

Next Steps

by A. Berglund ©2016

A UFO Story, Sequel to 'Transitions'

UFO and its' characters created by Gerry & Sylvia Anderson with Reg Hill, properties of ITV Studios Global Entertainment. See further disclaimers and references at end.

I offer a hat-tip to Write-Rat (Amelia and Ed Straker) for inadvertently providing a plot bunny to add to my storyline. Food-borne illness is a continuing global concern with often tragic results. Thank you for the suggestions as well...

CHAPTER 1

“Hey Rocky, watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat!”

“Again? But that trick never worked...”

“Nothing up my sleeve (rip)... Presto!”

“Wrong hat...”

“I usually wear a 7-1/2...”

“Now here's something we hope you'll really like...”

Paul Foster pressed the power button on the remote control shutting off the small television on the shelf. His small room on Southern Island Base seemed to be closing in on him.

He was biding time until he was due to report as interim commander on Sky Diver 7, a new Mark II boat. They were due to sortie at midnight and he would be filling in while Captain Ballantine was stateside tending to a family emergency.

It was late in the day and Paul was intent on getting some fresh air before departure. He actually liked Rocky and Bullwinkle and considered it a sort of guilty pleasure for an officer of his ranking. It was also the fourth time he'd seen this episode in the three days he'd been here.

Southern Island Base was too remote for regular television broadcasts so the technicians had rigged a closed-circuit system so all of the non-duty rooms and barracks could have some kind of entertainment on the single channel set-up.

Programming was around the clock, consisting of recordings of old sitcoms, cartoons and movies. The programming was also limited to whatever DVD's the resident staff had thought to bring with them. Foster would see to it that their library expanded greatly as soon as he returned to Harlington.

* * *

Paul repacked his duffel in preparation for his departure. He was not only filling in for Captain Ballantine. He was hiding – from a beautiful young woman from another galaxy with long, light brown hair and eyes the color of the ocean around the island base.

In the three months since Ambassador Ilyana, Ona and Marta had arrived, Paul had been fighting the swell of affection and warmth he felt for Marta. He was outside of his comfort zone, with an uncharted course before him. He knew that he and Marta would be together and it would likely be a life-long arrangement. The thought of it scared the hell out of him. Virginia had been right – terrifying and exhilarating.

Immediately prior to Captain Ballantine’s contact with HQ, Paul had overheard Marta speaking with her aunt Ona. She had used the phrase, “Of course, Paul is going to be my life mate. He just hasn’t figured it out yet...” She then caught his glance and shocked expression.

When Straker emerged from his office moments later to send him to fill in on Sky Diver 7, Paul had a look of relief on his face that the general just ignored. Paul went to get his briefcase and told Marta of his assignment. She laughed, embraced him and kissed his cheek. “Come home safe, you chicken-shit...” she said with a wink. She was becoming proficient with her English slang terms.

Paul couldn’t help but smile then and now he sat on a driftwood log gazing out on the sun setting over the crashing southern ocean surf. The blazing orb of brilliant yellow and orange was making the cresting waves glow the same shade of green as Marta’s lovely eyes. He basked in its warmth, the steady breeze in his hair and thought of her captivating gaze. Paul Foster was in love and fighting it every step of the way.

He grinned and laughed out loud, his head in his hands. “Dear God, I am *such* a chicken-shit...” he said with nobody around to hear it. He reported early for duty after a quick meal in the mess hall.

* * *

Brigadier General Gunther Prosser emerged from his office and found Ilyana and Straker in the command post. “Just the two people I need to see,” he said. Dmitri entered from the corridor. “This will involve you too, Dmitri,” said Prosser with his customary grin.

“My office,” said Straker. The door closed behind them.

Prosser began. “The I.A.C. has been contacted by multiple news agencies wishing to interview Ambassador Ilyana. There was a pool to determine which reporter would be granted the first interview. The name drawn was Elaina Dumas...”

“The tabloid reporter?” growled Straker. “She’s the worst kind of interviewer. Everything she does is sensationalist crap under the label of ‘investigative journalism!’ I can’t allow Ilyana to be exposed to that kind of manipulative interrogation.”

“Do you not trust me to represent the Alliance in a professional and diplomatic manner, Ed?” said Ilyana with a touch of irritation in her voice.

“Of course I do,” said Straker. “It’s just that Elaina Dumas has only one marketable skill – that of twisting your words to mean something you never intended. She’ll ask you if you still beat your wife and push for a strictly yes or no answer. Either response becomes an admission of guilt.”

“Elaina Dumas isn’t satisfied with just making the kill... She feels compelled to

eviscerate her victims and pick the carcass clean! Dumas is a predator!” said Straker with growing anger.

“Sensationalist journalism isn’t an Earth invention, Ed. I know how this works and you need to trust me to do what I was sent here for,” said Ilyana. “If her name was chosen by random chance we can’t very well deny her the opportunity without creating further turmoil and fueling the anti-alien agenda.”

Straker exhaled loudly with his head in his hands. He knew Ilyana was right but he still didn’t like the idea. Elaina Dumas had ruined the lives, marriages and careers of celebrities, business leaders and politicians with no remorse or restraint. A few turned out to be sleazy or criminal, but the others had simply been too weak-willed to stand up to the interrogation tactics used. She had made them look like idiots and amoral crackpots. Her line of questioning was crafted to create contradictions in people’s statements and drive them to a weakened point of confession.

General Prosser added, “The terms and conditions of the interview will be set by us and we will control the venue and the security. Miss Dumas may have her own agenda, but so do we... If she or her crew attempt anything unsavory they will be dealt with immediately and harshly. She has remained silent on the alien visitation question, so there is a distinct possibility of hostility.”

“Okay,” said Straker. “I want airtight security coming and going, plus a security and tactical detail in case there are protestors or insurgents. The site is to remain a closely guarded secret until the last minute. No room for errors...”

“I would like to suggest we add an additional body guard for the Ambassador. A female security agent would be able to accompany her in places where I cannot go without causing unwanted attention,” said Dmitri.

“Captain Chan would be a great asset to deploy. She has years of experience in special security applications. We’ll just have to pull her off of her current assignment,” said Straker.

Dmitri smiled. He had been wanting some excuse to get close to Tsi Chan since he’d first met her. She was beautiful, smart and quite deadly – an intriguing combination in his eyes. Dmitri was quite shy. His profession had occupied most of his life and it hadn’t allowed romantic pursuits.

He was very aware of his lack of experience with women – especially for a man in his 40’s. The idea of being close to Tsi brought both excitement and anxiety.

Prosser said, “I’d like to use a secure meeting room at I.A.C. Headquarters. We have covert secure access points and egress if needed. It is a home turf advantage for us. Tell me Dmitri – do you have any experience with motorcycles?”

“Of course, General...” said Dmitri. “My Spetsnaz training included both on and off-road riding. Is that important?”

Prosser grinned with that toothy, piranha look that Dmitri had seen all those years before. “Absolutely, my friend,” said Prosser. “We are going to and from the interview without anyone knowing how we arrived or left. Go see Lt. Trower from my RAU training

group and tell him I sent you to get checked out on a GS. He'll take care of everything." Dmitri exited with a smile on his face.

"You're going to ride to the interview?" asked Straker.

"Yes. Two-up. The Ambassador with me and Captain Chan with Dmitri. We will have an RAU and tactical detail with us as well." Straker was looking at him with puzzlement.

"I fully expect the news of the interview, location and time to be leaked as soon as it is given. Insurgents, protestors and other malcontents will be watching the roads for motorcades with limousines and police escorts. Any air surveillance will be watching for helicopters. We will be in armored riding suits with full-face helmets, gloves and boots. Nobody will give us a second look and we can utilize whatever pathway provides us advantage," said Prosser. "We will look like just another group of motorcycle enthusiasts."

Ilyana had a look of fascination. She had marveled at Prosser's machine more than once. There was no vehicle like it on her home world.

* * *

Straker's AV link chirped indicating an incoming message. He pressed the button to connect and found himself looking at a very haggard looking Doctor Reed.

"Doctor Reed, what can I do for you?" He inquired.

"Sir, we have a medical emergency here on Moon Base. In short, we have an outbreak of food-borne illness that is hitting us hard. We don't have enough safe food or water to last more than a day or so more. Everyone has been afflicted and there are only a few restrooms on this base. We're having to abandon our duties fairly often for relief and there doesn't appear to be an end in sight. Our supplies of electrolytes and medicines are running low too. Our lab techs are too ill to isolate the causative organisms."

"We will send you supplies, food and personnel as soon as we can get them there, Doctor," said Straker. "Is there anything else you need?"

