

Hunches

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Chapter 1

The phone buzzed on Freeman's desk and he glanced to see which line was blinking. He picked up the cordless receiver.

"Mr. Freeman," It was Miss Ealand in the top-side office of Harlington-Straker. "Mr. Straker for you on line one."

"Thank you, Miss Ealand." Freeman turned his chair sidelong to his desk and leaned back in his seat. He touched the button to change lines. "Ed, its good to hear from you."

"Alec," It was Straker's unmistakable voice. "How soon can you be in New York?"

"Well, not for quite a while. Maybe a month or more." Freeman leisurely glanced around the room and at the holoscreen on the wall behind his desk. "Colonel Harrington's project is about to be executed and I really should..."

"Alec, someone has called a special meeting of selected delegates to the UN Security Council."

"So? What does that have to do with us?"

Straker lowered his voice to an ominously threatening tone and explained, "They want to discontinue the SkyDivers, Alec. All of them."

Freeman brought himself out of the chair and to his feet, "WHAT!?"

"How soon can you be in New York?"

"By close of business today."

* * *

Gay Bradley slept next to her husband. She was curled up into a ball near the edge of the bed. Quickly, her foot moved but then stopped. Her hand shook and her little arm quivered. Mark was awake instantly and rolled toward her as she came out the nightmare clawing at the night and taking a breath to scream.

He cuddled her gently into his chest and she nestled in his arms.

"Another nightmare?" He whispered softly.

She nodded but said nothing.

"I caught you this time. Before you could wake up Cara."

Gay nodded again and took a long breath of air.

"Its over, Darling. You're safe now." He spoke slowly and soothingly as his hand stroked up and down her bare back.

She relaxed her whipcord muscles and felt herself settle into him. Slowly, she pulled

herself up to his shoulder.

"Was it the same dream?" He asked.

She nodded.

He waited for a moment before continuing, "How could anything go wrong, Baby? You're going with Cara to Europe. She won't be alone, not for a moment."

Gay was silent as she slipped out of his arms and climbed out of the bed. "I'm going to do something about these nightmares."

She went downstairs and to the opposite side of the house from Cara's room. She quietly picked up the phone and dialed a number. The phone rang on the other end.

"Harlington-Straker Studios, how may I direct your call?"

Gay didn't recognize the receptionist's voice. "This is Gay Bradley calling for Alec Freeman."

"Mr. Freeman isn't in his office right now Mrs. Bradley, he is in the basement."

"Patch me through."

"Just a minute Mrs. Bradley."

A few seconds later, Gay heard the characteristic tone of the comm-link ringing in the Commander's office of SHADO London.

"Yes Gay," It wasn't Freeman, it was Colonel Harrington.

"Joan, is Alec nearby?"

"No, he's in a meeting right now. Can I help?"

"I hope so." Gay took a long breath and lowered her voice, "My daughter and I leave for Europe in the morning for her modeling auditions. I want security."

"For what purpose, Gay?"

"Call it Mother's Worry."

"Our sixth sense?"

"Yes, Joan. A Moonbase hunch."

Harrington smiled, "What do you want?"

"I want a SHADO-issue car, fully equipped for long term field recon, waiting for us in Paris, and an operative to tail myself and my daughter."

"You've got it. Anything else?"

"I'll call you tomorrow and give you the details of the trip. Can you spare an operative long enough for a drive through France, between Paris and Milan, Italy? She'll need to stay with us during the competitions."

"Sure."

"Thank you Joan, you're a doll. I have to go now before I wake up my daughter. I'll call in the morning."

"Of course, I'll be waiting."

Joan disconnected the line as an operative strolled through the doorway with a clipboard in her hand. Colonel Harrington turned and looked at her.

Lisa Carpenter stopped and curtly nodded at Harrington. The Colonel stepped aside to allow her access to Freeman's desk. Lisa came forward and dropped the clipboard on the Commander's chair and turned to leave, noticing that Harrington was eyeing her figure.

"Colonel," Lisa asked, "Can I help you?"

"Carpenter, have you ever entered a beauty contest?"

"Ummmmm, yes ma'ma. When I was younger."

"Did you win?"

"Second place."

"How old are you, Carpenter?"

"Twenty."

"Good, you'll do nicely."

"Ma'am?"

"You're going to Paris and Milan to compete in modeling contests. You'll be security for Captain Bradley and her daughter."

Lisa's eyes brightened and she smiled.

Harrington realized Carpenter's enthusiasm, "This is your first mission, isn't it?"

Lisa nodded her head.

"Well, it will probably be uneventful, so I wouldn't get your hopes up if I were you. You'll just be a contestant in an audition, and don't forget to refuse the contract if you win."

* * *

It was another cloudy day in London. Alec strolled between Studios A and C when Joan turned the corner while chatting with two women in Victorian dresses. The ladies said their goodbyes and Joan joined Alec.

"I understand that you ordered a car and a guard for Captain Bradley's daughter." He said matter of factly, without looking at her.

"Yes." She answered matter of factly, without looking at him.

"Joan, we can't give a tail everytime one of our people goes on holiday with their kid..."

"I didn't know that I needed your permission before I make decisions." She said as she waved to a friendly studio worker who didn't know about SHADO underneath.

"You don't, and I'm not implying that you do." He answered, "But at least tell me why you ordered it. You are my Second in Command of SHADO London, I've never known you to make frivolous decisions."

"Thank you Commander." She turned to face him and explained, "I spent several years on the Moon with Gay Ellis. While we were up there together, we discovered that all the Moonbase girls develop a sixth sense, hunches that come true, you know what I mean."

"Yes." Freeman expounded, "Its the reason that Ed Straker continually staffed Moonbase Command with women."

"He was right." She told him, "And last night Gay called and told me that she had a hunch. She wanted a guard and I gave her one. Besides, it'll be Carpenter's first mission. Builds character."

"And if anything happens? Lisa is pretty young and inexperienced."

Joan smiled brightly, "I remember in 1980 when a small group of young and inexperienced girls racked up a pretty good kill rate on Moonbase---and we did it in those awfully uncomfortable anti-static wigs..."

Alec chewed on a smile and looked at the ground. "Alright, alright, Carpenter goes to Paris on a hunch."

They walked together for a few minutes longer when they were stopped by a construction chief who needed Freeman's approval for a ew stage. The two men talked briefly while Joan waited. Presently, Alec returned to her and they began strolling back toward his office.

"Have you finalized your plans?" He asked her.

"Yes." She answered.

"Okay, I'm leaving for New York in a couple of hours. Give me something else to worry about on the flight."

She correctly interpreted his words as a friendly way to ask about her project. She motioned with her hands as she explained softly, "The premise is quite simple. A Ufoe makes a run for Earth and the Interceptors lift off. Two of the bombs herd the Spinner into the burst radius of the last bomb, which isn't a nuke but a neutron. With luck, we'll kill the pilot and leave the Ufoe intact and free for the taking."

"What about the characteristic self-destruct devices of the Typical Class vehicles?"

"We'll leave it in space for a day or two, just to make sure. Then we'll tow it to the Moon and land it. We'll work on it there. We'll use robotics to probe the Spinner, and send in volunteers if everything goes well."

"Very good Colonel." Alec complimented her, "I will be looking forward to your results while I'm in New York."

She stopped walking, "How do you know that Ufoes will fly in while you're in New York?"

"Just a hunch." He smiled.

Chapter 2

Gay and Cara stepped off the airliner in Paris and made their way to the baggage claim.

"Hey Mom," Cara suggested, "I'll get the bags, you get the car."

"And leave you alone with an airport full of French boys, forget it!" Gay smiled and purposely bumped her daughter with her wide hip.

The two ladies received their luggage and walked the long way across the terminal to the Shadair desk. Cara seemed a little perplexed until the attendant handed her mother the keys to a car. Gay smiled and thanked the young man, who couldn't help but stare at her in awe. Cara knew that her mother was beautiful, and it was fun to watch the faces of men as Mom walked past them.

There was another young woman at the Shadair desk with them. She was strikingly beautiful, long blonde hair, perfect figure, and china blue eyes. She also picked up a set of keys and thanked the attendant. Then she turned and smiled at Gay, and scampered off toward the parking lot with a single bag slung over her shoulder. Cara had a sinking feeling in her stomach that she had just met another model who would compete against her for the Gucci contract.

"Come on, kiddo." Gay said playfully, "Let's go get our car."

The sun shone down upon them as they exited the building into the concrete lot. Gay turned immediately and seemed to know exactly where she was going. Cara followed but stopped at the moment she saw their...car.

It looked like a wide and rounded DeLorean, complete with the gull-wing doors. It was a very dark shade of hunter green, with windows tinted completely black.

"Radical, Mom!"

Gay bounced to the driver's side while thinking 'If you only knew how radical this car really is..!' She pressed the switch on the keychain and the doors opened by themselves.

