

# Best Friends

## A UFO Story

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Based on the Characters and series created by  
Gerry Anderson



**Historians Note:** The events depicted here take place about four months after the episode “Subsmash” written by Alan Fennell.

## **Chapter 1:**

January 1982:

“This isn’t good Alec,” said Ed Straker to his best friend.

Straker was looking at the Moonbase efficiency reports. For months, the reports had shown inconsistent levels of performance. The overall figures were acceptable, but Straker expected better than just acceptable, and inconsistency to him indicated a problem.

“I know. I wish I had a better answer, Ed.”

“The overall responsibility for this falls on the base commander. What did Lt. Ellis offer as an excuse?”

“None, and she accepted complete responsibility for the problem.”

Straker sighed, even though he was upset about the results of the report, he had to admire her

professionalism. He reached over to the intercom. “Lt. Ford, find Colonel Lake and have her come in please.”

“Yes sir.”

“The last time this happened, I sent Foster up there for a couple of months. He brought the numbers back up, but didn’t get to the root of the problem. He missed something,” said Ed.

“Maybe, so what do you intend to do?”

“I’m going to kill two birds with one stone, Alec. With you going to Dreamland next year to supervise the aeroceptor projects, I’m going to need a new executive officer. As I see it, I have two choices, Craig Collins, or Virginia Lake.”

“What about Foster?” asked Alec.

“Foster needs to pull his head out of his ass. He’s not even close to being ready yet.”

“He’s still young, Ed. He’ll eventually settle down.”

“When I was his age I was married, with a child on the way, and working sixteen hours a day getting this place up and running. Foster has ambitions of commanding this organization one day, and he’s not going to get there unless he grows up.”

“I think you’re being too hard on him, Ed. I know for a fact that he was quite broken up over Tina Duval. Maybe he reminds you of a young, brash, air force major that I met in Thailand, some years ago. Besides, you recruited him. That means you saw potential in him.”

“Yes, and I still do. Don’t get me wrong, Alec. Paul Foster is a very intelligent officer, with a natural gift for decision making. His loyalty is above reproach. What he needs is seasoning, that comes with time and experience. One day he will be ready to sit in this chair, but not today.”

“I suppose. Do you think Ginny is ready for command?”

Ed leaned back in his chair and smiled. “Not quite yet, but not because she is incapable, she just needs more of the right experience. Despite her youthful appearance, she is several years older than Foster, her psych profile indicates a very high level of maturity. By the end of the year, she will be ready, and quite frankly I’m favoring her over Collins. She has been the Director of advanced research for two years now, and that department is one of the most efficiently run operations we have. The position carried a lot of responsibility and she took it in stride.”

Ed Straker was a difficult man to please because he held everyone to the same standard of performance he put himself to, but he took good care of those who rose to the challenge.

The office doors parted and Virginia Lake walked in. “Sorry I took so long, we had a problem down in the main computer room,” she said.

“That’s all right, Colonel, please have a seat.” Ed said.

Straker handed her the Moonbase reports, “Take a look at these reports, and tell me what you think.”

Virginia quickly looked through the reports. “There’s too much inconsistency in the figures, I think we have a morale problem up there.”

Ed Straker smiled; he had reached the same conclusion. “I agree. So the question becomes, what do we do about it?”

“First of all the officer in charge is a lieutenant, and the interceptor leader is often a captain. That fact, in itself can cause friction. The billet of Commander Moonbase was supposed to be a Lt. Colonel.”

“I know. I intend to fix that as soon as the budget allows, but first I need to know who to promote. Secondly, I need to find out if there

are any other underlying issues that we have missed.”

Virginia considered before she answered. “Someone from the command staff is going to have to go up there and evaluate the situation first hand.”

“We tried that last year with Foster,” said Alec.

“It’s going to take longer than a month or two to sort this out, and nothing against Paul, but he might be too close to the problem.”

“How do you mean?” asked Ed.

“He is on very friendly terms with everyone on the base. That familiarity may be compromising his objectivity.”

“I agree,” said Ed. “That’s why I’m sending you, Colonel Lake.”

“Sir?”

“You haven’t formed any ties with anyone at Moonbase, so you should be able to form an

objective opinion. This is going to be a long term assignment, except for furloughs; you're going to be up there for a year. You are going to be in overall command of the base. I need you to familiarize yourself with the entire lunar operation."

Virginia smiled, she had wondered what it would be like to work on the moon and this assignment sounded challenging.

"When do I start?"

"A week from today, that should give you time to put your earth side affairs in order. Take whatever time off you need between now and then. I'll give you the names of firms SHADO uses for taking care of your apartment while you are away."

"I can be ready in a week."

"In case you haven't noticed, Colonel, I have you on a fast track for command. You're performance as Director of Advanced research



was exemplary.” Straker paused for a moment considering, “I wasn’t going to tell you this yet but I think you’ve earned the right to know. Alec is going to Dreamland next year to supervise the aeroceptor project. Because it will be a full time position, I’m going to have to select a new executive officer. You are one of two people that I have in mind for the position.”

Virginia was somewhat surprised. “Are you certain that I’m the right person to even be considered for that position?”

“That’s what I intend to find out. By this time next year you will know everything there is to know about Moonbase operations. Colonel your dedication to duty is above reproach and I have every confidence that you will excel in this posting as well.”

Virginia smiled, the commander had just offered her a challenge, and she rarely ever turned down a challenge.

Straker handed her the list as well as copies of the efficiency reports.

“Good luck, Commander,” he said to her as she left.

“Thank you, sir.”

When they were alone again, Ed turned to his friend to see his reaction, “Do you still think she’s not ready?”

“She seems pretty confident to me.”

“Alec, in this organization I have two people I can hand a project to, and be absolutely sure it will be carried out without having to check on them. Virginia is one, and I’m sure I don’t have to tell you who the other is.”

“Why do you favor her over Craig Collins?” asked Alec, changing the subject.

“Alec, you know Craig is a close friend of mine, but for the past four years he’s been doing nothing but driving cargo ships. And to be

perfectly honest, he doesn't want the job. He'll only take it if I ask him to."

"But why Colonel Lake, isn't she more valuable in the research section?"

"First of all Lake is next in line after Collins, and secondly I don't like to hold someone back just because they excel in a posting."

"Who is going to replace Virginia in research?"

"I don't know yet, let's see who rises to the top. I'll leave that in your court Alec."

"Gee thanks, but seriously Ed what else are you seeing that I missed?"

"Virginia Lake impressed me the day I met her, not only is she brilliant, she can delegate responsibility, she thinks on her feet, and she knows how to get things done. And one more thing, she has the uncanny ability to see through any attempt at deception."

A little over a week later, the lunar module, carrying Colonel Lake, touched down at Moonbase. This was the first time Ginny had been off planet and she was savoring the experience. Although, she was wondering how she was going to get down from her seat. Traveling with her on this trip was Astronaut Jim Regan.

“Colonel Lake, if you press the recessed button on your left armrest, your seat will rotate forward. Then you can easily get to the ladder.”

Virginia pressed the button and her seat rotated forward bringing the ladder into sight. Because of the low gravity she was easily able to pull herself over to it. Jim Regan, knowing it was her first trip, was watching from below making sure she was okay. Virginia climbed down without any trouble.

“Piece of cake,” she said pleasantly.

They walked through the airlock to another ladder leading down into the base. Once down,

she walked into the reception dome. Lieutenant Ellis was waiting for her.

“Welcome to Moonbase, Colonel Lake, I relinquish command to you at this time.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant, I accept command.”

Virginia shook hands with Ellis watching her carefully, not noticing any resentment, but sadness in her demeanor.

“Would you like a tour of the base ma’am?”

“Yes please,” said Ginny.

Ellis turned to Jim Regan, “Jim, would you see to it that the Colonel’s bags are brought to her quarters?”

“Certainly, Gay.”

Ginny noticed the informal exchange, but said nothing about it. She wanted to get a good handle on the personal dynamics before she made any changes, and then only if they were needed.

“Colonel, if you will follow me, please.”

Ellis took Lake on an extensive tour of the facility, describing the base in extreme detail. Virginia was very impressed with her knowledge of all the systems and procedures of SHADO’s lunar base. She found it difficult to believe that she had been asked to relieve this person. She was planning on being detached and watch from a distance, but now seeing the situation first hand, Virginia quickly decided to rethink her strategy.

The tour ended in the commander’s quarters.

“Well, Colonel, I’m sure you’re tired from the trip. I should let you get some rest.”

“Before you go, Lieutenant, I would like to talk to you, off the record and setting aside rank.”

Gay Ellis seemed apprehensive; *she doesn’t know me*, thought Ginny. They sat down across from each other.

“Colonel, I...”

“When we are in private, please call me Ginny.”

“All right, I’m Gay.”

“Gay, you have a very impressive knowledge of this base, as well as its systems and procedures. I understand you took complete responsibility for the drop in efficiency. Commander Straker was impressed with that, and quite frankly so am I, but I need to know what the problems are up here.”

“The problem is me, Ginny. Ever since Ken Matthews was killed I’ve found that I second guess every single decision I make.”

Virginia did not expect her to be so forthright.

