

# Another Question of Priority

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## Chapter 1

"Mobile Two to Mobile Leader, I think I have something."

Captain Ayshea Johnson leaned in to her microphone, "Talk to me SM Two."

"Just another second...I think...yes Captain, I confirm, I have an alien. He's alone and he's in the clearing of grid 19. On foot, appears to be unarmed. He's seen us. He's running for the forest. Should we pursue?"

Ayshea turned in her seat and looked closely at the situation holo-map projected on the wall of her Mobile. One of her operatives thought out loud, "Looks like a trap..." She silently agreed. The clearing was on the foot of a range of hills and was bordered on the other three sides by forest. The woods in grid 19 were light at first but thickened until they became very dense a few hundred yards in. If a Spinner had landed in there, it would be impossible for the Mobiles to follow. On the other hand, the aliens weren't in a good position either. Too many trees to shoot through before they could range in on one of the Mobiles.

Ayshea's decision was made. She spoke without turning away from the map, "Lead Unit to SM Two. Pursue the alien into the forest until your vehicle can go no further. Then proceed on foot. Expect action."

Mobile Two acknowledged while she pressed the switch that connected her with all other units, including the driver crew of her own Mobile, "All Mobiles converge on grid 19. I authorize weapons-free status upon sighting of Spinner. Repeat, you are authorized to fire at will with a weapons-free status upon sighting a UFO."

She heard the drivers of Mobiles One and Three verbally receipt their orders. The driver of her own Mobile left the comm-link open long enough for she and her operatives to hear him tell his co-driver, "You heard the Lady. We're going in hot and bothered."

She smiled to herself, and told her young assistants to strap in tight.

\* \* \*

"Everything is in perfect order, Alec." Straker told him while picking up his briefcase, "Another shining report for the United Nations. As usual."

"Well, except for our unfinished business in Australia."

"You'll find them, Alec." Straker assured him, "Captain Johnson is one of your best people and Ufoes can't hide forever."

"I just can't believe that they got past the Interceptors." He huffed.

"Those things happen Alec. The aliens aren't stupid, they change their tactics every so

often. Sometimes an Interceptor's warhead malfunctions. It might be coincidence, it might not. That's what the Mobiles are for."

General Straker and Commander Freeman waited together at the door to the office-lift. The large double doors split open and the two men stepped inside. Straker turned so that he could see the old familiar SHADO sign before the doors closed.

He motioned his head to indicate the sign and asked, "Is that the same sign I had installed in 1980?"

Freeman smiled, took a long draw from his cigarette and answered, "Nope. It looks exactly like the old one, all the artwork is the same. But it serves 'other' functions now."

Straker snickered and shook his head from side to side, "Miracles of modern technology."

The office-lift stopped and the window blinds open by themselves to reveal dim sunlight. Freeman picked up Straker's longcoat and handed it to him saying, "Don't be a stranger here Ed. Don't wait so long between visits next time."

"You know how it works Alec." Straker reared back and righted himself, "The business of the UN, SHADO's funding, the political games..." His voice trailed off. "That's all in New York. There's an...ocean...between my house and the studios. I play my games with the bureaucrats," He turned to Freeman, "...and you play your games with the aliens."

"Sometimes I wonder who has more compassion." Alec mused loudly enough to be heard. "The people you play with or the people I play with."

Straker smiled and moved toward the opening door. Stepping into the lobby he stopped at Miss Ealand's desk. She looked up and smiled brightly.

Alec followed Straker through the door and Straker turned to him saying, "My only regret of leaving England, Alec." He turned back to Miss Ealand, "Come to the states and work for me. The pay is better and the job has less stress."

Miss Ealand spread her arms wide, "And give up all this?! Not on your life, Mr. Straker." She waited until both men began to chuckle, "I have the highest security clearance in SHADO, the highest job security..." She pointed to the red phone on her desk, "...and a direct comm line to Security. I have more 'security' than I could ever need, and I doubt that New York is less stressful."

"You wouldn't have to look over your shoulder all the time at the UN." Straker told her.

"I wouldn't have a SkyDiver only a few minutes away either." She countered.

Straker said to her, "I called the bakery about your son's birthday party. I ordered a cake large enough for eight or ten people. It will be delivered on the afternoon of his party, say, about 2 pm?"

Her mouth dropped open. "Ed, you didn't have to do such a thing!"

"Of course I do, Miss Ealand. Its not easy being a single mother, and you have done very well for your son. Johnny is a wonderful boy, and we both how often he sends me postcards of London."

Alec lifted his hand to cover his face as he giggled.

"He is rather fond of you." She grinned.

"You will tell him that I am sorry I couldn't stop by and see him this time, but I will call when I land in New York. I will have his present delivered on the morning of his birthday. I told my secretary to schedule my calendar so that I can be at his party next week. I will hail a taxi to get me from Heathrow to your house. I should be there about 2:30 or 3."

Her eyes became moist.

"Well, no tears now." Straker noticed her facial expression, "And don't you worry Miss

Ealand, I will take care of everything. I promise."

Alec glanced at his wristwatch, "Oh, Ed, the time."

"Yes, well, I'll be off now." He turned to Freeman and shook his hand, "Alec, I'll see you on the videolink next tuesday morning."

"I'll have the reports on Interceptor One's malfunction ready for you by then."

"Good, very good. I'll call 'Bombs-R-Us' and see if I can't scare up some more nukes for Colonel Barry."

"Safe trip, Ed."

Straker nodded and said goodbye to Miss Ealand. With that, he stepped through the passage and made his way to the limosine waiting to take him to Heathrow Airport.

Alec waited until the door slid closed. "He's a good man. I miss him often."

Miss Ealand leaned forward and said in a low voice, "He adores my Johnny, you know."

Alec silently smiled and took another draw from his cigarette as she continued, "He made sure that Johnny had extra Christmas presents every year, he has authorized pay increases everytime Johnny went to the doctor, he tries to see him each time he comes to London...Johnny thinks of him as a big brother."

"Has Johnny ever met his father?" Freeman asked.

"No, never. Thomas and I were dating in 1984 when I got pregnant with Johnny. Thomas wasn't ready to be a father again, with two daughters of his own. I certainly wasn't ready to be a mother. I thought about giving Johnny up for adoption until Mr. Straker convinced me not to. He said that he would make everything alright if I chose to raise Johnny myself." She gazed out the window and thoughtfully reflected for a moment before going on, "He's always been there for us. I think my Johnny reminds him of his Johnny."

Alec nodded in silent agreement as the phone buzzed. She picked up the line and listened for a few seconds.

"Mr. Freeman," she said, "Its Captain Ford, sir. They've found something in Australia. They need you downstairs."

## Chapter 2

Mobile Two entered the woods and the driver estimated how far they could go before the forest was too dense for the tracked vehicle. When the Mobile was too large to fit between the trees, the rear hatch came down and three men jumped out carrying assault weapons. They ran ahead of the vehicle as the driver opened the forward gun ports. He chose not to bother with the missiles because of the thickness of the forest.

