

Heartbreak on the Moskva

A UFO Challenge Story

Written by Matthew R. White

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Based on the Characters and series created by
Gerry Anderson

The Character Major Vladimir Natiroff was
created by Deborah Rorabaugh



Historian's Note: The events depicted here take place about nine months after the episode "Timelash" written by Terence Feely. Some of

the events in this story are based on my stories “Mission of Mercy” and “Silver Star” which are parts of the “Soul Mates” saga. They can be found in the SHADO Library.

Prologue:

Damn him, she thought. Damn him, all to hell and back.

Walking through the corridors of HQ, her blue grey eyes filled with hurt and anger, she made a bee line towards the Commander’s office. She had made it to the hallway just outside when she was intercepted by Alec Freeman.

“Get out of my way, Alec,” she said, in a voice that would brook no argument.

“No way, Ginny,” said Alec, as he stepped in front of her and held her shoulders. “Look, I know you’re upset, but this is not the way to handle it. Regardless of the way you may feel

about him, he's still your commanding officer. You need to cool down."

"He didn't even have the decency to tell me himself, Alec! I had to find it out second hand, in the mess hall this morning," she said, as her voice cracked and tears began streaming down her face.

Freeman pulled a handkerchief out of his jacket and handed it to her, as he guided her to the elevator leading to the computer section and her office. Once they were inside, she began to cry in earnest. Alec reached to the panel and stopped the lift between floors.

"Ed wanted to tell you himself," he said. "Paul Foster has a big mouth. Trust me. I'll have words with him later."

Ginny dried her eyes, "It wasn't his fault. I overheard him and Keith talking about it. They clammed up when they saw me, but I forced the issue. God, Alec, I can't believe Ed is going to remarry that bitch!"

Freeman was surprised to hear her say that, even though he agreed with her. To the best of his knowledge Ginny had never met Mary, and it was out of character for her to show that kind of animosity to a woman she had never seen.

“Jealousy isn’t becoming of you,” he said, quietly.

“It’s more than that, Ed deserves better than someone like her. She’s the most self centered, miserable creature I’ve ever met in my life,” said Ginny, before she thought about it. She suddenly became very quiet.

“I didn’t know you had ever met Mary.”

“It’s a long story, Alec. Maybe, one day, I’ll tell you about it,” she said, as she restarted the lift. Even though she was angry with Ed, she would never betray his confidence and she hoped Alec would forget about it.

The lift stopped on the bottom floor, and the pair got off and walked to her office. When they

arrived, they both sat down on her couch. Alec had just returned to HQ to reassume his position, as executive officer, and Ginny stepped back to intelligence chief. She had been looking forward to the demotion, hoping that it would open a door for her to pursue a relationship with Ed.

“I shouldn’t be this upset about the whole thing, Alec. Ed and I never had any kind of a commitment. I just got my hopes up when he took me out to dinner a few weeks ago. And he finally started calling me Virginia, instead of Colonel,” she said, wistfully.

“I remember that day. It’s ironic that Ed got a call from Mary the next afternoon. Apparently, she had divorced her abusive husband and wanted to talk to Ed about their son’s death. She asked him to forgive her for the way she treated him. They’ve been seeing each other ever since.”

Virginia remembered the scene Mary had made at the hospital. She had delivered the drug from the US, not ten minutes before, and was standing in the corner of the lobby. She witnessed the entire incident, and she remembered the anger she felt seeing the way Ed had been treated.

The intercom buzzer sounded drawing her attention from those thoughts. Ginny got up and walked over to her desk.

“Yes?”

“Colonel Lake? Is Colonel Freeman with you?” asked Lt. Ford.

“Yes, he is, Keith.”

“Commander Straker would like to see both of you in his office right away, ma’am.”

“We’ll be right there,” she said, pensively.

Ginny looked over at Alec as he stood up from the couch. “I can go ahead if you need a few minutes to collect yourself,” he said.

“No, I’m fine now. Thanks, Alec.”

The two Colonels walked out of the office and headed for the elevator.

Chapter 1:

When they walked into Ed’s office, Ginny could tell right away that something was very wrong.

“Virginia, Alec, please sit down,” he said, as he looked up from the report on his desk.

Ed looked more drained and haggard, this morning, than she had seen in a while. Whatever this problem was, it wasn’t routine. He handed them both a folder as he began.

“It seems that our friends in the Soviet Union have managed to capture a UFO, completely intact,” Ed said, as he let the information sink in. “Henderson called me at two in the morning to give me the good news.”

Alec and Ginny looked at each other in shock, “When did this happen, Ed?” Alec asked.

“Two days ago,” said Ed, pausing before he continued. “Now most of this has been already contained, and the spacecraft will be handed over to SHADO, under very tight security. The majority of personnel involved, have been told that this is an experimental satellite, a joint project between the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. Now, here is the problem. An officer in the Soviet Air Force apparently obtained possession, of photographs, and the technical documentation of the alien craft. He went missing yesterday afternoon.”

“What technical documentation?” asked Ginny. “They didn’t have the craft long enough to write anything up on it, did they?”

“No, Virginia, they didn’t. But apparently this craft had an owner’s manual, for lack of a better term. Now, granted, it is written in the alien language and would have to be translated, but

that is usually not difficult with science and technology, as this type of writing often contains universal constants, like the speed of light, the composition of the hydrogen atom, the standard model, and so on.”

Ginny considered this, *that book could be the Rosetta stone for deciphering the alien language and technology. And the information it contained could be more dangerous than the plans for a nuclear device.*

“So what are we going to do about it, Ed?” asked Alec.

“I’m sending you, and Virginia, as well as Major Natiroff, to Moscow, where you’ll meet up with your contact at the British Embassy. You’ll be working with the KGB, to track down and recover the Russian pilot, and the information he has in his possession.”

“And if the pilot doesn’t cooperate?” asked Ginny.

“In that case,” said Ed, in very measured tones. “You will prosecute him with extreme prejudice. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir,” they both said, in unison.

Ed looked down at the schedule on his desk, “Your flight will leave in three hours. You’d better get moving.”

Ginny and Alec both stood to leave when Ed said to her, “Virginia, would you stay for a few minutes?”

She knew what was coming and she decided to get it over with.

“Of course,” she said, not giving any inkling that she knew why he asked her to stay.

When Alec had left Ed looked up at her, “Virginia, you might want to sit down for this...”

“I already know, Ed,” she said, interrupting him. In a hesitant voice she continued. “I found out in the mess hall this morning. I guess I should wish you the best.”

Ed lowered his eyes, “I’m sorry, I wanted you to hear this from me, not second hand,” he said, sadly.

“Maybe you should have told me first, instead of...” she said, bitterly. She stopped mid sentence and turned away, fighting tears. “I didn’t mean that the way it came out. I’m sorry, Ed.” She struggled with her emotions, with her back still to him.

“I never meant to hurt you, Virginia,” Ed said, sincerely as he looked up at her. “Mary’s call to me was ... unexpected.”

Ginny wanted to scream, and she found herself despising Ed’s ex, and soon to be again, wife. *Jealousy isn’t becoming of you*, Alec had told her. Yet she was fighting waves of it, as she stood there. She still had her back to him, as she fought to regain her composure. Through sheer willpower, she finally found her voice and she turned back to face him with a wan smile.

“You have to follow your heart, that’s all any of us can do. I wish you both the best,” she said, unconvincingly.

“Thank you, Virginia. If there is...”

“I really have to get moving if I’m going to catch that plane, Ed,” she interrupted.

“I understand,” he said, quietly. “Have a safe flight.”

“Goodbye, Ed,” she said, as she turned to go, considering the dual meaning of her farewell.

Virginia made straight for her office managing to hold herself together until she arrived. Once inside she closed and locked the door and sat on the couch, allowing herself the emotional release, she knew she needed.

On the third floor of the Lubyanka Building, Colonel Mikhail Letov examined the dossiers before him. The first file was that of a Royal Marine Colonel, who seemed to have dropped of

the KGB radar screen, almost fifteen years ago. The second file was that of a Russian Major, listed on special assignment by order of the party chairman himself. *This is most intriguing*, he thought to himself.

The third file was the most confusing of all. A British-American Physicist whom, according to his intelligence reports, was an associate producer at a film studio. Letov opened the file and was shocked to see the picture. *A woman*, he thought, *and a beautiful one at that*. The Colonel was sure that the film studio information was invalid until he saw the magazine article that had been clipped out. The picture in the article was a couple of years older than the dossier photo, but there was no mistaking that this was the same woman.

The door to the office opened and the Colonel's aid walked in and stood, at attention, in front of his superior. "Good afternoon, comrade Colonel."

“Vasily, please have a seat,” Letov said, kindly.

“Thank you, comrade Colonel.”

The younger officer sat and waited for his boss to speak again.

“You have news for me, Vasily?” Letov asked, leaning back in his chair.

“Yes, comrade Colonel, the three envoys from England will be arriving, at Domodedovo International, in about an hour. They will be receiving us at the British Embassy around three.”

“Excellent!” said Letov. “You will, of course, accompany me for our little visit to our British friends.”

“It will be my honor, comrade Colonel. On a related subject, we still have not been able to locate the *missing* pilot, but our intelligence sources are sure that he is still somewhere in the Moscow proper,” said the Russian Captain.

“I’m hopeful that our agents eliminate him before we meet with the British contingent,” Letov said, thoughtfully. “And of course deliver the package that Major Stepanov was supposed to hand over to us.”

“A question, if I may, comrade Colonel?” asked the Captain. “Is there any truth to the rumor that this document contains information on alien technology?”

Letov looked at his aid, thoughtfully, “Let’s just say this, Captain Yeltsin. The information in that document could forever tilt the balance of power in favor of the Soviet Union. It is too bad that we cannot convince the peace lovers, in the Kremlin, of that fact.”

“I agree, comrade Colonel, as always, you will have my unconditional support,” said Yeltsin, as he stood and snapped to attention.

As Letov watched the young captain leave, he found himself wishing he had more like him under his command. His thoughts wandered to

the three envoys from England and how he planned to deal with them. *Too bad about the woman, he thought, but espionage is a dangerous business.*

Alec Freeman sat in the cockpit, of the Shadair SST, worrying about his friend back in the cabin. Ironically, he had met her on this, aircraft almost five years ago, and they had become close friends. It might have blossomed into more, had Ginny not been attracted to Ed. He remembered seeing her eyes light up the day they met, and he knew that Ed felt the same way. Alec never understood why he never told her, until a few weeks ago when Mary came back into his life. It was clear, then, and to add insult to injury, Ed had taken Virginia to dinner the night before.

Poor Ginny, thought Alec. She had gotten her hopes up only to have them crushed. Alec knew this was the reason he never would settle down.

The pain of heartbreak just wasn't worth the risk. He had seen his own parents go through divorce when he was very young, and his first love broke his heart so bad he would never trust the words *I love you* again.

"Take over for me, Bill," he said to Captain Johnson. "I need to check on something."

"Sure thing, Colonel," said Johnson, as he assumed control of the aircraft.

Alec got up from the pilot's seat and walked back to the passenger cabin. He was surprised to see Ginny sitting by herself. He sat down next to her and asked, "Where's Natiroff?"

"He's in the back cabin checking our gear for the mission, and phoning his wife," she said, wistfully.

"Are you okay, Ginny?" he asked, placing his hand on hers.

“Do you want the truth? Or do you want me to tell you what you want to hear?” she said, with a twinge of bitterness still in her voice.

“We’ve known each other too long for anything but the truth.”

Ginny looked out the window and answered, “It hurts, Alec. I should have known better than to get my hopes up. I’m forty years old, Alec, and still single. I guess I’m just too damn picky,” she said, bitterly.

“Look at me, Ginny. I’m fifty one and I’m not married.”

“Alec, you could have been, hell you told me that yourself.” She paused, and Alec could see her pondering over her life. “I never wanted to be single at forty. I wanted a husband I loved, and I wanted a family. Why do you think Paul and I never lasted?”

Alec had been surprised when Ginny had dated Foster. “I never understood what you saw in him. The two of you were such a mismatch.”

Ginny looked at him, “I was on the rebound. Craig had died, a few weeks earlier, and Paul saved my life when the window blew out in the command sphere. He was interested in me and I felt like I owed it to him to at least try to make a relationship work.” She shook her head as she recalled the event.

Alec remembered reading the reports of the mass attack on Moonbase that had almost destroyed the installation. The woman sitting next to him had risked her life, to save her comrades, and her actions had prevented the destruction of the base. Often seen as cold and uncaring, by her colleagues, she had a reputation that she didn't deserve. Alec, found Ginny, to be one of the kindest and warmest people he knew. Her professional cool was often misinterpreted as unfriendliness and

superiority, and he knew that nothing was further from the truth.

“Virginia, you have qualities that set you head and shoulders above most women I know and someday you’ll make some lucky man a good wife,” he said, sincerely.

“Yeah, when I’m eighty something,” she said, with a chuckle.

“You see, I managed to make you laugh,” he said, with a smile. “So, I have a question, when did you meet Mary?”

Virginia considered for a moment. Finally she said, “I’m sorry, Alec, I can’t tell you. I gave Ed my word and right now that’s all I have that’s worth a damn.”

“I hope Ed realizes how good a friend you are, Ginny.”

“Thanks, Alec, that means a lot,” she said, with a genuine smile.

The Shadair SST touched down at Domodedovo International about an hour later and a motorcade was waiting for the aircraft at the gate. The three SHADO VIPs disembarked from the aircraft and quickly walked to the waiting limo. It was below zero this afternoon and Ginny was glad she had worn her fur coat. They climbed into the car and it sped off to the British Embassy, some twenty six miles north of the airport.

In the car the trio was greeted by the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Sir Byron Sinclair.

“Colonel Freeman, it’s a pleasure to see you again,” said Sinclair.

“The pleasure is mine, Sir Byron,” said Freeman, pleasantly. “May I introduce my associates, Colonel Virginia Lake, and Major Vladimir Natiroff.”