The two of them dumped their luggage into the trunk, and climbed in. The inside of the vehicle looked like a Lotus Espirit, with leather seats, adjustable climate controls, a cellular phone, the works. Cara instantly noticed the surge of energy that rocked the car when her mother started the engine.

"Hey Mom, punch it!"

"Cara," Gay chided, "Its a rental!"

* * *

He ran his fingers through her hair and sprayed again. Cara melted each time he spoke to her with his heavy French accent.

"You have such precious hair...the things I could do with your silky hair...you are so beautiful..."

Cara was nervous. More frightened than she had ever been in her life. It helped a lot that her mother was with her. Gay never left Cara during the preparation before the show. Other mothers had left their daughters alone with the makeup artists, but not Gay. Cara was glad of that as the butterflies bounced off the inside of her little stomach.

The sexy voice of the hair stylist helped too.

"There now." He told her, "Turn this way, Amore."

Cara looked at him and he took her little face in his hands, "Now then..." He turned her head to the right, "Yes...yes..." He turned her head to the left, "Magnifique."

Cara smiled. With her face in his hands, she could do little else.

"You are so precious." He told her and then looked at Gay, "She is so precious." He took

his hands away from her while still addressing Gay, "She will win. I have a hunch that she will win and my hunches are never wrong."

Cara popped out of the chair and looked at herself in the mirror that clad the whole wall of this room. She glanced once at her mother before darting to the other side of the room where the costumes and clothing were located.

The stylist was wiping off his hands with a towel when Gay leaned over and said, "Thank you, she needs all the support she can get."

"Ma'dam," He smiled, "I meant what I said. I have been in this business for a long time and I know what the designers are looking for. She will win one of the contracts. Have no fear. Jean-Michelle is never wrong."

He watched Gay as she walked away from him, thinking: 'And so would you, Ma'dam, if you competed as well.'

* * *

Gay smiled and followed Cara to the clothing rack. Another attendant was dressing Cara. They gave her a short black silk dress with white hems. Her shoes were black pumps. An older woman with grey hair asked Cara to try on a white blazer that resembled the unconstructed jackets of the eighties. It didn't look quite right and hid most of Cara's figure, and so they placed it back on the rack. Finally, they wrapped a black scarf with white polka dots around Cara's little throat and tied it off. The scarf trailed long and slender down her back, following her long dark silky hair.

The older woman handed Cara a large bag-like purse made of black patent leather, but it was a little large for her. She put it back and produced a smaller version of it. Cara reached out for it but it dropped accidentally. Out of nowhere, a tall woman with long blonde hair appeared and retrieved the purse.

Handing it back to Cara, the young woman warmly said, "Hi, my name is Lisa Carpenter. What is your's?"

"I'm Cara Bradley, didn't we meet at the airport today?"

Lisa's bright blue eyes widened in mock surprise, "Yes! I remember you! You were at the Shadair desk!"

Cara nodded very much like her mother would in the same situation.

Lisa was trying to pull herself into a swimsuit that was constructed for a Barbie Doll, "I can't believe they really want us to wear this!"

"I know, but they have cute stylists."

Lisa looked in the direction that Cara was motioning and saw the Frenchman. She pursed her lips and looked back at Cara, "Wow."

Cara laughed openly.

Gay arrived as Lisa finally decided to trash the swimsuit.

"Hi, I'm Cara's mother. Gay Bradley."

"Lisa Carpenter. Pleased to meet you."

Cara had the strangest feeling that her mother and Lisa greeted each other as if they had known one another from an earlier time.

"Are you here by yourself?" Gay asked.

"Yes, and it is such a pain with no one to help me. I'm not even finished either, from here I have another audition in Milan."

Cara's head snapped around. Lisa saw the gesture and said, "I guess I'll see you in Milan too!"

Gay nodded, "Have you been through this before?"

"Oh yeah." she lied, "This is old stuff."

"Maybe you could give us a few pointers before you go on?"

"Sure!"

"When you have some time, meet me out in the audience while Cara is performing."

* * *

Even though the lights were blinding, Cara could still see her path down the runway. She walked mockingly like an adult, putting each step in front of the other with an exaggerated hip movement. She strolled with a carefree aura toward the judges, then she twirled and walked away from them with an arrogant facial expression that said 'If you didn't see me, its your loss.' The judges picked up on this attitude and loved it. Cara could hear the audience cheer her as she made her way back up the runway. One last time she twirled, and something caught her eye. For a moment, the cameras weren't snapping photos and she was partially shielded from the spotlights, she saw Lisa kneeling down beside her mother in the front row of the audience. The two women shook hands, and Lisa made her way backstage for her own run later in the show.

* * *

"Lisa," Gay asked her, "How did you come to join SHADO?"

"My mother got me involved." She answered.

Gay looked puzzled, "I've been in Shado since the beginning," she shook her head from side to side, "But I don't recall anyone else called Carpenter."

Lisa looked at the floor for a moment and then back to Gay, "My parents divorced when I was a little girl. Mom and I were on holiday in Sweden just after my graduation. We were staying in a country cottage when early one morning we heard a strange sound. We knew that we were the only people for miles, so we went outside to see what it was. Mom was grabbed immediately and something hit me from the side. I wasn't knocked unconscious, but I was bleeding badly and couldn't get off the porch to help her. I saw two men in red spacesuits drag my mother into a golden saucer, and then the saucer began to spin. It took off with my mom inside, and there was nothing I could do about it."

Lisa had to pause for a moment before going on, "I had just pulled myself up to the railing of the cottage when a lot of people came out of the woods and took me to a hospital. I met Alec Freeman and Paul Foster in the hospital room. They asked me to consider joining SHADO. After a couple of weeks, I decided to join."

"I'm sorry about your mother." Gay told her with genuine sympathy, "Is that the last you ever heard?"

"Yeah. Six months after joining SHADO, I checked the Moonbase log for the day that Mom was abducted. The Interceptors missed the Spinner during its escape. It got away."

"I'm so sorry, Lisa."

"Sometimes I lay in bed and wonder how Mom would feel right now if she had been on the porch and watched the spaceship lift off with me inside."

Gay remained quiet for a few seconds before asking, "Are you alright, Lisa?"

"Oh yeah." She nodded, "Dr. Jackson and I still have counseling sessions every once in a while, but I think I'm fine. SHADO is taking very good care of me."

Gay nodded and produced a thin smile.

Lisa continued, "Alright, Captain Bradley, its your turn. Why am I with you in Paris?"

"It was just a hunch of mine, Lisa. A nightmare that mustn't come true."

Lisa remembered the stories she had been told of the Moonbase women and their premonitions, and then glanced at the runway where she saw Cara. "I understand, Captain. I'll do my best to derail any nightmare that I find while I'm with you two."

The two women shook hands and Lisa darted off for her own walk down the runway.

* * *

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

Paul Foster pulled his thickly padded leather chair inside the horseshoe desk of Moonbase Control and listened for SID to continue, "One UFO, Typical Class, detected at 732 by 556. Speed decreasing to sublight SOL decimal 89. Red Alert, Red Alert."

Foster keyed up his mic, "Moonbase Control to SHADO London, come in Colonel Harrington."

"I'm here, Commander Foster."

"Joan, we're not ready. The neutron warhead hasn't been mounted and we have a sighting. Maybe next time."

"Understood Commander, thank you."

Foster turned to his staff, and then to the holomap that depicted the situation theatre. Only two of the Interceptors had launched with the third having no warhead and out of the game. Foster glanced once at his monitor, then at his lieutenant.

"Jerry, we've only got two operating Interceptors. The UFO has a higher chance of getting past them. Get the ARMMs rolling as well."

"Yes Commander."

The Armed Recon Moon Mobiles lifted off from their pads and slid out over the lunar landscape like insects. Each one carrying sufficient firepower to hold its own in a confrontation with a Spinner. Foster surveyed the holomap again. "How long to Confirm & Confront?"

An operative answered, "Thirty seconds to Confirm & Confront, Commander."

Those seconds were always the longest. Foster had always hated the waiting game. He had nursed a streak of impatience for most of his life.

The comm-link finally crackled to life, "Interceptor Two to Control Sphere, at visual range now. Confirmed one Typical class Ufoe, recommend no time sequence corrections. Launching bombs in three, two, one..."

The oversized warhead-nose of the Interceptor darted away toward a location in front of the Spinner. The Alien veered away from that point. The bomb erupted into a white hot mass and the Spinner reeled to miss the explosion. Interceptor Three's warhead exploded on the opposite side of the first blast, and the Spinner had been herded into the burst radius of the second explosion. The UFO vaporized as it was engulfed in the expanding burst of the second nuclear device.

"Interceptor Flight to Control Sphere, the alien is pop-corn."

