

Absence

A UFO Story

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Based on the Characters and series created by
Gerry Anderson



Historian's Note: This story opens just over a week after the episode "The Long Sleep" written by David Tomblin, but most of the events depicted here take place about one month before the episode "Timelash" written by Terence Feely.

Prologue:

Ed Straker looked up, as Virginia Lake walked into his office just after noontime. She had been in a meeting, with Doctor Jackson, since early that morning and she looked drawn and haggard. He closed the door behind her as he stood to take her in his arms.

“Virginia, are you all right? You look exhausted.”

She nodded as she returned his embrace, and Ed could feel her trembling. A few minutes later he led her to the conference table.

“The interview was emotionally draining, and intensely personal,” she said as she sat down. The emotional toll of the encounter was still evident in her voice. “Are you sure you still want to go through with this, Ed?”

Ed knew the answer to that, as he was not at all looking forward to the required meeting with Jackson. Eight weeks ago, Virginia and Ed had

started seeing each other socially, spending much of their off duty time together, exploring the interests they both shared. Since they had both had followed the regulations by filing the required relationship study, and no objections were filed by the commission, the couple assumed that there would be no further complications.

Less than two weeks ago, the relationship became intimate, and when Henderson learned of it, he convinced the commission that this issue required closer scrutiny, even though the CRS results indicated no contradictions. Because of that, the IAC decided to have Doug Jackson interview the couple and make a recommendation based on the findings. Virginia and Ed were given a choice, submit to the interviews, or end their relationship.

“Want to?” he asked, “No. Have to, yes.”

For Ed, there was no choice in the matter, as his objectivity had been called into question and his

dedication to SHADO required that he submit to the scrutiny, no matter how uncomfortable it might be. He was just as motivated by duty, as he was by love.

“I could always transfer back to the research section,” said Virginia. “According to Jackson, this interview process would not be necessary if I step down as your second.”

The two of them had discussed the idea of her taking reassignment, a conversation that lasted well into the previous night, but the circumstances and needs of the organization would not allow that possibility. She had told him that she would gladly step down as his second, if there was someone else that could fill the void.

Straker shook his head, “Virginia, we’ve been over this. I need you where you are. Alec is still busy with the Skydiver and aeroceptor projects, and Foster is not yet ready to take over as

executive officer. Don't worry; I'll be all right with this. You got through it okay, didn't you?"

She gave him a wan smile as she continued, "You're a much more private person than I am. Compared to you, Ed, I'm an exhibitionist." Her smile became a wry grin. "I know how hard this was on me. It's going to be much worse for you...I just don't want to see you put through more stress on my account."

Ed admired her selflessness. Virginia had insisted that she see the good doctor first and he reluctantly agreed, after a somewhat heated discussion. She was right, as Commander, he would still have to field the toughest of Jackson's questions.

Taking her by the hand, he said, "I've been through much worse for less. Once this is done, you and I should be in the clear, assuming that Jackson doesn't throw us to the wolves."

That statement brought the smile to her face that he had hoped for and she squeezed his hand.

“Well, I’m going to get this over with. Why don’t you get something to eat? I’ll see you in a few hours,” he said as he stood to leave.

Virginia got up with him and allowed herself to be gathered in his arms. He noticed that her blue grey eyes were moist, but he just held her in silence.

“I’ll see you when I’m done,” he said again, gently breaking away. He reached down and opened the door to the office and walked out heading to the SHADO medical center.

When the door opened, Jackson looked up from his notes, “Ah, Commander. Please have a seat,” he said.

“Doctor Jackson,” he said as he sat down.

The SHADO psychiatrist regarded his commanding officer for a moment as he considered their shared history. Jackson knew that the man seated in front of him had, at one time, a measure of contempt for him and his methods. But the Commander had warmed to him somewhat over the past year. He hoped that it would make the interview less painful for the very private man.

“Commander, I would like to assure you that my report to the commission will omit any personal details which we discuss in the course of this interview,” Jackson said, quietly. “The report will only contain my recommendation after reviewing the facts.”

“I appreciate that, Doctor Jackson,” Ed said. “More than you know.”

Jackson looked down at his notes as he asked, “Shall we begin?”

Straker nodded his consensus to proceed.

“Now, Commander, how long have you been aware of Colonel Lake’s emotional attraction toward you?”

“I suspected it...” Straker paused, “a couple years ago, a few months before she was assigned to Moonbase. I didn’t know for certain until over a year later. Virginia inadvertently revealed her feelings when she warned me about Craig’s change in personality.”

Jackson nodded, “Ah yes, Colonel Collins, a terrible tragedy. He was a friend of yours, I understand?”

“Yes, one of my best friends.” agreed Ed. “We joined the astronaut corps together, and the two of us commissioned SID. I still can’t believe he is gone...”

Jackson nodded and allowed a moment for the Commander to collect his thoughts. He continued, “Do you have any idea why Colonel Lake told you her feelings?”

“I don’t think she meant to. She knew that Craig and I were close friends and that I would defend him unless I had overwhelming evidence that something was amiss. I was shocked when she informed me that Craig had attempted to sexually assault her.”

Jackson paused and looked up, “She did not tell me about that.” An element of astonishment was evident in his voice.

“I’m not surprised. I didn’t find out until it was too late to take any official action. It was, in her words, a borderline incident and it’s my guess she didn’t want the event to ruin Craig’s career. Colonel Lake is not a vindictive person, Doctor.” Straker paused, “In the heat of the moment, she told me that she didn’t want to lose someone she cared about. Virginia may very well have saved my life with that admission.”

“And you, Commander? Did you feel the same way about her?”

Ed paused again, dealing with the uncomfortable situation. “Virginia has always had a reputation of being cold and aloof. I never agreed with that assessment as I find her to be warm and selfless, and those who have a different opinion probably don’t know her. I consider her to be a close friend, but I didn’t seriously consider the possibility of a relationship until a couple of weeks before the Timelash incident.”

Jackson nodded, as he wrote down notes on the pad piecing together a picture, of the events, that brought these two people together. He had been monitoring the Commander’s stress levels since the incident that had taken the life of Craig Collins. Straker’s stress factors had been approaching dangerously close to the point where medical intervention would be necessary. To his surprise, that trend started to reverse soon after the Timelash incident. The only explanation that Jackson could find was the

relationship that bloomed between Lake and Straker.

“Tell me, Commander, what changed your mind.”

“Now that, Doctor, is a very long story.”

Jackson smiled, “Colonel Lake indicated the same thing, but as you can see, I have set aside plenty of time.”

Over the next several hours, Ed Straker found himself baring his soul. It would be one of the hardest things he ever faced.

Chapter 1:

Three months earlier:

“Red alert! Red alert! Interceptors immediate launch!”

The voice of Nina Barry came over the Moonbase loudspeaker, rousing the crews to action. In the control sphere, the radar showed three blips less than fifty miles from the base. A sighting at this distance gave the base almost no warning before they would be under attack.

“Range?”

“Forty eight miles, Lieutenant,” said Carol Miller.

Barry brought up the radar display on her screen and watched the incoming UFOs. *How in the world did they get so close*, she thought.

“Moonbase to SHADO control, we’re under attack.

Commander Straker ran down the corridor of SHADO HQ, closely followed by Colonel Lake. *So much for breakfast*, he thought, as they entered the control room.

He walked down to the communications station and flipped up the mic.

“What do we have, Lieutenant?”

“Three UFOs sir. We picked them up on radar, less than fifty miles from the base. The interceptors are space born and moving in now.”

The Commander nodded as Colonel Lake stepped up next to him.

“That’s the third time this month,” Virginia added. “What have they come up with this time?”

Straker looked over at her, noticing a concern in her eyes that mirrored his own feelings of unease.

“Interceptors are launching missiles, sir,” said Ford.

Straker and Lake watched the radar display as the knife fight unfolded. In a few minutes, they both breathed a sigh of relief as the threat had

been eliminated with the efficiency that Ed had come to expect from his people.

“Targets destroyed,” Nina Barry reported.

“Thank you, Nina, convey my congratulations, to both the pilots, and the rest of your staff. Do you have any idea how they got so close undetected?”

On the monitor, Barry shook her head. “No sir, it’s the same pattern as last week. One minute, the screen was clear, the next, the UFOs were suddenly just there.”

“Very well, Lieutenant. Send me a full report, including the tracking data, as soon as possible.”

“Yes sir,” she said as she nodded. “Moonbase out.”

Ed looked at Virginia, “That’s three attacks now inside two weeks, with little or no warning. The next time we may not be so lucky.”

“Commander, I’ve ordered a complete diagnostic of the tracking network, twice. There is simply nothing wrong with the equipment. The aliens must have come up with something new...” Ginny continued, as the two senior officers walked into Ed’s office. “...I can’t repair what isn’t broken,” she finished, clearly exasperated with the situation.

Ed reached down to the desk and closed the door and walked to the conference table. He uncovered a serving set and picked up the decanter.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“Please.”

Ed poured two cups and handed one to Ginny. Secretly, he knew that she relished the special blend he made in his office.

“Thank you,” she said as she sat down next to his desk. “Do you have any ideas?”

Ed shook his head determined not to repeat the events after last week's attack. The two of them had got to the point of snapping at each other out of frustration. He realized that he often expected the impossible from her, and in spite of that she always did her best to deliver. So seldom did she complain that when she snapped back last week, it surprised him. The incident gave Ed a new appreciation of her legendary temper. It also reinforced his decision that he had promoted the right person. Where Alec would openly disagree about many of his decisions, Virginia tended to choose her battles carefully. When she did stand on an issue, it would give him a moment of pause as she usually was right.

“No, I was going to ask you the same question. I promise not to bite your head off this time.”

Virginia smiled, “I'm going to hold you to that.” She paused a moment before continuing.

“Didn’t we have a pair of UFOs once come in so fast that we couldn’t intercept them in space?”

Straker sat down behind his desk as he pondered the question.

“A few years ago,” he said. “We tracked them approaching at almost SOL twelve. One of them veered off and the other wasn’t able to slow down enough to make a soft landing,” he said.

“I remember that incident,” she said with care, as she knew it would be forever tied to the loss of the Commander’s son.

“Let’s consider this,” she continued. “At the speeds that UFOs normally approach, they have to fly a hyperbolic course into the Solar system, using the gravity of the sun and Earth to decelerate. Once they evade the interceptors, the alien craft would reduce to sub light velocity rapidly and enter our atmosphere. It takes a finite amount of time for them to drop from interstellar speed to re-entry velocity.”

“So far I follow you,” said Ed. “Go on.”

“So, what would happen if they found a way to decrease the amount of time they need for deceleration, something independent of a planet’s gravity well?” asked Ginny.

Ed finished the scenario in his mind and added, “They would be able to fly a straight course to their target, in turn, giving us little or no warning. It certainly fits the pattern, except for one thing. We still should be able to pick them at one hundred thousand miles. That would be about eight and a half minute’s lead time. These things are showing up less than fifty miles from Moonbase.”

“I know,” said Ginny. “I haven’t quite figured out how they could manage that, unless they are approaching at speeds much faster than have ever been observed.”

The phone rang, interrupting the conversation. “Excuse me,” said Ed, as he picked up the phone.

“Yes, Miss Ealand?”

“I have General Henderson on the line for you,” she said.

“All right, put the General through.”

Ed rolled his eyes as the gruff voice of James Henderson came over the phone. Virginia covered her mouth to avoid snickering at her already agitated boss.

“Good morning, General.”

“Commander, what’s the story with these last two UFO reports? How the hell did they get so close without us picking them up?” he asked, bypassing any pleasantries.

“Why I’m fine, General, thanks for asking,” Ed said, in a somewhat derisive tone. He continued before Henderson could respond. “To answer your question, Colonel Lake and I were just discussing this problem. We have some ideas but nothing that quite fits the pattern.”

“So the two of you haven’t come up with anything concrete?”

Straker shook his head as he answered, “We were in the middle of hashing out a couple of theories...”

“She’s there with you now?” the General asked, interrupting.

“Yes, she is.”

“I want to see both of you in my office, in an hour.”

Henderson abruptly hung up the phone leaving Ed stunned.

“What happened?” asked Ginny.

“He told me he wants to see us in an hour and hung up,” said Ed, still shocked in disbelief.

“This sounds serious,” she said. “He’s never asked to see me before.”

“Maybe he’s going to fire me and give you my job,” he pondered, daydreaming. “Just think, I

could retire, spend more time on the golf course.”

Virginia shook her head saying, “Somehow I don’t think that is going to be the case. And even if it was, you’d be bored in ten minutes.”

She had hit on an unwavering truth, *she knows me too damn well.*

“Well, let’s not keep the General waiting, shall we?” he said, as he opened the door and they walked out of his office.

Ed and Virginia arrived at the General’s office just before nine in the morning and Henderson’s secretary greeted them as they strolled in.

“Commander, Colonel, the General is expecting you. Please go right in.”

“Thank you, Miss Scott,” said Ed as he opened the door for his second.

Always the gentleman, thought Virginia, nodding her thanks.

She always felt uncomfortable with the situation that the General had put her in by insisting that his relationship with her family remain confidential, and Ginny had not told anyone except for Nina Barry.

Ginny had been through a rough time dealing with Craig's death and subsequent reappearance, as well as her brief relationship with Paul Foster, and she needed someone to talk with. Nina had become a both close friend and confidant. Ginny had shared things with Nina that she hadn't even discussed with Gay. But not being able to tell Ed bothered her, much more than she would care to admit.

“Commander Straker, Colonel Lake, please have a seat,” said the General as they walked into his office.

As the pair sat down, Henderson spoke into the intercom, “Miss Scott, please bring in some coffee and see to it that we are not disturbed.”

“Yes General.”

When the coffee had been brought in and they were alone, Henderson turned to Lake.

“How fluent is your German, Colonel?”

Ginny was confused but she didn’t allow it to show as she answered, “It’s a little rusty, General, I don’t use it every day. I actually read the language better than I can speak it.”

Henderson nodded as he handed her a document.

“Read this,” he said. Turning to the Commander, he began, “The document I just gave her was written by Albert Einstein over forty years ago. He sent it to President Roosevelt, along with a letter urging the United States to develop atomic weapons before the Germans. We have just recently uncovered

evidence that the Third Reich was much closer to developing the atomic bomb than we first realized.”

While the General spoke to Ed, Ginny scanned through the scientific paper. The complexity of the mathematics astounded her.

“In short,” said the General, “the paper that Colonel Lake is reading has to do with manipulating the space-time continuum in such a way that one can not only travel faster than light, but travel through time. Einstein somehow knew that it would be relevant at some point in the future and he asked Roosevelt to keep this paper safe until it was needed.”

