

A Matter of Responsibility

A UFO Challenge Story for the Sci-Fi
Forever Forum

Written by Matthew R. White

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Based on the Characters and series created by
Gerry Anderson



Historians Note: This story takes place within the *Soul Mates* story arc about five months after *The Long Sleep*.

“Would you like some more coffee?” she asked quietly, as he read the morning paper.

She really has no idea how absolutely beautiful she looks in the morning, he thought, as he took in the image of her blue grey eyes, and her still out of place ash blonde hair. For almost four years, he had seen her at HQ looking picture perfect, her hair just so, her makeup applied just right, and her meticulous choice of attire, all of which defined the physical attributes of this stunningly gorgeous woman. For Ed Straker, all of that paled in comparison to the natural beauty that she radiated in the first morning light.

“Yes, please,” he said to his fiancée, still finding himself ever so taken by her radiance, even though they had shared the same house for almost half a year.

After pouring his coffee Virginia sat down at the table next to him, and finished her breakfast while Ed continued to read the paper. They

were up early, even though an alert had kept them at HQ until well after midnight. Outside, the early morning rain pelted on the windows and a roll of thunder could be heard in the distance. Looking up at his future wife, he was fondly reminded of their first night together. Two storms had hit that night, one driven by the forces of nature and the other by the burning of passion, and they had played in perfect harmony with each other.

“Anything interesting this morning?” she asked, bringing him back to the here and now.

“The usual nonsense, the START talks have stalled again, there’s more unrest in the Middle East, in the states Democrats and Republicans are pointing fingers at each other over the budget,” he said sardonically. “It’s a wonder we ever made it out of the dark ages.”

“There are those who say that we are still in the dark ages,” she replied facetiously, launching a

preemptive strike in what she perceived as a coming war of wit.

Ed and Virginia had always been able to read each other very well but with the empathic connection, brought on by the Timelash energy field, the battle of wits took on a whole new dimension.

“Three more weeks, and we leave for the Cape. Are you ready to ride the rocket again?” he asked, redirecting the conversation.

“Oh hell yeah,” she replied. “It’s not every bride to be that gets to take a deep space flight with her future husband. Besides, I have plans for our trip home.”

Ed could see a twinkle in her eyes as well as a bit of playfulness in her smile. The felling of impishness he sensed from her was unnecessary.

“Oh, and what might that be?”

She leaned forward and mischievously touched the tip of his nose with her finger.

“Let’s just say I have an experiment I’d like to try,” she said in a suggestive tone.

He still found himself surprised by the playfulness that had become the cornerstone of their relationship, and it was something he never would have expected from her, never mind himself. It was a welcome diversion from the stress and rigors of commanding SHADO.

The couple was scheduled to rendezvous with, and commission SID-Three, SHADO’s newest and most advanced tracking satellite, that would be parked at the L₃ libration point. Because the L₃ was an inherently unstable orbit, the new satellite had been equipped with a more sophisticated station keeping system and larger maneuvering fuel tanks. This last mission would tie in, and align, all three of the units in the SID system. And Virginia Lake was

the only person qualified to make those adjustments.

She had previously flown the SID-Two mission with Paul Foster. The relatively simple mission had given her a chance to become acclimated to the rigors of a deep space mission. Taking a lunar shuttle flight was nothing like riding a Saturn V into orbit.

“Paul did well on the last mission, don’t you think?”

“Yes, he did,” she replied. “I think he’s finally turned the corner.”

“I agree. I think I now have as much confidence in him as I do you.” Ed said, deadpan.

His future wife just gave him a venomous look.

“Well, almost as much,” he added.

That brought both of them to laughter.

“You are right Ed,” she continued in a serious vein. “Paul has come a long way from where he

was year ago. But you never doubted that he would.”

“At times I did,” he said as he flipped the paper to the local section. “For all his potential, Paul had a brashness that needed to be tamed. In a way, he reminded me of a certain Lieutenant Colonel I used to know. There were more than a few times when I...”

