Soul Mates
A UFO Story

Written by Matthew R. White
© April 12, 2010

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 immediately after the episode “Timelash”, written by Terence Feely, and encompass the episodes “Mindbender”, written by Tony Barwick, and “The Long Sleep”, written by David Tomblin. The story contains dialogue
from those episodes. Certain dialogue also refers to the short story “By Invitation Only” written by Catherine Stewart. It may be found in the SHADO Library. The reader may wish to refer to them as a referent.

Prologue:

December 1, 1984: 16:00Z

“Commander Lake,” Henderson addressed her formally, “I am relieving you of your command.”

Virginia Lake shot Henderson a venomous look as she held his eyes with hers.

“On what grounds, General? Unless you can charge me with gross dereliction of duty; you need the unanimous vote from the commission.”
“You don’t think I can get it?” barked Henderson.

You don’t have it yet, and testimony from two officers is required to bring a dereliction charge. Lake did not raise her voice when she responded, however her tone was chilling. “Do you have two officers who will stand in support this action?”

Henderson, staring back, said nothing.

I didn’t think so. “Now if you will excuse me, I’m needed in control,” she said as she walked over to the desk to open the doors.

The General interrupted, “Just a minute Commander, I want some answers.”

She spun around to face him; her voice masking the anger she felt, “General, I don’t have time for this.”

Heatedly the General asked, “Why are you wasting time and resources to track down this one UFO when we could have an invasion from
within on our hands. Do you really except to find Straker alive? He has been missing for over a week. The aliens have probably gutted him like a catfish, and left him for dead. You’ve lost your objectivity; I don’t care what the computers say. And one more thing, don’t think for a minute that just because your father and I were friends that I will tolerate from you what I put up with from Ed Straker. As much as you may not believe it, Straker had always held my utmost respect.”

Lake held his eyes with the characteristic icy blue glare that was her birthright. Her expression was one of tightly concealed fury. “General, that’s as far as you go. You know as well as I do that if the aliens get off planet with either Straker, or the knowledge he possess we can kiss any benefit from the last six months of upgrades goodbye. As a matter of fact, I didn’t have any hope of finding him alive until twenty minutes ago, and I will be damned if they are
going to use him against us. He wouldn’t have it and neither will I.”

“And what will you do if the craft lifts off before Foster can get into position?” asked the General his voice lowered slightly.

“My duty, General, whatever I have to.” Lake walked out of the office with the general in tow. “Lt. Ford, get me Colonel Foster.”

General Henderson watched, but said nothing.

“Yes ma’am.” Ford replied.

A few moments later the image of Paul Foster came on the vidscreen. “Foster here.”

She flipped up the microphone, “Paul, what’s your status?”

Seated in the command mobile Foster looked at his map, “We tracked the UFO to an area near Urquhart Bay on Loch Ness. Straker’s Utronic transponder indicates somewhere near the
deepest point. It’s at least 750 feet deep and the visibility is very poor. I will have the other mobiles in position for a depth charge attack in about twenty minutes.”

On the vidscreen Virginia nodded, “Thanks, Paul keep me posted.”

“Will do, Foster out.”

Lake walked over to the command console where Colonel Grey was plotting SHADO’s assets. “What is the closest aerial asset we have to Loch Ness?”

Grey looked at the electronic map, “Captain Ellis in Sky 5. She is flying combat air patrol over the base.”

She nodded and walked back to the communications console. “Lieutenant, get Captain Ellis up please.”
Ford switched the console to Sky 5’s frequency. “Yes ma’am,” he replied. “Sky 5 from SHADO control, come in please.”

The voice of Gay Ellis crackled from the speaker, “Sky 5 answering; go ahead control.”

She flipped up the microphone, “Gay, it’s Ginny. How’s your fuel status?”

“I just met up with the tanker; I’m fully laden.”

“We’ve located the UFO that we believe has Straker,” said Lake, “it’s in the middle of Loch Ness. Colonel Foster is setting up for a depth charge attack now. But if it lifts off before we’re ready...” she paused.

Captain Ellis knew what may be asked of her. “Understood; Sky 5 out.”

Below the icy waters of Loch Ness the alien craft began to rise. The water above it roiled as the cone shaped spinning craft broached the
surface. In a moment it was airborne and climbing rapidly.

On the eastern shore of the loch, the SHADO team watched in dismay as the alien craft rose from the surface. “Foster to SHADO control, UFO lifting off! Unable to interdict”

Virginia Lake reached for the transmitter control, “Sky 5, from control. The UFO has lifted off, go for intercept.”

Gay Ellis checked the attack data being feed to her from HQ; she was going to have to hustle to catch it. She switched on the Utronic transponder receiver to help her home in on the UFO. Five minutes later she was at 60,000 feet flying at Mach 5.
She spotted the alien craft coming out of the clouds below her. She keyed her mic, “Have visual contact, confirm go for intercept.”

In the control room Virginia’s voice was distressed as she ordered, “Intercept and destroy.”

Captain Ellis brought her jet into a dive and closed on the alien craft. She triggered a missile off. 10 seconds later an explosion wracked the side of the alien craft. A dark red plume was emitted as the cone shaped craft spiraled down towards the North Atlantic. She was hit with a feeling of dark foreboding.

Captain Ellis’ voice came over the speaker, “Direct hit, it’s going down,” she paused, and then added, “No signal from the Commander’s transponder”
Virginia knew that could only mean one thing; tears began rolling down her face. “Colonel Grey, take over for a few minutes please,” she said as she walked toward her office. Once inside she closed and locked the door. She sat down at the desk and looked down at the diamond ring on her left hand as a tear landed on it. Quietly she said, “Goodbye Ed...” She felt as if the best part of her had just been ripped away. As she recalled the last nine months and the events that brought her to this point, she laid her head down on the desk and began to cry in earnest.

Chapter 1:
Virginia Lake tossed and turned in restless sleep as the events of the past few hours played through her mind. Bits and pieces of the ordeal that she and the Commander had gone through began to materialize in her thoughts as she subconsciously sorted out the events. Slowly but
surely the jumbled images began to form coherent memories.

She remembered riding in the passenger seat of the Commanders car, on the way back to HQ from the airport as Ed was saying...

“That’s why I wanted to pick you up myself. I wanted to debrief you before you saw Henderson.”

“Well I knew it wasn’t for my big blue eyes.” She looked over flashing her big blue grey eyes at him.

“Coming back from the moon can be disorientating, even moon speeds have some effect on time.”

Virginia assumed he was joking with her as he would never insult her intelligence by saying something like that; she decided to play along, curious at his change in demeanor.
“Yes sir, I see sir, never knew that sir!” she said as a send up.

Straker smiled as he looked up through the driver’s side window.

“What’s that?”

“What?”

“I thought I saw something up there.”

“Cars on dark country roads can be disorientating too, you know.”

Virginia’s thoughts leaped ahead to the point where the two of them were in the medical center. Whatever had affected the rest of the staff was beginning to get to them. They had managed to get there from the control room but the effect was rapidly taking its toll. As Ed prepared a shot of stimulant he was saying to her...
“The only way they could have ... gotten past Moonbase... is to... travel so fast ... that they could ... cheat time.”

Thinking out loud she recited, “Sound barrier...heat barrier...light barrier...Time barrier!” Virginia realized that the aliens had somehow circumvented the space-time continuum, thus avoiding detection.

“They can control it,” Straker continued. “But only for so long, until the field force they built up on the way here has worn off. Like the pressure waves in front of an airplane.”

Straker had injected himself with a stimulant and was rapidly recovering. He began prepping a shot for her.

“That’s why... they haven’t landed yet,” she said as he prepared to inject her. “They’re still... in a different continuum.”

“Yes, they have to shed some of the field before they can operate down here.”
“But how... are they reaching us?” She winced slightly as he gave her the shot.

“I don’t know we might find some answers back in control.”

Ed put the bottle of X50 and an extra syringe in his pocket. He looked into her eyes and softly asked, “Are you okay?”

Virginia had always been attracted to Ed and right at that moment she just wanted to fall into his arms and tell him so. But her sense of duty would not allow her to succumb to those feelings; they were in trouble and he needed her to stay sharp. Smiling, she only said, “Fine.”

Still tossing and turning she began to recall the balcony in the prop room. Ed was a few yards ahead of her when Turner grabbed her scarf and began to choke her with it saying, “I didn’t say anything about not killing you.”
She managed to get Ed’s attention by firing a couple of rounds from her rifle. He ran back pulling Turner off of her. As Ed battled with Turner she collapsed to her knees gasping for breath. Ed had just saved her life.

The scene in her mind faded again and she recalled the elevator equipped with a hand held rocket launcher, the Molly. They walked out onto the roof and as she loaded it she asked Ed, “Shall I get another one of these?”

“No, there’s no point. We’re not going to get a second shot, if we miss with this first one, they’ll fry us.”

“What’s their range?”

Virginia had not taken another shot of X50 and the initial dose was quickly wearing off. She was having trouble concentrating.

“Well we have to wait until they get in close.”
Virginia watched as Ed adjusted the viewfinder and targeted the incoming UFO. She didn’t want to distract him from what he was doing but she longed to tell him how she felt as she could feel herself succumbing to the effects of the alien device, and it was affecting her judgment. She had decided that if he missed she was going to tell him she loved him knowing they would both be dead in a few seconds anyway. She turned her attention to the incoming alien craft as she fought to stay in the here and now.

Something hit her in the back of the neck and she lost consciousness as she fell...

Colonel Virginia Lake awoke to a knock on the door. She looked around the room somewhat disorientated, and realized she was still in the medical center at SHADO HQ. “Come in.” she said.
Dr. Doug Jackson entered the room with a SHADO nurse in tow. “Colonel.” he said, in greeting, “How are you feeling?”

Virginia looked for a clock on the wall, as she rubbed the back of her neck, and asked “How long have I been out?”

Dr. Jackson made some notes on the chart he was holding and answered, “It’s 18:00 hours. You have been asleep since about 04:00 hours this morning.” Jackson continued, “Between the blow to the back of the neck, the X50 stimulant, and the shock of the events you experienced, your mind and body needed time to regenerate.”

He paused to check her pulse, “I am going to release you once I check your vitals, assuming everything is in order,” he said as he proceeded with the examination.

“How is the Commander?” she asked.
“He is still sleeping but not very restful,” answered Jackson, “He took twice as much stimulant as you did; breathe deeply please, I do not expect him to be conscious until sometime tomorrow. Also the shock and after effect of the drug I used to open his mind are taking a toll. It’s too early to tell.”

Jackson finished the exam and said, “Colonel, I am authorizing your release, but I want you to take it easy for the next few days.”

Lake nodded, “With the commander down I don’t see that happening.”

“Colonel Freeman is here and wants to see you in the commander’s office before you leave.” said Jackson. “If you will excuse me I need to check on Commander Straker.”

Colonel Lake was lost in thought for a moment, “Thanks,” she said as she got up slowly and proceeded to get dressed. She looked at the purple scarf that matched her outfit and murmured, “This is all stretched out...” She
remembered how Turner had managed to get behind her and tried to strangle her with it. She had managed to get off a couple rounds with the rifle she had and Ed Straker turned and came to her rescue. Virginia began to remember bits and pieces of the ordeal that engulfed the two of them. *I need to thank Ed for saving my life,* she thought, hoping she would get the chance.

Alec Freeman sat behind the commander’s desk in what Straker and he had both called “The Responsibility Seat.” The intercom buzzed and Freeman answered it, “Yes.”

The figure of Lt. Johnson appeared on the vidscreen, “Colonel Lake to see you, sir.”

Alec sat up, “Ah, send her right in.”

The doors parted and Virginia Lake walked into the office. “Alec, it’s nice to see you again.”
Alec Freeman stood up and took her hand in both of his. “Good to see you too Ginny, please sit down.” Virginia sat down in the corner seat next to the desk. “General Henderson called me back from the States to take over while you, and the commander, recuperate. As soon as you have had a couple days of rest I am heading back to Dreamland. Once you’re up to it you will be minding the store; at least until Ed is back on his feet.” Alec paused for a moment before he continued. Can you remember any more about what happened?”

Virginia looked at her stretched scarf, then back at Alec, and answered. “It is still a jumble; I can only remember bits and pieces. The one thing I do remember is Ed saving my life.” The look on her face was contemplative.

“Typical.” Freeman snorted, “Ed always did have a soft spot for a damsel in distress.”

Virginia giggled slightly saying, “Oh stop it. We were on the loft in the prop room. Ed had gone
ahead, I was maybe ten feet behind him when Turner somehow, got behind me and tried to strangle me with my own scarf.” She looked down again at the stretched material and continued, “I couldn’t speak or make a sound. I managed to get a couple rounds off to get Ed’s attention. He ran back and got Turner off me.” She shook her head still having trouble remembering all the details.

“It will come back to you, it will just take time.” Alec continued, “In the meantime I want to bring you up to speed, I sent Paul Foster up to Moonbase to oversee things there, while we regroup. The General thinks the aliens are planning to pull this again. He is concerned about the possibility of a UFO using extreme speed to get past our defenses. As soon as you are up to it, he wants you to come up with a modification to the Utronic systems to detect them.”
Virginia considered this for a few moments. “I’m going to need some help,” she finally said, “Ironically Commander Straker is one of the few personnel who have the specialized experience needed for a project of this scope. We will need to pull in some addition resources as well. A good portion of this material is still theoretical, and while I have a strong minor in interdimensional theory, my specialty is quantum mechanics and applied physics.”

Alec shook his head and said, “This looks like it is going to be a long term project, we may not have anything in place for a year or more. Anyway we can go over the details on Monday; why don’t you go home and get some rest?”

“I’ve been asleep all day,” she said, “I doubt I will be able to sleep tonight, besides I don’t plan to leave just yet. I want to be here when Ed wakes up.”
Freeman looked up at her with concern in his eyes. “Ginny, that might be a while,” he said. “The docs say it will be morning at the earliest.”

Virginia met his gaze and nodded. “I know Alec; I just think it will help if I am there when he comes round. Paul said the last thing he did before they brought him in was run back to the rooftop where I was unconscious. He was kneeling at my side when they caught up with him. If he sees that I am okay he might be able to rest easier. I owe him that. He saved my life Alec.” With that she stood up and headed for the door.

“Ginny.”

She turned and looked at him.

“I’m worried about him too.”

She smiled and said, “Thanks.”

Ed Straker lay in a restless sleep, tormented by the nightmare he was reliving. At his side
Virginia watched with a look of apprehension on her face. Her mind was racing through conflicting thoughts. She reached out and took his hand; holding it for her comfort as much as his.

Her relationship with the commander had always been cordial and professional but had become considerably closer over the past year. She had never told anyone that she was attracted to him, but she was sure that Paul and Nina suspected. On the way back from the airport, she remembered flirting with Ed, just before they spotted the UFO. She was kidding him about cars on dark county roads causing disorientation in response to something he had said to her.

Virginia knew that few people got close to the commander; he held almost everyone at arm’s length. Alec Freeman, his best friend, was the only one he seemed to confide in until recently, and Ginny appreciated being taken into that
small circle, although Alec was still the only person who would publicly disagree with him and she would need to learn how to master that trait to be an effective executive officer.

She also was aware that the commander’s dedication to SHADO had cost him his marriage, with a little digging she had been able to find out some of the details, enough to know that Ed had got the short straw in the deal. She had known Ed Straker for almost four years now. When she had first met him he seemed like a tactless icy glacier of a human being. She initially thought he would be impossible to work for. Virginia soon found out that she was being tested and to her surprise being considered for a command position in SHADO, her dream come true. As she got to know the Commander she found her initial assessments were incorrect. Ed Straker did have kind and gentle side that seldom was seen. Virginia respected his dedication to duty and to the personnel
under his command. She considered him a good friend as well as her commanding officer.

Trying to focus her thoughts, she played out the events in her mind again. Besides the commander saving her life, one other event stood out; Ed asking if she was okay after they used the X50 drug to counteract the Timelash effect. The look in his eyes was soft and caring; not the harsh frigid stare that normally defined his demeanor. The truth was she was terrified, of being a liability to her commander, of the situation they were in, and of the growing feelings she had toward him. She had never seriously considered the possibility of them being anymore than good friends, but the way he had looked, and had spoken to her when he asked the question had lit a fire inside her. She began to consider things she never thought possible before.

At 02:30 Ed Straker bolted up in bed yelling, “Colonel Lake, look out…..VIRGINIA!” He
looked around the room trying to focus eventually seeing her hovering over him.

“Commander... Ed, are you all right?”

A few seconds later he seemed to realize where he was and nodded as he laid back and asked, “You?”

She smiled and answered, “I’m okay. A bump on the back of the neck, but I’ll live.”

Ed looked at her suddenly, “The time freeze...”

Gently she cut him off, “It’s all right Ed, you found the piece of equipment that Turner modified, and you destroyed it.”

Ed seemed to relax; he looked down at their joined hands; Virginia flushed when their eyes met. The door opened and Virginia discreetly released Ed’s hand when Dr. Schroeder walked in. Straker continued looking at her for a second then to Dr. Schroeder.

“How are you feeling Commander?” he asked as he made notes in his chart. Straker only
noded. “I saw your EEG readings increase so I knew you were awake. Dr. Jackson was sure you would be out until morning.”

“So who won the pool?”

Schroeder chucked, “Colonel Lake deserved to; She hasn’t left your side since 19:00 last night. You have been out since late Wednesday night.”

Straker looked at Virginia; she was still wearing the outfit she had on when he picked her up at the airport.

“Commander you are out of danger now, so I am going to give you a sedative to help you get some sleep and I mean restful sleep. According to the EEG readouts your sleep has been broken due to excessive REM cycles; a side effect of the drugs. Dr. Jackson will see you in the morning, if he approves we will be releasing you tomorrow. You will of course need to take a couple days off...”
Straker started to object but Schroeder cut him off.

“These orders come from General Henderson. Alec Freeman is going to take over, for a couple of days while both of you get some rest.”

Virginia cut in, “I’m being forced to take the next two days off as well.”

Dr. Schroeder prepped an injection and swabbed Straker’s forearm. “This will take effect in about fifteen minutes. Colonel; the commander will be out until about noon. You should get some rest yourself.”

Virginia nodded, “I will.”

Schroeder walked to the door. “Good night Commander, Colonel.” He exited the room.

Straker looked back at Lake and said “Colonel, why don’t you do as he says? We can talk tomorrow. Maybe by then they’ll let me out of jail.”
Well he already seems to be acting like his normal self; his dry sense of humor has returned, “I will, but first I wanted to thank you,” she said.

Straker looked puzzled. “For what?” he asked softly.

“For saving my life; Turner would have killed me.”

Ed Straker smiled somewhat embarrassed and said, “Oh, that. You would have done the same for me, besides I couldn’t let anything happen to my executive officer.”

She smirked, and said teasingly, “Oh and I thought it was for my big blue eyes.” A moment of déjà vu passed over her. Good night Commander, sleep well.”

As she got up to leave Straker called to her; “Colonel Lake.”

Virginia turned; she looked at him somewhat puzzled. “Yes Commander?”
Ed said quietly, “Thanks, Virginia.”

Her heart skipped a beat; this was the first time the Commander had consciously called her by her first name. She smiled warmly and responded, “Good night Ed.”

He drifted off as the sedative took effect.

“RED ALERT, RED ALERT. UFO 428-146 BLUE, SPEED SOL 8.2, RANGE 20 MILLION MILES, CLOSING.

Colonel Lake heard the alert as she was walking by control on the way to her quarters. She turned quickly and dashed into the control room, the nerve center of SHADO. Colonel Geoffrey Blake had the low watch. Blake had transferred, almost six months ago, from section seven; SHADO’s advanced weapons research division. As well as being difficult to work with, he had a reputation as a chauvinist.
He watched the tracking screen along with Lt. Keith Ford.

“Roger UFO 426-146 Blue. Interceptors immediate launch.” Paul Foster’s voice came through the speaker.

Colonel Lake walked to Blake’s side. “Only one,” she asked?

Blake answered “So far,” he had a thick British accent. “What are you doing here so late? I thought...”

The SID loudspeaker cut him off. “UFO CHANGING COURSE AREA 428-157 BLUE.”

Blake was irritated, “I don’t like it. It smells of a trap.” Virginia agreed but said nothing.

“UFO SPEED NOW SOL 8.5, MAITAINING COURSE.”

From Moonbase came Paul Foster’s voice, “Interceptors space borne; time to intercept 10 minutes.
Colonel Blake flipped the microphone up. “Colonel Foster, let’s hold two of the interceptors in lunar orbit, allow the other to continue. I don’t like the looks of this, Paul.”

On a personal level Virginia had never cared for Blake. It seemed like every time he looked at her, she was being undressed in his mind. During the Timelash incident she vaguely remembered him being frozen in time staring down the low cut dress of a young actress. She discreetly buttoned up her blouse another notch. At the moment Blake was ignoring her; that suited her fine.

Ten minutes later Lieutenant Stephan Harris had the UFO in range of his missile. He triggered the weapon. In less than thirty seconds the missile had found its target and destroyed the UFO. The threat of a trap had never materialized.

Virginia left control before Blake could grill her with questions, and walked to her quarters.
Someone had brought her bags down from the commander’s car. *Good*, Ginny thought, *a fresh change of clothes*. She showered, changed into her bed clothes, and fell asleep.

Miss Ealand was busy at her desk when Alec Freeman walked in. “Colonel Freeman?” she said, “Commander Straker woke up last night around 02:30. Dr. Schroeder says that he is out of danger.”

Alec breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank God*, he thought. “Thank you Miss Ealand.” The doors to the office/elevator parted and Alec opened the silver cigar box on the desk as the doors closed behind him. “Freeman,” he spoke into it.

“Voiceprint positive, nine seven Freeman, Alec E.” He pushed another button on the desk and the elevator proceeded down eighty feet to the underground location of SHADO HQ. The doors parted and Alec walked to the control room. He greeted several operatives along the way. Shift
change was underway and the staff members were busy passing information to the oncoming shift. Alec walked into the commander’s office; Colonel Blake was right behind him.

“Good morning Colonel,” said Blake.

“Good morning Geoff,” replied Freeman as he sat down. “Looks like you had a busy night,” he said.

“We splashed one,” began Blake, “but it smelled like a trap. The UFO came in straight then veered off. I held two of the interceptors in outer orbit, and sent Lt. Harris after it. That makes ten kills for him now.”

Alec nodded, “Time to put him in for the SHADO DFC I think,” he said.

“Yes,” replied Blake, “it’s all in the report. By the way Ginny Lake was here late last night. Know anything about it?”
Alec looked up at the man and said, “She wanted to be here when the Commander woke up, he saved her life you know.”

Geoff Blake nodded thoughtfully, “Lucky man, I’d love to see her at my side when I wake up especially the way she was dressed last night.”

Alec spat out, “You are more of a chauvinist than I am. Seriously they went through hell together. In a tight spot you get to know a person pretty well. Besides they have become good friends and they also have a lot of common ground, Ed has a master’s degree in Astrophysics from MIT, and Colonel Lake is an applied physicist. I’m talking PhD. She has a doctorate from Stanford.”

Blake’s jaw dropped. “Really?” he asked. “Absolutely bloody gorgeous and brains to boot; what a combination, well that does explain a lot. Good day Alec.” Blake turned to leave.
“Take care, Geoff.” Alec said as Colonel Blake left the office. Colonel Freeman punched the intercom to Medical. “Is Dr Jackson in yet?”

Dr Jackson appeared on the vidscreen. “Jackson here, how can I help you Colonel?”

Alec Freeman never liked Jackson personally but respected his medical expertise. “How is Commander Straker progressing?”

Jackson replied, “Much better than expected, his mind is amazingly resilient. Most human beings would not have fared nearly as well. As a matter of fact Colonel, he is regaining consciousness now, I have to go.”

Alec nodded and said, “I’ll be right down.” Alec got up from the desk and walked through control. “I’ll be down in Medical,” he said to no one in particular.

When Alec arrived at the infirmary, Ed Straker was sitting up being examined by Jackson. His
color had greatly improved and he looked much more rested.

“Alec!” Straker shook hands with his best friend.

“Ed, you look a hell of a lot better now, than you did last night!”

Jackson had finished the exam and cleared the commander for release.

“You know Ed, Henderson has ordered you on a mandatory furlough.”

Straker frowned, “Yes, I know. Dr. Schroeder broke the news to me last night.”

“It’s only until Monday and you’ve not taken any leave in over a year. Don’t worry I’ll keep an eye on things while you are gone. Come on let’s go back to the office. I have a lot to tell you,” said Alec as Straker finished getting dressed.

The two men walked back to the control room.
The morale at SHADO was given a big boost as the staff saw that Commander Straker was back on his feet. A tough demanding boss, but fiercely loyal to his people, he would not give any order that he would not follow himself. As Straker and Freeman walked through control Lt. Ayshea Johnson said quietly to Lt. Tara Paulson, “I told you he would be back on his feet by today.”

Straker and Freeman walked into the office and closed the door. Alec had breakfast brought in and they sat at the table and indulged.

“So Ed what are you going to do on your weekend off?”

Straker shook his head, “I haven’t had a day off in a year and a half, I don’t know.”

Alec reached into his pocket and pulled out two tickets to the London Symphony Orchestra and
handed them to his CO. Straker had always been a fan of classical music.

“There are two tickets here Alec.”

Freeman smiled. “Its black tie; I’m sure you can find someone who has a similar taste in music, I understand Ginny Lake likes classical. And she is on forced vacation as well. Besides it will do you good to get out.”

Ed Straker pocketed the tickets. “Thanks. Playing matchmaker again Alec?”

Freeman smiled, ignoring the question, “Anytime Ed, so do you want to hear about Dreamland?”

The alarm went off at 10:00. Virginia Lake arose from her bed and got herself ready to leave grabbing the fresh set of clothes she had hung in the closet to change into. She packed her bags and headed for the elevator and she
walked down the corridor a familiar voice called out,

“Good morning Colonel.”

Virginia turned to see Captain James walking toward her. “Good morning Beaver. How are you?”

James smiled and said, “I’m fine, thank you Colonel. Let me get someone to take these up for you.” She was going to refuse but James was already on the phone. “This is Captain James, I need a couple boys to bring Colonel Lake’s bags up to her car, he is... I’ll tell her. Thank you.” James turned to Lake, “The Commander is up and in with Colonel Freeman. I’ll get this taken care of these for you, Colonel.”

Lake smiled, “Thank you, Beaver.” She headed for control.

“So the redesigned Sky aeroceptors are ready. That’s great news Alec.”
Freeman went on, “And the best part is that the redesigned aircraft is backward compatible with the older launcher, after we do some modifications; we are planning to retrofit Skydivers 1, 2, and 4 by the end of the year.”

“Are Ellis and Bradley ready?” Ed asked. They had both been promoted to Captain and each received command of a new Skydiver.

Freeman continued, “Skydiver 5 is ready for sea trials, Captain Ellis is flying Sky 5 to the rendezvous point later today. The dockyard loaded new missiles onboard and they are operational. As you know the sub is somewhat bigger than standard.”

Straker interrupted, “How is Captain Ellis?” She had been at Dreamland for over a year, as one of the test pilots for the new aircraft.

“She’s fine, she sends her regards. You know she is one hell of a pilot, a real natural.”
Straker nodded in agreement. “I understand her scores rival Captain Carlin; that takes some doing. I heard they went head to head in the simulator; it was an even match. I’m glad she is on our side.”

The intercom buzzer rang; Alec walked to the desk, “Yes?”

Lt. Paulson appeared on the vidscreen. “Colonel Lake is here to see you, sir.”

“Send her in, thanks.” Freeman replied.

The office doors parted and Virginia Lake walked into the office; she apparently knew that the commander was there. “Good morning gentlemen,” Virginia said pleasantly.

“Colonel Lake,” acknowledged Straker, “You’re just in time for breakfast.”

Lake sat down at the table while Straker poured her a cup of coffee. “Thanks,” she said, “I need it.”
As the trio finished breakfast Alec brought them both up to speed on the Skydiver project. “So in six months time we will have tripled our defense capability.”

“Well that is good news,” said Straker, “and none too soon. We also have to find a way to track them at hyper light velocities. Otherwise we won’t know they are here until they reach orbit.”

Alec nodded and continued, “General Henderson is worried, so he may open the purse strings for this. When he is willing to do that, I get nervous.”

“As both of you know, I want to find a way to track them passively,” said Straker. He turned to Lake, “What do you think, Virginia, how can we modify our tracking systems to detect them?”

She thought for a moment, then answered, “There is no known way to track them passively until we understand more about the power
system they utilize. As far as hyper light travel is concerned, that is at speeds in excess of SOL 10. The Utronic equipment will require extensive hardware modifications. We may be able to detect the tachyon and neutrino emissions from the time wave generated by a UFO traveling at hyper light speeds. We should be able to do that with a software upgrade. This would not be enough warning for a lunar intercept but it may give us the edge we need to get Skydiver in position. With the new Sky aircraft fringe of space capability we could catch them just as they are bleeding off their power. They might be vulnerable then.”

Alec nodded in agreement, “It might work Ed.”

“The real problem is we are going to have to install and align new sensors in the space tracking network as well as SID. That could take more than a year,” she finished.

Straker seemed lost in thought for a moment, and then continued, “We’re going to do it in six
months, Colonel. The number of UFO incursions has dropped off since that mass attack last November. We thought they had expended their resources but what if they are planning another attack, this time with an advanced propulsion system. There’s something else Alec. The UFO, that attacked Colonel Lake and me on the way to the studio, where did it come from? Was it the same craft I destroyed with the Molly and if so why do we remember it? I destroyed it at 18:00; we were attacked around 19:45. By all reason it should not have even existed. Did we create a time paradox?”

Alec thought for a moment and suggested, “Maybe it was bleeding energy and couldn’t follow you into the Timelash bubble.”

Straker shook his head, “I don’t think so; it doesn’t fit somehow.”

The conversation paused for a moment.

“Could there have been more than one craft?” asked Lake.
Straker looked at her thoughtfully. “That would make sense, except for the energy beam; we thought that it was the cause of the Timelash, but what if it had another purpose...”

“If that’s true, then we have an un-located UFO on our hands,” she said.

Alec got up from the table and went over to the desk. He pressed the intercom button to control. “Lt. Paulson, signal to all SHADO stations, Yellow Alert, and get me Moonbase.”

The blonde headed lieutenant responded, “Yes sir.”

Presently the vidlink came to life, “Colonel Foster.”

Freeman pressed the vidlink toggle, “Paul, it’s Alec. I need you to take the next moon flight back here.”

Foster looked concerned and asked, “What’s this all about?”
Freeman shook his head. “Not on the vidlink, Paul, I’ll fill you in when you get here. When can you get back?”

Colonel Foster looked at the schedule, “The next flight leaves in 3 hours, I’ll be on it. Foster out.”

Alec sat back then turned to Straker and Lake. “I’ll call you if something big comes up; go enjoy your two days off.” He opened the doors to the office and headed for Control.

“Alec,” called Straker. Freeman stopped and turned.

“Thanks.”

Freeman nodded, “No problem.” He walked out, the door closing behind him.

Straker looked back at Lake, their eyes met. Virginia spoke first, “We could be wrong you know.”

Straker responded, “Only if our luck changes. Come on, I’ll walk you to your car.” Straker bent
down to grab his briefcase and as he did the tickets fell out of his pocket.

Virginia reached down and picked them up. “LSO,” she said, “Someone is not going to be bored on Saturday night,” she said, as she handed them back to the Commander.

“Alec gave them to me; it’s a black tie affair, couples only. You don’t know anybody who likes classical music, do you?”

Virginia nodded. “As a matter of fact I love classical music,” she said.

“Would you like to accompany me?” asked Ed.

Her heartbeat went into double-time and she felt flushed. “Why Commander Straker, are you asking me on a date?” Virginia was smiling at him, her eyes already saying yes.

Ed continued, “The show opens at eight thirty. We would have time for dinner if that’s all right with you?”
Virginia’s eyes twinkled as she answered. “I would love to. What time will you pick me up?” she asked.

“Quarter past five?” Ed answered.

“All right, I’ll be ready.” They walked out of the office together.

Chapter 2:

Colonel Paul Foster finished the preflight checks and initiated countdown. In two minutes he would be earthbound. “Lunar module 14 to Moonbase, preflight checks complete, countdown commenced, T minus 1 minute, 56 seconds and counting, and all systems are go.”

Lt. Carol Miller replied, “Roger 14, go for launch.”

At the center console in the Moonbase command sphere, Lt Nina Barry watched the
countdown readout. At T minus ten she began counting out the seconds, “T minus ten...nine...eight...seven...six...five...four...three...two...one...Liftoff!”

The rocket motors fired and the module lifted up from the pad.

“Liftoff confirmed,” said Barry, “trajectory and speed nominal. Good luck Colonel.”

Foster checked his readouts and replied, “Thank you, Nina. All systems go, ETT 2 hours, 59 minutes, Lunar module 14 out.” Foster was more than just curious as to why Alec had called him back to Earth so quickly, seeing he had arrived only yesterday. He knew that both the Commander and Colonel Lake were expected to make a full recovery, having spoken to Dr. Jackson earlier that day. The fact that Colonel Freeman was not willing to discuss it over the link told Foster that this was serious. Well he would know in about four hours.
In a remote area of Scotland the water bubbled in an isolated loch. The alien craft broached the surface of the water, accelerating as it headed toward space.

“RED ALERT, RED ALERT, UFO SITED 149-253 GREEN, SCOTLAND. SPEED 600 KNOTS, INCREASING.

Alec Freeman watched the radar trace. “Alert Skydiver,” he ordered.

Lt. Keith Ford switched frequencies. “SHADO Control to Sky 1, immediate launch.”

“Launch Stations,” Captain Peter Carlin called as he donned his helmet. In the control room below the crew could be heard reciting the launch checklist.

“Clear one...One cleared...Clear two...Two cleared...Cut boosters...Cutting boosters...Circuits.” “Ready for launch, good
hunting Captain,” said Lt. Maxwell, the ship’s XO.

Captain Carlin slid down the launch tube as the door behind him slid closed. The seat rose up to the cockpit and Peter Carlin strapped himself in as Skydiver tilted up to a 45 degree angle. “Standby for liftoff,” called Carlin.

He pulled back on the launch lever and Sky 1 leaped forward on two plumes of flame. It broached the surface of the North Atlantic and gained altitude. “Sky 1 to SHADO Control, airborne,” announced Carlin. His onboard computer was receiving the attack data as Lt. Ford read it off verbally,

“UFO bearing 060 true, speed 700 knots, altitude 15,000, course 285.”

Carlin checked the data in the attack computer to verify it matched. “Roger Control, five minutes until target acquisition. Out.”
“Where is LM 14?” Colonel Freeman asked the Communications Chief.

Ford punched up the position on the monitor and answered, “Ten minutes until reentry, sir.”

Alec Freeman thought for a moment. “Get me Colonel Foster,” he ordered.

Ford dialed up the frequency for LM 14. “Lunar module 14 from SHADO Control, come in please.”

The voice of Colonel Foster came through the speaker. “This is LM 14.”

Freeman flipped up the mic, “Paul, it’s Alec. We have a UFO heading in your direction. It was hidden in a small loch ten miles southeast of Loch Ness, Scotland. Sky 1 is about four minutes from intercept. Wait for the all clear before you reenter.”

Foster punched up the abort codes. “Understood.”
Captain Carlin checked his readout; he should be close enough for visual contact. He scanned the sky and spotted the alien craft. The spinning dome shaped craft was below him but gaining altitude quickly. He knew he would only get one shot as the craft was already moving at Mach four.

“Sky 1 to SHADO Control, have visual contact, going in for attack.”

Carlin pushed the nose over and quickly accelerated to maximum speed. He lined the craft up in the crosshairs of his HUD and pushed the trigger to launch his missiles. They left the launch tubes at Mach eight and quickly found their target. The alien craft exploded in a ball of fire.

“Sky 1 to SHADO Control, UFO destroyed, returning to base.”
In Control Alec Freeman flipped up the mic and answered, “Good shooting, Peter, control out.” Freeman looked down at Ford and said, “Give Foster the all clear.”

Ford nodded, “Yes sir. SHADO Control to Lunar module 14, clear for reentry, I say again, clear for reentry.”

From the speaker came the voice of Foster as he answered, ” Roger Control, clear for reentry, 14 out.”

Alec Freeman looked over to Colonel John Grey and said, “Let’s go into the office.”

They walked down the two stairs into the side corridor leading to the commander’s office. The doors closed behind them after they entered. Alec walked over to the servitor and poured himself a small glass of whiskey. “Drink?” he asked Grey.
“No thanks, it’s still morning for me.” Grey said. He continued, “Ed Straker never touches the stuff does he?”

Alec sat down behind the desk and answered. “I’ve only seen him indulge once, and that was at his wedding reception, and even then I twisted his arm; other than that, no, never.”

Grey nodded and continued, “Tragic about his marriage, did you know that Major Myers lost his wife under similar circumstances?”

Freeman looked down at his drink thinking. “SHADO is a jealous mistress John.”

“Commander Straker has recommended to the committee that they approve promoting Colonel Lake to executive officer when you retire, at the end of June.”

Alec didn’t look surprised. “She has been acting XO since I started working on the Skydiver upgrades at Dreamland. She is a damned fine officer,” he said.
Grey looked somewhat troubled when he continued, “General Henderson does not approve of promoting her to the position. He feels that role should be filled by someone with a military background. Colonel Lake, although she has the education, comes from the civilian sector. I think Henderson wants to promote Paul Foster. I know he came from a civilian corporation as well, but he has six years with the RAF. He attained the rank of Major while on active duty. He also has combat experience.”

“Do you agree with Henderson?”

Grey shook his head, “No, I think Foster is a good officer, but is too impulsive. He needs more seasoning. Now Colonel Lake, besides being four years older, is by the book; she acts more like someone with a military background than operatives who actually have one. She was awarded the Silver Star last year, when that mass UFO attack on Moonbase cracked the glass in the command sphere. She pulled Joan
and Nina from the dome and went back in to activate the ground defense launchers before the window blew out. She risked her own life to do it. The action she took saved Moonbase. Henderson himself put her in for it. She is about as buttoned down as they come.”

Alec leaned back in the chair. “I still don’t see the problem John.”

Colonel Grey pressed on, “Virginia called me today to run a RCS on her and Commander Straker.” RCS was an acronym for Relationship Computer Study.

Alec Freeman was floored, “You’re kidding! “Ed Straker and Virginia Lake; who would have thought,” thinking to himself then remembering, “Wait a minute, I gave Ed two tickets to LSO today; I told him Ginny likes classical music, maybe there’s nothing more to it than that.” Alec suddenly grew serious, “What did the study show?”
Grey smiled when he answered, “Of all the studies I have done, this one showed the least impact to SHADO operations. Both of them are dedicated professionals. As you well know Commander Straker scarified his marriage to get SHADO up and running. Colonel Lake is cut from the same cloth; the mission comes first. The figures for the worst case scenario were well below the intervention threshold. I have to assume that she has not yet told the Commander of her feelings, otherwise I might have had two requests, assuming of course that the Commander wanted to pursue the relationship.”

Alec nodded and then it dawned on him, “You think Henderson will use this to disqualify her as executive officer?”

Grey paused for a moment then continued, “I’m sure of it, especially since he has nothing else to use. I guess we will just wait and see.”
By the time Paul Foster arrived in the commander’s office, Freeman had finished his tactical briefing with Colonel Grey. “Paul, come on in, help yourself to a drink.”

Foster walked over to the servitor, “Don’t mind if I do.” He poured himself a scotch and sat across from Freeman. After a moment Foster asked, “So what is so important that you couldn’t discuss it over the vidlink?”

Freeman looked up from the report he was finishing and said, “The UFO we just splashed...we think it slid in during the Timelash incident. Fortunately for us, Peter Carlin made it a moot point.”

Foster was confused, “It was one craft. Why the secrecy?”

“We suspected that it might have the same capability as the craft Ed hit with the Molly. We couldn’t afford to take any chances. I was going to send you out with the Mobile team to track it
down, but it took off fifteen minutes before you hit reentry. I’m assuming you were the target.”

Foster sipped his drink. Though the commander did not drink, the bar in his office always was stocked with good stuff. “I understand that Straker and Lake have been released,” Foster noted. “I assume you will be heading back to the States.”

Alec nodded, “I was going to leave on Monday, but since you are back from Moonbase I’ll be returning tomorrow morning. Captain Ellis docked with Skydiver about an hour ago. She and her crew are going to give the sub a one week shakedown cruise; Skydiver 5 will be commissioned and go fully operational next Monday.”

Paul nodded, “She is a fine ship, and she’s in good hands.” Foster finished his drink,” Well Alec, I had better get going if I have the day watch tomorrow. Have a safe flight.”
Alec stood up and they shook hands. “Be seeing you,” he said. I need to bring Ed up to speed thought Freeman as he dialed Straker’s home.

Ed Straker’s hands danced over the keyboard as the piece he was playing reached a crescendo. He didn’t hear the phone until he was finished.

“Straker.”

“For a few minutes I thought you might have been out,” said Alec.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I just wanted to let you know that Peter Carlin splashed a UFO that wasn’t accounted for this afternoon.”

“That is good news Alec. Where was it when it lifted off?”

“We caught it on radar over the Scottish highlands. It was probably hiding in one of the lochs. Foster is back from Moonbase so I am
going to head back to Dreamland tomorrow morning,” said Alec.

“Can’t wait to get out of that seat can you?”

“I told you years ago, Ed, I never wanted it.”

“Very well, leave Foster in overall command; it’s about time he gets to see what things are like from the other side of the fence. Have a safe flight back.”

“It was good to see you again, Ed, take care.”

Virginia Lake spent most of Saturday morning shopping for a dress. She wanted something guaranteed to turn heads yet still be conservative and classy.

“I think this is just what you are looking for, Miss Lake.” The boutique owner brought out a dark blue dress with a matching mini jacket.

Virginia’s eyes lit up, “It’s beautiful,” she said, “May I try it on?”
The shop owner directed Virginia to the dressing room saying, “Of course.” She went into the dressing room and quickly changed. The dress fit her perfectly it looked even better than it did on the hanger.

Virginia walked out of the dressing room; the shop owner took one look and said, “Miss Lake, you will turn every head in the place tonight.” Virginia smiled and turned around a few times for effect. “Girl, you will have him eating out of your hand,” observed the owner. “Shall I box it up for you?”

Ed Straker also had a busy morning. In addition to his morning run, he had picked up his tux from the cleaners, made dinner reservations, and was wading through his mail. He looked at the clock; it was three o’clock. Uh oh, time to get ready Ed thought. By four thirty Straker was on his way to pick up Virginia. He said to himself, this is just two good friends going out
for dinner and a show. His ploy did nothing for the butterflies in his stomach. The truth was Ed found her enticing. Virginia was an extremely intelligent person and Ed had always enjoyed the intellectual conversations they shared over lunch in the mess hall. She also had the most beautiful blue grey eyes that he had seen in his life. Ed remembered the day he met her and how it took every bit of self control he had not to react to her beauty but it was more than that; Virginia Lake had presence.

Ed pulled up to Virginia’s place around quarter past five. He walked into the foyer and stepped onto the elevator as her apartment was on the third floor. Ed knocked on the door and he was totally unprepared when Virginia answered the door as she looked absolutely stunning. Ed was left speechless as he gazed at her.

“Well come in,” she said, “I’ll only be a few minutes.”
Ed found his voice and said, “You look beautiful Colonel.”

She responded teasing, “I’m off duty, its Virginia, or Ginny until Monday morning and may I say you look absolutely dashing yourself. Can I get you something to drink?”

Ed looked around the room; in the center of the living room was a Steinway Grand piano. “No, thank you. May I?” he asked pointing to the piano.

“Please, I didn’t know you played,” he sat down at the piano, “I’m a little out of practice.” He said as he played a few bars of The Entertainer. He then transitioned into Alexander Borodin’s Polovetsian Dances, and finished with Memory from the musical Cats.

“Ed, you play beautifully.” She was pleasantly surprised; no one she had ever been involved with shared her love for music, much less had talent surpassing her.
“It helps reduce stress, I should play more often.” observed Straker. He looked at his watch, and stood up. “Shall we go?”

Virginia took his arm. She couldn’t deny the chemistry at work. This is going to be interesting. They walked to the elevator. When they got to the car Ed opened the passenger side. Straker climbed in the driver’s seat and they pulled out onto the street.

Nina Barry looked at the solar flux readouts as they came through. “Control, can you confirm these readings?”

On the vidscreen Lt. Ford nodded, “They’ve been confirmed; a solar storm will take place at lunar sunrise, Monday morning. It looks like the intensity will be high enough to cause a communications blackout.”
Barry nodded, “Understood, Moonbase out.” Barry turned to Lt. Ayshea Johnson, who had just been assigned to Moonbase.

