

Straker Meets His Match - A SHADO (UFO) Story

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INTRODUCTION

This story begins not long after the last UFO episode. The aliens and UFOs in this story are merely used as a background setting. The story is really about the man who runs it all, Commander Ed Straker. What's he really like? And why is he the person he is? What are his thoughts on SHADO ... What goes on inside his head? You're about to find out

I'm not sure in which category this story falls. It might be classed as science-fiction, because it's situated in and around the organisation fighting off the UFOs, and a part of the story does deal with these UFOs. It might just as well be categorised as a psychological drama, since we see most of the story through Commander Ed Straker's eyes. Or ... maybe it could be called a love story. If you are looking for a story about battles with aliens and the like, I advise you not to read this, you'll be disappointed.

Now something about me (the author - doesn't that sound grand!) : As most of you realise, I'm not a native English speaker. I lived in the UK for five years, about 20 years ago. I liked UFO at the time, as I liked other science fiction stories. Star Trek and most of my other favourite series were shown again and again, while I had to wait until just recently to see some of the UFO episodes again - I still haven't seen all of them! I was as impressed with the character of Commander Straker, as I had been with Mister Spock's. Following the FAB-UFO list and reading other people's stories gave me the idea of writing one of my own. As I haven't lived in an English speaking region for 20 years, I can imagine that I made quite a few mistakes against the English language. So to those of you who love to point out mistakes, go ahead! I would welcome any comments and/or corrections. - Lieve.

CHAPTER 1

"Could you please wait for a few minutes Commander", said Ms Rogers, "General Henderson is on the phone. He'll see you as soon as he's finished."

Straker was wondering as to why Henderson wanted to see him this time, as the General had been over at SHADO HQ only a week before. Trouble with funding again?

But why here? Whenever Henderson had something to say, he usually came over to SHADO HQ. All this driving to and fro was really a waste of time - it seemed totally unnecessary, which meant Henderson must have a pretty good reason to ask him to come.

"You can go in now, Commander", Ms Rogers broke into his thoughts.

"Thank you Ms Rogers."

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"Sit down Straker", barked General Henderson. "You've really done it this time. Only a miracle can save your precious SHADO command now."

"What..."

"You're out, Straker", Henderson interrupted him, "Out, finished, relieved of your

function as Commander of SHADO. You're to be replaced in two months."

"Why?" Straker managed to get out.

"Time and time again I've told you to be a bit more considerate towards those under your command, Straker. Time and time again I've stuck up for you when the Astrophysical Commission received complaints from SHADO operatives. I have warned you several times that the Commission has a pretty good idea what happens at SHADO. SHADO personnel has been hand-picked - mostly by you - from the best of the best in all our military organisations. Some of your operatives have at one time or other been in contact with people who were and are part of the Commission. The Commission has been keeping tabs on you from day one, Straker, which is something I warned you about several times. Knowing all that, you should have watched your back. Some SHADO operatives make reports directly to the Astrophysical Commission - not exactly standard procedure in the light of the secrecy surrounding SHADO, and ultimately dangerous to it if these reports fall into the wrong hands - but I have never been able to get any details as to who wrote these reports, nor to whom they reported, so I haven't been able to do anything about it. I have, however, read several of these reports, or parts of them, and some of them read more like an anti-Straker campaign than a report. A lot of these reports are filled with complaints about you, Straker.

"And now the Commission received the one complaint they needed to set things in motion - from Colonel Freeman. They couldn't possibly overlook this one, he's the highest ranking officer besides you."

"Who is to replace me?" Straker managed to get in between the flood of words from the obviously distraught Henderson.

"Because no officer has been found yet that could efficiently replace you, you have been given a reprieve. Two months, Straker, two months.

They have promised me to let me have the final say as to who is to replace you, as I am the one finally responsible for SHADO. I can perhaps delay things a little more, but not forever. They will know I'm stalling if I turn down every possible candidate."

"Will they let me stay on as second in command?"

"Straker, you know better than that, surely. You'll be transferred back to the States, as far away from SHADO as possible. I notice you're not even asking why Freeman complained."

"Water under the bridge, General. Besides, Alec Freeman told me about it. What if he contacted the Commission and retracted his complaint? He'll do that if I tell him what the consequences of his complaint are."

"Their minds are made up. They don't ever change their minds. Besides, you have been a thorn in their eyes for quite some time. This is just the excuse they needed to get rid of you."

"There must be some way that I can retain command, I refuse to believe that they will actually go through with this. They must know that nobody can give as much time or effort to SHADO as I do. They must know that nobody can learn how to run SHADO in two months. Besides, as you just said, they haven't found a replacement yet."

* * *

Straker started to feel desperate now. Could they really do this? How many casualties would it cost? Would the Commission change its mind afterwards, if the casualty toll rose sky-high? Would they give him his command back then? He considered that for a moment, then realised there was no way they would - the Commission doesn't rescind orders, ever.

How could he live with the guilt? Again? He might at one point see articles in the newspapers of people he knew so well dying 'in the line of duty'. Wondering far away from

here whether or not he could have prevented their deaths. It would be his fault for not seeing Alec's point of view, over such a silly matter too, cancelling a few leaves. He should have known that the other SHADO operatives weren't as strong as their Commander. If only he hadn't been as hard on the others as he was on himself.

Did he ever have that choice? Could he have functioned as a warm and friendly Commander? No, not really - too dangerous. Better to avoid friendships altogether, it was the only way to be objective when lives were at stake. Maintaining a cold exterior was a necessary evil which hadn't earned him much sympathy but had served its purpose.

He should have seen Gay Ellis's breakdown coming. Had he given her that requested leave of absence when she asked for it, none of this would have happened. If only he had listened to Alec. If only Alec hadn't gone behind his back. If only Henderson had been in his office when Alec called him. If only Alec had waited for Henderson to return instead of talking to one of the other Commission members. If only - Straker's thoughts were still racing when another part of his mind registered that Henderson had gone strangely quiet and was watching him closely. Henderson had this malevolent look about him. Was he enjoying this?

Maybe Alec would take over. No, impossible, Alec was far too emotional - too involved with the SHADO people. He would refuse to take risks. He would often know what course of action to take but he would hesitate, try to find other solutions, kinder solutions. He would hesitate at giving any order that might adversely affect a SHADO operative or even an unknown innocent bystander. He would hesitate until it was too late.

Paul? Could Paul do it? No way, Paul Foster was a good man, but hardly Commander-material. Too impulsive by far. He wouldn't think decisions through at all, and take unnecessary risks. If only Paul and Alec could be moulded into one man, that could do the trick.

Why was he thinking such impossible thoughts? Really - he should know better. Better switch back to the here and now. He looked at Henderson - he was still silent, still observing him.

"Didn't the Commission suggest giving Alec Freeman the command?" Straker asked, if only to break the uneasy silence.

"Do you think he is capable, Straker?"

"No General, not of running SHADO. He is the ideal second in command though."

"And will stay in his present position, Straker. Your replacement will need someone to show him the ropes."

Straker's mind kept racing. What had Henderson said at first? He had said something. Something positive. Or relatively positive. What was it? Miracle, Henderson had mentioned a miracle. A miracle could still save his command. What miracle? Why had Henderson uttered the word miracle? Dare he ask? Was he clutching at straws? The silence was getting oppressive again. Better break it, before he lost the courage to say something.

"General ..." Straker hesitated.

"Yes?"

Better be flippant, Straker thought.

"You did say a miracle could save my command. Do you have any miracles up your sleeve?"

"As a matter of fact I do, Straker."

Straker didn't really know what to say to that, apart from the obvious. He decided to wait. Henderson would tell him when he was good and ready. Henderson had, be it reluctantly,

backed him up so many times. Henderson too knew how difficult a job it was to run SHADO. To wage war in peacetime. If only SHADO could come out into the open, get the support of everyone on Earth. No more covert operations. No more lies to everyone. All SHADO operatives could relax a little then. Live pseudo-normal lives - at least at their homes. Paul would enjoy playing the hero. He would have a new girl every day instead of every week. No, that's unfair, Straker decided. Paul didn't dare stay with one girl too long for fear of saying too much. Maybe Paul would settle down then, have kids, and he, Straker, could be the godfather to one of them. Show them around the studio when they grew up. No - if everything was out into the open, there would be no more need for the film studio. Trivialities, why was he thinking about trivialities? Henderson was still watching him - playing a cat-and-mouse game. But why?

"Well Straker, aren't you going to ask about this miracle?"

"OK, General, I'm asking."

CHAPTER 2

During the drive back, Straker couldn't help but feeling apprehensive. Would Henderson's plan work? Was there somebody out there who could help him - help SHADO - help Henderson - in their predicament? Did such a person really exist? Someone who was a civilian surely couldn't understand the Armed Forces, and this Lieutenant had been attached to NATO for only about a year. Even if Lieutenant Fonteyne was an 'expert' at solving problems...

A Public Relations Assistant - ludicrous. How could a Public Relations Assistant effectively stop all the complaints against him? Straker knew these complaints would keep coming, even with someone else at the helm. The stress factor was too high - stress got to every single SHADO operative, in spite of Dr. Jackson's efforts to keep this down. If the world knew what SHADO was all about, the stress level would go down to a more tolerable level. But the world was blissfully unaware there was a real war on. That could not be changed in the near future.

Who was this Lieutenant Fonteyne? Henderson hadn't even given him the guy's first name, nor a personnel file either. Henderson had only said that Fonteyne was no security risk and highly thought of amongst the powers-that-be. Henderson had told a few stories about this guy's exploits, but those hadn't convinced Straker that Fonteyne could be any help at all.

The story of how this Lieutenant had found the real guilty party over at that NATO base in Germany, when everyone thought Colonel what's-his-name had been responsible for some silly thefts. How NATO command had contacted the Commander of the base and told him that the Colonel was to receive his dismissal - a dishonourable dismissal. How the Lieutenant had - no, wrong, he was still a civilian at that time - how this Mr. Fonteyne had overheard the Commander's conversation (why did the Commander allow his civilian secretary to overhear his conversations with his superior?) and protested that he didn't think this Colonel could be responsible. Fonteyne had asked for a few days to find the real guilty party, and got it. And found him. 'Psychological deduction : so-and-so is guilty', Fonteyne had stated after only two days and endless conversations with everyone on the base. And Fonteyne had been right, some of the stolen stuff had been found at that guy's flat - the proof they needed. Really, that only made Fonteyne out to be a good detective, so what?

Fonteyne's subsequent enlistment, without training or anything, and how he immediately received the rank of Lieutenant didn't surprise Straker at all. Fonteyne had probably refused a post unless he was to be an officer. Every man has his price.

What other cases had Henderson mentioned? Something about another NATO Base, no it was NATO Brussels, where the Lieutenant had smoothed over a long-standing argument between one set of officers and another. The first lot being American, the other group British. Surely nationality didn't matter in SHADO - still, there was a remote similarity to that case and this one. "I'm a case now, am I?" Straker said aloud, and laughed - but his laughter didn't ring true.

Straker started to feel an unreasonable dislike for this fellow Fonteyne. Meddling in SHADO affairs, probably no authority even to give the guy an amnesia-shot later. Because Fonteyne had to be, as Henderson phrased it, 'on call in case of problems arising later'. In case complaints were made again at some day in the future. Only Straker didn't see how anyone could stop these complaints in the first place - bar shutting down all post-offices and the telephone company! Straker smiled - at least his sense of humour was coming back, after that shock Henderson had given him.

Why had Henderson tried to scare the living daylights out of him? To teach him a lesson? No, probably to make sure Straker co-operated fully. Good tactics that, first scare someone half to death, then offer a solution and the unsuspecting victim will agree to anything.

It occurred to Straker that Henderson would make an excellent Commander of SHADO - if only it weren't for the man's health ...

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The light was flickering underneath his desk - Straker's eyes registered the fact, but his mind didn't see its implications. It was just a flickering light, and momentarily didn't register as being or meaning anything else. It pulsed regularly, on off, on off, on off. Like a light one notices through the trees, appearing and disappearing in the night. Trees were blocking the lights, and it was dark at the camping site. How he and Johnny had had fun those three days. Signalling each other with torches. Johnny forgetting that his dad couldn't see his light when he was weaving through the trees. Garbled messages - their laughter at those mistakes - Straker's thinking how he too had been fascinated by the Morse code when he was a kid, and being patient for once.

Three days. The only three days he had felt like a real father. He could have been a good father, if only Mary had given him half a chance.

The if only-s had been paramount in his thoughts the last 24 hours, ever since his meeting with Henderson. And now this Lieutenant Fonteyne was due to arrive any moment. A smooth slick guy who thought he had all the answers.

"Mr. Straker?" Straker jumped at hearing the metallic sound of the intercom.

"Yes Alec."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"You didn't respond to the warning signal"

"Sorry Alec, I was just reading a script, didn't notice it"

Straker hated lying, but hated the thought even more that anyone - even Alec - would find out that he had just sat there, daydreaming.

"Two UFOs approaching."

"Can't Moonbase take care of it?"

"Probably Ed, but I thought you would want to know"

"Right Alec, just take care of it will you?"

Straining to keep the irritation out of his voice, Straker continued, "I'm expecting someone, I'll be with you as soon as the meeting is over."

"OK."

The intercom went dead, but only for a second. Miss Ealand's voice caused the next interruption. "There is a Lieutenant Fonteyne here to see you Sir."

