

Change in the Air

by A. Berglund, © 2016,- A UFO Short Novel - *Sequel to Things Old and New*

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A very heartfelt thanks to Matthew White for his creation of a backstory and mother character for Virginia Lake. It opened up a world of opportunities to explore...

CHAPTER 1

It had been six months since the incident at Scarborough and three months since SHADO Moon Base had successfully repelled the vanguard of an alien invasion force. Attempted alien incursions had dropped off to only two or three of the smaller scout ships per month.

Some of the officials at I.A.C. were insistent that this indicated that the alien threat was coming to an end. They were pushing to cut the funding for SHADO. Cuts had already taken place after SHADO's cover industry in nuclear waste processing and storage had brought about a windfall of funding.

Many nations had jumped at the opportunity to rid themselves of stored radioactive waste that bypassed the tangle of regulations within their own borders. The operation had been unofficially dubbed "Transformation Enterprises".

All financial transactions were processed through multiple Swiss banks and laundered again through accounts in the Cayman Islands. Plausible denial was essential and their customer base insisted upon it.

It was necessity that SHADO and this operation be officially unconnected to preserve the security of both. The only time that SHADO operations connected with the remote island facility was to take on containers of depleted uranium ingots for casting into projectiles. This was done at night with no customs controls and air-tight security measures. The container ships were generic and nondescript.

Markers Transport trucks handled the containers once they made port in England. The site of the former Sea Side Holiday Camp near Scarborough had proven perfect to build a dock and warehouse facility. It had all simply been built over the ruins left by the SHADO operation there. The facility solved two problems at once.

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SHADO Commander Ed Straker was in his office at the underground headquarters, some 80 feet beneath Harlington-Straker Studios. He was well aware of the push at I.A.C. to cut funding to his organization. The drop off in UFO incursions was just a convenient excuse. They had seen the numbers of attacks increase and decrease multiple times during the thirteen years since SHADO had become operational. Straker knew from harsh experience that these drop off periods meant the aliens were working on something new. The last time it resulted in the large troop ships that utilized new membrane technology.

Straker expected the call from General Henderson for the last two weeks and it hadn't come yet. In fact, Straker's monthly report to him hadn't brought about so much as an irate phone call to complain about the additional 23 seconds it took to deploy five or six Interceptors instead of three...

Something was happening at I.A.C. and Straker felt it over his head like a dangling anvil. Uncertainty with the alien agenda was one thing, but he didn't appreciate having the foundation of his organization shaken when it was already weakened by the decisions of disinterested committee officials.

His mood had been soured and his temper shortened long enough. He had snapped at too many staffers just doing their jobs and was eating antacid tablets like candy. His lack of sleep had begun to affect his ability to concentrate and make decisions. He expected Dr. Jackson to send him home with a tranquilizer any time now...

Straker had decided to call Henderson and get to the bottom of this situation. His right hand was inches from the orange phone handset when it rang...

"Yes, Ms. Ealand?"

"General Henderson on the A.V. link from I.A.C. Commander."

"Thank you Ms. Ealand – put it right through."

The A.V. link chirped announcing the incoming call. Straker pressed the connect button.

Straker leaned forward toward the monitor camera. "Hello General Henderson, what can I do for you today?" he said with some acidity to his voice.

Henderson was slow to respond. Straker noted that he looked haggard and worn and as if he wasn't sleeping either. The General spoke softly, without his usual bluster. "Straker, this isn't a business as usual

call. I know I'm long overdue to respond to your report from last month. Let me clear that up now – I am quite satisfied with the report and status of all SHADO operations.”

“The delay in contact was of a personal nature... Look Ed, we've known each other for nearly thirty years so I'm going to be frank and cut to the chase. My wife Evelyn had a rather severe stroke two weeks ago. She's in a nursing facility in the Cotswolds and will have to go through months of rehabilitation before she can return home – if she can. Son, I'm punching out my timecard and retiring, effective at the end of this week... No fanfare, no parties, no fuss... I don't know how much longer we have together Ed, and I'm not putting her second in my priorities ever again. She stood behind me all these years – now it's my turn.”

“I'm so sorry that you and your wife are going through this, Sir...” said Straker with sincerity. Henderson and his wife had been more like parents to him than either of his own. Straker knew all too well how hard this job was on a marriage.

“I wanted you to hear it from me instead of through some official communique from I.A.C., my boy. Despite all the times we've butted heads over big or small issues, I've always been proud as hell of you. You have raised SHADO up from a loose assortment of science geeks, military types and bureaucrats into a juggernaut of global defense. Nobody else could have done what you have accomplished.”

“I learned most of what I know from you, General. You taught me to surround myself with brilliant and talented people, and to rely on and stand behind them,” said Straker.

“You learned it well and you have a great team to prove it, Ed. That brings me to my next topic...”

“The U.N. Security Council insists on me naming my replacement, but they also insist on you remaining in command of SHADO. I didn't buck at that since I know how much you would despise being locked in an office and surrounded by talking heads, bean-counters and bureaucrats. This job has probably sucked twenty years of my lifespan away with continual pointless chatter and bullshit... If I stuck you in this job, you'd be jabbing a Voodoo doll of me with push pins inside a week.”

“So who will be our new liaison to I.A.C., sir?”

“A Brigadier General named Gunther Prosser. He was a career combat pilot from the former West Germany and came up through the NATO command ranks. He's a military minded, defense-oriented no-nonsense type. He will be a rock solid ally for you and your crew and he has a way of handling bureaucrats that is just a joy to watch. It's like watching a T-rex in a sheep pen...”

“What is his interest in our organization, General?”

“He doesn't know about SHADO yet, but he will by the time I walk out the door. He'll want to spend time there with you all and asking lots of questions. I suggest your staff expect to spend plenty of time answering them. He's a hands-on command type. As for his connection to anything SHADO-related, he has personally shot down three UFO's during his service as a combat pilot for the Bundesrepublik Deutschland... He's going to love being in on the program.”

“Ed, I'll be bringing him to your site in person to meet you and your staff.”

“We'll be pleased to have you both here, General. We'll keep you and Evelyn in our thoughts and prayers,” said Straker.

“Thanks, Ed. We'll see you on Friday morning, say around ten.”

“See you then, Sir.”

CHAPTER 2

Thorvald and Virginia had been spending their free time together for two months. They were both slowly feeling out the connection they felt with each other. The warmth, the closeness and the attraction they shared were undeniable. They were both quite gun-shy and they agreed to take things slowly.

Virginia hadn't been involved with any man since her short attachment with Craig Collins and the brief moments with Paul Foster immediately afterward. In neither case was there anything she could call "love". They hadn't even been physical relationships. That was what Foster was after and she saw through his façade of sweetness in the aftermath of Craig's death. She was needing someone to hold her while she released the emotional turmoil within her. Paul saw an opportunity to take advantage of a beautiful and emotionally vulnerable woman.

When Straker and Freeman realized what was happening, they were ready to step in and end Foster's involvement, with a bullet if necessary. They were extremely protective of Virginia. It was her that stepped in and stopped them, saying it amounted to nothing and to let it go. She had saved Paul Foster's life and career and he would never know about it... He had matured in the decade since.

Thorvald had not been close to any woman in over thirteen years since his wife and daughter had been murdered and harvested by the aliens. He was struggling with feelings that he was being unfaithful to her by pursuing a relationship with Ginny. It was something hard for him to let go of. He was also scared to death to be intimate with a woman again. It had been so long and he was terrified of being a disappointment where it counted. Ginny was so beautiful and he couldn't bear the thought of not living up to her expectations and satisfying her desires.

* * *

Thorvald and Virginia had been to several eateries, music venues and films together. It turned out they had similar tastes in these so they ventured to art museums and craft shows together as well. Outside of work they were always hand-in-hand beside each other. They would take walks through parks and watch the sun set over water when possible. The romance was building and they were helpless to suppress it despite their personal fears.

They were together in Virginia's kitchen putting together a meal of savory oven-roasted chicken, wild rice pilaf, roasted root vegetables and fresh pumpernickel bread. Cooking together had become a regular occurrence for them.

Virginia loved to watch Thorvald prepare the dishes and present them with great care. She knew he did this, not just because of his fondness for cooking but because of his love for her... It had been as yet unspoken by either, but it was clear to each of them.

He could feel it in the way she embraced him and pressed herself against him, nestling her face against his chest. Her soft, beautiful grey eyes closed with each gentle kiss, and her smile and laugh made him feel warmth like he hadn't in so very long.

She could feel his love for her in the way he wrapped his arms around her and seemed to cradle her completely. She loved those expressive deep green eyes that seemed to open all the way into his core. There was nothing there that could ever hurt her. She felt the warmth of his smile and in his gentle but shaky touch.

Virginia knew what Thorvald was fighting inside and it broke her heart to see him struggling. She knew that he was worth waiting for and that they would be together like she dreamed of some day.

* * *

After their dinner they were sitting on the veranda on her porch swing. They were enjoying a glass of Merlot as the sun was sinking low on the horizon, painting the clouds with glorious shades of orange and yellow with streaks of purple. Thorvald's arm was around Ginny and she had her head on his chest, his cheek resting atop her golden hair. She could tell he wanted to say something but was holding back.

As they gently swung slowly back and forth she simply said, "What is going on behind those worried eyes, Thorvald?" He sighed nervously and took a sip of the Merlot to wet his lips and mouth which suddenly

felt very parched.

“I know that our relationship is moving at a more glacial pace than you would have expected. I want you to know that I have been meeting with Dr. Jackson to work through the issues that are keeping me from giving myself to our relationship with the fullness we both desire. It will happen, I promise you... Please, just don't give up on me, Love...” His eyes were misted, and she could see that he had been very worried.

Virginia turned to face him and placed her hand gently upon the side of his face. “That is something you never had to worry about, Thorvald. I love you and I'm not going anywhere without you beside me.” She kissed him tenderly and it released a sigh of relief and contentment from deep within him.

CHAPTER 3

It was Wednesday morning. Ed Straker was expecting a group in his office shortly. He was going to break the news about Henderson and his replacement to the command staff. Within moments Alec, Virginia, Paul and Dr. Jackson were there. He had also asked Thorvald to join them since he was such an old friend of Henderson's. Thorvald slipped in behind the group and up beside Virginia. He gave her hand a quick squeeze and stepped over. Straker noticed this and also the smile on her face.

The idea of Thorvald and Virginia together was not a worry to Straker or Freeman. They were supportive of the relationship in whatever form it took. Virginia was very happy and Thorvald was a man that would never hurt her and would defend her with his own life without hesitation. They were so compatible on so many levels... There were also no security issues with the relationship among SHADO operations. Foster even seemed to be happy for them both.

* * *

"I've called you here this morning to inform you that General Henderson is retiring, effective at the close of business on Friday afternoon. His wife is in poor health and he intends to spend whatever time they have left, together. He will be arriving Friday with our new I.A.C. liaison, a Brigadier General Gunther Prosser. He is an experienced combat pilot and was with NATO Command after the West German Air Force." Thorvald was grinning and shaking his head.

"I take it you are familiar with General Prosser," Straker said to Thorvald.

"Yes, Commander. He is one of those that knew of me from my *Project Mjolnir* days. He flew me in to several of my missions. A higher ranking flight officer was the pilot for those insertions for security reasons." He smiled again. "In retrospect, despite the many times he took off with me aboard, I've never actually seen him land an aircraft."

"What can you tell us about General Prosser, Thorvald?" Asked Straker.

"He is very much the rugged individualist, Commander. He is a unique personality, fond of good food, music and company. He was often referred to as 'The German Shepherd', not just because of his fierceness but also due to the great loyalty he gave and demanded from his reports. He forgets nothing he sees or hears..."

"I got a similar description from Henderson. He said we should expect lots of questions and give all the answers we can. He seems to think General Prosser will be a good fit with SHADO operations."

Alec added, "Are we going to throw a party or celebrate Henderson's retirement?"

Straker said, "He wants to go out with no fanfare of any kind. Just a quiet departure..."

Thorvald chimed in. "Perhaps we can give him a luncheon and welcome General Prosser as well. Oddly enough, I happen to know they both are fond of home-made chicken and dumplings as well as Dutch apple pie."

Straker grinned at him saying, "Thanks for volunteering, Thorvald."

* * *

Friday morning at just before 1000 hours, General Henderson and General Prosser arrived at Ms. Ealand's office at Harlington-Straker Studios. Straker stepped out of his office to welcome them. Both generals carried a brief case.

Ms. Ealand pressed the button on her desktop console that secured the room from entry. From her upper left desk drawer, she removed a small box with buttons that looked like a television remote control.

"This way, gentlemen," said Straker, motioning toward his office door. He allowed them to enter and for Ms. Ealand to precede him through the door. He closed and secured the door behind him.

Henderson began. "General Gunther Prosser, this is Commander Ed Straker and his Administrative Assistant Ms. Ealand. She keeps Straker on track both in the studio and at SHADO as well. When you pick up your phone at the I.A.C. and press the red button, she will be the voice at the other end."

Ms. Ealand spoke with quiet confidence that made General Prosser smile. "General, before you enter

SHADO HQ, there is one procedure we must take care of.” She held up the small box with the buttons on it and said. “Please say your name clearly into the microphone, General.” She pressed the two outer button simultaneously and a voice said, “Ready for voice print identification entry.”

Prosser stood erect and spoke with a deep bass voice with Germanic accent, “Brigadier General Gunther Jurgen Prosser.”

“Voice print identification complete. Authorization completed. Welcome, General Prosser.”

Ms. Ealand said, “Thank you, General, I look forward to serving your command.” She stepped back out of Straker’s office and re-secured the door behind her.

Ed Straker opened the humidor on his desk. “General, please say any part of your name into the humidor.” Prosser raised an eyebrow quizzically but followed the instruction.

“Prosser,” he said clearly.

“Voice print identification positive, Brigadier General Gunther J. Prosser.”

Straker pressed the hidden button that looked like a dovetailed corner joint on the humidor and the office began to descend the 80 feet down to SHADO Headquarters.

Straker took the opportunity to look over General Prosser. The man was an imposing figure to be sure. He stood around 6’3” or so, with a broad chest and shoulders. He had arrow straight posture and stood with his hands clasped behind him and feet nearly shoulder width apart. He had a taught and angular jawline, thin lips and light crystal blue eyes that looked as though they could cut like a laser. He wore his pearl white hair short cropped in military fashion.

Today he wore a black leather overcoat over a white banded collar shirt and midnight blue trousers with a perfect crease. Even his squared off black boots were perfectly polished.

He had a timeless look that would fit perfectly in any period of military uniform of nearly any nation. A soldier’s soldier. Prosser had a look of quiet strength and confidence. Straker understood why Henderson had such confidence in this man to be the voice of SHADO in the I.A.C. Nobody was going to intimidate or coerce this man. Straker wanted to see him in action before the committee of scientists, economists and bureaucrats. Like Henderson had said, a T-rex in a sheep pen...

* * *

The door of Straker’s office opened into the corridor. Prosser looked over the large SHADO logo on the wall. He smiled and followed Straker down the corridor toward the command post. Along the path, SHADO operatives at all levels stopped and stood at attention as the Commander and both Generals passed by them. Prosser noted every single face and committed each of them to memory.

He liked the cut of the operatives he saw. Each appeared to be fit, confident and quite dedicated to their commander. It was apparent to Prosser that Straker had the loyalty of his reports and that only came from returning that loyalty when things got tough. Prosser would insist on nothing short of that.

* * *

Straker’s office door was open. Colonels Freeman, Lake and Foster were lined up standing at attention. Behind them stood Thorvald and Dr. Jackson. Commander Straker stepped through the door followed by Henderson and Prosser. Thorvald instinctively snapped a NATO command salute. Jackson suppressed the urge to smile. Prosser noted the salute and recalled the face behind it. He grinned at Thorvald. The door whooshed closed behind them.

“At ease, everyone.” Said General Henderson. He then introduced each of the SHADO command staff, saving Thorvald for last. When completed, he stepped back and motioned General Prosser to address the SHADO staff.

Prosser stepped forward and took that same stance with his hands clasped behind him and his feet poised directly beneath his shoulders. He looked over each face before him. Despite his imposing appearance he spoke as one would to their revered peers. His crystal blue eyes and gentle smile warm despite the strength behind them.

“I am familiar with all of your dossiers and personnel files. I have been studying your monthly and

incident reports for the thirteen years SHADO has been operational and I will be asking you questions in the weeks ahead. I am counting on you to bring me up speed on SHADO operations in all sections, and I will be getting to know you individually and seeing how you interact and function here.”

Prosser continued. “I want you to know two very important things...”

“First, I am not here to change anything that you are doing. You have an efficient, effective and professional team here, in space and at sea.”

“Secondly, my job at I.A.C. is to fight on your behalf to secure the funding, assets and respect that SHADO deserves. If we cannot secure these things through the officially sanctioned channels, we will invent new ones...”

“I am not a diplomat, a bureaucrat or an accountant. I am a combat pilot. A room full of diplomats and talking heads, whether at I.A.C. or at the U.N.S.C. are just another soft-skinned target in my sights.” Alec was grinning like a schoolboy.

“There has been a Gunther Prosser in every global war of this century. My father was a U-boat command officer and was lost in action in the North Atlantic in 1944. His father before him flew an Albatross fighter in Oswald Boelcke’s Jasta 2 squadron, and was lost over France in 1917. I am the last Gunther Prosser, and I am honored to now fight for the preservation of humanity.”

“I am not here to command, but you may very well find me beside you, here and in the field when the action starts. Don’t take that as a criticism or lack of confidence in you. I accepted this position for one reason only... To help you get your job done. I am always available to you all for anything you ever find need of... Are there any questions?”

There was a collective sigh of relief. Straker and Henderson just looked at each other. Henderson smiled at him and said quietly, “This is the second-most brilliant decision I’ve made regarding SHADO... You were the first, my boy...”

CHAPTER 4

Thorvald had come in to the SHADO cafeteria kitchen near dawn to get started on the luncheon so that everything would be perfect and ready to serve on time. Dr. Jackson had come in early to spend that time talking with Thorvald about what was distressing him. Jackson had also quite naturally began helping process and cut the vegetables and apples for the dishes. Nobody at SHADO knew that Dr. Jackson was a competent chef in his own right. He made a double batch of Polish country-style yeast rolls to go with the meal while Thorvald was making the dumplings. Cooking with an old friend while chatting was always a joy to Thorvald.

The luncheon was a major success. The chicken and dumplings, yeast rolls, vegetable medley and apple pie had been a big hit with both generals and the other command staff.

After the meal, the cafeteria staff cleared the dishes and utensils from the conference table in Straker's office. The Commander offered cigars from his personal supply to his guests. Prosser graciously accepted one. He had his own clipper and lighter, which made Straker pause and smile.

Prosser slowly released a plume of grey smoke upward toward the lights. He turned the Lonsdale sideways, admiring the construction and the flawless natural wrapper.

"Very nice cigar, Commander Straker. I would be honored if you would accept a box of my favorite Toro's from my own stock."

"I would be delighted, General."

General Henderson spoke up. "Before we fully immerse in the pleasantries, there is something we need to discuss of a pressing nature. Straker knows, but you others probably don't as of yet. One of the reasons General Prosser is such a good fit for SHADO is because he has personal experience with UFO's. He shot down three of them during his days flying fighters for West Germany. Go ahead and tell them what you told me, Gunther..."

"General Henderson showed me the dossiers on the UFO's and aliens that you have been fighting against for over a decade. I engaged UFO's on two separate occasions over the Bundesrepublik, and neither time were they like the ones you've been fighting against." Everyone in the room was suddenly on the edge of their seat and listening intently...

"In both incidents, I was flying a covertly purchased, state of the art Saab JA-37 Viggen fighter with full avionics and targeting systems. In neither case was a radar image generated, nor missile lock obtainable. I was fortunate to have 30mm cannons in my underwing pods or I could not have fired on them and would have perished like the others in both flights. I have provided General Henderson with footage from my gun cameras and cockpit on both occasions. I had to switch the films with others to keep them from being confiscated by West German Air Force Intelligence."

"On both occasions, I encountered a different type of UFO which fired upon and destroyed my wingmen before I shot them down with conventional weapons. In both cases, the delay caused by the lack of target lock allowed the UFO's time to fire their offensive weapons."

"In short, there are more hostile alien races coming to Earth than just those green fellows in their spinning pie tins. The threat is much larger than SHADO realized..."

The looks around the table ranged from anger to horror at the prospect of what was coming... Each face was focused miles away recalling the horrific events of the last thirteen years...

It was Henderson that finally spoke again. "I picked a hell of a good time to punch out didn't I? Don't fret people, Prosser and I have some ideas on how to proceed in building up our defenses to accommodate other alien threats. This will be my parting shot on your behalf people. I have complete confidence in you all."

CHAPTER 5

Straker and his command staff looked over the proposed ideas with General Prosser while General Henderson wandered around SHADO HQ saying farewell to the staff and thanking them for their service.

Keith Ford had given him a misty-eyed hug which he gladly returned. Keith had been one of the first SHADO operatives recruited by Henderson and Straker.

Henderson entered the medical center. Dr. Jackson rose to meet him with a warm smile. Henderson embraced him and patted him on the back. “You’ve done a great job keeping this odd mix of military and science geeks on track and functioning on an emotional and psychological level, Yannick.”

“General, you’ve never called me by my real name before.”

“I owed it to you - and for good reason. I’m the one who chose the name Douglas Jackson for you coming into SHADO... It’s my fault. I thought a solid American-sounding name might give you an air of credibility to the outside world and help conceal your past more effectively. In retrospect, I should have been more respectful of your ethnicity and cultural heritage. I gave you a name more fitting of a cattle rancher or some all-pro quarterback... I’m so sorry, Yannick.”

Jackson let out a belly laugh that bent him at the waist and made his eyes tear up. “Please don’t feel badly for that General, you actually did me a great service by choosing such a name. It has allowed me to be a sort of enigma in my profession. People make an incorrect assumption of me based on my name then are brought face to face with my bulging eyes, bushy brows and a voice like Peter Lorre in ‘The Maltese Falcon’... It adds to their disorientation and makes their minds more susceptible to probing and manipulation.”

“It is always a useful tool to keep people guessing when they meet me, General.”

“I’m glad there are no hard feelings, Yannick. Thank you for all your years of hard work here and at I.A.C.”

“It has been an honor to serve in your command, General.”

* * *

Straker and his command staff escorted General Henderson to his blue Rolls Royce for the last time. Hands were shaken, hugs were exchanged by those so inclined and Virginia gave him a kiss on the cheek.

He would return to his office for the sole purpose of signing the documents making Prosser the Commanding General at I.A.C. and SHADO liaison to both U.N.S.C. and the world... Henderson’s signature carried much more impact than just sending a professional wolf into a den of self-absorbed sheep – it also released a large monetary fund and made assets available to SHADO for immediate build up.

Henderson knew there was a storm coming and that SHADO would be all that stood between humanity and destruction from beyond our solar system. Prosser would see to it that they were ready when the time came...

He presented the mandates to the governing committee. Those that were paying attention were incensed that there was no vote, appeal or revocation possible. They were bound under an obscure Charter provision to accept the changes and make it happen immediately. He greatly enjoyed his last contact with them all...

Henderson knew these talking heads hadn’t read the Charter carefully beyond the sections that they had authored to secure favors for their own countries. Henderson had made sure the Charter and by-laws had these special provision to be played as his trump card when needed. He had patiently endured the pointless, self-righteous bullshit of the committee for over thirteen years just waiting for this specific day...

Henderson placed a few personal items from his office into a box and walked out with his head held high in defiance. He simply dropped his facility keys and identification pass on the desk in front of the security guard on duty.

He ambled to his blue Rolls Royce. His driver placed the box in the trunk beside his luggage and closed the door behind his employer of over twenty years. The elegant machine slipped quietly out the main gate and accelerated in the direction of the nursing facility in the Cotswolds.

James Henderson would never return to London again. The thought didn't cause him any discomfort. He had made the world a safer place than he found it and he had established the only independent global defense organization in existence. His farewells had been satisfying and appropriate. He left with no regrets about the way his career had gone or ended – except for one...

He was on his way to make that right now. His beloved Evelyn had suffered so very many lonely nights and days due to his professional life. She had been alone when she had the stroke. The night maid had found her. That broke his heart beyond words.

Now, he would see to it that she was never alone or lonely again.

“Pedal faster up there, would you Hastings?”

“Gladly General...” He was not only Henderson's personal driver but also his trusted bodyguard. An appointment personally arranged and payed for by Commander Ed Straker in gratitude to his mentor of nearly 30 years.

CHAPTER 6

“How in the hell are we supposed to get all this done in short order, General?” Asked a frustrated Ed Straker. His hand was cupped across his forehead in an attempt to stall the coming headache.

Prosser clipped a Toro cigar for both of them and expertly toasted the foot of each with his lighter. He handed one to Straker, which he gladly accepted.

“Commander, we do this following the same successful recipe that brought SHADO to its current glory. We recruit and employ the brightest and best of humanity while our experts expand our infrastructure and scale up the operation,” said Prosser, releasing a plume of silky grey smoke toward the lights.

He added, “It is exactly what you have done for the last thirteen years, Commander... I did not come here to lob a grenade and walk away... I am here to help you for as long as you need me to be.”

“You seem to be an unflappable optimist, General. You also have a unique leadership style,” said Straker. The Toro cigar was quite a bit larger in ring gauge than his Lonsdales, but incredibly smooth.

“I am simply a pragmatist, Commander. I utilize what works. In the same vein, I will also promise to tell you you’re full of shit when it is appropriate.” He smiled...

“As far as leadership style, I learned from letters that were written to me by my father while at sea, Commander. He learned his command leadership from watching Admiral Karl Doenitz.”

“Doenitz did not command from some bunker in Berlin or a palace in Paris. He lived at Kerneval, within sight of the canal leading to the Keroman submarine bases. If at all possible, he was there to see his U-boat crews off on war patrol and also there to welcome them home. He knew all of his commanders and many of their crew members as well. He took care of them and provided for them, even when Hitler was casting them aside in favor of yet another misguided campaign.”

“Doenitz was loyal to his U-boat crews and saw them as more than push pins on a map. They were fiercely loyal in return, even when the allies had developed effective detection methods and anti-submarine weapons. U-boat service was entirely voluntary and commanders hand-picked their crews.”

“There was never a shortage of volunteers, even when the attrition rate climbed to over 50 percent. They put to sea out of love for country, sense of duty and to protect their loved ones – not to satisfy some Nazi ideal. They stood alone...”

“They knew up front there was a less than even chance that they would ever see home again. By the end of the war, U-boat losses were over 75% Commander, my father being one of those lost... He was no Nazi, he was a patriot for his homeland and an inspiration to his men. They share their war grave...”

“A compelling example, General,” said Straker. He knew as a student of history that the texts covering the events of all wars usually reflected only the viewpoint, rhetoric and propaganda of the victors.

The records and documents of the vanquished usually never saw the light of day after the fact, except in international courts of law to support the prosecution of war criminals. The atrocities and brutalities of war were very real and committed by victor and vanquished alike...

“My leadership style is based on two very different sources, General,” said Straker, slowly building a smile and a sear in his blue eyes. “From antiquity, my inspiration is found in Attila the Hun.”

Prosser grinned, a plume of smoke exiting through his toothy smile. “And the other?”

“General James L. Henderson. Both could be described as demanding of personal integrity and duty, but equitable, reasonably open-minded and fiercely loyal to those who serve with honor.”

“Well said, Commander Straker. Well said...” Stated Prosser with a gleam of pride in his eyes. “We will work well together...”

Straker said, “I want to assemble my full team here tomorrow morning to get some ideas on paper and develop a path forward, General. I’ll send word to those off-site to be here well rested at 0700 hours.”

“Excellent, Commander. I will go to the cafeteria and arrange for catered breakfast, lunch and possible dinner for all involved,” said Prosser.

Prosser rose from the chair to his imposing full stature. He arched his back to stretch it and tilted his

head to the left and to the right. Sitting had caused him to stiffen. He noted Straker's concerned look and said, "Commander, I am not a young man. Most people my age are worried about stretching their pension checks and why their children and grand-children never seem to visit." Straker smiled...

"Do you have a dormitory here, Commander?"

"Yes General, but I can provide you with a fully furnished apartment for your use as long as you need it. The dormitory is primarily for young SHADO operatives, lab people and support personnel. Each room has a private bath, but the dining, laundry and recreational facilities are used by all residents," said Straker.