“Ayshea, schedule a yellow alert starting at 04:45 and an upgrade to red alert at 06:00, Monday morning.”

“Yes Lieutenant,” replied Johnson.

Nina Barry had faced this threat more than once but even knowing ahead of time didn’t make it any easier.

Paul Foster was finishing a report when John Grey walked into the office.

“You heard the news?”

Paul closed the file and looked up, “I did; high solar activity during lunar sunrise.”

Grey walked over to the servitor and poured a glass of water.
“Nina Barry has already scheduled an alert,” Paul continued, “I would expect our alien friends will try to take advantage of it.”

Grey nodded, “Well the Commander will be back by then; he has a knack for guessing their next move. Any plans for tonight, Paul?”

Foster smiled, “As a matter of fact I do, you remember the Dalotek Affair a few years back?”

Grey nodded and replied, “I do, the geologist, what was her name, Carson?”

Paul grinned. “Yes,” he said, “Jane Carson. She called me last night, says she is going to be in London for the next few weeks. I have a dinner date with her tonight.” Paul looked at his watch. “Have to go,” he said, “see you later.”

Foster got up to leave; Grey called, “Good night.” as he walked out.

Skydive 5 skimmed over the surface of the North Atlantic at a speed of seventy knots.
Captain Gay Ellis surveyed the surrounding waters with her binoculars. She picked up the handset, “Bridge to control room, prepare for crash dive.”

From below came the reply. “Aye, aye, skipper.”

Ellis replaced the handset and closed the control panel. She climbed down the ladder into the conning tower of the modern submarine. Skydiver 5 was bigger than her sister ships and contained hypersonic missiles with variable yield nuclear warheads. She had better crew quarters and more living space. *This is a plum assignment.* “Seal the hatches,” ordered Ellis.

“Seal the hatches, Aye, aye, Skipper.” Lt. Joan Harrington, the ships XO was checking the “Christmas Tree” making sure the ship was rigged for dive. “Straight board shut, rigged for dive, Captain.”

Ellis activated the elevator platform and descended to the control room. “Crash dive!” she ordered. Skydiver 5 slipped beneath the
waves. In thirty seconds the bridge was awash. Captain Ellis watched the ship submerge through the periscope. “Speed?” she asked the helmsman.

“Sixty five knots, Captain, holding.” Ellis stowed the periscope and ordered, “Very well, hold current speed. Lt. Harrington, continue on course to the test area, you have the con. I’ll be in my cabin.”

“Aye, aye, skipper,” replied Harrington.

Gay Ellis walked through the corridor leading to her cabin. The Captain’s cabin had not changed with the new design except being further back in the ship. Ellis sat down at her computer terminal and checked her messages. She ran across a note from Virginia Lake. They had become best friends during the development of the improved Skydiver. Colonel Lake had pushed Ellis to take the flight aptitude tests. Her scores were in the stratosphere, only Peter Carlin had scored higher. In a head to head
combat simulation she was an even match for Carlin. Mark Bradley called her a natural.

“So what’s going on with Ginny?” Gay asked out loud. She read the note;

Hi Gay,

I hope your shakedown cruise goes well, as they say in the movies, “Break a leg.” You will have to call me when you get back in port, we’ll have lunch. By the way I have something to tell you but please keep it to yourself. As you know Commander Straker and I have been ordered to take furlough until Monday morning. He had tickets the London Symphony Orchestra Springtime show, it’s a black tie affair; he asked me to go with him. You know how I love classical music so naturally I said yes. Now don’t worry I’m not reading too much into this yet, but there does seem to be chemistry between us. Anyway I’ll tell you about it later.

Ginny
Ellis leaned back and thought, *Ginny and the Commander, well I’ll be, “You go girl!”*

Ed Straker pulled his car into a parking spot of The Register, one of North London’s five star restaurants. He opened the gull wing doors of his car and they got out. Virginia took Ed’s arm and they walked up the stairway to the entrance. “They have a very large selection on the menu here,” said Ed, “I like the steaks myself, but they can make just about anything.

“Good,” said Virginia, “I’m in the mood for baked stuffed shrimp.”

Ed smiled, “I’ve had that here, and you won’t be disappointed.”

As they walked up to the maitre’d he looked up and said, “Ah Mr. Straker, reservations for two. Do you have any preference as to a table, sir?”

“Something in a quiet corner would be good.”
The maitre’d picked up two menus and said, “I have just the place, if you and the lovely lady will follow me please?”

Virginia and Ed followed him to their table. To Ed, it seemed like every male head in the room had turned. Their table was in the back corner of the room across from a lit fireplace. Ed pulled the chair out for Virginia, and then sat down across from her. Quietly he said, “Well I have to compliment you dressmaker, I think you just gave every man in this room a case of whiplash.”

Virginia smiled, “The owner of the boutique promised me I would have that effect.”

“You don’t drink at all do you Ed?”

He replied, “I never touch the stuff, even with all of Alec’s best attempts to corrupt me.” They laughed. The conversation between them just flowed, each sharing very personal details of their lives.
“You’ve known Alec for a long time, haven’t you?” asked Virginia after a while.

“We go back a long time; Alec was my wingman in Vietnam, and the first person I recruited into the “company.” He was the best man at my wedding…” Straker’s Voice trailed off.

Virginia continued, “I know what it’s like to lose a spouse because of a profession. You know I’m divorced, that much is in my file. I met my ex-husband Brad Stevens at Stanford. He was majoring in chemistry while I was finishing my doctorate. I was only 21, the youngest person in my class. When I went to work for Westbrook, I was assigned to the UT project. I soon became its chief designer. Brad and I had married just before we started initial testing the prototypes. That was in May of 1973; sixteen hour days were the norm. Cross country trips. I did most of the flying myself.”

Virginia paused while the food was served. When the waiter left she continued she wasn’t
holding anything back; “One afternoon about eight months later I came home early, I found him in our bed with my best friend, the maid of honor at our wedding. We had not even been married a year.” Virginia paused to collect herself. Ed reached out and held her hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said. They were both silent for a few minutes, Ed was surprised how much she had revealed; out of character for him he continued; “I met Mary when I was working as General Henderson’s aide. It was a whirlwind courtship; we were married six weeks later. That was just about the time when the “company” was being organized.”

Ed told her the circumstances surrounding his marriage.

“It’s my turn to be sorry,” said Virginia.

“It’s all right,” he continued, “You know the rest of the story.”
When Virginia was stationed at the SHADO research facility in the States, Ed had Janice Ealand call her with an urgent task. His son had been struck by a car and needed a special antibiotic flown in. He needed her to obtain the medication and hop an SST transport back to London. Not knowing why the transporter had left early Alec Freeman had it diverted to Ireland. A downed UFO was in that area and the mobiles were needed to track it down. The delay turned out to be critical. Johnny died just as Virginia arrived at the hospital. She was the only person who knew the truth as Janice didn’t know about the diversion and Straker had never told Freemen why he ordered an early takeoff.

“Mary has never forgiven me,” he said.

After they finished their meal, Virginia continued; “It wasn’t your fault Ed and my failed marriage wasn’t mine, you know what we do, and you know what’s at stake.” Virginia thought for a moment and realized something;
“Now I know what you meant when you told me you made your choice a long time ago.”

They continued the conversation though dessert. After a pause Ed asked, “How was your meal?”

“It was very good,” said Virginia, “almost as good as the company.” She smiled at him.

Ed paid the check and they got ready to leave when Virginia saw Paul Foster come in with a pretty brunette. “Ed, “she said quietly, “it’s Paul.”

Straker looked across the room and recognized the brunette with Foster as Jane Carson, from The Dalotek Corporation. Straker and Lake walked to the main aisle just as Foster and Carson arrived. Foster was caught off guard but recovered quickly.

“Hello, Ed, Virginia, it’s nice to see you.” Foster said as he shook their hands. “May I introduce Miss Jane Carson?”
Virginia offered her hand, “Virginia Lake.”
Ed shook hands with her as he replied, “Ed Straker.”
Carson lit up. “From the film studio?”
Ed nodded, “Guilty as charged.”
“Would you care to join Paul and me for a drink?” asked Carson.
Ed looked at his watch. “I’m afraid we’ll have to take a rain check,” he said, “Virginia and I, are going to the Symphony tonight; the show starts in less than an hour.”
They said their goodbyes; a few minutes later, Virginia and Ed were on the road heading toward the Barbican Centre.

Chapter 3:
On Moonbase Ayshea Johnson was adjusting well to her new position. As much as she
enjoyed working at HQ being in close proximity to Patrick Turner and dealing with his unwelcome advances was too much to handle. She could have lodged a complaint but she did not want to cause him trouble even if he deserved it. In hindsight turning him in might have saved the Commander and Colonel Lake a lot of grief. That still bothered her.

“Ayshea, how is the system check coming along?” asked Nina Barry.

“Just finished, Lieutenant; All systems show normal.”

The atmosphere on Moonbase was much more relaxed than HQ, except when the brass was visiting, and Ayshea liked working with Nina. Still she was going to miss working at HQ. Being in the limelight did have certain advantages. Oh well she thought, you can’t have it all. She got up from her console to give Nina Barry the report.
“How are you adjusting to moon life?” asked Barry.

Ayshea smiled, “It incredible, I should have asked for this assignment sooner. Looking out the viewport and being able to see the entire planet; it’s breathtaking.”

Nina nodded, “Well I for one am glad to have you. We have been shorthanded since Joan Harrington was reassigned to Skydiver 5. Gay asked me to come as well but I like it up here. Besides I get to be acting commander most of the time anyway.”

Command positions were hard to come by and in an organization like SHADO you were up against the best of the best. It was very rewarding. “I expect we will see some action on Monday morning Ayshea, the aliens will probably try to come in low to the surface and catch us off guard. Fortunately we have a little surprise of our own waiting for them.”
Ayshea nodded, “So I gather; I’m going to run and grab a coffee, do you want one?”
“You read my mind,” said Nina, “I’m dying for one, thanks.”

Alec Freeman looked up from the metallurgy report he was reading.
“Here is your coffee.”
“Oh, thanks Mark.”
Captain Bradley sat down across from him and asked, “So how long before we can take her out?”
Freeman called up the production schedule for Skydiver 3 and looked at it. “It looks like Diver 3 will be fitted out by the end of next week. You should be able to take her out for sea trials the following Monday. How is Sky 3 shaking out?”
Captain Bradley answered, “She is a dream to fly. I had her up to 300,000 feet at Mach six today.”

Alec nodded, “I was just going over the ablative figures in the metallurgy report. The figures look exceptional.” Alec changed the subject, “How’s Gay?”

Bradley responded, “She’s fine, but she’s much busier than I am, as a matter of fact I am going to be flying chase for her during her launch tests tomorrow. It should be fun.”

Alec laughed, “Just remember, she can fly the pants off you.”

Alec had spared no expense for the tickets he had given to his best friend. The acoustics at the Barbican Centre were exceptional. Ed was sure that they had the best seats in the house. “I haven’t seen LSO in almost six years.” Ed commented.
“Really, I saw them last year,” said Virginia, “Paul Foster will never forgive me; he hates the orchestra. I guess that’s one reason why we didn’t really click, not to mention the fact that Foster has a one track mind when it comes to women.”

Straker laughed, “That’s an understatement.”

Virginia said suddenly serious, “I haven’t been in a serious relationship since I divorced my husband.”

Straker was surprised, “I thought you and Craig were an item?”

“We were seeing each other, but I wouldn’t have called us Romeo and Juliet.”

The house lights dimmed as the conductor walked out onto the stage and the crowd applauded enthusiastically. The conductor raised the baton and the crowd quieted. They opened with Bach’s Goldberg Variations.
Virginia moved closer to Ed as he discreetly took her hand.

The aliens stalked slowly through the woods surrounding Loch Ness. Their attention was on a young couple parked by the lake. Each one carried what looked like a small silver cylinder. They came up quietly behind the car. Very quickly each alien placed the cylinder against the back of the necks of their victims. The couple went limp as the anesthesia took effect. The aliens picked them up and carried then back into the woods. Half a mile in, they came to a cove on the loch. The girl was taken into the cone shaped craft that was parked on the shore. The young man was laid down on the shore and vivisected alive, his mutilated body left on the beach. The aliens returned to the craft and it submerged into the loch.
On the waters of Lake Superior, the fully loaded freighter Sara Mae slowly cruised west. At the helm the first mate noticed a glow from under the water. He locked the wheel and went out on the deck to investigate. The glow from under the water seemed to get larger like it was heading toward the ship. He walked back into the wheelhouse to call the captain when an explosion rocked the ship. The mate was thrown overboard and the ship was hit by what looked like a beam of light. The hull broke in two and the Sara Mae slipped below the waves. On the surface debris burned; one lone survivor clung to a life vest.

The orchestra was playing Borodin’s *Polovetsian Dances*. Ed Straker could not remember the last time he had enjoyed himself so much. Next to him Virginia had laid her head on his shoulder very relaxed, and content. Ed could not deny the attraction he felt towards her
as she was a very beautiful woman. But it was more than that; something he wasn’t able to put into words. He considered the problems this could cause them as he planned to promote her to executive officer when Alec retired. Straker had considered both Foster and Lake for the position and it was clear early on that Virginia was the better choice. Paul Foster although competent was impulsive and hot headed; Straker felt he took too many risks. Colonel Lake on the other hand was much more cautious and seasoned. She could handle herself well in a crisis, and knew how to delegate. What was going to be a difficult fight was at the verge of slipping into impossible territory. The orchestra built up to the crescendo as they finished the piece. The pair rose to their feet and applauded.

“How did you like the show?” asked Ed.

“It was fantastic!”
The pair slowly moved through the mass of people toward the exit. Ten minutes later they were in the car on their way back to Virginia’s apartment.

“Ed, I had a wonderful time tonight, thank you.”
“I enjoyed it as well; it’s been a long time.”

They drove a bit further and Virginia asked, “I was going to go flying tomorrow, I want to do some aerial photography of Loch Ness. Would you like to come? I would love the company, besides it isn’t often I can find a qualified copilot.”

Ed looked at the time, it was after midnight. “What time are you leaving?”

“I want to be wheels up by ten o’clock,” she replied. “I own a Mooney Bravo, single engine retractable; it’s fast and its fun; you can’t say no.”

Ed considered as he turned onto her street, “I’ll have to get to bed as soon as I get home.”
“Well if you want you can stay here,” she said. Ed was surprised by the invitation; Virginia continued, “I have a roll away in the closet.”

Slightly embarrassed he said, “Oh…”

Virginia did not miss it, “I know what you were thinking; I didn’t mean it like that.” But to be perfectly honest it’s very tempting. Your charm could sweep a lady off her feet.

Ed pulled into the parking area and parked the car. “All right, I wouldn’t normally do this on a first date but…” He leaned over and kissed her gently. “I’ll stay.”

They got out of the car and he grabbed the overnight bag he always kept in the back of his car. Virginia thought nothing of it because all of the senior staff had gotten into that habit as twenty four hour shifts were not uncommon. Ed and Virginia walked into the building hand in hand.
Ed helped Virginia pull the rollaway out of the closet and set it up in her living room. She grabbed him a set of blankets and a pillow.

“Ed, there is an extra set of hangers in the closet for your tux.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“I usually have a cup of tea before bed, would you like some?” she asked.

“That sounds good, thanks.”

Virginia put the water on for the tea and walked over to the bedroom. “Ed I’m going to get comfortable while the water is boiling, if you want to change the bathroom is over here. If you need a robe I might have something you can throw on.”

“I should have one in my bag, thank you.”

Ed grabbed the hangers out of the closet and went into the bathroom to change. By the time he was done, she had already poured tea. He hung up his tux and joined her on the couch.
They talked while finishing their tea.

“I really had a wonderful time tonight, Virginia. Would you consider having dinner with me sometime next week?”

She rewarded him with a beautiful smile.

“I would love to.”

They finished their tea and got up from the couch. As he took her in his arms she looked into his eyes. He gently kissed her good night.

“Good night, Virginia.”

“Sleep well, Ed.”

Ed watched her walk into the bedroom and she smiled back at him before she closed the door. He began to realize how much she meant to him. Ed put aside his robe and crawled into bed having not felt this way in years.

Virginia was tired, but she found that she could not get to sleep right away. She had always been
intensely attracted to Ed and now those feelings were surfacing with a vengeance. She knew now that she was in love with him and hoped that she wasn’t setting herself up for a fall.

Ed awoke to the image of Virginia sitting on the bed next to him. She was holding two cups of coffee. “You’re going to spoil me; I could get used to this. Thanks,” he said as he took the cup from her.

In a mock serious tone she said, “I want your word as a gentleman, that you will tell no one how bad I look in the morning.”

Ed smiled, “If this is what you call bad, I’d love to see a good morning.” Even with her hair out of place she still looks striking, he thought to himself.

“Do you want to shower first, Ed?”
He shook his head, “No you go ahead; I need to finish my first cup of coffee, which is very good by the way.”

She smiled and kissed him on the forehead, “You’re so kind, I won’t be long.”

She headed to the bathroom.

Straker got up and put on his robe. He folded the blanket and stowed the roll away. He sat down at the piano and started playing *Memory*; it had always been a favorite of his.

In fifteen minutes Virginia was done, “Bathroom’s free now,” she said as she went into the bedroom.

Ed was showered and dressed in ten minutes. As he came out of the bathroom he saw Virginia fixing her scarf. “You look very nice.”

“Thank you; I like your sweater, Ed.”

Ed had on a charcoal grey pull over and a matching set of trousers.
She noticed the roll away was put back in the closet, “You could have left that.”

He shook his head, “Not a chance, you never leave a lady’s place a mess, otherwise you may not be invited back.”

They sat down at the kitchen table and had a light breakfast. “Have you checked the weather, Virginia?”

She nodded, “Should be VFR this morning; coming back we may have to file a flight plan. A front is moving in from the ocean. Fortunately the Mooney tops out at 25,000. That should keep us above most of the muck.”

They finished breakfast and cleared the dishes. Ed brought Virginia’s camera bags out to the car and pulled it around to the lobby, while she locked up. They pulled out onto the main road and headed to Heathrow International.
Gay Ellis was awaked by the buzzer in her cabin. She reached for the toggle, “Yes.”

Joan Harrington appeared on the monitor, “Sorry to wake you Captain, we are picking up a strange sonar signal; you may want to have a look.”

Ellis sat up, “Be right there.”

In the control room, the sonar operator was watching a strange pattern on the waterfall display. He had never seen anything like it. The object was moving at eighty knots. Captain Ellis walked into the control room and looked over his shoulder. She recognized the pattern almost immediately.

“Action stations, load tubes one and two!”

Ellis had seen the sonar readouts Captain Waterman had taken, six months ago, when he found the underwater dome. This was a UFO. “Sonar, give me bearings,” ordered Ellis.
“Course 265, range 8000, speed 80, bearing 010 relative,” called out the sonar op.

“I have a firing solution,” said Harrington, who was manning the fire control panel.

“Fire one...Fire two,” ordered the Captain.

“Torpedoes away,” Harrington called.

The new design used “swimout torpedoes” that did not use compressed air to launch.

“Torpedoes running normal Captain,” said Harrington.

Two minutes later the homing torpedoes had locked on to the UFO. An explosion rumbled through the water ten seconds later.

“Target destroyed,” reported sonar.

“What’s the sounding?” asked Ellis.

“2000 fathoms, Captain,” replied sonar.

“Very well; Lt. Harrington, write up an action report and send it to HQ. I’m going back to bed, big day tomorrow.”
“Heathrow tower, Mooney 8 3 Sierra, ready for takeoff, runway 9 right, IFR departure.”

In terse aviation lingo Virginia requested clearance for takeoff.

“Mooney 8 3 Sierra, Heathrow tower, clear for takeoff, runway 9 right.”

She advanced the throttle slightly and taxied the single engine aircraft onto the runway. As soon as she was lined up she pushed the throttle slowly, but all the way forward. The aircraft sped down the runway. At sixty five knots she pulled back on the yoke and the aircraft took off. Ed watched her handle the aircraft like a pro. At eighty five knots she reached over to raise the landing gear.

“Mooney 8 3 Sierra, climb and maintain 5000, turn left heading 350, contact London departure on 135.75, good day.”
Virginia responded to the tower and banked the aircraft to the left.

“Very nice takeoff, Colonel,” Ed said teasingly. She looked over and gave him a smile. “Do you want to take her?” she asked.

“Sure, but I have to warn you I haven’t flown a prop driven aircraft in years.”

While Ed was at the controls Virginia loaded film into her cameras. Visibility was at least fifty miles; she hoped to get some good aerial footage of the loch. At 5000 feet Ed leveled off and set the auto pilot while Virginia closed the cowl flaps, fine tuned the mixture, and set the prop speed. The small airplane cruised along at two hundred twenty knots.

“What did you fly in the service Ed?”

“Phantom jets mostly, the F-4.”

She thought for a moment, “Didn’t Alec, fly F-4s?”
“Yes he did. He was RAF, but back then he was assigned as a special liaison to our squadron. I told you last night that he was my wingman in Vietnam,” answered Ed. “I’m going to miss him when he retires.”

Ed lapsed into shop talk, “So what do you think, how was that UFO able to freeze time, and more to the point how have they made such a jump in speed?”

Virginia thought for a moment, “I still think they are generating their own time continuum, I’m even surer of that now considering what they were able to do during the Timelash incident. But every UFO we get our hands on is either too severely damaged or there isn’t enough of the craft left to analyze. It was a stroke of luck that we were able to synthesize the metal they use in their craft.”

“Yes and creating a new alloy by blending titanium we prevent atmospheric deterioration. I’m glad the aliens haven’t figured that out yet,”
said Ed. “They have to be able to control a gravity field, and somehow alter or warp the space time continuum. What kind of a power source would give them those abilities? Even the UFOs that have crashed on the moon don’t seem to have enough material to account for the size of the craft.”

Virginia looked at him suddenly and asked, “Ed, what if they are using a quantum singularity as a power source? Theoretically it would give them unlimited gravitational control, and ability to warp space.”

Ed looked at her, “It makes sense, and it also explains the discrepancy of material at UFO crash sites. The singularity collapses taking most of the craft with it. All that is left is a shell. No wonder we haven’t been able to find a power system,” he finished then added. “Let’s assume for a minute we’re right, and they are using a micro or quantum singularity as a power
source, is there any way to passively detect it?” He let the question hang.

After a few minutes Virginia answered, “Most of this is hypothetical, we don’t even know if such a phenomenon can exist. As you know the standard model has been evolving for the past 15 years. While I was at Stanford I was able to get involved with some of the experiments being done at SLAC. We are just beginning to understand quarks and leptons, and now dark matter is being hypothesized. This opens a whole new dimension in quantum mechanics. If I had to guess, and keep in mind this is purely speculative, we might be able to detect anti-neutrinos, and anti-tachyons from the source. In theory these particles never can slow down to light speed because of the barrier.”

Ed Straker had been considering a passive detection system for some time. “Theoretically how close would we have to get, to a UFO, in order to detect these emissions.”
“Twenty million miles, the decay of the particles is considerable.”

Thinking out loud, Straker continued, “SID currently orbits at the L5 libration point. If we were to put two more SID satellites at the L4, and L3 Earth-Moon libration points, it may give us the protection we need. Colonel, are you familiar with the GIUK SOSUS line?”

She nodded, “Of course, we have to co-ordinate with them every time Skydiver enters or leaves port.” It dawned on her where Straker was leading, “You’re thinking of the same idea, but on a much larger scale.”

“Exactly. A trip wire, if you will. We had better enjoy our time off; I have a feeling we won’t have much to spare after tomorrow.”

In the control room at SHADO HQ, Colonel Blake was looking at the report he had just been handed. “Lt. Wade, get me Captain Carlin.”
At the communications console the blonde lieutenant toggled the transmitter, “Skydiver 1 from SHADO control, come in please.”

The voice of Lt. Maxwell came over the speaker. “SHADO control this is Skydiver, Maxwell here.”

“Colonel Blake for Captain Carlin,” said Wade. “Standby.”

A few seconds later, the image of Peter Carlin appeared on the screen. “Carlin here.”

Colonel Blake flipped up the mic, “Peter its Geoff, I need you to get to our installation near Glasgow, Scotland. Once there you will join up with a cleanup team and proceed to a small field near the eastern center of the loch. I’m sending you the exact coordinates on the data link. I want you to assume over all command of the operation. I’ll provide you with all the details when your en-route.”

Carlin nodded, “Understood, Skydiver out.”
Ten minutes later Sky 1 broached the surface of the North Atlantic. Captain Carlin climbed to 60,000 feet and fire-walled the throttle. He would be in Glasgow within the hour.

At two o’clock the Mooney Bravo was flying over the southern half of Loch Ness. “This is beautiful country,” remarked Ed. He was flying the airplane while Virginia was shooting photos. “Who are the pictures for?”

She turned and answered, “My mom likes to paint, she asked me to get a few shots of the loch the next time I was up here. Can you drop to 1000 feet and fly up the loch lengthwise?”

“I think I can manage that.”

Ed brought the aircraft into a left bank as he descended. Just before he got to the southern tip of the loch he executed a hairpin turn to the northeast. He dropped the flaps to five degrees
and reduced power. The Mooney was heading north by northeast at one hundred knots. Virginia was busy snapping shots of the western shore while Ed hand flew the aircraft. Forty minutes later they were approaching the northern end of the loch.

“Do you want to go around again?”

She nodded, “Please, you know this is so much easier with a co-pilot.”

Ed brought the Mooney around just before they reached the northern tip of the lake.

“Can you bring her down a little lower on this pass, Ed?”

He put the plane into a shallow descent and leveled off at 600 feet. “How’s that?”

Virginia gave a, thumbs up. “Perfect. You seem to have a handle on this.”

“They all fly the same way, but I could get used to one of these.”
Twenty minutes later they were over the middle of the loch. Ed noticed something in the water. “What’s that?”

Virginia turned to look. “What?”

He pointed, “I saw something in the water, there see.” In the center of the loch the water was swirling. “I’m going to overfly it, maybe it’s Nessie,” Ed said kiddingly.

Virginia had just loaded a new roll of film in the camera and she aimed it at the disturbance in the water. As the aircraft flew over the disturbance Ed banked so she could get a clear view. He could hear the shutter clicking away. As they flew by the disturbance became more pronounced.

The water roiled as the alien craft approached the surface; it formed a whirlpool as it broached. It began to climb rapidly.
Virginia was still taking photos when she realized what she was seeing, “My God, Ed, It’s a UFO!”

Straker pulled up the flaps and pushed in the throttle. He dropped his altitude as the small plane accelerated; he was barely fifty feet over the water. The UFO was now about a mile away.

“Find the closest airstrip!” he said urgently to Virginia, “We’re sitting ducks!”

The UFO started to climb to the north first moving away from the small aircraft.

“There’s a small field on the east bank, about two miles south of here.” She didn’t let it show outwardly, but Ed could see the fear in her eyes.

“RED ALERT, RED ALERT...“

The voice of SID echoed through the control center.
“UFO 426-157 BLUE SPEED, 200 KNOTS, ACCELERATING.”

Colonel Blake stepped down to the communications console. “SHADO control to Sky 1. We have a UFO in area 426-157 Blue. Sending attack data now.”

Peter Carlin checked the readout and verified the data. “Sky 1 to SHADO control, I have the attack data. Going for intercept, ETA two minutes, out.”

“Take over Colonel.” Straker was in full command mode now. He turned the radio to the encrypted SHADO ops frequency. “Straker to SHADO control, Straker to SHADO control.”

The voice of Colonel Blake came over the speaker. “This is control. Where are you Commander?”
Straker looked up the coordinates on the map and gave them to Blake. At that moment a bright green energy beam flooded the aircraft. The engine quit and all of the electronics suddenly lost power. Virginia had already lined up with the field and dropped the landing gear. Ed looked around but could not see where the alien craft was. He grabbed his pistol out of his flight bag.

“When we get down, make a run for the trees at the end of the field.” he told her, “Whatever happens, don’t stop.” She looked at him, apprehension in her eyes. “Don’t worry; I’ll be right behind you.”

They could hear the hum of the alien craft as it closed in on them. Virginia flared the plane as it came in over the runway. As they touched down the UFO passed overhead. It looked as if it was going to land when it suddenly started climbing rapidly. The Mooney rolled to a stop in the middle of the field as the alien craft vanished.
from site. Ed opened the door and got out. He turned to help Virginia when they saw a fireball explode in the sky. They could hear the roar of a jet in the distance.

“Sky 1 to SHADO control, UFO destroyed.” Peter Carlin made a low pass over the field where he had seen the UFO force down a small plane. As he passed he turned on his high resolution camera to record the plane and its occupants. He wagged his wings as he overflew the field.

Virginia came up next to Ed; he turned and reached for her as she returned his embrace. “I was sure we were goners.”

Virginia looked up at him and said, “I’ll say one thing; a date with you will never be boring, Commander.”

Chapter 4:
The SHADO cleanup team arrived at Loch Ness less than an hour later. That fact that the aircraft that was forced down was piloted by Colonel Lake made the security issues much easier to manage. Captain Carlin had landed Sky 1 and assumed command of the scene. Ed Straker walked over to him.

“How far are we from the cove Peter?”

Carlin turned and pointed. “The attack occurred less than a mile south of here. The site has already been scrubbed, but the photo evidence is in the command mobile.”

Straker nodded. “Let’s go. I want to see those photos Colonel Lake shot anyway.”

They walked towards the command vehicle, as they passed the Mooney one of the technicians called out, “Commander.”

Straker and Carlin walked over to the plane.

“We figured out what happened,” he explained, “The magneto wires are burned through right
here,” he said as he pointed the damage out to the commander. “Also the main power link is open, that’s why you lost the electronics.”

“That alien energy beam, it must have been more selective than I thought. Can you repair it here?” asked Straker. He already knew the answer.

“Easily Commander, we’ll have her airworthy in about twenty minutes.”

Straker nodded as he and Carlin walked away.

“You both were lucky,” said Carlin, “I didn’t know that Colonel Lake owned a Mooney, I’m jealous.”

Straker and Carlin continued to the command mobile.

“Yes she is quite an airplane; I wouldn’t mind getting one myself, Peter. But when would I ever have the time to fly?”
They stepped up into the mobile. “Show the Commander the photos,” said Carlin to one of the scrub team.

Straker examined the photographs, “Do we have an ID on the victim or the missing girl yet?” asked Straker.

Carlin looked in the report and said, “John Collins, age twenty, and Katherine Howard, age eighteen.”

Straker shook his head, “Just kids; no sign of the girl?”

“There was no sign of a struggle; I have to think she was on the craft I just downed. And speaking of the girl, we received a report that her parents have been reported missing as well.”

“Do they live nearby?”

“Their house is about five miles down the road, but the local police found the family vehicle abandoned on the side of the road less than half
a mile from here. They suspect that the couple was out looking for the daughter.”

As Straker and Carlin discussed the incident, Virginia came out of the darkroom with the shots she took of the UFO as it came out of the water. The trio examined the photos.

“These are excellent shots Colonel,” said Carlin. “Look at the detail.”

Straker looked at the photo showing the moment that the UFO broached the surface.

“Yes, I don’t think we have any from these angles, they might tell us something. Add them to the report,” Ed said.

The SHADO aircraft technician stepped into the mobile. “Colonel Lake, your bird is ready to go. We did a run up for you, everything looks fine.”

“Thank you,” she said.

As the technician left Straker continued, “Well I don’t think we can do any more here, besides Colonel Lake and I are on a forced vacation.”
Straker looked over to Lake and asked, “Well Colonel, are you ready?”

Virginia nodded, “I’m ready.”

Straker and Lake said goodbye to Carlin and walked back to the Mooney.

“Virginia, are you all right?”

She smiled, “Fine, I’ve just aged ten years that’s all. Ed, do you mind flying left seat on the way home? I suddenly feel very tired. I might try to nap on the way back.”

“All right I think I should be able to handle it.”

The Mooney only had a door on the right side of the aircraft so Straker had to get in first. Virginia followed him in and closed the door. Ed pulled out the checklist and went through the preflight.

He noticed that the fuel had been topped off and said to Virginia, “We won’t have to stop for fuel; the team filled our tanks.”
Ed started the engine and taxied to the end of the field. After doing a run up he lined up the aircraft and slowly advanced the throttle to full. In a few minutes they were airborne on their way back to London. By the time Ed had reached 10,000 feet, Virginia was fast asleep.

A bolt of lightning awoke her with a start. Outside the window she saw only dark sky and menacing storm clouds. She saw Ed busy at the controls of the Mooney; they had obviously run into bad weather and Ed was hand flying the aircraft.

“Ed, where are we?”

Another bolt of lightning flashed near the small plane.

“About twenty minutes out from Heathrow, I’m going to try to get a lower altitude.” He picked up the mic, “London approach, Mooney 8 3
Sierra with you, 8000, request immediate descent to 3000.”

The speaker crackled to life, “Mooney 8 3 Sierra, descend and maintain 3000, turn right heading 190.”

Straker acknowledged the instructions and the plane descended. As they broke through 5000 feet they were able to see the lights of London. The turbulence had subsided and the flight smoothed out. Ed turned the autopilot back on so he could set the nav radios for an instrument approach.

“How have they assigned you an approach yet?” asked Virginia as she got out the approach plates.

“Yes, 09 Right.”

She double checked the frequency information on the plates. “The ILS is 109.5,” said Virginia, “Tower is on 135.4.”
Ed set the radios. London approach came on and vectored them to final then handed them off to the tower. The airport was not yet visible and he knew he was going to have to fly an instrument approach.

Straker dropped the landing gear at the outer marker and set full flaps. Using the throttle he kept the airplane on the glide slope while the autopilot kept it centered with the runway. Virginia called out the airspeed as they came in.

“Airspeed 85...Middle marker...80...75...Inner marker.”

Just as they reached decision height Ed could see the runway environment. He took over from the autopilot and flared the aircraft just past the numbers. The Mooney settled onto the runway and rolled out. As soon as the speed was low enough he turned off the runway onto the taxiway. In ten minutes the aircraft was pulling into the hanger. He went through the post flight checklist, and killed the engine.
“Have you ever flown a Mooney before Ed?”

He shook his head, “No this was my first time in one, nice aircraft; takes a little getting used to.”

Virginia looked at him, “You landed this one like you do it every day.”

They disembarked from the plane. Ed grabbed their bags and they walked to the car. He pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward Virginia’s apartment.

Gay Ellis and Mark Bradley were playing tag, sort of. Ellis pulled her fighter up short as Bradley flew by. She dropped her nose and got in behind his aircraft. In a moment Bradley heard the warning tone in his headset. It meant that Ellis had missile lock.

“That’s it, best three out of five; you owe me dinner.” Gay teased as they formed up.
“My pleasure, Gay, I’m just glad I won’t ever have to face you in real combat. How is Skydiver 5 shaking out?” he asked.

“No problems; we even got our first kill.”

“I heard,” said Mark, “that makes three UFO’s that got through somehow. I don’t get it”

“Neither do I,” she said as she looked at her fuel gauges, “Time to head back to base, Mark.”

“OK, see you on Friday, Gay, safe flight.” Bradley rolled off her wing and rocketed back to Dreamland.

“Sky 5 to base, heading back to rendezvous point,” said Ellis as she banked the jet to a new course.

“Received Sky 5.” Lt. Harrington answered.

In the Moonbase control sphere Lieutenant Nina Barry sat at the command console. She was in communications with HQ. “How long
until lunar sunrise, Nina,” came Straker’s voice through the speaker.

“Four minutes.”

“Right; are the interceptors ready?” asked Straker.

“Yes sir, we’ve been on red alert since 06:00 hours.”

On the lunar surface the interceptors waited for the order to lift off. The pilots looked around keeping themselves occupied. They had been through this before.

Through the vidscreen Straker continued, “If we do lose contact, Nina, you’ll have to play it by ear.”

Lt. Ayshea Johnson turned to Nina, “Three minutes.”
In the underground HQ, Virginia Lake walked up besides Straker.

“It’s the feeling of helplessness I can’t take,” he said to her.

Virginia looked at him, “Sunspot activity is the perfect cover for a UFO. Do you think they’ll try anything?”

“I think you can lay odds on it,” said Straker.

“Get me the surface camera,” Nina Barry said to Ayshea.

“Yes Lieutenant.” Ayshea Johnson switched the camera feed to Nina’s console. She looked at the countdown and turned to Nina, “Fifty seconds.”

The alien craft was skimming the lunar surface trying to stay below the radar. Its approach would be masked by the sun.
The signal from SHADO HQ was beginning to fluctuate. Ayshea Johnson looked at the signal to noise ratio; it was dropping rapidly.

“Interference ratio two over seven...increasing.”

Nina Barry switched back to the HQ link, “Interference level rising to critical, Commander.”

“Right,” said Straker, “It looks like we are going to have a communications blackout.”

Ayshea cut in, “Sound and vision breaking up.”

Straker continued, “We’ll keep the line open and test signal every sixty seconds. Good luck.”

Nina nodded, “Thank you, sir.” She turned to Ayshea, “Give me the surface.” Nina scanned the lunar surface as Ayshea counted down the final seconds.

“Minus, ten...nine...eight...seven...six...five...four...three ...two...one...zero.”
The disk of the sun slowly began to rise above the lunar surface. In the center of the disk was a cone shaped spinning craft flying directly out of the sun. A blip appeared on the radar screen.

“Radar trace bearing 184, range 20 miles,” said Ayshea.

“Camera three,” ordered Nina.

The image came up on the vidscreen, but the glare from the sun obscured the image. Nina grabbed the binoculars and walked to the window. As she scanned the surface, she caught a glint of motion. She held in the spot; a UFO popped up from a valley trying to evade detection.

“Launch the interceptors!” Nina ordered.

“Interceptors immediate launch, immediate launch,” said Ayshea speaking into the mic.

The interceptors rose off their pads and flew in formation over the surface of the moon.
In the control sphere Nina Barry was still watching the UFO with the binoculars. Ayshea Johnson called out the range figures. “Fifteen miles.”

The alien craft continued hedge hopping over the lunar surface. It dropped into another valley and stayed out of site for a few minutes.

“Nine miles,” said Ayshea.

Nina spotted the UFO as it came out of the valley. It was much closer now and clearly visible through the binoculars. Suddenly the UFO increased altitude and veered off.

“It’s altering course,” Nina said as she watched it climb.

The alien craft continued to gain altitude then, without warning, exploded.
In control Straker and Lake smiled. He walked to the communications console and spoke into the mic, “Convey my congratulations to the interceptor pilots.”

“They didn’t get near it,” said Nina.

“What,” said Straker the smile leaving his face, “It disintegrated no apparent reason,” Nina responded.

Straker looked puzzled, “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Straker walked up to Virginia Lake, “Get a hold of Paul Foster. And check on the next available lunar flight,” he said.

“You’re going up to Moonbase?” she asked.

“I want to know why a UFO gets within four miles of Moonbase; then destroys itself,” said Straker.
Virginia watched him as he walked away, concern in her eyes.

As the lunar module headed for the moon, Paul Foster punched up the midcourse correction figures and entered the data.

“LM 1 to Moonbase, midcourse correction in five seconds,” said Foster.

“Roger 1,” Nina Barry’s voice came from the speaker.

The motors fired as the course correction was made.

“LOI trajectory nominal,” said Barry.

“Thank you, ETA 57 minutes, LM 1 out.”

Paul Foster closed the communications channel. Next to him Ed Straker was just finishing a report. He stowed it in his briefcase and set the locks.

“So Paul how is Miss Carson?” Straker asked.
“She’s well, thanks for asking,” answered Paul. “I’m taking her out Friday night. By the way, did you enjoy the Symphony the other night?”

Straker nodded, “I did, and it was a great show. You should go see it sometime.”

Foster shook his head, “I went once, and that was enough for me. Not my kind of music.”

The conversation paused for a bit. “So do you have any idea what happened they are up to?” asked Foster, changing the subject.

“That’s why I’m going up there,” said Straker, “By the way, Lieutenant Barry’s promotion paperwork has finally come through. She is being promoted to Lt. Colonel. I’m also officially giving her command of Moonbase. I should have done this a year ago.”

“That’s a three grade jump. How did you get that through Henderson?”

“It wasn’t all that difficult; Henderson is just as impressed with her as I am.”
Foster nodded, “She’s a good officer; she deserves it.”

Colonel Lake was working in the commander’s office when the intercom buzzed. “Yes,” she answered. “Colonel Grey to see you,” “Thanks Tara, send him in.” The office doors opened and John Grey walked in. Lake closed the doors behind him. “Hello John, what can I do for you?” “Hello Ginny,” he answered, “I want you to take a look at these two reports. Tell me what you think.” Grey handed the reports to her; she scanned through the first one quickly. “Well this one I knew about. Captain Ellis torpedoed a UFO off the coast of California.” She opened the second report and started to
read. “I haven’t seen this yet,” she said as she looked up.

“The only survivor of the wreck is in a coma,” began Grey. “The ship was called Sara Mae, a Great Lakes freighter. She exploded Saturday night, for no apparent reason. We looked at the ships manifest, it wasn’t carrying anything that could have caused an explosion of that magnitude,” Grey finished.

“You think it was a UFO.” Ginny surmised.

“I think we have to consider it a possibility. That would make four UFOs that have slipped through in the past week. Captain Carlin shot one down Friday night as it was heading for space; he got another one on Sunday afternoon. Then there is the one Captain Ellis torpedoed, and if the freighter incident was in fact a UFO, it would be number four. My concern is this; even if they are using the new propulsion system to get by Moonbase, they still would be detectable in the atmosphere,” he finished.
Ginny considered for a moment, “Put this all in the report, and I’ll brief the Commander later today. You could be on to something.”

Grey nodded and got up to leave. “I’ll get this together straight away. See you later,” he said as he left.

“We’ve got a hell of a mess up here Virginia,” Straker said to Lake over the vidlink. “Two Astronauts dead, one technician wounded...” his voice trailed off as he finished.

“I heard; is there anything I can do to help on this end?”

Straker nodded, “As a matter of fact there is. “I’m having Nina send down the recordings and reports on that UFO crash. I need you to get the computer analyzing the data as soon as possible. I have a lot of questions and no answers.”
“I’ll get the computer working on it as soon as I receive to data,” she said and continued, “By the way Ed, we may have another un-located UFO on our hands; Colonel Grey gave me a report this morning citing a freighter explosion on the Great Lakes. The only survivor is still in a coma. If this is true then we have had at least four undetected UFO incursions in the past week.”

All sorts of good news Straker thought. “All right, leave the report on my desk, I’ll be back tomorrow morning anyway, anything else to report?”

Virginia shook her head, “No everything else is quiet. Did you give Nina the news yet, Ed?”

“I’m on my way to do that now.”

“Pass on my congratulations, if you would,” she said.

Straker nodded, “I will; on a personal note, I asked you about having dinner later this week, are you free Friday night?”
“Only, if I’m being asked by a handsome gentleman.” Virginia teased.

“I’ll take that as a yes; see you tomorrow.”

“Attention to orders:” Straker began formally. “Lieutenant Nina Barry; for outstanding performance in the course of your duties, for dedication and untiring commitment to SHADO; it is my honor to bestow upon you the rank of Lt. Colonel, with all the privileges and responsibilities thereof, and as a result of that rank, that you be hereby appointed to the position of Commander, Moonbase. I offer my highest praise and congratulations,” he pauses, “and may God have mercy on your soul.”

Lt. Colonel Barry shook hands with her CO. “Thank you, sir. I’ll try to live up to your expectations,” she said.

The control sphere broke into a round of applause.
“Congratulations, Nina, “said Paul Foster.
Everyone on Moonbase came through control to offer their best wishes to Nina Barry.

“Oh Nina, Colonel Lake sends her best, I think she would like to hear from you,” said Straker.

Nina smiled, “Thank you Commander, I’ll call her when things settle down.”

Ed Straker looked around the room thinking it’s good for morale to let everyone let their hair down once in a while.

“You have someone waiting to see you, sir,” said Miss Ealand as she gathered a set of papers on her desk.

“And who might that be,” asked Straker already knowing the answer.

“General Henderson.”

Straker sighed, “How long has he been waiting?”
“Long enough to work up a lather.”

They walked into the office/elevator. “Just what I need at 8:30 in the morning.” Miss Ealand handed him the report to sign. “Thank you.”

“I could always ring down with an excuse to get you off the hook,” she said as she handed him a pen.

“That might work if you can think of a good one,” said Straker as he signed the reports.

“Fire in the studio?” she suggested.

“No it would take at least an earthquake to get one angry general off my back.”

Miss Ealand started walking back the outer office. “Nuclear attack?” she called over her shoulder.

“That might work, if it’s a big one.” Straker pressed to switch to close the door.
Straker walked into the control room. He saw Colonel Lake reading a report in front of the tape drive. “Good morning, Colonel.”

She had just taken a drink of her coffee, when Ed stole it from her and sipped it. “Well good morning,” she said playfully smiling at him.

