

UFO-Faint Heart, Fair Lady

by Jeff Warshaw

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I. The Long Drive Home

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Dan Archer had too much to drink at Alison's swinging party. He'd started with a beer, promising himself he wouldn't touch any hard liquor. But when buxom Gwen Milstead had offered all the men Tequila "body shots," he'd done his part, licking liquor out of her considerable cleavage. The next thing he knew, his mind was a blur. He vaguely recalled dancing topless on a table, stumbling and landing in some woman's lap. He recalled head-pounding heavy metal music and dancing with girls half his age who kissed his cheeks and called him "sweetie" and "darling." Then he passed out on Alison's couch.

"Come on Danny boy!" Pat O'Halloran, a big Irish SHADO Security Officer said, lifting the drunken man by his armpits. "Time to get you home and sobered up."

"But I was just starting to have fun!" Dan objected, staggering and stumbling as Pat led him out the door. "Why'dja go an ruin it for me?"

"You've had enough fun for one evening," Pat assured his drunken friend. "Can you stand up while I open the doors?"

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Dan warned. Then he was, all over the side of O'Halloran's brand new SHADO car.

"Jesus!" Pat said. "It'll be in the paint shop for weeks!"

He dragged Dan into the passenger's seat and strapped on his harness. Then he drove away from Alicia's isolated country pad.

"You have to learn how to handle your liquor," Pat said. "Christ! We could use your breath as a weapon. You'd have aliens dropping in their tracks!"

The car drove down the lonely country roads, some little more than ruts carved by passing lorries. Then, out of nowhere, came a sound Pat knew and dreaded. He looked in the rear view mirror and his fears were confirmed. He grabbed the intercom and dialed SHADO HQ.

"This is Lieutenant Patrick O'Halloran," he spoke into the receiver. "I'm being followed by a UFO on County Mill Road, outside Northford, two miles from the M5. UFO bearing 109 Green. Taking evasive action."

He jerked the wheel around a sharp, 180-degree turn. Gravel spat as the slim vehicle reversed course and sped under the UFO. A blast of energy sent pavement erupting as the UFO fired on him. Pat struggled to keep the car on the road as more energy bursts exploded in front of him.

"This is SkyFour to SHADO Car 9," a friendly voice called. "Closing on UFO. Will reach your position nineteen minutes, four seconds."

"Too long!" Pat hollered as the next blast hit his bonnet.

The car's engine exploded and the vehicle flipped over. Pat O'Halloran was crushed to death by the impact as the car slammed viciously down to the pavement. Amazingly, Dan Archer was only bruised. He suddenly felt arms reaching in for him. He screamed as he saw the red-suited aliens, their faces obscured by green liquid. They had something like the "Jaws of Life" with them. It tore open the side of the car. They hauled Dan out struggling. One of them hit him on the back of the neck with his rifle butt, and the world went black.

* * *

When Dan came to, he was strapped to a metal table, looking up at a panel of swirling blue, green and red lights. An alien stood over him, his inscrutable green face staring unblinking. He tore the sleeve of Dan's shirt and jabbed a long hypodermic needle into his vein. Dan saw a greenish-blue liquid go into his arm. He felt light-headed, and his heart was pounding too fast. He couldn't force his eyes to focus.

He saw another alien approaching with a small metal capsule and what could only be a scalpel. Dan tried to struggle, but his arms and legs were frozen. They felt as if they were embedded in concrete. There was no pain as the alien cut open his chest and attached the metallic capsule to his superior left ventricle. He attached a small battery to the capsule with fiber optic wires thinner than human hairs, and sealed the wound with a laser wand. The aliens sealed his chest and applied a salve that instantly regenerated the tissue. There would be no scar to indicate there'd been an operation.

Next, a metallic disk was placed on his forehead, between his eyes. Dan saw the future.

He was standing in the SHADO HQ control room, talking to a colleague, when a madman burst in. He was armed with a machine pistol and was aiming it at Virginia Lake. In a slow motion blur, Dan screamed "No!" shoved Colonel Lake aside, and felt the hot sting of several bullets piercing his chest. He clutched at his chest and fell. Paul Foster drew his sidearm and shot the intruder in the head, then ran to Dan, but it was too late. He was dying. He stared up at Virginia Lake's beautiful, panic-stricken face and tried to speak, but he could only whisper.

"Couldn't let you die, Colonel," he gasped, life leaking from his lips. "Too-- important. Too---beautiful."

He collapsed into her arms.

"You'll be all right, Dan," the blonde beauty assured him. "The doctor's on his way. Try not to exert yourself. Breathe normally."

"Too late," Dan puffed, straining to see her lovely, golden hair. "Want you to know---love you. Always have. Was---afraid to tell you."