Foster smiled and returned to his desk as if nothing had disturbed him.

Chapter 3

Cara was asleep in the passenger seat of the SHADO car while Gay drove them out of Paris and into the countryside. Cara had been so helpful getting everything ready that morning for their departure. Gay had planned out their trip while Cara packed everything and loaded the car. Now the young lady was sleepy, brought on by the stress of the previous day and the audition. Gay replayed the memory of her precious little girl working the runway like a professional model. The judges loved her, even though they wouldn't release their decision until later. There were 16 contracts to be awarded. Surely, Cara would get one of them. Gay smiled and looked at her sleeping daughter.

"I love you." She whispered.

* * *

Lisa was travelling in the same kind of car that Gay had received, except that Lisa's vehicle was white. She was alone, with only the radio, a map and a CD player for company. Too bad that she had forgotten all of her CD's back in London.

Her radio came to life with SID's reverberating English accent. She listened raptly as the two Interceptors were sent out, and she giggled when she heard the pilot announce that the Spinner was blown into "pop-corn." She wondered if she had gone through training with that astronaut.

Her thoughts turned back to her own dilemma, "I'm a SHADO operative, cross trained as a SkyDiver computer specialist and a Mobile driver. I have flown more than forty hours in a Sky simulator and downed thirty three holographic Spinners. I can't believe that I left ALL of my CD's in London!"

Then she reflected, "Well, okay, I died nine times in the simulator."

* * *

Slowly, Cara fought herself back to consciousness. She turned to her mother and asked, "Where are we?"

Gay leaned over and squeezed her daughter's knee, "We are just outside Dijon, France." She pulled back, handed Cara a small map and continued, "From Dijon we will enter Switzerland briefly for a stop at Lake Geneva and the city of Geneva, and then its on to Milan and Christian Dior."

"Mom?" Cara hesitated.

Gay's silence prompted her to continue.

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

Gay feigned shock, "Of course I think you're pretty. You're beautiful. Other girls want to be like you, all the boys want to be with you---except that none of them CAN be until you're a little older..."

"Am I prettier than Lisa?"

Gay wasn't feigning shock any longer, it was genuine, "Why do you ask that?"

"Because I watched her walk the runway and I think she's better than I am. She's nicer to people than I am. She spoke to me first and I never did that for her or any of the other girls in Paris. And....uhh....I think she's prettier than I am."

Gay glanced between the road and Cara while saying, "Lisa is older and different than you. She's more experienced on the runway and this wasn't her first show. She has been through some...aerobic training regimes that you haven't, that is why she is so trim and defined."

"And she's prettier."

"No," Gay said flatly, "She's not prettier. YOU have the face that the designers want to see in their ads. YOU have the look of the innocent little girl that the marketing experts want, YOU have the advantage of a perfect figure at such a young age and you have a permanent tan from your father---and you're prettier."

Cara rested her head back against the soft leather seat, "I love you, Mom."

Suddenly, all those years on Moonbase and in SkyDiver 7 disappeared for Gay. In a flash, all the sacrifices were worth the cost just to hear her baby-girl say those magic words.

"I love you, Mom."

* * *

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

The Command Sphere of Moonbase was a flurry of activity. The doors slid apart and Commander Foster eagerly stepped through. Glancing up at the ceiling and speaking to no one, he said, "Moonbase to SHADO London, come in Colonel Harrington."

"I'm here, Commander."

"Joan, we're ready at this end. Operation Microwave Oven is go for launch."

Joan smiled to herself but did not verbally respond.

SID cut back in, "Two UFOs sighted at co-ordinates 732 by 556."

Foster announced, "That's the same vector as the other Ufoe before."

SID continued, "Speed dropping to sublight. SOL decimal 98, 95, 89...Red Alert, red alert."

"Status of Interceptor Flight?" Foster barked.

"Interceptors are away and on holomap, Commander. One minute, ten seconds to Confirm & Confront."

"Jerry," Paul turned quickly, "Get me everything you can find on what's in 556. The aliens seem to have taken notice of that course heading, I want to know why."

"On it, sir."

Someone else spoke loudly, "Twenty seconds to Confirm & Confront."

Silence. The waiting game again. Foster's hands were wet with perspiration. He was thinking that Joan Harrington must be trying to stop her heart from beating itself right out of her chest.

"Interceptor Leader to Control Sphere, confirmed two Typical Class Spinners. Recommend time sequence correction for warhead launch."

Foster leaned into his mic, "Call it, Interceptor One."

"Too late for reprogram, we're gonna have to eyeball it from here."

Foster said in a voice loudly enough to be heard by everyone, "Use the Force, Luke."

"Roger the Force, Obi-Wan. Interceptor Flight, on my mark.

Three...two...one...Interceptor Three...fire!"

The warhead darted away from the vehicle. Both Spinners saw it coming and pulled hard to avoid destruction. They did. The explosion buffeted both Spinners and caused them to separate into two different courses while still heading for Earth.

"Interceptor Two, fire!"

Interceptor One's bomb launched almost simultaneously.

The trailing Spinner missed all of the action. The lead UFO tried to avoid the incoming nuke and darted forward, directly into the burst radius of the neutron bomb. The nuke exploded and physically separated the two UFOs with the burst. When the blast had cleared, it

looked to be curtains for the lead Spinner. The bomb burst, but the blast was nothing like what the aliens expected. There was a bright flash, a visible shock wave followed by a shower of light, and the lead Spinner began to waver on its axis. Its companion caught up to it quickly but could not stop to assist. The undamaged Spinner pulled slightly ahead of the other ship. Then, suddenly, the alien vessel stopped spinning. It just sat there dead in space.

"Ohmigod!" It was Interceptor Leader, "The other Ufoe! He could kamikaze his buddy."

Joan Harrington sank down into a chair. No one had thought of this. The companion UFO could vaporize the other Spinner and get away.

The voice of Interceptor Leader returned to the comm-link, "NO! No, no, no, no, no...dammit!"

Foster jumped out of his chair, "Lead One, report!"

"He's spinning again, sir." The voice betrayed obvious dejection, "He's slow and tilted, he must be badly damaged but he's spinning again."

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

All channels were quiet as SID continued, "Both UFOs on new course, estimated trajectory termination in northern Barents Sea."

Foster grabbed up an electronic clipboard and slammed it down hard onto the desk.

Chapter 4

"...and now, distinguished guests, I will itemize the reasons behind this proposal."

There were perhaps forty people in the small meeting hall. Ed and Alec were sitting together in the front row of what appeared to be a very large classroom in the United Nations Building. The woman at the podium in front was an age between Ed and Alec, and her hair was graying slightly. She seemed to have a Jamaican accent but she showed no physical signs of being an ethnic native. Her name was Ms. Rosalynn Mays.

As far as Ed and Alec were concerned, her name was another word consisting of four letters.

"The Skys are launched not to engage an alien vehicle, but to intercept it in much the same way that an aggressive football player attempts to intercept a pass. He only gets one chance if he is lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. The UFO moves much faster than a Sky, and can thusly achieve orbit and leave the Sky in the atmosphere below. The Sky is fired off like a rocket in hopes to get close enough to launch a missile that would destroy the alien vehicle. Dogfighting is not even recommended."

She took a breath and looked indiscriminately across the room, "My proposal would prevent the needless economic waste of maintaining a crewed SkyDiver fleet and replacing them all with missiles launched from underwater silos. These missiles could chase the alien into space, with no chance of loss of human life by the destruction of a Sky or the sinking of a Diver."

Alec leaned toward Ed, "She has a point."

"Who's side are you on?" Straker retorted with his arms folded across his chest.

A hand went up and she called on that person, "What about any surprise tactics the aliens might use to dodge or divert the missile?"

She looked out at the individual, "Very good question. The aliens have not typically engaged in dogfights with Skys in the air or SkyDivers underwater. Thusly, Sky pilots are not trained in the art of dogfighting as are the pilots at Miramar. Any dogfighting skills that Sky pilots have mastered are learned on their own. The aliens have never displayed a propensity for protracted engagement with a Sky or a Diver, and so there has been no statistically significant variance in the tactics employed by either side. It is highly unlikely at this point that the aliens will EVER change their tactics."

Ed leaned over toward Alec and whispered, "I'll bet she's never met Peter Carlin."

Alec snickered.

"Next question?" She looked around the room, "Yes, you in the back row."

"I want to know how SHADO feels about this."

There was a hush in the room.

Straker climbed out of his chair and turned to face the crowd.

Applause.

Straker put out his hands to quell the audience, and strolled to the microphone at the podium.

"What Ms. Mays has said is true...partially." He smiled thinly, "In 1971, General Henderson and I considered the...possibility of a missile defense system similar to today's discontinued Patriot. We also considered the possibility...and liability...of a manned---excuse me, a CREWED SkyDiver fleet. We opted for the more expensive human element in each of our interception systems in the event that the Aliens decided to change tactics someday.

