

ORION

Based on "UFO" the science-fiction TV series created by
Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and Reg Hill (1969-1970)
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The time is now; the mission - as always - keep this planet safe from an alien intelligence, bent on harvesting what they can of earth's natural resources and her people, for their own dying race.

General Straker has been in the vanguard of that fight for almost thirty years. His friends are now retired, transferred to command other SHADO divisions - or dead. But, his dedication has never waned.

When a mission to take up the new SHADO moon module ends in a dog fight with alien ships, Straker is forced to rescue the crew of a NASA space shuttle caught in the cross-fire, and then recruit the astronauts who've seen too much to ever go home again!

CHAPTER ONE

"You're not serious are you?" Alec Freeman shifted uneasily in his chair.

"I'm serious. It's time I got to enjoy a bit of the excitement. You British fly boys get all the glory!" Ed Straker grinned.

"Yes, but this is the new moon module's inaugural flight," countered Freeman.

"What better chance to log a little air time behind the controls? I haven't exactly booked much flight time since I took this job, you know." Straker leaned forward in his own seat, "Look, it's perfectly safe. It's not really a test flight. We're going to have back-up in the form of the Interceptors who'll be guiding us in, and I'm reassigning Pete Carlin to fly co-pilot with me - just for this trip. It's no big deal."

"The big deal is that SHADO's commander is going to be riding a new spacecraft, and putting himself 'out there' unnecessarily," Freeman used his coffee cup to punctuate his point. He'd given up the demon tobacco when he'd lost a lung to cancer.

"C'mon, Alec, I know what's eating you," Straker grinned again, mischievously, "You're just a sore loser. You wanted this trip, didn't you?"

"I'm expendable, you're not," Freeman commented.

"I know where you're coming from, but just this once I'd like to take her up myself. Look, case closed. Everything's been arranged, I leave at 0:400 tomorrow morning. I'll be back in a few days, and you can keep my seat warm for me!" Straker lit up a cigar, "Guess I better enjoy this while I can - what with all those non-smoking regulations at Moon base, eh?"

Freeman got up to leave the office, "Why don't you give that filthy habit up. It's so politically incorrect nowadays."

"You former smokers are the most militant! Besides, if I gave up my last vice, what would

you have to bitch me out about?" He sucked in on the cigar luxuriously, closing his eyes as if to suggest great pleasure.

"You're incorrigible!" and Freeman was gone.

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Freeman wasn't the only member of SHADO's "upper management" staff to question Straker's decision. Paul Foster and Dr. Jackson also chided their commander for wanting one last joyride. Straker's viewpoint was that he'd made numerous trips to the Moon base over the years in the old modules - the only difference was that he was going to be the pilot this time - not a passenger. His age had nothing to do with it. Straker cited his high marks and obvious skill in the module simulator as justification for his desire. He was a "hands-on" kind of commander - he kept himself informed and up to date on every new piece of hardware, device or vehicle that SHADO developed for usage in their war against the alien invasion. He tried all the simulators as they became available. Straker believed he had to maintain his own knowledge of the equipment his people were using.

The new Moon module was an improved design. SHADO, posing as a top secret British Intelligence think tank, managed to purchase some timely technology from the American and Canadian space programs a number of years earlier, adapting them substantially for their own purposes. SHADO had enjoyed for some time the technical wizardry to grab their SIDs, using a modified CanadArm, to pull them inside the new modules (much like NASA's space shuttles, but vastly tweaked!) for repairs or add-ons. Many dollars, pounds, rubles and francs were expended on the building of additional SIDs since the 1980's, and extra long-range scanning devices similar to the Hubble Space Telescope. The advent, in the year 2000, of the International Space Station, meant SHADO would have to exercise even greater caution to maintain their secrecy in space.

Special "cloaking" or anti-radar technologies, even better than that utilized for the Stealth fighter planes, had been created, to prevent non-SHADO astronauts from determining just what that "British think tank" was up to in outer space. It was a dicey business, this growth of an international space consortium, side by side with a secret military force, also of international origin. While NASA, ESA (the European Space Agency) and the space programs of other nations were busy working to conquer the "final frontier," SHADO had been utilizing advanced technologies (some captured from downed alien spacecraft in the 1940's!) to fight perhaps those same aliens whose gadgetry they sometimes took for granted. Rumours abounded for decades on both sides of the Atlantic that many modern technologies owed their development to alien scientific mastery.

SHADO had of course been in the forefront of silencing those rumours for their own protection, and whisperings of "Men in Black" actually alluded to SHADO operatives who destroyed film and video footage, wiped memories clean with special serums, and generally eradicated all evidence of other-worldly visitors. There was a full time, separate SHADO division devoted to this work, called the Omega Corporation, and they took their work VERY seriously. Straker had given them carte blanche, right from the beginning, to silence those who spoke of alien encounters, but the worldwide phenomenon of recalling "alien kidnappings" under hypnosis had taken on a life of its own. SHADO operatives investigated these cases quietly. Some were hoaxes, some were pathetic bids for attention from the public, and some were...dealt with. Top SHADO theorists were of the educated opinion that the aliens had begun using their own medical technology to clone human organs, which meant they no longer had to kill and mutilate for their spare parts. And, their quest for human reproductive organs

had an ominous menace. Were they now poised to start breeding hybrid alien-humans? And to what purpose?

Straker watched SHADO's mission take on new colorations in the last two decades; from its early shake-down days in the 1980's, when traitors and penetration of the organization seemed a constant risk, to the incredible cyberspace explosion of the 1990's that enveloped SHADO and improved its performance level 200 percent. Cell phones, VCRs, digital television, home and corporate computers, laptops - this technology had given all of SHADO's divisions unbelievable reach and power - many years before they became items of public consumption. And, the organization wasn't above a little industrial espionage when they felt some technological advance would serve their needs better than the public's.

Now, one year into the new millennium, Straker was beginning to feel the ravages of time. Unlike his alien adversaries, who rebuilt themselves with human organs and tissues, Straker was getting older naturally. Alec Freeman was about to retire; Paul Foster transferred over to co-ordinate the Omega Corporation, based in New York City. Virginia Lake got out so she could have a family and a "normal" life eight years ago. Gay Ellis and Mark Bradley were now leading the Moon base operatives' training program on a private island off South America. Even Peter Carlin, normally the commanding officer of SHADO's submarine fleet, was feeling antsy. He'd accepted Straker's offer to ride co-pilot on the new moon module, and made some humorous comment about "not being ready to be put out to pasture" yet.

With all the "old hands" retiring, or taking posts with different responsibilities, Straker had managed to groom replacements. The people might move on, but the job didn't. As long as there were still aliens intent on subverting, harming, or kidnapping humans for God knows what reason, SHADO had a mandate. But, for the present, Straker was still General Straker, and if John Glenn could take one last space ride at age 77, than by God, so could he!

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The sun was not yet up. Straker and Carlin were taken by special truck to the launch pad and strapped into their command cockpit. Countdown commenced, and all systems were given one final check. They were carrying some cargo, but nothing of vital importance, mostly gourmet foodstuffs for the Moon base crew, who were tired of reconstituted and microwaved meals. NASA was also scheduled to send up their own new space shuttle, the Enterprise, named after the famous Star Trek ship, en route to the International Space Station, orbiting above the earth's atmosphere. Equipped with their SHADO anti-radar-scanners, the NASA astronauts would never even know they'd have company in space today.

SHADO, like NASA, had started naming their spacecraft. At 0:500 exactly, the Luna One lifted off from one of Great Britain's top secret launch site, and was on her way skyward when Straker reported to SHADO Control, "Luna One is on course 278-zero-one-niner. We'll escape earth's gravitational forces in 58 seconds, and follow trajectory seven to the Moon."

Sitting in their space suits, Straker and Carlin exchanged naughty school-boy grins. They had forgotten the unbelievable rush that came with lift-off. It had been far too long for both of them. They enjoyed the incredible vista of stars and the moon looming in their viewing ports. Coming up on the right, a phalanx of Interceptors took up formation around the module, and the team leader, Sergei Romanov, radioed, "Luna One, we have you on visuals now. We'll be your personal escort to Moon base. Congratulations, on your inaugural flight - she looks gorgeous!"

Straker responded, "Nice to see you fellas - just out for a Sunday drive?"

The bonhomie was momentarily halted as sensors and scanners in every ship, including

the Luna One, screamed!

"What the hell was that?" Straker demanded, but his request for information was drowned out by the rapid inter ship chatter amongst their escort.

Col. Romanov came back over the radio finally, "We've lost our cloaking capacity - and so have you! There's another space craft dead ahead - they must have seen us by now!"

Carlin leaned forward and peered out his own view port - he looked back at Straker, "My God, it's the Enterprise!"

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NASA's new flagship shuttle, the Enterprise, was moving quickly, closing the distance between the Luna One and her escort of Interceptors. Without their special visibility damper, they were naked - exposed to the real world shuttle crew. SHADO had long since dispensed with using identifiable external logos on their ships, but they weren't supposed to be there at all. As far as NASA and ESA knew, they were the only organizations with that kind of hardware. How the hell were they going to explain THIS sighting?

And, every NASA space shuttle was equipped with more than just the astronauts' eyes. They had some of the most sophisticated recording and scanning gear technology could devise, and all of it was aimed right now at the Luna One and her sister ships.

"Can we jam their radio frequencies to Houston?" Straker asked Col. Romanov, tersely.

"It's probably already too late for that - bloody hell!" Romanov's transmission was cut off...

Straker and Carlin watched in stunned paralysis as a swarm of UFOs flickered into solid mass, firing at will! They realized, with growing terror, that they and their party were NOT the obvious target - it was the Enterprise!

The Interceptors screamed off in a flight formation to protect the Enterprise - chasing individual UFOs like WWII fighter planes. Rapid fire cannons were blasting out bolts of colored energy from both the UFOs and the Interceptors. Caught in the crossfire, trying vainly to maneuver itself, was the Enterprise. It tried to turn in a wide arc to avoid the space battle, but ended up having one of its wings blown away.

Straker and Carlin exchanged grim expressions, then Straker said, "I'll pilot her in if you'll take over weapons control!"

Carlin nodded, and powered up their weapons array, "Whenever you're ready!"

Exercising her muscle, the Luna One swooped over closer to the Enterprise, firing repeatedly at those UFOs who'd ventured too close to the NASA shuttle. They dinged one, which spiraled off on a sharp trajectory towards the earth's atmosphere, and managed to blast two more out of existence. Meanwhile, the Interceptors were disposing of the rest.

Straker could hear the Enterprise's mayday message being broadcast over several radio frequencies, "...we're hit! Jesus, they all just came out of nowhere! Who in hell...Houston - WE HAVE ONE HELLUVA PROBLEM!"

Carlin watched the stricken UFO as it flashed through the outer layers of earth's atmosphere, "The fleet will track that one down!" he observed, with satisfaction, hearing Col. Romanov's voice reporting the injured UFO and their "kill number" to the operatives at Moon base.

"Yeah, but we gotta do something about the Enterprise," Straker responded, noting the NASA craft's lopsided maneuvering. It was obvious she was now almost powerless, drifting in space. How much time did they have before the astronauts were without air or in danger of an explosion on board?

"There's no choice," Carlin told him, "We have to contact them - tow them in - or take them off the shuttle!"

Straker knew there was no other choice. They couldn't condemn those astronauts to a fiery reentry death in a space shuttle which could no longer power itself properly.

"Raise them on the radio, Pete! Let them know we want to effect a rescue - I'll try to park us a little closer to them," Straker laid into the throttle gently.

* * *

After the initial shock, the NASA astronauts were indeed grateful for a rescue. The Enterprise was too badly damaged to be towed anywhere. Their commander, astronaut Tina Kovac, was guarded at first, barraging Carlin with questions. Finally, Carlin convinced her to have her people suit up, and space walk the short distance to the Luna One, where they could enter the SHADO module through the airlock.

In the interests of getting them off the Enterprise with as little fuss or fear as possible, Carlin lied to Commander Kovac. He told her they would all be returning to earth immediately, and everything would be sorted out back home, but he knew that was not possible. In truth, the Luna One would finish her trip to the Moon base, and the NASA astronauts would be given the special amnesia serum to erase all memory of their space encounter, or dealt with in some other manner.

Explaining the loss of the Enterprise to a shocked world below would be the kicker. When the Enterprise reentered the atmosphere, she would be destroyed, and the astronauts would be considered dead.

Once the astronauts were safely on board the Luna One, Straker had Carlin deliver a couple of shots to send the NASA flagship careening on her way into the earth's atmosphere, to burn up and become so much dust and unrecognizable space debris.

Commander Kovac leapt forward in her seat, at least as fast as zero-g would permit, and grabbed Carlin's arm, "Christ! What are you doing! That's our ship out there! Are you crazy?"

Straker laid an arm on her space suit to restrain her, "Commander, it's better this way." His voice was ominously calm as he looked from his pilot's seat up at her, "Please, we do know what we're doing."

Kovac looked back at her own crew. They, too, were shocked, and some were still trying to digest the events of that morning, judging by their expressions. She flopped back into her own seat and turned down her sun visor so the others wouldn't see her angry, impotent tears.

The Luna One, having mercifully dispatched the Enterprise, banked and headed for the moon, followed by its escort of Interceptors.

CHAPTER TWO

Straker radioed ahead that they were going to have "guests". In SHADO parlance, that meant the base commander was expected to have discreetly armed guards and a couple of doctors on hand so their "guests" could be dealt with efficiently. Secrecy was still of the essence. The NASA astronauts had to be kept as "protected" as possible. Besides, Straker also had to make some difficult decisions.

As far as the rest of the planet was concerned, NASA would have already tracked the injured Enterprise down into the atmosphere and would be forced to announce its destruction with all hands on board. Already CNN was calling the "Enterprise Incident" another Challenger. SHADO made it a point to carefully monitor all electronic media broadcasts. The networks were portraying Commander Kovac and her crew as "heroic" and having given their lives in the commission of their duty in space, etc. That sort of rhetoric always brought a grim smile to Straker's face - how many SHADO personnel had given their lives to protect earth, and CNN would never announce them as being heroes!

For the time being, the doctors took the NASA people to their infirmary. It was a newer area of the Moon base which could be well isolated from the rest of the installation. On the pretext of giving them all standard medical checks, the doctors managed to keep the astronauts confined to the infirmary for some time.

Straker, Peter Carlin and the base commander, Col. Boyd sat down to discuss the situation at hand.

"How the hell did we lose our cloaking capability out there?" Straker demanded.

"The best educated guess our techs have come up with is that the aliens' cloaking frequencies jammed ours. They're still working on it. Lab tests show our systems are back on-line now," Col. Boyd explained, as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Do we have the text of everything those NASA astronauts reported to Houston?" Peter Carlin asked.

Col. Boyd added some sugar to her cup, "Yeah, but it's not encouraging. They managed to describe our ships, the aliens, and the battle."

"What can we do for damage control?"

"The rest of the world thinks they're dead. We can't wipe their memories and then set them down somewhere. That would just keep the controversy going," Col. Boyd commented.

"You've been monitoring NASA's communications system - what are they saying internally about this?" Straker demanded. He had been many hours without a cigarette and was beginning to feel more than slightly irritated.

"To be frank, they're scared shitless. And, it's clear they don't want it to become public knowledge that some Star Wars-type space battle KO-ed their flagship space craft and killed their top crew. I think we can safely depend on NASA to keep their figurative mouths shut. At least in public. But, there are those who know, at the highest level, that something vastly unexplained took place this morning."

Peter Carlin sipped his own coffee thoughtfully, "These people are highly trained astronauts. They can't go home now. What can we do for them?"

"We?" Straker asked, "They're a goddamn security risk!"

"This wouldn't be the first time we turned someone over to our side. Look what happened in the 80's when we brought in Paul Foster," Carlin mused.

"I know what you're saying, Pete, but we've never had so many at one time before. It's

easy to turn one man or one woman, but seven freaked out astronauts?" Straker asserted.

"I don't think we have a choice. What's the point of us rescuing them just to dispose of them here? I don't think SHADO has to resort to murder all the time." It was clear Carlin was opposed to drastic action.

Col. Boyd spoke up again, "It's worth a try, General. If we deal with them all fairly and honestly, explain the impossibility of their 'coming back from the dead' and offer them a reasonable alternative, as SHADO operatives, maybe they'll be more agreeable than we think."

Straker sighed. He was outnumbered. And, badly in need of a cigarette. Like Carlin, he deplored having to resort to murder to maintain security. It had happened before, and his conscience was still smoldering over it. He had never liked ordering "a hit" on someone just because they knew too much and couldn't be trusted to keep quiet. SHADO shouldn't have to function like some space-age Mafia.

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"Well, I just read all their files. They're an elite group. They might prove useful to SHADO. The commander's a Canadian. Kinda odd. I thought NASA was pretty protective of their own." Straker motioned to Pete Carlin to sit down.

"Canadians have been going up on NASA shuttles since the days of Marc Garneau and Roberta Bondar. But, I do believe this is the first time a Canadian has ever led a mission," Carlin commented, "What about the others?"

"One Brit, the rest are Americans. Their mission involved some scientific experiments and a payload of materials for the International Space Station. Not a cheap loss, that one."

"Where people are concerned, it never is", Carlin watched Straker fidget nervously with his pen, "So, what are you going to do?"

"Jesus, Pete," Straker cursed quietly, "I don't want to condemn these people. But, what if any of them say no to us? How do we handle that? NASA considers them dead heroes."

"We don't have to follow standard operating procedures all the time. We can make exceptions," Carlin's unspoken words were obvious to Straker - YOU can make exceptions - you have the power of life and death over these people.

"How do we tell them they'll never see their families again? That the world believes they're dead? And, that their only choice now is to work for us - or...what?" Straker had always passed this task off in recent years to Alec Freeman, or Paul Foster or Virginia Lake.

Pete Carlin leaned across the table, "I don't think they have much choice in the matter. They're smart people. I think they'll see the options open to them and embrace them, once they're given the truth."

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Over 24 hours without much rest or a single cigarette had not prepared Straker well for this encounter. He was tired, bitchy, and going into nicotine withdrawal. Col. Boyd had managed to find some stale anti-nicotine chewing gum for Straker, but it was virtually tasteless and was doing nothing to improve Straker's mood. He stepped out of the sonic shower and popped another piece of gum in his mouth - it wasn't even good enough to make bubbles with!

After shaving and getting dressed, Straker felt he at least looked the part of SHADO's commander, even if he didn't feel the part. Exhaustion had drawn deep circles under his expressive blue eyes. He knew the Enterprise's skipper had been demanding a meeting with "whoever was in charge of this installation" for several hours. It was no longer possible to put her off. All the astronauts had been put through as many tests as the doctors could perform on them, and it was clear anything else would be viewed as stall tactics by NASA's best. Aside

from their mental states, they were in good health physically.

Straker walked down the corridor to Briefing Room One. He seated himself at the desk and buzzed for Commander Kovac to be brought in.

Stripped of her bulky space suit, Commander Kovac was something of a surprise. She was short, solidly built, and red-haired. What had he expected? NASA chose their astronauts for their intellectual capacities, not their physical appearances.

She came in and looked down at Straker, "Are you in charge here?" she asked. For a woman so short in stature, she had a deep, resonant voice.

"My name is General Edward Straker. I'm the person you've been wanting to talk to."

Kovac nodded and sat down, but there was a caged tigress aura about her, "I remember you - you were the pilot who picked us up...you ordered the Enterprise destroyed!" Her voice was stone cold.

"Commander, I think once you permit me to explain everything to you, you'll forgive me for the decision I had to take. I do know what it's like to pour your heart and soul into something." Straker was oddly composed, regarding her with those big blue tired eyes.

"Who are you - really?" Kovac was clearly tired of being given the run-around, "What the hell happened out there?"

"From what we've been able to ascertain, your ship was the target of an alien intelligence." Straker paused to let what he said about aliens sink in, "We tried to protect you, but it didn't go well. Your ship's loss is... regrettable. I'm just glad we were able to take you and your crew off to safety." Time to remind her to be grateful.

"Okay, so you saved our asses. What's with the Star Wars scenario? You don't look like Luke Skywalker to me!" Was she playing the tough cookie on purpose?

"Not even close," Straker smiled, despite himself and the seriousness of the situation, "But, here's what I will tell you..."

* * *

Tina Kovac lay back on her bunk, still stunned. She had spent the last three hours in conversation with a man who told her aliens from another solar system had been raiding planet earth for the last 30 years or more, kidnapping humans, using them for spare parts, and generally causing havoc. And, an organization named SHADO had stemmed the tide and kept the aliens from a full scale take-over. Scenes from a dozen science-fiction movies flooded her mind - like Star Trek: First Contact, with the Borg going back in time to prevent the Federation from becoming a reality; Sigourney Weaver battling those nightmarish aliens in the movie series of the same name; Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith blasting insectoids in "Men In Black"; audio recordings of Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds." It was the love of science and science-fiction that had gotten her into the Canadian Space program, and finally into NASA. And, now where was she? Dead.

Dead to her family. Dead to NASA. Dead to the world. General Straker had even played for her video footage of President Bush's announcement of the Enterprise and her valiant crew's loss. They were being compared to the Challenger crew, the Apollo One astronauts. Lost in the line of duty. The Canadian flag on Parliament Hill was lowered half-staff, as were the Union Jack in London, and the Stars and Stripes in Washington, to commemorate the Enterprise's lost crew. It was surreal. Too weird for words. There were even plans being laid for some sort of three-country memorial service...and she would never see her family again. She thought of her husband, an architect, and her two kids - what would it be like for them? They would have to start a new life too - one without her. She could never see them again,

could never go home, could never enjoy all those things that had made her life worth living up to this point.

Now that she was conveniently dead, Straker had offered her another job. In fact, her entire crew was being offered new jobs. She looked over at the laptop computer Straker sent her back to her quarters with. He said it was loaded with vital information about SHADO, its history and the alien menace which had been SHADO's raison d'etre for the last 20 years or so. Were the science-fiction authors right after all?

She couldn't sleep anyway. It was time to consider contingencies. Kovac sat up and flipped open the laptop.

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Carlin reported to Straker that the NASA people had agreed as a body to take up their new lives with SHADO. All except one. Commander Kovac insisted on speaking again with Straker personally.

"Before I sign on the dotted line, what guarantees do I have that I won't be eliminated?"

"What makes you think we'd eliminate you? We've just offered you all new jobs and new identities," Straker countered.

"Don't play that game with me. I'm not stupid. We know too much. We SAW too much! We're a major security hazard. How can an organization like yours ever completely trust us not to go AWOL?"

"We can't. We're taking a calculated risk. Standard operating procedure, if we'd followed it to the letter, would have meant you'd be REAL dead heroes. We could have left you on the Enterprise to die."

Kovac was silent for a moment, then she said, "So can we ever really trust each other?"

Straker inclined his head slightly and then he fixed her with a cold blue eyed stare, "I guess that's up to you and your people, isn't it?"

