

By Invitation Only

Catherine Stewart

First impressions were negative.

They hadn't been expecting a woman. Then again, no one ever was. Virginia Lake flipped down the top of the newspaper she had been reading, a cool, almost, disdainful expression on her face. She had learned long ago that a facade of aloof, reserved formality served her best on an initial encounter. Particularly with authority. "How do you do, Colonel?" she asked, watching Freeman's face carefully.

His eyes brows didn't sky-rocket in surprise, but he had the same reaction she had wearily come to tolerate : the brief pause, then the swift recovery, followed by the rapid reassessment. His attempt at gallantry was awkward. "Well, for the first time in my life, I wish I was flying sub-sonic aircraft."

She resisted the urge to ask, or even look puzzled. Sure enough, Freeman explained immediately, "At least the trip would seem that much longer," he said.

Phil, as usual, took the fact he was being ignored with amusement, introducing himself with self-mocking grace. "Uh, in case anyone's interested," he said to Freeman's back, "I'm Phil Wade."

Co-designer, chief encourager, trouble-shooter extraordinaire is what he should have added, Ginny thought to herself. But he won't say another word for the rest of the trip. Phil's really so self-effacing that nobody would notice him, if he didn't speak up from time to time.

Freeman's greeting was indecently quick. He turned, grabbed Phil's hand, shook it vigorously for less than half a second, muttered, "Oh, how do you do?" and was sitting down almost before Ginny could blink. "Well, it looks like you're the answer to all our prayers," he said, smiling at her.

So much for Phil's distraction, she thought ruefully. So much for his promise to keep everyone away from her so that her head could recover. Well, at least he tried. Which is more than Boss Mahler had. Sitting there morosely in the corner, pointedly ignoring the interchange.

"Would you like to see the Utronic equipment, Colonel?" she asked, determined to set the tone of the conversation on a business setting from the beginning. Freeman was obviously going to be difficult to deal with. Somewhere not too far behind those smiling brown eyes, there was a leer lurking. He wasn't intimidated by her brains, as so many men were, and she could tell, just by the look on his face that it didn't even occur to him to question her qualifications. There'd been more than one jealous academic rival of recent times who'd suggested that the number of military contracts Westbrook had been awarded had a greater correlation with the number of generals she's slept with than the combined IQ points of its employees. Nothing to do with an ability to deliver a research package consistently on time, within budget constraints. Of course not.

Ginny had given up being angry about the comments. Last time someone had made such a disparaging remark, she'd rounded on Phil and told him it was his turn next to seduce a general. He'd shrugged equably and muttered something about his genius being compromised.

"I think your equipment is fabulous, but I am familiar with it," Freeman said.

Oh? Ginny thought. Claiming expertise is one of the oldest gambits in the book. "Really?" she asked, managing to keep almost all the derision, if not the skepticism, out of her voice.

"Yes," he replied. "For instance, I know that the Utronic beam travels instantaneously." It was difficult not to be patronizing. "*Almost* instantaneously," Ginny corrected.

Freeman accepted the reproof without missing a beat. "Well, anyway," he went on, "it means that we'll be able to detect u.f.o.s when they're flying many times the speed of light in deep space."

It was almost entertaining, Ginny thought, valiantly not shaking her head in disbelief, to realize how little he actually knew. Still, what he was telling her was useful. Sooner or later, she was going to have to face his boss, and one thing she'd learnt in dealing with the top brass over the last few years was that you had to let them think that they knew all about your project and if you had to explain anything, you made it so simple that you had difficulty in keeping to the truth. And you made absolutely sure that your comments never deviated from what they'd already been told. A confused general doesn't spend money. But things were looking promising here. If Freeman was this easy to deal with, his Commander was going to be a piece of cake. "Go on," she prompted.

"So our moonbase interceptors will have a chance to destroy them before they reach the Earth."

A perfect speech, she thought. I'm going to remember this, maybe even reproduce it verbatim for his boss. "Very good," she said aloud.

Freeman was obviously encouraged by her positive response. Taking her hand, he looked into her eyes. "I could tell you more over dinner," he suggested. Ginny drew back. The time to slap him back down had come all too soon. "Don't you think you'd better get back to your little seat up front?" she asked. She was careful to continue smiling.

He took the rejection easily. "I suppose so," he admitted. "I'll be seeing you."

Unfortunately, yes, you will, Ginny thought. *And it pays never to be too careful about whom you've just given offence to.*

"Colonel," she said as he left to go into the forward cabin, "you were right. You are familiar..." Her smile didn't fade. "...with the equipment."

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Second impressions were slightly better.

Despite adverse circumstances.

"Gentlemen, Miss Lake..." The very tone of Freeman's voice was clear evidence of the seriousness of the situation. "SHADO Control has just informed me that a u.f.o. is approaching the North Atlantic. I'm afraid we must assume this aircraft is its target. Now I'm going to reduce height in order to gain the advantage of cloud cover. This will mean we'll have to reduce speed but, of course, in the dense atmosphere so will the u.f.o."

