

# Silver Star

## A UFO Story

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Based on the Characters and series created by  
Gerry Anderson



**Historian's Note:** The events depicted here take place during and after the episode "The Man Who Came Back" written by Terence Feely. It contains dialogue from that episode.

## **Prologue:**

Craig Collins and Ginny Lake walked to the reception sphere hand in hand. Over the past nine months they had become close friends and two months prior the relationship had bloomed into the promise of romance.

“So Ginny, when do you leave for earth?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. One whole week out of this tin can, then eight more weeks and I get my new assignment.”

“Yes, I know. That means I’m going to have to salute you now,” he said teasingly.

“Oh stop it.”

“Seriously Virginia, you’ve worked very hard, you deserve it.”

“I’m glad you think so, I heard Foster threw a fit when he found out.”

“Rumors, I wouldn’t give it much credence. So, how about dinner on Saturday night?”

“I think I could be persuaded, but let’s make it something special.”

“I like the sound of that, what’s the occasion?”

Virginia stroked his nose with her finger as they turned towards each other, “You’ll find out, on Saturday night.”

“Now I can hardly wait.”

“You just pay attention to your instruments on the way down; I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Is that an order from the soon to be executive officer?”

“Yeah, it is. I’m serious, be careful,” she said as she threw her arms around him.

“Don’t worry Ginny; this old astronaut isn’t going anywhere.”

Still embraced they kissed each other tenderly.

“Have a safe flight Craig.”

Collins gave her a wink as he let her go and turned to the airlock. She waited for the hatch to close then headed for the control sphere. She had a system check scheduled this afternoon and wanted to get a jump on it.

Ginny had not been interested in Collins when they first met on Moonbase nine months ago, but he had slowly grown on her, so much that she had John Grey run a Computer relationship study on them. The study wasn't required unless a relationship became intimate but to Ginny that made little or no sense at all. What would happen if the study showed a contradiction and they had already formed an emotional attachment? She did not want to expose herself to that possibility.

Ginny and Craig had not yet got to the point of intimacy as Ginny was very old fashioned in that respect. But she realized today that she was

falling in love with Craig and she was ready to explore a deeper relationship with him.

The girls were somewhat surprised that Craig and she had ended up as an item but Ginny saw through the rough and ready exterior that Craig displayed. He had a very keen mind and a taste for classical music, one of Ginny's loves in life. As she got to know him, she found that they had a lot in common.

At least he wasn't a puzzle to her, unlike Ed Straker. The Commander was one of the reasons that she took so long to pursue a relationship with Craig. She had resigned herself to the fact that she would never figure him out, and she wasn't getting any younger. Ed was a fantasy and it looked like that was all he would ever be. Maybe one day Craig could help her understand Ed, they were good friends after all.

She walked into the control sphere and started looking over the system checklist as she sat down at her console.

“Did you see your honey off?” asked Nina teasingly.

“Oh stop it,” said Ginny, then she said quietly, “yes, I did.”

Nina came up to the console so they could speak privately, “So have you told him yet?”

“Told him what?” she asked innocently.

“The three little words?”

“Nina!” she said embarrassed.

“Well it’s written all over your face.”

“It’s is?” asked Ginny, surprised.

“Yeah, it is. You’ve been on a cloud since he arrived a couple of days ago.”

“I guess I have,” she said as she sighed.

“Isn’t being in love grand?” asked Nina.

“I’ll let you know, after we do this system check.”

## **Chapter 1:**

Colonel Craig Collins checked his course readout and found that he was right on the money; a midcourse correction would not be needed. *Damn, there goes my excuse to talk to Ginny!* He figured that he would just have to come up with something else.

Virginia was unlike any other woman he had ever known, and he was enthralled with her. Craig had seldom had to wait more than a second date before moving to the next level, until now. But he didn’t mind at all, as he saw Ginny as someone very special.

Ginny had told Craig of her failed marriage now years in the past and that she hadn’t been with anyone since. That was a rarity in itself and Collins was surprised when she agreed to start

seeing him. And now he found himself in love with her and that amazed him even more, as he never thought of himself as the type that would settle down. He could however, picture himself with her as they shared quite a few common interests. He still couldn't beat her at chess however.

Collins decided it was time to have some fun with her, *to hell with the regulations!* He flipped on his transmitter and called.

In the control sphere Ginny was reading off the system check list while Nina and Joan verified the status of each subsystem. Halfway through the check the speaker came to life.

“Ship five three four to Moonbase Commander, ship five three four to Moonbase Commander.”

While Nina and Joan grinned at her, Ginny walked to the console and flipped up the mic.

“Go ahead five three four.”

“Approaching an earthly reentry, and feeling blue. Is it still all right for Saturday night darlin’?”

Ginny was embarrassed, as she answered, “Your communications are against standard procedure.” She then added, “And yes, it’s still all right for Saturday night.”

“Now that’s more like it.”

An hour later Straker was walking through the control room heading for his office when he overheard Lt. Paulson mention Collins ship.

“Five three four, that’s Craig Collins, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir.”

Straker smiled, “Have him call me when he gets down, will you?”

“Yes sir.”

Straker continued walking to his office when Tara Paulson sang out, “Pilot reports fire in cabin.”

Straker spun around and rushed back to her station.

“Let me in there.”

Ed quickly sat down at the console and studied the readouts. Even a small fire in a spacecraft could be deadly in a short period of time, and Craig was one of his best friends.

“Craig, it’s Ed, how bad is it?”

“I can’t tell... There’s a lot of smoke... and it seems to be getting worse.”

“Craig, push the life support, and try cutting your Q circuits.”

Behind him Paul Foster has just walked into the control room as Ayshea Johnson turned to the Commander, “SID reporting three alien craft.”

Over the speaker came Collins voice, “It’s no good, the heat is still building up.”

“Sighting confirmed,” said Johnson.

Straker was torn trying to keep track of both goings on.

“Main warning lights are on. Repeat alarm lights are on.”

The baritone voice of SID came over the speaker in the control room. **“Three alien craft at five million miles, closing. Speed SOL eight.”**

Straker knew he had to make a choice, “Hold on Craig... Be back with you in a minute.” He turned to Lt. Paulson, “Stay with him.”

**“Range four million miles closing.”**

“Launch the interceptors,” said Straker as he walked over to the main console.

On Moonbase the interceptors were already on the pads.

“Interceptors immediate launch,” said Ginny, now seated at the command console.

The three interceptors lifted off their pads and headed out towards space.