Humans are more adaptable to such changes as they happen, so that each and every Ufoe has the same statistical chance of being destroyed. Additionally, SkyDivers roam the oceans randomly and are very difficult to locate. A missile system would be anchored and much easier to find and destroy."

Straker waited for a moment and then continued, "Ms. Mays is correct that we do not train our pilots for protracted dogfighting. We do, however, train our pilots for dogfighting with Ufoes, which is different than dogfighting with---say---a Russian MIG, or the half-hour ending of Top Gun. We do not train our pilots to dogfight with other human pilots, ladies and gentlemen, we teach them how to fight with aliens. SkyDivers were never intended to be used against other human beings, and so none of our pilots have names like Maverick or Goose."

There was some muffled laughter in the room.

"The original SkyDivers were designed during a time when SHADO didn't possess Stealth technology. The Ufoes could not be seen by Earth based intruder detectors but all of SHADO's vehicles could be. Our only pilot at the time, Admiral Peter Carlin, had to blast out of the water, destroy the Ufoe no matter who's national airspace it was in, and get back to the ocean without being seen. Or if seen, without being followed. That was quite a daunting task, ladies and gentlemen, but Admiral Carlin performed it flawlessly each time."

Straker allowed for an emphatic pause and then, "It is also true that Ufoes don't typically go out of their way to engage Skys or Moonbase Interceptors in dogfights. In the case of the Interceptors, we really don't know why. The 'Typical' Class Spinner appears to be designed for optimum deployment in a vacuum or aquatic environment, and as you know the Interceptors are a space-exclusive vehicle. All of our evidence suggests that Ufoes should be able to fly up on the Interceptors and blow them to bits before they can get the first bomb away. But they don't, and we don't know why yet. As for SkyDivers, however, we DO know the reason why."

Straker paused again. "Spinners are terribly difficult to manage in our atmosphere. The aliens don't engage a Sky in our air for the same reason that a Sky doesn't engage an alien in space or underwater---the Sky would be out of its optimum operating environment. So, after all these years AND the advent of Stealth Technologies, the main tactic of the aliens is to rocket toward Earth at breakneck speeds. That's how the aliens get past Moonbase. That's also how our Skys catch them before they can get out of the atmosphere."

Another pause, "The difference is that we have home-court advantage." He looked to Ms. Mays, "The reason that the aliens don't change their tactics is because not enough of their pilots make it out of Earth's atmosphere to analyze the tactics used by SHADO. They don't know our tactics because they don't survive long enough to report on our tactics. SkyDivers vaporize them before they can compare notes."

Another muffled laugh from the crowd.

Straker concluded: "SHADO would be willing to consider any ocean-based missile attack system that could aggressively and unerringly hunt down and destroy an invader. However, the missiles would work in partnership with the existing SkyDiver fleet. There is no substitute for actually having a living, breathing, feeling human being in the cockpit with a vested interest in saving this planet. I submit to you, Ms. Mays, that if it ain't broke, please don't try to fix it."

Applause.

Chapter 5

"Lift off!"

Sky 5 blasted away from Diver 5 and tore out of the Atlantic Ocean like a rocket. Captain Maria Lopez guided her dark dragon into the clouds in search of the enemy.

"SID," She called out, "Give me a hand up here, old Goggle Eyes, where are they?"

"This is Space Intruder Detector...tracking two Typical Class UFOs entering Earth atmosphere over the Barents Sea. On their present course, they will pass over St. Petersburg and Moscow of the Former Soviet Socialist Republics."

Maria thought to herself, 'Who programmed that damn thing? I ask for locations and get a geography lesson.'

"What are my course corrections, SID" She said out loud.

"Adjust course to intercept by zero decimal three two four, north. Expected interception in nineteen minutes."

Maria's mouth opened in shock, "Nineteen minutes?! SID, how fast are these boys moving?"

"Vehicle designated FIRST UFO has been damaged by Moonbase Interceptors and its speed is variable. Vehicle designated SECOND UFO is escorting by matching speed and course." Then there was a moment of silence before SID continued, "WARNING, WARNING. Stealth attachment of First UFO is failing. UFO is detectable by standard Earth military scanning devices. WARNING, WARNING."

That was something which neither SHADO nor the aliens could afford to deal with. SHADO was trying to keep this whole war a secret to avoid global panic and rioting, and the Aliens didn't want a planet full of guerilla freedom fighters waiting for them each time they dropped out of the clouds. SHADO was bad enough!

Maria found herself accidentally wishing that the alien could fix it's ship before she arrived to destroy it. "SHADO London to Sky 5."

"Go ahead, London."

"Maria," It was Joan Harrington, "Either reduce speed or change course. We can't have you engaging Ufoes with Russian MIGs flying around you like sparrows."

"Yes, Ma'am." She mouthed the word DAMN silently, "Request instant updates from SID until engagement can occur."

"Granted. You'll have a constant channel with SID. Good luck, Maria."

"Thank you Colonel. Sky 5 out."

Maria scanned over her control panel. Sky 5 had sufficient fuel and resources for a protracted holding pattern until the Spinners could clear Russia---or until she was forced to go into Russia and solve the problem of Soviet possession of a UFO.

"I stand on the field of honor and wait for thee to emerge." She mused, "And I hate waiting..."

Joan Harrington made her way to the Commander's office. The doors slid apart to admit her and she took her seat at the executive desk in front of the holoscreen. She pressed the button to hold the doors open so she could keep constant track on what was happening in Control.

She put her face in her hands and closed her eyes hard.

"Colonel?" It was Captain Johnson of the Mobile Search Group.

"Its nothing, Ayshea." She brought her face out of her hands, "What can I do for you?"

Ayshea grinned, "You can tell me what's wrong."

Joan's silence prompted Ayshea to continue, "I know that facial expression. I've seen it on Alec's face too many times as he sat behind that desk."

Joan was aware of the on-again-off-again relationship that Alec and Ayshea shared. It was very discrete, and neither of them allowed it to spill over into their professional work. It also meant that if a person wanted to know how Freeman would feel about a certain topic, they could ask Ayshea.

"It's this business of the Ufoes." Joan explained. "This whole neutron bomb thing was my plan. It was supposed to work, except that the alien pilot didn't die and now the Russian Air Force has the opportunity to bag a Spinner."

Ayshea observed, "They would still have to get past the second UFO."

Joan looked squarely at the Captain, "The other Typical Class, at full capability, could dispatch many MIG fighters, and be cloaked from their screens. A lot of good Russian pilots are gonna die before they bring down that other ship, and this whole screw-up is my responsibility."

"This is war, Joan. You can only plan for the first few minutes of an attack. After that, the opponent reacts and it's a free for all. All the best laid plans are gone in a instant, and the winner is whoever is left standing when the smoke clears. Remember Joan, the aliens want to win too."

Harrington just looked at the younger woman.

"Come on, let's go get some coffee." Ayshea suggested, "It could be a long night and we need to stay alert to make sure that Maria and Sky 5 are left standing when the smoke clears."

When the two women emerged from the Commander's office, Joan turned suddenly and strolled to her comm operator.

"Tom," she called.

He turned in his seat.

"Contact Covert Ops. I want frequencies jammed, radar ghosts, computer viruses, evil spirits, whatever it takes to keep the Russians away from those Spinners."

"Yes, Colonel." He acknowledged as he pulled the angerhair microphone around.

* * *

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

"SID," Maria commented, "Since you were constructed, have you ever opened a communique in any other way except: This is Space Intruder Detector...?"

"Negative." The reverberating English accent continued, "First UFO has reactivated Stealth attachment and is now invisible to Earth standard scanners."

"Thank God." Maria whispered, suddenly anticipated SID saying: you're welcome.

"SHADO London to Sky 5. Maria, are you still awake up there?"

She laughed, "Yes I'm still awake Control. Hot and bothered too."

"Well," it was the comm officer, "Here's your chance at Freudian stress relief. Change course to 175 mark 346 decimal two. You will engage both Spinners at 46.5 latitude, 6.5 longitude in two minutes."

"Roger that Control, expected Romulan contact in one hundred twenty seconds."

Maria checked her mapscreen. The confrontation would take place over Lake Geneva, Switzerland.

* * *

The Spinners appeared as tiny dots in the cool night skies over Switzerland. There were

some clouds, but not enough for total cover. Still, it was very late and they were very high. Sky 5 raced out of cloud bank and Maria watched as the two Spinners abruptly separated. She plowed Sky 5 right between them and ascended in a high upward arc. One UFO skidded into a large whispery cloud and found enough moisture for cover. The other one tried desperately to hobble away but began to turn on its axis as it cycled. The ship was forced to decrease speed and depend on its friend to provide protection.