Then he died. Virginia Lake stared at Foster, as if it was somehow his fault. She let Dan's body slip to the floor. He felt his heart slowing, slowing, slowing---stopped. The metal capsule broke open. His corpse exploded, taking out a whole bank of computers, killing Paul Foster, Virginia Lake, and five SHADO operatives. The fire was quickly suppressed, but not before it had done its damage.

"No!" Dan shouted, fighting the alien vision. "I won't let that happen. You can't make me kill my friends. You might as well kill me now, because I won't do your dirty work!"

There was a blinding pain behind his eyes, and he blacked out. When he awoke, he was beside the burning wreck of the SHADO car, and a blue SHADO jeep was just arriving. He didn't recall anything that had happened. The aliens had erased his memory.

"Stay still, Daniel!" a SHADO medic said. "You're not badly hurt. We'll have you to hospital in a few moments."

Dan nodded and passed out again.

* * *

"It doesn't make sense," Ed Straker said to Paul Foster for the fifth time. "A UFO attacks two SHADO Security Officers, killing one, then just lets itself be destroyed by SkyFour? Why?"

"No one knows," Foster replied. "All we know is that Pat O'Halloran is dead, and Dan Archer will be out of action for about ten weeks with four broken ribs."

"It's a bonehead move, Paul," Straker said. He picked up a model of one of the new multi-rocket Interceptors and played with it as he spoke. "The aliens don't make bonehead moves! There has to be a reason they spared Archer. They had plenty of time to take him before SkyFour got there. Why didn't they?"

"Maybe he has the wrong blood type," Paul commented. "Hey! I just remembered something. Dan wanted to be an Interceptor pilot."

"So?" Straker frowned, putting down the model. "Lots of people want to be Interceptor pilots. As you and I know, very few make it. It's a tough program, Paul, as it has to be."

"Yes, I agree," Foster said. "But I remember why Dan washed out. He has an irregular heartbeat. Not enough to affect his performance as a Security Officer, but enough to make him a risk outside Earth's atmosphere."

"Hmm, interesting," Straker said. "I see where you're going with this. The aliens couldn't take him, because he'd die under high g-forces, even in one of their pressure suits. So they left him and ran. But they still had time to evade SkyFour. Instead, they practically flew right into Brianna Brennan's sights. Why?"

"Give her credit, Ed," Paul smiled. "She's a fantastic shot. Best Sky-fighter pilot aside from Captain Carlin."

"I know that," Straker said, lighting up a cigar. "But I still don't like it, Paul. It stinks of a set-up. Find out everything you can about Dan Archer. I want to know what he had for breakfast ten years ago!"

"I'll get right on it," Paul said. He saluted and left Straker's office.

Straker put the cigar out and studied the reports of the incident. He smiled ironically. This was just the sort of mystery Alec Freeman would have loved. The fact that the drunk driver who'd killed him had been convicted was little consolation to Ed for the loss of his best friend.

Paul Foster did a complete background check on Daniel James Archer, from his early school days, to his stint in the RAF as a freighter pilot, to his recruitment by SHADO. He came up with a profile of Mr. Average. There was absolutely nothing that stood out about Dan Archer. He was the perfect SHADO operative. No family, no close friends, no bad habits the aliens could exploit. He was just a grounded pilot with a bad heart.

"Here it is," Paul said, handing Ed Straker his report. "But I don't think you're going to like it."

"Why?" Straker asked. In the ten weeks since the incident, there'd been only two UFO sightings. The Moonbase Interceptors had easily destroyed both UFOs. It made him suspicious whenever there was a marked fall off in UFO activity. The aliens were up to something, and it was up to him to puzzle it out.

"It's pretty dull reading, I'm afraid," Paul replied. "His medical, psychological and fitness reports are all routine. Save for his erratic heartbeat, he's in perfect health. Doesn't smoke, doesn't gamble, only drinks on rare occasions, never missed a day of work due to illness or

personal business. If I were looking for someone to promote, he'd be at the top of my list."

"There must be something extraordinary about him," Straker insisted, slamming his fist on his desk. "Damn it, Paul, why did they leave him alone? It doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe it was his heart," Paul said. "They couldn't take him, and they couldn't use him for transplants."

"Why not kill him, then?" Straker asked. "They had time to do that. They've done it before. Eliminate the witnesses. He's a SHADO Security man. Why not interrogate him, find out what he knows? Why not brainwash him, try to get secrets out of him? No. They just left him alone. Why?"

"I don't understand it myself," Paul admitted. "Maybe you should talk to Archer. Maybe he knows something I missed."

"Good idea," Straker said. "Send him in, will you?"

"On my way," Paul said. "Oh. There was one thing I noticed. It's probably nothing though, it's rather common."