The Ambassador shook hand with both of them, “My pleasure, Colonel, Major,” he said. “How does it feel, to be home again, Major Natiroff?”

“A nice bracing Russian winter, it’s so good to be home,” said Natiroff, who seemed unaffected by the cold.

“It would seem that Colonel Lake doesn’t share your enthusiasm for the weather,” said Sinclair.

Ginny was still shivering from the extreme cold even though the heater in the Rolls Royce was quite efficient.

“Being a Brighton native, I prefer warmer climates, Sir Byron,” she said, as she snuggled deeper into her coat.

“Ah, I see,” said Sinclair, knowingly. “I grew up in Lancaster, and as you can well imagine, it’s somewhat colder up there. No matter, we should be back at the Embassy in about forty minutes. Your contact with the KGB will be arriving at three.”

“Do you have any information on him, Sir Byron?” asked Alec.

Sinclair handed each of the trio a dossier on the Russian Colonel. “Colonel Mikhail Eduardovich Letov, age 48, he has been with the KGB for most of his career. He is considered to be a hardliner by the west, but is supposedly loyal to the current chairman therefore considered trustworthy, at least for this operation.”

“Do you know anything about him, Major?” asked Alec, as he turned to Natiroff.

“Only by reputation,” he said, earnestly. “Sir Byron’s assessment is quite correct. He is a hardliner, and I would be careful of him, Colonel Freeman.”

Ginny examined the photo in the dossier, a habit of hers. She was often able to ascertain the trustworthiness of a person by the body language they displayed and that trait could sometimes be seen in a photograph. This one sent a chill up her spine, as she saw what she

perceived to be cold blooded arrogance in his expression.

The motorcade arrived at the British Embassy just before two in the afternoon and the temperature still was below zero. The weather was supposed to turn worse with a storm front moving in, from the west, later that evening. By morning, there would be over a foot of new snow on the ground.

The three SHADO members were shown to their rooms and once they were settled, the trio met in one of the conference rooms. Natiroff swept the room for bugs and once it was pronounced clear, the three operatives discussed the impending meeting with Letov.

“So, here is the game plan,” began Alec, without preamble. “Officially, the KGB has been tasked with providing any and all assistance in locating the missing pilot. In reality, they can be counted on to do whatever is in their own best interests,

providing they can be covert about it. And the fact that they chose a hardliner, to act as a liaison, doesn't instill me with a lot of confidence as to their good intentions."

Alec handed out another set of folders, "This is who we are looking for," he said.

Virginia read the dossier, *Major Ivan Andreovich Stepanov*, age 42, MIG 29 pilot, Soviet Air Force. She looked at his photo, noting that he had none of the arrogance that she saw in Letov. *He's quite handsome, actually*, she thought to herself. She looked at his military record and noticed that it was both, distinguished, and flawless. *Something isn't right about this.*

"Virginia, you'll be spending most of your time here, ferreting out as much information as you can out of the Russian computer systems. If anyone can hack into them, it's you," said Alec.

Virginia smiled at that, "Piece of cake," she said, enjoying the idea of a good challenge. Her

reputation as the information queen of SHADO was legendary, and it would take her mind off of other problems.

The meeting broke up just before three, and the SHADO team walked down to the Ambassador's reception room to meet their Russian guests.

Chapter 2:

“Vanya, you need eat,” said the woman across from him.

Major Stepanov was staring out the window, over the busy streets below, rather than eating his dinner.

“Vanya, did you hear me?” she asked, impatiently.

Ivan turned back to the table and dug in to his dinner, nodding his head in approval as he ate.

“This is very good, Ilya,” he said to her.

The slender dark haired woman watched him with a look of concern on her face. It was only a matter of time before the KGB tracked them down, she thought.

Ivan Stepanov noticed her gaze. “What’s wrong, Ilya?”

“I’m worried, Vanya. You’re a pilot, not a spy. I’m afraid you’re going to end up getting killed over all this. Couldn’t Uncle Yuri find someone else? Someone trained in the ways of espionage?” she asked, her voice filled with fear.

The Russian Major looked back out the window, “He had no one else to turn to who had access to the craft. And certainly, no one he could trust,” he said reflectively. “Don’t worry, Ilya, we’re not alone. Uncle Yuri has people watching out for us. All we have to do is make contact with the British.”

“And how the hell are we supposed to do that?” she asked, annoyed at the situation. “The embassy is no doubt being watched, we can’t get

near it. How are we going to get their attention?”

“Well now Ilya Susannavich, I guess we’ll just have to bring them to us,” he said, assuredly.

Ed Straker sat in his office as he spoke with his best friend over the vidlink. It was almost six, and he had promised Mary he would be home by seven thirty.

“How did the meeting go, Alec?”

“It went better than I expected, Ed. Sir Byron has done an exceptional job in getting the doors open for us. We start tracing down some leads tomorrow, Natiroff and Yeltsin are working together on the field team while I coordinate the operations with Colonel Letov. And Virginia will be doing some behind the scenes computer hacking to cover our backs,” said Alec, confidently.

“What is your impression of Letov?” Ed asked, thoughtfully. He knew that the KGB Colonel was considered a hardliner.

“He was surprisingly cooperative, Ed. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he didn’t have a hidden agenda. Ginny doesn’t trust him though.”

Ed considered that for a moment. Virginia was an excellent judge of character and Ed had learned to listen to her.

“Just be careful, Alec. If Virginia doesn’t trust him, there’s a reason for it. You should know that by now. By the way how is she doing?” asked Ed, softly.

“She’s heartbroken, Ed. She never expected this, and quite frankly, neither did I. Are you absolutely sure you want to go through with this? I mean, let’s face it. You and Mary had the deck stacked against you from the start. But you’ve both healed, and you’ve forgiven each other. Why not just leave it at that?” asked Alec, in a very concerned voice.

Ed leaned back and considered his best friend's words. He finally answered, "We both realized that we still love each other. And now we have a chance to get it right. I don't have to spend sixteen to eighteen hour a day here at HQ. And with the new security rules concerning spouses, I was able to tell her enough of what I really do here to make her understand when I do have to work late," Ed said, almost pleadingly. "I'm very sorry that I hurt Virginia, I've come to consider her a close friend, and I do care about her. I think the reason I waited so long to do anything about it was because deep inside I was still in love with Mary. Speaking of Mary I told her I'd be home by seven thirty and I don't want to be late."

"I don't know, Ed, but hey, it's your life. I just want to see you happy. If being with her makes you happy, then I'm delighted for you," he said, acquiescently.

"I owe it to her, Alec. I owe it to both of us."

“Yeah, sure,” said Alec. “I do have one question. When, and where, did Ginny meet Mary?”

Ed’s face went white at the question, “Why do you ask?”

“Ginny started to say something this morning and she stopped mid sentence. I asked her about it later and she wouldn’t tell me. I never knew they had met.”

Straker visibly relaxed, “It’s a long story, Alec. Maybe I’ll tell you about it one day.”

“That’s about all I got out of her. Virginia is a true friend, Ed. You should count your blessings. Well I should let you get going. I don’t want you being late because of me. Good night, Ed,” he said huskily.

“Good night, Alec.”

Straker closed the connection and considered the conversation. *Poor Virginia*, he thought. The truth of the matter was that he had been ready to explore the possibility of a relationship

with her. He had known for a couple of years that a mutual attraction between them existed. *If only I had waited another day, Virginia might not have been hurt so much.*

Ed looked at the clock and decided to call Mary, to let her know he was leaving the office. He picked up the phone and dialed her number.

In the reception room of the British Embassy, Virginia sat by herself as she read through a book. She was an avid reader and had already gotten halfway through the novel she had started reading, soon after dinner. Ginny was lost in the pages, when the fall of footsteps drew her attention. She looked up to see Alec walk into the room.

“Hello, Ginny. Fix you a drink?” he asked, as he headed to the liquor cabinet.

“Oh, hi Alec,” she said. “No, thanks, I’m having my evening tea. Did you talk to Ed?”

Alec wasn't going to raise the subject but there was no way to avoid it now, "Yeah, a couple of hours ago. I filled him in on everything." Alec paused for a moment before speaking again, "He did ask how you were."

Ginny smiled wanly about that, regardless of the circumstances, Ed Straker was still a good man and she knew that he meant no malice or ill intent, but she needed to separate herself from those feelings, for a while, until she could put it all in the right perspective. And that could take some time.

Alec walked over to the chair across from her and sat down, as he nursed his drink. Ginny had always been amused by the way he could hold his liquor.

"That stuff never bothers you does it?" she asked, changing the subject.

"It takes practice," he said. "It's not something you can do just once in a while."

“Most of the time, that much practice will land you in rehab,” she said, with a wry grin as she turned her attention back to the book. She finished the last paragraph and marked her place, as she closed the book.

“I’m sorry, Alec, I wasn’t being rude, I just wanted to finish that chapter,” she said, as she put the book aside.

“What are you reading?”

“It’s a romance novel,” she said, wistfully.

“Isn’t that, kind of like, self torture?” he asked, somewhat puzzled.

Ginny thought about it for a moment, “In a good romance novel, the male lead, in the story, becomes the romantic hero that the men in our lives can’t always be. It’s a woman thing, Alec.”

Freeman shook his head, “I don’t think I’ll ever understand that, Ginny.”

“Don’t feel bad, very few men can grasp that concept. Why do you think that most romantic

fiction is written by women? In modern writing, very few men broach the subject, but those who do have it down to an art. I have to wonder how these writers behave in real life.”

“It sounds too good to be true,” he said, noncommittally.

Ginny looked at her friend seeing something, in his expression, that she perceived as unrelated to the conversation.

“What’s really on your mind, Alec?” she asked, quietly.

As she watched, Alec struggled with his thoughts. He finally spoke, “I asked Ed about where you and Mary had met, and he basically told me the same thing you did. Did you meet her the night their son died?”

Ginny tried to cover her shock, as Alec had obviously been doing some digging and was very close to the truth. Her response was measured, “What would give you that idea?”

“I did some checking on the transporter flight records for the night his son was hit by a car. I didn’t know what was going on at the time and when I found out I read Ed the riot act. I could have handled the situation at HQ. He didn’t need to be there. Ed had ordered an early takeoff that night and I thought he was psychic. I found out tonight that the plane took off right after you boarded it,” said Alec, with conviction.

Virginia flushed as she became more uncomfortable with the situation. She had never actually met Mary but she had witnessed the way Ed was treated by his ex-wife and it had angered her to no end. Ginny had developed a very deep dislike for a woman she had never really known.

“I’m sorry, Alec, but you’re going to have to ask Ed about it. I’ll neither confirm nor deny any of this. Even though Ed’s decision hurt me, I know in my heart it wasn’t done out of malice. I still consider him a close friend and I won’t violate

his trust.” She paused as she collected her thoughts. “I would suggest that you leave it alone, no good can come out of it.”

“Just tell me this,” Alec said. “Why were you on the plane?”

“I was doing Ed a favor, and that’s all I can say about it,” she said. Ginny paused a moment then continued, “It’s getting late and I have a busy day tomorrow so I’m going to turn in. Good night, Alec.”

“Good night, Ginny,” he said, as she stood and walked out of the room.

Virginia felt torn, as Alec was also a good friend. He, unknowingly, made a decision that night that had inadvertently cost the life of Ed’s son. She never agreed with Ed’s decision to keep it from him but she became an accomplice in the conspiracy of silence. And now she felt guilty about it.

The men, in plain clothes, approached the fifth floor apartment from either side of the hall. Two more waited at the bottom of the fire escape. The team leader reached the door that showed evidence of being kicked in before. Silently, he counted from three with his hand. At the prescribed moment, one of the men kicked in the door and the six men quickly filed in weapons drawn. It took them less than ten seconds to sweep through the apartment and ascertain that it was empty.

Major Natiroff turned to Yeltsin and said, “Well, this makes five places that we’ve hit today, and the only thing we’ve managed to do is scare the daylights out of two old ladies.”

Captain Yeltsin shrugged, “It’s just a typical day in the work of the KGB, comrade Major. These things take time. The person we are looking for is quite well trained in evasion tactics. Remember, he’s a pilot in the Soviet Air Force.

Avoiding capture is a skill that all of our pilots are taught. You know that.”

Natiroff nodded thoughtfully, as the Russian captain had spoken the truth. But Colonel Freeman was not going to be happy about it.

“Comrade Captain,” said a KGB corporal. “Look at this.”

Yeltsin took the scrap of paper from his subordinate and examined it. There was nothing extraordinary about it to the casual observer. But Captain Yeltsin was anything but a casual observer.

“It would appear that this trail is warmer than we thought, comrade Major. Take a look at this.”

Natiroff examined the scrap seeing a set of numbers on the back. When he turned it around, the logo was unmistakably from the letterhead of Soviet Air Force stationery. He

looked at the KGB captain, who was grinning ear to ear.

“So it seems that they were here,” said Natiroff, as he handed the scrap back to the captain, carefully memorizing the number on the back.

“That much it certain, comrade Major, but the question becomes, were we meant to find this?” asked the Captain, rhetorically.

Natiroff considered this as Major Stepanov was quite resourceful according to his dossier.

“I guess we shall see, comrade Captain,” said the Major, noncommittally.

“Damn it, Colonel Letov, I was sure we had them,” said Alec, as he paced the floor of the KGB colonel’s office.

“Patience, Colonel Freeman, we’ll get him. We always do,” said Letov, somewhat smugly.

They were into the second day of searching and so far the only leads had come from Ginny's tenacious computer hacking. Two of the ten leads had struck pay dirt in the form of evidence that put the wayward major, recently, in at least two of the places they had searched.

"You know, Colonel Freeman, I could use someone like Colonel Lake in my organization. She's quite skilled in what she does. Do you think she'd be interested?" asked the KGB colonel.