She knew what he meant. The veiled threat was implied. "Do as we want, work for us, and you'll have a whole new life. Step out of line, just once, and it's game over."

"What happens next?" she asked, dropping into the chair across from Straker.

* * *

"I know what you're going to say, so don't bother! I've had enough "I told you sos" already this morning!" Straker cut Alec Freeman off in mid-sentence, as he dropped into his seat.

"General Henderson must be twirling in his grave by now," Alec replied.

"Not unless he's burning in hell," Straker smiled grimly, "Look - shit happens. I just happened to be the one to catch it this time."

"You're one damn lucky bugger!"

"It was gonna happen even if I hadn't been behind the throttle, Alec. I'm actually glad I was in the middle of it. I saw it all first hand," he grinned suddenly like a schoolboy, "Besides, I got to play Luke Skywalker, too!"

"Who the hell is Luke Skywalker?"

"Long story, that one. I kinda liked the testosterone rush that came with saving someone's ass up there."

Alec shook his head, "You think NASA's going to make public any of what the astronauts reported?"

"Nope. I can bet the NASA spin doctors are already at work, playing the whole thing like an American tragedy. Their government has been one of our biggest allies, albeit unwittingly,

for covering up stories of alien involvement. I talked to Paul right after it happened. The Omega Corporation's been on it from the first."

"So, you're not worried about those astronauts?"

"I can't waste my time worrying about what hasn't happened yet. I talked to the psychiatrists on their reorientation program. Their assessment is fairly positive. The only one they're even remotely concerned about is Kovac. She's a real bitch."

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SHADO's reorientation program was several months in length. It was usually carried out at Moon base, simply to put a certain amount of real distance between the new people and the families and friends they had to learn to live without on earth. If they were allowed to stay earth-bound, they might be more tempted to "phone home," like E.T.

The astronauts thought they were prepared to undergo new training, similar to that they had already experienced at NASA. What they discovered was something completely different. Physical fitness was vital. So as a result, weight training, weight loss, self-defence education and other aspects of physical well-being were front and centre.

Weapons training was also important, and something new. Only one of the astronauts had ever even fired a handgun, so it was stretch for the others. Their level of ability to handle different types of weapons would determine which division of SHADO they would eventually be assigned to. One of the astronauts had done a stint in the British Navy, so he was naturally interested in joining SHADO's underwater fleet of Skydivers. The youngest member of the crew, a former U.S. air force pilot, expressed an interest in possibly joining the Interceptor crew. The others had no idea where they could possibly fit into a military organization.

As their former commander, the astronauts looked to Kovac as their spokesperson, a liaison of sorts with SHADO. If there were any complaints, concerns, whatever, she was their advocate. If they'd all made the grade at NASA, they sure as hell couldn't afford to "wash out" with SHADO! There was a lot more at stake than getting a mission on a space shuttle now.

By the end of the program, the coordinator had made some decisions. He opted to keep the American fly boy for the Interceptor training program. The British seaman would be sent back to earth to enter the Skydiver fleet. The Enterprise's former payload specialist was going to be retained on Moon base to work with SHADO's own shuttle program. That left four astronauts, including Tina Kovac, to be reassigned.

They were all to be reassessed before being sent earth-ward. The temptations of contacting their families, once they returned to the planet, would be hard to overcome. Of course, the security risks involved were just too huge. If the SHADO shrinks found reasons to doubt any of the astronauts, they'd have to remain at Moon base for further indoctrination. However, SHADO's reorientation experts seemed very pleased with the progress their new proteges were making. To further assist them in avoiding temptation, it was recommended they reassign the remaining four NASA people to international SHADO stations.

Straker personally read each astronaut's file, and kept abreast of their progress. He had a great deal at stake for being so generous. He privately cursed Pete Carlin for pressing him to back off from "eliminating" the lot of them, but he also knew Carlin was right. It would have been an incredible waste. His conscience was riddled with many regrets, but he likened himself to Winston Churchill, Britain's WWII Prime Minister. Winnie had let the East End take it in the face from the Luftwaffe, just so MI5 could protect their German intelligence sources. Straker believed in the principle of the "good of the many before the good of the few." Ruthless? Oh yes. Choices? Nope.

Some of the astronauts left behind families. Obviously, that would be one of the most difficult issues to face. Learning the enormity of the alien threat to earth's security was another. The NASA people had no idea. Even though they all admitted to believing in other life forms, accepting that earth was not only being visited, but under various forms of attack did shock them. But, they were responding well to their training, and their new lives. It would be a matter of time to see if they would also recover from the emotional trauma.

* * *

Kovac didn't know it yet, but the main reason she'd been assigned to Great Britain was so the SHADO brass could keep a closer eye on her. Straker, in particular, perceived her as a rogue element, a loose cannon. She was smart and quick, but constantly bucking authority. He wondered how she managed to get command of a space shuttle with her attitude. If she stepped out of line, just once, he'd pull the trigger himself.

Straker had her report directly to his office for reassignment.

"Sit down," Straker gestured her to a seat in front of his desk. She was wearing street clothes, not a uniform, but he could still sense her impatience, her restlessness.

"The big man himself!" mused Kovac aloud, "I must have stirred up a lot of shit this time."

"Not at all," he kept his voice modulated, "Just a little talk about your new responsibilities," he went to light up a cigarette, "Mind if I smoke?"

"Actually, yes. It's a filthy habit," she was obviously not bothering to be accommodating.

Straker lit up nonetheless, "You sound like my second in command, Ms. Kovac." He emphasized the "MS." appellation, and then puffed for a few minutes, enjoying her discomfiture.

After a minute of contented inhaling on his part, Straker fixed her with a basilisk stare, "I don't like having to repeat myself, MS. Kovac. I told you once that co-operation was the best policy. I understand from your trainers and assessors that you're adapting very well - but that you have a problem with authority."

Kovac shrugged, "I have my own ideas on how some things should be done."

"Mmmmm. Well, around here, we tell you how things should be done. We've been in this business a long time. I'm not going to bull shit you - we don't need any Xenas or Princess Leias in this organization. You follow orders. How the hell did you ever get command of a space shuttle with your attitude?"

"It's called command ability to make decisions and assess risks. You should be familiar with that."

"You're being assigned today to simulations development, until further notice. You've flown in space, you may be able to help that division with its software," Straker watched her for some reaction. Nothing.

"Will I be able to at least communicate with the other astronauts?"

"Not for some time. They've all been assigned to jobs in different parts of the world. Your main task now is to buckle down and make yourself useful."

Kovac got up from her seat, "It's been a slice, General. See ya," she was a little surprised to see a SHADO operative waiting for her at the door, "Babysitter?" she indicated the operative.

Straker blew a perfect circle of smoke at her, "That's up to you."

CHAPTER THREE

The "Enterprise Incident" finally lost its press punch. It had been milked for every possible emotion, headline and sound byte. Except for rumors that some film company was planning to make a made-for-TV-movie of the event, the world went on with its daily life, and the "dead" NASA astronauts were relegated to CNN's archives.

Straker ordered the astronauts to undergo psychological testing every 6 weeks. It was imperative that they readjust to their new lives and jobs, and make peace with their pasts. Also, they had been ordered to participate in critical incident stress debriefings to work through the trauma of being attacked and almost marooned in space by the aliens.

He'd pulled out all the stops to bring the NASA people into SHADO - Straker had a lot riding on this gamble. And, in general, he wasn't the gambling type. So the seven NASA people continued to be his pet project for a many months.

Meanwhile, Straker tasked the cloaking systems development team with making certain they didn't have a reprise of their earlier problems. And, determining how the alien cloaking devices worked. The aliens had been strangely absent since then. Straker had his theorists at work trying to decide if the aliens really had been out to destroy the Enterprise, or if the attack was meant to unmask SHADO to the earth's population.

"I don't get it, Alec. Four months and those alien bastards haven't even so much as sent a scout ship our way," Straker blew smoke rings.

"Don't bet on it. With that new cloaking technology of theirs, they're likely here right now, evading our sensors and scanners."

"The techs are working on that, actually. They're developing some gadgetry to detect the alien signatures. Our Interceptors recorded the readings when they materialized in space. Of course, it's not 100 percent yet. And, we still don't know who or what the alien objective was that day."

"Any problems with NASA?"

"Nope. Paul's people mopped that one up well. A little memory serum here, a little visit from the Men in Black there..."

"How are your pets doing?"

Straker chuckled uncharacteristically, "They're fine so far. But, they're on short leashes."

"Adapting?"

"As well as can be expected. Doug Jackson says the worst case scenario is still Kovac. She was married with kids. Women have a harder time with that sort of thing. I've got her working with the sim people in Scotland."

"Well isolated, eh?"

"Let's just say it's a VERY secure installation."

"The others?"

"Five men, one other woman."

The conversation turned to other topics. In addition to the aliens' seeming quiescence, Straker was concerned with the final autopsy reports from the last captured alien. It provided irrefutable proof that the aliens had started cloning human organs. The dead alien body contained three lungs and two livers. All were distinctly made of human tissue, and all were genetic matches for each other.

"Why the additional organs, Alec? They were just squeezed in there like so many sardines! The lab thinks the aliens may be trying to bring about an evolutionary change in their

own physiology."

"They're not exactly equipped to live on our planet without special considerations. They need their suits."

"But, what if they could learn to breathe without the liquid? And, eat and digest human food just as we do?"

"So what are you saying here?"

"I think the aliens want to walk among us undetected, and the best way to do that is to be LIKE us, in every way possible. It's one helluva fifth column."

Alec shook his head, "We can't base our theories on only one body."

"Exactly. That's why we have to get more bodies."

* * *

Kovac finished going over the last simulation. The Scottish Highlands were beautiful, if remote. Her work was challenging. But, her family was across the Atlantic Ocean, thinking she was dead. When she could get permission, Kovac often walked down to the shore and looked seaward. It was too cold in April to go swimming. Spring would come to her beautiful Island and she would never see it again. The pain in her heart would not, could not, go away. And, she'd long since cried out all her tears. She thought of her children, her husband, her home on the water, the peaceful people she grew up with. They'd all been so proud that one of their own had made it so far in the world; was going to become famous. Now she was not only famous, but famous and "dead."

Would she ever be able to dedicate herself so thoroughly to the cause of earth's defense as the others she'd met working for SHADO? Did they too have pasts they dared not speak of? She knew what she was doing was very important, in its own way, to the defense of her planet. In fact, that was the only consideration keeping her from running AWOL. That and the possibility that Straker would have her, and perhaps even her family, hunted down and eliminated in the interests of global security.

She also found it hard to adapt to what she considered being a "drone." Kovac likened SHADO, in her mind, to a hive mentality. A little like the Borg on the Star Trek TV series. The chain of command was far more rigid than she could understand. She was a scientist, not a military person. Logic, deductive reasoning and cold facts were the tools of her trade. Adding military discipline to that mix was difficult for her. Even at NASA, the "food chain" wasn't quite so tight. NASA encouraged its people to think "out of the box," to utilize original thinking to solve crises - witness the thinking that brought the Apollo 13 crew home safely in the early 1970's!

She felt like a small child, constantly under the paternalistic eye of "Big Brother." In fact, she was certain her quarters were "bugged" and that she was being more closely observed than the others at the sim installation. Kovac was working hard to quell her personal paranoia and accept SHADO's methods as commonplace. But, the restlessness was unhinging her. She worried every day how her poor family was adapting to her "loss." She thought about her kids. She thought about her husband, her parents. Her time off-shift was often spent watching inane British sit-coms on TV or listening to music, simply as ploys to occupy her mind and prevent her from obsessing over her family. The SHADO shrinks knew what she was doing, and she knew they knew. It was a continual battle to keep one step ahead of the shrinks. If they considered her a threat, what would they do with her?

* * *

Luna One, piloted by regular SHADO people, had been making biweekly flights to Moon

base for some time. In addition to supplies, it brought posted mail (the families of SHADO personnel had no idea their letters were being rerouted to the Moon - they thought their loved ones were on extended business trips to Australia or southeast Asia - scouting locations on that continent for the Harlington-Straker film studio!), software upgrades, and vital technology. An experimental prototype software and probes to detect the aliens' cloaking devices had been installed several weeks earlier, and the Moon base staff were all in various stages of training with it.

Col. Boyd was giving Straker a progress report, "Everyone is pretty much up to speed with the Alien-Tect. It's in full operational mode and we've been running sims with it constantly."

"So why aren't we picking up any aliens?" Straker demanded, his face visibly stern on the video screen.

"Either the prototype isn't doing its job, or it's a dud - period."

"That's not a very encouraging report."

"I can't pull rabbits out of my hat, sir. We're doing our best, and I really can't be any more positive than that. The sims show the software and probes are on-line and working. Beyond that - I honestly don't know."

"And, the Interceptors?"

"We've got one of them posing as a UFO, while the others run sims to detect it cloaked. The sims are run several times a day. There are some pretty frazzled nerves up here."

"Some here too, Colonel Boyd, believe me!"

* * *

The simulations division in Scotland continued to fine-tune the Alien-Tect. They took the Moonbase's sim reports and ran them over and over again. Recalibrations didn't seem to change the lack of detection. It seemed unbelievable that the aliens wouldn't take advantage of the situation. Straker, and many other SHADO people, were mainly concerned with the possibility that the aliens would utilize the time remaining until the Alien-Tect was fully operational, to set up secret bases or conduct more of their own ruthless brand of experimentation.

SHADO, and the Omega Corporation, gathered every little snippet of information from around the world on possible UFO sightings. Because of the aliens' cloaking technology, SHADO was at a distinct disadvantage in the war. They could deal with UFOs only if they could track them.

Three more months went by. Straker's chain smoking was getting worse. Alec Freeman suggested Straker try the "patch", as he had, after his bout with cancer, "It'll ease the nicotine cravings until you can swear off for good."

"I won't get cancer, Alec. No cancer in my family, anyway."

Alec just rolled his eyes. Why did he bother?

"Have you had time to read those Canadian reports from the Omega Corporation?"

"Paul e-mailed them to me yesterday. I just glanced at them. Why?"

"There's something weird happening over there."

"The usual kind of weird?"

"Nope, a new kind of weird. People missing, strange lights - sounds like the same shit, different day, but it's not," Alec could always tell Straker's mood was unsettled when he used his favourite swear word, "The Omega people have been investigating a small rural village. The kicker is that after the initial report, the locals are saying NOTHING happened there at all!"

In fact, they're very insistent about it. Paul says his people aren't taking anything at face value. They're more used to people telling their stories to anyone who'll listen."

"What's so weird about that? Maybe nothing happened, like they say."

"The locals are farmers and fishermen. You'd think they'd be up and out every morning at their work. Look, Paul's report says they're not going anywhere - just staying in their homes and sitting in front of their TV sets - all day - every day. And, they seem to have some difficulty speaking. Their English is garbled."

Alec sat forward in his seat and grinned, "Well, Canadians DO have their own way of speaking the Queen's English!"

"Not funny. Paul sent in a Canadian team to investigate! No, there's more to this whole situation than meets the eye. I want it given a high priority until it's resolved. I've been shitting my pants every day with the prospect that the aliens have managed to use their time while we're blind to them to set up a base somewhere. And, what would be a better spot than some hole-in-the-wall rural village in Canada - it's the perfect place to work unseen and undisturbed! We've got to isolate this problem and get a SHADO clean-up crew in there somehow."

* * *

After three months of working at the sim installation in Scotland, Kovac was being granted a reprieve - of sorts. She was told she would be reassigned to SHADO Central, where she'd become a science advisor to Harlington-Straker's sci-fi/horror film unit, under an assumed name, of course. The long-standing joke around SHADO was the film company's lengthy series of filmatic flops. Harlington-Straker hadn't produced a moneymaker at the box office for decades. Most of its television work consisted of documentaries, children's entertainment and public affairs programs. They had won a few prestigious TV awards in Great Britain, but in general, the studio maintained a very low profile.

Kovac's real work at SHADO Central was, for once, a little closer to her original training. Finally, her expertise as a biologist-gerontologist was going to be put to usage. Her mission with NASA had been to effect experiments on the other astronauts. They'd all ranged in age from their early thirties, into their fifties, and after John Glenn's historic "coming out of retirement" flight, understanding human aging in space, and the body's deterioration during long-time space assignments had shifted into higher gear. Like those Russian astronauts who'd remained on the Mir station for many months, and the advent of the International Space Station, humans would be spending even more time in zero-gravity. The effects of it would have to be studied in-depth.

What NASA didn't know, was that SHADO had not only conducted the same kind of testing two decades ago, but was dealing with an even more critical gerontological problem - aliens who aged and died as soon as their special suits and equipment were removed. Kovac was being reassigned to the exobiology division to work with the scientists there in analyzing alien bodies, alien and human tissue samples, and building reports.

Straker, ever mindful of how his "pets" were progressing, invited Kovac to his office after she'd had some time to "settle in" to her new assignment. He was perennially curious about her "tough" act. According to the shrinks' reports, she used it with everyone, not just himself.

"So," he started, blowing a smoke ring at her, "How do you like it here, closer to civilization?"

"I miss the sheep. They're about the only friends I was allowed in Scotland," Kovac replied.

The General noted her slimmer figure, her longer hair, "Is the work here more

interesting?"

"It keeps me off the streets at night," she was being as noncommittal as possible.

"I understand you're a gerontologist."

Kovac stood up abruptly, "Look, let's not bother with the small talk! You probably want to know when I'm going to go off the deep end, right? The shrinks been keeping you up to date on the crazy Canuck? EH?" her hands had balled themselves into fists, "Okay - here it is - straight from the horse's mouth to the horse's arse - I'm surviving! My kids will never see me again - they don't know I'm not really dead - but I'm surviving! I have NO life, but I'm surviving! I might as well BE dead, for all the difference it makes!"

"You done?" Straker asked sardonically, tapping the ashes off his cigarillo.

"What else do you want me to say? Oh, thank you, great God Straker, for saving my ass in space only to condemn me to a living death, squirreled away in some god-forsaken laboratory, dissecting dead alien bodies!!"

"I see we haven't dealt with that attitude problem yet."

"I don't give a shit anymore, if that's what you mean."

Straker waved around him with his ciggie hand, a cloud of smoke trailing about, "You don't get the enormity of what we're trying to do here, MS. Kovac?"

She took a deep breath and paused momentarily before she answered, "I accept what you're doing here. I know it's imperative - it's vital - it's the only thing standing between those goddam aliens and life on our planet as we know it," her eyes welled up, and it was obvious from the expression on her face that she was struggling to control herself, "But, General Straker, I am NOT some female version of Captain James T. Kirk! I can't just forget I had a life, and a family and a profession - and push them all aside to make the world safe for democracy. Working for SHADO? I'm just going through the motions. I can't... reincarnate myself this way. I'm a security risk. And, I know what you people do with security risks."

"Do you think you're the only person we've ever recruited? You think you're the only person who gave up their lives and took on new lives working for SHADO?"

"But, those people did it freely - they didn't do it because the alternative was being eliminated."

"You like to talk tough, don't you? Well, I'm going to give it to you straight," Straker got up from his seat, stubbed out his ciggie, and faced her, hands on his hips, "I've given you a VERY long leash. I've had the shrinks evaluate you constantly, give you anti-depressants, work your ass off. SHADO didn't wash you out - YOU'RE washing yourself out! You think you're the only one to ever have kids? To lose them? Get your shit together, woman! You're not a special case. Christ, I should have just left you on the Enterprise!"

Before she could stop herself, Kovac struck out blindly. The palm of her hand snapped smartly off Straker's cheek, leaving an ugly red mark. He'd seen it coming, and he hadn't even stopped her - she knew that! And, she felt ashamed of her momentary lapse in control.

"C'mon," he taunted her, with that damn sardonic smile of his, "Didn't that make you feel good? Y'wanna do it again?"

"What do you want from me?"

"Your soul, Kovac. Your soul! I lost mine years ago to this organization. I don't want to be alone."

"You're crazy!" Kovac actually backed away from him.

"No crazier than you. I lost my wife, my kid, my life - to SHADO. Do you think I spend my time going to movie premieres and studio parties? That's all a front. I don't manage

Harlington-Straker any more than you do. You think you're lonely? Got nobody to lean on? Nobody to go home to every night? Join the goddam club, baby!"

The lump in her throat became unbearable. She felt the hot gush of tears as they slid down her face. It came as a surprise to her when Straker took her in his arms and cradled her, the way she used to cradle her children when they cried. She had not imagined he could in any way be tender. They sank to the floor, and Straker rocked her, while she sobbed and sobbed. For her kids. For her husband. For her life. Most of all, for herself.

After what seemed a very long time, Kovac looked up at Straker. He was regarding her with those big expressive blue eyes.

"I don't know what to say," she murmured.

"Now, that's a first," Straker chided her quietly. He helped her up, and placed her in the chair across from his desk.

"I guess I haven't been firing on all thrusters."

"Everyone adapts in their own time, Tina," it was the first time Straker ever used her first name.

"Jesus, I must be suffering from the Stockholm Syndrome," Kovac was referring to the established psychiatric terminology for individuals who end up siding with their kidnappers.

Straker smiled fleetingly, "Look, I know you've had a harder time than the others. They didn't have to give up as much as you did."

"I feel like such a dip shit."

"It's okay - we all have our dip shit moments. The secret is: we go on. We pick ourselves up and simply...go on. I'm not asking you to do anything I haven't had to do myself. It's just that I'm at a distance of about 25 years or so away from my heartbreak. You never forget, Tina - you just go on."

His voice was soothing, soft - so unlike the hard nosed General Straker she was used to. He handed her a wad of tissues, "You can do this, Tina. I'm an old man now, but you've got the rest of your life ahead of you. You have to make peace with yourself."

"I keep thinking there must have been something else I could have done to prevent all this."

"Was the Enterprise equipped with missiles or cannons? Were you expecting a space battle? No commander can be ready for every crisis - it was all out of your hands long before the Enterprise lifted off. You have to know that. It doesn't mean you were a bad commander. Even Napoleon didn't expect to lose at Waterloo. Your ship was fatally damaged - you had no other choice, as a commander, but to get your people to safety. Only the Captain of the Titanic had a good reason for going down with his ship. "

There was a sadness, and a wisdom in Straker's eyes. For a moment, Kovac thought she could see a small blonde-haired boy mirrored in them.

"Maybe some R&R is what you need. Let me take you somewhere to dinner and we'll hash it out."

"I...feel like they're dead, General...and I know it's me they THINK is dead. It's like I want to mourn for them, but they're not dead. They're alive out there."

Straker picked up his cell phone, "You like curry? I know this great place not far from here. I'll make us some reservations."

* * *

The headwaiter, in his turban, obviously knew Straker and guided them quietly to their table in the back of the restaurant. Without even looking at a menu, Straker told their server

what they wanted to order - in Hindi.

"Want a drink?" Straker asked before the server left them.

"I don't suppose you have any Canadian beer?" Kovac asked tentatively.

"We do have some Canadian rye, would that do?" the server offered, and Kovac nodded.