"What?" Straker asked, his steely-gray eyes piercing into Foster like lasers.

"He's got a bit of a schoolboy crush on Colonel Lake," Foster said. He was smiling like a kid who knew someone's dirty little secret.

"Who doesn't?" Straker replied. "As I recall, you two were quite an item ten years back."

"Yes, well, what can I say?" Paul grinned. "The lady's got exquisite taste!"

"Get out of here!" Straker said. "Get me Archer. I've got to get to the bottom of this before it drives me nuts."

Dan Archer felt as if he'd been put through a combine harvester. Over the past ten weeks, he'd been through a battery of physical and psychological tests worse than his initial training course. He was tired, angry, irritable and ready to go back to work and forget all about the car crash. He felt guilty that he'd been unable to attend Pat O'Halloran's funeral. Dan had known Pat's parents for years, and had once dated his sister, Fiona. He felt he owed them more than a condolence card and a wreath sent in his name.

"Back from the dead, I see," Ernst Keller smiled as Dan resumed his post as Security Officer at the SHADO's Harrowgate Tracking Station.

"The rumors of my survival have been greatly exaggerated," Dan joked. "After Dr. Jackson's debriefing, I'm sure I'm dead!"

"Well, you must have pissed off someone to pull this duty," Ernst said, clapping him on the back. "Good to have you back."

No sooner had Dan set foot inside the station, ready to assume his post when someone called him to the videolink.

"Harrowgate, Archer here," he said. Paul Foster appeared on the link screen.

"Straker's sent a car for you," Foster said. "He wants to talk to you."

"Why?" Dan snapped. "What have I done now? I told you, I wasn't driving!"

"Calm down, Dan," Foster said. "He just has a few questions."

"Straker never has just a few questions!" Dan replied.

"The car will be there in twenty minutes," Foster said. "I suggest you lose the attitude, Dan. Ed's on our side, remember?"

"I'm beginning to wonder!" Archer spat, severing the link.

Moonbase-24 Hours Later

The new SID, SID 4 was equipped with special audio transducers, which could detect the presence of stealth-shielded UFOs.

"I'm sure they'll find a way around that, too," Straker had predicted. His precognition was about to be proved correct. At 18:30 hours, a stealth-shielded UFO slid past SID 4. Ten seconds later, a second UFO destroyed SID 4.

"This is Space Intruder Detector 3, Red Alert!" SID 3 said. "SID 4 has been destroyed. I have no radar traces. Suspect presence of stealth UFOs in Grid 114, Sector Green 105. Target, Moonbase! Repeat, target Moonbase!"

"Commander," Gay Ellis spoke over the Earth link. "SID 4 has been destroyed. SID 3 estimates at least two stealth UFOs, but we can't get any radar or audio traces."

"Any chance it was a meteorite strike?" Straker said.

"Negative," Commander Ellis replied. "There are residual energy traces. SID 4 was vaporized by an alien particle beam."

"Launch the new Interceptors," Straker ordered. "Tell them to activate their tachyon wave scanners."

"But sir, the technology is untested," Gay objected. "Dr. Taylor doesn't even know if they'll work. She hasn't had time to calibrate them."

"Just do it, Commander!" Straker yelled. "Test them in the field, while there's still a Moonbase left!"

"Aye, Commander," Gay Ellis said. "Red Alert, Interceptors 14, 15 and 16, immediate launch! Repeat, Interceptors 14, 15 and 16, immediate launch!"

Tamara Taylor, the inventor of the TWD device was also the pilot of Interceptor 14. She slid down the launch tube into the cockpit of her modified fighter and prepared to test her unorthodox theory. Since the UFOs traveled faster than light, they should emit "tachyons," theoretical particles that could only exist at FTL speeds. The detectors were keyed to detect the "tachyon wake" created by passing UFOs disturbing the space-time continuum.

"Time to see if this tiger has teeth!" fellow pilot Lenore Kendall smiled. Lenore was one of Tammy the Tiger's chief skeptics. She didn't believe tachyons existed, and had told Straker so on many occasions. Today she'd either be proved right, or made a fool.

"TWD activated," Taylor announced. "Interceptor 14 proceeding to Grid 114 Green."

She hit her retrorockets and headed for the projected path of the stealth- shielded UFOs. Time to see if her new technology worked.

"Confirmed, Interceptor 14," Gay Ellis spoke over the comlink. "Good luck, Dr. Taylor."

"This is Interceptor 15," Lenore Kendall called. "I am in position, but my Tachyon Wave Detector is not functioning properly. Repeat, not functioning."

"This is Interceptor 16," Denise Dawkins reported. "I am in position. TWD functioning nominally, but I am not picking up any tachyon emission."