Alec chuckled, knowing that right now, Ginny would prefer to be anywhere but HQ, in light of recent events. She had even made noises about transferring back to New York or Moonbase. But she would never leave SHADO as she was too dedicated to her duty.

Somehow, I don't think she would be interested, Colonel," answered Alec.

"Such a pity," said Letov. "She could have such a promising career with us. Not to mention the

fact that she is very easy on the eyes. And speaking of eyes, I would think she would make quite a field agent with those captivating blue grey eyes of hers. What man could resist?”

“I thought I was a chauvinist, Colonel. You have me beat hands down,” he said, feigning laughter.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, Colonel Freeman,” he said, with a grin. “Anyway, it’s about time for your friends from the embassy to arrive to collect you and the Major. Would you care to join me for a drink?” he asked, as he walked to his liquor cabinet.

Alec almost never turned down an opportunity to indulge, and he was sure the Colonel stocked genuine top shelf Russian vodka. “I’d be happy to,” he said.

The Colonel poured two small glasses and handed one to Freeman. “To your health, Colonel Freeman,” he said, as he raised his glass.

“And yours,” said Alec, following suit. “Cheers.”

Alec had had some real rotgut vodka in his day, but this was certainly not the case for the stuff that the Colonel kept stocked. He took another pull on the drink and nodded approval.

The three SHADO operatives joined Sir Bryon for a formal dinner that evening. Although she didn't think she would need it, this time out, Ginny had brought a formal dinner dress with her. As was always the case, it was conservative but elegant. She was feeling quite depressed, and being able to still turn heads at forty, gave her ego a much needed boost.

“You look absolutely beautiful tonight, Ginny,” said Alec, as he pulled the chair out for her.

She smiled at him as she sat down, “Thanks, Alec,” she said, knowing that he meant it by the way he said it. *It's nice to hear that, even from a friend,* she thought.

The British Ambassador was hosting the dinner for several members of the Russian Parliament, the Supreme Soviet, as it was called. It was a public relations function having nothing to do with the current crisis.

One of the foreign languages that Ginny spoke was Russian and although she was a little out of practice, she was fluent enough to hold a meaningful conversation. Major Natiroff knew that she spoke Russian, as she would occasionally polish her skills with him back at HQ. Alec, however, had been caught off guard.

“I didn’t know you spoke the Russian language, Ginny,” he said, quietly to her.

Virginia gave him a wry grin, “I speak German as well, Alec. It’s in my file.”

“Hmm, I must have missed that somehow,” he said.

One of the Soviet Parliament members was talking about a new souvenir shop that had just

opened up. Ginny waited for a break in the conversation and then inquired about the shop.

“My mother is a collector, and one of the things she asked me to pick up for her was a *Matryoshka*, or *Nesting Doll*, as we call it,” she said.

“The shop has a very fine selection, Miss Lake, although some of them are a bit expensive,” said the Russian statesman, as he wrote down the address and handed it to her.

“Thank you very much,” she said.

Sir Byron said to her, “I can have my chauffeur take you tomorrow if you’d like, Miss Lake?”

“Thank you, Sir Byron, I’d like that.”

Chapter 3:

Alec Freeman was more than a little surprised to see Doctor Jackson when he walked in to the reception room of the embassy.

“Doug, what the hell are you doing over here?” he asked.

“Since you were not available to come to me for your quarterly check up, I decided to come to you,” he said, in his quiet reserved manner.

“This could have waited until I got back you know. Or maybe you were just looking for an excuse to get out of the office,” said Alec, as they shook hands.

As the two men walked to the infirmary, Jackson asked, “So where are Colonel Lake and Major Natiroff this morning?”

“The Major is out with Captain Yeltsin, scaring the hell out of old ladies, and Ginny went souvenir shopping for her mother this morning after she started the new database search,” said Alec, as they entered the embassy infirmary.

“Speaking of Colonel Lake,” Jackson began, “how is she doing? It’s no secret how she felt about Commander Straker.”

“She’s coping. You know Ginny, she’s a fighter. She’ll be all right,” said Alec. He paused a bit before continuing. “Doug, I’m worried about Ed. Don’t you think he’s rushing into this, I mean he and Mary both went through a lot of hurt. Can a person really forgive that much? Can they really love each other again?”

As Alec removed his jacket and shirt, Jackson pondered the question.

“It’s hard to say, Alec. Forgiveness is a very powerful force especially for two people who never stopped loving each other.”

“Do you believe that?” Alec asked. “That they still loved each other?”

Jackson was checking Alec’s heart rate and respiration, “Breathe in, please?” he asked, as he listened with the stethoscope. When he

finished listening he continued, “I’ve always believed that about the Commander. And I had a chance to speak to Ms. Nightingale, two weeks ago, when she came in for her security clearance.”

Soon after his divorce Straker had convinced the IAC to modify the security protocols for married personnel. It was an absolute necessity for Moonbase and Skydiver crews. The spouses were told about certain aspects of their significant other’s job function, assuming that they passed the security screening, although the alien aspect was still kept a secret. Had the program been in place at the beginning it might have saved four marriages, including the Commander’s.

“So, you spoke to Mary?” he asked.

“As part of the screening procedure, I interview all of the spouses just before they are told what they need to know. So, yes, I did speak to her, and based on things that she told me, I believe

that she never stopped loving him,” said Jackson. “When she was told that the Commander had never retired from the military but was still on active duty, her face lit up like a candle, it was like everything that had happened in the past became clear to her.”

While they talked, Jackson prepared to draw blood from Freeman’s arm.

“I hope you’re right, Doug,” said Alec, as he winced from the needle. “I just don’t believe that people can change like that.”

“An interesting point of view, Alec, but if that were true, you and I should have never become friends,” said Jackson, convincingly.

“That was different, you saved my life.”

“Yes, and your point is?” asked Jackson.

Alec considered this and found himself lost for words. He looked at his friend and shook his head.

“People grow and change, Colonel Freeman,” said Jackson, deliberately formal. “We grow in knowledge and wisdom. When you and I first met, it was highly unlikely that we would be anything but adversarial towards each other at worst, maybe loose colleagues at best. And yet here we are, Alec, on a first name basis.” He paused for a moment. “I should have the blood work done later today and everything else looks good.”

Freeman quickly got dressed. “Thank you, Doug, for everything.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Jackson said, bowing slightly.

The Rolls Royce pulled up in front of the quaint little shop just as it opened. The snow was just beginning to fall and the weather was supposed to get bad later that day. Virginia still had not become accustomed to the cold and the temperature had broken records lows this week.

She spoke to the driver, “I’ll only be about ten minutes.”

“Very good, madam, I’ll keep the car running,” the embassy driver told her.

She stepped out of the car and quickly walked into the shop. Once inside, Ginny found it to be surprisingly warm, and the air was scented with apple and ginger spice. It made for a relaxing atmosphere.

Virginia spotted what she was looking for on one of the shelves, a large hand-painted *Matryoshka*.

“May I see this item?” she asked the clerk in Russian.

“You have very exquisite taste, madam,” said the young man as he brought the Nesting Doll down from the shelf and placed it on the counter. “This is all handmade, and painted, by a local craftsman. It’s a fine piece of workmanship.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Ginny, as she opened it to reveal the nested parts.

Ginny opened each one of the dolls and was very impressed with the fine craftsmanship of the piece. *Mom will love this*, she thought to herself.

Outside the shop, the waiting limo was approached by two men. One of them stopped and tapped on the driver’s side while the other continued down the street. The chauffeur lowered the window, and asked in fluent Russian, “May I help you?”

“Yes, I wonder if you might tell me where Leonov Prospect is?” the man asked, politely.

The driver pointed toward the front and said, “Yes, it’s about two kilometers in...”

The man quickly smothered the driver with a handkerchief, soaked in anesthesia, and the chauffeur passed out. He jumped into the

driver's seat pushing the unconscious man aside. His partner climbed into the back.

“What now, Yuri?” said the younger man in the back.

“Now, we just wait for her to come out. Be ready,” said the older man, as he watched the area in front of him.

“I do certainly hope you'll come back and visit before you return to England, Miss Lake,” said the clerk, as he handed her the wrapped package.

“I will try,” said Ginny, sincerely. “Dasvidanya.”

Virginia left the shop and quickly walked to the waiting Rolls Royce. The snow was getting much worse and she was glad that she had run this errand now instead of waiting until later. She climbed into the car not noticing the man sitting in the back until the car was in motion. Before she could say anything, he swiftly

covered her face with the handkerchief. She made one muffled sound before she went limp. The car continued on the road heading away from the embassy.

“How the hell did that happen?” asked Alec, as he spoke to Colonel Letov over the phone.

“I’m somewhat at a loss, Colonel Freeman,” the Russian responded. “This is highly irregular as kidnapping a visiting dignitary will most certainly cause an international incident. Believe me, Colonel, I am doing everything in my power to locate her.”

“Do you have any leads?” he asked, desperately.

“The limo was found about two kilometers from the gift shop about twenty minutes ago. The driver was found in the vehicle unconscious in the front seat. He had apparently been drugged. Colonel Lake’s personal effects were found in the back seat. We spoke to the gift shop clerk

and she had left the shop around nine. So she's been missing for about two hours. Two men were seen with a woman, fitting Colonel Lake's description, driving away from the area where the limo was found. We're trying to trace the vehicle now. If I find out anything, I'll call you at the Embassy," said Letov.

"I hope so, Colonel. Just to let you know, the British Ambassador is most displeased over the matter. The British government is not going to take this lightly either."

"I understand their position, Colonel Freeman. I would feel the same way. We will do everything in our power to secure her release," Letov said, convincingly.

"One last thing, Colonel, if any harm comes to her, heads are going to roll. I'll see to it, personally," said Alec, as he hung up the phone.

Byron Sinclair regarded his friend for a moment before he spoke. "She means a great deal to you, doesn't she, Alec?"

Freeman looked at him, “Ginny and I are close friends, Sir Byron,” he simply said.

“I see,” said the British Ambassador. “I’ve always found it funny how we categorize our relationships, especially when we are trying to hide from our true feelings.”

“I don’t think I know what you mean,” Alec said, not very convincingly.

Sir Byron sat down across from his friend. “How long have we known each other, Alec? Twenty years?” He paused to light his pipe. “I saw the way you looked at her over dinner last night, Alec. When are you going to tell her?”

Byron Sinclair was one of Alec’s closest friends and he never could keep a secret from him. They spent years working together in MI-5, before Alec went to SHADO and Sinclair entered the diplomatic corps.

“I can’t deny it, Sir Bryon. I care for her a great deal. I always have. But her heart belonged to

someone else, someone who is, also, a close friend. Besides, she deserves someone better than me,” said Alec, as he shook his head.

“You sell yourself much too short, Alec, and judging from what I saw last night, her heart belongs to no one. She struck me as someone who is incredibly lonely,” he said, as he pulled a long draw on his pipe.

“You always were the perceptive one of the bunch,” said Alec. “But I really can’t talk about her situation. As I said, Ginny is a close friend.”

“Of course,” said Sir Byron, leaning back in his chair.

Colonel Letov shrugged off the veiled threat made by Colonel Freeman, as it made him seem quite Russian in demeanor. He had come to admire the man over the past couple of days and he regretted what he had planned for the three British agents. Unfortunately for him,

Colonel Lake's unforeseen abduction, would delay those plans.

The door to his office opened and Captain Yeltsin walked in. He approached the Colonel's desk and came to attention.

"You wish to see me, comrade Colonel?"

"Yes Vasily. Sit, please," said Letov, as he poured tea for both of them. He handed a cup to the younger officer.

"Thank you, comrade Colonel," said Yeltsin.

Letov finished pouring his own cup and leaned back in his chair.

"You have heard what happened this morning?" asked Letov.

"I did, comrade Colonel. It is a most unfortunate turn of events. You have a plan of course," he said, as he sipped his tea.

"I always have a plan, Vasily," said Letov, smiling. "You will instruct the sniper on each

team to target Colonel Lake, in addition to Major Stepanov. We will simply claim that she was killed in the cross fire. A simple solution, don't you think?"

"As always, comrade Colonel."

Slowly, she opened her eyes, her head still spinning from the anesthesia, and tried to take in her surroundings. It was quite warm so she assumed she was indoors, somewhere. She tried to move and realized that her hands were tied behind her back. She forced herself to sit up and take the weight off her arm, hoping to get the circulation going again. She had skipped breakfast that morning, in order to run her errand, and was now getting hungry. *That was a real bright idea, Virginia,* she thought to herself, *going off alone, in a foreign country, without a security escort during an operation.* She knew that she would entertain the wrath of

the Commander over this, assuming she survived her indiscretion.

She could hear a muted conversation, in the other room, in Russian. She strained to listen, hoping to ascertain information about where she was.

“How long has she been here?” asked a, somewhat irritated, male voice.

“Uncle Yuri’s men brought her in about an hour ago. She’s tied up in the back bedroom,” responded a female voice.

“Ilya, why is she still tied up? We need to gain her trust, not lose it.” The man was clearly agitated now.

“Vanya, listen to me. We have to be careful. If she escapes, she’ll tell the KGB where we are. We’ll all be shot, as traitors. You can’t untie her,” she pleaded, desperately.

“I must. Once I show her what we have, she’ll help us. She has to. There’s simply too much at stake,” said the man, adamantly.

As Ginny listened trying to make sense of the conversation, she realized that she may not be in as much danger as she thought.

“I’m going to release her and bring her out here so we can talk,” he said, decisively.

“Vanya, please don’t,” pleaded the woman.

“It’s my decision, Ilya, and it’s final.”

Ginny heard the heavy footsteps approach the door. The knob turned and the door opened and in the doorway stood Ivan Stepanov. *His picture doesn’t do him justice*, she thought, as she looked up at the Russian major. He was a tick over six feet and his sandy blond hair was cropped short. He had a slightly heavier build than Ed and Ginny saw warmth in his smile.