Mobiles One and Three entered the clearing from opposite sides and rumbled their way toward the tracks left by Mobile Two. Mobile Leader appeared last, and watched as the other Mobiles opened their gun ports and exposed their missile racks in anticipation of the coming confrontation.

Ayshea and her assistants heard the weapons systems activate on their own Mobile as they closed range on the edge of the wood. At that moment, the commlink came to life.

"This is Gholstein. No sign of the running alien. Its really quiet out here, no birds, no wind, nothing."

Ayshea activated her Mobile's link, "SM Two, how are you doing?"

"I have nothing on sight or scope, but we're ready."

"This is Mobile One to Gholstein, we're at the forest and we're hot and bothered."

"Mobile Three, hot and bothered."

"Mobile Leader." It was her own driver speaking to the others, "Hot and bothered."

"Thanks you guys," it was Gholstein and his ground team, "Its good to know we're not alone out here."

The radio was silent. The moment felt like an hour. Ayshea noticed that she had sweat beading on her eyebrows. She brushed her long black hair away from her face as the radio came alive again.

"Gholstein to Lead, I can hear cycling. I can't see one yet, but I can hear a Spinner."

Ayshea grabbed at the anglehair microphone, "Weapons free ONLY upon visual sighting, no random fire. Repeat, NO random fire. Ground team, scatter---scatter now!"

The radio answered with an unknown voice yelling, "There, I see it! She's a Spinner!"

"Confirm!" It was Gholstein, "A single Spinner, grid seventee..."

Mobile Two opened fire with its heavy machine guns. Limbs blew away from the trees between the vehicle and the Spinner. The UFO seemed to ignore the three men on the ground, who promptly turned and fired their rifles at the rising craft. The UFO returned fire with its standard plasma beam. A tree exploded into splinters and sent the ground team diving for cover. The Spinner fired again at Mobile Two but annihilated another tree. Mobile Two never ceased shooting, and sparks began deflecting from the hull of the UFO. The Spinner launched a series of rapid fire pulses, clearing a path between itself and Mobile Two. Suddenly, the characteristic beam weapon lashed out and Mobile Two erupted into a firestorm of smoke and burning metal.

As the Spinner cleared the treetops, Ayshea heard Gholstein's voice yelling, "Its GONE! Mobile Two is just...GONE!"

Ayshea felt the guns of her own Mobile firing. She turned to the monitors and saw the other Mobiles shooting and moving simultaneously. The UFO launched another long beam that cut between Mobile One and Leader. Mobile Three launched a missile that quietly whispered into the sky and after the alien ship. The Spinner saw it and released another rapid succession of pulses.

Ayshea and her team were thrown violently from their seats as the rear hatch of Mobile Leader exploded away from the vehicle. Her Mobile rocked and lurched and she hit her head against some unseen hard object.

She awoke to the sound of a soothing male voice talking gently to her. A large and strong hand supported her head, and somebody was talking about medivac aerocopters. She turned slightly, but felt a searing pain in her chest. The soft voice told her not to move, help is on the way.

"The UFO?" She whispered.

He sighed, "It hit the missile and got away, but we think the rocket's burst did some damage."

She choked, "SkyDivers..."

"Already done Captain. You rest now."

\* \* \*

Ed Straker stretched his legs in the comfortable first class section of British Airways TransAtlantic. Without putting down his London Times newspaper, he reached for his cola and took a long drink. He turned the page and began reading another story about Lady Diana's "un-regal" behavior. The night sky was particularly nice with a brightly lit newspaper while other passengers were asleep.

His flip-phone rang.

He fumbled around for it and checked the caller. The screen said that "Sid" was calling. Why would someone bounce a call through Space Intruder Detector? Straker immediately pulled himself up in the seat and checked to make sure that other passengers hadn't wakened. Quietly, he answered the call.

It was Alec. "Ed, there's been a development here that you should know about."

"Alec, I have the greatest faith that you and..."

"No, Ed. Its Miss Ealand. She and her son have been in some sort of accident."

## Chapter 3

Straker leaned back against his seat, "Dear God. What happened?"

"The newspapers are gonna say that it was a hit and run driver."

"Fine Alec," Straker was getting impatient, "What was it?"

"We think it was aliens. We've got a Spinner's landing circle near the site of the accident."

Straker's blue eyes closed hard. Alec broke the silence by saying, "Neither of them were taken. We have them both under personal watch in a local civilian hospital."

"Thank God. Tell me everything that happened."

"Well..."

"What? What is it Alec?"

"There is a complication."

Straker's teeth were clenched, "Say it."

Alec drew a long breath, "A few hours after your plane took off, Miss Ealand picked up Johnny at the sitters. On their way home a Spinner overtook the car and ran them off the road. Miss Ealand will be okay. She is unconscious now but the doctors say she'll make a full recovery."

"And the boy?"

"Ed, Johnny was found several yards from the vehicle with severe blows to the head. Judging by the distance from the car and the type of injuries, Security thinks that Johnny was pulled from the vehicle and beaten. We can't say for certain that the aliens did it, but there were landing marks not far from where Johnny was found."

Straker put his face in his hand, "How is he?"

"He's not expected to pull through. I don't understand all the medical mumbo-jumbo, but the doctors say that he needs some kind of surgery. There are only a few surgeons in the world who can perform this kind of work and none of them are in England tonight."

Straker was silent for a long time, "Alec, I need a moment to compose."

"I understand Ed. I'll keep you informed of any new developments."

"Yes, right. Thank you Alec." Straker deactivated his phone and asked the attendant for a cup of strong coffee.

\* \* \*

"Commander Freeman."

Alec looked over as he strolled through the Control Room adjacent to his office. He noticed a young woman with a clipboard hurrying over to him. He stopped to wait for her.

"Here are the search patterns that you asked for."

"Thank you Lisa."

Freeman stood on the steps separating the computers from the operators and read the report. Everything looked good. Every location of alien activity was being covered by SHADO resources. They'd be flushed out soon.

Suddenly, Freeman's beeper vibrated. He looked down and saw that he had a call from Ed Straker. He returned to his office and lit a cigarette which he promptly put into the ashtray. He picked up the phone and carried it with him as he strolled toward the minibar for a drink. He keyed the phone and heard Straker's voice.

"Alec, its Straker."

"Ed, there's really no more to tell you right now..."

"Alec, listen to me. I called the hospital and I found one of those neuro-surgeons. There's

at a symposium at the IU Medical Center in Indianapolis, Indiana..."

Alec nearly choked on his drink, "Whoa, Ed, slow down. Start again now, what are you saying?"

"I found one of the surgeons and we can get her to London. Shadair can dispatch a concorde..."

"That's not possible."

"WHAT?"

"Everything that flies is out looking for three UFO's. One of them is damaged and another has attacked one of our people and her son. That leaves a third unaccounted for, at full capability, and none of them are in my hands. Every piece of SHADO equipment is committed to this search Ed, including Shadair."

Straker breathed a long slow sigh, "All I need is one of the concordes and a single Sky to escort it."

