

UFO II: Return



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Keith Ford stared out the window of his office at Harlington-Straker Motion Pictures. A gloomy overcast sky darkened as a light rain began to fall. It was late, and unless he left within a few minutes, he'd be late for dinner.

"This won't be the day," he said, smiling to himself. He hadn't missed dinner with his wife and daughters in nearly ten years.

Closing the files on his desktop display, he checked his agenda for the next day: mostly a series of meetings about an animated feature about leprechauns that H-S MP was developing to compete against the new TeleTubbies movie next year. While dreading the meetings themselves, he loved working with the celebrity voice-talent he'd collected for the project. As an old television interviewer and voice-over man himself, Ford could appreciate the enthusiasm his team was already showing: they were chomping at the bit to get started and really seemed to love the idea, even the Hollywood-types Ed Straker had brought back with him from America.

"Rhonda," he nodded to his secretary on the way out, "I'll be in a bit late tomorrow. I'm going straight to the meeting in Building C, first thing. Don't stay too late."

"Okay Mr. Ford, err..Keith," the platinum-haired and nose-ringed Ms. Sheppard replied, smiling at his concern for her. A fairly new recruit for SHADO, and probably the last, she had a lot of paperwork to catch up on, and a lot of old data files to archive.

When SHADO was completely shut down in a year or two, she'd probably ask Ford if she could stay on with the studio. Despite her punkish-dress and tendency to go out on weeknight raves, she had grown to love the children's programming that he produced, and wondered if he'd stay as well. Hell, if the legendary Edward Straker could remain head of the Studio even after officially retiring from SHADO, perhaps there was hope after all. She would just be sorry the amnesia procedure would make her forget the friends that she only saw because of their connection to SHADO. Almost no one was exempt from the procedure after leaving SHADO.

As the door closed behind him, Ford heard Sheppard's phone ring. "You're kidding..." he heard her say, as he turned to walk down the hall towards the mezzanine's staircase. Ford said his goodnights to the rest of the department as he passed their cubicles on the way to the stairs. Flipping open his cell phone from his jacket pocket, he was dialing his home number when the office door behind him flung open.

"M...Mr. Ford," Sheppard stammered after him, "You...you have a long...long distance call coming in!"

A...a very important one!"

A chill went up his spine as he pushed the red "End" button on his cell phone. Spinning on his heels, one look at her face told him all he needed to know. Ford sprinted back down the hall past puzzled faces as Sheppard held the door open for him.

Heart pounding, he rushed into his office as Sheppard pushed the "Private" button on her receptionist's desk, closing a thick metal door between them. "It's a Red Alert, Colonel..." he heard her say as it closed. Ford pressed his hand against the lower right quadrant of his glass-topped desk and spoke as evenly as he could: "Keith Ford". After a second, a voice declared: "Voice and fingerprint identification positive. Colonel Keith Ford." Then the door to his personal washroom popped open.

Stepping into the small room, Ford closed the door behind him and pulled the coathook down. As the washroom itself descended towards SHADO HQ, the falling sensation in his stomach reminded him that it would be dinner time soon. He gritted his teeth at the thought that this would finally be the day he missed dinner. One of the first things Ed Straker had told him when he finally turned command over to him was to never neglect his family.

The elevator stopped and Ford pushed through the door, nearly hitting Lt. Bailey, his face even more earnest than usual tonight, as he stepped forward with an electronic message pad for SHADO's commander-in-chief.

"Report, Lieutenant," Ford demanded, knowing and dreading the answer Bailey was about to give him. "I haven't authorized a drill tonight."

"No drill Colonel," Bailey replied, "SID has a trace."

"What?!"

"That's right, sir," Bailey continued as they walked quickly to through dim hallways, "First time in over ten years."

"I guess I win that five pounds from Alec Freeman, then..."

"Sir?"

"It's a long story, Lieutenant, and we've got very little time according to this report you've just handed me."