"You're not indulging in a little booze, General?" she asked, when Straker accepted a glass of iced tea.

"Gave it up years ago. Weakens the mind," and he smiled, "What was your life like before SHADO got in your face?"

"My work was the most important thing in my life, sad to say. It took me away from home a lot. I guess I felt I'd never get ahead in my career if I didn't play the game. And, I wanted to play that game."

"How'd you get involved with NASA?"

"I signed up to be assessed for the Canadian Space Program. It took me five years to get in. I just kept reapplying. My husband thought I was crazy, at first. But, then he realized how important it was to me. When the CSP started looking for astronauts to liaise with NASA, I jumped at it," Kovac looked down and stirred her rye with a swizzle stick, "In fact, I put getting into the CSP and NASA ahead of my kids. I mean, I loved them, but I kept thinking there had to be more for me to do in life. I'll never forgive myself for that. I farmed them out to their grandparents for months while I trained, and studied, and...chased the dream of flying in space. My husband had his own architectural business and he traveled too, so the kids got put on the back burner. I missed school plays. JP's hockey games. Christa's tae kwon do exhibitions. I didn't even see my own kids learn to walk, for Chrissakes. And, now...there's no way I can ever make it up."

Their meal arrived - steaming rice, chicken tandoori, fresh chapatis, and all the trimmings. Straker asked a large carafe of water and another rye for Kovac. They ate in silence for a time.

"What can you tell me about the aliens' aging processes?" Straker asked nonchalantly.

Kovac chewed thoughtfully, and sipped her rye, "The lab is currently running tests on their cellular regeneration. We've been trying to grow their cloned cells to find out why they degenerate so damn fast. The cells only remain alive as long as we keep them stored under protective conditions. Compared to our cellular structure, we think theirs eats up energy faster."

"So...what does that mean?" Straker helped himself to more Tandoori Chicken.

"They burn themselves out faster. I don't know if it's earth's specific mix of breathable gases, or what it is. At least that's one theory. Another is that their bodies break down faster because of the borrowed human organs - they don't have as many rejection problems as humans used to have with transplants, but they're not perfect, either."

"And this business with the multiple organs?"

"You've probably read some of our latest reports. There is one group in our lab which thinks the aliens are doubling up to eventually change their own evolutionary pattern."

"But, you don't believe that?" Straker raised an eyebrow at her.

"It just doesn't make sense. I know some of the exobiologists are grasping at straws. Evolution takes too long. I can't see the aliens starting with something like that now. No, I think they're doubling up in case one fails. Like packing an extra pair of pants on a golfing trip. Then, there's the fact that most of those doubled organs are cloned. We've known for some time that they're ahead of us in this technology."

Using his fork to punctuate his comments, Straker replied, "So what's your take on all

this?"

Kovac sipped her rye again, "Cloning would solve a lot of problems for them. It might even mean that they could eventually leave us alone. I mean, if they can clone effective, non-rejectable organs, over and over again, from tissues they already have access to, why risk coming back to earth?"

"I don't think human tissue is the only reason they come here."

"What else are they after? If it's true that they are a dying race, why wouldn't they have approached us peacefully to ask for assistance from us? Then, there would have been no need for this secret war all these years."

"That's just it, Tina. They want more from us than our humanity."

"How do you know that?"

"SHADO has been monitoring everything on the planet now for decades. For instance, we know the aliens have been observing our advances in medicine, biochemistry, agriculture, atomic and nuclear power development, and even aquaculture. It's been going on longer than even most SHADO people realize."

Kovac shuddered a bit, "Makes me feel like an ant or some other insect."

"Have you ever heard the word Roswell?" Straker asked quietly.

She looked up from her plate of curry, fork raised midway to her mouth, "You mean THE Roswell? As in New Mexico?"

"The very same."

"Jesus. I knew there had to be some truth to it."

"More than you know," Straker said sotto voce, "Let's get out of here." He threw a wad of currency down on the table, while Kovac scrambled to grab her purse.

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"The safest place to talk right now is my place. No bugs, complete security. It's not far," Straker opened the passenger car door for Kovac. His shiny new Mercedes was a distinct upgrade over his old Delorean with the gull-wing doors. Ah, the things he'd had put up with for the sake of appearances as a film studio head!

They made a fast trip to Straker's house in the country, pulling into an attached garage with a special intelligence/defense unit that reminded Kovac her boss was more than just a movie mogul.

Once inside, Straker offered Kovac a cup of something hot to drink, and she opted for Earl Grey Tea with a slice of lemon. His home was not what she expected, for the residence of a film producer. Instead of being palatial, it was spare, like the man. A simple, one floor ranch-style house with a sunken living room, and an adjoining kitchen-dining area. The furnishings were a bit dated; there was a fireplace, which looked as though it was rarely, if ever, used. Straker lit several long matches and newspaper bits before getting it to finally blaze up warmly, and lit his cigarillo off it. Kovac could tell from the lack of real decor that Straker hardly spent any time in the house at all. It was simply a place to sleep.

"Were you just bull shitting me with that mention of Roswell?" Kovac asked pointedly, sitting down on the edge of the fireplace hearth to absorb some of the fire's heat.

Straker laughed mirthlessly, "I can assure you that Roswell is not a joke," and he surprised her by sitting down next to her on the hearth. He stirred his own tea around a bit before speaking again, "How much have you heard about Roswell?"

Kovac lifted both her eyebrows and shrugged, "Just what the TLC specials on television tell us: that aliens crash landed out in New Mexico in 1947 and the American government has

been in overdrive trying to cover it up ever since."

"Like all good rumors, portions of it are true," Straker admitted, "An alien craft did crash land in New Mexico. The American air force base near the crash site was sent out to handle it. But, once the story of a UFO crash hit the airwaves, the government had to dispel it as fast as possible."

"I suppose. World War II had just ended two years earlier. If the Allied countries thought Hitler was their worst nightmare, imagine what the threat of an alien menace would be like!" Kovac agreed.

"Not only that. National security had been seriously breached and we were into the Cold War. Stalin and the Communists were supposed to be the new Number One enemy. Bear in mind, the aliens were making little trips here to planet earth for some time, and until that crash, hard evidence had been unavailable."

"So what happened?"

"Not only was there a crash, but there'd also been survivors. Aliens who could and did communicate with the highest level of the American government for their own freedom and return to their home planet. These communications went all the way to the White House and the Pentagon. The American government struck a deal with the aliens."

Kovac felt the color rush out of her face, "What kind of deal?" Her voice was hushed.

"The worst kind. The American government, the President and his Joint Chiefs of Staff, hammered out an agreement with the aliens. A trade-off. In return for giving the American military some of their advanced technology, they would let the surviving aliens contact their home planet and go home - kinda like E.T. But the comparison ends there," Straker's face was grim as he continued, "The President and his cronies thought they had a good deal. The aliens didn't seem interested in having their presence here known by the general population. Like most American negotiations, the President and his men thought they had the aliens over a barrel. Except...the aliens played a kind of hardball Old Harry and his generals could barely even imagine. The aliens asked for carte blanche to kidnap, examine, experiment on human subjects at their choice. And, if they didn't get this concession from the American government, they'd continue taking what they wanted BY FORCE. They had the technology and power to completely take over the entire planet."

"Didn't the President ask why the aliens wanted to use humans?"

"The aliens were shrewd. They didn't want to give the Americans a bargaining chip. They were dying even then, we think. They'd already begun kidnapping humans for their organs, experimenting on them, etc. Roswell was just the crystallizing incident that brought the aliens up close and personal with the American government. And, not only the American government. They told the President that if he didn't want to deal with them, maybe Stalin would."

Kovac gasped, "Harry didn't want to lose the Cold War to the Commies!"

"Exactly. He dealt with them to keep them from making a deal with the Russians."

"But, what guarantees did the Americans have that the aliens wouldn't play both sides of the fence and deal with Stalin after all?"

"Technology. The aliens gave the U.S. military stuff they could hardly dream of. Gave them a heads up on the kind of rocket propulsion that sent the original NASA astronauts to the moon even. That kind of technology was likely ancient to the aliens, but not to the Americans. And, once the Americans were obviously ahead in the arms, technology and space races, it looked like the aliens were keeping their part of the bargain."

"The Russians were the first into space, though. I remember Yuri Gagarin was the first Russian cosmonaut. The Americans didn't get Alan Shepard and John Glenn aloft until the early 1960's."

"Did the aliens welch on their deal with the Americans? Maybe. But, by then it was too late. The government made the deal in 1947. At that point, the Americans were still leading the techo-race. The Russians got the bomb after WWII, remember? But, who could have helped them?"

"My God! They WERE playing both sides of the fence!" Kovac exclaimed.

"Probably. The spies convicted of passing atomic secrets to the Russians, the Rosenbergs, were executed in 1956. We'll never know now. And, they didn't volunteer any information on aliens that we know of. The real trial transcripts were destroyed after their execution."

"Man, what a head-fuck!" Kovac shook her head, looking at Straker, abashed, "Sorry for the expletive deleted!"

"If Nixon could use the F-word, I suppose you can," Straker smiled, "Have I over-loaded your mind?"

Kovac sighed and put down her now-empty tea mug on the coffee table, "And I thought the X-Files was just a TV show."

"Chris Carter comes so close to the truth he scares me sometimes," Straker joked, referring to the X-Files' imaginative producer.

"Has he ever worked for the Harlington-Straker studio?"

Straker laughed now, "No, but perhaps we should recruit him."

Kovac attempted to stifle a yawn, "Sorry, it isn't that this isn't utterly fascinating, but I don't sleep too well at night. I'm always pooped."

"You can stretch out in the spare room if you want. I've got some reports to look over before I crash for the night, myself."

"Are you sure it wouldn't be an imposition?"

"Having to drive you back into the SHADO headquarters would be more of an imposition."

"Well, if you're sure you don't mind having a house guest..." Kovac was tentative.

"Just as long as you're not one of those happy happy morning people. I hate happy happy morning people," Straker cautioned her.

"No, you don't have to worry about that. I'm not worth a damn till I have that first blast of caffeine in the morning. I just schlep around half out of ...," Kovac was almost going to mention the fact she slept starkers, and decided against it. After all, the man was her boss, and old enough to be her...big brother.

"Fine. Second door to the right. Sleep tight."

--

"You kept her over night at your house? What are you up to, Ed? Are you out of your mind?"

"I was trying to get her back on-line, Alec. She was pretty messed up. I think she could be valuable to us in time, and I wanted to make her see that."

"I notice you haven't had any of the other NASA astronauts doing an over-nighter at your house."

"Christ, if it'll make you happy, Alec, I'll invite them ALL for a sleep-over next week!"

Alec leaned over Straker, "Don't get yourself involved. You'd be the first one to caution me in a similar situation. I thought you were past all that."

"Look, I'm old enough to be her...big brother. I didn't want to see her wash herself out."

"Just don't make it personal, Ed."

"It's not personal. It's about protecting SHADO's investment in her."

"Yeah. Sure. I believe you."

Straker lit his cigarillo, partly in defiance of Alec's comments, and partly to annoy him as thoroughly as he was being annoyed. He drew in a long intake and then blew out a couple of perfect smoke rings. He'd perfected the smoke ring technique years ago, and knew it always pissed the hell out of Freeman, "Did you talk to Paul about that situation in Canada?"

"Yes," Alec knew Straker was intentionally changing the subject, "They've done some on-site reckoning. It's definitely a hot spot. Something's happening. The problem is that the crew tend to stick out too much. They don't blend in very well with the locals."

"Mmmmm. Gonna have to do something about that quick. I thought Paul sent in a Canadian team to assess the situation."

"Hah - from Toronto! The crew doesn't exactly know how to interact with farmers and fishermen. They've pulled back to keep security, but they've got the area under tight surveillance."

"So what we need is a crew which can work undetected?"

"We rarely have situations this isolated."

"Are there any operatives from that part of Canada we could send in?"

"I don't even want to mention it, but yes, we've got one."

"Who?"

"Tina Kovac," Alec supplied, quietly.

"Shit. I'd forgotten that..." Straker caught the look in Alec's eye. He blew more smoke rings, nervously.

"She's not ready for an assignment like this, Ed. You know that."

"And, we've got a crisis about to explode in our faces! It has to be handled!"

"I strongly advise against this. Her family is there. Her husband. Her kids. Her whole life. You know what Doug Jackson said - she can't be trusted not to go AWOL at the first opportunity! If you put her down on Prince Edward's Island, or wherever this situation is, we have no guarantees that she won't take the chance to come back from the grave and rejoin her family. We simply cannot take that kind of risk!"

"I don't think she'll run, Alec," Straker said quietly, "She understands now. She knows what we're trying to do here - she wants to be a part of it."

Alec stood up suddenly, and leaned over Straker, "You think one night in your bed is going to make that woman give up everything she really cares about?"

Straker was out of his seat, barely controlling his fury, "Christ Almighty! I don't have to answer to you or anyone in this organization for my sexual habits. Least of all YOU!"

"I'm just trying to remind you to use more than your arse when making decisions from the responsibility seat!"

"She's the best bet we've got, Alec. I'll have her cleared by Jackson, if that'll make you feel better. It's imperative we clean up that situation over there. If she can do it, so much the better," Straker's control was improving, "Look, we can send her in with Paul's Canadian team, and they'll be with her all the time."

"I'm warning you, Ed, she's a time bomb."

"A diffused time bomb, Alec."

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

Straker was still fuming the next day when he called Dr. Doug Jackson in for a consultation. First off, he was pissed because Alec had had the temerity to assume he'd slept with Kovac. Secondly, he was PO'ed because Alec suggested he was letting his gonads affect his decision-making abilities. And, thirdly, he was pissed because he was fifty-eight years old and the idea of sleeping with Kovac had never even entered his mind. SHADO had been his real mistress for the last thirty years.

Dr. Jackson, with his strange Slavic features, and even stranger voice, was a highly trusted SHADO shrink. In fact, most SHADO personnel didn't believe Jackson was his real name. Straker could always depend on Jackson for an accurate assessment of any SHADO operative, or psychological condition. He was the perfect shrink - cruelly analytical, completely without bias, and utterly thorough.

"Well, Doug, what's the story on Kovac? Did you do a new assessment?" Straker gestured Dr. Jackson to a seat in front of his desk.

Always correct, Jackson seated himself, but retained a ramrod-straight posture in his chair. He paused for effect, watching Straker's expression, and said, "I did a new assessment as ordered, General."

"And?" Straker lit another cigarillo off the old one. He dropped the old one into an ashtray. Chain smoking again, Jackson noted. Not a good sign.

"You read my report, didn't you?"

"Yes, I read it. But, I wanted to talk to you personally, Doug." Straker's usage of Jackson's first name was unusual. Jackson was on his guard.

"I haven't magically changed my opinion in the last 24 hours. The report stands."

"So, you think Kovac's still a security risk," Straker regarded him with a scowl.

Jackson, unaccustomed to being the one under such intense scrutiny, returned Straker's stare directly, "I do. She has improved somewhat, but not enough to be part of such a delicate operation. While she may be a native of the area under surveillance, which could be useful, she has no training or experience in this type of work. The temptation would be far too great for her."

Straker was silent while he digested Jackson's comments. Finally, he said, "What if I decide to send her anyway?"

"Then, you'll have to be prepared to eliminate her when she breaks. The team will have to kill her."

"Shit." Straker blew some more smoke rings.

Jackson broke the silence by getting up from his chair to leave, "General, it's your decision, of course, but...you'd be asking too much of her by sending her back there."

"She might be able to help us break this thing wide open, Doug."

"And, she might also expose the entire organization, as well. Is it worth it? Are you willing to push your lover that far? Sacrifice us all and everything we've worked for?" Obviously Alec had been doing some talking!

"Get out," Straker's voice was deadly calm, but Jackson knew he'd said too much.

"Read my report again, General. It's based on the cold hard facts."

--

Kovac entered Straker's office as requested. She was still in her lab coat. He offered her a caffeinated beverage, and she turned it down. She had to get back to some cultures she was

working on soon.

"I know you're involved with some research, but I wanted to speak to you in person about a situation which we've been following. I might have to reassign you for a time." Straker watched her intently. She nodded, and he continued, "The Omega Corporation has been monitoring a problem which we think is going to need action very soon. In fact, ASAP. We've been holding back, not because we don't have the manpower, but because it's an extremely sensitive mission, and we need someone who will be able to work with the locals and help the Omega team investigate more closely."

"So...why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I'm considering reassigning you to the Omega team for this one mission."

"They're headquartered in New York City, aren't they?"

"Right. But, you won't be going to the Big Apple. You'll be going somewhere else. Canada. Prince Edward Island." There - he'd said it.

Straker watched as Kovac got up out of her seat and paced the length of his office several times. She ran a hand through her hair, pulling the elastic out. Finally, she paced back to the front of his desk.

"What is this?" she asked, taking a deep, shaking breath, "Time off for good behavior? Some sort of joke?"

"It's no joke. We've got a problem in a small rural village in eastern PEI and we need someone who not only knows the geography, but knows the people. Someone who can fit in, get their confidence. Push the investigation along. We need your help."

She dropped down into her chair again, "I can't do this."

"Of course you can. You won't be responsible for the operation, you'll just be the facilitator."

Kovac stood up and faced Straker, "NO! I mean, I can't DO this! If I go home...I don't think I can...leave...without..." she couldn't finish, but she didn't have to. Straker knew what she was trying to say. Suddenly, her expression changed, "That's why the extra assessment with Jackson for me. You ordered it!"

"I've got his report right here - wanna see it?" Straker tapped the plastic covered dossier on his desk.

"I don't have to...I can just imagine what Jackson said about me," Kovac ruffled her hair again, "That man gives me the creeps..."

"Look, Tina, I know what you think. I know what Jackson thinks. Hell, I even know what Alec Freeman thinks, although I'd rather he kept his opinions to himself. But, you have an opportunity here. A chance to prove yourself. I'd like to see you take it."

Sighing, Kovac sat down again, "Great choice. Go home, never see my family again, and prove myself. Or go AWOL and die." She caught Straker's eye, "That's what will happen if I break on this mission isn't it?"

For once, Straker didn't feel like being the heavy, "You won't break."

"Jackson probably said I'd be a major security risk. I AM a security risk if you send me home. What makes YOU so sure? "

"Because you know now what's at stake. You know that your job with SHADO will ultimately save the lives of your family. And, that the price you have to pay for their safety is living without them."

Kovac swallowed hard, "How soon do I leave?"

--

Straker arranged for Kovac to take a commercial flight to New York on the Concorde. She'd been thoroughly briefed before leaving, and Paul Foster was going to meet her at JFK airport.

"I'm Foster. You must be Ms. Kovac?" Even after fifteen years in the United States, Foster still retained a hint of his British accent.

Kovac nodded. She knew Foster from her briefing, "Reporting as ordered, sir." She hoisted her small overnight bag to her shoulder.

Foster led her out to a long black limo and helped her into the back compartment.

"The Omega Corporation certainly knows how to roll out the red carpet," Kovac commented.

"We're a software company, Ms. Kovac - a very successful software company. Not as well known as Microsoft, but we're working on that," Foster smiled at her. He pushed a small red button on a pushpadd console and the glass partition between their compartment and the driver slid up, "I take it you've been briefed?"

"The village in question is very small. I know it. It's got a couple of small campground sites for summer tourists, a B&B home, a general store, a local church and that's it. There are several watercourses where the fishermen sail out of," Kovac lifted the lid of her laptop, and punched a few keys to bring up a map, "Here, at Graham's Pond...here at Clow's Wharf... and the old Poverty Beach area. That last one isn't used anymore. In fact, the breakwater and the wharf are long gone. There aren't many houses surrounding it. It's the most isolated spot in the village."

"The plan is to send us in as Environment Canada researchers, to do some reconnoitering and establish a base. We're to pose as a couple of married scientists. You're a "local" from Charlottetown, and I'm your new husband. We'll be looking to take water and soil samples, do some diving - all that. It'll explain why we're taking so many photos and video, and moving about, talking to people."

"The diving equipment is going to be for an underwater search?"

"Right. We've got to cover all the bases. We'll be in constant contact with the rest of the team. They're staying at a resort not far from the village. Some place in..."

"Brudenell," Kovac finished, "How are they going to back us up if we find anything?"

"SHADO developed a specialized fleet of SUV's awhile back. They're loaded with so much firepower they make James Bond's movie cars look like Corgi Toys!" Foster laughed.

--

Kovac had wrestled all night with her feelings. Now, sitting in the private SHADO aircraft, flying over Atlantic Canada, she was face to face with her fears. In the bright summer sunlight, she watched the topography change, saw the blue of the ocean. And, caught her breath when the red cliffs of Prince Edward Island came into view.

It was still beautiful. All those terrible months, a virtual prisoner of SHADO, melted away as she drank in the beloved scenery of her home. Brick red cliffs rose majestically out of sapphire blue waters, only to give way to a patchwork quilt of green, yellow and red fields. Kovac forced back the tears. If there was any one time in the last year she had to forget her emotions, this was going to be it. She had to put her personal problems aside. She had to view this whole trip as a mission to make the world safe for "democracy." She had no family any more. She was like Straker, like Freeman, Jackson, Foster - just one more SHADO drone.

The aircraft landed at the Charlottetown airport. She had lived in Charlottetown, and knew the area well. Once they collected their luggage, they proceeded outside to also collect

their vehicle. As Foster had mentioned, a dark blue SUV, with an attached travel trailer, awaited them in the parking lot.

Foster threw her the keys, "You drive," he smiled.

Kovac got in the driver's seat, adjusted the steering wheel, and shifted into gear. She reversed, turned, and smoothly drove the SUV and its tag-along out of the parking lot and onto the highway.

--

The SUV's stereo was blasting Shania Twain. Kovac made a call to the larger of the village's campgrounds to secure a spot for the week on the cell phone. She did so in her best "home town" voice, using the slight Scottish twang many Islanders spoke with. If Foster noticed her change in speech, he didn't acknowledge it. He could tell she was building herself up to performance level.

"Any particular reason for playing Shania?" Foster asked, squinting into the sunlight and turning the visor down on his side of the vehicle.

"Looking for some deep-seated psychological answer in my choice of music?" Kovac glanced at him.

"Actually, no," Foster smiled gamely, "Just making conversation."

Kovac gave him a look that said 'keep off' and kept driving. She headed the SUV and trailer down the highway marked for the town of Montague. Upon their arrival there, she stopped at a gas station, pumped in \$10 worth.

Then she swung the vehicle around and eased into a drive-through.

"I think it's time you were acquainted with a little Canadian tradition. How do you take your coffee?" she asked, approaching the Tim Horton's drive-through order speaker.

"Uhhhh...black, I guess," he shifted in his seat.

"May I take your order?" the speaker suddenly blared into life.

"Yeah, I want a large black and a small double double, please."

"Anything else?"

"Gimme a box of mixed Timbits!"

"Ok - please drive up to the window to get your order!"

