

U.F.O. 5 PRIMARY TARGET

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BEGINNINGS, 1971

Colonel Ed Straker, United States Air Force, was an unhappy man as he paused in front of the door to his commanding officer's office. To either side of him stood the two plainclothesmen from MI5 that had picked him up from Heathrow Airport only an hour earlier.

He knocked twice on the door. "Come in," a gravelly voice ordered.

Straker opened the door and stepped into the office beyond, leaving the two intelligence agents to wait in the hallway.

"Ah, Colonel," General James Henderson greeted his aide. "Good to see you."

"Good afternoon, General," Straker replied. "How are they treating you, sir?"

"Fine, fine," Henderson said, maneuvering his wheelchair around the small room.

It was three months since the aerial attack on the motorcade that killed British Defense Minister Talbot and shattered Henderson's right hip. The attack had sent the Rolls Royce they were riding in through a stone wall and into a ravine, setting it afire as it went. Straker had walked away with only scrapes and bruises. The press called it a miracle.

Henderson waved in the direction of the small sofa set against one wall. "Sit down."

Straker took a seat as Henderson wheeled over to face him.

"Look, I'm sorry to have fouled you up like this," Henderson said.

"It's all right, sir," the young man lied. He had been picked up only minutes away from boarding a commercial flight to Athens with his wife of twenty-four hours. They were going on their honeymoon.

"How'd your wife take it?" the general asked.

"Oh, she's fine," Straker said, without enthusiasm.

"Yes, that's what you need in this job, an understanding wife." There was a touch of bitterness in Henderson's tone.

Straker understood some of Henderson's bitterness. He had personally made the arrangements for the general's wife to come to London only the week before. Mrs. Henderson had been more than a little upset about her husband's decision to remain in England after the 'accident'.

"Well, let's get on with it, shall we?" Henderson said, forcing some cheerfulness into his voice. "Apparently, I'm stuck in this chair for another couple of months. Now, things are happening, Ed. A lot of it's gonna' fall on your shoulders."

Straker nodded. He wasn't especially surprised at Henderson's announcement. Straker had been handling most of the general's work since the wreck.

"The special committee of the United Nations meets day after tomorrow," Henderson told him. "We get the go no-go decision then."

"And you want me to be there?" Straker asked.

Henderson grinned. "Who else?"

A touch of worry clouded Straker's finely chiseled features. "What about Colonel Sprenger?"

"What about him?"

"I think he's been expecting he'd go with you to the special committee, sir," Straker said. "He is in Washington already."

Henderson gave the younger man a long look. "Do you honestly think he could handle it?" Henderson asked.

Straker took a moment to consider his reply. "No, sir. But, he won't like being left out of

it."

"Ed, I want that approval. I've worked too hard and too long on this project to worry about Lieutenant Colonel Sprenger's delicate sensibilities."

"Yes, sir."

Henderson grinned. "Let me worry about Sprenger, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Henderson sat back in his wheelchair and gave Straker another long look. The younger man shifted uncomfortably under his commanding officer's gaze.

"What is it between you two, anyway, Ed?"

Straker was surprised by the question. He hadn't been aware that his feelings toward Sprenger, Henderson's other aide, were so noticeable. "I don't know. Just sort of chemical, I guess."

* * *

Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Sprenger picked Straker up at LaGuardia.

"Your meeting with the special committee is at ten tomorrow," Sprenger told him as the driver placed Straker's over-night case in the trunk of the car.

After the car entered roadway towards downtown, Sprenger opened his briefcase and handed over a manila envelope. "Here's the additional documentation the general requested for you."

Straker pulled out the contents and glanced at the papers briefly. They were what had been requested. He put them back in their folder and placed them in his own document case.

"I've booked a room for you at the Hilton, if that meets your approval, sir," Sprenger said.

"I'm sure that will be more than satisfactory, Colonel, thank you," Straker replied.

Sprenger leaned forward and instructed the driver to take them to the Hilton. He then settled back in his seat to face Straker.

"Is there something on your mind, Colonel?" Straker asked after a moment. He didn't like being the subject of Sprenger's stare.

"Permission to speak frankly, sir?" Sprenger asked.

Straker bit back the sarcastic reply he wanted to make and said simply: "Permission granted."

"I'm wondering why I'm not going to that meeting with you. After all, I've put as much work into this project as anyone else."

"Your presence at the meeting isn't necessary, Colonel Sprenger. The documentation we have speaks for itself."

Sprenger relaxed a little, settling his thin frame deeper into the car seat.

"Besides," Straker continued. "I am aware of how much you disapprove of the notion that the project should be genuinely international in organization and scope."

"The United States is the one country best capable of dealing with this problem. I see no reason to violate our national security by handing advanced technology over to whoever agrees to join up," Sprenger spat out angrily. "Let the damn Russians handle their own problems."

"We've been through this all before, Colonel," Straker replied very calmly. "And I don't agree."

"I assume, then, that as soon as the project gets its approval, I'll be fired?" His tone was venomous.

Straker paused, considering the options open. To fire Sprenger from his position would

mean the end of the man's career, an indelible black mark on his record. As much as he disliked Sprenger, he didn't want that on his conscience.

"You won't be fired," Straker promised. "Assuming things go as planned, General Henderson can arrange a transfer for you to another assignment."

"How charitable of you." was Sprenger's cold comment. "But, I won't be invited to serve with the project?"

"I think that will depend on who gets appointed to head the project," Straker replied. "Don't you?"

* * *

The United Nations building looked as it always had, stark, yet beautiful. The spring morning air was brisk. The cherry trees that lined the plaza were in bloom. Straker regretted the fact that he hadn't been able to bring his bride with him on this trip. She would have enjoyed it.

The special committee was already waiting when Straker arrived, exactly at 10:00. Straker recognized the six men from dossiers Sprenger provided him the night before.

Sir Jameson, the British representative, and chairman of the committee, stood and greeted him. "Ah, Colonel Straker."

"Gentlemen." Straker removed his uniform cap and nodded a greeting to the group.

"Please, sit down." Sir Jameson indicated the one empty seat at the end of the table.

"Thank you." Straker took the indicated seat. "First of all, I should like to apologize on behalf of General Henderson for his absence. As you probably know, he's still recovering from injuries he received in the 'car crash'."

"Thank you, Colonel," Sir Jameson said. "No doubt, you will make an excellent substitute." He turned to the other members of his committee. "Now, gentlemen, I suggest the best way for us to proceed is be a process of question and answer."

The French delegate, Duvall, spoke first. "Colonel, as representatives of our respective governments, we are being asked to approve the largest financial appropriation ever envisaged for an international project. Two questions. Is the project, the whole project, absolutely necessary, and if it is, are we getting value for our money?"

Duvall's dossier had indicated he was a hard-headed pragmatist, an excellent businessman and international negotiator. His questions weren't a surprise.

"I believe the setting up of SHADO is not only necessary, but vital," Straker replied. He addressed the entire committee, paying special attention to Duvall. "Every day we just sit about and talk about it, the potential danger increases. As to your second question, I believe this break-down of expenditure might be helpful."

Straker opened the large envelope he'd brought with him and handed the sheets out to the committee. The members looked over the figures on the papers.

"A fleet of submarines? Base on the Moon? Satellites?" Duvall sputtered.

"If I might point out, sir," Straker interrupted, "we're confronted with alien space craft, possibly from another solar system."

"Maybe the general and Colonel Straker have been reading too much science fiction." Duvall's remark brought smiles to the faces of several committee members.

"The Earth is faced with a power threat from an extra-terrestrial force," Straker stated. "We've moved into an age where science fiction has become fact. We need to defend ourselves."

"And how long will it take to set up this 'defense organization'?" Duvall demanded.

"We estimate, seven to ten years," Straker answered.

"Ten years!" Duvall repeated in surprise. "But you say, Colonel, the danger is imminent."

"Yes, sir, that's true," Straker replied. "But the type of organization we need can't be set up overnight. All I say is, any delay only increases the danger."

"The estimate for security is astronomical," Sir Jameson interjected, cutting off another of Duvall's protests.

"It's a vital aspect," explained Straker.

"Everything seems vital," Duvall complained.

The Russian delegate, Alexandrov, spoke for the first time. "How is SHADO to be organized regarding personnel?"

"On strictly military lines. We hope to recruit the best people available," replied Straker.

"Internationally?" the Russian queried.

"Yes."

"And who will command this international band of heroes?" Duvall demanded.

Kingston, the American representative, broke in: "My government has stipulated that the commander and chief must be an American."

"Yes, yes, we know," Duvall retorted, waving his hands in dismissal.

Kingston responded in anger, half rising from his chair. "As the nation being asked to dig a little deeper into its pockets..."

"Naturally, naturally," the Frenchman interrupted.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Sir Jameson broke in, gesturing for Kingston to retake his seat.

"We asked Colonel Straker here to answer our questions. I suggest we let him do so."

Straker nodded a thanks to Sir Jameson, then addressed Duvall's original question. "Well, there's no question in my mind, gentlemen. There's only one man for the job. General Henderson. He's the obvious choice."

There was a long pause as the committee members considered Straker's reply. Finally, Sir Jameson asked, "Any further questions?"

Kingston and Alexandrov both shook their heads. Straker stood and began to collect the papers he'd handed out.

"Thank you, Colonel Straker," Sir Jameson said in dismissal.

Straker picked up his cap and turned to leave. Then, he stopped and looked back at Duvall. "Monsieur Duvall, I understand you have three daughters."

"Yes," Duvall said slowly. A worried look came into his eyes.

"I pray that you never find yourself looking down at one of their mutilated bodies. I hope that the next Ufo incident is not in your home town." Straker paused and looked around at the shocked expressions of the other committee members. "Thank you for your time."

* * *

A week later, Straker was back in Henderson's office in the American Embassy.

"It has been approved unanimously," Henderson chortled as he wheeled his chair around the office. "You've done a great job, Ed."

"Well, I thought I'd screwed it up, sir," Straker admitted. "I was only in there about ten minutes."

Henderson stopped and looked back at the young man. "Well, all we've got to do now is work sixteen hours a day for the next ten years."

"Sure." There was no enthusiasm in Straker's voice. The fact that the project they'd been working together on for the past two years was now approved was almost a letdown.

Henderson cleared his throat. "There is another thing I have to tell you."

Straker looked up expectantly.

"They appointed the commander and chief."

"Who?"

"You." Henderson grinned.

"Me?"

"Again, it was unanimous," Henderson told him. "It seems that the French delegate, Duvall, was particularly insistent."

"But, sir, why...?" For once, Straker was at a loss for words.

"Why not choose me?" Henderson asked of him. "Oh, come on, let's not kid ourselves, Colonel. What sort of shape am I in? What sort of shape would I be in in ten years time?"

"Nonsense, General," Straker protested. "Why, in a couple months, you'll be out of that thing, up and about, fit as ever."

Henderson leaned forward in his chair, his expression sadly serious. "You can always refuse. But, if you do, it's got to be now. There'll be no turning back later."

Five white spheres were arranged in a hexagon around a central hub. The sixth side of the hexagon contained an airlock that faced a landing pad carved out of virgin lunar rock. A bright construction of metal and plastic that was the only significant evidence of humanity's continued presence on the lunar surface.

There were no other signs of life on the dusty gray surface. Inside the base, however, life continued on in its orderly fashion. Three silver uniformed operatives did the required equipment checks for their shifts in the Control sphere. They kept their eyes and ears open for any evidence that the enemy, the so called 'little green men from outer space', were on their way to wreck further havoc on a virtually unsuspecting Earth.

This was the most remote outpost of SHADO - Moonbase.

It was the third Tuesday in February, 1982. Colonel Alec Freeman was the command officer on duty in the top-secret underground headquarters of the Supreme Headquarters, Alien Defense Organization, near London.

SHADO's problems started innocuously enough, this time. Space Intruder Detector, SHADO's main tracking satellite in orbit of Earth, had notified Moonbase of an incoming Unidentified Flying Object.

In turn, Moonbase notified SHADO Headquarters.

According to Gay Ellis, Moonbase commander, the U.F.O. had started banking and weaving about two minutes before. It was a flight pattern they'd never seen before.

"But it is maintaining an overall flight path," SHADO's C-in-C, Edward Straker, observed, watching one of the many radar monitors in SHADO H.Q.

Moonbase announced the destruction of the U.F.O. Straker congratulated the Moonbase crew and headed for his office, just across the corridor from the control room. Freeman followed him in.

"Well, that one certainly made a new approach," Straker began conversationally as he settled behind his slate topped desk. He took a cigar from the silver pail set on one corner. "I wonder what it was trying to do?"

"We'll never know, I'm glad to say," Freeman replied. Straker held out the container and Freeman took a cigar from it. He settled back in the leather chair opposite the desk and watched as Straker straightened the small stack of reports on the desktop, then lit his own cigar.

Overall, Straker looked like a successful businessman, well dressed, confident, needle-sharp. Physically, he was medium height, but, his slimness and military posture gave the impression he was taller. His complexion was boyishly smooth and unmarked. An excellent bone structure made his age indeterminate, somewhere closer to forty than fifty. His hair was a pale blond. His accent said he was American and a trained ear could detect the faintest traces of Back Bay, Boston.

However, a certain cold cynicism showed around his blue-gray eyes, as though he'd seen more trouble than a mere businessman, or military officer, had any right to expect.

The intercom on the desk buzzed and Straker hit the button.

"Moonbase to SHADO Control," Ellis's voice said from the speaker.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"We have another contact, sir." She sounded worried.

"A second Ufo?"

There was a long pause and Freeman could almost see Ellis double-checking the findings with her crew.

"No, sir. The same one."

"The same one? But you reported a positive detonation." Straker was tired. It showed in the sharpness of his tone. Quietly, Freeman returned the cigar to its container.

"I know, sir. The scanners showed negative, but it's back."

"Well, what's its position now, Lieutenant?" Straker demanded.

"I'm sorry, sir," Ellis apologized, even though she obviously wasn't to blame. "It's through Moonbase defenses, heading for Earth."

Straker thumbed off the intercom, then rubbed his temples. "Damn," he muttered.

Freeman followed as Straker got up and left his office to go back to the control room.

"I can't understand how those interceptors missed. Seemed to me that that Ufo was a sitting target," Straker said finally. He seemed to be speaking to himself as much as to Freeman.

"Maybe that's what we were supposed to think," Freeman pointed out.

"That's a good point, Alec," Straker said. "Force the interceptors to release their missiles, avoid them and it gets a clear run past Moonbase defenses."

He turned to Lieutenant Keith Ford, seated at the main communications station.

"Where is it now?"

"Range: seven million." Ford responded.

"Trajectory termination?"

Ford shook his head. "It's difficult to say. It's changing course more violently than before. The nearest we can get is Western Europe."

"Well, it could be damaged," Straker commented. "Lieutenant Ellis reported a strike."

Ford was concentrating on the read-outs on the monitor screen in front of him: "Speed increasing, one decimal four, one decimal eight... two decimal four..."

"That does it. We'll never get near it at that speed," Freeman stated glumly. "Let's get a closer E.T.T. Is the rate of descent constant?"

"More or less, there's still a slight variation," Ford reported.

"It should be possible to work out a broad target area," reasoned Freeman.

"We've tried, but our readings aren't good enough for the computer to use," Ford explained.

"Do your best, Lieutenant." Freeman instructed.

He turned back to Straker, who was still intently watching the U.F.O.'s path on the radar screen. "Looks like its going to hit. Question is, what's it up to?"

Straker looked up from the screen a moment. "Tell you what I think, Alec. I think that Ufo's under manual control. First the flight variation was used to disrupt our computer programs, but now, I think the alien is fighting to regain control."

"That makes sense," Freeman agreed. "If it's damaged."

"Yes, the next few minutes are going to be very interesting."

"Vector termination: areas seventeen to twenty-three," Ford announced as the data finally came through. "Central England."

"Too close for comfort," Straker announced. "Sound a red-alert."

Around them, the red-alert siren sounded, letting everyone else in SHADO Headquarters know that an alien was on its way to Earth.

* * *

SHADO Colonel Paul Foster was in charge of the Mobile unit team. He was temporarily replacing Captain Green, who was on her mandatory two week stint at SHADO's health research center, also known as the "health farm."

Foster stood by as the mobile drivers unloaded their small, highly maneuverable mobile-armored vehicles from the transport trucks that had brought them so quickly to this particular section of central England, near Birmingham. He climbed into his own vehicle and called into headquarters for instructions.

"This is a red-alert," Ford informed him. "Proceed to map reference four-zero-five green."

"Roger, Control," Foster acknowledged. He relayed the instructions to the three other mobiles in his group

* * *

Straker and Freeman watched the alien's radar track on the screen. The mobiles' progress reports came through the speaker overhead.

"It's weaving off line again," Freeman observed. Straker reached over and took the microphone from Ford's station.

"SHADO Control to Mobile Two. Get that area sealed off, Foster," Straker ordered. "I want a detailed survey of the area. If there is a specific target in there, I want to know about it."

The mobiles quickly proceeded to their assigned areas. Men in military uniforms with official looking cars set up blocks on all the roads into the area.

In Mobile Two, Paul Foster and his driver checked the aerial map against the land-use survey spread on the console in front of them.

Foster frowned. Then he took the microphone from the console: "Mobile Two to SHADO Control. According to our survey maps, there's just a derelict farm and a couple houses within a five mile radius of the E.T.T."

* * *

"It's wooded, common land. What could be of interest there?" Straker asked no one in particular. He was looking over a copy of the same map Foster had in his mobile.

"It's out of control," Freeman suggested. "The alien's being forced to crash-land."

"No, somehow I don't think so," responded Straker. There was worried crease between his eyebrows. "What's it after? What could it possibly want in a wilderness of trees and bracken?"

A new set of figures appeared on Lieutenant Johnson's computer monitor near-by and she

reported them: "U.F.O.'s speed decreasing, twelve thousand knots; range, one thousand miles."

"Course maintained, no deviation," Ford reported.

"So, it's back under control and slowing enough for a landing," Straker said.

"When's the estimated termination?" asked Freeman.

Ford did a quick calculation in his head. "About five minutes. Colonel Foster won't have time to complete evacuation."

After a few quiet moments: "Speed, seven thousand five hundred knots, decreasing. Range: six hundred miles."

"The roadblock should be in place by now. The whole area's sealed off," Freeman said.

"Three minutes to termination," Ford announced. "Maintaining course, reducing speed."

"Come on, friend," Freeman urged. "We're waiting for you."

"It's going to be a perfect landing, Alec," Straker said. "And we're going to be right there."

Freeman glanced over at Straker. There was a decidedly feral look to his commanding officer. He was like a pale cat waiting for its prey. If he'd had a tail, it would have been twitching.

* * *

At one of the roadblocks, a late model sedan drove up and stopped. A khaki clad NCO stepped over to the driver's side. He peered into the car to see a plump middle aged man in a thread bare brown suit. The man was sweating and looked pale, almost ill, under the flash-light's beam.

"I'm sorry, sir, this area's been sealed off. Military maneuvers..."

"Military maneuvers?" the man repeated. His voice trembled. "I live a couple miles over there."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to..." the military man began.

"Yes, I know. It won't be long now," the little man said.

* * *

"One minute, course maintained," Ford announced, translating the readings on the screen in front of him.

"Speed?" Freeman asked.

"Speed increasing." There was a hint of surprise in Ford's voice.

"Check it," ordered Straker.

Ford shook his head, "No error, sir. It's coming down faster."

"Get me Colonel Foster," Straker demanded. Ford made the connection and handed him the headset.

"Mobile 2, go ahead Control," Foster's voice announced over the speaker.

"The U.F.O.'s increased speed to crash velocity. It'll be too late to correct," Straker stated grimly. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Foster acknowledged.

"Oh, and Colonel Foster, if there's a survivor, I want him."

"Right." Foster understood completely. SHADO didn't get many opportunities to capture live aliens. They certainly didn't want to miss this one if they could help it.

Foster looked out of windscreen of the mobile. He was hoping to catch sight of their target. The sky was leaden with dark clouds and it looked as if it might start raining at any time.

He could hear the craft as it approached. Its whirring whine sounded as though it were directly overhead.

"Decreasing," Ford's voice announced over the radio. "Switching... Yes, course altered two degrees."

"Colonel Foster," Straker's voice crackled over the speaker. "Have you got visual contact?"

"Still tracking on audio," Foster replied. He was still trying to catch sight of the alien when it broke through the cloud cover.

* * *

At the roadblock, the little man waited with the NCO, listening to reports coming over the radio concerning the 'military maneuvers'. A voice announced that the pilot of an experimental aircraft said there was a fire in the cabin.

There was a sudden gasp behind the military man and he turned to see the little man hit the ground in a dead faint.

* * *

There was resignation in Paul Foster's voice when he notified SHADO Control: "It's crashed right through a house."

"All right, Colonel. Do what you can." Straker responded. He turned to Freeman, perplexed.

"I don't understand it, Alec. Under control, and out of control. Crash landing velocity, safe landing velocity. Now, it hits a house."

Freeman had the distinct feeling they were dealing with a puzzle with some important pieces missing. He also had the feeling they weren't going to like those pieces when they were found.

* * *

The digital speedometer display in Freeman's black Saab 900 Turbo indicated he was driving at better than seventy miles an hour. He and Straker were heading out to map reference 4-0-5 green, where the U.F.O. had crashed, then exploded.

Freeman listened to the periodic updates from SHADO Control as the special radio receiver in the dash decoded them.

At forty nine, Freeman was one of SHADO's oldest operatives, a high school and college athlete who'd managed not to go to fat in his middle age by working hard and playing harder. His accent betrayed him as an Australian.

Freeman's hair was a medium brown and one curl kept falling onto his broad forehead, to the delight of his many female friends. His blue eyes were in a permanent squint from too many years of staring into the bright sky from the cockpit of an airplane. Overall, Freeman exuded the public's image of a pilot: bold, adventurous, romantic and very, very competent.

Freeman glanced over to check on his passenger. Straker was unusually quiet. Freeman wondered if he was even awake. Freeman knew Straker had been putting in long hours recently at SHADO's security cover, Harlington-Straker Studios.

There were rumors of personnel problems on one of studio's longer running shows, a science fiction piece that had proved surprisingly popular in the United States. There were also rumors of a possible writers' strike later on in the summer if union negotiations with MGM, UA and BBC weren't successful.

Harlington-Straker Film Studios was ten miles north of central London in an industrial area that specialized in electronic companies and precision industries. The studio complex itself was virtually indistinguishable from the antiseptic-looking factories nearby.

Ten enormous sound stages were concealed in industrial-looking buildings, surrounded by

clusters of carpenter shops, paint shops, storage buildings and office units. Behind the buildings was a huge lot covered with bits and pieces of various productions. There was a facade of Downing Street, the hulk of a B-17 bomber and other debris that was used repeatedly in various guises in various productions. Surrounding the entire complex was a ten-foot high brick and concrete wall, pierced at intervals by electronically monitored iron gates.

The film studio and production company was SHADO's cover, both literally and figuratively. SHADO Headquarters was carved out of solid bedrock eighty feet beneath the sound stages, offices and parking areas of Harlington-Straker Studios. The public, indeed, most of the four hundred studio employees, had no idea of SHADO's existence. They would never know, if SHADO its way.

Freeman slowed the Saab as they approached the roadblock and were passed through. If Straker had been asleep, he gave no sign of it now. He was studying the area as they approached the crash site.

"Quite a mess," was Freeman's only comment as they stopped in front of what, only a few hours before had been a two story house, surrounded by a well-tended country garden.

Now, the garden was littered with debris. A crater still smoldered in what used to be the backyard. Only about half the building was still standing. The part that was standing didn't look particularly safe.

"I still don't understand it, Alec," Straker said finally, studying the house. "Right from the start, that Ufo was on an unusual flight pattern."

"We can only guess it was a method to out-manuever the interceptors," Freeman responded. He fell in with Straker's need to go over what they knew one more time.

"Yes, but let's say it came in damaged," suggested Straker.

"And, unable to control his ship, the alien tried to land, failed, and hit that house," Freeman continued for him.

"No, I don't buy that, Alec." Straker frowned. "For a while it was out of control, yes. But, just before impact, it seemed to be fine. It looped that line of trees, smashed straight into an isolated house."

"Sheer coincidence," Freeman insisted. "The house just happened to be in the way."

"Well, you could be right," Straker said, but Freeman could tell he wasn't convinced.

Lieutenant Aarons, from the Mobile unit team, introduced himself as they got out of the car to look at the demolished house more closely.

"What happened to the pilot?" Straker asked.

"There was just enough evidence left to establish that it was an alien." Aarons reported. "What we have is being shipped down to SHADO H.Q. for analysis."

"And the Ufo was completely destroyed?" Freeman asked.

Aarons nodded. "The largest piece measured six inches across. We found it imbedded in Colonel Foster's mobile."

The mention of Foster brought Straker's attention away from the house. "What's the news on his condition?"

"It's too early to say," the young man replied. "He's lost a lot of blood, but at least he was luckier than his driver."

Aarons looked a little green at recalling what was left of the driver's body inside what remained of Foster's mobile. Apparently, the driver had taken the brunt of the blast. His body had shielded Foster and thus saved the colonel's life. But, the inside of the mobile had looked

like an abattoir.

Aarons later told Freeman that there was so much blood and gore they'd had a hard time telling how badly hurt Foster was.

"What about the woman?" Straker asked. He seemed oblivious to Aarons' discomfort as they entered a relatively undamaged area of the house.

"She couldn't have known anything about it, sir. It must have been instantaneous."

In fact, there'd only been enough of that body to establish that it had been a woman in the house at the time of collision.

"What do we know about her?" Straker asked, going to a window. Surprisingly, the window and the curtains around it were still intact. A plump, little, nervous-looking man with thinning brown hair was waiting outside the house with another uniformed member of the mobile team.

"Stella Croxley. Ordinary woman, married," Freeman answered. That had been one of the items headquarters had come up with and relayed over the radio.

"Nothing to connect her with U.F.O.'s?"

"Nothing that we know of," Freeman amended. Apparently, Straker had been asleep on the drive over.

"That's her husband out there now. John Croxley." Aarons pointed out the man outside.

Straker sighed. "I suppose I'd better talk to him."

Freeman nodded and motioned Aarons to accompany him outside, leaving Straker alone in the ruined house.

Croxley entered the house at Aarons' direction. Freeman could see both Straker and Croxley through the window. The two men spoke for a few moments, Straker's expression becoming more puzzled as the conversation continued. Then, Croxley left, wandering away in a seemingly aimless manner.

Freeman noted Croxley's departure and went back to join Straker.

"How's he taking it?"

"Hard to tell," Straker replied. "He seemed to know exactly what I was going to say."

"Yeah, I guess it's pretty difficult to find a new way of telling a guy you're sorry."

The temperature outside was unseasonably warm, but suddenly Straker shivered.

"What's wrong?" Freeman asked.

"I don't know," Straker admitted. There was an odd, haunted look in his eyes. "It was like someone walked on my grave."

CHAPTER 2

It took two weeks for the various departments involved to complete and send in their reports on the Croxley matter. Straker was still going over them when Freeman walked into his office late one night.

"Is that the time?" Straker asked, indicating the clock on his desk. It read 2:00 A.M.

"Yeah, it's time you went home," Freeman stated in his best mother hen form. "You've been here a full eighteen hours."

"Well, I have to go through these reports," Straker explained very reasonably. "Not that they tell us a great deal."

"We've combed the ruin and everything for a mile around. We looked at security yesterday." Freeman told him.

"Yes." Straker looked through the pile on his desk for the report. "I understand Croxley was having psychiatric treatment."

"He also left his job. It's hardly surprising after what he's been through. I think we can close the book on the incident."

"Well, not quite, Alec," Straker protested mildly.

"Paul Foster's still in the hospital."

"Yes, I spoke to him yesterday. Doctors are very pleased with his progress."

"The wonders of modern medicine." Straker's tone became bitter.

Freeman didn't have to ask why. Modern medicine hadn't been able to save the commander's eight-year-old

son nearly eighteen months before.

"He wants to see you," Freeman said, deliberately breaking into Straker's morbid train of thought. "He's worried about something."

"What?"

Freeman shrugged: "He wouldn't tell me."

* * *

"You mean to tell me you called me all the way out here just to tell me that?" Straker demanded.

Paul Foster had just told him he thought someone had been spying on him. Luckily, Straker was in a good mood following the long afternoon drive out to the small military hospital Foster had been admitted to.

"Well, I thought you should know about it," Foster defended. "Surely, it's a security matter."

Straker gazed thoughtfully at the younger man. Foster was thirty two, young for the responsibilities he'd been given in SHADO since his recruitment two years before. His hair was dark and he was good-looking in a matinee-idol sort of way. Straker knew some of the women at headquarters referred to Foster as SHADO's 'James Bond'. Like the fictional Bond, Foster wasn't normally prone to idle imaginings.

"What does he look like?" Straker finally asked.

"It's difficult to say. It's just an impression," admitted Foster.

"Come on, Paul. Next you'll be telling me you hear strange noises at night," Straker chided.

"Now, look," Foster demanded. "Every time I look up, he's there, looking at me, and a sort of nauseous feeling

comes over me."

Straker gave him a long appraising look, then: "I'll get you out of here. You're okayed to be moved to our medical center. It'll be closer to home."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

There was just a hint of a smile on Straker's face: "I'll tell you what I think, Paul. I think you've been lying in that bed too long. I also think if you're well enough to worry, you're well enough to go back to work."

A basket of fruit was sitting on the bedside table and Straker made a show of selecting an apple from it.

"I'll arrange for your discharge," he promised. He took a bite from the fruit and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Foster sighed and laid back in his hospital bed for a few minutes. Then, the nauseous feeling he'd described suddenly came back.

He looked up to see the door to his room closing.

*** * ***

"How long's it been as quiet as this?" Foster asked Freeman two weeks later as they both waited for Straker to arrive at the underground control center. Foster sat on the steps to the back upper level, where the banks of tactical computers stood. Freeman leaned against the railing, smoking a cigarette.

Foster looked around at the beige uniformed operatives seated at their stations around the room. No one was doing anything that could be remotely construed as work. Lieutenant Johnson was polishing her nails. Ford was whistling some unidentifiable tune while reading a popular

film magazine.

"Since you went into the hospital," Freeman replied. The control room consoles practically shone with polish. There probably wasn't a speck of dust in the entire complex.

"But, that was a month ago," Foster protested. "You mean there's been no sightings since then?"

Freeman shrugged, a sly grin on his face: "Oh, just two. The interceptors took care of them. We managed to scratch along without you, Paul."

Straker walked in, carrying a brown paper-wrapped package under one arm.

The control room operatives abruptly straightened up in their chairs and put aside their newspapers and magazines. Straker pretended not to notice their sudden efforts to look busy.

"Hello, Paul, feeling better?" he asked Foster.

"Yes, sir."

Foster got to his feet to follow Straker into his office. Straker beckoned Freeman to accompany them.

"Well, are you fit for duty, Paul?" Straker inquired as he dropped the package on the desktop, and settled himself at his desk.

"Yes, sir. Shroeder checked me out an hour ago," Foster informed him.

"Good." Straker gave Foster a wry grin. "No more little men watching you?"

Foster returned the grin. "Well, in the medical center, security's tighter than at Drumley, anyway." The incidents at the hospital had already faded into something rather like

a bad dream.

"Oh, I see, and your little friend, he couldn't get in?" Straker gave a dry chuckle, peering at Foster over steepled fingers. "Don't worry about it, Paul. You go home and get a good rest and report to Moonbase briefing first thing in the morning."

"Yes sir," Foster acknowledged and headed for the door.

"Oh, Alec," Straker called before Freeman had a chance to leave. "I want you to go over to the Zeta tracking station. The lieutenant in command there's come up with a new grid link-up. There might be something in it. There's no panic."

"I can go over there right away," Freeman said. Straker picked up the package he'd brought down with him and inspected it.

"By the way, what's that?" Freeman asked. Except for the address label, with Straker's name printed in large letters, the front of the package was completely covered with stamps.

"I assume this is a film script."

Freeman gave Straker a mischievous grin: "Well, why don't you open it and find out?"

He walked out before Straker could come up with a suitable retort.

* * *

Freeman was just informing Janice Ealand, Straker's executive secretary and guardian of SHADO's main entrance, of his afternoon itinerary when Straker's call came through for him to come back down immediately.

Straker was white with fury when Freeman walked into his office. He was holding a thick bound sheaf of paper.

"Something wrong?" Freeman asked.

"I'll say there is. Just about as wrong as you can get!"

Straker shoved the document at him.

"What is it?"

"Read it, Alec, just read it!" Straker's voice cracked in anger. "The SHADO organization, Colonel Alec Freeman, Moonbase, Sky-diver, everything. It's all there, Alec, every last detail!"

"That's impossible. How could anyone...?"

"How should I know?" Straker demanded, cutting him off. "Security leak? Coincidence, lucky guess? What does it matter? That document is a complete dossier on SHADO, its operatives, installations, equipment."

"I don't get it," protested Freeman. "Who wrote it?"

"The name's on the front," Straker pointed out. He was finally calming down somewhat. "John Croxley."

"The man whose house was hit by the U.F.O.?"

"Yes. Now, you tell me, Alec. How did he get that information?"

"The whole thing's ridiculous," Freeman stated flatly. "We checked out him and his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Average."

Straker frowned, suddenly thoughtful. "When I told him about his wife, there was something about him. He was different." Straker shook his head. "Wait a minute, Foster's little man in the hospital. That could be Croxley, too."

"We'd better pick him up," Freeman decided, reaching for the intercom on Straker's desk.

"No, not yet, Alec," Straker countermanded. He was

still worried, but now coldly controlled. "If it was him, I want to know more about him."

"He was visiting a psychiatrist," Freeman reminded him. "Maybe he knows something."

"Right, we'll start there." Straker agreed.

* * *

A quick check with security gave them the psychiatrist's name and address.

Doctor Corbin's office was in an old, and rather shabby, medical office building in Birmingham. It wasn't a fashionable address, but Croxley, formerly an accountant for a small manufacturing firm, couldn't have afforded a fashionable doctor.

Despite the building's unprepossessing exterior, the man's office was neat and comfortable. Professional texts filled the bookcases next to the door.

The psychiatrist was suitably impressed with Freeman's proffered identification. It indicated he was with M.I.5, military intelligence.

"You realize, I hope, that I do not normally divulge such details about my patients," the doctor explained. "But, with your authorization; it was a somewhat unusual condition, E.S.P."

"Extra sensory perception?" Freeman asked. The psychiatrist nodded.

"It's a subject about which we still know very little. But most of us have experienced it at one time or another," Doctor Corbin looked from Freeman to Straker. "You, yourself, have probably been in a situation of sensing what is going to happen."

"Yes, and it usually means trouble," Straker replied. He stood by the door, arms folded over his chest.

The psychiatrist smiled. "Well, it affects different people in different ways. Some adjust quickly and make good use of their powers. I believe there have been quite a number of successful theatrical acts based on the condition."

"And Croxley?" Freeman wanted to know.

"He is not one of the lucky ones. It was driving him to mental illness. His powers of perception are so pronounced he can hold a complete conversation with someone without that person uttering a single word."

"A mind-reader," Freeman suggested.

"Not quite," Corbin corrected. "Telepathy, perhaps. He can 'anticipate'. He can, how shall I say, 'feel' the future."

"And it bothers him," commented Straker.

"To the point of mental illness," Croxley's doctor concurred. "When simple, everyday phrases take on new and terrible meanings."

"Yes, well, most of it is clear now, Doctor. Thank you very much," Straker responded. His expression was thoughtful.

"Croxley phoned here for you earlier today," the psychiatrist announced as Straker opened the office door to leave.

"And?" Straker demanded.

"For some unexplained reason, he wants you and Mister Freeman to meet him at the ruin of his house at twelve o'clock tonight."

**"And how'd he know we'd be here?" Straker asked.
The psychiatrist smiled: "E.S.P.?"**

*** * ***

"We're early. It's only eleven," Freeman informed his commanding officer, checking his watch. The Saab was parked in front of the wreckage that only a month before had been a nice country house. It looked now like it had been deserted for years.

"Yes, I always like to look over a convention hall before a convention," Straker commented.

"Or a battle field before a battle?" Freeman suggested. He turned to look at Straker. "You know it's madness, don't you? Coming out here without security?"

"We have no choice," Straker reminded him quietly.

"Listen, Alec, we have to assume that Croxley can anticipate our moves. That film script, he wrote it by reading Paul Foster's thought patterns."

"Or someone told him."

Straker shook his head, "No, listen, I think that doctor's right. Croxley has a super-sensory power and if we try to trap him, or go against his wishes, he'll know about it."

"Well, I hope you're wrong about this," Freeman commented.

"So do I."

*** * ***

"Look, I know it's late, but this is not easy to live with," Paul Foster protested to Doctor Shroeder in the psychiatrist's office in SHADO's medical center.

"Listen, Paul, you went through a pretty rough

experience. It takes time," explained Shroeder.

"But, that was physical!"

"Paul, you nearly lost your life in that house. Your mind is simply trying to adjust to the recent shock you received when you were injured there," the SHADO psychiatrist explained calmly and logically.

Foster had come into his office suffering from a full blown anxiety attack. He was convinced it had something to do with the Croxley house and the U.F.O. that had crashed through it. He couldn't explain why he felt that way, but it had driven him to near panic.

"Well, maybe you're right," Foster finally conceded.

"I'm sure of it," Shroeder assured him. Then, seeing the unconvinced look on Foster's face: "Look, if it bothers you that much, there's only one answer. Go back to the house, overcome your anxiety. Face the problem."

Foster relaxed a little: "Okay, Doc, I'll go home and get some rest."

"Good night, Paul," Shroeder responded. "See you at final medical checks tomorrow."

* * *

At a half past eleven, Freeman pulled out two high powered flash-lights and handed one to Straker. They got out of the car and entered the ruined house, taking care in stepping through the uncleared rubble.

"Croxley, where are you?" Straker called, looking around.

Freeman entered what had obviously been the living room. He motioned Straker to join him. The beam from his flash light highlighted a cheap metal typing table with a

portable typewriter sitting on it. There was a pile of crumpled paper balls on the floor.

"You know, Ed, I think I'm developing E.S.P."

Freeman stated quietly, after a few minutes. They had looked over the rest of the main floor and had returned to the living room. "I've got the feeling Croxley's here already, watching us, waiting."

"You're right, Colonel," a voice said from behind them.

"Croxley!" Straker identified the voice. He turned to face the man then stopped short. Croxley was holding a revolver and it was pointed directly at Straker's heart.

"The answer to your question is 'no'. Why should I give you my gun?" Croxley said. He stepped closer.

Straker made an unobtrusive move to reach inside his unbuttoned jacket. He froze as Croxley cocked the hammer of his revolver.

"You would both be dead before your hands were on the butts," Croxley informed them. "You see, I do know what you're thinking. You use a shoulder holster, Commander. Please?" Croxley made a motion towards the far corner of the room.

Straker removed his automatic pistol from its holster and tossed it into the designated corner.

Croxley held out his hand: "The lamp."

Silently, Straker handed over the flashlight he was holding.

Croxley then turned to Freeman: "You prefer the right hip, I believe, Colonel? Slowly," he added. Freeman took his gun from where it was tucked in his belt under his suit

jacket and tossed it next to Straker's.

"You have a more devious thought pattern," Croxley informed Freeman.

"I want to see you clearly before I kill you," the little man announced. He turned the flashlight on them. The two SHADO officers winced at the sudden glare in their faces.

"It's fitting you should die here, Straker."

"We made it easy for you," Freeman noted.

"Yes," Croxley agreed. He stared at Straker a moment longer. Straker levelly returned his gaze.

"I must say, you have particularly logical thought processes."

Straker ignored the comment. "How long have you had this E.S.P., Croxley?"

"All my life," the man admitted. "Oh, it got stronger about a year ago, but I remember I used to play tricks at school, predicting the future."

"And U.F.O.'s? What do you know about them?" Freeman demanded.

"Shut up!" Croxley screamed. "You did it, Straker. You've been messing with things you don't understand and you caused my wife's death!"

"No, Croxley," Straker stated. His voice, though quiet, was intense. "Don't you see? Use your power, use your E.S.P. A U.F.O. destroyed your house, not me. It was part of a carefully laid plan. The aliens, Croxley, they've taken over your mind. They killed your wife. They're using you.

Can't you see why? They're using you to kill us."

Croxley didn't seem to hear Straker, but his aim didn't waver as he circled the two SHADO agents. It was as

though he were listening to something else entirely. He murmured his wife's name and tears began streaming down his face.

However, when Straker began to turn to watch him, Croxley was immediately behind him, pressing the gun barrel behind his right ear.

Straker froze, barely breathing.

"Croxley, for God's sake!" Freeman protested.

Croxley didn't seem to hear.

"Mother," he was murmuring, mostly to Straker.

"You're thinking about your mother."

Croxley backed away, as if in pain. "Stop it! Stop it!" he screamed. Then, just as suddenly, he seemed back in control. "It's four minutes to twelve. You die at midnight."

"Croxley..." Straker protested. But again, it was as if Croxley didn't hear him.

The little man wandered away from his two prisoners, into the adjoining room. He was muttering to himself, asking the doctor to help him. However, when Straker and Freeman moved towards the door, Croxley spun around, gun in hand.

"Come through that door and I'll blow your head off," he promised.

"Croxley, listen," Straker began again. "You say you want someone to help you."

Croxley's mind seemed to have faded away again. Another voice, softer and questioning, answered instead: "Our planet is dying, our natural resources are exhausted.

We must come to Earth. We must come to Earth to survive!"

Freeman began to move towards the corner where his gun was. Croxley suddenly stepped back into the room.

"Don't try anything!" he ordered. "Hold it right there."

Freeman straightened up, empty handed.

"Two minutes," Croxley announced. Then, he seemed to fade out again and another, different voice emerged: a child's treble, unhappy at being left alone by classmates made uneasy by his ability to read their thoughts. Alone and tormented because he was different.

Straker reached out his hand: "Give me the gun."

Croxley's gun went off and Straker jerked back. His right hand began to bleed where the bullet had grazed it.

"You fool, do you think I'm going to let you get away with it?" Croxley demanded angrily. Then, once again, the other voice sounded: "We mean no harm to peoples of Earth. Why do you attack us? We're fighting for our existence. You must understand."

Just as abruptly as before, Croxley appeared to be in control of himself once again. "No, there's no need for words. It is time."

Paul Foster already had his Colt.45 automatic drawn when he walked into the house. It took only a fraction of a second to comprehend the scene in front of him as he came up behind Croxley.

Two shots rang out.

It seemed to Foster that, for just a second, the expression on Straker's face was one of startled incomprehension as he watched Croxley collapse with two bullets in the back of his brain.

In the distance, a church bell began to strike twelve.

"He knew," Straker stated after a moment. Freeman gave him a curious look and Straker went on: "Well, what did you think, Alec, when you saw Foster appear behind him?"

"Well, shoot, for God's sake, before he..." Then it occurred to him: "He could read our thoughts."

"Yes, I'll always believe that in the last few seconds, Croxley regained control of his own mind."

Paul Foster simply wondered what the hell was going on.

*** * ***

Foster left for Moonbase the next day, as scheduled, following his regulation debriefing.

A week later, he noted a news article stating that a John Croxley, recently widowed due to a military airplane accident, had been found dead in the ruins of his house. It was being ruled a suicide. Foster wondered how they could possibly have come to that conclusion, or if the investigators had even seen Croxley's body.

Foster also found himself wondering what brought him to that house that night. Straker had repeatedly stated it was fate, kismet, like Croxley's gift, or curse. Or, maybe it has just blind luck. But, somehow, Foster doubted that. He didn't believe in luck.

CHAPTER 3

Colonel Virginia Lake, temporary Moonbase commander while Gay Ellis was on training assignment to Sky-diver, was reading off a checklist as Nina Barry double-checked the equipment tell-tales. Behind them, another young woman wearing the same form-fitting silver uniform and anti-static mauve wig, monitored a radar screen.

A single blip was moving across the screen, indicating a craft heading towards the Earth. "Ship 534 to Moonbase Commander."

A male voice came over the overhead speakers. Lake smiled and stepped over to the center console, picking up the microphone.

"Go ahead, 534."

"Approaching Earthly re-entry and feeling blue," the voice announced. "Is it all right for Saturday night, darlin'?"

Lake glanced at the other two women. Both were trying to stifle broad grins.

It was hard to keep secrets in an outpost as small and remote as the Moon. Everyone knew about the growing romance between Lake and Colonel Craig Collins, the pilot of the lunar shuttle that was now approaching Earth.

"Your communication is against standard procedure," Lake informed him. Then she smiled: "And yes, it's still all right for Saturday."

* * *

In the subterranean chambers of SHADO headquarters, Commander Straker was completing his morning rounds of the complex. It was his habit to check on how the different work groups were doing each morning after reading the previous day's incident reports. He prided himself on knowing the status of each unit under his command.

Satisfied for the moment with what he saw in his domain, he stopped in front of one of the radar monitors and watched a slow blip as it approached the wide circle that represented Earth.

"Lunar module 534 from Moonbase," explained the beige uniformed woman seated in front of the monitor. "Approaching reentry, normal pattern."

"Five three four," Straker repeated thoughtfully. "That's Craig Collins, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have him call me when he gets down, will you?" he asked. His request seemed to surprise her and that amused him a little. A touch of unpredictability helped keep his people on their toes. He was in good spirits this May morning as he turned to head back to his office.

"Sir," Lieutenant Prentice called out. "Pilot reports fire in the cabin."

Straker's pleasant mood evaporated as he hurried back to the woman's station. He gestured her aside and slipped in to take her place in front of the monitor.

"Craig, this is Ed." Straker announced into the microphone. "How bad is it?"

"I can't tell," the voice on the speaker said through a fit of coughing. "There's a lot of smoke and it seems to be getting worse."

Straker was able to keep his voice calm, but his chest was tight with worry, as he rapped out orders to the shuttle pilot. Behind him, Prentice watched the monitor as she listened to distant whispers on the headphone she held to one ear.

"SID reporting three alien craft," she stated quietly. Straker nodded acknowledgment.

"It's no good, the heat's still building up," Collins' voice crackled over the radio.

"Sighting confirmed," the operative murmured.

As if to underscore her statement, the overhead speaker came on with the deep synthesized voice of Space Intruder Detector.

"Three alien craft at five million miles and closing at Sol zero decimal eight."

Straker was already out of the chair. "Hold on, Craig," he told the shuttle pilot as the communications operative resumed her seat.

"Stay with him," Straker ordered as he moved on to watch the monitors over the other stations that lined the walls of the control room.

SHADO Control was now a beehive of sudden, seemingly frantic, activity. Information came in bits and pieces from stations all over the globe. It was like a giant jigsaw puzzle that had to be fitted together in only a few moments.

They only had a few moments. The aliens were coming in hard and fast at nearly the speed of light.

Somewhere out to sea, a small fleet of Sky-diver submarine/fighter planes waited. Their pilots were prepared for the probable orders that would send them screaming out to destroy the alien invaders.

* * *

In lunar space, the three Moonbase interceptors were already on their way to intercept the alien craft.

"One U.F.O. has changed trajectory," Space Intruder Detector announced over the speakers in SHADO Control and on Moonbase. "Predicted target, this satellite."

In the Moonbase Control sphere, the Moonbase commander relayed new orders to one of the space-borne fighters.

Tension permeated the atmosphere within the underground spaces of SHADO Control. Everyone listened and waited for the outcome of the battle in near-Earth space.

Craig Collins' voice still sputtered on the speaker above Lieutenant Prentice's station. He announced the warning lights were still on in the burning cabin, the fire and smoke getting worse. Then, even that faded away as the shuttle entered the top of the Earth's atmosphere and ionization blackout.

No one cheered as Interceptor One announced the destruction of one incoming U.F.O.

But, a shudder of anguish went around the room as Space Intruder Detector, familiarly known as SID, proclaimed the end of its own operation. It was spinning out of control, its electronic eyes and brain suddenly burned out by a single blast from the alien craft just before Interceptor Two reached and destroyed it.

SHADO was now half blind.

* * *

It was the middle of June and this particular June morning was not going at all well, Straker reflected as he entered the studios' executive offices.

The past several weeks since the destruction of Space Intruder Detector hadn't been pleasant. Although Virginia Lake and Colonel John Gray, SHADO's surveillance satellite expert, were doing their best to reconfigure the tracking systems, SID's absence was sorely felt.

This morning's meeting with the U.N. Commission on Space and Astrophysics had been even more exasperating than usual. At least SHADO now had the money to launch a team to repair SID. Unfortunately, it also meant there wouldn't be enough money for certain other projects SHADO wanted and needed.

Straker glanced around the outer office as he greeted Miss Holland, the temporary replacement for his regular secretary, Janice Ealand. Miss Ealand was on a long, and long

overdue, holiday with her mother in the south of France.

He noted a familiar looking file in a color coded document folder on the desk. He picked up the file and opened it.

"Miss Holland." Straker's voice was harsh with irritation. "I ordered this file transferred to the morgue weeks ago. Why is it still here?"

The woman flushed guiltily. "Well, sir, it isn't certain...".

He cut her off with a shake of his head: "You know as well as I do that space personnel are presumed dead forty-eight hours after failure to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere."

"But, it's just that..."

"Miss Holland," he interrupted, on the verge of losing his temper. He caught himself and continued more gently: "Craig Collins was one of my closest friends. We were astronauts together. But, we have enough to worry about without trying to keep the dead alive. Now, please, just get it out of here."

With that, Straker dropped the file on the desk and walked into the inner office that doubled as the main entrance elevator to SHADO Headquarters. His head was lowered as though the weight of the world had just come down on his shoulders.

Miss Holland watched after him for a moment and suddenly felt rather sorry for the man. The schedule SHADO demanded of him, and his own personality, didn't permit SHADO's most senior officer many friends.

* * *

Commander Straker was not permitted any more time to be concerned with his grief over Collins' death. Even as he entered SHADO's underground headquarters, Moonbase was on alert status. A U.F.O. had been spotted by radar crews stretching their equipment to the limit to compensate for SID's absence.

The alien craft was coming in hard and fast, as if to take advantage of any weakness in SHADO's over-burdened systems.

Moonbase ground defenses were in place. The interceptors had already been launched.

"The Ufo's retreating," one of the astronauts observed. Straker recognized the voice: James Regan. A top fighter jet pilot, he was now piloting a death dealing rocketship through lunar space.

"Giving chase," Regan announced.

"It smells," Straker commented more to himself than anyone else. He took the microphone from the communications supervisor's console. "Moonbase, tell your ground defenses to get nervous."

"SHADO Control, three more Ufos approaching. Orbital reference 318." the Moonbase commander announced, confirming Straker's hunch.

"Decoys," he muttered to Lake, who'd been waiting for him in the Control center. He keyed the microphone again: "Moonbase, instruct the interceptors to return immediately!"

There was a long silence in SHADO control as Moonbase control relayed the orders. Then, they waited.

"Ground defenses knocked out," Moonbase announced in subdued tones after a few moments.

"That's it, they're wide open," Lake announced, echoing the thoughts of every person in SHADO's control center. "Where are they?"

The waiting resumed.

Within minutes, Moonbase announced the destruction of the U.F.O.'s that had been

menacing the lunar base.

* * *

"That's eight Ufos we've destroyed in the past week." Lake told Straker a few minutes later, in his office. She'd been called back to Earth only the day before to help reconfigure the European radar net. "Do you think they'll take the risk?"

Straker shrugged. "First two under cover of sunspot activity, then three at ground level, now six in a decoy maneuver. That's ten, plus the one that got through." he observed.

"All for nothing. A last fling," the young blonde woman speculated. "You think they'll give up?"

Straker's expression hardened. "Colonel Lake, they didn't lose all those craft just to give up. What worries me, what will they try next?"

He gestured to the newspaper on his desk. A small article on the front page reported on a joint U.S.-Soviet unmanned probe to Venus. It was scheduled to return to Earth in two day's time carrying sealed samples of the Venusian atmosphere.

"You think they'll try something with the Venus probe?" Lake asked.

"I would," Straker replied.

* * *

On Moonbase, James Regan, and the other interceptor pilots had other things to worry about than with what the aliens might elect to throw at them next. Regan, specifically, was giving little thought to the U.F.O.s or their occupants.

Paul Foster had called Regan in for a refresher course on hand-to-hand combat. Regan was a fine combat pilot, as were all Moonbase interceptor pilots. But, in spite of intensive training both in the RAF and in SHADO, he lacked what Foster termed 'the killer instinct'.

"Well, I'm a nice fella" Regan protested when Foster chided him for not making the final, crippling blow to his opponent when he had the chance.

Foster shook his head and dismissed Regan with a wave of his hand: "Give my regards to the wife. See you in a couple of days."

* * *

By late afternoon, Regan had already been checked through the security gate at the air field in central England where the Lunar Modules and their pick-up planes were serviced and launched, and was home with his wife.

For the most part, SHADO personnel, most particularly Moonbase operatives, tended to be single. The stresses of long absences, the inability to talk about one's work, even to warn a spouse of the dangers, made marriage a difficult proposition.

So far, Regan had been luckier than most. His wife, Jeanne, was from a military family and had accepted the necessary absences and mysterious secrets. Silent proof of their success was that she was six months pregnant.

* * *

Five hours later, Straker and Lake were listening in near silence as Astronaut Regan made a U.F.O. report. Regan had come running into SHADO Headquarters less than half an hour before, in near shock, demanding to see Commander Straker. Straker had obliged him, leading the distraught astronaut to a chair in his office.

Regan related that he and his wife had been attacked by aliens and taken to the aliens' ship. He couldn't say exactly where the ship was, except it was some distance from the road, in a wooded area near Bedford.

"And then, they gave us what could only be a medical," Regan finished.

"Spare parts, transplant organs," Lake speculated aloud. "That's all it could have been."

Regan was horrified. "No, it couldn't. It couldn't, or they would have taken me as well."

"You could have been an unsuitable donor, wrong body tissue group," Straker responded quietly. He regarded Regan carefully. "But, why leave you alive?" "What puzzles me," Lake interjected, "Is why pick on a member of SHADO?"

Straker shrugged. "Well, that could be a coincidence. Four other people were taken a short time ago on that road. A woman was left behind, apparently dead. Before she died, she had a chance to tell us what had happened. She had a weak heart."

"Who shall I assign to replace him?" Lake asked after a few moments.

Straker shook his head "No one." He turned back to Regan: "You will report for normal duty tomorrow."

Regan seemed dazed and not quite sure what Straker's order meant.

"That's all, Regan." Straker's tone was firm. Regan nodded, still in a daze, and left the office.

"Can't you see? The man's in shock." Lake sputtered over Straker's apparent callousness. "He needs to..."

"We need!" Straker interrupted. "With all these attacks, and the Venus Probe coming in soon, and SID still down, and that Ufo still around, we need every astronaut available."

Lake opened her mouth to protest and Straker cut her off once more: "That's all, Colonel."

* * *

Later that evening, Straker stopped by Doctor Jackson's office in SHADO's medical section.

"You've heard what happened, about Regan?" Straker asked the Hungarian-born psychiatrist.

"Yes, poor man. A tragedy." Jackson replied, looking up from an open file drawer.

"I've ordered him back to duty."

Jackson nodded. "Quite right, the only thing you could do."

"Well, it's nice that somebody understands." Straker gave him a crooked grin. "I'd like you to keep an eye on him though, Doctor. Just in case."

"I most certainly will." Jackson peered at Straker, noting the strained look on the other man's face. "You look a bit under the weather yourself."

Straker shrugged. "Just a headache. But, if it will make you feel any better, I'll take a couple aspirin."

Jackson laughed.

Paul Foster walked into the small office.

"They asked me to drop this in for you, Doctor." Foster referred to the thick folder in his hand. He handed it to the psychiatrist. Jackson opened it and started leafing through the reports.

"I was just coming to see you," Foster turned to Straker. "He's got a couple weeks of leave due, if you want to relieve Regan for a while."

"That's nice of you, Paul. But, I think he'll be better off occupied," Straker responded. "Come back to the office, will you? I want to go through the Venus Probe escort procedure with you." Straker turned back to Jackson, still immersed in the reports. "Thank you, Doctor."

"Don't go!" Jackson nearly shouted as the two men were almost out the door. They stopped.

"This is the result of the autopsy we carried out on the alien's body."

"The one we found after the Moonbase attack?" Foster asked.