“Where is he?” Straker asked ruefully.

Lake pointed to his office with her pen. “Oh, thank you,” he said. She was about to walk away when Ed grabbed her elbow. “Ah...I need moral support.” She grabbed the file she was working on and followed him into the office.

“Good morning Beaver,” she said to Captain James as he walked into control.

“Good Morning Colonel,” said James.

General Henderson was looking over a report when the doors parted and Straker walked into the office.
“Ah, General Henderson,” said Straker acting surprised.

“Straker I ought to kick your a...”

Henderson stopped when he saw Colonel Lake.

“General, you know Colonel Lake...Ah yes. Of course you do.”

Straker set down the coffee he stole from Virginia and closed the office doors.

“Now where’s that report,” Henderson asked Straker.

“I don’t have it finished yet,”

Straker said as he opened his briefcase. Behind them Virginia stole back her coffee and sipped it.

“The committee meets in three days. I need your report and all the figures,” the general said.

“I’ve been busy.”
“Look it takes money to run SHADO, a hell of a lot of money, and we’re asking the committee for even more this time.” Henderson said getting riled up.

“Well General that’s your bag, you get the money; I run the store.” Straker said facetiously.

“I tell you Straker, they are out for blood...my job is on the line, not that that’s important to you, but if I go...you won’t exactly win any popularity contests.”

“That sounds like a threat, General,” said Straker as he looked Henderson in the eyes.

“Not from me. We could both walk out of here tomorrow and believe me I’ve considered it, but you...you’ve got a monkey on you back...dedication. Think about it.”

Henderson turned to grab his briefcase and walked out of the office. Virginia closed the doors and walked up to Straker.
“Do you want me to reprogram the computer to get out the finance figures?” she asked.

“He is right you know.” Virginia said, playing devil’s advocate.

Ed considered. “Yes, he’s right, right, sometimes being wrong, right is harder...No let the computer run. I have to know what happened to Conroy.”

As Virginia turned to leave, Ed said, “Thanks for the moral support.

She smiled, “Anytime.”

Chapter 5:

Six weeks later:

Straker walked through the corridors of SHADO HQ. He gave a pleasant “Good morning” to everyone he passed. To most of the operatives Straker seemed to be in a particularly good
mood. He saw Virginia Lake on the computer platform waiting on the phone.

“Good morning Colonel, all quiet on the western front?” he asked as he was strolling to his office.

“I’ll let you know,” she called pleasantly over her shoulder.

Straker walked into his office only to be greeted by a stack of reports sitting in his in box. He sat down at his desk resigning himself to task of muddling through the paperwork.

“That was security on the line,” said Virginia as she walked into the office.

“And?” inquired Straker.

She pressed the button to close the door. “Inquiries on UFO report YP-195 may be reopened now,” she began.

“And?” he said not yet knowing the significance.
“Will you be handling the report yourself?” she asked.

“Well since I don’t know what UFO report YP-195 is all about, I can’t answer the question. You see the last one was numbered around 7000. So you have the advantage on me Colonel,” he stated somewhat perturbed.

“Well this was 10 years ago, the main witness was run down by a car, and has been in a coma ever since; that is until this morning.”

Straker’s demeanor suddenly changed as he realized the implications.

“How is she?”

“I don’t know,” she said softly, “The hospital only said that she was conscious. Dr Jackson is on his way there now.”

Ed put his hand to his eyes as he remembered the accident. He was driving the car that hit the young girl.
“Colonel Johns was on that case; would you like me to ask him to follow it through?” she asked.

“No, I’ll handle it. Get me Colonel Foster.”

Virginia picked up the phone to have Foster paged.

“Ed, are you all right?”

“Yes, it’s just that this brings back some unpleasant memories, I’ll be all right. Thanks, Virginia.”

Later on the next day, Ed Straker walked out onto the upper level of the hospital lobby. Catherine Fraser was dead; the aliens had somehow taken years from her life and given them to the young man Tim Redman, so that he could find the piece of the alien bomb that she hid ten years ago. With Catherine’s help Paul and he were able to find the bomb that would have destroyed most of England.
Ed looked down on the lower level; Virginia was standing there looking out the window and he knew that she was waiting for him. In his heart he knew that she would be there for him and he had known for a while now that he loved her, but he didn’t know if he was ready to tell her. Ed had known for at least a year how she felt about him; it was the reason, until very recently, he always called her by rank and not her first name like he did everyone else. *That must have hurt her deeply, she didn’t deserve it,* he thought.

He was also concerned about their friendship, a friendship that he didn’t want to lose, to him that was more important as having her as a lover. Over the past six weeks they had shared dinners and conversation and companionship but they had not yet explored physical intimacy. He asked himself, *was it worth the risk?* He depended on her more than he cared to admit. Most of all, he didn’t want to burden her with his guilt.
Virginia turned when she heard Ed come down the stairs, he stopped and looked at her for a moment; anguish evident in his eyes. Their eyes met and then he looked down and walked out the door to the hospital grounds. She walked out the door and stopped for a moment looking at him for a moment finally reaching a decision she had been pondering for weeks. She ran after him thinking, *I love him and it’s time I told him. I’m not letting him just walk away this time.* She matched his pace as she came up next to him remaining silent while they walked down the path.

“Ed, talk to me,” she finally said.

He didn’t say anything for a few moments.

“I can’t...this is my problem...I’ve had enough death for the past month and a half to last me a lifetime, Conroy, Dale, James, Cooper,
Simmons, and now, Catherine...” he finally said his voice trailing off.

“Listen to me Ed, you and Catherine saved millions of people today.” He remained silent. “Ed, please don’t push me away.”

You know she loves you so why are you holding her at arm’s length, he thought. Are you that much afraid of telling her you love her, or are you just afraid of being hurt again? Virginia interrupted his thoughts.

”Ed, please let me help...I love you.”

*There it is she’s just risked it all, so what are you going to do,* he thought. He looked into her beautiful blue grey eyes and saw that she was crying; he gently placed his arm around her.

“I’m sorry, I just need time to work this through; I’ll talk about it when I’m ready, all right?” he gently said.

She nodded and reached around his waist as she laid her head on his shoulders. When they
reached the end of the path they stopped and turned towards each other. Ed gently caressed her hair and the side of her face which fanned the fire that was growing inside her.

“Promise me one thing, Virginia?” he asked.

She looked up at him and nodded not trusting herself to speak.

“No matter how this goes; promise me that we will always be friends,” he said to her.

She smiled as she answered in a quivering voice, “I promise.”

Ed slowly took her in his arms and drew her into a long passionate kiss; she reciprocated her eyes closing as their lips met. Somehow he knew that she no longer cared if they were seen by anyone.

Ed awoke to the sound of thunder. A few moments later another flash of lightning lit up the bedroom window quickly followed by
another clap of thunder. This one was close as it caused the house to rumble. Next to him, Virginia stirred as she was awakened by the storm.

“Ed?” she called to him quietly.

“I’m awake; sounds like one hell of a storm.”

She turned to him, resting her arm and head on his chest.

Ed ran his fingers through her hair, “We should try and get back to sleep; tomorrow is going to be a very busy day.”

“Aren’t they all?” she observed.

They were both silent for a few moments.

“Ed, are you okay with this?”

“Yeah, I am, I’ve known for a while now that I love you.”

“I’m afraid that I’m going to wake up and find out that this is only a dream,” she said.
“Do you think this is a dream?” he said as pulled her closer and kissed her.

“I love you Ed.”

Ed caressed her shoulders as he tried to calm his mind but the worries of the morning continued to invade his thoughts.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“We have to see Henderson next week to sell him on the tracking system, so the first thing I want to do in the morning is go over the plan ourselves. We are still going to have to find a theoretical physics expert to work on the project. We are also going to have to tell him about us,” he said as she snuggled into his shoulder.

“I may have someone who would be interested if he knew the ramifications, he was one of my instructors my last year at Stanford; Professor Manfred Reinhardt, he just retired as Professor
of Physics, and I’m not worried about Henderson.”

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes. “Ed, I could try to…” Virginia started to say before Ed stopped her.

“I love you,” said Ed as he put a finger gently to her lips, “now get some sleep.”

She propped herself up on her elbow and looked at him. “Yes, sir,” she said in a mock serious tone. She relaxed in his arms and was soon sleeping again.

Just over a week later, General James Henderson was reading through the tracking project report when his intercom buzzed.

“Yes,” he grunted.

“Commander Straker and Colonel Lake are here to see you, sir.”
Ulcer territory, thought Henderson; let’s spend more money that we don’t have.

“Send them in,” he finally said.

The door opened and the pair walked into the office.

“Good morning General,” said Straker as he shook hands with Henderson.

“Commander, Colonel Lake, please sit.” Henderson reached for the intercom.

“Miss Scott, would you have some coffee brought in please?”

“Right away, sir,” she replied.

Straker decided to go on the offensive.

“Have you read the report, General?”

Henderson nodded, “I have, and all I see is a big black hole sucking in more money. Can’t we do any of this with software?”

Straker looked at Lake giving her the cue to begin, “We were able to enhance our tracking
systems by modifying the detection sensors to scan for tachyon and neutrino emissions from the time wave created by the hyper-light velocities. When the system went on line last week we intercepted two UFOs in the upper atmosphere.”

“Then why do we have to spend billions of dollars on a new tracking system if the software upgrades are working?” Henderson asked testily.

Straker leaned forward, “Because General, it’s just like in war. The aliens have our backs to the sea right now. The whole idea of a space tracking network is to stop them before they reach Earth. Unless we are changing our strategy in which case we are going to need another fleet of Skydivers.”

“Colonel Lake,” the general addressed her directly, “You mentioned in the report that we would need to bring more resources into the research section. Do you have anyone in mind?”
Virginia nodded, “As a matter of fact I do, General. Professor Manfred Reinhardt, Professor of Physics emeritus, at Stanford, He is one of a dozen physicists who has an understanding of the theory involved. He was also my instructor while I was working on my doctorate.”

Henderson’s look was unreadable to her. “Very well, the commission doesn’t like the idea of fighting the aliens in the atmosphere. They consider it too much of a security risk, but we’re going to have to do some creative financing to fund this project.”

Over the next few hours, Straker and Lake set down the plans for a new detection system. It would use Utronic beam transmissions for the communications between all the tracking assets as well as voice communications. The digital coding of the transmissions would use a new encryption algorithm that was thirty years ahead of its time. This would make the signals
impossible to decipher or intercept. The computer system at HQ would be replaced with a very modern supercomputer, all the tape drives to be converted to hard drive technology. In a month SHADO HQ would be transformed. Soon after that they would have in place a true passive detection system.

As Straker and Lake were getting up to leave Henderson said, “Just one more thing, Commander.”

They sat back down as Henderson continued, “I received a copy of the Computer Relationship Study that Colonel Grey ran on the two of you. I have only two questions.”

Henderson paused for effect as Straker thought here it comes.

“Personally I don’t care one way or the other as long as it doesn’t affect your efficiency. First of all; are we talking about an intimate relationship?”
Straker and Lake looked at each other. Lake nodded and Straker turned to the general. “Yes, General, it is.”

Henderson considered for a moment. “I see,” he then asked his next question. “In that case Commander, are you still maintaining that Colonel Lake be promoted to executive officer?”

Henderson was throwing down the gauntlet. “My recommendation was made six months ago, it stands General.”

Henderson nodded, “Very well then.” Henderson said getting warmed up. “Straker, you know my feelings about civilian sector source operatives being promoted to command level positions. And now with the two of you in a romantic relationship, how am I supposed to sell this to the commission?”

“Colonel Lake’s record speaks for itself, General. You recommended her for the Silver Star yourself. As to our personal life interfering with our efficiency, you have the report; it
clearly states that neither Colonel Lake, nor I would have our efficiency adversely affected. Furthermore General, I should not have to remind you of my own personal history of putting the needs of SHADO ahead of my family. It cost me my marriage and eventually the life of my son.”

Henderson looked at Straker who held his glance. Henderson knew what it cost Straker emotionally to make that statement. Half a minute later he said, “Very well, but it goes to the commission without my endorsement; I’ll let them decide. No offense Colonel.”

Virginia looked at him. “None taken, General,” she answered her voice thick with irony.

Virginia was quiet on the ride back to HQ. She didn’t usually engage in idle chatter anyway, this was one of the things he liked about her, when she spoke it was because she had something meaningful to say. Straker hated
small talk. She was looking out the window when Ed broke the silence.

“General Henderson got to you didn’t he?”
She turned to him and Ed see could by the look on her face that he was right.

“I was wondering if I get away with sticking him in one of Skydiver’s crash dive tubes, just before sea trials.”

“He probably wouldn’t fit,” Ed chuckled.
In a second the tension was gone as they both laughed.

“Henderson does that on purpose just to keep people off balance. You handled him well by not reacting. He hates that.”

Virginia looked back at him considering. “It’s more than that, Ed. During World War Two, my father flew B-17’s out of England. But more to the point his commanding officer was Colonel James L. Henderson.”
Ed was stunned. “Your dad flew with Henderson?”

“It’s a small world Ed. My father was assigned to England as part of the Eighth Air Force. My mom was an RAF nurse at the airbase hospital; that was where they met. They fell in love and got married in December 1943. They did not plan on having children until after the war but accidents happen. My mother became pregnant with me in late 1944. On February 14, 1945, my father was flying a B-17 over Dresden Germany. His aircraft had completed the bomb run and they were on their way back to England. His plane suddenly went out of control taking three other aircraft with it. All of the crews, on all three aircraft were killed. Henderson was flying a couple miles back and saw the incident. Because of his report, the investigation board ruled the cause of the crash as pilot error.”

“What was your dad’s name?” Ed asked softly.
“Robert F. Lake,” she continued, “I think that is why he doesn’t want me as executive officer. I think he still blames my father for the loss of those four aircraft, and because of that he doesn’t trust my judgment.”

Ed made a mental note to check on his record. Good piloting skills often ran in a family and Virginia was an exceptionally skilled pilot. If she flies half as well as her father... Straker was having difficulty believing this story was completely true.

“Speaking of your parents, I think it’s time I met your mother,” said Ed.

“I have to bring her the photos we took of Loch Ness. Why don’t you come with me on Sunday?” Ed pulled the car into the studio and up to the valet. “I’d like that.” He opened the doors and they walked into the studio.
“Alec I need you to do me a favor.” Straker spoke to him on the vidlink. “I need to find out everything you can about a Lt. Colonel Robert F. Lake US Army Air Corps. He was killed in action on February 14, 1945. I want you to go on the assumption that the official story is a cover up.”

Alec wrote down the information when the name stuck out at him. “Robert F. Lake, any relation to…”

Straker cut him off. “He was her father, Alec.”

Freeman nodded. “I’ll get right on this; I take it that this is important?”

“It may be, something about it doesn’t add up. I can’t quite put my finger on it,” said Straker.

“How are things with you and Ginny?”

“I’ve just fallen off a mountain; I’m in love with her, Alec. I’ve known for a while now.”

Freeman did a double take. “You’re serious. Does she feel the same way, Ed?”
“I found out for sure, last week, that she does.”

Alec Freeman smiled; he had hoped that one day Ed would be able to find someone to share his life with. “Ed, I’m truly happy for you, Ginny is a very lovely lady. Hey, listen, when I get back to London, we’ll all go out for dinner, make a night of it.”

Remembering Alec’s antics one night years ago, Straker said, “I’ll make sure I get reservations at a place I never want to go back to. See you later Alec.”

On the vidlink Freeman said, “Take care Ed.”

Skydive 5 cruised below the surface of the North Atlantic. At the ships periscope Captain Gay Ellis checked for nearby vessels.

“All clear, XO, take her up,” she ordered.

The submarine broached the surface of the ocean. Captain Ellis stowed the periscope and walked onto the open elevator platform. The elevator platform rose up to the conning tower. Ellis pressed the control to open the hatch. She climbed up the ladder and on to the bridge of her ship. Ellis scanned the horizon with her binoculars. Beside her, Joan Harrington was scanning in the opposite direction. Ellis picked up the handset and spoke into it.

“Helm, steer course 095, all ahead two thirds.”

The submarine lifted out of the water as the sea skim mode was engaged.

“Do you have any plans for shore leave, Gay?” Joan asked.

“I have a dinner date with Mark on Saturday night, and I’m having lunch with Ginny tomorrow.”

“Oh, please say hi to both of them for me.”

“I will,” said Gay.
“Where is Mark taking you?”

“The Register, we haven’t had a night out in four weeks,” Gay answered.

“Are you seeing Dave this weekend?” asked Gay.

“Friday night; dinner and a movie and whatever comes after,” she said a bit of naughtiness in her voice.

Gay shook her head, some things never changed.

“I heard a rumor that Ginny Lake went out to dinner with Commander Straker last week. Know anything about it?” asked Joan.

Gay Ellis had always hated gossip, almost as much as Joan loved it. More than once it had been a point of contention between them.

“If I did I wouldn’t say anything, it’s none of my business.” Gay lowered her binoculars and looked at Joan and continued. “It’s also none of yours, if they want us to know they’ll tell us.”
Joan was taken back a bit. “I’m sorry Captain,” Joan said reprimanded.

“No I’m sorry Joan, I didn’t mean to snap, it’s just that Ginny is my best friend and I don’t want any rumors being spread about.”

Ellis picked up the handset and spoke into it. “Slow to one third.”

The submarine settled down in the water as it slowed. A mile ahead was the marine base cut into the side of the cliff. Gay found commanding Skydive both a big boost to her confidence and she enjoyed the challenge, but she was looking forward to some rest and relaxation.

“If it’s a cover up Ed, it’s a dammed good one. I wasn’t able to get any information from any of my sources. I checked a couple of leads outside my normal contacts but the minute I mentioned Lt. Colonel Lake they clammed up. Something stinks here Ed, I don’t like it.”
Straker listened to his friend’s voice on the vidlink. He had one other card to play but that would mean going right to the source.

“Well thanks Alec, I appreciate the effort. By the way, Virginia and I will be flying out to the states next week to meet with Professor Reinhardt.”

”Do you think he’ll come on board?”

“Virginia seems to think so. I’ve looked at his credentials; I think he would be a perfect addition to the team.”

“Right, so I should plan on coming back next week?” asked Alec.

“Yes, assuming things go well with Professor Reinhardt, I plan on assembling the entire team. We need to go over the upgrade plans and assign pieces of it to each team leader,” he paused, “I need to get Lt. Colonel Barry down from Moonbase as well. I’m going to pull
Captains Waterman and Bradley for the lunar tracking piece.” Straker finished.

“How about Captain Ellis?”

“I would love to put both her, and Carlin, to work on this; unfortunately somebody has to defend Earth while this is being implemented. Ellis and Carlin are the two best aeroceptors pilots SHADO has. I need them right where they are. Besides, both Bradley and Waterman were interceptor pilots; they have the astronaut skills needed for this part of the project. No Alec, for once we are in a win, win situation.”

“So Ginny, tell me all about it, what’s he like?” Gay Ellis asked her best friend.

They sat in a quiet corner of the restaurant having lunch; they could speak without being overheard.

“You wouldn’t recognize him at home, he’s warm, gentle, he plays classical piano; a total
contrast to the Ed Straker we all know from the company.” Ginny said.

“It sounds too good to be true, so when did you start feeling attracted towards him?”

Ginny thought for a moment and answered.

“I guess it was after I was made acting XO. When I got reassigned to HQ I started working closely with Ed. As you already know, working for the Commander is always a challenge. Our working relationship was somewhat tense at first.” Ginny paused to sip her coffee.

“As I got to know him I discovered that he treated everyone the same. Expert first, person second, and gender third. Just that aspect itself is a big turn on. Although he demands a lot, he is also fiercely loyal to us as well. I didn’t realize that until I saw him go toe to toe with General Henderson over the promotion list.”

“I know, I was on that list,” said Gay.
“Anyway, we were on our way back from the airport; this was the night of the Timelash incident; Ed picked me up himself, I’m still not sure why, but I didn’t mind. I’ve always enjoyed being in his company even if it was on a professional basis. He is strikingly handsome man you know.”

The two women laughed at that. It was true; Ed Straker had an enticing effect on almost all of the female operatives at SHADO. Because of his diffidence that effect was more pronounced than would be normally perceived.

Ginny continued, “Well he told me he wanted to debrief me himself before Henderson saw me. I think he just wanted someone to talk to. That is when we saw our visitors in the sky.”

Ellis nodded and said, “Commander Straker doesn’t show compassion very often, but it catches you off guard when he does,”

“Don’t I know it,” Ginny said ruefully. “I lived for those moments. Anyway when we got back
to the studio, we found everyone frozen in time. After about ten minutes, we noticed it was getting to us. Ed and I made our way to the medical center. He injected us both with a stimulant called X50. It helped stave off the Timelash effect. Just before we left to go back to control, he asked me if I was ok. I have to tell you Gay, my heart skipped a beat; it was some form of electricity between us. Truth be told, I was terrified, but I was bound and determined I wasn’t going to be a liability to him. But at that moment I just wanted to melt into his arms.” Ginny paused remembering that moment.

“You’re glowing Ginny, did you know that?”

“Am I?” she asked suddenly embarrassed.

“There is a love light painted all over you, it’s magical.”

Virginia blushed. “Oh stop it,” she muttered, embarrassed.

They finished lunch and ordered coffee.
“So when did you find out the attraction was mutual?” asked Gay.

“It’s hard to say mostly because Ed always called me Colonel while everyone else had the privilege of being addressed by their first names; he told me last week that he didn’t trust himself using my first name because his real feelings would show. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry; I think I did both. Getting back to your question, I suspected it when Ed woke up from the after affect of the drugs that Jackson used to open his mind; he called me by my first name in a dream. When he woke up, he looked at me the same way he did in the medical center. I was holding his hand and he squeezed it gently when he noticed. I still get goose bumps thinking about it.” She pulled her sweater around her shoulders.

“You’ve got it bad girl.”
“The hardest thing we’ve faced so far was telling Henderson, you know the regulations concerning that.” Ginny finished.

“Mark and I ran into a problem with that about four years ago.”

Ellis remembered the time Mark Bradley and she had run afoul of one of SHADO’s Psycho-Analytical tests. It had revealed an emotional attachment between her and Mark which threw her judgment into question. Fortunately the trajectory analysis cleared her of any wrong doing. After that Mark and she decided on their own that they should not be posted to the same base. Mark transferred to Earth and began training for Skydiver duty. She still had not told anyone that they had been engaged for almost two months.

“Ed and I are going to see my mother on Sunday.” Ginny said.

“This is serious, who suggested it you or him?”
“He did, I’m actually not surprised. Ed is very old fashioned in that way. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not a prude, and neither is he, but certain things are important to him. He is very protective of my reputation as a lady.”

“Ed, are you alone,” Alec asked over the vidlink. Straker reached over and closed the office door. “I am now. What did you find?”

“Switch to Ultra-Secure mode.” Alec instructed. Ed pressed the toggle on his vidlink. The communication between them was encrypted end to end. No one, not even inside the SHADO complex could tap into their conversation.

“I was able to find out some information regarding Lt. Colonel Lake. I had to call in a few favors at SAS, but I still have some friends over there. Ed, what I am about to tell you is still classified under MAJESTIC.”
Straker’s jaw dropped as Alec continued, “Lt. Colonel Lake was secretly working for, at that time Army Intelligence. His wife was with MI-6. She was the British Liaison to US Army Intelligence. Contrary to popular belief MAJESTIC was formed in 1939 not after the Roswell incident in 1947. I wasn’t able to find out any of the details of the crash. All of that information is MAJESTIC level 12 clearance. It would seem that even we have been kept in the dark about certain things.”

Straker leaned back in his chair.

“What are you going to tell Ginny?” asked Alec.

Ed thought for a moment before he answered. “I’m going to leave her out of this at the moment, at least until I find out what is going on. It’s not because I don’t trust her, but for her own safety. I don’t want to place her in jeopardy if certain parties don’t want this getting out.”

Alec looked troubled, “Ed, what are you going to do?”
“I’m going straight to the source, Alec. I’m going to pay a visit to James L. Henderson. Let me know if you find out anything else. Oh...and Alec, keep your head low.”

“Will do, Freeman out.”

Ed ended the call, unlocking the office doors. They opened and Virginia walked in. She noticed the look on his face and reached down to close and lock the doors.

“My God, Ed, you look like you just saw a ghost.”

“I think I have,” he replied. “Virginia, I need you to mind the store, I have to go see Henderson.” Straker placed a few reports in his briefcase and set the locks.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?” she asked.

“No this is something I have to handle myself. I should be back in time to pick you up; my place tonight?”
“Sure, we’ll just have to stop by my apartment so I can grab the mail and a few things.” She kissed him as he was getting ready to leave.

“See you later,” he said as he walked out.

As second in command Virginia knew that there were very few aspects of SHADO operations she would not have access to. She knew that Ed wouldn’t keep her out of the loop without a good reason. I hope he’s all right, she thought to herself.

“Commander Straker. Twice in one week. To what do I owe the pleasure?” Henderson greeted him in his usual callous way.

“General, I need to know all you can tell me about Lt. Colonel Robert F. Lake US Army Air Corps. He was lost in a B-17 over Dresden, Germany on February 14, 1945.”
Henderson leaned back in his chair. “So Colonel Lake told you about her father’s mishap, did she?”

“She did, but something about it doesn’t add up. Virginia Lake is an exceptional pilot. It has been my experience that good piloting skills run in a family. Something about this doesn’t sit right with me.”

Henderson was getting upset, considering the whole exchange a waste of time. “Straker, that was almost forty years ago; of what possible importance can this serve now?” he demanded.

“Because General, I made some inquiries into the incident. It would seem that Lt. Colonel Lake was more than just a pilot. He was also with Army Intelligence. But the most confusing part is why an event as simple as pilot error is classified under MAJESTIC?”

The General’s jaw dropped. “Sit down Commander.”
Straker went to object but Henderson cut him off. “Ed, please...sit down.” Henderson had not called him that in years, it had the disarming affect that the General had intended.

Henderson pressed the intercom button, “Miss Scott, hold all my calls, and see that we are not disturbed until further notice.”

Henderson leaned back in his chair. “What I am about to tell you Colonel Straker is classified by the Pentagon at the highest security level in existence, MAJESTIC 12.” General Henderson purposely used his USAF rank to convey the seriousness of what he was being told. “Less than twenty people on the planet know the full story. I was given explicit instructions not to share this with you unless you asked about it specifically. As far as SHADO knows, the first confirmed UFO incident was in early 1970. In reality it was much earlier than that.” Straker went white as Henderson continued. “Well I’m glad to see our security works so well. No
matter, the first confirmation we had of an extraterrestrial presence was in 1939. An alien spacecraft crashed in a remote area of Nevada. As a matter of fact that area is now what is known as Area 51.”

Straker was confused. “General, I don’t understand if the alien threat was evident in 1939, why wasn’t it included in the Cine report?”

“Remember Ed, the world climate was much different back then. We were on the verge of another world war and the United States did not want to share this new technology with the world. You see Colonel; the alien craft we found was from a different faction than the one we currently face.” Henderson paused letting the implication of what he just said sink in.

Straker’s mind was racing; his whole sense of reality had just been turned upside down. “Why have we never run across this other faction?”
“We believe the first alien faction was strictly on what we would call a survey mission, with no hostile intent. Neither the ship nor crew carried any form of weaponry that we could identify. We have had only limited success in translating their language, but from the star charts on their spacecraft we have been able to determine that they come from a solar system in the Epsilon Eridani system about ten light years from Earth. Through careful analysis we have been able to reverse engineer a sizeable portion of their technology. All the advanced alloys used in SHADO air and spacecraft came from information obtained from that crash site. Even the some of the theory for the Utronic project came for that incident. Why do you think our technology suddenly leaped ahead during and after World War Two?”

Henderson watched as Straker considered all he had just been told. Henderson continued. “During the war over Europe many pilots reported seeing cone shaped flying objects.
Because they did not show up on radar we thought the Nazi’s had developed some type of stealth aircraft. Lt. Colonel Lake and I were assigned to the theater by Army Intelligence. It was our job to see if the phenomenon reported was in anyway related to the aliens we had discovered in Nevada. In 1945 Bob Lake and I were flying back from the raid on Dresden. At that time in the war German resistance to air attack was almost nonexistent. I was flying about a mile back from Lake’s group when I saw a UFO identical to the ones we face now come down out of the clouds. It fired a directed energy weapon at all four of the aircraft in the group. The four planes exploded in midair. When I got on the ground I reported what I had seen to Army Intelligence; the whole incident was immediately classified. The hardest thing I’ve ever had to do was tell Lynn Lake the official lie. By the way I’m curious; have you met her yet, Colonel?” Henderson suddenly asked changing the subject.
“Virginia is going to introduce us on Sunday, sir.”

The conversation had become surreal. It was as if they had gone back in time. Straker and Henderson had been at odds over SHADO’s budget for so many years that they were hardly civil to one another anymore.

“When you meet her you’ll know where Colonel Lake gets her attractiveness from. Even in her early sixties, Lynn is still a striking lady. I’m surprised she never remarried.” Henderson said after a moment.

“Did you know that she was with MI-6?” asked Straker.

It was Henderson’s turn to be shocked. “Are you serious?” the General asked incredulously.

“I verified it through my own sources this morning.”

“If that is the case there is a good chance she knows most of what we have just discussed.
That would also explain why she didn’t put up a fuss when I told her the official version of what happened to her husband. For security reasons I never knew who Bob’s contact was. How much does Virginia Lake know of this?” asked the General.

“To my knowledge nothing. Apparently her mother told her the same story you did. I can only assume that is because she doesn’t know what Virginia really does. Sometimes our cover as a film studio is problematic. Take Colonel Lake for instance; doctorate in applied physics from Stanford, IQ of 145, ten years as chief designer for a military contractor, why would someone with that kind of background be working as an Associate Producer in a film studio? As you can see it can be an awkward fit.”

“We are all right as long as nobody recognizes who we all really are,” agreed Henderson.
“Speaking of Colonel Lake, why are you against promoting her to executive officer?”

“Ed, I don’t think that she would be able to make the hard decisions, especially if it would jeopardize the life of someone she cares about.”

“Don’t underestimate her General, Virginia Lake may seem to be kind and easy going, but she can be hard as nails when necessary. You remember the incident nine months ago when we lost the Fairfield Tracking Station and Skydiver 3?”

“Painfully,” said Henderson.

“Foster ended up bringing Linda Simmons to HQ. You should have seen the look on Virginia’s face; she put the fear of God into everyone who saw her. Truth be told, I’m not looking forward to the day she turns on me. She wasn’t pleased with my decision that day and I think she would have put up more of a fight, if not for the fact that she had just been promoted.”
“It looks like the commission is going to back your decision anyway; I just hope you’re right.” Straker looked at his watch. “Well General, I’ve taken up enough of your time, I can’t thank you enough.” Ed shook hands with his boss.

“So how long will this truce last?”

“Until the next budget meeting,” Straker said smiling. “Good afternoon, General.” Straker said as he got up to leave.

“Commander.” Henderson said as Straker left.

Chapter 6:

Ed was sitting on the couch looking over reports when Virginia came out of the kitchen with two cups of tea. She had already got ready for bed. She sat down next to him.

“You’ve been pretty quiet,” she began. “Care to talk about it?”
Ed put down the report he was looking at and sat back.

“Have you ever wondered what goes through the minds of people who come across either aliens or our organization? They suddenly find out that history as they knew it is a lie. Today I found out what that feels like,” he said.

She looked at him with puzzlement.

“My meeting with General Henderson went well, maybe too well. I’d almost rather not know some of the things I learned today,” he said rubbing his eyes.

“Is it something you can tell me?”

Ed shook his head. “I wasn’t going to tell you right away, but you have the right to know; besides I need to talk to someone about it.” He paused. ”It’s still classified MAJESTIC 12.” Ed began.
Virginia had heard of MAJESTIC but she had always assumed that it was the forerunner to SHADO.

“This has to do with your father, Virginia. When you told me how he had died something didn’t feel right about it. You are an accomplished pilot, you keep a level head in a tight situation and I’ve never seen you panic. You handle an aircraft like a pro. So if your father was half the pilot you are; it would be almost impossible, in my opinion, for him to lose his aircraft the way it was described, let alone take out three others. So I dug around, called in a few favors; I found out the truth today. Your father’s aircraft, along with the rest of his group, was shot down by a UFO.”

Virginia’s eyes went wide with shock.

“How is that possible?” she asked. “The first confirmed UFO incident wasn’t until 1970...” Virginia stopped as she realized what Ed had told her. No wonder he was so quiet on the way
home. “How much of what we have been told is a lie?” she asked almost angry.

“The incident with your father was the first confirmed hostile incident of the type of craft we battle now. But they have evidence of a second alien species that is apparently not hostile. This goes back to 1939.”

Virginia considered, her head now spinning. “And what about the Roswell incident in 1947. Was that actually real?”

“According to Henderson that incident was a crash by the hostile faction.”

“Then why were we kept in the dark? Ed this could change everything.”

Straker understood remembering his own reaction. “It already has; most of the technology and metallurgy SHADO uses came from the first faction of aliens. Where do you think the theory for the Utronic beam came from? The reason for secrecy was the geopolitical situation
of the time. Britain and the United States kept the technology and all the circumstances surrounding it Top Secret. As a matter of fact they created a new level of secrecy; MAJESTIC. When SHADO was formed they decided it would be too embarrassing to come clean so they kept it classified under MAJESTIC and funneled the information by other means.”

“So that means that all the work on the alloy for the new Sky aeroceptors is a sham?” she asked.

“That means that all the work on the alloy for the new Sky aeroceptors is a sham?” she asked.

“Just the source of the study material, the research is real.”

Virginia laid her head on Ed’s shoulder. “How much trouble are you in by telling me this?”

“Henderson, told me in very formal terms that this information is classified MAJESTIC 12. But as CINC I have some discretion as to how I distribute information. I think it’s best to keep it between us for now. I do however intend to bring Alec in on this, and I will do that in
person next week. I suspect he already knows some of it anyway.”

Virginia thought about Ed’s ex wife. Yes it would have been hard on her not knowing the truth, but she realized it was much harder on Ed, living a dual life out of necessity. Not being able to talk about most of what he did. *How did he bear it?*

“I’m going to schedule our flight to the states for Monday. By the way, study up on the procedures for the SHADAIR SST, you’re flying right seat with me when we go to see Professor Reinhardt.”

Virginia looked at him somewhat surprised. “Ed, that’s a complex aircraft. I’ve been in the simulator but I’ll have to brush up.”

“I want to get you certified to fly supersonic aircraft; the Seagull series is the easiest of our transporter aircraft to master and you have over 2000 hours in turbojets. Alec will give you a check ride while we are at Dreamland. When
you pass you’ll be flying left seat on the way back; Trust me you can handle it.”

“You seem pretty sure about it.”

When they finished their tea, Virginia said, “Come on, let’s get to bed.”

Ed looked up from the report he was reading and looked at the clock; it was only nine thirty. “You go ahead, it’s still early and I’m not sleepy yet.”

Virginia gave him an impish grin as she put her arms around him, “Good, neither am I.”

Ed tossed the report aside and took her in his arms wishing, not for the first time that he had shared his feelings with her. As he looked into her eyes he realized just how lonely he had been and how much he loved her.

“You’ll be sleepy by the time we’re done,” he said as he picked her up and carried into the bedroom.

“You think so,” she said saucily.
“Yeah.”

“Promises, promises.”

Ed had dropped Virginia by her apartment so she could pick up her car. He had to drive down to the Skydiver Naval base for an inspection of Skydiver 5. He wouldn’t be in until later. In the control room, Colonel Geoff Blake was watching the monitor, but noticed as Virginia Lake walked in.

“Ah, Good morning Ginny,” said Blake.  

*Here we go again.* Virginia thought to herself. Blake was overbearing, the type who wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Good morning, Colonel Blake,” she said keeping things formal; maybe he would take the hint. She walked into the Commander’s office and sat down behind the desk. As she expected he was on her coattails. “What can I do for you Colonel?” she asked reluctantly.
“Where’s Commander Straker this morning?”

Ginny didn’t know if his inquiry was genuine or not. *When the cat’s away the mice will play.* “He’s at the Skydiver Naval installation, doing an inspection on the new boat. Do you need to see him or is this something that I can help you with?”

“Well you could say yes to dinner.”

“We’ve been through this before, Colonel.” Virginia said impatiently, looking back down at her reports.

“Well I think you’re just playing hard to get, Ginny. It’s just dinner what’s the harm in that?”

*That’s it! It’s time to snap him back in place, once and for all.* “Colonel Blake, I thought I told you last week I wasn’t interested, not now, not ever, are you reading me loud and clear?” she said getting out of her seat and not trying to hide her anger. The door was still open and Paul
Foster had just walked into the room. Virginia knew he must have heard the exchange.

“Yes, Colonel Lake; very loud and clear, Good day to you,” said Blake. He turned and walked out. “Paul?” he said to Foster, as he left.

“Geoff?”

Virginia closed the doors and sat back down. She wanted to scream.

“What was that all about?” asked Paul as he sat down.

“I’ve told him a dozen times I’m not interested and he won’t take no for an answer. He gives me the creeps every time he looks at me.” Ginny said clearly frustrated.

“Would you like me to have a word with him?”

Virginia smiled, she knew Paul well enough to know the offer was genuine. “No I have to handle this on my own, if I can’t handle a small problem like this then I don’t belong here,” she said. “I just don’t want Ed to catch wind of it.
He has zero tolerance for this kind of thing. If he finds out, Blake could find himself in a gulag in Siberia.”

The fact that we are a couple would have absolutely nothing to do with it. She remembered a particular incident six months ago when a new radio technician was making unwelcome advances on Ayshea Johnson. Ed Straker had dressed him down for nearly an hour, and then had him transferred to a remote tracking station in northern Alaska.

“As much as I dislike Blake, he is a good officer,” she said.

Paul nodded, “May I ask you a personal question Ginny?” Paul Foster was never one to mince words.

“Sure, Paul,” she said almost sure what he was going to ask.

“I heard a rumor going around HQ this morning that you and the Commander are, shall we say,
involved. I told those caught up in the gossip to mind their own business, but I was just wondering if there is any truth to it.”

In for a penny, in for a pound, she thought. “Yes, it’s true, the night you saw us at the Register was our first date.”

Paul didn’t seem surprised. “That’s about what I figured, but I don’t place a lot of stock in something unless I hear it from the source. Do the two of you want to keep this under wraps?”

“No we decided not to hide it, but we’re not flaunting it either.”

“So if I hear the rumor mill grinding how would you like to handle it?”

Virginia laughed. “Tell them to ask; if they have the courage to do that, then I think they deserve an answer.”

As Paul got up to leave he said, “I do think the two of you make a striking couple.”

Virginia smiled. “Thanks, Paul.”
“Attention on deck, CINC SHADO, arriving.” Joan Harrington said on the ship’s loudspeaker. On the deck of Skydiver 5 Captain Ellis and Lt. Harrington Snapped to attention as Commander Straker walked up the gangplank.

“Request permission to come aboard, Captain?” Straker asked formally.

“Permission granted; welcome aboard Commander,” said Captain Ellis.

Straker looked over the submarine. It was somewhat longer than the original design. “Nice to see you again Gay...Joan...” Straker said as he shook hands with them.

“If you would follow me, sir,” Ellis said to Straker as she started down the ladder into the conning tower. Straker climbed down into the submarine looking at the instrumentation upgrades. All of the CRT displays had been replaced with TFT technology. The ship was
years ahead of its time. Straker stepped onto the platform elevator as Captain Ellis lowered it down to the control room. Gone were the tape drives, replaced by hot swappable hard drive systems. He noticed that the stations were the same, just the technology had changed. Captain Ellis took him through the ship showing him all the improvements and expansions. The inspection tour ended in the Captain’s cabin.

As they sat down, Straker began. “Gay, you have a very tight ship, the tightest I’ve seen in SHADO. You should be proud.”

Gay Ellis smiled, “Thank you, sir.”

Straker noticed she did not have any of the apprehension she showed during her time on Moonbase. Virginia had been right in pushing for her transfer and promotion.

“So tell me about the failsafe system?” Straker asked.
“We hope to have Utronic communications upgrades in by the end of next month. The remote loop failsafe is ready now. It will automatically switch in and out of circuit depending on radio reception. At normal launch depth it isn’t an issue.”

Straker nodded, satisfied with what he heard.

“Gay, when we start the upgrade project next month, both you and Peter Carlin are going to be the front line of defense. I need my best pilots on the front line until we can get Moonbase back into the picture. Unfortunately with exception of upgrades here, you and Peter are going to miss out on most of expansion work. Do you have any thoughts on that?”

“The upgrades are important, but we can’t just shut down operations while we install the technology. As you have said, somebody has to mind the store.”
“Good I’m glad you agree, now if Peter is as easy to convince this will be a piece of cake,” Straker finished.

“He knows what’s at stake as much as I do. You won’t have to convince him.”

“I understand you had lunch with Colonel Lake yesterday,” said Ed looking at the picture of Ginny and Gay.

“Yes, I don’t get to see her much anymore; most of our correspondence is in the form of computer messages. If it wasn’t for her I don’t think I would be where I am today.”

“I know, she pushed very hard to get you this promotion, and she refused to yield. I’ve learned to listen to her; when she gets adamant about a subject she is usually right. As it worked out I’m very glad I listened.”

Gay noticed as Ed glanced back at the picture. *He’s glowing too,* she thought to herself.
“Well I have to get back to HQ; I’ll leave you to it. Again Gay you’ve done a great job here.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said as they walked out of the cabin.

“Ginny, I’d love to meet him,” said Lynn Lake to her daughter over the phone. “What did you say his name was?”

“His name is Ed,” Ginny said, “Ed Straker.”

Lynn Lake jotted down the name on a pad. “You mean the Ed Straker, from the film studio?”

“Yes Mom, he’s really nice, I’m sure you’ll like him,” Ginny said.

Lynn Lake wrote down a few more notations on the pad. “Why don’t you plan on coming by around noontime? We will have Sunday dinner around one.”

“All right, that sounds great. I have to run; I’ll talk to you later. Love you.”
Lynn Lake hung up the phone, and dug a number out of her purse. She picked the phone up and dialed.

“Hello, Nigel...It’s Lynn...Would you run a security check for me...His name is Ed Straker from Harlington-Straker Studios...Yes I’ll be here...Thanks Nigel, goodbye.”

Lynn never liked to interfere in her daughter’s life but she didn’t want her to go through a repeat of what she did ten years ago. Fortunately she still had her contacts in British Intelligence. She hoped Ginny would not be too angry.

“I have a possible sighting 426-242 Blue,” Ayshea Johnson called out.

Lt. Colonel Barry switched on her monitor. “Verify.”
Ayshea punched up the verification sequence. “Sighting confirmed 426-242 Blue, speed SOL 8.3, range, 40 million miles.”

“Yellow Alert, interceptor crews on standby,” Nina ordered. “Trajectory termination?”

Ayshea entered the figures into the tracking computer. On the wall monitor a graphical representation of the UFO’s course was displayed.

“Grid reference 51 by 0, southern England,” said Ayshea.


Just then the speakers came to life with the voice of SID.

“RED ALERT, RED ALERT, UFO 426-242 BLUE CONFIRMED, SPEED SOL 8.5 ACCELERATING, RANGE 35 MILLION MILES CLOSING.”
Lt. Colonel Barry keyed the mic, “Interceptors, immediate launch, I say again immediate launch.”

On the lunar surface, the space interceptors lifted off their pads. They soon were rocketing in formation, as they climbed into space. In the lead spacecraft, Lt. Stephen Harris punched up the attack computer.

“Interceptor leader to Moonbase, space borne.”

Virginia Lake walked into the control room.

“What have we got Tara?”

Lt. Tara Paulson brought up the readout and activated the printer.

“One UFO, speed SOL 8.5, range 30 million miles, trajectory termination 51 by 0 southern England.”
Virginia grabbed the hardcopy. “Get me Commander Straker, and get a status update on the interceptors,” she ordered.

“Yes ma’am,” said Tara as she picked up to phone to call the Commander.

“Interceptor leader from Moonbase,” said Nina, “Attack data as follows, Trajectory 101-242-019, missile timing 2-7-6-5.”

Lt Harris entered the data into his attack computer. “Program complete, compute five minutes until arrival at launch point.”

Commander Straker was on his way back to the studio when the phone buzzed.

“Straker,” he answered.

“Colonel Lake for you sir,” said Lt. Paulson. After a moment Virginia came on the line.
“Commander, we have a UFO on positive track. Trajectory termination indicates grid reference 51 by 0, southern England, range is 25 million miles.”

“Practically in our back yard, what’s the status on the interceptors?”

“They are four minutes from launch point,” Virginia answered.

“I don’t like this Colonel, call Captain Ellis and have her get Skydiver out to sea. If Harris and his crew miss I want to be ready. I’m about ten minutes away.”

“Right, I’ll get on it.”

