

Private Agendas

Based on "UFO" the science-fiction TV series created by
Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and Reg Hill (1969-1970)
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Something kept tickling his nose. It was soft, and yet insistent. No matter how many times he brushed the tickling away, it came back. He sought to solve the problem by turning over in bed. It worked for a moment, but then it was back.

Finally, Ed Straker opened his eyes. In the dim bedroom light, he could see the outline of Cleo - his closest companion and bed mate. Cleo, whose dark blue eyes captivated him. Cleo, whose every whim became his command. And, once more, Cleo raised her paw and tapped him on the nose, Wake up!

She was standing on his chest, and the photo receptors in the back of her irises gave her eyes an unearthly glow. Straker glanced over at the digital clock on his night table - it was shortly after midnight. The house was in darkness, and quiet. He'd fed Cleo before they both retired to his room - what could she possibly want at this hour?

He lifted her off his chest carefully, but she sat on the bedclothes staring at him. It was clear she wanted his attention for some reason. She was over the first flush of kitten hood, and hadn't wakened him to play Mouse-y for several months. Back then, she used to drop her fur mouse on his sleeping face as an invitation to play with her. Since Cleo usually slept all day while Straker was commanding SHADO, blissfully unaware of her master's difficult job, she was often active at night, chasing her toys, eating, watching out the windows, and being a pest when Straker wanted to get forty winks.

Before he could verbally chide her for disturbing his sleep, Straker heard a noise. It seemed to be coming from another area of the house. He slipped silently out of bed and pulled the small SHADO standard issue handgun out from his night table drawer. He didn't bother to put on his slippers; he simply padded to the bedroom door and moved down the hall to the living room.

The noise was discreet, hardly possible to make out. Had Cleo heard the noise and wakened him on purpose? It was true cats enjoyed a better auditory sense than humans. Cleo tended to start at any little noise - Straker labeled her skittish. She didn't even like human visitors to their home. Whenever Alec or some other person would come in the door, Cleo would usually retreat to Straker's bedroom and cower under the bed.

Another noise attracted Straker's attention, this time in the kitchen. He padded out noiselessly in his bare feet, feeling the coolness of the Mexican tile under his toes. There was light, and a moment of pain - before it all mercifully ended.

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"Well, that was one close call!" Alec Freeman admonished Straker as he woke up in bed. He looked down to see his left arm bandaged and in a sling, his pajama top removed.

"What the hell happened?" SHADO's CO demanded to know, shifting on top of the covers impatiently.

"I might well ask you the same question, but luckily you were able to make it to your cell

phone and call me!" Freeman grinned, "I wouldn't irritate that arm too much for a few days anyway."

A partial memory was beginning to coalesce in his mind, "Where's Cleo?" Straker was worried.

"She's still under your bed. I tried to coax her out with tuna and milk, but she's just sitting there, refusing all overtures of friendship. Evidently she isn't going to fall prey to the Freeman charm."

"Look, Alec, I'm a bit hazy on all this."

"The Omega boys are out in the living room taking care of your intruder," Freeman's expression became serious, "Apparently, your surprised an alien in your kitchen!"

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Major Allan Leslie sat down on the end of Straker's bed. He was one of the sister-organizations' top alien experts, and as such, was greatly in demand all over the world. Freeman called Leslie in because he could depend on his brains and his discretion.

"I shot an alien in my kitchen?" Straker sounded incredulous.

"Yeah, point blank range," Leslie commented, "Dead. Lucky for you he was such a bad shot."

"Damn. No interrogations."

"I just sent the body off to the lab. Dr. Raychaudhuri'll do the post-mortem for us. You hit him in the upper thigh - somethin' else caused his death. He didn't lose enough blood, and you didn't hit anything vital."

"Well, it was too dark to really see," Straker mused, as though he would have killed the alien for sure if the light had been better, "Why would an alien be in my kitchen, of all places?"

Leslie shrugged and chewed his thumb as he ruminated, "I dunno, unless he was an assassin. It wouldn't be the first time the aliens have targeted you or some other important political figures. The jury's still out on JFK... .But, it's a pretty unsophisticated assassination attempt for the aliens. They're usually a lot savvier than that... what tipped you off that you had an intruder?"

Straker smiled, "Believe it or not, it was my cat. She kept... tickling my nose till I got up. Then I heard a noise. If it hadn't been for her, I might not even have wakened.," he didn't want to think of the alternative ending to the evening's alien visitation.

"Smart cat. We'll need you to come down to HQ later to make a full statement of course, and have your arm looked at again. From the scarrin', it's likely from one of the aliens' energy weapons."

"How soon can we get the Doctor's report on the body?" the silver-haired General asked.

"I'll tell Mitali to put a rush on it for ya."

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"It's alright, Cleo, everybody's gone, you can come out now," Straker was kneeling on the floor beside the bed, trying to curry favour with his Siamese cat. She wasn't having any of it. First there was that noise in the kitchen, then gunfire, then a crew of Omega experts combing her house looking for alien evidence. No, it was best to stay under the bed - where it was safe. Aliens were too stupid to look under beds for cats. And, if tuna and milk weren't going to tease her out, nothing would. She never liked Alec Freeman anyway. Too sure of himself for her feline taste.

"Oh, come on, Cleo, I can't sit here all day. I have to go in and make my statement and

see the doctor again, and check with the lab on the alien's autopsy," Straker always talked to Cleo like she was a person, not just a cat. She liked that.

"Fine, then. Stay there. Get hungry. When was the last time you visited the pooh-box?"

Cleo's imperious blue-eyed Siamese stare said she was staying put for the time being, thank you very much. Straker got up slowly, the arthritis in his knee was always worse in the spring. The price of aging. But, he'd take the arthritis over the aging process of the aliens!

* * *

Several hours later.

"The post-mortem clearly shows the alien did not die by your hand, General," Dr. Raychaudhuri reported, "He consumed some sort of poison, which shut down his respiratory system."

"Accidental?" Straker asked.

"No. I suspect to avoid capture and possible interrogation."

"Suicide."

"Not uncommon for the aliens."

Straker shook his head, "And, in all these years, we've never managed to keep an alien alive long enough to get any usable information out of him."

Allan Leslie leaned across the table, "From the forensic evidence we gathered in your house, the alien might have been there to kill you, and then again, maybe not," he spread out a series of photos for Straker, "These were taken as soon as we got to your house - the alien got in by disarmin' your security system and comin' in the back kitchen door."

"How could he disarm the security system?"

"Some kind of sub-auditory harmonics - he used a frequency humans don't hear, but one your cat likely did. They can hear mice skitterin' around in a field long before they see it."

"Do you know yet which frequency was used?"

"We're workin' on that - we're gonna have to completely change our access codes and recalibrate our systems world-wide. If nothin' else, this incident has given us that much information."

