

U.F.O. 3

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CHAPTER 1

It was the second Friday of the month, the one day each month Ed Straker refused to permit SHADO to intrude. On the second Friday, Saturday when school was on, there were no U.F.O.s screaming in from space, there was no SHADO organization, he was not on call. This was the one day each month he could genuinely say he looked forward to. This was the day British divorce court documents allowed him to visit his son.

John had been pestering him for the last two months, since school broke up, for a visit to Harlington-Straker Studios. Today, after some serious consideration, Straker agreed to give his eight and a half year old son a tour of the production facilities the boy found so fascinating. The boy had no knowledge of the real reason for the studios, naturally, to hide the existence of SHADO Headquarters, eighty feet below the sets, offices and sound stages.

There was a new McDonald's restaurant just a mile down the road from the studios. After the obligatory hamburgers and french fries, they spent the afternoon exploring the back lots, nooks and crannies of the film studios.

They hitched a ride on an antique fire engine being moved from one area to another. John was allowed to ring the brass bell. He was delighted. So was his father.

It was getting late in the day when Straker and John started back to his ex-wife's house. The house Straker had paid for and now belonged to another man, her husband of ten months.

"Dad," John said. "Do I have to go home yet?"

"We're already half an hour late," Straker replied.

John, still full of energy even after a long day, started pushing buttons on the car's console control panel. The radio blared onto a rock station. John quickly shut it off with a careful glance at his father, as if expecting to be yelled at.

Straker tried to look stern, but he couldn't. He gave John a grin instead. His son grinned back and turned the radio back on. After a little bit, Straker adjusted the station to one more to his own liking.

"Nearly home, John," Straker said as the car turned onto the road to the house. John didn't answer. Straker glanced over to see his son simply looking out the window, a wistful expression on his young face.

"How'd you make out with the model boat I sent you?" Straker asked, trying to break the suddenly somber mood.

John's expression brightened. "I finished it."

"You finished it?" Straker said in surprise. The label on the model had said it was for older children. He knew John liked model building, especially boats, so he had sent it anyway. He had supposed John would need help with it, but apparently not.

The car phone buzzed. Straker flicked off the radio and picked up the handset. It was Alec Freeman. SHADO was on alert.

"I'll be back around six," Straker told him, checking his watch. He hung up the phone, his thoughts already switching over to SHADO and his other life.

Paul Foster was at the health research center for the next two weeks. S.I.D. had another fifteen minutes of program time missing. Whoever had used the time had covered their tracks well. Major Graham hadn't been able to track it down yet and he was one of their best electronics people. It was just one of a series of annoyances waiting for him at work.

"Would you like to see it?" John asked, derailing Straker's train of thought. Straker tried to recall the conversation before the phone call.

"The boat, Dad," John reminded him with only the slightest touch of exasperation.
"Oh, sure. Bet I do." SHADO could wait for a few more minutes.

* * *

SHADO's underground control center was the scene of sudden, urgent activity. Two U.F.O.s were on their way to Earth.

Alec Freeman checked a readout on one of the monitors. Then, he moved over to his usual place, behind the senior control room operative at the main tracking station.

"They're still maintaining course," Ford announced.

"Termination?" Freeman asked.

"Should be through any second," Ford answered, checking the readout on his screen.

"What happened to the interceptors?"

"They didn't make contact," Ford told him.

"What?"

"They're coming in too fast."

Lieutenant Gay Ellis, Moonbase Commander, came on the video screen above Ford's tracking screen.

"Moonbase to control. Speed sol 1.4."

Freeman simply shook his head. The aliens were coming in way too fast. They were going to crash and SHADO was going to have to pick up the pieces. Freeman could only hope the two craft didn't crash into a heavily populated area, otherwise there'd be hell to pay.

"They're changing course," Ford announced, eyes glued to the screen. Freeman leaned close over Ford's shoulder, peering at the screen for confirmation.

"Correction," the operative said. "One maintaining flight path. The second," He waited for numbers to appear from the computer. "New course 042 183."

"One's veered off?" Freeman repeated. It didn't make sense. Why was only one of them heading for Earth?

* * *

Straker's car pulled the car into the gravel driveway in front of his ex-wife's house. He noted that the house had some work done to it. There was fresh paint on the windows. The garden at the side of the house looked very nice. Mary had liked gardening. It looked like she still did.

"I'll go and get the boat," John announced, climbing out of the gull-winged Omen. "Wait for me, Dad."

Straker smiled and nodded. He watched as John ran up to the front door.

The door opened and Mary, John's mother, stepped out onto the upper step. John ran past her, into the house.

Straker climbed out of his car and simply stood beside it. "Hello, Mary," was all he could say.

"Hello, Ed," she replied. Her tone was cool. "You're late."

"Yes, we were having such a great time," Straker started to explain. Her expression showed she wasn't interested in explanations. "I thought an extra half hour..." He let his voice trail off. He'd blown it again.

A voice came from inside the house. "Mary?" Straker recognized the voice as Steven Rutland, her new husband.

Mary glanced back into the house. "Can you make it a week later next month?" she asked. "Say, the 18th?"

"The 18th? Yes, that'll be fine," he agreed. He had little choice in the matter. With very little effort, she could arrange that he never see his son again. Even being C-in-C of SHADO wouldn't help. "Listen, I'd like to talk to you about John. Is he ... ?"

"No, no," she interrupted. "He's fine. We're both fine."

"Mary?" Rutland called again from inside the house. She turned as her husband came to the door. Steven Rutland was a heavy set man with dark hair and a full beard.

Straker had a hard time understanding what Mary saw in the man. He was in construction, Straker knew that much. Security had a file on him because of his relationship with her but Straker hadn't read it. He didn't want to know more about the man than he had to.

"We're all perfectly all right," Mary said. Rutland's glare said Straker's presence was no longer wanted, if it ever had been.

"Johnny wanted to show me something," Straker said. Mary's expression didn't change.

"I think you'd better go," she said. "I'll explain to Johnny."

"Right." Straker already knew what her explanation would be. That he'd simply left, not interested enough to stay.

"Goodbye, Ed," she called as he got back into his car.

* * *

From his upstairs bedroom, John heard the car engine start. He ran to the open window to see his father's car backing out of the driveway. "Dad?"

He ran down the stairs, model boat in hand. He ducked his mother's hand as he ran through the open door after his father's car.

* * *

Straker's car had only moved a few car lengths when he heard the squeal of brakes behind him. He looked into the rearview mirror just in time to see a small sports car skid past the driveway.

John didn't see the sports car, or if he did, it was too late. There was a sickening thud as the car's fender and headlamp caught John, throwing him to the side of the road.

Straker stopped his car to look back in horrified disbelief. He watched Mary run down the driveway into the road. She screamed her son's name.

Straker left his car in the middle of the road and ran back to where John lay. The glass from the shattered headlamp was strewn across the road. The driver of the car had climbed out of his vehicle.

"I couldn't do a thing," he was saying. "He just came running out."

"Johnny?" Mary cried. John didn't stir. She turned and saw Straker standing above her. "Ed?"

He said nothing. There was nothing he could say.

"Well, do something!" she screamed at him.

* * *

The trip to the hospital was little more than a blur. Straker simply followed the ambulance carrying his son to the nearest hospital. The attendants let Mary and her husband ride in the ambulance. Straker stood by and watched in near shock as the attendants delivered his son to the emergency room.

A nurse directed him to the waiting area in the hospital lobby. Mary was already there, waiting for her husband. Straker assumed Rutland was handling the necessary paper work. Mary sat in a chair, arms close around her. She didn't look at him, didn't even acknowledge his presence in the same room.

After a time, Rutland came in and sat beside his wife. He lit a cigarette, but didn't bother offering Straker one. He didn't even bother to ask if it was all right to smoke in the lobby.

Straker simply sat, resting his head in his hands as he waited for news. It was already after six. He was late for work. Alec would get worried soon, but he didn't care. He looked across to Mary. Her face was ashen with shock and grief. Her husband just sat there, smoking his cigarette.

A door opened and a nurse stepped into the waiting area.

"The doctor will see you in a moment," she said. "They came out of the theater ten minutes ago." She paused before answering the unspoken question that lay in the air. "He's as well as can be expected."

Straker heard the doubt in her voice.

* * *

In SHADO Control, Alec Freeman waited for more information on the one U.F.O. that was still coming in like a bat out of hell. He paced the floor behind the operatives, stopping occasionally to watch the various radar screens.

"Termination coming through," Ford finally announced.

Tamara Paulson picked up the data stream: "Ireland, west coast."

"It's still coming in too fast," Ford reported.

"Range seven million," Paulson read aloud.

* * *

On Moonbase, the operatives rechecked their radar readings one more time.

"Confirmed, one decimal four," Nina Barry read off her screen.

Ellis activated the communications link to Earth and SHADO Control.

"Moonbase to SHADO Control. We still have Ufo on positive track," she said. "Confirm speed, Sol one decimal four."

* * *

Freeman watched the radar and information systems operators as they continued to track the one streak that denoted a U.F.O. coming to Earth.

"It must slow soon," Freeman muttered to himself.

"Range twenty-five thousand," Paulson read from her monitor. "Reducing speed."

"Alert ground radar," Freeman barked out the order

Ford made the announcement: "All radar stations, areas B142 and 144 -- red alert. I say again, red alert."

* * *

In the hospital waiting area, Straker, Mary and her husband waited.

There was something about hospital waiting rooms that made them all seem the same. Straker remembered another waiting room, eight and a half years before. It wasn't Mary and her new husband then. It was Mary's father, John Oster, waiting with him for news. Both of them were afraid to break a peace made fragile by Mary's hysterical accusations of infidelity.

Mary was eight months' pregnant. She already had her bags packed when he walked in that morning after an overlong staff meeting at a flat in London. The flat had belonged to Nina Barry, one of SHADO's first recruits.

Mary was coming down the stairway in their house. He hadn't understood what it meant, the suitcase, the envelope in her hand. He found out soon enough.

"You shouldn't be carrying that," he'd said, taking the suitcase from her and setting on the step beside him. She was upset, lips trembling. Her eyes were red, her face tear stained.

"I'm leaving you, Ed," she said. She handed him the envelope. "I've explained it all in the letter."

"Wait a minute," he said. He couldn't believe what was happening. "If something's the matter, I want to hear it from you, Mary."

"I know," she said. "Don't you understand? I know everything."

Straker's heart froze in his chest. "What do you know?"

She didn't answer.

"Tell me what you know!" He found himself shouting.

"My mother had you followed," she said finally. There was bitterness in her voice.

"Go on," he instructed, barely able to breathe for fear of what she might say.

"You were followed to the flat with the girl," Mary said.

He couldn't believe the relief he felt. It was simply a misunderstanding, easy enough to clear up. He reached out for her. "Mary..."

"Don't touch me!" she nearly screamed. He stepped back and nearly fell.

"Mary, darling, I can explain everything," he tried.

"Don't," she said. Her tone was venomous. "It's dirty enough, don't lie."

Straker was appalled. He had never lied to her. He had simply not told her those things security would not permit him to tell. That wasn't the same as a lie.

"The man was here this morning," she continued, a little more calmly. "He even had photographs with the time, everything."

There was a knock at the door. He didn't know who it was but it didn't matter.

Straker came to a decision. "Mary, darling, I can explain it to you."

"I don't want to hear," she said.

"Please, just listen to me, will you?" He found himself begging.

She wouldn't. "No, just give me my case," she said.

Straker lost his temper. "No, you're not going anywhere," he said. "You're gonna' stay right here and listen!" It was ridiculous. He was willing, for the first time in their marriage, to tell her about SHADO, to tell her everything, to risk his own life, if it came to that, and she wouldn't listen.

The knocking at the door became more insistent and he heard Mary's father outside.

"What's going on in there?"

"I'm coming, Dad," she called to him. She turned back to her husband. "No, Ed, don't you understand? I've had enough!"

"All right, I'll tell you everything," he said.

"What's going on in there?" Mary's father called.

"No. It's no good, Ed," she said, refusing to even consider.

"Everything!" he promised. He no longer cared about the consequences.

She began screaming at him. "I can't take it anymore. I can't take it!"

Straker slapped her to stop the screaming and then was overwhelmed with horror that he had actually hit his wife. In his entire life, he had never raised his hand in anger to anyone.

Outside, Mary's father started shouting. "Mary, Mary, what's the matter? Open the door, Mary!" He began to pound on the door.

Straker was in shock. He couldn't believe what he'd been driven to. He moved aside to let her pass. It didn't register that her case was still beside him. She bent down to pick it up and fell, head first down the rest of the steps.

"Oh my God." He ran down to check on her. She was unconscious. He opened the front

door for her father, then picked up the phone on the hallway table. Mary's father started to go to her.

"Don' touch her!" Straker nearly shouted. Her father backed off, but the look he gave his son-in-law could have killed.

They waited, he and Mary's father, in a waiting room not unlike this one. Waited, separated by only an arms length, if that. Separated by an impenetrable immensity of secrets and assumptions, accusations and misunderstandings.

Rain beat on the windows. They were the tears he couldn't shed for what could never be.

"Your wife has an internal hemorrhage," the doctor came out to tell them. After all this time, Straker could no longer remember his name.

"They're taking her into the theater now, but I shall have to perform a cesarean section."

Straker simply nodded his understanding and the doctor began to head toward the door he came through.

"Oh, Doctor... ," Straker called after him, finally finding his tongue.

The doctor stopped and looked back at him, a little puzzled.

"If there's any complication," he started haltingly. "If you have to choose between my wife..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"I understand," the doctor assured him.

It only felt like an eternity before a nurse came out.

"It's a boy!" she announced with a smile.

"How's my wife?" Straker asked. The nurse's expression became more serious.

"The doctor will be out in a moment," she said.

Mary's father clapped him on the shoulder. He was smiling. He had a grandson.

After a moment, the doctor came out again. There was blood on his smock. Mary's blood.

"How is she, Doctor?" Straker asked.

"As well as can be expected," the doctor said. His expression was solemn, as if he wasn't saying everything.

"She'll be all right?" Straker insisted.

"Yes."

"When can I see her?"

The doctor smiled, finally. "When she wakes up, but only for a few minutes."

"How's my son?" Straker asked, almost as an afterthought.

The doctor laughed. "He's fine."

* * *

In this waiting room, in this hospital, Mary finally looked over at him. She straightened in her seat and pushed a lock of hair away from her face. The door at the end of the lobby opened again and a fairly young man in surgical scrubs stepped out. He looked around and then came over to the seating area. There was blood on his smock, too. Johnny's blood.

"Mrs. Rutland. I'm Doctor Segal," the man introduced himself. He took a seat so he could face Mary and her husband.

"How is he?" Mary asked. There was a tremor in her voice.

Segal's expression became more serious. "The boy has a broken right femur and a compound fracture of the tibia and fibula," He paused, as if trying to find a better way of breaking the bad news. "There was serious internal rupture and hemorrhage. He's been given a transfusion."

His report was not reassuring.

"May we see him?" Mary asked.

"Not for the moment, I'm afraid," Segal said. "As you probably know, your son has an allergy to antibiotics."

"Yes, when he was just a baby," Mary began. She broke off, as if unable to continue.

"When he was three months old, he was critically ill from a teromycine injection," Straker told the physician. Segal gave him a curious look.

"I'm the boy's father," Straker explained.

"I see," Segal said. He turned back to Mary and her present husband, shifting his position just enough to include Straker in the discussion. "Well, the problem is one of elimination. We need to find a suitable antibiotic. It takes time."

Straker looked over at Mary. Her face was drawn tight with worry.

"There must be something," Straker insisted.

Segal considered the question a moment. "Well, there's the new American hypo-allergenic drug."

"Will it do the job?" Straker demanded.

"It's been fully tested," Segal said. "But supplies are still extremely limited."

"But available." It was a statement, not a question.

"In America, yes, but we need it urgently," Segal said. "Within the next few hours."

"We could have some flown over," Rutland suggested. He was finally doing something. "I'll charter a plane if necessary."

"I'm afraid there isn't time," Segal said.

"I'll take care of it," Straker said, voice low.

"What are you talking about?" Rutland asked impatiently. "How can you?"

Something in Rutland's voice irritated him. "I said I'll take care of it. He's still my son," Straker reminded him, voice going hard. He turned to the doctor.

"If you'll give me the details, Doctor," Straker said.

"Yes, naturally," Segal said. He went to the desk in front of the lobby doors.

An electronic chirp sounded. Straker grimaced and pulled a beeper from his jacket pocket, checking the number. SHADO. He turned it off, and dropped it back in his pocket.

He turned to Mary. "I have to leave."

"You always had to leave," Mary responded bitterly.

Rutland put his arm around his wife. "We'll stay and see the boy through, Mary." It was a direct hit. Straker found himself clenching his fists as if he were preparing for Rutland's next strike to be a physical one. He had to force himself to loosen his hands as Doctor Segal returned with a slip of paper.

"Tell your contact to ask for Doctor Ashley," Segal instructed, handing Straker the paper.

Straker nodded and turned on his heel to leave, unwilling, unable, to look back at his ex-wife and her new husband.

* * *

In his car, heading back to the studios and SHADO H.Q., Straker placed a call to his own office.

"Miss Ealand?" he said when the receiver was picked up on the other end.

"Yes, sir?" Miss Ealand's clear voice came over the phone.

"Contact our people in New York. I want a special courier to pick up a drug from the Westmore Hospital. Take down these details," he instructed. He read off the note Segal had given him.

CHAPTER 2

Alec Freeman watched as information concerning the incoming U.F.O. flashed on the monitor.

"Four thousand, eight hundred miles from impact," Ford read off.

"Speed?" Freeman asked.

"Eighteen thousand knots," came Ford's answer.

"He'll never make it," Freeman responded.

"We have it on ground radar," Ford said after a moment.

* * *

Unseen by human observers, the alien craft leveled off. It emitted an eery whine as a small life capsule ejected. The capsule settled softly to the soil of a wild, sparsely populated corner of Ireland. The larger ship careened into the sea.

* * *

"Impact confirmed," Ford announced as the data came onto his screen.

"Do we have grid reference?" Freeman asked.

"Yes, sir. IGR B-142-08," Ford read from his screen. "Just off the west coast of Ireland."

"Tell Carlin to overfly the area."

"Yes, sir," Ford acknowledged. He nodded to Paulson at her own station. She pressed a series of buttons on her own panel.

"This is SHADO control to Skydiver. Sky-One immediate launch, proceed to area B-142-08," Paulson ordered.

Freeman turned back to Ford. "It's crazy, coming in at that speed."

"Could it have been damaged?" Ford wondered aloud.

"I don't see how," Freeman said. "The interceptors didn't get near it."

"Well the aliens don't usually make that kind of mistake," Ford reminded his superior.

"At least it shows they're fallible," Freeman said, but he didn't really believe that was the explanation.

* * *

In her office at Harlington-Straker Studios, Miss Ealand was finishing her filing for the day. She looked up as the outer door opened and Commander Straker walked in.

"Has that drug been picked up, Miss Ealand?" he asked without preamble.

"Yes, sir. They're taking it straight to the airport," she reported.

"Fine. I'll make the arrangements with the transporter," he told her, heading into the inner office that would take him down to SHADO headquarters, eighty feet below.

"Yes, sir," Miss Ealand said. She looked up to find she was speaking to empty air.

* * *

Freeman was still pondering the bizarre behavior of the U.F.O. when Straker walked into the control center.

"What's the situation, Alec?" Straker asked. He barely paused as he headed to his real office in SHADO Headquarters. Freeman fell into step with him.

"Two Ufos. One veered off 10 million miles out. The other crashed, Western Ireland."

Freeman glanced at Straker to discover the other man wasn't really listening. There was a tense worry in his eyes.

"Its entry speed was too high," Freeman volunteered.

"Right." Straker murmured, still not paying attention. They walked into his office.

"Sky one is on its way to search for the wreckage, though I doubt if there'll be much left to see," Freeman continued.

"Fine."

Freeman peered at Straker as he settled behind his desk. Straker seemed distant and preoccupied, more than he usually was after a visit with his son.

"Everything all right?" Freeman asked.

"Is it ever?" Straker asked back.

Freeman watched the other man a moment longer, then: "Well, I was going to grab a bite to eat. Care to join me?"

"No, that's all right, Alec. I've got a few things to clear up here," Straker replied. "You go ahead."

There was something there Freeman couldn't quite put his finger on. An anxiety Freeman rarely saw in his commanding officer, his friend. "Right," Freeman agreed slowly. "I'll see you later."

He walked to the door and looked back. Straker had settled back in his leather chair and was staring off into space. Again, Freeman had the sense of wrongness he couldn't identify as the office doors closed behind him.

* * *

Finally alone, Straker keyed the intercom to the duty officer.

"Tell the transporter in New York to stand by for immediate take off," he instructed.

"But, it isn't due to leave for another seven hours, sir," Ford reminded his commanding officer.

"I believe I said immediate take off," Straker said, voice going cold.

"Yes, sir," Ford replied.

* * *

In the control room, Ford gave Paulson a worried look. He, too, had sensed something wrong.

* * *

In the office, Straker picked up the phone that linked his office with Miss Ealand's desk upstairs.

"No calls, Miss Ealand," he instructed. "And get me 014-212."

He waited for the connection to be made, for the phone to ring. When it did, he grabbed it.

"Maisefield Hospital," The voice on the other end of the line said.

"Intensive care unit please, I'm enquiring about a patient," he explained to the voice. "A young boy, John Straker."

"I'm sorry, but there is no patient by that name here," the voice said.

"But there must be," Straker protested.

"We have a John Rutland listed," the voice said, trying to be helpful.

"John Rutland," Straker repeated. "Yes, he could be under that name."

"No change, sir."

"No change? Thank you." He put the phone down slowly. They had finally done it. They had taken away his son's name. He wondered whose idea it was, Mary's or her husband's. John hadn't mentioned using his stepfather's name. Had John been afraid to tell him? Had their poison finally done its work and made his own son afraid of him?

* * *

Sky-One flew in low over the designated target area. Peter Carlin peered through the cockpit windscreen at the rocky beach below.

"Sky-One to control," he said, keying the microphone in his helmet. "Looks like it crashed about a hundred yards offshore."

* * *

Sky-One's engines echoed in the night sky over western Ireland. An isolated country cottage reverberated with the thrum of its jets as it flew overhead.

Inside the cottage, a log fire burned on the grate to ward off the night's chill.

James Green, a slim, balding, country doctor, put his stethoscope into his medical bag. "Well, Mrs. O'Connor, there's not a lot wrong with you," he told his patient, a grandmotherly widow of 65.

"I could have told you that myself, doctor," Mrs. O'Connor said from her rocking chair.

"I'm sure you could," Green agreed. "Well, I'll call in next time I'm passing."

"Won't you be stopping for a cup of tea?" Mrs. O'Connor asked, disappointment in her voice. Green knew she didn't get many visitors this far out.

"No thanks," he said. "It's pretty late and I have to get over to the Reagan farm."

He hefted his bag and turned toward the cottage door.

"I'll see you to the door," she said, getting to her feet. "I have to treat my gentlemen callers with great respect or else they won't come back."

Green shook his head, marveling at her independence despite her handicap.

She opened the door for him, letting him out. She tilted her head slightly upwards, as if looking for something. Her hazy blue eyes twinkled at some unspoken jest.

"It's a fine evening," she said, sniffing the air. "Smell the flowers."

"Goodbye, Mrs. O'Connor," Green said with a smile of both admiration and amusement as he headed for his car.

"God bless you, doctor," she called. "Goodbye."

The door to his car slammed shut and she went back inside the cottage, closing the front door against the night air. There was a stirring in the birdcage near her chair. The blue and green parrot started to twitter as the sounds of Green's car driving away drifted into the house.

"Lovely day," the bird called out. "Lovely day, lovely day."

"Oh, go way ou'a that!" Mrs. O'Connor admonished her feathered companion. "You decide to talk when the company's gone. It's always the same. You're a naughty boy, Billy."

She turned out the light beside her rocking chair. No need to waste electricity. She sat, deciding whether or not to turn on the radio.

She decided against the radio. After a short time, she heard a noise outside. Footsteps, or something else. She hadn't heard a car pull up. The sound came again, closer.

"Did you hear that, Billy?" she asked aloud, not expecting an answer. "Who is it, Billy?"

She stood and went to the front door. She opened it to listen for the sound again.

There, it came again, the sound of quiet footsteps, someone moving on the gravel.

"Is anyone there?" she asked aloud. She wasn't frightened, just curious as to who could have made it this far from the main road without a car or bicycle at least. She hadn't heard sounds of either, just a weird whine somewhere overhead just before the doctor arrived.

She turned on the porch light. "I know there's someone there," she said. She sensed the stranger was near. She could hear his footsteps, his breathing. She assumed it was a stranger because a friend would have already spoken.

"Ah," she said turning to where she heard him. "You'll have to excuse me. I'm blind, you

understand."

The stranger took her arm and led her inside the house, closing the door behind them. He said nothing as he took her back to her rocking chair. She could hear him move about the room, touching the vases, the small statues on the tables.

After a time, Mrs. O'Connor spoke up. "What are you doing? What are you looking for? There's nothing of value here."

The stranger didn't say a word, but she heard him move on, toward the bird cage. The parrots squawked.

"Please, don't hurt my bird," she said. She heard him move away from the cage and the bird calmed down.

* * *

At Maisefield Hospital, Nurse Spencer checked the readouts on the biosensors attached to a little blond boy, only eight and a half years old. She looked at the child. He hadn't moved at all since her last check and that was an ominous sign. The bruise on his cheek was a dark blotch on his pale skin.

She glanced at her watch. They were running out of time.

A little later, in the waiting area, the phone buzzed. Nurse Spencer picked it up.

"A' block, night nurse speaking," Spencer answered "Yes, she's still here," she replied to the question asked on the other end. Spencer set down the phone and walked over to Mrs. Rutland and her husband. Mrs. Rutland was pale with worry. Her husband was sprawled on his chair, asleep.

"It's for you," she told the little boy's mother, giving her a reassuring smile.

Mrs. Rutland got up and went to the reception desk, picking up the phone.

"Yes?" she said. "Oh, it's you, Ed." Her expression was one of cautious relief. Spencer supposed it was the boy's father. "No, there's no news."

"I want to stay here," Spencer heard her say.

Something was said on the other end of the line. Spencer couldn't hear it and it was a private conversation.

"All right. But, don't let Johnny down this time, Ed," Mrs. Rutland said to the phone. She started to cry. "Don't let us down."

Something else was said.

"I believe you," the boy's mother said. "Bye."

Spencer wondered a little about the dynamics of a family where such a conversation could take place. Mrs. Rutland's ex-husband certainly didn't look the part of a neglectful or abusive parent, but looks could be deceiving.

* * *

In his office, eighty feet below a film studio, in a concrete bunker few people knew about and even fewer had seen, Commander Straker of SHADO set down the telephone receiver and bowed his head in private agony.

After a moment, he keyed open the intercom to the senior duty officer's station.

"Where's that transporter?"

"Just taken off, sir," Ford replied. "ETA London, 23.30 hours."

"I want a car and escort at the airport to meet it," Straker ordered.

"Yes, sir."

Straker let his finger off the intercom key. Once again, he bowed his head, nearly giving in to the pain that threatened to overwhelm him, all the 'if onllys' that came to haunt him. If

only Mary had trusted him more. If only they'd been able to make it work. If only he and Johnny had left the studio on time, maybe, just maybe, this wouldn't be happening now.

The office doors slid open. With an effort, he composed himself, but Freeman still gave him a quizzical look.

"Great steak... medium rare... with a side order of salad," Freeman said.

"Sounds very appetizing," Straker said. Despite his best efforts to seem normal, Freeman was still watching him worriedly.

"It was... It certainly was." Freeman sat on the bench in the corner. "Look, it's pretty quiet. Why don't you go home?"

"What home?" Straker asked in response.

* * *

Mrs. O'Connor sat in her rocking chair. For the past several minutes, the stranger had been sitting at her desk. She could hear him moving quietly, doing something at the desk, what, she couldn't even guess at.

After a time, she gathered enough courage together to make a move. Quietly, she stood and crossed the room to the small table by the door where the telephone sat. She had just lifted the receiver when a hand came down on hers and forced the receiver back onto its cradle.

Mrs. O'Connor barely stifled a scream. The stranger made no further move, releasing her hand as soon as the phone was hung up. She made her way back to her rocking chair, sensing the stranger was still close.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What do you want from me?"

There was no answer.

* * *

Freeman sat and watched as Straker sorted through a pile of files on the desk. He knew something was bothering the other man. What, he couldn't guess, except it probably had something to do with his son. Straker frequently came into work in a difficult mood after visiting John.

"Ed, would you like to talk about it?" he asked quietly.

"Talk about what?" Straker asked.

"I know something's bothering you," Freeman explained.

"It's nothing for you to worry about," Straker replied.

"You're sure?"

Straker simply nodded. Freeman knew that Straker would share his trouble only when he was ready, if at all. But he also sensed that this trouble was different, deeper, darker. Freeman studied his commanding officer a little longer before heading back to the command center. After a moment, he noted Straker followed him in.

Freeman went over Ford at his console and took the microphone.

"What's the position, Peter?" he asked.

"Well, we've confirmed the Ufo crashed in the sea," Carlin said. "Skydiver will be there in about 20 minutes. We'll start looking for wreckage right away."

"Fine," Freeman agreed. "Contact us the moment you have anything."

Freeman turned to Straker. "I still can't figure why it came in so fast."

"To avoid the interceptors?" Straker wondered.

"Possible," Freeman conceded. "But once it was past Moonbase, it still had plenty of time to decelerate." As Freeman spoke, Straker walked away, to the radar screen beside Ford's station.

"The transporter?" Straker asked the operative, pointing to the blip on the screen

"Yes, sir. 23.30 hours confirmed as ETA," Ford said.

Straker checked at his watch. "Have my car outside in 30 minutes," he instructed. "I'm going...home."

He started toward the door of his office, then stopped and turned back to Freeman.

"Maybe that Ufo was trying to decelerate but couldn't because it had been hit," Straker suggested.

"The interceptors were way out," Freeman reminded him. "What else could have done it?"

"The second Ufo. The one that veered off."

Straker went into his office and the doors closed behind him.

Freeman considered Straker's suggestion. The idea seemed patently ridiculous, but it worried him enough to tell Ford: "Tell Captain Carlin to keep a look out for any wreckage with signs of damage not consistent with the crash."

"Right, sir," Ford said, keying in the sequence that would connect SHADO Control with Skydiver.

* * *

Underwater, as close into the rock strewn beach as was safe, Skydiver searched for the wreckage of the downed U.F.O. Its powerful searchlight lit up the rocks, scaring the sea life. Inside the submarine, Carlin studied the sea floor charts on the table before him. Above him, on the upper deck, Lieutenants Masters and Maxwell studied the outside monitors for some trace of their objective.

"Anything?" Carlin asked.

"Not a sign," Maxwell answered.

* * *

Mrs. O'Connor listened hard once more. Her parrot was quiet, but she could sense he wasn't asleep. The stranger was once again working on his mysterious project. She was sure he wasn't paying attention to her again. She stood and began to move toward the front door. Barely daring to breathe, she opened the door.

The door was wrenched from her hand and slammed. She gasped in fright, then heard the lock turn and the deadbolt click into place. But, instead of hurting her, the stranger took her arm and led her to the desk. She heard a slight click, then an eery humming whine.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "Why don't you answer? Who are you? Why don't you speak? Why don't you leave me? Why don't you leave my house?"

* * *

Doctor Segal opened the door to the little boy's room. The child still hadn't regained consciousness. More ominous even than that, the biosensors showed his temperature was starting to rise, a sign of the infection Segal was sure would happen. A ruptured bowel was nothing to take lightly.

The physician checked his patient quickly, efficiently. Time was running out. John Rutland's condition was deteriorating.

* * *

Straker checked his watch, then reached for the phone once again. He pulled back as Freeman walked in.

"I'd like you to hear something," Freeman said, coming over to the desk. Straker simply looked at him, puzzled at the interruption.

"It's important," Freeman added.

Straker nodded. Freeman leaned over the desk and keyed open the intercom.

"Play it back," Freeman instructed.

The voice of an old woman came over the speaker: "Why don't you leave me? Why don't you leave my house?"

"It cut in three minutes ago on our waveband," Freeman explained, letting up on the intercom key.

"Cut in?" Straker repeated, not quite understanding.

"Clear as a bell," Freeman said. "Estimated signal strength 15 hundred megawatts."

"That's as powerful as a medium sized commercial transmitter," Straker pointed out. "Did we get a fix?"

"Ireland, the west coast."

* * *

The weird whine continued.

"What's that noise?" Mrs. O'Connor asked. She reached out a hand to touch whatever was making the noise. The stranger grabbed her hand, not hard enough to hurt her, just enough to keep her from touching whatever was on the desk. She reached out with her other hand to touch his face. He blocked her hand.

"I only wanted to feel your face," she explained. "Don't you understand? I'm blind."

She touched the hand that still held hers. "You're trembling," she said, surprised.

* * *

Maxwell spotted something artificial on the monitor in front of him. "That could be it. Fifty yards ahead, a couple of degrees to port," he called out.

"Stop engines," Carlin ordered. He climbed to the upper level where Maxwell and Masters were studying the monitor.

There was something metallic on the sea floor.

"I'll go and take a look," Carlin announced. "Take her down to the bottom."

"Yes, sir," Maxwell acknowledged.

"Release a marker buoy and inform control," Carlin ordered as he opened the compartment next to the airlock. He pulled out a drysuit.

"This is Skydiver to control," Carlin heard Maxwell announce. "We have possible sighting of Ufo wreckage."

* * *

Freeman, Straker and Ford listened to the signal that was cutting into SHADO's waveband.

"Why don't you answer? If you tell me who you are," the old woman's voice was saying. "And what it is you want. I might be able to help."

"I just don't get it," Freeman complained. "The voice of an old woman coming over on a transmitter powerful enough to cut in on our wavebands."

Straker fought down a rising panic as he felt the situation closing in on him. It was as if the very walls were ready to reach out and grab at him.

"Maybe it's not her transmitter," Straker said, trying to keep his voice calm. "Cancel my car," he added as he turned to head for his office.

Freeman turned to Ford. "Did you get a closer fix?"

"No, sir," the operative told him. "We'd need to triangulate from ground vehicles in the area."

"And we don't have any," Freeman completed for himself. "Where's the nearest transporter?"

"There's one over the Atlantic," Ford said, checking a chart beside his console. "200 miles out."

"Flying in from New York?"

"Yes, sir."

"But, I thought that wasn't due to take off till 14.00 hours," Freeman said.

"No, sir," Ford told him. "It's been en route for 50 minutes. Commander Straker's orders."

"The man must be psychic," Freeman commented to himself. He looked over at the closed doors to Straker's office across the hallway.

* * *

Inside Sky-Diver, the inner hatch to the airlock slid open and Peter Carlin stepped into his ship. He handed Maxwell the underwater camera as he pulled off his face mask.

