

UFO - The Battle Continues
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TARGET REACQUIRED Chapter 3
by Jeff Stone

"In our business, Occam's Razor is awfully blunt."
- Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoeter, first Director (1947-56) of the Majestic
Intelligence Command

MacCARRAN AIRPORT, LAS VEGAS

10-21 am GMT December 25, 1983

Robinson had hoped for a cocktail when Straker's SST had taken off from MacCarran, but all she'd got was an instruction to fasten her safety belt. Once she'd done so, the plane took off, and she was shown a syringe full of green fluid. Straker then said they were going to inject the fluid into her. Needless to say, Robinson was not keen on the idea.

The syringe, she was told in curiously-accented English by a rather sinister-looking man in yellow doctors' scrubs, contained a "mild meta-hypnotic". What the hell is a meta-hypnotic, she asked?

"It is..." the man said, "a means of filtering out certain brainwave patterns, and altering the short-term memory of the patient."

I'm glad you said 'patient' she mused dryly. *Sounds a lot better than 'drug guinea pig'.* She said that in more polite words, and got a frown for her troubles. *Wrong thing to say love.*

She had to take it, Straker said, because the location of Dreamland (*Dreamland? Sounds like a friggin' theme park*) could not be disclosed to anyone below MJ-ULTRA security clearance. Her USAF security rating was four ratings above Top Secret, but MJ-ULTRA was...apparently 37 levels higher than that. *Now THAT'S secret*, she thought.

"You're not going to kill me now, are you?" she asked, half-serious. She knew in her mind that all this was probably not a very convoluted and expensive ploy to 'rub her out', but she needed to know for sure.

Straker actually smiled at this. "No, you're quite safe. But there is a very special reason why we keep Dreamland's location a complete secret...and besides," and here his voice grew flat, "when you agreed to join our organisation, you authorised this procedure."

"How can I tell where this Dreamland of yours is inside a plane? It's not like I can get out and ask a passing motorist where I am!" She shrugged, trying in this gesture to illustrate the stupidity of such paranoia.

Straker and the other man looked at each other, then back at her. "Captain, you have to have it. So do two other people on this jet. I'm afraid there are no two ways about it," Straker told her firmly.

Robinson put up her hands. "OK, OK, sir, I surrender. It just seems...well, more than a little bit silly."

"I know; but, like I said, there's a reason we take these precautions. And there's one other reason you need the shot."

Robinson was about to ask what that other reason was, when the doctor (if he WAS a doctor) bent over her and pushed the syringe needle into her arm.

There was no pain, but she flinched at the sudden attack like the thing had been wired to the mains. "Shit!"

He withdrew the needle and straightened up; she automatically rubbed the tiny red spot where the drug had gone in and pouted ruefully.

"Now, you may experience some mild visual hallucinations shortly, but I want to assure you that- " was all the doctor said before she sat bolt upright and opened her mouth in horror. "What the f-"

"Captain!" Straker barked, and she turned to face him. "The effects are mild and in no way harmful. You'll be fine, trust me. Hell, some of my pilots say they like it. Just sit back and

relax. We'll be there in about three hours."

She sat back and relaxed and hoped nothing weird would happen. She laughed at the thought; nothing weird?! It had been non-stop weird for almost two days now. She tried to envisage herself as she was just a year ago; a brash young Falklands war vet with delusions of becoming the first female head of the RAF, whose closest personal contact to flying saucers prior to the incident over Nevada had been the Close Encounters ride at DisneyLand. Straker had told her during the ride to McCarran that one had to think on two levels, had to learn to effectively be two people, in this game. One was the public you, the other the SHADO you. And never the twain should meet...the intrusion of either into the other would make one's life (such as it was) impossible.

Celeste would have to cope with the fact that this schizophrenic existence was now reality for her. She's have to get used to lying through her teeth to people she'd never even think of deceiving in any other case; to pretend that the inevitable deaths of people she'd come to know in this job had never taken place. To live the illusion that Humanity was safe on it's planet. No wonder 80 percent of SHADO's trainees failed the entrance tests; some of them must have been turned into raving nutters, she thought to herself. She looked at her watch; ten minutes had passed since take-off. So far, she wasn't seeing Lucy in the sky with anything, let alone diamonds. Good.