Tammy cursed in the cockpit of her Interceptor. Only her device was properly hooked up. She would have to get both of the stealth shielded UFOs. With the new multiple rocket launcher, she could take down two targets, or even six, but it would be difficult. The TWD would hardly give her time to lock on to the first one. Suddenly, her screen flashed red, and the whole thing became academic.

"This is Colonel Taylor," she reported. "I have a tachyon pulse, Grid 115 Green. Setting missile timing sequence. Indications are only one UFO. Repeat, I am detecting only one UFO."

"Confirmed, Colonel Taylor," Joan Harrington said. "Fire when ready."

"Missile timing set," Tammy said, crossing her fingers for luck. "Launch in four, three, two, one. Fire!"

The missile streaked silently into the blackness of space.

There was a brilliant, soundless orange flash as the missile detonated.

"Detonation positive," SID 3 reported. "Radioactive debris indicates UFO destroyed. Repeat, UFO destroyed."

Howls of joy rang over Tammy's headset. She could hardly hear the orders from Moonbase, when her screen flared red a second time.

"This is Interceptor 14," she called frantically. "I have detected second UFO. Grid 114 Green. Coordinates 9 by 100 by 33 degrees right ascension, 14 degrees, 14 minutes, 12 seconds declination. Setting second missile sequence."

No sooner had the words left her lips than a bolt of blue energy struck Interceptor 14. Tammy had only a few seconds to be startled before she was vaporized by the blast.

"Interceptor 14, do you read me?" Gay Ellis called. "Tammy, do you read me?"

"This is Space Intruder Detector 3," the satellite reported. "Interceptor 14 destroyed. Interceptors 15 and 16 are out of range of UFO."

"Understood," Commander Ellis frowned. She turned to Nina Barry.

"Get me Straker," she ordered. "Priority One."

"Somewhere up there, there's a UFO we can't even see," Ed Straker explained to Captain Peter Carlin. "I don't know what to tell you, Captain. You have to get it somehow!"

"How can I shoot what I can't see?" Carlin retorted. "The damn things don't show up on radar, either, Commander."

"I don't care how you get it, Captain," Straker fumed. "Just get it!"

"I'll do my best, Sir," Carlin said, saluting. The video link went blank.

"Listen, Commander," Daniel Archer was protesting to Colonel Straker a few minutes later. "I've been all through this. I don't remember anything after the car crash."

"Damn it, Archer!" Straker said, puffing cigarette smoke at the smug Security Officer. "There must be an answer. Isn't there anything you can tell that's not in these damned reports?"

"I'm sorry, Sir," Archer said. "If there was anything, I'd tell you."

"All right, you can return to duty," Straker sighed, disappointed. "I'm sorry I dragged you in here. And I'm sorry about Pat O'Halloran. He was a fine man. A loss to us all."

"Yes," Archer smirked. "I miss him. Do send a note to his wife, will you?"

"I will," Straker promised.

Dan rose to leave, and suddenly reeled, losing his balance. Straker ran over and caught him before he fell.

"What is it, Archer?" Straker asked, helping him to his feet. He was shaking, unsteady, as if he was having an attack of labyrinthitis.

Behind his eyes, Dan Archer saw something. A dark object, plunging unseen through Earth's atmosphere. It was a UFO. A special, powerful UFO, equipped with a deadly particle cannon. Its target was---no! He wouldn't let them! He wouldn't let them harm her!

"Virginia! In danger!" he shouted, flailing his arms like a wild man. "Colonel Lake. Have to warn her. Danger. Unseen. Death from the skies!"

He felt a blinding red pain, and then he fainted.

Straker helped the unconscious man to the couch in his office and dialed SHADO Medical. Dr. Jackson's long, vulpine face appeared on the screen.

"Yes, Commander?" the Hungarian psychologist and neurosurgeon inquired, seeming distracted. "What is it?"

"Daniel Archer is in my office," Straker said. "He had some kind of panic attack. He claims Virginia Lake is in some kind of danger. He said 'Death from the skies.' He could mean that stealth shielded UFO that got past the Interceptors."

"Yes," Jackson affirmed. "Or he could be hallucinating. He hit his head pretty hard in that car crash. I'll send some men to collect him. I think you'd better let me look at him."

"I think I'll warn Colonel Lake, just to be on the safe side," Straker said.

"As you wish," Jackson said. "But I doubt she's in any real danger. She's on the most secure vessel we have, after all."