Hearing voices, louder than usual, ahead of them in the main Control Room, Ford steeled himself to issue orders he hadn't given in years. Major Grey turned toward him as he and Bailey strode up to the Command Section. Ford glanced up at the Master Situation Monitor on the far wall, half expecting to see the trajectories of three Moonbase interceptors already on their way to meet Alien craft in battle. Instead, he saw a single trace on the monitor indicating a fast-moving Alien invader already passing through the Moon's orbit, heading for Earth. Moonbase and SHADO's space Interceptor fleet had been decommissioned years ago.

"Not good, Keith," Grey stated flatly.

"What's the projected termination point?"

"North America. Canada. Maybe Alaska."

SID's monotone voice suddenly blared out over the speakers: "Intruder bearing 035-214 Green. Speed: SOL zero decimal five four. Range: two million miles"

"Get us a more precise location, Major," Ford ordered. "And, Bailey, get on the secure line to NORAD. I need to speak with General Carlton. Tell whoever answers our call that we have a Code X, and if they ask where you're calling from say 'RAF Fighter Command'."

As Bailey scrambled for the communications console, Ford crossed his arms and leaned against the Command Console, pondering his options.

"Got it," Grey called out. "It's coming down fast, just off the coast of Alaska..."

"...and we just mothballed our last Skydiver," Ford bitterly finished.

SID cut in: "Intruder bearing constant. Speed: SOL zero decimal three zero. Range zero."

"Damn," Grey whispered, "It's in the atmosphere, what'll we do?"

"Well, if we can't get it, there's got to be someone out there who can," Ford replied. "Bailey! Where's Gen. Carlton?"

Sprinting up to the two senior officers, Lt. Bailey held up a cordless red telephone receiver to Ford. "Your call, Sir..."

"Good work, Bailey," Ford said as he squinted at the Master Situation Monitor. "Hello, General Carlton? This is Col. Ford of SHADO...yes, SHADO...Listen, this is urgent. We've got a hostile contact heading into American airspace from orbit...Yes, yes, right now! We need you to scramble a flight to your grid reference H-5 over Alaska near 145-00..."

Grey and Bailey saw Ford's expression sink.

"You've got to have someone in the air...Any air-to-air missile batteries?...How about the Navy?...No?...Yes, yes, even your National Guard...Please, General, this is, as you say, an 'end-of-the-world' situation..."

Ford frantically scribbled on the message pad and handed it to Bailey, mouthing the words "get them up on the monitor" to the junior lieutenant.

"Thank you, General...yes, we'll take care of security...tell your radar operators that it's a meteor...Thanks, we'll need all the luck we can get now..."

Ford handed the phone to Grey and pointed up at five new trails creeping across the Master Situation Monitor, now zoomed to show the projected UFO landing area. "That's a flight of US, or rather Alaska Air National Guard, F-15 Eagles being vectored into the UFO's termination point. They're carrying full armaments for a live-fire exercise and have been told to follow our orders directly. I gave Bailey their comm frequency."

"Quick thinking, sir."

"Don't congratulate me yet, Dave, those American pilots will have their hands full in a few minutes."

"Eagle flight zero one. Eagle Leader here, go ahead," said a male American voice over the Control Room speakers.

Ford leaned toward the microphone on his Command Console and said in his best Air Traffic Control voice: "Eagle flight zero one, this is RAF Fighter Command care of NORAD. We're tracking a hostile contact coming into your area from orbit. You must destroy. Repeat: a hostile contact coming into your area from orbit. You must destroy. Use any means necessary."

"Affirmative RAF Fighter Command. Hostile contact coming from orbit. Request bearing of bogie."

"Bearing zero one three mark one two five. Look for a bright silver disk."

"Sorry RAF...did you just say 'silver disk'?"

"Affirmative Eagle Leader. This is NOT a joke. Destroy at all costs! Repeat: All costs!"

"Roger, RAF. Eagle leader acknowledged. Eagles Two through Five, do you copy?"

Male and female voices came on the line. "Eagle Two copies. Arming AAMRAMs One and Two for firing... Eagle Three, affirmative. Arming Sparrows One and Two... Eagle Four, affirmative. Arming Sparrows One and Two, Sidewinders One and Two... Eagle Five copies. Arming AAMRAMs One and Two...Ready to go Skipper..."