Prosser smiled and said, "Perfect. That is exactly what I am looking for, Commander. I want to get to know them and I want them to gain a report with me as well. We will need the participation of all of them to get this job done.

"Oh, and I have provided my own transportation as well. My *motorrad*, or perhaps I should call it a motorcycle - is parked out front. I followed General Henderson here this morning."

Straker said, "I have taken the liberty of giving you a viable cover story to explain your presence on the site topside, General. There is no doubt that you would be eventually recognized for who you are, so your cover will be to act as technical advisor for military themed films. We do a lot of documentaries here, sir."

Straker continued, "It will take just a short while to arrange your accommodations and an office here, General. In the meantime, please feel free to walk the halls and familiarize yourself with the facility."

Prosser smiled. "That is a grand idea, Commander..."

* * *

Prosser stepped into the cafeteria entrance. He spoke with the staff in the kitchen. He saw Thorvald and Virginia sipping coffee at a corner table and moved toward them. "May I join you?" he asked.

"Please do, General. Can I get you a mug of coffee?" Asked Virginia.

Prosser sat down opposite them. "No thank you, Colonel Lake. I felt compelled to greet my old comrade, although the name change will take time. Please don't be offended if I call you Magnus." Thorvald smiled as did Virginia. Prosser could see they were a couple, but somehow not fully connected. He could see in Thorvald's eyes that there was some obstacle there. He had seen those eyes filled with purpose and bravado before, but never worry or sadness.

Prosser spoke softly. "I am pleased to see that the report of your demise was untrue, old friend. My heartfelt condolences on the loss of your dear wife and daughter. I cannot even imagine the hell you have been through and it breaks my heart for you. We insertion-extraction pilots feel a very special bond and sense of responsibility for our op's friends." Thorvald's eyes darkened...

Prosser continued, "You probably didn't know it, but I knew your Helge before you were a couple. She worked at the farm market near the base where you and I were stationed. I saw her at least twice a week for fresh vegetables and fruits. She was always such a joy to chat with. I knew her well enough to know she would be pleased that you are not alone, Thorvald. She wouldn't have wanted that to happen, ever..."

Thorvald's eyes were tearing up. "Please excuse me, General." He left the cafeteria quickly leaving Virginia and Prosser behind.

Prosser said softly, "I caused my old friend great pain, Colonel. I am so sorry..."

Virginia smiled through her teary eyes, "No General, you just freed your old friend from a very heavy burden. Thank you so very much, Sir..."

CHAPTER 7

The next morning, Virginia stepped out her turbine car in the parking lot. Dr. Jackson pulled into the adjacent stall in his pristine older Mercedes coupe. She waited for him to gather his things so they could walk in together.

“Doctor Jackson, may I ask you something?” She said sheepishly. They began to walk toward the entrance.

“I have been expecting your visit, Colonel Lake. It is no secret that you and Thorvald are deeply involved and I know he is struggling with some powerful emotions.”

He continued, “I would imagine that it feels like you are competing against ghosts for his affection. They are a very real part of who Thorvald is and represent an important portion of his life.”

“If I could offer any suggestion to you, Colonel, it would be to realize that memories of his late wife are not a threat to you. In fact, it would bring you two closer together if you were to simply embrace the memories of his late wife and daughter. Help him celebrate them and when appropriate, grieve for them...”

“Now, what was your question, Colonel?” He asked quizzically.

“As usual Doctor, you have answered it already.” Virginia laughed. It made Jackson smile as well. She added, “I don’t know how you manage to do this every time...”

* * *

Prosser and Straker greeted the command staff as they entered his office. Prosser stood behind him and to his right as a gesture of confidence and support.

“Help yourselves to coffee, tea and breakfast and we will get started,” said Straker. Prosser handed him a mug of black coffee. “Thank you, General.”

Around the table sat Straker, Prosser, Colonels Freeman, Lake and Foster, with Thorvald and Dr. Jackson as well.

He began, “If you look in your folder you will note there are still photos taken of the UFO’s by General Prosser’s gun and cockpit cameras. You will notice they are quite different than the spinning silver domes we are accustomed to. The top photo is of a spherical glowing orb that disintegrated two fighters and accelerated to nearly Mach 4 before turning back on the General’s aircraft.”

“The next photo shows two elongated crescent-shaped UFO’s that not only banked and turned like terrestrial aircraft, but they also attacked and flew in formation like our own would. They also accelerated to nearly Mach 4 and were able to pull near right-angled turns at that speed.” Alec let out a slow whistle. Paul’s jaw hung slack.

“These two UFO’s fired a beam type weapon of intense heat that quite literally vaporized two modern combat aircraft.”

Foster blurted out, “How in the hell do you fight against these things?”

Straker spoke up. “I’m glad you asked, Paul. In this case, a picture is worth far more than a thousand words... Watch the monitors. The left is the gun camera composite and the right is the cockpit view with heads-up display (HUD). I have chosen not to add the cockpit audio as you might find it disturbing enough without...”

Straker pressed the play button on the remote controller for both screens. Alec and Paul were on the edge of their seats. “Would you care to narrate, General?” He handed the remote to Prosser. It was night footage. The left screen was blank but the date/time signature showed in the lower left corner which matched the right.

The footage began of the glowing white sphere off in the distance. “Here we are climbing upward toward the object. You’ll notice the climb rate, G-load and airspeed of Mach 1.4. We are closing on the object, to within 5 kilometers.”

He paused the films. “There is nothing on the radar screen and the UFO is about to do something unimaginable. It is going to reverse course without slowing and accelerate back at us. It happens very

quickly. The bright flash to my left is my two comrades being destroyed by the UFO.” He started the tape again. It was simply a blinding light that grew quickly until it took up the whole screen. The display on the HUD showed that Prosser had just executed a 4-G turn to the right. A brilliant flash illuminated the canopy interior. Red lights on the thermal threat management readout flashed quickly in response to the heat of the explosion behind him.

Prosser continued. “Now I am descending to gain airspeed in an increasing radius right turn. The object is to my right as I come around and it is moving away but turns again to come back at me. I firewall the throttle and climb rapidly to my service ceiling. At the top, I cut throttle and snap the nose over into a dive.” The HUD display was dizzying and the visible gauges were all in rapid motion.

“You will now notice the object is directly in front of me and climbing while I am diving toward it at full throttle.” The Mach register was climbing to over 2.3. “The object is unswerving as I open up with my guns.” The left monitor began showing 30 mm tracers, each followed by nine explosive projectiles. Prosser was rolling his ship, creating a vortex of fire to cover maximum surface area. A blinding flash whited out the screen on both sides. “The UFO has been destroyed and I must now pull out of a high speed dive without scattering myself all over the Black Forest.”

All of the faces around the table were white as a sheet.

“Are we ready with the second film, Commander?”

“Just press play again, General,” said Straker.

Freeman and Foster sat with their jaws clenched and fist tight enough to make the fingers whiten.

Prosser began again. “As you will note, the second incident takes place in daylight. Our flight was dispatched to look for the two objects. We had an idea what general area they were in and their direction.” He started the tape. “We are at low altitude and cruising just over Mach one, with me in the point position. Again, there is no radar image or missile lock possible.”

There was a flash in the canopy and the thermal threat indicator was flashing quickly. “The two UFO’s have just vaporized the other members of my flight from behind and overflown me at nearly Mach four.” They were just a silvery blur...

“I am now going vertical with full afterburner to gain the advantage of altitude and to put the sun behind me. You will note the G-load, altimeter and airspeed indicators.” The dizzying image through the canopy was of the sun rotating slowly around the nose as Prosser was rolling vertically, looking for the UFO’s.

“I found they had circled back around and were now speeding along in close formation from behind me but just above the ground. I suspect they lost sight of me against the glare of the sun. I have now reached my service ceiling and cut throttle again to bring the nose over. I am now the ‘Hun in the sun’ and diving inverted on them at over Mach two.” The image of the ground was closing quickly while the indicators swung wildly.

“They are close enough together that deflection shooting of my 30 mm cannon pods presents a wall of projectiles that they fly directly through. They both impact on a rocky outcropping less than a kilometer away. I roll upright and pull out...”

“Are there any questions?”

The films proved to be a white knuckle ride for all of the command staff and they sat in stunned silence. Straker was an experienced fighter jock but the others were reeling from culture shock. Air combat was more intense than they had imagined.

Straker decided to break the ice. “General, what kind of projectiles were you firing in each incident?”

“Standard 30mm explosive ordnance with incendiary tracer rounds. This is the middle 1970’s you are seeing,” said Prosser.

Paul was next. “Who taught you maneuvers like that, General?”

“I learned from former Luftwaffe pilots who had survived the war. It was a different experience for German pilots than their Allied counterparts, Colonel.”

“Allied pilots rotated in and out of combat duty, and after so many sorties were sent home or off to other non-combat roles. German pilots in both wars simply flew until they were either killed or the war ended.”

“Honing survival instincts in the cockpit are what defined their training from any other flight schools I’ve ever experienced. In air combat, it is often the case that real victory comes down to simple survival...” Straker added. “I have watched these films several times now and I believe I can safely say that there are two reasons why the General survived these encounters.”

“First, he did not waste time trying to make something work that didn’t.”

“Secondly, he was continually thinking outside of the box and not bound to a standard procedure that could be easily anticipated by his opponent.”

Straker continued. “General, was anything recovered from either incident that would tell us about these other alien species?”

Prosser said, “Regretfully little, Commander. There was little recovered from the glowing sphere, suggesting that it was not structure as we know it. There were fragments that looked similar to thick egg shell. That material disintegrated within a matter of hours. I suspect that it may have been remotely operated and had no pilot.”

“The wreckage from the two crescent-shaped craft required excavation to expose fully. They were able to salvage bits of an unknown metal, none larger than a fist and badly deformed. That was collected and confiscated immediately.”

“The most useful information that the investigation team discovered was biological material scattered among the wreckage. I encountered great difficulty getting any information about this. It appeared to be reptilian flesh with humanoid musculature and partially hollow bone structure. Also, the ground where the biological material was scattered was saturated with greenish liquid, high in oxygen content...”

“Shit!” exclaimed Commander Straker. “This is what I feared as soon as I watched those films from your encounters, General.”

“That egg shell material that disintegrated in hours... The green oxygenated liquid... Our alien opponents are collaborating with other hostile alien species.”

“They are either sharing, or more likely copying more advanced technologies.” Straker’s face was red. “Our aliens may prove to be the slower-witted kids in the galactic neighborhood... Their scout ships seem much less advanced.”

“I’m afraid there is more to it Commander,” said Prosser with a gaze like glacial ice.

“The small size of these craft would suggest that they were short-range vehicles and not interstellar craft.”

Prosser placed his hands flat on the table and leaned over it. “These alien craft got a ride to our planet...”

CHAPTER 8

By late afternoon, they had a game plan. Everyone felt a bit overwhelmed at what was before them. The necessary training, design and commission of new equipment, systems and facilities were all staggering. Straker was sitting at his desk, a gaze miles away. He placed his hands over his face and took a deep breath.

Straker looked and sounded exhausted. “Most of this is planning, staffing and training with a major load of design and construction. What has me stymied is how in the hell we’re going to pay for it all...”

Prosser dropped a plain looking folder in front of Straker and pulled two Toro’s from his pocket cigar sleeve. He clipped them and toasted the foot of each. He had a broad grin and a razor sharp gleam in his eyes. He pushed the folder toward the Commander and flipped it open.

Straker began reading and his countenance changed completely. He accepted the cigar from Prosser and took a long pull on it. A smile was forming on his face as he read...

“What is that, Ed?” asked Alec. The command staff stepped over toward his desk from around the conference table. Prosser stepped around behind Straker and to his right so the rest could stand in front of the desk. He stood erect with his cigar clamped securely in his jaws.

“This is a duplicate of the document General Henderson shoved down the throats of the I.A.C. and U.N.S.C.” His eyes were lit up and shining as he read on and turned the pages. He turned a few back just to make sure he read them correctly. He was now laughing out loud. He looked over the puzzled faces of his command staff...

“Once more, General James L. Henderson has saved the world...” he said.

“This document not only restores absolutely full budgeted funding to SHADO, but dumps a massive windfall from I.A.C. into our coffers, provides for commission upgrades for all SHADO officers and staff and makes major changes at I.A.C. in structure. They now answer directly to General Prosser for all SHADO matters.”

“The committee can never cut support or funding to us again and this document makes the United Nations Security Council legally and financially responsible for any damage to life, property or infrastructure due to alien hostilities and collateral damage as a result of defending the Earth from them.”

“There is also a list several pages long of well-padded offshore accounts and real estate holdings around the globe for our use. I suspect the value may be well into the upper hundreds of billions... I can’t even imagine how these came to be.”

Straker turned around and looked at Prosser. “You knew about this, didn’t you?”

Prosser just grinned broadly and winked. He released a large smoke ring over Straker’s head. “Your guardian angel intended to make sure you would keep your halo intact, Commander.”

They all shared a laugh and a renewed sense of optimism.

Prosser leaned forward and spoke softly to Straker. “It was never intended for me to occupy General Henderson’s office at I.A.C., Commander. It was intended to generate a healthy fear when they see me arrive unannounced...” Straker grinned.

* * *

Big changes were indeed coming. SHADO’s underground complex would more than double in size. The excavation would enter through the rock quarry beside the studio grounds.

The dormitory would become one of three in a complex with a university-like setting for training courses. Even the medical center would double in capacity and staff.

Planet Earth would be surrounded by a global network of advanced satellites that watched for all types of measurable anomalies in the depths of space in all directions. S.I.D. would get substantial upgrades as well.

Moon Base would not only grow but would become the space-born headquarters for two additional Earth orbiting platforms for launching new long range Interceptors.

Terrestrial defense would no longer be limited to Skydiver units and Mobiles. There would be new

SHADAIR bases scattered around the globe for launching long-range high speed variable wing-geometry interceptors and tactical fighters. Several would be on remote islands that would also serve as bases for the enlarged fleet of updated Skydiver submarines and surface vessels.

SHADO would also train and disperse a network of intelligence agents around the globe to look for alien activities, influences and presence here on Earth. They would be supplemented by rapid insertion strike teams with state of the art weaponry.

The SHADO Command Staff would be very busy recruiting and training new staff in all areas of operation. This was going to be a huge undertaking...

* * *

Following the meeting, Thorvald walked with Virginia back to her office. It had been a very long but productive day. Thorvald closed the door and secured it behind them. "I need to tell you something, Virginia..."

She looked at him with a mix of worry and wonder. "What is it, Thorvald?"

"We are going to be very busy and pulled away from each other in the months ahead by our duty schedules. I don't want that to happen without me having said this..." He wrapped his arms around her and looked deep into her storm grey eyes.

"I love you with all my heart, Virginia." She felt as though she was melting, yet she felt equally weightless in his arms. "I cannot and will not hold that love back from you ever again... I want you to be my wife, and soon." He raised her hand gently upward and softly kissed the back of it then pressed it against his cheek.

"Oh Thorvald, I want that too, Love." She kissed him tenderly, her fingers slipping through his hair. "We should probably make a trip to Brighton first though. I think my mother would be insistent on meeting you first."

Thorvald smiled. "Good. I have something very important to ask her..."

* * *

Commander Straker called the Command Staff back to his office and spoke to them as a group once more before they called it a very long day. Everyone noticed that Virginia and Thorvald were standing hand in hand. They all smiled at that.

"I need to express a couple last things before we depart. There are two here that have potential issues with being recognized out on recruitment drives due to their past lives. Yes, that's you, Thorvald and Dr. Jackson. They will be tasked with training the prospects that the rest of you bring in according to their fields of expertise. You will all be working with designers, machinists, aviation and aerospace engineers, covert operatives, strike units, pilots, naval recruits, etc."

The last thing I want to say, General Prosser has also put his blessing on – Namely that you all have the next two days to yourselves to take care of whatever personal business you need to complete before we hit the ground running... There won't be time to stop once this machine gets rolling... Now go home and do some living." He finished with a broad smile.

Prosser leaned over him and said, "You take off too, General. I think Major Ford and I can handle the overnight shift together. See you in the morning."

Straker didn't argue – he was exhausted and his thoughts were becoming disorganized.

Everyone stepped out of Straker's office while General Prosser remained behind. Ford had just arrived to take Ayshea's duty station for the overnight shift. Prosser rolled a chair from the conference table out and right up beside Ford.

"Hello, Major Ford," he said with a toothy grin and a sparkle in his eyes. "I am General Prosser. I'm going to work beside you tonight so you can show me what goes on at your station."

Ford looked terrified momentarily and then looked puzzled. "Did you say Major?"

Prosser smiled warmly and put his hands on his knees. "You heard correctly."

Ayshea overheard the exchange as she was gathering her belongings. She put a hand on Ford's shoulder

and said, "Congratulations Keith! It was a pleasure to meet you, General Prosser," she said preparing to exit.

"It was for me too, Captain Johnson..." She paused in her tracks and looked back at the imposing man with the broad grin on his face. Prosser noted the glow in her soft brown eyes and the lovely smile on her face framed in beautiful flowing black hair. He would try to sketch that image later if time permitted.

"Thank you, General." She turned and stepped toward the exit energetically.

CHAPTER 9

The following morning Virginia pulled up in front of Thorvald's apartment ready to head for Brighton. When he came out she was sitting on the passenger side with a sweet smile. "Really Love, you want me to drive this turbine machine?"

"You might as well get accustomed to it, Thorvald. Besides, if you can happily take navigation directions from a woman, it will be proof that our love will last forever..." she said with a giggle.

"May it never be said that I am unwilling to take direction from a woman..." he said with a grin. "You will know someday soon how far that policy goes, Love." He had a devilish glint to his eyes.

She cut her eyes at him with a sensuous smile and said, "I can hardly wait..."

Thorvald pressed what he assumed to be the appropriate buttons. The car rolled forward into the parking block with a thump. Ginny stifled a giggle and patted him on the shoulder. "This button is forward and this one is reverse, Love." He looked down again near his feet. No clutch and no gear lever. He made an effort to be smooth with his inputs. The turbine engine spooled up in rpm's and the car headed out to the motorway smoothly. He got a feel for it quickly...

* * *

Virginia had navigated for Thorvald right up to her mother's driveway. It had been an enjoyable trip. They had chatted and relaxed, talking about the future and things they'd like to do together. Virginia's mother was peeking out from behind the curtains as they walked toward the door hand in hand. She liked what she was seeing already. This brawny bear of a man absolutely adored her daughter.

Thorvald paused, feet from the door. He suddenly felt incredibly nervous and his feet felt like bags of wet clay. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. Virginia was incredibly amused by all of this.

"Where's my Viking warrior? After years of combat experience and jumping out of airplanes in the dark, this is what scares you?" She laughed and mopped his brow with a handkerchief. "She is going to love you almost as much as I do..." She grabbed his arm with both hands and towed him in through the front door.

"Mom, we're here..." she said loudly. Her mother appeared from another room she had just scurried to in order to give the right appearance. They embraced and kissed each other on the cheek.

"Lovely to see you, dear," she said, with all the charm and grace of a princess. Virginia's mother was stunning, and not a lot older than Thorvald. It was easily imagined that strangers might assume them to be siblings. Virginia was cut from the same bolt of cloth as her mother but didn't inherit her deep brown eyes.

Virginia spoke sweetly. "Mom, this is Thorvald Magnusson. Her mother had already heard much about this man from her daughter but she played along. She stepped in front of him and held out both hands. Thorvald gently placed his hands around them and gave a warm smile. She looked up into those deep green eyes and then back at Virginia.

She broke from Thorvald's hands and instead moved in, giving him a heart-felt hug. "This is how we really say hello in this house, Thorvald." He wrapped his arms around her, perhaps a little too tightly. She stepped over toward Ginny and said, "You were right dear, those eyes are just bottomless... They look as though you could swim in them." Thorvald's cheeks reddened quickly. "All that formality and manners crap goes out the window as of now, Thorvald..." She smiled up at him.

"Relax darling, she likes you," said Ginny.

They chatted in the kitchen over coffee. Virginia was amused seeing her mother awestruck by Thorvald automatically slipping a towel over his shoulder and preparing to make them a gourmet lunch.

Her mother whispered to her. "Good Lord Ginny, he's gorgeous, he adores you and he's sweeter than any dessert you can name. Plus, he cooks like a professional chef. If you don't marry him, I will..."

Virginia laughed. "He is actually going to ask you for your permission to do just that. He is very big on Old Country tradition, Mom."

"Which one?"

"He's from Northern Sweden mom, the Lapland region, where people still herd reindeer and stuff. He

speaks of it like a snow covered paradise.”

“How fascinating darling. That short ponytail and the grey highlights in his hair are just sexy as hell. Great body as well.”

“You noticed that too... He is also a brilliant musician and craftsman.”

Thorvald was in his kitchen groove and began humming a folk song from his childhood on the family farm. Virginia and her mother were smiling and bobbing their heads to the tune behind him, amused at his expense.

Thorvald found the plates, utensils, glassware and napkins without input. Virginia and her mother just gazed, smitten.

Thorvald set their places and plated the savory dish and sides for them. He poured the wine for each and joined them. “Mrs. Lake, I’d like to ask you something very important after our meal.”

She played along. “That would be fine, Thorvald.” She slipped a bite of his offering into her mouth and her brown eyes grew. “My goodness this is delicious, Thorvald.”

They chatted over the meal and when finished, Thorvald cleared the table, rinsed everything and loaded it in the dishwasher. He placed the leftovers in a container and then in the refrigerator. It took only a few minutes to complete.

He asked Mrs. Lake if he could speak to her privately. Ginny just smiled and sipped her coffee. She could see them on the screened-in porch. Thorvald was sitting across from her mother. She was playing the unknowing role to perfection. She placed her hand in Thorvald’s while he spoke, looking very earnest.

Ginny saw Thorvald stop speaking and her mother glanced back at her with a wink. She saw her mother say something and Thorvald responded. He kissed her hand and squeezed it. She could see he was thanking her profusely... They both rose and came back in. Virginia’s mother gave her a covert thumbs-up. Thorvald was beaming...

Virginia rose up to embrace him. “Come with me, Thorvald, I want to show you the gardens.” She said, taking him by the arm. Her mother moved to a seat by the window so she could enjoy the spectacle. They walked slowly hand in hand.

“Thorvald, this is my favorite place in the whole world. I spent much of my childhood sitting here among the flowers, dreaming of all the wonderful things that might be before me. This was always a place of great hope and joy for me.”

Thorvald said, “That makes it perfect for this then.” He removed a box from his pocket and bent down on one knee taking her hand gently in his. Her eyes and smile grew to a look of surprise. He looked up into her eyes with a glow in his. “Virginia, I don’t want to spend one more single moment of my life without you beside me. Please make me a complete and joyful man by being my wife.”

She pulled him up to her face, her eyes tear-filled and gleaming. “There is nothing in this world or any other that I want more Love. Absolutely yes...” She kissed him tenderly and glanced back toward the house.

She could see her mother in the window, pumping her arms over her head in celebration. She put them down before Thorvald turned back in that direction. She was teary eyed, so pleased that Ginny had finally found the love of her life. Her mother had prayed for this for so many years...

Virginia and Thorvald walked arm in arm back to the house.

There was a round of hugs and the customary showing of the ring to the mother. A bottle of champagne was opened to toast the engagement.

Virginia and her mother sat on opposite sides of Thorvald on the sofa while they showed him pictures of Virginia’s father, both in uniform and in family photos. He now knew where Ginny’s steel grey eyes came from. Her parents were a handsome couple and Ginny was an adorable child. He never had doubted it.

As evening approached Thorvald offered to make another meal or take them both out to celebrate at a fine dining establishment. Ginny’s mother looked at her daughter and said, “No thank you, Thorvald. It’s been a full day and you two have much to do and quite a drive ahead of you...” She turned and winked at Ginny.

Thorvald hugged her again and thanked her graciously once more. She walked them to the door. As she and Ginny embraced she whispered, "I'm so happy for you Love. He is everything I ever hoped for to be your partner in life. Your father would have loved him too, dear."

The sun was setting as Thorvald opened the door for his fiancé and climbed in on the driver's side. He found the starter button, then seemed to be searching...

"Where are the lights, Ginny?" She pressed a button on the console and the headlights opened and illuminated. The gauges in the dash lit up as well. They just smiled at each other. One nice feature on a turbine car was that the driver and passenger could hold hands and not have to break them in order to change gears...

A couple hours into the drive, Thorvald asked Virginia, "Are you hungry, Love?"

"Yes Thorvald – hungry and sleepy. I've made this trip hundreds of times and there is a small village up ahead with a cozy Italian place. There is also a place near there on a lake that rents the cutest little furnished cottages. We did both bring an overnight bag dear." Thorvald smiled – he was getting nervous again...

The Italian dinner was authentic and perfectly prepared. After dinner they sat hand in hand sipping their wine and gazing into each other's eyes illuminated by the glow of the candle. They would remember this day always and would try to come back to this little eatery often to recapture this moment. This night was indeed very special.

They were able to get the last of the little cottages that looked out over the lake. Thorvald paused on the porch looking over the water. "Sjubolet," he said. "It means 'cottage on the lake' in Swedish. I hope to have a similar view for our home in the future." Inside, the décor was like a step back in time. Except for the somewhat modern bathroom and quaint electric lights, there was nothing that would look out of place in the early 1900's. The center point of the room was a beautifully crafted oak bed with a forest scene carved in the headboard and elegant lines in the posts. It was covered by a hand-sewn quilt and several fluffy pillows. It was inviting.

"You go ahead and get ready, Thorvald. I might need a bit longer..." He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. Virginia was looking at the sparkling glint from her new ring and feeling some fear. It had been so very long since she'd been intimate with anyone. She was well into her 40's and the years had changed her body much since that last time. She was afraid he wouldn't like what he saw...

She looked at her ring again and steeled herself. "This man loves me dearly and nothing can change that now." She would be herself. A loving, grown adult woman.

In the bathroom, Thorvald was having his version of the same talking-to. Would he be able to satisfy such a beautiful woman? Would she be repelled by his bizarre collection of scars, including the newest one for his cardiac implant? It left a pink slash below his left collarbone and felt like a large tin of sardines under the skin. The others were a mix of bullet wounds, blade wounds and evidence of having been scourged for hours in an attempt to extract information when he'd been captured.

His body looked like twenty miles of bad gravel road and he was worried... He looked in the mirror and pulled up his best Viking warrior gaze. "This woman loves you and wants to be with you for life. Suck it up soldier, and bring your 'A-game' to the field." He finished getting ready and emerged wearing a simple robe.

Virginia smiled and stepped in with her overnight bag. Thorvald waited, sitting in a hand-made oak armchair with quaint quilted cushions. He was still nervous.

Virginia opened the door and stepped out, looking positively radiant in a flowing silk robe with delicately embroidered flowers. It was a champagne color with pale pink borders and sash. She stepped slowly over to where Thorvald was seated, now on the edge of his chair. He leaned forward and she moved to him, her sash slipping loose and the robe parting to reveal the full glory of the woman he so adored.

Thorvald's eyes seemed to glow. He reached inside her robe and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her snugly. He closed his eyes and buried his face in the luxuriantly silky skin of her abdomen, her breasts cradling his head. She ran her fingers through his hair gently, kissing the top of his head. She felt him shudder a few times and realized he was softly weeping with his arms wrapped tightly around her. Tears

filled her eyes.

“Thank you for not giving up on me, Ginny,” he said, with a soft shaking voice. “I never believed I would ever know anything this beautiful... Thank you Love, thank you, thank you...” She pulled him up and kissed him tenderly. She untied his robe and pushed it gently off of his shoulders. She let hers drop behind her.

They embraced and shared their first lingering passionate kiss. There would be no more restraint or fear for either. They made love, tenderly and thoroughly. It left them both physically and emotionally spent and blissfully satisfied. They slept the contented slumber of completed souls finding fulfillment.

CHAPTER 10

After a blissful night of sleep wrapped around each other, Thorvald and Virginia awoke, relaxed and toasty warm under the blankets. They looked at each other, smiling, looking deep into each other's sleepy eyes. Then the both began to laugh uncontrollably. They each were sporting a crop of hair that was flat in spots and pointed to all directions of the compass in others. Bed head...