Virginia hung up the phone. “Get me Captain Ellis,” she ordered.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Interceptor time on target?” Nina asked.
Ayshea checked the readout. “One minute, thirty seconds.”

“UFO INCREASING SPEED, NOW SOL 8.9, RANGE, 15 MILLION MILES CLOSING.”

Nina Barry watched as to computers automatically updated the attack data being feed to the interceptors.

“Interceptor leader to crew, missile launch in five decimal seven seconds,” Lt. Harris said.

He watched the countdown on the weapons display. The three interceptors each launched their lone missile. The resulting explosions covered a 50 thousand cubic mile area of space.

The UFO was in the outer area of the blanketed area when the explosions occurred.
“MISSILE DETONATIONS POSITIVE, UFO INTERCEPTION NEGATIVE, SPEED REDUCING TO SOL 4.5, RANGE 10 MILLION MILES...TRAJECTORY TERMINATION STILL GRID 51 BY 0 SOUTHERN ENGLAND”

Nina Barry keyed her mic. “Moonbase to interceptor one, come in one,”

Lt Harris answered, “Near miss Colonel, we slowed it down but it’s still heading in.”

*Straker’s not going to be happy*, Nina thought. “Very well Lieutenant, return to base.”

“Gay, it’s Ginny. I need you to get Skydiver out to sea right away. As soon as you can, launch Sky 5. The interceptors got a near miss on the UFO but it’s still heading in.”

Captain Ellis was already ordering the crew to get underway. “How much time do we have?”

“The last plot shows that we have about thirty minutes until it hits the atmosphere.”
“Plenty of time, I’ll call in when I’m airborne, Skydiver 5 out.”

Commander Straker walked into the control room. At the communications console he saw Virginia watching the readout. As he walked up to her he spoke.

“I take it the interceptors missed it, Colonel,” he said seemingly perturbed.

Virginia knew better, it was frustration. “They got a piece of it, sir. Captain Ellis should be at the safe dive point by now. The UFO is still fifteen minutes out,” she said.

As she finished the speaker came to life. “Sky 5 to SHADO control, airborne.” Straker walked over to the console and flipped up the mic.

“Captain, that UFO is heading right for our backyard; make this one count.”

“Understood Commander, I have it on my screen, going for intercept, out.”
Straker and Lake watched in silence as the screen updated to position of both craft. A few minutes later Gay’s voice came over the speakers.

“Have visual contact, commencing attack.”

Gay Ellis pushed the nose of her fighter down and picked up speed. She lined up the alien craft in her sights and released her missiles. The missiles flew straight and true, they impacted the craft dead center and it exploded in a ball of flame.

“UFO destroyed,” she said. “Returning to base.”

“Good shooting Gay. One more and you’ll be an Ace, Straker out.”

Virginia looked at him and smiled.

“Well let’s step into the office, shall we, and go over these finance reports,” he said to her.
Chapter 7:

Lynn Lake had been waiting for a call all day. It wasn’t until nine in the evening when her phone finally rang.

“Hello,” she answered.

“Lynn it’s Nigel. Sorry I took so long getting back to you but digging out information on this chap raised all kinds of red flags. Kind of unusual, for a film studio executive, don’t you think?”

“Well what did you find out?”

“Well first of all Colonel Edward Straker has a very impressive military background. He’s a combat pilot; flew in Vietnam. He has a master’s degree in astrophysics from MIT, two years lunar research, top of his class with a four point zero grade point average. His IQ is in the high 130’s. He also excelled in flight school,
turned down the offer to teach to go to MIT. Here is the kicker; before he went into motion pictures, he was aid to Lt. General James L. Henderson.” Nigel finished.

“Straker worked for Jim Henderson?” she asked clearly shocked.

“Apparently so; do you remember the car crash that killed Defense Minister Melvin Talbot?”

“I do, if I remember correctly there were only two survivors of that crash.”

“That is correct. Those two people are none other than James Henderson and Edward Straker.” Nigel said.

Why would two people with an advanced physics background be working for a film studio? Lynn thought to herself. “What year was Harlington-Straker Studios founded?”

“Construction started in 1972, finished in 1974, along with a block of government office
buildings next door,” said Nigel. “Straker started running the studio in 1974.”

“Can you find out his discharge date?”

“I tried; everything I’ve looked at indicates that he is still on active duty. Something else doesn’t seem right. Straker was married in April 1971. His wife left him exactly two years later, right after the birth of their first and only child. The divorce papers stated he was having an affair. This was apparently supported by some very damaging photographic evidence. Under the UCMJ adultery is considered a court martial offense. Straker was still on active duty when he got married, and served at least six months in uniform after that. Some of the allegations in the divorce filling state the affair started only a couple of month after he was married.”

This doesn’t make any sense at all. “Nigel, if that was true the Air Force would have thrown the book at him. They do not take anything that tarnishes the service lightly.”
“You’re right Lynn, they don’t, but if you look at his service record, Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, Legion of Merit, Purple Heart, Meritorious Service Medal; this is the kind of a man that normally doesn’t cheat on his wife.”

Lynn Lake considered all of this. “Well thank you Nigel, if you can find out that last piece of information, I would greatly appreciate it.” Lynn hung up the phone. Clearly there was more here than meets the eye. What had started as a simple background check on a potential son in law had uncovered much more than she expected. Virginia was in her late thirties now and certainly was old enough to take care of herself, but she deserved to know about the alleged affair. She walked over to her easel and continued to work on the painting. She was working completely by a description her husband had given her almost forty years ago.
Virginia and Ed had decided to stay home on Saturday night. It had been a grueling week for both of them. Chopin played quietly in the background. The couple had cuddled up on the couch enjoying each other’s company. The tea was okay too.

“So I heard you had a little run in with Geoff Blake.”

Virginia was somewhat perturbed. “Ed, did Paul Foster tell you that? Because if he did I’ll...”

Ed gently cut her off. “No I didn’t hear it from him, but I got the impression that everyone in control heard it. Tara Paulson wanted to give you a standing ovation.”

“Blake doesn’t take no for an answer, he has been trying to get me to go to dinner with him ever since he got transferred to HQ. I finally decided I’d had enough. So I told him in no uncertain terms that I wasn’t interested. I didn’t want you to find out about it. I was afraid you would exile him to Siberia.”
“Well unless you want to file a formal complaint, I’ll consider the matter closed. Personally I don’t think he will bother you again, from what I heard you snapped him back pretty hard.”

“When we first walked into the studio during the Timelash incident Blake was standing in the hallway with the young actress and staring down her dress. Granted it was quite revealing anyway, but he didn’t have to be so obvious about it. I just feel like I’m being undressed in his mind every time he looks at me.”

“Do you want me to speak with him?” asked Ed seriously.

“No I just needed to talk about it. I think he got the message this time.” Virginia got up to bring the empty cups into the kitchen. “Do you want some more tea?”

“No thank you, I think I’m about ready to turn in.”
She walked back out and met him halfway to the bedroom. “I was thinking the same thing. I’m exhausted,” she said as they walked into the bedroom. They left the player going; it would turn itself off in a while.

Lynn Lake was busy in the kitchen preparing Sunday dinner for her daughter and her gentleman friend when the phone rang.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Hello Lynn, its Nigel.”

Lynn was relieved, “I was hoping that it was you, Ginny and her guest will be here in less than an hour. Were you able to confirm his military status?”

“I had to go all the way to Sir Colin himself to find out, but it’s confirmed, Ed Straker is still on active duty. He is listed as assigned to the UN special projects, classified. Sir Colin requested that I not inquire any further.” Nigel stated.
“Well that’s very interesting; no matter I will watch him closely and see how he treats Ginny.”

“Won’t he be on his best behavior?”

“Yes but a real pretender can’t easily hide his ways, and you can tell quite a bit by the way he looks at his love interest. Thanks Nigel, I owe you.” Lynn hung the phone up and went back to working on dinner. *Well Mr. Ed Straker you’re quite an enigma.*

By the time they had made their way through London traffic Virginia and Ed had been on the road for about an hour.

“Virginia, how far is it from here?”

The house is about forty miles away, another forty five minutes, depending on traffic.”

Once they had got out of the city traffic began to flow smoothly. Thirty minutes later they pulled up in front of the house. Lynn Lake lived in a small well kept home on the outskirts of the
It had a sizable amount of land for the area. Ed got out of the car and met Virginia on the passenger side. She took his arm and strode up the walk way. When they got to the door, Ed rang the bell. When Lynn Lake answered the door Ed was unprepared for what he saw, the resemblance between the two women was uncanny even for a mother and daughter. From a distance they could easily be mistaken for each other.

“Hello Ginny,” said Lynn as she hugged her daughter.

“Hi Mom. Thanks for having us. I’d like you to meet Ed Straker.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Lake.”

“Mr. Straker, the pleasure is mine, and please, call me Lynn,” she said as she ushered them into the house.

“Dinner is almost ready; you two make yourselves at home.”
“Can I help you with anything Lynn?”

He offers to help in the kitchen; his stock just went up a few points. “No I’m good; I have it all on the roll cart. I know Ginny is going to have coffee. Would you like some as well or would you prefer something stronger?”

“Coffee is fine, Thank you.”

Lynn brought out the coffee on a serving tray and set it down in the parlor. She poured three cups of coffee and sat down in the wing chair across from the sofa. “So tell me Mr. Straker, how did the two of you, meet?”

“Oh, please call me Ed; Virginia and I started working on a science fiction television series last year. In the course of the production we spent a lot of time together.” Ed looked at Virginia as he spoke. “We found out we had quite a bit in common.”

“Including a love for classical music and piano.” Virginia interjected.
As they talked, Lynn watched Ed’s mannerisms carefully. She noticed right away that he included Ginny in the conversation, and the way he looked at her was that of a man whose very heart and soul had gently swept away. *Well Lynn it seems that Ed Straker is quite smitten with your daughter.* “Ed, Ginny says that you are a very talented piano player. Why don’t you play us something while we girls bring out dinner?”

“I’d be honored, what would you like to hear?”

“Memory,” said Virginia.

“And I would love to hear some Bach,” added Lynn.

As Ed played the two women went into the kitchen. “So Mom, do you like him?” asked Ginny as she pulled the chicken out of the oven.

“I do actually, and I didn’t know if I would. He doesn’t fit the mold of the movie producer, there is much more than meets the eye.”
“No he is not you run of the mill studio executive...” As the music played in the background Ginny continued. “He plays with such meaning, he almost brought me to tears the first time I heard him. He still does.” Ed was playing Memory now; Ginny looked over at him, “See want I mean,” she said tearing now.

“My dear, you’re quite taken by him aren’t you?” asked Lynn. Virginia just nodded her head. “Answer me a question?” asked Lynn. “If he asked you today, to marry him, would you say yes?”

Virginia hadn’t thought about it. Ed and I hadn’t even discussed it; but she knew the answer. “Yes, I would, in a heartbeat.”

“Well I had better find something to wear for the wedding.”

“Why do you say that, Mom?”

Lynn looked at her daughter. “Haven’t you noticed the way he looks at you?”
“That’s what Gay said to me yesterday. She had a picture of the two of us on her desk. When Ed went down to see her regarding some casting snafu he kept looking at the picture. She didn’t say anything because she didn’t want to embarrass him. She had to stifle the giggles.”

“I’ll bet you dinner at the Register that you will have a diamond on your finger before the end of June.”

This is a win, win scenario, thought Ginny. “You’re on.”

It was a typical Sunday afternoon at HQ. Paul Foster had the day watch, much to his chagrin. He had gone out with Jane Saturday night. Needless to say he was lacking for sleep. By mid afternoon he was dragging. Thank God for coffee, he thought. He walked out of the office into control.
“Lt. Anderson, get Moonbase up for me will you?”

“Right away sir.”

While Anderson was working Paul checked the schedule. Colonel Blake was due in at 16:00.

“I have Lt. Colonel Barry for you, sir,” said Lt. Anderson.

Foster flipped up the mic. “Hello Nina, I wanted to give you a heads up. Straker is probably going to want you Earth side later this week. He has a meeting scheduled Thursday morning to go over the Utronic upgrade plan.”

“Sounds like fun, Colonel. I’ll catch a lunar flight on Wednesday afternoon. Anything else?”

Foster shook his head. “No that’s it Colonel, see you on Thursday.”

Barry nodded. “Roger, Moonbase out.”

“Lynn that was a great meal,” said Ed.
They had all finished dinner and had gone into the parlor to have coffee. “Well thank you, Ed. By the way, don’t let Ginny here tell you she can’t cook, I made sure that she is quite at home in the kitchen.” Lynn said giving them a wink.

“Oh stop it, Mother,” said Virginia only half serious.

“Actually Virginia and I either take turns or work together making meals. I happen to be a passable cook myself. When you have been a bachelor as long as I have you either learn to cook or starve.” Ed said with a grin.

That brought the trio to laughter. “Lynn, I understand that you are an artist?” asked Ed.

Lynn Lake nodded, “I don’t know if I would go that far, trust me Van Gogh has nothing to worry about. Would you like to see my latest attempt at fame?”

“Of course.”

Lynn got up and walked over to the easel.
“I painted this from a description my late husband gave me years ago.” Lynn said as she uncovered the canvas. Virginia and Ed got up to look closer at the painting.

“That looks like Loch Ness, but what is this in the...” Virginia stopped in mid sentence realizing what she was looking at. She looked at Ed; her eyes wide in astonishment. The object in the center of the painting was an alien spacecraft.

“When did your husband see this object, Lynn?” asked Ed quietly.

“Well, let me see, it was before I was carrying Ginny, say early 1944. Robert described this craft to me in vivid detail. Officially he was flying reconnaissance over Scotland, patrolling for German incursions. The real reason was both American and British intelligence had evidence of an advanced race visiting this world. Very few people, even in the intelligence community knew of this. I’m sorry Ginny, but
my job as a nurse was a front. From 1942 until 1975, I was working for MI6. Doing sketches, from witness descriptions and agent accounts, were my specialty.”

Ed stared at the painting for a moment. Virginia held on to his arm for support. Finding out earlier this week that a UFO had destroyed her father’s aircraft, and now realizing that her mother might have known about it was too much for her. Ed helped her back to the couch. “Are you okay?”

She nodded and turned to her mother. “Why didn’t you tell me, Mom?” asked Virginia as she tried to make sense of this.

Lynn smiled in bemusement. “For the same reason you and Ed can’t talk about what the two of you really do.”

Ed looked at Lynn. How much do you know? “And what do you think we do?”
“Well I know there is a lot more to it than just making motion pictures. I could believe one of you was hired as a science fiction consultant, if the science fiction you put out was at least feasible. That last one you did about the moon being blown out of orbit takes the cake. I’m not a physicist and even I know that an explosion that size would have cracked the moon in half. And let’s face it years would have gone by before it even left the solar system. Both of you are much too intelligent to have put your names on that. So my guess is the studio is a cover for something else.”

Virginia was genuinely frightened now; she knew that SHADO security would make anyone disappear if they felt it would compromise their operations, no matter who they were. Mom, you don’t know the danger you are putting yourself in.
“An interesting hypotheses, Lynn, but don’t you think this is a bit farfetched?” Ed asked determined to bluff this one out.

“Maybe; unless you consider all the facts, I have to confess that I used my contacts at MI6 to run a check on you, Ed. You are the first person Ginny as brought home to meet me since she divorced her first husband. I figured that the two of you must be quite serious about each other. I wouldn’t have said anything unless I turned up something nasty, and even then I would have only told Ginny. She is after all of age.” Lynn said. She could tell that Virginia was somewhat upset with her. “Now Ginny, please don’t be angry with me, had I done this the first time I might have saved us both a lot of pain,” said her mother.

Virginia acknowledged that much to herself. She was very young and naïve when she met Brad. A few of her friends tried to warn her off, but she didn’t listen. Her mother would have
simply gave her the facts and let her make her own decision.

“Ok, Mom I think I understand, but what in all of this makes you think we’re involved in anything other than film production?”

Lynn smiled at her daughter. “My contacts at MI6 have access to information not available through normal channels. So the question was raised; why would a highly decorated career officer, a full bird colonel in the USAF, with a degree in Astrophysics, two years lunar research, suddenly leave that to go to work for a second rate film studio? Why would that same studio hire someone with a doctorate in applied physics? And most important why does Ed’s military record list him still on active duty?”

There is going to be no bluffing her, thought Ed. Lynn must have known what he was thinking. She looked back at Ed when she spoke next “I know you’re worried about security. To put your mind at ease, I still hold an eyes only security
clearance. You see, I have been living with a lie that disgraced my late husband for almost forty years. When Jim Henderson told me what had happened I knew it was a cover-up. Robert would have never made that kind of error. I believe his aircraft, along with the rest of his group, was shot down by this type of craft.” Lynn said as she pointed toward the painting.

Ed knew that Lynn Lake was no fool, she had come to the same conclusion that he had. The amnesia drug would not work, as she would only piece this together at some point in the future. Ed’s mind raced for a way out. She already had the equivalent basic SHADO clearance. He looked at Virginia, and saw the disquiet in her eyes.

He turned back to Lynn and asked, “If someone were to describe an incident to you would you be able to reproduce a picture like this?”

Lynn nodded, “You mean like a police sketch artist? Sure I could do that. As I said, it was my
specialty. Sir Colin still calls me at times when they need an older agent to handle an investigation.”

Ed Straker made a decision. “Let’s take a ride.”

Lynn went upstairs to get her purse and jacket. “Ed what are we going to do?” asked Virginia.

Ed knew that for Virginia to lose her composure she had to be genuinely concerned for her mother’s safety and he knew that they were very close.

Ed put his arms around her; she was trembling. “Do you trust me?”

She looked into his eyes and answered, “Yes, with my life.”

“Then trust me now.”

Virginia nodded; although Ed could still see apprehension in her eyes, she had stopped trembling. The trio left the house, and they were soon on the highway heading towards London.
Colonel Blake was working on the stack of reports that Paul had left for him. The two men often covered for each other so they both could enjoy their Saturday night social activities.

*Foster looked like hell today,* thought Blake. *Miss Carson must be quite a woman.* The intercom on the desk buzzed.

“Yes,” answered Blake.

“I just received a call from Commander Straker. He is on his way in with a VIP. He said to tell you he’ll be arriving in about ten minutes.”

*Great, that’s all I need on a Sunday night.*

“Thank you, Lt. Wade.” Blake picked up the reports and left the office.

Ed Straker pulled his vehicle into the valet spot at the studio.

“Well this is nice,” Lynn observed.
The trio walked to his office which surprisingly to Lynn on the first floor in the corner of the building. “Aren’t the executive suites usually on the top floor?” asked Lynn.

Ed smiled as he led the two ladies into the outer office. It seemed way too small for a film studio executive. They walked into the inner office which was also very small and spartan. Ed closed the door and opened a cigar box on the desk.

I hope he’s not going to light up, thought Lynn.

Instead of choosing a cigar Ed spoke into the box. “Straker.”

“Voice print positive, Commander Straker.” Ed pushed another button and the entire office started to descend. Lynn sat down this was surreal.

“So this is why it’s on the first floor. It’s an elevator,” said Lynn.
Ginny remembered the first time she had come to SHADO. They had just flown over in an SST, both her and Phil Wade were needed to stay and help interface the Utronic equipment. That was almost five years ago. Her reaction was similar to her mother’s. The lift stopped and the doors opened. An attractive young lady dressed in a form fitting uniform stood at the doorway with a visitor ID badge in her hand. As the girl clipped the ID to her collar, Lynn read the SHADO Logo Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization. Ed Straker led them through the maze of corridors into the control room.

Ed spoke to Blake. “I assume everything is quiet today Colonel?”

“Very quiet sir, not even a sighting all weekend.” Blake answered.

Blake looked at Ginny and her mother seeing the resemblance between the two. The look wasn’t lost on Virginia as she said, “Colonel
Blake may I introduce Mrs. Lynn Lake, my mother.”

Blake nodded as he took her hand, “Colonel Geoffrey Blake, my pleasure madam.”

“How do you do, Colonel?”

“Why don’t we step into the office, I’m sure Colonel Blake is very busy.”

Straker directed the ladies to his office. Lynn looked around Straker’s real office thinking; now this is more like it. She sat down in front of the desk while Virginia took her favorite corner seat next to the desk.

“Can I get your something to drink?” asked Ed pointing to the servitor.

“Nothing for me, thanks,” said Lynn.

“Virginia?”

Virginia nodded, “A small glass of brandy, please?”
Ed was amused, Virginia avoided the stuff almost as much as he did; her nerves must be shot. He walked over to the servitor and dispensed the drink.

“Thank you,” she said as Ed handed her the glass.

“Forgive me for asking Lynn but you don’t seem surprised. Don’t tell me you knew about all this?” asked Ed.

“Let’s say I’ve suspected it to exist. Now I don’t know the details but there was talk running through the ministry of a multi-national defense organization being formed in the late 1960’s. It was rumored that Lt. General James L. Henderson was to spearhead the operation. When he became president of the IAC and retired from active duty in 1971, the rumors were dispelled. Not to mention the escalating tensions between the Soviet Union and the west. It fell through the cracks and wasn’t brought up again until I asked Sir Nigel to make
a few inquiries about you, Commander.” Lynn finished. “By the way, I love the color mural behind you,” she added.

“Ah yes, I find that it calms my nerves; besides I suffer from claustrophobia. The mural makes the room seem much larger than it is.” Ed paused a moment then continued, “So you must be wondering why I brought you down here?”

“Well, I was fairly certain it wasn’t to make me disappear, I’m certain your security boys could have done that right after you left, and make it look like an accident.”

“At SHADO we have to choose our personnel very carefully. With the expense of training, mistakes are much too costly. So that is why you can’t just walk up to a counter somewhere and ask for an application. How did you once put it Virginia?” turning to her.

Ginny was relieved, she knew where this was going, and relaxed for the first time since this
chain of events had started. “By invitation only,” she answered smiling broadly.

“Ah yes, by invitation only. Lynn your investigative skills do you credit; in addition you have a very unique talent, as well as still having your contacts at MI6. Would you like to join SHADO?”

“You don’t have an age restriction?”

“No, the people here at SHADO are here because they are the best at what they do, the very best. You won’t find any equal opportunity agendas being filled here; race, gender, religion, creed, beliefs; none of those matter. Of course you would end up working for your daughter. Colonel Lake is my acting second, and I have recommended to the commission that she be promoted permanently once Colonel Freeman retires.”

“Colonel; I did hear that right, your father would have been proud Ginny.” Lynn said and continued, “Yes, Commander, I would like to
join, it’s been boring sitting in that house for ten years.”

Straker smiled and pressed the intercom button. “Colonel Blake, would you come in here please.”

In a few moments the office doors opened and Colonel Blake walked in. “Colonel I would like you to take our newest recruit, Lt Lynn Lake, down to processing and get her setup with an ID and uniforms. I want her equipped for undercover work.”

“Very good sir. Lieutenant Lake, if you’ll follow me please?”

“Oh Lieutenant, when you finish getting setup come back to the office.”

“Yes, sir,” said Lynn.

The office door closed as they walked out. Virginia got out of her seat and gave Ed a quick kiss. “I thought for sure that you were going to have to hand her over to security,” she said as
she sat back down. “Tell me the truth Ed; are you bringing her in just to avoid the alternative?”

“Colonel Lake,” he said deliberately feigning formality. “I’m surprised you would even ask something like that. No your mother will fit nicely into a spot I’ve been trying to fill for a while now. We need someone, to take witness accounts of UFO incidents, and who has traceability to another organization outside of SHADO. We already have agents in the CIA and KGB. I’ll have to call Sir Colin tomorrow to work out the details. By the way, I forgot to tell you something the other night.”

Virginia looked at him quizzically.

“While I had no idea how much your mother knew about UFO’s, or what kind of clearance she had, I did know she was with MI6. I meant to tell you when I found out the truth about your father.”
Virginia looked at him with an unreadable look. “Well I should be upset, but I’m not. I’d much rather hear it from you even if a little late than from someone else. Thank you.”

“I can’t believe the resemblance between the two of you,” Colonel Blake said to Lynn as they walked into the processing center. “You could pass for sisters.”

She’s just as beautiful as her daughter, pity she’s ten years older than I, he thought.

Lynn laughed. “You’re too kind Colonel Blake.”

“Well, Ginny doesn’t think so.”

Lynn looked at him for a moment. “Do tell Colonel.”

“Please, call me Geoff. I’ve tried for the past couple of months to get her to have dinner with me. She refuses to even consider it.”
Lynn was amused. “Well Colonel, no offense but it’s inappropriate to refer to a senior officer by first name, besides we just met. As far as my daughter goes, it may have nothing to do with you; have you considered the possibility that her heart is already taken?”

“To the best of my knowledge she is not involved with anyone, I see her and Commander Straker together a lot but I assumed that it was business related; unless the rumors are true…” Blake’s voice trailed off.

“Colonel Blake, let me give you some good motherly advice, pursuing my daughter might not be in the best interest of your career.”

Two hours later Virginia was driving her mother back home. Ed had stayed at HQ to push Lynn’s paperwork through.

“So tell me, Ginny, what do you think of Colonel Blake?”
Virginia shook her head, “I try not to, why?”

“He told me that he asked you out to dinner several times and you turned him down flat. I assume it was because you were seeing Ed.”

“Not really, the first time Blake asked was while he was still assigned to our advanced weapons research section. I just broke it off with Paul Foster as the two of us just didn’t have the right chemistry. That was over a year ago. For the next couple of months I didn’t want anything to do with men. The only man I would have dated didn’t seem to be interested. Anyway Blake just wouldn’t take the hint.”

“I’m assuming the other man was Ed Straker?”

Virginia smiled, “Yes, when I came back from my assignment as Moonbase commander, Ed promoted me to acting executive officer. I started working closely with him. At first it was a little tense, part due to the fact that he can seem cold to people that don’t know him well. The other reason is I was attracted to him. Over
the past year we have become very close. When he asked me to go to LSO with him last month I couldn’t believe it. I went out and bought a new dress just for the occasion.”

“Commander Straker is a very attractive man, but I can tell just by watching him that he only has eyes for you. He looks at you the same way your father looked at me.”

“Before the show, we had dinner at the Register and I shared things with Ed that most people would never tell on a first date; the funny thing is he did the same. By the time we finished dinner I knew as much about Ed as it took me to learn about my ex in a month. It was more than just chemistry; I just knew I could trust him. He told me later that he felt the same way. The best part about it Mom is that Ed is a perfect gentleman. He stayed at my place that night because we were going flying the next day but he slept on the rollaway. To be honest I knew I was in love with him and I would have
taken him into my bedroom if I didn’t think that would have made him uncomfortable and I almost told him as much. We didn’t get to that point until a week and a half ago,”

Virginia paused for a moment knowing what the look her mother gave her meant. “I know Mom, you don’t approve of intimate relations before marriage,” she said continuing. “A young woman who had witnessed a UFO incident ten years ago was in a coma caused by her being hit by a car. She was fifteen at the time and it turns out that Ed was driving the car that hit her. So when security called about it; he decided to look into the case himself. During the investigation they had formed almost a father daughter relationship. To make a long story short; the aliens had somehow taken years from her life and given them to someone else. She died of old age at twenty five years old,” Ginny paused.

Lynn could see tears flowing down Ginny’s face. “Darling if this is upsetting you...”
Ginny interrupted, “No it’s okay; I want to tell you about it. Anyway when Ed got back to the hospital, I tried to warn him, but he ran up to her room and that’s when he found out she had died. I waited downstairs in the lobby for him.”

“He was only up there about five minutes and when he came back down and looked at me I could see the pain in his eyes. We had lost five people in two months, Catherine made six. Ed looked down and walked out on the path alone. I followed him out and watched him for a second and then went after him deciding then to tell him how I felt about him. He was withdrawn and I begged him not to shut me out. By this time I was crying. Ed put his arm around me when I finally told him I loved him. He asked me if we would still be friends no matter how this turned out and I don’t know when I have ever felt so special.” Virginia grabbed a tissue.
“I think that means Ed loves you for who you are.”

“After that he kissed me and I’m talking about the kind of kiss that you feel all the way down to your toes. That night I stayed at his house and we haven’t slept apart since.”

“You’ve been in love with him for a while, and I mean before you started seeing him,” said Lynn.

“I guess I have.”

Lynn put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “As far as not approving your actions, you’re a grown woman and you do not need my approval. But before you left home to go to Stanford you knew the truth of the Word. I just wish you would pick it up again.”

“Maybe someday, so, anyway, what did you say to Blake?”

“I told him it probably would not be in the best interest of his career to continue pursuing you,” said Lynn.
“Does he know?”

“I’m sure he suspects, he’s not stupid you know, he mentioned something about a rumor going around HQ. So if he has any brains at all, judging from SHADO’s requirements, I’m sure he does; he’ll put two and two together. But I don’t think he’ll give you any more trouble.”

Virginia pulled into her mother’s driveway.

“No thanks Mom, Ed and I are flying out to the States first thing in the morning. We won’t be back until Wednesday night.” Ginny said. They walked into the house; as soon as Ginny was sure she was settled she left for the studio.

“Straker,” he said into the phone when the direct line rang on his desk.
“Ed it’s me, I’m about five minutes away.” Virginia said to him.

“Good, when you pull in wait in the car I’m on my way up.” Straker hung the phone up and stood up from the desk. He grabbed his briefcase and walked out of the office.

Virginia pulled into the valet parking spot at the studio. She opened both the gull wing doors and moved to the passenger side. She was tired and she knew Ed preferred to drive. A few minutes later Ed walked out of the building; he climbed in and closed the doors.

“Ed?”

He looked over at her as she leaned to kiss him.

“What was that for?”

“Because I love you,” she answered.

“Oh...” he said bemused.

“Now let’s go home.”
“Yes ma’am,” Ed said kidding with her. He started the car and soon they were on their way to his house.

Chapter 8:

“Heathrow ground, this is Seagull X-ray, requesting IFR taxi to runway 9L.” Commander Straker called over the radio.

“Seagull X-ray, Heathrow ground, taxi to and hold short of runway 9L via taxiway tango...” As the ground controller read the clearance, Virginia copied it down.

“Roger ground, Seagull X-ray taxing.” Straker answered. He advanced the throttles slightly and the SST began to roll down the taxiway.

“Once it’s rolling, pull the throttles back to idle. That will provide enough thrust to keep the aircraft moving.” Ed said to Virginia. She had been checked out in the simulator, and had
spent some time last week flying the actual aircraft. “When we get to Groom Lake, Alec volunteered to proctor your check ride. He has more time in these than I do. Ten minutes later the SST was next in line for takeoff.

“Heathrow Tower, Seagull X-ray, at runway 9L, ready for takeoff, IFR to Palmdale,” Virginia called to the tower.

“Seagull X-ray, position and hold, 9L.” Virginia advanced the throttles slightly as she answered the tower.

“Position and hold, Seagull X-ray.” Virginia lined the aircraft up on the runway and set the brake.

“Not bad Colonel,” said Ed deliberately formal.

“Seagull X-ray, fly runway heading, climb and maintain 10 thousand, clear for takeoff, Good day.”

Ed keyed his mic, “Roger Heathrow, Seagull X-ray, rolling.”
As was aviation tradition Ed and Virginia both placed their hands on the throttles and moved them 1/3 of the way forward. Virginia reached down and released the brake and they pushed the throttles forward. As the aircraft accelerated, she called off the airspeed. “70...90...120...140...160, V1...VR, rotate.” Ed pulled back on the yoke and the aircraft lifted off the tarmac.

“Gear up,” called Ed.

Virginia pulled the landing gear lever to the retracted position.

“Gear up, and locked,” she said. Ed pulled back the throttles to set climb thrust.

“Once we reach forty thousand feet we’ll raise the heat shield and transition to supersonic flight.”

“Not that I mind, but why is it so important to have me trained on this aircraft?”
“I want you to be able to fly everything that Alec currently flies. That will make it harder for Henderson and the gang to squash your promotion.” He didn’t tell her that the promotion was already approved as he was saving that surprise for later.

Virginia looked at him with a grin. “Sounds like some more of that bloody mindedness,” she said. Thirty minutes later the aircraft was at sixty five thousand feet flying west at Mach four.

Captain’s Bradley and Waterman walked into Alec’s office and Dreamland. “Good morning gentlemen, have a seat.” The two men sat down across from Freeman.

“Before we begin, Colonel, is there a reason why my crew and I were relieved by Lt. Colonel Carlin?” Bradley asked.
“Yes, there is, but it’s only temporary; you and Lew have been selected for an extremely vital mission. Commander Straker and Colonel Lake are flying out here now. When they arrive you will both be briefed. I can tell you that your experience as interceptor pilots is part of the reason you are here.”

“Sounds like fun for us, but what will our crews be doing in the mean time?” asked Lew.

“They will be on the project as well, but in a different capacity. We are pulling in resources from all departments, each according to their expertise. Straker is shuffling the deck a little bit to get this done. Anyway the two of you will be handling the lunar portion of the project.”

“This sounds like a big upgrade, when is this all going to be done?” asked Mark.

“Straker wants Phase 1 of the project completed by July 1st. Phase 2 is scheduled to be completed by December 1st. Now the catch is that parts of
Phase 2 are still in research and development stage, so December may be optimistic.”

“I suppose Straker is going to push people until they drop,” said Mark.

“This time, Mark, he’d better,” Alec said solemnly. “Because if he doesn’t we could all lose.”

SHADO’s newest recruit walked into Straker’s outer office. Miss Ealand there speaking on the phone, “As soon as she comes in...she just walked in I’ll send her right down to you.” Miss Ealand hung up the phone and reached to shake hands, “You must be Ginny’s mom, nice to meet you. I’m Janice Ealand,” The two women joined hands.

“Ah, Ed’s, I mean Commander Straker’s secretary.”

“Secretary, chief troubleshooter, first line of defense; sometimes he even notices. I can’t
believe the resemblance between you and Ginny, if she ages as gracefully as you have, she’ll be blessed.” Miss Ealand said.

“Thank you Janice, you’re too kind. Well where do I start?”

“Come with me,” said Janice as she led Lynn into the office/elevator. “This cigar box is the voice identification system, simply open it and speak your name. If you pass, the system will activate this panel. Push this button and it activates the elevator. Colonel Foster is waiting for you downstairs. As we say in the movies, break a leg.” Janice said. She gave Lynn a quick hug and walked back to her desk. The doors closed behind her. Lynn opened the cigar box savoring the moment.

“Lake.”

“Voiceprint positive, Lake, Lieutenant Lynn E.” She pushed the button and the elevator began its descent. When the elevator reached the bottom the doors opened.
“Good Morning Lieutenant Lake, I’m Colonel Paul Foster,” he said as he shook her hand. He almost did a double take, God she does look like Virginia.

“How do you do Colonel.”

“I’m going to show you around a bit before I turn you over to Dr. Jackson.”

“Thank you, Colonel Foster,” said Lynn pleasantly.

The SHADAIR SST was just crossing the eastern seaboard of the United States. While Virginia kept watch on the flight Ed poured over the reports he was supposed to read the night before; not that he really minded. Virginia had told him that he would have plenty of time to read them on the plane.

“I have other plans for our evening,” she had told him.
He wasn’t about to argue especially after seeing the bedroom attire she had on.

Ed felt ten years younger. He hadn’t felt this way since he met Mary. Mary...Ed hadn’t even thought about her in a month. The tragedy of his first marriage had hung around his neck like a millstone. For the most part he had avoided any social gathering or situation that might have paired him up, much to Alec’s chagrin. He knew at least half a dozen women at SHADO would have jumped at the chance to be with him. Nina Barry was the only one he would have considered a relationship with but she would always be tied to his ex-wife and that wouldn’t be fair to either one of them.

Then of course there were the numerous starlets at the studio, although Ed found most of them to be air-headed and hollow. He looked up at Virginia thinking; she’s brilliant, soft spoken, caring, eloquent, aristocratic, beautiful, and yet she can be hard as nails if needed. In Ed’s
mind her beauty was an added bonus as he had found that he would have been attracted to her anyway. Ed admired the inner strength he had seen her display over the years.

Virginia must have seen his gaze; “Penny for your thoughts?”

Ed hadn’t realized he was staring, as he snapped back from his reverie.

“I’m sorry?”

“You were miles away, what were you thinking about?”

“I was just thinking about how you take my breath away whenever I look at you.”

Virginia smiled and reached to take his hand, they locked eyes for a few moments. In a few short weeks they had found they could sometimes communicate without words. He released her hand as she turned back to the instrument panel; after all she was flying the aircraft.
Ed finished the last report and put them back in his briefcase. A while later Virginia broke the silence.

“Ed, take a look at the temperature on number two.”

He looked at the engine cluster; sure enough the number two engine was running hot.

“That doesn’t look good.”

Ed was puzzled; the aircraft had just been through a maintenance cycle. The reading wasn’t dangerously high but he didn’t want to take any chances.

“I’m going to shutdown number two, when I do bring up power on one and three.”

Ed reached above his head and activated the fuel cutoff for engine two. Shortly after, the temperature indicator started to fall. As the power fell off Virginia smoothly advanced the throttles to compensate.

“Airspeed is down to Mach 3.5,” she said.
Ed punched a few numbers into the flight computer and looked at the results.

“Looks like we’ll be delayed about half an hour,” he said.

Ed turned the second radio to the Groom Lake SHADO frequency and activated the encryption.

“Dreamland control, Seagull X-ray, with you, Flight level 65, amend ETA 13:30 GMT, due to engine trouble.”

“Roger Seagull X-ray, understand ETA 13:30, Standby.”

A few seconds later Alec’s voice came over the speaker. “Ed its Alec, are you two okay?”

“Alec Freeman, the last of the mother hens,” said Ed laughing.

“Alec, we’re fine. The number two engine was running a little too hot and we shut it down; nothing to worry about.”
“Understood,” said Alec, relived as he continued, “Mark and Lew arrived yesterday with their crews; I gave them the preliminary briefing.”

“Good. It will speed things up a bit. See you in an hour. Seagull X-ray out.”

By 13:00 Lynn Lake had been through the most exhaustive psychological exam she had ever taken and Dr. Jackson had told her to wait in the office while he did the preliminary evaluation. The final results would take a couple of days, but she would be clear to begin training provided the initial tests were acceptable. Everyone at the complex had said Jackson was a sinister looking character but Lynn thought he was quite loveable. He had a very thick eastern European accent and she loved hearing him speak.

“Well Lieutenant Lake, the initial reports are very impressive, you have a very high IQ, and
your mind is extremely well ordered. I suspect the final report will be even more impressive.”

“So I’m cleared for duty, Doctor Jackson?” she asked simply.

“Absolutely; based on the initial reports I would expect you to be ready for unsupervised field work in about six weeks.”

As they finished Colonel Foster walked in. “Well Dr Jackson, how did she do?”

“I was just clearing Lt. Lake for duty, Colonel.”

“Good. Lieutenant why don’t you run upstairs and grab some lunch, Miss Ealand will show you where the cafeteria is. Be back down here in about an hour.”

“All right Colonel, I will. Maybe Janice and I can have lunch together.”

Foster was puzzled, “Janice?”

“Yes; Miss Ealand.”
Foster had been with SHADO almost four years and had never heard anyone refer to Miss Ealand by her first name. *I don’t think I knew what it was.*

“Oh, right,” said Foster. “See you in an hour.”

Ed was on final approach to the longest ILS runway at Groom Lake. Even though the conditions were VFR he was reviewing the ILS procedures with Virginia. The SST had auxiliary cameras used for landing because the nose gear was higher than normal.

“The one thing to be careful of Colonel is coming in with the nose too low. Remember your nose gear is much longer than most aircraft. If you touch with your nose gear first, you will find this aircraft to be very unforgiving.” The truth was it almost always resulted in a crash landing. Virginia had missed it twice in the simulator. She finally learned to watch the nose camera and ignore the windows.
Ed touched down with the precision of a master. When the nose gear was down firm he called for reverse thrust. Virginia engaged the thrust reversers as they had rehearsed and the aircraft began to slow. Ten minutes later they were parked at the gate reserved for SHADO operations.

“I don’t understand why it overheated, the aircraft was hardly loaded. In that aircraft you should be able to maintain a cruise speed of Mach 4. As light as you were, you could have hit Mach 5 and not stressed the engines. I don’t get it,” Alec was saying.

“Well make sure the maintenance technicians go through it with a fine tooth comb. We will be loaded to capacity on the way back to London,” said Straker.

“Do you still want me to take Ginny up for her check ride?”
“Yes, after they repair the aircraft. You should be able to certify her by late tomorrow afternoon. While the two of you are in the air I plan to take up one of the new land based aeroceptors.”

“You may not want to come down; they’re a dream to fly. When are you and Virginia planning to see Professor Reinhardt?”

“Late this afternoon, he’s coming in on a C-40B air force courier, it’s a glorified 737. I want you there as well,” Straker said as they walked out of Freeman’s office to the conference room.

Lieutenant Lake was nearing the end her first day as a member of SHADO. She had just finished the last batch of procedure tests when Colonel Foster came in with another gentleman; tall dark and handsome, thought Lynn.

“Lieutenant Lake, I’d like you to meet Colonel John Grey, he is for all intents and purposes
what would equate to SHADO’s Director of Human Resources.”

“How do you do, Colonel?” Lynn greeted him formally.

“My pleasure, Lieutenant, please have a seat,” he said. “I’ve got back most of your security clearances, thanks to a little help from Sir Colin, who sends his regards. Your test results are in the stratosphere,” Grey said. “Depending on how you do on the agility tests, I don’t see any reason why you can’t start assisting in field work by Monday. You will of course be paired up with a senior officer for the next six weeks or so; he or she will evaluate your performance and progress. As soon as we feel you are ready, you will be handling cases on your own.”

“May I ask who I will be reporting to, sir?”

Grey nodded and continued, “I’m still looking at the schedule but it looks like you will be reporting to Colonel Blake. The two of you may be going to the states next week. A Great Lakes
freighter was lost on Lake Superior about six weeks ago. The lone survivor has been in a coma since the incident, but the doctors seem to think he is about to come out of it. If that happens you and Blake will be heading out to see if he can remember anything about what happened.”

Colonel Foster chimed in, “Well Lieutenant, you’ve had a busy day. If you like I’ll walk you to your car.”

“Thank you, Colonel Foster. It was a pleasure to meet you Colonel Grey.”

“My pleasure, Lieutenant,” Colonel Grey said as they left.

Inside the terminal building Freeman, Straker and Lake waited for Professor Reinhardt’s plane to arrive. They had already briefed the two Skydiver captains and their crews as to the importance of the project. Many of them saw
this as the perfect opportunity to advance their careers.

“I think this is his plane coming in now,” Alec said.

As if on cue an Air Force C40 touched down and rolled down the runway. Five minutes later it was pulling up to the gate. The ground crew rolled the stairway up to the aircraft and the passengers began to disembark. Most of them walked the bus waiting to take them to another part of the field; however two individuals walked toward the terminal. One of them was a young Air Force captain, the other man was a couple inches shy of six feet tall, and could best be described as a thin Santa Claus. He had snow white hair and a well trimmed beard to match.

“That’s him,” Virginia said to Ed as she pointed Reinhardt out.

The Air Force Captain shook hands with Reinhardt then opened the door for him. He
then turned and walked back to the parked jet. As Reinhardt walked in, his eyes light up.

“Virginia! It’s good to see you again,” Reinhardt said to her as they embraced.

“Professor, you look well,” she said. “May I introduce Commander Edward Straker, and Colonel Alec Freeman,” she said making the introductions.


“Colonel Lake speaks very highly of you, Professor,” said Straker as he shook Reinhardt’s hand.

“Colonel Lake? It seems that Virginia has done well for herself.” Reinhardt commented.

Straker nodded, “In our operation, we try to find the very best personnel we can. Colonel Lake is going to be my second in command; unless Alec here changes his mind about retirement.”
“Not a chance Ed. Let’s go down to my office, we’ll be more comfortable there. I’ve already arranged to have your bags brought to your quarters, Professor,” said Alec as he led them down the corridor.

Professor Reinhardt sat back in his chair. For the past hour the three members of the command staff from SHADO had introduced him to a reality he did not know existed. Although he had always suspected the existence of extraterrestrial life, he was of the opinion that such advanced life would also possess an advanced sense of morality. The Professor was visibly shaken by the photographic evidence of atrocities committed by these visitors from another world.

“So you see the need for absolute secrecy Professor, the general public must never know,” Straker was saying, “Do you remember the radio play done in 1938?”
“I do. I was 28 at the time, and it scared the hell out of me, until they finally came on and said what it was,” said Reinhardt. “So I have to ask, how can an old broken down physicist, who has been put out to pasture, help?”

Alec noticed Ed and Virginia exchange a look, and then she continued, “We have reason to believe the aliens are using a quantum singularity as a power source. We have to find a way to passively detect such a source from millions of miles away. As much as I paid attention in your theoretical physics classes, most of this is beyond my expertise.”