A woman in a Air Force uniform brought her a coffee and a movie magazine, and she settled down to enjoy these relative comforts. Straker, off in another row, wasn't interested in talking, and the doctor had vanished aft to do the other injections. She looked out the window to her right...nothing but cloud and sun. They were at about 30,000 feet, heading...west, yes.

She looked back at her magazine and noticed the picture of Dustin Hoffman on the cover was rippling. In fact, everything on its cover was in sluggish motion. Rather startled, Robinson looked up and turned to try and see Straker. "Comm-Commander?"

Oh God, the *whole cabin* was moving. It was like gazing through thick spectacles that were the wrong prescription for your eyes, she decided after a moment of thought. *Right, I'm officially hallucinating,* she told herself. *They said it'd be mild, just keep that in mind. As long as you know you're tripping, you'll be OK. Hold on, Celeste...*

She'd taken acid twice in the 70s, before she'd joined the Air Force. She hadn't liked it much...a pint and a curry was far more her official "poison" ...but at least she'd vaguely know what to expect. Acid's wash of colours and dreamlike thought patterns weren't present here; it was more like she was locked into a bubble of normality surrounded by a chaotic, distended world. Basically, it wasn't her that was crazy, it was everything around her. Complex geometric patterns broke and coalesced in her middle vision, and blinking didn't seem to clear it. A square hole of light coming in from a window across the cabin seemed to be extending out from the frame towards her as a solid block of radiance. It was making a high-pitched warbling hum as it approached.

"Shit oh dear, I'm tripping!" she said out loud, realising a second later that she'd meant to only THINK that. She drunkenly tried to get her eyes to focus and her head to move in unison so she could apologise. There was a kind of hollow fizzing in her ears, making her own voice sound like it was muffled by cotton wool. "Sssorry, ssssir," she managed to say.

"It's alright, Captain. I was rather more vocal when I had it the first time," Straker said with a trace of humour in his voice. His words were echoing like a choir solo in St Paul's Cathedral. "By the time we reach Dreamland, you'll have recovered. Just take it easy."

She turned her headlook out the window, an act that took roughly a year in her own

private timeframe, and stared in total awe at the scene outside. The sun was no longer too bright to look at, and the clouds...the clouds were friggin' INCREDIBLE. No longer just puffy blobs of water vapour, the cloud-deck was now an immense sea of vividly 3-D fractal patterns. She could, if she wished, zero her vision in on one separate element of a cloud's form and see the intricate boiling of the molecules that made it up. What was more, the level of 'deep focus' was apparently infinite, and she felt herself going deeper and deeper into the Mandelbrot chaos that her misfiring brain was presenting her with.

"How's the coffee?"

Robinson yanked her mind back into the plane and noticed the Air Force 'stewardess' looming over her. The kindly (and no doubt genuine) smile on her face made Robinson mildly paranoid. The eagle insignia on the woman's lapel was shining like a car's headlamp.

"Uhhhh..." Robinson let her head flop forwards so she could see her coffee cup. The untouched drink was steaming slightly, the wisps of moist hot air turning into tiny ghost-snakes as they coiled upward the cabin wall and dispersed into the overhead luggage rack. "My coffee is...er, cool, thanks."

"I understand. If you need someone to talk to, just ring your bell." And with that, the woman moved off. Robinson turned her magazine, and found herself giggling softly but constantly at a decidedly unhumorous review for Terry Gilliam's Brazil. She dwelt on the stewardess's words.

"I'm glad someone understands, 'cos I'm totally out of my skull," Robinson muttered to herself presently, before realising that the very act of saying that meant she was coming down from the drug's peak. *Thank God for that. Now, drink your coffee.*

She picked up her cup and found the drink was stone cold. A glance at her watch told her that 165 minutes had passed since take-off.

Contrary to what one might think, the cockpit of the SHADO SST was hardly a hive of activity. The plane had so many automatic features that a human crew was hardly necessary; like Concorde, it could even land itself without anyone on board having to touch a joystick.

Nevertheless, the three-person cockpit team were fully occupied; the navigator was anxiously monitoring the plane's electronic radar system, the co-pilot was talking to Gatwick Airport about landing clearance on the return flight, and the pilot...well, he had on a black helmet that covered his entire head.

