

The North Woods

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Chapter 1

Cameron leaned over the Main Control Console in SHADO HQ London and stared at his monitor. Those damn Spinners *had* to be in sector 12.

"Cameron?" The voice of a female strolling up from behind his seat.

He turned toward her. She was tall, tanned, and athletically lean, with long brown hair that cascaded across her shoulders and down her back. She also had a stroll that reminded Cameron of a prowling panther.

"Your daughter on line 17." Tawnya smiled.

He nodded and watched her body change direction. Tawnya's long stride quickly covered the space between the Control Console and the opening to the corridor.

Cameron was one of the few young men in HQ who *could* keep his eyes off of Tawnya. Not long ago, he was a member of a small team in a Mobile with Tawnya and Captain Ayshea Johnson. They were called to strike a downed Typical Class Spinner. He had seen Tawnya fight. To be more specific, Cameron and two other large men had to restrain Tawnya after the battle was over.

She was good. Very good. And she *enjoyed* it.

"Beautiful like a panther kitten." Cameron whispered to himself. "Playful until threatened, then deadly with no conscience."

He called for another to man his station while he sought a phone. He walked to the corridor, strolled to the break room and looked inside.

No one there.

He entered, shut the door and activated the switch that turned on the "Warning: Civilian Telephone Call In Progress" sign on the outside wall.

Cameron picked up the phone and pressed 17.

"Hi baby." He said. "Yeah, sorry it took so long for me to get to a phone. We're working on the lighting for a production on Lot Two. Its good to hear your voice, too, darling. What do you need? Oh...the BBC didn't show it again? But it was in the schedule...I know, it was in the schedule *last week* too. Damn, I really wanted you to videotape it for me. I know...its our favorite science fiction series and the BBC continually replaces it with something else. What is on now? What show is playing that preempted our favorite show? You're kidding...*that?!?!!* That's off of American Cable, that a satellite feed! Did you call the BBC and complain?...You did?...Good! What did they say? They told you *that?!!* How *rude!* They should *never* speak

that way to a little girl! Right, let me see what I can do about it from here. No, I can't get our favorite show back on the air, but I have some friends here in Harlington-Straker who can cause the BBC some grief for the way they treated you. Right. I'll let you know what happens. Love you, too. See you at 6. Bye."

He put the phone down and poured a cup of coffee.

They were rude to her. He thought. **Damned rude.**

* * *

The large white sign hung above the soldier's head. In powder blue lettering was written: UN PEACEKEEPER COMMAND. Below that it said, SECTOR 12.

"I'm sorry ma'am." The soldier explained to her as he tipped his head to avoid a spotlight, "Orders. No civilians allowed outside the compound tonight."

"Sergeant," She countered, "We are not civilians, we're reporters and we're here to do a job. We won't get in the way."

The sergeant glanced once at her, and then at her group. Waiting near the exit gate was a small jeep with three people in it. The young lady who stood before him was their spokesperson. The sergeant had been warned about her already. She had succeeded in getting her reporters past the gate on previous nights.

"Orders ma'am, no civilians out tonight."

"Why sergeant? All of the UN troops in this compound are accounted for." She paused to wipe some sweat from her brow, "None of our people are out there tonight. What's going on out there?"

"Government troops, ma'am. They're patrolling the area tonight." He responded.

"Really?" She lied, "I didn't know that. I bet the folks back home would like to see some pictures of them..."

The sergeant rolled his eyes before answering, "Ma'am, The only pictures that will be seen will be the ones of your funeral if I let you out that gate. The Government troops are searching for a rebel cell group in the north woods. They told us to lay low tonight, and that's just what we're gonna do." He reached for his radio and keyed it up, "Security, this is gate three..."

She put out her hands in front of her as a gesture for him to stop. "Okay, okay, we'll be good little kids and stay at home tonight." She made her way back to her friends.

The young man in the passenger seat leaned forward and spoke softly, "Hey Shelby, any luck?"

"No." She said with a tone of disgust, "That soldierboy must have terrible luck with women, cause he knows when we lie. I never had a chance. C'mon kids, back to the bunks for tonight."

The woman in the driver's seat looked at Shelby as she climbed into the vehicle and smirked, "And you owe me a twenty dollar bill."

Shelby grinned, "I haven't forgotten our bet Carla. You just drive."

The guard tower brought their floodlight around again and drenched the whole area in a spotlight. Shelby and David had to shield their eyes.

* * *

It was a small building set away from the barracks. It had only one window, and that window faced Gate 3. The old jeep was parked just outside the door. Inside the building, there were two rooms, a bathroom, and a single closet. Two beds in one room for the women, one bed in the other room for David. A single lightbulb dangled from the cord connecting it to the

ceiling. It cast eerie shadows across the little room after the sun went down. David sat on Carla's bed sipping a vodka while Shelby was stretched out on her bed. Carla was busy putting film in the cameras and readying equipment.

"We've been here for days!" David complained, "When are we gonna get some action?"

"Don't be so eager to see a fight, Captain Kirk." Carla chided him, "Bullets can kill photojournalists just as fast as they kill soldiers."

He looked up to the ceiling, as if to address a deity, "We're wasting time here, there's a Pulitzer Prize waiting for us in the north woods." He brushed his hand through his bright blonde hair.

Shelby smiled.

Carla turned to her, "Okay boss lady, what's it gonna be?"

Shelby tensed her abdominal muscles and lifted her upper body off the bed. "Keep going. Maybe we'll get a break anyway. If we do, I want that equipment ready to go."

Carla continued with her work.

"I love it when you do that." David joked with Shelby.

"Do what?" She asked.

"Pick yourself up with only your stomach." He grinned and downed another sip of the vodka. "Why do you bother working out so often?"

Shelby looked once at the ground, and then back at him, "I was almost killed once in Desert Storm. I learned that a dead journalist doesn't get credit for undeveloped shots. I wanted better odds of living to old age, and so I started weight training. Now I have a superior body to go with my superior intellect..."

"Ohmigod, give me a break!" He laughed.

Shelby put one hand on her knee and brushed her long brown hair across her shoulder, "Carla?"

The older woman turned but kept working on the video camera.

"Tell me about the north woods."

Carla was a darkskinned African, with closely cropped auburn hair. She was older than Shelby or David, and she had a little more experience with conflict than her companions. She had taken her first bullet in the arm on the island of Grenada. She had met Shelby for the first time in Desert Storm. This was David's first assignment in or near a combat zone, but Shelby had been in both Saudi and Bosnia. Shelby knew. David didn't.

Carla answered, "There's a rumor that a group of rebels have an encampment up there. Now that the conflict has escalated, the Capital wants to flush out any cells of resistance."

David leaned up, "What makes the Government so sure that they'll find something?"

Carla shrugged her shoulders, but Shelby answered for her, "The Government has its sources. If they are willing to commit troops to search the north woods, they must have damn good reasons. They don't have the backing of the people ever since they abolished the last election..."

"Which they *lost*." Carla interrupted.

Shelby nodded her head and continued, "...and now they don't have popular support. Sending troops away from the Capital is dangerous since every farmhouse and barn could be a rebel stronghold. They must have received some reliable intelligence, and I want to be there if they find anything. Hell, that's why we're here. We're supposed to interview and photograph some of the rebels. The *whole world* knows the Government's position. They own the country's news media!"

There was silence for several minutes until Carla finished with the equipment.

"There." She announced, "Everything is ready to go, including your new playtoy."

Shelby looked over, she had been playing with her passport. "You got it working?"

Carla nodded.

"You're a genius."

Carla grinned, "Tell that to USA Today. I need a good word after that photo spread I botched with them last April."

Shelby rose off of her bed and realized that her foldaway wallet had fallen out of her pocket. She checked to make sure that her ID, passport, and credit card were still in the foldaway. She replaced it in her back pocket.

"What time is it?" David coughed through another sip of his vodka.

"About 1 AM."

David began reciting one of Sting's songs: "My mistress' eyes, are nothing like the sun. My hunger for her, explains everything I've done... That's it." He said to no one in particular. "I'm fried. I'm going to bed. This is a washout. Call me in the morning."

"Goodnight Dave." Shelby waved.

"Goodnight Captain." Carla smiled.

"See you in the daylight, Uhura."

* * *

It was 3 AM when the explosion rocked the compound. David came straight up out of his bed and instinctively grabbed for his camera. His door opened and Shelby stuck her head through.

"Somebody blew up the fence, just outside the perimeter. The UN boys are on their way. Now is our chance to slip out."

He pulled on his boots and ran to their jeep. Carla and Shelby were already there with the engine running. As soon as he climbed in, Carla shoved the vehicle into gear and spun the tires in the dirt. They rocketed forward and through the smoldering fence. Shelby glanced but did not see the sergeant. She quickly turned back around when the jeep thudded over the charred remains of the UN sign that hung above the gate.

Carla turned the jeep onto the north road and continued on into the forest.

* * *

They drove for more than half an hour when Carla thought she saw lights in the woods. Shelby waved her to cut the lights and pull over. Putting the jeep off the road, Carla shut down the motor.

Gunfire. A firefight somewhere in the woods. Without being told to do so, each of them jumped out of the vehicle and grabbed their equipment. David checked his Nikon, Carla set her long range focus, and Shelby activated the new starlight lens on her video.

Shelby turned to the young man, he was busy putting on a black cap to cover his bright hair, "Okay Captain Kirk, there's a Pulitzer Prize waiting in those woods, but you've got to dodge bullets to get to it. Still sure that you want to go?"

"It beats photographing the fashion runways."

Silently they bolted together into the darkened forest.

* * *

They came to a downed tree that had fallen over another. It covered their advance so that they could get close to the scene. Now it was a burden, because it blocked their view of what was happening. Shelby brought up her camera and tried to move around it, but someone saw

her moving silhouette and fired. The bullets chewed up a significant limb on the fallen tree and sent Shelby scampering back for heavier cover.

"Don't be so goddamn brave." Carla warned her.

"I promise..." She gasped for air, "...it won't happen again."

David looked in the other direction, "I can get through."

"Oh no you don't." Carla reached out and took him by the back of his shirt collar. She was much stronger than she looked, and her pull nearly took him backwards.