Too many assumptions, Ginny thought, immediately and critically analyzing the situation. *Too many variables. What if a u.f.o's tracking system didn't find cloud cover an impediment?*

Phil had obviously had thoughts along another tangent. "Presumably," he said, "that increases SHADO's chances of intercepting it?"

"Yes it does," Freeman agreed. He looked concerned. "I'd fasten my seat belts, if I were you," he advised. Turning, he stopped to reassure Ginny further. "Look, don't be worried, it'll be okay," he said, forgetting to smile. Then he remembered. "Anyway, we have a dinner date. I wouldn't let anything interfere with that."

Ginny rewarded him with a brief wan smile. Freeman was much nicer when he wasn't trying to impress anyone. "Thank you," she said, grateful that he had seen fit to keep them informed. He was obviously of the school of thought that panic arises through ignorance not

knowledge.

The Colonel left, and Phil immediately came over to sit next to her. He stared right through Mahler as he spoke. "I don't think I'm cut out for this sort of excitement," he commented quietly.

Ginny said nothing in reply. She turned, watching out the side window for several minutes. Both of them ignored Freeman's suggestion about the seat belts. It wasn't long before a few ripples of turbulence indicated that they had reached the cloud ceiling. A shaft of sunlight reflecting from a distant object caught their attention. "Look." Phil said. But it wasn't a u.f.o. - it was a sleek, small jet shadowing their flight path. After nearly three minutes, it broke away suddenly, accelerating and ascending in a shallow banked curve.

"There" Ginny said, under her breath, spotting its quarry. A gleaming silver cone - a child's spinning toy - hurtling down in a parabolic line towards them.

But the jet was already in position before the rotating ufo came into firing range. There wasn't even an exchange of shots before a thin line of red smoke spiraled out behind the ufo. "Umm," Phil mused, watching the effect of the missiles on the target. The ufo began a plunging descent towards the ocean. "Not bad," he muttered, getting up slowly and going back to his seat. Facing Karl Mahler, he said, "Hardly even had time to get the adrenaline really racing." He grinned at his boss. Mahler had been quieter this trip than Phil had ever seen him before. He began to wonder if the boss suffered from aerophobia. Glancing back at Ginny, Phil grinned even more broadly. She would appreciate the joke if, of course, it were true about Mahler. On the other hand, the boss was probably just worried whether the insurance payout would cover the loss.

Ginny nodded to Phil momentarily, before turning her attention back to the jet out the window. It circled lower, diminishing to a tiny speck as the distance between them increased. *It's a war, she thought suddenly. And that brief encounter wasn't a minor skirmish, it was a major battle. Were our side's tactics better? Or were we just lucky to be alive?*

* * *

Third impressions were much more positive.

After the Incident, Ginny had spent the remainder of her flight mulling over her future. Not the immediate future, of course. That would be spent in installing the Utronic equipment and trying to avoid a dinner date.

But beyond that. Westbrook Electronics had been destroyed. Karl Mahler was going back on the first plane out of England to see what could be salvaged and what the insurance would cover. Still, even if he got more money than he expected, it would take years to rebuild. She could take her resume, and try for a position with another firm but, unless she took a project with her, she was certain she'd have trouble finding a place. And she was tired having to prove herself capable of doing the job. Even at Westbrook, she knew that she'd been as much a liability as an asset when it came to landing a contract. The list of impressive credentials behind her suddenly meant nothing to the prospective client who'd just caught a glimpse of her face.

Beauty is the curse of an intelligent woman, Ginny reflected. I have to constantly fight the innate prejudice that, if you're in any way aesthetically pleasing to the eye. you can't be that bright. And once you've won that battle, if you can, you have to demonstrate that your position isn't an accident, or a matter of luck - you have to show you have the IQ to match. *Which wouldn't really be so frustrating,* Ginny thought, *if it only happened the once.* But to have it occur over and over again, ad infinitum, ad nauseam, was just too much for anyone to

endure. *Doesn't it even dawn on them, Ginny wondered, that in order to be able to get to my position in the first place, all other factors weren't equal?*

She hadn't seen Freeman again until they arrived at London. Then it was only for a moment. "Duty calls," he'd said with a smile, leaving Phil and herself to follow in another car. They'd supervised the loading of the Utronic equipment into a huge van designated Markers Universal on the side. Phil had raised his eyebrows, before looking at her dubiously and mouthing, *A bit obvious, isn't it?* But neither of them said anything aloud.

Satisfied, finally, that their crates had been safely stowed, they set off to SHADO headquarters. Their driver, taciturn and uncommunicative, drove them, not to the heavily-guarded military base they'd been expecting, but to a film studio in the suburban outskirts. She and Phil glanced at each other warily, then burst into laughter at exactly the same moment. "Clever," Phil said.

Someone had a sense of humour and a touch of genius - disguising the secret headquarters of a massive para-military organization as a film studio in these days of blockades and protests showed considerable foresight. The massive Markers Universal van rolled into the back lot as they were shepherded out of their car and into the main office.