Ed stopped mid sentence, as he saw a picture in the obituary section that brought back an unpleasant memory. He quickly read the section that only confirmed the identity of the woman shown in the photograph.

“Ed, what’s wrong?” asked Virginia, having sensed his shift in mood.

When he recovered from the initial shock, he quietly continued, “Do you remember the incident with the GPA reporter a couple of years ago?”

“I was on furlough that week. But I read the report. Why?”

“The woman, who posed as the reporter, was killed in an automobile accident last night. According to the police report, she was driving while intoxicated.”

Straker was silent for a few minutes as he tried to collect his thoughts, knowing that his future wife had already sensed his discomfort. He had been open and honest with her with every subject that had ever been broached, but he now found himself retreating into the mask that he wore to all but his closest friends.

“Ed...please, tell me. What’s bothering you about this?” she asked tenderly, as she reached for his hand.

“It’s a long and troubling story,” he offered.

Virginia could see the turmoil of emotion, which she sensed from him, being mirrored in his intense blue eyes.

“Well Ed, it’s Saturday, it’s raining, we’re off duty today, and the only plan we had made was to go back to bed and maybe catch up on some sleep.”

“Maybe?” he asked, his mood lightening by her steadying presence.

“Well, maybe later,” she said conspiratorially. “Ed this is the first time in months that I’ve felt you withdraw emotionally. That means it is serious. You need to talk about it, and I need to listen. As I see it, we have all day.”

“Virginia, when I tell you what I have to tell you, you’ll probably think less of me,” he said with deep sense of sadness.

She wondered what could have been so terrible to make him say something so ominous. But she knew that Ed held himself to a standard that, quite frankly, would be impossible for most people to live up to. But Ed Straker wasn’t most people.

“Well, unless you’re going to tell me that you’re secretly working for the aliens or that you’re a closet serial killer, I don’t see that you have to worry.”

Ed leaned back in his chair and let out a deep breath.

“A few days before this incident, Craig stopped in to see me. He was more excited than I had ever seen him. I still remember him telling me how he had finally landed a date with the woman of his dreams.”

“I see,” said Virginia, as she began to make sense of it. That week in December, Craig had taken her to see *The Nutcracker*. Ginny had an avid appreciation for the arts and was more than surprised that Collins shared that passion.

“It’s my fault,” Ed added. “Craig had asked me about you while you were on bereavement leave. He even went as far as to bring up the notion that I had feelings for you, but I chose to keep quiet.”

“Craig knew?”

“You know how intuitive he was. In astronaut training we had a mantra, you snooze, you lose. Craig gave me the opportunity to interject, but had I done so I would have been obligated to act on it. I wasn’t yet ready to do so.”

“I still can’t believe that I didn’t see it,” she said wistfully. “In hindsight the signs were all there. I must have been blinded by my own feelings. Those feelings are what kept me from dating Craig right away. I still feel guilty about that you know, for several reasons.”

Ed stood up from the kitchen table and went over to the French door leading to the patio. In the distance, he could see lightning flashes painting the grey sky. The deep rumble of thunder rolled in several seconds later.

“I was delighted for both of you,” Ed continued. “You both deserved to be happy. But I suddenly realized just how lonely I was. And I was tired of being lonely. Anyway...there was a lot going on

that month. If you remember, I had to pull Gay Ellis off of Skydiver training to fill in some of the empty slots on Moonbase, and that morning I gave Alec the unpleasant task of informing the Moonbase staff of the rotation changes that needed to be made...”

“I do remember. When I got back, you and I got into a heated discussion over that subject if I recall correctly.”

“Yes, the first of many,” Ed said with a chuckle. “But I knew then that I was promoting the right person. I wanted a second in command that had the moxie to tell me when I was wrong.”

“Fortunately that didn’t happen too often,” she said with a grin. “But getting back to the reporter...”

“Ah yes. With everything that went on that week, I had completely forgotten about the interview, and Alec wasn’t inclined to handle it for me, especially after I had just dumped a difficult job on him. When I heard the name Jo

Frasier, I had assumed that I was meeting with a man. Unbeknownst to me, Jo was short for Josephine.”