They brushed their teeth and enjoyed a leisurely shower together. They gently and thoroughly washed each other and shampooed each other's hair. Virginia made an effort to shave the appropriate parts of Thorvald's face. For them it was simply an act of loving kindness – the kind of intimacy that can be shared daily for life, no matter how long that might be.

They took their time getting ready but both were quite hungry. They found a small restaurant nearby that served the traditional English country breakfast. Thorvald wasn't sure what to think when it arrived but Virginia had said, "Trust me..."

Eggs, toast, sausage... and baked beans? Thorvald was a little hesitant at first but the flavors actually worked together, the smoky flavor of the sausage and beans complimenting the eggs better than he would have expected. He also knew all too well that there were a few traditional Swedish foods that were only palatable to other Scandinavians, and maybe felines. Even he couldn't force himself to eat lutefisk...

They had the whole day so they made a trip to the Cotswolds to visit the Henderson's. They wanted to share the good news with them and to ask the General if he would be willing to stand as either Thorvald's Best Man or to stand with Virginia's mother to represent her late father.

James Henderson greeted the visitors warmly. His beloved Evelyn was sitting in a wheelchair with an afghan spread over her legs and left arm. She was sharply dressed and her silver hair was pinned up with perfection. She looked up at Thorvald and recognized those deep green eyes. She tried to smile but it was clear her left side was not responding.

She reached up with her right hand. Thorvald kneeled down in front of her and she placed it on his cheek. "You're that lad that brought my James home to me when everyone else said he was missing and presumed dead."

Her eyes were tearing and her voice was getting weaker sounding. "Thank you, son. Now I have him all to myself..." Thorvald stood and leaned over, kissing her gently on the cheek. She motioned to her husband to come near and whispered in his ear. He laughed and looked at Thorvald.

"She said you look much better with a full head of hair," said Henderson. "Last time she saw you it was a quarter inch long." He looked at Virginia. "Now what's all that sparkly jazz on your left hand, Virginia?" She and Thorvald just beamed...

They talked of the engagement and asked the General to be a part of the ceremony. He graciously declined but thanked them. Evelyn could not travel yet and he would not leave her.

He told them he sold that drafty massive house on the estate they had lived in for nearly twenty years. He joked that there were rooms he still hadn't entered after all those years. He had bought a more reasonably sized traditional home here in the Cotswolds – thatch roof, stone walls and sheep for neighbors. A paradise...

Some of his home staff had moved with him but he would never need a game keeper or gardener again.

Mrs. Henderson had fallen asleep. Her husband whispered his thanks for the visit and wished them well in their new life together with the demand that they come back for regular visits...

The drive back to Harlington was filled with talk of wedding plans and things of the future. They had a game plan although it was clear there would be no nights apart again unless one of them was travelling or on duty. Home would be wherever they could be alone together.

* * *

They were just a bit delayed getting in to Straker's office. Their shower had gone a bit longer than expected, so Virginia followed Thorvald's example and just put her hair in a ponytail. That alone had probably made up at least 10 minutes.

They stepped in together. Prosser, Straker, Freeman, Foster and Jackson were already there. They all noticed the couple had a very different vibe.

Straker smiled. "Virginia, what is that thing on your hand that is sparkling like a disco ball?" She smiled and blushed. Thorvald was standing right behind her and to her right, grinning like a schoolboy.

Virginia turned and swatted him in the gut. "Well... say something!" Everyone else erupted in laughter.

Straker said, "I see you two have made the most of your two days off. Thorvald is already at a loss for words..." Now Thorvald was turning red. They talked briefly of the visit with the Henderson's and the plans for the wedding that they were trying to put together quickly. They wanted to have it during the next week...

Virginia had most of the details worked out and all of the people in Straker's office had a part in the ceremony. It would have to be nearby and simple. She said, "I just don't know where to find a clergyman on such short notice."

Dr. Jackson spoke up. "I can perform the ceremony for you gladly." They all looked at him. "General Henderson didn't put it in my personnel file, but I was a young Novice studying for the priesthood when the war broke out. I put that on hold to serve in the Polish underground. After completing my medical training, I completed my divinity studies and was ordained."

This explained a great deal. Jackson was a brilliant interrogator, swinging from icy detachment to apathetic patron and all points between at will. It also explained his gift in the role of gentle, caring counsellor for those in need.

"Did none of you ever wonder why I never had a woman in my life?" he asked, feigning irritation. He knew that they had all assumed he was either gay or simply asexual. It was an amusement to him.

Virginia said, "Neither of us are Catholic Doctor." Jackson laughed.

"I can do Catholic, Protestant, Hebrew or whatever you need. I would best be described as a chaplain over the term priest. And it would be my honor..."

Thorvald spoke up. "That means I need a new best man Yannick, but we would love to have you perform our ceremony. There is only one other person that has known me for that many years. Would you please stand with me, General Prosser?"

Prosser grinned, "I would be honored to do so, Thorvald. I will always stand by my Viking friend..." Thorvald smiled broadly.

Ginny said, "Ed, Alec, I want you to stand with my mother in the place my father would have stood. She knows you both and thinks the world of you."

Straker and Alec both nodded and smiled.

Paul Foster looked at them and simply said, "Well...?"

Virginia laughed, "You'll be my flower girl, Paul..." He grinned.

Thorvald said, "We know you have a solid baritone singing voice and we'd like to have you sing a duet with Ayshea during the ceremony." Paul looked shocked.

Virginia added, "Thorvald can hear both of you singing in your respective showers so don't deny it. The wedding will be a sort of old-world, simple Swedish ceremony. What we want you to sing is a simple, beautiful Swedish hymn - a capella... Oh yes, in English..." she said.

Straker said, "We can do the wedding here if you like. We can turn a sound stage into a slice of Old World Sweden in short order. That actually is a good segue into our first topic for discussion of SHADO business..."

"We are going to need every square foot of this site to accomplish the herculean tasks we have outlined. In order to make that happen will have to close the film studio and dismiss the staff."

"We will do so under the guise of bankruptcy or an action by the board of directors. Since there is no board of directors, we can pretty much do whatever we need to as long as the story is a good one."

"We'll give all those near retirement a generous early payout and the rest we'll give a years' severance pay. We can even provide letters of reference to those deserving. We need to tell them the facility has already been leased in case they see activity here when they drive by."

“The beauty of it is that once things stabilize again for SHADO, we can re-open the studio under new ownership. Our cover in the community must remain intact at some level...”

“Alec, would you take care of getting the set crew to create our little slice of Sweden?”

“I’m on it, Ed,” he said, giving Ginny a wink as he passed by and out the door.

He continued, “I need to go upstairs to work out the details of the closure. I hope to have an empty upper deck by the end of the business day - tomorrow at the latest. You all know your assignments...”

Straker stepped out, leaving Foster to maintain the vigil while the others went their own ways. Prosser stepped out with Virginia. Thorvald was already several steps ahead looking like he was on a mission.

Virginia said, “Thank you for being his Best Man, General.” Prosser smiled and said quietly, “I don’t want Thorvald to ever know this, but I used to watch over him like a mother hen over her baby chick.”

“He was always sort of a lost soul, being an enigma of combat and espionage. It was such a lonely way to live... I saw the depth of his character and brilliance and felt driven to protect him. He drew my profound respect and admiration the first time I worked with him. He was an absolute Master of his craft...”

“He doesn’t know that I did two highly-illegal deep cover extractions to recover his nearly lifeless body. He never knew how he got home and I don’t want that to change...”

“You’ve no doubt seen his horrific scars. They are a testament to the resilience and determination possible in man. He is that rare combination of sage and poet-warrior, and an absolute credit to his Viking ancestry...”

“If I could have ever been a father, I would have wanted a son exactly like him...”

Virginia smiled. “General, I should probably warn you about my mother who will be attending the ceremony.” He looked at her puzzled. “She is going to be absolutely smitten with you the first time you two meet and chat.”

“How could you possibly know that, Virginia?” he said grinning.

“Because she is a brown-eyed, nineteen-year older, carbon-copy of me...”

CHAPTER 11

Straker was in his office with Ms. Ealand going over the plan for shutting down the studio. He and Alec would make their presentation to the studio staff at a 2pm group meeting. They scrambled to get the individual packets ready by then.

At 2pm they addressed the studio staff, both salaried and hourly - and told them that the board of directors that controlled Harlington-Straker Studios had decided to cut their losses on the film business and had already set up a lease for the property to a third party to do light manufacturing and distribution.

The staff were disbelieving at first but were awestruck by the generous severance package. Those within five years of retirement would get the complete package immediately and not have to scramble to find employment to fill the time gap.

Although there was disappointment, HSS provided letters of reference to many of the staff as a help to find further employment. Straker and Freeman's signatures carried a great deal of clout as studio executives. Their employees would be well taken care of and there was nothing to regret about the way it had been handled.

Ms. Ealand and the other staff that did dual duty with the studio and SHADO would stay on, with their formerly hidden SHADO rank and commission status becoming their sole identities. These administrators, accountants and personnel staffers would be busier than they'd ever thought possible.

* * *

Thorvald found Bill Harvey in his woodshop in the fabrication department. He was putting some items in a box to take home. He was one of those whose retirement would begin at 5pm today.

Harvey had given Thorvald unlimited access to the woodworking equipment and materials after having worked with him on so many projects. Those late nights building furniture with the two young craft apprentices had been special to him. Harvey loved the way their eyes lit up when he and Thorvald had taught them classic joinery, shaping and finishing techniques. They had learned well...

Thorvald had made several items that he had under a tarp in the lay down area. He had made something special for Bill in gratitude and for his friendship.

Harvey's most prized possession was an old family Bible that dated back to the 17th century and it contained hand-written letters and charts retracing his family tree to that period. It was in need of careful storage and preservation.

Thorvald presented him with a beautifully crafted, hand-made wooden case in which to store the treasure. It had dovetailed joints that blended Birdseye maple on the front and back with rosewood sides and base. The top was also Birdseye maple with a delicately carved rosewood inlay depicting a crucifix with rising sun behind it.

It had taken many hours to complete but it had become a labor of love. Harvey had inspired him, not only as a craftsman but also as a human being. He would miss him...

Bill Harvey was overwhelmed by the gift and his smile beamed continually, even as he drove out of the main gate later.

Thorvald had to retrieve a few items he had stored there in the lay down area of the shop. One was a large wooden structure he had built and the other, an item he had built specifically for Ginny during the two months they had been together...

It would become her wedding gift...

* * *

The following day was a whirlwind of activity. All of the preparation for the wedding the next morning had been shoe-horned in between travel planning for recruiting and a red alert for a UFO incursion.

Prosser was in Straker's office when it had occurred and he was fascinated by the tactics and professionalism of the Moon Base personnel.

He was visibly thrilled when Straker informed him that he was scheduled to be on the next Moon

Shuttle, late the next afternoon. He would see the installation in person and meet the staff. The very first Prosser in space...

He would spend time on a Skydiver when he returned.

* * *

Straker arranged for a chauffeur-driven limousine to transport Virginia's mother to and from her home in Brighton. He had included champagne service and an assortment of her favorite snack items.

She would stay with Virginia tonight and depart following the reception. It would be the only night that Virginia and Thorvald would voluntarily spend apart ever again...

* * *

Thorvald took a break from setting up two classrooms for trainees to go look at the sound stage that would be the setting for the wedding. It was beautifully done and looked much like the setting of his grandparents wedding photo in Lapland.

There was a white runner between two sections of white wooden folding chairs. A border of pine boughs with cones bordered the runner and flared out to surround a riser where they would stand. Simple wooden candle stands flanked the area where Dr. Jackson would stand. Other than the wedding party, there were only two things missing from the setting. Thorvald would resolve that now.

He opened the massive door behind the setting allowing the sunlight to softly illuminate the scene. He began to assemble the final touch. It was a structure of natural-finished carved oak that rose upward on each side to an ornate cross-beam. It resembled and symbolized a doorway through which they would enter their new life together.

Thorvald had built it from memory, inspired by the image of his grandparents' wedding day. They had stood within a frame just like this for that photo. He attached pine boughs to the frame with wire. He stepped back, his thoughts going to the memory of his elderly grandfather and the role model he had been for him.

Everything was ready...

* * *

Thorvald and Virginia hadn't needed to avoid each other the remainder of the day. Their busy schedules had done that for them. They would not see each other again until they stood before God and their revered witnesses.

Every effort was made to ensure that Virginia's mother would see only an active film studio. All SHADO staff would park in the studio lot and many would be seen wandering in street clothes in the background.

It was agreed that Prosser would represent his military presence as a technical advisor in case her mother might possibly speak of him later.

Ms. Ealand had agreed to be Virginia's attendant as well. All of those not maintaining the vigil of duty would be able to attend in civilian clothes. They would rotate topside for the reception.

CHAPTER 12

The following morning, all was in place for the wedding. Virginia's mother was warmly welcomed by Straker and Freeman in his studio office. It would serve as the bridal chamber prior to the wedding.

While Virginia primped and prepared, Straker escorted her mother in a golf cart to the setting for the ceremony for a peek. She was amazed at the charm and coziness of the set. It really did look like an old country church.

She also noted Prosser talking with Dr. Jackson. He was in his full formal NATO Command dress blues with several rows of medals and awards across his chest. His short white hair accented by pristine white gloves and gleaming tall black leather boots. She pulled Straker near to whisper, "Ed, who is that impressive man?"

"He's the Best Man. I know Virginia will tell you all about him..." He drove her back to the office to tend to her daughter. The time was getting near...

* * *

Thorvald entered the set to fully open the doors. Prosser and Jackson were still chatting. A warm, golden glow from the morning sun spread a gentle illumination over the scene.

Prosser approached him, putting an arm around his shoulders. "Do you have pockets in that outfit, Thorvald?"

"Yes General..."

"Call me Gunther, please." Thorvald smiled.

Prosser continued, "There is a tradition common to many countries, called "something borrowed – something blue... I want you to place these in your pocket for the ceremony, son."

Prosser held out his white gloved hand. In it were two very old military medals. "This is my Grandfathers' 'Blue Max' from the Great War, and my Father's 'Iron Cross with Oak Leaf Clusters'. I never flew a sortie without these securely in my possession. This puts three generations of Gunther Prosser squarely behind you in support." Thorvald's eyes lit up.

"I'm afraid a handshake simply won't be sufficient," said Thorvald, embracing his old friend. Prosser patted him caringly on the back.

"I'm so very proud of you, Thorvald. You are a man after my own heart... We should retire to the ante room now so the ceremony can begin."

* * *

The guests were seated and the recorded music began. It was Beethoven's 'Emperor' Concerto in E flat Major. Dr. Jackson took his place on the podium with lit white candles and a warm sun behind him. His vestments were simple and elegant.

General Prosser entered with Ms. Ealand on his arm. She wore a tasteful pale blue dress with her hair pinned up into an elegant swirling braid. She was well matched to her escort. They parted and took their places.

Thorvald entered next, wearing a blend of traditional Saami and Swedish attire. He had a white banded collar shirt, open at the neck with long full sleeves. His grey woven trousers tapered down to formal black leather and wood clogs with a fine polish.

He wore the same wedding vest that his Grandfather had worn all those years ago. It was closely clipped natural deerskin with a black border around all of the edges. The border had intricate hand-embroidered tiny flowers in blue, red and yellow with orange centers. Green vines connected them, meandering along the entire length of the border. His hair neatly pulled back into his customary short tail, he took his position on the podium with his Best Man behind him.

Virginia's mother entered on Alec's arm. She was impeccably dressed and carried herself like a countess arriving at a formal ball. Alec was beaming, pleased to escort such a lovely woman. They took their place in the front row.

The music paused and everyone rose and turned around. Thorvald's heart was pounding. He was grateful that his pacemaker was up to the task...

Paul and Ayshea began to sing a beautifully harmonized rendition of the old Swedish hymn.

*"Children of the Heavenly Father,
Safely in His bosom gather,
Nestling bird nor star in Heaven,
Such a refuge ere was given..."*

In stepped General Ed Straker with Virginia on his arm. He wore a simple tuxedo that matched Alec's but was confident nobody would ever notice it. Paul and Ayshea sang the next two verses in the background.

Virginia was a radiant vision of beauty in a simple cream gown with matching lace covering around her back and shoulders. Upon her head was an elegant tiara of finely woven green vines ringed in delicate white blossoms of Baby's Breath.

As she gracefully glided toward Thorvald, he noted that she had something cradled lovingly in her arm. It was his hand painted wooden Dalla horse. It had reminded Thorvald of the one so treasured by his little Anna. Ginny's wedding gift to him was to embrace the memory of his beloved daughter... His eyes filled with joyful tears.

Straker and Alec gently kissed Virginia's cheeks simultaneously and took their places on either side of her beaming mother.

Virginia stepped up to face Thorvald, placing her hands in his. Their eyes were locked together, both gently illuminated by the glow above.

"Who gives this woman to be wed?" Asked Dr. Jackson.

"We do!" Said Alec, Ed and Mrs. Lake in unison. Smiles erupted behind them.

They exchanged vows and rings backlit by the morning sun...

Dr. Jackson pronounced them husband and wife and they shared the first kiss of their marriage. Jackson introduced them to the assembled guests and they all stood, applauding.

Thorvald and Virginia, husband and wife with their lives before them, stepped symbolically through the wooden archway and down the aisle arm in arm.

The reception was simple, elegant and relatively brief. Mason from security was serving as the disc jockey and there was a dance floor adjacent to the tables.

Following the luncheon, toast and the cutting of the wedding cake, Virginia took her mother around to meet the other guests, suitably giving their studio cover identifications. She saved Prosser for last although her mother kept glancing at him across the room.

"Mom, this is Brigadier General Gunther Prosser of NATO Command." Her brown eyes were gleaming. Virginia continued, "He is the studio's technical advisor for all military themed productions."

Prosser bowed taking her mother's hand and kissing it gently. She swooned a bit. She smiled sweetly, gazing up into those gleaming crystal blue eyes.

"Mrs. Lake, would you care to dance?" She nodded and looked at Ginny. Prosser stepped over to Mason and slipped him a very crisp bill of generous denomination to deliver three Strauss waltzes back to back. He returned and held his hand out to Mrs. Lake as the music started...

They stepped gracefully hand in hand to the center of the dance floor and began to waltz like were surrounded by royalty in a Vienna grand ballroom. Slowly, other couples stepped in around them, circling the General and his partner. Virginia and Thorvald watched them, enjoying the spectacle and then joined the dance.

After the three waltzes, Prosser escorted his lovely partner to a seat and brought her a glass of champagne. They chatted long about life, family and the war that once separated their homelands.

They spoke of Virginia and Thorvald. She was taken by the way he spoke with such fondness for both of them. Mrs. Lake was indeed smitten by this gentle but powerful man who represented everything admirable about their generation.

Prosser glanced at a clock in the background and bid his dance partner a fond farewell for now. He congratulated the wedding party and departed.

Mrs. Lake walked over to Virginia and Thorvald, still glowing from her time with Prosser.

“Are you okay, mom?” She smiled and her cheeks reddened a bit. It was just as Virginia predicted...

“He’s an amazing man, Love, and he thinks the world of you both,” she said. “But he said the oddest thing just before he left. He saw the time and said he had to go pack a bag for the Moon...” She looked puzzled.

Thorvald and Virginia laughed. As Thorvald turned, Mrs. Lake caught sight of some of his wound scars, briefly visible through his open shirt. She looked back at her daughter and smiled sweetly. Virginia said, “Don’t worry mom, I’m sure he’ll call when he returns...”

The happy couple, Straker and Freeman escorted Mrs. Lake to her waiting limousine. She embraced them all, saving her daughter for last. She whispered in her ear, “I don’t know what you all really do around here, but you’ve surrounded yourself with an amazing group of friends, dear.” Virginia kissed her cheek.

Mrs. Lake said to her chauffeur, “Come on cutie - take me home...” She blew a kiss from the back window.

CHAPTER 13

Gunther Prosser entered the command post at SHADO HQ wearing his armored riding suit with his white full face helmet tucked under his arm. He had a satchel in his opposite hand.

“Where exactly am I supposed to go to meet my ride to the Moon?” he asked. He paused with a smirk. “I can’t begin to express how odd that felt coming out of my mouth...”

Straker laughed and gave him the directions to the SHADAIR hangar at the regional airport. Prosser stepped out to his BMW R100GS-PD and stowed the satchel in the bulky right side aluminum pannier. The left one was narrower inside to allow passage of the single exhaust silencer. It contained his tools and First-Aid kit.

He donned his helmet and gloves, set the choke lever and thumbed the starter. The machine growled and he accelerated toward the main gate. With no studio left and full protocols in place, the security staff saluted him as he rolled by, hand off the throttle briefly to return it.

* * *

In Straker’s office stood the remaining command staff, including the newlyweds. “I’m sorry to separate you two so soon after your vows with no prospect for a honeymoon,” he said.

“We knew that was the arrangement,” said Virginia. “Besides, a honeymoon is wherever you make it. We’ll take an official one down the road when time permits.”

Straker continued, “Thorvald and Dr. Jackson will remain here with me, while Alec, Paul and Virginia kick the recruiting drive into high gear. Thorvald and Dr. Jackson simply have too much potential to be recognized by an old nemesis that wants them dead.”

“You others will go to universities, military academies, industrial sites and anywhere else you can find candidates to be pilots, naval operatives, engineers, scientists, astronauts and combat troops.”

“You will each select at least five SHADO operatives to go with you and train them in how to conduct detailed interviews and process candidates. They will also train under Dr. Jackson for interrogation instruction in order to weed out unsuitable individuals.”

“Your protégés will continue to beat the bushes while you return here to begin design and commissioning of new equipment. We have to get this right the first time and do it quickly...”

Straker continued, “Do not overlook pending or currently retired candidates. “Many of them are forced out unwillingly in order to fill their slots with new lower paid workers. They have experience that we need, especially as aviation and aerospace engineers.”

“Thorvald will head up our combat training center and develop the curriculum. You will also teach covert operations and infiltration techniques to those you select from the combat center. We might as well start calling you ‘Professor’...”

Straker continued, “The good Doctor will be doing psych evaluations of new recruits almost continuously. I suggest you train a group of assistants to use your techniques in order to keep up. You will also train our field intelligence agents in interrogation techniques. We need them out there probing as soon as possible.”

“Ever since that awakening about other more advanced alien species, I’ve had a nagging thought in the back of my mind that our customary visitors might just be a diversionary force to take our attention off of something much more sinister...”

Straker continued, “General Prosser had an idea to create Rapid Assault Units to hit terrestrial incursions or operational sites. The transports and Mobiles are always useful, but they are not quick on the scene by any measure.”

“These RAU’s will be strategically deployed according to intel tips and perform rapid insertions using dual-sport motorcycles and compact weapon systems. We will be able to deploy them from air transports, ground transport, by parachute and even the new generation of Skydiver subs.”

“You will be travelling by SHADAIR transport to and from your destinations as will your recruits. I

want no footprint of our presence beyond receipts for car rentals, hotels and restaurants. You will all get new company credit cards to that end.”

“Your recruitment teams will always include at least one SHADO Security Agent with a portable field intel kit to check out your prospectives before they get any closer to us. Any found to have an issue in their profiles will find themselves waking with a hell of a headache and no idea how they got there.”

“Go, plan your trips and pick your protégés,” he said along with, “Good luck...”

CHAPTER 14

Thorvald and Virginia made the absolute most of their wedding night despite the pending separation the following morning. Little was said. They simply bathed in the warmth of their intertwined forms, savoring every moment together.

Virginia's alarm clock was a rude awakening. Thorvald was not in the bed beside her when she woke. As she reached for her robe to go look for him the bedroom door opened.

Thorvald was in a robe and holding a bed tray loaded with gourmet breakfast items. He placed it over her lap, the sheets only covering her lower half. He poured her fresh brewed coffee into her favorite mug. A ham and cheddar omelet, crispy hash browns and whole wheat toast with her favorite seedless black raspberry jam.

Thorvald sat beside her while she enjoyed his meal. The last item remaining was a piece of toast, generously coated in jam. A dollop slid off, landing between her breasts. "I'll take care of that, Love" he said grinning.

Virginia smiled a saucy little smile and said, "It looks like it's going to be another pony-tail kind of day..."

After seeing her off at the SHADAIR terminal, Thorvald reported to Straker's office, looking a bit lost. Straker smiled gently. "I know how it is, Thorvald – the same thing happened to me on my attempted honeymoon as well." Thorvald had heard of the divorce and the loss of his son. He was grateful that he and his bride were not on opposite sides of the wall of secrecy that was SHADO.

* * *

General Prosser was beginning his first day at Moon Base. He had enjoyed the flight up, spending much of it in cockpit despite the zero gravity. He had been warmly welcomed by Major Ellis and she had conducted him on his tour of the facility.

Colonel Bradley had shown Prosser the Interceptors, Mobiles and Hoppers. He was especially pleased to meet the pilots and support crews. The magnetic rail guns mounted on the vehicles were fascinating. He had never thought of that approach and was pleased that Thorvald had been behind their development.

His quarters were compact and simple but quite adequate. The transparent inflated air bed was a bit disconcerting but had proven quite comfortable. The cuisine offered by the automated system was a different story.

While he understood the need for food options to be grouped by national origin, the food itself was heavily processed, preserved and filled with additives. It was as far from fresh as could be created. The coffee and tea were also found lacking. All was clearly reconstituted from frozen bulk for the sake of storage and stability.

This situation would have to be resolved before they could consider enlarging the facility as much as planned. These dedicated people need fresh vegetables, fruits and other nutritious foods. A 24-hour cafeteria like headquarters had would be a godsend here. He would see to that if possible. Perhaps hydroponic gardens...

Prosser had chosen to stand beside Major Ellis' raised platform in the control sphere so he could see all that happened there. Ford had warned her that he would stay right beside her and ask questions to her and the other monitor staff. He also told her that the General was fascinating to chat with and truly interested in the work done, and not just some over-bearing leader wanting to intimidate the staff.

His first question was the same one asked by everyone visiting Moon Base for the first time... Why the disparity in uniforms and the purple wigs? Gay fought the urge to giggle at the question.

She explained that the blue flight suits were insulated and that the silver material worn by the female and some male staff were simply very durable, comfortable and easy to clean. Since water was a precious commodity on the Moon, clothing that could be rinsed clean that would air dry in hours were necessities.

There now were other fabrics in various colors that would be suitable, but these had become a sort of

tradition over the last 13 years. The same was the case for the purple wigs. They were originally thought of as a convenience when time and water were so tightly controlled. “We never had to worry if our hair was uncooperative, and this eliminated the need for hairdressers in space,” she said with a grin.

“Perhaps the male staffers should be wearing them as well,” said Prosser with a smile and sparkle in his crystal blue eyes. She and Joan both laughed at the idea...

They chatted and she explained the functions of the equipment and monitor systems. She had just finished describing the function of S.I.D. when they were interrupted.

“This is Space Intruder Detector. Red Alert. There are two inbound targets, bearing 438-126, Blue. Speed – Sol 7. Range – four million miles and closing.”

“All stations, this is a Red Alert. Interceptors, immediate launch,” said Gay. “The inbounds will be passing Moon Base in fourteen minutes.”

“Projected Earth terminal point calculations coming in now General...” she said. “It looks as though they are headed for Northern Canada, Sir.”

“Do they ever change their trajectories, Major?” Asked Prosser.

“Not as often as you would expect, Sir. They generally only do that as a diversion or when they are going to attack this station,” she said.

The AV link chirped and Straker’s face appeared. “What have you got, Gay?”

“Two inbounds, Sir. Three interceptors will be in position to fire in thirty seconds. I am sending them their fire control solutions now,” she said.

The Interceptors reached their positions and the navigation systems automatically maneuvered to match the firing solutions for each.

“Launching missiles in three point four seconds...” said Gay. “Two... One... Launch.”

Two Interceptors fired their nose mounted missiles and the third fired ten depleted uranium explosive rounds from each of its side mounted rail guns.

Thirteen seconds later there were two brilliant white flashes in the distance. A third distant flash consisted of a series of rapid bright yellow ones followed immediately by a sizeable white one.

“Both inbounds destroyed, Sir,” said Gay. “One by missile and one by rail gun.”

“Well done, Gay. My regards to you and your staff,” said Straker. He added, “What did you think, General Prosser?”

“Very impressive indeed. All of these people remained calm, focused and professional, General Straker. This operation works exceptionally well.”

The AV link closed, with Prosser’s head filled with new questions... First things first...

Straker’s AV link chirped but no call was incoming. The second time this week...