"Shelby," He spoke past Carla, "Do you want shots of the rebels or not?"

"Are you sure? You sure you see a path?" Her voice was almost threatening in its tone.

"I see it, but its gotta be *now* or I might lose the window."

"Let him go Carla," Shelby agreed, "You and I will pull back and get a better vantage point."

David crouched and ran low to the ground. He disappeared into the night on the far side of the fallen tree.

Shelby motioned to Carla to notice another treeline not far away. "We can see everything from there."

Carla saw the location, and was instantly angry that she hadn't seen it earlier. "Okay, you first. I'll watch your back."

Shelby patted the dark woman on the shoulder and bolted.

Shelby's hair got in the way and she brushed her hand through it. It cooperated and fell behind her as the wind rushed through it. She got to the trees and turned to dash behind one. That is when she saw what was happening.

A soldier had accidentally found Carla. The dark woman grabbed for his rifle and twisted it into another direction. Shelby brought up her video and activated it. She instantly found the scene in her viewer.

Carla pulled the weapon around but did not get it away from the hidden soldier. The rifle fired into the air. Something seemed wrong to Shelby as she heard the automatic weapon fire. It didn't sound like the AK-47's that the Government used, or like the UN rifles. This one was different and more silent.

Carla pushed the weapon away from her, which pushed the soldier backwards and beyond the cover of the fallen tree. Shelby's video camera followed him.

He was dressed in a red suit, like a thin Santa Clause, and he wore a gold helmet with a very dark green visor. Shelby had never seen a weapon like the one in his gloved hands. He turned back toward Carla and quickly raised his weapon at her. Shelby's heart sank as she thought that she was about to film the death of her friend.

The red soldier toppled to the ground in a hail of gunfire. His suit tore open and meat erupted from inside as the Government trooper fired into him.

Thank God for that Government man!

Carla bolted away from the downed tree before anyone else saw her. She quickly made her way to Shelby's place between the trees.

"Who the hell was *that*?!!" Carla gasped. "I've never seen anything like him before. Do you think he was a Russian pilot?"

"Carla." Shelby shushed her, "You're alive, be thankful. And you're never gonna believe what I'm filming right now."

"What do you see?"

"I've got Government troops behind a rockslide together with rebel forces."

"Oh god! Who's winning?" Carla pulled close, "Let me see."

"You don't understand." Shelby spoke quietly and deliberately, "They aren't fighting each other. They are fighting together against someone else. I think its those dudes in the Santa suits."

"We better get outta here. I think we'd better tell someone in the UN about those Santas."

"Okay," Shelby agreed, "Go get the jeep. I'll get David and we'll get the hell outta here."

"Right."

The women separated in different directions. Shelby paced herself and then dropped to the ground. She rolled and turned the starlight lens on the fallen body of the strange soldier. He was quite dead. Green liquid was oozing from bullet holes carved into his helmet. Shelby leaned close with her camera. She scooted his strange rifle into her hand, and used it to prop his head up to the lens. He looked Oriental, greenish liquid dripping out of the broken visor. His skin was a greenish tint. She panned the camera up and down his body looking for a flag or a patch on his flight suit that would tell her what country he was from. There was none. She thrust her hand into a pocket and produced an empty film container. She popped the top and scooped up some of the green liquid out of the helmet. She replaced the container into the pocket and started to move.

A strange *shwoosh* sound stopped her in mid-movement. An explosion rocked the whole area. Men screamed, others cried out, dirt and debris began to fall out of the night sky.

Shelby crouched and leapt forward. She quickly made her way to the edge of the fallen tree and brought the video camera to her face. She continued to record, but was using the starlight lens array to try and locate David. She panned the entire scene laid out before her. Dead men were lying in the clearing, Government and Rebels together. None of the Santas were there though.

Someone screamed in the night on the far side of the clearing. Shelby focused her camera on that point.

She saw them.

It was big and gold. A large vehicle of some sort, a circular construction with a shield of some kind covering the upper half. There was a ring of disks around the widest point of the.....*saucer!*

As the camera refocused, Shelby discover another ship partially hidden behind the first.

"My God, how many are there?" She whispered.

Another scream caught her attention. She turned the camera in that direction.

She began to tremble.

Two of them were dragging David behind the closest gold ship. He tried to struggle, but one of the Santas cuffed him savagely across the jaw. He fell unconscious and they pulled him behind the vehicle.

Shelby began to shake. *These aren't Russians. She realized, These are aliens, these are goddammed X-Files aliens!!! How the hell am I gonna get David back from aliens?*

Suddenly, two red suited Santas came out of the woods on the far side of the clearing. They seemed to be looking for something. They glanced in several directions and kicked over dead bodies. One of them hefted his strange rifle started to move toward the fallen tree, where the dead Santa was lying. Suddenly, his buddy leaped toward him and motioned him back. They quickly made their way to one of the saucers.

"Why would they want to leave in such a hurry?" Shelby whispered to herself.

She remained perfectly still, waiting for the vehicles to "move." Each ship started to spin,

faster and faster, and each of them made a cycling noise. The first one lifted off, straight up into the sky. The camera watched as it made no lift off thrust against the ground, it displaced no dirt or debris, it just *lifted* up into the sky as if by magic.

Then Shelby lowered her camera to watch the other one lift off. But to her surprise, there was not just one more waiting to lift off, there were two. One was further back in the forest, away from the first two.

"Three of them."

The first one was airborne and moving. She refocused her camera on it and pressed herself against the tree for cover. The ship moved over her and toward the road.

Carla! She fought herself not to scream.

The spinning vehicle passed over Carla's jeep. The starlight camera instantly refocused and watched as the ship hovered for just a second. Suddenly, a pulse of light shot away from the disks of the ship and made the "*shwoosh*" sound. The jeep erupted in a shower of fire and burning debris. Carla could not have survived it.

You bastards. You goddam bastards.

They might come after me too.

Shelby bolted for the dead body of the Santa soldier. She wrapped her little fingers tightly around his strange rifle and took it with her as she darted back for the cover of the tree.

The other golden saucers lifted into the night. She turned her camera on them. The last one stopped and hovered above the body of the dead Santa as the second one went on. Shelby jumped when the saucer fired another *shwoosh* pulse. It vaporized the Santa and the area around him. The tree shook violently and Shelby was thrown out of her cover. She scrambled for her camera and remounted it on her shoulder when she noticed how loud the cycling noise had become.

The UFO had seen her.

It slowly slid through the air toward her. There was no point in trying to hide from it anymore. Shelby stood up to her feet, focused her camera squarely on the spinning UFO, and gestured to it with the middle finger of her free hand. The other ships slid into the camera's view high in the sky beyond.

She thought she could see a crackling inside the spinning disks. Perhaps a gathering of static energy. Perhaps the charging of a weapon.

The farthest UFO unexpectedly exploded in a beautiful cascade of light and fire. Shelby's camera struggled to compensate for the sudden burst of light. The other two UFOs darted away in a flash.

Shelby ran back to the clearing for a better view of the starscape. Hefting her camera, she set its finder for infinity and tried to follow the golden UFO's. She found only one, then something zoomed past it. She didn't get a good look at the newcomer. Widening the field of vision, she was able to view the entire scene with some difficulty. She found the two surviving UFO's, but they were running from something.

The good guys, I hope. She whispered to herself.

Then she found it. One of the golden UFO's turned violently as two streaks shot past it. It continued evading as the two streaks returned toward it. One of those streaks found its mark and the UFO exploded in an expanding fireball. The camera fought quickly to correct the view in the sudden burst of light. The third UFO was very high now, it was just a tiny dot to the zoom lens of the camera. Shelby tried desperately to pan the sky looking for the reason why the aliens were running away.

There! There it was. A single plane, a fighter jet. Short, with a large forward air intake, large rocket pods built under squat wings and a flat rear end. The plane didn't look like it should be able to fly, but there it was in the air. Plain as...*day*...to her starlight camera.

Bumblebees do it. She thought.

A quick refocus and...got it! A wonderful side view shot of the strange fighter.

Shelby observed English writing on the side of the fighter and thought to herself: *I wonder what "SKY" means. Wait, there's more. There's a five on the stabilizer. So that means there are at least four more of these fighters.*

David. Carla.

You bastards! She put the camera down and turned it off. You killed one of my friends and you kidnapped another! I'll tell the whole goddammed world about you and put my tape on goddammed CNN International News. I'll show everyone in the whole goddammed world that you exist and what you're doing here! We'll be ready when you come back! There won't be anywhere for you to hide!

Shelby had to think fast. There had been a blast that had brought down Gate Three at the UN compound. That would bring UN investigators. She was standing in a battle scene, and that would bring more UN investigators. By the looks of the surroundings, none of the Government or rebel soldiers survived or got away. That would bring more Government and rebel forces to this spot to find out why. Finally, Shelby realized that she couldn't go back to the compound alone. She had no way of explaining the disappearance of David or Carla's death or the destruction of the jeep.

She was alone. Completely on her own.

She put the camera on the dirt, and surveyed the scene. She visited each of the bodies and took whatever wasn't covered in gore. When she had finished, she discovered that she had enough provisions, water, soap, a comb, a jacket, rope, fire starting equipment, a backpack, a duffel bag, everything that she'd need for the long hike to the Capital and out of the country. She kicked aside mounds of unused ammunition to clear a place to load the pack.

Ammunition...weapons...the alien rifle...more physical evidence!!!

She quickly climbed over the fallen tree and searched desperately for that weapon.

C'mon, damn you, where'd you go?!

There!

It was tucked in under the limb of the fallen tree. Still in perfect condition, not a single scratch on it.

Shelby hefted the alien rifle in her hands. "You're gonna make history my little friend." She spoke to the rifle, "I'll visit you in the Smithsonian. You, my tape, and that green yuck fluid are gonna help me prove the existence of *aliens*!!"

* * *

The meeting took place in the office of the Commanding Officer, United Nations Peacekeeper Command, Sector 12.

None of the military officers of the UN compound were in the room.

"Alright." Commander Virginia Lake sat in the thickly padded leather chair and leaned back. She looked up toward the four people in the room with her. "Thank you for your reports, that will be all for now. Gather your teams together and get them to their Mobiles. Prepare your groups for departure."