"Send him in."

"I'll eh - send the Lieutenant straight in Sir."

As Lieutenant Fonteyne walked through the doors, Straker understood Miss Ealand's hesitation just now. Darned Henderson, he thought, to have kept that a secret. It wouldn't have mattered, he hadn't had any other option but to agree to the Lieutenant's coming down here to investigate the complaints - and make said complaints disappear.

The Lieutenant was saluting him now.

"At ease Lieutenant, and please sit down. We don't stand on formalities here at SHADO, so you can do away with that time-consuming saluting."

As the Lieutenant didn't say anything, Straker continued "I assume General Henderson has briefed you?"

"Yes Sir."

"There is no need to call me sir either, most people here just refer to me as 'Commander' - well - when I'm within earshot anyway."

She seemed amused at that.

"You do understand that no word can ever get out as to the existence of this organisation, or its operations?"

"I do understand that, Commander."

Now Straker was at a loss for words. Should he try some casual talk? Should he check out exactly what Henderson had told her? Better take her downstairs and offload her to Paul or Alec so she could have a look at the place.

"How are you going to account for your presence here?"

"I thought it would be best to keep things simple, Commander, and keep as close to the truth as possible. How about we say I'm here to see if working conditions can be improved and the stress-level reduced. I could mention some complaints having been made, which would account for my asking questions as to what people think of their working environment and conditions - and of the people who are in charge."

"Don't tell me you're investigating Colonel Freeman too!"

"No Commander, but if I were to ask people only how they feel about you, your treatment of them, and your methods, they would cotton on very quickly as to why I'm here."

Well, that was one thing anyway. The Lieutenant seemed to want to do her best not to undermine his command. But how was she planning to stop those complaints about him? Dare he ask?

"What exactly will you need, Lieutenant? An office, I assume? I've already arranged for one. What else?"

"Unrestricted access to all computer records, Commander."

"Unrestricted?"

"Well, General Henderson did say that you would give me the same security clearance as your own, in order to be able to check out everything which I deem necessary."

"I'll have to clear that with General Henderson first."

"No problem Commander. I would also like to talk to you at length, after I've had a chance to check out the complaints."

Straker didn't feel that he needed to respond to that, so he went on "I have also arranged your living arrangements, in the SHADO-5 section. This is really reserved for SHADO operatives when they are on call, but some do live there, and the quarters have all the necessary facilities."

"Facilities?"

"Every unit is a one-bedroom flat and has a phone, fax, computer, as well as a television set and a radio."

"Oh good. I do love to watch television, especially science-fiction, although what I've learned in the last 24 hours makes Star Trek seem pretty tame now."

A sense of humour, thought Straker, she has a sense of humour. This Lieutenant Fonteyne might not turn out to be such a disaster after all.

"Are there cooking facilities in these flats too, Commander?"

"Limited but yes, there are. Let's go down and I'll make sure somebody shows you

around."

He had to ask, it was now or never. "Can I ask you a question, Lieutenant?"

"Of course Commander."

"How are you going to stop people making complaints about me?"

"If I knew the answer to that, I wouldn't have to spend two months here to find out, would I?"

"Sounds logical, Lieutenant."

"Thank you Sir. I do so love being called logical - Mr. Spock has always been my favourite science fiction character, you know."

Straker looked at her, trying hard not to show any reaction at all. He nearly laughed, but felt it was better not to. Then he wondered - was she laughing at him? Or was she trying to send him a message? Mr. Spock, the logical Vulcan, who shut off all feelings if he could. His own favourite science-fiction character too. Was the Lieutenant trying to say that she understood why a Commander of SHADO had to be the way he was? Or was it just a coincidence? Or a joke? Time would tell.

The voice check didn't seem to rattle the Lieutenant, neither did the office's downward motion. Strong nerves, Straker thought - or had Henderson told her? Probably not, much too trivial to mention.

"The General has instructed me to give this to you Commander ... it's my medical file. The General said it is standard procedure, in case of emergencies, such as an alien attack."

"Standard procedure is for SHADO to receive your complete military file before you're assigned to us, with all your data in it, not just the medical ones."

"Well I won't be SHADO personnel exactly, so there would be no need for that."

"As far as emergencies and your safety are concerned, you will be."

At her raising her eyebrows, Straker added "The aliens have tried to attack this place more than once."

She didn't comment on that, so Straker opened the doors and walked through to the control room. They came in at the grand finale, the second UFO just having been destroyed by Sky 1, Alec in the process of patting everyone on the back ... Straker didn't even bother to ask how the UFO got through the outer defence system, but immediately went on introducing Alec and the Lieutenant, leaving Alec to show her around and to her office.

CHAPTER 3

"Commander, could we talk?"

"I'm sorry Lieutenant, I have a meeting scheduled in 10 minutes, actually I'm already running late."

"Film company stuff?"

"That's right."

Straker was aware that he was avoiding the Lieutenant. This was the third time she had asked this, and each time he had come up with some excuse. No, not really an excuse, Straker tried to justify his refusal to himself, he really had been busy each time she had asked him. He could easily have told her to come and talk to him later in the day. But he hadn't. Was he afraid of her? He was very much aware of her, in fact he could feel her eyes upon him whenever there was a red alert on and he was in the control room. It seemed to him that Ivy had been there at almost every UFO attack. Didn't the woman ever sleep? Why did she get up in the middle of the night whenever a UFO approached? Just to watch him? Study him? Did Ivy think he was some kind of rare species - or a guinea pig? The thought made him smile, until he realised something ... When had he started to think of the Lieutenant as Ivy? It didn't even seem an appropriate first name for her, he had expected something more foreign, something exotic maybe? No, exotic applies more to Southern countries, not Western Europe. Maybe one of her parents was English or American, hence the English name.

He had to talk to her sometime, and he kept putting it off - why? Was he afraid she wouldn't understand? No, he knew that wasn't it. Quite the opposite, he was afraid she would.

* * *

Upon his return to his office an hour later, Ms Ealand was wearing her 'there is trouble' expression.

"General Henderson arrived a few minutes ago Commander, I was just about to page you."

"Did he say what he is here for?"

"Not really. He just asked whether Lieutenant Fonteyne was in the building. He's with her now."

"Thank you Miss Ealand, I'll go straight down."

So why was Henderson here? Had the Lieutenant complained? Straker knew quite well that he hadn't exactly been co-operative, but hadn't thought she would go running off to Henderson about it. She seemed quite capable of fighting her own battles. No, Henderson was probably here on his own initiative. Sticking his nose in as usual.

Why couldn't they just let him be - let him get on with things? Having to waste his time on meetings with actors was bad enough, this constant interference from Henderson and his Commission upset the SHADO routine - his routine - even more.

So where were they? Alec was looking at him as he arrived in the control room and seemed disturbed too. Did Alec know just what was up? He probably did suspect something was wrong without realising exactly how bad it was. He couldn't very well tell Alec though, after all Alec would feel at fault and he didn't want to upset Alec.

"General Henderson is in Lieutenant Fonteyne's office, Commander."

Well, he had expected that. Now what? Was he supposed to go and join them? Or had he better wait till Henderson called him in? No, he wouldn't wait, after all he was still the Commander - for now.

* * *

Both Henderson and the Lieutenant looked startled at the intrusion, but neither of them seemed to mind.

"Sit down Straker, I came down here to talk to you - both of you."

It didn't take a genius to have guessed that. Straker noticed Ivy's smile, a reassuring smile, as if she was trying to tell him not to worry.

"So how have the two of you been getting along?"

Silence.

Straker glanced at the Lieutenant, but she was looking at Henderson now. Who did Henderson expect an answer from?

"Well Lieutenant, has Straker been co-operating?"

She smiled. "I haven't had time to get around to talking to the Commander, Sir, I wanted to get the background picture first."

As Henderson didn't say anything she continued "I wanted to find out first exactly who complained and why, whether some people complained just for the sake of it or because they really had a reason to bear a grudge."

"And your conclusion so far, Lieutenant?" Henderson asked.

"If I might speak freely Sir?"

"Of course you may Lieutenant."

"I think the whole thing is just a load of nonsense, and that the Astrophysical Commission has been making huge mountains out of one tiny molehill."

Straker did admire the Lieutenant's use of the English language - that was really nicely put. Her words also confirmed that he was right - their first conversation had pointed to her being on his side.

"Meaning, Lieutenant?" General Henderson seemed amused.

"It is as you said Sir, I don't really need to repeat your whole speech as you gave it to me a couple of weeks ago, do I?"

"I would like to know on what points you agree with me, Lieutenant." Noticing her glancing at Commander Straker, he added "Just pretend Straker isn't here Lieutenant. I don't mind him knowing what I think about this whole business."

"I agree with what you said on all counts, Sir. About SHADO being at war and the Commission not having a clue about what this situation is doing to every member of SHADO. About the stress factor, and people over-reacting. The reason for that is simple: most men or women go home and vent their frustrations on their partners, or at least talk things over with them, thereby getting rid of these frustrations. The members of SHADO have no such safety-outlet.

"Also about the reason why people pick on the Commander - mostly because he's there, in plain view, and when things go wrong everyone needs a scapegoat. Regrettable, but normal. They would react in a similar fashion if someone else was in charge of the place. I also agree with you, Sir, that Commander Straker does ask for it sometimes, because his manner is such that the SHADO operatives are finding it hard to approach him and talk things through with him - if they could, things would perhaps not have come to a head so soon - if at all."

Straker started to have more and more respect for this Lieutenant. She didn't mince words, did she? Why couldn't everyone be so up front and speak their minds? She was right of course, he knew it better than anyone. Did she realise it was a choice he had consciously made?

"Right Lieutenant, but all this isn't really the issue here is it?"

"You asked, Sir."

"I know that, Lieutenant - I did want to know first what your assessment of the situation was. The point is now that the Commission expects you or rather SHADO or perhaps me to take some kind of action to prevent further complaints being made."

"Not every problem has a solution, Sir."

"Meaning that you can't find a solution, and that Straker will be kicked out in 6 weeks time after all?"

Henderson sounded horrified and Straker realised, perhaps for the first time, that Henderson was behind him 100% - in spite of everything - everything that had transpired between them over the years, every argument, every discussion, every angry phone call. Not that that thought was much help to him now. If Ivy didn't have an ace up her sleeve, it seemed they had lost this battle - the final battle for him.

"I can come up with some ideas to alleviate the situation, Sir, but the root of the problem cannot be removed, not by me or by anyone here in SHADO. So whatever measures I might come up with will not be foolproof."

"What measures do you mean Lieutenant?" Henderson sounded hopeful again.

"They are still just ideas Sir. So I would rather not say at this moment in time."

Was she stalling, Straker wondered? No, she did know what she was talking about. He could see the quiet self-confidence in her eyes. She didn't want to tell Henderson, was that it? Would she tell him, Straker? Yes, he decided - that was it, bait. She was using this possible 'idea' as bait to force him to talk to her. Straker didn't know why he was so convinced of that, but he was. He didn't blame her for this either, but silently applauded her reasoning. Ivy was just the kind of woman he needed. Someone he could rely on, someone who was there to back him up. Someone obviously intelligent and level-headed.

Would she go for it? Would she accept his proposal? It had been in the back of his mind for a few days now, but he hadn't formulated the thought until just now. Would she accept? If not, he could always force her transfer, SHADO always got the personnel it really needed. But he would prefer the Lieutenant to come and work for SHADO of her own volition. He had this idea that she wouldn't like to be forced.

"All right, Lieutenant, I won't press the matter just yet. I do trust you will come up with something."

"I'll do my best Sir."

* * *

Henderson was gone, and they were now alone. They were both silent for a while, but this silence was by no means oppressive, it was a friendly silence. Straker wondered how he was ever going to broach the subject of her coming to work for SHADO. He couldn't possibly talk about that now, better to let her take the initiative and let her ask whatever it was she wanted to know about him, SHADO, or whatever.

"I do apologise, Commander."

Seeing the questioning look in his eyes, she went on "I hope I didn't offend you when I indicated that you are partly to blame for this situation."

"You don't have to apologise for being right, Lieutenant."

"Oh ..."

That startled her, and Straker felt good about it, he hated being predictable - no, she hadn't expected him to admit she was right quite so easily. 1 - 0, he thought.

"At a loss for words, Lieutenant?"

He shouldn't tease her, she didn't deserve that after sticking up for him earlier. Too late now to retract it, but he wasn't sorry. He wondered just how much she knew or suspected about him and how he felt.

"I wouldn't say that, Commander, just taking a pause to try to figure you out. Which takes some doing."

She had him there, thought Straker. That evened the score.

Ivy continued "Actually I was trying to think of a way to convince you to give me some of your valuable time. We do need to talk sooner or later."

"Do you like Chinese food Lieutenant, or do you prefer Italian?"

A blank stare - yes! 2 - 1 in my favour, Straker thought. She hadn't seen that one coming either.

"If we do have to have that talk, I would rather do so over dinner," Straker explained, "and since it is getting on for 6 o'clock without a UFO in sight, now is our chance."

"I don't mind Commander, as long as it isn't hamburgers."

"Couldn't agree more Lieutenant, so let's go"

CHAPTER 4

When they finished the main course, Straker realised that until now she had been trying to make things easy for him. She hadn't asked him anything personal so far, they had been pleasantly engaged in discussing the differences between America and England and the rest of Western Europe.