"What about transport? How the hell did he get to my house? How did he know where to find me?"

"The only footprints that match the alien's boots are leadin' up to the back door. I've had operatives combin' the neighbourhood, the houses on either side of yours, and the wooded areas around your place. They haven't turned up any more matchin' footprints, or any other alien type of transportation. We don't know how he got there - yet. As for the aliens knowin' where you live, you better pack up and move into HQ for awhile - until we can find you a new secure residence."

"Anything else I should know about our would-be assassin?" Straker drained his coffee cup.

"Yeah. He had an empty cage-type container with him. We found it on the floor in the kitchen. Made of alien metal."

"What the hell...?" Straker's cup hit the briefing table, "What for?"

Leslie shrugged, "It's the perfect size for something small and alive - like a cat."

* * *

Three neatly packed suitcases sat on the floor in Straker's living room. Cleo was sniffing them suspiciously. Something's up. She avoided the kitty-carrier, its wire mesh door propped inviting open, with a small dish of Fancy Feast inside. As if, she thought contemptuously, I'd

ever get inside that thing willingly!

An empty pooh box was packed, along with her food dishes and her toys, a bag of kitty litter, cans and bags of cat food. Something's definitely up...

Straker snapped his briefcase shut - the same battered briefcase he'd had for years. It still bore the ancient scars of an alien-induced car accident that landed his then superior, General Henderson, in a wheelchair, and ensured his own rise as SHADO's supreme commander. He'd packed his laptop computer, his favourite cigarillos and his private papers. Now, all he had to do was stuff Cleo into her kitty-carrier and Alec could drive him to SHADO HQ for his stay there until new living arrangements could be made for him.

The cat food in the kitty-carrier didn't induce Cleo to explore the inside, so Straker wrestled her in, "Sorry, Cleo, but I know you hate Alec, and you're not going to like traveling in his car any better," he told her, as he snapped the wire mesh door shut in her face, "We'll be a few days at SHADO HQ and then we can move into our new apartment." The disgusted expression on Cleo's face told him she was not impressed. She had a few choice comments to make on the subject, and she kept up a steady howl for the next ten minutes until she wore herself out.

Freeman and some of the Omega security boys decided Straker would be safest in one of their own specially constructed condominium buildings. His furniture and personal effects would be packed and moved while he was at HQ. He took one last look around at the house - he'd been there for years. It never occurred to him that he could actually miss living anywhere. His house had never been a home to him. Just a place to eat and sleep, after he and Mary divorced. The only female company he'd had in the house had been Canadian astronaut Tina Kovac... and now Cleo.

The doorbell rang and Straker let Alec in.

"Ready to go?" Alec smiled. He bent down and peeked into Cleo's kitty-carrier, "And, how's our little girl this morning?"

Her response was an eloquent hiss.

* * *

February 17th, 2002

It smelled strange. The scent of fresh paint was actually painful to Cleo's delicate feline nose. Even the carpet was new - it's fumes rising on the air in the condo-apartment. She recognized the furniture from the old house, and Straker himself, but there were enough new items, and a new lay-out of the new living quarters, that she'd be busy for days ferreting everything out to her satisfaction.

Straker was seated at his workstation. The new condo had been remodeled to his specifications, and he had hook-ups for his laptop and other SHADO-issue gadgets built in. His exercise gear dominated the living room, and the galley kitchen was only large enough to accommodate a fridge and a microwave and some counter and cupboard space. Living solo meant he didn't need much for himself, and Cleo was just happy to be with him.

The security boys assured him this would be the safest living arrangement SHADO and Omega could provide. A new security system had been installed just the day before he'd moved in, and all the access codes were recalibrated against the frequencies the alien had utilized to disarm the one in Straker's old residence. Because he now lived in a condo building, owned and lived in by other SHADO staffers, it would be even harder for anyone to get to him.

He downloaded Dr. Raychaudhuri's final autopsy report to read it, and also Allan Leslie's

report on the disposition of his old house and the subsequent investigation. Straker was surprised that SHADO intended to keep the house empty, and hold the deed to the property into the future. It wasn't like he was planning to move back in. Now that the aliens knew where he'd lived, he couldn't go back there. Leslie's viewpoint was that the aliens' knowledge of the house made it unsafe for anyone else to inhabit it. Instead, they hooked up a set of covert video cams and listening devices, in case the aliens tried another break-in.

Cleo was busily sniffing out the small condo. It's square footage was much smaller than the old residence, and she missed the kitchen window, where she could watch birds all day. All the windows were sealed shut and wired for intruders, and the condo itself was on the twelfth floor of the building, in a very busy urban area. Of course, she did not understand these niceties - all she knew was that things smelled and looked different - and as a result - were suspect in her Siamese mind.

Straker had never really been worried about Cleo staying home by herself before, but now he'd had special vid-cams installed which he could access on his laptop when he was at the office - he wanted to see her and be certain she was alright. Alec thought he was being silly about an cat, but Straker had become very much attached to Cleo, and he wasn't about to let anything happen to her. His life's worth of frustrated emotions had come to centre on the feline - he had to have something - somebody to love. And, Cleo was the perfect woman - relatively undemanding, ready to greet him adoringly whatever time he got home, and always gorgeous. She didn't need any make-up to look her best! And, Cleo was his last connection to a certain Canadian astronaut...

In later years, Straker had taken to doing his paperwork at home. The advent of SHADO's and Omega's new and secure computerized technology made it possible for him to spend less time in the office, although he was there just about every day for some period of time. As he got older, he found he liked to have a bit of time to himself to recharge and reflect. This often meant taking long drives out to the cemetery where his son was buried, and leaving flowers. He knew his ex-wife also visited Johnnie's grave site, but he didn't care if Mary knew he'd been there. The boy had been just as much his child as hers. Fortunately, they never ran into each other there. Sometimes he'd call ahead to his favourite Indian restaurant on the way home from the office, order some curry to go, and eat in front of his computer, checking the day's reports from MoonBase and the Skydiver fleet. Cleo usually sacked out on the counter at his side, snoozing, after consuming a can of Fancy Feast. She didn't object to the smoke from his cigarillos, and after her meal, she'd curl up in his lap, a warm purring presence.

Alec Freeman had long since stopped cajoling Straker about his lack of female companionship. He knew the intimate details of Straker's short, unhappy marriage, and the death of his son. Freeman also knew about Straker's unresolved feelings for Tina Kovac, and the human-alien hybrid child she gave back to the aliens. Her departure with the child meant Straker never knew for certain if she was dead or alive, and Freeman strongly suspected his boss of having taken in Cleo the cat because she had formerly been Kovac's pet.

Whatever the reason, Straker, the man most often believed by his SHADO and Omega subordinates to be the most cold-blooded, was sweet on a four-footed furry female. Cleo was his one indulgence, other than his cigarillos, and he meant to protect her from everything, including marauding aliens!

