

Transitions

A UFO Story, Sequel to Change in the Air

By A. Berglund, © 2016

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I offer thanks to Matthew White for making Keith Ford a family man in his stories. It created an avenue to add to my storyline.

CHAPTER 1

In the three months since humanity fought off the combined assault of three alien species, Planet Earth had begun to settle back down to its customary patterns of chaos, oppression and strife.

It wasn't at the global scale it had been prior to the alien attacks, but it was rising up in regions of chronic unrest. What was different is that the rest of humanity was now watching with irritation and felt obligated to get involved to resolve it.

That period of time when humanity had worked together to preserve their species had made a lasting impression on the masses. They understood that they could do a better job of sharing the planet than they had done before.

Global peace and an end to oppression were attributes worth fighting for. This recreated the old historical paradox that had played over and over throughout human history. How much military force is appropriate to establish and enforce peace?

The patterns were repeating themselves as they had before. The liberator becomes the enforcer and peace keeper. Eventually, the enforcers are considered to be the oppressors and the oppressed rise up, starting the cycle over again... Exit strategies always looked better on paper between diplomats than they did in the field under fire.

The United Nations charter members were busily at work imposing economic sanctions, trade restrictions and organizing relief for the displaced and needy.

Humanity was in a period of adjustment. Infrastructure in many major population centers had been destroyed and many saw the loss as an impetus to pursue a simpler and less complicated pathway.

The adjustments for some had been easy. That was not the case for General Ed Straker. The Monitor had told him three months ago that his role and that of SHADO would be changing. The changes had him wishing for the days before the epic battle for humanity. There had been only one alien species to worry about and he had his alternate world as a studio executive to be his respite and diversion.

At first, the cube device had been an interesting way to learn about the various worlds and species that were unknown to earthlings. Then it began to flash due to incoming communications from otherworldly entities. The cube wasn't translating the languages to English, so Straker and the command staff were continually interrupted by the blinding flashes followed by loud gibberish. They quickly stopped trying to answer the incoming messages.

The cube was driving them crazy... Straker had contacted the Monitor several times. Each time she appeared as a hazy image in his office, speaking like a patient adult to an irritating child.

Straker had genuine concerns about visiting extraterrestrials that the Monitor seemed hesitant to discuss. It was time for a face-to-face meeting.

Straker was sitting behind his desk in his subterranean office. His head was lowered and his hands pressed firmly over his eyes. The bright flashes from the cube were intense enough that he could see the red inner contents of his hands and the shadows of the bones of his fingers through his skin. His headache was throbbing.

Straker rose and searched his cabinets for something opaque and large enough to put over the 10cm square cube. The trash can had the same alternating clear bands as his desk so it was a non-starter. The coffee mugs were too small.

Finally, Straker dumped out the contents of the metal ice bucket into the small sink near the corner beverage dispenser. He inverted it over the cube and felt a bit of relief. Alec stepped in through the door.

"Is that damn thing flashing again?" He asked. He raised the edge of the inverted ice bucket and the flashing light leaked out through the small gap.

"Why don't we just put the bloody thing somewhere else?" he added.

"Go ahead, Alec. Go ahead and move it..." said Straker with irritation.

Alec removed the inverted ice bucket and reached for the flashing cube. Just looking directly at it caused his head to throb. The cube wouldn't budge. Alec put all his weight behind it and shoved the cube with all his might. The desk moved a couple inches on the floor.

"Did you really think I hadn't thought of that, Alec?" said Straker, replacing the ice bucket over the cube again. The door opened again and in walked Virginia and Thorvald.

"The cube is at it again?" asked Virginia. She smiled at the inverted ice bucket and lifted an edge up until it lit up like a camera flash bulb.

Straker had his hands pressed against his eyes again. "Why won't these goddamn aliens just leave us the hell alone? What's so damn interesting about us?" he growled with clenched fists.

"Ed, it isn't even 9 am yet and you're already over-wound like a cheap clock," said Alec. "Get out of here and decompress before some SHADO psych-jockey comes in and makes you. Thorvald, take him somewhere and make him relax if you have to sit on him to do it..."

"Gladly, Commander." Thorvald kissed his wife quickly and led Straker out into the corridor. The door closed behind them. Straker felt a bit less angry with Alec but still felt a burning hatred for the cursed cube device the Monitor had forced on him.

"Well Thorvald, what do you have in mind?" he asked, still sounding quite irritated.

"Let Commander Freeman or Virginia contact the Monitor this time. I'm taking you fishing for a few hours. Some fresh air and sunshine will do you a world of good."

"I have no gear here, Thorvald."

"Leave it to me, Sir. I always keep two or three fly rods in the car and a couple boxes of flies. There are some old shoes there as well, so we can just wet wade it if you can come up with some swim trunks and a towel."

"We can take what we need from the gymnasium and locker room," said Straker, warming up to the plan to blow off work for a few hours and go fishing. "I'll get a few cigars for the afternoon for both of us."

CHAPTER 2

Thorvald and Straker rolled out of the new main gate in the little blue Beetle. Thorvald slowed and both men saluted the memorial in the clearing on the other side of the road. It had been erected in memory of the 143 SHADO personnel that had lost their lives in the alien attack three months earlier.

The permanent marble pieces were still being carved and included the names, ranks and service area of those lost. There now stood a temporary memorial, hewn from a fallen oak in that same field that had stood for over two hundred years.

Thorvald had carved part of it into a large sculpture of a medieval knight's shield leaned back against a broadsword with ornate hilt and pommel rising above the top. On the shield was carved the SHADO logo. It was left unstained and covered with marine polyurethane to make it weather resistant. Around the shield and sword were halved logs with the names of all 143 carved by hand into the grain of the stately old tree felled by an alien weapon. It was a beautifully rendered monument even if it was temporary. There seemed to be an endless supply of fresh flowers left there by both SHADO employees and local civilians who recognized the sacrifice of those listed.

Thorvald drove for nearly an hour down winding country lanes and beside miles of stone fences, finally turning onto a gravel road that led to a charming old farmstead.

“Who lives here, Thorvald?”

“An elderly gentlemen I only know as Mr. James. I met him in the spring after the Norway raid and he offered to let me fish the stream on his acreage anytime I like. In return, I come and do tasks for him from time to time. Being a farm boy myself, that is always a pleasure to me.”

“Is that him?” asked Straker. Thorvald stopped the car and motioned for Straker to step out with him. An aged, fairly round man with rosy cheeks and a white fringe stepped out of the barn wearing bibbed overalls and tall rubber boots.

“Thorvald! Good to see you, lad!” he said loudly in a gruff voice. “Doing some fishing today?” He grasped Thorvald’s hand and pumped it energetically.

“Yes, Mr. James. This is my friend, Ed.” Mr. James shook Straker’s hand with a grip like a woodworkers’ vise.

“I wanted you two to meet and to see if we can find some of those brown trout I saw in there several months ago,” said Thorvald.

“Good luck with that, lad. My livestock won’t even go near that stream to drink since that blasted space thing crashed back there during that mess three months ago. I think something might have landed in the water that is upsetting my cows and goats.”

Thorvald pondered a moment. “Do you have some heavy chain? If we find something in the water, maybe we can drag it out.”

“I’ll get it and follow you down with the tractor.”

Thorvald motioned for Straker to get back in the car and he went to open a gate into the pasture. He drove the Beetle in and waited for Mr. James to pass through the gate. He secured it again after the tractor passed through. He climbed back in and pulled the levers locking in the four wheel drive and locking the center differential. “It gets rather muddy as you get closer to the stream,” said Thorvald.

The little Beetle wound its way slowly but nimbly back through the knee high grass carefully going around the grazing Holsteins. Thorvald stopped near the tree line. The stream was now within sight. He and Straker climbed out. There was a large section of tree limbs that had been sheared from the treetops and the ground and brush had been burned and charred black. Nothing had grown back in the three months since it had happened. “Looks just like Kecksburg,” said Straker.

As Mr. James rolled over the rise on his tractor, a Holstein lumbered directly over to Thorvald. He turned and held out his hands. The cow pressed its muzzle up against Thorvald’s face and licked him. He

scratched behind its ears with both hands while the tail swished excitedly. Thorvald whispered something to the cow and she nuzzled his face with hers. She then lumbered off looking content.

Thorvald turned and saw Straker smiling with a look of pleasure in his vivid blue eyes. Thorvald said, "That's my friend, Esther."

"What did you say to her?" asked Straker.

"Just something friendly in Swedish," said Thorvald.

Straker laughed. "Believe it or not, that never happened to me growing up in Boston." Thorvald grinned. Straker was already feeling quite relaxed.

"Wait until you meet the goats. They're little comedians."

The tractor came to a stop beside them. "Ed and I will go look around and see if we can find anything," said Thorvald. Mr. James just nodded. Very quickly, they found a partially submerged metal structure that looked as though it had been torn from a machine. Straker found a couple smaller segments up-current in the stream.

"They look like fragments of one of the crescent fighters the reptilians flew," said Straker. Thorvald motioned to Mr. James and he backed the tractor down to the edge of the stream bank.

Thorvald slipped off his clothes down to the swim trunks he had on under his pants and put on a pair of tattered old boots to protect his feet. He carried the chain slowly into the stream. Straker had never seen the horrible scars Thorvald hid under his clothing before and he tried not to stare.

"The lad's been through the wood chipper, hasn't he?" Mr. James said to Straker.

"I had no idea," said Straker. The old man leaned down and looked into Straker's blue eyes. Straker looked back into the weathered old face with tired storm grey eyes that looked as if they'd seen the very limits of time.

"We all carry scars of some sort, lad. Some just go deeper than others," said Mr. James with a gentle smile. Straker smiled, understanding clearly why Thorvald was so fond of this old man.

Thorvald disappeared under the surface of the shimmering water for a prolonged moment then re-appeared hauling the chain back out of the stream with tension on it. He pulled the link pin on the hitch and dropped it through the end link.

Mr. James throttled up his tractor in a low gear and the large alien metal structure released from the streambed and slid up the bank, coming to rest. It had 30mm holes punched through it in a slightly curved line.

"Maybe one of Prosser's flight did this," said Straker. Thorvald nodded in agreement. The two smaller fragments upstream were easier to remove. "We'll get rid of this stuff for you Mr. James," he added.

Whatever metal this was, it had proven toxic to the aquatic life in the stream. Although the water was gin clear there were no signs of visible plant or animal life.

Thorvald picked up a large rock from the streambed and rolled it over.

"This should be covered in algae, with insect nymphs and shucks all over the bottom side. There isn't a crustacean or snail in sight either," said Thorvald. "We won't find any fish here today. Fortunately, this stream is spring fed so it will flush itself clear in time. This same thing has probably happened all over the planet."

"It probably isn't much good to swim in either," said Straker. "You should probably wash yourself soon and we will get you checked out by the medical center back at HQ."

They used the hose back at the barn to flush Thorvald's eyes, skin and hair. The water came directly from the well and was quite cold. Straker held the hose while the water cascaded over Thorvald's head and downward.

Straker was amused and trying to hide it. "How's the water, Thorvald?"

Thorvald looked up at him through his long dripping hair and said in a low, gruff voice, "it reminds me of home..."

Thorvald dried himself and redressed. He took Straker over to the pasture to meet the dairy goats that

Mr. James kept. Thorvald had him sit down on the grass beside him and wait. The sound of jingling bells got closer.

Within moments Straker had a goat in his lap, one on either side of his face sniffing him and one behind him with its front hooves on his shoulders and trying to eat his hair. He was covered in little muddy hoof prints and laughing hysterically. He finally settled into a pattern of trying to pet and scratch the ears of six goats at once. Thorvald wished he'd thought to bring a camera.

They set a time to come pick up the UFO fragments and bid farewell to Mr. James. They began the drive back to SHADO HQ. Straker was still smiling.

"Thanks for a good time on the farm, Thorvald. I really needed this," said Straker.

"It was my pleasure, Sir." Thorvald smiled broadly. "I enjoyed sharing the experience with you. It is a bit like the farm I grew up on, except for the lack of snow and reindeer. Farms have a way of making you feel more appreciative and connected to other living things."

"I grew up in a Boston brownstone full of antiques. It had all the warmth and friendliness of a furniture warehouse," said Straker. Thorvald grinned.

"Mr. James seems like a wise old sage, Thorvald." Straker continued, "He said we all carry scars of some sort, and that some just go deeper than others."

"He knows well, just as you and I do. He was wounded in the Normandy Invasion and has outlived his wife and all three children. He has the wisdom of a lifetime of hard work, self-sacrifice and deep faith." Thorvald added, "I worry about him being out here all by himself, but his goats and cows keep him company."

"How did you get all those terrible scars?" asked Straker.

"They represent bad decisions, bad timing and bad people," said Thorvald. "The thin lines are from various blades in parts of Africa, the Eastern Block and even Central America. The broad lines that run parallel are from a flail at the hands of KGB interrogators when I was captured after my objective was completed."

"What about the three smaller round ones on your right shoulder?" asked Straker.

"A Spetsnaz greeting card - from an operative named Dmitri. He put three rounds of 7.62mm in a perfect triangle less than an inch apart and missed every important blood vessel in my shoulder."

"How is that a greeting card?" asked Straker.

"Because, with his Dragunov rifle 600 meters away he could have just as easily put them through my forehead."

"Why didn't he just kill you?"

"Professional courtesy... I spared his life a couple times as well but left him with a limp and scar near his right eye," said Thorvald. "Dmitri tracked me like a Blood Hound behind the Iron Curtain and around the world. The KGB had missed me multiple times, so they sent him and his Spetsnaz team."

Thorvald added, "He was very, very good at what he did. There was mutual respect between us, if not admiration... We just worked for rival companies."

"Do you think your old adversaries will find you someday?" asked Straker.

"It is a distinct possibility. It is the reason Virginia and I are armed everywhere we go. It has also become a topic of debate regarding my desire to adopt a child."

Ayshea smiled at General Straker as he entered his office wearing clothes still sporting little hoof prints of dried mud. Straker was still smiling as well.

"Well Paul, I see you have the evening shift covered. Anything I need to know about?" said Straker. The ice bucket was still inverted over the cube.

"Virginia got through to the Monitor about our concerns with the cube function and the whole alien visitation question. She said she will be arriving here on Earth as soon as she can." Paul smiled at Straker's soiled clothing and disheveled hair.

“Okay, Paul. I’m heading for home then,” said Straker. Paul waited for the door to close then burst out laughing. He had no idea what Straker had been doing today but it looked as though it would make an entertaining story.

CHAPTER 3

Straker's day had ended much better than it had started. He was tired, a little sunburned and hungry. He peeled off the clothes he had worn, pausing to chuckle at the little hoof prints all over his shirt and slacks. He dropped them into the laundry room sink and procured some hot water and detergent to let them soak.

He took a leisurely shower and found himself humming. It had been a long time since he'd done that. He felt happy and content. He slipped into his favorite pajamas and striped robe and went to the kitchen to warm up some dinner.

The leftover meatloaf and mashed potatoes tasted better than the night before. He pondered how some foods just seemed to taste better as leftovers. He listened to some relaxing music while he ate and cleaned up the dishes.

Straker placed his pre-soaked clothes into the washer and sat down in his favorite spot for reading to enjoy a few chapters and a fine cigar. A nice quiet evening, with the songs of birds transitioning to chirping crickets as the sun finally sank below the horizon.

His laundry completed, Straker read until he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. He secured his home, set the alarm system and prepared himself for bed. He was still feeling relaxed and content. It had been a long time since he'd gone to bed with nothing pressing on his mind or causing anxiety.

He mused out loud as he clicked off the light, "Goats are therapeutic... Who knew?" He chuckled and squirmed a bit until the pillow, sheets and his position were just right. Sleep came quickly...

A bit after 2 am, Straker was dreaming about the cube. It wasn't flashing or gibbering loudly, it was telling him about distant and ancient civilizations and showing him projections of fascinating places and species he'd never imagined to exist. He could hear the often melodic voice of the Monitor saying "Straker, can you hear me?"

In his dream he waved his hand twice over the cube. "Straker, can you hear me?"

Again, he waved his hand twice over the cube. "Straker, can you hear me?" It repeated again...

Straker woke with a start and surge of adrenalin. He grasped the grip of the pistol secured behind his pillow and spun around. The voice wasn't in his dream, it was beside his bed...

He brought the glowing tritium sights to bear on the figure just a few feet away.

"No Straker! It is me!" exclaimed the Monitor. He swept the thumb safety of his Browning Hi-Power back upward and moved the muzzle away from the frightened target.

"How in the hell did you get in here, Monitor?" he exclaimed, trying to get his pulse and breathing back under control. "The previous aliens who have showed up in my bedroom left here in body bags," he said angrily.

"I am sorry to have startled you, Straker. Did the others not tell you I would be coming?" She asked calmly.

"They did, Monitor. I assumed you would arrive in a vessel with some notice and official ceremony. I didn't imagine you would arrive in my bedroom in the middle of the night." Straker slipped his pistol back into the holster behind his pillow.

"We don't need to make a landing to disembark, Straker. I simply transmitted myself to your location," she said.

"I have misjudged the timing of my arrival and disrupted your slumber. My profound apologies for this intrusion. Perhaps I should rest as well so my time reference will synchronize with yours," she said.

The Monitor stepped softly around to the other side of Straker's bed. She unfastened her shimmering gown at her shoulder and let it slide to the floor. She was wearing absolutely nothing underneath. She reached down to fold the sheets back.

Momentarily stunned by the beautiful image softly illuminated by curtain-filtered moonlight, he placed his hand over the sheets and said, "It would be inappropriate to share my bed with you, Monitor."

“Do you object to sharing your bed with a woman, Straker?” she asked sounding genuinely concerned.

“Not at all - as long as there is a prior invitation involved,” he said with a smile. “I have a guest room that is comfortable, quiet and private that you can use.” He flipped the sheets back and slipped his robe on.

Straker smiled and motioned for the monitor to precede him through the door. She picked up her shimmering gown and slipped it over her arm, following him gracefully down the hallway – still gloriously nude.

Straker showed her into the guest room and turned down the sheets for her. “You have your own bathroom right here and all necessary supplies in the cabinets. I will wake you in a few hours, so sleep well.”

“Thank you, Straker,” she said smiling warmly. She moved very near him and gently grasped his hands, looking into his vivid blue eyes. “Once past the initial surprise, you have proven to be a kind host,” she added. “I believe I will enjoy being close to you, Straker.”

Her deep brown eyes sparkled as she smiled. Straker was enjoying her closeness already. “Please call me Ed, Monitor,” he said. She smiled warmly.

“Please call me Ilyana,” she said. “I am no longer the Monitor for the Alliance. I have been appointed to be their representative here on Earth. An ambassador, or perhaps envoy would be a more appropriate term.”

She gracefully sat on the turned-down bed, reclined and slid her legs beneath the covers. She smiled sweetly as Straker gently pulled the covers up for her. She was a vision of unearthly beauty, with her long white hair flowing in swirls around her head on the pillow and framing her lovely smile in the filtered moonlight.

“Sleep well, Ilyana.” Straker smiled warmly and gently closed the door behind him. On his way back to bed, Straker paused. *What the hell is wrong with me? I just escorted the single most stunning woman I’ve ever seen out of my own bed, nude.*

He could only shake his head and get back under the covers. He still had the image of her in his mind in vivid detail. He hoped he could get back to sleep. He was sure his dreams would no longer be of the cube...

Around 6 am, Straker went to the guest room and gently knocked on the door. He heard no response and knocked gently again. It went unanswered so he quietly opened the door a bit. Ilyana was partially wrapped in the covers, with one shapely leg exposed to the thigh and her arms wrapped around the pillow, her face resting upon it. Her silken white hair cascaded in waves around her head and down her exposed shoulders and back. Straker was again quite stunned by her beauty and couldn’t help but wish he were taking the place of her pillow.