Straker had suggested they addressed each other by their first names in order to make sure no-one in the restaurant overheard any mention of ranks. Judging by the ease with which Ivy had adapted to this, he thought she had been thinking of him as 'Ed' - just as he had been thinking about her as 'Ivy'.

* * *

When they were drinking their coffees Ivy brought up a more serious subject.

"I do admire your attitude Ed, I think if it had been me I wouldn't have taken it quite so well - I would have been furious."

"About what?" He knew what she meant though.

"Oh come on, you know what I am talking about. They haven't been exactly fair to you have they? You have done your best, more than your best. You've given it all you've got - you have sacrificed your personal life for the sake of you-know-what. And their way of saying thanks is to threaten to chuck you out."

She was right, it wasn't fair. Straker was conscious that she had said this to draw him out, and he didn't know what else to say than a "You've got a point."

"It would be better for you personally to be rid of the whole organisation, you know. It may not be too late to start having a life of your own again."

"You think so?"

"Don't you?"

"It depends on how you look at it." Straker wondered whether he should speak his mind or not. "I'm used to being where I am, doing what I do. If I leave, the question is what happens next. Not to me, that's not the problem."

Right, he had said that much. Would she pick up on it? He could see her thinking about what he had said, weighing his words.

"I would certainly feel a lot safer with you running things at eh - your company than somebody else. I don't get it, you know. Why can't they see it? Surely they are supposed to be a body of wise men - they are supposed to keep us safe."

Annoying this, having to turn the words around and around to make sure they weren't overheard saying something really revealing. She had understood what he meant to convey and she agreed apparently. It gave him a warm feeling.

"I have a theory as to that"

"Yes, Co- I mean Ed?"

"That was close ..."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Let's get out of here."

* * *

In the car, he knew what her first question would be, and he was right.

"What theory?"

"The Astrophysical Commission thinks it is playing with toy soldiers."

It was the first time he had heard her laugh, and he found himself laughing along with her.

She was looking at him, the laughter still in her eyes, but this was fading now. In its place came what? Compassion, concern? It was difficult to read her expression.

"Maybe if the SHADO operatives saw this other side of you, they wouldn't be so quick to judge."

Straker decided to start the car to avoid having to say something.

"But then maybe you don't want them to see this other side of you."

Straker kept his eyes on the road.

"It must be hell for you."

Oh God, Straker thought, how does she know? He wasn't sure he was ready for this. He had wanted her to understand, hadn't he? But she had pierced his armour with that last remark, and that made him feel vulnerable. For a moment he felt as if he was being hurled around a mental tornado. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, trying to recompose himself.

Ivy didn't say any more. Did she know how he felt? Straker had this uncomfortable feeling that she did - he hoped she wouldn't put it into words. Maybe he would tell her one day just how he did feel, but he didn't want to think about it just now. He wanted to take the conversation back to where they were before, light-hearted banter, about something silly like the differences between America and England, which was so much safer a subject.

"So tell me, where are we going? Are you abducting me because you're actually an alien who's after my body parts?"

Straker threw a quick look at her, yes - she had gotten the message - somehow. So where were they going? Where were they? He had just been driving along without noticing where the car was heading, and he realised that they were on their way back to SHADO, as if he had switched to automatic pilot.

No, he didn't want to go back there yet. It was only 8 p.m., nobody had either beeped or called him, so SHADO was all right. He decided to turn South at the next intersection.

"Tell me about yourself, Lieutenant."

He saw her frown at his using her rank again, and continued, "Ivy. Somehow the name Ivy doesn't suit you. Is it your real name or is it short for something?"

"My real name is Virginia."

"Virginia is a beautiful name. Where did the 'Ivy' come from? Why the change?"

"Just a name I picked. I was fed up with the jokes about virgins."

"When did you change it?"

"About two years ago. I'm still called Virginia officially though."

"You could have changed it to Ginny or something like that."

"Where I come from Gini is a brand of lemonade."

He threw her a quick smile. She must have changed it when she had started to work for NATO. A woman in a man's world. He could understand that.

"So what do you want to know? Where I was born, my family and all that?"

"Actually I was wondering how it came about that you joined the NATO forces."

"Coincidence really. I was doing an interim job at NATO Germany, strictly temporary, because of a convention - something to do with school kids and armies. The Commander-in-Chief found out I spoke several languages and asked me to translate some stuff for him. When the convention was over he asked me to stay on because his secretary was ill."

"How come you remained a civilian for about a year then?"

"Because I didn't want to join up. NATO Command did try to make my Commander-in-Chief find a suitable replacement for me, but he couldn't find anybody - or so he told them -

or else I would have been kicked out double quick."

"Surely you must have had access to classified files, even if only by accident. I can't understand NATO allowing that kind of situation."

"Neither can I. Perhaps they thought I was a spy and hoped I would lead them to my contact or something silly like that. They did make me take several oaths and I frequently had the impression I was being followed. But I didn't really mind that, actually it was quite a lot of fun."

"Fun?"

"Yeah, I used to play little games, like going into a women's undies shop and staying in the fitting rooms for ages. The people who followed me were mostly men, you see. I even went into a lesbian bar once! The guy who had been following me stayed outside at first, pretending to look at the window of the shop next door. I told the women in the bar that this guy had been following me and that I was scared and asked for their help. They bought my story and one of them then went to ask the guy in. He ended up by having to pay several rounds for everyone in that bar! He was terribly embarrassed... You should have seen his face!"

"You could have lost your job, pulling a stunt like that."

"So what? Plenty of jobs going, I wasn't worried."

"You were trying to get yourself fired." He stated.

She looked at him then and remained silent for a moment. "Hey, we're at the seashore!"

Quite an adept at changing the subject, wasn't she? They had indeed arrived at the coast.

"Let's go for a walk." Straker suggested.

They didn't walk very far, just up to the Pier. They sat down right underneath it, just out of reach of the water.

"You didn't answer my question just now, Ivy."

He wasn't going to let her get away with it, he had to know. She might be an excellent choice to become a SHADO operative, but he had to find out somehow how she felt about NATO and military service in general.

"What question?"

"Were you trying to get yourself fired?"

"You didn't phrase it as a question - it was a statement."

"You're splitting hairs."

"I'm very good at that ... Maybe I was hoping they would fire me, yes."

"Maybe?"

"You don't give up easily, do you?"

"I'm quite famous for my determination, just ask Henderson, he'll be the first to agree."

After a pause Ivy admitted reluctantly "OK, I did want out. I was getting bored with my job. At first it had been fun, you know... All these secret documents, I felt like I was in the middle of a spy-movie.

It took me quite a while to realise that it was exactly that. A spy-movie, and a bad one at that. All these projects of how they could do things, only they never did. I saw plans for blowing up the whole world, one week it would be Central Africa, the next week Russia, then China or Cuba, even Japan... War games. Or like you phrased it so aptly earlier, them playing with toy soldiers. It got up my nerves - they kept on re-arranging their potential arsenals to suit their war-schemes. But none of it was real, it was only on the computer. Like a computer strategy game - all these plans on how they could annihilate half the world, how they could invade this or that country, only they never would, not that way."

She paused for a while, so Straker decided to spur her on "What do you mean, not that way?"

"The nuclear way. Oh yes, and chemical warfare too. Nobody would ever dare execute those plans. They were just a way to keep everybody busy. A reason to keep NATO in existence. NATO could have stopped any and every of those small wars going on all over the place, but they didn't because the 'Powers-that-be' wouldn't let them."

"Why?"

"Money."

"I'm not following you now."

"War is a profitable business. The making of the weapons, the ammunition, the vehicles involved. And all the towns that are destroyed in the process. They need to be rebuilt, don't they? So the poorer countries have to take out loans. First to pay for the weapons, then to pay for the rebuilding. War is a large economical factor in our society. Isn't it crazy?"

"Then why did you join up?"

"You should know that better than anybody else, Commander."

Straker detected the tone of bitterness in her voice. Darn, he would never be able to convince her to join SHADO at this rate. After all, SHADO did employ the same tactics. Better to bring it out into the open, that might just work.

"You weren't given any choice. Because you knew too much." He guessed.

She didn't answer, because there was no need to. She had picked up a few pebbles from the beach and started throwing them into the water. Was she indirectly blaming him too for having been forced into the Armed Forces?

"It's different for you," she said, "at least you have the excuse that there is a real war on. You don't have much choice."

Had she been reading his mind? Again?

"I brought it upon myself, really." Ivy went on. "I shouldn't blame anybody, because I should have seen it coming. And I actually enjoy the job I'm doing now, the moving around, meeting different people, trying to work out why people do what they do, why they are who they are. Anything is better than typing and shelving reports."

"Did you study psychology?"

"Good Lord no, all this psychology they dish out in schools is just bunkum, all one needs to figure out people is common sense. The closest I ever came to studying psychology was reading Agatha Christie books."

"Detective stories?" Straker sounded incredulous.

"Agatha Christie knew about people. Just read her Miss Marple books. Miss Marple had some sixth sense about people because she had been observing different people all her life. She kind of categorised them, divided them up in different types.

Apart from this Agatha-Christie technique, what I always do is trying to imagine what it would be like to be the person or persons I'm investigating - I try to look at things from their perspective. The Virginia Guidelines to Practical Psychology." She was laughing again now, her anger forgotten. "Why did you think I studied psychology?"

"Just something General Henderson said."

"Oh, that."

Ivy remained silent for a while. She was trying to make up her mind about something. But what? There was something she would like to tell him, Straker sensed, but she wasn't sure telling him was a good idea. She had been very open with him. Why was that? Because she

trusted him? Or because it made her feel good to talk to someone? Or was she laying the foundation for his opening up to her? She was looking at him now, and laughed.

"I've already told you that much, just as well tell you the rest. Another joke, I'm afraid, or at least it seemed like a joke at the time... General Henderson told you about my first so-called 'case', didn't he?"

"Something about a Colonel suspected of stealing things, only you proved he wasn't the culprit."

"And I told them that I could find the real thief if only they would give me 2 days."

"Well - you did, didn't you?"

"The identity of the thief was not the issue, merely my methods."

Straker was puzzled now.

"You see, I told them - as Henderson told you I'm sure - that my methods were purely psychological. The thing was, they had just added a psychiatrist to the unit I was working in, and I couldn't stand the guy. He was forever telling everyone how he understood them, and talking about books and how clever he was. He was always using complicated terms that nobody understood, and everyone was taken in by him, thinking he was real good. So when my boss, the Commander-in-Chief, told me that this idiot psychiatrist had indicated Colonel Grant to be the author of some real strange thefts that had been occurring, and that as a result of this Colonel Grant was to be demoted and imprisoned pending his court martial, I told the Commander that I didn't believe it was Colonel Grant, that I too was well-versed in psychology, and that I was sure I could find the real culprit. Since the Commander liked Colonel Grant, he decided to give me a chance."

Tiny lights were dancing in her eyes, and she seemed to expect him to say something. She expected him to figure it out, did she? But how could he? Think, Straker, the clue must be there somewhere.

"You knew who the thief was all along, didn't you?" Straker had this note of triumph in his voice - yes that must be it. He was right, that was it, she was laughing her head off now.

"How did you know who it was?" he asked.

"I had witnessed the kid taking some papers from one of the safes. I didn't say anything about it, because I knew he was harmless. He was just some kind of gopher, not very clever, but real good with his hands. He was only in the Army by accident, having been stupid enough to sign up after hearing and believing one of those idealistic come-and-join-us talks. The kid enjoyed playing with all mechanical things, and safes were just a natural challenge to him. It had puzzled everyone why unimportant papers kept disappearing, and the general opinion was that the thief was also taking copies or photo's of the papers that were important, and selling them to the 'enemy', whoever that was.

So I played the charade for a couple of days, talking to some of the guys, asking them so-called 'meaningful questions, designed to trip up the guilty party'. Or so I told my boss. When I indicated poor Gary as the thief, they searched his room and did find some of the papers he had taken. He was then assessed by some psychologists or psychiatrists who decided that he wasn't 'all there', and they just let him go back to civilian life without any sanctions, which was by far the best thing for him.

My boss wanted to know about my methods, so I tried to make it seem as complicated as possible. He wrote a report about it apparently - I didn't get to type up that one - and all of a sudden they decided they needed me elsewhere. Only I had to join the Armed Forces first, for a two-year term." She sighed. "End of story."

"Or the beginning of one."

After a few minutes of silence, Ivy went on "I brought it upon myself. I had just been an obscure and almost-forgotten secretary to one of the Big Guns, until my boss was so terribly impressed by my finding out who this thief was. He kept on telling everyone how clever I was, what a tremendous asset I was, etc. etc. etc. All this praise became more and more embarrassing, and I did try to play it down, which in turn made him think I was being modest. I did at one point nearly tell him the truth, but decided not to - he might have thought I had been trying to make a fool out of him."

"He might have construed it that way."

"Exactly." She glanced up at him and added "I was trying to make a fool out of our master-psychiatrist, and maybe out of the system, but not my boss. He was a real good guy."

As Straker remained silent, Ivy went on "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Would you have told me all that if you thought I would tell this story to others?"

"No."

Straker still wasn't sure why she had told him so much. Was she trying to gain his confidence by herself confiding in him? Devious but clever method, since it was working. He had this urge to talk to her about how he felt. But he wouldn't. At least not now.

