

A Departure from the Norm

**A UFO Challenge Story for the
SHADO Writer's Guild**

Written by Matthew R. White

© May 7, 2011

Based on the Characters and series
created by Gerry Anderson



Historian's Note: This story opens soon after the episode *The Man Who*

Came Back written by Terrance Feely but most of these events occur after the episode *The Long Sleep* written by David Tomblin.

Writer's Note: This story contains adult situations and adult humor and is not meant for younger readers.

Prologue:

Departure – In test pilot terminology, an unplanned deviation from controlled flight.

“Virginia, I’m sorry, but I’m just not ready to settle down,” he said, as he gently caressed her face, moving a

strand of hair from her eyes in the process. A tear had fallen from her eye and landed on the pillow they shared.

“What are you afraid of?” she asked, her voice quavering slightly.

Paul Foster rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. Virginia Lake had a unique talent for cutting through to the heart of the matter. *What am I afraid of?*

When Paul had arrived at Virginia’s place, earlier, he had expected them to discuss a parting of ways. They had both come to the realization that they had nothing in common. When she answered the door, Paul could tell that she had been crying and she broke again when he took her in his arms. One thing

had led to another and they soon found themselves embroiled in a passionate sexual encounter.

It was their first time and she had turned out to be the most passionate lover he had ever known, a complete contrast to the logically cool and aloof SHADO Colonel who was the acting executive officer of the super secret organization. He found himself overwhelmed by the raw intensity of her lovemaking.

Paul had never been someone that stayed in a relationship for very long, with one notable exception, Tina Duval. He had been dating her for almost two years when he had been presumed lost during a mission on the lunar surface.

Alec Freeman had informed Tina of his *death* and when he showed up on her doorstep, alive and well, it was too much for her to handle. Paul had truly loved her and the pain of losing her still weighed heavy on his heart. He swore that he would never get that close to anyone again.

“Of giving you my heart, only to lose you to an alien attack, or some other misfortune, our jobs are too dangerous,” he said wistfully. “Besides, Ginny, you deserve a better man than me...”

“I think you should let me be the judge of that,” she said as she laid her head on his chest. “I have a better chance of being killed on an airliner or driving to work for that matter.”

“Three years ago, I was almost killed on the lunar surface,” said Paul. “Just last year, I almost bought it on Skydiver. You’ve almost been killed twice on Moonbase. No, I can’t allow myself to become attached to anyone. Could you be with someone long term with no strings attached?”

“No, when I love someone, it’s all or nothing. I give myself completely and totally. Besides tonight, I haven’t been with anyone since my divorce. I knew you were coming over to end this...hell we both know we have nothing to share...well had nothing,” she said with an impish grin.

“It was incredible wasn’t it?”

She leaned up to kiss him, “Yeah, it was. I guess the reality hit me tonight that we were splitting up and I realized that I had fallen in love with you.”

“I wish I could return that kind of commitment, Virginia, I really do. But I can’t and I care for you too much to try and lie to you about it. It wouldn’t be fair to either one of us.”

“At least you’re being honest, Paul, it means a lot to me.”

Paul took her in his arms and kissed her gently, “I should get going. I don’t want to mess you up any more than I have...”

“Don’t go,” she interrupted. “I don’t want to be alone tonight. You can leave in the morning, after breakfast.”

“Virginia, if I don’t leave now, you’re going to have more company than you bargained for.”

She gave him a mischievous look, “I was kind of hoping you’d say that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah...besides, a gentleman doesn’t bed a lady without making her breakfast in the morning,” she said with a grin.

“Are you sure you trust my cooking?” he asked, looking slightly bemused.

“Let’s just say I’m feeling adventurous.”

Paul drew her into a long passionate kiss and what followed was even better.

A year later:

Alec Freeman and Paul Foster walked out of the front of Harlington Straker Studios when they were met by Virginia Lake, who was on her way in. It was late in the afternoon and Virginia had the second watch.

“Good afternoon gentlemen,” she said, pleasantly. “Is Ed still in?”

“Hello, Ginny, yeah he’s still here,” said Alec. “If you’re lucky he’ll be gone by ten.”

“More like midnight, knowing Ed,” she replied.

“I really like your new outfit, Virginia,” said Foster. “It suits you.”

Paul was being complimentary but he had noticed that her attire, although still

classy, had become much less conservative than the outfits he was used seeing her in. It gave her a sophisticated, yet sexy look, he thought.

“Why thank you, Paul. I’m spending much more time topside now and I got tired of all the tabloids calling me frumpy. I’ve just about changed my whole wardrobe.”

“Paul, quick, three o’clock,” said Alec, as he gawked at the scantily clad actress walking down the path.

“Whoa!” Paul added.

The two men moved their heads in unison, like a heat seeking missile that was locked onto a target. Although she was somewhat amused by the juvenile

behavior, Virginia shook her head in feigned disgust.

“Boys!” said Ginny, as she turned to enter the building.

“Now that is a beautiful sight,” said Freeman, as he turned back to Foster. “Speaking of that, Ginny looked pretty damn hot as well. What I wouldn’t give...”

That statement made Foster uncomfortable, Virginia Lake was a close friend and although the rumor about the two of them had already circulated, he had never discussed it with anyone.

“That’s really not called for, Alec,” said Paul. “I thought she was your friend.”

“Oh she is, but that little detail wouldn’t stop me from sleeping with her.”

“Well maybe you should ask her out.”

Freeman shook his head, “I have. She flat out turned me down, twice. I still don’t see what she saw in Craig.”

“They had a lot in common, Alec. You know how much Ginny appreciates the arts, Collins did as well. Virginia and Craig were the two experts on SID’s engineering. They spent a lot of time together and after a while you really get to know the other person.”

“I guess so,” said Alec. He unexpectedly redirected the subject, “So Paul, what was she like?”

“I’m sorry?” asked Foster, genuinely confused.

“Virginia, what was she like in bed,” he pressed. “Come on, Paul, everyone in the place knows you slept with her.”

Foster kept his temper in check. While he didn’t mind discussing his casual relationships, he found himself oddly protective of Virginia Lake.

“Well, maybe everyone doesn’t know as much as they think they do,” he answered, as off handed as he could manage. “I’m not going to tell you whether I slept with her or not. And assuming I knew what she was like, I certainly wouldn’t tell you or anyone else for that matter. If you’re so curious why don’t you ask her?”

“I can think of better ways to commit suicide. She’d cut my balls off and feed them to me,” said Freeman. “So, are we going to grab dinner?”

“Sure,” said Paul.

Paul had found himself preoccupied with Virginia, as of late. They had parted ways amicably and remained close in spite of their romantic past. When he had found her on the roof after the *Timelash* incident he had been afraid that she was dead. A few days later Beaver James had held a gun to her head. He was glad in one way that he had kept his emotional distance from her, although he knew he would suffer the loss of her friendship.

Ginny and Paul had worked closely together during her tenure as executive officer and since she transferred back to nights, he found himself missing their interaction. He wondered if she felt the same way. He found himself still haunted by the passion of the one night they had spent together, even though the choice to breakaway was his. Her sudden change of dress only added to his confusion.

I wonder if I made the right decision?

Chapter 1:

“Colonel Lake, come on in,” said Straker, as Ginny walked into the office. He

closed the doors behind her and she sat down in the corner seat next to his desk.

“You know, Ed, there has been a pool running lately as to what time you will be leaving for home,” she said, mischievously.

“Oh really? Where is the smart money?” he asked, deciding to play along.

“Well most people are betting on 22:00, but I put my money on midnight.”

“If it’s any consolation you would have won,” he said, becoming all business. “Take a look at this.”

Virginia quickly scanned through the report that he had handed her. When she reached the second page she looked up at him.

“When did this happen?” she asked, very concerned.

“About nine this morning,” he answered.

“Moonbase suspects it was a meteorite, probably not much bigger than a pebble. But as you can see, it knocked out the automated tracking installation on the far side of the moon. Fortunately for us, the diagnostic routines are still operational and we know what components we need to obtain for the repair mission. Nina is sending a recon team to assess the physical and antenna damage. We should have that report by late next week.”

Ginny flipped to the last page of the report and looked over the component list. There was quite a bit of specialized

equipment listed that was no longer available.