Everyone started to leave. Lake suddenly called out, "Captain Johnson, I would like to speak with you for a moment."

Ayshea remained in the office as the other exited and closed the door.

Lake did not get up from the chair, "Ayshea, what do you make of the reports?"

Ayshea relaxed and allowed herself to sink into one of the leather chairs by the desk.

Now that the junior officers were gone, the women could relate to each other with a more personal demeanor.

"Virginia," Ayshea told her, "We have a major, *major* security risk here."

Lake leaned in the chair, "I knew that his *had* to happen one day. High technology in the hands of the press. Dear God, why did this have to happen *before* I retired?"

Ayshea did not comment.

"You've read the reports," Lake said, "And you've inspected the forest clearing."

Ayshea crossed her legs. "SID followed four Spinners down into this area. The UN guards saw something big and gold in the woods. Seconds later their observation tower exploded and took gate 3 with it. Other soldiers observed three journalists leave in a jeep after the gate area incinerated. The jeep and one journalist is accounted for. Maria Lopez provided us with the infra-red scan that Sky 5 made of the area. It clearly shows one solitary live figure. The battle scene shows evidence of three Typical Class Spinners, aliens on foot, and abductions. We found two cameras on the scene. One was a hand held Nikon with film still in it. We developed the film and discovered some great shots of a Typical Class, and a several clear photos of alien warriors in combat with local factions. The last photo was of an alien reaching toward the camera. The other was a video camera, it was carefully buried, and its cassette tape was missing. And it had a starlight lens."

Lake sighed, "What do you make of this?"

Ayshea uncrossed her legs, "I'd say that both of the local factions went into the woods to search for each other. They both saw something going on in the forest and each group suspected the presence of the others. When they arrived, they both found aliens. The aliens panicked and opened fire, assuming the newcomers were SHADO. One Spinner flew clear and bolted for the edge of the woods, where it found this base. It fired and blew up the tower, and then it got away clean. The other three Ufoes had crew caught outside of their ships and had to stay and fight. The journalists arrived and started snapping pictures. I'd guess that the one with the Nikon has been abducted, and is probably *spare parts* by now. The one in the jeep was incinerated when a Spinner tried to get away and spotted their vehicle. All the local people were accounted for, so that leaves only one journalist. Sky 5's infra-red saw a solitary figure at the scene, so I'd guess that was our journalist. The guards on base say that the Nikon belonged to a man. The jeep was driven by an African woman, and the starlight camera was used by a woman named Shelby Cox."

Lake nodded her agreement.

Ayshea asked Virginia, "So where does that leave us?"

Lake sounded exhausted and disgusted at the same time, "It leaves us with a photojournalist who has a tape that contains images of at least one Typical Class Spinner, alien warriors, and probably Sky 5. She's in the media, so she knows the value of substantiating evidence. She probably has some equipment or a helmet or something left behind by the aliens to prove her story. She discarded the starlight camera so that she doesn't have to carry the extra weight. She took the time and expended the energy to bury it because she expected to be followed and she didn't want any remaining evidence that she was still alive. She took food and survival equipment from the dead soldiers for her journey, so she knows what she's doing. I'd say that she's headed for the quickest way out of this country's civil war and back to her

publisher. I need to know where she's going, Ayshea. Get me the name and nation of the publisher that dispatched Shelby Cox and her team to photograph this civil war. Also, have Security monitor her bank and credit card accounts. If she tries to use them, we've got her location. Tap the phones of her parents, family, friends, and employer. Find out if she has any subscriptions to Internet providers, telephone cards, or a cellular phone. Dear God, I hope that she doesn't have a cellular phone! If an American Ambassador starts asking about her Social Security Number or her passport, we nab her. You know the drill."

Ayshea climbed out of her seat and moved toward the door.

"And Ayshea..."

She turned back toward Lake.

"When you find her employer, report that all three journalists are confirmed dead."

Ayshea looked puzzled.

Lake explained, "So no one will come looking for Ms. Cox. Makes our job a little easier, especially if we can lay our hands on her. Remember that the aliens don't like this any more than we do. They will be searching for her too, and two of their four Spinners got away from us. Call London and get Security people to cover this nation's airports, airstrips, any ports that might exist, and the railways."

Ayshea asked, "What if our dead Ms. Cox is discovered alive by other authorities?"

"Tell them that she and her possessions are to be placed in immediate quarantine. Say that Ms. Cox and her belongings have been exposed to the AIDS Virus and she might be contagious. People are still violently phobic about anything and anyone associated with AIDS. She and her belongings will be tossed into a barren room and no one will talk to her or touch her until we arrive. Or, you can tell them that she has schizophrenia brought on by diathesis-stress. We can usually depend on people's fears and stereotypes, especially where AIDS or mental health is concerned."

Ayshea nodded and left the room.

Virginia picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Yes, get me Colonel Richardson, UN sector 12 please. Thank you." Then a long pause, "Colonel, this is Commander Lake. Yes, we've completed our survey of the area. We have found evidence of biological agents in the vicinity. We need you to inform both the Government and the Rebels to stay clear of the area until we can mount an environmental scouring of the entire woods...No Colonel, we don't know which faction might've used the biologicals...That's right Colonel, no survivors...No Colonel, there is no danger to your compound. I agree, it *is* such a terrible loss..."

* * *

Shelby had been walking and riding in the back of horse drawn wagons for several days before she found the train depot. She made her way between two boxcars and nearly tripped on the rail tracks. She righted herself and continued on toward the stationhouse. The sounds of powerful locomotives drowned out her footsteps through the harsh gravel and made it very difficult to hear herself thinking.

A whistle went off. Shelby could see that beyond the next row of boxcars, a train was leaving. She bolted for the space between two of the cars in front of her. She squeezed through it easily with her backpack and duffel bag.

She saw him just as she was about to dash for the departing train. He was completely out of place here in the train depot wearing his expensive black suit. She instantly recognized the appearance of an *agent*. Their "look" hadn't changed much in over thirty years, and neither had their aura of observant snooping.

Maybe he's not looking for me. She thought, but her paranoia swayed her opinion. This agent's clothing was obviously too expensive for him to be of the local Government. Which meant that he was from a foreign power. That was good enough for Shelby to assume that he was looking for her. He was foreign, she was foreign. Even if he wasn't looking for her, better to be safe than sorry.

Shelby weighed her chances of getting past him. Damn near zero. Other trains would be leaving today, she would just have to find another.

At least I don't have look over my shoulder anymore. She thought to herself, *Now I know that they're after me.*

* * *

Cameron activated a secured channel that would link his headset with a private line to SID.

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

"SID," Cameron asked, "Link up with NASA commercial telemetry and tell me which satellites are feeding the BBC line-in from American Cable."

Only a few seconds passed before the old satellites responded, "NASA identified four reflector satellites at the following coordinates..."

Cameron cross referenced each location with his monitor screen.

They were rude to my little girl. He thought. ***Damned*** *rude.*

"SID," Cameron asked, "Monitor the frequencies of each of those satellites. Which one is reflecting or transmitting on the BBC channel right now?"

Space Intruder Detector identified only one of the communications satellites in operation for the BBC.

Cameron found it on his monitor. Then he overlaid the image with the transponder signals from all other SHADO orbiting units. SID was over the planetary curve and not in line of sight with the communications satellite.

"Damn." He muttered. *SID would've been perfect for this.*

Cameron went looking for one of the Watchdog Platforms.

There it was. Watchdog 4. A little far away but it would serve.

Cameron punched in the elaborate codes to gain access to Watchdog 4's computer system. It responded with a series of beeps and whirs in his headset, but his touch panel refreshed its screen to show many control options for the Platform.

Cameron began touching controls.

* * *

Shelby spent the evening on a mound of hay in a boxcar. The door had been slid back and left open and she had crawled in. After a short meal of C-rations, she watched the shadows fall across the mountains far away. There was a layer of snow on the highest of the peaks, and it blazed a bright white as the setting sun's glare reflected from it.

She reached for the duffel bag. She opened it, and drew out the alien assault rifle. She hadn't had the time or the privacy to inspect the weapon in the last few days. Now was her chance before night fell and it was too dark.

The weapon looked like strange variation of a normal military assault rifle. She hefted it in her hands, it was much lighter than it looked to be. She turned it over and held it like a soldier would. She found a switch near the trigger assembly. She flipped it and pulled slowly back on the trigger. The trigger gave under the pressure. She flipped the switch again and tried the trigger. It did not move. There's the safety.

*I guess accidents have occurred with firearms on **their** world too.*

She quickly located the magazine, but found no way to remove it from the slot. She began to wonder what the bullets looked like. Were they different from those constructed on Earth? She wouldn't know unless she could find out how the catch release worked on the magazine.

Shelby found no writing on the weapon. No insignia, nothing. She had hoped to locate the name of the manufacturer, written in the *alien language*. This rifle just seemed to be a generic, simple "point and shoot" rifle carried by the hands of a soldier who wasn't born on this world.

Damn. She thought, Why couldn't they have carried a Phaser or something? All the high energy weapons in Science Fiction, and I get an alien who carries a tommy gun!

Shelby whispered to the weapon, "I just hope you're made of a metal that isn't found on Earth. Cause if you're not, my story might be toast."

She checked to make sure that she still had the container of green liquid, and the all important tape cassette.

Why do they come here? She wondered silently, They bring guns and they have no hesitation about shooting people. That's not the Prime Directive. Aren't we all supposed to be part of a galactic village? One big happy space family?

*I wonder if they're hostile? Or were they shot at first by the nervous Government troops? Ohmigod! What if they're friendly and we killed some of their people?!!! We could have a war! And it would be **our** fault!*

*But they **live**! I have proof that aliens really exist and that they have been here!*

She began to ponder the contents of her cassette tape recording.

I wonder what that "SKY" fighter was? It just came out of nowhere and started blasting the aliens. What a weird design for an aircraft. Hey wait a minute!

The realization suddenly hit her.