The woman at the desk waved them straight through. "Miss Lake, Mr. Wade, go straight in. You're expected." They stepped through the doorway with its illuminated *ENTER* sign and sat down. Ginny looked around. Functional, but little else. It told you almost nothing about the personality of its occupant. In fact, for a chief executive's office, it was almost spartan. The desk was modest, the furnishings looked as if they were a decade out of date, the venetian blinds weren't even pastel. No executive toys anywhere in sight. The only real sign of ostentation was a silver cigar box on the desk.

Through the door they could see a man come into the outer office and speak briefly with the secretary. "Straker casting a new film?" he asked, glancing at them furtively.

The woman shook her head. "It's okay," she said. "These are the people from Westbrook Electronics. Can you take them down and hand them over to Ford?"

"Is the Commander in?"

"He's with Dr Schroeder. It's not going well."

The man sighed, nodding, and came into the office. He smiled faintly at the two of them, before reaching for the silver cigar box on the desk. Flipping it open, he said. "Carlin."

"Voice identification positive," came the reply from the box as the door slid closed. "Carlin, Captain Peter W."

The room began to descend. Phil suddenly started to grin. Ginny could tell he was really enjoying himself. This obviously wasn't your average military base. *Really effective security*, he'd once said, several years back when he was modifying a space intruder detector alarm system for a museum, *is unobtrusive, almost invisible. To the general public it should appear that there isn't any security at all. The actual devices should be a combination of psychological deterrent, physical barrier and instant warning, in case intrusion occurs.* Somebody round here undoubtedly thought the same way Phil did.

Carlin interrupted Ginny's thoughts. He was a fairly tall man, dark-haired, with a velvet brown complexion. His voice was strong and mellifluous and, wonder of wonders, he didn't stare at her. On the contrary, he had a distant preoccupied manner. "I'll take you straight to Lieutenant Ford," he said. "He's our chief communications controller. He'll give you the run-down on the installation. . ." He smiled diffidently. "We've never captured a live alien before," he said. "We're not usually as disorganized as this."

Ginny stared. *Disorganised?* If this efficiency was their idea of disorder, she'd hate to see them on a good day. And she wondered what their version of chaos entailed. The door jolted slightly as it reached the bottom of the liftwell and the door opened automatically. There was a woman standing at attention in front of a logo. *S.H.A.D.O.*

Strange, Ginny thought, realising suddenly that she'd never actually seen the word before, only heard it mentioned. I always imagined it had a *W* on the end. It somehow seems a lot less sinister with only five letters.

The woman stood aside briefly as she clipped an identity badge to Phil's top pocket, giving Ginny the opportunity to read the whole acronym. *Supreme Headquarters Alien Defence Organization*. It was a name straight out of the sixties.

And then she realized why. SHADO had undoubtedly been in existence that long, despite all official denials. The woman clipped another badge to Ginny's collar. It registered suddenly that SHADO's outer defences were manned by women. The secretary upstairs, the security guard here. *Would you put your strongest or weakest line of defence first?* Ginny wondered. She paused. Somehow she knew that SHADO wouldn't have such a thing as a weak line of defence.

Carlin escorted them to the communications control centre and fronted up to the nearest operative. "These are the technicians from Westbrook," he said.

Technicians? Ginny thought as the operative turned and smiled, holding out his hand. Phil took it first.

"Phil Wade," he said.

"Keith Ford," the operative replied. "Glad to have you here. Especially in one piece. I hear you had some excitement over the Atlantic."

"Yeah," Phil agreed. "We caught a glimpse of what you're up against." He smiled, turning to make the introduction. "This is our chief designer, Virginia Lake."

"How do you do?" Ford said, shaking her hand warmly. He gestured around the room. "Things are in a bit of turmoil at the moment," he said. "I know the Commander wanted to speak to you both first, but unfortunately, he's tied up at the moment with the capture of an alien." He smiled. "Perhaps the best thing I can suggest for you to do is to familiarize yourselves with the set-up here, so that when the equipment's brought down, we can get straight into the installation without delay."

"Sounds good," Phil said.

Ginny nodded. Looking around covertly, she had noticed that almost half the personnel in the communications section were women. Every passing moment re-enforced the fact that SHADO was not your run-of-the-mill military organization.

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Fourth impressions were stunning.

Phil had hardly been able to stop laughing since he'd heard the major detector system call the whole organization to attention with a red alert drill. The fact that it was called *S.I.D.* - short for *Space Intruder Detector* - seemed to be a source of vast amusement for him. "What's so funny?" Ginny had asked quietly when Ford had gone to find some linking cable.

"It's named after a burglar alarm," Phil had managed to explain between his chuckles. They were examining the electronic interface at the time, trying to determine the best way to connect the Utronic module to SHADO's present equipment. Ignoring Phil finally, she glanced across at one of the communication screens. She was able to observe it closely for the first time. There, on the monitor, was the image of an attractive woman in a purple wig. *Anti-static*,

she realized at once.

The operative in front of the screen was receiving a report and, after every question, there would be a slight delay before woman in the purple wig replied. In a flash, Ginny recognized the implications. The jigsaw of references she'd heard over the past year, culminating in Colonel Freeman's comment about 'moonbase' fell into place. The woman in the purple wig was working on a computer and she was on the moon.