“Don’t we have this stuff in stock?”

“No, we used the last of the spares three weeks ago when the installation at the lunar North Pole was hit. So that means ordering new equipment, and since the entire system is going to be upgraded in a few months anyway, I’ve decided to get a head start with this station.”

Virginia realized the implications at once. The new sensor system would require initial alignment and the procedure had not yet been written. She knew that this duty would fall on her as would the job of doing the initial alignment. *A week and a half on the*

lunar surface in a moon mobile, she thought.

“How long will it take to procure the equipment needed?”

“John says he can pull some strings and get the components in six weeks. Unfortunately that leaves a gaping hole in our defense net that will be very easy for the aliens to exploit if the solar activity increases unexpectedly. We need to close that hole as quickly as possible.”

“The alignment process is a delicate matter, Ed, I haven’t even started working on the procedure and it’s going to have to be tested on the hardware. If we are going to do this in six weeks I’m going to have to do the initial setup myself.”

“I had figured on that,” said Straker. “Which leads to my next concern, I noticed that over the past few weeks you have been avoiding Paul. Since he is the most qualified person to undertake this mission with you, I need to know if there is a problem between the two of you.”

Ed Straker, you don't miss much.

“No, at least nothing that is his fault,” she said. “It has to do with my feelings and I just needed some space to order to figure a few things out. Paul is the right choice person for this job. He is already studying for the satellite upgrade missions later this year, and I'm going to need his help. Don't worry about it, Ed. Paul and I will work through it, we'll be okay.”

She could tell by his expression that he wasn't convinced, but his next question surprised her.

“Do you need to talk about it?”

Virginia felt herself flush as she was caught off guard by the Commander's sudden tenderness. *Those who say that he has no feelings don't really know the man*, she thought to herself. Soon after being posted Earth side, she found herself intensely attracted to him, an attraction that grew into a close friendship rather than a romantic connection. In the end, it was just as well as she didn't need any more confusion in her life.

She also knew he was returning a favor. After Catherine Frasier had died, Ed

walked out of the hospital and briefly paused to glance at her. Their wordless conversation indicated that he was determined to face his grief alone. Virginia took off after him, having decided that she was not going to allow it. She walked with him in silence for a while, providing a steady presence. Through gentle coaxing she was able to draw him out, and he vented his grief in the comfort of her arms. It was only the second time that she had ever seen him break. Between this and the events a few weeks earlier, the two of them had formed a bond of mutual trust and respect.

“No...yes...aw hell, I don’t know, Ed,” she said out of frustration. “Some of it

has to do with Craig, and you are one of the few people I can talk to about him.”

“Go on,” he said, with the barest hint of hesitation.

“I took Craig’s death very hard,” she began. “Much harder than is generally known, and I don’t think I would have gotten through it without Paul’s support. Underneath that macho man façade he wears on the surface is a very kind heart. He can be really sweet when he wants to be. I never expected to...” her voice trailed off.

“I was a little more than surprised when I saw the study request come across my desk. The two of you seemed so different.”

“Opposites attract, or so it would seem,” she added, wistfully.

“I guess you’re right. It just caught me off guard.”

“I was on the rebound, Ed, and I found myself in a very vulnerable state of mind. Believe me no one was more surprised than I was,” she said. “In fact, it was Paul who broke things off, and for once he was seeing things much clearer than I. If you are concerned about the rumors...”

“I don’t pay attention to those, more often than not they are greatly exaggerated,” said Straker. “Virginia, you earned my trust and respect a long time ago. You have always had your head on straight and as for Paul, I’ve

noticed a marked improvement in his performance since then. That is except for one notable incident.”

She gave him wry grin knowing that he referred to the *Psychobombs* incident. Virginia had thought that Ed had acted just as foolishly as Paul, maybe even more so as he should have known better. It had been a close call.

“I still think that you made a very poor decision that day. I was ready to throw you both in the brig,” she said, her tone conveying that fact that she meant it.

“I’m surprised that you folded so quickly. I expected you to get right in my face over the situation.”

“If you remember correctly, I did get in your face. The only reason I didn’t

pursue it any further is that you had made your mind up. I'd of had better luck arguing with a brick wall. Add to that the fact that I didn't feel as comfortable with you back then."

"If it's any consolation, you were right about it being a risk, but I think I would have made the same call today."

"Like hell, just you try to get away now," she said, feigning seriousness.

"Anytime you want this chair, just say so Commander Lake."

"Actually, I'll be wanting a bigger chair, sir."

"Careful what you wish for, you might get it," he said, with a grin.

Virginia enjoyed the friendly banter with her boss and she knew he appreciated the stress relief that it provided.

“Well, I can’t spend the rest of the afternoon entertaining you,” she said. “I’ve got to come up with a rough alignment procedure so I’ll have a baseline to work from. John will be here until ten so I should be able to get something on paper before the end of his shift.”

She stood and turned to leave, but stopped before she reached the doors. Looking back at her boss she said, “Thanks Ed.”

“You’re quite welcome,” he replied.

After dinner with Alec, he headed straight for home. It had been a long day as Foster had been called in early that morning for an alert. Two UFOs had evaded the Moonbase defenses but only one of them had entered the atmosphere. The second one had not yet been accounted for.

It had been assumed that the spacecraft veered off at the last minute using a solar event as cover, but that didn't sit well with Foster.

God, I'm even starting to think like him, thought Paul.

In reality, Foster had nothing but admiration and respect for his CO, and he saw himself as a humble student under the tutelage of the master. Paul

was keenly aware of the fact that he was in line for the big chair, and he had a better than fifty-fifty chance of sitting in it one day, as Virginia had told him that she wanted to get back into research. It was a prospect that both excited and terrified him.

Paul, shamefully, remembered his response when he learned of Virginia's promotion to acting XO while Alec was on assignment. It was a juvenile reaction and he had learned much since then. Ironically it was Virginia's guidance and direction that had helped him to grow into potential that Straker had seen in him when he brought him into SHADO. *I owe her a lot*, he thought, to himself.

It was just after eight and Paul would have stopped by to see her had she not been working. Her image had haunted his dreams over the past several weeks, and he once again questioned his decision to break away from her. In fact he had been questioning many of his past actions over the past few months as well as his fear of commitment. His social calendar as of late, represented that of a monk rather than a virile thirty-something single male. He thought of Ginny's reaction to him and Alec as they undressed the young actress with their eyes that afternoon. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn that he saw a twinge of jealousy.

Paul was distracted from his day dream by a glittering object up ahead. At first he thought it was an aircraft as there was an airfield close to his flat. It didn't take him long to realize that the glittering object was a UFO.

And it was heading straight for him.

“Sky 1 is airborne, sir,” Keith Ford said to the Commander.

Behind the communications chief stood the Commander, Colonel Lake, and Colonel Grey. They all watched the radar screen intently as the UFO was perilously close to HQ.

“Where the hell did he come from?” asked Straker.

He was not at all pleased with the way this attack was going down.

“The UFO was hidden in a small lake about twenty five miles north of here,” said Virginia. “It must have used a new evasion technique to make it appear to veer off when it in fact re-entered and concealed itself. I have one other theory, but you’re not going to like it.”

“Sky 1 to SHADO control,” the voice of Pete Carlin came over the loudspeaker. “I have the target on radar. It’s almost stationary, just south of Wycombe Air Park near Marlow Road. Time to intercept, five minutes.”

“Ed, that’s not very far from Paul’s place,” said Ginny, now very concerned.

“Keith, get a security team out to Foster’s residence and try to get him on his car phone.”

“Yes sir.”

On Marlow Road, Paul Foster had his hands full dodging energy blasts from the UFO that was following his car down the road. He tried to raise HQ but his car phone was apparently being jammed.

The next bolt was directly in front of him and he lost control of the vehicle when he pulled the wheel hard to the left, narrowly avoiding the alien energy beam. Foster’s car careened off the road and came to an abrupt stop in the ditch. As Paul Foster lost consciousness, a

bright beam of light formed his last perception.

Lt. Colonel Peter Carlin put his jet into a dive as the UFO tried to climb from the English countryside.

“Oh no you don’t, your ass is mine,” he said to himself, as he triggered off two missiles.