*That "SKY" fighter was one of **ours**! Maybe it wasn't from the US or the UN, but it was built on Earth. The aliens were afraid of it and they ran from it. The aliens already **knew** about the "SKY" fighter, and the "SKY" fighter was gunning for **them**. Which means that they **know** each other. **Somebody** is shooting down UFOs and not telling anyone else about it!*

*Somebody **already knows** and is keeping it a secret!*

She carefully replaced the rifle into the duffel bag. It was even *more* important now

* * *

Watchdog 4 was a triangular platform, made mostly of girding and disk antennae. Each of the three points of the triangle had large reinforced fins that gathered solar energy for a backup fuel source. Each of the Watchdogs served a dual function for SHADO. They helped facilitate instantaneous communications worldwide for SHADO, and they protected SID during UFO alerts. The aliens had often tried to destroy the old satellite during the time that Ed Straker was in the responsibility seat. SID was just too important for SHADO to lose, and too *expensive* for SHADO to replace, and so Straker had put up additional Watchdog Platforms to keep track of incoming Spinners while SID got away from the UFO's entry path. The Watchdogs were not armed, and they were not as useful or as intelligent as SID, but they could be easily replaced...and often were. The aliens wanted SID *really* bad, but they would be happy to take a few potshots at Watchdogs on their down to Earth's surface.

Watchdog 4 responded to Cameron's command and fired thrusters. It sent a confirmation signal to Cameron's desk and to SID that it had executed the course change.

* * *

Shelby woke up when the boxcar lurched. It was dark, very late at night. A whistle sounded and the car lurched again. Shelby tried to get to her feet but fell back into the hay mound. She looked out the open door. The train was moving, taking her somewhere unknown.

One direction was as good as another. She crawled back into her warmed place on the hay and tried to go back to sleep.

Just take me to a phone and an airport...and a shower.

* * *

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

Cameron came forward in his seat at the control desk in SHADO London and tightened his headset to a more comfortable position.

The old satellite continued, "U.F.O. detected at the following coordinates..."

Cameron began the confirmation process with other Earth based Utronics stations.

"This is SHADO Control to..." He looked at one of the monitors for information, "...SkyDiver 5. Ufoe detected in your area at the following location..."

The speaker crackled to life, "This is SkyDiver Five, roger that Romulan. Launch stations!"

The longlegged beauty strolled to Cameron's side. She bent down and put her hand on Cameron's chair to support herself as she watched.

"How long to interception?" Her voice was cold, emotionless.

"About six minutes." Cameron answered her.

There was silence in Control for a few minutes.

Alec Freeman appeared behind them, "Tawnya?"

The woman turned, "Yes Commander?"

"Monitor trajectory on this one as a doublecheck. We want to make sure that none of these get away from us. They're all carrying abductees."

"Yes sir." She said as she rose to her feet and walked toward another workstation.

Cameron half turned in his seat, "Commander. Sky 5 is engaging."

Alec nodded, "C'mon Maria, take it down. Don't let ET go home."

* * *

Maria brought Sky 5 around in a wide arc and sighted quickly on the UFO. The golden Spinner hung there in front of her. Then it darted to the left and accelerated. Maria compensated and fired.

Two missiles tore away from the fighter and toward the enemy ship. The alien launched a rapid series of pulses at the oncoming rockets and exploded them both.

"Shit! He got both of them!" Maria cursed into her microphone.

The Spinner fired a long beam at Sky 5. The fighter pulled right and avoided the weapon.

Maria quickly read her instruments, "The Spinner is headed for a cloudbank. Ready the Interceptors if I lose it!"

* * *

Cameron leaned toward the angelhair microphone, "SHADO Control to Moonbase."

"This is Moonbase." It was Nina Barry. "We're ready at this end Control."

Nina turned her head toward the operatives in the Moonbase Control Sphere, "Interceptors," She called out, "Immediate launch."

Nina turned to the situation map. If the Spinner lifted straight out of the atmosphere over the combat zone it currently occupied, the Interceptors would never get close enough for a decent shot. It was on the opposite side of the Earth from the Moon.

* * *

The Spinner was heading for the cover of the clouds. Maria was trying to gain on it but that last maneuver had put a lot of distance between them.

"C'mon, c'mon..." She whispered to herself.

"Captain Lopez." It was the voice of Alec Freeman on her radio deck.

"Commander, I can try one last time, but there's not much chance. I think he's gonna get away from me."

"Do what you can, Maria." Freeman told her, "Your rockets don't do us any good in their wing pods."

"Roger those rockets, Commander."

Maria's instruments reported that the missiles had acquired their target. She fired. Two missiles sped away from her and toward the golden UFO.

In the seconds that followed, Maria thought to herself, *The missiles are camera guided because of the alien's stealth equipment. If he gets into the cloud, he could evade and escape. Funny, I don't ever recall seeing a woman alien.*

The missiles gained quickly on the UFO, but they were not fast enough. The Spinner disappeared into the cloud bank. The missiles followed anyway.

Maria saw a flash somewhere inside the cloud.

She called out, "SID!"

"This is Space Intruder Detector..."

"What is the Spinner's altitude?"

Back in London, everyone had gathered around Cameron's desk and was silently waiting for the old satellite's response.

The English accent reverberated from the globe in SHADO and the radio system in Sky 5: "U.F.O. is rapidly losing altitude. Expected impact with ocean in twenty one seconds."

Maria twisted in her seat, "Yes!! Got that sonofabitch!"

Sky 5 ducked under the cloud bank and awaited the sighting of the dying UFO. Maria watched closely, holding her breath.

There it was!

The Spinner was still spinning, but very slowly. There was thick purple smoke pouring out of a large gaping hole in one side of the craft. Maria followed it toward the ocean surface.

It slammed into the water and rebounded.

"Splash one Romulan." Maria announced.

"Good work, Captain Lopez." It was Freeman, "Stay with it until you can confirm its auto destruction."

"Yes sir."

The ship sank beneath the surface. A moment later, the ocean began to boil in that location. The seething water churned and spit up tiny pieces of debris.

Then she saw them come up from the depths.

"Sky 5 to SHADO Control." Maria was speaking very slowly and deliberately.

Cameron prompted her to continue.

Maria took a deep breath. "Control, I've got two abductee canisters floating on the ocean surface. Get somebody out here *fast!*"

"This is Space Intruder Detector...locking Utronics beacon on sighted abductee canisters. Maintaining constant contact until further notice."

Alec turned to Cameron, "Dispatch a Retrieval/Extraction team from the closest SHADO

base. I'll be in my office."

Cameron happily followed his orders.

* * *

Commander Lake sat in the soft, plush seat of the Shadair Lear on her way back to London Control.

The speaker in her cabin came to life, "Commander, there's a call for you."

Lake reached for the receiver on the deck in front of her, "Lake."

"Virginia, it's Ayshea."

"What have you got for me?"

"Shelby Cox is employed by Gannet News, their New York office. As far as the authorities are concerned, she is officially dead as of the night in the forest. She was seen by a train conductor in the depot near the capital. We've scoured the entire depot. She's a stowaway on one of six trains that left the Capital between 11 PM and 4 AM last night. We're flying agents to those six destinations right now. Only two of those destinations are located outside of this country, and we're doubling the teams sent to those two depots."

"Excellent, Ayshea. I'd wager that Ms. Cox is headed out of the country."

"We'll be ready, Virginia."

"Good, Good. Contact me when you have any developments."

"We will. Mobile Leader out."

* * *

Shelby awoke at dawn and crawled to the door of the boxcar. The train was still moving and the countryside hurried past the opening. She looked out and tried to gauge what direction she was going.

Heading northwest, that means I'm not out of the civil war yet. Damn. Not going to leave this country for a while. Well, a few more days won't matter, I guess.

She rummaged through her pockets and searched for her duffel bag. There was the rifle. She found the cassette and the container of green liquid. She crawled back to the hay and opened her backpack for a little breakfast.

Gosh, I'd love to find a shower...

* * *

Watchdog 4 located the satellite that the BBC was using to preempt the regularly scheduled science fiction series. The large triangle fired a side thruster that set the entire platform into a very slow spin.

Cameron watched on his monitor. Watchdog 4 was close, very close, almost there...

*They were **rude** to my daughter.* He thought. *Maybe I can't force the BBC to air her science fiction show, but I can make sure that they nothing to preempt it with...*

The powerful support arms that connected the solar fins to Watchdog's superstructure slammed into the back of the small communications satellite. It rolled and tumbled toward the Earth's atmosphere. The two million dollar communications reflector burned up in an uncontrolled re-entry.

"This is Space Intruder Detector..." the old satellite's voice resounded throughout SHADO HQ, "Watchdog Four reports physical contact with civilian communications satellite. Watchdog Four reports no damage but the communications satellite has been destroyed."

Cameron smiled. The BBC would not be very happy. Cameron allowed the Platform to resume self-control.

Watchdog 4 corrected its spin and returned to its assigned patrol route.

Don't preempt our show! Next time, I'll send the Interceptors.

* * *

After her breakfast of C-rations, Shelby tried to brush the hay out of her dark hair. She succeeded, but cringed anyway. Her hair felt like the straw. Although she couldn't smell herself, she assumed that she was pretty bad by now.

She felt the train decelerate. She crawled again to the open door, put her head out and looked forward toward the front of the train.

Woods, some rocks, and a city. She was heading for a depot.

If I were Scully & Mulder, would I be waiting for me at that station?

Damn right, I would!

She gathered her belongings and looked out again. She located the small woods and a rockpile ahead.

"If I miss, I'm dead on the rocks." She whispered.

Shelby counted the seconds, timed her jump as the train slowed down, and hopped feet-first out of the car.

She landed on her feet and tried to roll. She slipped and landed on her side, allowing the duffel bag to go free. The impact hurt her but she got back up. Retrieving the bag, she made her way into the woods and watched the train go by.

After the caboose had passed, she remained perfectly still for several minutes. The sounds of the woods in the early morning intrigued her. Small insects, a squirrel scampering across a tree limb, birds singing in the cool air. Shelby felt her back and shoulders relax a bit. She reached into the backpack and extracted a canteen of water. She took a gulp and put the canteen back in its place.

She rose to her feet, put her backpack back on, grabbed her duffel bag, and started to hike towards the edge of the woods.