Ed was shocked, “Albert Einstein is considered the father of relativistic physics. Who else knows about this, General?”

“Less than twenty people on the planet, Commander,” Henderson answered. “The President, the British Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and a handful of

military scientists that, quite frankly, couldn't make any sense of the document. Because of Colonel Lake's theory, that the aliens generate their own continuum, the JCS decided to give her a crack at solving this forty year old riddle."

Virginia had quickly scanned through the paper. It was an extremely complex theory, but it could explain some aspects of the recent attacks they had seen over the past couple of weeks.

"I understand some of this, General," she said. "But I'm going to need some help to decipher the dynamics of these equations."

"You'll have all the military resources you need..."

"You misunderstand, General," Virginia said, cutting him off. "You will not find a military scientist anywhere in the world who has a background in this type of theoretical physics. There are maybe six physicists in the world with the knowledge and expertise to understand and decipher these concepts."

Ginny pointed to a formula on the second page. “I know that this equation has to do with a time energy relationship, but most of this work is well out of my league.”

Henderson gave her an unreadable look, and then asked, “Do you have anyone in mind, Colonel?”

The General was putting her on the spot by questioning her directly and she looked over at Ed, hoping he would read her expression. But a year of working closely together, allowed them to hold a conversation almost without words and his barely perceptible nod told her to proceed.

“I do, General. He’s not as well known as Freeman Dyson, Richard Feynman, or Stephen Hawking, but I would certainly rate his ability to be on par with the best in the field. His name is Professor Manfred Reinhardt, and he currently is the Professor of Physics at Stanford. With your permission, General, I’d like to

confer with him over the theory contained in this document.”

Henderson leaned back in his chair as he considered. Finally he answered, “He will have to pass a full G6 and he cannot be told anything about our operation. Will he agree to these conditions, Colonel?”

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem, General,” said Virginia. “I was a student of his in my final year at Stanford. And I trust him.”

Henderson turned his attention back to Ed.

“Commander, we are going to have to find out if this is the method being used by the aliens. I also need to know if we have other problems on Moonbase.”

Straker shook his head, “I’m sure that the problem has nothing to with personnel. I’ve looked over the tracking data, from the first two attacks, myself. There was nothing to see. And the efficiency ratings on Moonbase have been

consistently above ninety five percent since Colonel Lake was assigned there two years ago. The figures have stayed at that level even after she was reassigned to HQ. In fact, Lieutenant Barry beat the Colonel's record by two tenths of a point last month."

"I see," said Henderson. "Still, correct me if I'm wrong Colonel, in order to prove or disprove this theory, she would need direct access to the tracking sensors."

"Yes, she would," said Straker.

"In that case, I want her assigned to Moonbase for the next month. You can get by without her for a few weeks. Have Colonel Foster take over her duties at HQ while she is away."

Virginia knew that Ed was seething over this, seeing the expression on his face was unnecessary.

"Before you get wound up, Commander, hear me out," continued the General. "You and I both

know that Colonel Lake is the best person for the job.”

“That may be true,” said Ed. “But I still would have liked to have made that decision myself.”

“Listen, Ed,” the General said, softening somewhat. “The commission is very concerned over this latest chain of events. In fact they are seriously reconsidering the two additional SID satellites you have been hounding them about. Almost losing Moonbase last year might have tipped the balance. And just for the record, I’m on your side this time.”

That statement had the desired effect, and Ed found that he was forced to agree. They needed answers and Colonel Lake was best qualified to find them.

She looked over to him, a wry grin on her face as she said, “Well I guess I’d better pack.”

On the way back to HQ, Ed was quieter than normal as he considered the meeting in the General's office. Having Virginia on Moonbase for a month was going to have a significant impact on operations at HQ. And even though Colonel Foster was progressing, he still wasn't ready to step into her shoes.

General Henderson had told him to whip the young Colonel into shape, and Straker was doing just that, but not for the same reason. Ed knew that the aliens had targeted him in the past and one of these days they just may succeed. Leaving Foster unprepared to assume a greater command role would be irresponsible, and unfair to Virginia. If anything happened to him, she would need a good second.

Over the past year, Colonel Lake had become his right hand, even surpassing in some ways the level of support he received from Alec. Her record spoke for itself and it had been next to impossible, for the commission to push her

aside. Add to that, the fact that Paul Foster himself realized that Lake had better qualifications and experience. To Ed that admission spoke volumes, as Foster was starting to draw on some of the qualities that Ed had seen when he recruited him.

Alec Freeman was still Ed's best friend and he missed his bulldog, yet steadying presence. But he was surprised how well Virginia Lake had filled that void. She had the mettle to speak her mind when necessary, a trait that Ed looked for in an executive officer. And she had become a close friend; he found that he trusted her judgment as much as he did Alec's.

He had never called her by her first name, even though on occasion she would call him Ed, being afraid that she would see through his façade of indifference. He could imagine that he saw hurt in her eyes every time he called her Colonel instead of Virginia. This situation

wouldn't keep forever and he knew that sooner or later they would have to talk about it.

Next to him, Virginia broke the silence, "Ed, this wasn't my idea."

"I know...but Henderson is right. You are the best person for the job. I'm not going to play politics, at the expense of the well being of SHADO, or Earth. If the aliens have come up with something new, we have to find out about it, and how to counter it."

"You know, it would have been much easier to design the Utronics system if this document had been made available years ago. I have to wonder, what else is being hidden by the US or British governments."

"I don't know," he said absently. "Do you want me to swing by your apartment on the way to HQ?"

“That would help. It won’t take me long to pack and I can call Professor Reinhardt when we get back to the base.”

“Once you make that call, I’ll drive you to the airport, if you’d like. The lunar flight will depart as soon as you are aboard,” said Straker.

Virginia looked at him with a grin, “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were going to miss me.”

Chapter 2:

Commander Straker looked drained, even though the interview had barely begun and Doug Jackson felt empathy for his commanding officer, privately wishing that this interview wasn’t necessary. But like his CO, Jackson was a man of duty. And the integrity of SHADO’s command structure trumped all other concerns. He had to be absolutely sure that the

relationship between Straker and Lake would not compromise that structure. This was a decision that a computer simply could not be trusted to make.

“Commander, do you need a break?”

“No, Doctor, let’s get on with it.”

“Very well,” he said. “You told me that you intended to talk to Colonel Lake about not calling her by name. Were you going to tell her why?”

“I’m not sure. At that point I still had no intention of acting on it.”

“So tell me, Commander, did you miss her while she was posted to Moonbase, on a personal level that is?”

“Yes,” Ed said huskily.

“And that absence was complicated by the loss of your father was it not?”

“I received a call from my father two weeks after Virginia left for Moonbase. We hadn’t spoken much since I took over as C in C of SHADO.”

“Your father was a career air force officer and he was what would be called a mustang, coming up through the ranks, eventually retiring as a full colonel.”

“Yes,” said Ed. “Dad disapproved of my decision to leave the military to run a film studio. Of course, I couldn’t tell him the truth due to the security concerns.”

“Tragic, of course,” said Jackson. “Commander, it is truly unfortunate that you have had more than your share of personal sacrifice, to protect the security and integrity of this organization. Why don’t we continue there, tell me about the events leading up to the meeting with your father...”

“I tell you that woman is as cold as an Alaskan glacier,” said radar operator first class Patrick Turner, to his two coworkers.

The three men had an access panel open in the corridor outside of the control room. One of the radar circuits had malfunctioned, and Keith Ford assigned the three junior members of his team to the task of tracing the problem.

“Are we talking about the same person?” asked Mike Watson. “Colonel Lake seems like a nice lady.”

“She gave me hell for being two minutes late for a duty shift,” added Gregg Carlson. “I call her the ice princess.”

“Oh come on, Gregg, you’ve been late every day this week, it’s not her fault that you can’t get here on time.” Watson said, dismissively. “In my opinion you deserved it.”

“Yeah Mike? Well she got all over my case too. A few weeks ago, I was trying to make a date with

Ayshea, when the frigid witch, blew in and pulled me aside to dress me down,” said Turner. “She’s just as miserable as the Commander.”

Watson stopped what he was doing and looked at Turner, “Pat, I told you that Ayshea wasn’t interested. If you keep on hassling her, and Straker finds out about it, you’ll find yourself in Siberia building igloos. And by the way, Colonel Lake has always been pleasant to me.”

“I don’t care if...” Turner suddenly paused. “Commander?”

The other two men looked over to see Straker standing there, a stern expression was lined in his face and an awkward silence filled the corridor.

“Lieutenant Watson, Keith Ford is looking for you in control,” said the Commander, his voice carefully neutral.

“Yes sir,” said Watson as he quickly left.

Straker turned his attention to the two men in front of him, “Lieutenant Carlson, if you think Colonel Lake was hard on you, trust me, you’ve seen nothing yet. How would you like to be reassigned to Cape Horn, permanently? I can arrange that.”

“That won’t be necessary sir,” said Carlson.

“I expect you to be on time from now on. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir,” he said quietly.

“As for you, Turner, HQ is not is not your private playground. If I get any complaints about unwelcome advances, you will find yourself reassigned to a posting where that particular temptation will be nonexistent. Do I make myself absolutely clear?”

“Clear as glass, Commander.”

Straker turned to walk away, when he suddenly stopped and turned back to the two men. His voice was like ice as he spoke.

“One more thing, gentlemen,” he paused for a moment. “If you have any derogatory opinions about any members of this organization, I would strongly suggest that you keep them to yourselves. I had better not ever again hear the disrespectful remarks I just heard. That’s all.”

The Commander turned and stalked away. Patrick Turner looked at his CO with contempt, as he watched him walk away. “Big man,” he said, in a voice dripping with sarcasm. “Your day is coming, Straker...and much sooner than you think.”

Later that day, Lieutenant Ayshea Johnson stood at attention in front of the Commander’s desk. Straker regarded her for a moment.

“At ease, Lieutenant,” he said kindly.

Ayshea visibly relaxed. Ed knew that being summoned to his office often struck fear in the hearts and minds of even some of his senior

staff. In the case of a junior officer the fear could approach the level of sheer terror. While that effect had its advantage in some cases, Straker did his best to dispel the effect in those who pleased him with hard work and dedication to duty.

“I received your request to be reassigned to the available posting on Moonbase. After reviewing your record, I found it to be flawless and since you meet all of the necessary qualifications, I have subsequently approved your transfer.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

“Lieutenant, I do have one question. Is your request, in any way, due to a problem with personnel?”

“No sir,” she said.

Straker was sure that he saw a barely noticeable flicker cross her eyes, but he chose not to pursue it.

“Very well, Lieutenant, you will start your new position in three weeks. Lieutenant Barry is getting one of my best people and you will be sorely missed here at HQ.”

“Thank you, Commander,” said Johnson. “I’m very happy working here, but I see this as a chance to expand my horizons. I’ve dreamed of going into space since I was a child. I’m really looking forward to it, sir.”

Ed Straker could relate to that very ambition as he recalled his own childhood aspirations. He stood to shake her hand.

“Congratulations, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

After she left, Ed sat back down at his desk and he began looking through the stack of personnel files, in search of a replacement for Lieutenant Johnson.

One name had risen to the surface, Lieutenant Tamara “Tara” Paulson. She had been

temporarily assigned to HQ during the incident where Craig Collins had been lost, and was already familiar with the operations procedures at the base. Ed pulled her file and thumbed through it finding her record was still clean along with a note that indicated her desire to return to HQ should an opening become available. Tara was currently assigned to a Skydiver crew and was on a scheduled furlough. Ed made a note to call Pete Carlin and inform him that he may need to find a replacement for her.

The direct line to the office upstairs rang and Ed picked it up.

“Yes, Miss Ealand.”

“Commander, I have your father on the line. He says that it’s important.”

Ed’s face went ashen, as he had not spoken to his father in almost two years and he had not seen him since before he married Mary.

“Put him through, Miss Ealand.”

Ed heard the click of the transferred call.

“Dad?”

A weak almost unrecognizable voice came on the line.

“I’m surprised that you took my call,” said Tony Straker.

“Dad, you don’t sound well, what’s wrong?”

“Son, you and I have some unfinished business, and I don’t have a lot of time. I need you to come home for a couple of weeks.”

Ed and his father had been estranged for years; they were barely civil to each other on the phone. He still blamed the death of his mother on the bout of alcoholism that his father had succumbed to soon after he retired from the military.

“A couple of weeks!” he exclaimed. “Dad, I don’t really think...”

“I’m dying, Ed.”

Straker was shocked by his father’s admission and he swallowed hard. After a moment he asked, “How long?”

“A week or two, maybe a month on the outside,” said his father. “Ed, we have a lot to talk about, and I don’t want to go to my grave leaving these things unsaid.”

“I’ll get a flight out this afternoon. I’ll call you when I arrive at Logan,” said Ed.

When Straker got off the phone, he mashed the intercom, “Lieutenant Ford, find Colonel Foster and have him come to my office.”

“Right away, Commander.”

Gently he caressed her back as he drew her into his embrace and she lost herself in his arms. As she brushed her hands up his back to firmly grasp his shoulders, she gazed into his deep blue eyes as he lowered her to the bed. She

closed her eyes as he met her lips with his, a light touch at first, growing deeper with the rhythm of her sighs. As the satin sheets cradled her back and the kiss deepened she began to tremble in anticipation of...

Virginia was awakened by the buzzing of the intercom and she reached to the nightstand, still somewhat disorientated by the extremely erotic dream. *Damn him*, she thought to herself.

“Yes.”

“Sorry to wake you Ginny, I have the Commander on the line for you, he said it’s urgent.”

Yeah, I’ll show him urgent, she thought, as she quickly tried to collect herself. She sat up in bed and threw on her robe.

Nina noticed that she seemed out of sorts, “Are you okay, Ginny?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said huskily. “Put him through.”

Virginia could feel herself flushing as the Commander's image came on the screen. *I should have switched off video.*

"I'm sorry to wake you, Colonel," he began. "I have to take a week or two of personal leave in the States to attend to an urgent family matter."

Her embarrassment quickly subsided as she realized the gravity of the situation. Ed only had two living relatives, a sister in Arizona, and his father in Boston. A few months ago, in a rare moment of weakness, Ed had opened up to her about the situation between him and his father. The pair had been discussing Craig Collins and the shared loss had bridged a gap between them. From the pain she saw in his eyes, she was sure this had to do with his father.

"I can be back on Earth in about six hours..."