"A Sky?!" Freeman was aghast, "You want me to order a Sky to land with a concorde at Indianapolis International Airport? Do you know how many concordes land in the corn fields of Indiana? It will take years to quell all the questions and suspicions."

Straker was taken aback by Freeman's behavior. "Alec," He asked slowly, "What's the problem? We're talking about a little boy here."

"Ed." Alec spoke deliberately slow, "For years you grilled me about my empathy towards SHADO operatives..."

"This is different."

"Why Ed? How is this different?"

"This time its personal."

"Personal to who Ed? To you? You're not the boy's father. To me, I have no relationship with him at all. His mother is just my secretary..."

"She's a valued SHADO officer and she needs our help."

Alec was silent for a very long moment. Straker finally felt prompted to speak.

"Alec, what has gotten into you?"

"Johnny, Ed. Johnny got into me." Freeman said.

"I know, I feel for Miss Ealand's..."

"No. Not Ealand. Johnny Straker."

Silence again. Freeman took it as a sign to continue.

"One night, almost seventeen years ago, I saw something different about you." Alec explained, "You were strange and fragmented...aloof, other things on your mind. I asked you what was wrong but you refused to tell me. I did everything I could to get you to talk, but you wouldn't. You were distant, almost sinister that night. It was months later when I found out that your son died because I diverted that concorde off course to chase down an alien defector. You let me live with Johnny's death for all these years..."

"I never blamed you, Alec."

"You didn't have to. I blamed myself. I was there when you and Mary got married, I was there when Johnny was born, and I the person who always took you away from them. Did you know that Mary hasn't spoken to ME for LONGER than she hasn't spoken to you?! I helped cause your divorce and I helped to end Johnny's life. And you never---never once---said a WORD about needing my help or wanting to be left alone or anything. Do you know how quickly we could've gotten that drug across the Atlantic if you had TOLD me that your son was about to die?! I never got married and I never had kids because of this damn job that I

inherited from you. I don't ever want my executive officer feeling responsible for taking me away from my family or causing my divorce or anything else."

"Alec, what do you want me to say?"

"I want you, General, for the first time in both of our lives, to tell me exactly what you want and exactly WHY you want it. And then I want you to get the hell out of the way and let your friends help you to get it."

Straker was quiet, then slowly began to speak. "I was always more worried about SHADO than I was of my own family, Alec. I was always 'business first.' I wasn't much of a husband to Mary, in fact she thought I was having an affair with Nina at one time. I was never there for them Alec, I was never a husband and father. When my son lay dying in the hospital, the doctors said that they needed a drug from the States. I promised Mary that I would take care of everything. I thought that I could be forgiven for all those years of absentee fatherhood with one fulfilled promise. I hoped to make Mary see that there was more to Harlington-Straker than she thought---but I wouldn't have to tell her. A film executive who commanded concordes and produced miracle drugs from across the ocean. She'd see it and wonder. Maybe she'd understand. Maybe she and Johnny would forgive me. I failed them Alec. I never kept that promise. I died that day along with my son. My soul went with him when he left me, Alec. How can I express what I felt? I was a commander in a war against ALIENS for God's sake! I couldn't have been in Vietnam or Grenada or Desert Storm, no, not me, I have to fight aliens in a war that doesn't end and has no cease-fires! I tried to divert military hardware and operatives for my own personal use. I couldn't tell anyone, that would make them just as guilty as I was. And my son died because I didn't keep my promise. I haven't slept well since that day Alec. It haunts me day and night. Do you want me to forgive you Alec? Okay, you're forgiven. But tell me something, Alec---who can forgive me?"

\* \* \*

There was a moment of silence before Straker continued. "Just before I left Harlington-Straker today I promised Miss Ealand that I would take care of everything. I promised her Alec. I intend to keep that promise. I am determined to follow through and make good on my word THIS time."

"Is it for Johnny?"

"Yes." Straker said, "Its for both of our Johnnys...and it's for my soul."

## Chapter 4

Ed Straker felt trapped and helpless in his seat on the British Airways jet. He looked at his flip phone every few minutes, willing it to ring. He tapped his fingers, looked out the window, glanced back at the slumbering passengers.

He thought to himself, 'There must be SOMETHING that I can do.' He moved in his chair, but never really became comfortable. The flight attendant arrived and asked if she could get him anything. He asked for another cup of strong coffee.

The coffee arrived and he sipped at it. Just as he sat the cup in its holder on the seat, his phone buzzed. Nearly spilling the cup on his expensive Aramani suit, he grabbed and opened the phone.

The call was from "Sid." His fingers moved so quickly to activate the phone that he missed the button and had to try twice.

"Ed, its Alec again."

"What have you got for me Alec?"

"I've got good news and I've got bad news."

"Johnny Ealand doesn't have time for games, Alec."

"He's got time for the game we're gonna hafta play to get that surgeon across the Atlantic."

"Alright, I'm listening."

Straker heard Alec light up a cigarette in the background before speaking again. "Okay Ed, this whole thing is covert, only selected SHADO people will participate. When its over, it never happened. Here's the part you play in the scheme. You land with British Airways in New York in the morning. You have a four hour layover in the Big Apple until you board USAir flight 812 to Chicago. Thirty minutes at O'Hare, and you're on Eastern Airlines 317 to Indianapolis International. Our people will already have the surgeon briefed and ready to leave with you. You'll meet a Dr. Hemmingway at the Indianapolis terminal and the two of you will be taken by taxi to your point of departure for England."

"Why the four hour layover in New York?"

"That will give you time to pull some strings before you leave for Chicago." Alec explained, "There are some signatures and authorizations that we need to pull military people and hardware away from their assigned duties to play in our little game. Plus, this whole operation is going to be staffed by volunteers."

"Ummmm, Alec, there are some SHADO officers who didn't appreciate my iron-handed style of management. Are you sure that volunteer participation is a good idea?"

"Well General," Alec told him, "Its either that or we both get prosecuted for grossly misappropriating military resources. Its also the reason you're stuck with commercial flights instead of one of Shadair's HST's."

"Okay." Straker said curtly. "After I leave Indianapolis with the surgeon, how do we get back to England?"

"That's one of things you're going to do during your long layover. Let me explain..."

\* \* \*

The British Airways jet landed in New York and the General disembarked. His first telephone call was to a porter at the UN building to come and pick up Straker's luggage and transport it to his home. After that he walked outside and immediately hailed a taxi to take him to the United Nations. On the way there he was on the phone and setting up emergency

meetings with a few selected delegates who's countries owed favors to SHADO.

\* \* \*

"Hey Joe, throw me another Bud Light!"

The attendant baited the hook with a large reeking cut of bloody meat while the men on the deck of the yacht gathered around the cooler for more beer. One particularly large man with a grotesque beer gut came forward and snatched the rod & reel from the attendant's hand. He resembled a spiteful Homer Simpson.

"Throw it in, boy." He snarled.

The yacht began to troll forward. From his position on the boat, the dark-skinned Jamaican attendant could see only the waters and horizon of the Atlantic Ocean. The day was sunny with a few high clouds, but otherwise hot and humid.