* * *

It was 2 in the afternoon when Ayshea got the last report.

"Captain Johnson, this is Security 6. No sign of Ms. Cox. We found a stowaway, but it wasn't the woman we're looking for."

Dammit! "Alright Six. Stand by for further instructions. Johnson out."

Ayshea thought for a moment, and then opened a channel that would connect her to all six Security teams, "Alright, Cox has jumped her train before we got to her. Fan your teams out along the tracks and see if you can any signs of her. Send people to cover the local airports."

Six team leaders acknowledged and closed the channel.

Ayshea didn't want to tell Commander Lake the bad news. She leaned forward in her seat in Mobile Leader and keyed up her mic.

* * *

Virginia Lake was in Commander Freeman's office when Ayshea's call came in.

"I know you're doing your best, Ayshea. Keep at it. Ms. Cox can't evade us forever."

"Will do, Virginia. Thanks. Mobile Leader out."

Lake leaned back in her seat and put her face in her hand.

"Tired?" Alec asked her.

"Exhausted." She responded, "But we've got to find Shelby Cox before anyone else does."

Freeman nodded his agreement, "I've been thinking about her, Virginia. Maybe we can

approach this problem from another angle?"

Lake brought her head up to face Freeman, silently prompting him to continue.

"We know the aliens will be looking for her too. SID is already looking for them, and we can get a Sky to almost any location..."

"You mean let the aliens take care of our problem for us?"

Alec rolled his eyes. "No, Virginia, I'm not as ruthless as General Straker was." He leaned forward in his chair. "I mean that we let the aliens take us to her, and then blast the aliens before they can get Ms. Cox. As I was saying about SkyDivers..."

The buzzer on Alec's desk interrupted him. He answered it.

"Commander, this is Dr. Barrons in SHADO New Zealand. We have completed the extraction process. We've successfully recovered both abductees. They're resting in our infirmary, still unconscious from the ordeal."

"Very good Doctor." Alec exclaimed, "Good work."

"Commander, there is something you should know."

Alec looked once at Virginia with a dark wondering expression.

"Go on, Doctor..." He said to the monitor.

* * *

She heard it long before she saw it. Shelby froze. Slowly, she crouched to her knees.

*What the hell is **that**?!!*

It looked like a small tank but had no turret or canon. It was gray, it had two large forward windows, loud as hell and cumbersomely lumbering through the forest. It was a tracked vehicle, moving slowly. It looked like a large All Terrain Vehicle. Shelby recalled seeing something like it before. When she was in the Arctic last year doing a photo shoot of an Alaskan tribe. Her guide had a vehicle like that.

*Except this sonofabitch is **armored**. This is a fighting vehicle. Its too modern to be from the Government, and too expensive to be from the Rebels. I'll bet this monster is from those people who own that "SKY" fighter. It is searching for something.*

Me, I'll bet.

She remained perfectly still as the large machine lumbered past her. The roar of the engine was deafening. Carefully, she looked from behind her hiding place and watched the vehicle go beyond her. She read the word printed on the side of the tank.

What does "SHADO" mean?

Then she saw the number "3" printed on the side and rear of the vehicle.

"Shit." She whispered, "That means there's at least two more of these goddammed things running around out here!"

Shelby put her head down and partially covered herself with the duffel bag. She waited for the tank to lumber away. It went beyond her for a great distance, and then it stopped. She could tell because the loud engine noise subsided and maintained its volume.

She poked her head up. She could barely see it in the woods far away. It had ceased forward movement and was just sitting idle.

"Did you see me?" She whispered toward the tank.

Two events happened simultaneously. Something appeared on top of the tank as Shelby's ears caught the new sound. At first, she thought the tank was making the new sound but then she recognized it.

Cycling.

The protrusion on the roof of the gray tank turned out to be some sort of weapon. The

tank opened fire at something further away. Shelby already knew what the tank was firing at. She had heard that cycling sound before.

It's an alien!

Her mind raced. Should she run? Stay where she was?

She saw it. Far beyond the gray tank, in the woods. It was exactly like the ones she had seen before. A gold saucer, spinning quickly, rising through the trees.

It fired a single energy beam at the tank.

The tank erupted into smoke and fire. The noise of its engine stopped.

Shit!

She bolted from behind the tree and started to run.

Shelby crossed the path where the tank had lumbered past her. She turned instinctively to view it down the cleared path.

She stopped herself at the closest tree. Images of aliens carrying dragging David suddenly filled her memory. She took a step, stopped herself.

The aliens take people.

The tape, the story.

The aliens take people.

"Don't be so goddamn brave." Carla had warned her.

"I promise..." Shelby recalled, "...it won't happen again."

Shelby dropped the backpack, opened the duffel bag, pulled out the rifle, deactivated the safety, and ran down the freshly trodden path toward the burning tank.

The aliens take people.

She got to the wreck and dashed to the side. Smoke and fire billowed from inside the vehicle.

Santa!

Shelby rolled to the ground and cut to one side. One alien was dragging a young man in a gray jumpsuit. He was conscious but far too hurt to fight back.

"Bastard!" Shelby got to her feet.

The alien dropped the young man and quickly reached for its own rifle. It saw Shelby, and hesitated for a fatal second.

She tensed her muscles for the recoil and pulled back on the trigger.

The alien took several rapid shots in its chest and flipped sideways to the ground. It did not get back up.

Shelby crouched suddenly and crawled along the ground. She neared the young man and looked around for any more Santas but didn't see any. She also did not immediately locate the golden ship, nor did she its sound.

She hovered over the man. His uniform was burnt across the chest. She put her rifle down and he looked at her.

"Is there anyone else in the wreck?" She asked him.

He shook his head from side to side and whispered, "I...only one."

"God," She exclaimed, "I don't have any medical supplies." She looked to the fallen man, "What can I do?"

"Mobiles on the way..."

Shelby suddenly remembered! The words on the side of the tank, SHADO **Three!** That means there's at least two more of these goddammed things bouncing around out here!

"Uhhh," She told him, "I gotta go. Your friends are on the way...right?"

He nodded weakly. "Stay...looking for you."

"Yeah, I bet you are." She gathered her rifle. "The Santas won't stay here if your friends are coming, they've ran from your SHADO people before. You'll be okay until others come for you?"

He nodded. He laid his hand on her forearm but did not close his fingers around her wrist, "Thank you."

She smiled at him. "I gotta go buddy. I'm sorry. Stay alive, okay?" She touched the side of his face.

He tried to smile, but fell unconscious. She carefully laid his head on the ground.

She pulled her hand away from his hand. She got to her feet and heard the voice.

"Mobile Three? This is Captain Johnson. We're at the ridge, we're coming. Hang on."

Shelby reached down and saw the small communicator on his belt. She took it, grabbed her rifle and dashed off into the forest.

Only the SHADO knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men...

* * *

Lake was on the phone in Freeman's office under the studio.

"Mother of God, she did *what*?!!"

Freeman waited impatiently for the phone call to end. He made a mental note to no longer allow his operatives to take anything but speakerphone calls in his office in the future.

She put down the phone and started to pace.

"For God's sakes, Virginia, what happened out there?" Freeman blurted.

She turned slowly and looked Freeman squarely in the eyes, "Shelby Cox just saved the life of the driver of Mobile Three. He unexpectedly encountered a Ufoe and lost the confrontation. They were abducting him when Ms. Cox jumped out of the woods like Princess Leia and shot the alien with her own alien assault rifle. She tended to the driver but left before Ayshea could get there in Mobile Leader. Ayshea has discovered that the driver's communicator is missing. The dead alien on the scene doesn't have it."

Freeman surmised, "Ms. Cox."

Lake nodded, "That *bitch* has a tape recording of three Spinners, aliens, and Sky 5. She's got *an alien assault rifle*, she's seen a Mobile, she knows our name, and **now** she has one of our communicators!!! Its a big mistake to have our name printed on the sides of those Mobiles, Alec! Why do you and Straker *insist* on parading our name of the exterior of all our vehicles?"

Alec put out his hand in a gesture that spoke *calm down*. "That '*bitch*' as you call her, just saved the life of one of our people, Virginia. That counts for something."

Lake silently conceded.

"Now I want you to issue new orders to the Security teams searching for Ms. Cox." Alec ordered, "I want her taken alive and in one piece. You tell them not to shoot first or use the standard Neanderthal tactics on this mission. I want no indiscriminate shooting, no 007 license to kill. She is to be subdued with the least amount of force that is possible, and treated with the utmost respect after being captured. We owe her that much. She didn't have to go into the belly of a battle and save our driver. Interrogate everyone who comes into contact with her. Don't just eliminate them unless we have to. And I mean that I want *verifiable* and *justifiable* reasons why they should die before they die, *not afterwards*."

Lake nodded and moved toward the door.

"And Virginia." Alec called after her and rose from his chair.

"Tell SID to delete that communicator frequency from the list of available channels. He is

only to monitor it, don't transmit anything to it. Receive only."

Lake nodded again and the double doors opened for her. She left the room.

Alec returned to his seat and turned to ponder the situation at while looking at the psychadelic holoscreen behind his desk.

*She's scared, on the run, and she's carrying the most powerful news story in history. He thought. And she **still** went back to help our man, **knowing** that he was **our** man.*

* * *

Shelby ran and ran and kept running. When she could run no further, she collapsed by the side of a large tree. It was late dusk and the light was fading.

She rested for more than half an hour.

I hope that guy is okay.

The alien rifle has almost no recoil. I wonder how they did that?

Shelby opened her backpack, took out another container of C-rations, opened her canteen and ate her sparse dinner in the woods.

*Good God, these SHADO people are **really** gonna be after me **now**!*

She put her canteen away and buried the empty rations container.

She began to wonder what SHADO meant.

Secret something Alien Dudes something.

Shit Happens And Death Overall.

She chuckled to herself and shook her head from side to side.

SHADO isn't omnipotent. The aliens might run away sometimes, but they won that last fight with SHADO's tank. The Santas are afraid of the SKY fighters, but not of the gray Tanks. I wonder what that means. Maybe the SKY fighter is faster than the Santa ships. Maybe its something else.