Ginny listened to the communications between Craig and HQ. She knew he was in serious trouble and she was powerless to do anything about it.

**“Trajectory, Northern Europe. Range: three and a half million miles and closing.”**

**“Two million miles, closing. Speed reducing to SOL six.”** Sid continued to report.

Straker watched as the UFO’s approached still torn between duty and friendship. He could

hear Collins coughing in the background, his voice filled with urgency.

**“One UFO has changed trajectory, predicted target this satellite.”**

On Moonbase Virginia watched the readouts and swore to herself when she heard the new course.

“Interceptor two, lock on to new bearing, three-three-zero.”

The interceptor changed course and gave chase to the UFO heading for SID.

As the alien craft approached the L5 libration point where SID was parked the interceptor launched its missile, but the UFO fired an energy weapon at the satellite hitting it amidships. A moment later the alien craft exploded after being hit by the missile.

In the control room the voice of SID was heard as the satellite went through its death throes, its voice repeating ever slowly.

**“I’ve been hit, I’ve been hit... I’ve... been... hit... Non... operational.”**

The satellite went silent as its systems failed.

Interceptors one and three closed on the other two craft. They fired their missiles destroying one UFO and narrowly missing the second.

“Contact lost on the last UFO sir,” said Lt. Johnson.

“Damn, get Sky One in the air. Send them to the UFO’s last known datum point and start a search pattern.”

“Yes sir.”

Straker walked back to Paulson’s station.

“Do you still have Collins on the line?”

“Negative sir, we lost contact during reentry.”

“Very well, call me if you reestablish contact.”

“Yes sir.”

“Colonel Foster come with me,” said Straker as he walked towards his office.

On Moonbase Virginia had her hands full. The destruction of SID had created a huge hole in the tracking network and she was trying to fill the gap by rerouting the space borne tracking assets through the Moonbase computer system. The telemetry and control links for SID were offline and there was no way to ascertain the damage to the satellite without an actual hands-on inspection and that would be impossible unless they could stabilize the satellite. The only reason she knew it hadn't been completely destroyed was it had broadcast a death knell and it still showed up on radar.

While Virginia worked on cross connecting the satellites Nina and Joan attempted to restart SID. Up to this point the complex satellite had ignored all the commands sent to it. The radar showed that it was still spinning out of control meaning the station keeping systems were offline as well.

“Any luck Nina?”

“No Colonel, I don’t even know if the restart signal is getting through. SID is still rotating and I can’t establish a steady telemetry link.”

“Let’s hope the watchdog timers are working. If we can’t stabilize the satellite we won’t be able to get near it for a repair mission.”

Virginia finished the last cross-connect and restated the tracking network. Until SID was repaired every sighting would have to be analyzed by hand, fallible human hands. The range of detection had just been significantly decreased as well. The network would not be able to establish positive track on any object out

farther than fifteen million miles. They were more vulnerable to attack than they had been in a long time.

“Let’s get the mobile launchers in position and I want a waking alert for the primary interceptor team.”

“Yes Colonel,” said Nina.

“Colonel Lake, I have a telemetry link. It looks like the station keeping system is back on line.”

“All right Joan, give me a status report.”

“Coming up.”

Joan keyed in the command for SID to run a self diagnostic. They watched as the results appeared on the screen.

“Station keeping system operational, radio links operational, tracking sensors inoperative, networking systems inoperative, artificial intelligence routines inoperative, main CPU compromised.”

“Joan, print me a detailed copy and send one down to HQ. Advise them of our current tracking status and operational readiness state.”

“Yes ma’am.”

It had been almost an hour since the attack and Ginny had not had a chance to think about Craig. She wondered about him now, unsure if he had made it or not. She was fighting back tears knowing that the chances of him surviving were not good. Nina walked up to her console to speak privately.

“Ginny, why don’t you take a break?”

“I can’t Nina, there’s too much to do.”

“Ginny, you’ve already done all you can do right now, please take a break, you know Straker is going to be calling up here as soon as he sees that report.”

“I know and I should be here.”

“Listen to me, you need the release. You don’t want to do it in front of the Commander do you?”

“No I suppose not.”

She got up from her station and walked out of the control sphere. When she reached her quarters the tears would not come right away as it wasn’t yet real. It wasn’t until she saw the thermos of coffee Craig brought her that she realized he wouldn’t be coming back. In a torrent of emotion she let her grief come to the surface.

For the past hour Straker and Foster had been working on a plan to reroute all the earthbound tracking assets to tighten the radar net. The tracking data had to be routed directly to HQ for the main computer system to sort out. It was a cumbersome arrangement and Straker was not happy with it.

“What about Moonbase, sir.”

“If Colonel Lake is worth her salt she’s doing the same thing we are with the satellites.”

“You didn’t check with her?”

“I don’t need to. She should be following standard procedure and I have every reason to believe that’s what she is doing.”

“I see.”

As if on cue the door opened and Ayshea Johnson brought in set of reports.

“Status reports from Moonbase sir.”

“Oh thank you Lieutenant.”

Straker quickly thumbed through the tracking report, the coverage wasn’t great but it was better than he expected in the short term. The SID report confirmed his worse fears, for all practical purposes the satellite was out of commission. About all it could do was correct its attitude and tell them that it didn’t work.

Straker actually smiled when he saw the readiness report. Colonel Lake had brought the base to full alert and was already canceling furloughs. *Damn she's good*, he said to himself, and not for the first time.

“Take a look at these Paul.”

Foster read through the reports nodding his head knowingly.

“It looks like she covered all the bases.”

“That’s why she’s getting promoted; I don’t have to hold her hand.”

“What if you didn’t want to use this plan?”

“Then we’d have to change it wouldn’t we. Paul let me give you a bit of advice concerning command. You can be right, and you can be wrong, but you should never ever be uncertain.”

Paul considered his words and took them to heart. He had reacted poorly when he heard the Colonel Lake had been promoted to acting second. Someone had overheard his reaction and

the word had spread around the base at light speed. Paul had tried to dispel the rumors, as he had nothing against Lake and he didn't want to get off on a bad note with her.

“Paul I'm going to be sending you up to Moonbase to assist Colonel Lake. She is going to be busy trying to improve our tracking capability while we figure out how we are going to repair SID. She is still going to be in command of the base but you most likely will be assuming most of her normal duties. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No sir.”

“Good, I'm glad to hear it. You'll be leaving tomorrow and I'd plan on being up there for a while. That's all for now.”

“Yes sir.”