“What can I do for you to make your jobs easier, more efficient or more comfortable to do?” asked Prosser with full sincerity.

Gay, Joan and Nina all stared in disbelief. This General Prosser seemed truly interested in their needs. There were several things they had discussed over the thirteen years they’d been stationed here together.

Gay smiled sweetly. Prosser was momentarily forced to pause by her beautiful, shining hazel eyes and disarming charm. Nina and Joan were equally lovely, with soft brown eyes that reminded him of a very enchanting dance partner from less than 24 hours ago... Prosser could remember every feature of her lovely form.

“Perhaps we could start with a change of clothes, General,” said Gay. Her two charming co-monitors smiled sweetly and nodded their agreement.

Prosser withdrew a notepad and pen from the inner pocket of his tunic.

CHAPTER 15

Two days later, General Prosser was making his first return trip to his home planet. The wonder of that alone kept a smile on his face. He greatly enjoyed the excitement and precision of re-entry, as well as the docking procedure and vertical landing of such a massive machine. In all of his years behind the control stick, he'd never imagined such things. It felt good to feel the full pull of gravity once more...

He chatted with the pilots of both craft in the SHADAIR hangar and thanked them graciously for the experience. He donned his riding suit and powered his machine through the meter-wide gap that remained in the massive sliding doors. The gap allowed fresh air to help the fascinating aircraft and its space-traversing symbiont to reach thermal equilibrium so that routine maintenance could begin.

Within a brief ride, Prosser was again standing in Straker's office, having left his riding gear in his makeshift office. He related the details of his first lunar visit and his eagerness to return.

He handed Straker Major Ellis' completed monthly report, which was completed three days before it was due. Straker smiled. He also had a list of features the Interceptor pilots wanted to see on the next generation of craft.

Prosser would get something palatable to eat in the cafeteria before meeting with the aircraft design team to develop specifications for the new long range, high-speed ground based interceptors and their tactical fighter counterparts.

* * *

Prosser saw Thorvald at a table in the corner with a bowl of soup, bread and coffee. Thorvald motioned for his friend to join him. It was clear that Thorvald's appetite was off with the absence of his bride.

"Have you heard from your lovely bride?" Prosser asked.

"Only briefly. Between the time zone changes and schedules, we have only been able to speak for minutes at a time."

"She is a captivating woman, Thorvald," said Prosser, "as is her mother." Thorvald smiled broadly.

Prosser said, "I haven't been this distracted by a woman in at least thirty years..."

Thorvald laughed. "She and her daughter are very much cut from the same bolt of cloth. Enough so that I would venture to say they exhibit the same quick wit, tenacity, and zest for life - and, quite likely... similar appetites."

Prosser's blue eyes widened and his coloring changed a bit. He had been thinking of her while on his Moon visit. He was mentally processing how to balance a romantic relationship with a civilian while in such a covert role at SHADO...

If the chemistry they'd shared at the wedding reception was any indication, there wouldn't be a lot of unnecessary chit-chat anyway. She was that kind of woman...

* * *

Virginia's recruiting team had hit a rich vein of both recent engineering graduates and retirees with no job prospects in the United States. Jobs were scarce and many corporations had kicked their pending pensioners out to pasture while at the top of their craft in order to cut operating costs. They included aviation, aerospace, marine, mechanical and chemical engineers.

The economic climate in the US and world in general were in decline. Skilled and brilliant people were struggling to maintain their quality of life. It created a buyer's market for recruiting.

The challenge was in presenting an organization that operated outside of any government in a defensive military role without sounding like some evil outfit bent on world domination from some spy movie...

Virginia and her protégés were insistent on the fiction of those examples, despite their nuclear waste processing and storage center being located inside the caldera of an extinct volcano on a South Pacific island...

The new Skydiver bases would be more like those movies, but real and much, much more elaborate...

* * *

Foster's group was having less immediate success, but he had found a cache of experienced pilots of varying backgrounds. Some flew passenger and transport while a handful had combat experience in various large aircraft, fighters and ground attack craft. They seemed to be either quite young or late middle aged.

Paul was initially disappointed by all the older experienced pilots that seemed to come out of the woodwork. Then he thought about Prosser. As sure as he was about his own prowess in the cockpit, he was confident he wouldn't last more than a couple minutes in aerial combat against him.

These older pilots would serve in the cockpit and in the classroom as flight instructors. They would be evaluated for combat roles as well. This was a too valuable a resource to pass up.

* * *

Alec and his group were canvassing the globe, looking for skilled combat soldiers and intelligence agents. His training from the RAF and connections to the SAS proved very useful. Prosser had given him the added caveat that he needed a group of combat troops that were experienced with motorcycles.

Just as Paul had found, the available experienced soldiers and intelligence types tended to hang out in groups. Only these compatriots understood the skills involved and they tended to be very similar in temperament and personality.

They would come from all corners of the world. Even former enemies would learn and train to work in the field together. Their new mission would make new allies.

Within two weeks, the first of the trainees began to arrive by special SHADAIR transport. The vacant soundstages were converted into makeshift dormitories, classrooms and cafeteria. Mobile trailers for classrooms, shower and toilet facilities were brought in and set in place.

To passersby on the road that ran the length of the property, all they saw were parked cars and a lot of trailers that indicated the presence of the new lease holder. All looked as it should to the outside world...

* * *

General Prosser guided his GS through the security gate at the Scarborough sea base. He was there to meet with Commander Carlin and fly out to meet a Skydiver sub in the North Sea under cover of darkness. A SHADAIR amphibious transport helicopter would deliver them along with a shipment of fresh supplies.

When the Eastern sky began to glow, the submarine was underway on the surface with the conning tower and the tail of the Sky unit cutting a frothy path through the grey chop.

Prosser was still a little unsure about having an aircraft attached to the bow of a submarine but it had worked brilliantly for 13 years. He basked in the crisp morning breeze and salt spray from the bow. It was something his father had written of often.

Carlin was amazed by Prosser's stance, flexing his waist and legs instinctively, letting the deck move beneath him while his head remained stationary. Carlin said, "You seem like a natural for sea duty, General."

Prosser turned and smiled, "I'm not the first Prosser to walk the bridge of a submarine, Commander..." He smiled as Carlin motioned for him to climb down through the hatch. The sun was rising and they would spend the bulk of the day beneath the surface, answering eager questions from the son of a submariner.

* * *

Virginia was due to arrive at the SHADAIR terminal at 2pm. Thorvald was there waiting, pacing in the reception area. He was glued to the window watching as the Seagull touched down gracefully and slowed to an appropriate ground speed.

The portable ramp drove up as the aircraft came to a complete stop and the engines shut down. Virginia was the third person down the ramp, in her sunglasses, garment bag over her shoulder and a tow-behind suitcase wiggling along behind her. She saw Thorvald in the window looking like a child in a toy store window.

"Hello Love," she said smiling. Thorvald wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, kissing her long and tenderly. The garment bag and tow-behind slumped to the floor. The SHADO staffers behind her grinned as they stepped around the obstacles and the intertwined lovers.

The rest of the day was a blur until they could be alone together in the evening. They unleashed all their

pent up passion in one glorious evening together. They had completely forgotten dinner.

Afterward, when they were both completely worn out and realized they were hungry, Virginia stepped out of the bedroom and returned with a can of SPAM, a butter-knife and a sleeve of saltines. A bottle of beer was in each of her robe pockets. It was a blissful feast, in spite of the crumbs amongst the sheets...

CHAPTER 16

Tasks were being accomplished on schedule and the level of innovation would be establishing an entirely new state-of-the-art threshold.

In addition to a pair of new Earth-orbiting space platforms, there would be a network of orbiting satellites to detect any approaching objects from deep space and to fire on them with weapons that would deter or destroy them. That hinged on figuring out how to detect the invading craft.

These same satellites would also be watching over planet Earth with reconnaissance systems and the ability to launch offensive weapons if needed. It was a simple recognition that threats may arise from within as well as from space.

Virginia was leading the team to develop the satellites and platforms. By discarding “the box” up front it left room open to innovative ideas that proved the value of their recruiting drive. There would be much to build and launch into space...

* * *

Plans were expanding rapidly and the pieces were coming together. There were massive construction projects underway simultaneously on several remote islands and in equally remote land locations where sheer distance to civilization were a reality. Some projects were underway despite a lack of permission from the countries in which they were located. That would come later.

Straker and Prosser had traveled to the United States to visit with some NASA contacts. He would attempt to persuade them to lease a pair of Space Shuttles, launch vehicles and the facilities to make it happen.

While the NASA faithful were eager for any viable reason to venture into space, the senate sub-committees that oversaw their operation were not. It would be a dead end for now.

As Prosser and Straker took their seats on the SHADAIR SST, Prosser smiled at Straker, saying, “Now we will find our own way to launch space vehicles.” By the time they landed at the terminal near SHADO HQ, they had a game plan...

* * *

Back in Straker’s office, the command staff were listening to the update from the trip stateside. Straker’s AV link chirped twice rapidly. Again, there was no connection to be made.

“Ford, get the communications technician back in here pronto, it’s doing it again,” he said leaning out of the door.

“Right away sir. Nothing on the com channel here either...”

The others looked at the design specs drawn out that morning for new SHADO space shuttles. They would be much larger and designed for cargo. They would also be capable of remaining on station for construction support and be adaptable for both personnel and medical transport. It was intended that they be able to launch satellites like a naval mine layer.

New, smaller long range shuttles would be built as well for both service and search and rescue work. These would launch from the existing vehicles.

The other notable change was that SHADO space launch vehicles would be supplemented by two large island installations with expansive tarmac areas and support facilities. No more prying eyes would see SHADO launching vehicles of a covert nature at regional airports.

* * *

The communications technician finished his systemic and signal checks. All circuits had tested positively as well, just like the two times before. Straker was clearly getting irritated, “Well?”

“Everything is in perfect working order, General Straker. Perhaps we should consider this less a fault in the system or equipment and entertain the possibility that it is an incoming message that is either being interfered with or coming from an exceptionally long distance.” Straker just gazed at him with a blank expression...

Prosser stepped over to the desk. “You and I both know he might just be onto something there.” Straker looked at him with raised eyebrows.

“Think of it this way,” Prosser began. “We see countless thousands of points of light in the night sky. Each one has potential to harbor planets with intelligent beings who might have developed space travel. We only know of three so far and they are all belligerent species with a sinister agenda. Do the math...”

“They can’t all be assholes...” Straker smiled and Prosser concluded, “I’m rather counting on a bit of assistance from the outside...” Straker just looked at him in wonder.

* * *

Weeks passed, with the new SHADO recruits arriving and training. They were now seeing an average of one UFO incursion per week.

* * *

The first wave of SHADO field intelligence operatives were now beginning to infiltrate various countries around the globe. They had been well trained by Dr. Jackson in interrogation technique and Thorvald had taught them all how to disappear into the population wherever they were. They had also taken quickly to demolitions and other covert deviltry for when the need arose.

Thorvald’s combat troops were building on previous experience and already working well individually and in groups. Due to his heart issues, he tired more quickly than he wished, but he had already developed their leadership skills to where they were entirely self-starting. All he had to do was point them in the right direction and be there for questions or to give them new instructions. They were not amateurs...

From Thorvald’s combat troops, he culled a crop of fifteen that had experience on motorcycles. They reported to Prosser’s classroom with a mix of street and off-road experience. Prosser stepped in wearing his armored riding suit and boots.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you will shortly be measured for your own armored riding suit, gloves, boots and helmets. You will each be given your own moto to love and care for as you would your offspring.”

Prosser continued, “You will not only learn to competently ride all terrains on planet Earth, but you will learn to fight from your mount and use it as an offensive and defensive weapon. A very real part of your training will consist of a game you remember from childhood... It’s called Follow the Leader.”

The budding Rapid Assault Unit would spend the afternoon meeting their mounts and learning to service them in the field. They were 650cc single cylinder machines with large capacity fuel cells, five forward gears, and chain driven with long-travel front and rear suspensions and massive knobby tires.

Plywood panniers on each side seemed like a non-starter and were outright ugly. Closer inspection proved they contained bricks to simulate the weight of their field packs. They would ask Prosser about them tomorrow...

Meanwhile, General Prosser was setting up the afternoon session for the pilot candidates with Dr. Jackson. Jackson would be watching from behind the one-way glass panel that made up part of the wall. This was what they referred to as “the great culling.”

At 1300 hours, the seats were full in the classroom. There were men and women of all descriptions and ages in attendance. A projection screen was at the front with large theater sized speakers to deliver the audio.

Prosser entered and paused to look them over. Pilots of any age had a specific look when they reached a specific level of skill. It was a sharpness of eye that he saw in all but a handful of candidates. He began.

“I am Brigadier General Gunther Prosser, a career combat pilot and one of your instructors here. While we wait for some test results to catch up with you, I will show you some actual footage of what you will be facing. For the skeptical among you who have been questioning the authenticity of our mission, here is your proof.”

He dimmed the lights while Jackson remotely started the projectors of the cockpit and gun cameras from Prosser’s two UFO interdictions. This time they were on a massive screen with clear details and the added impact of full sound.

Prosser watched from the front of the room while Jackson watched from the side. They were looking for

something very particular... The majority of the group were visibly terrified by the twisting cockpit view, the continual threat alarms and labored rapid breathing punctuated by groans against the pull of gravity.

About a dozen other candidates were leaning forward with their hands on invisible stick and throttle while leaning with the attitude of the artificial horizon... They would be separated from the rest of the group under the auspices of "test results." They would go on to tactical fighter training.

CHAPTER 17

The command staff was meeting again in General Straker's office. His Commanders were there as were Prosser, Thorvald and Dr. Jackson. His AV link was chirping so often now that they barely noticed it anymore.

They were going over the first urgent report from the field intelligence group. This one was from right here in the U.K. They had discovered an installation not far from Harlington with a powerful multi-frequency transmitter. Complaints of radio and television signal loss were the initial clue to check it out.

The station was neither registered nor licensed. The AV link in Straker's office was the only one at headquarters that utilized common carrier frequencies other than the studio phone lines. Its link to I.A.C. was the reason.

All other SHADO communications utilized automated rolling frequencies that changed at regular intervals simultaneously at all stations. It was a quick project for Virginia and her engineering team. The idea was spawned by a similar but simple rolling frequency generator in her remote controlled garage door opener.

The intelligence group had moved in on the site of the transmitter and found it to be unmanned but operational. The latter was going to be remedied by their first field application of explosives. It would fire on Straker's command.

Mason from security had leapt at the chance to do field operations after being stuck in the guard shack for thirteen years. He keyed his ear bud communication device. "We're ready when you are, General Straker. The area is clear and we are positioned for firing."

"Go ahead then, Mason," said Straker.

The blast levelled the transmission station, leaving no piece larger than a cigarette pack.

"Target destroyed, sir," said Mason.

"Well done, Mason. Your crew are the first to see action," said Straker.

"Thank you, sir. Out."

They were all just about to sit down at the conference table when Straker's AV link chirped a full tone. He stepped over to it and pressed the button to open the link...

"Straker." He said.

"Straker, can you see me?" said an unknown voice.

"Not yet. Who are you?" An image was trying to form on the small desktop monitor. Straker switched it to the large overhead monitor above the conference table. A somewhat ghostly but humanoid form was appearing.

"My identity is not important," said the voice. A clearing view revealed the voice to be coming from what appeared to be a human woman with long white hair. She wore a loose draping garment that softly reflected the light wherever she was.

She continued. "We are not of your planetary system, Straker - but we monitor activity in your sector and on your planet as well. We are quite aware of what you call SHADO." Straker's fists clenched, his anger rising.

"We are a multi-galactic operation that enforces the unifying charter of many worlds. Your world would call us a law enforcement agency."

"What is it that you want?" asked Straker. All eyes were on the screen.

"We have contacted you in order to warn you of a pending attack on your planet." She continued, "We are forbidden to interfere with the event itself but are compelled to warn you that you may make preparations to preserve your species."

"Who is going to attack us?" asked Straker, growing angrier.

"The species of three different planets in two different star clusters are working together, Straker. One species that you already know utilizes stolen body parts and entire organisms to their own ends. The two others seek only to enslave your race and strip your world of natural resources. When they complete their

mission they will destroy your planet. The species and planet names are unnecessary details. They have done the same to other planets before yours and the trail of destruction has led us to your world.”

She continued, “We regrettably cannot intervene to stop them, but we will use the destruction of your planet as evidence to try their species for that crime. The punishment ranges from crippling sanctions to outright genocide of their species.”

Straker lost his composure and shouted. “You are telling me that the demise of the human race has no more significance to your multi-galactic organization than a set of fingerprints at a murder scene? And that is sufficient evidence to exterminate an entire species?”

“That is not entirely correct, Straker. Your species is not supposed to be contacted for potential inclusion into our organization for over a hundred years by your measurement. We didn’t have to warn you at all – this was done as a courtesy.”

“By contacting you prematurely, we have made you noticeable to the species of hundreds of different worlds before you are mature enough as a planet to interact with them. Most are worlds of intellect, culture and peace while a few of them are militaristic, narrow of mind and motivated by greed or lust for violence.”

Straker calmed, saying, “That sounds like a fair assessment of our own planet as well. So what you are saying is that we are not yet ready as a species to interact with outside worlds because we are still...” He paused looking for the appropriate term...

Thorvald spoke, “Skraellings, General. It is the old Norse word for savages.”

“Exactly, Thorvald,” said Straker. The woman on the monitor raised her hand and a light formed around it.

“See the cube-shaped device on your desk, Straker,” she said. A cube approximately 10cm square sat on his desk, beside the glass orb on the stand that always seemed to find its way into his hand.

The cube was iridescent white with swirls of color that changed, very much like the mural on the wall behind his desk. The top of the cube had a blue circle visible but it did not extend above the smooth surface.

“Straker, this device will allow you to contact us. Use it by passing your hand over it twice. We will then contact you again. Before we can do so we need to record the imprints of you and your command staff. This will allow us full access to each of your minds, emotions and experiences. It may be momentarily unpleasant, but do not resist the probe.” She concluded, “You have no choice...”

The room illuminated with a blinding light. Straker, Prosser, Alec, Paul, Virginia, Thorvald and Jackson were held stationary while their minds raced with images of their lives, educations, experiences and the emotional turmoil of each. Both Straker and Thorvald were hit with images of their children and former wives.

The brilliant light ceased and the probe returned to its prior iridescent state.

The woman on the monitor held out her hand again. It glowed as she received the information from the cube. She smiled gently, looking almost sympathetic. “Generals Straker and Prosser, Commanders Freeman, Lake and Foster, Doctor Jackson and Mr. Magnusson.” She now sounded friendly. “We now fully understand what you are trying to accomplish and the resources you have available.”

“We will give you the following information to give you a better chance to preserve your species... There are already covert cells of humans working with your enemies on your planet. Also, look for anomalies in the 700 to 900 nm wavelength of visible light. This will be your tool... We will be watching your planet closely.”

“SHADO is the key to the survival of your planet, but it is not alone. There are over six billion fellow humans that may surprise you. You are a talented and industrious species and you have the tools to prevail. We wish you success.”

Straker exclaimed, “But when?” The AV link went blank.

Everyone’s heads were in discomfort. Virginia had hers on Thorvald’s shoulder. The image of his daughter had brought both joy and pain. For Ed Straker, the image of Johnny’s limp body in the weeds beside the road caused tears to form. Jackson was also teary-eyed, seeing images of the discarded bodies of his

Polish Underground comrades after being interrogated by the Gestapo.

Alec spoke up first. “Okay, we know now that not all aliens are belligerent, so where do we go from here?”

Prosser said, “I think the only way we are going to avoid resistance from other nations is to bring them in on it. I think it’s time for a trip to address both the I.A.C. and U.N.S.C., perhaps a joint session with the entire U.N.”

“Agreed,” said Straker. “One other thing – until we ferret out and destroy these subversive groups, all SHADO personnel outside this facility will remain armed at all times. See to that Thorvald and Paul. Give them whatever training they need to be safe... We know now that we are being targeted - by individuals who are willing to sell out their own species.”

Prosser went to his office to make some quite pivotal appointments to address the full committees of both entities. He had to get this right the first time...

CHAPTER 18

“What’s with these plywood panniers, General?” said one of his RAU trainees.

“These are sacrificial units that will help you get comfortable with the added weight, bulk and width of the ones that you will receive at the completion of this program.”

“Those will be made of Kevlar and open like a suitcase. You will use them to carry your necessities into the field and they will also function as a bullet-resistant barrier when removed and fully opened.” Their eyes grew wide. They hadn’t considered that they might actually be under fire.

“Gear up, mount up and follow me...” He added, “If you have to make an unplanned dismount, please try to do so with some semblance of dignity...”

Prosser secured his chin strap, donned his gloves and fired up his GS. He gave a straight hand signal overhead for them to form up in a line behind him.

Prosser’s ‘Rolling Circus’ as it would come to be called, followed him dutifully around the studio lot, taking advantage of the sharp corners, open areas and varying size of apertures through which to ride. The group stretched out and individuals would eventually pass the slower riders, forming a new order.

The large paved area of the former studio employee parking area presented the opportunity to dial up the speed substantially. Prosser leaned hard, touching his knee sliders to the tarmac and accelerating sharply out of the corners. He looked back to see which others were anywhere near keeping up. There were a few...

He gave the hand signal to form into a circle around him and let them stop and come to idle and a lower pulse. Into the intercom system he said, “Now we will see how comfortable you are when the pavement ends... Follow me to the quarry.” He pulled away sharply between the student machines. They willingly followed...

The paved road allowed them speed and transitioned suddenly to gravel. The street riders suddenly were out of their element and tried to keep up with the experienced off-road riders. Prosser’s voice was soon in their ears, “Apply increased smooth throttle and get your speed back up so you don’t sink and wash out. Keep your transitions smooth left to right and stop fighting the bar. Let it move a bit... Keep those knees pressed against the fuel cell!”

They went down a ramp and onto the shelf of a road that led to the quarry floor. It was wide enough for the massive dump trucks and scrapers to traverse safely but to the street-only riders it looked like a sidewalk with one side a rock wall and the other certain death. A few of them were getting too close to the edge.

Prosser yelled into the com, “Get those eyeballs up and focused on the line of the inner wall. Don’t look at that edge ever again, do you understand?” He heard several sheepish sounding “Yes Sirs...” They formed up a circle again at the quarry floor. He shut down his GS, swung up the chin bar of his helmet and dismounted. The group did likewise. Several were dripping wet with sweat.

“Okay everyone, take a few breaths...” said Prosser. “I want you to learn two very important maxims that you must commit to memory and action.”

“First – There are very few situations you will encounter on two wheels that cannot be mitigated by a generous application of throttle...”

“Second – That upon which ye fixate, ye shall surely hit... Repeat them with me...” It brought about laughter, but the lesson was nonetheless quite valid.

Prosser stepped over to a young dark haired lad who reminded him in appearance of a young brunette Ed Straker. “Son, when we rode on pavement, you were right on my flank, yet you slid all the way to the back when the road turned to gravel and stayed there. What kind of riding have you been doing?”

“I raced vintage British motorcycles on road circuits, General.”

“Excellent,” said Prosser. “You will help your comrades learn to be faster on pavement. However, we need to take care of an issue with you and the rest of the riders who rolled in last with you. I am assuming that you all were street oriented riders, probably cruisers and sport bikes, am I correct?” They all nodded.

“Your intuition and muscle memory makes you want to hunker down on the tank when the machine gets

unsettled. This will get you killed off-road. You have to get your ass off the seat and keep it there...”

“You must learn to put your full weight on the pegs, pushing your center of gravity down to that level. I promise you that you will get to where standing on the pegs with your knees pressed into the tank will become second nature to you. To flatten your learning curve immediately, please present your ignition keys...”

Prosser took each key and used it to release the seat on each of the machines. He removed each and set them in a neat row on the ground. “After we do three more trips up and back successfully, you will be allowed to re-install these.”

His RAU group would repeat this exercise multiple times daily without his presence, each member helping to mentor their fellow operatives. This is exactly what Prosser wanted...

* * *

The day was coming to a close and the Command Staff reconvened in Straker’s office. The status of projects was at the forefront.

Virginia’s engineering team had a preliminary design for the new network of recon and attack satellites. It would include multiple detection formats and also missiles, a rail gun and a new device of terrifying potential: A focused beam form of electromagnetic pulse energy.

If fired at a terrestrial location, it would immediately return that region to the pre-industrial state where electric lights and telephones would be a dream of the future. They hoped to be able to focus the effect for better isolation to minimize collateral damage. It would be, like the other satellite systems and armaments, capable of firing both into space and back down toward planet Earth.

The new satellites would make up the Orbital Defense and Intelligence Network. The acronym a happy coincidence that Virginia dedicated to her favorite Viking son.

* * *

A dedicated aerospace manufacturer was now under very tight SHADO security and producing new prototypes for the long-range Interceptors and the giant cargo shuttles and massive VTOL aircraft that would launch and recover them.

The new Interceptors would include an escape/survival capsule to protect the pilot and weapons officer. An accident or received fire from a UFO would no longer mean certain death. They would also be larger, with triple the range, multiple forward missiles and a pair of rail guns. They would be capable of tight maneuvering and utilize heads-up displays for navigation and weapons systems.

* * *

The massive hull sections for the new Skydiver subs were being built quickly as modules at well-established shipyards in both Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin and Groton, Connecticut. The sections would be joined and the propulsion and other systems added at a new island installation in the North Atlantic between Iceland and the Shetland Islands.

The new Sky units would be carried internally with rails that would elevate them to launch position while the hull remained level. They would also have greater range, speed and armament than present. The prototype, based on the current version, would be flight ready in a matter of weeks if the schedules held up.

The visit from the otherworldly police representative had pressed home the message. Time was not on their side. They would have to pause from re-inventing the wheel in favor of finding some stop gap measures that would satisfy immediate needs. This meant getting out to do some global shopping for big ticket items...

* * *

General Prosser worked on his presentation for the I.A.C. meeting tomorrow and his address to the U.N. joint committee the following day. He considered giving them the exact same message. This was no time for anything but crystal clarity. He had to get the words right.

Prosser looked at the desktop display case that Thorvald had made and given him in thanks for serving as Best Man on the big day. It was beautiful burlled walnut with a hinged glass-paned lid and cushioned blue satin interior. It held his father’s Iron Cross and his grandfather’s Blue Max. He gazed upon them for

inspiration.

He wondered what his father would have said to bolster the courage and solidarity of his U-boat crew when their demise was eminent...

CHAPTER 19

At her home in Brighton, Mrs. Lake returned from the market to find a message on her answering machine. She pressed the play button.

“Mom, this is Ginny. Tomorrow afternoon, something important is going on at the United Nations Joint Assembly meeting in New York. It will be broadcast live around 7pm our time. You need to find that channel and watch it – it will explain a great many things... Love you...”

Mrs. Lake knew of those channels but only turned them on when she had trouble falling asleep. To her, diplomats at work had all the appeal of watching corn grow.

She checked her cable service menu and found nothing but parliamentary coverage which was even less exciting than diplomats in action.

She called her neighbor Madelyn, also a widow, who had a satellite system that kept her glued to the television. She had a channel that would carry the U.N. meeting and invited her over if she agreed to bring a bottle of wine...

* * *

Prosser reluctantly relinquished riding to London on his trusty mount in favor of riding with Paul in his turbine car. Following their visit to the United Nations, they would visit a few U.S. combat aircraft manufacturers to troll for prospective models and contracts. There was no time to wait for new aircraft designs to make it to production. SHADO needed combat aircraft as soon as possible.

Prosser’s arrival at the I.A.C. went as expected. They already knew about SHADO but the news that there were two other belligerent species involved and some kind of extra-terrestrial law enforcement organization came as a shock.

The committee didn’t debate any of Prosser’s speech or the implications it involved. They couldn’t do anything but support it by the language of their own charter.

Prosser and Foster boarded a SHADAIR SST that afternoon bound for the U.S. They were picked up by SHADO operatives and were provided reasonably posh accommodations at a company safe-house minutes from the U.N. building in Manhattan.

* * *

The following evening Mrs. Lake was sitting on the sofa beside Madelyn, both with a rather large glass of wine. She was telling Madelyn about Virginia’s wedding and the handsome General she waltzed with for what seemed like an hour.

“Ginny said this was something important, but this kind of programming doesn’t meet my definition of ‘entertainment’.” Madelyn giggled. Her glass was getting nearer to empty.

