

Computer Affair II

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By Albert Hastings

The blackness of space was filled with swarms of particles, spinning and eddying around the view-ports. It slowed and settled into weightless clouds drifting outwards from the lunar module. Freeman unbuckled and swung himself out of the vertical seat. Using his hands, he propelled himself through the cabin door into the passenger compartment.

Gay Ellis and Mark Bradley were also slipping out of their harnesses. Bradley looked as if he was waking up out of a heavy sleep, which he probably was.

Ellis avoided his gaze.

"Um, there's something I'd like to say before we all go inside," Freeman said awkwardly, holding onto the bulkhead to stop himself drifting.

"Colonel?" said Ellis politely, if a little coldly.

"Yes, well it's just that I'd like to apologize for everything that went on back there." Freeman, normally a 'people person', was struggling to find the words. "I consider you both fine officers, and that thing Straker's computer came up with won't have any effect on the way I treat you if it was, um, true."

Bradley pulled his bag down towards him and secured the overhead locker. "That's OK Colonel. I don't think the Commander meant to insult us personally."

"Yes, I think we understand Commander Straker had a job to do." Ellis paused, turning back to Freeman. "Thank you Colonel, for what you did for us."

Staring at those brown eyes, Freeman wouldn't have doubted that any man would have been attracted to her. Especially one stationed up here for long shifts, tens of thousands of miles from everyone he had ever known. "My pleasure," He took a deep breath, "OK, well let's get on with it."

The gravity shields in the shuttle were crude devices, just effective enough that they could drift down through the vertical craft before Moonbase's shields took over. It was comforting to have the feeling of one earth gravity back again as they stepped out of the airlock. It was the only thing Straker had spared no expense on to save the personnel up here from having to deal with the debilitating effects on .6G. On the 3 month shifts it would have sapped their fitness, their stamina, and their fighting ability. Straker wanted them sharp, always.

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The Control sphere didn't vary from day to night like the rest of the facility. Purple haired operators performed their duties smoothly despite the fact it was the early hours of the morning.

"Nina!" smiled Freeman. "Good to see you!"

"You too, Colonel!" Barry smiled back, not interrupting the technical check she was completing.

Freeman walked over for a look. Data spooled across her screens, flowing in familiar patterns as it was stored away onto magnetic tape cartridges.

"Backing up SID?"

"Yes, sir. Accumulated files from the last month. Thirteen sightings, eight lunar shuttle

flights, and 200 Gig of SHADO communications data."

"Well, that should ease the space problems on the drives for a while."

"Yes, sir."

Off duty, it would be easy-going chatter, and 'Alec', not 'Sir'. Freeman looked forward to hearing Nina Barry's musical laughter again, but right now she was Lt. Barry, Senior Moonbase officer. One of the six people who guided operations to keep three billion safe on Earth. No time for chit-chat.

"OK," said Freeman, "I'm going to turn it in. Before we call it a night, I'd just like to sort out who's going to be assigned to the recovery operation tomorrow."

Ellis picked up the duty rosters, and handed them to Freeman. She didn't have to ask what the 'recovery operation' meant. The atmosphere in the control sphere seemed to grow heavier at the mention of the words. Somewhere out there, on the lunar surface, the wreckage of a UFO lay waiting...mingled with the wreckage of an Interceptor.

"I've already assigned that, Sir." Ellis responded, not missing a beat. "Lt. Bradley and myself will be taking Hopper Three to the crash site."

"You?" Freeman looked up, surprised. "Isn't your place here, as Moonbase Commander?"

"I'd like to go, Colonel." Her face was serious. "Unless it's a problem?"

Freeman paused, then shut the file and handed it back. "No, no problem." He glanced over at Barry, who looked away. "I'll see you at the airlock at 0900 then. Have a good sleep, Gay."

* * *

Gay Ellis stared at her brown hair in the mirror. Tomorrow it would be purple/blue again. She ran her fingers through the fine strands. She had come very close to leaving this place, and this life, forever. Even Straker would never know how close.

To work in SHADO had been her dream. She had been there in the beginning, when Moonbase had been a design on a draughtsman's table. She had changed the organization of the five spheres, breaking out the vital air and water recycling plant to a separate installation in case of a missile strike. She personally designed the communications equipment, the encryption codes, the targeting computers.