His thoughts went to the last alien they had interrogated. They hadn't gotten very far with that, had they? Maybe next time, they would get Ivy onto it. She could surely disarm even the most suspicious character. Would that work on an alien?

"SHADO could use someone like you Lieutenant."

There, he had said it. Perhaps he should have waited, it was hard to read the expression on her face with only the dim lights of the Pier above them. How would she react?

"That's a strange reaction to the story I just told you."

"That story shows you are resourceful."

Since she didn't react to that, he added, "You're also intelligent and you seem to have a lot of common sense. And you are good at reading people, even if I have to thank Miss Marple or Agatha Christie for that. You're also good with people, handling them I mean. Both Paul and Alec sing your praise, as do quite a lot of others, or so I've been told."

Still no reaction. Her face was turned towards the sea, so he could only see her profile.

"Most SHADO operatives are impressed with you, they can't all be wrong." He was trying to switch to a lighter mode, maybe that would elicit a reaction. What was she thinking? Quite frankly he had expected an immediate 'no, never' as an answer. If she said no after really giving the idea some thought, it would be a far more final 'no'.

"It would definitely not be an office job..."

Well, at least that made her look at him. Why the pain in her eyes? Or was it his imagination?

"There is another reason for my wanting you at SHADO ... I could do with some moral support. I have this weird idea in my head that somehow you understand where I'm coming from. I sometimes feel as if you're looking straight through me, reading my thoughts in the process. Is it me? Or do you do that with everyone?"

Better change the topic slightly, he really couldn't bear her silence any longer. He needed to hear her voice, especially now, after admitting that he was vulnerable - vulnerable to her. He hadn't perhaps said so in so many words, but he was sure she knew now - if she hadn't before.

"You are the only person connected with SHADO who treats me like a person, Ivy. Like

a human being. You-" his voice trailed off... "I need you. Someone like you."

There, he had said it. How could he have? What was it about her that drew him out? That made him feel good? Hell, she had even made him forget what was at stake. Six more weeks she had somehow convinced him that in those six weeks she would find a way to make him stay on as Commander.

"If I don't come up with some bright idea real quick, you won't be at SHADO long enough for me to make a difference." Ivy remarked.

"Oh I will stay in command," He said confidently, "because you'll find a way to make that happen."

"You sound far more confident than I'm feeling."

"I believe in you."

She looked away again. Embarrassed? Yes, she probably was.

CHAPTER 5

They didn't talk on their way back. As Straker brought the car to a halt in the SHADO underground parking lot, Ivy started to speak.

"I can't work for SHADO, Ed, I don't think I could live like that. I hate lying, and it would mean me lying to my family, to my friends, to everyone I meet outside of SHADO. It would also mean I would have to live outside of my own country permanently, and my mother isn't getting any younger. If I thought I was really essential to a part of your operations, I would say yes. But as things stand, I doubt I could do something for SHADO that somebody else couldn't do equally well or even better."

"I think I am a better judge of that than you are." He paused, then added "Do you have a boyfriend?"

He should have thought of that sooner, but he hadn't considered that possibility.

"Not really. I'm seeing someone but it isn't serious. More a casual relationship. With my moving about such a lot, it wouldn't be feasible."

"Who is he?"

"It doesn't matter, he isn't a factor. He's just someone I go out with at times, he sees other women too I believe."

Silence reigned for a while, then Ivy went on "Besides I never liked the Armed Forces, I told you that a little while ago. They have me for another year, and after that with a bit of luck they'll let me go. If I join SHADO I could never leave again - or I couldn't without being subjected to amnesia shots and the like. Not a method I agree with, or would want to be subjected to."

"A necessary evil."

"That's an excuse, not a reason, Ed. Let's not debate the point, I do realise it's something that is beyond your control. You have to follow orders too."

He sighed. "See what I meant earlier, about your understanding me? Whenever I dish out an amnesia shot to someone, most SHADO operatives look at me as if I'm a monster, while I'm just doing what I have to do. You're the only person seeing things from my point of view."

"It's part of my job, or at least part of how I understand and carry out my job, to make an effort to see things from your point of view."

It is high time you learned one thing, Commander. Pass the buck. Don't let it stop at you. Blame Henderson, blame the Commission, blame your orders - you would get a lot more sympathy that way. It might make your job a lot easier, you know."

"What makes you think I want anybody's sympathy?" He asked gruffly.

So she was only doing her job, was she? Making an effort to understand him. Was she only pretending she understood? He had started to think of her as a friend - but that didn't appear to be mutual after all.

"You may not want it, but you do need it. How long do you think you can go on like this, Ed? You're heading for a mental breakdown the way you're going. You're cutting yourself off from everyone and everything, and you refuse to see anything but your job at SHADO. You force yourself to be objective and in order to do so you maintain such a cold exterior that most people think you're made of ice. It may serve a purpose, it may be the only way you think you can run SHADO efficiently, but it is tearing you apart inside. How much longer can you keep it up? I think you've just about reached the end of your tether."

Everyone needs approval Ed, everyone needs some kind of human warmth. You've been

deliberately starving yourself and you've driven things so far that you don't dare to show a sign of humanity, because you're afraid that it will cause the bubble to burst. You don't want to like people because one day you may have to decide over their life or death. If you make sure nobody likes you, that task may seem easier to you. You're afraid that one sign of weakness will break the cycle, and that you won't be able to function any more. Afraid that once you show signs of being a mere human being like the rest of us you'll become an ordinary mortal again and that you'll be useless as a Commander.

Or maybe you're afraid that it is too late, that the other people at SHADO won't give you a second chance and that they will reject you.

You should try to find a middle way somehow, Ed, for your own sake - and SHADO's."

Straker remained motionless, in shock at what he just heard. So she did understand what it was like, but was she right about the rest too? Was he heading for a breakdown? He didn't think so, but he knew others that had gone down that road and they hadn't seen it coming either.

"To repeat one of your statements, Lieutenant, it may not make a difference for much longer. I may be out of here in six weeks."

Would sarcasm stop the flood of emotions he was feeling? The regrets? The pain? Could he block it all out?

"If you really want to stay in command, Ed, you will, I'll make sure of it. But you'll have to promise me something."

"What?"

"That you'll take some time off, away from SHADO. Far away. Go to Spain or Florida or wherever and start having some fun for a change. Meet some people and focus on something else but SHADO, if only for a week or two."

"Or I'll turn into a basket case?"

Ivy smiled "I wouldn't have used that term, but yes, it could happen."

"I could just go and see a psychiatrist ..."

"You don't need a shrink Ed, he would only tell you things you already know, but won't admit to yourself."

Straker could admitted to himself that she was right though. On all counts. But he wasn't going to admit it to her. She was right about him having to sort himself out though - and he now knew that she would help if he needed help.

"This car park isn't exactly the best place for lengthy conversations, Ivy. But I do want to talk to you. Sometime."

Straker paused, deciding it was time he changed the subject.

"How are you going to stop people complaining about me?"

"I'm trying something out - I'm not sure it's going to work, but I think it will."

"What?"

"It's better if you don't know - or at least not yet."

So she wasn't going to tell him. She probably had a good reason not to, so he wouldn't question it. He felt tired, exhausted even. Should he go inside and check that everything was all right? No need, nobody had tried to contact him, so nothing much had happened.

"Well, I think I'll head home. It's after midnight. I'll see you tomorrow."

"So what about that promise to take a holiday?"

"I'll think about it - but only if you promise you'll think about coming to work for SHADO."

"I already said no."

"Isn't it a woman's prerogative to change her mind?"

"Very funny. I wasn't making a decision as a woman, but as a person, so it doesn't apply."

"And if I don't promise to take a holiday, you will make sure that I'm kicked out after all, is that it? Sounds like blackmail to me."

He said this with a big smile on his face, since he was convinced that this promise wouldn't make a difference one way or the other. She was going to make sure he was to retain his command, because she knew she had to.

"Never mind the promise, just take that holiday. You need it."

"I might just promise if I could convince you to come with me."

She laughed at that. A "Goodnight, see you tomorrow", and she was gone. Had he been serious? The idea had just tumbled out, the two of them together, on a holiday. He considered - she was good company, and certainly very beautiful. And he could talk to her.

Why was he so affected by her? Was it not only her mind but also her body that had such an impact on him? He didn't think so. All those beautiful actresses hanging around the studio, and not one had ever made an impression. He had always considered beauty to be an asset in an actress, but had never taken much notice of this feature in the other women he knew. It was really Ivy's personality he was attracted to. Attracted? Was that an understatement?

* * *

That night he dreamt. A car was bearing down on his son Johnny, but it didn't turn out to be one of his usual nightmares. A beautiful dark-haired angel with Ivy's eyes swept Johnny up just before the car hit him. The angel deposited the frightened-looking Johnny gently into Straker's arms and said "I'm giving you your son back Commander - and your life. It's your last chance - take it."

CHAPTER 6

As Straker sat in the studio to view a documentary on the behaviour of the 'typical tourist', he was reminded of Ivy's words some time ago. The documentary had been shot partly in Spain and partly at the English South Coast. Spain! Ivy had said he needed a holiday and had suggested Spain but after that one evening she had never mentioned it again. They had gone out for dinner quite a few times since then, they had spent endless hours at the coast, sitting in his car or on the beach talking about him and SHADO ... she had even cooked quite a few meals for him at his place - her spaghetti sauce was far better than any he had ever tasted! - and he was now starting to dread the arrival of the last day of the month, which was also to be Ivy's last day at SHADO.

Two more weeks and she would be gone. For ever? He missed her already, and she wasn't even gone yet. How would he cope without having her to talk to? He had done it for years, bottling everything up inside, deliberately keeping his mind on SHADO rather than think about being lonely and very much alone. She had changed all that. It was good to have a friend, somebody who is there for you when you need them. She had been right about that too, he did need someone. Someone to be with when he was feeling down. He had wanted to ask her more than once whether she hadn't changed her mind yet about coming to work for SHADO, but he hadn't - because he knew it was no use.

He had started to see SHADO through different eyes too. He had relaxed a little, not too much, just a little. He had let either Alec or Paul deal with some of the Red Alerts. He had also given orders not to be disturbed at home - or anywhere else - unless a UFO broke through the outer defence system and made it to Earth. He had slept better, and the nightmares were gone completely now.

And SHADO - The place simply felt different. He couldn't pinpoint how it had changed or what had changed. It bothered him - surely he should be able to figure that one out? The equipment and layout had remained the same, so that could definitely be eliminated as the source of the change. Maybe it was the SHADO personnel? Had they changed? That was unlikely too, such a large body of men and women, they couldn't possibly or could they? He was remembering some rather odd phrases he had picked up here and there. They hadn't registered as odd at the time. Nor were they - just their frequency seemed odd. Phrases like 'Bravo Commander, you did it again' and 'I never thought you would pull it off Commander, but you did'. There had been a lot of sentences like that lately, words spoken by people who had never before thought of him other than as a piece of office equipment. The atmosphere had definitely warmed up - warmed up towards him. How had that come about? He couldn't understand it. Perhaps Ivy would know. Ivy. Was she at the root of their change in attitude? Had she affected all SHADO personnel, not just him? He wouldn't be surprised.

What about him - had he really changed? No he hadn't, he had made a minor adjustment, but that could affect his outlook of course. Ivy had said that he needed to ease up a little, to try to be a bit more considerate towards the feelings of the SHADO operatives. But he hadn't followed her advice on that one. She had understood that he couldn't, that he needed to remain aloof...

"What do you think, Mr Straker?", the producer broke into his thoughts. Back to film business.

* * *

As there were no messages or any urgent matter requiring his attention, Straker headed

straight for Ivy's office. As he walked in, she hurriedly turned towards him, away from the computer she had been using, after exiting the program in what appeared to him to be a rather furtive manner. What had she been doing? That computer game again? It hadn't looked like a computer game, more like a photograph of something. As he sat down, he studied the expression on her face. No guilt there, whatever it was she had been looking at, it was probably something quite legitimate - but something she didn't want him to know about.

"Were you playing that game again?"

"No."

"So what were you doing - or is it a secret?"

"Just looking at a few things..."

"Such as?"

"UFOs." She laughed. "Don't look so surprised Ed, this whole organisation is centred around UFOs, I was just curious as to what they really looked like and..." She halted.

"And?"

"Well they aren't all the same type are they? I just wondered."

"Wondered?"

"Oh will you stop repeating every last word I say!"

"Best way to keep a person talking, I find."

"How clever. Tell me, how many planets do you think are out there that are inhabited?"

"Good question - but your guess is as good as mine. Scientists all over the world, as well as our computers, have made calculations based on probabilities and haven't come up with either conclusive or uniform results."

"Any idea as to where we stand?"

"What do you mean?"

"Evolution-wise. We cannot be the furthest developed planet, because the technology that makes those UFOs is much further ahead. And there are worlds where life is probably still in the bacterial stage. So where are we? Amongst the top 3? The top 10? Somewhere right in the middle?"

"Again, your guess is as good as mine."

"OK, so let me guess."

"I'm listening."

"First guess : we are number 2, UFO-world is number one. Does that sound probable?"

Straker pondered the question. "No. It is a possibility but I wouldn't classify it as a probability."

"Then where are the others?"

"You mean the other inhabited worlds?"