“Ah, Virginia, you sell yourself short, it’s not called theoretical just to make it sound complicated you know. You see gentlemen, Virginia never did like a puzzle she could not solve, but make no mistake she certainly has the ability. If only I could have convinced her to change her major, she would hold the chair at
Stanford now, and we might even have solved the unified field theory.” Reinhardt concluded.

He thinks very highly of her, Ed thought to himself.

Before she could interject Reinhardt continued, “I will be glad to do what I can to help Commander. As you are probably aware most physicists tend to be pacifists as well. But it would be foolhardy not to defend my home planet from an outside threat of such magnitude. Even Albert Einstein knew better than that.”

“Then it’s settled, we’ll fly back to London on Wednesday morning,” said Straker.

They adjourned the meeting; Ed and Virginia stepped out into the corridor while Alec and the Professor went over some arrangements.

“You seen to be pretty taken by Colonel Lake,” said Alec to the Professor as they watched the pair in the corridor.
“Virginia is like a daughter to me, although I must admit if I had not been a happily married man when I met her, Alec; I might have seen her in a different light. But that was a long time ago; besides, I can see that her heart is already taken.”

“I know, did you notice how they seem to communicate with just a look, I’ve known Ed for years and he never let’s anyone get that close to him, not even his ex wife,” Alec mussed.

“I have a theory about that,” Reinhardt began, “Each of us when we are born has a specific brainwave pattern that is as unique as our fingerprints. Now take two people who are unrelated but have similar brainwave patterns as well as higher than normal psi ratings. These people tend to develop a very close relationship, they think the same way and it would seem they are reading each other’s thoughts, but it’s more empathic than telepathic. They are also much more aware of the visual cue’s they send to each
other than most. Have you ever noticed how certain couples seem to capture your attention when they walk in a room?”

“Like Ginny and Ed,” said Alec.

“I call them soul mates.”

In the corridor Ed and Virginia were having their own discussion.

“Well you were right, he wants to help, I was worried we were going to have to give him the amnesia drug and put him back on the plane,” said Ed.

“Professor Reinhardt has a very highly defined sense of morality. He doesn’t like to see anyone exploited. You may not have noticed, he hides his feelings quite well, but he was enraged when he saw the picture of the young man we found in Scotland last month.”

“I thought I saw him tense up a bit but it was very subtle. You seem to know him fairly well?”
“Professor Reinhardt and his wife were like parents to me, Ed. My mom was almost half a world away, I didn’t really know anyone on my father’s side, and I had no one to turn to when I caught Brad in the affair. That night I left the house in tears and ended up on the Professor’s doorstep. His wife Gretchen, God rest her soul, answered the door. She was such a sweet lady, and they insisted that I stay with them that night. I called my mom the next day; I was going to resign from Westbrook and go home to Brighton. Between the Reinhardt’s and Mom, they convinced me to stay, they helped me get through the divorce, and begin a new life.”

“What happened to his wife?” asked Ed quietly.

Virginia sighed wistfully. “He lost her to cancer about two years ago; you remember, I had to take leave a month after I started my tour on Moonbase.” She finished just as Alec and the Professor were walking out of the office.
Ed remembered; he was the one who had given her the news that Mrs. Reinhardt had been taken to the hospital. He was thinking how he wanted to say he was sorry when Virginia looked at him with gratitude. *How did she know?*

“Have you heard from the aircraft technician Alec?” asked Ed.

“I’m heading out to the hanger to check on it now. The last time I looked they had pulled number two out of the aircraft and were tearing down the engine. The tech seems to think it’s a bad turbine bearing.”

Virginia looked puzzled as she looked at Ed. “That doesn’t make sense, above Mach two the engines are in ramjet mode, the turbines are mostly bypassed.”

“That occurred to me as well, that’s why I wanted to see the thing torn down,” said Alec.
“Well let me know what they find Alec, I would rather have another SST flown in if need be. Professor Reinhardt; Colonel Lake and I are going to grab something in the mess hall. Would you care to join us?”

“Oh, thank you but I wondered if I might accompany Colonel Freeman, aeronautics is a hobby of mine,” said the Professor.

“Ok with me, Professor, this way please,” said Alec.

Ed and Virginia walked down to the mess hall. The airbase had an outstanding selection on the menu. After they had gone through the line they found a small table in the corner.

“You know this isn’t fair,” Virginia began as she dug into her salad.

Ed looked at her, “What’s not fair?”

“You can eat anything you want and not gain a pound, and I have to eat rabbit food to keep
from blowing up like a blimp,” she said feigning annoyance.

Ed laughed remembering what she told him when she joined SHADO.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Do you remember the day I asked you if you wanted to join SHADO, more specifically do you remember the questions I asked?”

She thought for a moment then remembered, “You mean exercise? I still hate it,” she said ruefully.

Virginia knew that Ed worked out at least four times a week, ran five miles a day and to his credit he did watch what he ate. “I guess I should spend more time on the treadmill,” she conceded. “Well I did sign up for Nina’s self defense refresher course, I’m still upset that I let Turner get the drop on me, twice no less,” she said clearly disappointed in herself.

“Don’t feel too bad. He caught me as well.”
Virginia shook her head, “You were concentrating on aiming the Molly. Instead of sightseeing I should have been watching your back.”

This is really bothering her, Ed thought. He took her hand and looked her in her eyes, “Virginia, the X50 shot was wearing off, and when you come down off that stuff it’s very difficult to concentrate. We were both at our wits end. I was damned glad to see you were alive. I was afraid Turner had killed you.”

“Do you remember running back to the rooftop?” she asked.

“I remember seeing you lying on the roof as I got to the top of the ladder. I saw you take a breath when I knelt down beside you, after that nothing until I woke up with you at my bedside.”

“Then you don’t remember Henderson or Jackson questioning you?”
“No not at all.”
They finished their dinner and headed to their quarters. “Alec got us adjoining rooms.”
“That was very thoughtful of him,” Virginia teased.

They each opened up the door to their quarters. On the common wall was a pass thru door with two locks. Ed walked to the door and unlocked the bottom lock. A few seconds later he heard the top lock click and Virginia opened the door.

“Hello, stranger, have you seen the size of the beds?” she asked.

Ed looked at the bunks, they were both twin size. “We could always sleep on the floor,” he said lightheartedly.

Virginia walked over and put her arms around him. “I think we’ll manage apart for a couple of days, but to be honest I’ve kind of gotten used to not sleeping alone,” she said as she kissed him.
Chapter 9:

“So this was the cause of the overheating?” asked Alec pointedly.

“It’s the only thing I could find wrong. At the speed the aircraft was reported traveling the turbine was almost completely bypassed. It would have been turning at not much more than idle speed,” the SHADO tech answered. Alec had reached the same conclusion earlier; at least this guy wasn’t trying to pull a snow job on him.

“Do you have any idea what might have caused the problem?”

“Colonel, we tore this engine down completely, that was the only thing we could find wrong.” Alec didn’t like unsolved mysteries, especially involving aircraft reliability.

“Okay, when will she be put back together?”
The technician looked at his clipboard and answered. “We should have her ready for flight check by mid-morning, Colonel.”

“All right, I’m giving Colonel Lake her check ride tomorrow, while we are up we’ll shake her out at little bit. If the thing holds together we should be ok.” Alec looked at his watch as he walked over to the phone. 21:30 Ed should still be awake, he thought as he dialed.

Ed was sitting at the desk catching up on paperwork when the phone rang.

“Straker,” he answered.

“Ed, it’s Alec; I just finished up with the aircraft technician. The only thing they found was a bad bearing. Ginny and I will shake her out tomorrow, I figure if she checks out then we’ll be ok.”

Ed knew that Alec wasn’t happy about it.
“Right, make sure you try a couple of high speed runs.”

“I planned on it. Is Ginny still up?”

“Yes, she’s helping me wade through this paperwork. I finally figured out this is the real reason you’re retiring,” said Ed half jokingly. Only the two of them knew the real reason.

“I’ve been telling you that for almost fifteen years; tell Ginny to get some sleep. Unlike you I’m not a push over when it comes to flight certification.”

Freeman was easy going most of the time but was a real hard-ass when it came to flight training. *You’re only allowed one mistake*, he had said some years ago.

“Goodnight Alec,” Ed said as he hung up the phone.

“Virginia, you should get to bed early, Alec just reminded me what a hard nose he is when it comes to flying.”
“Yes, give me one minute, this is the last one and I’m almost finished.”

A few minutes later she handed him the report. He put it in the pile and when he reached to grab another she stopped him.

“You need to get some rest as well, you’re supposed to take up an aeroceptor tomorrow and I don’t want you falling asleep in the cockpit,” she said. Ed started to argue but Virginia cut him off. “You’re not going to win this one; Seriously Ed we’ve both been up since five thirty this morning, London time, that’s 22 hours.”

He had somehow forgotten the time difference and held up his hands in surrender.

“You win.”

Ed looked at Virginia through the open door between their two rooms, she was already
asleep. He was tired as well, but found he could not sleep right away. He thought of the beautiful woman sleeping in the room next to his and wondered how he could have been so lucky. They had only been together for eight weeks, and even then only been intimate for the past two, but to him it seemed like he had known her forever. Virginia knew things about him that he had not even told Mary.

Vietnam had been hell, he rarely talked about it even to Alec and he had been there. But one night Virginia asked him to tell her what had happened. He didn’t hold anything back, even the torture in the Viet-Cong camp. Ed still didn’t know why he had opened up so willingly to her, for him it was completely out of character. Over the years he had gotten used to being alone, but he now could not imagine a life without her in it.
The SHADAI R SST made a picture perfect landing. After it rolled out and pulled off the runaway

Alec Freeman turned to the pilot; “That was excellent, do it two more times and you’re done.”

Virginia relaxed for the first time that morning. “I knew you were all business on the check ride, but I thought I had done something wrong, Alec.”

Alec Freeman smiled at her. “It’s a bluff; you see I set up an almost hostile environment. If a pilot can handle that and still not make any mistakes, then I know that they are sure of what they are doing. Now that you know, you’re sworn to secrecy,” he said with a smile.

“Your secret is safe. Alec you’ve known Ed for years?” she asked as she taxied back to the beginning of the runway.
“That’s right, met him in 1966. We were both stationed in Thailand. I was with MI5 as well as an RAF officer. I was there to observe American fighter operations in Vietnam. Because I had experience with the F4, I flew as Ed’s wingman.”

“I know, he told me; that and a whole lot more. Most people who were there won’t talk about it, and Ed has always been a very private man anyway. So I was surprised he confided in me.” Virginia said as she aligned the aircraft for takeoff.

Once they were airborne Alec continued, “Professor Reinhardt has a term for it, he calls the two of you soul mates,” he said.

Virginia considered it for a few minutes. She thought of Ed for a moment and the love she felt for him and she began to sense him feeling the same. The last time they made love, she felt like she was merging with him mentally as well
as physically. And right now these feelings were giving her goose bumps.

“How is the temperature on number two, Alec?” she asked trying to distract herself from those thoughts.

Freeman looked down at the indicator. “It’s running normal. Let’s do a, Mach two, speed run.” Alec said. Virginia raised the heat shield and pushed the throttles forward.

“All right Lew, that’s three in a row. I’m supposed to be the old man up here.” Straker said to Waterman as he formed up on his wing.

“Sorry Commander, I’m afraid you’re too good for us,” Waterman replied.

“Maybe I can talk Gay into joining us, that might even up the playing field a bit,” said Mark Bradley as he formed up on Straker’s other wing.
The new land based interceptors were everything Alec said they would be. Straker hoped to have ninety aircraft, six squadrons of fifteen in service by the end of the year. He noticed an SST flying several thousand feet above them. That had to be Virginia and Alec. He knew by the sensed feelings that she had passed the initial test and the rest was a formality. *Time to have some fun*, he thought.

“Gentlemen, let’s pay Colonel’s Lake and Freeman a visit, shall we? Form up on me.” Ed pulled the jet into a climb as he flew towards the SST above.

“I think we’re going to have company, Alec,” Virginia said. “Do you want to have some fun with them?”

“Sure, but how do you know?” he asked. Virginia pulled the jet into a climb and pushed the throttles all the way forward.
“Trust me.”

Ed noticed the SST start to gain altitude and speed. *She knows*, he thought. The next feeling he sensed was one of amusement.

Virginia had the SST up to Mach four now; she was coming to the end of the test range so she started to bank the aircraft for a turn. A few minutes later she was flanked by three SHADO interceptors.

Alec was shaking his head, “How in the blazes did you know?” he asked in astonishment.

“Lately I seem to be able to sense what he is feeling. Just before I climbed I felt a feeling of playfulness from him. He must have seen us pass overhead.”

“Seagull X-ray from Delta Foxtrot 15, fancy meeting you out here Colonel.” Ed’s voice came over the speaker.
“Let me see that,” Alec said as he grabbed the mic. “Delta-Foxtrot 15 from Seagull X-ray, don’t you boys have anything better to do than bothering my student,” Alec said giving Ginny a wink.

“I guess you have to report us to the commander, oh wait, that’s me. I guess I’ll have to put myself on report.”

“You’re a real card Ed, anyway Ginny did fine on her first go around; the rest is for the books.”

“How is number two holding up?”

As the two men were talking Virginia had slowed back to Mach two.

“It looks fine, I’ve never seen a bearing cause that much overheating in this type of engine, Ed. I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“Okay, we bothered the two of you enough, see you on the ground. Flight, form on me,” said Ed as the trio of aircraft pulled away.
Virginia was heading back to the airfield and had already begun her descent.

“See what I mean, Alec?”

“It’s uncanny, I’ve heard of cases where people who have been together for years have experienced this but never in this short a period of time.”

Virginia had to agree, she needed to talk to Ed about this. She brought her thoughts back to piloting the aircraft, in a few minutes she would be landing and she still had to complete one more flight.

Tuesday evening found the “Tiger Team” as Ed had christened it, in the mess hall. They had taken three tables. Captain Bradley and his crew, Captain Waterman with his, and Virginia, Professor Reinhardt, Alec and Ed seated at the last table. Ed was going over the update plans for SID with Professor Reinhardt.
“I don’t see a problem with the L4 and L5 placements, but you’re going to have a problem keeping the L3 unit where it is supposed to be,” the Professor was saying. “The L3 libration point is inherently unstable; any object in that orbit would require some method of station keeping.”

“You’re absolutely right Professor, that’s why we had to design a new satellite, with larger fuel tanks and better maneuvering thrusters.”

“Have you worked out who is going to do the SID upgrades and alignments?” asked Alec.

“By far the most physically demanding mission is going to be the retrofit on SID 1 at the L5 point. The mission will entail a large amount of heavy EVA. Paul Foster and I will handle that one. The second mission SID 2 at the L4 will be much easier as that satellite will be launched preconfigured and will only need alignment when it reaches orbit. I’m assigning that one to Virginia and Paul. I’m sure that she can be
ready by then; the timing of the mission is not critical anyway. The last mission to SID 3 will be the most difficult mission. It’s more involved technically, and since it is going to be parked at the L3 point, piloting the mission will have its own set of challenges. It also will involve final alignment of the entire system. Virginia and I are the only ones qualified for the alignment work and it’s a two person job. It would take Paul six months of uninterrupted study to master the technical end so I’ve decided that Virginia and I will fly that mission.”

“You know Ed, Henderson is not going to like this; what sort of time table are we looking at?”

“The mission to SID 1 will go in thirty days. Paul already has the training necessary to complete the mission. SID 2 has already been shipped to the cape; so all we have to do is add the upgrades while it’s still on the ground. The retrofit and launch should be done by August. So the SID 2 mission will go in September.
Virginia already has the basic astro training, it will take her about eight weeks to train for the second and third mission. That will give her plenty of time to finish the computer upgrades before the SID 2 and 3 missions. The third mission will be contingent on the launch of SID 3. Construction and testing should be completed by September. The launch should be set for mid October with the alignment mission scheduled the week of November 9th. This will correspond with the full moon.”

Alec shook his head, “The part that troubles me is the third mission. I don’t like the idea of SHADO’s first and second working the same dangerous mission, the aliens will most likely try to take advantage of that. Why don’t you let Paul handle it, he can be up to speed in time.”

Virginia chimed in, “Ed’s right Alec. Getting Paul up to speed in six months would be an optimistic goal. With the theory involved I would expect it to take more like a year. He has
the astronaut experience but is not a scientific specialist.”

Professor Reinhardt was listening with intense interest. “Forgive me gentlemen, Miss Lake; I seem to be missing something. Aren’t we, shall we say, putting the cart before the horse, if we don’t know what we are looking for how can we design sensors for it?”

“I’m sorry Professor,” said Ed. “I should have explained the goals of the project more precisely. The technology we are using is called SDSS, software defined sensor system. It allows us to adjust for detecting any and all emissions in the EM band, as well as particles, radiation, tachyons, temporal disturbances, FTL particles, the works. Once implemented it can be modified to circumvent any countermeasures the aliens attempt to utilize. When Virginia first came to SHADO, she had theorized that the alien craft bypass the light barrier problem by generating their own time continuum. Eight
weeks ago the two of us were brainstorming the problem and she suggested the possibility of a quantum singularity being utilized as a power source. The idea seemed to fit several characteristics we have observed regarding UFO’s. Your role in this Professor will be to discover the type of particles or emissions or temporal disturbances that would be generated by a quantum singularity. Once we know that our SDSS techs will upload a new detection program to the network.”

Professor Reinhardt smiled at Virginia, “I told you she was my star pupil. Virginia my dear, that was absolutely brilliant theoretical reasoning, truly inspiring.”

Ed could feel that Virginia was grateful but also embarrassed by the Professor’s praise. “Well I don’t know about the rest of you but I have a flight to make tomorrow,” Virginia said getting up from the table. “Good night gentlemen.”
The men all stood up and Ed said quietly to her, “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

She smiled and said quietly, “Don’t be too long.” Ed watched her walk out. “I’m going to turn in as well,” said Professor Reinhardt, “Good night.”

Straker and Freeman bid him good night. Before Ed could leave Alec said to him, “Before you go Ed I wanted to talk with you, let me grab us some more coffee.”

Alec walked to the line and grabbed two cups as Ed sat back down at the table. Freeman came back with the coffee and handed a cup to Ed. “Thanks, Alec, so what’s on your mind?”

“You’ve changed Ed, for the better I might add.” Ed was amused, “How so?” he asked.

“You’re much more focused, not nearly as on edge, being in love suits you. I haven’t seen you this content in...well, it’s been a while.”
Ed Straker considered that for a moment before he replied. “Come on Alec, I know you better than that, what’s really on your mind?”

“Today while we were flying, Ginny knew somehow that you were coming up on our wing. She all of a sudden just knew, she said that she could sense your feelings?”

“I’ve had the same experience with her; I have to admit it can be unnerving.”

“I pulled up yours and her psi ratings Ed; I did it myself because I don’t want anyone else to know about this. Anyway both your readings are higher than average, but not high enough to cause this type of phenomenon. My concern is both of you were exposed to an alien energy beam during the Timelash incident. I’m just wondering if there is a connection.”

“Why would the aliens do something to us that would give us an advantage, Alec, it doesn’t make sense,” Ed wondered. The two men regarded each other for a moment.
“Maybe it wasn’t supposed to be an advantage. What if the beam they used was supposed to have another effect but somehow backfired. As Jackson has told us; when they have reprogrammed humans for their purposes they burn out the emotional and creative centers of the brain. They probably don’t have any idea how to deal with emotions and the concept of love is unheard of to them.”

“We might be reaching a bit but I have to agree this connection Virginia and I have does seem quite paranormal. We’ll discuss it with medical when we get back to HQ. In the mean time, I have a lovely lady waiting for me. Good night Alec,” he said as he got up to leave.

“Good night Ed.” Freeman watched him walk out of the room. The last time he saw Ed look so happy is when he met Mary. Ed had asked her to marry him almost immediately after they met. Alec had never believed in love at first sight. At least Ed and Virginia have known each
other much longer. To Alec’s knowledge he hadn’t yet popped the question, but judging by the way Ed had changed, he knew it was only a matter of time.

“You’re troubled Ed, talk to me,” Virginia said to him when he came in.

Ed already knew she had sensed his feelings while he was talking to Alec. He took her hand and led her over to the sofa.

“When is the first time that you noticed the connection we seem to share?”

“I sensed it a couple nights ago while we were making love and I’ve been meaning to talk with you about it.”

Ed paused for a moment not sure how to continue. “Alec thinks the alien energy beam we were exposed to during the Timelash incident may have altered us somehow. I don’t know
what they could have been trying to do, unless it backfired, like he suggested,” Ed said.

Virginia looked in his eyes searching. “You’re worried that our relationship was manipulated into being, aren’t you,” she said. Ed nodded, uncharacteristically lost for words. “Ed I was attracted to you long before the Timelash incident and I know what I feel for you now, is real. Think about it, and be honest,” she paused for effect. ”When did you first realize that you were attracted to me?” she asked.

“Do you remember the day you stopped in at HQ after coming back from Mrs. Reinhardt’s funeral?”

Virginia was surprised, “That long ago? I never knew.”

“I wanted so much to drop the formality that day but I was afraid you would see right through me.” Ed paused for a moment, “Not that it matters, but I would really like to know. How close were you and Craig?”
“I was being truthful when I told you that we hadn’t slept together. What I didn’t tell you, is had we gone out that Saturday night, we probably would have. I was just starting to fall in love with him. It was hard because I had to push my feelings for you aside. Had I known then that you were interested, I never would have dated Collins.”

“I’m sorry Virginia, I should have told you.”

She grinned as she said, “It would have saved me from my big mistake.”

“You mean Paul?”

She nodded, “When I thought Craig had died, I was heartbroken. I cried, a lot. Paul gave me a shoulder to cry on. You know, he can be sweet when he wants to be. I started seeing him on the rebound and I knew right away it was a mistake. I should have broken it off right then and there but I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. He had helped me through a very difficult time. I knew
he would get board and move on especially since I had no intention on sleeping with him.”

She had just bared her soul and Ed had to admire her honesty.

Virginia put her arms around him and looked deep into his eyes. “So as we were saying there was already a mutual attraction brewing. Ed the only thing that kept me from melting in your arms when we had taken the X50 was that I didn’t want to be a liability to you. I would have felt that way even without any possible alien influence. I don’t think the empathic connection had anything to do with it; we didn’t notice it until we were already involved,” she said. Ed gently pulled her to him and they kissed each other deeply.

“Come on, we need to get to bed, I don’t want to be late captaining my first flight.”
“Groom Lake tower, Seagull X-ray, rolling,” Virginia Lake called to the tower as she pushed the throttles forward. As the aircraft picked up speed Alec Freeman called off the airspeed figures.

“80...100...120...140...160, V1...VR, Rotate.”

Lake pulled the yoke back and the SST lifted off the runway. Thirty minutes later they were at cruising altitude and speed. Freeman looked over at Lake,

“Have you looked at the astronaut training guidelines yet?”

“Only briefly, why do you ask?” she looked at him questioningly.

“The program is one third technical, one third mental, and one third physical,” he said. Alec knew that Ginny hated exercise.

“Oh that. Ed has been trying to get me to run with him in the morning, but he does five miles; I’d be lucky to survive one.”
“By the end of the program you will be doing five miles in thirty minutes.”

Ginny was unconvinced, what have I gotten myself in for?

“I thought Ed would be up here with us,” Alec mused.

“Henderson sent him a pile of finance reports to go through last night. I told him to work on them this morning while we were in the air. He’s back in the cabin buried up to his ears, no doubt.”

Alec nodded, “I wondered why he asked me to fly right seat,” He looked out the side window of the cockpit. The clouds formed a blanket that topped out at thirty thousand; they were flying more than twice as high. *So much for the scenery*, he thought.

Colonel Foster was working on the daily reports when the phone rang.
“Foster,” he answered.

“Major Myers, sir. The survivor from the Sara Mae is coming out of the coma.”

Foster looked at the flight schedule, a transporter was leaving for the states in two hours.

“Is our security angle covered?”

“Yes sir, we have him in a private room under guard, the hospital is a military facility and they have been most accommodating,” said Myers.

“All right, I’ll be sending Colonel Blake out to oversee the debriefing; he will be accompanied by Dr. Schroeder and Lieutenant Lake. They’ll be on the next flight out.”

“I’ll have someone meet them at the airfield, Good day Colonel.”

Foster hung the phone up and keyed the intercom. “Have Colonel Blake, Dr. Schroeder, and Lt. Lake report to the commander’s office at once,” he ordered.
“Right away, sir,” said Lt. Ford.

**I would rather face an entire fleet of alien spacecraft, than having to deal with paperwork.** A cup of coffee appeared on the table next to him. Ed looked up in time to see Alec sitting down. “Oh, thank you Alec,” he said as he took a sip of the coffee, “I needed that.”

Alec nodded, “Ginny said that you were tired, grumpy, grouchy, and you needed a cup of coffee,” he said and continued, “So Henderson dumped a pile of finance paperwork on you?”

Straker nodded, “Yes, he wants to make sure I suffer right along with him for every last penny. I suppose I shouldn’t complain. We’re getting the money we need.”

Alec changed the subject, “Ed, I hope I didn’t speak out of turn last night,” he said quietly. Ed looked at his best friend with amusement.
“Alec, we’ve known each other too long to mince words. You did what you thought was right. Virginia and I discussed it last night; she has an interesting way of looking at things. The only difference the alien interference could have made is it took less time for the inevitable to happen.”

Alec thought for a moment, “So you’re saying the attraction between the two of you was already there.”

Ed nodded. “Do you know why I went to pick her up at the airport the night of the Timelash incident, Alec?”

“Not really, I heard that you wanted to talk to her before she saw Henderson.”

“I missed her Alec; she had been up on Moonbase for a month. Foster was on leave and Nina had a death in the family so she volunteered to go. Do you want to hear something strange?”
“What’s that?”

“I was going to ask Virginia to go to that LSO show on Saturday night, the one that you gave me the tickets for,” Ed confessed.

“You didn’t already have the tickets though did you?” Alec said not really a question.

“No I was going to pick them up when I got back to HQ, but I never had the chance.”

“Miss Ealand had a list of things you wanted her to remind you of, the tickets were on the list,” he grinned as he confessed.

Ed Straker looked at his best friend with gratitude. “Thanks, Alec.”

“So I know it’s none of my business, but when are you going to ask her?”

“Is it that obvious?” Straker was surprised as Alec nodded.

“I bet she would know even without the empathic connection.”
“Well you’re right; I feel that she does know, just as I feel her answer is going to be yes. I’m going to the jewelry store down the road from the studio once we land and I can get away for about an hour,” he said.

Alec offered his hand, “Let me be the first to congratulate you, do you need a best man?”

“Do you really think I would ask anyone else? I’d be honored Alec.”

Mark Bradley was on the flight engineers station of the SST. As he was recording the instrument readings he noticed the turbine temperature of engine two was close to the red line, too close, he thought.

“Colonel Lake?”

Virginia turned to look back, “What is it, Mark?”
“Number two is running extremely hot, isn’t that the one you had trouble with on the way here?”

Virginia looked down at the panel; the indicator was in the red now. A feeling of unease came over her.

Ed was still talking with Alec when he stopped midsentence. *Virginia is seriously worried about something.* “Virginia’s in trouble. I can sense it. Let’s go,” Ed said as they rushed toward the cockpit.

“Shutdown two!” she said but it was too late. The overheated bearing in the turbine seized and the engine tore itself apart. The aircraft shook violently with the explosion; parts from the shredded engine became projectiles and tore into engine one. The cover above the port and center engines was blown open and sheared
off in the slipstream damaging the port side flaps and wing tank. A piece of the turbine blade from engine one ripped into the port landing gear wheel well, destroying the landing gear as well as tearing off the door panels.

“Engine two is out, losing power on one, pitch is out, losing altitude,” Mark called from the panel.

The SST was nose down and rolling to the left. Virginia fought to maintain control of the aircraft as she put out a distress call.

“Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is Seagull X-ray, have lost two engines in an explosion, we are going down, repeat, we are going down.”

Alec managed to climb into the copilot’s seat and strapped in. He looked at the hydraulics indicator, it was falling rapidly. He grabbed the yoke and mirrored Virginia’s motions. Between the two of them they were somehow able to right the aircraft. Ed strapped himself into the
observation seat which also served as a radio post.

“Mark, engage auxiliary hydraulics!” Virginia exclaimed.

“Cut power, descend,” she ordered.

Freeman complied. Even though he had more time in the aircraft, Virginia was pilot in command. Nobody, regardless of rank could supersede her authority on that aircraft.

“Ed, try to contact SHADO HQ while I try to assess the damage.

“SHADO control from Seagull X-ray, do you read?”

Paul Foster dashed into the control room.

“What’s the situation?”

“Seagull X-ray sent out a Mayday call, I have Commander Straker on the radio now,” said Ford.
Foster flipped up the mic, “Ed it’s Paul. What’s your situation?”

In the cockpit of the SST Alec had quickly filled out a systems status report. He showed it to Virginia who quickly glanced at it and nodded. He then handed it to Straker.

“Paul, we lost engine two in explosion. Engine one is damaged and non operational, possible airframe damage, main hydraulics are out, axillaries are only partially operational, the portside inner wing tank is ruptured, port side landing gear shows red, flight computer and main avionics are out.”

My God, two engines out; they don’t stand a chance, thought Paul.

“Get me Skydiver 5,” he ordered.
“Ed, I’m going to dispatch Sky 5 to rendezvous with you and try to assess your airframe damage. Can you make Keflavik?”

“Virginia can we make Keflavik?” Ed asked.
She nodded and keyed her mic, “Paul, its Ginny, we’ve just dropped to subsonic flight, I think we can make that field. At our present speed we will arrive in just under an hour. Have them foam the runway just before we arrive.”

“The video landing system is out,” Alec said to her as she finished with Foster. *This is a worst case scenario; the emergency procedures don’t even cover it,* he thought.

“Launch stations,” Captain Ellis ordered.
She donned her helmet and walked to the launch tube.

“Good luck, skipper,” Joan called.
Ellis slid down the tube into the pilot’s seat of her fighter. In a few moments she was in the cockpit of Sky 5. She strapped in and activated the power units of the aircraft.

“Standby for lift off,” she called. The Skydive tilted up to forty five degrees. Ellis pulled back on the launch lever. The aircraft surged forward through the water and broached the surface of the North Atlantic on two plumes of flame.

Schroeder, Lake and Colonel Blake walked into control, to see Foster, and immediately noticed things were not normal. Blake walked up to him.

“What’s going on Paul?”

“The SST coming back from the US had a catastrophic engine failure; they are going to try to make Keflavik.”

“Isn’t that the flight from Dreamland?”
“Yes, the Commander, Freeman, Lake, Bradley, Waterman, both Skydiver crews, and Professor Reinhardt, are on that aircraft.”

“My God in Heaven help us.”

“If I were religious, I’d start praying,” Foster said.

Lynn walked over to Colonel Blake; she had heard, “What are their chances Colonel?”

“Virginia is pilot in command; I understand she is an accomplished pilot. And Colonel Freeman is most likely flying as her copilot. Freeman knows that aircraft better than anyone else. It depends on how badly damaged the aircraft is. I agree with Colonel Foster.”

Lynn knew that belonging to an organization like SHADO could be a dangerous occupation. She just didn’t think the reality would hit so close to home or so soon. Dear God, protect them, she silently prayed.
Gay Ellis came up on the wing of the crippled SST.

“Seagull X-ray from Sky 5, how do you read?”

Virginia smiled for the first time in an almost an hour.

“Gay its Ginny; am I glad to hear you. I’ve got a hell of a mess up here.”

Ellis had seen some of the damage as she approached the wounded aircraft. She said over the radio, “Okay, I’m going to have a look at your underside.”

Ellis brought her jet around and underneath the SST.

“The port side rear landing gear doors have been blown off. The tires look like they have been shredded. The gear itself is bent up considerably. The port side flaps appear to be damaged as well. I’m going to look up top.”
Gay slid out from under the SST and climbed above it. She then inverted the jet and slid over the top.

“Oh my God,” she said without keying the mic. “The panel covering the portside and center engines has been blown off. The inner engine is completely missing and the outer one looks like it went through a shredder. You can see into the port wheel well from the outer engine compartment. There is a gash on the port side wing that is leaking fuel. The damage is evident on the top of the port side flaps as well. You have minor damage to the port side horizontal stabilizer.”

In the cockpit Alec had marked down the damage on the status diagram.

Gay Ellis came over the radio. “I’m going to stay with you as escort to Keflavik.”

“Understood, thank you Sky 5, Seagull X-ray out,” Virginia said as she turned to Alec.
“I don’t remember any emergency procedures for this scenario. Did I miss something?”

“No, they don’t cover this because it’s next to impossible. I think your best bet is to lower the nose shield and belly in,” Alec was saying.

Virginia considered it, in the simulator that scenario always ended up with the nose and half the cockpit being torn off the aircraft.

“I’m not comfortable with that. What other options do we have? How about ditching near shore?”

“If you ditch with the heat shield down, the fuselage will snap in half. We’ll be under before anyone can get out; with the damage we’ve sustained, that might happen even if we leave the shield up.”

She thought for a moment, “What about precision approach radar?”

“That would get you on the glide slope but you still won’t know when to flare the aircraft.”
“Gay can follow us down and tell me when I’m over the threshold.”

Alec looked at Ed and said, “I don’t like it Ed, she’s flying blind.”

“Let’s look at this a different way,” Ginny said. “We know the backup Horizontal situation indicator is still operational and the nav radios appear to be functioning. So that means the localizer should be operational as well. The only question mark I see here is the glide slope indication and receiver. As I see it, the best course of action is to leave the nose up, get vectors to final, get on the localizer and have Gay follow us in Sky 5. If the glide slope is functional then all I need to know is when to flare the aircraft. If it isn’t then we execute a PAR.”

“Virginia, look you and the rest get to the back of the aircraft, and I’ll fly it in. It’s the...” Virginia cut him off.
“No Alec, I’m in command of this flight. If anyone is going to risk their life it’s going to be me,” she said giving Alec the full force of her icy blue glare.

“Damn it Virginia, I’m...”

This time Straker cut him off, “Colonel Freeman, Colonel Lake is in command of this aircraft, it’s her decision.”

Alec looked at his commanding officer, “Yes, sir,” he said in resignation. Ed looked back at Virginia. Their eyes met. I can do this Ed, trust me, she thought. Ed knew she was sure of herself. “Colonel Lake, it’s your call.”

Virginia nodded and turned back to the business at hand. She grabbed the mic. “Sky 5 from Seagull X-ray.”

“Go ahead Ginny.”

“Gay, I’m going to need your help. Our camera system is out and I don’t want to try a belly landing with the heat shield down. I’m going to
get vectors to final, once I’ve established on the localizer, I need you to get in behind me. You’ll have to tell me when to flare, in this aircraft that is just past the threshold.”

“I can do that, easily.”

“What was it that an astronaut once said, this is like flying a toaster through a car wash,” said Alec.

At Keflavik NAS Lieutenant Commander Patterson had received a flash priority from Washington. A damaged SST, carrying military hardware, was heading in from the North Atlantic. It had suffered a catastrophic engine failure which had disabled most of its systems. His orders were to get the airfield closed to all other traffic, get the runway foamed and render assistance. He walked off the elevator into the control tower.
“Ok Bob, where are they now?” he asked the duty officer.

“There still about sixty miles out, Keflavik approach is going to vector them to final, sir. They are not sure if there glide slope indicator is operational.”

Patterson had seen SST’s land without gear, it was never a pretty site, and you almost always lost the flight crew.

“Let’s power up the precision approach radar, if their ILS is out we can transition without delay,” said Patterson.

“Commander Patterson, the crash crew is getting ready to foam runway 29 now, sir,” said Lt. Bob Masters, the duty officer. “I understand it’s the pilots’ first time in one of these, sir,” said Masters.

“Oh, terrific, get in touch with the outlying EMS units, I want at least three more ALS unit right now,” ordered Patterson.
“Right away, sir,” said Masters.

“Seagull X-ray, Keflavik approach, descend and maintain 3000, come to heading 320, maintain 3000 until established, contact Keflavik tower on 129.85.”

Virginia read the instructions back and set the autopilot which was still working to intercept the ILS.

“Mark, how is engine three?”

“Okay Colonel, temperature and power read normal.”

“Alec after this transmission I need you to keep in touch with the tower, while I communicate with Gay,” she said and then keyed her mic.

“Keflavik tower, Seagull X-ray with you, ILS approach runway 29.”

“Seagull X-ray, Keflavik tower, fly straight in, clear to land runway 29, understand you have a
chase plane, over,” the controller said. “Correct Keflavik tower, clear to land runway 29, Seagull X-ray out.”

Virginia looked at the glide slope indicator as it started to move. “Gay it looks like I have a good glide slope indication.”

The crippled SST locked onto the glide slope and started to descend. Straker tried to keep his thoughts neutral; he knew Virginia didn’t need the distraction.

In the tower LCDR Patterson watched the SST on the radar scope. It appeared to be in the center of the glide slope, and localizer beams.

“They have glide slope indication, sir” said Lt. Masters.

“Ginny, you’re right on the numbers,” said Gay.

“Outer marker, airspeed 170,” said Alec.
Coming in hot, Virginia thought, no flaps, can’t be helped.

She prepared to take control of the aircraft as it was tending to yaw to the left.

In the control room at HQ all they could do was watch and wait.

“I’m surprised Freeman isn’t flying her in, Paul,” said Blake.

“You know the rules, Geoff. The pilot in command is the pilot in command, period.”

“Straker could override that.”

“You know as well as I do he won’t do that.”

Virginia took over from the autopilot as the aircraft was yawing noticeably to the left. She kicked the right rudder peddle to line the aircraft back up.
“The yaw dampener is out on the autopilot,” she said.

“Middle maker, airspeed 160, too fast,” said Alec.

“I know, it can’t be helped; get ready to cut power on my mark,” she said. Virginia keyed the intercom, “All hands, brace for impact.”

“Inner maker, airspeed 155...150,” Alec called out.

“Cut power...cut it now.”

“Threshold,” Gay called from Sky 5.

Virginia slowly flared the aircraft, at the speed they were moving she would gain altitude if she pulled up too fast.

In the tower LCDR Patterson watched the crippled SST as it came in. Too fast, he thought. It was on the glide slope but the flare was going to be critical. As it came over the numbers he
saw the nose rise very slightly. A few seconds later it contacted the runway.

The aircraft shook violently as it impacted the runway. Virginia reached down and deployed the drag chute to help keep the aircraft centered. She fought to maintain control as the aircraft careened down the runway; it seemed that it would never stop.

In the cabin cups and papers and anything else that was not secured went flying forward as the aircraft slowed. The sound of metal screeching against asphalt could be heard throughout the cabin.

Ed sensed fierce determination from Virginia as she struggled to keep the aircraft centered.

Forty five seconds later the aircraft finally ground to a stop at the end of runway 29.

“All right, Ginny, you go girl,” said Gay as she overflew the downed SST wagging her wings.
“Thanks for the assist Sky 5; I owe you dinner, Seagull X-ray out.”

“Anytime; Sky 5 to SHADO control, returning to base.”

Virginia looked around the cabin. “All right, you know the drill, everybody out.”

A cheer went up in the control room that could have been heard in the studio, at least that is what Lynn thought. Thank you, Lord, she thought to herself.

“Damn, she landed that thing blind. Can you believe it Geoff,” Paul said to Blake.

LCDR Patterson was beside himself. As a naval aviator, he had seen his share of emergency landings. This one had to be at the top of the list.
“Bob, I’m going down there, I want to shake that lady’s hand.”

Chapter 10:

Virginia and Ed were the last two off the plane. By the time the pair had made sure the plane was empty, a boarding stairway had been rolled into place. Ed grabbed his hat and briefcase; Virginia and he walked down the stairway together. They gathered everyone for a headcount a safe distance from the aircraft. A few minutes later a military issue jeep pulled up to the group. A naval officer dressed in khakis stepped out of the jeep. He was about ten years younger than Straker and looked oddly familiar. Straker had worn his Air force uniform while he was at Dreamland, and still had it on, and as soon as the naval officer saw the birds on Ed shoulders he snapped to attention and saluted.
“Lieutenant Commander Jeff Patterson USN, sir.”

Straker returned the salute. Ed remembered; Patterson was at the Newport RI, Naval War College with him in 1968. Straker had taken an accelerated course in naval aviation tactics.

“Colonel Edward Straker USAF, nice to see you again Jeff.”

“Ed I didn’t know you were still on active duty, good to see you, sir,” Patterson said as they shook hands.

“I’m not full time anymore, just a reservist now,” Ed lied.

“I came down to make sure you were all all right, and the shake the hand of the lady who landed this thing, sir.”

“In that case, may I introduce Miss Virginia Lake, Virginia, Lieutenant Commander Jeff Patterson,” Ed said making the introductions.
“My pleasure ma’am,” he said as they shook hands.

“How do you do Commander Patterson.”

Patterson had to stop himself from staring; I didn’t expect her to be drop dead gorgeous as well.

“Jeff I need to ask a favor, once you’ve moved this aircraft off the tarmac I need it cordoned off, no one is to go near it. It’s carrying classified material.”

Patterson was confused. Why would a reservist be in charge of a top secret project?

“It’s an unusual request but seeing it’s coming from you, I’ll take care of it,” he said. ”I have a shuttle coming that will take you to terminal; I understand you have another transport coming in. Are they going to pick you up?”

“No, the transport is carrying a cleanup team; you won’t have to worry about this mess. We
will need to catch a military hop back to London if possible.”

“I’m sure I can arrange something; I’ll send word once I firm up the arrangements,” said Patterson. He shook hands with Ed then saluted. “Colonel, Miss Lake,” he said.

Virginia and Ed found a quiet spot in the terminal. He could sense that she needed a few minutes alone with him.

“Are you okay?” he asked. She looked at him and smiled. Ed had seen that smile before, he knew what it meant.

“No, not really; like a car accident, you don’t shake until it’s all over. Some second I turned out to be,” she said noticeably trembling. Ed took her face gently in his hands.

“Now you listen to me, we are all damn lucky to be alive. That was a brilliant piece of flying
Colonel,” he said as he kissed her. She gave him a grateful smile.

“I just got off the phone with Foster. The scrub team will be here within the hour. As soon as they off load our bags, we will fly out of here on the military hop that Jeff arranged for us. We should be in London by 21:00,” said Ed. Virginia was hoping HQ would send a transport for them.

“I have to get back in the cockpit Ed, soon,” Virginia looked at him seriously as she continued. “I’ve never had a scare like this in an aircraft before. Even when we ran into the UFO over Loch Ness, I wasn’t as frightened as I was today. I have to face this head on or I’ll lose my edge.”

“That was a frightening event, it would have shaken me up, but you’re right. I’ll have Alec go with you first thing tomorrow morning. Seagull Yankee is coming in later tonight and isn’t scheduled to leave until late afternoon. You’ll
have plenty of time as our meeting has been moved back to 16:00,” he said. *Besides I have an appointment at the jewelry store in the morning.*

“The two of you must have just been on your why back to the cockpit when the engine exploded.”

“I knew something had alarmed you. I was still working on the reports when I told Alec we were in trouble. We got up and rushed to the cockpit just in time to hear you call for shutdown,” he told her.

Ed and Virginia were still engaged in conversation when Alec walked over to them.

“That was some of the best flying I’ve ever seen. I was very impressed,” he said to Virginia.

“Thanks, Alec but anymore like that and I’ll die of old age before my time. I must have lost twenty years today,” she said feigning humor.
“Let me tell you a secret, Ginny, I was more scared than you were. I lost thirty years today. You kept your head about you and reasoned your way out of it. You did better than I would have.”

“Well I hope you’re not too frightened to fly right seat for Virginia tomorrow morning; she wants to get back in the cockpit,” said Ed as he gave Alec a grin.

“As long as she does the flying,” Alec said giving her a wink. Virginia Lake was extremely confident in her abilities. To have these kinds of reservations was out of character for her, Alec thought. *Hell that flight scared the daylights out of me, I don’t blame her.*

“By the way Ginny, Paul wanted me to tell you, your Mom got her first assignment today, she’s going to see the survivor of the Sara Mae incident.”
That statement had the effect that Ed intended. “Do you think she’s ready?” Virginia asked, becoming all business.

“Jackson and Foster say she is; she was after all a trained SIS agent, that’s one of the reasons I brought her on board. Besides, success runs in the family.”

“I’ll see you two later,” Alec said as he got up to leave.

They watched as Alec went over to talk with Mark and Lew. Ed turned back to Virginia and noticed that she seemed to have collected herself and sensed that her anxiety had subsided. At least she wasn’t trembling anymore. Ed put his arm around her knowing she wanted to be held. He was aware that the two of them were being discreetly watched by their comrades; *It doesn’t matter*, Ed thought to himself. *They are all going to know by tomorrow anyway.*
“I guess the rumors are true,” Lew Waterman said to Alec and Mark as he tilted his head towards Straker and Lake.