And these customers were making the day miserable.

"I said throw it in, boy!"

He tossed the bait into the salt water and removed the protective gloves from his hands. He was needed on the front of the ship but he had to walk past the "clients" to get there. He tried to get passed them as uneventfully as possible.

"Hey there, boy." Said the fat man with the jiggling belly, "Do you drink yet or are you old enough?" He turned and laughed with his friends.

As the young man cleared the stern he heard one of the customers exclaim, "I'll bet that kid doesn't even speak english. Stupid foreigner."

"Joe, dammit, I said throw me another Light!"

"I'm fishing you idiot. Get it yourself!"

"Yeah, you're fishing! You ain't caught nothing all damn day you bozo. Who are you kiddin'?"

"Oh yeah, well get over here Mister Bad Ass because I just caught the mother of all sharks right here."

His line went taut and suddenly the pole bent forward. In an instant, the pole, and the supporting arm connecting it to the ship's deck, were ripped out of the vessel and flew far out across the water.

"I'll be a..."

"My God!"

"Mike, did you see that?"

"Mother of God."

Just behind the yacht, the seawater began to churn.

"I did it!" Joe cried out while slapping the shoulder of his buddy, "I told you! I caught the mother of all sharks!"

One of his friends commented, "You sure caught a Mother all right."

The Spinner arose out of the water spraying droplets all over the ship. The fishing pole and its supporting arm were tightl wrapped around the spinning UFO.

"Holy sheep..."

The Spinner fired.

\* \* \*

"This is Space Intruder Detector."

All heads in SHADO Control snapped around to the globe in the center of the room as the orbiting computer continued to speak.

"Red alert. Red alert. UFO detected at 76 degrees longitude, 18 degrees lattitude. Moving

on a northeasterly course. Speed, approaching mach one."

"Colonel Harrington, SkyDiver 1 reports ready." It was a young male operative.

"No," She ordered, "Launch SkyDiver 5. SkyDiver 1 is going to be placed on special assignment soon."

Harrington and two lieutenants poured over a desktop holo-map of that region. One of the junior officers pointed the path that the Spinner was following. It would pass between Cuba and Haiti on its way out to the open Atlantic.

A passing operative stopped momentarily to glance at the hologram. "If we're lucky," she said, "Castro will mistake it for a mercy flight and shoot it down for us."

One of the lieutenants smiled as Colonel Harrington explained, "It doesn't work that way, Lisa. The aliens have had stealth technology long before SHADO did. Nothing on Earth except Utronics can see one of their Ufoes. Utronics needs something big to contain it, like Moonbase, SID, the ARIDs, and Earth ground stations. Individual manned vehicles are too small for Utronics. That's why the Interceptors, SkyDivers and the Mobiles have to close to visual range for confirmation."

Lisa looked perplexed, "Can they see us?"

Harrington shook her head from side to side. "Both sides have suitable stealth technology to cloak from each other. Both sides have to close to visual range for verification or confrontation. The advantage to this is that none of us are detected by any other Earth scanner."

"But SHADO vehicles can't see each other?" She asked.

"Not exactly. The vehicles can't electronically see each other, but they still transmit transponder signals and they still have SID keeping a close watch on each of them."

"What about the weapons on the Interceptors and the Skys?"

"The Interceptor bombs are deaf, dumb and blind. They explode and cover a wide area hoping that the Ufoe will pass through the burst radius and be destroyed in the blast. Sky's missiles, SID's missiles, and the Diver's torpedoes all have cameras that guide them to their target. Again, requiring visual contact."

Lisa took a breath to ask another question when Alec Freeman appeared in the doorway and asked for status.

Harrington turned and answered, "Ufoe sighted by SID northeast of Jamaica and heading out over the Atlantic. It hasn't tried to leave the atmosphere. SkyDiver 5 has been dispatched to intercept."

Alec frowned, "SkyDiver 1 is in a better position if the Spinner makes a break for space."

"SkyDiver 1 was slated for the special training assignment, Commander."

Alec smiled thinly and nodded. "Very good Colonel, carry on." Freeman walked away from the Colonel while thinking, 'Sky 1. Ironic. The old warrior flying his old dragon back into battle for the old warlord.'

\* \* \*

"What do you mean, stand down?!"

"Orders from SHADO London, sir. Colonel Harrington ordered this SkyDiver to stand down."

The Captain unbuttoned his flight jacket. "I hope they know what they're doing!" He looked around the small submarine, "Okay people, lower the nose and straighten us out. We're not gonna play this round."

The Captain tore off his jacket and returned to his quarters. Once the door slid closed

behind him, he was on the comm-link to London.

"SkyDiver 1 to London, please confirm orders to stand down."

Static crackled for a moment before the voice came through, "Confirmed Captain." It was a radio attendant in SHADO London. "SkyDiver 1 is ordered to stand down and await arrival of flag officer for special training assignment."

\* \* \*

"Cara! Turn that boom-box down!"

The young girl uncurled herself from a powerful stomach exercise and lay flat on the floor. Then she rolled over and turned down her stereo.

"Hi Mom!" She beamed as she mopped off her little face with a towel.

Cara's mother leaned on the doorsill to her daughter's bedroom, "Is that your last spandex suit?"

"I'm doing laundry tonight." She countered.

"You're working too hard for this modeling contract Cara. Go easy on yourself..."

"Mom, get real. There are hundreds of girls who are trying out for these contracts and they all look like me." She looked down and motioned at her perfect figure, "I have to be different to get noticed."

"You'll get noticed, don't worry."

"Hey," Cara noticed how her mother was dressed, "Where are you going?"

"I was asked to make a flight for an old friend."

"Mooooooooooooommmmmmmmm," Cara whined and mockingly stamped one tiny foot onto the floor with both of her arms locked to her sides, "You were gonna teach me that new dance tonight. I need it for the modeling audition."

Her mother stepped into the room, "You have weeks before your audition." She took another step toward the little girl, "I just came up here to see that you'd be okay until your father gets home."

Cara was silent for a long moment before she slowly and carefully said, "Yeah, Mom, ...I'll be...fine."

Her mother knew that Cara had figured it out. She waited for her daughter to continue.

"Mom," Cara stammered, "You're not flying an airliner this time."

Mom pursed her lips and shook her head from side to side.

"You're gonna fly for that company that you and daddy won't talk about."

Mom nodded her head up and down.

Cara stepped forward and her mother spread her arms wide. The young girl wrapped herself tightly around her mother.

"When are you gonna stop working for this company, like daddy did?"

Both women were silent. Mom patted Cara on her back between her shoulders and rocked her from side to side.

Cara pulled away but did not leave her mother's arms, "You're gonna come back to us---to daddy and me? You're not gonna stay away for a long time like before?"

"I'll be back very soon, Cara." Her mother said comfortingly, "It will be a quick flight and then I'll be home to teach you how to dance."

"Mom...please...where are you going? Who are these people?"

"You know the rules Cara, no questions, no answers."