“That was almost two years ago, Gay. I read the report. The investigation cleared you of any wrong doing. Had you followed standard procedure, we would have lost all three interceptors.”

“I know, but the computer was right. I vectored Mark out of danger, before Ken, because I loved

him. I still do you know. That's why he transferred to Skydiver duty."

"Do you get to see him often?" asked Ginny.

"Not nearly as often as I like, our furloughs don't always line up. I miss him terribly. I was going to tell the commander the same thing I just told you."

Virginia had to admire Gay's honesty, but telling this to the commander would probably get her grounded. In her opinion, that would be a waste of material. Ellis was a very bright and capable officer, she just needed something to boost her confidence.

"Well, why don't we hold off on that for now? I don't want to hand him a problem until you and I find a solution. We'll talk tomorrow. In the mean time, I'm going to need the latest readiness reports and procedure manuals. I have a lot of studying to do, and I will be relying on you quite heavily for a while."



“I’ll have those reports sent into you right away. Thanks, Ginny.”

“My pleasure, Gay.”

Ginny looked at the uniform standards, she was relieved to see the purple wig was optional for the base commander, although, she might wear it on a bad hair day. She was also glad to see that the base commander’s uniform was not quite as form fitting as the ones that the trackers wore. Ginny liked to dress on the conservative side.

Virginia pulled out Lt. Ellis’ service record and scanned through it. She had been an RAF pilot before coming to SHADO, and though she had never seen combat, her flight school scores were extremely high. She had put in for duty on Skydiver, but no openings were currently available.

She reached over to the intercom, “Lt. Miller?”

“Yes Colonel.”

“Call down to HQ and see if Colonel Freeman is still in. If so, patch him through to my quarters please.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Ginny continued to read Gay’s record while she waited for her call. She saw that the Commander had put her in for a commendation for her work on Project Discovery. The photos from the alien planet had been received last month, and it was a shame that the project didn’t pan out as they had hoped.

“I have Colonel Freeman for you ma’am.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Ginny, where’s your purple wig?” asked Alec.

“Hanging in the closet, and that’s where it’s staying.”

“How was your flight?”

“It was fun. I think I’m going to enjoy this assignment. Alec, do you have the simulator software ready for the new Sky aeroceptors yet?”

“It should be ready in a few weeks. Why do you ask?”

“I may have another test pilot for you, but I won’t know for a while yet.”

“I’m not in a hurry to fill the slot, as you know the aircraft is still on the drawing board.”

“All right, thanks, Alec. I’ll let you know.”

“Take care, Ginny.”

The next morning, Ginny walked into the leisure sphere for breakfast. She noticed that Nina, Joan, and Carol were at a table chatting amongst themselves. Gay sat at a table by herself, isolated from her peers.

“Good morning, Colonel,” said Nina.

“Lieutenant.”

Ginny got her coffee and breakfast, and walked over to where Gay was sitting.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“Please,” she said.

Ginny sat down and took a sip of her coffee grimacing as she did.

“Is the coffee here always this bad?”

“No, most of the time it’s worse,” Gay said, smiling.

Virginia was a person who enjoyed a good cup of coffee. *This is going to have to change.*

“How did you sleep last night?” asked Gay.

“Quite well, I didn’t realize how tired I was until my head hit the pillow.”

“It was a week before I could sleep up here. It seemed like I was able to hear every little noise. It was eerie.”

“That’s how I felt when I was on Skydiver,” said Ginny. “I never sleep very well when I’m on board her.”

“I put in for duty on Skydiver,” Gay said, wistfully. “All the billets were filled. Mark was lucky to get to alternate with Lew Waterman on Skydiver 2.”

“I know. It’s in your service record. Is that what you really want to do?”

Gay nodded, “When I was in the RAF, I flew the Lightning. It was a demanding aircraft to fly, but I loved it. I felt like I was being challenged all the time.”

Virginia realized as she looked at the woman sitting across from her that she was seeing a kindred spirit. Gay was about six years younger than Ginny. Coincidentally, Gay was struggling with the same self doubt that she did, at that age.

At the other table, the three women got up to leave. Ginny called to one of them.

“Lieutenant Barry?”

“Yes ma’am?”

“Would you take over in the control sphere until Lt. Ellis and I get there?”

“Certainly ma’am.”

When they were alone, Ginny continued.

“Gay, I might be able to help make that happen. But first of all we need to fix the problems here. I told you last night that I was going to rely on you quite heavily for a time, but I also need you to focus on the tasks ahead of us. I looked at your record last night. It not only told me that you were a pilot, but a damn good one.”

Gay smiled at the last comment, “I didn’t think anyone had noticed.”

“That was one of the reasons that you were given command of the base, your military

record is exemplary. Ed Straker wouldn't have put you here if he didn't think you could do the job. We need to prove to him that you still can. Otherwise you may find yourself assigned to HQ, working the communications console during the low watch."

That brought a chuckle from her.

"Gay, I want to setup a new shift rotation. I want to put the three most senior officers on different shifts, and I will spend a week at a time on each shift. I don't plan on taking my first furlough until we have the efficiency numbers up to where they should be."

"That means breaking up teams that have worked together for a while, Ginny."

"Exactly, sometimes people get too comfortable and they fall into a rut. By shuffling the deck, it forces everyone to stay sharp. And we have to do something about this coffee, it's abysmal," Ginny said as she sipped hers.

They both laughed at that.

## **Chapter 2:**

A few weeks later, Commander Straker sat at his desk looking over the latest Moonbase efficiency reports. He smiled, as they were the highest he had ever seen them. *Damn she's good*, he thought to himself. The doors parted and Alec walked in with Colonel John Grey.

“Well,” said Alec, knowing what Ed had been reading.

“Ninety eight point three percent; it beats the old record by almost two full points.”

Straker stood up and shook Colonel Grey's hand. Grey had just transferred from the IAC, as Director of Personnel, to SHADO in the same capacity. Henderson had finally realized that SHADO needed its own person in that role.



“Welcome to SHADO, John.”

“Thanks Ed, so is that the Moonbase efficiency report you’re talking about?”

Ed handed him the report and Grey quickly scanned through it.

“Ginny Lake is up there?”

“That’s right, it was either her or Alec, and she needed the experience if I plan on making her executive officer next year while Alec is at Dreamland.”

“You’re going to have an uphill battle with Henderson on that one, Ed.”

“Yes, I know. But I’m convinced that she is the right person for the job. I’m going to be sure I do everything I can to make it impossible for him to say no.”

“With results like this, it’s would be hard for him to refuse,” added Alec.

The direct line to the upper office rang, “Yes, Miss Ealand?”

“Sorry to disturb you, sir, but I have a Code Foxtrot for Colonel Lake.”

Straker lowered his voice, “Give me the details.”

“Colonel Lake’s mother called with a message, sir. Gretchen Reinhardt, a very close friend of the Colonel, has been taken to the hospital this morning. She was diagnosed with terminal cancer six months ago, and is not expected to survive the night.”

“Very well, send the contact information to my terminal please. I’ll take care of it.”

“Yes sir.”

Straker hung up the phone, a Code Foxtrot was a key phrase for a critical family matter. Straker had implemented its use after the death of his son. Not only did it get messages to the affected party quickly, it also allowed for SHADO personnel to receive emergency leave to handle

a family crisis, subject only to the commander's override.

“Gentlemen, I have a private call to make, Alec, have Seagull X-ray standing by for departure to the States, Code Foxtrot.”

“Right away Ed,” Alec said, as they left.

When they had left, Straker locked the doors and keyed the intercom. “Lt. Ford, get me Moonbase.”

“Yes sir.”

A few moments later, Nina Barry appeared on the screen.

“Yes Commander?”

“Nina, the flight that is scheduled to leave in four hours; I want it ready in two. I also need to speak to Colonel Lake.”

“Yes sir. Colonel Lake is on sleep period, shall I wake her?”

“Yes, it's important.”

A few minutes later Virginia Lake came on the screen.

“Commander?”

Ed hated this aspect of his position, but being a creature of duty, he never shied away from it. “Colonel, I’m sorry to have woken you but I have some unpleasant news. Gretchen Reinhardt was taken to the hospital this morning. She is in critical condition and not expected to live. I understand that she is a very close friend.”

“Yes sir, she is,” said Virginia, obviously distressed.

“Colonel, I’m authorizing personal leave for you, effective immediately. There is a lunar flight scheduled to leave in four hours, I’ve ordered them to be ready in two. When you arrive at the airport, there will be a car waiting to take you to Heathrow. Seagull X-ray will be standing by to take off for the States as soon as you are aboard.”

Even though she was upset, Ed noticed her smile as she said, “Thank you, sir.”

Softly Ed said, “If I can do anything else for you, Colonel...”

“No sir, I appreciate it, more than I can say. Thank you.”

Straker closed the connection.

Virginia knew that her friend had been diagnosed with cancer, and had prepared herself for this day, but as the reality hit her, she could not stop herself from crying. Gretchen Reinhardt and her husband were like adopted parents to Ginny. To her, this was just like she was losing her own mother.

Gay Ellis walked into the control sphere on her way to her quarters. She was battling with another bout of insomnia and she found it helped take a walk through the base, rather

than lying awake in her bed. As she walked in, Nina said to her, “I was just about to call you, Colonel Lake needs to see you right away.”