The hypersonic missiles closed the distance rapidly and the UFO was wracked by two explosions in quick succession, followed by a secondary explosion when the power system imploded. The alien ship was vaporized in midair leaving little, if any, debris to fall to Earth.

“Sky 1 to SHADO control, UFO destroyed. It looks like it was attacking a target on the ground. I’m going to overfly the road for a closer look.”

Carlin brought his jet into a slow hover over the road, seeing the evidence of alien weapons fire. He spurred his jet forward until he came upon a pair of skid marks that veered off to the left. In the ditch was a lilac colored SHADO car.

“Sky 1 to SHADO control, I’ve located a vehicle in a ditch about half a mile west of Wycombe Air Park. It looks like Colonel Foster’s vehicle.”

“Is there any sign of life?”

Carlin recognized the Commander’s voice right away.

“Negative, although the vehicle is intact, I don’t think it was hit, sir.”

“Very well, a cleanup team is on their way now. Loiter in the area as long as fuel permits. Straker out.”

The security and cleanup team, led by Colonel Grey, arrived at the scene within twenty minutes. Grey jumped out of the SHADO jeep before it had come to a complete stop and ran towards Foster’s car.

The driver was slumped over the steering wheel and Grey reached in to check his pulse relieved to find him alive.

“You need a haircut, Paul,” he said to himself, as he leaned Foster back in the seat.

Grey switched on his flashlight and looked at his face.

“Oh my God,” he said, quietly.

Sitting in the driver’s seat, wearing Foster’s clothes, was a young woman.

Chapter 2:

Commander Straker watched intently through the glass of the operating room as Doctor Shroeder finished his examination of the young woman. She had apparently suffered no serious

injuries and Shroeder was finishing the biometric scans to confirm her identity.

Next to him, Virginia Lake was also transfixed on the young woman. Her face was impassive, but Straker could see apprehension in her eyes.

“Has Paul mentioned a new girlfriend to you?”

“No, he hasn’t,” she said, her voice filled with disquiet. “He would have told me if he had started seeing someone.”

“Unless he just met her,” added Straker.

“I suppose it’s possible, but why is she wearing his clothes. And where is Paul?”

“I don’t know...” he said his voice trailing off.

Ed did not believe that the UFO had enough time to land and abduct Foster, and the search of the area had turned up empty. SHADO still had teams in the area and the search was being expanded from the Colonel's last known whereabouts.

Straker had already called Freeman and learned that he had left the restaurant alone not twenty minutes before the incident. Unless he had picked this woman up at a traffic light in town, there was no explanation as to how she ended up in the vehicle, as it had not stopped until it was forced off the road by the alien craft.

“Is it possible that the aliens have developed teleportation technology?” he asked his close friend.

“The biggest problem with matter to energy conversion would be the Heisenberg uncertainty principle,” answered the blonde SHADO scientist.

“Yes, I remember my quantum mechanics, Virginia,” interjected the Commander. “Could the aliens have figured a way around the problem?”

It was a rhetorical question but she answered it anyway, “Their technology is decades, maybe even centuries beyond ours, Ed. Look at how far we have advanced since the turn of the century, or for that matter, the past ten years. FTL travel was considered impossible

before 1969, never mind a method for tracking objects moving faster than light.”

She was referring to the Utronic technology, a system that she had spent the past twelve years designing and improving. Straker called it, “The eyes of SHADO.” He often had to remind himself that the very beautiful woman, standing next to him, was just as brilliant as she was stunning. Not that she would let him forget it.

Presently, Doctor Shroeder came out of the operating room with a report in his hand. The expression on his face was unreadable.

“How is she, Doc?” asked the Commander, without hesitation.

“Let’s go into my office, you’ll want to be sitting down for this.”

Ed and Virginia followed the physician into his office and they sat down on the couch. Shroeder closed the door and sat at his desk, opening the report as he looked up at the two senior officers.

“We’ve established the patient’s identity and there is no mistake. The biometric scans both retina and fingerprint, along with the EEG and ECT confirm it.”

“Confirm what, Doctor?” asked Straker, getting a bit testy. “Who is she?”

“The better question would be, who is he?” said Shroeder, pausing for a moment. “Commander, Colonel Lake, there is no question about it. That is Colonel Paul Foster lying in there.”

Ed and Virginia looked at each other in shock, “How is that possible?” asked Virginia, now wide eyed in astonishment.

“The ECT test shows that his body was subjected to an energy field which appears to have altered his DNA and physiological makeup, on the subatomic level. As best as I can tell from the EEG, his higher brain functions and personality centers are unchanged. He is going to be in for quite a shock when he wakes up. Medically and psychologically speaking, it would be wise to have someone here that he trusts when he comes to. Colonel Lake, since you and Foster are close friends, you would be the ideal choice.”

“Stay with him Virginia, I’ll have Blake cover in control,” said the Commander.

Straker rubbed the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. He had been up since four that morning and the lack of sleep was catching up to him.

“I’m going to go get some sleep,” he said in a tired voice. “I’ll be in my quarters. Call me when he wakes up.”

Paul was transferred to a private room, in the medical center, a short time later. At his bedside Virginia sat, working on the initialization procedure for the lunar far side tracking station. She had been at it for several hours and she set the notepad down beside her and looked at Paul. *So this is what your sister would*

have looked like. Ginny had to admit that she would not want to find herself in competition for a man's affection, with the person lying in the bed.

At five feet eight, Ginny was taller than average but she found that she would still have to look up to Paul. His height had not changed by much as he may have lost only an inch in the process. His hair was somewhat lighter and much silkier than normal, but his eyes were the same, Ginny had noted when the doctor checked his pupils. What surprised her most of all was his *attributes.* Foster had always appreciated that particular feature of a woman's body and he was now *gifted* in that area. *Just think, Paul,* she thought

to herself, *you have a pair of your own to play with now.*

Virginia had to stifle a giggle. *I hope someone tells Alec before he comes in here.* Ginny found the thought of Alec unwittingly hitting on Paul quite amusing. It would be poetic justice to the unsuspecting Freeman, she thought, as she pondered the over flirtatious Colonel getting an unexpected surprise. And Paul would get a taste of his own medicine as well.

As amusing as it was to watch, Virginia found herself suddenly jealous anytime Foster would leer at another woman. It was a feeling that she had no justification for and it was one of the reasons that she requested night shift

duty for a while. And even that wasn't working and she knew that she was going to have to talk with him about it.

She suddenly stopped the laughter, as the ramifications of what had happened hit her. *What if this is permanent,* Ginny thought to herself. Her confusion had just taken on a whole new dimension.

When Paul opened his eyes, he found himself struggling with a sense of vertigo. All of his senses felt out of sorts and He didn't feel at all like himself. He tried to raise his head but another round of dizziness forced him to lie back.

“How do you feel?” asked the disembodied voice that he recognized as Virginia Lake.

Slowly he turned his head and she came into focus.

“Dizzy,” he said, not even recognizing his own voice. “What happened?”

“You were attacked by a UFO while you were driving home. What is the last thing you remember?”

“I...I was about a mile and a half from home when I noticed an object up ahead. I thought it was an aircraft at first...I couldn't out run it. The last thing I remember, I had been forced off the road and before I could get out I was hit with a blinding flash of energy,” he said. “I must have passed out.”

Unknown to Paul, Virginia had pushed to call button to alert the medical staff that Foster was awake. A moment later Doctor Jackson walked into the room and looked Foster over.

“I see that you are awake, Colonel. How are you feeling?”

“I don’t feel right, I’m dizzy and nauseous,” he said.

“Yes, I’m not surprised. Your mind has not yet adjusted to the physiological change that your body has undergone. You may feel that way for a few hours, maybe even a few days,” said Jackson, as he monitored the EEG patterns on the display.

This event had “case study” written all over it and Jackson was trying to collect

as much psychoanalytical data as he could. The results of these tests could open a new understanding to the differences in the way that men and women process information and stimuli.

“What happened to me? I don’t recognize my own voice, and I don’t feel right. You mentioned change, exactly what kind of change?” asked Foster, his voice now indicating his impatience.

“The energy beam that you were subjected to has altered your DNA at the subatomic level. You have been subjected to a, gender transformation, for lack of a better term,” said Jackson, maintaining a dispassionate demeanor.

It took him a moment to decipher what he had been told and the realization hit

him like a sledge hammer. He looked back at Virginia, wide eyed.

