

The Long Game

The Long Game Trilogy III - © June 7, 2012

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Keith Ford watched the Utronic 'radar' screen as the mass of UFO's assembled at the edge of its range. Moonbase was on high alert, as were all the other SHADO installations. It was only a matter of time before the aliens moved to strike.

This was the big one. SHADO's strategic and tactical experts were positive the aliens were at the edge of their capacity to attack. Over-long supply routes, lack of ships and personnel - it was reasonably certain this was the aliens' last ditch effort to destroy SHADO and have free access to Earth and her resources.

Ford took a moment to look around the underground command center, eyes flicking to the nearby stations. Ayesha Johnson gave him a slight nod, acknowledging her readiness for whatever the aliens were preparing to throw at them.

As was his habit, Straker was standing at Ford's shoulder watching the screen. But this time Freeman wasn't standing with him - Freeman's body was in SHADO's morgue. Freeman had collapsed and died in Straker's office only the day before. Most SHADO operatives accepted Doctor Frazier's assessment that Freeman had died of a massive heart attack.

A few operatives, Ford among them, knew that the 'official' story was nothing more than a hasty cover-up of a murder. In the moments before Freeman's collapse, he and Straker had been arguing.

"Did you really think I didn't know who you were, Alexei?" Straker had shouted. He didn't know his office was wired for sound and vision - the units were sophisticated enough to escape SHADO security's weekly bug sweep - at least Jackson assured Ford that Straker didn't know. Ford wasn't as certain.

"Did you really believe I wouldn't see through your charade, *brother*?" Straker's image snarled. "Did he think I needed babysitting, or were you planning something a little more brotherly, like getting me out of the way once the hard work was done?"

Freeman snorted. "He'll take care of that himself once he sees how weak and pathetic you really are."

"Weakness didn't build SHADO."

"You know your orders. Tomorrow there won't *be* a SHADO."

"You're sure of that?" Straker asked. There was something very assured and very cold in his voice.

"What are you planning?" Freeman demanded.

The video barely caught Straker's motion, but it looked like Straker grabbed Freeman's

wrist. Freeman's expression turned from surprise to horror as he clutched his chest with his free hand. Straker simply stood and watched as Freeman collapsed. He checked the pulse at Freeman's throat and only then did he go to his desk to call for help.

"Never forget that I'm my father's son," Straker said to Freeman's already cooling body just before the office doors slid open to allow the medical team in.

"Do we know what really killed Colonel Freeman?" Ford asked once he found his voice.

"Yes," Jackson said. "A very rare, very potent, venom from Australia, though I'm not certain that Freeman, or Federov or whatever his name really was, would have appreciated the irony."

"So, what do we do now?" Ford asked.

"We do what is necessary."

That was yesterday. Now Straker and everyone else seemed to be waiting for the aliens' next move.

"I count over a hundred Ufoes," Anderson said. His voice was quiet, but Ford knew he had to be worried.

Then the aliens moved - but not towards Earth. Their new target was something out of range of SHADO's detectors.

"What are they doing?" someone asked.

"I believe they received information from a trusted source that one of their allies planned to betray them," Doctor Jackson said, coming to stand beside Straker. "Apparently they decided a pre-emptive strike was a prudent move."

"And do you know who that 'trusted source' was, Doctor?" Straker asked.

Jackson shrugged. "Not Colonel Freeman."

Ford didn't dare turn to watch the by-play between the two men. On the detector screen, alien ships were disappearing. Then an energy surge blanked the screen.

"Something big just went up," Anderson announced.

"The other ship?" Straker demanded.

"I guess," Anderson said.

"You guess?" Straker grated. He waved his arm at the equipment. "With all this you have to guess?"

"Sometimes yes, Commander," Colonel Foster put in. Colonel Lake was standing beside him.

This time Ford twisted around to see what was going on behind him. If looks could kill, Foster would have been a smouldering pile of ash. Then Straker schooled his expression to something less threatening. It was a masterful performance. But Ford also suspected that Foster had just signed his own death warrant. It was unlikely Straker would tolerate much more of Foster's natural impudence.

Ford turned back to his monitor. The screen was clearing and the remaining UFOs - a fraction of the number from before - started toward the Earth and Moon.