“Ilyana, can you hear me?” he said gently, amused at the irony. She stirred, rolling back toward him. She swept her hair away from her face and looked up at Straker. She smiled sweetly, stretched her arms over her head and yawned. She looked up at Straker with sleepy eyes. She reached a hand out to him and he took it gently.

“It is time to begin your first day on a new planet, Ilyana,” he said softly. Her eyes seemed to light up and she smiled warmly. Straker knew to his core that if she simply pulled him to her he would gladly follow and slip in beside her.

This alluring creature from another world had a grasp on his heart and his imagination. How could someone from another galaxy seem so utterly and delightfully human?

He would have to keep his emotions and desires in check, at least for now...

“Would you like to partake in a morning meal, Ilyana?” Straker asked.

“I am not familiar with your foods, but I am here to learn and connect with all aspects of your culture.” She added, “I trust you, Ed.” She smiled sweetly and rose up from the bed, standing near him. Straker was momentarily awestruck yet again by her shapely and lovely form. He hoped it wasn’t as obvious to her as it felt to him.

After a brief tutorial on how the toilet worked, he showed her how the shower operated. He then showed her the soaps and shampoo in the cabinets, explaining what each was for and how to use them.

She showered while Straker worked in the kitchen. The warmth of the shower and the sensations and smells of the soaps and shampoo were delightful to her. She emerged, enjoying the feeling of the water droplets trickling down her body with the pull of gravity.

In her view, showering was a sensual and luxurious experience. She wondered if Earthlings knew how rare a shower of warm liquid water was in the universe. Even the softness of the plush rug beneath her feet was a delight.

She considered the towels, but chose to do her daily ritual cleansing according to her practices. She held her hands up beside her and closed her eyes. Her body began to glow with energy. Moments later, she was clean, dry and dressed in her shimmering gown once more.

As she exited the guest room she smelled a blend of aromas unknown to her. She entered the kitchen smiling. "Good morning, Ed." She smiled sweetly looking up into his eyes. "I don't know what these aromas are, but they are wonderful."

"I have prepared a sampler of breakfast foods for you to try," he said. "Breakfast is what we call our morning meal. Lunch is our midday meal and dinner is our evening meal." He continued, "Some of these items are plant derived and others are from animal sources. I didn't know if that would be important to you, so I felt I should warn you in advance."

Ilyana smiled. "A conscientious and diplomatic effort, Ed. Most worlds have animal species that are consumed as food sources in addition to plants. Only a few worlds known to us have fully synthetic foods. Those worlds have one thing in common..."

"What might that be, Ilyana?" asked Straker.

"They have very few visitors," she said laughing. Her deep brown eyes seemed to be illuminated by the glow of the rising sun coming through the windows. Straker laughed out loud. He set a mug of coffee, a cup of tea and a glass of apple juice on the table in front of her.

"I am delighted to see you have a sense of humor, Ilyana," said Straker. "You seem to be so very much like a human woman in so many ways. I hope that is not insulting to you to hear."

Ilyana smiled. "Humans are not only found on this planet, Ed. You will come to understand that and many other things in the time we spend together."

He served her buttered wheat toast, stone-ground oatmeal with brown sugar, and bacon with farm-fresh scrambled eggs. She sampled them all and seemed to enjoy them. Straker enjoyed this breakfast more than any in recent memory.

Straker took care of the dishes and went to shower while Ilyana enjoyed the morning sun on the back veranda. She wondered what he might say if she slipped in beside him to enjoy the sensations of the shower once more.

He emerged wearing a dark blue tunic with matching slacks and a cream colored turtleneck underneath. He stepped out on the veranda behind Ilyana. Her gown was reflecting the complete spectrum of colors as it lay on the chase lounge. She stood nude with her arms outstretched and her eyes closed, soaking in the warmth of the sun despite the chill of the morning. He paused smiling, unsure of whether it was the sun or her shining more brightly.

"Outdoor nudity is generally only practiced in specific locations, Ilyana." Straker chuckled to himself. "Fortunately, my property is quite private."

"Your world seems to be a bit more inhibited about such things. Perhaps you find this repulsive," she said, sounding disappointed.

Straker couldn't hold back his words adequately. "No Ilyana. Regardless of what planet you might be from, you are the most beautiful and captivating woman I have ever known. You make me wish I had the artistic skill to render your image in sculpture or on canvas."

He realized he was blushing. Ilyana turned to him, her cheeks reddened as well. She gently placed her hand against his cheek. Her skin was as warm and soft as her smile and gaze. Straker placed his hand over hers gently.

“Perhaps we should start our day before we get further distracted, Ed.” She slipped away from him and put her gown on again. Straker was beaming. He knew now that the chemistry he felt was shared.

Pull back on that throttle, Ed... He knew there was much more at stake than his own personal happiness. Under other circumstances, he could easily imagine being beside Ilyana day and night for the rest of his life. How difficult could it possibly be?

CHAPTER 4

Ilyana enjoyed the ride in to SHADO headquarters in Straker's turbine car. She had run her fingers over the streamlined shape as he opened the gull-wing door for her. She lowered herself into the seat so gracefully that Straker stood there smiling like a fool and was slow to close it behind her. He was more distracted than he was comfortable with. They were a little early for the morning shift...

After a brief introduction to Major Ealand, Straker escorted Ilyana into his former studio office. She found the vividly-colored décor and the picture of giant red lips to be a startling contrast to Straker's tastefully simple cottage.

"This was my office when SHADO used a film studio as a cover to hide our operation from prying eyes and enemies." He opened the humidor. "Straker," he said into the box.

"Voice print identification positive, General Edward Straker..." He pressed the switch that looked like a dovetail joint. The room began to descend the 80 feet to SHADO HQ. Ilyana seemed to be intrigued by the carefully crafted deception.

Straker escorted her to his office, pausing to introduce her to the staff and point out the items of interest on the way. She greeted them all warmly and carried herself with elegance and dignity as was befitting an ambassador representing multiple galaxies and hundreds of worlds.

General Prosser was at the desk in Straker's office, pouring over some reports that required his attention and signature. He had relieved Paul a little early so he could enjoy more of the beautiful morning topside.

Straker escorted Ilyana into his office. Prosser stood to full stature and bowed a bit with a pleasant smile on his face. Ilyana returned his bow and smile. "General Prosser, it is pleasant to meet you in person," she said with courtly grace. Prosser stepped around the desk and gently took her offered hand.

"I am very pleased to meet you as well. Welcome to SHADO Headquarters and planet Earth," he said. Straker noted Prosser's professional military manners and smiled. He knew that Prosser had been introduced to foreign heads of state for his entire career. He was very, very good at making a first impression.

"Ilyana is no longer the Alliance Monitor. She is now their ambassador to our planet. We will be working with her very closely," said Straker. Ilyana turned and smiled at him.

The door opened again. Commanders Lake and Freeman entered, followed closely behind by Thorvald. Ilyana greeted them warmly.

Alec turned on the charm immediately. "Your projected image did not do your beauty justice, Monitor," he said with smile beaming. She smiled sweetly.

"Please call me Ilyana," she said to them all. "I am no longer the Monitor for the Alliance. I am now their ambassador to your world. I am here to interact, resolve any issues we might face and plan for our joint future together."

Virginia said, "When we spoke yesterday, I had no idea you would arrive so soon."

Ilyana smiled. "My arrival was even more surprising to General Straker... I interrupted his sleep early this morning." The command staff all looked toward Straker with curious grins. Ilyana added, "He was kind enough to provide me with guest accommodations and my first sampling of Earth cuisine this morning." She looked sweetly at Straker and he felt his cheeks turning red.

Alec caught his reaction and raised an eyebrow. He'd seen this look on his best friend before. It always meant trouble...

Ilyana noted the inverted metal container where the cube should be. She looked quizzically at Straker with a wry grin. She lifted the inverted ice bucket. The blinding flashes and blaring gibberish made her turn away.

She held her hand stationary over the cube. "Reduce light intensity by 90 percent," she said. The flashing diminished to where it looked like Straker's color and pattern changing mural behind his desk.

"Reduce volume by 80 percent and translate incoming messages to Earth English," she added. The

volume of noise dropped immediately and everyone began to hear an inquisitive voice in English. “Hold all incoming messages pending diplomatic processing per Alliance charter.”

The cube went silent and the color changing ceased. Several sighs of relief were audible. “My apologies my friends. I failed to explain the basic functions of the cube. It must have been most irritating to you all,” she said. “No wonder you always seemed short-tempered with me when we spoke before, Ed.” Everyone else noted that she and Straker were on a first name basis already...

“Are those adjustments to the cube ones that I could have made myself?” asked Straker.

“Yes, Ed, but only if I would have provided the information that you needed.” Ilyana smiled sweetly at Straker. Alec watched his best friends’ reaction carefully. Straker just smiled warmly back at her. Alec’s expression turned dour. *Shit - it’s too late already*, he thought. Straker would have chewed down anyone else for such an omission.

Ilyana spoke again with her melodic, yet courtly voice. “Perhaps I should ask you all if you have any questions that I can answer for you. It may help us all to find common points of reference.”

Alec was still looking dour with his arms folded tightly. “I’d like to know why we’re so bloody interesting to the rest of the universe. Surely, there must be a lot of other planets that have fought off an alien invasion successfully.” His voice had carried his irritation.

“You really don’t know?” asked Ilyana, looking around the room at the blank expressions looking back. She smiled warmly, “Then that is the perfect place to begin...”

“Your planet is very special, my friends. For a planet of relatively small size, you have a much greater diversity of lifeforms than any other known world in any other galaxy.”

She continued, “Most planets are comprised of a single higher life form that covers the inhabited portions of that world. Everyone looks somewhat similar and speaks the same language. There are some forms of plant and animal life, even some aquatic, but nothing like what you have here on Earth.”

“On this planet, each land mass is populated by beings that not only differ in appearance, but also in language, customs, religion and heritage. Your animal and plant life is so diverse that you probably haven’t even discovered them all yet. They range in size from microbial organisms to massive sea and land mammals. Life is everywhere here and it is amazing.” Ilyana spoke with great warmth and enthusiasm. “No other world exists that is like your world...” Her smile was beaming.

Alec’s dour expression had melted into one of amusement. “I never considered that before,” he said. “You could spend a lifetime just travelling and sampling various local cuisines and music.” He laughed and grinned at Ilyana. He was warming up to her as well.

“Are there any other questions for now?” asked Ilyana.

Prosser said, “Not a question, but perhaps a recommendation. The Ambassador seems comfortable with using our first names. I suggest we follow her lead and use our first names when amongst ourselves and our titles when appropriate.” Everyone nodded in agreement.

Prosser continued, “I have only one other thing to add and it applies to those of you still driving a turbine car. The Jet Car Corporation hasn’t existed in nearly ten years now. There are no spare parts on the market anymore and I have received word that Her Majesty’s Government is closing the dedicated fuel stations that you have been using. You will only be able to purchase fuel at airports beginning January 1st, and you will only be able to keep your cars running if you can machine your own parts and fix them yourselves. Since the turbine cars were a company perk of the studio and SHADO, we will give you funds toward the purchase of something else. It’s time to go car shopping my friends...”

“I’m going to go topside and work on that right now,” said Prosser. “Ilyana, it is going to be most enjoyable working closely with you. You are helping us see our own world with a fresh perspective. Thank you...” Prosser returned her smile, bowed slightly and slipped out the office door.

“Ilyana, what is your lovely gown made from?” asked Virginia. Ilyana reached her arm toward her so she could feel it. “It shimmers with that pearlescent glow that changes hues, yet it feels like it is weightless.

What sort of material is this?”

“It is a fabric created by one of our most ancient Alliance worlds. They have made and used it for millennia. It uses natural energy from a planet or nearby star to keep the body at a comfortable temperature regardless of the surroundings. Right now, it is keeping me comfortable although my feet are quite cold,” said Ilyana.

Virginia looked down at Ilyana’s bare feet and flashed a look of disapproval at Straker. “Ed Straker, did you really allow your houseguest – a visiting dignitary no less – to actually leave your house barefoot?” She folded her arms in a gesture of mock anger then smiled.

Straker was turning red. “I honestly didn’t notice your feet, Ilyana. My apologies.”

“Ilyana, I am taking you to experience a fundamental right for Earth women... We are going shopping at the mall,” said Virginia. She smiled and flashed her eyes at Straker. “We *will* be using the company card, gentlemen. Don’t wait up...” She hooked her arm under Ilyana’s and began to escort her out. Virginia winked at Thorvald and smiled. The door closed behind them.

Straker looked at Thorvald. “Did your wife really just stall a diplomatic mission to go shopping with the ambassador?” Thorvald grinned and shrugged his shoulders. He left and went to work in the armament lab.

Alec began, “Now that we’re alone, Ed... What the hell are you doing? I know that look and her hook is already set deep into your jaw. You made a career of protecting humanity from alien captivity. Now you’re an alien captive and bloody well enjoying it!”

Straker smiled at him. “Relax Alec.” He clipped the Lonsdale and toasted the foot while he spoke. “She’s human. I mean *perfectly* human.” He lit the end and leaned back in his chair, lofting a cloud of grey smoke upward. Apparently, humans can be found on many planets besides ours.” Alec looked surprised.

“That’s not all, Alec. I have also learned that a warm shower of liquid water is a rarity among the stars and that we are the only world to use a flush toilet that utilizes a water vortex to remove bodily waste.” Now Alec was chuckling. *No crappers is space?* He thought.

“Alec, I also learned that much of her world is ‘clothing optional’ and nudity is part of their regular practice.” Alec’s eyes opened wide.

“Then you...”

“Oh yes, Alec. I saw her in her natural glory and she is absolute perfection. Do you remember that exotic dancer in Bangkok named Giselle?”

“How could I forget? I brought flowers to give her backstage after her performance – until the Bates brothers started a fight in the bar and the MP’s came.”

“Ilyana makes Giselle look like one of those Eastern Bloc female shot-putters back in the 70’s.”

Alec let out a slow whistle. He shook his head.

“She is stunning, warm and captivating. She is also probably the single most fascinating woman I will ever meet... Yes, Alec. I am developing feelings for this woman, but rest assured, my head will remain above the current. I have to keep my wits intact...”

“You damn well better, Ed. You know how quickly things can change and I don’t want to see you go through the hell that you did with Mary or any of the other women since then. I won’t give you grief about it unless I see you doing something stupid... I hope you would return the favor.” Alec grinned and winked.

“Count on it, Alec.” Straker smiled and blew a smoke ring upward toward the lights.

CHAPTER 5

Virginia drove her new friend back to her apartment that she shared with her husband. She invited Ilyana inside and went to get her some footwear for their visit to the mall. “Your gown is elegant enough to pass for a very nice dress but we will have to get you all the essentials for life on planet Earth. I’ll be right back...”

Ilyana looked around the apartment a bit. She paused at the pictures of Thorvald’s mother and grandfather and the one of his late wife and daughter. Virginia returned holding a pair of soft-soled plush slip-ons that would stretch to fit Ilyana’s feet. She set them on the floor.

“The old picture is Thorvald’s mother and grandfather on their farm in Lapland. They were Saami, an indigenous people in the northern reaches of Scandinavia. They both passed away when he was very young.”

Ilyana touched the photo and smiled. They looked so happy standing in the snow with the roughly hewn barn behind them. She looked at the other photo.

“That is Thorvald’s first wife and daughter. They were killed by the aliens that SHADO fought for so many years.” Ilyana touched the photo and her eyes became moist.

“From the cube, I knew he had a troubled early life, but I never realized what sadness was in his past.” Ilyana turned to Virginia. “I am so pleased that you two have each other now. You two share a strong bond that is visible to me as a vivid orange glow around you both. You even have it now, despite the distance between you.” Virginia smiled sweetly.

“I waited a very long time for a man as special as Thorvald, Ilyana. He is more than everything I thought I wanted in a mate. He is everything I didn’t know I needed as well. I feel very blessed to share my life with him.”

Ilyana spoke while Virginia slipped the soft shoes on her feet. “I hope to find that kind of life mate as well, Virginia.”

“It may be happening already, Ilyana...” said Virginia. Ilyana’s cheeks began to redden. “I watched you two together this morning. A woman can always tell...”

“I have to ask you a serious question, Ilyana. If your relationship with Ed grows into love will you stay with him?” Ilyana’s deep brown eyes were lit by her smile.

“I can remain here as long as I like, Virginia. Ed has a blue glow when he is by himself, but when we are together, we both shift to orange like you. That kind of bond is very rare in the universe. The bond is already there and growing...”

“I have known Ed for a long time, Ilyana. I don’t want to see him find love and then suffer the anguish of losing it. He, Alec and the other command staff are not only my coworkers. They are my dear friends and I am protective of them.”

Ilyana smiled. “I would never willingly allow him to come to harm in any way, Virginia. I too had a mate earlier in life and lost him. I have my beloved daughter to remind me of that time. I want a life mate to grow old with – to share adventure, joy and sorrow with. I do not take it lightly. My bond with Ed will take time and effort, but like anything of great value, that effort would be a worthy one.”

Virginia was pleased. “Ilyana, in order to help you make a lasting impression, I know of a special store I want to take you to.” She led Ilyana back out to the car and chuckled to herself. *Straker doesn’t know what he’s in for...*

In the early evening, Virginia dropped Ilyana off at Straker’s home. She helped her carry several bags in. Straker was waiting eagerly. He helped carry a bundle of smaller, discreetly labeled bags into the guest room. He had no clue their contents were for his benefit.

“I’d love to stay and chat, but Thorvald and I have plans for the evening. I enjoyed every minute of our day together, Ilyana.” Ilyana thanked her graciously and they embraced briefly. Virginia smiled and gave her a wink on her way out the door.

“It looks like you two have become fast friends, Ilyana,” said Straker.

“Virginia is a wonderful person of great character and intelligence. She is very kind and also very loyal to you and your friends.”

“We are very protective of her as well, Ilyana. After all these years, I still haven’t seen any limit to her brilliance. Without her, SHADO would have failed years ago and the Earth would have fallen to alien invaders. This entire planet owes her a debt of gratitude and yet she remains caring and humble. I have great admiration for her...”

“She suggested that I should tell you much more about myself, Ed.” He smiled. “I’d like that, Ilyana. We can chat while I make our dinner and we get a start on washing all your new clothes.” She smiled sweetly.

Thorvald and Virginia were in the little Beetle on their way to a favorite restaurant in Harlington. Thorvald had made several unusual turns. Traffic was fairly heavy.

“Love, that makes seven unnecessary turns on a straight-course route,” said Virginia.

“That is because there is a blue Audi behind us that has made the last eleven turns with us... No, don’t look back. The driver is a light-haired male with dark shirt and wrap-around sunglasses.”

“Should we do it like we planned, dear?” asked Virginia.

Thorvald smiled, “That’s my girl...” Virginia opened the glovebox and took the two earbud communicators out. She gave one to Thorvald. They both put them on and did their signal check.

Virginia checked her pistol and secured it in her thigh holster. Thorvald leaned forward and slipped his into his small of back holster.

“There’s too much traffic for evasive driving. I’m going to park in a very public spot and set the snare for our guest.” He rounded the corner onto the main street. There was one open parking spot up ahead and he swung the Beetle in. The driver of the blue Audi would have to park farther down the block. It would buy them time...

Thorvald smoothed his bulky sweater down over his holster as he got out. He went around and opened Ginny’s door. They walked down the sidewalk side-by-side.

“Just like we practiced, Love. Give me about ten seconds,” he said.

“Be careful dear. I love you...” She squeezed his hand and reluctantly let go of it. She turned into a store front and waited near the door. Thorvald rounded the adjacent corner into an alley. He was ready...

“About 5 foot 10, thin build... Sandy colored hair... Sun glasses and black button down, short-sleeve shirt, untucked...” said Virginia.

“Thanks. Love you...”

The man strode past the store front. He had lost sight of Thorvald so he slowed to a stop at the corner of the building on the alley. A large left hand came around the corner and grabbed him by the shirt and collar, yanking him off balance and around the corner.