On the moon.

Ginny held her breath. *I want this*, she thought suddenly. *I want to be part of this.*

Ford arrived back with some cabling. She partly listened to his conversation with Phil, but most of her attention was on the report coming from the moon. It took her less than a minute to reach the conclusion that the woman was effectively in command of moonbase. What was more - Ginny had seen two other women, silver-suited, purple-wigged, sitting at consoles in the background. It was obvious that the woman on the screen wasn't the only one with a high responsibility. She wasn't a rarity.

I don't believe this, Ginny thought. *It's too good to be true. There's got to be some unpleasant catch somewhere. Bet the Commander's a misogynist.* She dismissed that idea immediately as impossible. The head of an organization invariably puts his stamp on it, for good or ill, and Straker, if you could judge by appearances, didn't have a prejudiced bone in his body. It wasn't just the significant percentage of women around, it was the diversity of racial types as well. And you can bet your bottom dollar that no one's employed here because of any equal opportunity legislation. They're here because they're the best in their field. The very best.

So, how do you go about applying for a job?

And, do they need a research physicist?

And most important of all, would I make the grade?

* * *

The Commander was an impression in himself. The very air seemed to exude respect as soon as he walked in to the room. There were no salutes, but several operatives nodded in acknowledgment as he passed, and the small talk seemed to halt immediately he appeared.

Word had already reached the communications centre that the alien had died and that the Commander had left just before the autopsy had begun. He probably wasn't in the best of moods.

His opening words as he squatted down next to Ford and opposite Phil were brisk and demanding. "Tell me about the xi module." he said, without wasting time on preliminaries.

Ford made rapid introductions. "Commander Straker, this is Virginia Lake . . . and Phil Wade."

Phil glanced at Ginny, giving her the cue to respond. She shrugged, thinking back to her first conversation with Freeman. "The xi module," she said, "encodes the wave function and is the controlling of the Utronic beam, which because it travels almost instantaneously will mean that you'll be able to detect u.f.o.s when they're travelling many times the speed of light in deep space. So your moonbase interceptors will have a chance to destroy them before they reach Earth."

Straker's look was absolutely withering.

Uh . . . oh, Ginny thought. *We've made a mistake, Phil. You should have answered. I don't think he likes women.*

But his tone when he spoke was surprisingly even. "I should have clarified my question," he said, more than a little coolly. "Given that the only objects capable of traveling at velocities

in excess of the speed of light should have negative mass and be moving backwards in time, I am curious to know whether your xi module is basically a tachyon detector or whether you're in the process of cracking the unified field theory."

He doesn't hate women, Ginny thought, amazed. He hates being patronized - and I've just treated him like a moron. He's not only conversant with some of the theoretical extrapolations from the special theory of relativity, he's just paid me the compliment of suggesting I could well be in the same league as Einstein! What's more, he hadn't been facetious. Why didn't someone tell me that SHADO officers weren't like their counterparts in any other military force? *Look around*, she chided herself. *They did*. It was the incident with Freeman which had normalized her expectations. Sensing that an apology would have been out of order, she said, "Phil and I theorized that u.f.o.s must travel in their own time continuum, since they obviously don't travel backwards in time."

"How do you know they don't?" Straker asked bluntly.

"I'm certain SHADO wouldn't have failed to observe the phenomenon, if it had happened. And in that case you wouldn't have neglected to pass on such an important point to us. The Utronic equipment has cost you enough for us to be sure that you didn't keep too many technological secrets close to your chest."

Straker watched her closely. "True. But I'm not challenging you on that point. I'm questioning your underlying assumption that Einsteinian physics is correct."

"Present me an alternative," Ginny said archly, the corner of her mouth pulling into a faint smile. She recognized the devil's advocate ploy, and realized the dangerous territory she was in. Sparring higher physics with a ranking officer was a novelty in itself, but Straker's attitude was even more refreshing. She had never been able to speak so candidly to a higher authority before. Perhaps she should be more cautious. But what she sensed from Straker was disarming. She liked the way he treated her. Expert first, person second, woman third. If he'd registered the fact she was beautiful as well, nothing whatever showed in his demeanor.

"Consider every alternative," Straker said. "No matter how crackpot."

Ginny noted thoughtfully. "If you've got an idea of which theory we might start with, it could be helpful."

"Theories are a dime a dozen," the Commander said. His tone made it clear that he had a hypothesis himself, but he wasn't prepared to discuss it. "Facts are what I want." He paused. "Besides, I would prejudice you in favour of something that may well turn out to be wrong." He smiled coldly at the two of them. "If your Utronic beam works, that's all I care about. I assume your research papers were destroyed when Westbrook went up?"

They both nodded.

"Then you'll be staying until you reproduce them," Straker informed them. "We need to know everything about the operation of the Utronic beam, before you leave." He stretched, and standing up and turning away, he strode off towards his office.

Phil stared after him, astounded. Straker's transition from scientist to dictator had been so swift it was unnerving.