"I want those shots developed and radioed to control as soon as possible," Carlin ordered.

"How did it look?" Maxwell asked.

"Part of the metallic structure has been practically vaporized. I can tell you one thing, it had been fired on by something before it crashed," Carlin said, heading into the dressing area to remove the dry-suit.

CHAPTER 3

Straker sat at his desk, his head resting on his hands. In the present situation he could not leave. He could not be where he needed to be, where he wanted to be. He could not be with Mary and John at the hospital.

The door slid open and Freeman walked in, holding two 8 by 10 photographs. Straker straightened in his chair, but Freeman gave him another curious look.

"Carlin just radioed these in," Freeman said after a moment, handing the photographs to Straker.

One of the photos was a medium close up of a piece of wreckage on the sea bed. Some of the metal had obviously been melted by tremendous heat.

"Well, there's no doubt about it," Freeman said. "The Ufo was damaged before it crashed. But what by?"

Straker said nothing.

"Let's make a couple of educated guesses," Freeman went on. "An alien survives the crash. He goes to a house. The occupant is an old lady."

"She said she was blind," Straker reminded him.

"So, she thinks he's a man, an intruder possibly," Freeman continued. "The alien has a transmitter and he beams in on our waveband."

"Why?"

"We'll find that out when we track him down," Freeman said.

"It won't be easy," Straker commented.

"With mobiles in the area, we can pinpoint the exact position," Freeman said.

"It will take time to set it up," Straker said.

"Less than an hour," Freeman told him.

Straker looked up at him, suddenly bewildered.

"We're in luck," Freeman said with a smile. "A transporter will be landing in minutes. The mobiles can move into the area immediately. When they're in position, we can get a fix on the next transmission."

"A... transporter?" Straker repeated. He could barely keep the tremor of fear out of his voice.

"Yes," Freeman said. He paused, peering at Straker in open confusion. "The one from New York. You ordered an early take off."

Straker hardly dared to ask the obvious question. "What have you done?"

"Diverted it... what else?" Freeman answered, equally obviously. "Is anything wrong?"

Straker didn't answer. He couldn't answer.

"I'll contact Carlin and tell him to go ashore as field commander," Freeman continued in the face of Straker's silence.

After a moment, Freeman left the office, heading to the control room to give Carlin his new orders.

* * *

At Maisefield Hospital, Mary sat, waiting. The door to the nursing block opened and Nurse Spencer walked over with a cup of coffee.

"I thought you'd like some coffee," Spencer said, handing her the cup.

"Thank you," Mary said, accepting the cup and taking a sip. She looked up. "What time is it?"

"That clock is right," Spencer said softly, nodding to the clock on the wall. It was past midnight.

Rutland came back into the building and walked over to where Mary sat. She looked up at him, an unspoken question in her eyes.

He shook his head 'no'. The drug hadn't yet arrived.

The nurse left to tend to her duties.

In the waiting area, the phone ring. It rang again and Rutland got up to answer it. "Hello," Rutland said. "Yes, it's me," he said to the voice at the other end. "No, still the same"

"There's been a delay," Straker said over the phone. "The drug will be there as soon as possible."

"We're running out of time," Rutland reminded him.

"I know, I know," Straker said. "I'd like to explain to Mary."

Rutland looked across at his wife and silently held the phone out to her. She got up and came to the phone. As he handed the receiver to her he said: "It's been delayed."

"Yes?" Mary spoke into the phone. She listened a moment. Disbelief played across her face as she listened. ". . . but... important! What can be more important than your son's life?"

"It isn't like that," Rutland heard Straker say. "Mary, please try and understand."

"No, I don't understand," Mary said, her voice going shrill. "I'll never understand." She started to cry. Rutland took the phone from her hand and simply hung it up.

* * *

Straker walked back into the control room, going to Ford's station.

"Where's the transporter?" he asked.

"Just landed in Ireland, sir," Ford replied.

"The minute it's unloaded, I want it back in the air for London."

"Yes, sir," Ford acknowledged.

Freeman looked up from watching a radar scan at a station nearby. After a moment, he walked across to Straker.

"I'm sorry about the transporter," he said. "Was it important?"

"These things are always a question of priorities," Straker said. There was pain in his eyes and once again, Freeman wondered what was happening that Straker was refusing to tell him about.

After a moment, Straker seemed to rouse himself from whatever private misery he found himself. He began to move across the control room, barking out orders: "Tell the mobiles they don't move in till I give the word, and I want a large scale map of the area and get me Captain Carlin."

* * *

In the cottage, Mrs. O'Connor stood by her bird, smoothing his ruffled feathers.

"It's alright, Billy. Our visitor is a nice man. He doesn't want to hurt us," Mrs. O'Connor assured him and herself. "Good boy, Billy."

* * *

A SHADO Mobile crossed the night countryside until it was in its preassigned position.

Inside the Mobile, Peter Carlin nodded to his co-driver and picked up the microphone from the console. "Mobile one in position."

* * *

"Roger one," Paulson acknowledged. She looked over her shoulder at Straker and Freeman. "All mobiles in position, sir."

Straker nodded.

"Well, all we can do now is wait for the next transmission," Freeman commented to Straker. Again, Straker simply nodded.

* * *

Mrs. O'Connor heard the weird whine once again. She walked slowly over to the sound, to where the stranger sat.

"Why won't you speak to me?" she wondered aloud. "Why won't you tell me who you are?"

* * *

"Get a fix," Carlin ordered. His companion tuned the equipment at his console to get a bearing on the signal.

"Are you in some sort of trouble?" the old woman was saying, but the signal was starting to break-up. Interference.

". . . better to tell someone, you know."

"Got it?" Carlin asked, suddenly worried. The interference was getting worse. His companion gave him a thumbs-up.

* * *

The interference was making it hard to listen to the old woman's voice.

"just... always... try and help..." The static didn't stop. Then, it was continuous.

"We have a bearing," Ford announced.

"Mobile 1 to control," Carlin's voice came over the speaker. "Signal vector one-three-eight decimal three."

Straker plotted the two vectors on the map on the table in front of him. He jabbed his finger down on the intersection of the lines. "That's it," he said. "Tell the mobiles to move in."

"What the hell's jamming that signal?" Freeman wondered aloud. Straker shook his head. That was yet another question he had no answer to.

* * *

On Moonbase, the radar had just picked up a signal.

"Sighting confirmed," Nina Barry announced from her station. "Area 014-263. Green."

Ellis keyed open the base loudspeakers. "Red alert - interceptors immediate launch."

* * *

Her voice was repeated in the astronauts' lounge.

"I say again, red alert," Ellis's voice stated.

The three astronauts leapt to their feet and grabbed their space helmets in a well practiced drill. They dove into the interceptor chutes.

* * *

"Moonbase to control," Ellis announced to the link to Earth and headquarters. "Have U.F.O. on positive track."

* * *

"The mobiles are on their way," Freeman commented. Straker's expression had gone distant again.

"An alien who wants to cooperate," Straker murmured. "To help."

Freeman stared at him.

This time, Straker noticed. "Why else would he transmit on our waveband?"

"A defector," Freeman mused. "An outsider. If we can only get our hands on him."

* * *

Moonbase waited. The control sphere operatives stared into their monitors.

"Maintaining speed," Barry said. "Red 128 - 041."

"Trajectory?" Ellis demanded.

"Still as predicted," Barry translated.

"I have green on 1,2 and 3," Joan Harrington announced.

"Moonbase to interceptors," Ellis spoke into the console microphone. "Stand by to set on board computers."

Barry picked up the sequence: "One-zero-two, two-six-eight, timing one-zero-eight-four, zero-three-five."

* * *

The three interceptors flew over the lunar surface in close formation. Captain Lew Waterman, the interceptor leader, flipped a sequence of switches on his instrument console.

"Roger base," he acknowledged. "On board computer programmed, firing sequence complete."

* * *

"Missile firing minus 6 decimal 4," Barry announced. The operatives listened as the electronic countdown clock beeped the seconds. After a few seconds that seemed like an eternity: "Firing confirmed." A pause: "Detonation."

Harrington checked her scanners once again. The blip remained.

"It's through," Ellis said. "Tell control."

"This is Moonbase to control," Harrington announced to the console microphone. "Ufo through outer defenses."

* * *

"It's up to the mobiles," Freeman murmured, echoing what everyone else in the control room knew. He turned to the operative seated beside Paulson. "How's the interference?"

Campbell took off his headset and turned up the volume. The interference was unrelenting.

"Nothing can get through that," Freeman said.

Campbell grimaced as he put the headset back in position over his ears.

* * *

Mrs. O'Connor heard a change in the weird whine. It was beginning to pulsate. She heard the stranger working again, moving his hands, his arms. After a moment, he stood and the whine went away. She heard him walk to the door and undo the bolts.

"Are you leaving?" she asked. Again, there was no answer. "Goodbye," she called after him. The door closed and he was gone.

Mrs. O'Connor walked over to where her bird sat on top of his cage. After a moment, he chirped up: "Lovely day, lovely day."

* * *

"He's dead," Freeman said, repeating what Peter Carlin had just reported. The U.F.O. that had made it past Moonbase had simply blasted the alien as he stood in an open field. The mobiles were only three hundred yards away from him. They'd been so close.

"We'll never know," Freeman added. "He may have told us everything."

Freeman turned to where Straker had been standing beside him. Straker had vanished.

* * *

Straker ran into the hospital waiting area to discover no one was there. There was the sound of a woman crying somewhere. The doorway to the ward opened and the doctor came

out.

Segal looked over at Straker and shook his head.

Mary was sobbing, barely able to walk. Rutland had his arm around her, guiding her to the hospital exit. Rutland looked up to glare at him.

The doctor stopped in front of Straker. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "If it had gotten here an hour earlier, it might have made a difference."

Straker was stunned. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening. He looked over to Mary and her husband heading for the door.

"Mary?"

They stopped and after a long moment, Mary turned around to look at him. Her face was a mask of grief. She took a shuddery breath.

"I never want to see you again," she said, voice shrill and venomous. "Don't ever let me see you again!"

Straker watched her leave and felt part of his soul die.

* * *

Commander Straker didn't show up for work the next day. Freeman wasn't worried. It had been a long day for him and losing the alien after coming so close had to hurt. Freeman figured Straker was simply taking a little time to rest, to sort through whatever else had been going on last night. One thing did bother Freeman, though. Straker usually called to tell the duty supervisor if he wasn't coming in. There was no call this time.

When Straker didn't show up Sunday, either, Freeman started to get worried. He was just about to call the commander at home when Lieutenant Johnson called over the intercom.

"Sir, you have a call from Colonel Komack in San Francisco."

"Put her on," Freeman ordered.

Kathryn Komack's face appeared on the video monitor in the commander's office. She looked worried. "Hello, Alec. Where's Commander Straker?"

"He didn't come in this morning," Freeman told her. "Is there something wrong?"

"Alec, I think you'd better find him," the young woman said.

"Why, what's going on?" Freeman asked.

"Have you read today's paper?" she asked in answer.

"Which paper?"

"The London Times," she said. "I get the satellite feed here."

"I've read the headlines," Freeman admitted.

"Read the obituaries, Alec," the woman told him.

The screen went dark. With a sudden foreboding, Freeman turned his paper to the obituary page.

He almost missed it.

John Edward Rutland was the name given. He had died as a result of injuries sustained when he was struck by a car in front of his house. He was survived by his mother and step-father and his father, Edward Straker, CEO of Harlington-Straker Film Studios.

"Oh dear God," Freeman muttered to himself. That was why Straker was late coming in Friday evening. Why hadn't he said anything? He hadn't needed to stay during the alert. He could have been with his son. No one here would have faulted him if he had left.

Freeman dropped the paper on the desk and dialed Straker's home number. There was no answer. Even the answering machine was off. Hanging up the phone, Freeman headed into the control room.

"Lieutenant Johnson, could you locate Commander Straker's car for me, please?"

"Yes, sir," Johnson acknowledged. She typed a sequence into the keyboard at her station, alerting one of SHADO's surveillance satellites that it was to locate the transponder buried inside Commander Straker's SHADO customized Euroford Omen. After a few moments, the satellite sent back a set of coordinates. Johnson matched it against a standard map.

"The commander's car is parked near St. Thomas Aquinas Church. It's just a couple miles from his house."

"Thanks, lieutenant," Freeman said, heading out of the control room for the main elevator to the surface.

"Sir," she called. "Is there something wrong?"

Freeman stopped, wondering how he was going to handle the situation. "Commander Straker's little boy died Friday night, during the alert. I'm a little worried about him," Freeman admitted. He headed out, leaving Johnson and the other operatives staring after him in shocked surprise.

* * *

St. Thomas Aquinas Church was typically English. It wasn't exactly Romanesque, or Gothic, or anything else in particular besides old. The worst of its architectural offences were blessedly covered with ivy. Straker's car was parked at the far end of the graveled parking area. Freeman pulled his Saab up to park beside the bronze Omen.

The service was just getting over. Parishioners were filing out past the old priest in his vestments, shaking his hands, murmuring comments. The priest held one man back for a moment, a blond man dressed in black.

Straker looked haggard, worn out, as though he hadn't slept at all since it happened. He probably hadn't, and knowing Straker, he hadn't eaten, either.

Suddenly, Freeman didn't know what to do. Questioning traumatized witnesses was part of his training with MI5. How to help his commanding officer, a friend, through something like this, he had no experience, no idea. So, he simply waited.

The priest finally let Straker leave and he headed towards his parked car. He didn't seem to notice Freeman until the Australian stepped up to him.

"Ed?"

"Oh, hello Alec," Straker said, very quiet. "Is something wrong?"

"Everything's fine at work," Freeman said. "I got worried when you didn't answer the phone."

"Sorry, I've had a lot on my mind."

"When's the last time you ate?" Freeman asked.

"I don't remember," Straker answered. "Lunch with John, I suppose."

"I know a place near here with great fish and chips," Freeman responded. "How about it? We can take my car."

It took a moment for Straker to react. It was like he was drugged, or so tired he'd stopped thinking. When he did respond, it was simply a nod.

The restaurant Freeman drove them to was only a few miles from the church, in the village just north of Straker's house.

Straker only ate his meal at Freeman's insistence. After the waiter had cleared away the plates, Freeman broached the subject he was most worried about confronting.

"Ed, why didn't you say anything about John getting hurt Friday night? We could have handled the alert. You didn't need to be there."

He wasn't sure Straker was listening. The other man kept looking off into the far distance, not really attending to what was here and now. After a long moment, Straker spoke: "She started screaming at me. I could never stand her screaming."

Freeman assumed he was referring to Mary, his ex-wife. Freeman remembered she had a grating shrillness to her voice when upset.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Freeman asked again.

Straker finally focused on him. "I'd rather not talk about it right now, Alec," he said. "Not now."

Freeman knew a door had just closed. A door Straker would never willingly open again.

* * *

By Tuesday, Straker seemed almost normal. He was a little more distracted, a little quieter, than usual but not enough to arouse comment from any of the control room operatives.

SHADO's war against the alien invaders continued on in its more or less orderly fashion. After a few months, the nightmare of that night seemed little more than that - a nightmare.

* * *

One Friday afternoon in early May, SID announced: "Have three U.F.O.s on positive track, Course, four-two-six, one-five-eight; green. Speed, zero-Sol -eight, Range, Thirty two million miles. Red Alert."

The alert sounded throughout SHADO's systems. Moonbase launched the interceptors.

A few minutes later, Ellis announced: "Have positive detonation on one, two, and three. Two Ufos destroyed. Interceptor three reports a near miss."

"U.F.O. on positive track, course four-two-seven, one -five-five, blue. Speed zero-Sol-three, Range, one hundred thousand miles," Space Intruder Detector said.

"It's through," Ford said, reading off his terminal screen.

"Termination?" Straker asked.

A new set of figures appeared on Ford's screen. "Termination one-five-nine, three-three-nine. About fifty miles southeast of Aberdeen, Scotland."

"That's the North Sea," Straker pointed out. "Is any shipping in danger?"

"Negative, sir," Johnson answered. "The termination point is well away from any shipping lanes and any of the oil platforms."

"What's it after then?" Straker wondered aloud. Ford just shook his head.

After a long moment, Ford announced: "It's dropped below the water. We've lost it."

"Get Sky-Diver out there," Straker ordered. "I want that area under constant surveillance. Alert the stations along the coast, in case it comes into land underwater."

"Yes, sir," Ford acknowledged. He passed the orders on to the various units involved.

"Now comes the hard part," Straker said to no one in particular.

"Sir?" Johnson asked, a puzzled look on her dark face.

"Waiting for it to move so we can catch it," Straker said. He turned and headed to his office.

SHADO settled down to wait.

CHAPTER 4

Paul Roper sat in a chair in the Moonbase leisure sphere. His travel case was on the floor beside him. But, Roper was not waiting patiently, looking forward to his week's furlough on Earth with his beautiful wife. Instead, he was studying a computer readout, trying to memorize the figures. It wasn't something he wanted to do, but he felt he had no choice.

"Earth blast-off, fifteen minutes precisely," Gay Ellis's voice came over the overhead speakers. "All personnel to leave, report to Control sphere immediately. Will Paul Roper report to Control sphere immediately?"

Roper nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard his name. He stuffed the paper in his pocket.

"Count-down is proceeding," Ellis's voice continued.

It was time to go.

* * *

The Lunar module landed at its private airstrip in central Britain without a hitch, as usual. Roper as checked through security without any trouble, also as usual. If any of the security people noticed his heightened nervousness, they put it down to the stress of being on Moonbase for a month, little more.

Roper picked his car up from its garage at the air strip and headed for his home, southwest of London. As he approached the main interchange that would take him into London's suburbs, the car phone buzzed and he picked it up.

"Well Roper, have you made your decision?" a hated familiar voice asked from the other end.

"I have and I won't do it," Roper told the unidentified voice.

"You're being stupid," the voice said.

"It's no good, I can't go through with it," Roper said. "Do what you want."

"Temper, temper..." the voice mocked.

"For God's sake, I said I won't tell you anything!" Roper replied, losing his temper.

"What about your wife?" The voice asked. Roper went cold.

"My wife?" Roper said.

"Yes."

"Leave her out of it, will you?" Roper demanded.

The connection went dead and Paul Roper, senior SHADO Moonbase programmer was filled with dread.

* * *

Carol Roper sat at her dressing table, checking her hair. She knew her husband was on his way and she wanted everything to be just right, especially herself. She missed him so badly when he was away at work. Sometimes she felt she was married to a sailor away at sea for a month at a time. She knew she was luckier than some. Real sailors could be away from home six months at a time.

She heard a car drive up outside and stop. A car door opened and closed. Footsteps approached over the gravel. But, they didn't sound like Paul's footsteps.

Carol left the bed room to go to the living room, to wait.

"Paul?" she called out, as the door knob slowly turned. The door opened, very slowly.

"Paul, is that you?" she called, suddenly worried. This wasn't like her husband. He didn't play tricks like that.

A gloved hand reached in through the partially open door, reached up and turned out the light. The room went dark and she screamed.

* * *

Roper drove up to his house and parked in front of it. The drapes were drawn. He got out and went to the front door, pulling out his keys. He put his hand on the doorknob, and realized the door was already unlocked. Carol knew better than to leave a door unlocked, even when she knew he was on his way home. As he began to open the front door, a gun went off, the shot just missing his head. He rushed into the house, terrified at what he might find.

Carol was standing with her back to the far wall of the living room. In her hands was his old shotgun. She was pointing it at the door in abject terror.

"Carol!" he shouted. She simply stood there, too terrified to move.

Suddenly: "Paul!"

She ran to him. He took the gun from her hands and held her tight. She was shaking.

"What happened?" Roper asked. Carol started to cry.

"Oh, it was horrible!" she sobbed. "When you came in the door, I thought he'd come back!"

"Now, it's all right now, darling," he assured her, leading her towards the bedroom. She wouldn't stop shaking. "Come on, it's all right."

"Come on, come on, It's all right now, darling," he kept reassuring her. She finally stopped shaking. "It's all right. Come now and sit down," He said, leading her to the bed. She sat down, still sobbing uncontrollably.

"Now calm down darling. It's all right. I'm here," he assured her yet again. He opened the cupboard behind the headboard and pulled out a small bottle of sedatives. They were from a while back, when she had trouble sleeping. He shook out one tablet and handed it to her.

"Here, take one of these."

There was a carafe of water on the bedside table. He poured out a glass for her. She took it and swallowed the pill.

"Shouldn't we phone someone, the police or somebody?" she asked when she'd finally stopped sobbing.

"The police?" he repeated, drawing a momentary blank. "Yes, yes, I'll do that. I'll phone them right away," he promised. He headed for the bedroom door.

"Leave the door open?" she called as he began to close the door. He smiled and left the door half-open for her.

Roper went to stand by the telephone in the living room. He didn't want Carol to hear. He didn't want her any more alarmed than she already was. After a moment, the phone rang and he grabbed it.

"Hello Roper. How's your wife?" the voice on the other end asked.

"You swine!!" Roper hissed, keeping his voice low so his wife couldn't hear. "All right, all right, you've convinced me. I can't talk now. . ."

"Shall I call back later?" the voice asked.

"No," Roper said, fighting to keep his voice low.

"When?" the voice demanded.

"Tomorrow night, twelve o'clock, my car. I'll give you all you want then," Roper promised. "And if you come near my wife again...!"

The connection broke with a loud 'click'.

* * *

Roper carried a breakfast tray with toast and tea into the bedroom from the kitchen. They'd only been married eight months. Before that, he'd been an old bachelor. He'd learned to cook to keep from starving. He still marveled at the fact she had agreed to marry him, despite the difference in their ages. He was ten years older than she was.

He stopped and pulled a flower out of the bouquet in the crystal vase on the credenza. He placed the flower on the tray before he opened the door to the bedroom.

"Carol?" he called.

She was just waking up.

"Hello, darling. How do you feel?" he asked, setting the tray down.

"Fine," she said, yawning. "Hmm, that pill really did the trick."

"Yes," he said. He sat down to watch her eat her breakfast. "Listen, you mustn't worry about last night. It's all right now."

He poured a cup of tea and handed it to her. "Tea?"

"You phoned the police?" she asked, taking the cup and warming her hands around it.

"Yes, they came round," he said. "You were asleep. They seemed to think your scream frightened him off." He paused, remembering something, a detail he might have forgotten.

"You did scream?"

"Oh, yes," she replied with a smile.

"Well, you can forget it," Roper said. "They caught him. Picked him up a couple miles along the road."

"What did he want?"

"Oh, just an intruder. Apparently been after him for some time," Roper said, warming to his tale.

"Will I have to make a statement?" Carol asked.

The question confused him a moment. He hadn't expected it. "I don't know." He shrugged. "Well, maybe not. It's an open and shut case." He remembered his morning's appointment at work, at SHADO H.Q. "Look, darling. I've got to go. I'll ring you."

He looked at her, forehead creased with worry. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Yes, really," she told him with a laugh.

"Right," he replied, still worried. He didn't want to leave her with that person, that blackmailer, still out there, waiting, but there was nothing he could do.

"Bye, darling," she called as he headed for the door.

"Drink your tea," Roper ordered with mocking sternness as he closed the door to the bedroom.

* * *

It was nearly eight in the morning when Roper's car drove through the gates of Harlington-Straker Studios. Roper entered the underground complex through one of the secondary personnel entrances .

He made his way to the Medical Center, to the psychiatric section, as regulations demanded of all personnel returning from tours of duty on the Moon.

Dr. Shroeder and his assistant, Dawson, were waiting when Roper entered the testing room. Roper had seen the room many times before. It felt like hundreds of time, even though Roper knew it hadn't been that often. There was the familiar desk, a couple of chairs, a monitor and a modified polygraph. The room was divided in two by a glass partition..

"Eight-three-seven, Roper, for debriefing tests, doctor," Roper announced himself. Shroeder looked up from the file he was looking through.

"Thank you," Shroeder said. He put down the file and went over to the chair beside the polygraph. "Come here, Roper."

Roper sat in the chair the psychiatrist indicated.

"I assume you're familiar with this test?" Shroeder asked.

"It measures how much strain goes into any decision you make," Roper explained. He was familiar with the tests.

"Yes. It's amazing how hard we work, even on the simplest decisions. Like, whether or not to have a cup of coffee," Shroeder said with a smile. "On big decisions, the stress can render a man useless," he continued more seriously.

As Shroeder spoke, Dawson finished placing the test electrodes on Roper's head and hands.

"Right, all set?" Shroeder asked Roper as Dawson stepped back to the test monitors.

He nodded to Dawson. "Start the test."

The room lights darkened, and the test began. A pad with two buttons sat at on the little desk in front of Roper. Both index fingers were placed on the buttons. The object of the exercise was to determine whether or not he recognized the items projected on the screen. They were only shown for a fraction of a second.

"Stop," Shroeder ordered after a minute. The room lights came up and the test stopped. Roper found he was shaking. He knew he hadn't done well on the test. He also knew this was the second test he'd failed. He hadn't done well on his return from his last tour on the Moon either.

He'd first heard the voice on the phone during his last tour. He'd been asked to feed some nonsense numbers into the Space Intruder Detector for analysis. He knew enough about S.I.D.'s operations to recognize the analysis wouldn't affect the satellite in any way, so he went ahead with the program as requested. That was a mistake. The voice had made further demands this time, threatening his wife. Now, Roper was in too deep. He couldn't go back and admit he'd made a mistake the first time.

Shroeder gave him permission to leave the testing room. Roper went though the door so fast he nearly ran into Alec Freeman in the hall outside.

"Oh, just the man I was looking for," Freeman said, grinning.

Roper was alarmed. He couldn't guess what Freeman might know, what security might have already discovered. "For me?"

"To ask you to come and have a drink," Freeman explained. He gave Roper a curious look.

"Oh, no, I," Roper began, relieved that Freeman was just being his friendly self. "I'll, um, I'll take a rain-check on that."

"Something on your mind?" Freeman asked.

"Oh, nothing, really," Roper said, trying to shrug it off. "It's these kid's games."

"The debriefing tests?" Freeman asked.

"Yeah," Roper said.

"That's not like you, Paul," Freeman chided.

"Well, maybe I'm getting old," Roper suggested.

"Well, they're not just for amusement," Freeman reminded him.

"Let's forget it, shall we?" Roper suggested. He hadn't realized Freeman would be so touchy about the tests. "I've got to ring Carol. I'm taking her out this evening."

"Sure. How is she?" Freeman asked.

"Fine," Roper answered, recognizing too late he had spoken too abruptly. Freeman was giving him another worried look.

"Fine," Roper said, more calmly. "Uh, look, I'll see you later for that drink, Alec, okay?"

"Sure," Freeman agreed, apparently mollified. "See you."

As Roper headed down the hallway, Freeman watched after him. He wondered about Roper's odd reaction. He and Roper had known each other a long time. Freeman had recruited Roper into SHADO. The door opened behind him and Shroeder stepped out, looking over a file in his hands.

"Oh, Doctor..." Freeman began. Shroeder looked up at him. "How did Roper make out in the decision-stress tests?"

"It's too early to say, for certain, but he seemed," Shroeder paused, thinking. "Well, he seemed a bit strung out. Indications of super-numary stress factors during his last tour of duty."

"Any ideas?"

"Not at this stage. Could be anything. Boredom," Shroeder grinned. "Misses his wife."

Freeman chuckled. "See you."

* * *

Later that evening, Roper walked into his house. Carol was dressed up, finishing her make-up at the dressing table.

"Ready?" Roper asked, eyeing her.

"Ready," Carol announced, standing so he could finish his inspection.

"Oh, hold it," Roper said. "I don't know if I can take you out looking like that."

"What do you mean?" she asked. It was a new dress and it fit perfectly.

"Oh, people might say 'What's that beautiful young girl doing out with a broken down old wreck?'" he joked.

"Oh, don't worry," she said, heading into the living room. "You can always tell them I married you for your money."

"They didn't ring," she said, suddenly changing the subject.

"Who?"

"The police."

Roper gave her a puzzled look. Carol shook his head at his forgetfulness, grabbed her purse and took his arm.

"Come on, cradle-snatcher. I'm hungry," she said, leading him out of the house.

* * *

Commander Straker was sitting at his desk, reading the report Shroeder had submitted only a few minutes before. Freeman sat near-by, waiting. The report had been delivered on Freeman's suggestion that Roper seemed more strung-out than was normal for the man.

"Well, what do they say?" Freeman finally asked.

"Not good. The stress decision tests are positive," Straker said. He flipped to one of the pages and began reading aloud. "Signs of anxiety, traces of tension and traces of neurosis." He looked over at Freeman. "And the observers report similar findings. Decision making below par, reflexes bad, impetuosity, nervousness."

"I don't believe it," Freeman said.

"Well, it's all down here," Straker pointed out. "He's an out and out risk, Alec, and we can't afford to take chances."

"I've known Paul Roper for years," Freeman said, rising to defend his friend.

"Well, take a look at the facts, Alec!" Straker said, voice sharp. "The man's a mess! I

don't know why. Check him."

"You know security checked him out just last month," Freeman reminded Straker. "They didn't find anything out of the ordinary."

"Then maybe you need to do the job yourself," Straker suggested. "There's obviously something wrong there."

Straker picked up another report to look at, pointedly ignoring Freeman's continued presence in his office. For a moment, Freeman considered suggesting Straker be checked out as well. Freeman dismissed the idea as quickly as it came. He knew why Straker was upset. He needed to find out why Roper was.

* * *

The object of Freeman's concern had his own problems.

Roper was driving home after a romantic dinner with his wife. She snuggled up to him.

"Lovely evening, darling," she said. "Thank you."

Roper didn't notice he was driving too fast. The car squealed around a corner.

Carol straightened up in her seat. "Hey, I'm not Cinderella, you know."

"Wha...?" Roper responded, finally bringing his attention to his passenger.

"You," she said. "I don't have to be home by midnight."

"Sorry," Roper apologized, slowing the car to a more reasonable speed as they approached the house. Roper pulled the car in front of the house.

"Don't be long," she said, getting out of the car. She looked around at the bushes and trees surrounding the house. She gasped in alarm. "I thought I saw someone."

"What?" Roper asked, looking around. Nothing was moving. "It's nothing," he assured her, climbing out of the car. "We're both tired, there's nothing." He took her arm. "Come on. I'll see you into the house."

Once inside the house, Roper looked around the living room, then the bedroom, with exaggerated care. "All right now?" he asked when she finally stepped into the bedroom.

"Yes, fine," she said, coming up and giving him a kiss that promised more. "Thanks, darling."

"I'll put the car away," he said, heading for the door. He placed his hand on the door knob and gave her a mischievous grin. "All right to close the door?"

"Ohh!" she groaned at him, rolling her eyes. He shut the door.

He went back to the car, checking his watch as he opened the door. It was nearly time. He'd just made it. He drove the car around to the garage and stopped just in front of the garage door instead of pulling in. It was just midnight. The car phone buzzed and he grabbed it.

"Roper?" the unknown voice said.

"Yes?" Roper acknowledged.

"The calculations?"

"Yes, all right," Roper said, dreading what he was about to do. "But you must never contact me or my wife again."

"Yes, of course," the voice agreed.

"Okay, on those conditions, ready? Begin, forty-two degrees, two minutes, angle eight-four. Fifty-eight degrees, seven minutes, angle six-five. Go down two. Sixty-eight degrees, seven minutes. Position, thirty-three degrees, down two. Alternate Coordinates: two-seven-four-two. Now, down three. . ."

* * *

SHADO security picked Roper up almost before he hung up the phone. Alec Freeman

simply shook his head as the security men drove away with Roper in the back seat of the van. He couldn't understand how Roper could turn traitor. It didn't make sense.

Roper was taken to the medical center for interrogation by Shroeder. Two guards stayed in the room with them. They stood carefully back from where Roper sat in front of the same monitor where he'd taken his tests only that morning.

Straker's face was on the monitor this time. He was not a happy man. "The last time, Roper, I want answers! Who are they? What did you tell them? What do they want?"

Roper's lips pressed together, but he didn't answer.

"Come on, come on!" Straker demanded irritably.

Roper simply shook his head.

* * *

Straker flipped off the switch to the monitor and sat back in his chair with a silent snarl.

Freeman knew the commander had just gotten home when he was called to come back to headquarters because of the Roper problem. Freeman was tired and wanted to do nothing more than curl up in a corner somewhere. He suspected Straker was in the same shape.

"You're pushing him too hard," Freeman said quietly.

"We've got to make him talk, Alec!" Straker said. He took a deep breath as though willing himself to calm down. "Let's try another angle. Money?"

"No."

"Blackmail?"

"I don't see it."

"Well, threats?" Straker asked. His impatience was growing visibly. "Violence?"

"His wife, maybe," Freeman said.

"All right," Straker conceded. "Tell me about her."

"Carol? She's young, attractive. Roper's crazy about her. I could understand it if she's..."

"Understand it?" Straker was close to shouting. "Can't you accept the fact that..."

"That he's a traitor?" Freeman interrupted. "I know that, but it's also a matter of degree."

"Degree nothing! It's what he's told them that matters, not why," Straker said. He stopped and a familiar, calculating coldness came into his face. "Well, you say he's crazy about his wife. We'll see just how crazy."

Straker switched on the desk monitor and Roper's face came onto the screen. Shroeder was standing over him.

"All right, Roper," they heard Shroeder saying. "Let's take it from the beginning, once more."

"Oh, just a moment, Doctor," Straker said. Shroeder glanced at the monitor and stepped away from Roper.

"All right, Roper," Straker said to Roper on the screen. "So, it's your wife."

Roper jumped like he'd been given an electrical shock.

Straker nodded to Freeman in confirmation, then turned back to the screen. Freeman watched as Straker's expression shifted from cold calculation to an almost brotherly warmth. Freeman had seen it before and it always amazed him.

"And naturally, you don't want to see her get hurt. And you think that by being quiet, you'll be able to protect her," Straker said. "You tell us what we want to know. That's the best way to give her protection."

Freeman turned on the tape-recorder on the desk.

"... thirty-three degrees, down two. Alternate coordinates: two-seven-four-two., Now,

down three. . ." Roper's voice said from the tape.

"Numbers, angles. What do they mean, Roper?"

"I was given program numbers for S.I.D." Roper admitted. "Code, feed in certain information, memorize the results."

"So, we've got a batch of data," Freeman said. "But, how do we apply it?"

Roper shrugged. "I can give you the data, not the significance."

Straker's warmth vanished into irritation once again. "You mean to tell me, you didn't know what you were doing when you handed over those figures?"

"No."

Straker turned to Freeman. "We're going to have to put everything into finding out."

* * *

The Moonbase command crew reviewed the figures sent them, recalculating, reworking, rethinking them. With a little huff of disappointment, Lieutenant Ellis turned to Barry.

"Get me Commander Straker," she said.

"Yes, Lieutenant," Barry acknowledged, keying the sequence that would connect Moonbase to headquarters.

* * *

"Well, keep working on it, Lieutenant," Straker instructed after being told of their failure to make anything out of the figures given them. "Are there any ideas from SID?"