As Thorvald slammed the man hard up against the brick wall, the buttons on the black shirt popped open revealing a tattoo of a bat in a circle. *Spetsnaz!* Thorvald’s right hand came up with his 2-1/2 inch barreled, deep-blued Colt King Cobra revolver. He pressed the muzzle up against the left lens of the man’s sunglasses and thumbed back the hammer. The action made a satisfyingly loud mechanical click as it reached full-cock position.

The man had a close up view of the cylinder rotating into firing position and the 158 grain semi-jacketed hollow-point that would end his existence. A .357 magnum cartridge makes a profound impression... The man knew the bullet moving at over 1,300 feet per second would exit the back of his skull before he could mentally process the flash and muzzle blast.

Virginia rounded the corner, slipped up her skirt and drew her H&K P7 9mm from her thigh holster. She trained the tritium sights on the man in the black shirt. Thorvald spoke in a low voice in flawless Russian.

“Why are you following me?” The man was slow to answer so he repeated himself, again in perfectly spoken Russian. The man finally spoke. In English...

“Why does a dead man need a sexy blonde bodyguard?” he said and smiled. Thorvald used his front

sight to slide the man's sunglasses up onto his head and looked into familiar blue eyes. There was a scar across the right one.

"Dmitri, what the hell are you doing following me like that?" Thorvald eased the muzzle away and lowered the hammer gently. He let go of the shirt.

"You answer my question first, Magnus..." Thorvald grinned broadly. "She's better than a bodyguard, she's my wife." Thorvald slipped his revolver back into the holster. Virginia wasn't taking any chances yet and kept her sights on him.

"Still keep it in the right boot, Dmitri?" He smiled back. Thorvald reached down and pulled the projectile dagger out of the scabbard. He spun and hit the release, launching the double-edged blade hard enough to imbed itself deeply in a billboard sign for a florist. He put the blade right through the center of a painted daisy.

"You Spetsnaz guys had all the fun toys. Between this and the shovel of doom, my equipment was always quite pedestrian."

"I seem to remember a matte black double-bladed battle-axe that was anything but pedestrian. It left me this daily reminder each time I look in a mirror."

"That wasn't NATO issue. There is also a matching broadsword that goes with it. Neither was very handy when you needed to make a slit trench or shit in the woods. Now, why were you following me?"

"It's simple, Magnus. I need your help... I'm down to my last ten pounds, and if the rental agency catches up, I will lose both my transportation and my home."

"Why the hell should I help you?" asked Thorvald. "The last time I saw you, you put three bullets through my shoulder..."

"Those bullets saved your life, Magnus... They kept you from stumbling directly into a platoon of troops further up that mountain slope. The KGB was satisfied thinking I killed you. I even called in your own medivac unit. Your extraction pilot flew in several moments after I sent the message flying one of our Mi-24 gunships. He had a medical crew in the passenger compartment. I asked him where the hell he got it and he just looked down from the cockpit door with these light crystal blue eyes and a smile like a piranha. He tossed me a cigar and left."

Virginia remembered her conversation with Prosser before the wedding. "I think he's telling you the truth, dear." She lowered her pistol.

"When's the last time you ate, Dmitri?" asked Thorvald.

"That depends... What day is it?" he said.

The setting sun illuminated Ed Straker's veranda, bathing it in a warm glow of orange and yellow with streaks of purple in the backlit clouds. He and his charming house guest had enjoyed a meal of grilled salmon on a bed of wild rice with steamed seasonal vegetables.

Ilyana had enjoyed the different flavors and textures of the meal. Straker had described each item to her delight. She was enjoying Earth cuisine. He played some soft music while they ate which she found to be pleasant as well.

They had also conversed about their previous mates and children. She knew from the cube that Straker had lost his son tragically, but didn't know about his failed marriage.

She told him about her daughter and how her former mate had lost his life in a laboratory accident. She then asked Straker about the many books spread out in various locations throughout his home, searching for a lighter topic of conversation.

"I love to read and fill my mind with history, science, ancient cultures, the arts and classic literature. It informs as well as entertains," he said. "Would you like me to share some of it with you, Ilyana?"

"I would like that very much, Ed. It will help me better understand you," she said. She smiled warmly and gently touched his arm with her hand.

He lit a pair of tiki torches and brought back his favorite dog-eared copy of Homer's 'The Odyssey'. He

sat down on the chase lounge and motioned for her to sit with him. She sat and reclined, leaning back against his chest. Her hair was soft and subtly fragrant. The warmth of her body against his was even more wonderful than he had dreamed it to be the night before.

He opened the book and lowered his arms down around her shoulders and began to read to her. He began with King Odysseus finally making it to his homeland after his long, convoluted journey due to his arrogant pride and having angered Poseidon.

He read to her about Odysseus being reunited with his son who'd thought him dead, the disguised challenge to the Queen's suitors, the bloodbath that followed and the revealing of his true identity to his beloved wife Penelope. Their joyful reunion and return to the bed he'd made from the great tree concluded the grand story.

She had enjoyed every bit of it. She rolled over in his arms, embracing him. She reached up and gently placed her warm hand on his cheek. He instinctively placed his hand gently on top of hers.

"I won't be sharing your bed in the great tree just yet, Ed." She smiled, her eyes sparkling in light of the tiki torches. "As wonderful and natural as the idea seems, we must deepen our understanding of each other before we become overly distracted by the sensual delights. Besides, you still have not extended that invitation..." she said sweetly.

"That invitation is extended as of now, Ilyana. Your point however, is valid," he said sounding somewhat disappointed.

She propped herself up and took his hand. "Do not lose heart, Ed. In the short time we have spent together, you and I have formed a very special bond already. I have every intention of nurturing and protecting it as it grows to full potential." She guided his hand to her cheek and gently kissed it. "We are meant to be together."

Straker held her in his arms, his heart pounding in his chest and swelling with emotions he had not known in a very long time. Although the night sky above was resplendent in its pin points of light, swirls of deep blue and silvery wisps, Straker could only gaze in amazement at the woman who had thrilled him to the soul. He rested his cheek on her soft, silky white hair and closed his eyes. It all seemed just too wonderful to possibly be real...

CHAPTER 6

“When did you get so old, Magnus?” asked Dmitri as he pushed another salsa-laden tortilla chip into his mouth. “I was in my twenties when I was chasing you around Russia and the Eastern Bloc.”

“I just turned sixty, Dmitri,” said Thorvald. “My name isn’t Magnus Johannson anymore either. That name and his story died many, many years ago. I am now Thorvald Magnusson and have the documentation to prove it. This lovely lady is my wife, Virginia... Now, how in the hell did you find me?”

“Actually, I thought you were dead and buried. In the modern Russian Federation, there is little room for aging Special Forces types, so we older Spetsnaz stock were herded back through briefly as instructors and then out to pasture to await old age and death. It was an unceremonious conclusion to my only vocation in life.”

Dmitri continued, “They gave us severance pay to last for a while and even gave me a new replacement right hip so I no longer walk with the limp you gave me.” Thorvald smiled. He had placed that 124 grain 9mm bullet precisely to slow Dmitri down without endangering his life.

Dmitri went on. “I went in search of you since you were one of the few people I ever had any respect for. I found your grave marker in Norway. I placed fresh flowers on the grave, grateful that you had been a husband and father, but saddened that you were lost to me.”

“Then a few months ago I saw that General Prosser address the United Nations on television and recognized that face from the helicopter that flew you out. I followed the trail of destruction left by the aliens hoping to connect with him and perhaps find work. I finally stumbled onto the memorial with the same emblem. He was easy to spot on that giant motorcycle.

“Seeing you drive out in that old Beetle gave me a cold chill. I had to follow you just to make sure it was really you. Sure enough, that shaggy looking Norwegian Elk Hound in the little car was you.”

“I’m not from Norway, I was just stationed there and lived there later. I am a Laplander – I am Saami...” he bit down on the chip and it shattered. A dollop of salsa splattered on the table in front of him. It was his fourth miss with the salsa. “No Mexican I’ve ever known would approve of these fragile chips,” he said.

Dmitri was smiling. “I wasn’t born Russian, I was born Nenets and grew up on the tundra near the River Ob. We lived in a wooden cone-shaped hut called a yurt. We herded reindeer and fished the river.”

Thorvald was grinning. “I grew up on a farm and herded reindeer as well, Dmitri. What made you leave such an idyllic life?”

“Disease and poverty,” he said. “Tuberculosis ran rampant through our settlement and we couldn’t get vaccines or medical treatment. We eventually left and went south to Barnaul where jobs and doctors were available. We always were outsiders in Russia. ‘Samoyed’ is what they called us. A sled dog... That was even my call sign in the Spetsnaz. It was not a term of endearment.”

He looked at Thorvald with worried eyes. “Will you help me, Magnus?” Thorvald saw something move past the window.

“Yes, Dmitri. I will see if there might be an employment opportunity for you where we work. I will also put you in a nice hotel room for a few nights and get you a couple changes of clothing... I say that because I just watched your Audi go down the block behind a tow truck. I hope there was nothing important inside...”

“Only my toothbrush and a spare pair of socks,” laughed Dmitri. Their dinners were served by the waitress. Dmitri felt a weight ease from his shoulders. His faith in his favorite former adversary was not misplaced.

“Good morning, Ilyana,” said Straker with a smile. “Did you sleep well?” She stepped over and embraced him, looking up at him with a warm smile and sleepy eyes.

“Yes, Ed. I seem to sleep very well here. Knowing you are near makes me feel peaceful and secure.” He handed her a mug of coffee and she took a sip. She understood that this morning ritual was not solely for the stimulant effect but also the comforting aroma and pallet of rich flavors.

Straker said, “We need to arrive earlier this morning. Our Wednesday staff meeting is this morning and we bring breakfast in for everyone. There is also something that you may enjoy that takes place before our shift begins.” Ilyana’s eyes and smile displayed her curiosity.

They both showered and dressed. Straker found her on the veranda again, arms outstretched and eyes closed. This time she wore a shape-flattering tasteful print dress in colors that made her long white hair a showpiece. She had flat soled shoes that matched but she stood next to them barefoot.

Straker stepped up behind her quietly. She felt his presence and was smiling when she turned. “You look lovely, Ilyana,” said Straker. “I must admit, I prefer the outfit you wore yesterday...” She placed her fingers on his cheek and gave him a smile and look of very specific intent, “Perhaps when we’re not so pressed for time...” She touched his lips with her index finger. His heart did a series of violent cartwheels in his chest. No woman had ever made him feel anything like this by a mere touch of her finger. He hoped his tunic draped low enough to hide his involuntary reaction.

She slipped her shoes on as she spoke, “My morning ritual will seem odd to you at first, but it is quite necessary and quite enjoyable. You will understand it soon...”

“I don’t believe I will ever come to understand everything about you, Ilyana,” said Straker with a warm smile.

“Does that worry you, Ed?” she said.

“Actually, it doesn’t.”

“That is good, Ed. A certain amount of mystery will keep things fresh and exciting between us.” She gave him that same sensual smile and it secured a grin on his face that did not fade for quite a while...

CHAPTER 7

Upon their arrival, Straker escorted Ilyana to the SHADO auditorium. Virginia was there waiting. Straker excused himself and left Ilyana to experience her first live performance of Earth music.

“Quite a few of us that work here have musical talents, so we get together once a week before our shift to practice and play together,” said Virginia. “Some play an instrument, some sing. Some do both...”

“Musical forms and instruments vary everywhere you go on our planet. It is an important part of all Earth cultures and is often used to both celebrate and teach the young about their cultural heritage. It also teaches the importance of discipline and practice to achieve skill. Mostly, it is just for entertainment.”

The stage lights were on but the auditorium was dark. Thorvald and his bandmates could only see the shadowy shapes of two women in the seats. He had no trouble recognizing the woman he adored. He correctly assumed the identity of the other figure.

Captain Chan stood beside him with her sunburst Les Paul and Keith Ford sat behind the drum kit. They were pleased to have Mason back on bass guitar. His stint as a field intel operative had been exciting but he grew tired of living out of a suitcase and sleeping in a different bed every few nights. He was gladly welcomed back to his prior post as a senior security officer.

Thorvald’s battered looking old Fender Stratocaster hung from its strap around his neck. The instrument’s rough appearance was not a reflection of its comfortable familiarity or its perfect function or value. It mirrored the man who wielded it.

There was some low chatter among the musicians and some laughter. Ford smacked his sticks over his head four times at a moderate pace. Their warm up would be the CCR staple, ‘Born on the Bayou’. After the slow-rolling lead in, Thorvald added the vocal, sounding the way he remembered hearing it years ago.

Ilyana sat wide-eyed with her mouth slightly open and a smile forming. Virginia was laughing. “What do you think, Ilyana?” She was visibly delighted by the sensations.

“Music here is not only heard, it is felt physically! The low frequency vibrations are pulsing through my body in a most pleasurable way...” Her hands began to glow. As the song ended, Virginia motioned for Ilyana to follow her down to the stage. She introduced the band members. Thorvald grinned broadly knowing the others had no idea they were playing before an intergalactic ambassador. Ilyana and Tsi Chan seemed equally fascinated by each other’s facial features and hair. It culminated in a warm embrace between them.

Ilyana asked, “Would it be objectionable to you if I recorded your music to the cube? It will be the first live performance of Earth music ever heard by the other worlds.” Thorvald and his bandmates were quite excited at the idea.

Virginia pulled Thorvald’s ear down to whisper. “Go easy on her, dear. Save the head banging stuff for another time...” He smiled and winked.

“We’ve been working up an all Clapton set and I think he’d approve of it being the first Earth music heard on other planets.” Thorvald laughed and kissed his wife on the cheek. She and Ilyana sat in the center of the auditorium.

They began with the instrumental ‘Peaches & Diesel’, setting the mood for the further selections. Ilyana was visibly moved by the flowing melody. Her hands were glowing with a golden light. She reached over and gently grasped Virginia’s hand. Virginia had a look of shock and pleasure. She could feel the energy flowing from Ilyana’s hand.

As the song ended, Ilyana looked at her, smiling. “Your music can touch the emotions,” she said with wonder.

“Absolutely,” said Virginia. “Music can express love, sorrow, joy, anger or any emotional state.”

The next song began. Thorvald sang ‘Pretty Girl’ with his eyes on Ginny. Ilyana watched them both closely. Her smile was beaming. Virginia’s eyes glistened and her gaze remained lovingly locked on Thorvald. He was singing the song directly to her and she could feel it. Ilyana hoped she would feel love like that soon.

Straker slipped in behind them as the song ended. Thorvald saw him sitting adoringly behind Ilyana and grinned about the final song. He suspected Straker wouldn't know the song but he would certainly get the irony.

The band launched into a soulful, sensual cover of 'Wanna Make Love to You'. Ilyana was moved and her hands glowed brightly. Straker was glowing as well, but it was his reddened cheeks. Apparently, his feelings for Ilyana had been noticed.

Ilyana thanked them for sharing their music with her and the worlds of the Alliance. It was a pleasant start to a very full day for them all.

CHAPTER 8

The staff meeting started promptly as always. The floor was open for input and discussion by all participants. Ilyana was included as much of the agenda would involve her function on planet Earth. She enjoyed her second Earth breakfast.

Paul Foster had remained in the office after his night shift. He could come up to speed on current issues and do so over a hot breakfast. He also wanted to meet the extraterrestrial ambassador he'd heard about. He dialed up the charm when he saw how attractive she was. To Straker's amusement, Ilyana didn't respond to it beyond her customary courtly manners. She looked at Straker and smiled in a way that let him know her interest was solely in him.

General Prosser passed out checks to those command staffers who would have to replace their turbine cars. Paul was glad to have the opportunity to finally get rid of his light pastel purple car. He had endured years of mockery for its rather feminine color scheme. Never again would he order a vehicle sight unseen. If others hadn't been paying for it he would have never driven it off the lot.

Straker began the session. "Ilyana, we are giving you your own office between General Prosser and Commander Lake. You will have full communication links and your own data system. She seemed pleased to be accepted among these defenders of the Earth. It seemed to her an expression of trust and confidence.

Straker motioned for the next topic from among the group. Ilyana seemed intrigued by how business was conducted.

Prosser spoke up. "My friends, I believe we should be using first names in deference to Ilyana's wishes. My topic is a personnel issue. I was approached yesterday by an old mutual acquaintance of Thorvald's and mine. He is seeking employment with us. He doesn't know any more about us than my face and that we led the defense of the Earth three months ago. What can you tell us about Dmitri Guyeva, Thorvald?"

"He was a Spetsnaz Counter-Insurgency specialist. During my years in Project Mjolnir, he chased me throughout the Eastern Bloc countries and even through the heart of Moscow itself. He was very, very good and we spared each other's lives more than once out of respect for the rarity of those skills. He is clever and resourceful. His combat skills are at least a match for my own."

Thorvald continued, "We had a rather awkward reunion with him ourselves last night, but he shared that sentiment with us as well. I understand I owe you my life, Gunther... I thank you for your selfless and - I should add - highly illegal actions."

Prosser smiled broadly as he clipped the foot of the Toro cigar from his leather pocket sleeve. "When I arrived, he had compression bandages on your wounds and had carried you through the forest to the clearing where I landed. He did more to save you than I did. I was just the taxi driver." He smiled and toasted the foot of the cigar. "What was your impression of Dmitri, Virginia?" He lit the end of the cigar to the fascination of Ilyana. The plume of the flame rose and the fell as Prosser drew in through the cigar and the flame followed the flow of air.

"It was like watching Wally and the Beaver reuniting over burritos and chips with salsa." Virginia laughed out loud, "Life with you is never dull, Thorvald," she said giving his arm a squeeze.

Thorvald added, "I am confident that Dmitri would be a valuable asset for special security applications provided he passes preliminary scrutiny. He is quite a bit younger than me and still has fairly good health. I have arranged his lodging for now but he will need that, transport and the basic staples. He was living in a rental car."

"So we can bring him in on your recommendation, Thorvald?" asked Straker. "And mine," said Prosser. They would begin the process to bring Dmitri into SHADO. It would prove to be fortuitous for them all.

Straker took on the serious, analytical tone that the command staff had grown used to from him. It had been curiously absent since Ilyana's arrival. She noted that the glow about him had shifted to a very chilly dark blue.

“There are concerns we must address before we can accept travelers from other worlds, Ilyana. This is why we contacted you days ago.” He stood and stepped over to his desk. He removed a Lonsdale from the humidor, clipped and lit it while he spoke.

“We must carefully consider the ramifications of interaction between Earthlings and extraterrestrials. The biological concerns alone have a massive scope... The biological diversity that attracts their attention may also prove deadly to our otherworldly visitors. There are microorganisms everywhere on our world that could prove to have a pathogenic effect on them. Conversely, they could be carrying biological agents that our medical technology couldn't begin to cope with. That first handshake could result in mutual genocide of both species.”

Straker continued, “That concern ties in with another more basic one. How will visitors know that our atmosphere, our water and even our foods will not be toxic to them? If they did become ill here, how would we care for them?”

Alec spoke next. “Visitors must be kept aware of the locations of unrest and warfare on our planet. Tourists stepping into a civil war or military state would be treated as spies and likely exterminated. Those consequences are hard to even imagine...”

Prosser said, “My friends, we are operating under a forgone conclusion that these visitors will be welcomed worldwide. That is not our decision. That privilege must be granted by the nations of interest. You must remember, six months ago the human population not connected with SHADO were sure they were alone in the universe. Three months ago, that was proven a false perception and those extraterrestrials they encountered were here to either destroy or enslave them.”

Prosser looked at Ilyana. “Neither SHADO nor the I.A.C. have the authority to impose such a mandate on sovereign nations. It is not the same situation as when we were defending them all from invasion. Our alien visitors must be invited by the various nations and we must respect the wishes of those that do not wish to participate.”

“It sounds like another trip to the United Nations is in order,” said Straker. “The U.N. doesn't speak for all nations but they will all be watching the broadcast at some point. The various nations can decide and contact us through the I.A.C.”