“Isn’t she on sleep period?”

“She was, but she received a call from HQ about five minutes ago.” Nina paused, and then added, “Gay, she sounded upset when I talked to her.”

“All right, I’ll go see her, thanks.”

Gay walked out of the control sphere and headed to the base commander’s quarters. In the few short weeks that Ginny had been on Moonbase, she had made such a difference in Gay’s outlook on life. Gay could see why Ginny had impressed the Commander, she was a born leader. In three weeks they had brought the Moonbase efficiency levels to the highest point that they had ever been, and Ginny had made it clear to everyone that it was a team effort. Gay was proud to have been a part of it.

Ginny's style of command was so much different than Straker's, but just as effective. And she could be just as fierce as the Commander, if the situation warranted. Last week, Captain Martin, one of the interceptor pilots, had decided that he knew better than the trackers, by virtue of his rank, and he refused to follow Joan's instructions. They almost lost two of the three interceptors because of it.

Gay had never seen Ginny angry before, and she decided that she would rather have to face the Commander, than her. When Captain Martin landed, Ginny ordered everyone else out of the leisure sphere. While no one knew what was said behind closed doors, it was rumored that her voice could be heard in the upper level of the leisure sphere, as well as the adjoining corridor. He was transferred back to earth the same day. The look on his face was telling.

Gay rang the buzzer for Ginny's quarters and the door opened. As she walked in she could tell that Virginia had been crying.

"Ginny, are you all right?"

"Yes, just give me a minute..." she started to say and tears began to flow again.

Gay didn't even hesitate; she walked over to Ginny and hugged her. It didn't matter that this woman was her commanding officer; right now she was fellow human being who was hurting and needed comfort. After a few minutes, Ginny regained her composure and they sat across from each other.

"Gay," she said drying her eyes, "I have to go back to Earth for a few days. I need you to take over while I'm gone."

"I understand. Can I do anything for you?"

Ginny recognized the underlying question. As she considered the woman sitting across from her, she realized that Gay was a person of both



compassion and integrity, someone she could confide in.

“A close friend of mine was diagnosed with terminal cancer, a few months back. They admitted her to the hospital this morning, and she isn’t expected to live. I thought I was ready for this but...”

She couldn’t finish the sentence, she began to silently cry. Gay reached out and took her hand as she said, “I’m sorry, Ginny. We’re never ready to lose someone we love, no matter how much time we’re given.”

When she could speak again she said, “Thanks, Gay. You are a true friend.”

Gay’s heart was warmed by this, and it brought a smile to her face. Ginny was easy going, but also very selective of those she chose to call a friend. In that regard she was much like Commander Straker.

“Thanks.”

The lunar module had been prepped for launch and was just waiting for its passengers to get aboard. In the reception sphere below, Ginny was going over last minute instructions with Gay.

“I’d like you to switch shift assignments for Lt. Miller and Lt. Anders. That should round out the overall experience level and pick up another couple tenths of a point.”

Gay wondered for a moment if it was worth it and then remembered who they were working for.

“Right, I’ll take care of it. Have a safe flight home, Ginny,” she said quietly.

“I’ll see you in a few days.”

Gay watched as her new friend climbed up the ladder to the airlock, thanks to Ginny she had a renewed sense of purpose.

“So tell me, Ed, where did you find that beautiful woman who is running Moonbase?” asked Colonel Craig Collins.

“You’ve never met Colonel Lake, Craig?”

“No, with me driving supply ships all the time, I don’t get to see all the little lovelies that you do, unless they are on Moonbase, or the supply depot.”

“You’re more of a chauvinist than Alec, and that takes some doing.”

“All part of the service, Ed. Seriously where has she been hiding?”

“Colonel Lake was the Director of SHADO’s Advanced Research Division.”

“Which part, FTL, weapons, communications?” asked Craig.

“She was responsible for the entire division.”

Collins was impressed, “Isn’t that too much for any one person to handle?”

“Virginia Lake is an exceptionally gifted individual. Under her guidance, the research division is the most well run operation SHADO has. Even in her absence, the division has been running itself. That is a testament to her leadership ability. I’m still looking for someone to fill that billet, interested?”

Collins had the look of a rough and ready grunt, but in reality he possessed a very keen mind. No one in SHADO knew as much about the inner workings of SID, than Craig Collins.

“I’d be board in a month, Ed. No, I’m an astronaut, and my place is among the stars.”

“That’s all right, Craig. I’m probably going to have to divide it up anyway. I don’t have anyone who can just step in and take it over as is.”

“So, is she available?”

Straker looked up at him, “I think that is something you will have to ask her,” he said quietly.

“You sound like you’re interested in her, Ed.”

“No, Craig, I already have a mistress, her name is SHADO,” he said, wistfully.

“In that case, maybe I’ll ask, see you later.”

“Take care, Craig.”

After Collins had left, Ed considered his reaction. It was true, Virginia Lake was a stunningly gorgeous woman, and she had the most beautiful set of blue-grey eyes Ed had ever seen, but that shouldn’t have mattered. He had learned to be impassive to feminine beauty, almost as a matter of necessity. Posing as a film studio executive, he was surrounded by beautiful women, but most of them had no depth, beyond their physical attributes, a fact that helped him keep his diffidence.

Virginia was different. It was true that she was very intelligent, but there was something else, and he couldn’t quite put it into words.

Ed forced his mind to other thoughts. Craig would ask her out, she would probably say yes, and that would be that, assuming of course that she didn't cut him to pieces.

Virginia stood next to Professor Manfred Reinhardt at his wife's grave. The funeral had been that morning, and the Professor wanted to visit after the burial had been completed. He had been one of her instructors, at Stanford, during her final year. She had remained in contact with him and his wife after she had graduated.

Ginny had caught her husband in an affair less than a year after they were married, and the Reinhardt's had helped her through a difficult time.

“Virginia, I want to thank you for coming all the way from England to be here, somehow thank you, doesn't seem to say enough. Surely this has wrecked havoc with your employer.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it, Professor, and I have the best boss on the planet. He made it possible for me to be here before Gretchen passed, I was able to say goodbye,” she said getting misty.

“When do you have to leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. I was told I could have a few more days, but too many people are depending on me. I don’t want to take advantage of the situation.”

The Professor smiled, he had always admired her sense of responsibility. As they started walking back to the car, Virginia watched him closely. The Professor and his wife were people of faith, and he had told Ginny earlier that he was sure his wife was in a better place. She was raised in a believing household but had become disillusioned soon after her divorce. And having learned of the existence of aliens ten years ago, she found that her spirituality was tested even further.

Professor Reinhardt opened the door for Virginia, and walked around the car to get in the driver's side.

Captain Martin stood in front of Straker's desk, at attention. He had been suspended for a week for his insubordination and failure to follow standard procedure. Before he would be allowed to return to duty, Straker had to know if he could be trusted to follow the chain of command. He also had to decide if the man was still worthy of the position he was going to be promoted to.

“Captain Martin, you realize of course why you are here, do you not?”

“Yes sir.”

“I want to know why you felt the need to ignore the instructions from the trackers, and violate standard procedure.”

“No excuse, sir.”



John Martin was career military, he made a grave error in judgment and would make no excuse for it, not that there was one. Ed regarded him while he stood at attention, finally he said, "At ease, Captain."

Straker continued, "John, up to this point you have had a spotless career with SHADO. Had your actions only endangered yourself, I might have been able to keep this off your record. But you endangered the lives of your fellow interceptor pilots, as well as everyone on Moonbase. That can't go unanswered. The write up on the incident will go into your file for a year, and you will be on probation for that amount of time. Any infraction during that year, and both will become part of your permanent record."

"I understand, sir."

"Furthermore," Straker continued, "The test pilot position you were accepted for has been

withdrawn, for now. If you keep your nose clean for a year, we can discuss it then.”

“Yes sir.”

“One more thing, Captain, it will be up to Colonel Lake as to whether or not you are assigned back to Moonbase. You’re dismissed for now.”

Martin snapped to attention, “Yes sir.”

He executed a right face and left the office. A few minutes later Colonel Lake came in.

“Colonel Lake, please have a seat,” he said gesturing to the corner seat near the desk. “I just wanted to say I’m very sorry for your loss. Are you sure you are ready to come back?”

“Thank you, sir. I can’t say how much I appreciate you getting me out there so quickly. I made it to the hospital in time to be able to say goodbye. It meant more than I can put into words. I’ve done all I can do for the Professor

and I still have much work to complete on Moonbase.”

“You’ve done an exceptional job up there in a very short period of time.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said, smiling this time.

Ed forced himself to look away from her hoping she wouldn’t see right through him.

“Colonel, you need to decide if you want Captain Martin back up there. Right now he is on probation, and he has been removed from consideration for the aeroceptor test pilot program. That means I have another opening for a test pilot. Do you have anyone you would like to recommend?”

Ginny saw her chance and went for it, “I do, Lt. Ellis.”

Straker was surprised at that, “Why her?”

“Take a look at her record, Commander; she flew the Lightning while she was in the RAF.

From what I've read, it took a very good pilot to stay ahead of the aircraft.”