"Oh, Ford," Straker called, just as he reached his office door.

"Yes, sir?" the Lieutenant asked.

"As soon as the Utronic report is prepared, make a copy for me, one for Maxwell and one for Kelly. We'll see what improvements can be made."

Improvements!? Ginny thought, ire rising.

"Yes, sir," Ford said.

What a repulsive tactless glacier, Ginny thought as Straker's door slid closed. He's obviously impossible to work for.

So why did she envy everyone who did?

* * *

The studio cafeteria was open twenty-four hours a day. The food was surprisingly palatable, ranging from healthy salads and soups to cheesecakes piled with cream and huge slices of strawberry shortcake. You could get a roast dinner at three in the morning, and it wasn't reheated either. As for the privileged few who had a staff card - every thing on the menu was not only put on the studio account, but was computer-checked through a personal diet itemizer.

It had become obvious to Phil and Ginny after only four meals in the cafeteria that the privileged few actually constituted the whole of SHADO, most of whom treated the diet regimen with the contempt it deserved. Not that SHADO personnel formed the entire complement of the cafeteria's clientele. There were real film-makers on the lot, which was something of a surprise to Phil, and dozens of actors and actresses. Ginny had to restrain him from autograph-hunting on more than one occasion. In addition to these customers, queues of public servants from a government office block inundated the place at various times of the day. Most of them apparently patronized the cafeteria regularly and all of them seemed to wonder what criteria you had to fulfill to receive the much-prized staff card.

"I've been offered a position," Phil said over lunch as he began tucking into his ravioli. They had managed to find an isolated corner for themselves.

"Lucky you," Ginny said, without looking up. She concentrated on spearing a lettuce leaf. "Going to take it?"

Phil nodded. "Marcia won't be happy, but I'll persuade her. It's a better country to bring up kids." He paused. "They haven't asked you?"

Ginny looked up, giving a brittle smile. "I don't think Straker likes me," she said. "Every time I see him he asks me to justify our theories regarding the operation of the Utronic equipment."

Phil looked at her searchingly. "Aren't you over-reacting just a little?" he asked. "You're imagining he dislikes you because he doesn't automatically accept your expert opinion. Ginny, for the first time in your life, you can't answer half the questions being put to you, and you can't bamboozle him with a half-baked explanation and you can't fudge the rough bits of your hypotheses because he'll catch you out. That's the truth, isn't it?" He grinned suddenly on seeing her rueful expression. "And I forgot to mention that, contrary to him not liking you, you don't like him because every time you get a half-way satisfactory answer, he immediately comes up with ten implications of what you've just said that are all incompatible with observed facts."

"I don't dislike him," Ginny asserted.

"Good," Phil said. "He studied at M.I.T., you know. Degree in astro."

"Oh, wonderful," Ginny said with a grimace. "Are you sure?"

"I asked."

Ginny nodded, before sighing. "What job are you going to be doing for them?"

Phil shrugged. "Who knows?" he prevaricated.

Ginny glared at him. "Come on," she insisted. She knew him well enough to know he'd never accept a position without finding out full details of what it entailed. And she knew that he knew that she wouldn't let him get away without answering.

"Straker wants to crack the speed of light barrier," he said reluctantly. "He says that the aliens obviously have a technology that enables them to bypass the infinite mass problem and all the other side effects of the Lorenz transformation equations. He wants to duplicate that technology and he thinks we might be on the right track with the Utronic beam. He wants me to pursue the present idea to its theoretical limits." He smiled uneasily as Ginny's expression became more and more fixed. "They're working on a project to send a probe back to the alien planet. They expect it will take several years before they're ready, but one of the problems is that to track a ufo back to its source, it will be necessary for the probe to be able to travel at supra-light speeds."

"Congratulations," Ginny said.

Phil could see that she was fuming, "I didn't ask for it, Ginny," he said apologetically.

"I know that," she snapped back. Then she shrugged. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have figured out that you don't actually walk up to the front desk and ask for an application form."

"Don't call us, we'll call you," Phil confirmed under his breath.

"By invitation only," Ginny added despondently. Then she smiled, totally wiping the disappointment from her face. "I meant the congratulations," she said. "I can't think of anyone better for the job."

"I can," Phil said, looking her straight in the eye.

Ginny shook her head fractionally, attacking the button mushrooms on her plate as if they were Straker's eyeballs.

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The Colonel Alec Freeman Ginny had met on the flight to England was such a contradiction to the Colonel Alec Freeman who was Straker's right hand man that she was confused by the differences. Far from the smooth posturing charmer who had a schoolboy ignorance of the Utronic equipment, he turned out to be a warm and sympathetic man, and a complete contrast to his Commanding Officer. Furthermore, his knowledge of the Utronic equipment, while not as awesome as Straker's, was certainly extensive. The incident on the plane didn't make sense. *Or did it?*

Ginny observed and noted. It didn't take her long to pick up much information about Alec Freeman - he was the only person in SHADO who frequently and openly disagreed with the Commander. Not only that, but Straker accepted rebukes from him that he wouldn't have tolerated for a second from anyone else. Then an extraordinary thing happened - she watched Straker invite criticism. Difficult as this was to believe, having been in close proximity to Straker's ego for so long, she had to admit that she was wrong about his arrogance - or at least about the totality of it.