Prosser said, “We must take care of our preliminary concerns before we reveal Ilyana's presence to the world. I will gladly arrange for her presentation at the U.N. when the time comes.”

Ilyana said, “I will contact the Alliance to resolve the issues of your concern. I will bring that information back to you soon.”

“You may wish to relocate the cube to your office so you can contact them in privacy, Ilyana.” Straker was thinking of both her convenience and having the cube out of his sight. He added, “Also, our medical group has asked if you would consent to analytical testing and study. It would involve an examination, scans, blood and tissue sampling. Our staff would like to both satisfy their curiosity and also establish base line information for you in case they have to provide medical assessment and treatment.”

Ilyana smiled, her eyes sparkling. “I will gladly submit to their testing and answer any questions they might have. I hope they will find the information useful.”

Ilyana rose from her seat and walked to the cube on Straker's desk. She held her hand stationary above it and said, “release.” The cube rose up into her palm and appeared to have no more mass than if it were made of balsa wood.

Alec smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand, “Why didn't we think of that?” He and Straker laughed. No more inverted ice buckets...

“Does anyone have anything else to discuss?” asked Straker.

“Only a question, Ed,” said Ilyana. “What are those smoldering sticks in your mouths?”

CHAPTER 9

Virginia woke the following morning. Thorvald was not in the bed beside her. She rose and slipped on her robe. She didn't have to look long to find him. He was asleep in his robe in the armchair by the fireplace. He was cradling the hand-painted wooden Dalla horse as if it were a teddy bear.

"Did you dream about Anna again, dear?" Thorvald opened his eyes. They were dark and filled with sorrow.

"Yes, but I also had a realization that I did not enjoy. Meeting Dmitri again has proven that my past life can catch up with me. In his case, it did not pose a threat to us but that is likely the exception rather than the rule. I couldn't possibly expose an innocent child to that kind of danger. It is bad enough that you are at risk, Love."

Virginia wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed his forehead softly. "I know you want to adopt Annie, dear. Not being her father doesn't mean you have to stop caring about her or the other children there. They love you and you provide them with the love of a father until they have one of their own. They need you, darling."

"I knew you were right all along, Love. It just had to get it through my thick skull. I had so much hope wrapped up in it that I can't help but feel this sadness. It will pass, Love. It is comforting to know I always have your arms around me."

"Come with me and I'll wrap them around you in the shower. Then we can pick up Dmitri and stop for breakfast on the way in to work." She gave him the saucy look that always made his heart speed up. "If you're *very* good, I'll even let you drive my new car to work." Thorvald followed her, stepping over her discarded robe.

Thorvald was enjoying the drive in. Virginia had searched and found this recent vintage BMW M5 at a nearby dealer. The low mileage and near showroom condition had caught her attention. The midnight blue paint reflected every source of light around the car. Thorvald liked the smooth power and precise shifting of the six speed manual gearbox. It had the ride quality and road manners befitting of its pedigree. Dmitri sat in the spacious back seat. "Beats the hell out of a Skoda," he said laughing. They dropped him at the personnel office to begin processing.

Ed Straker and Ilyana had arrived a bit early. They had enjoyed a quiet evening on the veranda looking up at the stars together the night before. She described her home-world in detail including the constellations visible in the night sky.

She had spent the evening again leaning back against his chest, gazing up at the pinpoints of light. She had found the rhythmic sound of the crickets delightful. She playfully rubbed her legs together to see if they made an audible sound. Straker listened intently for it, bringing joyous laughter and their first kiss. The touch of her soft lips and sweetness of her breath made him tingle like a mild electrical current. Ed Straker was very much in love.

Ilyana stepped out of her office as Virginia arrived. Virginia told her Thorvald had gone to the auditorium to play a bit before the shift began. Ilyana found him there on a stool sitting on the darkened stage. He had a brass body tri-cone resonator acoustic guitar on his right thigh and a glass tube slide on his left index finger.

Ilyana slipped into a seat in the back of the dark auditorium so as not to disturb him. He began to play the slow slide-accentuated blues that only a hurting heart can inspire. Ilyana was quite moved. She understood that the music was an expression of anguish. She quietly stepped down to the edge of the stage. Thorvald opened his eyes and saw her glowing hands. He slipped his glasses back on.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you, Thorvald. I believe your music was meant to be very personal and

private. Please forgive my intrusion.”

Thorvald smiled. She could see the darkness in his eyes. He said, “It’s okay, Ilyana. This form of music is an emotional release. The things weighing heavily on my heart sometimes seem to have a sound and releasing them makes me feel better.”

“It is an expression of sadness and anguish, Thorvald. I could feel it as well. I hope it does not offend you that I shared it without your consent.” She stepped up on the stage beside him, placing her hand on his shoulder. He smiled at her. “You will be playing joyfully again soon,” she said.

Doctor Schroeder called Straker to his office. Upon entering, Schroeder secured the door and motioned for him to take a seat.

“Our alien ambassador is full of surprises,” he began. “My nurse and I went into the exam room and she was already standing there nude. My nurse helped her into a gown while I turned my back.”

“She’s not shy or inhibited, is she doctor?” laughed Straker.

“Not at all, General. We did a standard physical including x-rays, CT scans and we took multiple samples to process blood, cytological and genomic studies as well. Can you guess what we found?”

“She’s human, right doctor?” said Straker.

“Not just human, she’s human and then some... Her physiology is absolutely perfect. There is no trace of disease, no scar tissue and none of the age-related markers we expect to see in an adult human body.”

Schroeder continued, “Professor Reisman was so fascinated by the results of the tests at the cellular and molecular level that she was actually giddy. In fourteen years I’ve never seen her crack a smile before. I sent her home a few minutes ago to get some sleep. She and her techs were at it since before noon yesterday.”

“I asked the ambassador how old she was and received a very well-crafted lecture on how time references are not a universal standard. Each world establishes its time references based on planetary rotation and orbit around its parent star. She was very nice about it, but I felt like an absolute moron for asking with no further understanding of my own question.”

Schroeder continued. “The genomic study was a revelation to us and the source of Reisman’s delight. The ambassador has DNA that looks identical to ours at a cursory level. Forty-six chromosomes in twenty-three pairs, comprised of about three billion crosslinked base pairs of hydrogen-bonded nucleobases. At the molecular level things got interesting. We found the expected linked guanine and cytosine as well as linked adenine and thymine. What we didn’t expect was to find two more sets of base pairs that are unknown to our world.”

“Geneticists here have been experimenting with creation of new hybrid base pairs with only some level of success in the laboratory setting. The ambassador’s additional base pairs are not variations of the four common nucleobases. They are unique molecules. The DNA and the cellular alleles they create could take almost any form, including enhanced cognitive abilities, expanded sensory capabilities or even something like a greater normal lifespan or slower aging.”

“The ambassador is human, but she is likely from a human population that is thousands of generations older than our own. Creating these additional base pairs as a result of stimulus/response, random mutation or even code manipulation would take millennia. She is what we may be in thousands of years.”

“She is very connected with natural sources of energy,” said Straker. “She seems to absorb it from the sun and the planet directly and she can use it to manipulate certain objects like the cube.”

Schroeder said, “That makes sense. Where all humans have an inherent and subtle galvanic charge present in their bodies, hers is about three times greater. I would imagine that certain forms of contact with her may even cause a tingling sensation.”

Straker held his tongue but thought, *you have no idea, doctor...*

Straker stopped in Ilyana’s office on his way back to his own. She rose and greeted him with a warm embrace and smile, looking up into his blue eyes.

“You made quite an impression on the medical and scientific staff,” he said with a grin.

“I enjoyed our interaction, Ed. Did they learn all they needed about me?”

“I think you may have created more questions than you answered,” he said.

She said, “I need to tell you about my contact with the Alliance moments ago, Ed. They have answered our concerns from the staff meeting, but they have recommended I find other living arrangements in order to avoid personal bias in my interactions with Earth humans.”

Straker’s heart skipped a beat and he steeled himself, “What did you tell them?”

“I told them that you and I were involved in a very important cross-cultural experiment intended to foster a long-term mutual connection.” Straker grinned. “Did I do well, or would you prefer I make other living arrangements?” she added.

“Ilyana, I don’t want to even consider the prospect of a single day without you near...” He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. She seemed to melt in his embrace. “Surely you can tell how I feel about you,” he said softly.

Her eyes sparkled with her warm smile, “I love you too, Ed... As I told you, we are meant to be together.” She touched his cheek with her hand and kissed him again softly. They walked together to Straker’s office for the follow up meeting with the command staff.

The command staff was already assembled and they all stopped and watched Straker and Ilyana walk in together. There was a very different feel to their arrival and it drew a smile from Virginia and a raised eyebrow from Alec.

“If we can get started, Ilyana has resolutions to our concerns from yesterday,” said Straker.

Ilyana set the cube on the conference table so it could record the proceedings for the Alliance. “The concerns you expressed yesterday have been considered and we have resolutions to address them,” said Ilyana. “Firstly, part of my function here will be to monitor world events and prevent visitors from travelling to places where they might be harmed. On a similar theme, they will not be permitted to travel to places where they have not been welcomed.”

“In answer to your biological concerns over disease transmission and dangers to travelers due to the atmosphere and life forms here on Earth, all visitors will be required to utilize the particle transmission method for arrival and departure. This method uses highly detailed formulas at the molecular level for each individual being processed. It removes and destroys anything extraneous such as microbial life forms, parasites and even tumors. It will perform this function in both directions so there is no cross-contamination concern. It will also resolve any injuries or medical needs of the transmitted individual. It also will not allow beings to travel to places that will not support their physiological requirements.”

“In order to establish and maintain this additional infrastructure, the Alliance is sending me two dedicated helpers. They will work with me as well as interact with all of you. I hope this is acceptable to you all...”

“Who are they sending to work with you, Ilyana?” asked Prosser.

She smiled. “The two souls I would feel lost without... My daughter Marta and my sister Ona. I believe you will enjoy their presence here. They will work out of my office with me but will require lodging and transport.”

Ilyana concluded, “I promise you they will arrive at a more appropriate time and location than I did...” It brought about a laugh around the table but again reddened cheeks for Straker.

“I understand you caused a bit of a stir in the medical and biological labs yesterday,” said Alec, leaning back with his arms crossed. He was grasping for a straw to dissuade his best friend’s blind adoration to this alien visitor. It drew an angry stare from both Straker and Virginia.

Ilyana looked at him warmly and smiled. “I *fully* understand your concern, Alec. Please rest assured that I am fully human just as you all are. The genetic differences at a molecular level that fascinated the technicians in the lab are simply changes in the genetic code that reflect the greater amount of time my world has been populated with humans. Your world will reach a similar level of modification to your existing

genome in future generations.”

She smiled again at Alec. “The changes to my DNA are what allows me to connect with natural sources of energy and to manipulate certain devices like the cube. It is the basis for our interactive technology. It is also the basis for our personal cleanliness rituals and it protects us from disease and infection.”

“It allows me to visualize the overall emotional state of individuals. It also helps me see the emotional connections of people to each other and to feel music and other sensory inputs. It does not give me any ability to read your thoughts or influence them in any way.”

“So we’re your knuckle-dragging ancient ancestors?” said Alec with irritation. Again Straker glared at him. He shrugged it off knowing he’d answer for it later...

Ilyana gave him a sly smile and narrowed her eyes. “Ona is going to greatly enjoy interacting with you, Alec... In answer to your question, human development on your world and mine run parallel, not end to end. What we share is a common progenitor.”

She smiled, leaned back and crossed her arms, a mimic of his action but without the attitude. Alec let a bit of a smile escape. She was playing him and he was enjoying it.

“Let me ask you a question, Alec,” said Ilyana. How do humans of this world explain their presence here?”

Alec sat upright again. He considered his words before he spoke. “There are two basic theories that prevail. The first is that we evolved from lower primates through the process of natural selection by adaptive response to our environment. The second is called intelligent design and gives credit to a Divine Creator or some other extraterrestrial source.”

He looked at her quizzically and added, “Well, which is it? It bloody well had better not be hyper-intelligent mice and that forty-two in the answer to everything.” There were smiles around the table.

Ilyana smiled. “I am not from your world and have no simplistic answer to offer you, but I will tell you this... No other human-inhabited world has lower primate life forms. I will leave the ultimate answer for your scientists and theologians to debate as appropriately. You will find those same debates on other worlds as well.”

“How marvelous,” said Prosser with a wide grin. “Otherworldly civilizations struggle with the same issues of faith and science as we do. They somehow seem closer...”

Ilyana smiled sweetly. “You will find you share many common beliefs, experiences and hopes, my friends. If that were not so, my presence here would be pointless.”

“I do have a concern, Ilyana,” said Prosser. “Your Alliance is based on a charter. There are expectations of behavior, compliance and uniformity, are there not?”

“There are expectations and there are consequences for failing to uphold them,” said Ilyana. “Your planet is being viewed differently because it does not have a singular governing body. It is conceivable that some nation could lash out violently and commit an act against charter statutes. Because your world is fragmented, it is not bound by the charter. You are too independent a world to be contained by some otherworldly rule book. Surely you must understand how another world might find that fascinating.”

“Ilyana, would you be willing to travel to make a presentation to the General Assembly of the United Nations?” asked Prosser. “You can make your request for visitation approval to many nations at once. The other non-member nations monitor the proceedings and will know of your request as well. It will take time to prepare, but I will make the necessary arrangements.”

“It is the purpose for which I was sent here,” said Ilyana smiling sweetly. The meeting dissolved and the participants began to depart.

Straker said with a snarl in his voice, “Alec, a word...”

The others began to leave Straker’s office. Ilyana paused beside Straker, placed a hand on his arm and whispered, “Alec’s concern is honorable, Ed. Ona would have done the same thing to you on my behalf.” She smiled and stepped out. The door closed leaving Straker, Freeman and an elephant in the room with them...

Alec waited for the inevitable sinking of fang into flesh. Straker stepped around the desk to the beverage dispenser in the corner. He poured himself a mug of coffee then procured Alec a couple fingers of scotch in a glass. He sat on the edge of his desk and handed it to him. Straker began to chuckle as he sipped. "Dear God Alec, that was quite an obvious display." Alec eased a bit.

"And your girlfriend caught it in midair and fed it right back to me," said Alec with a grin. "Against my normally solid judgement, I'm starting to really like her, Ed."

"I'm going to give you a warning, Alec. It's not the one you think you're going to get, either." Straker lit a Lonsdale cigar and grinned. "I have personal knowledge about Ilyana's sister Ona that concerns you, my friend. Not only is Ona just as beautiful as her sister, but I understand she has that voluptuous look that turns your brain into pudding. She is also prone to the same kind of snarky, smart-ass comments and humor that you display daily. You two were custom made for each other, and you, my dear old chum are totally screwed..." Straker coughed a bit on the cigar smoke because of his laughter. Alec's eyes were enlarged. "I predict you will be head-over-heels in less than a week of meeting her." Alec downed his drink, shook his head in disbelief and walked out of the office.

CHAPTER 10

General Prosser made the arrangements for the alien ambassador to address the United Nations Assembly. He also cleared the visit with the U.S. State Department. As soon as it was posted on the itinerary at the U.N., word travelled quickly. The State Department notified N.Y.P.D. and New York State Police of the visit by the otherworldly representative. Within hours the visit had become known to the news media and spread globally.

Prosser began to work with Ilyana to draft her presentation to the Earth nations. It would have to be carefully crafted. She enjoyed his wisdom, his experience and his command of the language. Prosser reminded her of her mentor, a well-educated statesman and scientist. She was intrigued that the senior general had spent his life in military service, yet displayed the courtly manners and speech of a head of state.

It was only mid-afternoon when Straker's secure line rang. "Straker," he said.

"This is Major Beck, SHADO field intelligence, sir. We are intercepting radio flash traffic that indicates potential trouble. We've intercepted overlapping messages that mention SHADO, Manhattan, United Nations and alien ambassador. Your trip and arrival in New York could be walking into a trap of some kind. There is also online chatter indicating anger toward aliens in general. People seem frightened of a repeat of three months ago."

"That is troubling," said Straker, "but not entirely unexpected... Fear of the unknown is a powerful motivator."

"We will stay on top of the situation and keep you informed, sir. We will have operatives and tactical units in place should you require us there."

"Well done, Major. We may very well need your help."

Thorvald stopped in the main guard shack to see Mason. "How is Dmitri's first day going?" Mason laughed.

"Mr. Guyeva is skilled far beyond what is needed to check identification cards and search vehicles. He would be better utilized as special security. Right now, he's making Wilson look like a boat anchor by the simple fact that he isn't sitting on his ass asleep." Mason looked irritated. "Wilson is most senior, but he is on his way out and doesn't know it. He has developed a condition I call 'metalosis'."

"That sounds serious," said Thorvald.

"Not really. It is simply that the iron in his blood has turned into lead in his ass. He is currently serving his last day of employment as a door stop. I'm about to break the news if I can wake him up."

Thorvald roared with laughter. "I have to share that one with the command staff..."

Straker called for his command staff late in the day. Ilyana came in with General Prosser. "We have information that our trip to the U.N. may be subject to an attempt to prevent your presentation," said Straker. "It could happen at any point in the journey or at the site itself. This is no longer a genial cultural exchange... I want full security measures in place."

Straker continued, "I want an SST with a long range interceptor escort both ways and personal security on station everywhere you go. Alec, I want you at the yoke of the SST in case you need to get creative in the air. General Prosser, you are the finest fighter pilot in our ranks, but you have no stick time in our transports and the moves you find natural will snap the wings off an SST."

Prosser grinned, "I will do whatever you need me to. I can coordinate the escort flight, but I suggest we use the MiG's and have an AWAC's and tanker stationed in the mid-Atlantic. We can then handle surprises in route. I will contact the State Department and inform them that we are bringing our own special security with us. Let them worry about what that might entail... I'd like Paul leading the escort flight as well."

"We will have SHADO special op's there when we arrive. Does anyone else have something to add?"

asked Straker.

“My daughter and sister will arrive here tomorrow,” said Ilyana happily. Everyone looked pleased, although Alec looked a little worried. Straker grinned at that.

Thorvald added, “I want to bring Dmitri in as a bodyguard for Ilyana and the diplomatic team. He will be very, very useful if there is trouble...”

Straker said, “Make it happen, Thorvald. He has been topside all day and is probably bored out of his skull. Go get him and bring him down here to meet us all. He needs to be brought up to speed quickly.”

Dmitri rose to the occasion. He was not only brought up to speed but he was excited to be part of it. The very irony of a former Soviet soldier in America at the U.N. was just too amusing to miss. He hoped he could see the seat where former Premiers had sat and grumbled in response to the plans of the capitalist nations.

Despite the propaganda and indoctrination, he'd always wanted to see America. In fact he hoped this detail would take him to many other countries around the globe. During his years of service, the only scenery he had seen outside the former USSR had been a brief stay in Cuba. As he recalled it, he laughed. He had been on Thorvald's trail at the time...

Ed Straker took Ilyana to his favorite Italian restaurant in Harlington. She enjoyed the cuisine and the roving violinist moving table to table. They retired to Straker's veranda once more to gaze at stars and each other's eyes.

In loving embrace, Straker spoke quietly to her. “I know we will be separated for a time, so I want to say this now... I love you, Ilyana. I can't imagine my life without you here in my arms. Promise me you'll always come back to me...”

She kissed him softly, saying “Always, Ed. I love you. Our souls are connected and I see you as my life mate.” She gently caressed his cheek with her fingertips. Tonight we share the bed in the great tree, Odysseus.”

Ilyana rose and led him by the hand to the bed they would share whenever they could be together. Doctor Schroeder was right. Not only did their intimate contact produce a continual tingling sensation but it also produced a glorious glow wrapped around them both. It grew in intensity along with their desire and ultimately their mutual energetic release. The glow only faded as they blissfully slept, bodies intertwined.

The puzzle that was Ed Straker's life finally felt as if all the pieces were in place...