Virginia Lake was aboard the most secret SHADO project of the new millenium, SkyDiver Zero One. A whole new breed of fighter-submarine, SkyDiver Zero One incorporated her own Utronics designs into its SkyZeroOne fighter. It had silent turbines, scanning sonar and a host of jamming devices. But most importantly, SkyZeroOne was a "scramjet" fighter, meaning its supercharged ramjet engines could take it to the limit of Earth's atmosphere. It was, in essence, a one-manned Earth-to-Space plane. If the test flights were successful, SHADO would have a powerful new weapon against the aliens. They would be able to intercept UFOs before they entered the atmosphere.

SkyDiver Zero One was currently cruising at 25,000 fathoms in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Cuba. Her surface was radar reflecting, so there was no threat from Castro's submarine fleet. This was a preliminary "shake down" cruise, meant mostly as a training exercise, operating with a skeleton crew. Still, it was top secret. The navies of the world powers had been given fair warning to give her a wide berth.

Colonel Lake was in the Captain's Cabin, reviewing ocean charts when her secured video link chimed. Startled, she switched it on, straightening her hair. She was sure she looked an absolute mess. SkyDiver duty was hot, sticky and generally terrible for a girl's sense of glamour.

Ed Straker appeared on the screen, a concerned look on his face. She'd come to take those looks very seriously over the years. He'd saved her life on many occasions.

"Yes, Commander?" the blonde beauty said, smiling. Ed had told her once she had a pretty smile.

"Sorry to disturb you, Colonel," Ed said. "This may be nothing, but I thought it worth mentioning."

"What is it?" Colonel Lake asked.

"As I'm sure you know, a stealth UFO destroyed SID 4 about two hours ago," Straker said. "It also killed Tamara Taylor, one of our best Interceptor pilots."

"Taylor?" Colonel Lake said, sounding shocked. "Isn't she the one who invented the tachyon wave detector?"

"Yes," Straker frowned. "It worked, but not soon enough. Any way, we can't track the UFO because it's shielded, but it may be headed your way."

"Oh?" Colonel Lake asked, arching her eyebrows. "What makes you think that?"

"Do you know a Security man named Dan Archer?" Straker asked.

"Afraid not," Virginia replied. "Why? Who is he?"

"He was in a car crash a few weeks back," Ed said. "He had some kind of fit in my office. Jackson is checking him over now. He said you were in danger. He said 'death from the skies,' and 'unseen danger.'"

"Sounds a bit far fetched, Ed," Virginia smiled. "Shall I put the crew on Red Alert?"

"No," Straker said. "Not yet. But step up to yellow, and prepare to get the hell out of there at full speed if necessary."

"We'd better," Virginia said. "We don't have our missiles yet, and there isn't a pilot on board for SkyZeroOne."

"Yes, there is," Ed smiled. "I just hope you don't have to battle test her against a stealthed UFO, Colonel."

"I hope not either," Colonel Lake said. "I've only got 200 hours flying time in the prototype."

"Is she armed?" Straker asked.

"Yes, of course," Virginia said. "Armed, fueled and ready to go."

"Let's hope you don't have to," Ed said. "But be prepared. If we spot that UFO, you'll have splash it."

"Understood," Colonel Lake said.

The link clicked off. Who the heck was Dan Archer, and how did he know she was in danger?

"This is Colonel Lake," she said over the intercom. "Go to Yellow Alert. Prepare SkyZeroOne for immediate launch."

"But Colonel, we have no pilot," Jenna Jamieson, her Executive Officer replied.

"Yes we do," Colonel Lake said. "Me."

* * *

"Tell me what you saw," Dr. Jackson asked for the tenth time. He had Dan Archer under deep hypnosis. "Tell me what happened, after the car crash."

"Only---pieces," the man said, writhing against the gurney's arm straps. "Metal--object. Aliens. Took me from the car. Put something on my head. I saw--- Foster---shot someone. I--died. Virginia! They want to hurt her! I won't let them. I won't let them hurt her!"

He shouted and thrashed wildly until an orderly injected a sedative into his left arm.

"Daniel?" Dr. Jackson said. "I want you to remain calm. No one is going to hurt you, or Colonel Lake. Everyone is safe, do you understand me?"

"I understand," Archer replied in a weak, robotic voice. "Everyone safe."

"Now," Jackson said, making notes on his palm computer. "Tell me how you know the aliens want to hurt Colonel Lake."

"I--don't remember," he said, straining. "They did---something to me. Showed me the future. Madman in SHADO Control. Something happens. Colonel Lake, Colonel Foster, others, all dead."

"What happens?" Jackson asked. "What happens in the future?"

"Don't remember," Archer insisted. "They---took it away."

* * *

"Well?" Straker demanded of Dr. Jackson. "What happened to him?"

"You were right," Jackson admitted. "My first series of tests missed it somehow. The

aliens did take him after the car crash. He says they showed him the future, but he can only remember bits and pieces. They did something, erased his memory."