"I mean the UFOs from those other more advanced worlds. There may be 1, 10 or 50 worlds out there that are capable of space travel. These worlds may or may not know of our existence. Those that do may or may not be capable of coming here. The question in my mind is, have they? Are we dealing with one lot of UFOs or are there other UFOs coming here too, UFOs from other worlds, non-hostile worlds? And have we destroyed those too as they arrived, thinking they were part of our hostile lot?"

Straker liked the way her mind was working. "We have always more or less assumed that they all came from the same place, but no one will or can confirm that as a certainty, or prove the opposite either. Why do you think otherwise?"

"Because of the shapes and the sizes of the UFOs, and because of the detonations."

"Detonations?"

"Some UFOs seem to go with a bigger bang than the others, I just wondered what could cause that."

"The amount of fuel they had on board, the type of fuel, the amount of liquid oxygen that was on board, and where the explosion occurred - in our atmosphere or in space. It might also make a difference where in our atmosphere the explosion occurred - high over the North Pole or the Alps for instance, or just a few feet above sea level."

"You're probably right"

"Not my theory Lieutenant, it's the computer's. You sound disappointed - why?"

"I just thought there might be another cause, well - an additional one I should say."

"You have my full attention, Lieutenant Fonteyne." He did like teasing her.

"I thought the size of the explosion could also be connected to the type or amount of ammunition it had on board. I have seen reports of UFOs using explosives and conventional weaponry - well, conventional in the Earth sense that is."

"That would make a difference, of course it would."

"You didn't mention it on your list just now."

"Because apparently no one has thought of it before. Or considered it to be of importance. You have something else up your sleeve, haven't you?"

"I don't really know much about spaceships and stuff like that, so it's probably all nonsense anyway. I won't bore you with it."

"You could never bore me. Besides, you've got me interested now. Tell me."

"Well I had been thinking that maybe here and there a UFO arrives that is just exploring space and doesn't mean any harm, a spacecraft coming from another world than the ones who come here to destroy us or harm us. It would get shot up like the others, and there goes our chance to find out where those other guys come from. So I have been looking at the different shapes, looking at the difference between them to categorise them or something. It would be a hell of a coincidence if UFOs made on different planets by different peoples had the same shapes and sizes. Then I thought that there was probably no way of telling by the shape alone. So..."

"So you thought if the shape could be linked to the strength of the explosion, we might be able to single out those that are potentially non-dangerous."

"You've got it Commander. Even if the size of the explosion is linked to one or several of the factors you mentioned just now, it might still be indicative to the type of UFO we're dealing with... And there is something else, too."

"You still have my full attention."

"Some UFOs start shooting as soon as they find a target to shoot at. Others don't, they seem to wait until they're shot at before they start firing. Some come here for some specific reason, like the ones that came to try to take out SHADO HQ. That's what I was looking at just now. I was comparing the video takes of the UFO that tried to attack SHADO HQ with some others that were destroyed without putting up much of a fight. I thought comparing them might be the best lead to find out which ones are hostile and which ones aren't."

Straker thought for a while, then said "I was wrong about you Lieutenant."

"Huh?"

"I thought you were just clever. But no, you are brilliant. Let's go and talk to Colonel Lake and see whether she can think of a way to make our computers check up on your theory. It might be rather difficult because not all UFO incidents are fully documented. Determining

the sizes of the UFOs and their shapes will be easy enough; checking up which type or model starts shooting up the place before we manage to get a good shot at it should probably be the next step. To determine the size of the 'bang' as you call it might be a bit of a problem. We will have to evaluate the exact distance of the UFO and correlate this with the vibrations our instruments picked up at the time of the explosion or crash. Also the video records will come from a different source and location than the location of the instruments recording the size of the explosion - if the explosion was picked up at all. One doesn't hear a 'bang' in outer space, due to the absence of sound waves as we know them on Earth..." He stood up, but she remained sitting at her desk. "Well, are you coming?"

"Can't see the point. I know next to nothing about calculations like that. If you want to test my idea, fine, but you don't need me there do you?"

"Don't you want to test your theory?"

"I'm sure you'll come and tell me what the computer has to say about it."

"That will take days, maybe even weeks."

Straker didn't want to think past the next 2 weeks.

"Which reminds me, Ivy, I haven't got any phone number for you, or a place I can contact you."

"I'm never in the same place for long, usually 4 to 8 weeks."

"And in between? Do you go to visit your mother?"

"Yes."

"You could give me her phone number."

"She doesn't speak English, so there would be very little point in calling her."

"What about your Commanding Officer?"

"He doesn't always know where I am or for how long. He thinks I'm in France right now."

"Do you already know where you're going from here?"

"Yes."

"A NATO assignment? Or is it classified information?"

"Hardly. It's holiday-time... six whole weeks of it! I was due for vacation before I came here, it actually got cancelled because General Henderson told NATO HQ this case was urgent."

"Where are you going? Spain?"

"Sunbathing is not my idea of a holiday. I'll probably go to Austria or Switzerland, or another region where they have mountains, after I've visited my mum."

"I'm going to see what Virginia Lake has to say about starting the computer running on your theory. Shall we try out that pizza place tonight?"

"OK. And don't tell anyone that UFO idea came from me."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm asking you not to."

"Fine."

She didn't want to get involved, was that it?

* * *

Driving to the restaurant, Straker wondered how he should bring up the holiday again. The two of them hill walking... He hoped she wasn't into mountaineering, that seemed hardly his cup of tea.

"Why are we stopping here, Ed? That doesn't look like a pizza place to me."

"Observant as usual, my dear. I just thought you deserved better."

The table in one of the secluded booths at the back of the French restaurant had been set for two, in fact it looked rather romantic with the candlelight and the huge bunch of flowers.

"Aren't you going to read the card?" Straker asked.

The card attached to the flowers simply said "Ivy - Thank you - Ed".

"I'm not really good with words, even less so when I try to write them down. So I kept it short. I had a go at a longer version at first, but - well, I'm better at writing reports and things like that. Whatever I tried to write seemed so inadequate. So after tearing up about 5 different versions of a thank you letter, I just stuck to this."

"I'll have to come up with more UFO theories if this is the kind of reward I get."

"It isn't for the theory. I wanted to thank you for being who you are and doing what you do. You made me realise what a mess I've been making of my life for quite some time. You've helped me get things back into perspective. You can ask the waiter, I booked the table this morning, long before you came up with that theory."

Straker took a deep breath. This wasn't coming out right. Surely he could do better than that? The words had sounded stiff and mechanical. He shouldn't have tried to rehearse what he was going to say, that made things worse rather than better.

Sipping their aperitifs while studying the menu, they both reached for the ashtray at the same time and their hands touched briefly. Ed had the impression that a bolt of lightning was shooting up his arm. Suddenly it was hot in here - or was it because they were sitting so close? Had she felt it too? She was still looking at the menu, unperturbed or so it seemed... Hadn't she noticed the touch of his hand?

"What are you having?"

Her voice sounded normal and steady. Didn't she feel anything? Wasn't she aware of how he was feeling? His heart was racing, and he tried to keep his voice as steady as he could.

"How about you choose for the both of us? You know a lot more about French food than I do."

"OK, how about Escargots à la Bourguignonne as starters?"

"That's snails, isn't it?"

"Or we could have the Cuisses de Grenouilles"

"Frog legs, now that's real appropriate for a French restaurant."

"Or Saumon Fume."

"And that is Smoked Salmon. I told you, you choose."

"Have you ever tried Escargots or the frog legs?"

"No, but I do know they are considered a delicacy in France."

"You're not much fun. The last time I was in a French restaurant with an American, and I suggested these two dishes for starters, the chap turned a greenish colour."

"Maybe he was an alien."

That made her laugh.

"OK, Ed, I retract the bit about your not being any fun."

"Thank you. But I was serious, I don't mind trying either dish."

"Well frog legs are fried with loads of garlic, so I usually avoid eating them, except if I'm alone at home for at least two full days. I do like escargots, but I really prefer the salmon. That all right with you?"

"Yes."

"And how about the Langue de Boeuf in Madeira sauce for the main course?"

"Sure... What did that other American end up eating?"

"He took soup, I had the frog legs."

"Probably a wise decision on your part."

"A very deliberate decision."

"When was that, by the way?"

"What?"

"The other French restaurant and the other American."

"Six months ago or thereabouts."

"What do you do when men try to come on to you?"

She seemed surprised at that question. "I try to make it clear that I'm not interested. If they go on trying, I just ignore them, that usually gets the message across loud and clear."

"Does it happen a lot? I mean, since you joined the eh - you know."

"Occasionally. Some men get infatuated at the sight of any woman. It hasn't caused any problems so far. All I want is to do my job properly, getting involved would only complicate things."

Was she giving him the brush-off?

"What if some of them had been genuine?"

"Well, they weren't. Why are you so interested in my potential love life all of a sudden?"

"What if you fell in love with a man that was also in love with you?"

"I would probably run a mile. It could never work. I would have to leave again after a while, on to the next job, and I would have to start lying to him about where I was etcetera. Being together for one weekend every 6 weeks or so wouldn't be enough if one was serious about a relationship."

"What about us?"

"Us?"

"I think of you as a friend. Is it possible to sustain a friendship under those same circumstances, do you think?"

"Why not? You know what I do for a living. I'm sure you would never ask me to reveal classified stuff."

She had looked relieved when he brought up the term 'friendship'. She knew how he felt, he was sure of it. Was she trying to let him down gently?

* * *

Two courses and a bottle of wine later, Straker decided it was time to find out how he could keep seeing her. On her terms, for the time being.

"You remember you said I should take some time off?"

"Of course I do. Even if I have a memory resembling a Gruyere cheese at times."

"What... Oh you mean that cheese with the holes in it."

"And cutting out those holes is hard to do, so I've been told."

"Never mind the cheese, it's that vacation I wanted to talk about."

"Let me guess... You decided to take my advice and go to Spain. Good for you, Spanish women are notorious for being beautiful when they are young. I wish you all the luck in the world with them."

She giggled and raised her glass. Could she possibly be drunk, Straker wondered? Surely not from one aperitif and half a bottle of wine. Not with all the food they had eaten. Besides, if he didn't feel the effect of the alcohol, and he wasn't used to drinking at all, she normally wouldn't either.

"Don't worry Ed, I'm not drunk. I'm just in an excellent mood - why don't you try to

lighten up a little? Do you have to be so serious all the time?"

"Let's order an espresso. Would you like some dessert?"

"You do think I'm drunk! Anyway, coffee wouldn't help if I were, that only keeps one awake, it doesn't take away the effects of the alcohol. But I will have that espresso, without the dessert."

He ordered the coffees and wondered if he should try to bring up the vacation again. She was looking thoughtful now, her exuberant mood seemed to be gone.

"Why don't we go somewhere together? To Switzerland or Austria or whatever place you would like to go."

As she didn't reply, he continued "If I went off somewhere by myself, I wouldn't last more than a day. I would just feel I was wasting my time when there are so many pressing matters to take care of. You could help me keep my sanity."

Still no answer. The waiter brought their espressos. She dropped in two lumps of sugar, and started stirring her coffee. What was she thinking now? Trying to work out a 'thank you but no' answer? That sugar would have melted by now, but she still kept stirring. He decided to put his hand on hers. That could be construed as a token of simple affection, she couldn't blame him for that, could she?

He took her hand into his, very gently, but she showed no sign of having noticed this. He started stroking the back of her hand with his thumb, and she still didn't react. She seemed miles away. Was she thinking of this other man? This guy she was seeing 'casually'?

He switched hands and put his free arm around her shoulder. Her body seemed to freeze for a moment, then it relaxed again. She was still looking down into her coffee cup as he moved the hand that had been holding hers to her chin, turning her face towards him. She was looking straight into his eyes now, but he couldn't read what was in them. If she didn't want this, wouldn't she have withdrawn by now? He kissed her, first on her forehead, then on her mouth. At first she didn't respond, then all of a sudden it was as if that bolt of lightning he had felt earlier enveloped both of them, and they were kissing passionately, as if nothing else existed but the two of them.

Then, suddenly, she broke away, still without uttering a word.

He was at a loss about what to do or say next, so he too remained silent. His arm was still around her shoulders, yet she made no attempt to remove it. She remained completely immobile, as if she were a statue. Why didn't she say something?

"Would you like another coffee?"

That was silly, she hadn't drunk this one yet, but he couldn't bear her being silent any longer.

"A glass of ice-cold water would be more fitting, don't you think?" She said this without even glancing in his direction. It might have sounded like a joke, but it hadn't.

She looked at him now, her face expressionless, blank.

"This shouldn't have happened." She said in a monotonous voice.

"We can always try to pretend it didn't."

"I will have to."

"Why, Ivy?"

"Because of my report." She smiled up at him now, so things couldn't be too bad. "The Commission is bound to want to talk to me after reading it, Henderson said as much. Whenever I have had to clarify a report in person in the past, the same questions always recurred. The main one usually goes something like 'Has so-and-so tried to buy you off in any

way?', followed by 'Has he made, or tried to make, any sexual overtures?', so this must not happen again."

"I love you."

"Oh Ed, you don't! You've been through hell and back again, and I have been there for you, to help you. Don't confuse gratitude with love. Maybe you're a bit in love with me, but it isn't because of me or who I am. It's because you've been lonely and you needed someone to turn to. I just happened to be the person who was there, close at hand. Propinquity - like a patient falling in love with a nurse or a doctor."

"I know a few doctors that are married to former patients, and they are very happy. One such couple I know has been married for over twenty years, and they are still together."