* * *

February 22nd, 2002

"Here we go again!" Straker thought, immediately alert. He sat up in bed, and Cleo was

on the pillow next to his, her eyes wide, her tail fluffed in fear, her back arched. "What is it, girl?" he asked her, sotto voce, "Do you hear something?"

It seemed impossible to Straker that anything could get through the phalanx of security in his building and in his condominium. Yet, here Cleo was, quivering with emotion, displaying all the classic feline signs of being terrified. Straker strained his human hearing, listening for the tell-tale thud of an alien boot, but he could detect nothing. He didn't want to lie down and go back to sleep in case there really was something in the apartment - he had come to trust Cleo's senses that much. After all, she saved his life the last time!

In the dim light from the electric clock, Straker watched Cleo. She seemed to be on the alert, her tail twitching from side to side nervously, but she didn't get down off the bed. Instead, she moved even closer to Straker, as if she felt he could protect her from whatever it was she was sensing. She burrowed under the bed covers and cuddled up beside him, her little body shaking. He wondered if he should get up and investigate, but somehow he got the feeling Cleo didn't want him to leave her alone.

Straker took his cell phone gently off the night-table and pressed the security button. He'd wait for them to arrive, and see what was going on.

* * *

Several hours later.

"Well, General, we did a thorough search of the building, the grounds, and the security system itself. We didn't find evidence of an incursion of any sort," Lieutenant Laltoo explained, "I think your cat just had a case of the heebie-jeebies this time."

Straker didn't like the Lieutenant's patronizing tone, but there was no disputing the facts. Cleo had had a false alarm. The security people left, and he scooped her up in his arms to return to bed, "Are we going to have to get you some kitty Prozac?" he asked her quietly.

Cleo curled up on the second pillow beside Straker as he got back into bed, but when he put a hand out to pet her, he noticed she was still shaking, and her eyes were wide with fear. What was wrong with her? Maybe it was just all the fuss she'd been through lately - the alien in the old house, moving to the new place, nothing familiar. Maybe that was why she was spooked. For some reason, Straker respected her reactions, and knew something was disturbing her. But what?

* * *

The next morning, Straker went about his usual regimen. Cleo stuck to him like glue. She sat on his shoulder while he walked his treadmill, and hopped up on the sink to keep him company while he shaved. She sat outside the shower stall and cried until he came out. He ate his breakfast with her in his lap.

As Straker dressed in his usual severe business suit, Cleo stood on his dresser and watched him closely. Her enormous blue eyes seemed to say "Take me with you!"

"You hate the kitty carrier," Straker told her. And then stopped. How the bloody hell had he heard what Cleo 'said'? Was he going barmy? There was only one way to know.

He went to the bedroom closet, took out the carrier, lined it with a fluffy towel from the bathroom, and sat it on the dresser. To his shock and surprise, Cleo walked inside, curled up on the towel and gave him a "Well, what are you staring at?" look.

"Now I've seen everything," Straker muttered, closing the small wire door on the front of the cat carrier. With his briefcase and Cleo in hand, Straker rode the elevator down to the main floor, checked out with the security people on the desk, and walked out to his car.

* * *

SHADO's supreme commander went down to the offices of Dr. Douglas Jackson. He felt rather sheepish about the whole thing, but if anyone could determine whether he was nuts or not, it would be Jackson.

Still weasel-faced, and of an indeterminate age, Dr. Jackson was an enigma to most SHADO and Omega people - including Straker. Jackson had been 'inherited' from the days of General Henderson, and had a reputation for ruthlessness unmatched by most personnel. Straker didn't like Jackson - never had - but he'd come to trust the man over the last three decades. Jackson just happened to be one of those brilliant, if bizarre, geniuses, who occasionally crossed the line from a healthy appreciation of his work, to an over-zealousness that rattled even Straker at times. But there was no doubting his results, and he was discreet.

Straker sat Cleo's cage on top of Jackson's desk and looked him in the eye, "I want this cat tested."

Jackson eyed the cage warily, "I'm a psychiatrist, not a veterinarian, General. I don't even like cats." His voice was oily, and Cleo hissed at him. Straker noted with satisfaction that Jackson seemed to flinch away from her.

Not feeling in the mood to be toyed with, Straker replied, "I don't like you, but that doesn't mean I don't trust you, Doug. And, I need this cat tested."

"For what? Rabies, distemper, fleas?"

"You can test for psi levels. I want this cat tested for that."

Jackson raised an eyebrow, "May I remind you, General, that we test humans for psi levels? Lower mammals don't have them."

Cleo hissed at Jackson again, as if she understood his comment as an insult.

"But, we don't really know that for sure, do we? We humans arrogantly assume cats don't have psi powers because we think we're bigger and brighter than they are," Straker was getting testy, "Up until just lately, humans didn't realize how smart whales and dolphins are, right?"

"Whales and dolphins have far more complex brains than cats," Jackson added, and heard Cleo hiss at him again.

Straker looked from Cleo's cage to Jackson, "I think you're pissing her off, Doug."

Jackson rolled his eyes, "The tests we have available for psi levels require human reactions - speech, for one thing. And, the ability to pick out designs and respond to certain stimuli. I don't think Cleo, here, no matter how smart you think she is, is capable of that."

"What if I sit in on the testing? I can give you her answers."

"Oh, I see, General," Jackson's smarmy smile appeared, "You're going to tell me what the cat thinks?"

Straker sat down with a thump, "Look, Doug, I know this sounds crazy. But, ever since the night the alien invaded my house, it's like... Cleo is communicating with me on some special level. It's like I can 'hear' her talking. And, what's even weirder, is that she understands me. We had this sort of thing happen before with a Siamese years ago."

"That was a so-called alien-controlled Siamese, and I was never completely convinced the aliens would bother with a lower animal to affect behaviour in humans. It just seemed ridiculous. It would be much easier to simply get control of a human, as in the case of the psycho bombs we encountered in the 1980's. Besides the question of human-like intelligence, animal behaviorists have refused to give credence to the possibility of human-like emotions in their studies of animals. If anything, cats act and react on instinct alone, not real emotions. We know most cats have only the intelligence level of about an 18 month old human child - no more. And, even an 18 month old human doesn't..." , " Jackson stopped in mid-sentence as he

saw Straker's pursed lips, "With one exception," he finished lamely, "Orion."

"Right. And, we didn't pay attention to what he could do until it was way too late. Cleo, here, is trying to tell me something. I need to find out what it is."

Jackson shook his head, "I cannot imagine that the normal psi tests we have available will be of any use on a cat, General. Cats just don't have that kind of intelligence, let alone psi powers."

"Well, here's your chance to challenge those theories. To put the whole matter to rest. Test her and see what you find out."