"Lots of toilet paper and utmost speed, sir. We are weak, exhausted and couldn't repel an alien tennis team."

"Are duty stations going un-manned, doctor?"

"No Sir, but we are down to a rotating skeleton crew, to allow the mad dash when needed. It hit us hard and fast, sir. Fever, abdominal cramps and the weakness and dehydration that prolonged diarrhea brings. Please get us help quickly sir. In another twenty-four hours these people will be lucky to have any bones left..." Reed took on a look of discomfort. "Sir, I must end the call *now*. Moon Base out..."

Prosser said, "I'll take care of it immediately," and left for his office.

"Is that serious, Ed?" asked Ilyana.

"It can be deadly. Contaminated food, water and parasitic infections end more human lives annually than nearly any other natural cause of death. I'm worried that this might not be a random incident," said Straker. He picked up his orange phone and pressed the button for the station right outside his door. "Ford? Get Mason in here on the double..."

CHAPTER 2

“Commander Freeman, there’s a call for you from General Prosser on the secure line...” The Southern Island Base command post was a duplicate of HQ but not 80 feet beneath the surface.

“Red phone?” asked Alec. The communications tech nodded in the affirmative. “Hello, General...”

“Alec, I know you’re busy with trials on the sleeper jet, but we have a medical emergency on Moon Base that needs immediate response. They have an outbreak of food poisoning from their food and water systems. They need provisions, medical supplies and all the rolls of toilet paper you can spare loaded in the small shuttle and launched ASAP...”

“Will do, General. I’ll have the large shuttle prepped and waiting for your relief flight as well.”

“Thanks Alec. Tell them to configure the bay for both cargo and passengers. I’ll have two transports heading your direction in the next 24 hours. Launch the big bird as soon as you have it stuffed,” said Prosser. Alec grinned. “How are the trials going there, Alec?”

Alec paused to give instructions to the nearby group of operatives and set them to work preparing the small shuttle for launch.

Alec continued. “Bringing the Bates brothers into SHADO as flight techs and engineers was a great idea, General. They have heavily modified a Gulfstream IV-SP into a covert luxury combat aircraft, complete with water injectors and extended range. It handles like a dream and so far I’ve resisted the urge to break the sound barrier in level flight. It is the ultimate sleeper of a corporate jet.”

“Are the boys behaving themselves?” asked Prosser.

“Surprisingly, yes. Haircuts, clean shaven and regular bathing... Eddie even got a partial set of teeth so he doesn’t look like a jack-o-lantern when he smiles. I told them that this was a military base and there would be no tolerance for debauchery or recreational pharmaceuticals. Even Rico and Edgar are behaving. It helps that we set them up with a bunker on the edge of the tarmac. I think they’re just glad to have a place of their own again and that there are actual live women nearby. It doesn’t hurt that the women there can kick their asses at will...”

Prosser laughed. “Excellent, Alec. Let us know when the first shuttle launches.”

“Will do, General,” said Alec.

Prosser exited his office. “Major Ford, do you have a way of contacting personnel that are cross-trained for Moon-Base operations? We’ll need pilots, technicians and medical people – a whole replacement crew. They’ll leave in less than 24 hours.”

“That’s the Delta list, sir. I can issue a general order to them to report for deployment immediately.”

“Thank you, Keith. Tell them to bring their own rations and a bedroll as well. I have no idea where we will quarter them when they get there.” Keith nodded and began to

record the message.

Prosser found Virginia and Thorvald in the cafeteria. He poured a mug of coffee and joined them. “I need both of you to clear your schedules and pack for Moon Base. Virginia, you’ll be heading the tracking room and the ODIN control center. Bring whoever you need to help.”

“Thorvald, I need your culinary and organization skills. The food and water system up there has been compromised, so you’ll have to set up a field kitchen and feed the masses fresh, nutritious food and lots of it. They’re all down with food poisoning and I want them to have something more substantial than MRE’s and paste on a tray. You’ll need to bring the raw materials and a few helpers.”

“How long do we have?” asked Thorvald.

“The transports will leave the SHADAIR hangar for Southern Island Base tomorrow afternoon.”

“I have a lot of work to do then,” said Thorvald, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

As Prosser watched him exit the cafeteria, he asked Virginia, “Do you think he knows he’ll be in pressure suit all the way there?”

“We’ll let that be a surprise, Sir. No need to make him worry in advance.” She winked and smiled and went to gather her crew together.

* * *

Alec walked into the tarmac-side bunker of Bates Engineering on Southern Island Base. At least that’s what the home-made sign said above the door. Eddie Bates grinned at him with a full set of teeth. Alec still found it amusing.

“Bud, we been workin’ on your sleeper jet and have some cool shit to show you...” said Eddie. The Gulfstream IV-SP was a blank canvas for creative engineering. Widely used as a hurricane-hunter/meteorological study and communications platform, it featured an extended nose and tail cone for specialized radar and radio equipment and a cabin over 7 feet wide, 6 feet tall and 33 feet long.

The interior was nearly complete, with a luxury bath with walk-in shower, a queen size bed with ample storage and a well-appointed galley and lounge area complete with wet bar. They also made a point of padding the ceiling and bulkheads, due to Alec’s unswerving ability to whack his head on every surface above his shoulders.

Alec was surprised to see so many beautifully varnished wood appointments. Cousin Edgar had spent some of his more lucid younger years working for a premier yacht builder in the Carolinas. Cabinetry was his passion and this interior was a labor of love for him. The interior also included several hidden panels and compartments for safe-room, weapons locker and access for the less civil accoutrements. The wood panels were thin hardwood veneers on aluminum sheeting to keep the weight manageable.

Concealed within the fuselage were a single, shrouded forward-firing 30mm gun, the auxiliary fuel cell and anti-missile countermeasures. Utronics had provided a pair of their new miniature radar systems as well. It looked exactly like any other corporate luxury jet.

“Well done, lads...” said Alec as he stepped back down the ladder. “Not of bit of shag

carpet in sight, either.”

Teddy Bates said, “Look at the rudder...” Alec walked to the rear and looked upward. On each side was painted a very fine rendering of a wombat. “In honor of your Aussie roots...” said Bates. “We just call it ‘the wombat’. It sounded more wholesome than flying sin wagon...”

Eddie added, “we still have some electronics work to do, but you’ll be able to operate everything from the pilot’s seat and much of it from behind the bar. We figured you’d be spending a lot of time there...” Alec laughed.

“So what’s next?” asked Alec.

“We finish the systems, check them out and do the shake-down to see what it can really do,” said Eddie. “The box-stock ship will hit 0.88 Mach at top end. The water-injectors on these Rolls-Royce turbofans will likely add at least another 150 knots. It would do more with afterburners, but this has to work as an inter-continental luxury jet and you’ll need to be able to get it serviced where you land, so we kept it closer to stock with that in mind. You’ll still be able to rattle some windows when you need to.”

“Well done, lads,” said Alec. “Anything you need?”

Eddie’s lips were moving but the only sound heard was the deafening roar of the fully-loaded lunar shuttle and carrier doing its vertical take-off. Bates just stopped and waited with folded arms. When the noise level dropped significantly, he simply shouted, “beer!” Alec nodded and gave him a wink.

* * *

General Ed Straker looked up at Mason with irritation. “I need you to take a team to find the source of the food and water contaminants on Moon Base. The recharge packs for the food and beverage equipment are made right here in the London area. Inspect everything in the process. The raw materials, the machines, the suppliers, the manufacturing and storage as well. We’ll make whatever identification you need to look official. They already have a partial security clearance but they usually deal with the I.A.C. directly.”

“If the problem is with them, we’ll find it,” said Mason. He would begin by studying the regulatory review process for drug and biologics manufacturing and add food supply processing to that.

* * *

“Yes Lt. Trower?” said General Prosser into his orange handset. “How is Dmitri doing on the GS?”

“Sir, he’s a competent rider until he has to stop. The seat height is just so tall on these machines that he’s hanging off the seat just to touch down with one foot. I don’t know what he’ll do with a passenger on the pillion. I can order a lowering kit but it will take a couple weeks to get all the parts.”

“We don’t have that kind of time, Lieutenant,” said Prosser. “Perhaps having 50 or so kilograms on the pillion will compress the suspension to a more user-friendly height. I’ll schedule a couple practice sessions for all concerned and we’ll see how it goes. We may

have to alter our plans. I'll send the Ambassador and Captain Chan to see you for equipment fitting."

"We'll take good care of them, sir." Said Trower.

"I know you will and thank you," said Prosser.

CHAPTER 3

The following afternoon, two SHADAIR long-range transport planes were sitting on the tarmac at Harlington Regional Airport. Their loading ramps were lowered and there was continuous activity around them. The decontamination/sanitization teams were the first to arrive with their equipment.