Foster tilted his head to one side, "What's a Timbit?"

Kovac maneuvered the SUV to the pick-up window, dug in her dress pocket for some change, and hauled out some loonies and toonies, "Just a little something to make us look more the part. Nothing like a couple of empty Tim's cups in the truck to confirm our status as Atlantic Canadians," she smiled absently.

The drive-through window opened, and the clerk handed out a pulp tray with two paper coffee cups and the requested box of Timbits. Kovac instructed her to "keep the change," and handed the items over to Foster, "Help yourself," she indicated the goodies.

"So what's this...Tim Horton's?" Foster asked, taking the lid off his coffee.

"No, no...not that way, you'll spill it all over yourself...the roads have really bad frost heave at this time of year...," Kovac told him to put the lid back on.

"I can't drink it this way!"

"Yes, you can - see that little perforated section at the front of the lid? Turn that up and push it into place...," Kovac stopped the SUV and did it for him, "Voila!"

"Canadians!"

"Why, Mr. Foster, we Canadians have an impeccable reputation around the world," Kovac bantered. It was the first time he'd seen her even close to a smile, "Tim's, my

uninformed Americanized Brit friend, has been a Canadian institution for the last 20 years or so. Absolutely everyone, especially in Atlantic Canada, relies on their Tim's coffee to socialize, conduct business with and generally treat themselves. It's a franchise company that earns literally millions of dollars annually in this country. Because Canadians cannot do without their Tim's."

"I see," Foster sipped his coffee thoughtfully. This was a little wrinkle his Canadian Omega team never even mentioned, "Very strong, isn't it?"

"That's why I ordered a double double for myself."

"What's that?"

"Two helpings of cream and sugar both. Try the Timbits - they're good. Personally, I like the filled ones."

Foster opened the little colored box and extracted an innocuous-looking roundlet of sugared donut. He took a bite off it, and licked the jam off his lips, "Edible," he pronounced it, helping himself to another, then another.

Kovac noted his eating, but didn't comment on it.

"We'll be at the campground shortly. Do I call you Paul?"

Swallowing a Timbit, Foster nodded, "I'm your new husband, remember? Married couples are generally on a first name basis."

"Yes, I do seem to recall that aspect of my marriage," Kovac said quietly.

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to dredge anything up for you --"

Kovac waved him off abruptly, "We've got a job to do here. I'm just like any other SHADO drone."

"What?" Foster asked, looking at her pointedly.

She waved him off again, "Just my twisted sense of humour showing, Paul."

--

The campground was in easy walking and/or driving distance from the wharves Kovac had cited to Foster earlier. They paid their fees, took some good-natured ribbing from the proprietor on this being their "honeymoon," and parked in their space. They opened the trailer, unhitched the SUV, and sat down to some microwaved lunchables.

"Well, at least this isn't SHADO rations," Foster smiled as he forked down some food, "I should have picked us up more groceries."

Kovac waved him off again, "I'll handle it later today. It's a good excuse to hit the general store and shmooze around some locals. Where do you want to start?"

"What about those wharves you mentioned."

"Sure. We can walk down to Clow's Wharf, which is just up the road, and we can drive over to the other two. I'll unpack the videocams. Why don't you touch base with our friends at Brudenell?"

--

After taking some video footage at Clow's Wharf and Graham's Pond, Kovac suggested they go down to Poverty Beach. The first two wharves were busy-looking places, with fishing boats, traps, and other equipment. But, no fisherman. Just lonely seagulls looking for a handout.

Kovac, still in the driver's seat, turned the SUV down a long road, past the few houses closest to the intersection, and finally down a semi-rutted path which had once been part of the road. She parked and got out with her videocam. Foster followed her.

"There used to be a breakwater and wharf here. They've been gone for the better part of

30 years now. My grandfather fished out of here, actually."

"So that's how you know the area so well," Foster commented.

"In two generations, our family went from sailing the sea to sailing the sky...", Kovac mused aloud. She turned back to him, "We can walk down a little further, but there's only so far we can go here..."

They took a few more steps, and Kovac stopped. She raised her binoculars, "Paul... take a look at this, will you."

Foster raised his own binoculars and followed her gaze over the water, "You're looking at?"

"About two o'clock. There's a tiny projection out of the water, there. See it?"

"Just barely. I wear contacts now, you know," he smiled.

Kovac shook her head and kept staring out at something.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know exactly. But, I don't remember that being here last summer."

"Could it just be a piece of broken wharf?"

"No...like I said, the wharf hasn't been here for decades. People don't even swim down here much, Paul. It's just a forgotten place..."

Kovac lowered her binocs, "I'm going to videotape this and send it back to headquarters for them to have a look at it with infrared and heat sensor processing."

"I'll use the digital camera on it," Paul uncapped the lens and zoomed in on the projection, "You were here when last?"

"Last June - we were down to buy some lobsters...", Kovac used another small SHADO instrument to take readings, "I'm getting some strange stuff here..."

"Let me see," Paul glanced down at his tect-corder, "Mmmmm, yesssss...I shouldn't think there would be any kind of readings like that in this location."

"The Irving Company cleaned up that sunken oil barge off the Island coast a couple of years ago. Besides, I don't think oil barges emit radiation, no matter how small the dose."

"They wouldn't have been carrying hazardous wastes on that barge, would they?"

"There was a major environmental study done on the barge - it was just oil as far as I know. If there was anything else more dangerous, I think it would also have been taken care of. No company can afford to fail in public accountability around here where the environment is concerned."

"What do you want to do, then?" Was Foster testing her?

"I'd like to come back right away and make a dive on that site. See what's really down there," and she turned back to get in their SUV.

CHAPTER FIVE

Foster and Kovac returned to Poverty Beach about thirty minutes later. They suited up quietly outside the SUV. Nobody came to investigate them. As Kovac had indicated, the area was mostly unfrequented. The sun was still shining brightly on the sparkling blue waters.

Kovac attached all her instruments and her breathing tank to herself, but pointedly left her small underwater weapon and holster in the suit trunk. She snapped the lid down and turned the electronic dials to lock it.

"You're not taking your side arm?" Foster asked her, checking his own and sliding it into the holster over his wet suit.

"That's what I have you for, Paul," she noticed his grimace, "I'm not exactly a crack shot with that thing."

"SHADO Rule Number One, Kovac - don't go anywhere unarmed."

"Mmmm, well, I'll use my own discretion on that one," she started marching ahead of Foster, flippers in one hand and a small marine vidcam in the other. Kovac stopped at the edge of the water, it was high tide, and slipped on the fins. Then, she walked in far enough to submerge and disappeared from view. Foster waddled into the water after her, putting his mouthpiece in just before going under.

--

Kovac fully expected the view underwater to be clear. The dark murkiness surprised her. She should have been able to see the submerged remains of the wharf and the breakwater. Instead, it appeared as though a thick, smoky pall floated in front of her. Foster paddled up silently and gestured for her to go ahead. He was expecting her to lead the way, and the murk was starting to disorient her. She thought back to her NASA dive training. Should she proceed where she couldn't see? Kovac increased the power intensity of her underwater flashlight, and shone it into the "fog." It seemed thick, almost tangible.

Foster was treading water beside her. The "fog" had a strange solidity to it. Kovac experimentally reached out to touch it, and "lost" her hand in the murk. She looked over at Foster, and pressed her comm-link, "What d'ya think?"

"I think I've got a bad feeling about this...," Foster replied, through his headset.

"You've seen something like this before?" Kovac asked, fighting a rising panic. She could discern something just beyond the reach of her normal five senses, and she didn't like it. Red flags were being thrown up in her brain. Every instinct was telling her to get out there - fast!

"Maybe...it was a long time ago..."

Kovac thrust her hand into the "fog" again and realized there was definitely something on the other side. It felt warm. It felt...alive, somehow. She looked at Foster again. Against all the warning signals in her head she told him, "There's something in there. Cover me..."

--

They passed through the "fog" to the other side. It was indeed warm. In fact, much warmer than the water temperature had been outside the "fog." Foster looked at his thermometer and spoke through his comm-link, "Christ, it's twenty degrees warmer in here!"

Kovac nodded, and pressed her own comm-link, "Like a warm bath. I can tell you right now this is VERY unnatural for these waters!"

As they swam further, they became so disoriented they were having difficulty even finding the seabed.

"Where's the bottom?" Foster asked, swimming deeper, reaching out his hands to explore.

"It's...like it's gone...," Kovac muttered. She too moved downward, "I think we better stop for a minute and get our bearings." She shone her light on her compass, but the hand spun round and round, refusing to register properly. Foster saw it too, and looked at her through grim eyes behind his mask. If the compass was on the fritz, that meant something in the "fog" was interfering with the magnetics. Foster opened his underwater GPS instrument and pressed a few buttons to get their position. Nothing registered at all.

"Well, we can't just stay here in limbo," Kovac stated, "We've got to do something."

"We should be going back to report this to the Omega Team," Foster looked at her.

"You go back. I'll keep moving here and see if I can find an end to this...fog or whatever...," Kovac suggested.

"You can't go alone."

"And, you don't need me to call the Team. I can come back and give a you progress report."

Foster was dubious. He didn't want to leave her, but he also knew the team had to be alerted. With no way to determine their position underwater, one of them would have to find a way to the surface and radio in where they were and what they'd seen. The Team would be on their way immediately.

"Look, Paul, the team can be here from Brudenell in ten minutes with those SUVs they've got. Get them down here. I'll go on ahead and see if I can find an end to this...stuff."

--

The feeling of panic was rising, but Kovac fought it. She was so completely enveloped in the "fog" that she couldn't see her own body. It was as though something had churned up the mud from the bottom and it wouldn't settle. With no real idea of where to go, she simply kept swimming forward. She kept checking her chronograph to track her amount of time underwater. There was only so much air in her tanks. How soon should she consider trying to surface?

After her chronograph told her she'd been down for 40 minutes or more, she decided, based on her knowledge of the area, that she had to have traveled well away from the shoreline and the remnants of the wharf. Kovac felt it was time to surface and make her way back to Foster on the beach. She turned to paddle back the way she came...

Hands! Many pairs of hands grasped her body, her limbs, her equipment! Kovac struggled furiously, against the unseen owners of those hands, thrashing, splashing - she reached for her weapon - belatedly remembering how she'd left it behind instead of bringing it...

--

Back on shore, Foster had used a special SHADO cell phone to contact the Omega team, waiting at Brudenell, "I don't know. She hasn't surfaced yet and she's got to be running out of air..."

The Team leader replied, "We can be there shortly, sir. Just give us the word."

"Don't use the chopper. It'll cause too much excitement around here. Bring the SUVs - and your diving gear - I think we're going to have to go in after her."

"How long has she been down there?"

"By herself, almost an hour."

"We'll be there in 15 minutes."

Foster trained his binoculars out towards the remnants of the wharf. The original item which registered so peculiarly, and sent them diving there, was no longer visible. Strange, with the tide going out, more of it should have been seen above the surface...

--

When the Team arrived, they were suited up and ready to follow Foster. They'd told the locals previously that they were Environment Canada scientists researching the deterioration of the old wharf and the breakwater. Islanders were very used to having environmental people around - aqua culture and agriculture which were very important to the Island economy and way of life - studies of the environment were ongoing constantly.

Foster briefed them again quickly and led the team down into the slowly receding water. The tide had started going out. Five SHADO people, including Foster, submerged into the murk he'd reported earlier to the Team.

Silently, they swam down into the "fog."

"It's like pea soup down here," Team member Tom Robertson commented over the comm-link.

"Wait till we get further, there's a point at which the water temperature increases dramatically," Foster explained over his own comm-link, "Once we get inside the stuff, we won't even be able to use our GPS or our compasses, so let's everybody take a bearing right now, before we go any further."

All five opened their GPS instruments to take readings. And, all five got a different bearing!

"Alright, this is what we're going to do," Foster decided, "I want Robertson, Tupper and Chacon to go back to shore. Little and Leslie, follow me," he turned to the other three, "If you don't hear from us in one hour, inform HQ. And, DON'T come in after us." The three SHADO operatives turned and began swimming back the direction they'd come. Foster continued on with the others. Little and Leslie were big men, they could handle themselves in a fight, and Leslie was an expert in alien technology. He'd need him if they came into actual contact with the extra terrestrials or any of their equipment.

They passed through the "fog" into the warmer section. By that time, none of their electronic equipment was functioning properly. It was still impossible to see anything.

"Kovac thought at this point, we probably would have passed the ruins of the wharf and the breakwater, and be outside PEI's provincial waters. Since we can't take any reliable readings, we'll have to take her word for it," Foster's voice crackled through the comm-link.

"Are we going anywhere at all?" asked Leslie.

"We could try surfacing, " suggested Little.

On a nod from Foster, they all swam upwards, pushing hard with their flippers.

Hands! Hands! Many pairs of hands were clutching their bodies, their limbs, their equipment! Foster and his team were trapped, unable to see their attackers, losing consciousness...

Foster's last coherent thoughts were, "God Almighty - is this what happened to Kovac?"

--

Slowly, his eyes began to focus...Foster looked around in the dim light. He saw Leslie and Little lying slumped on the floor with him. He looked down for his weapon and his equipment pieces, but they had all been removed, as had those articles from the other divers. The room they were in did not appear to have a door. It seemed sealed completely. Foster shook his comrades awake and started walking the perimeter of the room, feeling with his hands for any sort of change in the smooth walls that might indicate a door or exit.

It wasn't until Leslie and Little looked up at him that Foster realized the worst. Inside new alien helmets with tiny backpacks attached, they were breathing a green liquid! He knew he

also had to be breathing the same material. He was now in no doubt about what kind of installation they were in!

"Aliens!" he exclaimed to the other two, but there was no comm-link. Leslie and Little were also looking at Foster and at each other. They'd all come to the same horrible realization together.

--

Because their chronographs had been removed, the three SHADO men had no idea how long they'd been trapped in the alien room. Even with all three investigating the walls, ceiling and floor, they had not discovered one spot that suggested a way out. They did know that their own air tanks would have run out hours earlier, and breathing the alien liquid was all that was keeping them alive. Their comm-links had also been removed, so they couldn't even communicate with each other, except via American Sign Language. SHADO personnel were instructed in this mode of communications just for times like this, when normal speech was not possible, but all three were so rusty, they had to repeat their messages several times before they understood each other. Even using ASL, the SHADO men had little to communicate to each other. All they could do was wait. But, for what?

--

"Shit! I thought I could trust Paul with this mission!" Straker fumed, lighting another cigarillo furiously. He was pacing his office while Alec checked a laptop computer for the latest e-mail messages.

"Robertson says Foster and the other divers have been missing for over three hours. Foster gave them strict instructions NOT to follow them, but to report to us," Alec commented.

Straker stopped pacing for a moment, "Is the other team on its way?"

"They were flying in from Toronto - they should be there as we speak."

Freeman was watching Straker intently. He was about to speak when Straker cut him off, "Don't say it, Alec! You were right. Jackson was right! I shouldn't have sent Kovac in there!"

"Both Foster and Kovac are missing, along with the other SHADO people. It may not be because of anything Kovac did wrong. Paul's last e-mail suggested she was performing well - up until she disappeared. Chances are she ran into trouble - not that she compromised the mission. What's the problem, Ed? Feeling guilty? It'd be the first time for you."

Straker gritted his teeth in what passed for a grim smile, "I shouldn't have risked sending her in there. She wasn't ready. She told me so. Jackson said so. Damn it!" he pounded his fist on the wall and then stood there, his head pressed against his fist.

Freeman had rarely seen Straker in such a mood. He'd seen Straker big time pissed off, he'd seen him pleased about some successful mission or project; he'd even seen him frustrated, but this was unusual. If Freeman didn't know better, his commander was exhibiting fear and guilt. Not two of Straker's customary emotions.

Both men jumped as the e-mail squawked. Alec hit the receive key and waited a moment until the message came in on his laptop's screen, "It's from Robertson. The second team is there - they're awaiting your orders."

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The Canadian Omega Team Two, consisting of seven divers, was ready to follow General Straker's new orders. Three operatives would remain on land, investigating what was left of the wharf and breakwater now that the tide was completely out. Robertson, Chacon and Tupper would lead the other four down under. They followed the Team One divers one at a time, spaced out at three minute intervals.

--

The three SHADO men had alternately lain on the floor, trying to rest while one stood guard. It wasn't possible to do it in precise time intervals because they lacked a reliable timepiece. Using the ASL, they felt their communications were at least private. If the aliens had them under surveillance, it was unlikely they could decode sign language.

How many hours they had been imprisoned in the small, doorless room, they could only hazard a guess. Since the aliens had not put in an appearance, nor offered them any food, they were all grimly of the opinion that they were just marking time until execution or some other equally undesirable end. The three of them were sitting on the floor, their backs to each other to watch the walls for possible openings, when the ceiling opened up...

Three aliens descended on a small thin elevator-type mechanism. The SHADO men instantly leapt to their feet, ready to do battle. But, it was no use. The aliens pointed small-pen-sized instruments at them. Leslie jumped forward, and was sent sprawling by a painful blast from one of the aliens' "pens." The aliens motioned for Foster and Little to get him up again, then they pushed them onto the elevator and ascended to the next level.

--

Foster, Little and Leslie found the brightness on the next level almost painful after the dim light in their small prison. They turned away at first, but the aliens jerked them around roughly, maneuvered them through a three-slatted sliding door and sat them down in large dental type seats. Each SHADO man was strapped down in his turn, so he was unable to move. The aliens were wearing thin silver suits and light helmets - very unlike their usual orange and silver space suits. Obviously, in this underwater installation, they didn't require such hardy equipment. Foster and his men noticed the aliens moved with a smoothness that the much heavier Terrans didn't have. They were slim, almost willowy, and seemed to float across the floor's surface like synchronized swimmers. And, yet, for all their seeming fragility, they had no difficulty in wrestling Foster, Little and Leslie into those seats.

If he could have done so, Foster would have asked the aliens about Kovac. He wondered if she was already dead. How would they ever know? And, would he even survive to make a report to SHADO HQ?

His attention was immediately brought back as the alien technicians, if that's what they were, began cutting away his wet suit. Out of his peripheral vision, he could see the same process was being repeated on Little and Leslie. None of them were able to resist physically - they were too well restrained. Their heads were covered by helmets full of green breathing liquid. If those helmets and backpacks were removed, would they suffocate?

The aliens quickly and efficiently sliced off their wet suits with some sort of small laser cutting devices. All three men were wearing thermal underwear, which was also removed. They were then covered with boxer type shorts which sealed shut with some sort of velcro-style closings.

Foster watched the faces of the two aliens who worked on him. They did not appear to be communicating with each other - at least not verbally. Their demeanor was non-emotional. They went about their work with great dispassion; rather like well-experienced Terran vets working on dogs or cats. They simply seemed to be preparing the SHADO men for something else. Once the change of clothing had been effected, the aliens moved in three small tables with an assortment of strange-looking instruments and tools beside each SHADO man. Foster, Little and Leslie all looked at each other. They didn't need sign language to express their concerns at this point...

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How many times could one scream silently? Foster had given up counting. He was in too much pain to even worry much about Little and Leslie. All he could imagine was that they were suffering the same pain and indignities he was. The feeling of violation was stronger than he'd ever felt - even when he'd been trapped on the Moon's surface with an alien. Even when he'd been kidnapped from the spa 20 years ago.

Was there no end to it? Foster wondered fleetingly if this was how women who'd been raped felt. The aliens went about their work with cruel efficiency. What did the aliens want? Or was this merely what happened to those who dared get too close to the aliens's underwater installation?

Time was not fleeting. An eternity passed in those seats. By the time Foster thought he could not quell his rising fear of insanity, the aliens had strangely concluded their experiments and moved the little tables back. They loosened the restraints, and in pairs, the aliens worked to lift the humans onto their feet. All three Terrans were tall, well-muscled men. They dwarfed the aliens in height and weight. Foster squirmed in their grasp until he was able to make two ASL hand signals to Leslie and Little.

Weak, and in severe pain, but fueled by their suffering, the three SHADO men turned on the aliens. They struck them with their fists, punching right through the faceplates of their helmets! Red blood streaked the floor as Foster, Little and Leslie realized they'd cut their hands on the aliens' synthetic glass faceplates, but they were too far gone to care. What was a little more pain? All three were gratified to watch the aliens gasping for breath. Leslie, the heaviest-set of the three, wrestled one of his two aliens down, slamming its head repeatedly on the polished metal floor until its helmets shattered completely. He'd momentarily gone mad with some well-justified anger. Little and Foster made short work of the remaining aliens, and then pulled Leslie up. They appropriated the pen-like pain instruments off the aliens' suits to use as weapons.

Their lack of verbal communication was galling, as was the necessity to keep wearing the helmets and the backpacks with the breathing liquid. After watching the aliens die gasping from lack of the liquid, the SHADO men wondered if they'd suffer the same fate when their own liquid supply ran out. Before they could stop him, Leslie tore off his helmet and threw it to the floor, muscousy green liquid spraying everywhere. He took a deep breath...

"Shit - we can breathe in here!" he muttered. Foster and Little tentatively took off their own helmets and backpacks, the green liquid running down the front of their bodies in thick rivulets. They inhaled shallowly, at first afraid to do so. Then, they sucked in more air. As if they could read each others' thoughts, the SHADO men began turning the dead aliens over, stripping them of their silver suits, and picking up the intact helmets. They wiped their own blood off on their shorts.

"I don't think these suits are going to be a great fit, but we've got to pass for three of them for as long as we can," Foster said quietly, "We've got to get out of here somehow and warn SHADO."

Leslie was forcing his much larger body into one of the alien suits, "We can't leave without finding Kovac, sir."

"Our first and best line of action is to get out of here. If we take the time to look for the others, we might not make it...Look, we just don't have TIME!" Foster told him quietly, but firmly.

"If do we some recon, we can tell HQ a lot more about this installation. And, in the

process, we might find Kovac," Little insisted.

Leslie nodded, "Except for what's happened to us personally, we can't tell HQ much about this set-up. We should take a shot at learning some more - we don't know where this thing is planted, how it's powered, or how they've managed to keep the locals, and our people, outta here for so long. If we find Kovac, she'd have information, too. There's a lot of unanswered questions. You know Straker - he'll be up our asses for as much information as we can give."

Foster knew they were right. Even he wanted to look around. But, reporting to HQ seemed the best chance they had of wiping this place, whatever it was, off the map.

"We need to know what's going on here," Leslie added, "What are they doing here? What caused the locals to stay in their homes for days on end? What did the aliens do to THEM?"

Finally, Foster picked up a now empty helmet, "Alright. Let's do some recon, but we're going to bail as soon as we see the first sign of trouble. Everybody know how to use those little pen-things?"

All three smeared the inside of the helmets with the sticky green breathing liquid to give the impression they were aliens, and slung unattached backpacks over their shoulders. Without the liquid they could still breathe, and communicate verbally. Foster played with the comm-padd on the wall beside the door until it slid open and they stepped through it.