Alec glanced over to them for a second and said, “Ed Straker has been a lonely man for too long; if the two of them can find happiness together than what’s wrong with that. Personally I think they make a charming couple.”

Mark Bradley was silent. Gay had told him one night about the brewing relationship; he had made a lover’s pledge to her that he wouldn’t say anything.

An hour later the passengers and crew of the ill-fated SST were boarding the military transport bound for London.

“I don’t know about you but I’m going to sleep well tonight, Virginia,” Ed said to her quietly as they took their seats.

“That makes two of us.”
The 737 pulled away from the gate and taxied to the active runway. The airfield had just reopened and this flight was the first in line. Ten minutes later it was in the air on course for Heathrow International.

The heavy duty SST carrying Lake, Schroeder and Blake had just crossed the eastern seaboard of the United States.

“We will be landing at K. I. Sawyer Air base in about an hour,” Colonel Blake said. “The survivor is at the base hospital and our security angle is covered. Dr. Schroeder you will be working under the guise of a specialist flown in to attend the case. I’ve been assured that the doctor in charge is going to be needed for some type of emergency. That will leave you free to administer the amnesia procedure if needed.”

Schroeder nodded. This was one of the things he hated about the job. The amnesia drug was benign in most cases but in some trauma cases
it could have undesired effects. And not administering it was not an option.

“Understood,” was all he said.

Lake knew by watching that Schroeder wasn’t happy about the whole affair, but what choice did they really have. It did beat the alternative.

Straker and Lake stopped in at HQ before going home. Home had pretty much become Ed’s house, it was bigger. While they were in the States, Virginia had made arrangements to have most of her furniture put in storage along with whatever they couldn’t fit at Ed’s. She was canceling her lease at the end of the month; the landlord already had a tenant waiting to move in. The couple walked into Ed’s studio office, and while Ed grabbed a handful of reports, Virginia opened the cigar box on the desk and spoke into it, “Lake.”

“Voiceprint positive; Lake, Colonel Virginia L.”
Ed was rubbing the bridge of his nose; Virginia didn’t need to sense his feelings to know something was bothering him. The lift reached the bottom and the pair walked through the corridors to control. Colonel Grey had the mid watch.

“Commander, Colonel Lake, I’m glad to see both of you in one piece.”

“Thanks John, anything to report?” asked Straker.

“It’s been remarkably quiet. When it lasts for this long, I get nervous,” said Grey. “I understand Virginia, that you saved everyone’s bacon today,” Grey said to Lake.

“Yes and lost twenty years in the process, I hope that was my last close call for a while, otherwise I’ll have grey hair before my mother.”

“I’m going to drop these in the office and grab the meeting agenda; I’ll be right out,” said Ed.
“Your mother should be landing at K. I. Sawyer about now,” Grey said.

“I hope that freighter explosion wasn’t related to the aliens, you know how Ed gets when we have an un-located UFO around, besides I’m still getting used to the idea of her working as a field operative.”

“From her SIS dossier, she’s been doing this longer than most of us. She’ll be fine, hell maybe she can teach ol’ Blake a thing or two.”

Ed walked up as Virginia answered, “If he can keep his mind on his job maybe she will,” she said. She turned to Ed. “Did you find everything you need?”

“I think so, are you all set Virginia?” he asked. She smiled and nodded. Ed took her gently by the arm. “John, hold down the fort, will you?” he said as they were leaving.

“Good night Commander, Colonel.”
Skydive 5 was patrolling the North Atlantic in the area where the SHADAIR SST lost its engine. Gay Ellis was bothered by the incident that almost claimed the life of her closest friends, including the commander, her best friend and her fiancée. She had gotten off the phone with him soon after their plane landed at Heathrow. The flight had shaken them all up, especially Ginny.

She learned from Mark that the aircraft had been torn down out at Groom Lake, was gone through with a fine tooth comb and been certified as airworthy. She knew that Straker being Straker was going to want some answers and she hoped that she would be able to provide some. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack but she had Skydive searching the bottom for the wreckage of the engine. The chance of finding a piece large enough to stand out from the bottom was slim.

“Joan what’s our depth?”
“700 fathoms, Captain.”
“Sounding?” Gay asked.
“120 fathoms, keel to bottom, ma’am,” replied Joan.
“Very well continue search pattern.”
“Continue search pattern, aye, aye, skipper.”
Gay thought about Mark again. They had been engaged for a couple of months, but had decided to tell no one at the moment. Their schedules were so hectic that it would be late in the year before they could have a wedding. She didn’t even wear her engagement ring except when Mark and she were alone. She knew that sooner or later they were going to have to tell everyone, she just didn’t want the gossip train running them over.

Commander Straker had said once that the only thing that moved faster than light was gossip. Gay wondered how he and Ginny were handling it. She knew things had gotten very serious
between the two of them, but she also knew how the rumor mill worked. People like Joan worked overtime to keep it running. *At least aboard Skydiver I can keep it contained,* she thought to herself.

The heavy transport SST had landed at K. I. Sawyer Air base without incident, and the three SHADO operatives were given quarters on the base. Once they had settled in they walked over to the base hospital. Dr. Carlson, the attending physician was going over the chart with Dr. Schroeder.

“So as you can see doctor he is out of the coma but for some unknown reason he has withdrawn into himself,” Carlson finished.

“What do we know you he is yet?” asked Colonel Blake.

“Yes we did find identification on him; it identifies him as Peter Watson, age 40. He was
the first mate on the Sara Mae. We’ve run the standard biometric checks, they match. That is Mr. Watson lying in there.”

“If it’s all right with the two of you,” Blake was saying to Carlson and Schroeder, “I’d like to have either myself or Lieutenant Lake present in the event that he regains consciousness. Would that present a problem Dr. Carlson?”

“No, that shouldn’t be an issue; I’ll let the duty nurse know. I trust you will stay out of the way if something happens?” Carlson asked but it wasn’t really a question.

“Of course Dr. Carlson.”

“Very good then, come along Dr. Schroeder, I’ll get you formally attending the case,” he said as the two doctors left.

“I’ll talk to Schroeder about using a psychotropic drug to open his mind,” said Blake after they left. Even though her placement at the army hospital was a cover, Lynn Lake was,
in fact, an RN who still had her certification. She turned to Blake.

“Colonel, that is not a very good idea, and if Dr. Schroeder is worth his salt he won’t go along with it either.”

“Lt. Lake sometimes it is necessary to take certain risks,” he said flatly.

“I agree with you Colonel, but right now is not one of those times. We stand a much better chance of getting valid information if he comes out of this on his own. That particular family of drugs is extremely risky.”

Blake had forgotten about her medical background, he hated being caught off guard. “What would you suggest we do Lieutenant?” he asked somewhat sarcastically.

“I looked at his chart briefly, there is every indication that Watson will come out of this on his own in the next twenty four hours. The first thing they teach you in medicine Colonel is first
of all, do no harm. This man was in a coma for six weeks, what differences will another twenty four hours make?”

Blake had to admit she made a valid point, he also found that Lt. Lake was a force to be reckoned with, just like her daughter.

“Very well Lieutenant, we’ll wait at least for now,” he said then added. “For a moment I thought I was talking to Virginia.”

Lynn chuckled to herself. “No Colonel, my daughter is not nearly as diplomatic as I am,” she said innocently.

No damn wonder her and Straker get along so well, thought Blake.

It was after midnight by the time Virginia and Ed made it to bed. He was still bothered by something and he hadn’t shared it with her yet. Virginia didn’t want to pry but the worry she sensed from him was keeping her awake.
“All right Ed, talk to me, you’ve been brooding ever since we got off the damn plane. What’s bothering you?”

Ed sighed he didn’t want to add to her burdens but it seemed there was no way to hide this from her.

“That engine was torn completely out of the airframe and stripped. The technicians even replaced a bearing in the turbine. So why does a perfectly good running engine suddenly and without warning catastrophically fail mid flight. And why does it correspond to the same flight that has most of the command staff, two Skydiver crews and Professor Reinhardt, on board?” he asked knowing it was a rhetorical question.

“I don’t know; but I agree there is something going on it’s too much of a coincidence to be an accident,” she said. “But we’re not going to solve it tonight, so please do me a favor and stop worrying about it at least for right now.”
Ed knew she was right; he just didn’t like this kind of a mystery. Ed pulled her closer to him and tried to clear his mind. He thought about the diamond they had seen at the jewelry store a month ago, Virginia’s eyes had lit up when she saw it. They weren’t even shopping for a ring at the time, it just caught her eye. Ed of course had made a mental note of it. Two weeks ago he went back to the jewelry store and placed a deposit on the ring. It turned out to be an almost perfect stone, with one very slight inclusion. It was a one carat marquee with a rose gold setting. Ed didn’t even blink an eye when the jeweler told him the cost. Virginia had absolutely loved it and Ed knew he was going to spend the rest of his life with her. As he thought about surprising her Virginia relaxed in his arms; she was finally drifting off to sleep.

The next morning was hectic; Ed and Virginia met Alec at Heathrow and Ed dropped her off.
Alec was going to drive her in after they did a check ride. Ed’s plans to go to the jewelry store were delayed when SID reported three UFO’s on course for the North Atlantic. They came in much faster than normal. But the interceptors were able to get two of them. The third had changed course and was now heading for the central Pacific.

“Get me Lt. Colonel Carlin,” said Straker as he walked into control.

Carlin’s promotion had finally come through. Straker had pushed hard for this one as well.

“Peter, it looks like you’re going to have some company this morning, the interceptors got two of them, I need you to play cleanup,” Ed said.

“Roger Commander, I have it on my screen now, closing for attack.”

Colonel Carlin was Straker’s ace in the hole; he had come through every time it counted. And with Gay Ellis that gives me a pair.
“Have visual contact, going in for attack,” said Carlin.

You could already hear him accelerating over the radio. Carlin closed rapidly on the UFO and launched his missiles. The alien spacecraft exploded in a ball of flame.

“UFO destroyed, returning to base.”

Straker flipped up the mic, “Good shooting Peter,” said Straker. He walked back to his office planning to check through a few reports and run out for an hour. But he had a phone call to make first.

“Lt. Paulson, contact Lt. Lake and patch her through to my office. Use a secure line,” Straker ordered.

“Yes sir,” came to reply. A few minutes later Ed’s secure line rang.

“Straker,” he said.

“Good morning Commander,” said Lt. Lake, “you asked for me, sir.”
“Yes, but this is a personal matter.”

Lynn was fairly certain what this meant. “If this is what I think it is then someone owes me dinner.”

Ed was sure there was an inside joke somewhere in this but he didn’t bite.

“The reason I called is I would like to ask Virginia to marry me, and I would like your blessing.”

Lynn smiled to herself. “I was right, tell Ginny that she owes me dinner, and of course you both have my blessings. When are you going to ask her, Ed?”

“Later this morning as soon as she gets back from the check ride,” he said to her.

Ed’s curiosity got the best of him, “What’s this about dinner?”

Now Lynn laughed out loud. “I bet Ginny dinner at the Registry that she would have a
ring on her finger by the end of June,” she said adding, “In this case it was a win, win scenario.”

Straker chuckled to himself.

“Any word on that sailor they pulled out of the drink?” he asked switching gears.

“Not yet sir, I would expect him to be conscious by morning.”

“All right have Colonel Blake keep me posted.”

“I will, goodbye sir,” she said as she hung up. Straker got up and headed out to control.

“I should be back within the hour. Mind the store Colonel,” he said to Paul Foster as he left. Paul watched him leave, a bemused expression on his face.

Virginia was on final approach for the last landing. She felt much better having climbed back in the cockpit. This landing was going to be absolutely perfect she thought. As she
expected she put the aircraft down just past the numbers, Alec was impressed.

“I don’t see any trepidation here Colonel, I would say you’ve got it down.”

“Thanks, Alec. I knew I just needed to get back in the cockpit before too long. That landing was quite a scare,” she said then continued. “So what is Ed up to this morning?”

“What do you mean?” Alec asked innocently.

“He looked like the cat that ate the proverbial cannery this morning. I know he’s up to something, and I know it’s something good, but I can’t quite figure out what it is.”

“Well we’ll back to HQ in thirty minutes or so you can ask him,” said Alec hopping she wouldn’t push the matter further. He was never good at fooling those who knew him well. And Ginny had his number.
Ed pulled up to the store around 10:30 in the morning. He got out of his car and walked to the door. The door latched buzzed and he walked in not noticing the car pulling up behind him.

“Ah Mr. Straker, I was expecting you last night,” the jewelry store manager said to him as he walked up to the counter.

“I flew in from the States last night, my flight ran into some trouble,” Ed said.

“Well no matter, are you still interested in the ring?”

“Yes I am, as a matter of fact I want to pick it up today.”

“Very good sir, I’ll be back in a moment. As the store manager walked into the back, Ed looked around the store. A young couple was at the other counter being waited on by another member of the staff. Another staff member was busy cleaning the counter. A few minutes later
the manager came back out with a small box in his hand.

Ed opened the box and made sure the ring was the correct one and asked, “You sized it as well?”

“Yes sir, it should be fine. Let us know if there are any issues.”

“Thank you,” Ed said as he finished the transaction and placed the box in his pocket. He turned to walk out of the store. As he opened the door two men rushed him with guns drawn.

“Back inside, Now!”

The first gunman pushed Straker back into the store, and pointed his gun at the man cleaning the counter, while the second one ruthlessly killed the manager before he could trip the alarm.

“You four, down on the floor!” the second gunman said pointing to Ed, the young couple and the employee helping them.
Straker was concerned for their safety but he was also angry, these men had just killed a man in cold blood, and he was sure they would not hesitate to kill all of them. They were worse than the aliens he battled every day.

Ed was the closest to the gunman, lying slightly on his right side. He looked at the young couple, a few feet away from him. The young woman was quietly sobbing and Ed saw fear in the young man’s eyes. He looked at the store employee, who was laying next to one of the display cases, facing away from him. He noticed a mirror in the display case that allowed him to see their captor.

Ginny was riding back to HQ with Alec when a cold foreboding feeling came over her.

“Alec, Ed’s in danger.”

“Are you sure?” he asked concerned now.
“Yes, I can feel it, I just know he’s in danger,” she said. Alec saw concern in her eyes. He picked up the phone to HQ.

“Colonel Freeman for you sir,” said Lt. Paulson to Paul Foster.
“Alec what’s up?”
“Where is Commander Straker?”
“He said he had to go out and would be back in about an hour, why?”
Foster was locating the commander’s car while he spoke.
“Find out where he is.”
“His car is parked at 110 Pierce Place.”
“Okay thanks Paul; I hope this turns out to be nothing.”
He gave Virginia the address and she looked at it. “I know where this is; take a right up here, its two streets up.”
In the store one of the gunmen had gone in the back with one of the staff to open the safe. Ed discreetly observed, through the mirror, the man who had been left to watch them. He seemed to be paying more attention to the back room than the people he was supposed to be watching.

They had not bothered to search him, assuming none of them would be armed, and he still had his Glock. Ed timed the gunman’s intervals looking for a pattern. *Once my jacket is open I only need a few seconds to get my gun*, he thought as he formulated a plan.

Lake and Freeman pulled up across the street from the jewelry shop. As Alec went to get out, Ginny stopped him. “Let’s not rush into this,” she said as she grabbed a pair of binoculars. She looked at the store adjusting the polarization to allow her to see inside.
“It’s a robbery, and Ed is mad as hell.”
“I’m going to call security,” he said.
“Wait a minute Alec. Ed is going to try something. I’m not sure what it will be, let’s just watch him closely.” She could sense a feeling of determination from him.

“Ginny, what can he do? He may not even have his sidearm.”

“Alec, I trust him. Please trust me.”

Reluctantly Alec cooled his heels.

One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, four, one thousand, five, one thousand, five seconds, more than enough time, Ed thought. He waited for the man to look away again, and then shifted his body to free his left arm. He carefully opened his jacket to expose his shoulder holster while watching the gunman. Ed rolled back on his belly having pulled his jacket out of the way.
It’s going to have to be a head shot, this man has already killed once, Ed was thinking as he waited for him to look away again. When he did, Ed rolled to his left side and pulled his Glock. He quickly took aim and fired just as the gunman looked back. Straker’s aim was true as the man now had a hole in the center of his forehead, but the force of the bullet blew the back of his head off.

The young woman screamed as Straker quickly jumped to his feet. The first gunman came out of the back room holding the employee around the neck. The gunman had his pistol to the staff member’s head. He looked and saw a man with a look of fierce determination in his vivid blue eyes, holding a gun aimed at his head.

“Drop it!” ordered Straker.

“No, you drop it or he dies.”

“Are you sure you can pull the trigger before I kill you?” asked Ed.
Ed watched the man very carefully looking for the slightest bit of hesitation. The conflict had just become a war of nerves.

“I mean it mister; I’ve got nothing to lose!”

“You have your life. The only way you are going to get out of here alive is to drop the gun. Look at your friend.”

He looked down at the lifeless body of his accomplice, seeing the hole in his forehead and the destruction caused by this man.

“How do I know you won’t kill me anyway?”

“You have my word,” Ed said.

The face of the gunman was ashen as he dropped the pistol, and released his captive.

“Turn around, place your hands behind your head and stand against the wall.”

Straker looked at the store employee and said, “Get the police down here.”
The staff member quickly complied motivated by Straker’s command parlance.

“Yes sir.”

As Ed watched his prisoner, he saw Alec and Virginia running to the door.

“And let them in.”

The employee buzzed Alec and Ginny in.

“Ed, are you all right?” exclaimed Virginia as she came up to him.

“I’m all right. Alec, watch this guy.”

“I got him covered, Ed.”

Ed holstered his weapon and reached to help the young couple off the floor asking, “Are you two all right?”

“Yes, who are you people, Scotland Yard or something?”

“Something,” Ed said.
Ed looked at Virginia, “How long have you two been watching?”

“Long enough to see you get out of trouble.”

“The police are on their way, sir,” said the store employee.

They left the police to deal with the paperwork and questioning. The SHADO high level security passes were sufficient to get them on their way, without answering any questions.

Chapter 11:
When they arrived at the studio, Alec excused himself saying he had to check on something.

“Will you take a walk with me?” Ed asked Virginia.

They walked by the fountain in front of the studio hand in hand. Ed could sense the
anticipation that Virginia was feeling but he still wanted this moment to be special. He found a quiet spot on the studio lawn and he turned to face Virginia. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the box containing the ring and as he opened the box he heard her catch her breath.

Dropping to one knee, he said, “Virginia, in these past few weeks, you have given me more happiness than I ever thought existed. My words are insufficient to describe the burden of my heart, I love you, I want to spend the rest of my life with you; will you have me as your husband?”

Tears of joy ran down her face as she answered, “I have only one question; what took you so long? Yes of course I’ll marry you, I love you too, Ed. I’ve loved you for a long time, and now both of my dreams have come true.”

Ed put the ring on her left hand and they embraced in a long passionate kiss. As they
walked back to the office Virginia looked closer at the ring.

“Ed you didn’t?”

“I saw how much you liked it when we were in the store a few weeks ago, don’t tell me I was wrong,” he teased.

She smacked him in the arm. “Don’t be silly, it’s beautiful, you didn’t have to do that...I mean, thank you Ed.”

In a few minutes they had walked back to the office.

“Good Afternoon Commander, Colonel Lake,” said Miss Ealand as they walked in.

“Hello, Miss Ealand.”

Straker had not kept Janice Ealand as his secretary for nothing; she didn’t miss a trick and today was no exception as she spotted the ring almost immediately.
“You’re engaged!” she exclaimed. She came from behind the desk around to Virginia. The two women hugged each other, and then she walked over to Ed and embraced him. *To hell with decorum, this is a special occasion.*

“I’m so happy for the both of you, now let me see,” she said to Ginny. Virginia held out her hand.

“My God, it’s beautiful.”

“Freeman,” said Alec as he answered the phone. “They are on their way down,” said Miss Ealand.

“All right thanks,” he said as he hung up the phone. He rushed into control.

“They are coming down now, places everybody,” he said as he killed the lights.
Virginia and Ed rounded the corridor from the elevator when she noticed the lights were out in control.

“Commander,” she said all business.

Ed saw what she did and a feeling of unease surrounded both of them as they rushed into control. The monitors were all on but...

“Surprise!”

The lights went on and they saw that the room had been decorated and a big congratulations sign had been hung.

“All right, where is Alec Freeman, he’s the only one crazy enough to set this up,” said Ed relieved that it wasn’t a real emergency. A few months ago Straker would have never tolerated this in control, but Alec was right. Ed had changed. The bitterness that he had carried for years was gone. Ed was able to appreciate life again.
Alec walked up to them. “Do I get a kiss from the bride to be?”

“What are you asking him for,” said Ginny teasingly as she kissed him on the cheek.

Alec shook hands with his best friend. “My best wishes to the both of you. Have you picked a date yet?”

Ed shook his head. “With everything going on it may not be until the end of the year, and don’t think for a minute you’re going to get me drunk at the reception.”

_Don’t bet on it_, thought Alec as he grinned.

Ginny was chatting with Nina Barry.

“When Alec told us what was happening I couldn’t believe it. This is the one bad thing about being on the moon. You miss all the good stuff. But Congratulations Ginny, I wish the best for both of you. Is Gay going to be your maid of honor?”
“Yes, she is, would you be in the wedding party?”

Nina smiled, “I’d love to Ginny, how big are you making it?”

“Six, including Ed and I as a matter of fact he is asking Paul right now.”

“Congratulations, Ed,” said Paul Foster to his commanding officer.

“Thank you Paul, by the way I wanted to ask you something,” he said as they walked into a corner. “I’ve asked Alec to be my best man, well you know how long we’ve known each other, but I would like you to be a groomsman, if you wouldn’t mind?”

“I’d be honored, Ed.”
Peter Watson, the first mate and sole survivor of the Sara Mae sinking regained consciousness around 07:00 CDT.

“Where am I?” he asked Lt. Lake.

“You’re at the K. I. Sawyer Air base hospital.”

Watson was trying to get out of bed when Lake stopped him.

“Mr. Watson, you’ve had a bad concussion, as well as having been in a coma. You need to stay in bed until the doctor has seen you.”

He lay back down partially due to the fact he was dizzy from trying to stand. Lynn walked over to the phone and dialed the nurses’ station.

“Yes, this is Lt. Lake in room 25. Mr. Watson has regained consciousness. Could you have Dr. Schroeder and Colonel Blake paged?” She paused. “All right, thank you.” Lake hung up the phone. “The doctor will be in shortly, and Colonel Blake will have a few questions for you if you’re feeling up to it.”
The impromptu celebration at HQ broke up around 14:00. Virginia and Ed were in the office going over the meeting agenda with Alec. The Commander had just filled him in about the revelations General Henderson shared last week.

“So certain factions of the US military know about extraterrestrial visitation?” asked Alec.

“According to General Henderson the first faction crash landed in 1939. The first official witnessed alien attack was the incident involving Virginia’s father.”

“My mother didn’t buy the official line,” Virginia added. “Dad had already told her about the alien craft including a detailed description. Apparently they were responsible for abductions of both military personnel and civilians during World War Two.”
Alec shook his head in disbelief. “So who are we going to tell about this Ed?”

Straker was pacing now, a nervous habit of his. “For the moment,” he began, “this information stays between the three of us. The only other person that knows is Lt. Lake, and she only knows half the story. Henderson went to great lengths as to the sensitivity of this information. As CINC SHADO I have some discretion as to how I disseminate this information, but I don’t intend to pass it around without a good reason.”

The intercom buzzer on the desk sounded. Ed walked back to his chair.

“Yes,” he answered.

Lt. Paulson appeared on the vidscreen. “Sir, I have Captain Ellis on the line for you.”

“Ok. Put her through.” In a few seconds Gay Ellis appeared on the screen.

“Commander we may have found the wreckage of Seagull X-ray engine two. Because it came
down in our patrol area, I’ve been searching for it.”

*Some good news,* he thought. “Are you sure, Captain?” he asked.

“Have a look for yourself; sir,” Gay said as she switched to the underwater camera feed. True to her word she had found what could only be the wreckage of a jet engine.

“Look at this,” Ed said to Virginia and Alec as he punched it onto the office monitor.

“Yeah, it could be,” Virginia said looking at Alec. He nodded in agreement. “I think that’s it Ed.”

“Good work Captain, I want you to try to salvage a piece of the turbine assembly, if you can, and mark the site so we can find it later.”

On the vidscreen Gay nodded. “Understood sir, Skydiver out.”

Straker closed the connection. Alec looked over to Ed, “Maybe now we’ll get some answers,” he
said. Virginia walked around the desk to her new fiancée, placing her hand on his shoulder.

“And not soon enough,” she added, “somebody kept me awake all night, worrying about it.” She looked at him with a mischievous grin.

“Consider it an occupational hazard,” Ed said teasingly, “it comes with the territory.”

Ed opened the doors to the office. As the three of them walked out, heading to the meeting, Virginia said quietly to Ed, “Well we will just have to see about that.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen: we are about to begin the most complex upgrade operation SHADO has undertaken since the installation of the Utronic equipment, almost four years ago. By now you have all been briefed on what we are referring to as the Timelash incident.” Commander Straker said as he opened the meeting.
“The ramifications to both our organization and to Earth are staggering. General Henderson and the International Astrophysical Commission have, shall we say, loosened the purse strings for this, but the money supply is not endless. That means we have to prioritize certain pieces of this project. The staff members I called here today are here for one of two reasons. Either you will have a major role in the upgrade planning, or the actual implementation.”

The SHADO officers looked around at each other while Straker let the words sink in. “Before I get into the new projects I would like to introduce Professor Manfred Reinhardt formally of Stanford University.” Professor Reinhardt stood and nodded to the group. “Professor Reinhardt comes to SHADO as a civilian outside of the chain of command, answerable only to Colonel Lake or me. He will be working with our research and development section concentrating on particle physics and quantum mechanics. I’ve asked Colonel
Freeman to bring you up to date on the ongoing projects. Colonel Freeman?”

Straker sat down as Alec took to the podium. “Good afternoon. By now all of you are aware of the Skydiver upgrade project that was started last year. You also know that Skydivers’ 3 and 5 are now fully operational. The remainder of the fleet is in dry dock now being overhauled. Skydiver 4 will be the first to be completed, I’m told no later than the end of August. Skydiver 1 and 2 are slated to be finished by the end of the year.”

Alec paused to take a sip of water; he always hated public speaking. “Phase one of the land based interceptor project is also nearing completion. Thirty new hypersonic aircraft have been delivered and are ready to be deployed. Ten will stay at Groom Lake; they will be our first operational squadron. A second Squadron will be stationed here in England, and the third will fly out of Melbourne, Australia. Phase two
of the project will place squadrons in Brazil, South Africa, and if our negotiations with Moscow proceed smoothly the final location will be somewhere in the eastern part of the Soviet Union. That will give us a fleet of ninety aircraft. Commander Straker?”

As Freeman sat down Straker took the podium. “This may seem to be overkill to some of you, but at some point the aliens are going to launch a massive attack. We barely held our own against the fifty UFO’s they sortied against us last year. Imagine an attack twice or three times that size. And we have to remember their technology is changing as well, they already have the advantage there. We however have one thing that they don’t. Bloody mindedness, it built this planet.”

Virginia smiled as she remembered Ed saying the same thing to her during the Timelash incident. Ed Straker had a deep belief in the
human spirit and its ability to overcome overwhelming odds.

“The first phase of the tracking and communication upgrades will be the main computer system; Colonel Lake?”

Virginia stepped up to the podium has Ed sat back down. “Six weeks ago, we implemented a software change to the Utronic equipment which enabled us to track the alien spacecraft as they approached at much higher speeds. But that action was only a temporary measure. The permanent solution involves redesigning the sensor systems to be software defined. In order to accomplish that, we needed much more advanced computer systems. Starting next week the computer system downstairs will be replaced by new advanced equipment. During the down time which should last about three weeks, Moonbase and our tracking station in New York, will be in control of the tracking system. After the new computers are installed,
the command and control interfaces will need to be upgraded. That means gutting the control room and replacing the monitors, consoles tape drives, with new and updated equipment. A new workstation for the command duty officer has been designed, similar to Moonbase but much more elaborate. The new computer and tracking displays feature three dimensional graphics. This part of the project should take about two weeks; Commander?”

Virginia sat down as Ed took the podium. He picked up the presentation control and dimmed the lights. A diagram of the SHADO tracking and communications network appeared on the screen.

“I call your attention to the tracking system pictured here. As you all know SID is parked at the L5 libration point. Because of this service missions have to be handled by NASA. The Saturn V is still the only booster able lift payload to that orbit. At some point in time we
are going to address that, the reasons will become clear when I show you the last slide. Our current communications system has two major flaws; the aliens have exploited both of them. First and probably most important is they have cracked our encryption protocols. They are reading our mail people; we are going to put a stop to that. The second problem is that radio waves are unreliable under certain sunspot conditions. With us heading toward cycle 23 this problem eventually will get worse. I don’t want to have to go back to Morse code to get through the interference. Now as some of you know the Utronic beam itself is unaffected by solar activity. Our problem has always been the radio links that tie the system together.”

Straker switched to the next slide. “As part of Phase one, the radio links will be replaced with Utronic beam transmitters and receivers. FTL radio if you will, unaffected by solar disturbances or transmission delays. We figured out that a good portion of our misses were
caused by the finite delay in our radio transmissions. A UFO moving faster than light can cover quite a distance during that timeframe.”

He paused to let the information sink in. “With almost instantaneous transmissions, the delay will be held to much more manageable proportions. The signals will be encoded with a new encryption algorithm that I have been assured is a least thirty years ahead of its time.”

Straker paused to take a drink. As he took a sip of water he flipped to the next slide. Several gasps could be heard across the room. “As you all can see Phase two is much more involved. The key points are another SID at the L4 libration point, and a newly designed SID at the L3.”

Mark Bradley raised his hand.

“Captain Bradley?”
Mark stood up. “A question sir, the L3 libration point is an inherently unstable orbit. Most satellites parked their run out of parking fuel after only a few months. How can we maintain a satellite parked in that position long term?”

Mark sat back down as Straker smiled. “An excellent question; I see someone remembers orbital mechanics. Captain Bradley is correct; parking a satellite at the L3 introduces a few technical challenges. To meet these challenges we designed SID three with special station keeping thrusters and extended capacity fuel tanks. This reduces service refueling missions to once a year. At some point in the future SHADO will take over the Saturn V launches ourselves, but for now NASA will handle that aspect of the mission. This part of Phase two will be in place by the end of the year.”

The room burst into murmurs and muted conversation. Straker took another sip of water.
The interruption was very brief as the room got quiet again.

“I know this is a lot to take in at once but it is necessary. It is my belief that the aliens are planning a major offensive before the end of this year. We have evidence that leads us to believe they already have craft hidden here on earth now; most likely underwater somewhere. And since the Earth is covered by water over 78 percent of its surface, it gives them plenty of places to hide.”

Ed paused again to allow the statement to hit home.

“An invasion from within...” Captain Waterman spoke aloud.


“The good news is this. Colonel Lake came up with a theory as to how their power systems work. We now theorize that the alien craft are using a quantum singularity as their power
source. I won’t go into the technical details here but suffice to say the theory seems to fit with what we do know about the spacecraft. The last part of Phase two is the upgrades to the Moonbase defensive and offensive capabilities. Most of this has been pushed out until next year due to the lack of funding. Colonel Lake and I did however manage to keep the new missile defense system in the budget. As you can see it provides for hardened silos for the defense rockets rather than mobile missile launchers. That’s why I haven’t replaced the ones we lost last year. It was a concession we had to make in order to get the new system approved. Construction starts next week. I’ve also received approval for one more interceptor pilot team. We will be able to sortie nine interceptors now instead of six. As you can see by the plan our goal is to be able to sortie nine at once; in all a total of twenty seven interceptors will be crewed and ready to go.”
Straker raised the lights as he sat down. Over the next hour the projects were divided up and assignments handed out. The reformation of SHADO had begun.

“Where’s the boss?” Alec asked Virginia as he walked into the control room.

She pointed to the office.

“He’s in with Paul going over the SID mission.

“Ok, thanks, Ginny,” he said as he started toward the office.

“Alec,” she said stopping him. “I need to ask you something privately.”

“Sure let’s step into your office,” said Alec gesturing for her to lead the way.

“So Paul how much do you remember from your training with Collins last year?”
Foster rubbed his ribcage remembering the unfortunate incident with the free weights.

“My side still reminds me about it, but to answer the question I might have to brush up on some of the procedures but I will be ready by the launch date.”

Straker nodded. “Good,” he said, “Of the three missions this one is going to be the most physically challenging. And right now you and I are the only one’s qualified to fly it. Which leads me to the second mission, Paul; you will be the senior astronaut as this will be Virginia’s first deep space mission. That means you will be in command of the mission. Do you have any thoughts on that?”

Foster shook his head. “Not really, to me it’s just like a pilot in command scenario, nothing more.”

“I think you will find it’s a little more complicated than that Paul, as senior astronaut you will also be responsible for her training;
that means if you don’t think she can cut it then I need to know. And that will be your decision you’re the one that has to fly with her. And for the record, the fact that she is going to be my wife cannot enter into it,” said Ed as he lit a cigar.

Paul looked confused, but asked, “Do you think that she won’t be able to handle it sir?”

Straker shook his head, “If I even suspected that was the case I wouldn’t have assigned her to the mission. No I’m sure she will do fine, but if I’m wrong I need to know before you lift off. It just means I’ll have to take her place.”

Paul was still baffled, “Forgive me Commander, but why don’t, you and I, just fly all three of the missions?”

Straker leaned back in his chair. “The problem Colonel is the third mission requires two people with the special physics knowledge to complete the mission. I’m going to have to hit the books myself for this one. The only person who is
qualified to put SID 3 in service is Colonel Lake. It would take you and me a year to train for that mission. So as you can see a lot is riding on her ability to complete the second mission.”

Foster rubbed the bridge of his nose, a habit he picked up from his boss. “Well then, I guess I had better not let her fail.”

The intercom from control buzzed.

“Yes,” said Straker.

The image of Keith Ford appeared on the screen. “I have Colonel Blake on line two for you, sir.”

“Okay, thanks Keith.”

Paul was going to get up but Ed motioned him to stay. Straker picked up the phone.

“Colonel Blake what have you got?”

“It’s confirmed sir, we have a probable UFO hiding somewhere in Lake Superior. The
witness positively identified the craft,” said Blake over the phone.

“How is our security angle?”

“It’s covered, sir. We administered the drug about an hour ago. Lt. Lake and I will do another interview with him in about an hour. If all goes well we will be on the next flight back.”

Straker nodded, “Ok Geoff, good work. Your shift is covered for tonight so when you get back, go home and get some rest.” Straker hung up the phone.

“Well Paul, it seems we have another un-located UFO on our hands, somewhere in the middle of Lake Superior.”

Foster shook his head, “And no way to find or attack it.”

“Not yet, but that’s coming soon I hope.”

As Paul got up to leave Ed asked, “By the way, a group of us are going to the Register on Friday night, Virginia, Alec, Miss Ealand, Gay, Nina,
Mark, Professor Reinhardt, and Lynn Lake, why don’t you join us?”

“Well I was going out with Miss Carson Friday night. Dalotek Corporation folded last week, she’s feeling pretty down,” said Paul.

“Well, bring her with you.”

“All right what time,” he asked?

“Eight o’clock. That will get us in after the rush, besides, I plan on making reservations.”

“Alec, why are you really leaving?” Ginny asked outright.

Freeman hadn’t expected that. “Did Ed tell you anything?” he asked perturbed.

Virginia shook her head. “No, he hasn’t said a word, and I know him well enough not to ask. I just can sense that there is more here than I’ve been told. Every time I think about it Ed tenses up. I can only assume that he promised to not
say anything. I would never ask him to violate a trust. But since the two of us can sense the others emotions I already know that it’s serious.”

Alec looked down for a moment before he answered. “I guess I should tell you, after all you’re going to be my best friend’s wife, and it’s not fair to leave you out. I have terminal cancer Ginny. On the outside I have maybe a year to live. That’s one of the reasons why I took the job at Dreamland, less responsibility and less stress.”

Virginia Lake was in shock, the tears started flowing. “Alec I’m sorry...” she couldn’t say anymore. She sat on the couch next to him silently crying.

“Where is Colonel Lake?” Ed asked Tara Paulson.

“She is in her office with Colonel Freeman, sir”
Straker walked down the corridor to her office. Something had upset her badly. He had a pretty good idea what it was. He pushed the button to open the door.

Alec got up from the couch when the buzzer rang. He walked to Ginny’s desk and opened the door. Ed walked in and immediately went over to Virginia and took her in his arms. Alec closed the door.

“She knows Ed,” said Alec as he watched his best friend comfort his fiancée.

“I should leave the two of you alone...” Alec started to say, but Virginia cut him off.

“No, please don’t go?” She collected herself for a few minutes before speaking. “I knew something was wrong but I had no idea it was this. I’m sorry I came apart, I’ve been on an emotional rollercoaster today.”
Alec sat back down. He let a few minutes go by before he spoke. “Look at least I will be around to see the two of you tie the knot. You don’t know how much it means to me to see Ed happy again; to see both of you happy. And trust me I am going to get Ed drunk at the reception, even if I have to spike the punch.”

That statement had the effect Alec was looking for; Ginny smiled. “I think I’d like to see that Alec.” Virginia wiped her tears. “You get him drunk then I’ll take advantage of him,” she said attempting humor; laughing and crying at the same time.

“Now wait a minute the two of you are ganging up on me,” Ed said feigning seriousness.

“That’s right and the best thing for you to do is surrender peacefully. Now Ed I think the two of you have an appointment with Dr. Jackson, and I, have work to do,” said Alec as he left.
“Are you okay, Virginia?” She looked in Ed’s eyes. “I will be in a minute, I was shocked. Alec is more than a friend, he’s family.”

Ed nodded in agreement. He held her for a few minutes.

“All right Ed, I suppose we should turn ourselves over to Jackson’s tender mercies.” They walked out of the office to the medical center.

“So exactly how long have you been able to sense each other’s feelings,” asked Jackson?

Ed nodded to Virginia indicating that she should respond first.

“The first time I noticed it, was last Wednesday night.”

“And what were you doing at the time?” asked Jackson in his typical clinical manner.
“Ed and I were...” Virginia blushed she was embarrassed. “We were in an intimate situation,” she said clinically.

“I see,” Jackson said as if she was just reading a report. “Have you noticed this any other time?”

“When Colonel Freeman and I were heading back from the airport this morning I suddenly sensed that Ed was in grave danger. It was like I could feel the same emotions he did; it was the strongest I ever felt the sensation.”

Jackson jotted down more notes and turned to Straker. “And you Commander?”

Ed thought for a moment. “The first time I could sense her feelings that I recognized was the day Catherine Frasier passed away. Virginia was waiting downstairs for me. She had just told me her true feelings; when I kissed her I somehow knew that she didn’t care if anyone saw us.”
Jackson was still taking notes. “And what is the strongest sensation you have felt so far?”

“Wednesday afternoon on the flight back, we were about an hour out from London when I knew she was alarmed. By the time Alec and I had made it to the cockpit the number two engine had exploded.”

Jackson turned to the nurse. “Lt. I’ll need to draw a tube of blood from both of them please?”

“What I plan to do is run an electro-chemical tissue test on the two of you, and compare it with the baseline we have on file. If anything in your genetic makeup has been changed the ECT will tell us. There is one other test I would like to run. It’s called an isolation electroencephalography or ISO-EEG,” said Jackson.

“Isn’t that the experimental test you ran on Craig Collins last year?”
“Yes Commander it will tell us if your brainwave patterns are being altered by an outside force.” The nurse had finished drawing blood and was putting a recording net on the Commander’s head.

“Nice hat,” said Virginia.

“Very funny Colonel,” Ed said feigning irritation.

Virginia knew that the Commander hated being a patient, and she loved to tease him at moments like this.

“All right Commander, just lie back and relax. This will take about five minutes. Colonel Lake if you will step over here please. She sat down in the chair next to Ed while Jackson had the nurse put another recording net on her head.

“All right Colonel, lie back please.” Jackson started the baseline EEG on her.

“Commander, let’s get you into the chamber. Now I want you to remember the door can be
opened from the inside so you are not trapped,” said Jackson well aware of the Commander’s claustrophobia. Jackson showed the Commander the emergency exit procedure and closed the doors. As soon as he activated the isolation device Virginia winced in pain.

“Colonel, are you all right?” he asked. Virginia nodded then realized something.

“I can’t sense Ed, is he okay in there?”

Jackson walked to the panel. “Commander, can you hear me?”

“Yes, but I felt a sharp pain when you started this thing. Is Virginia all right, I can’t sense her.”

Jackson ran the tests again each under a different set of circumstances. “I’ll need about an hour to compile the results, Commander, I’ll call you when I have finished,” Jackson said.
Straker was working on reports when Jackson called.

“I have the results Commander, they are very interesting,” said Jackson.

“Ok bring the report to my office please,” he said. Straker hit the intercom for the control room.

“Lt. Ford.”

Ford appeared on the monitor. “Yes sir.”

“Find Colonels Lake and Freeman and have them come in please.”

“Yes sir.”

A few minutes later the doors opened and Alec Freeman walked in.

“Ginny is on her way Ed; she was down in the computer room.”
Virginia showed up followed by Doctor Jackson a few minutes later. Straker closed and locked the door.

“Let’s sit down at the conference table,” he said. Jackson sat at one end of the table so he could face the trio. “Well Doctor, you have the floor,” said Ed.

“Thank you Commander. The test results both support an empathic link between Commander Straker and Colonel Lake. The ECT when compared to the baseline shows the gene that controls telepathy as been altered. Based on the tests this would correlate to the night of the Timelash incident. I don’t know if this is a temporary condition or permanent, I’ll have to run another set of tests in a few weeks. Now the ISO-EEG tests were very interesting. When the link between the two of you was severed by the isolator you both reported experiencing physical pain. Before I continue Commander,
Colonel, some of this report is medically confidential…”

Straker interjected, “Alec knows the nature of my relationship with Colonel Lake, please continue.”

Jackson looked at Lake who nodded her consent. “Very well as I was saying, because of the intimate relationship between the Commander, and Colonel Lake, the empathic bond is extremely powerful. To suddenly break that bond would cause a psychosomatic response. The readings in the isolator for each of them were normal after the initial pain response. The baseline I took on both of them showed increased activity in the Theta and Gamma brainwave patterns. The Gamma pattern usually indicates processing multiple sensory stimuli such as sound, sight, touch, and in your cases empathic responses. Now the increase in Theta patterns usually indicates arousal or drowsiness in adults. I attribute this
to the deep emotional attachment the two of you have formed.”

Straker leaned back in the chair. “So the question is Dr. Jackson will this affect our efficiency, and if so to what degree, and more important can the aliens use this against us?”

Dr. Jackson pulled out another report. “I thought you might ask me that so I reran the computer relationship study with the new information. The intervention figures were higher than the last test but still well within acceptable limits. Both of you ended up with markedly better scores in emotional stability. As far as the aliens are concerned I have no answer as to why they would purposely do this as it is counterproductive to their aims.”

Alec spoke for the first time. “So what you are saying is Ed and Ginny have been given a gift.” Jackson nodded, “I would agree with that Colonel Freeman, I can only hypothesize that the aliens tried to achieve some goal and the
plan backfired on them. As I have said before they do not seem to have any concept of dealing with emotions. The concept of love is completely foreign to them.”

Straker rubbed the bride of his nose. “This doesn’t make sense, we are missing something here. The UFO that emitted the beam that night tried to destroy us not thirty seconds earlier. Why would they suddenly shift gears and try to use us in some kind of plot. It makes no sense at all,” Ed said looking around the room.

“Dr. Jackson, you said that the beam affected the gene that is associated with telepathy,” Virginia said continuing, “What if their intention was to abduct one of us to be used as a conduit into the thoughts of the other?”

Jackson considered it. “I think we have to consider the possibility.”

“Ed and I were in a small aircraft, over Loch Ness, a couple of months ago, when we were forced down by a UFO. They could have
destroyed us; we were sitting ducks. Instead they forced us down. Maybe they intended to capture us and somehow change the empathic link to serve their purpose.”

Alec spoke up, “So you’re saying that one of you would have been released and the other held as a conduit into their mind.” Straker didn’t like the implications of what this could mean, especially with the SID missions coming up.

“So far this is the only explanation that makes any sense, and if this is what is going on it means that both of us a just become targets,” Ed said looking at Virginia.

“The two of you need a security detail assigned to your residence,” said Alec in a tone that would brook no argument. Straker started to protest and Alec cut him off. “Look Ed, you and Ginny are invaluable to the success and operation of SHADO, not to mention being my best friends. I’m not going to let either of you be
Ed knew he was serious. He held up his hands in surrender. “Why don’t I just retire and let you run the store?”

