how fast they were rising. The view outside was almost totally black apart from some stars he could pick out. They offered no clue as to how fast they were now rising into the sky. It felt like the beginning of a train journey to Philip. The locomotive too far away from the carriage he was riding in to be heard. The only sounds were those in the cabin with him. The acceleration so gentle that he would have otherwise not known he was moving at all. He looked around at his ship mates and smiled.

"So that's it then?"

"That's about it," said Lieve. "We'll be at launch altitude soon. Then there'll be a few fireworks."

She turned to attend to some more of her duties. Flicking switches and checking readouts on a panel mounted above the pilot's seat. She stretched herself to lean over the back of the seat in her bulky space suit. Suzanne sauntered around a central console between the two seats and swung her leg over to climb into the co-pilot's seat. She almost crashed landed in it as there was still plenty of gravity available.

"Hello Freeman, this is Sewell. Do you copy?" came a distinctive voice over the radio. It rang out over the constant background chatter. Suzanne pressed some buttons on a panel and responded.

"Hello Sewell, how can we help you? Over."

"Jerry's asking if you've done your checks yet?"

"Virginia's just completing them now. All systems green so far. We'll advise you of any leaks when we pass 10 thousand." There was a pause followed by some laughter breaking in.

"Roger that Suzanne." Lieve spun round to face Chris behind her as best she could in the bulky suit and in full gravity.

"I'm reading a low volt on secondary payload supply 2. You wanna give me your ops on that?"

"Sure. Hold on," said Chris as he rotated himself and began fingering buttons on the panel behind him. A large colour LCD display glowed into life under his hand. His gloves dangling on cords from the wrists of his suit.

"Yeah, I get a down by nearly a volt. under load. It's not dropping so it must be just the charge. I wouldn't worry about it. It's not going to jeopardize the mission or anything." He turned and then turned back again. "Hold on, I know what that is." He punched some more buttons and ran his hand across the display. A finger tapping some highlighted text. "Yeah that's OK. It's just that we're carrying 6 of those wascally wobots. The extra two launch bays are causing a false reading." He rotated back toward Lieve. Lieve looked at him blankly as she thought about this.

"Hmmm. I'd better confirm this with Sewell I think." She squeezed forward to reach her

radio panel and connect her suit-coms to the main radio link.

"That still doesn't inspire me with confidence," said Philip.

"Don't worry too much," said Chris. "We've kinda re-written the book on space faring with all this new alien technology we use these days."

"Yeah, but a problem is still a problem, isn't it?" said Philip.

"HmMMM. Not really," said Chris in a drawn out tone to stress the point. "There are three kinds of systems. Life support, mission critical and other. This problem falls into the other category. If we had a leak, that would be a problem, if our radio or telemetry went dead, that would be a problem, but an under volt on one of the secondary launch systems is nothing to worry about."

"Sewell confirms," said Lieve. "They reached the same conclusion you did."

"Ok good," said Chris. He turned back to Philip. "You see even if that failed we can still launch at least the other 4 robots."

Lieve took up the story. "Under normal circumstances it would be no big deal to haul our asses back down again, fix the problem and put us up, but we're in kind of a hurry. Launching with the balloon is so cost effective and re-usable it wouldn't make any difference."

"Other than a couple of hours," said Suzanne over he shoulder as best she could. Lieve agreed and nodded inside her helmet.

"Oh I should point out that these launch systems were designed to launch satellites and small drones with supplies in them. This was kinda a quick modification to make it launch these things."

"And not to mention that most of the rest of the space ship is a totally new design. This is the first with all that alien junk on ass end."

"Passing 10 K," said Suzanne.

"Jeez that was quick," said Philip.

"You bet your sweet bippy," said Suzanne. "We're really hiking now."

"What's the balloon size?" said Lieve. Suzanne looked for the appropriate display.

"Just over 200 metres," she said.

"That's twice its deflated size," said Lieve.

"How big does it get?" asked Philip.

"Well if it's anything like the old ones it could blow out to 400 metres. But I don't know with all that alien optics stuff on it."

"Is that because of the thinning atmosphere?" continued Philip.

"Yeah that's right." She turned to make her way to the pilot's seat. "Oh well I guess it's time we were getting ready."

Philip looked around for Chris, hoping to take a cue from him. There were four passenger seats in the cabin behind the two pilot seats. While Lieve found her comfort zone in her own seat, Chris selected a seat by the left hand window. Philip decided to find a seat by the right hand window which gave him a dimly lit view of the Sewell next door. A few splashes of red and green painted on it from some indicator lights somewhere on the platform. Philip assumed it was from one of the control panels out there. When Lieve announced they had passed 20 thousand kilometres, Chris began to lower and seal his visor. He gestured to Philip to do likewise. Philip fumbled with it until Chris pointed out a mechanism on the side. Once lowered, a small head-up display reflected in the glass of his visor illuminated with a display telling him the helmet was sealed and that he was on internal life support.