“Is he saying that I’m a woman?”

“I’m afraid so, Paul,” said Ginny, having a bit more trouble keeping a straight face.

Paul felt his breasts finding two generous mounds that would have made him very pleased, if they belonged his intimate partner, but the real shock came when he found that his manhood had been replaced with...

“I’m going to be sick,” said Paul, as he rolled and started heaving.

Virginia quickly grabbed the bowel next to the bed and held it under his face as he lost the contents of his stomach. In a

few minutes he had nothing left and he sat back in the bed. While one of the nurses took the bowl away, Ginny wiped Paul's face with a cool cloth. She handed him a cup of water.

“The nausea and disorientation will pass as soon as your body has adjusted,” said Jackson. “In the mean time just try to relax.”

Paul sipped just enough of the water to get the taste out of his mouth. He put the cup aside and looked at Ginny.

When Jackson had left he said, “I'm going to be the laughing stock of SHADO, Virginia.”

“I'm sure we'll figure something out. There has to be a way to reverse this,” she said, pensively.

Paul noticed that her mood was vacillating between concern and giddiness.

“You can’t even keep a straight face,” he said, heatedly.

“Well, Paul, you have to admit, there is a certain aspect of humor involved in this,” she said, facetiously.

“I’m sorry; you’ll forgive me if I fail to see it.”

Virginia stood to go, “I have to get back to my office. The Commander will be in shortly to see you...”

“Ginny, don’t go,” he said, pleadingly.

Virginia stopped at the door and turned to him.

“I thought you might want to speak to him alone.”

She came back to his bedside and sat down.

“I’d rather nobody see me like this...that is...well the only person I would want to see is you.”

Paul saw her tense up at once, and before he could say anything else the door opened and the Commander walked in.

Paul’s meeting with Straker was uncomfortable for both of them, Virginia observed. As soon as the Commander had the information he needed he quickly left. Foster had tried to put his

best face on things but Ginny saw right through his façade. *Poor Paul, he's scared to death.*

Straker decided that the knowledge of this incident was to be compartmentalized. The only ones who knew the truth were the medical personnel directly involved, the Commander and her.

Ginny walked down the corridor back to the elevator and selected the computer room level. She had just settled back into her old office, downstairs, and she would be able to work largely undisturbed. The executive officer's digs were on the way to the mess hall and she could never get anything done unless

she closed her doors. *Out of sight, out of mind*, she thought.

Paul's admission left her all the more confused, as she had been contemplating their relationship for some time. If it hadn't been for the fact that he was now a woman she would have kissed him. *God, what would we have done had we still been together?*

Virginia Lake buried herself in the alignment procedure, in attempt to distract herself from things she didn't want to consider.

Chapter 3:

Virginia met with the Commander, a few hours later, in his office.

“I’ve decided to keep a lid on this situation with Foster,” he said, when the door was closed. “This is partially due to Paul’s request on the matter.

“You mentioned that before,” she said, not surprised. “Who is going to be aware of the situation?”

“You, Colonel Grey, the three med staffers involved, and me,” he said.

“You’re not going to tell Alec?”

“After you left, Paul sent for me and asked that I not tell anyone who didn’t already know. Under the circumstances, I can see why. I’ve only brought in

Colonel Grey because Foster is going to need a new identity.”

“That’s going to take some doing, especially if you plan on him keeping his rank. It’s not like we have an abundance of full birds running around, and I’m the only woman who currently holds the rank,” she said, careful to keep any accusation out of her voice.

“Yes, I know. That is going to change, starting with Foster,” said Straker, as he handed her a folder. “Take a look at this.”

Virginia looked at the folder noticing that it was a personnel file. She flipped it open and immediately saw a picture of Paul in his new form on the dossier and ID card.

“Paula Harris?” she asked.

“Yes, she was a Lt. Colonel, who was first in line to command Moonbase. Colonel Harris was overseeing a lunar construction team when she was lost and presumed dead. John has fabricated a convincing cover story to explain her prolonged absence. She has been reassigned to HQ as a full colonel and, as of now, she is on the repair mission to the lunar far side station.”

“Cute,” she said, giving her boss a wry grin. “Does Paul, I mean Paula, know about this yet?”

“I’m going to tell him when he wakes up. In the mean time we’re going to have to find him a place to stay. He obviously

can't go back to his place and maintain his cover."

"He can stay with me," said Ginny. "He's going to need some help making the adjustment. It's not easy being a woman you know. How are we going to explain Paul's disappearance?"

"The logs will show that Foster picked Miss Harris up right after he left the restaurant. Foster is going to be listed as missing and presumed to have been abducted. And since Harris had no family, and few friends, no one will question it."

Ginny looked at the older picture in the file and held it up for Ed to see.

"Is this her?"

“Yes, an amazing resemblance, wouldn’t you say?”

“Uncanny is more like it. I didn’t know that John Grey could be so subversive.”

“He had a little help from Doctor Jackson,” said Straker.

“I might have known,” she answered.

Virginia paused for a moment before she asked her next question.

“Ed, what is the real reason for all the cloak and dagger. I can’t believe that you’re doing all this because of Paul’s request.”

“No...I’m not.”

Straker sat back in his chair as he contemplated his answer.

“Virginia, there is no known method to reverse what has happened to Foster. He is going to half to learn to adjust. That will be hard enough without everyone he has worked with knowing his past. Psychologically speaking, Jackson informed me that he has less than a fifty-fifty chance of adapting to the situation. And you already know what the consequences are should he become unstable. There is too much at stake.”

Virginia had not considered that and her eyes went wide with shock.

“Ed...do you know what you’re saying...”

“I know,” he interrupted. “I don’t take any pleasure in this. But we don’t have a choice. If Paul cannot adjust to his new identity, he’ll have to be eliminated. The

security of this organization is more important than anyone of us. If it were me lying in there, I'd expect you, or Alec, to do the same thing."

Ginny knew he was right, but it was a bitter thing. She made up her mind that she would do anything to help Paul make the transition to his new life. He had saved her life once before and her personal honor demanded that she do the same for him.

"Well I'd better get going. Paul is going to need some decent clothing and he can't very well go and get them in his state of mind. If he were a few inches shorter he could wear some of my older stuff. You know that kind of things I used to wear. The very last thing he

needs is to have a bunch of men leering at him.”

“I’ll leave that in your capable hands.”

When Paul woke up he found Ginny sitting at his beside, asleep in the chair. He reached out and touched her hand. Momentarily she stirred and slowly opened her eyes.

“Hey,” said Paul. “You should be home sleeping.”

“I’ll sleep later,” she said, as she sat up straight. “You’re going to be staying with me for a while. I picked you up some appropriate clothing, conservative of course.”

Foster looked over at the nightstand where Ginny had set out a change of clothes. He got out of bed and went into the bathroom to change. A few minutes later she could hear him cussing.

“Virginia, how the hell to you work this damn thing?”

She walked into the bathroom to see a frustrated Foster struggling with the mechanics of a bra. She had to stifle another giggle.

“Paul, hook it in front, spin it around, and then slip your arms underneath the straps,” she said, managing to keep a straight face.

Foster did as he was told and was able to get the garment somewhat in place.

“It’s uncomfortable as hell, why don’t I just skip it?”

“No,” said Virginia. “You’re much too well endowed for that. Do you want all the men in the place gawking at you? You have to adjust the straps. Here, let me help.”

She helped him adjust the bra straps and get himself comfortable. In a few minutes he was dressed and Ginny looked him over.

“How the hell do you do this on your own?” he asked.

This time she laughed, “Lots of practice. You will get used to it.”

On the way out Ginny and Paula ran into Alec Freeman.

“Hello Ginny,” he said.

“Hi Alec.”

“On your way out?” he asked her, but his eyes were on Paula.

“Yes, I haven’t been home yet. Have you met Colonel Harris?”

“No, I haven’t,” he said, extending his hand. “Alec Freeman.”

Paul recognized the look that Freeman was giving him, having seen it many times before, but never in his life did he think that he would be on the receiving end.

“I’m sure I’ll be seeing more of you,” Freeman was saying, somewhat suggestively.

“Yeah, sure,” Paul said. *Don’t count on it Alec.*

“Well we have to get going, it’s late and I’ve been here for sixteen hours. Come on Paula,” said Ginny.