When Foster had left, Ed steeled himself for an unpleasant duty. They still hadn't heard from Collins and Ed feared the worst. He knew that

Craig and Colonel Lake had become very close over the past couple of months and she deserved to know what was going on. He owed it to both of them.

Straker keyed the intercom, “Contact Moonbase and get Colonel Lake on the vidlink.”

“Yes sir.”

A few minutes later Virginia appeared on the monitor. Ed could see that she had been crying.

“Colonel, are you all right?”

“Yes sir. You needed to speak to me?”

“Yes, we haven’t yet heard anything from Craig. We had radar coverage where is ship should have went down but we never picked him up. That means he either didn’t reenter or...”

“I know, sir. A burn up,” she wiped her eyes fighting tears again.

“Colonel I’m very sorry, Craig is a friend of mine too, a good friend. If I hear anything you’ll be the first person I call.”

“Thank you sir.”

“I’m sending Colonel Foster up there to help you. I need you to come up with a way to extend our detection range. Push as many of your normal duties off on to Paul as you need to.”

“I heard he was resentful about my promotion. Is it wise to send him up here now?”

“That rumor reached my ears as well, so we will consider this a test. If he works out then we’ll know it was just gossip. If he’s resentful and can’t follow orders, then I want you to drop kick his ass back to Earth on the next shuttle and I’ll send someone else. Colonel Foster will find himself cooling his heels at the Siberian Tracking station.”

Virginia had to stifle a chuckle.

“I don’t think it will come to that sir.”

“Good, I call you if I hear anything. Straker out.”

## **Chapter 2:**

Paul Foster arrived on Moonbase the next day along with a shipment of computer components that Colonel Lake had requested for the tracking system. By using sub processing modules to sort the tracking data she hoped to be able to extend the range and reliability of the cobbled together tracking network.

Paul walked into the reception area where Virginia was waiting for him. Paul had always thought that she dressed outmoded, her attire being ultra conservative. Her Moonbase uniform however was quite a different matter. Not as form fitted as the trackers but it still showed off her figure in a flattering way and it

made her much more attractive to him. She was a few years older than him but she didn't look it.

“Hello Virginia, it's nice to see you again.”

“And you Paul.”

“The Commander sent me up here to help you out while you get the tracking systems back online.”

“Paul why don't we go to my quarters so we can speak in private.”

“All right.”

When they arrived in her quarters she asked over her shoulder, “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

Virginia made two cups and sat down across from Paul handing him the cup.

“This is very good.”

“I got sick of the stuff they were sending up here so I got my own machine.”

“The coffee has always been bad up here.”

“Paul, I’m going to get right to the point. I heard a rumor that you were not happy about my promotion to executive officer. I want to know if there is any truth to it, and if so, is it going to cause us a problem?”

*Damn the rumor mill made it all the way up here!* Paul decided to be up front.

“I said some things that I shouldn’t have, but it was nothing against you personally. I was upset that I wasn’t considered for the position.”

Virginia was surprised at his admission.

“Well at least you’re honest. I can work with that. You should know that the decision was made almost a year ago, and nobody was more surprised that I was. So with all that in mind, can we work together Paul?”

“I don’t think it will be a problem, as long as you’re willing to share your coffee,” he said with a smile.

That statement broke the tension between the two of them and Ginny allowed herself to relax.

“Well I don’t know, I don’t share my coffee with just anyone, but seeing that you were honest I suppose it will be all right. Paul I’m going to need you to take over most my duties in operations while I concentrate on solving our tracking problems. You’ll have a free hand in the day to day operations, but I want to know ahead of time if you want to make any assignment or scheduling changes.”

“I don’t see that to be a problem. Anything else?”

“You’ll start on the first shift tomorrow taking my place; otherwise I think that’s it.”

“Well I’ll see you later, thanks for the coffee.”

She watched him walk out grateful that he wasn’t going to be a problem and turned her thoughts back to Craig. It had been over twenty four hours since he should have reentered. By

this time tomorrow he will be officially declared lost. Ginny thought of the possibilities that would never be and started to cry.

A week later Ginny was having breakfast with Nina in the leisure sphere. The day Collins was declared lost had been hard on her and she was still struggling with the loss. She had immersed herself into the tracking problem using it as a lifeline, but sooner or later she was going to have to deal with the grief.

“How are you holding up?” asked Nina.

“I don’t know, it just seems to hit me at the oddest times, I still haven’t dealt with it.”

“It’s going to take some time. You and Craig were at a transition in your relationship; sometimes losing someone then can be harder than if it happened later. You end up with a plethora of what ifs. It’s enough to drive you crazy.”

“That’s where I think I’m at right now. I just feel so empty.”

“How are you getting along with Paul?”

“Better than I thought I would considering what I’ve heard about him, but then you know that I like to form my own opinion about people. I don’t care much for gossip.”

“Speaking of gossip I heard about his reaction to your promotion.”

“I talked to him about it. He did say a few things that he shouldn’t have, and he apologized for it. The whole incident was blown out of proportion,” said Ginny.

“I talked to Joan last night; she’s still fuming over her transfer getting canceled. She doesn’t get along with Foster at all.”

“I noticed that, I’m thinking about reversing that decision and approving it. We’re caught up now and Gay is going to need to have her up to speed by next year. I spoke to her last night.”

“How is Gay?”

“She’s well; she just finished a three month training billet with Skydiver 1 as XO. From there she is going to spend six months at Dreamland testing the new Sky aeroceptor. The first one rolls out in six weeks. They laid the keel yesterday for Skydiver 5. She’s pretty busy.”

“I guess so; she gets to have all the fun.”

“By this time next year you’ll be just as busy as she is now. Straker has been pushing the IAC for two more SID satellites for over a year now. Maybe he’ll get them in light of this incident.”

“That’s one job I would never want, fighting with Henderson, that is.”

“I’ll be seeing more of him I’m afraid, and the fact that I’ve known him since I was a child doesn’t help at all.”

“You’ve known Henderson that long!”

“Yeah, small world. He flew with my father during World War Two. They were good friends and my mother still keeps in contact with him and his wife.”

Nina looked at the time, “Well I’d better get going; I’m due to relive Paul in a few minutes. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

After Nina left, Ginny sat alone in the leisure sphere thinking about her father. He had died tragically young six months before she had been born. Contemplating that loss caused her to think about Craig and her grief came to the surface with a vengeance.