The girl didn't know what else to say. Neither did her mother. They hugged each other for several minutes before the black car pulled up the driveway to take Cara's mother to the

airport.

## Chapter 5

"Sky 5 to SHADO Control. Wrapping up patrol. Have zero. Repeat, nada. No Spinner, and no sign of Spinner."

Sky 5's radio crackled to life, "Acknowledged Maria. Make one more pass through the middle of the grid and then return to Diver 5."

"Roger that London. Out."

Sky 5 turned on its side and looped back in the direction it had come. The whole Atlantic layed out before it. Seawater for as far as could be seen all the way to each horizon. Maria serenely thought for a moment about the lure of the water and the air. Humanity had found ways to travel in or on each. The lure of the impossible. Space was next. The great vacuum between habitable worlds. Provided of course, that humanity survived this little secret war.

She brought Sky 5 slowly around and angled leisurely upward toward the billowing mountainous clouds above. Blazing white in their reflection of sunlight. She closed her glare shield and drove her warrior bird into the greatest of the white mountains in the sky.

At that moment, the UFO crested the waves, its fishing pole still attached, and darted off toward the northeastern United States.

Sky 5 unexpectedly appeared out of the cloud, diving like a predator toward the Spinner. "Surprise, you bastard!"

"This is Space Intruder Detector." Sky 5's radio came alive with the announcement, "Have reacquired first UFO at co-ordinates..."

"Sky 5 to SHADO Control, already on it. Tell SID to shut up."

The Spinner reeled away at the unexpected intrusion of Sky 5. The fighter came from above, and the Spinner couldn't fire its weapons at steep upward angles. In space, it could just turn on its side and shoot, but that wasn't possible in Earth's gravity and still maintain flight. The only choice the alien had was to run for orbit and get above the fighter. The Spinner tore upward like a rocket. Sky 5 leveled off and waited, closing range at speeds high enough to push Maria deeply into her seat.

Slowly, Maria timed her seconds, and closed her thumbs around the weapons switch. Four skinny missiles blasted away from the fighter's wings, two from each side, and darted across the sky toward the golden Spinner. The UFO launched a short series of rapid plasma pulses, but only one missile was hit.

Maria barely had time to notice that something was attached to the outside of the UFO before it exploded into oblivion. Whatever it was, it was blown free of the blast and fell back into the sea with the shredded remains of the alien ship.

"Sky 5 to SHADO Control. Splash one Romulan."

\* \* \*

Straker looked at his Breitling watch as the plane landed. Twelve minutes late. Damn.

He stepped off the plane and made his way up the gantry to the terminal gate. It was a cool day in Indianapolis, overcast, rainy and dreary. He hesitated at the door to adjust his Nordstrom tie and straighten his Canali suit.

Clearing the ramp, Straker found two men standing together with a woman in the middle. Each of the men wore very expensive suits like his own, and they both had the characteristic black ray-ban sunglasses in their pockets. Straker mused how the look of security people hadn't changed in thirty years.

Straker approached the surgeon.

"Doctor Hemmingway?"

"Doctor Annette Hemmingway. You must be Mr. Straker, I presume." She tipped her head slightly, "I must say, you have quite a bit of political clout in America for being the owner of a British film studio."

Straker smiled but did not comment. He turned to the security man on his right, "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, Mr. Straker. If you will follow us, sir."

The security leader turned on his heel in a manner that betrayed his military training, and lead the way to the exit of Indianapolis International.

Straker fell into step with Dr. Hemmingway, "Well, Doctor, I assume that you have been properly briefed?"

"Uhh, yes Mr. Straker. I think so. I received a fax this morning telling me about the boy. I have received his condition, his chart, and his diagnosis. All I need is transportation back to London."

"That's why we're here." Straker looked at her and nodded.

The limosine took them from the Airport to the highway. From there, they turned north of Indianapolis and onto a paved road that took them through a couple of smaller towns and numerous cornfields. The weather, combined with the sleepy nature of the landscape, provided a sort of melancholic feeling for the occupants of the limosine. They turned onto a paved road and saw a sign that said "Terry Airport." Hemmingway looked around at the countryside. A large farm with a barn and a silo, another with cows, and yet another with old implements as decorations in the front yard of the house.

She looked to Straker and motioned to indicate what she had seen. "Quaint."

The limosine turned in to the drive of Terry Airport, between the junction and a small town called Jolietville. The security men got out first, produced black umbrellas, and opened the doors for Straker and the Doctor.

She turned and looked at the only runway of the airport, but it was empty. She looked to Straker.

"We're a few minutes early Doctor." Straker told her, "Perhaps you'd be more comfortable inside?"

The entire entourage entered into the small control building of the airfield. Inside, they found four young men, all dressed in blue jean overalls and operating various pieces of equipment.

One of the airfield workers looked up at the well-dressed group and said, "Yer plane is commin' down." There was a noticable drawl to his voice, "It be on final approach now."

Straker smiled, keeping to himself the knowledge that these boys were going to get a very big surprise.

"Okay folks, here it comes."

There was a moment of silence.

"Jeezuz H. Christ! Look at that damn thing!! Billy, go get Momma! Ohmigod, where's the coon-dawg!"

The Shadair concorde dropped out of the clouds and descended quickly toward the runway.

The concorde came to a halt in front of the control building. Because of the height of the landing gear, the plane was as high off the ground as the control building's roof. It started to turn around when Momma entered the room.

"Glory be! I do declare in all my born days!"

"Well Doctor, I believe our transportation has arrived." Straker mentioned in a soft voice.

The surgeon was obviously surprised that such a craft had arrived to whisk them back across the Atlantic. "Ummmm, yes, uh, well...studio owner?...shall we be off then?"

The concorde had turned around, and mauled the first few rows of a cornfield in doing so. It was poised and ready to take on passengers. An inflatable walkramp had been produced from inside, and the hatch was open to admit them. Going up the ramp was very difficult because of the unstable footing and the rainwater, but they made it without any major problems. The security men returned to their limosine and disappeared down the country road.

Hemmingway stepped through the door and was escorted to the first row of large comfortable seats. Straker was met at the door by Commander Virginia Lake, who gave him a light hug.

"Its good to see you again Ed."

Straker slipped an arm around her, patted on the curve of her back and greeted her warmly.

"The pilot would like to see you." She smiled.

"Who's the pilot?" Straker inquired.

"Why don't you go see for yourself?" Lake produced a sheepish grin.

Straker couldn't resist. He left Doctor Hemmingway with Virginia Lake. He made his way to the nose cockpit of the plane and tapped on the door. It opened to reveal four people on the flight deck. Three of them were young SHADO women whom Straker had never met.

Then the pilot turned in her seat. He recognized Gay Ellis-Bradley instantly.

"Gay."

"General." She smiled brightly and held out her little arms. They hugged as best they could from her siting position.

"Its good to have friends, Gay. I can't tell you how much this means to myself and to Miss Ealand."

"You were there for us when we needed you for more than a decade. Now its our turn."

"How is Mark?"