Jackson nodded excitedly. "This could shatter all our past theories."

"Go on," Straker encouraged quietly.

"It is mostly conjecture, the head was badly damaged. I may be completely wrong." Jackson warned. "We need more proof..."

"Cut the caution, Doctor. We're not likely to quote you." Straker told him.

"All right, all right," the psychiatrist agreed. "As you are well aware, up until now we've all believed they were humanoid. A dying race keeping themselves alive by transplanting our organs into their bodies."

Straker and Foster nodded. They were both aware of the hypotheses the doctor was referring to.

"The alien I examined this morning, I think.." he paused for dramatic effect. "His whole body was human."

"His brain?" Straker asked.

"Even his brain." Jackson's excitement accentuated his Central European accent.

"You mean, he was one of us?" asked Foster.

"Ultimately, yes," Jackson agreed.

"But, if his brain...?" Foster sounded confused.

"His brain may have been human, but it doesn't mean his mind was," Jackson stated.

"But, mind, brain, they're the same," Foster protested.

Jackson shook his head. "No, no, no. Let me try to explain. Oh, there was so much damage it was almost impossible to tell," Jackson moaned. "But, certain sections of the brain seemed to be missing. The parts that control emotions, creativity. Only the analytical, the logical remained. It may be that these creatures are not humanoid at all. They just use our bodies, drain from the brain all knowledge, wipe it clean and reprogram it with, ah, transmit to it, their own thought patterns, their own tastes."

"But, why?" Foster demanded.

Jackson shrugged again. "I don't know. It could be they are incapable of traveling in space. The form of life they are, I can't begin to imagine. They may have no physical being at all, and therefore need a vehicle to contain them. Our bodies."

"And so, with spare part surgery, they're able to keep these human computers alive and free from senility during their years in space," Straker concluded.

"It's unbelievable!" Foster protested.

Jackson grinned at his disbelief. "So were U.F.O.s. Yes, as fantastic as it sounds, they could be living computers."

* * *

In SHADO Control, Lieutenant Johnson caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. She looked around to investigate and spotted a seal-point Siamese cat crouched under a near-by console, as if it were trying to hide. The animal didn't struggle when she scooped it into her arms and began scratching it under the chin.

"What are you doing in here?" she murmured to the animal as it purred in her embrace. "I should report you, you know. This is a restricted area."

China-blue eyes gazed at her, almost as if the animal understood what she was saying. Then it squirmed out of her arms to sit on the floor and begin carefully washing itself. "Looks like we've got us a mascot," Johnson laughingly told one of the other operatives who

had stopped to stare at the sight.

"I wonder how it got down here?" the other woman said.

"Who knows, cats are supposed to be mysterious," Johnson replied.

* * *

By the following day, the Siamese cat was all but forgotten.

An alien craft was detected leaving the Earth. Moonbase interceptors were launched to stop it. The operatives and officers in SHADO Control waited and listened as orders were given to the interceptor pilots, results sent back for analysis.

"Near miss, some damage," Interceptor One's pilot announced.

Nina Barry radioed back further instructions.

On Earth, Virginia Lake murmured: "He must. Regan must get it now."

"Regan?" Straker repeated in dismay. "His wife's aboard that craft."

All of SHADO listened in horror as Moonbase announced the U.F.O.'s escape.

* * *

That evening, Astronaut Regan was called back the Earth, to Straker's office.

"One moment it was right in my sights, next it was gone," Regan was trying to explain to Straker.

"It was unfortunate that you had to encounter that particular Ufo," Straker stated. It wasn't a condolence, or even an excuse, merely an attempt at an explanation.

"The fact that my wife was on board made me more determined. I wanted that Ufo. I'd rather she were dead, than..." Regan's voice cracked.

"It wasn't entirely your fault," Straker shrugged away Regan's protest. "I made a bad decision sending you back to duty so soon. But, now I'm resting you. For a month."

"But, I don't want to be rested," Regan nearly shouted. "I'm flying Venus Probe escort tomorrow, there may be another chance."

Straker wasn't moved. "Regan, I can't afford vendettas. Colonel Foster will take your place."

"But, I have to go!"

"You are suspended for one month! That's an order." Straker barely raised his voice, but it had the effect of a shout.

Regan's chin quivered as though he were ready to cry. "But..." He tried again weakly after a moment.

"That's all," Straker informed him curtly. He watched as Regan turned on his heel and stalked out of the office.

"Colonel Foster will be replacing James Regan until further notice," Straker informed the chief communications officer over the intercom. "Inform all departments." He keyed a different combination on the intercom keypad and Doctor Jackson responded over the speaker.

"I've just relieved Regan from duty, Doctor," Straker told him. "Tomorrow morning I want a full physical and psychiatric report."

* * *

Straker's reservations concerning Regan would not have been allayed had he seen Regan a few moments later in the crew lounge. Johnson was taking a break. The cat was having a saucer of milk on the floor beside her.

"So that's where you've got to," Regan exclaimed when he caught sight of the animal.

"Oh, is it yours?" Johnson asked.

The cat looked up, eyes wide, as Regan scooped it into his arms.

"My wife's," he started to explain. "No, it would have been. We found it on the road, just before..." He grimaced as if in pain, "Just before the Ufo."

"Are you all right, Jim?" the young woman asked. She was a little alarmed at the pain in his face.

He shook his head: "Just a headache."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah." He gave her a crooked grin. "It's gone already, see."

"If you're sure..." She watched him worriedly, then glanced at the clock on the wall. "I've got to get back to work. You know how the Commander gets."

"Yeah, I know," Regan replied in a mournful tone.

* * *

Miss Holland was already hard at work when Straker entered the studio office early the next morning.

"Well, how's show business?" Straker greeted her. Collins's file was no longer on her desk. He seemed to have completely forgotten the incident.

"There's no business," she replied. Straker looked surprised.

"Well, hardly," she amended, handing him a stack of bound papers. "Business reports. They've just finished The Rebels of Santo Domingo, and there's a dog food commercial on stage D."

"Oh?" was Straker's only comment.

"And a script for your approval." Holland handed him a thick manila folder. "It's a period piece about World War Two."

"World War Two?" Straker placed the folder back on the desk. "Well, I think I'll leave this until Miss Ealand gets back. Let her handle it."

"Right," Miss Holland agreed as Straker turned to go.

He stopped suddenly and turned back to her: "Oh, Miss Holland, I haven't had a chance to thank you yet for filling in here."

She smiled. "No need. It makes a break from Section Nine."

"Hmm, and how is Colonel Blake?"

Section Nine was weapons research and development. All new weapons or battle equipment modifications used in SHADO came through Section Nine. Colonel Blake was a heavy tactical weapons expert SHADO had borrowed from the RAF some years ago. He had a reputation of being very difficult to work with.

"Oh, he's the same," Miss Holland replied. "I'll give him your regards."

"Good, do that." Straker checked his watch. "Well, I suppose as head of the studio, I'd better show my face. Stage D, you say?"

"Yes."

Straker turned to leave.

"Sir? How's Jim Regan taking it?"

Straker looked back at her: "He's taking it."

* * *

On soundstage D, there were a dozen dogs of all shapes, sizes and decibel levels. A handful of animal trainers were trying to instill some order into the mass of barking, excited canines.

Straker wondered, as he walked in, what chances the director had of creating a polished

finished product out of the pandemonium before him.

* * *

Paul Foster was not concerning himself with dog food commercials, although he was aware of the animals. He was heading out to his car, preparing to leave for the airfield that would send him off to Moonbase once again.

He found James Regan sitting in his car, apparently waiting for him.

"Jim, what are you doing here?" Foster asked. Regan didn't answer.

"It was terrible about Jeanne. I don't know what to say," Foster said, worried. "If there's anything I can do...?"

Regan still didn't react to Foster's voice. The young astronaut seemed distracted, vacant even.

"You okay?" Foster asked. "I'll take you back..."

Foster's concerned offer was cut short when Regan heaved himself from the car straight at Foster.

"What is this?" Foster protested. "Now, wait!"

Further protests were cut off as Foster found himself fighting for his life against Regan's furious, almost animal-like, attack. In fact, the noises Regan made as Foster lost consciousness, were more cat-like than human.

* * *

Later that afternoon, Straker called Doctor Jackson: "The medical report I asked for on Regan, it hasn't come through yet."

"I haven't been able to contact him," Jackson said, explaining the delay. "Nobody seems to know where he is."

Straker cut contact with Jackson and pressed the combination of keys that connected him to SHADO's security officer, Major Natiroff. "Locate Regan. He is to report to Doctor Jackson at once."

A short time later, the security chief at the airstrip called in to Straker's office.

"Regan went to Moonbase this morning," Captain Morgan informed him.

"Didn't you get the order about Colonel Foster replacing him?" Straker inquired sharply.

"Yes, sir, but he'd said you'd cancelled them."

"I want to see you first thing tomorrow, Morgan," Straker informed the other man. "I don't make orders to have them ignored."

"Yes, sir," Morgan responded meekly. He wasn't looking forward to facing Straker's wrath in the morning, or, for that matter, Natiroff's.

Straker's next call was to Moonbase. Lieutenant Barry was manning the command console.

"I want to talk to Captain Regan," Straker told her over the video-link.

"He's escorting the Venus Probe in, Commander," Barry informed him.

"Where's Colonel Foster?"

Barry shook her head. "The colonel's not on Moonbase."

"Contact Regan," Straker ordered angrily. "Find out what the hell he's playing at!"

"Yes, sir," Barry acknowledged. She'd known Straker a long time and was familiar with his moods. She certainly didn't want to be in Regan's shoes when Straker caught up with him.

"Regan, come in, Regan...", she called out on the communications channel to the interceptors. "Regan, come in..."

There was no response.

* * *

"Regan's flying!" Straker fumed as he entered the Control room.

"I thought you grounded him," Lake responded.

"I did," Straker confirmed. "He's broken radio contact."

"He's never disobeyed orders before," Lake reminded him.

"Yes," Straker nodded and the anger left his voice. "That's what worries me. Find Foster!"

"Why?" the woman asked in surprise. "Isn't he on Moonbase?"

"No, he isn't," Straker said. "He's here, somewhere."

Lake called security and set them to help her locate Foster. Then she hurried off to join them.

Straker placed another call to Moonbase.

"Yes, Commander?" Barry responded promptly, coming on the screen.

"The minute Captain Regan lands, I want him placed under close arrest and brought back here," Straker ordered. His expression was utterly grim.

"Yes, sir," Barry replied. She decided she didn't want to be within a hundred miles of Regan when Straker got hold of him.

* * *

A very short time later, Lake returned to SHADO Control, accompanied by Foster. A barely stifled gasp from Lieutenant Johnson brought Straker's attention to their arrival, but it was insufficient warning.

"God Almighty," Straker gasped as he caught sight of Foster. "Paul, what happened?"

Foster sat down in the chair Lake offered him. His face was scratched, bruised and bleeding. His clothes were torn.

"Regan," Foster responded through swollen lips. "He was like a madman. He knocked me out and threw me in the old quarry." The abandoned quarry was just east of the back lot, outside the walls. It, and the old apple orchard beyond it, were sometimes used by the studio for various purposes.

"Why? Why did he do it?" Lake asked.

Foster shrugged stiffly. "I don't know. I tried to reason with him, but he was out of his mind, like a wild animal."

"Did he say anything?" Straker asked.

Foster shook his head: "No, nothing."

"Nothing at all?" Straker insisted.

"No," Foster stated. "He just kept making noises, like a cat."

"A cat?" Straker repeated aloud.

Johnson looked up from her station: "Commander, there is a cat. It belonged to Regan's wife. He said he found it close to the Ufo." She looked troubled and added: "Something else, Commander. When he picked it up, he suddenly developed head-pains."

Straker considered her information for a long moment then keyed the intercom next to her station to contact Doctor Jackson's office.

"That human computer theory of yours, Doctor," Straker began as soon as Jackson responded. "Could it apply to an animal?"

"Well, without researching ..."

"Is it possible?" Straker insisted.

"The brain pattern is entirely different," Jackson protested. "But, I suppose..."

"Never mind that!" Straker cut him off. "Yes or no!"

"Yes!" Jackson sputtered. "But, you must understand..."

Straker switched off the intercom.

"I'll get the building searched," Lake volunteered. She turned to go but Straker help up one hand.

"Hold it. Let's make sure it's still down here." He picked up the phone at Ford's station. "Put me through to Miss Holland."

Miss Holland informed him she had let a cat out of the main entrance elevator only half an hour before.

Moments later, Moonbase called. "Commander, Regan's broken formation," Barry announced.

"Trajectory?"

"He's on a collision course with Moonbase," she replied, glancing at the monitor set next to the video-link screen.

"They're using Regan to destroy Moonbase," Straker stated, mostly to himself. He turned to the video-link: "Instruct interceptors One and Two, pursue and destroy Interceptor Three."

"Say again, sir?" responded Barry in disbelief.

"You heard me correctly, Lieutenant!" Straker informed her. "Tell them!"

Barry did so, only to discover both Interceptors One and Two reporting total power failure. They were dead in space and totally defenseless.

"Find that animal!" Straker ordered.

"We'll never find it in time," Lake protested.

"Try!" Straker hissed.

"Wait a minute," Foster interrupted. "The dogs, they're still on stage D."

"That's it," Straker agreed. There was a cold look of triumph in his eyes. "Get onto it."

* * *

The animal trainers protested, the director wailed in anguish for his shooting schedule, but the dogs were released onto the studio grounds. They ran, barked and bayed as though they'd suddenly been released from canine purgatory.

A studio guard reported a few minutes later that several of the dogs had treed a Siamese cat in one of the giant elms near the main entrance gate. One of the animal trainers was being called to rescue the cat from the overly excited hounds.

* * *

Moonbase waited for the impact, for Interceptor Three to tear through the fiberglass and steel construction of the lunar base.

As they watched the radar screens and computer analyses, it seemed that Regan couldn't possibly miss in his suicidal dive. But, at the very last possible moment, Interceptor Three appeared to try to pull up from its dive.

Regan's momentum was too great. Interceptor Three struck the rocky surface and exploded a mere five hundred yards from SHADO's installation.

* * *

Regan's cat was found hanging from the mouth of a large Alsatian. It's neck was broken and it's skull smashed. There was no reason to believe the dog had killed the smaller animal and the dog's trainer denied that it ever would do such a thing. It was suggested the cat had jumped from the tree to escape and had miscalculated, jumping to its death instead.

The only regrets expressed were by Doctor Jackson. The cat's skull was too badly damaged to help determine whether his theory about the aliens was correct.

* * *

One evening, several days later, the doors to Straker's office in SHADO Headquarters slid open and Alec Freeman walked in.

"We now have clear title to that land we want in Alaska," Freeman told Straker, taking a seat in the chair opposite the desk.

Straker nodded without speaking and Freeman peered at him more closely. "You look tired," he observed.

"It's been a long week. Regan came too close to destroying Moonbase and the doctors haven't come up with anyway of testing who might be under alien influence." Straker said.

"What about SID?" Freeman asked.

"I have John Gray and Virginia Lake working on re-configuring the tracking systems to compensate."

"How's it working?" Freeman asked.

Straker sighed. "Well enough, but we still need to send someone out to physically make repairs on SID."

"Who were you planning to send?"

"I'm not sure," Straker admitted. "SHADO doesn't have many people qualified to fly a Saturn Five booster to the L-5 orbital point."

"Pity we can't just use one of the lunar modules to get up there," Freeman said.

"Getting up there isn't the problem," Straker reminded him. "It's getting back. The experts tell me it'd take four months to add the extra internal fuel tanks to a standard lunar module so it could handle the mission."

"I don't think the aliens are going to give us four months," Freeman replied. He went over to the liquor cabinet set into the corner of the office and poured himself a whiskey.

"Sure you won't have one?" Freeman asked.

"Why do you keep asking when you already know the answer?" Straker asked in reply.

Freeman grinned at Straker over his drink. "Because some day you might surprise me and say 'yes'."

"And you'll call the medics because I'll have obviously gone off the deep end, finally."

Freeman chuckled and sat back down. It was a long standing joke between them. Straker rarely imbibed. People who didn't know him well assumed his teetotalling was due to some estheticism, a moralistic superiority. The truth was far simpler. Straker loathed the taste of hard liquor and beer gave him migraines. It was easier to simply say no.

"Who do you plan to assign to the Alaska Sky-Diver base project now that Collins is dead?" Freeman asked.

"We can't be sure Craig is dead, Alec," Straker protested mildly.

"Ed, we both know that space personnel are declared dead forty-eight hours after failure to make reentry," Freeman responded.

"Yes, I know that," Straker admitted. "I also know that the chances he could have survived are almost non-existent."

"But you're still hoping he shows up?"

"I guess I am. He was a good friend." Straker's expression was sad and distant.

"He was a good man," Freeman said, finishing his drink. "Oh, by the way, how's next year's appropriation request coming? It's due in less than three weeks, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Straker replied. "It'll be ready. I was thinking we might assign Paul Foster to handle the Alaska project. It'll give him some good experience."

"Good idea," Freeman agreed. "He should be back from Moonbase in a week or so. I can fill him in on the details then." Freeman stood and turned to head for the office door. Then he stopped. "Oh, Katie called yesterday. She must have just missed you."

"Oh? What did she have to say?"

"She wanted to make sure you had the Institute's financials for the appropriation. They should be in that pile somewhere."

Straker didn't bother to check the pile of reports on his desk. "Anything else?"

"She sends her love, wanted you to know she's sorry she won't be able to make it to Craig's memorial service."

"I'm not exactly surprised," Straker remarked. "I figure she might decide to come to London for my funeral, but I don't know anything else that'd do the trick. Lord knows, I've tried everything I can think of."

"She is a SHADO officer. You could just transfer her back here to headquarters," Freeman reminded his commanding officer.

"I've thought about it," Straker admitted. "But, I promised her that it would be her decision. Besides, it wouldn't look right."

"Oh, yes, her uncle, the general."

"There's that, too," Straker agreed. He checked his watch. "It's six in the morning in San Francisco. I'll give her a call when she gets into the office there, see how things are going."

"Pity the two of you can't come to some sort of accord," Freeman said, heading for the door again. "You make a cute couple."

"You're a hopeless romantic, you know that, Alec?" Straker told him.

"It's funny, but Katie said the same thing to me yesterday," Freeman said as the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER 4

A week later, a U.F.O. was spotted too close to Moonbase defenses. Moonbase reported the sighting to SHADO Headquarters. A few minutes later, they were forced to admit the alien had vanished into a radar blind spot.

There weren't many blind spots in SHADO's radar coverage of near Earth space, even with Space Intruder Detector out of action. Unfortunately, the aliens seemed to know exactly where those few were.

Within SHADO's command center, Commander Straker took his usual position during an alert. He stood beside Freeman, behind and to one side of the communications supervisor's station. From there, he and Freeman could watch the various monitor screens and hear the radio messages coming in.

One of the monitors showed a slow blip crossing the screen.

"Is this the Lunar Module?" Straker asked. He pointed out the signal to Lieutenant Ford.

"Flight 209." The younger man confirmed.

"I'll feel a lot happier when it's landed," Straker muttered.

The Lunar shuttle was twenty-one minutes from entering the relative safety of Earth's atmosphere. It would be picked up by its launch plane four minutes after that, assuming all went well.

Paul Foster was a good pilot. He was one of the best SHADO had, and SHADO had some of the finest pilots in the world. But, on this trip, Foster was acting as copilot for Frank Craig, letting the other man gain some valuable experience piloting a lunar module through reentry.

"Red alert, U.F.O. four-two-eight, one-four-six, green. Trajectory four-two-seven, over five decimal four." Moonbase reported.

Lieutenants Ford and Johnson checked the information against the readings on the monitors at their stations. Johnson glanced at Ford and shook her head.

"Your sightings are masked from us by the Moon," Ford informed the Moonbase crew. "We'll pick it up in Tee zero-six."

Freeman knew that the Moonbase interceptors had already been launched and were heading out to catch and destroy the intruder before it could reach Earth's atmosphere.

"Check the estimated reentry time on the Module," Straker ordered quietly. Ford made a quick adjustment to his communications board.

"This is SHADO Control. Relay your reentry time and angle."

Lieutenant Craig answered promptly: "Reentry begins in seven minutes. Angle twenty-seven decimal five, on a three-second burn."

"Thank you, Captain," Ford replied. Ayshea Johnson rechecked a piece of information that had just come onto her computer monitor. She transferred the data to Ford's station.

"It checks," she informed him.

Ford nodded and turned to Straker. "The U.F.O.'s altered course five degrees. The interceptors won't make contact. It could reach the Lunar Module before reentry."

Straker nodded, lips drawn thin with worry.

"Relay to the captain," he rapped out after a moment. "Emergency reentry at angle three-one, increase burn one second."

* * *

The two man crew of the Lunar Module acknowledged the instructions.

"That's a tough order, isn't it?" Craig asked Foster.

Foster's expression was grim. "Theoretically, the U.F.O. could be on us in four minutes. The new angle takes just less than three."

"An angle over thirty degrees, that's pretty close to the upper limit, isn't it?" Craig insisted.

"Yeah, like taking a head on dive into a bowl of molten lead. It's possible, but you wouldn't do it for kicks."

* * *

The SHADO Control operatives listened to the information coming through from Moonbase. They checked and rechecked the data from the tracking stations on Earth and on the Moon.

"Sighting in area blue, sir," Ford finally announced.

"Termination?"

"We don't have confirmation yet, sir," Ford said. "But, it's definitely closing on the module." Another string of numbers appeared on the screen before him. "The U.F.O.'s increased speed to Sol zero-decimal-six. Even with the new angle, it's going to reach the module before reentry's completed."

"Warn them," Straker ordered.

Ford tried to make contact with the module, with no result. "It's too late. I have reentry cessation on radio contact."

Another man might have sworn, but Straker said nothing. He simply walked out of the control room toward his office. His head was bowed, whether in grief or simply in thought, Freeman didn't know. Freeman did know that losing two lunar modules, and two senior SHADO officers, in less than two weeks, was a hard blow. It didn't help that both officers were friends, of sorts, and Straker's job and personality didn't afford him many friends.

* * *

Sixteen hours after the Lunar Module disappeared from the tracking system, Moonbase's radar picked up a slow-moving object approaching the Moon. Interceptors were launched to investigate.

It was the lunar module, a little charred around the nose cone, but intact, coming in for a landing.

* * *

Straker and Freeman were on the next shuttle to Moonbase. Officially, they were going to pick up additional material for the appropriations meeting in just ten days time. Unofficially, Straker was anxious to find out what had happened to the lunar module. The U.F.O that had been chasing it had not yet been found.

The two officers located Foster eating lunch in the crew lounge.

"Paul!" Straker called. "How are you?" Foster ignored him.

"How are you, Paul?" Freeman asked, puzzled by Foster's reaction.

"Fine." Foster's answer was short. He refused to look up at the two men as they settled into seats across the table from him.

"Well, you gave us all quite a scare," Straker began again.

Foster finally looked at him. There was a grimly amused smile on his handsome face. "I gave you quite a scare?"

"Well, sixteen hours with no radio contact," Straker explained.

"The transmission antenna was destroyed in the reentry attempt," Foster stated.

"Yes, I read the technical report," Straker informed him.

"Why don't you tell us your version?" Freeman suggested.

"Version?" Foster caught the word.

"Yes, we'd like to know what happened," Straker explained. He also seemed puzzled by Foster's sudden hostility. "From you," Straker added.

"You'll get my report," Foster stated flatly.

"Now look, Paul, there's nothing official about this." Straker assured him.

Foster didn't seem to hear as he walked over to one of the food vendors set into the wall.

"What'll it be?" Foster asked. "Coffee?"

"No thanks, you go ahead," Straker replied.

"How about something a little stronger?" There was a touch of something extremely unpleasant in Foster's smile.

"You know I don't use it, Paul."

"Never?" Foster taunted. "Oh, I was forgetting, the ice-cold computer mind of Commander Straker can rationalize his troubles away."

Freeman rose to Straker's defense: "Now look, Paul. We know you've had a pretty rough time, but Commander Straker doesn't have to take that kind of stuff from anyone."

"Maybe that's because nobody's dared to dish it out to him before now," Foster retorted angrily.

Straker motioned for Freeman to sit back down. His expression was one of stony calm as he regarded Foster: "All right, let's have it."

"If you're talking about details of the 'accident', you're asking the wrong man," Foster told him bitterly.

"Who should I be asking?"

"The man who ordered the reentry angle of thirty-one degrees," Foster stated.

"That, as you very well know, was me," Straker informed him. "It was a dangerous, but not impossible, angle."

"That depends on your stage of reentry," Foster replied. "For us, it meant a certain burn-up unless we leveled out."

"So, you overcompensated and bounced off the atmosphere," Freeman finished for him.

"Yes, and just had enough fuel to make it back here," Foster told him.

"It was a risk I had to take."

Foster turned on him, face white with fury: "A risk you had to take? The next time you have a risk to take, Commander, let me know and I'll pick up some of that back leave!"

Foster stormed out of the lounge. Straker and Freeman were left staring after him in worried bewilderment.

* * *

The lunar base's central recreation area had long ago been dubbed 'Central Park' by Moonbase personnel. It was filled with flowering plants and ferns. The growing things lent some Earthly normalcy to the otherwise antiseptic spaces of Moonbase.

Straker and Freeman had appropriated one of the tables. Sheets of computer paper were spread out in front of them as they went over the data Gay Ellis had printed out for them.

"Well, over the past year, our rate of success against U.F.O.'s has been impressive, but by no means, one hundred percent," Straker observed after a time.

Freeman smiled. "Like they used to say in the old days, that'd be like asking for the Moon."

"Well, that's pretty much what I plan to ask for this time, Alec," Straker admitted.

"Enough money to set up four new, fully automated, moonbases over the next ten years."

Both men looked up as Foster entered the room. He walked over to their table.

"Private?" Foster asked, glancing at the papers spread out in front of them.

Straker's expression was carefully bland. "Just work. Why don't you join us?"

As Foster grabbed a chair from another table, Straker turned back to Freeman: "I think it's the only way to achieve adequate backup capability, even against a massive U.F.O. attack."

"Who says they have the capacity to mount a mass attack?" Foster asked. Once again, hostility underlined his tone.

"Nobody," Straker admitted calmly. "Because nobody really knows. But, they might have, next year, ten years from now, and we have to be ready for it."

He glanced at Freeman. "All right, let's hear your reactions. Alec?"

"You're asking a lot and I think the Commission will fight you all the way, but I'm all for trying," Freeman replied.

"Paul?"

"I don't know," Foster stated flatly, folding his arms across his chest.

"Just exactly what is that supposed to mean?" Straker demanded.

"Well, let's just leave it like that," Foster suggested, getting out of his chair.

"No, spit it out," ordered Straker. "Well?"

"You want it straight?" Foster challenged.

"Yes, I want it straight," Straker insisted. He stopped short as a Moonbase operative walked in. "But not here."

* * *

The crew lounge was smaller and more private. Straker shut and locked the door from the inside.

Then, Freeman turned on Foster. "I'd like to know just what you think you're playing at!"

"Hold it, Alec," Straker ordered softly. "All right, Paul, let's forget rank for the moment."

"Alec says you're asking a lot," Foster began. "I think that's just one way of avoiding the fact that you're asking to double last year's appropriation."

"You're saying you're against?" Straker asked.

"I'm saying we should rename the whole thing 'Straker's Alien Defense Organization'."

Straker's lips drew into a tight smile as he nodded. "Oh, I get the picture. You think I run this organization for kicks. You think I ask for more money so that I get bigger as SHADO gets bigger."

"It's got a name," Foster told him. "It's called 'Empire building'."

Freeman lost his temper. "Now look, Foster, you've just about gone far enough."

"It's all right, Alec," Straker told him, voice very quiet. He motioned for the older man to sit. Freeman did so.

"Maybe you should have spoken up earlier, Paul," Straker said.

"Maybe. You said you wanted it straight."

"That's right," Straker admitted. "I've no time for 'yes men'."

Emboldened by Straker's apparent compliance, Foster continued: "I think you should put yourself on the furlough roster, three to four months complete rest."

"You think I'm falling down on the job," Straker clarified.

"I think it's got to you," Foster corrected. "I think you're obsessed with SHADO and Ed Straker. I think you're making decisions without any real thought to the consequences."

"Like that reentry angle."

"Yes, like that reentry angle." Foster was nearly shouting in anger and frustration. "And

like spending millions on moonbases when they're needed on Earth. Like a hundred other instances I can name."

"All right, all right, Paul," Straker said very quietly. He glanced worriedly at Freeman. Foster seemed to be on the verge of hysteria, fighting to keep control of himself.

"Suppose Commander Straker took some leave," Freeman suggested. "You got a replacement in mind?"

A sly look came onto Foster's face as he considered the question.

"It's possible," he admitted.

* * *

"Why the soft pedal?" Alec Freeman wondered aloud as he waited for the call for the next shuttle back to Earth. The Australian was seated on the end of the bed in the sleep cubicle Straker had been assigned during his stay on Moonbase.

"Why don't you just slap him back into line?" Freeman asked.

"It isn't that easy, Alec," Straker said.

"Well, if you take my advice, you'll think about it."

Lieutenant Ellis' voice came over a small overhead speaker: "The Lunar Module leaves for Earth in seventeen minutes."

Freeman got to his feet, picking up his briefcase. "Well, I have to go," he reminded Straker as he headed for the door.

"I'll sleep on what you said, Alec," Straker promised.

"Fine, you do that." Freeman commented dryly.

"Safe journey," Straker called after him.

Freeman smiled and closed the door behind him.

Straker sat on the bed for a few moments, contemplating Foster's anger. It was true that Foster was head strong and a little hot-tempered. It was also true that he'd proven himself an excellent senior executive during the past two years since his recruitment into SHADO. Straker would not have characterized Foster as a close friend, but Foster's sudden hostility was extremely troubling.

Straker pulled a prescription vial out of his briefcase and swallowed a sleeping tablet. He didn't like taking them, but he'd been finding it necessary more often since Collins' disappearance. He reflected that Foster might be right. The job was getting to him. But, his personal problems with the job didn't explain the sudden change in the other officer.

Sleep was slow in coming, even with the tablet, and then his slumber was shallow and fitful. Every sound in the base seemed magnified. Every vibration, a premonition of disaster. It seemed like hours before he finally dozed off.

His sleep was abruptly broken by a hand roughly grabbing his arm and the jab of a needle trying to find a vein. Straker slid out of the bed, away from the needle and the hand holding it, and hit the light switch by the bed.

The sudden flood of light temporarily blinded his attacker. He ran out of the room, dropping the hypodermic syringe.

Straker had recognized his attacker: Frank Craig. He picked the syringe off the floor and inspected it in the light. The syringe was empty.

* * *

Lieutenant Ellis declared general quarters, an internal security alert. This followed Straker's angry report of the attack on him in his quarters.

Ellis looked up from her central control console as Straker strode into the Control sphere.

He was tying the belt of his dressing gown around him, and he was utterly furious.

"Seal all exits," he ordered. "I want Lieutenant Craig found and brought here. Use stun guns if necessary, but I want him alive."

"Yes, sir," the Moonbase commander murmured, taken aback by the vehemence in Straker's voice.

Orders were relayed to the security teams.

"What happened?" Foster asked. He was in uniform and had been waiting in the Control sphere even though it was several hours before his shift would begin.

Straker eyed him suspiciously: "You tell me."

Foster didn't rise to the bait, but he kept himself on the opposite side of the control console from where Straker stood.

Slowly, search reports came into the Control center.

"What's taking so long?" Straker demanded. His impatient irritation was one indication of how angry he was.

"We'll find him, sir," Ellis assured him. Behind her, Joan Harrington confirmed the search parties' reports.

"Reception and embarkation area searched, each sphere checked. Move on to recreation area," she instructed. She used a light pen to check the cleared areas off on her monitor.

One of the searchers reported in: "The explosives store's been broken into. Looks like a high detonation packet's missing."

Almost immediately, another search party reported: "He's just entered emergency exit ten."

"Order a condition red," Straker commanded.

Ellis complied, hitting the switch that controlled her console microphone: "This is Control. Internal security, condition red, repeat, condition red."

"If he gets near the air and water installations with that explosive pack..." Straker said, but he didn't need to finish.

Everyone else in the room knew exactly what he meant. If Craig managed to damage the air recycling station, they would all be condemned to a slow death. SHADO wouldn't have time for a full evacuation with the lunar shuttles.

"Why wasn't exit ten sealed?" Straker asked after a moment.

"It's an emergency exit," Ellis reminded him. "It remains operational even during an alert."

Straker was obviously more tired, and the incident with Lieutenant Craig was bothering him more, than he would admit. Ellis knew he should have remembered those facts.

"All right," Straker conceded. "Get some men out there after him."

"Yes, sir," Ellis responded. She was already signaling the search parties from her console.

"And I want a check on all emergency air supplies."

"Yes, sir," replied Nina Barry, already working on the problem. He glanced over at her.

"Oh, and find out where he got that space suit," he added.

"Right away, sir," was Barry's bemused response.

A signal sounded on Ellis' control board. "Go ahead, Mark," she acknowledged.

"There's a space suit missing from the register," Mark Bradley's soft voice announced over the speaker. "But he won't get far. It was due for recharging. There's practically no air left."

"Scan the surface," Straker ordered. A monitor next to Barry's station flickered on,

controlled from Ellis's console. The screen showed the lunar surface. In the distance, the air and water recycling installation could be seen.

"There he is." Barry pointed out a silvery object moving near the center of the screen.

"We have no choice," Straker said, turning to Ellis. "Use number four."

At the base of each of the five spheres that made up the upper levels of Moonbase was a small video camera and next to it, a powerful, remote-controlled gun.

A few shots established that Craig was already out of range.

"We'll have to use a missile," Ellis announced, watching the screen. Craig was crawling toward the air and water station on his belly.

Straker shook his head. "No, it's too close to our installation." He reached for the microphone on Ellis's console and flipped the group of switches that would connect him with Craig's suit radio. Behind him, Foster simply watched, waiting.

"Listen to me, Craig," Straker insisted to the microphone. "We know what you're trying to do. But, it's two hundred yards to the air and water installation. You'll never make it."

"It'll be close enough." Craig replied, gasping for breath.

"Lieutenant Craig, we realize you want to destroy Moonbase, but you're destroying yourself. Your air supply won't last."

Lieutenant Frank Craig of SHADO didn't seem to hear his commanding officer as he continued to struggle toward the vital air and water recycling station. Then, apparently realizing he couldn't get any closer, he set the charge on the demolition packet.

It exploded, killing him instantly. A new crater was left in the lunar surface.

Quickly, the Moonbase operatives checked and rechecked the integrity of the pressurized spheres. They reported their findings to Ellis and Barry, still on duty in the Control sphere.

"All systems checked and A-okay, sir," Ellis announced as soon as all the inspections had been completed.

"Right. Oh, and stand down to yellow," Straker ordered. It had finally occurred to him they were still on red alert status.

"The damage report, sir," Barry handed him a clip board with several sheets of hard-copy clipped to it. He glanced at the pages briefly before handing it back to her.

"Well, there's nothing here we can't handle," he told her. The only damage listed was very minor: a pierced conduit that was being repaired even now, and the lock to the explosive storage locker, which Craig had forced.

Paul Foster finally spoke up: "What now?"

"I'm going back to bed," Straker informed him.

"Aren't you interested in finding out what happened?" Foster demanded.

"It'll keep." Straker gave him a puzzled look. "No one's going anywhere, are they, Colonel?"

Foster didn't bother to reply as Straker left the command center to return to his bed.

CHAPTER 5

"Colonel Freeman," Lieutenant Ford called out the next morning as Freeman entered SHADO Control. "I have a communication for you, Colonel."

"Well?" Freeman asked as the communications officer stepped closer to him.

"It's a somewhat unusual channel," Ford told him quietly. There was a concerned look on the younger man's face.

"All right, Lieutenant, what is it?"

"General Henderson wants to see you, right away."

"He contacted you?"

"One of his assistants did," Ford explained.

"Well, why not Miss Ealand? She usually deals with personal calls," Freeman wondered aloud.

Publicly, Janice Ealand was Straker's executive secretary at the studios. In reality, Miss Ealand served as a buffer between SHADO and much of the outside world -- guarding SHADO's main entrance, fielding uncomfortable questions concerning personnel whose names appeared on studio payrolls but who had no job on any production, answering phone calls for those same people and relaying the messages down to their real positions downstairs, in SHADO H.Q. A 'somewhat unusual channel' was an understatement.

"I was a little surprised myself," Ford admitted. "Anyway, I was asked to give the message only to you. You're asked not to communicate it to anyone."

"Anyone?" Freeman repeated suspiciously. "Does that include Commander Straker?"

"Commander Straker was specifically mentioned," the younger man admitted.

"I see." Freeman dismissed the operative with a nod of his head. Then, he hurried into the commander's empty office and placed a call to Moonbase.

"I appreciate it, Alec," Straker said after Freeman had appraised him of Ford's message. "I'm not going to say you shouldn't have told me."

"Good," was Freeman's response. "But, what's it all about?"

"Why don't you go along and see Henderson and find out?" Straker suggested. Then, he cut the communications link, leaving Freeman wondering what all was going on that Straker wasn't telling him.

* * *

General Henderson's office was in a large concrete and glass office building near Whitehall. A sign beside the main doors indicated the building was home to the International Astrophysical Commission.

"Well, you're wondering why I asked you here," Henderson observed without preamble as soon as Freeman was alone with him.

Henderson's age was somewhere on the high side of sixty, but his posture was still as ram-rod straight as any marine's and the blue-gray eyes beneath the gray, bushy eyebrows were as keen any younger man's. He was heavy-set and there was a faint white line of an old scar under his left jaw. He walked with an almost imperceptible limp, legacies of a U.F.O. attack before SHADO was even formed.

Henderson gestured for the SHADO officer to take a seat across from the desk.

"More than that," Freeman admitted as he sat. "I'm wondering about the way you asked me here."

"You mean, my request that you tell no one about your visit?"

"I mean, the fact that I was asked not to tell Commander Straker," Freeman corrected.

"And did you?" Henderson asked, knowing what Freeman's answer would be.

"First chance I got," Freeman confirmed.

"Read that." ordered Henderson.

There was a thin file folder on the desk top and Henderson pushed it toward Freeman. The SHADO officer reached out and picked up the file. He opened it and took a glance at the papers inside.

"You didn't finish it," Henderson observed as Freeman snapped the file shut and tossed it back on the desk.

"I didn't have to. I've seen enough," Freeman informed him coldly. "Is that all you wanted to see me about?" Freeman was already out of his chair.

"Sit down, Colonel, and listen," Henderson ordered.

It had been a number of years since the United States Air Force had forcibly retired James Henderson for being past their upper age limit. However, he was still a man who expected to be obeyed. He was rarely disappointed.

Freeman sat back down.

"Now, if this had come to me from a SHADO operative, or even from a senior SHADO officer," Henderson explained, "I'd've pitched it into the garbage. But, it didn't. It came from Moonbase, from Paul Foster, the man who's backed Straker in every fight he's got into since he came on board."

"If you say so," Freeman said.

"I do," Henderson insisted. "Which makes Foster one hundred percent loyal."

"Not anymore. Not in my book," Freeman replied angrily.

"I have to take this seriously, Freeman. That's why you're here," The general explained patiently. "Now, the basic allegation is that Straker's become mentally obsessed with his command and has to be removed. I want your opinion."

"It'd make even you blush," Freeman replied, returning the older man's level gaze.

"So, there's nothing to Foster's allegations?"

"Nothing," Freeman stated flatly.

"They're completely false?"

"Yes," the SHADO officer insisted.

"Even this one?" Henderson asked, taking the file and turning to the last page in it. "The claim that Commander Straker plans to request double his last year's appropriation? If it's true, it might go a long ways toward establishing a case for believing that Straker's suffering from serious delusions of grandeur."

He paused, watching Freeman carefully.

"Well, is it true, Colonel?"

* * *

"I told Henderson to ask you himself, but he knew," Freeman told Straker over the video-link to Moonbase. "If someone had told me, just a month ago, that Foster would do a thing like this, I'd... "

"Forget it, Alec," Straker told him. He looked worried, but not especially surprised, by Freeman's news.

"What do you mean, forget it?" Freeman demanded.

"Listen," Straker said. "Foster didn't transmit that information to General Henderson out of pure malice. There's got to be another reason for it." Straker hadn't told Freeman about

Craig's attempt on his life the night before, or of Craig's death.

"Has there?" Freeman demanded. "He's bucking for promotion and he doesn't care who he has to step on to get it."

Straker paused as if considering Freeman's suggestion. "Well, there's only one way to find out the answer," Straker told him. "Tackle him about it. Thanks, Alec."

Again, Freeman was left wondering what Straker planned to do. He had a bad feeling about Foster, about Henderson, about the whole thing. It was a mystery and Freeman much preferred his mysteries between the covers of a book.

* * *

Paul Foster was still on duty in the Control sphere when Straker walked in, carrying a cup of coffee.

Liquids were not allowed in the control area for good reason. The control sphere was filled with extremely delicate equipment. However, Commander Straker was known to bend the rules occasionally.

"Why don't you girls go and grab a cup of coffee?" he suggested to the two female control operatives. His voice was friendly enough, but there was an angry glint in his eyes. The two women left without a word as he set his cup on top of one of the monitor screens.

"All right, Paul," Straker began as soon as the women had gone. "You sent details of the new appropriation request to General Henderson."

"That's right," Foster admitted coolly.

"At best, that was a serious breach of trust," Straker stated. "What are you trying to pull, Foster?"

Foster glared back. "Stop you from spending millions on moonbases for a start."

"You should know better than anybody that a mass attack is in the cards," Straker pointed out. He was angry and tired. He knew it showed and he didn't much care.

"Speculation," Foster sneered.

"Half this job is speculation. It must be," Straker protested.

"Yes, and it's proving to be pretty expensive."

Straker paused a moment, fighting to regain his self-control. "In the past four months, there has been a marked fall off in U.F.O. sightings," Straker said, finally.

"Which proves that our present equipment is more than adequate," Foster stated.

"Maybe," Straker admitted. "Or, maybe it indicates a grouping. A grouping for a much larger operation. It's going to come. I want to be ready."

"I think you're wrong."

"I don't care what you think," Straker stated, his tone icy cold. "I didn't come in here to discuss the appropriation. I want to talk about your future with this organization."

"Are you firing me?" Foster asked. There was a touch of amusement in his voice.

"No," Straker told him. "Nobody gets 'fired' from SHADO. Your report to General Henderson was," he searched a moment for the right word, "an 'inconvenience'. I can ride that out. No, you've the right to express your criticism of this command. But, you are not free to divulge information given to you in confidence."

"And if I do?"

Straker gave him a long, hard, look.

"All right," Foster conceded. "Let's get one thing clear, I stick to my opinion. I'm gonna' push for a change of command."

"How hard are you going to push, Paul?" Straker asked quietly. "As hard as Craig?"

Foster smiled. "You still say he tried to kill you?"

"Yes."

"With an empty hypodermic?"

Straker's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Foster paused, and the startled expression on his face told Straker enough. Foster had no idea how he knew that.

"What did you say?" Straker's tone was as cold and hard as steel in a liquid nitrogen bath. "I told no one how he tried to kill me. An air bubble in the blood. Lethal, if it's in an artery, if it's large enough. And very difficult to prove the cause of death, since up here, there would be considerable delay before an autopsy could be performed."

Foster flipped the switch on the console in front of him that controlled the single door to the compartment. Obediently, the door slid shut and the electronically controlled bolts slipped into place.

"Open it," Straker ordered.

Foster grabbed Straker's coffee cup from atop the monitor and splashed the hot liquid onto the control board. There was a hiss and the lights flickered, then went out. Smoke wisped out of the panel and the smell of burning insulation filled the air.

"It's no use, Commander," Foster announced as Straker reached over to check the damage in the darkness.

There was something ugly in Foster's voice. Straker stopped and looked up at the younger man.

Foster had a gun in his hand, a 9mm Beretta. He was pointing it right at Straker's chest.

"Colonel, why don't you just think about this?" Straker forced himself to stay calm, to keep his voice soft.

"Think about it?" Foster shouted. "That's exactly what I've done ever since that last re-entry."

"You're crazy, Foster. You know that, don't you?" Straker informed the younger man. He kept his tone quiet and matter of fact as he was slowly made his way around the central console, keeping it between himself and Foster.

"Am I?"

"You must be, to think you'll get away with this." He was now in front of the control board.

"You've run this organization too long. It's as simple as that," Foster explained. Foster was watching Straker's face and so didn't find out until much later that he had pressed a button on the console - the button that activated the microphone and outside speakers.

"All right, Foster. What do you plan to do?"

"You came into the Control sphere," Foster explained. "You asked the girls to leave and locked the doorway. You tried to talk me back into line. I refused. You started throwing insults, there was a fight. You lost control and pulled a gun."

Foster indicated the gun in his hand, the one he still had trained on Straker. "Your gun, Commander. I got it from your locker. I managed to jump you, there was a struggle."

"And the gun went off, accidentally," Straker completed for him.

Foster nodded.

"One question, Colonel. What happened in that module during those sixteen hours of radio black out?"

A flicker of confusion crossed Foster's face.

"All right, Foster, give me that gun." It was a direct command, given in a tone that

brooked no argument. Reflexively, Foster lowered the automatic and Straker moved, grabbing his gun arm.

Foster was taller, younger and stronger than his commanding officer, but Straker was surprisingly quick. It was Foster who was startled when the gun went off.

There was the whistle of air rushing out into the lunar vacuum.

Straker had the Beretta and now had it leveled at Foster.

"Why don't you use it?" Foster suggested. "Makes no difference, that shot punctured the sphere. We're losing air. This is the end, Straker."

"Is it?" Straker moved to the back of the central console. Again, he kept it between himself and Foster.

"If we don't pass out, I'll kill you with your own gun," Foster stated.

"You just try and get it." Straker rested his arms across the top of the console. He kept the automatic aimed carefully at Foster's chest.

The air was already getting thin in the dome. Sounds weren't as loud and it was getting harder to breathe, harder to concentrate. Soon, the loss of pressure would cause their blood to boil. Straker struggled to remain conscious.

"That's it, fight it," Foster taunted. "I can wait. You see, it's a question of physique. I'm younger, fitter, stronger."

"You're forgetting one thing, Foster," Straker retorted. "Will power."

But, Straker knew Foster was right. It was just a matter of time. He noted a thin trickle of blood coming from Foster's nose. He barely noticed that his own nose had started to bleed from the low pressure.

The gun fell from nerveless hands as Straker slumped to the floor. Foster grabbed the weapon and managed to pump off two shots before he, too, collapsed into oblivion.

* * *

"Why, why?" Freeman asked Straker for the umpteenth time following Straker's return to Earth with Foster under guard.

Straker was seated at his desk in his office, shuffling through the pile of reports that had accumulated for him in his absence. He'd been looking at the same set of files for the past hour. Freeman doubted Straker actually read the papers at all.

Armies traveled on their stomachs, a wag once observed. Sometimes it seemed that SHADO didn't move at all unless it was in quadruplicate. Freeman couldn't quite remember how it happened, but that's how it was.

Straker finally pushed aside the papers and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know, Alec," he admitted. "I just don't know. Two men bounce off the atmosphere during re-entry. We know that a Ufo was closing with their ship. The Ufo disappears. Then, after an extended space flight, they manage to limp back to the Moon." He looked over at Freeman and sighed. "Now, what happened during those sixteen hours?"

Freeman shrugged. "Something pretty frightening. Something traumatic enough to make them both want to kill you."

Straker shook his head. The Moonbase operatives had managed to pull him and Foster out of the Control sphere in time to prevent any permanent damage from the decompression. However, Freeman could tell that Straker was still feeling the after-effects. He was favoring his left arm as if it hurt and his eyes were blood-shot.

"Well, we may know more when the psychiatric unit has finished its tests," Straker said after a few moments.

Freeman nodded in understanding. Twice before they'd nearly lost Paul Foster. Once, due to a horrible series of coincidences soon after he had become an officer, later, when a U.F.O. had plowed into the Moonmobile he was believed to have been in. He'd been assumed dead until a surface search party at the U.F.O. crash sight found him near death with an alien nearby.

The alien died and Foster lived.

Foster was a good officer, despite his occasional eccentricities. He sometimes stated his belief that SHADO should at least make the attempt to negotiate with the aliens, that they really weren't much different from humans. It was a belief that was difficult for more experienced operatives to deal with.

The aliens had fired the first shots.

It would be hard, waiting for those test results.

* * *

Four days later, Freeman and Doctor Jackson came into Straker's office. Jackson had been assigned to Foster's case due to his familiarity with the officer.

Jackson's swarthy face was glum. Freeman wondered if he looked that disheartened. He certainly felt it.

"All right, let's have it," Straker ordered after seeing their expressions.

"Paul Foster is finished," Freeman stated without embellishment.

"Finished?" Straker repeated as if he didn't understand. He turned to Jackson. "But, you said yesterday that he was going to be all right."

"Yes," Jackson nodded, "but, in our psycho-neurologic tests we found . . ."

"Never mind the text book blur," Straker interrupted. "What happened?"

Jackson looked even more downcast, if possible. "Well, sometime during that space flight in the lunar module, Colonel Foster was subjected to a deep subliminal impulse."

"Brainwashed, by who, or whatever, was in that U.F.O.," Freeman explained in more melodramatic terms.

"Brainwashed?" Straker repeated. He still didn't seem to understand what they were saying.

"Yes, the impulse was extremely powerful and confined to one specific action," the psychiatrist explained in his softly accented voice. "To kill you."

"But, you said that Foster could be completely normalized," Straker protested.

"That's right. But, our latest tests have shown there is still a trace of the impulse deeply rooted in his subconscious."

"Just exactly what does that mean?" Straker demanded.

"It means you can never be sure."

"Sure?"

"That next week, next month, or in five years time, the impulse might surface and Foster's subconscious will force him to kill you. It could happen today," Jackson explained.

"Jackson, you said we couldn't be sure," Straker pointed out. "So, there is a doubt."

"That's right. I could be wrong, Foster may have it under complete control."

"Well, surely, there's something," Freeman protested. "Drugs, hypnosis?"

Jackson shook his head. Despite his early doubts about Foster's suitability in SHADO, Freeman knew that Jackson had come to respect, even admire the young man.

"No, I'm sorry," Jackson said finally.

Straker was standing with his head bowed. He looked up as Freeman spoke. "You know

what this means?"

Straker nodded, but there was pain in his eyes.

CHAPTER 6

SHADO security guards did not ask questions, especially not of senior SHADO officers, most especially not of Commander Straker. Two such blue uniformed guards accompanied Straker and Paul Foster to SHADO's armory and its adjoining shooting range.

"Lock the door," Straker ordered when they arrived. "Under no circumstances whatsoever open it for fifteen minutes. Is that understood?"

"Very good, sir," the lead guard confirmed.

Straker led Foster into the armory and the guards dutifully locked the door behind them.

Foster was familiar with the armory. He'd spent many hours there when he'd first joined SHADO, becoming familiar with the various weapons stored there. He was, by no means, an expert, but he was capable of effectively using any of the hand guns and assault rifles there.

Wordlessly, Straker went to one of the shelves and selected an automatic pistol. He picked out a cartridge clip and loaded it into the pistol.

"Go ahead, do it," Foster spoke into the silence as Straker walked into the adjoining, sound-proofed, firing range.

"The thing is, I feel perfectly normal," Foster told him. He followed Straker onto the range. "I don't blame you. I know it has to be done. I'd do the same in your place. What did the reports say? I'm liable to crack up again?"

Straker didn't answer, didn't even look back at the younger man as he took a position in front of the targets, aimed his gun with one hand and slowly squeezed the trigger. There was no emotion in Straker's face as he watched the shot miss the target and hit the back wall.

"Look, I know you can't just kick me out of SHADO, I know too much. Internal security," Foster found himself saying. He watched as a second shot missed.

"Well, for God's sakes, get it over with!" Foster shouted. He was angry that Straker was prolonging this agony, that Straker was simply ignoring him.

"I think there're a few things you should know first, Foster," Straker stated abruptly. He was still watching the far targets rather than Foster. "The aliens planted one objective in your mind, to kill me. The rest of your mind was unaffected."

Another shot missed.

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't understand," Straker informed him very quietly. "The psychiatrists, they gave you a clean bill of health."

"If I'm okay, then why this?" Foster asked, puzzled. Finally, Straker looked at him and Foster promptly wished he hadn't. There was a glint of madness in those blue-gray eyes, a smoldering anger that frightened Paul Foster to his core.

"I think you said it pretty well yourself," Straker replied, voice very cool, very controlled. "You told me you were going to push for a change of command."

Straker's tone became venomous. "Change of command"? Eleven years, I've given eleven years of sweat and sacrifice to get SHADO running the way I want it. I won't let some young punk like you mess things up. You're a threat, Foster, a troublemaker. I can't fire you, and I can't shelve you, so..."

"I don't believe you," Foster interrupted.

"It doesn't really matter, does it?" Straker asked icily. Slowly, almost casually, he aimed the pistol at Foster.

Foster began to back away, toward the targets.

"Well, there's Henderson," Foster reminded him. "Now, he won't let you get away with this."

"Won't he?"

"And then there's Alec Freeman. What about Alec Freeman?" Foster was back by the targets and found he was trembling. He could handle himself in perilous missions. He had proven himself many times over, but Straker's madness was scaring him to death.

"I can handle Alec Freeman."

There was an electric track that moved life-sized targets for a greater challenge. Foster threw the switch, hoping the movement might somehow confuse his tormentor long enough for him to escape.

Straker fired repeatedly at the targets, at Foster. Some shots came uncomfortably close, but not a single one hit their intended target.

Straker stepped closer: "Hold it, Foster."

He had the pistol aimed right between Foster's eyes, and at that close range, there was no way he could miss. Slowly, Straker pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. There was a fleeting look of something Foster couldn't identify on Straker's face. Then, he threw the gun at Foster. Foster ducked and ran past Straker back into the armory area, to the door to the corridor outside.

"Guards!" Foster shouted.

Straker walked up to him.

"Now, who do you think they're gonna' believe?" he asked. "Foster, you've had it!"

Suddenly, Straker backhanded him across the mouth, splitting his lip and sending him reeling.

"A change of command," Straker was practically ranting. "I know how to take care of punks like you. Gonna' tell General Henderson, huh?"

Foster tried to dodge the furious blows, but Straker was surprisingly quick, despite using only one hand. He held his left arm stiffly. The younger man didn't have time to wonder why.

"Guards, guards!" Foster tried again.

Straker's expression was one of grim satisfaction. "They take orders from me, Foster." Straker slapped him again.

There was an assault rifle loose on the rack nearest him. In desperation, Foster grabbed it and the ammunition cartridge on the shelf above it. He shoved the clip into place and brought the rifle to his hip.

"Get back, Straker!" Foster warned, aiming the rifle in the older man's general direction.

"You're gonna' have to kill me, Foster," Straker informed him. He took a step toward him. Foster fired a single shot past Straker, into the wall. Straker didn't even flinch. He stepped even closer, fists clenched.

"No! I said kill me," Straker grated. "It's you or me, Shoot!" he ordered. "Kill! Kill!"

Foster simply looked at him. Suddenly, he was too frightened, too confused at Straker's seemingly suicidal rage to do anything.

Slowly, as though strength, even life, were draining out of him, he slumped to the floor. Foster found he was crying like a terrified child. He didn't even look up as Straker took the rifle from his hands.

It was a soft, gentle voice he heard saying: "It's all right, Paul. It's all right."

"You tried to kill me," Foster protested. He couldn't keep the tremor out of his voice.

There was no anger, no madness in Straker's expression. There was only a touch of

bemusement as Straker picked up the assault rifle that had so recently been pointing in his direction. With an almost careless indifference, he aimed the gun at one of the far targets. He pulled the trigger several times in succession.

A pattern of holes appeared in the center of the bulls-eye marked on the target silhouette. They were so close together, there might have only been a single scatter shot.

"I could have killed you anytime I wanted," Straker explained quietly. He unloaded the rifle and put it back in its place on the rack.

"I'm sorry, Paul. I had to do it." His expression was worried. "I had to be sure. If you were ever going to kill me, it would have been just now."

Straker reached out his hand to help the younger man to his feet, but Foster flinched away.

"It's all right," Straker promised.