* * *

"This is just a waste of time, General," Jackson threw down his test sheets, "Who ever heard of a cat communicating on a psi level? We can't get her to recognize her own reflection in a mirror, let alone respond to the different stimuli we've shown her. I might as well test a plant!"

Cleo growled at him, and Straker tried to calm her with some petting, "What about running some scans on her brain waves?"

"How do I do that? I'd have to put some equipment on her head, and I don't think she'd permit it, do you?"

"Maybe if you let me do it, I can keep her calm and still.," Straker was beginning to clutch at straws.

"This is the last thing. I have important work here in this office, and... "

"Just do it. If we don't learn anything from her brain scans, I'll just chalk it up to imagination," Straker finished.

Jackson didn't appear convinced, but he conducted Straker and Cleo into a special test room. Inside there was a comfortable bed, and the scanning equipment could be wheeled over for work on the subject. Straker took off his shoes and laid down on his back. Cleo laid on his chest, rather nervously, her tail switching back and forth. Jackson leaned over to place a portion of the headset on Cleo, but she smacked his hand with her paw and hissed at him.

"Here, you try," Jackson handed the headset to Straker.

The silver-haired general rubbed Cleo soothingly and said, "Now, girl, we just want to put this little thing on your head for a few minutes. It won't hurt. It's not like getting a shot at the vet's office. We just want to see what's going on inside that furry little brain of yours. It's ok, girl," Straker looked up at Jackson, "Can you operate that thing from outside the room?"

Jackson nodded.

"I think she'd be happier if you left. She doesn't like you," Straker told him.

The doctor made a face, "I'll use the scanner outside the window."

Cleo watched Jackson shut the door. She looked back at Straker with an appealing expression. He gently placed the headset on her. It was much too large for her small feline skull, so he pulled in the strap as far as he could. It would have to do, "We're ready," he told Jackson.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Cleo was back in the safety of her cat carrier, and Jackson was poring over the printouts from her brain scan, "There is an unusual amount of electrical activity occurring in Cleo's brain," he told Straker.

"What could that mean?" the General asked anxiously.

"Not being an animal expert, I really cannot say. Just that it's not normal for her levels to be so high."

"Could abnormally high electrical activity in the brain mean Cleo is experiencing psi abilities?"

"Anything is possible, General, but since we can't test Cleo as we would test a human, we can't know for certain."

"OK, let's suppose for just one minute that Cleo does have some sort of accelerated psi powers - how could this happen?"

Jackson shrugged, "Has Cleo had any strange accidents lately? Has she chewed an electrical cord and gotten seriously shocked?" His facial expression was that of a man who hated himself for even asking such stupid questions.

Straker sat for a moment thinking, "The only thing I can reasonably connect this all to is the night the alien invaded my house. Cleo woke me up. She saved my life. Allan Leslie said afterwards that the alien got in by disarming my security system with a sub-harmonic frequency," Straker looked up at Jackson, "Could that have done it? Could a sound that humans can't hear trigger psi powers in a cat?"

For the first time, Jackson actually looked thoughtful, "It was thought that the psycho bombs might have been controlled by sounds humans normally don't hear, but vibrate to on a subconscious level... "

"If that is so, why didn't I respond to the sub-harmonics along with Cleo?"

"But, you were asleep when the alien came in. Maybe being in REM sleep protected you from the sub-harmonics, but the cat was awake, or more closely attuned to picking up on those frequencies."

"Leslie said cats can hear mice long before they see them - even in the dark."

"Cats do have more sensitive hearing than humans, that much is true. And, if your cat has been affected with psi powers, perhaps that Siamese years ago was also..." Jackson's voice trailed off thoughtfully.

"But, what she 'says' to me is... well... normal. She isn't urging me to kill anyone. She isn't telling me to kill myself. In fact, if anything, she has been very protective of me. And, she's scared. Very scared of something."

"A scaredy-cat. One that talks to you," Jackson was looking at Straker oddly.

Straker picked up Jackson's inference, "Oh, no, you don't! Don't you dare look at me like that! You said yourself we've had at least one precedent for a psychic cat."

"I'll place the results of Cleo's brain scan on file, General, and e-mail you a personal copy. But, perhaps you should consider going home and getting a good rest. You've been through a lot lately. Both of you," he added, with a smarmy smile.

Straker picked Cleo's cage up off the doctor's desk, "I resent your implication, Jackson, and I don't want to hear it again. I am not crazy. There has to be some legitimate explanation for all this."

* * *

After checking in with some of the Ops operatives, and reading the latest battery of e-mails from the Moon, Straker opted to go home after all. Cleo had sat in her carrier beside his desk, content merely to be protected in her cage, and knowing she was with her human.

Straker put Cleo's cage on the passenger seat and connected the seat belts around the carrier, to secure her in case he had to make a quick stop, or slam on the brakes. It also helped her in the car if she could see him while they were driving around. Otherwise, she'd howl her head off. And, Straker's head was aching up a storm already. Time to go home.

The General left through the Harlington-Straker film studios front gate as he always did.

He showed his pass and placed his left hand on the fingerprint scanner as usual, and the security officer held up a small instrument to do a retina-scan as well. The tests proving that he was Edward Straker completed, the electronic gates swung open, and he drove out.

Because Harlington-Straker was located in the countryside, Straker had to drive a number of kilometers to get to his new urban address. He punched a number on his cell, and informed the front desk security at his condo building that he'd be arriving shortly. Twilight was just starting, and the slanting rays of the setting springtime sun make the General squint. He grabbed a pair of dark sunglasses off the dash, put them on, and kept driving.

Straker hadn't gone much further when he became aware of a low rumbling growl coming out of Cleo's carrier, "What's the matter, girl?" he asked her, cooing the question in a soft voice, "We'll be home soon and you can get out of that old cage and stretch and have some Fancy Feast," he put two fingers between the bars of the cage to scratch behind her ear, and hauled them back, dripping blood. She'd bitten him! Then, she hissed and backed up as far as she could inside the carrier and sat there, her eyes like saucers, her fur fluffed up, her fangs showing in a feline grimace of fear.

Not thinking, Straker wiped his bloody fingers on his suit pant leg and pulled over to the side of the road, out of the way of any traffic which might come along. Once the high performance car was stopped, Straker opened Cleo's carrier, "It's ok, girl, it's just us here. No more Dr. Jackson, no more tests. I promise..."

He suddenly noticed another sound. Not Cleo's growling, but a deep, throbbing echo, coming it seemed, from outside the vehicle. It was completely dark now, and the General expected to see another car coming towards him. Lights rounded the curve of the road.

And, what he did see made his flesh crawl...

* * *

the alien space craft was hovering above the asphalt like a giant Christmas ornament, glowing, humming, twirling slowly, as though in slow motion. Straker immediately tried to start up his car, but it wouldn't turn over. He'd heard of that phenomenon with cars and alien ships before. funny how the oddest things popped into his head at this moment.