"So far, we've got a series of three-dimensional direction indicators," Ellis said.

"Now, what does that mean?" Straker asked, tone sharp with annoyance and fatigue.

"Well, it's like some sort of navigation course, only in three dimensions," Ellis explained. "Like a course for some sort of space vehicle to steer."

"Like a Ufo?"

"Could be," Ellis admitted.

"Well, as you say, Lieutenant, it's not much, but maybe it's a start. Let me know the moment you have anything."

"Right."

The monitor went dark.

Straker turned to Freeman. "A flight path, but to where?"

After a moment, Straker shook his head and turned towards his office. Freeman fell into step with him. Straker sat down at his desk and Freeman took his usual seat on the bench in the corner.

"Well, let's see what we've got," Straker said. It seemed to help him order his thoughts if he could verbalize them.

"It's some sort of a flight path," Freeman said.

"And the fact that they chose Roper to do their dirty work," Straker reminded him. "Why?"

"One, because he had access to S.I.D. and understood its operations better than most."

"And two," Straker said. "They knew he was particularly vulnerable where his wife was concerned."

"Well, he's told us all he knows."

Straker sat back in his chair. "Except who his contact was. Who was on the other end of that phone?" Straker was silent for a long moment. Freeman could almost see the wheels turning in his head. Suddenly, Straker reached over to the intercom on his desk and pressed the button to connect him with the duty supervisor.

"I want an immediate yellow alert on all SHADO installations," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," the duty officer acknowledged.

Straker looked over at Freeman, his finger still on the intercom key. "Let him go, Alec."

"What?" Freeman asked in sudden confusion.

"Let Roper go in one hour's time."

"Your key is still down, sir," the duty officer's voice came over the intercom.

"Oh, thank you," Straker said, sounding surprised. He lifted his finger from the key.

"Very neat," Freeman snorted in disgust. "You've just let the whole base know we're gonna release Roper in an hour."

Straker looked thoughtful. "Yes. I've been thinking about Roper's contact, Alec. Whoever he is, he would have to be able to radio Moonbase. He would know Roper's movements on Earth, have access to his records." He glanced over at Freeman. "There's only one answer."

"You mean, someone on this base," Freeman said, catching on.

"Yes, someone on this base," Straker agreed. "Let him go, Alec. We must draw them out into the open."

"Okay," Freeman agreed.

They left the office together.

Ford sat at his station, speaking to a microphone. Lieutenant Ellis' face was on the monitor screen in front of him.

"I'm not sure I've got that," he was saying. Straker stepped closer as Ford beckoned to him. "One moment," Ford told Ellis.

Straker gave him a curious look.

"Lieutenant Ellis for you, sir," he told the commander. Straker moved closer to the monitor.

"I've had Joan Harrington work over Roper's figures," Ellis said.

"And what does she make of them?"

Ellis seemed to come to a decision, one she didn't like. "They describe relative planetary positions."

"Which planets?" Straker asked.

"Considering the urgency of the problem," Ellis said with obvious reluctance. "There seems to be no choice but to make an educated guess."

"All right, Lieutenant, educate me!" Straker ordered, irritation bubbling to the surface.

"The relative positions of the Sun, Moon and Earth would fit Roper's figures. One snag, the last bit of information is a time reference," Ellis said. "But it still doesn't make sense."

"Well, you've come up with enough to scare the daylights out of me, Lieutenant. Keep working on that last sequence. Out."

Straker flipped a switch on the console and the monitor went dark.

* * *

Freeman and Roper walked down the corridor, away from the bare security cell Roper had spent the past few hours.

"Did you swing this? It seems pretty suspect to me," Roper said.

"Look, if Straker says you can go, don't ask too many questions," Freeman advised.

"Yes, but he's not exactly the forgiving type," Roper reminded him.

"Don't push your luck, just go."

Freeman clapped Roper on the back, pushing him toward the exit.

He watched Roper leave the complex. Then, he headed for Major Gunderson's office to

finish the arrangements on the security detail to find Roper's contact.

* * *

Lieutenant Johnson spotted Straker heading down the corridor pass her station.

"Sir?" She called out. Straker stopped and turned back to her.

"You wanted to know when Roper left?" she asked.

"You mean, he's gone already?" Straker asked. He sounded a bit confused her question.

"Why, yes, sir," Johnson responded, surprised at his reaction.

"But my orders were that he was to be released in one hour's time," Straker reminded her. He seemed more than a little upset.

"Yes, sir, but I understand Colonel Freeman..." she broke off at the cold anger in Straker's face.

"I see!"

Straker hurried away from her, towards the duty supervisor's station.

"Signal a maximum security alert and get me Captain Carlin on Sky-diver," Straker ordered.

"Yes, sir," Ford acknowledged flipping the switches that would connect his station of all of SHADO's systems. "Attention all defense systems," he announced into the microphone. "This is a maximum security alert. Attention all defense systems, this is a maximum security alert. Condition: red!"

The red alert siren began to sound at every SHADO base and operational group.

"Your instructions have been received and understood. Standing by," Space Intruder Detector announced.

At the sound of the alarm on Moonbase, the three astronauts waiting in the ready room grabbed their helmets and jumped into their launch chutes. Within two minutes, all three astronauts were space borne in their interceptors, waiting for instructions to locate and destroy the alien intruder.

Straker's voice came over the alert system. "This is Straker. We are faced with a probable Ufo attack against an unknown target. Until we have further information, all SHADO defense systems and vehicles will remain on alert."

In less than five minutes, Ford was able to turn to Straker. "Section security alert operational, sir. Captain Carlin standing by."

"Right," Straker acknowledged. Peter Carlin's face came on the monitor. Straker took Ford's microphone. "Captain Carlin? Straker."

"Carlin, reading you," Carlin responded.

"I want you to launch Sky-One for possible interception."

"Area?" Carlin asked.

"Green zero-B," Straker said. "Make a twenty-mile radius sweep around SHADO H.Q."

"That sounds pretty close to home, sir," Carlin pointed out. "What's going on?"

"That's our problem, Captain," Straker grated. "You just concentrate on being ready. Out."

He punched the key and the monitor went dark.

* * *

"Launch stations!" Carlin ordered his Sky-Diver crew. He grabbed his leather flight jacket and helmet and headed for his own launch tube.

"Yes, sir! Launch Stations!" his first officer announced. The launch alarm sounded. "Clear one!"

"One clear," the systems officer announced.

"Clear two!"

"Two clear."

"Check boosters!"

Carlin buckled the chin strap in his helmet and jumped into Sky-One's launch chute. His crew was well trained. He knew his boat was in good hands as his fighter launched and broke to the sea surface.

The plane leaped into the night sky.

Carlin checked his instruments and plotted his course to green-zero-B, Harlington-Straker Studios.

* * *

S.I.D.'s voice came over SHADO's systems. "Have relocated U.F.O. in area four-two-seven-blue."

"Get me Captain Carlin, immediately!" Straker ordered.

"Yes, sir," Ford acknowledged. He flipped the appropriate switches. "SHADO Control to Sky-One."

Straker took the microphone. "Carlin, this is Straker."

"Receiving you," Carlin's voice came over the speaker.

"Suspect driving east on route four in bronze Omen with SHADO package," Straker said. "Follow and observe."

"Roger, out."

* * *

Roper was driving home. A bright spot appeared above the road. It enlarged into a gold U.F.O. He jerked hard on the wheel to avoid the blasts of plasma the alien was shooting at him.

He was a computer technician, not a grand prix driver. Despite his best efforts, the car went off the road, out of control. Another blast threw the Omen into the air. It landed against the fuel pumps of a roadside service station.

Roper found himself in the air, thrown from the car. He landed in soft earth by the side of the road. Behind him, the service station exploded and burned. Over the roar of the flames, Roper heard the scream of jet engines.

* * *

From Sky-One, Peter Carlin looked down on the destruction. The flames leaped into the air, almost above his plane.

"Sky-One to SHADO Control. Am positioned over target area. Building below destroyed," he said into his helmet microphone. "See no sign of life. Request U.F.O. fix and attack coordinates."

"Roger, Sky-One," came Ford's reply over the radio.

In the control center, Ford looked over to where Straker still stood, listening. Straker's head was bowed and he seemed almost grief stricken at Carlin's report.

Ford relayed the fix and attack information to Sky-One.

Within moments, Carlin radioed back, confirming the destruction of the alien craft.

* * *

The local emergency team dispatched to deal with the service station fire radioed their home base that they had found a survivor. The man was identified as Paul Roper.

CHAPTER 5

Ford listened on his headset. "Right," he told the voice in his earpiece. He looked over at Straker, still standing beside the monitor, waiting. "They're bringing him in now, sir."

"Thank you," Straker said, very quietly. He walked away, to his office.

Ford looked after him a moment. He didn't understand what was going on in Straker's mind. He had seen the horror and grief in Straker's face when it was assumed Roper had died. He had seen the relief when Roper was found alive.

Ford also knew Straker was likely to have Roper executed for treason, assuming the trial board concurred. The duty supervisor figured he never would understand his commanding officer. He wasn't altogether sure he wanted to.

* * *

Freeman was waiting by the entrance when Roper was brought in. Two blue uniformed security men accompanied the gurney down the corridor to SHADO's medical center.

"Hold it a moment," Freeman called out. The guards slowed and Freeman stepped closer to the dirty, singed man on the gurney. Roper was conscious but he was obviously in pain.

"All right, Paul?" Freeman asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Roper said. He managed a crooked grin. Freeman stepped back and the two guards resumed pushing the gurney towards the medical center doors.

* * *

Another pair of SHADO security men were driving down the M6. Only five minutes before, they'd lost sight of their quarry, Medic Albert Dawson. He had taken the ramp onto the motor way and disappeared, somehow.

"Maintain surveillance for SHADO medic Dawson," Straker's voice came over their radio. They looked at one another. Straker wasn't going to be pleased to find they almost had Dawson and lost him.

* * *

Straker was at his desk, watching Freeman pace the floor. Freeman had poured himself a drink. He was angry. They both were.

"This is a war, Alec," Straker pointed out. "People have to be at risk."

"I don't buy that and I never will," Freeman nearly shouted. "It's too complicated for people like me. And too simple for people like you!"

Straker watched Freeman for a long moment. His expression softened just a little. "Well, how is Roper?" he asked in a mild tone.

"Conscious," Freeman said. "He'll be all right."

"So. He gave us two wrong figures in the timing sequence," Straker said, thoughtfully. His hands were steepled in front of his face.

"Two wrong figures?"

"Yes. It must have been a memory lapse," Straker said, leaning back in his chair. "Not surprising, considering the strain he was under."

"But, we got our figures from the tape," Freeman said, thinking aloud. "That means, the aliens have the same false information."

Straker nodded. "Yes. We finally managed to sort it out." He paused for emphasis. "An hour ago. It would have taken them about five minutes?"

"I realize that," Freeman said. "But, they obviously thought he did it on purpose. A mistake that could have cost him his life."

There was sudden horror in Straker's face. "Wait a minute. It could cost him his wife!" "Carol!" Freeman remembered. He started for the door.

"No," Straker ordered sharply. "You stay here. I'll send a couple of guards to Roper's house."

* * *

The unmarked blue van continued down the narrow road towards its new destination. McCary, in the passenger seat, picked up the car phone and flipped the switch that would connect them to SHADO HQ.

"We've just passed the Raften fly-over," he said. "E.T.A. Roper's house, six minutes."

* * *

Carol Roper was alone and worried about her husband. He had left to put the car away and hadn't come back. The car was still there. She'd checked. He had simply vanished.

There was a noise outside. It didn't sound like an animal. She went to the closet and got out the shotgun. She checked to make sure it was loaded. Paul didn't like it when she left it loaded and he sometimes unloaded it without telling her. Her hands began to shake and she braced herself against the wall beside the bedroom door.

The front door began to open, very slowly.

A gloved hand reached inside for the light switch, just like last time. Carol aimed the shotgun at the door, above and to the right of the hand. The blast went through the door. A man she didn't recognize fell into the room, grabbing at his face. He had a handgun and it dropped on the floor as he fell.

Carol stared at the man and began to cry. She hadn't meant to hurt anyone. She just wanted to scare him away. She stuffed a fist into her mouth to keep herself from screaming. She didn't notice that the shotgun had slipped out of her other hand.

She watched in terrified horror as the man reached out for the handgun. He raised it and pulled the trigger.

* * *

Straker sat at his desk working on Roper's figures. He noted down a set of calculations, stared at them. Then he wadded up the paper and tossed it away. He missed the trash can by the desk.

After a moment, he stood and went over to the planetary display set into the wall opposite the desk. He flipped the switch and the display came to life.

* * *

"Data and figures from flight plan passed to aliens by Roper have been analyzed," Space Intruder Detector announced to Moonbase. "Input information, incorrect. Results, negative."

Ellis shook her head in frustration and turned to Harrington.

"What do you make of it, Joan?"

"Nothing."

"Straker's not gonna' buy that," Ellis reminded her. "Re-run it."

"It won't alter the results, Lieutenant," Harrington told her.

"It will if you permutate it differently," Ellis said.

"If you insist, Lieutenant," Harrington said with a sigh..

* * *

Straker looked up from the figures on his desk as the office doors slid open. Freeman walked in. The Australian officer's expression was grim. He was holding a file and dropped it on the desk.

"Dawson died ten minutes ago," Freeman said.

"Yes, a shot gun makes quite a mess." Straker responded. He'd already seen the preliminary report.

Freeman handed Straker a tiny object. "The doctors found this."

Straker turned it over in his hand to look at it more closely. It looked like a transistor or a small diode.

"It's some sort of electronic probe," Freeman explained. "It'd been inserted into his temple."

"Hmm," Straker murmured, dropping the object on his desk. "Well, I think the picture is almost complete."

He stood and went over to the planetary display, turning it on. Freeman simply watched him, not moving from his place in front of the desk.

"Come over here, Alec and watch this," Straker said. Freeman stepped over to the display.

They watched the model of the Earth and moon as it traveled around a simulated sun.

"Here," Straker pointed out the moon as it approached lunar sunrise over the mark that indicated Moonbase. "There!" He flipped the switch, stopping the motion.

"Sunrise on the Moon," Freeman said.

"Exactly," Straker agreed. "And that's how they plan to make the attack. Fly in across the lunar horizon at sunrise, keeping between Moonbase and the Sun."

"Visually undetectable."

"Totally."

"But it would be picked up by Moonbase radar the moment it crossed the horizon," Freeman reminded his commanding officer.

"No, not if the attack were planned to coincide with heavy sunspot activity like that predicted in two day's time," Straker said. "And, with Roper's flight plan to guide the attacker."

"Moonbase wouldn't stand a chance," Freeman completed.

"Chance? No," Straker said, thoughtfully. "But we have Roper's flight plan too, remember?"

"But, I don't see how we can stop it."

Straker considered the problem for a moment. "One man, on his own, at a predetermined position out on the Moon's surface. A rocket launcher, polarized visor."

"It'd be suicide," Freeman protested.

"Possibly," Straker agreed.

"But, you can't expect a man to. . ."

Straker interrupted, "I don't need a volunteer, Alec."

"You mean Roper." Freeman picked up the file from the desk and pulled out a photograph. It was Carol Roper, face down on the floor of her living room, shot through the heart by Dawson. "And I suppose you used this to twist his arm?" Freeman asked, shaking the paper in Straker's face.

"No, I didn't have to," Straker replied very quietly. "He's doing it to try and 'even' the score."

"And when are you going to tell him?"

"Maybe he'll never need to know."

* * *

Roper was on the next shuttle to the Moon. Straker didn't bother to order a guard. Where

would Roper go from Moonbase?

The Moonbase control sphere operatives helped Roper with his equipment when the time came. He didn't have much experience with space suits. He was glad to have their help.

Harrington finished checking the radio connections. She nodded to Ellis.

"Right," Ellis acknowledged. Roper was almost ready to head out to the surface. "One hour. Now, once you're outside, maintain radio silence," she instructed.

Roper nodded his understanding. "One favor," he said. "I couldn't tell Carol, my wife. If you could book an Earth call, by the way, if you know what I mean?"

Ellis smiled. "I'll sort things out when you get back," she promised.

A beeper went off on the console. Ellis flipped a switch and Straker appeared on the monitor.

"All set?" Straker's image asked.

"All set," Ellis answered.

"Good," Straker said. "Begin stage one. Oh, Roper, good luck." The monitor went dark. Lieutenant Harrington accompanied him down the corridor to the main airlock. She double checked his visor and life support connections.

He hefted the rocket launcher in one hand. For something so deadly, it didn't weigh much.

"Prepare for exit procedure," he heard Barry say over his suit radio.

"Good luck, Paul," Harrington said. The airlock door opened and he walked into the tiny chamber. He watched the air pressure indicator drop to zero, felt the air in his suit expand in the absence of pressure. The outer doors opened and he was on his own.

The area selected for him was several miles east of Moonbase. It was rocky, with many peaks and ridges, but it was directly on the flight path. The lower lunar gravity made his walk easier than it would have been on Earth, despite the space suit. He would reach the designated spot well within the time allotted.

Roper found a large rock to rest the rocket launcher on and he settled down to wait. It wouldn't be long. His suit chronometer showed he had ten minutes until sunrise.

* * *

Moonbase waited. The radar tracking screens were snowy with static.

"Is there any chance of the radar trackers working?" Harrington asked.

"Not with all this sunspot activity," Ellis reminded her. The radio emissions were expected to die down in a day or so. In the meantime, they were blind.

"The time is now zero-seven decimal four-nine. Sunrise is in ten minutes," Harrington announced. She flipped the switch to connect to SHADO Headquarters. "This is Moonbase time check at zero-seven, decimal six, precisely."

* * *

The sun started to peep over the lunar horizon. Roper lowered the polarized visor on his helmet and the worst of the glare went away.

He began to load the charges into the rocket launcher.

* * *

Moonbase waited. Ellis checked the chronometer on the wall above Harrington's console.

"Roper's on his own," Ellis commented. The tracking screens hissed in the background.

"Twenty-three seconds after sun-up, Lieutenant," Harrington said after a moment.

* * *

Roper waited. On the horizon, the bright white sun rose over the peaks. A dark spot crossed the sun. A U.F.O., exactly as predicted.

The alien ship crossed the landscape, coming towards him. Roper fired his first shot. It missed and the U.F.O. ducked behind a ridge.

He started to load a second round. He had trouble getting his hands to work in the heavy space gloves. Roper was a computer technician. His only contact with things like rocket launchers was in basic training and that was years ago. He'd never even worn a spacesuit in vacuum until now. He managed to get his hands to work and got the missile properly loaded in the launcher.

The U.F.O. began dancing in and out of the ridges, taking evasive maneuvers. It was hard to see the alien ship, even with the visor down. The rising sun made him squint. His eyes watered, but he had no way to wipe them.

The U.F.O. came closer. Roper aimed with extreme care and pulled the trigger once again. He knew he wouldn't get another chance. This time, the charge hit its target. The U.F.O. spun out of control, careening over his head before crashing into the surface. The alien craft lay still on the gray surface for a long moment.

Roper wondered if there were any survivors. Straker would be happy if there were survivors.

In a moment, the question was moot. The U.F.O. exploded, sending debris flying in a million directions.

Roper ducked and tried to take cover in the rocks as large chunks of the alien craft rained down all round him.

"U.F.O. destroyed," he announced into his suit radio, finally breaking radio silence.

* * *

Ellis and the other Moonbase operatives breathed a sigh of relief.

"He's done it," Ellis crowed. She turned to Barry. "Get a Moon-hopper out there and fast."

"Right, Lieutenant," Barry acknowledged with a grin.

* * *

Roper was having trouble breathing. He didn't understand why until he looked down and saw a small rip in his suit leg. His suit was losing pressure. The rip must have happened when the debris was coming down around him. He didn't recall being hit by anything, but obviously, he had. He couldn't tell if there was any other damage to his space suit. He wasn't even sure how to check if the rip was the only puncture.

"Losing a little air," he announced into his radio. "Damage only slight."

There was a Velcro pocket on the leg of his suit and he opened it to pull out a tube of sealant. He opened the sealant and smeared some on the tear. The sealant bubbled and popped. He dropped the tube and had to struggle to get down and pick it up. His body didn't want to work. He managed to get up again to lean against the rocks.

Roper smeared more sealant on the rip with the same result. He wondered if he was doing something wrong. He couldn't remember the instructions he'd been given in basic training concerning space suit repairs. He wondered if he needed to put a patch over the sealant. He couldn't remember. His hands started to go numb and he dropped the tube of sealant again. This time, he didn't have the energy to get it again.

His breathing became more labored as the pressure dropped further. He began coughing as blood began to bubble in his lungs.

"Paul, is everything all right?" He heard Ellis ask over the radio.

"Yes, sure," Roper replied.

"Listen, a Moon-hopper is on its way," Ellis said. "It'll be with you in minutes."

"Fine." Roper knew he wasn't going home alive. He hoped it would be Freeman who would tell Carol he wasn't coming home. Freeman was a good friend.

"Tell... Tell Straker...Tell him I hope this evens things up," Roper said into his radio. It was getting hard to think. He couldn't catch his breath.

"Paul?" he thought he heard Ellis call.

"Tell...Tell...Carol," Roper began with his last breath. He never finished.

* * *

"I hope you're happy," Freeman said when news of Roper's death was announced. Straker gave him a puzzled look.

"Do you really think I wanted him to die?" he asked.

"No," Freeman admitted. He crossed to office to the drink dispenser in the corner and poured himself a whiskey. "It just makes it nice and tidy and convenient. You don't have to tell Roper we let his wife get killed."

"Is that supposed to be my fault, too?" Straker wondered aloud.

"No, we missed, that's all," Freeman said. "I just wish you'd sometimes let the rest of us poor idiots know what you're thinking. We're not mind-readers."

"I thought my instructions were very clear," Straker said.

"You wanted to find out who Roper's contact was," Freeman reminded him. "We found that out. You didn't bother to say anything about setting a trap for that Ufo and using Roper for bait."

"Oh," the commander murmured.

"Gunderson handed me his resignation," Freeman said. He pulled an envelope from his jacket and handed it to Straker.

"Why?" Straker asked.

"Roper," Freeman said, as if that explained everything. Straker gave him another puzzled look.

"Remember Roper's tests last month?"

"Yes," Straker said slowly. "You had a hunch about him. We had Gunderson check him out. He came up clean."

"That's right," Freeman agreed. "But, when I went back and checked the security report on Roper, I found it wasn't complete. Gunderson gave the assignment to some new guys and signed their report off without checking it. We could have had everything wrapped up a month ago."

"And maybe Roper and his wife would still be alive, and maybe we could have caught Dawson before he did any damage?" Straker wondered.

"That's how I see it," Freeman said.

"I see," Straker said. "And who do you suggest we get to replace Gunderson as chief of internal security?"

"I don't know," Freeman admitted. "I'll send some feelers out through the intelligence community. See who I come up with."

"Good," Straker said. He turned to the pile of files on his desk and picked up the top one.

"By the way," Freeman said. Straker looked up from the file. "I hear Paul Foster had an interesting first day at the health farm."

Straker waited for him to continue.

Freeman grinned. "Apparently he was hung-over when he got there and passed out in the

sauna. He had a nightmare about being kidnaped by aliens."

"Some nightmare," Straker commented.

"It gets better," Freeman assured him. "He was taken into a Ufo and you ordered Waterman to shoot it down."

"Did he?" Straker asked.

"No, and you were positively infuriated. Then, the Ufo crashed on the Moon and the Moonbase medic didn't have a clue as to how to get Foster's breathing back to normal," Freeman said. "I guess that's when Frazer found him and he came to."

"Well, I hope he learned something from it," Straker said.

"Oh yes. Don't go into a sauna with a hangover," Freeman said. "I'd better get started on finding a new security chief." Freeman finished his drink and put the glass back on the shelf.

"Good hunting," Straker called out to Freeman before the doors closed behind him.

CHAPTER 6

Cass Fowler looked over at the woman driving the car he was riding in and smiled. The woman was fashionably thin, a little on the old side, but he didn't care. Her husband had money and she was willing to share it with him, her lover. He reached over to squeeze her thigh, partly exposed by her short skirt that rode up as she drove.

"Later," she said, pulling his hand away. She smiled at him in silent promise as she maneuvered the car down the dark, tree-lined road.

* * *

On SHADO's Moonbase, a U.F.O. was being tracked.

"I have a possible sighting, Lieutenant," Barry announced as the blip remained after another pass. After the trouble they'd had with sunspot activity the week before, Barry wasn't making any assumptions concerning the electronics on Moonbase.

"Bearing?" Ellis asked.

"One dash nine," Barry reported.

Ellis turned to the microphone on her own console in the center of the Moonbase Control Sphere. "This is Moonbase Control. Yellow alert, repeat, yellow alert."

* * *

The three on duty astronauts in the leisure sphere grabbed their helmets and jumped into the chutes that would deposit them in their space craft.

* * *

Space Intruder Detector spoke up. "Red alert, Confirming U.F.O. 429-117 Blue"

"Red alert, interceptors immediate launch," Ellis announced.

The three interceptor launch pads rose to the surface. The three interceptor craft rose from the surface to scream away after the intruder.

* * *

In the underground confines of SHADO Headquarters, Straker was pacing the control room as he listened to the interplay between the Moonbase control center and the interceptor pilots. Paul Foster, back from his stint at the health farm', stood beside one of the radar operatives. He watched the blip as it crossed the screen towards Earth.

After a moment, Lieutenant Ford announced: "We have the termination, sir."

Straker stopped and moved over to the duty supervisor's station.

"What is it?"

"Western Europe," Ford translated from the screen in front of him.

"Anything more specific?" Straker demanded.

"The path indicates grid reference 2 x 104, Southern England," Ford said.

"Southern England..." Straker repeated to himself. The faintest hint of a smile appeared on his finely honed face. He stepped over to a table-height cabinet set in one corner of the control room and pulled out a one of the maps stored in the drawers underneath. He spread the map out on the cabinet top, looking it over.

"Interceptors closing in," Foster announced.

"I'll give the command," Straker told him.

"Sir?" Foster wondered aloud in confusion.

"Tell Moonbase I'll give the command," Straker said.

"Yes, sir," Foster acknowledged. He stepped over to Ford's station and took the microphone. "SHADO Control to Moonbase. Orders from Commander Straker..."

"U.F.O. range eleven million miles," S.I.D. announced. "Nine million miles."

"Interceptors within range," Foster said. "Sir, do we intercept?"

Straker stared at the map without answering.

"Range closing, seven million miles," S.I.D. said.

"Sir, do we intercept?" Foster asked.

"No... negative," Straker said, finally.

"Negative?" Foster asked in disbelief.

"That s what I said," Straker replied. There was an edge to his voice. He didn't like being questioned.

"Five million miles," S.I.D.'s synthesized voice announced.

Foster took the microphone from Ford's console once again. "SHADO Control to Moonbase. Interception negative, repeat, negative."

* * *

On Moonbase, the three Control sphere operatives looked at each other in confused surprise.

Lieutenant Ellis shrugged and turned to the microphone on her own console. "This is Moonbase Control to interceptors. Return to base."

The three interceptor pilots were also confused by the change of orders. They had never gotten orders to let a Ufo through before. They wondered what headquarters had in mind.

"U.F.O. passing outer defenses," Space Intruder Detector advised. "U.F.O. maintaining course. Confirmed speed. Sol zero decimal 4."

* * *

"Ufo signal now negative, sir," Foster said, looking up from the monitor he'd been watching. "It must have landed."

"Map reference?" Straker asked, not looking up from the map on the table.

"Reference 119 -120 , approximately," Foster read off.

"119 - 120," Straker repeated. He traced out the intersecting reference lines with his fingers. "Some where there." He pointed out an area on the paper, then looked up at Foster who had come over to look at the map. "I want the whole area cordoned off. Alert mobiles one, two and three."

"Yes, sir," Foster acknowledged. He nodded to Ford.

"This is SHADO Control. . ." the duty supervisor announced over SHADO's secure communications network.

"Colonel Foster," Straker called quietly. He beckoned to the younger officer. Foster stepped over to the table.

* * *

The SHADO mobiles arrived in the area within half an hour of the alert being called. The trailer rigs that carried them were marked 'Markers Transport and Storage, London, Brussels, Amsterdam, Madrid, Rome'.

Inside the mobiles, Ford's voice came over the radio. "Mobile-2 proceed to area 119-128."

* * *

The yellow Chevy headed down the dark road. Inside, Liz smiled at her passenger.

"It's not much further now," she said. Cass smiled.

After a few minutes, she pulled the car into a driveway that adjoined a two storey country house. They got out of the car and went inside.

Suddenly, Liz wasn't as sure as she had been. Cass walked around the main floor with a set of snapshots in his hands. Snapshots he had asked her to take of the house, the furniture, the walls, the paintings on the walls.

"You did a good job, Liz," he said after a while.

"I... I can't," she mumbled, suddenly afraid. He grabbed her and kissed her full on the mouth. She melted into his arms once more.

"Go and get it," he ordered. She did as she was told, hating him for making her do it, hating herself for letting him make her obey him. She went to the sideboard and opened a drawer, pulling out a handgun. It was her husband's gun, the gun he left in this house so she could protect herself against intruders. The house was half a mile from the nearest neighbors and there had been reports of burglaries in the area.

* * *

Alec Freeman walked into the command center to begin his duty shift. He stood for a moment to watch the activity. Peters paused in her duties to let him know what had happened. He thanked her and stepped down to the main floor, to Straker.

"Hello, Alec," Straker greeted.

"So, you let one through," Freeman said.

"That's right."

"Why don't we do the job properly?" Freeman asked.

Straker gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"Ask the aliens around for a drink?"

The puzzlement disappeared. "Let's go into the office," he said, heading in that direction. Freeman fell into step beside him. The office doors closed behind them.

Straker stopped to face Freeman.

"We're fighting a series of losing battles here, Alec. Why? Because we don't really know who, or what we're fighting," Straker explained. "I've waited months for a chance like this, Alec. A Ufo, right on our own doorstep. That's why I let this one through. And those mobiles are on their way to bring it in, intact, before any deterioration sets in."

"Meanwhile, there's a potential killer, or killers at large," Freeman reminded him. He considered it a fool-hardy gamble at best. The aliens were too dangerous, too unpredictable to allowed any access to Earth.

"Yes, I know it's a risk," Straker conceded. "But the area has a low population density. It's mostly virgin forest. The danger factor must be very slight."

* * *

The search seemed to go on forever. Foster called in to headquarters.

"Go ahead, Mobile-1," Ford's voice said over the secure radio.

"Have covered area Blue X-7 P, Q and R," Foster said. "Ufo negative."

"Roger, Mobile-1. Proceed to link with Mobile-3 at location 118,-109," Ford instructed. In the control center, Ford turned to Straker and Freeman. "SHADO Mobiles 2 and 3 are due to report any time now. Areas X-8 and 9 are practically covered."

"What about Mobile-1?" Freeman asked.

"His progress is slower, he has the densest area," Ford explained.

"Every inch of that forest has to be searched," Straker reminded them. "Somewhere in there, there's a Ufo, and we're going to find it intact." There was excitement in Straker's voice. He reminded Freeman of a cat who knew there was a bird somewhere near. He was practically chattering.

* * *

It was the explosion that caught Foster's attention and located the U.F.O. By some miracle the forest didn't catch fire. The three mobiles made their way to the explosion area.

Foster sighted the remains of the alien craft and shook his head. He picked up the microphone. "Mobile-1 to SHADO Control."

"Go ahead one," Ford said.

"Have located Ufo, position Blue area 119-113."

"This is Straker. Advise on condition."

"It's a total wreck," Foster said.

"Is there any sign of life, Colonel?" Straker asked. There was deep disappointment in his voice.

"Investigating now, sir," Foster said, getting out of his seat.

* * *

Liz and Cass finished their dinner. Liz cleared the table and began washing the dishes. Her hands were shaking. The more she thought about it, the less she liked Cass's idea. It was dangerous, foolish. A china cup slipped from her soapy fingers. It hit the floor and shattered.

"Nervous?" Cass asked with a grin.

"What on earth do you think?" she snapped at him.

He pulled her toward him. "Come on now, pull yourself together," he said. "Let's go over it once again. Take it from eleven o'clock." She turned away from him, shaking her head. This wasn't going to work.

"From eleven o'clock," he repeated.

"At eleven o'clock," she began. "We finished supper and I did the washing up."

"There's something else."

"What do you mean?" she asked, suddenly confused. She hated it when he did that to her, changing the subject suddenly, confusing her.

"What do you do before doing the washing up?"

"I call up Mrs. Pearson," she said, remembering. "I tell her that I'm ringing her from the cottage, and I ask her over for lunch tomorrow, then I . . ."

"Why?" Cass interrupted. "Why do you invite her over then?"

"I'm nervous about being here on my own," Liz said. "Then I tell her two things. First, that Jack won't be with me, that he's gone off on a business trip. Secondly, that I'm going to go to bed and take a sleeping pill."

* * *

"Dispatch an analysis team to the area," Straker told Paulson.

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged.

Straker stalked out of the control room, toward his office. Freeman followed him. Freeman knew that losing the U.F.O. was a bitter disappointment and even the most independent of cats needed company once in a while.

"Just one thing puzzles me," Freeman began as Straker settled in behind his desk.

"You should be so lucky."

Freeman ignored the bitterness in Straker's voice. "How come that Ufo is a total wreck? It hasn't been in the atmosphere long enough to deteriorate."

"Maybe it was the difficulty of the landing area," Straker suggested. "Could be a thousand reasons."

Ford's voice came over the intercom: "Mobile-1 has reported a body inside the wreck of

the Ufo."

"An alien?"

"They can't tell yet. It's severely charred," Ford said. "They're going to call back as soon as they have more information."

* * *

Liz was wringing her hands with nervousness. "Then, at eleven-thirty, I check the front door to see that it isn't locked from the inside., so that Jack can get in. And then I go to bed."

"You don't go to bed," Cass corrected. She looked at him in confusion. "There's something else."

"Don't shout," she said, pressing her hands to her head. "I can't concentrate." She paused, thinking, trying to remember what Cass had told her, what he had decided she must do. "I turnout the lights, and wait for Jack."

"And when he comes in?"

"I get out of bed, and I come in here."

"That's right," Cass said.

"And I take the gun..." She stopped, unable to complete the sentence. She didn't want to say it, she didn't want to make it real.

"You take the gun, and then what?" Cass insisted. "Then what?"

"I stand at the bedroom door," Liz continued despite herself. "With the gun pointing towards the front door."

"Go on," he urged. "Go on." His eyes were bright with anticipation. There was a time when he always looked at her that way.

"And when Jack opens the front door," she said.

"You take aim and you fire," Cass finished for her.

"No!" she screamed. "I can't! I can't, I can't."

He took hold of her shoulders. "It's perfectly simple," he said. "You're all alone here, someone breaks in, you take aim and you fire."

She kept shaking her head.

"Aren't you forgetting one thing?" he asked.

"What's that?"

"I'll be here. Right beside you."