Ed was impressed, Virginia had done her homework, but then again, he expected that.

“Very well, put her in the running. The simulators will be delivered to Moonbase next week. Captain Carlin will be up there as well to evaluate the test results and maybe do a little head to head with the pilots.”

“I think that will work out well. As far as Martin is concerned, I'll take him back, but the first time he steps out of line, he's done.”

“I agree, Colonel. Have a safe flight,” he said as he took her hand in both of his.

Ed watched her walk out of the office, feeling a twinge of regret in his heart.

The next day, Colonel Lake was on duty at the command console when Colonel Craig Collins walked into the control sphere. “Hello all you

lovely ladies,” he said as he walked in. “Your monthly supply driver is here again.”

“Colonel Collins, do you always come in and disrupt the place like this?” asked Virginia, a mild tone of disapproval coloring her voice.

“Well, that depends on who is here. By the way I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced. I’m Craig Collins,” he said, as he extended his hand.

“Virginia Lake,” she replied, accepting his gesture.

Alec had warned her, when she first came to SHADO, that Collins was a chauvinist. But Ginny had to admit, he could be quite funny.

Collins was saying, “Do you prefer Virginia, or Ginny?”

“I think for now, Colonel, will be fine,” said Ginny, not wanting to encourage him too much.

“Anything you like,” said Collins, his smile never fading.

Collins looked down to his manifest and became all business.

“Colonel, in addition to your normal monthly supplies, I have the two simulators for the new Sky aeroceptors. Peter Carlin will be flying up tomorrow to set them up.”

“Good, we are going to set them up down in the lab. I’ve already made room for them. Did supply approve my request to change the brand of coffee they send up here?”

“I’m afraid not Colonel. They bought two years worth of the stuff, when purchasing got a deal last year.”

Virginia grimaced. *Another whole year of bad coffee*, she thought.

“However, Colonel, I usually bring the base commander a little gift every month,” he said, as he handed her a large thermos.

“Is this what I think it is?” asked Ginny.

“Fresh ground coffee, brewed just before I left, and it should still be hot. These bottles will keep it warm for three days.”

Virginia rewarded him with a grateful smile as she said, “Thank you, Colonel. I really do appreciate it.”

As Craig and Ginny were talking, Gay Ellis walked into the control sphere. “Hi Craig,” she said.

Collins turned to her, “Oh, hello Gay,” he said as he reached into his pocket. “This is from Mark,” he said, as he handed her the letter.

Gay’s eyes light up, “Oh, thank you, I have one for him as well.”

“I’ll make sure I see you before I leave. Well if you ladies will excuse me, I have a ship to get unloaded.”

“See you later, Craig,” said Gay.

Virginia watched him walk out, seeing that there was much more to him than meets the eye.

“Did he bring you your *gift*?” asked Gay.

“Yes he did. You and I are going to share it later.”

“Thanks, Ginny.”

### **Chapter 3:**

Straker sat at his conference table discussing the research division with John Grey and Alec Freeman. It had been running on its own for a month and a half, and Ed didn't want it to fall apart due to neglect.

“So Alec, who do we have to fill Colonel Lake's old position?”

“Well, Ed, it looks like we are going to have to split the responsibility. I have three people in



mind; Captain Jennifer Wallace, Major Joseph Kelly, and Lt. Colonel Geoffrey Blake.”

“I had assumed as much. I know Geoff and Joe. John, tell me about Captain Wallace.”

“Captain Jennifer Erin Wallace, age 32, single, came to us from the USAF, Masters in Astro from Cal Tech, she’s currently working on her doctorate. Virginia was quite impressed with her.”

“Any specifics?” Ed asked.

“Colonel Lake wrote her up for commendation last year for her work on the FTL drive system for Project Discovery, as well as a recommendation for promotion just before she came back to HQ.

Straker sat back thinking, *Virginia Lake doesn’t impress easily, this young lady must be quite exceptional.*

“All right, John, I want to see all three of them next week. I want you to look over her record and see if we can fast track her to Lt. Colonel.”

“I quickly looked her record over, judging from what I’ve seen accelerated promotion should not be an issue.”

“What kind of structure are you considering?” asked Alec.

“A director and two deputies, they each will be responsible for their own territories. Colonel Blake will be in charge of the Advanced Weapons Division as well as being the overall department head, Lt. Colonel Kelly will oversee the European operation, and Major Wallace will have the operations in the States. John I want the promotion paperwork on my desk by the end of this week”

“Blake has a reputation of being difficult to work with,” said Alec.

“True,” said Ed. “But Blake and Kelly are very good friends, and the oversight will be strictly for administrative purposes. If Blake wants to interfere with one of the other shops, he will have to justify it.”

“How are we going to get this through Henderson?” asked Grey.

“Ah, Henderson. I spoke to him this morning about this. While he didn’t yet know the names, he did approve the plan. The only fly in the ointment will be the accelerated promotion for Wallace, but when Henderson sees the recommendation from Colonel Lake that may not even be an issue. He seems to put quite a bit of confidence in her opinion.”

“Does that surprise you Ed?” asked Alec.

“In itself, no, but Henderson has never meet Colonel Lake. When she came on board, she went directly into the research section. The General doesn’t usually bother meeting a new

recruit, even a colonel, unless they are on the command staff.”

“He must have read her reports,” said John. “Some people express themselves quite well in their writing and delivery.”

Straker considered this, it was true that Virginia Lake had an innate ability to break down a complex problem and present it to someone, who was not an expert, in terms that could be easily understood.

“You could be right John,” said Ed, pausing briefly. I think we’re finished here, thank you gentlemen.”

Gay sat in Ginny’s quarters, savoring a cup of coffee.

“I haven’t had a chance to offer my condolences since you got back. How are you doing?” asked Gay.

“Thanks, I’ll be all right. Thanks to the Commander, I got there in time to say goodbye, and I was there when she passed.”

“You knew her well?”

“Yes, when I was at Stanford, Professor Reinhardt was my theoretical physics instructor. I got to know both him and his wife very well. About eight years ago I came home early from work and found my husband in bed with my best friend. I was devastated and somehow managed to drive to the Reinhardt’s. They helped me through a difficult time.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you were ever married.”

“Although it’s on my service record, it’s not common knowledge otherwise. I’ve only told one other person besides you.”

Gay smiled.

“So what did you think of Craig Collins?” Ellis asked, changing the subject.

“He’s a bit on the familiar side, but he did bring us good coffee. If he keeps doing that, I may even let him call me by first name.”

“I think he’s sweet on you.”

“Oh come on Gay, I just met him.”

“He is a big flirt, but I saw something in his eyes when he looked at you.”

“Well he can look all he wants but I’m not interested.”

“You have someone special?”

“Yes...no, hell he doesn’t even know I exist.”

“That’s an interesting way to pursue a relationship.”

“It’s more of a fantasy than anything else. Would you like some more coffee, Gay?”

“No I need to get to bed, too much coffee will keep me awake, thanks Ginny.”

“Good night, Gay”

Virginia sat back as she finished her drink. She had never told anyone that the man she fantasized about was Ed Straker. Ever since she had met him, years ago now, his image had haunted her dreams and she had spent more than a few sleepless nights thinking about him.

When his son had tragically died after being struck by a car last year, Ed had called her a friend. She expected him to start calling her Virginia or Ginny, instead of Colonel, but that never happened. It was a contradiction that drove her crazy. She never did like a puzzle that she could not solve, and Commander Straker was a mystery. Maybe that was the reason she found him so attractive. No, it was more than that. Ed Straker respected her as an expert in her field, as well as respecting her as a person.

The next day, Captain Peter Carlin arrived on Moonbase to oversee the simulator setup, and examination of the persons applying for the test

pilot positions. One of those selected, would later have first shot at commanding the newly designed Skydiver 5. The new submarine was to be larger than her predecessors, and armed with hypersonic missiles, tipped with variable yield nuclear warheads. The assignment, as her commanding officer, would be a gem of a posting. In addition, Straker had persuaded to IAC to fund land based aeroceptors. They would need crews, as well as squadron leaders. That position was also quite desired, as it meant a promotion to Lt. Colonel. Before the first round of tests Colonel Lake and Captain Carlin went over the applicants and schedule.

“So, Colonel, the Commander tells me you have another pilot you would like to have considered.”

“Yes Peter, I do. You know Lt. Ellis, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, very well. I’m surprised she wants to transfer from Moonbase.”



Virginia considered for a moment before she responded. “Gay isn’t happy up here, Peter, if she goes back under these circumstances, she will end up at HQ on the low watch.”

“That would be a waste of talent,” said Carlin. “I know the situation with her and Mark. What does Gay want to do if she were given the choice?”

“Command Skydiver 5. She dreams about that posting.”

“Her and everyone else on the list; what kind of flight experience does she have?”

“She came to SHADO from the RAF, where she flew the Lightning.”

Peter Carlin was impressed; having flown that aircraft, he was well aware of the skill required to master it.

“If she flew the Lightning, she should do well.”

Virginia nodded and redirected the subject.

“Peter what is your training schedule going to look like?”