Now Straker had lost his faith in her. If he had ever had any. One moment she was the most trusted officer on Moonbase, the next she was about to be dismissed, stripped of badge, rank and even memories. Was that how much all the work meant? The months up here away from Earth and the burden of the terrible secret she could never explain to her family and friends?

Perhaps that's why she had grown so fond of Mark. She ran her long fingers over the ribbed uniforms that hung in the recess in her bedroom wall. Woven metal thread felt cool and strong to the touch. It was her armour, her chain-mail. The breast-plate was a circular metal badge with the silhouette of a man embossed on the surface. To its right, set against an orange background were five innocuous symbols. S.H.A.D.O. How much those five cryptic letters meant.

* * *

Mark Bradley lay on his air-filled mattress and breathed out the smoke of his cigarette, watching it swirl away towards the air-conditioning vent in the ceiling. Somewhere out there in the night lay the wreckage of the interceptor craft that had carried a friend to his death. He and Ken Matthews had only known each other a year, but they had flown side by side on too many missions to be strangers. Now he lay somewhere, beside the body of the enemy they had flown

to destroy.

 Fallen comrades.

 Ken had been closer than the other pilots because he, like Bradley, had not enjoyed the kill that came at the end of the missions. In fact he hated it almost as much as the failures. The times when the spinning craft would pass unharmed and disappear into the bright glow of the Earth below. In those times, he had confided in Bradley, he felt a strange relief that he would not be the executioner. Leave it to someone else.

 Bradley smiled as he thought of the younger Interceptor pilots. Hot-heads who enjoyed the power of the rockets at their back as they hurtled out into space. Almost sexual thrill as they sent thermonuclear missiles off on their trajectories, adrenaline pumping as the fireworks display lit up the sky.

 What would Straker think if he knew he thought like this? Shit, he probably did. He punched out the cigarette on the ashtray beside his bed.

 There was only one other person he had told about his reluctance to kill. Their intimacy was a luxury that had almost had them both suspended. But it was too late now to shake the feelings he had for her. He wondered idly if he felt the same on earth, with brown hair instead of purple. Loose cloth instead of metal mesh. Was the attraction tied into the goddess-like image of the Moonbase commander?

 No, he guessed it wasn't.

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 "Pre-flight check A-OK. Green lights across the board, all systems go."

 "Roger, mobile three. Lt. Ellis has left the control sphere. ETA your position eight minutes."

 Bradley smiled. It was a thirty-second walk anywhere on Moonbase. But it took a long time to have a nervous rest break in a space suit.

 "Roger, Control."

 "Mark." It was Freeman. "I want you to stay in touch all the way to the terminator. Hourly reports. I'm giving you five hours over the horizon, and then I'll expect another communication at 1145. Clear?"

 "Roger Colonel. The orbital shots say the wreckage begins in area seven, blue. We will leave the crash site sixty minutes after arrival."

 "Don't take any chances, Mark. The photos say this is probably the most complete UFO we've come across yet. About thirty percent intact. Salvage any machinery, weapons, or superstructure but stay back till you're sure it's stable."

 "If the destruct mechanism was going to work, it should have happened by now." Bradley's voice was even, professional. "I don't think we'll be in any danger. Lt. Ellis is coming in board now. Signing off. Next communication 1000."

 "Roger. Good luck. Moonbase out."

* * *

 Bradley leaned to help her clamber up into the tight cabin. He couldn't help noticing the subtle curves under her suit as she shuffled into her seat.

 "Feel better?"

 She shook her head. "Couldn't go!" she whispered in a low voice.

 "Just have to use the suit then," he smiled. She made a face at him. Out here the pose of the Moonbase commander was gone completely. One of the biggest benefits of their relationship was that they had no secrets from each other.

"Buckle in then. Here we go." His relaxed posture hid the skill with which he lifted the craft out of its hanger. One pilot in ten could get a hopper out in a single turn. He eased the craft up to a safe altitude above the jagged rocks strewn on the lunar surface. They cruised together in silence down the familiar valley that led away from Moonbase. Without asking, Ellis reached up and snapped off the cabin lights, leaving the illumination of their headlight reflections to light them in the darkness.

* * *

"Are you OK," he asked her softly as they slid along on a cushion of gravity repelled dust in the night.

She smiled. "Sure. Didn't sleep much last night."

"Neither did I. I don't think this is going to be an easy day for either of us. Sleep on the way, if you want."

"I'll try. But I'm glad we got a chance to be here, just us together."