Paul walked down the corridor heading for the leisure sphere hoping to catch Virginia before she left. He was dying for a good cup of coffee and she had been kind enough to share some with him at breakfast the other day. Paul had

been told that she was cold and unapproachable by a few of the operatives at HQ but he found that not to be the case at all. While it was true that she didn't always warm up to people right away, she still treated them with a reserved kindness. Paul found himself being quite attracted to her.

When he stepped of the elevator into the leisure sphere he found Virginia sitting on the couch crying. He walked over and sat next to her.

“Virginia, what’s wrong?”

“I never told Craig I loved him. I never had the chance, and now he’s gone...” she said through her tears.

Paul took her into his arms and to his surprise she didn't resist instead returning the embrace and he held onto her until she had cried her heart out. A few minutes later she pulled away to look at him.

“I’m sorry Paul; I didn’t mean to fall apart like that.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

Paul looked into her eyes realizing for the first time how beautiful they were. He suddenly found himself overcome by the moment and he slowly went to kiss her. She seemed as if she was going to reciprocate when she quickly pulled back shaking her head.

“No Paul, I can’t. It’s too soon. I’m vulnerable right now and I could easily fall into your arms. I’m empty and I’m lonely. If I were to let this happen it would be for all the wrong reasons. It wouldn’t be fair to either one of us.”

“I understand,” he said with only a hint of rejection.

Virginia did not pick up on it as she was still dealing with her grief.

“Paul, what I need right now more than anything else is a friend.”

“Well that’s always a good start,” he said.

“I can’t promise anything more as I don’t know where I am. I may never feel anything more than that.”

“Ginny, let’s just take things one day at a time shall we?”

“All right, but don’t get your hopes up.”

“I’d be happy to share the coffee with you,” he said with a grin.

Paul’s comment broke the tension and Ginny smiled.

“I think I can promise that.”

She stood up and he followed suit, “I have to get to work, I’ll see you later Paul.”

“Take care.”

Paul watched her walk out of the leisure sphere. He had never thought he would fall for the brainy type. *I wonder how long she’ll keep my interest.*

Ed Straker and John Grey sat at the conference table looking over the detailed damage report from SID. Over two thirds of the artificial intelligence hardware had been destroyed in the attack. The networking system was a total loss and the XI module for the FTL tracking system would have to be replaced.

“All right John, let’s break this down from easiest the hardest in terms of obtaining replacements.”

“By far the easiest item to obtain is the XI module. When Virginia Lake designed the Utronic system, she standardized the most important part. The same module is used throughout the system only needing different firmware depending on the application.”

“So all you have to do is change a chip?” asked Ed.

“It’s even simpler than that. The hardware uses flash memory to store the software routines. It’s cutting edge technology; you won’t see it outside the military for another ten years.”

“I see, so you just preprogram the module with the correct firmware and plug it in.”

“That’s right. So the FTL radar isn’t a problem. The networking systems are a bit more challenging as the hardware is outdated. But the interfaces are standard and the equipment mounts in nineteen inch racks. The replacements are actually smaller and more energy efficient than what was being used. The development team is already modifying the script to be loaded into the new router and switch configuration files,” said Grey.

“How about the main CPU, and AI routines?”

“That’s where things get dicey. The main CPU lost eight of the ten processors that make up its core. Since the processors are outdated, and no longer available, all of them are going to have to

be replaced. It's the same with the AI modules. We're looking at a replacement of all the sub processors as four of the five units are defective."

"How long will it be before we can procure everything we need to mount a repair mission?"

"I've been told six weeks; we might be able to shave a week off that, but that isn't going to be the problem."

"I know; Craig Collins was the only one qualified for this type of a mission."

"If you say so Ed, Craig and I never saw eye to eye."

"I had heard that, but it's a moot point. So who on the personnel list can be brought up to speed in the shortest amount of time?"

"As far as the technical aspect is concerned the only person qualified is Virginia Lake."

"Out of the question, I need her right where she is, who else?"

“John Masters has the technical ability, but he doesn’t have the astro training.”

“That’s eight weeks minimum, not counting the SID orientation training; anyone else?” Ed asked.

“The only other person left is Paul Foster; he already has the basic astro training.”

“You forgot me John. Collins and I put SID up there.”

“Henderson would have a fit, Ed.”

“It won’t be the first time; I think we had better plan on getting Foster up to speed, he’ll be flying with me.”

“Very well Ed, I’ll let him know, but I’m not comfortable with you going either. The aliens could seize this as an opportunity to get their hands on you. They’ve tried it before.”

“I don’t see that we have any choice. We have to get SID back online, and if that means that I have to fly a space mission to accomplish that,

then so be it. Besides it's been too long since I rode a Saturn V into orbit. John this is going to be your project. Do whatever you have to do to get it done."

Straker already knew everything that he had been told but it was always good to review all the facts to make sure he hadn't missed something important. When Grey had left Straker keyed his intercom, "Keith, get Colonel Lake on the vidlink please."

"Yes sir."

A few seconds later Virginia Lake appeared on the screen.

"Colonel Lake, I'm temporarily postponing Harrington's transfer Earth side."

"I understand; I assume you have a reason sir."

"Yes, I do. How are you getting along with Colonel Foster?"

"We're managing sir," she said wryly.

“Good, I need you to bring Foster up to speed on the inner workings of SID; He is going to fly the repair mission with me.”

“I see. That’s an awful lot of material to cover in a short period of time.”

“I know; that’s why I only want you to cover the information that he absolutely needs to know to assist in the repair. Just cover the flash upgrade procedures, don’t get too technical. Have Nina, Joan, and Carol take over Moonbase operations. With you coming Earth side after SID is repaired Nina is going to be acting commander anyway.”

“That’s not a problem sir; she’s ready.”

“I didn’t have any doubt of that. Is Foster around?”

“Yes sir. I’ll transfer you.”

When the link was closed, Virginia shook her head thinking; *Damn that man! Full of*

*compliments yet he can't even call me by my first name!* Nina Barry walked up to the console and looked at her CO.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“Does it show that much?” she quietly asked.

“Not really, except for the fact you look like you want to strangle someone.”

“You know Nina, I wouldn't mind so much if he was as aloof with everyone else.”

“Maybe he's hiding something. Watch his eyes the next time he speaks with you.”

“There's no way in hell Nina, I don't believe it.”

“Well I could be wrong, but I've known Ed Straker for years, I'd be willing to bet dinner on it.”

Virginia couldn't believe what she was hearing; she decided it was wishful thinking and she wasn't going to allow herself to get her hopes up.

“You’re going to have to convince me of that, Nina.”