“Miss Lake,” he began, kindly. “I am Ivan Stepanov. I need talk to you. You will forgive my poor English, no?”

He knelt down to undo her bindings.

“I apologize about way you were taken,” he said, as he freed her.

Virginia decided to take a chance and she responded in Russian, “Thank you.”

“You speak Russian?” he asked, clearly surprised.

“Enough to get by,” she said, as she rubbed the circulation back in her wrists.

“Good, then our conversation will be much easier. Please let me help you up,” he said, reassuringly.

Stepanov stood and helped her to her feet and they walked into the kitchen where a slender dark haired woman was preparing food. She gave Ginny a disdainful look as she sat at the table.

“My sister, Ilya,” said Ivan.

“She speaks Russian?” asked Ilya, startled.

“Quite well, I might say. Her Russian is much better than my English,” said Ivan.

“How do you do, Ilya,” said Ginny, hoping to break the ice.

The Russian woman simply nodded to her and Ginny could tell she was not happy to have her out here.

“Ilya is going to make us something to eat, and then we will talk. Miss Lake, this is a matter of the gravest urgency. The safety of the entire world may very well be determined by the events of the next few days,” he said, in a way that made her skin crawl.

Chapter 4:

“Why did she not have a security escort?” asked Straker, clearly annoyed. “That’s standard procedure during an operation. Both you and Colonel Lake know that, and so do you, Major Natiroff.”

“It wasn’t his fault, Ed,” said Alec, doing his best to keep the wrath of his boss off the Chief of Security. “It was mine. Vladimir didn’t even know Ginny was going until she had left. Sir Byron is livid over the whole matter. This isn’t something that we even remotely expected.”

Alec had not seen his friend this angry since the day Foster had violated the *Washington Square* order a few years ago.

“That why security protocols exist, to guard against the unexpected. And exactly how is it your fault, Alec?” Straker asked, curtly.

“I knew last night she was going to go into the city. I should have arranged for an escort,” he said, simply.

“Wrong, Alec,” Ed interjected. “Virginia knows the regulations and it was her responsibility to see to it, and quite frankly I’m surprised she didn’t follow procedure.”

Alec had to agree as Ginny was a stickler for doing things by the book. He could only assume she was distracted, and her indiscretion was an oversight.

“Is Doctor Jackson there with you?” asked Straker.

“I’m here, Commander,” said Jackson.

“Doctor, I need you to stay on and assist Colonel Freeman. Do you still have your contacts in the KGB?” asked the Commander.

Jackson smiled as he answered, “I do, Commander.”

“Good, see what you can find out behind the scenes. In the mean time, we still have the primary mission to be concerned with. How are

your computer hacking skills, Doctor Jackson?” Straker asked.

“Not as good as Colonel Lake but I have other methods that might work,” said Jackson, wryly.

“I want to be informed as soon as you find anything. I want them both found, gentlemen, alive,” said Straker, as he closed the connection.

Freeman looked at the two other men and made a decision, “Well, we’re not going to be able to do anything about Stepanov today. It’s getting too late and the weather is getting worse. We’ll resume the search with Letov’s men tomorrow...”

“Letov,” interrupted Jackson. “Mikhail Letov?”

Alec quickly looked at his friend, “Yeah, Doug, you know him?”

“Only by reputation, Alec, he’s a man who has always carried a hidden agenda. He’s certainly not someone who can be trusted. This is who

you are dealing with?” asked Jackson, clearly shocked.

“Yes, he’s a Colonel in the KGB, the military counterintelligence section,” said Alec.

Jackson nodded as the situation suddenly came into focus, “Yes, this makes perfect sense now. You don’t remember, Alec, this was before you came to SHADO and I was still assigned to General Henderson’s staff. Both the United Kingdom and the United States were quite astounded that the Soviet Union so easily joined forces to sponsor and fund SHADO. It was later discovered that the Soviets had recovered a UFO a year before.”

Alec paled as he asked, “You not serious?”

“One of the men involved in the intelligence effort was then, Major Mikhail Letov, a member of Soviet military intelligence. He was requested by the commission to become a member of SHADO but the request was denied by the

Soviet government. It is inconceivable that he doesn't know our real purpose here."

"Damn, Ginny said that she didn't trust him. I should have listened to her," said Alec, clearly upset.

"Colonel Lake has an exceptional ability to judge character, Alec. That's why she makes such a good intelligence chief," said Jackson.

"Well, let's see what we can dig up through your sources. Do you feel like making some phone calls?" asked Alec.

"Of course," said Jackson, as he smiled.

"Major Natiroff, get down to the infirmary and see if the driver can give us any more information. Anything will help," said Alec.

"Right away, Colonel," said the younger man, as he stood to leave.

Alec Freeman sat alone in the conference room, his makeshift office, and considered the implications of what he had been told by

Jackson. For all he knew, Ginny could have been kidnapped by Letov's men.

Virginia sat at the table, after dinner, reading a book written on another world. *Well I tried to read it*, she thought as she flipped through the pages. Stepanov had told her about the book that he had stolen, from the crash site, and agreed to show her after they ate. It was getting dark and the weather was getting worse, as the storm continued to dump snow on the Russian capitol.

Ivan Stepanov was sitting in the next room near the door reading a book. He would look up, occasionally, and give her a reassuring smile. His sister, Ilya, was still in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner. She had not spoken more than two words to Ginny since she was released. For some unknown reason, Ilya did not like her, and Virginia was bothered by that.

Ginny went back to studying the book, and came across a section in the back that looked oddly familiar. It was an illustration of formula's that Ginny was sure she had seen before. Though the symbols and variables were unrecognizable, she was sure she saw a pattern.

“Ilya, do you have a pen and a pad?” she asked.

The Russian woman said nothing, but she went to a cabinet and produced a notebook and pen. She plopped them on the table and went back to what she was doing.

“Thank you,” said Ginny, determined to be polite, even if Ilya wasn't.

Ginny copied down one of the alien formula's that she thought she recognized, and began to transpose the alien writing with known symbols and variables. As she transposed the various elements she immediately recognized one of the formula's as Einstein's mass-energy equivalence formula.

“I don’t believe it,” she said, unable to contain her excitement. “This could be the key.”

Ivan quickly stood and rushed into the room. He quickly came to Virginia’s side.

“What did you find, Miss Lake?” he asked, as he sat down.

Virginia found herself caught in a conundrum, as she would violate security if she shared this with Stepanov. And she had no way to explain why, without opening a larger problem. She finally said, “I’m sorry, Major, I can’t tell you.”

Stepanov seemed unperturbed at that and Ginny was surprised by his reaction.

“I understand your organization’s need for security, Miss Lake, or should I say, Colonel Lake.”

The mention of her SHADO rank visibly shocked her. *Damn*, she thought, *how the hell did he find that out?*

Her shock was not lost on the Major and he quietly said, “As the Americans are so fond of saying, I think it’s time we put our cards on the table.”

“Vanya!” interjected Ilya. “You can’t tell her!”

“I must,” he said, strongly. “I told you before dinner we need to gain her trust.”

“You promised to wait until we spoke to Uncle Yuri,” she said, pleadingly.

“I know, but Colonel Lake has discovered something, and if we have to leave quickly I want her to come willingly, not as a prisoner.”

The conversation proceeded in very fast Russian, and Ginny had trouble keeping up. She finally spoke up, “Don’t I get to speak here?”

Ilya and Ivan looked at her as the room got very quiet.

“First of all,” Ginny began, “whatever gave you the idea that I’m a Colonel.”

“I’m sorry, Colonel,” said Ivan, “but I am very familiar with the United Nations International Astrophysical Commission operational unit known as SHADO.”

Well that’s it, Ginny thought, the gig’s up.

Ivan Stepanov collected his thoughts for a moment and then began. “Roughly fifteen years ago, I was flying air patrol over an isolated area in the Ukraine. My air controller vectored my patrol to intercept and identify an object that was picked up on radar moving at almost Mach 5. By the time we reached the area the object had landed. We overflew the area and loitered as long as fuel would permit.”

As Ginny listened, she felt an icy ball form in her stomach. *This mission just got infinitely more complicated,* she thought.

“A heavily armed squad, attached to the KGB, was dispatched to the area. They were attacked by the occupants of the craft, as they approached, and three of the ten men were

killed. The craft was recovered and moved to a special research lab run by the KGB military counterintelligence section. It's been there for the past fifteen years, but, so far, the researchers have discovered little about it," said Ivan.

Ginny stared at the window looking at the snow, as she contemplated what she heard. "Who is in charge of the project?" she finally asked.

"Colonel Mikhail Letov," he said.

Virginia's face went ashen as she realized the implications.

"I've got to warn my people..." she started to say.

"You can't, not now. Don't worry, they are being looked after. Letov's group, plans on using the technology, found in the alien craft, to forward their agenda. There are two factions struggling for power right now, and if the wrong one wins, it will mean the end of Soviet participation in

both, the UN, and SHADO,” said the Major, as he too, watched out the window.

Before Ginny could think, the door burst open and a man rushed into the room. Virginia recognized him as one of the men who abducted her.

“Vanya, Ilya, we must leave, quickly. The KGB is on their way!” said the young man, in a voice filled with fear.

“Virginia, you must trust us. Will you?” Ivan pleaded with her.

Ginny knew that she only had seconds to decide, but her inner voice told her she was safer with Ivan than she would be with Letov’s men. She smiled at him and nodded, hoping she was right. *The safety of the entire world, she thought, the end of history.*

The KGB squad pulled up next to the ten story apartment building in two vehicles, one in the

front of the building and one around the side. The KGB Lieutenant ordered the three men with him to follow him into the building. He had the other four set up a perimeter outside.

The sniper on the team quickly checked the photos of his two targets, he looked at one of the pictures, thinking, *what a waste*. But this wasn't the first time he had to kill a beautiful woman.

The four fugitives ran out the side door, of the apartment, and made a quick dash for waiting vehicle. The snow made the going slow and Ginny almost lost her footing. She had the book in a bag over her shoulder and was surprised that they left it to her to carry. She didn't have a hat and her blond hair was easy to spot.

Seeing movement on the side of the building, the KGB sniper trained his weapon on the

group. His heart skipped a beat when he spotted one of his targets, the blond woman making her way across the street to the nearby parking lot. The visibility was dropping and he switched on the laser sighting scope and drew a bead just below her neck.

They were only a few steps from the vehicle when Ivan saw the telltale red dot of a laser sight on Ginny's back, "Virginia look out!" he yelled, as he quickly went to pull her down.

The report of the rifle echoed between the buildings, and Ivan and Ginny fell to the ground. Virginia climbed to her knees and saw that Ivan was not moving, and she saw why, as the snow became stained with blood. "Ivan!" she yelled, as she reached to him.

The young man who had warned them came to Ginny's side and said, "I'll get him. Quick, get in the car."

Virginia did as she was told, and the man unceremoniously tossed the Major in and climbed in next to him as the vehicle sped off.

The KGB sniper had radioed to his team and they were soon getting in their cars to give chase.

“Did you get one of them?” asked the Lieutenant.

“Major Stepanov, comrade Lieutenant. I hit him in the left shoulder. He jumped in front of the woman just as I fired,” said the sniper. “It won’t be fatal, but it will slow him down.”

The Lieutenant considered this for a moment. *They’ll need to seek medical attention,* he thought, to himself.

“Very good, corporal,” said the Lieutenant, as he turned to his aid. “Have all the hospitals and clinics placed under surveillance. We will catch them off guard,” he said, with satisfaction.

In the vehicle, Ginny had removed Ivan's coat and begun to treat the gunshot wound. She was applying direct pressure to try to stop the bleeding. Ivan Stepanov was conscious but in extreme pain.

"He needs to get to a doctor," said Ginny, as she grabbed another four by four out of the first aid kit. "I can't stop the bleeding. The bullet might have nicked an artery."

"A doctor will be available once we get to where we are going," said Ilya, as she handed her brother a flask. "Here, Vanya, drink this."

Stepanov took the flask from her and drank a generous swig before handing the container back to his sister. He turned back to Ginny and said, "She's right, you know. By now the KGB will be watching all the hospitals and clinics in the city." Quietly he said to her, "I apologize for being informal earlier, Colonel. I meant no disrespect. A KGB sniper had drawn a bead on

you. I saw the laser dot on your back. Had he hit where he had aimed, you would have been killed instantly. So, please forgive me.”

Ginny gave him a grateful smile. “That’s all right, I don’t mind. Besides, it’s not every day that a man get’s to save a woman’s life.”

“And you are repaying that debt by tending to me. Although my given name is Ivan, my sister, and friends, call me Vanya,” he said.

Ginny had managed to slow the bleeding enough that she could start to bandage to wound. Quickly and methodically, she wrapped his injured shoulder with a pressure bandage and set his arm in a sling to keep it immobile.

“Do you consider me a friend?” she asked, as she finished the first aid work.

“I could easily consider you a friend, and so much...” his voice trailed off.

Ginny looked at him quizzically. “And so much what?” she asked, quietly.

Vanya looked out the window as he seemed to wrestle with something. He finally turned back to her and said, “So much more that is. I find you very attractive, Virginia. I wish we had met under different circumstances.”

Ginny was unsure of how to respond, as her heart was still in turmoil over what happened earlier this week. A couple years back she had made the fatal mistake of falling for Paul Foster, on the rebound, when Craig had died. While this was different, as she and Straker never had a relationship, other than close friends, she still had an emotional attachment to him. The loss was the same, and falling for another man right now would be a mistake. Regardless of how attractive she found Ivan Stepanov, she had already been there once and had no intention of repeating that indiscretion.

“We can certainly be friends, Vanya,” she said, hoping to avoid explaining herself.

“I see, you are encumbered,” he said, sadly.

“No, I’m not. It’s a long story,” she said.

She helped him get his coat back on as the heater was having trouble keeping up with the cold. They had made it out of the city proper and were driving down an unplowed road. The driver had switched into four wheel drive and had managed to evade the forces looking for them.