CHAPTER 11

Prosser's later than normal arrival was due to missed sleep resulting from an evening phone call that had lasted much longer than expected. His heart and thoughts were focused on a captivating woman in a large, lonely house in Brighton.

Prosser rolled into the parking area on his BMW GS-PD and pulled into a stall next to Thorvald's plucky blue Beetle. He noted that the only turbine car remaining belonged to Alec.

Virginia's blue M5 was there as well as Straker's new Jaguar XJ-12 coupe. It was a dark brown metallic color with tan leather interior. He suspected the choice of color had something to do with the color of Ilyana's lovely eyes. Paul's pastel purple machine had been replaced by a dark grey metallic Porsche 911. Paul had lusted after this 993 variant of the iconic machine as soon as he saw one in the flesh. It had the aggressive styling cues of the 959 prototype he had seen at a London auto show. Nobody would ever call his personal vehicle feminine again.

The command staff were in Straker's office. Dmitri had walked over from the dormitory using the underground tunnel connecting it to SHADO HQ. Ilyana waited in her office for the arrival of Marta and Ona.

As the door to Straker's office opened, the staff formed a reception line. They would meet Prosser first, followed by Virginia and Thorvald, Dmitri, Paul and finally Alec and Straker himself. There was a cumulative held breath as the two women stepped in with Ilyana. Both wore the same shimmering gowns that Ilyana had worn when she arrived.

Ona looked much like her sister, with a fuller face and figure. She shared the same deep brown eyes but her long white hair hung in waves and elongated loose coils. She was stunning... Straker heard Alec quietly say, "Dear God, I'm in trouble..."

Marta was a more youthful version of her mother. Her ocean green eyes and muted brown hair inherited from her late father. The gaze, poise and disarming smile were all mirrors of her lovely mother. She carried herself like a princess.

Ilyana introduced each of the staff members in turn, fascinated by the hues and changes in the glow around them while they interacted. It was a visible indication of the direction these relationships would follow.

As Paul met Ona, he maintained a cool blue colored composure. Marta however, was a different story. He had started cool blue until she smiled and she leaned her head back, letting her long hair slip from her shoulder to its full length. Her green eyes were illuminated by the overhead lights. Paul's ability to speak was lost momentarily and Ilyana saw his glow shift to a warm yellow.

"Are you always this bashful?" asked Marta with a gentle smile. All Paul could do was smile back at her. He had never been at a loss for words with any woman.

Ona took Alec's offered hand and held it, taking his other as well. "I have heard about you, Commander." Ona cut her eyes slightly and gave him a sly smile. She had Alec's number already and he knew it. Somehow he didn't mind, but he would never admit it to Straker. He didn't have to.

The introductions completed, Straker said, "I'll keep this short. Most of you will be turning around and going home to get some rest. You will need it... I have bumped up your departure for New York to tonight. You will be a couple days early, but anyone plotting an intercept will be thrown off schedule."

"Virginia, you'll cover the night shift and I'll cover the day. The rest of you will be leaving tonight. Thorvald, you're going to be filling in the gaps from everyone's schedules."

He looked a bit bewildered. "Where do I begin?"

Virginia placed her hand on his arm. "Ona and Marta will need several changes of Earth type clothing - and I mean all of the *special ones* as well. You will have to take them shopping and get them everything they

need.” Thorvald’s eyes opened wide and his mouth fell slightly ajar. Ginny laughed.

“Just take them to the same places I’ve dragged you along, dear... You will have to help them pick outfits, shoes and accessories that match. Don’t forget the lingerie, either.” Thorvald’s eyes displayed more fear than for any mission he’d ever faced. Ginny took her car keys and company credit card and placed them in his hand. She looked at him sternly and added, “NO CAMO!” She smiled sweetly and kissed his cheek. She took the keys to his Beetle and stepped out with Ilyana laughing and following behind her.

Around midnight a non-descript panel truck with the Markers Transport logo passed through the gate at Harlington Regional Airport. It came to a stop at the base of a ladder stand leading up to the hatchway of a SHADAIR SST.

At the assigned time, Major Bill Johnson had boarded, completing the pre-flight checklist and powering up the onboard systems for rapid departure.

Dmitri stepped out of the passenger side of the truck and walked cautiously around the perimeter of it, employing night vision optics. It was clear. He pounded twice on the rear door and it opened. A small group of people exited and went immediately up the stairs. The hatchway closed. The driver of the truck quickly pushed the ladder stand to the fence and drove away.

Alec Freeman slipped into the pilot’s seat and secured his belt. “Good to fly with you again, Alec,” said Bill.

Alec smiled, spooling up the six afterburning turbofan engines. “Just more of our personalized service.” He grinned. “Let’s piss off the neighbors...” The sleek machine rolled through the taxi paths without slowing. Alec shoved the throttles forward as soon as it was lined up and the flaps were set. The source of the roar over Harlington was only visible as small lights against the night sky.

Ilyana watched the massive sea of twinkling lights that was London recede in the distance behind them. The escort group of six SHADO MiG-31’s formed up with them as soon as they cleared the western shore of Ireland. Prosser excused himself from the passenger compartment and entered the cockpit. He slipped on his headset and took the flight engineer/navigation station behind Major Johnson.

“Paul, what is your status?” asked Prosser. “Optimal, Seagull,” said Foster. “Excellent, Paul. Proceed as planned. Seagull out.”

“Seagull to Visor, what is your status?” asked Prosser. A much fainter signal came into his headset. “Visor to Seagull, Visor and Thirsty on station. Monitoring...” Prosser responded, “Seagull to Visor, roger and keep us informed. Seagull out.”

Ilyana and Dmitri settled in to their seats. The cube sat in front of her on the table. “You should probably try to rest, Madame Ambassador,” he said.

She smiled. “Call me Ilyana, Dmitri. We will spend too much time together for formalities.”

Dmitri smiled at that. “You should still try, Ilyana. When we land, you will be very busy.”

“I’m too excited to sleep, Dmitri. I am also missing my beloved and my family...”

“You always carry their love with you, Ilyana,” said Dmitri. “My family has all passed away, but I carry them with me daily. Their love, their wisdom and their examples... There is not a day when they do not come to mind.”

She looked at him with fascination and a warm smile. “You have a poet’s soul, don’t you, Dmitri?” she said. “You have a depth of character much like our friend Thorvald.”

Dmitri grinned wide, “That is the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Four and a half hours out over the North Atlantic, Prosser heard an excited voice in his headset. “Seagull, Seagull, this is Vision. You have two inbound bogies rising up from behind you on an intercept course. They should be on your radar very soon.”

“Roger Vision. Paul, it’s time to circle the wagon,” said Prosser.

“Roger, Seagull. Deploying per plan,” said Foster. The six MiG’s banked off to port on a flat plane turn

which would bring them up from behind the intruders.

“Alec, we have incoming visitors. If they come up and check us out that is fine. If we get threat status, you’ll have to pull out the stops. The escorts will be on their six if we need them,” said Prosser.

“Any idea where they came from?” asked Alec. “None,” said Prosser, “and I see they have no transponder signals... Kill the lights, Alec.” Alec switched off the navigation, interior and running lights. He switched the transponder off as well.

Prosser leaned out of the cockpit door into the passenger compartment. “You two need to secure everything and strap yourselves in. Trouble is coming to visit.” Dmitri made sure Ilyana was securely strapped in, secured loose items in the area and then strapped himself in as well.

Foster and his group switched off transponders and running lights and waited. Off in the distance he could see the blue glow of the jet engines of the rising intruders. They had no lights or markings visible. From the distant outline in the dim glow of the sky the two craft appeared to be some version of world market Mirage fighters. The delta wings stood out as black triangles against a slightly brighter background.

The MiG’s rose to a height advantage and split into two flights of three. All they could do was wait. It wasn’t a long one...

“Seagull, Seagull, weapons just went hot!” exclaimed Paul. “They’ve got lock!” The threat monitor system in the SST cockpit began to flash and emit the warning tone.

“SHADO Shield, execute, execute!” shouted Foster. The two flights of MiG’s engaged full afterburners, bringing their cannons to bear on the intruders.

Paul saw the flashes of air-to-air missiles from beneath the wings of each intruder. “Launch positive!” he shouted into the microphone. Prosser said loudly, “NOW ALEC!” Alec firewalled the throttles of the big SST, the airframe resonating with a deafening rumble. He banked the ship in hard sweeping turns on a serpentine course. Prosser stood by with the controls to launch flares and chaff to confuse the missiles. The four heat seeking missiles altered their track, streaked forward then corrected, again and again.

Paul and his flight opened fire on the intruders as they banked away from firing the missiles. Both intruders cartwheeled in a blazing fireball. Foster looked up and saw the missiles getting close to the blue glow of the six exhaust plumes of the SST. “Alec, NOW!” he shouted.

Prosser released the chaff followed by two cascades of flares. Alec pulled back hard on the yoke. The missiles corrected their tracks and impacted the flares. Four massive detonations shook the SST and set off alarms in the MiG’s. The thunder of the interceptor’s exhausts was deafening in the SST as they overflew it and circled around to form up again. The scopes were clear once more...

Everything quieted down again.

Prosser spoke into the microphone. “Paul, what’s your status?”

“We’re all here, sir. No damage to report, but a change of underwear is in order...”

“Here too, Paul. You all did your jobs to perfection, everyone. Very well done... This attack proves the validity of our precautions. Our departure did not go unnoticed.”

Prosser checked on his passengers. Ilyana was shaking and teary-eyed. Dmitri had his arm around her, trying to comfort her. “Do they fear me so much that they are willing to murder all of you as well?” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I bring only destruction and turmoil to your world.”

Prosser knelt down, looking up into her deep brown eyes. She looked into his kindly ice blue gaze and returned his smile. “No more of that talk, Ilyana,” said Prosser. “Your warning four months ago saved every life on this planet. Without you our world would have ended in great suffering.”

He gently grasped her hand. “We are a planet of fallible, frightened beings. There are few things that motivate us more than fear... We fear the unknown and we fear change. Many do not have the boldness of spirit and zest for life that makes the unknown a challenge to explore. It requires curiosity. It requires faith. It requires courage... You will inspire these things in them if they will give you the chance.”

Ilyana smiled sweetly and touched his cheek, “Thank you, Gunther. You inspire them in me as well.”

Prosser rose, reached in his pocket and withdrew the old Blue Max and Iron Cross wrapped in a silk cloth. He handed them to Ilyana. “I’d like you to hold on to these for me for a while. I’ll explain them another time.” He patted Dmitri on the back and winked at him. “More adventure to come, Dmitri,” he said.

Prosser went back to his station and called in the report to SHADO HQ. Virginia called Straker at home immediately. Around 5 am his phone rang.

“Are they okay, Virginia?” he asked with his heart in his throat. “No, I wasn’t really sleeping anyway, just dozing off periodically. I’ll be in shortly so I can call them.”

Straker rolled out of bed with a surge of adrenalin. His worry was mostly for Ilyana. Less than a week on planet Earth and there is already an attempt on her life. He needed to hear her voice.

Prosser emerged from the cockpit with a headset and microphone. He helped Ilyana get them adjusted. Soon she heard a voice. Her eyes teared and a smile formed.

“Yes, Ed. I am unharmed – just frightened. Dmitri and the crew are taking good care of me.

“I’m so sorry it happened, Ilyana. I know it is frightening. I wish I could say that kind of thing rarely happens, but for SHADO staffers, it happens with some regularity. It is why we take the precautions that we do. I will assign special security to watch over Ona and Marta as well.”

“Thank you, Ed. I love...”

A signal broke in, “Seagull, Seagull, this is Vision, there are multiple bogies eastbound on an intercept course. We are seeing at least twenty targets, your altitude. You should have them on scope in another fifteen minutes. Transponder signals coming in...” The duration of the static felt much longer than it actually was.

“Seagull this is Vision. Flight is USAF, they are your escorts into US airspace. Thirsty is ten nautical downrange on your course in case you need a top off.”

“Seagull flight, this is Doorbell. Welcome to the United States of America. Your destination is no longer JFK. Please alter course to starboard, heading 344 degrees. Your destination is now Plattsburgh AFB. Follow Air Force ground control and tower instructions. We have been monitoring your approach and we will ride shotgun until you are down and secure.”

“Roger Doorbell. Will comply. Thank you for the escort. Seagull out,” said Prosser.

CHAPTER 12

“Thanks for your help, Rebecca,” said Straker, looking into the secure AV link to NORAD Command. “We owe you one.” She smiled. Straker still found her quite charming and attractive. He suspected she would always be “the one that got away...” Despite any mutual attraction, the logistics alone would have proven insurmountable. He was relieved now that he had Ilyana in his life.

“You can treat me to a steak dinner if you ever come within 50 miles of Cheyenne Mountain. That’s about as far away as they let me go anymore...” She laughed. “I won’t add it to your tab, though. I promised Uncle James I would assist SHADO whenever possible. I told the security staff to give your group plenty of space but roll out the red carpets.”

General Rebecca Henderson smiled sweetly, “You know my Uncle warned me that you would be good at making trouble for me. He wasn’t kidding...” A grin crossed her perfectly almond-shaped face. “NORAD Command, out.”

The SHADAIR SST was about ten minutes from touchdown on final approach. Dmitri went quickly to the storage locker and slipped into his leather over-shoulder harness rig and clipped the ends to his belt. He clipped in the H&K MP-5K, chambered a round and set the safety. He let it dangle freely from its strap.

Under his left arm, he slipped a CZ-75 into its vertical holster, chamber loaded, cocked-and-locked. He slipped the extra magazines in his waistband carriers and finally slid a projectile dagger into each of the scabbards sewn into the shaft of each boot. Many of them were on loan from Thorvald’s private arsenal. Dmitri positioned his earbud communicator. He slipped into a duster style black leather coat with a slit up the back for mobility. He sat and tried to get comfortable.

“Are you expecting that much trouble among allies, Dmitri?” asked Ilyana.

Dmitri smiled. “I expect nothing but prepare for everything.”

Bill Johnson’s voice came over the intercom. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are on final approach to tropical Plattsburgh, New York. Please ensure your seat-backs and tray-tables are in the fully upright and secured position. Please use caution when opening overhead storage bins as their contents may have shifted while evading enemy missiles...”

Seconds later he added, “On behalf of your captain and flight crew we thank you for choosing SHADAIR transport. We know you have no choice whatsoever in how you sneak around planet Earth and we congratulate you for selecting us. It is a balmy twenty-six degrees Fahrenheit and the local time is 1:43 am, Eastern Standard Time. Please remain seated until the captain turns off the fasten seatbelt sign.” Alec grinned at him. He always liked Bill’s sense of humor.

Dmitri was laughing heartily, looking out the window at a stark snow-covered moonlit landscape. It looked like the tundra of home.

Alec lowered the heat shield, flared the approach and touched the wheels down with textbook smoothness. A security detail was waiting on the edge of the tarmac. The entire flight- SST, interceptors, AWAC’s and tanker would be cordoned off and kept secure from both prying eyes and staff as well. All fuel cells were topped off and the flight crews were brought supplies, cold beer and a large portable generator for their comfort while waiting.

Prosser, Ilyana and Dmitri exited the portable jet-way and climbed into a waiting large black SUV with dark-tinted windows. The base commander had a hot breakfast waiting for them in his private quarters. He’d been briefed by General Henderson and he had pulled out the stops in keeping with her orders.

After the cordial meeting and a brief tour, the security detail whisked them away to a nearby underground bunker. They would travel to the SHADO safe-house in Manhattan by underground rail transport.

The trip from upstate New York to Manhattan would take a few hours. Since there was nothing to see,

there were also no windows in the passenger car. It was essentially an armored subway operated by the Department of Defense.

The passenger car was well lit and seating was comfortable but it was not overly spacious. It was clear that Dmitri was not enjoying the confined feeling. Prosser noted the darting eyes and began to chat to take his mind off of it.

“Dmitri, we have some time to kill, so let us fill in the span since we first met.” Prosser slipped his leather coat off and lay it aside. Dmitri was amused to see the shoulder holster he wore with an old Sig P210 secured inside. Magazine pouches hung on the opposite side for balance.

“An interesting choice of sidearm, General,” said Dmitri. Prosser grinned. “I was wearing it the first time you met me as well. It is my longtime trusted companion.”

“Does everyone on this planet carry a weapon at all times?” asked Ilyana.

Prosser smiled. “No, my dear, it is just often a necessity for SHADO personnel. We have a gift for finding trouble wherever we go. Many of us are former military, but all SHADO staff maintain a high skill level with various weapons and in unarmed methods as well. We remain armed now to protect you, Ilyana.”

He looked at Dmitri. “I understand that Thorvald had something to do with that stylish scar across your eye...”

“It is true, but it is not as you suspect. I had been chasing him through a forest outside of Bratislava. We were both on foot and it was bitterly cold. It was late at night and my night vision gear had failed. I heard a scraping sound and stumbled headlong into a rock wall rising up. He was free climbing the rock face in the dark with no night vision gear of any kind. I struggled to follow him and could not. I heard him utter strange words and I looked upward. Apparently, he had dropped his double bladed axe and it fell. I looked up and caught it with my face. I saw stars and then nothing.”

Dmitri began to chuckle. “I awoke to laughter. My Spetsnaz squad had found me with a compression bandage over my eye and wrapped tightly in a Mylar emergency blanket. They said I looked like an entrée at a Mexican restaurant. Thorvald had treated my wound and kept me from freezing to death in the snow. Things were different between us after that.”

“What did he say that made you look up?”

“He said ‘UFF-DA’. I’m still not exactly sure what it means, but the context was clear enough...” Prosser laughed heartily. Dmitri felt more relaxed. Despite the closed in feeling, the DOD rail car was incredibly spacious compared to the troop compartment in a BMP.

Mason entered Straker’s office. “What brings you to the wine cellar, Mason?” asked Straker.

“I heard about the attack over the Atlantic and something’s got me bugged... It would have taken quite a bit of time to get those enemy aircraft staged where they could intercept our flight. They also knew the course and when to show up.” He looked seriously at Straker. “I think they had the info long before our flight left.”

“A mole, Mason?”

“A rat, General... I have some detective work to do. That stint in the intel group got me thinking differently about security. If I find our rat, what would you like me to do?”

Straker’s gaze turned ice cold. “The same thing you do with any other rat.”

Mason nodded. The tech lab was his first destination. The technicians entered each office in turn using detection equipment to search for listening devices, cameras or data system parasites. All locations came up clean.

His next stop was to see Marianne in the I.T. department. Her expertise in all things computer and data system related was without equal. “Can you see who was using their data link at some given time, Marianne?” he asked. “Yes, of course, but due to the classified nature of what they may be viewing, what we track is the individual data link activation and deactivation by location. Let me pull up the spread sheet,” she said. She typed and clicked several times arriving at a screen looking like a large grid. “They must log in each time they use it and it automatically boots them out of the secure sector after sixty seconds of inactivity.”

Marianne scrolled as she pointed to the monitor. “These first several columns show data link access from the various key staff offices, the medical center ports and the various labs. These normally occur on and off over each 24 hour period.”

“What are these tabs way out here to the right?” asked Mason. Marianne clicked and dragged the spread sheet to the left, exposing the right-most columns. “These are not regular points of use. They represent access points in peripheral locations on the campus. They were placed there as part of a contingency plan in case the main facility was compromised. They look just like a standard phone jack port...”

She scrolled up and down the spread sheet. “What the hell?” she exclaimed. There were tags intermittently in one column. It had repeated at regular intervals, including yesterday during the day shift.

“Can you tell me exactly where that access point is located?” asked Mason, pulling out his pocket notebook.

Marianne pulled a printed spread sheet from her desk drawer, she used her index finger from each hand, one tracking the room number and the other following the rising consecutive numbers that would match the six digit code of the access point.

Her finger tips eventually came together and tracked back to the room number. “Bingo,” she said. “Do you know this location, Mason?”

He jotted down the room number and the time stamp. “I sure do,” he said with anger rising in his voice. “If this pans out, I owe you a fancy dinner and a show in London.”

“Can I bring my husband?” she asked with an irritated smirk.