"You can't stay here," she said, starting to cry. "You can't stay here."

* * *

Foster brushed the oily char off his hands as he entered the lead mobile. "Mobile-1 to SHADO Control. 1 to Control," he said into the microphone.

"Go ahead 1," Ford's voice came back over the radio.

"The body inside the Ufo is definitely not an alien," Foster said.

"Mobile-1," Straker's voice said. "Explain yourself."

"The body was charred beyond field identification, but there are no signs of the hermetic seals around the neck" Foster explained. "We're searching the area on foot. The alien must be somewhere in the forest."

* * *

Cass kissed her. She finally stopped trembling. "It's time."

She shook her head.

"Go on," he urged, pushing her toward the telephone.

It took her a long moment to work up the courage to reach for the phone. Suddenly, it

rang and she jumped. She stared at Cass with wide, frightened eyes.

"Answer it," he ordered.

She obeyed. "Hello?"

"Hello, darling?" Jack Newton said over the receiver. "I'm just ringing you to tell you I'm on my way."

"Fine, that's fine," Liz said. She was both frightened and relieved that the voice on the phone was her husband.

"Well, it worked," Jack said.

"What did?" Liz asked. She didn't understand what he was talking about.

"Well, your little idea," he reminded her. He sounded happy. "No calls, no interruptions." She couldn't respond.

"Hello, are you there?" he asked when she didn't speak.

"Yes, I'm here," she said, finally. She knew she needed to sound more enthusiastic but she couldn't.

"Guess what," he said. "I've got a little present for you."

"You have?" Jack was being sweet and generous. How could he do this to her when she and Cass hated him.

"Don't you want to know what it is?" Jack asked.

"Yes, yes, of course I do, Jack," she said, trying to sound happy. "What is it?"

"Remember that Arcade?"

"Oh yes, yes, the pendant," she said. "The blue pendant." She had fallen in love with that cheap, gaudy pendant at the Arcade. Jack wouldn't buy it, said it was wretched workmanship, the stone wasn't real, it was much too over-priced. He would get her something nicer. She had insisted and they had a row. Now he was making up.

"You don't sound very pleased," he said. "I mean, I can easily take it back and get something else if you'd rather."

"No, no, I'm sorry, Jack, I'm sorry," she said. "That was very thoughtful of you."

"Are you all right?" he asked. Try as she might, she couldn't make herself sound as happy and cheerful as she should be.

"Yes, I'm all right," she assured him. "I've just got a slight headache, that's all."

"Why don't you go to bed, then?"

"No, no I'll be fine," she said. Cass was listening.

"Go on to bed," Jack ordered. "I'll be at the cottage about twelve, I'll try not to disturb you."

"All right," she agreed.

"Bye, then," Jack said, ringing off.

"Good bye, Jack," she said. Cass took the phone from her hands and hung it up.

"You heard?" she asked him. Her resolve was weakening. Jack cared, he really did. She couldn't go through with it.

"Yes," Cass hissed.

"You heard how he was talking," she said. "I don't think I can do it, Cass. I can't go through with it."

"Do you know now long we've known each other?" he asked.

"Ten months, a year," she answered.

"It's exactly one year and one month ago, that I first came into your house," Cass told her. "I noticed the way he spoke to you then, I've heard it a million times since."

"Well?" She didn't really understand what he was talking about.

"Every time he talks to you, it's in that way," he said.

"Cass..."

"Words," he spat. "What's he ever given you, but words. You've said so yourself over and over again. He's clothed you, fed you, bought you." He pulled her toward him and kissed her, hard. She struggled against him a few moments, then relaxed into his embrace. He had won.

CHAPTER 7

Foster's voice came over the radio. "Blue area to SHADO Control. Blue area to SHADO Control. We've found a couple of things, sir. First, a piece of torn fabric that looks like it came from an alien spacesuit. There's also signs of a struggle."

"Yes, what else?" Straker asked.

"We've also found an Alsatian dog near the landing sight," Foster reported "Collar number 95-9-3."

Straker shot a look at Freeman before turning back to the microphone. "Listen, Colonel. We have details here of a missing person, in the Blue area. A game warden by the name of Mitchell."

"The dog's collar information checks," Freeman said quietly, leafing through the report in his hand.

Straker nodded. "It's my guess that it's Mitchell's body you found in the debris. Try using the dog to locate the alien. Chances are, he can pick up the scent," Straker instructed.

"Yes, sir," Foster agreed. He handed the dog's leash to his co-driver.

"Come on, come on, boy," the man, Harris, said quietly, speaking to the dog.

The animal seemed to sense what the men wanted. He strained at the leash, ready to go after the foul scented thing that had killed his master.

"Okay, hold him," Foster warned.

The dog was ready to break into a run. The men with him were forced to pick up the pace. The animal seemed to know exactly what he was following. He whined when the men held him back.

* * *

Cass and Liz heard the gate creak open.

"What's that?" Liz nearly shrieked.

"The lights!" Cass hissed.

"Jack?" Liz mumbled in growing horror.

"The lights!" Cass nearly shouted at her. She fumbled with the light switch, finally turning them off.

"He's come an hour early!" she moaned. It wasn't going to work. He was early, they weren't ready.

The gate creaked again.

"It isn't time," she said in rising panic. "What are we going to do?"

"Don't worry!" Cass said. "We're ready for him."

"It isn't time!" she moaned. He handed her the pistol.

"I can't," she kept moaning. "I can't!"

"I'm here," Cass reminded her. "Right beside you."

There was a long silence. Then, footsteps across the gravel.

"He's gone," she breathed in relief.

The footsteps came back, outside the window.

"He's going around to the back now," she murmured in confusion. This wasn't like Jack. Why would he be checking the house? The footsteps went past the window once more, to the front door.

"For God's sake," Liz moaned. The draperies separating the entrance from the living room were closed. They heard the front door open beyond the drapes. There were heavy foot steps

on the wooden entry floor.

"Now!" Cass shouted at her.

She emptied the gun into whoever was behind the drapes. The draperies tore from their pins as a body fell.

Cass ran over to the light switch and flipped on the room lights. It wasn't Jack on the floor, wrapped in the drapes. It was a man with greenish skin, wearing a shiny red jumper.

Liz stuffed her hand into her mouth to keep from screaming. She had just shot an innocent man.

Cass took her arms and led her to the sofa. He started to pace.

"What's the matter, Cass?" she asked. Her voice was trembling "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to think!" he snapped at her.

"What are we going to do," she insisted. "How are we going to explain it? Who is he?" Her voice rose in growing hysteria.

He slapped her. "Shut up!"

Tears started down her face. He had never hit her before. He grabbed his coat from the chair and started for the door.

"You're not leaving!" she shrieked "You're not going to leave me here!"

"You know I'm not," he assured her. "Our only chance is to go through with the plan as we arranged it."

She started shaking her head, gibbering in her terror. She grabbed at his clothes.

"Well, we must!" Cass insisted. "Now, I don't know any more than you do. As far as you're concerned, he was an intruder and you shot him! Do you understand?"

She didn't respond.

"Do you understand!?" he insisted.

"Yes, yes," she agreed. She uncurled her fingers from his shirt.

"Now, I must go" he said. "Give me three minutes, phone the police. Three minutes, that's all, then." He stared for the door.

"Cass, Cass," she called after him. "Wait with me here, wait, wait, just until I've called the police."

"Three minutes," he said, opening the door.

"Wait, Cass, please!" she cried.

He slammed the door behind him. She collapsed into the nearest chair, tears streaming from her eyes. This was too much. Nothing was right. She'd never been so frightened in her life and Cass had just walked out.

The door opened. A tall young man with dark hair walked in, followed by two men in blue, military-like uniforms.

"Would you get your coat, Mrs. Newton?" the young man said.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, suddenly bewildered. The two uniformed men were looking over the dead man.

"Who are you? Are you the police? How do you know my name?" she asked.

The young man gave her an understanding look. "Please?"

She went to the closet and got her coat and purse. The young man led her out of the house to awaiting car. There were several official looking cars and vans parked on the road in front of the cottage. Cass was sitting in the back seat of one of the vans. He refused to meet her eyes when she walked past.

At the crossroads, Liz and Cass were transferred to a posh sedan, driven by another

young man in uniform. A second man sat beside him, watching them. The sedan drove toward London, pulling into an industrial looking complex somewhere north of the city. The name on the shiny silver entrance sign read Harlington-Straker Studios'.

The driver let them out of the sedan and escorted them across the lobby of an expensively furnished office building. He led them through a narrower side corridor to the door of an office. He knocked once, then opened the door, ushering them into the office beyond.

It was an outer office. Like the lobby, it was a study in understated elegance. The walls were lined with framed, signed lithographs and photographs. A middle aged man in an expensive suit was waiting.

"Ah, Mrs. Newton, Mr. Fowler. We've been expecting you," he said. The door to the inner office slid open. "This way please." He waved them past him, into the inner office. "Would you care to sit down?"

Liz and Cass sat in the leather chairs opposite the wide desk in front of the window. The man hit a switch on the desk and the office doors slid shut.

He opened a small silver box and spoke into the air above it. "Freeman, Alec."

"Voice print identification positive, 9-7, Freeman, Alec E," a disembodied voice said.

The room moved. Liz and Cass looked at each other in alarm as the entire office began to drop like a high-speed elevator. The man, Freeman, smiled at their reaction.

It stopped and the doors opened again, this time onto a concrete corridor. A bright sign opposite the door read 'Supreme Headquarters, Alien Defense Organization'. An attractive young woman with long black hair, wearing a beige uniform, stood beside the sign waiting.

"Now, If you'll just follow me, please," Freeman said. He said it politely, but there was no question that it was an order. They followed him. The young woman fell in behind them.

He led them to another door, which opened at his approach. He waved them into the room beyond. Like the lobby and offices above, this room was expensive and impersonal.

"Look, now, what is going on here?" Cass demanded.

"Now, please, sit," Freeman said. Cass's belligerence didn't seem to ruffle him at all. "I realize, you've both had a very harrowing experience."

"Right," Cass said. Liz took a seat on the leather sofa.

"And you're entitled to an explanation to this intrusion into your privacy," Freeman continued as if Cass hadn't spoken.

"Right again," Cass said.

Freeman smiled. "Mr. Straker will explain our reasons for bringing you here. In the meantime, if you'd just like to make yourselves comfortable? I'm sure you'll find everything you need."

The man nodded to the young woman and they both walked out. The door slid shut behind them. Cass tried the switch beside the door. It didn't move. They were locked in. He began to look around the room, under the lamp shades, behind the tastefully arranged plants under the grolights.

"What are you doing?" Liz asked.

He stopped and sat beside her. "Just be very careful what you say."

"Where are we?"

"Under some kind of film studio," he said. She knew that much. She'd been in the car with him.

"I don't understand," she complained. It wasn't making sense.

"Neither do I," Cass said. "But we must get our stories straight."

* * *

The alien's body had been removed from the cottage. Paul Foster waited for the second team, the forensics team, to arrive. He looked over the house, careful not to touch anything.

He walked into the back bedroom. The wide bed was messed. The room smelled faintly of perfume and recent sex.

"Liz?, " a man's voice called. "Liz?"

Foster stepped to the bedroom door. A tall, distinguished older man was standing in the middle of the living room, looking at the fallen drapes.

"Who are you?"

"More to the point, who are you?" the man shot back.

* * *

Liz had calmed somewhat. At least, she had stopped shaking and asking mindless questions.

"The rest of the story is exactly the same," Cass repeated. He could only hope the room wasn't bugged.

"Who are these people?" Liz asked.

"I don't know," Cass admitted. "The one who brought us here said something about someone called 'Straker'."

The name seemed vaguely familiar. "Isn't he a film producer, or something?"

Cass's reply was interrupted by the doors sliding open. A slender man with white blond hair, and a suit at least as expensive as Freeman's, walked in. The dark haired girl in the beige uniform took a position just inside the door, where she could watch them.

"I must apologize for having had you brought here like this, Mr. Fowler, Mrs. Newton," the blond man said.

"Now, listen here," Cass began. He started to stand.

"And I've had you brought here for a," he paused, as if looking for the right word. "A discussion. Now, if you'll both, please, sit down?"

There was something in his voice, in his manner, that said he was someone who was used to being obeyed. They sat back on the sofa.

* * *

"Was your wife expecting you?" Foster asked the man who had come into the cottage. It was Jack Newton, the woman's husband.

"Naturally," he said. He seemed surprised by the question.

"Are you certain?" Foster insisted.

"Well, of course. I phoned her on the way down here," Newton said. "Why do you ask?"

Foster didn't answer the question. Instead, he handed Newton a small pile of photographs he's found on the dining table. "Do you recognize these?"

Newton looked through them. "They're photographs of this room."

"Did you take them?"

"No," Newton said, handing them back.

"Know who did?" Foster asked.

"I've never seen them before," Newton said. He looked puzzled at the questions.

"Do you keep a gun here, Mr. Newton?"

"Yes."

"Who knew about it?"

"My wife," he answered.

"Anyone else?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so," he said. "Look, what is this all about?"

"I'm sorry, you'll just have to bear with me," Foster said with a small shrug. "I suggest that you return to London. I'll arrange for your wife to join you there, as soon as possible."

* * *

Cass shook his head in disbelief as Straker finished his small speech. "Unidentified flying objects. Aliens from another planet. A world defense organization. That's incredible."

"Then the lives of everyone, would be in terrible danger, all the time," Liz added, eyes wide in fear and worry.

A thoroughly modern coffee service sat on the small table in front of the sofa. Liz sipped her coffee. Cass poured himself a second cup.

"Very great danger," Straker agreed. "That's the reason for all the security. The general public must never know."

"One thing I don't understand is," Cass said. "If your organization is so secret, why did you bring us here?"

"To help you forget the whole thing," Straker said, as if it were obvious.

"Forget?" Cass repeated.

"Yes, you see, SHADO has developed an 'amnesia drug', for obvious reasons," Straker said. "We administer it to people like yourselves who've come into contact with aliens. Or, indeed, with our organization."

"An amnesia drug?" Liz asked.

"Yes. It's perfectly harmless," Straker assured them. "All it will do is erase all memory of the past twelve hours. It's tasteless."

With growing horror, Liz and Cass looked at the cups in the hands. They set the cups down on the table. Now they understood why only two cups had been brought.

Straker picked up the coffee carafe. "Would you care for some more coffee?"

* * *

Straker looked up from the report he was reading as the doors to his office slid open. Freeman walked, followed by Foster. They both looked like they had tasted something nasty.

"What's wrong?" Straker wondered aloud, putting aside the report.

"Paul has just come up with a very interesting theory," Freeman said.

"Oh?"

"Tell him," Freeman said, turning to Foster.

Foster took a deep breath. "Mrs. Newton and Fowler said they heard an intruder and shot him as he forced open the door."

"Plausible," Straker said.

"Yes," Foster agreed. "If they weren't expecting the husband."

Straker frowned in surprise. "The husband?"

"He came back to the cottage forty minutes ago," Freeman explained.

"Is our security angle covered?" Straker asked. This was a complication he hadn't expected.

"Yes, that's all taken care of," Foster assured him. "But don't you see what it means? They planned a cold-blooded murder. They had it all worked out. But, unfortunately for them, an alien came through that door instead of her husband."

"It all fits," Freeman said.

"Morally, they're guilty," Foster added.

"Well, the amnesia drug was administered a few minutes ago," Straker told them. "They won't be able to remember a thing."

"Well, we can't just let them go free," Foster protested.

Straker leaned back in his chair, watching the young officer. "I suppose you think I should hand them over to the public prosecutor?" He shook his head. "Sure, have a great case. Now, what would he go for? The attempted murder of the husband?, or the killing of an alien? You can't produce that body. There's no concrete evidence against them. And the two accused would both have genuine, total amnesia."

"So there's nothing we can do about it?" Foster asked.

"We're not in the moralizing business, Colonel," Straker reminded him.

"So, what about the husband?" Foster insisted. "They wanted to kill him once, they're bound to try again."

Straker shrugged. "Well, in the line of duty, we stumbled onto a triangle. SHADO's involvement made it a 'square'. All we're doing is erasing the past twelve hours. So, it's back to the triangle." He straightened in his chair. "Colonel Foster, get back to that Ufo. Get all the information you can."

"Right, sir," Foster agreed. He headed for the door.

"Alec, you'd better get the medical team to work on that alien."

"On my way," Freeman said as he too, headed for the door.

Straker sat back in his chair for a moment, watching the closed door. He keyed a switch on the intercom control.

"How are Mrs. Newton and Mr. Fowler?" he asked.

"They're sleeping, sir," one of the medical technicians said.

"Well, get them out of here," Straker ordered.

"But sir, I really don't think," the technician began to protest.

Straker cut him off. "Just get them out of here."

He sat back once again. His arguments to Foster still held. There was nothing he could do. But he didn't have to like it.

He pulled the top file from the pile on the corner of his desk and opened it. This one was from General Henderson at the IAC, the committee that oversaw SHADO's finances and operations. It was a complaint that SHADO's chain of command wasn't clear enough, that duties among the senior staff were not sufficiently defined.

It was a joke and Henderson knew it but had sent the complaint along anyway. Henderson was still upset that Straker had personally nixed IAC plans for a manned Mars mission. The situation with the aliens made a manned mission of that length far too risky. It was bad enough that a manned mission to the comet Delgado had been sent out over Straker's objections. Delgado was crossing Earth's orbit only three million miles out, almost in the immediate neighborhood.

Mars was out of the question.

Straker reread the complaint. One issue he agreed with. The chains of command were clear enough on Moonbase, the Sky-diver fleet. Within SHADO control, things were a little more nebulous, maybe too nebulous. Straker reviewed his options.

Freeman was chief of staff but abhorred the idea of being second in command. Foster didn't have the experience yet to be promoted to second. Collins and Gray were out of the question, as was Komack, but for differing reasons. Straker made a mental note to work on getting Alec Freeman to agree to taking on the responsibility of second and training Foster to

take on some of the duties of chief of staff.

Then, there was a matter of the new chief of internal security. Freeman had volunteered to go to Moscow to interview the top candidate, a major with the GRU. Straker thought it might be a good idea.

CHAPTER 8

SHADO was tracking a manned UN-NASA mission returning to Earth from a rendezvous with the comet Delgado. The mission had gone spectacularly well and now the two man capsule was safely on course for home with its human cargo. At least NASA and the rest of the world believed it was safe. SHADO knew better.

S.I.D.'s voice echoed through the control room. "Unidentified flying object, bearing 423-126 green."

Within moments, Nina Barry, in charge of this control sphere shift, notified SHADO Control: "Interceptors space borne and on course. Ufo maintaining flight path. Now sixteen miles from GSP 4."

NASA and the capsule picked up a radio signal they couldn't identify. The world press was already clamoring for more information concerning the radio signals, their source, their meaning.

SHADO identified the signal as the energy signature of the U.F.O. that was following the manned capsule to Earth.

Straker was on the phone to the space mission's control in Houston.

"Yes, that's right," Straker was saying. His expression suggested he was speaking with a fool, or an idiot, or both. "I want a complete press, radio and T.V. clamp-down on any information relating to the signal being monitored by the GSP 4." Something was said on the other end. "Well, look, I can't make it any clearer for you." The other person said something else and Straker's expression got even darker. The NASA security contact was obviously an idiot.

"Well, you tell them anything you want, that's your problem." Straker said and slammed the receiver down. He was still fuming when he turned to Foster.

Normally, Freeman handled communications with NASA security, but he had left for Moscow two days before. A recruiting mission, or so he had told Foster before he left.

"How far, Paul?" Straker asked.

"Twelve and still closing," Foster answered.

Straker shook his head. "Well, If it gets any closer before the interceptors are in range, they won't be able to attack."

S.I.D.'s voice came over the speaker: "U.F.O. reducing speed. Position, ten miles from GSP 4."

Seconds passed. Johnson checked a readout at her station. "U.F.O. is now two miles from capsule. Interceptors now in range. - One mile"

"Interceptors in position," Barry announced over the video monitor. "Awaiting firing instructions."

"Roger Moonbase," Johnson said.

"We can't attack," Foster said quietly to Straker.

"No, too near the capsule," Straker agreed. He turned to Johnson "Tell Moonbase to recall the interceptors, Lieutenant. And the alert Sky-Diver."

"Yes, sir," Johnson acknowledged.

"They know we can't get it this time," Foster said.

"Right, it's going to follow the space probe," Straker agreed. "Right back to Earth."

* * *

SHADO's tracking stations lost the alien's signal when veered away from the capsule, less

than half a mile from Earth, only ten seconds from landing.

"It's in the middle of Northumberland," Foster commented, locating the coordinates on a map. "At least it's not a heavily populated area."

"Thank God for small favors," Straker muttered.

* * *

Lew Waterman flew his plane low over the predicted landing area. There was a pair of horses with riders in a clearing below. One of the riders shook a fist at him as he cruised past.

"Sky-1 to SHADO Control," Waterman said into his helmet microphone. "Have searched predicted landing area. No trace of Ufo. It's thickly wooded. Aerial visibility, limited."

In SHADO Headquarters, Straker looked over a set of maps of the area as he listened to Waterman's report. He turned to Johnson. "Tell Sky-1 to re-dock with Sky-diver. And get the mobiles out there as quickly as possible."

"Well, there's no chance it lifted off again," Foster reminded his commanding officer. "Ground radar would have picked it up."

"Yes, Paul," Straker agreed. "It's out there somewhere."

"How long will it take the mobiles to get there?"

"Two or three hours," Straker answered. He looked up at Foster. "You'd better get moving."

* * *

The two riders Waterman saw from the air were heading back to the stables.

"Father says you're taking him to Berlin next month," Anne Stone said.

"Well, he always likes to be there when I'm riding in international events," Russell, her older brother, said. A dog was barking somewhere near, in a wooded copse not far from their practice area. "Who's that?"

"Shad-up," a man's voice said.

"Maybe it's a party of Sioux," Anne suggested with a mischievous grin. "You know, Indians."

Russell urged his horse into a gallop and headed toward the barking. Anne rode off after him, whooping a war cry.

"I think I know who it is," Russell shouted back at her.

"Look out for the arrows," Anne called.

Russell paid no attention to her as he spurred his horse on. A tumbledown shack was nestled in the trees. It was an old storage shed which had long outlived its usefulness. A young man with ragged, dirty clothes and dark, greasy hair had his camp in front of it. A scruffy mongrel dog was tied to a tree beside a fire that was built much too close to the trees. The young man started to run, but Russell and his horse kept cutting him off.

"Wait for me, Custer!" Anne called, catching up with him. She was appalled at what she saw her brother doing, chasing the stranger around the tree. "Russ! Russ! Russ?! What the devil's got into you?"

The man tripped and fell, giving Russell a deadly glare.

"I've told him a dozen times about trespassing and lighting fires on our land," Russell told her angrily. The man stood up. "I thought I'd told you enough times, Cully," Russell spat at the greasy man. "But you still don't seem to get the message!"

"Russ!"

Russell paid no attention to her. "If ever I see you or that mongrel on this estate again," Russell said darkly. "Get moving."

He sat and watched as Cully untied his dog, gathered his rucksack and headed deeper into the woods. Finally, Russell rode off, toward the stables.

"White man, him strong," Anne muttered under her breath, following her brother home. She didn't understand her brother's reaction to the stranger. Russ's horse could have easily hurt the man, but Russ didn't seem to care.

* * *

The mobiles were in position within the three hours Straker had predicted and began their orderly search of the heavily wooded area that was the U.F.O.'s predicted landing site.

"Mobile one to Control, area twelve negative," the driver of the first mobile one reported.

"Roger, One. Continue search in area fourteen," Foster responded from the control mobile. He switched radio channels on his communications board. "Search leader to SHADO Control. Still have no visual evidence of Ufo."

He stared at the map in front of him. U.F.O.s don't simply disappear. It had to be there, somewhere.

* * *

"You should come home more often, Anne," Larry Stone, Anne and Russell's widowed father said over lunch. "It's the only time I get a decent meal."

"She can't tear herself away from the bright lights," Russell joked. Anne was an aspiring actress with a job as a secretary at a London firm. She didn't often have time to come home to the farm. Fortunately, she had chosen to spend her vacation time with them instead of heading off to Switzerland with her theater friends.

"You should have someone in to look after you," Anne suggested. "Like a kinky Swedish au pair girl."

"We did," Stone said.

"A real au pair?" Anne asked in disbelief. "Bet her name was Olga."

"No, Mrs. Harris, from the village," Russell said.

"Tried her for a couple of weeks. I thought it was going to be all right," Stone explained. "She was a good cook. But in the end it just didn't work out."

Anne looked at Russell. "Oh. Well, if you lost your cool like you did today, I'm not surprised."

"What have you been up to, Russ?" Stone asked.

"I ran into our favorite hippy again," Russell said, glowering into his plate.

"Oh, him," Stone said. "Where were the others?"

"I don't know," Russell said.

"I haven't seen anyone quite like him," Anne said. "At least he was different."

"Different's the word," Russell groused. "If I had my way, I'd lock the whole bunch up."

"Ah, there's no real harm in them," Stone said. "Let's have some more coffee." He picked up the coffee pot and poured himself another cup.

"Isn't here?" Russell complained, pushing his own cup away from him. "You wait and see."

"Well, family. Why don't you get the fuzz to move them on?" Anne asked brightly.

"Fuzz?"

"The police," Russell explained to his father.

"Well, we've tried but they always seem to come back." Stone said. He shrugged as if the problem was insoluble and therefore, had to be endured. He sipped his coffee.

"Well, the one we ran into today is vicious," Russell said. "And if the police don't do

anything about it, I will."

* * *

"Mobile three to control. Completed search in area 24. negative." Mobile three called in to the control mobile.

"Roger, three," Foster replied. "Continue search in area 25."

It was growing dark and Foster was tired. He sipped his coffee, a ghastly brew that only resembled coffee in name. He knew none of them would be getting any rest until the area was thoroughly searched and the U.F.O. found and destroyed. He took another sip and wondered if anyone in SHADO knew how to brew a proper cup of coffee.

* * *

Anne was woken from a sound sleep by the sound of Blue Boy, Russell's champion gray, stomping and whinnying in his stable.

"Oh, shut up," she moaned. The horse kept at it. At least in her London flat, she didn't have to hear horses stomping about all night. Finally, she grabbed her robe from the bottom of her bed, slipped it on and went down to the stable to calm the animal before he woke everybody else up.

"Blue!" She called, looking around the stable for whatever had frightened the horse. She didn't see anything, but then Blue was a bit high-strung. "Blue Boy," she soothed, stroking his great head. "Come on, it's me. It's all right." After a few moments, the horse began to calm down.

There was a rustling sound somewhere nearby. Anne jumped when Russell came around the corner. "Oh, I wish you wouldn't do that," she complained, willing her heart to slow down.

"What the hell are you doing down here?" Russell demanded.

"I heard Blue," she explained. "He was stomping around. Sounded frightened so I came down."

"What's the matter with him?" Russell asked. He came closer, looking his horse over with a practiced eye. Aside from nervousness, the horse seemed all right.

"He's sweating up," Anne pointed out.

Russell took a moment to look around the inside of the next stable, the storage area beyond. He looked outside the building before coming back to his sister and horse.

"There's nothing out there. I don't know what could have frightened him."

"Well, he seems all right now," Anne said, giving Blue one last pat. "Maybe he had a nightmare."

Russell snorted his disbelief and led his sister back to the house.

* * *

The next day, Russell and Anne rode down to the small lake near the center of the estate. Blue started to spook as the tree lined path opened on the lake shore.

"Come on, Come on Blue, Come on," Russell spoke soothingly. Blue was determined he wasn't going near the lake. He danced with nervousness. "What on earth's the matter with him?"

"He's sweating again," Anne noted. They stopped at the edge of the water. "Russ, listen."

"I can't hear anything."

"That's just it. There's nothing. Not even a bird," Anne said. Even the breeze in the trees sounded quiet, muted somehow. It was eery, almost frightening.

"Oh, come on," Russell said. "You're enough to scare anything away." He headed Blue away from the lake and took off.

Anne shook her head, grinned and followed them.

* * *

"Well, we've completed a search of the whole area," Foster reported back to headquarters. "Nothing."

"No trace at all? Torn vegetation, broken trees, tracks?" Straker asked.

"Negative. And no response from the instruments," Foster said. "I'm convinced it's not in this area."

"All right, all right," Straker conceded. "We'll have to move on."

"In which direction?" Foster asked. He was tired and hungry and he knew his mobile team was in the same shape.

"Well, we'll have to widen the search area," Straker told him. "Divide your mobiles and branch out east and west from the original flight path."

"Right," Foster acknowledged. So much for heading home for sleep and a good meal. He wished he could get a decent cup of coffee.

* * *

Anne sat on the porch of the house reading a magazine. She ignored the sound of her father splitting firewood in the wood yard behind the stables. Hoofs chattered across the gravel. Anne looked up to see Blue covered in sweat, his eyes wide with fright as he circled the stable yard.

"Pa? Pa!" She yelled at her father..

"Yes?"

"Where's Russ?"

"He's out practicing," Stone answered.

"But his horse is here," Anne said.

Stone dropped his sledge and splitter and ran across the yard. "Come on," he said, leading her to the open jeep they used for the estate.

Their first stop was at Russell's normal practice site. Anne climbed out of the jeep and began to call for her brother.

"Russ?"

"Russ!" Stone yelled. He headed toward the nearest copse of trees.

Anne stepped closer to the practice fence set up in the middle of the field. She spotted a dusty piece of bright fabric on the ground beside the barrier. She picked it up to discover it was the hat Russell had been wearing earlier that morning.

"Pa!?" she screamed. "Over here."

Her father came running. She showed him the hat.

"You stay here," he ordered. He headed back into the woods.

* * *

"Paul," Straker called Foster over the radio. "We've just received a report on a missing person. I want you to look into it."

"Missing person?" Foster asked. Worrying about a missing person during a search for a U.F.O.? Foster knew better than to ask the question aloud. "What are the details?"

"Russell Stone. International show jumper," Straker said. "And he lives about three miles from the search area. At a place called Stonebeam Farm."

"What about the authorities?"

"That's all been taken care of," Straker assured him. "Now get over there right away."

* * *

Stonebeam Farm wasn't really a farm in the sense of growing crops, as Foster soon discovered. Larry Stone and his son, Russell, the medal winning show jumper, bred and trained champion show horses.

The senior Stone explained what had happened, the horse running home in a terrified sweat, finding the trampled hat by the practice jump.

"Well, I think I understand the situation," Foster said. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Er, no. I don't think so," Stone said.

Foster sensed the senior Stone was holding back but chose not to press the issue for the moment. "Miss Stone?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"I'd like to take a look around the estate if that's possible," Foster said.

"Yes, of course," Stone said. "I appreciate you getting here so quickly."

"I'll drive you," Anne volunteered.

"Thank you."

Anne gave him a worried smile as she left to get the jeep. Foster turned to follow her. Stone cleared his throat and Foster stopped.

"There is something else," the older man said slowly. "In the wood I found a dog. It was horribly mutilated." He paused, letting his information sink in. "Whatever did that. . ."

"I understand," Foster said. Unfortunately, he really did understand. Mutilated animals almost invariably meant there were one or more aliens in the area. The aliens didn't just stick to stealing organs from humans.

Anne was waiting outside with the jeep. Foster climbed in and they took off for the practice area.

"How big is the estate?" Foster asked.

"About two hundred acres," Anne replied.

"Aren't there any roads?" Foster asked as they hit a particularly large bump on the track they were following.

"No, but there are some tracks. You can drive around if you like," Anne said. She slowed the jeep as they came to the practice jump. "About here," she said, stopping the jeep. "This is where we found his hat."

Foster looked around but his practiced eye could see nothing of interest on the hard ground. Any tracks the aliens might have left had been accidentally obliterated by Anne and her father. "Let's keep going."

She drove on, toward the far trees, to a faint track leading through the woods.

"Hold it," Foster said as he spotted the shack. Anne slowed the jeep. "What's that?"

"Just a tumbledown shack," Anne replied. "A couple of hippies have been living there."

"Let's take a look," Foster suggested. Anne pulled the jeep up to the shack and stopped. Foster hopped out and began to look around. He noted the remains of a campfire, it was cold but no more than a day old. A rope was tied around the pine tree.

"They seem to have moved out," Foster observed, scuffing at the charred ground.

"They'll probably be back," Anne said. "We ran into one of them yesterday. Russ chased him around. Tried to scare him off."

Foster stepped over to the tree and picked up the end of the rope to look at it more closely. It was frayed, as though something had been chewing on it.

"His dog," Anne said. "Scruffy looking thing."

Foster didn't comment as he climbed back into the jeep and they drove off again. If the dog was killed by the aliens, where was his master?

The path came out on a small lake, although a more proper term might have been pond. Anne stopped the jeep just short of the water.

"Can your brother swim?" Foster asked.

"Like a fish," Anne replied. A puzzled look came into her pretty face. "Listen."

Foster stopped and listened. There was no sound besides the faint lapping of the water against the shore. No birds, no insects.

"There's nothing."

"Like before."

"Before?"

"With Russ, earlier," Anne said. "And his horse was frightened. It was sweating."

Foster considered her information for a long moment. He knew that dogs were frequently frightened by the presence of aliens, something to do with the scent of the spacesuits, the breathing liquid. He didn't know about horses, but he did know there was at least one alien somewhere near.

"I want you to do something for me," Foster said. "Go back to the house and wait for me."

Anne looked at him in surprise.

"Go on. Take the truck," Foster assured her. "I'll walk back."

"Okay, then," Anne agreed. She started the engine and drove off.

Foster watched until she was out of sight. With aliens in the area, he didn't want to be hampered by the presence of a civilian. He was certain they wouldn't attack a moving vehicle.

He looked over the lake. It was just the right size to hide a U.F.O. Suddenly, a horn honked in the distance. Foster oriented on the sound and started running toward it. Whoever it was, they were laying on the horn, a single, blatting tone of distress.

The jeep was parked beside an open gate. Anne let up on the horn as soon as she saw Foster coming through the trees. She was shaking and tears ran down her cheeks.

"What happened?" Foster demanded.

"It's over there," She sobbed, pointing at the brush beside the gate. "Cully."

Foster stepped over to the brush. A man with dark, greasy hair was lying face down in the tall grass. Foster turned the body over to discover the man's throat had been cut and his chest opened. Foster's mouth filled with bile when he saw an insect crawling inside the wound.

* * *

Foster told the Stones there was a maniac killer loose on the estate. He gave them no details except to give them the impression that the police had been looking for the man for some time. Foster made arrangements for them to spend the night in town while the authorities searched the property with dogs.

"What about the horses? We can't leave them," Anne protested.

"I'll make sure we have some people posted to guard the animals," Foster promised. He watched them leave, then notified SHADO headquarters the coast was clear, the mobiles could move in. Carrera, driving the command mobile, picked Foster up and maneuvered the heavy mobile toward the lake. It was already growing dark.

"How long will it take to get the mobiles into position?" Straker demanded over the video link.