The Delta list personnel were on-board as were Virginia's technicians. She stood outside looking at her watch. Bill Johnson stood beside her with his clipboard. "The only thing not accounted for is what your hubby is bringing," he said to her.

Two large box trucks bearing the Markers Transport logo rolled in through the main gate and made their way over to the transports. Thorvald climbed down from the cab and kissed his wife on the cheek. "We raided a used restaurant equipment warehouse and cleared out two butcher shops, a bulk distributor and a few farmer's markets."

Bill Johnson grinned, "You have three enormous cold storage boxes in the second bird and room for your equipment and staff as well."

Thorvald stepped to the top of the ramp taking in the large storage boxes. "They look a little over-complicated for giant insulated coolers," he said.

Johnson laughed. "They don't just regulate temperature – they regulate and maintain one atmosphere of pressure as well. If they didn't, you'd have crates filled with vegetable mush and meat that is hard as rock."

"Will all this fit on the large Moon Shuttle?" asked Thorvald.

"With some room to spare," said Johnson. "Getting it out of Earth orbit is the hard part... If launch fails, there will be quite a feast falling from the sky."

Johnson flagged down two forklifts that began to transfer crates from the box trucks. They disappeared into the cavernous aircraft as they crested the top of the ramp.

Both aircraft would be ready for departure within thirty minutes, bound for Southern Island Base.

* * *

Ed Straker stepped into Ilyana's office toward the end of the day. She had been watching recordings of Elaina Dumas' interviews of various celebrities and public figures. The ambassador sat with her arms folded, looking quite relaxed.

"What is your impression of Ms. Dumas?" He asked.

"She is tenacious with a surprisingly diplomatic approach. She does not pounce unduly on her guests. She asks pointed questions, allows them to ramble then picks apart the poorly thought-out statements until they appear foolish or as though they have

something to hide. Each statement becomes a thread to pull upon.”

“Ed, is it difficult for an Earth woman to attain that level of achievement and reputation in her vocation?” Straker felt the sharp edge of her question.

“Historically, yes. In years past, many fields of employment were male-dominated. It is changing, but changing slowly and there are still gaps between men and women in job opportunities and in pay as well. Women have had to work harder to break through those barriers and in social standing as well. There are still parts of the world where they are seen as property and have no legal or civil rights.”

Ilyana’s eyes flashed anger. “I begin to understand the point of view of Ms. Dumas with greater clarity. Gender equality is something that the Alliance worlds had achieved long, long ago. Sometimes I forget how archaic Earth cultures can be.”

“You did arrive here a century before you planned to approach our planet...” said Straker. “Things improve here but they do not do so quickly.” Ilyana smiled.

“My interview will not be of the low-brow fare I’ve seen in many of these recordings. If her intent is forthright then the interview will be as well... I have no reason to fear or to hide anything.” Straker grinned. His beloved Ilyana was every bit as tenacious and motivated as any Earth woman he’d ever met.

“What’s on your agenda tomorrow?” Asked Straker.

“Gunther has us practicing our motorcycle travel both on and off road. I’m looking forward to the experience,” she said.

* * *

The following morning, General Prosser met Ilyana, Dmitri and Tsi at the RAU center. They suited up in their riding gear. Prosser explained how the machines worked to Ilyana. Her curiosity piqued, she climbed aboard behind him.

Dmitri boarded his machine with one foot down and the other dangling on the opposite side. Tsi stepped on the passenger peg and he began to struggle to keep the bike upright. Tsi put a foot down to help stabilize it but the machine still leaned to the left wobbling. Dmitri managed to put down the side stand in time. They removed their helmets.

Prosser laughed. “Try changing places... Tsi is a fully qualified RAU operative and she has a few inches of inseam on you, Dmitri.”

Dmitri was clearly embarrassed. “What am I supposed to do?” he asked.

Tsi smiled sweetly at him with her deep brown eyes glowing. “Put your arms around me and hold on tight, Dmitri.” Her look made it clear it was more invitation than instruction. Dmitri’s face turned a deep shade of red. His shy smile was met with her wink and smile. She mounted the machine and Dmitri took the pillion and happily wrapped his arms around her. The full face helmets obscured the grins on both faces.

Following three hours of intensive on and off-road practice, they convened in the cafeteria for some coffee. Straker entered and asked, “How did your first ride on a motorcycle go, Ilyana?”

She smiled sweetly, “It was a bit frightening at first, but it was quite enjoyable. It is a sort of mechanized test bench where certain fundamentals of physics are employed to keep

others at bay.”

Prosser laughed heartily, “That’s the most accurate description I’ve ever heard, Ilyana.”

Straker noted that Captain Chan and Dmitri sat closer together than anyone else in the cafeteria. As he stepped out he mused to himself that he wouldn’t have imagined the two of them as a couple before but there was obvious chemistry between them.

* * *

Ed Straker sat in the chair behind his desk. He looked worriedly at the AV link monitor. Gay Ellis was looking gaunt and missing the sparkle in her hazel eyes. She spoke quietly and more slowly than normal. “Tell everyone thank you for the shuttle full of supplies, general. They should add a couple days to our stores.”

“The transports should be landing at Southern Island Base any time now. The large shuttle will bring not only supplies but personnel so you can take the time you need to recover fully,” said Straker.

“We will be grateful, sir. We’ve been clearing space for the supplies and for bunks. It will be tight for a while but we’ll manage,” she added. “Moon Base out.”

* * *

Commander Alec Freeman stood on the tarmac beside a very awestruck Eddie Bates. The last of the cargo had been transferred to the large Moon shuttle from the two transport planes. The pair had just lifted off on a heading that would return them to Harlington.

“You’ve never seen the large shuttle launch. What do you think of our big bird?” asked Alec.

“This is some seriously freaky shit, dude,” said Eddie. “Ain’t no way in hell that thing is going to lift all that weight no matter how long the runway is.”

“You’re partially right,” said Alec. “It’s going to taxi to the end of the strip and take off vertically.” Eddie’s mouth hung open, displaying his oddly complete set of teeth.

“I gotta see that shit.”

“You will, but behind the bunker view ports,” said Alec. “The thrust that thing generates on lift-off will launch every bit of nearby sand, stones and sea shells in a cloud that will take a couple hours to settle. You’d better go tell the guys to secure your doors and windows or you’ll have grit ankle deep and in all your drawers too.”

Virginia and Thorvald went to the prep center at Southern Island Base to get issued their flight gear. She waited until the supply master handed him the pressure suit, helmet, gloves and pack, watching his eyes grow wide.

“What are these for, Love?” He asked. “I thought the shuttle docked at the reception sphere.”

“Dear, this shuttle is too big to dock. We land on the lunar surface and enter through the main mobile and hopper hangar door. The cargo bay isn’t pressurized, either.”

He looked at her with searching eyes. She added, “We’ll be strapped into jump seats along the walls three rows high.” Thorvald wasn’t fond of feeling confined and was even less happy about feeling restrained. He had spent enough time handcuffed in tiny holding

cells to last five life-times. At least Virginia would be beside him.

They waved to Alec as they walked by and up the ramp. The technicians raised them on a scissor lift to the level of their jump seats. After securing the harnesses, they plugged in the life support gear and the communication links. It proved to be less uncomfortable than Thorvald had expected. Much of the pressure he felt from the straps would lessen as soon as Earth gravity was left behind.

The techs explained to Thorvald what he could expect and it made him feel more at ease. He began to formulate a plan to make the several hour journey more interesting. He only wished he and Virginia were able to hold each other's hand.

* * *

Thirty minutes later Alec stood in the command bunker with the Bates brothers and their cousins watching the enormous Moon shuttle and its launch vehicle taxi to the end of the tarmac nearly two miles away. Through the thick polymer slot windows there first was visible a massive plume of smoke, flame and debris that moved toward them as an opaque wall. As it neared the bunker, the low frequency rumble began to make the floor and walls vibrate and the sound grew in intensity until it was uncomfortably loud. Those watching the spectacle with them were all surprisingly silent, overwhelmed by the sensory onslaught. The disorientation passed as the shock wave moved passed the bunker and the shuttle was only visible as a brightly glowing dot in the sky.

"It'll be safe to go back out in another 90 minutes or so after things settle down a bit," said Alec. He anticipated the coming question... "It's about the same g-load as an old Saturn V launch." Eddie only shook his head and grinned.

"Come on boys," said Alec. "We'll take the tunnel over to the mess hall. Lunch is on me today..."

CHAPTER 4

Ed Straker had just lit the first Lonsdale cigar of the morning when his orange handset buzzed. "Straker"...