CHAPTER SIX

One of the first things the SHADO men learned when they got outside their own chamber, was that the doors had transparent panels on the other side. This would make it much easier to see inside each room as they passed through the rabbits' warren of corridors. The alien installation's layout didn't make any sense to the Terrans, but then it didn't have to. It served the aliens' needs, whatever they were.

Foster, Little and Leslie knew they were physically bigger than the aliens they'd already seen. They hoped they could keep moving and keep a low enough profile from the other aliens in the installation, to escape notice long enough to reconnoiter and perhaps even find Kovac. And ultimately, they had to escape.

They turned many corners, peering nonchalantly into each chamber. Some were occupied with busy alien technicians, working on other humans, and some were building what appeared to be component parts, or conducting unknown lab experiments. The SHADO men did not recognize any of the humans in the rooms they passed, so they kept moving. As much as they would like to have rescued those fellow suffering humans, they had to avoid bringing attention to themselves in any way.

At an intersection of corridors, the three men stopped to decide which direction to take.

"We could learn more if we split up," whispered Leslie.

"Yeah, and be at the aliens' mercy if we get caught alone," Little hissed back.

Foster silenced them both with a hand movement, "Leslie's right - it's time we split up. Let's take ten minutes down one corridor each and report back to this spot if we can. Otherwise, we'll all have to continue trying to find an exit singly. It gives us three separate chances to get a message out to HQ."

The others nodded in assent, and started off down their chosen corridors quietly. Foster passed what seemed an empty area. The chambers he looked into were vacant of alien activity. He tried to count off ten minutes in his head. The corridor he traveled led to a dead end. No exit there. He made his way back to the intersection.

Leslie was waiting for him when he got back.

"Sir, I found Kovac!" he whispered furiously.

"Where are she?"

"She's in a chamber down my corridor. Right now she looks to be alone."

Little arrived moments later, "Dead end," he commented softly.

"Al found Kovac," Foster told him, "Let's get down there."

--

Kovac was alone in the chamber. What Leslie hadn't mentioned was that she was encased in a long, body-sized cylindrical tank, floating in green breathing liquid. The aliens had stripped her of her diving suit - she was nude.

"How the hell do we get her out of this thing?" Leslie asked Foster as they surveyed the tank. Little was keeping watch at the door. He was trying all the controls to see if there was a locking mechanism.

Foster moved from one end of the tank, looking for a control padd. There had to be some way of opening it. He slid his hands over the container, in case it was operated by touch. He wanted to avoid having to break the glass, or whatever it was made with. Leslie was the expert on alien technology, but even he was stumped.

"Why is she in this thing?" Foster asked quietly, "Is she even alive?"

Leslie peered in closely, "I'm sure I can see her chest rising and falling - but that green stuff is probably the same breathing liquid the aliens used us on."

"Damn. If we open it, will she suffocate like the aliens did?"

"We were breathing it, and we're alright. I just don't know how long she's been in there. The time factor might make a difference," Leslie looked at Foster, "We'll never know unless we can get her out."

Grim choice - leave her there to be a guinea pig for the aliens to continue working on, or condemn her die gasping if she'd become too dependent on the breathing liquid. Foster remembered Straker always said he'd rather someone killed him, rather than leave him for the aliens to use for their own fiendish purposes.

"I don't want to break this thing open - there has to be an actual locking mechanism," Foster said sotto voce, "We can't afford to attract any unwelcome visitors."

Leslie shook his head. He'd been giving the tank the once over too, "I know there's a release pin on the alien helmets..." he walked over to a lab table where a number of instruments were laid out, as though ready for surgery. Some of them looked familiar - too familiar for comfort. He lifted several scalpel-like instruments, "Maybe we can pry it open quietly with one of these."

"Do you think there's any sort of alarm on it? Will it scream bloody murder if we compromise it?" Foster asked.

"There's always the chance of either an alarm or a failsafe mechanism showing up somewhere else in this complex - I'd bet there's some sort of monitoring system here. But, the longer we take to make up our minds, the better our chances of getting caught. I can't guarantee this room isn't on closed-circuit TV, or the alien version of it."

"Right," Foster knew Leslie was just giving him the options. They both bent down to the thin "crack" where the lid met the bottom of the tank, "If we get it open, we're going to have a green mess on the floor."

"Yeah, I know. We'll have to step back from it if we can pry it open..." Leslie slid his scalpel into the groove, and motioned for Foster to do the same.

"How do you think they got her in there? I mean, if she was conscious and able to struggle, it wouldn't be easy to get anyone in there and then close the lid." Foster asked, straining to force his scalpel deeper into the groove.

"There's what looks like a spout device inside the tank - maybe they pumped the breathing liquid in after they shut her up. Maybe she was in restraint," Leslie pushed harder and felt the handle of the scalpel break in his hand, "Shit, I broke it," he whispered, chagrined. He picked up another one, and reestablished his position at the tank lid. He threw his body against it, as did Foster. The green liquid sloshed up around the glassed in tank and Kovac's body moved from side to side like a child's toy in a bathtub. They pushed down again and sensed something clicking in the tank. Just as Leslie suspected, they must have hit on the locking mechanism. A wide stream of green liquid began pouring through the separation.

By now, both men were able to get their fingers in the groove - they pulled it up and over, thick green mucous splashing over their silver boots and puddling across the floor. Little moved away from the door, as if to help them, but Foster waved him back, "No, no...we can manage..."

They pushed the lid back into an upright position, and taking Kovac's head and shoulders at one end, and her feet at the other, they removed her from the tank. There was no choice but to put her on the floor in the green puddle. She lay there motionless, her skin tinged a pale

green shade.

Foster looked up at Leslie. Was she dead? What could they do? Green liquid was streaming from her ears, her nostrils, her slightly opened mouth. Leslie crouched down and began CPR - pinching Kovac's nose, and breathing into her. Foster was going to start working on her heart, but he was rewarded, when he bent down to listen to her chest, with a steady, if slow, heartbeat.

"Heart's pumping," Foster whispered to Leslie, as he continued breathing into Kovac's mouth. Leslie stopped and shook his head, "Not for long unless I can get her to breathe right. Help me turn her over."

The two men shifted Kovac's body and watched more green liquid pouring out of her mouth and nose. A small noise and a body twitch alerted them that perhaps all was not lost - then Kovac started to make soft vomiting sounds - the kind a cat makes when it's trying to bring up a hairball.

Leslie and Foster exchanged relieved looks over Kovac's body, but they knew it wasn't over yet - not by a long shot. If she could breathe, and come back to full consciousness, they still had to be able to take her with them, and get out of there - alive!

--

Although she hadn't been able to speak, Kovac was able to indicate to them that she could now breathe on her own, and was fully conscious. They found her a towel to wrap up in. Foster and Leslie quietly explained to her where they all were, and that their next move was to find the exit and get out. Finding some dive tanks would also be a major consideration.

"They removed ours, but I didn't see anything resembling our equipment in that room they had us in," Little commented.

"What about doing the green stuff again?" Leslie asked.

Foster grimaced, but he knew Leslie was right. It would be impossible to locate their own gear, and even then, their tanks might already be empty. If and when they were able to get out of the aliens' installation, they'd still have to swim for it.

"Anything like that in here?" Foster asked Kovac.

"I don't remember everything...when they grabbed me, I think I lost consciousness. But, I do recall being taken to some chamber where they stripped me, and pumped green liquid into my helmet," She ran her fingers through her wet, greenish slimed hair, squeezing the muscousy material off between her fingers, and shaking it off onto the floor, "It was like one of those nightmares you want to wake up from, but you can't, y'know?...I can feel them doing things to me...I think I passed out and woke up several times..."

Foster didn't want to seem impatient with her, but he needed more details, "Do you remember where they stripped you? Can you recall coming into the installation at all?"

"Yessss...I think it was...", Kovac looked up at Foster and Leslie, "I don't know...my perception of times and events is really screwed up..."

Leslie took her by the shoulders gently, "Go back to the entry point. Can you see it in your head?"

Kovac nodded, "It was a bare chamber with racks on one side..."

"What was on those racks?"

"...silver stuff...suits, I think."

"Any helmets?"

"Maybe... the aliens stripped me and then stayed behind there, while others took me away to the lab..."

"Was that lab or that entry chamber anywhere near this room?"

Kovac felt tears welling up in her eyes, "...I don't know..."

Leslie held her for a moment so she could get herself back together. He continued quietly, "This corridor we're on continues down quite far. Do you think you're up to doing some exploring?"

"I don't really have a choice, do I?" she whispered.

"No, you don't. We've got to keep moving. It's only a matter of time before the aliens know we're on the loose."

--

The four of them moved quietly down the corridor. As a protective measure, the men had donned their green slimed helmets again, and opted to pretend Kovac was being "herded" by them to another location, so they kept her ahead of themselves, with their "pens" at the ready. It would look vaguely legitimate if they encountered other aliens. So far, they had been lucky, but they knew that luck couldn't possibly last.

And, it didn't. A group of aliens exited a chamber and passed them by in the corridor. They fortunately seemed bent on their own purposes and didn't give much more to the SHADO group than a cursory glance, but it was a tense few seconds before the aliens went on their way and the SHADO people could breathe more easily again.

Their relief didn't last long. As they turned a corner, they were met by a phalanx of silver-suited aliens. They were packing what appeared to be pistols, not the "pens" the SHADO men had confiscated from their alien captors earlier. Kovac shifted her eyes quickly, using her peripheral vision to get some idea of what Foster, Little and Leslie were about to do. She dove for the feet of the lead alien, while her male counterparts rushed the remaining aliens.

While the SHADO people were outnumbered and outgunned, the aliens were smaller and more fragile. Kovac's dive took down her alien, who accidentally discharged his weapon into the ceiling! Foster narrowly missed getting fried by the energy shot directed his way, and Kovac heard one of the men shout, "I'm hit!" She was too busy wrestling her alien for possession of his weapon to know whose voice it was.

Leslie, the largest of the three SHADO men, was pounding one of the aliens, while yet another was atop him, striking repeatedly at his head. Little pulled the alien off Leslie, and threw a painful punch that broke the alien's helmet, driving him into the nearby wall, and slicing Little's knuckles. Another alien attacking Little from behind, and got Little's elbow in his faceplate. Both aliens were gagging as the green breathing liquid poured from their helmets.

Foster was also struggling with an alien for a weapon. The alien had surprisingly powerful hands, and wrapped a death grip around Foster's throat - the weapon went skittering across the floor. Foster was on the verge of passing out when Kovac fired her captured alien pistol and took down the alien in a blast of bright light. He collapsed slowly to the floor, a mixture of red blood and green breathing liquid dripping out through the alien's suit.

Finally, the SHADO people realized they were the only creatures standing. They took stock of each other. Foster's throat was badly bruised; Little was bleeding from both his left hand knuckles and his right elbow. Kovac was totally winded and had a beaut of a shiner starting, not to mention having most of her towel garment torn off. Leslie was in the worst condition. He'd received an almost direct hit from one of the alien weapons. There was little blood, but his shoulder was scorched white, indicative of a second degree burn at least. The energy weapons obviously were designed to cause great pain and even death.

They gathered up the weapons, and dragged the dead or unconscious aliens into hiding in

a nearby empty chamber.

"I wondered how long we'd get before a posse would show up," Little grunted, as he dragged one dead alien by the feet. There was red blood and green liquid all over the corridor walls and floor. That was something they couldn't do much about.

Leslie replied, "My guess is they knew about our escape fairly soon after, and kept things quiet to lull us into a sense of false security. They must've figured their weapons were all they'd need to take us down." He helped Kovac carry another alien into the chamber.

Kovac bent over, her hands on her knees, breathing as deeply as possible, winded, "God knows I hate to say this fellas, but I think our only ticket out of this loony bin is to do the green stuff again."

Nodding, Leslie started to strip one of the aliens with an intact helmet, "She's right. We'll never find any other equipment to get us out of here."

Foster and Little joined in stripping the other aliens.

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They helped each other get suited up. Kovac was the most in need of a silver suit, but Leslie's had been torn open in the melee and gun battle, and his shoulder was painfully exposed. They had no bandages to use, but Kovac wadded a piece of her garment against his injury and helped him suit up with the others. The final task was to put on the alien helmets and inject the green breathing liquid. None of them were looking forward to that process. They'd switched backpacks with the aliens in the hopes that they contained enough material to get them out of the base.

"I don't remember having this done," Kovac observed, as Foster fitted a helmet down over her head, "I must have been unconscious when they put me in that tank."

"So were we," Little agreed, "This isn't going to be the most fun part of this little adventure!"

--

After gagging and retching terribly, the four SHADO people submitted to the indignity of breathing the green liquid again. Foster, the member of the group most experienced with it, had the easiest time. Kovac struggled until Leslie was almost ready to pull the helmet off her again, but Foster shook his head and Leslie had to hold her upright while she made the adjustment. It was at least fifteen minutes before she could walk on her own again. Foster chafed at the delay this caused, but knew they had to wait long enough for them all to be able to breathe easy enough to fool any other aliens they might encounter. It was now even more vital that they find the exit and escape.

--

They ventured out of the chamber cautiously. Armed with both the energy weapons and the pain pens, the SHADO people hoped they could slip silently about the installation until they could find an escape egress. There was much more alien activity in the corridors by now. They passed several groups in the halls, keeping Leslie to the centre of their own group, praying his larger size would go unnoticed. The missing squad of aliens who attacked them would have failed to report back. The installation would soon be on alert.

Bathed in the green liquid, the Terrans could not speak to each other. They had to revert back to ASL. Kovac was the weak link in that chain, because she had only been introduced to ASL during her indoctrination period, and was not conversant enough with it to understand the others. Nor was she any good at lip-reading. Not that she could see all that well through the green slime. The only reason she could tell the difference between Little and Leslie was

because Leslie's injured arm hung differently.

But, if none of them could see each other properly through the breathing liquid, this was a plus for their escape. That meant the aliens also could not see their faces. The four of them kept moving down every corridor, and as they moved, they realized they were not only getting further away from where they started, but deeper into the maze of the installation. Were they ever going to find the way out?

--

Halfway down a new corridor, the artificial lighting began to flash, and the SHADO people could hear a peculiar sound filtering through into their helmets. The alien installation was finally on full-scale alert, if the scurrying groups of aliens were any indication!

They couldn't afford to make any false moves now. They had to fit in, to fade into the mob. Foster led the way behind a squad of six aliens, and around the corner to a dead end and a chamber. The aliens seemed to view them as backup, and didn't respond overtly to them. Foster made a couple of small signals in ASL to Leslie and Little, and they drew their captured energy weapons. Little opened a chamber door with a quick energy blast as they passed by, and Leslie and Foster opened fire on the aliens. Kovac fired after them.

The carnage was a little more than they expected. Several of the aliens were still burning from the energy blasts. One alien had his helmet compromised and was lying on the floor, gasping as the green liquid and his life seeped out. The SHADO men and Kovac dragged the alien bodies inside the chamber, behind a large equipment locker, out of sight, and closed the door again. They checked their weapons and discovered that there were mechanisms near the triggers which adjusted the amount of energy used. They must have been set to kill. That sobering thought was communicated to the others by Foster, and this time, even Kovac caught the inference.

The room was dimly lit, but they could make out racks with silver suits and helmets lining one wall, arrayed neatly. Kovac pointed to the racks, and tried to use her limited ASL skills to say something. Leslie finally clued into what she was saying - she'd been here before! He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder, and slowly signed in ASL, "You here before?"

Kovac signed affirmatively over and over. The three men thought back to what Kovac had said about her abduction by the aliens. She said they'd brought her into the base to a room with racks of silver suits! Had the aliens they'd just followed and killed been planning to exit the installation? There was no time to worry about that. If this chamber was indeed connected to the exit, they had to find out how.

Little lifted the lid of the big equipment locker. Inside were more suits, helmets and backpacks. Obviously this was a departure point. The aliens could not exist in earth's atmosphere and live for very long. Most of them aged and died within minutes, unable to make the transition from breathing the green liquid to breathing Terran air.

They began quickly perusing the entire room for a door or exit egress. The chamber walls, like most of the chamber walls in the base, were flat, metallic and featureless. Something clicked in Leslie's head - he looked up. And, there it was. A small circle of metal, just like the elevator the aliens had utilized to enter their prison chamber when the men had first been abducted. He gestured to the others, and pointed up. Foster smiled grimly; why hadn't he thought of that? Now, how were they to get it to open?

There were several items of equipment hanging from the captured alien suits they were all wearing. Leslie examined all those on his own suit minutely while Foster, Kovac and Little canvassed the room again and again, looking for some sort of control padd. He knew what the

"pen" was. He knew how the helmets and the backpacks worked, and of course the energy weapons. But, there were several other pieces he'd only glanced at. One looked vaguely like a comm device. Something made him snap it off his belt and crush it under the heel of his boot. Leslie signed to the others that he thought it might be a means for the aliens to track all those wearing the devices and they should perhaps destroy them. If they could succeed in getting out of the base, they certainly didn't want the aliens to have a direct beeline to them. The others followed his lead. Another one of the gadgets attracted Leslie's eye next. He'd seen the aliens use something on their belts to open the door to their torture chamber. Was it some sort of keyless entry device? He aimed it at the circle of metal on the ceiling.

All four watched anxiously as the circle slowly descended to just inches above floor level. It seemed to be held in place by some sort of energy beam, not working machinery.

The chamber door burst open, and a team of aliens opened fire on the SHADO people! Foster and the other men tried to herd Kovac onto the circle platform first, but she drew her weapon and began firing with them. She saw Leslie staggering backward in a fire storm of energy! Kovac screamed soundlessly inside her own helmet! Foster and Little were hit also, but they traded fire with the aliens, switching their weapons' in their hands.

Kovac grabbed Leslie around the waist and dragged him onto the platform with her. She saw Foster and Little, even though they were injured, squeeze onto it too. Leslie's "key" was gone, but Kovac had one of her own attached to her belt - she grabbed it and pressed every button on it. The platform started to ascend just as she felt a searing bolt of energy pass through her legs!

Once the circle deposited them on the upper level, they could see a strange bubble-like tent above them. Foster knew exactly what it was - he'd seen something like it nearly twenty years ago. It was their ticket out! It would only be a matter of seconds before the aliens reached them - they had to move now!

Leslie had sagged against Kovac's much smaller body - he was shaking his helmeted head, as if to say, "Go on without me, I can't make it !" Little and Foster took him by the arms and together with Kovac, plunged through the bubble...

CHAPTER SEVEN

It seemed impossible, but the SHADO team passed through the bubble as though it had no real structure, as though it truly was made of soap and water. Only Foster was unsurprised. The others could hardly believe the sensation of seeing their own bodies slide through the bubble like some sort of science-fiction special effect.

Once they exited, they were enveloped in a warm murky fog. It almost felt good. Even though they couldn't see properly, they were swimming as fast as they could away from the bubble. It seemed any direction was better than back the way they'd already come!

Each one of them had time to consider how they were going to avoid being attacked by any SHADO personnel waiting for them on the beach - if there was someone waiting for them. They were garbed in silver alien suits, breathing green liquid - what if they ran into a trigger-happy Omega team member - eager to bag his first alien? Or would the others be hopeful of catching a live alien? Foster knew Straker had been keen on getting as many live aliens as possible. Or at least recovering bodies for the lab. He didn't relish being an accidental autopsy! Foster was planning to use ASL if he could get to the surface to communicate with the Omega people. After all, it was doubtful if the aliens could have ever decoded hand sign language - it was even more idiom based than English!

The four SHADO people stayed together as best they could by holding each others' hands. Without their own equipment, they had no compasses, no GPS devices, nothing. They simply continued out for as far as they could to avoid recapture. After about fifteen minutes, it was Kovac who signaled clumsily to Foster that perhaps they should try surfacing. It was an act fraught with fear - in trying to surface before, they'd all ended up as prisoners of the aliens.

Cautiously, Foster began to swim up, the others following discreetly, hand in hand, the water getting colder in temperature as they ascended. It seemed to take forever, but finally, Foster's helmet broke the surface. He glanced around quickly, through the haze of green liquid in his helmet, and saw the sun just breaking in the east over the water. Kovac surfaced beside him, as did the others. Using ASL once more, Foster signed to Kovac to ask if she could identify their position. Since her ASL wasn't very accomplished, all she could sign back was for them to head east - to follow the sun. At least swimming on the surface meant they had better visibility and had an actual target to aim for. But, it also left them sitting ducks for both SHADO and the aliens' search teams. Who would find them first?

--

As it turned out, the alien backpacks held only a limited amount of breathing liquid. Leslie was the first one to discover his was thinning rapidly. Because of his extra injuries, he'd been laboring and breathing heavier, using up more of the liquid. He signaled the others that he had to take his helmet off. The other three assisted him in removing the helmet and tried to hold him as much out of the water as possible as he retched and gagged and gradually became acclimatized to breathing normal air again. It wasn't a pretty sight, and they knew they would all end up having to do the same thing, eventually. Dawn was breaking now fully; the winds began to pick up, and whip the water into ever-growing waves. Perhaps Kovac might have been able to tell them more about the local waters and what to expect, but she was hampered considerably by her lack of ASL skills.

They floated and swam at intervals. At that moment, their biggest concern was keeping Leslie above water. He was getting weaker and weaker from his injuries. Shock and/or hypothermia was an unpleasant prospect. The silver alien suits were not much protection

against the cold Maritime water - it was obvious they'd been designed for usage in the installation and the warm "fog" the aliens had created to smoke-screen their base. Each cold wave poured frigid water down over their heads. For those still immersed in their green liquid helmets, it was bearable, but for Leslie, it was sheer agony. He was losing more and more body warmth, and Kovac could tell from his bluish lips that he was getting less oxygen to breathe and using less of what he was taking in. He could barely keep his eyes open - they all knew what that meant.

--

Foster was the next to use up his breathing liquid. Little held him up while he coughed and spewed up residual green mucous. It wasn't easy, with the early morning swells. They bobbed about like corks, barely able to help each other. Unlike the others, Foster recovered from his breathing problems quicker. He was soon able to swim unaided, and went back to help Kovac with Leslie.

He tapped Kovac's helmet, "Can you hear me?" She nodded, "How far off shore do you think we are?" he asked her.

She tried to sign to him, but couldn't free her hands. Finally, she managed the word, "Far."

Little was holding Leslie up while they tried to converse.

"Are we at least going in the right direction?" Foster asked again.

Kovac signed, "East - yes."

While they were concentrating on each other's signals, the wind seemed to pick up even more. Suddenly, they realized the propellers of a helicopter was whipping the water around them into a frenzy!

A voice boomed out through a bullhorn, "This is the Canadian Coast Guard! We're going to lower some divers to you!"

The last thing Foster remembered was squeezing Kovac in his arms...

--

Kovac sat upright in her bed, "Leslie!" she yelled, "Where's Leslie? My God, where is he?"

A pair of orderlies in hazmat suits hurried into her room and laid her down again, "It's ok," one of them soothed her, "He's ok. He's in intensive care, remember? We told you that before..."