“I’m looking at doing four hours of basic flight maneuvers, four hours of combat flight procedures, followed by four hours of head to head. The off time would be used for what I call, playtime.”

Virginia raised an eyebrow and Carlin smiled as he explained, “I open the simulator to anyone with a basic flight rating. I’ve found quite a few combat pilots through that technique.”

Virginia was impressed; she remembered the first time she had met Peter Carlin. It was a year and a half ago; she was waiting in Straker’s studio office, along with Phil Wade, from Westbrook Electronics. They had just arrived with the Utronic equipment, and Peter had taken them down the executive lift. She noticed right away, that underneath his mild mannered outer appearance, was a very keen mind.

“Pencil me in for some of the playtime, Peter.”

“I will, Colonel,” he said giving, her a warm smile.

“The research directors are here to see you, sir.”

“Thanks, Keith. Send them in,” said Straker, as he opened the doors to his office.

Ed stood and shook hands with the three officers.

“Colonel Blake, Lt. Colonel Kelly, Major Wallace, thank you for coming. Please have a seat.”

Straker regarded them for a moment before he spoke.

“First of all, I want to congratulate all of you on your recent promotions.”

“Thank you, sir,” the three said almost in unison.

“As all of you know, Colonel Lake is going to be on Moonbase for the next ten months. When

she returns, she will be reassigned permanently to HQ as a senior member of the command staff, most likely as the executive officer.”

“Is Colonel Freeman retiring, sir?” asked Blake.

“No, Alec is going to head up the new Skydiver project, as well as the land based aeroceptor program. His knowledge of aeronautical engineering and metallurgy will be invaluable. Because of the size and scope of those two projects, I’ve decided to separate them from the research division.”

“We don’t have much going on right now, at least in the European division,” said Kelly. “Is there anything we can do to support the new projects?”

Straker leaned back in his chair smiling, “You might want to wait until you see your next project, Joe.”

Ed pulled a set of folders out of his briefcase and handed a copy to each of them.

“Here is the next project for the SHADO research division, codenamed Project Poseidon. What you are looking at is an artist’s conception of a deep submergence vehicle or DSV. It will be designed to penetrate the world’s deeps oceans to seek out and destroy alien craft that take refuge there. This project is just as massive an undertaking as the aeroceptor projects. With the Subsmash incident, a few months ago, I realized that the world’s oceans are a perfect place for the aliens to stage. Colonel Lake projected that this project would take about two and a half years to complete.”

“Colonel Lake was almost always spot on when she estimated a project timeline, sir,” said Wallace.

“I know. That’s why I felt comfortable planning operations based on her estimates. Colonel Blake, you will be in overall command of the research division, but mostly in an administrative role, fiscal considerations, and

so on. I would suggest that you let your two deputies handle their sections, without too much interference from above. Besides, Section Seven is going to be quite busy designing the weapons systems for the DSV.”

“I understand, sir,” said Blake.

“By the same token, if the two of you need input from Geoff, don’t be afraid to ask. I want this to be a team effort.”

“Yes sir,” they said.

“All right that’s all for now. Major Wallace, would you remain for a moment please?”

“Certainly, sir.”

When they were alone, Straker continued, “Colonel Lake speaks quite highly of you, Major. Based on her recommendation, I am putting you in for accelerated promotion. In six months you will be a Lieutenant Colonel, but you are going to have to earn it.”

Wallace was surprised, “Ginny, I mean Colonel Lake did that for me, sir?”

Straker smiled, “As you can see, her opinion carries quite a bit of weight around here, but you will still have to convince me that you deserve it. So far I’ve been very impressed with the reports from the States. I expect to see more of the same.”

“Yes sir, I won’t let you down,” she said, excited.

“Thank you, Major, that’s all.”

As she walked out of the office, Paul Foster came in. He turned to watch her walk out.

“What can I do for you, Paul?”

Straker’s question brought Paul back from his daydream. “The damage report for Skydiver 1,” he said, as he handed Straker the report.

“Who was the young lady, sir?”

“That was the Deputy Director of advanced research, Major Wallace. Keep an eye on that

young lady, Paul. She is going places in this organization. You could learn a thing or two from her.”

“I’ll bet. I think I’d like to get to know her a lot better.”

“Forget it Paul, unless you want to transfer to New York. She was Virginia’s protégée.”

“I see, too bad.”

*This man has a one track mind,* Straker thought, as he shifted the subject, “Tell me about Skydiver.”

“The reactor is toast. It’s going to have to be completely replaced. The starboard engine is irreparable as well. The portside engine isn’t too bad. To make matters worse, the sonar suite is shot, a total loss.”

“How long before she’ll be seaworthy?”

“Six months, minimum.”

“How about Skydiver three, is she ready?”



“She starts sea trials next week.”

Straker already knew that, but he was glad to see that Foster was prepared for the question.

“All right, Paul, tell Captain Wallach, to do everything he can, within reason, to shave time off the sea trials. I don’t like the idea of being down to one sub. That’s all for now.”

When Paul had left, Ed sat back in his chair remembering the incident, a few months ago, aboard Skydiver. He had handpicked the crew for that mission and he was still haunted by the image of Lieutenant Chin lying dead on the deck; his eyes wide open. In all, they very were lucky. They suffered only a single casualty out of the six people aboard that sub.

Straker had figured the sub to be a total loss, and he was relieved to learn the salvage operation had been a success. Six months wasn’t all that bad considering that it would take over a year and a half to build one from

scratch. Not to mention the cost of construction.

## **Chapter 4:**

Gay pulled her jet into an aggressive vertical climb, narrowly avoiding the missile launched by the enemy aircraft. She kicked in the afterburners and the jet accelerated rapidly. She looped her jet around and dove on the aircraft that was pursuing her. The growl in her headset indicated that she had missile lock. Gay fired her missile, and a few seconds later the enemy craft exploded in a ball of flame.

A cheer from the ladies went up behind her, as she turned from the simulator and removed her helmet. On the other side of the room the men were groaning. Peter Carlin walked up to Gay, extending his hand.

“Nice match, Gay. Congratulations.”

“Thanks Peter. I guess that makes us even.”

“Are you up for a rematch?”

“Maybe later, that last one took everything I had.”

“I was hoping you would say that.”

The two of them had been in the simulator for over an hour with one victory each. That was a long time, considering that the average engagement was less than ten minutes. This simulation was the finale of the testing session, and no rookie had ever beaten Peter Carlin in the simulator. Gay had the highest scores of anyone tested, both on Moonbase and planet side.

Ginny came over and gave her a big hug, “Congratulations, Gay.”

“Thanks Ginny. I can’t believe I actually beat him!”

Both Carlin and Ellis had worked up a sweat from the tension of the engagement.

“I need a shower,” said Gay.

“Why don’t you go take one. I’ll meet you in the leisure sphere in about ten minutes. I still have some of that good coffee left, enough for two cups.”

“That sounds great!”

Ginny watched Gay leave just as Peter came up to her.

“That was a good recommendation, Ginny. Gay is at the top of the class. She’s a real natural.”

“I had a feeling that she would be, Peter.” Ginny looked at him and asked quietly, “Tell me the truth Peter, did you fly at your best?”

Peter Carlin laughed, “Look at me, Colonel, I’m drenched. Seriously, I was flying for all I was worth. The only reason I beat her the first time is that she made a slight error that I was able to capitalize on. With a little more experience, no one in SHADO will be able to touch her, except maybe Ed Straker, and he doesn’t count.”

“Ed beat you in the simulator?”

“Until today, he was the only one.”

“How do you think she would do against him?”

“I don’t know, Ginny, that’s a tough call. Ed Straker is an exceptionally skilled fighter pilot. He smoked me in about twenty minutes. Still, Gay is just hitting her stride. It would be interesting to see.”

“Peter, what do you think her chances are of landing the Skydiver 5 assignment?”

“If you go just by the test scores, she would have it nailed. But, as you well know, it’s more than that. A Skydiver Captain is responsible for a lot more than flying. Gay’s experience on Moonbase will certainly help and I would put her in the top five. Straker usually interviews the top ten. Anything she can do to improve herself, between now and the time the interviews are done, can only help.”

“Thanks, Peter.”

“Oh, Colonel?”

“Yes?”

“Are you still up for that match tomorrow?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Gay and Ginny sat in the leisure sphere of Moonbase enjoying the last bit of coffee that Collins had provided.

“This really was good coffee, Gay.”

“I know it. I was thinking, the next time one of us is down on Earth we should pick up a small coffee pot and some good coffee.”

“We might have trouble smuggling up the pot but, the coffee itself shouldn’t be an issue. That’s a good idea. You know, Gay, Peter was telling me that you are only the second person to beat him in the simulator.”

“Who else, no wait, let me guess? Commander Straker?”

“None other, of course that is unofficial as Ed doesn’t fly combat anymore. I just thought you would like to know the company you’re keeping now.”

“I understand you’re going up against Peter tomorrow, Ginny.”

“Yes, and I’ll probably only last a few minutes. He’ll be laughing at me over the radio.”

“I don’t know Ginny, I saw you beat some good pilots today. I loved it when you slammed on the brakes and Harris flew right by you. He didn’t know what happened until you put a missile up his tailpipe.”