The moderator introduced the United Nations Security Council Acting President. All fifteen U.N.S.C. representatives were in attendance along with the full United Nations standing membership, representing dozens of nations. The auditorium was filled. Following the cordial greeting, the moderator introduced the speaker...

Brigadier General Gunther Prosser, in formal dress blue uniform complete with the same white gloves and gleaming black boots stepped to the lectern with calm confidence.

“My God, Madelyn... That’s him! That’s General Prosser! Turn it up dear...”

* * *

Prosser glanced at his notes and slipped them back into his pocket. Cue cards and tele-prompters were no way to prepare the world for global war with alien races. Prosser took a deep breath and began.

“Esteemed representatives of the many member nations of this United Nations charter, I address you this afternoon in order to inform you of a pending threat to every individual human life in every country on Planet Earth.”

“I am here to represent an organization that was formed thirteen years ago by U.N.S.C. charter action to address a threat from outside our solar system. Several of your governments have supported this organization

covertly due to the nature of the threat.”

“At that time, we were tasked with protecting the inhabitants of this planet from a race of extraterrestrial humanoids that prey on our species as a source of transplant organs, test subjects and possible slave labor.”

The assembled delegation gasped and glanced back and forth as the translations entered their headsets.

“This organization of dedicated individuals has fought tirelessly around the clock, fighting desperate battles in space, on land, sea and air - all on your behalf.”

“These alien incursions still occur at an alarming rate and this organization stands in the gap voluntarily while you remain blissfully unaware. They have maintained their covert status to avoid delivering this inevitably terrifying revelation to the whole of humanity.”

“Our universe is teeming with sentient life. We now face two additional worlds of belligerent aliens who seek nothing less than to enslave our species and rend this planet for its resources. This will end our world as we know it. This has been confirmed by otherworldly authorities we are now in contact with.”

“This covert organization needs the cooperation of every nation of the globe to prepare for this pending threat to all of humanity. This means that we will have to be able to operate in all parts of the globe with complete freedom.”

There was an angry murmur building in the assembly as the words reached their ears.

“We are not asking for your governmental permission to operate in your airspace, within your borders or in your territorial waters. This serves as notification to your respective nations that we *will be* operating within and above your countries as we deem necessary.”

“This message is delivered to you as a courtesy...” Prosser leaned forward with a piercing gaze in his crystal blue eyes. The camera zoomed in accordingly...

“I also serve you official notice that we will not tolerate any form of interference from any faction, nation or group of nations. In addition, we will not tolerate any attempts to surveil our operations, personnel or installations, on land, at sea, in the air or in orbit. We have no interest in your internal, national affairs...”

“Any violation of this dictate will be treated as a threat to the sanctity of human life. All human life. Retribution for such an act will render your nation isolated from the rest of the world economically, and you will be returned to the technological level of your Iron Age ancestors.”

There were now shouts of outrage and a shoe was thrown by a Middle Eastern delegate, which fell far short of the podium. Prosser resisted the urge to smile...

“When I address you again, it will be to give you notice that the battle is pending...”

“Finally, our organization welcomes the earnest support of your military forces both in preparation and at the time of attack by this grave threat. For the purpose of identification, you will either support or actively avoid any and all land, air and sea vehicles bearing this emblem...”

Prosser placed a length of rolled fabric across the top of the lectern, clipped it in place and let it roll downward to reveal the image of a stylized man in a circle with a long tapering shadow vectoring away at an angle. The script beneath had the first letter of each word capitalized and rimmed in blood red. “Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization.” The camera lens zoomed in on the image of the SHADO logo and stayed there. It would be on the cover of every newspaper and online news source for the foreseeable future...

Prosser coolly turned on his heel and stepped away to the exit of the stage. A SHADO sedan was waiting in the secure parking area at the bottom of the stairwell.

* * *

At a home in Brighton, two aging widows watched with widened eyes. “That explains so much... All of these years having to keep it concealed. My poor, dear Ginny and her friends.” Mrs. Lake had tears in her eyes.

Madelyn, a little tipsy said, “That is one hell of a man, dear...” Mrs. Lake laughed through her teary eyes. “That he surely is, Madelyn...”

She walked back home in the dark, wondering at the terrifying things her daughter and her friends had

experienced and decided it was better that she didn't know... She just wanted to hear Ginny's voice and to know that she was safe.

Her answering machine picked up, twice now... She now understood why it was so hard to find Ginny at home. The second time, she left a message.

"I understand now, Ginny... I just want to tell you I love you very much..." Her voice was straining when she added, "Give my love to your Thorvald and those fine people you work with – especially General Prosser..."

She hung up the phone and picked up the framed photo of her late husband in his dress uniform. She gazed at those familiar grey eyes as tears rolled down her cheeks. "You'd be so proud of our Virginia, Love. She's been saving the world for thirteen years and we've never known... She has all the brilliance, selfless devotion and love that we could have ever hoped for. We both miss you so..."

She sat on the sofa and sobbed, clutching the photo in her tightly wrapped arms...

CHAPTER 20

Ed Straker was in his office the following morning. He was feeling very mixed emotions about the unmasking of SHADO. He toasted the foot of the Lonsdale cigar he just clipped and leaned back, pondering the ramifications of the last 24 hours.

Alec entered the office looking a bit worse for wear. “Looks like you didn’t get much sleep either, Ed.” Alec went to the dispenser in the corner. Ed was about to question an 8 AM cocktail when Alec picked up a mug and the coffee decanter. He smiled.

“I think I might have gotten a cumulative total of three hours...” said Straker. “It’s an unsettling feeling to think the world knows we’re here now. My comfort level for this job hinged on my having both a public face and a covert one. When things got uncomfortable, I could always retreat to the alternate world.”

“Alec, I never thought I would say this, but I miss the mindless banter of actors, directors and script people. Their self-inflated egos, delusions of importance and oddball personalities were such comic relief. I miss all those hard-working crafts people and support staff that could make an entirely new world on a sound stage in an afternoon. Being among them all while playing a more serious role than any of them could have ever dreamed of was a kind of release for me...”

“Before you get too far on your nostalgia tour Ed, let me remind you of a few items...” said Alec. “Nobody except us knows where we are headquartered or that we have a base on the moon. They don’t know any face but Prosser’s and they knew that one already. All the world knows of is our mission and our logo.”

He added, “General Prosser may have unzipped our collective fly, but our trench coats are still very much secured... It needed to be done, Ed. We need back-up on this mission from every nation that gives a shit about humanity.”

“Have you considered the possibility that for one fleeting moment in the history of mankind, we all might put aside our animosity based on race, religion and political persuasion, and work together for the good of all?” Straker began to smile. It reminded him of President Reagan’s speech years ago.

“I’ll give you one more item for consideration Ed. How much more full will our lives be if we can have real loving relationships with real women? No more hiding our lives from people we care about, Ed.”

“Wrong, Alec!” said Straker, with some irritation. “Our loved ones would become targets, and our time and effort would be spent trying to protect them. The most they could know is that we were active duty military service or something like that.”

“The only way SHADO personnel will ever be able to step fully out of the darkness is if the need for us goes away, Alec...”

* * *

“This is Space Intruder Detector, Red Alert... There is an inbound object on course 347-128, Red. Range, six million miles - speed, Sol 8.”

Straker and Alec stepped out to Ford’s station. He had Major Ellis on the monitor. “What have you got, Gay?” asked Straker. “One inbound UFO, General. It will pass Moon Base in seven minutes. Interceptors have launched.”

Straker paused, rubbing his chin. “Is this one following the same trajectory as the last few UFO’s, Gay?”

“Within two degrees of the last six, General - same velocity,” she said.

“Do we have a terminal location yet, Gay?”

“North Atlantic Ocean, no land nearby...”

Straker said, “Get me Skydiver Two, Ford. Waterman’s in that area now.”

“This is Skydiver Two...” said Lew Waterman.

“Lew, I want you in the air to intercept that UFO if it alters course.”

“Gay, hold fire on those Interceptors – I’m going to play a hunch...”

“Yes General, what do you want us to do?” she asked.

“Let it pass...” said Straker. Alec perked up looking curious.

“What are you playing at, Ed?” he asked.

“I suspect we’ve been shooting clay pigeons for the last six weeks. We’ll know shortly...”

“Sky Two, airborne...” said Lew Waterman.

Straker said, “Lew, if my hunch is correct, you won’t have to fire a shot, but if it so much as twitches I want it blown out of the sky.”

“Roger that, General,” he said.

The UFO passed the waiting interceptors and Moon Base. No change in course or speed. Straker, Freeman and Ford watched the radar display closely. The UFO entered the Earth’s outer atmosphere and began to burn. At a high altitude it broke up into a stream of fragments, leaving a vapor trail behind them as they cartwheeled down and impacted the icy waters of the North Atlantic.

“I’ve got you bastards now!” exclaimed Straker. “All units stand down, cancel red alert...”

“We’ve been shooting skeet for weeks, Alec. Tying up resources and expending time, fuel and ammunition to shoot down unmanned drones. They’ve been keeping us distracted while they bring their plan to fruition. That stops now...”

* * *

Straker’s AV link chirped. He pressed the button to connect the call. “Straker...” Paul Foster’s face appeared on the desktop monitor. It was a secure SHADO line...

“The General and I are still at the Manhattan safe-house. We’ve run into a snag here in the states...”

“Let’s hear it, Paul.”

“Since the General’s presentation at the U.N. yesterday we’ve been on the phone trying to set up appointments to visit aircraft and armament manufacturers.”

“Nobody will even talk to us... Turns out that within hours of the address, the U.S. Congress forbade the contract or sale of new armaments or vehicles to us until they get some questions answered.”

“We doubt that the shipyards working on the new subs will be effected but it means no dice on new airplanes and weaponry.”

“Understood, Paul. You and General Prosser make your way back to the transport while we check a few leads on this end... We’ll contact you there.”

Straker and Alec looked at each other. “The Bates brothers?” asked Straker.

Alec smiled, “Hell yes, I’ll track down the numbers...”

* * *

An hour later, Paul Foster and General Prosser sat waiting in the SST on the corner of the tarmac at JFK. It was getting stuffy in the aircraft despite the open hatch to the ladder truck. Their AV link chirped, this time Prosser answered it.

“General Straker, Commander Freeman, what can I do for you?”

“We have a couple more destinations for you to visit before you return. Ford is sending the coordinates to your aircrew...”

“What have you got for us?” asked Paul.

“A pair of twin brothers named Bates...” he said. “Alec and I were acquainted with them in Thailand during Vietnam. Pilots that ran the bone yards and parts game for everything that flew. Now they own two massive aircraft graveyards, one in the Tucson area and the other in the Mohave Desert. Each brother runs a site.”

Alec and I have already spoken with them and they have some aircraft for you to check out. All are recently retired from service with solid airframes and fully functional systems. All they have to do is peel off the plastic wrappers...”

“Yes Sir,” said Paul. “We’ll be in touch.”

The call ended and the hatchway was closed. The six after-burning turbofan engines began to spool up.

* * *

“Alec, I want you to go beat the bushes looking for surplus aircraft we can utilize immediately. These

UFO drones just accelerated our timeline even more.”

“I have a couple irons in the fire already, Ed,” said Alec with a sly grin. “As long as you don’t ask too many questions...” Straker grinned. He had come to appreciate his best friend’s gift for circumventing red tape.

“I’ll contact Paul and Prosser if I come up with any concrete leads,” said Alec, walking out of the office, coffee in hand.

Straker read the reports on the new shuttles and ODIN satellites. The prototypes would soon be ready for trials soon at Moon Base. Using known and proven technology had sped up the process. The lunar shuttles would be hauling components and technicians nearly continuously...

CHAPTER 21

“What can I do ya for, gentlemen?” asked Eddie Bates, standing on the top most step of the rolling ladder. The bottom of the hatchway on the SST level with his waist. “My name is Bates, Eddie Bates. Welcome to Tucson... You the guys that Freeman and Straker sent?”

“We are, sir,” said General Prosser. “This is Foster and I am Prosser.” Prosser bent and shook the man’s outstretched hand despite the grime and grease covering it.

“Good, you fellas are gonna have to watch your step getting out.” He added, “This is one helluva slick ship you got here... Oh, sorry ‘bout the dirty handshake...”

Prosser laughed. “I’d never trust an aircraft mechanic with clean hands...”

Bates smiled, revealing the gaps from his missing teeth. He had long, stringy white hair, mirrored sunglasses and what may be five or more days-worth of white stubble since the last time a dull razor scraped his face. “Hey, you’re that guy that pissed off the whole U.N. yesterday...” He smiled again. “Sweeeet...”

He was even thinner than Straker and wore grunge-covered overalls and a yellow, formerly white t-shirt with the sleeves cut off. The tattoos that covered his arms were probably once considered raunchy depictions of female forms, but were now distended and contorted by the march of time and loss of skin elasticity. It now looked like a bad topographic map.

Prosser and Foster eased down to the top of the platform and followed Bates down the ladder stand. Prosser carried a briefcase in his left hand.

“Alec said you guys would be lookin for some used but nice aircraft of various descriptions for actual full duty service. Well, I got over 500 acres of stuff to browse, ranging from nostalgic parts donors to recently retired combat aircraft.”

Paul said, “We need fighters, reconnaissance ships, interceptors, tankers, early warning and air-sea rescue ships as well... Ones that are able to fly,” he added with some sarcasm.

“Relax junior,” said Bates. “I don’t sell ‘em to fly unless I’ve flown ‘em myself... Anything I sell you is gonna be gas-n-go capable. Drop tanks, flight systems and everything. You just gotta find your own guns, tactical systems and ordnance.”

“I got some goodies you might could use, but you gotta go to see Teddy at Mohave for the big ships. He’s got them tankers, AWAC’s and stuff.” Bates pulled a walkie-talkie from the torn back pocket of his overalls. The antenna was bent badly...

“Hey Rico, you still wrappin’ them one-elevens?” There was an unintelligible reply.

“Well, peel the one you’re wrapping and pull it around in front of the office. I’m on the way with some potential buyers...” He turned back to Foster and Prosser. “You guys might be able to use these ships. I just got twenty pristine F-111 fighter bombers that were retired after Operation Desert Storm. They have the rotary bomb bays, drop tanks and all the hardware the D.O.D. didn’t confiscate.”

“They all have terrain-following radar, swing wings and can hit Mach 2.5 in level flight. These suckers are more aerobatic than a lot of purpose built fighters were able to deal with - they’re just more than twice the size of them. It took two new planes to do the same job when they were retired. You guys bring flight suits...?”

* * *

Four hours later, Paul called Straker at home and woke him up. “This had better be damn well important, Commander Foster.” Grumbled a sleepy Ed Straker.

“It is.” He said. “We have twenty F-111’s, two KC-135 tankers and a pair of AWAC’s ships in a package deal here. We did a test run on an F-111 and the General scared the living shit out of me running flat out, feet above the desert floor.”

Straker laughed out loud. “How good is the deal, Paul?”

“An outright bargain, Sir. I think they cut a large part off the bottom line just because it was for you and Alec. It includes spares and the contact info for some people who professionally serviced them.”

“Write them the check, Paul. Alec is in the Baltic States checking into a sweet deal there. Make it out any way they want and give them our best regards.”

“Yes Sir. We’ve been listening to stories of you and Alec from the old days.”

“Don’t believe a word of it, Paul.” He laughed. “We’ll send the trained pilots that direction to ferry them back to our airfields.” The call was over and Ed Straker fell back to sleep with a smile on his face. He would sleep much better now.

* * *

Alec was back the following afternoon. “Well Ed, we’ve got our interceptors squared away.” Straker looked at him.

“Well?”

“How about 24 used but nice, fully equipped MiG-31’s? The current owners are in need of foreign currency to boost a sagging economy. We’ll need to make some modifications for things to match up, but Mach 2.8 in level flight and multiple target tracking systems are nice assets...”

“I have a line on some tactical fighters as well but Paul and Prosser will have to take care of them. I’ll contact them both shortly...”

“The Bates brothers came through in a big way as well, Alec. A squadron of F-111’s, tankers and AWAC’s. Oh, and Eddie and Teddy send their best.”

Virginia entered the office. “I’m going up on the next shuttle to Moon Base. We have working prototypes for the ODIN satellites that need testing in their target environment. The optical systems and EMP generator are priority items.”

She continued, “Thorvald has a sizeable collection of rather frightening combat troops for you to deploy as needed. Right now, they are cross training with General Prosser’s Rolling Circus. Thorvald calls them ‘mobile bad-asses’.”

Straker and Freeman both laughed. Things were coming together faster than they’d hoped for. The nagging question was always, “how long do we have?”

CHAPTER 22

Two days later, a very exhausted sounding General Prosser called Straker on the AV link. He and Paul had followed up on Alec's lead for tactical fighters.

"General Straker, we have found our fighters in Sweden. Thirty brand new Saab JAS-39's that had been ordered by a small African republic."

"How did we get brand new fighters?" asked Straker.

"In short, a violent change in regime occurred and the new government doesn't have the capital to pay for them. It is a wholesale deal and they still have 'new-fighter smell'. Three of them are two seat versions for training and advanced anti-radar operations. We had an enjoyable test flight in one of them."

Paul leaned over the General's shoulder. "I'm never getting in another cockpit with this man again, Sir."

Straker laughed. "Seal the deal and come on home gentlemen, we need you here."

* * *

Another unmanned drone UFO came in from deep space. It followed the same course, speed and trajectory. The Interceptors launched and took up firing positions just in case it made any surprise moves. Again, it hit the Earth's atmosphere at extreme speed, bursting into flaming fragments.

This time, the cascade of hurtling debris was being watched by a large number of small telescopes and radar installations. Since Prosser's speech to the U.N., the number of people and instruments looking skyward had risen intensely. Humanity had been told they were not alone in the universe and were gazing skyward, some in wonder and many in fear...

* * *

Doctor Douglas Jackson entered the cafeteria and found Thorvald at the back corner table. His bowl of soup was looking untouched and the sandwich had a single bite missing. Jackson sat down opposite him.

"Hello, Yannick." Thorvald said, sounding and looking exhausted.

"What's troubling you, old friend?" Asked Jackson.

"I seem to lose my appetite and have less restful sleep when Ginny is gone. My thoughts seem to go to things that cause me sorrow, especially in my dreams," said Thorvald.

"Are you dreaming of your late wife and daughter, Thorvald?"

"Mostly my daughter, Yannick. It leaves me feeling empty and heart-broken..."

"It is part of mourning, my friend," said Jackson. "You must understand that you miss more than just your daughter and her mother – you miss the joy and fulfillment of being a father, Thorvald." Thorvald smiled weakly. It made sense.

"I am so happy being married to Ginny and we have a wonderful life together, but it feels like an empty hole is always in the background. We cannot have children together Yannick; for both physical and practical reasons."

"Perhaps not Thorvald, but you have no outlet for the parental love that is already within you. I can suggest an outlet for that love Thorvald, but it might also bring those painful memories to the surface... Only you can decide if it is worth the risk." Jackson scribbled something on a napkin and handed it to Thorvald.

There was a name and address on the paper. "What is this, Yannick?"

"An opportunity to volunteer, Thorvald. Discuss it with your wife."

"But this is a..."

Jackson cut him off. "A place of great need, Thorvald."

* * *

The global news media was still having a hey-day with General Prosser's presentation to the United Nations.

Scholars and diplomats around the globe were debating the authenticity of the claim that the Earth was facing pending doom from outside our solar system. The scientific community conceded there was a possibility of intelligent life in the cosmos, but this SHADO entity offered absolutely no proof of their claim.

The near weekly incidents of “meteor showers” were being attributed to previously unidentified clusters of small space debris being caught in the Earth’s gravity.

Politicians, militaries and pundits were arguing whether or not this SHADO was simply a cover for a military group bent on world domination. That warning by a General was tantamount to a line in the sand, and that sand was on their soil...

All of this was about to change and do so quickly...

CHAPTER 23

There were several large radio-telescopes searching the heavens at remote sites dotting the surface of planet Earth. The primary search was for evidence of new planets but also to study known celestial bodies, utilizing infrared and other wave bands to unlock the secrets of the universe at a sub-atomic level.

It was new territory, and astronomers were beginning to understand the nature of binary stars, quasars, pulsars and star formation. They hoped to capture data on the decay and destruction of stars to support black hole theories as well.

The search for new planets involved looking for a winking effect caused by planetary bodies passing in front of a distant light source at regular intervals. They had catalogued several examples.

Another method used was to look for known and catalogued stars that exhibit changes in the position or intensity of the point of light. Objects in space with a gravitational pull often caused the measurable light and observed position to fluctuate as the light from behind the object was bent as it passed in front of the source. Several examples of these indicators of planetary presence had also been catalogued.

Two groups of radio-telescopes were working together in observation of these light anomalies. Each group consisted of two arrays in separate locations to confirm the observation and to add their own data to the aggregate picture.

The former NASA DSS1 site in Gauteng, South Africa was now run by the Foundation for Research and Development. It was working in tandem with the ATCA site in New South Wales, Australia.

Further northward, the Jansky VLA array in Socorro, New Mexico was working with the SEST site at La Silla, Chile on a similar project.

Both groups were studying visible light anomalies in different parts of the night sky.

Both groups were seeing evidence of what acted like a planetary system, with multiple objects bending light from behind them. These objects however, would not be added to the content of Messier's Catalogue, for three very important reasons...

They exhibited no evidence of orbital movement relative to reference stars...

They appeared to be large because they were closer than the points of light behind them. And...

They were moving - approaching our solar system on a vector that would bring them near Planet Earth...

At the measured velocity of closure, tracked for nearly two weeks, the objects would enter our solar system in about six weeks...

There was no time to publish their findings in the appropriate periodicals or to schedule gatherings of fellow scholars and scientists. There was only one entity they could contact to get their message out to those who could do something - The International Astrophysical Commission...

* * *

The following morning, General Ed Straker's orange phone buzzed for the first time in weeks.

"Straker..."

"Major Ealand, Sir. We have a call coming in from I.A.C."

"We don't have anyone in the building anymore. Who is it?"

"A Professor Leyton-Smythe Sir. One of the I.A.C. astronomers."

Alec stepped into the office with Foster and General Prosser close behind.

"Put him through on the AV link, Major."

"Yes Sir."

The AV link chirped and Straker pressed the button to connect. He was looking at the side of an elderly man's head.

"On your right, Professor..."

"Oh, I see you now. I had no idea Henderson had this kind of equipment in his office. All I could think to do was press the big red button on the phone..."

“You did just fine Professor, now what can I do for you?” asked Straker.

“I need to tell General Prosser something of great importance.”

“He’s standing right here, Professor – go ahead.”

“We have four radio telescopes in various countries that have reported large objects heading toward Earth. They cannot be seen by optical methods, but we can observe the light bending around them due to their massive gravitational fields.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us, professor?” asked Straker.

“They are coming from two different directions... They will be here in six weeks if their current velocity remains unchanged...”

Straker said. “Thank you professor. You will be hearing from us soon...”

Straker closed the AV link, with a searing gaze in his blue eyes. “Okay people, we’ve got six weeks to prepare a planet-wide defense network and get all the help we can...”

Someone at I.A.C. had already leaked the information to the press... Word spread quickly in print and on the radio and television. People were already responding with fear and scrambling to stock up on food, water, medication and ammunition in countries that permitted firearm ownership. Still, there were skeptics...

* * *

“Get on those contractors and builders. Get all of our assets into the field and working immediately. Get those intel agents out there in force and have the combat troops and RAU’s ready to move on any alien cells they find...”

“The closer those invasion forces get, the more resistance we can expect from subversive groups here already. I want maximum security measures at all SHADO sites. All military bases around the globe will need to do the same.”

Straker looked at General Prosser, saying. “General, you’re going to need to get supporting evidence from I.A.C. and prepare to address the world again. This time you can do it from right here in our auditorium.”

He added, “Give the press time to spread the word and distribute the photos. Let the masses weigh the information for themselves and develop a healthy fear.”

“What the hell are you doing, Ed?” demanded Alec. Straker lit his cigar.

“Alec, I’m not leaving them out to hang in the breeze of impending doom. I’m giving them time to demand their governments do something to help. That’s when General Prosser will deliver his message.” He released a plume of smoke.

“A call to arms... A message of solidarity... And a message of hope...”

“General, you have your work cut out for you. If there are any future generations of humanity, they will be studying the words you share for ages to come...”

Prosser narrowed his eyes and rubbed his chin in contemplation. “I must go to where I can think with the most clarity gentlemen...” All eyes were now on Prosser.

“Nothing clears your head quite like rattling its contents around in a helmet while thrashing a machine off-road...” Prosser spun and exited the office.

Alec laughed, “I do it daily with bottled anesthetics of varying origins...”

Straker added, “I shocked the hell out of myself as a kid, experimenting with a direct current worm extraction device I invented for gardens. It used a hand crank generator from an old field telephone and I made contact with the circuit while cranking as fast as I could. I couldn’t have come up with a thought if I’d paid cash.” Alec laughed.

Paul looked at them with a smirk. “Swell, but do either of you remember the last time you got laid?” Paul shook his head and walked out of the office.

Alec still appeared to be pondering the question. “Hmmm... If this is 1993, then it must be... Hmmm...” He laughed. Straker was less amused.

“Alec, I want updates on all of the project teams. Impress upon them that six weeks has to be four. Too

much is at stake. Kick their asses as hard as you have to in order to get the truth..." Alec nodded and stepped toward the door.

* * *

Straker's AV link chirped, "Straker."

Virginia's face appeared on the desktop monitor. "Hello General, I've got an update for you on the efforts here."

"I could use some good news, Virginia," said Straker, noting that she looked as tired as he felt.

"I actually have some of that for you. The satellite weapons systems and intel systems are working perfectly. We have the EMP weapon focused down to a four square meter impact zone."

"The new detection and intel systems are giving us great resolution both earthward and out. We have had to create new formats for magnetic shielding to protect the other satellites, systems and Moon Base operations from the pulse generator."

"The other good news with the satellites is that we've got them set up in a modular format that will make them quick to manufacture, service and re-arm. We have twenty in the shop down the hall from you being built and can double or triple that within a few weeks if we don't run out of anything."

"The Moon Base additions are coming along quickly as well. Everything is being built in modules and it goes together much faster since we don't have to do it covertly. We could really use those bigger shuttles though..."

"If you see my wayward hubby wandering around looking lost and forlorn, tell him to give me a call..."

"Will do, Virginia," said Straker. "Thanks for the good news and give my best to the staff up there. Is there anything else?"

"Oh yes, tell General Prosser that the female staff here are very grateful for the change of clothes. The male staffers are less excited about the new wardrobe..."

Straker laughed, "I'll tell him Virginia, and keep up the good work..."

* * *

General Prosser stood before his RAU group in his riding suit, with his helmet tucked under his arm. "My friends, today is your final exam and graduation. In honor of your achievements we will be taking a tour of the studio and then riding the grounds one last time together. Everyone load your weapons, gear up and form up behind me..."

After the customary blitzing of the various roads and paths between the buildings that once were Harlington-Straker Studios, Prosser spoke into the helmet intercom to his group. "Now begins our studio tour, so follow me and remember to speak up if you have any questions."

Prosser powered his GS through the exit door of the studio building and up the stairway to the stage, "This is where the studio performed Hamlet and other literary classics..." He wheeled off the edge of the stage, the chassis soaking up the three foot drop heavily. The line of machines behind him followed dutifully.

At the other end of the dark space, Prosser shifted back on the pegs and opened the throttle heavily, using the front wheel to impact the crossbar that opened the door. Again his group followed, repeating the same maneuver to perfection.

They rode the wooden board sidewalks of the western set, pausing to take a ride through the saloon set and back out of the swinging door. The graceful grand staircases of the Victorian mansion and maze of shrubs were a fun departure as well.

"And we will wind up our studio tour with a visit to ancient Athens." Prosser led them in a slalom around the many columns that made up the interior set and finally down the massive fake marble steps that made up the foreground of the set. The group kept up easily so Prosser opened up the throttle and headed for the open parking area. As the speed increased, Prosser was pleased to see the group keeping pace with him and dropping to their knee sliders when appropriate. The knobby tires were exceeding their grip for dry pavement and the machines were drifting neatly behind him.

Prosser led them off the back of the lot into the field behind. "Weapons ready, the blue drums are your

enemies, so make them pay..." The machines formed a picket line, bouncing across the field, firing their automatic weapons with their left hands while maintaining speed and control with their right. Water gushed from the bullet holes in the blue drums.