Cleo was growling ominously, shrunk up against the far wall of her cage. Had she somehow sensed the alien ship before it became visible to Straker?

Straker watched the alien craft spin to a halt on the road. Watched it sit there for what seemed an eternity. Then a hatch opened on the top, and a pair of silver-clad aliens stepped out and walked towards the car...

* * *

His head ached. It was throbbing unmercifully. There was a bright light in Straker's eyes. It took him several moments to realize that light was the rising sun. He blinked and reached out for his sunglasses. His neck was stiff, too, as though he'd slept on it strangely. But why had he been sleeping in his car?

Beside him, on the passenger seat, was Cleo's cat carrier. He opened the wire door and peeked inside. She was sleeping, curled up on the towel. Was she ok? Straker reached in and petted her head. The Siamese opened one blue eye lazily, and yawned herself awake.

The General's cell phone began to chirp. He flipped it open, "Straker, here."

"Shit, Ed, we've been trying to find you for hours! What the hell happened?" Alec Freeman's frantic voice has risen several octaves.

Straker looked back inside Cleo's cage and then up at the rising sun, "To tell you the truth, Alec, I'm not really sure"

* * *

An hour later, Straker and Cleo had been picked up by an Omega security detachment and brought back to SHADO headquarters. His car had also been appropriated and was being investigated in the Omega forensics lab. Dr. Jackson and a team of doctors examined Straker himself.

"What do you remember, General?" Jackson was seated across from Straker. Cleo's cage was parked on top of the doctor's desk.

"It was... the damndest thing. Cleo actually seemed to be aware of the UFO before I ever saw it. She started growling and hissing, and exhibited real fear."

"Did the aliens take you into their ship?"

"I don't know. I don't recall anything else - until the sunrise woke me up. I felt like I'd been asleep for some time."

Jackson raised an eyebrow, "So you don't know what, if anything, the aliens might have done to you?"

Straker shook his head. "I feel ok. Just tired, that's all. And, Cleo was asleep in her cage when I woke up."

One of Jackson's assistants poked his head in the door and handed him a diskette and a paper file folder, "Ah yes, the prelim medical report," Jackson smiled and installed the diskette in his laptop. He scanned several pages before looking up at Straker.

"All your tests seem to have come back negative for any alien incursions. Either they didn't touch you, or they did so in such a manner that our tests haven't picked up."

"What about Cleo?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to leave her here with me. I have a vet coming in to look at her later on today."

"She isn't going to like that," Straker mused aloud, "I want to go down to the Omega lab where they're holding my car. I'll be back in time to sit in when the vet looks at Cleo."

* * *

Dr. Imma Zama smiled as General Straker came into the room, "I've completed my tests on Cleo here," she indicated the cat carrier with Cleo inside, "We did additional brain wave scans, and checked her over very carefully. Did you know that your cat is pregnant?"

Straker's jaw dropped, "That's impossible - she's been spayed!"

The doctor shrugged her shoulders, her blue-black corn-rowed braids moving with the gesture, "I did an ultrasound, General, and Cleo is carrying four kittens in her uterus. Oddly enough, Cleo has no ovaries."

"How in hell could a neutered cat get pregnant? As I understand it, when female cats are neutered, all the reproductive organs are removed. And, I swear, Cleo has not come into heat or ever been contact with any other cats - male or female. I thought she was getting a little rounder, but I just figured it was too much Fancy Feast."

"How did you obtain Cleo?"

"She was... a gift... from a friend," Straker lied. Cleo had been Tina Kovac's pet and he'd acquired the Siamese after Kovac's disappearance. Kovac was top secret information and the General was not inclined to break his own rules for Dr. Zama.

"Did your friend ever disclose the name of the breeder to you? Or who they purchased Cleo from?"

"No. I believe Dr. Jackson was involved in Cleo's purchase."

"Well, whoever sold Cleo to your friend, sold a cat capable of having kittens, not a

neutered cat. I'd have that breeder checked out, if I were you."

Straker peeked in at Cleo who was still doped from some of the drugs Dr. Zama had administered to have her more co-operative with the testing they'd had to do on her, "Yes, Doctor, thank you for all your work here."

* * *

The General slammed his fist down on Jackson's desk, "What the hell are you doing? Where did you get Cleo? What is she? Is she really a cat or one of your weird experiments gone wrong?"

Jackson stood up behind his desk, "I resent your implication... "

Straker cut him off, "I get reports all the time about what your department is doing down here, and in other secret labs - it's the reports I don't get that scare me the most!"

"I can assure you, Cleo is a cat, General."

"A very pregnant cat, Dr. Jackson. A cat who was supposed to be neutered. A cat who was meant to be company for someone else who was pregnant!"

Jackson's eyes flashed, "I knew I couldn't prove that Kovac's alien baby was controlling her mentally - we didn't have enough time to test him or her before they disappeared. But, I had some of Orion's alien DNA samples stored, and we've been experimenting with the cloning process long before Dolly made headlines."

"What are you talking about?"

The doctor indicated Cleo's cage, "Our little feline here has proven to be quite an interesting subject."

"What did you do to her?"

Jackson threw a diskette down in front of Straker, "It's all here, General. All up to date - including Dr. Zama's test results."

* * *

Back at his secure condo, Straker popped Jackson's diskette into his laptop and started accessing files. Cleo was ensconced on the desk beside him, full of Fancy Feast and dozing comfortably, her tail curled up around her black nose.

As the material in Jackson's files moved up the computer screen, Straker felt a sense of anger and frustration. The good doctor had been conducting "weird experiments" alright. According to his in-depth notations, he'd removed alien DNA samples from baby Orion and stored them. When Kovac disappeared with her hybrid child in July of 2001, Jackson still had the samples. It was true SHADO and Omega had been engaged in cloning work privately, and Jackson had access to all their labs. He believed that Orion had been preprogrammed when Kovac was impregnated, to act on her psychically - so that she would return to the location of the alien underwater base in Canada, which was serving as one of their human-alien research facilities. The baby and his mother were removed from the former alien base location, even though Omega operatives tried unsuccessfully to prevent that.

Straker had put Jackson "in charge" of procuring Cleo for Kovac as a present. She'd been lonely and nervous throughout her pregnancy and the General hoped the kitten would provide a much needed calming influence, and lower Kovac's blood pressure. Jackson did find a reputable breeder of Siamese in London, and had the six months old kitten declawed, but only partly neutered. He instructed the SHADO vet at the time to remove only Cleo's ovaries, but to leave her uterus intact. He was earmarking the kitten for the cloning project even at that time, as the SHADO scientists were discovering felines made better cloning candidates than some other small mammals.