"Sir, this is Mason. We're on our second day of inspection at the food processing facility. So far we have found nothing to attribute the contamination to. We have examined the quality and purity controls of both the raw food materials as well as the other components that comprise the product. They keep accurate and well documented records of all release testing, in process testing and stability testing as well. Everything is current in calibration and all equipment is fully validated and shown to provide consistent results through each cycle of operation."

"What's next, Mason?"

"Next we focus on facility sanitization, equipment cleaning and sterilization. The final step is the human factor... To ensure that procedures are being followed and documented accurately. That will include checking batch and compounding records and training

documentation. It will also require observation of their manufacturing process and clean-room techniques. This will likely take another couple of days to complete. So far everyone has been very accepting of our credentials and has bent over backwards to provide whatever information we've needed. They firmly believe their products are only in use on naval vessels."

"They're partially right," said Straker. "They are so cooperative because they have one kind of product and only one customer. That's a relationship they feel motivated to protect. The decontamination/sanitization team is still in route to Moon Base. They will have a report for us in a day or two. Worst case - if nothing turns up at either end, it's a security problem here at SHADO..."

"I'll have another report for you same time tomorrow," said Mason.

"Keep digging Mason," said Straker as he returned the handset to the cradle. His cigar had gone out. He thumbed the striker on his table top lighter and it sparked but failed to catch – a second and then a third time. He failed to notice his door had opened.

A large, well-aged hand moved in front of his cigar with a torch lighter, its blue double-coned flame perfectly formed as on a well-tuned Bunsen burner. Prosser simply asked, "News?"

"Mason has found nothing so far and it sounds like he's really turning over all the rocks on the path. The shuttle won't make Moon Base for another several hours. They had to follow a less direct path to avoid a cluster of debris in orbit."

"Old satellites?" asked Prosser.

Straker laughed. "No, it's junk we created up there from blasting UFO's for nearly twenty years. As you can imagine, janitorial services are a bit lacking..."

"It would be a massive undertaking to clean up Earth orbit," said Prosser.

"I had a long-standing debate with your predecessor on exactly that topic. He said it was a waste of funding until we lost a shuttle and crew to an alien limpet mine that was using the orbiting trash as cover," said Straker.

"I'll go chat with the engineering department," said Prosser with a smile as he stepped smoothly out the door. Straker grinned wide. It was truly a different organization than when Henderson held the reins.

* * *

The shuttle was still about six hours from arrival at Moon Base. Thorvald and Virginia had chatted a bit and slept. He was clearly getting fidgety. "What's wrong dear?" asked Ginny.

"I've got to relieve myself, Love," he said pensively.

"That's what those two bags are for that are strategically attached inside your inner garment. It's a little awkward to use them the first time but it will make you feel better. For what it's worth, everyone on this flight will have used theirs as well. The only difference is that we've all been through astronaut training and know what to expect. Did you hear me, dear?"

"Shhh, Love, I'm trying to concentrate..." Ginny burst out in laughter.

A while later, Thorvald switched his intercom to the common channel and reached out to the rest of the group. As they all hung there like three rows of bats on the wall of a cave, he led them in an ages-old childhood camp tradition – the sing-along. They laughed and shared songs from other countries and in other tongues. The remaining time passed quickly.

The shuttle engines changed pitch and rumble several times as could be heard and felt by the crew members attached to the wall of the cargo bay. The landing was so gentle they had no idea they had touched down until the sound of the engines began to fade. The massive ramp door began to lower revealing the grey of the lunar surface and the large rectangular door of the rover/hopper hangar.

An exhausted looking Colonel Bradley stood in his pressure suit at the top of the ramp as technicians detached the bats from the cave wall and eased them down to the deck. Wobbly first steps past, they began to slowly waddle down the ramp. Bradley said, “Proceed to your de-gown stations. We’ll get your cargo inside and stowed and get the bay pressurized by the time you’re ready for your gear.”

“What made you think of a sing-along, dear?” asked Virginia as they waddled. Thorvald laughed. “My foster parents were missionaries. It was an ice-breaker we used in every village we went to. It was how I made friends with the other children. All cultures have a common draw to sitting around a fire, singing and telling stories. It’s a universal bond we all share...”

* * *

With the somewhat embarrassing de-gown procedure completed, the replacement staff got to their tasks.

Doctor Reed, satisfied that all was in good hands, ordered the Moon Base staff to report to the infirmary for meds and nutritionals. Since space was limited there, they were all sent to their compact quarters for sleep and time to recover. He then went to his own quarters and followed his own orders. Doctor Schroeder assumed command in the medical department.

As Thorvald got the portable kitchen up and running, the ill were provided with hot clear broth, easily digested fare and plenty of fluids. Volunteers brought them whatever they needed and Dr. Schroeder checked on them all on regular rounds.

After many hours hard at it, Thorvald found a little cubbyhole between a loudly buzzing commercial cooler and a makeshift sink. He crossed his legs, leaned back against the vibrating machine and promptly fell sound asleep.

Virginia stepped up to the improvised counter with her tray. “Have any of you seen my wayward husband? I don’t suppose he’s gone for a walk outside.”

The assistant cook simply pointed downward. Virginia looked over the countertop and laughed. “When he wakes up, tell him his wife is sleeping in Straker’s quarters.” The tech grinned and placed the bowl of soup and fresh green salad plate on her tray.

The Delta medical crew got to work in the lab while the decontamination crew began its task of sanitizing the entire station - every surface, ceiling to floor and every handle,

knob, button and furnishing. In short order the lab had their answer...

* * *

Straker's orange handset buzzed. "Straker..."

"Sir this is Schroeder, we have an answer about the food-borne illness here. It is common terrestrial bacteria – subspecies of *Pseudomonas* and *Staphylococcus* that are normal microflora found on human skin tissue. They are both easily treated with regular antibiotics and everyone should recover fully within six days or so."

"Any idea of the source?"

"The decontamination crew is digging into the food dispensing equipment in search of the culprit. We cleaned and regenerated the carbon beds and changed the filters on the water system. Our testing shows it clear of contamination. We'll need every drop we can generate with all of these additional people here."

"Thank you Schroeder, keep me informed," said Straker. He breathed a sigh of relief.

* * *

General Prosser entered Straker's office and noted the look of relief. "Good news I take it?"

"Yes, the contaminant was terrestrial and was found to be common, easily treatable bacteria." Prosser grinned.

"I have news as well," said Prosser. "The interview will take place tomorrow at 1300 hours in a small conference room at I.A.C. headquarters. Ms. Dumas agreed to limit her group to herself, one sound tech and one camera operator."

"The word should be spreading as we speak then," said Straker. "I'll tell Ilyana when we finish here."

* * *

Alec Freeman sat behind the yoke of the sleeper jet with a very eager Eddie Bates in the co-pilot seat. He spooled up the Rolls-Royce turbofan engines on the apron.

"SHADO flight you are cleared to taxi and lift-off at your leisure. You have an empty sky in the test area," said the tower operator in his headset. Bates just grinned.

Alec gave the throttles a purposeful shove forward and the Gulfstream accelerated briskly, rotating into an aggressive climb. He leveled off at 25,000 feet and began to bank the ship, first gently then progressively with more aggression. It was turning in and tracking like a fighter. Pulling back solidly on the yoke pulled the nose up hard and pressed them into their seats. Bates just giggled like a schoolboy.

"How high is too high?" asked Alec.

"The stock ship is good to over 40K," said Bates. Alec rose up to 35,000 feet. "The red toggle next to the throttles is the fun button."

Alec pushed the throttles fully forward and dipped the nose slightly. He triggered the water injectors and the ship surged forward, the gauges showing the increase in chamber pressure in the engines. The airframe vibrated a bit then smoothed out. Below, the concussive boom resonated amongst the hangars and bunkers.

"Hot damn!" shouted Eddie Bates. "There's your Mach one plus!"

Alec just grinned. “I’ve got a bottle of well-aged bourbon in my quarters that just became yours,” he said.

“We’ll split it with ya tonight over cigars,” said Bates. “Now, take this thing up top and kick it again. I can fix anything you can break as long as it ain’t in a smokin’ hole in the ground.”

They had much to celebrate. By late evening, the bottle lay empty upon the table – five tumblers around it - with several butts in the marble ash tray. They were donated by Straker and represented the very last of his pre-ban Cuban stock.

Five decades-long friends lounged together, with arms and legs draped over the chair and sofa arms and feet on the table just like the old days. An old scratchy record played Muddy Waters, with every hiss and pop like a visit from an old friend.