Slowly, Foster relaxed, finally accepting that the nightmare was over, that everything really was all right now.

* * *

Freeman was furious. "I thought we'd agreed on how to handle Foster." He was leaning over Straker's desk, glaring down at his commanding officer.

"You and Jackson agreed on how to handle Foster," Straker pointed out. "You decided to send him off to Outer Mongolia for a few years, until Jackson could figure out a way to defuse the problem."

"So, instead, you take matters into your own hands, risking your life and his in the process?" Freeman found himself shouting.

"I can't afford to lose any more officers," Straker responded quietly. "Besides, I considered the risk acceptable."

"You considered the risk acceptable?" Freeman stared at Straker a long moment, the silver blond hair, winter blue eyes, unyielding posture. "I don't understand you, Ed. And frankly, right now, I wonder if Foster wasn't right about you not considering consequences and putting people at unnecessary risk."

Straker's expression turned hard and Freeman realized he'd gone too far.

"That's quite enough, Colonel."

Freeman straightened up and took a deep breath. "Who do you want to send to handle the project in Alaska, sir?" he asked with forced respect.

"I was thinking it might be better for Foster if we assigned him to Moonbase for a month or so," Straker responded.

Alec Freeman nodded. "I'll see you in three months or so then, Commander."

"You don't have to do that, Alec. We have other people who can handle it."

"Would you rather I resigned?" Freeman asked.

Straker looked surprised. "Of course not."

Freeman headed for the office door. As the door slid open, the Australian turned to look back at his commander-in-chief. "Ed, you might want to think about taking some time away from here, before this job really does get to you. Oh, and good luck at the appropriations meeting Monday."

* * *

Foster accompanied Straker to General Henderson's office near Whitehall the following Monday morning. The actual meeting with the Astrophysical Commission's officers would not take place for another hour but protocol and overall security demanded a meeting with

Henderson first.

For security reasons, SHADO's operating funds appropriation request was presented to the commissioners in a heavily edited form. Henderson, as commission chairman, would be the only member to review the details of the request. He would make the recommendation for approval of SHADO's annual funding.

Miss Scott, Henderson's secretary, ushered the two SHADO officers into the general's office.

"Where's Colonel Freeman?" Henderson asked as the door closed behind them. He gestured for the officers to take seats in the leather chairs opposite his desk. Foster took a seat. Straker remained standing, placing his briefcase on the indicated chair.

"Colonel Freeman left for Alaska two days ago," Straker answered. "He's handling the construction of the new Sky-diver base up there."

"And how's that going?" Henderson asked.

"We have the title and all the permits in order, finally. With any luck, we'll come in at only twice the original estimate," Straker replied as he opened his briefcase and pulled out the appropriation request.

"I think I already know what's in this," Henderson commented.

"I don't doubt that," Straker replied. He handed the file to the general.

Henderson opened the cover and glanced over the computer generated financial lists. After a long moment he looked up at Straker. "I don't see a request here for money to fix Space Intruder Detector."

"We didn't put it in," Straker explained. "We postponed a few other, less urgent, projects to free up the funds."

"Which ones?"

"The new Sky-diver base in Australia, updating the mobile transport system," Straker answered.

Henderson paged through the report again. "Yes, I see those listed as needing additional funding," he said. He turned to the last page of the request. "I also see a request for an exorbitant amount for a multi-year project to build additional moonbases."

Henderson gazed at his former aide from beneath brindled eyebrows. "I'd like to hear a good explanation for such a large construction request."

"Granted, the expense will be high, but we believe the need for adequate backup capacity in the event of a massive attack more than outweighs the cost," Straker explained. His voice was quiet, but he was drumming his fingers against the back of the chair.

"Who says they have the capacity to launch a massive attack?" Henderson demanded.

"We don't know that they don't have the capacity, General," Straker replied. "However, that is their next logical tactical step. That's certainly what I'd be planning in their place."

Henderson turned to Foster. "Colonel, why don't you go get us some coffee." He glanced at Straker, "You still take it light and sweet?"

Straker gave a slight nod.

"I like mine black," Henderson added. Foster glanced at Straker who nodded almost imperceptibly, confirming Henderson's instructions. With a shrug, Foster got out of his chair and left the office to get the coffee.

* * *

Miss Scott looked surprised at seeing Foster leaving the office alone.

"They sent me out for coffee," Foster explained.

"There's a kitchen just down the hall, second door to the right," Henderson's secretary told him.

* * *

"There's no way I can present this request to the finance committee in its present form, Commander," Henderson began. His tone was mild. "Have you got any evidence whatsoever that the aliens are capable of launching an attack that would justify this type of defense budget?"

"General, you know as well as I do, by the time we get evidence like that, they'll be on their way. It'll be too late," Straker replied.

"Very well," Henderson said. "I won't argue tactics with you, or your unwarranted assumption that the other side'll even give SHADO enough time to finish those new bases." He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a pile of folders, dropping them onto the polished desktop.

"I'm not interested in assumptions. I'm interested in facts," Henderson said. "These are the allocation requests the Astrophysical Commission is considering for next year. There are about a dozen of them, including one of yours, the Maddox Fund, to clear space debris. Fact: SHADO's present operating budget takes more than half the funds the commission has at its disposal and now you want even more. Now, who won't get funded because you want it all?"

"I don't need a lecture in fiscal responsibility, General," Straker stated. He was still gripping the back of the chair.

"No?" Henderson asked. "I'll put it bluntly, Straker. SHADO has a serious problem living within its allocation."

"Since when can you run a war on a budget?" Straker demanded. "SHADO is defending the planet on an allocation that'd barely arm a tin-plated dictator!"

"Are you sure you're not one of them?" Henderson asked, watching the younger man carefully.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Straker asked. His knuckles had gone white.

"Your request to double last year's allocation might lend credence to the notion that you have an inflated concept of your authority and value," Henderson stated. "If nothing else, your request shows a rather callous disregard for the needs of anyone outside of SHADO."

"I don't see it that way," Straker replied.

"I know," Henderson said. "And that's exactly what I mean. The money pie is only so big. You have to share and you don't want to."

"We're fighting a war!" Straker protested. "You can't budget the cost of a battle."

"Wars have always been fought on budgets," Henderson responded. "All other things being equal, the more guns and bullets you have, the greater your chances of winning. But, bullets aren't the only determining factor and you know it."

"Then what is?" Straker asked.

"Properly trained people," Henderson replied. Straker straightened up to begin a protest and the older man put up a hand to stop him. "I admit, SHADO has one of the best training programs in the world," the general continued. "However, many of your people seem more interested in their pet research projects than actually fighting this war."

"Research is a necessary component of SHADO's mission," Straker said. "'Know thy enemy.' We don't even know where they come from or why they risk so much coming here. We're not much better off, intelligence-wise, than we were when we were first putting the project together. And, the more we do find out, the less we seem to actually know."

Henderson gazed thoughtfully at the younger man. "Reality looks a lot different than what we put on paper twelve years ago, doesn't it?"

Straker sighed, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "How much of the request will you approve, General?"

Henderson opened the file and skimmed through it once again. "I'll clear everything except for the Moonbase request. By my figures, that still puts you about ten percent above last year, but I think the Commission can manage that."

"Thank you, sir."

Henderson glanced at the closed office door. "I'm curious as to what prompted Foster to make that report to me, and how you've handled it." He looked over at Straker. "To forgive and forget has never been one of your policies."

That prompted a brief smile from the younger man. "It's never been one of your policies either, as I recall." Straker paused, then continued. "Colonel Foster was extremely upset at the time about an order I gave that he considered was made without due consideration of the risks."

"Is that all?" Henderson demanded.

"No, but that's all I'm going to say about it," Straker replied. "You can ask Foster about it, if you'd like."

"Will he tell me what it was about?" Henderson asked.

"I doubt it very much."

As he spoke, the door opened and Foster entered the office carrying a tray with three coffees.

"One black, one light and sweet," the officer announced, handing over the cups. He took the last one for himself. "Well?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

Henderson took a sip of his coffee before replying: "Your appropriation request is now in a form I am willing to recommend to the commission for approval."

"And?" Foster looked to Straker.

"And," Straker checked his watch, "the commission convenes in about five minutes."

"Before we go, Commander, I do have one recommendation to make to you," Henderson said.

A flicker of worry crossed Straker's face. "About the budget?"

"No, personal," Henderson replied. "When's the last time you took some time away from that hole in the ground you work in?"

"I spent last Thanksgiving in San Francisco," Straker replied.

"You know what I mean," Henderson stated.

"I've been too busy," Straker said. "There's too much to do, especially with SID out of action."

"And when do you think the satellite will be back on line?" Henderson asked.

"We're hoping to launch a repair mission in about six weeks. We've already made the launch arrangements with NASA," Straker answered. "Our biggest problem is that Craig Collins was our expert in that type of mission. We're having problems finding someone else with the same type of expertise."

Henderson nodded. "Collins certainly was a hard act to follow."

"Yes, he was," Straker agreed.

* * *

On the way back to the studios, Foster turned to his commanding officer. "Now what?"

"What do you mean?" Straker asked, weaving the car through the London afternoon traffic.

"You didn't get the money for the new bases, so what do you plan to do now?"

"Go to plan B."

"And what's that?"

Straker shrugged. "I'll let you know as soon as I've figured it out. I think I'll assign a couple people to it. Let them hassle it out instead."

"Who were you thinking of?"

"Barry and Bradley mentioned some ideas they had a while back. They sounded pretty good. Maybe I'll give it to them, give them Ford and Major Graham for the details. In the meantime, I still have to figure out a way to get SID back on line."

"Do you really think we'll find somebody to send up in six weeks time?" Foster asked.

"I'm sure we will, but then, I've always been an incurable optimist," Straker said with a grin.

Foster snorted in disbelief. He would never have characterized Straker as an optimist.

"On the other hand," Straker continued, "We can always pray for a miracle."

* * *

Four weeks later, while Sky-1 was on a routine aerial reconnaissance of the coastline and islands near its cruising area around South America, the pilot sent a not so routine message back to SHADO H.Q.:

Craig Collins Found Alive.

CHAPTER 7

Commander Straker was not a happy man as he spoke with Colonel John Gray.

"Well, let's get this straight before he gets here," Straker found himself stating in no uncertain terms. "When it comes to SID's brain, Craig knows more than anybody, so, as of now, he's on the project."

"All I'm saying is that Craig and I...," Gray faltered.

"Look, your personal feelings for him are your own problem," Straker reiterated. He was tired of dealing with personnel problems and artistic differences of opinion up at the studio. He was in no mood to deal with them in SHADO, especially not from a senior operative.

Gray had been called into SHADO headquarters eight weeks earlier after Space Intruder Detector was damaged. His assignment at the time was to optimize SHADO's remaining radar systems to compensate for SID's loss. He and Colonel Virginia Lake worked well together and their efforts had been quite successful. However, having Space Intruder Detector back on line was of the highest priority and Craig Collins was the best person for that job. Straker knew it and he knew Gray knew it.

"Just tell me who's in charge," Gray asked, finally.

"Well, overall, you are," Straker admitted, happy to be given at least that small concession from Gray. "But, when it comes to SID's engineering, Craig is God, okay?"

Gray nodded as the intercom on the desk buzzed. A disembodied voice announced Colonel Craig Collins' presence outside.

Straker thumbed a switch next to the intercom and the door to the office slid open. Craig Collins walked in, a wide grin on his broad face.

"It's good to see you," Straker said, delighted.

"It's good to see you, too." Collins laughed. "It's good to see anybody after eight weeks of jungle cats." His grin lessened ever so slightly as he noticed John Gray. "John."

"Craig." Gray's smile came out a little crooked.

"Well, come on. What happened?" Straker insisted abruptly.

"Well, I don't know," Collins with a sheepish grin. "I just sort of lost consciousness on reentry and then I came to and I was floating down over the sea and I went smash into the sea and I got out and swam ashore before she sank."

He leaned toward Straker with a conspiratorial wink. "Tell your boyfriends that their survival course really works."

Behind them, Gray rose to leave. The movement brought Straker's attention back to his presence, and to the business at hand.

"Oh, Colonel Gray, thank you."

Gray nodded, accepting the dismissal, and headed out the door.

As soon as the door slipped shut, Straker turned back to Collins. "You heard what happened?"

Collins nodded.

"I had no choice," Straker explained. SHADO had declared Collins lost and presumed dead, closing the file on him. Reopening that file had meant a week of intense, occasionally painful, testing for the other man.

Collins grinned and shrugged. "I know. I would have done the same in your place."

"Sure." Straker wasn't sure he believed him. He studied his old friend a moment. The experience in the jungle didn't seem to have changed him much. He'd lost some weight and his

deep tan hadn't yet faded, but, it was still the same sandy hair, broad, friendly grin as Straker had remembered. It was good to have him back.

* * *

Gray was still musing about his own problems with Collins when the subject of his ruminations walked up to him in the corridor just outside the control room.

"Hello, Master," Collins greeted. "I'm just off to Moonbase to get things started."

"What?" Gray was startled by the sudden decision. "I thought we'd go together tomorrow. There's a great deal to be done here."

"Yes, well, I thought I'd be more use up there. Besides, I have, shall we say, a little unfinished business to attend to. So, if you'll excuse me, I'll see you later." Collins sauntered off.

Gray was left standing in the hallway with the infuriating feeling he was missing something terribly vital.

* * *

Virginia Lake was sitting on one of the sofas in the recreation lounge on Moonbase, having a quiet conversation with Paul Foster. She was beginning a four week stint commanding Moonbase. Foster was filling in for Alec Freeman, doing the monthly inspection.

They made an attractive couple. Lake was fair and blue eyed with a figure that was accentuated by the silver Moonbase uniform. Foster's dark good looks simply accented Lake's prettiness.

They both started a bit guiltily when Collins stepped over to them. He had entered the room so quietly, neither of them had heard him.

"Craig, I was so glad when I heard." Lake rose to meet him.

"Well, it takes more than a little barbecue to fry me, you know." Collins grinned and grabbed her in a bear hug. She gasped in pain and surprise and he abruptly dropped his arms.

"Gee, I'm sorry. I do hope I haven't cracked a rib. I don't know what came over me," the big man apologized.

Lake checked the condition of her strained rib cage. Nothing was broken, but she watched him with sudden wariness. Collins turned to Foster.

"Well, Foster, nice to see you again." The incident of only seconds ago seemed to have already slipped his mind. "I'm glad you've been keeping an eye on things for me while I've been away."

Foster looked puzzled. "I can't say I know what you mean."

"Oh now, of course you do."

"Craig," Lake said, warning him away.

Collins shrugged. "Well now, how about getting this old jungle cat a cup of coffee, now that he has returned?"

"All right," Lake agreed. She went over to the coffee machine set into the wall of the recreation room.

"If it's all right with you, Foster," Collins baited.

Foster simply shrugged. He got up from the sofa and walked away, telling Lake he was heading for the Control module.

"Still making this moon dust, I see," Collins observed after taking a sip of the coffee Lake handed to him. "I wanted to say that there's no reason to feel guilty about anything."

"I don't feel guilty, Craig," Lake stated calmly, returning to her seat on the sofa. "I cried a little, when I thought you were dead. After a while, I stopped crying. People do, you know."

"Yes, they do."

"And we weren't exactly Romeo and Juliet," she reminded him.

"Virginia," he began, taking a seat next to her. "Ginny, you make it - , You make it very hard for a man who only wants to say there's no hard feelings." He gave her a little smile.

"I'm sorry, it that's really what you're trying to say." She wasn't entirely convinced.

"What else would I do?" Collins protested.

"How was the jungle, Craig?" she asked.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing." He settled back in his seat. "There was no one there who looked like you. You know, I used to lie there, and I used to look up at the old moon and I'd say to myself, you know somethin', ol' Ginny's up there."

She smiled faintly. "I did think about you."

"Did you?" He sat up, a hopeful look on his face. "You mean, there's still a chance for this singed, old astronaut?"

"I never said there wasn't," she reminded him. "It's just that I resent you looking upon me as your property."

"Now, you know I'd never do that." He looked hurt and bent over to kiss her.

She let him, then almost immediately found herself struggling to escape his embrace as his hand grabbed her hair. His lips pressed so hard against hers she could scarcely breathe. Finally pushing him away, she slid off the sofa and took a shaky step backwards in horror.

"You didn't leave the jungle, you brought it back with you!"

* * *

Gray was still unpacking his small personal case when Collins came into his sleep cubical.

"You wanted to see me, Master?" Collins asked, grinning as he watched Gray unpack.

Gray wasn't amused by Collins' good humor: "What's this request for a two-man mission?"

Collins shrugged. "Well, fixing SID is a two-man job, I need a partner. I want Foster."

"Why Foster?"

"He's the only man available with the necessary know-how," Collins explained. "Also, he went through basic astro-training. I know he may be a bit rusty, but I figure I can lick him into shape in time."

"Is that the only reason you want him?" Gray insisted. A nasty suspicion was growing in the back of his mind.

Collins looked mystified and a little hurt at Gray's mistrust. "Well, why else would I want him?"

"All right, you've got him," Gray agreed, unable to find a single concrete reason to deny the request.

Collins bowed repeatedly as he backed out of the tiny cubicle: "Thank you sir, yes sir, please sir."

Gray found the joke irritating, but he wasn't about to let Collins know how irritating.

* * *

Gray's next order of business was with Virginia Lake. He located her in her sleep cubicle. She was sitting on the end of her bed, waiting for him.

"You ran a computer check on my relationship with Craig a long time ago," She reminded Gray when he broached the subject with her.

"I know," he admitted.

"And the readout said that it would not affect my efficiency."

Gray nodded. "And two weeks ago, we ran one on you and Foster and it said the same thing."

"So why the inquisition?" she asked.

It was an unpleasant fact that SHADO insisted on having the final say on who could and could not fall in love. It was all based on whether or not it was likely to influence their efficiency on the job. Couples adversely effected by their relationships could find themselves filling posts on the opposite ends of the world. Lake recognized the need, but she had no desire to be questioned about her feelings.

"Yesterday, we ran one on you and Craig and Foster." Gray explained. "The computer seemed to think a triangle is the nastiest emotional shape there is."

"Well, you can tell the computer to relax. There is no triangle."

"Oh, who got dropped?" Gray asked, a bit surprised.

"Craig."

"May I ask why?"

"That is my business," she informed him sternly. She refused to discuss the matter any further.

* * *

Gray's next stop added yet another item to his growing list of things to worry about.

The exercise room, like the rest of Moonbase, was compact but fully equipped. Collins and Foster were wrestling on the thick floor mat as Gray stopped to watch them through the open door.

Foster was an excellent physical specimen. He was in superb condition and kept himself that way with the dedication of a devoted hobbyist. But, he was obviously no match for Collins. The older man outweighed Foster by nearly forty pounds, and had the reflexes of the proverbial cat.

Collins was calling out numbers. Foster was being required to recite the functions assigned to those numbers as they grappled. Collins was leaving no margin for error.

"Oh, now, sorry's not good enough, old man," Collins berated when Foster murmured an apology for his one miss. "Sorry can kill. Now, when we're up there together, I don't want you to be sorry, I want you to be right. Now, let's try that again, all right?"

Foster agreed, but Gray found himself wondering exactly how long it was going to be before he had a mutiny on his hands.

* * *

Gray was still wondering about Foster's limits that evening in the central recreation lounge. He was studying the chess board on the table in front of him as well as observing Foster and Lake seated in the far corner. He from their expressions he could guess what they were talking about. However, even he was surprised by the look of hatred on Lake's face when Craig Collins entered the room.

Collins sauntered over to the chess table. "Good evening, my Lord. How's about a game of chess?"

He appeared to be ignoring the couple in the corner.

"You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you?" Gray observed, surprised by the request. "You haven't won a game with me yet."

"How about a little bet?"

"You really want to throw your money away?" Gray asked, increasingly amazed.

Collins shrugged. "Shall we say, fifty?"

"If that's what you want," Gray accepted the challenge. "You take the white."

Gray finished setting up the pieces and turned the board so the white faced Collins.

Gray soon wondered about the wisdom of agreeing to the bet. Gray was a good chess player. Many considered him SHADO's chess master, although he denied he was that good. Even so, tonight Collins had him outclassed in a way he hadn't been out-matched in years. That worried him.

Collins had always been a careless player. He usually moved his pieces without any real plan of action. But tonight, he played like a master.

"You really want to play that move?" Collins asked after Gray's last move.

"Just get on with it, Collins," Gray ordered. Collins moved his queen.

"Check-mate."

Gray studied the board for a long moment. Then he nodded, conceding defeat. "That's fifty I owe you."

"I'll let you have your revenge tomorrow?" Collins inquired as he stood up to leave.

Gray shook his head. "We're due on Earth tomorrow," he reminded him. "I'll take my 'revenge'," - the word was hard for him for some reason - "when we get back here."

"Anything you like." Collins gave him a half bow and sauntered out of the room. He seemed totally unaware of the stares that followed him.

* * *

"I thought we'd been through all this before," Lake protested when Gray caught up with her later in one of the corridors.

"You told me you dropped Collins. You didn't tell me you hated him."

"Who says I hate him?"

"Virginia, I was watching your face when he came in."

"People do move away from each other sometimes, you know." She no longer denied it.

"Collins is on a vital mission," Gray stated firmly. "If there's anything you know about him, his attitude, state of mind, anything, it's your duty to tell me."

She looked at him uneasily, not quite sure what to say.

"He's different."

* * *

Straker was not amused when Gray brought forward his case against Collins upon his return to Earth and SHADO Headquarters.

"You're trying to tell me that just because he beat you at a game of chess, he's a psychotic. Oh, come on now, John, what are you, a sore loser?"

"No, it's not just that," Gray protested. "It's the way he's been riding Foster."

"He's training Foster for a tough mission, not for a game of Ping-Pong. Foster has to shape up," Straker replied.

"And Virginia Lake?"

"Virginia Lake is a girl who fell out of love," Straker stated flatly, dismissing it.

"Look, I know he's a friend of yours...," Straker gave him a warning look, but allowed Gray to continue. "But, all I'm saying is that what he went through in the jungle . . ."

Straker pressed a series of buttons on the computer keyboard on his desk. The monitor set into the wall flickered on, showing Collins' signed test clearances.

"Doctor Adams, full clearance," Straker read off. "Doctor Jackson, full clearance; Doctor Buden, full clearance. Now, all those reports have been computerized and checked. Full clearance."

"Computers aren't God," Gray pointed out.

"Are you, John?" Straker asked, suddenly very quiet.

"I just have an instinct about him," Gray tried one last time.

Straker sighed. "Look, just now you implied that my friendship with Craig could warp my judgment. Just make sure your personal feelings don't bend yours."

* * *

Gray caught up with Collins outside, near one of the sound stages.

"Blast-off for SID's in five days. You going to be ready?" he asked Collins.

"Well, I'm just about finished down here. Of course, I've got one or two things still to do at Moonbase," Collins informed him.

"We go back tomorrow."

"Right."

A silver Rolls-Royce stopped in the drive-way they were walking past. A gray uniformed chauffeur got out and opened the door for his one passenger. Gray recognized the elderly blind man who climbed out of the car.

It was Sir Esmond Willoway of Willoway Productions. Gray recalled he had a television series currently in production at the studios.

Gray and Collins both paused as Sir Esmond approached them. His servant guided him in a routine made easy by long practice.

"Excuse me, can you direct me to D-stage?" the old man asked Gray.

"Yes, of course. It's over there." Gray pointed out the direction to chauffeur. "Take the second turning on the right."

"Oh, thanks." The old man patted him on the arm. "Mr. Gray, isn't it?"

"That's right, Sir Esmond." Gray was pleased he'd been remembered. He hadn't seen the old man in over a year.

"Yes, I never forget a voice," Sir Esmond smiled at him, then turned, sensing another presence. "And who...?" His voice trailed off in sudden confusion and he turned away, troubled.

"Come along, Charles."

"Yes, sir."

Sir Esmond took his chauffeur's arm and permitted himself to be led away. "Can't have you standing about all day," he was muttering.

Gray watched them walk off toward D-Stage, then turned to Collins. "There's something I've forgotten to do. I'll catch up with you later."

"Very well, Master." Collins turned to leave as Gray headed off toward the corner Sir Esmond and his man had just disappeared around.

"Sir Esmond!" Gray called out as he turned the corner. The pair stopped and waited as he ran up to them.

"Excuse me, Sir Esmond, but I couldn't help noticing something seemed to upset you back there."

"It was nothing." The old man brushed it off, although he was obviously still distressed. "It was just one of those inexplicable moments, like walking over a grave." He shuddered slightly at the memory.

"Well, if you're quite sure there's nothing I can do."

The white-haired gentleman shook his head. "No, that's very kind." Then he turned, heading toward D-Stage again with his servant as Gray turned to head back to his car.

For an instant, he thought he saw Craig Collins standing at the corner of the building, watching him. But, when he turned to get a clearer look, there was no one in sight.

CHAPTER 8

"How about that game of chess?" Collins asked as soon as he and Gray finished the standard decontamination procedures on their arrival at Moonbase.

"No thanks," Gray demurred. "I'm tired. I'm going to turn in."

"All right. See you tomorrow, Master."

* * *

Gray woke suddenly, gasping for breath. A shrill whistle filled his ears. He recognized the bright yellow flasher above the door as he clawed out of the bed-covers and fought his way to the door - decompression.

Air rushed past him as he hit the emergency override switch beside the door and it slid open. For a long moment, Gray simply hung on the door frame, catching his breath. Two Moonbase technicians came running, alerted to the emergency by the warning lights and buzzers at the environmental station in the control sphere.

For a moment, Gray considered putting a call through to Straker, then disregarded the thought. He had no proof besides his own gut feeling that Craig Collins had caused this 'accident'. He worried about how many more 'accidents' there might be before Collins' launch Friday.

* * *

The next morning brought at least part of an answer, to Gray's horror. While lifting weights in the Moonbase exercise room, Collins managed to drop a two hundred twenty-five-pound barbell onto Paul Foster.

"How bad is it?" Gray asked as he watched as the Moonbase medical technician wrapped a wide bandage around Foster's ribs.

The medic shook his head. "There's a rib gone, the right tibia's cracked. He'll be strapped up for a fortnight."

"No!" Foster protested. He turned to look back at the medic, then he groaned and sat back to let the man finish his work.

Gray turned on Collins: "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Collins shrugged. "It was a mistake."

The statement did nothing to mollify Gray: "The mission goes in two days time and you knock out the only man qualified to fly it with you? Some mistake."

Collins did not appear at all perturbed by Gray's anger. "You know, there is another man equipped to fly this mission with me."

"Oh? And who would that be?"

"Ed Straker. I mean, he and I put SID out there in the first place."

Gray and Foster both simply stared at Collins in shocked disbelief.

* * *

On Earth, in Straker's office, Gray tried one more time.

"You can't go up there with a man who's unstable," Gray argued.

Straker was unconvinced: "He's only unstable in your mind. Look, what do you want me to do? Cancel the mission, leave Earth undefended?"

"Train somebody else to go with you."

"There isn't time," Straker explained. "Collins is right, I'll go." He caught the combative look on Gray's face and cut him off sharply: "I said, I'll go."

"Two nights ago, he tried to kill me," Gray stated quietly.

Straker was caught off guard. "He what?"

"He blew the pressure in my sleep cubicle."

"That incident was reported in the daily report as a mechanical failure," Straker pointed out. "And why didn't you tell me immediately after it happened?"

"Because I can't be completely sure," Gray said.

"Do you have one piece of tangible evidence?" Straker finally asked him. He still couldn't accept the possibility that Collins could be guilty of anything beyond being hard to handle, but he had to hear Gray out.

"No, not yet," Gray admitted.

Straker shook his head. "All right. My top priority is to get SID back into commission. I've no alternative and that's what I'm going to do. You'll be in charge here. I've doubled the alert status on Moonbase and I'd advise you to do the same here."

The discussion was ended.

* * *

"Well, the weather at the Cape is good, the outlook is clear." Straker told Collins a short time later.

"I hope they've got those transducers I asked for," Collins commented. He acted just as he'd always acted.

"Yes, Colonel Gray's taking care of it. Say Craig, what is it between you and him?"

"Oh, I don't know," Collins shrugged it away. "It's sort of, you know, chemical. Just one of those things."

Oddly, although it was the answer Straker had half expected, it bothered him. Collins had never been introspective, and so might not be able to describe the problem between himself and Gray, but Straker suspected there was more than just 'chemistry' behind the situation.

Collins had come from a poor family in a poor town in the north of Britain. He'd had to struggle for everything. Gray, on the other hand, was the epitome of the British upper-class. He was well connected and privileged by birth.

However, Straker knew how talented Gray was, and how hard the officer worked for SHADO. It was galling to him, personally, to have two officers in his command in an idiotic feud. It also worried him that the problem seemed to have worsened considerably since Collins' return.

Straker let the matter pass, for the moment. There was too much work to do and he sincerely hoped Gray was mistaken about the whole affair.

* * *

Gray, too, was finishing off some last minute chores, rechecking all of Collins' most recent clearance tests. Only Jackson had found anything out of the ordinary with Collins, and that was in one of his own semi-authorized experiments.

Jackson was gaining a reputation for running peculiar experiments.

"I call this an 'isolator'," Jackson said, opening a panel in one wall of his office to reveal a small cubbyhole with a built-in seat. "It cuts you off from all outside influences, sound, heat, light, microwaves, even cosmic rays. I wanted to study the effect on the brain of a total absence of radiation. Rather like a sensory deprivation tank, only cutting out radiation specifically."

"What has this got to do with Collins?"

"One of the tests I do is record the brain's electrical patterns both inside and outside this cabinet."

"Well?" Gray prodded.

"Usually, there's very little difference."

"Doctor, will you please get to the point?" Gray was losing patience with the psychiatrist's carefully slow presentation. Jackson turned on the monitor beside his desk. A squiggly line appeared on the screen.

"Look, that's the kind of pattern I usually get. That's one of my colleagues. That's the pattern outside the isolator."

The pattern changed slightly as he pressed a series of keys on the computer keyboard. "That's the pattern inside. Now, I'm going to show you Collins'."

He hit another series of keys and another pattern appeared on the monitor screen. It was not much different from the first two. "That's Collins outside the isolator."

Another series of keystrokes and suddenly a flat line appeared across the screen. "That's Collins inside."

Gray was stunned. "What's your conclusion?"

Jackson shook his head, professionally cautious. "It's too early to have one. I've got central computers on it now."

"Have you told anybody else about this?"

"There's nothing to tell," the psychiatrist assured him. "It's a purely unofficial experiment."

"When do you expect your computer analysis?" Gray asked.

"Probably late tonight."

Jackson seemed undisturbed at the prospect of waiting up all night for the report.

"Call me as soon as you get it," Gray told him. "If I'm not at home, I'll be at Collins' apartment."

* * *

Collins had an apartment in London, in one of the older buildings just off the King's Road. A neighbor lady came in twice a week to clean, or so SHADO security indicated when Gray asked.

Collins answered the door on the first ring.

"I'm afraid I can't spare you much time," Collins explained, returning to his packing. "Ed and I are flying off to the Cape in an hour."

Gray nodded and looked around the apartment a moment. It was small, but immaculately neat. There were several sports trophies on a shelf by the window as well as a group of models of modern fighter planes.

Gray recalled that Collins had been a highly regarded athlete before joining the RAF. He'd been a top test pilot and one of the few international pilots accepted into NASA's astronaut program in the late sixties. He'd helped design SHADO's basic astronaut program.

Gray stood and watched as the other man continued packing his suitcase.

"Did you know we still haven't located your ship?" Gray began casually. "The one you crashed in."

"Really?" Collins didn't seem very worried.

"Are you sure the map references you gave us were right?"

Collins shrugged. "Well, I was pretty groggy at the time. It could have been one mile, two miles either way."

Gray nodded, thoughtful. "Do you remember anything more about what happened?"

"No, my mind is very much a blank, still."

"Don't you find that a bit worrying?"

"No, I'm still the same fellow, you know." Collins laughed.

"Are you, Craig?" Gray was deadly serious.

Collins looked at him, suddenly suspicious: "Now, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Virginia Lake thinks you've changed."

"Oh, Virginia's just... "

"And you give blind men the creeps," Gray added.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"And you tried to kill me."

"Now what the devil are you talking about?" Collins demanded. He had finally stopping his packing to stare at Gray.

"Jackson did a test on you," Gray stated, trying to remain calm under Collins' stare.

"Well, he does lots of tests."

"One in particular, where he put you in a cabinet."

"Yes, what about it?"

"When you were in that cabinet, you were isolated from all communication of any kind, even radio waves," Gray explained.

"Really?"

"Inside that cabinet, your brain pattern stopped. You were inert, a nothing. A body without a will."

Collins simply stared at him a moment. "Now look here, I know that you have never liked me... ."

Gray cut him off: "I think the aliens snatched you out there. I think they burned out the personality centers of your brain and then programmed you so that they could control you with radio waves. I think they sent you back here as a kind of guided missile, to kill Ed Straker."

Collins' face was suddenly calm, eyes cold and glittering. "Now, I mean, if that's really the case, Master, you're wasting your time aren't you? I mean, you can't reason with a robot."

Without warning, Gray felt something hard smash against his temple and saw the carpeted floor coming up to meet him. Then, there was nothing.

* * *

Kennedy Space Center hadn't changed much in four years even though it wasn't quite as busy as it once had been. That was thanks to the growing high orbit and lunar shuttle programs that launched from other facilities.

However, despite the drop in business, the Space Center technicians were just as efficient, and just as friendly, as Straker remembered them from his last visit, when SID was first launched.

"Well, here we go again, old man" Collins joked as they were riding up the gantry elevator to the capsule.

"Not so much of the 'old', if you don't mind." Straker objected mildly. "After you."

Collins murmured a 'thank you' and climbed into the cramped, two man capsule. Straker followed close behind him. A NASA technician sealed the hatch as the two men settled themselves into their seats.

Straker reviewed the instrument panel in front of him for a moment, listening to the reports from the control center. All was proceeding normally, no problems.

"I hope I can still drive one of these things." Straker commented, only half joking. Collins glanced at him, seemingly worried.

"Yeah, so do I."

"We have ignition," a voice announced over one of the capsule speakers. "We have lift-off."

Acceleration is indistinguishable from gravity in its effects. The effect in the capsule of the initial 500,000 pounds of thrust, then the 150,000 pounds of thrust from the second stage boosters, pressed the two SHADO astronauts into their seats at the equivalent of seven times the force of Earth's gravity.

"A-okay from here. How about you boys?" A southern drawl asked over the radio.

"Thank you, Houston, this is SID Two reporting all systems go." Straker replied, checking the gauges in front of him. The engines had automatically shut-down, exactly at the time required by the computers, their fuel exhausted. Then, several minutes later, also at exactly the time required, the explosives to separate the capsule from the second stage boosters detonated.

They were now in free-fall, in high orbit, in excess of seven hundred miles a minute.

"How long now?" Collins asked after a moment.

"Seven hours, eighteen minutes, twenty-seven seconds," Straker stated, settling back for the ride.

* * *

Seven hours and fifteen minutes later, Collins caught sight of their target: "Well, there she is. There's old SID."

"Right on the old button." Straker commented.

Three minutes later, a touch of the control retro rockets brought the capsule along-side the larger satellite.

"Well, time to go for our walkies, old man," Collins announced as soon as Straker checked their orbit on the navigational computer. As if to echo, NASA confirmed their position on radar. They had located SID. Their orbit was correct, parallel to the satellite.

* * *

In SHADO Control, the operatives listened to the radio exchanges between NASA and the space capsule. Paul Foster paced the control room, unconsciously rubbing a hand over his cracked and bandaged ribs. Everyone there knew he wasn't happy at just listening in.

He wanted to be out there instead of Straker. One of the reasons he'd joined SHADO was that he liked being out on the edge, pushing back the envelope. Simply waiting didn't suit him.

A phone rang on the communications supervisor's console. It was the emergency outside line, a special security line that bypassed the usual communications channels into SHADO Control. Only a handful of senior officers even knew the number.

Foster answered the call and listened to the voices on the other end. The control center was fully climactically controlled to seventy degrees and 50 percent relative humidity, but he suddenly felt a shiver run up his spine.

John Gray was in a central London hospital with a skull fracture and a severe concussion, or so the voice on the telephone was saying. A neighbor had heard something like a fight in Craig Collins' apartment and had notified the police. According to the doctor treating him, Gray was still extremely confused, but had insisted this number be called before he would cooperate in his treatment.

Unfortunately, what Gray did say made only too much sense to Foster.

As he hung up the phone, Foster flipped a switch on the communications console. The switch interfaced SHADO's communications with NASA's radio contact with the capsule and the two men working on SID. He breathed a silent sigh of thanks that they were nearly finished

with their work. Then he promptly felt guilty at putting the work on SID first.

"Commander," Foster announced into the microphone on the console, "Collins is going to kill you!"

* * *

"So, Gray was right," Straker murmured mostly to himself. He watched Collins approaching him. His companion's face was blank, without emotion. Straker was reminded of the few aliens SHADO had managed to capture. Their faces had shown much the same lack of feeling.

"Listen, Craig, you can beat this thing," Straker found himself saying, using the short range channel on the suit radio. They could not be overheard on Earth. "Listen to me! We can help you. They may have your mind, Craig, but they can never get your soul."

* * *

SHADO Control was silent, except for Foster's worried attempts to raise some response from the radio link with the capsule. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Straker responded: "Receiving."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," came Commander Straker's reply. The operatives in the control center breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"What about Collins?"

"He's - ," There was a catch in Straker's voice and he began again: "He's out of it."

"He could have killed you," Foster reminded him.

"Yes, he could have killed me," Straker agreed, very quietly.

* * *

Officially, Colonel Craig Collins died of a simple accident in space. Death was quick and virtually painless. The hose connecting the environment control pack to his space suit had failed, spinning him off into deep space. If the body had been recovered, Collins would have been buried with full military honors. As it was, his file was closed with a posthumous commendation - at Straker's insistence.

Unofficially - Well, Straker's regulation post-mission debriefing was short. How the hose could have failed at just the necessary moment, he refused to even speculate on.

CHAPTER 9

"Sir?" Miss Ealand called out to Straker as he entered the offices at the film studio early one morning the next week.

"I have a message here for you from Sir Esmond," Miss Ealand said when Straker stopped at her desk. He still looked exhausted. There were dark rings under his eyes.

"What's he want?" Straker asked. He even sounded tired and depressed.

"He wanted to remind you that he's picking you up at seven tonight and you're to bring a friend, preferably female."

"For what?" Straker asked.

Miss Ealand gazed at him in bemused surprise for a moment before replying: "Both Harlington-Straker and Willoway Productions are up for some awards this evening."

Straker still looked blank.

"The note on my schedule is in your handwriting," she added. "It's been down here for several weeks."

"Oh," Straker commented. "What were you planning on doing this evening?"

"I'm taking my mother to that new stage production of Othello."

"That sounds a lot more interesting than an awards dinner with Sir Esmond," Straker said.

"I'm sure you'll survive, sir," Miss Ealand said. "I'm also sure one of the girls downstairs will be more than happy to go with you."

"Well, if that's what it takes to keep Sir Esmond happy. He is one of our best tenants," Straker replied as he turned to enter the inner office/entrance elevator to SHADO headquarters.

"Sir," Ealand called again. Straker stopped and looked back at her. "I was wondering how you were."

"I'm fine, Miss Ealand. Why do you ask?"

"You look tired, sir. And, you haven't said anything about Colonel Collins since you came back from the States."

"Craig Collins is dead. What more is there to say?" he asked very quietly.

* * *

Entering SHADO control, Straker looked around. It looked like a quiet day, so far. Ayshea Johnson was seated at her communications station talking to Julie Omura, a young radar operator. Johnson was also young and very pretty. She had long black hair she let hang down her back. Her eyes were a warm brown and she had a sweet smile.

"Lieutenant Johnson?" Straker said, beckoning her aside.

"Yes, sir?"

"I was wondering if you had plans for this evening," he said, very quietly.

"No, sir. Why do you ask?" Johnson said.

"I just found out I have a black-tie dinner to attend this evening," Straker explained. He was uncomfortable with the idea of asking. He knew other senior officers, including Freeman, seemed to have no qualms with dating junior officers, even enlisted personnel, despite the fact that such fraternization was officially frowned upon. It wasn't something he had ever done himself. It smacked too much of an abuse of privilege. "I wouldn't even ask, except Sir Esmond insists I have a female escort."

Johnson stifled a giggle. "You're asking me to go with you?"

"You don't have to. There's nothing official about it," Straker told the young woman. "I

wouldn't be going myself if I didn't have to."

"What time should I be ready, sir?" she asked.

"Pick you up at your place about seven-thirty?"

"I'll be ready," she promised. Straker nodded and headed off to his office. Johnson returned to her station.

Julie Omura leaned close to Johnson. "You have a date with the commander?" Johnson nodded. "Lucky you. I always end up with a radar tech."

Robert Turner was nearby, working on a computer-radar interface. His expression grew more and more sullen.

"And what's wrong with radar techs?" he demanded, stepping over to the two women. He had a long screwdriver in his hand, holding it like a weapon.

"Nothing," Julie said. "But you have to admit, the commander's one hell of a good catch and he's not bad looking, either. A girl could do a lot worse."

Turner looked hard at Johnson. "We had a date tonight, Ayshea."

"We did?" she asked, surprised. "I'm sorry, I forgot."

"Sure, forget all about the little guy when Mister Big comes calling," Turner sneered. "But mark my words, pretty soon, he won't be so big."

"Rob, what are you talking about?" Omura asked.

Turner glared at her a moment, then shrugged. "Never mind."

* * *

The awards dinner was nearly as boring as Straker had warned Johnson it would be. Sir Esmond droned on about the changing face of advertising production and the inflexibility of the American film rating system. The others at the table were people Johnson recognized from the studio, but she didn't really know them. One was an art director. His wife was an actress. One of the studio's directors, Carl Mason, was there with his pregnant girl friend.

Straker introduced Johnson as a 'computer programmer' from the accounting department. The actress seemed slightly scandalized. Mason appeared vastly amused by the idea and his girl friend seemed awed at meeting anyone capable of programming a computer.

"I must apologize for dragging you to this," Straker told Johnson as he helped her with her shawl when the presentations were finally over. "It's still early. Why don't I buy you a cup of coffee before I take you home?"

"Okay, sir," she agreed, surprised by the offer. He'd been very quiet during the dinner, sticking to monosyllables even when directly addressed by Sir Esmond. When Harlington-Straker Productions picked up an award in cutting edge advertising production, his acceptance speech has fewer than a dozen words.

"I know a place that's close," Straker told her as they left the building. He hefted the small golden statuette in one hand, as if wondering what to do with it.

They walked a few blocks before stopping at the elegant Georgian frontage of a private club. A broad stairway led to the leaded glass double entrance doors. A simple brass plaque beside the doors declared it was the Zodiac Club, founded 1916.

London was noted for its exclusive political and social clubs. The Zodiac Club was not as old as some of the other clubs in the area, but it was just as exclusive, in its own way. It claimed no political affiliations. Straker explained that political discussions were frowned upon, in fact. Metaphysics was the order of the day at the Zodiac, coupled with hot jazz and a gambling floor that rivaled Blades.

Straker escorted Johnson through the leaded glass double doors. They walked over to the

porter's lodge that guarded the main entrance to the club.

"Good evening, Donall. How're are things going?" Straker asked the liveried porter.

"Excellent, as usual, Colonel," Donall answered. "I was surprised to hear that Colonel Collins had died. Please accept my condolences."

"Thank you, Donall," Straker said, but there was little conviction in his voice. He took Johnson's arm and led her across the huge zodiac circle inlaid in the wide white marble floor of the entry hall and down the marble staircase to the main dining room. A jazz quartet could be heard playing in the room beyond as they went through the tall double doors.

The quartet was on a low stage in front of floor to ceiling windows that looked out on a lush atrium garden. Disappointingly, every table in the dining room was occupied.

Johnson was surprised, however, to see General Henderson seated at one of the tables near the stage. His companion, a silver haired woman of about sixty, waved to them, beckoning them over.

"Good evening, General, Mrs. Henderson. This is Miss Johnson, from work," Straker introduced quietly. "Would you mind much if we joined you?"

Henderson raised one bushy eyebrow at his wife and said: "I don't think it would matter if I did." He glanced at Johnson. "It's Ayshea, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," she said as she took a seat in the armed chair opposite Mrs. Henderson, to the general's right. Straker took the remaining chair at the table, opposite Henderson. He placed the statuette on the table.

"So, Edward, what have you been up to tonight?" Mrs. Henderson asked. The jazz quartet started another piece.

"Sir Esmond insisted I be at an awards dinner with him and some people from the studio tonight," Straker answered. "The two companies won a couple awards this evening."

"That's wonderful," Mrs. Henderson said, looking over the statuette. "You must be very pleased."

"I guess so," Straker said, without enthusiasm. "Sir Esmond's happy about it, anyway." He pulled a cigarette from a silver case and lit it, ignoring Mrs. Henderson's grimace.

A steward arrived and placed menu cards on the table beside Straker and Johnson. A Zodiac traced in gold was imprinted at the top of the menu, below which was row upon row of fine italic print. Johnson looked down the menu while Straker ordered coffee for himself.

"You don't seem very excited about it," Henderson commented to Straker as soon as the steward had taken Johnson's order. "In fact, you look like hell."

"I'm tired, that's all," Straker replied. "I haven't been getting enough sleep, I guess."

"I thought you said you were going to take some time off after you got that equipment fixed." Henderson said.

"Did I?" Straker responded. Henderson simply looked at him.

The steward brought his coffee and Straker took a moment to add sugar and cream to the bone china cup. "It'll have to wait till Alec gets back from Alaska, I'm just too busy right now. The fall T.V. season begins in less than a month and the writers are talking about a strike again. We're finishing up production on two films that look promising for Christmas. I don't have time to take time off."

Henderson sat back and simply watched the younger man for a long moment. SHADO's commander looked haggard and worn out. Straker lit another cigarette.

"How are you doing?" Henderson asked finally.

Straker seemed surprised and a little irritated by the question. "You're the second person

to ask me that today. How should I be doing? I haven't fallen apart, if that's what you're asking. Craig is dead, and I'm not, that's all. End of story."

"Is that all?" the general asked.

"What more is there?" Straker demanded. He sat back in his chair in a huff of annoyance. "We agreed a long time ago never to discuss the business here, General."

"I'm not discussing the business," Henderson responded. "I'm talking about you taking better care of yourself."

"I'm touched by your concern," Straker commented. "But, I don't need it."

Henderson raised one eyebrow at Straker's statement. "When's the last time you had a decent meal and a decent night's sleep?" he asked quietly.

Straker didn't answer.

"You're going to end up sick or worse," Henderson warned.

"Would anybody really care if I did?" Straker wondered bitterly. "Maybe I should go on that vacation. Maybe I'll just go and not come back."

"You'll come back," Henderson contradicted. "You're too damn stubborn to let anyone else take your job."

"Don't bet on it, General."

Henderson simply watched Straker for a long moment, then: "Kathryn phoned me this morning. You haven't been returning her calls. She said it's been more than a week."

"Maybe I haven't been getting her messages at work," Straker said.

"Sir," Johnson interrupted shyly. "I put your messages on your desk myself this morning. Mister Freeman's been complaining you haven't been returning his calls either, sir," she added. She ducked her head to avoid his glare.

Straker snuffed out his cigarette. "Maybe I don't want to talk to them right now," he stated, addressing Henderson. "Maybe I don't need their sympathy and platitudes right now."

"What do you need, Ed?" Mrs. Henderson asked.

"I need to be left alone," Straker stated. He lit another cigarette, but Henderson noted his hands were shaking ever so slightly.

"When's Alec getting back?" Henderson asked after a moment.

"In about a month," Straker answered. "Why?"

"Just curious," Henderson replied. He turned to his wife. "Amanda, why don't you show Ed that art display you were telling me about in the card room?" He smiled at Straker's sudden puzzled look. "The club has picked up a new collection in that post-modern style I know you like." He nodded to Johnson. "Miss Johnson can keep me company while you're gone. I can't stand the stuff myself, think it's a bunch of garbage."

Mrs. Henderson was already out of her chair. Straker stood, expression stony with hurt anger at his obvious dismissal. Mrs. Henderson took Straker's arm and some of the tension seemed to drain away from him.

"We'll be back in a few minutes," Mrs. Henderson promised.

"Take your time," Henderson instructed. He watched after his wife and Straker for a moment before turning back to the young woman seated beside him.

"It's Lieutenant Johnson, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," the young woman answered. "I work at H.Q."

"Yes, I know," Henderson murmured, deep in thought. "How has he been since he came back?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question, sir," Johnson said.

"Oh, come now, Lieutenant," Henderson said. "Straker went through a lot on that last mission with Collins. I need to know how he's handling it." He noted her hesitation. "I can make that an order."

"No, sir," Johnson said. "I guess he's handling it okay. He's been very tired since he came back. A little moody, maybe, but nothing too bad. He's been really busy with getting things back to normal. John Gray just got out of the hospital, you know."

"Yes, I know. Has Ed said anything about what happened up there with Collins?" the old man asked.

"No, sir. He hasn't said anything except that it was an accident."

"How long has he been chain smoking?"

"Chain smoking, sir?"

"He's gone through five cigarettes in the past half hour, Miss Johnson," Henderson pointed out. "How long has he been doing that?"

"Since he came back from the States, I suppose," Johnson replied. "But, I don't understand what you're getting at, sir."

Henderson rubbed his chin in thought. "Lieutenant, besides Freeman, is there a senior command officer who hasn't been around Straker for the past couple of weeks?"

"Colonel Lake's been on Moonbase," Johnson answered. "Why, sir?"

Henderson simply shook his head. He turned to watch his wife and Straker returning from the card room and the art display.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked as they got to the table.

"They've got some nice pieces there," Straker told him as he took his seat.

"Well, you know more about it than I do," Henderson commented. Again, uncharacteristically, Straker failed to rise to the bait.

Henderson watched him a long moment before saying: "I've been reconsidering that request you made for that special building project."

"I thought you made your refusal very clear last month," Straker replied. "May I ask what's made you change your mind?"

"It's possible I was too quick to turn you down," Henderson said. "I would like to get some opinions on the subject besides yours, though. I understand Virginia Lake has been running things on location, I think your people call it, for the past couple weeks."

"Yes."

"Good, I'd like to see the two of you in my office Wednesday morning. Say, about 10:30?"

"Yes, sir," Straker said softly. His expression was clouded with worry as he lit yet another cigarette.

* * *

"Sir, you weren't serious when you told the general that if you left on furlough, you wouldn't come back, were you?" Johnson asked Straker as their cab approached Johnson's flat near Knightsbridge.

Straker considered her question before replying: "No, Henderson's right. I'm too pig headed to hand the job over to anyone else. Realistically, the only way I'll be leaving that job is feet first, which, considering everything, may be sooner than anybody expects."

"Sir?" Johnson was surprised at the pessimism in his voice. She found herself at a loss as to how to respond.

"Never mind," he told her. "I'm just tired and out of sorts."

The cab pulled up to the curb in front of her apartment building. "Would you like to come in for coffee, sir?" she asked as she opened the door to get out.

Straker paused, as if considering her offer, before replying: "No, thank you. I need to get back to the office for a little bit."

She climbed out of the cab. "Thank you for an interesting evening, sir."

"I hope you weren't too bored by it all, but it's the price I pay for the illusion of being a businessman."

Johnson laughed. "It's all right, sir. It really was kind of fun, especially the club. The general can be quite charming when he wants to be." She became solemn. "He really is worried about you, you know, sir."

"I know," Straker replied. "Keeping an eye on me is part of his job."

Johnson shut the door to the car and turned to climb the front steps of the building. "Good night, Ayshea," he called.

It was dark, and the street lighting wasn't very good. She did note that the cab waited until she had the security door open before pulling away.

She slipped inside and was surprised to find Turner waiting in the hall.

"Rob, what are you doing here?" she wondered aloud.

"Waiting for you," Turner replied. "I thought you'd be home by now. That dinner was over two hours ago."

"The commander took me to his club afterwards," she replied. She headed up the stairs to her flat. Turner followed close behind her.

"How was it?" Turner asked. He was still wearing his beige control room uniform. A brown leather jacket covered the SHADO insignia on his left breast. Johnson stopped at her door and put her key in the lock.

"It was kind of fun," Johnson answered, turning the key.

"Did you have sex?" Turner demanded. There was something unpleasant in his tone. Johnson turned to look at him. Her dark eyes widened in worried surprise.

"What sort of question is that?" she asked. "Of course not."

"Wasn't that why he asked you out?"

She glanced down the hallway to make sure no one else was around to hear. "The commander needed a dinner escort. You know that," she stated, keeping her voice low. "Besides, it's none of your business even if I did go to bed with him. Just because we dated a few times doesn't mean you own me. Commander Straker happens to be a very attractive man and a lot nicer than you are. And, if he had asked me to bed, I would have gone!"

Johnson suddenly opened the door and ran inside, slamming the door in Turner's face. She threw the bolt on the door as he grabbed for the door handle.

He started pounding on the door. "You're a whore, you know that?" he shouted. "You're all f***ing whores for the Big Man. He doesn't care about you or anybody else. He doesn't have to care, he already runs the world!"

As Turner ranted on, Johnson found herself leaning against the door, shivering at the venom in his voice. Tears ran down her face. She waited for him to leave and wondered what she should do. Turner has a good control room operative. She didn't want to get him into trouble, but she couldn't understand why he was so angry.

CHAPTER 10

It was promising to be one of those quiet, boring mornings so rare at SHADO Headquarters. It was a promise that Foster, as senior command officer on duty, was more than a little grateful for. The past few weeks had been hectic. They all could use a little rest.

SID was fully repaired and had been functional for nearly two weeks. All the linkages had been checked and recalibrated. Things were running remarkably well.

Even his broken ribs had pretty much stopped bothering him.

Foster glanced at the digital clock set into the wall above the computer and communication consoles: 7:59.

Commander Straker was late this morning. He was usually in his office with his morning's coffee by 7:30. By 8:00 he'd normally be done going through the previous night's report logs. Foster recalled that Straker and Virginia Lake were both supposed to be at Henderson's office near Whitehall at 10:30.

Foster shrugged mentally. There were times when the commander was just plain unpredictable. This was probably one of those days, too. Straker had been short-tempered and more moody than usual these past two weeks. The staff psychiatrists said it was probably stress related, but since he refused come in for a check-up, they couldn't be sure it wasn't something else.

A nearby printer clattered a moment, spitting out a message. An operative glanced at the sheet, tore it off the machine and handed it to Foster.

"Priority readout, Washington, Commander Straker, SHADO," Foster read aloud, welcoming the distraction. "General McGruder sends his compliments, looks forward to meeting you."

There was a crash of metal striking metal behind him. Foster whirled.

Straker had appeared on the upper level, literally out of nowhere. He toppled another piece of computer equipment, pulling the plug out of the wall. He then attacked the next equipment rack with the heavy pry bar he was using as a club.

"Commander, what's wrong?"

If Straker heard Foster's shout, he gave no indication of it. He was single-mindedly attacking the equipment in the rack until two of the security guards tried to grab him.

Foster and the other SHADO operatives simply watched in utter astonishment as Straker tossed the two men away from him as if they were large rag dolls. Foster ran over to grab him and was tossed away as well. He watched in amazement and horror as Straker defended himself against the attempts of four burly security men to subdue him. They were trying to subdue a dervish.

Suddenly, Straker broke off and disappeared down the hall to the express elevator to the surface.

Foster picked himself off the floor and grabbed the telephone receiver on the console nearest him. "Get me studio security!"

* * *

Straker was running flat out through the studio grounds. He paused in his headlong flight only just long enough to check on how close his pursuers were.

Foster joined the four studio guards who were trying to catch Straker before he could do any more damage. But, Foster's heart went cold at what they came across next.

One of the studio's mini-utility cars was tracing a wide circle in the middle of the parking

lot. The man slumped over the steering wheel was wearing a SHADO H.Q. uniform. There was an assault rifle on the seat next to him and the car seat was covered with blood from the holes in his chest.

Foster spotted Straker climbing a fire escape ladder to the roof of one of the sound stages. "Commander!" Foster called out. "Ed!"

For just an instant, Foster's voice seemed to penetrate and Straker paused to look back at him. Confusion and exhaustion played across the older man's face. Then, he was gone, onto the roof, Foster and the security guards close behind him.