Once Kovac and Orion disappeared, Jackson wanted to test his theory that the "homing beacon" response in Orion had been preprogrammed into his very DNA, so he set about utilizing some of the baby's alien DNA samples in the cloning lab. After some trial and error, Jackson decided it was time to use Cleo. He had her removed from Straker's home while the General was on a business trip, and implanted with four cloned feline eggs - which also contained some of Orion's alien DNA, then Cleo was returned so the General was unaware.

The testing proved too close for comfort when Cleo's kittens' alien DNA began "broadcasting" homing signals. The alien incursion of Straker's home earlier that month was proof that the aliens must have thought they were closing in on another human-alien hybrid baby, and sent one of their people to retrieve it. Instead, Cleo may have "sensed" the alien's presence, and alerted Straker that there was an intruder. Cleo, pregnant, was being psychically manipulated by her four alien DNA-ed kittens. But, being a nervous cat, Cleo herself was equally as terrified by the aliens, as she was unwittingly sending out "signals." The fact that the aliens stopped Straker's car on the road home, and didn't abduct either Cleo or the General, must have been proof that they realized they were intercepting signals from an animal, not a child, and they didn't have time or orders to do anything else.

Cleo's brain waves had in fact been elevated, but it was due, not to the psi powers Straker mistakenly attributed to her, but to the psychic activity between her alien kittens and herself. How and why Straker seemed able to "communicate" with Cleo - Jackson couldn't answer - as yet. According to Dr. Zama's tests, Cleo was due to give birth in about eight weeks. Her bulging belly had meant only Fancy Feast overindulgence to Straker - not pregnancy.

It was not the first time Straker realized that the organization he helmed for so many years had become so enormous, that even he was out of the loop on many things. He was no longer in complete control of SHADO or Omega. Like many national governments around the world, small groups worked below the radar, carrying out their own agendas: strange research, experiments and actions. SHADO and Omega were running on their own - had he become merely a figurehead? And, it took an eight pound feline to bring all this into sharp focus.

Straker sat back in his chair, and ran a hand through Cleo's soft fur. She vibrated with purrs at his touch. Did she understand what was happening to her? Or was she as confused as Kovac had been when she was pregnant with Orion? No wonder Jackson had been so damn smug - he'd recreated the aliens' impregnation of Kovac by utilizing alien DNA to clone something living - but not human. Were human-alien hybrid clones possible now? And, what could be learned from them if they were?

As much as Straker wanted to kill Jackson for mounting such a complex operation behind his back, he couldn't escape the Doctor's logic. Jackson used what was available to him to copy alien reproductive technology, and it was the first time the aliens had ever responded directly to anything SHADO did like that. Jackson, ever the manipulator, had made an important discovery - that the aliens could be motivated by something if given the right stimulus.

Had the aliens known when they'd stopped Straker's car on that lonely road who they had in their grasp? Were they surprised to find SHADO's supreme commander and a Siamese cat, instead of the baby they were looking for? Why hadn't they abducted or killed Straker? Were they not prepared to take such actions without direct orders? These and other questions haunted Straker that night. He sat up, rereading Jackson's files, his mind a-whirl with all the possibilities, both scientific and horrific.

Straker's time-programmed drip coffee-maker started perking at seven am. He got up and poured himself a cup, putting milk and sugar in. He opened a can of Fancy Feast for Cleo, who

was stretching and yawning on his desktop. Then he put in a phone call to Doug Jackson.

* * *

February 25th, 2002

"You son of a bitch!" Straker spat out at Jackson, "How dare you come into my home and use my pet for one of your schemes! Who gave you the authorization to do such experimentation?"

Jackson looked up at his obviously perturbed superior. His smile was smarmy and more than a little dangerous as he said, "General, I thought you knew by now that I don't need your permission for any research I undertake."

Still standing, Straker glared down at Jackson, "You put my life in jeopardy, you bastard!"

"Would you have sanctioned my experiment had you known about it?"

"Of course not!"

Jackson sat back in his chair, "I rest my case, General."

"This isn't a simple case of insubordination, Jackson. You deliberately tinkered with an animal in my care. You utilized valuable DNA samples for your own purposes. You engaged in an operation that was potentially deadly to both Cleo and myself."

"Come on, General. She's only a cat."

"An innocent animal who just happens to be mine! What the hell will her kittens be when they're born? Monsters?" Straker was angry, and bent on keeping Jackson from knowing just how important Cleo had become to him, "You've gone too far this time, Doug!"

"Is learning something vital about the aliens going too far?" Jackson stood up and moved around his desk to confront Straker face to face, "I knew you'd never sanction what I wanted to do. I also knew you were too emotionally involved in the whole Kovac-Orion issue to think objectively about such an experiment. You have a more than the usual attachment to Cleo, and I knew you'd never permit me to use her. I had no choice but to act on my own initiative."

"Are you going to make this personal, Doug? Because if you are, I... "

The doctor cut Straker off in mid-sentence, "Would we have learned any other way how the alien DNA worked? How it really was preprogrammed as a 'homing beacon'? I was able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the aliens impregnated Kovac with a hybrid child destined to take her back to them - for their usage!"

"You mean... she didn't go back thereof her own free will?" Straker asked quietly.

"Evidently not. Kovac didn't leave with the aliens because she wanted to. She was coerced by the sweetest of all attractions - motherhood - even alien motherhood. From the moment she was impregnated in that alien breeding base in Canada, she had no other choice. No other fate."

Straker slumped into the chair across from Jackson's desk, "I've wondered all these months what might have happened to her... if she was still alive if we'd realized what was happening to her, we might have been able to prevent... "

"As long as she provides what the aliens want, she may survive - for a time at least. But, the aliens want as many hybrids as they can get - for whatever their own reasons may be. When Cleo's kittens started broadcasting the homing signal, the aliens thought they were getting lucky and somehow another hybrid baby was calling them," Jackson smirked, "Imagine their surprise when they found out they were being called by a Siamese cat!"

"What can we do for Cleo?" Straker's mind flipped back to concrete actions.

Jackson shrugged, "Her kittens should be born in about 7 to 8 weeks. I see no evidence in her MRI's that her offspring will be monsters. They look like normally developing kittens. With

a bit extra," the doctor's smile was smarmy again.

"I want Dr. Zama brought up to speed on everything associated with Cleo's condition and I want her to attend when the kittens are born. I want the best of everything."

"Yes, General. You're not the only one interested in Cleo's kittens," Jackson's voice was oily.

* * *

April 30th, 2002

"How long has she been in labour?" Dr. Zama asked as she took off her coat and sat her medical equipment down on the floor.

Straker was sitting in a chair beside his bed. Cleo was lying on the bed, obviously in discomfort, but purring nonetheless.

"I don't know. I just realized she was unable to get off the bed and was acting as if in pain. I figured I should call you. You're the expert."

The doctor knelt down and gently examined Cleo, "I'd say she may give birth within an hour or so. She seems almost ready," she looked up at Straker, "Do you mind if she has her kittens on your bed?"