"We should be there in about ten minutes," Foster reported. The mobiles were moving

carefully through the dense trees, as per Foster's orders. He didn't want to do any more damage to the estate that absolutely necessary. Heavy tractor tracks were hard to explain.

"Well, let's hope your theory's right," Straker said.

"There's no other explanation," Foster said. "The Ufo's been in Earth's atmosphere for two days, now. It would have started to disintegrate."

Within the predicted ten minutes, all three mobiles were in position by the lake, about thirty yards distance between them.

"Mobile one?" Foster called.

"We're in position, ready to fire," the driver of Mobile One confirmed.

"Roger. Mobile two?"

"In position and ready," Mobile Two reported.

"Roger," Foster acknowledged. He climbed out of the command mobile to get closer to the lake for a better view. He hunkered down behind some brush and clicked on his radio. "Set detonation for twenty-seconds. Mobile one, fire."

He watched as Mobile One launched two missiles into the lake. The explosive charges went off underwater, send spumes of water high into the air.

"Mobile two, fire."

Again, spumes of water flew into the air. It was a lousy way to fish, Foster mused to himself, unless you were hunting submarines, or U.F.O.s.

A greenish gold light appeared in the water.

"All mobiles standby for rapid-fire," Foster ordered. The U.F.O. in question erupted from the water.

"All mobiles, fire."

All three mobiles opened fire on the U.F.O. The alien returned fire and Mobile One erupted into flame. Foster didn't see anyone escape from the burning vehicle. The other two mobiles kept firing.

Red, vile smelling smoke spewed from the U.F.O. It tilted off its axis, fell back into the lake and exploded. The debris rained into the water and the brush around the lake.

Foster looked through his binoculars to see if there were survivors. He didn't see any red-suited aliens floating in the water, but he did see a large metallic looking canister bobbing in the lake water.

"Foster to diving team," he called over the radio to the command mobile. "There's something in the water."

* * *

The divers fished the canister out of the water and it was sent to SHADO headquarters for examination. The investigative team, Wilson and Lovelace, discovered the two-meter long canister was ticking. They were of the opinion it might well be a timing device of some sort, possibly a bomb.

"Can we move it out?" Foster asked Straker in the commander's office. Foster had gone to SHADO headquarters after dismissing the surviving mobile team members. It had been a long two days for all of them, but his day wasn't over yet.

"That could be more dangerous than dealing with it here," Straker said. "If a trigger mechanism is set, any movement could blow this place to pieces."

"Could we defuse it here?" Foster asked.

"I don't know, Paul," Straker said. "I'm not saying that it is an explosive device. What I am saying is that we must treat it as if were."

Straker got up from his desk and walked out of the office into the control room. Foster followed him.

"Lieutenant, sound a red alert," Straker ordered Johnson. "Clear all nonessential personnel from the complex."

"Yes, sir," Johnson acknowledged. She pressed a switch on her console and a loud buzzing siren sounded throughout the complex. "This is a red alert," she announced into her console microphone. "This is an internal emergency. All personnel on B roster to evacuate the area."

Several control room operatives quietly set aside their papers, closed down their network stations and left.

Foster watched after them. "It'll be a long wait," he said to Straker. He knew Straker hated waiting.

"There's an old miner's saying, Paul," Straker said. "The nearer you are to an explosion. The better your chances are." Straker turned and headed back to his office. Foster followed him and took a seat opposite the desk.

"What about the other wreckage?" Straker asked.

"Most of it disintegrated," Foster explained.

"And this didn't."

"Correct," Foster said. "It must be something pretty special."

The intercom buzzed and Straker pressed the key to open the connection. "Straker."

"The radiation tests will be through in a couple of minutes, sir," Lieutenant Johnson said.

"We'll be right there," Straker said, already out of his seat.

* * *

It was odd, walking through the empty, darkened corridors to the electronics lab. All but essential personnel had left to wait for a phone call to return to work. Wilson and Lovelace were alone in this section of the complex.

Lovelace gave the two officers a nod of acknowledgment as they walked in. He adjusted a setting on the recorder he had set up beside the canister. A wire went from the recorder to a small microphone laid on top of the alien object.

"Listen to this, Commander," Lovelace said.

He turned a dial on the recorder and a noise sounded through a small speaker. A slow even, oddly familiar rhythm.

"We picked it up on the audio-sensor," Lovelace explained. "From somewhere in the center, here." He pointed to where the microphone sat.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Straker asked.

"It's regular, mechanical," Lovelace said. "We think we've pinpointed the mechanism, sir. If we cut an exploratory hole here, we can get an x-ray shot and see what makes it tick. But, once we start cutting, sir, anything can happen."

"All right. Let's get on with it." Straker ordered.

"Right," Lovelace agreed.

"Radiation, negative," Wilson read off his own equipment set on a rack on the far wall.

Lovelace assembled his manual hole cutter, moved the microphone aside and set the assembly on the canister, directly over the source of the sound. He began twisting the cutter, pressing the toothed blade into the metal. The metal was surprisingly soft and the cutter went through it easily.

"It's not their usual alloy," Lovelace commented. "It cuts like aluminum, but it's a lot

heavier."

Wilson kept watch on the dials on his monitors. "Still negative."

Lovelace kept cutting, slowing turning the blade in the hole, stopping periodically to let the blade cool.

"Reading?" Lovelace asked.

"Still no reaction," Wilson responded.

Suddenly, there was no resistance to the turning cutter and Lovelace stopped.

"It's through," Lovelace announced. "I'm going to remove the cutter." He slowly pulled the cutter out of the hole, leaving the metal plug in place. Lovelace put a probe down the center hole the cutter had made in the plug and began to gently pull the plug out of the canister. Suddenly, the beating sound stopped. Lovelace froze.

"It's stopped," Wilson said. There was an edge of fear in his voice. After a moment, the beating resumed.

"All right, let's get moving," Lovelace said, removing the plug from the hole. "Now we'll find out what we're up against."

Straker and Foster backed out of the way as Wilson wheeled a portable x-ray machine into place over the canister and its new observation hole.

There was nothing more Straker could do in the lab, apart from being in the way. Straker went back to his office to wait for the results of the x-rays. He started looking through the pile of files on the corner of his desk, then realized he wasn't really reading them. He hated waiting, hated the helpless feeling that came from not knowing exactly what was happening.

The office doors slid open and Foster walked in, carrying an x-ray film. He showed it to Straker. The film showed the shadowy form of a heart, a human heart.

"There 's no possible doubt?" Straker asked in disbelief.

"No, sir. It is a human heart," Foster said.

"Russell Stone," Straker stated.

"It must be," Foster agreed. "They 've slowed his basal metabolism and heart beat down by lowering the body temperature."

"All packed up, ready for shipment."

Foster nodded. "The doctors think there is a chance of getting him out of there alive, But, they'd like someone he knows to be around when he comes to," Foster said. "I'll take care of it."

"Yes," Straker agreed. Foster nodded again and hurried out of the office.

Foster was back within an hour, accompanied by a pretty young woman with brown eyes and hair. She looked confused and a little frightened.

"Miss Stone," Foster said, bringing her over to Straker. "This is Commander Straker."

"It's Anne, isn't it?" Straker asked, putting on his most congenial mask.

"Why, yes," Anne said. "But I'm so confused. All this. Where are we?"

Straker smiled. "Well, if you'll try not to think about that for the moment," he said. "We found your brother."

"Russ?" The fright was replaced by hope. "Is he all right?"

"We hope he will be," Straker said.

Foster and Straker led Anne to the medical center room where Russell was. She looked around at all the machinery surrounding him, the medical people in yellow smocks. Russell moved slightly as she came closer. He tried to speak to her but couldn't find his voice.

"Russ?" Anne whispered to her brother. "Russ?"

"Anne?" Russell asked, finally saying something intelligible. "What happened?"
Doctor Frazer gave Straker a nod of confirmation. "The amnesia shots are ready, sir," he said.

"Right," Straker acknowledged. He took Anne's arm and led her to a chair in the corner. She looked up, eyes wide in fright, as Frazer came toward her with a filled syringe.

"It will help you to forget," Straker said softly. She relaxed just a little. Frazer gave her the shot and within moments, her eyes closed in deep sleep as the drug did its work.

* * *

"All three Stones are back home. I had the father given the amnesia treatment as well. None of them will remember anything about what happened," Foster told Straker the next day in the commander's office. Foster yawned. He was still tired from his two days in the mobiles hunting for the U.F.O. He was hoping to take some leave time, he needed a break.

"Good, good," Straker commented, not paying much attention to Foster's state. He frowned at the report he had open on his desk.

"Something wrong?"

"No, not really," Straker said. "Laurel Andrews was scheduled to rotate to Moonbase but she's in the hospital. Appendicitis."

Foster waited for Straker to continue.

"Alec should be back tomorrow," Straker said. "I haven't been happy with the launch times on the interceptors the last few weeks. I'm sending you up to handle that and to help Gay while Laurel's in the hospital."

"Yes, sir," Foster said. So much for getting a break.

CHAPTER 10

It was looking to be quiet day at SHADO headquarters. Alec Freeman hoped whatever powers there were would see fit to keep it that way. He was tired and achy and just slightly jet-lagged from his trip to Moscow, then Vladivostok. He had returned only the day before to find Foster on Moonbase, a foot high pile of reports on his desk and Commander Straker in a foul mood thanks to General Henderson.

Today had to go better, Freeman said to himself, simply because he couldn't see how it could get much worse. Even a full scale alien attack would be better than dealing with Straker's black attitude after talking to a recalcitrant Henderson and Astrophysical commission. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what Straker had done this time to get Henderson mad at him.

Straker walked in, briefcase in hand. He seemed to be in a much more pleasant frame of mind this morning than he had been last night. It was amazing what a night's sleep could do.

"How's everything going?" Straker asked, looking around the control room.

"Fine," Freeman responded. "The doctors say Laurel can go back to Moonbase in about a week. And, assuming General Henderson agrees, we can have our new chief of internal security in place by then, too. His file is on your desk."

"Good," Straker said, coming down the short flight of stairs to the main level and heading for his office. "Oh, Alec, can I see you for a minute?"

Freeman handed the duty roster he'd been looking at to Ford, who put it back on its hook. Straker paused just long enough for Freeman to catch up. The office doors opened and both men went inside. Straker hit the switch on the desk and the door slid shut.

"The Astrophysical Commission meets in one week," Straker said as he settled behind his desk. "We'll need that debris report finished."

"It's almost ready. I just have to go up to Moonbase for the final documentation," Freeman said.

"Fine." Straker waved his hand at the chair opposite the desk. "Sit down, Alec."

Freeman sat.

"I want to talk to you about the leave roster for Moonbase," Straker said, opening one of the files on the desktop.

"I thought you might," Freeman said, looking at the open file. He was good at reading upside down and the leave roster was the file that was open.

"It'll have to be changed," Straker said.

"And who tells them?"

Straker simply looked at him.

"I might have guessed," Freeman said. As chief of staff, it really was his job. He just hated doing it, especially since he'd just gotten back to headquarters after nearly a week in Russia. Foster had put together the leave roster and it had been posted right before Laurel Andrews' appendicitis attack and hospitalization. Freeman knew the Moonbase personnel expected a few changes due to Andrews' illness. Straker wanted more than a few changes.

Straker closed the file and folded his hands on top of the desk. "Henderson's been on my case to officially appoint you as my second. We need to firm up the chain of command down here."

"We have a chain of command. Your name is at the top and the rest of us are somewhere lower," Freeman said. "Besides, you know I don't want the responsibility of being second in

command down here. Appoint Paul or Craig. They like giving orders."

Straker glared at him.

The intercom buzzed and Straker hit the switch. "Straker."

"Jo Frazer is in reception, sir," Miss Ealand's voice announced.

"Who?"

"The reporter from the press agency," Ealand explained.

"Did they make an appointment?" Straker asked.

"Yes, sir," Ealand told him with only the slightest touch of impatience. "You agreed to the interview last week."

"All right," Straker conceded. "Thank you, Miss Ealand." He switched off the intercom and looked over at Freeman. Freeman was struggling to keep from grinning at Straker's sudden discomfiture.

"Look, Alec, can't you handle it?" Straker asked. Freeman knew Straker loathed talking to the press, for any reason. It was a hangover from his days of investigating U.F.O. incidents for General Henderson and avoiding the press.

"Well, you're head of the studio," Freeman reminded his superior officer, no longer able to suppress his grin. It was the perfect way for Freeman to get even for the changes he was being forced to make in the Moonbase roster, changes that weren't even necessary except that Straker wasn't in an understanding mood. Sometimes it was fun just to sit back and watch Straker as he tried to cope with annoyances outside of SHADO, nonmilitary problems he couldn't just give orders to have solved.

"It's you he wants to interview," Freeman reminded him.

"An article for a heap of glossy film magazines," Straker complained. "I'm no P.R. man."

Freeman couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard the slightest touch of a rather childish whine in Straker's last protest.

Glowering at his chief of staff, Straker stood and headed for the door. Freeman fell into step beside him as they entered the control room.

"It won't be that bad," Freeman promised. "G.P.A. will syndicate the story and keep the rest of the press off your back."

Straker glared at him from beneath pale eyebrows. It was all Freeman could do to keep from laughing aloud.

Lieutenant Johnson stepped up to them carrying a note-board with papers clipped to it. "Commander Straker," she said, holding it out to Straker. "The refueling schedule, sir."

Straker waved it away. "Give it to Colonel Freeman," he said, giving Freeman another glare of annoyance. "I'm about to be thrown to the press."

Johnson gave him a confused look as Straker walked away.

* * *

The office/elevator settled into place as Straker finished setting up his props on the desk top - files and notes and photographs. Things he would be working on, if he really spent any time running the studio. He was going to have to start making time to run the film company. Some of the studio people were beginning to complain about his inaccessibility. SHADO wasn't an excuse he could use. Most of the people who worked at the studio had no idea SHADO existed, safely hidden as it was, deep below the sound stages.

He clicked on the desk intercom to connect the inner office to Miss Ealand, seated at her own desk in the outside.

"I'm ready. Miss Ealand," he announced when she answered.

"Yes, sir." She sounded amused. That didn't help his temper any. First Freeman and now Miss Ealand seemed to be enjoying a joke he was missing the point of.

The doors slid open as he busied himself sorting through the papers.

"Now, before we start, I must tell you I'm a very busy man, Mister Frazer," Straker began, not lifting his head. A shadow fell across the desk top and he finally looked up at the reporter.

This was, he realized with a sinking feeling, going to be one of 'those' days. Standing before the desk was a young woman with very long legs, wearing a very short dress that left little to the imagination. A large brown leather handbag was slung over one shoulder. It matched her low heeled shoes. Her hair was light brown, as were her eyes. Her expression was one of bland amusement.

"I must apologize," the woman said, breaking into a smile. "My name is Josephine Frazer. I sometimes find that in a man's world, 'Jo' is more convenient."

"Hmm," Straker murmured, taking a moment to recover his composure. He had been caught making an assumption he didn't normally make. "Well, is it a man's world?" he asked as he sat back in his chair.

"I think so," Josephine Frazer said with a little laugh. "I hope you'll forgive me." She was still standing.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Straker said, abruptly realizing his error. He was used to a more military etiquette. Few people in SHADO expected to be allowed to sit in his presence and it was sometimes hard for him to shift gears into the civilian rules. He was getting out of practice dealing with civilians. It was something he was going to have to work on. Maybe that's what Freeman and Miss Ealand were finding so amusing.

"Please sit down." He indicated a chair not far from the desk. She pulled it closer and arranged herself in the chair. "Well, fire away, Miss Frazer," Straker invited.

She opened her purse and pulled out a note pad and pen. As she did so, the front flap fell forward so that the inside lining was exposed. Straker noted a thin wire going from the interior of the bag to what looked like a decorative insignia on the flap. Frazer folded the flap over and set her purse on the floor.

"And now, how long have you been head of the studio, Mister Straker?" she asked.

"You, ah, tape-record the interview and take notes?" he asked, putting on his most disarming smile.

She looked surprised at his comment.

"I noticed the microphone in the front of your purse," he explained. She laughed, a little nervously, he thought.

"Oh, that's to insure I don't misquote you. And the note pad's for my impressions."

"Of me?"

"I think first impressions are so important."

"I think so, too," Straker agreed with a tiny chuckle. There was something intriguing about this woman. It wasn't the body, which was, he admitted to himself, rather nice, but beautiful faces and bodies were commonplace around the studio. There was something else he couldn't quite put a finger on.

She was a challenge, something new, different. Maybe this interview wasn't going to be the trial he had thought it would be.

* * *

The morning was still quiet. Ford sat at his station, reviewing equipment checks with the captain of Sky-Diver one.

"The fuel checks are complete," Waterman said over the video-link.

"Thank you, Sky-Diver," Ford responded. "I'll tell Commander Straker."

Joy M'Bhutu crossed the control room to Ford's station, carrying a cup of coffee. Freeman gave the cup a curious look as she handed it to Ford.

"Black, no sugar, sir," M'Bhutu told Freeman with a grin.

"Just my luck." Freeman grinned back. M'Bhutu was relatively new to SHADO. She was Nigerian and her skin was only a shade lighter than the coffee. She was beautiful and had, so far, withstood the advances of every unattached male in SHADO Headquarters. The only two exceptions were Commander Straker, who would never consider dating a subordinate, and Freeman, who was simply biding his time.

"Would you like some coffee, sir?" M'Bhutu asked.

"Black, with sugar, please," Freeman said.

* * *

Miss Ealand looked up from her work as the doors to the inner office opened and Straker and Miss Frazer stepped out.

"Well, I'll walk you to your car," Straker said. He was relaxed and smiling. The interview had gone better than expected, Ealand thought to herself. Straker had a well-deserved reputation of being a difficult interview subject. In point of fact, there were only two or three reporters in the entire British press corps to whom Straker would deign to give the time of day. Miss Frazer appeared to have increased that number.

"Thank you," Frazer said. "I thought the age of chivalry was dead."

Straker chuckled. "Oh, no. I have to go up on the studio lot. It's on my way."

"Good bye," Frazer said brightly to Miss Ealand as Straker opened the outside door and ushered her though.

* * *

A small expensive sports car was parked near the front of the office building, not far from Straker's own car.

"It's right over here," Frazer said, pointing it out. She walked up to it, keys in hand.

"Very smart," Straker commented.

"I've earned it," Frazer said with pride in her voice. She opened the car door and slid behind the steering wheel. "Well, thank you. You've been very kind."

"A pleasure."

"Good bye," she said, turning the key in the ignition.

"Miss Frazer." He gave her a nod and headed off to complete his other errands. He hadn't spent much time the last couple months handling studio matters. Things were quiet in SHADO for the moment, he could spend a little time pretending to run Harlington-Straker Productions.

His first order of business this morning was a contract matter. Roy Parker was a regular in one of the shows being produced by another company using the studio facilities. He was also working on a film being done by Harlington-Straker. The problem was, he had begun working on the film before his contract was fully negotiated and his other employer objected. It took two weeks to get the matter straightened out and get Roy back in the film.

The film crew was working on one of Roy's final scenes. The director, Matthew Donahue, was giving the crew their instructions. "Stand by," he called. "When I give the word..."

Straker stopped behind the cameraman to watch. Roy strode across the parking area to a set wall.

"Now!"

Small explosions pocked the wall and Roy's chest. The stuntman grabbed his face, blood showing between his fingers as he fell to the asphalt and lay still.

"Cut it!"

Roy got to his feet. His hands, face and clothes were covered with fake blood.

"Is it all right?" Roy asked.

"Fine," Donahue said. "How'd it feel?"

"Good."

Donahue turned to the cameraman. "Doc, we'll get some close-ups on these next shots."

A make up man started touching up Roy's make up as Straker stepped closer.

"Morning, boys." Straker called. The crew nodded acknowledgment as they continued their work.

"Good morning, Mister Straker," Roy said.

"Well, you died beautifully," Straker told him with a smile.

"Thank you," Roy said. He made a face. "I don't think much of the blood, though."

Straker chuckled. He knew the complaint. The dark red, sticky fake blood was at least as messy as real blood and almost as hard to get out of clothes. Roy would need a shower before even thinking about heading home.

"By the way," Straker said, returning to his errand. "We finally got that contract matter all straightened out. If you want to call Miss Ealand, she'll put you in the picture."

"Thanks," Roy said with a grin of relief.

Straker nodded and walked away, heading back to his office. His pager buzzed and he pulled it out to check it. The number was one of the codes for downstairs - SHADO. It indicated the message was important but not urgent. He pressed the confirmation button on the pager and headed back to SHADO.

* * *

Freeman read through the requisition forms on the note board Johnson had handed him. They were for a replacement secondary generator for the North Sea Sky-Diver base, and a replacement moonmobile for Moonbase, both high ticket items.

"Commander Straker will have to authorize these," Freeman told her, handing her back the board. He turned to Ford. "Lieutenant, do you know where Commander Straker is?"

"Yes, I paged him a couple of minutes ago," Ford said. "He's on his way back from the lot."

* * *

Straker walked into the outer office. Miss Ealand was busy inputting data into her network station.

"Messages, callers?" Straker asked, stopping in front of her desk.

"No, sir," Ealand answered. "Only Miss Frazer."

"Miss Frazer?" Straker repeated, puzzled.

"Yes, sir. She came back for her handbag," Ealand said. "She left it in your office."

"You didn't let her go in there?" Straker asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Well, only for a moment." Ealand said defensively.

"I see," Straker commented mostly to himself as he went into the inner office. The doors closed behind him.

He looked around the spartan office. Everything was in its place, the awards on the glass shelves, the modern art on the walls. Still, it worried him that a microphone had been left in the office. He wondered if it had been deliberate. She hadn't seemed to be after anything related to

SHADO. Her questions had all been related to the studio, his views on the media, the changing styles in film, upcoming projects. Nothing that rang any alarm bells. She hadn't even been that interested in his reasons for supposedly leaving the USAF to run a film studio in England. That was a bit of a surprise in itself.

Most reporters wanted to understand his reasons for leaving the military after Minister Talbot's death. The year delay between the Rolls Royce crash and his supposed retirement puzzled them, as did his decision to stay in England to run a failing film studio. Miss Frazer accepted his reasons without questioning them.

Straker crossed to room to the desk, opening the silver cigarette box with its own hidden microphone.

"Straker."

"Voice print positive. Identification, Commander Straker," the voice print check confirmed, unlocking the controls to the elevator. He flipped the switch and the room began to descend. He berated himself for not being more observant, for letting that woman reporter leave the office without her purse, for not noticing the bag beneath her chair.

The office doors opened into SHADO Headquarters. He ignored the security operative standing at the entrance, hurrying past her without a word. Ford was at his station, speaking with Freeman.

"Alec, Ford," Straker said, beckoning them to join him in his office. The two men exchanged curious glances before following him.

"Something wrong?" Freeman asked as Straker went to his desk and sat down.

Straker turned to Ford instead. "Did anyone call me during the last fifteen minutes?"

"I beeped you on the studio lot," Ford said.

"No," Straker amended. "I mean the office, up-top, over the intercom."

"Well, yes," Ford replied. There was confusion in his voice. "I tried there first."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," Ford said. "There was no answer."

"Well, you must have said something," Straker grated. "It's important."

Ford gazed into space as he tried to remember. "Well, just 'Commander Straker'," he said after a moment. "There was no reply, so I clicked off."

Straker nodded, his lips thinning with worry. "'Commander Straker'," he repeated to himself before looking back at the operative. "Well, thank you, Ford."

He nodded a dismissal. Ford hurried out of the office, the doors closing behind him.

"How could I be so stupid, Alec?" Straker snarled in sudden anger. Freeman's eyes widened at Straker's outburst. "That reporter had a tape-recorder. It was left in the office. The chances are, it picked up Ford's voice over the intercom."

"That's not so important. He only said 'Commander Straker'," Freeman said. "Assuming it was picked up, what could it mean to anyone?"

"Not a lot, I agree," Straker said, a little calmer. Freeman's levelheaded appraisal of the situation helped. "But maybe just enough for that woman reporter and her press friends to start snooping around."

"It was a girl?" Freeman said, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Yes." Straker picked up the phone that connected his SHADO office to Miss Ealand's desk upstairs.

"Miss Ealand, get onto the Global Press Agency," Straker said when Miss Ealand picked up the other end of the line. "I want to contact that Miss Josephine Frazer. It's urgent."

Straker set the phone back in its cradle and sat back in his chair.

"What was she like?" Freeman asked.

Straker looked up at his chief of staff. He had almost forgotten Freeman was still there.

"Oh, intelligent."

Freeman looked amused at Straker's description. "Attractive?"

Straker glared at him. Freeman grinned. The Australian reached over to the desk and placed two papers in front of Straker.

"While we're waiting, you can sign these," Freeman said.

"What are they?" Straker asked, looking over the papers.

"Requisitions."

"How many moon-mobiles does this make this year?" Straker asked.

"Just the one, but it's only April," Freeman said.

"What's this about a secondary generator?"

"The primary went out two weeks ago and so they switched over to the secondary," Freeman explained.

"What's wrong with the primary generator?"

Freeman's well-practiced obtuseness could be irritating sometimes.

"The bearings went out," Freeman said. "Now the manufacturer claims we never told them the equipment was being used so close to salt water."

"Where did they think *Kinnairds Head*, Scotland was? Kansas?"

Freeman shrugged. "Anyway, Louie says it would be faster and simpler to go ahead and replace the entire unit and let him retrofit the old one as a backup when the next one goes out."

The phone from the upper office buzzed and Straker picked it up. "Yes, Miss Ealand?"

"I just called the press agency, sir," Ealand said. "They've never heard of Miss Frazer."

"Then, check all the other agencies. I want her found!" Straker nearly yelled. Freeman stared at him and he realized how badly he was overreacting. "Thank you, Miss Ealand," he said more calmly, hanging up the receiver. He turned to Freeman. "Intelligent, attractive and a possible security problem."

CHAPTER 11

"It was my mistake," Straker told Freeman. "I'll take care of it."

"I still think I should go," Freeman said. Handling this type of problem was normally Freeman's responsibility. He wondered at Straker's insistence on handling it himself. Maybe Straker realized he needed a break. Freeman dismissed that idea. Straker was too singlemindedly stubborn to admit he needed time away from work.

"Well, it's simple enough, Alec," Straker said. "Find Miss Frazer and get the tape. A logical sequence." He got out of his chair. "Well, you can look after things here."

"Sure."

Straker came around the desk and looked back at the chair he had just vacated. "Well, there it is, Alec. The 'responsibility seat'."

Freeman gave him a curious look and Straker smiled. "The, ah, other side of the fence. I'll check in every few hours," Straker said, going to the door.

Freeman nodded, still wondering why Straker was choosing to handle the problem himself and what he meant by the other side of the fence'. He had a suspicion Straker was going to appoint him second in command over his overwhelming objections. He didn't want to sit in the responsibility seat', to give orders that could cost lives, to deal with the headaches of command. Freeman had done that before, in the RAF as a flight leader. He knew he was much happier doing what he did, acting as Straker's chief of staff and lead troubleshooter.

Maybe Straker realized he needed a break and maybe Josephine Frazer, fake reporter, was just the break he needed. Freeman just hoped Straker wouldn't get himself into trouble. For all his brilliance in juggling the responsibilities of both SHADO and the film studios, Straker was sometimes just a little naive when it came to people.

* * *

Space Intruder Detector announced: "Have trace on positive track. Course four-two-eight-one-four-six-green. Speed, zero Sol eight. Range, twenty million miles, closing."

Freeman walked into the control room from the commander's office and went to Ford's station.

"Termination?" Freeman asked.

"It should be though any second," Ford said. They waited as a series of numbers appeared on Ford's monitor. The numbers showed that the U.F.O. was heading for Earth, Northern Europe.

"Tell Moonbase to launch the interceptors," Freeman ordered.

"Red alert...," SID announced. An alarm siren sounded in the control center. "Red alert."

After a moment, Nina Barry's face appeared on the Moonbase video-link. "Moonbase to SHADO Control, confirm Ufo sighting. Launching interceptors."

* * *

The King's Arms was a posh restaurant-bar, just off the main road. At three in the afternoon, Straker was the only customer in the lounge as he marked off three dead-ends on the list in his Day-runner. He took a sip of the drink in front of him - a Virgin Mary, tomato juice spiced with pepper sauce. The ice had already melted and it wasn't very cold. He beckoned to the bartender.

"May I have some ice, please?"

The bartender took the tumbler and added a few ice cubes before handing it back.

"How far is the Grenville Motel?" Straker asked.

"About eight kilometers down the road," the bartender answered. He started wiping down the bar top.

"May I use your phone?"

"Of course, sir," the man said. He pulled a phone from beneath the counter and placed it on the bar in front of Straker.

"Thank you."

Straker picked up the receiver and dialed the last number on his list.

* * *

The operatives in SHADO's control center listened as the interceptors went after the alien.

"Range, five million miles," SID announced.

"Missile One, positive hit. Missile three, not confirmed," the lead interceptor pilot reported. "Ufo changing course, moving out of range."

New numbers appeared on Ford's monitor. "We've lost it."

Freeman nodded in understanding and walked away, toward the commander's office. The U.F.O. had disappeared in one of SHADO's few blind spots. Now, it was a matter of waiting until it moved and they could see it.

Fifteen minutes later, SID announced: "I have a sighting bearing Green-zero-four-two. Maintaining stationary position at fifty-thousand feet, Earth atmosphere."

Ford checked the reading on his monitor, then headed to the office to inform Freeman.

The intercom buzzed and Freeman hit the key. "Yes?" Freeman said to the intercom as Ford stepped in front of the desk.

"I have Commander Straker on the line, sir," Miss Ealand said. "He wants to know how things are."

"No trouble," Freeman said, letting his finger off the key. He looked up at Ford. "Well, do we have trouble?"

"I don't think so," the operative said.

"But we have an unidentified radar trace," Freeman said.

"Yes," Ford agreed.

"Then something's there," Freeman insisted.

"I guess so," Ford admitted reluctantly. His experience told him it wasn't an alien ship. "But..."

"And it could be that Ufo," Freeman said, interrupting the operative.

"It's practically stationary!" Ford insisted.

"The point is, do we have a Ufo on our hands, or don't we?" Freeman asked.

"Well, in my opinion, it's a million to one against," Ford said. "But, of course, we'll maintain a full radar alert."

"No, launch Sky-one," Freeman ordered. "Tell Waterman to investigate."

"Yes, sir," Ford agreed, unable to keep the reluctance out of his voice. All of Ford's instincts told him they were going after a weather balloon or something equally innocuous. Freeman was overreacting, and that wasn't like him.

Ford went back to his station and made the radio connection to Sky-Diver in the North Atlantic. After a few moments, Freeman walked in to stand in his usual place, behind and to one side of Ford, watching the operative's monitor.

"This is SHADO Control to SkyDiver," Ford announced into his microphone. "Sky-one to investigate possible Ufo, position zero-one-two-three-zero-two, red, three."

"Roger Control, out," Waterman acknowledged.

"We still have positive track," Johnson said a few moments after Sky-one's trace appeared on their radar.

"Green on three, confirm radar fix," Prentice reported from her station.

"Control to Sky-one," Ford announced. "New position, zero-one-eight-two-nine-four. Range, twenty-five miles."

"I have it on internal radar," Waterman told them over the radio. "Should have visual contact in about a minute... I think I see it."

A minute later: "Have visual contact. Panic over, it's a weather balloon."

Freeman stalked out of the control room, back to the commander's office. Ford managed to suppress a rueful grin as he shook his head. He wondered why Freeman had overreacted so badly, but it wasn't his place to ask. Maybe Freeman wasn't feeling well, or maybe there was something else going on.

* * *

Straker waited in his car in the parking lot of the Grenville Motel. A familiar sports car drove up and parked in front of one of the guest rooms. The driver got out, went to the door and unlocked it. Straker got out of his car and followed.

She had left the door ajar and he pushed it open. She was sitting on the bed, hand on the telephone as though she was going to make a call.

"Miss Frazer?"

She looked up at the sound of his voice. "How did you find me?" She sounded surprised and a little worried.

"The studio gate logs all license plate numbers," Straker explained. "From that I got your address. I called and they gave me a couple of places where I might find you. From there, it was a simple process of elimination." He paused, looking over the cheap room. It didn't fit the car, or his initial impression of the woman. She hadn't struck him as someone who would accept second best.

"Who do you work for?"

"Myself," she said, her voice challenging him to call her a liar.

"And sell whatever you get to the highest bidder, hmm?"

"Look, I'm sorry I lied," she said, actually managing to look contrite. "But if I hadn't said I was from GPA, you wouldn't have seen me at all, would you?"

"Just give me the tape, Miss Frazer, and we'll call it a day," Straker said. He didn't want to do it, to ruin a day's work for a struggling reporter. But, he had no choice. SHADO's security came first.

She hesitated.

"The tape, Miss Frazer!" He let his voice go harsh and cold.

She shivered at his tone, pulled the tape from her purse and handed it to him. He glanced at it. The tape was wound all the way to the end.

"You've played it back," he said, unable to keep the upset out of his voice. This was going to get messy. He had hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"There wasn't time," Frazer spat.

"All right," Straker said. He wanted to believe her. He turned to leave, the tape still in his hand. Something hit him across the back of the head, knocking him off balance. He fell to his knees while Frazer grabbed the tape out of his hand and ran out of the room.

Straker climbed to his feet, shaking his head to clear away the muzziness. He wondered

what Frazer kept in her purse that could pack such a wallop as he headed after her. It felt like she'd hit him with a padded brick.

She was already in her car, speeding out of the parking lot.

He ran to his own car to follow.

Frazer wasn't that far ahead of him. Her little sports car was fast, but Straker's Omen was faster, thanks to modifications European Ford Motor Company didn't know about. Despite her lead, the Omen soon pulled abreast of her. The road was narrow, too narrow for two cars racing into oncoming traffic.

A truck horn blared and Straker pulled the Omen's wheel over hard. Frazer slammed on her brakes, skidding her little car into the ditch as the Omen came to a screeching halt a short distance ahead of her.

The truck that had been coming toward them honked furiously at them as it passed.

* * *

Freeman was mulling over reports, nursing a vile headache when Ford walked into the office, clip board in hand. The operative stopped in front of the desk and simply stood, waiting.

"Well, why don't you say it?" Freeman grouched.

"If you'll just sign these, please, sir," Ford said, holding the clipboard out to Freeman.

"Oh, get out of here." Freeman waved the board away.

"I'll leave them on your desk, then." Ford placed the clipboard on the desk top. "Even a practice launch for Sky-diver needs an authorization," the operative reminded Freeman. He turned to leave.

"Hold it, Keith."

Ford turned back.

"I'm sorry," Freeman said apologetically. "Can you imagine what Straker would have said?" He gave Ford a rueful smile.

"Yes, sir," Ford said, making a wry face. "I can imagine."

Freeman picked up a pen from the desk-set and signed the authorization. SHADO would have to wait for the U.F.O. to move. Freeman hated waiting almost as much as Straker did, but there was no helping it. He could only hope the aliens didn't wreak too much havoc before they decided to head home.