It was very much quieter inside the space suit. His gloves were on and sealed from the

potential vacuum of space should the cabin pressure suddenly drop for any reason. He saw Chris gesture toward him but heard nothing. Then Chris gestured toward his own, wrist mounted control panel. Philip looked at his and tried to work out what Chris was telling him. Chris unbuckled, waddled over to him, grasped his arm and selected a button on his wrist. Suddenly Philip could hear all manner of radio conversation in the background.

"Now you can hear us," said Chris.

"Yup. no problem," said Philip pleased that he was back among the team.

"You've got general comms. At the moment you can hear all of us plus the conversations from the ground and the Sewell in the background. If you talk, only we hear you. There are buttons on your sleeve that you can select who you want to talk to besides us. The ground of the Sewell, even private conversations with anyone in SHADO if you wish, but we'll keep it simple for the time being."

"Hold it down back there for a moment will you?" said Lieve. "I'm trying to hear a conversation Sewell is having with the ground."

Philip kept very silent and also tried to listen in. Something about "Beam drift" and numerous other terminologies he was not familiar with. He messed with the controls on his sleeve. A small display guided him through menus. Sometimes, as he investigated them a colourful display would light up on the head-up system inside his visor. He came across some life support settings at which point he thought better of messing with them.

Ground control were saying something about a mirror on the platform was reaching its limits and they'd have to switch to a different system. He raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders in Chris's direction. Chris selected a private conversation with Philip.

"The cap has drifted further down range than they had hoped. There's a mirror, more of a prism really, mounted on the platform that re-directs the laser onto the balloon target. But we've drifted a little too far and soon the angle of the laser will beam past the target. They're trying to use the rockets on the cap to re-position it. If that doesn't work then they'll have to switch lasers. It's no problem but it will cost a few minutes in ascent time while they make the switch and the computers re-align everything."

"Ah I see," said Philip.

"Quiet," said Lieve again but this time in a more forceful voice.

"Private conversations only work in one direction. If you want to have a private conversation with me you have to select me on your controls," said Chris.

Philip looked down at his wrist controls again and realized he had no idea where he was in the system and how to get back to the menu of radio controls. He fumbled with it desperately till finally Chris unbuckled again and came over to sit next time him. Chris set up Philip's radio to have a private conversation between the two of them whilst still being able to hear Lieve and the others. Then he proceeded to explain how to use the controls properly. Eventually showing Philip a few neat tricks he could play using his environmental controls. Like expanding his chest so that he looked like a caricature of a space man. And making his head-up display switch its screen-saver mode on so that all Philip could see in front of him was some pleasing, brightly coloured, geometric, plasma patterns.

Philip, now in command of his space suit, made a private call to Bernard and Amelia who were Pay-load specialist and Mission specialist respectively, in the Sewell. He knew better than to call up Hanniford or Vourhause as they were just as busy as Suzanne and Virginia were in the front of the Freeman. He passed the time and soon he heard the announcement from ground control that they were approaching 140 thousand metres.

Lieve reached for a series of small handles above her on a panel which revealed some large, recessed switches. She flicked the switches and Philip heard some popping sounds from outside the space craft. The sounds reverberated through the floor and up through the feet of his space suit.

"The restraining clamps," said Chris. "Are you nice and strapped in? We'll be doing launch soon."

"Taking a lunch break are we?" said Philip in a nervous joke. His heart rate began to climb as the moment of truth approached. He checked his harnesses and pushed himself back into his seat as best he could through the layers of space suit, his head supported by the layers of foam in the back of his space helmet. He was as ready to go as he'd ever be. He listened to the conversations on the radio.

"Ok here we go ladies and gentlemen," said Suzanne. "Third floor. Socks, locks, bangles and clocks. Watch your step please."

The platform began dropping again. Falling out of the sky. Philip felt it as his stomach began to rise into his mouth. He felt slightly sick.

Philip heard the last three counts of the count down from ground control.

"Three, two, one."

He didn't hear "zero." the rocket engines kicked in from behind. He was expecting the kick in the back from the blast off but he wasn't expecting the space craft to nose dive. It took his breath. The space craft rumbled and dived and Philip's heart rate increased proportionally with his thoughts that something had gone wrong. No-one was talking to him. No one was telling him what was happening. He was trapped there. Alone in his own private environment with only his thoughts of doom and destruction for company. He began to shake more than the shaking of the space craft and he thought he might be going into shock. Suddenly he realized the space craft was nose up to space. He was weightless but strapped into his seat. Disoriented and confused.