"To the quarry one last time my friends." Prosser led them down the roadway that once seemed so narrow to them at speed, all machines keeping pace and in various stages of controlled slides all the way to the bottom. Another set of blue drums waited for them there. "Fire when you have first opportunity!" he said in their earbuds. In seconds, the water gushed from the barrels. He gave them the overhead circle signal beside a trailer at the bottom of the quarry and gave them the signal to shut down and dismount.

"Congratulations my friends, you have all excelled in this endeavor. In order to celebrate properly, you may now remove those ugly plywood panniers from your machines and install these." Prosser opened the door of the trailer and began handing out pristine new Kevlar pannier sets. "These are keyed to match your ignition so you can lock them in position and from prying fingers. You will note that your field gear and new weapons are already inside and stowed."

Prosser concluded, "I am very proud of all of you, ladies and gentlemen. You will be deployed in groups very soon and I have complete confidence that you will perform with great skill and efficiency in each mission assigned you. Take care of each other... I am hopeful that we all can ride together again soon..."

Prosser shook their hands and returned a few hugs. He fired up his machine and the first SHADO RAU group saluted him as he rode back up the winding road. His mind was clear and he was feeling inspired. It was time to speak to the world.

CHAPTER 24

“You’re bloody well not going to like what I have to tell you, Ed,” said Alec, stepping through the office door. He stepped over to the beverage dispenser in the corner and procured two fingers of bourbon.

“It must be tragic to require the hooch, Alec...”

“This is just to settle my stomach. The coffee here is eating a hole in my gut.”

“Out with it, Alec!” demanded Straker.

“No new Sky units or subs will be ready in time.”

“Only four of the new Interceptors will be ready in time and there will be no additional space platforms to supplement Moon Base.”

“Two new cargo space shuttles and recovery aircraft will be ready in two weeks but we can’t get the new Interceptors to Moon Base without them. Same with the new ODIN satellites.”

“On the plus side, Ginny is ahead of schedule on Moon Base and the shop here is kicking out ODIN clones rapidly.”

“Eddie and Teddy came through for us and we have staged fleets of aircraft being re-armed and outfitted for combat duty. The pilots will be up to speed in plenty of time.”

“I’ve requalified on F-111’s and Foster is getting his on MiG-31’s. We have a crew training on the new Saab’s as well. Prosser will likely lead them himself.”

“Our RAU’s and combat teams are ready to deploy and we’re getting intel updates regularly from our field operatives.”

“We now have defensive capability here on site, with rotary cannons behind drop-down bulwarks on top of several buildings. We are now a land-locked Q-ship.”

“Finally, the media is having a three ring circus with the leaked info from I.A.C. including still photos of the anomalies and the worried scientists in lab coats. It’s like some 50’s sci-fi film. The world is watching and beginning to panic that doomsday is six weeks away...”

Straker looked at Alec. “General Prosser is just waiting for the go signal from us. The broadcast will hijack every television and radio signal for a few hours as it repeats. Every telecom satellite and ground repeater will carry his message.”

“Let’s go give him the go signal, Alec. This is where our world begins to change...”

* * *

Straker and Freeman entered the glassed-in sound booth of the SHADO auditorium. Thorvald was there completing the settings from the sound check. Prosser was sitting on the edge of the darkened stage, one arm folded across him supporting the other which held his bowed head. He was praying.

Thorvald walked quietly down and stood beside him, waiting for him to finish. He placed an arm around the General saying, “It is nearly time, old friend.” Prosser stood and embraced him briefly. He stepped up before the podium bearing the SHADO emblem and reached into his pocket. He placed a Blue Max and an Iron Cross on the lectern.

The lights came up and he took a few deep breaths, feeling the weight of the task before him.

The AV crew was ready to broadcast and signals were exchanged.

* * *

“Brothers and Sisters of Humankind, I am General Prosser of the International Astrophysical Committee and liaison for SHADO. When I last addressed you at the United Nations, I told you that I would appear before you again when the threat to planet Earth was pending. I stand before you for that very reason today.”

“You have all seen the images from the four radio telescopes that indicate groups of large objects moving toward us from deep space. These are not naturally occurring space phenomena, but are alien armadas from two different star systems.”

“There is a third race of aliens, one that we have faced before with regularity on your behalf, that is also involved in this invasion. The two groups being monitored will be here in less than six weeks. The third

group could be here at any time.”

“These are not benevolent extraterrestrial visitors. They cannot be reasoned with, pleaded with for mercy or bargained with to preserve lives. They are here to take our viable organs, raw materials and to enslave us.”

“Planet Earth and all of humanity are simply a business opportunity for them and our lives are of no value beyond that of a commodity. When the invaders have what they want they will destroy our planet. This has been confirmed by other extraterrestrial sources that will be observing our response to this threat with cool and dispassionate interest.” Prosser sharpened his gaze.

“Our battle for self-preservation will begin in space, transition to aerial combat and will absolutely include a ground war against alien troops. These battles could take place in any conceivable location on our planet.”

“I will first appeal to the governments and militaries of every nation. In short, we need your help. We cannot possibly meet this threat alone. Every human life, in every nation is at stake.”

Prosser’s voice rose in intensity and his countenance changed to steel. “Any failure to respond will only accelerate the demise of our species. We must put aside our animosities based on race, religion and politics to stand together – an impenetrable wall of defense against the genocide of humanity. There can be no surrender, no capitulation and no quarter given. We must stand together as one united force, and if necessary we will die that same way.”

“As a symbol of solidarity, I will request that each nation mark their combat aircraft, ships, vehicles and troops with painted stripes of red, symbolic of the shared blood of humanity.”

“Only one of our antagonist species have craft that appear on radar or targeting systems. The others have no track or emissions to lock onto for missile guidance. This will require old-fashioned aerial combat gunnery and dogfighting skills. Armor piercing projectiles and deflection shooting are the tools for success. You must re-learn the three dimensional art of aerial warfare.”

“You will need to provide your own stores of fuel, weapons and equipment. We will work tirelessly to keep communication effective among all contributors.”

“One last warning for governments and militaries; we have evidence that there are already subversive cells operating in many countries that will attempt to sabotage and derail our mission. These are comprised of humans working for and with the alien invaders for some unknown reason. They have already sold out their own planet and are capable of anything. Be diligent in your security and defense.”

* * *

“The last part of my message is for the civilian populations that inhabit every region of every nation on the Earth. This is the most frightening event that any generation has ever faced. You are not facing it alone...”

“You have the one luxury rarely afforded anyone prior to battle – ample warning. You have time to prepare and plan. Plan to shelter in groups – underground if possible. Gather food, water and medical supplies. Leave nothing to chance.”

“If your nation still allows private firearm ownership, use them to good effect. Your enemies are indeed alien, but they are not immortal. Nations that have given up their arms, whether voluntarily or by force will regret being rendered vulnerable. Their governments will have to answer to their masses.”

“Each of you must utilize your skills and resources to the fullest. It is you who will rebuild communities and nations in the aftermath. Protect, defend and care for each other, for your families, your neighbors, communities and towns.”

“While this appears to be the darkest possible time for Humanity, I swear to you this is instead our opportunity to shine our brightest!” Prosser pounded the lectern with his fist. “We will be an illuminated beacon in the night sky of other worlds and show them what it means to be Humankind! We will NOT go down easily as beasts to the hunter’s bow!” His steely gaze melted slowly to heartfelt warmth.

“Prepare, plan and when the time comes, act with diligence. Make the most of what time remains. Do

not leave your love, your respect or your care unspoken.”

“With God’s help, Humanity will emerge from the other side of this challenge with a new sense of purpose... A renewed faith... and hope for the future. Thank You.”

The stage lights dimmed and the signal went into automated repeat. Brigadier General Gunther Prosser placed two aged medals in his pocket, sat down on the edge of the stage and wept for humanity.

CHAPTER 25

“I miss you too, Thorvald. I’ve been out of your arms far too long,” said Virginia.

“I’m afraid I’ve crushed your pillow beyond repair, Love. It smells of you and I find myself wrapped around it by morning.”

“I can’t believe I’m jealous of my pillow...” She laughed. “You can wrap yourself around me all you want when I get back. Unfortunately, I don’t know when that will be, dear. I’m so tired from spending my days in a pressure suit outside that I’ve considered wearing one of the purple wigs just so I don’t have to do my hair.”

“Me too,” said Thorvald. He missed that lovely smile of hers.

He continued, “Did you all get to see the General’s message?”

“We did, Love. I saw everything from high-fives to tears. I think it was exactly what the world needed to hear. It makes me worry about Mom though. I don’t want her to be alone through all of this... Do you mind if she comes and stays with us until it’s over? I promise it is temporary dear...”

Thorvald answered, “Under any other circumstances, I’d say this was a marital set-up from a sitcom.” Virginia laughed.

“Your delightful mother is always welcome here, Love. As long as you and I can get the appropriate privacy, I’d be happy to have the company while you’re away. Besides, I know a certain general who would be much happier knowing she was safe in SHADO bunker housing as well. Do you want me to go get her?”

“I will reward your gallantry enthusiastically when I return, Sir Thorvald,” she laughed. “I’ll call you again when I can, dear. I love you...”

“Love you too Ginny, come home to me soon.” She blew a kiss and the image faded...

* * *

Straker’s orange phone buzzed. “Straker... Yes, Major Ealand. Please put him right through on the AV link.” He pressed the connect button.

“Hello Professor Leyton-Smythe, what can I do for you today?” asked Straker.

“Something wonderful is happening but it’s causing a problem for us. Is General Prosser there?”

“He’s not available at the moment, but you can tell me Professor, I’ll get the word to him immediately.”

“Very well then. Our phones have been ringing non-stop since his broadcast. Everyone wants to help SHADO. I’ve gotten calls from NASA, the European Space Agency, and even the Russians, volunteering the use of their orbital launch systems to get your assets into orbit. You have two shuttles waiting for you in Florida right now...”

“Nations are offering their air forces, naval and ground troops to repel the invasion. My God, it’s just overwhelming... We could actually experience global peace on the eve of interstellar war... What do you want me to tell them all, Straker?”

“Tell them all thank you and welcome aboard, Professor! We will be in contact with them all very soon. Is there anything else, Professor?”

“What do you think our chances of success are, Mr. Straker?”

“I’d say they just improved exponentially, Professor. Also, keep scanning the anomalies but focus in on the 700 to 900 nanometer visible light wave band. We have reason to believe they will be more visible to your instruments.”

“We will do that, Mr. Straker, and please tell the General we send our regards.”

“Will do Professor, thank you for calling.” He ended the transmission, finally noticing Alec standing just inside the doorway. He was grinning with that same ‘see I told you so’ grin that meant Straker had been wrong about something, again.

Straker rolled his eyes playfully, “Yes Alec, you were, once again... right about something I didn’t believe due to my curmudgeonly streak, yada-yada-yada.”

“You forgot stubborn and pig-headed, Ed.” He laughed.

“You’ll give me diabetes with all that sweet talk, Alec! I for once am quite happy to be wrong about assuming that humanity will crash and burn by its own greed and ineptitude. I have seen the error of my ways, oh great guru...”

“Prosser’s message moved a lot of people, Ed. Including me.”

“Me too, Alec.” They smiled at each other and Alec gave a wink.

“I’ll get started on shipping ODIN’s to Florida. Won’t Ginny be surprised when the mail arrives?”

“Not as surprised as the rest of the world would be to find out where she is right now,” said Straker with a grin.

Alec stepped from the office. Ed Straker clipped and lit another Lonsdale cigar and blew a smoke ring up toward the lights. He couldn’t fathom why he had this overwhelming sense of optimism. Perhaps mankind could save itself after all...

* * *

“Mrs. Lake, I’m sorry Virginia couldn’t be here to pick you up herself. She’s travelling on business.”

“Thorvald dear, you can cut the crap. I figured out what’s going on after I saw the General on the tele twice. I don’t know exactly what you all do, but it has something to do with that organization that protects the earth from aliens.”

“It would be a good idea to keep that to yourself, Mrs. Lake,” said Thorvald. “They do not appreciate exposure and the repercussions of disclosure are grave indeed.”

“I understand dear, but I hope they know that they blew their own cover in a big way... I worked briefly in the covert world before Virginia was born. It’s where I met her father, an American Army Air Force officer.”

She looked at him across the little Beetle. “Now, how did you come by all those scars Thorvald?” His face reddened and his eyes darkened.

“That same covert military world, Mrs. Lake. This is my second life...”

“I’m glad Ginny and I get to be part of it, dear.” She patted his arm and gave it a squeeze. “I really like your old Beetle too. It’s much spunkier than that one Virginia had in college.” Thorvald smiled and increased his speed. He had to get back to SHADO HQ.

* * *

“I hope you will be comfortable in the guest room, Mrs. Lake. This is company housing, so it is more-or-less a reinforced bunker. There is emergency backup electrical power and we have our own utility sources. You should keep your keys with you at all times, as the exterior doors lock automatically behind you. You will see armed security guards on the grounds as well.”

“You have your own bathroom in here and all your supplies are in the cabinets. Please feel free to help yourself to everything here and in the kitchen. You have full run of the place. Virginia and I keep odd hours and I’m afraid you’ll be here by yourself much of the time. Virginia and I will call to check in with you from time to time.”

Thorvald led her into the master bedroom. “One other thing I need you to know about is this other closet in our bedroom.” He opened the much heavier door with a key and turned on the light. It was Thorvald’s armory. There were racks of combat rifles, tactical shotguns, assorted handguns and shelves of ammunition, magazines and all of the gear from his former life. His broadsword and axe hung on the wall.

“Your key with the square head will open this if you need access,” said Thorvald.

“Very well dear, I’ll be fine while you go back to work. Greet your coworkers for me...” Mrs. Lake kissed Thorvald on the cheek and playfully pushed him toward the door. She went to the kitchen to start a kettle for her tea.

CHAPTER 26

With the additional support of NASA and other global space agencies, the ODIN satellites were being launched and positioned in orbit with regularity. The ground tracking and linking stations were being installed and staffed quickly. All satellites could be operated independently and in concert to meet any threat.

There were thirty more ODIN's to launch and the two new massive lunar shuttles were tasked with placing them systematically. The shuttle crews referred to the operation as 'Rabbit Mode', as the vessel would travel a fixed distance then eject the satellite from the stern like a fecal pellet.

With the last ODIN's in geostationary orbit, the two shuttles returned to their island base for reconfiguration of their cargo bays. Their next deliveries were eagerly anticipated...

Virginia and Colonel Bradley stood on the lunar surface in their pressure suits, watching the two shuttles move slowly over the rocky ridge that formed the natural bunker behind Moon Base. They pivoted so their loading ramps would face the large hangar door and extended their massive landing pods. Both slowly descended, launching an enormous cloud of lunar dust but touching down with the grace of a preened feather.

As the loading ramps made contact with the lunar surface, two rows of technicians and pilots stood at attention in their pressure suits. Over the intercom, they heard Colonel Bradley's steady tenor voice, "Welcome to Moon Base, I am Colonel Bradley. Please follow Commander Lake to your de-gown and duty stations." The two rows stepped down the ramp of each shuttle and followed Virginia to the open hangar door.

Mark Bradley stepped up the ramp and slowly ran his thickly gloved hand along the sinuous contours of the new Interceptors secured along each wall. He let out a low whistle and patted his hand on the nacelle-mounted rail gun. His team of technicians walked up the ramp, pausing to gaze on the new, very lethal looking Interceptors. They got to their work quickly.

* * *

There were now less than three weeks until the approaching armadas would reach our solar system. By filtering the visible spectra of light to isolate the 700 to 900nm range, telescopes all around the globe were capturing images of the massive vessels approaching.

The vessels backlit by Orion's belt were angular with large protrusions and irregular shapes to them. Those backlit by the M51 galaxy appeared to be perfectly spherical. The ominous still photos were splashed across every television screen, published print source and internet news site.

* * *

As the danger approached, populations around the world stocked and prepared their shelters. Masses of people fled the convenience of the larger cities for the perceived safety of the countryside, just as they had during wars past.

There were record numbers of marriages, divorces, and adoptions. People were choosing who they wanted near them, in life or in death. Those who used the opportunity to manipulate others or attain wealth would find themselves alone and isolated during the battle and in its aftermath. Their actions would be remembered.

Churches were packed with believers in search of divine guidance, spiritual comfort and a sense of belonging. Many stepped into those places for the first time, hoping to find answers, something to cling to and even a brief feeling of peace within.

Beyond the sales of the staples of life, there was a great surge in the sale of photographic film and processing. Nobody wanted to face their possible demise without photos of loved ones for inspiration or remembrance.

* * *

Ed Straker sat alone in his office. He was having trouble maintaining focus on the reports in front of him. His command staff was spread out around the globe. Alec, Paul and Prosser were staged with their air wings, training and waiting for the call to action.

Virginia was still at Moon Base and Thorvald was setting up the perimeter defenses for HQ. Straker hadn't even seen Dr. Jackson in days. The regular staff outside his door were the only familiar faces in the facility. He found it somewhat comforting to be out among them. Something was going to happen soon, he could feel it like the cold chill one gets when they realize someone is watching them covertly.

Thorvald had the same kind of feeling. He knew from hard experience to pay heed to these instincts. He skipped his lunch in order to make a quick run home. He would try not to alarm his mother in law.

"Is that you, dear?" asked Mrs. Lake.

"Yes, I came home to check on you and pick up some supplies."

"Something doesn't quite feel right today, Thorvald," said Mrs. Lake. "It's the same feeling I used to get during the Blitz. I felt it long before the sirens would start."

"Me too, Mrs. Lake," said Thorvald. "Let's get ourselves prepared a bit, shall we?"

He opened the heavy security door in the master bedroom and turned on the light. "Do you have a preference, Mrs. Lake?"

She stepped in and looked around a bit, as if she were picking the perfect loaf of bread in a bakery. She stopped, smiled and pointed to a 12 gauge pump tactical shotgun. "This will do nicely, dear. Don't worry, I know how to use one of these quite well."

Thorvald slid seven shells of double-ought buckshot into the tubular magazine, racked the slide to chamber the first round and topped the tube off with one more round. He handed the shotgun to Mrs. Lake and placed a bandolier of 25 more 2-3/4 inch shells around her neck. She smiled sweetly, despite looking like a gun moll from 1920's Chicago.

Thorvald slipped on the black tactical over clothes and harnesses that held his various weapons and equipment. He slipped the Colt 1911 into his thigh holster with several spare mags in the side pocket. A CZ-75 9mm went into the chest pack with three spare mags. A Ruger Redhawk .44 magnum revolver went into a vertical shoulder holster beneath his left arm. Three speed-loaders went into the left thigh pocket. He slung an FAL rifle over his shoulder along with two battle packs of magazines filled with 7.62 x 51mm NATO spec ammo. He picked up a long cloth roll bag and stepped out locking the vault behind him.

"Back to work dear?" Mrs. Lake asked. Thorvald smiled. "Is my Ginny safe wherever she is, Thorvald?" The question caught him off guard.

"About as safe as we are, Mrs. Lake." She nodded in understanding.

As Thorvald went through the security gate at Headquarters, he noted that there was no activity around the outside of the perimeter of the site. No cars, no civilians, not even any birds. "Initiate yellow alert gentlemen," he said to the guards. He placed his earbud communicator in his ear.

Something was indeed coming and they wouldn't have to wait long...

CHAPTER 27

“General Straker, we have reports coming in from our field intel units that subversive groups are mobilizing worldwide,” said Major Keith Ford. “We have combat troops and RAU’s positioned around several cells. There are others that are closer to our position here and in proximity to several military bases that we simply don’t have the manpower to deal with directly.”

“Issue the red alert to all SHADO stations and trigger the global warning network,” said Straker. “Whatever they have planned is happening very soon. Tell all combat units and RAU’s to act on their own initiative.”

Thorvald took his position on the highest roof at Harlington-Straker Studios between four of the rotary cannon bulwarks. “All SHADO security staff, seal the gates and pull back to your defensive positions,” he said calmly into the com link.

Security operatives secured the gates and moved quickly back toward the buildings on the lot. The many decorative brick and concrete patio settings transformed into reinforced bunkers. The decorative brick fascia released to reveal the stowed Bren squad automatic rifles, cases of ammunition and racks of acoustic rifles. They were positioned to provide a crossfire zone across the grounds which could extend beyond the perimeter fences. One by one, they called in their status as ready and awaiting orders.

* * *

“This is Space Intruder Detector, Red Alert. There are multiple inbound targets, bearing 458-102 Green, 459-102 Green, 460-102 Green, 457-102 Green...”

“What the hell is going on up there, Gay?” demanded Straker. “How many UFO’s?”

S.I.D. continued to rattle off coordinate trajectories, finally saying “Speed, Sol 4 and decreasing. Inbounds continue to appear.”

Gay spoke intently, “All Interceptors, immediate launch. All gunnery crews to defensive batteries. All Mobile and ground tactical crews to defensive positions. All Moon Base personnel, this is a code blue emergency – all personnel into pressure suits immediately!”

Straker shouted, “Major Ellis, how many UFO’s are there?”

Gay responded loudly with irritation, “I can’t answer that question, General Straker, because we haven’t seen the end of the column yet!” She quickly regained her composure. “We have seen over a hundred ships so far, mostly troop ships, but with squadrons of scouts.”

Her voice became muffled momentarily as she secured her pressure helmet and switched on the intercom. “A wave of over thirty scouts has vectored away and toward this station. We have ten Interceptors airborne including the four new ones. The ODIN stations are not online yet.”

“Commander Lake, what is the hold-up on those ODIN’s?” Growled Straker.

“They were almost ready when the alert started and these gloves are less than useless on a keyboard!” she snarled back. “Now, set the links and energize the system,” she shouted to the technicians around her.

“Okay, it’s armed and responding now, so go yell into someone else’s goddamn headset and let me do my job!”

Ed Straker pulled back away from the microphone wide-eyed and pressed the mute button. He and Ford just looked at each other and exchanged a suppressed grin. “Wow,” said Straker. “I’ve never heard her that angry before...”

* * *

“All SHADO air units are up now sir,” said Ford. “AWAC’s report that flights have sortied from many countries. F.o.F. transponders are in use to keep things organized.”

* * *

“Major Ellis, we need firing coordinates,” one of the new pilots said.

“No you don’t!” said Colonel Bradley in the intercom. “You have a wall of alien craft before you, just fire your weapons. You will hit something...”

“When missiles are depleted, you must find targets of opportunity and maneuver independently. You will return, refuel and rearm as needed...”

The ten Interceptors launched a barrage of missiles spread across the oncoming column. Flashes of light indicated hits. Each of the four new ships launched all six of their missiles. More flashes of light... The Interceptors formed up and opened fire with their rail guns. In a matter of minutes, the front of the column was reduced to cascades of spinning debris and scattered bits of silver and red.

The Interceptors' weapons systems were depleted and they turned toward Moon Base just in time to see the wave of scout ships open fire on the facility. Over twenty ground and Mobile based rail guns opened fire on the formation. Plumes of oxygen enriched flame flashed over the lunar landscape and over the facility.

UFO's had scored direct hits on one of the gun Mobiles and hit two of the rail gun blisters mounted on the rocky ridge behind the base. One of the massive transports was hit and destroyed, throwing fragments and debris hundreds of meters. The bits punctured the envelope of the command sphere and new technical section.

Large structural components of the ship landed close to the hangar entrance, effectively blocking the return of the Interceptors. A pair of blade equipped Mobiles exited the hangar and began pushing debris back from the entrance amid the flashes of fire between sky and ground. They were under fire immediately.

In the command sphere and the technical section, the staff were holding tightly onto their work stations waiting for the pressure to fully evacuate. The emergency doors had shut automatically, sealing them in. The piles of computer paper printouts Virginia had generated were now swirling in shards like flecks in a snow globe. She shouted into the mic over the noise, “I am NOT cleaning this shit up!”

As the last torrents of air escaped the jagged gaps in the walls, the technicians and command staff got back to business, glad for the precaution of the pressure suits. After a brief period of terror, the first wave of UFO's to attack Moon Base lie scattered in fresh craters on the surface. Crews scrambled to re-arm, refuel and repair damage from the first wave. More would surely be coming. Two in fact...

* * *

Outside of headquarters, groups of people began to approach the gates from the fields across the road. They were clearly armed. A similar scene was playing out at military installations all around the globe.

Thorvald heard Dr. Jackson's voice in his earpiece. “Thorvald, do you have operatives outside the perimeter?”

“Yes Yannick, I have several in the tree line and scattered throughout the area where the masses are walking right now.”

“I need two random individuals from among the group so I can determine if they are acting out of programming or of their free will.”

“I'll send the message. You should have them momentarily...”

From the rear of the group, a young man and woman both disappeared silently. They were bound and gagged and hauled quickly back through the perimeter without the massive group seeing a thing.

From the front of the group, something flew, streaking forward across the road. The guard shack erupted in a fireball, launching fragments of glass, wood and roofing shingles. Shots began to hit the studio buildings. More rockets impacted the parking lot and courtyard. Cars were flipped and burning.

Thorvald could see Dr. Jackson from his rooftop vantage point. He had switched off his earpiece and was questioning the two prisoners. They both snarled back, shouting and kicking with their bound legs. Jackson crossed himself, drew his H&K P7-M8 and put a 9mm hollow-point through each of their foreheads. He switched the com back on and simply said, “This is being done willingly for personal gain.”

“May God forgive us all, Yannick,” said Thorvald. Tears rolled unrestrained down his face. He pulled back the bolt charging handle and let it snap forward, chambering the first of thirty rounds.” He said, “All units, fire at will...”

* * *

The ODIN satellites powered up their rail guns and targeting systems for the clusters of missiles they

carried. While the Interceptors refueled and rearmed, a group of over fifty troop and scout ships made it past the frontier before the satellites fired. The remaining ships behind them fell prey to the wrath of ODIN.

Fighters and interceptors from over thirty nations were waiting for them beneath the cover of the clouds. Troop ships split off into groups of three to five with scout escorts. They vectored off for various parts of the globe, with combat aircraft closing on them from different directions.

Prosser and Freeman both managed to down several UFO's. Paul Foster got his first taste of air combat. He began to understand the delicate balance of terror and exhilaration that came with being under fire at high altitude and speed. He was comfortable behind the stick, but nobody had ever tried to kill him while he had been flying before.

His MiG-31 was plenty fast and agile, but he was having trouble getting his cannons on target. While Alec led his squadron of F-111's off toward another pod of UFO's, General Prosser hung back with Paul to institute his favorite training method – follow the leader.

After several passes getting Paul accustomed to much harder turn-ins and transitions, Prosser pulled in front and let Paul pursue him. "Much better, Commander Foster. Do remember your guns are loaded... You can push your ship much harder than that. It is not as fragile as you imagine." They completed aerial refueling and formed up.

"SHADO control, do you have any more inbounds for us?" asked Prosser. The AWAC's responded with course and altitude for intercept. "Okay Paul, let's go hunting."

The General's Saab and Paul's MiG hurtled off into the darkening sky with afterburners lit. Paul would taste his first aerial victories in the night sky over the Atlantic Ocean. He gained a much greater respect for his pilot coworkers.

* * *

Two hours later, Ed Straker was sucking down another cold coffee when his orange phone rang in the office. "What is it, Major Ealand?"

"A General Harris from NORAD Sir, on the secure line. Connecting now..."

"This is SHADO Command, General Harris, what can I do for you?"

"Well Mr. Shadow, I have one serious question for you. Are you sure these aliens are really supposed to be more intelligent than us?"

"They travelled here from a different star system General and use advanced technologies. Why do you ask?"

"Because they are choosing landing and attack sites like idiots throwing darts at a map. Four of those ships that look like a giant hoagie bun landed in the Sandhills of North Carolina, less than twenty miles from Ft. Bragg and Pope AFB. There was a flight of C-130 Spectre gunships there within fifteen minutes. There was nothing left for the Rangers to do but torch it."

"A group of four of them came down near Kingsport, Tennessee in the mountains. There's not a person in that part of the country that isn't well armed and used to running wooded mountain paths at night. There were piles of red and silver clad bodies all over the woods."

"By the time local authorities got there they were met by a group of commando types on dirt bikes who said they took care of everything. 'Bout that time there was a big blast at the site."

"General, those are some of our operatives. I had no idea they'd made it that far already."