When they were alone, Paul said, “Thanks Ginny. I owe you.”

“Oh trust me, when this over with, you will owe me, and I intend to collect,” she said, with a wry grin. “Watch Alec, I think he’s sweet on you.”

“Very funny, Virginia,” he muttered.

“You know, Ed, every time I think that I’ve met the most beautiful woman on the planet, another one comes along,” said Alec.

Straker had to force himself to keep a straight face.

“I take it you’ve met Colonel Harris.”

“Yeah, I ran into her and Ginny in the corridor. The two of them at once,” he said, pausing for effect. “What a fantasy that would be. Even you have to admit that.”

“You know something, Alec,” Ed began. “I’ve come to the conclusion that you’re far worse than Foster ever thought of being.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Is there any word on Paul?”

Straker shook his head, “He may very well have been on that UFO that was destroyed by Carlin. The search has turned up nothing, so far.”

Alec sat down in one of the niche seats. “Poor Virginia...”

Straker looked up, “What do you mean by that?”

“Paul told me this in confidence, but I guess it doesn’t matter now. You know the story between the two of them, right?”

“Not really,” said Ed. “I know they dated for a while after Craig died. Paul apparently helped her get through a

difficult time. Soon after she took over your duties, they stopped seeing each other, although they remained close friends.”

“The reason he split up with her is that he was afraid of losing someone he cared about. You remember what happened with Tina Duval?”

“Yes, said Straker. “I remember.”

“Paul told me last night that he was having second thoughts about Ginny. He said he missed her and was going to tell her how he felt. I never did apologize for what I said to him earlier,” Alec said, pausing for a moment. “Paul never said much about his relationship with Virginia and like an idiot I never took

the hint. I should have known that he still cared about her,” he finished, sadly.

“I’m sure that he doesn’t hold it against you Alec. The two of you have been friends for a while.”

“I’m surprised that you didn’t end up with her, Virginia that is. Don’t deny that you find her attractive, Ed, I know you too damn well.”

“Alec, in six weeks I’m going to be sending her on a very dangerous mission. It’s hard enough with her being a close friend, never mind if we were involved,” said Straker. “I won’t put myself in that position,” he said, remembering all too well the situation he was put when he was forced by duty to forfeit the life of his son. To this day,

only three people in the organization knew the truth, and Alec was not one of them. *One of us was enough.*

“Yeah, I suppose. Are you going home sometime today?”

“Right after I finish this report.”

“In that case, I won’t keep you,” he said, as he stood to leave. “Be seeing you.”

Straker watched his friend walk out saddened by the fact, that he couldn’t tell him the truth. His thoughts turned to Virginia and Paul. *This could get very complicated.*

Over the next week, Paul Foster slowly settled into his new identity as Paula Harris. For the most part, he was buried

in preparations for the planned SID upgrades, as well as the repair mission on the lunar far side. His studies, for the projects, had diverted most of his attention from his problem, but he found himself questioning his own self confidence when it came to the day to day command decisions he faced as a shift leader.

“Virginia, I don’t feel comfortable making decisions anymore,” he said to her quietly over their midnight meal. “I’ve never second guessed myself like this.”

“Paula,” she said, addressing him by his alter ego in public. “You’re going through an identity crisis. It’s perfectly normal to feel out of sorts and question

yourself. Confidence in your abilities will return in time. Try to focus on what you're doing right. I looked over your schedule for the far side mission and it was very well organized. That was a difficult plan to put together and you managed fit in every aspect of the repair with little or no wasted time.”

“I suppose you're right. I'm not used to being out of my element like this. It's unnerving.”

Virginia heard a determined fall of footsteps and looked up to see Commander Straker approach the table.

“Colonel Lake, Colonel Harris,” he said in greeting.

“Is something wrong, Ed?” asked Ginny.

“We have a problem. I need to see both of you in my office when you’re finished.”

“We’re just finishing up now,” she said.
“We’ll be right there.”

“What now?” asked Paul, when the Commander had left.

Virginia shook her head, “Whatever it is, it has to be serious. Did you hear the tone of his voice?”

“Just the normal, Straker wants it done yesterday, tone. Why?”

“I think it’s more than that. Come on.”

Foster and Lake noticed right away that Straker’s normally clean desk was inundated with documents, maps, and

orbital tracking data. It meant that he was working on something very complicated. The slide rule in his hands and the intent look on his face was unnecessary.

“Virginia, Paula, please have a seat,” he said as he closed the door.

The two colonels sat down and waited for Straker to finish what he was doing.

“Take a look at these reports,” said Straker, handing a copy to each of them.

Paul quickly scanned the report that Ed had given him. It was the solar activity report that covered the next six weeks. He looked up to see the concerned look on Straker’s face.

“High solar flare activity,” he said. “It will peak in about four weeks.”

“And it’s going to correspond with the full moon,” Ginny added.

“Yes,” said Ed, winding up. “Now take a look at this map.”

The map on his desk showed the approach paths most commonly used by the aliens. This copy had been heavily marked up with orbital calculations and plotted positions for the moon over the next six weeks. Foster looked at the dates to see where the moon would be in during the height of the solar activity. He looked up at Ed.

“We’re going to be wide open.”

“Exactly,” said Straker. “I’m beginning to think this was not a coincidence.”

“But how could they have possibly known?” asked Ginny. “That would mean they are monitoring our solar observatories.”

“Or they have their own installation somewhere,” added Straker. “It really doesn’t matter. It’s a fair guess that the aliens are going to hit us with something in four weeks.”

“What can we do about it?” asked Paul. “The components needed to repair the station won’t be ready for another five weeks.”

“There is another option,” said Virginia. “The prototype equipment could be pressed into service. The problem would

be the temperature variations in the equipment shelter. The production units are designed to compensate for environmental irregularities, but the prototypes would require constant adjustment to maintain alignment. The best way to accomplish this would be to keep the sensor platform in the moon mobile. The extended range models have shirtsleeve environments which would help keep the adjustments to a minimum.”

“Yes,” said Straker. “It also means exposing two people to a significant increase in risk. Let’s consider this a fall back plan. In the mean time I’ll see if Colonel Grey can expedite procurement

of the components needed. That's all for now."

Chapter 4:

While Paul had been sitting, he had been ignoring a series of cramps in his midsection and when he stood up a sharp pain caused him to double over.

"Paul? Are you all right?" asked Straker.

"I don't know. It started when I came in here. I thought it was just indigestion."

"Where is the pain?" asked Ginny.

Paul pointed to his midsection, just below the beltline. "Right here."

Virginia shook her head, “That’s not indigestion, Paul,” she said, with a wry grin. “You are about to learn about one of the least glamorous aspects of being a woman. Can you stand?”

“I think so,” he said, as he slowly rose to his feet.

As Paul drew himself to full height, he almost doubled over in pain, “I’m all right,” he said, trying to minimize it.

“Virginia, you had better get him, er, her, down to medical,” said Ed, as he opened the doors.

Paul was able to walk with Ginny’s help but Straker could see him leaning heavy on Virginia as they walked out of the office.

“Well, Colonel,” said Doctor Shroeder, as he finished the examination. “You’re suffering from menstrual cramps.”

“You’ve got to be kidding?”

“It’s perfectly normal, Colonel. The first couple of days are usually the worst for the cramps. The remaining five or so days are more of an inconvenience. I can prescribe a low dosage estrogen therapy to help regulate your cycle and reduce the pain associated with the cramps.

Shroeder walked out of the room and Paul looked at Virginia.

“I don’t believe this,” he said.

“Let this be a lesson to you, this is real. And remember, you can get pregnant

too, if you're not careful," Ginny said, with a smirk.

"I can promise you there will be zero chance of that, even if I have to become a nun."

"Sister Mary Pauline?"

"You're very funny, Ginny. What would you have done if this had happened to you?"

Virginia shrugged, "I wouldn't have to put up with male chauvinism anymore. Although it's almost nonexistent down here, it's alive and well upstairs. That's another thing for you to think about."

Doctor Shroeder came back into the room and addressed Foster.

“Colonel, I want you to take two of these, it will ease the cramps. You want to take them with food.”

“I just ate an hour ago. What is this?”