"No, with this morning's attack, I need you to stay on Moonbase. I'm going to leave Foster in command here at HQ, but you are still overall

senior. I know it's harder to keep an eye on things from up there but..."

"Ed, take care of what you need to, Paul and I will be fine," she said. "If I can do anything..."

"Thank you..." he said with genuine gratitude. It seemed to her that he was going to say something else, but the words never came. "I'll leave a number where I can be reached in Boston, if need be."

The connection closed and Virginia lay back in her bed, her emotions in turmoil now. She felt sorrow for Ed, knowing that his father was up in his years and for him to leave now, she knew this had to be serious. But she was still confused as to her own feelings about the unspoken message he had given her. His eyes had said, thank you Virginia, she was sure of it.

Over the past two weeks, he had called her at least twice a day, mostly for legitimate reasons. But at least two of his calls could have been deemed superfluous, not that she minded. She

missed their interaction, even if it was only to talk shop. *Maybe Nina was right all along*, she thought, suddenly terrified at the prospect that the two of them might be dancing around their feelings.

Ginny knew that she wasn't going to get back to sleep and Nina was due for a break. She needed to talk to someone. She got up to quickly dress and she walked out of her quarters to see her friend.

In his office at HQ, Straker looked up from the videophone as he closed the connection with Moonbase. Paul Foster had been sitting across from him.

“I'll call you once I know where I'm staying, Paul. The phone will be most likely an unsecured line, so we'll have to plan accordingly. I should be back in a couple of weeks.”

“Yes sir,” said Foster. “Commander, if there is anything else I can do...”

“Thank you, Paul,” said Straker as he stood and closed his briefcase. “Make sure that these documents, that Professor Reinhardt is sending, make it to Moonbase. Colonel Lake is going to try to make some adjustments to the tracking sensors based on this new information.”

“Do you want us to keep you apprised of our progress?”

Straker noticed his choice of words, implying a team effort and he felt more confident in his decision to leave Foster in charge at the base.

“You can summarize it when I check in, otherwise don’t call unless it’s an emergency.”

“Understood, have a safe flight sir.”

Straker walked out of the office leaving a bemused Paul Foster standing there.

Ginny and Nina sat at a table in the leisure sphere, engaged in quiet conversation. It was the middle of the low watch and they had the room to themselves.

“I knew something was up. That must have been embarrassing,” said Nina. “You’re having a passionate dream about someone, and then they call you out of the blue.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Ginny. “Nina, I have to be honest. I’ve had this dream before, and I always seem to wake up just as it’s getting to the good part. What’s weird, is this time, it seemed so real. I’ve never been kissed like that, not even by my ex-husband.”

“You’re lucky; I never get to have those kinds of dreams. I’m jealous.”

Nina looked genuinely hurt at first, until her grin gave her away. The two women started laughing uncontrollably.

“Remember what you said to me about Ed not calling me by name?” asked Ginny, redirecting the subject.

“Yeah, I do. Why? Are you having second thoughts about what I said?”

“I never saw it before tonight, but when he said thank you, I’m certain that he wanted to call me Virginia. This time I could see it in his eyes. I don’t think he’s ever looked at me like that before. I mean, it was same way he looked at me in my dream.”

Virginia paused and shook her head, “You know, I’m probably just getting my hopes up and I’m going to end up making a fool of myself.”

“Maybe not, Ginny, think about this for a minute; you had just been awakened from a very intimate dream. Maybe you just saw him in a different light. He’s called you at least twice a day since you arrived.”

“Hardly for social reasons, Nina,” Virginia retorted.

“You have to admit; at least two of his calls were not what you would consider urgent.”

“I didn’t think anyone else had noticed,” Ginny said pensively.

“You trained me too well, Ginny. I don’t miss much. Besides, Ed Straker never calls up here unless something significant is going on. Granted that the two of you are working closely together on a project of extreme importance, but that alone doesn’t explain his behavior, and I know for a fact that he’s not watching over you. If you ask me, he misses you.”

“I don’t know, Nina...”

“Do you want to find out once and for all?” she asked.

“How?”

“Commander Straker told you that he’s going to pick you up from the airport when you’re finished up here, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“What did you bring for civilian clothes this trip?”

“We’ll there is the cream colored...”

“You mean the getup you had on when you arrived? No, that won’t do at all. What else?”

“I did bring one other outfit. I bought it the night before I came up here and I only brought it with me to try on...”

“Let me see,” said Nina.

The two women got up and went to Ginny’s quarters and she opened her closet to retrieve the outfit, a purple silk blouse with a matching set of slacks. As accessories she had a wide black belt to cinch the outfit in at the middle and a purple scarf with black accents.

“Yes,” said Nina. “*That* will definitely turn his head.”

“Nina, we’re talking about Ed Straker here,” Virginia said, dismissively. “Do you know how many young beautiful actresses he see’s every day? It doesn’t matter how scantily clad they are, he doesn’t give them a second look. I’m beginning to think the Commander is oblivious to female beauty.”

Nina shook her head, “He’s still a man, and no man is completely oblivious to the opposite sex. Straker is better at hiding it than most. Virginia let’s face it. Ed Straker is an intellectual and any woman that has any hope of being with him is going to have to meet him at least somewhat on that level. Most of those actresses have absolutely nothing between their ears so they aren’t even on his radar screen. On the other hand, you are brilliant, kind, and very independent. That’s a big plus for someone with his responsibilities. He wouldn’t want to have to

hold his life partner's hand. Believe me, he *will* notice you.”

“Nina, what do you really think, I mean just think of the problems this could cause.”

Romantic relationships were allowed within the organization within certain parameters, one aspect being no more than one step of separation in rank. Direct chain of command relationships were discouraged as well, although they were handled on a case by case basis. But a relationship with the SHADO C in C was uncharted territory.

“You’ll cross that bridge when you get to it. You may end up having to take reassignment if the two of you were to get together. I told you before, I think Ed is interested, but he’s still sitting on the fence about it. You need to make yourself irresistible.”

“And just how do I do that?” asked Ginny, very skeptically.

“Well for one thing, you need to quit hiding some of those curves that you’ve been blessed with. That outfit is a good start, it’s stylish and sexy, yet it still leaves something to the imagination.”

“Are you sure about this...”

“When you leave for Earth, in a couple of weeks, you’re going home wearing this. Trust me, you’ll knock him dead. Come on, try it on and make sure it fits.”

Chapter 3:

The operators of the Logan SHADAIR terminal were nothing, if not efficient. When Seagull X-ray taxied to the gate, security had a car waiting for him. As he walked down the ramp, the crew had offloaded his bags and placed them in the trunk of the waiting vehicle.

“You’re all set, Commander,” said the crew chief as he handed him the keys.

“Thank you, Lieutenant...Crossfield? Isn’t it?”

The big man smiled, “Yes sir, welcome home.”

Straker prided himself in his ability to never forget a face and it was a skill that served him well. *It’s also good for morale*, he thought.

The Straker residence was located in Westwood, Massachusetts, a quiet rural community, located about fifteen miles southwest of the city. As Ed drove through the Sumner Tunnel, he decided to stay on the Mass Pike and drive down Rte. 128 as he knew the traffic on the southeast expressway would be horrendous this late in the afternoon. It took him a little over an hour before he pulled into the driveway of the well kept home.

Ed was surprised as he had half expected the place to be in disrepair, due to his father’s affliction, but to his pleasure, that was not the

case. The driveway had been cleared of snow, and all the walkways had been shoveled. Ed knew that it had snowed the night before so this was being done on a regular basis, so it would seem.

As he got out of the car, a familiar voice called out, “Hey Ed! Ed Straker!”

He looked across the street and replied, “Hello Tom.”

Straker walked out to meet his neighbor at the end of the driveway. “Tony said you were coming home. It’s good to see you again,” said Tom Reynolds, as he shook Ed’s hand.

Tom Reynolds and his wife had been friends of the Straker family for years. Reynolds was only a few years older than Ed and the young couple had moved in a few months before Ed left for the service. Ed’s younger sister Barbara had become close to Mrs. Reynolds and they often went shopping together.

“How’s Tina,” asked Ed.

“Just as mean and miserable as ever. A real ball and chain,” Tom answered.

Ed knew better, he had seen Tom and his wife interact. It was a relationship that fairy tales were made of.

“That’s only because of who she has to put up with,” Straker retorted. “I always said she was too good for you.”

“You’re probably right about that one Eddie,” Tom paused as he suddenly grew serious. “Ed, I’m sorry to hear about your Dad.”

“I just found out this morning, Tom.”

“And you’re here already? You must have taken a Concorde. Yeah, he hasn’t been looking well the past few weeks. You know your sister is coming home, right?”

“She’ll be in tomorrow evening; I have to go pick her up...”

“Why don’t you let Tina and I go get her, it will give you and your father a chance to set some things straight.”

“I don’t think...”

“Listen to me, Eddie, I’ve known you and your family for years, and I know the situation between you and your father. He spent quite a few years in the bottle and I know you blame him for your mother’s death, but his alcoholism had nothing to do with it.”

Ed was silent for a moment as he considered a prospect he had never thought remotely possible.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“It’s really not my place to tell you that, Eddie. Talk to your father. Don’t make the same mistake that I did. Trust me on this one, okay?”

Ed nodded and changed the subject, “I hope you and Tina will stop in before I have to go back to England.”

“You bet,” he replied. “Maybe we can all get together tomorrow night after we pickup Barbara. Hell, you and I can get a chess game going, we’ll see if you can beat me now.”

That brought a smile to Ed’s face as he had never been able to beat Reynolds at chess. But that was a long time ago and Ed had polished his game significantly throughout the years.

When Tom had left, Ed grabbed his bags and started up the walkway. At the door stood Tony Straker, watching his son come up the stairs.

“Hello Dad,” said Ed, as he stepped onto the porch.

The alien spacecraft approached the planet at a speed faster than had ever been attempted before. The onboard computer system was controlling both the navigation and propulsion

systems as the precision maneuver could only be handled by a machine.

At the predetermined time, the computer began the deceleration process and the craft appeared over the waters of Loch Ness. It quickly settled into the water and disappeared from view. The surrounding terrain had shielded the UFO from both civilian and military radar systems.

On Moonbase, Virginia studied the raw unprocessed output of the tracking sensors, comparing them to the output of the new tracking algorithm. With Professor Reinhardt's help, she was able to decipher most of the paper that Albert Einstein had written over forty years earlier. Armed with that information, she had modified the FTL tracking sensors to detect objects moving at over twenty times the speed of light.

Ten minutes ago she had detected a trace on the course display. It had not approached the

moon, instead heading for Earth. But the object, whatever it was, was not picked up by ground based radar. Without verification, she had no way of knowing if the trace was a real contact, or a sensor ghost.

“Any luck, Ginny?” asked Nina as she walked into the control sphere.

“I’m afraid not. Earth radar never picked anything up, so I can’t verify that this was even a valid trace.”

“You need a break?”

“No, I’m going to run some more simulations and see if I can fine tune this a bit.”

“In that case, how about some coffee? I still have the machine you gave me last year.”

“I’d love a cup. Thanks Nina.”

At the kitchen table, Ed sat across from his father. Other than some minor pleasantries, the

two men had said very little. He had to force his responses not to be short.

“All right, Ed, let’s put it all out on the table. I know you have things you want to say to me, so go ahead and say what you need to say so we can move on.”

Ed looked at his father with haunted eyes, “I have just one question, why?”

“Why did I start drinking? In a nutshell, I lost it son. When I learned about your mother’s condition, I couldn’t deal...”

“What do you mean by her condition? She died of a stroke.”

“Yes, that’s true, but she would have died anyway,” said Tony Straker in a wistful voice.

“Your mother had cancer son. It was inoperable and untreatable. She had, at the most a year to live.”

Ed’s face dropped with the revelation. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me Dad?” he asked no longer

holding himself in check. “Did Barbara know about this?”

“Now just a minute, Ed, your mother insisted that I not tell you kids. She didn’t want anyone putting their lives on hold because of her. I think she wanted to wait until she was almost out of time. The stroke was unexpected.”

“Damn it, Dad, you should have told us,” Ed said as he stood up to pace the kitchen. “Of all the times to start drinking, why did it have to be then? Just when Mom needed you the most.”

“Edward, for once in your life just listen,” ordered the elder Straker. Although he had been retired for over fifteen years, and was sick himself, he still had not lost his command voice.

Ed forced himself to calm down. Though he was angry with his father, he still had a measure of respect for him.

“Son, I loved your mother more than you will ever know. I couldn’t deal with the reality of

being here without her. I started drinking the day I found out she was dying. The day she died, the best part of me went with her. I spent four more years in the bottle before I was able to pull myself back together. I wanted to die, Ed. I wanted to be with her. If it wasn't for Tina and Tom next door, I probably would be dead now."

"Dad, we should have talked about this sooner, maybe I..."

"I tried a few years ago, but you had just lost your son in that terrible accident, and you had no use for me right then. I don't blame you. You know, Ed, one of the twelve steps involves, making amends, but only if doing so will cause no more harm. You weren't ready then."

"Maybe I was wrong as well, Dad," said Ed.

Tony looked out the window seeming to ponder something. He turned his attention back to his son.

“So you finally got sick of working for old lead bottom Henderson?”

Ed had to stifle a laugh, having never heard that moniker used to describe the General.

“You’d be surprised the things I can tell you about him,” said Tony.

This could be interesting, thought a very surprised Ed Straker.

“I didn’t know that you had met Henderson.”

“I never did, but his reputation was well known throughout the service. He was a real hard ass. But he also knew how to get things done.”

The elder Straker paused again, and Ed could see him still considering something as he stared into space. He decided to wait it out and a few minutes later his father broke the silence.

“Your mother’s cancer wasn’t the only thing that drove me into the bottle, Ed.”

“Go on.”

“Edward, what I’m about to tell you is still classified, hell you may even know some of it.”

Ed felt an icy ball from in his stomach, as he thought, *Is it possible that Dad knew what I was doing all along?*

“You are familiar with *Project Blue Book*?”

“Of course, the group’s final report indicated that UFOs were all explainable natural phenomena, or conventional aircraft. They were no threat to national security and there was no evidence to suggest that the sightings had an extraterrestrial origin. The investigation was terminated in December of 1969.”

“What would you say if I told you that the Condon Report was an elaborate ruse, designed to lure the general public into a false sense of security?”

Ed was well aware of the disinformation campaign that both the British and American governments had launched to clarify UFO

sightings as explainable things, but he had no idea that his father was involved.

“I think I’d like to hear more,” he asked, quietly.