Both the Freeman and the Sewell had blasted off at the same time heading in roughly the same direction but moving away from each other. The slight off-centre positioning on the launch platform preventing them colliding. The platform and the balloon, no deflating, dropped away rapidly whilst highly tensioned spring-loaded pegs flipped the space craft from their cradles. Nose down at first, the momentum soon re-oriented them and flipped them into space. Within seconds the vibrations gave way to a smooth ride. Philip could have believed he was still on the platform.

"Integrity checks OK," said Suzanne. "Go for orbit."

"Roger that," said Lieve. She placed both hands on her control yoke and shortly after Philip felt another kick in the back. Less vibration but a lot of acceleration.

"Ok we're in business people," said Lieve. "You can take your helmets off. When we get into initial orbit I'll rotate so you can have a look at home. Welcome to my world."

Philip began removing his helmet and saw that Chris had already done so and was unbuckling. He sprung effortlessly out of his seat and headed toward the ceiling. Though in microgravity conditions, the concept of ceiling was an abstract one. Philip left his helmet floating aimlessly beside him as he worked on removing his harness. Suddenly he was struck on the head by it as Lieve fired the roll thrusters. He was soon free and drifting like his helmet. He expected gravity to come back in 20 seconds or so but it didn't.

He drifted with his helmet till he could kick himself toward the ceiling and its two large windows which were now looking earthward. Suddenly the Earth was on top of him and he

began to feel nauseous. And as the vomit reached his mouth, he thought it was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

CHAPTER 19:

"I've got to sit down," said General Straker.

"What? Your legs getting tired?" said Foster beginning to laugh.

"Damn. We were going to nick name you Ever-ready with those legs," said Ford.

"Ever-ready!" said Foster as he openly burst out laughing.

Straker didn't like people laughing at his expense but the laughter was infectious. They had just pulled off a minor coup and proved they made a good team together. Even after all these years.

The all flopped chuckling into some seats placed conveniently in one of the corridors. An operative turned into the corridor and headed toward them. They all stopped laughing long enough so that she could pass then immediately burst out laughing again such that the operative thought they were laughing at her. She kept on walking and turned into another corridor and was gone.

"They'll be charging you with sexual harassment," said Foster to Straker.

"I thought that was your department," said Straker in rebuttal.

"Department of sexual harassment," said Ford. "I think I've heard of that."

It was time for another round of jollity. Eventually they composed themselves. Reverting to their adult state after fully five minutes of school boy impersonations.

"I'm quite surprised though," said Straker.

"How so?" said Foster.

"Well there was actually a leak. I didn't think there would be. "

"I thought the evidence was strong and there she was."

"No that's not what I meant exactly," said Straker. "I didn't think a loyal SHADO employee would leak information willingly."

"Well she didn't did she?" said Foster. "I mean those things in her head."

"That's right," said Straker. "Something doesn't add up. There's not much scar tissue. There's no much evidence of any kind really."

"They probably have some micro surgical tools we could only dream of," said Ford.

"Yes maybe so," said Straker. "They might even have done it biologically some how. Micro and Nano technology is in its infancy in main stream technology here. We have the jump on most because of our having access to alien technology. But that's not what worries me. How did she become like that. Where did they do it and how. And what's more worrying, how many more people have they manipulated that way? What is the long term consequence of these, shall we call them, implants?"

"Who's to say?" said Ford.

"Is there any way we can find out?" said Foster.

"Yes I've been thinking that too," said Straker. "What I wanna know is how and where she came into contact with the aliens long enough that she could be manipulated?"

"We could go back through her records. That might tell us something," said Ford.

"We know she use to work in the field so we could start there," said Foster.

"We'll need to access the archives and for that we'll need a computer terminal," said Ford.

"So we should step back into the computing department then?" said Foster.

"No not necessary," said Ford. "Come with me down to my office in Comms. I have a bunch of computer terminals there we can use just as well. And we won't be disturbed."

Straker stopped off along the way to change his battery. They sat in Ford's spacious office

situated at the back of the comms lab. Its dark, mirrored glass windows allowing them to see out and observe the people working outside without them being able to see back in. Ford brewed a hot strong pot of coffee and they set to work. Each reviewing a different set of records to save time. Cutting and pasting anything interesting to their own trace files. Occasionally beckoning the others to look at interesting and curious items. They drew the records of all those people she had worked with all the way back to her internship in 1994. They cross checked the records but soon a single incident emerged as a likely anomaly. Three people from the field comms team went missing for two days in March 2002.