“We are lucky that the weather is so bad, it should keep the helicopters grounded,” he said, changing the subject.

“How much further?” she asked.

“Another hour, unless the weather gets worse,” Vanya said, looking out the window.

Virginia thought about the attack as they were leaving the apartment complex. It was inconceivable that the sniper didn’t know who he was aiming at. She had just become a target.

Chapter 5:

It was all that Alec could do to keep from hitting the man as the Russian Colonel causally announced that Virginia Lake was being considered a willing participant in the escape from the KGB forces. Because of that, she was being labeled as a security risk and would be detained upon her capture.

“That is completely unacceptable, Colonel! I won’t stand for it! You have no jurisdiction to hold her.” Alec shouted at the Russian, losing his temper.

“I’m afraid that’s the way it must be, Colonel Freeman. If she cooperates she may be released after questioning. If not, well, the cells at Lubyanka can be quite convincing,” he said, smugly.

Sir Byron Sinclair watched the two men banter back and forth about the problem. When he finally spoke, it brought an immediate silence to the room.

“Colonel Letov,” he began, quietly yet with a voice that would brook no argument. “I have been in touch with the Chairman himself, in regard to this matter. As Colonel Lake is working on an international project, she is afforded diplomatic immunity, as are Colonel Freeman, Doctor Jackson, and Major Natiroff. You should be receiving confirmation of that through your own chain of command. I trust that there will be no delay in returning her to the British Embassy when she has been located.”

Letov suddenly lost his steam and arrogance. His response was very cautious. “I will of course have to verify her status, but if the Chairman has made that decision it will of course, be carried out, Sir Byron.”

The British Ambassador nodded and said, “Very well, we shan’t keep you from your duties any longer. Good evening to you, Colonel.”

The dismissive attitude used by Sinclair passed an unspoken message; *you will do as you are told.*

Letov turned on his heel and walked to the door followed by an embassy guard. When he had left, Sinclair turned to his friend.

“You know, Alec, I always knew that you were never cut out to be a diplomat,” he said, with a chuckle. “But I’m very glad that you didn’t assault him. I wasn’t sure for a few minutes there.”

“I almost did, Sir Byron. The only thing that stopped me, was the fact that it would have caused you trouble,” said Freeman, quietly. “Had someone been in that chair that I didn’t know, I would have.”

Sinclair shook his head as he said, “lose your temper, you lose the fight, Alec. But you’ve been a bulldog for as long as I’ve known you.”

As the two men talked, Doctor Jackson came into the room. He greeted both men formally.

“Sir Byron, Colonel Freeman.”

“Alec, I’m going to retire,” said Sinclair. “I’ll leave the two of you to talk. Good night.”

“Good night, Sir Byron,” said Alec, as his friend stood and left the room.

Freeman turned to Jackson and asked, “Did you find out anything, Doug?”

“The KGB doesn’t know where they went as they lost them in the bad weather,” said Jackson, as he sat across from Freeman. “My contact had a very difficult time in digging up this information. Whatever Letov is working on, it’s classified at the highest levels.”

Freeman leaned back in his chair thinking about something Jackson had told him earlier.

“What ever happened to the UFO that the Russians recovered?” he asked, quietly.

“It disintegrated when the IAC retrieval team tried to move it,” Jackson said. “There was nothing left to study.”

“Are we sure about that?” he asked, knowing it wouldn’t be the first time the Russians have tried to hide UFO artifacts.

“I was on the retrieval team myself, Alec, so, yes. I’m quite sure.”

Freeman was still puzzled as to why Ginny would become a willing partner with Stepanov, *unless she knows something that we don’t.*

“Doug, let’s consider something. The book that Stepanov has possession of would be useless without the technology to go with it. Does that make sense?” he asked.

“Having the technology available would certainly be a plus, although there may be things in the book that could be useful on their own. But they had both the book and the spacecraft. If it was their intention to reverse

engineer it, then why turn it over then steal the book?” asked Jackson.

Alec was sure that he was onto something. “Picture this. The Russians recovered not one, but two alien craft, years ago. They hide one of them, and turn the other over to the IAC before SHADO is formed. They spend the next fifteen or so years trying to decipher the alien language and technology. But they run into the same problem we have. No common point of reference. Then, one day, they find a technical manual on the spacecraft. Virginia called it a Rosetta stone. So they have the book stolen and make it look like an independent act.”

Jackson considered this and shook his head. “It would be very easy for them to copy the book before they turned it over, so stealing it is an unnecessary detail. Stepanov must be acting alone.”

“If Ginny is cooperating with him, then there is a good reason for it. She knows something we

don't. And for her to do this, it would have to be something extraordinary.”

Jackson stood and walked towards the hallway. He turned back to face his friend. “You should get some sleep, Alec,” he said. “Maybe a fresh look in the morning will help you solve this puzzle.”

“Good night, Doug,” said Alec.

Jackson bowed politely and left the room and Alec allowed his thoughts to wander back to Ginny. Alec had never been a praying man, and truth be told, he didn't even know if he believed in God. Tonight, he found himself praying for her safety.

The mid-winter storm was turning into a record breaking event and the visibility was less than a quarter mile. The four wheel drive vehicle carrying the five unlikely fugitives, lumbered along the back roads of the Russian

countryside. In the back, Ivan Stepanov was beginning to shiver from the cold. *He's going into shock*, thought Ginny. *I have to keep him warm.*

She looked in the back and saw a heavy wool blanket which she grabbed and wrapped around both Ivan and her and pulled him close, hoping shared body heat would help. He was slipping in and out of consciousness, and she knew he wouldn't survive if they did not reach their destination soon.

“How much longer?” she asked.

Ilya turned to face her surprised at first to see them wrapped together, then nodded knowingly. “About another twenty minutes. How is he doing?” she asked, very concerned.

“Not well, Ilya, we need to get there soon or we're going to lose him,” said Ginny.

The Russian woman looked at her, without the scornful attitude she displayed earlier. “Thank

you for looking after Vanya,” she said, kindly. “And please forgive my previous behavior. I don’t always warm up to people, even in the best of circumstances.”

Virginia gave her a grateful smile and looked back at Ivan, who had slipped in to unconsciousness. She found herself on the edge of an emotional abyss, as she fought with her conflicted heart.

“I’m going to need help getting him inside,” she said, trying to distract herself from her feelings.

“Pavel will help you,” she said, nodding to the young man sitting in the back. “I believe the two of you have met.”

“Yes, we have,” she said, ruefully as she turned him. “I have you to thank for my headache, earlier.”

“Forgive me, Miss Lake. It was decided that using anesthesia would be the least traumatic

method of securing your abduction. We did not want any harm to come to you,” he said, kindly.

Virginia found the whole situation surreal as they lumbered along the back roads on the outskirts of Moscow. Ten minutes later they pulled up the driveway of a well maintained dacha. Ginny noticed that the security was tight as she saw at least four well armed guards. The vehicle pulled up to the front door and two figures emerged for the house. The vehicle doors opened and the group was led inside to the well warmed dwelling. Ginny shed her fur coat and immediately went to check on Vanya. He was placed on the couch in a sitting position and had regained consciousness. The nearby fireplace was roaring and it felt good after almost two hours in the cold.

“How are you feeling?” asked Ginny, as she checked his wound in the light.

“I had the most amazing dream,” he began. “I was sleeping in the arms of a beautiful woman, being cradled and kept warm in the darkness.”

“I see that you were hallucinating too,” said Ginny clearly embarrassed.

Vanya looked at her, and she could see that he was completely enamored of her. She flushed as she turned away, still fighting a battle with her heart.

An older man came in and asked, “May I have a look? I’m Doctor Romanov.”

“Of course,” said Ginny, as she stood to allow the Doctor to examine him. It also gave her a moment to collect herself.

While Romanov examined Vanya’s wound, Ginny heard a familiar voice call to her.

“Colonel Lake,” said the older man. “It’s nice to see you again.”

Virginia was totally unprepared for this. Standing in front of her, his hand extended, was

someone she knew very well, General Yuri Filtov, the Commander in Chief of the Soviet Air Force.

Ed sat in his office at HQ, having just gotten off the phone with his fiancée. Although she was disappointed, about him canceling their dinner date, she understood. He knew that Alec, and a few others, were concerned about his planned remarriage to Mary. *And once Alec finds out what we are planning, he'll hit the ceiling,* though Ed.

Mary had not spoke to her mother in almost five weeks, right after she told her that she was seeing him again. Her mother had thrown a fit and had even gone as far as to show up at restaurant, where they were having dinner that night, to make a scene. Much to Ed's surprise, his once and future wife stood her ground and told her mother to mind her own business and leave. It was her new found trait of

independence that Ed found as the driving force behind the rekindling of love between them.

Her initial call, inviting him to dinner had been nothing more than to clear the air between them. Since her divorce from Rutland she had been in therapy and one of the things that had hindered her progress was the unresolved tension between her and her former husband. She needed to forgive him and let go of the animosity that she had been carrying like a millstone around her neck.

She had admitted, in counseling, that the responsibility for what happened that day was hers and not Ed's, and she shared that revelation with him over dinner that evening. The conversation soon came to Ed's alleged infidelity and Mary had simply asked him if he had been unfaithful. When he still stuck to his story that he had not cheated, she chose to believe him, thinking that he had nothing to gain by lying about it now.

It was Mary who had initiated a second date, the one that had been interrupted by her mother, and Ed found that he could no longer deny how he felt, especially after hearing Mary tell her mother that she should have never listened to her and her meddling. Their initial courtship had been a whirlwind affair and Ed and Mary found themselves in that place again. A week later, he asked her to marry him and she happily agreed.

I should have told Virginia before then, he thought to himself. Straker was sure that distraction was the reason she had not followed protocol and he questioned his judgment for sending her on this mission right after she found out about his impending marriage. He had been well aware of her feelings, for some time, and he felt responsible for that.

Straker looked down at the report that Alec had sent over from Moscow. The British Government had stepped in and instructed Sir

Byron to contact the Soviet Chairman directly. His health was not good, and he was not expected to live much longer, but Sir Byron was able to speak with him personally and was assured that Colonel Lake would be granted full diplomatic immunity and pledged her return to the British Embassy once she was located.

Ed also read the footnote about Doctor Jackson's input concerning Letov. He was waiting for a call from General Henderson to see if the IAC could put pressure, on the Soviets, to remove Letov from this investigation. He suspected that the Russians were playing both ends against the middle. And it was beginning to look like Ivan Stepanov, and Virginia Lake, were being used as the rubes in an international game of Three Card Monte.

How do I get off this train? Virginia thought to herself as she sat down. General Filtov was the Soviet military liaison to SHADO. She had met

him soon after she became acting executive officer. If he was involved, then the security of the entire organization was at risk.

“I need a drink,” she said, quickly.

“Ah, Colonel, we’ll make a Russian out of you yet.” He signaled to one of his aids and two glasses of vodka were poured and set on the coffee table. “Sergei, please see to it that we are not disturbed.”

“Certainly, comrade General.”

Vanya had been moved to one of the bedrooms so the doctor could treat him and everyone else vacated the room, leaving Filtov and Lake to speak freely.

“General, what the hell is going on here?” asked Ginny, sharply.

“Relax, Colonel. I assure you that you are quite safe, and so is the security of SHADO. Drink your drink, and I will explain everything,” he said, switching to English.

Virginia took a long pull on the drink. She seldom partook of alcohol, as a matter of choice, but her nerves were shot and she was riding an emotional rollercoaster.

“As Major Stepanov has already told you, the Soviet government recovered an alien spacecraft almost fifteen years ago. What he didn’t tell you, is two craft were recovered. One of them was damaged and the other, the one we currently have, is in pristine condition. As SHADO was not yet operational, the IAC was supposed to be given possession of both of them. The decision was made by the Chairman, at the time, that the Soviet government would retain one of them for study,” said Filtov. He paused to sip his drink.

“That would be Colonel Letov’s group?” asked Ginny, clarifying the point.

“That is correct. In fact, the IAC had approached the Soviet government about the possibility of having Letov recruited into

SHADO. But that was not to be the case. The project came under the authority of the KGB and Letov was the man that the Chairman had picked to run it. I have only recently become aware of its existence. When a third craft was recovered last week, I managed to persuade the Chairman, and the Politburo, to release it to SHADO. It was then that I learned about the recovered technical manual. I enlisted the help of my niece and nephew to recover the book. They are both Soviet patriots and understand the gravity of the situation.”

“So they didn’t steal it from the crash site?” asked Ginny, caught up in the intrigue.

“No, Colonel,” said the General, as he paused collect his thoughts. “Vanya and Ilya, along with two others, broke into the KGB research station not far from Moscow. They found the alien document and destroyed the copies made. They were supposed to destroy the research center but something went wrong with the charges.

The building and all of the study material was destroyed but the alien craft remained intact. It has since been moved to an unknown location.”

Virginia considered the implications of this as she said, “So there are two factions in the highest levels of government vying for power. It sounds like you’re on the cusp of a civil war!”

“A very distinct possibility, Colonel Lake,” said Filtov. “The current chairman is an old man and he is not well. He is not expected to survive another year. And even though he supported this clandestine project, as did his predecessor, and his as well, it was always understood that should a breakthrough be made it would be shared, with first the IAC, and later SHADO. Keeping the craft initially was an insurance policy to protect Soviet interests. I’m sure that the Americans have done the same thing.”

“So what is going on that is changing the balance?” Virginia asked.

“There are two candidates being considered to replace the current Chairman when he passes. One of them is a very forward thinking progressive and younger man, who understands that Soviet society cannot, and will not, survive in its current form. I support him and his plan to gradually phase in changes that will take the Soviet Union into a new age more in line with the west. Under his leadership, this black project will be halted and all research and materials will be turned over to SHADO,” said Filtov, convincingly.

“Dare I ask the agenda of his rival?” she cautiously inquired.