The maneuver that Ginny had used was not easy to execute as the pilot can easily stall the aircraft if their timing is not right. It was done by extending the airspeed brakes, cutting the throttle, and pulling back on the stick. This would cause the aircraft to drop a hundred knots of airspeed, in a very short time. The trick was to push the nose back down, pull in the

brakes, and firewall the throttle, just as the enemy aircraft was flying by. If the pilot waited too long, the aircraft would stall, and go into a flat spin. If they didn't wait long enough, the enemy aircraft would end up right on their tail. It took practice to get it right, and Ginny had the maneuver down to an art.

“Harris is a space pilot. He flies with a different set of rules. Peter would have seen that coming. But that doesn't mean that I won't try it. Enough about me, Peter said you were at the top of the class, that's quite an accomplishment.”

“Ginny, I know the only way I'm going to get that posting, is to be head and shoulders above the rest. It's not fair, but that's the way it is.”

“I know that feeling,” Ginny said, ruefully. “But remember who we are talking about. You've known Ed Straker as long as I have. When have you ever seen him make a decision based on a preconceived notion?”



“Never,” said Gay “You know, sometimes he treats me like a daughter, and sometimes I don’t think he likes me at all.”

Virginia was very much aware of the puzzle that was Ed Straker. She had been trying to make sense of it, and him, for the past few years and she was sure it would take much longer than that to unravel.

“I know for a fact, that he has a very high opinion of you. He agreed to put you in the testing program with almost no persuasion on my part. This program is too important to waste resources to appease someone’s feelings. He wouldn’t have agreed to it if he didn’t have confidence in your abilities. A word of advice, said Virginia, pausing briefly. “When you go in for your interview, you can’t show any self doubt. You have to convince him that you are the best person for the job, and the only way you will do that is to believe in yourself. My

mother used to tell me to picture it happening in my mind. Put it in the realm of possibility.”

“Thanks, Ginny, I think you are the best friend I’ve ever had. I mean that.”

Virginia rewarded her with a big smile, as for her, the title of best friend was an honor. She had not had a best friend in years as she was reluctant to bestow that title or trust on anyone. It had hurt her deeply when she found her former best friend in bed with her husband. And yet she trusted Gay without reservation, probably because she had been forthright from the beginning. To Ginny that trait had spoken volumes.

“Thanks, Gay, I honored to have you as mine.”

Virginia was on the vidlink with Earth. She had decided to recommend Gay for the Skydiver 5 posting.

“Alec, you remember last month when I mentioned that I might have another test pilot for you?”

“Yes I do. Who is it?”

“Lieutenant Ellis.”

“Gay Ellis? You’re kidding?”

“No. Her test scores are in the stratosphere. She was at the very top of the class, and she beat Peter Carlin in a head to head match. They are tied at one apiece. Alec I want to recommend her as the commanding officer for Skydiver 5, when it’s completed. I need to know if you would support that decision.”

“You say she was at the top of the class, and she beat Peter Carlin? I’d be a fool not to support it. But I’m not the one to convince.”

“I know, but I think I can convince Ed, as long as I have your support.”

“You know, Ginny, a lot is going to depend on the interview.”

“Yes, and that will be up to Gay.”

“Why is this so important to you, Ginny?”

“Gay is a kindred spirit, Alec. She’s my best friend.”

Alec knew Ginny well enough to know she was very selective of her friends. He thought of his own friendship with Ed, and the lengths he would go to for him.

“When are you going to talk to Ed?” he asked.

“After Peter has sent down the test results; I want Ed to have them at his fingertips when we discuss this.”

“All right, Ginny, let me know if I can help in any other way.”

“Thanks, Alec.”

The Space Intruder Detector satellite sat parked at the L<sub>5</sub> libration point, sixty degrees behind the moon, in lunar orbit. SID had not had as

much as a single sighting in almost two weeks. Although most of those who heard it would say that it had a personality, it was in fact a mindless automaton, following a preprogrammed set of instructions. Craig Collins had called it an artificial personality, and since he knew more about it than anyone else, his opinion was widely accepted.

At the moment, the computer was analyzing a signal return from the FTL radar, the Utronic beam, the *Eyes of SHADO*, as Ed Straker had called it. The signal return was slowly, but surely rising to a finite number that would set a conditional branch in the programming. When that happened, the computer logic would branch to a new set of instructions. The satellite continued analyzing, unaffected by boredom or repetition.

In the control sphere of Moonbase, Gay Ellis sat at the command console supervising the low

watch. The last couple of weeks had been quiet, too quiet. Usually when it was like this for a while the next attack was massive. Gay knew that the base was exposed, and sooner or later the aliens would take advantage of it.

Straker had originally pushed for a base that was completely under the lunar surface, but the cost and logistics of building such a facility were astronomical. In the end he had to concede; an exposed base was better than no base at all. She knew that sometime in the future he would secure funding for a larger more protected base, and the existing facility would be instrumental in supporting its construction.

SID continued to monitor the signal return from the unknown target as the signal slowly rose to the branch threshold. As it passed the preprogrammed number, the satellite executed the conditional branch in the programming.

**This is Space Intruder Detector. I have a sighting, area 147-242 BLUE,** the baritone voice came through the speakers at all the SHADO installations. On Moonbase, Lt. Ellis turned to Lt. Anders and said, “Confirm sighting, Joanna.”

Lt. Anders checked the coordinates on her radar screen, verifying the sighting.”

“Sighting confirmed, area 147-242 Blue.”

“Very well, signal Yellow Alert,” Gay said, as she turned back to her mic. “Moonbase to SHADO control, we have a sighting, area 147-242 Blue.”

At HQ, Colonel Paul Foster had the low watch for the week. As he observed the data being relayed from SID, and Moonbase, he checked the clock, it read 04:30. Straker had left orders to be called if anything came up, but Paul didn’t want to wake him for a false alarm.

“Lt. Paulson, let’s wait until we have confirmation from SID before you call the Commander. I don’t want to wake him if it isn’t necessary.”

“Yes sir,” the blonde lieutenant answered.

On Moonbase, Gay was listening to her inner voice. It was telling her that this was going to be more than just a routine sighting. She pressed the intercom to ring up the Base Commander. Ginny appeared on the screen, appearing somewhat disheveled.

“Yes Gay.”

“Sorry to wake you, Ginny, but we have a sighting.”

“Has it been confirmed by SID?”

“Not yet, but I have a feeling about this one.”

Ginny recognized intuition as a command prerogative, and she trusted Gay’s intuition.



“I’ll be right there.”

**This is SID. I have a second sighting, area 148-242 BLUE. Third sighting, area 150-242 BLUE. Fourth sighting, area 152-242 BLUE. Fifth sighting, area 154-242 BLUE. Sixth sighting, area 156-242 BLUE. Seventh sighting, area 158-242 BLUE. Eighth sighting, area 160-242 BLUE. Ninth sighting, area 162-242 BLUE.**

“Damn,” said Foster. “Get the Commander on the line, now!” He knew that multiple sightings signaled a real threat.

On Moonbase, Ginny rushed into the control sphere in time to hear SID call off the last sighting. “Nine? Did I hear that right?”

“Yes, but none of them have been confirmed by SID,” Gay said, as she vacated the command

console. She had to suppress a grin, having never seen Ginny in the purple wig.

“Bad hair day,” Ginny said, noticing Gay’s reaction.

Ginny looked at the tactical display. Like Gay, she had a bad feeling about this. She decided not to wait as she reached over to the alert panel and activated a switch.

“Red alert, red alert. Interceptors immediate launch. I say again, immediate launch.”

Ginny turned to Lt. Anders, “Joanna, have the secondary interceptor team on the pads as soon as the primary team has lifted off”

“Yes ma’am”

“Gay, any change on the sightings?”

“No ma’am, but confidence still remains high.”

Ginny hated this part. Until the UFO’s got closer they had inaccurate tracking data, they

needed more satellites to better triangulate their position. All it took was time, and money.

Right now all they could do was wait.

## **Chapter 5:**

Ed Straker was driving in to HQ. Nine sightings at once had to be more than an anomaly. Colonel Lake had already brought Moonbase to red alert and he had ordered Foster to do the same at HQ. He picked up the phone.

“This is Straker, patch me through to Moonbase.”

A few seconds later Virginia Lake came on the line.

“Colonel Lake, what’s your situation?”

“We’re at red alert. The first wave of interceptors is en-route to the most likely

interception point. The second wave is warmed up on the pads.”

“Any idea what the trajectory termination is yet?”

“No sir, they are too far out, we can’t triangulate on them until they get closer.”

Straker was frustrated at the limitations of the tracking network. *Damn the IAC for not funding more than one satellite.*

“All right, I’ll be at HQ in about ten minutes. Keep me posted, Colonel.”

“Yes sir.”

Straker hung up the phone saying to himself, “Good luck, Virginia.”

**Red alert, red alert, Have multiple UFO’s on positive track. Range fifty million miles. Speed SOL 6. Trajectory termination, Moonbase operations area.**

“Damn,” said Ginny. “Second wave, immediate launch, I repeat, immediate launch.”

Gay Ellis punched up the target data, for both sets of interceptors, not waiting to be asked. “Targeting data being computed now,” she reported.