She looked up at them, feeling stupid and somewhat disoriented. The room was obviously a private one, since she occupied it alone, "Where am I?" she asked.

"This is the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, but you're being airlifted tonight. All of you."

"Where are the others?" Kovac tried to remain calm.

"They're in the room next door - you've been in isolation for the last twelve hours."

"Where are we going?" she queried, just now noticing the IV drip in her right arm.

"We don't know that yet."

"How'd I get here?"

"The Coast Guard brought you and your friends in. You almost didn't make it," the other orderly explained, "This isn't the best time of year to go diving in these waters..."

"What about our stuff? Our gear?" Kovac realized the ER doctors and nurses would have had to strip them. She wondered if they realized they'd handled materials of alien manufacture.

"It's all been cleaned and stored for you. You'll get it back."

"Who's airlifting us out tonight?"

"Don't worry, Environment Canada is handling everything. Just lie back and rest..."

--

Kovac sat on the edge of her bed, looking at the jogging suit the hospital gave her to put on. She'd been given exactly five minutes to see Leslie, before they prepared him for the airlift. Foster and Little were in good shape, too, she was pleased to see. They'd returned to their own room to dress and get ready to leave.

Kovac got up and looked out the window. Her room was on the top floor of the hospital, and she had a clear view right across the Hillsborough River. She could see the twinkling lights of Charlottetown's tiny harbour, and the lights of Stratford shone like tiny diamonds on the dark water. Home. She was that close. All she had to do was get dressed and slip out. She could hail a taxi in the hospital parking lot and give him her home address on Holland Drive. How easy it would be! Her husband, her kids, Miranda, the big black Labrador with her plummy tail. Home! She leaned her forehead against the window and felt the coolness of the glass on her skin as the tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Kovac, get dressed! We're just about ready to leave!" Little called to her from the corridor.

She turned around, trying to regain control over herself, "I'll...be ready in a minute or so..." She took one more look out the window and then slowly drew the drapes against the tempting image.

--

Foster, Kovac and Little were able to walk out to the helipad, but Leslie was taken aboard the chopper in a stretcher. He was conscious now, and able to talk, but still on an IV drip for dehydration and medication for his burns and the pain. Kovac watched silently as the chopper took off and moved off over the River, over Stratford, over the Island terrain. In moments, Prince Edward Island was behind them, and they were soaring out over the Atlantic.

"We'll be heading to New York for a prelim check, and Straker wants us back to HQ for more tests and a debriefing," Foster told them all, "As far as the locals, the Coast Guard and the hospital staff know, we were Environment Canada divers who ended up in trouble."

"What happened to our gear at the campground?" Kovac asked, wondering how SHADO had managed to cover so many tracks.

"The Omega Team stationed in Brudenell took care of it," Foster answered her, "In fact, they've been very busy while we've been lollygagging in the hospital," he smiled briefly, noting the other three didn't seem to share his sense of humour at the moment. He continued, "Kovac, remember that strange projection you saw our first day down at Poverty Beach?" she nodded in assent, "Well, turns out it was some sort of device the aliens were using against the locals in the area. We're not completely certain, but our techs think it was responsible for controlling the people and keeping them in their homes, glued to their TV sets. The device was more than likely tuned into their TV frequencies and was instructing them, subliminally, to stay indoors. This would mean the aliens could build their installation, kidnap lab victims and do whatever they wanted with no interference from the locals and pretty much undetected by us."

Little leaned forward, "How big of an area did this thing cover?"

"The estimate is about fifteen miles in all directions. According to what we know from Kovac, this would have been fishing season for that village and many others like it in that part of the province. Looks like those men have lost at least a month, thanks to the aliens."

"So, how're they gonna handle that?" Leslie inquired, from his stretcher.

"As I understand it, Omega has offered the fishermen a pretty nice financial compensation package - they think it's coming from Environment Canada."

"But, what about the alien base?" Kovac was asking the biggest question on everyone's mind.

"It's gone. Omega destroyed it."

"My God," Little whistled, "There were locals down there! We saw them - remember?"

Foster shook his head, "There was no choice. Omega didn't have any time. After we disappeared, orders came through from HQ to destroy whatever was in the warm 'fog'."

Silence prevailed as Kovac, Little and Leslie digested the facts - that HQ knew there was a chance they had not escaped and were still in the alien installation. And, they'd ordered the base destroyed nonetheless. Drones - they were just drones, Kovac thought to herself.

"How did they find the base? How long had it been there?" Little asked.

"The base may have been several months old - the aliens probably constructed it before we got our anti-cloaking technology up and running. They had us at a real disadvantage on that for awhile. Omega didn't find the base until they fired into the "fog." That "warm fog" was part of an alien underwater cloaking screen. Once the screen was disabled, they were able to get inside and overrun it. It was nip and tuck all the way."

"So what happened?"

"The aliens didn't go down without a fight," Foster sighed, "Guess Straker will have plenty of alien bodies to dissect in his exobiology lab now. They're all dead."

"And, the humans who were there?"

"As far as we can figure out, the aliens killed them when Omega compromised the base. Guess they didn't want anyone talking. More fodder for Straker's lab."

"What about all the technology?" Leslie tried to sit up, "Didn't they try to take any of it out for study?"

"They took as much out as they could. But, without the cloaking device intact, the base would be detectable underwater by divers, so they blew it up. From what I gather, the news reports claimed it was an old World War II mine that had been discovered by us - as workers for Environment Canada. Supposedly we were trying to defuse it. Every question has been covered."

They all fell silent as the SHADO chopper flew into the darkness.

--

When they were landed in New York, they simply disembarked from the chopper and were loaded onto a huge SST SHADO transport for England. Foster, Little and Leslie fell asleep on the last leg of the flight home. Their return to Great Britain was low-key. From the aircraft, they were transferred to a large motorhome-bus, and driven to a SHADO laboratory/debriefing installation outside London. There, they were given full physicals, a battery of blood tests, urine tests, x-rays, CAT-scans and MRIs - the works.

Kovac's "favourite" shrink, Doug Jackson came down from HQ to oversee their physicals and debriefings. Much as she disliked Jackson, she had to admit he behaved decently towards her, even permitted her to visit Leslie in sickbay. Leslie was recovering from his injuries and Kovac found herself looking forward to those daily chats with him. He didn't seem as much a drone as some of the others did.

The debriefing sessions were, it seemed, worse than the physical exams. While the good doctors pondered over every orifice and surface area of their bodies, it was the debriefers, including Jackson, who were more rigorous. They were constantly, dispassionately probing them about every aspect of their ordeal.

--

"...Doctor Jackson, I am telling you everything I can remember. If you think there is something extra locked up in my subconscious, well - you're the shrink - you tell ME!" Kovac sat back in her chair, her arms folded across her chest. Then, Jackson shut off the videotape recorder in Straker's office. The screen went black.

Straker blew out a smoke ring, "And, your point is?"

"There is more. I can't get at it consciously. We should prep her for a hypno-session."

"Do you think she's refusing to tell us something - purposely holding back information?"

"I'm not certain - that's why I suggested the session. She doesn't THINK she's holding anything back, but SHE may not have a conscious choice over that."

"Mental trauma, I suppose," Straker mused, drawing in on his cigarillo, "Wouldn't be the first time we've seen this in SHADO personnel. What about the others?"

Jackson shook his head, "Physical trauma, yes - especially in the case of Leslie. But, he's well on the road to recovery. They all are. It's her I'm most concerned about."

Straker sat back in his chair and propped one foot up on his desk, "Doctor, you've always been concerned about Kovac. Is this just more of the same?"

"She's...different. I can't pinpoint it, but there's been some sort of intrinsic change in her. And, not just because of what she's been through consciously. There's something I just can't get at. It could be dangerous. Her mind throws up blocks in most of the psycho-tests we've been running with her. There's something there she doesn't want us to access."

"Has she asked for me?" Straker said quietly.

"Why, no, General. She spends all her spare time with Major Leslie," Jackson was wearing a most insidious smirk.

Straker took his foot off the desk and walked around it to lean over Jackson. He blew a smoke ring right into the doctor's face, "Do your bloody tests."

--

Seven weeks passed. Foster and Little were certified for duty and released. Kovac took leave of them, thanking them for all their assistance and protection during their alien incarceration. Foster was being flown back to New York to take up his post as head of the Omega Corporation again, and Little was returning to Toronto to rejoin his own Omega cell. Leslie and Kovac were being kept back. Leslie, of course, had to recuperate from his burns. New skin was being grafted onto to his injured areas. So far there had been no rejection problems, but the doctors were vigilant about infections setting in or post-traumatic shock.

Kovac, on the other hand, couldn't see why she was being held. Her slight burns had been handled with a minimum of fuss and she'd healed well, with only a few scars. She was spending what she considered too much time in psycho-tests. Dr. Jackson booked her for a hypno-session, which he handled himself. He knew she didn't care much for him, and was less than comfortable with the way he probed her, but he was so intent on discovering her "secret" that he went ahead personally.

"Ms. Kovac, we'll be taping this session - just like all the others. Just lie back, relax, and we'll start...," Jackson flipped on the video cam.

After several moments, Jackson deemed it possible to begin regressing his patient, "Let's go back to the alien installation...you told me that you struggled against too many pairs of hands..."

"They were...all over me...I didn't have a weapon...I left it in the SUV..."

"Yes, yes...go on..." Jackson urged her quietly.

"I was in this lab...I was undressed...I...I..."

"What happened next?"

"It was...it hurt...I begged them to stop, but they...didn't pay any attention to me...I told them no...to stop...STOP!"

"You're doing fine," Jackson patronized her, "Keep going..."

Kovac was sweating now. She was pulling at her own clothes, as though she couldn't breathe. She kept trying to protect her lower abdomen with her hands.

"I can't!!"

"You can't go on? Or you won't go on? Which is it?" Jackson asked her, not so gently, this time, leaning forward in his seat.

She was sobbing now, entreating the invisible aliens which haunted her memory to stop whatever it was they were doing to her, "Please...don't do this...it's not right...I can't...I can't...Don't do it!" a scream tore from Kovac's throat as she relived some terrible, agonizing pain. She was thrashing about on the couch, and before Jackson could catch her, she fell off onto the floor. Kovac was curled up into a tight little ball when Straker opened the door and strode in.

"That's enough, Dr. Jackson!" Straker knelt to lift Kovac up, "Bring her out of it, Doug!"

"We've never gotten this far before, General...", Jackson argued.

"I said - NOW!" Straker's angry blue eyes flashed an unmistakable message. Jackson helped put her back on the couch and counted her back to consciousness.

Kovac opened her eyes, but it was clear she was still in pain, even if the pain was now just as horrible memory. She looked around her, taking in both Dr. Jackson and Straker.

"I think that'll be all for today, Doctor," Straker dismissed him, using his iciest tone.

Jackson glared at the General, but left by the same door Straker had entered. Straker sat down in the doctor's chair across from Kovac. He handed her some tissue so she could wipe her eyes and face and compose herself. She looked up at him suspiciously.

"You just happened to be in the neighbourhood, right?" Kovac said finally, looking over and blowing her nose.

"Glad to see your alien encounter hasn't dampened your sarcasm," Straker smiled grimly. He crossed one leg over the other, "Wanna tell me what's going on?"

"I wish I could... Part of me wants to know...part of me doesn't..."

"You know Jackson's not going give up until he finds out. He's like a terrier with a bone in these matters."

"Mmmmm...and I bet I know who's holding his leash," Kovac replied, crossing her arms over her chest, "What is this? SHADO's version of 'good cop, bad cop'?"

"I'm just suggesting that a little more co-operation on your part might end this thing a lot quicker for you."

"Don't you think I want this nightmare to end?" Kovac got up off the couch in one swift movement, "Ye Gods! I've been living this nightmare since the day the Enterprise was destroyed!" she turned on Straker, "What MORE do you want from me?"

"Then, you're not consciously holding anything back in these sessions?"

"Hell, no! I'd like to carve all those awful things the aliens did to me out of my head and get on with what's left of my life!"

"You're being straight on this with me?"

"Would I lie to you? Have I ever bothered to lie to you?"

Straker shook his head, "No, you're too much the bitch for that! You enjoy being brutally honest."

"I'm glad we've got that much straight, then," Kovac sat back down on the couch, "So what business brings you up here?"

"Oh, the usual, checking up on the troops. I guess I just missed Paul and Pete."

"They left yesterday."

"I hear you've been spending time with Major Leslie."

"Don't tell me you're jealous?" Kovac leaned back on the couch, "He's been through a rough time with all those skin grafts, but he's got the best sense of humour about it...", she lowered her eyes, and said quietly, "He saved my life, you know."

"From what I heard, you repaid the favour," Straker replied.

"You don't miss much, do you?"

"Hey, it's my job. They won't let me do anything else around here," Straker leaned forward and slapped Kovac's knee, "Look, let's get you something to eat and we'll go see how Leslie's doing today."

Kovac looked up at him, "Am I ever going to get out of here?"

Straker held out his hand to her, helping her off the couch, "When you're ready."

--

Kovac had repeatedly asked Jackson for tranquilizers. She wasn't sleeping well, and when she did get to sleep, the nightmarish images returned. Images of helmeted alien faces peering down at her, sensations of pain, violation, fears of gagging on the aliens' green breathing liquid as they sealed her in the stasis tank...Kovac woke up every night, screaming, her bed soaked with sweat. She was exhausted, bitchy and feeling vastly uncooperative in general. The only person she had a smile for was Major Leslie. But, even he could see she was labouring under an enormous burden.

Dr. Jackson seemed content to just let her suffer - or so she thought. He permitted her no sleeping drugs. His only suggestion was to write down the images she was dreaming immediately upon waking. Those images might be clues to what she had endured in the alien base and could not express in hypnotherapy.

Another round of physical exams proved fruitless. Except for the energy burns, she was in relatively good health. Her lungs had sustained no lasting damage from breathing the green liquid, and the greenish tinge faded from her skin, as it had from the men.

Physically she was healthy - her mental health was another question. Kovac felt as though the doctors, and even Straker himself, wanted something she could not give them - and she wanted very much to escape the medical installation and at least participate in the work of examining the alien bodies SHADO had captured from the base. It would keep her mind busy with learning new things. She had always buried her pain in her work.

The morning she threw up, she thought it was just another manifestation of her nerves. She'd been breakfasting with Major Leslie, in his sickbay room. Suddenly, the room started to spin, her stomach lurched, and she barely made it into the lavatory. When she came back out, white-faced, sweaty and shaking, Leslie was concerned enough to call for a nurse.

"You need me?" the nurse stuck her head in the door.

"Kovac, here, just chucked her breakfast," Leslie explained.

"I'm ok now," Kovac said, sitting back down in her chair.

The nurse took stock of her weakened appearance, "Well, I know everyone makes fun of our food services, but I don't think it's quite that bad. Why don't I take you down to the clinic and have you checked out?"

"I'm fine," Kovac shot a glare at Leslie, "Shit-disturber!" she hissed at him.

--

The nurse accompanied Kovac down to the clinic and turned her over to the doctor on call. She was asked about her symptoms, and the doctor drew more blood and requested she give a urine sample.

"Any food or drug allergies?"

"None that I know of...Look, I'm booked for more psycho-sessions - it's probably just my nerves acting up..."

The doctor's attention was interrupted by an e-mail coming up on his computer screen. He read it, then continued studying Kovac's chart very intently, "When was your last menstrual cycle?"

Kovac blinked at him, "Uh...last month, maybe?"

"Can you give me a date?"

"Not without checking my personal calendar. I've always been irregular anyway. My cycle runs five weeks in between each period. It's done that since my last baby."

"When was your last pregnancy?"

"Nineteen-ninety." Kovac responded quietly, remembering the cuddly little bundle she brought home from the hospital.

"Normal birth? Any complications?" the doctor queried.

"Eight pounds seven ounces - and I delivered normally."

"Your file here says you've had two children."

"That's right."

"Well, congratulations. Number three is on its way!" the doctor announced.

Kovac just stared at him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"She's WHAT ?" Straker halted his cigarillo in mid-air. Dr. Jackson's face on the computer screen was strangely triumphant.

"You heard me, General."

"How the hell...? Was it Paul Foster? Major Leslie?" Straker demanded.

"I am aware of her relationship with Major Leslie, but it doesn't appear to have become sexual."

"So, how could this have happened?"

"We're currently running some tests. We'll need to determine the actual number of weeks, the condition of the fetus, and it's genetic code. Is there anything you want to tell me, General?" Jackson's smirk was almost more than Straker's temper could bear, "We believe her condition predates her 'friendship' with Major Leslie."

Straker's big blue eyes burned, "I'll be up there tomorrow morning!"

--

It was Freeman's turn to be incredulous, "After everything she's been through, this is a bit much!"

"I thought all female SHADO operatives were on special birth control medication," Straker paced the length of his office back and forth, puffing on his cigarillo furiously.

"It's my understanding that they all are," Alec concurred, "But, I suppose accidents do happen...Ed, I know it's none of my business, but...you did sleep with her..."

Straker shot Freeman an angry glance, "You're right, it's none of your business, Alec!" he halted his pacing momentarily, "But...I didn't sleep with her."

Freeman was silent. Straker continued quietly, "You know me, Alec. I never ever let my head rule my heart. SHADO has been my life now for years. Since Johnnie died, I haven't had any desire to find anyone else. It's just too damn hard on a person in my position. I felt sorry for Kovac - I guess I saw a bit of myself in her. The night she stayed over at my place, well...I put her in the spare room and let her sleep. She's no different from any other man or woman we've recruited in the last 30 years."

Freeman didn't believe that, but he opted not to say so. Instead, he asked, "So what happens now?"

"I'm heading up to the hospital complex tomorrow. I want to talk privately with Jackson, review the test results, and make some sort of decision. Whatever takes place, it won't be easy. Kovac is pretty headstrong."

Freeman grinned; he'd heard Straker refer to Kovac in other less flattering terms, "Why not just take the easy way out? Let her keep the baby. It might make a positive difference in her quality of life. And, that would make her an even better member of the SHADO team." He got up and headed for the door, turning just as the panels swished open, "For once, Ed, make a decision with your heart instead of your head!"

--

Straker sat waiting in Jackson's office. There were no-smoking signs posted everywhere, but he lit up a cigarillo anyway. He didn't feel in the mood to fence intellectually with Jackson, and his nerves were a little jangled. The longer he waited, the more he felt Jackson was deliberately stalling the meeting.

When Jackson finally entered and sat down behind his desk, Straker was curt and to the point, "Ok, Doug. Just give me the highlights."

Jackson lifted the lid of his laptop, punched some keys, and brought Kovac's file up on the screen, "From the preliminary tests we've done so far, Ms. Kovac is eleven weeks pregnant. The fetal heartbeat is strong and steady, although a little bit slower than is usual. The mother herself appears physically healthy, considering her most recent ordeal. She's had two other children, all normal births, all normal babies. No complications of any sort in the past. There's no reason to expect any problems with this one."

"What about the DNA tests?"

Jackson smirked, "You mean, who's the father? We won't be doing those tests yet. At sixteen weeks we can do amniocentesis, which will identify the fetus' likely gender, any congenital defects or illnesses, and the DNA material of the father."

"So, you're saying you don't know who the father is?" Straker blew a smoke ring at Jackson.

"We will, General, it's just a matter of time."

"And, what's Kovac saying about this?"

"I think she's in shock."

"I'd like to see her, Doug."

"I'm sure that can be arranged, General."

--

Straker entered Kovac's private room. She was lying in her bunk, a headset on, listening to music. He watched her for a moment. Her eyes were closed; it was obvious she didn't realize he was there yet. He reached out to touch her, then reconsidered, and cleared his throat loudly. Kovac opened her eyes, saw him, and took off the earphones.

"And to what do I owe a visit from the Great Man himself?" she asked, swinging her legs up and over the side of her bunk to greet him.

He sat down, and for once, did not immediately take out a cigarillo, "I hear you've upstaged us all."

"Oh - that," Kovac looked down at the floor.

"Yes, 'oh-that'," Straker lifted her chin with his right index finger, "I think we have to talk, Tina."

"I'm not having an abortion, if that's what you're here to tell me," Kovac said quietly, but firmly, looking him straight in the eye.

"Are you going to tell me who the father is, or do I have to wait for Jackson's DNA report?"

"I wasn't aware that was any of your business, General." Straker saw a flash of fear in her eyes.

"I'm making it my business. Jackson says it can't be Major Leslie, so who is it? Paul Foster? Who are you protecting?"

Kovac's green eyes bored into Straker's blue ones, "Jackson thinks it's you."

"I know that."

"I tried to tell him it wasn't you - or Paul - or Allan - that is, Major Leslie."

"So, who is the father, Tina?"

Straker wasn't ready for her answer, "I don't know !"

--

Straker was inclined to believe her. Kovac was many things - bitchy, risk-taking, and anti-authority - but a liar she was not.

Jackson explained that it wasn't worth the risk to take any amniotic sac fluid before the

sixteen weeks were up. At best, amniocentesis did carry the possibility of causing a miscarriage, and Straker now agreed with him about waiting the necessary time. The fact Kovac admitted she didn't know who fathered her child surprised Jackson - he was still sure it was Straker. Of course, he wasn't the type to pass on idle gossip, but that didn't stop him from listening to it!

Kovac was examined by an expert gynecologist, was placed on a special diet and maternal vitamins, and the psycho-sessions were discontinued. For the following five weeks, she took moderate exercise in the installation's indoor swimming pool, got as much rest as possible, and spent her spare time with Major Leslie.

At the time she was sixteen weeks, Jackson booked her for the amnio tests, a series of ultrasounds, and another round of blood and urine tests. Food was still repelling her somewhat. Kovac's continued refusal to name the father seemed ridiculous to Jackson. After all, once the DNA tests were done, if it was someone in SHADO, it would no longer be a secret.

A whole day was spent on Kovac, executing every test, getting every tissue and liquid sample possible for the laboratory to work on. Jackson was instructed by Straker to send on the results as soon as they were available, and not to disclose anything to Kovac until he had seen them personally.

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Instead of e-mailing Kovac's results to Straker, Jackson appeared at Straker's office, in person. He had a CD in a case with him. He passed it over to Straker himself.

"I think you're going to find these results very interesting, General." Jackson seated himself and watched Straker insert the CD into his player on the desk.

It took a few seconds to open the file. Straker scanned through it quickly, his facial expression tense. Finally he looked up at Jackson, "Are you absolutely certain about this?"

"We actually ran the tests 25 times over to make sure there was no margin for error. The DNA structure does not correlate to any SHADO personnel. Nor any human male on the planet, for that matter."

"How could this have happened? When?" Straker's voice was hushed.

"These test results confirm much of the questions we've had about Kovac since the incident in Canada. I think we can safely say her mental trauma has been the reason she could not recall certain events at the aliens' base, even under intense hypnotherapy. Her mind just refuses to address the issue. The violation has been too great. This is the first documented evidence of its type that we've been able to work with, General. Kovac will be very useful to us, as this pregnancy progresses."