Straker entered the cabin and moved to the co-pilot's seat. "Have we made contact with Dreamland Control yet, Lieutenant?" The co-pilot, an African woman in her late 20s, nodded.

"Captain Shroeder is just talking to them now, sir." As soon as she had said that, Shroeder removed the helmet. He shook his blonde hair free of the shape the headgear had squashed it into, and removed two small electrode pads from his temples. Noticing Straker, he coughed self-consciously.

"We're cleared for landing. Automatic ground control threshold in...ninety seconds, Commander." His German-accented English was so clear and precise, it sounded like it had been sterilized in alcohol.

"Good." Straker paused for a moment, then softened his features. "Get any headaches from that receiver this time? Dr Jackson told me the bugs had been ironed out at last week's re-fit."

"No trouble," Shroeder replied, smiling. He held up the helmet, which had ESP-COM: MJ-ULTRA CLEARANCE REQUIRED FOR OPERATION stencilled on it in billious green

letters. "Still feels strange every time I hook up to the esp-net, though. And it takes so long just to say one sentence! I know it's a secure line, but you'd think they'd trust us enough by now to talk over the radio."

"Oh no, Captain, our friends at MAJIC don't even trust themselves. And with what they have, I'm not sure I blame them."

"Me neither, sir."

Shroeder replaced the esp-com helmet in its cabinet and raised the SST's window shields. He waited for a single double-tone signal from the flight computer, and switched on the auto-landing system. Immediately, the plane altered height and speed on its own, and line after line of arcane-looking computer symbols scrolled rapidly down the flight computer's screen.

"Dreamland Control has command, sir," Shroeder reported as per regulations. "We'll be landing in exactly four minutes."

"Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seatbelts and extinguish all pre-conceived notions about normality," the navigator mumbled, just loud enough for everyone in the cockpit to hear.

DREAMLAND

UNKNOWN LOCATION

1-01 pm GMT

The SST rolled to a stop in the enclosed hangar. Around it, red and yellow warning lights were spinning, painting Straker's aircraft with stroboscopic Technicolour. Once the plane's engines had wound down to stop, there was silence for a time, apart from the rush of massive air circulator fans and the odd metallic clank from something else in the hangar.

After a moment, the main passenger door opened and a motorised embarkation stair, controlled remotely, was driven into place. Straker was the first down, and he waited at the bottom for the welcoming party. The passenger door shut with a deafening clang; Straker caught a fleeting glimpse of a human figure behind them as they did so. No human contact unless it's totally necessary, ran MAJIC's unofficial slogan. You knew you were in a high security area when even the hangar staff had a higher clearance than you.

He glanced around the hangar, taking in the other machines scattered around. There was an SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance plane parked next to his SST, and further to the rear of the huge space were two Harrier jump-jets.

Captain Robinson will be right at home, he thought to himself, before making way for Shroeder and the rest of the aircrew at the foot of the stair.

"They love this," Shroeder remarked to no-one in particular. "Making us wait, I mean. It's like Elvis is going to come through that door any second now, and we're expected to cheer." He gestured to the interior main door of the hangar, which were fully ten metres wide and twice that high. The MAJIC emblem (a black shield containing a silver stylised globe, with a gold eagle clutching a broadsword in its claws above it) was painted on the doors, as it was in smaller form on virtually every wall surface.

"Elvis is dead, Kurt," the co-pilot replied absently.

"No; ten to one, they've got him here, doing concerts for the EBEs."

Robinson and the 'stewardess' emerged next, followed a moment later by Dr Jackson and the rest of the passengers. Robinson was still feeling very light-headed, and she couldn't remember why she felt like this. She recalled something about coffee...coffee and clouds. That made no sense at all.

Her eyes lit eagerly upon the comfortingly familiar shape of the Harriers sharing this metal bird's nest. "The AV-8F," she murmured. "I didn't think that was in service yet." She took in the various new features of the VTOL fighter-bomber, details that only a veteran pilot and confirmed plane-spotter like her would find fascinating.