“Ed, there were two groups in the US Army Air Corps that dealt with UFOs. My group, under General Cabell, was to deal with the reports that could easily be cast aside as explainable phenomenon. The second group originally under *Project Sign*, later renamed to *Angel Project*, under then Major General Henderson.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Dad, Henderson was in Germany, during and after World War Two, and when Korea broke out, he was assigned over there. He returned to Germany after the Korean conflict and didn’t get reassigned to the States until 1965.”

“That’s right, he was. Now why do you think that is?”

“He was running Ramstein Air Base during the consolidation with Landstuhl in 1957.”

“That’s the official story; the truth is a bit more chilling. During the war I was assigned to a fighter squadron supporting the Eight Air Force bombers. The Americans and the Brits had just started equipping the P-51 Mustang with the British made Merlin engine, and we now had a fighter that could escort the bombers deep into Germany. Late in the war, the fighters would be cut free from the bombers to seek out and destroy Luftwaffe fighters. Henderson, who was by then a colonel, led the bomber group that I flew escort for. As I said, I never met Henderson but I did meet some of the pilots in his group.”

“I don’t get it, Dad. What does all this have to do with *Blue Book*?”

“I’m getting there, this is complicated. Do you remember the Dresden Raid?”

“I do, it was one of the most controversial attacks made by the allies in the entire war.”

“Yeah, it was, but it was also the event that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that we had some unwelcomed off world visitors.”

Ed considered this, in light of the information that Henderson had given him, two weeks ago. During the war, Germany had leaped ahead with technology that was years beyond any of the allied powers. *Is it possible that they were collaborating with the aliens?*

Tony Straker continued, “On the way back from the raid, I had been separated from the rest of my fighter group, and I ran across the first wave of B-17s that were heading back to England. There were about twenty aircraft in the group so I formed up with them. By this point in the war, the Luftwaffe was flying ME-262 jet fighters so the bomber pilots were glad to have me along for the ride. Just before we left enemy airspace, I saw an object approach from the cloud layer above, it was like nothing I have ever seen. The craft was cone shaped and it seemed to be

spinning on its central axis. Bobby Lake was flying point; the poor bastard never had a chance. The unidentified craft fired some type of energy weapon and his plane exploded in midair. I turned hard to the left and dove just missing being hit myself. By the time I turned around to attack, three more aircraft had been destroyed and the unknown craft had retreated. I never saw anything move so fast.”

Ed knew that there had been people that had claimed to have seen UFOs before the incident in 1969, that prompted the formation of SHADO. But most of these sightings were explainable things, the craft that his father had seen, could have only been a genuine UFO, and if this was the case, the aliens had been on Earth for much longer than was previously known.

“I assume, that you were debriefed when you landed,” Ed said, in a voice just above a whisper.

“They flew in some four-star from Washington, I don’t even remember his name. The entire flight was questioned, and told never to discuss this with anyone, ever. Anyone violating the order would be summarily Court-Martialed and shot. They weren’t kidding around either, one of the guys in the group started running his mouth. To this day I don’t know what happened to him.”

Ed was pale as he realized that history as he knew it, might just be a lie.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“There’s more. After the war, the allies divided up the spoils, so to speak. German technology, scientists, aircraft, tanks, anything that might prove useful in a military sense. Most of what we found was later made public, but some of the things that the Third Reich was working on have never been seen outside of a government lab. We still don’t know how much of this technology fell into Soviet hands. Ed, I’m

talking about radically advanced propulsion systems, aircraft that seem to defy the laws of aerodynamics and physics, and so much more.”

“How do you know about all this?”

“After the surrender, it was decided to move as much of the stuff as we could to the United States for study. Many of the men who had witnessed the attack on the Dresden group were reassigned to Airlift Command. Ed, I saw some of this stuff up close and personal.”

“Are you telling me that this technology all went to Area 51?”

“Area 51 was only one of several places where this equipment was studied. The antigravity drive and the bell craft went to a facility somewhere in Pennsylvania, the radar systems went to California, the power systems went to Los Alamos, and some of the other technology ended up at Wright-Patterson.”

Tony Straker paused for a moment, allowing Ed to consider everything he had been told.

“After the equipment and materials had been brought over here, our group was split up. We were again told that all of this was considered Top Secret, and that National Command Authority had authorized the use of extreme prejudice to silence anyone who did not keep their mouth shut. Some of us went to *Project Sign* and the rest of us ended up on *Project Grudge*, which later became *Blue Book*. In order to sell a lie, you need to surround it with a little truth. That’s what *Blue Book* was all about. It succeeded where *Grudge* had failed.”

Ed Straker sat there, stunned by what he had just been told. His world had just been turned on its ear.

Chapter 4:

Doug Jackson found himself in a place of astonishment, not something he was used to. During his stint as the IAC military liaison, a position he held since before the formation of SHADO, he already knew much of what Straker had just told him, but finding out that Straker's father was involved surprised him. Apparently, much of the information, or more precisely who knew about it, had been compartmentalized.

“Were you surprised to learn that these events were factual, Commander?”

“More like shocked, Doctor Jackson. When Henderson confirmed all of this, last week, I was at a loss for words. Some of this information could have been useful, had I been aware of it earlier. And I still don't understand why the General hid the fact that he knew Virginia and her family.”

“I noticed that you didn't react when your father mention Bob Lake,” Jackson added.

“At the time, I didn’t realize Dad knew her father. It wasn’t until Virginia told me that her father flew with Henderson, that I made the connection. As you can well imagine I was quite shaken by some of what he told me.”

“I have a theory,” began Jackson. “Henderson knew that if you became aware of the shared history, between your three families, you would find out things that he was under orders to keep from you.”

Jackson stood and walked over to the coffee pot and poured two cups. He walked back and handed one to his boss.

“You’re not going to get on me about my coffee intake?” Straker asked, somewhat bemused.

“Under the circumstances, Commander, I think you could use it right now,” he said as he took his place across from Straker.

Picking up his notepad, Jackson continued, “There were at least two attacks while you were in the States, correct?”

“Yes, Virginia and Paul handled them both very well and I didn’t find out until after the fact,” he said, with a hint of disapproval.

“All the more reason for you to take some of your allotted time off, you’ve trained your command staff well, and it is no longer necessary for you to be here every waking moment. This leads to my next concern.”

“Go on,” said Straker.

“If you and Colonel Lake are allowed to continue your relationship, you realize that it will require both of you to spend time nurturing that association.”

By the look on Ed’s face Jackson registered the confusion and went on to clarify, “One of the concerns put forth by the IAC is how the two of you would handle the demands of an intimate

relationship in the face of your duties, and what would be the ramifications if the two of you parted ways? By your own admission, reassignment is not an option, so the two of you would still be required to work together. Have you considered this carefully, Commander?”

Jackson watched his boss meticulously as he answered the very difficult question.

“When Virginia told me that she loved me, the two of us made a promise. Regardless of what happens, or where this relationship goes, we would always remain friends. You see, Doctor, one of the reasons that I waited so long to pursue this, is I consider Virginia to be a close friend. I was afraid to put our friendship in jeopardy. Her friendship means as much to me as...” he paused, seeming to consider his words. “We gave each other our solemn word. Truth be told, I think our close friendship will be the means that will get us through the hard times.”

Jackson was impressed, but he gave no indication of the fact. It was evident to him that both of these people had thoroughly considered the consequences of their actions.

Contrary to popular belief, Jackson was not a vicious man but the responsibilities of his position often required actions that would be considered callous and cruel. The SHADO psychiatrist had no wish to cause these two individuals pain or heartbreak, in fact he had a unique understanding of the Commander's dilemma. Isolated from his peers by protocol and unable to form a lasting bond with outsiders, Straker seemed to be a man doomed to loneliness and isolation. It was truly sad that his duty may require just that.

He flipped his note pad to a new page and looked up at Straker.

“Commander, let's continue with what happened the day of the first attack.”

“Red alert, interceptors, immediate launch,” Colonel Lake said into the mic as she brought the base to full alert.

The UFOs had appeared on radar, less than thirty miles from the base, by far the closest approach yet, but the tracking modifications had given them enough warning that an attack was pending. The interceptor crews were already on the pads and warned up when the track was confirmed by radar.

“Interceptor leader, lock on to bearing two five three.”

“Roger, Colonel,” said Lt. Andrew Conroy.

Virginia and Nina watched the scope as the interceptors closed with the targets.

“This is too close, Ginny, without the modifications, we wouldn’t have had time to launch,” she said.

Lake glanced at her friend, seeing her own concern mirrored in Nina’s eyes.

“Leader to group, they’re making a run for it! Break formation!”

The three interceptors each selected one of the three targets and closed to attack.

“Set weapons for minimum yield, we don’t want to take out the base,” said Conroy.

Both of the other pilots set their weapons accordingly and signaled their readiness. As they reached the launch point, Conroy counted down the seconds.

“Missile launch in five...four...three...two...one...fire!”

Each pilot released his weapon and the missiles rapidly closed the distance as the three interceptors peeled off. Their aim was true and the three UFOs were obliterated by the explosions.

“Interceptor leader to Moonbase, splash three, Colonel!”

“Roger one, good shooting. Return to base.”

“Okay boys, you heard the lady. Let’s go home.”

“That *was* too close, Nina. Did we just get lucky, or what?”

“Maybe they’ll take the hint,” replied Nina.

Ginny shook her head, remembering a conversation with Ed almost a year ago. “Somehow I don’t think they are quite with us done yet. Let’s keep the base on full alert for now. I have a feeling that they are going to try this again.”

The man and woman moved in stealth, hidden amongst the rubble that was once Harlington-Straker Studios. It was also once home to Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization, a fact known to a very small fraction of the planet’s once teeming population of humans.

The outbreak of war, and the subsequent alien invasion, had culled the population to a fraction of what it once was. The pale blonde man looked over the carnage in despair. Underneath the dirt, his own body was covered in bruises and scars from the treatment in the detention camp, run by the collaborators. He looked at the woman next to him; her soiled, torn and tattered clothing reflected his own. Her once beautiful shoulder length ash-blonde hair was now a tattered and matted mess, and her blue grey eyes were haunted by the shame of violation, and the grief of great personal loss.

The two of them crouched when they spotted an alien patrol, but they soon found themselves running for their lives as the patrol opened fire on them. As they crested the hill, the woman cried out as she was hit by a round in the back. The man turned and caught her as she fell. Hidden in an alcove he cradled her now dying form as she looked up at him. Through all the

pain and anguish, he saw her undying love, as her spirit slipped the bonds of her earthly life...

“Virginia...no...please don’t go...VIRGINIA!”

Ed bolted up in a cold sweat from the nightmare and tried to get his bearings, reeling in his still raw emotions.

The phone was ringing on the nightstand and he quickly answered it.

“Straker residence.”

“Ed, it’s Paul.”

“Paul...what’s wrong?” he asked, still somewhat disorientated.

“We had visitors, again. They came much closer this time.”

“How long ago?”

“About thirty minutes.”

“Virginia...” he said without thinking.

“She, and her coworkers, handled the problem. Our guests were assigned to stage D.”

Straker understood the hidden message, the aliens had been destroyed.

“All right, Paul, I’ll try to check in later, good night.”

“Good night, Ed.”

He hung up the phone and lay back down, thinking about the attack. The closest place he could find a secure line would be Hanscom Air Force Base, about fifteen miles north of his home. Ed looked at the clock; it was almost four thirty in the morning. He decided to get up, knowing that he wasn’t going to get back to sleep anyway. He walked into the bathroom and splashed water on his face as he remembered the details of the dream. The feelings that he had felt for Virginia, in the very vivid dream, went well beyond friendship. By the haunted look in her eyes he knew that they had shared a

terrible personal loss, but he couldn't remember what it was.

Ed showered and dressed, donning his USAF uniform. Between that and his high level SHADO clearance, he would be granted unfettered access to the base.

When he went down stairs, Ed was surprised to see his father already up, making breakfast.

“Where are we off to this morning?”

“I have to drive up to Hanscom, I promised an old friend I would stop in while I was here.”

“I see, well tell Charlie Johnson I said hello, and that he still owes me that lobster dinner. Do you have time for breakfast and coffee? It's just about ready.”

Ed was hungry and still somewhat groggy. A cup of coffee would do him good.

“Yeah, I think so.”

Tony Straker poured his son a cup and set a plate of cinnamon French toast and scrambled eggs in front of him.

“The syrup is on the table,” the elder Straker said.

“Thanks Dad.”

Ed was quite at home in the kitchen, a skill he had learned from his father and he was pleased to see that his father had not lost his skill as a culinary artist.

“So tell me son,” said Tony as he sat down. “Who is Virginia?”

“Why do you ask?” Ed said, cagily.

“I heard you yell out the name just before the phone rang.”

Ed paused for a moment before he answered his father’s question.

“Virginia is a colleague and a friend.”

“Yeah, a friend, friend, or a girlfriend?” asked his father.

“It’s platonic, Dad.”

Tony Straker looked unconvinced as he absently stirred his coffee.

“From the way you called her name I’d say you feel a lot more than that, but you probably don’t want to talk about it.”

“That would be about right,” agreed Ed, hoping that his father would drop the subject.

The elder Straker was not so easily dissuaded being the source of Ed’s own stubbornness.

“So, are you going to just stay alone for the rest of your life? You’ve been divorced, what, ten years now? Don’t you think it’s time to move on?”

“Dad, I really don’t want to...”

“You really are stubborn, you know that? Just like your mother and just like me. The apple never falls far from the tree, does it?”

“I suppose not.”

Tony picked up a tabloid magazine and handed it to Ed. He had it open to an article about the studio.

“So is that her?” he asked pointing to a picture of Ed getting into a car with a blonde woman.

Ed examined the picture and sighed in frustration, “Damn paparazzi.”

“I take that as a yes. Welcome to the life of a film studio executive. Anyway I read her bio and I was surprised to see that she’s in her late thirties, she looks ten years younger. She dresses very conservative for an associate producer and that’s probably not a bad thing. So what the hell are you waiting for, an engraved invitation?”

“It’s not that simple, she works for me Dad.”

“You know as well as I do the movie industry doesn’t have that kind of taboos. Let me guess, she’s dumb as a rock.”

Ed chocked on his food with that. He washed it down with a quick swing of orange juice before answering his father.

“Hardly, Dad, in fact she is probably the most brilliant woman I know. She holds a doctorate in physics, and she is chief technical advisor for most of our science fiction productions.”

“According to her bio, she plays classical piano as well as having an interest in flying. I see some common ground here, Ed,” said Tony.

“I told you, we’re friends. Look Dad, I’m not blind. I can see how attractive she is, but our relationship just isn’t that way.”