"Another group of ships tried to hide in a large cloud formation south of Ft. Dodge, Iowa. It was a supercell thunderstorm that had dropped funnels all over three counties and they flew right into it. They got pancaked by winds of over 250 knots into a cornfield near a state park."

"They also came down in California, North Dakota and Nevada too. In each case there was a military base with combat troops or aircraft within thirty minutes response time."

"Advanced maybe, but these aliens are a bunch of morons..."

Straker's anger swelled. "Whatever you might think of them General, we've fought those morons for over thirteen years and they have murdered well over a thousand innocent victims and harvested their internal

organs. Those morons have made countless hundreds of widows and orphans around the world while you did absolutely nothing.”

“What you perceive as stupidity is simply a race so callous that it doesn’t value us enough to bother to study our society, structure or history. You are only under-estimating them, just as they have done to us.” He now had an acidic note to his rising voice. “Many human lives were lost today, General...”

“The two species of aliens approaching Earth right now make this first wave look like a scout troop by comparison! Make no mistake about that, General! SHADO OUT!” Straker’s fist closed the link leaving Harris in his Cheyenne Mountain base listening to a dial tone. “Goddamn arrogant prick! You’ll see soon enough...”

Harris would indeed see. His command ended that same day. His failure to take the threat seriously enough resulted in the loss of critical air defense bases due to both UFO attack and subversive cell action. He was relieved of his command and detained for review by a military court.

His replacement would make no such mistakes. She was an experienced command Colonel who had proven her combat mettle in Operation Desert Storm. Her promotion to General would be precedent setting and a fulfillment of family honor.

Her mother had been a Marine Corps field nurse in Vietnam. Her late father had been career Air Force and his older brother had just recently retired as a general in the I.A.C. and U.N.S.C. Devotion to duty was their family hallmark...

CHAPTER 28

In the aftermath of the first wave, SHADO intelligence operatives scrambled to assess damage and look for alien presence that might have been missed in the hours since the initial attack.

Civilian and military air transportation centers had been hit hard, including the Harlington Regional Airport where the SHADAIR base was located. An SST and two VTOL rotorcraft had been reduced to smoldering wreckage on the apron outside the company hangar.

Troopships and scouts had slipped into unnoticed locations around the globe and the aliens were attempting to herd humans into their stasis pods for later processing. Their success in surprise attacks on individuals didn't translate into success marching into remote villages.

Alien intruders fell to the skilled hands of people wielding spears, bows and the machete. A group of injured aliens were horrified that the warriors of the African tribe that captured them would eviscerating them so as to free their spirit from bodily captivity in death. They did so as a courteous tribute to their fallen foes. An ironic expression of dignity those foes had never extended to any of their victims.

Satellites, divers and militaries of the world were searching rivers, lakes and seas looking for UFO's that might have sought the cover of water. There were reports that small groups of alien troops were hitting targets connected with SHADO installations worldwide.

The alert level had been decreased to yellow after a six hour lull in attacks. Thorvald had descended to the ground level. The security staff had rushed offsite a couple hours ago to address some situation. One of the remaining guards informed him there had been trouble at one of the SHADO housing units.

Thorvald looked to the parking lot. His Beetle was blocked in by debris and wrecked vehicles. "I need to borrow your truck right now, Sargent."

Thorvald didn't wait for the answer. He powered the Pinzgauer over the wreckage of the guard shack and through the remnants of the outer gate. He stood on the throttle and a plume of dark smoke poured from the exhaust stack.

He drove up on the grass in front of his home. There were three SHADO six-wheeled utility vehicles out front. He vaulted past the security officers and through the doorway.

Mrs. Lake sat on the sofa sipping tea from a hand-painted china cup, her hair a bit disheveled. The shotgun leaned against the sofa, its muzzle blackened from repeated fire. Thorvald sat on the coffee table, misty-eyed with relief to find Mrs. Lake intact.

"I see you've had a busy day," he said. Two security officers were dragging a lifeless body in a red suit toward the door. It had blackened holes where what had been flesh was now a gap surrounded by shredded red fabric. The faceplate of the helmet was absent as was most of the face behind it.

"I was getting a snack when I heard shouting and gunfire. Before I knew it, three of these red-suited chaps were kicking in the patio door. I fired first and hit all three of them but they started reaching for those silver guns again so I had to put one through each of their helmets up close. I rather lost my composure at that point and had to fully reload twice... What the hell are these creatures, Thorvald?"

"These are the extraterrestrial monsters that murdered my family, Mrs. Lake."

"Then they had it coming and then some, dear." Thorvald brushed her hair back up into position and kissed her cheek.

"I couldn't have done better myself," he said.

The security operative stepped up. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Magnusson, but the sanitization crew will have this squared away and a new door installed within a couple of hours. How much of a 'dose' should we give the nice lady?"

"None, or you will answer to Commander Lake, General Prosser and the command staff. The nice lady is her mother..."

* * *

"She WHAT Thorvald?" exclaimed Virginia, still muffled by her pressure suit helmet.

“I said she single handedly dispatched three alien soldiers at the house!” he shouted. Realizing she would want more info than that, he added, “With the shotgun I gave her before I left for work.” He waited, unsure of what was coming.

“Thanks for taking care of my mom, Love,” she said, sounding very far away. “I miss you both so badly...” He could hear her sniffing. “I can’t even wipe my nose in this goddamn pressure suit!” she shouted, then began to laugh...

“We’re supposed to have pressure restored and full access within another two hours. I am seriously regretting that second cup of coffee...” She was trying to carry some humor forward to cope with a very bad day at Moon Base. Six of her friends and coworkers were now sealed in long plastic bags in the storage area.

“I’ll be home as soon as I can get there, Love. I need your arms around me and a very, very long, hot shower,” she said. “I love you, Thorvald.”

“All my love, Ginny,” he said as the link dissolved into static again.

* * *

There were only two weeks left to find any lingering threat from the first wave and to prepare fully for the arrival of the two armadas. Much had to be done in spite of the losses to life, infrastructure and equipment.

They would need every minute of it...

CHAPTER 29

Virginia Lake stood beside her longtime friend Gay Ellis, watching from the viewport as the engineering groups worked outside on the lunar surface. The small lunar shuttle and the remaining giant one were in continual use, re-arming and re-fueling the ODIN satellites and bringing in construction materials and equipment.

Moon Base was now much more of a lunar fortress. New dual rail gun units were brought in to replace and supplement the existing defensive blisters. Demolition and construction teams were crushing lunar rock into useable size and forming berms of natural material across the approaches to the base. There were now two rows of mounded rock protecting the relatively fragile spheres.

An opening in the rows allowed lunar vehicles and the various flying stock to gain access to the hangars but was bermed on each side to prevent collateral damage should another craft be destroyed in close proximity to the base. Pre-formed reinforced concrete wall sections were placed strategically to protect the vulnerable modules behind them.

Her tasks now completed, Virginia waited for her ride back to Earth. Since the large shuttle was configured for cargo, it would mean another several hours in her pressure suit, strapped into a jump seat along the wall. She could nap if she could relax enough. There would be no extra coffee prior to this session...

She pondered how long it would take to get home from the island base in the Southern Atlantic... She wasn't even sure where it was located.

* * *

Ed Straker stood beside Dr. Jackson on the roof of the administration building looking down over the view of carnage that reached from the parking area all the way across the road and into the field beyond. Sanitization workers in biohazard suits were loading the bodies of subversive insurgents into the buckets of large wheel loaders and dumping them into trucks for incineration and a mass grave.

"Will you perform any religious services for the dead insurgents?" Asked Straker.

"There can be no absolution for them, General," said Jackson. "I will pray for their families and that God may be merciful, but they must arrange for their own forgiveness. They won't find it in this world..."

With cool detachment, Jackson continued. "We are living the role of Elijah and they are the prophets of Baal... Defeat is not sufficient. It must be followed by eradication. We are not just fighting for our species, General, this is a battle against forces of evil. Our very souls are at stake; lest we lose our humanity and attain evil ourselves..."

* * *

Virginia was thrilled to feel the full pull of gravity again. She had been gone long enough to have no clean clothing left. The staff at the island base gave her a clean flight suit with the SHADO logo. She met General Prosser, Alec and Paul in the mess hall and gratefully downed the first good coffee she'd had in weeks. The soup and sandwich tasted fresh and were still piping hot. She was relaxing, finally...

"How does one go about getting back to England from here?" she asked.

Alec looked at the clipboard beside him and shook his head. "A SkyDiver sub will be heading back next week for resupply at Scarborough. I'm sure they can rig you a bunk for the trip." Her pleasant expression turned to one of irritation.

"Virginia, I am flying back to Harlington tonight. It's a two-seater and I'd appreciate the company," said General Prosser. "It will be several hours in the cockpit with at least one refueling stop."

"I know from your files that you are flight rated on multi-engine jet and propeller craft. You can work toward your tactical fighter certification on the way..."

Virginia smiled broadly. "When do we leave, General?" Her grey eyes were sparkling now and her demeanor had perked up considerably. She'd be home by morning...

* * *

A bit after 4 am Virginia arrived home, slipped out of her flight suit and under the covers beside her husband. He found her quickly and pulled her tightly up against him with his arms wrapped around her. Her silken skin and soft lips melted away the anxiety he'd carried since she left. There would be no nightmares tonight.

She woke a few hours later to find her husband gone already. She joined her mother for tea and breakfast and they caught up on each other's lives. Dead aliens in the living room pretty much blew the lid of secrecy off of the barrier between them. The stains in the carpet made that point clearly.

Her mother was delighted to find her daughter had been on the Moon for the last couple weeks. She was equally delighted that General Prosser wanted to call on her while he was back. "I'm too old for romance, Ginny," she said half-heartedly.

"Don't you dare say that, Mom," retorted Ginny playfully. "I'm counting on passionate romance and earth-shattering orgasms until I'm too old to remember my own name..." They both laughed long and hard.

* * *

Virginia showered, dressed and drove to work. She passed scenes of scorched earth and levelled buildings. She had no idea how hard the Earth had been hit while on the Moon. She had only seen the wreckage at the regional airport. She had to stop at the concrete barriers that now stood where the guard shack had once been. Full security protocols were still in place.

The ground was blacked and engineers were installing new perimeter fencing, this time with coils of razor wire along the top. A pile of burned and twisted cars had been pushed to the corner of the parking area awaiting removal. The asphalt had irregularly-shaped dark stains scattered everywhere. The pools of blood had dried, awaiting a heavy enough rain or intervention by pressure washers to remove them.

Virginia looked at the dried blood pools and her heart broke. She knew her husband would have been in the middle of it. She found him reinforcing a bunker position with sand bags and wrapped her arms around him teary eyed.

"I'm so sorry, Thorvald... I had no idea it was this bad here." She saw the great sadness in his eyes. He kissed her forehead and pressed his cheek to her head.

"I'm afraid this is only the beginning, Love," he said.

Virginia felt a renewed sense of purpose. She went to the newly added underground satellite control center and went to work creating a duplicate of the ODIN site on the Moon. It would be a redundant control center that could take over if Moon Base satellite control failed for any reason.

* * *

General Ed Straker had lit his first Lonsdale cigar of the day. His orange phone buzzed.

"Yes, Major Ealand."

"I have NORAD Command on the secure AV link General," she said.

"How the hell did they get access to that?" he growled.

"They linked into the system at I.A.C. Sir."

"Put it through, Major," said Straker, his anger building that Harris would have the audacity to bypass SHADO security measures.

The image cleared on the desktop monitor. It was a woman. A very attractive woman in BDU's with a gleaming star on each lapel. She had auburn hair and deep brown eyes with delicate cheekbones and perfectly almond-shaped face.

"General Straker, I am General Henderson at NORAD," she said.

"Did you say Henderson, General?" She smiled.

"My uncle James sends his best, General Straker. To quote him directly; 'The lid is off the chamber pot now, so you might as well dial direct,' she said and smiled again. Her voice was clear, pleasant and confident.

Straker was quite taken with the lovely woman before him. She was looking at a much larger monitor and was similarly captivated by the man she was looking at in life size. Her Aunt Evelyn was right, he did look like a white haired Roman statue, with piercing blue eyes.

“Not that I have any actual concern, but what happened to General Harris?”

She spoke with a courtly, command voice. “Private Harris is now living in a ten-by-ten cell and dining on rations left over from Korea. If he survives the military court proceedings, he may find a new civilian career in the janitorial sciences.”

Straker couldn't hold back the belly laugh. “Absolutely marvelous!” he roared.

Her smile faded quickly. “I'm afraid I am calling for a less than amusing reason General Straker. The two approaching armadas have accelerated. We have a little over three days until they arrive. It is confirmed by I.A.C. astronomers.”

Ed Straker felt an uncontrollable cold shiver and his legs felt weak. “Thank you for the warning, General Henderson,” he said, struggling to maintain a clear voice.

“Under the circumstances, please call me Rebecca.” She added, “I remember you attended my graduation from the Academy with my Uncle James, back when you were both in Air Force Intelligence.”

“You are every bit as lovely as I remember you, Rebecca. I am glad to say you look nothing like your uncle.” She smiled. “Please call me Ed...” he added.

“I'll notify all U.S. and NATO Commands, Ed. They'll spread the word from there.” She added, “I hope you and I can meet soon under more social circumstances.” She smiled again, looking remarkably feminine despite the BDU's and no make-up.

“I'd like that very much, Rebecca. We'll notify all SHADO installations and get the word to the civilian populace as well.”

“Seeing you again has been the only highlight to a very long day, Ed.” She smiled and said, “NORAD Command, Out.” The link terminated leaving Ed Straker with a very mixed bag of emotions...

“Ford, get on the horn to all SHADO sites and personnel. Notify them that the arrival date has been bumped up to three days or less.”

Ford's eyes widened and he felt that churning in his stomach again. Straker added, “Then find General Prosser and tell him he needs to talk to the world again and soon.”

“Yes Sir,” said Ford. Straker stepped back into his office and closed the door. Ford took a deep breath and keyed the communications console.

Prosser delivered another message to the masses. Again, it was a warning, a call to arms, a message of solidarity and a message of hope. He did not want to be alone after it was finished.

Virginia arrived home after dark. There was a dark blue Beetle in the drive and beside it a very large blue and white motorcycle on the center-stand. Thorvald met her at the door. “Your mother is being visited by General Prosser. He is flying back to his base in the morning. Based on the chemistry I am seeing, I don't think he'll be leaving this evening.”

Virginia flustered a bit. “But what if they're not ready for that kind of relationship, Thorvald?” She was worried as a mother might be for her daughter.

“Love, what if tonight is the only time they ever have together...” Virginia's eyes filled with tears. She smiled sweetly. “They deserve some privacy,” he added.

“So what's the plan, my hopeless romantic?” she asked with a sly smile.

“A picnic under the stars on a soft blanket... We have food, wine and each other.”

* * *

The blue Beetle rolled along the countryside for nearly an hour, stopping beside a field of young green clover. The smell was sweet and fragrant. Thorvald and Virginia walked hand-in-hand to the center of the field and spread out their blanket.

The brilliant pin-points of light, deep blues of nebular clouds and silvery shadows of dust comprising the bands of our galaxy were prominently displayed. There was no nearby Earthly light to obscure them. It was absolutely beautiful and they gazed up while in loving embrace.

The night sky was deceptively peaceful and formed a beautiful canopy over the improvised marital bed. They made love, taking great care to savor every moment together. There could be no more moments wasted

or without purpose.

At the same time, Mrs. Lake led the man who adored her by his hand to her bed, the passions of youth far from extinguished, despite the march of time. With the years, came a focus on tenderness that culminated in a peaceful sleep, lovingly wrapped together as if they had been formed for that very purpose.

Thorvald and Virginia arrived home again well after midnight. A blue and white motorcycle still sat where it had, now covered with dripping condensate from the fallen dew.

Morning found the machine gone and Ginny and her mother awaiting breakfast from Thorvald in the kitchen. Much went unsaid, but Ginny held her mothers' hand while she wiped tears away over a forced smile. "I'm just worried about him dear."

"Mom, I spent over six hours in the cockpit with him getting advanced aerial combat training," said Ginny. "I feel a twinge of pity for the alien pilot who is foolish enough to come within range of his guns..." Her mother smiled her first genuine smile since he'd left. Thorvald placed the breakfast plates on the table.

* * *

Two more days passed, with a flurry of preparation in every nation and in every community on Earth. Individuals who were not intending to be part of the fight went to their shelters and staffed the medical facilities set up to triage the wounded. Others waited near their fire and rescue vehicles. Humanity was as ready as it was going to be.

CHAPTER 30

The formation of huge spheres and angular, blocky vessels were now stationary in different parts of the sky, visible both day and night to the unaided eye. Planet Earth was at Red Alert status. Every nation that would participate had combat aircraft in the sky and ground troops massed and ready to deploy at a moment's notice.

Ed Straker was talking to Alec, Paul and Prosser on the radio link. He was worried about them all and feeling rather useless that he hadn't had any stick time in nearly twenty years. "I want you all to come home safely, my friends," he told them.

Alec replied, "Ed, you should see what I'm seeing... There is literally a complete net of combat aircraft, AWAC's and tankers stretching around the globe. All of them have red stripes painted on them. My God this is a beautiful sight..."

Colonels Carlin, Waterman and the other Skydivers were at action stations awaiting the call to move and launch.

Colonel Bradley and his ten Interceptors sat on the launch pad, fully fueled and armed waiting for the launch signal. Moon Base defenses were fully deployed among the facility and behind the berms on the lunar surface. They waited with weapons ready. All internal base personnel were already in their pressure suits.

Virginia and Gay were able to switch ODIN control back and forth between Moon Base and HQ at will while maintaining fire control and targeting signal feed.

* * *

"Ford, can you connect me with all SHADO units at once?" asked Straker.

"Absolutely sir, ready on my mark..." He motioned to Straker to go ahead.

"All SHADO personnel, this is Straker. We are facing the biggest threat our world has ever experienced. SHADO was created specifically with this ultimate battle in mind. You were all specially recruited, trained and deployed as the best hope our world would have to meet such a challenge. You are the best, brightest and bravest humanity has to offer. Today we stand, not alone as in the past, but side by side with every nation on Earth, to defend it at all cost. I have complete confidence in you all. Stay focused and take care of each other. God willing, we will prevail and humanity may continue to remain united. Straker out..."

Ford looked up at him and smiled. He turned off the com microphone. Straker put a hand on Ford's shoulder and squeezed it. "This is what it was always about, Keith..."

* * *

In near Earth orbit things were starting to happen. The large angular alien ships appeared to be covered with scales. There were much larger elliptical shapes interspersed among them. They all began to move...

In another part of the sky, the enormous spheres began to exude orbs, both small and large, from all over their surface. They streamed like water droplets from a garden hose.

"Moon Base to all SHADO installations, Red Alert, incoming vessels, all vectors," said Gay Ellis. "Immediate launch, all defenses open fire when in range..."

Each of the scales separated into two crescent shaped fighter craft which formed into squadrons of eight. Behind each was a much larger vessel with a flattened elliptical shape. Each one carried a compliment of ground troops. It only took minutes for each armada to launch its fighters and troop ships, leaving the large parent vessels behind.

The frontier of ODIN satellites was the first to fire, but only with rail guns. They still had nothing to lock onto with missile guidance systems.

"All Interceptors, hit what you can with missiles but save your rail guns as long as you can in case we have to defend Moon Base," said Colonel Bradley. The Mark I's formed up in two groups of three and the Mark II's in groups of two. "Good hunting everyone," he added.

The ODIN rail guns were culling individual ships from the mass of crescent fighters and orbs but at their rate of fire, their ammunition would be depleted quickly. Virginia downloaded a command to all satellites to

switch from full automatic fire to three round bursts in an effort to slow the rate of depletion. It had worked perfectly with no loss in the numbers of hits.

Orbs and crescent fighters began to fire back, the ODIN's being hit were exploding as the onboard missiles detonated in place. It was causing damage to the adjacent satellites.

"Interceptors, open fire!" shouted Colonel Bradley. "Mix it up with them so they can't fire without hitting their own ships." The Interceptors darted in three dimensions as they had practiced. It was very different than the days of formation firing at distant targets.

Missiles depleted, they began to fire their dual rail guns using the heads-up gunnery sights installed in each. They were destroying orbs and crescent fighters but it wasn't stemming the flow of them still streaming in from the parent ships.

Eventually two Mark I's were hit and destroyed. One Mark II was crippled but its crew safety capsule had ejected as designed and was on a slow approach to the lunar surface under internal guidance, its crew of two helpless to defend themselves among the melee of fighters.

"All Interceptors, pull back to defend Moon Base, immediately!" called Colonel Bradley. He knew they were all low on fuel and ammunition. They would have to refuel and re-arm under fire while Moon Base defenses fired around and above them at incoming fighters.

* * *

Virginia was busy trying to figure out how to launch the ODIN weapons against the parent ships. They might be failing to stop the fighters but they may be able to ruin their ride home. She poured over the specifications for the variety of missiles on each...

"Bingo!" she cried. "Gay, this is Virginia. Do you have any targeting or range finding lasers on Moon Base?"

"We have several that the engineers use for precision measurement of distance and height. Can they help us?" Virginia could hear the sound of the rail gun emplacements firing, even through Gay's pressure helmet.

"Get them all out on the lunar surface and point them at one of those big pointy looking ships. Tell them to try to paint one big spot on it. I'm going to try something..."

* * *

Crescent fighters and small orbs were dropping through the cloud layers and began firing on the aircraft waiting for them. While the smaller craft engaged the defenses of Planet Earth, the large elliptical troop carriers and larger orbs pushed past them heading for ground targets. The large orbs vectored off toward large bodies of water protected by clouds of the smaller orbs.

The clouds over much of the world were being continually illuminated by the flashes of advanced weapons, tracer streams and the brilliant plumes that signified the demise of both terrestrial and alien craft.

Paul and his flight of MiG's was faring well against the small orbs. While they were much faster and able to change direction without slowing, they seemed to follow a general flight path to which they would return within seconds of vectoring away.

The flight Paul led and the international squadrons that had joined them had found success making angular slashing cuts through the formations from alternating directions. The large orbs, however wouldn't fall no matter how many depleted uranium projectiles they fired into them. Another technology was at play here.

* * *

Alec was leading his F-111's in a high speed run to plug a gap where dozens of crescent fighters had found easy entry. His cannons had a little more than half of their rounds left. As he led them with wings folded back near Mach 2, a flight of two more 111's appeared beneath him. He looked down on them and shook his head.

"Who the bloody hell is fielding two pink 111's?" he called out over the radio.

"Is that you, Freeman? You 'roo-porkin' Aussie sumbitch!" the voice yelled back.

"Bates! Bloody marvelous to have you along. Now what in hell happened to your ships?"

“Teddy and me had a couple cream puff ships that came in after your big purchase, so we made some modifications. We had ‘em in an old SAC underground bunker when them flying trashcan lids came in and hit both Mohave and my Tucson yard. They roasted hundreds of acres of vintage aircraft and blew our shops to hell. Dammit man, we live there ‘ya know? They not only took out all my LP’s, beer and tools, but they roasted all thirty of Rico’s primo Panama Red plants.”

“Aren’t you boys a little old for living out ‘Reefer Madness?’” asked Alec.

“Its 50 miles of bad gravel to the nearest bar and there ain’t no damn women there either!” growled Eddie Bates.

“Rico is right sidin’ for me here, bud,” he added. “Cousin Edgar is right sidin’ for Teddy. You remember them boys don’cha Alec?”

“I remember bailing all your asses out of countless bar fights in Bangkok. You were the smallest guys in all of Southeast Asia and you never failed to pick a fight with the biggest guys in the bar. Hell, even Straker is bigger than any of you!”

Eddie Bates laughed hard. “Rico just flipped you off, bud! Oh, and the paint is what happens when you’ve got less than a half-gallon of red and white paint and two ships to mark.”

“We got us some surprises here too, bud. Roll it over there, Teddy...” The 111 to starboard gracefully inverted, revealing four rotary cannon pods on its wing pylons. “We got auxiliary tanks in the bomb bays that get us well over three thousand nautical and we added something else just for fun.”

“I’m all ears, Bates,” said Alec.

“You remember when we put water injectors on that F4 back in the day? Gave us almost 400 knots additional speed. We rigged ‘em on these ships too, but we figured out how to control them so the pressure waves don’t bust anything up.”

“We’re glad to have you with us,” said Alec. “We’ve got to plug a hole in the sky about 400 nautical miles downrange on course one-zero-five degrees.”

“Consider it plugged, buddy,” said Bates. The two pink splattered F-111’s hit full afterburners and triggered the water injectors. The shock wave they created pulling away made the rest of the flight shudder through their control sticks. They hurtled off at what Alec could only guess was approaching Mach 3...

“That’s my boys...” said Alec to his weapon’s officer in the seat to his right. “The Bates brothers may be aging juvenile delinquents, but they are also the most innovative aircraft mechanics and aerial gunfighters I’ve ever known...”

* * *

“Virginia, we have the lasers positioned on the forward bunker and they’re painting a sizeable red dot on the lead ship of the column,” said Gay.

“Hope this works...” said Virginia. She rebooted the missile guidance systems and brought those capable up in laser guidance mode. The group of five ODIN’s began processing available target data and found the laser dot on the lead ship.

“Holy shit, I’ve got target lock!” shouted Virginia. “Firing missiles now!”

Five ODIN satellites launched a barrage of six missiles each. They were more than double the size of their predecessors used on combat aircraft. The missiles streaked away toward their target at great speed. Even if their fuel was expended, their inertia would carry them to the target which remained strongly locked.

“My God Virginia, you just blew that huge ship to bits!” said Gay with excitement. “I’ll tell you when they get the next target painted...”

After two more of the angular alien vessels had been obliterated, the four remaining began to move off.

“Okay Gay, let’s try it on those big round ones,” said Virginia. Following the same procedure, they fired three ODIN missile barrages. Each one impacted on the membranous surface but did no damage.

“I’ve got only one more card to play, Gay. I’m going to try the EMP weapon, then paint and fire. It may interfere with communications a bit.”

Virginia moved a single ODIN that had fired its missiles until the optical camera had the massive orb

centered in its lens. That was also the secondary targeting sight for the EMP weapon. She fired the burst of EMP energy. The orb immediately began glowing luminescent pink.

“Firing missiles now!” she said. Again, five ODIN’s launched six missiles while she maintained the EMP beam. They streaked toward and found their laser painted target.

The brilliant flash was followed by a region of empty space where a ship had been. They followed the same procedure for two more of the massive orbs. Again, the remaining vessels moved off.

Virginia was very excited to report the success to General Straker.

“You mean you destroyed six of the parent ships and the rest moved off?” he asked, dumbfounded. “Brilliant Virginia! I’m calling I.A.C. to see if they can track the ships that left. We need to know if they just moved out of range or if they are leaving... You just changed the game entirely, Virginia. Well done!”

Straker put on a radio headset and mic and headed for the roof.

* * *

Outside of SHADO Headquarters, Thorvald’s security troops were again repelling a mass of armed insurgents. This time they were attacking at several points along the perimeter, not just at the main entrance. This time it was also different because there were alien soldiers bringing up the rear of the formations.

Thorvald looked through his binoculars. The creatures were all easily nearly eight feet tall in what appeared to be armor similar to chain and plate type. They had helmets that were clear in all directions and he could just make out faces in the green liquid of the helmet. They appeared to be reptilian...

“I want two cannons on each rooftop to stop firing against the fighters and direct fire toward the insurgent groups,” said Thorvald. “Target the vehicles they are moving to the front. They may be trying to breach the perimeter with them.”

The cannons fired on the approaching vehicles, two cars and three trucks intended to force a gap in the perimeter and deploy insurgent troops. In each case the vehicles erupted into a fireball and cartwheeled in place sending scores of insurgents fleeing the flames and fragments.

Straker appeared beside Thorvald. “What have you got up here, Thorvald?”

Thorvald handed him the binoculars and pointed to the rear of the mass toward the alien soldiers. “Good Lord, what are those?” asked Straker.

Thorvald didn’t look at him. He just lifted the sights on his FAL and fired a burst into the group nearing the fence. They returned fired throughout the crowd and bullets hit the buildings all around them. “No idea what they are, but they are not pretty...”

He fired another burst, his rifle bolt held back by the follower of the empty magazine. He stripped it out and replaced it with another thirty rounds. He snapped the bolt back and released it, chambering the first round.