Good soldiers, thought Ford. They know that now is not the time for questions.

"Eagle Leader here, AAMRAMs One and Two armed and standing by. Got a bogie on my scope bearing zero one three mark one oh niner...Just out of range..."

"Eagle Two here, bogie appears to be headed for imminent crash into the sea..."

Ford cut in sharply: "Destroy 'bogie' before contact with water! Repeat: Destroy bogie before contact with water..!"

"Eagle Two, target lock. Fox one and two..."

"Eagle Leader, target lock. Fox one and two..."

"Eagle Three, target lock. Fox one and two..."

"Eagle Five, locked and firing Fox one and two..."

"Eagle Four, lock Sparrows and Fox one and two..."

Silence. Grey was about the speak, when the speakers blared out alarm sounds coming from the American fighters.

"Jeez! What the hell..?! Eagle Two, hits zero. Repeat, hits zero..!"

"Eagle leader, hits zero...maneuvering for second shot...Eagle Two, watch your six..!"

The entire SHADO Control Room fell silent as they strained to hear the battle going on thousands of miles away by five part-time US fighter pilots using every skill they ever learned to fight an enemy the origin of which they could not imagine. A crackling sound came over the speakers and they knew one pilot was no

more.

"Oh my god..! Eagle Two, where are you? Eagle two, bail out, bail out..!"

Three more crackles over the loudspeaker signaled the demise of more aircraft.

There were the sounds of grunting and wheezing as the remaining pilot twisted in the air, enduring tremendous G-forces, trying to get his remaining weapons to bear on the UFO.

"Flashes of light...can't lock on...going to try for a point-blank shot...fox..."

Another crackling sound. Damn, thought Ford, they'd tried...

"Eagle Leader to RAF. Scratch your bogie...Eagle Leader to base...Heading home...Eagles Two through Five missing...Rescue, get your PJ's up here and find my people..!"

Smiling slightly, Grey turned to Ford and saw that he was shaking.

"They're back," the SHADO commander whispered. Composing himself quickly, he shouted to Bailey: "Get me a flight to Alaska, straight to whatever air base those fighters came from. And notify SHADO Security. Make sure that pilot goes right into solitary confinement. Tell the Americans it's for fear of contamination. No visitors. No talking. Say you think the object on their radar was a meteorite. Got it?"

Ford headed to his office. Looks like I'm going to have to think up an excuse for Maddie and the girls, he thought. Maybe I'll tell them I decided to stop off in Alaska to do some location scouting: bring them back some nice king crab?

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The Humvee bounced excessively during the short ride to the air base's stockade. I guess this part of the base isn't plowed often, Ford thought. The RAF identification he carried, as well as Dr. Tate's NASA credentials, had impressed the base commander enough that he offered to come along with his entire staff, until Ford diplomatically turned him down.

Nevertheless, the obviously excited man insisted on driving them to see Major Vasquez personally. 'My best pilot', the commander had said at least twice. He probably already knew that he might never see his pilot again. Although the four other pilots were by now certainly gone.

"Gentlemen," the rotund base commander announced, "here's our little 'cooler'."

Ford and Tate, a dark man originally a psychologist with the US Army, exchanged sour glances before stepping out into the snow with two SHADO security officers disguised in US Air Force 'Blue Beret' security uniforms and following the man into the stockade office. This must be the man's way of coping from the loss of four of his pilots, Ford thought, annoyed.

A single guard answered the door and let the group in.

"If you please, commander," Ford asked, "wait outside with your guard."

The man began to protest but Ford cut him off: "I'm afraid we really mean it when we say that we'll 'have to kill you if you overhear anything'...Keys please?"

The commander reluctantly nodded at his guard and headed out the door.

The stockade was actually quite warm. Ford had the two security officers stand guard at the door to Major Carlos Vasquez's cell, which had been decorated with large framed posters of the earth seen from orbit, the US Space Shuttle, and a signed picture of Neil Armstrong. Their presence bothered Ford a lot.

"Where's the General?" asked Vasquez, a short man of slight build with short cropped hair, in his mid-forties but looking much younger.