They caught Straker on the roof, bent over the still form of Virginia Lake. For a horrifying moment, Foster thought she was dead. Then, she took a deep breath.

Straker didn't seem to notice when two of the guards pulled him away from Lake's body. He seemed totally oblivious to them. His pupils were dilated as he slumped against the guards who had hold of him. He showed no reaction at all when Foster searched through his pockets for some clue to what was happening.

To Foster's amazement, he found an empty drug vial and a hypodermic syringe in the pocket of Straker's black pullover sweater.

Paul Foster had a sudden hunch that Straker was beyond noticing much of anything right now.

The question was: Why?

* * *

Foster was still asking himself that question when General Henderson arrived at SHADO headquarters.

A security officer escorted him to the medical center room where Straker was being held under armed guard.

"He's been like this ever since we brought him in," Foster explained at Henderson's questioning look.

Straker was lying on one of the hospital style beds. His eyes were half open but he wasn't seeing anything. The only sign of continued life was the slow, almost labored, rise and fall of his chest under the bed-covers and the green bouncing dot on the electrocardiograph screen. An intravenous tube fed clear fluid into one arm.

"He's in deep physical and psychological shock," Doctor Jackson explained.

"And what made him that way? What pushed him over the edge?" Henderson demanded.

Jackson shrugged. "It's hard to say, but, whatever it was, his mind has had to just walk away from it."

"Isn't there anything you can do for him?" Henderson asked more gently.

Jackson hesitated a moment, then nodded: "Yes, there is something. But I don't like to use it except in an emergency."

"Doctor, when SHADO's most vital piece of manpower suddenly becomes homicidal, it is an emergency." Henderson grated.

Jackson nodded with an unhappy grimace. He retrieved a vial and a syringe from a nearby cabinet. He locked the cabinet behind him and proceeded to give Straker an injection.

"This will take a little while. I'll call you when he breaks through."

Foster took advantage of the time to investigate another question that had come to mind, namely: How?

How had Straker gotten into SHADO Headquarters without his presence being noticed by anyone? It appeared that no one saw him even enter the studio lot.

His car, a bronze 1978 EuroFord Omen with SHADO security package, had been found in the middle of one of the parking lot entrances. However, the studio gate guard swore the car had not returned to the studio after Straker drove away in it at 6:00 the night before. The electronic gate sensors had not registered the car passing back through any of the other gates.

Miss Ealand was seated at her desk, guarding the main entrance to SHADO. When asked, she swore the same thing. Straker had left the previous night to pick up Colonel Lake at the airstrip and he hadn't returned.

No one saw him enter the building. No one saw him enter SHADO Headquarters. It was impossible, but it was true.

Lake couldn't shed any light on the mystery either.

She rubbed the back of her neck as she sat up in a bed in another room in the medical center. "I'm sorry, but I can't remember a thing."

"You can't remember coming back here with Commander Straker?" Henderson insisted.

She shook her head and grimaced at a sudden pain. "I can recall leaving the airport in Commander Straker's car, but after that, there's nothing I'm afraid," she told them. She laid back on the pillows.

"It was a severe blow to the base of the skull." Doctor Buden explained.

"Don't I know it," Lake complained as she took the two aspirin the doctor was holding out to her.

"It's caused amnesia covering a period of several hours. It's not uncommon in cases like this," Buden told them.

"How long will it take her memory to come back?" questioned Foster.

"It might never come back, Colonel," the physician admitted.

The wall phone buzzed and Henderson picked up the receiver. He listened a moment before hanging it up.

"Straker's beginning to break through."

"Paul," Lake called as Foster turned to follow Henderson through the door. "He couldn't have done it. Ed's just not a killer."

Foster tried to give her a reassuring smile and found he couldn't. The evidence they had was pretty damning. Besides, Foster wasn't convinced that Collins' death was the accident Straker claimed it was.

* * *

The change in Straker was alarming. He was thrashing about, muttering irrationally. His eyes were glazed as he tried to watch something that was only occurring inside his own head. Straker was still utterly unaware of his surroundings, even of Jackson's assistant securing restraining straps to the bed.

Henderson's forehead creased in a frown. "How dangerous is this drug?"

"I told you it was dangerous. It could open his mind, or it could destroy it," Jackson stated. He took a second vial from the wall cabinet and gave Straker another injection. Straker whimpered as the needle bit his arm. It was the only notice he'd given anything real since he'd been brought in.

"They've murdered time," he was muttering, almost weeping.

"I want you to go back eight hours," Jackson instructed quietly. "You were in your car with Colonel Lake."

Straker seemed to focus on the psychiatrist's face for just a moment. His voice was nearly a whisper as he began to speak. His forehead glistened with sweat.

"I was in my car with Colonel Lake. I'd been to the airport to pick her up... "

CHAPTER 11

The road from the airfield to the studio was dark. There was little traffic. Lights from farmhouses and small villages gleamed in the distance like landlocked stars. To the south, the sky glowed with London's lights.

Straker was only half paying attention to the road.

"That's why I picked you up myself," he was explaining to Virginia Lake, seated on the passenger side. "I wanted to brief you before you had a word with General Henderson."

"Well, I knew it wasn't for my big blue eyes," Lake responded, turning her big blue eyes on him. One hand brushed blonde hair from her face. She was dressed in a blue gabardine pantsuit. Her blue silk blouse, and the long silk scarf tied around her neck, matched her eyes. The colors suited her.

Straker was dressed all in black - slacks, cotton knit pull-over sweater.

"Coming back from the moon can be disorientating," Straker told her, very seriously. "Even lunar speeds have a relativistic effect on time."

"Yes, sir. I see, sir. I never knew that, sir."

She grinned. Straker glanced at her sharply, then smiled back, relaxing a little. He was tired. It had been a long day and he was worried about tomorrow morning's meeting with Henderson. The general rarely changed his mind on funding matters and Straker wondered what Henderson would demand as a price for his cooperation.

Additionally, Doctors Shroeder and Jackson had been pestering him to come in for a check-up. They insisted his continued tiredness and depressed mood were symptoms of some underlying condition. He wasn't sure he believed them.

A speck of light moved in the night sky, catching Straker's attention.

"What's that?" he wondered aloud, trying to catch sight of the object again.

"What?" Lake asked.

Straker shook his head. "I thought I saw something up there."

"Cars on dark country roads can be disorientating, too," she reminded him. He glared at her a moment, then peered out the side window again.

"There is something up there, fifteen degrees west." He pointed out the moving light to their right. "There, see?"

Lake tried to catch sight of the glowing object through the wind-shield. "It's Venus," she announced.

Straker shook his head worriedly. "No. Venus precedes the sun for the next month or so."

"A space shot?"

"No, we have none scheduled."

"It could be a Russian launch," she reminded him.

"No, we have their schedule, too." He watched the object carefully. "Space debris?"

Lake shook her head. "It's the wrong pattern," she said. "But, all that would leave is a weather balloon, but that would mean it's drifting against the wind."

"It's a Ufo," Straker concluded grimly. He picked up the receiver to the car radio-phone, punching the automatic interface button to SHADO H.Q. "Straker to SHADO Control, do you read me?"

The receiver buzzed and crackled in his ear.

"Check the radio link," he instructed Lake, handing her the receiver. He brought the Omen to a stop at the side of the road.

"But, how could it have gotten past Moonbase without being seen," she wondered aloud. She checked over the dials hidden in the console between the two front seats.

"I don't know," Straker replied. His tiredness seemed to have evaporated.

Lake finished her inspection of the car radiotelephone. "Well, the radio checks out. We're receiving and transmitting at full strength."

"It's absurd," Straker stated. "Why doesn't headquarters answer?"

"Well, it's not at this end," Lake said. "Unless they've figured out some way of jamming our signals without us having any indication of it."

Straker nodded and started the car again. They pulled out onto the road.

"But, if they've managed to cut communications, why haven't they landed and destroyed the base?" she continued.

"They may have done just that."

"It's coming this way." Lake warned. There was something bright flying just above and behind them.

"It's going overhead," Straker observed tightly.

The U.F.O. fired a burst at the car. It hit the road instead. Straker fought to retain control of the vehicle as it was buffeted by the concussion. Then, he ran the car off the road and into some brush for cover.

Overhead, the alien craft swung around for another strike.

"Freeze," Straker hissed as some intuition told him the aliens weren't interested in killing them just yet. However, what they were after, he couldn't even begin to guess.

The U.F.O. hovered over the car for just a moment and the cab was bathed in an eerie green light.

Then, the light, and the U.F.O., was gone as suddenly as they'd come.

* * *

They both gasped in surprise as, passing through the entrance gates to the Harlington-Straker film complex half an hour later, they were abruptly blinded by bright light - bright sun light.

"Outside it was night, but here...," Lake's voice faltered. "What's happened?"

"I don't know," Straker responded, looking around. There was no noise, no sound in the air. "Look at that."

He pointed out a small hover craft crossing the lawn in front of the studio office building. Only, it wasn't moving. It was simply suspended above the ground. The driver was staring off into space, frozen in place.

"Why doesn't it fall?" Lake wondered. Confusion sounded in her voice.

Straker just shook his head.

"I don't believe it," the young woman insisted. "We must be dreaming. It's unreal." She looked to Straker. "What's happening?"

"Night into day, everything's stopped, arrested," he observed, trying to make some sense of it. "It's like a clock that suddenly..."

Straker had an idea. He started the car, and drove to another section of the studio property. There was no sign of life anywhere, no movement at all.

"It's like a nightmare, a grotesque nightmare," he stated finally. He stopped the car and got out. Outside one of the carpentry shops, a man was tossing a wooden chair to a second man standing on the back of a truck. Both men were frozen. The chair was suspended between them in midair.

"Get me that piece of wood," Straker instructed, pointing out a short piece of 1x4 lying on the ground. He continued inspecting both the men and the chair without touching them as Lake handed him the board.

Warily, Straker swung the board under the chair. It met no resistance. Still cautious, he poked at it. The chair was solid and immovably fixed seven feet above the ground. Even when the board broke against it, there was no sign of motion from the chair. There was no change at all.

Straker stood back, pondering the matter a moment. Then he dropped the broken 1x4 and motioned Lake to follow him into the workshop. The workmen cutting a sheet of plywood were frozen. The sawdust from the table saw was suspended in midair, resembling a swarm of tiny light brown insects.

Straker gave the scene a glance, then walked over to the far wall where the worksheets were posted. He peered at the papers.

"If these worksheets are right, and, if they're up to schedule, then, this thing's only just happened here."

"But, why the daylight?" Lake asked him. "It's been dark outside for two hours."

"I don't know," he admitted. "But, there must be some kind of logic to it somewhere. According to that, it's already tomorrow morning." He looked around the workshop once again. "Come on, let's get down to Control."

* * *

Everything and everyone was frozen in SHADO Control as well, as Lake and Straker discovered when they entered the control center. They looked over the various monitors and consoles. All the readings seemed normal enough, except, nothing moved.

"Why hasn't Moonbase reacted?" Straker wondered aloud. "They must know something's wrong. They could've had Sky-diver over Headquarters by now."

"What are we going to do?" Lake asked. It seemed she was finally comprehending the enormity of what was happening around them.

"Call General Henderson. We need help," Straker said. "That thing's still up there. If it comes down before we can get assistance..."

He picked up the telephone receiver from the console nearest him and listened for a dial tone. There was nothing, not even static.

"It's no use," he protested, putting down the receiver. "If we could just understand the principle they used."

He looked over the still, frozen bodies that were so familiar. But now, they were almost frightening in their present state.

"There's no pulse," he observed, finally touching one of them.

Lake felt a face with her hand. "The body temperature's normal."

"But they're fixed, like statues," as Straker tried to move one.

"It's as if they were frozen in time," Lake said.

"Yes, that's it. That way, whatever they were doing, they'd be 'fossilized' when the force struck."

"But, the lift in the office was working," Lake pointed out. That was the way they'd gotten down to SHADO Control, past Miss Ealand frozen in an attitude of exasperation, pencil pointing at a scantily dressed starlet.

"Yes, I know. It doesn't fit the pattern."

Straker sighed, trying to will away the all too familiar exhaustion that was creeping up on

him. Absently, he picked up the note board from Lieutenant Ford's station and looked at it.

Then it occurred to him: "This isn't frozen."

He picked up a pen from the top of the computer monitor, then put it back. "They have one thing in common," Straker observed.

"They weren't in motion when it happened," Lake agreed.

"Yes, they weren't moving through time," Straker was thinking out loud. "That's why the elevator works."

Lake looked hopeful. "Then, if we could find a monitor that wasn't switched on..." She looked around at the monitors above the communications consoles.

"No, they're all switched on," Straker said. He was finding it hard to ignore the exhaustion he felt. It was far worse than the tiredness he'd been feeling since Collins' death. "There's got to be an answer. We've just got to think it through," he said.

Lake shook her head and sat on the steps to the upper level. "I just don't seem to be able to think anymore. God, I feel so tired." She sighed. "I feel like I could sleep for a week."

"Yes, I know." He leaned against the railing. "It must be shock catching up with us." He rubbed the bridge of his nose, then glanced at his watch, a gold Rolex Thinline. It had stopped at 10:32.

"Wait a minute, let me see your watch."

She looked at her watch, then held it out for him. "It stopped the moment we got to the studio."

"Just like the clock."

He pointed out the digital clock on the control room wall. That timepiece had stopped at 8:00:00.

"The medical center," Straker announced suddenly. He grabbed Lake's arm and pulled her to her feet, dragging her after him as he headed for the infirmary.

"The only way they could get past Moonbase is to travel so fast, they cheat time," Straker explained. He took a drug vial and two syringes from one of the glass cabinets that lined the walls of the medical storage room adjacent to the infirmary.

"Sound barrier, heat barrier, light barrier," Lake listed. "Time barrier."

Straker filled the syringe. She winced as he found a vein and injected her with the fluid.

"They can control it," Straker stated, giving himself an injection. "But, only for so long, until the field force they built up on the way here begins to wear off."

He rolled down his sleeve. He was breathing more easily as the drug began to take effect, dispelling some of the exhaustion.

"Like the waves of pressure in front of a supersonic jet," he continued.

"That's why they haven't landed yet," Lake said. "They're still in a different continuum."

"Yes, yes," Straker agreed. The rush of energy, the adrenaline-like surge the drug created was not at all unpleasant.

"But, why? How are they reaching us?" Lake asked. Their theory didn't explain everything.

"I don't know," Straker admitted. He pocketed the syringe and drug vial. "Maybe we'll find out some answers when we get back to the control room." He glanced at her. "Are you okay?"

She seemed surprised by his question. "Fine."

"Well, let's go." He led the way back to the control room.

"What is that stuff?" She asked him after a moment.

"X-50, speeds you up to about ten times normal. Heart, muscles, brain. They used it a lot in the early high-Gee test flights. Finally banned it as being too dangerous."

"Why?"

Straker shrugged. "Well, it burned people out. If we weren't under the 'evil-eye' right now, we'd be moving so fast we'd be just a blur."

He didn't add the drug's other major drawback. At higher dosages, the stimulant was known to cause paranoid-schizophrenic reactions.

Returning to the control room, they looked around. Nothing had changed. Everyone and everything was as frozen, as stationary, as before. It was eerie.

Then, something moved in the hall outside, just at the edge of Lake's vision.

"Commander," she called quietly, getting Straker's attention. "I'm sure I saw something move."

They both ran to investigate and entered the hall outside the control center just as the doors to the entrance elevator closed. The status light above the door switched to red, indicating the elevator was in use.

Straker gestured for Lake to follow him, then led the way to SHADO's armory.

* * *

The armory was well-stocked with weapons of every kind.

Straker and Lake picked out two light rapid fire assault rifles from the selection at hand, loaded them and pocketed extra ammunition clips. Straker picked up a small motion detector from one of the shelves.

A security-keyed elevator at the end of the hall opened into the back of one of the sound stages.

"All right, Straker, come and get me, big man." An amplified male voice called as Straker and Lake emerged from the building.

"A transistor microphone," Straker speculated aloud. "Somewhere over there, to the right." He gestured to a low wall bordering one of the parking areas.

"You've got to get me, Straker. I'm the only one who can help you," the voice taunted. "I'm the only one who can put it right."

The motion detector in Straker's hand buzzed. "He's behind that wall," Straker announced, interpreting the detector reading. A bullet whistled overhead. They both ducked.

"Cover me," Straker instructed, unlocking the safety catch on his rifle. He bolted into the open, firing at where the detector indicated their tormentor was hiding before ducking behind the half wall.

The voice laughed. "No, not that easy, Big Man. Things always come easy for you, don't they, Straker? But not this time, not me."

Lake ran across to join Straker.

"He's around the corner, by the covered way to J and K block," Straker said, checking the detector. "Now, stay behind this wall."

He ran around the end of the wall in a crouch, firing the rifle as he went. There was no one in the passageway.

Straker gestured Lake to join him.

The mysterious voice began to laugh again, horribly. It echoed between the buildings.

"Where'd he go?" Lake asked, peering around.

"To J and E stages," Straker reasoned, recalling the layout of this area of the film complex. "He's over on one of the sound stages."

They were filming a costume piece on J and E stages. The frozen actors and actresses were decked out as French nobles and courtiers. The director had been caught in mid-gesture, arms thrown wide, a disgusted look on his face.

"You've heard of silent films, haven't you, Mister Big?" the voice asked. "Well, this is the new bag, non-moving movies. Kind of restful, isn't it?"

The voice seemed to move. "Yes, this is the place, Mister Big. Yes, sir, Ah is heah, if you can but faind me," it heckled in a distorted parody of an American Southern accent.

Warily, Straker and Lake looked around the set, peering around the walls, the equipment. Suddenly, a man wearing a beige SHADO Control uniform jumped out from behind one of the sets. He was holding an automatic assault rifle and fired a round at them. One of the giant flood lights exploded behind them and the man vanished behind the set again.

"Take the other exit," Straker ordered. "We'll cut him off." He gestured her to his left. She ran off as directed, heading for the other door. Straker wheeled around and ran for the door they'd entered through.

Lake met Straker on the covered walk just outside the sound stage.

"Where'd he go?" she asked.

There was no sign of the man. Straker pulled out the motion detector. A shot rang out close by and they ducked.

"You don't look so big now, Commander," the voice taunted. "Just come and get me. I'm Turner, radar operator, class one. I know you, Commander, the Big Man, in charge of the world."

Straker looked around. The voice seemed to come from nearby, around the next corner. He fired at where it seemed to be. The voice laughed once more.

"Big Deal Straker, the guy the girls admire," Turner sneered.

Straker glanced at Lake, suddenly perplexed. Turner wasn't making much sense, at least, not to him.

"Yeah, well, I'm the big deal now, Straker," the voice continued. "They promised me and you're a nothing!"

The detector indicated movement inside a closed cart parked by the building. Straker and Lake both fired at it. The doors popped open, revealing puppets and props ready to be moved to another area. The prop master was going to be less than pleased when he discovered the damage.

"Wrong again," Turner berated. There was the sound of a small engine behind them. Straker and Lake turned to see Turner racing toward them. He was driving one of the small, custom motor cars left over from a recent film production. They jumped out of the way as Turner threatened to run them down.

There were several more of the small cars parked further down the alley. Lake and Straker ran to claim one.

"He's got a good start," Straker commented as he started the car. Lake climbed in beside him.

Turner turned and fired back at them.

"Go for the tires," Straker ordered. Lake complied, firing back at Turner's mini-car. Turner rounded a corner, Straker and Lake following close behind him.

Abruptly, Turner vanished from his car, leaving it parked in the middle of the alley. Straker jerked the steering wheel over hard to avoid hitting the other car.

"Finders keepers, losers weepers." Turner's voice sing-songed. "Where're you going to

find me? Where're you going to find me? You're through, Straker," Turner announced. "You've been had. They're coming soon, Straker, as soon as they've brought their power down. They'll be here soon and you're not going to spoil it. Oh, they're marvelous, Straker. They're wonderful. They can do things we can't even conceive!" The voice laughed. There was a bitter, brittle tone to the laughter. "Have you any idea what they've done here, Straker?"

Straker and Lake had left their vehicle and were searching for Turner. They peered down the alleys, around corners, for the man.

"They've taken a millionth of a second of our time and frozen it. This whole thing is taking place in a millionth of a second, Straker," the voice explained, gloating. "That's why Moonbase doesn't know anything's wrong. Compared to them, we're midgets, Straker. All of us."

Turner appeared at the end of the alley and they ran toward him. He disappeared around the corner as they approached.

"It's not that easy, Straker. You're no match for me, Big man. You're not on my level."

The detector indicated motion around the corner. Straker rounded the corner at a run, firing his rifle as he went.

"Don't you understand, Straker?" Turner asked. "Hasn't it soaked into that blond skull of yours yet? I'm outside of time, Straker. I am outside of time!"

"What does he mean, 'outside of time'?" Lake asked, running up to join Straker.

He considered for a moment before answering: "Well, time has stopped in here, we know that. But, somehow, the aliens have given him immunity in return for his help."

"So, he's independent of time. He can move backwards or forwards, however he pleases."

Straker nodded in agreement.

"So, that's why we can't pin him down," Lake continued. "How are we going to find him?"

"Well, we've got to try. Trying's all we've got," Straker responded, leading the way back to the car.

He was beginning to feel just a bit overwhelmed, and grimly pushed it out of his mind. He climbed back into the car. Lake followed him.

"They may be years ahead of the human race," he started to explain as they drove up to the prop barn behind the sound stages. "But, we've got one thing they haven't got - bloody-mindedness. It built this planet."

"Oh, well done, Big Man," Turner's voice called as they climbed out of the car. "You've found where I am. Come on then, I'm waiting for you, and your lovely lady."

The prop barn was a large storage building filled with old furniture and strange objects created for different films, then stored away and forgotten. At the moment, it had the aura of a terrible nightmare. Bullets whistled overhead and Lake and Straker took cover among the shoddy pseudo-antiques.

"It's all right, Straker," Turner's amplified voice stated. "I don't intend to kill you. You see, in the new order, I am going to be boss. I think you might be rather useful for making the tea," the voice taunted. "I'm going to be boss, Straker, they promised me that, in return for my help."

The motion detector in Straker's hand buzzed. Turner was in the loft overhead. "You can't handle it," Straker called, moving toward the ladder to the upper level. Lake followed on his heels.

"I can handle it," the voice assured him.

"No, you're small time," Straker stated with a certainty he didn't really feel. "You haven't got the horsepower."

"I've got more than I need to fix you!" Turner protested. Straker and Lake quietly climbed the ladder to the loft.

"No, come on. It takes brains and guts to be the boss." Straker goaded.

Turner was not amused: "Listen, you primitive idiot, how do you think they're transmitting their power in here? Because I, I fixed a piece of equipment in the control room so it would act as an aerial. A piece of SHADO equipment, Straker."

"I don't believe you. What piece of equipment?"

"Oh, you must think I'm as stupid as you are," Turner's voice announced. Then he started laughing again.

Straker didn't give himself time to be disappointed. He motioned for Lake to search the far end of the loft while he looked over the nearer end.

She was only out of his sight for a moment. Then, there was the sound of a gun being fired in the far end of the upper level. Straker ran to investigate.

He found Turner trying to strangle Lake with her own scarf.

Straker threw himself at the man, knocking him away from her. Lake collapsed to her knees. She gasped for breath as behind her, the two men fought.

There was a loud crack as Straker managed to throw Turner against the wooden guard rail. It parted under the operative's weight and he fell hard onto an old, musty mattress. He lay there for a long moment, apparently unconscious. Then, he vanished into thin air.

"It's not that easy, Straker," the voice announced. Straker sagged a little in sudden exhaustion, but helped Lake to her feet. They hurried out of the building to search for Turner once more.

"Look!" Lake pointed at a glowing object above the studio complex. It was a nearly spherical alien craft, identical to the one that had tormented them earlier on the road. It hovered above the studio office building.

Straker sighed from hopelessness as much as exhaustion. Lake looked at him with a worried expression.

"Slowing down," he explained. He reached into his pocket for the drug vial and the syringe. "Used too much energy."

"What will another shot do to you?" Lake asked.

Straker shook his head as he handed her the vial and syringe. "It doesn't matter. Hurry."

He watched as she filled the syringe, then winced as the needle penetrated his skin and the vein beneath. He waited a moment to feel the drug take effect and then rolled down his sleeve.

"The Molley," he announced, putting the vial and syringe back in his pocket. "It's our last chance."

He began to walk away, toward the main office building.

"Shouldn't I have another shot?" Lake asked.

Straker stopped and simply looked back at her.

"It was dangerous, wasn't it?" Lake answered her own question.

"I made my choice a long time ago," he told her. It wasn't a choice he especially liked, but it was one he was resigned to. Alec Freeman had once told him he wouldn't live to collect his pension. Freeman had an uncanny knack for being right about that sort of thing.

* * *

The underground SHADO complex was filled with strange little rooms and cubbyholes. Most of them passed for offices, but some had more interesting and sometimes sinister uses.

Straker led Lake to one of the more interesting cubby holes and opened the door with a key from his key ring. He placed his palm against the hand-print verifier set into one wall of the small room. The lighted plate obligingly clicked green and the panel next to it slid open, revealing a key hanging in a small recess.

"Take that key," Straker instructed. Lake did so and the panel slid shut again. "And put it in there." He indicated a key slot on the control housing of a small rocket launcher that was on a stand in the middle of the room.

"Hold onto this." He handed her a single rocket charge as he unlatched the launcher from its stand and cradled it in his arms. Then, he led the way to an even tinier adjoining room and pressed a button on the wall by the door. The door snapped shut and the entire room rose. It was a disguised elevator, like Straker's studio office, only much smaller and more sparsely appointed.

"I didn't know about this," Lake remarked.

"It's that old bloody-mindedness," Straker explained. The elevator stopped and the doors opened onto the roof of the one of the sound stages. A heavy metal stand was bolted to the roof near the edge. Straker motioned Lake toward it and followed her, setting the rocket launcher onto the stand.

Lake was beginning to show signs of exhaustion.

"Can you hold on?" Straker asked her. She smiled and nodded.

"Shall I get another one of these?" she asked, referring to the single rocket charge in her hand.

"No, there's no point," he replied. "We're not gonna' get a second chance. If we miss with this one, they'll fry us." He took the charge from her and loaded it into the Molley.

"What's their range?" she wondered.

"Well, we have to wait until they get in close."

Suddenly, Turner attacked, having climbed onto the roof from the exterior fire stairs. He struck Lake hard across the back of the neck with the heel of his hand. Then, he hit Straker across the face and grabbed the key to the rocket launcher.

He ran off, leaving Lake in an unconscious heap on the roof. Straker shook himself from his stunned daze.

"Turner, don't be a fool," Straker shouted after him. "Give me that key, they don't need you now!"

Turner's reply was simply another of his mad laughs as he fired his rifle into the air. He drove off in the mini car.

Straker spared one glance at Lake. She was now as frozen as everything and everyone else in the complex. He wasn't even sure Turner's blow hadn't killed her. Then, he climbed down from the roof to chase after Turner.

Suddenly, Commander Straker of SHADO felt very frightened and trapped. Mostly, he just felt horribly alone and he didn't like it. He was chasing after a madman who quite literally planned to hand the enemy the key to the planet they were trying to destroy.

* * *

The treasonous SHADO operative was simply cruising between the sound stages in his car, waiting for Straker to come after him.

"Big Man!" he taunted as the Straker came closer in his own mini-car.

"Turner, listen to me!" Straker demanded. He was desperate and he didn't really care if Turner knew it.

Turner grinned and drove off, Straker right behind him.

At the far end of one of the alleys, the radar technician turned a corner. He ran his car into a tall pile of cardboard boxes, which toppled on top of him and his car. Turner seemed momentarily stunned.

Straker stopped his own car and climbed out to face him. The other man turned and grinned back at him.

"I think I'll just play that back," he announced. Then, he and his car vanished. The pile of boxes was suddenly back as a loose stack against the brick wall.

Straker turned sharply at the sound of a mini-car approaching and was startled to see Turner and his car coming down the alley again. Just as before, he struck the pile of boxes.

Straker was forced to jump aside as another mini-car turned the corner and stopped. A grim looking blond man, dressed in black, climbed out of that mini-car to face Turner.

He realized with a start that he was watching himself.

"I think I'll just play that back," Turner announced, just as before.

Abruptly, both men and both cars vanished. A broken pile of boxes and a very confused and shaken Commander Straker was left standing alone in the alley.

There was the sound of a small engine revving up behind him. He turned to see Turner driving away, laughing wildly.

"It's a shame, isn't it?" Turner asked. "I can do it all again, but I can't change anything."

Straker shook his head to clear away his growing confusion. It was insane, unreal, nonsensical. Suddenly, the only thing Straker was really certain of was the existence of his self-appointed tormentor and that U.F.O. overhead, waiting to destroy them all. Everything else was simply a nightmarish backdrop.

He climbed back into his car, setting off after Turner once more.

"You're too late, Straker," Turner announced as Straker caught up with him in one of the parking areas. Turner stopped his car and sat, waiting. He had a leering grin on his face.

"You're too late."

"Give me the key, Turner," Straker ordered, climbing out of his own mini-car. He picked up his rifle and cradled it against his hip.

"Come and get it, Commander." Turner challenged.

Very deliberately, Straker pulled the trigger on the assault rifle. It clattered out a spray of bullets that should have cut Turner in two. The man simply sat in his car and laughed.

"You're out of your league, Straker. The nearer they come, the more power they transmit to me. I can play time like a trumpet now," Turner boasted.

He and his car began to pop in and out of sight, now behind, now in front of his victim.

With increasing futility, Straker tried to keep track of the man's unpredictable appearances. He fired at him when he could. Turner seemed to be enjoying the spectacle enormously.

"You primitive idiot," the radar man taunted. "You can only see me where I've just been or where I'm going to be, not where I am, unless I want you to. You're IT, Straker!"

A notion, less than an idea, more like an intuition, dawned in Straker's increasingly befuddled mind. He swung around suddenly, strafing the entire area around him with a spray of bullets. Abruptly, Turner and his car appeared on the far side of the circle. The man was slumped over the steering wheel, blood spilling from half-a dozen wounds in his chest. There was a hurt and surprised look on Turner's face as he died.

Straker took a shaky breath and retrieved the key to the rocket launcher out of the dead

man's pocket. There was blood on the key. He wanted to be sick, but the U.F.O. overhead was coming closer. He could almost hear its whirring buzz as he drove back to the sound stage with the precious key.

He prayed there was still time as he climbed to the roof and put the key into its slot in the missile launcher. The alien craft came even closer, hovering directly over the studio complex. It didn't seem to notice, or didn't care about, the lone figure on the roof below it.

Straker pressed the firing trigger and the explosive charged missile flew, just as it was designed to do. Seconds later, the missile exploded, right on target.

An instant later than that, the alien craft blew up in midair. The blast scorched the rooftops, knocking Straker off his feet.

It was gone. He'd done it. But, still nothing moved. The only sound Straker could hear was his own breathing, loud in his ears, his heart beating too fast in his chest.

The U.F.O. was gone, destroyed. But, nothing had changed. Time was still halted.

'I fixed a piece of equipment in the control room so it would act as an aerial,' Turner had said.

But which piece of equipment? It was hard to think and a tiny voice taunted him about the toxic-side effects of the stimulant he'd taken. He suspected it was affecting his mind, but he pushed it aside as he had pushed aside so much in the recent past.

He didn't dare succumb. He wasn't finished.

He picked up his gun and went back down to SHADO Control, to the frozen living statues there. His mind was fixed on finding, and destroying, that piece of equipment Turner had modified.

"Commander, what's wrong?" Foster's voice abruptly rang in his ears as he smashed another equipment rack.

But, that was impossible. Foster was frozen in a nightmare of time being stopped unless he could find that one piece of equipment.

The nightmare didn't stop. Straker could feel his sanity slipping away from him, into the abyss, or where-ever sanity slips away to.

* * *

"It's all right, Commander, it's all right." Jackson was saying. His tone was professionally soothing. His softly accented voice seemed to momentarily penetrate Straker's fogged, struggling mind.

Straker looked up at Henderson and for just a moment, seemed to recognize him. Then, he fell back with a sob, utterly spent.

"Yes, try to relax," Jackson insisted gently. He motioned Foster and the medical assistant to step back.

"It's incredible," General Henderson commented in disbelief to no one in particular.

Jackson looked back at him. "Yes, General, but there are more things."

"But, how did it happen?" Henderson demanded.

Jackson shrugged. "I'm not sure, but in some way, they were able to expand a moment in time. Commander Straker experienced such an expanded moment."

Henderson looked at Straker once more and shook his head. Straker was no long struggling against his unseen assailant. He just lay there, utterly, totally exhausted. His breath came ragged gasps and tears streamed down his face.

"Will he be all right?" Foster asked after a moment. Doctor Jackson turned back to his patient.

"He needs to rest," Jackson explained, not really answering Foster's query.

Foster nodded and gestured for General Henderson to join him as he left, heading back to the Control room.

* * *

On the upper level, operatives were at work repairing the equipment Straker had damaged in his rampage. They were nearly done. The damage hadn't been nearly as extensive as it had first appeared.

Lieutenant Ford was waiting at the door to the commander's office as Foster and Henderson came in. He was holding a circuit board in his hand. Wires dangled loosely from it.

"We found this in one of the radar analysis computers, sir." Ford explained, handing the device to Foster as they entered the office. "Major Graham says it's not part of the computer, and it doesn't appear to be an alien device, but we don't know what it is."

"It could be that 'aerial' the commander said Turner put down here," Foster commented, mostly to Henderson. The older man nodded in agreement.

He inspected the device in Foster's hand. It didn't look impressive or dangerous. The parts were commonplace and the connections crude. There was a crack across it that broke several of the circuits.

"Have Louie check it out after everything else is fixed," Foster instructed, handing it back to Ford.

Ford took the device and turned to leave. He paused in the doorway: "Oh, sir, I took the liberty of notifying Colonel Freeman that the commander's taken ill. He should be arriving here this evening."

Foster simply nodded.

CHAPTER 12

Alec Freeman scanned the instrument panel in front of him. Everything was in order: altitude, air speed, fuel. The customized Citation III executive plane in the silver, red and white livery of Harlington-Straker Studios was a dream to fly.

He was glad he'd managed to talk Straker into getting it for jaunts like this one. Under almost any other circumstances, Freeman would have been at peace with the world and all that dwelt therein.

However a mere hour before, he'd been having dinner with Peter Carlin, captain of Sky-Diver Two, at one of the finer restaurants in Anchorage, Alaska. Then came a call from the construction office they were using while building the new Sky-diver docks, some two hundred miles up the coast. There was a message from London, from a Mister Ford, saying that Mister Straker had taken ill and Freeman was needed back at the 'home office' immediately.

Now, Freeman was sitting in the pilot's seat of an eight passenger private plane, nursing a splitting headache. They were cruising over the polar cap at 35,000 feet, heading toward London and SHADO Headquarters.

Freeman glanced over at his co-pilot. Carlin looked as tired as Freeman felt.

They'd both been working long hours trying to get the construction finished on the Sky-Diver base. It needed to be ready to move into before winter and the Arctic weather really moved in. Even though it was the middle of August, hard frost was predicted in less than two weeks.

"What's our ETA look like, Peter?" Freeman asked

after a while.

Carlin checked the chronometer on the instrument panel: "About nineteen hundred hours, London time. We'll get there in time for dinner."

Freeman grinned crookedly and leaned back, letting the auto-pilot take over. The muffled roar of the twin Garret turbofan engines simply underlined the quiet in the cabin. Freeman was suddenly reminded of a similar trip more than a year before. It seemed longer ago than that, so many other things had happened since, but none quite so heart-stopping.

It had started with a radio call into SHADO Control from Lew Waterman in Sky-One. Sky-Diver One had been attacked and sunk by the U.F.O. they'd been searching for. Commander Straker and Colonel Foster had both been on board. Freeman recalled the five hour flight to Sky-Diver's last reported position with the rescue team, hoping against all odds that they'd be in time, that the commander and the Sky-Diver crew would be all right.

They had been very lucky that time. Everyone had been rescued safely, except for the radio operator, Chin. He died as a result of injuries sustained in the initial attack. The rest of the crew returned to duty within the week with no lasting ill-effects, except, perhaps, an occasional nightmare.

Straker claimed to have actually benefited from the experience. He said his claustrophobic tendencies no longer bothered him when duty required his presence onboard the undersea fighter-sub. Freeman had an eerie feeling that they weren't going to be so lucky this time.

"Sir?" Carlin said after while, interrupting the loud

silence. "You've known the commander a long time, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I've known him a long time," Freeman replied. "About sixteen years." He paused, thinking. "I just wish I knew what was wrong, what happened. Ford didn't give much information."

*** * ***

"Colonel Foster?" Lieutenant Ford's voice came over the intercom in the commander's office. Foster set aside the report he'd been studying ever since General Henderson left for his own office.

He flipped the switch on the intercom controls. "Yes?"

"Doctor Jackson has an ambulance waiting up top to take the commander to Mayland Hospital, sir. They'll be bringing him through in a couple of minutes."

*** * ***

Doctor Jackson, his aide and two blue uniformed security men were hurriedly wheeling a stretcher down the corridor toward the main express elevator to the surface.

They slowed as Foster approached them.

He motioned Jackson aside. "I thought you said he would be okay," Foster began. He didn't take his eyes off the stretcher or the body strapped to it.

Straker's eyes were closed. His head was tilted back and a thick hose-like tube had been pushed down his throat. Wilson, Jackson's assistant, was rhythmically squeezing the attached air-bag. There were bags of ice nestled in the sheet covering Straker's body.

The psychiatrist waved the small group on. They disappeared behind the doors of the main elevator. The

light above the door blinked red.

"Colonel Foster," Jackson began after they were gone. "Commander Straker took a very dangerous drug. It puts the entire body under tremendous stress."

"I thought you treated him for that."

Jackson shook his head: "I treated him for the symptoms he presented, severe neurogenic shock. The drug I gave him was to keep him from retreating further from reality. We didn't know at that time he'd taken an overdose of the drug X-50. It's now the physical stress and shock from that drug that we're dealing with, and despite what we can do here, his condition is not good."

"What do you mean?"

Jackson took a moment before answering. "His body temperature, his metabolism is far above normal. He is so weak now that he is no longer breathing on his own. His heart has stopped once already."

Foster latched onto that one phrase: "You mean, he's had a heart attack?"

"No, not exactly, Colonel," the psychiatrist replied.

"Then what, exactly?"

"He is utterly exhausted."

"Then, why send him over to Mayland?" Foster demanded. "We have a medical center here, don't we?"

Jackson took a deep breath. "Colonel Foster, SHADO Medical Center is a research facility. We don't have the facilities, or the manpower, for the type of intensive critical care the commander needs right now."

"But, he will be all right, won't he?" Foster asked.

"I told you, Colonel, Commander Straker took a very

dangerous drug."

"What about Virginia Lake, then. She took it too,"

Foster reminded him.

"But, she took only one dose," Jackson replied. "Right now, Colonel Lake simply has a mild temperature elevation and a headache. There is every reason to believe that by tomorrow, she'll be fully recovered from her experience."

"I see."

Jackson turned to head back down the corridor to the medical center and his own office.

Foster didn't like Jackson. Despite his credentials as a psychiatrist and researcher, Doug Jackson, M.D., Ph.D., seemed devious and ever so slightly untrustworthy. He'd come to SHADO as a military liaison and in that capacity he'd nearly succeeded in having Paul Foster executed for a crime the officer hadn't committed.

Now, the little psychiatrist was one of SHADO's primary researchers into alien psychology and physiology. It was a change Foster couldn't quite fathom, except he recognized Straker's hand in it.

'If I must live with a rattlesnake,' Straker had stated once, long ago. 'I want to make sure it's where I can keep an eye on it.'

Foster considered it a good adage in regard to Doctor Jackson.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Ford's voice interrupted Foster's unsavory line of thought. He turned to find the operative standing beside him. There was a worried look on Ford's face.

"It's bad, isn't it, Colonel?"

"Well, it doesn't look too good," Foster admitted. His mind was already clicking over to detail out what needed to be taken care of in Straker's unexpected absence.

Colonel Gray needed to be called into Headquarters from his assignment at the northern tracking stations. General Henderson and the Astrophysical Commission needed to be notified. No doubt Alec Freeman, as senior SHADO officer after Straker, would take command on his arrival. However, the Commission might have other ideas.

Foster was ambitious enough to consider himself a good candidate for the position. He was also realist enough to recognize it wasn't very likely.

*** * ***

Mayland Hospital was the type of medical center that film directors thought of when they needed a modern, scientific setting for their hero-doctors. It was an attractive structure, towering above the surrounding trees and the parking lots. One of those parking lots was being torn up for the new trauma center they were getting ready to build.

SHADO would pay for part of that construction, just as it had paid for part of Mayland's construction, ten years before. SHADO had wanted a fully equipped medical center close by. Mayland was only five minutes east of the studios.

The administrators asked few embarrassing questions about the occasional odd patient SHADO had admitted for treatment. They knew better.

The main entrance doors were closed for the night, but the emergency room attendant was helpful. She located Straker's room number from the hospital computer system and gave directions to the main elevators.

Freeman half wondered if she was interested in a screen test. The studio was always interested in new talent.

Freeman located Straker's hospital room without much difficulty. It was right near the nurses' station, naturally. Straker would hardly elect to be treated as an ordinary, passive, ignorable patient. It wasn't in his nature to be either passive or ignorable, Freeman mused.

Freeman knocked lightly on the door, then swung it aside. He entered the hospital room and was suddenly filled with horror. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but it certainly wasn't this.

The room was cramped with equipment. A large sign on the wall above the bed read: NO SMOKING.

The head of the hospital bed was raised slightly. Next to the bed, a respirator hissed and clicked. A tube went from it, and an oxygen tank, to a fitting on Straker's throat.

His chest rose and fell in time with the machine.

On the other side of the bed, an artificial kidney machine whirred quietly. Tubes snaked from it to disappear beneath a thermal blanket. The bed's side-rails were up.

They were covered with heavy padding.

The room was cold, the air conditioning turned high. The pale green thermal blanket didn't quite disguise the refrigeration blanket under it.

A group of electronic monitors occupied a rack by the respirator. Freeman recognized at least some of the equipment. SHADO had them in its own medical research center. There was a cardiac monitor, a heart pacer, an internal pulmonary artery pressure monitor. Various lines and wires attached the different monitors to Straker's body.

Freeman recalled reading somewhere what anything over 106 Fahrenheit was incompatible with life. The internal temperature monitor read 104 .

Several plastic bags hung on a pole by the rack. One was feeding a white fluid into a tube that was threaded through one nostril. Other bags fed other tubes that dripped colorless liquids into veins in both of Straker's arms.

A drug pump was pumping measured doses of something into yet another vein. Both of his wrists were wrapped in gauze and secured to the bed frame with short gauze leashes. Freeman surmised that was to keep him from moving about, to keep him from dislodging the various I.V.s and monitor lines that were his continuing life-line.

But Straker didn't move. His eyes were closed, taped shut, yet he wasn't asleep. No sleeper lay so still.

Freeman stepped closer to the bed and peered down at the middle-aged man lying there.

Straker wasn't a large man. He was a little shorter than Freeman's six-feet and quite a bit lighter than the Australian's hundred ninety pounds. But, now he seemed much smaller, almost child-like, lying there, overwhelmed by the machines keeping him alive.

There was no indication he ever intended to wake up. There was no sign of the coldly brilliant mind that should have been looking out from behind that exquisitely boned visage.

Freeman had a sudden, irrational urge to reach out and simply shake him awake, to force him to respond. Instead, he carefully took one of Straker's limp hands in

both of his own.

"Ed, it's me, Alec." Freeman announced his presence to unheeding ears. "Everything's going to be okay," he promised. He prayed that maybe, somewhere, Ed Straker heard him and understood.

Behind him, the door opened and he heard footsteps. Freeman looked up to see General Henderson standing beside him. Freeman was surprised at how old and tired the man looked. For the first time in ages, Freeman realized how old Henderson really was, seventy-one, old enough to be his, or Straker's, father.

"Hello, Freeman," Henderson greeted. "I'm glad you managed to get here. As you've probably guessed, this has been one hell of a day."

"General, what happened?"

Henderson moved to the other side of the bed to look down at Straker's unconscious face.

"Ed and Virginia Lake were supposed to be at my office at ten-thirty this morning. About eight-thirty, Foster called me. Ed had appeared at work, literally out of nowhere. He was berserk, out of his head. They found Lake unconscious on the roof of one of the buildings. A technician named Turner was dead from gunshot wounds. The gun had Ed's prints on it."

"How's Virginia?" Freeman asked.

"Buden says she'll be fine. But, she suffered a concussion and she doesn't remember what happened."

"Do we know what happened to Ed? What did this to him?"

"When he was brought into the medical center, he was

catatonic. He'd simply mentally walked away from whatever it was that had happened to him," Henderson said. "Thinking about it, we probably acted prematurely by not letting him recover physically a little more, but we felt we needed to find out what had happened as quickly as we could."

"And what did happen?" Freeman demanded.

"You can read the full report at work tomorrow," the general said. "But, it appears that technician Turner helped the other side set a trap for him. Ed took an overdose of the drug X-50 and then pushed himself to the point of total collapse in trying to deal with the situation."

"I see," commented Freeman. He remembered the early drug tests and the subjects' reactions. They hadn't been pleasant, but he didn't recall anything as severe as this.

"Right now," Henderson continued, "he's in critical condition. Even with the refrigeration blanket, his temperature isn't coming down. He's had three cardiac arrests in an eight hour period. The last one was less than an hour ago. He's had convulsions, his kidneys have shut down and he's deeply comatose."

Freeman gazed at Straker for a long moment. "Any idea how long he'll be like this?"

Henderson shook his head. "I'm told he could wake up tomorrow, or, he could be like this until he dies, when someone turns off the respirator or he gets a massive infection they can't control."

"Or anything in between?"

Henderson nodded. "Frazer told me the longer Ed's unconscious, the poorer his chances of complete recovery

are."

"Paul Foster was in a coma for six days before he woke up, and he's perfectly fine now," Freeman reminded him.

The SHADO officer recalled how Foster had first come to SHADO's attention. He had been flying an experimental aircraft that was destroyed when it came too close to a U.F.O. and Sky-One's interception of it.

"Yes, I remember the report on his case," Henderson replied. "But, as I recall, Foster was simply suffering from a nasty case of hypothermia and some burns. The medics induced a coma to treat the hypothermia. This is a whole different ball game."

There was a momentary silence, broken only by the sounds of the machines that were keeping SHADO's commander-in-chief, and Freeman's closest friend, alive.

"Frazer asked me to come down when Ed started going into convulsions and his heart stopped the second time," Henderson continued after a time. If possible, the old man looked more glum than before. "They needed authorization to override his written request that heroic measures not be taken to keep him alive. I called a priest to come in after his last arrest. They don't call it 'last rights' anymore, you know."

"I know," Freeman told him. He could just feel the smudge of holy oil on the back of Straker's hand. "I remember Ed telling me once he was raised Roman Catholic. I don't think he's been to Mass since Johnny died.

I don't know if he even believes any more."

"I don't know either," Henderson admitted. "I remember we used to argue theology over lunch at

Peterson, drove everybody else at the table crazy, especially my other aide, Sprenger. He was an atheist. You remember him, don't you, Freeman?"

Freeman nodded. He hadn't thought of Sprenger in years, but he did recall not liking the man much.

"It's funny, but I miss those arguments." As he spoke, Henderson reached over to straighten the bed covers around Straker's shoulders. Then, he brushed a strand of hair away from Straker's face, as one might do with a small, sleeping child. There was no response.

"The floor nurse has Frazer's number in case his condition changes and someone's supposed to come in about every fifteen minutes or so and check on him," Henderson announced. "There's a pot of coffee at the nurses' station. If he does come round, it'll be better if there's a familiar face nearby."

Henderson turned to leave, then stopped. "Jackson thinks it's possible Ed can hear us, even if he can't respond, so it certainly wouldn't hurt if you talked to him, told him what's going on, read to him. It might even help. Who knows?"

"Right," Freeman responded.

"This isn't how it's supposed to be, you know," Henderson said. "Ed's just a little younger than my youngest boy. It's not natural." With a shake of his head, the general closed the door behind him.

Freeman gently laid Straker's hand on the bed. "Ed, I'm going to be right here. You're going to get through this." He settled into the armchair in the far corner, moving it closer to the bed.

There was a small radio on the window sill. He turned it on and tuned in a local jazz station. It was the one music style he knew that he and Straker both agreed on. Freeman preferred Big Band music. Straker had a fondness for Wagner and Tchaikovsky and Sibellius, but they both liked hot jazz.

Freeman studied Straker's face a few moments longer, wondering what his friend would say to all this effort to keep him alive, when, and if, he recovered enough to say anything at all.

CHAPTER 13

A little after lunch the next day, Paul Foster walked into the lobby of studio office building. A woman was seated in one of the chairs in the modern seating group opposite the elevator bank.

All the women in SHADO were confident. Most were shapely and attractive. This woman would not have been out of place in a SHADO uniform, or in front of one of the studio's cameras.

Her hair was a rich coppery auburn, pulled into a French braid; eyes, emerald green. Her ivory complexion was flawless, as was the figure under the oyster white linen suit and peach colored silk blouse she was wearing.

Foster was no expert in fashion, but he suspected the suit was a designer original, possibly a Valentino. There was a coffee brown briefcase on the floor beside her chair. She was looking through a collection of papers clipped to a gray file folder.

"Waiting for someone?" Foster asked.

"As a matter of fact, I am," she said, with a hint of a smile. There was something challenging about her. She could have been anything; an actress, a highly paid call girl, a corporate executive. Her accent was American. "I'm waiting for Mister Freeman."

"I wasn't aware he was coming in this afternoon," Foster responded, taking a seat beside her. "Maybe I can help though. My name's Paul Foster."

"Elizabeth Kathryn Komack," the woman said, holding out her hand to be shook. He took it and was a little surprised at how firm her grip was.

"What were you waiting to see Mister Freeman about?" Foster asked.

"We're old friends," she replied with a smile.

"Actually, I was supposed to be seeing Mister Straker concerning a management position here at the studio. But, since he's ill, I'll just have to settle for talking to Mister Freeman."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything concerning a management opening here," Foster admitted. "Do you know Mister Straker well?"

"Oh, yes. I've known him for years."

"It's funny, but I've never heard him mention you," Foster told her.

"That doesn't surprise me. Mister Straker is a very private person," Komack said. "He has mentioned you, though."

"Oh?" Foster studied her face, but her expression was simply pleasantly neutral. "What did he say?"

"You're young and ambitious and an asset to the company."

"I suppose I should be flattered," Foster said, smiling.

"You should be," she remarked.

Foster let that one go. "Where are you from?"

"I live in San Francisco."

"What do you do in San Francisco?" Foster asked.

"I run a think-tank," she replied. "What do you do, Mister Foster?"

"I work here," Foster replied. She laughed and Foster found himself wondering what she found so amusing.

*** * ***

Alec Freeman entered the studio office building. To his surprise, Paul Foster was sitting in the lobby with Kathryn Komack. They both stood as he came towards them.

"Alec," Foster greeted. "Miss Komack said you were coming in today."

"Yes, we have an appointment," Freeman explained. He checked his watch. "I'm sorry I'm late," he told her.

"I understand," she assured him with a smile. She gave him a quick hug. "Doctor Frazer told me you spent the night at the hospital with Ed."

"Oh?" Freeman replied. "I was certainly surprised to get your call this morning. Ed figured you wouldn't come back to London unless it was for his funeral."

"He told you that?" she asked, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Isn't it true?" Freeman asked in reply.

"Mostly," she admitted. "You know what he's like to work for."

"Yes, I do know," Freeman replied. He looked over at Foster, at the look of confusion on the younger man's face.

"Paul, you go on ahead to work. I'll be there in a little bit. Katie and I have a few things to discuss."

"Certainly," Foster agreed. He nodded to Komack. "It was nice meeting you, Miss Komack. I hope to see you again some time."

"I'm sure you will, Mister Foster," she replied. Foster smiled and turned to head for Straker's ground floor office and the entrance to SHADO Headquarters.

Freeman turned back to Komack. "I know what Ed's like. I got fed up and walked out on him two months ago.

I'm still not happy about how he handled that whole situation."

"With Foster?" she asked.

Freeman nodded. "I know why I was called back here, but what brings you Merry Old England after all this time?"

"Orders," she replied.

"Not from Ed," he stated with certainty.

She shook her head. "General Henderson. He thought it would be a good idea if I were at a meeting he had scheduled yesterday with Ed and Virginia Lake."

"I see," Freeman said. "Did Ed know that's why you were here?"

"Probably. He didn't ask and I didn't volunteer."

"How long are you going to stay?"

"That was going to depend on how the meeting went," Komack replied. "Now, I don't know. His getting sick like this bollixes up a lot of things. If I stay past Friday, I'll have to have Esther fly over. I suppose I'll end up asking Amanda Henderson to watch her for me. She's made the offer. I may have to take her up on it."

"I keep forgetting that Henderson's your uncle."

Freeman said.

"You don't forget," Komack responded. "Even though I wish you would. It's hard enough working for the 'company' without having to constantly prove I can do the job without the help of relatives in high places."

Freeman raised his hands slightly in surrender. "I apologize. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"It's been a bad couple of days, Alec," she said. "We're

all on edge. Let's both forget it. I called Barbara this morning, let her know what's happened."

The name didn't mean anything for a moment, then he remembered. "Ed's sister?"

"She offered to fly out from California. I managed to talk her out of it."

"Good," Freeman said, heading across the marble floor to the office Foster had disappeared into. Komack kept pace with him. They entered the outer office where Miss Ealand sat at her desk, as usual.

"Colonel Freeman," Miss Ealand greeted. There was a worried look to her fine features. "I heard you were coming in."

"I flew in last night with Peter," he told her.

He glanced around the small outer office. It was no different from how he last remembered it. Sleek and ultra-modern, with pieces of film art hanging on the linen covered walls. The perfect film company office. "How's it going up here?" he asked.

The secretary shrugged. "It's hard to say. Mister Foster posted an announcement yesterday afternoon that Mister Straker had fallen extremely ill from a reaction to a prescription he was on and had to be hospitalized. We also had to evacuate Soundstage D. A gas leak. Very dangerous. I'm told that mess should be cleaned up by tomorrow and the film crew can get back to work, none the wiser."

"What about Turner's body?" Freeman wondered.

Miss Ealand gave him a crooked grin. "What body? A special effects dummy was found in the carpark. New design, very convincing." She pressed a button on her desk

and the door to the inner office slid open. Miss Ealand nodded to the door. "General Henderson is already downstairs. Welcome back."

"Thanks," Freeman commented as he and Kathryn Komack walked into the inner office. The door closed behind them.

As usual, the inner office was unoccupied. Freeman went to the desk and opened the grilled lid to the cigarette box that sat on its wide surface.

"Freeman," the SHADO officer spoke aloud to the air.

From the box, a computer generated voice: "Voice Print Identification Positive, nine-seven, Freeman, Alec E."

Freeman handed Komack the box and she repeated the ritual: "Komack."

"Voice Print Identification Positive, one-zero-five, Komack, E. Kathryn"

The office began to descend.

"How's Esther?" Freeman asked. "She's what now, four?"

Komack chuckled. "She'll be five in November. She's fine. She came home from day care the other day and announced she really should have visiting rights with her father like everybody else at the center."

"What did you tell her?"

"I would take it under advisement." Komack's smile turned sad.

"You know, Ed and I've talked about different possibilities. But it always comes down to the same thing.

I'm a SHADO officer and SHADO can't afford the appearance of the commander-in-chief playing favorites."

Freeman nodded as the office-elevator doors opened. "I remember Ed saying the same thing a while back. I guess San Francisco is about as far away from SHADO as you can get and still be in SHADO."

"We were discussing the situation before he left for the airport Tuesday night," Komack replied as she followed Freeman out of the elevator and down the wide corridor to SHADO Control. "He asked me to consider taking over the studio for him."

"What did you say?" Freeman asked. It was a surprising development. He wasn't aware Straker had been thinking in that direction. Of course, Freeman had also been out of touch for two months.

"I said I'd think about it."

"Will you do it?"

"That depends on what the general and the commission decide to do about Ed being in the hospital, don't you think?" she replied.