"I'm glad too," he smiled and reached for her gloved hand. She slid her fingers into his.

"I spent all night wondering, Mark. Did I really get Ken killed? I know what the computers said, but I can remember thinking Oh God, I've got to get you out, I've got to get you out..."

He sighed. "The computer said you should have lost all three of us."

"I wrote that program, Mark. I wrote it to apply to Nina and Joan and all the others," she dropped her eyes, "not to me."

* * *

They rode for a stretch in silence. Eventually, he broke it with words he dreaded to say aloud.

"So, what do you want to do?"

"I still want us to be friends," she said softly, squeezing his hand. "But I think we should stop the other side, Mark. I think we have to."

He expected the surge of emotion these words would well up in him. He was ready for it when it came, but it still made his chest tighten and his teeth clench. What she didn't have to say was that they had no control over themselves when it came to making love. Suppressed tension and stress turned them into animals, rutting wildly with abandon. They had walked paths few lovers ever did, unfettered by inhibition. Mornings were rushed hours setting their quarters back in shape before their shifts began. They were interludes of unbelievable release for each of them, and neither of them knew if it was a result of the pressure they were both under, or the passion they had for each other.

"All right. On one condition."

"What," she asked. Barely a whisper.

"That's all we stop." He leaned over and kissed her, finding her tongue waiting for him. When they parted she closed her eyes and nestled into the crook of his shoulder to sleep.

The sunlight dazzled her and her mouth was dry in the air-conditioning. Shielding her eyes, she sat up and looked through the tinted view-port.

Both the Sun and the Earth hung low over the horizon, like glowing eyes staring at her. The barren landscape was a litter of twisted metal and glass. Before her the tail fin of an Interceptor jutted like a statue out of the sand and dust. A ski-plane leant at an angle against a hillside, its landing leg chopped neatly off at the top. It looked for all the world like a junkyard for spaceships missing only the scrap metal signs and a roadway.

"Good morning," said Bradley, shifting his arm from under her. "Catch up on your beauty

sleep, Lieutenant?"

She sipped the cool water from a valve in the neck of her suit and checked the chronometer.

"2215. You made good time."

"Yeah, it was the lively conversation I had with myself," he smiled back. "We had 60 minutes to look around. Straker wants us to spend the time salvaging the UFO, but I wanted to get here a little early."

She smiled and squeezed his arm. She didn't need to ask what he intended to do with the time.

"Let's go."

They fixed on the yellow helmets and checked the pressure gauges before sliding down from the Hopper, but Bradley's eyes never left the twisted metal that lay all around them. Silently, they pushed off in odd, bouncing steps into the crash site.

The metal plates carried with them a strange familiarity, out of place in their current shapes and forms. Neither of them had seen an Interceptor before that wasn't shining and poised like an insect ready for battle. To confront the reality of these scattered pieces seemed like a betrayal. This craft would no longer protect anyone from the harsh cold of empty space.

* * *

They worked their way up the hill, passing like silver ghosts through the shattered craft. The steep climb made easy by the weightlessness of the lunar gravity. Ellis allowed him to lead her to the top of the rise where the rest of the craft lay. His palm made her stop, and she looked up to the final wreckage.

The cockpit was gone. Obliterated on the blast. Scorch marks ran away from where the front of the ship should have been. When the collision had happened, the UFO had met it almost head on, its rotation causing the large blades to shear through the metal and glass. Heat and energy had fused the craft together for an instant then the inertia of a spaceship travelling at half the speed of light had ripped to shreds the entire bow of the Interceptor, and with it Ken Matthews.

There would be nothing for them to bury.

Gay felt her knees sag beneath her. Only Mark's hand kept her from falling. The horrific scene was blurred by tears that streamed freely now. Weeks of sorrow welled up and she knelt on the dust, crying like a child. Thank God they were out of radio range of Moonbase.

Mark said nothing. Letting her weep. His mouth was dry, the sound of his breathing loud in his ears. This was the scene he tried not to think about every time the chute delivered him into the cockpit of his fighter. He didn't know if he would ever be able to shut it out again.

He had hoped that he would find Matthews' body. It would have been preserved in the airless suit so well he would have appeared to be sleeping. Bradley would have picked it up easily in the low gravity, and slid it into the hold of the hopper. It would have meant less space to carry alien machines for Straker, but he didn't care. And later, he would have buried his friend.