“Are you going to take the bet?”

“You’re on.”

Meanwhile Straker and Foster were having their own discussion.

“So you will have six weeks to get up to speed on the hardware. It’s a lot of work and you will be working closely with Colonel Lake.”

“I understand, I think I can handle it.”

“Good because you’re going to get a two week crash course concerning the SSC spacecraft and I expect you to learn it like the back of your hand.”

“It will be an honor to fly with you sir.”

“You won’t be saying that by the time we’re done, trust me, Straker out.”

Paul took that as a challenge and decided he would show Straker what he was made of.

### **Chapter 3:**

By the end of the third week Paul was as frustrated at himself as Virginia was with him. *There is no way in hell I'm going to remember all this!* Even now she was getting on his back about it.

“Paul we're not even halfway through the material and we've only got three weeks left. I told you, you're not going to be able to commit this all to memory. You're going to have to take the manuals with you on the mission and follow the procedures step by step. The important thing for you to remember is where in the manual to find the information.”

“Yeah, I'm going to look like an idiot in front of Straker thumbing through a book.”

“Paul, what do you think Ed’s going to be doing?”

Foster stopped to consider before he answered, “Straker knows this stuff like the back of his hand. I should too. What am I going to do if something goes amiss during the launch? Pull out the book?”

“That’s different, and you know it. That part of the mission you’re going to have to memorize. This part you don’t need to. Why create more work for yourself? You need to work smarter not harder. Ed is going to be going by the checklist as well, he has to, there’s just too much to commit to memory.”

“I guess I’m realizing I’m not as smart as I thought I was.”

“Good, maybe you’ll start listening to me. Look we’ve been at this all day. Why don’t we start again in the morning?”

“All right, see you in the lounge later?”

“Yeah, I’ll be in there in about an hour or so.”

“Okay, see you then.”

Virginia watched him leave to lab shaking her head. She knew that he was still hoping for more than friendship between them, but she just didn’t feel that way. She doubted that she ever would.

It took Paul two more weeks to absorb the information that he needed for the mission. To his credit he listened to what Virginia told him and stopped trying to do things his way. He had come to appreciate just how brilliant this woman was and how he measured up to her. Straker had been right all along and it was a tough pill for him to swallow. Paul was beginning to develop a new respect for her as a person although he still fantasized about being with her. *Brilliant and beautiful, what more could a man ask for?*

Virginia still did not show any inkling to him that she was considering them any more than friends, but Paul was sure there was some type of attraction as she almost let him kiss her when she was crying over Craig. She had stopped crying about a week ago, at least in front of him. Paul figured that she was ready to move on.

“So Ginny, what about us?” asked Paul.

They were in the leisure sphere at one of the tables. The room was occupied by several other operatives so they were speaking subdued tones.

“I’m not sure what you mean Paul.”

“I’d like to pursue a deeper relationship with you.”

“Paul, we talked about this. I’m not ready for that kind of relationship, hell Craig has only been gone five weeks.”

“You don’t seem to be upset about it anymore.”

“Granted I’ve stopped crying every day, but I still miss him, and even if it wasn’t too soon, I just don’t feel that way about you.”

Paul looked dejected as he looked away.

“Don’t brood Paul, it’s unbecoming,” Ginny said getting frustrated, “I’ve been honest with you. And you’ve been a good friend; you’ve helped me through a difficult time. But if I were to start seeing you now it would be out of obligation, is that really what you want?”

“I feel as though we had made a connection.”

“Maybe we have and I just don’t know it yet. I didn’t know with Craig either, he waited for me for seven months. But he never pressured me it just happened.”

“I’m sorry, I just thought we might have had something special; I guess I was wrong. I’ll see you later.”

“Paul, wait...”

He got up from the table and walked out of the room.

Ginny sat there alone feeling guilty as Paul had been there for her when she was hurting. *Why should I feel this way? I've done nothing wrong.* But her reasoning did nothing to assuage her guilt.

“All quiet up there Colonel?” Straker asked her over the vidlink.

“Yes sir, we haven't had a confirmed sighting since the attack. The last time this happened we were faced with a mass attack,” Virginia answered.

“I remember that all too well. How did Foster make out with the technical training?”

“He struggled through it at first but I think he'll be all right. Paul has already started studying the flight procedures that were sent up last week.”

Straker noticed that she looked distressed and he asked her, “Colonel, are you all right?”

“Yes sir, I’m just a little tired. It’s been a long stretch.”

“Yes I know, I want you to get some rest. Let Nina and the girls pick up the slack. If the tracking system fails you’re the only one who can repair it. I need you to stay sharp.”

“Yes sir.”

“Good night Colonel.”

“Good night Commander.”

Virginia sat in her quarters totally frustrated. *Men*, she thought to herself. *The one man I am interested in doesn’t know I exist, and the one I’m not interested in is pressuring me.* The low watch was just about to start. Nina and Joan were on the schedule and Ginny decided to drop in on them. It would probably be the last time that they would be able to work together. Ginny

decided that this was more important than a few extra hours of sleep.

“Ginny, I was just about to call you. Take a look at this,” said Nina.

Virginia walked over to tracking station, where the two women were analyzing a signal; several signals in fact.

“How long ago did they show up?” asked Ginny.

“Less than a minute ago; I still can’t get a working range figure,” said Joan.

“I’ve got a feeling about this,” said Ginny as she sat at the command console and reached for the alert panel.

“Red alert, red alert; interceptors standby for launch.”

“Do we have a count yet?”

“No Colonel,” said Joan. “Best guess right now is nine.”

Eight months ago Ginny had faced the same scenario and four of them had gotten through. And that was with full tracking capability. She decided that she wasn't going to take any chances.

“Interceptors, immediate launch! I say again immediate launch! Hold position in lunar orbit and wait for further instructions.”

The interceptors rose off their pads and rocketed into space. When the pads were clear she ordered the second team into space.

“Nina let's get the ground defenses into position.”

“Yes ma'am.”

Paul walked into the control sphere. “What's going on?” he asked.

“Nine possible sightings, they showed up about ten minutes ago.”

“Colonel Lake,” said Nina. “I have a problem with launcher one, the outer door is jammed.”

“Damn...”

“I’ll get it Ginny,” said Paul.

As he turned to walk out Ginny called to him,  
“Paul?”

Foster stopped and looked back to her.

“Be careful, okay?”

He gave her a wink and a smile, “Don’t worry.”