They walked into the control room.

Freeman noted how subdued everyone seemed. There were no jokes or snide remarks like when he usually came in after an absence. The worry was almost a stink in the air.

They went into the commander's office.

Freeman knew everyone waiting there. General Henderson was leaning against Straker's desk. John Gray, Virginia Lake and Paul Foster were seated around the conference table that filled the alcove at far end of the room. Major Vladimir Natiroff was standing, stiff backed, next to the small corner bar.

"Good afternoon, Colonel Freeman, Colonel Komack,"

Henderson greeted wryly. "I'm glad you could make it." Henderson bobbed his head in Komack's direction. "I don't believe you've met Colonel Foster."

He gestured vaguely in Foster's general direction. Foster's expression was one of surprised shock.

"How do you do, Colonel?" Komack said, shaking Foster's hand with a smile. She turned to Lake: "How have the boys been treating you, Ginny?"

Lake smiled. "I can hold my own. It's different than the Institute, I'll tell you that."

"I can always kick Dennis out of your old office if you want to come back," Komack said. "He misses you terribly."

"I'm afraid I'd be out of practice handling his boy friends," Lake replied. "I think I'll stay here. It's a little safer."

"Colonel Komack runs a research facility in San Francisco," Henderson explained, seeing Foster's continued confusion. He turned back to Komack as she took a seat at the end of the conference table. "How is Ed today?"

The woman took a moment before replying. Her expression became solemn. "When I left this morning, his temperature was still over a hundred and three. His blood enzymes suggest the possibility of severe heart and liver damage. The one hopeful sign is that he's started reacting to pain. That means his coma isn't as deep as it was and at least part of his brain is still functioning. But, his condition is still critical. He's still on total life support."

There was a long pause as everyone considered this new information. Finally, Henderson spoke: "Colonel

Foster's got some information on the U.F.O. Straker said he'd destroyed."

"Apparently, there was a U.F.O. and it did get through our defensive screens," Foster stated. He had several files by his elbow and handed them out to the others. They quickly glanced through them.

"We've had a crew out for the past twenty-four hours searching everything for a mile around the studio. From what they've found so far, it looks like a Ufo did explode about a hundred yards north of the west carpark," Foster reported. "We also found a device of unknown purpose hidden in one of the radar monitors."

"From the damage my people have found, it looks like the studio was a free fire zone," Natiroff said. As security chief, he had taken charge of the search parties. "We have been using metal detectors to find all the shells and bullets.

It is very fortunate no one was killed."

"Radar operator Turner was killed, by a gun with Straker's prints on it," Henderson reminded him. "What do we have on Turner, anyway?"

Natiroff shrugged. "Not as much as we would like. Robert Andrew Turner, British citizen," the Soviet officer read aloud from one of the sheets in his heavily accented voice. "He came to SHADO about three years ago from the RAF. He had good record there, good record with SHADO.

He transferred to SHADO Control from Zeta tracking station about ten months ago. Everyone says he was quiet, not many friends. We are not aware that he had permanent girl friend. He was seeing Ayshea Johnson for a time, but she broke it off a week ago. Aside from Johnson, I have not

heard that anyone had any problems with him down here."

"Did Turner have an alcohol or drug problem?"

Virginia Lake asked.

Natiroff shook his head. "According to our records, nothing has ever shown up on his regulation medical tests."

Lake took a moment to look through her copy of the file for one particular report. "According to this, Turner had a blood alcohol level of point one percent, and some other substances they are still analyzing. There are indications of brain damage indicative of repeated use of certain proscribed drugs. Why didn't the medical checks ever pick this up?"

"I do not know," Natiroff admitted. "However, we have Doctor Shroeder looking into it. Turner also had an alien implant in his temple similar to one that was found on Dawson last year. Medical checks should have found that as well, but did not."

The incident with Dawson was a sore spot for some in SHADO, especially Freeman. A highly experienced SHADO technician and his young wife were dead because of Dawson's treachery. The incident had also caused a major shake-up in SHADO security, forcing the former chief into early retirement and bringing Natiroff on board from the GRU.

"What was Turner's last duty shift?" Freeman asked.

Foster didn't have to look at the file. "Four to midnight. He was just leaving when I came on to relieve Major Westover at midnight."

"So Turner would have known when Commander Straker left here, and that he was planning to go pick up

Colonel Lake at the air strip later in the evening," Freeman observed.

"But it doesn't explain why Turner would want to betray SHADO and Commander Straker to the aliens," Gray observed.

"If Jackson's report on Ed's interrogation is accurate, then I think Ed gave us part of Turner's reason," Freeman stated, rummaging through the report file. "Jealousy, envy," Freeman supplied when no one else spoke up. He quoted from the report: "Big Man, the guy all the girls admire."

"I still don't get it," Foster complained.

Kathryn Komack's expression was one of utter incredulity as she regarded the other officer. "Colonel Foster, you do realize that power can be very erotic, very compelling? Especially when that power is held by someone who is almost, but not quite, unattainable?"

"Like Commander Straker?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I doubt there's a woman down here, maybe even some men, who haven't, for at least a few moments, contemplated the notion of helping ease the loneliness of command, of breaking through that iron reserve."

Lake was nodding thoughtfully. "I'm sure Turner must have overheard some of the girls talking about it at some time. Commander Straker happens to be a very attractive man. The report says Lieutenant Johnson was going out with Turner for a while." Lake told them. "Maybe she knows something."

"The lieutenant was with Straker at our club just last

Friday. He was in black-tie. Something about an awards dinner," Henderson recalled. "I wonder if Turner may have misinterpreted Straker's intentions towards the young lady."

"Do you think something happened that night?" Foster wondered.

"Paul, you know Ed better than that," Freeman remonstrated. "He wouldn't take that kind of risk, whatever Turner may have thought."

There was a buzz at the door. Henderson reached over and pressed the button on the desk top to open it. Lieutenant Ford was standing in the hall just outside. He looked uncomfortable.

"Yes, what is it, Lieutenant?" Henderson asked.

Ford seemed to come to a decision and stepped into the office. The door closed behind him. "Sir, Commander Straker left this." He indicated the video cassette tape in his hand.

"Well, what is it?" Henderson demanded with forced patience.

"My instructions were to give it to the senior officers in the event of Commander Straker's death or incapacity," Ford explained.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Freeman ordered quietly. Ford nodded and went to the wall monitor and the video cassette recorder on the shelf just beneath it. He turned on the equipment and loaded the tape into the machine. After a few moments, a picture came on the screen: a picture of Commander Straker as he had been only a few weeks before - calm, self-assured, seemingly in total control of both

himself and his environment.

The image on the screen looked out at them and began to speak: "Ladies and gentlemen, I assume that since you're playing this tape, I am either dead, missing, or so incapacitated that there is serious doubt as to my being able to continue as commander-in-chief of SHADO operations. I can only hope that the situation at Headquarters is not critical."

Lieutenant Ford made a move to leave the office and Henderson motioned for him to stay as the recording continued.

"Please consider this to be my last will and testament as commander in chief of SHADO operations. My written will is in the wall safe, along with the necessary papers concerning the studio."

Freeman went to the wall safe and opened it. He pulled out the papers Straker had referred to, including a 'power of attorney' statement authorized a long time ago. It gave Freeman the legal authority to take whatever actions were necessary on Straker's behalf. Freeman had a similar document locked in his own desk.

"Alec, as most senior SHADO officer," the recording continued, "the Commission will no doubt give you first consideration for appointment as commander. We've been friends for a lot of years, and I think I know you pretty well, so please don't take this wrong. You're a very capable, very loyal officer and I've been proud to have you under my command, to have you as a friend. But, you'd hate being SHADO's commanding officer. Do yourself a favor and tell the commission 'no'. You'll live longer."

The image on the screen grinned and Freeman found himself grinning back. As much as he was loath to admit it to anyone else, he knew Straker was right. Freeman was far happier doing what he already did -- acting as Straker's chief-of-staff and SHADO's lead trouble-shooter.

"If you give SHADO's new commander even half the assistance, the consideration, you've given me through the years, I know he or she will have no trouble dealing with SHADO's problems," the recording continued.

"I don't know if Colonel Komack is present. I can only hope that arranging my funeral is sufficient reason for her to come back to SHADO Headquarters. Lord knows, nothing else has worked. Assuming you are present, Kathryn, the Institute has an impressive record, one of the best of SHADO's operational groups. You should be proud, you deserve it. But now, I think your services will be needed more here, at headquarters.

"Despite what the Commission chooses to believe, I know the aliens are planning something. I just don't know why they haven't done it yet. But, SHADO's going to have to be ready when they do make their move and there's no doubt in my mind that you're one of the people who can make sure SHADO is ready. Don't let the Commission get on your case because you're a woman. As even they should know by now, sex is irrelevant in terms of command ability.

Some of our best combat commanders are female, and I know, for a fact, that you are capable of doing anything you firmly set your mind to, including, if necessary, commanding SHADO.

"General Henderson, I asked Lieutenant Ford to make

sure you were present at this viewing since you will be the one to make the recommendation to the Commission concerning my replacement.

"At present, SHADO has two senior command officers of whom I can give my highest recommendation for consideration for promotion to commander-in-chief, SHADO operations. I am aware that the Commission may have other candidates in mind from other services, but please remember, it will take time for one of these to become familiar enough with our operation to actually take command. And time is one of the things SHADO doesn't have an abundance of.

"As I'm sure you've surmised, General, one of the officers I have in mind is Colonel Elizabeth Kathryn Komack. Her record speaks for itself. The other officer is, equally obviously, Colonel Paul Jerome Foster. Although he hasn't been with us as long as some others, his record also speaks for itself. He has repeatedly proven himself capable as a commander, despite his age. And before the Commission can raise any objections to that, please recall that he's about the same age I was when they decided I should head SHADO."

On the screen, Straker was smiling, as if he could see Paul Foster's reaction to his remarks. A cut-crystal wine goblet filled with a pale amber liquid sat on the desk on the screen.

Straker took the goblet and raised it in a toast: "To the new commander-in-chief, SHADO Operations, whoever you are. I wish you every success and good fortune."

He took a drink before continuing, cupping the goblet

in his hands. There was a pensive look on his face. "Alec, Kathryn, if you're there, Paul, General Henderson -- I hope you never have the opportunity to see this tape. But, if you are seeing it, I wish you all the best in the world and all the help God can give you."

The tape ended. Ford stopped the machine and turned off the monitor.

"When did Commander Straker make that?" Colonel Gray asked the operative.

"He gave me the tape and his instructions just before he left for Cape Canaveral with Colonel Collins," the uniformed man told him.

"You're joking!" Foster exclaimed. He turned to the others. "But, if Ed believed what John was saying, if he believed that Collins was dangerous, why did he go ahead anyway?"

Gray answered. "Because he'd already said he was going to go. Because SID absolutely had to be repaired, one way or another. Because I didn't have any proof at the time, but if I were right, then Collins had to be isolated, away from any SHADO installation."

"I suspect he also gave contingency orders to Sky-Diver," Henderson added.

"Yes, sir," Ford confirmed, "When he gave me the tape, the commander also had coded orders sent to Captain Waterman. He told me to transmit the confirmation code if anything 'untoward' happened to him."

"How did he define 'untoward'?" Henderson asked.

"He told me to use my judgment," Ford said with a faint smile.

"That order would have been for Sky-One to destroy the capsule on re-entry, wouldn't it?" Lake asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm glad I didn't have to send that confirmation order."

"Would you have?" Freeman asked quietly.

Ford's expression turned thoughtful. "Commander Straker trusted me to make the proper decision. I think I would have done it, if necessary, simply to validate his trust.

I did ask him, at the time, why he didn't want Colonel Foster or Colonel Gray to give the order. He told me he didn't want to have to put Colonel Foster in a position to have to make that particular decision."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Henderson said after a moment. "That will be all."

Ford nodded and left, leaving the video tape on the desk.

"After everything, he didn't think I'd be able to pull the trigger on him," Foster mused to himself. "You know though," he continued, "as much as I hate to admit it, I think Ed's right. Except for a spate of sightings while SID was down, there's been a marked drop off in U.F.O. sightings in the last six months. I don't know what they're waiting for either, but the problems of a change of command down here would make it a perfect time for them to stage a mass attack."

"Do you think they're capable of a mass attack?" Henderson asked.

"I know Straker thought so two months ago," Foster told him. "I don't know anything that would've changed his mind."

"You're probably right, then," Henderson agreed, then he exploded: "Damn him, anyway!"

The SHADO officers gaped at him in surprise.

"Straker," Henderson grated. "Ed Straker is undoubtedly one of the most brilliant officers I've ever known, and one of the most politically naive. No matter who I'd like to recommend to take over here, the political reality is that the Commission won't accept either of you. They're going to want someone with a documentable military background, and that leaves out SHADO. And with the present administration, there's no reason to believe the U.S. government won't still insist that SHADO's commander be an American."

"Yeah, I can see where that leaves us out," Foster agreed.

"Who do you think they will assign then?" Gray asked.

"Off hand, I'd suggest Braedon over at Langley, or Tanner at Edwards," Henderson replied.

"In either case, we are looking at a minimum of a month before my people can grant either of them proper clearance so they could be considered for appointment, assuming the Commission accepts my recommendations," Natiroff pointed out quietly. "I'm told that some members were unhappy that Commander Straker selected a Soviet Army officer to be his chief of internal security."

"Well, no matter how the recommendations are made, we still need an acting commanding officer," Lake said.

"Which means," Henderson completed, "One of you will have to be temporarily promoted to the position."

"And be demoted when the new guy comes on board,"

Foster concluded. He obviously didn't like the notion.

"There is one person I know who's qualified on all the counts named," Komack stated thoughtfully. The others looked over at her in surprise. "And, SHADO security certainly won't have any problems clearing him, since he already has full clearance for all SHADO documents." She gave Freeman a sly grin and he grinned back as he caught the direction her thoughts were taking.

"Yeah, and he has the added advantage that if Ed does recover, we won't have to demote him, or shuffle one of them off into a corner somewhere," Freeman added. The others looked at him, confused frowns on their faces.

Komack turned back to Henderson: "General, SHADO doesn't have a mandatory retirement age."

Henderson stared at her a long moment. "Elizabeth Kathryn Komack, are you offering me the job?" He looked at Freeman and the other man nodded.

"You've been fighting Straker for it since day one," Freeman pointed out. "Now you've got your chance."

Komack looked around at the others: "Well?"

Foster and Lake were grinning and shaking their heads.

Gray looked thoughtful: "I call it an elegant solution to our immediate problem. The Commission can hardly object to you as our temporary commander-in-chief, at least until they've located a replacement." He looked around at the others: "Are we agreed?"

Foster laughed. "Straker is going to freak when he finds out."

"If he finds out," Henderson reminded him gently.

**Henderson thumbed the intercom switch on the desk:
"Lieutenant Ford, inform the Commission that I've
assumed temporary command of SHADO operations, then
pass the word along to Moonbase and the other operational
groups. Tell them simply that Commander Straker's taken
critically ill and has been hospitalized."**

**"Yes, sir," Ford acknowledged. Henderson turned
back to the officers in the room.**

**"Ladies and gentlemen, I think it's time we got to
work."**

**As they turned to leave the office, Henderson
remembered something.**

**"Colonel Foster," he called. "A U.F.O. got through the
defenses yesterday morning. Straker got one, but I wouldn't
bet that was the only one that got through."**

"Yes, sir, I'll get right on it," Foster assured him.

**Then, he left as General James L. Henderson settled in
behind the wide slate and chrome desk that dominated the
office of SHADO's commander-in-chief.**

CHAPTER 14

Freeman decided he needed a cup of coffee before heading to his small office. He wasn't looking forward to filling out all those report forms he needed to finish in regards to the building project in Alaska.

The door to the crew lounge was open and the voices inside sounded familiar. He stepped inside to find Kathryn Komack sitting with a couple of operatives on break: Ayshea Johnson, Charlie Anderson, and Major Natiroff.

Johnson looked uncomfortable. "Everybody's making so much more of it than there was," she was complaining.

"Making so much of what?" Freeman wondered aloud.

"My dinner with Commander Straker last week,"

Johnson replied. "Nothing happened."

"You like Commander Straker, don't you?" Komack asked. Her voice was gentle.

Johnson nodded again, and gave her a shy little smile.

"I've never had any trouble with him," the girl responded.

Anderson made a face. "I mean, he does have his bad days," she amended.

"And weeks, and months," Anderson put in.

Johnson glared at Anderson, then went on: "He's kind of like the weather. You know when a storm's brewing, but, it always blows over. He never apologizes for it, but he never asks any of us to do anything he wouldn't do himself. If there's an alert, or some other problem where we have to stay down here all night, he's always here, too.

"He's kind of like an elemental force. You can't take him too personally," she concluded.

"Yeah, for a guy with a stressful job, the commander

doesn't always handle stress all that well," Anderson observed wryly.

"That's true enough," Freeman commented. They all recalled tongue lashings in Straker's office. Not that those reprimands weren't deserved, but the coldness of the tone was strictly dependent on how well the rest of world was treating him that day.

"But, you know," Anderson said thoughtfully. "It's not true that he won't apologize for things. He just won't apologize for getting mad when you've made a stupid mistake, but he'll do it, if it turns out it the error was his, or it was something he thought he should have caught first."

"And when did that happen?" Natiroff wondered. Anderson grinned. "About a year ago." His grin faded as he recalled the incident. "The aliens had put an underwater dome or something off the coast. The commander and Colonel Foster went to investigate it and saw someone who looked just like me in the dome. They thought it was me and hauled me off to detention. Turns out, the aliens had made doubles of everybody down here, including me. When it was all over, Commander Straker explained the mix-up.

"You know, I was all ready to hate his guts over how I was arrested and interrogated, and then he apologized. He admitted he'd handled it badly. He actually said he was sorry."

"You don't hate him over it?" Freeman asked.

"No," Anderson shrugged. "Like Ayshea says, he's like an elemental force. You shouldn't get mad if you're fool enough put up a tall mast in a storm and it gets hit by

lightning."

**"That's a good line, Anderson," Freeman chuckled.
"I'll remember that one. Was Turner 'putting up a tall
mast'?"**

**Johnson shook her head: "No, I don't think so. Rob
was good at his job. I don't think Commander Straker ever
said more than two words to him. You know, I still can't
believe he did it."**

**"Which?" Komack asked. "Turner betraying SHADO
or Commander Straker shooting him?"**

**"Either, both," Johnson replied. "I know Rob had
some problems. He had a lot of anger, a lot of jealousy,
inside. But, going to the aliens is so extreme. And,
Commander Straker simply isn't a physically violent person.
It's not his style."**

**"Was Turner jealous of the commander?" Freeman
asked.**

**"Yes, I suppose so," Johnson admitted. "Commander
Straker needed an escort to this dinner with Sir Esmond
and he asked me to go with him. I know he was
uncomfortable with the idea of asking me to do it. As far as
I know, he's never gone out with any of the girls down here.**

**"Any way, he and Sir Esmond picked me up at my flat
at about seven-thirty and we went to the dinner. I didn't
know anybody there and it wasn't as fun as I thought it
would be. When it was over, the commander offered to buy
me coffee before taking me home and we walked over to this
club. Turned out that General Henderson and his wife were
there and so we had coffee and dessert with them and
listened to the band. About midnight, he took me home."**

"Is that all that happened?" Natiroff insisted.

"That was all. The commander and General Henderson talked a little about business. The commander got upset with him. The general asked me some questions, privately, about how Commander Straker was handling what had happened to Colonel Collins. But, the commander was every bit the gentleman with me. I even invited him up to my flat. He said no. He didn't even try to give me a good night kiss."

"What about Turner?" Freeman asked.

"Rob was waiting for me when I got home that night. He was furious. He accused me of sleeping with Commander Straker and he wouldn't believe me when I said we hadn't done anything like that. He called me some awful names."

"Did you tell security you were having problems with him?" Freeman asked.

"Yes," she said softly. "I told Lieutenant Evans about it the next day. But the next time I saw Rob, it was like it hadn't happened, so I didn't bother to file a written report. I didn't want to get him into trouble."

*** * ***

Outside the lounge, Freeman turned to Komack. "I still don't get it. It doesn't make sense for Turner to go to the aliens over a girl."

"Since when does insane jealousy need a reason, Alec?" Komack asked him.

"If that's all it was," Freeman said. "Katie, why did Henderson really call you back here?"

Komack suddenly became very solemn. "He said he

was worried about Ed. Jackson had contacted him saying that the commander didn't seem to be handling Craig's death at all well. His stress levels were extremely high and he was showing of signs of clinical depression - loss of appetite, extreme moodiness, sleep problems, that sort of thing."

"Isn't that understandable?" Freeman asked. "Ed and Craig were together on a mission when Craig died. Of course, Ed's likely to get depressed over something like that. So would I. We're not robots, you know."

"I know that, Alec," Komack said. "But something was eating him up inside, something he wouldn't talk to Shroeder or Jackson about. He was flat out refusing to come in for a check-up, even after they'd made it a medical order."

Freeman considered what she was saying. "Maybe he was feeling guilty because he's the one who came back. Craig was a good friend. The aliens destroyed his mind and Ed had to destroy his body."

"You don't accept his report that Craig died of an accident, then?" Komack asked.

"Of course not, do you?"

"No," the woman admitted thoughtfully. "But there's more to it than just Craig's death. He told me he wanted out, that SHADO had stolen everything he'd ever valued, and was after his soul. He said he wanted to quit before he ended up putting a bullet in his brain."

Freeman shook his head in disbelief. "He said that? What did Jackson say?"

"He said it wasn't a good sign, especially since Ed

keeps a loaded gun in his desk."

"You know, Katie," Freeman said. "I've talked to Ed maybe twice since I left to handle the Alaska job. I haven't talked to him at all since he came back from that mission. I thought maybe he was still upset about me walking out, but now I think it was more than that."

"Probably. He wasn't taking my calls either, until I showed up on his doorstep. He's too much a gentleman to send me packing to a hotel. I also think he was relieved to talk to somebody who wasn't required to write a report on it."

"But, you reported to Jackson anyway," Freeman pointed out.

"Alec, suicide isn't a joking matter, even if he is much too dedicated to the job to do more than talk about it," Komack replied. "And we can't assume his dedication to SHADO would be enough to stop him if something happened to push him past the brink."

"Do you think the aliens have been trying to push him past that point?" Freeman asked.

"Don't you?" Komack asked in reply.

* * *

He couldn't move, couldn't see. He was encased in a block of ice, frozen in a place of eye searing light and mind-halting noise and pain. So much pain.

He couldn't recall where he was, or why he was there.

Even who he was escaped him.

He was trapped in a bitter cold hell, and he was afraid.

Gradually, after several hours, or was it several days?, he became aware of the sursurration of human voices in the

noise around him. The voices called his name, asking him to respond. But, he couldn't speak and it was nearly impossible to move.

He was so very cold, so very tired, so very confused. He was enshrouded in an impenetrable, mind-numbing fog. Still, the voices persisted, demanding his attention. They were demanding a response, demanding and demanding.

He didn't know why. They didn't say why, but it did occur to him there must be a reason for this torture, for this fear, but he couldn't remember what it might be. He was so cold, and there was so much pain.

He had a vague foggy recollection of something awful, something terrifying. Of frozen bodies, blood, gunshots, of a U.F.O. overhead somewhere, but he couldn't remember. Other memories filtered in, his friend Craig, always laughing, forever silenced. Craig's face bloody and bloated from decompression, eyes staring blindly at his killer. He didn't want to remember. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't.

Even oblivion was preferable to remembering.

But, in the times the fog seemed to lift a little, he thought he saw people he knew, people he cared about, Alec and Kate, even General Henderson. They seemed so worried. Or, were they all illusions?

He couldn't tell, anymore. He was so cold and so very tired.

He wanted the voices to go away.

He wanted to die and the voices wouldn't let him.

** * **

It was a Sunday morning. The sky was overcast and the weather bureau was predicting rain as Freeman drove over

to Mayland Hospital.

Again, the SHADO officer brought with him a briefcase full of paperwork to look over. He'd forgotten how difficult a change in command could be. It had been years since he'd been involved in something like that. Not since he'd joined SHADO, in fact.

General Henderson had ordered a full personnel and budget evaluation on all SHADO operations. Luckily for Freeman, Straker had always been a stickler for accurate and timely reports. They were all filed and computerized for ready access.

Freeman was glad, however, he hadn't taken the job Komack had opted for. She had assumed the management of Harlington-Straker Studios. Henderson had refused to even consider taking on that particular headache.

Officially, she was now vice-president in charge of operations and they were now in the midst of a full scale audit. The studio records had turned out to be as chaotic as SHADO's records were orderly. Freeman didn't envy her that chore at all.

SHADO's funding came from taxpayers' money from every civilized nation on Earth. Harlington-Straker Film Studios were, in theory, self-supporting. They had the deserved reputation of being moderately successful at making forgettable low-budget films and award winning television commercials. They had three television series in residence, from two different production companies, using four sound stages. Five other stages were presently rented out to two other film companies, with all the headaches demanding tenants create.

No, Freeman did not envy Kathryn Komack in her new position. But he did wonder if Komack would let Straker have the business back, if and when he recovered. She had discovered she liked running a real company.

Freeman entered the hospital room, as he had done each morning for these past four days. Nurse Dunnigarth, the short, pretty one, was waiting and greeted him with long needed good news.

"Ah, Mister Freeman, it's good to see you again," she said. "Mister Straker's started fighting back a little, especially when we have to suction the mucus out of his trachea and bronchi."

"I don't blame him," Freeman admitted. "It can't feel very good being hooked up to all these machines. What about his temperature?"

The nurse shook her head. "Still over 103 even with the refrigeration blanket. We just don't know why his temperature's so high."

Freeman walked over to the bed and as he had every morning, he greeted his friend: "Hi Ed, it's me, Alec. How're you doing?"

For the first time since Straker was admitted to the hospital, five long days before, he opened his eyes at Freeman's greeting. There was no recognition in his face, only pain and perhaps a touch of puzzlement.

"Mister Straker, Ed," Nurse Dunnigarth said, "Eddie, I want you to blink your eyes. Can you do that? Can you do that for me?"

The sense of puzzlement seemed to deepen but after a long moment, Straker blinked. Not a reflex blink, but a

slow, deliberate closing and opening of his eyes. Freeman gave a silent sigh of relief as Nurse Dunnigarth gave more instructions for simple actions. Straker was able to comply with the simplest of them before tiring and closing his eyes, turning his face away from the nurse.

"This means he's going to be okay, right?" Freeman asked.

"I think so," Dunnigarth admitted. "Mister Straker's no longer in a coma. That's a good sign."

*** * ***

In film and on T.V., a comatose patient simply wakes up and is perfectly normal, able to go home in a few days. Reality isn't as simple or straightforward.

It was Tuesday before Straker's temperature stopped going to life-threatening heights every time the refrigeration blanket was turned off. By that time, he was also breathing on his own so the respirator could be discontinued, and the hole in his throat closed. His kidneys finally regained some of their function, so the dialysis machine was moved out.

Despite his improving condition, there was still no sign that he knew, or cared, where he was. It was hard to tell if he even recognized his friends and associates when they came in, but he was improving.

Frazer upgraded his condition to 'serious'.

CHAPTER 15

Major General George H. McGruder of the United States Air Force was one of the few outsiders who even knew that SHADO existed beyond a name. Originally with SAC, he was now in the process of taking over the leadership of the U.S. Air Force in Europe.

McGruder was a short, grizzled haired man who, even out of uniform, looked as though he should be in uniform. He had a reputation of utter military correctness, of liking everything 'by the book'.

Freeman was waiting with the studio's Rolls Royce Silver Shadow limousine when McGruder's jet landed at Mildenhall Air Force base. The general gave a sniff of disapproval at Freeman's dark brown worsted business suit as the SHADO officer introduced himself.

Freeman ushered the older man into the rear seat of the car and got in himself. They were followed by McGruder's aide, Colonel Anthony Sprenger.

The gray uniformed chauffeur shut the car door behind them and got into the driver's seat. The Rolls purred as they left the Air Force base and headed for London and SHADO H.Q.

"I was looking forward to meeting your Commander Straker," McGruder was saying. "But, I understand he had to be hospitalized last week. I hope it isn't anything serious."

"He's getting better, General," Freeman responded. "In the meantime, General Henderson has assumed command at SHADO headquarters."

McGruder turned to Sprenger: "I believe you know General Henderson, don't you, Colonel?"

"Yes, sir," Sprenger admitted. "I worked with the general's staff at the time SHADO was being planned. I like to think I was instrumental in its approval."

Sprenger smiled, but it was a smile that did not extend to his eyes. His teeth were large and yellow, his skin sallow and scarred. His hair was black, with gray at his temples. Sprenger's eyes were so dark the pupils were invisible, and the whites showed all around. Snake eyes, some people called them, said to be the sign of a fanatic or a madman.

Freeman wondered which it was.

*** * ***

The drive to Harlington-Straker Studios was uneventful. Within two hours, the limousine had passed the main gates to the studio complex. McGruder and his assistant were ushered past Miss Ealand and into the executive office.

Sprenger stopped in front of the glass shelves on the far side of the office. On the shelves stood a collection of film and television industry awards. The gold and crystal display included two awards from the British Academy of Motion Pictures and one from the American Academy.

"Are these real?" Sprenger wondered.

"Yes," Freeman said.

"Straker won these?"

"The studio's won them," Freeman explained. "We've never won 'Best Picture', but we've picked up a couple on the technical side and a few for television."

"I hadn't realized how successful the studios had become," Sprenger said. "I remember the original proposal for using a film company as security cover was simply based

on the idea that no one would bother to notice strange goings on or equipment being shipped in if it could be explained away as a film prop."

"That's still true," Freeman said. "But we also make pretty decent movies."

"How much is all this worth?" McGruder asked. He looked around at the modern art work on the walls.

"Theoretically, the studios are worth millions," Freeman answered. The officer stepped over to the desk and opened the cigarette box. "Freeman," he announced into the box.

"Voice Print Identification positive, nine-seven, Freeman, Alec E." the computer voice announced. Freeman flipped the switch under the edge of the desk.

Both Sprenger and McGruder started as the entire room began to move downwards.

"Interesting," McGruder commented.

The two American military officers seemed even more impressed upon entering the brightly lit concrete cavern of SHADO Control. A few SHADO operatives glanced up from their duties to give the small group a momentary curious glance, then went back to their work.

"Amazing," McGruder commented. "All this, and no one even knows it's here. I'm impressed."

"I'm glad you like it, George," James Henderson said, walking up to them.

"Jim!" McGruder exclaimed, pumping Henderson's hand. "How long has it been?"

"About six years, isn't it?" Henderson responded. "My retirement party?"

"I thought you'd stayed on this side of the Atlantic because you liked the climate," McGruder said. "Now your boy here tells me you've taken over this toy shop."

"No, I'm just watching the store until Commander Straker gets back on his feet," Henderson replied.

"Some store," McGruder commented appreciatively as one of the female operatives stepped over to Henderson and handed him a clip board.

"Sky-diver authorization, sir," she murmured.

Henderson glanced at the papers and initialed them, handing the board back to her. McGruder stared after the young woman as she walked away. Her lightweight uniform merely accented her figure.

"I am amazed." McGruder stated. "All this to chase down little green men and their flying saucers. We all thought you were a little nuts when you first suggested this whole setup."

"U.F.O.'s are real, George. And, those not-so-little green men are very dangerous," Henderson informed him.

"That's why SHADO exists."

"Have you managed to capture any aliens, General?" Sprenger asked.

Henderson glanced at Freeman, who answered:

"We've captured two. They both died."

"Oh?"

"The aliens don't adjust well to Earth's atmosphere. Neither do their ships," explained Freeman.

"So, why do they risk coming here?" McGruder asked.

Freeman shrugged. "Resources, bodies, organ transplant material, who knows what else?"

**"What's SHADO's success rate against them, so far?"
asked Sprenger.**

**"Ninety to ninety-five percent destruction rate before
reaching Earth's atmosphere. The rest are taken care of by
Sky-divers and ground units," Freeman answered.**

**"How many have reached Earth?" Sprenger wanted to
know.**

**"Six have reached the atmosphere in the past twelve
months," Freeman stated. "Four of those caused damage
on Earth."**

"Out of how many?"

**"Seventy-seven," Freeman replied. "There has been a
marked drop off in attacks recently."**

"How do you explain that?" McGruder asked.

"I can't," replied Freeman. He checked his watch.

**"I'm sorry, but I have to get going. I have a lunch
appointment with Colonel Komack. Studio business."**

Sprenger looked surprised. "Colonel Komack?"

**Henderson nodded. "You remember Kathryn Komack,
don't you Colonel?"**

**"As I recall, there were some heated discussions over
whether or not she was suitable for such a high security
position," Sprenger said. "No disrespect intended, General.
I know she's a relative, but I never did consider a degree in
business as being adequate for involvement in such a highly
classified military operation."**

**"Kathryn's done a lot of good work for SHADO. She's
been running our cover operation for us since Straker went
into the hospital," Henderson told him.**

"I'd heard that you people were hot on sexual equality

and all that," McGruder commented. "I'd like to meet this Colonel Komack. Maybe she can join us for dinner."

"I'll ask her," Freeman promised without much enthusiasm. He turned and began to walk away.

"Colonel Freeman," Henderson called. Freeman halted as Henderson stepped over to him. "I know you don't like Sprenger," Henderson said quietly. "But, SHADO needs McGruder's cooperation."

"What time should I tell her to be ready?" Freeman asked.

"How about if you both meet us at my club at eight o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Freeman drove his Saab into the parking garage beneath the Zodiac club, pulling into the parking space designated by the garage attendant seated in a kiosk at the entrance. The garage was nearly full. One of the niceties the Zodiac offered was 'free' parking privileges for its full members.

There was a classic, powder-blue, 1966 Ford Mustang convertible parked nearby.

Freeman liked well-designed aircraft and well-designed cars, the faster, the better. His own car was a black Saab 900 Turbo. He was aware he got a lot of envious looks whenever he drove it onto the studio lot, but only SHADO's armorer and very few others knew exactly how complex and sophisticated this particular car was. He did, however, have a particular fondness for the '66 Mustang, especially that one. He had made several offers to buy it from Straker.

So far, Straker had refused to sell.

Komack and Freeman took the small elevator up to the main floor of the club, bypassing the leaded glass double entry doors. They walked over to the porter's lodge.

"Good evening, Donall. Has the general arrived?"

Komack asked the porter.

Despite the years since their last visit, the porter still recognized both of them.

"Yes, Miss Komack, General Henderson and his guests are already in the main dining room," he replied. "Miss Komack, I was distressed to hear that Colonel Straker had fallen ill. If there's anything we here at the club can do, you know you need but ask."

"Thank you, Donall. I'll keep that in mind," Komack promised.

Donall beckoned to a liveried page. "Show Miss Komack and Colonel Freeman to General Henderson's table."

Komack and Freeman followed the page across the entry hall, down the marble staircase and through the tall double doors to the main dining room.

Despite the full garage, there weren't many diners. The pre-theater crowd had already left. The after theater groups that frequented the Zodiac would not show until well after ten.

Henderson, McGruder and Sprenger were already seated at a white damask covered table. They had a clear view of the atrium garden beyond and the low stage where a jazz quartet would be playing later.

The head steward was waiting behind Komack's chair.

He had already placed the menu cards beside the plates.

The Zodiac's kitchen was an excellent one, though it would be hard to say if it were because or in spite of the menu. There were a large number of poultry and fish items and a sophisticated selection of international vegetarian dishes, but no red meat was served.

The steward took their dinner requests and beckoned the wine steward over to take their drink orders. General McGruder seemed dismayed that he couldn't order a steak, but the promise of Wolfschmidt prewar vodka mollified him a little. He ordered a double. Freeman chose a whiskey and soda, as did Sprenger. Henderson ordered a half bottle of claret while Komack ordered a Perrier with lime to go with her fruit salad.

"I take it," McGruder said to Komack and Freeman, after their drinks had arrived, "that you're members here, too?"

Freeman shook his head: "Not me. I'm not the club type, and besides, I don't believe in all the mumbo-jumbo they go into around here."

"Oh?"

Freeman gestured to the walls around them. Set into large frames on the ivory linen walls were oil enlargements of the Major Arcana of the Rider Tarot deck. "Not my cup of tea."

"And you, Miss Komack?" Sprenger asked.

"My grandfather was one of the co-founders," she informed him, bringing his attention to the large silver seal ring she was wearing on her left hand. The seal depicted a woman bearing a bundle of wheat, the sign of Virgo.

Henderson wore one too, only his ring had a goat with a fish's tail as its seal - Capricorn.

"My father is the present chairman of the board of trustees," she continued.

"What else does he do?" McGruder asked.

"Whatever he wants, mostly," she informed him with a smile. "He has an art gallery in New York, one in London, and one in Paris. He's involved in a number of business ventures in Europe and in the United States."

"And you work for SHADO," Sprenger observed.

"I have a brother who's a captain in the United States Navy, another brother runs an inn in France. I have an MBA from MIT and I'm running a film studio these days.

We're a well-diversified family, Colonel."

"And what do they know of SHADO?"

"What should they know?" Komack asked. She was no longer smiling.

"Colonel Sprenger," Henderson interrupted. "We came here to have dinner and to discuss the liaison situation, not the Komack family businesses."

"My apologies, sir," Sprenger responded. "I merely wanted to find out what type of persons SHADO has as its senior officers. As I said this morning, I was never sanguine about the lady joining Colonel Straker's little elite group."

"Our dossiers are on file, if you're interested,"

Freeman told him, voice cold.

"Yes, I have checked them," said Sprenger. "You joined Straker's little group after four years with MI5. Before that, you were with the RAF, a combat pilot with single and multiple engine ratings. An exemplary record

that you threw away to join Straker's private little army."

Any further discussion was interrupted by the arrival of the waitress with their meal. Another round of drinks was ordered. The food was excellent, as always. McGruder even complimented the poached salmon.

"Miss Komack, do you believe this mumbo-jumbo?" Sprenger probed sharply after the dessert tray had come and gone.

"Colonel, one of the foremost rules of the Zodiac concerns the right of each member to hold to their own beliefs without fear of ridicule or persecution," Komack told him. Her expression was mild as she watched for Sprenger's reaction.

McGruder interrupted before Sprenger had a chance to reply. "Jim, I was thinking it might be a good idea if we had Sprenger here manage that liaison slot you mentioned earlier."

Henderson simply raised one bushy eyebrow and waited for McGruder to continue.

"He knows something about your operation and he certainly knows how I like to run things," McGruder explained.

"I'll pass the recommendation on to the committee," Henderson promised.

Any additional comment was interrupted by the arrival of the steward with a telephone. He plugged the instrument into a phone jack set into the floor, then placed it on the table. "An urgent call for you, General," he told Henderson.

Henderson picked up the receiver: "Henderson." He listened for a few moments, then: "We'll be right over."

There was a worried frown on his face as he hung up the receiver. He beckoned the steward to remove the instrument.

"What's wrong, Jim?" McGruder asked.

Henderson shook his head. When he replied, it was to Freeman and Komack: "That was Foster. He's over at Mayland. Straker's in surgery right now. They're not sure what happened."

Komack and Freeman were out of their seats almost before Henderson had finished speaking.

"We'll meet you over there." Freeman told him, then he followed Komack out of the room at a near run.

*** * ***

The drive from the club to Mayland hospital proceeded in near silence. Both Freeman and Komack were touched with the guilty feeling that whatever the problem at the hospital was, it might have been avoided had one of them been there.

"Hello, Alec," Foster greeted as they got off the elevator on Mayland's third floor.

"Paul, what happened?" Freeman asked as Foster led the way to the surgical unit waiting area.

Foster shook his head. "We're not sure, but it looks like he tried to kill himself. One of the nurses came to investigate the alarms and he slashed her arm up pretty badly."

"Why, for God's sake?" Freeman demanded.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Foster informed him. "Security's looking into it, and we've got the security tape from his room. It looks like he had some visitors before it happened. Maybe he said something, or one of them noticed

something.

"He's in surgery now," Foster continued. "Frazer said the wounds weren't as bad as they looked. He managed to miss all the vital organs." Foster paused as he inspected Freeman's dinner jacket. "How was dinner?"

"All right, I guess," Freeman responded.

A plain-clothes SHADO security man walked up to the three officers. He was carrying a manila envelope and two video tape cartridges.

"What have we got?" Foster asked.

"Here are the security tapes from his room," the security man, Arbuthnot, said. "We can run them back through the video machine in the visitors' area."

"Let's see it, then," Freeman instructed.

The SHADO operative led them to a nearby waiting room. He pushed the first tape into the video machine below the rack mounted television monitor.

"This is the end of the first tape," Arbuthnot explained as a picture came on the screen. "This is the visitor coming into the room." On the tape, Straker appeared to be asleep as a middle-aged woman walked in. Suddenly, the video picture tore and then went black.

"That's the end of that recording," the security man explained.

He pressed the eject button and replaced the first tape with the second. "There's about fifteen minutes between that and this."

"Why is that?" Freeman wondered.

Arbuthnot sighed. "That's one of the things we're looking into, sir. It shouldn't have happened. The machines

were synchronized to have a one minute overlap during change-over. Naturally, the problem occurred at just the time this 'incident' happened." He started the machine and the second tape began to play.

This time, Straker was obviously awake. He was struggling with a woman in a light colored uniform. Dark blood stained the bed covers and splattered the floor. There was something shiny in Straker's right hand and he brought it down on her arm. More blood stained the covers. Two male orderlies ran into the room and proceeded to subdue him, forcing the object out of his hand. It fell to the floor as Straker stopped struggling and collapsed back into the bed.

The expression on his face of one of blind terror.

Komack shuddered and turned off the machine.

"Is this all we have?" Freeman asked. There was slight tremor in his voice.

"We do have this blowup from the first security tape, sir," Arbuthnot said, handing Freeman the envelope.

"We're checking with the hospital staff to identify the woman."

Freeman pulled a photograph from the envelope and inspected it. Foster looked over his shoulder. The picture was of an attractive woman of indeterminate age. It was hard to say from the black-and-white print, but her hair looked to be a light brown or ash blonde.

Freeman swore to himself and handed the photograph to Foster. Komack peered over his arm at the print.

"This is Mary Rutland," Komack announced.

"You know her?" Foster sounded surprised.

"Yes, she's Ed's ex-wife," Komack informed him. "Her

mother's a patient here, up on nine."

"We'll get someone out to talk to her," Foster said.

Komack shook her head, "No, I'll do it." She paused, glancing at Freeman's stony expression. She turned back at Foster. "Do you want to come along?"

CHAPTER 16

Mary Rutland lived with her husband and year-old daughter in a large cottage about thirty miles from the studio and the hospital. Despite being so late, there were several lights showing through the windows of the main floor when Foster and Komack drove up.

"Let me handle the questions, okay?" Komack asked as they got out of Foster's Corvette.

"Sure." Foster didn't mind. "By the way, why did you ask me to come out here with you, instead of Alec?"

Komack closed the car door. "This is a very difficult situation, Paul."

"I noticed Alec's reaction to her picture," Foster said.

"He doesn't seem to like her much."

"No, he doesn't," Komack admitted. "I asked you because I felt you would be a more objective observer, considering the circumstances."

"Thank you, I think," replied Foster. He knocked on the front door to the cottage. There was the sound of movement inside and the door opened.

A heavy set, bearded man opened the door.

"Hello, Katie," the man said, recognizing Komack. "What a surprise, we didn't know you were over here." He noticed the grim expression on her face. "What's going on?"

"Hello, Steven," Komack said. "We need to talk to Mary. It's important."

"Steven? Who is it?" A woman's voice called. It was the woman from the photograph. Foster noted that the picture hadn't really done her justice. Her hair was ash

blonde. Her eyes matched the pale blue of her night dress.

"It's Kate Komack," Steven said. "She says it's important."

"Kate, have you any idea what time it is?" Mary Rutland asked.

"I do know what time it is. And yes, I'm afraid there is something wrong," Komack told her.

Mary seated herself in an overstuffed chair. She gestured for Foster and Komack to sit on the sofa opposite the chair. Her husband came and stood behind her.

"Mary and Steven Rutland." Komack introduced.

"This is Paul Foster, from work." She paused, considering her approach. "Mary, I need to talk to you about Ed."

Mary Rutland's expression froze. "I thought we agreed after Johnny died that we'd never discuss Ed Straker."

"You leave me no choice. You were in his room this evening at the hospital," Komack said. "We have the tapes from the nurses' monitors."

"You know, it's been nearly two years since Johnny died," Mary said. There was a catch in her voice and she clasped her hands together so tightly her knuckles turned white.

"Yes, I know," Komack said.

"I've been in therapy for the past year, trying to learn to deal with it," the woman explained. Her husband began to massage her shoulders.

"Mary, you don't have to tell her this, you know," he told her.

"Yes, she does," Komack contradicted. Rutland looked at her in surprise. "Either we talk about this now, or you

both talk to the authorities later."

"Why?" he demanded. "What happened?"

"Steven, it's all right," Mary said, patting her husband's hand. She turned back to Komack. "My therapist suggested about a month ago that now would be a good time to talk to Ed about Johnny's death, about what happened. I called Ed's office at the studios several times, but he never got back to me."

"So you decided to visit him in the hospital?" Foster asked.

"Yes, I was at the hospital anyway, to see my mother. Her surgery was this morning. I thought I'd drop in and see how Ed was doing, talk to him," the woman said. She clasped her hands together nervously. "I figured that if he was confined to a hospital bed, he wouldn't be getting any calls to leave suddenly."

"And?"

Mary Rutland looked upset. "Ed was never there when I needed him. He was always having to leave. Even when Johnny was born, he had to leave. He couldn't even stick around the night Johnny died."

As she spoke, her voice became more shrill, more venomous. She paused to take a deep breath and regain control of herself.

"This time, he was there, but he still wasn't," she continued, more calmly. "It was like there was a wall around him I couldn't get through. He didn't say a word, just kept staring off into space. I'm afraid I lost my temper. I finally got up the courage to face him and he still wasn't there!" She started to cry.

"What did you say to him?" Komack asked.

"I don't remember, exactly," Mary admitted. "I think I called him some names. I just don't remember." She looked over at Komack suddenly worried. "Kate, did something happen after I left?"

Komack didn't answer the question directly. "Mary, did you hand Ed anything that might have been used as a weapon, a knife or a pen, anything like that?"

"What sort of question is that?" Rutland asked.

His wife shook her head. "Of course I didn't. Why?"

"While you were on his floor, did you notice anything odd, or out of place? A person who didn't fit in?" Komack asked.

"Something did happen, didn't it?" Mary said.

"Please answer the question, Mrs. Rutland," Foster said. "Did you notice anything when you were there?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. Then she stopped, her forehead creasing in a frown. "No, wait, there was something. There was a man in a lab coat waiting by the elevators. I got the weirdest, sort of clammy, feeling when I looked at him. It was creepy." She shuddered slightly at the memory. "Like someone walked on my grave."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

Foster asked.

"Yes, I think so," Mary replied. "As a matter of fact, I thought I did recognize him, but then I remembered it was impossible."

"Why?" Foster asked.

"He looked like Ed's old air force buddy, Craig, but I thought he died a couple months ago. Some sort of

accident," Mary Rutland answered, speaking to Komack.

"Yes, Collins' plane disappeared over the ocean. No trace," Komack affirmed. "Did you try to talk to the man?"

"No, when I left Ed's room, he was gone," she said.

"Kate, what's happened?"

"A little more than an hour ago, Ed Straker tried to kill himself. He injured one of the nurses who came to stop him," Komack answered.

"Why would he want to kill himself?" Steven Rutland demanded. "The man's a brass-plated SOB. That kind doesn't commit suicide."

"You don't know him very well," Komack replied. There were daggers in her ice green eyes. She turned back to Mary. "Did it ever occur to you, or your therapist, that maybe Ed wasn't ready to deal with Johnny's death? Not right now? Did it ever occur to you that there might have been a good reason he wasn't returning your calls?"

Komack's voice became harsh and bitter. "One of Ed's closest friends just died and you want to go and open old wounds?"

Foster put a hand on her arm. "Kate, calm down," he said quietly.

She took a deep breath. "I agreed not to discuss him with you because I knew how much you hurt because of what happened between the two of you," Komack said more calmly. "But, I am sick and tired of the blame you've been heaping on him since. He wouldn't defend himself even when he could and now you attack him when he can't. You fight dirty, Mary Jeanne Rutland."

Steven Rutland moved to defend his wife. "Katie, I

know you're in love with him, but what kind of man spends the night with another woman when his wife's eight months pregnant?"

"And what makes you think any of those allegations are even true?" Komack shot back.

"Ed didn't contest the evidence at the divorce proceedings," Mary pointed out.

"Of course not," Komack said. "But it wasn't because it was true. You married a brilliant, dedicated, high ranking officer in American air force intelligence. He was assigned a highly classified job that required him to work sixteen hours a day, seven days a week."

"A job that was more important to him than his wife?" Mary wondered, voice trembling.

"A job that was, and is, more important to him than his own life," Komack answered.

"I can't believe any business is that important," Steven said. "He runs a movie company, for God's sake."

"Does he? Mary never saw his discharge papers. She never saw any checks for the pension he should have been receiving even with an early retirement," Komack stated, very quietly. Ruland suddenly looked puzzled and uncertain.

"There were pictures," Mary protested. "And he accepted the blame in the divorce."

"Mary, do you know what happened to the detective your mother hired to follow Ed ten years ago?" Komack asked, suddenly very quiet.

"No, I don't," Mary admitted. "I never heard from him after he turned over the pictures and the observation notes."

Komack gave her a bitter smile. "You didn't hear from him because he was found floating, face down, in the Thames about a week later."

"How do you know that?" Rutland demanded.

Komack ignored Rutland's question and continued to address his wife. "The official report said he'd been stabbed and robbed, his body thrown into the river."

"Did Ed know about it?" Mary asked.

"Yes, he did," she told her. "The man's name was Thorndyke and he knew a lot more than he told you, such as, Ed was never alone with the woman you accused him of sleeping with. Thorndyke tried to take advantage of the other things he found out and died for it. It took a while, but Ed finally took the hint and moved out on you. It damn near killed him, but he didn't have much of a choice. It was either walk away from you or let you be killed and maybe Johnny with you. The people he works for aren't always real particular about niceties like that."

Mary Rutland went pale. "Why didn't he ever say anything? I might have understood."

"That would have been signing your death warrant," Komack replied quietly. "He loved you enough to leave you to save your life. You returned the favor by twisting the knife in his heart every chance you got. You took away his son's name. You even denied him the right to attend his own son's funeral and he let you do it. I hope you're pleased with yourself. He may not live through the night." Komack's voice had become an angry hiss.

Mary Rutland had tears running down her face. "He never said anything. He never once said a word."

"Of course not," Komack told her. "And you wouldn't have believed him if he had."

"Why should we believe you now?" wondered Rutland.

"Frankly, I no longer care if you do or not," Komack replied.

Foster's pager buzzed and he pulled it from his jacket pocket. He noted the number on the tiny gray screen. "Is there a phone I can use?" he asked Rutland.

Rutland nodded. "There's one on the table by the door."

With a nod of thanks, Foster went over to the phone and placed a call. He listened briefly, then hung up.

"Ed's out of surgery. We should get back."

Rutland followed Komack and Foster to the door.

"Look, I'm sorry Straker's having so much trouble." He actually looked contrite.

"I'm sorry I got Mary so upset," Komack responded. "But after what's happened tonight, I can't let it go on. Ed never meant to hurt her, ever."

"I know you believe that, even if I don't," Rutland assured her.

"Steven, in all the years you've been married to her, in all the years Ed came on visitations to see his son, you never once actually talked to him, did you?"

"I never saw much point in it," admitted Rutland. "He was Johnny's father and he had his rights. I didn't have to like it, I just had to accept it. There's no law that says I have to like my wife's ex-husband."

"No, there isn't," Komack agreed stiffly. "But you didn't have to go out of your way to hurt him, did you?"

Once again, the troubled look came into the man's face.

Foster pulled a business card from his wallet and handed it to Rutland. "If Mrs. Rutland happens to remember anything more about what happened at the hospital, she can leave a message at that number."

"I'll make sure she gets this," Steven Rutland promised.

Moments later, Foster and Komack were in the Corvette, heading back to Mayland Hospital.

"I'm not sure I was much help," Foster commented.

"You got pretty upset in there."

"You were more help than you realize," Komack told him. "Alec would have lost it worse than I did. Alec can be quite protective of Ed."

Foster considered her comment, then: "I hadn't realized Ed's divorce was so bitter."

"Oh, yes," Komack replied. "He lost nearly everything he had in the settlement and he never said a word in protest. Mary turned around and found a nice, dependable man in the construction trade who didn't work all hours of the day and night and who was willing to take care of her and her son."

"That was the 'Johnny' you were talking about?"

"Their son. John died nearly two years ago. He was eight and a half years old," she told him. "He was hit by a car in front of the house, died a few hours later at the hospital. Mary blamed Ed for his death."

"Why? What could he have done about it?" Foster wondered.

"I'm not clear on the details of the accident, but I know

SHADO was on alert that night. Ed couldn't stay at the hospital with them, and the arrangements he'd made for a special drug to be flown in from New York fell through because of the alert," Komack told him. "I got a copy of the autopsy report, later. The drug wouldn't have saved the boy in any case. If he had lived, he would have ended up a vegetable. But, she still blames him for it all."

"You seem to know her pretty well." Foster observed.

"I'm the one who first introduced them. She worked for my father in his London gallery. She was an art buyer, a very good one." Komack smiled at a far off memory. "We roomed together the year I went to Oxford. When Ed's assignment with my uncle kept him in England, I talked him into bringing a buddy along on a date. As a matter of fact, it was Craig Collins."

"What happened?"

"I've never seen anybody fall so hard so fast for anybody in my entire life as Ed did for Mary. Craig ended up driving me home and neither of us saw hide nor hair of either of them for nearly three days. They drove to Scotland on a lark. Four months later, they were married."

"That was fast work," Foster commented.

"If they'd had their way, they'd've eloped in Scotland."

"What stopped them?"

"Ed had to have permission and since he was marrying a non-citizen, it took a little time. Then Mary's mother insisted they have a proper wedding, church and all. That also takes time."

"And now she hates him?" Foster asked.

"Bitterly angry is probably more accurate," Komack

said. "She's always refused to understand that Ed's not the villain of the piece. He's as much a victim in this ugly mess as she is."

"So, you haven't talked about it until tonight."

"I was trying to keep a certain amount of peace."

Komack said. "I'm sure I'll regret losing my temper like that."

"You took a big risk telling them as much as you did, especially in front of me," Foster pointed out.

"I didn't tell Mary anything she didn't already know, except for the part about Thorndyke being killed," Komack explained.

"Was that true? Did SHADO have him killed?"

"Thorndyke has the dubious honor of being the only civilian SHADO has ever carried out a termination order on," Komack said.

"And Ed's the one who gave the order?"

"Oh no," Komack said with a quick shake of her head.

"General Henderson signed the order. Alec Freeman counter-signed it. Ed actually tried to stop it when he found out, but it was too late."

The car phone buzzed and Foster picked it up.

"Foster." He listened for a moment, then handed the receiver to Komack. "It's for you. Amanda Henderson?"

Komack took the instrument. "Yes?"

"Esther woke up screaming about two hours ago," Foster heard a woman's voice say over the phone. "When I finally got her calmed down, she demanded I find you. Jim's office finally traced you down to this number."

"Has she gone back to bed?" Komack asked.

"No," Mrs. Henderson replied. "She insists on talking to you first. Considering how upset she is, I wasn't going to argue."

"Okay, put her on," Komack replied with a smile.

"Mommy?" a child's voice said over the phone.

"Yes, Esther," Komack responded. "Were you looking for me?"

"A nightmare came and scared me," the child said. "A big man was trying to hurt you and Daddy."

"What did the man look like?"

"I don't know, but he was big and he didn't have any light around him, and that was real scary."

"But dreams can't hurt you, you know," Komack said.

"I know that, but it was still scary," the child insisted.

"Esther, I want you to do what Grandma Amanda tells you and go back to bed," Komack ordered. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay, Mommy," the child agreed. "But watch out for that big bad man, okay?"

Komack smiled. "I promise. Can I talk to Grandma Amanda again?"

Mrs. Henderson came back on the line.