"They aren't in service," Starker answered. "You see before you the only two production examples in existence so far. For some reason, the USAF considers nothing fit for front-line service until some UFO nut brings out a model kit of it." Robinson and Shroeder snorted at this, recalling last year when a UK model company had brought out plastic scale model kits of the SR-82 Aurora SuperStealth...and of Sky One. Robinson had seen an Aurora parked at RAF Eglinton just after the Falklands War...she'd not been able to look at it closely, but even a vague glimpse showed her that whomever had supplied the design for the model had an authentic blueprint. Immediately after the kit had come out, the USAF had huffily admitted the existence of the plane...but not before suing the model company out of existence. The rather inaccurate but still recognizable Sky One model was listed on the kit box as 'The SR-79A Skybolt...America's Top-Secret Stealth Plane!!', and a frenzied blurb written by the MUFON

member who'd provided the blueprint went on at length about the secret spy missions over Russia and China both it and the SR-82 had made. In fact, the one thing Sky One did that the blurb didn't mention was what it *actually* did. The irony was priceless to anyone in SHADO.

Finally, there came an end to the awkward standing about. An airlock next to the inner hangar doors slid open and two people emerged. Both were wearing one piece blue-grey jumpsuits and dark sunglasses. They strode unhurriedly towards Straker and his party, their soft-soled black boots making almost no sound on the painted metal decking. Presently, the female member of the duo came to a halt in front of Straker. Her hair, flaming auburn in colour, lay decorously on her broad shoulders, and provided the only real touch of colour to a face that was just this side of Dracula pale. Slender, dark eyebrows arc'd gracefully over her glasses, topping a finely featured, classically beautiful face. Someone had once said she looked like a cross between Lynda Carter and Susan Sarandon, but no-one had the nerve to actually tell HER.

She was either not wearing lipstick, or else using a skin-tone brand; Robinson, in noticing this minor detail, seemed to recall there being a regulation against the use of lipstick by female personnel in the US Armed Forces...

God, you're in the bowels of the world's biggest conspiracy, and you're thinking about lipstick she then told herself sternly.

There was a second of silence, then she smiled. "Commander Straker," she declared languorously, almost as if saying the words was something she'd rather put off until tomorrow. "An all-too-rare honour. You don't visit us nearly as often as you should." Robinson tried to place the woman's accent...it sounded, well, Mid-Atlantic. She briefly wondered if that meant Atlantis; I mean, why not Atlantis as well as aliens?

"Well, Colonel Romanov," Straker replied, in a way that told Robinson that that was her introduction to the woman; Romanov had eyes only for him. "As you know, I've been somewhat busy lately."

"But of course. Your aliens still giving you trouble?"

"You know they are. You spy on us more than we do you."

They smiled at each other. "Who watches the watchers, no?"

Romanov's companion, a rather heavy-set US Marine type with a buzzcut hairdo and looks right off a GI Joe action figure box, moved forward to take Straker's hand. They shook, for a heartbeat, then broke off.

"Commander," he said firmly and rather too parade-ground politely. "Pleasure as always to have you here. Good flight, sir?"

"Yes, thank you, Tyler. How are the kids?"

"Sue-Ann's just gotten into Weston Elementary, sir. Teachers say she's a bright little girl."

"Given her parents, I wouldn't expect anything else."

"Thank you, sir."

Robinson rolled her eyes skyward at this rather sad attempt at banter between two men whose lives were their jobs.

Romanov squared her shoulders. "Shall we go? Jay-ROD has just returned from the back of beyond, and is dying to meet your new recruit." With this, she and Tyler turned and headed for the airlock. Straker and his party followed.

Robinson frowned. **Who or WHAT the hell is Jay-ROD?** she wondered.

Jay-ROD, as it turned out, was a bona fide, 100%, Grade-A, dyed-in-the wool alien.

Robinson and Straker stood in the Blue Room, facing it. Robinson was completely awe-struck; Straker just stood there, looking at the alien with mild expectation.

The extraterrestrial looked...well, it looked *human*. Robinson had had no idea what to expect when she'd been told that Jay-ROD was a being from another planet, but she'd expected more than what she got. The creature was roughly five feet tall, hairless, bipedal, with ghostly white skin. Its body was clothed from throat to feet in a skin-tight silver outfit that seemed to have been sprayed directly onto the being's flesh. The bald skull was large, but not much larger than a human one; very dark almond-shaped eyes, slanted upwards at the corners, presided over a mere bump of a nose and a tightly pursed, almost lipless mouth. Its fingers were slender but normal looking, and only the fact that each hand had six fingers jarred from the status quo.