“I have positive track,” said Joan. “Nine UFO’s, area 157-233 Green, speed SOL 8, range fifteen million miles, trajectory termination, Moonbase operations area.”

“Here we go again. Moonbase to interceptors, proceed on marked headings. Data is being transferred now.”

“Interceptor One to Moonbase, data received, we’re moving.”

In SHADO HQ, Ayshea Johnson was monitoring the chatter from Moonbase; they

appeared to be facing another mass attack. She turned to Colonel Grey, who had the low watch.

“Moonbase has just confirmed nine sightings; predicted target is Moonbase operations area.”

“They haven’t called down yet?”

“No sir, but the interceptors have already been launched.”

“That mean’s Virginia’s got her hands full. Get in touch with the Commander, he’ll want to know.”

“Yes sir.”

In the control sphere Lt. Harrington watched the radar returns from the incoming UFO’s as well as the interceptors dispatched to deal with them. The UFO’s still had not reduced speed. The base defenses were not designed to handle more than three UFO’s at any one time. Joan was surprised that the aliens had not pressed home that advantage sooner.

“Time on target for group one?” asked Ginny.

“Four minutes Colonel. Six minutes for group two.”

“Ground defense launcher two, in position,” reported Nina.

“Very well,” said Ginny. “Moonbase to SHADO control.”

John Grey came on the vidlink, “I was starting to get worried. What’s your situation?”

“We’re currently tracking nine inbounds with a trajectory termination in the Moonbase operations area. Group one is one minute from intercept.”

“The commander is on his way in, he estimates fifteen minutes.”

“It will all be over by then John, one way or another,” she said.

The first interceptor group led by Lt. Andrew Conroy reached the launch point.

“Interceptor one to group; break formation, missile launch in six seconds.”

The interceptors separated each one homing in on a single alien craft as this group was too widely spaced to get more than one with a single missile. The interceptors each fired a single missile and a minute later the fabric of space was torn by three thermonuclear explosions.

Joan watched the incoming UFO's as the interceptor missiles found three of their targets.

“Three down Colonel!”

“Moonbase to interceptor one, confirming splash three, return to orbit and wait for the all clear.”

“Understood Colonel; leader to group, you heard the lady. Let’s get our butts out of harm’s way.”

In the airlock that housed the first ground launcher Paul worked frantically to free up the frozen hatch. He was seriously considering using a set of charges to blow the door open. Without the second launcher they were sitting ducks.

“This is Colonel Lake; all non essential personnel to the shelters. This is not a drill!”

“Second wave coming up on launch point ma’am,” said Joan.

The second wave of interceptors was led by Lt. Stephen Harris.

“Leader to group, break and attack. Missile launch in eight seconds.”

The second wave of interceptors closed rapidly with their targets and the single missile was launched from each. The missiles closed within a few hundred yards of the alien ships and detonated.

“Three more UFO’s destroyed, Colonel.”

“Moonbase to group two, splash three. Break off and hold in orbit.”

“Understood Moonbase, Harris out.”

The hatch finally began to budge as Paul pried it with the crowbar.

“Foster to control. The hatch is open.”

“Copy that Paul,” said Ginny as she turned to Nina.

“I’m on it Colonel,” Nina said as she rolled the launcher out of its hanger.

The alien craft approached Moonbase from three different directions. The launchers were able to destroy two of the craft but the third one slipped through and scored a glancing blow on the control sphere.

Inside equipment arced over and several fires broke out. Joan was knocked back from her station and she hit her head on the command console as she fell back. Nina was blinded by the electrical discharge that had danced from her console. Warning sirens activated throughout the complex and Ginny noticed that the atmospheric integrity had been compromised.

“Nina, Joan? Are you all right?” she asked.

“I can’t see Ginny,” said Nina.

“Joan... Joan...” said Ginny as she reached her side. Lake checked her pulse and tried to wake her to no avail. She dragged Joan to the airlock and ran back to Nina.

“I’m getting you out of here.”

“What about you?”

“Someone has to transfer the systems to auxiliary control.”

“Ginny the atmosphere is going.”

“I know. No arguments, this is my responsibility.”

The smoke was getting thicker and the oxygen content of the air was dropping rapidly. Ginny pushed Nina into the airlock and closed the door. She knew that she only had another sixty seconds of consciousness before she would pass out. She noticed that the window had been cracked as well and if it blew she would be exposed to vacuum.

Virginia made it to the master panel and started switching circuits starting with the defense systems.

Paul Foster ran down the corridor towards the control sphere. He knew it had been hit and still had his EMU suit on. The medics were carrying Joan away on a stretcher and Nina was talking to the other medic.”

“Where’s Virginia?”

“She’s still in there Paul,” said Nina very upset. “She wouldn’t leave.”

Paul donned his helmet and stepped into the airlock.

As soon as Virginia had transferred the control of the ground defenses the missile launchers came back to life. One of them locked on the UFO as it came around and fired its missiles. The missiles found their target and the UFO

exploded just short of the base, with the force of the detonation felt throughout.

Virginia passed out as she transferred the last circuit to the auxiliary control center. The window in the control sphere began to give way.

Foster was in the airlock now and the door would not open. He hit the override and was appalled at the damage that had been done by the attack. He was horrified when he saw the window give way.

Very quickly he found Ginny collapsed on the floor. Paul picked her up and carried her to the airlock as the last traces of air were drained out of the command sphere. He closed the hatch and re-pressurized the airlock. Paul knew that a person could survive in a vacuum for a short period of time but how long had she been out. *Don't you dare die on me Ginny!*

On the vidlink was the image of a very somber Ed Straker. He had been summoned to HQ in the wee hours of the morning and he looked drained. This was one of his worst nightmares played out; a mass attack on Moonbase.

“How bad is the damage Paul?”

“Right now the control sphere is unusable; it will be a week before we can repair the damage to the system controls. Fortunately all of the critical systems are located underground. We just have to replace the control circuits. We should be back up by next week. It could have been much worse. If it wasn't for Colonel Lake it would have been.”

“How is she?”

“The doc put her in a hyperbaric chamber as soon as she was brought in. She hasn't regained consciousness yet and the doc is worried.”

“Very well, until she’s back on her feet, you’re in command. I want a detailed report of what happened up there as well as an operational readiness report within twenty four hours.”

“Yes sir.”

When Straker signed off Foster turned to Lt. Miller.

“Carol, take over here. I’ll be in sick bay.”