Maria pulled out of her climb and turned the fighter. She saw one Spinner and a trail path left by the other where it slid into the cloud.

She focused her attention on the damaged UFO. Quickly she sighted in on it and slowly pressed on the triggers.

Suddenly, the damaged Spinner darted upward toward her. It was trying a kamikaze ram. Maria banked right, and the UFO missed. Sky 5 quickly recovered and pulled left in an arc. Just as Maria righted her fighter, the damaged UFO fired its long beam of plasma energy.

Maria knew it was over. She would be dead long before she hit the Lake below.

The Spinner's weapon connected with Sky 5's midsection, but did no damage. It was like being assaulted by the beam of a spot light. Maria tried to recompose quickly and regain her sight, but the second Spinner emerged from the clouds. She turned Sky 5 and fired four missiles. The second Spinner launched a series of rapid fire pulses, vaporizing three of her rockets. The UFO pulled up hard, and the remaining rocket passed just a few meters underneath. The missile twisted in midair and acted like it was sniffing around for the prey it had just lost. The rocket banked to the right and reacquired the Spinner.

The UFO sent another rapid series after the missile, and unexpectedly fired a long beam at Sky 5. Maria's control panel erupted into sparks and she knew that she had not been so lucky this time.

"Sky 5, dragon down, repeat, dragon down."

Her radio crackled and sputtered, she heard the words but could not recognize the voice, "Maria, bail!"

"Negative, I can ride her down."

"No, bail now!"

"Negative! I've got population on the ground, the self-destruct is gone and I've got to ride her down. I can put her into the drink and miss the city."

"We're on the way, Maria. We're coming."

Her control panel erupted again.

"SID," she yelled out, "my transponder is gone, status board is dead, scan me and tell me what's happening."

The English accent suddenly seemed comforting to Maria, after her years of criticizing the old satellite, "Sky Five has not lost Stealth capability and is not visible to Earth military or SHADO defenses. Sky Five has lost transponder signal and cannot be located by SHADO vehicles while Stealth is functioning. Sky Five is not, repeat, not being followed by target UFOs, engagement has ended. Both UFOs are descending into forest southeast of Lake Geneva."

"SID," Maria called out, "I don't think SHADO can find me without you. Turn your missile targeting scanners on Sky 5 and lock onto me as if I were a UFO."

SID turned its large bulk in orbit and faced the planet Earth for the first time in years. Somehow, even to the machine, it was strange to lock onto another SHADO vehicle with the targeting scanners "This satellite has established positive target lock on SkyDiver, Sky 5."

Weapons systems are not charged. Comm-link frequencies remain open."

"London," She called out, "Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

"Diver 5, are you out there?"

No response.

"Alright, maybe you can hear me but I can't hear you." Maria surmised out loud. "I'm going down into Lake Geneva, Switzerland. I can see a high cliff, sheer face wall on one side of the Lake. I'm gonna try to skid her across the water and end up at the base. I'll be exposed in the daylight so you'd better find me quick. I think I still have partial VTOL capability and I'm gonna use that to help me land my dragon. The self-destruct device is gone so this bird is gonna be free for the taking. God, I hope SID is relaying all of this. The water is coming pretty fast now. I'm leveling off, she's really sluggish. I think I can get the nose up a little more..."

Maria fought with the controls. "Okay, that did it, I'm ready to skip across the surface...sorry SHADO, the Romulans won this round." She suddenly thought of something: "SID, I'm sorry for those smartass remarks I've said to you."

The satellite answered her with an empty tone, "Acknowledged."

Sky 5 hit the water.

* * *

Colonel Harrington spun abruptly and faced the flurry of activity in SHADO Control, "Ayshea, do you have that cliff face?"

"Yes, Colonel. Sky 5's location has been established. SID is feeding us constant telemetry from his weapons scanners."

Harrington turned to another operative and said, "I want Moonbase to establish a scanning network to cover SID's job until this is over."

"Yes, Colonel."

Joan turned to the globe in the center of Control. "SID?"

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

Harrington began walking as she spoke, "Shut down all non-essential systems and don't take your eyes off of Sky 5. You're all we have without her transponder. She may be hurt after the landing. Talk to her every now and then as long as her radio holds out. We can hear her and she can hear you, but she can't hear us. Tell her what we're doing, give Maria progress reports. Stay with her SID, you're her only friend right now."

"Acknowledged."

Joan came up behind Ayshea, "How long until we can get to Lake Geneva?"

"Too long." Captain Johnson's head shook from side to side. "Does SHADO have anyone near that region who can get there ahead of us?"

Harrington thought for a moment, "No, dammit, we don't have anyone...wait!"

Harrington's dark eyes grew bright, "Gay Bradley and Lisa Carpenter are in Geneva tonight."

Ayshea looked puzzled, "Why are they in Switzerland?"

"Gay had a hunch, I guess she was right...again."

Ayshea smiled, "I'll contact them."

* * *

Chapter 6

"Ummm, I've got my daughter with me...yes...both of them came down?...I'm on it."

Gay put the cellular phone back in its place and turned to her daughter, "Ummm, baby, we're gonna make a stop up ahead."

"What's wrong. Mom?"

"Nothing, baby, nothing is wrong."

"Bull," the young woman crossed her arms in front of her, "That call was from that company that you sometimes work for, wasn't it?"

"You know the rules, Cara. No questions, no answers."

* * *

Gay pulled the car around the next turn and faced a gorgeous nightscape of Lake Geneva. It was stunningly beautiful in the dim moonlight. She put the car just off the road and pulled forward. Cara jumped in her seat when she saw the other car. It was exactly like her mom's, except that it was white. Suddenly, Lisa Carpenter appeared from the darkness, and both Gay and Cara climbed out to meet her.

"Lisa," Gay called out, "What have you found?"

"Nothing yet. But I found the path that SID said would lead to the base of the cliff."

Cara stopped in her tracks and faced both women. "Lisa? What the hell are you doing here?"

Gay tried to diffuse this, "Cara, listen..."

"No Mom, no more of this crap."

Gay took hold of her daughter's shoulders, "I don't have time for this, Cara. There are lives at stake here."

Gay turned to Lisa, "Go down the path and see if you can find Sky 5."

She reached around Cara and pressed the button that lifted the door of the car. She sat her daughter back into the vehicle and rested her bodyweight on Cara's little legs. Cara quietly sat and listened to her mother.

"I have been a member of a para-military group since before you were born. That's where I met your father. The name of the group is SHADO, and they call on me only when they need me."

"Why?"

"Because I have been placed on indefinite leave because of you."

Cara looked shocked, "Me?"

"The group, it's existence, it's purpose, its all a secret, Baby. Very few people ever find out about us or what we do. Your father and I fell in love, got married, and together we made you. Dad resigned from SHADO to take care of us and to make sure that one of us was always there for you."

Cara realized what that meant, "You could die in this job? Like in True Lies?"

Gay nodded and continued, "It's a very important job, Baby. But when I got pregnant with you, a very nice man named Straker put me on leave until I was done raising you. He didn't want to expose you to any of this, or to let you discover who I work for. They only call me when they really need me. All the rest of the time, I'm an airline pilot for the Shadair Corporation in England. That's the job you know about."

Cara reflected on this, "Shadair, SHADO. They're related."

Gay nodded.

"Does Lisa work for this Straker guy too?"

Gay chuckled, "General Straker is no longer my commander. He is in the UN now. I report to a man called Alec Freeman and he has an executive officer that you met at Thanksgiving, Joan Harrington."

Cara rolled her eyes, "How many people do I know that work for this Freeman guy?"

"Most of the friends of your father and I either work for, or have worked for SHADO."

"What did you do before I was born?"

Gay thought about this question, "Cara, I don't think..."

"Mom," she pleaded, "They only call you when they need you, and you could die when they call you. We're here, this minute, and they called you. Whatever is commin' down is commin' down right here and right now. If you don't tell me now I may never know."

"I was the Commander of Moonbase for a long time. After that, I captained a submarine with a detachable fighter plane on its nose cone. They're called SkyDivers. They are the reason we're here Cara. One of those fighter pilots needs our help and we just happened to be here."

Cara sat with her almond eyes as wide open as they could be. She mouthed the word: moonbase.

"You remember that skin tight silver outfit that we told you I wore in the discos of the seventies, and that ugly purple wig?"

Cara nodded.

"That is the inside lining of a bulkier spacesuit that I would wear in emergencies while I was on Moonbase. It protected my body while I was in the spacesuit and the wig was anti-static."

Cara's face began to turn a strange shade of white.

"Baby, you're going into shock. Listen to me please, listen to me carefully. I want you to think about all this and stay right here in the car. Don't leave the car, do you understand me?"