Oh shit. She thought, Maybe the SHADO Tank and the Santa ship surprised each other by accident. Maybe they both stumbled on each other while they were looking for something else---like me!

It was beginning to get dark.

"I'm getting paranoid." She said out loud.

Better safe than sorry. She thought. Better alive than dead.

She heard cycling. An alien ship!

Shelby got to her feet and bolted for a thicker cover of trees. She stole a glance behind her. Nothing.

It's above the trees. Not in the woods like before.

She ran and kept running.

Suddenly she recognized the heavy engine sounds of another SHADO tank. It was far in the distance, but then it was closer. Suddenly, it was much closer.

I guess those gray hulks move a lot faster than I thought!

At least one of those gray tanks must be behind her somewhere and coming in her direction. There were powerful spotlights in the forest behind her, weaving from side to side.

She tried to run faster.

The whole top half of a large tree exploded over her head. Fire and sparks and burning splinters showed her on their way to the ground. She screamed and fell rolling to the ground. She kept rolling until she was clear of the burning debris. She looked up and saw a white hot beam of energy come down through the canopy of forest and incinerate the ground in front of her. The blast knocked her down again.

If she hadn't fallen down, she would have been in that area and killed by the beam.

Another weapon fired. Large guns, from behind her.

She twisted, praying to avoid large caliber bullets.

She quickly realized that the bullets were not directed at her, but at the golden UFO.

SHADO had her in their spotlight, but they hadn't fired even though they might have. Shelby heard the shells slamming into the metal of the spinning ship. The tops of the trees began to flutter with dropping debris of the UFO.

Shelby changed direction and ran again. She was immediately out of the spotlight.

The alien hovered for a long moment, and then moved away. Shelby heard large caliber machine gun fire again and the cycling sound of the Santa ship changed pitch. SHADO must've hit it pretty hard. More than once.

The roar of the tanks were very close behind Shelby now. A spotlight suddenly illuminated her and her entire area again. She had been caught by a Tank.

She didn't stop running. The trees suddenly disappeared behind her and she found herself out of the forest and at the edge of a ravine. She slammed her feet and skidded to a halt at the edge. Rocks and pebbles fell over the edge in front of her.

She looked over the edge. At the bottom of the ravine was a road, on the road was a pair of dim lights. A vehicle was approaching. She turned around and guessed that the Tanks were maybe twenty meters behind her. She looked again at the sides of the ravine.

A tracked vehicle of great weight couldn't negotiate this incline, but I could.

Shelby turned around, waved goodbye to the SHADO Tanks, and pushed herself over the ledge.

She quickly skidded down the incline, her feet kicking up dust and dirt and pebbles back into her face. She cursed and rolled and cursed again. One foot hit a large rock and pain shot up her leg. She closed her eyes hard and tried to slow herself down with her backpack. She succeeded.

Arriving at the bottom of the ravine, Shelby quickly picked herself up. She brushed herself off and limped to the road. She turned around and peered back up the slope. She had been right, the incline was too much for the Tanks. She had gotten away.

She limped into the middle of the road and waved her arms at the oncoming pair of lights that she had seen before. The lights turned out to be a rickety pickup truck driven by an old farmer. She flagged him down and he stopped.

"I need help." She pleaded, "Can I have a ride?"

The old man looked at her, looked back up the hill at the two Tanks, and then looked back at her. There was some apprehension in his eyes. He stayed silent.

Then she remembered what Carla had said about the civil war. The Government did not have the support of the people.

"I..." She pointed to herself, "...am part of the Rebel Alliance, on my way to the fourth Moon of Yavin."

The old man didn't understand English, and only recognized the word *rebel*. He motioned for her to get into the back of the truck. Once she was safely in the truck with the load of vegetables, he pressed the accelerator and got out of there as fast as the truck would travel. He grinned. He felt proud of himself for helping a rebel get away from the forces of the Dictator and the Government.

Shelby looked at the SHADO Tanks as she was being carried away from them.

They could shoot me right between the eyes from where they are, but they do not fire.

"Use the force, Luke." She laughed.

* * *

"Captain Johnson." The Mobile driver called back to her. "Missiles have acquired the target. Sighted and locked. Ready to launch."

Ayshea quickly grabbed the angelhair mic, "Negative, do **not** fire. Repeat, do **not** launch missiles. New orders from London. Turn this rig around, we're going back after that Spinner."

The driver was shocked, "Captain, in two seconds this can all be over..."

"No. We have new orders and an alien in the area." she repeated. "Redirect those missiles. After we take down the UFO, we'll come back and find where that road leads."

* * *

Alec Freeman and Virginia Lake sat at a corner booth in the lavish restaurant. The steak had been wonderful, and the wine was superb. Alec raised his glass to his lips and sipped at the alcohol.

"The way I see it," Virginia told him, "Ms. Cox is heading for one of two airports near the border. There's no other way for her to get back to New York now. We've cut her off from the rivers and the ports, and from railways."

"This is turning out to be a major fiasco. Thank God it didn't happen in a large, English speaking country with modern technology, telephones and civil rights laws." Alec observed.

She continued, "One of the airports is just a civilian airfield, the other is a major commercial installation called Katobi Raan. Right now she's closer to the commercial airport. It literally on the border. They speak English there. They also have high technology, telephones and civil rights laws."

"But she would guess that we'll be waiting for her there." Alec commented, "Our people would stand out light neon signs in the smaller airfield."

"She's correctly second guessed us at every step of the way." Lake huffed, "We haven't had a run like this since Paul Foster."

"Most of that was staged for his benefit. This one isn't being staged. Don't worry, Virginia, its not over yet." Alec told her. "We still have some tricks up our sleeves, too. I have no intention of seeing Ms. Cox as a guest on CNN Live."

"She's good Alec." Lake admitted, "If I didn't know better, I'd say that she was trained by our own Security people."

Alec shook his head from side to side. "No way. She's not good, she's lucky. And she's foolhardy too. She cares about people, especially about her friends. We'll use that."

They were silent for a moment.

Lake spoke first, "I have put our people in both airports. I have a couple of ideas, one is pretty risky."

"Lets hear it."

She sighed, "Launch a Sky and follow the pickup truck from the air."

Alec disagreed, "Normally a good idea. But not this time. A Sky could only follow her at night. The fighter would have to travel very slowly to follow that truck. Almost a hover. It could be heard and seen by people on the ground. Every Government and Rebel soldier would be shooting at it. I'd rather be chasing Shelby Cox than have that damn fool Dictator get his hands on one of our Skys."

Lake silently agreed.

"What's the other idea?"

"We have SID reactivate the Mobile Driver's communicator. Talk to her. Try to convince

her to come in peacefully."

Alec thought about this quietly. He sipped his wine.

Thought more about it.

Sipped again.

He put his glass down.

"Is that a *yes*?" Lake asked.

Alec nodded. Then he asked, "Tell me about that airport, Virginia. Do they have any office space for rent?"

* * *

Shelby had spent the night in the back of the truck. In the morning, the pickup truck pulled off to the side of the road and stopped. Shelby jumped out of the back and ran around to the driver.

She smiled brightly, "Thank you! You're a doll!"

The driver didn't understand her, but he suspected that she was happy and saying goodbye.

She put her hand on the window of his door, leaned over to the old man and kissed him lightly on the cheek. He grinned broadly and patted her hand.

Shelby waved goodbye, turned, and dashed away from the truck and up the hill.

She topped the hill, crossed the unguarded border and looked out over the large commercial airport.

The pickup continued on its way. She waved again, even though the driver didn't see her.

Shelby walked down the side of the hill and up to the fence of the airport. The sun was warm on her back. She chose a direction and started walking along the perimeter of the fence, looking for a way in.

She was also looking for any large, gray, tracked Tanks.

Shelby walked the long way around the fence and entered the terminal. Once inside, she tried to find a women's restroom. From outside the building, she heard an aircraft lifting off. Then another.

Take me home.

Home.

Take me home so that I can change the world!

There, ahead and to the left. A women's restroom.

Shelby entered the restroom and searched it. She wasn't alone. She made her way to a stall and closed the door. She hung the duffel bag on the peg behind the door and sat her backpack on the lid of the toilet. Then she went to one of the sinks and began to clean herself up and wash her hair. When she finished, she removed her shirt and washed it in the sink. The soap dispenser was empty. She moved to another sink. When her shirt was done, she dried it under the blowers that were intended to dry off her hands. She cleaned and dried her trousers, and finally her undergarments, socks and boots. A few women came in to use the facilities during this time, but they assumed that Shelby was just a vagrant and gave her no attention. When she had finished with her clothing, she turned to her belongings. She cleaned up the duffel bag first, balancing the alien rifle on the toilet lid and closing the door to keep it concealed. No one bothered it or wandered near the stall. When she had cleaned the bag, she replaced the rifle and loaded the bag with as much from the backpack as she could. Everything else went on the lid of the toilet. Then she cleaned and dried the backpack. She ate another C-ration meal while waiting for the pack to dry under the blowers. She mused about how many

times she had to press the "on" buttons of each blower before that damn pack would dry! She checked her foldaway to make sure that she still had her ID, passport, and the credit card to buy her ticket.

*First Class. I **deserve** it.*

She refilled her canteens from the sink, just in case, and replaced her things in the dry backpack.

I'll have to check the duffel bag so the metal detector doesn't catch the rifle. I wish I didn't have to. She reached into the duffel and reactivated the safety on the rifle.

*Maybe the gun won't get sensed by an Earth metal detector. But if it **is**, my ass is **grass** with airport Security!*

Maybe I should check the backpack too.

*The liquid. The communicator. **The cassette.***

No way! That pack stays with me.

Shelby slid the pack onto her back and watched as a little girl entered the restroom with her mother. The daughter was holding a brown teddy bear. Shelby smiled at the little girl as she hefted her duffel bag. The child smiled back at her warmly. With a spring in her step, Shelby exited the room. Turning immediately to the left, she found a row of telephones.

Telephones!

Shelby had no coins.

The nearest phone could be operated with a credit card.

Shelby pulled her card from her pocket. She picked up the phone and slid the card through the slot. A dial tone came to life in the receiver.

