

UFO II: New Faces

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"Jesus, Ed. I really thought we'd never be back in this office! I was hoping, in fact, that the next time we met would be at a wedding or something."

Alec Freeman, pacing back and forth in front of Ed Straker's desk, immediately regretted his outburst. He turned away from Straker and Virginia Lake as his face reddened.

"Actually," Freeman hesitated, "I meant at Ford's youngest's... Maggie's."

"Oh, you mean you don't know about the plans Ginny and I have?"

"What..?! You're kidding..."

"Actually, Alec, I am," smiled SHADO's commander-in-chief. Lake even grinned.

Freeman laughed and perched on the corner of Straker's desk. It was nice, he had to admit, that they could still joke with each other, even with the threat of another UFO invasion hanging over them. He lifted an MI-6 briefcase to the desk and unlatched it. Twisting the barrel of a fountain pen innocently protruding from a pen holder in the case and pressing a hidden catch, he lifted the false bottom and retrieved a manila folder marked with an MI-6 seal and a "Top Secret" stamp.

"I've got my candidate's dossier here."

Straker took the folder and glanced at the contents. Looking over his shoulder, Lake whistled when she saw the attached photograph and shook her head mischievously.

"A little young for you, Alec."

Now it was Freeman's turn to redden. In fact, Dawn Hamilton was the last woman he'd ever flirt with. And he'd even once briefly considered pursuing Lake herself, until he realized the depth of her attraction to Paul Foster and later Ed Straker himself. He thought of Dawn Hamilton as the daughter he never had, as well as a colleague he could speak honestly with. He had hoped, despite her youth, that when he retired from British Intelligence she'd be the one to take his place. Now he hoped to bring her into SHADO as a senior officer, answering directly to Straker himself.

"There's no one better, Ed. She's the best," Freeman stated flatly.

"Okay, Alec," Straker replied. "We'll bring her in along with Col. Lake's and my candidate on Friday. They can be briefed together and then have the weekend to relax. It'll help them bond. Remember the first batch of SHADO recruits?"

"Like boot camp, gentlemen?" Lake sarcastically asked.

"Well, yes, Ginny," Straker admitted.

"Look at what happened to those who were recruited individually," Freeman smiled, staring at her on purpose.

"Doctors and scientists exempted," Lake responded, raising her beautiful head slightly higher in mock superiority. Damn, thought Freeman, if Ed didn't marry her soon he's going to have some competition from his best friend. Virginia probably reminded Ed too much of his first wife, Mary, Freeman thought. That's why he can't ask her the big question. Well, at least the pressures of secrecy didn't apply to this couple, he mused.

Straker pushed the intercom button. "Major Grey, is Major Vasquez there?"

"Yes, Commander, he's right here with me."

"Good, send him in," ordered Straker, standing up and turning toward Lake and Freeman. "I'll be on my way to Boston tonight to talk to my candidate," he informed them, "Check in with me from Sydney, will you Col. Lake? Col. Ford will be in charge here and he'll have his hands full. Please, Alec, give him a hand like you did with me years ago. Bringing SHADO back on line is going to be a big job. Dismissed, you two."

The metal doors opened and Carlos Vasquez strode in as Lake and Freeman filed out. He smiled at Lake and Freeman, then stood at attention in front of Straker's desk as the doors closed.

"Relax, Major," Straker said. "This isn't another test. In fact, today I'm signing your official commissioning papers."

"Thank you, sir," the relieved Vasquez replied.

"I'm sending you to Norway next week to work with Captain Greenleaf on Skydiver 4's re-fitting. Do you remember Greenleaf? She trained with you when you first came to SHADO."

Vasquez frowned and shook his head. It was so frustrating: sometimes remembering every word spoken fifteen years ago, and other times not knowing someone who worked with you every day for years. Before meeting Straker for what he thought was the first time, a few months ago, Dr. Tate had explained that he had, in fact, met Straker years before. He had also been cautioned by the good doctor that those he knew previously at SHADO might have a difficult time remembering to re-introduce themselves to him.

"No, sir. But a few things might come back while I'm there."

"Like flying Sky 4, Major?"

"That's already back," Vasquez grinned. The SHADO Sky fighter simulator had revealed that Vasquez's reflexes were more than adequate for the tasks ahead. He might be a tad slower than he was a few years ago, but he was a lot smarter. All he needed now was the real thing.

"Good. You leave on Tuesday at seventeen hundred hours on a British Airways flight. Security will provide you with a cover, probably a CIA identity under a Harlington-Straker job as a stunt pilot."

"Thank you, sir," the once and future SHADO pilot said. "It's good to be back."

"Good to have you back, son," Straker smiled as he shook Vasquez's hand and walked him to the door. "Feel like a little lunch? I can tell you've got a million questions simmering under the surface, and it'll do you good to get them out. Why not hear the answers from an old horse's mouth?"