"How often does that happen? Once every hundred times, or once every thousand?"

"It does happen, and I do love you."

"You hardly know me. You don't know in the least what I'm really like."

"You've been with us six weeks. You know me really well, so why should I not know you at least a little?"

"You've had other things on your mind apart from me. I have been concentrating on you and situations involving you. I've had conversations about you with dozens of people. You haven't even met anyone that knows me."

"Then give me a chance to find out what you're really like. Let's go on holiday together."

She grinned. "I should have seen that one coming I suppose."

"If you say yes, I will make sure something like this doesn't happen again in the next two weeks. I'll even promise not to mention it."

"OK."

"I also think what did you just say?"

"I said OK. I agreed. I said yes."

"Thank you."

"And do stop thanking me. I should be thanking you for the great meal."

"About your vacation - any idea where you're going yet? And how are you planning to go there?"

"I usually just point my car in more or less the right direction, and stop at a village or small town that I like the looks of."

"When you find that town or village, will you call me?"

"I will."

"How long would it take you to drive to Switzerland?"

"I may not be going to Switzerland, it might be Austria or even Germany. Besides, I'm going to stay with my mother for a week or so first."

"Then call me from her place."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"It might take the General and his buddies a few days to get the report accepted and all that. Better we don't have any contact until afterwards, just in case they decide to recall me and ask me more questions."

"You're right. Again."

* * *

On the way back Straker said "There is something I would like to know"

"Such as?"

"Did you know I was going to kiss you? Had you seen it coming?"

"Didn't we just agree to forget what happened?"

"We definitely did not! Only to pretend it never happened - for the time being."

"You did promise not to mention the incident though."

"I meant after today."

"You're changing the rules, that's not fair."

"Everything is fair in love and war - or so it is said... All right, just answer this one question then and I'll shut up about it."

"Just the one?"

"Yes."

"No snags?"

"No snags."

"I didn't know. But I wasn't really surprised either. Does that answer your question?"

"I often wondered whether you knew how I felt."

Ivy didn't respond to that - it hadn't been a question anyway. And she wouldn't answer any more questions she had said. He should have thought to ask a few questions earlier. He knew insisting would do no good. He should have substituted his question for another one, the one that was paramount in his mind - how she felt about him. Too late now. Another two weeks - no, three at least - somewhere in Switzerland - she would tell him then. Would she have agreed to his plan if she didn't have any feelings for him?

Straker started to think about their little word games. He did enjoy them, and so did she, judging from her eagerness to keep their battles of words going sometimes. She was better at these games than he was, according to her it was because she had been a secretary for a long time, and that she had to weigh words before writing them down in order to convey the right ideas. The written word is so much more final than the spoken word - afterwards one could often not remember exactly what had been said.

He should have married someone like Ivy instead of Mary, his life would have been so different. He would have been able to tell Ivy about SHADO without having to fear any security leaks. She wouldn't have given him away either, not even by accident, he didn't think anyone could trip her up, make her say or admit things she didn't want to say or admit. She was too intelligent for that.

CHAPTER 7

Early the next morning Miss Ealand called over the Intercom and said : "General Henderson is on his way down, Commander"

Another unannounced visit, what was the urgency this time?

* * *

"Get Lieutenant Fonteyne in here, Straker"

No greeting? What was wrong?

They sat in silence until Ivy walked in.

Henderson turned towards her. "Good day Lieutenant. I have only one question for you: How did you do it?"

"Do what, Sir?"

"I was called to a meeting of the Commission yesterday, Lieutenant. They showed me a few of the more recent reports of SHADO operatives. For some reason none of these reports contained even one word against Commander Straker, quite the contrary, some of them actually praised him. So I'm asking you Lieutenant, how did you bring that about?"

"Does that mean I can stay in command?" Straker asked.

"For the time being, Straker. As long as these reports keep out negative references to you." Henderson turned to Ivy and went on "So tell me Lieutenant, can you assure me that that trend will continue? And tell me how you influenced these reports in the first place?"

Ivy seemed uncomfortable and didn't answer.

"I'm waiting, Lieutenant."

"Well Sir, all I really did was talk to the various people who had been affected by any decisions made by Commander Straker. I talked to them and explained a few things - things that should have been obvious, but apparently weren't. Some SHADO operatives seemed rather paranoid and looked at certain decisions, like restrictions, cancelled leaves, transfers to and from Moonbase and other kinds of measures, only from their own point of view. When I explained to them why the Commander had taken the decisions he had, and that they had been necessary, they stopped blaming him for things going wrong or not going their way. Ninety percent of the complaints arose from a lack of communication, Sir."

"You make it sound very simple."

"Because it was."

"So you talk to a few people and all of a sudden Commander Straker is the most popular guy in town." Henderson sounded incredulous.

"People are like sheep - where one goes the others follow. Quite a few people were putting everything the Commander said or did in a bad daylight, while most of the others rather liked him really, but were afraid to say so. I only had to talk Commander Straker's opponents around, and the rest followed." Ivy smiled while explaining this.

"So what will happen when you leave? Will this I-like-Straker-trend continue or reverse itself again?"

"I do have an idea as to that Sir."

"I'm starting to rather like those ideas of yours Lieutenant."

"Get somebody to keep an eye on things, to find out which SHADO operatives are involved in or affected by decisions that are made, and make sure these people don't have the time to start brooding or to start badmouthing the Commander. I would say that that is absolutely essential when a SHADO operative dies, in that case a counsellor should go and talk

to all of the victim's friends and make sure that they understand why it happened, how it happened, and that this death was nobody's fault - bar the UFO's of course. That's what people were upset at the most, you know: their friends dying and nobody giving them any explanations."

In the silence that followed, Straker was thinking Ivy was setting herself up for being asked to continue to work at SHADO. She must either have changed her mind on that subject, or else she was prepared to be honest and straightforward at whatever the cost.

"You sound like the ideal person to take on that job, Lieutenant."

"There are dozens of people who would qualify for it, I'm sure. I rather like the diversity of my job Sir, I would really prefer to keep on doing it."

"How far are you at making a report on the whole situation, Lieutenant?" asked Henderson.

"My report is just about finished Sir, but it's still a bit rough around the edges."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I haven't really checked it for typing errors and I haven't printed it out yet. Apart from that it's finished."

"Never mind typing errors, nobody will mind them. Does that mean you're finished here really?"

"I suppose."

"Good. How about you go get that report, pack your bags, and come with me. I can have a quick look at your report and make sure the others get a copy. The sooner they get your report, the better - it following up on the latest positive comments about Straker should clinch this matter once and for all. Besides, I'm flying over to NATO Brussels this afternoon, so I could give you a ride home."

"I thought the Commission would want to discuss my report with me in person?"

"Since you already did what they considered impossible, there will be no need for that. They are convinced, and they haven't even seen your report yet. If there should be some questions, we can always contact you. So what about it, are you coming with me?"

"I'll go and throw my things into my suitcase, Sir, and print out my report." Ivy said and left.

Turning to Straker, Henderson said "You're being very quiet, Straker. What do you think of this solution of hers?"

"Might not be as easy as she made it sound."

"Because it would take a very special kind of person to do the job ... keeping up with you and your decisions?"

"Exactly"

"I'm surprised you didn't ask her to come and work for SHADO."

"She made it very clear she didn't want that, General."

"Oh, so you have asked her."

"She's a very level-headed person, General - intelligent and with a lot of common sense. Exactly the kind of person that SHADO needs. I did ask her, yes."

"We can always force her transfer."

"She is also a very strong-willed woman, so I thought I would avoid that. She may do more harm than good, if she's forced."

"She strikes me as a thorough professional. She would do her job anyway."

"Could you force her to transfer to SHADO if I asked you to?"

"Don't see why not."

"I may ask you to do so - at some later date."

Straker thought it would be better to agree with Henderson, lest he should get suspicious. How was he going to manage to have a few minutes alone with Ivy? She would keep her word and call him, he was sure of it, but he did want to say goodbye. Properly.

However, Henderson started to ask questions about their latest computer project, checking the UFO's sizes and behaviour, so Henderson gave him no chance to slip away.

As Ivy came in with her report and a small computer disk in the one hand, and her suitcase in the other, all he could do was to thank her and wish her well.

"I do hope we'll meet again one day, Ivy. I owe you one. If I can ever do anything for you, do call me."

"I was just doing my job Commander."

And she was gone...

CHAPTER 8

"Is anything wrong, Ed?"

"I'm fine Alec, just a bit tired."

"Are you sure it isn't more than that?"

"I'm sure."

"But I'm not. It's Ivy, isn't it?"

"Ivy? Lieutenant Fonteyne? What makes you say that?"

"We have known each other for a long time, Ed. I can see something is wrong - and I think Ivy is at the bottom of it."

As Straker didn't answer, Alec went on "You're in love with her."

It wasn't a question. Straker just looked at his friend, without saying anything. What was there to say? That he was waiting for her to call? That she had promised him? That every time the phone went he hoped it was her - hating the person on the other end for not being her? That she hadn't called him so far, even though it was three weeks now since she left? That he was afraid that something was wrong? Should he tell Alec about the images he had of her lying by a roadside somewhere, having been knocked down by a car - or of her driving off the road in some mountainous Swiss region? He didn't know what was worse, a possible accident, or the thought that she hadn't meant it when she promised they would spend some time together, in Switzerland or Austria or wherever. How could she do that to him? She couldn't. She wasn't that type of person. She kept her word. Maybe her mother was ill. Only it had been three weeks, surely she would have called him to tell him.

"You want to talk about it, Ed?" Alec asked in a soft voice.

Straker didn't think he could.

"Do you have any idea where she is now? She said something to me about taking a vacation to Switzerland or some other mountainous area."

Straker flinched but still didn't answer, so Alec continued "I thought the two of you looked well together, as if you understood each other perfectly. She certainly stood up for you whenever anybody said something detrimental about you. I thought she was in love with you too, Ed. After she left I half expected you to come and tell me that you were going on a vacation - maybe to Switzerland or some such place."

"That was our intention - at least my intention" Straker couldn't refrain from saying. He wasn't sorry he had said it. Maybe Alec would know an answer. Any answer.

"Can't you call her?"

"I don't have a number for her. She stays with her mother sometimes, but her mother doesn't speak English, so Ivy said there was no point in giving me her number. She said she would call me as soon as she knew where she was going to stay for her holidays, so I didn't insist."

"Maybe she's ill."

"Hospitals have phones."

"General Henderson could probably track her down for you."

He shook his head. "What reason could I give? The only one I can think of is that I want to get her to transfer to SHADO. Henderson would set the wheels in motion and her transfer might become a fact - I promised her I wouldn't do that. I couldn't very well call Henderson afterwards and tell him that I don't want her transfer after all."

"What about checking a Belgian phone book? Do you know which town she lives in?"

"I don't."

"Well- she did tell me something about a town called Leuven, I think she was born there. Even if she doesn't live there any more, she may have family there that know where she is."

"What if they don't speak English?"

"Since when have you become a defeatist?"

"She has my number. She can call me."

"My God, Ed, she could be sick or something - is your damned pride really that important?"

"Pride has nothing to do with it."

"Isn't it better to know what's going on, rather than guessing? Maybe she had to go on another assignment."

"She probably just said yes to get me off her back. If she had been called to do another job, she could have told me."

"Tell me how it come about that she agreed to go on vacation with you."

He stared at Alec. Could he tell him? Maybe he should - Alec wouldn't tell anyone else, his secret was safe with him. "In the very beginning she said I needed to take some time off, away from SHADO. Then, the day before she left, I was asking her where she was planning to go on holiday, and asked her whether I could join her. She didn't say yes, or no. A bit later I told her I loved her - and she said that that wasn't possible, that I didn't really know her. So I asked her to give me a chance to get to know her, to let me spend some time with her, and she agreed. She said she would call me as soon as she knew where she was going to stay."

"Did you have to insist, or did she give in easily?"

"Easily."

"Would she have done that had she not intended to keep her word?"

"Maybe - maybe not. She did say I didn't know her very well. Maybe she was giving me a hint then."

"Find her, Ed, and ask her. She does owe you an explanation. How about her phone records?"

"She didn't make any calls outside the building, I checked."

"Hang on Ed, I have an idea - I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

It was 15 minutes before Alec returned, waving with a piece of paper in his hand : "There you go Ed, not one but two phone numbers."

"How did you get hold of these?" Straker asked mechanically, staring at the two numbers.

"I asked Miss Rogers, Henderson's secretary. Told her I had borrowed something from Ivy and forgot I still had it when she left. Miss Rogers didn't have an address for her, but she did have two contact numbers. The top one is the base, the second one her mother's number. Which are you going to try first?"

"I don't know - what would be the point of calling anyway?"

"Oh come on Ed, you know you want to try. You must want to find out why she hasn't contacted you. Call the mother - if she doesn't understand a word of English, try some German on her, she may understand that. I know you understand quite a bit of German, so here's your chance to speak it."

With a wry smile Straker picked up his phone and dialed the second number

"Bij Fonteyne."

"Mrs. Fonteyne - I am a friend of your daughter Ivy, and I was hoping you could tell me where I could find her."

Straker spoke slowly, enunciating clearly, hoping she would at least understand some of it.

"Ginny is away on holiday, she has gone to Germany, to the Schwarzwald."

"When do you expect her back?"

"In three weeks or so."