"He can't be here, Major," Ford answered. "I'm Colonel Ford from the RAF and this is Dr. Tate from your NASA. This visit is about what you saw."

"The flying saucer, you mean."

"Well, yes, in so many words."

"Okay, Colonel Ford. Where are you guys really from?"

"Please, Major, we'll have plenty of time later for your questions. For now, please try answering ours."

"Okie dokie, Colonel. You've probably read the report I wrote yesterday. I saw a spinning disk. Actually a kind of rounded cone shape with flat disks around the edges..."

"Like this," Dr. Tate handed Vasquez a photograph of the UFO taken by the gun camera of his F-15.

"Yeah. And I guess it's a safe bet that those pictures aren't going to wind up in the Weekly World or in the Inquirer, right?"

"We hope not, Major," said Ford, smiling. This man seemed a lot like Paul Foster when he was first recruited into SHADO, thought Ford, I hope I can play my cards as well as Straker did so many years ago.

"It was blown to bits by one of my AAMRAMs fired point blank."

"Good."

"And it killed all four of my people."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. We'd only been together for a couple months, but they were damn good people and didn't deserve to go like that...in flashes of light."

"I'm sorry, Major."

"I'm not blaming you, Colonel...Hell it was you wasn't it? It was you on the radio, telling us to destroy that thing at all costs, right? I never forget a voice!"

Ford smiled again. This man was sharp, indeed. Dr. Tate cleared his throat, nervously.

"I think you owe me answers to a few questions of my own, Col. Ford," Vasquez continued.

"Alright Major. Go right ahead. I'll be as forthright as I can be."

"Uh, okay...", said a stunned Vasquez, obviously not expecting that response. "For starters, what was that thing? A real flying saucer?"

"A UFO from another, as yet undetermined, planet. They've been coming here for at least forty years kidnapping ordinary people and using them to replace their own old or damaged organs: they're butchers, Major. And I'm actually the head of an international organization called SHADO, Supreme Headquarters Alien Defence Organisation, authorized to stop them."

"Wha..? Ah... Oh, God! I guess I didn't expect you to tell me..."

"The truth, Major? You deserve it. You bailed us out, as you Americans say, 'big time!'"

"So...what happens now?"

"Well, you have two choices: either take an amnesia drug which will wipe the last 48 hours out of your memory, or come back with us."

"I should probably pick the former..."

"...but you'll take the latter, " smiled Ford. "You know Major, it's no coincidence you've got these posters on the wall."

"I had them bring 'em in from my quarters."

"You wanted to be an astronaut. I saw on your service record that you've applied three times in the last ten years"

"...and struck out three times," Vasquez finished, sadly. "I guess I'll never make it into space."

"Not true, Major, in fact, you've already been there."

"What..?!"

Ford handed Vasquez a small photograph. In it, a much younger Vasquez grinned at the camera along with two other men and three women. The men were dressed in light blue flightsuits and each held a white helmet with an amber visor. The women wore silvery catsuits and each had a purple wig topped with a red santa hat. In the background, a stark black and gray moonscape could be seen beyond a wide window set deeply into the far wall. Over the prettiest of the women, there was some writing: "Merry Christmas 1987. To the best Interceptor crew ever! Thanks, Carl for being there for us. Captain Gay Ellis, Moonbase Commander."

Vasquez's hands trembled and his face turned white. "That coma I was in after crashing at the test site in Nevada..."

"There was no crash, Major. We staged it to get you back into the real world. To get you out of SHADO. We have another, surgical, procedure to erase even more memory. Over a decade ago we thought we'd won the war. This photograph was one of your personal effects that was put into the archived personnel files at SHADO."

"I...I was an astronaut on the Moon?"

"Actually, an Interceptor pilot based on our Moonbase. One of the best. In fact, the only reason your applications to NASA were turned down was our fear that one day you'd get back up into space on the Space Shuttle and eventually remember some of your previous life."

"The amnesia procedures we use don't normally fail," Dr. Tate added. "But with enough familiarity constantly around you, there's a small chance of recurring memories in the form of dreams or feelings of *deja vu*. Partial memories resurfacing is even possible."