A report showed that the incident occurred right after a particularly tricky three month period of hard work. They successfully installed coded transmission systems in the north of Scotland. They went missing on their way back but the report suggested they simply celebrated a little too hard, and had to sleep it off. They were officially reprimanded but not too severely because of the situation.

They followed the records of the three people after that event. Slowly the team split up. One of the team, Mike McNeil, went to work on another field team which was due to spend the next 12 months in California. The other, Imram Kavarechek, joined a space communications team. Eventually being certified to work in space and service satellites.

"Nothing much there," said Foster at the time and concentrated on other people she had worked with. But Straker persisted and followed the career paths of these two men. He found that McNeil had finished up in California three months early. There was a long running personality dispute with another operative and it was deemed best to transfer him. He transferred back to SHADO HQ.

"This is interesting," said Straker. "McNeil and Hooper crossed paths again before McNeil was transferred again. He moved out to the air force base and works air communications."

Foster and Ford saved what they were doing and dialled up their respective records.

"Looks like Kavarechek wasn't all that keen on working in space after all," said Ford. "He's now working on ground based space comms in Australia."

"What at Woomera?" said Straker.

"No, he's out of Pine Gap. In the American spy base there."

"Oh right," said Straker. "But neither of them have access to any sensitive information in those jobs do they? It's probably nothing. I think we must have got our only suspect."

"Think again," said Foster. "I just dug a little deeper. Kavarechek transferred to Woomera three months ago. They needed someone down there in a hurry. Oh my god. And McNeil isn't working in air-coms any more. He's working in transport co-ordination."

"What?" Said Straker. "What does Kavarechek do exactly?"

"He still works in space comms. Basically fixing radios," said Foster.

"Get me a work record will you?" said Straker to Ford, who obviously knew his way round the computer data base better than Straker. A few seconds later Ford had pulled up some details.

"Well I'll be damned," said Ford. "He's been working on the interceptor data relays."

"That does it for me," said Straker.

"Yup. I'd say the evidence is strong," said Ford. "We've got to get them out of those positions and fast."

"Yes but we have to do it discretely. Don't worry about McNeil. The horse is bolted on that one."

"At least we know how the aliens knew about our transport schedules," said Ford.

"Yes but Kavarechech poses a more immediate threat." Straker paused. "Then again, perhaps we can use him to our advantage. Is there anyway we can get a message to Moon Base one without Kavarechech knowing about it?"

"The old comms systems still exist. We could try and get a link up with them," said Ford.

"Yes but will anyone answer the phone?" said Straker.

CHAPTER 20:

"This is Moonbase alpha calling Freeman. We have you on positive track."

"Thanks Alpha," said Lieve.

"You are go for target one. It's your show now."

"Thanks Alpha. Approaching target area. If we find anything, you'll be the first to know."

Lieve turned and spoke over her shoulder. They had removed their space suits and were all moving freely in the cabin. Chris had disappeared through the hatch in the floor to the deck below. Philip had watched him dive head first like a swimmer off the starting block. Philip couldn't work out how he had managed to curve himself in zero gravity but was hoping to get the chance to work it out when Lieve spoke.

"Ok Philip darling, what are we looking for?"

"Ah! Ok," said Philip realising it was his turn to earn his keep. He pushed himself to a console at the back of the cabin and pulled the Velcro straps across him. Then he pulled a viewer toward him. "Can we deploy the scope?"

"Yup. Not a problem." said Suzanne. She reached for a switch and a motor whirred into action. The sound vibrated through the hull somewhere above him as a hatch opened. The motor stopped as another motor began. A higher pitched motor which picked up speed and held constant for some time before winding down. Philip thought the motor was about to stop but it simply became much slower for a time. Indicators on his control panel began to flash and an LCD display showed a stylized graphic of a telescope being extended through a hatch. Eventually the motor noise stopped.

Philip glued his eyes to the monitors in front of him. They were mounted on arms so that they could be positioned at an optimum position for him. He grasped two large joy-sticks on small arms in front of him and began to contemplate his next move. He had only had a few hours training on the instrument but was sure he could operate it competently. He took a deep breath and pressed forward on the left hand joystick. A motor noise wound up and once again reverberated through the cabin quietly. Then it clunked and strained.

"Ooops," said Philip silently to himself. He realized he had tried to force the telescope to lower itself beyond its limits. He immediately pulled back on the same joystick and this time the telescope extended out beyond the body of the space craft where it could be pointed more freely.