"He's doing very well in his new job." Her head bobbed up and down as Straker knelt in the cockpit beside her. "He was promoted to the executive staff last month. He oversees accounts between his corporation and others such as Hughes, Lockheed, Microsoft, and European Interests."

Straker smiled, "And your daughter?"

"Cara is bouncing between her schoolwork and modeling. She'll be eligible to work for the fashion designers in Milan and Paris when she turns fourteen. She already has an offer for photo ads with both Gucci and Mirabella."

"Fourteen years old." Straker shook his head in mock disbelief, "Has it really been that long?"

She nodded silently.

"Will Cara ever work for SHADO?" He asked.

Gay smiled, "Not unless SHADO plans to market a line of swimwear in the near future."

Straker giggled and glanced out the side port to the clouds overhead, "Reminds me of London."

"I wouldn't know sir, most of my time was spent on the Moon or in a SkyDiver."

Straker grabbed the top of her seat and pulled himself to his feet. She felt the pressure of

his weight on her chair. He looked not at her but into the clouds and he said, "Put this bird back in the sky, Gay. There's a little boy in London who needs us."

"Immediate launch, General?" She asked.

"Yes, Gay. Immediate launch."

Joan Harrington called Alec Freeman to her holo-map. She asked both of the lieutenants to take an unscheduled coffee break. They were both experienced enough with SHADO procedure to know when they shouldn't hear what is being said. They left graciously and professionally.

"Yes Joan."

"Look at this Commander." She pointed to the Atlantic. "Here is where the Ufoe was found by Sky 5, and here is the site of engagement."

Alec lit another cigarette, "Alright Joan, what am I looking at?"

She motioned with her finger, "If I draw a line that continues the path of the Ufoe before Sky 5 surprised it..."

Her finger connected the position of the Spinner with the city of Indianapolis. She looked back to Freeman, "...the Ufoe would have intercepted Shadair's concorde before it reached Indiana."

"Good God." Alec exhaled. "How the hell do they KNOW?"

Freeman put down his cigarette, "Alert SkyDiver 1 that the training mission is about to begin."

"Yes sir." Joan left.

## Chapter 6

Straker returned to the passenger cabin and sat down near the Doctor and Virginia. Relaxing for a moment, he felt his eyes growing heavy. He fell into a light sleep for an undetermined amount of time when he was awakened by loud talking.

"Well Mr. Straker, would you like to tell me how the owner of a film studio gets all this?" Hemmingway motioned to the concorde around her.

"There are certain perks that go with proprietorship." He responded.

"Mr. Straker." She leaned toward him, "Do you know where the restroom is on this concorde?"

His silence prompted her to continue.

"I have been to the restroom on this concorde, Mr. Straker. Guess what? The restrooms are all the way in the rear of the aircraft." She pointed in the general direction. "And there's no one else on board between us and the restroom."

"Your point Doctor?"

"My point is that you didn't charter this concorde Mr. Straker. You OWN it. The CEO of Paramount doesn't OWN a concorde, and Paramount is a whole lot bigger than any studio you might own."

"I don't own this concorde, Doctor. Neither do I own a film studio."

She threw her hands up and over her head, "I knew it, I knew it, something smelled wrong about this whole thing."

"Nothing is wrong Doctor." Commander Lake chimed into the discussion. "There is a little boy in London who needs your help."

"And how can I be sure of that?" She demanded.

"You'll know when we land at Heathrow and an aerocopter takes you to the hospital." Straker told her.

"What's an aerocopter?"

Lake answered, "Its an airplane with special wing props that allow it VTOL capability."

Hemmingway sank down into a cushioned seat. She put both hands over her mouth in shock and said, "Oh my God. You people are military."

Straker and Lake looked at each other, then looked back at the Doctor, but said nothing.

"I don't care what you people are doing, but my part in your scheme ends right here. You turn this plane around right now By God and take me back to the States."

Straker tried to diffuse this, "I'm sorry Doctor, but your patient..."

"...my patient doesn't exist!" She finished the sentence for him. "There is no patient, is there? Was the boy just a lie too? What is this whole thing, some poorly planned Mission Impossible that got away from you Mr. Straker---IF that is your real name..."

Lake tried to calm her, "Doctor, please."

"No, no more! Out with it, am I being kidnapped?"

"Of course not!" Lake retorted.

"Then you'll honor my demand to return me to the United States. And I mean right now." She said while pointing to the floor.

Lake looked at Straker, who wasn't looking at anyone.

Slowly, carefully, Ed Straker whispered, "Commander Lake, you will go to the cockpit and you will order Colonel Bradley to turn this concorde around and proceed at hypersonic speed back to Indianapolis International."

The Doctor was actually surprised that Straker was granting her demand.

"Ed..." Lake pleaded.

"That is an order Commander." He said in a soft voice. "We're not kidnappers."

"Yes General."

Colonel Lake turned to leave, but before she could exit the cabin, the intercom came alive with the soft contralto of Gay Bradley's voice.

"Mr. Straker, you have a message from Sid. Please come to the cockpit."

Straker answered by speaking to the ceiling, "It's alright Captain, the Doctor knows. Pipe the message back here, please."

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

The Doctor came straight to her feet. Her eyes widened with an expression of shock and surprise. What could be intruding from space?

The reverberating English accent continued: "...Have reacquired second UFO at new location in north Atlantic Ocean at 66 degrees latitude, 22 degrees longitude, moving on a southerly course across Iceland toward the ocean. Holding speed at Mach zero decimal 7. Red alert, red alert..."

Straker ignored Hemmingway for the moment and concentrated on Lake, "That course will put the UFO in our flight path."

Lake's mouth dropped open, "It's intercepting us. How did they know?"

"Why do they care?" Straker added.

Hemmingway interrupted, "Who are...THEY?"

Colonel Lake knelt down beside the Doctor and placed her hands gently on the surgeon's knees as Straker spoke softly. "Doctor, you are about to learn more truth than you wished you'd ever know about who we are and what we do. Strap in tightly, this could be a bumpy ride."

The Doctor chose not to fasten her belt, and answered "This game is not going to get me to agree with your plan---whatever it is Mr. Straker. You had this whole thing cooked up just to pull it off when I figured out your lie. You'll take me back to the States now."

Straker simply turned away from her and made his way to the cockpit.

"Gay." He called out.

"Yes sir." She answered.

"Change course at will, keep us out of harm's way. Try to keep London somewhere in front of us."

"General, can't we just call for help?"

He went to her side and supported himself on the cushion of her seat, "Very few people know that we're up here. SID doesn't know. Those who DO know can't admit to it. We may on our own unless our friends can correctly anticipate that we are the UFO's target. No SOS Gay, we have to veer and dodge until a SkyDiver launches to intercept."

Gay turned to gaze into Straker's blue eyes. He recognized a tint of concern as she said, "No SOS?"

"Do your best Gay. We have faith in you." With that, Straker left the cockpit.

Gay stared out the front visor and thought about Cara. Then she thought about Cara without her mother. Mark would take good care of her. God knows there was enough money. She'd be alright without Gay, even though Mark could never tell her what REALLY happened to mom.