"I'd rather not move her at this point," he explained, "I want her to feel as comfortable as possible. Jackson wanted her in his lab, but that would have scared her to death. She's nervous enough as it is. Most of the time she dives under the bed if strangers come in. I wonder why she's purring? She's got to be in pain."

"Cats purr when they're happy, that much is true, but they'll also purr if feeling pain, or if they are trying to convince another animal they're no threat. Females often purr while giving birth. Cat researchers don't really know why. According to the MRIs, Cleo is carrying four kittens, but some females take as long as an hour in between each birth. She'll repeat the same process with each kit - she'll chew off the umbilical cord, eat the placenta and wash the kitten to stimulate breathing and other bodily functions. Then she'll wait for the next one to be born."

Straker shook his head, "How will she know what to do?"

"Pure instinct, General. Cats are bright, even if their IQ has been estimated at only the level of an 18 month old human. They know what they need to do. Cleo may not need my help at all."

"Yes, but I wanted you here just in case of complications, Doctor. I think you know what I'm referring to."

Dr. Zama nodded, "Dr. Jackson brought me up to speed a couple of weeks ago. I must say I was rather shocked by it all. I'm used to animals being used for scientific purposes, but using Cleo as a repository for alien DNA surprised me. I had not been aware of the situation you had last year with Tina Kovac."

"Few people knew. It was highly classified. I want you to know I did not sanction this experiment."

"So I understand," Dr. Zama regarded the General carefully, "The good doctor seems to have quite a reputation for... doing things his own way."

"If he wasn't so damn right most of the time, I'd have tossed him out years ago!" Straker's expression was sour.

The General and the Doctor watched Cleo intently. Her first kitten was born, and as Dr. Zama had explained, she instinctively snapped the cord, ate the placenta and washed the new arrival assiduously, purring all the while. Within half an hour, the next kitten was born, and the process was repeated. Finally, all four kittens were washed and suckling from Cleo's nipples.

She looked up at the attending humans with pride in her big blue Siamese eyes, as if to say, Look what I did!

Straker sighed with relief, "Well, Doctor, is everything alright?"

He watched as Dr. Zama's delicate, long-fingered black hands carefully and tenderly checked Cleo and she looked at the kittens without removing them from the mother's feeding, "I think everything went well, General." She reached down into her medical equipment and brought out some items, "I have here what is called 'queen's milk' - it's a vet-formulated liquid you can feed Cleo to keep her healthy and keep her own milk flowing well. It's packed with nutrients for her and her kittens. See if you can get her to drink some, starting tomorrow. The placentas she ate should keep her going until then." She handed Straker her card, "Call me if you see anything wrong. I'll come right over."

"That damn Jackson wants to put the kittens through tests at his lab," Straker growled.

"I've advised him that's not a good idea. The kits should be at least 8 to 12 weeks old before he attempts any tests at all. By then, they'll be weaned off their mother and able to be separated from her."

"Well, I don't plan for him to meddle any more with my little family," the General looked down at Cleo, her paws wrapped comfortingly around her babies, "She's been through enough already."

* * *

Not wanting to disturb or leave Cleo, Straker opted to make a bed on the floor with an old sleeping bag and some pillows. He kept the light dimmed in the room, now that the kittens were born, and maintained a warm temperature. He got out the book on cats Dr. Zama had left him, and started reading, a cup of fresh Earl Grey in hand. When he'd gotten Cleo, he'd purchased a couple volumes on the Siamese breed, but hadn't read up on the gestation or birthing of cats - he believed Cleo was fixed and therefore it was a non-issue.

He watched her cuddling her kittens and was momentarily reminding of Kovac with Orion. Cleo's kittens were all white. Siamese did not begin to show their "points" until they were several weeks old. If they were normal, and like Cleo, they would be Seal point - the original Siamese breed, and carry the darkest coloration possible. The four kits nuzzled into their mama and little mewling cries were answered with Cleo's comforting purrs. Straker thought he'd rarely seen anything so genuinely innocent in his life.

As per Dr. Zama's orders, Straker fed some of the queens' milk to Cleo and she even ate a few bites of Fancy Feast and drank some water, which he brought to her in bed. He hadn't wanted to disturb her, so he carefully removed the soiled bedspread from under her and the kittens and replaced it with another clean prewarmed blanket. Cleo seemed grateful for all the assistance, and didn't mind when Straker gently touched her kittens as they lay nursing beside her.

When his cell phone chirped, he answered it quickly, "Straker, here."

"Yes, General. Dr. Zama tells me you have some new arrivals at your place."

Straker recognized the oily tones of Jackson on the other end of the secure line, "And, they won't be leaving my place anytime soon for your laboratories, Doctor," he enunciated Jackson's title with as much sarcasm as he could muster, "You're through tinkering with my little family."

There was silence for a moment, then Jackson replied, "General, those creatures are important research subjects."

"Like hell. They're not going to suffer what you put Cleo through. Ever. If you think I'm

going to turn them over to your merciless care, you're sadly mistaken."

"They're not your property, General. They are the property of SHADO, and as such."

Straker cut him off, "Funny you should start throwing the SHADO name around like it means something to you. You didn't care about protocol and the chain of command when you stole my pet and utilized rare alien DNA samples to further your personal research agenda. Don't start with me, Doug. You won't win. If you persist in this, I just may start some research of my own - like how you got those alien DNA samples without any proper authorization? Whose arms did you twist to get those documents forged? Do you really want me to start digging into your little schemes?"

The sudden dial tone at the other end forced a grim smile from Straker, "I guess not."

* * *

May 8th, 2002

"Have you named them yet?" Alec asked, smiling down at Cleo and her babies.

"No, I want to wait till they've grown somewhat and have individual personalities before I get into names."

"You'll have quite a vet bill with five cats to take care of."

Straker waved that off, "Cheaper by the dozen, Alec."

The two old friends walked back out to Straker's living room.

"Seriously, Ed, what are you going to do about Jackson?"

"My first impulse was to blow the bastard's brains out. I'd like to throw the book at him. Unauthorized usage of rare DNA alien samples, unsanctioned over the top experiments, invading my personal residence, putting my life at risk."

"You mean, a court-martial?"

"It would be poetic justice, wouldn't it? Especially if I had Paul Foster come from New York to preside over it," Straker smiled grimly.

"I hope you've thought this out, Ed. If you court-martial Jackson, you're going to set off a whole cascade of trials. He's got his fingers deep into this organization. There's no knowing what could be churned up to the surface with this."

Straker had a resigned expression on his chiseled face, "There's a difference between what I'd like to do, and what I know I have to do. Before I even consider putting Jackson and his methods on trial, I have to connect the dots to every private agenda, every covert ops he's ever been involved in. And, weigh those against the positive work he's done for both SHADO and Omega. The man's a menace. I know if I start digging, there could be any number of people who've been used by him - good people - who might end up being sucked down the tubes when it all hits the fan. I'd rather not do that. I'm only interested in him at this point."