“Ed, I’m going to say one more thing and then I’m going to shut up. Your mother and I had a lot of plans for our retirement, we were going to travel and do some of the things that we

couldn't do while we were raising you and your sister. And then your mother got sick. If I've learned anything, I've learned this. Life is not a dress rehearsal. Learn to live in the moment; because once the moments are gone, they're gone forever."

An eerie silence fell in the room as Ed considered his father's words.

"Well, Dad, I'd better get moving, I should be back before noon."

"All right, Ed, watch the traffic up on 128, they still use the breakdown lane during rush hour. And don't forget to give Charlie my message."

"I will, Dad. See you later."

As Ed walked out the door his father looked down at the article noticing how much Virginia Lake looked like Bobby Lake's wife, Lynn.

Nah, it couldn't be...

“Colonel Lake, call for you from Earth. Audio only.”

Virginia put aside the book she was reading and switched on the intercom.

“Thank you Carol, patch it through please.”

“Colonel Lake, I understand that you had some excitement,” said the Commander’s voice. “I’m glad to see that you’re still in one piece.”

“That makes two of us, Commander. It was touch and go for a while. I do have some good news. The upgrades to the tracking system seem to work. It doesn’t give us much lead time but it certainly is better than the alternative.”

“I agree. I understand that Moonbase is still on full alert.”

“Yes sir. At maximum range we only have about ten minutes of lead time before the UFO drops to sublight. As I said it’s not much but it’s a start.”

“When will you be heading back to Earth?”

“I still have to upload the new detection routines into SID. I can do that easier from up here. Unless you need me back there for a reason?” she asked.

Virginia noticed a slight pause.

“No, that will be fine. How long will it take to upgrade the entire system?”

“I’m planning on another few days to perform the necessary modifications and I’d like to spend at least a week testing it.”

“It looks like I’ll be home before you then,” he said.

Virginia decided to go out on a limb, “So, can I still expect you to pick me up at the airport?” she asked, in a slightly flirtatious voice.

“Colonel Lake, it would be ungentlemanly to leave a lady stranded. I’ll see you in about a week...”

“Ed, how’s your father doing?” she asked before he closed the connection.

“He’s...not well. He’s going in for surgery in a few days, but Doctor Cartwright thinks this will only postpone the inevitable.”

“I’m sorry...,” she said, as her voice trailed off. Virginia remembered seeing him in pain at his son’s funeral and she had to struggle to keep from tearing.

“Take care...and thank you.”

Ginny closed the connection and she sat back still fighting back tears. *I hope he was able to set things right with his father...*

Chapter 5:

Colonel Foster almost ran into Geoff Blake as the two of them headed for the science lab at HQ.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Paul,” said Blake, as he sidestepped to avoid hitting Foster.

“Did Joe call you as well?”

Blake nodded his head as he answered, “He did, and he sounded quite ecstatic.”

The two men continued to the lab at a less urgent pace. When they arrived Lt. Colonel Joe Kelly was engrossed in an experiment.

“What’s going on, Joe?” asked Foster.

“Ah, Paul, Geoff, you’re here. Have a seat, gentlemen.” Kelly waited for them to sit before he continued.

“Two months ago, Skydiver located a dome off the coast of western England. As I remember, it was you, Colonel Foster, who accompanied the Commander on a survey of its interior.”

“That’s right, Ed barely got out of there alive. The aliens had created duplicates of all SHADO personnel. The Commander, Colonel Lake, me; they were going to use them to order a complete

stand down of all SHADO stations, while launching a mass attack.”

“Skydiver destroyed that dome, did it not?” asked Blake.

“Yes, it did,” answered Kelly. “Here’s my point, while in the dome both the Commander and Colonel Foster had taken samples of the atmosphere. With the exception of argon, the analysis came back to match the element composition that you would find dissolved in seawater.”

“Go on,” said Foster.

“Okay, we all know that the Earth’s atmosphere is comprised of seventy-eight percent nitrogen, twenty-one percent oxygen, and point nine-three percent argon. The remaining point one percent contains just about everything else. Now seawater is slightly different sixty-three percent nitrogen, thirty-four percent oxygen, one point six percent argon, and one point four

percent carbon dioxide. What do you notice about this?”

Foster shrugged, “There is more oxygen in the water, much more carbon dioxide, more argon.”

“And less nitrogen,” added Blake.

“That’s correct,” said Kelly, as he flipped on the screen behind him. “We know that the alien craft can survive much longer underwater than they can in the atmosphere, maybe indefinitely, so it would make sense that the atmosphere in the dome would be regulated as not be harmful to the alien craft. At first we thought that the reduced level of nitrogen was the key, so we took a piece of alien hull that we recovered from the crash site off of Ireland a few years ago. We have numerous samples, all preserved in seawater.”

“This sample here,” he continued, referring to the picture, “was subjected to one-hundred percent nitrogen at one atmosphere. As you can see nothing happened. We achieved the same

result each time for every other gas until we tried an argon mixture. Watch carefully.”

The three men watched the video showing the small piece of alien metal in the glass vacuum chamber. The readouts below the chamber showed the composition of the two gases in percentage of volume. As soon as the argon content reached two percent, the piece of metal flared up and disintegrated.

“Interesting,” said Blake. “But that was almost pure nitrogen with just a small percentage of argon.”

“That’s right, Geoff. The results vary somewhat depending on the second gas, but the important part here is exposure to the argon is what causes the alien craft to decompose in our atmosphere.” Kelly said.

“Wait a second Joe,” interjected Paul. “There is almost two times the amount of argon, in seawater. Why does it not have the same effect?”

“You noticed that, Paul,” said Kelly, with a grin. “That’s why I called you both down here. The chemical composition of water, that’s hydrogen two parts oxygen, seems to form a barrier that prevents the argon from coming into contact with the alien hull. Now we should be able to synthesize a coating that will bond to the exterior of the alien craft preventing decomposition. Do you think that might be useful in the process of salvaging an alien spacecraft?”

“Hell yeah it would,” said Paul, very excited now. “Wait until Straker hears about this. He might even give three hips and a hooray.”

Driving down Rte. 128, Ed Straker was relieved to learn that there had been no loss of life and that Moonbase had not been damaged in the attack. Although he was concerned for all the occupants of the base, his mind kept drifting back to Virginia Lake. The dream that had

awakened him had left him with disturbing thoughts about the future, and uncertainty as to where his friendship with Virginia was heading.

In his dream, Ed had felt a pain in his heart that was physical as Virginia died in his arms. To think of it now, still caused him great discomfort, and he tried to put his feelings in perspective. He found that he could not, and the conversation that he had with his father did not help matters. *Dad always did have a way of cutting through the bullshit.*

For the first time, Ed contemplated the complexities that a relationship with her could create. He had little doubt that the pairing would draw the scrutiny of the IAC, especially with her as acting executive officer. And there was his friendship with her, a friendship that he truly valued. He had to wonder if they could still maintain that friendship should a romantic relationship fail. And there was the loneliness that had become so much a part of him. Would

he be able to adjust to a life that involved someone else?

Ed thought of his first wife, Mary, and the circumstances that had destroyed their marriage. The relationship had been a whirlwind romance, but Ed believed that he and Mary would have stayed together, had it not been for SHADO's demands on him and his family. In fairness to Mary, she had no idea what she had gotten herself in for when she married him. They had both been victims of circumstance. Ed took some comfort in knowing that he and Virginia, were they to become an item, would not have to deal with that particular issue.

Straker switched lanes to take his exit and to his chagrin some drivers were still using the breakdown lane for normal travel even though it was well after ten in the morning. Ten minutes later he was pulling into the driveway and he killed the engine.

Tom and Tina were going to pick up Barbara later this afternoon, and Ed had not seen his sister since she and her ex-husband had visited him in England a couple years ago. He had missed her and was looking forward to seeing her again.

Ed's sister was almost ten years younger than he was, and she had followed the family military tradition. But unlike her older brother, who studied astrophysics, she had pursued a career in the medical arts having just completed her residency. Following her divorce, she had accepted a transfer from Luke AFB outside of Phoenix to Dreamland, better known as Area 51.

When Ed walked into the house, his father looked up from his paper, "Did you see Charlie Johnson?"

"I did," said Ed. "It would have been nice if you told me he had been promoted. It's considered

poor form to ask for the General by first name. By the way, the General sends his regards.”

“I’ll take any chance to tweak him up that I can get, it’s not like I have a lot of time left...”

“Dad, please...”

“Edward, let’s not dance around this. In a few days, they are going to put me under the knife, and we both know that I’m not coming out alive.”

The elder Straker stood up and walked out of the room, and Ed looked out the window, not having shed a tear since John’s funeral. For the first time in over three years, Ed wept.

Doug Jackson would not have believed it if he had not seen it himself, he quickly excused himself and walked into the outer office and rummaged on his assistant’s desk for a pen. By the time he had returned, the Commander had composed himself.

“It was at that point that you realized the reality that your father was dying, from some of what you have told me I sense that you were reevaluating several aspects of your life.”

“Yes,” said Straker, his voice still colored in emotion.

Jackson made some notes as he waited for the Commander to elaborate. When Straker remained silent, the SHADO psychiatrist pressed on.

“This was also the point where you, for the first time, seriously considered a relationship with Virginia Lake, is this not true, Commander?”

“Yes.”

Jackson opened one of the reports he was holding in his hand. He looked up at Straker as he read from the report.

“Virginia had been fatally shot in the back, and she died as I held her in my arms...Commander,

can you describe exactly what you were feeling at that point?”

“I...I felt like I had lost someone very close.”

“A friend?” asked Jackson.

“She was more than that...much more.”

“In your dream,” began Jackson, “you describe the destruction of both the film studio and SHADO HQ. Do you remember any other details about how this all came to pass?”

“Not really, I only remember that war had broken out, and the aliens had taken advantage of the conflict. It was only a dream.”

“Yes Commander,” said Jackson. “A dream by a person who has one of the highest ESP ratings in the organization, as well as a medical history of having experienced precognition in the past. You remember the test that we ran on all SHADO personnel a couple of years ago?”

“I do,” said Ed. “But what does that have to with this dream?”

“You are one of five people who scored significantly higher than average on the test. The other four were Craig Collins, Paul Foster, Ayshea Johnson, and Virginia Lake. You and Colonel Lake have the highest results. Tell me Commander, in the past year, have you ever been in a situation where you and Colonel Lake were able to anticipate each other’s actions?”

“Of course,” answered the Commander. “Virginia and I have worked very closely together for over a year. We know each other very well. I don’t think that there is anything more to it than that. The dream could have been brought on by my concern for Virginia’s safety. She was almost killed twice on Moonbase.”

“Perhaps,” said Jackson, pausing for a moment. “How old were you Commander? In the dream, that is.”

Straker looked up suddenly, as if he had realized something for the first time, “We were older; I was in my fifties...”

“Interesting.”

“Doctor Jackson, please tell me that you’re not giving this a lot of credence.”

“Precognitive dreams are a documented fact, Commander. We would both be foolish to ignore a premonition of the destruction of SHADO and the fall of Earth, would you not agree?”

“Of course, if I had other evidence to support this notion. But we have nothing else to go on. The only reason I filed that report is the regulations required it.”

Jackson made some notes and flipped to the next page of the report, “In your statement, you mentioned that both you and Colonel Lake had suffered a great shared personal loss. Was that loss related to SHADO, that is, your friends and colleagues, or was it something more personal?”

“It was much more personal, I don’t remember any of the details, only that it was something unique to both of us.”

“Have the two of you discussed marriage, and children?”

“We haven’t discussed children, but we have had one very serious conversation about marriage.”

Jackson was not surprised at that, as both Straker and Lake were traditionalists. They would both want to formalize their relationship. Ironically the union would pose little or no problem to their cover, in fact it was common for film studio executives, actors, producers, and directors to form romantic relationships with little or no regard to their position in the studio.

A military organization was another matter, although the multinational aspect of SHADO had a less parochial view than the US forces would. As a native of an eastern bloc country he

knew that husband and wife command teams were much more prevalent and accepted in the eastern bloc, than they would be in the western world.

Henderson had called Straker the organization's most vital piece of man power, an assessment that Jackson agreed with. Protecting that asset was a job that he took very seriously. Looking through his notes, he could make arguments for both sides of this coin.

“Commander, when we finish here, I may to need to see both you and Colonel Lake. There are things that one of you have mentioned, that the other did not and I'd like to get both of your reactions on these points.”

“I understand,” said Straker.

“Now, if you please, let's continue where you left off...”

Later that evening, the Reynolds stopped by, having picked up Ed's sister. Tony Straker had made dinner for the group and they all spent most of the evening catching up on old times. For Ed, the reunion was therapeutic and he couldn't remember when he had felt so relaxed.

Tom and Ed did manage to play the chess game and Ed beat him for the first time in his life. Reynolds made him promise to play a rematch before he left for England.

That evening the sky was clear and a full moon illuminated the snow covered landscape. The early spring storm that passed just before Ed came home, had dumped over a foot of snow in the greater Boston area, but a couple of warm days had reduced the ground cover to only a few inches. In some ways, Ed missed the New England weather, if you didn't like it, all you had to do was wait, or so the saying went.

In the backyard, Ed looked up at the moon, a place that had so much meaning to him, for

many different reasons. On July 20, 1969 a man had first set foot on that, as it was considered then, alien world, becoming the first of twelve astronauts to explore the lunar surface. Little did they know that less than a decade later, mankind would have a permanent base of operations. That base being the front line, in an interplanetary war that had up until then been a one-sided affair. Between twenty five and thirty five souls resided on that base at any one time, all of them his concern and responsibility, but tonight his mind was occupied with only one of them.

He found himself troubled by her absence, a fact he could no longer deny.

The sound of footsteps in the ice crusted snow drew his attention.

“Penny for your thoughts, Eddie,” said his sister, as she strolled up beside him.

“I’m just thinking, that’s all,” he said. “I thought you’d be asleep by now.”

Barbara Straker looked up at the moon following her older brother's gaze.

“When a man stares at the moon, he's usually doing it for one of two reasons. He's either planning to go there, or he's thinking about a woman. Since you are no longer in the astronaut corps, it has to be a woman.”

“You seem to forget, I studied astrophysics with two years invested in lunar research,” Ed countered.

“If you were doing research, you'd be up at Wallace Observatory looking through the sixteen inch scope. Care to try that again?”

Ed could never keep anything from his sister, she knew him too well, *just like someone else*. He remained silent hoping that she would drop the subject.

“Dad say's her name is Virginia,” she added.