“Naproxen Sodium, I’ll give you a script for it. You should only have to take them a couple days a month.”

He handed Foster another item, a circular plastic container. “I want you to start this in seven days.”

“What’s this?”

“Estrogen therapy,” he said, struggling to keep a professional demeanor. “We talked about this.”

“It looks like a birth control container,” said Foster.

“It’s the same medication at a different dosage. But Colonel Foster, I must caution you that this dosage is not sufficient for contraceptive purposes. If you intend to engage in sexual activity without running the risk of pregnancy you’ll have to use additional methods. Or I could increase the dosage...”

“No, that will be fine,” Foster said, quicker than he intended to.

“Very well,” said the doctor. “Remember that this therapy has to be taken every day, as close as possible to the same time.”

After the doctor had left Ginny dug through her purse and handed Paul a slender object wrapped in plastic. “You’ll need this, Paul.”

“Is this what I think it is?” he asked, embarrassed.

Virginia nodded, “I told you it wasn’t easy being a woman.”

A week and a half later Paula was back to her normal self, at least as normal as she could be under the circumstances. She was working the day watch, with Colonel Lake, both of them buried in preparation for the upcoming mission.

Paula had taken lunch early and was on her way back to the lab when she ran into Alec.

“Good morning Alec,” she said without thinking.

“Well good morning, Paula. How are you settling in?”

Uh oh, now I did it, she thought to herself.

“Just fine,” she answered, as casually as she could. “Virginia and I have been very busy with the mission planning.”

“All work and no play makes for a boring existence. I don’t know if you remember me, we only met once just before we started construction on Moonbase.”

“That was nine years ago,” said Paula, trying to discourage the flirtatious Freeman.

“I remember you. You haven’t aged a day. We never did get to have that drink.”

“What drink is that?”

“We were going to get together when you rotated down from Moonbase. But the accident...I thought you were dead.”

“Yes...well, I got lucky. I don’t remember much about the week leading up to the accident.”

“I see,” said Freeman, pleasantly. “Maybe we can get reacquainted?”

“I don’t think so, as I said, Virginia and I spending every waking hour on preparation for the mission,” said Paula, as she tried to make her way back to the safety of the lab.

“*Colonel Freeman, please report to Control,*” a voice said over the intercom.

“Duty calls, some other time maybe?” said Alec, as he turned to walk down the corridor.

Saved by the bell, thought Harris.

“So Alec Freeman hit on you?” Ginny chuckled, clearly enjoying the prospect. “I told you he was sweet on you.”

“That’s not funny Virginia! I almost told him the truth.”

Paul had decided to wait until they were home before he told Ginny about his uncomfortable encounter with Freeman.

“If you decide to tell him, please make sure that I’m there to see the look on his face. Wait, I’ve got a better idea. Sleep with him first, and then tell him.”

“Virginia!”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

“You think this is a big joke don’t you, Virginia!” said Paul, finally losing his temper. “I am a man trapped in a woman’s body, with all her feelings and sensations. It’s driving me crazy!”

“I’m sorry, Paul,” she said, sincerely. “I’m trying to make light of it because I don’t know what else to do.”

“It’s not a laughing matter, Ginny...”

“Don’t you think I know that!” said Virginia, her own frustration now surfacing. “You’re not the only one that is suffering because of this. Why the hell do you think I transferred to night shift, Paul? I needed to put some distance

between us so I could figure some things out. And now this happens and where does that leave me? In love with a man, who is now a woman?”

Virginia turned away from him, as the tears began to fall, angry with herself for losing her self control. She felt his arms wrap around her from behind and her first reaction was to push him away, but he held on fast and she soon let her emotions go as she clung to his arms.

“I didn’t know that you still felt that way about me,” said Paul.

Ginny turned to face him, still being held in his arms. “It takes me a while to get over someone, especially when I’m still good friends with them. I planned on talking with you about it.”

“Well, in that case I have a confession, I was going to tell you that I still care...it’s taken me this long to realize that I love you Ginny. I guess I have all along.”

“Truly?”

“Yeah.”

Virginia looked up at him, her emotions roiling now. She was torn between her feelings for Paul and the change in gender that he had undergone. “Aw hell,” she said as she reached to kiss him deeply.

“Well?” asked Virginia, as she gently stroked his chest between his now ample breasts.

“That was incredible,” he replied, still holding her close. “I didn’t know that you had this kind of...experience.”

“I don’t,” Ginny said, feigning shock. “This is all new to me!”

The pair was silent for a few moments, basking in the afterglow.

“How did I do?” he asked.

“It was different...not in a bad way. For a moment I forgot that you didn’t have the right equipment. Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have...”

“Shhhh, it’s all right,” he said. “Are you okay with this?”

“I’m not ashamed, if that’s what you mean. I didn’t make love with another woman; I made love with Paul Foster.

You see when I look at you; I'm seeing you with my heart, not my eyes. But I'll admit, this just got very complicated. Most of the people we know would not understand."

"I guess this means I can't sleep with Alec," he said with a grin.

"Not if you want to live and do well," she replied, with a smirk. "I happen to be a very jealous lover. I might just have to warn him off."

"Now that I'd like to see," he said, pausing for a moment. "Virginia, is this why you were so angry about Linda Simmons?"

Virginia laid back in the bed as she contemplated the incident where Paul had brought one of the Psychobombs to

HQ. While it was a gross violation of security, and a significant danger to the staff, her reaction was a bit overzealous.

“I might have overreacted just a little bit, but I was just as angry with Ed as I was with you. I took my frustration out on poor Linda. She really didn’t have any idea what was happening to her. Yeah, I was jealous.”

“I’m sorry, Ginny. I should have been more considerate of your feelings. I’ve been troubled by that decision for over a year now, but I was sure you had moved on.”

“I thought about it, but when we parted ways I decided that I wasn’t going to get involved with anyone else in the organization; the rumors about us were

already flying, even though neither one of us had said anything. To make matters worse, everyone assumed that Craig and I had been sleeping together so when you put it all together, it made me look cheap.”

“Virginia, maybe I shouldn’t have...”

“No Paul, it wasn’t your fault, it was mine. After Craig had died, you were incredibly kind to me. The night you came over to say goodbye, I was feeling very lonely and vulnerable. You did offer to leave, more than once I might add.”

“Ginny, I have to be honest. I did that as much for myself as I did for you. I’ve been haunted by that night for over a year. When you see someone in your

dreams all the time, it's more than just infatuation.”

“Yeah?” said Virginia as she rolled on top of him. “Well here is your chance to prove it.”

Two weeks later:

Alec Freeman, Virginia Lake, and Paula Harris sat around the conference table as the Commander conducted the final briefing before the two women were to leave for Moonbase.

“So, as you can see,” said Straker, “the contractors came through. The equipment is being sent up right now, via supply ship, and it will be waiting for you when you arrive this afternoon.

Virginia, do you have everything else that you need?”

“I think so. Paula and I will double check our documentation before we leave for the airport. Once we arrive on Moonbase, I want to unpack the equipment and run a functional analysis to verify that nothing was damaged during transportation. Paula and I will depart for the far side station the following day.”

“Once the two of you leave, Ginny,” added Alec, “I’ll bring Moonbase to yellow alert. The interceptors can be over your position in less than five minutes.”

Straker looked at each of the three of them, “Very well then, that’s all.”

As Paul drove to the airport he noticed that Virginia was quieter than normal. To him she seemed almost withdrawn.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

She turned to him, managing a wan smile.

“I’m sorry, Paul. I don’t mean to be antisocial, it’s just...I’m still trying to figure us out. I don’t know what to think or what to feel, it’s like I don’t even know who or what I am.”

“Tell me about it.”

Ginny reached for his hand, “I appreciate you giving me my space last night, Paul. More than words can say...”

“I know how hard this is for you, I’m sorry that I didn’t see it sooner. So are we going to be okay cooped up in a moon mobile for a week?”

“I think we’ll be all right, it’s the part that comes after that has me thinking. I mean...you know...where are we going to go from here?”

“I could tell everyone the truth; at least it would take the heat off of you...”

“No. That’s not the answer. I checked the regs and there is nothing that prohibits a same sex relationship as long as we fill out the proper forms. At least we’d be in the same boat.”

“What would your friends think about you?”