"I don't suppose she mentioned me? My name is Ed Straker."

"Straker? No, I've never heard her talk about you."

"We only met a few months ago. She didn't mention me when she was over last?"

"I haven't seen my daughter for over three months. She usually calls me once a week though, do you want me to give her a message next time she does so?"

"Do you have a number where I can contact her?"

"I'm afraid I haven't, but I will give her a message if you like."

"Would you? I'll give you my number, in case she lost it."

After putting the phone down, Ed said "She lied to me, Alec. Her mother does speak English - a bit stilted perhaps, but her English is pretty good. And Ivy is in Germany somewhere, on that vacation of hers. She never went to visit her mother after leaving here, she went straight on to Germany."

"That's rather odd, isn't it - her not going to visit her mother? And her mother not having a number for her? There must be some kind of explanation. Maybe she's on another assignment and just told her mother she has gone to Germany."

"It's a possibility I suppose."

"There are two things you can do now, Ed. You either call her C.O., pull rank, and demand a number where she can be reached. She will have left them one. Or else, get on to Henderson and tell him you want to try to persuade her to come and work here. He'll find out where she is for you."

"I'll think about it, Alec."

Could Alec be right? He had to find out somehow. Sitting here waiting for the phone to ring wasn't doing him much good. Taking some action, any action, would be better than that! So he decided to call Henderson and get him to track Ivy down - he frowned. Ginny - her mother had called her Ginny.

* * *

A few days later Straker was again staring at a phone number. Nobody was pressing him to make that call this time, so he didn't move. Henderson hadn't been surprised at Straker's request, he too thought Ivy would make a good addition to SHADO personnel, that she was the ideal person for the job - and neither Henderson or Straker had come up with anybody else who was qualified yet. As Henderson hadn't mentioned any more complaints, Straker was safe - for the time being. Henderson had also agreed that she would perform better if she wasn't forced. So this was the number of the little hotel in Germany Ivy was staying, Hotel Löwen. It was in a village somewhere, or so Henderson had said. What were the chances of the hotel personnel speaking English? He hadn't spoken German in years, nor had he been proficient at it then, so he would stick to English if he could.

It was six p.m. now - would she be in?

He dialed.

"Gasthaus Löwen"

"I am looking for a guest of your hotel. Do you speak English please?" Straker said slowly and clearly.

"Moment bitte."

Another voice continued, female this time, "Can I help you?"

Miss Fonteyne wasn't in her room, but they thought she was somewhere around since her room key wasn't in the rack, they would look for her in the garden, if it was indeed urgent.

Straker said he didn't mind waiting ... and started regretting that less than a minute later. The woman on the other end was talking - probably to the guy who had picked up the phone in the first place - and Straker could hear every word she said, and he understood most of it. How 'Die Fonteyne' had arrived to be with her boyfriend, somebody called 'Herr Fisher'. How Fisher was absolutely nutty about her. How another guy, 'der Altheim' had whisked her away from Herr Fisher. Altheim with his Ferrari who was always chatting up the women, how no woman could resist the guy's charm, or was it his money and his Ferrari. How she couldn't understand that any woman could prefer 'der Altheim' above poor Jurgen Fisher, even if Altheim was rich and powerful.

Straker didn't want to hear any more, but he couldn't slam down the phone either. What was it that Alec had said? That it was better to know?

"Miss Fonteyne has just come in Sir, please wait, I'll put the call through to her room."

And then her voice was on the other end. "Who is this?"

"Ed Straker"

"Oh it's you."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you." She was keeping it very polite and sounded like she was talking to a stranger. She didn't ask him how he was, but then she would have a pretty good idea as to that, wouldn't she?

"I had hoped you would call me."

"Something came up. I'm sorry, I really am."

"The something that came up wouldn't be called Altheim by any chance, and drive around in a Ferrari?"

"Ed, I ... It isn't what you think ..."

"I want to know the truth, so don't lie. You owe me that much. So you dumped your old boyfriend for the Ferrari-guy, did you? Did you tell your boyfriend about me, by the way? Or didn't I count?"

"Ed, really ..."

"Don't you 'Ed really' me - is it true or isn't it?"

"If you really want to know the truth Ed, I came here because I wanted to tell Jurgen it was all over. Then I met Heinrich and, well, we fell in love. As to you and me, you know very well nothing ever happened between us. I liked you a lot, but it wasn't a love affair now was it? We kissed once, that's all. I'm sorry if you read more into it, I never wanted to hurt you, but I thought you would get over it, over me, eventually."

"You knew how I felt."

"I also told you it was impossible, that it wouldn't work."

Straker could hear a voice in the background - a man's voice.

"Listen Ed, I have to go, we are going to a party and I have to get changed."

"Is he there with you? In your room?" Straker knew he shouldn't have asked that ... too late now.

"That isn't any of your business Mister Straker. Goodbye."

And the phone went dead.

Straker stood up, went to the drinks cabinet, and poured himself a double whisky. Then he called Henderson.

CHAPTER 9

"That must be a first, you drinking whisky," Alec said as he walked in, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong Alec. In fact I'm celebrating."

He couldn't even make the effort to keep the bitterness out of his voice. Well, he could tell Alec, couldn't he? Alec was probably the only friend he had ever had - or was likely to have. Even if Alec had never really understood him.

"Celebrating?"

"Lieutenant Fonteyne will be joining SHADO shortly - isn't that a cause for celebration, Alec?"

He took a sip from his whisky, and very nearly spitted it out again. How could anybody drink this stuff? It tasted foul.

"How can you drink this stuff, Alec?"

"Habit. Tell me what happened."

Straker stood up and went to get a coffee instead. He would throw that whisky out later.

"Happened? Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. Just a phone call, Alec. One little phone call. But a revealing one, definitely."

After a pause he went on. "It was all a lie. Or maybe it was all in my mind, just a fantasy. Ivy and I! There never was such a thing! She was just doing her job. She said as much, more than once, but I didn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. She went on that vacation after all, but with some other guy, her boyfriend. She told me she had someone but that it wasn't all that serious. She probably led that poor guy by the nose, just as she did with me. She got to where he lived in Germany and promptly fell in love with somebody else, some rich guy. With a Ferrari." He laughed. "Probably one up on my car, right? Anyway, so that's that. End of story."

"Did you ask Henderson to get her to transfer here?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that is wise?"

"She'll do her job, Alec, and she will do it well. I may have been wrong about her in other ways, but that I'm sure of. She's a professional - and SHADO needs her."

"Are you sure you aren't demanding her transfer here to get back at her?"

"Quite the opposite, Alec. When I told her I wouldn't force her to come and work here, now that was a decision made out of sentiment. That's how far sentiment gets one - gets me."

"It will be hard to take, having her around all the time."

"I'll survive. She is the best choice for the job. She knows how I think, how I operate. If anyone can keep the peace around here, if anyone can keep those sharks of the Commission off my back, it's her."

He had told Alec the real reason for Ivy's assignment here a few days after she had left, so there was no need to lie to Alec about it any more.

"And you are still as much in love with her as you were a few weeks ago."

He shrugged. "More fool me. I'll get over it."

"The computer has come up with some pretty amazing results regarding that comparative study of the UFO's shapes and their strength of explosion, by the way. You told me that that theory was her idea, didn't you? Well, they have found two types of UFOs that don't ever shoot first, and don't give a strong explosion either. The difficulty now will be to determine the type next time a UFO shows up. The computer is trying to work that one out. We will need better equipment to pick up the shapes and sizes of the UFOs."

"As soon as we've worked out the report, I'll go and convince Henderson to find us yet another big chunk of money. He'll love that. Maybe I'll tell him it was Ivy's idea, that will put him in a good mood. He liked her too."

"Everyone did. She seemed a decent sort - she couldn't have been fooling all of us surely? That's why I can't understand her behaviour regarding you and those guys you just mentioned. Are you sure you didn't get it wrong?"

"I'm positive. I'm off Alec."

"Going home?"

"I don't know. I'll see you in the morning."

"Be careful, Ed."

Straker smiled. "Don't worry - I'll be all right. It was just a bit of a shock."

He was playing it down a little, for Alec's sake. He didn't want Alec to worry about him.

* * *

Two hours later the telephone went on Straker's desk. Alec answered it and recognised Ivy's voice. No, he couldn't tell her where Ed was, had she tried his home?

"I tried there first, then his car, then here."

"I can always give him a message."

"Just tell him I'm sorry. And not to call me here again."

"He's not likely to do that."

"So he told you. Will he be all right, Alec?"

"He'll be fine. He just feels as if he's been through a major earthquake, his whole world just fell to pieces, and his heart is broken. Nothing to worry about really."

"You don't understand, Alec - but then how could you?"

"Make me understand."

"Well ... " there was a long pause, then she added curtly : "I was trying to be cruel in order to be kind. Goodbye Alec. Look after him."

"Until we meet again, Ivy."

She was gone.

Alec tried to get hold of the Commander, but he was nowhere to be found.

* * *

The next morning when Commander Straker didn't show up, Alec started to worry. Surely Ed hadn't done anything silly? Alec started calling Straker's home and his car every hour, without any results. Where was he?

The intercom went "Commander Straker just called Colonel. He'll be here in an hour or so."

"Thank you Miss Ealand."

* * *

Commander Straker looked his usual composed self, without any signs of strain or worry.

"Where the hell have you been, Ed? I've tried calling you several times, but I couldn't get hold of you."

"Sorry Alec, I didn't mean to worry you. I just drove around a bit, ended up at the South coast, and went for a walk. A long walk."

"She called last night."

"Did she?" Straker laughed bitterly. "Probably worried about what I would do - like having her transferred to SHADO. A bit late to stop it now - did you tell her?"

"No. She sounded worried about you, really worried."

"Oh yes? She would make quite an actress. Maybe Harlington-Straker can use her in a movie some day."

"That's what I thought at first, but thinking about it afterwards. I don't know - she sounded genuine."

Alec tried to repeat the conversation as well as he could to his friend.

"You have an over-active imagination, Alec. Forget it. I wish I could. Maybe I should try some of that amnesia drug - maybe they should invent a selective amnesia drug, that would be better in my case."

Straker was glad Alec left - he hadn't been sure how much longer he could have kept Alec from seeing what was really going on inside him. Alec probably knew, but he had to sort this out alone. And soon, before Ivy got here. A six week vacation - only two more weeks to go. Would her transfer have been approved by then? How long before she would show up here? In spite of everything, he longed to see her again, hear her voice again. He had to get over that somehow.

CHAPTER 10

Two weeks later, Ed Straker's calculations seemed to prove correct, since Miss Ealand announced Ivy's arrival.

"Sit down Lieutenant. Did you enjoy your vacation?"

He strove to maintain an even voice, he didn't want her to know how much it hurt just to look at her again.

"I've come to ask you not to do this, Commander."

"To do what, Lieutenant?" He asked innocently.

So he had managed to get under her skin. She knew about the transfer - would it have taken effect already? He hadn't heard anything about it any more, apart from Henderson's message that it had been arranged. Ivy looked angry. Why? She should have expected this. Besides, she didn't have half as much right to be angry as he did.

"Force me to come and join SHADO."

"Because of your poor sick mother who doesn't speak English?"

Good, he liked that. Just the right amount of sarcasm. It made her flinch.

"I never said anything about her being sick, just that she was getting older."

"Did she do one of these 'learn a language in 6 weeks' courses?"

"I'm sorry I lied about that, but I don't ever involve my mother in my professional life."

He couldn't really fault her on that. Hell, he wasn't going to let her win yet another battle was he? Better get back to discussing SHADO.

"You are the best choice for the job, Lieutenant, something which both you and I have known for weeks. You must have realised that your transfer to SHADO was unavoidable."

"I don't want to come and work for SHADO, I told you that several times."

"You told me a lot of things, Lieutenant. You even made me a promise. That taught me not to take too much notice of the things you say."

She was taken aback by that. In spite of his pain, Ed also felt a strange satisfaction.

"Oh come on, Commander, do you really think I can do this job if I have to do it against my will?"

"You're a professional, Lieutenant." He said firmly. "You will do your job. And you will do it well."

"You're a strange man, Commander. You are prepared to trust me on the one level, but not on the other."

That hit home. She was right - she had always been able to figure him out.

"It's too late now anyway, Lieutenant. Henderson has already ordered and approved your transfer, I couldn't stop it any more, even if I wanted to. So there is no need to try to talk me around, it wouldn't be any use. Now was there anything else, Lieutenant? I am rather busy."

Alec had been right. It would be difficult having her around day after day. But the alternative, never to see her again, was unthinkable. He wanted her to leave now - he needed to be alone.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I never meant for things to turn out that way. And I'm not talking about SHADO this time."

Straker didn't know how to respond to that. He didn't want to talk about that phone call to Germany.

"Forget about it, Lieutenant. None of that is important."

She knew he was lying, he could see it in her face. She knew just how important it had

been and still was, and how it had affected him.

"I just thought I would explain - or try to explain."

"I already told you, Lieutenant, I don't have the time to listen to tiresome explanations. I'm due for a meeting in five minutes time. I'm going to be late."

He was running away. Did she realise that? Of course she did. He didn't like the expression on her face, as if she were sorry for him. Not pity! He would have preferred her to remain angry, as she had been when she came in. He got up, ready to leave.

"I'm off now, Lieutenant. I'll be seeing you."