Ginny nodded as she keyed her mic, “Moonbase to SHADO control. “

“This is control, Foster here.”

“We have the trajectory termination as Moonbase operations area. Both waves of interceptors have been launched. Time on target for the first wave is five minutes. TOT for the second wave is ten minutes.”

“Very well, standby for Commander Straker.”

“Standing by.”

Ginny turned to Lt. Anders, “Joanna, let’s get the ground defense launchers in place.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Moonbase, this is Straker.”

Ginny turned back to the vidlink, “Yes Commander?”

“Status report Colonel.”

“Both waves of interceptors are launched, and ground defense launchers are being moved into position.”

Back at HQ Straker nodded. Virginia had covered all her bases, he had expected as much. “Very well, Colonel.”

Ginny knew that the Commander was worried, and truth be told, so was she. This time they knew that they were the target.

“The first wave is reaching launch point, Colonel.”

“Very well.”

The first wave of interceptors soared through space rapidly closing with their target. Piloting Interceptor 1 was Lt. Stephen Harris. He double checked the targeting data as every shot had to count. He was very well aware that if they missed, they may not have a base to return to.

“Interceptor leader to group; break formation.”

The three interceptors separated each closing on a group of UFO's. They were hoping to get more than one apiece.

A minute later they were at launch point.

“Interceptor leader to group; Missile launch in five...four...three...two...one...launch!”

The three interceptors each launched their single nuclear warhead. A few minutes later three nuclear explosions ripped through the fabric of space.”

Back at Moonbase, Gay watched her screen as the missiles exploded. Out of the nine targets,

only five were left. “We got four of them, Colonel.”

A cheer went up in the control sphere; their odds of survival had just increased significantly.

“How long before the second wave is in position?” asked Lake.

“One minute, Colonel.”

The second wave of interceptors was being commanded by Lt. Andrew Conroy. He checked his targeting data. “Interceptor 4 to group; break formation.”

Piloting Interceptor 6, was Captain John Martin. He was still chaffed by the fact that his probation would not allow him to command the group. He just should have asked for a transfer Earth side until Lake was gone, but he wanted to fly. He wasn't happy with the target data either.

“Andy, these numbers don't look right.”



Conroy double checked his figures, “They look fine to me, John.”

“The range is off; they can’t be that far away.”

“John, remember what happened last time. Just go with their numbers. Trust me they’re right.”

Martin wasn’t convinced. He activated the manual override on the targeting computer and changed the range settings.

“Interceptor 4 to group; missile launch in five...four...three...two...one...launch.”

The interceptors launched their missiles. Three more explosions ripped through space. The missile from interceptor six exploded a few seconds before the others allowing two UFOs to avoid the explosion.

On Moonbase, Lt. Ellis watched the screen as two more targets disappeared from the screen. Four UFOs were going to make it through.

“Four made it through, Colonel.”

“Ginny activated the internal alarm, as she spoke into the intercom, “This is Colonel Lake; all nonessential personnel are to proceed to the shelter immediately.”

Ginny turned to the two women in the command sphere, “All right girls, we don’t need to have all of us in here. Get to the shelter. Lt. Anders, transfer fire control to my station please.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Gay waited until Joanna had left, then turned to Ginny.

“I’m staying, Ginny.”

“Gay, the ground defenses weren’t designed to handle four UFOs, anyone that stays up here is putting them self at unnecessary risk.”

“Ginny, I’m not leaving my best friend up here, alone. Besides, we stand a better chance with two people on fire control.”

Ginny knew she was right; it could make a difference.

“All right, take the fire control station and launcher two.”

“Moonbase to SHADO control.”

In the underground headquarters of SHADO, Colonel Lake appeared on the vidlink. Ed Straker flipped up the mic to answer.

“This is Straker.”

“We were able to destroy five of the nine UFOs. Four of them are inbound. I’ve ordered all but essential personnel to the shelter.”

“How long until they arrive?”

“Five minutes. There isn’t enough time to rearm the interceptors. I’m holding them in orbit until it’s over...” her voice trailed off.

“Leave this channel open, Colonel, we’ll be standing by.”

“Yes sir.”

Ed was worried. Moonbase was not well defended even with the ground based rocket launchers. He felt a pang in his heart, as he realized his concern for Virginia was on a personal level. *She is a good friend and...* Straker would not allow himself to finish the thought.

“Lt. Ford, put Skydiver 2 on alert. One of them may break off and head to Earth.” *Hopefully*, he thought.

“Yes sir.”

The four alien craft separated; two of them dropped down close the lunar surface, while the other two approached Moonbase from above, each of them firing energy weapons as they approached.

In the control sphere, Ginny began to sweat from the tension and she could feel the adrenalin flowing in her veins. She aimed the launcher at two of the craft as they approached. Outside, the explosions shook the base as the UFOs fired their directed energy weapons. One of the defense missiles found its mark, and the alien craft exploded.

“I got one,” Ginny said to Gay.

Gay’s heart was beating in double time, as she targeted the two craft approaching at ground level. She released a salvo of missiles, destroying both alien craft.

“Two UFOs destroyed,” she said.

The alien craft that Ginny had missed fired at Gay’s launcher, destroying it.”

“Launcher two destroyed,” she said, with a feeling of foreboding.

In lunar orbit, Captain Martin was distraught, having made another serious error in judgment; one that might cost the lives of everyone on Moonbase. The second defense launcher had been destroyed, and the first one was probably low on missiles.

Martin realized he had only one way to atone for his indiscretion. He reached a decision and fired his main engine and headed toward the surface.

The remaining UFO started its attack, this time approaching along the lunar surface. It fired an energy beam at the last launcher, destroying it.

In the control sphere Ginny looked at Gay, “That’s it, we’re wide open now.”

The two women walked to the window, and watched as the UFO circled around for the final assault.

Captain Martin spotted the UFO skirting along the lunar surface. He put his interceptor in a dive towards the alien craft. His fear was checked by a sense of duty and obligation.

Gay and Ginny watched the alien craft as it approached, determined to face death without showing the fear they both felt. Ginny thought she noticed something heading towards the alien craft.

When Martin was a few hundred feet from the UFO, he accelerated to maximum speed. The SHADO interceptor collided with the alien craft; the force of the impact pushing it to the lunar surface. The UFO and the interceptor both exploded on contact.

In the command sphere, the two women ducked as the base was showered with shrapnel. They could hear the pelting of metal on the skin of the sphere.

Ginny rushed back to the center console. “Colonel Lake to all sections, damage report!” Turning to Gay she said, “Gay, check atmospheric pressure in all sections.”

Ellis punched up the systems check routine and looked at the pressure readings. “Readings are all normal, Colonel, for now.”

Ginny nodded knowing they would have to do an inspection on the outer skin very shortly. “Moonbase to interceptors, report in.”

The five remaining interceptors responded and Ginny had them return to base.

“Moonbase to SHADO control.”



At HQ, Straker walked to the communications console and took the mic. “I’m glad to see you are still in one piece, Colonel. What’s your situation?”

On the monitor, Ed could see Virginia reading the damage report, “The explosion was very close to the base, less than a thousand yards. The atmospheric integrity is still okay, but we are going to have to survey the outer skin for damage. Some of the secondary systems have been knocked offline, most of them just circuit breakers that tripped during the explosion.”

“Casualties?” Ed asked afraid of the answer.

“Only one, Captain Martin. He saved the base by ramming the UFO with his interceptor.”

“I see. I’ll need a detailed report on that after you handle the more pressing matters. Good job, Colonel Pass my congratulations along to your crew.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As Ed walked back to his office offered a silent prayer of thanks, for more than one reason.

That afternoon Ed Straker was in his office studying the reports and telemetry sent down from Moonbase. He found two of the reports disturbing, each creating its own set of problems. As he finished the last report, Alec Freeman walked in to see him.

“You look tired, Ed.”

“It’s been a long day,” Ed said, as he closed the doors.

“Drink?” Alec asked, hopefully.

“You know better than that,” said Ed, going through the ritual again.

“Take a look at this report, Alec. It’s the telemetry from interceptor six.”

Freeman took the report and quickly scanned through it. When he came to the targeting data,

he looked up. “Martin changed the range settings.”

“Yes, he disobeyed orders, again.”

“Too bad, he’d have been a shoe-in for the Medal of Honor, even if it was awarded posthumously.”

“Yes, now read this report.”

Alec took the report and looked at the title, “Tracking data?” he asked.

“The pertinent information is on page thirty.”

Alec read the section that Ed had mentioned. He re-read the conclusion twice before he looked up.

“It didn’t make any difference, Martin would have missed anyway.”

“Yes. Alec, I’ve been arguing with Henderson over the design of the tracking system for years now. Space tracking is three dimensional trigonometry. The more distance you have

between your tracking assets; the better your accuracy will be. Any high school student could tell you that. The other problem we have is the finite delay of the radio links.”

“Henderson will never give us the money for more satellites.”

“That’s a battle for another day. In the mean time we have to figure out what to do about Captain Martin. Any thoughts?”

“I don’t know, Ed. It’s a damn shame having him go out like this, but he did disobey orders.”

“Well had his actions caused the problem, I’d be the first to hang him out to dry. His figures were closer than the tracking system. He just over compensated.”