“Dad has a big mouth. Besides, haven't we both learned our lesson by now?” Ed asked, before he

could catch himself. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

But Barbara was unperturbed. “It’s okay, Eddie. Believe me; I do know how you feel. George and I were married for three years. The first two were pretty good, but I’d never want to go through the last year ever again. It must have been the same with you and Mary.”

“Yes, the good times, well...they were great. But the bad times were pure hell, for both of us. That’s probably why I’ll never marry again.”

“My divorce became final six months ago. When it was all over, I felt just like you do now and I’d probably still feel that way if I didn’t talk to someone about it.”

“You mean go see a shrink?”

“No, not necessarily. I did go see a therapist, but it was my best friend who helped me the most. She had been through the same thing, and she could relate. And I trusted her. It’s like this, Ed,

we can wallow in our grief wondering what mistakes we made, or we can ask ourselves, what lesson was I supposed to learn from this? When I asked myself that question, I was able to put things in proper perspective.”

“So what do you do when it’s entirely your fault?” asked Ed, in a subdued voice.

“If that’s what you believe, then you learned the wrong lesson. It’s never entirely your fault. Marriage is a team effort, and there is no I in team.”

“So, you think you would ever remarry?”

“Right now, I’m still getting used to being single again, but if the right man comes along, yeah, I would. Just as long as it’s not the flirtatious Royal Marine colonel that runs the new installation. He’s nice, but I think he’s a tad bit old for me.”

“What new installation?” Ed asked, very curious. He was sure he knew who that Royal Marine colonel was.

“You know what we do there. Everything on the base is Top Secret. Well, this installation is on the other side of the airfield, and it’s classified well above anything that I’ve ever seen. Nobody in my section knows anything about it. There is a crazy rumor going around the base that we really do have flying saucers hidden there. I figure it’s just another black project. By the way, you’re still cleared, right?”

“Yeah, it helps to have people in high places.”

Barbara looked back at the moon before turning to her brother.

“Ed, take some advice from your little sister, ask this lady out. Dinner and a show, keep it light. Dad says that the two of you are good friends. In that case, take her out as a friend. Romantic feelings will ebb and flow, but friendship is something that endures. Had George and I been

friends as well as lovers, we might have been able to get through the rough times that killed our marriage.”

“I’ll think about it...”

“No...don’t think about it, do it. And I want a phone call with all the details. This bit of hearing from you once every six months is going to stop. This will give us something to talk about.”

“This could get complicated,” said Ed.

“Good, that means there’s chemistry there, and I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

Chapter 6:

“Have you told Ed about this, yet?” Virginia asked over the communications link to HQ.

On the screen, the image of Paul Foster shook his head.

“Not yet, I figured I would wait until he returns and give him the news then. Besides, that will give Joe Kelly a chance to finish the analysis of the water to metal bonding and possibly devise a formula to synthesize a protective coating.”

“I can’t believe it, Paul; we may actually get a chance to study an alien craft at length without having to worry about it disintegrating. Does Lt. Colonel Kelly think the coating would interfere with the operation of the propulsion system or the power core?” she asked.

“He doesn’t think so. Water seems to bond to the paddles to form a protective barrier yet it seems like it has no effect on the power system. Unfortunately the only way to test his theory is to get our hands on an alien ship. Still, I think this is a significant breakthrough and Ed will be ecstatic.”

Virginia nodded, “You have a talent for understatement. Did the search in Scotland turn up anything?”

“No, we surveyed the entire area that you calculated as a possible landing site, but we came up empty. The only other possibility would be the deep end of Loch Ness, but the high peat content makes an underwater search next to impossible. Have you had any other sightings, Ginny?”

“It’s been quiet since the last attack.”

“The calm before the storm,” agreed Paul. “How are things progressing with the upgrades?”

“I finished them yesterday afternoon, but I’d still like to verify functionality under actual operational conditions. And I still have another week worth of testing and calibration,” said Virginia. Changing the subject, she asked, “Paul, have you heard from Ed today?”

“He called around noon. His father went into surgery this morning,” he said quietly.

“Would you call me if you hear anything else? I don’t care how late it is.”

“Of course,” said Paul, looking somewhat surprised.

She closed the connection and stared at the blank screen as a feeling of worry came over her.

Ed and his sister were sitting in the waiting room when the doctor came to see them.

“Dr. Cartwright how is he,” asked Ed, as he stood to speak to the surgeon.

“Mr. Straker, your father is one very stubborn man. He made it through the surgery okay. We were able to remove the blockage, but the overall prognosis is still unchanged. The cancer has spread very rapidly through his body and all we have managed to do is buy a small reprieve. And now that the tissue has been exposed to air...it’s just a matter of time. The best that we can do now is to keep him comfortable.”

“When can we see him,” asked Barbara.

“We’ll be moving him out of recovery to his room in about twenty minutes, Dr. Straker. I understand that your father signed a DNR.”

Barbara Straker nodded in affirmation.

“Once he has been moved, you will be able to see him. In the mean time, why don’t the two of you grab something to eat? There is a cafeteria style restaurant on the first floor.”

Straker had skipped breakfast that morning and was starting to get hungry.

“All right, you have my pager number?” he asked.

“I do, Mr. Straker. I will call you right away if there is any change.”

Ed and his sister walked down the hall to the elevator and pushed the button for the first floor.

“I thought I was ready for this, Eddie,” said his sister, on the verge of tears.

“I don’t think we are ever ready for it.”

They stepped onto the elevator and the door closed. The pair had the car to themselves.

“Did you and Dad square things away, Ed?”

“Yes...I shouldn’t have waited this long...if only I hadn’t been so damn stubborn...”

“Don’t second guess yourself, and don’t blame yourself later,” she said. “We all make mistakes.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

The car stopped and the two of them got out on the first floor and made their way to the cafeteria. A short time later they were having lunch at a table overlooking the courtyard. The sun was shining brightly and the last of the snow was just about melted away.

“So, Dad showed me a picture of your lady friend this morning,” she said teasing him.

Ed shook his head, “You two don’t give up do you?”

“She’s beautiful Ed, what’s she like, in person.”

“Well, she’s brilliant...”

“I don’t mean that. What’s she like?”

Straker had to pause suddenly at a loss for words, “I...”

“Is she kind, is she flamboyant, is she shy...”

“Virginia is kind, although she is reserved around people that she doesn’t know very well, and it takes a while to get to know her. But once she befriends you, it’s for life.”

“I think I like her already. What does she like to do?” asked Barbara.

“I’m sorry?”

“Does she ski, ride horses, workout?”

“She hates exercise, that I do know,” said Ed, with a slight grin, remembering Virginia’s reaction to his question when he interviewed

her. “She enjoys flying small aircraft, she listens to classical music, and she’s a photographer. I think she mentioned once that she played the piano.”

“Dad said that the two of you had a lot in common. If she likes classical music, you should take her to the symphony. Doesn’t LSO do a spring show in London?”

“They do, it’s a black tie affair,” said Ed.

“That would be perfect. Just think you would get to see each other at your very best. Do you know a good restaurant, I mean something really fancy?”

“The *Register*, it has a great reputation and the food is excellent.”

“There you go, now all you have to do is ask her,” she said.

“Don’t you think all of this is a little much for a first date?”

“It depends. How long have the two of you known each other?”

“We’ve worked together for almost four years.”

“Long enough, Dad said that the two of you are close friends, so spent an evening enjoying each other’s company. You both might be surprised at what happens.”

Ed felt as if he was standing on the edge of a cliff. His sister had no idea of the ramifications that this could cause, but she had somehow convinced him to seriously consider the possibility. He knew that Virginia would say yes, in a heartbeat, but the prospect of asking her gave him more pause than facing an alien fleet.

They finished lunch and dropped off their trays.

“So are you going to ask her?”

“I haven’t decided,” he said.

Barbara Straker stopped in front of the elevator and tilted her head slightly, with her hands on

her hips, as she glared up at him. That pose, reminded Ed so much of Virginia when she was angry, that he couldn't hold back a chuckle.

“What's so funny?”

“That pose,” said Ed. “You have Virginia down to an art.”

Barbara lightened up, “I knew I liked her for some reason.”

When the aliens attacked again, they received an unexpected surprise. At least that's what Virginia was thinking, as she watched the last UFO being obliterated by interceptor two.

Seated at the command console, she called down to HQ.

“That's it, Paul, splash three!”

Paul Foster breathed a sigh of relief; the three UFOs were on a course heading that would put them within a mile of the base. The interceptors

had stopped them just shy of the million mile mark.

“We’re all breathing down here again, thanks.”

“With this last attack, I have all the calibration data I need,” said Ginny. “I should be able to triple our interception range. That will put the target datum at roughly three million miles. Granted, this is closer than we are used to, but still within acceptable limits. The only way to shave any more time off this figure is to keep the interceptors space borne. I don’t see that as a viable long term option.”

“I agree, but at least we aren’t in knife fighting range anymore,” said Paul. He continued in a subdued voice. “I spoke to Ed this afternoon; there has been no change since his father got out of surgery yesterday.”

“Thanks, Paul. Call me if anything changes. Moonbase out.”

Virginia knew that Ed's father was not likely to recover, having spoken to him late last night. He said that the doctors only gave his dad a few weeks on the outside, but after seeing him, Ed was convinced that he would not last the week. Ginny was glad to learn that Ed's sister was there with him. At least he didn't have to face this alone.

Nina walked into the control sphere and spoke quietly to Ginny, "You look like you need a break. Care to join me for coffee?"

"Yeah, okay. Carol, would you take over for me please?"

"Sure thing, Colonel."

"All right Ginny, talk to me. What's wrong?" Nina asked her friend as they sat alone in the leisure sphere.

"I'm worried about Ed," said Ginny. "He carries the entire weight of the organization, the

responsibility for the safety of each and every one of us, as well of the safety of the planet, squarely on his shoulders. And now his father is terminally ill. Damn it Nina, he shouldn't have to do this all on his own."

"For as long as I've known him, Ed Straker is a man who has always stood alone, maybe that's why we all find him so attractive. In the midst of his solitude, he holds firm in the face of almost impossible odds."

"I wish I could do more for him."

"I think you're already doing it, Ginny. In all my years with SHADO, I've never seen the Commander away from HQ this long for personal reasons. He wouldn't do that, unless, he had absolute trust in the person he left in charge."

Nina looked closely at her friend and suddenly realized that she was crying.

"You are *really* upset about this, aren't you?"

Ginny simply nodded as she wiped her eyes.

“Nina, you know that Ed lost a child in an automobile accident.”

“Yes, that was so tragic.”

“What you don’t know, in fact no one does, is that I was at the funeral. I saw Ed grieving for his son and it’s the only time I’ve ever seen him cry. It tore my heart out, and I wasn’t in love with him back then.”

Nina knew that Ginny was attracted to Ed, but she wasn’t aware how deep those feelings went, until now. She regarded her friend for a moment before speaking again.

“*Do you love him Ginny?*”

“Yeah, I do. I think I realized that just now. God Nina, what am I going to do?” she asked, as she shook her head.

“Follow your heart, Virginia, tell him how you feel. Then let the chips fall where they may,” said Nina, her voice filled with sincerity.

“I can’t just come out and tell him that, as much as I want to, and I don’t want this to come between the friendship Ed and I have fostered.”

Nina leaned back in the chair and sipped her coffee.

“You and Ed have always been honest with each other. At some point in time, you are going to have to broach this subject with him, and now that you have admitted this to yourself, it’s not going to go away.”

“You know that I told him I cared about him last year, just before he went up with Craig,” said Ginny.

“Caring about someone, and being in love with them, is two different things.”

“Don’t I know it,” she said, ruefully. “I know I’m going to have to talk to him about it, at least then it will be out in the open, but I’m not going to do it right away. I still want him to make the first move.”

Ginny looked at her watch, “Well I’d better get back to work. Thanks for the coffee Nina.”

“Anytime.”

Nina Barry watched her friend walk out of the room and briefly contemplated intervening on her friend’s behalf. She just as quickly dismissed the idea as a bad one. *Ed and Virginia will have to work this one out on their own.*

“Ed wake up,” called Barbara Straker from the doorway.

Ed roused and looked over at the clock seeing that it was just past two in the morning.

“What is it, Barbara? Is it Dad?”

“Yeah, the hospital just called. They said that we had better get down there right away.”

Straker jumped out of bed and dressed with haste. In ten minutes the two of them were on

their way to Mass General. Before they had left the house, Ed had called a friend, who was on the Massachusetts State Police Force, and told him they were heading to the hospital. He was surprised, however, to see a cruiser pull alongside him and wave them to follow.

“Good ol’ Randy,” said Ed. “I didn’t expect this.”

“Dad has friends on the force too, Ed.”

“You’re right, I forgot about that.”

With a police escort, they made it to the hospital in less than thirty minutes. Tony Straker’s oncologist was waiting in the lobby for them. For a brief moment Ed was afraid that they were too late, but the doctor quickly ushered them into the waiting elevator.

“His breathing started to get labored about an hour ago, and I’m surprised that he’s still holding on,” said the doctor, as they rode up to the third floor. “You got here quick.”

“We had help from some friends. Is he awake?” asked Ed.

“Yes, I think he would have passed on had he been sleeping. Your father has an incredible amount of will power.”

The trio stepped off the elevator and they made a quick trot to Tony’s room. “I’ll be making rounds if you need me,” said the doctor, as they arrived. Ed and Barbara walked into the room and saw that their father was looking out the window. When he saw his children, he smiled and waved them to his bedside.

“I guess this is it, kids,” said the elder Straker. It was evident that he was struggling to stay conscious and his voice was weak and raspy. “I want both of you to know how much I love you. And I’m proud of both of you. I always have been...”

His voice trailed off and he looked at his children intensely. Ed could imagine him trying to burn the image in his mind.

“Dad, I’m so sorry I didn’t set things right before,” Ed said, on the verge of choking up. “Please forgive me...I love you Dad...I always have...”

As tears flowed from his eyes, he found that he could no longer speak. Beside him, his sister was openly crying as she said her final words to her father.

“Daddy I love you, you can let go now. Ed and I will be okay...”

Anthony Straker closed his eyes for the last time while his two children held his hands. Slowly his breathing became less labored but more shallow and the beeping of the heart monitor slowed.

It was just before three in the morning when he took his last breath. Ed and Barbara said their last goodbyes and walked out of the room. Ed’s sister was still openly crying and his own eyes were drenched in tears.

“Eddie, at least he’s with Mom now,” she said trying to pull herself together.