Foster grabbed the information he needed for the report planning on doing it at Virginia’s bedside. He wanted to be there when she woke up. *If she wakes up.*

## **Chapter 4:**

Virginia slowly opened her eyes trying to make out the blurred image in front of her. She ached all over and couldn’t seem to focus her eyes.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been run over by a truck,” she said.

“That’s what explosive decompression will do to you. I never did like vacuum for breakfast.”

Virginia was finally able to focus her eyes and Paul came into view.

“Paul, what happened?”

“You pulled Nina and Joan out of the control sphere, and went back to switch over the systems.”

“I remember that much but nothing after.”

“You passed out; you were pulled out of the sphere just as the window blew out,” said Paul.

Virginia looked at him knowing he was hiding something.

“You pulled me out of there, didn’t you,” she said.

“Well...”

“Thank you,” said Ginny. “How are Nina and Joan?”

“Joan is back on her feet but the doc has ordered best rest for the next few days. She may have a slight concussion. Nina’s blindness was temporary. She’ll be back on duty tomorrow.”

“How long was I out?”

“About five hours, the doc said it was mostly due to exhaustion. He wants you on strict bed rest for the next three days.”

“Damn doctors,” she said gaining a bit more of her spirit.

“Look I have to get back on duty, I’ll check in on you later.”

Ginny gave him a smile as she said, “Okay.”

Paul bent towards her to give her a gentle kiss, this time she did not resist.

“Paul, I still don’t know where I am right now, let’s take this slow okay?”

“All right, I’ll see you later.”

Virginia was thinking to herself, *what am I getting myself in for?*

The next day Virginia called down to Colonel Grey, to discuss a computer relationship study between her and Paul Foster.

“I’ll call you with the results later this afternoon,” Grey was saying, “but I should warn you, this one might raise a few eyebrows.”

“Why, I’m just following standard procedure, John.”

“Virginia, you’re being promoted to executive officer. Because of that, everything you do now is going to be under a microscope, and Paul Foster has a reputation of being wild and loose with the ladies. Getting romantically involved with him, especially so soon after Collins’s death, could bring your judgment into question. Look Ginny, I know you pretty well and I know why you’re doing this. Most people wait until

the relationship has turned intimate before they have this study done.”

“John, we’ve talked about this, by the time a relationship gets to that point it’s too late. How many people have we had to separate because of that?”

“Over a dozen and I’ve sent your recommendation up the chain. Ed agreed and sent it to the IAC for final approval. But until the regulations are changed, filing one of these studies is like telling everyone who sees it that you are sleeping with the other person, whether you are or not.”

“It is what it is, John. People are going to talk. There is not much you can do about it.”

“Virginia, are you sure about this?”

“Look, I took Craig’s death really hard, I realized that I was in love with him after he was gone, and because of that I never had the chance to tell him. That hurts more than I can

tell you. A week later, Paul found me in the leisure sphere crying my eyes out. He gave me a shoulder to cry on and I needed that. Then yesterday he saved my life. If he hadn't pulled me out of there when he did, I would have been killed”

“I heard about the attack, how are you feeling?”

“I feel and look like I went ten rounds with the champ and lost. I spent several hours in a hyperbaric chamber yesterday on pure oxygen at one third an atmosphere and I'm still sore from the decompression.”

“You're very lucky to be alive. All right Virginia, I'll call you this afternoon, remember the report doesn't go on record until I enter the results, if you have a change of heart, let me know then.”

“Thanks John.”

She sat back in her quarters sipping her coffee.  
*Ginny, what the hell are you doing?*

Straker was in his office reading the repair status report from Moonbase. Last week's attack was devastating as it effectively negated the space tracking network. The pressure skin breaches and window had been repaired earlier in the week and repairs had been started on the control systems. Virginia Lake was back on her feet and was working feverishly to restore the space tracking network.

Ed had already read the computer relationship study on Lake and Foster. He was shocked when he saw it. He knew her well enough to know that she had nothing in common with Foster and this turn of events baffled him. Ed had given Virginia more credit than this and he was disappointed, more in himself, than her. He knew since last year, that he cared about her, but he didn't pursue his feelings.

Straker knew that Craig Collins was trying to win her affections and when he succeeded Ed was happy for both of them, even though he felt

loneliness in his heart. Now he was regretting his decision as Foster had a reputation for being somewhat licentious. *Virginia deserves better than that.* The intercom buzzer interrupted his thoughts.”

“General Henderson to see you sir.”

“Thanks Keith, send him in.”

The office doors parted and Henderson walked in, “Good, morning Commander.”

“General,” said Ed as he shook his hand. “What brings you down here this morning?”

The two men sat down at the conference table and availed themselves of the coffee.

“I just read both Lake’s and Foster’s reports on the attack. You should tell Colonel Lake that she is too modest.”

“Yes, I read them. It’s obvious to me that her actions saved the base, but she almost got herself killed doing it. It shouldn’t have to be

that way General. If we had more than one SID, we wouldn't be in this predicament."

"For once I agree with you Commander, but these things take time and money. You don't know what I go through to keep the committee from cutting the budget. Anyway that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. Foster's report made it very clear that Colonel Lake's actions under fire prevented the base from being destroyed. I'm putting her in for the SHADO Silver Star. I'm surprised that you didn't do it yourself."

Straker thought about his own feelings concerning Virginia Lake. He had always been impressed with her and she certainly deserved the honor that Henderson was recommending.

"I expect my people to perform above and beyond the call duty General, that's why they are here. They're the best of the best."

"Ed this was well above and beyond, besides it will take some of the sting out of the next issue."

“And what would that be General?” Ed asked suspiciously.

“The committee has approved Virginia Lake’s promotion to executive officer, but that is temporary. They want someone with a military background to take that position permanently.”

“Well, in their infinite wisdom,” Ed began sarcastically, “who do they have in mind?”

“You’re not going to like this, but they’ve selected Paul Foster, and I’ve endorsed it.”

“General, there is no way that Foster is even close to being ready to step in to this job, whereas I’d hand the reins over to Virginia Lake today if needed.”

“The decision has been made.”

Ed felt his blood pressure rising as his anger built up. *Over my dead body*, he thought.

“You’re going to have to whip Foster into shape,” added Henderson.

“Foster needs to accomplish his own personal growth before he is ready to take command at that level. And I’m not promoting him over Colonel Lake; even if it means that she remains *acting XO* for the duration. As I understand it the final decision is mine.”

“Think about this carefully Commander, you need friends in the committee right now.”

“I don’t play politics General, and I don’t compromise my principles for anything, or anyone. If that’s the way the committee feels I’ll just have to convince them otherwise.”