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Dawn Hamilton raised her SIG-Sauer SP2022 to eye level and sighted down the top of the slide at the target silhouette. The polymer frame felt solid, yet comfortably light in her hands. Lining up the glowing dot on the front site with the other two on the rear site, she squeezed the trigger three times in rapid succession. Pushing the target-retrieval button on the pillar to her left, Hamilton replaced the weapon in the holster at the small of her back and pulled the hearing-protection headset off, shaking her long dark tresses to untangle them.

"All three had better be head-shots," said a good-natured voice over her shoulder.

"Alec! I thought you were on vacation. When did you get back?"

"Just today," Freeman replied and examined the paper target. A tight cluster of holes, all touching, were centered where the figure's nose would have been.

"I'm leaving for Singapore tonight," the beautiful young agent said. "Want me to bring anything back for you?"

Freeman gritted his teeth and began walking toward the door of the underground firing range. "You won't be able to, Dawn," he informed her.

"What? Hey, wait a minute. I've actually been looking forward to this mission, Alec..."

"I know and I'm sorry. Something bigger came up."

Hamilton's gray-green eyes widened. Freeman looked back and stared at her. The Singapore mission had been Priority One: two RAF missile battery commanders had gone missing, along with their launch codes and some classified documents. Hamilton was to pose as the sister of one of the missing men and scout out the area they were last seen in. She would have had at least a dozen MI-6 operatives working under her command, along with two seasoned CIA agents. Freeman had no doubt she would have gotten the job done. After all, he'd trained her himself.

"What could be bigger?"

Freeman brought a finger to his lips and opened the door. He walked down a short hallway, Hamilton in tow, and headed toward the exit facing the parking lot.

Leaving the nondescript low gray building which hid an MI-6 firing range, the two approached Freeman's Jaguar. Hamilton smiled to herself at what a passerby might think. A distinguished older man in a well-tailored suit driving off in a sports car with a very young girl wearing a short leather skirt and thin silk

blouse: the stuff private investigators make their money from. She wondered what Freeman was like thirty years ago. As he started the motor and floored the accelerator to whip the car around, she smiled and concluded that he would have had to beat her off with a stick.

"What's so funny?" Freeman asked in mock irritation.

"You are," Hamilton replied.

"Ha, ha."

"The great spymaster isn't so good at keeping a secret."

"Better than you think, little girl," Freeman responded, pushing the button on the dashboard that activated the anti-listening device installed in his car. Hamilton took his cue and reached up to twist the knob that turned the windows reflective from the outside. Completely secure.

"Now then, General Freeman," Hamilton began, a tone of real concern in her voice, "What could be bigger than a Priority One mission?"

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Virginia Lake stepped onto the curb just outside the Sydney International airport and waved at the taxicab parked at the end of the stand. Despite the "Off Duty" sign, the driver pulled up to her and unlocked the door. Stepping out, he opened the trunk and placed her luggage inside. Holding the rear passenger door open for her, he asked her where she was going.

"University of Sydney. Department of Biology," she curtly answered. It had been a long flight, and she missed the secret fleet of supersonic transports that SHADO had operated ten years ago.

"I know it sounds hackneyed, but what's a beautiful..."

"...Doctor doing coming in so early? Well, if I told you young man, I'd have to kill you..."

The driver's eyes widened. She loved doing that to her admirers, thought Lake. Maybe Ed was right, and she'd eventually miss the attention she attracted as she got older. She smiled and hoped not. The day that Ed had told her that she was as beautiful as she was intelligent was the day she stopped complaining about how her looks put her at a disadvantage in the world of science. Impressing Ed Straker first as a scientist and colleague, and then as a woman, was something she'd always cherish.

She wondered about Alec Freeman's joke. No, there was no way now that she and Ed would ever marry. SHADO was their life, for better or worse. He'd sacrificed his marriage and his only son, and she'd given up a brilliant career as a computer scientist in order to defend the Earth from a silent attack by Alien intruders. It had to be that way.

Lake frowned when she thought of all she and Straker had done for the studio these past few years. A few years ago, they'd drunk a toast to retiring from SHADO and taking on the demands of Harlington-Straker full time. To studio employees, it seemed that they'd suddenly gained two brand new executives with seemingly endless energy, and to SHADO personnel anticipating retirement themselves, Straker and Lake became the poster children for what was possible when they returned to the real world: amnesia or not.

As the taxi pulled away from the curb, a second taxi followed at a discrete distance. In the back seat a man in his late thirties peered at the viewing screen of a small digital camcorder and played back the last few seconds of the conversation between Virginia Lake and her cab driver. He frowned at Lake's last sentence, then motioned to his cab driver to keep his distance from Lake's taxi.