"You know you'll get accused of throwing your considerable weight around if you take him on. He's been working independently for years and nobody's said word one. Because of Cleo, it'll look like a personal vendetta on your part."

"Anytime my life gets put in danger, it's personal, Alec!"

"So what are you going to do?"

"First off, I'm going to make sure Cleo and her progeny are off limits to Jackson. It seems impossible to beef up security in this place any more than it is, but I don't want him getting into my home like the last time. I thought things were pretty safe there - not."

"If you take on Jackson, you're making an internal enemy. SHADO and Omega don't need that kind of conflict."

"We've dealt with traitors before. You know that. It's only made us stronger."

"Any sort of witch-hunt within the organizations is going to make it harder for people to do their jobs."

"Maybe it's time we learned just how far Dr. Jackson's sticky fingers have roamed. What else has he been up to that we don't know about? Is he doing anything which is going to compromise the secrecy and security of both SHADO and Omega? How closely should we be monitoring him? It worries me, Alec. What happens when and if I decide to retire? How much control can someone like Jackson exert? Can he be a king-maker, utilizing his power, calling in his favours, to promote his candidate to replace me? Is he some sort of eminence grise in the making?"

Alec bit his lower lip, "I've always presumed Paul Foster would be your choice to replace you."

"Paul is busy with Omega, but you're right, he'd make a good candidate. However, I don't think Jackson would want Paul to be his commanding officer."

"That court-martial business was a long time ago, Ed."

"If and when Paul ends up as my replacement, I want him to inherit a pair of organizations which are firmly behind his leadership. I don't want any internecine little private agendas impeding him from making decisions. It scares to me think that even now, Jackson could be countermanding or distorting some of my orders - look how long it took for me to find out about this current business with Cleo!"

"I can see your mind's made up, but if you do go through with this investigation, or monitoring, or whatever you want to call it, tread carefully. Jackson is not someone to be taken lightly. He's wily and manipulative. He knows how to cover his ass like nobody's business."

"I'm completely aware of who and what I'm up against, Alec. If I decide to take him on, it'll be with all the power I can muster as SHADO's supreme commander and the best spy moles we've got. I can bury this investigation so deep not even Jackson will know it's happening. He may have some influence, but I can call in markers that he couldn't even dream of."

Epilogue

"Dr. Zama, glad you could come by," Straker showed the veterinarian into his condo.

Perfect white teeth showed as the doctor smiled, "How are the kittens doing?"

"They're fine, fine. Growing. Playful. Cleo has her paws full handling those rambunctious youngsters!"

The vet followed Straker into his bedroom, where Cleo was resting in her own basket, surrounded by a cat heap of sleeping kittens, "They're all napping right now."

"I got the impression your message was rather urgent. Is there a health problem?"

"No, the kittens and Cleo are fine. But, I do need to have a chat with you. A very private chat."

"Yes, General."

Straker led her back out to the kitchen and poured Dr. Zama a cup of freshly perked coffee, "I have an assignment for you. I know your specialty is mostly vet work, but you're involved in other concerns as well."

Zama took the mug of black coffee and sat down, "I've been fortunate in my research work with SHADO. My work has formed the basis of several exo-biological projects. My colleagues have utilized my animal information to further their own research on the aliens and their humanoid bodies."

"Where do you feel your loyalties lie, Doctor?"

"General, I'm not sure I follow you."

"Are you loyal to SHADO and Omega, or are you loyal to... certain people within these organizations?"

"I'd like to think I was equally as loyal to SHADO and Omega as I am to my superiors and my colleagues."

"You have an impeccable record with us, Doctor. I'm hoping your record is indicative of your loyalty to SHADO above all."

The doctor inclined her head to one side, "General, you seem to be tap-dancing around something. Why don't you just come out with it?"

Her forthrightness impressed Straker, "Alright, Doctor. Here it is. I believe one of SHADO's top people is carrying on a personal research agenda - utilizing valuable SHADO resources and people - without sanction - without permission - entirely a law unto himself. I want this person monitored."

"You want me to spy on Jackson," she summed up.

"Yes. This is purely between us at this point. Although, I have told SHADO and Omega Security to co-operate with you in any way you require. Will you take this assignment?"

Zama put her coffee cup down on the counter, "I'm a vet. I don't specialize in covert ops. If you suspect Jackson of pursuing a private agenda, then I submit he will be having me watched - especially in view of my association with Cleo's case. I have found it necessary in the last few weeks to watch my own step - very carefully."

"Your continued involvement with Cleo would make it easier for you to report directly to me. I'll be needing Cleo and her kittens properly neutered in a few months, and of course they'll need constant care and assessment, because of their alien DNA. If Jackson thinks your research with Cleo and her family is worth it, he won't question your coming here or contacting me."

"I don't doubt that, sir."

"Doctor, in an organization like ours, one man, or one small group of people, cannot operate independently. We all have to work together. There should be no private agendas, no misuse of power, no risking lives unless it's absolutely necessary for the safety of the organization, or vital to carry out our mandate of protection. Dr. Jackson has forgotten these lessons over time and has chosen to move beyond the sanctity of the prime directive under which SHADO and Omega were created. If this is really true, then he's become a security risk. A risk which has to be neutralized, for the protection of all."

"And, there is no one else you would trust this assignment to?"

"You're not a prominent member of Dr. Jackson's coterie. Some of the others may have already been compromised by him. He won't see you as important, except for what information he thinks he can glean from you in regards to Cleo's kittens. That gives you considerable opportunity to use his curiosity against him - for me. And, for SHADO."

Dr. Zama stood up, "I don't have a choice, do I?"

"There are many ways in which we have all be called upon to serve the greater good. If I hadn't been doing my job for the greater good, I'm sure the Astrophysical Commission would have seen to it that I was replaced. I don't like the idea of ratting on our own, but this time I do believe it's for the greater good of us all. Yes, Dr. Zama, I want you to take this assignment."

"I'll set up a regular weekly visit here to see Cleo and her kittens. I can do some legitimate research here and confer with you at the same time. I'll make sure it's easy for Jackson to get access to my work, and then perhaps I'll be able to follow the trail of my information through

his system. I can't guarantee that I'll be able to get the damning evidence you need."

"We have to start somewhere."

The doctor headed for the front door. Straker called to her, "Thank you, Doctor." He saw her look back over her shoulder and then go out.

His attention was diverted by a small mewling sound. Cleo's kittens were through napping and ready for another round of play. They gamboled out of the bedroom door, chasing each other clumsily, knocking each other down, play-fighting. Cleo herself walked out leisurely, stretching and yawning. She looked up at Straker, "You'll look after us, right?" she seemed to be asking.

"I'll use every weapon available to me to keep you safe, Cleo. You and our little family."