“What are you doing up here, Sir?” asked Thorvald with some irritation. Thorvald’s eyes were reddened, dark and cold looking.

“I’m the only one here not doing anything useful!” Straker shouted. Thorvald handed him the FAL and reached for his long roll bag. He removed a very old looking bolt-action rifle and began setting up rows of five round stripper clips on the ground in front of him. Straker looked at him quizzically.

“A model 96 Swedish Mauser infantry rifle,” said Thorvald. “This one is dated 1908. It shoots a 6.5 x 55mm round that is ballistic perfection. This is the sniper version with a fixed power intermediate eye relief scope. Now, let’s see what little monsters are made of...”

He stripped five rounds into the internal magazine and closed the bolt. It made a sound on closing like a cleaver cutting neatly through a meat covered thigh bone. It was clearly a purpose-built and hand-fitted weapon, thought Straker.

Thorvald looked for evidence of wind velocity and adjusted for drift and distance to the back of the formation. He targeted the first alien soldier on the left and fired.

The old rifle bucked straight back in recoil. A couple seconds later, the first alien soldier on the left side was met by an Earthly bullet. It made an entry wound like an ice pick, squirting a plume of green liquid

forward from the holed helmet. The creature's head snapped backward and it fell heavily, arms outstretched in a pose of startled terror. The soldiers beside it paused and raised their weapons, firing bolts of what appeared to be plasma energy. They impacted the structures of the building with great fury sending waves of heat radiating from where they hit.

"For God's sake, fire!" shouted Thorvald. Ed Straker shouldered the FAL and pulled back on the trigger. The muzzle climbed upward rapidly under automatic fire.

Thorvald reached over and moved the selector to semi-auto fire. Straker began to hit his targets immediately. Thorvald continued to drop the alien soldiers in the back of the formation. Their voluntary human shield would not protect them any longer.

The same scenario was playing out at military bases around the globe. The reptilian ground forces targeted military installations in order to destabilize the human population and its protectors. Defenseless slaves were more easily manipulated.

* * *

Tactical fighters and interceptors from all over the globe were having great success against the small orbs. The crescent fighters, however were forcing human pilots to prove their mettle profoundly.

Those that had taken Prosser's advice about re-learning the three dimensional art of aerial warfare were emerging victorious. Many were not, and brave pilots were leaving our world for the next in a brilliant flash of light, some far from their homelands.

Alien troopships were finding themselves under fire from ground attack helicopters and aircraft. American A-10's had rediscovered the tactic of the drop shot, allowing the alien craft to overfly them at speed then rise up and open fire with their 30mm cannons.

Armored combat vehicles were laying in suppression fire to keep the alien ground forces contained until heavier ordnance could be delivered on target. Great effort was made to prevent the alien forces from linking up with reinforcements.

* * *

The large orbs were forming up in groups of three. They were all over open water, oceans, lakes and reservoirs. They began to drop down, making contact with the surface. The water churned beneath the 300 meter diameter globes. The colors changed from white to various pastel shades while they extracted the water, filling their onboard tanks. They were taking the most valuable natural resource in the universe – liquid water."

A group of three of these orbs was positioned 200 kilometers north of the Falkland Islands. They operated with blind impunity in the growing darkness. They disregarded the approach of two narrow, dark shapes from the east. The dark shapes turned away from each other, revealing more dark shapes behind them. These turned as well, as did the ones behind them.

They had successfully 'crossed the tee' of the alien craft. Six naval vessels, three American and three British, formed a picket line and opened fire. The large bore projectiles impacted on the surface, failing to penetrate. Phalanx guns fired bursts but were still repelled. Their efforts were being monitored by radio and satellite.

"This is SHADO Control, if you give us the coordinates for the UFO's you are fighting, I will arrange some assistance," said a pleasant woman's voice over the radio. They responded with the exact position of each of the three large orbs.

"When you see them glow pink, let them have it," said Virginia. She triggered three ODIN's to rotate 180 degrees and targeted the orbs with the EMP device. The three spherical ships began to shimmer bright pink under the EMP beams.

The ships opened fire with another broadside of deck artillery and Phalanx guns. Three massive explosions sent a wall of water outward in concentric circles as the shock wave expanded. The six vessels were nearly rolled over by the massive swells.

They had managed to turn their bows partially into the oncoming waves to split the pressure of the water

with the prow. As the ships pitched violently, their crews were slung about unmercifully inside. Those unfortunate enough to be on deck were swept clear by rolling walls of dark water. Submarines from three nations arrived quickly to look for the missing and help treat the wounded.

Sky Units had launched in the Straits of Gibraltar to destroy both orbs and crescent fighters while their submarines fired deck guns and rockets in conjunction with EMP pulses against three large orbs. The subs were able to dive in order to avoid impact from the massive waves created by the explosion of the three ships.

The narrows caused the waves to pile up and they pushed far inland at great height. Rescue units from four nations responded immediately to the inundated coastal communities.

Straker and Thorvald were still firing from the roof of the administration building. The crowd of insurgents was dwindled to a remaining few. SHADO combat troops were rising up from their grassy concealed positions and making the final shots in close.

“We need one of those reptilian corpses for analysis,” said Straker into his microphone.

He and Thorvald heard a rolling, rumbling sounds like thunder in the grey skies overhead. There was a pervasive smell of burning wood, plastic and garbage. The cloud ceiling was lowered by plumes of smoke from burning fires in all directions. The booming sound hit them again. It wasn’t thunder...

Five crescent fighters flew low over the facility, one trailing red-tinted smoke. There was the ear-splitting shriek of jet fighters at high speeds directly behind them. At the point was a Saab JAS-39 with red painted wings, cannon pods blazing. Five more followed it close behind with red striped wing tips. A SHADO flight...

“Prosser,” said Thorvald with a devious looking grin on his face. Straker grinned, feeling a mix of pride and anger that he wasn’t up there too.

Ford’s voice came into his headset. “General Straker, you are needed downstairs.”

“On my way, Ford,” he said, motioning for Thorvald to join him.

There was an unmistakable concussive rumble in the distance. It was the sound made by fast moving aircraft impacting solid ground. “Theirs, I hope,” said Straker.

* * *

All over the Earth, humans were fighting bitterly for survival against the experienced reptilian soldiers. Bands of armed civilians used guerilla tactics from ages past to isolate, strike and defeat their alien enemy.

Civilians were voluntarily reinforcing military groups in the field.

The RAU’s had deployed over and over again, from positions of deep concealment to airdrops into forward areas. SHADAIR transports were air-dropping large shipping containers with the Markers Transport logo by parachute.

Inside each were six RAU’s and six combat troops who would deploy with them riding two-up. They had doubled their strike power and allowed for more effective rolling gunfights. The combined units left knobby tire prints on the soil, carpet and concrete of three different continents. They had lost only two of their own.

The large orbs had been systematically destroyed by the ODIN’s in conjunction with terrestrial forces. The small orbs had seemingly vanished. All Earth defenses concentrated on the elliptical troop carriers, crescent fighters and their reptilian forces.

Humanity was containing the otherworldly threat, fighting with a vengeance.

CHAPTER 31

“Sir, they have some... ‘Thing’ in the medical lab,” said Keith Ford.

Straker and Thorvald stepped into the ante room of the lab. Doctors Schroeder and Harris were in full encounter suits over the corpse. Over the intercom, Schroeder said, “No entry until we get a clear on biological threats.”

Major Ealand stepped in behind Straker. She saw the creature on the gurney through the lab window. It was the first time Ed Straker ever saw her lose composure. She looked horrified and a little faint.

“What is it, Major?” asked Straker, pulling her attention back and giving her the opportunity to regain her customary calm. She cleared her throat and straightened her posture.

“Message from the I.A.C., Sir. The alien parent craft have left our solar system and appear to be maintaining a retreating course.”

“Excellent news, Major... Get the word out to all commands; these aliens lost their ride home...” She departed the ante room with no interest in looking behind her.

Schroeder spoke into the intercom. “All clear General, but you should wear gloves and a mask.” Straker nodded. He and Thorvald complied and stepped in. Schroeder and Harris removed what was left of the helmet. Some residual green fluid splattered to the floor. There was a single clean bullet hole through its face, right above the bridge of what was presumably the nose.

“Nice shot,” said Schroeder. Harris nodded. Straker looked at Thorvald and gave him a grin.

Schroeder continued, “Interesting physiology so far. Reptilian features and humanoid features combined. Deep scan and X-rays show a mix of solid and partially hollow bones. Despite its size, it weighs no more than one of us. The heavy musculature is along solid bones, as are the supportive and joint structures.”

“The secondary bones that locate connective tissue and organs, are what look like ribs, but are hollow. It is something like a giant bird’s skeleton. It even has a ‘wishbone’. They may have had avian ancestors.”

“Organs look similar to ours according to the scan and are in analogous locations. We won’t have many more answers until autopsy and completion of the blood and tissue panels.”

The creature had skin looking smoother than Earth reptiles. It was soft to the touch despite the green coloration. Despite the imposing stature, the facial features were quite delicate, almost feminine looking. The eyes were large and structured like a snakes, with black elliptical pupils and yellow-green iris.

Straker said, “It looks like something from the Black Lagoon had a one-night stand with Malibu Barbie.” He added, “Is it a male or a female, Doctor Schroeder?”

“Let’s find out,” said Schroeder. They found clasps to release the plate armor around the shoulders and chest. They lifted it away slowly and set it aside for analysis.

The alien wore an ornate purple tunic with several chains of metallic substances, looking similar to gold and platinum. There were faceted stones of various colors imbedded in the collar of the tunic. A sash of gold and crimson red cut diagonally across the chest.

“Uh-oh,” said Straker. “I think this was somebody important.” They all looked at each other. “This could become a problem...” he added.

Schroeder and Harris removed the metallic belt that seemed to be securing the chain mail that hung to the knees. It all came off together, revealing a very large organ in the groin area. “Whoa!” exclaimed Schroeder. All the humans in the room stepped back.

“I’m guessing this means they don’t reproduce asexually,” offered Harris, with a clinical tone to his voice.

Thorvald said, “I feel like I should salute.”

“I’m just glad Major Ealand chose to come in earlier,” Straker said with a grin. “Cover this thing up doctor.”

He looked up to see a very wide-eyed Keith Ford looking through the window.

“What is it, Ford?” asked Straker through the intercom.

“Th... There is something going on in your office Sir,” said Ford, not sure exactly what he had just seen. Straker motioned to Thorvald to follow. They stripped off their masks and gloves, dropping them in the biohazard trash receptacle. They stepped quickly down the corridor.

Straker and Thorvald stepped into the office. The small cube on the desk was glowing brightly and flashing different colors.

“Straker, can you hear me?” came a familiar voice. Straker hit the AV link button but nothing was there. “Straker, can you hear me?” it repeated.

He waved his hand twice over the cube. A three dimensional image formed in the center of the room. It resembled a hologram, life-sized and substantial but partially transparent. It was the same woman with the long white hair, standing in a shimmering whitish robe that seemed to mimic the colorful flashes of light in the mural behind Straker’s desk. She looked at the mural and smiled...

“Greetings, Straker. I am pleased that you remembered how to use the cube.”

Straker straightened his black turtleneck and attempted to smooth his trousers a bit. He and Thorvald were both covered in sweat, grime and smears of black residue from many rounds fired. Straker decided to strike a diplomatic tone.

“What can we do for your multi-galactic organization today?” he asked, realizing it probably sounded a bit condescending.

“We have been observing your battle to preserve your species, Straker. I will address that, but I first have an urgent plea from one of our member worlds.”

Thorvald and Straker looked at each other. Ford entered, seeing the image and noted Straker motioning to him to key the office camera and broadcast the signal. Ford nodded compliance and stepped back out to the communications console.

Another image began to appear. It was a very large reptilian, easily over 8 feet tall. It was wearing a long purple tunic with jeweled collar and the crimson and gold sash. Instead of decorative chains, this alien wore a long white cape and had a band of iridescent metal around its head.

“This is the Monarch of the species you are battling right now,” said the woman.

He spoke with a deep and powerful voice. “I have come to end this atrocity.” He said, “The government of our world did not approve this attack on your species. It is the doing of my impudent and irresponsible eldest son.”

“He formed an alliance with races who steal and squander natural resources from worlds they have no claim to. He planned and launched this attack on your world for personal gain and to establish his status as a warlord. He has followers that would do anything for a share of the spoils. I wish to bring this to an end before more lives are lost to both our worlds.”

He added, “The body of my son now rests in this very facility. I want to know who ended his life, Straker.”

Thorvald was fearful, but he stepped forward, stood at parade rest and said, “It was I that ended his life.”

The Monarch looked Thorvald over and then at the white haired woman. She held up her hand. It began to glow. The Monarch raised his hand and it began to glow as well. The reptilian king looked back at Thorvald, whose legs were feeling weak now.

Straker had a look of horror on his face for what might happen next. Virginia could see the exchange on the monitor. She began to run the maze of corridors connecting the new section to the old facility.

“The Monitor has shared your information with me, Thorvald. You are a warrior of honor and tradition, from a land of ice and snow. Under other circumstances, I would have enjoyed meeting you more.”

“I am grateful to you for giving my son the most honorable and merciful death possible – to fall by the hand of a warrior foe who fights with honor and integrity. Little is of more importance to our clan than honor and integrity. It is unfortunate that my son exchanged his for avarice.”

“My son will be mourned, but he will not be honored. You will be honored in his place, Thorvald. You will be forever welcome on our world...”

The door opened and a panting Virginia entered, stopped cold by the images before her. The Monitor and the Monarch exchanged glowing hands again. The Monarch smiled gently, as did the Monitor. Virginia stepped close to Thorvald and he put his arm around her. “This is my life mate, Your Majesty,” he said.

“Ah, Virginia Lake. Great intelligence, courage and integrity. You have chosen your life mate well, Thorvald.” Virginia smiled and gave her husband a squeeze.

The Monarch struck a courtly pose and said, “The forces of your world fought bravely with honor against foes that have crushed other, more advanced worlds. I will now remove our wayward young, our dead and our sky vehicles.”

“I offer my profound regret and sorrow at the death and destruction brought upon your world at the hands of my son and his accomplices. I also regret that our worlds first met in this manner. For your world, I wish you peace, prosperity and excellence.”

The reptilian King raised both hands and they began to glow. He closed his eyes and his image faded. All over Planet Earth, reptilian soldiers both dead and living began to glow in a hazy white light.

It was clear to those watching that the extraction process was a painful one. They were not wrong. The living reptilian soldiers would be directly sent to a forced labor camp awaiting prosecution. Their craft, both wrecked and functional disappeared as well.

Their benefactors gone, the few remaining insurgents surrendered immediately. It was all over...

* * *

The Monitor spoke gently. “Straker, your world has prevailed against forces that have left a trail of destruction across the universe. Yours is a species of great resourcefulness, valor and passion. You have proven yourselves worthy of respect and admiration.”

“You have also captured the attention of many, many worlds. They are going to desire to visit your world and interact with your species. Our timeline for approaching your world has been made pointless. We will interact freely with your world effective immediately.”

“SHADO has a new mission, Straker. The threat from your familiar adversary will end soon. Few escaped and with very few captives to harvest organs from. They expended the last of their resources and population to take part in this attack. They will end as a species in a short span of time. They have doomed themselves to extinction.”

“The species that was pilfering your water resources acts remotely and never physically takes part in an attack. They are a particularly cowardly species with no known honorable traits. We will remove their advanced technology and confine them to their own world to rediscover the concepts of toil and social virtue. They will rise to a level worthy of contact in several generations.”

“What of the reptilian King and his world?” asked Straker.

“As a member world, they are subject to heavy sanctions for their part.”

“But they did not act as a planet, Monitor. Their Monarch brought peace to both worlds,” said Straker.

The Monitor paused, smiled and tilted her head in an expression of wonder. “Your world would extend a plea of mercy for such a planet, Straker?”

“It is a character trait of our species,” said Straker. “It is an inherent search within us to seek the noblest attributes in our individual selves and as a species. We try to extend those grand concepts to others, in hope that they will respond in like manner.”

Straker added, “We refer to it as ‘humanity’. It is of such importance to our world that we use the same word to describe our species; ‘Humanity’.”

The Monitor smiled warmly. “Your world will be a welcome addition to our charter, Straker. It will be very popular to visiting species in search of knowledge of your Earth, its history and Humanity.”

“SHADO’s role in your world will now change, Straker. You need not focus solely on defense of your world. Your organization will now be the primary contact for beings of all other worlds. You will regulate and facilitate their visits to your world, and help them understand the complexities of your species.”

“To aid you in this pursuit, you can utilize the cube to communicate with them and study their species

and home-worlds. Simply pass your hand over the cube once and tell it what you want to know, it will hide nothing from you. Use it in peace, Straker.”

The image of the Monitor began to fade, “We will meet in person very soon,” she said. The room seemed suddenly very large and empty.

Ed Straker stepped gingerly to the door with a feeling of renewed energy. “Ford, issue the order – bring them all home...”

With misty eyes, Keith Ford issued the general order for all personnel to return to their bases. It would become the high point of his career.

Ed Straker stepped back into his office and smiled at the embraced Thorvald and Virginia. He stepped over to the drink dispenser and procured two fingers of scotch.

He placed the glass on the desk. Thorvald and Virginia looked at him puzzled. “It’s just waiting for my best friend to come home and pick it up,” said Straker.

He continued, “If you two will excuse me, I need to put in a call to NORAD Command.”

EPILOGUE

In the days after the battles' end, SHADO operatives and military forces from dozens of nations made their way back to their homelands.

The death toll among humanity rose daily as more bodies were discovered in the wreckage of buildings, homes and vehicles.

In the final analysis, humanity had lost nearly 400,000 souls. Of those, 14,238 were military service members from various nations. SHADO had lost 143 of its own as well.

The balance consisted of civilians who perished either by alien hands or as a result of collateral damage created by falling aerial craft and the aftermath of the massive detonations that rocked every continent. More than double that number had been injured.

Utilities and other infrastructure were being slowly restored, but great care was being taken to secure terminal points of use to prevent further fires and casualties.

Field hospitals were full to capacity and medical treatment centers were being set up in whatever buildings were deemed safe for use. Many were still operating in tents, on board ships and in rail cars on sidings. Slowly, the end of the medical emergency would come into sight.

Nations worked to re-establish supply chains for food and the essentials needed to care for human populations. National borders remained intact, but now were open for supplies and refugees to travel in both directions.

The whole of humanity was working together to restore their world. It was global peace in the wake of interstellar war. Human nature being what it is would ensure that the peace wouldn't last...

* * *

Ed Straker finally had his command staff home and standing in his office. There were warm embraces where once there had been reservations over proprieties and appearances. Alec, Paul, Virginia, Thorvald, Dr. Jackson and General Prosser were together again.

Ed Straker was ecstatic they had returned safely.

Straker handed his best friend of nearly thirty years the glass of scotch that had been waiting for his arrival. Alec took a healthy swig and promptly choked on it, coughing until he was red in the face.

"Believe it or not Ed, this is the first drink I've had since I left," sputtered Alec. "Looks like I need to practice," he said, downing the rest of the glass. Everyone laughed.

Straker spoke. "Everyone, I want to express my gratitude to you for your hard work and sacrifice. We lost 143 of our own, and we owe it to them to make sure they are properly honored and celebrated for their service. To this end, there will be a permanent memorial established, set in the clearing of the field across the road from the entrance. It will list every single name, their ranks and their jobs within SHADO. This memorial will be open to the public and any other visitors who wish to pay their respects..."

"The new role for SHADO is to function as the liaison for Earth to the many worlds and species who wish to communicate with and visit us. In order for this to happen, SHADO must present a public face to the world, yet continue with some level of covert operation. For most intents and purposes, the lid is off and we are in the open light of day... After thirteen years, this will be a challenge. Does anyone have anything they want to add?"

Dr. Jackson stepped forward. "My friends, I am retiring from SHADO medical services, effective immediately. I will be devoting my efforts to a different, more service-oriented endeavor."

"I trained over twenty people to take my place and I am going to make my departure at this highly opportune time. You will all still see me from time to time..." he said, smiling warmly.

The command staff congratulated Dr. Jackson. A very tired looking Thorvald embraced him.

Dr. Jackson whispered, "Are you having trouble sleeping again, old friend?"

Thorvald leaned away so Virginia wouldn't hear and whispered, "Dreams about my daughter again, Yannick."

“Do you still have that address I gave you a few weeks ago?” asked Jackson. “Discuss it with Virginia. It’s time for you to turn a corner, old friend...”

* * *

Thorvald and his loving bride arrived at their home to find a blue and white motorcycle in the drive. They entered and found Mrs. Lake happily stuffing her things into a couple of canvas zippered bags.

“Mom?” said Virginia. “What is this?”

“It’s time for you to have your home to yourselves again, dear. Gunther is going to take me back to Brighton... On his ‘motorrad’. Did I say that right?”

Prosser smiled and nodded. He had given Mrs. Lake her own armored riding suit, helmet, gloves and boots. The sizes were a little off, but close enough to be functional and comfortable.

Thanks and farewells were exchanged. The couple loaded up, mounted the machine and rode away. Virginia had tears in her eyes and was a little unsure why...

“I need to ask you something, Love,” said Thorvald. He pulled a slip of paper from his pocket with an address on it.

* * *

Thorvald and Virginia followed Dr. Jackson’s directions and turned onto the access road, it wound through a stand of birch trees and then a lovely orchard full of apple, pear and peach trees. An ornate sign greeted them.

“Evelyn’s Orchard - Orphanage and Children’s Hospital.”

Thorvald and Virginia just looked at each other. They pulled up and parked near the marble columned entrance. It just looked like an enormous stately old home.

Janet Holmes, the administrator of the facility greeted them warmly at the door. “What brings you two to our facility today?” she asked.

Thorvald said quietly, “Doctor Jackson recommended I come here for a visit.”

Holmes smiled, “Dr. Jackson is such a blessing to us here. He has served as a counselor, physician and clergyman here for many years. The children absolutely adore him. He’s around here somewhere if you’d like to see him...”

Thorvald and Virginia smiled at each other, understanding now what Jackson had been referring to in Straker’s office when he announced his retirement.

Janet Holmes continued. “This facility was created in 1982 by General James Henderson as a labor of love and a tribute to his wife Evelyn. Although they had no children, the General felt a burden to provide for the children left injured and orphaned by alien attacks.”

“All of these children you see are here because their parents were murdered for their organs. Many of them were unfortunate witnesses to the act.”

Thorvald could not help himself. He stepped slowly and quietly into the activity room where fourteen children of different ages and descriptions were at play doing varying things, some in groups. He was drawn to these unfortunate children by overwhelming compassion. He kept his distance, not wanting to disturb them.

All of the furniture in the room was sized for the children. Thorvald moved to a small chair near the large picture windows and sat down slowly.

He dearly missed the sounds and sight of children at play. His heart was breaking, yet swelling with warmth. His eyes misted despite his effort to avoid it.

“His first wife and daughter were also murdered by the aliens,” Virginia said quietly to Janet. She did not see Dr. Jackson watching from an adjacent corridor, obscured from their sight.

Slowly, a very small girl with blonde curls and shining steel blue eyes walked toward the large man near the window. She had a look of serious contemplation...

Janet had a look of shock. She grabbed Virginia’s arm with both hands. “Oh my goodness! That’s Annie... She has been here for seven months and has shied away from everyone!”

“Her parents and brother were murdered in the raid at Whitby while she was at a neighbor’s home. She was there when they were found and saw the horrific result. She hasn’t said a word since she’s been here. She just clings tightly to that little stuffed toy Holstein.”

Dr. Jackson stood in the corridor, praying and watching with teary eyes. “Please Heavenly Father...”

The little girl, who couldn’t have been any more than five, walked slowly up to the somewhat scary looking man with the thick framed glasses and warm smile. She stood directly in front of him looking up into those shimmering dark green eyes.

Little Annie reached up and handed Thorvald her soft, adorable stuffed cow. She raised her arms and opened her hands – the universal child’s signal to pick them up...

Virginia and Janet watched, breath held and teary eyed at what was unfolding across the room.

Thorvald reached gently down and lifted the little girl up, setting her on his lap. She was smiling sweetly and cuddled into Thorvald’s arms. He gently placed the soft, fuzzy cow in her arms.

He gazed warmly into the blue eyes of the precious child in his lap.

“And what sound does a cow make?” he asked gently.

She squished her facial features and took a deep breath. “MOOOOOOOOOOO!” she shouted joyfully.

She turned and wrapped her arms around Thorvald’s neck. He wrapped his arms around her and held her, rocking gently by instinct. She couldn’t see the tears rolling down his face or his heartfelt smile. She only knew she felt safe and comfortable and loved.

That was enough...

***** The End, For Now... *****

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MiG-31, (NATO designation 'Foxhound'), all variants, is a property of Mikoyan-Gurevich Design Bureau, Russia.

F-111 'Aardvark', all variants, is a property of General Dynamics Corp.

C-130 'Spectre' gunship, all variants, is a property of Lockheed and Boeing in a joint venture.

KC-135 'Stratotanker', all variants, is a property of Boeing.

A-10, 'Thunderbolt II' and 'Warthog', are properties of Fairchild-Republic.

F-4 and 'Phantom', all variants, are properties of McDonnell-Douglas. Operation Skyburner water injection variant, 1961, setting world speed record of 1,606 mph.

Weapons:

FAL rifle, all variants, are properties of Fabrique Nationale, Herstal, Belgium.

Colt 1911, all variants, are properties of Colt Patent Firearms.

CZ-75 pistol, all variants, are properties of Ceska-Zbrojovka, Uhersky-Brod, Czech Republic. The 'pre-B' original in the story, made in the former Czechoslovakia.

Redhawk revolver, all variants, are properties of Sturm, Ruger and Co., Inc.

H&K P7-M8, all variants, are properties of Heckler & Koch.

Bren Squad Automatic Rifle, all variants, are properties of Zbrojovka Brno Factory and the British Royal Small Arms Factory, Enfield. Still in production in India.

Model 96 Swedish Mauser rifle, 6.5x55mm, all variants, made in Sweden by Carl Gustafs Stads Gevarsfaktori or Husqvarna Vapenfabriks AB.

Phalanx CIWS, (Close-In Weapons System), 20mm rotary canon, is a property of General Dynamics Corp, Pomona Division (now Raytheon).

Literature, Film and Music:

The Maltese Falcon, 1941, is a property of Warner Brothers, based on a novel by Dashiell Hammett – Starring Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Mary Astor & others.

Reefer Madness, 1936, is a property of George A. Hirliman Productions.

Messier's Catalogue of Nebulae and Star Clusters, by Charles Messier, originated in 1771 with additions made until 1966 by many contributors.

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal, The Holy Bible, Old Testament, 1 Kings 18:21-34

'Emperor Concerto', Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Opus 73, by Ludwig van Beethoven, composed between 1809 and 1811, Vienna, Austria.

Children of the Heavenly Father, Swedish hymn, English version 1925, translated by Olson. The original, Trygarre Kan Ingen Vara by Ahnfelt and Sandell-Berg, 1858.

Historical Persons:

Gross-Admiral Karl Doenitz, 1891-1980, Commanding Admiral of U-Boat Corps. Commander in Chief of the German Navy, then served as Head of State at the end of the war, authored two books and multiple

other texts.

Oswald Boelcke, 1891-1916, German WWI Ace, Leader of Jasta 2 Squadron and innovative tactician and instructor. His pupils included Manfred Von Richtoffen.

Attila 'the Hun', 406-453 Leader of the Hunnic Empire, a conglomeration of multiple tribes and peoples, known as the 'Scourge of Rome'. Feared military leader by the Eastern and Western Roman Empires.

Johann Strauss II, composer, 1825-1899, famous for composing over 400 waltzes, operettas and symphonies.

Miscellanea:

SPAM, is a property of Hormel Foods.

Kevlar, para-aramid synthetic fiber, all variations, is a property of DuPont.

RAU's, Rapid Assault Units, based on a program used by the U.S. Army, 82nd Airborne Ranger Pathfinders. Inspired by conversations with an old dear friend who served in the program.

Radio-Telescopes in the story were all operational in the 1993 time setting.

Malibu Barbie, all variations, is a property of Mattel, Inc.

Lutefisk, a Scandinavian holiday food (spellings vary by country), made of dried fish (usually cod) brined in lye, soaked, then steamed prior to serving. Highly pungent aroma. It combines elements of cooking and soap making. Seriously.

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W3 Validator