“I insist on it,” said Mason to her surprise. “You may have just saved several lives.”

Mason lit out of her office with energy, passing Straker in the hallway. “How goes the rodent search, Mason?” asked Straker.

“I’ve found the hole and I’m going to set the trap,” he said without turning. His next point of call would be the small storage room on the ground level. It was not one accessed regularly but it had something that narrowed down the suspects. It had a key station for security guards to register their presence at required intervals while doing their rounds according to schedule. It was probably one of his own men...

Straker would assign Thorvald to serve as bodyguard to Ona and Marta. They had all become close during the day before. Thorvald had taken them to all of Ginny’s favorite clothiers including the lingerie shop where she had procured items that Thorvald could recall the image of by simply closing his eyes.

After a long, repetitive cycle of trying on and modelling outfits for Thorvald, he had forgotten to tell them it didn’t apply to the lingerie shop. Ona and Marta both emerged wearing highly revealing ensembles that had caused quite a stir in the shop. Thorvald gently explained that these items were for them to see and enjoy and perhaps for them to share with a romantic partner.

When the shop Matron approached him with crossed arms, he thickened up his Swedish accent. “My sisters are recently arrived from Stockholm. I explained that England is less free with its exposure of flesh.” She seemed to accept his response.

Following the shopping trip, Thorvald treated them to their first taste of ice cream at Ginny’s favorite shop. He checked them into the SHADO dormitory, showing them around and giving them instruction on the laundry equipment and their private bathroom fixtures. Again, the flush toilet seemed to be fascinating...

Before he left them, he swore them to secrecy about what a good time they had together. He explained that Earth men aren’t supposed to enjoy shopping for women’s clothing and that it was a sort of game. He said, “I never had any siblings of my own, but you have made me feel like an older brother today and I enjoyed it greatly.” They embraced him and thanked him.

The next morning he would pick them up at the dormitory in a very different role.

The DOD train slowed as it went under the East River. Prosser checked his weapon and slipped on his coat. Dmitri checked his gear as well.

“We have no way of knowing what to expect, Dmitri,” said Prosser.

Dmitri smiled. “If we go out in a flurry of bullets it’s still the best job I’ve ever had...”

He and Prosser waited for the door to open with their weapons in the ready position. There was a chime and the door opened quickly.

There before them stood six figures, all dressed in matte black armored motorcycle suits with black helmets and dark face shields. Dmitri raised his H&K...

“Relax, Dmitri. These are friends...” said Prosser. As the general exited the rail car, all six snapped to a salute. Their visors slid up simultaneously. Prosser’s face lit up with delight. “Hello my friends!” he said loudly. He secured his pistol in its holster.

Following a brief introduction of his RAU group to the Ambassador and Dmitri, Prosser led them to waiting armored SHADO SUV with darkened windows. They exited the roll up garage door into a non-descript alley full of warehouses. Every building looked the same as far as the eye could see. The six motorcycles rode escort over the SUV while it traversed several blocks moving alley to alley. The RAU’s would pull out and stop oncoming traffic while the limo passed then followed behind it.

As odd as the sight was, all spectators remembered seeing was people on motorcycles in winter in NYC. Within less than twenty minutes, they entered another non-descript alley and disappeared into the roll up door of yet another unremarkable brick building. All had gone to plan... They now had to kill a weekend under wraps in the safe house and prepare for the Monday presentation to the U.N.

General Prosser checked in with the SHADO Command post via the secure AV link in the safe house. Virginia answered. “We have arrived safely, Virginia. Do you have any information for us?”

“Yes, General. It is not good news... We had a security leak here that resulted in the attack over the North Atlantic. We are not sure how much information has been passed on to the insurgents but it is assumed that your trip to the United Nations will be a dangerous one. Your exit may prove difficult as well...”

“Thank you, Virginia. Please pass on that info to Alec and the flight crews so we can make a speedy departure. Was there anything else?” asked Prosser.

“Ed said to pass on his ‘special warm greeting’ to Ilyana,” she said with a grin. Ilyana’s eyes lit up with her smile. “She heard you, Virginia. It is safe to assume she returns his warm greetings,” said Prosser smiling.

“All of you come home safely, General. I don’t want to have to make any unpleasant phone calls – especially to Ed or my mother,” said Virginia. Prosser grinned broadly. “Tell her I’ll call when I get back, Virginia.” Ginny smiled, winked and terminated the link.

She had no idea how the security leak had been plugged.

CHAPTER 13

After leaving the I.T. department, Mason went directly to the room where the data port had been accessed. The room had a small table and stool near the data and phone ports. An electrical outlet was beside them. The room was dimly lit by a single bare low wattage bulb directly over the table. The room was stuffed full of old boxes and large black plastic bags bulging with who knew what. It smelled of stale cigarette smoke.

Mason found ashes scattered around on and near the table. There were several stubbed-out butts on the floor. Whoever had been here had visited often. He picked up the least flattened one and carefully exposed the remaining unburned filler. He smelled it carefully... Turkish blend cigarette filler, no menthol. He had smoked cigarettes just like this for decades before quitting. The intoxicating, full palate of tobacco flavors came flooding back into memory. They were the only ones he'd found that didn't taste like burning paper bag. He looked around again seeing nothing else noteworthy.

Mason stuffed the contents of the dissected butt into his pocket and left the room, making sure he heard the click of the self-locking mechanism. He hurried back to his locker for a black-out suit and his preferred weapon. He then hurried back to the small room several minutes before the guard was due to arrive on his rounds.

Mason took position inside a pile of black plastic bags with his tritium pistol sights looming over the stool and table. Whatever happened next would depend on the actions of whoever sat upon that stool. He tried to relax a little so he wouldn't be tempted to squirm.

Mason heard the metallic clunk of the key station being activated at 1405 hours by his watch. Seconds later he heard the door lock trip. A figure entered and moved quickly to the stool. Even in the dim light Mason recognized Anthony Davis. He was an unspectacular man in his early twenties. Tall and lanky, he had passed all the security screening procedures in the period shortly after the world had held off destruction by alien hands. He was a portrait of average, in all aspects of his personnel profile.

Davis removed a flattened device from his pocket that had exposed circuits and a small CRT screen. A series of small cables came out of it to a small rectangular box. A single cable led from that to the data port jack. Davis clicked the device into the port and Mason could see tiny print scrolling on the screen. Davis lit his smoke...

It took only about four minutes to download the information. His device had entered the code for the secure server in seconds as if automated.

Mason was angry enough to squeeze the trigger on the .45 ACP pistol in his hand but he needed the other half of the equation. He needed to know who Davis was giving this information to on the outside. Davis disconnected his device and stubbed out his cigarette under his shoe. He shut the door securely and went on to complete his rounds.

Mason went directly to the I.T. department and had Marianne change all the access codes. He reported it to Straker, who agreed to wait. Mason made arrangements with a couple tactical operatives and changed back into his uniform. He went directly to the guard shack.

Davis was on duty for another two hours. Mason stepped in saying, "Afternoon lads. Can I bum a smoke from one of you?" Davis handed him one of his Turkish blends and lit it for him.

Mason just wanted to see his eyes and expression. It was cool and cocky for an entry level security guard. "Thanks, Lad," said Mason as he stepped away. He began to cough and sputter immediately. He could hear Davis laugh coarsely saying, "goddamn lightweight."

Mason walked away with a somewhat evil smile on his face. He had his rat and Davis would have a surprise waiting for him at home.

He lived in a loft above an old empty storefront. Two tactical operatives entered and cleared the loft before Mason entered. They sent the lift back down to the ground floor. Mason looked around quickly. The place was rather messy with old fast food containers and drink cups left here and there. It was strewn with old

magazines of questionable nature and lots of used napkins with smears of ketchup and mustard.

Mason found men's shoes in two very different sizes in the closet. There was one large bed that looked as though the sheets and blankets had been thrown there from a distance. There was a sizeable assortment of bottles of hair and skin products in the bathroom and very little food in the refrigerator. It was stark, sparsely furnished and kept with little effort expended. It did however, have a very up-to-date computer with peripherals. Mason didn't give a flip that Davis might prefer the company of other men. The shoes indicated someone else lived there who might find them first. Mason and the operatives took cover spots and waited.

Anthony Davis entered the loft slurping the last remains of some beverage in a fast food drink cup. He sat down immediately at the computer and withdrew the data device from his pocket. He attached it to a USB port on the tower. Mason watched carefully as Davis logged in and opened his email account. He could see Davis take the steps to attach the data files to a new message. As he moved the cursor to the send button, a sound-suppressed 9mm bullet entered his skull from the right side. It made a rather large exit wound and Davis crumpled to the floor from the chair.

Mason moved in quickly so the screen wouldn't be lost and printed the message. He checked the sent files and address book, printing each as it came up. He entered a SHADO designed tool into the USB port and it automatically downloaded the contents of the hard drive. Mason grabbed the data device that Davis had used and waited by the door.

The tactical operatives moved into the kitchen and took a sauce pan from the pile in the sink. One operative set it on the stove burner and turned it to high. The other dropped a blackish puck into the pan and both moved quickly to the door. It would be over in twenty minutes. They departed quickly without being noticed.

The puck would release three very volatile chemical agents as a thick, sticky fog. The first was an ammonia based substance that would render most biological forensic samples unusable. The second chemical released was violently acidic and would begin to degrade both tissues and all metallic objects, including electronics. The third substance was an incendiary accelerant that would ultimately ignite from the heat of the stove, incinerating most remaining traces of the team's presence. Except for a bullet hole in a charred skull, it would look like just another case of someone leaving something unattended on the stove...

The RAU and tactical groups had a rather nice bivouac center located in the building with the SHADO safe house. There were several nicely equipped guest rooms, a commons area and a bunkhouse. Since the operatives were pretty much evenly split by gender, they adopted a coeducational format. They had separate bath and toilet facilities, but they all bunked in the same large room. They all ate together and rotated through the cooking, cleaning, patrol and equipment maintenance roles. Everyone learned to do everything well.

They treated Prosser, Ilyana and Dmitri to a home cooked meal and they chatted into the evening. Later, Ilyana had a chance to talk to Ed on the secure line. Prosser watched her return from the chat. She was radiant. She and Straker were very much in love and Prosser was pleased for them both. He shared with her the story of the two aged medals and how they served as his inspiration.

Saturday and Sunday passed quickly with a very social atmosphere. Ilyana had taken quickly to learning poker and other games. Dmitri and Prosser had been immersed in a game of chess that lasted for more than three hours. To Prosser's delight, Dmitri had played a carefully crafted game that ultimately ended in his victory. They celebrated with a cigar and cocktail.

After another comfortable night of sleep they rose and put together their plan over breakfast. Prosser was scheduled to introduce Ilyana at one pm. They would arrive there early according to their own schedule. They hoped any insurgents would count on a just in time arrival.

They had twelve blocks to cover to get to the secure garage area of the U.N. building. The six RAU's mounted their machines and warmed them. Six tactical operatives mounted up on the pillion seat of the machines facing backward. Each had an H&K G3-A4 on a quick strap across their chest. Their tactical garb and helmets covered every bit of exposed skin.

A petite, lovely young lady in black named Paula would drive the armored SUV. Her specialty was evasive and tactical driving. Prosser and Dmitri sat on each side of Ilyana in the back seat. They waited for the go signal.

The large door began to roll upward. Paula took a deep breath and exhaled slowly...

All at once, the column began to move. Two RAU's in front, two in back and one on each side. They utilized alleys as far as they could and then took to surface roads. The RAU's blocked intersections and alleyways until the SUV passed, rotating their positions to maintain coverage.

A pair of unmarked panel vans approached from behind, pushing their way through traffic. They formed up side by side and approached quickly. The back two rear-facing operatives raised their rifles and cycled their bolts. The vans continued to accelerate toward the column until they were within ten meters. Both operatives opened fire, putting several .30 caliber rounds through the windshield and grill of each van. They both swerved, hitting each other and then impacting parked cars. The tangle of vehicles brought a stop to the following traffic for several blocks.

The motorcade moved without slowing directly into the secure parking area and came to a stop near the security entrance. Dmitri was the first one out of the SUV. His hand on the grip of his MP-5, he cleared the perimeter and motioned for the others. He led them up the escalator to the main security gate. Ilyana and Prosser were directly behind him.

Dmitri was stopped by a very large security guard. He looked down at Dmitri's small frame and grinned. He leaned down close to Dmitri's face. "I must confiscate your weapons, *sir*," he said. The condescending attitude was blatant.

Dmitri gazed unblinking upward into his face and grinned, "I would enjoy it very much if you tried..." There were several tense moments.

Prosser finally spoke. "He has to give them back to you when we leave, Dmitri. This is standard procedure here." Prosser withdrew his pistol and magazines and placed them in the cloth lined box.

Dmitri smiled and slipped his hands into each side of his jacket. Out came the CZ-75, and the MP-5, then an assortment of magazines. He then raised each boot one at a time and withdrew the projectile dagger in each. Throughout the process, he stared unblinking into the face of the large man.

"I suppose you're going to tell me you could kill me with a single finger," said the guard with sarcasm. Dmitri smiled, "actually, I would prefer to use a shovel..."

CHAPTER 14

The Secretary-General of the United Nations stepped to the lectern and adjusted the microphone. The auditorium was filled to capacity. The member nations were in attendance as well as the press corps. Everyone was fascinated to get a glimpse of the otherworldly ambassador. Indeed, the entire world was watching...

The Secretary-General greeted the assembly briefly and introduced General Prosser. He thanked him and stepped up to the lectern. Prosser paused momentarily to take in the spectacle. He was quite pleased to be addressing them for such a strikingly different purpose than his last visit.

“Esteemed representatives of the many member nations of this United Nations charter, I address you this afternoon for a very different purpose than our last meeting together. On that occasion I stood at this very lectern to warn you of a threat to all mankind from outside our solar system.”

“That warning to us was provided by a representative of an alliance that includes hundreds of worlds in many distant galaxies. That warning provided us with time and vital information to help humanity to stand against those invaders, and ultimately to prevail.”

“Each and every living person on our planet owes a great debt of gratitude to our new-found friend and ally. It is my profound privilege to introduce to you Ambassador Ilyana of the Alliance...”

He stepped down from the lectern and motioned to the side of the stage. Ilyana stepped out from behind the partition, looking resplendent in her shimmering gown. She stepped gracefully toward Prosser with a warm expression on her face. Prosser bowed slightly and smiled, which she returned. The assembled crowd was on their feet applauding amid a continual twinkle of camera flashes. Ilyana stepped up to the lectern and smiled sweetly, taking in the spectacle. She placed two items on the lectern. The cube illuminated as it began to record the proceedings. The other item was a silk cloth. She carefully unfolded it and placed the two old war medals side by side. Prosser was beaming with pride and confidence in her.

Ilyana spoke with her customary courtly grace and poise. “I thank you all for your kind reception. I stand before you to humbly deliver warm greetings from your brethren among the stars.”

“The Alliance was formed many centuries ago to provide solidarity and support to its member worlds. It is a means of sharing resources, cultures, ideas and knowledge. The Alliance also provides mutual protection, defense and aid in times of crisis. The member worlds work together for the good of all and we are bound by charter to ensure the equality and sovereignty of each.”

“Planet Earth has garnered the attention and the imaginations of these many worlds and you are a topic of great fascination and curiosity. This planet has the greatest diversity of inhabitants, cultures, plant and animal life of any known world. You are unique among the universe.”

“The purpose for which I was sent here is to inform you that your brothers and sisters of the other worlds want to meet you. They want to learn all about you and your world – the cultures, languages, religions, history and the many forms of life found here. They want to experience your music, your cuisine and your natural wonders. They reach out to you with the same curious caution with which you would receive them.”

“We know that this is a daunting proposition to consider and there are many ramifications to simply knowing you are not alone in the universe. I want you to understand that many of the worlds I represent are populated with human beings much like yourself. My home world is one of the many. All of these worlds struggle initially with how to explain alien beings within the context of their own history and religious beliefs. This can create fear and anxiety.”

“Do not lose heart, my friends. Preserve and treasure your faith with new understanding that the Creator of one world may simply be the Creator of many. It may be a challenge, but rest assured that faith that is challenged is faith that grows in depth and wisdom. Your otherworldly neighbors have had this experience as well and want to share yours with you. Science and faith can find common ground...”

“This meeting of worlds should not be a source of fear. It is an opportunity to share, learn and grow in

understanding.” Ilyana looked at Prosser and smiled. “It requires curiosity... It requires faith... It requires courage. The mutual benefits far exceed any potential challenges.”

“I humbly request your consideration to allow these curious travelers to visit your nations, experience your cultural and natural treasures and to share something of themselves with you. These visitors will not travel to any nation without its official invitation extended in advance. Your wishes will be respected and protected by the Alliance charter. They eagerly await your answer...”

Ilyana concluded, “I thank you for your gracious reception and attention. From the Alliance, I bid you and your many nations peace and prosperity.” She gathered her items from the lectern, bowed and stepped away. Prosser stood as her escort from the stage. The applause continued long after she, Prosser and Dmitri were passing through the security station. Their weapons returned to them, they made their way back to the SHADO motorcade.

“We are not returning you to the safe house,” said Paula. Insurgents have staked out that area although they have not pinpointed the location. We cannot return there without their notice. We instead will be returning you directly to the D.O.D. train station. Our path there will be convoluted to avoid further attempts to intercept.” She added, “As soon as you leave Manhattan, we will notify your aircrews that you are on the way.”

The path the motorcade followed made the trip last nearly an hour. They arrived at the train car without incident. Prosser bid his RAU friends farewell amid hugs and handshakes. Paula gave them a cooler full of sandwiches, snacks and bottled water. They were soon on their way back to Plattsburgh.

As the black Air Force SUV came to a stop beside the jet way, Prosser, Ilyana and Dmitri could hear the engines of the SST rising in pitch. They entered and Prosser secured the hatch. He took his position at the rear console as Alec and Bill listened to the tower instructions.

“Roger, Plattsburgh control. Many thanks for your hospitality,” said Alec. The tower operator said, “Our pleasure, Seagull – safe voyage.” The heat shield lowered, the SST took to the sky gracefully, followed closely by six MiG-31’s with matching markings. Vision and Thirsty had sortied immediately as soon as the train had left Manhattan. They would be waiting on station in the Mid-Atlantic.

“General, we have a change of itinerary for our return trip,” said Alec. “We’re not flying directly back to Harlington. Straker is sending us to the southern island base and your party will be returning to Scarborough by Sky Diver sub.

“A wise decision, Alec. I will plot a course that will generously skirt known islands on the route. We will use SHADO-only transponders and frequencies, and the full set of jamming equipment. They will have to work hard to find us...” said Prosser. “Vision, Vision, this is Seagull flight, going dark on plan Charlie. Stay sharp.”

“Roger Seagull. Vision and Thirsty going dark in thee, two, one...” In all of the SHADO craft a series of toggles were engaged effectively causing them to disappear from ground tracking stations and sea-borne radar as well. Only a series of faint wispy contrails would display where they had once been.

Dmitri was just about to suggest Ilyana get some sleep when he turned and saw her leaned back on the chaise and sound asleep. He took a soft blanket from the cabinet, unfolded it and gently pulled it up over her. He smiled looking down over her sleeping form. This fascinating woman he was assigned to protect was quite possibly the most important person on Planet Earth. He did not take it lightly...

SHADO Intelligence quickly processed the recorded contents of Anthony Davis’ hard drive and e-mail accounts. He had been sure he would never be found out. His online address book had more than simply e-mail addresses. It had names and street addresses as well. Each would have to be investigated.

It was clear from sent and received messages that Davis was part of a splinter group that had formed from the reserve insurgents in the aftermath of the alien attacks. They had not been deployed by their alien benefactors for the sole purpose of infiltrating SHADO and other Earth military organizations if the invasion

failed. Their alien masters planned to return to find SHADO and Earth military forces compromised from within.