Besides a relatively conventional optical telescope, he also had command of several scanning devices pointing in the same direction. A radar system developed by the U-tronics team who originally designed the space intruder detector system, as well as a laser paining device similar to that used for laser guided bombs. Using some sophisticated holographic software it would aid in pin pointing anomalies in space, but only a visual inspection would confirm an alien device.

He dropped his left hand from the joy-stick and turned up the volume of a speaker mounted at the top of the panel. It was making some strange, crackling and whistling noises which were audible representations of the sensor arrays. Sensors which were tuned across the electromagnetic spectrum and also employing some alien receiving technology. The small amount SHADO scientists actually understood. It was thought perhaps the alien satellites could be detected by the transmissions they made. However Philip had already pointed out to the design team that once the Aliens realized what they were up to, they would surely make them very quiet.

"How big are these things going to be?" said Suzanne.

"We don't really know?" said Philip. "But I'd assume they'd be quite small."

"What? Small like a car?" said Lieve.

"Could be small like a house brick," said Philip.

Suzanne whistled. "That's mighty small."

"Yeah. That's what we're up against. They wouldn't want anything to be detected too easily. Plus they'd have to launch them from one of their UFOs. So they wouldn't want to be carrying anything too hard to deploy."

"But a House brick?" said Suzanne. "We couldn't build anything useful into that size of a package. How do they keep them in orbit?"

Philip spoke as he scanned. Comparing what he was seeing with reference charts displayed on other monitors on his panel.

"Well we'd assume they'd obey the same laws of physics our satellites do. At an altitude of about 32 thousand kilometres they'll just hang there in the sky. The Clarke orbit. Named after Arthur C Clarke. And as for small satellites, that's become the growth sector of the space industry over the past 5 years. The smaller the satellite, the cheaper it is to deploy. Perhaps not the size of a house brick but pretty small. Some the size of a portable television. But what really amazes me is that we can go from launch to 32K in a single orbit and then slow down enough to do this kind of searching. NASA have no chance of getting up here with their shuttle. That's why the aliens have been able to hide these things away."

"That's assuming they're up here at all," said Lieve.

"Oh there up here alright," said Philip. "Even if they've already blown them into tiny bits. But I doubt it."

An alarm beeper sounded.

"Ah! We have something. The laser's painted something out there. I'm zeroing in on its position." He twisted a knob on the control panel as if tuning a radio. A digital readout counted backward to zero. He hit a button beside that read-out and the telescope motors stepped up in pitch for a moment then ground to a halt. He brought the monitor displaying the visual scan a little closer and manipulated at pair of handles on each side like a periscope of a submarine. The telescope zoomed in.

Suzanne and Lieve watched on their own monitors which showed the view Philip was getting. Chris, having heard the conversation from the cabin below, popped his head through the floor hatch and slowly pushed himself into the cabin so that he could look over Philip's shoulder.

"I can't see anything there," said Suzanne.

"Ye of little faith," said Chris

Philip nudged the view slightly to the left in such a way that the casual observer might get the impression he had been doing this job all his life.

"There!" he said.

"Where?" said Suzanne. "I don't see anything."

There was a slight glint in the picture. Philip zoomed in more until a grey, spinning hexagonal figure came into focus. Chris headed back down to the lower deck.

"I'll get one of the robots ready," he said.

"Don't bother," said Philip calling after him. "It's one of ours."

"One of ours?" said Suzanne.

"Well not necessarily one of ours as in SHADO's" said Philip. "But a satellite made by the

hand of humans. It's not alien. Look." He brought the view closer. It kept swinging out of view as the space craft moved relative to it but he kept jogging it back into view. Then he remembered the tracking button. He hit it and the telescope tracked with the object guided by the laser. Sure enough a typical earth made satellite. Hexagonal and spinning. Its sides covered with solar panels and a pair of parabolic reflectors at each end pointing earthward.

"It's an old comms satellite," said Suzanne.

"Yeah. And really old," said Philip. "Really really old."

"How do you mean?" Said Suzanne.

"Wait till it swings round again," said Philip as he craned to see Chris floating slowly up through the floor hatch again.

"Oh yes," said Chris. "I don't think that'll be doing too much communicating."

The satellite revolved exposing almost an entire side panel missing. It looked as though it had been torn off. Then they noticed the other panels has gaping holes in them as well. As it spun round further they glimpsed what looked to be star light flashing through one of the holes where it matched a similar hole on the other side. Its antenna array was broken and bent .

Twisted and pointing in unintended directions.

"Must have been hit by something," said Lieve.

To Be Continued.