“Nina and Gay would be fine with it, Alec will never speak to me again, and Ed, he knows the truth. His concern would be how the rest of the staff reacts. As long as it doesn’t get in the way of operations, he wouldn’t object. Remember that a sizable percentage of our people come from the US military where this sort of thing isn’t allowed.”

“That’s why I should come forward, Ginny. Psychologically speaking, I’m still a man. What happened to me should be looked on as an illness, or a disability. That is...what I mean...”

“You don’t have to explain, Paul. I know what you are trying to say, and you’re right,” she said, pausing for a moment. “I think we should talk to Ed when we

get back. It was as much his decision, as it was yours, to keep this under wraps. And Jackson is still looking for a cure, maybe we'll get lucky."

"I've pretty much resigned myself to the fact that I'm going to spend the rest of my life as a woman," said Paul. "But I'm not sleeping with Alec!"

"Even if he begged you to have his baby?"

"I thought you'd be jealous?"

"I would," said Ginny. "But seeing the look on Alec's face would be worth it."

The car erupted with the sounds of uncontrolled laughter.

Chapter 5:

The terrain, on the lunar far side, was illuminated only by the lights of the moon mobile as it skimmed over the surface. At the controls, Paul was piloting the final leg of their three day journey. He carefully checked their position as a navigational error could prove to be fatal at the speed they were traveling. Paul often compared a long range moon mobile mission to the barnstorming made famous during the early days of aviation.

A few hours ago, his companion had retired to the sleep cabin, in the rear of the extended range vehicle. He looked back in time to see her emerge from the tiny cubicle.

“Still on course?” asked Virginia, as she slipped into the seat next to him.

“Yeah, we should be at the site in about two hours. I didn’t expect you to be awake so soon.”

“I woke up about twenty minutes ago,” she said. “I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

“Are you concerned?”

Ginny gazed out the viewport, seeming to collect her thoughts.

“Yes,” she answered, after a while. “But not about the mission.”

Paul remained silent, waiting for her to elaborate. An uneasy quiet came over both of them. When it was apparent that she was not going to continue, he pressed further.

“Virginia, what’s wrong?”

Ginny reached for his hand, and held it firm as she answered, “It’s about my mother. I never considered how she would react to our situation. Mom is easy going about most things, but she is quite old fashioned when it comes to relationships. I know she was upset when she learned that Brad and I had been intimate before our wedding. I can only imagine how she will react to this.”

“I see,” said Paul, pausing for a moment. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“No, it’s my life, and my decision. I’m just worried that she won’t understand.”

“Ginny, you’ve told me how close the two of you are. I think she’ll adjust.”

“I hope so, Paul. My family is very important to me.”

“Have you considered not telling her?” asked Paul.

“That won’t work. My mother knows me too well. I was dating Craig for only a month when she asked me about him.”

“Like mother, like daughter,” said Paul, with a grin.

“Hey, watch it!” she said, feigning a swat to his head.

Two hours later, the moon mobile arrived at the remote tracking site. While Paul shut down the drive systems, Virginia extended the communications umbilical to dock with the access port.

She picked up the handset and dialed the extension for the control sphere.

“Colonel Barry.”

“Nina, it’s Ginny. Paula and I have arrived at the site.”

“You’re ahead of schedule,” said Nina. “I’ll call down to HQ and let them know that the two of you are on site. Are you going to start the repairs now?”

“Paula has been at the controls for almost twelve hours, she needs to rest. While she is sleeping, I plan on taking the site off line and running a local diagnostic. That should take about two hours. When this step is complete, I’m going to get some rest. We’ll plan on the EVA in ten hours.”

“Understood, have a good nap. Moonbase out.”

“How are they coming along?” asked Freeman, as he poked his head into the control sphere.

“Colonel Harris just checked in, they are about ready to finish the final calibrations,” said Barry.

“They should be heading back in a few hours then. Any change in the solar activity report?”

“The Solar Flux readings have begun to increase over the past hour. At its current rate, we should begin to see our detection range start to degrade in about two hours. Meteorology is predicting the

peak of the storm to occur in about twelve hours.”

At least they'll be on their way back, thought Alec.

“Let me know immediately, if there is any change,” said Freeman.

“Yes sir.”

“This would be a great place for an observatory,” said Paul, as he scanned the star filled vista covering the lunar night side.

“A multinational team of astronomers has been trying to get a grant for over two years. But they keep running into red tape.”

“Caused by the IAC, no doubt.”

“The commission considers a manned observatory a security risk,” said Ginny. “They’ve been encouraged to pursue an unmanned platform. The communications link will run through our network.”

Paul thought about the situation for a moment, and said, “So SHADO can censor anything that accidentally shows up, cute. Was that Straker’s idea?”

Virginia chuckled, “You know Ed. If there is a way to have the best of both worlds, he’ll figure it out. The astronomers receive a higher resolution imaging system, and SHADO adds an optical tracking system as a backup. Add to that, Moonbase doesn’t have to deal with the complications of another

civilian crew on the moon. Now if you're done gazing at the stars, I could use a hand with this module."

"Oh, of course," said Paul. "Sorry."

The module weighed over a hundred pounds on Earth, but was only sixteen and a half pounds in the lunar gravity. Its mass, however, had not changed, and the bulky piece of equipment required the two of them to safely position it in place.

"Okay Paul, can you hold it there?"

"I've got it."

While Foster held the unit in place, Virginia secured it with the fasteners.

"That's got it! Thanks."

As Virginia brought the tracking station back online, Paul collected the tools and stowed them in the waiting Moon mobile. When he returned, she was just closing the access panel.

“Moonbase, from Lake,” she said. “Nina, the local calibration procedure is complete and the station is online. You can begin the reintegration process.”

“Understood, Colonel. I’ll call you when the procedure is completed. Moonbase out.”

“How long?” asked Paul, as he stepped beside her.

“It usually takes about ninety minutes, assuming there are no problems. I was going to go back inside and charge my air supply.”

“Good idea.”

The two astronauts ascended the ladder into the mobile and closed the airlock behind them. When the pressurization was complete the inner door opened and they were greeted by the alert klaxon.

“Red alert, red alert, interceptors, immediate launch!” said Lt. Colonel Barry, just as Alec Freeman entered the sphere.

“How many?” he asked.

“SID picked up two sets of six, one in sector 142 Red, and the second group in sector 252 Green. Fifty million miles and closing, their speed is SOL 6. The

network is having trouble maintaining a lock, due to heavy solar interference.”

“Sneaky bastards,” said Freeman. “They’re approaching from the sun. Do we have a trajectory termination?”

“Best guess is southern England,” said Barry.

“Bloody hell!” said Freeman as he slid into the center seat. “Moonbase to SHADO control.”

“This is Straker. Are the interceptors space borne?”

“The first group has just cleared the pads. It looks like you are going to have company.”

On the video screen, Alec saw his friend nod, “I was expecting them to try

something like this. Have you informed Lake and Harris?”

“Nina has them on the landline now.”

“Very well. Deploy your ground defenses. They just may come after you.”

“It’s being done,” said Freeman. Quietly he asked, “Ed, what about Ginny and Paula?”

“They know the risks, Alec. Tell them to keep their heads low.”

Alec understood the unspoken order. The current tactical situation would not allow CAP over their position. Lake and Harris, were on their own.

“Right,” said a frustrated Freeman.

“We just got thrown to the wolves,” said Paul. “I’d leave my suit on if I were you.”

“How many?”

“Twelve, so far, and they’re coming from two different directions.”

“Ed said they might try this. It was his biggest concern with this mission,” said Ginny.

Paul climbed into the pilot’s seat and activated the weapons system, “I wish he had said something to me.”

“Would it have mattered?”

Paul stopped what he was doing and looked at her, “No. I suppose it wouldn’t, except maybe to ask him not to send you.”

“Stay home and let you have all the fun? Not on your life. Besides, it would have taken months to train another person to take my place,” said Ginny. “I do appreciate your concern, Paul. I know it’s for the right reason.”

Undetected by the impeded tracking network, three UFOs approached the lunar far side, taking advantage of the gap in the sensor coverage. Their SOL two approach speed was reduced to sublight, as they closed to within a quarter million miles of the lunar surface.