“What does Ginny think?”

“She’s angry as hell about the whole thing, the fact that he disobeyed orders, the fact that the tracking data was off, the fact that our system is flawed, shall I go on?”

“She must have an opinion about Martin?”

“She does. Alec, I don’t know what surprises me more, the idea she had, or the fact that I agree with it.”

“Well don’t keep me in suspense, what did she say?”

“She wants to have him decorated.”

“The Medal of Honor?”

“Martin is career military; his family thinks he is still an air force pilot. He has a young wife and two small children. His family would be entitled to special benefits if he is decorated.”

Straker paused for a few minutes before continuing.

“Here is Colonel Lake’s report on the incident. It clearly states that had it not been for the selfless action of Captain Martin, no one on Moonbase would have survived the attack. The UFO was apparently packing some heavy hardware, that’s why it exploded on impact.”

“You surprise me sometimes, Ed.”

“How’s that?”

“Sometimes you seem almost human,” he said with a grin.”

Captain Carlin closed rapidly on the jet piloted by Colonel Lake. He had been engaged in a dogfight for almost ten minutes. *Damn, Ginny can hold her own*, he thought. He was just about to get a missile lock when he suddenly flew right by her. “Damn,” he said aloud, as he recognized the maneuver instantly.

Carlin pulled his jet into an aggressive vertical climb as he kicked in the afterburners. He looped his jet and started a dive towards Lake’s aircraft.

Ginny had executed the maneuver perfectly, but Peter Carlin was an experienced fighter pilot. She saw him go ballistic and was unable to follow him in the climb. Ginny pushed the nose

over and picked up speed banking hard to the right. She knew she had to put some distance between them or she was going to get smoked.

Peter closed rapidly with Ginny's aircraft and quickly lined up the shot. He fired his missiles. Two seconds later her aircraft exploded.

This time the cheers went up from the guys, as the groans came from the gals.

Ginny got up from the simulator to shake hands with Carlin, "Congratulations, Peter, nice match."

"Thank you, Colonel. You did quite well for someone with no combat experience. You have the *dead stop* maneuver down to an art. You'll be one hell of a fighter pilot with a tad more experience."

"Thanks," she said, as she walked over to Gay.

"Okay, what did I do wrong?" Ginny asked, quietly.

“You made the same mistake I did. You can’t follow him in a climb when your airspeed is that low. You have to push your nose over and kick in the afterburners to get your speed back up. Also, don’t stay in a tight turn too long. It eats up too much airspeed.”

Ginny listened carefully, noticing no apprehension in Gay’s demeanor as she spoke. *She finally has her confidence back*, Ginny thought to herself.

A few weeks later, Straker had finished the interviews for the new Skydiver 5 Captain. He had narrowed the list down to two people, Lt. Roberts and Lt. Ellis. This was going to be a difficult decision and he needed some input from a trusted source.

The image of Keith Ford appeared on the vidlink, “Colonel Lake to see you, sir.”

“Oh, thanks Keith, send her right in.”



The office doors were open and Ed stood as Virginia walked in. “Join me for breakfast Colonel?”

“Thank you, sir.”

They sat down at the conference table and Ed poured coffee for both of them.

“Buy the way, Colonel, I have something for you.”

“Sir?”

Ed reached over to his desk and picked up a bag and handed it to her. A surprised smile came to her face as she looked in the bag.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“Fresh ground Columbian coffee, but you can’t tell anyone where you got it. It would ruin my reputation as a hard ass.”

Ginny gave him a knowing smile as she said teasingly, “I think your reputation is safe. Thank you, sir, I do appreciate it.”

“When do you have to leave for Moonbase?”

“This afternoon,” she said.

Ed forced himself to look down at the report in front of him, distracting himself from certain thoughts.

“I want to go over the interviews with you; I’ve narrowed the list down to Jeff Roberts, and Gay Ellis. I’ve read your recommendation and I’d like you to elaborate on it.”

Ginny now felt like she was walking a tightrope. *Damn him, I hate it when he does that!* She took a deep breath and reiterated the important points in her recommendation.

“Lt. Ellis is a natural pilot, sir. Her skills in an aircraft rival Peter Carlin, by his own admission. And she still hasn’t risen to her full potential.”

“Yes, I read his report as well. When I interviewed Gay last week, she exuded confidence that I haven’t seen from her in a

long time. I was very impressed. It speaks highly of her, and of you, Colonel. Your hard work helped a good officer regain her confidence.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Ginny was having a lot of trouble trying to figure out where the Commander was heading, again having a puzzle that eluded her.

“This is my concern, Colonel, if I put Lt. Ellis in this position it takes her out of the running for accelerated promotion. She is next in line to command Moonbase as a Lt. Colonel once you finish your tour of duty. As a Skydiver Captain, she will be reporting to Peter Carlin, who is going to be overseeing naval operations sometime next year.”

*He is just as impressed with her as I am,* Ginny thought. She made a decision.

“Commander, Gay would be much happier being posted to Skydiver. It is really what she

wants to do, it's the best thing for SHADO, and it's the best thing for her.”

“The two of you have become close I see.”

“Yes sir, we have,” she answered.

Ed sat back in his chair considering, “Who would you recommend to replace her on Moonbase?”

“Nina Barry,” Ginny answered without hesitation. “Gay and I split the shifts a couple of months back, so Nina has had a chance to gain some experience. She has an aptitude for command. And she enjoys what she does.”

Ed knew that Virginia Lake would not stake her reputation on a cause unless she was absolutely sure of herself. Lake had recommended Major Wallace, who was working out extremely well. In the end, he trusted her judgment.

“Would you like to give Captain Ellis the good news?”

“I would love to. Thank you, sir.”

“I’d reached another decision as well.”

“Sir?”

“In nine months, your assignment at Moonbase will be completed. At that time you will be reassigned to HQ as my executive officer. A position I intend to make permanent.”

“Why? What about Alec?” she asked, shocked.

“Alec informed me this morning of his intention to retire once the aeroceptor projects are completed.”

“I see,” she said, wanting to ask but thought better of it. Alec was Ed’s best friend and she couldn’t help but wonder how much more there was to this.

“I’m going to start sending you the same reports that Alec see’s, as well as involving you in senior staff discussions. It’s going to be a lot of extra work for you, but I’m sure you can handle it. Have Nina take over some of your duties on Moonbase, if need be. If she’s going to

command the base, we might as well break her in right.”

Virginia gave him a knowing grin, having thought the same thing.

They finished breakfast and Ed stood up with her as she prepared to leave.

“Oh, Colonel?”

“Yes Commander?”

“Have a safe flight.”

She smiled, “Thank you sir.”

## **Epilogue:**

The lunar module touched down just as the mid watch had taken over. Gay rushed from the control sphere to the reception sphere to meet Ginny.

Gay arrived just as she was descending the ladder. The two women joined hands.

“Welcome back Ginny, how was your flight?”

“Fun, as always,” she answered. “You know, I’m going to miss this when I transfer back to HQ. I can’t believe it’s been three months already.”

“I know it. Let me help you with those,” Gay said, as she grabbed one of her bags.

When they arrived in her quarters, Ginny opened one of the bags and pulled out a paper bag. She handed it to Gay.

“Look what I have.”

Gay’s eyes went wide when she saw what was inside. “Fresh ground coffee?”

“Compliments of Commander Straker.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, it surprised me too. But it’s a secret, I gave my word. I think he was just being nice for a

change. That man is a puzzle I'll never figure out."

"Isn't that the truth," Gay said, ruefully.

Ginny set up the small four cup coffee maker she was able to find while she was on Earth. In a few minutes the two women were waiting for the machine to finish brewing.

"I have some news for you, Gay."

*Uh oh, here it comes,* she thought.

"I saw the Commander just before I left Earth, and he had the list down to two people for the Skydiver 5 posting."

"Who made the cut?"

"Lieutenant Roberts, and you."

Gay's heart skipped a beat as she saw Ginny smile.

"Congratulations, Captain Ellis."

Gay screeched in delight as she went over to hug her best friend.



“I can’t believe it!” she said, tears of joy now flowing.

“Commander Straker was worried that giving you this posting would be depriving you of a better position. He thinks very highly of you, Gay. He said you did quite well in the interview.”

“I thought I blew it to be honest. I guess I have you to thank for convincing him?”

“I persuaded him to consider all the aspects. He really didn’t need much convincing.”

“Ginny, I can’t thank you enough, somehow words just aren’t enough.”

“Seeing your reaction was all the thanks I’ll ever need. So anyway, it won’t be official until next week, and the Commander asked that you keep it confidential until the announcement is made. You will be reporting to the SHADO Naval Training Center in two weeks. The school is eight months, which will be followed by six

months of test pilot school at Dreamland. Here's the best part, Mark will be assigned to Dreamland the same time you are."

"I didn't know he had been accepted!"

"Neither does he; yet. Ed will be telling him tomorrow."

"Ginny I'm so happy, I can't tell you."

"Just make sure you keep in touch, okay?"

The room was filling with aroma of fresh brewed coffee. Ginny got up to pour them both a cup. She handed one to her best friend saying, "Cheers."

END