CHAPTER 5

Straker spoke to Virginia on the secure line to Moon Base. “The big event happens tomorrow at 1300 hours local time. I want a yellow alert beginning at 0800 in case there is a plan to intervene. All Interceptors ready and the ODIN satellites ready as well.”

“It will all be ready sir,” said Virginia. “I’ll have a couple of ODIN’s pointed earthward just in case...”

“Excellent,” said Straker. “The group’s route and departure time will be at their own choosing to keep everyone guessing. I’ll get Waterman in on this end.”

* * *

Straker had everything prepared and he had every confidence that Prosser and the security detail would keep his beloved Ilyana safe at all costs. There was however, an unrelenting ember of worry within him. They had been surprised by new technologies in alien hands before and the cost had been great.

He knew he could make a call and have the sky over London filled with squadrons of fighter and interceptor aircraft as well as fighter-bombers. Such a show of force would not only be unwelcome by the government of Britain but also the population of the massive metropolis. It would also serve to fan the flames of anti-alien sentiment by showing that the visiting extraterrestrials had Earth military forces to do their bidding. It would have to be kept intimate and very, very quiet.

* * *

Straker was distracted and quiet as he and Ilyana ate dinner. He was clearly not following the conversation and his few words were mere platitudes rather than the sparkling discourse they usually shared. He hadn’t even looked her in the face.

When he realized she’d stopped speaking and looked at her, she was sitting with her arms crossed and an eyebrow raised. He smiled and reached toward her for her hand.

“You have got to let go of that worry, Ed. You know I’ll be well looked-after and you’ve covered every potential danger you could think of,” said Ilyana.

“It’s not those that worry me,” said Straker. “It’s all the things I couldn’t think of that worry me... It’s the unknown threats.”

“You just finish your dinner and then come down the hall. I have something special hanging in the closet that will occupy your attention for the rest of the evening...” He smiled and watched as she stepped slowly past with the fluid movement of a large jungle cat. She slowly and gently dragged a fingertip up the length of his arm, glancing back over her shoulder.

He was tempted to shovel the contents of his plate into his mouth, but that would appear far too eager. He finished the rest of his meal with a sly grin and a sense of great anticipation. He even took a few minutes to wash the dishes, knowing that the anticipation was building for her as well.

* * *

The following morning as Straker and Ilyana entered the command post he put a hand on Keith Fords’ shoulder. “I want to have someone monitoring local law enforcement radio and tower chatter from Gatwick and Heathrow as well. We need every angle covered.”

“Yes sir. General Prosser and his group are in the RAU center, ready to transport.”

Straker and Ilyana stepped into his office. When the door closed he pulled her close. “I love you and want you back in one piece,” said Straker. He kissed her softly and added, “Do whatever Prosser and the detail tell you, even if it sounds odd to you.” She began to respond but he placed a finger over her lips gently. “You are in the best hands you could be in and they will keep you safe at all costs...”

She gently kissed his finger. “I know Ed, I know... Try not to worry, please... This interview is very important to me and to the Alliance. This could be an opportunity to ease the fear of extraterrestrial visitation and open minds to the benefits.”

Straker kissed her tenderly and she smiled sweetly. She turned back and winked as she walked out the door with her bag. Straker turned to his desk, noting that his office seemed more large and empty than usual.

* * *

A little after 0900, the group departed the RAU center. Prosser had mapped out a route to skirt most of the traffic and travel through some of the most beautiful countryside and small towns that skirted London to the north.

The two GS dual-sport motorcycles and three smaller RAU machines rolled past rolling farms with fields of green moving fluidly with the breeze. Ilyana was enthralled by the peaceful vistas, feeling the change in temperature and taking in the sweetness of the smell of growing hayfields. Sheep and cattle dotted the hills in the distance.

They rolled through sleepy towns with narrow lanes and thatched roof homes. The roadsides were snapshots of ages past, with old taverns and inns with traditional thick white paint and shuttered windows. People on sidewalks smiled and waved as they drove past and continued with their daily activities. Ilyana marveled at the pastoral beauty and kindly people they passed. Visitors would enjoy this region greatly.

As they neared the city center and I.A.C. headquarters, Prosser turned down a side

road that entered a wooded area with a golf course on the right. The course had been rented for the day so nobody was there to notice five motorcycles crossing the fairways and riding around the hazards. There was a small wooded stand of trees that made up the end of one fairway and beyond that the back of the I.A.C. building.

They nimbly passed through the trees and across the park-like expanse of the back lot. Prosser gave the recognition signal and a steel door opened on the lower level of the building. All five machines rolled in through the door and it was secured behind them. They dismounted, surrounded by the various mowers and machines used by the groundskeepers. It had taken two and a half hours to make the trip.

Prosser called SHADO HQ from his office and reported their safe arrival. Straker felt a weight lift from his shoulders. He lit a Lonsdale and poured a fresh cup of coffee. He would watch the interview from his office. He went to the cafeteria and picked up a sandwich and soup for lunch.

* * *

Around noon, Elaina Dumas and her party arrived. As expected, there was a crowd of protesters in front of I.A.C. headquarters. Many carried signs with anti-alien sentiment displayed. Some were obviously more militant in their views and were sporting red berets as part of some kind of uniform for their movement. The members of a SHADO tactical detail were in plain clothes and mingled in with the crowd.

A buffet was set up in the reception room, with tables set around. There were small sandwiches, salad items and fruit with tea and coffee in urns. Elaina Dumas and her sound and camera techs were loading their plates when she turned. Ambassador Ilyana stood behind her in the line wearing her shimmering official gown. General Prosser stood behind her in his dress blues, browsing the selection of sandwiches. Tsi and Dmitri stood watching along adjacent walls.

Dumas took a long moment to size up her quarry. Ambassador Ilyana wore her simple gown and her pearl white hair pulled gently back and lying softly on her shoulders. Flat soled shoes completed the picture. Dumas saw an easy mark.

Elaina Dumas was tall and thin with eyes that appeared to be vacantly black holes. She wore her favorite fitted Armani power suit in dark grey with navy blue pinstripes. Her jet black hair was pulled back and pinned down tightly. She wore two inch heels that made her absolutely tower over Ilyana. It was quite by intention. Despite her overall feminine form, there was nothing about Elaina Dumas that could be interpreted as softness...

“Ambassador, I hadn’t expected you to be here already,” said Dumas.

“We arrived a bit early. This interview is of great importance and I wanted to be properly prepared. It may have profound impact for both myself and the Alliance.”

“The Alliance?” asked Dumas.

“Yes Miss Dumas. I don’t represent one world – I represent hundreds of them. The Alliance will be watching and listening to our interview.”

Elaina Dumas felt a cold chill and her eyes grew large. “I had no idea,” she said. Ilyana smiled sweetly. “Our meeting today will have an impact on interstellar

relations,” she said. “Have you tried this fruit salad? It is delicious, although I am still learning the names of these fruits...”

Elaina Dumas and Ilyana sat at a table. Dumas pushed her chair further back to establish her detachment. She was already well into her intimidation routine.

Prosser approached them. “May I bring you ladies some coffee or tea?” he asked. Dumas was momentarily stunned. Prosser’s steely gaze caught her eyes and held them. She knew another predator when she saw one. This predator was orders of magnitude above her level. These ice blue eyes had sent many beings to their demise by his own hand. She could see it in them like streaks of lightning in a night sky. She would have to tread carefully with this one.

“Elaina Dumas, this is Brigadier General Gunther Prosser,” said Ilyana. “He is both a colleague and dear friend.” Prosser bowed slightly and offered his hand. Miss Dumas tried not to show her discomfort at not being the apex predator in the room.

Prosser brought them both a cup of tea and retreated to an adjacent table where he could see and hear everything.

“I see you are well protected,” said Dumas.

Ilyana smiled. “Very well indeed,” she said. “That is Tsi and Dmitri.” Both of them grinned and nodded.

After the sound and camera checks were completed, the interview began at precisely 1300 hours.

* * *

“This is Elaina Dumas coming to you from a conference room at the International Astrophysical Commission headquarters, London. My guest today is a woman of great influence and responsibility that I can only describe as other-worldly. It is my privilege to introduce Ambassador Ilyana of the Alliance.”

“Thank you, Miss Dumas. It is a pleasure to be here with you today,” said Ilyana.

“May I ask about that colorful object on the table?”

“That is a communication device we refer to simply as a cube. It is a tool we use that performs some of the same functions as a computer and also will record and broadcast this interview to the member worlds of the Alliance. Hundreds of worlds will be watching and listening.” Dumas squirmed a bit then regained her composure.

“You arrived here on Earth shortly after the attack on our planet. I understand that you played a part in that event,” said Dumas.