In short, Jay-ROD looked like a bald, Asian David Bowie with a bad nose-job in a silver aerobics suit.

"What happens now, sir?" Robinson said sotto voce out of the corner of her mouth. She couldn't take her eyes off the alien...the ALIEN...that was sitting not five feet in front of her.

"Jay-ROD is sizing you up," Straker replied. "Just making absolutely sure that you're the right woman for the job."

"Great; my first job interview in eight years, and it's with a person from another planet." Straker smiled thinly, then gestured at the alien.

"Here we go. Be polite, Captain."

"Naturally, sir."

Jay-ROD reached out a hand to one of the three glass sculptures on the small desk before it. There was a cylinder, a pyramid and a sphere. For the life of her, Robinson couldn't figure out how the sphere was just poised there motionless, and not rolling all over the desk. Was it stuck down somehow?

The object the creature touched was the pyramid, and as its fingers made contact, the transparent object became instantly opaque with blinding white light. Robinson and Straker both flinched and shielded their eyes, but the glare lasted only a second before the pyramid returned to its clear state.

Then Robinson heard a voice in her head.

Kurt Shroeder sipped his coffee and glanced at a folder of UFO photos he'd found lying on a table in the waiting room. Most of the pictures were fuzzy, indistinct...Shroeder often wondered if camera companies built some kind of automatic blurring device into their products that made them take crappy pictures whenever a flying saucer came near them...but some were astoundingly sharp and detailed. One in particular took his fancy; a black and white image of a classic domed-and-portholed saucer, with three spheres attached in a triangular formation to its convex underside. The photo was stamped GENUINE in bold red letters at the bottom, and Shroeder's eyes gravitated to the biographical data. The picture had been taken in August 1947 by...George Adamski.

Shroeder laughed out loud.

"He was serious!" he chuckled. "Mein Gott..."

His co-pilot looked up from his meal. "What's so funny, Kurt?"

"Nothing, nothing. Finish your...your...what IS it that thing you're eating?"

A shrug. "I dunno...tastes like pork."

"Pork isn't supposed to be orange, is it?"

"No; maybe it's space pork."

"I'm not sure I want to know, do you?"

With this, Kurt glanced up at the clock. It had only been twenty minutes since Straker and Robinson had gone into the Blue Room. He wondered what they could possibly be talking about; maybe it had something to do with...

A klaxon burst into life, making everyone in the room jump. Shroeder and his co-pilot stared at each other.

"Oh no," Shroeder whispered. "Not *now*?..."

Actually, Jay-ROD's voice *wasn't* a voice per se, but rather a series of thoughts that replicated exactly the soundless 'noise' of one's inner monologue. Robinson didn't HEAR the words; she *knew* them. It was a sensation impossible to describe in words, needless to say.

#You have many questions, Captain Robinson. Allow me to answer them.#

The words were toneless, but not sterile. Jay-ROD spoke softly and carefully with the kind of lazy metre that reminded Robinson of the way her constantly stoned ex-flatmate in Croydon had talked after one too many tokes. Along with the words, she experienced a feeling of utter benevolence and calm; clearly the alien was empathic as well as telepathic.

#Telepathy is such a cold term,# said Jay-ROD, interrupting her thoughts. #My people prefer to call the process Joining.# Robinson frowned.

"You're reading my thoughts as well? Nice of you to ask permission."

"Captain!" Straker barked.

#No, Commander. She is right. Forgive me. Your thought patterns are not as complex as mine, and it is very easy for me to read them unless you actively block it. I give you my word, your private thoughts remain your own; it would require a much stronger Join for me to read them.#

"Well, OK...anyway, what I would like to know is...why all this? And why me?" She spread her arms. "I'm just a pilot. I see one UFO, and suddenly I'm a member of an ultra-secret military project who gets to chat with a man from outer space. What's so great about me that I get all this special treatment?"