* * *

Ayshea's communicator buzzed. She picked it up and read the tiny screen. SID was calling. She put the unit up to her ear.

"This is Space Intruder Detector...the MasterCard account of Shelby Cox has just been accessed. Location of usage is telephone number 14 in the second floor lobby of the Katobi Raan Airport in the country of..."

Ayshea forgot to thank the old computer. She cut SID off and activated the channel that connected her with the other members of her team.

"Second floor lobby, at the phones. *Move!*"

* * *

Shelby dialed the number to the New York Gannet office. The phone clicked, sputtered and tried to open a transatlantic line through cyberspace. This went on for a few seconds and gave Shelby some time to reflect.

I'm gonna do it. I'm really gonna get away with it!

She wondered what her publisher would say when he heard her voice on the other end of the phone.

The phone. It was good that she made this phone call. Good to talk to a friendly voice. Somebody who didn't want to capture or kill her. Someone with a face, and not just a machine to hide inside of.

Thank God for telephones. Shelby felt lucky that she had kept her credit card with her.

Ohmigod! She realized, **My credit card! Shit!**

She dropped the receiver and turned to run. People screamed, she turned to see what was going on.

The people parted. Several men dressed in expensive black suits were pushing their way

through the people. There was a thin woman with long blonde hair with them. Each of the men had a large and powerful looking handgun, and they were all gazing at Shelby.

She could feel her own heart thumping. She felt the sudden rush of adrenaline and every muscle tensed in her body. Her head snapped around, and her long dark hair whipped with it. No bad guys behind her, but she'd be dead before she could get to the doors.

Shelby reached into her duffel and grasped the handle of the alien rifle. She hefted the rifle while it was still contained in the duffel. There was no time to remove the bag from the weapon. She clicked the safety off. Each Security man raised his weapon at Shelby, but they hesitated and looked at the duffel.

The blonde woman put out her hands in front of us, as if to stop everything from happening.

"Shelby!" She said, "My name is Lisa Carpenter. I just want to talk to you!"

They are from SHADO. She realized, *Only SHADO knows what I've got in this bag.*

The little girl emerged from the women's bathroom. She stopped directly in front of Shelby, between her and the men in the black suits.

The little girl was frozen in fear, the teddy bear dangling from her hand. Her mother screamed. On the other side of the corridor, a dark man took two steps toward the child and spread his arms wide. The little girl looked to him and said:

"Daddy?"

Shelby yelled, "Nobody move!"

Everyone in the corridor froze and became very silent.

"You!" Shelby yelled at the little girl, "Come here."

Carpenter lowered her hands, the Security men lowered their weapons with her.

Terrified, the little girl clutched the teddy bear and slowly stepped toward Shelby. The mother began to sob from inside the restroom opening.

Good. Shelby was relieved, *She speaks English!*

Still pointing her weapon at the men in black, Shelby bent down and put her head close to the little girl.

She whispered, "No one is going to hurt you, Baby."

Shelby reactivated the safety on the alien weapon as she continued whispering to the scared little girl. "I want you to stand right here and don't move. I'm gonna back up to those doors behind me. When I leave through those doors, I want you to run to your mother, inside the restroom, as fast as you can. Will you do that for me?"

The little girl nodded, there was a single tear falling from her eye.

Shelby brought up the sleeve of her freshly washed shirt, and wiped the tear away.

"Thanks, Baby. I owe you one."

Shelby arose and took two steps backward, toward the doors. The little girl did not move. The mother was sobbing loudly.

Shelby held the bag in such a way that the rifle, with the safety on, was not pointed at the girl. She glanced once at the doors and snapped her head back around. No one had moved.

Good. They think its for real.

Slowly, Shelby walked her way to the doors. No one moved. She pushed her hip on the bar and the door opened for her. She disappeared through it and darted around the corner.

The little girl dropped the bear, turned and bolted for her mother's outstretched arms. The father was there almost immediately. They immediately left the area, leaving the bear in the corridor.

The men in black bolted past them and ran for the doors.

Lisa Carpenter stayed back while the men ran ahead. She reached into her pocket and produced a communicator, "This is Carpenter in the lobby. Shelby Cox just blew the chance to take a hostage and shoot my entire team. Tell Commander Freeman that he was right about Ms. Cox."

* * *

Shelby darted between trucks carrying luggage and fuel transports. She hid in a large empty bin for several minutes until she felt that it was safe to move again. She made her way under large commercial passenger aircraft and large men carrying luggage. The roar of their engines was even worse than that of the gray tanks. She walked the length of the terminal and circled around to the other side. On the other side of the terminal, there were smaller craft. Still commercial carriers, but smaller companies with less lucrative air routes.

But they could still get her to Europe from here. From Europe, she could get to the US.

Shelby walked to the entrance of the first air carrier. She inquired at their desk, but their next flight would not be for several hours. They were going the wrong direction anyway. She thanked the clerk and left.

The next carrier was closed. According to the sign on their door, there had been a terrorist incident in the lobby of this terminal recently and this carrier had been asked by the airport to close until 3 PM.

The same sign was on the door of the next carrier.

Shit!

There were still a few carriers left to try. The next one Shelby found had a Lear jet parked on the tarmac near its office door. The door was propped open.

They should be open for business.

Shelby read the sign over the door. Shadair Airways, United Kingdom.

She went inside.

There was an attractive woman at the desk. She had long and thick black hair and a very pleasant smile.

"Hi! My name is Ayshea. Welcome to Shadair. Can I help you?"

"Hello Ayshea." Shelby smiled, "I need to get to New York. Does Shadair have any transatlantic flights to Kennedy International?"

Ayshea looked at a small booklet. "Not from this terminal, but we have Concorde service from both Paris and London. We can get you to a connecting flight in either of those cities from here."

Shelby relaxed, "That would be wonderful. When is your next flight?"

Ayshea smiled, "We just had a Lear arrive about an hour ago. Its an air taxi between this terminal and Paris. He'll leave in half an hour. Would you like a ticket?"

Shelby nodded, "Yes, but I'll put it on my credit card just before we leave."

Ayshea smiled and put her booklet under the counter.

Shelby removed her backpack and sat down in one of the seats of the waiting room. She pulled both the pack and the duffel close to her body, and reached for a magazine off the rack. She sank low in her seat and tried to make herself difficult to see from outside the small office.

She suddenly found herself reading a copy of Psychology Today. The article was written by a schizophrenic who claimed he had proof that an alien race has been visiting Earth for several years. He asserted that they are tall, gray people with large black eyes and long lean limbs. They speak in telepathy and they are quite friendly. They come to see him while he is in

his room at night. His room, in the Psych ward of the hospital.

Really? She thought. The aliens that I saw weren't too friendly...and they weren't tall either. They looked almost Oriental.

* * *

Shelby had waited about twenty minutes when the pilot arrived. He was a tall gentleman with dark hair. He stepped through the door and walked up to the woman at the desk. They spoke quietly, laughed, she playfully slapped his shoulder and he backed away from her.

He turned around and faced Shelby. He smiled.

"Are you almost ready to go ma'am?" He asked.

Shelby nodded and grinned.

The pilot left the building and strolled to his Lear. A moment later, the engines fired. Seconds later, the Lear was putting aircraft exhaust into the Shadair office.

The dark haired clerk came out from behind the desk and closed the door.

The clerk returned to her place behind her desk and waited for Shelby to come and buy her ticket.

Shelby waited until the last possible moment. She arose from her chair, gathered her things, and stepped up to Ayshea's desk. Shelby presented her ID and passport. Everything seemed to be in order, according to the Shadair clerk. Shelby purchased her ticket and the clerk ran her card through a slide machine. No electronic transaction.

Shelby breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

The door opened behind Shelby but she did not turn around.

The door closed behind Shelby but she did not turn around.

"Hey Shelby!" It was a strangely familiar male voice. "I hear that you found the Pulitzer Prize in the north woods!"

She spun wildly.

David!!!

She clasped both of her hands together in front of herself. He came to her at the desk and they hugged each other tightly. He picked her up off the floor and slowly put her back down again. Ayshea just sat down in her seat behind the counter. The door opened again and several men came through. They were dressed in expensive black suits.

Shelby didn't seem to care. No one tried to take her pack or her duffel. Everyone just stood there watching the reunion.

Shelby brushed back tears, "I saw them take you...where did you go? You're dead. How did you get here?" Shelby touched the side of his face, his chest, his arms. She wrapped herself around David again.

"Ummm," He stammered, "That's a long story, and I don't know all of it myself."

"What are you *doing* here?!!!" She wiped her tears on his shoulder.

"I'm here to ask you to forget about that night in the north woods."

Shelby put her face in his chest, "David...I...what's going on?" She shook her head from side to side.

He gently wrapped his arms around her again. He glanced up at Ayshea.

Ayshea smiled brightly at David and said, "Take all the time you need. Tell her everything you know. Everything is alright now."

The Security team relaxed and moved away while still remaining in the room.

"David?" Shelby wiped her tears, "What's going on?"

He turned and led Shelby to the row of seats and away from her things. He sat her down

in the closest chair, and bent down to her knees. She took his hands into her own and held them tightly. No one moved toward the duffel or the backpack at the counter.

David said softly to her. "They tell me that you have a gun, and a cassette tape. But I know you better than that. I suspect that you have more evidence than that. What else do you have?"

She hesitated at first, but then she answered, "I've got some green yuck juice from a helmet, and a pocket pager from a gray Tank."

"May I have them?" David asked.

Shelby looked longingly into David's eyes. Could he really be asking that?

"The story..."

David smiled to her, "Shelby, I want you to listen to me please, listen carefully." He paused. "I thought that the story was important too. That's what I told them. But the aliens are not nice people. They come here to hurt us." David looked around the room and decided to say it quickly: "Shelby, the aliens come to harvest our organs."

His words shocked her into silence. Her eyes widened.

"They took me for *spare parts*." He told her bluntly. "They put me in a deep freeze suspension canister and tried to take me away from Earth like a frozen dinner. When they tried to leave, they were seen by a very smart and observant satellite. A fighter plane came and shot the alien ship down. My canister and one more was recovered and some doctors in New Zealand revived me and one of the rebel soldiers. SHADO saved my life, Shelby. That's what they do, they save people's lives."