Cara swung her little legs into the vehicle and Gay pulled down on the gull-wing door. Then she walked to the back of the car and opened the trunk. She moved some luggage aside and pulled up the carpet at the bottom of the trunk space. Revealing a long panel, she flipped a switch and touched her finger to the small square of light that had activated. The panel opened up and revealed a tube with a pistol handle and trigger assembly. Gay pulled the weapon out of the vehicle and closed the trunk. Cara had rolled down the window to get some air, and turned to watch her mother handle the weapon. Gay held the tube at arm's length and flipped a switch. Two other tubes telescoped out from either end of the main tube, so that the whole thing was three times longer than it had been.

Cara recognized the bazooka from action movies she had watched in the past. She looked longingly after her mother as she disappeared into the woods.

* * *

Lisa made her way down the rock face with a small but powerful handlight. Approximately halfway down the cliffs she saw Sky 5 in the water. The canopy had been blown off and no one was inside. She moved a little faster and descended the path.

Arriving at the shore line, she looked around but saw nothing. There were rocks and bushes, but no sign of the pilot.

"Captain Lopez," She called out in a low voice, "I'm Operative Carpenter from London Control. SID told me to find you here."

One of the bushes moved and Maria painfully arose to her feet. She was holding a 9 millimeter semi-automatic pistol.

"Captain?" Lisa moved toward her, "Are you hurt?"

"Yeah," Maria sounded disgusted, "I've got a gash on my leg and a bad case of whiplash. I'm not gonna be flying again anytime soon."

"Let me help you Captain, SHADO is on their way."

* * *

Cara was alone with the two vehicles. In the dark quietness, she heard faint voices coming from Lisa's car. Cara flipped the button that raised the door and climbed out of the car. She quickly made her way to the other vehicle and leaned down beside Lisa's open driver's side hatch and listened.

"...to Lake Geneva. No other reports."

"...telemetry does not continue, nothing has lifted off..."

"Alert the Interceptors for an escape attempt..."

Cara eyes widened in horror as she listened to the Englishman's strange voice say: "This is Space Intruder Detector..."

Space intruders, she thought. Space, spacemen, aliens! SHADO fights Martians. Cara shuddered as she remembered watching Independence Day.

Large and powerful gloves grabbed the girl from behind. She fought and clawed but she was overpowered quickly.

Chapter 7

"SkyDivers are obsolete in the face of today's missile systems, Mr. Straker. Most of SHADO is too."

Ed Straker leaned back in the chair and looked around his office at the UN building. Alec sat in front of his desk, with Ms. Mays and two of her attendants.

He turned his blue eyes to the woman, "Nothing about SHADO is obsolete Ms. Mays, at least until the aliens decide to go elsewhere for their replacement organs."

"That's exactly what I mean Mr. Straker. This 'organization' of yours is search and destroy only. There are no scientific benefits in blasting alien spacecraft out of the heavens. We gain nothing when we could be capturing the spacecraft and furthering our own technical or medical knowledge."

"That's been tried in the early days of SHADO, Ms. Mays." It was Alec chiming in, "It didn't work then, either. The aliens installed self-destruct devices on their excursion vehicles and specifically adapted them to disintegrate in an atmosphere containing oxygen. Even if we got our hands on a Spinner, we couldn't study it for long before it either blew itself up or evaporated before our eyes. However, a new project is currently in the works..."

"But SHADO isn't even trying to end the war!" She snapped, "There are no peace talks, no negotiations, nothing. If SHADO showed a little more compassion toward the aliens..."

Straker leaned forward quickly, "Compassion?! Ms. Mays, someone has dropped a psychotropic drug into your food. You cannot be compassionate and extend warm fuzzies to a species who want to harvest your organs."

"But you're not even trying!" She cried.

"Give me a radio frequency, Ms. Mays!" Straker shouted, "Give me a frequency and I will personally call them up with an olive branch in my hand to discuss peace. SHADO has worked for almost twenty years to locate a channel---any channel---that the aliens use for communications back to their homeworld. Hell, we don't even know where their homeworld is located. How is SHADO supposed to talk with an alien race who can't be found or contacted?"

"That's my point, Mr. Straker." She retorted, "SHADO has made no progress at all and spends over five billion dollars a year doing it. Its time we trimmed that sum in favor of social programs that take care of our own people right here on Earth."

Alec cut in, "We ARE taking care of our own people on Earth..."

"How?!" She yelled, "By carrying those interceptor bombs into space and irradiating the vacuum around our world? Those weapons of mass-destruction..."

"Wrong, Ms. Mays." Straker interrupted, "Those are weapons of mass-protection. There would BE no people for your social programs to support if SHADO didn't exist in its current incarnation."

"All I'm saying is that SHADO should change tactics and either win the war quickly or negotiate a peace treaty. The first step in doing that is to prevent as many human deaths as possible. A missile system would prevent needless loss of Sky pilots and increase the number of alien fatalities. Then they would come to us with the idea of peace."

Alec was appalled that Mays did not see the flaws and hypocrisy of her logic. "Ms. Mays, that is terrible logic. What you're saying is that if God is Love and Love is Blind, then Ray Charles must be God."

"SkyDivers are an integral part of the overall defense grid, and our only manned atmospheric defense system. They stay." Straker told her.

"Maybe its not your decision Mr. Straker? Maybe SHADO's chief contributors should have a vote in the question?"

Alec stood up and faced Ms. Mays, "Just exactly Madame, which countries are SHADO's largest contributors?"

She was silent for a moment which gave Alec the chance to continue this topic with Straker, "What do you say, General? Who are SHADO's largest contributors?"

Straker answered, "Well Alec, there is Russia. They got involved several years ago when we saved their moonrover from hitting Moonbase. Then we shot down the Ufoe before it could completely destroy the Chernobyl power facility."

Alec continued, "What about the Carribbean? All those rich and powerful people plagued by the Bermuda Triangle, until SHADO came along and flushed the aliens out. Yeah, the island nations are big spenders."

Straker leaned forward in his chair and mockingly said, "And then there was that pilot in Bosnia, the American who was shot down. A SHADO Sky was in the area at the time and saw the whole thing. We led the Americans right back to him. What was his name again?"

Alec agreed, "Do you remember the California earthquake, Ed? The Spinner that tried to land and hide in the rubble. We sent Mobiles in to help clear roads and transport food and water, and hunt down the aliens."

Straker: "And the American space station we saved from its encounter with the aliens."

Alec: "And the Japanese sub that we rescued after it found the Spinner."

Straker: "And that affair in Australia where the Ufoe..."

Alec: "The German factory in Berlin..."

Straker: "The French diplomat's abducted son..."

Alec: "The Brazilian Ambassador's wife..."

"Alright." Mays interrupted. "You've made your point."

"No, Ms. Mays, we haven't." Straker corrected her. "You'll be hard pressed to find a country who'll voluntarily cut their annual funding of my organization. They know how important our work is because they have personally benefitted from our presence."

Alec added, "Every instance that we just described, and many more, involved a Sky or a SkyDiver at one point or another."

"Besides that, Ms. Mays." Straker concluded, "Our black helicopters are legendary among the conspiracy theorists of the world."

* * *

Gay wandered in the woods for some time. Moving slowly, very carefully so as not to make too much noise or expose her location. Of course, it would help if she knew exactly where to look for the two landed UFOs. All SHADO had told her is that they lost them soon after Sky 5 went down. The Spinners had followed but had not reacquired the fighter during its descent. The aliens had landed their vehicles somewhere near the cliff that now hid Sky 5, or what was left of it.

"God, I hope Maria is alright." Gay mouthed to herself.

Forests are especially dark at night, and this one was no exception. Slow moving, very slow.

A twig snapped, Gay froze. She sighed heavily and took another step.

Someone yelled but the voice was cut off. Gay spun and her heart stopped in terror as she heard the scream of her daughter.

"Mom!"

Gay instinctively armed the rocket inside the launch tube and tore through the woods toward the sound of Cara's voice.

Gay's nightmare was coming true.

* * *

The alien dragged Cara into the woods but the girl continued to struggle. He picked her up off the ground and carried her to increase his speed. She yelled once but he was able to cover her mouth. In doing so, he allowed her to squirm out of his arms. He caught her before she could get away, but not before she could yell out for her mother.

The alien gathered Cara into his arms so that her back was against his chest. He squeezed her and kept moving. His arms closed savagely around her so that she coughed and gasped for air. When he released her enough to breathe, she looked up and came face to face with a golden flying saucer.

He belted her across the back of her head so that she fell unconscious into his arms.

* * *

Gay heard the distinctive cycling of a UFO and appeared out of the darkness in time to see the alien drag Cara into the Spinner. She instantly bent at knee and hefted the bazooka to her shoulder.

"Give her back, you bastard!"

She leveled the weapon at the alien ship and put her face up to the electronic sight. Instantly the rocket acquired the target and signaled launch-ready.

She hesitated. Something was wrong.