#Commander Straker's organisation has had its eye on you, so to speak, for quite some time. Your skill with piloting jets of various types is an obvious asset to an organisation like SHADO. And there are other reasons; your high intelligence, your excellent security record. Had you not shot down the craft over Nevada, you would still have been offered a position in SHADO before too long.#

Straker was a silent observer to this dialogue, though in fact he wasn't 'listening' to much of it. Rather, his thoughts were consumed with the fact that Jay-ROD was here at all. The Reticulans, he had been told, had broken off contact with MAJIC four years ago and in that time hadn't even deigned to contact anyone on Earth. Now, without any warning, they were back, and no-one was batting an eyelid. Straker wondered if the aliens had ever *been* gone, and MAJIC had just lied through it's teeth to ISC when asked about the matter. Why would they conceal ongoing Reticulan contact from the only other organisation in the Western world that dealt with alien beings? It made no sense, but then very little MAJIC did *did* make sense. By comparison, SHADO's problems were models of simplicity.

"OK, next question. You're not the aliens SHADO are fighting, correct?" Robinson asked, getting into the swing of this strange conversation.

#Correct. My species hails from the star system you call Zeta Reticuli; the hostile beings

originate in the Coma Berenices group.#

"Well then, if you've got the high tech you MUST have, why are you not helping us stop these bastards?"

Straker nodded ruefully; everyone asked that. Jay-ROD must be getting bored of having to explain. The alien betrayed no sense of any emotion on its pallid face; it just sat there, its hand resting on the pyramid, staring right at Captain Robinson.

#My people are what you would term scientists. Our culture evolved without the concept of violence, and we cannot employ it in any case. Our completely undetected...until 1947...surveillance of the planet Earth over the past two centuries has shown us that your species is highly aggressive; a trait that your recent quantum leap in technological prowess has not helped curb to any great degree. We cannot announce our presence to your world, as full-scale contact and co-existence would expose my people to a way of thinking that would unravel millennia of our culture. We cannot and will not interfere with your natural development in any way.#

"Other than spying on us and abducting us."

#We do not abduct your people. That is a product of your media. Aside from the fact that our code of ethics forbids such a violation of personal freedom, your species is, quite frankly, not worthy of in-depth study. As a race, homo sapiens is remarkably unexceptional.#

"I don't know whether to be happy or insulted," Robinson muttered.

#No offence was intended. I was merely answering your question.#

"If we could move on, Jay-ROD...?" Straker prodded quietly.

#Of course, Commander.# The alien blinked for the first time in what must have been ten minutes, and shifted slightly in its chair. It lifted its hand off the pyramid and took the sphere off the desk. Like the pyramid, it glowed brightly for a second, then faded... to reveal a wondrous sight.

Somehow, the sphere was hovering in mid-air, projecting a free-standing holographic image that filled the room. Then the sphere faded from view, swallowed up by the rapid growth and opacity of the image it was showing. Robinson was suddenly standing in the blackness of space, watching the surface of the Earth scroll past beneath her.

Then, they were moving away from the planet and heading out into the depths of the Solar System; the Earth and Luna dwindled to points of light, and Mars grew larger and swept past. The speed of travel kept increasing, and Robinson had to fight down a very powerful feeling of motion sickness. Next it was the turn of the Asteroid Belt, the gas and ice giants, Pluto...and finally the Grand Tour ended in a vast area of floating rocks and ice.

#This is the Oort Cloud,# the invisible Jay-ROD stated from behind the image. #A vast irregular mass of frozen liquid and asteroidal material, located in an annulo-spherical orbit around your star at a distance of some 3 trillion kilometres. It is the graveyard of your system, composed entirely as it is from debris left over from its creation and formation.# Robinson wasn't really listening; she was still thunderstruck by the realism and perception of depth that the holographic image possessed. She wasn't just watching the Oort Cloud, she was *there*. She reached out a hand to touch an 'icestroid'; naturally, her fingers went straight through it. But it was so REAL!

#The Cloud,# Jay-ROD continued, #is also the birthplace of the phenomena you call comets, and it is from here that ice and rock clusters travel sunward and slowly vaporise.#

"Forming comets, yeah, I know," Robinson said gently. "I'm not totally out of touch with astronomy. I watched The Sky At Night religiously when I was a kid."

"Bully for you, Captain," Straker commented drily, shutting her up.

#Recently, however, the Cloud has become host to a new group of space travellers.#
Jay-ROD paused.