-0-0-0-

Second Lieutenant Jeff Barry straightened the tie on his crisp new US Air Force uniform. Standing in his dormitory room at Boston University, he made faces at the mirror as his roommate watched and giggled. Holding up a model F-111 Stealth fighter, he sang an off-key rendition of the Air Force song "Wild Blue Yonder" in an exaggerated English accent.

"Dude," Jeff's Southern Californian roommate Chuck laughed, "you crack me up so bad! Send me an e-mail from the base as soon as you get there. Sure you don't want to stay here for another couple years? I don't think I can stand another semester with Prof. Lester alone."

"You'll do fine, Chuck. Just don't stand up and sing 'Good Vibrations' again in the middle of one of his sleeping pill lectures, huh?"

"Dude, you are the man!"

Spinning on his heels, Barry saluted his roommate and picked up his duffle bag. Smiling, but more

serious now, a torn tee-shirt wearing Chuck returned the salute, then hugged Barry.

"Thanks, Chuck," Barry whispered. "If it weren't for you I never would have passed Physics-three...and I wouldn't have ever discovered 'Baywatch' reruns."

The two laughed and walked through the door of their room for the last time together.

Barry and Chuck headed toward the elevator. As it opened, the new USAF Reserve officer stepped over a large plastic bag full of garbage. It was the last day of the semester, and the dorm was being cleaned out by the Buildings and Grounds staff. Most graduates, unlike Barry, had already left. But his mother had only flown back home to England yesterday and he had stayed to the last minute in the AFROTC dorm to be with her and his sister Jane. Now it was time to head to his first US Air Force assignment in Nevada as a reconnaissance officer for a mysterious squadron that he suspected flew the new top secret Aurora aircraft. He couldn't wait to see if he'd be allowed to fly in the 'back seat' in one of the secret sub-orbital craft.

Shaking Chuck's hand one last time, Barry saluted Chuck as the doors of the elevator closed.

As he walked out onto the street in front of his dormitory on Commonwealth Avenue, a sleek silver car pulled up in front of him. A thin white-haired man looked up at him through dark aviator's glasses.

"Need a lift to the airport?" the man asked.

"Uh, I was going to take a taxi."

"It's no problem, Lieutenant. In fact, I was waiting for you. I knew your mother, Nina."

Barry's eyes widened.

"Come on, get in. I spent some time here years ago, and I know how long it can take to get to the airport."

Against his better judgment, Barry opened the rear door, swung his duffle bag onto the back seat, and climbed into the passenger seat. There was something intriguing about this man, he thought. Perhaps he worked with Mom when she was a Royal Navy officer. The car sped off towards Storrow Drive on the way to Logan International Airport.

"I'm an MIT-man, myself. Although I took some classes at BU. It's got a pretty good program now. Straker, Ed Straker. I was a colonel in the Air Force a long time ago."

"Did you know my mom when she was in the Royal Navy?"

"Yes. Well, actually, she worked for me in England before I retired. Good officer. Very good under pressure. She probably never speaks of those years, though."

"You're right, in fact, she had an accident..."

"I know...How is she doing?"

"Good. She's VP of operations now for an Internet startup, you know. My mom the entrepreneur," Barry laughed.

"Really? Going public soon?"

"Maybe next year. She says it's really for her retirement money."

Straker laughed and then was suddenly very serious. Pressing two buttons underneath the car's dashboard, he glanced at Barry. A low hum, almost imperceptible, filled the car.

"Now we can speak freely, Lieutenant. I'm here to ask you to join the same organization your mother once worked for. An organization so secret that we had to give her amnesia when she retired."

-0-0-0-

Dawn Hamilton and Alec Freeman sat in his parked Jaguar on the side of the road, English farm country outside the closed windows.

"My god, Alec," Hamilton exclaimed, "This all started before I was even born. This is unbelievable! I figured you had some secrets that you could never tell me, but this..."

"...was from a life I thought was over," Freeman continued. "But it's not, unfortunately. And I'm looking at someone now whom I think has got the right stuff to help SHADO."

As Hamilton looked up at him, Freeman suppressed the urge to hug her like a father. He continued to silently stare at her.

"So there really are monsters under the bed, huh?" She read his expression perfectly.

"Yeah. Yeah, kid there are."

-0-0-0-

"Hello? Anyone here?" called Virginia Lake, as she walked through the laboratory. She looked at the names attached to the open office doors until she found the one she was looking for: Dr. Steven Oakes.

There was no one there.