"Why? Why couldn't we...you shoot down the UFO yourselves?"

"The short version is that SHADO is in the process of being dismantled, shut down," answered Ford.

"We haven't had a sighting for over ten years, and just when we're congratulating ourselves on a job well done, they show up again. Rotten luck? Well, maybe not. If this UFO were to have come in a year from now, maybe we wouldn't have even seen it. Some poor bastard then gets his insides removed for the benefit of the Aliens and they start the war over again: but this time with an advantage that we haven't seen them coming.

"Major, I'm starting up SHADO again and I need people, good people. You can't get all your memories back, but maybe with Dr. Tate's help you can get enough back to help you climb back into an Interceptor or Sky 4 like you used to. Game?"

"Are you kidding? Just show me where the bad guys are," Vasquez smiled.

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"Thank you, Keith for my old office," Commander Ed Straker said as he began emptying the contents of a large cardboard box onto his old desk. Each item went to a particular location. Straker's hair was now completely white, making him look much older than he did when he last worked behind this desk.

"Don't mention it Ed, err...Commander," Ford replied, wondering how long it would take before he could go back to thinking of his old friend as his superior officer again. How did Alec Freeman manage to walk that line? It probably helped that he had known Straker even before SHADO, Ford mused.

"I've already told Ginny, err..Colonel Lake," Straker said. Now it was his turn to wonder about relationships. "And I'll give Alec Freeman a call right now. Can you give me a copy of that report on the total cost to re-open Moonbase? I'll need it when I go to see the Commission."

"No problem, sir. I'll have Lt. Bailey put a copy into your database right away, along with the reports of the two latest sightings in Africa. I've got a meeting at Downing Street in less than an hour, I'll be back by fifteen hundred in Paul Foster's old office."

Straker seemed to feel a twinge of pain at the mention of his old protégé's name. "Good luck with the PM, Keith."

"Thanks, Commander. Oh, one more thing. I've arranged for Vasquez, our man who shot that UFO down, to be re-instated as a SHADO Major. He starts his training this week."

"Vasquez. Yes, I seem to remember a group of young Interceptor pilots who came through for us when things looked especially grim during the big battle of '90."

"He was one of them. Lt. Vasquez back then."

"Oh, Keith," Straker's brow furrowed, "I wanted to say that you did some quick thinking in getting that first UFO. I saw that you put out that request for re-activation for all SHADO senior staff, myself included, and I want you to know that you've done a good job these last few years...a hard job...one I don't think I could have done myself. I mean, I don't think anyone could have done better."

"Thanks again, Ed. You know, I don't really think of this as a demotion. It was as if I was just minding the store until it got busy again. Not that I ever wanted the Aliens to turn up again, but I always told myself that if they ever did show up again, I'd want you and the old team back."

"Along with some new talent, Keith."

"Yes, Ed, new talent. And I have a feeling we're going to need a lot more very soon."

Ford walked out of his old office, now Straker's again, and headed towards the washroom/elevator. Closing the door behind him, he pushed the coathook up and felt the room rise to his H-S MP office level. Taking advantage of the time it took to ascend the full distance, Ford straightened his tie and combed his hair. When the washroom door popped open, he went to his desk and pressed the button to open the security door between his office and Ms. Sheppard.

"Your car's already out front, sir," the suddenly very young-looking Ms. Sheppard said.

"Thanks, Rhonda," Ford replied, "If Maddie calls, tell her that I'm out at the recording studio."

The girl nodded and unsuccessfully tried to stifle an expression of worry, an expression of doubt.

Ford began to walk out the door, then stopped and turned around to re-enter the office. Closing the door

behind him, he leaned on the top of his receptionist's desk with a fatherly grin on his face. "Rhonda, it's going to be okay. It really is," the older man reassured her. "Yes, the Aliens are back. And they seem to be landing in places all over the world without us being able to do much about it right now. But Ed Straker's also back. And SHADO's back."

Smiling bravely, Rhonda Sheppard, SHADO's youngest operative, looked after Ford as he headed down the hall to his meeting with the Prime Minister. Yes, perhaps it will be, she thought, perhaps it will be.

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W3 Validator