"Tell me," she said to Keith Ford as he dropped down to the labs to see how she and Phil were progressing in the re-construction of their research, "why do you use lasers on your interceptors? I don't like to appear ignorant, but isn't a one-shot missile a bit inefficient?"

Ford nodded. "Well, yes," he admitted. "But there are two problems associated with lasers. The first and least important is that, while they're fine for targeting your average cruise missile, ufos travel at speeds . . ." He paused, grinning. ". . . *just* a tad in excess of that."

Just a tad? Ginny thought. *Tens, sometimes hundreds of times, in excess.* "Granted," she said, "but your average one-shot missile is a whole lot slower than your laser."

"Ah, yes, but it has two advantages," Ford went on. "It covers a whole lot broader target area, for a start. Secondly, and most importantly you could laser a ufo in space until the sun turns blue and it wouldn't make an iota of difference. Unless you can start an oxidation

reaction, it'll just continue on its merry way. Of course, once it gets inside Earth's atmosphere, there isn't a difficulty any longer, but the reaction is still slow. So because we want to stop them before they even get near Earth, we have to supply oxygen to the vacuum of space - so that's why we shoot enough liquid oxygen at them, with a timed explosive, hopefully to blow up at just the right moment and take the ufo with it."

"So the traditional shoot-'em-up method is a lot better than the latest technology?" Phil said.

"In this instance," Ford agreed.

"How often do you miss?" Ginny asked.

"Missing at all is missing too often," Ford said, without really answering the question.

Ginny nodded. "Of course," she said, understanding. She glanced at Phil. "We should be finished up here by early tomorrow, " she said. "Don't you think, Phil?"

"Yeah," he agreed.

Ginny held out her hand to Ford. "If I don't get a chance to thank you properly later, I'd like you to know how much we've appreciated your help."

Ford shook her hand briefly. "No trouble at all," he assured her. "In fact, you've been a much greater help to us than we could possibly have been to you." He smiled. "And your equipment is even better than we'd hoped. The Commander's very pleased with it."

"Oh?" Ginny asked dubiously.

"He calls it the *eyes of SHADO*."

Ginny's mouth curved into a twisted smile. "Oh, and I almost forgot," Ford said. "Colonel Freeman wants to have a word with you before you leave."

The dinner date, finally, no doubt. "Well, I do have a *busy* schedule," Ginny said, "but I'll try to fit him in."

If Ford noticed the sarcasm, he refused to respond to it. "I'll tell him as soon as he gets back," he said. "He's picking up the Commander after the funeral." Neither Phil nor Ginny felt able to ask, but Ford supplied the information anyway. "Captain Carlin's sister," he said. He looked quite depressed as he left.

* * *

She woke up in the middle of the night, sweating, able to recall every moment of the nightmare vividly. Suddenly she was afraid. Straker had been there, in the dream. "You know too much," he'd informed her coldly.

Freeman had been standing behind him, alternately leering and being sympathetic. "Our amnesia drug only scrubs your mind clean of the memories of the last twenty-four hours," he'd said.

"We cannot let you loose with what you know," Straker had confirmed.

It might have been a dream, but Ginny realized that her subconscious wasn't mistaken. There weren't many options available to SHADO. It was obvious that there wasn't a place for her in its ranks. If they were going to ask her at all, they would have done so before this. So, what were they going to do with her? Would they really let her walk out the door, knowing as much as she did about so many vital aspects of their operation? Somehow, she didn't think so. They'd have to kill her.

Unable to get back to sleep, she turned on the light above the bed and stared at the far wall for a long time.

* * *

"Well, does she know?" Straker leaned back in his chair, slowly lighting a cigar and

scrutinizing the man opposite him intently.

"She's not unintelligent," Dr Jackson pointed out.

"I know that," Straker said with asperity. "It's not what I asked."

"If she doesn't suspect, I've underrated her," Jackson said.

"And the response?"

"Cool, rational, outwardly unperturbed," Jackson said.

Straker inhaled deeply before blowing a smoke ring towards the ceiling. "Well, what do you think?" he asked finally. "Yes or no?"

"Pity she's a woman," Jackson commented. "That's not only going to make it difficult for her, but for other people as well."

"Well, they'll just have to learn to cope," Straker asserted flatly, "as I'm sure she's already done." He inhaled deeply again and blew a series of smoke rings, before changing the subject abruptly. "How long will it take you to prepare a complete and comprehensive report on alien physiology? Genetics everything?"

"If I'm not interrupted - maybe a year," Jackson said. "If I am, then - - " He left the sentence dangling.

"You'd better get started." Straker ordered as he rose laboriously from his chair.