"Mark," Gay held out a hand to him. "Let's go."

He helped her up and together they turned and walked back down the hill to the Moon Hopper. Bradley knew he was supposed to record the crashed interceptor on digital and video but...to hell with it.

They climbed into the cockpit and unclipped their helmets. Gay brushed the purple strands from her wet eyes and smoothed away the tears. The Hopper lifted off smoothly and

slid forward, it's dusty wake covering at least some of the twisted metal.

Bradley guided them down a deep cut in the dusty plane. Old rock unearthed by the crash piled up around the sides. It was perfectly straight, carved by a heavy object travelling fast, careering down into the surface. Two hundred meters away, they saw it.

The green glass of the UFO was splintered and torn. Half was missing, probably scattered along the trail. Beneath it, silver gleamed in the intense sunlight. Silver and metal so green it looked oddly like wet grass in the dry lunar plain. It was open to space, torn and twisted, but it was still there.

Mark set the hopper down and sat watching the craft. There was no movement. It looked like it might have lain here centuries, not weeks. For ten full minutes, neither of them dared to blink. They searched for the glow of lights, or of weapons but there was nothing.

"It looks dead," said Bradley at last. He unclipped the safety harness and picked up his helmet. "Time is 2245. Let's get this over with."

They climbed onto the surface and began towards the craft.

"50 meters. Rads low. Nothing on Infra red."

"Check. Dropping the first marker. Proceed 10 metres."

He stepped cautiously forward, knees bent for maximum balance. He felt his pulse racing in his neck.

"40 metres. No sign of movement. Come on up."

"OK, Mark. 40 metres. Still no radiation."

"Drop the second marker."

"Check. Mark...movement!"

He spun to look at the UFO. A giant metal fin twisted away from its wing, falling slowly to the ground. Dust welled up in clouds as it hit, obscuring the ship before drifting off upwards. It would take a long time to come back down.

"Must have finally broken loose," breathed Bradley. "No more movement. I'm going on."

"Check."

The craft grew as they approached. Gay had never stopped to think how big they might be. When they reached it the broken hull loomed two stories high over them. At first it seemed a hopeless wreck, with no sign of anything familiar to greet their gaze. She reached out and watched the fingertips of her glove touch the alien metal.

Mark called her from the side of the ship. "I've found a way in."

* * *

Alec Freeman had never been able to wait well. He paced, he smoked, and he drank and there was not a damned thing he could do.

"What time is it?"

"Eleven o'clock, sir"

He smiled back at the use of civilian time. Perhaps they were trying to tell him something?

"I'll be in the leisure sphere. Call me at 2330"

"Yes, sir"

He made his way down to the leisure sphere and poured himself another coffee. With a quick look over his shoulder he asked the computer to put a dash of whiskey in it.

With the warmth of the coffee cup in his hand, he walked over to the small glass view-port. The last time a UFO had crashed on the moon, its occupant had shot out that view-port. The decompression that had followed had killed an astronaut. Well, at least it would

be quick.

He genuinely liked Gay Ellis and Mark Bradley. Unlike Straker, Freeman didn't discount the human factors involved in working for SHADO. If they found some sort of comfort in each other up here in this damned place, let them. Now they thought they had something to prove to him and to Straker. Prove that they could do without the comfort of another person and still carry on fighting this war. They had given up their families to do it. Friends and partners. What the hell was one more person?

He doubted he could do it and stay sane.

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Lt. Ellis put the toe of her boot on the bluntest piece of torn metal and pushed herself up. The world she emerged into was like nothing she had ever seen. Even in its semi-destroyed state the UFO was awe inspiring.

Walls of membrane hung around her. It was divided into chambers of varying sizes, some of which held green oily liquid. There were occasional veins running down the membrane and where they branched were opaque sacs. At the edges the walls were shredded and torn. Fragile pink and blue colours hung in ribbons like a torn-open body. Bradley was feeling his way along the skin, pushing against the surface. Suddenly his fingers found a slit and he pushed his arms through it, opening it wide. She stepped through as he held it apart, and found herself standing in one of the chambers. Bradley stepped through after her and together they looked upward.

Above them the membranes radiated out like nothing more than the insides of a jellyfish. Colours danced in the sunlight and the movement of their passage caused the chambers to sway and sparkle.

"It's beautiful," she said simply. There were no machines, no furnishings, so signs of habitation of any kind.