* * *

"What now? The police?" Frazer asked. Straker was driving her back to the motel, the tape safely tucked in his jacket pocket. The tow-truck he had called had already pulled her car from the ditch. A tie-rod had come loose, but the driver was sure the nearest garage wouldn't have it repaired until late morning, at the earliest.

"Who are you?" Straker asked, ignoring her question.

"Jo Frazer, freelance reporter, failed," she said with a grimace. "I've only had one article published in the last month."

* * *

On Moonbase, Lieutenant Gay Ellis turned to Nina Barry, seated at the primary radar station. "Is it still there?" Ellis asked.

"Yes, Lieutenant," Barry said, watching a slow trace that had appeared on the edge of her screen.

"Ask Colonel Foster to come in, and get Control," Ellis said. "I want to speak to Commander Straker."

"Right," Barry agreed.

* * *

The office intercom buzzed and Freeman keyed it on.

"I have Colonel Foster on the video-link, sir." Ford announced.

"Oh, thank you," Freeman said, letting up on the key and switching on the video-link to Moonbase. Paul Foster's face appeared on the screen.

"Hello, Paul."

"Hello, Alec. It's a surprise to see your face. Where's Straker?"

"I'll explain later," Freeman promised. "What's your problem?"

"Well, we've picked up radio signals about fifty miles east of the base. It's some sort of vehicle. It's moving on an erratic course, but it's heading our way," Foster reported.

"Have you any idea what it could be?" Freeman asked.

"Not really. We've tried to make radio contact, but no go," Foster said.

"Could it be unmanned?" Freeman wondered.

"It's possible," Foster admitted. "But, if it maintains its present course and speed, it'll run straight into us. It'll be a couple of hours before there's any real danger."

"Well, get onto it right away," Freeman instructed unnecessarily. He knew Foster would be working to solve the problem before it became a serious issue. He turned off the video-link and keyed the intercom to Ford's station.

"Lieutenant, I want an immediate run down on all installations on the Moon operating surface vehicles," Freeman ordered.

* * *

Instead of the motel, Straker pulled into the parking lot of the King's Arms. It was getting near dinner time and the lot was almost full, but he managed to find an open space not too far from the entrance.

There were no tables open in the dining room and it was a forty-five minute wait to be seated. However, there were still a few open tables in the lounge. Straker found one near a quiet corner.

"Why did you do it?" Straker asked after the waiter had taken their drink order and left.

"It's a dirty world," Frazer said. "Sometimes you have to cut a few corners."

"To get what you want?" Straker asked. "Like that car of yours?"

Frazer gave him a bitter laugh. "The car? It's on hire. All part of the front."

Straker knew that wasn't strictly true. The car was on lease, rather than being a rental. He wondered why she felt she had to lie about it. Of course, British usage occasionally still confused him. He still wasn't used to pavement being a sidewalk, and houses 'in' the street rather than 'on' it. Sometimes he'd catch himself unable to remember exactly which word he was supposed to be using, the American or British, or which was which. His sister in California occasionally joked that he sounded British now, but no Briton would ever mistake him for anything but an American.

The waiter returned with their drinks. She had ordered a gin and tonic. His choice was coffee.

"Does it matter?" Frazer asked when the waiter had gone.

"Well, let's say, I'm interested."

"You've heard it all before," she observed.

"I'm a very good listener," he said.

"With an ice cold, clinical outlook," she stated.

Straker simply watched her. He was no longer upset about the tape, but his curiosity was

piqued and, he had to admit, it had been a long time since he had been around an intelligent and attractive woman outside of work. The women in SHADO, and at the studio for that matter, were nearly all attractive and intelligent, but they were off-limits. He held their lives, their careers, in his hands and he could never be sure if their interest was due to him personally, or his position. He didn't really want to know.

"Hmm, you don't believe me, do you?" Frazer said.

"You know, there's one thing I hate," he said, letting his voice go cold.

She pulled away ever so slightly.

"It's eating dinner alone," he finished with a little smile.

CHAPTER 12

"Well, what do you think?" Freeman asked Ford. The signal Moonbase had picked up was coming closer.

"It's a tough decision," Ford said.

"Thanks," Freeman muttered, not bothering to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "All right, tell Moonbase to launch the interceptors."

"Right, sir," Ford acknowledged, leaving the office to go to his station and pass along the instructions.

* * *

Straker pulled the Omen into the gravel driveway beside his house. Half a house, really - it was a duplex, only a few miles from the studio complex. He had lived there nearly five years, since his divorce, and didn't often bring people in. Alec Freeman was probably the last guest he had over.

Straker hefted the sack of groceries onto one hip, unlocked the front door and let Frazer inside.

"Hmm, nice," she commented, looking around the living room.

"Well, it suits me," Straker said. For some reason, her approval felt good. "Well, I'll get things moving in the kitchen."

"Can I help you?"

"No, I can handle it," he said, setting the sack down and unloading it on the kitchen counter. He snapped his fingers in mock annoyance. "I left the wine in the car."

"I'll get it," she volunteered.

"Oh, thanks," Straker said, handing her the keys to the Omen. She left, closing the front door behind her.

Straker let his friendly mask slip a little as he went to the phone, picked it up and dialed Miss Ealand's office.

* * *

The intercom buzzed in the commander's office. Freeman hit the key. "Yes, Miss Ealand?"

"I have Commander Straker on the line, sir," Miss Ealand said over the intercom.

"You'd better tell him...," Freeman stopped, reconsidering. He didn't really want Straker to know what sort of day he was having. "Tell him everything's under control."

"He says he's glad to hear it and he'll be back tomorrow morning," Ealand said.

Freeman let his finger off the switch and sat back, wondering what was happening on the Moon.

* * *

"Oh, Miss Ealand, I want you to do a voice check for me," Straker said before Ealand had a chance to ring off. "It's Miss Frazer, just routine."

"A full G-six, sir?"

"That's fine, Miss Ealand. A full G-six," Straker agreed. A full G-6 was a full security file search, a little more than routine, but Straker trusted Miss Ealand's judgement.

"I understand, sir," Ealand assured him. "Record immediately."

The living room door opened and Frazer walked in, bottle of wine in her hand.

"Yes, yes," Straker said to the phone. He held the receiver out to Frazer. "Come and say hello to Miss Ealand."

Frazer took the phone, handing Straker the bottle of wine. "Hello, Miss Ealand," she said into the receiver. "You're working very late tonight. Hope to see you again soon. Goodbye now."

"Good bye," Miss Ealand said as Frazer handed the phone back to Straker. He put the phone back to his ear.

"Yes, that'll be fine," he said. "Good night, Miss Ealand." He hung up the phone and turned to Frazer. "Well, why don't you help yourself to a drink, and I'll go out and break out the can-opener."

"Fine," she said with a little laugh, holding out his keys. He put out his hand and she dropped them into his palm.

"Thanks," he said, putting them in his pocket.

* * *

Moonbase waited for the interceptors to identify the unknown signal source.

"I can see it," Astronaut North reported "I'll go down and radio back a photograph."

Foster stood beside the Carol Miller's communication console as the printer whined for a moment and spat out the picture. It was some sort of ground vehicle, designed for use in lunar gravity. Foster didn't see any identification markings on the rig.

"Transmit a print of this to SHADO Control," he instructed, handing the print to Miller.

* * *

Frazer sat facing Straker over the dining table, cupping the pewter goblet in both hands. They had finished their meal, pescine with *giardiniera*, a green salad on the side. Straker stirred his coffee and puffed on a cigarillo.

"You know, Ed, you're a terrific cook," Frazer said, pushing aside her plate.

"I just follow the instructions on the can," Straker said with a small self-deprecating laugh. He knew he was at least an adequate cook and he liked doing it, even though he didn't have much time anymore for entertaining.

"The wine was great," she said, taking a sip. "You should have had some." She looked around the room once more. "You know, you have a nice home here."

"A place to sleep," Straker said with a slight shrug. It was, he had to admit, a nice place. He liked the brightness, the art, the apparent disorder, so different than either of his offices. The studio office was bright, but it was kept fastidiously neat, with the help of studio housekeeping. His SHADO office was muted in color, all gray and black and fern green. The only bright colors there were the glasses above the drink dispenser and the light panel behind his desk. Here he had both the brightness and the art he liked.

"You know, it's funny, Jo, I enjoyed today," he said, pouring her another glass of wine. "Ever since my divorce, I've kept myself pretty much to myself. You know how it is."

"Yes, I do know," she said. She sounded sincere.

* * *

Ford handed Freeman a copy of the photo the interceptors had sent back.

"It's Russian," Ford said. "They have a base about a hundred and twenty-five miles east of Moonbase."

"Russian?"

"It's a mobile used in commercial mining in rich surface ore areas," Ford explained.

"Get onto their base," Freeman ordered. "Tell them unless they divert their machine..." He paused for effect.

"I'll explain the situation, sir," Ford assured him and left the office.

* * *

"We understand your concern," Colonel Pavel Orsov said over the radio link from his base on the Moon. "But we still can't establish radio contact with the crew. Something must have gone very seriously wrong. I'm sure they're out of control. All we can do is keep trying."

"Thank you, Colonel," Foster said, cutting the radio link. He turned to Miller. "Get me SHADO Control."

The video screen at the center console flickered on and Freeman's leathery face appeared. "We've contacted the Russian Base," Foster reported. "There's a crew of two on board, but no one can contact them."

"Is the radio link okay?" Freeman wondered.

"It seems to be, they just don't answer."

"What's the vehicle's position now?" Freeman asked.

"About twenty miles east of the base," Foster said. "The Russians have a surface mobile on the way, but it won't get there in time."

"Well, then, send out a Moon-mobile," Freeman instructed. "Try to establish visual contact."

"Right," Foster agreed. The Moon-mobile crew was already waiting for him.

* * *

Straker had turned the lights down. Wagner was playing on the stereo system. He watched Frazer as she looked around the room, at the artwork, the small collection of sculptures. One of the things he had learned from his ex-wife was an appreciation for modern and impressionist art. He still visited the galleries when he had time, though that was rare now.

Frazer inspected one of the sculptures, running her hand down the smooth marble shape. Straker realized for the first time, that for all that was on the walls, on the tables, there was nothing personal in the room. There were no photographs, no awards, nothing with his name on it. Nothing that was unique to the owner, to him. The room was a set, like the studio office. He wondered if she had noticed.

After a short time, she came to sit beside him on the leather sofa. She settled back, laid her hand on his chest and he felt his pulse race. It had been a long time since he'd been alone with a woman. He hoped she hadn't noticed how jumpy he was.

She smiled in an invitation and he accepted it.

* * *

The Moon-mobile made good time. Foster and his driver, O'Mara, peered out of the front window. They were both in space suits, helmets tucked by their feet.

"We should be making visual contact any minute," Foster reported to Moonbase. The Russian rig came into view, lumbering across the landscape at breakneck speed. "Yes, I make it about two miles."

* * *

The phone rang and Straker got up to answer it. "Straker," he said into the receiver. Frazer left the sofa and made her way to the bedroom.

He barely noticed as Miss Ealand began her report concerning the voice print check. Josephine Frazer was a prostitute and suspected extortionist.

"Criminal records show four arrests," Ealand continued.

"I see," Straker commented. Somehow, he wasn't surprised, only disappointed.

"Is there anything else, sir?" Ealand asked.

"No, that'll be all right," Straker answered.

"Good night, sir," Ealand said.

"Right," Straker responded, hanging up the phone. He went over to the stereo and turned it off.

He stood a moment in the doorway to the bedroom. Like the rest of the house, there was nothing personal in the room, nothing that marked it as belonging to him, including its present occupant.

Frazer had taken off her dress, laying it across the bed. Some things were best left to the imagination. She looked better clothed, a dispassionate part of his mind said. She was soft and out of shape, her breasts too heavy. Her bra didn't fit as well as it should, considering her build. The straps left red marks on her shoulders and back. She looked 'used', worn and a little shabby, like the stories she told.

She turned and saw the disappointment in his face as he picked up her dress and handed it to her.

"What's the matter, Ed?"

"Get out," he ordered.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I know, that's what's wrong," he said. To his surprise, his voice cracked. He hadn't realized exactly how upset, how disappointed, he was. He let the anger surface. "One article published in the last month? The car on hire? You were right about that the first time. You earned it, the hard way. Just what did you have mapped out for me? You plan to take me for all you could get? Or, maybe, something more cozy, like an idyllic weekend somewhere, and a guy with a camera just happens to burst in at the right time?"

"Maybe, at first," she admitted, pulling her dress on

"Oh, come on, don't give me that," Straker said, letting his voice go sharp and bitter, the tone he used on difficult actors and obtuse SHADO operatives. "Don't tell me there's an emotion left in that pretty little head. You're getting soft!"

"Soft?" she shot back angrily. "That's the way you get eaten alive." She pulled up the zipper on the back of her dress and grabbed her purse from the floor. "Oh, you wouldn't understand. It's a man's world, remember?"

She stalked out of the house, slamming the front door behind her.

He already regretted losing his temper. He had heard what he wanted, a story about struggling reporter, a woman trying to make a living. He had ignored the inconsistencies, the lies, and now wondered why he had let it happen. Maybe it wasn't her getting soft, but him. He needed to get out more, remember what the rest of the world was like away from SHADO's protective ivory tower, eighty feet below ground.

Straker picked up the phone and dialed the local cab company to come find her and take her to her motel. It was at least a mile to the village and she didn't have a coat with her. He didn't want her death by pneumonia on his conscience.

* * *

Freeman waited for Moonbase to report on the progress of the Moon-mobile. Finally, he gave up waiting.

"Get me a direct radio link with the Moon-mobile," he told Ford.

"Right, sir."

* * *

The Moon-mobile set down to one side of the path of the Russian rig. They flashed lights at it. No response.

"I have Colonel Freeman for you, sir," Barry's voice announced over the radio.

"Right, put him on," Foster said.

"What's your position?" Freeman demanded.

"We've just established visual contact and we're trying to get through to the crew, without much success," Foster explained.

"Right," Freeman said. "Fire a warning shot."

"Warning shot?" Foster repeated, puzzled. A warning shot from the depleted uranium shells the Moon-mobile carried was a little extreme. One of those shells could take out a tank, or a U.F.O.

"Look, you're less than five miles from Moonbase," Freeman reminded him.

"That's a civilian vehicle!" Foster protested.

"Fire that shot!" Freeman ordered.

"Right," Foster said, clicking off the radio. He looked over at O'Mara who gave him a sympathetic shrug. Foster shook his head as O'Mara checked the mobile's weapons targeting system.

"Range, four hundred ninety yards, Angle zero decimal two-eight," O'Mara read off.

"Not too close," Foster instructed.

O'Mara pressed the firing button and the mobile's gun fired the shell. It exploded in front of the Russian rig, sending up dust. The Russian rig didn't even slow.

"Try another one, as close as you dare," Foster ordered.

"Yes, sir," O'Mara said, checking the new targeting numbers. "Range, three hundred twenty yards, angle zero decimal two-four."

Again, O'Mara pressed the firing button and the mobile's gun fired. The second shell exploded almost directly underneath the rig.

"No reaction," Foster announced to the radio.

"You're certain they saw the warning shots?" Freeman asked.

"If they had been any closer, they'd have been part of it," Foster stated. He couldn't believe anyone could be so out of it as to miss seeing those two shots, but the rig was still heading for Moonbase. Maybe the crew was dead.

"Stop them," Freeman said.

"You mean...?"

"I mean, shoot to stop them. That's my decision, I'll take the responsibility," Freeman said. "Do you read me?"

"Be with you in a couple of minutes," Foster said. "I'm going to try something."

He grabbed his helmet and beckoned O'Mara to come with him as he headed for the airlock on the Moon-mobile.

A few minutes later, O'Mara was back at the controls of the Moon-mobile, alone. Ford was on the radio. He sounded upset. "Come in, M-Three," he kept repeating.

"M-three to Control," O'Mara said into the microphone.

"Control to...," Ford began. He was interrupted by Freeman.

"Let me speak to Colonel Foster," Freeman demanded.

"He's trying to get aboard the rig, sir," O'Mara explained, expecting an explosion.

"What?" Freeman yelled. There was a pause then: "Has he made it?"

O'Mara peered through the front windows of the Moon-mobile. "I'm not sure," O'Mara admitted. "I can't see him. If he's not inside..."

* * *

Foster had made it inside, with some small difficulty. Getting aboard a moving train was easier. They didn't bounce. He made his way to the control cabin and found both the Russian drivers sitting, singing, laughing. They saw him and greeted him with open arms. They acted drunk, reeling as they came toward him.

"*Tovarisch!*" the younger one shouted.

"Listen, they're both incapacitated," Foster told O'Mara over his suit radio. "The air pressure's down. They could be suffering from anoxia."

* * *

The Moonbase Control Sphere personnel could see the rig approaching the base. Given the path it was on, it would impact Moonbase at the Control Sphere.

"How far is it now?" Ellis asked.

"Fifteen hundred meters," Miller reported.

Ellis went to her center console and flipped on the base announcement system. "This is a red-emergency alert. Seal all airlocks. All personnel to carry out decompression drill," she announced.

The emergency siren started to wail.

* * *

"Get me the Russian base," Foster said into his radio, not removing his helmet despite the urging of the two Russians. "Find out how to stop this thing."

Ellis called the Russian base. Dudzinski was on the radio so quickly, Ellis wondered if he had been standing right there.

"Yes, I understand," he said in response to her question. "The quickest way to stop it is to throw the red master-power switch. It's, ah, situated left of center on the control panel."

* * *

Foster looked around the control cabin and spotted the large red switch, under a red switch guard.

"Yes, I see it," he announced into his radio. He headed toward the control panel.

* * *

SHADO Control waited.

"How far is it from Moonbase?" Freeman asked.

"Just a few hundred yards," Ford answered.

On Moonbase, the personnel carried out the decompression drill with practiced precision.

Ellis, Barry and Miller were in their space suits, wearing helmets. They could see the Russian rig coming toward them. The women pulled down their helmet visors and tightened them.

* * *

Foster almost had his gloved hand on the switch when the two Russians took objection. Luckily, they were both too incapable to be effective. He pushed them off with little difficulty and threw the switch.

The rig ground to a halt only three yards from the Moonbase Control Sphere. Foster could look out the control cabin window and see the three Control Sphere operatives behind the control sphere view port. He waved at them.

The two Russians started waving at them as well. Foster doubted the two men had any clue how close they had all come to disaster.

* * *

Half an hour later, Ellis was on the radio again to Colonel Dudzinski.

"The crew is fine," Ellis told him. "But I doubt that they'll remember much about the incident. There must have been a slight pressure leak. They were suffering from lack of oxygen, causing a sort of drunkenness."

"Drunkenness?" Dudzinski asked.

"Like drinking too much whiskey. We call it 'anoxia'," Ellis explained.

Dudzinski laughed. "Ah, we know it in the same way. Except, our description would substitute vodka for whiskey. On behalf of Sovidex, I would like to thank you for your cooperation."

Foster grinned at Ellis and shook his head. Of course, they would never tell Dudzinski the real reason his men wouldn't remember the incident. Medic Tze had already given them their amnesia shots. The two Russians had just lost twelve hours of their lives. A small price, considering what had nearly happened.

* * *

The next morning, Straker walked into the control room. Ford was already seated at his station.

"Good morning, sir," the younger man called.

"Ford," Straker said in greeting, walking over to him. "Well, it's all sorted out."

"And the girl, Miss Frazer?" Ford wondered.

"You were pretty quick with the voice print."

Ford dismissed the compliment. "'Hello, Miss Ealand' was enough," he said. "The international crime computer did the rest. She's got a record as long as your arm."

"Is she wanted by the police?"

"Not at the moment," Ford said. "But she won't stay out of trouble for long. Her kind never do."

"Maybe," Straker said. He looked around the control room. "Where's Colonel Freeman?"

"In your office, sir."

Straker nodded and headed for his office.

Freeman was seated at the desk. He looked up as the door opened and Straker walked in.

"Hello, Alec."

"Hello."

Freeman sounded tired.

"Well, I hear you had quite a day," Straker said. M'Bhutu had quickly briefed him before he walked into the control room.

"You could say that," Freeman said. He didn't elaborate.

Straker sat his briefcase on the desk and pulled two cigars from the silver cigar pail. He handed one to Freeman.

"Paul Foster might have lost his life, ordering him on board the rig like that," Straker said. He lit his cigar, then Freeman's. "Tough decision. The right one, of course."

"It wasn't quite like that," Freeman said.

Straker shrugged. "Well, whatever way it happened, Alec, you were responsible."

Freeman sat back in the chair. "I certainly have to hand it to you."

"Hmm?"

"That Miss Frazer," Freeman said. "She didn't have you fooled for a moment. If it had been me, I'd have probably gotten emotionally involved, or something."

"Yes, I can see how it could happen," Straker said. His expression became thoughtful and Freeman gave him a quizzical look. Straker smiled and pointed to his chair. "Oh, say, Alec..."

"Sorry," Freeman said with a smile, getting out of Straker's chair. He stood beside it.
"Well, it's all yours."

"The, uh, other side of the fence," Straker said, setting his briefcase on the floor and settling into his chair.

"Oh, by the way," Freeman said, stopping at the door. Straker looked up expectantly. "If you have any ideas about officially appointing me second in command, forget it."

"How does acting second' sound? That still leaves my name on top and everybody else somewhere lower."

"I'll think about it," Freeman promised.

CHAPTER 13

Straker's appointment with General Henderson, to pound out the details of SHADO's special project request, was set for 10 A.M.. Straker parked beneath the building in the space reserved for visitors of the IAC and made his way to Henderson's office on the 12th floor.

Straker wasn't looking forward to this meeting. Henderson had been difficult and out of sorts for the past couple months. He had grudgingly approved SHADO's appropriation last year, but had made it clear even then he wasn't happy with the amount of money SHADO was spending on upgrading its equipment, building Sky-Diver bases to get more adequate coverage of Earth's land masses.

Then, Straker forced the indefinite postponement of the manned Mars mission.

The Mars project was Henderson's personal baby.

Henderson scowled as Straker walked into the office. "What we say goes no further than this room, okay?" Henderson said, not even bothering to greet his former aide. "So let's get down to the infighting. You have been a thorn in my side for years, Straker. Consistently excessive demands for the diversion of resources to your organization. Now you're saying a total clearance program?"

"Right."

"And I'm saying," Henderson enunciated carefully. "While I'm running this commission, I'll fight you on this issue every inch of the way."

* * *

The Moonbase leisure sphere was comfortable, as always. Freeman liked going to the Moon. This was his thirty-fourth trip. Sixteen more and he'd be eligible for a second silver Moon pin. He looked over the chess board in front of him. His opponent, Steve Maddox, had just made his move.

"Oh, you've been practicing," Freeman complained, moving a pawn to block Maddox's move.

Maddox studied the board. "What are you working on, anyway, Alec?"

"One of Commander Straker's projects," Freeman said. "It's a beautification campaign."

"Well, I don't deny he could use it," Maddox said with a grin.

Freeman chuckled. "Nah, space junk. Straker want's it all cleared."

"Well, the Astrophysical Commission takes care of any space junk," Maddox said.

"Anything with hazard potential."

"Straker has an idea it could be used by the aliens to crack our defense system," Freeman explained. "I'm beginning to think he may be onto something."

"Well, if your report shows it's a possibility, the junk gets cleared," Maddox said. "So, what's the problem?"

"James L. Henderson is the problem."

* * *

"Cost, time, personnel, resources," Henderson ticked the list off his fingers. He sat back in his chair, looking over at Straker who hadn't bothered to sit. "You want reasons, why not? I can give you a hundred."

"Listen, Henderson, every item of space junk can be cleared in a matter of weeks, if the commission gave its full support," Straker said. "As for the cost, I admit, it would be high, but safety factors alone would justify it."

"Safety factors?" Henderson's brindled eyebrows drew together in a warning scowl.

"Yes," Straker said. "My organization uses space more than any other. My pilots take more risks with that junk in one month than..."

"My men do in a year?" Henderson asked, interrupting. "No, we need facts, Straker, details, statistics. You just don't have them."

"Don't I?"

"Of course you don't."

"I have my report," Straker said.

"Your report," Henderson said derisively.

"You promised that the commission would not take a final decision on a clearance program until my report had been fully considered," Straker reminded him.

"And so it won't," Henderson said. "However, I must confess I don't think it will have that much influence."

"Well, if that's so, Henderson," Straker said. "It must be because you've already swung the commission against it."

"Look, Straker. We've just completed the annual clearance of all items of space junk we considered a menace to navigation. The cost was more than doubled that of last year's operation."

"And worth every penny," Straker said.

"Do you realize what a full clearance program would cost?"

"Look, I'm not going to swap dollars signs with you, Henderson," Straker said angrily. "Mens lives are at stake. Now, I want that junk cleared. Every last piece."

* * *

Foster knew just by the fuming look on Straker's face on the video-link, that the meeting with Henderson had gone worse than usual.

"Well, where is he?" Straker demanded. He had asked to speak with Freeman only a few seconds before. Foster was suddenly glad he was on the Moon, instead of in firing range of Straker's wrath. Then again, maybe the Moon wasn't far enough away.

"He's on his way, sir," Foster said as Freeman walked into the Control sphere. "Commander Straker, for you," Foster told Freeman, moving aside so Freeman could sit in front of the video-link monitor.

"Freeman," the Australian announced.

"Alec. I want that space clearance report."

"But I only just got here," Freeman protested. "And there's data still missing."

"I don't care what's missing," Straker grated. "Looks like Henderson's commission has already decided against a major space clearance project. We have to convince them otherwise."

"Well, give me twenty-four hours," Freeman asked. "It can't make any difference to you, but it could make a heck of a difference to the report."

"I want that report, Alec," Straker said. "I don't care what shape it's in, just get it back here."

The screen went black as Straker cut his end of the link. Freeman just shrugged his shoulders as he walked out of the control sphere to collect his things.

* * *

The lunar module was ready to launch. Lieutenant Ellis went through the final launch checklist in the Control Sphere.

"SHADO Lunar module 32, cleared for takeoff at 14-21-34, Stand by," she announced

into the center console microphone.

"Roger, Moonbase. Affirm T.E.T." Steve Maddox said over the radio link.

"Affirmative," Ellis confirmed. "Trans-Earth trajectory green. Lift off 32."

There was the slightest shudder in Moonbase's structure as the Lunar Module's engines pushed it away from the launch structure over the embarkation sphere.

The module appeared as a green dot on Moonbase's tracking systems. The flight was going normally, no problems.

"Contact SID," Foster ordered. "Tracking procedure green." He turned to Joan, seated at her station. "Has SHADO H.Q. been alerted?"

"Yes, sir."

The door to the Control sphere slid open and Freeman walked in.

"So, everything's fine?" he asked.

"Straker's not going to think so," Foster told him. "He's expecting *you*."

* * *

Two hours into the lunar module's flight, the tracking screens were still clear, SID was silent.

Harrington listened to the communications from the module. "32 reports unidentified sighting, sir." There was still nothing on the screen.

"Signal red-alert," Foster ordered. The alert siren shrilled throughout the base.

The three astronauts on duty waited for orders to send them out after the U.F.O. that was probably on its way.

The radar tracking screen was still empty except for space debris and the lunar module.

"His angle of reentry is too steep," Foster announced, checking the radar trace. "Tell him to correct angle of reentry," he told Harrington.

Harrington shook her head. "Loss of signal, sir." After a few moments: "Earth-orbit insertion, now."

The lunar module's blip vanished from the monitor.

* * *

Straker's knuckles went white as he clenched his fists, listening to the reports from the control room operatives.

"We've lost it, sir," Ford announced quietly.

"Moonbase to SHADO Control." Freeman's face came on the Moonbase video-link to Earth. Straker uncurled his fingers and let himself relax just the tiniest bit.

"SHADO Control here," Ford said. "Go ahead, Moonbase."

"Have you picked up any signs of the Lunar Module?" Freeman asked.

"Negative," Ford answered.

Straker came into range of the video-link camera. "When can I have the report, Alec?" he said, very quietly.

"Twenty-four hours," Freeman said. "Forty-eight if you want to include anything from the module's loss."

"Forty-eight it is," Straker said. He turned and walked away, back to his office. He was both furious and relieved. Relieved the Freeman was alive, furious that the Australian had ignored his orders, and equally, that he had been left, even temporarily, fearing he had lost his closest friend. At the moment, he wanted nothing better than to give Freeman a sound thrashing. He decided to settle for getting Freeman on the next available shuttle back to Earth, with the report.

CHAPTER 14

It was a twenty minute drive to Henderson's office.

"Look, Henderson," Straker said. "All I need is another 48 hours."

"Another 48 hours?" Henderson raised one bushy eyebrow.

"Yes, I can have a summary of the completed report on your desk by then."

"You know I can't hold up the commission any longer," Henderson said. The meeting was scheduled in two days. "Why don't you let me tell them that you've decided to withdraw your proposal?" he suggested, not unkindly. "It might get you off the hook."

"I intend to hold you to your word," Straker said. "To consider my report before making a decision on the clearance."

Henderson nodded. "All right, Straker, I think I'm reading you. You want an alibi for that pilot of yours who killed himself and his crewman. You want to blame it on the presence of uncleared junk."

"I want your word, Henderson," Straker insisted.

"On one condition," Henderson said. He gave Straker a thoughtful look. "Now, you consider your spacecraft was involved in a reentry collision with an item of space junk."

"It's a possibility," Straker admitted.

"Hmm, a possibility, yes," Henderson agreed. "So you suspend all lunar flights until we've fully investigated the, ah, incident."

Straker was horrified. "Do you realize what you're doing?"

"Yes, Commander, I do," Henderson assured him. "I'm proving to the commission that your organization, in its present form, is an expensive, and unworkable luxury."

* * *

The drive back to the film studio and SHADO Headquarters took longer than twenty minutes. He didn't really want to have to go to work and do what he had to do.

He pulled into the studio parking lot sooner than he wanted. The studio security guard at the entrance doors to the building was as cheerful as ever. The security man didn't know the bottom was about to drop out from under SHADO.

Straker walked into the outer office, where Miss Ealand guarded the entrance into SHADO. She was seated at her desk, as usual.

"Ah, Miss Ealand," he said. "Hard at it?"

"I'm always hard at it. Sometimes you notice," she replied. "How did it go, sir?"

"Go?" he repeated. "Do you know the code word 'Washington Square', Miss Ealand?"

"Well, not without looking it up," she admitted. "It's not one we use regularly."

"It's one I thought we'd never use," Straker said. He couldn't keep the disappointment out of his voice.

"Well, what does it mean, sir?"

"It means shutdown," he answered. "Cancel lunar flights, virtual isolation of Moonbase." She simply stared at him as he turned and entered the inner office.

* * *

Ford didn't ask the meaning of the code Straker gave him to pass on. The look on Straker's face was enough.

"SHADO Control to all unit commanders," Ford announced on SHADO's command channels. "'Washington Square'. I say again, 'Washington Square'. Immediate compliance, 'Washington Square'."

* * *

Foster and Freeman were having lunch together in Central Park, when Foster's personal transceiver buzzed. He opened the connection.

"Colonel Foster, sorry to disturb you, sir," Barry's voice announced over the tiny speaker. "Code message from SHADO. 'Washington Square'. I'll check it right away."

"There's no need," Foster said into the transceiver's microphone. "It means shutdown."

"What?" Freeman nearly shouted in his stunned disbelief.

"More specifically, it involves a complete ban on all orbital flights," Foster said.

Freeman nearly ran out of the room.

* * *

Straker was alone in his office, staring off into space. He was still numb from realizing how far Henderson would go to get even for the loss of his favorite project. Henderson knew how vital Moonbase was to Earth's defense.

The video-link buzzed and Straker keyed it on. Nina Barry was on the screen.

"Colonel Freeman for you, sir," she announced.

It took a moment for Straker to orient himself to the here and now. "Put him on."

Freeman's leathery face appeared on the screen.

"Why the ban on Moon flights?" Freeman demanded.

"Henderson."

"But why, what about the report?"

"Forget it," Straker said. "The commissioners are going to believe that it's an attempt to blame space junk on the Maddox crash."

"When in fact, you think it was...?"

"Maddox, pilot error," Straker admitted. "Take a rest, enjoy the scenery, Alec."

Straker cut the connection.

* * *

"What's Straker trying to do?" Foster asked.

"I don't know," Freeman admitted.

"He doesn't usually take a thing like this lying down," Foster reminded him.

"You couldn't call it 'typical'."

"And then there's Maddox," Foster said. "What do we do about him? Forget all about it?"

"Well, what else can we do?" Freeman asked. "Any pilot can make a mistake. And you're only allowed one."

"Not Steve Maddox."

"Anyone can make a mistake," Freeman repeated.

"Not Steve Maddox," Foster insisted. "He was too experienced."

"All right, all right," Freeman conceded. "What caused the reentry error?"

"He reported an unidentified sighting just before loss of signal."

"But the trackers couldn't pick up anything," Freeman reminded him.

"Well, it must have been something," Foster said. "Space debris."

"Maybe."

"Maybe," Foster admitted. "And we just sit back and do nothing about it?"

"No, we make sure it doesn't happen again," Freeman said, heading for the Control Sphere exit. The door closed behind him.

Foster turned to Harrington. "Get me 32's electronic log."

"Captain Maddox's flight?"

"Yes."

* * *

Freeman finished the report. He wasn't happy with it, much of the data he wanted was still missing and he knew that the report was an exercise in futility. Still, it gave him something to do. Until now, he hadn't really appreciated how boring Moonbase could be. He encoded the report and headed for the Control Sphere to radio it to headquarters.

Foster wasn't in the Control Sphere, even though it should have been his shift. The console telltales showed a module was ready to launch.

"What's going on here?" Freeman demanded. The two Control sphere operatives refused to look at him.

"What the devil's going on?" he demanded. "Who's in that module?"

"Colonel Foster," Barry said after a long moment.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, furious. "Any of you?"

"Colonel Foster's orders," Harrington told him. "On no account were we to tell you until takeoff was imminent."

"And irreversible," Freeman completed for himself.

Barry and Harrington both managed guilty looks. Freeman stepped over to the central console and picked up the microphone, flipping the switches to connect him to the module's communication system.

"Paul, cut your motors," Freeman ordered.

There was no response from the module.

"I said, cut you motors," Freeman repeated. "Paul, this won't help."

"What won't?" Foster asked, finally.

"Taking out a module," Freeman said. "If you're doing it for the reasons I think you are."

"I'm gonna fly the same course Maddox flew," Foster told him.

"Under precisely the same conditions."

"Yes."

"You're crazy," Freeman announced. "What would it prove?"

"For one thing, Maddox wasn't responsible for the loss of his ship."

"Well, if you do make it, it won't mean much," Freeman reminded him.

"It depends on how I get through."

"And if you don't?"

"Then I don't."

Once again, Moonbase shuddered slightly as the lunar Module lifted off.

Again, Moonbase's tracking screens were clear, except for the module and the debris in orbit.