"Is it something we need to be concerned about?" Straker asked. "Could he be another psychobomb? Another programmed killer?"

"I don't think so," Jackson said. "But I can't be certain. All he knows is that they want to kill Paul Foster and Virginia Lake."

"Wonderful," Straker spat. "Any more good news for me, Doctor?"

"I'm only guessing," Jackson said. "But this man could be useful to us. It seems that when the aliens showed him the future, they unwittingly formed a link between him and Colonel Lake. Now he can tell when she's in danger, and he can act as a kind of early warning system."

"I hope you're right, Jackson," Straker said. "I just hope they didn't program him to behave exactly this way."

"Why would they do that?" Jackson said, knitting his hands. "It wouldn't make sense for them to warn us."

"To gain our trust," Straker hypothesized. "Suppose we decide he's just what you say, an early warning system. Maybe he can tell when Colonel Lake is in danger. So we put him on assignment as a kind of body guard, and then his programming forces him to kill her himself."

"It is possible," Jackson admitted. "But I don't think he could do it, even if they did program him."

"Why not?" Straker said. "Didn't Paul Foster try to kill me? Didn't Craig Collins try to kill me?"

"Yes," Jackson said. "But neither Paul Foster nor Craig Collins was in love with you."

"Foster was right?" Straker asked. "Archer is in love with Colonel Lake?"

"Well, it seems he worships her from afar," Jackson said. "He's far too shy to approach her. But I still think he is incapable of harming her."

"I want him kept on medical disability," Straker said. "I'd rather have him as far away from Virginia Lake as possible, until we get to the bottom of this."

"Where is Colonel Lake now?" Jackson asked.

"I'm afraid that's classified, Doctor, even to you," Straker said, lighting up a cigarette.

Peter Carlin completed his fifth circuit of the area Moonbase estimated might be the trajectory of the stealth UFO. He had nothing to report. He might have passed with ten feet of the darned thing, but he had no way to tell. As far as his radar, sonar and echolocation equipment told him, there was no UFO present.

He was about to report in when he got a strange, inexplicable sensation. There was something ahead of him, blocking the stars. He squinted his eyes. Probably just an after-image from staring too hard into the sun. Even with his visor down, he sometimes experienced "sun dogs." But this one wasn't going away. He frowned and put SkyOne into a dive. When the blob was in the center of his gyroscopic gunsight, he fired two missiles from his under wing rocket pods. They exploded, but there was no bright flash. Damn! He'd just wasted two expensive missiles on a hallucination.

In actuality, Peter Carlin had scored a hit, though not a direct hit. The explosion had damaged the UFO's stealth generator. The aliens struggled to keep the invisibility shield operating, but it was beginning to break down. At best, they had twenty minutes of invisibility left. It would have to be enough.

At the Harrowgate Tracking Station, Milton Hill, the man Straker had assigned to replace Dan Archer snored soundly, his head lying against a bank of monitor switches. He had been up for twelve hours the night before, and simply hadn't been able to keep his eyes open. Unfortunately, he missed the 12 PM report, which would have shown him that a UFO was headed for the South Atlantic at Mach 5.4 and decreasing.

Dan Archer jumped awake. He grabbed the nurse buzzer and pressed it frantically.

A SHADO medic, Lesterson, walked in casually.

"What's the matter, can't sleep?" Lesterson asked. "Want me to get you a sleeping pill?"

"Colonel Lake is in danger," Archer said. This time he was completely calm and collected. "You have to tell Straker. She has to launch SkyZeroOne, now! The UFO's stealth generator is damaged. She'll be able to see it in ten minutes."

"How do you know all this?" Lesterson asked. "Been dreaming?"

"Damn it, it's not a dream!" Archer said with conviction. "Get me Commander Straker. That's an order!"

"Yes, sir," Lesterson said, saluting.

"Are you sure about this, Archer?" Dr. Jackson asked as he took the man's pulse.

"Yes, I'm sure," Archer stated calmly. "Look, I don't know what those aliens did to me, but I can---see things. I can see that UFO as clearly as I can see your own face. It's heading for SkyDiver Zero One. That's its target. But Colonel Lake still has time to get it. But she must launch immediately!"

"That's good enough for me," Ed Straker said. He ran to SHADO HQ.

"Captain Ford, sound Red Alert, and get me SkyZero One, in my office, secure line," Straker ordered.

"Aye, Sir!" Ford said. "Red Alert! All SHADO installations, Red Alert!"

"Are you sure you can fly that thing?" Louis Reynolds asked Colonel Lake. "I mean, it's not fully tested yet, Colonel."

"Don't worry, Louis," Colonel Lake replied. "I promise I'll bring her back in one piece!"