"I'll pick her up in the morning, okay?" Komack said.

"Don't worry about it, Kathryn. Esther can stay with us as long as you need her to. Jim and I have plenty of room and she hasn't been any trouble until tonight," the woman assured her. "It's kind of fun, taking care of a little one after all this time and Jim has been spoiling her unmercifully. We've never had a grand-daughter before."

"I guess you are the closest thing she's got to grand-

parents. My father isn't exactly the grand-father type," said Komack.

"Nick's never exactly been the father type. Besides, Jim may disown you if you take Esther away from him." Mrs. Henderson said.

Komack replaced the receiver on its console. She was smiling.

"The 'Jim' Mrs. Henderson was talking about, that wouldn't be 'James L.' Henderson, would it?" Foster asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it is," Komack admitted.

"Don't get the idea it makes my life easier. It doesn't."

Foster grinned and shrugged. "Knowing Straker and Henderson, I didn't really think it would. Elizabeth Kathryn Komack, only daughter of Nicolas and Eva Komack," Foster quoted. "Father is a retired CIA section chief, owns several art galleries. Mother is deceased. You joined SHADO immediately after graduating fourth in your class from MIT's MBA program, including a year at Oxford."

"You finally checked my personnel file," Komack commented.

Foster nodded once. "You left SHADO headquarters rather suddenly a bit more than five years ago. Five months later, your daughter, Esther Krystin, was born in San Francisco. Your file doesn't name her father, which is a little strange considering, but I gather it's Ed Straker. Is that why you left? He wouldn't marry you?"

"I wouldn't marry him," she corrected. "SHADO is a very jealous mistress. It doesn't tolerate divided loyalties. Ed tried it once and it nearly destroyed him. I chose not to put him in that position again."

"What about now?" Foster wondered. "Aren't you putting yourself in that position?"

"I've spent five years as a single parent," She said. "I promised myself before Esther was born that she would have at least a real mother, if not a father. Maybe I was being selfish, wanting everything or nothing. My mother died when I was little. My father was never around. Ed's getting sick like this has put things into perspective, I guess. I can't make him change. I can't make SHADO change, so if my daughter's to have what I didn't, and what she needs, I have to change. I have to learn to share."

The car turned into the parking lot at Mayland Hospital and Foster pulled into a space near the emergency entrance. They got out and entered the building, heading for the main elevators.

The elevator arrived and they stepped in, the doors closing behind them. Foster pressed the button for the third floor.

"Kate, do you think his ex-wife's visit could have made him feel guilty enough about that whole mess, and his son's death, that it finally pushed him over the edge?" Foster asked. "I mean, he was pretty depressed about Collins' death before the problem with Turner landed him in the hospital. It could have been the last straw."

"I don't know, Paul. It's possible," Komack admitted. "But, let me ask you this: if Mary didn't hand him the weapon, where did he get it? He was hooked to the monitors, bed rails up. He shouldn't have been able to sneeze without half-a-dozen alarms going off."

"He used a scalpel on the nurse," Foster said. "But,

you're right. Even if his wounds were all self-inflicted, someone else had to have given the scalpel to him."

"Precisely," Komack agreed. "Now, who gave him the scalpel and wanted it to look like a suicide?"

"Someone who looks like Craig Collins?" Foster speculated.

"Someone who gives people the creeps. Someone without any 'light' around him," Komack added.

"You're taking a child's nightmare seriously?" Foster asked in disbelief.

"Paul, Esther's nightmares have an uncanny reality to them. Sometimes she scares even me," Komack told him.

"But, as to what really happened, and why, there's only one person who can tell us."

"Ed Straker," Foster answered.

The elevator doors opened onto the surgical floor. Foster and Komack entered the hallway to find Henderson, McGruder and Sprenger standing with Freeman and Doctor Jacob Frazer of SHADO. Frazer was still in his surgical jumper and booties.

"He's conscious, now," Frazer was saying as they approached. "But, he is extremely weak, confused and combative. I hesitate to use any sedation, because he's so weak."

"Is he going to be all right?" Henderson asked.

"Physically, yes. Aside from the blood loss, his injuries weren't all that serious."

"Can we talk to him?" Sprenger asked.

"I wouldn't advise it," Frazer said. "He's still very weak."

"Jake, we need to ask him some questions about what happened," Freeman insisted.

"Very well, but you can only stay for a few minutes," the SHADO physician reluctantly agreed. He opened the double doors behind him, letting Freeman past him.

Komack cut in front of Foster and Sprenger to follow Freeman through the doors.

Straker was lying on one of the six narrow beds in the recovery room. There were no other patients. A nurse was keeping an eye on the monitors at her station. She looked up to watch as the doors opened and Freeman and Frazer and the others entered.

Straker's eyes were open, but he didn't seem to see Komack or Freeman as they stepped over to the side of his bed. His right hand was clenched into a fist. His left hand and wrist were bandaged and splinted. Both wrists were in heavily padded nylon restraints, but he didn't seem to notice that, either.

"Ed?" Komack called. Her voice caught Straker's attention. He looked up at her, a pained expression on his face. He didn't speak.

"Ed, what happened?" Freeman asked.

Straker shook his head.

"Who hurt you, Ed?" Komack asked. Behind her, Foster and Sprenger moved closer to the recovery bed.

Straker caught sight of them and began to tremble violently. His face, already pale, went ashen and he began muttering: "They've ordered him to destroy us." His voice was hoarse. "He's dead. Why is he here? Why doesn't he stay dead?" He began struggling against the restraints.

Freeman grabbed his shoulders to keep him down on the bed, to keep him from hurting himself further.

Henderson gestured for Sprenger to leave, then took the officer's arm when Sprenger didn't move. He motioned for McGruder to follow them.

Frazer hurried over to the locked drug cabinet set into the wall and retrieved a vial and a hypodermic. Despite his earlier qualms concerning sedation, the physician injected the drug into one of the intravenous lines.

The drug took effect with surprising speed. As Freeman watched, the blond man's eyes closed and he relaxed, although his breathing was still ragged and he was still tearfully muttering: "He's dead and he's going to destroy everything."

"Who is dead?" Komack asked quietly. Straker didn't seem to hear her.

"You'd better go," Frazer told them.

Komack ignored him: "Ed, who is dead?"

"Him," was Straker's only response.

"You'd better go," Frazer said, more forcefully this time. "I'll notify you if his condition changes."

Generals Henderson and McGruder were waiting outside in the hallway with Sprenger. Henderson turned to Komack and Freeman.

"What was that all about in there?"

"I'm not sure," Freeman replied.

"I assume this paranoia is a manifestation of Colonel Straker's illness, whatever that may be," Sprenger stated.

"Doctor Frazer didn't say," Komack responded.

"But surely even you consider attempted suicide as

evidence of mental illness," Sprenger insisted. "Illness severe enough to warrant his replacement as C-in-C?"

"Colonel Sprenger, you're making some serious charges here and I'm not altogether convinced that's what happened here tonight," Henderson said.

"Jim, the evidence is pretty obvious," McGruder said.

"The man's out of his mind."

"That man has been critically ill for nearly a week, and just came out of emergency surgery," Henderson stated. "I think it's a little early to be insisting he be replaced for psychiatric reasons."

"Is that your final word on the subject, General?"

Sprenger insisted.

"Yes, Colonel, it is. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Of course not, General," Sprenger responded. "It is your decision, after all."

CHAPTER 17

The following morning, James Henderson entered the reception area of his own office at the London headquarters of the International Astrophysical Commission.

"Good morning, General," his secretary, greeted. "Monsieur Duvall called a few minutes ago. He said he needed to speak with you, urgently."

"Did he say about what?" Henderson asked.

"No, sir, only that it was extremely urgent."

Henderson's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Get him for me. I'll see what it's about."

"Yes, sir." Miss Scott picked up the telephone from her desk. She was interrupted as the outer door slammed open and Emil Duvall blasted in. His round face was red with exertion.

"General Henderson, I need to speak with you, now!" Duvall stated. He led the way into Henderson's office. Henderson simply followed him in, giving his secretary a tiny shrug of resignation.

Duvall flopped into a chair as Henderson took his seat behind the desk.

"What's wrong?" Henderson asked. Duvall pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his face, tucking the cloth untidily back into his pocket.

"I received a very disturbing telephone call this morning, from a man calling himself Sprenger," Duvall explained. "He claims that you and General McGruder of NATO have assigned him to be the liaison officer between SHADO and NATO."

"McGruder has requested Sprenger be named to the

position," Henderson said. "I told him I would take the recommendation under advisement."

"You did not make this appointment?" Duvall insisted.

"Of course not," Henderson said. "I would hardly make an appointment of that nature without consulting the Commission, and SHADO's commanding officer, first."

Duvall nodded and straightened up in his chair. "I see... SHADO's commanding officer?" He grimaced and began to methodically clean his glasses with his handkerchief. "This Colonel Sprenger also told me that Commander Straker was much too ill to return to duty and a new commander needed to be appointed as soon as possible. He said that Straker was psychotic and suicidal."

Duvall studied Henderson for a long moment, as if trying to read something from the old man's face.

"Is it true, General? Should Commander Straker be removed?" Duvall asked when Henderson failed to respond.

"As I told Sprenger last night, I think replacing Straker may be a bit premature," Henderson said. "We're still not altogether sure what's wrong with him."

"Sprenger seemed very concerned that Commander Straker be replaced as soon as possible. For the sake of SHADO's mission."

"I assume he put forward McGruder as the best possible replacement," Henderson said.

Duvall nodded, putting his dark rimmed glasses back on his face.

Henderson sighed. "It's true that Straker is extremely ill. It is also true that he was showing signs of severe psychological strain before he became ill."

Duvall opened his mouth to speak but Henderson put up a hand to stop him. "However, there is every reason to believe that he will recover fully and he will be able to resume his duties with SHADO."

"This Colonel Sprenger seemed very certain that Straker would never be able to return to his duties. He also seemed to feel the strain of commanding SHADO would be too much for a man of your advanced years."

"My advanced years?" Henderson repeated. He was a few years older than Duvall and, except for the limp, in excellent health. He hardly considered himself to be of advanced years. "Duvall, who else has Sprenger talked to this morning?"

"General Putin, Kruger and myself, as far as I know. They both called me to ask about the man. I still have certain friends who tell me things," Duvall admitted with a smile.

"And what do your friends say about Sprenger?"

"He is McGruder's assistant. There is some speculation that he arranged McGruder's appointment to NATO operations. There is also speculation in some circles, that his methods were less than scrupulously honest."

"Did your friends also tell you that Sprenger hates Ed Straker's guts?"

"They mentioned that, yes."

Henderson gave a long sigh. "Duvall, as a senior member of the commission, you have the right to call an emergency meeting to replace Straker as commander-in-chief of SHADO. As I'm sure you remember, it will take a unanimous vote of the full commission to do so."

"Naturally."

"I'm telling you now, as chairman of the commission, I will not support such a vote prior to Straker being declared permanently unfit for duty by SHADO's medical staff."

Duvall shrugged. "Then there is little point to discussing the matter. Although, there are some on the Commission who might welcome replacing Straker. He has a habit of being quite annoying."

"People who make a habit of being right against all odds are usually annoying. That doesn't stop them from being right."

"I thought you were one the people he annoyed most often?" Duvall asked with a hint of smile.

"What can I say?" Henderson wondered, returning Duvall's smile. "He's an obstinant son of a bitch with a one track mind. He's also brilliant and the perfect man for the job. Why do you think I sent him to make the presentation to the special committee twelve years ago?"

"I had always assumed your injuries made it difficult for you to travel at the time," Duvall said.

Henderson shook his head. "I sent him for the same reason I talked him into working for me in the first place, fifteen years ago. If I could convince him the danger was real with the evidence I had back then, I could convince anybody. He was also the one man I knew who'd be able to handle the job, despite the odds." Henderson's expression became more solemn. "I don't want to lose him."

"General, what shall I tell this Colonel Sprenger when he asks about the Commission's decision?"

"Tell him we're taking his recommendation under

'advisement'," Henderson said. "We can always change our minds later."

"And his belief he has been appointed as liaison officer to SHADO?"

"My granddaddy used to say, 'If you gotta live with a rattlesnake, make sure it's where you can keep an eye on it'."

*** * ***

Friday, Foster and Virginia Lake drove out to Mayland from the studios. Frazer had reported that Straker might be lucid enough to answer a few simple questions.

Foster and Lake arrived on the seventh floor a little past 10:30. A broad shouldered man with sandy hair was just leaving Straker's room as they got off the elevator. He wore a white lab coat and was pushing a medication cart in front of him.

The two SHADO officers identified themselves to the security guard seated by Straker's door. He told them that Freeman had just left to head into work.

The guard watched as Foster knocked on the open door. With some trepidation Foster stepped into the room, Lake following close behind him.

"Commander?" the young man called quietly. Straker seemed to be asleep. His eyes were closed and he was very pale. There was an odd puffiness around his eyes and lips. Lake glanced at the monitors on the equipment rack beside the bed.

Both SHADO officers had ample experience reading monitors of various types and making rapid decisions based

on what they saw. What they saw on the hospital monitors made Lake run to the door and scream for a nurse while Foster checked for a pulse at Straker's throat.

The electrocardiograph screen showed the jagged irregularity of ventricular fibrillation. Straker's pulse was non-existent and he wasn't breathing.

Foster called to Lake to help as he tried to begin mouth to mouth resuscitation. But Straker's throat was swollen shut. No air could get past.

A moment later, one of the floor nurses came running in. She took in the scene in front of her in a single glance. She pulled a small radio transceiver from her pocket and spoke into it. Her voice was repeated on speakers throughout the hospital: "Code One, seven-two-three, Code One, seven-two-three, Doctor Frazer, seven-two-three, stat."

She didn't wait for acknowledgment, but pushed Foster away so she could begin work. "Get out," she ordered. The two SHADO officers complied, going to stand outside the open door.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was really only half a minute, the Code One team came running in with the cardio-pulmonary-resuscitation cart. One of the team members tripped over a small trash can beside the guard's chair, sending its contents skittering across the white linoleum floor. Lake turned the trash can upright and began to pick up its contents.

Shortly, Foster and Lake heard the distinctive crack of a defibrillator. Moments after that, they heard team leader announce: "We have sinus rhythm, blood pressure one

hundred over sixty."

By the time Doctor Frazer arrived, the team was packing up its equipment. The floor nurse had already checked the intravenous lines and dressings and had started double-checking the various monitors.

"What happened?" Frazer asked Foster as the emergency team left. The physician beckoned Foster and Lake to accompany him inside.

"When we came in, he wasn't breathing," Foster explained. "Virginia called the nurse and I tried to start C.P.R." He glanced at Straker's inert form on the bed. There was a gauze bandage tied to Straker's throat with string. The bandage covered a plastic fitting that hadn't been there before.

"Is he going to be okay?" Foster asked worriedly. Frazer's answer was interrupted by the nurse, who beckoned him aside. "Doctor, the cardiac alarms were turned off."

"Could it have been an accident?"

She shook her head. "No, Doctor, not both alarms at once."

Frazer sighed, pursing his thin lips together as he considered what he knew. He dismissed the nurse with a brief 'thank you, that was good work', and she left to resume her other duties.

"Doctor," Lake called. She moved over to him, carefully holding a small drug vial in a handkerchief. "I found this on the floor."

Frazer took the vial, carefully cradling it in the cloth, and read the label. *Ampicillin*.

"Damn," Frazer muttered. He looked up at Lake and Foster. "Did you see anyone when you came in here?"

Lake thought for a moment. "Yes, there was a man in a white lab coat leaving the room with a cart when we came out of the elevator."

"Did you see his face?"

"No," Foster replied. "But, the guard must have checked him through. Do you think he did this?"

"It's possible," the SHADO physician admitted. He wrapped the vial in the handkerchief and handed it to Lake.

"Get this to security for prints and analysis, please, Colonel."

"What is that?" Foster asked.

"The label says it's Ampicillin," Frazer responded. He turned to check on his patient. Straker was beginning to stir a little.

"But, that's an antibiotic, isn't it?" Foster asked.

"One man's meat is another man's poison, Colonel," Frazer said. "Anaphylactic shock can kill just as thoroughly as a bullet." The physician completed his brief examination, noting his observations on the notepad he was carrying.

"I suppose we can't ask him any questions now,"

Foster said, disappointed.

In response, Frazer leaned closer to Straker's face.

"Commander Straker, can you hear me?"

Straker opened his eyes at the sound of his name and looked around for the source as though half asleep. Recognition was slow in coming as he studied Frazer's face for a long moment.

"Paul Foster is here," Frazer explained. "He has some

questions to ask you."

Straker tried to speak and was startled to discover he couldn't. The tracheotomy made it impossible. There was a frightened look in his eyes.

"It's all right, Ed," Frazer reassured him. "We had to put a tube in your throat to help you breath. You can't talk right now. Nod your head if you understand."

Straker nodded and some of the fear left his eyes.

Foster stepped closer to where Straker lay. "Ed? It's me, Paul. Can you answer a few questions? It's important."

Frazer handed Straker a tablet and pen. He struggled to sit up in the bed, holding the pen awkwardly in swollen hands.

"Ed, do you remember the night you needed surgery?"

Foster began.

Straker nodded once, but there was a puzzled expression on his face.

"You had some visitors that night. We need to know who they were," Foster said, as gently as he could. "Can you write it down for us?"

Straker held the paper and pen a moment, then scrawled something illegible on the tablet. He stared at what he'd tried to write, then he threw the tablet away from him with a noiseless sob.

He curled up into a ball and buried his face in the mattress. A shudder convulsed his body when Foster touched his shoulder. Then, abruptly, Straker swung at him, pen clenched in his fist like a knife.

Foster jumped back in shocked surprise as the pen just grazed his arm. Straker raised his hand to strike again, but

Foster grabbed his wrist, forcing his hand down while Frazer pryed the pen from his hand.

"Ed, why? What's wrong?" Foster demanded. There was no answer as Straker fell back. He curled up into a tight ball once more and buried his face in the mattress, sobbing silently.

"Paul, it might be better if you came back later, when he's recovered a bit more," the physician said.

"What's wrong with him?" Foster demanded. "Why did he attack me?"

Frazer gave a long worried sigh. "I'm not sure. Jackson thinks he may be suffering from ICU psychosis. Earlier in the week, he was convinced you and Virginia, and nearly everybody else at work, were dead."

"That's crazy!" Lake sputtered.

"Yes," Frazer agreed.

"How long will it take for him to snap out of this?" Lake asked.

"It's hard to say," Frazer admitted. "An hour ago, I would have said he was going to be fine. He seemed lucid enough when Freeman was here. He knew you were coming over this morning and he seemed to be looking forward to it."

"Then, what happened?" Lake demanded.

"Colonel Lake, that ampicillin wasn't an accident," Frazer said. His expression had turned grim. "Find out who gave it to him and you might have your answer." With that, Frazer turned his attention back to his frightened patient, murmuring comforting phrases as one might do with a small child.

Disheartened and worried, Foster left, Lake following close behind him.

They were surprised to find Colonel Sprenger waiting in the corridor. "Well, were you able to get anything out of him?" the American asked.

"No, I'm afraid not," Foster told him. "He's had a bad morning and he's pretty upset."

"Maybe I'll have better luck," Sprenger said, heading for the door.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Colonel," Foster said, moving to step in front of the door. He kept his voice low.

"Commander Straker's very upset and unable to speak. Doctor Frazer's in there right now with him."

"You say he's unable to speak?"

"He was having trouble breathing. The emergency team had to do a tracheotomy," Foster explained, tone cool.

"He literally can't talk now."

"Yes, I imagine that would be very upsetting for someone who likes to talk as much Straker does," Sprenger commented. He looked at the closed door. "I suppose I'll just have to come back later."

"Yes, I suppose you will," Foster agreed. He didn't move from his place in front of the hospital room door. "Of course, if we knew what you needed to talk to him about, we might be able to help, save you the trouble of coming back here."

"No, I don't think so," Sprenger said. He gave the door one last look before turning to head down the corridor to the elevators.

"What questions would our military liaison have for

Commander Straker that he can't ask us?" Lake wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Foster replied.

"And why didn't you tell him that someone just tried to kill the commander?" Lake asked.

"I'm not sure," Foster admitted. "I guess I didn't think it was any of his business." He paused, frowning thoughtfully. "Hold on a minute, will you?"

Lake nodded. Foster stepped back into the room. Straker was still curled into a tight ball, but he was no longer shaking.

Frazer looked up. "Yes, Paul?"

"Doctor, I was going to suggest we keep quiet about that little incident before. He's not responsible for his actions right now, so why make anything of it?"

"I need to say something about it when I consult with Jackson," Frazer said. "Also when I make my report to Henderson."

"Why not just say he got very upset and leave it at that?" Foster asked.

Frazer took a long breath before saying: "All right Paul, I'll leave the attack out of my report to the general and out of the paperwork here. I still have to let Jackson know, though."

"Okay, Doc. Thanks. I owe you one," Foster said, leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER 18

"General," Ford called as Henderson entered the SHADO control room later that afternoon. "We've been picking up some activity, right at the edge of SID's detection range. We finally have confirmation from Moonbase."

"Well, what is it?" Henderson demanded.

"It's hard to say, sir," Ford began cautiously. "But, it appears to be a massing of U.F.O.'s within the asteroid belt, a hundred fifty to two hundred million miles out. Ten, maybe fifteen units."

Foster came over and studied the tracking screen next to Ford's station.

Henderson glanced at him. "Well, Colonel, do you think this is the mass attack Straker was worried about?"

"Ten's a larger number than they usually use, but I wouldn't call it massive," Foster replied.

Henderson turned to Nina Barry, seated at a computer terminal nearby. The Moonbase operative was on rotation to Headquarters for the next eight weeks.

"How long would it take to get an observation platform out there?"

Barry typed the request into the keyboard in front of her. "At maximum velocity, we can have observation platform 'Watchdog' there in ten hours."

"Do it," Henderson ordered. "And notify Colonel Freeman."

The dark-skinned operative murmured acknowledgment of the orders and began to feed the instructions for the platform into the computer. Henderson beckoned Foster and Lake to follow him

into the commander's office.

"You don't think this is the big one?" he asked as soon as the door closed.

Foster shook his head. "Their last mass attack was over a year ago. Then, it was fifty of them and only three got through. Ten to fifteen, even twenty, we can handle without too much trouble with what we have."

"So, assuming they are planning something, this will be a feint, a test," Henderson said.

"Probably," Foster agreed. "At fifty, we were at the edge of our limits."

"What's the projection if they come up with a hundred fifty units or so?" Henderson asked.

Foster considered the question for a few moments before answering: "With a massing that large, we can expect Lunar defenses to knock out only about 10 percent before they reach the Earth's atmosphere."

"That would leave a hundred or more to be handled by twelve Sky-divers and ground defenses which were designed to protect specific installations," Henderson stated.

"Yes, sir," Foster agreed quietly. They looked up as the office door slid open and Freeman entered. He was accompanied by Kathryn Komack.

Henderson nodded acknowledgment of their arrival.

"How are things going upstairs?"

"Not bad," Komack told him. "We should be able to get contract approval from the writers' union in a few days."

"So soon?" Henderson asked. "The papers are predicting a long strike."

Komack grinned. "In eleven years, Harlington-Straker Productions has never been struck. The company's always the first one to give in and agree to the union demands. I know it seems a little weird, but Ed has a reputation in the industry of being a strong union supporter. We're considered a good and honest shop to work for, even if upper management isn't always easily accessible."

"Virtually inaccessible is more accurate," Freeman quipped.

"Well, I'm glad that's being handled. We can't afford for our cover operation to be compromised," Henderson said. He quickly briefed them on the aliens' presence. Then he turned back to Foster and Lake: "What are these ten or so waiting for?"

Lake glanced at the computer printout in her hand and gave the others a sardonic grin. "A: reinforcements, B: bad weather to negate radar, or C: the non-functioning of Earth defenses, namely, SHADO Control."

Foster returned the grin. He remembered quite vividly the last time the computer came up with those same conclusions. Straker had been substantially less than pleased and had recommended adding castor oil to the program.

"The weather forecast for the next month has nothing to suggest anything severe enough to negate radar," Lake continued. "And their most recent attempt to cause the 'non-functioning' of SHADO control has failed."

"Has it?" Freeman wondered.

"We're still here," Lake observed. "Commander Straker destroyed the Ufo Turner was going to let through, and the disruption in our operation they must have been

hoping for with his illness hasn't happened."

"Maybe that wasn't what they were after," Freeman suggested. "What if just getting Ed out of the way was what they were going for?"

"I don't buy it, Alec," Foster complained. "Straker's just one man. Important to SHADO, yes, but not indispensable. SHADO's getting along just fine without him."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Freeman. "But, Paul, since you came on board, how many times have the aliens attacked headquarters, down here?"

Foster thought a moment before answering: "Four, no, five times."

"Moonbase?"

"Four times, and two successful attacks on Sky-diver units," Foster added before Freeman could ask.

"How many times in the past ten months or so?"

Foster had to think about that. "Except for an attack on Moonbase a month ago and the two lunar modules, none." It was a surprising realization.

"But, in the past seven months, there have been seven attempts on Ed's life." Freeman stated. "Three of them have been in the last ten days."

"So, there is a definite pattern," Lake said. "But, why?"

Komack shrugged and replied: "Obviously something happened seven months or so ago to make the aliens believe that Ed Straker specifically is a threat to them."

She looked speculatively at the others. "I've read the reports on the Croxley incident last March. I have a feeling

there was a lot missing."

"You want to hear about Croxley?" Foster asked, suddenly uncomfortable. He didn't like talking about the incident.

"There may be something there none of you were aware of at the time," Komack explained. "Some clue that could help us now. The aliens appear to want Ed dead.

There has to be a reason."

Foster took a deep breath. "Like the reports said, John Croxley's wife was killed when a Ufo deliberately crashed into their house. Croxley had E.S.P., which the aliens somehow augmented. Anyway, he managed to get details about SHADO from my mind, while I was in the hospital recovering from the injuries I got when the Ufo exploded. I guess Croxley blamed SHADO and Commander Straker for his wife's death. He wrote a whole dossier on SHADO and sent it to Ed as bait to lure him and Alec out so he could kill them."

"But he didn't succeed," Henderson pointed out.

"He didn't succeed because Paul showed up at the last possible second to stop him," explained Freeman.

"How did you know to go help them?" Henderson asked.

"I didn't," Foster admitted. "I'd had a horrible premonition regarding Croxley's house. Shroeder suggested I go out there and face down my problem with it. When I got there, I found Croxley ready to kill them both. I shot first and killed Croxley where he stood."

"Coincidence?" Henderson wondered.

"Straker tried pretty hard to convince me it was,"

Foster said. "Personally, I'm not sure."

"Croxley was a telepath," Komack observed thoughtfully. "That fits the overall pattern my people in San Francisco detected."

"The aliens are telepathic?" Lake said.

"Why not? We've never picked up any indication the aliens use radio or any other communications channel we can detect," Freeman said. "The way they controlled Astronaut Regan and med-tech Dawson last year suggested some sort of telepathic control."

"Sarah Bosenquet, too," Lake reminded him. She had been the secretary of a high ranking British naval officer and Foster had been very attracted to her. Then, it was discovered she was under the control of the aliens, feeding them classified information from her employer's office. SHADO had gotten involved to stop her. It had not been a pleasant situation.

"Dawson and Turner both had implanted devices in their heads, didn't they?" Henderson recalled.

"My people think it's an enhancement device of some sort, probably artificial telepathy or something like it," Komack said.

Foster looked thoughtful. "You know, the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that Straker didn't see me at that house until after I shot Croxley. He was surprised when Croxley died and he didn't want Alec or me to know it."

"Paul, you were in clear sight of both of us," Freeman reminded him.

"I know," Foster admitted. "But, I think he was

concentrating on Croxley so hard, he may have blocked everything else out."

"Concentrating on what?" Lake wondered.

"Maybe he was blocking Croxley's E.S.P.," Foster suggested half seriously.

"Paul!"

"It makes as much sense as anything else," Foster defended. "Maybe Straker has E.S.P., like Croxley did. Maybe they've figured it out. Maybe they're afraid he might be able to use it against them, somehow."

"That's an awful lot of 'maybes', Colonel," Henderson observed.

"You know, though, I used to kid Ed about things like that," Freeman mused. "He was always doing little weird things, like answering the phone before it would ring."

"And he knew that Sky-4 got that U.F.O., even though we were completely blacked out down here," Lake related, wondering. "You remember, Paul. When that Simmons woman got loose down here after Sky-Diver 3 was destroyed."

"Linda Simmons," Foster supplied the rest of the name. "Yes, I remember." That was not a happy memory, either. He had been assigned to investigate her involvement with a UFO incident and had fallen for her, hard. He still couldn't explain why he brought the woman to the studios that day even though he had known at the time that she was implicated in the murder of a policeman.

"But, E.S.P. doesn't explain Straker's reaction in the recovery room," Henderson said. "He seemed pretty upset at seeing you there, and Doctor Frazer said he was nearly

hysterical this morning."

"Frazer described it as 'ICU psychosis'. Earlier this week, Ed apparently thought Virginia and I were both dead. He may have figured we were hallucinations or something. But, you're right, there may be more to it than that," Foster admitted.

"Like what?" Henderson demanded.

Foster and Freeman exchanged worried looks.

"Paul, Ed ordered the file on the incident closed and security sealed: Eyes only, by written and verified permission of the commander," Freeman informed him quietly.

"What file?" Henderson demanded.

Foster sighed, steeling himself for the worst. "Two months ago, right after I sent that report to your office from Moonbase?"

"Yes, I remember that report," Henderson told him. Freeman went to the corner bar and poured a tall whiskey.

"I attempted to murder Commander Straker," Foster said. "The aliens planted an impulse in my subconscious to see him dead. We got the problem straightened out finally, but he scared me half to death doing it. I still don't understand why he felt he had to go through with it."

Freeman handed him the drink and he accepted it.

"I mean, the commander could have just sent me on permanent assignment to Alaska, or Australia, or Outer Mongolia for that matter. I know I would have if I'd given much thought to it," continued Foster.

"That's what psychiatric team and I both recommended," Freeman stated. "Ed didn't want to lose

you that way. Why do you think I took over the Alaska project? I was so ticked off at him for that stunt I wanted to shoot him. I still get mad at him just thinking about it."

"Paul, it might help if you read this," Komack said. She was referring to a page in a leather bound book she'd picked up from a shelf in the corner of the office.

"What is it?" Foster asked, taking the open book.

"It's Commander Straker's journal," she explained.

There was no title on the binding. The date on the page was June 4, 1982, the day Straker had taken him to the armory. Foster recognized the neat, angular hand writing as Straker's.

"I didn't know he kept a journal," Foster commented. There was something unnerving at the thought of reading something that was so obviously private.

* * *

Doctor Jackson gave me his evaluation of Foster's condition this morning. It wasn't good. Alec suggests we either shoot him or find him a permanent assignment in Australia or Outer Mongolia or someplace like that. But, I find I am disinclined to accept their assessment of the situation.

I do find it interesting that Foster's first impulse was to discredit me rather than kill me. He got my gun only after General Henderson didn't act to immediately remove me from command. I wonder if Foster would have even tried it if the general had ordered us both back to Earth for an evaluation of my mental state.

Given the information Foster sent him, I've no doubt the general could have made an excellent case against me. I

don't know why he hasn't bothered. Maybe he's just giving me enough rope to hang myself when we get to the appropriations meeting next week.

Maybe Foster's innate resistance to authority has made him resistant to the aliens' conditioning, or maybe, since I suspect he's been toying with the idea of eventually forcing a change of command here, all the aliens really did to him was to strengthen that wish, take it out of his control. Hopefully, Jackson's deconditioning has brought it back under conscious control.

I'll know more later this afternoon. I've checked out the weapons I'll be using and I've written instructions for Major Natiroff. If I'm wrong, if Foster does kill me, my death is to be listed as a suicide. No measures are to be taken against Paul Foster, no matter what, since I am fully aware I will be playing with a loaded gun this afternoon.

I just hope Alec will understand.

** * **

Foster turned the page to the following date.

Alec didn't understand. I wonder how long it'll take for him to get over his mad this time.

Foster finished reading and closed the book with a snap. He handed it to Komack, who placed it back on the shelf.

"I still don't get it," Foster stated. He turned to Henderson: "According to that, the commander was more worried about why you didn't demand he be relieved of command than he was about the fact I could have killed him."

"Colonel, let's assume for the moment that your

hypothesis is correct, that Ed has this gift, whether he recognizes it or not," Henderson stated. His tone was reminiscent of one of SHADO's instructors. "What follows?"

"That he was fairly well convinced I wouldn't kill him," Foster replied. "But, he had to prove it to Jackson, to Alec Freeman, and to me. Also, assuming he really has E.S.P., the aliens know it, having used Croxley, right?"

The others nodded, listening.

"Let's say that Croxley died because Ed did keep him from knowing I was there," Foster continued, warming to the idea. "The aliens know that too."

"Then, it's possible the aliens have been after Commander Straker because they see him as the one person on Earth who stands in their way, that he knows something about them that's dangerous to them," Lake suggested.

"But, they also may feel that just having him out of SHADO isn't enough," Foster warned. "Someone wants him dead. They tried again just this morning. If Virginia and I hadn't shown up when we did, he'd be dead."

"What does security say about it?" Henderson wondered.

Foster snorted. "The guard checked an orderly through, but forgot to check his I.D. or the drug orders. The drug came from the hospital pharmacy, but the druggist doesn't recall any one matching the orderly's description filling the prescription. The drug order itself appears to be a forgery, since it had Frazer's signature on it and Frazer would never have ordered Ampicillin for Straker."

"I thought you and Virginia saw the man leaving the

room," Freeman said.

"We did, but neither of us saw his face well enough to recognize him again," Lake admitted. "However, there was something weird about him, something I can't put my finger on."

"Which puts us back to square one," Foster complained. "Someone's out to kill him, but we haven't got a clue as to who it is, except it's probably the aliens."

"What I don't understand is why, if they want him dead so badly, they haven't just gone ahead and blasted him when they've had the chance?" Freeman said. "Why this elaborate use of second parties?"

"A better question, Colonel, is why haven't they gone ahead and exposed SHADO?" responded Henderson. "Our security can't matter to them, so why do they maintain it? All they would have to do is land in Times Square and start shooting."

"Maybe we're not alone," Komack suggested. "We know that humans aren't the only intelligent beings in this part of the Galaxy. There must be others we don't know about. Just suppose, for the moment, that there are others out there, and our aliens don't want them to know what's going on here."

"You mean, the aliens are breaking some sort of intergalactic law and they don't want anyone else to find out?" Lake asked.

Komack nodded. "We still get reports of sightings above and beyond our sightings, and reports on ship capabilities that do not correspond to what we know about the aliens' technologies."

"Plus, we have had instances where the aliens were shooting at one another," Freeman reminded them.

Foster shook his head. "You know, this discussion is getting even weirder than our usual talks with Jackson and Shroeder."

"Paul, if you think this is weird, you should sit in on some of the sessions we have at the Institute," Komack laughed. "The idea that Ed may be a telepath is tame compared to some of the stuff they've come up with. I have a couple of medical researchers who claim that not only are there different groups of aliens living on Earth, but that Ed and I are among them. They say it has to do with some oddity with our mitochondrial DNA. Apparently, it doesn't match any known ethnic group on Earth."

"Does it match our aliens?" Lake asked in disbelief.

"No, they're entirely different."

"Did Straker know about this?" Foster asked.

"Yes," she replied. "He was there when they presented their paper last November. He thought it was funny, once he got over the shock. Especially when he found out they'd included Mark Bradley, Nina Barry and Keith Ford in their list of resident aliens."

"Who else knows about this research, Kathryn?"

Henderson asked.

"No one, outside of SHADO," Komack answered. "I think he may have given a copy of their paper to Doctor Jackson."

"Are you an alien from outer space?" Foster wondered with a grin.

"Both of my grandfathers were czarists. One was a

banker, the other was a school teacher. Since when do aliens from outer space have valid emigration papers?" Komack asked with a laugh, but there was a brittleness in her voice.

Henderson looked around at the others: "Ladies and gentlemen, I suggest we all remember, this is a theoretical discussion."

"General, you don't think there's any truth to any of this, do you?" Foster asked.

"Colonel, I'm saying that SHADO and Commander Straker have some powerful enemies out there, and I'm not just referring to the aliens we know about." Henderson sat down behind the desk, dismissing the SHADO officers with a wave of his hand.

However, Foster had one final question before he left. "General Henderson, why didn't you act on my report when I sent it?"

Henderson considered the question. "Colonel, I did act on it. I investigated the allegations that were made against Straker and decided that, aside from the money matter, there was no basis for concern."

"Just on Alec Freeman's say-so?"

"No, I also talked to Jackson and Shroeder. As far as they could detect, Straker was not under any undue stress at the time, aside from being worried about you. He certainly wasn't behaving erratically, at least no more than usual. Plus, no one else had been making any complaints or comments about him. Believe me, Colonel, if there had been any real evidence to support your allegations, Straker would never have known what hit him."

"I see," Foster replied. "Thank you, sir."

**Outside the office door, Foster turned to Freeman:
"Alec, what did Henderson mean, exactly, when he said
SHADO and Straker had powerful enemies?"**

**"Paul, when SHADO was first approved and
organized, there were a number of people who didn't agree
it was needed, at least, not as an independent military unit
of the United Nations. There were also more than a few
people who objected to Ed being appointed commander-
in-chief," Freeman explained.**

"Like who?"

"Colonel Anthony Sprenger, for one."

**Foster gave him a curious look and Freeman
continued: "Sprenger never liked the idea of SHADO being
international in scope and outlook. I guess he figured that
since the U.S. was footing most of the bill, SHADO should
be controlled from the Pentagon. He was infuriated when
the politicians decided SHADO should be based in Britain
and Ed got assigned to be SHADO C-in-C."**

**"And now Sprenger's our new liaison to NATO,"
Foster said. "Do you think he's working for the aliens?"**

**Freeman shrugged. "I doubt it. CIA's more likely, but
I wouldn't put anything past him." Freeman walked away,
toward the control room.**

**"And Sprenger was at the hospital this morning," Lake
reminded Foster.**

**"Sprenger was also at the hospital when Straker
decided I was dead and out to destroy everything," Foster
told her.**

**"Paul, what if the commander wasn't talking about
you, but someone else in the room with you?" Lake asked.**

"The only other people there were Alec and Kathryn," he paused, reconstructing the scene in his mind.

"Henderson, McGruder and Sprenger, Frazer and the nurse. Sprenger was standing right beside me."

"Maybe we should be looking at Sprenger?" Lake suggested.

"I've seen the preliminary report on him. He comes up clean, so far, but Natiroff's still looking," Foster said.

"Colonel Foster," Major Graham's voice called out from the far entrance as Foster and Lake entered the control room. Freeman was already standing with him.

"You asked me to do a run-through on the radar systems with Colonel Gray for the day Turner was killed."

"Did you find anything?" Foster asked.

"That's what I wanted you to look at," Graham told him, beckoning them on to his office further down the corridor.

John Gray was waiting for them inside Graham's tiny office. One wall of the room was covered with heavy-duty shelving laden with equipment manuals, test equipment and repair gear. On the desk was a powerful computer setup.

Graham sat down in front of the computer keyboard and began typing in instructions.

"We've run a complete check of the tracking systems, including the Utronic systems on SID and on Moonbase," Gray informed them.

"And?" Lake prompted.

"The system did pick up something that morning, but the contact was so tenuous and so odd, the computers listed it as an error and ignored it," Gray explained.

"What was it?" Freeman asked.

"We believe it was the U.F.O. that Commander Straker reported he destroyed over the studio," Graham said. "There was just one track, but it showed up virtually simultaneously on every system we have at 7:59:59 that morning."

On the computer screen, a grid flashed on. One axis was labeled 'time', the other, 'location'. A single straight line cut across the grid.

"Just one track?" Foster asked.

Graham nodded.

"But, if we have one track at 7:59:59, where did the Ufo that attacked them on the road come from? That would have been about eleven the night before." Foster reminded them.

"We thought of that," Gray said. "So we went back and checked all the raw data from Moonbase and the other stations for the previous month."

"Is that why it's taken you so long to get your report in?" Foster asked.

Graham sighed. "There's an awful lot of raw data there. But, we did find something."

There was a pause as Graham and Gray observed their audience's reaction. "A major storm system developed in the mid-Atlantic a few hours after Commander Straker landed following the mission to repair SID," Gray told them. "The storm was sufficient to disrupt SHADO's radar coverage of that area for a short time."

"So?" Foster asked.

"So, neither Moonbase nor SID reported any contacts

during that time," Gray stated. "However, the raw data shows a single contact, very similar to the track we've found for the one Commander Straker destroyed. The computers listed it as an error, since it appeared momentarily on all systems simultaneously."

"If it stayed underwater, it wouldn't deteriorate," Lake said. "But, we haven't had any reports in the past couple weeks that would suggest alien activity."

"Not in any place we can monitor," Freeman corrected. "But, if it had a special target, they might forgo their usual mayhem to stay hidden."

"And you think Straker's that target?" Foster asked.

"I think we need to find that U.F.O." Freeman replied.

* * *

"Doctor Jackson," Henderson said, entering Jackson's office in the medical center. Jackson looked up from the file he was reading.

"Last November, did Commander Straker give you a copy of a report into some DNA research being done at the Institute.?"

"Yes, general. In fact, I have it right here," Jackson replied.

He handed the file to Henderson. The general glanced through it quickly, stopping to completely read the final page.

"They have some interesting hypotheses, don't you think, General?"

"Interesting isn't the word I'd use, Doctor," Henderson replied. "Jackson, if you were going to defend Commander Straker against the charges implied in this

report, how would you go about it?"

Jackson shrugged. "Their conclusions are highly speculative and their assumptions concerning the data they were using from other sources are extremely questionable..."

"Could you disprove their findings?"

Jackson looked thoughtful. "No, I cannot prove the people they mention are not related to one another, although I think it highly unlikely. Lieutenants Barry and Bradley are both black. Bradley is Jamaican. Ford and Barry are British. Commander Straker and Colonel Komack are both American."

"Straker's mother was English. So was Komack's," Henderson informed him. "Straker personally recruited these people as I recall."

"Yes, but Commander Straker has always taken an active part in recruiting personnel," Jackson said. "That is hardly suspicious."

"What about this alienness' issue?" Henderson asked after a long moment.

Jackson shook his head. "The commander and the others are well within Earth human norms. As a group, they are brighter and healthier than the general population, but that is true of all SHADO personnel."

"So there's nothing to it?"

"General, what are the chances of another planet independently developing a species that so closely parallels our own that our best medical science cannot tell the difference?" Jackson asked.

"Doctor, I could ask you the same thing about our

U.F.O.s and the aliens," Henderson replied. "I noticed Mary Rutland's name here, with a question mark beside it."

Jackson nodded. "Yes, the commander's ex-wife. They did have a child together. I thought, when I have some time, I might look into the matter, expand the data base, as it were. Mitochondrial DNA is passed from mother to child. Everyone listed has at least one living relative on the female side. Colonel Komack has a half brother. Commander Straker has a sister; the others all have parents and siblings still living. If this group is genetically related, then all these other people should carry these markers as well."

**"I see," Henderson replied thoughtfully, then:
"Jackson, I'm told Straker's developed something called
'ICU psychosis'?"**

Jackson nodded. "A more proper term for it is 'sensory-perceptive restriction syndrome'. The human mind is a remarkably powerful, extremely delicate, piece of equipment. To function properly, the mind, the brain, needs a certain minimum amount of understandable input. If this input is unavailable, or distorted, the mind fills in the gaps in whatever way it can. It creates its own reality, so to speak. It's a not uncommon phenomenon in hospitals, especially among seriously ill patients who are restricted in their movements, in their contacts with the outside, as in an intensive care unit."

"Will he recover?"

"Yes, the mental confusion usually clears up as the patient physically recovers and becomes less isolated," Jackson said. "However, the commander was severely traumatized psychologically during the expanded moment

the aliens created. That trauma may affect his perceptions of reality and affect his recovery."

"The fact that someone seems to be out to kill him, won't help any either, I should think," Henderson said.

"Quite so," Jackson replied. "Plus, Colonel Komack did report that the commander's ex-wife identified a man who looked like Craig Collins alive and at the hospital," Jackson said. "A man the commander knows is dead, but whose body has not been found."

"No wonder Ed's out of his mind," Henderson mused. "The 'undead' are only supposed to haunt late night movies, not real hospitals."

"Well, even Dracula has some basis in fact, General," Jackson reminded him.

"Somehow, I don't think silver crucifixes and hawthorn stakes are going to do it for us," Henderson said.

Jackson smiled. "In that case, we shall have to find something that will."

CHAPTER 19

Space observation platform Watchdog relayed its information back to SHADO Control from its new position near the asteroid belt. Its readings indicated 12 U.F.O.'s near the belt. Two days later, all communications with the platform ceased and it was presumed destroyed.

The following day, NASA reported a total loss of communications with their Voyager 5 probe as it was passing through the asteroid belt heading for Jupiter. NASA announced it assumed the probe had been struck by a piece of debris. SHADO's analysis indicated it would have passed very close to the U.F.O.s.

There was no indication of when the alien attack might occur. Henderson ordered an increased alert status for all SHADO stations.

SHADO settled down to wait for the aliens' next move, where ever or whenever it might come.

* * *

The move came three days later.

"General Henderson," Nina Barry called from her station in SHADO Control. Henderson stepped over to her station.

"General, the twelve Ufos in the asteroid belt have altered their positions. They appear to be heading for Earth."

As if to echo her observation, SID's voice announced from the speakers: "Red Alert, Red Alert, Twelve U.F.O.s on course, one-three-five, two-seven-nine, blue. Range: two hundred million miles. Speed, Sol one decimal eight."

"That's a lot faster than usual, isn't it?" Henderson

asked.

Barry nodded. "At least they'll have to slow down when they reach the Earth's atmosphere."

"Not if they use that new technique they've got," Foster reminded them. "We'll be lucky to track them."

"We have a steady track on all twelve," Barry reported, watching the figures on the screen in front of her.

"Speed slowing to Sol one decimal one."

Above the Moon, the interceptors screamed after the dozen alien invaders.

Moments later, Gay Ellis reported the destruction of four of the U.F.O.s. SHADO lost interceptor three, piloted by a young man named Chandra. His ship had inadvertently rammed the fourth U.F.O.

Within half an hour, all twelve alien craft were reported destroyed, no survivors.

"It was too easy, sir," Lieutenant Bradley complained to Henderson. Like Barry, Mark Bradley was on rotation from Moonbase, manning a radar station in Control.

"What do you mean, Lieutenant?" Henderson asked.

"It was too easy," Bradley repeated. His voice was soft, Jamaican accent barely perceptible. "It was like they wanted us to win this time."

"Mark, we just lost an interceptor," Foster reminded the pilot. "I don't call that easy."

"Mark's right, Colonel," Barry said from her station. "They were coming in fast, but they made no attempt at evading the interceptors or Sky-one or two. They were sitting ducks."

Barry and Bradley were both highly experienced

Moonbase operatives. They were more experienced, in fact, than Foster was.

"This was a feint, a decoy, then?" Foster asked, accepting their evaluation. Both operatives nodded.

"Twelve ships is a big loss," Henderson observed.

"Not if they're planning something even bigger, sir," Bradley said.

"Any guesses as to what and when?" Henderson asked.

Barry shook her head. "That was always Commander Straker's strong point, being able to figure out their next step."

"I wish he were in a condition to help us out here," Henderson commented.

"Sir, I was wondering how the commander was doing?" Barry asked.

"That depends on who you ask," Henderson said dryly.

"According to the night nurse, he's still mentally out of it. He sees things that aren't there. According to Freeman and Komack, he's doing fine, considering. It's the nurse who needs looking at."

"And who do you believe, sir?" Bradley asked.

*** * ***

Barry, Bradley and Ford arrived on the seventh floor of Mayland Hospital at about seven that evening.

The chair beside the open door to Straker's hospital room was empty. The security guard who should have been there was nowhere to be seen. A newspaper was folded on the seat of the chair.

Barry knocked on the door.

"Yes?" a very quiet voice called from inside the room.

Barry entered, followed by Ford and Bradley.

Straker was alone. He was seated on the bed, dressed in blue silk pajamas with a heavy velvet robe. A small radio was on the bedside table, tuned into a classical station. The meal tray next to the radio looked like it hadn't been touched. He looked up from the game of solitaire on the table in front of him as they stepped closer.

"Hello, Ed," Barry said. She tried to hide her shock at seeing how gaunt he looked. Straker had always been slim. Now he was positively skeletal. His bones stuck out in sharp relief beneath his skin. There were dark rings under his eyes. He looked like he'd aged more than ten years in the past three weeks.

"Hi, Nina," Straker responded with an uncertain smile. He nodded to Bradley and Ford, "Hi, guys."

"How are they treating you, sir?" Bradley asked.

"Fine, just fine," Straker responded. His voice was very soft and there was an uncharacteristic tentativeness in his tone.

Bradley inspected the meal tray. "Not very hungry, sir?"

Straker shook his head. "I don't much like the food here."

Ford leaned over to look at the solitaire game.

"Shouldn't the black ten go on the red jack, sir?"

Straker looked at cards on the table, forehead creasing in a puzzled frown. Ford pointed out the cards in question and Straker's expression cleared as he moved them to their proper places. Then he grimaced and pushed the table away, folding his hands in his lap. His left wrist was

bandaged.

"How're you feeling, sir?" Bradley asked.

"All right, I guess. Better than I have been," Straker said with forced cheerfulness. "I'm told I'm doing quite well today, actually. I remember who I am. I know I'm in Mayland hospital and I actually remember Alec telling me today was Thursday."

"That's right, sir," Ford confirmed with a smile.

"Just don't ask me anything hard, like the date, or why I'm here," Straker added with a crooked smile.

Ford and Bradley looked puzzled.

"It's like I'm in a dense fog, only it's inside my head," he explained. The cheerfulness slipped. "I keep getting turned around in the fog."

"It'll get better, sir," Barry assured him. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"That's what Doctor Jackson and everybody else keeps telling me, only nobody can tell me when the fog's supposed to lift, or when I can get out of here and go home."

"Being in the hospital gets old pretty fast, doesn't it?" Barry commented, gently patting his knee. He grabbed her hand and held it tightly.

"Sometimes it's hard to tell what's real," he said. "It gets a little scary. I wake up and I don't know what's going on, what was a dream and what wasn't." He let go of her hand with a shuddery breath. "I have horrible dreams."

"Would you like to go for a walk, sir?" Bradley asked.

"I thought we might buy you a cup of coffee."

"I think I'd like that," Straker responded. His expression brightened then clouded again. "What about

Nurse Goodwin?"

**"Sir, since she's not here, she can get her own coffee,"
said Bradley with a grin.**

*** * ***

The cafeteria was on the second floor. It wasn't crowded and they chose a table away from the entrance. Straker sat so his back was to the wall and he could watch the entrance doors.

Bradley went to collect some coffee and sandwiches.

"How have things been at work?" Straker asked after Bradley returned. He cupped the coffee mug the black operative gave him in both hands as if warming himself. Barry touched his wrist. Straker's hands were like ice.

"Things have been fine, sir," Ford said. "We've all been worried about you."

"About me?" Straker wondered. There was a touch of disbelief in his voice.

"Yes, sir," Ford said. "When you were first admitted to the hospital, we were told you might not make it. They said your heart kept stopping."

"I think I remember Alec telling me something like that," Straker told them. "I can't remember what happened, how I ended up here. All Alec will tell me is that I got sick so he came back to London. Kate and Doctor Jackson both tell me not to worry about it. But it bothers me, the blank spaces. At first, I kind of figured I must have totalled my car when I was coming back from the airport with Virginia, but they keep telling me that's not what happened."

"Sir, you did go to pick up Miss Lake from the air

strip..." Ford began tentatively. Barry frowned. Both Henderson and Jackson had asked them not to volunteer details that might upset him. Most particularly, they weren't to mention Turner's death.

"Is she really all right?" Straker interrupted.

"Yes, sir, she's fine. She and Paul Foster came to visit you a little over a week ago." Ford said. "Don't you remember, sir?"

Straker shook his head. The worry had come back into his eyes.

"Well, she's fine, sir," Ford assured him. "But, we're not really sure exactly what did happen to you. When security found you, you were delirious, out of your head. Miss Lake had a concussion and lost her memory, so she can't tell us what happened."

"Has security come up with anything?" Straker asked.

"If they have, they haven't told us about it," Ford said.

"I see." Straker paused, then: "Everything else is okay at work?"

"Yes, sir," Ford said. "But we do all want you to get well enough to come back, especially General Henderson. I guess your job turned out harder than he expected."

Straker managed a chuckle. "My job turned out harder than I expected." His smile faded. "I'm not sure I want it back."

"Sir, you can't be serious," Barry protested.

"Virginia and I were supposed to have a meeting with General Henderson about some special funding. My resignation letter was in my briefcase. I hadn't decided whether I was going to give it to him or not. I woke up here

instead."

There was a moment of shocked silence at his admission.

Ford found his voice first. "Sir, I'm sure things will look a lot brighter once you're get well enough to get out of here," he insisted.

"Maybe," Straker said. "Frazer and Jackson have me on antidepressants. They tell me I have a depressive mood disorder. I guess the medication's helping. I'm not as down as I have been, although the stuff does make me a little spaced out most of the time." He gave them another crooked grin. "Not that anybody can tell, I always was a space cadet. Look at what I do for a living. They still don't trust me with anything sharp, you know." He massaged the bandage on his wrist. "I'm still considered suicidal. I might hurt myself." He said it lightly, but a distant, weary expression come into his face.

"Is it really that bad, sir?" asked Ford quietly.

"Sometimes," Straker admitted. "Sometimes it feels like the whole world is out to get me, that everything I touch is doomed, there's no way out, no reason to even try. That's called paranoia, you know."

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you, sir," Bradley quipped.

Straker actually chuckled at that, and took a sip of coffee. Suddenly, he looked up and the color drained from his face. Barry turned to follow his gaze. Colonel Sprenger was standing in the doorway. He was speaking to a broad shouldered man wearing a white lab coat. There was something eerily familiar about the man, but Barry couldn't

quite identify why. Beside her, Straker shuddered.

Sprenger nodded a dismissal to the other man and approached the table. "Good evening, Ed." He looked around at the people at the table as though memorizing their faces.

"Good evening, Colonel Sprenger. I wasn't aware you were still in England," Straker said.

"My duties with General McGruder, and with SHADO, require me to stay near London. I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot of each other. It'll be like the old days, Eddie."

Straker's face became a stoic mask as he continued to watch the doorway, but Barry noticed his knuckles went white as he clutched the mug.

Sprenger turned to Barry. "I was under the impression that the Russian, Natiroff, had ordered that no one from 'downstairs', I believe your people call it, be allowed to visit. Something about security?"

Barry managed to look guilty as she studied her coffee mug. Neither Bradley nor Ford rose to her defense as they inspected their own cups.

"I'm sure Major Natiroff knows what's going on, Colonel. Besides, it's General Henderson's responsibility right now, not yours," Straker said after a moment. He didn't bother to look up at Sprenger standing over him.

"Who was that?"

"I beg your pardon?" Sprenger said, apparently surprised by the question. He turned to look at the doorway. "I don't see anyone there."

"You were talking to someone before you came in here. Who was it?" Straker insisted.

"I wasn't talking to anyone, Eddie. You must be seeing things again. I'm told you've been having delusions, hallucinations, signs of paranoid schizophrenia. But don't worry, I'm sure SHADO will still have a place for you. Making the tea, maybe."

Straker's mask cracked ever so slightly, letting a hint of despair show through. "Mark, I'm very tired. I'd like to go back to my room, please." His voice was so soft he could barely be heard.

Bradley's dark forehead creased with worry. He came around the table to help Straker to his feet. The commander leaned heavily on him for a moment, then forced himself to stand straight. Bradley kept a grip on his arm, just in case.

Ford came around to Straker's other side to help.

They headed for the cafeteria doors. Sprenger moved as if to follow and Barry stopped him with a hard look. "We don't need your help, Colonel."

*** * ***

Nothing was said until they returned to Straker's room on the seventh floor. The guard who was seated by the door, reading the newspaper. He looked surprised to see them coming down the corridor.