“His rival, as you call him, is the last of the hardliners young enough to assume power. He plans to expand the KGB program and use the research to develop new technology to further the Soviet agenda. Colonel Letov is a staunch supporter of this man. This cannot be allowed to take place as one of the first things that will

happen is the withdrawal of the Soviet Union's participation in SHADO. I'm sure I don't need to explain the repercussions," he finished, with a deep tone of concern.

"General, I need to get in touch with my people at the British Embassy. There's too much at stake," she said, her voice betraying the fear that she felt.

"I'm making arrangements to get a message to the embassy now. We can't use the phones or normal communications routes as they are surely being monitored," Filtov said.

"Won't the KGB come here to look for Vanya? He is your nephew," she asked, unable to hide her concern.

"I see you have taken a liking to him," he said, kindly.

His statement brought color to her cheeks and she looked away in her embarrassment.

“You do care for him, much more than I suspected,” he said, with a hint of amusement. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Vanya is a good man. I think you will find that the two of you have a lot in common. To answer your question, the KGB would have come here had I not ordered Vanya’s arrest and detainment days ago. You see, Colonel, espionage, is as much about the illusion of the truth, as it is intelligence gathering.”

“So what do you need me to do?” she asked, hoping that he had a plan.

“I need you to compose a message to your people and I will make arrangements to have it delivered through my contacts. Surely you have a cipher that you can use.”

Virginia smiled for the first time and said, “I think I can come up with something.”

“I thought as much, but I must caution you. Do not reveal our location, even in code. I do not know the extent of Letov’s influence in the rest

of the organization, and if he learns of our location before we can move, all will be lost. Letov will not think twice about killing everyone here.”

The finality in his voice sent a chill up her spine, and she finished her drink as she shook her head, *I may need another one of these*, she thought. *This could set Soviet relations with the west back twenty years, and open the door for an all out alien invasion!* She knew she wasn't going to get much sleep that night.

Chapter 6:

Up well before dawn, after a few hours of restless sleep, Virginia sat in the main room of the dacha, translating the formulas in the alien manual. She had the fire still going and the room was quite warm. Outside, the blizzard continued showing no sign of letting up, as the

snow as still falling at the same rate as when they arrived. Engrossed in what she was doing, she did not notice him enter the room.

“Hello, Virginia,” he said, as he sat down next to her.

“Vanya,” she said, surprised. “I didn’t hear you come in. How are you feeling?”

“I’m sore, but the doctor fixed me up. It looks like I will live,” he said. “What are you working on?”

Virginia put aside her work as she answered, “Deciphering the Rosetta stone.”

She noticed his puzzled look and took pity on him as she went on to explain.

“The Rosetta stone was discovered in 1799 and it became the key to translating Egyptian hieroglyphics...”

“Ah, yes,” he said, interrupting. “It had the same message in three different languages, did it not?”

“That’s correct. Hieroglyphic pictographs, Egyptian Demotic, and ancient Greek, all carrying the same message,” said Ginny.

“Forgive my ignorance, Virginia, but I don’t see how this metaphor fits this book. I mean it’s all in one language, correct?” he asked, quizzically.

“Yes, it is, but certain universal constants often can be found in technical writing. The speed of light, Ohm’s Law, relativistic physics, the composition of hydrogen, are all universal constants. They become the known factor used to extrapolate the rest of the alien language,” she said.

“Back at the apartment, you said that you found something. Would you show me?” he asked.

“One of the alien equations stuck out because of the way it was written, so I substituted a known formula in its place and started filling in the other variables. As I did things started falling into place and I recognized some of it as advanced calculus. The formula I recognized,

was Einstein's mass-energy relationship. It was a shot in the dark but it worked. I've translated three pages so far," she said.

"May I?" he asked.

Virginia handed him the notepad she had been working on, having already decided that he would not be a security risk. In fact she saw him as a potential recruit into SHADO as he possessed the skill sets needed.

Vanya looked over the notes nodding with admiration.

"Virginia, this is brilliant. It all makes perfect sense. What is this section over here?" he asked.

He was pointing to the section that she had bracketed off from the rest of the page.

"I'm not really sure yet. It's very advanced calculus and the relationships are something I've never seen before," she said, as casually as she could. Virginia was sure she knew exactly

what that section was but it would be classified under Omega, as was the Timelash incident.

She was unaware that Ivan Stepanov held an advanced degree in mathematics and was shocked by his next statement.

“This looks like a relationship between time and energy,” he said, as he regarded her closely.

“I was unaware that you had an advanced understanding of calculus.”

“I have a Masters in Astrophysics. It is a dream of mine to one day, be allowed to complete my doctorate at Stanford or Cal Tech. Studying abroad is a privilege not often afforded to my countrymen,” he said, sadly as he looked out the window.

Ginny could empathize with him as she well understood the calling of the quest for knowledge. She suddenly realized that her attraction towards Vanya was not just physical.

They were kindred spirits. His uncle had been right after all.

“I see...” she said, suddenly lost for words as she felt her heart pounding in her chest. She knew that the handsome man seated next to her was seeing right through her façade.

“Virginia, I find myself not only attracted by your beauty, but by your brilliance as well. I simply have no words that do justice to how I feel when I’m near you,” he said, putting voice to what she felt in her heart.

She felt herself flush and it had suddenly become too warm in the room. Part of her wanted to run and hide but another force inside yearned for his closeness. Her face must have betrayed her feelings and she did not resist when Vanya slowly and gently kissed her. The touch of his lips to hers was lighting a long dormant fire inside her, and she reached to pull him closer as her heart won the battle with her mind.

When the long kiss had ended, he lovingly looked at her and said, “The doctor said that the bullet had indeed nicked my artery. Your attention probably saved my life, Virginia. I haven’t yet thanked you for that.”

“I think you just did,” she said, her voice shaky with anticipation, as she basked in the moment. “But I don’t mind if you thank me again.”

Her eyes closed as they drew together for another long kiss and she knew that she was falling in love with him.

Straker had spent the night at HQ and was woken when Alec called on the vidlink from Moscow.

“We’re sure that Ginny is with Stepanov, wherever he is, and the KGB has no idea where to look, but then again, neither do we. We need to reevaluate our stance on the wayward major, he may not be the problem here,” said Alec.

“After reading both yours and Jackson’s reports on the subject, I agree. Has the good doctor been able to dig up anything else?” asked Ed.

“I’m afraid not, Ed. Whatever Letov and his gang are up to, it’s surrounded by a very tight veil of security. He has it very well compartmentalized,” said Alec, letting some of his frustration show.

“What’s your game plan, Alec?”

“I’ve suspended the door to door search, at least our participation in it, until I find out Letov’s true intentions. Remember how I used to feel about Doug?” he asked.

Straker grinned as he recalled the animosity that once existed between Jackson and Freeman.

“You used to call him slimy, if I remember correctly,” said Ed, recalling the day in Henderson’s office.

“On his worse day, Doug was never as slimy as this creature. I almost put him in the ground last night. Had it not been for the trouble I would have caused Sir Byron, the man would have been on the floor. For now, the suspension of operations won’t cause a problem as nothing is moving with the weather being what it is,” said Alec.

“I heard it was bad.”

“Sir Byron told me that it’s the worst that he has ever seen. The storm has stalled and there is no let up in sight,” said Alec.

“I see, well let me know if you need me to run interference from this end,” said the Commander. He changed the subject to a personal matter. “As soon as I know you’ve wrapped up over there, I’ll be heading to the states for a week’s personal leave.”

“Is this for what I think it is? You know that I’d still stand up for you,” said Alec, somewhat disappointed.

“I know that, Alec, but Mary’s family, with the exception of her father, have all but ostracized her. Even her best friend isn’t talking to her. So we decided on a nice quiet private ceremony, just the two of us. And this time we’re going to take that honeymoon. Hawaii is still quite nice this time of year.”

“I understand Ed, but don’t be surprised if someone throws a party for the two of you when you get back,” said Alec, doggedly.

On the view screen Alec could see his friend shaking his head.

“Just keep it small, okay?”

“No promises,” said Alec. “I’ll be in touch.”

Alec thought about Ginny and how she would react to this. He was quite sure that she would attend out of a sense of duty if nothing else. *Maybe this isn’t such a good idea*, he thought to himself.

Ilya Stepanova walked quietly into the room where her brother and the British woman were, and sheepishly smiled when she saw them.

“My, aren’t we comfy,” said Ilya, just above a whisper, as she sat in the chair across from them.

Vanya and Virginia were sitting on the couch together and she had fallen asleep in his arms. He had been dozing himself and he was awakened by his sister’s voice. He went to waken Virginia but Ilya stopped him.

“No, don’t wake her, Vanya, she looks so happy and relaxed,” she said. “You wanted to gain her trust and I think you have most certainly done that.”

The Russian woman paused and looked out the window, seeing that the storm had not let up at all. She looked back at her brother seeing him more contented than she could remember. He had lived a lonely life and she felt partially responsible for that. Ilya was almost twenty

years younger than her brother and she had been an unexpected addition to the Stepanov family. But their parents were both staunch believers in the will of God and they accepted the gift they had been blessed with in the same loving manner they had given her brother. Tragically, both of their parents were killed in an automobile accident when Ilya was only two years old. Ivan was of age and he took responsibility for his kid sister and raised her himself with the help of his aunt and uncle. Because of the responsibility, he had little time for a social life.

“Do you love her, Vanya?” she asked.

Ilya and her brother had always been open and honest with each other, and she was sure she knew the answer.

“I do, Ilya,” he said. “I think I knew the moment I laid eyes on her. Does that bother you?”

“It might have, had I not seen the way she looked at you last night while she was treating you,” she said.

“Maybe she was just concerned for my well being,” he said, evasively.

“No, Vanya, it was much more than that. I may be your younger sister, but I’m also a woman. And as woman I can see things that you may not recognize,” she said. “Even in the apartment, I watched her glance at you as she dealt with conflicting feelings.”

“You’re very perceptive,” he said, conceding her point.

“As I said, I’m a woman,” she said, smiling now. “But I am also your sister, and as your sister I’m very happy for you.”

As they talked, Virginia stirred in his arms and opened her eyes. She sat up quickly when she realized they were not alone.

“I’m sorry, I fell asleep,” she said, trying to hide her embarrassment.

General Filtov’s aide walked into the room and announced that breakfast was ready and the three of them made their way to the dining room.

The mail clerk, assigned to the British Embassy, managed to walk to the postal station a few streets away. To his surprise the station had stayed open, despite the weather, and it was easier to walk than try to drive. He walked in and dropped the handful of letters in the slot. As he turned to leave he was approached by a middle aged man.

“May I help you comrade?” he asked.

“Yes, please deliver this to Alec Freeman,” said the man.

The clerk looked at the letter briefly, but when he looked back up the man was gone. He

decided to turn it over to the embassy security and let them deal with it.

After breakfast, Freeman met with Jackson and Natiroff, to plan their strategy. Circumventing the KGB outside of Russia was a difficult proposition, but within the borders of the Soviet Bloc, it slipped very close to being an impossible task. But what Alec lacked in finesse, he made up for in sheer bull doggedness. Stubbornness was a trait the Russians understood, and Alec possessed it to the nth degree.

Before they could get started, a knock came from outside the door.

“Come in,” said Freeman.

To his surprise, Sir Byron entered the room. He closed the door behind him and walked over to Freeman.

“Sorry to interrupt, Alec, but this letter was received under most interesting circumstances

this morning. Our mail clerk was stopped and handed the letter by an unknown party,” said the British Ambassador.

Alec looked the envelope over suspiciously seeing his name on it.

“It’s been checked,” said Sir Byron, as he noticed Alec’s apprehension.

Freeman quickly opened the letter and looked it over as it was in code. His heart jumped when he recognized the operative designator.

“It’s from Ginny!” he said, excitedly. “Vladimir, how long will it take you to decode this?”

Natiroff looked at the letter and said, “About fifteen minutes, Colonel.”

“Good, get right on it, we’ll meet back here in twenty.”

Freeman looked at his friend and for the first time in almost a week, he was grinning.

General Filtov enjoyed having a big breakfast as he ate lightly during the rest of the day. The Russian was in his mid sixties but he had the physique of a twenty year old, a trait somewhat unusual for someone in his position. It was rumored that he could keep up with the new recruits in an endurance run. Ginny had already noticed that he did not smoke which was another deviation from what she would have expected. But then again neither did Vanya, much to her delight.

While they ate, the General outlined his plan.

“The problem we have is getting Colonel Lake, and Major Stepanov, to the safety of the British Embassy. Once they are safe, our supporters in the government can openly broach the issue of Letov’s misconduct. He will be arrested for disobeying orders and his supporters will scatter to the wind. There are two forces at work here, and the most of the Politburo is, as the

American's like to say, sitting on the fence. They will side with the winners.”

“Uncle Yuri, can we not just have the embassy send a diplomatic vehicle?” asked his niece.

“That was my original plan, Ilya. But unfortunately, the KGB found out where you were and I had to have you all brought here. Safer in the short run, but sooner or later they will come. My men will, of course, fight to the last but we would be out numbered. We must move before then. Nothing would stop the KGB from attacking even a diplomatic vehicle on these back roads. They destroy the vehicle and wash their hands of it, dead men can tell no tales,” said the Russian General, convincingly.

“So what do we need to do, comrade General?” asked Vanya.

“While you were being patched up, Colonel Lake and I worked out a plan of action. This morning, I had a message sent to Colonel Freeman at the British Embassy. When the

weather breaks, a signal will be sent to the British. They will have a diplomatic vehicle sent to a specific location just inside the city limits. Both Colonel Freeman and Sir Byron will be waiting in the vehicle. Major, you and Colonel Lake will take my heavy staff vehicle and proceed to the rendezvous point. You will have to break through at least one check point, maybe two, but no more than that. The vehicle is lightly armored so you will be safe from small arms fire.”

“But Uncle Yuri,” Ilya began. “If the British know where we are can’t they go to the Chairman for help?”