"Launch Stations!" Jenna Jamieson ordered.

The submarine silently tilted upward on her powerful thrusters. Like her predecessors, SkyZeroOne used magnesium fuel for blast off.

Colonel Lake donned her helmet and slid down the launch tube into the cockpit of the modified fighter. Her heart raced as she strapped on the shoulder harness. It had been a long time since she'd actually flown a combat mission. Most SHADO personnel thought of her as cold, efficient administrator, but in truth, Virginia Lake had a woman warrior side. She let few see it, but those who did gained a new respect for the beautiful blonde with the ice-blue stare.

She powered up the thrusters and punched the separation button. The g- force slammed her back into the leather seat as the magnesium motors kicked in. The water roiled away from the nose of the little jet as it broke the surface and took to the sky.

"This is SkyZeroOne," she called over the headset. "Launch positive. Heading for intercept point."

"Roger, SkyZeroOne," a SHADO controller spoke. "Good hunting, Colonel!"

Virginia reached to her right console and switched on the Utronics tracking beams. Her radar screens immediately responded, pinpoint the UFO's position. She linked in the computer

weapons control system.

"This is SkyZeroOne," she reported. "ETA two minutes. Utronics lock positive. Height, 41,000 feet and climbing. No power drop off from the engines. All systems functioning perfectly."

She switched on the heads up display and searched the skies for the UFO. At first, all she saw were stars. Then, suddenly, she saw the spinning cone shape in the distance.

"All right, baby," she said to the jet. "Time to see what you can really do!"

She opened up the throttle and screamed forward, the UFO locked in her sights. She closed to 10,000 feet. The UFO tried to maneuver away, but she had him. She waited until it filled the gunsight before depressing the launch button. A SkyHawk 90 infrared tracking missile streaked out to meet the speeding target. Ten seconds later, the UFO exploded in a brilliant orange ball of light.

"SkyZeroOne reporting," she spoke calmly. "UFO destroyed. Returning to docking point."

* * *

"That was a fancy piece of flying, Colonel," Ed Straker said. "I take it SkyZeroOne meets your expectations?"

"Exceeds them, Commander," Virginia Lake smiled. "She made me an ace. That was my fifth UFO."

"Congratulations," Straker said. "Remind me to put you in for a DFC. But we've still got this damned stealth crisis to deal with."

"I thought you said Dr. Taylor's TWD equipment works?" Colonel Lake said, draping her leg over Ed's desk.

"It works, but Tamara Taylor is dead," Straker said. "She was the only one who really understood the principles involved."

"Seems like we need another physicist," Virginia said.

"I've already got Paul Foster looking for one," Straker said. "He's at MIT right now, interviewing scientists."

"I'm sure he'll find someone to continue Dr. Taylor's work," Colonel Lake said, smiling confidently.

"Henderson's having kittens about losing SID 4," Straker said. "He's refusing to even consider budgeting a replacement until we can give him some kind of proof positive we can crack the aliens stealth technology."

"Maybe you should let me handle Henderson," Virginia suggested. "I can take him my report on SkyDiver Zero One's perfect performance. That should loosen his purse strings a bit."

"I'll think about it, Colonel," Straker said. "Meanwhile, would you like to meet your savior?"

Virginia walked into the hospital room where Dan Archer was recovering from his panic attack.

The moment his eyes met hers, he felt a pressure in his temples, and he began to see missing parts of the nightmare. But they didn't make any sense. "Congratulations, Mr. Archer," Virginia said. "You gave me the precise lead I need to intercept that UFO."

"You destroyed it in time?" Dan asked, trying to make sense of the images flooding into his mind. Who was the madman with the rifle? Why had he broken into SHADO HQ, and why was he threatening Colonel Lake?

"Yes, I'm happy to report," she smiled. God, he loved that smile. She was so heart-breakingly lovely he wanted to cry whenever he saw her face. "You also helped me test a vital

new piece of SHADO technology, though I'm not at liberty to discuss it."

"SkyZeroOne," Dan said. "I saw it in my dreams. A new fighter. Fast, sleek. Elegant."

"Yes, well, I'm afraid you'll have to have an amnesia shot to erase that," Virginia smiled.

"Not yet," Dan said. "I'm starting to remember other things. Colonel, could you take my hand?"

"I don't understand," the icy blonde said.

"I think the aliens did something to my mind," he tried to explain. "It's linked to you, somehow. That's how I knew you were in danger, even though your mission was top secret. I had no idea where you were, I just knew you were in trouble."

"Intuition," she smiled. "Don't make it more than it is."