She thought to herself, 'I haven't taught her how to dance yet.'

She turned to her co-pilot and said, "Take us out of hypersonic. We can't perform defensive maneuvers at that speed."

"Yes Colonel."

Gay turned back to the forward visor, thinking: 'My God, are we REALLY alone this time?'

\* \* \*

The English Channel was quiet and placid, until Sky 1 blasted out like a missile and pulled into a westerly course toward Iceland.

Admiral Peter Carlin keyed up his microphone, "Sky One to SHADO Control."

Alec Freeman answered him, "Peter, am I glad to hear your voice."

Carlin smiled, "Request permission to substitute interception of Spinner for my self-imposed refresher course in SkyDiver."

"Granted, granted." Alec sighed, "Get there as fast as you can Peter."

"On my way Commander." He keyed off and activated the hypersonic engines. The forward thrust was enough to tip his head backwards and push his body into the seat.

\* \* \*

Gay had the cockpit crew watching the thickly clouded skies for the enemy. They knew the concorde couldn't detect a Spinner, and they couldn't call SID for assistance or location updates. Gay had activated the concorde's stealth and changed course to make it hard to be discovered. Her course changes might have caused the Spinner to miss them altogether, except that Johnny Ealand couldn't afford the time required for avoidance. Each direction change was followed a few minutes later by a correction so that they continued toward London.

Gay had lowered her altitude to just above the billowing mountain peaks of thick cottony clouds. With a little luck, maybe a prayer, she could glide the concorde into cover before a pulse could reach them.

"Captain." It was the co-pilot, and Gay knuckles tightened sorely around the joywheel. "A gold spot in the sky, nine o'clock. Can someone confirm?"

Bradley didn't wait for a reply. She threw the concorde into a drop to the right and the cover of clouds. Just as the plane moved out of the way, a long energy beam passed through the area where they had just occupied.

"I think you just got confirmation." Gay said as she put clouds between the concorde and the UFO.

\* \* \*

The concorde leveled off and Straker righted himself.

"What the hell was that?!" Hemmingway screamed. "I demand that you turn this plane around right now! I want to be on the ground!"

Straker could take no more. He unstrapped himself and lunged out of his seat. Gruffly taking the Doctor by her arm, he snarled, "Do you know what an airplane looks like, Doctor?"

She struggled, "Of course I know what a plane looks like. Let go of me!"

Straker dragged her to the row of port side windows. The concorde emerged from the cloud bank and the cloud-mountains were displayed in majesty before them.

"Then look there Doctor, right there, below us. Tell me what you see."

She stared for a long moment, "I see something very small and gold. So what?"

Straker turned and stared icily into her face, "Take a close look NOW. Tell me Doctor, have you ever seen an aircraft like THAT before?"

Her eyes widened in horror as she answered, "On the X-Files."

"That ship wasn't built on this planet or in this solar system." Straker explained, "We call it a 'Typical' Class Excursion Vehicle, otherwise known as a Spinner. It has a crew of one or two, but it can fit four uncomfortably. There are other ship designs that the aliens use, but this one is their fastest and most heavily armed. It has several tandem plasma generators that run the length of its girth, so that it can fire either pulses or beams while spinning. These energy bursts have been known to exceed 8000 degrees fahrenheit. It was built primarily for use in vacuum and aquatic environments. We don't yet know how it flies, but as you can see---it does very well in the air. It can be outfitted with special equipment for specific missions, and I'm NOT talking about benevolent research projects. It can move faster than the speed of light in space and in the atmosphere it is faster than anything on Earth. It is faster than this concorde's best speed, Doctor, and it is out there right now---hunting US---and Mulder and Scully aren't here to save the day."

Straker gave her a few seconds to properly digest the situation before going on. "Alright Doctor, how much more truth do you want?."

She turned to face him. Her eyes were glazed over.

"Three Ufoes, that one and two others, came to Earth recently. One of them ran a car off a road in England. Then they beat the hell out of an eleven year boy who wanted me to come to his birthday party next week. Unless we can get you to the hospital in one piece, that little boy is NOT going to see his next birthday." He pointed out the window, "That Ufoe wants to destroy this concorde and there's not much that we can do to stop it. I would really appreciate it if you would sit down and stop issuing orders."

She nodded silently and sat down right beside the window.

The Spinner noticed the concorde in the sky above. It rose up through a cloud bank and Gay tried to pass under it. The UFO emerged from the clouds and launched a series a rapid fire pulses and some of them passed dangerously close. The wings bore carbon scoring evidence of how near they came. Suddenly, the whole aircraft rocked to the left, with the sound of thunder just outside.

"General." It was Gay, "Its too close, I can't get it away from us."

Straker, Hemmingway and Lake turned to see the Spinner keeping pace with the concorde. The UFO was about two hundred yards off the port wingtip and holding position. There were no nearby clouds to dive into.

Ed thought that he could see tiny lines of energy forming behind the spinning gravity disks of the Ufoe. He thought that he was watching a plasma collection system just before it discharges.

This was it. Lake closed her eyes. Hemmingway just sat in her seat, staring at the alien ship in shock. Straker kept his eyes on the Ufoe, he wanted to see it coming.

## Chapter 7

The Spinner fired its characteristic long beam, but not at the concorde. The beam shot high above and to the right of the aircraft. The UFO darted away from the concorde, and it was followed by four slim missiles that twisted and turned in the sky as if they were alive. The Spinner released another series of rapid pulses and vaporized three of the missiles before it disappeared into a cloud bank while still being chased by the fourth.

\* \* \*

Sky One passed over the concorde and followed the Spinner into the clouds.

\* \* \*

The intercom came alive with Gay's voice, "General, its Peter Carlin in Sky 1! He reports that Skys 5 and 6 are on the way."

He answered, "We can't be here when they arrive."

"Understood sir."

Gay activated the hypersonic engines and turned back toward England.

Hemmingway leaned over in her seat, "That fighter plane. Is he one of yours?"

"Yes Doctor. There is an Admiral in the cockpit of that 'fighter plane,' and he is our best."

"Is he better than 'they' are?" She whispered.

Lake leaned over and answered, "Once he faced off with twenty five Spinners." She explained, "He was the only survivor, and he did it in the plane that he's flying right now." She pointed at Sky 1.

\* \* \*

Sky 1 danced in and out of the clouds, staying up with the hypersonic speeds of the concorde. Carlin knew that the Spinner was too. He passed through another cloud bank and switched his radio to an old Moonbase Interceptor frequency that was no longer used by SHADO.

"Sky 1 to Promise 1, are you still with me Gay?"

"Roger that Peter, have you intercepted the Spinner?"

"Negative, Promise 1, but I put the fear of God into him. He'll be back."

"We're unarmed Peter, and we're carrying precious cargo."

"Roger that cargo Gay. I'm coming back to Promise 1 for escort."

"Thanks Peter, its good to know you're here."

Carlin smiled but did not answer.

\* \* \*

The doctor jumped up in her seat, "There it is!" She screamed and pointed out the window.