“They don’t know where we are, Ilya,” said Ginny. “Your uncle was very insistent on that point.”

“Yes,” interjected the General. “The Chairman is not well, Ilya, and he is being pulled in two directions. This whole situation has the

potential to erupt into civil war. If that happens, no one will win.”

“And what about the signal, comrade General?” asked Ivan.

“It has been arranged and for your own safety that is all I can say, Vanya. You must trust me,” said the General.

Virginia looked outside seeing the snow continue to fall as she considered the future of her planet, her home, as it now hung in the balance.

Chapter 7:

Colonel Freeman had just received word that Lake and Stepanov were preparing to leave for the embassy. They were to meet at the rendezvous point at three o'clock this afternoon. In the reception room, he discussed the operation with friend the Ambassador.

“This could be very dangerous, Sir Byron,” said Alec. “I should go alone...”

“Absolutely not, Alec,” said his friend. “I’ve been in contact with both the Prime Minister and the American President and they both agree. My presence at the rendezvous is the best insurance we have that the KGB will fold and go home.”

Alec shook his head as he said, “If you’re killed, Sir Byron, it could trigger the very thing we are trying to avoid. Please, reconsider your decision.”

“Alec, I take my Royal Honors very seriously, and I swore a sacred oath to protect and defend the British Crown and her interests. Saving the life of Colonel Lake is certainly in our country’s best interest. She is also a close friend of yours, and you are a close friend of mine. As you can see I’m honor bound in that respect as well. I shan’t abdicate my responsibility.”

Freeman knew that it was useless to try to persuade him once his mind was made up. But

in all the years Alec had known him, he was usually right. In their days in MI-5 they had both saved each other's lives on several occasions. Alec would greatly mourn his loss.

"I thought I was supposed to be the stubborn one," he said to the Ambassador.

"You are, he said. "Come on, Alec. Let's go resurrect an old tradition."

The tradition that Sir Byron referred to was a small drink of scotch before the mission. The men would drink only half of the shot leaving the rest to finish when they returned safely. In the event one of them did not return, the survivor would finish his drink, and then finish the other, in memory of his departed friend.

Sir Byron raised his glass, "To your health, Alec."

"And to yours, Sir Byron," said Alec, as he toasted his friend.

The two men set down the half full shot glasses inside the cabinet so they would not be disturbed and they headed for the door. They planned on being at the rendezvous point well ahead of schedule.

As Virginia and Ivan were getting ready to leave, the General entered the room with two assault rifles and extra clips.

“I hope that you will not have to use these,” he said, gravely. “I am still not comfortable with you leaving now. You would have a better chance if you wait until the storm moves through. It will be dark by then.”

“I don’t agree, General,” said Ginny. “I’d rather meet my people in broad daylight, in full view of others. If the KGB opens up on the British contingent they’ll have to do so in public. I’m betting that they won’t risk it. Besides I’ve arranged for some insurance.”

Virginia picked up one of the AK-47's and expertly slapped in a full clip. She cycled the bolt and chambered a round. It was now locked and loaded. She repeated the procedure with the other weapon and handed it to Vanya.

This show of determination brought a smile to the face of the General, "You are stubborn, Colonel Lake, are you sure you're not of Russian descent?"

"British-American General, but I think my stubbornness comes from my mother's side," she admitted, with a slight grin.

General Filtov took her hand in both of his, "Stay safe, my friend." He turned to Ivan and added, "Vanya, you're going to have your hands full with this one."

The General took his nephew into a bear hug, "Keep safe, and look after Virginia."

"I will Uncle Yuri," he said. He stepped back and saluted. "By your leave, comrade General."

Yuri Filtov returned his salute, feeling great pride for his departed sister's son.

Ilya came up to Ginny and hugged her, "I'm so sorry I was so cold to you yesterday. As you can see, I'm quite protective of my brother."

"I understand, Ilya," said Ginny.

Ilya released her and turned to Ivan, "And you be careful, my brother, I don't want anything to happen to you," she said, through tears.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine," he said, with more confidence than he felt.

When the goodbyes had been said Ivan and Virginia walked out into the throes of the ongoing blizzard. Vanya opened the passenger door to let Ginny in. He walked around to the driver's side and waved as he climbed behind the wheel.

"Vanya, are you sure you don't want me to drive?" she asked.

“No, thank you. My arm is fine now, it’s better if I use it,” he said, as they started the long drive back to Moscow. The vehicle had been started and cleaned off and the heater was starting to warm the passenger compartment. But Virginia was much more warmed by the gentleness in his voice and the loving way he looked at her.

“So, Vasily, you understand the plan, do you not?” asked Colonel Letov.

“I do, comrade Colonel. My team is to set up within sniper distance of where Sir Byron and his party are waiting. When Colonel Lake and Major Stepanov arrive I will kill all of them, including the British Ambassador,” said Yeltsin, repeating the orders he had just been given.

“That is correct, Vasily. You understand what this will do, yes?” asked Letov.

“I do, comrade Colonel, the death of the British Ambassador will cause an immediate break in

relations with the United Kingdom which will soon be followed by the rest of the west. In short it will bring us to the brink of war,” said Yeltsin.

“Yes, it will. The peace lovers in the Politburo will have no choice but to prepare for it by supporting the KGB plan. With the technical information in the book and the craft to study we will develop new weapons of warfare,” he said, smugly.

“Don’t we risk the chance that the west will launch a preemptive strike?” asked Yeltsin.

“You forget, we have a significant second strike capability. No, the west will not initiate the conflict. They have no stomach for it. You seem on edge, Vasily, relax,” said Letov.

“Forgive me, comrade Colonel, I’m just very tired. It will be as you say,” he said, as he stood to leave.

“Good luck, Vasily.”

“Luck is going to have nothing to do with it, comrade Colonel,” said Captain Yeltsin, confidently.

Ed Straker was beside himself over what he was being told over the phone. He had not gotten much sleep over the past few days and it was starting to take its toll.

“General, this is got to be the craziest idea I’ve ever been a party to. I don’t like the thought of my people being setup for an ambush,” he said, icily.

“Commander Straker, you must trust me. There is no other way to do this, and maintain the illusion of truth, I wish there was,” said the General.

“Very well, but keep me posted,” said the Commander.

As soon as this is over, he thought, Mary and I are getting on that plane before something else can go wrong.

Between the treacherous road conditions, and the gravity of the situation, a disquieting silence had come between them. Ginny finally broke the tension.

“So, have you considered what you are going to do when this is all over, Vanya?” she asked, quizzically.

“I’m just trying to think about surviving, Virginia. I can’t let myself be distracted by what may come after,” he said, keeping his eyes on the road.

She reached out and took his hand and he was surprised how warm it was. Yet she was trembling, not from cold he decided.

“Have you thought about staying in London?” she asked.

“You mean defect? I couldn’t, Virginia, it would dishonor my family,” he said, repulsively.

“No, of course not, Vanya. I would never ask you to do that!” she replied, defensively. “I thought you might consider joining SHADO.”

“I was of the understanding that you had to be asked to join,” he said.

“Yes, or be sponsored by a senior member of the command staff,” she added.

Ivan considered her proposal, accepting it would end his dream of studying at Cal-Tech or Stanford. He was envious when Virginia had told him that she was a graduate of Stanford, and he was awestruck to learn she had turned down a teaching fellowship there.

“You would sponsor me?”

“I would gladly recommend your acceptance. You have a unique skill set and could fit into several key positions in the organization. If you

were stationed in London you could finish you're doctorate at Cambridge.”

Ivan considered this, *to study physics in the same university that Sir Isaac Newton once attended, would be an honor indeed.*

“You have to be accepted to Cambridge, do you not?” he asked, as reality set in.

“As a member of SHADO, you would have some powerful sponsorship, and I've seen your prowess in mathematics already. You may have to take a placement test, but I'm sure that most, if not all of your credits would be accepted,” she said, convincingly.

Ivan held her gaze for a moment and turned back to the road.

“Would you be doing this for me if you felt nothing for me?” he asked, quietly.

Ginny flushed briefly, “I can answer that honestly. My recommendation has nothing to do with how I feel about you personally,

although I will admit I like the idea of having you around.”

“Truly?”

“Yeah,” she said with an impish grin, as she leaned over to kiss him.

The motorcade from the British Embassy arrived at the rendezvous point, not more than a few hundred yards from a KGB run checkpoint near the city limits. Alec had expected the checkpoint to be reinforced but he saw no additional manpower or vehicles. Knowing that the Russians were usually predictable, seeing them do the unexpected unnerved him. Sinclair and Freeman climbed out of the Rolls Royce and stood next to the vehicle. The snow had finally begun to taper off but the temperature was dropping rapidly.

“I’m getting too old for this, Sir Byron,” he said to his friend. “I smell a trap.”

The British Ambassador nodded, “I tend to agree, whole heartedly, Alec. Our Russian friends are most certainly up to something. I guess will just wait and see.”

Accompanying the two men, were four Royal British Marines to act as a security force. All four of the men had volunteered for this mission knowing full well the risk involved. They took up positions nearby with weapons at the ready.

Alec couldn't help but admire the strength and character of his friend as he considered the ambassador to be one of the bravest men he knew.

“You know, your wife will never forgive me if something happens to you,” said Alec.

The British Ambassador just grinned, “You underestimate her, Alec. My wife, Laurie, is a good woman and she knows that I do what I must. She has always been a source of

unwavering support. You should try marriage sometime. You might find that you enjoy it.”

“My problem has always finding someone who would put up with me. As much as I care for Ginny, the truth is, she wouldn’t put up with me for very long. She’s quite capable of chewing me up and spitting me out should I step out of line in the slightest,” said Alec, wistfully.

“Maybe that’s what you need, said Sir Byron.

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” replied Freeman, as he looked at his watch. “It shouldn’t be much longer now.

Freeman noticed another vehicle pull up nearby and saw the American flag flying on the front. He turned to Sinclair questioningly.

“A bit of added insurance,” Sinclair said, “compliments of the American President.”

Virginia had placed the weapons where they could be reached easily by both of them,

expecting that they would certainly need them before this was over. She had discussed the future with Vanya but knew the chances of them getting out of this alive were less than ideal. *If I'm going to die, I'd rather go down fighting,* she thought to herself.

“There should have been a checkpoint here, Virginia,” said Ivan, with a puzzled tone in his voice.

They were about two miles from the city limits and Stepanov knew something was wrong having driven this route many times. “If the KGB moved the checkpoint they did so for a reason,” he added.

“The snow has let up,” she said. “How much further till we reach the city limits?”

“A little less than three kilometers,” he said. “Virginia, there is something I don't want left unsaid in case...I love you.”

She leaned over and kissed him and she said, “Don’t you even think about that. And I love you too.”

The vehicle lumbered down the road as the couple continued towards their rendezvous with destiny.

Captain Yeltsin and his squad of men pulled into the square a few hundred yards from the check point and less than a hundred yards from the British contingent. Yeltsin turned to his sniper and asked, “Do you have the ammunition?”

“Yes, comrade Captain,” said the KGB sergeant. “The round is chambered in my weapon.”

“And the additional material?” asked the Captain.

The sergeant handed Yeltsin a small tin box which the KGB Captain opened and inspected. He quickly nodded his approval.

“You understand my instructions sergeant?” asked Yeltsin.

“Quite clearly, comrade Captain,” responded the sergeant.

Yeltsin turned to the rest of his team noticing the presence of the Americans nearby.

“The rest of you men will not open fire unless, and until, I give the word. Do I make myself clear?” he asked, emphatically.

“Very clear, comrade Captain,” his team responded.

The KGB team dismounted and took up positions nearby.

“Do you see that, Sir Byron?” asked Alec, as he pointed to the new arrivals.

“I see it, Alec,” said the Ambassador. He turned to the marines and said, “No one is to fire without my instructions, am I clear?”

“Very good, sir,” said the squad leader.

“We’re going to be sitting ducks, said Freeman, sardonically.

“It may very well be, Alec. We’ll know in about thirty seconds,” he said, as he pointed to the road beyond the road block.

A lightly armored staff vehicle was bearing down on the road block and it showed no signs of slowing down.

Ivan Stepanov knew the roadblock would have tire shredding devices laid in the roadway. He needed to get the speed of the vehicle high enough so the momentum would carry them to where the British force was waiting. *Virginia’s chances for survival had just increased significantly, he thought. But the KGB force would think nothing of gunning him down in front of the British and call it an internal matter.*

“Virginia, I need you to listen to me, and do exactly as I say,” he said, with a tone of finality. “When we stop, leave the weapons, and make a run for the Ambassador’s party. Don’t stop, and don’t look back, no matter what happens.”

“No, Vanya, we go together, we can...”

“Virginia, please,” he said, interrupting. “This is the only way. I need you to trust me, no matter what happens.”

Ginny hated giving up control, but she had come to respect the Major as much as she loved him. She nodded her head in silence.

Chapter 8:

The KGB team, at the road block, opened up on the approaching vehicle with small arms fire when it became clear that they had no intention of stopping.

As Alec watched, in dismay, he found himself praying, *Dear God, protect them...*

The staff vehicle crashed through the gate as the KGB men dashed out of the way. Behind the wheel, Ivan fought to maintain control as the tires were torn open by the shredders. The windshield was difficult to see through as it was splayed with bullet marks. He managed to coax the vehicle close enough to the British limo to give them a fighting chance.

The KGB sergeant trained his weapon on the vehicle as it slid to a stop. He knew he would only get one shot. Behind him, Yeltsin spoke into the radio to the roadblock forces, ordering them to stand down.

Virginia and Ivan climbed out of the passenger side and broke into a run. To her, it seemed as if

they were running in slow motion, and it took forever to close the forty or so yards between them. She quickly glanced back at him to make sure he was following her.

The KGB sergeant drew a bead on one of the running figures and squeezed the trigger.