"I wonder what Straker wants us to bring back?"

"Are you recording this?"

He checked the cameras on the shoulder of his suit. Green markers flashed. "Got it. I don't know what use they'll be able to make of it though. Look, up through there."

She peered up to where he was pointing. Vague shapes were visible through the semi-transparent walls. "Is that a skeleton?"

"I don't know," he replied, shifting around to get the lens of the cameras pointing up. "They look like knuckles. At least four metres up."

"What about the floor?" she said stepping back. "My boots have left indentations. When I move they look as if they're filling up with some kind of liquid."

"Shouldn't be any liquid in here. This is open to space."

"I know. And Mark..." she paused, looking up at him, "This place is warm."

"The heat of the sun on the hull?"

"The hull must be insulated. No heat should be getting through to here."

He turned back to the walls, running his hands along them. "I'm going to try and get through to the inner hull. I think you should wait outside."

"I won't let you stay here alone. You could run into trouble and need my help."

"I'd feel much better if I knew...shit!" He disappeared from view through the thin membrane. "Damn. My weight broke it. Oh damn, this thing's full of some kind of gelatinous substance. Can't see. Pull me out, would you?"

She hurried over and took hold of his boot. She pulled and he slid out of the chamber onto the floor. With her gloves, she cleared away the greasy film that obscured his visor. Peering in,

she smiled down at him.

"Going to be more careful next time, are we?"

"Damn," he said again, sitting up and wiping himself off. "OK, I've had enough of this. Looks like it's stable enough to send a salvage team out here. Time's up, we should be getting home."

"I think so. And by the way - you're a mess!" She laughed and helped him to his feet. Together they made their way back through the ship and down onto the lunar surface.

She turned and took a last look before they headed off back to the hopper.

"Do you think that whole ship's in some way alive?"

"Could be," he said, taking her arm and helping her over the twisted plates. "The aliens we know of must travel inside one of those chambers, like an acceleration couch. Could be some kind of symbiotic relationship with the craft. In a true symbiosis both parties gain from the arrangement. This could be the reason they destroy all their ships. Their great secret."

"But there must be machines in there some place. What about the weapons? The propulsion system? The computers?"

He stopped her and looked at her through the smeared visor. "I think that the creature does all that."

She looked back once more, then started up into the hopper. "Imagine what kind of power it must have. We have to get back to Moonbase and get Dr Jackson to look at the footage you shot."

They levered themselves into the cockpit and re-pressurized. Bradley unclipped his helmet and placed it carefully on the hook beside him. Rivulets of slime dripped down onto the walls.

"Oh yeah. I sure want to put that thing back on again!"

She laughed. "We should be careful. Until we get that to a lab, don't let that stuff touch your skin. It might be hazardous."

"I won't argue with that." He lifted the ship up and swung it around. The glare of the sun and Earth swept the cabin and disappeared as they headed back towards darkness.

* * *

"We should be in communications range again in two hours." noted Gay. She looked at the jelly like substance on the wall. "At least it doesn't have a smell."

"Well whatever it is, I hope it's friendly, because you're going to be spending the next day with it."

"Roger that! I feel exhausted. Mind if I catch another couple of hours before we reach radio range?"

"Typical," he smiled. "Go on. But then I wake you and it's your turn to drive."

"Goodnight then. And Mark..."

"Yes?"

She kissed him. Then she closed her eyes and slid down again into the dark void.

Act II

The side of the bulkhead slammed into her forehead, causing bright spots to swirl in her vision. She fell back disoriented, but the next impact sent her sprawling onto the cockpit floor.

The Moonhopper tipped over to a crazy angle threatening to roll but at the last moment it stopped and began to settle back on it's legs. The craft's weight had saved them.

Gay pulled herself back into the seat. She looked over to see Bradley still harnessed in to the pilot seat, but showing no signs of life.

"Mark!" she cried, pushing over and struggling to find a pulse. It was there, but it was weak and erratic. She looked around the cabin for the cause of the accident but all the indicator lights glowed green in the darkness.

Darkness. Then they were over the terminator. In radio range of Moonbase. Her training took over as she reached for the communications console.

"Moonbase, this is Hopper Three. Come in please we have an emergency."

"Hopper Three, this is Moonbase, reading you strength five." Joan Harrington's voice was a welcome relief, and the pounding in Gay's ears started to quiet.