Looking at her watch, she noted that she was slightly early. Turning her attention back to Dr. Oakes' office, she noticed that he had a suitcase partly open on the floor near a well-worn sofa. On the sofa there was a folded blanket and sheet, along with a pillow. On a bookcase behind his desk, Lake noticed that Dr. Oakes had quite a collection of small clay and pewter figures. Each figure seemed to be some sort of odd creature: the sort of creature a xeno-biologist might imagine existed on another not-quite-Earthlike planet.

Looking up at the whiteboard in Oakes' office, Lake recognized a series of complex biochemical molecular diagrams. Each diagram was a work of art, complete with small precise notations along the side of the main diagrams. Tearing her eyes away from the whiteboard, Lake saw that Dr. Oakes had an open file on his PC. It was a book he was writing entitled "The Chemistry of Extra-Terrestrial Life: Supposition and Experiment". Lake smiled at the thought that Dr. Oakes might actually have the opportunity soon to fulfill the promise of his book. Too bad he'd never be allowed to publish it. We'll also have to work on his lack of attention to security, she also thought.

"Dr. Lake?" called a male voice from the doorway.

Turning towards the door, Lake cleared her throat. "Yes. Virginia Lake. Pleased to meet you, Doctor."

"The pleasure's mine," Dr. Oakes said as he shook Lake's hand. He was slightly younger than he appeared in the photograph in the SHADO report, Lake noted. The thirty-three-year-old Oakes gestured towards the sofa as he closed the door behind him.

"Well, Dr. Lake," he began, "you didn't waste much time getting here. The guard said that you left a suitcase with him."

"Speaking of suitcases, Dr. Oakes, I see that either you're anticipating leaving on short notice, or have recently been evicted," Lake joked, pointing to his own suitcase at her feet.

"When experiments run for several days, what can I do? I don't live on the University campus."

"Ah. I see, Doctor. I remember some late nights when I was at University. But you must be very dedicated to keep a whole wardrobe here."

"As dedicated as any researcher would be when he thinks that extra-terrestrial life exists, and that we need to be prepared for detecting it. You probably know that the first Soviet space missions to Mars and Venus never had any cleanroom treatments prior to launch. For all we know, our own microbes may be killing innocent Martian or Venusian native life."

"Perhaps, Doctor." Lake took a small silver cylinder out of her handbag and twisted one end. A faint humming sound filled the room.

"Are you recording our conversation?"

"Quite the opposite, Dr. Oakes. I'm making sure our conversation stays as private as possible. I have an offer for you. A plea, really..."

The man who had followed Virginia Lake by taxicab lowered the camcorder from his eyes and shook it. Growling, he tapped the side of the viewing screen, which showed nothing but static, and fumbled with a small 35mm camera. Just as he lifted it to his eyes, he saw the curtains close to Dr. Oakes' office window. He swore and then reached into his jacket pocket for a small reporter's notepad and a pen. The name "Jake Mudge" was scrawled on the cover of the notepad along with a Web address: .

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The intercom buzzed in the conference room. It was Major Grey. "The recruits are all here, Commander."

Straker looked up and exchanged glances with his senior staff, as well as Major Vasquez. "Send them in, Major," he responded.

The door opened and Dawn Hamilton entered the room, followed by Dr. Oakes and a wide-eyed Jeff Barry.

"Hello Ms. Hamilton, Dr. Oakes, Lieutenant Barry," Straker began. "I believe you've met some of our senior staff here at SHADO already: General Alec Freeman, Col. Keith Ford, Col. Virginia Lake, and Major Carlos Vasquez. I'm Commander Straker. The next few weeks will be tough. I won't lie to you. They'll be the

toughest weeks of your lives. But they'll make you better officers, better people. We need the best if SHADO is going to begin fighting Aliens again.

"Ms. Hamilton, upon completion of your training, you will be 'Colonel Hamilton', reporting directly to me. Dr. Oakes and Lt. Barry, you will be the primary members of Col. Hamilton's team, along with Major Vasquez when he finishes with his assignment in Norway. Standing in front of you is the 'old' SHADO. What we need you to become is the 'new' SHADO.

"As you all know, forty years ago Alec and I founded and built SHADO in response to Alien abductions and mutilation of our planet's innocent inhabitants. Among our first recruits were Keith Ford, here, and your mother Nina, Lt. Barry. It took almost three decades, but I believed we had beaten them. We forced the Aliens to withdraw. But now, they're either desperate or they sense an opportunity because they're back, and we need to fight them with everything we've got.

That means bringing our Skydivers out of mothballs, getting Moonbase back on line, and recruiting people like you to pick up where we left off. The old SHADO will there to guide and advise you, but remember this: the Aliens have had years to think up new tactics and new ways to get what they want. So we need you to anticipate and circumvent their moves. That's what you and others like you will bring: a fresh perspective and energy to fight for our planet, for our lives.

"Welcome to SHADO."

Author: Luke McGlue

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