“She outfoxed you. That’s a rarity.”

“In more ways than one I’m afraid. I noticed right away that Miss Frasier used a tape recorder for the interview. She told me that her notepad was for her impressions.”

Ed turned and sat back down at the table and went on with the story, “The interview was what I would have normally expected, the goings on in the studio, nothing out of the ordinary. When she had concluded the interview, I walked her to her car.”

“What did you think of her?” Virginia asked.

“She was confident, intelligent, attractive, and she seemed to have a handle on the way to deal with a man’s world. It wasn’t until I found out that she had left her handbag in my office, that I knew something was amiss. When I found out

that she had returned to retrieve it, while I was on the lot, I checked downstairs to see if anyone had called me. Ford had buzzed me on the intercom, calling me Commander Straker.”

“I see the problem,” said Virginia. “She deliberately left the tape recorder in your office running, didn’t she?”

“Yes, and because of that, Jo Frasier had become a possible security risk. And it was my fault. When I had Miss Ealand call her press agency, we found out that Miss Frasier had misrepresented herself. You know, Virginia, when you were flying to England with the Utronic equipment, I chewed Ford out for making a simple coding error. This mistake was much more serious and I had no excuse...”

“Ed, you just told me how much was going on that week, it happens. Sometimes we make mistakes.”

“You know as well as I do that this is the kind of mistake that could blow the lid off our cover.

Because I made the error, it became a matter of responsibility.”

“I was surprised that you chose to pursue the matter yourself, rather than let security deal with it,” she said. “That would have been standard procedure.”

“You’re right of course, and I thought about it, but you know how rough our security boys can play. I had hoped to avoid putting her through that kind of trauma. I felt that I could handle it a tad more discreetly than security would have. So I left Alec in command, and went off in search of Miss Frasier.”

“You also didn’t want to leave your problem for someone else to have to deal with. I can understand that,” Virginia added.

Ed simply nodded. His future bride had a unique talent for cutting to the heart of the matter. It was a trait that he valued, as he could always count on her to be upfront, regardless of how unpleasant his reaction might have been.

“It took most of the day, but by late afternoon I had located her hotel. She was a little more than surprised to see me. Miss Frasier admitted that she was a freelance journalist and that she had used the name of GPA to secure the interview. All I really wanted was the tape and when she gave it up, I didn’t expect any more trouble that is until she clubbed me with a vase.”

“I didn’t see that in the report. This woman certainly was a feisty one,” Virginia commented dryly.

“I have to admit, I did admire her spunk.”

“So she did make an impression.”

“Yes, she did,” Ed said. “She got a jump on me, but I was able catch up with her on the highway and I eventually forced her off the road. Her car was stuck in the ditch so I took her with me. She expected me to hand her over to the police and by all rights is probably what I should have done.”

Virginia leaned forward, resting her chin on her hands, “Maybe. Why didn’t you?”

“At first, I felt sorry for her. At the café she told me that the car was a rental and it was all part of the front. When I thought that she was being honest with me, I invited her to dinner. On the way home, I stopped by the store to pick up a bottle of wine and I deliberately left it in the car. While Jo went outside to retrieve the bottle, I called in and had Miss Ealand run a full G6 on her voiceprint.”

“How did you get her voice on tape?”

“I turned the tables. When she came back in I let her say goodnight to Miss Ealand. Janice already had the tape machine going and while we had dinner, Keith Ford ran the background check.”

“I take it that the G6 turned up something?” she asked.

“She had a police record as long as my arm. The five counts of extortion are what topped the list. I became very angry when I heard about it.”

“You began to feel something for her didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, embarrassed to admit it.

“We’re human, Ed. It’s not a crime to find someone attractive, or to develop feelings towards them. What would have happened if she had come through with a clean record?” she asked.

“I haven’t thought about it. And now it seems like a lifetime ago.”