"This is Lt. Ellis. Captain Bradley has passed out. We've crashed into the surface. The cabin is intact and pressurized, I'm going to run a check on the rest of the craft."

"Gay, are you all right?" it was Freeman's voice now. Tight, betraying his concern.

"Roger Moonbase. A Little bruised. Captain Bradley's pulse is erratic, breathing irregular."

"OK, get that craft up and back as fast as you can. What's your position, Gay?"

She checked the navigation display. "Area four, blue. We're about six hours away. Status check almost complete..." She watched the green dots appear in the system check boxes. Her breathing stopped as one by one they began to turn red. "I am registering a loss of hull integrity. Aft compartment, the fuel store. We are losing fuel pressure. Shutting down the core, switching to batteries."

"What about cabin pressure?" Freeman's tone turned cool and professional. Beneath the friendly exterior, he had what it takes to be in command.

"A-OK. Air recycling is still running. Just one puncture in the hull at the rear."

"Good. I'm getting the emergency Hopper's ready for evac. Hold tight, Lieutenant. We'll come and get you."

"I'm sorry Alec, cancel that order."

"What?" Freeman stared, disbelieving, at Straker's face on the Comm-Link. "Dr Jackson thinks the vehicle may be contaminated. We have to assess the situation again in forty-eight hours."

"I'm not leaving them out there that long. We've got to get them back."

"If you bring them inside the base, you could be exposing everyone there to a biological hazard." Straker was tapping his pen on his palm as he leaned over the console on his desk. "They have to be quarantined until we find out what caused Bradley's blackout. Forty-eight hours Alec."

"Listen, I know what you saw on the tapes, but Bradley needs medical attention."

"That Moonhopper has medical supplies. And enough air and water for a week. If Captain Bradley hadn't been exposed to an alien substance it might be different..." He looked up, changing the subject. "Dr Jackson and I will be up there on the next shuttle. I want a follow-up salvage team ready to go as soon as Ellis and Bradley are cleared."

"Fine," said Freeman, resigned. "I'll pass on the good news."

* * *

Bradley sunk deeper, drifting between vague points of light. He tried to concentrate on them but they slipped through his grasp. They milled around. Their movement had some incomprehensible pattern to it as they receded into the blackness. They were a tiny group, alone in a great void.

He drifted further, the specks of light dwindling to a point, and they were gone. About him now, only darkness. He lifted his gaze to the horizon and suddenly a symphony of colour

rose up before him. This time not tens, but millions of teeming points swarmed together. They formed a glorious sphere, scintillating in the darkness.

A voice came to him. It did not speak in words, but its meaning was clear like fresh water running through his mind. He let it take him and lift him up, away from this dimension. Suddenly he was suffused with warmth. The revelation of the new existence overwhelmed him and he felt emotions that he had never experienced pouring into him like an empty vessel.

His mind raced to comprehend the rush of sensation, but the voice quieted him. Suddenly he understood that he was in a new place, above the domain of flesh and blood. In this realm emotions could burn like fire, or freeze like frigid oceans. All he needed to sustain him here was what had been caged inside his skull. He soared, reveling in the freedom. Here, it seemed that he would never need to put on his coat of flesh again.

* * *

"I understand, sir." Ellis replied. "I'll monitor Captain Bradley's condition and keep you up to date with his progress."

"Keep up the hourly checks on yourself as well, Lieutenant. Inform me the minute you find anything unusual. OK?" Freeman was having a bad day. He hated it when Straker left him holding the baby. Well, the big man himself would be up here soon and Alec would feel just fine about handing it all over to him.

"Roger Moonbase. I'm going to pressurize the cargo hold and move with Mark in there. Will contact you again in two hours. Ellis out."

Freeman watched the Lieutenant's image disappear from the monitor screen. It struck him that he might have seen her in the flesh for the last time.

Silently, he wished her luck.

* * *

Ellis hauled Bradley through the cargo doors and sealed them shut. She laid him out on the survival couches and started to pressurize the bay.

The cargo hold wasn't as cramped as the cockpit, but there was barely enough room for her to stand and peel off the spacesuit. She lay it by the doorway and set to work removing Bradley's. His body lay calmly as she worked his features serene. She didn't know how she was going to tell if she was suffering the same symptoms as his pulse rate and temperature were back to normal. He looked for all the world as if he was sleeping peacefully, just as he had looked lying beside her in her quarters on many long nights that they had shared.