"No," the tall, dark-haired man smiled. "It's more. I--I have feelings for you, Colonel. Don't worry---I know it's just a silly crush. But---I think if you touched me, I could break this damned memory block they placed inside my mind." She slipped her hand into his. It was glove soft and warm. He held it tight and tried to concentrate, but he saw nothing. Then, suddenly, it all made sense. He saw all of it clearly. The assassin was an alien dupe named Bill Braddock. He was a maintenance man at the Harlington-Straker Studios. The aliens had brainwashed him one night after work, shown him SHADO HQ.

"Braddock," he said. "The killer is William Braddock. He works up in the Studios. Must have him arrested."

"What else do you see?" Virginia asked, concerned at the pained look on Archer's face.

"The aliens put something in me," he said. "They cut me open. Welded a bomb to my heart. It has a dead man's switch. It's designed to accentuate my cardiac arrhythmia. When I get excited, it will break the capsule. But it won't explode until I die."

"I see," Colonel Lake said. "And you were supposed to die saving my life."

"Yes, Colonel," he said. "I couldn't let you die. You're too important to SHADO. But in trying to save you, I killed you, and Paul Foster."

SHADO medtechs rushed Archer into surgery. Dr. Bluden checked the X-rays, showing them to Dr. Jackson.

"There it is," he said, pointing out the metal cylinder to Commander Straker.

"Can it be surgically removed?" Straker asked. "Not without triggering the explosives," Dr. Bluden said. "The bastards rigged it so that if it comes into contact with oxygen, it goes off."

"Then we have no option," Straker said. "I'll got talk to Dan Archer."

After arresting Bill Braddock, Straker had his security men place Dan Archer in quarantine. He knew what it meant.

"I'm sorry, Dan," Straker said, patting him on the shoulder. "It would have been better for you if you'd died in that car crash with Pat O'Halloran." Archer laughed.

"What's so funny?" Straker asked. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"Yes," Archer said. "Don't worry, Commander. I knew the risks when I agreed to join SHADO. I don't blame you. I'd do the same in your place. But it's funny. Ironic, I mean. The aliens couldn't use me for transplants because of my bad heart. But it's my heart they turned against me. Not for how it beats, but because of who causes it to beat."

"I don't follow you, Archer," Straker said. He had a headache it would take more than aspirin to cure. He'd lost a SID, one of his best scientists, and now a top security man, all in

one day.

"There's a saying, Commander," Archer said, pulling on his flight suit. "Faint heart never won fair lady."

"I've heard it," Straker said. "Tennyson, I believe."

"I don't know," Archer coughed. "Though I suspect it's Shakespeare. At any rate, it was my feelings for a fair lady, our dear Colonel Virginia Lake that the aliens used, or tried to use, against me. My faint heart doomed me, Commander."

"Well, they failed," Straker said. "You can take this thought with you, Mr. Archer. Your feelings for Colonel Lake actually saved her life, and many others, if what they showed you would have happened."

"I guess that's some small consolation," Archer smiled sadly. Then he laughed again. "With my condition, one kiss would probably have killed me anyway!"

"Well, let's not prolong this business," Straker said. "Come on, I'll walk you to the launch pad."

"No, Commander," Archer said, pulling on the space helmet. "If you don't mind, I'll take that last walk by myself."

"As you wish," Straker said. "We're all proud of you, Dan. You saved SHADO HQ."

"Tell Virginia, I'm sorry if I caused her any pain," Dan said. "You do know why they want her dead?"

"No, I don't," Straker admitted. "Except for the blow it would deal to SHADO."

"That's not it," Dan smiled. "I can tell you this, from what I saw in their minds. Dr. Jackson is right. The aliens, the real aliens, are living computers. They calculate everything down to precise equations. But they do have some emotions, Commander. Not like ours. When they know there is something or someone who represents a great threat to their overall plans, they experience a kind of electronic anxiety. A failure of their circuits to complete a junction. Fear, if you will. They fear you, they fear Paul Foster, and they fear Gay Ellis. But most of all, they fear Colonel Virginia Lake. She absolutely terrifies them. Sends whole colonies into short circuit."

"Why?" Straker asked. "Why should Colonel Lake inspire more fear than Colonel Foster or myself?"

"For the same reason I fell in love with her," Dan said. "Because she's Virginia Lake. Never underestimate her, Colonel. She's your greatest weapon against them."

Dan smiled, put on the helmet and walked off down the gantry to the waiting SHADO jeep.

Straker watched the Moon Mobile lift off. When the g-forces became too much, Dan's heart would stop, and the ship would explode, safely out of Earth's atmosphere. He didn't stick around to watch the explosion. Captain Ford would confirm it soon enough.

* * *

Commander Straker thought for a long time about what Dan had said, about how the aliens feared Colonel Lake more than anyone else. Then he called her into his office. He decided she was the person to deal with General Henderson after all.

The End