Intelligence and tactical operatives would hit over twenty prospective insurgent safe-houses simultaneously using thermal imaging, sound and video gear to verify the operations at the sites. It would strike a major blow against them but there was no guarantee that there weren't other cells in operation. SHADO would step up its investigation of its employees. All data system link points outside of core offices and labs would have motion activated security cameras. The militaries of the world would have to be notified so they could begin to ferret out infiltrators within their own ranks as well.

Major Beck's field intel group and a tactical assault team took a presumptive chance and it paid dividends the night of the U.N. presentation. It was assumed the party would fly directly back to Harlington Regional Airport following the presentation and an insurgent group was waiting for them there.

On the corner of the tarmac sat an unmarked panel van. Thermal imaging showed six individuals in the back with two more in front. Using the darkness as cover, Beck's groups moved in and deployed magnetic door blocks on the exterior doors, effectively sealing the occupants inside. Beck himself stepped in front of the van wearing a black-out suit and raised a single shot grenade launcher. They could hear the muffled shouts and banging on the doors which wouldn't open. Beck fired the canister through the windshield and waited. It was not an explosive grenade. It released a heavy gas that rendered the occupants unconscious for over twelve hours. The van was full of RPG's and automatic weapons.

The insurgents woke to find themselves bound hand and foot with a ball gag in place. Each wore nothing more than a hospital gown. All eight were within sight of each other in order to help them share the continual terror of the experience. They would be processed one at a time through the interrogation group trained by Dr. Jackson. None would be returned to the remaining group. As the numbers dwindled, the remaining insurgents became freer with the information requested.

Alec, Paul and Bill Johnson were airborne once more, this time as passengers on a standard SHADAIR transporter on its routine bi-weekly flight. Straker had personally authorized them to receive VIP treatment, which meant that they were quartered in the lounge reserved for dignitaries. There was a fully stocked wet bar, poker table, plush seating and every electronic device available for entertainment.

Straker had seen to it that there was a generous supply of snacks and sandwiches in a cooler with a note attached telling the three men that they had the next two days off with his compliments. The humidior had also been well stocked. It was a much slower flight than in an SST, but it gave them time to unwind and enjoy the occasional perks of working for Ed Straker.

The Sky Diver sub was on the surface on a northerly course, two hours out from Southern Island Base. It would take about three days to reach the rendezvous point off of Scarborough.

The new Mark II was larger and faster than its predecessor. It carried its symbiont fighter internally, launching from a large hatch and rail system that would lift the aircraft into launch position. Upon recovery, the hangar was pumped dry permitting re-arming and re-fueling as well as routine maintenance while submerged.

The submarine looked much more like a modern nuclear missile sub, but wider in the beam and shorter behind the elongated conning tower. The lines were much cleaner and the craft more efficient. It was also very well armed and carried extensive towed sonar and communications arrays.

Commander Lou Waterman was on the fair-weather bridge taking in the morning view through his binoculars. Prosser, Ilyana and Dmitri were enjoying the cool, brisk breeze and salt spray from the bow. The sun was rising above the eastern horizon as a glowing orb just peaking its forehead over the curvature of the planet. Ilyana stood gazing into the rising sun, arms raised and hands aglow. It was the first time she had felt the radiant energy in a couple days and it was invigorating.

The intercom buzzed, drawing Waterman's attention. "Okay, thank you," he said. "I'm afraid we'll have

commercial ship traffic and a satellite overhead on our course so we're going to have to pull the plug. We should be able to surface again when it gets dark." He followed them down the ladder, dogging the hatch behind him.

An hour later, Lt. Catherine Scott motioned to Ilyana to join her. She removed her headset and handed it to Ilyana. The hydrophones were picking up an unmistakable sound off to port. It was one that Ilyana was unfamiliar with – whale song. Her eyes and smile grew large as she listened to the chirps, clicks and varying tones.

Lt. Scott fed the signal into the overhead speaker for the others to enjoy. Ilyana slipped off the headset and returned it. "Perhaps they are extending a greeting, Ambassador," said Lt. Scott with a smile.

"Does anyone really understand their language?" asked Ilyana. "I'm afraid only they know what they are saying to each other," said Lt. Scott. "Marine biologists are trying to learn the meaning of the more frequently repeated sounds. Cetaceans seem to truly have a language and call to other pod members and their young. The sound travels great distances under water. They have a special organ in their cranium that allows them to detect the signal at great distance. It functions much like our own sonar systems. They are quite remarkable creatures."

Dmitri grinned at Prosser. "Like I said before - best job I ever had..."

Thorvald showed Ona and Marta the secure underground passageway from the SHADO dormitory to the subterranean complex. It would limit their exposure until security was better assured topside.

The two ladies had entered the secure sector at headquarters and were meeting the monitoring and communications staff.

The loudspeaker blared. "This is Space Intruder Detector. Red Alert. There are two inbound targets, heading 344-148 Green at a velocity of Sol 6." The red alert signals illuminated in SHADO headquarters, Moon Base and aboard the fleet of Sky Diver submarines.

Straker was immediately drawn to the AV link at Ford's station. "Is this for real, Gay?" asked Straker.

"All Interceptors, immediate launch," she said. "Yes, General Straker, the two inbounds appear to be scout ships. There are six Mark II Interceptors on the way and the Moon Base and ODIN defenses are in readiness as well."

"Good, Major Ellis. Keep us informed..." said Straker.

The six Interceptors took up firing position and energized their missiles and rail guns. The weapons on board the ODIN satellites were also locked on the two approaching craft. The two UFO's slowed greatly and veered off their course, finally coming to a near stop. They were within range of both the Interceptors and the ODIN armaments.

"What the hell are they doing?" asked Straker. "They were defeated. Why have they returned?" he added.

"Perhaps we should ask them precisely that question, General," said Ona, standing behind him with a cube in her hand.

"We've never been able to communicate directly with them, Ona. We've only been able to communicate when they take over a human host's brain and manipulate them," said Straker. "Hold your fire for the moment, Gay," he added.

"They communicate by thought, not by spoken word," Ona said. "The cube will translate for us." She raised the cube and held her hand over it. "Why have you returned to this planet?" she asked.

A slow, deep mechanized voice responded. "This world withholds from us what we need to survive. We are now few in number and our need is great. You will give us what we seek," said the voice, trailing off.

"This is Ona, special envoy of the Alliance. You have no claim to this world or its resources. The Alliance is able to offer your world assistance, including medical provisions and nutritional sustenance."

"We will not be indebted or constrained by your *benevolence*. If we cannot obtain the resources we need from this world we will take them from the many compatible worlds of your *precious* Alliance. We will take

what we need, without your approval or your interference,” said the voice.

“You have chosen the path to your own destruction,” said Ona. “The Alliance has been monitoring this communication and they will act to protect the member worlds, including this one. Your species has been doomed by your own callous words.”

Ona continued. “The Alliance will not permit your world to further extend your violence regardless of the purpose. I will offer you one more chance to secure the future of your race with our help, but you will not plunder the biological assets of any other world.”

There was no further response.

“Fire when ready,” said Straker. The two scout ships began to move and both fired their beam weapon in the direction of the Interceptors. The dual rail guns of all six Interceptors fired simultaneously, reducing the two UFO’s to an expanding, spinning mass of fragments and licks of flame from the ignited oxygenated fluid consuming the last of its combustible material.

“It is regrettable that they chose extinction over survival,” said Ona. She moved her hand away and the cube became inert once more.

“Stand down, Gay,” said Straker. “Job well done.”

“Thank you, General. Moon Base out...” she said and the AV link closed.

CHAPTER 15

Virginia called Thorvald to her office. He arrived with curiosity piqued and found Ford there with her. She said, “Dear, Keith has something to share with you and I want you to hear it directly from him. Go ahead, Keith...”

Ford began, unsure of what response to expect. “I was just telling Commander Lake that my wife Carol and I have completed the approval process and we are going to adopt Annie and her playmate Janna from Evelyn’s Orchard. My son and daughter are older now and are really excited to have two new little sisters. They even decorated their new bedroom themselves.”

Thorvald’s face seemed to change expression several times, finally settling on heartfelt warmth. He reached out and embraced Keith with moist eyes. Keith added, “The girls insist on Aunt Ginny and Uncle Thorvald being a regular part of their lives and we agree. You are very important to them...”

“We would be honored, Ford. Annie and Janna have a big place in our hearts as well,” said Ginny. Ford excused himself and returned to his station. Virginia stepped around the desk and embraced her husband. “I know, dear. I know... It’s a mix of disappointment, relief and joy, isn’t it?” She lifted his face with loving hands. “Like I told you, not being her father doesn’t mean she’s out of your life. Now, dry those eyes and go blow something up in the armament lab. That always makes you feel better...” He laughed and kissed her. “Thanks, Love. You always know what to say.”

The customary Wednesday staff meeting was postponed to Thursday since Straker and Virginia were the only ones there. The band would resume practice next week.

Virginia had been tinkering with the data extraction device used by Davis. Each night working in the command post she got a little closer to figuring out the source of the technology. Part of the housing just refused to open and reveal its secrets. Everything outside the housing was commonly available components.

Eventually she had the idea to push it together and turn the top and bottom in opposite directions. The housing made a hissing sound and easily separated releasing a puff of ozone. Inside were rows of small glowing blue beads that pulsed rhythmically. “You’re not from around here are you?” she said. She placed the opened device in a lead-lined box in case it was leaking any radiation.

Further tests would take place in her lab down the corridor, but she was now confident that this device was a combination of terrestrial and extraterrestrial components. Whoever Davis had been working for had alien connections.

Prosser, Ilyana and Dmitri would arrive on Thursday evening, flying back on the large amphibious transport helicopter that would ferry supplies out to the Sky Diver waiting at its rendezvous point in the North Sea.

Ilyana had been able to see and speak to Straker on the secure AV link in Waterman’s cabin several times. Both were eager to be reunited. Heavy weather in the Atlantic basin and North Sea kept the sub under, even at night when the sea state was too violent to safely take in the open sky on the fair weather bridge. The diplomatic team would be grateful to stand on solid ground once more.

Straker arrived Thursday morning and took in the spectacle of the employee parking lot. Paul’s 911 was there as were Virginia’s M5 and Thorvald’s old Beetle. However, where Alec’s bronze turbine car was normally parked there sat a white Ford Scorpio sedan. Straker shook his head and laughed.

Upon entering his office, Straker was greeted by Alec, Paul, Virginia, Thorvald, Ona and Marta. Each was waiting for him to arrive before they dove into the breakfast buffet. Straker waved them toward the food and followed in behind them finally sitting down last. “Welcome home everyone and congratulations on a job well done. I hope your trip home was in suitable style and comfort,” he said.

He continued, “Alec, I see you’ve finally got some new wheels under you. You win the award for the

least imaginative choice of auto in the group.” Alec laughed out loud and said, “I had a chance at a low mileage Bentley in white but I decided I’d like to do more with my income than buy petrol.”

“What could be so fiscally important as to lead you to such an uninspired choice of vehicle?” teased Straker.

“Retirement,” said Alec. “If you’re smart you’ll get your ducks in a row too.” He laughed, “You know you’re not much younger than I am, and I don’t want to have to fund my retirement years by asking strangers if they’d like fries with their order... I want to travel, play or just sit on my ass all day if I choose to.”

Ona crossed her arms and leaned back with a sly grin on her lovely face. “That’s the least imaginative plan for a life I’ve ever heard, Alec,” she said. “Surely you can come up with something more interesting than that.”

Alec crossed his arms and leaned back returning her gaze. “I made that decision while doing aerobatics with a supersonic transport being chased by four heat seeking missiles. I’ve seen more air combat in the last six months than I did during the entire Cold War. I’m too old for this shit. I want to have some damn fun while I still can...”

“A plan can be a comforting thing, Alec,” said Ona, “but don’t cling to it and miss the life that is unfolding before you.” She smiled at him with great warmth. He understood that she meant with her. Alec felt a softening and warmth within him. He and Ona gazed at each other over the table.

Straker stifled his laugh and cleared his throat. “Ona, do you or Marta have anything you need to carry on your work?”

Marta said, “I could use some means of monitoring developing situations around your world. In our office I only have the internet based news sources and they seem to be heavily colored with personal bias pertaining to the content. I need the objective report to protect our Alliance visitors.”

Paul finally found his voice, “I’m afraid you will find a similar situation with news reports from television, radio and print sources as well. We call it ‘spin’ and it often reflects the political and social ideals of the reporter or the publisher. They all claim to have unbiased truth in their stories, but there are usually three sides to any story... Only one of them is the undiluted truth and that is the one you are least likely to find reported.”

“Is that cynicism or observation, Paul?” asked Marta with an inquisitive smile and cut of her eyes. Paul caught her sparkling eyes and could only smile mutely again.

“Observation I’m afraid,” said Straker. “We will get you a television and either cable or satellite link. A short-wave radio may be useful as well. Paul is exactly right about the content. Perhaps you shouldn’t focus so much on what is happening as much as where. If you spend your time immersed in the inhumane acts of mankind against fellow man, you will quickly become jaded toward us. We make no excuse for the evil deeds of our species against itself, but you will notice there are serial offenders and often repeat victims. Those are areas for visitors to avoid.”

Straker continued. “Another potential threat exists in natural disasters. That will mean staying informed about developing severe weather systems, hurricanes, tectonic activity and a host of other more seasonal extremes. It isn’t possible to predict all possible natural disasters, but many can be foreseen at some level. Your scientists may find the applicable disciplines a source of fascination.”

Ona spoke next. “We are already receiving responses to Ilyana’s presentation at the United Nations. The I.A.C. seems to be the chosen pathway to get the information to us. It would be helpful if I could visit those consenting nations and find out what they have to offer Alliance visitors. Most who come won’t be able to stay indefinitely, so if we can direct them to points of interest it will help them utilize their time more efficiently and allow them to plan more time for interaction with the locals as well as enjoying their cultural and natural treasures. This world does not know of my presence here so I can travel without fear of anti-alien activities.”

“While I am confident in your abilities and resourcefulness, Ona, I am sure your ambassador would prefer you had a travelling companion that was also well informed, a seasoned traveler and good in a crisis,”

said Straker. "It would also be useful if they could provide the transport and had an itch to travel and see the world." He leaned back and pressed his index fingertips together in a steeple shape and stared at Alec. It took a few seconds to register...

"Oh bloody hell!" exclaimed Alec with cheeks beginning to redden. Straker grinned.

"We can provide Ona with a perfectly believable alias and all necessary documents so she can travel with complete freedom and safety. The cover story almost writes itself, Alec." Straker continued, sweeping his outstretched open palm slowly from left to right implying a tabloid cover page. "What could be more natural than a recently retired famous film executive travelling the world and seeing the sights with his lovely wife?"

There was riotous laughter around the table except for Alec Freeman. He had a look of fear and panic on his face. Straker let him sweat long enough to get a Lonsdale from the humidor and both clip and light it. He finally had mercy on his best friend.

"Relax, Alec," he said. "You won't just be a tour guide and chauffer, this will be working travel. You will touch base with our field intel and tactical groups, checking their status and reporting it back. I want updates on the counter-insurgent project. We need to know where our weak links are in the system.

Straker added, "Of course, you will have to maintain all the appearances of a loving married couple on a world tour to maintain your cover." He grinned and launched a smoke ring up over the table. Alec turned red again.

"Oh, I think you can both handle that," teased Virginia. Ona's cheeks were red now as well.

Marta grinned at her aunt. "My mother is going to absolutely love this idea..."

As the meeting dissolved, Paul was walking with Virginia and Thorvald. She said to Paul, "You and Marta seem to be connecting on a personal level."

Paul said, "I have no idea what to say or how to act around a woman like her. She's so unlike any woman I've ever dated. I'm not as suave as you might think." Virginia stopped him by grasping his arm.

"Go on to the lab Thorvald, I need to talk to Paul a moment," she said. She pulled him into her office and secured the door. "Sit, Paul." He did so reluctantly.

"Paul, we've known each other for over thirteen years now, so I'm going to be frank because I care about you and your budding relationship with Marta..."

She continued, "You have a track record of using hot little bubbleheads and party girls as your temporary toy and semen receptacle. You see a slap to the face as a challenge and not a barrier. You treat women with the same 'useful but disposable' mindset that your father did. He used you as his little prop to chat up the lonely and loose and it resulted in your mother's suicide..."

"Please, Virginia. Don't..." he said softly.

"You have used women as playthings, yet you have solid friendships with several. Why is that, Paul? Is it only with the ones you didn't bed?" His eyes were beginning to tear. Virginia placed a hand on each side of his face and lifted it.

"Paul, if you follow your standard pattern, you will blow a chance at happiness and a future. You will also become a stumbling block to interstellar relations. You know the ramifications of that go far beyond your little bedroom."

She looked into his eyes and said, "If you want to know how to treat Marta and how to behave around her, simply treat her like you wish your father had treated your mother. Be thoughtful, kind and considerate. Treat her as a treasure, not a toy, and don't try to steer the relationship to suit your desires. Let it develop and grow on its own and see where it goes. That is the only way to avoid regrets down the road."

"That sounds terrifying, Ginny," he said.

"Terrifying and exhilarating, Paul. The fear and the joy are part of an adult relationship finding its course. This is the good stuff in life, Paul. You'll live it if you rise to the challenge." He smiled up at her.

"I'll take your advice, Ginny, but I have to ask, how did you know so much about my parents? They've both been dead for many years."

“Doctor Jackson compiled your dossier, Paul. His psych evals went so deep into your head that he had to use a miner’s headlamp. All of our dossiers are that detailed.”

Paul stood and Virginia hugged him. “Sorry I was hard on you, Paul. I just couldn’t stand to watch you blow a chance at real happiness.”

“Thanks Ginny. Only a real friend would do that. What you said is true... The reason Ayshea and I are such good friends and neighbors is because when we first met at the apartment complex, I put my hand on her backside.” Virginia flashed a look of shock. “She belted me so hard that I woke up on the ground with an ice pack on my jaw. Nobody had ever hit me that hard before or since. She and I still laugh about it, but we are absolute chums.” Virginia was still laughing as they exited her office.

Thorvald had driven to Scarborough to pick up the diplomatic party in Ginny’s M5. They thanked the SHADO flight crew and took their first steps on solid turf in several days. Thorvald laughed as they wobbled their way to the car. He said, “Don’t worry Dmitri, the wobbles will pass quickly. They’ll be twice as intense the first time you come back from Moon Base.” Dmitri’s eyes grew large. Thorvald and Prosser just laughed out loud. “I guess we neglected to mention that site,” he said.

“No, I just thought you were kidding,” said Dmitri. “I went from living in a rental car to being a bodyguard to an extraterrestrial ambassador in less than twenty four hours. I guess a base on the Moon isn’t a much greater stretch of the imagination.”

A few hours later Thorvald pulled up in the drive in front of Straker’s cottage. He’d been pacing the floor awaiting their arrival. He opened the door to welcome Ilyana home. She looked exhausted and just crumpled in his arms. Thorvald carried in her bags and set them aside. “We stopped for dinner on the way,” he said.

“Thank you for bringing her home to me, Thorvald,” said Straker.

“I’m just the cabbie sir, Dmitri and the General did the hard part. They’re both asleep in the car.” He grinned and closed the door behind him.

Straker gently carried his beloved Ilyana to the bedroom and slipped off her clothes. He pulled the covers over her and went to close up and secure the house. He readied himself, set the clock radio and slipped in beside her. She felt his presence and instinctively snuggled into his arms, pressing her back up against him. His desire for her was tempered by her need for sleep and his loving embrace. Sleep came quickly for him as all of the necessary pieces of his life were again in place.

CHAPTER 16

Ilyana and Straker awoke before the alarm and shared the release of stored passion that they had been too tired to partake of the night before. They were momentarily startled by the clock radio clicking on and playing some ironically fitting light jazz.

Following breakfast and a lengthy shared shower, Straker watched with fascination as she did her morning ritual. As the glow began to spread over her body she said, “Get as close as possible to me but do not touch me or you may feel a jolt.” Straker was within millimeters of her body – close enough to feel the warmth of it.