Virginia heard the rifle report just as she reached Freeman. She quickly turned and saw Stepanov fall to the ground less than ten feet from safety.

“Vanya!” she screamed, as she tried to break free of Alec’s grip.

“Ginny, no, wait,” he said, trying to keep her out of harm’s way.

“Let me go, Alec, please...”

Sir Byron Sinclair walked to Stepanov and knelt at his side and checked his pulse as Captain Yeltsin and two KGB men approached.

“Hold your fire,” said Yeltsin, both to his men as well as the British marines.

Alec had released Ginny, and she quickly went to where Ivan had fallen, kneeling at his side.

“Vanya...”

“I’m sorry, Colonel Lake, he’s gone,” said Sinclair sadly.

Virginia broke into tears and began weeping uncontrollably now as she buried herself in Stepanov’s lifeless body.

“Vanya...oh, Vanya...why, oh God, why?” she was saying through her tears. “Noooo...”

Sir Byron stood and faced the Russian Captain as Ginny sobbed behind him, “It would appear, Captain, that this incident is over. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Yeltsin nodded, “Yes, it is of course regrettable that they did not stop at the roadblock. Major Stepanov’s death would have been unnecessary. It is tragic of course.”

“Yes, tragic indeed,” said Sir Byron, disdainfully. “Well I shan’t keep you from your duties. My associates and I will be returning to the embassy with Colonel Lake. I trust that there will be no further complications.”

“It will be as you say, Sir Byron,” responded Yeltsin, icily.

Sinclair turned to leave and stopped suddenly looking back at Yeltsin, “And please, give my regards to Colonel Letov.”

“It will be my pleasure,” said Yeltsin.

Sinclair and Freeman gently lifted Virginia, still crying uncontrollably, to a standing position and walked her to the waiting limo. Yeltsin watched them climb into the vehicle and drive away.

“Take him and place him in my vehicle,” ordered the Russian Captain, pointing to Stepanov’s body.

The two men did as they were told and Yeltsin climbed in the back of the waiting vehicle.

“The Kremlin,” he said to his driver.

“We’re not going back to Lubyanka, comrade Captain?” asked the puzzled driver.

“No, please follow my orders, corporal,” said Yeltsin, dismissively.

“As you say, comrade Captain,” said the driver quickly, knowing he had just used up a year’s worth of tolerance.

In the back, Yeltsin opened up the tin and read the instructions contained inside. He nodded his satisfaction and went to work.

In the Rolls Royce, Virginia had, somewhat, pulled herself together although she was still silently crying.

“Ginny, I have to report to Ed, as soon as we arrive at the embassy. Were you able to recover the book?” he asked, feeling somewhat guilty about raising the question now.

She nodded knowingly and unzipped the lining of her fur coat revealing a hidden pocket. She handed the book to Alec along with a steno pad.

“I started transcribing some of it already. It will save our linguistics people some time,” she said, wistfully.

“I’m sorry, Ginny,” he said, sincerely.

She leaned against his shoulder as she broke into weeping again being held in her friend’s arms.

Late that afternoon, Captain Yeltsin walked into Colonel Letov's third floor office. He stood at attention in front of his superior.

"Things did not go exactly as planned, did they, Captain Yeltsin?" he asked, somewhat sarcastically.

"They did not, comrade Colonel. But we did recover the recordings and the book," Yeltsin replied, as he handed the book and what looked like a pen to his boss.

"And Major Stepanov?" asked Letov.

"That particular problem is no longer of any concern, comrade Colonel," said the Captain.

"So tell me, Captain. Why did you not follow my instructions?" asked the Colonel, pointedly.

"The American Ambassador showed up on the scene as well, I didn't think it would be prudent to proceed as planned, comrade Colonel," said Yeltsin.

“Hardly a reason to deviate from the plan, Captain, I truly hope for your sake you have a better reason than that,” said Letov.

“I received a communiqué from General Popov, just before the operation began countermanding your orders,” said Yeltsin.

“What!” exclaimed Letov intensely, as he stood up from his desk.

The office door burst open and General Popov quickly entered the room, flanked by two KGB corporals.

Letov suddenly lost his steam as the General came face to face with him.

“Comrade General, may I ask what is going on?” Letov asked, pensively.

“Colonel Letov,” began the General, formally. “I am relieving you of command, and placing you under arrest, for crimes against the state. Specifically, you are being charged with

conspiracy to murder a foreign dignitary, and conducting unauthorized operations.”

“Comrade General, I was following orders,” Letov said, pleadingly.

“You can mention that at your trial, if you so choose,” said the General. He turned to Yeltsin and asked, “Did you not have a message for the Colonel, Captain Yeltsin?”

“Ah, yes, I did, comrade General.” He looked at Letov and said in a voice full of contempt, “Sir Byron Sinclair, sends his regards, *Colonel.*”

“Take him away,” ordered the General.

The two corporals very quickly hustled the Colonel out of the office. When they had left the General turned to face Yeltsin.

“You did very well, Vasily, at times I was sure you had fallen under his influence. It was an outstanding performance,” said the General, admirably.

“As always, comrade General, it is both a privilege and a duty to serve the state,” said the Captain now standing at rigid attention.

“I understand you’re meeting with your fiancée shortly?” asked the General.

“Yes, comrade General. She and her uncle were due to arrive in Moscow twenty minutes ago,” he said.

“I won’t hold you any longer then. Please give her uncle my regards.”

“I most certainly will. Thank you, comrade General,” said Yeltsin. He turned on his heel and walked out of the office.

In the reception room, of the British Embassy, sat the four members of SHADO and the British Ambassador. They were involved in a discussion, recapping the events of the past few days.

“So, thanks to Doug’s contacts, we were able to pull the whole picture together. All of those who were willing participants in this conspiracy have been arrested and are being held by either the KGB or the GRU,” said Alec. “The black project, that Letov oversaw, has been disbanded, and all of the research is going to be turned over to SHADO. By the way, Sir Byron, it would have been much easier had I known that you were aware of the existence of our organization.”

“I’m sorry about that, Alec, but it was decided for security reasons that my knowledge of SHADO be kept a secret. I was only to reveal that to you if the situation warranted,” the Ambassador said, apologetically. He continued, “By the way, three members of the Politburo were arrested by the KGB late this afternoon on charges of treason. I rather suspect that the whole affair will be concluded by tomorrow evening, trial and all.”

While the rest of them bantered on, Virginia sat silently, working on a sketch pad. She had he poured out all the grief she was capable of, for now, and was trying to find a way to deal with a pain in her heart that was physical. Slowly but surely, under her gifted hand, formed the likeness of Ivan Stepanov.

Sitting next to her, Doug Jackson watched her work with keen interest. He had always marveled at her professional cool demeanor. He had been shocked by her condition when she was brought in and was very concerned for her well being having seen her suffer two losses within a week. But his concern was abated slightly as he watched her turn her grief into something positive through artistic expression, a widely accepted method of therapy.

She must have felt his gaze as she suddenly looked over at him.

“You find this more interesting than the debriefing?” she asked, amused rather than perturbed.

“Yes, Colonel, I do, for a couple of reasons,” he said, quietly.

When she held his gaze, he took it as an invitation to continue, “We all deal with grief in different ways, and I was concerned about how well you would handle the situation. But seeing you funnel your loss into a positive expression, I think you will transcend this difficult time in your life,” he said, privately.

“I won’t lie to you, Doctor Jackson, it hurts. I could fall apart again just by thinking about it,” she said sadly, as she wiped a tear. “See what I mean?”

“I would be more concerned if you tried to suppress the emotions, rather than let them surface. I am, of course, always available if you need to talk about it,” he added.

Virginia remembered her initial assessment of the good doctor and how she thought he was a cold icy glacier of a man. But over the years, she began to see how grossly she had underestimated him and how much warmth Doug Jackson had inside. It was a lesson she took to heart.

“Thank you,” she said, sincerely. “You said there were a couple of reasons for your interest?”

Jackson smiled, “Ah, yes, I knew of your musical talent but I had no idea that you so gifted in this area.” He paused and pointed to the drawing, “May I?”

She handed him the pad and he looked it over with an appreciative eye.

“This is excellent work, Colonel Lake. How long have you been drawing?” he asked.

“Not long, a few months maybe, Ivan was only the second person I’ve ever drawn,” she said.

Jackson highly suspected that the one other person she had put to paper was the Commander.

“What are you going to call this picture,” he asked.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Ginny, looking at him quizzically.

“Many artists will name their works when they are finished,” he said.

“Oh that,” she said. “I could call it, *Vanya*, but if I were going to name it I’d call this picture *Heartbreak on the Moskva*.”

While Jackson and Lake were talking, Alec was called to the phone. A few minutes later he came back in and approached her.

“Ginny, the Major and I are going to this little bar not far from here. We’d like you to come with us,” he asked.

“No, you two go ahead,” she said. “I’m really not in the mood for socializing.”

“That was Ilya Stepanova on the phone. She is going to be there with her fiancée, and she would like to see you before we leave tomorrow,” said Alec.

“It’s a Russian tradition, Colonel Lake,” added Natiroff. “At midnight we will all drink a drink to Ivan’s memory. To refuse, would be an insult to his sister and his family.”

“Well seeing as you put it that way, I guess I have no choice. When are we leaving?” she asked.

“About fifteen minutes, and speaking of traditions, we have one to finish, don’t we, Sir Byron?” asked Alec.

“Yes we do, I almost forgot,” he said. as he got up and went to the liquor cabinet.

He retrieved the two shots and handed one to Freeman.

“To a successfully completed mission,” he said.

“And to absent friends,” added Alec.

The two men finished to half shots and Sinclair closed the cabinet.

The bar that Alec had picked was less than a half mile from the embassy. The trio from SHADO had arrived just before midnight. Virginia had ordered a double deciding that she was going to allow herself to indulge for once. She was already starting to get a bit tipsy and she hoped the vodka would warm her up. Except for falling asleep in Vanya's arms, she had been cold since she arrived.

In the background the local band played, not the kind of music that she cared for, but at least they were in tune. As the men played on, Ginny thought of the few people that she had been romantically involved with and how all the relationships had ended sadly. Her failed marriage, where her husband had cheated on her with her best friend, Craig Collins, who died at the hands of the aliens before their love had a

chance to blossom, Paul Foster, a rebound relationship that was doomed before it got off the ground and Ed Straker, the promise of romance cut short by his ex-wife's return to his life. And now Vanya, who was tragically killed and she was not even comforted by the fact that she had told him that she loved him. Virginia found herself slipping into depression.

The snacks on the bar were stale and Alec had said the beer was bad. *What the hell am I doing here*, she asked herself. She noticed a man standing near the door watching everything and everyone. *KGB no doubt*, she thought. *I've had it with espionage, hell I just want to get somewhere warm. Maybe southern California would be nice, it's noontime there now.*

"Ilya said that she'd be here before midnight," said Alec, before he noticed how haggard she looked. "Are you okay, Ginny?"

She looked at him and the tears began to flow as she could no longer hold back her grief. Gently

her friend took her in his arms and she began to cry earnestly.

While Ginny cried, Major Natiroff saw Captain Yeltsin come in with a dark haired young woman. The couple walked up to him and Natiroff was surprised when he said, “I believe you are waiting for my fiancée. My I introduce Ilya Stepanova.”

“How do you do, Major,” she said, in greeting.

“It’s an honor, but I must admit to being confused,” said Natiroff.

“It’s a long story, I’ll explain in a minute. Where’s Virginia?” she asked.

Ginny heard Ilya’s voice and went to hug her still crying. The two women embraced and Ilya said, “I have someone who wants to say hello.”

“I don’t want to meet anyone right now, I’m a mess,” she said, through her tears.

“In that case maybe I should go home,” said a familiar male voice.

Virginia opened her eyes blinking out her tears and stared in disbelief. She was sure she was seeing things until he spoke again.

“Well, don’t I even get a hello?” he asked.

Ginny rushed into his waiting arms crying, “Vanya...how is this possible?”

Ivan Stepanov held her while she cried in both joy and disbelief.

“We thought you were dead, Major,” said Alec, as he shook hands with Stepanov.

“It was my uncle’s idea,” he began. “We didn’t know who we could trust in the KGB so we planned it to look like I had been killed. The round I was hit with was a deep tranquilizer that simulated death. Vasily gave me the antidote once I was in the car. When we arrived

at the Kremlin, I gave the Chairman evidence of Letov's treason. I was no longer a target. We had to be careful, as the head of the KGB was involved. He was one of the Politburo members arrested this afternoon."

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you," he said now to Virginia. "It was risky enough as it was. Only four of us knew the whole truth, Ilya and Vasily, Uncle Yuri and me."

"I'm just glad you're alive!" she said, as she smothered him with kisses.

Epilogue:

Ilya Stepanova and Captain Vasily Yeltsin were married two weeks later. They were both recruited into SHADO and Captain Yeltsin became Chief of Security at the New York tracking station. His wife is a member of the

research team at the SHADO Research Center working on deciphering the alien language.

Mikhail Letov was convicted on all charges and shot before a firing squad a few days after the SHADO team left for England.

The three members of the Politburo including the head of the KGB were found guilty of treason and sentenced to be hanged.

General Igor Popov was promoted to acting head of state security a position that later became permanent when the new Chairman took over later that year.

General Yuri Filtov continues to serve as head of the Soviet Air Force and as the Russian military liaison to SHADO.

Commander Edward Straker remarried his ex-wife Mary in a private ceremony in Las Vegas, Nevada, that day. The couple flew to Hawaii after the ceremony and they were able to have

the honeymoon that they had missed the first time around.

Major Ivan Stepanov was accepted to SHADO and promoted to Lt. Colonel. He heads up the London based Aeroceptor squadron, and is working on completing his doctorate at Cambridge. His new fiancée, Colonel Virginia Lake, continues to act as intelligence chief at SHADO HQ. She and Ivan visited her mother in Brighton where Ginny presented her the *Nesting Doll* she bought in Moscow.

END