With all the dramatic flair of a sci-fi movie, a UFO hove into view from behind a large icesteroid. It was identical to the rounded, spinning pyramid that Robinson had engaged over the desert. Just the sight of it made some of the ice from the Cloud seem to coalesce on her spine.

#This image was inadvertently recorded twenty-six solar days ago by one of our remote survey drones. The drone was taking core samples from an icesteroid, and captured the image when its anti-collision sensors detected an artificial construction. Over the next five days, the drone observed a further nine craft passing through, or motionless within, the Cloud. At this point, the drone's power supply exhausted.#

"They're using the Cloud as a base, of course," said Robinson.

"Precisely," Straker replied. "We've wondered ever since SHADO was formed how it was that the Aliens' ships were able to get so close to Earth's solar system without being detected. And now, thanks to Jay-ROD's people, we have the probable answer. If the Cloud is indeed a base, or just a good way to hide from our detectors, we need to get out there and find out what's happening."

"And I have something to do with this?"

"Yes, you're going to be the person who gets a ship out there. We need a pilot. You up for it?"

Robinson nearly choked. "You need to ask?"

#One of your men is coming, Commander,# Jay-ROD announced. And sure enough, Shroeder entered the Blue Room and jogged up to Straker.

He glanced at the alien for a second, and gulped.

"Er...hello," he said to Jay-ROD.

#Hello, Mr Shroeder. You have a message?#

"Yes, sir...er, I mean, yes. For the Commander." Shroeder, usually a model of Teutonic sobriety, was clearly flustered; it must be bad news, Straker noted with utter dread.

"Well?"

"SID has just reported ten...ah..." The pilot was visibly in shock, Robinson noted; he was really, genuinely, scared witless. "Ah, ten high-speed targets approaching Earth at Sol 8. They're all made of the same stuff that bullet-proof UFO was made of, according to the new spectroscan package we fitted to MoonBase's laser telescope. It's begun, sir."

"You don't say," Straker snapped. "I am invoking Liberty Bell-1. SHADO is now on Full Invasion Alert. We'll be leaving here for HQ in five minutes, Captain."

"Yes, sir," Shroeder ran off as fast as was proper. Straker pondered for a moment, then wandered closer to Jay-ROD.

"I must go. You will not help us?" This was a question he'd asked the alien and others like it for the past nine years. Only he and a few other members of SHADO knew the Reticulans were here on Earth, in constant contact with MAJIC. A secret that kept itself, because what it implied, what it meant, was just too crazy to be true.

#You know we cannot. We can only advise. We have gone outside our remit already by showing you the drone probe images.#

"Yes, I understand." With this, the Commander turned to look at Robinson. "Looks like you may not get the chance to go to the Oort Cloud now. It's happened, and we aren't ready."

"What's bloody happened? What's begun?!" Robinson spluttered, throwing her hands up. "I don't understand! What is this madhouse?"

Straker's eyes flared, but then the anger died. He realised how utterly bemused and frightened she must be. No-one could be expected to take all this in just one day. He put a hand on Robinson's shoulder and sighed tiredly. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, the all-out assault we've feared for so long has started. The weapons we have at our disposal almost certainly can't handle ten of these new UFOs. The Aliens have finally decided to settle this once and for all."

Robinson felt her insides freeze solid; she wanted to scream from the tension. This nightmare was real.

"So...so what are we going to do?" she asked timidly. Straker just stared. His eyes were *so* weary, she noted.

"We, Captain, are going to fight. the SST."

DEEP SPACE, BETWEEN URANUS AND SATURN

1-36 pm GMT

WatchDog 41, the most distant of SHADO's automatic UFO detection probes, turned silently in space to follow the ten targets swiftly approaching it. Its main electronic camera locked on to the lead UFO.

Computers aboard the WatchDog dispassionately calculated velocity and approach vectors and then downloaded the result to SID.

Thirteen seconds after it had done so, the lead UFO opened fire on the probe. A beam of coruscating blue energy leapt across the void and slammed into the defenceless WatchDog, utterly destroying it.

The tiny fireball swiftly faded into the deep black as the UFO armada swept on past. Billions of kilometres ahead lay their destination, still just a pinprick of brilliance among millions. A small blue-green world, swimming in infinity, 99% of its inhabitants blissfully unaware of the fate rushing to meet it at a speed far greater than that of light.

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