“Yeah,” *I hope so.*

Ed had been raised a Catholic, but had become disillusioned with the church soon after leaving home. Unlike his sister, who remained a staunch believer, he sometimes questioned the existence of God or heaven. The discovery of extraterrestrial beings only added to his quandary.

When he had composed himself enough to drive, the two of them left the hospital and began the journey home.

Chapter 7:

The mood, both on Moonbase and at HQ, was somber, when the news was revealed that the Commander’s father had passed away. With

very few exceptions, the staff had taken the news of the loss as being one of their own.

At a table in the mess hall, two of those exceptions were engaged in conversation.

“I’ll be willing to bet that he didn’t even cry,” said Turner, to his friend Gregg Carlson. “If he were a cop, he’d write his own mother a ticket.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Still, it’s not really right to poke fun at him right now.”

“What, are you going soft on me? A couple weeks ago he threatened to exile you to Cape Horn. Have you ever seen that place?”

Carlson nodded, “I spent two weeks down there, in the middle of July. It’s not a place I’d like to go back to. The guy in charge, Major Grant, rumor has it that he really ticked Straker off about something. He’s been down there for almost two years. Let me tell you something Patrick, this guy Grant, is more of a hard-ass than Straker.”

Turner leaned back in the chair with an evil grin on his face, “I told you that Straker is going to get his. By the way, did you install that power tap behind the console near the Commander’s office?”

“Yeah, I did it this morning. What was that thing? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It’s something that the R and D boys came up with. I have to install the rest of it later this week,” said Turner.

“What do you mean by, Straker is going to get his?” asked Carlson.

“You’ll see. The next job he has will be as the tea boy.”

On Moonbase, Virginia was having a bad day. She had been asleep when Paul called up from HQ to give her the news about Ed’s father. When she had gotten off the vidlink, she began

to weep. Even now, hours later, she was still misty.

Ginny knew that the funeral was tomorrow and she would have attended had she not been on Moonbase. A few hours ago, she had called her mother to ask her to have flowers sent to the service, but it wasn't the same as being there.

She had spoken to Alec, just before he boarded the plane to Boston, and asked him to give Ed her condolences. She wanted to do it herself but had been unable to reach him at the family residence.

Nina walked in and stepped over to the command console.

“Are you holding up okay, Ginny?”

“Yeah, you?”

Ginny could see that Nina was misty as well, a few of the girls were.

“I'm okay. Did you get in touch with him?”

“No, I’m sure that he’s too busy right now to answer the phone. I talked to Alec, he’s going to the funeral and he said he would pass on our sympathy.”

“Do you need a break, Ginny?”

“No, I’m okay. Thanks.”

As Nina walked out of the command sphere, Virginia looked towards the window. She stood up from her console, and crossed the room to stand in front of it; she gazed up at the blue and white globe that was her home. The world population stood at almost five billion people, and as acting Commander, they were all her responsibility. For the first time, she felt the full weight of the burden that normally sat on her friend’s shoulders. And with that burden came a feeling of isolation. *Ed, how do you bear it?*

Alec Freeman pulled into the driveway of the Straker residence just before ten in the

morning. As usual, Ed had given him good directions and he had no problem finding the house. He got out of the car and strode up the walkway. He was surprised when Ed greeted him at the door.

“I didn’t even have a chance to knock, you must be psychic. I see the uniform still fits,” said Alec, as he greeted his old friend.

“Hello, Alec, come on in,” said Ed, as he ushered him into the house.

“I’m very sorry about your father, Ed”

“Thank you.”

Ed took his friend’s coat and hung it in the closet.

“I just made breakfast, Alec, why don’t you join us.”

“Who’s us?”

“Oh, that’s right; you never met my sister Barbara. Come on into the kitchen and I’ll introduce you.”

Alec followed him into the kitchen and stopped in his tracks when he saw the young blonde air force officer sitting at the table.

“Major Wyatt?”

“Colonel Freeman, this is a surprise,” said Barbara. “And as of next week, it will be Major Straker. I’m getting my maiden name back.”

“I didn’t know that the two of you had met,” Ed said, although he suspected that was the case.

“Major Wyatt is on staff at the base medical facility, but I had no idea that she was your sister,” said Alec, looking somewhat embarrassed.

Ed looked at Barbara who seemed to be enjoying Freeman’s discomfort, *I’d like to hear this story*, Ed thought to himself.

“So Eddie, how do you know Colonel Freeman?” asked Barbara.

“We flew together in Vietnam. Alec was assigned to the base as the British military liaison. He flew as my wingman.”

“I see,” she said, as she eyed the Royal Marine Colonel.

“By the way, Ed, Ginny has been trying to get in touch with you. She asked me to express her condolences, but I think that she would rather have told you herself.”

“All right, Alec, I’ll call her later. Thanks.”

“Ginny?” asked Barbara. “You mean Virginia?”

“Yes, Alec knows her,” said Ed. “Last year he hired the studio to do a recruitment commercial and that’s how they met.”

Ed set the breakfast plates down on the table seeing that this was going to be an interesting day.

After breakfast, Ed excused himself and went into the study to make a phone call. A few seconds later Janice Ealand came on the line.

“Yes Miss Ealand, can you connect me with Virginia Lake, tell her I’m calling from home.”

“Right away, Mr. Straker.”

Ed waited on the line, knowing it would take a few minutes to setup the call. Presently Virginia came on the line.

“Ed, I’ve been trying to get in touch with you all morning,” she said.

“Is anything wrong?”

“No, I...I just wanted to offer my condolences.”

“Thank you,” Ed paused for a moment. “Alec did give me your message, but I do appreciate hearing from you personally. It really means a lot to me.”

“I wish I could be there Ed...” her voice trailed off and, in the background, Ed was sure that he could hear her crying.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes...give me a minute...” she said pausing for a few more seconds before she continued. “I’m sorry, Ed. I don’t know what’s come over me.”

“I’ve always known that you have a caring heart,” Ed said gently. “Ever since that night at the hospital...”

“I didn’t think you had noticed.”

Ed was silent, suddenly at a loss for words. Before he could respond she continued.

“I should let you go, I’m sure you have a lot to do.”

“I’ll be on the plane to England tomorrow night. Do you still need a ride from the airport on Wednesday?”

“You’ll be too tired, Ed. I can call a cab...”

“No, I’d like to pick you up, when we get back to the studio we need to sit down and talk.”

“You’re not sending me to Antarctica, are you?” she asked suspiciously.

“Hardly, I...I just realized how much I missed having you around,” Ed said, his secret now out in the open.

There was a brief pause before she answered, “Ed, I missed you too.”

“I guess we *do* need to talk,” he said. “I’ll see you on Wednesday evening, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Bye,” he said hanging the phone up briefly then picking it back up. He dialed the direct line to his office.

“Ed Straker’s office, Miss Ealand.”

“Miss Ealand, I need you to call Dave Lambert over at the Barbican Center and reserve two

tickets for Saturday night's show. Leave a note on my desk."

"All right, anything else, Mr. Straker?"

"Yes, let Paul Foster know that I'll be out of reach this afternoon as well as tomorrow morning."

"Already taken care of sir, anything else?"

"No that will be all. Thank you Miss Ealand, for everything."

While Ed was on the phone, Alec and Barbara were catching up on old times.

"I had no idea Ed was your brother," said Alec, still quite embarrassed. "You're not going to tell him about us are you?"

"Relax, Alec, I told him that other night that you were too old for me..."

"Oh gee thanks."

“You don’t see the humor in this?” she asked, as she grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“No. Look, Barb, Ed is my best friend. I just don’t think he would understand...”

“No Alec Freeman, you listen to me,” she said, a hint of frustration in her voice. “I’m a grown woman, and I wouldn’t need my father’s approval, let alone my brother. We were both lonely and we found comfort in each other’s arms and I’m not ashamed of that. In fact, finding out that you’re my brother’s best friend is going to make me look at you in a different light.”

The conversation paused for a moment while they looked at each other.

“Ed chooses his friends very carefully,” she continued. “That means there are qualities in you that I must have missed.”

“Are you going to tell him?” Freeman asked, just above a whisper.

“Alec, we both know I’m being transferred overseas next month. I don’t see the need to make you uncomfortable, and I do see how hard this is for you,” she said, smiling now. “But if we were going to continue our relationship then, yes, I would tell him. Speaking of relationships, how well do you know Virginia Lake?”

Alec was caught off guard by the question.

“Why do you ask?”

“Eddie is sweet on her, but I had to kick him in the butt to get him to do anything about it.”

Alec was not surprised having seen them both dancing around their feelings for almost a year. The weekly command briefing allowed him to see the two of them on a regular basis. The attraction between them was subtle and would not have been seen unless the observer knew both of them very well.

“I’m not surprised,” he said.

“You knew?”

“Ed would never admit it, but I’ve seen a spark between them for at least a year.”

They both heard the door to the study open, cutting short the discussion. Ed strolled into the room and asked, “Are we just about ready?”

Alec and Barbara both nodded and the trio made their way to the front door.

“We’ll take my car, Alec,” said Ed.

“You don’t trust my driving?”

“I know better,” he said, as he locked the front door.

“Eternal rest, grant unto him O Lord.”

“And may the perpetual light, shine upon him.”

“Rest in peace.”

At the graveside, Father Gerald O’Riley concluded the service. As the mourners dispersed to return to their waiting vehicles the

pastor made his way to speak to Ed and Barbara.

“It’s nice to see you both again,” he said. “Your father was greatly involved in our youth outreach ministry, and thanks to him, a great many young men are walking along the right path. He will be very sadly missed. So, Edward, I understand that you have to leave for England this evening?”

“Yes Father O’Riley, I was lucky to have so much time accrued, I would stay longer if I could. I had forgotten how good it is to be home.”

“All the more reason for you to come visit us more often,” he said. “And you, Barbara, when do you have to leave?”

“I’m going to be here for a few more days, like Eddie, I had quite a bit of leave built up. Dad had done a very good job of wrapping up his affairs so we don’t have much that needs attention. Eddie and I are keeping the house, at

least for now, neither one of us really wants to sell it, it's our home."

"You have someone to take care of it?"

"Yeah, Tina and Tom next door offered to help us out with that. We thought about renting it out but right now that would be too much work. With Eddie picking up most of the financial burden, we don't need to sell it. My overseas posting, next month, will pay much better so I'll be able to help out a lot more."

"It gives me great comfort to see both of you working together; it's not all that common anymore. Well I'll let the two of you be along; it was a pleasure to see both of you. God Bless you both," said the pastor as he shook their hands.

"Thank you, Father."

They made their way back to the car where Alec was waiting for them. Barbara absently stepped up to Alec and straightened his tie. Ed noticed,

but said nothing. *Maybe I don't want to know this story...*

The next afternoon, Ginny was packing for her trip back to Earth and she had just finished dressing in her new outfit when Nina walked in. The two friends had always had the free run of each other's quarters, and Ginny was as close to her as she was to Gay.

"It looks good on you, Ginny, let me see the front."

Virginia turned and her friend looked her over, "Not bad, but let's try this."

Ginny had fastened all but the top two buttons and Nina undid the third and draped the scarf over the front.

"There."

"Nina! I don't want to show him everything I own..."

“Ginny, trust me, it’s not too much. The scarf adds a bit of cover here, it’s perfect.”

“I hope you’re right, Nina, I’m way out of my comfort zone with this.”

The two friends sat down on the couch as Virginia had a few minutes before she was due to board the shuttle.

“So he actually told you that he missed you?” asked Nina.

“Yeah, we’re going to talk when we get back to the base. I told him that I missed him as well...I don’t know if I should have.”

“You are both honest people, so that probably wasn’t a bad thing. Are you going to tell him that you love him?”

Ginny shook her head, “That’s a tough one, Nina. I might wait a while and see where this goes. Who knows, I just might end up buying you that dinner after all.”

“For your sake I hope I can collect. Seriously Ginny, I hope this works out, for both of you.”

“Thanks, Nina, for everything.”

“You know that Ayshea Johnson’s transfer was approved?” asked Ginny.

“Yes, she’s coming up on Friday. That’s going to help, as we’ve been shorthanded since Joan transferred to Skydiver 5. She starts sea trials this week right?”

“Yes, Gay is going to fly the new aircraft to rendezvous with the sub on Friday. Then they start a two week shakedown cruise. She is going to be busy.”

Beside them the intercom chimed, “Yes,” said Ginny.

“The shuttle is getting ready to board now, Colonel.”

“Thanks Carol, I’ll be right there,” she turned to Nina. “Well this is it.”

“Break a leg, Ginny,” said Nina, as the two friends embraced. Virginia grabbed her bag and they set off for the reception area.

Chapter 8:

Having returned from his trip to Boston, Straker had spent a full day getting back into the hectic rhythm that was the norm at HQ. It had taken him most of the morning to wade through all of the reports, and that was after Virginia and Paul had highlighted the relevant information. Had it not been for that, he would have still been working on them. As he walked into the control room he noticed that the radar console near his office was pulled apart and being worked on.

“Paul, I’m on my way to the airport. You should be receiving a telex from Washington shortly. General MacGruder is scheduled to visit next

week and Henderson wants us to give him the *Cook's Tour*, something to do with getting more funding.”

“It’s a sad state of affairs when our fiscal future hangs on a dog and pony show,” agreed Foster.

“I know. When it comes in leave it on my desk, would you?”

“Certainly Commander, are you returning later this evening?”

“Yes, Colonel Lake and I need to go over the new tracking modifications before we go see Henderson. I suspect we’ll be burning the midnight oil.” Straker tilted his head to the radar screen behind him. “What’s the story with that radar unit?”

“A glitch in the new firmware, it should be repaired before you return. We had a problem with one of the communications channels to Moonbase as well. I’ve got a radio tech coming up to look at it.”

“I’ll leave it in your capable hands, Paul,” said Ed, as he strolled out of the control room and made his way to the executive lift.

As was always the case, Miss Ealand was hard at work when Straker stepped out of his office.

“Miss Ealand,” he said in greeting. “I’m on my way to the airport to pick up Colonel Lake. If anyone calls, tell them I’ve left for the day. Between us, I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“I understand sir, did you see the note I left on your desk about the concert?”

“Oh, yes I did. Thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Commander.”

Ed looked at the clock on the way out of the studio, seeing it was about ten minutes of six. Virginia’s shuttle was due in around seven and it took about forty minutes to get to the SHADO airfield north of Harlington. The traffic on the

M4, this time of day tended to be congested. Once he got to the M25, he should be through the worst of it.

He thought about Virginia while he was driving, and while he looked forward to seeing her again, he still felt a great sense of trepidation. He was unsure if he made the right decision by telling her that she was missed by him, and even though he knew she cared, her admission caught him by surprise.