Straker's head snapped around and he scanned the sky, "No, doctor, that one is ours. Its the Admiral." Then he took a second to recompose himself from the shock of the doctor's unexpected yell.

Sky 1 pulled itself into a parallel course with the concorde. At that close range, the occupants of Promise 1 could look through the visor of the smaller fighter and see Carlin's helmet. They watched him look around the skies above, and then he inverted Sky 1 and searched the airspace below. Righting the aircraft, he allowed the concorde to push slightly ahead and he ascended to a position behind and above.

Straker and Hemmingway quietly watched the skies on the port side while Lake did the same on the starboard. Minutes felt like hours and Straker was beginning to worry about being

seen by the approaching Skys coming to help Carlin.

A beam of white-hot energy passed between Sky 1 and the concorde. Gay banked slowly away from it and Sky 1 engaged head-on. The Spinner came out of the clouds and promptly reversed course to duck back in when it saw Sky 1.

Carlin was no fool. He recognized the potential of this alien pilot. "You've faced off with one of my Skys and lived to fight another day."

That day had come.

Carlin banked right and avoided the cloud range. He skirted the edge of the billowing cotton and ascended sharply. Exactly as he had anticipated, the Spinner appeared below him and sighted on the concorde. The alien had expected Sky 1 to follow him into the clouds.

Carlin dived and fired two missiles. The Spinner realized what was happening and accelerated to avoid the rockets. Both rockets missed but then turned in neck-snapping arcs to reacquire their target. The alien fired rapid pulses and vaporized both missiles. Then it fired at Sky 1 but Carlin had already ducked into the cloud bank. The alien assumed that he had enough time to complete his mission, and so he sighted quickly on the concorde.

Sky 1 blasted out of the clouds and caught the Spinner between itself and the concorde. The Spinner tore away from Carlin as four missiles were launched. The alien fired pulses and got two of Carlin's shots, dodging the other two. The two missiles passed the Spinner, one banked to the left while the other went right, and then turned back toward the alien ship. Carlin chuckled as the UFO was struck from both sides simultaneously and exploded into oblivion. Sky 1 ascended to avoid the expanding burst and performed a victory roll.

Carlin suddenly realized that he had been thinking of his sister all this time.

Doctor Hemmingway fell back and allowed her arms to flop across the seat, "Thank you God."

Straker and lake looked at each other and smiled.

\* \* \*

"Sky 1 to Promise 1." Carlin called out to Gay, "Splash one Jem Hadar. You're clear to keep your promise."

"Roger that Sky 1" Bradley's smile was evident in her voice as she responded, "Thanks Peter."

"Anytime Mrs. Bradley, and tell the General that I sent greetings."

"Will do, Sky 1."

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

All channels went quiet as SID continued.

"Have reacquired third UFO west of London. Airborne, heading for mid-Atlantic on course 357-222 southwest."

Gay keyed up her mic, "Should we worry, Peter?"

"Negative, Promise 1. That course won't put the Spinner between you and London. You're still clear."

\* \* \*

The aerocopter was there to meet them when the concorde landed. Straker, Lake, Bradley, and Doctor Hemmingway disembarked their flight and briskly made their way to the helipads. Alec Freeman, Nina Barry, Joan Harrington, were already on board and waiting for them. Lew Waterman piloted the aerocopter and Straker said his greetings on the way to the hospital.

\* \* \*

The aerocopter circled the building and landed in the parking lot instead of the helipad on the roof. Straker was the first one off, followed by the Doctor and the others. Together they walked toward the front doors as many people simply stood staring at them.

They walked through the heavy double doors of the hospital, down the hall and to the right. They emerged into the same lobby of the same hospital where Ed had brought Johnny back in 1980.

Two doctors came out to meet them.

"Doctor Hemmingway?"

She stepped forward, "Yes, is my patient prepped for surgery?"

"Yes Doctor, if you'll follow us please?"

She waved them on, and turned back to Straker and his friends to say, "Don't worry Mr. Straker. I'll take it from here."

He smiled and nodded without speaking. She turned to follow the physicians and they disappeared through the double doors between the stairs and the nursing station

Straker turned to face the highest ranking officers in SHADO.

"I, uh, don't really know how to thank you all." He stammered.

One by one, in the waiting room of the hospital, his friends came to him. They shook his hand, or hugged him saying "Don't stay away so long," "You must come over for dinner," "Call me and we'll have lunch," and several offers for coffee.

Nina Barry leaned in close and offered Straker a place to sleep that night before he left for the States again. He accepted.

Gay Bradley gave him a tight hug and a kiss on his cheek. Then she picked herself up to her tiptoes and whispered into his ear, "Immediate Launch."

The room quieted a bit when Alec came forward. Both men stared at each other, shook hands, and then hugged each other. When they separated, Ed looked squarely at Alec and said: "Thank you."

Alec replied, "Ed, these things are always a question of...priorities."

Straker smiled and nodded. "You'll have to give the amnesia drug to Hemmingway before she returns to her symposium. You'll need to erase a portion of her flight on the concorde."

Alec chuckled, "Doctor Jackson will handle it. He's on his way from Calcutta to personally take care of it." Then Alec leaned over to him, "Miss Ealand is awake. She asked for you."

Straker said his goodbyes to those who had to leave, and made his way to Miss Ealand's room alone.

He knocked on the door and she bid him enter. He pressed on the door and she was sitting up in the bed and smiling.

"You really came through for my Johnny, Ed. You kept your promise to be there for us and take care of everything."

Tears welled up in her eyes and she spread her arms wide toward him. He hugged her lightly as she wept into his shoulder.

"Thank you for saving my Johnny." She sobbed.

"I'm going to call the bakery and have the cake delivered here to Johnny's hospital room. I'll stop by to see you tomorrow and check on how he is doing."

She nodded and wiped her face with a cloth.

"You get some rest now Miss Ealand. Everything is going to be okay."

"I know." She sniffled.

\* \* \*

When Straker returned to the waiting room, Alec and Nina were waiting for him. They both climbed out of their chairs when Ed approached.

"Oh, ummm, Alec." Straker inquired mockingly, "I thought there were three Ufoes?"

"There were. The third one lifted off when Sky 1 engaged yours. It dropped into the sea about 80 kilometers west of France, and we haven't reacquired it yet."

Straker nodded, "Well, I haven't had the chance to call Bombs-R-Us either, so I guess we're even."

Nina simply looked at the two men, unaware of their inside joke.

Alec offered, "Come on you two, dinner is on me." The three of them left together for Ed's favorite seafood restaurant.

## **Epilogue**

Page thirteen of the London Times carried the story of a young boy who had been severely injured in a hit and run accident near London. He had received a dangerous blow to the head, but luckily a British neuro-surgeon was flown in from a symposium in the United States. The boy had a birthday party during his stay in the hospital's recovery ward. Among those in attendance were the CEO, the Administrator and several crew members of the Harlington-Straker studios of London, England.

Two weeks after Johnny Ealand's birthday party, Ed Straker noticed that he was sleeping much better at night.