“I was then the Monitor for the Alliance. We had followed the trail of destruction left by those factions and it led us to Earth. We were able to provide warning in advance so your planet could prepare its defenses.”

“Could you have prevented the attack?” asked Dumas.

“No,” said Ilyana plainly. “Our function was not military but rather more like what you would call law enforcement. Our Alliance charter forbids us from interfering with non-member worlds. Our contact with this world was forced by the situation although we were not scheduled to reach out to you for another century. Two of the invader factions

were from Alliance member worlds and those factions have been punished severely for their actions.”

“Were you incapable of repelling the invasion yourselves?” asked Dumas.

“The patrol ship I commanded had a crew of thirty and minimal weaponry, so yes – we were incapable of repelling the invasion,” said Ilyana.

“Could you not have called in a fleet from the many Alliance worlds to repel the attack?” asked Dumas, leaning forward and speaking more forcefully.

Ilyana’s gentle look began to change to one of granite. “The Alliance can field armadas of battle cruisers that would obscure your view of your own sun,” said Ilyana with growing intensity.

“Then why didn’t you, Ambassador? Why did so many Earth lives have to end? Why didn’t you intervene to save us?” Dumas sharpened her gaze and leaned out of her chair. She was moving in for the kill...

Dumas glanced at Prosser across the room. He was smiling... It momentarily threw her focus off. She turned her icy gaze back to Ilyana.

“Because of experience, Miss Dumas...” said Ilyana with a pointed edge to her voice. “Due to having learned that lesson the hardest way possible.”

Ilyana continued. “The reason that the Alliance is so unwilling to step in and defend non-member worlds is because we have done so in the past... It’s been nearly 120 years since that pivotal event.” Dumas leaned back into her seat again with arms folded.

“At that time a human non-Alliance world *very* similar to your own planet fell under the aggressive eye of another more advanced, non-member world that coveted their natural resources, had attacked several times and taken prisoners to become slave laborers.”

“The three nearest Alliance worlds sent ships, troops and arms to that afflicted world. We armed them, taught them to fight and stood beside them to repel the full scale invasion. Many Alliance warriors were lost... In the aftermath of the war, the very race we had fought to save turned those same weapons on our Alliance troops and attempted to commandeer our ships to make them their own. The only thing that prevented their success was those valiant ship commanders’ choice to destroy their own vessels rather than let them be used to attack other worlds. Those three worlds lost so many of their young that their populations faltered due to the loss of an entire generation... *An entire generation!*” said Ilyana with resolve in her voice.

She continued, “Our good intentions and altruistic motives blinded us to something so fundamental – *Human nature*... That is why we appeared to so callously step back and watch when your world was attacked. We will not throw any more Alliance world lives away to protect non-member worlds. There are just too many to even contemplate such action.”

Dumas stewed briefly. “So who decided to make us part of this Alliance of worlds?” asked Dumas with an accusatory tone.

Ilyana smiled but without her normal warmth. “*You did, Ms. Dumas... You did.* For decades your world has been sending out radio transmissions and deep-space probes

saying, 'we're here'. You've been sending invitations to your own doom for many years now. The fact that the two factions came here to rend your planet for natural resources and slave labor is proof of that. You have made yourselves known to the rest of the universe without any remote concept just how large it is or how many species out there may respond to your messages."

"But why do we need the Alliance, Ambassador?" asked Dumas.

"Because there are many, many worlds outside of the Alliance... Millions of worlds of advanced species that know of your existence and may have less than honorable intentions in mind for your planet. As a partial member in the Alliance, your world is protected by the whole of the combined forces," said Ilyana.

"As for why that is important, remember that the extra-terrestrial forces you faced were one dying race and two relatively small factions. Those millions of worlds are capable of wielding forces that are more formidable than you can possibly imagine. Your world was spared by the actions of the ruling monarch of the reptilian world as much as by your own efforts."

"Why is Earth only a partial member?" asked Dumas.

"The Earth is a fragmented world. You have no central government, and the many nations and factions still seek to kill each other over matters of race, religion and political ideology... You are too unstable a world to hand our technologies and knowledge to. It would be weaponized immediately," said Ilyana. "It was purely by chance that my vessel was in your sector at the time and was able to provide the warning."

"Your warning saved billions of lives, Ambassador."

Ilyana spoke with her customary courtly grace. "The people of your world rose up and stood together to defend your planet. You are a resourceful and resilient people and you should be proud of what you accomplished together. There are several other worlds that did not survive the same kind of attack which you so bravely met. Most were more advanced than your planet but still failed. Those worlds were ultimately destroyed," said Ilyana.

Elaina Dumas glanced at her notes, changing direction once again. "You appear to be as human as I am," said Dumas. Ilyana smiled.

"That's because I am human. There are many other worlds upon which humans are found. We have common ancestors and our physical makeup is nearly identical to yours. Any differences we have are simply evidence of the longer time period that our worlds have been inhabited by humans," said Ilyana.

"That brings me to your mission. What is it that you have come here to do?" asked Dumas.

"As I said at the United Nations meeting months ago, your brothers and sisters from the other Alliance worlds want to come here and meet you. I am hoping to facilitate visitations by our member worlds and to eventually make it possible for Earth humans to visit other Alliance worlds as well. All of these worlds have so much to experience and learn from you and want to share of themselves as well."

"Surely you can understand why there is so much fear and resistance to the idea of

extraterrestrial visitors,” said Dumas.

“I do indeed,” said Ilyana. “However, visitation by alien species is not a new idea. Your world has been visited by extraterrestrials since humankind was in its infancy. Those interactions have been recorded by ancient Earth cultures in many forms. They include oral and written legends, cave drawings and both monuments and structures erected all over your world. Ancient texts speak of celestial travelers, star beings and sky gods. Some of these visitors were here to study humanity. Others came for natural resources and some came to assist and defend you. Some were seen as deities, some as teachers and some even became rulers on your world.”

“Why didn’t they stay here?” asked Dumas.

“Many were only here to serve a purpose, which they completed. It will come as a shock, but many did stay here. Many of them were refugees. They have integrated into the population and have been here so many generations that this is now their home world.”

“Aliens living among us?” flashed Dumas.

“They ceased being aliens. They merged with the human population here on earth and simply added to the rich tapestry of your genome. Nearly all of you have a bit of other-worldly DNA within you. This shouldn’t be frightening. The humanity of this planet are directly connected to those of the other worlds. You are simply learning that the family of mankind is much larger than you ever imagined. That is why I refer to them as your brothers and sisters of the other worlds. We are one people...”

Elaina Dumas paused momentarily to absorb the statement. She decided to change her direction yet again.

“Would you share a bit of your life story with us?” asked Dumas.

“Gladly... My parents were both teachers. My older sister and I were raised in a world of science, art and literature. We were encouraged to learn all we could and to embrace new experiences and challenges. During my education at the consortium I was assigned a mentor. He was an elderly scientist and statesman who taught me much and provided continual encouragement. He ultimately helped me find my vocation and introduced me to my first life-mate.”

“Life-mate?” asked Dumas.

“Yes,” said Ilyana. “What you would call my husband. He was a research scientist in high-energy physics and he perished in a laboratory accident. From that time I have a brilliant and beautiful daughter, Marta.” Ilyana smiled with genuine warmth. “She’s about the same age as you...” Dumas smiled.

“Do you have a life-mate now?” asked Dumas.

Ilyana smiled warmly. “Yes. A wonderful, brilliant and valiant man from your world... Of course, I must keep his identity secret, but I have great joy in my life once more. My daughter and sister are also here on Earth to help me do my work.”

“Do you think you might ever take this mystery man to your home world to visit?” asked Dumas.

“That is a grand idea. I will look into that very soon...”

Dumas grinned. “Do you think I might have an opportunity to visit your home world sometime in the future?”

“I would be pleased to arrange it when we have the means better established,” said Ilyana.

Elaina Dumas thanked her guest and the interview concluded. The two chatted after the camera and mic had been stowed.

Prosser brought them each another cup of tea and nodded to Dmitri and Tsi. They used their earbud communicators to dispatch the tactical crew throughout the building to begin the sweep of the facility to ensure no unauthorized personnel had slipped inside.

* * *

As General Prosser and Ilyana donned their riding gear, he said, “You and Miss Dumas seemed to connect quite well. Perhaps a budding friendship?”

“I am glad you feel that way,” said Ilyana. “It is very important for her and the rest of the world to see us as fellow human beings and not as monsters from outer space. She may yet prove to be a valuable ally.” Prosser grinned as he secured his chin strap and thumbed the starter button.

Engines thoroughly warmed and communication checks complete, they began to re-trace their earlier route. It should be a simple matter of remaining incognito on the return trip. It should have been as simple as reversing the course down to London...