Straker got up from his desk and lit a cigarillo. He puffed quietly for a few moments, one hand resting on his hip as he paced the floor, "Why didn't we know this before? How did we miss this?"

Jackson leaned forward, "General, we tested Kovac for everything possible. We x-rayed her, her sent through the MRI. But, nothing indicated we should check her for pregnancy. It was an oversight on our part, yes. But, an understandable one. Even if we had thought of it, we had no idea before that a mating between a human and an alien could produce a viable fetus. This has been a complete revelation."

"Does she know yet?" Straker asked.

"Of course not. You specifically ordered that the results come to you first."

"Doug, I'd like to be the one to tell her," Straker said, "It's gonna be a shocker," and he blew out a perfect circle of smoke.

--

Kovac was playing gin rummy with Major Leslie when she was summoned to see Straker in the sickbay's boardroom.

"No peeking at my cards," she admonished him cheerfully. He laughed and waved her off to her meeting.

When she entered the boardroom, Straker was pacing the floor, looking at the abstract artwork on the walls.

"You and I have to stop meeting like this," Kovac smiled at him. The smile faded when she saw his tense, distracted face.

"How are you feeling, Tina?" Straker asked, pulling out a chair for her.

She sat down, "I'm still a little barfy in the mornings, but nothing I can't handle. I've been down this road before."

Not this road, Straker thought silently, "I wanted to talk to you myself. Dr. Jackson came to see me yesterday at Headquarters. We've...uh...got the results on your recent round of tests."

Kovac looked up at him, "I wondered when they'd be available."

Straker lifted the lid on the laptop sitting on the table, he pressed some keys, "I want you to have a look at this." He turned the laptop around to face her.

Kovac viewed the page, scrolling through, reading furiously. Straker watched her face. He saw her eyes widen, saw an expression akin to disbelief cross her face, then saw the shock as she slumped back in her seat, her head in her hands.

"I'm sorry, Tina. I know...this must come as a shock to you..." Straker began.

Kovac cut him off, "It all makes sense now, doesn't it? The nightmares, the screaming, the pain..." she raised her head, her green eyes bright with unshed tears, "That must have been why the aliens had me in that stasis tube."

"Dr. Jackson and his team think the aliens may have been planning to take you back to their planet with them. You were going to become part of their breeding stock," Straker's voice was infinitely gentle, even if the words weren't, "Were there any other women with you in that installation?"

Kovac nodded slowly, "I think there were."

"When the base was destroyed, they all died, Tina. You're the only one who made it out alive. That makes you very special."

The enormity of her situation washed over her, "My child is...an alien?"

"Well, we think it's an alien-human hybrid. How they managed to bring the fetus to conception is something we may learn in time. It's been our understanding for the last 30 years that the aliens were a dying society; that they couldn't reproduce themselves, and they were coming here to get organs for transplant purposes, among other things. Now, they've moved ahead. They've obviously found a way to combine their DNA with ours successfully."

Kovac shook her head, "It's just too fantastic to take in all at once...I can never see my children again, but now I'm going to have another child. A star-child..." she got up from her seat, tears finally flowing down her face.

Straker didn't know what else to do, so he took her in his arms. A strange tenderness crept up into his heart. He stroked her reddish hair, and when she lifted her head from his shoulder, he pressed a kiss to her mouth.

"What's going to happen to me?" Kovac asked.

"I don't know yet..." Straker's blue eyes met her green ones, "It'll be ok, I promise."

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In order to maintain complete secrecy on Kovac's star-baby, Straker decided to let the rumour of himself as father go uncontested. Jackson and his team of gynecologists were made aware of the delicacy of the situation. Only they would know the truth. This was too big a deal. Straker decided it was time for Kovac to be moved to a more secure location. He permitted her enough time to pack her few things, and say goodbye to Major Leslie, before he had her taken back to HQ.

Protecting Kovac at all costs was of paramount importance. Over and above the human tragedy of the matter, there was the unparalleled opportunity to watch the development and birth of a human-alien being - a scientific miracle. The first provable coupling of a Terran with an extraterrestrial. Straker and the team were determined to surround Kovac with every comfort during her pregnancy. They knew they had a rare find, and they would go to considerable efforts to protect the mother and her star-baby. The amnio tests also offered another tidbit of information: the star-baby Kovac was carrying would be a male.

Straker had Jackson set up a special maternity suite at HQ. There were several reasons for this choice. First of all, HQ was SHADO's most secure installation in terms of protection from the outside world, the rest of SHADO, and the aliens themselves. Secondly, the development and birth of Kovac's star-baby would be of such significance, that Straker wanted to keep tabs on the situation at all times, plus having access to the mother and her team of doctors. And, lastly, Straker felt oddly guilty.

Why he should feel guilty about just another SHADO recruit, he hadn't dared ask himself. Was it because he was instrumental in destroying the Enterprise, and therefore Kovac's former life? It was the aliens who'd attacked the Enterprise and the SHADO spacecraft that fateful day almost a year ago. Straker was not responsible for that. And, while the other NASA astronauts went on their merry way, making new lives within the confines of SHADO, Straker felt compelled to monitor Kovac's progress - even counsel her on how to successfully make the transition from astronaut to SHADO operative. Why had he made her case personal? And, why had he kissed her? Definitely a no-no.

He'd told Alec she reminded him of himself. Kovac, like Straker, was forced by circumstances beyond her control, to lose her spouse and her children. And, even though she knew and understood SHADO's mission, and tried to function within that mission, she found work the only answer to the emotional pain. Straker had her monitored, watched, spied on. She'd pretty much kept to herself until the mission to Canada. And, her friendship with Major Leslie had been born of their shared near-death experience at the hands of the aliens. Straker's view that Kovac would be vital to the success of the Canadian mission had been proven correct - but in ways he could hardly have dreamed of. Then, of course, there was the "little dividend" she brought back with her!

News of Kovac's pregnancy had at first filled Straker with a peculiar swell of -- jealousy? He barely acknowledged the emotion. What he focused on was maintaining secrecy and providing an environment in which Kovac could be examined and monitored daily. As her condition progressed, there would be much for the SHADO doctors to learn. In private info sessions with Straker, Jackson and his team put forward many theories and ideas on how the conception took place, the possible length of gestation (did aliens follow the standard human time period of nine months?), the internal and external fetal development, the effects this pregnancy would have on Kovac herself - both mentally and physically, and what contingencies they would follow in case of miscarriage, stillbirth and live birth. Each situation

merited its own set of SOPs, and Straker was advised on all the ramifications involved. In fact, he insisted on making the the final decision in each case, as it might occur.

For the time being, Kovac was housed in a comfortable suite of rooms, renovated post-haste for her. She had a living-dining area for herself, a small bed-chamber, a full piece bath, and next door was the lab/birthing room. Jackson and Straker arranged for her to have daily undisturbed swims in HQ's pool (as she had at the sickbay installation), and moderate exercise on a treadmill. In order to help her keep busy, since Straker decided her normal work in the exobiology lab was no longer possible, Kovac asked for seeds, sun lamps, planting soil, videotapes of her favourite movies, extra audiotapes (her preferences were for New Age music, and Canadian artists such as Shania Twain, Lenny Gallant and Sarah McLaughlin!), books on Russian and ancient Egyptian history, and a kit of watercolor paints, paper, brushes, an easel, and a journal book in which to chronicle her subjective impressions about her impending motherhood.

Twice a week, Kovac was taken out privately to a local park. If the weather was good, she strolled for 30 minutes, accompanied by a SHADO security operative. She was even permitted to take photos using a digital camera, so she could utilize the images as fodder for her art projects. When it rained, the security agent took her to a nearby indoor arboretum, so she could still get the feeling of the outdoors. Each day she went out, she had a different operative with her. Straker felt it was better that way - he didn't want her to get close to anyone again, as she had with Major Leslie. Secrecy was of the essence.

Straker kept his distance. He had weekly updates on her care and condition, with copies of all the reports, but otherwise tried to maintain a low profile in the case. Other than Alec Freeman, Straker restricted knowledge of Kovac's pregnancy to the circle of doctors attending her. None of the Omega personnel who'd been with Kovac in Canada were remotely aware of what had happened to her in the aliens' installation, and since Straker considered the whole business on a strictly "need to know" basis, that meant he'd even left Paul Foster out of the "loop."

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Pursuant to Omega's activities, Straker had been very pleased with the results turned up by the "Corporation" during Foster's period of convalescence. Paul's second in command, Lew Waterman, had successfully sent teams worldwide, flushing out alien installations similar to that found in Canada. Their experience in Canada taught them what they were looking for. Some of the alien bases they discovered had already been abandoned - a few were only partially constructed. SHADO and Omega theorists suspected all the bases had been started during the four to five month period before SHADO's alien ship cloaking detection devices had become operational. It was accepted that the aliens were buying time for themselves so they could establish viable beachheads on Earth, from which to operate without having to risk conflicts with SHADO in the Terran atmosphere.

Each discovered base yielded a another clue to the puzzle, but no aliens themselves. They found a few human bodies, all of which were obviously the victims of experimentation which had gone wrong. The worst case they uncovered was in Siberia, where human bodies were being subjected to what appeared to be experiments in chemical analysis. Chemicals known to be poisonous to Terrans had been injected into the bloodstreams of the victims - but to what purpose?

All the bases were devoid of any working alien technology. What little was left behind had been damaged, mostly beyond repair - on purpose. The aliens obviously knew about their

eastern Canadian base being compromised and subsequently destroyed. In all, forty alien installations worldwide were discovered, analyzed and finally dismantled; some of their materials were transported to SHADO research facilities for further study.

The aliens' cloaking device no longer rendered them invisible to SHADO detection. Moonbase and the band of SIDs around the earth were now able to pick up incoming alien craft as before. Special R&D had not only gone into the new technology for this, but new cloaking services for SHADO were also in the works. While their own systems were still on-line, they did not want to lose their cloaking system as they had during the Enterprise incident. It was imperative to create a whole new system to counter any alien jamming.

So SHADO appeared to be back in the war against the alien intelligence bent on exploiting the human race. But, what of that human-alien creature growing inside Kovac's belly? SHADO couldn't wage war against a baby. The irony was that SHADO was pulling out all the stops to protect a child created via alien technology, with alien DNA.

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Kovac's first trimester passed uneventfully. She swam, painted, tended her plants, watched movies (she had a fondness for science-fiction that Straker found amusing!), and listened to soothing New Age melodies. Her recent requests included miniature hydroponic equipment so she could try growing some vegetables indoors, and a pet.

"She wants a what?" SHADO's commander asked, tapping the ashes off his cigarillo impatiently.

"A cat, General," Jackson smiled. Straker had never liked Jackson's smile. It was so insincere and smarmy.

"Why in hell would she want a cat?"

"She says she's lonely."

"Good God, she's got a whole team of doctors at her disposal!"

"According to her, we aren't much company, sir."

Straker shook his head.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Straker nodded.

"Hypothetically, bringing in a feline would not be a security risk. A neutered, declawed cat, with a litter box, kept in the confines of Kovac's private quarters, isn't so much to ask. I think this request should be granted."

"Since when did you get so soft-hearted, Jackson?" Straker was irritated by Jackson's seeming acquiescence. It was probably geared to make Straker feel like a selfish bastard. Why did he always feel like Jackson was playing head-games with him? "Well, how do we go about this?"

"Ms. Kovac has asked for a Siamese, at least 6 months of age."

Straker rolled his eyes, "She doesn't want much!" he waved at Jackson, "Go handle it yourself!"

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By the time Kovac was nearing the end of her second trimester, she had feline company, and a small hydroponic set-up in her living space. She opted to grow small heads of lettuce and Tiny Tim tomatoes. Since she liked flowers, she'd experimented with a variety of indoor plants, such as African violets, and other types started from seeds. Her easel was always set up with a work in progress. Currently, she was painting a watercolor of her kitten, a Siamese she called Cleo-catra, indicative of her fondness for ancient Egypt.

When Straker arrived at her quarters for one of his rare visits, he discovered her doing a charcoal drawing of Cleo. The kitten was sacked out comfortably on the small couch in the living area, curled up in one of those amusing pretzel positions only cats can assume.

"Can I get you anything? The doctors don't permit me to have any tea or coffee, but I can ask for some juice or spring water," Kovac told him.

Straker noted her ample girth. He hadn't seen her for some time, and the changes to her body were now very evident. She was even moving differently to accommodate her increased size.

"Please...sit down, I don't get much company these days," Kovac waved him to the couch and she removed the kitten to the safety of her arms. She seated herself, with Cleo, on a comfortable cushioned chair.

"I suppose asking you how you feel is pretty silly," Straker smiled. He cast his eyes down on the drawing pad Kovac had been using, "Not bad at all," he mused, examining her Cleo-sketches.

Kovac shrugged, "I don't have to throw up any more. That's a plus," the kitten was purring loudly as Kovac stroked her, "Thanks for Cleo - she's great company."

"Happy to oblige," Straker decided to take credit for Jackson's recommendation, "What did you think of those reports I had forwarded to you from the exobiology labs?"

"Actually, I made some notes on them. I would love to have been involved in the autopsies. I'd also like to say I appreciate your largess in allowing me access to many of the reports on myself. I don't exactly lead an intellectually challenging life here."

"We didn't feel it was necessary to have you overwork yourself at this point in time," Straker leaned forward, "How are you - really?"

Kovac was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "That's not an area I explore too much. I write a bit in my journal, but it's mostly just a recording of my physical feelings. I don't know what I feel. Mostly, I just do my gardening, my painting, I play with Cleo, I have my daily exams. I try not to think too much about it." She looked up at him, "What are they going to do with my baby once it's born?"

There it was. The question Straker feared the most from her. "There are contingencies set up by the medical team to deal with every event as it happens. I don't think you have to worry about anything."

"General, my child is...for all we know, one of a kind. There's no doubt in my mind that the exobiology lab will be involved. They'd have to be. The research, the tests and exams - I know what will happen. I just need some assurances."

"What kind of assurances?"

"Whatever you think of this star-baby - it's a living child. It's not just a half-alien creature - it's a real person. He's a real person," Kovac corrected herself, "I know we're at war with the civilization that brought this baby to conception. I'm just asking that you and the rest of the team don't treat this baby like the enemy. He didn't ask to come into this world. He's as much as victim as anyone who's been tinkered with by the aliens."

"Tina, we can learn a lot from your baby. Maybe we can even learn what the aliens are doing here."

She wasn't convinced, "After 30 years of war, I don't think either SHADO or the aliens are going to achieve much of a detente," she stroked Cleo again, "I just feel as though I have to protect this child - he's depending on me to keep him safe. I'm all he's going to have in this world."

Straker was shaken by the conviction in her voice - did she view SHADO now as the enemy?

"It's true that this...star-baby of yours... is going to offer us vast opportunities for research. But, bear in mind, we've been protecting you here for several reasons. First of all, we've needed to keep your situation in the strictest secrecy - for your own safety - both from a xenophobic public and an alien enemy who might just want you back. You may be the only one of their breeders to escape alive! You're probably a pretty valuable commodity to them right now. We can't risk a kidnapping. It's happened before, for other reasons less compelling! Until the child is born, you'll have to trust that we know what's best for both of you."

CHAPTER NINE

Straker woke up groggy and stupid - was that his cell phone ringing? He grabbed for it off the night-table, dropped it and cursed. He was still cursing as he flipped it open.

"Shit! Who is this?" he growled into the cell.

"General, I thought you left standing orders to be called whenever Ms. Kovac went into labour," it was Jackson's odd Slavic-sounding voice at the other end.

"Yeah, I did. So what's happening?" he was sitting up on the side of the bed now.

"She's about to go into the final stage of delivery."

"How many hours has she been in labour?"

"Her water broke only an hour ago."

"That's pretty fast, isn't it?"

"It's hard to say what the norm is for this child, General. But, I would advise you to come to HQ asap."

Straker closed his flip-phone. He didn't bother with a shower, he simply hurried on some clothes and headed out the door.

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By the time Straker made the drive to HQ, and arrived in the birthing lab, Kovac was already on the table.

"I might have known you'd show up...," she huffed in between breathing exercises, "If it's happening to me, you've got a friggin' front row seat...," her sarcasm was cut off by another wave of pain.

Straker watched as her back arched, her face contorted, and her belly seemed to ripple. He looked at the nurse, clad only in a bathing suit and sandals, who was timing the contractions, "How's she doing?"

"Everything appears to be normal, except for the radically sped up process of delivery."

"Celia, here, is looking after me just fine...I just wish I had a little more fabric to cover my arse," Kovac huffed again as the nurse sponged the sweat off her forehead. She indicated the thin johnny-shirt.

"Where's Doctor Jackson?"

"He's a shrink, remember? He doesn't do babies...he didn't waste any time getting out of here...," she was interrupted by a pair of white-garbed doctors coming in the door.

Straker turned to them, "Are you going to do a section? Are you giving her any painkillers?"

The first doctor pulled down her mask, "Unless we detect any fetal trauma, we're going to let nature take its course. She's dilated quite nicely. We haven't administered any drugs because we have no idea what the contraindications could be with this hybrid baby."

Straker looked back at Kovac. She was employing the assistance of the nurse to get down off the bed and walk about the room.

"It's ok, General," the second doctor explained, "It's common for delivering mothers to walk around. We'll be taking her into the pool soon anyway."

"The pool?" asked Straker, "Hell of a time to go swimming, isn't it?"

"We have a birthing pool set up in the next room for her. Since her baby is half-alien, we felt birthing in a nice warm watery environment might be the best thing. We're going to be video-taping the birth, but you'll be able to observe the whole thing if you wish. It's not unusual for most men to be squeamish at this sort of thing." Straker hated being patronized, he had

quite enough of that from Jackson!

Kovac, with Celia's assistance, walked the circle of the med-lab several more times. The doctors took her pulse, blood pressure and temperature, and suggested it was time for her to get into the pool.

Straker followed the four into the next room. The lighting was much dimmer, and the room felt much warmer. Celia stripped Kovac of her johnny-shirt, and carefully helped her down the three broad steps into the pool. The doctors also stripped to bathing suits, and waded in after her.

"What kind of music do you want, Tina?" Celia asked her.

"Enya...", Kovac said, "The one with the The Celts on it..."

Celia looked over at Straker, "General, would you mind? The CD she wants is right on the top - right beside the player."

Straker took the CD out of its case, and slid it into the machine, adjusting the volume. The deep bells and Celtic drums began sending out a rhythmic beat as Kovac sank into the warm welcoming water with the doctors and Celia attending her.

For the first time, Straker noticed the small tray of surgical instruments sitting beside the pool, ready for the doctors' use. He also noticed several stacks of clean towels and sheets on hand, just at arm's length from the pool. They had certainly thought of everything! A flood of old memories swept over him and he remembered the birth of his son - he hadn't been allowed in the operating room with Mary. She'd almost lost Johnnie after that terrible fall she'd taken.

A cry from Kovac's lips brought him back to the present. Now, he was poised to watch the birth of a scientific miracle - the first known star-baby - half human, half alien. Straker crouched at the rim of the pool. The doctors and Celia were holding Kovac up, massaging her legs and belly gently. She was supported by the back of the pool and was lying on the middle stair step, a soft towel wadded under her bottom and back.

Straker was so engrossed in the birth, that he barely noticed the fact Kovac was nude and exposed for all to see. He watched the doctor plunge her hands into the water between Kovac's legs.

"Push - the baby's crowning! Keep pushing!"

Kovac had had her eyes closed, as if concentrating, or fighting the pain. Now she opened them and looked straight up at Straker, kneeling beside her. She reached a hand out to him, her eyes full of agony. He took her hand and felt her gripping him so hard her fingernails were leaving marks in his flesh.

He watched, fascinated, and vaguely repelled too, as the doctor slowly pulled the head and shoulders out of Kovac's body. There was a flooding of bright red blood in the water, and Kovac cried out again. The doctor reached up and grabbed a pair of scissors off the pool-side tray, while the other pulled the rest of the baby out.

Straker saw the doctors lay the newborn on Kovac's breast. Her face shone. She looked up at him, and he kissed her hand and let her go. It was her moment, after all.

There, floating with Kovac in the bloody water, was the star-child...

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The pair of doctors hesitated before they cut the umbilical cord. What would happen? After all, the baby had been linked to Kovac's body all these months. Would severing that cord cause any problems?

Straker watched as Kovac stroked her baby, cooing to it softly, urging it to her breast to suckle. For some foolish reason, she reminded him of an old Beagle he'd had as a teenager - a

Beagle who produced her one litter of pups when she was really too old to be pregnant...how proud Gypsy had been of those puppies...he shook his head back to reality - the doctors were now cutting the cord and tying it up.

Celia momentarily took the star-child away to be weighed, his nose suctioned, and given treatment to prevent eye problems. But, the baby hadn't cried yet - weren't babies supposed to cry? One of the doctors was occupied with removing Kovac's afterbirth from the pool. It was placed in a sealed container so it could be examined in the lab after.

Straker got up and went over to where Celia was working on the baby, "Is it alive?" he asked urgently, sotto voce.

Celia handed the baby, wrapped in soft towels over to the General, "See for yourself," she smiled.

The small bundle was squirming slightly. Dark-lashed, pale silver eyes stared up at Straker, unfocused, while tiny fists curled and uncurled. The star-child appeared to be having no difficulties breathing. It was just silent. And, completely human in appearance.

"Give him to me," Kovac called, her arms reaching up for the child. Straker walked over to the pool, and lowered the baby to her. She placed the baby on her breast again, and Straker watched in wonder as the child began to suckle hungrily. Mary had not breast-fed Johnnie, so he'd never seen it done. It seemed...oddly comforting. Kovac held the baby with the expertise of a practiced mother. The star-child curled his fingers around Kovac's index finger and continued to draw nourishment, the silver eyes closed for the moment.

Celia had shut the CD player off and the room was quiet, except for the small splashings in the pool. Both doctors removed themselves to a discreet distance, but were hovering close enough to be of immediate assistance should something suddenly go wrong.

Kovac looked up at Straker, "I'm going to call him Orion."

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Several hours later, mother and child were safely back in the med-lab, resting comfortably. Kovac had been examined minutely following the birth, as had the star-child. Then, they were both bathed and put to bed. Exhausted, but jubilant, Kovac found it hard to settle down to sleep. She kept looking over at her son. Her other-worldly son. Orion.

Straker managed to get in a call to Alec Freeman between everything. He was pooped, and drained from the experience. He could only imagine how Kovac felt.

"How's Kovac doing?" Freeman asked.

"She seems to be ok. The kid's something else, though."

"Does it look human?"

"Actually, yes, it does. Strange eyes. Silver irises. Doesn't make any sound so far."

"When is the lab going to start testing?"

"They've done a few prelims already. I told them to give Kovac 24 hours before they start anything more serious. She's pretty protective."

"That gonna be a problem?"