She touched his forehead, stroking his short hair back. He seemed to flinch for an instant, a look of puzzlement flickering over his face. She looked down at his hands and watched the fingers twitch briefly then lie still. Perhaps he could still feel her near. She entwined her own fingers in his and bent down so that her face was close to his.

"Don't scare me. Come back, Mark."

* * *

Straker strode through the shuttle bay with Jackson in tow struggling to keep up. Briefcase in hand he waited for the twin doors to part and let him into the control sphere. His features were composed, betraying little of the racing thoughts underneath.

"Alec, any change in Bradley's condition?"

"Nothing so far. He's still unconscious." Freeman stood and stretched, nodding to Jackson.

"I want a reconnaissance team ready to go to the crash site in an hour. Jackson and I will be joining them. I want to handle this one personally, Alec."

Freeman didn't hide his surprise, but he held his tongue. Straker's style was to control operations from back at base. But Freeman knew there was no sense arguing with him when his mind was made up. He looked at the tension on Jackson's face and felt a little better.

"Fine."

"Colonel, could you do me a favour?" Jackson spoke up. "I would like to see the tapes of the Interceptor wreckage please, if you have them"

Damn, thought Freeman. "Ah, there wasn't anything in the transfer from the Hopper in Bradley's last transmission." He'd hoped to avoid this.

"Really?" Jackson raised his eyebrows. "That's unusual, wouldn't you say? Did you ask Captain Bradley if there was a reason for this?"

"Didn't have a chance." replied Freeman coldly. "Perhaps you'll be able to ask him yourself, Doctor."

Jackson was undeterred, "I must say Colonel, I think it might have been a rather delicate mission to send Lt. Ellis and Captain Bradley on together."

"OK," Straker changed the subject. "Let's get ready. I want ultra violet scanners and every biological monitor you've got Doctor. If there's any danger of contamination from that craft I want to know about it before it's too late. Let's go gentlemen. We have a lot of work to do."

* * *

Gay Ellis was beginning to feel claustrophobic in the cramped cargo hold. It shouldn't have worried her after her extended stays on Moonbase, and she reasoned to herself it was the lack of windows. She tightened her grip on Bradley's hand and tried to close out the feelings of suffocation.

She leant back against the cold bulkhead and shut her eyes. Coloured dots swam behind her eyelids and she felt as if her body was tipping over backwards and falling an impossible distance. She tried to look at Bradley again but her eyelids stayed shut, refusing her attempts to open them. She gasped and shook her head to clear it.

To her surprise, the swirling dots moved as she moved her head. She looked down and bright light emanated from the place where the Interceptor pilot lay. For a second, she stared at the glowing form, her mind reeling. In her vision, the head twisted around to look back at her.

"Gay," it was a voice. Inside her head, but definitely Bradley's.

"Mark, what's happening?" she replied in panic, speaking the words aloud.

"Come to me, Gay. Relax. Leave your body behind and let your mind come to me..."

She felt her thoughts slipping, trying to hold onto their anchor to her body but losing their grip. She tried to stop, claw her way back but found she could not.

* * *

"Straker to Hopper Three. Come in." A voice burst from the communications board. She snapped awake, dropping Bradley's hand and bolting upright.

"Commander!" she cried out.

"Lieutenant, what's happening?" Straker's clipped tones came back.

"I think I'm starting to experience some of the symptoms of Captain Bradley, sir." she replied shakily. "Hallucinations. It just...crept over me."

"You've got to hold on, Gay. We're passing five hundred metres off your port bow on our way to the UFO site. Dr Jackson thinks there may be a chance we will find what's causing Captain Bradley's coma. I can't risk any exposing any more personnel until we know what

we're dealing with."

"I understand sir," she said, regaining her self-control.

"Until we do that Lieutenant, you're the only one who can help him. You have to resist whatever it is that's taken hold of him for as long as you can. Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir. I think it's over, for now. I'm sure I can hold on until you come back."

"That's great, Gay. We'll be back this way in eight hours. I'm hoping we can pick you up then. Just hang on. Straker out."

"Roger, Ellis out." she settled down on the mattress. Eight hours to get through. Whatever happened, she would not close her eyes again.

Hopper One settled in a cloud of dust beside the first marker buoy fifty metres from the UFO. Straker leaned forward, his gloved hands clenched as he watched the viewport slowly clear.