"Two-Nine calling Moonbase," Foster's voice came over the radio.

"Everything under control?" Freeman asked. He had taken the center console.

"So far," Foster said. "E.O.I. 2 hours, 38 minutes, 22 seconds."

"Roger," Freeman acknowledged. "Have you contacted Straker yet?"

"No. But I have a feeling he'll be contacting me soon."

* * *

SHADO's tracking stations on Earth spotted the incoming craft.

"Sighting at Galactic latitude 43 decimal 17. Altitude 4 decimal 53," Ford read off his monitor. It didn't make sense. SID hadn't notified them of an incoming U.F.O. and nothing else should be flying out there.

"But, that's Moonbase operations area," Johnson pointed out.

"Right," Ford agreed. "Call Commander Straker."

Straker was at Ford's station almost before Johnson had finished calling him. He grabbed the microphone from Ford's station.

"You'll turn back right now," Straker ordered.

"E.O.I. in one hour precisely," Foster announced. "I've gone too far for that."

"You're right, Foster," Straker stated, utterly furious. "Much too far."

* * *

There was still no trace on the screens other than the module and the debris.

"Module 2-9 to Moonbase," Foster called in.

"Go ahead, 2-9," Harrington replied.

"Reentry in 6 minutes 9 seconds."

"Roger."

Freeman and Barry watched the radar screens. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"Moonbase," Foster called.

"Receiving, 2-9," Freeman answered.

"E.O.I. in 4 minutes, 3 seconds."

"Reentry angle 5 decimal 73 degrees," Freeman read off. "Confirm?... 2-9 Confirm reentry angle."

Foster didn't respond, although the radio link still registered as good. The trackers showed that Module 2-9's reentry angle had shallowed out dangerously.

"Paul, adjust reentry angle. Cut back to five," Freeman ordered. "Cut back to five, Paul, you're too shallow."

There was still no response

Freeman glanced at Harrington. "If he doesn't adjust, he'll bounce off the Earth's atmosphere, out into space."

On the tracking screen, they watched as Foster's reentry angle adjusted to a safer level.

A few minutes later, the module had safely passed through the ionization black out.

"Colonel Foster?" Straker's voice came over the radio.

"Foster here, I'm happy to say," Foster announced.

"Congratulations," Straker said, his voice cold. "But, don't let my delight at your survival blind you to the fact that we have a few matters to discuss."

"Yes, sir," Foster murmured to himself.

* * *

Henderson laughed when Straker and Foster walked into his office. "Oh, you've gone too far this time, Straker."

"I don't see it that way," Straker told him, very calmly. Foster took a seat while Straker remained standing, hands clasped in front of him.

"You authorized a lunar flight," Henderson said.

"I authorized nothing."

Henderson shook his head. "Look, Straker. I don't want to argue with you. You are responsible, whatever the circumstances."

"I agree," Straker said. "But, Colonel Foster has proved that there is alien interference with our inter-orbital flights."

"Has he?"

"Yes, and I almost got killed doing it," Foster said.

"So you say," Henderson responded. His voice dripped with disdain.

Foster was on his feet. "Yes, I say!"

Henderson glanced at Foster, then gave Straker a long look. Straker stood very still, watching Foster, then he motioned for Foster to sit back down. Foster gave him a sullen look as he obeyed.

"My apologies," Straker said.

"Thank you," Henderson acknowledged.

"I think it's time we laid our cards on the table, Henderson," Straker announced.

"All right," Henderson agreed. "I'll tell you what I think of Colonel Foster's so-called 'proof'. You knew the Commission was going to turn down your space junk clearance program. So, you instructed Foster to make this flight."

"Now, why should I do that?" Straker asked.

"Because you were desperate for evidence."

"Go on," Straker urged quietly.

"You authorized a flight to rig this information. But you won't get away with it," Henderson grated. "The Commission convenes the day after tomorrow. By the time I get through, you'll be out of a job."

"Is that all?" Straker asked. "I'll see you at the Commission meeting."

Straker picked up his briefcase and beckoned Foster to accompany him out of the office.

Henderson watched the door close behind them. "Indeed you will, Commander," Henderson murmured to himself.

* * *

"Can he really do it?" Foster asked as Straker pulled his car onto the main road.

"Do what?"

"Ease you out."

"He can try," Straker admitted.

"What about our evidence?" Foster asked. "They've got to take notice of that."

"Evidence?" Straker gave a bitter sounding laugh. "What's it gonna look like when Henderson claims that we faked it just to get a space clearance program?"

"But we're right," Foster insisted.

"Well, sometimes, Colonel, that's not quite enough."

* * *

Freeman still sat at the center console. A printer clattered for a moment. Harrington tore off the sheet, glanced at it and handed it to Freeman.

"The tracking data's been processed, sir," she said.

"Anything?" he asked, looking over the printout.

"Not that we can see."

"They should have been able to pick up something," Freeman protested.

Harrington shrugged. "There's nothing on Colonel Foster's log except a record of maneuvers."

"All right," Freeman conceded. "Send it down to SHADO Headquarters."

* * *

"So, what do we do now?" Foster asked as they entered SHADO headquarters.

"Any suggestions?" Straker asked.

"No. But we can't just sit around," Foster told him.

"I've solved quite a few problems by just sitting around, as you call it, Colonel," Straker

said with the faintest touch of amusement. "I suggest you try it yourself, sometime."

Ford spotted them crossing the control room. "Commander," he called. "The tracking report on Colonel Foster's flight has just come in from Moonbase."

"And?"

Ford gave Foster an apologetic look. "Well, nothing unusual, sir."

"All right," Straker with a sigh.

"Well, that leaves the M.B-3 detector," Foster said.

"Yes, they're processing the data now," Straker said. "Well, we haven't had much luck so far, maybe we're due for a break."

One of the printers chattered, spitting out a long stream of paper. Lieutenant Johnson tore off the sheet, looked it over and took it to Straker.

"The MB-3 data, sir," she said.

"Ah, thank you," Straker said, beckoning Foster to accompany him into his office.

Straker spread the printout on the conference table.

"Looks like a S-P-S rocket of some sort," Straker commented.

"Like the limpet rockets used in debris destruction," Foster said.

"Yeah," Straker agreed. "But it doesn't make sense. I mean, why would the aliens put a device like this into Earth orbit?"

"Could be programmed to attack Moon ship flights?" Foster suggested.

"Blockade on Moonbase? Maybe," Straker conceded. "But why hasn't our radar picked it up?"

Foster looked over at the whiteboard on the wall opposite the desk. A map of orbital debris had been overlaid on it. "Space debris," Foster announced. "It's based in one of those burned out rockets over there."

"Well, assuming you're right, which one could it be?" Straker asked.

Foster walked up to the map. "Considering Maddox and I flew practically identical flight paths, it would have to be one of these two here, or Apollo eight, here, or 3-47." He pointed them out on the map.

"Hmm, four possibilities," Straker commented to himself. "I think we're onto something."

He looked at the map for a long moment, then went to the desk. He keyed on the video-link to Moonbase. Freeman's face came on the screen.

"Alec, I have an assignment for you," Straker announced. "I want you to launch the interceptors. Their mission: to destroy four pieces of space junk. I'll have Control relay the coordinates direct to the astronauts."

"You mean, space junk in Earth orbit?" Freeman asked.

"Right. And I mean use all three interceptors."

"All three?" Freeman repeated in shocked disbelief.

"Yes, I know it will leave Moonbase undefended, but, nevertheless, do it, Alec, at once." Straker cut the link to Moonbase.

"Now, wait a minute," Foster protested. "Do you know what's gonna happen when Henderson finds out about this?"

"Ah, yes, Henderson," Straker said. A hint of a smile played about the corners of Straker's mouth and there was a self-satisfied chirpiness in his voice. "Why don't you go over and tell him, Colonel?"

"He'll go berserk," Foster said.

"Yes, Take a nice, slow drive, give me about, half an hour."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Foster muttered. Straker gave him a hard look and he left to tell Henderson, as instructed. Straker was up to something, but for the life of him, Foster couldn't figure out what it might be.

* * *

Freeman ordered the interceptors launched, as instructed.

"Control to interceptor leader," Freeman radioed. "Steer programmed course to Earth orbit. You will receive destruct details from Earth Control. Out."

* * *

Miss Ealand was still seated at her desk when Straker came out of the inner office.

"Miss Ealand, when James Henderson calls, tell him I'm unavailable," Straker told her.

"And when he arrives, sir?" she asked knowingly.

"Oh, show him right in, the red carpet treatment," Straker said. "He's a very important man. You can expect him at three o'clock."

CHAPTER 15

Henderson barreled into the outer office at five minutes after three. Foster followed him in, giving Ealand an apologetic smile.

"I want to see Straker immediately," Henderson demanded. "And before you try to fob me off with some damn fool excuse, I'm telling you, I won't take no' for an answer."

"But, of course you may see him, Mr. Henderson," Miss Ealand said with a smile. "He's expecting you. Go straight in." The inner office door slid open.

"Oh, thank you," Henderson said, the bluster gone for the moment. He walked into the office. "Straker," he started, but the younger man wasn't alone in the inner office. A dark haired man was seated in the white leather chair opposite the desk.

"Ah, Henderson," Straker greeted him with a smile. "You're late. Won't keep you a moment. Studio business." Straker turned his attention back to the man in the chair. "Well, I think it's a great script, Mr. Steiner. There we are..." He made a show of signing a document and handing it to the man. "Cleared for shooting."

"Thanks," Steiner said. "You know, I like the way you operate."

"Oh, thank you."

"Your policy of non-interference," Steiner explained. "Some executives crawl all over you."

"Well, I can assure you, Mr. Steiner, you'll see very little of me," Straker said.

"And I'll give you a film the studio'll be proud of. Thanks again," Steiner said, heading toward the door. "Nice guy," he told Henderson. "Good bye."

"Good bye," Straker called as the door closed behind the director.

"All right, Straker," Henderson warned.

Straker opened the silver cigarette box and held it out to the older man.

"You know I never touch them," Henderson grated.

"Voice identification," Straker explained, all bright innocence.

"James Henderson," Henderson said into the microphone.

"Identification positive, Henderson, James L.," the voice print computer announced.

"Thank you," Straker said, closing the box and hitting the switch to lower the elevator.

Henderson glowered at him as a concrete wall moved past the office window. The movement stopped and the office doors slid open. The security operative on duty in the entrance hallway nearly jumped in startlement as Henderson barreled his way through the door.

Henderson led the way through the control room, heading directly for Straker's office. He didn't bother checking if Straker and Foster were following him. The office doors were open, as they usually were when Straker wasn't present. Inside the office, Henderson turned to find that only Straker had followed him in. The older man hit the door control on the desk and the doors closed.

"I tried to call you, Commander," Henderson said. "I was told you were not available. Were they your instructions?"

"Yes."

"I see. A very high-handed attitude," Henderson observed. "However, one more question. Is it true you ordered all three Moonbase interceptors into Earth orbit to destroy certain items of space junk?"

"Correct."

"Do you realize what you've done?"

"You tell me," Straker said. His voice had gone flat.

"You've blatantly and openly defied the commission, and left Moonbase and the Earth defenseless."

"It was my decision," Straker said. "I realize the implications."

"You had better start packing, Straker," Henderson announced. "When the Commission hears about this, you're through."

"Aren't you interested in hearing my reasons?"

"Oh, let's be kind," Henderson said. "Let's put it down to a mental aberration, the strain of command. Get those interceptors back on Moonbase, Commander, while you can still give orders."

"Sorry, Henderson."

"Don't push your luck, Straker," Henderson warned. "If Moonbase reports... "

"A Ufo sighting?" Straker asked, completing Henderson's sentence. "Stick around, I'm expecting it."

* * *

Moonbase tracking systems picked up a signal: "Possible contact 248-016 red," Barry announced. "Contact confirmed, Ufo 248-136 red."

"Red alert," Freeman ordered. "Get me SHADO Headquarters."

* * *

"Ufo maintaining course 248-204 green," Harrington was saying as Straker and Henderson entered the control room.

"Get the termination," Straker ordered, coming to stand beside Ford.

"Request trajectory termination," Ford passed on the request.

"Predicted termination, 1F-026, Southern England," Harrington read-off her own monitor on Moonbase.

Straker nodded, expression grim. "Close enough. Its target is this studio," Straker told Henderson. He turned back to Ford. "Maintain visual contact on countdown."

"Yes, sir."

"And order a complete shut down," Straker said.

"Shutdown?" Foster repeated in surprise.

"Everything," Straker said firmly. "VHF, radar, the computers, complete radio silence."

"Straker," Henderson warned.

"As you said, Henderson, I can still give orders," Straker reminded him. He turned back to the control room operatives, who had stopped to listen. "Complete shut down. Do it!"

The operatives hurried to comply. The normal background sounds of the computers, the constant radio links, quieted into silence. For the first time anyone could remember, the only sound in the control room was a whirr of the ventilation fans.

"Termination: 8 minutes, 4 seconds," Ford announced. His voice sounded too loud in the silence.

"Commander Straker, I'd like to talk with you in your office," Henderson said quietly.

"You too, Colonel," he told Foster.

Henderson turned and led the way to Straker's office. Once inside, Henderson hit the door switch on the desk, locking the electronically controlled door.

"Straker, I'm relieving you of your command," Henderson said. "Colonel Foster will take over, as of now."

"You can't do it, Henderson," Straker told him. "You require the unanimous backing of the Commission."

"You think I won't get it?"

"Yes, I think you could get it," Straker admitted. "But it would take time."

"And this base is due to be attacked in a few minutes?" Henderson said. He turned to Foster. "Colonel Foster, assume command."

Foster hesitated. Henderson glowered at him. Straker simply waited.

"Colonel..." Henderson's voice held a threat.

"I take my orders from Commander Straker," Foster announced quietly, but firmly.

Straker took a deep breath before turning to Henderson.

"Now, for the first time in your life, Henderson, you're going to listen!" Straker stated with an edge of anger. "The aliens put a satellite into Earth orbit, using a piece of space junk to cover. Why? A blockade on Moonbase? A logical reason, but obvious. Too obvious. In time, we would have located and destroyed it. So the satellite was a decoy, a red herring for something bigger. An attack on this headquarters. They hoped the satellite would draw the interceptors from Moonbase."

"And you fell right into the trap," Henderson interrupted.

Straker couldn't be sure if Henderson really didn't understand the situation or was just being stubborn.

"I acted as if the plan had worked, yes," Straker said. "It would take a Ufo of great destructive power to destroy this underground base. I didn't want that hanging over our heads."

"All this guess work does not explain the shutdown," Henderson pointed out.

"Well, why make it easy for them?" Straker asked. "The Ufo is probably programmed onto our radio signals."

"I don't buy it, Straker," Henderson said. "I just hope you've guessed wrong. Because, if you're right, we're about to be killed."

Straker flipped the door lock switch and the door slid open. "Still time for you to leave."

Henderson glowered at him from beneath brindled eyebrows.

"All right," Straker said, leaning against the desk. "We all just sit here and wait."

"For what?" Henderson wondered aloud.

"A voice."

* * *

The Moonbase Control sphere crew was as close to panic as their training would allow.

"Moonbase to SHADO Control. Come in, Control," Harrington kept repeating over the now dead radio link. She turned to Freeman. "No use sir, it's complete radio shutdown."

"What the hell is Straker playing at?" Freeman growled.

* * *

"Four minutes to termination," Ford announced as Straker, Henderson and Foster reentered the control room.

"Straker, if we contact the interceptors, there may still be time," Henderson said.

Straker shook his head. "It's no good. They can't operate in the Earth's atmosphere. And the Ufo s already in the stratosphere."

They waited.

"Termination, one minute twenty seconds."

"We're sitting ducks," Henderson commented to no one in particular.

"Maybe," Straker said.

The phone to the upstairs office rang and Straker grabbed it. "Yes?"

"Sky-One has just overflown the studio at zero feet," Miss Ealand announced.

"Thank you, Miss Ealand," Straker said, setting the phone back in its cradle. "Switch everything on."

"Yes, sir," Ford said as a sense of relief filled the room.

"And get me Captain Carlin," Straker added.

Ford made the connection to Sky-One.

"Nice timing, Captain," Straker said into the microphone. "Don't miss it."

"Roger, Control," Carlin acknowledged. "Sky-One to Moonbase. Request Ufo fix and attack coordinates."

* * *

Moonbase breathed its own sigh of relief.

"Will relay direct to outboard computer," Harrington told the pilot.

Behind her, Freeman shook his head. "Why, Straker, the sly old..."

Harrington turned. "Fox?" she said, completing the phrase for him.

He grinned. That wasn't exactly the word he had in mind, but it would do.

* * *

"Forty-five seconds," Ford counted down. "Forty-seconds... thirty-five seconds... thirty seconds..."

* * *

Peter Carlin scanned the blue skies above the film studio. After several seconds, he spotted the bright, spinning dot that was the enemy ship.

"Have visual contact," Carlin announced. "Going in for attack."

Sky-One was not as fast or maneuverable as the alien ship. But, her pilot was vastly more experienced. Sky-One climbed nearly vertically, firing at the alien. The enemy got off a single shot before bursting into flame and exploding.

"Sky-One to SHADO Control. Ufo destroyed," Carlin notified SHADO Headquarters.

* * *

The relief in Headquarters was almost palpable.

"Colonel Foster," Straker said. "Would you get this operation computerized and we'll prepare it for the commission in my office."

Foster nodded and headed over to the computer center to get the data.

Henderson watched him leave before turning back to Straker. "Well, Straker, I guess I owe you an apology. You were right," he said. "The Commission will recommend the complete clearance of all space junk."

"Thank you."

"Of course, it will take time," Henderson said. "The money has to be raised."

"Call it the 'Maddox' fund," Straker suggested.

"Maddox?"

"The pilot that was killed," Straker reminded him.

"Ah, yes, Maddox."

"If only you hadn't been so positive that you were right," Straker grated in a sudden surge of self-righteous anger.

"Like you?" Henderson responded with only a hint of a smile. He turned and started up the short flight of steps to the upper level and the closest exit.

"Henderson," Straker called, anger gone as suddenly as it had come. Henderson stopped

and looked back at the younger man. "I'll walk you to your car," Straker offered.
He hurried up the steps and they walked out of the complex together.

CHAPTER 16

Another early day at SHADO. Straker had finished reviewing the logs of the previous day and was now looking over the first report turned in by his new security chief, Vladimir Natiroff. Henderson had pushed approval of the appointment through over the objections of several commission members, notably the German and British delegates. It was Henderson's way of making amends for trying to force Straker's removal from command the week before.

"Natiroff seems to be settling in okay," Straker commented to Freeman seated across the desk from him.

"His wife and kids should be arriving next week," Freeman said. "I'm afraid to ask Henderson how he arranged that."

Straker managed a rueful grin. "When you've been around as long as our favorite general, not only do you know where the bodies are buried, you know who dug the graves."

"Knowing Henderson, he knows what brand shovel they used," Freeman said.

"Probably handed it to them," Straker said. He turned the pages of the open file on his desk. 'Atlantica 4' was the title typed across the cover page.

"No survivors?" Straker asked Freeman, expression solemn once more. Freeman shook his head. He'd been over the report with Natiroff. A freighter went down in the south Atlantic with the loss of all hands. The only trace of the ship was an oil slick and a charred life preserver.

"Conclusions?" Straker asked.

"Well, for my money it hinges on the last radio message," Freeman said. "'Under attack'... that could mean practically anything."

"Let's assume it means under attack from the aliens," Straker said.

"Possible," Freeman conceded.

"An underwater craft?"

"They're obviously capable of building it," Freeman reminded his superior.

"Undetected?" Straker asked, letting his skepticism show.

"The ocean's a big place. Quite a few radar blind spots," Freeman said. "Some UFOs still get through. We still haven't found the one that got through last week. There may be others we don't even know about."

"Not many, but maybe one or two big enough to carry component sections," Straker said, warming to the idea.

"It could have been assembled underwater," Freeman suggested. "They've perfected life maintenance in a liquid environment."

Straker was silent for a long moment, thinking. "I buy it, Alec," he said finally.

"Right," Freeman agreed. "What do we do about it?"

"A systematic search of the area," Straker said. "I'll go myself." He reached forward to hit the intercom button.

"In Skydiver?" Freeman asked softly.

Straker sat back and looked over at his chief of staff. "What else?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't like me to take over?"

Worry flickered across Straker's face for just an instant. "Oh that," Straker said with a tiny shrug. "Well, the dictionary says it's a morbid dread of confined spaces. Skydiver isn't that small."

"And you're not always morbid," Freeman added.

"Exactly," Straker agreed with a smile. But Freeman noted his smile seemed a little tense. "Where's Skydiver right now?"

"Southern Atlantic," Freeman said. Straker keyed a sequence into the keyboard on his desk and the wall monitor flickered on to show a map of the south Atlantic. Freeman pointed out an area in the middle of the screen. "Around four hundred miles from St. Helena."

Straker hit another set of keys and the map enlarged, showing a small group of islands.

"Is there a rendezvous point where we can exchange crews?" Straker asked.

"There are dozens of small atolls in the area," Freeman said. "Mostly uninhabited."

"Good," Straker said, getting up from his desk. "I want to be aboard with the best available sub crew as soon as possible."

* * *

The crew transfer went without a hitch. The regular Sky-diver crew was scheduled for leave rotation in a week in any case. Now they could get started that much sooner. The sea was smooth, the sky clear as Straker, Foster, Captain Lew Waterman and his crew boarded Sky-diver. The transfer took less than half an hour, including the change of command checklists on the status of the sophisticated combination of fighter-launch platform and submarine.

As always, Peter Carlin left his ship as clean and neat as he had found it, seven weeks before. "Take care of my boat," Carlin joked as he boarded the seaplane.

"I'll take care of my boat, don't you worry," Waterman said, taking possession of Sky-diver.

The seaplane lifted off from the water and Sky-diver was alone, new crew in place at their stations below, passengers on the conning tower skimming the horizon with binoculars.

"Switch to seaskim. Full ahead," Waterman ordered as soon as the plane was a dark speck in the bright sky.

"Switching to seaskim," Lieutenant Lewis's voice came over the small speaker. "Full power."

The engines began to whine a little as Sky-diver began to move away from the island. Within minutes, the craft was running along fast enough to climb up on its hydrofoils. Its speed increased even more.

Satisfied, Waterman turned to Straker. "I'm needed below, sir."

"Right," Straker said. "Carry on, Captain."

Paul Foster watched Waterman press the lift mechanism switch. The lift lowered and Waterman disappeared into the boat below. Foster had been surprised to get Freeman's call the day before telling him to pack for a short tour on Sky-diver. He had been more surprised to find Straker waiting for him at the airfield.

Foster still wasn't sure why he hadn't been ordered to count penguins in Antarctica for a while, a punishment tour for bringing the lunar module to Earth in direct violation of orders. Maybe Straker had forgiven him because things had worked out and Henderson had agreed that Straker was right, or maybe Straker just hadn't come up a suitable punishment. Forgiveness was not one of Straker's stronger characteristics.

"Do you think we will find anything?" Foster asked. He had read the report on the Atlantica 4 that Straker had given him, but hadn't had a chance to discuss it. Straker had immersed himself in paperwork for the entire eight-hour flight to the rendezvous point.

"Hard to say, but the more I think about it, the more the theory stands up," Straker said. "We know they've taken people from houses in broad daylight."

"You mean it'd be a lot easier mid-ocean?"

"Right," Straker agreed.

Foster looked around at the empty horizon. "It's a big place to play cat and mouse."

"Well, we'd better make sure our claws are sharpened," Straker said.

"What do you mean?" Foster asked.

"We're trying to find them," Straker reminded him. "Let's hope the aliens don't think we're the mouse."

Waterman's voice drifted up through the open hatch: "Maintain sea skim until we reach search area."

"Yes, sir," Lewis, the navigator said.

"Approaching B17," Tony Chin announced from his helm station.

"Plot a search pattern," Waterman ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant." Waterman's voice again. "I want a constant radar sweep and sonar sounding."

"Right," Nina Barry's quiet alto agreed.

Waterman's head appeared in the hatchway. "We'll make the first sweep on the surface, sir," Waterman said.

"Right, we'll keep our eyes open," Straker told him.

"Then we'll go under for a submerged circuit," Waterman said. He smiled. "Make the most of the fresh air, gentlemen."

Foster grinned at the Sky-diver captain. Foster had spent a six-week tour as a crewman under Waterman during his initial training. Service aboard a submarine, even this one, was a far cry from his prior career as a pilot, but Foster enjoyed being aboard Sky-diver. He noted, however, that Straker's smile seemed a little tense and he wondered if Straker was a little more worried about this search than he had let on.

Waterman disappeared inside the sub once again.

Straker handed Foster the binoculars he'd been using and headed for the hatch. "Maintain the watch, Colonel. I'm going below."

"Yes, sir," Foster agreed, taking the binoculars to watch the horizon once more.

* * *

Straker had come to the conclusion before he'd even left the seaplane that coming aboard Sky-diver hadn't been a good idea. He should have allowed Freeman to handle the search, even if it did mean he would have had to admit how much he disliked going onboard SHADO's submarine. Claustrophobia was a weakness Straker hated admitting to. It was a failure of will, a psychic wound that had never healed despite his efforts to overcome it. He hated the feelings of panic it brought and hated himself for not being able to stop it by force of will.

It was too late now, he had to go through with it. He had to face the fear, handle the panic he knew was waiting for him below. Straker took a deep breath and pressed the switch to lower the lift platform to the upper level of Sky-diver's main cabin.

Lieutenant Tony Chin was seated at the helm station on the upper level, watching the monitor in front of him, the gauges. Straker walked over to the pilot, looking over the instrument panels lining the walls, the helm console. He recognized most of the instruments and the rest he could figure out. They weren't all that unlike what was found in the cockpit of a jetliner. Unlike a jet however, Sky-diver had no windows.

Straker stopped a moment to take in his surroundings. Sky-diver wasn't really all that

small. The ceilings were normal height and there was room to move around. He shouldn't be feeling the nibbles of panic at the edges of his awareness. He found he was hunching over and straightened up.

Straker approached Lieutenant Chin's station. The helmsman glanced back at him momentarily before turning his attention back to steering the boat, settling his earphones back on his head.

Beyond the helmsman, along the far bulkhead, there were two airlock hatches. There were two more on the opposite side, escape hatches.

"Ever used this?" Straker asked.

Chin didn't hear him and he moved closer to catch the young man's attention. Chin raised one earphone.

"I asked if you'd ever used the escape hatch, Lieutenant," Straker said.

"Yes, sir," Chin answered with a smile. "In training. Our navigator, he's the one you should talk to about escape hatches."

"Forget it," Straker said with a tiny shrug. "Just familiarizing myself with the ship."

Straker looked over the system telltales once more before heading back to the open lift platform. He hit the control and the lift took him to the lower deck. Sky-diver really wasn't all that much different from an airplane or a space vehicle. However, airplanes and space capsules didn't bother him and Sky-diver did. Maybe it was the knowledge that water was surrounding the boat rather than air or vacuum.

Nina Barry had been called in from Moonbase to handle the radar and sonar section. It was odd seeing her without the Moonbase anti-static wig, in a Sky-diver uniform rather than Moonbase silver, but he had told Freeman he wanted the best. There was little doubt Barry was the best radar operator SHADO had. He stepped closer to her as she listened on her headphones, frowning at the monitor screen in front of her.

"What is it?" Straker asked.

"Large shoal of fish," Barry answered. "Tuna, probably."

"You're the expert," Straker said. Barry smiled, not taking her eyes off her monitor.

Chin had mentioned the navigator. Lewis was standing at the map table, marking the boat's course, speaking quietly with Waterman.

Straker recalled what he had read in the man's file. Lewis was Straker's age, a career Navy petty officer before joining SHADO. Lewis looked up and saw Straker watching him. Straker gave him a nod and headed toward Waterman standing by the periscope.

"It's a trim ship, Captain," Straker said.

"Thank you, sir," Waterman said. "My cabin is at your disposal."

Straker gave Waterman a grateful nod then looked around the main cabin once more. He made the mistake of looking up to the ceiling. He knew it was a good fifteen feet between the lower deck and upper hull, the same as the highest ceiling height in SHADO Headquarters. It just didn't feel like it. The nibbles of panic were becoming more noticeable.

Straker headed for the captain's cabin and closed the bulkhead door behind him. The cabin was about the size of a large closet. A bunk was built into one side, with lockers over and under it. On the opposite side was a fold down writing table.

One of the lockers was labeled maps, another was labeled operations. Straker opened the door on the second locker and pulled out a heavy notebook with 'Sky-Diver' printed on the binding. He opened the notebook on the table, pulling a set of plans from a protective pocket. He unfolded the plans on the desk and began to look them over.

Waterman's shaving mirror was on a small shelf above the desk. A reflection caught Straker's eye. He was surprised to see the image of someone he barely recognized - a frightened man with cold sweat beading his forehead. He looked around the cabin once more and panic began to raise its ugly head. Straker closed his eyes and reminded himself that the walls weren't really moving, it was just his imagination. Nothing was going to happen, Sky-diver was perfectly safe. When he opened his eyes, the walls were back where they belonged and he went back to looking over the plans. He liked knowing the lay of the land he was in.

* * *

Waterman had noticed Commander Straker's nervousness, but had attributed it to the fact that it was Straker's first visit to Sky-diver while on the high seas. Waterman had similar misgivings when onboard planes when he wasn't the pilot.

The Sky-diver captain looked over his domain once again. Lieutenant Barry was frowning as she listened to a signal in her headphones.

"Sonar echo increasing," she announced after a moment.

Waterman moved to look at the monitor in front of her. "What do you make of it, Lieutenant?"

Barry listened for a long moment, just touching the control knob on the sonar unit. "Metallic object," she said. "And moving quite fast. 60 knots."

"How far?"

"2,000 yards," Barry said. "Increasing."

Waterman took a step over to the microphone beside the lift mechanism and picked it off its holder. "Get below, Colonel. I'm taking her down."

Foster didn't bother waiting for the lift. He clambered down the ladder rungs, dogging the upper hatch behind him. Waterman didn't wait for him to finish: "Dive - Dive - Dive!"

The dive alarm sounded as Waterman hit the warning klaxon. The boat shuddered slightly as it sank beneath the waves, heading for its normal cruising depth.

The door to the captain's cabin opened and Straker came out. "What is it?"

"An underwater craft, sir," Waterman said. "Moving ahead of us."

"Altering course," Barry announced. "Veering to starboard, 8 degrees."

"Stay with it, Captain," Straker instructed.

"8 degrees starboard," Waterman ordered, looking up at Chin.

"Try the cameras," Straker ordered.

Waterman touched a control panel beside one of the monitor screens. A dark, murky image appeared.

"Visibility poor, sir," Waterman said, pointing out what his superior already knew.

Barry's frown became deeper. "Sonar now registering rock formations..." After a long moment she shook her head. "We've lost it."

The monitor screen showed rocks and cloudy water. It was impossible to make out anything else.

"Anything?" Straker asked.

Barry shook her head once again, not taking her eyes from the sonar screen. "These rocks don't help."

On the monitor, a dark space appeared in the rocks. Straker watched as it came closer.

Suddenly, the monitor blazed white and the boat rocked violently, the hull reverberating with the sound on an explosion. Unprepared, Straker crashed to the deck, skidding across the

floor before coming to rest beside the bulkhead door. Foster managed to grab a handhold to keep from being pitched to the deck by the violent rocking.

The rocking stopped almost as suddenly as it started. The electrical motor on the lift platform whirred then stopped, leaving the platform halfway between the two decks. The interior lights began to flash, as though undecided whether or not to cut out completely. After a moment, the lights returned to normal. The silence was deafening.

The control room was a shambles. Several panels had torn loose from their attachments, exposing the wiring. Anything loose had been sent flying, crashing into other instruments.

Straker managed to get his feet under him as Waterman and Lewis began to check the controls and ship systems.

"Main systems still operating," Lewis announced.

"Right - surface!" Waterman ordered. Lewis hit the appropriate switches.

Foster was on his feet, looking around at the damage. He looked up at the upper level to see Lieutenant Chin laying on the deck. There was blood streaming from the helmsman's head.

"Hey!... Chin!" Foster called, launching himself toward the upper deck, using the jammed elevator platform as a step.

"Blow two," Waterman ordered.

"Blowing one and two," Barry acknowledged, hitting the controls.

Straker made his way to the upper deck as the ballast tanks roared, air pushing the salt water out of the steel tanks on each side of the boat.

Chin was still laying on the metal mesh floor of the upper deck. His eyes were closed and he was very pale beneath his dark complexion. A bruise was starting to color and swell on his cheek, extending under the hairline at his temple.

"He looks pretty bad," Foster said.

"Let's get him down below," Straker instructed.

"Malfunction on one," Barry announced.

"Depth increasing," Lewis read off the gauge in front of him. "300..."

"Keep trying those tanks," Waterman ordered.

Barry flipped another series of switches. "Full pressure."

The tanks roared once again. After a moment, the boat began to roll.

Waterman put out a hand to steady himself. "Hold it," he yelled. "Shut down ballast. We'll keel over."

Barry hastily flipped the switches off and the boat settled to an even keel once more.

Straker and Foster had maneuvered Chin onto the lift platform and had him nearly on the lower deck when the boat shuddered violently. Muffled explosions shook the hull. Foster lost his grip on Chin and Straker went down under Chin's unconscious weight.

Lewis held onto the nearest bulkhead for support as the violent rocking subsided once again. "That was the starboard turbine," he announced.

Barry stared at the sonar screen. "Commander - I'm getting a new signal," she said. "It must be the UFO."

"Coming back to finish the job," Straker muttered to himself as he managed to get back on his feet, using the wall for support.

Barry listened intently to her headphone. "It's heading away, toward the surface."

A blip appeared on a different screen. "Airborne!" she announced.

"Can we Launch Sky 1?" Straker asked, looking at Waterman.

"We can try," Waterman announced, grabbing his flight helmet and pulling himself up

into the opening on the Sky-1 chute. He disappeared into the chute.

The boat's nose had started to drop down. They could feel it sink. Foster climbed up to the helm and sat in the helmsman's seat.

"Pull her up, Paul," Straker ordered. He watched as Foster wrenched at the control yoke.

"It's no good," Foster announced.

"What's the attitude?"

Foster checked the attitude gauge beside the yoke. He tapped it, but the needle didn't move. "Ten degrees."

"It's enough!" Straker said after a long moment. "Launch Sky 1!"

"Lift off!" Foster announced into the helm microphone as he pulled the launch release lever.

* * *

Sky-diver's launch attitude left a lot to be desired. A negative ten degrees off level was barely within launch tolerances.

Sky-1 parted from the submarine with scant feet to spare before nosing up toward the surface. The fighter burst from the water, climbing toward the sky and the enemy waiting there.