To his delight, he could feel a mild tingling sensation that spread over the surface of his skin. He could feel the hair on his body begin to rise. The sensation was one of warmth and energy. No wonder she could happily stand nude outside in the brisk morning air. He hoped this would be something they would share often.

As the glow dissipated, she opened her eyes. “That was amazing,” said Straker.

“You’ll find your skin is now softer and free of dead cells.” Straker could only feel the skin and sniff it.

“It smells completely neutral. I can’t even smell the soap I just used,” he said.

She smiled and embraced him tightly. “This is what daily cleansing is like on other worlds that do not have the liquid water resources you enjoy. My world uses the energy of the planet and its parent star. Other worlds use a chemical mist or vapor to accomplish the same task. My DNA reflects both natural and engineered modifications to make this possible.”

Straker was again amused at the complexity of the woman he so adored. They headed in to the office and a full schedule.

The command staff was in Straker’s office with the notable exception of General Prosser. Ilyana, Ona and Marta were chatting. Thorvald and Dmitri just stood side by side taking in the reunions and chatter. Straker was about to address them when the door slid open and in walked a very solemn looking Gunther Prosser. He stood with darkness in his eyes and expression. All talk ceased.

“My friends,” he began, “I just received a call from Major Hastings, the bodyguard and driver for General Henderson.” His voice was trembling. “Both General Henderson and his wife Evelyn passed away during the night. Hastings went in to wake them and call them to breakfast and found them. General Henderson was holding his wife in his arms and both appeared to have passed peacefully.”

Prosser’s voice began to break. “The attending doctor said that she passed away first and he followed perhaps less than an hour later, embracing her.” Tears rolled down his cheeks. “Even in death, a gesture of loving tenderness...”

“Hastings will call us with details of the arrangements when he finds out. I have already told him and the Henderson staff to come here when it is over and we will find employment for them all. If you like, I will make an announcement to all SHADO staff so they can join us in mourning and remembrance.”

“Please let me do that, General,” said Straker with teary eyes. “Alec, I’d like you and the General to give him a fitting aerial tribute when the time comes.”

“It would be our honor, Ed,” said Alec with a catch in his voice.

The meeting dissolved as everyone went to where they could be alone and reflect on the life and loss of their founder, mentor and benefactor. Even Paul was moved. Despite his near court martial, he respected the man and all he’d accomplished. Marta took his hands and gently held them, looking supportively up at him.

Ilyana waited for the others to depart and she was alone with Straker. “He was very important to you, Ed. I know your heart is hurting.” She placed her palm gently on his cheek. “I am here for whatever you might need, My Love.” He kissed her palm and smiled despite his bleary eyes.

Thorvald and Virginia just held each other in her office. Her memories of SHADO operations were starkly different than her husbands’ memories of Cold War misery and his efforts to return James Henderson

intact to his loving wife.

In Alec's office, Ona wrapped her arms around him while he trembled. He was unsure what he wanted but he needed to feel her arms around him. Slowly, he wrapped his around her as well. His heart just spilled open and he held her tightly.

Straker wrote down what he wanted to say to the whole of SHADO staff. He hoped to complete the announcement without losing composure. Ford remained faithfully at his side during the announcement and squeezed Straker's hand when he began to struggle. Straker put his arm around him in gratitude.

In keeping with their instructions, the Henderson's remains were cremated and placed in a single larger urn. There would be a funeral in the United States on Tuesday at the Henderson family cemetery in upstate New York. His family had been interred there since their arrival in America in the late 1700's.

There would be a proper military and religious funeral with fly-overs by both USAF and SHADO air groups. SHADO would have its own memorial service in Harlington upon everyone's return.

General Rebecca Henderson had arranged for them to use Plattsburgh AFB again and she rolled out the red carpet for them. The Henderson's remains would travel in an F-111 fighter-bomber with a full escort of fighters. A USAF escort would meet them over the Atlantic. The SHADO command staff would attend wearing their midnight blue dress uniforms with rank insignias and the company emblem. It was the first time they'd ever been used since their commissioning nearly ten years before. The company fitness regimen ensured the uniforms would fit for many years.

Thorvald and Paul would remain behind while the others attended the ceremony in upstate New York. They would participate in the local memorial service. Ilyana, Ona and Marta would wait for the local ceremony as well. The United States was one of the nations that had not yet given its welcome for extraterrestrial visitors.

When the day arrived, the SHADO flight group was staged at Harlington Regional Airport. It would be a flight consisting of one F-111 and six JAS-39's, including Prosser's personal two-seat version. Straker would serve as Alec's weapons officer for the flight. They carried a very special cargo. Virginia would fly with General Prosser. Their tanker had sortied hours before so it could be on station in the mid-Atlantic.

Straker was in a flight suit and helmet for the first time in many years. He slid into the right side seat and fastened his harness. Alec could hear him release a long sigh as memories came flooding back to him. He pensively took the stick and pressed his feet against the rudder pedals. Alec smiled, "It'll come back to you, Ed.

The formation topped off with fuel due south of Greenland and returned to their flight formation. South of Newfoundland they heard the radio call, "SHADO flight, this is Air Force Honor Flight. We are forty nautical downrange on your course. We are your escort into U.S. airspace. Please follow Air Force ground control and tower instructions."

"Roger, Honor Flight. Will comply. Thank you for the escort. SHADO flight out," said Straker. Prosser's voice came into their headsets, "Let's tighten it up and look sharp. Make it 750 knots." Alec set his throttles and the fighters formed two perfect deltas one above it and one below.

Six F-16's merged in and flanked their position forming another delta on each side. Straker watched and was moved by the sight to the point of trembling. Alec reached his gloved hand over and squeezed his arm. Straker put his hand on Alec's for a few moments until his nerves were steadied again.

The combined flight maintained tight formation until on final approach where they broke into elements with perfectly coordinated group landings. Henderson himself would have been impressed and pleased with their precision.

Upon landing, the flight formed up behind the F-111 on the edge of the tarmac. A limousine and Humvee rolled up beside them. Straker, Freeman, Prosser and Lake stood in line at parade rest. Straker held a large aluminum case containing the urn. The Honor Guard detail took places along either side of the rear limo

door then opened it. General Rebecca Henderson stepped out in her dress uniform. Her assistant, a major, walked with her maintaining her pace across the tarmac.

Straker stepped forward and placed the case flat into the arms of the major. He stepped back in line and they came to attention. They returned General Henderson's salute and assumed parade rest position. She said, "My thanks to you all for giving my Uncle James and Aunt Evelyn a first class homecoming. They would have been grateful. We have provided quarters and transport for all of you. We will take you there so you can get some food and get ready for the ceremony. The motorcade will depart in three hours. Who will be leading your Honor Flight?"

Prosser stepped forward and resumed parade rest. It took a couple moments for her to recognize him and her eyes grew large. "You're Brigadier General Prosser," she said with surprise. Prosser bowed a bit and smiled. "I studied your combat tactics at the academy and used them in the Persian Gulf. Did you know my Uncle?"

Prosser smiled warmly but maintained his position. "He and I have been friends going back to the Cold War. He appointed me to take his place at the I.A.C. when he retired." She seemed pleased. She shook his hand and moved down the line, shaking hands with Virginia, Alec and then Straker. She returned to the limo and departed. Four Humvees rolled in to transport the group to the Base Commander's quarters for a meal. Prosser went to speak with the Air Force flight leader about the ceremony and what he wanted to do.

The graveside service combined tributes to both James and Evelyn Henderson. An Air Force Chaplain shared duties with the Pastor of the adjacent old Presbyterian Church. Following the eulogies a bugler played taps. As Straker, Alec and Virginia stood at attention, they choked back tears as long as they could. The loud crack of the rifle salute brought trembling lips.

The Air Force Honor Guard stepped forward and waited for Straker. Alec opened an aluminum case and Straker withdrew the folded SHADO flag and stepped up beside the Air Force Colonel. They approached Rebecca Henderson together. The Colonel said, "On behalf of a grateful nation," and handed her the folded American flag. He retreated and Straker stepped forward. He steeled himself and said, "On behalf of a grateful planet." He handed her the folded SHADO flag and stepped back.

Overhead, a flight of F-16's passed low in the Missing Man formation from East to West. Moments later, a flight of six SHADO JAS-39's with crimson red wings flew low over them from North to South in the Missing Man formation. At the proper moment, Prosser pulled back hard on the stick and hit his throttle. He rose straight up, slowly rolling the craft so the contrail gave the appearance of fluttering wings. He rose into the clouds and disappeared from view. It was a beautiful display and a fitting tribute. The clergymen announced the benediction and closed with a prayer.

Rebecca Henderson approached them and embraced them all. With tears on her cheeks, she said, "Uncle James was so very proud of all of you. He and Aunt Evelyn spoke of you like you were their own children. They thought the world of you all... Thank you so much for being a part of this celebration of their lives.

Straker said, "We will continue to carry forward their legacy of service and benevolence. They bettered the lives of so many souls who will never know of them or their dedication. We are honored to have known them and to have participated in this celebration."

Rebecca kissed him on the cheek and squeezed his hands. "Keep in touch, Ed," she said and turned away with her security detail. The limo was gone with its Humvee escort in moments. They stood together with only their driver remaining. With a shaking voice, Straker said smartly, "Ten-Hut!" They snapped a salute to the monument in unison then retreated to the awaiting Humvee.

The flight departed the following morning at sunrise. It was somehow fitting to fly into the rising morning sun, meeting the new day head-on. Both Straker and Virginia were able to get some time at the control stick. Their skills were intact despite infrequent use.

CHAPTER 17

With Virginia gone, Thorvald spent some of his free time in the old studio woodshop. He was making use of the last remnant of the old oak tree from across the road. He felt like he had to do something to honor his old friend and comrade, James Henderson.

Dmitri brought Ilyana, Ona and Marta up to the shop to watch. Thorvald had cut a flat bottom so the trunk would stand straight upright and made another cut at a sharp angle so he had a sizeable flat oval surface to carve upon. His spectators found him in a leather apron with his hair unbound and dangling in his face. They watched in amazement while he used a razor-sharp scribe and detail chisel to create the text and an intricate eagle with outstretched wings. He applied gentle pressure with his fingertips to guide the cutting edge.

“Where did you learn to do that?” asked Dmitri. Thorvald smiled but did not look up. “From my grandfather when I was a child. Carving was his passion. The little house in Lapland where I was born had intricate carving on every post, beam and door frame. Even the furniture and cooking utensils were carved wood. Whenever I do this it feels as though he is standing behind me with his arms reaching around and guiding my fingers like when I was a child. I feel his presence and it makes me happy.”

Ilyana said, “Dmitri told me we carry our loved ones with us wherever we go.” She smiled sweetly.

Thorvald paused and raised his head to grin at Dmitri. “Well said, old friend. Well said...” He began to tell them about James and Evelyn Henderson and the founding of SHADO and Evelyn’s Orchard.

“You mean this organization runs an orphanage and children’s hospital?” asked Dmitri. Ilyana, her sister and her daughter were unaware as well.

“Absolutely,” said Thorvald. “They have done so for several years. SHADO does much more than just protect the planet from hostile aliens. They felt a special burden for the children effected by alien attacks. I would be glad to take you there to meet the staff and children. Ginny and I usually go two or three times a week to play with the children, read to them or just give them the warmth that they need.”

Ilyana said sweetly, “It would be our privilege to meet them.” Ona said quietly to her, “the more I learn about these people the more grateful I am that you sent for me.” Marta nodded in agreement.

Everyone had returned to Harlington and resumed their regular schedules. Straker worked on a speech to honor James Henderson at the dedication of the carved monument in the memorial park across the road. The ceremony would take place in two more days. There was time to erect a flagpole at the site.

Straker invited all who had military service uniforms to wear them in honor of the lifelong service of his mentor. Thorvald asked Prosser for help to obtain an appropriate one. The aging general grinned wide and told him, “I’ll see what I can do, my friend.”

On Saturday morning, as the sun sat low on the horizon, the group assembled at the SHADO Memorial Park. The carved temporary monument to James Henderson was covered in midnight blue velvet and situated between the SHADO shield and the flagpole.

This had been James Henderson’s favorite time of day. The only sunrises he had missed in 50 years had been when he was laid up following the UFO attack on his motorcade and the morning when he had joined his wife in eternity. He had loved the symbolism of greeting each new day as the opportunity it presented.

There was a skeleton crew of volunteers keeping the vigil at SHADO Headquarters and the ceremony was open to all personnel wishing to pay their respects. All SHADO Command Staff were present in their dress blues. Prosser was in his NATO Command dress uniform. Dr. Douglas Jackson would present the eulogies and the benediction, a dedication to both the General and his dear wife of over 50 years.

The group came to attention at the command of General Prosser. Jackson opened the ceremony with a prayer and then nodded to Ford at the back of the assembly. He began to play a cadence on a snare strapped around his neck. From the rear of the group came Thorvald, carrying the SHADO flag. He wore the belted

light olive field coat, trousers and beret of NATO Army Special Operations. He wore the single stars of a full Major, his rank at the time of his forced retirement.

He carried the flag to the front and Prosser stepped with him in unison up to the pole and secured the standard to the halyard. Prosser held salute as Thorvald ran the SHADO flag upward in stages to the beat of the cadence. Once secured, they returned to the line and assumed parade rest.

The Reverend Doctor Douglas Jackson began when the cadence stopped. He delivered a heart-felt eulogy for both James and Evelyn Henderson. They had been high-school sweethearts and she was his girl back home when he went to England with the U.S. Army Air Corps.

She had moved to England to be near him and to work with the USO and British medical relief volunteers. She worked in the field hospitals and rehabilitation facilities alongside British nurses.

Jackson spoke of the founding of SHADO and Evelyn's Orchard with great reverence. He shared with them the scripture verses that had been the foundation of the Henderson's lives of service.

Jackson said, "In the letter by Paul to the Ephesians, Chapter 6; beginning with verse 10, the scriptures tell us to put on the full armor of God. It describes each piece of spiritual armor and how we are to utilize them in the defense of peace, truth, and righteousness. We are to maintain vigilant readiness and employ these tools to withstand the schemes and onslaught of evil itself, both within this world and from outside of it. Having done everything possible to prepare for such evil, we are instructed to stand firm."

He continued, "Standing firm is precisely what the Henderson's did and they instilled that ideal in each of us as well. That level of military preparedness in defense of the innocent always balanced by their compassionate tending to the needs of those left injured and alone. Their dedication to both paths of service to humanity is the rock upon which this organization was established."

"It is their legacy to mankind and our grave responsibility to carry forward their example in our lives and in our duties." He motioned to Straker to step forward and address the group.

He stood and paused, taking in the faces of those assembled in tribute. At the back stood Dmitri with Ilyana, Ona and Marta with SHADO staffers from the various operational groups and offices. Major Ealand stood beside Gay Ellis and Colonel Bradley. Commanders Waterman and Carlin stood beside Keith Ford, Ayshea and representatives of SHADO Security and Medical groups. Prosser called them all to attention which put a lump in Straker's throat. Straker said, "At Ease." They all assumed parade rest position. Ilyana, her sister and her daughter were greatly moved by the reverence and decorum of the assembly. Funerary tributes varied greatly throughout the Alliance worlds.

Straker began, "We gather here to honor two individuals who lived lives dedicated to service, both in military and humanitarian form. The Hendersons were not only bastions of leadership and organization. They set high standards for this organization and Evelyn's Orchard and instilled those expectations in every one of us. The General hand-picked many of you to serve in the roles in which you continue to excel. The rest of you went through his personal approval up until he retired. He knew each of you and he had a talent for choosing individuals of great intelligence and character. He saw seeds of brilliance in each of you and assigned you to areas of service that would nurture and develop your potential."

He continued, "Personally, both the General and his wife were like family to me. When I was shot down over Southeast Asia, badly wounded and barely clinging to life, there was always one of three faces that I saw in my brief moments of consciousness. They were Commander Freeman, The General and his wife. One of them was always there each time my eyes would open. Only family provides that kind of a dedicated vigil."

"The General had little patience for excuses or platitudes. He told me on multiple occasions that 'bad luck' was the excuse of those guilty of half-assed planning. It was a failure to consider all contingencies and possible outcomes. It is why we have so many levels of defense in our organization."

"When I was his attaché in the Air Force, I once made the mistake of telling him that he needed to be more open-minded. The General gave me a look of disapproval and said, "Son, an open mind is an empty mind..." There were chuckles in the group.

“General Henderson had a characteristic growl and bluster that never quite managed to completely override his brilliance or humanity. He expected us to tow the same line that he held himself to. That is why he was so intolerant of failure to perform your duty, defeatism and complacency... Yes, he could be a hard-ass – *but he was our* hard-ass. He wanted us and SHADO to have a backbone of steel. That is why he chose General Prosser to carry the torch onward. He knew that spine would never soften under his watch.”

Straker concluded, “As hard as General James Henderson could seem, his loving wife Evelyn made sure he exercised compassion. She helped him keep balance between military structure and humanity. They complimented and completed each other. When he told me of his retirement, he said she had stood beside him for all those years and it was his turn to do so for her. He vowed that she would never be alone or lonely ever again, and he kept his word. They departed this world together in loving embrace. Even in death, they are a testament of steadfast dedication and loyalty... We should all endeavor to live up to their example.”

Straker and Prosser took opposite sides of the velvet memorial cover and lifted it smartly in unison. It revealed a soaring eagle with text in testament. The wood memorial would eventually be replaced by a marble one. Prosser called the assembly to attention one more time, capped with a salute.

Thorvald and Paul sang a beautifully harmonized acapella version of the old hymn, ‘It is Well with My Soul’. It brought tears to many in the assembly and some joined their hands in solidarity.

Straker stepped back and Dr. Jackson said a prayer and gave the benediction. The assembly began to dissolve, each to their own moments of personal reflection.

A bronze memorial had been commissioned for Evelyn Henderson in the form of a large butterfly with wings of colorful stained glass. It would reside in a clearing within the orchard of the facility that carried her name in loving tribute by her husband.

Virginia stepped up and embraced her husband, one of several such displays in the group. Straker said to Thorvald, “You were a major? I had no idea.”

Thorvald smiled and said, “I served a long time, sir. I enlisted in the closing year of the Korean War. I was deployed in Europe as part of the scale up to the expanding Soviet threat.”

Straker said, “This is a group that could use a real boost, Thorvald.”

Thorvald grinned, knowing exactly what he meant. “I’ll make the call right now, sir.”

Early Sunday afternoon, Mr. James’ farm was a beehive of activity. There were at least twenty cars parked along the gravel drive and a bus from Evelyn’s Orchard was parked near the barn. Long covered tables were surrounded by chairs and covered in containers full of food. There were balloons in clusters everywhere and the smell of burgers and hot dogs on a charcoal grill.

Thorvald and Ford were walking through the pasture with Annie on Ford’s shoulders and Janna on Thorvald’s. Straker, Ilyana, Ona and Marta were joined by Ginny, Alec and Paul. Thorvald turned around and said, “I probably should have warned you to watch your step...”

“Too late,” said Paul. Everyone laughed. As they neared the fence line, a Holstein began to lumber over directly to Thorvald. He and Ford lowered the children and knelt down to their level. “This is my friend, Esther,” he said. She licked his face and nuzzled him. The children petted her and she licked them as well, causing riotous giggling. The alien visitors were captivated by the charming creatures.

The goats provided their usual welcome and laughter and smiles were everywhere. Doctor Jackson had been mobbed by them and was laughing hysterically on his back, covered in little hoof prints.

Later, he, Thorvald and Mr. James stood together near the barn. Mr. James put his arm around Thorvald and said, “Thank you lad. You’ve made an old farmer very happy today. It’s been a very long time since there were children and laughter here. Change can be good for the soul...” Thorvald smiled and squeezed his shoulder.

Jackson scanned the activity and joyful revelry around him and said with an unusually warm grin, “I can’t believe I never thought of this...”

THE END

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Author: A. Berglund