The alien pilots had to fly a difficult flight path if they were to succeed in their mission. The first leg required a

near vertical descent over the human installation on the lunar surface. It was their intention to destroy the complex, before it becomes operational. The second leg involved a high speed run along the lunar surface, and the craft would approach the human base from different directions. If successful, the plan would deal the human defense organization a serious, perhaps fatal blow.

Paul maneuvered the moon mobile to an outcropping with an overhang, a short distance from the tracking installation.

“At least this will provide us a little cover,” he said. “Anything on the radar screen?”

Virginia looked over to the display.

“No, it’s all clear...wait a second. Contact! Three bandits, bearing 030 by 85. They’re coming down almost on top of us.”

“Damn, I won’t be able to get a clear shot,” said Paul, as he jumped out of the seat.

Paul opened the locker and pulled out the portable rocket launcher and the ammo container.

“You’re not going out there, are you?”

“I don’t have a choice, Virginia. I can’t let them take out the installation.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, it’s too dangerous...”

“What, because I’m a woman, have you looked in the mirror lately?”

Paul didn’t want to put her at risk, but he knew she was right, and she did have a point.

“All right, join the party. Just keep your head low.”

The pair suited up and exited the moon mobile, the lunar gravity making their task of hefting the heavy equipment easier. Once on the surface, they climbed up the rock face and set the rocket launcher in place. While Virginia activated the unit with the key, Paul loaded a rocket round into the chamber.

“They should approach from the northeast,” said Paul. “All we have to do now is wait.”

The three UFOs descended a few miles east of the installation. They skirted, single file, a few yards above the lunar surface.

“There,” said Ginny, pointing to the east. “I see two, no wait, make that three UFOs. They’re spaced about fifty yards apart.”

Paul trained the launcher in the direction of the targets and adjusted the rangefinder. *Come on baby, just get a little closer.*

“Virginia, these are going to be snapshots. Be ready to reload.”

“All right.”

The range indicator, in the viewfinder changed from amber to green, as he centered the first UFO in the crosshairs. Paul pulled the trigger, and the hypersonic rocket blasted out of the launch tube.

Paul's aim was true and the missile impacted the alien craft dead center. The damaged craft lost control, and crashed into the lunar surface. Paul and Ginny had no time to celebrate, as the second UFO fired an energy beam near their position.

“Duck!” yelled Lake.

They narrowly missed getting hit by the alien beam. Ginny grabbed another round and placed it into the chamber.

“Reloaded, go!”

Paul lined up for another shot. The second alien craft was much closer, and they were now alerted. The alien craft jinked and shifted direction making it harder for Foster to line up a shot.

“Damn-it, Virginia, this bastard won’t hold still.”

“Take your time, Paul. He’s still a ways out.”

“Where’s the third one?”

Virginia scanned the surface with the binoculars, “I don’t see it. He must have ducked behind a rock formation.”

Paul readjusted the rangefinder, bringing the alien craft into focus. As soon as the UFO was in range, he fired again.

This shot impacted on the side of the craft causing it to veer away. It tried to gain altitude, but the ship was too badly damaged. The increase on its power system caused the craft to explode.

“That’s two!” yelled Paul.

While Ginny looked for the last craft, Paul reloaded his weapon.

“Virginia, have you found it yet?”

“I’m still looking...wait...there it is. Eleven o’clock.”

Paul had to shift position higher on the rock to get the weapon trained on the incoming craft. He adjusted his aim and peered through the viewfinder.

“Paul, be careful...”

As Ginny was speaking, the alien craft fired an energy beam at them. He pushed Virginia down, taking the brunt of the beam himself. He fell back on the ledge, next to her.

“Paul! Paul!”

Ginny rushed to his side, but she couldn't tell if he was breathing or not. She picked up the rocket launcher and climbed back to the perch.

The UFO was much closer, and she had no trouble finding it in the rangefinder. Carefully, she lined up the crosshairs on the alien craft.

“Take this, you son of a bitch,” she said, as she pulled the trigger.

The rocket left the tube and tracked in on the alien craft, exploding it on impact.

It took Ginny a while to get her friend back into the moon mobile. Once inside she removed his helmet and breathed a sigh of relief when she could see him breathing. Virginia closed her eyes and gently kissed him, still very much torn about her feelings. She leaned back and looked at the woman, lying on the bunk, knowing that trapped, in a female body, was a man that she loved.

“I don’t care anymore, Paul, Paula, whoever you are. I love you.”

Virginia activated the automated distress signal and donned her helmet.

She entered the airlock and exited the mobile to retrieve the launcher and ammo. *We may still need it*, she thought.

Ten minutes later, she opened the inner door to the cabin and removed her helmet and spacesuit. As she went to remove Paul's suit she noticed his hair. *Oh my God!* Quickly removing the locking collar of his suit, she unzipped the outer and inner layers of the suit, revealing his chest. His breasts had returned to normal.

Paul began to stir.

“What happened?” *he* asked.

“You were hit by an alien energy beam. How do you feel?”

“Strange, my voice has changed, am I...”

“Yes, oh yes, Paul. You’re a man again.”

“I feel dizzy,” he said.

“That’s to be expected. You spent six weeks as a woman, Paul. Just think about it, you can embarrass the hell out of Alec now.”

“I’m not sure who’ll be embarrassed more, him or me.”

The communications system came to life with the voice of Alec Freeman, calling the moon mobile.

“Well, we are about to find out,” said Ginny.

Epilogue:

A few days later, Virginia was sitting in Ed's office, while Paul was being examined in Medical Center.

“You and Paul did well,” said Straker. “I was very happy to see you make it home in one piece.”

“We were lucky, Ed. I think we need to look at better protection for the remote sites.”

Yes, I agree. Now, all we have to do is convince Henderson,” said Ed. In a softer voice he asked, “How is Paul doing?”

“He was sick, and dizzy, most of the trip back to Moonbase. Jackson is putting

him through a battery of tests,” said Virginia.

“It must have been hard on you, these past few weeks?”

Virginia let out a sigh, “Yeah, it was, Ed. Everyone else saw Paul as a woman, but to me, he was still Paul. Would it surprise you to know that I would have loved him regardless?”

“Not at all,” said Ed. “Would you leave someone that you truly loved just because they contracted an illness?”

“Then you understand?” asked Ginny.

“I hope Foster realizes just how lucky a man he is.”

“Thanks,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye. The Commander rarely showed

his tender side, but it was consuming, when he did. Ginny quickly changed the subject.

“You should have seen the look on Alec’s face, when Paul walked out of the moon mobile. You know, he tried to hit on *Paula*.”

Straker couldn’t keep a straight face, “I would have paid real money to see that. I’m sure you didn’t let him live it down.”

“Who, me?” asked Ginny, innocently. “Commander Straker, I’m shocked that you would even suggest such a scandalous course of action.”

“I’ll bet you enjoyed every minute of it.”

“I think our dear Alec will think twice before he chases the next young lady

that is assigned to HQ. Yes, I did enjoy it. Poetic justice.”

The door opened as Freeman and Foster entered the office.

“Speaking of the lovely couple,” said Virginia.

“You’re not going to let me live this down, are you, Ginny,” said a frustrated Freeman.

“Not a chance in hell,” she said. Turning to Paul, she asked, “How are you feeling?”

Foster shook his head, “I’ve never been poked and prodded so much in my life. Jackson enjoyed this way too much.”

Paul turned to Alec, “And I thought you still cared?”

“Don’t you start, Foster.”

Straker was struggling to keep a straight face, “Are you ready to grab dinner, Alec? Or would you rather go with Paul?”

“Let’s go, I’m outnumbered here,” Freeman said in resignation.

In the parking lot the same scantily clad actress strolled down the walkway as Freeman paused to watch her walk by. Ginny and Paul looked at Alec, then at each other. “He’ll never change,” said Ginny.

As Lake and Foster walked away, hand in hand, Freeman tuned to Straker.

“Now come on, Ed. Tell me that you wouldn’t want to have one night alone

with that,” he said, pointing his thumb to the actress.

“Sorry, Alec,” Straker said, deadpan. “He’s not my type.”

“What do you...”

“I think the term used is, drag queen.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Ask Miss Ealand.”

Alec Freeman was doing a fairly good impression of a gaffed fish.

“That’s it. I’m going to become a monk.”

END