"Why don't you get some rest, sir?" Ford suggested after they entered the empty room. Straker shook his head. His expression was bleak as he sat down on the edge of the hospital bed.

"I have horrible nightmares," he said. The tremor was back in his voice. "Blood and gunfire, everyone at work dead and it's my fault. Sometimes there's a voice saying they don't intend to kill me. I'd be good for making the tea.

Sometimes I wake up and I think it wasn't a nightmare, that maybe it was a real memory of something, but I don't know when or where. Alec and Kate keep telling me not to worry about it, but they won't tell me if it really happened or not."

He pulled his knees to his chest, looking for all the world like an abandoned waif. "Why did he say that? Why did he say there was nobody there? I saw somebody there. I know I did." There was an oddly plaintive note in his voice and his eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I'm not crazy, am I?"

"You're not crazy," Barry said. She sat down beside him on the bed and placed an arm around his shoulders. He was trembling. "Sprenger was talking to somebody in a lab coat before he came over to the table," she told him. "There was something strange about him I can't put a finger on."

"You saw him?" Straker insisted.

Barry nodded affirmative. "Do you know who it was?"

"I wake up at night and the nurse isn't here. But he'll be standing there, against the wall and I start to feel sick,"

Straker told them. He didn't seem to notice the tears beginning to run down his face. "A little bit later he'll be gone and Nurse Goodwin will be back, smelling of tobacco and beer, insisting she hadn't left, that I'm still confused and seeing things that aren't there. Then I get sedated until morning, till Alec gets here and she leaves. I'm not sure even Alec believes me. He says he does."

"Sir," Ford said softly. "We believe you."

Relief washed over Straker's gaunt features and he relaxed his grip on his knees. "Do me a favor, will you? Don't..." He paused as if trying to clear his thoughts. He

wiped a hand over his face, discovering the wetness. "I can't seem to stop crying," he commented absently. "Jackson and Frazer both tell me that loss of emotional control is a normal result of what I've been through and the medications they have me on. Its supposed to get better, but in the meantime, I'm a wreck. I can't think, I can't concentrate, I can't even play solitaire right."

"I'm sure it will get better," Barry said. "It just takes time, that's all. You've been through a lot."

"That's another thing they keep telling me," he said. A stab of anger came into his voice. "But, nobody will tell me what it was I've been through." He sat back with a sigh. "When you give your report to General Henderson, be sure to tell him everything. Don't gloss over anything to protect me. He needs to know. I need for him to know."

"Yes, sir," Bradley agreed for all of them. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes," Straker said. "I'm sorry I haven't been better company."

"We understand, sir," Bradley assured him. Then the astronaut frowned at a sudden realization. "Sir, how did you know we were going to report back to the General?"

Straker managed a crooked smile. "Elementary, my dear Mark. I know, from Alec and now from Sprenger, that Natiroff has requested I not have visitors from work.

'Security'. Sprenger may assume you three are simply violating orders, but I know you all better than that. The only person who has both the authority and a reason to send you here would be General Henderson, to check out my mental state. Therefore, you will be reporting back to him

your observations."

Bradley grinned. "Sir, anybody who tells you you're out of your mind is out of theirs."

"You really do believe me?"

Their reply was interrupted by the arrival of a heavy set woman with bleached hair and cold blue eyes. Nurse Goodwin glared at the three visitors over the top of her gold rimmed glasses. "How the devil did you get in here?"

"They were just leaving," Straker told her. He indicated the door with a tiny jerk of his head.

"Take care of yourself, okay, sir?" Bradley said as he turned to head for the corridor outside.

"Mark," Straker called. Bradley turned back to look at him. The worry had settled back on his features. "Watch your six."

Outside the hospital room, Ford turned to Bradley.

"What did he mean, 'watch your six'?"

"It's pilot talk for watch your back," the black SHADO astronaut explained.

"Who's he warning us against?" Barry wondered.

"I'm not sure," Bradley admitted. The astronaut looked up to see Sprenger standing by the elevators.

Standing with him was a young man in the uniform of an American air force lieutenant. Both men were watching the three SHADO operatives. Sprenger's expression was one of smug satisfaction. The younger man's face was unreadable.

"Off hand, I'd say Colonel Sprenger was a good bet," Ford said quietly.

*** * ***

The following morning, General Henderson was sitting

at the desk in the SHADO commander's office, looking over the reports from the night before. It was a short pile. It had been a quiet night.

He noted a report on the ongoing search for the U.F.O. that was presumed to have followed Straker's capsule to Earth. They weren't having any luck locating it. There were no reports indicating alien activity anywhere SHADO could monitor. The observation satellites had not picked up anything on the alien's possible location either. There was a request at the bottom of the last page for his signature to authorize continuing the search. He signed the appropriate form and dropped it into the 'out' box on the desk.

The white phone buzzed and he picked it up.

"General Henderson, Monsieur Duvall is here to see you," Miss Ealand said over the receiver.

"I'll be right up," Henderson said. He placed the phone back in its cradle.

Duvall was waiting with Miss Ealand as the doors to the inner office slid open.

"General Henderson, we must speak," Duvall began as Henderson stepped out to greet him.

"Come on," Henderson took the Frenchman's elbow and led him out of the office, into the corridor. "Let's talk outside, shall we?"

Henderson suggested, leading the way through a side door onto a walkway that ran along the back wall of two of the sound stages. It was starting to drizzle.

"You're not concerned someone might overhear us?" Duvall worried.

"Around here, they'll simply assume we're deep in

discussion on screenplay plot points," Henderson said. "I doubt we'll be overheard by anyone who cares."

Duvall took a moment to inspect his surroundings, the warehouse-like sound stages, the lighting equipment parked beside the buildings. There was a crew working on the back of an exterior set. They seemed to be ignoring the rain.

"I have been associated with SHADO and the commission since the beginning," Duvall said. "This is the first time I've actually visited the facility my country, and yours, have spent so much money to pay for."

"You only had to ask and I'm sure Commander Straker would have arranged for a visit," Henderson said.

"I never felt it necessary," Duvall admitted. "Besides, as a businessman, I know how destructive it can be to a company, having a board member interfere in the chain of command. The chairman of the board is a more than adequate liaison to the company president."

"And now?" Henderson wondered.

Duvall shrugged. "And now, the chairman of the board is managing the company in place of the president. There is no one to adequately liaise between the board and the company."

"And you've been elected?" Henderson and Duvall continued to walk through the property.

"So it would seem," Duvall admitted. "Sprenger called Kruger, Putin, and myself again last night. He was quite insistent that Commander Straker was far too ill to return to duty. He said that Straker was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. He was seeing things that weren't there."

"Did Sprenger happen to mention that there were

witnesses to his denial of what Straker saw last night, witnesses who can confirm that Straker wasn't seeing things?"

"No, Sprenger did not mention that. He did mention that three operatives visited the commander last night against security orders," Duvall said.

"I see," Henderson mused.

"What do you intend to do about it?" Duvall asked.

"Nothing," Henderson said. Duvall looked surprised. "The three people in question came to me this morning with their report on what happened at the hospital. It was very interesting. I may let you read it sometime."

"You do not intend on disciplining them?" Duvall insisted.

"Why should I discipline them doing what I asked?" Duvall stopped and turned to stare at the old air force man. "I don't understand."

"Duvall, somebody's gone to a lot of trouble to get Straker out of the way. There've been a number of attempts on his life. Now they're trying to make it look like he's lost his mind."

"Who are 'they'? The aliens?" Duvall asked.

"They're our most likely suspects," Henderson said.

"Are there others?"

"I'd rather not say right now."

They went around the corner of the building and stopped. Kathryn Komack was deep in discussion with a man Henderson recognized as the director, Carl Mason. Paul Foster was standing to one side, watching the two of them. Mason looked angry. He was waving his arms

emphasis for whatever he was saying. In contrast, Komack was a pillar of cold calm.

"Is Colonel Foster one of those trying to keep Straker out of the way?" Duvall asked quietly.

Henderson looked over at the Frenchman in surprise.

"What gives you that idea?"

"Sprenger," Duvall replied. "He said Foster tried to assassinate Straker a few months ago. He also said Straker viciously attacked Foster only last week. He was under the impression that Straker and Colonel Foster hated one another."

"Really?" Henderson commented. He caught Foster's eye and beckoned the young man over. Foster murmured something to Komack and then hurried over to Henderson and Duvall.

"Yes, sir?"

"What's going on with Mason?" Henderson asked. Foster shrugged. "They're half-way through shooting and all the money's gone. Mason's demanding more money to complete the project or he'll walk off."

"And what's Miss Komack's reaction?" Henderson asked.

Foster grinned. "Mason had better hope all those funds are legitimately accounted for or she'll be hanging his head by the front gate. She's having an outside auditing team in here Monday."

"Tell me, Mister Foster, how would Commander Straker have handled it?" Duvall asked.

Foster took a moment before replying: "I'm not sure he's ever had this problem, at least not this serious. Mason's

run through twenty million dollars in three months. That's a lot of money, even for us."

Henderson beckoned Foster to accompany them as he headed back towards the main office building. "Colonel Foster, when you visited Commander Straker at the hospital last week, did he attack you?"

Foster stopped. "Who told you that?"

"Never mind that, for the moment. Is it true?"

Henderson asked.

"Commander Straker was very upset. He didn't know what he was doing," Foster answered.

"So, he did attack you," Duvall observed.

Foster didn't bother to respond.

"Who knew about the incident?" Henderson asked.

"Virginia Lake was there, so was Doctor Frazer. I asked them both to keep it quiet. Who told you?"

"Colonel Foster, I want you and Major Natiroff to check on who has access to the security cameras in Straker's room," Henderson said without answering Foster's question. "Also, who might have been watching the nurses' monitors at the time of the incident. You might also want to check with Colonel Lake and Doctor Frazer, in case they did mention it to anyone."

"General, Commander Straker was in bad shape that morning. Someone had just tried to kill him. He wasn't responsible for his actions," Foster insisted.

"I understand that, Colonel," Henderson replied.

"However, I'm more concerned about what appears to be a serious security problem at Mayland."

"I'll get on it right now, " Foster promised. He nodded

a good-bye to the two men and hurried away towards the office building and the main entrance to SHADO.

"Is this all you intend to do about this?" Duvall demanded. "Investigate security? Straker has been accused of attacking a SHADO officer."

"Duvall, I accept Colonel Foster's evaluation of the incident. Straker wasn't responsible for his actions at the time," Henderson said.

"Can we trust command of SHADO to a man who is insane, even temporarily?" Duvall demanded.

Henderson frowned. "This isn't the first time the other side has tried to drive him out of his mind, you know."

"I don't understand."

"Do you remember getting a report on the deaths of Astronaut Conroy and Captain James about a year or so ago?" Henderson asked.

"Yes, I remember something about the two men being killed by SHADO security after they went berserk and started murdering people."

Henderson nodded. "Yes. It was determined they had both been affected by an alien artifact that created something like a drug-induced psychosis in its victims. What wasn't in the report I gave you was the fact that the last person affected by the psychosis was Ed Straker."

"SHADO let him live?"

"He didn't hurt anyone," Henderson explained. "He was completely cut off from reality, but the only people he even raised a hand to were Paul Foster and myself. And, something I never even told SHADO's psychiatric unit about was, even when he did pull out a gun, it was to load a

single cartridge into the chamber so he could blow his own brains out if he couldn't break free of the hallucination."

"How did he break free?"

"We're not sure. We think he threw the artifact against the wall and broke it. It shattered into a million pieces and when it did, he came to his senses."

"Why didn't you give the full story to the commission?"

Duvall demanded.

"I didn't want the commission to go off half-cocked over the incident. When it was over, SHADO's psychiatric team gave Straker a clean bill of health. There was no reason to complicate the issue," Henderson said. "I do have a question for you, though. How did Sprenger know what happened in that hospital room and why does he keep insisting Straker is out of his mind?"

Duvall had no reply.

CHAPTER 20

At 11:00, Monday, September 6, Alec Freeman drove his black Saab up to the main entrance of Mayland Hospital. Straker was waiting by the entrance doors with Doctor Frazer.

Frazer nodded a greeting as Freeman got out and stepped over to them. Straker said nothing. There was an odd vacantness in his expression and Freeman wondered if it was due to the medication he was still on. At least, Straker was no longer convinced that Foster and Lake were dead and he seemed to have regained some control himself.

Straker was wearing a dark blue sweat shirt with a USAF emblem, a pair of faded jeans and black trainers. Freeman couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the other man dressed so casually. For Straker, the height of informality had always been a cashmere sweater.

A small over-night case sat on the ground by his feet. Freeman took the case and placed in the trunk of the Saab, next to the matching suitcase already there.

"Ed?" Freeman called. Straker looked up, almost as though he'd been asleep and was just now waking up. He followed Freeman's gestured instruction and got into the Saab's passenger seat.

Freeman closed the door for him, then climbed behind the steering wheel.

"Doctor Jackson's waiting for you," Frazer told Freeman as he started the car. Freeman glanced over at his passenger to judge his reaction to the news. The blond man seemed totally oblivious to his surroundings.

Freeman pulled the car out of the hospital lot and

headed for the M25 westbound. After a short time, the car wove its way through the knot of off and on ramps to the M11, heading towards Cambridge.

* * *

SHADO's Health Research center was thirty miles northeast of Cambridge, near the small town of Mundford.

"Alec, why are we going to the research center?"

Straker asked, finally breaking his silence.

"Sprenger's 'advice'," Freeman told him.

"And why does Sprenger want me at the research center?"

The sharpness in Straker's tone was so familiar and his expression so intent, Freeman had to suppress a smile of relief. This was the Straker he remembered.

"Ed, the aliens want you dead," he said.

"Tell me something I don't already know."

"I mean it," Freeman insisted. "There've been three attempts on your life at the hospital alone. Why do you think we had somebody with you 24 hours a day?"

"Well, I figured it wasn't for my sparkling personality," Straker commented wryly. "So, why the research center?"

"It has a full security complement," Freeman explained reasonably. "Jackson's waiting there for you. It'll be quiet, you can rest, get well."

"Alec, I feel more like I've been condemned to Coventry." Straker's tone indicated he didn't enjoy the thought.

Freeman laughed. "Coventry's more that direction." He pointed towards the north-west.

"You know what I mean."

"I know," Freeman assured him. "Look, Ed, the aliens want you dead, or worse."

"So, I'm being set out as a lure," Straker responded. "Hopefully, our people will deal with the 'assassins' before they deal with me."

"That's the general idea." Freeman admitted. He wasn't surprised that Straker had figured it out. Straker was many things, but stupid wasn't one of them.

"What did Kate say to this plan?" Straker asked after a few moments.

Freeman sighed, not quite sure what to say. He decided the truth was the best course.

"She swore at us and walked out."

"She what?"

"She threw her hands up in disgust, called us all a bunch of effing bastards and walked out of this morning's staff meeting," Freeman elaborated.

"What did Henderson do?"

"Nothing, yet. She hasn't left the studio. Mason's been causing problems, and they're still finishing up some of the details on the new union contract. You know how Katie likes having things neat and tidy."

"I know," Straker said. "She's better at that sort of thing than I am." He sat back and watched the scenery pass by. "Alec, what do you think?" he asked finally.

"I think Katie's not about to give up her new job as operational head of the studio unless she has to."

Freeman's well-practiced obtuseness made Straker smile. "I mean, about setting me up as a tethered goat."

"It stinks," Freeman admitted. "There're at least half a dozen places I'd chose over the research center. You'd be better off in uniform in the middle of Mildenhall or at an SIS safe house. Hell, you'd be safer in the middle of Red Square."

"You weren't supposed to tell me this, were you?"

All traces of the earlier vacantness had vanished. Freeman suddenly wondered if it had all been an act. If it had been, then Straker was working on the wrong side of the camera at the studio. It was an award winning performance.

Straker's expression betrayed nothing as he watched Freeman's reaction.

"Henderson didn't tell me not to," Freeman admitted with a smile.

"Did Sprenger?"

Freeman's smile slipped. "I don't take orders from Sprenger."

"Well, I can't fault you for your loyalty, Alec," Straker assured him with a little laugh. "You don't think I'm crazy, do you?" Straker's statement was more an observation than a question.

Freeman considered his reply for a long moment. "I think you've been through hell and I don't think it's over yet."

*** * ***

They stopped for lunch at a small pub Freeman knew in Cambridge. The smoked salmon sandwiches, a speciality of the house, were excellent, as usual. Freeman would have liked a beer, or something stronger, but settled for black

coffee.

As they ate, Freeman described the security arrangements at the research center. He tried to get a sense of what Straker was thinking, but the other man had settled back into his shell and said fewer than five words during the entire meal. Freeman wasn't even sure he was paying attention.

*** * ***

An hour later, the Saab drove through a pair heavy iron gates onto a gravel road. The road led up to a gray Georgian-style country house that had seen a few too many poorly planned additions. The building sprawled across the landscape. A thin wisp of smoke rose from one of the many chimneys.

Jackson was standing on the front steps of the building, waiting for them. "Welcome to the research center, Commander," he said when Straker climbed out of the car.

Freeman went around to the rear of the Saab and opened the trunk. He pulled out a small box wrapped in brown paper and handed it to Jackson. "The package you asked for, Doctor."

"Thank you, Colonel," Jackson said, tucking the box under his arm.

Freeman pulled Straker's luggage from the trunk and set the cases on the ground. "Ed, be careful," Freeman cautioned. "And don't do anything stupid, okay."

Straker simply nodded.

Freeman reached into his pocket, suddenly remembering. "Oh, Katie wanted me to make sure you got this." He pulled out a heavy silver ring and handed it to

Straker.

Straker took the ring and inspected it. It was his own membership ring from the Zodiac club. The seal was the Capricorn goat. He smiled and slipped the ring into his pocket. "Thanks, Alec."

Freeman climbed back into his car and roared away, back the way he had come. Straker picked up both suitcases and walked up the steps, following Jackson through the heavy front door.

"Who else is here?" Straker asked as Jackson led the way through a series of somberly furnished public rooms and up a back staircase to the second floor.

"Besides us, there's a security contingent and about a dozen recruits just finishing their training," Jackson informed him.

"Who's in charge of the security unit?" Straker inquired. Jackson paused as he used his key to open the door to one of the upstairs bedrooms.

"Lieutenant Wain," Jackson replied.

Straker frowned. That wasn't the name Freeman had mentioned over lunch.

"I believe he's one of Colonel Sprenger's people," Jackson explained.

"Oh," was Straker's only comment. He looked around the room. It was, as one author described such things, a room-shaped room with furniture-shaped furniture. The draperies were heavy and covered a pair of French doors that opened out onto an iron railed balcony. The balcony looked over a well-kept kitchen garden. Beyond it was a running track and several tennis courts.

Straker couldn't see the heavily monitored perimeter fence that surrounded the estate, but he knew it was there. There were cameras strategically placed throughout the grounds and inside the buildings. The main monitoring station was in the basement. The estate was as well guarded as any safe-house, but, as Straker knew, any security system had its weaknesses.

Jackson took care to point out the bathroom that connected Straker's bedroom with the one beyond. Jackson had assigned himself that room, over the objections of Lieutenant Wain.

"What does my itinerary look like, Doctor?" Straker wondered aloud. He started to unpack the large suitcase, placing his things in the bureau by the French doors. One item he didn't put away was a small black box with several small lights on one face. Straker scanned the room with the 'bug' detector. He silently noted the locations of the various listening devices planted in the room.

"Doctor Frazer has indicated that some physical therapy is in order, some carefully monitored exercise and, of course, rest." Jackson said, watching Straker scan the room.

"How long are we supposed to be here?" Straker asked. He placed the scanner back in the suitcase and placed the locked case in the corner by the bureau.

"Until you're fit to return to duty," Jackson replied calmly.

"And if I decide not to return to duty?" Straker wondered.

"I have six weeks to get you ready to return to duty."

* * *

Jackson led Straker on a brief tour of the building. Normally, it was more of a health spa than anything else. Besides the running track and tennis courts outside, there were exercise rooms, a handball court, an indoor swimming pool, examination rooms, class rooms.

The estate had provisions to care for two dozen operatives on their mandated two week stay. The staff, medical and support, normally numbered nearly two dozen as well. However, at the moment, the only residents were the dozen trainees, their instructors and a dozen or so security staff.

"Colonel Sprenger has requested we not fraternize with the trainees," Jackson commented after they'd taken a quick look in on a self-defense class being held in the gymnasium.

"Why?"

"I'm not sure," Jackson admitted. "Most of the regular staff members are on two week leave."

"Isn't that a little unusual?" Straker asked.

Jackson nodded. "Apparently, that was Colonel Sprenger's idea as well, to give you more privacy."

"Since when has my welfare been of any concern to Anthony Sprenger?" Straker asked.

"Perhaps you've misjudged him," Jackson suggested.

"Maybe," Straker said, but his tone indicated he didn't think it likely. "I'd like to check out the security systems, anyway."

"The central command post is in the basement," Jackson reminded him.

The door to the stairway leading to the basement and the security area had an electronic combination lock on it.

The lock looked new.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Straker commented.

"Colonel Straker, sir, how can I help you?" a young man asked, coming down the corridor towards them. The man's hair and eyes were medium brown and he was wearing an olive drab utility uniform with USAF markings.

His name tag indicated he was Lieutenant Tyson Wain, United States Air Force.

"I wanted to take a look at the security systems," Straker said.

"I'm afraid that's out of the question, sir. Only authorized personnel are permitted past that door. Security regulations, as I'm sure you are aware, Colonel," Wain said stiffly. He stood 'at ease', feet apart, hands clasped behind his back. The safety snap on his gun holster was undone.

"I see," Straker commented.

"Now, Colonel, it might be best if you returned to your quarters. I'm sure you could do with some rest after your long trip here, don't you agree, Doctor?" Wain suggested.

Jackson shrugged. "I was thinking a walk through the grounds might do just as well, Lieutenant."

Wain's expression turned hard. "As you wish, Doctor." Wain remained standing in the corridor until Straker and Jackson left the hallway to head outside the building.

"This whole set up stinks," Straker said when they were well away from the main building. "Or am I being paranoid about all this?"

"Even paranoia can have it's uses," Jackson replied.

There was the slightest slump in Straker's posture.

"However, I am also concerned about the security arrangements here. Lieutenant Wain's attitude towards you seems rather suspect. And considering what was happening at the hospital, a few feelings of persecution seem more than justified."

"You knew about that?"

Jackson pursed his lips together and nodded.

"Why didn't you have security do something?"

"We tried, but nothing seemed help," Jackson admitted. "We finally decided to simply handle each incident as it came along, deal with the psychological aspects as they came up."

"You and Alec really did believe me?"

Jackson nodded. "Natiroff is still looking into Nurse Goodwin's clearances. She had access to drugs the standard tests can't identify."

"Alien?"

"Possibly, but the CIA and KGB both have extensive non-standard pharmacopoeias, as does SHADO," Jackson reminded him. "Your last blood tests came up clear except for the antidepressants Frazer and I prescribed. We're fairly certain there are no lasting side effects from what she was giving you."

"Fairly certain?"

"As certain as we can be at this point," the doctor said.

"From present observation, I'd say your state of consciousness was normal."

"So, what now?" Straker asked.

"I suggest we proceed, for the time being, as originally

planned," Jackson said. "Including the psychological therapy and stress reduction components Doctor Frazer has suggested."

"What about the listeners?" Straker asked.

Jackson grinned and pulled a small black box from his pocket. There were several blinking lights and a toggle switch on its face. "I am assured by Major Graham that no one will be listening."

*** * ***

Inside the security monitoring room, Wain stood by as the watch officer frantically tried to get a signal from the several microphones in the vicinity of Straker and Jackson.

"It's no use, sir," the man said finally. "One of them has a jamming device of some sort. We have a picture but no sound."

"Fix it," Wain ordered.

"I can't, not without knowing exactly what they're using to jam us with and how."

"Then find out, sergeant," Wain hissed.

"Sir, this is one of the most sophisticated computerized security set-ups I've ever come across. I've only read about systems like this one in the tech publications," the technical sergeant explained. "Hell, sir, I can't even identify the programming language they used. It's not Jovial or any other military language I've ever seen."

"Well, you'd better figure it out pretty quick, sergeant," Wain warned. "The colonel has no tolerance for incompetence."

"Yes, sir, I'll do what I can," the sergeant said, turning back to the computer screen in front of him.

* * *

Dinner was served at 6:00 in a dining room that more resembled a school dormitory dining hall than anything else.

There were six large tables arranged in meticulous geometrical order around the room, a dozen chairs to each table.

A buffet was set up along one wall of the room, near the pass-through to the kitchen. A white uniformed server stood at one end of the buffet table, carving the meat and watching the diners.

Two of the tables were already occupied by a group of about a dozen young men and women with a sprinkling of older SHADO operatives. Several of the trainees seemed to be discussing the day's lessons, making figures in the air with their hands as they talked.

Straker and Jackson collected their trays. They were making their way to an empty table when one of the instructors left his seat to approach them.

"Gentlemen, we would be honored if you would join us," the operative said. He indicated two empty seats at his table.

With murmured 'thank you's, Straker and Jackson joined the trainees at their table.

"My name's Daphne, what's yours?" the brown haired girl seated next to Straker said, holding out her hand to be shook.

"Ed," Straker answered, shaking her hand. Her grip was very firm.

"Major Bonnano," she indicated the instructor who had invited them over, "says a high ranking SHADO officer

was going to be joining us here. I assume that's you."

"Yes," Straker replied with a smile at the girl's brashness. She couldn't be more than twenty. Straker wondered a little at who recruited her and why.

"Daphne," Bonnano began. "Let the..." He paused, giving Straker a questioning look.

"Colonel, will do, Major," Straker told him. "And it's all right, I don't mind the conversation."

"Very well, sir," Bonnano said, giving Daphne a glare. Lieutenant Wain entered the room and all conversation stopped. He stiffened at the sight of Straker and Jackson seated at the trainees' table.

"Doctor, if I may have a word with you?" Wain said. His expression was cold and grim. Jackson got up from his chair and went over to Wain who stepped out into the hallway beyond.

Although Wain seemed to be trying to keep his voice down, certain words floated back to the table, among them, psychotic and homicidal. Jackson's reply could not be heard, but his expression became more and more angry as he listened to what Wain was saying. Finally, Jackson turned on his heel and walked away, back to his seat at the table.

"May I ask what that was all about?" Straker asked. He tried to keep the worry out of his voice. He hadn't liked what little he'd heard of Wain's statements.

"I find I resent the lieutenant's attempts to interfere in my treatment of my patients," Jackson said. His Hungarian accent had thickened, reflecting his anger. "I also resent uneducated laymen bandying about terminology they have

no concept of the meaning of. Psychosis, schizophrenia, major depressions are all biochemical disorders whose symptomology includes alterations of brain function and thought processes. They are also treatable, and in some cases, completely curable."

"Who am I supposed to have killed?" Straker asked quietly. Jackson gave him a curious look. "He said 'homicidal', and since I'm reasonably sure he was talking about me, who did I kill to earn that label?"

"I would prefer that we discussed this at a later time." Jackson told him.

"I would prefer to discuss this right now," Straker responded. "Who does he think I killed?"

"I believe the Lieutenant may have been referring to Colonel Collins."

"That was an accident," Straker insisted. "He was my friend. Do you really think I wanted him dead?"

"I don't know," Jackson admitted. "However, I've been told that Collins was also a friend of Colonel Sprenger's."

Straker's expression softened as he sat back in his chair. "I wouldn't have said they were friends, exactly, but sometimes I think Craig felt it was his mission in life to keep Sprenger and me from tearing out each other's throats. Funny, but Craig never had the problems with Sprenger I did."

Half a dozen drab uniformed men walked in, collected their meals and sat down at the table furthest away from the trainees. The expressions on the men's faces seemed to be uniformly wary and watchful.

"You know, sir," Daphne said, voice quiet. Straker looked over at her. "I'm not sure I like the security people here. They certainly don't seem to like us much." Several other trainees at the table nodded agreement.

"Go on," Straker instructed.

"I mean, at the other installations, the security people were very firm, but polite, just doing their jobs, nothing personal," Daphne explained. "And once we passed all the checks, they were nice people. They considered us all part of the same team, all part of SHADO, even though we're just trainees."

"But, here, sir," one of the other trainees said. "We're not part of their team. We're an intrusion."

"They're right, sir," Bonnano confirmed. "Lieutenant Wain seems to have his own agenda here and it doesn't include us. I'll be glad when we're out of here next Monday."

"I was under the impression your group would be here for several weeks," Jackson said.

"That was the original plan. Three weeks here, then the trainees go on to their individual assignments," Bonnano confirmed. "However, I received orders this afternoon telling us to move out next Monday. Actually, they wanted us out today but I put my foot down. These kids just aren't ready."

"Who signed those first orders?" Straker asked.

"Colonel Sprenger."

"But, Anthony Sprenger isn't even a member of SHADO," Straker protested. "How is he giving orders?"

"I don't know, sir, but the orders arrived complete

with the proper security codes. I double checked," Bonnano said. "The altered instructions came with Colonel Freeman's signature."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Straker said. He sat back in his chair again, a troubled look on his face.

*** * ***

"Doctor, I have no intention of staying here after the trainees have gone," Straker told Jackson the following Sunday as they went on their daily walk through the grounds. The fact that Wain had an armed watcher keeping an eye on them was almost reassuring. Wain wouldn't be bothering with a live watcher if he trusted the electronic surveillance of the grounds.

"I had a suspicion that would be your decision," Jackson said. He had brought a paper sack with him. He handed it to Straker.

The sack was surprisingly heavy. Straker opened it and pulled out a Beretta. He hefted the weapon in his hand and then checked the magazine. "I take it you feel I can be trusted with a loaded gun?"

"I think you've been progressing very nicely, Commander," Jackson told him. "Besides, we may need the weapon and you're a much better shot than I am. However, I want your solemn word as an officer and a gentleman, that you will not use it on yourself."

"I thought you said I was progressing nicely, Doctor," Straker said.

"Do you know which medical speciality has the highest patient death rate?" Jackson asked.

"There's a catch here, isn't there?" Straker asked.

Jackson smiled.

"Before you asked, I would have guessed either cardiologists or cancer doctors," Straker answered.

Jackson shook his head. "Psychiatrists. I would rather you didn't add to my patient death statistics."

"Will my word be good enough?" Straker wondered, as he tucked the Beretta into his belt at the small of his back, under his sweat shirt.

"I will accept your word that you will not harm yourself," Jackson replied.

"I promise. You realize, of course, you won't be safe here after I leave," Straker told him. "Wain doesn't strike me as being very forgiving of people who've embarrassed him and you have embarrassed him, in front of his own people and in front of our trainees. It would be very convenient for him if I were missing and you were dead."

"Do you have a plan for getting us both out of here safely?" Jackson asked.

Straker grinned. "Funny you should ask that..."

From the trees, the watcher pulled out a small radio and reported his observations.

CHAPTER 21

The operatives at SHADO Headquarters placed bets on how long Straker would stay at the Research Center.

Ford won the pool. He had predicted that Straker would stay put a week and center security would discover his absence the morning of Monday, September 13. He had further predicted that Doctor Jackson would also be missing.

At 9:00 that Monday, Lieutenant Wain notified Colonel Sprenger, who informed Major Natiroff, that Straker and Jackson had vanished sometime between midnight and eight o'clock that morning. The security monitors in both bedrooms and on the grounds immediately outside the building had been overridden, somehow. Jackson's brown Euroford Omen was also missing.

In addition, Wain reported that one of his men saw Straker pull a gun on Jackson the previous afternoon. The group of SHADO trainees and instructors at the center were being detained for questioning.

Sprenger requested a full security alert and notified MI5 that two important members of SHADO had vanished. One of them was considered 'unstable', probably armed and likely dangerous. The other was probably dead.

Jackson's car was located several hours later in a self-serve parking garage a short distance from New London Bridge. Straker's suitcase was in the trunk, as was Jackson's luggage.

A check with the airports, the trains and the ferries out of the country revealed that no one closely matching Straker's description was seen leaving Great Britain.

One Portsmouth ferry worker did recall two men, one bearing a vague resemblance to the description given out, on the ferry to Cherbourg. They were driving a baby blue Ford Mustang convertible with British registration. His report was dismissed because he also described the pair as being blatantly enamoured of one another, something so out of character for an American military officer, as to be inconceivable.

Sprenger was confident that Straker hadn't left the country. It was only a matter of time before MI5 or SHADO security located him, as well as Jackson, or at least his body.

Major Vladimir Illych Natiroff wasn't convinced. General Henderson certainly didn't seem worried that Straker had taken off, nor was Colonel Freeman. Neither man seemed at all concerned at the possibility of Jackson's death. Henderson simply signed Straker out on extended medical leave.

Three days later, SHADO security intercepted a curious phone call to General Henderson which had been routed through to the office in SHADO headquarters. The call was from his wife and normally would not have attracted Natiroff's attention. However, this particular call was from the continent and had been flagged for review by the monitoring computer.

Mrs. Henderson told her husband that she and their granddaughter had taken the train from London to Tours and had hired a car to get to Chinon. One fact that Natiroff recalled from his review of SHADO's records was: The Hendersons had six teen-aged grandsons, all living in the

United States. They had no granddaughter.

Another fact Natiroff recalled was: SHADO colonel Elizabeth Kathryn Komack had a half-brother near Chinon.

He ran an inn. He also worked for the CIA.

Natiroff placed an anonymous bet in the new pool that was started in the Control room. Straker and Jackson would be officially located in one month's time. In the meantime, Natiroff made arrangements through personal connections to send three operatives to Chinon, France.

One week later, Colonel Komack signed herself out on furlough, leaving the studio once more in the capable hands of Miss Ealand. Her explanation for taking time away from work was that she needed to arrange shipping her belongings from San Francisco to London. She turned down the offer of the studio's executive jet. Instead, she booked a flight on the Concorde to New York, then on to the west coast of the United States.

SHADO security reported back that Komack got to Heathrow and checked her luggage in at the British Airways counter. Then she paid cash to board a commuter jet to Paris. They also reported that she had been followed to the airport by men from U.S. air force intelligence. She managed to lose them in the crowds, with a little help from SHADO security.

Anthony Sprenger was utterly furious. "How dare you interfere in our surveillance of that woman!"

Natiroff watched the air force officer with rapt attention, as though he'd just come across a large, rare, possibly poisonous, insect. "As chief of SHADO's internal security, my job includes protecting SHADO personnel

from unwarranted and unwanted surveylance, aside from that which SHADO requires."

"That woman is a threat to NATO security and you have willfully interfered with our investigation," Sprenger spat. "You let her get away! She might have led us to Straker."

"Possibly," Natiroff said. "However, since I am aware of the location of both Commander Straker and Colonel Komack, I hardly consider them as having 'gotten away'."

"Where are they?" Sprenger demanded, leaning over Natiroff's desk.

"I'm afraid that, in the interests of security, I cannot tell you where they are, except to say that they are both in good health and well guarded."

"Major, I order you to tell me where they are!" Sprenger hissed.

"Colonel Sprenger, I am a Soviet army intelligence officer attached to SHADO," Natiroff reminded the American. "You do not have the authority to give me orders. Please leave my office before I have you escorted out of the complex under guard."

Sprenger's face was a mask of barely controlled fury as he left Natiroff's small office.

*** * ***

"Thank you, Major," Henderson said, hanging up the phone in the commander's office. He looked over at Foster, seated opposite the desk. "That was Natiroff. Apparently Sprenger's on the warpath. You seem to get along with him. Maybe you can find out what's going on," Henderson suggested.

"I'll see what I can do," Foster promised, getting out of the chair. "You know, sir, the only reason he even tolerates me is he thinks I hate Straker as much as he does. I just haven't figured out why he thinks that. I swear I haven't said anything like that to him."

"I believe you, Colonel," Henderson responded. "But for now, just play along with him. You're the one SHADO officer in the best position to find out what he's up to."

"You think he's up to something, sir?"

"I know he's up to something, Colonel," Henderson said.

With a nod of understanding, Foster left the office, heading across the hallway, to the control center.

"Colonel," Ford called out. He was standing at the map table with Mark Bradley and Nina Barry. Diagrams and computer print-outs were spread over the table. Foster went over to them.

"Colonel, with Commander Straker gone, we weren't sure who we should be reporting to on this," Ford said.

"On what?" Foster asked.

"About three months ago, Commander Straker assigned us to work out contingency plans for handling a mass attack," Ford answered.

"Plan B?" Foster wondered aloud.

"The name he assigned was 'Angel'," Barry replied. "After SHADO's original cryptonym. We're pretty well finished, the computer simulations look good and we're ready to implement it."

"So, what's the problem?" Foster asked.

"Between Nina and Louie Graham, we can hack into

any computer system in the world, except for our own," Bradley said with a grin. "We don't have the authorization codes to access the security protocol overrides on SID."

Foster caught sight of Sprenger crossing the control room, towards the office. "I can see where that might be a problem," Foster told the three. "I'll be right back." He hurried over to intercept Sprenger.

"Colonel, is there something I can help you with?" Foster asked the older man.

"You can tell me where Colonel Straker and your Colonel Komack have gone off to," Sprenger grated.

"I'm afraid I don't know," Foster admitted.

"You mean, Henderson and Freeman, and their pet Russian, don't trust you enough to let you know where your own commanding officer is?" Sprenger said.

"Now that you mention it, I maybe they don't," Foster said. "Commander Straker and I have had some differences of opinion in the past."

That seemed to calm Sprenger down a little. He looked around the control room. "What are those three up to?" he asked, indicating the three operatives standing by the table, watching them.

"Nothing," Foster replied. "They're waiting for authorization to implement contingency plan B."

"And what's that?" Sprenger demanded.

Foster saw no reason not to tell the liaison officer. "It's something Straker was putting together before he got sick. Plans for handling a massive Ufo attack."

"What sort of plans?"

"I'm not sure," Foster admitted. "I assume they've

been working on some means to upgrade our offensive coverage in near-Earth space."

"And how do they intend to do that?" Sprenger asked.

Foster shrugged. "Originally Straker proposed building four new moonbases, but the commission turned down the funding request."

"And what do they propose?"

"I'm really not sure. I assume it's something similar. I can't think of any other way for SHADO to complete it's mission without compromising security." Foster told him.

"They're just finishing up the details now."

"Are they the only ones who know the details?"

Sprenger asked.

"As far as I know," Foster answered. "Why?"

"Just curious," Sprenger replied. "If you find out where Straker and his lady friend have gone off to, you will let me know, won't you?"

"I assume General Henderson will let you know when he's ready," Foster responded.

Sprenger gave him a mirthless smile. "Just in case he forgets, I expect you to keep me informed." Sprenger said. He turned and left the complex.

* * *

One month later, as predicted, Straker and Komack were officially located. General Henderson ordered Paul Foster to fly the studio executive jet to Tours. Once there, Foster rented a Peugeot. It wasn't his Corvette, but it would do.

His destination was an inn several miles south of the mediaeval town of Chinon on the river Vienne. It was a

pleasant drive from Tours to Chinon along D751. The sky was clear and there was a nip in the air, a reminder of autumn.

The Maison Cheval Blanc was a moderately sized inn in an area dedicated to wine-making. The red brick and half-timbered main building sat on a low hill, surrounded by walnut trees in their orange autumn dress. There was a winery a short distance away, surrounded by row upon row of well tended grape vines.

Foster stopped the car in front of the main building and got out. A piano was being played somewhere near-by.

A light blue classic Mustang convertible with British registration plates was parked by the side of the building.

Standing in the doorway was a very tall, wiry man with snow white hair and dark eyebrows.

"You must be Paul Foster," the man said, walking over to the SHADO officer. The man's deeply tanned face split into a brilliantly white smile as he shook Foster's hand.

"You must be Derek Flandry," Foster replied. "I'm looking for Ed Straker."

"I know. We've been expecting you," Flandry said. He turned and called out: "Esther, where are you?"

"Right here, Uncle Derek." A small face topped with pale blonde hair peered out from around the corner of the building.

"Where's your Momma, Esther?" Flandry asked. The girl looked up at him with a solemn expression.

"With Daddy. They promised to talk about getting me a baby brother."

Flandry chuckled. "Would you take Mister Foster here

to them, please, Esther?" he asked.

She gave Foster an appraising look, "You're a friend of Momma and Daddy, aren't you?"

"Yes, I guess I am, and you can call me Paul," Foster told her. The little girl nodded and then took his hand. There was something eerily familiar about the child, the blue-gray eyes, the fine boned, elven face.

The interior of the building was slightly more modern than the very traditional exterior. The furnishings were simple but very comfortable. The renovations in lighting and plumbing had obviously been made with an eye towards maintaining the traditional country feel of the place.

Esther led him upstairs, to the guest rooms. She stopped at a door at the end of the hallway and knocked.

A woman's voice replied. "Yes?"

"Momma, are you awake?"

The door opened.

"Yes, Esther," a tousled Kathryn Komack said with a touch of exasperation in her voice. Then she looked up to see Foster standing behind the girl.

"Oh, hello, Paul," she said, pulling her satin robe more closely around her. She didn't seem surprised to see him standing there.

She opened the door wider, gesturing them both in.

"Ed, Paul's here," she called out.

A door at the far end of the room opened and Straker walked in, toweling off his hair. He was barefoot and bare chested, wearing a pair of faded jeans. The scars on his belly from the incident at Mayland were beginning to fade.

"Hello, Paul," he greeted.

Foster returned the greeting. The rest had obviously done the other man a lot of good. Straker looked more relaxed, more comfortable, than Foster had ever seen him.

"How soon do we need to be back?" Straker asked. He ignored Foster's scrutiny as he pulled on a sweater and looked around the floor for a pair of shoes.

"Today," Foster replied. Straker nodded. He found a pair of soft leather moccasins and slipped them on.

Esther ran up to Straker as Komack disappeared into the adjoining bathroom.

"When do I get my baby brother?" the girl demanded.

"Well, there are certain formalities that need to be tended to first, you know," Straker told her. "Sure you wouldn't rather have a puppy?"

Esther's face screwed up in thought. "Maybe," she said after a moment. "But why can't I have a brother, too?"

"Ask your mother."

Esther rolled her eyes, placing her hands on her hips in the mock-adult manner that only very small children can affect.

"Momma told me to ask you."

"Well, baby brothers take time, Rome wasn't built in a day, you know," Straker informed her with a smile.

"I've heard that before," she complained. Straker took her hand and stepped into the hall. Foster followed them out.

"I assume we have enough time for lunch. I'm starving," Straker said. He led the way down the front staircase to the main hall.

"I assume we do," Foster replied. The smells from the

kitchen were making him hungry. It occurred to him that it had been a long time since breakfast.

*** * ***

The Maison Cheval Blanc may have been a country inn, but the kitchen was as modern as any new Parisian, or London, restaurant. It was all stainless steel and gray tile.

One entire counter top was marble.

Several white aproned women were busily chopping vegetables and meat. A young man tended several steaming kettles on one of the two large commercial stoves.

A sliding patio door led out to a large glass-enclosed sun-room filled with pots of herbs. A large oak table sat in the center of the red tile floor and there were several unmatched chairs around it. A teenage girl was just finishing setting the table under Flandry's watchful eye. He noted an error in one of the placements and quietly corrected her.

"Vacation's over, right?" he commented as Straker, Foster and Esther entered the sun-room. Outside, the sky was beginning to cloud over.

"We'll leave right after lunch, if that's all right. Be back in London by tea time," Straker said. He seemed to be looking forward to it.

Flandry grinned. "Well, if you ever get tired of the old grind, you know where you can hide out. I can always use a good piano player," he said as he walked back into the kitchen.

"Is that how you've been earning your keep?" Foster asked.

"I'm a very good piano player, I'll have you know,"

Straker retorted.

After a few minutes, they were joined by Kathryn Komack, Doctor Jackson, and a sprightly elderly woman with a halo of white hair and bright blue eyes. Esther called her 'Gramma'.

"How do you do, Mrs. Henderson," Foster said. "The general wanted me to ask when you were planning to come home. I think he's tired of eating his own cooking."

*** * ***

The meal was one of the best Foster could remember ever having, and Foster liked good food.

***Coq au vin du pays, asperges de Vineuil, champignons farcis, fresh melons de Tours and tartes des demoiselles Tatin,* all expertly prepared. If this was how Straker, Jackson and Komack had been eating the past month, it was a wonder that they all hadn't gained weight.**

Over the meal, Flandry explained that the restaurant portion of the inn was open in the evening for dinner. It was a favorite spot for the more knowledgeable tourists, since the prices were quite reasonable. The bed and breakfast also did very well, attracting primarily British and American tourists.

As he ate, Foster took the opportunity to observe Straker. He noted that Jackson, in turn, was watching him.

Straker had managed to regain much of the weight he'd lost in the hospital, and was looking quite fit, physically.

"Actually. I'm glad we're leaving before the dinner-show. If Mrs. Pettigrew asked for 'The Moonlight Sonata' one more time, I was going to strangle her with her own necklaces," Straker was saying to the others.

"Well, she wouldn't be picking on you if you hadn't asked her how long it took for the green to wear off,"

Komack admonished with a grin.

"Well, is it my fault she announced to all and sundry that she was an alien from Alpha Centauri?" Straker asked, all innocence.

"Ed, she's a customer," Flandry said, getting into the conversation.

"Derek, she's crazy," Straker retorted. "Rich, but crazy."

"She's eccentric, only poor people are crazy," Komack stated.

"Actually, I do believe Mrs. Pettigrew is seriously disturbed and is in need of professional assistance," Jackson put in.

"Does that mean you won't let me put her out of my misery?" Straker asked the psychiatrist. Jackson glared at him over a forkful of asparagus.

Something about the name clicked and Foster asked, "Mrs. Pettigrew? That wouldn't be Caroline Pettigrew with the 'Paraphysical Research Group', out of Kensington, would it?"

Straker nodded and gave him a rueful grin. "That's the one. She recognized me. Apparently, she comes down here every year for a couple weeks on holiday. Just my bad luck to be here at the same time."

"I ran across her a few years ago. Is she still preaching on the peaceful nature of flying saucer inhabitants?" Foster asked.

"Oh, yes," Straker replied in a bemused tone. "Of

course, we all know there's no such thing as flying saucers."

*** * ***

Jackson waited with Foster while Straker and Komack went upstairs to pack their things.

"Well, Colonel, what do you think?" Jackson said.

"Commander Straker's looking good, if that's what you mean," Foster responded. "The rest has done him good."

"Yes," Jackson bobbed his head. "Doctor Shroeder had suggested some stress management techniques. I believe they've helped."

"Is he ready to go back to work?" Foster asked, as they stepped outside.

"Physically, he's fit enough," Jackson said.

"What about psychologically?" Foster prodded.

"That is much more difficult to say, Colonel," Jackson admitted. "I've been working with him. However, he has no recollection of the events leading to his hospitalization and he refuses to discuss certain events that occurred at Mayland. Also, he is still having some difficulty dealing with Colonel Collins' death on their mission to SID."

"Enough to affect his ability to command?" Foster insisted. "General Henderson has expressed concern as to the commander's stability under fire."

Jackson nodded. "Possibly, I can't be sure. It's difficult to tell in cases like this. He could be fine, or, he could break under the first pressure. We have no way of predicting."

Straker and Komack had come out of the house, carrying a couple of satchels and a small over-night case. Komack had changed her clothes from a shirt-dress to a

teal blue, almost military, jumpsuit with a matching bomber-style jacket. Straker had put on a soft gray leather jacket against the October chill.

Straker overheard Foster and Jackson. Without a word, he placed the satchel he was carrying into the trunk of the car and then stalked away, towards the trees.

Komack simply shook her head.

"Damn," Foster muttered. Then, he hurried off after Straker.

Straker was just on the far side of the crest of the hill, sitting with his back to one of the large walnut trees. He didn't look up as Foster approached.

"You once told me to never judge a situation by the end of a conversation," Foster began. "You might try taking your own advice."

"The end of your conversation with Jackson was pretty obvious," Straker pointed out.

"Was it?" Foster asked quietly. "General Henderson asked me to check on how soon you might be able to return to work. Jackson still has doubts about your mental state, about your adjustment to Collins's death and to what was happening at the hospital. Personally, I think you haven't yet come to terms a lot of other things, either."

"And since when have you become an expert on my mental state?"

"I'm not. But, I have been there, remember?"

"What does that mean?" Straker asked. His voice was tight.

"I mean, sometimes it takes a long time to get over killing someone, even accidentally," Foster said. "I'm told

police officers who've been forced to kill sometimes end up taking early retirement because they can't handle it."

"I'm not a police officer," Straker observed. "I am a United States Air Force officer, assigned to the United Nations project known as SHADO."

"Ed, you're a human being. A responsible, conscientious, civilized man, who was forced to use his training to against one of his own people instead of the enemy," Foster said. "I still have nightmares about shooting Croxley and I didn't even know the man."

"I hadn't realized that," Straker admitted softly.

"I'm not a robot, and neither are you."

"You're sure of that, are you?" Straker asked.

"Robots don't care if they kill, or who they hurt.

You've been called an ice cold computerized robot. Hell, I've called you that. But, I also know how you've gone out of your way to avoid hurting innocent people, how often you've gone out on a limb to keep our people from getting hurt unnecessarily. I know how often you've had to protect me against my own stupidity," Foster said.

"I've always considered it part of the job," Straker said softly. "A good officer takes care of his people. I've always tried to be a good officer."

"Shouldn't a good officer take care of himself as well, if only so he can take care of his people?" Foster wondered. "Ed, you tried to kill yourself at the hospital. Who gave you the scalpel so you could do it? Those scars will be with you the rest of your life."

"Plastic surgery can take care of them." Straker was rubbing the scars on his wrist.

"Plastic surgery can't take care of the ones inside your head," Foster insisted. "Who gave you the scalpel and convinced you to use it on yourself?"

"I don't remember," Straker said, but there was an odd touch of uncertainty that told Foster he was lying.

Foster let his voice go cold. "Commander, someone handled you that weapon. Mary Rutland saw someone who looked like Craig Collins near your room a short time before it happened."

"Craig Collins is dead."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Straker insisted. His voice dropped to a mere whisper, as if by not saying it aloud, he could avoid facing the reality of his statement. "I left him drifting in space with his airhose disconnected."

"I warned you that Collins was going to kill you. Collins came at you..."

"We struggled, and somehow I managed to sever his airhose. I killed him. I killed him, Paul," Straker said. "I never actually killed a man before. Not like that. Not a friend."

Straker's voice was still very quiet as he stared at the ground at his feet. He shook his head sadly, as if sensing Foster's disbelief. "Oh, I've given orders for other people to do it. I've given orders knowing that people wouldn't come back alive. I've even been in fire fights where men under my command have died," Straker admitted. "But, I never had to do it to a friend."

"It was self defense," Foster reminded him.

"Really, Paul? You know how big he was. He should

have had me. He was stronger, with a longer reach and more experience in free fall. He should have killed me. He should have killed you and John Gray, but he didn't."

"We were all lucky."

"Were we really, Paul?" Straker asked.

"Who was it, Ed?"

"Craig."

"Or someone who looked and sounded just like him?"

Foster asked.

Straker shook his head. "It was Craig Collins. Don't ask me how I know it was, but it was."

"What did he say?" Foster asked, suddenly very gentle.

"I don't remember exactly. I think, he simply told me to do it, and I did. I suppose he must have convinced me it was the only way I could be sure I wouldn't be tortured again."

"Tortured?" Foster repeated, frowning. "Ed, nobody tortured you."

"No?" Straker finally looked up at him. "Paul, I know, intellectually, that I was in a coma for nearly a week and I was doped up and out of it for another week. But, what I do remember, what registered, was being exhausted, paralyzed with cold and being tortured in ways that'd make the Grand Inquisitor proud. I would have done anything, said anything to have made it stop."

Straker's expression was utterly bleak. "I don't know what I did do or say," he admitted softly. "No one will tell me."

"Of course not, because you couldn't say anything,"

Foster told him. "You were on a respirator most of that time, running a high fever. Ed, you developed what they call 'ICU psychosis'. It happens. Some people think they've been kidnapped by the Russians, or terrorists. You figure you're being tortured, and that Virginia and I are dead and it was your fault."

"I may be psychotic, but I'm not really crazy, is that it?" Straker smiled, but it was one of the saddest smiles Foster had ever seen.

"You're not psychotic," Foster assured him. "It's a temporary condition, as I'm sure Jackson's told you, repeatedly. It probably wouldn't even have happened if you hadn't been so very sick. Your reactions at the time didn't happen to be grounded in any reality the rest of us could relate to."

"And now it is?" There was a bitterness in Straker's laugh. "Paul, has it occurred to you that maybe I don't want to go back to a job that's going to cost me my life. It's already cost me everything else."

"Commander, my orders from General Henderson are to bring you back to headquarters," Foster told him. "I'd rather have your cooperation, but I'll have Jackson sedate you if that's what it takes."

Straker gave him an appraising look. "I think you'd do it, too, wouldn't you?"

"I have my orders, and so do you, sir," Foster said. He glanced up at the sky. It was now dark and cloudy and the wind was from the west. The weather wasn't bad enough to effect flying, yet, but that could change at any moment.

There was a rustle in the brush. It could have been

wind, or something else entirely.

"I'll come quietly," Straker promised, getting to his feet. "Paul, did you see anyone when you came up here? A couple of very earnest young men with guns?"

"No, I didn't," Foster replied. "But, I probably should have. Natiroff sent down a couple minders, didn't he?"

"Yes," Straker told him, looking around. "Hunter, Kimball, Kaminsky!" he yelled. Then he listened for a moment.

"Commander, we don't have any security men named Kimball or Kaminsky," Foster said with a worried frown.

"Yes, I know," Straker replied. "Neither does the KGB, as far as I know, but I find *Leytenant Vladzimirsky* a little hard to pronounce after a long day." He looked around one more time, before heading back towards the house. "I wonder where they've got to?"

* * *

Komack was waiting for them by the Peugeot.

"Esther isn't coming?" Foster asked, noting her absence. Komack shook her head. There was a worried look in her eyes.

An armored gray security truck had driven in while Foster and Straker were on the hill. It was parked across the driveway, blocking the Peugeot's exit. Irritated, Foster stepped towards the grilled window of the driver's cab. As he approached, the heavy rear doors opened and three young, well built, armed men in camouflage battle dress jumped out. One of them Foster recognized, Sprenger's assistant, Lieutenant Tyson Wain.

"Colonel Straker, I have orders to accompany you and

Miss Komack back to London, immediately," Wain informed them curtly.

"Lieutenant Wain, I was under the impression that Colonel Foster was to be our escort," Straker said.

"You and Miss Komack are to come with us, sir. I've been instructed to thank Colonel Foster for his assistance and to tell him that he's to escort Doctor Jackson back to Headquarters," Wain replied. Then he turned to address Jackson: "Doctor, I am relieved to see you in such good health. There were concerns that you'd come to harm."

Jackson shook his head. "As you can see, I am in excellent health, thank you."

Wain nodded his head once, then turned back to Straker. "If you will, sir?" He gestured towards the back of the truck. To punctuate Wain's movement, one of his men slipped the bolt of his automatic assault rifle.

"Very well. I take it, you've relieved Hunter, Kimball and Kaminsky, then?"

"Yes, sir," Wain replied. "They're already headed back to H.Q."

Straker turned back to Foster and said: "I guess we'll see you back in London, then, Paul."

"Commander, wait," Jackson called suddenly, then tossed Straker a small plastic vial. "Your prescription, remember?"

Straker glanced at the label briefly, then stuck the bottle in his pocket. "Thanks, Doctor."

Wain gestured impatiently for Straker and Komack to climb into the back of the truck, then followed them in, shutting and locking the doors behind them.

Foster and Jackson watched as the truck sped off.
"Doctor, Commander Straker indicated he thought his three watchers were KGB, one of them was named 'Vladimirsky'?"

"Vladimirsky, Kravchenko, and Redens," Jackson filled in. "The commander thought it was amusing to call them after the three scientists in 2001. We had to run the film for them to understand the joke. It lost something in translation."

Foster turned and ran into the house. "Mister Flandry," he shouted. Flandry appeared in the doorway to the dining room. "I need to get a call through to London, immediately."

"The phone lines are out," Flandry reported, his expression grim. "What's wrong?"

"Mister Straker and Miss Komack have just been taken by an unidentified armed party, and the three men that were sent to keep an eye on them don't appear to be around," Foster related with a calmness he didn't feel.

"Who does this information need to get to?"

Foster gave him General Henderson's number.