Alec shook his head. “Then it’s settled, I’ll get in touch with Major Natiroff to make arrangements,” he said. Dr. Jackson stood up to leave.

“If you don’t need me for anything else Commander, I have to get back to Medical Center,” he said.

“No, thank you Doctor Jackson,” said Ed as Jackson left.

Virginia was looking at Ed with an impish grin on her face. “All right Colonel, what is so amusing?”

Ginny looked over to Alec as she answered, “I need to have Alec show me how to do that.”

“What’s that?” Ed asked.
She walked over to him placing her arms around his neck looking into his eyes. “I need him to show me how to back you into a corner,” she said suggestively giving Alec a wink.

Alec took that as a cue to leave. “By the way,” said he, as he walked to the desk, “Don’t you two lovebirds forget tomorrow night.”

Alec opened the door and walked out. “I noticed you have lunch blocked out on your schedule tomorrow,” Ed said as he closed and locked the doors.

“Yes, Nina has to go back to Moonbase on Saturday, and Gay and Joan are due in port tomorrow morning. We haven’t been able to see each other as a group since our last tour together. The four of us were going to have lunch; it might be a while before we do this again.”

Ed took her in his arms. “Well enjoy it, because starting next week it is going to get crazy here,” he said.
“So what else is new,” she said as she kissed him.

The four women had finished lunch and were looking at the cover of a tabloid magazine.

“When Ed sees this he is going to hit the ceiling. How did they get this to print so fast?” Ginny asked.

On the front page of the magazine was Ed kneeling down holding Virginia’s hand. The headline read Executive Producer Straker proposes on lawn of studio. The article also identified Associate Producer Virginia Lake as the bride to be, and had several photos of the couple kissing after she said yes.

“I don’t know Ginny,” said Joan, “But I think it’s kind of like a storybook romance.”

Nina nodded in agreement. “I think so too, I mean look at the two of you, being yourselves
and totally in love, maybe we can get copies of the pictures,” she said.

“Ok enough of that,” said Gay, “Let’s see the ring.” Virginia put her left hand up on the table so the girls could see.

“It’s beautiful,” the three women said almost in unison.

“Where did he find it, Ginny?” asked Gay.

“Ed and I were having lunch about four weeks ago and on the way back to the studio I asked him to stop at this little jewelry shop I frequent occasionally. I had a ring that needed to be resized and the shop is not too far from the studio. While we were waiting, this ring caught my eye.”

“And the Commander noticed?” asked Joan.

“He suggested that I try it on. At the time I had no idea that he was thinking of marriage, and even after this I still didn’t give it much thought.”
“Did you have any idea that he was going to propose yesterday?” asked Nina.

Ginny considered before she answered as the knowledge of the empathic link, between her and Ed, was not widespread. Gay knew about it, as did Alec and the medical staff, but no one beyond that.

“I suspected that he was thinking about proposing when he invited me to move in with him while we were in the States.”

“I love the way he did it, the traditional one knee approach. It was so romantic,” said Gay.

“I know it!” said Joan. “Ginny tell us you weren’t swooning.”

Ginny blushed, as she admitted, “I was.”

“So when’s the big day?” asked Joan.

“We haven’t set a date yet, I don’t think it will be until the end of the year. There is so much to do with the upgrades; Ed and I are going to
need a bigger place. I don’t know maybe sometime in December.”

“That’s a long way off,” said Nina. “You can’t make it sooner?”

“Ed and I talked about it most of last night, with everything going on there’s just no way. Unless we decided to elope, we discussed that as well, but we wanted a day to remember.”

Gay smiled at Ginny as her and Mark had made the same decision.

“Well girls, Nina and I have to get back to control. Let’s do this again when we’re all in London,” said Ginny.

“You’ve seen it?” asked Virginia as she walked into Ed office.

“Yes, me, and just about everyone else around here; I think someone bought out the local
magazine shop and brought them all down here.”

Virginia could sense he wasn’t really upset about it. “Well, you’re taking it pretty well, I expected you to hit the ceiling.”

Ed smiled enjoying the lover’s tête-à-tête. “It at least proves our cover is working well.”

Virginia was sitting on the edge of his desk. She reached down and closed the doors.

“Did you enjoy your luncheon?” he asked.

“I did, I wish we could do it more often.”

Virginia regarded him for a moment. The discussion of her ring at lunch had caused her to think of the incident at the jewelry store. Ed had handled himself well as usual. She remembered the feelings of fierce determination she sensed from him, and the confidence he exuded. Again he had beaten the odds. Ed seemed to always beat the odds; that worried her. One of these days his luck was
going to run out. That would have killed her even if they were not a couple, never mind now that they were to be married.

“Penny for your thoughts?” asked Ed.

“Ed I think we should reconsider a security escort.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Virginia.” It came out clipped and harsh.

“Ed we have to consider it. Don’t you realize how close you came to getting killed yesterday?”

“I don’t want to be penned in like an animal. I came through it all right,” he said heatedly.

“Neither do I, but I don’t want to end up as a widow either...”

She turned away trying to stop the tears that were flowing. Ed stood up and took her in his arms as she laid her head on his shoulders. This was the closest thing they had to a fight since they had been together.
“I’m sorry Virginia; I didn’t mean to be short. I just want us to have a normal life,” he said tenderly.

Virginia looked deep into his eyes as she said, “There’s no such thing as a normal life. There’s only life.”

She had hit on an unmoving truth, and Ed admired the wisdom shown by his future wife. *How the hell did I ever get so lucky?* he asked himself as he kissed her.

**Chapter 12:**

By 16:00 Schroeder, Blake and Lt. Lake had returned from the states. The three of them were in the commander’s office along with Paul, Alec, and Virginia. Straker looked over the sketches Lt. Lake had drawn from Watson’s description of the UFO encounter.
“This is excellent work Lieutenant,” he said. Straker passed the drawing around. In addition to the drawing Lake had incorporated time, date and witness data into the bottom of the sketch. “Thank you, sir,” Lynn said after a moment.

“Dr. Schroeder, did we have any issues with the amnesia procedure on Mr. Watson?” asked Straker.

“No sir, we conducted a post procedure interview; the last thing he remembered was going on watch. That would have been about four hours before the incident.”

“All right people,” said Straker getting warmed up. “We’ve suspected for a while now that we might have un-located UFO’s here on Earth and we have four verified alien incursions that we now know slipped past our defenses. The first two were hidden under the surface of Loch Ness; the third was torpedoed by Skydiver 5 in the middle of the North Atlantic; and now we
have identified a forth, hiding under Lake Superior. So the questions are; have we accounted for all of them? If not, how many more did we miss? How can we locate and destroy them? And last; what is the purpose do the aliens have for deploying them here, besides organ harvesting?” Straker let the questions hang.

“The only thing we know for sure is we have a UFO hiding somewhere under Lake Superior,” said Paul, “Answers to the other questions would be gross speculation.”

“Granted, Paul, but let’s work with what we know to be true. How do we attack a UFO hiding in the lake? Colonel Blake, in regard to the third question, what kind of progress have we made with the deep submergence vehicles?” asked Straker.

“As you know two of them were built for Project Poseidon, along with the mother ships to carry them. The DSV’s, themselves are ready, but the
underwater weapon systems are still being fitted out. Some problem with the swimout system, I’m told.”

“We had a similar problem with Skydivers new torpedoes,” Alec added.

Straker looked irritated. Don’t these people talk to each other? “In that case let’s get these two teams comparing notes. I want those DSV’s operational,” Straker ordered. “All right, let’s think about the second question, how many have we missed?” Straker asked.

“There is no way to tell,” said Paul. “We have intercepted UFO’s since the Timelash incident, but what if some of those were sacrifices? They did that when they tried to destroy the ship carrying all that nerve gas last year. As I remember Commander you nailed that one.”

“Alec, you’ve been quiet, what do you think?”

“Paul’s right, we don’t know how many more we are dealing with until we can find a way to
detect them. On that note, Professor Reinhardt has been working on using gravitons in the detection sensor matrix. By monitoring changes in the graviton field he hopes to be able to detect them out as far as one hundred thousand miles, up to speeds of SOL 30.”

“That is good news. When does he think it will be ready?”

“Because of the way the sensors work, he won’t be able to implement it until all three SID’s are in place and upgraded; figure the end of the year.”

“What about the last question, why are they here? Do you have any thoughts on that, Virginia?”

“I think you sized it up quite well in the meeting yesterday, an invasion from within.”

Virginia and Ed exchanged a look.

“All right that’s all for now,” he said dismissing them.
Virginia stayed seated as everyone else stood and walked out of the office. When the two of them were alone she closed the door.

“You read my mind,” he said to her.

“Not really, I’ve seen that look on your face enough times before to know what it means.”

“Virginia, you said something to me a couple months back; it was right after the Timelash incident. We were talking about the UFO that fired the energy beam on us while we were on our way back from the airport. You asked if there could have been another craft. What if there were several more?”

“I suppose it’s a possibility, and it would answer a few questions Ed. But if that is the case then why haven’t they moved against us?”

Straker rubbed the bridge of his nose. He had a headache that this line of thinking wasn’t helping. “I don’t know,” he paused, “unless, they were waiting for re-enforcements. The
number of attempted incursions has been dropping, even with the three we destroyed the other day.”

Virginia poured a glass of water and grabbed a couple of aspirin and handed them to Ed.

“Thank you.”

“I still don’t think we are dealing with a large force,” Virginia went on to say. “But it wouldn’t take a large number of UFO’s, in our back yard, to put us in a state of disarray, especially if we were facing a mass attack from space. They know we would have to respond to the immediate threat.”

Ed nodded. “I have nightmares about just such a scenario.”

The Register was busy that night; Ed was glad they had made reservations. At least six conversations were going on around the table.
“Ginny I love those colors on you, the royal blue brings out your eyes,” Gay was saying to her.

“I bought this outfit a few months ago, Ed really likes the color. I had the purple one on the night he picked me up from the airport,” she said, “I was trying to get someone’s attention,” she added quietly tilting her head toward Ed.

“Speaking of the commander, why does he always call you Virginia?” asked Gay.

“There are only three people in the world who call me that on a regular basis, my mother, and half the time she calls me Ginny, Professor Reinhardt, and Ed. I asked him one day why he didn’t call me Ginny. He said that Virginia was such a beautiful name so I just melted, what can I say? When he addresses me that way, I feel special.”

While they chatted Alec was telling an old war story to Janice, Paul, and Jane. “So because Ed was my bunk mate, the rest of the squadron put
me up to the task of short sheeting his bed,” Alec said laughing.

“Oh come on Alec you enjoyed every minute of it,” said Ed.

“Yes I did, at least until you took your revenge. Don’t let Ed here fool you, he can be quite the practical joker when he wants to be.”

Lynn was in a quiet conversation with Professor Reinhardt. “Professor, I never had the chance to thank you and your late wife for taking care of Virginia while she was going through the divorce. You have been like a father to her,” she said.

“It was no trouble at all Mrs. Lake. Virginia was my star student, and I always had a soft spot for her in my heart. She was the daughter I never had.”

Nina and Mark were also involved in a quiet conversation. “We all miss the two of you at Moonbase,” said Nina.
“Thank you,” said Mark. “I haven’t had a chance to congratulate you on your promotion.”

Alec Freeman stood and picked up a spoon and glass. He tapped on it to get everyone’s attention. “Dearly beloved...oops wrong line,” he said. Freeman enjoyed being the clown. More seriously he continued. “My friends, both old and new, tonight we gather to celebrate the pledge of promise of marriage and of eternal love, by not just one, but two couples with us tonight.” Paul looked around the table, as did Nina. “Since we all know about Virginia and Ed, I have been asked to announce the engagement of another couple with us tonight, Gay Ellis and Mark Bradley.”

The table erupted into applause as Ed said quietly to Virginia, “I’m sure glad you told me ahead of time.”

“I only found out yesterday.”

Alec tapped on the glass again. On cue the wait staff rolled over the champagne for a toast and
began to pour. When the glasses were full Alec picked his up.

“Virginia and Ed, Gay and Mark, the four of you have been more than colleagues, you have been family. I wish you, love, long life, and happiness. Cheers.” Everyone at the table raised their glasses.

Dinner broke up around 11:00. Ed had told Alec that he would only have one glass of champagne but unbeknownst to him Alec kept topping off his glass.

“Virginia dear, I think you had better drive,” Ed said to her as he stood up and handed her the keys. He was feeling a bit tipsy from the champagne.

Alec whispered to her, “Let him sleep in tomorrow, I’ll look after things until you two get in.”
Virginia nodded and said, “You might have to help me get him to the car.”

With Virginia on one side and Alec on the other they made sure Ed was able to walk okay. Alec helped him into the passenger side.

“Good night everyone,” Virginia said as she got in the other side.

As they drove away, Paul said to Alec, “I thought I’d never live to see that.”

Virginia pulled up to the house at midnight. She immediately noticed the security Alec had insisted upon. She was thankful that Ed was still awake as it would have been embarrassing to ask the security detail for help.

“So Colonel, are you going to take advantage of me?” he asked as she helped him get out of the car.
She gave him a mischievous grin and said, “I guess you’ll just have to come in and take your chances.”

She closed the car doors and helped Ed up the walkway.

“Alec must have been topping off my drink. I was fine until I stood up, should have known better.”

“That sounds like something he would do,” she said as she laughed.

They made it into the house and Virginia closed and locked the doors. She steadied him as they walked to the bedroom, and helped him get undressed and into bed.

“I’m sorry,” he said to her as she was getting herself ready for bed.

“Sorry for what, being human,” she said, “For letting your hair down. Ed, you don’t need to apologize for anything. Besides it was fun to see you a bit tipsy.”
“Everybody at HQ will know about it tomorrow,” he said.

“No Ed, you’re safe, Joan wasn’t there.”

That brought them both to laughter.

Virginia climbed into bed and cuddled up to him. After a while she asked him a question that had been burning in her mind for a long time. “Ed, why did you pick me up from the airport that night?” she asked. “It wasn’t to debrief me, was it?”

Ed looked into her eyes and said. “When you volunteered to spell Nina on Moonbase, you were gone for a month. I had gotten used to having you around. The truth is I missed you.”

Virginia smiled at him, “Then it was for my big blue eyes after all,” she said as she pulled him closer and kissed him.

Straker walked into the control room just after noontime on Saturday. He made a beeline to
the communications console where Alec Freeman was standing.

“That was a dirty trick Alec,” he said feigning anger.

Freeman grinned. “You think that was bad, just you wait until your wedding reception.”

They walked into the office and closed the door. Ed sat down behind the desk while Alec poured a glass of water. “You only had what amounted to two glasses of champagne; I was surprised it hit you so hard, how’s your head?”

“Not bad, Virginia had me take two aspirins before I dozed off. I think I sleep through the worst of it. Keep in mind I don’t drink at all; it doesn’t take much to go to my head.”

“You must be a fun date.”

Straker laughed, “I don’t know Alec; you’ll have to ask Virginia about that.”

“Speaking of Ginny; where is she hiding?”
“She’s downstairs in the computer room, running the system backups. She has to convert all the archived data over to the new data format. We’ll be here until midnight. So when do you have to get back to the states?”

“I’m leaving on Monday morning.”

The intercom buzzer rang, and Ed pushed the key to answer it.

“Yes.”

The image of Lt. Paulson appeared on the screen, “Lt. Colonel Kelly to see you, sir.”

“All right, thanks. Send him in.”

The office doors open and Lt. Colonel Joseph Kelly entered. “I have the preliminary metallurgy report from the Seagull X-ray engine.”

“Give me the short version, Joe,” said Straker.

Kelly handed the report to Alec while he summarized it for his boss. “The metal in the
turbine assembly has been altered at the subatomic level. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Exactly how did this cause the engine to fail?” asked Ed.

“The turbine runs at a much lower speed while in ramjet mode. The metal seemed to resonate at that frequency,” said Kelly “It eventually shattered, like a lead crystal glass can be shattered by an opera voice.”

“But why didn’t it fail on the way out?” asked Alec.

“It did, but only partially, the aircraft wasn’t fully loaded, so the only thing that happened was the bearing overheated. Virginia and I shut it down before it became a problem,” said Ed. “Whoever or whatever did this didn’t want it to fail completely until we all were on that aircraft.”

“You mean sabotage,” said Alec.
“Yes.” Straker paused then turned to Kelly. “Colonel, let me know when you have the final report. And I want to know where that turbine came from and who came into contact with it.”

“We’ll get right on it sir,” said Kelly as he got up to leave.

Straker leaned back in his chair. For months SHADO had been plagued with security problems. To Straker it seemed as if the aliens had a mole in the organization. He reached over to the intercom. “Lt. Paulson, have Major Natiroff come to my office please.”

“Yes sir,” answered the blonde lieutenant.

“That finishes the primary backup Colonel.”

Virginia Lake looked up from the console at Major Graham, “Oh, thank you, Lou. Can you start the secondary set while I run these over to Lt. Janis?”

“Yes ma’am.”
Virginia pushed a cart over to the table and placed the backup tapes on it. There were 20 full size tape reels, too many to carry. Once it was loaded, she wheeled it out of the computer room and down the corridor to the computer research lab.

“How is the interface work coming along?” Virginia asked as she entered the lab.

Lieutenant Paula Janis looked up from the equipment she was working on and answered, “I just finished the comparison between the tape drive and hard drive. I’m still seeing a few bit errors on the file comparison routines, Colonel.”

“Is the data cable shielded?”

“That’s what we plan on trying next,” said Janis. “The techs in the lab are building a new cable now.”

“All right once you have the transfer interface working error free you can start copying the
data from the primary backup tapes,” said Virginia as she walked out.
“Yes ma’am.”

“You wanted to see me Commander?”
Straker closed the door behind Major Natiroff as he walked in. “Yes Major, have a seat.”
Major Natiroff sat down in front of the commander’s desk. Straker regarded him for a moment before speaking.
“Have a look at this report Major.”
Straker handed him the copy of the metallurgy report from the recovered SHADAIR engine. He skimmed through the report until he reached the section outlining the alteration of the metal. He stopped reading and looked at the Commander.
“This is impossible,” the Russian Major said.
“Impossible for us,” said Straker, “But what about the aliens?”

Straker let the rhetorical question hang for a moment.

“Sabotage?” asked Natiroff. “How would they know who was going to be on the flight?”

“That is the second question. The first is how did they manage to sabotage a SHADO jet in the first place?”

Straker was up from behind his desk now pacing. It was a nervous habit that helped him think. He picked up the round glass paperweight on his desk toying with it.

“We need to double check everyone who worked on that aircraft, both here and in the States. I also want to know where that turbine was manufactured. While we are at it have the rest of the spare parts inventory checked as well. Lt. Colonel Kelly is handling the technical end of this; I want you to coordinate with him.”
“This is going to take some time Commander, I had better get started.”

Natiroff was the type of person who did not like to waste time. As he got up to leave Straker stopped him.

“There’s one more thing Major. I want to run the entire staff through a medical security check. I don’t care what you have to do or how you organize it, I just want it done as quickly as possible.”

“Everyone sir?”

“Yes, including the command staff, myself as well.”

“Yes sir.”

Alec watched Natiroff leave, when the door was closed he turned to Straker, “You know he gives you a hundred percent, all of the time.”

Straker was still pacing; he looked at Alec.
“Yes he does, and I’ll take it. We’ve got a hole in our security, and I want it plugged.”

Virginia walked into Ed’s office just before midnight. They hadn’t seen each other all day. He stood up to greet her as the doors closed.

“You look tired,” Ed said as he took her in his arms and kissed her.

“I am, but I knew it was going to be a lot of work.” Virginia sat down in her favorite seat next to the desk. “How much do you have left to do?”

“I’m just finishing myself. I won’t have to come in tomorrow unless our friends attack en masse. I think maybe we can sleep in tomorrow.”

“Good idea,” she said.

Ed closed and locked his briefcase and got up from the desk. Virginia took his arm as they walked out of the office. When they reached the middle of the control room they stopped.
“Take a good look around Virginia; in three weeks we are not going to recognize this place.”

Virginia could sense the melancholy emotions Ed was feeling. He had spent over ten years working in these surroundings, it had become home to him. They walked out of the control room and down to the executive lift.

“Well at least this room doesn’t change all that much,” she said trying to raise his spirits.

“I was just thinking about Alec; with all the changes around here it brings it close to home that he isn’t...” Ed couldn’t finish the sentence beginning to choke up.

Virginia knew what he meant; she wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulders. She could feel him start to break down. “I’m here for you Ed; you don’t have to keep up this façade in front of me.”

Ed Straker was visibly crying now; Virginia reached across the desk and locked the lift. She
was very protective of him, and didn’t want anyone to see him like this. The eleven years of pain he had been hiding had finally broached the surface and she knew that he trusted her without any reservation to allow her to witness this.

To Virginia it seemed like ages before he collected himself as she wiped his eyes with a tissue.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me,” he said.

“Ed, you have had this bottled up for years; you needed the release. It warms my heart to know that you trust me enough to share your grief with me.”

“I don’t know why I waited so long to tell you how I felt about you.” He paused for a moment.

“Have I told you today, how much I love you, Virginia?”
She looked into his eyes rewarding him with a beautiful smile as she answered, “Yes, you have, but I don’t mind if you tell me again,” her eyes closing as their lips met.

Virginia bolted up in bed having awakened from a nightmare. “ED!” she called out still disorientated.

Ed woke up immediately; he sat up in bed, and took her in his arms, “Virginia, are you all right?”

She looked around realizing where she was, “Ed, it was terrible... the aliens invaded in force. We were beaten...the survivors...they auctioned us off like cattle.” She was still shaking from the dream.

Ed held her tightly knowing how she was feeling. “It’s all right, you’re safe.” He often had similar dreams.
It took Ed a good twenty minutes of comforting her before she stopped trembling. When she had calmed down she said, “It’s terrible what they did to our children, Ed.”

“We had children in your dream?”

“Yeah, a boy and a girl, they were only a couple of years old.”

“What did we name them?”

“I can’t remember; I just know that they were beautiful.”

“What did they look like?” asked Ed, interested.

“They had blond hair and they both had your eyes. That much I do remember.”

Virginia and he hadn’t discussed children; their jobs were so demanding Ed didn’t know if it was fair for them to bring children into the world. Ed had turned forty six this year and Virginia would be thirty nine in July. It was somewhat late in life to be thinking about it. Still he had
always wanted children. She must have sensed some of what he was thinking about.

“Ed, we haven’t talked about raising a family, what are your feelings about it?”

“I haven’t given it much thought until now; you know we’re not spring chickens anymore.”

“Are you opposed to it Ed?”

“No, but I think we should think it through and if we do decide that’s what we want we shouldn’t wait to long.”

“I think I want children with you Ed, can we talk about it tomorrow,” she said as she relaxed in his arms.

“All right.”

The next three weeks were organized insanity that reminded Straker of the startup of SHADO. The obsolete tape drives and monitors were stripped out of control; it was difficult to walk
around without tripping on cables or bumping into equipment. Operations were being run from the auxiliary control room on the other side of the complex. Ed found that even his office wasn’t a safe haven as the video displays in there were being updated as well. Virginia offered her office to him until the upgrade techs started working in there. During the final week of work Straker had gone up to Moonbase with Foster to finalize the details on the upcoming SID mission, now less than a week away.

Ed sat in his quarters, on Moonbase, reviewing technical documentation for the mission when the intercom buzzed.

“Yes.”

The image of Nina Barry appeared on the screen. “I have Colonel Lake for you sir.”

“Oh, thanks Nina, put her through.”
The screen switched and Virginia appeared. “Hey stranger, miss me yet?”

“I missed you as soon as I got on the flight here.”

They had found out that the empathic connection they shared appeared to be permanent and it had a range of about fifty miles. Because the link gradually faded as they were further apart neither Virginia nor Ed felt any physical discomfort. Jackson had theorized that only a sudden break would cause a psychosomatic reaction. But both of them reported an enhanced feeling of absence.

“Me too,” she said. “We’ve just about finished down here; I’m going to bring up the new system up in about an hour.”

“That’s great news, how does it look?”

“The three dimensional displays are much more intuitive, I don’t know how we managed so long without them. The duty officer console is going
to be a blessing, especially if we have to face a mass attack,” she said.

“Ed, Major Natiroff found the saboteur and hopefully the mole.”

“Who was it?”

“Lt. Davies, he was posted at our Heathrow section in aircraft maintenance. He oversaw the overhaul on Seagull X-ray.”

“Natiroff checked them out first. How did we miss him?”

“Davies was on a three week furlough, we picked him up when he came in this morning.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s dead; when security went to arrest him, he went into convulsions. Jackson found alien implants in his brain. The substance he used to sabotage the engine is like nothing we have ever seen. Lt. Colonel Kelly and Professor Reinhardt are working with Alec over the phone, trying to
make sense out of it. The rest of the medical screenings are done. Everyone else is clean.”

“Well at least that’s something.”

The Utronic communications net was working well, Ed had still not gotten used to the lack of delay seen on the conventional radio channels.

“Ed, when are you coming home?”

“Paul and I should be finished here this afternoon. I’d like to try to get home tonight if I can.”

“You won’t get any complaints from me. When do you have to leave for the cape?”

“Friday morning, two days from now,” he said.

“All right, I’ll let you go so you can finish. Love you, miss you.”

“Love you Virginia, miss you too.”

Ed closed the connection feeling a twinge of loneliness creep into his thoughts. He busied himself with the task at hand.
An hour later Straker and Foster were in the control sphere watching the cutover to the new system. If everything went as planned they would be able to catch the next lunar flight. Nina Barry was orchestrating the Moonbase piece while back on Earth Virginia Lake coordinated at HQ.

“Nina, we’re ready to switch over the backup tracking links,” Virginia was saying over the vidlink. “Switching now.”

The link status indicators flickered red for a moment then back to green.

“Ok Ginny, I have a positive link. Running diagnostics now, standby.”

Paul walked over to where Ed was standing, “I’ll be glad when this is all done.”

“That makes two of us Paul. How are Bradley and Waterman making out?”
“They finished the last lunar site today. The Earth based crews should be done by late tomorrow. That’s well ahead of schedule.”

“And the missile defense systems?”

Foster looked at the clipboard. “The main battery went online this morning; the two secondaries will be done in about six weeks.”

“Not bad considering, at least we have the same amount of fire power in that one battery as we did with the mobile launchers,” said Ed.

“SHADO Control from Moonbase, diagnostic checks complete; reliability one hundred percent.”

“Roger Moonbase, switching main tracking links, now,” said Virginia over the vidlink.

Ed Straker watched as the system went through its final checks. Virginia had spent a considerable amount of time planning this piece of the upgrade and it was paying off handsomely.
“Diagnostic checks on primary links complete; reliability one hundred percent,” said Nina.

Straker walked over to the command console and flipped up the mic, “Great work Virginia, pass that along to the team.”

“I will, and Ed, I expect you on that lunar flight, I’ll be waiting at the airport for you.”

The room filled with muted laughter.

“Yes Commander Lake,” he said jokingly; this time the laughter was loud, “I’ll see you in a few hours.” Straker looked at Paul, “Well Colonel Foster, shall we go pack our bags?”

Paul looked at his CO with a bemused expression. “Yes sir.”

When Ed got off the transport he saw Virginia waiting at the checkpoint; she started walking briskly toward him. As Ed put down his bags, she wrapped her arms around him. He returned the embrace as they kissed.
“I so glad your home, I missed you, Ed. And by the way I owe you this...” she said as she whacked him in the arm.

“Hey, what was that for?” he asked feigning pain.

“That was for the Commander Lake comment you made.”

“It brought a laugh to everyone on Moonbase.”

“Yes, I know; I’ll have to have a little chat with Lt. Colonel Barry regarding discipline,” she said mocking seriousness.

November 8, 1984: 12:00Z

“Launch control this is Houston, we are go for launch.”

“Roger Houston, countdown continues at T minus two minutes and counting.”
The giant Saturn V rocket sat on the launch pad at Cape Kennedy. In less than two minutes it would carry the SSC 3 spacecraft into orbit.

“Gantry arms retracted, pressurization on all stages, all systems go. T minus sixty seconds, and counting.”

In the Command module of SSC 3, Virginia and Ed were making the final checks for lift off. The first two missions had been picture perfect, with Virginia successfully completing her first deep space mission. Even though she was officially considered an astronaut now, a spaceflight veteran she still felt exhilarated as she waited for the countdown to launch.

For Ed this was mission number five, but even as a seasoned veteran he still was excited to be riding a real rocket. To him this was spaceflight as it should be.

“This is Launch control, T minus ten...nine...eight...seven...six...five...four, ignition sequence start...two...one...Lift off.”
The hold down arms retracted and the Saturn V rocket lifted off the pad.

“The clock is running,” called Straker.

“Houston, from Launch control, tower clear.”

“SSC 3, Houston, Roll program.”

“Roger, roll program complete, we are pitching,” said Straker.

“Ok SSC 3, your trajectory looks good, right down the center.”

The Saturn V rocket was performing flawlessly. The flight smoothed out considerably once the rocket went supersonic.

“SSC 3, Houston, standby for staging.”

“Virginia, get ready for a little jolt,” said Ed.

The Saturn V rocket was coming up on first stage shutdown. The two astronauts were thrown forward against their restraining harnesses when the first stage cutoff. When the
second stage ignited they were thrown back in their couches.

“That was more than last time,” Virginia remarked.

“Tower jet,” called Straker as the LES tower lifted off the nose of the spacecraft.

The flight was much smoother on the second stage and the G forces had lessened. Nine minutes into the flight the second stage shutdown and separated leaving the third stage S-IV-B to push them gently into orbit.

Twelve minutes and thirty five seconds into the launch the S-IV-B third stage shutdown and SSC 3 was in orbit. If all checked well with the spacecraft Virginia and Ed would relight the third stage to rendezvous with SID 3 parked at the L3 libration point two hundred forty thousand miles up.

“Orbit achieved, Houston, all systems go,” said Ed.
“Roger SSC 3, looking good.”

Forty minutes later Virginia and Ed had made all the preparations needed to leave orbit.

“SSC 3, Houston, go for TLI”

Virginia answered, “Roger Houston, go for TLI.”

The S-IV-B ignited and pushed the spacecraft out of orbit. They would rendezvous with SID 3 in fourteen hours. Virginia had never considered a career as an astronaut but she realized that it would be almost as good as working for SHADO.

“You know Ed, I should ask NASA if they are hiring. I could get used to this.”

He looked at her with a grin, “If we weren’t fighting aliens, this is what I would have been doing.”

Virginia and Ed had removed their spacesuits as they would not be needed until they
rendezvoused with SID. The flight plan called for a standard sleep period in about four hours. Normally a NASA mission would be filled with experiments to fill all their waking time but this was not the case. Virginia and Ed had little to do but watch the course indications, and the stars.

“Have Gay and Mark set a date yet?” asked Ed.

“Yes, Gay told me on the phone this morning. It’s going to be Saturday, November 24.”

“Good. Mark and I can remind each other about our anniversaries.”

“Like you would ever forget.”

Gay and Virginia had been discussing theme music for their respective weddings. Ginny had looked through both the British and American pop and rock charts and even looked through the country listings trying to find the right song. She finally found a song done by an American rock band that had a great piano part and very
meaningful words. She made a copy of it and gave it to Ed to listen to.

“Did you have a chance to listen to the song Ed?”

“I did, I liked it. But I would like to tone down the electric guitar and enhance the piano part. I have an idea,” he said.

When Ed whispered to her what he was thinking she cried out, “Ed, how romantic,” and leaned over to kiss him.

In the control room of SHADO HQ Colonel Foster watched the mission progression unfold. The first two missions had been accomplished without as much as a sighting. In fact there had not been a confirmed sighting in over a month. This worried him to no end. He had still objected to both Virginia and Ed going on the same mission, but to no avail. The Commander had made up his mind and that was that. He did
manage to convince him to call a red alert before the critical part of the mission.

Paul had been more than somewhat surprised when Straker chose Lake as acting XO last year. He had thought that he had a better than fifty percent shot of getting the position. He didn’t mind losing to Ginny Lake, she was senior to him by six months and she certainly brought much to the table. But he was forced to take a good look at himself and objectively rate his performance. When he was honest with himself he found he would have made the same decision. For Paul that was a big wakeup call.

Straker had told him that he was very impressed with his performance on the SID 2 mission. He had worked hard with Ginny to get her up to speed for the second mission. He did not want to have to tell the commander that she wasn’t ready. And of course Ginny had worked hard as well; Paul had told her after the mission that he would fly with her anytime.
“Keith, how long before they rendezvous with SID 3?”

Ford punched up the data on the new display. “Just over four hours, sir.”

“Very well signal to all SHADO stations, Yellow Alert.”

“Yes sir.”

Foster sat back down at the command console while Lt. Ford sent the alert. Foster knew one of the reasons he was considered unseasoned was due to his lack of commitment to anything. He carried this trait in his relationships with women as well. Since he had been at SHADO he had only had one serious girlfriend, Tina Duval. And that had ended when she was told he had died in the moon mobile accident more than two years ago. He found that trying to have a relationship outside of SHADO was difficult at best.
He tried dating someone within the organization but that didn’t last either. Virginia was on the rebound when he started seeing her. Besides being four years older, she just was too old fashioned and Paul liked to move quickly in that aspect. He also suspected that he was being compared to Ed Straker. Virginia hid it well but Foster knew she was attracted to the Commander. They mutually agreed to end the relationship only a few weeks after it had started, while they still were able to stay friends.

Paul tried dating outside again when out of the blue he got a call from Jane Carson. He had been seeing her for eight months now; that was a very long time for him. Was he afraid to settle down? Paul was thirty five now, and he had never been married. Foster, it’s time to reevaluate your life.

Virginia and Ed suited up for the EVA portion of the mission. If all went according to plan they
would have the satellite running and calibrated in about six hours. “Control from SSC 3, commencing EVA,” said Ed.

“Roger SSC 3, go for EVA.”

Ed and Virginia double checked their suits, and then closed their helmets. Ed activated the cabin depressurization sequence. When the cabin pressure read zero, Ed opened the hatch. The pair of astronauts exited the ship and jetted over to SID 3. Ed arrived at the hatch first and proceeded to open it. “Ok control we have access,” said Ed.

Virginia arrived at the hatch a few moments later and Ed motioned her inside, “Ladies before gentlemen.”

Once inside Virginia plugged her portable computer into the slot provide in the workstation. She began the tedious task of powering up the main computer. “Control, this is Lake. I’m starting the power up diagnostics now.”
“Roger Colonel.”

While Virginia configured SID’s main computer, Ed went to work bringing up the station keeping system. The designers had decided to build it as a separate subsystem isolated from the tracking network.

Two hours later Ed was ready to activate the station keeping system. He closed the outer hatch and said to Virginia, “When I enable the station keeping thrusters, the satellite is going to automatically adjust its position. Hang on it might be a bumpy ride.”

“Ok Ed, I’m ready.”

“Control, this is Straker, enabling station keeping subsystem now.”

The thrusters fired and positioned the satellite so that the antennas and sensors properly aimed.

“Ok control, alignment platform looks good. I’m enabling ground control and telemetry.”
“Ed, when you’re finished with the station keeping system, I could use some help with the sensor alignment,” said Virginia.

Over the next four and a half hours Virginia and Ed completed the sensor alignment. It was a painstakingly difficult procedure, constantly stopping and double checking the figures.

“All right Ed, I’m ready to restart and enable the main computer. Control from Lake, standby, I’m going to reboot the system now.”

“Standing by Colonel.”

Virginia punched in the codes for system restart. As the computer went through the procedure all the displays went dark, temporarily.

“This is the part I don’t like,” said Ed.

“You don’t trust me?” asked Virginia playfully.

“You know better than that.”
The monitors came back to life as the system restarted. Virginia verified that the system was starting properly.

**THIS IS SPACE INTURDER DETECTOR 3, REBOOT COMPLETE, SYSTEM CORE LOADED, ESTABLISHING UTRONIC COMMUNICATION LINKS, LINKS ESTABLISHED, LOADING ENCRYPTION SEEDS, SECURE COMMUNICATIONS AND TELEMETRY ESTABLISHED, SYNCRONIZING WITH NETWORK, TRACKING SENSOR CALIBRATION COMPLETE, SYNCRONIZATION COMPLETE, SYSTEM OPERATIONAL.**

In the control room at HQ a cheer of triumph went up. “SSC 3 from control, congratulations you two,” said Foster. “All the tracking systems are linked up and operational. It’s a beautiful sight. Why don’t you come on home now?”
“Well Colonel, you heard the man, let’s pack up and go home.”

Virginia looked at him smiling through the visor of her helmet, “That’s the best offer I’ve had all day.”

“Control from Straker; Paul lock the station keeping system in egress mode. I’ll let you know when we are clear.”

“Understood Commander, system locked.”

The egress mode allowed the astronauts to enter and leave the satellite without the danger of the thrusters firing unexpectedly. The pair packed up their equipment and exited the satellite. Ed closed and locked the access hatch.

“How is your oxygen supply, Virginia?”

“I’m down to an hour and a half.”

Ed was down to thirty minutes. That’s more than enough time to get back to the ship.

Ten minutes later they were both back in SSC 3. They removed their helmets and were able to
speak privately for the first time in six and a half hours.

“Well Virginia, you’re a spaceflight veteran now, how does it feel?”

“It feels good and this time was easier for a couple of reasons. First of all, I had done it once before, and second, you were with me and I could feel your presence. When I flew with Paul I couldn’t sense your feelings and I found that to be disquieting.”

“Control from SSC 3, Paul we are clear of SID 3, you can enable the station keeping. We will be executing the EOI maneuver in about twenty minutes,” said Ed over the radio.

“Roger SSC 3, Control out.”

Virginia and Ed got out of their spacesuits and stowed them away for the flight home. They strapped themselves in and prepared for the maneuver that would return them to Earth.
While Ed programmed the flight computer for the EOI maneuver Virginia called down to Earth. “Control from SSC 3, we will be switching back to mission control in Houston.”

“Roger SSC 3, have a safe flight home Colonel,” said Keith Ford.

“Houston, this is SSC 3, EVA mission complete. We are ready for EOI,” said Lake.

“SSC 3, Houston, roger Colonel, you are go for EOI.”

The flight computer counted down the seconds and fired the main engine to put them on a course for home. “Houston, SSC 3, burn complete, trajectory looks good,” said Straker.

“SSC 3, Houston, we show same, trajectory is nominal, EOI in fourteen hours, ten minutes. You have a sleep period scheduled in about three hours.”

“Roger Houston, SSC 3 out.”
Two hours into the return trip Virginia looked over to Ed.

“Ed, let me ask you something,” Virginia said as she unstrapped herself from the couch. “With the mission finished, can the ride home be considered as our private time?”

She floated over to him as he took her in his arms. “I don’t see why not.”

“Good,” she said suggestively as she began to unzip her coverall.

“You’re not thinking about...”

“Aren’t you curious?” she asked.

“Well, yes; but what about the bio-med sensors?”

The bio-med sensor system in the spacecraft did not use the old style obtrusive contact pickups. It was all accomplished using a passive pickup system.

“We could turn them off.”
“No, that would raise a dozen red flags down in Houston.”

Virginia gave him an impish grin. “Then I guess they are going to have some interesting readings to look at. We can always say the sensors malfunctioned.”

“You know, this isn’t as easy in zero G as it looks.”

“Oh?”

“Both NASA and the Russian Space Agency have experimented with it.”

“Well we can add to the research,” she said still grinning.

“This is going to be one hell of a debriefing for the flight surgeon,” said Ed as he unstrapped himself.

In mission control the flight surgeon was watching his telemetry readings. He was
confused as he notice both their heart rates begin to increase. When he saw their respiration rates follow suit, he called to the flight director.

“Flight, this is surgeon, I’m showing a marked increase in their respiration and heart rates.”

Mark Adams the Chief Flight controller for NASA was on the desk today, “CapCom, check with them and see if anything is wrong.”

“SSC 3, Houston, is everything all right up there?”

“We’re fine Houston,” came, Ed’s voice, over the speaker sounding somewhat clipped.

“We just saw your heart rates elevate, you’re sure your both all right?”

This time Virginia answered, “Everything is A-OK Houston, thanks.”

“Surgeon, mark it as a telemetry glitch,” said Adams.
“Mark, I don’t see any indication of a failure.”

The flight surgeon had never met the two astronauts, as the military had handled all the medical considerations, but Adams had known Ed Straker for years and he had met Virginia Lake a few days before the flight. He knew they were engaged and he had a pretty good idea of what was happening but he wasn’t going to let that get out; not on his watch.

“Mark it as a malfunction; log it as my orders.”

“Copy that flight.”

Ed and Virginia held each other closely, as they cuddled in the afterglow, their bodies illuminated only by the light from the instrument panels.

“A-OK?” he asked.

“They don’t need to know that our experiment wasn’t entirely successful. Besides it was romantic to try.”
“I still can’t believe I let you talk me into this, Virginia.”

Ed sounded serious but besides sensing his feelings, she could see a grin on his face.

“Admit it. You were just as curious as I was and it’s not like we had anything else to do.”

“Granted, but can you imagine the repercussions if Henderson or anyone else finds out?”

Virginia hugged him tighter, “What’s he going to do Ed? Fire us?” she asked as she kissed him.

“Slaves have to be sold,” he said bringing them both to laughter.

Chapter 13:
November 22, 1984:
“Dancer this is Iceman. Are we ready to give Athena her check ride?” Straker asked Lt. Colonel Carlin over the radio.

“Roger Iceman; Athena are you ready?” Carlin said asking Virginia.

“Dancer, this is Athena, let’s go!”

“All right Colonel, formation take off, just like we did in the simulator. Rolling.”

The two jets sped down the runway and leaped into the sky. Ed watched as Virginia accustomed herself to the aircraft. Straker was impressed. Virginia Lake was a natural pilot, and seemed to have skill equal to Ellis and Carlin. It was a shame that she wouldn’t get to develop it to that point. She was too valuable in other areas, to be flying combat.

Virginia had gotten the feel for the aircraft now as she followed Carlin in some basic combat maneuvers.
“Dancer, this is Athena, are you ready for a little head to head?”

“If you think you’re up to it. Let’s try a standard attack pattern.”

The two aircraft separated by a few miles and then turned toward each other, closing at over one thousand knots.

“Ok this is where we get smoked,” said Ed teasing her.

“You be quiet back there, no back seat flying.”

“Yes, Commander Lake.”

“Just you wait till we’re back on the ground,” she said just loud enough for him to hear.

Carlin had maneuvered his jet into a position behind them. Virginia pulled up on the stick and deployed the airbrakes forcing Carlin to fly by. She now had a chance to get on his six. Virginia activated her targeting radar in training mode as she closed on Carlin. Ed watched as Carlin inverted his jet then pulled
into an inverted dive. He had seen Peter use that maneuver before. In a few minutes he was on her tail again, the warble tone in her headset telling her that Peter Carlin had won the match.

“Nice try Colonel, you almost had me back there.”

“That’s all right Peter, if I have to be beat at least it was by the best.”

“Oh oh, I have a problem here, engine overheating, I’m returning to base.”

“Dancer this is Iceman, we’ll follow you back. Virginia, get on his wing.”

The pair flew back to the SHADO airfield. Once Carlin was down safely, Virginia turned back to the north.

“Ed I want to make a couple of passes over Loch Ness.”

“Are you chasing a ghost?” he asked remembering what happened last time they were up here.
“You could say that.”

Straker was going to object but decided they would be okay. At least this time they were armed.

Twenty minutes later the SHADO jet was flying low over Loch Ness. Virginia had dropped her speed so not to draw the ire of the locals.

Just below the surface of the loch the three, cone shaped, alien craft were preparing to surface.

As Virginia flew over the loch she suddenly felt a feeling of cold malevolence. She had never felt anything like it before. “Ed do you feel that?”

“Yes, I think we had better arm our weapons.”
Virginia reached down and switched the weapons system from training mode to attack mode.

The three alien craft broached the surface and fired an energy bean at the SHADO jet.

“Hang on Ed.”
Virginia banked the aircraft in a hard right turn narrowly avoiding the beam. She accelerated to attack speed and turned to engage one of the UFO’s. She fired a missile. It exploded the alien craft. Her adrenalin was flowing now and she not only felt her fear but Ed’s as well. She knew that they were in trouble.

“Colonel, there’s one on your six!” Straker warned.
Lake pulled the jet into an aggressive vertical climb as she kicked in the afterburners. She pulled back on the stick and looped the aircraft
back into a dive towards the UFO that had been tailing her. She launched another missile at the alien craft. The second UFO was destroyed in a ball of flame.

Ed was impressed. Virginia had no combat experience other than the simulator and she had just engaged and destroyed two UFO’s.

Lake pulled out of the dive; she had lost sight of the third ship.

“Ed, I lost the last one. Where’d he go?”

Straker looked around. He didn’t spot it until it was too late.