“You might have ended up together, who knows,” said Virginia. “Matters of the heart can be confusing at best. Look at the mistake that I almost made. I knew it was wrong and I put myself in that position anyway. All it would have taken is a moment of weakness at the right time. I was very vulnerable Ed, just like you

were. Why do you think I came to see you when I was reassigned Earth side?”

“You said that you didn’t want me to wonder if I should question your judgment.”

“That was one reason. There was another. I couldn’t at the time come right out and tell you that I didn’t sleep with Paul. But I wanted you to know and I had to hope that you got the message. Between that and telling you that I cared about you, had me worried that I had pushed you away for good.”

“I don’t think it would have mattered...”

“You say that now,” she interrupted. “But a year ago, yeah, it would have made a difference. It’s said, that at the moment of decision, we all go through a split second of insanity. That’s when all these subtle nuances rear their ugly heads. It’s crazy.”

“Well, as it worked out I never had to make that decision.”

Virginia looked at him suddenly confused.

“Why are you feeling guilty? I don’t see anything that you should have felt guilty about.”

Ed lowered his eyes in embarrassment, “When I got off the phone, Jo had gone into my bedroom. I found her half dressed when I walked in. I had no doubt that she intended to catch me in a compromising situation. Harshly I told her what I had found out and I threw her out. Looking at the situation now I could have accomplished the same thing without being so vindictive.”

“You felt betrayed. You began to trust her and she violated that trust,” Virginia said pausing for a second. “You didn’t make her walk home did you?”

“No,” said Ed. “A few minutes after she walked out I went looking for her, and when I found her I drove her back to her hotel. On the way, she tried to convince me that she had no intention of following through with her plan.”

“I would have been surprised had you left her stranded. As to the next part, you know that you couldn’t risk that. You think Jackson had a field day with us? Imagine what his reaction would have been if he had been asked to sign off on her.”

Ed chuckled at the thought of the SHADO psychiatrist going ballistic right through the ceiling.

“No, that would not have been a pretty sight, and regardless of the circumstances I would not have pursued things at that point. But I have to wonder, had I trusted her would she have changed her way of life?”

“It’s hard to say Ed. I’ve always believed that people can change. But we, as individuals, are responsible for that change. We cannot depend on the actions of others. It’s all about personal responsibility.”

“You know, Virginia, Alec had said to me after, he knew that I would not get emotionally

involved. If he only knew...” Ed said, his voice trailing off. “I’m sure your opinion of me isn’t nearly as high as it used to be either.”

“Oh, Ed, why would you ever think that? You really don’t know how people see you. Do you remember what Turner said to us during the time freeze?”

“You mean the comment about the guy that all the girls admire?” he muttered still embarrassed.

“I’m sure that you didn’t see my reaction, you were preoccupied. But it was the only complete truth that Turner told that day. I couldn’t help but react to it. That’s how all of us see you, larger than life. Nothing will ever change that. And I’ll tell you something else. There isn’t a man at SHADO who doesn’t feel the same way. Every single person in the organization would give their lives for you in an instant, because you have always had a deep seeded caring for each and every person under your command.

You show me a military commander anywhere else, who has that kind of commitment to his people. That trait, above all else, is the salve that fills any minute chinks in your armor. And by the way, Alec doesn't need to know about this, does he?"

"I suppose not," Ed Straker said, as he considered the words of his bride to be. It was an epithet that he still felt unworthy of, and with it came the weight of responsibility. Outside the rain had started to come down harder and the flash of lightning filled the kitchen, as a bolt hit nearby. The crack of thunder was heard almost instantaneously. It caused both of them to jump.

"That was close," said Virginia.

Yeah, it was," he said. "This is supposed to go on all day."

"Really?"

"At least until late tonight."

“You know Ed, this isn’t the only storm brewing right now,” she said with an impish grin.

“Oh,” he said. “Where is the other one?”

“In my heart,” she said, her grin growing into her radiant smile.

Ed stood, and took her in his arms, gently kissing her at first. He soon swept his bride to be off her feet and carried her into the bedroom.

Outside the house the storm intensified, but in all its majesty, it utterly paled to the storm of passion inside.

END