There was another issued on his mind that troubled him almost as much, Alec and Barbara. Neither of them had elaborated as to how well they knew each other but Ed Straker was keenly aware of everything that went on around him. It was a trait that had saved his life, and more than once. He could see by the subtleties of their interaction that there was much more there than he had been told.

At thirty six, his sister was well beyond point of having to be looked after. In fact, he knew she

would take great offense to it, but Alec's reputation with the ladies was somewhat colorful, although Ed didn't really know how much of it was for show. Alec was also his best friend, fiercely loyal and protective of him and the organization they both served. In his heart, he knew that his friend would be just as protective of her, especially now that he knew who she was.

Ed grinned when he pictured Barbara forcing Alec to tow the mark, *if anyone could do it, it's her...*

The lunar transport ship landed a few minutes before seven in the evening. As Virginia stepped off the shuttle she noticed that it was getting dark. She grabbed her bag and proceeded towards the security post where Captain Morgan was working the desk.

“Good evening, Colonel, the Commander just called and he's running a few minutes late.

There's a traffic snarl on the M25," said Morgan.

"Thanks Captain, I'll wait for him inside."

It was still chilly outside and she hadn't brought a jacket. She hadn't needed it with her other outfit. Inside the terminal she sat down and flipped through a magazine while she waited. She didn't have to wait long.

The Commander pulled into the secure airfield just after seven. He swore to himself when he noticed that the transport had already arrived. Straker parked the car and quickly made his way to the terminal. He hated being late.

Ed had to catch his breath when he saw her sitting there having never seen Virginia in anything but ultra conservative attire. The combination of missing her and seeing her dressed differently, than he had ever seen,

made her more attractive and he found that he had to force himself not to stare.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said, finding his voice.

“That’s all right; I just sat down a few minutes ago. It’s just a tad chilly out this evening so I decided to wait in here.”

Virginia set the magazine aside and stood, “Well what do you think?”

“I think it suits you, it’s snappy,” Ed said, trying to avoid tripping over his feelings.

“I thought since I’m spending more time upstairs, I should look the part of an associate producer. The shot they took of us for the tabloid last month? In the article they described me as frumpy,” she said, with only a hint of frustration in her voice.

Ed was somewhat amused by her reaction, he reached down and grabbed her bag, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, thanks for picking me up, you didn’t have to, you know.”

As they walked to the car the pair continued to chat.

“I know that...”

“Ed, how are you holding up?” she asked, color in her voice.

“Dad was in his seventies, he lived a full life. I just wish that we hadn’t wasted the last fifteen years...”

He paused just as they reached the car and opened the passenger side to allow her to climb in. With her bag stowed in the back, he sat behind the wheel and started the engine.

As they drove towards the highway, Ed could see that the traffic was still jammed up. Before he got to the on-ramp Virginia spoke up, “Go straight about half a mile, and take a left. You’ll bypass all this traffic.”

“All right.”

“I used to go this way on my furlough weeks. It’s a longer distance than the M25 but lightly traveled. Most of the time, you’ll save about twenty minutes going this way.”

Straker took the road that she had indicated and they found very little traffic to contend with.

“Ed, I’m sorry that I couldn’t be there...”

“That’s all right, the flowers that you sent were beautiful...I know you would have been there if you could have, like you were at John’s funeral.”

Virginia was caught off guard, “How do you know about that? I’ve only told one other person and I know she wouldn’t have said anything. At least I don’t...”

“Relax,” Ed said, gently. “No one violated your confidence.”

He paused and glanced over at her, “I saw you standing in the back of the group. I was going to thank you for coming but I couldn’t find you

later. I assumed that you had departed with everyone else.”

“When your ex-wife’s family left, I sat back in my car...I wanted you to have your privacy. You never said anything before now, why?”

Ed pondered her question, knowing that if he answered it truthfully, he’d be committed to the path.

“Probably for the same reason that I always call you Colonel,” he said.

Ed could feel her eyes on him and his glance to the right to see her look of astonishment was unneeded.

“You’ve known all along haven’t you? When I warned you about Craig, you already knew how I felt about you? Don’t deny it.”

He nodded, “I highly suspected it but I wasn’t really sure until you told me. I assumed that you would see right through me. At least now I can

thank you properly. You are an incredible lady, Virginia.”

The conversation stalled and Ed was sure he saw her drying her eyes.

“Are you okay?” he gently asked.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just give me a minute.”

When he spoke again, he changed the subject, “Paul tells me that that Joe Kelly’s team made a breakthrough.”

“Yes,” she said in a still shaky voice. “He thinks he can synthesize a compound that can be applied to the exterior of an alien spacecraft. The thought of recovering and examining a UFO certainly intrigues me.”

Their mood lightened considerably, as talking shop was familiar territory for both of them.

“How is Alec doing with the aeroceptor project?” she asked, having recovered her composure.

“He has one squadron completed. According to him, the aircraft is a dream to fly.”

“How is he doing, Ed?”

“I think he’s involved with my sister Barbara,” he said reluctantly.

“You’re kidding?” she asked, a wide eyed expression on her face. “They just met didn’t they?”

“Apparently, that’s not the case. Barbara is on the medical staff at the base and she was still going by her married name. Alec didn’t know she was my sister. I think he was very embarrassed by the situation.”

“Alec, embarrassed? I would like to have seen that. How did your sister take it?”

“She found it rather amusing. At least that’s the way it looked to me. Neither of them would confirm, but I’d bet a year’s salary that they are an item.”

“I miss all the good stuff,” she said, feigning hurt.

Ed glanced back over at her, seeing her smile. *She has a lovely smile*, he thought.

“I understand the tracking adjustments went very well.”

“We finished with a loss of about twenty percent. The interception datum point is about three million miles. That certainly beats forty.”

“I agree. The next step is to go see the General,” Ed said, in a lighter voice. “That’s why I wanted to pick you up myself. I wanted to brief you before you spoke to Henderson.”

“Well I knew it wasn’t for my big blue eyes.”

“Coming back from the moon can be disorientating. Even moon speeds have some effect on time,” he said, feigning seriousness.

“Yes sir, I see sir, never knew that sir,” Virginia responded, facetiously.

Ed looked over at her and saw that she was smiling at him again. He returned her gesture and turned his attention back to the road.

Doctor Jackson closed his notepad and looked up at his boss, “I’m sorry that this had to be so personal, Commander. After looking all of this over I don’t think I will need to interview the two of you together.”

“So, where do we go from here?”

“I will compile all of the notes I took into a report to the commission. As I stated to you before we began, none of either yours or Colonel Lake’s personal information will be divulged. The report will be a psychological profile and impact analysis of your relationship with Colonel Lake.”

“Do you care to guess how this will pan out, Doctor?”

“It’s hard to say, Commander. My involvement is to make a recommendation to the commission, but the final decision rests with them. I’m not normally supposed to reveal my findings to either you or Colonel Lake, but under the circumstances I think the two of you are entitled to know. I can meet with both in about an hour if you would like?”

“I appreciate that, Doctor Jackson.”

The SHADO psychiatrist watched his boss as he stood to leave. He couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of admiration for the man that was now coupled with a new understanding.

When the Commander had left, Jackson returned to his notes and began his final report to the IAC.

Virginia looked up from the desk as the doors opened. *Ed looks like hell*, she thought to herself.

The Commander's session had gone into overtime by almost three hours and it was almost nine in the evening. She closed and locked the door and made her way around the desk to embrace him.

“Did I look this bad when I came out of there?” she asked.

“You did look tired,” he said.

The couple made their way to the couch and sat down. Although she understood the need, Virginia found herself cursing the system for the hell they had been put through.

“This is the type of thing I'd tried to avoid by getting the rules about the computer study changed. Damn them! Why can't they just let us be? We're not robots, Ed, we're human beings! How the hell are we expected to just turn off our feelings?” she spouted off in exasperation.

“You know, you're beautiful when you're angry.”

He was giving her a smile that melted her heart which caused her to lose most of her steam.

“Yeah, right,” she said more subdued. “I’m sorry Ed, I’m sure that you don’t feel like hearing me rant.”

“Jackson is going to meet with us in an hour to give us his recommendation. It won’t be the final word, but it’s a high probability that the commission will follow his recommendation.”

Virginia considered this, “It’s not a given, is it?”

“No, it’s not,” he said. “I don’t think our problem is going to be Jackson.”

“Ed, have you considered that if the commission rules against us, they could also separate us?”

“To forcibly transfer you, would require a unanimous vote of the commission. I know at least two of the members will not go along with that. And if that did happen, it would eliminate the problem altogether. Of course we would have to carry out a long distance relationship.”

“I suppose there are worse things than that. You could use some of that leave time you have accrued to come visit me in New York. I promise I would make it worth your while,” she said, with a saucy grin.

“Maybe that’s why I never use it,” Ed said, in a sorrowful tone. “Until now, I never had anyone to share with.”

Virginia leaned over and gave him a gentle kiss. For a few minutes, they just gazed into each other’s eyes in silence.

“Hey, I’m hungry,” she said. “Join me for dinner in the mess hall?”

“That sound like a good idea.”

Epilogue:

“You were hungry,” said Ed, as the two of them finished their meal.

“I didn’t eat all day,” said Ginny. “My stomach was tied in a knot over all this, I’ll be glad when it’s over.”

Ed looked at the clock, “Jackson should be just about done. Let’s go hear what he has to say.”

The pair dropped their trays off on the way out and walked down the corridor to the control room. When they arrived Jackson was waiting for them.

“Commander, Colonel,” he said as the three of them went into the Commander’s office.

Inside the office they sat down at the conference table with Jackson sitting across from the couple.

“As you are both aware,” began the psychiatrist, “SHADO procedures require any personnel, which plan to pursue a romantic relationship, to file a request for a Computer Relationship Study. The rules for this never considered a possibility of the C in C and the Executive

Officer becoming romantically involved. In this case the General and the IAC become the reviewing body. Commander, because Colonel Lake is your direct subordinate, this situation falls under the case by case scenario and this is how it will be handled at the hearing. Do you have any questions so far?”

Straker and Lake looked at each other and shook their heads, “No, Doctor, please continue,” said the Commander.

“Very well, as part of my analysis for the report, I ran the CRS a second time including the new information that I obtained through the interviews. The figures were not very far from the original test, slightly higher but still well within acceptable limits.”

Jackson flipped to the next page of the report he held.

“I found in the course of my questioning that the two of you have considered all of the ramifications that this relationship could pose

on both the organization and both of you as a couple. I found your answers satisfactory.”

Jackson turned to the next sheet.

“The third consideration was your stress level tests. Colonel Lake, your tests have been fairly consistent with only three cases of slight abnormality. The first took place soon after you took command of Moonbase. According to your record, you lost a close friend to illness. The second case was when Colonel Collins was lost during reentry. Again this was a loss of someone close. The third case somewhat interesting as it occurred during the repair mission to SID.”

“I was worried about Ed,” Ginny said simply.

“That was my assessment as well. As I said, the stress levels were all within normal when adjusted for the situation.”

Jackson turned to Ed. “Commander Straker, your stress readings have been abnormally high for over the past three years. Your readings

spiked in 1981 and again during the mission to SID. The commission was almost ready to order you on a mandatory two month furlough. In fact, had it not been for General Henderson's overriding veto that is exactly what would have happened. What I find interesting, is that immediately after you and Colonel Lake initiated a relationship, your stress factors have returned to almost normal. It is this reason above anything else that I am recommending to the commission that the two of you be allowed to continue your relationship to its logical conclusion."

Virginia and Ed both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Don't celebrate just yet," said Jackson "This still has to go before the commission for a vote. They meet tomorrow in closed session. I am scheduled to deliver my finding in the morning and the board will deliberate and vote tomorrow afternoon."

Jackson paused and looked at both of them, “I’m sure you are both tired, I would suggest that the two of you get a good night’s sleep.”

“Thank you Doctor Jackson,” said Straker as they all stood.

“Yes, thank you,” added Virginia.

Jackson bowed slightly in his customary way. “Your welcome.”

When they were alone Ed turned to Virginia, “Let’s go home.”

“All right, let’s go to my place tonight, it’s closer, and we’re both tired.”

The next afternoon, Ed was working at his desk when the phone rang, “Yes Miss Ealand.”

“General Henderson is on the line for you, sir.”

Uh-oh, here it comes.

“Thank you Miss Ealand, put him through.”

“Commander Straker?”

“Good afternoon General, what’s the good word?” asked Ed cutting through the pleasantries.

“Well, Commander, you had better break out your wallet. As I see it, you owe at least two people dinner. Congratulations Ed, you and Virginia have been granted approval to continue, with no restrictions.”

Ed was both shocked and relieved. The decision meant that not only could they continue their relationship, the IAC had given them the green light for marriage and children if they so chose.

“Many thanks General, from both of us.”

“Don’t thank me, I would have voted against it. But both Doug Jackson, and Vasily Padorin, argued in your favor. It was unanimous, they even convinced me.”

“That I do find hard to believe,” said Ed.

“Well I’m sure that you would like to tell Virginia, so I’ll let you go. Good day Commander.”

“Take care, General, and thank you.”

Ed picked the phone back up and dialed Ginny’s office. It rang but there was no answer. He reached for the intercom.

“Keith, find Colonel Lake and have her come to my office right away.”

“Yes sir.”

Virginia made her way to the Commander’s office after answering Keith Ford’s page. The doors were closed and she felt that this didn’t bode well. *At least they’re not locked*, she thought, when they opened for her.

Her heart sank when she saw the Commander with his head in his hands. *Oh no, they’re breaking us up.*

“Ed?” she said already having trouble keeping the hurt out of her voice.

He looked up and smiled, weakly, “Virginia, please sit down.”

Behind her the doors closed and locked.

“Honey, I have some bad news...”

“They turned us down,” she interjected, as she started crying.

She was looking down and didn’t see his face.

“It looks like we owe Doug Jackson dinner.”

It took a few seconds for what he said to register, when she cleared her eyes and looked up, she saw him grin from ear to ear.

“They approved?”

“With no restrictions.”

Virginia shrieked with joy as she jumped into his lap, almost knocking him out of the chair.

“Whoa,” said Ed, as he tried to keep them from falling over.

“Sorry, I thought we lost for a minute. God, Ed, I don’t believe it,” her tears had become elements of joy.

“I thought maybe we’d leave early tonight and go paint the town red. Interested?”

“Let’s go!”

As they walked through the control room, Keith Ford noticed that Ed had his hand in the small of Virginia’s back. *Good for them*, he thought, as he turned back to his console.

END