The UFO was hidden in a low bank of clouds. It fired an energy weapon at the SHADO jet as soon as it emerged. There was no chance at all to avoid it.

In the cockpit alarms went off, as the aircraft went out of control. “Ed, I can’t hold it, she’s breaking up.”
Straker knew the aircraft was lost. He had to punch them out before it was too late. He reached behind him to pull the ejection lever as he yelled, “Eject, eject, eject.”

Virginia pulled her arms in as she had been trained and the pair punched out of the aircraft just before it exploded. Virginia came down by parachute in a small clearing. She looked to see where Ed was landing; a small grove of trees. She got up and released her parachute no worse for wear and ran to the grove of trees where she saw her fiancé land.

Straker wasn’t as lucky. He was suspended in the trees about ten feet above the ground. When he released his chute he fell hard on the right leg and twisted his ankle. He couldn’t put any weight on it.

Virginia found him about ten minutes later, “Ed; thank God, are you all right?”
“I tore my ankle up pretty good coming out of that tree. Welcome to the Martin Baker Fan Club.”

Virginia felt to see if it was broken. “It doesn’t feel broken but it’s hard to tell.”

She looked around; they had landed in a remote area with nothing around.

“What’s the Martin Baker Fan Club?” she asked.

“They build ejection seats; when a pilot punches out he or she becomes a member of the club. This is my second time; the first was over Nam.”

A flock of birds suddenly took off from a point closer to the loch.

“I’ve got to get you out of here,” she said as she tried to help him stand. They struggled to walk a few hundred feet. Although she was still in excellent shape from the space missions, Ed knew there was no way she could help him get to the road before dark.
“Virginia, listen to me. It’s going to be dark in a couple hours. You know the aliens are going to be coming for us. I saw the UFO that shot us down land near the shore. I can’t walk and I’ll only slow you down if you try to help me. You have to get out of here and get help.”

“Ed, I’m not leaving you...”

“You have too. Please Virginia, I don’t want to make this an order. We can’t let them get both of us. Please do this for me.”

Virginia was torn, she knew Ed was right, but it was breaking her heart to have to leave him. The moment of truth had come, duty over love. She held him closely. “I love you, Ed,” she said through her tears.

“I love you too, Virginia, now please go.”

She kissed him deeply then set out for the road that was a few miles away. Ed opened his emergency pack and removed the Utronic transponder. It was in a capsule that could be
swallowed in an emergency that would attach itself to the stomach lining. He twisted it to activate it and swallowed it with a swig from his canteen. Ed grabbed his pistol and cocked it, waiting for the inevitable. He wasn’t going to go down without a fight.

“How long ago did it go down?” asked Paul Foster. He was not happy.

“About twenty minutes ago sir,” Keith Ford was saying. “We already have a mobile team heading there now. They should be on site within the hour.”

“Are we sure they ejected?”

“Yes sir, we received the automatic MAYDAY signal just before the aircraft exploded.”

“Who’s in charge of the mobile team?”

“Lt. Colonel Carlin, sir.”

“As soon as they get on site let me know.”
“Yes sir.”

Foster was angry with his CO. He knew better than to be in the air unescorted. And taking Virginia with him; that takes the coconut. He hoped that he would have the chance to chew them out.

Virginia had made it to the road just before dark. She could still sense that Ed was all right but she also sensed his apprehension. By a stroke of luck the local constable was driving by when she got to the road. He gave her a lift to the nearest station where she was able to phone HQ. Thirty minutes later Peter Carlin picked her up in a SHADO jeep.

“Colonel Foster is fit to be tied,” said Carlin.

“I know; he just about bit my head off when I called HQ. What could I say, for once he’s right,” said Virginia. “How much further?”
“We’re set up just around the corner; I’ve got two mobiles out searching the area now. What happened?”

“We were ambushed by three UFO’s. I managed to get two of them before we got hit.”

“That’s not bad for a first engagement,” he said admirably.

The aliens walked through the woods in search of their quarry. If possible they were to take them alive. They came across a grove of trees where a primitive escape method hung.

Ed saw the two aliens approach the spot where he had landed. He stayed behind a tree hopefully out of sight. His .40 caliber Glock only had a ten round clip. And both the aliens were carrying their version of an assault rifle. Ed sensed that Virginia had made it to the road and was safe and he said a silent prayer of thanks.
for that. Ed was intent on the aliens in front of him. He did not hear the alien behind him.

Quietly the alien approached its quarry from behind. It quickly pressed a small cylinder against the neck of its victim and he went limp. The three aliens picked him up and carried him back to the shore where their cone shaped craft was on the surface of the loch. They boarded the craft and closed the hatch. The alien ship submerged into the depths of Loch Ness.

In the command mobile Virginia Lake looked at the maps. “Right here Peter, this is the clearing, and this should be the grove of trees.” Virginia knew that Ed was in trouble when suddenly she felt his emotions change to a state of solace. That only happened when he was asleep.
“That’s close to the water. There is a cove about a quarter mile from there,” Carlin was saying.

Without warning Virginia cried out in pain as her link with Ed was broken.

“Oh my God…I can’t feel him. Peter he’s gone.”

“Colonel?”

Virginia could not speak for a moment. Peter helped her sit down. She visibly shaking; sure that Ed was dead. It took her a few minutes to pull herself together.

“I’m sorry Peter, ever since the Timelash incident Ed and I have shared an empathic link. The link has a range of about forty miles. If it is suddenly broken we both experience physical pain. The link just broke between us. If we find him, we’re not going to find him alive,” she said through her tears.
Out in the clearing a SHADO chopper landed near the staging area. Major Natiroff jumped out and walked to the command mobile.

“Major, what are you doing here?” asked Carlin.

“I have orders to take Colonel Lake back to HQ.”

“Who gave that order?” asked Virginia.

“General Henderson, ma’am, I have the chopper waiting.”

“Peter, keep me informed if you find anything. All right Major, let’s go.”

Peter Carlin watched the chopper leave, he hoped that Colonel Lake was wrong, but she seemed so convinced; Peter didn’t want to think about it.

The alien craft traveled underwater just above the bottom of Loch Ness traveling towards the deepest point where it came to a dome shaped
enclosure. The craft entered the dome by merging into the wall and came to rest on a landing pad, inside the structure.

After the ship was powered down, the aliens dragged their captive down a corridor with doors every few yards. They stopped in front of one of the doors and opened it revealing a small room. The aliens strapped their prisoner to the chair in the center of the room. One alien waved a device over the captive human and looked at the readout. The alien nodded to its partner who prepared a syringe and gave the captive human an injection.

Ed Straker awoke strapped to a chair with two aliens on either side of him. He was very weak and he felt nauseated. He looked in front of him seeing a pan on a table. *How convenient,* he thought as he began to vomit. When he had finished the aliens removed the pan from the table. He saw one of them pick up a capsule with a pair of tweezers. Ed passed out as the
alien twisted the capsule, deactivating the device.

Virginia arrived at HQ only to face an angry General Henderson. “What the hell were you two trying to prove?”

“General if you don’t mind, I just lost my fiancé. I don’t need you screaming at me right now.” She gave him a look that would freeze water.

“How do you know he’s dead?” asked Henderson more softly.

“You didn’t read the report Jackson wrote?”

“Yes I saw it; I really didn’t believe it.”

“Well General, I suggest that you read it again. I’m telling you we are not going to find him alive,” said Virginia.

“If that is the case then you realize that you are in command now. Whether or not you stay there depends on how well you handle yourself.
If today is any indication of your judgment, you won’t last long. In the meantime I want an operational readiness report on my desk by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yes sir.”

Henderson turned and left the office. Virginia thought to herself as he left. *What a callous son of a bitch!* 

Straker woke up inside a small room in the alien dome. His head still hurt probably from the anesthesia. His ankle was still sore but not quite as bad as it was. Sitting across from him was a teenage girl maybe seventeen or eighteen. She somehow looked familiar.

“Are you all right, Mister?”

“Yes, I think so. How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know, months I think.”
“Well since we seem to be sharing the same cell, my name is Ed, Ed Straker.”

“Katherine Howard.”

Ed remembered now where he had seen her, she was the missing teenager presumed dead nine months ago.

“You’re from the film studio, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s right. How did you know?”

“I recognized you from one of the movie magazines.”

She looked away for a moment, and then asked, “So do you know what the aliens want from us, Mr. Straker?”

“I was going to ask you the same question. How do you know they are aliens?”

“Well they are wearing some type of spacesuit. It’s made of a red material I have never seen before. And they seem to be breathing some
type of green liquid. I don’t know why I’m here except that they come in every few days and take skin samples.” She showed her arm to him. It looked like they had just done a scratch test.

“They feed us once a day, and there is a bathroom,” she said pointing to a door.

“Is the food any good?”

“It’s somewhat like oatmeal, but it doesn’t have much taste.”

“Well Katherine, we are going to get out of here, I’m sure my friends are looking for me now.”

“Do you know where we are?”

“If I had to guess I would say this dome is on the bottom of Loch Ness.”

The conversation paused for a few minutes, and then Katherine asked, “Are you married, Mr. Straker?”

Ed was surprised by the question; this young lady was a force to be reckoned with. She had
long dark red hair and green eyes. Ed knew that she was going to be a charmer, assuming they got out of there alive.

“I’m engaged; my fiancé and I are supposed to get married this month.”

“What’s her name?”

Ed smiled, “Virginia.”

“That’s a very beautiful name.”

Ed felt a pang of loneliness as he wasn’t able to feel Virginia’s presence.

“Yes it is,” he said wistfully.

Commander Lake was working on the readiness report when the intercom buzzed.

“Yes.”

“Captain Ellis would like to see you, ma’am.”

“Thanks Tara, send her in.”
Virginia got up from her desk when Gay walked in. They hugged each other, “Ginny, I am so sorry.”

“Thanks Gay, everyone has been so supportive.” The two women sat down.

“I think Mark and I are going to postpone the wedding in light of what’s happened.”

Virginia looked at her friend, “Why?”

“It isn’t right, and with you just losing Ed; I don’t want to put you through it...”

“Gay, will you do something for me?”

“Anything, Ginny.”

“Please don’t postpone it because of us. What happened today can happen to anyone of us at anytime. We all have dangerous occupations, and right now I’m sorry that I didn’t just elope with Ed months ago. Don’t put yourself in that position please. I couldn’t bear it if something happened to either one of you.”
“Are you sure?”
“Yes, I know Ed would feel the same way.”
“Then you’ll still be my maid of honor?”
“Of course.”

Gay Ellis and Mark Bradley married on November 24, 1984 and by nothing short of a miracle, Virginia was able to get the ceremony and reception without breaking down. Later that night she laid down on the bed that her and Ed had shared and cried her heart out, clutching a pillow for dear life. Her mother was in the US on assignment, and Gay was on her honeymoon. Ginny kept herself busy by helping the Professor finish the final touches on the new tracking software. She still held on to a small ray of hope that Ed was still alive as the search teams never found his body.

Four days later, Professor Reinhardt uploaded the new sensor program to the tracking
network. When the system rebooted and went operational a dozen UFO’s were picked up beneath bodies of water on Earth. SHADO went to a maximum security alert. All leaves were canceled and all personnel recalled including Gay and Mark. Virginia had not been home in three days. It was a blessing in disguise as Ginny had little time to mourn.

Two of the UFO’s were beneath the surface of Loch Ness. Commander Lake sent Paul Foster up to the loch, with a mobile team, when SID picked up the passive portion of Straker’s transponder. Virginia held a small ray of hope that Ed might still be alive and they might be able to rescue him. Henderson believed that Straker had already been killed at the hands of the aliens and was not pleased to learn of Virginia’s plans. He showed up at HQ with the intention of forcing her to step down. She knew it was a bluff, Henderson had tried this before.
December 1, 1984: 17:30Z

Virginia still had her head on the desk trying to assuage her grief with pleasant memories when the buzzer rang. She sat up and grabbed a tissue to dry her eyes. She reached across the desk to open the door. As it opened, General Henderson entered the office. He didn’t speak until the doors closed behind him. “Commander Lake, I’m sorry for your loss.”

Virginia hated that title, to her and just about everyone else there was only one Commander, and she had just killed him. “Thank you, give me a moment and I’ll be right out.”

“No need, Commander. There is nothing going on right now, Colonel Grey will call in for you if that changes.

“Thank you, General.”

The General didn’t leave as she expected, “Something else, General?”
He seemed to be at a loss for words; finally he said, “I was wrong about you Virginia.”

Ginny was glad she was still sitting because she would have probably passed out. The General never admitted to being wrong, and very seldom did he call anyone under his command by their first name. As surprised as she was she kept her voice neutral as she answered. “How do you mean, General?”

“I didn’t think you had the ability to make the difficult choice that you made today; I see now that I was wrong. I’ve decided to permanently promote you to Commander in Chief, SHADO operations. I’ll be sure that the commission gives their full support.”

Yes, and all I had to do was kill my lover, fiancé, best friend and soul mate, she thought to herself. “Thank you,” was all she said.

The intercom buzzed, Ginny reached to answer it, “Yes.”
“Lt. Lake to see you, Commander.”

“Thanks Keith, send her in.”

The doors parted and Lynn Lake walked into the office. When the doors closed she turned to Henderson. “Jim, I need to speak to my daughter in private, if you please.”

Henderson was not surprised or irritated by the familiarity as he had known Lynn for over forty years. “Of course Lynn. Commander I’ll see you later,” he said as he turned and walked out of the office.

Virginia stood and walked over to her mother and the two women embraced. “Colonel Grey told me what happened, Ginny.”

She was crying again. “I don’t think I can do this Mom,” she was saying as the tears came in earnest.

“Ginny, you just lost your husband.”

Virginia gave her mother a puzzled look as they sat down.
“Even though it wasn’t official yet, Ed was your husband, at the very least in your heart. You need to grieve. And it’s going to take time.”

“I don’t have time, those people out there are depending on me, and I can’t let them down.”

“Then don’t.”

Virginia was confused; to her it seemed like a contradiction. “I don’t understand what you mean, Mom.”

“You told me once that Ed suffered from one weakness. Do you remember?”

Virginia thought back to the conversation a few months back. “He never used to share the burden with others, he held it all in, until one night we were coming up in the executive lift. We were talking about the changes being made around here. The subject of Alec and his condition came up and Ed finally broke down. I must have held him for fifteen minutes before he had cried it all out. I didn’t realize how much
pain he was carrying around with him. After that I never felt him try to shut me out again.”

“And that is what you have to do. Ginny, you have people here and around the organization that care about you, Gay, Nina, Paul, Professor Reinhardt, Alec, Janice, not to mention me. And others you’re probably not even aware of. One of the reasons Ed chose you is because you know how to delegate responsibility. So delegate some of the burden as well.”

“I guess I do have a few people to lean on.”

“One other thing, Virginia, Ed believed in you; the best way for you to honor his memory is to believe in yourself, and continue the work he started.”

Virginia knew her mother was right; she was blessed to have people around her to get through this. *Ed would have had no one except Alec.* “Thanks Mom.”
“If you need anything let me know, Commander.”

Virginia gave her mother a grateful smile as she left. She spent the next few minutes, collecting herself. *We’ll lick our wounds later,* Ed had once told her.

She picked up the round glass paperweight Ed always kept there and toyed with it, leaning back in her chair. She smiled wanly remembering how he would always stare at this thing while trying to figure out a problem or the alien’s next move. *Why are they so interested in Loch Ness?* Virginia remembered the picture that her mother had painted. *It was over Loch Ness as well.* She stared into the paperweight trying to think. She was missing something obvious, she just knew it. *What was it Paul had said? Poor visibility, 750 feet deep, and a history!* Virginia suddenly sat up, “Of course, how could we have missed it.”
She reached for the intercom, “Lt. Ford, have Colonel Grey come in here please.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The office doors parted as Colonel Grey came in. “Have a seat John; I need to bounce an idea off you.”

“Anything I can do to help, and Virginia, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks John,” she quietly said, then continued on in a normal voice. “Ed said something to us a few months back about the aliens hiding underwater where we can’t get to them; deep ocean trenches and such. But if they needed or wanted to be close to HQ, where would they hide?”

“Well the waters surrounding England aren’t deep enough for them to hide. You remember Skydive torpedoed that underwater dome off the west coast last year.”
“Exactly, they would be vulnerable in the ocean, because of our sub fleet, but how about a freshwater lake?”

John Grey considered, “You mean Loch Ness?”

“Think about it John, the lake is deep, over 750 feet. And the water is murky because of the high peat content of the surrounding soil. The lake has a legend to go with it, so if something strange happens there it’s attributed to folklore. Most important, Skydiver can’t get to it. How many UFO cases have we had in that area?”

“More than normal, I think you’re on to something. But what do we do about it?”

“Get a hold of Colonel Blake; I want one of the DSV’s flown up to Loch Ness, fully armed. Then call Paul Foster and let him know I will be joining him at the command post. Is General Henderson still here?”

“No he left about twenty minutes ago.”
“Very well, Colonel Grey,” Virginia spoke formally. “I am leaving you in command here at HQ. Call Dr. Jackson and have him assemble a minimal triage team with equipment and be ready to leave in ten minutes.”

“Yes Commander.”

As Grey walked out Virginia reached for the intercom, “Lt. Ford, get me Captain Morgan at the airfield.”

“Yes ma’am.”

A few minutes later the phone rang. Ginny picked it up, “Lake.”

“Captain Morgan here, ma’am.”

“Captain, I need a SHADAIR Learjet fueled and ready to go in twenty minutes.”

“Yes Commander, do you need a flight crew?”

“Just someone to fly right seat.”

“Yes ma’am, we’ll be waiting for you.”
Virginia Lake walked out of her office into control with a renewed sense of purpose. “Colonel Grey, keep me apprised of our situation while I’m en-route.”

“Yes Commander.”

Virginia turned and walked out of control as Lt. Ford walked over to the command console where Grey was seated.

“You know Keith; I think Commander Straker chose well.”

“I agree sir; I think I would rather face an entire alien fleet than have to face the lady that just walked out.”

Commander Virginia Lake had not been in an aircraft since the incident that allowed Ed to fall into the hands of the aliens. She had the SHADAIR Learjet at ten thousand feet heading towards Scotland. “Take over, Jeff,” she said to her co-pilot.
“Yes Commander.”

Virginia had asked Ed to take her up in the new land based aeroceptor trainer. She had done well in the simulator and wanted to get some real stick time. It had been a cold grey afternoon in November. How the hell did they know we were coming....?

“The empathic link,” Virginia said out loud.

“Commander?”

“Lake to SHADO control,” she called over the radio.

“This is control, go ahead Commander.”

“Have Colonel Grey scramble two aeroceptors and have them rendezvous with us, I don’t want to be caught in the air unescorted.”

December 1, 1984 19:00Z
The field closest to the command post was fogged in and Commander Lake had to land at an airport thirty miles south of the loch. Two SHADO jeeps waited to take them up to the command post. “Commander Lake, how are you doing?” Jackson asked her on the way to the CP.

“I have my good days and bad days, Doctor. I won’t lie to you, this isn’t easy.”

“Did you know that you saved Commander Straker’s sanity?”

Virginia looked at him, “What do you mean?”

“As part of the astronaut certification process I have to do a stress factor analysis tests. I did one on Commander Straker just before the Timelash incident. It was sixty percent. If he had been flying I would have grounded him. The second time I ran the test he scored eighty five percent. That was just before the two of you were engaged. The last test I ran on him was just before he left for the first SID mission. His score was ninety eight percent.”
“What is your point Doctor, I mean why are you telling me this now?”

“My point is that over the past six years the Commander’s scores had decreased steadily. He was heading for a nervous breakdown. The only thing in his life that changed was his involvement with you. I thought that you should know about the positive impact you had on his life.”

Virginia didn’t know what to make of Jackson’s comments. He was ice cold and calculating at times but she felt that there was more to him than met the eye. She decided he was trying to be helpful in his own way. “Thanks,” she said.

As the young woman had told him, their alien captors fed them once a day, and came in to collect skin samples every third day. Straker had been there for over a week, nine days to be exact. He still had no idea what the aliens were doing here as Katherine wasn’t able to provide
any answers. Ed was also worried about how security was going to handle this as the amnesia drug was not an option for Katherine, assuming of course that they survived.

“Do you remember how you ended up here, Katherine?”

“One night my boyfriend and I were parked in an overlook on the loch, we were cuddling together,” she said somewhat embarrassed. “We never saw then; all I remember was something cold pressing against my neck. When I woke up I was here.”

Ed did not want to ask the next question, but knew he needed to. “Do you know what happened to your boyfriend?”

“I’m sure he’s dead, I can’t feel him.”

Straker suddenly sat up, shocked. “What do you mean by, you can’t feel him?” he asked fighting to keep his voice neutral.
“A few weeks before I was taken; John and I were hiking along one of the trails that follow the shoreline. Up the trail we heard a strange humming sound. We came to a clearing; looked up and saw what I guess you would call a flying saucer. It looked more like an inverted spinning teacup. All of a sudden it radiated a strange glow, which caused us to see things, as a camera does, like if you look at a film negative.”

So this did cause the empathic effect, but why? “How long after this could you sense each other’s feelings?”

“It didn’t take long. We noticed it the first time we were, well...together, if you know what I mean.”

Ed knew exactly what she meant. One night Virginia and he were making love, the feeling had consumed both of them. Just thinking about it brought back the...

Ed suddenly realized that he was feeling a presence, at first it was just a feeling of sadness,
followed first by shock, and then great joy. *My God, it’s Virginia!*

“Katherine, this is very important. The link you shared with John; I share the same link with Virginia. I’m starting to feel her presence again. That means that she is not far away.”

She looked at him, “John and I were never more than a few miles apart, we didn’t know this phenomenon had a range limit.”

“It’s almost fifty miles. Listen to me, this is important. If Virginia is in the area, she’s here with help. But we might have to help ourselves as well, so when I tell you to be ready to run.”

“How, there is no way out of here.”

“Just trust me.”

Virginia was contemplating her next decision when she began sensing a presence. Her heart leaped in her chest when she realized what it was. “He’s alive! Oh my God, he’s alive!”
“Commander?” said Jackson as he looked at her.

“Ed is still alive, I can sense him.” Virginia yelled to the driver, “Can this thing move any faster?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Twenty minutes later Commander Lake walked into the command post with Jackson in tow. She had called ahead to let Foster know Ed was still alive. They had discovered what appeared to be another underwater dome beneath the loch.

“Sonar picked this up about ten minutes ago; it looks like the same type of dome we found off the coast last year,” said Paul.

“Where is that damned DSV?” she asked.

“Colonel Blake just called. They are about two minutes out.”
“All right, when it arrives, I want an assault team assembled to ride down in that thing. I want volunteers because this may be a one way trip.”

“Who is going to lead the assault?” Paul was afraid that she would pull rank and try to lead the assault herself. He was noticeably relieved when she continued.

“Paul, as much as I’d like to lead the raid, my place is here, I’ll be looking for a volunteer for that as well.”

“You’ve got one,” said Colonel Blake as he walked into the command post.

“Geoff, let me do this, I’ve been in one of these domes before,” said Paul.

“Foster, you’re a flyboy, not a ground pounder. Just tell me everything you can remember about that dome. Besides, I still need someone to pilot the DSV,” he said knowing that Paul wanted to go.
The new SHADO submersible could carry six in comfort to the deepest reaches of the ocean. It was also equipped with tracks allowing it to crawl on the bottom if needed. And it was armed to the teeth with torpedoes and a new directed energy weapon as well as a .50 caliber Gatling gun.

The direct line to HQ rang and Ginny reached to grab it.

“Lake.”

Paul watched a look of apprehension come over her as she spoke to HQ.

“I see...Very well, bring all SHADO stations to maximum security alert.”

Virginia hung up the phone and pulled Foster aside.

“Paul, I just received a call from HQ. The aliens are staging over one hundred UFO’s in area MNL 12. It looks like the mass attack that we have been expecting is here. I suspect one
function of the dome down there is to act as a forward command post for the attack. We think we have located another dome under the surface of Lake Superior. Colonel Grey is sending the other DSV out there now to investigate. If the UFO’s start their attack, I’m going to order the destruction of both those domes.”

“What if the team is still in there?”

“They know the risk, just like you did. Paul, I need you to promise me something, if I have to give that order, I want your word that you’ll carry it out, no questions asked. It’s going to be hard enough for me to make that decision again and I don’t want to have to worry about arguing with someone about it.”

Paul nodded his head in understanding, having a new found respect for this woman.

“Yes Commander.”

“Are you ready, Foster?” asked Blake.
“Coming.”

“Commander may I see you a moment?” asked Blake.

“What’s on your mind, Colonel?”

Quietly he said, “Virginia, I never apologized for my poor behavior earlier this year, I just wanted to say I’m sorry, and ask your forgiveness.”

Virginia Lake could tell he was sincere and she rewarded him with a grateful smile. “Thanks, Geoff. That means a lot and of course I forgive you.”

“Don’t worry Ginny, I’m going to bring Ed back, or die trying, I promise.”

“Just leave out the dying part okay?”

Foster, Blake and the assault team boarded the DSV. Blake sealed the hatch and climbed into the seat next to Foster. The DSV crawled from the beach into the water. The sonar systems on
the new submarine were designed to simulate marine life sounds. Any other underwater craft that heard it would think they were hearing a whale.

Near the bottom of the loch the visibility was almost nonexistent. Foster decided to kill the floodlights until they were right on top of the dome.

Blake turned to his team, “Ok people let’s lock and load.”

The team prepped their weapons as Foster brought the sub along the side of the alien structure. He turned the floodlights back on. The dome looked exactly like the one Ed and he had been inside last year.

Foster found a level patch of lakebed and set the sub down on it. He turned the sub on its tracks and slowly drove toward the dome. The DSV pushed through the membrane and the rupture self sealed just like it had in the Atlantic.
“Command post from DSV 1, we’re in.”
“Roger DSV 1, Good luck.”
Blake unsealed the hatch and got ready to exit the ship.
“Geoff, be careful,” Paul said as they left.

“John, its Ginny; what’s going on with our friends?”
“So far they haven’t moved, but the count is up to one hundred fifty.”
“Are the long range nukes ready on Moonbase?”
“They went on line this morning, but we’ll have to open failsafe to use them.”
“I was just thinking about that.” Virginia took out her failsafe key and placed it in the slot. The computer responded, VOICEPRINT INDENTIFICATION PLEASE.

“Commander Virginia Lynn Lake, authorization, Lake, Omega, 2141945.
VOICE PRINT POSITIVE, COMMANDER LAKE, AUTHORIZATION CODE CONFIRMED, FAILSAFE OPEN.

“Colonel Grey; I have just opened failsafe. I am authorizing the use of nuclear weapons at your discretion.”

“Thank you Commander, let’s just hope we don’t have to use them.”

In the dome, Blake’s team assembled outside the sub.

“All right let’s stay together, and check those corners.”

Blake and his men made their way through the interior of the dome when they came across an alien spacecraft. The hatch was open and two aliens were loading containers onto the craft. One of the aliens spotted the group; it raised a rifle and fired.
Ed looked up sharply when he heard the sound of gun fire. Katherine looked at him her eyes filled with terror. “What was that?”

He stood up and grabbed her hand, “Quick, over here.” Ed and Katherine pressed against the wall behind the door. “That’s the cavalry,” he said over more gunfire that he recognized as a SHADO assault rifle. “We might have to help ourselves though; do you think you can handle it?”

“I think so,” she said.

“Good.” Ed admired her strength, he knew she was scared as hell but it wouldn’t stop her from doing what she needed to do. She reminded him of Virginia.

The door opened and an alien came in with a rifle, looking for the captive humans. From behind, Ed grabbed the gun and wrestled with the alien knocking it to the floor. He pulled the rifle from its hands and smashed the butt end of
the weapon against the alien’s facemask. The glass shattered and the alien went limp.

“Okay Katherine. Follow me, and stay close.”

“All right.”

Blake’s team managed to kill both aliens, but Blake took a round in the arm.

“Colonel, you’ve been hit.”

“It’s not bad, I’ll live.”

The first team member, Lt. Hayes, treated the wound with haste.

“Ok let’s check these doors.”

Ed heard what could only be voices in the corridor. “Stay there,” he told Katherine as he proceeded carefully down the corridor. Ed’s adrenaline was pumping now as he fought to keep control of his fear, being worried more about Katherine than himself.
In the main corridor Blake’s team heard a set of footsteps coming down the hall. With his rifle at the ready Blake rounded the corner.

Blake lowered his rifle. “Commander Straker I presume?”

“Geoff, am I glad to see you? Come on Katherine let’s go.”

Blake looked at the Commander questioningly, “It’s a long story, Geoff.”

“So I gather.”

“All right, Hayes you take up the rear. I’ll take point,” Blake ordered.

The five of them raced through the corridors leading back to the submarine. As they ran Blake called Foster on the radio.

Colonel Foster had his own problems. Five aliens armed with assault rifles stormed the
submarine. Foster sealed the hatch and activated the Gatling gun on the deck of the sub. He killed two of the aliens and forced the remaining three to take cover.

“Foster from assault team, we’re on our way back, come in please!”

“Geoff, I’m under attack. Three aliens from the opposite corridor,” he said as he fired another burst.

“We’re about five minute away from the ship.”

“Understood.”

Foster managed to kill two more of the attackers, before the radio distracted him again.

“Colonel Foster this is Lake, come in please.”

“This is Foster, the team is on their way back now, they got the commander, and a young girl.”
At the command post Virginia was torn. The UFO’s in area MNL 12 were heading to earth. In addition to that ten of the twelve craft they knew about on Earth were now in the air.

“All right Paul they have five minutes. If they aren’t back by then, back out if that dome and destroy it. That’s an order.”

“Understood, Foster out.”

As Straker’s group came around the corner to where the alien ship was parked they ran into another group of aliens. A fire fight ensued, as bullets flew through the air ricocheting as they hit the walls. It took the team four minutes to fight their way through.

Blake looked at his watch, “We’re almost out of time.”

As they rounded the last corner two more aliens stepped out. Blake shot both of them but was hit himself, seriously this time.
The sub was in sight now, and Foster was still firing the Gatling gun, finally dispatching the last alien.

“You two; get Katherine to the sub,” said Straker.

Hayes and Rogers helped Katherine into the sub, while Ed went back for Blake. Straker picked him up in a fireman’s carry and dragged him to the sub. He brought him through the side hatch then sealed it.

Hayes was the team medic; he started treating Blake; he looked up at the commander. “He’s losing a lot of blood sir.”

“Do what you can for him,” Straker said as he looked down at Blake. You’re one hell of a brave man Geoff.

Straker climbed into the seat next to Foster. “Get us out of here Paul.”

“Yes sir.”
As Foster spun the sub around to leave the dome; Straker got on the radio. “

“Command Post from DSV 1, how do you read?”

When Virginia heard Ed’s voice over the radio she said a silent prayer of thanks. “Ed! Beyond all hope, I never thought I’d see you again.”

“Don’t count your blessings yet. What’s going on up there?”

“Ed, we’ve got one hundred fifty UFO’s inbound from MNL 12. They are coming in much faster than they did last year. I’m about to order a nuke strike.”

“I agree, don’t shoot too early; let them get in close. We’re getting ready to torpedo this dome now.”

Once the sub had cleared the dome, Foster spun it around to bring the torpedoes to bear. He
locked the firing solution into the attack computer and launched two torpedoes into the dome. Thirty seconds later the sub was rocked by a shockwave, it tossed them around violently but the sub suffered no serious damage.

Ten minutes later the sub had broached the surface of Loch Ness and was speeding toward the shoreline.

“Command post from DSV 1, tell Jackson to standby, Colonel Blake has been seriously wounded.”

When the DSV crawled onto the shore the triage team off loaded Blake and took him to the medical tent.

Straker, Foster and Katherine walked to the command post. Virginia was intent on the display and did not hear them come in. When she turned and saw Ed, she rushed into his arms.
“I guess they’re in love,” Katherine said to Paul. “You could say that.”

Virginia knew she should be updating the Commander rather than squeezing the life out of him. *To hell with the regulations, this is our moment.* She looked up into his eyes, “I thought I had lost you forever,” she said fighting back tears of joy. She wanted to let herself go as she needed the emotional release, but they were not in the clear yet.

“Virginia, I would like you to meet Miss Katherine Howard; Katherine this is Colonel Virginia Lake.”

“How do you do, Colonel?”

“It’s nice to meet you Katherine.”

“Paul, would you take Miss Howard over to the mess tent and get her something to eat?”
“Certainly. Miss Howard; if you will come with me please?”

Virginia turned to the display and punched up the tracking data being relayed from HQ. “This is where the first group of UFO’s is located. At their present speed they are about thirty minutes away. The second group is back here, about an hour behind the first group."

“Is failsafe open?”

“Yes I opened it about forty minutes ago. Colonel Grey has my authorization to fire.”

“Control from Command Post.”

“This is control, Ed is that you?”

“In the flesh, John. I want to wait until the UFO’s are about five minute out before you launch the nukes. That should minimize the number of stragglers.”

“Will do, Commander, welcome back.”
“Thanks John, Straker out.”

Virginia gave Ed a troubled look, “What are we going to do about Katherine?”

“I don’t know, the amnesia procedure is out of the question, selective hypnosis isn’t reliable, she’s too young to join SHADO although I suspect her to be an exceptionally bright young lady, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let security just disappear her.”

Ed rubbed the bridge of his nose he had been running on pure adrenalin for the past week. They were alone and Virginia reached out to hold him again.

“She doesn’t have any family either. Her parents went missing six months ago, and she has no other relatives,” she said.

“Do we have any other information on her?”

Virginia turned to the computer and typed in the query. “Katherine Beverly Howard...age 18, born: March 3, 1966, Foyers, Scotland. Finished
high school in 1983, accepted to University of Cambridge, unable to attend due to financial considerations. Has an extremely high IQ of 148, and an aptitude for mathematics.”

“I knew she was smart, she was down there all alone probably scared as hell but she didn’t let it show much.”

“You seem to be quite taken by her, Ed.”

“She’s young enough to be my daughter, are you jealous?”

“Maybe just a little bit,” she said teasing.

“Command post, from SHADO control.”

Ed flipped up the mic, “This is Straker.”

“Commander, we just launched the nukes. Time on target, two minutes.”

“How are we doing with the stragglers down here?”

“All ten UFO’s have been destroyed. We lost two aeroceptors from the Groom Lake squadron.”
“All right keep us posted.”

“Do you think they’ll take the hint?” asked Virginia.

“Nothing would please me more.”

Doctor Jackson stepped up into the mobile. “Colonel Blake is out of danger. I’m having him airlifted to Mayland Hospital now. He’s going to be off his feet for a few days but I think he will make a full recovery.”

“Thank you, Doctor. We have another problem we need to deal with,” said Ed.

“Ah yes, Katherine Howard. The usual amnesia procedure is of course out of the question. Does she have any family?”

“No, mother and father were both abducted and she has no other living relatives,” Virginia said.

“I see, that rules out selective hypnosis,” Jackson said.
“She doesn’t even know her parents are gone yet,” she added.

“Command post from SHADO control.”

Virginia keyed the mic, “This is Lake.”

“Commander, we got all but three of them, the interceptors have been launched and should be in a position to fire in about five minutes. The second wave has reversed course.”

“All right John, keep us posted.”

Lieutenant Stephen Harris and his team closed on the three remaining UFO’s. The pilots received the targeting information from Moonbase and set their weapons. A few minutes later they launched their missiles. This time it was a clean sweep as all three alien craft were destroyed.
Straker and Lake had watched the drama unfold at the command post. They looked at each other exchanging a smile of relief. Ed reached for the mic.

“Pass along our congratulations to all sections and stand down to Yellow Alert.”

Virginia placed her key in the slot. VOICE IDENTIFICATION PLEASE.

“Commander Virginia Lynn Lake.”

VOICE PRINT POSITIVE, COMMANDER LAKE, FAILSAFE CURRENTLY OPEN. DO YOU WISH TO CLOSE?

“Affirmative, close failsafe, authorization code, Lake, Omega, 2141945.”

AUTHORIZATION CODE CONFIRMED, FAILSAFE CLOSED.

“See I told you that you would be commander one day,” said Ed.
“That reminds me,” she said as she whacked him on the arm.

“Ouch, what was that for?”

“That was for that Commander Lake comment you made in the plane after Peter smoked us,” she said with a grin.

“Technically you are still in command.”

“Commanders I have to go close down the triage unit,” Jackson said as he stepped out.

“Did he just make a joke?” asked Virginia.

“Yes, I think he did.”

Twenty minutes later the mass wave of UFO’s was out of range and SHADO stood down to condition green. Loch Ness command was terminated and Katherine, Virginia and Ed were on their way back to HQ. On the flight back Virginia and Ed told her about her parents.
“I don’t have any family,” she said to them through her tears.

Virginia was holding Katherine while she cried. She looked at Ed and he nodded knowingly.

“Katherine, don’t worry, you can stay with us for now. Ed and I will help you get settled.”

Ed knew that they would have to figure out something for her situation anyway. He had an idea but he needed to verify a few things first.

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**Epilogue:**

December 1, 1984: 22:00Z

“General Henderson to see you, sir”

“Thanks Keith, send him in,” said Straker.

The office doors parted and James Henderson walked in. Ed stood and shook hands with his boss. “It’s good to see you in one piece Commander.”
“Thank you General. Help yourself to a drink.”

“No thank you.” Henderson sat down across from Ed. “I just wanted to let you know that I agree with your choice for executive officer.”

“I understand the two of you had words.”

“You could say that. She is just as stubborn as you are Ed. I don’t know how the two of you get along so well.”

“We think a lot alike General.”

“You look better than you have in years. Quite frankly I was afraid I was going to have to pull you out of here for a while. You must have known why Jackson was running tests on you every three months. If Freeman hadn’t gone to Dreamland last year, I would have put you on a six month furlough.”

“It helps to have someone to shoulder the burden with you.”

“So what are you going to do about Miss Howard?”
“Virginia and I are going to have her stay with us for now. She is going back up to Foyers with Katherine tomorrow to pick up her belongings and settle her parent’s affairs and put everything in storage. Katherine is going to put the house on the market and bank the proceeds. I’ve already called a friend I have in the admissions department at the University of Cambridge. Katherine’s acceptance is still valid so Virginia and I are going to arrange for her education.”

“That’s quite a bit of responsibility, are you sure that is what you want to do? And what do we do about her knowledge of SHADO and the alien threat?”

“Katherine is very mature for her age. She understands the need for security and why the general public must never know. She has agreed to sign and take the SHADO enlistment oath. Dr. Jackson will certify that she is mature enough to understand and be held accountable
for her decision. Her acceptance into SHADO will be contingent upon her completing her education. She told Virginia that she was going to have her PhD in four years.”

“That’s an eight year program,” said the General.

“Virginia did it in six, and that was while taking the summers off. If Katherine is able to finish in four years, she will have completed school by her twenty second, birthday. Don’t you think SHADO can use another theoretical physicist?”

“Is that what she wants to study?”

“Yes and her entrance exam scores show a very high aptitude for mathematics. She mastered both pre-calculus math and Calculus 1 while she was in high school.”

Henderson looked at his watch. “Well Commander, it’s late. I will support your decision on the matter of Katherine Howard. Good night Commander.”
“Good night General.”

As the door opened for Henderson to leave Virginia strolled into the office. “Good night Colonel,” he said as he left.

“Good night General.”

Virginia walked over to Ed and put her arms around him. “Katherine is still in medical, it looks like she is all right. She should be released in about forty minutes.”

“She didn’t want you to stay with her?”

“She started talking to Nurse Dana; they seemed to hit it off. Katherine told me I needed to spend some time with you.”

“She’s smarter than both of us.”

Ed reached down and locked the door; he knew that Virginia had not had her release yet and he could feel it coming to the surface. “It’s my turn to let you cry on my shoulder,” he told her as the tears came. Virginia held him like she never was going to let go.
When she could speak again she looked up at him. “I ordered Sky 5 to shoot down a UFO when I thought you were on it. I ordered your death Ed.”

“You did what you had to do, Henderson was impressed.”

“He said as much to me earlier this afternoon. I just hope I never have to go through this again.”

The intercom buzzer rang. “Yes,” said Straker.

Keith Ford appeared on the monitor, “Colonel Foster is on the line for you sir.”

“Thanks Keith, put him through.”

The image of Paul Foster appeared on the vidlink. “What have you got Paul?” asked Ed.

“We just finished a survey of the dome area under Loch Ness. It was completely destroyed; but the blast must have thrown the alien craft clear. We found it about thirty yards from the dome. It appears to be intact.”
“Are you serious Paul?”

“Yes sir, I’m sending the underwater footage now. The visibility is low but you can certainly make out the UFO.”

Virginia and Ed watched the footage as it was being sent. “It’s incredible,” said Virginia.

“It must have been powered down. Finally, we have a UFO, intact and undamaged. Paul, I’m placing you in charge of the recovery effort. I want it brought to our research facility west of London.”

“Yes sir, Foster out.”

“Well, we appear to have gone from lose, lose to win, win,” said Ed.

“While we are on the subject of winning, let’s set a date before fate throws us another curve ball,” said Virginia as she kissed him.
The next two weeks were busy for Virginia and Ed as they had picked December 15 as the big day and they had much to do. They had bought a new house closer to the studio and only ten minutes from the SHADO airfield. Katherine was settling in nicely and had already planned to start school in January.

At SHADO, Paul Foster had handled the UFO salvage operation flawlessly. Straker wrote him up for a commendation; only the third one he had written this year.

General Henderson was able to persuade the JCS into promoting Ed Straker to Major General, an unprecedented action. Henderson had always thought it was a shame that Ed had been taken off the promotion list.

Alec Freeman flew in on the fourteenth, and Nina came down from Moonbase the same afternoon. It was somewhat of a scheduling nightmare to accommodate everyone who was
to attend the wedding and some of the guests would have to leave early.

Virginia sat in the bride’s room of the wedding chapel. With her were Gay, Nina, and Katherine. “Are you nervous?” asked Gay Ellis Bradley.

“Yes,” said Virginia. More like terrified, she thought.

“Don’t worry; once you’re up there standing with Ed you’ll be fine,” said Gay.

“That’s if I don’t start crying my eyes out first.”

“Ginny, you look beautiful.”

“Thanks Katherine.”

At the altar, Ed stood with Alec and Paul. All three of them were in dress uniform.

“Those stars look good on you Ed,” said Alec.
“Thanks, Alec. So Paul, are you ever going to try this someday?”

“Maybe, someday.” That day might be sooner that you think. He looked out into the crowd and gave Jane a wink.

Professor Reinhardt knocked on the door of the bride’s room. Nina opened the door. “Is she ready?” he asked.

Virginia gave him a nod and stood up, “I’m ready.”

Reinhardt signaled to the organist and she began to play Cannon in D by Pachelbel. Katherine led the procession followed by Nina then Gay. Virginia took Reinhardt’s arm and they walked down the aisle in time with the music.

Ed had not seen her since yesterday afternoon and now, seeing her, in her wedding dress radiating beauty, had left him speechless.
Virginia handed her bouquet to Gay and joined hands with Ed. Professor Reinhardt sat down next to Lynn.

When the music finished the minister began to speak.

At the reception they had just finished dinner, and Alec was trying his best to get Ed to drink more champagne. “Later Alec, Ed kept saying. I need to be able to stand for our first dance.”

The band leader called for everyone’s attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen, for their first dance as husband and wife, Virginia and Ed have chosen the song, Faithfully.”

As the piano started to play Virginia and Ed pulled close to each other. They looked in each other’s eyes, as the band began to play. “Highway run…”
Ed looked deeply into the eyes of his new wife as he quietly spoke the words of the song from his heart. He thought about all the trials they had already been through and the trials ahead. For the first time in years he knew that he didn’t have to face them alone. As spoke the verse about no place to raise a family, he thought about their plans of having children. Ed had always wanted a family. He was speaking the part they changed, “My love, you stand by me,” turning the song into a duet. As he looked into Virginia’s eyes, he knew she would always stand by him.

Gay watched, as Ginny danced with her new husband. She wondered if Ed was singing to his new wife. How romantic, she thought.

“Circus life...” Virginia now sang as she gazed at her new husband now knowing that this was not a dream, but a dream come true. She too
remembered both the good times and the trials that brought them to this point, knowing they were forged at each other’s side. As she sang the words, “through space and time,” she thought about how appropriate the words were. She quickly kissed Ed between verses not missing a beat. As she sang, “I’m forever yours, faithfully,” she meant it as a pledge of her undying love.

As the band finished the song Virginia and Ed drew together in a kiss that promised love, passion, trust, and commitment.

Alec was embarrassed, having tears in his eyes. He looked around the room and saw he wasn’t alone. He didn’t see a dry eye in the place. Even Paul was wiping his eyes; that had to be a first.

Janice Ealand handed him a tissue; she had been seeing him shortly after the night at the
Register. “You know Janice, I never believed in storybook endings until today.”

END