CHAPTER 6

“Sir this is Ford. We have law-enforcement radio flash traffic that you’re going to want to hear.” Straker quickly was standing at Ford’s shoulder.

“What have we got?”

“Reports of an unidentified flying object that is flying at low altitude and following the Thames in from the sea,” said Ford. “It’s been seen by both police and civilians alike.”

“Does it show up on radar?” asked Straker.

“Only intermittently sir,” said Ford. “They must be keeping it close to the deck.”

“Any description of the craft?”

“A metallic grey disk that appears to be spinning. No mention of any lights. It is also reported to be making a loud buzzing and roaring sound and trailing black smoke,” said Ford.

“Get me Waterman and Moon Base now, Ford,” said Straker with purpose in his voice. “Patch it through to Prosser’s group so they’re in the loop.”

Ford set the controls on the console and nodded to Straker.

“Lew, launch and take up a position over London at high altitude. Use your standard transponder so the RAF knows you’re up there. I don’t want any friendly fire incidents.”

Straker continued. “Virginia, keep a close watch on the London area with the ODIN satellites and try to track the object. You’ll have to follow radio traffic and narrow your

search area accordingly.”

“General Prosser, are you following this?”

“Yes, we’ll keep our eyes skyward,” said Prosser. Any idea where it is now?”

Ford shook his head for no. “Not at the moment,” said Straker.

Ford placed his hands over his headset and strained to hear the new report. Ford spoke forcefully, “All units, the object is reported to now be heading north past London and maintaining low altitude. It may be attempting an intercept.”

Prosser said, “Defensive positions, now!” On the RAU machines, the rear operatives stood on the passenger pegs and turned around. A tug on the front of their black ballistic nylon riding jackets released the H&K MP-5k submachine guns on their quick straps. They cycled the bolts and prepared.

Tsi and Dmitri pulled ahead of Prosser and the three RAU’s took up flanking positions beside and behind him. They increased their speed quickly. Farm houses and fence posts whizzed past them.

Within a matter of minutes at speed they began to hear a loud buzzing sound followed by a roar as the object overflowed them. Black smoke trailed behind it.

“It can’t be!” shouted Dmitri. The motorcade slowed quickly and turned off the road into a wooded acreage, stopping under the cover of the trees. “It just can’t be!” shouted Dmitri again. The object turned slowly and awkwardly around and approached the area it had overflowed, less than a hundred feet above the roadway.

“It’s a Schartoff disk!” shouted Dmitri. He jumped from the pillion behind Tsi and withdrew his own MP-5k. He sprinted to the middle of the road and took up a kneeling position. As the craft passed overhead he emptied the magazine, all thirty jacketed 9mm rounds finding their mark on the now slow moving disk.

More black smoke trailed behind it as it made another slow turn a couple miles down the road. It began to come toward them yet again.

Virginia shouted, “I’ve got it! I have a lock with the ODIN’s. Firing the EMP weapon now!” The craft plummeted, dropping hard down on the tarmac. It was grinding metal and screeching loudly as it skidded. It trailed a plume of sparks behind it as it scraped along the roadway throwing gravel and chunks of loose tarmac. It finally came to a stop. Dark billows of black smoke began to rise from it.

“Good shooting Virginia!” shouted Prosser.

Dmitri shouted to the RAU’s, “Explosives... I need explosives now!” One of the operatives tossed him a small satchel charge with a pull cord. “Everyone stay back!” Shouted Dmitri. He sprinted to the downed machine. It had large vents around the circumference about half way up the sides. He pulled the cord and dropped the satchel into a vent. He began to run back to the group...

There was a massive detonation as he reached the cover of the trees. “We should go immediately,” said Dmitri. “I will explain later.” The group fired their machines and took to the road with great speed. A stream of police cars and fire trucks passed them headed in the opposite direction, sirens and lights blaring.

* * *

Lew Waterman dove on the position and reported the burning object on the ground, verifying that there were no others around. A flight of RAF Tornado fighter-bombers had been scrambled to the last known coordinates of the craft.

As Waterman turned away, the RAF flight began to follow him, not recognizing the signal from his transponder. Their weapons went hot as they pursued. “Ford, tell the RAF this is a SHADO flight!” Shouted Waterman.

“No response from the RAF,” said Ford. “The EMP weapon may have disturbed their communications momentarily.”

“Sky-Diver Four from Sky Four. Surface immediately!” Shouted Waterman. He dropped down to low altitude and accelerated out over the water.

The flight of Tornado’s followed close behind. Waterman’s threat indicators showed their weapons had target lock. He firewalled the throttle and dropped down to mere feet above the water. He hoped the displaced rooster-tail of water would dissuade them. It did not...

In the distance, Sky-Diver Four had broken the surface violently, its conning tower with the SHADO logo prominently displayed. Waterman overflew Sky-Diver Four and pulled back on the stick, rolling vertically. The RAF flight overflew the submarine and made the connection. They vectored off and returned to base. Waterman pushed up his face shield and wiped the sweat from his brow. “It’s okay Ford, they figured it out...”

* * *

The motorcade pulled into the RAU center at SHADO headquarters ninety minutes later. Straker was there to meet them. “What the hell was that thing, Dmitri?”

“A Schartoff disk, General. It is not extraterrestrial. It is from here on Earth,” said Dmitri.

“How could you *possibly know that?*” asked Straker with anger in his voice.

“It is not alien! It is Russian!” shouted Dmitri. Straker folded his arms and narrowed his eyes. Dmitri felt the chill despite Straker’s silence.

Dmitri continued. “I saw a pair of them while I was in the Spetsnaz. They were developed by a Russian engineer named Schartoff. In the closing days of what you call World War II, the Americans spirited away many Nazi scientists under ‘Project Paperclip’. The Americans did not get all of them...”

“When Russian troops closed in on Berlin they captured Nazi scientists that had been working on anti-gravity devices. They had been developed as an alternative to fighters for attacking allied bombers. They had successfully made several craft that functioned but the radiation they produced and the toxic material they contained resulted in severe illness and short lives for the workers in the lab.”

Straker said, “We were aware of these in Air Force Intelligence. We attempted to launch a recovered one in the early sixties that crashed in a forest in Pennsylvania. Not our finest moment...”

Dmitri continued. “The Nazi scientists agreed to share their knowledge in exchange

for their lives and avoiding prosecution as war criminals. Once their knowledge was extracted, they avoided prosecution in the traditional Russian way. They were executed...”

“Schartoff took the Nazi designs which used charged elements of mercury, palladium and other heavy metals and created a functional containment field. Radiation was still lethal, but he took the anti-gravity device and placed it in a sort of open metal basket that used a small jet engine for forward propulsion. The control surfaces are inside the disk and the airflow through the vents allows it to maneuver by remote control, although not with precision.”

“Why did you blow it up? We could have studied it,” said Straker with irritation.

“I didn’t want responding civilians to be exposed to the radiation. Igniting the jet fuel would keep them back for enough time for it to dissipate a bit,” said Dmitri.

“I appreciate your motive, Dmitri,” said Straker. “In the future, you will wait for orders before you obliterate something interesting. Understood?”

“Yes, General. Absolutely,” said Dmitri. Straker gave him a sideways grin followed by a full smile.

Straker embraced Ilyana. “Thank you all for taking good care of the Ambassador.” Ilyana thanked them all most graciously. The couple left the RAU center, her arm linked around Strakers’.

“That’s about as gentle as reprimands get, Dmitri,” said Prosser as he patted him on the shoulder. Tsi smiled sweetly at him.

“You have all done exceptionally well today,” said Prosser. “What remains of the day is yours, with my compliments.” As he returned to his office to make out the report for the incident, Tsi took Dmitri by the hand and they left through a side door.

CHAPTER 7

“Did you really mean it when you said you would take me to your home-world?” Asked Straker. Ilyana looked up from her morning mug of coffee.

“Yes, Ed. I can easily arrange it. It will require you to undergo a full-body molecular scan, which the cube can do. We can take care of that after we finish our coffee,” said Ilyana.

“Perhaps I should get my shower first,” said Straker. “I’d hate for my scan to be anything less than clean and fresh.” He grinned.

“After our shower then?” asked Ilyana. Straker nodded in agreement.

* * *

Following their shower, Straker dried himself and combed his hair. Ilyana followed her daily cleansing ritual, the glow beginning to dissipate while Straker gazed, still amazed at the process he’d seen nearly every day for months.

He stood wearing nothing but a smile waiting for her to do the scan. She placed the cube in his open palm and held her hand over it. “Initiate full body molecular transport

scan for General Edward Straker.” The cube beeped twice. She stepped back.