New Zealand? That's so far away! Shelby repeated, "The story..."

"The aliens are real, Shelby. And they're here to kill us and take our organs. Now think about it. What would happen if you told CNN that story and you were able to prove it?"

Shelby tried to follow his train of thought, "United Federation of Planets..."

"Mass hysteria, on a global scale. A breakdown of all governing authority across the Earth. Economic upheaval. Riots, religious jihads, the world in mass chaos. Sure, we could recover, but not before the aliens took hundreds of thousands, or *millions* of us. How long do you think SHADO could defend the Earth under those circumstances?"

"SHADO? Defend...?"

"That's right Shelby. SHADO is a multiethnic, multinational defense force. Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization. They fight the aliens and rescue people like me from their operating tables."

"Rescue...organ?"

David laughed, "Well, yes, I guess you could say that SHADO rescued my *organ*!!!"

She smiled.

"Shelby, may I have permission to collect your duffel, your backpack and inspect your evidence?"

Slowly, she nodded her head.

Shelby watched as the Shadair clerk came around the edge of desk, open the duffel, pull out the alien rifle, correctly check to insure that the safety was on, flip the hidden switch that dislodged the magazine, and instantly found the charging handle that removed the live shell from it's firing chamber. It fell to the floor and rolled by her feet. A Security agent took the weapon, the round, and the magazine.

"You sure know a *lot* about alien technology for being a desk clerk." Shelby told Ayshea.

Ayshea smiled toward her but did not respond.

A Security man went through the pack and found the green liquid and the SHADO communicator. He pocketed both.

David turned again to Shelby, "May I have the video tape Shelby?"

She looked at him. Her facial expression said that she just didn't understand what he was doing.

"SHADO must keep the war a secret. Your tape shows the aliens, abductions, and one of SHADO's attack fighters called a SkyDiver. Your tape would expose everything."

"SkyDiver...Sky? The SKY fighter?"

David grinned, "I'll explain a SkyDiver later. For now, Shelby, just know that your tape could change the course of history, and end society as we know it. Please Shelby. Give me your tape."

She reached into her jacket and produced a video tape cassette.

"Did you make any copies?" David asked her.

She shook her head from side to side.

She heard many people in the room sighing heavily.

"What did you say to the farmer who drove you here?" He asked gently.

"Nothing." She corrected herself, "Well, nothing about the aliens. He didn't understand English."

Ayshea made a gesture with her hand. One of the Security men left the room. He was on his way to contact SHADO Mobile Two and tell them to release the farmer and his vegetable truck.

"What did you say to the little girl in the lobby of the airport?" David asked her.

"I told her that nobody was going to hurt her, and to run back to her mother when it was safe to run."

Ayshea looked to one of the Security men. He nodded to her. The story checked out.

"Did you tell anyone about any of this?" David asked.

"No," she said. "The story was too important to share. After you and Carla died, I couldn't trust anyone else, and there were no phones to call Gannet in New York."

Because of the truth in her previous answers, Security believed her.

He held out his hand and she placed her cassette into it. He turned and handed the tape to Ayshea. She smiled brightly.

The Security men began to leave the office.

David leaned in close to Shelby, "Hey, you have a friend who wants to talk to you."

Shelby looked puzzled.

David explained, "You saved the life of a Mobile driver. The man from the big gray tank. You killed the alien that was going to take him to the operating table."

She remembered.

David continued, "That young man is on his way to a hospital in London right now. He wants to see you and personally thank you for what you did for him. Would you like to go to London? There's some good food on the Lear waiting for you. Much better than that C-ration *shit* you've been eating recently."

She laughed.

David repeated, "Would you like to go to London?"

She nodded.

Ayshea stepped forward and extended her hand with a warm smile. "Shelby, my name is Ayshea Johnson, Captain Ayshea Johnson. I would love to talk to you about your adventure.

Can we talk together on the plane?"

Shelby took her hand, and suddenly remembered, "I've heard your voice. On the pocket pager from the guy in the gray...Mobile."

Ayshea smiled and nodded her head up and down.

They moved toward the door. David, Shelby and Ayshea were the last ones to leave. Ayshea set out the "closed" sign, and locked the door. She pocketed the keys and headed for the Lear.

Most of the Security team climbed into their own black sedans parked near the terminal. Only two entered the Lear.

Shelby was met at the door by Lisa Carpenter. She helped Shelby into the craft and showed her to a spacious and soft seat. David sat next to her, with Ayshea on the other side.

The door of the Lear closed. The craft taxied out to the runway and awaited clearance to take off.

* * *

Shelby and David sat in the front room of her apartment in New York. Shelby was on the couch and David relaxed in the recliner. Shelby had turned her stereo to the station that played music from the 1980's. The music provided a soothing background while they sat quietly and contemplated the future.

"Either way, we're both dead and I have to move out of New York." Shelby said to the floor.

David agreed. "So am I. Both of our families were told that we died three weeks ago in the woods."

They were silent for a long moment. David went to Shelby's refrigerator and got himself a beer. He stopped and looked at Shelby in the front room. He held up the can and she nodded. He got her one too.

"We can go back to London, David." She told him as he handed her the can, "Freeman told us that we can see some shrink in Calcutta and have all this erased from our memories. We can go back to our lives."

"Without the story." David reminded her, "Our families think we're dead, Gannet thinks we're dead. That would be easy to get over, but we'll spend the rest of our lives scraping and scratching just to pay our bills. It will be just like before, blissful ignorance of the real truth, and no real contribution to our world or our people. Every time we get close to another Pulitzer Prize, SHADO will be there to stop us and give us another injection of the amnesia drug."

She silently agreed. She opened the can and asked, "You're going to take Virginia Lake up on her offer. You're going to join SHADO, aren't you?"

He nodded. "My Pulitzer Prize was in the north woods, Shelby. It led me to SHADO. I can make a difference in SHADO, photograph some UFO's, save a few lives, maybe learn a few things about an alien race. It won't be boring, the pay is superior, the expense account is unlimited, and their women are gorgeous." He grinned sarcastically.

She giggled and tossed a small pillow at him.

"You're still not sure yet." He meant it as a question, but it sounded like a statement.

She looked at him, and sipped the beer.

"What's stopping you?" He asked.

"I'd lose *everything*." She said, "Family, friends, my work, all those years in college and starving as a photojournalist intern. I mean *everything*." Then she looked around the

apartment, "Well, some things I *want* to lose..." She motioned to the bad paint job on the walls.

"You saw SHADO's connections." He tried to convince her. "They have people in the UN, they have people in every nation of the world. They've got people in high places. Hell, Shelby, SHADO has people on the *Moon!* *That's* the **highest** place..." He smiled and she laughed, "You could be an operative, and they could contact your family and claim that the Government had made a mistake and you're not dead. Governments make stupid mistakes all the time, just look at Washington. SHADO could get you a cover job with the London Times or the United Nations or in that film studio of theirs. It would be no problem. They have installations in Seattle, Phoenix, Belgium, New Zealand, Italy...You could live almost anywhere in the world, under the oceans in a SkyDiver or on that Moonbase of theirs."

Shelby shook her head from side to side. "Not Moonbase. I may have the figure for their catsuits, but I don't look good in purple hair."

David grinned at her.

"I want my family back." She said, "I want my friends to know that I'm alive. I'll keep their war a secret but I want my family to know that I'm alive."

"I'm sure that it can be worked out." He remembered, "Very few people in SHADO are considered dead. They just have cover stories."

She nodded, leaned back, and noticed the business card that Freeman had given them as they boarded the Concorde in London.

They both took long draws from their beers.

"Do you wanna make the call?" She asked him.

He motioned to her.

She reached to her phone, picked up the receiver. She glanced at the business card on the counter and dialed the number.

"Hello? This is Shelby Cox." She looked at David. "Yes, Mr. Straker. David has decided to become a SHADO operative...I want to join too...I'm just not sure yet...Its just that I want my family and friends to know that I'm okay...A cover story? What could SHADO do? Really? You could do *that?*...Ummm, sure, you can come over and talk to us...let me give you directions...oh, you already *know* where I live? I should have expected that. Okay. When would you arrive? Okay...We'll see you in about an hour. What? Dinner? Sure...we could all go to dinner. Seafood? Yeah, we both like seafood. Great! See you soon. Bye Mr. Straker."

She put the phone down and turned to David. "He's coming over in about an hour to take us to a seafood restaurant for dinner."

"Who is it?" He asked her.

"I don't know. I called the UN number that Freeman gave us. This guy answered the phone. Says his name is Straker."

David and Shelby looked at each other for a moment before David commented, "I wonder who this Straker guy is?"

"Never heard of him." She responded, "You don't think he's anyone important, do you?" Shelby asked.

"Probably not." David responded, "They wouldn't send anyone *too important* just to talk to a couple of new recruits."

Epilogue

The little girl and her parents were visibly shaken during their flight to Madrid. The flight crew did their best to help them calm down and rest as best they could. Once in Spain, they had a twelve hour layover before their flight would leave for the United States. They were met at the gate by a well dressed young man holding a sign bearing their last name. He approached them and identified himself as a representative of the American Consulate in Madrid. He led them to a waiting limousine. They were treated to dinner at the expense of the Consulate and taken to an expensive hotel for the night. In the morning, they were driven by limousine back to the airport. On the way to the airport, the young host asked if everything had been to their satisfaction. They emphatically agreed, except that they had forgotten to retrieve their daughter's teddy bear during the hostage ordeal. They arrived at the airport, said goodbye to their young host, boarded their transatlantic Shadair flight and were on their way back to the United States.

They rode in First Class, compliments of the airline.

* * *

One week later, a large package arrived at the home of the little girl. The package was much taller and wider than the girl. Her parents helped her open it. Her father noticed the strange return address: The United Nations, New York.

It was a brown teddy bear, big enough for the little girl to sleep in its arms.

Included in the package was a short letter from a Psychologist in Calcutta named Jackson. The letter gave them an international toll free number to call if they or their daughter ever felt the need to talk to someone about their ordeal.

* * *

The little girl was too happy about the huge teddy bear to notice the letter from the Psychologist in India.

The End