Waterman studied the instruments on the console in front of him. He wasn't receiving telemetry from the sub. A blip showed itself on his radar screen and he activated the missile controls. The alien craft came out of the clouds, firing at him. He noted, even as his missiles launched, that this U.F.O. was substantially different in shape than the usual. This one was shaped like a torpedo. Then, it had no shape at all as it disintegrated.

Waterman keyed his helmet microphone on. "Sky 1 to control. Target destroyed."

He waited a moment for a reply. There was none. "Sky 1 to control. Come in Skydiver."

He banked Sky-1 back into the clouds as he began to head to Skydiver's last position. It was possible that communications were out. He hoped it wasn't anything more serious.

* * *

Straker studied the bank of control gauges, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Barry was checking the communications system.

"Contact lost, sir," Barry said as the boat began to creak.

"We're going down," Foster announced from the helm station. "Turbines non functional."

Lewis moved from the navigation table to the reactor control panel with its large red 'danger' stenciled across it.

"Shut down the reactor," Straker ordered. "Prepare to switch to emergency power."

"Yes, sir," Lewis acknowledged, pulling down on the large handle on one side of the control panel. The lights dimmed and went out, then came on again, much dimmer than before as Lewis closed an emergency power switch. He turned to look back at Straker. "Emergency power operating."

"Still going down," Foster announced.

"Crash positions!" Straker ordered, grabbing the nearest hand hold. There was a loud scraping as the boat hit bottom, then kept moving down and forward. It finally ground to rest with its nose down, rolled nearly on its side.

* * *

Waterman peered out of his cockpit at the smooth sea below. Oil coated the water's surface and metallic debris bobbed up and down in the oil.

"Sky 1 to SHADO control," Waterman said into his helmet microphone. "Overflying

LNP. There's an oil slick... must assume we have an Emergency Operation Subsmash."

"Roger, Sky 1," Ford acknowledged via satellite link from SHADO Headquarters in London. "Return to nearest SHADO airbase."

* * *

Straker leaned against a wall to support himself. The boat was a mess and he could smell burnt insulation. Foster, Lewis and Barry were attending to Chin, bandaging his head, which still hadn't stopped bleeding. They were propping themselves against the tilted walls, trying to get comfortable. The boat was silent.

The fear that had been creeping around the edges of Straker's consciousness since he came onboard erupted into panic. He closed his eyes to blank it out. He couldn't afford this now, there was too much at stake.

He opened his eyes and turned to the others, hoping they hadn't noticed his lapse.

"I'm assuming...," he began. To his horror, his voice cracked. He cleared his throat and began again. "I'm assuming command of this vessel. Any order I give will be carried out instantly. Is that understood?"

They nodded. Lewis was sweating and Straker found himself wondering if Lewis felt as bad as he did. Lewis had been through this before, on a bigger boat.

"Discipline and control are the only tickets to the surface," Straker continued. "So let's play it that way." He looked to Barry. "Have the marker buoys and dye been released?"

"Yes, sir," Barry said.

Straker paused and looked around, trying to convince himself of the reality of what was happening. His worst nightmares didn't include this.

"You know the standing orders concerning a subsmash," Straker said, pushing himself closer to the others. "Let's get to it. Colonel Foster - the air systems and electric. Lewis, check the ballast tanks and the condition of the hull."

"What about the power?" Foster asked.

"Well, we've had no warning alarm from the reactor," Straker reminded him. "The radiation shields must be okay."

"At least that's something," Foster said with a smile. "We know we're not going to die from radiation exposure."

"That only leaves drowning and suffocation," Straker said. He gave the younger man a quick grin before moving over to sit beside Barry and Chin.

"What are our chances, sir?" Barry wondered aloud.

"We'll have to wait until all the systems have been checked," Straker said.

Barry nodded and climbed to her feet. "I'll see what shape the communications are in." She headed for the communications console, steadying herself against the walls.

Straker watched her a moment, then turned to Chin. The helmsman seemed to have recovered reasonably well, even if he was still a little unsteady.

"And how's the first casualty?" Straker asked, trying to keep his voice light.

"I'll be all right, sir," Chin assured him.

"You'd better be," Straker said. "We're going to need you."

"Let's see about those turbines," Chin said.

Something in Chin's voice, his expression, worried Straker. "Are you sure you're O.K.?"

"Yes, sir," Chin said, climbing to his feet.

Straker got to his own feet and clapped Chin on the shoulder. "Fine. Maybe we can get this tub off the deck before the rescue team arrives."

* * *

Alec Freeman sat in the co-pilot's seat of sea-rescue plane. The pilot, Turnwell, checked the instruments on his control panel. A green light had just flashed on, showing they were picking up the signal from Skydiver's emergency homing beacon.

Freeman picked up the radio microphone and keyed on the radio. "Albatross two-five to SHADO Control. We have positive area location on Skydiver beacon. Homing on signal now."

"Roger, Albatross," Ford acknowledged from London.

Freeman turned off the radio. After a moment, he turned to the pilot. "Another fifty minutes," Freeman estimated. "What do you think?"

The pilot shrugged. "No way of telling, sir. Sub smashes are always difficult."

Freeman stared at Turnwell for a moment, but the pilot wasn't inclined to add anything more. After a moment, Freeman got out of his seat. "I'll check things out in the cabin."

The cabin was utilitarian, resembling a bizarre cross between an air ambulance and a scuba-diving shop. There was a single bench across the back. Ross and Holden, the divers, were seated on it, checking their regulators and air tanks. Several other tanks were strapped to the walls of the plane, as well as full helmets, cold water suits, other paraphernalia Freeman didn't recognize.

"Less than fifty minutes," Freeman announced. Holden and Ross looked up at him. "How does it look to you?"

"Hard to say, sir," Holden said. "Could be the ship's righted itself. By the time we get there we'll maybe find it sitting on the surface waiting for us."

"That's not likely, is it?" Freeman asked. "The wreckage, the oil?"

"Until we get there, it's anyone's guess," Ross said. "One thing in our favor though. The area's relatively shallow. We shouldn't have to use any exotic air mixtures and decompression shouldn't be an issue."

Freeman looked out of the cabin window at the gray, cold looking sea below. "Ed, you'd better be okay when I get there," he muttered to himself.

* * *

Straker and Chin made their way back to the main cabin from the engine room. They were both disheveled. Grease and dirt stained their clothes. Foster finished checking the depth and air gauges, marking his findings on the clipboard in his hand. Lewis was still on the upper level, checking the escape hatches. His expression suggested he wasn't pleased with what he was finding.

Barry was working on getting their communications working. From the expression on her face, she wasn't having any more luck than Lewis.

"Nearly through here, sir," Foster said as Straker came closer. "How'd you make out astern?"

"Not good. One turbine is completely blown and there's some damage to the reactor cooling system."

"Well, that means we can forget the main power supply," Foster said.

Straker was sweating and wiped his face with his sleeve. More dirt smeared on his face but he didn't seem to notice. "How long will the emergency storage batteries last?" he asked, turning to Chin.

"The meters register eight hours," Chin said. "But, we can't recharge without the reactor. Pity we don't have a diesel, like the big boats."

"As far as I know, this is the first time anyone's ever scrambled a reactor on a Skydiver,"

Foster said. "Who'd have ever thought we'd need an auxiliary power source besides the batteries?"

"That's a design flaw we'll worry about correcting later," Straker said. "What about the air systems?" Straker shifted, trying to make himself comfortable against the wall.

"It's impossible to be accurate," Foster said, looking at his clip board. "But, I estimate there's enough air for eight hours - about the same as the batteries."

Straker nodded, doing a quick calculation in his head. It was going to take heavy equipment to get this beast off the floor and at top speed, it would take a good deal more than eight hours to get a salvage ship here.

"Number one hatch is flooded," Foster added. "So that's one escape route we can't take."

Straker nodded once more, then moved toward Barry's station. "And the communications, lieutenant?" he asked.

She picked up the hydrophone receiver and held it out to him. He could hear the static.

"Main radio knocked out," she said. "Sonar and radar working, but they won't help us. The hydrophone on the marker buoy is active, but the power is weak."

Straker looked up at Lewis on the upper level. "Well I guess that puts you right on the spot, Lieutenant. How are the escape systems?"

Lewis took a deep breath before answering. "Only one is operational," he said. "Number four hatch - and it's got trouble. It's working, but there is heavy damage to the outside door. In addition there's something wrong with the pumps. I reckon it'll take upwards of 90 minutes to empty."

"What about two and three?" Straker asked.

Lewis shook his head. "The controls are completely shorted out. We're stuck with Number four."

Straker looked up to the missile tubes behind Lewis. "What about the missile tubes?"

"No go, commander," Lewis said. "The ship's angle rules them out. The rock ledge is blocking the exits."

Straker stopped, thinking for a moment. "The escape hatches work on an equal pressure basis, right?"

"That's right," Foster said. "We have to take water into the hatch to balance the pressure of water outside the ship."

"And after the hatch has been used, the water has to be pumped out to allow the next man in," Straker continued. "And they're designed so that it's impossible to open the hatch while still flooded."

Lewis shifted his position to get more comfortable. "And that's the problem. One escape hatch still in commission and we can only use it every 90 minutes."

Straker considered the problem. The situation was uglier than he'd first imagined. "See what you can do to repair those pumps," he said after a moment. "And check that outer hatch door on 4. I'll be in the captain's cabin."

Straker closed the cabin door behind him, ignoring what he was sure were curious looks from Foster and the others. The panic was a growing pain in his chest, in his throat. His heart was beating too fast and he'd broken out in a cold sweat. He knew, intellectually, that he was in no immediate danger and that his reactions had no relation to reality, but that didn't help much. It infuriated him that he couldn't simply stop the panic and he was terrified of losing his nerve in front of everyone out in the main cabin.

It occurred to him that maybe that was a real problem. He was afraid of losing his nerve,

afraid that someone might see that he was merely a frightened human being. Afraid someone might think he was a coward.

* * *

Freeman went back to his seat in the cockpit. The signal light flashed, indicating they were getting closer to their goal.

"Can you get any more speed out of this thing?" Freeman asked.

"Not without blowing our engines to pieces," Turnwell said. The pilot glanced at Freeman. "You've known the commander a long time haven't you?"

"Yeah," Freeman said.

* * *

The lights flickered and dimmed. Straker looked up at them, waiting. He still had the boat's plans spread on the table. They weren't much help, just reminding him how dire their predicament was.

There was a knock at the door. "Come in."

The door opened and Foster came in, closing the door behind him. "All checks complete, sir," Foster reported. "It looks pretty bad."

"Then I guess we'll have to start getting to the surface," Straker said.

"Abandon ship?" Foster asked.

"Yes," Straker said. "I'm afraid so." Straker looked down at the plans, avoiding Foster's curious look. "We've got to phase this pretty carefully. We're playing with very little air and no time at all."

"I'm worried about the outer door on 4," Foster said. "All the warning lights indicate severe damage."

"And the pumps?"

"No improvement. With the reactor off the power is very low," Foster said. "What do we tell the crew, sir?"

"Don't worry," Straker said. "They've worked it out for themselves already."

* * *

Barry had figured it out. She had seen Straker's face as he went into the captain's cabin. Foster's expression wasn't any more cheerful. Time was running out. She left the useless communications station to move over to where Lewis stood, staring at the air gauges.

"Jim?"

He noticed her. "Hi." He pointed at the air gauge. Oxygen levels were down. CO2 levels were rising. Without power, the air scrubbers couldn't pull the waste gas out of the air. Soon, it would be at toxic levels. "It's not good. Worse than last time."

"Want to talk about it?" she asked.

"You mean last time?" Lewis asked. He tried to smile. "It was a big fish. Full crew, sixty-nine men. But we all got out and we'll get out this time."

The door to the captain's cabin opened and Straker came out, bracing himself against the door frame. "All right. Let's go over the situation," Straker said. "Only one regular escape hatch is operational. The pumps are damaged and so is the outer door."

He paused as if to gauge their reactions. Foster stood behind him, grim faced. "There is another emergency escape route," Straker continued. "The crashdive flood tube. But, once the outer cover is blown, the tube cannot be drained until Skydiver surfaces. So it's a one chance route."

"That tube is over 40 feet long," Chin said. "And only just big enough to get your

shoulders in. That's some crawl."

"The way I see it, two of us can get out now," Lewis said. "One through the escape hatch. The other along the crashdive trunking."

"Right," Straker agreed.

"That will leave three still trapped down here," Lewis reminded him. "If it takes 90 minutes to pump the hatch clear each time, it'll be four and a half hours before the last man can get out."

"Right again, Lieutenant," Straker said.

"But at best the air will only last...," Lewis began.

"You're forgetting one thing," Straker said, interrupting. "The less people there are, the longer the air will last."

There was a long pause as they considered what Straker said.

"Have you decided on an order of escape, sir?" Chin asked after a time.

Straker paused before speaking, as he was scripting his words. "I have. Lieutenant Barry, you will use the crashdive tube. Lewis, you'll take first crack at hatch four."

Lewis opened his mouth to protest.

"That's an order," Straker said before Lewis could voice his concern.

"Yes sir," Lewis agreed. "But, you can't send Nina out that way!"

"You think I'm giving it to you easy?" Straker asked, voice sharp with impatience. "That outer door is registering so many red alarm lights the control panel looks like a Christmas tree! There's a good chance that hatch is jammed. If it is, you'll drown in a flooded metal box no bigger than a coffin!"

Straker turned to look at the others. "Now does anyone else think Nina's getting the raw part of the deal?"

There was no answer.

"Okay, Chin will be second into the escape hatch. Then you, Colonel," he nodded in Foster's direction. "All right, let's get started."

Barry noticed a tiny smile of admiration on Foster's face. She knew enough about the air situation to know that Straker was being less than truthful about it. By her mental figures, the air would be toxic about the time Foster was scheduled to leave.

Lewis went to the diving locker on the upper level and pulled out two tanks and regulators, two of the bright orange survival suits. He brought one set down to the lower deck for Barry.

Straker came over to her. "Nina," he said quietly. "That tube offers the surest way out. But it won't be easy."

"I know, sir," Barry assured him. "I used it once during training."

"Then you'll know what happens when I pull that control." He pointed to a lever on the control panel. The notation read crashdive tube, emergency flood'. "The external cover will be blown clear."

"I remember," she said. "The water hits you like a sledgehammer." She remembered hating it during training.

"Right," Straker said. "But it only lasts a second. Just hang on. You'll be okay."

"I'll manage." She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. He was trying so hard to be upbeat about the situation.

Straker glanced at his watch, then looked around at everyone else. "All right, get into your escape gear," he said. "The sooner you get out of here the better."

CHAPTER 17

Holden and Ross were already in their wet suits, double checking their regulators. Their air tanks were on the deck beside them, already fitted into their diving harnesses.

Freeman stood, watching. "The second we reach the marker I want you boys down there."

"There's no chance of our surface vessel getting to the area ahead of time?" Holden asked.

"Forget it," Freeman said with a shake of his head. "She's five hours away, assuming the weather holds. We're on our own."

"Then we'd better pray they can still use the escape hatches," Ross said.

Freeman hoped he didn't look as worried as he felt. He hoped Straker was holding together down there.

* * *

Barry had her survival suit on. The air tank was strapped to her back, the regulator hanging from its straps, along with the dive mask. The suit was a little too big for her. Foster checked the tank valves, giving her a squeeze on the shoulder. The space in front of the crashdive tube was just big enough for her to stand.

"All set?" Foster asked.

She nodded.

"Synchronize watches," Straker ordered. His watch was in his hand as he looked at it. "15:50"

"Check," Foster said. Barry echoed his word as she adjusted her own watch.

"I'll blow the hatch in five minutes, Lieutenant," Straker announced. "Good luck."

"Thank you, sir. See you top side," she said as Foster helped her climb into the narrow tube that led to the outside of the boat.

As soon as she was completely inside the tube, Foster dogged the inner hatch down. Barry was on her own.

Foster and Straker went back to the main cabin. Lewis was already suited up, waiting by the one working escape hatch. Chin was still seated on the deck. He was staring off into space as though in a trance. His color wasn't good, though it was a little hard to tell under the dim lights.

"Right, Lewis," Straker said. "Disembark."

"Yes, sir," Lewis said, opening the inner hatch door. "I hope you make it."

"We will, Lieutenant," Straker promised. Lewis nodded and climbed into the narrow escape tube. Foster could hear the hatch being dogged. Lewis was sealed in.

"Keep a check on that escape hatch," Straker said. Foster moved closer to watch the telltales on the hatch.

"You told Lewis the air would last," he told Straker, keeping his voice low so Chin wouldn't hear.

"It won't if you start getting excited," Straker replied.

"Listen, sir," Foster said. "I know the air isn't going to hold out. I might just make it, but unless they get this tub off the bottom..."

"Get one thing clear," Straker interrupted him. "I go last."

Foster took a moment to study Straker's face. His blond hair was mussed and he was covered with dirt and grease, but there was an aura of calm assurance about him, as though

knowing his death was imminent was less important than knowing that those he was responsible for were safe.

Foster wondered he would be so calm if their positions were reversed, if he was the one in charge.

"All this talk uses up air," Straker said quietly. "Now let's all stay calm, and move around as little as possible."

Chin seemed to wake up, putting his hand to his head as though it hurt. "We're all going to get out okay, aren't we, sir?" he asked.

Straker moved to Chin's side. Foster was close behind him.

"Sure we are, Chin. Take it easy," Straker said. "How's the head?"

"I'll be fine when I get up to the surface," Chin said.

"Sure," Straker said, but his forehead creased with worry. He turned to Foster. "What do you think?" he asked quietly. Chin didn't seem to hear.

"He won't last ten minutes in the water without help."

Straker turned back to the helmsman, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Stay with it, Chin," he said. "The rescue team will be here soon."

Straker glanced at his watch. "Two minutes. Is the escape hatch flooded?"

Foster made his way back to the control panel on the wall. "Another thirty seconds," Foster said. "Let's hope that outer door decides to open."

* * *

The escape hatch was just about as Straker had described it, not much larger than a coffin, barely enough room for a man in a survival suit and breathing gear. The water was to Lewis's neck and rising fast, though not as fast as it should have been. The valve must not be fully open, Lewis reasoned.

He put the breathing regulator in his mouth and fitted his mask in place as the water rose above his nose. He gripped the hatch wheel above his head, waiting for the tube to be fully flooded. The water reached the top and he tried to turn the wheel. It wouldn't budge.

* * *

Inside the main cabin, Straker and Foster watched the gauges. "Negative," Foster said, translating the readings. "He should have been out by now. It's jammed."

* * *

Lewis fought with the handle, bracing himself against the wall as well as he could to get more leverage. The bubbles from his regulator were loud in his ears as he struggled to turn the wheel.

Panic rose with the bubbles. Not only was he going to die in his water filled coffin, he was condemning everyone else as well. The wheel creaked and loosened in his hand, finally turning, unlocking the hatch.

The hatch swung up and open and he was free. He dogged the hatch back down from the outside and began his ascent to the surface.

* * *

The indicator telltale on the hatch console began to flash and Foster smiled. "It opened," Foster said. "He's made it."

Straker breathed a sigh of relief then checked his watch once more. "Nina should be in position," he said. "Detonate in twenty seconds."

Foster made his way to the other control console and grabbed the handle that would blow the outer cover from the crashdive tube.

"Ten seconds," Straker began the countdown. At zero, he dropped his hand and Foster pulled the control down into the 'open' position. There was no noise, no sound of an explosion, but neither man had expected to hear anything.

"They should be on the surface," Foster said after a long moment.

* * *

The hatch hadn't blown.

Barry stared at it a long moment before realizing what had happened. She had heard the explosive bolts go off, but nothing had happened. The hatch hadn't blown. She tried pushing at it, but it didn't budge.

Sweat was running down her face, down her body, making the inside of the survival suit damp. She tried to move backwards, down the tube and discovered she was caught on something.

She shoved herself back with her hands and heard the suit rip. She hadn't moved more than an inch. Barry laid still for a long moment, then she began to murmur to herself. Her voice sounded hollow in the confines of the tube.

"It didn't work," she began. "I can't move! Help me! Someone." She started to scream. "Commander Straker! Get me out of here. Help me!"

* * *

The main cabin was silent. Chin was holding his head, face drawn in pain. Straker moved closer and slid down to sit beside the helmsman.

"Try and rest," Straker said.

Chin gave him a slow nod, as though even that movement hurt.

"In an hour or so you'll be out of here," Foster said, moving to sit on Chin's other side.

"My head," Chin said slowly, looking over at Straker. "It feels like it's splitting open.

I'm not sure I'll be able to... "

"You will," Straker said, letting his voice go hard. Chin nodded and laid his head back against the wall, closing his eyes.

* * *

Barry found she couldn't move and she couldn't stop screaming, even though she knew no one could hear. After a long while, she began to cry, the hysteria running itself out into exhaustion.

* * *

Chins' eyes were closed. Straker and Foster were silent, listening to the faint creaks of the boat, their own thoughts. Suddenly, a sharp, high-pitched skreel sounded. Straker and Foster both jumped at the unexpected noise, giving each other puzzled looks. After a moment, Straker identified the sound and made his way to the center console, snatching up the hydrophone receiver. The whistle stopped.

"Straker," he announced to the receiver. Sweat was running down his face and he was panting from the exertion, the nervousness.

"Ed! It's me," Freeman's voice came over the connection. The line was filled with static and it was hard to hear.

"Alec," Straker said. Foster came over to listen. "Thank God," Straker murmured.

"We've picked up Lewis," Freeman said. The static wasn't getting better.

"What did you say?" Straker asked, nearly shouting into the receiver.

"I said we've got Lewis," Freeman repeated. "He's safe... Listen, Ed, he's told us the situation. Just hang on."

"Alec," Straker said. "Have you got Nina?"

"Nina? No."

"She came up right after Lewis," Straker said. The static was making it impossible. "She should have reached the surface by now."

"Don't worry," Freeman assured him. "We'll find her. Ed, listen to me. You've got to conserve your air supply. Just rest and stay as quiet as you can."

On the surface, the seaplane bobbed on the swells. Holden and Ross made their way past Freeman to the open side door, checking their equipment one last time before giving Freeman a thumbs up and dropping feet first into the water.

"The divers are on their way down now," Freeman said into the nearly useless hydrophone. "We'll get you up."

Freeman's last message dissolved into static. Straker put the hydrophone handpiece on the desk, not bothering to hang it on its hook. He looked over at Foster, worry thickening his voice. "The power's failing."

As he spoke, the lights dimmed.

"I'll check the escape pumps," Foster offered, making his way to the panel. He stared at the gauge. "They're slowing down."

Straker gave him a slight nod of understanding before sliding down to sit on the floor once more. "It's getting hot," he murmured.

"I know," Foster said, trying to make himself comfortable as they settled down to wait once more.

Straker looked over at Chin. The helmsman was staring off into space, his face dripping with sweat. Straker slowly made his way back to the man's side. Moving was getting harder, he was getting tired. Straker put a hand against Chin's forehead.

Straker looked back at Foster in alarm. "He's burning up."

Chin's eyes were glazed. Slowly, he opened his mouth, grimacing in pain as he mouthed soundless obscenities. Suddenly he stiffened, as though seeing something terrifying.

"Relax, Lieutenant," Foster said, coming closer.

Chin's back arched as he began to struggle against something unseen. Straker and Foster made an attempt to hold the man, to quiet him. They were both thrown to the deck as Chin made it to his feet, charging toward the elevator platform.

"Chin!" Straker shouted. The man didn't hear him.

Foster leapt after the helmsman, just missing him as he stormed down the catwalk to the helm controls. Chin threw himself into his helmsman's seat, trying to get the controls to work. Their lack of response seemed to infuriate him. Foster climbed up to the upper level, Straker right behind him. Foster reached the helmsman first, grabbing him and hauling him out of the seat, trying to get Chin to the mesh floor. Straker managed to get to Chin's other side, but Chin swung around, flinging Foster away from him with fear maddened strength.

Chin charged ahead, brushing Straker aside as though the man was little more than a child. Straker managed to catch himself before he fell over the edge of the catwalk.

Chin wasn't so lucky. He screamed as he hit the handrail, his headlong dash throwing him over the rail, sending him crashing to the deck below.

Straker stared down at Chin's crumpled body, stunned. Chin's eyes were open, and blood seeped slowly from another head wound. His neck was canted at an odd angle.

"Poor guy," Foster murmured, following Straker down to the main level once more. Straker looked around for his jacket. When he found it, he laid it over Chin's face.

Foster stared down at Chin's now covered face. "You know death never worried me before," Foster began, smiling to himself. "But right now I'm scared."

Straker didn't look up, resting his head on his arm which laid against one of the instrument panels. "You're older."

"How's that?" Foster asked, giving his companion a curious look.

"The older you get the more precious life becomes," Straker said. His voice was soft. "You become aware of what life is. It's all you haven't achieved, the words you haven't said, the people you haven't met, the places you haven't seen."

He looked up at the younger man. "That's what life is, Paul. All the things you haven't done."

Foster had nothing to add as he considered Straker's words.

The air was thick and stale by the time the hatch emptied. The cabin was hot and humid.

Foster had his own survival suit on, air tank strapped to his back as he stood by the open hatch. "It 's time, sir."

Straker struggled to his feet and looked into Foster's face. "Well, Paul," he said.

Foster reached out and grabbed his arm. "Commander..."

Straker pushed him forward, toward the open hatch. "Get moving," he ordered, voice still soft as he tried to breathe the foul air. "In you go."

"Listen," Foster began.

"Foster," Straker interrupted, his voice quiet, but controlled. "Get off this ship - you're breathing my oxygen!"

Foster suddenly realized how true Straker's words were. He climbed into the tube, dogging the door down behind him. Straker hit the flood switch and water began to pour into the confined space. Foster bowed his head in a silent prayer as he realized he would probably never see Straker alive again. Even the extra air tank Foster had pulled out for him wouldn't help beyond an hour.

* * *

Foster sat on the bench in the seaplane, a towel wrapped around his shoulders. His survival suit was hanging to dry next to Lewis's.

Holden had just come up from the bottom and was sitting on one of the pontoons.

"How does it look?" Freeman asked.

Holden shook his head. "She's jammed fast, sir. The only certain way of moving her is by heavy lifting gear, but we need the salvage ship for that."

"Is there any way of getting an air supply through?" Foster asked.

"Negative. I was hoping we could use the escape hatch, but it's still flooded."

"The pumps must have packed up completely," Foster said to no one in particular.

"It's hopeless."

Freeman stared at Holden for a long moment before coming to a decision. "Get down there again, and get me a suit. I'm coming with you."

"What are you going to do?" Foster asked.

"I don't know," Freeman admitted. "Anything. Break him out with a toothpick if I have to!" Freeman began stripping off his suit. Foster stared at the older man. He'd never seen Freeman so upset, so desperate. It was a side of the man he hadn't suspected, although he had known that Straker and Freeman had been friends, even before SHADO. He found himself wondering what would happen to SHADO if they couldn't get Straker out there alive.

* * *

It was bizarre, breathing yet not finding any oxygen in the air. That wasn't quite true, there was oxygen in the cabin, but the carbon dioxide levels were so high, his lungs couldn't get rid of what they already had, they couldn't exchange the CO2 for O2.

He laid back against the bulkhead, keeping as still as he could. He found his thoughts drifting, remembering Henderson telling him of the special committee's decision to appoint him to C-in-C of SHADO, recruiting Alec Freeman, the birth of his son.

A quiet tapping caught his attention and he opened his eyes. The lights had dimmed even more. Soon he would be in darkness. He closed his eyes once more, too tired to investigate.

He smiled faintly at memories of a happier time. Maybe this was what they meant by one's life flashing before you before death. He let his thoughts drift back to his son. Maybe John would be waiting. They said loved ones waited to guide souls home. He wasn't sure he believed it, but it was a comforting thought. He heard the brakes squeal in his mind, Mary's scream as John was knocked down, her hysterical screams at him when John died.

The tapping began again. He opened his eyes and looked over at Chin's body. Chin hadn't moved, he was dead, wasn't he? Straker grabbed the jacket away from the dead man's face. Chin's eyes stared blankly at him.

The tapping was still there. He scanned the cabin, trying to identify the sound. It seemed to be coming from the captain's cabin. That was absurd, there was no one else here, no one could reach him. He was trapped and he was dying.

The tapping continued. He slowly got to his feet, fighting to breathe, to remain conscious as he made his way to the crashdive tube hatch. One part of his mind warned him that he would be flooding the sub if he opened the hatch, there was no one there.

He put his hands on the handle to the crashdive tube entrance hatch and turned.

"Mary," he murmured. The hatch swung open to reveal a woman. His eyes wouldn't focus. When they did, he found himself staring into Nina Barry's face. She fell forward, into his arms, nearly unconscious.

Straker slowly helped her toward the main cabin, where they both collapsed against the wall, sliding down to the floor.

"The cover," she murmured. "It didn't blow." Her voice was hoarse. After a moment she closed her eyes, her body relaxing into a boneless heap beside him.

After a time she opened her eyes again, looking up at him.

"How do you feel?" Straker asked.

"Fine," she said. He knew she was lying. Her hands were torn and bleeding, nails broken off to the quick. Nina had always been proud of her hands.

"How long have we known each other Nina?" he asked.

"Twelve years," she answered.

"Twelve years," he repeated. It was a long and eventful twelve years. He discovered he had few regrets.

"It was good to have people around," Barry said.

"You know, I always thought of you as a loner," Straker said.

"Maybe it takes one to know one," Barry said after a long moment. She gave him a weak smile.

"Well, loneliness is a state of mind," Straker said, slowly. "Sometimes it can even be a virtue." It was an effort to speak and the words came slowly and he wasn't sure his words were even coming out as he meant them.

"You mean you learn about yourself," she said.

He nodded. It took all his strength to do even that. He wasn't sure she understood, but the anoxia was blurring his vision, making the entire situation more than a little unreal. He looked over at her. Her eyes were closed once more.

Straker had the captain's log book open on his lap. One last chore before the end. His writing was shaky, nearly illegible.

Captain's log - 18.30 hours. Oxygen count down to 15.1. Emergency Power failing. Commend actions of Captain, crew and rescue team. No one could have done more. Note for Doctor Shroeder... subject myself... Pulse rate. reading 105. Apart from general feeling of nausea, condition satisfactory. Claustrophobia now negative... Straker 18.36.

Straker stared at what he'd written for a long moment before closing the log book and shoving it inside its plastic waterproof pouch. He sealed the pouch with difficulty. His hands didn't seem to want to move.

"Closing the book," Barry murmured. She smiled at him, taking his hand. "If... if it had to be anyone... I'm glad you're here. I mean... I'm glad... it's you..." she said slowly, haltingly.

Her eyes closed once more. He felt the pouch slip from his fingers and slide to the floor.

Straker closed his eyes and waited to die.

"And therefore, we commit ourselves to the deep and in turn corruption, waiting for the day of resurrection when the sea shall give up her dead." The prayer came unbidden to his mind. He couldn't remember where it came from, but it was fitting. He hoped John was waiting.

There was a sound so loud it hurt. He found himself covering his ears with his hands to shut the crashing noises out. It hurt so bad, pounding into his oxygen starved brain. He screamed and lapsed into oblivion.

CHAPTER 18

"I don't believe it," Barry protested. She was sitting in her hospital bed in SHADO Headquarters medical center. Her hands were bandaged.

"But that's the way it happened," Foster assured her with a grin. Freeman stood beside the younger man, a self-satisfied grin on his face.

"You mean, you just blew us out of the water?" she asked in disbelief.

"What else could we do?" Foster asked. "Holden came up with it, and with Skydiver off the ledge, the divers got in through the missile tubes."

"And that's how it happened," Straker added with a grin. He was sitting in an armchair beside the bed, clad in pyjamas and a dark robe, a lit cigar in his hand. He didn't remember much after hearing the explosion, and wasn't really sure he remembered that. He had vague recollections of the plane trip back to London. Freeman told him he had slept the nearly the entire way home. SHADO's physicians had assured him there was no brain damage from the anoxia, his enforced stay at the medical center was a formality.

A nurse peeked into the room. "I'm afraid the visitors will have to leave now." She noticed the cigar in Straker's hand. "Oh, and sorry, sir, no smoking."

Straker didn't move, giving the nurse a bemused smile as she left.

Freeman shrugged. "Well, back to the salt mines," he quipped, heading for the door with Foster at his heels.

"Good bye," Barry called as the door closed.

Straker stood to leave as well. He stopped and looked back at her. "Well, Nina," he began.

"Sir," she said. Her tone was gentle.

"We were pretty close down there."

"Yes," she agreed. "If there was anything that I said that I shouldn't..." Her voice faltered and she dropped her eyes, suddenly embarrassed.

"Or didn't say?" Straker asked. "That's what life's all about, I guess. The things we never say." He looked around the small room and smiled. "Well, they're kicking me out of here this afternoon. I'd better go and pack my toothbrush."

Barry nodded. She already knew. It would be a few days before she was ready to leave.

"You'll be back on Moonbase in a week or so," he continued. "Take it easy, Nina."

"Yes, sir," she said with a smile as he opened the door and left the room.

* * *

For himself, Foster was glad to be on dry land once more. He had faced death before, while flying, while working for SHADO, but this was the first time he'd honestly been worried about his survival. It was a feeling he didn't like and if he never served aboard Sky-diver again, it would be too soon.

Straker ordered him to take a weeks' leave. But, after two days, Foster found he was bored. Bored of London, bored of his flat, bored of all the familiar sights.

He was also a little irritated with Straker not just for ordering him to take time off. The London Times had published the results on the inquiry into the shooting death of John (Jack) Newton, a prominent London businessman. The inquiry board had determined his death was an accident. Newton's wife, Elizabeth, while under the influence of prescription sedatives had mistaken her husband for a burglar and shot him at their country cottage.

Foster knew there was nothing SHADO, or Straker or anyone else, could have done to

prevent it, but it irked just the same.

On a lark, he drove north, stopping only when he found a familiar sight that wasn't boring. He drove through the open gates to the horse farm.

Russell Stone was in the practice yard working with a gray horse on a long tether. Anne Stone was seated on the fence watching her brother as Foster climbed out of his car. The horse shied away from the jump and Anne started laughing.

"Oh, dear," Anne giggled. Russell gave her a dark look before turning his attention back to his horse.

"Come on boy," he soothed. "Good boy."

"Hello," Foster said, walking up to the fence.

"Oh, hello," Anne said. There was no recognition in her face, but Foster knew there wouldn't be.

"This is Stonebeam Farm?" he asked, knowing the answer.

"That's right," Anne said. There was pride in her voice.

"Nice place," Foster said, looking around the courtyard.

"We like it."

"I was interested in taking a few riding lessons," Foster said. He hadn't intended to take lessons, but it seemed the right thing to do.

"Well, that's what we're here for," Anne said, hopping off the fence.

Foster paused to watch Stone and the gray horse a moment longer. "Oh, that is Russell Stone, isn't it? The famous show jumper?"

"Yes. I'm his sister, Anne," she said. "And you are?"

"Foster, Paul Foster."

"Come up to the house, Mr. Foster," she invited. Foster fell into step beside her. Maybe his leave wasn't going to be boring after all.