"Inform all stations Alpha is go," Straker ordered.

Ford keyed in the commands that would connect him with all SHADO units. "This is SHADO Control. Alpha is go. Repeat. Alpha is go."

This was the critical time. Would the aliens fall for the same trap as they had during their previous large-scale attack? SHADO had let the first wave get past the Moon and trapped the aliens between the Sky fleet and Moonbase. Ground forces had quickly mopped up the few ships that managed to escape SHADO's space and air defenses.

The aliens moved past Moonbase, heading straight for Earth.

"All Sky units are in position, Moonbase has launched interceptors," Johnson announced.

There was an odd sound, like a half-voiced protest, from behind Ford. The operative turned to see Straker glaring at the monitor screen, fists balled, knuckles blanched white.

"Is there a problem, Commander?" Jackson asked.

"No, of course not," Straker responded.

Jackson was watching Straker through narrowed eyes and Ford knew the psychiatrist didn't believe Straker any more than Ford did.

On the monitor, alien ships were vanishing one by one.

"Did you really think we wouldn't notice the changes you made to the Alpha defense program?" Lake asked. Her expression was bland.

"And you're so certain I was the one who changed it?" Straker demanded.

"Actually yes, sir," Lake said. "Although the changes were made from Colonel Freeman's terminal with his passcode, the timestamp on the file puts him off premises and you in his office."

"Timestamps can be altered," Straker stated.

"We know an attempt was made to alter the timestamp on the file," Lake said. "But we have security measures in place to detect and thwart such attempts. Part of your security upgrades."

"Commander, why did you try to change the battle plan?" Jackson asked. "Why did you want the aliens to have access to Earth? I was under the impression that they were the enemy. Unless... ah, yes, the Ufoes are destroyed in public view, SHADO is revealed as Earth's sole defense and you are declared an international hero."

"Security! Arrest Jackson, Lake, and Foster!" Straker shouted.

No one moved.

Straker started to reach for the phone at Ford's station but Ford already had his hand on the handset.

"Traitors! I'll have you all shot!" Straker hissed.

"I think not, Commander," Jackson said calmly. "I believe that when all the evidence is presented to them, the IAC will have no trouble determining who the traitor to Earth really is."

Straker snorted. "Henderson will have your head."

"Henderson was the one who arranged for me to be here," Jackson responded. "You are not the only one who can play the long game."

Straker reached for Jackson but the psychiatrist slipped away from him. Then, almost faster than the human eye could see, Lake moved in to grab Straker's hand.

Like Freeman on the security tape, Straker's eyes widened as he realized what has

happening to him. The venom wasn't painless as it spread through his body.

"Did you really think Earth was completely defenseless against the Ufoes, or your people?" Lake asked, voice low enough that only the people closest to her could hear. "Of course, it is helpful that your people are both fratricidal and patricidal. Saves us a lot of pain and effort when you kill one another first."

"How...?" Straker managed to gasp.

"How long have we known?" Jackson asked. "Since before you were born. As I said, you are not the only one playing the long game. It's something your father excels at. Did you really think he would put himself at risk like that? Did you think he trusted you that far?"

But Straker was no longer listening.

The medical team hurried in just as they had the day before and again, it was too late. Their valiant efforts at resuscitation did nothing. At her station, Johnson had actually started to weep. Ford wanted to tell her that Straker had been a murderer and worse, but he also knew that was a truth that could never be told. No one would ever know the truth about Freeman's and Straker's deaths, just as no one would ever know the full truth about SHADO's war.

"Two Ufoes got through," Anderson announced, breaking through the pall that had come over the control room. "Mobiles are on their way."

"Location?" Lake asked.

Ford checked his screen. "Two miles north of here. It's not very built up. We shouldn't have any security issues."

He looked at the reflections of Lake and Jackson in the glass of his monitor. It wasn't quite a black mirror, but it was close. Their otherworldly shapes were as familiar to him as his own.

No one would ever know about SHADO's war and no one would know who the real enemies of Earth were. No one would ever know that Earth was merely a setting in a long game between powerful beings sometimes mistaken for devils and angels.