"I'll see it gets to him," Flandry promised.

CHAPTER 22

The gray truck rumbled down the road.

Inside the windowless back compartment, Wain gestured for Straker and Komack to stand apart from each other. Then, he quickly searched Straker, relieving him of the Beretta that had been tucked under his sweater, at the small of his back.

Wain tossed the automatic to one of his men. Finding the medicine vial in Straker's pocket, he read the label, then showed to Straker.

"What is this?" Wain said.

"It's nitroglycerin. I have a heart problem," Straker replied evenly.

"When are you supposed to take them?"

"When I need it," Straker said, taking the vial from Wain's hand and putting it back in his pocket.

Wain gestured for Straker to be seated on one of the wooden benches that ran down both sides of the interior of the truck. Straker complied without comment, watching as Wain proceeded to pat down Komack. Wain indicated she should sit, then he took her purse and dumped its contents on the floor.

Wain whistled when he saw a small Heckler and Koch automatic pistol in the pile. He picked it up. "A dangerous toy," he said.

"I have a permit, Lieutenant," Komack informed him.

"I don't recall asking you that, lady," Wain replied, coldly. He pushed the rest of the debris back into her purse, then tucked the gun into his belt. He snapped his fingers at one of his men and gestured toward Straker. The man took

a pair of hand-cuffs from the back of his belt. He cuffed Straker's wrists together around a steel post at the center of the bench.

"If I'm under arrest, may I ask on what charges?"

Straker asked.

"No talking," Wain ordered.

"I asked you, what are the charges?" Straker replied, letting his voice go harsh.

Without warning, Wain hit him across the face. "And I said, no talking."

Straker touched the back of one hand to his mouth and discovered a smear of blood. With a wary glance at Wain and the two men with him, Komack pulled a tissue from a pocket and dabbed away the blood on his face. Then, they settled back on the bench for what promised to be a long and uncomfortable ride.

*** * ***

Foster knew he had no chance of catching the van. He drove straight to the airport where the Citation executive jet, and his co-pilot, were waiting. Mrs. Henderson insisted she and Esther come with him and Jackson. Foster was in no mood to argue with a general's wife. They came along.

They took off the moment the control tower gave them clearance. As soon as they were at cruising altitude, Foster used the aircraft radio to contact Control and fill them in on what had happened.

Within an hour, Foster and his companions arrived at SHADO H.Q.

"What happened?" Henderson demanded, as soon as Foster arrived in the control room.

Jackson pulled aside one of the control room operatives and quietly gave her instructions to take Esther and Mrs. Henderson to the crew lounge.

"Should I have Doctor Buden prepare the amnesia treatment?" the operative asked.

SHADO had, a few years before, developed a drug that was capable of wiping out the previous twelve hours of a person's memory. It was tasteless and quick acting and had proved itself to be remarkably useful for their purposes. It was administered to civilians who witnessed SHADO's operations and could not be misdirected by false information as to what they saw. A witness who couldn't remember couldn't tell.

Jackson shook his head: "No, simply take them to the lounge. We'll handle the security matters later."

Puzzled, the woman nodded and led Esther and Mrs. Henderson away.

As soon as they were out of hearing range, Foster answered Henderson's question. "Sprenger's people arrived and took Commander Straker and Colonel Komack away at gun-point."

"Is security covered?" Henderson asked.

"Derek won't talk, if that's what you mean. He's CIA," Freeman answered for Foster.

"The three minders Natiroff sent down disappeared before Sprenger's people showed up," Foster added.

"We got word from MI5 about half an hour ago. The three men were found dead in some brush near the inn. Their throats had been cut. They'd been dead less than two hours," Henderson informed him. "French intelligence isn't

very happy with us right now. The Soviets are screaming murder and I agree with them."

Foster swore.

"What do we do about Amanda and Esther?"

Henderson asked Jackson.

"When this is over, we can have Mrs. Henderson sign a copy of the Official Secrets Act, and I expect Esther's parents can deal with her adequately when we find them. We don't dare give either of them the amnesia treatment. Esther is much too young and there are medical contraindications with your wife," Jackson replied.

Henderson nodded as Jackson turned to Lieutenant Johnson. "Lieutenant, have you got a trace on that locator frequency I reported?"

"Yes, sir," the woman responded. "We pin-pointed it at Alconbury, about ten minutes ago. It appears to be moving towards London."

"You put a homing device on Ed, didn't you?" Foster said. Jackson nodded.

"Colonel Foster, you have a call," Johnson said quietly, interrupting.

Foster nodded and picked up the telephone receiver from the communications station. He listened for a moment, then: "Thank you for letting me know. I'll check it out."

He hung up the phone, his expression grim. "That was Steven Rutland," he reported. "His wife was supposed to have picked up their little girl up at her mother's over an hour ago and hasn't shown up yet. However, her car is parked across the street from her mother's house and her purse was locked inside. A neighbor reported seeing her get

in a van with a couple men in military uniform."

"Have Natiroff check if any of our people are unaccounted for," Henderson instructed Foster. "Especially check on anyone who's on forty-eight hour leave. We might not miss them for a while."

*** * ***

From the length of time they were on the road, Straker guessed Wain had taken them to the French airbase near Tours. A Westland Sea King helicopter took them across the channel to Great Britain. There, they were hustled into another waiting panel truck.

There was another uncomfortable ride that ended in a city, judging from the traffic sounds. Those sounds were suddenly muffled when the truck took a sudden turn and headed downwards, into what could only have been an underground parking garage.

The truck stopped and Wain gave a wordless order to one of his men, who pulled two long scraps of a dense, dark fabric from a satchel. He then proceeded to blindfold both Straker and Komack before hand-cuffing Straker's hands behind his back and leading them both by the arm out of the truck and into an unidentified building.

There was an elevator ride downward, then a walk down several corridors before they stopped. There was the sound of a door being unlocked, then both Straker and Komack were unceremoniously shoved into the room beyond. The door clicked shut behind them and the lock turned.

Fuming, Komack pulled her blindfold off, then did the same for her companion.

"Ed? What's going on?" a woman asked as their eyes adjusted to the light. Straker looked around to identify the familiar voice.

He was startled to see Mary Rutland sitting on a worn sofa at the far end of a small non-descript room. Seated on chairs opposite the sofa were Nina Barry, Mark Bradley and Keith Ford, from SHADO.

"Ed, what's going on here?" Mary demanded.

Straker looked at her a moment before replying: "I haven't the foggiest notion." He glanced at the others. "Do you?"

The others shook their heads.

Bradley spoke: "Nina and I are on forty-eight hour leave. I was going jogging," he indicated the navy blue sweat suit and running shoes he was wearing. "Then some military types picked me up and brought me here."

"I was going shopping when they grabbed me," Barry explained.

"I got a call to come in to work. They picked me up at my car," Ford explained. He was in his beige control room uniform, with a brown cardigan covering the insignia badges on his shirt.

"Mary?" Komack asked.

Mary took a shuddery breath. "I was going to pick Alicia up at my mother's when these men in battle dress drove up and insisted I go with them at gun point. I don't understand. What's going on?"

"Off hand, I'd say we've been kidnapped," Straker told her as he took a seat.

"Who, on Earth, would want to kidnap us?" Bradley

asked in his softly accented voice.

Straker didn't answer, directly. "You're all on forty-eight hour leave. That means that none of you are going to be missed until you don't show up to work Wednesday morning."

"My mother will certainly miss me, and I'm sure she'll call Steven," Mary said.

"But, you won't be listed as a missing person for seventy-two hours. There's nothing the police can do until then."

"What about you, sir? Won't security be looking for you?" Bradley asked.

"They'll be looking," Straker agreed.

Komack had been quietly watching the others. There was a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Ed," she said at last, "Everyone here was mentioned in that DNA report last year. Also, they were all at the hospital at some time and saw the man you said was stalking you. The one no one can identify."

Straker nodded. "And except for you and Mary, they're also most of the team I assigned a special defense project to. By the way, I hope you got it finished."

"It's done," Bradley said. Straker's lip started bleeding again. "Who hit you, sir?"

"Lieutenant Wain. He's one of Sprenger's people."

"Sir, aren't there rules against that sort of thing?"

Ford asked.

"I wouldn't call it a real smart career move," Straker replied.

Behind him, the door lock clicked. Then, the door

opened and Wain walked in, carrying an air-force blue uniform and a small carry-all. He was accompanied by a young man carrying an automatic assault rifle. Another armed young man stood outside the door.

"You're to wear this," Wain told Straker, holding the uniform out. Wordlessly, Straker indicated his hands, still cuffed together. Wain reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. He tossed the key to Bradley. The black SHADO operative unlocked the cuffs. Freed, Straker took the uniform and the carry-all from Wain, who turned and walked out, followed by the guard. The door lock clicked.

Straker inspected the uniform. It was his own service uniform. Missing from the jacket, however, were the service ribbons and awards that should have been there.

"There's a washroom just through that door, sir," Barry told him. Straker nodded, distracted, and went into the adjoining room to change. A few minutes later, he came out in uniform.

"I'm surprised it still fits," he said, inspecting the sleeve length.

"You always did look good in uniform," Mary Rutland commented. Straker looked away, embarrassed by the complement.

"Your hair's too long," Barry told him. Straker ran his hand along the back of his neck to check and found she was right. His hair was over his collar by at least an inch.

"There's no helping it now," he said. "I doubt Sprenger's gonna' let me see a barber before he springs whatever he has planned."

"Ed, where are your ribbons?" Mary asked.

"An officer who has been suspended of rank and/or command is prohibited from wearing service awards," he quoted. There was a troubled look on his face.

"Sprenger doesn't have the authority to suspend you," Komack reminded him.

"No, he doesn't," Straker agreed.

"Sir, the Commission hasn't had a full meeting since before you went into the hospital," Ford said. Straker stared at him.

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely, sir," Ford replied.

"That's very interesting."

"What do you think he has planned, sir?" Bradley wondered.

"I don't know," Straker admitted after a time. "He wants me in uniform, that much is obvious. Probably to remind me of my real rank and position. Legally, I'm still an active duty United States air force colonel."

The lights in the small room went out, leaving them in utter blackness.

"Considering he has had access to our files at work, this isn't exactly unexpected," Komack commented.

"I don't understand," Mary complained in the darkness.

"He's after me," Straker answered. "I have an aversion to small, dark cages. He's using that against me, part of his psychological warfare tactics."

"Wouldn't that work better if we were separated?" Ford asked.

"That depends on what outcome he's looking for."

Knowing Sprenger, my guess is you're all hostages against my good behavior," Straker said. "I have to assume, from his choice, that he's giving credence to that genetic report Kate mentioned, and to the fact you three were my choice for a special project team. I also assume he's hoping a shared adverse experience like this will increase group cohesion and make me feel even more responsible for all of you. That's something he can turn into a weapon against me."

"But, why?" Barry asked. "What did you ever do to him?"

Straker paused to collect his thoughts. "He resents me, I think. Sprenger was never thrilled with the idea of SHADO answering to an international commission instead of Langley. And he was very vocal in his disapproval of me being named to head up our little band of heroes. Funny thing is, he was right, I wasn't the best choice. But, the job got done."

"Ed, there's more to it than that and you know it," Komack admonished softly. "I remember your reaction when you found out Sprenger was joining Henderson's staff thirteen or so years ago. I got the distinct impression at the time you'd've been happier working with Jack the Ripper."

"It was that obvious?" Straker asked.

"Sprenger just plain hates you, or fears you. I'm not sure which is worse."

Straker was silent for a long moment, dealing with memories he'd rather have left undisturbed. Finally: "Sprenger was my direct superior on my very first duty assignment. A few months into it, we had a real bad

situation develop. Sprenger gave me instructions to pass on to my unit concerning the problem. Instructions, that I, in all conscience, could not obey. So, I didn't, and I let him know why. He didn't like that much, but I survived and so did he."

"That's a long time to be after somebody for not obeying orders," Ford commented. "What kind of orders couldn't you obey, sir?"

"There'd been a murder on the base," Straker replied. "An NCO from my unit. Sprenger wanted me to destroy evidence that would have implicated the dead man in illegal drug and homosexual activity. As it turned out, the base police had been investigating the man even before he was killed. If I had followed Sprenger's orders, I'd've been implicated in it and probably court-martialed. Even direct orders are not necessarily an excuse for breaking the law. I don't think they ever did find out who killed him, or why."

"Why didn't you turn Sprenger in, sir?" Bradley asked.

"I was very young and figured I was better off keeping quiet," Straker explained quietly. "If I had said anything, it would have been his word against mine, and nobody was likely to listen to me. I was only twenty-one. On the other hand, he couldn't press charges against me because then he'd've had to explain what orders I hadn't obeyed. As it happened, he ended up transferred to the Philippines about two weeks after it happened, so I never had a reason to make an official report."

"What do you think he's going to try?" Barry asked.

"What couldn't he try? Off hand, I can think of about

half a dozen incidents he could make into a proper criminal case, given the right slant," Straker said. "Starting with violating security regulations by talking about the problem at hand in front of a civilian."

"Well, we have about ten hours before that turns into a serious problem," Komack commented.

"Let's just hope he isn't planning on keeping us here past that dead-line, or else there will be hell to pay," Straker said.

"I wonder why Sprenger wants Mary here, though?" Komack asked, thoughtfully. "I can't figure that part."

"He could be trying to trip us up over security," Straker replied. "But, more likely... Well, Sprenger's always been a misogynist with a capital 'M'. My guess is that he expects you three to fulfill his sordid fantasies concerning the female of the species. I mean, look at it, my ex-wife, who hates my guts for various good reasons, the alleged other woman', and my present mistress."

"Ed, I don't hate you," Mary protested. "I know I got angry at you in the hospital, but Katie explained a few things I should have realized a long time ago. I understand a lot more than I did."

"When were you there?" Straker asked.

"It was just before you...," she paused. "Before you were hurt. Don't you remember?"

"Mary, I don't remember most of my stay at the hospital," Straker replied. "My doctors tell me I had a very interesting two weeks that I should be glad I missed. What I do remember is none too pleasant."

"You still don't remember what happened to you, sir?"

Ford asked.

"No, not really," Straker replied. "It's just bits and pieces, like a nightmare. Jackson keeps telling me not to worry about it, there are good reasons why I don't remember." He turned to Komack in the darkness. "I told Paul it was Craig that night at the hospital."

"That's why Mary's here," Komack responded. "She's the only other person who can positively state Collins was at Mayland that night."

"But, Colonel Collins is dead," Barry protested in confusion.

"'Undead' is more like it," Straker told her. "Kate's right. You saw him at the hospital talking to Sprenger and didn't recognize him for some reason. He's around here, somewhere. I can feel it. He's not gonna' miss this time."

*** * ***

"Sir, we have an address to go with the fix on the Commander's locator," Natiroff announced quietly to Henderson, Foster and Freeman.

"Also, we have located all but three of our people. Lieutenants Barry, Bradley and Ford are not answering their pagers. Ford's wife indicated he was called into work, but no such message came from here."

"I'd say it was a good bet they've been taken, too," Freeman commented. Natiroff nodded.

"That's most of Straker's special project group," Henderson told them. "Foster, you and Natiroff take a security team and get Straker back here."

Natiroff handed Foster an ASP 9mm pistol. "The magazine is loaded with Glaser Safety Slugs," the Russian

said. "Don't shoot at anyone you don't want dead."

Foster nodded. The Glaser Safety Slug was an especially nasty round, a pre-fragmented bullet containing several hundred Number 12 shot suspended in liquid Teflon. Shot from the ASP, the Glaser could penetrate body armor before blowing, and a hit in any vital body area was usually fatal.

"Colonel Foster," Doctor Jackson called, as the security team was about to enter the express elevator to the surface. "I gather that Commander Straker finally admitted that it was Craig Collins at the hospital."

Foster nodded.

"There is the possibility that he may still be around. If so, I want his brain intact," Jackson said.

"Major, do you think Glasers will be effective against the 'undead'?" Henderson asked Natiroff, half seriously.

Natiroff took the question very seriously. "I hope so, General. I just received a report from my contacts in the KGB. It is possible that Sprenger is also undead. Three years ago, just after Sprenger took up his assignment with McGruder, his automobile was found in a lake near his former assignment base. He claimed, after the fact, the car had been stolen, but we can find no trace of how he managed to get from Edwards Air Force Base to Washington D.C. in less than three days without a vehicle."

SID's synthesized voice came over the speakers: "Yellow alert, One hundred twenty U.F.O.s sighted in area green 2-5-3. Maintaining position."

"General, I think a hundred twenty Ufos qualifies as a mass attack," Foster commented.

"Get Straker back here now, Colonel," Henderson ordered.

*** * ***

The lights came back on, suddenly blinding them. There was a sound of the lock being turned, then the door opened. Wain stood in the doorway, two stony faced young men with automatic rifles standing behind him.

"If you will come with me, Colonel," Wain said. Silently, Straker stood, gesturing the others to accompany him. They stood, taking their lead from him.

"Just you, Colonel," Wain said. Straker shook his head. "My people come with me, Lieutenant."

"Those were not my orders," Wain replied.

"Those were not my orders' what, Lieutenant?" Straker's voice had gone icy.

"Those were not my orders... sir."

"In case it hadn't occurred to you, Wain, this uniform isn't a costume. I am a full colonel in the United States Air Force. I have been a full colonel since you were in grade school. I hope I have made myself clear."

"Sir, you have been relieved of command."

"Oh? On who's authority?" Straker asked, voice still icily controlled.

"General Henderson's, sir."

"Oh? I see," Straker commented. "Be that as it may, I am not about to leave this room without my people."

"Sir, as an officer under arrest, you do not have the authority to make those demands."

Straker sat back down, staring up at the lieutenant.

"Sir, you're to come with me, alone," Wain ordered.

"And if I choose not to, Lieutenant?" Straker replied, very calmly. As he spoke, Bradley and Ford moved to stand behind him, expressions grim.

"What will you do then, shoot me?" Straker continued.

"I don't think Colonel Sprenger will like that, do you?"

Wain was sullenly silent for a long moment. Finally: "I could threaten to shoot one of your friends."

"In that case, you'd better be prepared to murder all of us, because I will not cooperate without guarantees of safety for my people," Straker informed him. "All my people," he added.

In response, Wain brought the muzzle of his assault rifle up under Straker's jaw, forcing the SHADO officer's head back. "I'd like to kill you right here," Wain muttered.

"Then do it, Lieutenant," Straker said, very quietly, very calmly. "I'm getting tired of your games."

Behind Wain, the two armed men standing in the doorway were beginning to look worried. Finally, Wain stepped back, lowering the rifle from Straker's throat.

"Very well, Colonel. They can come along. It doesn't really matter," Wain gestured to his men to fall in behind them as Straker stood and led the small group out the door.

They were taken to another room along the same corridor. This room was darkened and it was hard to tell exactly how large it was. The far end walls were hidden in shadows. Along the wall opposite the door was a slightly raised, well-lit platform with a door behind it. On the platform was a long table and several chairs set along the far side, facing into the room. Near the center of the room, a

single spotlight shown down on the dark linoleum floor.

Wain led Straker and the others to a row of chairs near the area marked by the spotlight. Two armed men were posted to stand behind them. Straker noted the men appeared well trained, standing well behind the chairs, out of reach of their captives.

"That was a big chance you took back there, sir," Bradley spoke softly from his seat beside Straker. Straker shook his head.

"Sprenger needs me alive and more or less cooperative until this show is over," Straker told him. "You're a lot more at risk right now than I am. Wain may well choose take his humiliation out on the bunch of you."

"Do you think we're going to get out of this, sir?" Bradley asked.

Straker gave him a faint smile. "There's always the cavalry, you know." Straker pulled the medicine vial from inside his jacket and handed it to Bradley. "Mark, I want you all to stay together. And, whatever happens, don't lose this."

Any further conversation was interrupted by the opening of the door behind the platform, and the arrival of Colonel Sprenger and four other men.

Straker recognized three of them. Kruger was the German representative; Duvall, French; and Putin, a Soviet general with ties to the GRU. They were all members of the nine man Astrophysical Commission, chaired by General Henderson. None of them had any great love for him.

The three men took seats behind the table, while the unidentified fourth sat down by a stenographic machine at

the far end of the table.

"Will Commander Straker of SHADO step forward, please?" Kruger asked, peering out into the darkened room.

Straker stood and walked the spotlighted area Kruger indicated.

"Commander, we are here to inquire into allegations made against you by Colonel Sprenger, concerning certain 'improprieties' he claims to have found within SHADO and certain acts that you are alleged to have committed."

Kruger turned to Sprenger. "Colonel Sprenger, if you will?"

Sprenger stepped down from the platform and strode over to where Straker stood.

"For the record, Colonel, your full name and rank."

Straker eyed Sprenger a moment before answering, "Straker, Johann Edward, Colonel, United States Air Force."

"Johannen? That's an unusual name for an All-American boy, isn't it?" Sprenger said. There was something like a sneer in his voice.

"It was my great-grandfather's name." Straker's demeanor was utterly calm and composed, his hands folded in front of him. "I've never used it."

"How long have you been at the rank of colonel?"

"Eleven years, nine months."

"Isn't that a long time to be in one rank?" Sprenger asked, his sneer more pronounced.

"As you know, officers assigned to SHADO are not included on the promotion lists of their originating

services," Straker replied.

"I see. What is your present assignment, Colonel?"

"Commander-in-Chief, SHADO Operations."

"And how long have you served in that capacity?"

"Eleven years, six months."

"What about the past few months?"

"I have been on sick leave for the past two months."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Two months ago, I became critically ill with a very high fever. I was in a coma for five days."

"You're looking very fit for someone who was critically ill only two months ago."

A faint smile flashed briefly over Straker's face. "I'm told my recovery has been quite satisfactory."

Sprenger nodded and smiled mirthlessly. "Do you know what caused you to become ill, Colonel?"

"No, I do not. I have no recollection of the events immediately preceding my illness, nor do I recall much of what happened while I was hospitalized. I have been told there were attempts against my life, but I have little recollection of those events, either."

"Do you recall the death of Radar Operator First Class Turner?"

"No, I do not." Straker was still composed, but was now touched with puzzlement.

"You don't remember shooting him?"

Straker's puzzlement became concern. "No I don't, Colonel."

Kruger interrupted: "Colonel Sprenger, Commander Straker has already stated he has no memory of those

incidents. This panel has no reason to doubt the commander's veracity in this matter, and the investigation into the incident conclusively clears the commander of any wrong-doing. You will continue with another line of questioning."

"Very well," Sprenger acquiesced. "Colonel, do you recall being present at a presentation of a research paper on using mitochondrial DNA patterns for ethnic identification?"

Straker glanced quickly at Komack, seated in the shadows. "Yes, I recall that report."

"You did not permit that paper to be published. Why?"

"Portions of the report referred to highly classified data. Also, there were questions as to the accuracy of the research itself and the researcher's conclusions based on the data they presented."

"I see." Sprenger paused then turned to address the panel.

"Gentlemen, I submit that Colonel Straker refused to permit this report published, even within SHADO, not because the research was faulty, but that it revealed his nepotism in recruitment. Worse, it revealed that Colonel Straker and his kinsmen within the organization are not of this Earth. I can only dread what plans they have for this world with the resources of SHADO at their disposal."

Kruger turned and spoke briefly to the other members of the panel. Duvall gave a Gallic shrug while Putin simply shook his head. Then, Kruger turned back to address Straker: "Commander Straker, can you explain this

matter?"

"Sir, I am not a geneticist. I cannot explain their findings," Straker began. "However, if I had been aware of an alleged kinship between us, and the possibility of alienness', would I, or any of my colleagues, have permitted this research to take place, knowing what it might reveal?"

"As to what plans I might have for SHADO, when I became an officer of the United States Air Force, I took an oath to defend my country against her enemies. When I was appointed C-in-C of SHADO operations, I took an oath to defend this planet against outside aggression. That is an honor and responsibility I have taken very seriously."

"Thank you, Commander Straker," Kruger said, glancing at the other members of his panel. They nodded solemnly back at him.

"Colonel Sprenger, it is the opinion of this panel that now is neither the time nor the place to analyze SHADO's recruitment practices in regards to the possibility of nepotism in its ranks. As to Commander Straker's plans for SHADO, there is a principle of law in this country, and in yours, that states a man is innocent until proven guilty. Since SHADO has shown itself remarkably capable in regards to its stated mission under Commander Straker's exemplary leadership, we have no grounds, other than your suspicions, to suspect him, or it, of ulterior motives," Kruger stated.

"Very well, gentlemen," Sprenger agreed. His voice was mild, but the look he gave Straker was utterly venomous. Then, he turned on his heel and strode back to the platform.

"Colonel Straker, on the twenty-third of July this year,

you flew an orbital mission with United States Air Force Colonel Craig Collins, is that correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"Did Colonel Collins return with you from that mission?"

"No, he did not," Straker replied. His head was bowed and his voice was very quiet.

"Commander, you will have to speak up," Kruger said. Straker raised his head and spoke more loudly: "No, Colonel Collins did not return with me from that mission."

"Why?" Sprenger demanded.

"He died," Straker answered simply.

"He died," Sprenger repeated. "Are you sure? His body was never located."

"Space is a very big place," Straker commented.

"I submit, gentlemen, that Colonel Collins was left behind as a direct result of Colonel Straker's attempt on Collins' life. I submit that Colonel Johannen Edward Straker is guilty of the attempted pre-meditated murder of Colonel Craig Collins."

"Colonel Sprenger, the inquiry into Collins' death determined it was due to an accident. The airhose on his environmental pack failed," Straker said.

"Of course it did," Sprenger replied. "Of course, they only had your word for it, your description of what happened after your friend, your comrade, Paul Foster, informed you that Collins was supposedly preparing to kill you."

Straker nodded.

"You'll have to speak up, Colonel," Sprenger

admonished.

Straker remained silent.

"Perhaps it's time we had a different point of view on the incident," Sprenger said. He opened the door behind the platform and a big blond man in a U.S.A.F. colonel's uniform stepped through.

It was Craig Collins.

At the sight of Collins, Straker went ashen. It was if he was an animal mesmerized by the headlights of an oncoming car. He stood frozen in place as Collins reached under the back of his uniform jacket and pulled out a pistol.

Bradley moved. With the finely tuned reflexes and instincts of the athlete and fighter pilot he was, Bradley hurled himself from his seat. He grabbed Straker, pulling him away from the spotlight's glare and knocking him to the floor.

A bullet whistled above them. Straker moved as if to get up. Bradley forced him down as two shots rang out from near the corridor door.

Collins was thrown back to the wall as the shots hit him square in the chest. He crumpled to the floor.

"Commander, are you all right?" Paul Foster called from the corridor doorway as he gestured Natiroff and the SHADO security team past him. Natiroff's men made quick work of disarming Wain and his men, rounding them into a small knot.

Bradley stood and helped Straker to his feet. "Are you all right, sir?"

Straker nodded, but his face was still pale and there was the slightest tremble in the nod.

"What is the meaning if this?" Sprenger screamed.

Natiroff replied: "Colonel Anthony Andrew Sprenger, you are under arrest under Section 8 of SHADO Security Regulations, for conspiring with the enemy and for willfully interfering with the operation of SHADO."

He turned to Wain. "Lieutenant Tyson Bradford Wain, you are under arrest on the same charges."

"You don't have the authority," Wain protested.

"To the contrary, Lieutenant, Major Natiroff does have the authority," Kruger told him. "SHADO is a military adjunct to the United Nations, and SHADO is at war."

CHAPTER 23

Foster brought Straker, Komack, the other three SHADO operatives and Mary Rutland in through one of the auxiliary personnel entrances in the parking garage across the street from the studio. Natiroff followed with Collins' body, the two arrested air force officers and their henchmen, and the rest of the SHADO security team.

"When Henderson sent me out to get you, we'd just picked up one hundred twenty bogeys out by the asteroid belt," Foster informed them.

"One hundred twenty?" Straker repeated. Foster nodded.

"It looks like this is the big one you were worried about," Foster commented as they entered the vaulted cavern of SHADO Control.

Straker dropped his uniform jacket on a chair as he and Foster headed over to where Henderson stood in the control room. Ford, Barry and Bradley headed for their stations.

Mary gasped in amazement as she looked around.

"What is this place?"

"Welcome to SHADO, Mary," Komack said softly. She beckoned an operative over.

"Colonel, shall I have Doctor Buden prepare the amnesia treatment for her?" the young woman asked.

Komack nodded. "I'll bring her over in a bit."

"Yes, sir," the operative responded, returning to her post at one of the computer stations. She picked up the telephone receiver to relay instructions to the medical center.

Mary looked around at the beige uniformed operatives, the banks of computers, the radar and communications consoles set against the walls. "This was Ed's important job, wasn't it? The one he could never tell me about."

"Yes."

"We never had a chance, did we?" Mary asked. "This is more important than anything or anyone, isn't it?"

"We're at war," Komack replied simply.

"I assume I'll be required to sign some papers, promising I won't talk about this," Mary said.

"No, that won't be necessary," Komack said. She took Mary's arm and led the woman out of the command center, down the corridor towards the medical center. "In about an hour you won't remember any of this."

* * *

"General Henderson, what's our situation?" Straker asked, standing beside the older man. He scanned the wall monitors, trying to make sense out of the information on the screens.

"Not good," Henderson admitted. "We detected a hundred twenty bogeys out by the asteroid belt less than an hour ago. They started moving in about ten minutes ago."

"This is Space Intruder Detector," SID's synthesized voice broke in. "One hundred twenty U.F.O.s bearing one-five-eight green, speed: Sol eight, one hundred fifty million miles. Projected termination, Northern Europe."

Straker rubbed the bridge of his nose for a moment, thinking. "Ford, what's our position on project Angel?"

"We had to make some major changes to the original concept, but the program's in place and ready to go, sir,"

Ford replied.

"Will it do the job?"

"I believe it will, sir," Ford said. He turned to Bates seated at the next console. "Go to an Angel alert, level seven."

Ford flipped a series of switches on his own console. "Attention all stations, this is SHADO Control, we have an Angel Alert, level seven, Repeat, this is an Angel Alert, level seven, one hundred twenty bandits, E.T.A. twelve minutes. Repeat, one-two-zero enemy, Estimated Time of Arrival, twelve minutes. This is not a drill," Ford announced calmly and clearly. "Repeat, this is not a drill."

"At least, they have to slow down when they reach the atmosphere," Straker commented quietly to Henderson. "The Ufos'll be hitting better than Mach 3 when they reach strike range."

Henderson said nothing. Around them, the Control room buzzed with the controlled chaos of coordinating the Earth's defense against a mass U.F.O. attack over two continents.

"General, I'm having trouble with the access codes for the Soviet system," operative Bates announced.

"What is the problem?" General Putin asked. Straker looked over to see the Soviet officer, as well as Kruger and Duvall, standing a short distance away from him. He hadn't noticed their arrival in the control center.

"It looks like we don't have the updated security codes to interface with the Soviet Air Command system," Straker told him.

"Will my personal access code be adequate?" Putin

asked.

"It should be, please, General," Straker responded, indicating the station in front of Bates. Bates moved aside so Putin could key in his access code.

"We're in, sir," the woman announced after a moment. "The Soviet Air Command is now at Angel alert, level seven."

SID's voice came over the speakers once again: "Ten U.F.O.s have broken from main group. Speed, Sol twenty, predicted target area, southern England."

"Sol twenty?" Straker repeated in disbelief.

Foster came over to stand beside him. "That's their newest trick, come in so fast we can't really track them, even using the Utronics system. They sort of fold a time bubble around themselves. Luckily for us, they still have to get down to below Mach 5 when they hit the deep atmosphere."

Straker turned to Ford. "What've we got close enough to intercept?"

Ford checked a listing on his computer screen. "Sky-1 and 2 are both within range."

Straker nodded once and Ford transmitted the new orders to the two fighters.

"I've never heard of an Angel alert," Henderson commented.

"It's a worse case contingency plan we had put together after you turned down the additional moonbases," Straker replied. "I'm not sure of the details myself, actually. I missed that staff meeting."

"Ford?" Henderson asked.

"The World Wide Military Command and Control system and the Soviet Air Command system are all tied into SHADO's computer command network right now," Ford explained. "We can order them all to an increased defense condition and give coded attack instructions."

"We'll deal with the political problems later. Assuming there is a later," Straker completed.

"What sort of cover story did you have planned for this eventuality?" Henderson wondered.

"I imagine the story will be that a nuclear capable terrorist group got hold of some highly experimental war planes and threatened to attack an unspecified northern capital," Straker answered. "The military control systems were co-opted by a U.N. anti-terrorist group to deal with the emergency."

"Will they buy it?"

"I'll worry about that later, too."

"Sir, I have reports that NATO, and the Soviets have all gone to defense condition three and have launched fighter strike forces," Ford reported. "Estimate NATO has launched two hundred planes, Soviets have one hundred fifty in the air now. The United States has deployed five hundred."

"Inform all the fighter groups the enemy craft will not have IFF and anything flying without wings can be considered a legitimate target," instructed Straker.

Ford relayed the information in English to the American, British and NATO forces. At another station, Natiroff relayed the same information in Russian.

"We're going to lose a lot of weather balloons with

instructions like that," Henderson commented.

"Would you rather we told them to shoot at flying saucers?" wondered Straker.

"No," Henderson said. "Weather balloons can be replaced."

"Sir, the aliens have changed course. The new heading brings them into the atmosphere in a circular array over the Northern Hemisphere," Barry announced from her radar station. "They haven't slowed much. They're coming in at better than Mach 30."

"Louie?" Straker called, quickly looking around the control room.

Major Graham answered from the computer station where he was working. "Yes, sir?"

"Can we keep everybody from going to defcon one?" Straker asked.

"We're working on it, sir," came the reply as Graham bent over a computer keyboard.

"I don't understand," Foster murmured.

Straker glanced at the younger man in surprise.

"They're all at defcon three right now. Defcon two is war warning, no missile authorization. Defense condition one allows for ICBM launch. The aliens are coming in on ICBM trajectories."

As he spoke, the bright mass of U.F.O.s on the radar screen broke into two main groups, one over North America, the other over Western Europe, spreading east into Russia.

Above the radar monitor, the image on the Moonbase communications monitor screen skewed and went to static.

Bates spoke up: "Sir, we've lost contact with the orbital communications net."

"We're being jammed," Barry announced from her station further along the wall. "Switching to laser relay to Moonbase and SID."

The screen image cleared to show Virginia Lake's face once again. She had returned to Moonbase only a week before.

"Moonbase to SHADO Control," Lake called over the screen. "On laser relay. Confirm ten Ufos destroyed. Interceptors returning to base."

"Thank you, Colonel. SHADO Control out," Henderson acknowledged. The monitor went black.

*** * ***

On Moonbase, Joan Harrington turned to her commander. "That's still a hundred and ten through our defenses. Do you think they can handle that many?"

"I don't know," Lake admitted. "I thought I saw Commander Straker standing beside General Henderson in the control room."

"Maybe he's well enough to come back to work, figure something out," Harrington suggested hopefully.

"Maybe," Lake said. "In the meantime, I want the launch crews to get the interceptors ready to launch as soon as possible. I want those ships space borne before those Ufos head back in our direction."

"Yes, Colonel," Harrington acknowledged, relaying the orders to the crews already hard at work preparing the interceptors for their next sortie.

*** * ***

"That's still a hundred and ten through the lunar defense system," Duvall commented. "Will SHADO be able to handle that many?"

"We'll find out in about five minutes," Straker told him. "I'm hoping a seven to one margin will be enough to pull it off, even with inexperienced pilots."

"I hardly consider Mother Russia's finest as 'inexperienced', Commander," Putin protested mildly.

"How many of them have been in a dog fight with a Ufo and lived to tell about it?" Freeman wondered aloud.

He moved to stand next to Straker.

"What in hell is going on here, Henderson?" a man's voice shouted from the entrance archway. A man wearing the uniform of an American air force general stalked into the control room. Straker didn't recognize the man but he noted that Henderson and the other SHADO officers seemed to.

Freeman leaned close to Straker's ear and said:

"That's McGruder from NATO."

"Sprenger's boss?" Straker asked quietly. Freeman nodded once.

"I just got a call from my office saying your people have initiated something called an Angel seven alert and ordered two hundred of my fighters into the air!" the gray haired man informed Henderson. His face was red with fury.

"That's right, George," answered Henderson with deceptive mildness. He glanced at the radar monitor beside him. "We estimate contact with the enemy in about thirty seconds."

"The enemy? What enemy? Your so-called flying saucers?" McGruder sneered. He looked around the control room. "Where's Sprenger? Why isn't he coordinating this operation with my people?"

"Colonel Sprenger has been relieved of his duties here," answered Henderson.

McGruder looked around at the stern faces of the SHADO operatives, then he stopped to stare at Straker's uniform. "You." He stepped closer to Straker. "You're American air force. You tell me what the hell you people are playing at!"

McGruder took a step closer. Freeman stepped out as if to intercept him. Henderson simply put a hand on Straker's shoulder.

"General McGruder," said retired Major General Henderson. "As I am acting senior officer of SHADO operations, you will address any questions or complaints you have to me. You will not harass my people while they are doing their jobs." With a jerk of his head, he indicated the younger man should return to his work. Straker turned to Ford, leaning close to speak to the communications man.

Henderson took McGruder's arm and led him away from the communications console to stand with the three members of the commission.

"Sky-1 reports two Ufos destroyed," Ford reported quietly to Straker.

"What about Sky-2?"

Ford shook his head. "Sky-2 reported a sighting but we've had no contact since."

Foster had moved to stand a short distance away, at

the map table. "The mobiles are already on their way into the projected termination area," he announced, listening to the information coming over the communications head-set he was wearing.

"Good."

"Sir, we're getting reports from the NATO and Soviet fighter groups," Ford announced as he typed information into the keyboard in front of him. "NATO estimates thirty bandits destroyed. Soviet Air Command estimates thirty."

"Friendly casualties?" Straker asked.

"NATO reports eight planes lost. The Soviets report losing ten planes and pilots."

"What about the U.S.?" Freeman asked.

Ford smiled. "The United States reports fifty kills, with a loss of ten planes, seven pilots."

SID spoke: "Ten U.F.O.s sighted leaving Earth on bearing red-three-three-seven. Speed, Sol 3, increasing. Moonbase interceptors on intercept course."

"What does that mean?" Duvall demanded.

Straker straightened up, but it was Henderson who answered the question. "That means, Duvall, the enemy has bugged out. They are in retreat."

"Earth has won?" asked Kruger.

"I think we can assume that, sir," Straker said. "I'm sure a couple made it through to land, but SHADO should be able to handle those without too many problems." He looked to Henderson. "Wouldn't you agree, sir?"

"I'm sure SHADO will be able to handle it," Henderson agreed with a bemused grin. He turned to Ford: "Lieutenant, stand down to a yellow alert."

Ford passed the information on to the various SHADO units.

"General," Graham called from his station. "With your permission, we're stepping everybody else down to defense condition five and backing out of their command systems."

With that announcement, an almost perceptible wave of relief crossed the Control room, with one exception.

"Henderson, I want to talk to you, privately!"

McGruder fumed, still furious.

"We can talk in the commander's office," Henderson replied, indicating the open door on the other side of the corridor. He beckoned Straker to accompany him into the office. Straker grabbed his jacket and slipped it on as he followed the two older men.

Inside the office, Henderson went to the desk and sat down in the leather chair behind it. Straker went to stand by the corner of the desk, arms folded across his chest as he watched McGruder.

"Who do you think you are? Willfully interfering with American military operations?" McGruder shouted at Henderson.

"We are Earth's sole functioning defense against an intolerable extra-terrestrial military threat," Henderson replied.

"How dare you interfere with America's defense systems!" McGruder responded in fury.

"George, I don't know if Sprenger bothered to brief you on our operations here," Henderson said. His expression turned grim. "However, for your information,

SHADO has been granted permission by the President of the United States, the Premier of the Soviet Union and the Prime Minister of Great Britain, as well as most of the other governments of this planet, to co-opt their military forces as necessary. SHADO is automatically included in all security system updates for nearly every military command system on the planet."

McGruder's ruddy face lost some of its color. "No one group can have that much power."

Henderson bobbed his head in agreement. "Granted, there are safeguards in place to prevent gross misuse of our access into those systems." He glanced at Straker, standing quietly beside the desk. "Our foremost safeguard has always been in the selection of SHADO's personnel, especially the chief of operations."

McGruder snorted. "Having a psychotic in charge of all this is a safeguard?"

"General McGruder, I don't believe you've been introduced to Commander Straker of SHADO." Henderson said.

"General McGruder," Straker greeted the man with the briefest of nods.

McGruder ignored him. "Where's Colonel Sprenger?" he demanded of Henderson.

Henderson simply glanced at Straker who answered: "The colonel is either in the detention area, or in the medical center. He wasn't looking very well when SHADO security took him into custody." Straker's lip started to bleed again.

Henderson handed him a tissue from inside the top

drawer of the desk. "What happened to you?"

"Sprenger's buddy, Wain, hit me," Straker replied, daubing his lip with the tissue. "He's also in detention along with several of his men."

"I demand they be released immediately!" McGruder growled. "You don't have the authority to hold them."

"On the contrary, George," Henderson replied. "SHADO does have the authority to not only hold them, but to try and, if necessary, execute them."

"On what charges?" McGruder demanded.

"Violation of sections 8 and 9 of SHADO's security code. Espionage and willful interference with SHADO defense operations, specifically, illegally detaining five SHADO operatives, two of them senior officers," Henderson replied.

"You can't be serious," McGruder sputtered.

"I'm deadly serious, General," Henderson responded. "And if our investigation into this matter discloses any conscious involvement on your part in Sprenger's actions against SHADO, I promise you, I will have your stars."

"You can't do that," McGruder protested. "Besides, no one's going to take the word of a known psychotic against that of the head of the American Air Force in Europe."

"They won't have to, General," Henderson replied.

"We have more than enough witnesses to Sprenger's actions. I very much doubt Commander Straker's testimony will be necessary. As for the accusations of Commander Straker being psychotic, I think we can make a very strong case concerning members of your personal staff being

actively engaged in the attempt to undermine the mental stability of SHADO's commanding officer at a time when that officer was already critically ill due to enemy action."

"You haven't heard the last of this, Henderson," McGruder promised. In reply, Henderson picked up the red telephone handset from the bank of three on the corner of the desk.

"This is General James Henderson calling on behalf of Commander Straker of SHADO. Put me through to General Sachs, please," Henderson said into the phone. He glanced up at McGruder, covering the mouthpiece with his hand. "This is a priority line to the JCS. If I were you, McGruder, I'd start packing."

McGruder turned on his heel and stalked out of the office. Straker took a deep breath and sank into one of the chairs at the conference table.

"Dave, this is Jim Henderson. I wanted to apologize for that fright we put TAC through a little while ago. From the reports I've got back so far, it looks like they did one hell of a job, only ten planes lost against fifty bandits," Henderson said into the phone.

Straker only half listened to the part of the conversation he could hear. He looked around the office. Henderson had rearranged the desk top. The crystal ball and the crystal cigarette lighter had both been moved to the shelf above the corner bar. The silver cigar pail has missing. Henderson didn't smoke.

Straker suddenly realized he hadn't had a smoke since he went into the hospital and thought of tobacco was actually mildly repugnant now.

"I agree with you, Dave," Henderson was saying. "It isn't a good idea to let anybody know these people have access to technology like that. Next thing you know, we'll be talking about flying saucers from outer space." He laughed.

"By the way, we've had a few problems with George McGruder's aide, Sprenger. He's been harassing Straker and a few other of our senior people and it now looks like he maybe was working for the other side and I'm not talking about the Russians," He listened to the voice on the other end for a few moments, then: "That's very interesting, Dave. Thanks, I owe you one." Henderson hung up the phone.

"Well?" Straker asked.

In reply, Henderson flipped the switch to the intercom: "Lieutenant Ford, I'd like to see Foster, Freeman and Komack in here right away, please." He flipped the switch off. "According to Sachs, McGruder's already under something of a cloud. Apparently they didn't know it when he was assigned to Ramstein, but he left his last assignment station in financial chaos. It may take months to complete the investigation, but I think SHADO won't have to worry about him."

Foster, Freeman and Komack entered the office.

"McGruder was still pretty upset when he left here," Freeman commented, looking from Henderson at the desk to Straker, seated at the conference table. "Is he going to cause us trouble?"

"He can try, but I doubt it he'll get anywhere,"

Henderson said. "How's the mop up going?"

"The mobiles will be in the termination area in Britain

in about an hour. All our satellite systems are on full alert for any Ufos that may have gotten past the U.S. and NATO forces," Foster answered. "Sky-2 finally checked in. It's long range radio was knocked out when it was attacked by a Ufo that was taking off from an area off of Cornwall."

"Cornwall?" Straker wondered. "That's not anywhere near the termination area."

"We're pretty sure it was the one that followed you down after the mission to SID," Foster explained. "The one that had Collins onboard."

Straker glanced at Freeman, who nodded. "We figured it out while you were still in the hospital, been looking for it ever since. It evaded our radar using that time bubble technique. But, we have the radar signature of that particular trick now and I don't think they'll be able to do it to us again."

Straker nodded understanding. "What about casualties?"

Foster replied, "Not too bad, considering. We lost Sky-3, NATO and the U.S. lost eighteen planes and the Soviets lost ten."

"Do we know how many were actually shot down by the aliens?"

"About half, the rest were mid-air collisions, with total loss of hands. It was pretty hairy up there. Most of those kids had never seen real combat," Freeman told him.

"A better than three to one kill ratio isn't too bad, especially with pilots who don't have the training for this kind of combat," Henderson observed.

Straker frowned. "I wonder why they chose now to

make their attack. They didn't have the advantage of bad weather, sun spot activity, nothing. It's not like them to be so... ill-prepared."

"We've got some ideas," Freeman said. "Ed, when did that inquiry of Sprenger's start?"

"Sixteen hundred hours, give or take a few minutes," Straker answered. "Why?"

"We picked up their activity at sixteen-fifteen. They began to move out at sixteen forty-two," Freeman replied.

"That makes it about the same time I shot Collins," Foster said. "The aliens must have been coordinating their attack on Earth with Sprenger's attack on you. They were probably thinking SHADO would be forced to divide its forces to locate you and fight them. They may have been thinking your death or disgrace would destroy SHADO's ability to act against them."

"They certainly weren't expecting SHADO to break its own secrecy and bring in reinforcements. It's not something we've ever done before," Straker said thoughtfully. "It certainly wasn't what I'd planned when I assigned Ford and the others to the project."

"Good thing we did, though," Freeman said. "With the polar trajectories they were using, the aliens could have started World War three."

"They were also expecting Collins to finish me off. The aliens have gone to a lot of trouble to try to kill me. Why?" Straker wondered aloud.

"We may never know," Freeman replied.

Henderson gave Straker a long, appraising look, noting the uniform with its missing ribbons and the shaggy hair.

"Colonel, your uniform is incomplete, and you're in serious need of a haircut."

Straker looked down at his uniform, then back at Henderson. "Sprenger claimed you'd suspended me. I guess he hadn't realized you didn't have the authority fire me." Straker gave him a wry grin. "Slaves have to be sold. By the way, the next time you guys decide to set me up as a tethered goat, let me know and I'll pick up some of my back leave."

"It worked, didn't it?" Freeman asked. "We caught up with Sprenger and with the creature they sent after you."

"You took an awful risk, though. Sprenger might have decided he had enough evidence to simply shoot me out of hand."

Henderson shook his head. "No, Sprenger needed to discredit you first, and through you, discredit SHADO."

"It looked like Kruger, Duvall and General Putin were all in on it," Straker reported.

"They weren't," Henderson replied. "At least, not the way it looked. Sprenger approached some of the members about some 'concerns' he had. I asked them to go along with him to find out if he had anything of substance. He didn't."

"What are we going to do with him?" Straker asked. Foster answered. "We won't have to do anything. He's dead."

"What?"

"Sprenger collapsed the moment Sky-2 destroyed that Ufo off Cornwall. His body simply disintegrated," Foster explained. "Jackson and Natiroff think he actually died about three years ago and the aliens resuscitated him to use

against you, somehow."

"What made them start looking that direction?"

"You," Freeman answered.

"Me?"

"At first, we all thought you were trying to tell us you thought Paul was dead, then it occurred to us that you might have been frightened by someone else, like Sprenger. Natiroff started digging and found evidence that you might have been right, even though you were out of your head with delirium at the time," Freeman explained.

Henderson watched Straker for a long moment, noting that Freeman was also taking mental notes. Straker's expression was one of tired worry, as if too much information were being thrown at him that he didn't have time to process.

"Ed, are you all right?" Freeman asked.

"I don't know," Straker admitted. "When I saw Craig standing there, I froze. Lieutenant Bradley had to pull me out of the line of fire."

"You were startled," Freeman explained.

"No, I don't think so. I knew Craig had to be around, somewhere, but when he showed himself, I went blank, I couldn't move."

"Commander," Foster said. "How did I kill Croxley?"

"Croxley? You shot him," Straker answered, puzzled by the sudden change in subject.

"I mean, how was I able to shoot him? For that matter, why was I there at all that night? Why didn't he know I was coming?" Foster asked. "I asked Jackson and Shroeder about it, before Jackson left to keep an eye on you. Jackson

thinks Croxley was a telepath with precognitive ability, and that when he was reading my thought patterns, I became sensitized to him. Some part of my sub-conscious was aware he was up to no good that night and set it up so I would go out to stop him. But, the only way Croxley couldn't have known I was coming out there was if something, or someone, kept him from knowing."

"What has this got to do with Craig?" Straker asked. There was a note of worry in his voice and a touch of what Foster recognized as fear.

"Ed, the only one who could have kept Croxley from knowing, was you," Komack said. "And, if you could do it to Croxley, it's just possible they could program someone like Craig to do it to you."

"That doesn't sound too promising, does it," Straker commented. "I can be programmed telepathically?"

Komack shook her head. "No, I was there, remember? You were startled at seeing Craig standing there and dropped your guard momentarily," Komack said. "It's likely that he even gave you instructions to that effect when you were still in the hospital. I mean, they had the perfect opportunity and the perfect weapon and still, they failed."

"I see," Straker said. He took big breath, in and out, as if to clear his mind as well as his lungs. "They're not going to stop, you know. They've got me pegged as a primary target."

"Well, with any luck, we've made them think twice about it," Freeman replied.

"I certainly hope so," Straker responded sharply. "By the way, what happened with Nurse Goodwin? Jackson said

she was being investigated."

"Turns out, Lieutenant Evans was the one who did most of the security checks on her and Dawson was responsible for the medical side," Freeman reported.

"Dawson was working for the aliens," Straker reminded him.

"Apparently, so was Evans. Also, Evans, Goodwin, Dawson and Turner served together in the RAF and it was Evans' security checks that cleared them all for SHADO. When Natiroff checked with the RAF, he found that Turner had a history of violent outbursts that never showed up in the records we got from them."

"Sprengr claimed I killed operative Turner," Straker said. "Is that true?"

"Yes, but you were more than justified in doing so," Henderson said. "He had already sabotaged equipment down here and was planning to hand SHADO H.Q. over to the aliens."

"How do you know that?" Straker wondered.

Foster answered. "You weren't in any condition to lie about it and the physical evidence supported your story."

"Oh," Straker commented. "What's happened with Evans and Goodwin?"

"Goodwin's in custody. Evans died when Shroeder tried to removed the alien implant from his head." Freeman reported.

"Do we know who else was in their network?" Straker asked.

"Natiroff's working on it, but we're pretty sure we've got them all," Freeman said.

"Good," Straker responded, but his expression indicated he was still worried.

"Oh, by the way," Henderson said, picking a file off the top of the desk and handing to Straker. "This is a list of some things that need to be attended to as soon as the doctors have cleared you to come back to work."

Straker opened the file and glanced through the several typed pages. "This was all you found in two months?" he asked, worry replaced by surprise.

"You mean, there's more?" Henderson growled.

"The piano in the lounge needs tuning."

Henderson laughed.

Straker looked at the list again. It was all things they'd discussed before, but never quite found time to change.

"Alec, there are a few things I want to add to this list."

"Oh?"

Straker nodded and glanced at Komack. "Kate has agreed to manage the studios for us on a permanent basis, so long as we never ask her to do anything down here. She suggested that John Gray take over the Institute. Miss Ealand will become Kate's personal assistant and I'll need a new secretary."

Freeman grinned at Komack. "Does that mean you're staying?"

Komack grinned back at him. "Just don't tell that relationship analysis program or the computer'll want one of us posted to Mars."

"Good thing we don't have a base on Mars then," Freeman said. "When's the momentous occasion to take place, may I ask?"

Straker and Komack looked at one another, then back at Freeman.

"We're still in negotiation," Komack answered.

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Craig Collins was buried that Friday. He had no close relatives and so was buried in a small cemetery not too far from the studios.

The funeral itself was small and simple. Most of the senior SHADO officers attended, including General Henderson. Henderson and Straker were both in uniform. This time, Straker's uniform jacket displayed all the ribbons and medals he was privileged to wear. Komack stood with them.

"Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our brother departed and we commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life... " the black robed vicar intoned as earth was thrown onto the coffin.

Shortly, the service was over and Straker turned to go to his car.

"Ed," Henderson called quietly, falling into step with the younger man. "Wain's trial is set for next Monday."

"Good."

"I've assigned Jackson to prosecute."

At that, Straker smiled. "Good."

"You know, we had a hell of a time trying to find three unbiased Commission members to make up the trial board.

We finally had to draft a couple people from SIS," Henderson informed him. "It seems Sprenger wasn't just

after you, but was collecting information on the board members, too. Enough to blow us sky high, enough to force control of SHADO into Langley's hands."

"I wonder why?" Straker asked. "I mean, they might well have pulled it off if they'd just waited, done a little more homework. I still don't understand why they were in such a hurry."

"I asked some friends of mine at the Joint Chiefs. Besides McGruder being in trouble for financial impropriety, Sprenger was also under investigation. For what, they wouldn't say. But, it looks like he was going to be forced to take early retirement. I imagine the other side figured they were running out of time and that Kruger and the others disliked you enough that they'd be willing to go along with it."

"But you got to them first?" Straker smiled.

"Well, you're not going to win any popularity contests with them, but you've done a damned good job, so far, and they're all smart enough not to mess with success,"

Henderson said. "Plus, none of us wants SHADO operations turned over to the tender mercies of the U.S. government. We're international for good reasons."

"There are still a lot of people who don't agree with those reasons, General," Straker said.

"Ed, can you imagine the CIA getting NATO and the Warsaw Pact to agree to joint maneuvers against a common enemy? Your people pulled it off. That's one hell of a team you've put together," Henderson said.

"They are good," Straker agreed.

Henderson reached into his jacket and pulled out a

long, flat, jewel box. "That reminds me, General Putin was surprised to find out you weren't eligible for promotion because of SHADO."

"I try not to worry about it," Straker said. "After all, it comes with the territory and I'm not likely to get assigned to the Pentagon after all this."

Henderson grinned. "Putin wanted me to give you these. He said the Soviets recognized general staff material, even if U.S. Air Force didn't."

He handed the jewel box to Straker, who opened it. Inside was a pair of silver shoulder boards edged in blue, with a single silver star beneath the Soviet coat of arms, the rank insignia of a Soviet air force brigadier general.

"Who knows, maybe the Commission can manage to get the U.S. to trade those stars for ones that'll go better with your uniform," Henderson said.

Straker was silent for a long moment then: "Thank you, sir."

"I'm told you've been cleared to go back to work."

Straker nodded. "I start back Monday. It'll be interesting. Alec's been briefing me on the changes you both made."

There was something in Straker's expression that worried Henderson. He put a hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Ed, there was nothing you could do for Craig Collins once the aliens got hold of him," Henderson said quietly.

"He was dead when he first came back."

"I know that, General," Straker replied. "But that doesn't make it any easier. We've had so many good people

die, and it doesn't get any easier."

"No, it doesn't," Henderson. "But, you can't let it stop you from doing your job."

"I never have, General," Straker responded. "We're a little like the Mossad. We do what we must and we do it very well, because the alternative is too horrible to contemplate."

"Welcome back, Commander," Henderson said. "By the way, I expect you, Colonel Lake and Colonel Komack in my office Tuesday morning. As I recall, you missed the meeting we had scheduled."

"We'll be there. Just don't tell me I need a vacation. I don't think I'd survive another one," Straker said as he climbed into his car.