He became very aware of the energy flowing through his body. He began to glow. The energy made it feel like every hair on his body was standing on end. It was painless but disorienting.

After several minutes he felt the energy begin to decrease until it was finally gone. The cube emitted a long single tone. “All done,” said Ilyana.

“We’re running ahead of schedule this morning. Would you like to see if I still have an electrical charge?” Asked Straker with a playful tone. She smiled and gave him that saucy look that made his heartbeat hammer. He took Ilyana by the hand and led her back to the bedroom...

* * *

They arrived in the command post and found General Prosser waiting patiently for someone. It apparently wasn’t them. He greeted them as they passed. “What are you waiting for?” asked Straker.

Prosser grinned wide. “I’m just going to have a little fun with Dmitri when he comes in...” A moment later, Dmitri stepped into the command post with Tsi at his side. He looked more relaxed than normal and had more confidence in his stride.

Prosser said, “Dmitri, I stopped by your room in the dorm last night with a couple cigars and a bottle of good vodka to share with you...” He added, “Twice.”

Dmitri’s face and neck immediately began to glow various shades of red. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. “I was... uh... elsewhere last night,” said Dmitri. Tsi grinned at him and squeezed his arm. Dmitri burst into nervous laughter.

Prosser grinned, “That’s okay Dmitri. We can do it another time when you are free.” He patted Dmitri on the back and went to his office chuckling, his suspicion confirmed.

Tsi squeezed Dmitri’s hand and they went to their duty stations.

* * *

“General, this is Mason. I’m wrapping things up here today. The inspection is complete and there is nothing here that the contaminants could be attributed to.”

“That’s good news, Mason. I’ll look for your report on my desk soon. What was your impression of the operation?”

“This place is exceptionally well run, sir. They were not only very organized and helpful, but they even offered me a position here as their Compliance Manager.”

“A good offer, Mason?” asked Straker.

“About double what you pay me,” said Mason with a laugh. “Don’t worry. I declined their generous offer. I don’t think I’d enjoy a job where I didn’t get to bust a few heads on a regular basis...”

“Make sure you give them some official looking document of compliance, Mason.”

“Will do sir. I’ll be back at HQ tomorrow,” said Mason.

“Make it the day after, Mason. Straker out.” Straker laughed aloud that he had ended the call like a radio dispatch. He hung up the handset. His mood was jovial.

* * *

Right after lunch, Straker's A.V. link chirped. He pressed the button to connect.

"Doctor Schroeder, how are things on Moon Base?"

"Excellent sir. We have found the source of the contamination in the food vending equipment. When the trays move into the heating chamber, the conductive element quickly heats it from underneath while a convection element heats and circulates the air in the chamber to ensure even warming," said Schroeder.

He continued. "When the tray leaves the chamber it seals shut. Two small rotating spray-balls spin and dispense a pressurized liquid disinfectant to sanitize the chamber. It is followed by a spray of clean water to remove the disinfectant in preparation for the next use. One of the spray-balls had stopped spinning, so a combination of splattered food material came in contact with the human hands reaching in for the food. Over time, the normal skin bacteria found the food remnants to be a suitable growth medium and they flourished. As this material was heated with each cycle, the culture dropped into the heated food and was eaten. They are relatively harmless on your skin but can cause severe illness when ingested."

"So it has been repaired?" asked Straker.

"Yes General. Although the fresh food being made in the field kitchen is going to be sorely missed when it is removed."

"Perhaps we can make it a permanent addition," said Straker. "General Prosser has been talking about that since his first trip up there."

"That would be welcome news, General. All of the afflicted Moon Base personnel are improving and we should be able to resume normal function here in just a few more days. We should be able to return to Earth in a week or less."

"Great news, doctor," said Straker. The call ended. Straker lit a Lonsdale and leaned back in his chair. Moments later Ilyana glided gracefully through his door.

"Ed, there will be an Alliance patrol vessel that will be near this solar system in about nine days. If you want to travel to my world, it will be the soonest opportunity," she said.

"Only if all our chickens are safely back in the coop," said Straker with a grin. Her puzzled look made it clear it was another English idiom in need of explanation...

* * *

At Southern Island Base, a SHADAIR transport had landed and taxied to the terminal entrance. Captain Ballantine stepped down the ramp in civilian clothes carrying his bag. Alec stepped up to him and greeted him warmly.

"My condolences on the loss of your mother, Jim," said Alec. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

Ballantine smiled, "Tell Foster I want my damn boat back..." Alec grinned.

"The seven boat is due in tonight. He'll be flying back to Harlington with me in the morning," said Alec.

Alec had one last evening with the Bates brothers. They grilled burgers and hotdogs and shared the festivities with the other base personnel. Foster and Ballantine were there to enjoy the food and camaraderie.

* * *

Paul and Alec arrived at Harlington Regional Airport late in the afternoon. The sleeper jet had proven to be both capable and comfortable for long range travel. Ona and Marta were there to meet them. Both men were welcomed home with a tender kiss and warm embrace. Alec showed Ona the inside of the craft that would become her home for the next several months.

Paul held Marta's hands. "I had a lot of time to think about things while I was gone." He smiled warmly and gazed into her eyes. "I understand what's happening between us more clearly now. I won't fight it any more. I'm on board for whatever it grows into..." said Paul. Marta's eyes lit up and she reached up and placed her hands on his face, pulling him closer. They shared a lingering kiss. Paul's heart was pounding in his chest but he knew to his core that he was where he belonged.

Alec walked back into the hangar with Ona on his arm. She looked at him with a cut of her eyes and a dangerous smile. "Perhaps we should practice living so closely together for a bit before we have to do it in our flying apartment." Alec only grinned. He'd been hoping she might think of something like that.

* * *

Five days later, a pair of large SHADAIR transporters landed at Harlington Regional Airport. Thorvald and Virginia walked down the ramp slowly. Full gravity felt good but tiring. "Do I look taller, Love? I feel taller..." said Thorvald. Virginia laughed.

"Don't worry dear, you'll shrink back down to normal size in a couple days." She patted his arm and leaned her head against it. "Tonight we sleep in a real bed again."

"Eventually..." added Thorvald. Virginia swatted him with her hand and smirked.

* * *

All of Straker's chickens were indeed back in the coop. With all personnel back to full duty, he began planning for his trip with Ilyana to her home-world. Alec and Ona would depart on their world tour in less than a week, so command duties would fall to Prosser, Paul and Virginia. He was confident that things were in good and capable hands.

* * *

When the day arrived for their departure, the full crew were standing in Straker's SHADO office awaiting whatever would happen. He addressed them warmly.

"We will be gone approximately six weeks. You will be able to contact us using the cube device. I have every confidence that you will be able to handle whatever arises. I'll be checking in with you regularly..."

Straker looked at Alec with a grin. "Try not to burn the place to the ground while I'm gone, Alec."

"Don't worry, mate. I'll browse through your mail and water the potted plants," said Alec with a grin.

"Just go easy on my humidior, will you?" said Straker. Alec winked as he procured a couple fingers of bourbon in a glass from the corner dispenser.

"It's nearly time, Ed..." said Ilyana.

Straker stepped over beside her. He smoothed out the outfit he wore. It was his favorite. Black Italian leather shoes, a cream-colored Nehru jacket and slacks with a black turtleneck sweater beneath. Ilyana held the cube out in her hand and told him to place his hand directly on top of it.

“Why did you wear your Alliance gown instead of one of your newer ensembles?” asked Straker.

“You will understand soon, and you will have something similar waiting for you when we arrive.” The cube emitted two long tones, the signal that transport was about to begin.

Straker pondered what her response meant. “Do you mean that I...”

The cube flashed brightly and the two were gone...

On the floor where Straker had stood were a pair of black Italian leather shoes, socks, boxer shorts, and a crumpled black turtleneck. A cream colored Nehru jacket and slacks were flopped down on top of them.

Alec spit the mouthful of bourbon out and smacked the desk with his fist. He burst out in hysterical laughter with tears rolling down his cheeks. Everyone else stood with mouths agape, at a loss for words.

Alec regained a small bit of composure and said with strained voice, “That’s my Ed, alright. He always tries to make a memorable first impression...”

The assembled group burst into laughter.

THE END, for now...

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Miscellanea:

Spetsnaz, Soviet special forces, originally part of the GRU intelligence group, established in 1950.

Project Paperclip, the program by which former Nazi scientist were brought to the U.S. following the close of WWII. The most famous example is Dr. Werner Von Braun, whose rocket designs became the basis for our space program. There are several facilities named for him in Huntsville, Alabama.

* * *

December, 2016

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