"My Baby is in there." Sweat droplets rolled down her face.

No, something else was wrong. She could hear cycling but the Spinner wasn't rotating.

The second Spinner cleared the trees and surprised Gay. She lunged sideways as it fired on her. The beam carved a hole into the ground and sent her flying forward. She slammed her ribs hard into a tree and groped about for the bazooka.

She twisted painfully and hefted the bazooka again. Sighting quickly and ignoring the striking pains in her ribs, she leveled the targeter on the second UFO. It locked on almost instantly.

Squeezing the trigger, the whole world around Gay seemed enveloped in sudden white smoke.

The second Spinner reeled in the burst as flames and sparks spewed out over the ground.

By the time Gay could recover, the UFO with Cara was spinning several yards off the ground and ascending. The other ship was terribly damaged and listing badly to one side. The bazooka rocket had blown many gravity discs loose and several of them were being dragged in a circle around the spinning craft. An eerie purple smoke was pouring out of a gaping hole in the hull. It began to pitch and roll and slide upward and away from her.

The UFO with Cara made a straight line for orbit.

She rolled onto her side and keyed up the mic on her wristwatch, "I hit one but its still airborne, the other is getting away...and its got my baby."

SID automatically cleared all frequencies.

The newly damaged Spinner righted itself about a hundred meters off the ground and charged its weapons. Gay knew that she was the target. There was a sickly roar behind her, but she couldn't twist that way to see what it was.

She looked up at the Spinner carrying Cara, "My Baby..." Her nightmare had come true, and she was left on the ground clawing at the night and taking a breath to scream.

* * *

Chapter 8

"This is Space Intruder Detector...Priority message."

Straker came forward in his chair, as did Alec. Ms. Mays and her cronies just sat in their seats without knowing the impact of SID cutting in on all channels and forcing his voice into Straker's UN office.

Straker and Freeman recognized Gay Bradley's voice instantly: "...the other got away...and its got my baby." Then a second's pause before they heard her say: "My baby..."

Then the familiar reverberation of the satellite continued, "This is an abduction alert, repeat, abduction alert."

* * *

The Atlantic SkyDivers reared back and blasted their fighters into the heavens.

* * *

The remaining SkyDivers all of the world reared back into their launch positions. If the Spinner should decide to stay in the atmosphere, the pilots were ready.

* * *

Paul Foster suddenly appeared in the doorway of the Interceptor ready- room.

"Bill," He looked to the pilot of Interceptor One, "I want to lead this flight. Gay is a friend."

"Yes sir, Commander Foster." As he handed over the headgear.

* * *

Two large panels of SID's rounded head slid back and exposed rocket pods very similar to the ones carried by a Sky. The old satellite used its thruster jets to position itself directly above the UFO's location in Switzerland.

* * *

Three Interceptors gently lifted off of their launch pads. Rather than continue beyond the craggy lunar rock formations, they suddenly turned around and headed in the opposite direction. They passed over Moonbase and increased to attack velocity while heading for Earth.

* * *

There was a sickly roar behind Gay, but she couldn't twist that way to see what it was.

Sky 5 appeared to levitate over the edge of the cliff and startled both of the alien ships. Each of them hesitated for a fatal moment. Sky 5 launched its last two functioning missiles at the Spinner that Gay had already damaged. The alien craft recoiled with the impact as both missiles broke through the hull of the craft. The explosive lightshow was spectacular and the alien was incinerated.

* * *

Gay fell onto her front and coaxed her head up. Her eyes were moist but she refused to cry. She saw Sky 5 rising with its VTOL jets over the rim of the cliff. It was listing badly to one side, and the canopy was gone altogether. Lisa was at the controls. One of Sky 5's rocket pods had completely melted, and the rear of the plane had been burnt away. The Spinner froze for a second, but then slowly continued.

Lisa called for SID to commandeer all frequencies. All channels cleared and opened for the young operative.

"This is Sky 5 to UFO." She said as the Spinner accelerated upward.

"Your weapons are impotent and you have a hostage."

The Spinner continued its trek into the sky.

"Every Sky in this part of the world is racing to this location right now to shoot you down. If you survive them, you'll have to fight your way past SID, who is a machine and has no fear of dying. If you survive him, you'll face off with the Moonbase Interceptors. There are roving computerized battle platforms in the solar system beyond the Moon. You have no weapons, no maneuverability, and no chance to get off this world."

SID piped all this across all SHADO channels. Lisa prayed that the alien had heard it.

"If you know anything about SHADO, then you know how we respond to abduction alerts. We know that you'll kill your hostage for body parts, and so she's gone whether you kill her or we destroy your ship with her inside it. Either way, she's dead and so are you. You'll never get passed us, and ET doesn't phone home. But if you listen to me, I have a deal that will leave both you and your hostage alive."

She paused again, "Here's the plan: You give the girl back to us and we let you go, in your current condition, to fend your way back to your world. Safe passage out of the solar system for safe return of your hostage."

The Spinner ceased its upward movement and held its altitude for a moment. Then it started up again.

Lisa tried one last time, "You give us the girl and ET can go home. Otherwise, you're pop-corn."

* * *

The Spinner reversed course and dropped slowly toward the ground. Sky 1 passed overhead but did not fire. Sky 3 was close behind.

* * *

Gay had crawled to the site where the Spinner had sat. It was descending slowly toward the same spot. The large saucer landed quietly, and Gay waited as the ship stopped cycling. From the other side of the spacecraft, a single alien came walking around holding Cara in his arms. She was unconscious.

The alien walked to within inches of Gay, who had brought herself to her feet painfully. He allowed Cara's feet and legs to slide out of his arms, and then leaned her upper body onto Gay. Somehow, Gay found the physical stamina to support her daughter in spite of the searing pain.

The alien saw the pistol in Gay's belt and backed away slowly. He put his arms up as if to show that he was unarmed. He walked behind the ship where Gay could not see him.

A moment later, the UFO began to spin and slowly slid into the sky. Gay looked up into the early morning heavens, and saw numerous Skys darting around like sparrows. They converged on the Spinner, but they did not fire. They escorted the vehicle into the upper atmosphere and then pulled back.

SID turned and followed the alien with his missile pods, until the Interceptors arrived to escort the vehicle out of orbit and beyond the Moon.

Sky 5 drifted back down to the lakefront.

Gay cuddled her daughter into her chest, and held her there until she heard the familiar thundering of SHADO Mobiles. She kissed her slumbering daughter, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

The mobile rumbled to a halt, and the rear hatch opened. Ayshea jumped out and walked briskly to the two women. Coming very close, she touched her finger lightly to Gay's shoulder

and whispered, "Its time to go home, Gay."

Gay nodded. Ayshea motioned and a medical team emerged from Mobile Leader.

* * *

Alec turned to Ms. Mays, "Your missiles couldn't have negotiated that hostage crisis, Madame. That was a woman in the cockpit of a Sky."

"Without the human element, Ms. Mays," It was Straker, "This incident would've ended in the needless death of both an alien and a young girl. Therefore, we have given you everything you asked for."

Mays looked at Straker with puzzled eyes as he explained, "Don't you see it Ms. Mays? SHADO just saved a human life and extended warm fuzzy compassion to an alien, all in the span of a few minutes. The alien will go home and tell his people how magnanimous we are, and then they will reconsider their position and call me to ask for peace talks. Ask and ye shall receive, Ms. Mays."

Straker silently picked up his pen and went back to work while ignoring her and her two attendants. Without looking at them, he said, "Please shut the door on your way out."

Mays climbed to her feet and angrily left the room. One of the men with her made sure that Straker's door was closed.

As soon as they were gone, Alec sat back down. "That was lucky for us."

"For now Alec." Straker observed, "People like Mays don't just go away. They always come back to haunt you. She doesn't give a damn about gutting the SkyDivers, she wants to dismantle SHADO altogether."

"How do you know?" Alec asked.

"Just a hunch."

* * *

The Shadair Lear landed flawlessly at Heathrow Airport. Gay and Cara disembarked and Cara had to help her mother walk the ramp. They were met in the terminal by Mark Bradley and several men dressed in expensive dark suits. He came forward quickly and Gay rested on him for a long moment for support. He felt the wrapping around Gay's chest under her clothing. Mark, Gay, and Cara were taken under guard to a private room in the airport, where they were left alone for two hours to talk, discuss their adventures, reassure each other and be a family again. Afterwards, they were shuttled to Harlington-Straker Studios in a large and streamlined version of a minivan. As soon as Cara saw the large silver sign with the name of the studio, she thought of the man called Straker that her mother had spoken of in Switzerland.

Cara giggled to herself as the minivan pulled up to the covered entrance of the studios, and passed all the cars in the parking lot that had gull-wing doors.