It lay there torn and broken, confronting him. In all the years he had given to setting up SHADO, he had never seen a UFO first hand. He could feel the emotions that had pushed him to do this thing from the first moment he had held the photographs from Leila Carlin's cine film. Emotions that had grown jaded over the years. They were back now, and they made his clenched palms damp with sweat.

"This is Straker," he said over the intercom. "Deploy the salvage team. Form up at the second marker and wait for my orders."

Six space-suited figures made their way to the flashing ground marker. None of their eyes left the towering craft for long. Straker joined them, Jackson at his side.

"OK, now I want this done as if it were an archaeological site. The slightest action might damage the UFO and destroy our chance of finally bringing something back. Doctor Jackson and I will be the first team. Baker and Davidson, follow-up in team two. Stevens and Lee, take the other side. Everyone stay recording the whole time. Doctor, we'll follow Lt. Ellis's route inside. The tracks lead off in that direction."

Jackson re-checked the suit monitors and nodded. Straker set off, feeling the weight of the alien craft over him as each step took him closer. The tracks led him up to the edge of the gash in the ship's hull. He brought his gloved hand up tentatively, not realizing his fingers retraced the path of Ellis's, hours before, as he slid them across the strange metal. Bracing himself, he hauled himself up onto a jutting ledge and began the climb to the open maw above.

With each step it opened wider, until his faceplate lifted over the rim. The ship was much bigger than he had imagined. The interior had space enough for twenty men, but it was filled with only a single organic structure that stretched from floor to ceiling.

He helped Jackson over the edge and for the first time, the Doctor's nervousness seemed to disappear in the face of the sight before him.

"It looks like some kind of bio-mechanical organism. It's hard to tell where the tissue ends and the craft begins." Straker volunteered.

"Yes, like crustaceans on Earth. The shell serves as a carapace for the creature inside. Most of them generate it to protect themselves from predators in the ocean, but this creature doesn't look like it evolved from a marine environment. I would say that space is its natural habitat," Jackson spoke as his eyes scanned the massive surface.

"An animal that lives in a vacuum? Is that possible? That would mean that the metal superstructure is some kind of shell."

"Yes. It would be reasonable if the animal began in some primitive form living inside an asteroid rich in nickel and iron. It would have metabolized the metal and secreted it again as a

protective surface. Perhaps as it evolved it began to make machinery from the metal eventually fashioning it into a means of transportation, as we see here. Of course this is all conjecture, but the idea is fascinating."

"Let's see if we can get you some evidence of that, Doctor." Straker turned toward the gossamer walls. "Try not to put your weight against anything. I don't want to repeat Captain Bradley's accident." He pressed the walls apart like curtains and stepped through.

Lt. Davidson was the most experienced of the astronauts on the salvage team, but his years in space left him utterly unprepared for this. The craft and all its geometry was completely alien. He pressed himself through layer after layer of the transparent chambers inside the UFO only to find more chambers within.

After what seemed like an hour he finally came to the outer hull. The inside of the smooth metal was constructed in a honeycomb pattern that was at least slightly familiar from his training in aircraft construction. He bent to examining the hexagonal compartments. Most were dark and empty but seemingly at random he found one filled with miniature versions of the larger walls behind him. Others held the green viscous fluid that had been the cause of Bradley's condition. He peered into the green darkness but his torch beam revealed only the silver metal at the back of the chamber.

"Jim, come over here," came Baker's voice from his helmet speakers. He turned and worked his way through a membrane to his partner's ghostly form. Baker was kneeling in front of one of the opaque nodules at the junction of a spidery network of nerves. He held his torch beam on the surface. Davidson looked closer and found that where the light hit it he could see through slightly. The shapes inside at first made no sense until he realized the object he was looking at hung suspended upside down. His brain suddenly pieced together the information and he recognized the smooth slope of a forehead, the bridge of a nose. As he leant closer the eyelids inside the liquid womb seemed to flicker as the creature might in a dream state.

Davidson fumbled with his suit radio, switching channels awkwardly with his gloved hands. "Commander Straker, this is team two. Come in please. Commander Straker..."

"Straker here. What is it Davidson?"

"Commander, we've found something. An alien sir. Some kind of hibernation chamber." he struggled to compose himself. "And sir, it's still alive sir."

Inside the chamber the eyelids flicked open and white, iris-less eyes stared back at him.

To Be Continued