"I don't know, Alec. There's only so much they can do - X-rays, MRIs, tissue samples, blood - the lot. I think this kid is going to be more interesting as it develops mentally and intellectually. Maybe the aliens aren't so different from us in a lot of ways."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Me? I'm going home to catch some Zees. I'll talk to you later!"

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Out of decency, Straker left orders for Kovac to be permitted to accompany Orion to all

his tests. Like a human baby, he slept mostly, and if he found the pokings and proddings of the good doctors offensive, he didn't let them know verbally. He never cried.

Every kind of test was performed and experiments done. Blood samples, stool and urine, tissues, the mucus which has been suctioned from his nose upon birth. Even his umbilical cord was dissected when it fell off. Cat-scans, EKGs, MRIs - basically everything SHADO medical could do in the way of testing, was done.

Dr. Jackson observed Kovac with the star-child daily. He made regular reports to Straker in person.

"Genetically speaking, the child appears to have absorbed the best of both sets of DNA. He's very healthy, very strong. We've had Kovac experimenting with him in the pool. Seems he can remain submerged underwater for much longer than would be normal for human babies."

Straker raised an eyebrow, but didn't interrupt Jackson.

"Nutritionally, he's still breast-feeding, but the team is considering supplementing breast milk with something else. He doesn't have as large a percentage of fat as human babies. We also found out why he doesn't cry - his larynx looks almost atrophied. Odd. There's a bit of webbing between his fingers and toes, just enough to be noticeable upon examination. His organs appear to be very human-like. He eliminates normally. There's a small attachment organ at the base of his brain that we're not sure of the function of as yet. It doesn't occur in humans, so it must part of his alien make-up. It doesn't seem to be impeding his development. Even we humans have the appendix and a few other internal items we no longer use. We've discovered something interesting about his skin. The upper epidermal layer seems thicker than in most human infants - we're still trying to determine what function this would have. His skin doesn't 'wrinkle' in the same way human skin does after prolonged water exposure. "

"How about Kovac? How is she doing?"

"Her gynecological team tells me she has recovered normally from the birth. Her body has adjusted well. It's her mind I'm more interested in."

"Is she behaving erratically?" Straker lit another cigarillo. He saw the grimace on Jackson's face and puffed away anyway - damn it all - it was his own office!

"Not erratically. But, I would venture to say she is more devoted than most mothers."

"I think most mothers are devoted, Dr. Jackson," Straker observed.

"It's more than just insisting on being the one to feed him, change him, put him to sleep, General. She doesn't leave him alone for a moment. She talks to him as though he can understand her."

"That's pretty common."

Jackson looked uncomfortable with his next pronouncement, "I think there is... some sort of psychic communication going on between the mother and child. They appear to sense each other's thoughts, moods, feelings. I can't explain it. I just know what I've... seen."

Straker sat behind his desk, digesting Jackson's last comments. Two months had passed since the star-child's birth. As long as the child or Kovac were not in danger, he'd been content to leave their care to the med team. None of them had entertained any ideas of what this child would be like once it was born. Their primary concerns had been keeping Kovac healthy and orchestrating a normal delivery.

"I'll rely on you, Doctor, to monitor this situation and keep me posted."

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Straker's attention was focused primarily on recent events. Since SHADO's Alien-Tect

technology was reconfigured, it was working well. Moonbase, commanded by Col. Boyd, was enjoying a very successful "kill" spree. The Interceptors, carrying small thermonuclear warheads, and laser cannons, managed to dispatch several dozen alien craft in the last couple of months. SHADO's fleet of Skydiver submarines, under the aegis of Admiral Peter Carlin, was also instrumental in destroying a large number of escaping alien ships - ships whose trajectories were traced back to secret underwater silos. These locations must have been jumping off points for those aliens who had been forced by SHADO to abandon their other bases in the clean-up following the Canadian mission.

While the alien base in Canadian waters was certainly not the only installation the ETs had in service, the discovery of that one had been significant. It was a precedent for how they handled all the others. Canada seemed like a popular destination for alien landings. Straker remembered the big UFO situation of Nova Scotia in the mid 1960's - how the Canadian and American navies worked to keep the secret of the downed alien ship from public knowledge. SHADO had had to intervene into a couple of Canadian UFO incidents, even before the one on Prince Edward Island. Canada was a huge nation, with hundreds of miles of secluded tundra up north, and miles of lonely beaches from the Atlantic shores, up to the Polar ice cap, and around to the Pacific. Canada also, like Siberia in Russia, had vast tracts of real estate in which few people lived. Both locales were great alien magnets because of their isolation. As a result, SHADO kept a close weather eye on those two countries.

The Omega Corporation, once again commanded by Paul Foster, was busy "cleaning up" all the flak surrounding the alien base demolition. His second in command, Lew Waterman, traveled the globe constantly, trouble-shooting and directing Omega's many "cells" in just about every country. After the last Canadian incident, Foster set about creating a Halifax, Nova Scotia cell, to take care of problems in that region. He had been amazed at how unprepared his Toronto team had been to handle the area's local people and geography.

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"How could Kovac be gone?"

"We're not certain yet, but she managed to duck her escort earlier today on an outing to the local park."

"And, the child?" Straker demanded.

"Gone with her," Jackson confirmed.

"Christ - why did she do something that stupid? Where could she get away to? She's a goddam Canadian - she doesn't know anybody here in Britain! What have you been doing about this?"

"I haven't been doing anything," Jackson explained with an aggrieved air, "I'm just the bearer of bad news. However, the security division has been searching for her now for several hours."

"Did she leave any note or anything on her computer?"

"She appears to have taken her laptop, but when security attempted to track her using her computer signature, it was disabled. We weren't aware she knew how to do that. Security itemized her quarters - she seems to have taken her international passport, the one she used to return to Canada several months ago - baby clothes, diapers, and cans of formula."

Straker chewed his lower lip, "Where the hell could she go? Has she been acting peculiar lately?"

"No stranger than usual," Jackson replied, "She has objected several times to some of the tests we've wanted to do with the baby."

"What could she possibly object to?"

"Remember I told you some time ago that I felt there was some sort of psychic bond between Kovac and the star-child? I opted to start a course of psi tests for her and for the baby about two weeks ago. She didn't show up for them, and when I asked her why, she brushed me off. Some poppycock about the baby being feverish."

"And, you think she was lying?"

"I think she knows something about the star-child we cannot confirm as yet ."

"But, why would she make a run for it? Wouldn't it make more sense for her to stay here, in a secure environment?"

"I am a psychiatrist, but I confess Kovac eludes my understanding."

"Something must have scared her - badly enough for her to leave the safest place on this planet for her and the child!"

--

Straker talked to the HQ Security Division chief, Joan Harrington, "Did you find any clues in Kovac's quarters?"

"Just a lot of unfinished artwork and a Siamese cat. I took the cat home to my kids. Hope you don't mind. Jackson hates cats."

"That figures...", Straker drummed his fingertips on his desk, "Joan, this is a pretty delicate matter as you know. I want her and the baby back, but I also don't want to raise any unnecessary attention with the public."

"We've talked to all her escorts, trying to get some sense of where she would go. We've got people covering the parks she frequented, the airports, bus stations, even the seaports. And, on the other end of the spectrum, we've got the same points of entry monitored in Atlantic Canada. Most people heading for Prince Edward Island would fly in or sail in through Halifax, Nova Scotia. We've alerted Customs Canada to be on the look-out for a Canadian passport - we told them Kovac kidnapped someone's baby and left the country with it."

"Well, let me know when you get a solid lead. I know you're doing the best you can under the circumstances...But, Joan - this is important - you've got to get that kid and the mother back in one piece - I mean it!"

"Right, General," and Harrington signed off.

Straker sat back in his armchair, and nervously lit a cigarillo. He puffed quietly for a few moments and then punched up Paul Foster's private Omega office number.

"Yeah, Paul, it's me. I've got a project for you..."

--

Kovac waited in the Cunard office. She was holding her breath over the usage of her old debit card. Funny how she'd always carried it in her back pocket - even on the Enterprise. Her husband never knew about that private account she set up at the Bank of Nova Scotia. It was her "mad money", her "nest egg", her emergency cash; a personal account left over from her days as a single woman. Was it still active after all this time? If it was, she could use the funds to move around for awhile.

The clerk smiled up at her from his computer screen, "No problems, Mrs. Millar. Your card checks out perfectly. I'll have your tickets processed in a moment," Kovac had left the account in her mother's maiden name, with no forwarding address for statements to be sent out. Why had she been so secretive at the time, squirreling away money for some unknown reason?

The printer spat out a number of documents, which the clerk handed over to Kovac,

"Here are your boarding forms, your customs declarations, your debit bill, your cash and your tickets. Have a safe trip!"

--

She took an auto taxi down to Southampton, a rather expensive proposition, and booked into a bed & breakfast spot near the waterfront. Southampton was a historic old seaport, perhaps best known for being the port of exit for the ill-fated White Star liner Titanic. Kovac visited a small marine museum there; she took the baby with her in a front-loading papoose carrier. Orion was of course, very quiet. His odd silver eyes absorbed everything, and he seemed more alert than most babies his age. After having two strictly Terran children, Kovac noticed the subtle, yet important, differences between Orion and the others.

Most notable, as of late, had been Orion's voice in her head. He didn't communicate with words. He wasn't mature enough to do that yet. Even from the moment of his birth, Kovac had been sure she could feel all his emotions and fears inside herself. It was a little disconcerting, at first. She would wake up in the night, little whispers of fear wafting through her subconscious. Then, she realized her child was trying to communicate with her - "Don't leave me, Mother. You are my only protection! What will they do to me in that lab?" But, Orion couldn't say those words - he could only "feel" them to her.

Her child was afraid. And, that fear had grown steadily since the day he was born. The almost daily round of tests, exams and observations were frightening to him. He seemed to know instinctively that he was different from everyone else. When Dr. Jackson wanted to perform psi tests on Kovac and Orion, she knew he might discover their secret. That was why Orion begged her to leave the SHADO installation and take him to a place of greater safety.

But, where would that place be? She knew from the moment of her departure that the SHADO people would be looking for her. Orion dangled the suggestion before her worried mind, "go home, home," and so she booked passage on a freighter bound for Sydney, Cape Breton. She was certain the SHADO people would be looking for her in airports and perhaps even in Halifax. She fervently hoped they would overlook the small port on the upper tip of Nova Scotia.

Led on by the urgency in her child, Kovac boarded the outbound ship the next morning. She had accessed an ATM under cover of darkness the night before, getting herself some British currency - maybe some kind soul on board would be willing to trade it for some Canadian dollars. With the condition of the Canadian dollar, it would be a dicey trade.

Kovac stood on the deck, Orion safely tucked into the papoose carrier, and watched England fade from view. Only a few days on the Atlantic, and she'd be in Sydney. From there, it would be easy to make it to the Island - maybe via a bus trip...

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Using her laptop on board the freighter, Kovac scoured the Net for a way out of Sydney. She checked the SMT bus schedules and discovered a bus leaving Friday night, her day of arrival in Cape Breton's steel town. However, the bus was not going to Prince Edward Island directly. It went to Moncton, New Brunswick, where she would have a three hour wait in the terminal. Then, another bus would take Kovac and Orion across the Confederation Bridge to Charlottetown, with stops in Summerside and Kensington first. At least it was a round-about enough, circuitous route, that she might slip through the SHADO security net unscathed. She wasn't really certain of her destination as yet, she just knew she had to go home.

Fortunately, Kovac found a crew-member willing to exchange British pounds for Canadian currency. She had enough on hand to purchase bus tickets for herself and Orion,

without having to risk going to an ATM or using her debit card, and some extra to pay for accommodations in Charlottetown, while she decided what to do next.

Kovac's freighter arrived on Sydney on Friday afternoon. She disembarked and went through Customs with no trouble. Her tickets and documents had been made out to Mrs. N. Millar, and she'd doctored her own passport sufficiently, thanks to the SHADO computers and her art kit, to make it match her documents. It wasn't the best job in the world, but that steady hand from painting Cleo the Siamese kitten had been her salvation. The Customs officers were too busy with the freighter's cargo to worry about a woman and a baby.

She spent the few hours waiting for the bus buying disposable diapers, small cans of fruit juice and finally sitting at a Tim Horton's coffee shop. She read the local papers, and even asked for the National Post and the Globe & Mail. She knew SHADO would be too smart to let their search for her go public. That is, until she read the small blurb in the Halifax Chronicle-Herald about British authorities looking for a Canadian woman who'd kidnapped a baby and was believed to be heading back to Canada. That felt a little too close for comfort. Kovac was grateful when she could take a taxi to the SMT bus station, buy her tickets and get on board. She sat at the back, quietly feeding Orion a bottle of formula. When the bus driver walked back to get her tickets punched, she was a little startled, but he chalked it up to a woman traveling with an infant and assured her their trip to New Brunswick would likely be uneventful.

Traveling light, Kovac had only packed one extra dress for herself, and some underwear. This lack of clothing meant she'd had to wash out her undies and socks every night. To avoid much attention on board the freighter, she'd taken all her meals in her stateroom, complaining of mal de mer as the excuse for not appearing at the captain's table. Her stash of formula had run out on board ship, but the ship's cook had a case on hand, as luck would have it. She bought some from him to use when she couldn't breast feed in public. Mother and child looked clean, but well-worn - Kovac hoped they looked enough like a welfare case to be left alone.

The bus trip to Moncton was long and boring. Kovac was getting hungry and she opted to get something from a fast food place as soon as they arrived at their destination. Staff at the SMT terminal there told her she could get food and baby things over at Highfield Square, so she crossed Main Street and headed into the Mall. There was indeed a fast food court, so she picked up some hot soup from the Tim's outlet, the local newspaper and a small plush toy for Orion. She was tempted to use her laptop but thought the sight of such an expensive piece of computer hardware would look somewhat incongruous with her pose as a welfare mother traveling with a baby.

When she could take the boredom no more, she and Orion went back to the bus terminal and used the bathroom facilities to get cleaned up. Kovac asked if she could board the bus early (on the excuse that she wanted a quiet place for the baby to fall asleep). Whenever anyone asked, she told them the baby's name was Ryan.

At last, the bus was ready to leave. Kovac again sat in the rear of the bus, close to the on-board bathroom facilities. She and the baby dozed for the first hour, but she woke up just as the bus was starting onto the Confederation Bridge.

Late afternoon sunlight shone down on the horizon. Kovac held her breath - the brick red shores of home looked more wonderful and welcoming than ever before. She held the baby up to the window, and thought for him, "We're going home !"

Orion looked up at his mother. The silver eyes shone. Then, he smiled, "We'll be safe here now."

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Paul Foster's face on the teleconference screen did not look happy, "I've got some good news and some bad news for you," he told Straker.

"Let's have it."

"One of our operatives in our Halifax office tracked a British freighter which went into Sydney, Cape Breton two days ago. They had a passenger - a female passenger with a baby."

Straker whistled through his teeth, "Where are they now?"

"That's just the problem. The Customs people passed her without any comment. She had a Canadian passport under the name of N. Millar. They have no idea where she went when she disembarked."

"Christ! There's only one place she could be headed!"

"We know that - we're on it. We've got people at the Charlottetown airport, the Caribou-Wood Islands Ferry and the Gateway Village at Confederation Bridge. If there's any way onto or off that Island, we'll find her."

"Paul, there's something I didn't tell you...," Straker's voice was quiet, "That baby..."

Foster shook his head, "You don't have to explain your love life to me, Ed."

"It's not...my child, Paul. Kovac was impregnated at the alien base before you rescued her..." Straker left the rest unsaid.

"Mother of God...you mean she had ...an alien baby?" Foster was truly shocked, "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Look, Paul, everything about this business has been on a "need-to-know" basis - the fewer people who knew, the better. I'm sorry if you feel left out of the loop, but there was no point in telling you back then. Now you know. And, it's vital we get that baby back safely. I want you to fly to Canada today and head up the search. You know the area from being there - and...Kovac trusts you."

"I'll head out within the hour, then. Any last orders?"

"Get that kid back, Paul."

"And, what about Kovac?"

"Please God it won't come to that, but...the kid comes first. He's the only one of his kind."

CHAPTER TEN

Kovac and the star-child spent the night in a quiet little hotel called "The Islander." It was a few streets off Charlottetown's city centre, and reasonably priced. Kovac was exhausted, and slept late for the first time in weeks. Orion lay in the bed beside her, cooing softly to himself. She woke up sensing her son wanted to nurse; she turned over and offered him her breast. He stared up at her with those big silver eyes, "Yes," she mentally reassured him, "Everything will be alright." And, they dropped back to sleep.

Orion's mental messages to his mother, instead of decreasing, were actually increasing. He was pressing her to leave Charlottetown. "Take me home," he kept whispering...and the picture in Kovac's head was flashing time after time with growing urgency - Poverty Beach.

The dilemma was getting out there. Poverty Beach was at least an hour beyond Charlottetown, in Kings County. There were no buses out to that location. There was no choice but to rent a car. It was almost suppertime when Kovac checked the phone book and found a rental place called Budget. She asked for a compact car, gave her mother's license number over the phone, and said she'd be down to pick it up directly. She figured they'd run a DMV check over the computer and maybe they wouldn't ask to see her ID. She had the forged passport in any case. Perhaps the clerk wouldn't ask too many questions...

Kovac had learned how to use Orion to deflect questions which should have been asked. He was an attention-getter. People seemed mesmerized by his strange silver eyes, and they never got around to making the kind of pointed inquiries that Kovac preferred to avoid.

It was no different at Budget Rent A Car. Kovac arrived by cab, whipped in with the baby in tow, signed off while the clerk fussed over Orion, and got the keys with no questions. She buckled the baby in the back in the special baby seat Budget provided for them, and gunned the car out of the parking lot, onto University Avenue. She turned left at the war cenotaph onto Grafton Street, and headed for the Hillsborough Bridge.

Even from the backseat, Kovac's mind was bombarded with mental messages from Orion. "Yes, Mother, you must take me home. We're going to be safe soon." A hint of paranoia crept into her thoughts as she decided to take a different route, instead of going the highway. She crossed the Hillsborough Bridge, passed the subdivision where her original family was still living, without even so much as a longing look this time, and turned right into the Southport corner. She drove past Rosebank, down through scenic Keppoch with its beautiful homes and waterfront properties, and through Alexandra. She joined the highway long enough to make the turn off corner which would take her down through what her family had always called "The Hills." It was a less traveled area, and only those "in the know" would take that route.

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"The Hills" was also a faster route. It brought Kovac right out to the Alliston corner. She drove down through Peter's Road, Cambridge, and on to Murray Harbour North. This route took her directly past the local cemetery and down the lonely lane to Poverty Beach. She parked the car, and shut it off, but left the keys in the ignition. She wouldn't be needing them anymore.

Without speaking, Kovac unbuckled her star-child from his baby seat. She lifted him up and walked down to where the remains of the old wharf disappeared into the water.

The sky was darkening. Cumulus clouds scattered across the horizon in shades of pink and mauve, reflecting delicately into the water. The remnants of the old factory buildings began to cast long, ominous shadows across the long grass and the sand.

Kovac sat down with Orion. She wadded up the skirt of her dress so they wouldn't get cold on the ground.

"We'll be safe, soon, Mother," Orion's "voice" echoed in her head. Kovac clutched the baby closer in her arms, shivering against the cooler evening air. All around them, there was silence.

Mother and star-child sat on the beach until the first stars appeared in the sky. They watched the thousands of points of light, until one of those points became larger. And larger. And larger.

The alien spacecraft settled gently into the incoming tide. Its hatch opened, and a pair of orange-and-silver suited aliens stepped out and onto the beach. Kovac stood up with Orion, the long skirt of her dress whipping around her legs from the stiffening breeze. There was no need for words - she knew what they had returned for. Now she understood everything.

"Kovac!" she heard her name being called, heard the urgency in the voice. She turned her head to look behind her.

There on the grass were two SHADO SUVs, their now brilliant headlights trained on the aliens and their ship. Two men came pounding over the grass to the shore - Foster and Leslie. Kovac saw their weapons and put her hand up. Dark shadows followed Foster and Leslie - there was a whole SHADO posse with them.

"No!" she cried out, "You don't understand!"

Foster leveled his rifle at the aliens, "I know what I see," he puffed, Leslie backing him up with his own weapon raised.

"We have to go with them, Paul," Kovac's voice was calm, "My son has to go home."

"This is his home," Foster countered, "He was born on this planet. Now, step aside and let us do what we have to do!"

"You're so wrong about this. It isn't just that my son has to go home... They're dying, Paul, and my son holds the key to their future. He knows that. I know that. They need him. And he needs me."

"What can a child do for them that their technology hasn't already? You can't turn him over to...them!" Foster called out.

"He is one of them - they are his people. They don't want to hurt us. We have a purpose to fulfill. My son is the first of his kind. And, because of him, there will be more."

"You know what they are! You know what they did to you, to all of us! You can't go with them!" Leslie was staring down the aliens, fear and hatred in his eyes.

Kovac's face was placid, her eyes gazing at Foster and Leslie with pity, "Desperation has driven them for all these years. They've had to do...terrible things...all in the name of survival. But, now, my son will change that. My son is their new Adam."

"And that makes you - what? The new Eve?" Foster's voice was cold, but in his heart, he knew the truth of the matter.

Kovac turned away, carrying Orion securely in her arms. She moved forward to join the aliens. They reached out for her, to assist her onto the hatch bridge.

"We have orders to shoot - to protect the baby!" Leslie called out.

Kovac stopped and looked back over her shoulder, "You won't shoot, Allan. You can't. You can't kill me. Not even for Straker."

Foster bit his lower lip, anger and resignation in his face. He nodded to Leslie to lower his weapon, "Let her go, Al. She's right. There's nothing we can do now."

The SHADO men watched Kovac board the alien ship, saw the hatch close, saw it lift off

silently. They tracked it until it was lost in the overhead sea of stars.

EPILOGUE

Straker sat back in his chair. For once, his cigarillo didn't taste so great. Foster's report CD was lying on his desk - he'd just viewed it.

He knew he should be feeling something. Long years of emotional control had inured him to so much pain. Losing Mary and Johnnie seemed several lifetimes ago.

But, this was different. He didn't know why. He couldn't fault Foster and Leslie. They hadn't had any other choice but to let her go. It was her decision. She willingly placed herself, and her child, back into the hands of the aliens.

Straker looked up at Kovac's uncompleted portrait of Orion. He'd asked for it when her quarters were cleaned out, had it framed and put up in his office. His mind recalled images of the day Kovac's star-child was born. Remembered her pain-filled eyes, and then the jubilation that came with the birth.

With a sigh, Straker threw himself out of his chair, flung his jacket over his shoulders and headed out through the main control room. He said his good-nights to a dozen operatives, accessed the elevator, and strode out through the parking lot to his Mercedes. As the keyless entry signaled his door open, he looked up into the night sky, the vast vista of stars twinkling brightly.

"God-speed, Tina, wherever you are..."

THE END