They were met at the door by a very cordial woman who was named Ealand. She greeted both of Cara's parents and then led the family through the hallways to the office of the Senior Executive, Alec Freeman. The doors slid open, which seemed strange to Cara, but it really looked cool.

There was nobody inside the office. Cara noticed the many awards that Harlington-Straker had accumulated in the trophy case, but she was perplexed because she had never heard of the studios before. Cara's mother walked over to the Producer's cigar box and opened it. Gay spoke her name to the box, and a voice similar to SID's identified her as Bradley, Gay, Captain of SkyDiver 7, leave status, access permitted.

Then Mark took hold of his daughter and held her close. At first she cuddled to her father, but then the windows shaded themselves and the room shook as the whole office began to

descend underground.

"This is SHADO, isn't it Dad?" Cara asked.

"Yes darling," Mark stroked her hair, "This is SHADO London, the command center."

The room stopped moving, the doors slid apart, and the Bradleys were met by several smiling faces.

A man stepped forward and extended his hand toward the young woman, "Hello Cara, I'm Alec Freeman."

She smiled brightly and shook his hand, "Mom told me a little about you. You run all this, don't you?"

Freeman motioned to the others, "When they let me."

"Hi kiddo..."

Cara turned and was hugged by Joan Harrington. Cara returned the affection, and warmly greeted Joan.

"Cara, my name is Ayshea Johnson. Your father and I rode in Mobiles together before he joined Corporate America..."

"I'm Lew Waterman, Cara. Your parents and I served together on Moonbase before you were born. Your dad is the best Interceptor pilot I ever knew..."

The group parted to reveal two more people for Cara to meet. She already knew one of them.

"Hi Cara!"

"Lisa!" She exclaimed as she stepped forward for a hug, "Mom told me what you did. I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't worry Little Lady, you won't have to thank me. Its just good to see that you're alright."

Cara didn't understand the first part of the sentence, but smiled anyway.

Then, Lisa stepped aside and there he was. Cara was instantly enthralled with the man. He was a combination of a fatherly figure, a slayer of dragons, and a warrior knight. He was Authority personified.

"Welcome to SHADO, Cara, my name is Ed Straker."

She shook his hand, mesmerized by his angelic blue eyes. She could not get the word "cute" out of her mind. After a moment of shaking his hand, she discovered that she had not said anything to him. She didn't know what to say to a man who's presence invoked the feeling that everything is under control. The group pressed the family toward the interior of SHADO. Cara got a quick glance at the big wall-sign in front of Freeman's office/elevator: Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization.

Cara could not explain why, but she suddenly felt very proud of her parents and very lucky to be their daughter.

The group toured through Control, and made their way to another room on the other side of the catacombs. Most of their friends stopped here, and waited for the doors to slide open. Inside were many chairs, some plants, two very small tables, a couch and an older gentleman. The Bradleys entered with Alec, Lisa, and Ed Straker with them. Everyone else said their goodbyes as the doors slid closed.

Mark led Cara to the couch, and everyone else took their seats in the chairs. Cara was the only person on the couch, but her parents and Lisa were very close to her.

The older man leaned over and extended his hand, "Its good to meet you, Cara, my name is Doctor Jackson."

Cara suddenly envisioned Frankenstein in her mind. She would probably have recoiled from this man except that she felt safe with Mom and Dad and Lisa surrounding her.

"Today," the doctor continued, "We're going to talk about what happened to you."

"Okay." She said, looking around the room.

The doctor interjected, "Cara, I'm a Psychologist. I work for Mr. Freeman and Mr. Straker here. I talk to people who have had experiences such as yours. Sometimes we get new information from people who have done what you have done. You and I will talk about what happened, and together we will make sure that you have sorted everything out and that you are comfortable with your adventure. Is that okay with you, Cara?"

She looked at her parents.

"Of course, your parents will be with you all the time." The doctor told her.

She smiled and nodded her acceptance.

"The first thing that we need to do Cara, is get to know each other."

Freeman arose from his seat, went to the wall and touched a panel. The wall slid back to reveal a wetbar. He poured himself a bourbon and turned around to face the group.

The doctor continued speaking, "I'm going to ask you a series of short and brief questions, and then I'd like to talk about your adventure." The doctor glanced back at Freeman and then returned to Cara, "Would you like a soft drink, Cara?"

She smiled and said, "Yes."

Freeman poured her a pepsi, and then walked over and handed it to her.

She took it, thanked him, and drew a long drink from the glass.

Jackson smiled, picked up an electronic clipboard and went on, "Now, Cara, tell me your full name please."

"Cara Marie Bradley."

"And where do you live, Cara?"

"Jacksonville, Florida, in the United States."

"Cara, do you have a job?"

"Ummm," She fidgeted in her seat, "I got a phone call on the flight to London that I won a contract with Gucci."

"Cara, that is wonderful. I'm so proud of you." Jackson leaned forward, took her arm, and looked to her parents, "You must be very proud of her too."

They smiled and nodded.

"Now Cara," Jackson went on, "How old are you?"

"I'm fourteen."

"You are a very beautiful woman for being so young. It is no wonder that you are a model."

She smiled, but her eyes were very heavy. Suddenly she felt her body becoming fatigued. Her muscles relaxed unexpectedly and she fought to stay upright. She started to slump to one side, but she thought she saw her father move to catch her before everything went black. Mark and Lisa laid Cara's slumbering body on the couch and then returned to their seats.

"Don't worry, Mark, Gay." Jackson reassured them, "I'll be very careful with her."

"Right," Straker said, "Commander Freeman and I are needed to supervise a project for Moonbase. Something that I am sure the two of you are well acquainted with."

Mark and Gay instinctively rose to their feet. "Thank you for coming."

"Our pleasure." Alec smiled, "It is good to finally meet this little wonder of yours." He looked to Carpenter, "Lisa, if you will assist us?"

Freeman, Straker and Lisa exited the room while the Bradleys remained with their daughter and Jackson.

Gay turned and touched the Psychologist on the forearm, "Doctor, she's all that we have, all that we love. We want to stay with her while you do this."

"Of course, Captain, I would have it no other way." He responded.

Mark and Gay took the seats they had before. Jackson pulled up his electronic clipboard, pressed a switch to change the screen, and slid his chair closer to Cara.

"Now Cara, why don't you tell me everything that happened after your mother received the phone call on the road to Milan?"

Cara told him the entire story. Everyone was hoping that she had seen something on the inside of the UFO, but she was unconscious during that period of her adventure.

"Now Cara, I'm going to tell you another story. The story that you're going to hear is the real story Cara. You'll forget everything that you just told me and you'll repeat my story if anyone ever asks you about what happened that night on the road to Milan."

Jackson spent two hours telling Cara every detail about a flat tire, Gay flagging down Lisa, Lisa helping to fix the flat, and Gay getting hurt while trying to put the flat tire in the trunk. Because of all that, both Cara and Lisa missed the audition in Milan and neither of them were awarded contracts with Christian Dior. Nothing in the story suggested any link to spaceships or fighter planes or talking satellites or bazookas or red spacesuits or the visit to London.

When the Doctor was about to finish, Gay leaned over and touched his shoulder. He smiled and moved aside.

"Baby," Gay told her, "You will remember the words that I am going to tell you for as long as you shall live. No matter what happens to you, no matter where you go or what you do, you will never forget these words: Your father and your mother love you very much. You are the most precious thing in their lives and they care for you deeply. They will love you forever, and you will never forget that."

She backed away from her daughter. Mark stood up.

Jackson ushered them out of the room.

"Doctor," It was Mark, "When can we take her home?"

"I'll have her taken to your hotel here in London and she'll wake up on the plane with Gay. By the way, Mark, you have another flight? You cannot be on the same plane with Cara. You're not supposed to be here."

"I understand."

Jackson smiled and shook their hands, "She'll be fine. She'll wake up from a very relaxing nap and she'll be still be your little girl."

"Will she ever remember the alien, or SHADO?" Gay asked.

"No." Jackson answered. "She may have a nightmare or two about golden flying saucers. That could happen after a breakup with a close boyfriend or something emotionally stressful like that. That is normal and nothing to fear. If she shows signs of remembrance, call me and we'll do it again. But I've been doing this since 1969, Gay, and the technique hasn't failed yet."

Mark leaned in and extended his hand, "Thank you Doctor Jackson, for everything."

"My pleasure Mr. Bradley."

Epilogue

Cara awoke on the Shadair Concorde on her way back to Florida.

"Good morning, Baby." Her mother gave her a glowing smile.

"Hi Mom. How long have I been asleep?"

"You slept all night. How do you feel?"

"I feel fine, except for that damn flat tire that made us late for Christian Dior. What about you Mom, how is your side?"

Gay sighed and smiled brightly at her daughter, "You're so precious." she said as she reached out and squeezed Cara's little leg.

Cara rested her head back against the soft leather seat, "I love you, Mom."