* * *

The report was finished, the installation complete. No mention had been made of whether a car would be available to take Ginny out to Heathrow. She was nervous. Were her suspicions correct? Or was she over-reacting? And if she wasn't, how discreet would they be, if they decided not to let her go? Would they simply dispose of her inside their headquarters, or would they be more subtle and arrange an accident on the way to the airport? She had already decided it was impossible to escape. She had no money, and even if she did make it out of the studios, her only protection would be in getting to the nearest police station. Where they undoubtedly had something that amounted to an extradition treaty for female physicists claiming to have worked for a para-military organization which had a base under a film studio and which was solely devoted to shooting down flying saucers. A highly credible story! She'd be luck if she didn't get sent to the loony farm before SHADO inevitably tracked her down.

She wondered whether it would be worthwhile confronting Colonel Freeman with her suspicions. What sort of response would she get from him if she made an accusation? Maybe he could be surprised into the truth.

She supposed that she should go and see him. Lieutenant Ford had twice reminded her that the Colonel wanted to see her before lunch. She had begun to view the upcoming meeting, not so much as a trial, but as a summons to a firing squad. She didn't really have anything to pack. Not even a handbag. So she made inquiries. Colonel Freeman, it transpired was in the Commander's office. *Ah, well*, Ginny thought, *no time like the present to beard both lions in their den*. She knocked on the outer door.

"Come in." It was Straker's voice, as frosty and harsh as ever. He was sitting at his desk, poring over a report. He didn't even look up as she entered. Colonel Freeman, pouring a drink for himself from the executive bar, lifted a glass in inquiry at her.

"No thanks," she said, declining.

Straker looked up. "Have a seat," he said.

She sat down opposite him, staring across the desk and over his shoulders at the mood mural which took up most of the feature wall. The drifting pastels were undoubtedly meant to have a calming effect, but they weren't doing the slightest thing for her stress levels. She let her

gaze wander. There were more than half a dozen glass sculptures on Straker's desk. *Now what, she wondered, can you tell about the personality of a man who collects paperweights?*

Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at Freeman. He was leaning back against the side of the drinks cabinet, sipping a scotch and staring at her. After a moment, she noticed that Straker was also watching her with an unusual steadiness. *What's this?* she thought. *A war of nerves?*

She stared back, silently, proudly.

After half a minute had gone by, Straker spoke. "I have a couple of questions to put to you," he said. "I'd like a straight yes or no, except where an opinion is involved."

"I can probably manage that."

"Good," Straker said, his eyes glinting icily. "How do you think it is possible for a ufo to travel at SOL speeds?"

"Everything we know confirms that the speed of light is an impassible barrier for objects which have anything other than zero mass," Ginny said. "This applies from the theoretical upper side of the light barrier, as well as the lower side. However, we know that, since ufos obviously do travel at velocities in excess of the speed of light, there must be a mechanism by which this barrier can be overcome. It must be possible to either bypass the problem, or else attain the speed of light and go beyond it, in a way that does not violate the laws of physics. Now I think the mechanism they've developed is a bypass, and whatever it is, it plainly works at the macro level, not just for sub-atomic particles." She paused. "I continue to suspect that the aliens have created some method of establishing their own time continuum."

Straker nodded thoughtfully. "Do you get claustrophobia?" he asked.

Ginny was astonished by the change of subject and couldn't bite back the instant retort. "Do you?" she snapped.

Straker's gaze didn't waver. "Quite severely," he said evenly.

Ginny glared at him, then realizing his response was genuine, she immediately calmed down. "No," she said, puzzled.

"Agoraphobia?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"How would you test your theory about ufos being in a different time continuum?"

"I'd send out a single high intensity light beam."

"Laser?"

"If I could find one big enough," Ginny said. "I'd want a very wide spread, you see. I'd aim it directly along the path of the ufo and wait to see what sort of reflections I got, if any."

"What if you didn't get a satisfactory result?"

"I'd try again. If the idea is sound, it's always worth attempting twice, just in case a random variable interfered the first time. But if I still got nothing on my second attempt; I'd abandon the experiment and try something else."

"What?"

"I don't know," Ginny said. "That would depend on the kind of nothing I got from my initial experiment. Maybe I'd modify my original set-up. Maybe, I'd start again from scratch with a new hypothesis."

"What sports do you play?"

"None."

Straker's stare became even colder. "How do you keep fit?" he asked.

Ginny gritted her teeth, almost angry that they were back to the personal questions. *What*

business of his was it? "I don't," she said. "I hate exercise."

"She looks in pretty good shape to me," Freeman observed.

Ginny would have shot him a glare of disapproval if Straker hadn't preempted her. The look he cast at Freeman would be enough to freeze almost anyone else. Ginny was astonished. Straker turned his attention back to her, asking suddenly, "Would you like to join SHADO?"

Ginny felt her whole body go numb. *Would she like to join . . . ?* She hesitated now that the moment had come, not wishing to appear too eager. "What would happen if I said no?" she asked slowly.

Straker took a deep breath. "You'd put us in a very invidious position," he admitted.

"Are you asking me because things would be awkward if you didn't, or because you think I can do the job?"

"If you couldn't do the job, I wouldn't ask," Straker stated firmly. "We choose our people with the utmost care."

Ginny believed him. "Is there a probation period?" she asked.