He walked out of his office, past Miss Ealand's desk, and turned round to face Ivy. She stood in the entrance of his office, still with this look of pity on her face - or was it concern? He would have thought so once, but not now.

"By the way Lieutenant, you're probably due to start here soon. When will you be joining us officially?"

"When my vacation is finished Commander."

"Till then, Lieutenant."

* * *

The studio business took up most of the afternoon. Back at his office he found General Henderson waiting for him.

"You have your funding Straker - for the equipment to determine the model or type of your UFOs."

Why did everyone and everything remind him of Ivy? Her scheme had been approved by the Astrophysical Commission. They had welcomed it with open arms - they called it a step in the right direction. They wanted to contact the UFOs badly, but until now nobody had thought there might be a safe way to do so.

"We are all looking forward to having a shot at contacting some of these aliens, Straker. If only you had thought of a scheme like that a few years before, I'm sure the Commission would have found it easier to back you up in other projects."

"I didn't think of it, Henderson."

"Well, one of your men did. Same thing."

"Wrong again Henderson."

Straker felt belligerent. He was angry with himself - He should have had it out with Ivy, instead of running away.

"What are you getting at, Straker?"

"Lieutenant Fonteyne came up with the idea. She wasn't even SHADO personnel at the time."

"She's one hell of a woman, isn't she? She was in my office earlier on. She will be a valuable addition to SHADO, especially if she comes up with more ideas like that one."

"Did she try to get out from being transferred to SHADO?"

"She did ask if that could be revoked, and I told her no. She isn't too happy about it, is she, Straker?"

"SHADO wasn't conceived to make its operatives happy, Henderson."

"She came to see you too, didn't she?"

"Yes. I didn't have much time though, I had to go to a studio meeting."

"Well, it's a pity we will have to wait for her for another six weeks."

"What are you talking about?"

"She's taking up all her leave first, didn't she tell you?"

"She probably didn't get round to it. I told you, I only saw her for a couple of minutes."
Straker was puzzled. Six weeks leave? Where did those come from?

Straker continued "I thought she took her vacation after her assignment with SHADO?"

"I thought so too, but apparently they moved her to Germany double quick. That's probably why NATO suggested I bring her along that day, even though they told me it had to do with one of her former cases. They didn't even give her time to go home after leaving here. That thing in Germany had something to do with a Commander Altheim who was using his contacts and even military transport to smuggle dope and weapons. Somewhere near the French border in the Schwarzwald."

Straker was glad he was sitting down. Was it possible? Was he hearing Henderson right? God, why hadn't he listened to her earlier? She had offered to explain and he hadn't wanted to hear it. It was as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders - she hadn't betrayed him after all! But why hadn't she told him at the time? Somehow?

"So what did she do? Catch the smugglers red-handed? Surely that seems a bit out of her league."

"As I understand it, it was a damned dangerous assignment. Interpol had already sent in people several times to find out just what was happening there after they received a tip. Two of their men disappeared, two others were found drowned in the Rhine.

"A few hotels on both sides of the border were involved, who used tourists to smuggle some of the goods across. This Altheim would pick up and deliver the stuff himself, because he apparently didn't trust anybody much. Your Lieutenant was responsible for finding out just when and where the goods were left and stored and who his contacts were, by playing along with him and even helping him to deliver the stuff. She did a real good job, very commendable."

Straker could see it now. His call, Ivy at a loss at what to say. The phones were probably tapped, if this Löwen Hotel was part of the chain. Just as well he hadn't called her by her rank at any time. His call must have scared her half to death. He could have given the whole show away! He could have caused her death. He suddenly felt sick. Would she ever forgive him? Why couldn't he just have trusted her? And of course she hadn't called him, she was probably under orders to tell everyone she was on a vacation. What if he hadn't left SHADO that evening, what if she had been able to talk to him instead of to Alec? Would she have told him then? She would have, he was sure of it. Strange how everything fell into place all of a sudden. She had given him clues, and he had been too blind to see it. Her denying anything had ever happened between them except for that one kiss. That wealth of feeling, of emotions that had suddenly broken loose when they kissed, that had been something tangible, far more important than the kiss itself. Her denying it had been a hint. And her calling him Mister Straker before she slammed the phone down! Why hadn't he gotten the message then? He had been an idiot. And he had probably lost her.

"She might find life tame here at SHADO after that rough stretch in Germany."

Henderson smiled. "Anyway Straker, I just came over to tell you the good news, your equipment will be ordered sometime in the course of the next few weeks, so you can go find us a few non-hostile UFOs. I'll see you later."

CHAPTER 11

So she was back in town. Paul had been helping her find a flat and she was moving in today. Paul was over there right now, giving her a hand. It should have been him, Straker, helping her, not Paul, but as things stood between them it was better he stayed away. He would wait for her to come into SHADO next week, and see how she dealt with it - how she dealt with being at SHADO because he had forced her transfer. She must hate him for that. He wanted so badly to go to her flat and see her, but he didn't have the courage - what if she rejected him? Much better to meet on neutral ground first.

"She's back, Ed." said Alec, walking into his office. "Did you hear?"

"Paul asked for the day off to go and help her move in. Yes, I do know."

"I never thought she liked Paul all that much. Do you think she asked him to help her to get back at you?"

He had told Alec the whole story - about Altheim and her mission there. Alec had offered to go and talk to her as soon as he got a chance, to go and explain things. But what was there to explain? He, Straker, hadn't trusted her, hadn't believed in her. Nothing Alec said could alter that fact.

"How are you going to handle it?"

"I don't know. I'll see first how she handles it."

"The waiting game. Wouldn't it be better to go into the attack straight away? Just go there, ask Paul to leave for a minute, and tell her you're sorry. She'll understand."

"I can't do that."

"Why ever not?"

He shrugged. "Because I can't."

Of course he couldn't. It would be too final if she were to reject him. At least now there was still a tiny ray of hope ...

* * *

She was back, back at SHADO, in her old office. Paul had brought her along. Straker, as her new C.O., would have to talk to her, it was expected of him. Paul and the others would wonder why if he didn't call her into his office. He wished Alec could be there for this meeting, but Alec had left for Moonbase the day before.

"Lieutenant, come into my office will you?", he said over the intercom.

And there she was, beautifully tanned, a smile on her face - a very faint smile. She was probably wondering how he would deal with the situation.

"Sit down, Lieutenant. I'm glad you are with us after all."

"I hope you won't expect me to say I'm glad to be here, Commander."

"Has Paul told you about how your little scheme has been worked out by the computer? Pretty soon we'll get the necessary equipment to try to figure out which UFO we could let safely through our defence system."

"What if I was wrong?"

"The computer doesn't think so."

"A computer doesn't think! It merely works out - at a tremendous speed - all the information that has been fed into it by human beings. Any mistake on the part of one of those humans might cause the computer to miscalculate."

"You make our computer sound nearly human, Lieutenant."

He liked this conversation. She was perhaps trying to needle him a little, but she had a

point, as usual. At least they were talking - and she was friendly. Cool, but still friendly.

Straker continued "We all owe you for that idea. The Astrophysical Commission is quite enthusiastic and they ordered me to get on with the scheme as soon as possible. If anything goes wrong, they will be to blame as much as anybody here. Something you once said to me, remember? Pass the buck, blame somebody else."

A dark shadow briefly crossed her face. She didn't want to be reminded of what had been said between them before. Was she trying to shut out the pain too?

She didn't answer. What else could he say to her?

"If there is nothing else, Commander, I'd better go back to my office."

As she was near the door, Straker began : "Ivy ... "

She turned around, a look of anger - or was it hatred? - on her face. "I would prefer to be addressed by my rank, Commander. You may be able to force me to come and work here, and I will do the best I can as far as that job is concerned. But that's as far as it goes."

"I'm sorry. For everything. That's all I really wanted to say."

"I'll tell you something, Commander - the day you sign my transfer back to my old unit, will be the day I accept your apology."

And she was gone.

* * *

Of the three UFO's, two had landed somewhere on Earth. They had approached from three different angles, too far away from Moonbase for the interceptor's launch to do any good. Sky 1 had shot up one of them, but Sky 2 and Sky 3 had been in totally wrong positions to get to the UFOs in time. And now they were lost out there somewhere. Everyone was looking at the beeps on the screen, but every beep was accounted for. They had lost the one UFO above the South Atlantic, the other one above the Indian Ocean. Where were they? He could feel the SHADO personnel looking at him, expecting him to come up with some brilliant idea as to how to locate those UFOs. But he couldn't think of one.

"Keep monitoring all traffic, Ford. I'll be in my office."

He was so deep in thought that he didn't notice Ivy following him in. She went to sit on the corner of his desk, facing him, pretty close considering how cool their dealings had been in the three weeks she had been back at SHADO. He could put out his arm and touch her. The thought excited him. Why was she here?

"I've always wondered why they don't do that more often, spreading out before they reach Earth so we can't possibly take all of them down. It gives one to think, doesn't it?"

"Just as well they don't, or we would be facing today's situation every time the UFOs approach."

"Doesn't that make you wonder?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Superior technology - or they wouldn't get here. But we still manage to catch the lot of them. Do you think that's logical?"

"There are more of us as there are of them. Safety in numbers. We can pull all stops, and find them at all cost, if need be. They usually only come in twos and threes."

"Which is odd by itself, don't you think?"

Straker stared at her. She was trying to stimulate his thoughts. She was trying to help him. Or was she trying to help the Commander rather than Ed Straker? It didn't matter, he was just grateful she was there.

He shrugged. "The trouble is I can't think. Tired, I suppose."

"I just thought they might be a civilisation on its way out. Not merely dying out or looking for another planet to live because of their atmosphere becoming un-liveable in some way, as seems the general thought here. I thought perhaps they aren't making any progress any more, that they have come to a standstill. Our world of science makes discoveries every day, maybe theirs doesn't, not any more."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because their attacks on Earth are so badly planned. Surely somebody capable of building a UFO could come up with a better plan of attack?"

"True. So what's your point?"

"Have you looked at the frequency of UFO sightings over the years lately?"

"Not really."

"There were 10 UFOs less in the last three months than in the same period last year. What I'm trying to say is, things might get better."

"I hope you're right."

Straker felt too tired to give a reaction or to discuss her idea at length. He closed his eyes to make his headache go away. If she were right, he should feel happy about it. But he didn't have the energy to feel anything much. Except for her nearness, that he could feel.

"I haven't been much help to you lately, have I?" Ivy said softly.

"You have done your job. I have no complaints."

"Maybe that's your trouble. You never complain."

He opened his eyes and looked at her, trying to figure out why she had said what she did. Was she extending the proverbial olive branch?

"As far as you're concerned, I don't have the right to complain."

"Says who?"

She was egging him on now. Why?

"What would be the use? You would only tell me to save my complaints for the day I let you leave SHADO, or something to that effect."

* * *

Ivy was silent for a moment. "There is something I think I should tell you, Ed."

She had called him Ed!

"I'm listening."

He was wide awake now, the lethargy and his headache had both disappeared.

"That business in Germany scared me. Henderson told you the story, didn't he?"

"Yes. My phone call could have given you away, I could have caused your death - I should have trusted you. I ..."

"Never mind, I wasn't talking about that."

As if she didn't want to think of his distrust of her either.

"That guy Alheim went for me, you know. They arrested him, and when they tried to handcuff him he attacked me. There were four of our team there apart from me, and all four of them together hardly managed to restrain Alheim. I had never seen such hatred in a man's eyes. That's when I made my decision."

"What decision?"

"That I would rather get into a fight with aliens."

He stared at her. "You mean you were going to request a transfer to SHADO after all?"

Ivy nodded.

"Then why did you say what you did - why did you insist on my letting you go?"

"Because you couldn't have anyway. Because I was angry with you. Because I wanted to hurt you."

He sighed and admitted "You certainly did that."

"I should never have let things go this far. But it's always difficult to find the way back isn't it? The way back to each other?"

What was she saying? The way back to each other? The way back to each other - but of course!

Straker jumped up, paused in front of Ivy, and briefly touched her cheek. "I hurt you too, unintentionally at first. Maybe that's harder to take than if it were intentional." Then he walked quickly to the control room.

"Ford, calculate a straight line between where those two UFO's came down. Then keep a very close eye on the area in the centre of the line. They are probably going to meet up again. We know they can travel under water. Calculate their course, and send Sky 1, 2 and 3 to follow this line. Position one right above each of the areas where the UFO would come out of the water along this line, before it goes over land to join up with the other one. Position the third Sky somewhere in the middle."

The atmosphere in the room changed instantly. There was this 'Straker has done it again' thought hanging in the air. Straker smiled at Ivy and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Thanks for putting that idea into my head, Ivy."

"Did I?"

"Think about it. You did."

Ivy smiled ... "You were taking my words out of context Commander."

* * *

"Sky 1 in position"

"Confirmed"

"Sky 2 in position" ...

"Maintain cruise above those co-ordinates."

They didn't have very long to wait. The one UFO was shot down as it popped up out of the water off the African East coast, the other one as it started coming out of the water close to the African West coast. The "well done Commander"s were numerous. But Straker hardly noticed them.

"How about we go for a pizza, Lieutenant?"

"Is that an order, Commander?"

"Definitely, Lieutenant."

"I don't seem to have any choice then, Sir."

Straker laughed - everything was going to be all right. They would sort things out between them, because they both wanted to. And he would never have to feel alone again.