"In a sense," Straker said, shrugging. "But again, no. Because I wouldn't be asking if we weren't quite sure you are right for the position we have in mind. Training is too costly for us to make mistakes. You've passed all the tests we've set you and we believe that you will fill the role admirably."

"Tests?" Ginny asked.

Straker's eyes held a strange look of amusement. "The first test was to find out how you would cope with too much attention from an unwanted source," he said, glancing at Freeman.

But . . . ! Ginny thought in wonderment. That was way back, before I'd even got to England. You've had an eye on me that long?

"Alec took acting lessons before we sent him off," Straker added.

"I resent the implication," Freeman announced. Ginny turned in time to see him wink broadly. "I enjoyed the role enormously, I might add," he said.

"The other tests," Straker went on, "were finding out how you would cope with an over-bearing, arrogant and totally opinionated superior." His faint smile was self-deprecating. "I'm not usually that bad all the time," he said, "only every other day." His smile faded. "And the other tests, of course, were seeing exactly how you would work as part of a team, how you cooperated with your peers, now you got on with people generally, how you used your intelligence in lateral thinking and finally, how you reacted when you suspected that we would have to kill you to silence you."

Ginny was stunned. There was nothing that had escaped their notice.

"Needless to say," Freeman commented, "you passed all tests with flying colours."

Ginny looked from one man to the other, unsure as to whether the tests were an insult or a compliment. She decided to be pragmatic. What did it matter? They'd got her exactly where she wanted to be. "Alright then," she agreed, nodding. "Yes."

Straker's abrupt smile was brief and dazzling. "Good," he said, and opening the folder in front of him, he removed an identity card from the inside front pocket. He slid it across the desk to Ginny.

She hardly glanced at it, knowing what it was. She knew now she'd be able to hand in her temporary card without even a twinge of regret. "You were *very* sure," she said.

"We try to be," Straker replied. He gestured towards Colonel Freeman. "Alec, of course, will be in charge of your training. Jackson will put you through more psychological hoops than you ever dreamed existed. And Doctor Fraser will get you in shape."

Ginny suddenly reversed all her previous opinions about Straker. *I like him*, she thought. There could be innuendo in everything he just said, but there isn't. He's direct, straight-forward, while at the same time being cunning, devious and ruthless. He means what he says. And he doesn't abuse his power - *much*.

"Now, of course, there's a couple of things you'll need to be aware of," Straker went on. "They'll become obvious as soon as you take up your position properly. A woman in command is subject to unique problems."

As if I didn't know, Ginny thought. Still it's going to be a long time before I'm in a command position - if ever.

"One of the more subtle traps," Straker went on, "is to over-exert herself to try and compensate for a perceived male hostility towards her." Straker's gaze was steady. "Such hostility is sometimes nothing more than ambition and is directed towards the command position, regardless of the gender of the occupant. You do not have to work to prove you are the best person for the position. I'm telling you right now, you are."

Ginny raised her eyebrows, unsure of whether Straker was being patronizing or not. Then, she had a flash of insight. He must be obliquely referring to his own situation - since manifestly, I'm not going to have rank for a long time. However, he had affirmed her and that was a welcome change. "Thank you, sir," she said.

Straker nodded. "Show her round Alec," he said, "before you turn her over to Jackson's tender mercies."

"Come along then, Colonel," Freeman said, putting his glass down.

Colonel!?

Ginny felt dazed. She was sure her heart must have stopped. Her breathing definitely had. She must have heard wrongly. But looking down at the identity card confirmed the title.

Colonel Virginia Lake.

It couldn't be. She felt unaccountably confused and wasn't sure what to do. She wanted to shout. To dance. To rush out and tell Phil. To just sit down quietly and cry. *What have I got myself in for?* she wondered. I wasn't even hoping for a lieutenantcy. I wouldn't have dared aspire that high. A Colonel? But I'm no good at giving or taking orders. She looked down at Straker's bent head. Obviously he thought she was.

She was standing next to the door and she wasn't quite sure how she'd got there. And she was certain there was a moonish, stupefied expression on her face. "Oh, Colonel Lake," Straker said, looking up briefly from his reports, "don't go expecting a research lab to yourself. We blew the budget on the Utronic equipment and we won't get another allocation for eight months."

"Understood, sir," Ginny said. *No money?* she thought. *Think that'll stop me?* She smiled to herself. No, he didn't think that. Which is precisely why he'd said it. She grinned as she looked up at Colonel Freeman. "Exactly how many Colonels are there in this organization?" she asked as they went out the door together.

"Well, now," Freeman mused, "we've just had a fifty percent leap in quantity and about a thousand percent improvement in quality."

"Is the other Colonel as chauvinistic as you?" she asked.

"Worse," Freeman reported gleefully. "Collins would actually have subjected you to that dinner date, you know." He grinned. "Speaking of which . . ."

Some things never change, Ginny thought with a sigh. Then again, some things do. I wonder how long it would take me to grow complacent with SHADO? A year, a decade, half a

century? She thought of the women in the purple wigs. *Longer than that, Colonel*, she decided. *Much longer than that.*