Henderson glared at him knowing full well that Ed was one of the few men who could sway the commission.

“Be very careful Commander, you don’t want to cross the political line, do you?”

“I don’t have to General, I know I’m right.”

“Well we’ll just have to see. Anyway you can give Colonel Lake the good news. I’ll see you at the next meeting.”

Straker watched him walk out of the office thinking, *yes, you most certainly will.*

The next day Paul was walking into the leisure sphere when he saw Ginny having dinner.

“Hello, I’ve been looking for you,” he said. “I understand that congratulations are in order.”

“How did you find out?”

“Everyone on the base knows about it, Colonel Virginia Lake; awarded the SHADO Silver Star.”

“Oh stop it Paul, it wasn’t that big of a deal. I wish they hadn’t done this to me.”

“Ginny, listen to me, your actions saved this base, as well as the lives of everyone here. You deserve it.”

Virginia did not look convinced. To Paul she seemed preoccupied.

“How did you make out with the tracking system?” he asked.

“It’s back online, about eighty five percent of where it was. Tomorrow I should be able to tie the rest of it in and at least get us back to the level we were at before the attack.”

“What are you doing after dinner?”

“I’m tired so I thought I might read a little bit before I go to sleep.”

“Oh I thought we might listen to some music if you were in the mood for it”

“What kind of music did you have in mind?” she asked her interest stirred.

“Well I have some Power Station, Men at Work, Aerosmith, White Snake, Dire Straits; it’s really great rock music.”

“How about Chopin, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Borodin, or any classical?” she asked.

“I don’t know anything about classical music.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing Paul. You really should try to expand your horizons a little. What do you do for enjoyment?”

“Well there’s always...” he moved in to kiss her but she backed away.

“I’m being serious Paul?”

Paul sat back and thought for a moment. He enjoyed the beach but that was only for all the little lovely’s running around. The same thing with going out to eat, it was a means to an end.

“I enjoy scuba diving.”

“That’s something I could get into, what else?”

Paul felt like he was being interviewed for a job, he started getting a bit testy.

“Virginia; why the twenty questions?”

“If you’re really serious about a relationship these are things you should be thinking about. You haven’t asked me so I have to pick up the slack.”

“I haven’t given it much thought. The last serious relationship I was in was over a year ago. Tina and I used to dive together, and we were always at house parties. We listened to the same music. How about you, what do you do to relax?” asked Paul, shifting the focus of the conversation.

“Well I play the piano, mostly classical but I enjoy some pop as well. I’m an amateur photographer, I love doing nature shots. I fly for recreation; as a matter of fact my new plane should be delivered in a few weeks. I use to trail walk when I was in school but I just haven’t had the time to do it now,” she answered.

“Wow, you keep yourself pretty busy, I fly so much for SHADO that I could never do it for fun.”

“It’s different when you’re flying for yourself, Craig and I used to fly together a lot when we were on furlough.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“It was, more important it was relaxing. We talked a lot, and we got to know each other very well. Craig didn’t pressure me into something I wasn’t ready for. I think that aspect is what won me over.”

“I didn’t think that you had slept with him.”

“I didn’t! I told you that, but we were supposed to have gone out to dinner that Saturday night. Had Craig lived and we made that date, I think I would have.”

“You had been seeing him for a while, what three months?” asked Paul.

“Yeah, but the first month doesn’t count as we were just going out as friends.”

“That’s a long time to wait.”

“That’s nothing; I made my ex-husband wait six months before we became intimately involved. If I had listened to my mother, he would have waited until we were married. Then I might have seen him for what he was, it would have saved me a lot of pain. Paul, I don’t know what you have heard about me but I don’t sleep around.”

“I didn’t expect you to be so prudish.”

“I’m not a prude, but I’m not promiscuous either. I have to be in love with someone before I’ll go to that point. There has to be a promise of a future together. Paul, I’m not a twenty something girl fresh out of school. I’m thirty seven years old. I don’t have the luxury of wasting time on a relationship that isn’t going anywhere. Someday I want a marriage, and I want children, and if that scares you then you should say so now.”

“I never really thought...”

“Red alert, red alert, interceptors, immediate launch...”

“Damn, I’ll talk to you later Paul,” said Ginny as she quickly got up and headed for the control sphere.

Paul watched her rush out, as he thought to himself, *am I really ready for this?* He quickly walked out to follow her, knowing that she was going to need help.

## **Chapter 5:**

The interceptors were able to get two of the three UFO’s before they reached Earth. The third disappeared somewhere over the Indian Ocean. Neither working Skydiver was close enough for an intercept, and Straker was not in the best of moods.

“I want reconnaissance flights over that entire area, starting ten minutes ago. I don’t care if it takes a week. I want that UFO found,” he said to everyone in the control room.

A week later Sky 1 was flying over a remote island off the coast of India when Captain Carlin spotted a reflection in a jungle clearing. He circled back to verify and sure enough there was someone down there. Peter put his jet into VTOL mode and approached the clearing. After he shut down the engines the man came running towards the Sky jet. As he opened the canopy he heard a familiar voice.

“Peter, am I glad to see you!”

Carlin was shocked, *I don’t believe it!*

“Colonel Collins?”

“In the flesh, and I’m glad to be rescued at last.”

Ed Straker sat at his desk having just received the best news he had heard in eight weeks. Craig Collins had just been rescued and was alive and well. His good mood was somewhat tempered by the next duty he had to perform. Virginia Lake had moved on assuming Craig was dead. Ed owed it to both of them to try to avoid what was going to be an awkward situation.

“Lt Ford, get me Colonel Lake.”

“Yes sir.”

Minutes later Virginia appeared on the monitor.

“Commander?”

“Colonel, are you in a place where you can speak freely?”

“Yes sir.”

“Craig Collins was found today.”

“Oh my God, he’s alive?”

“Alive and well.”

“How is that possible, where was he found?”

“On a tropical island off the coast of India. Peter Carlin found him while searching for the missing UFO.”

Virginia’s elation subsided somewhat as she realized the implications of this turn of events. Straker noticed but didn’t say anything.

“Thank you for letting me know, sir.”

“How are the repairs coming along?” asked Ed changing the subject.

“We finished this morning, all the system controls have been replaced, and operations are being handled from the control sphere.”

“That’s good news Colonel. I’ll look forward to the report. Straker out.”

Virginia sat in her quarters, her hand over her eyes. *What the hell am I going to do now?* She had told Paul last night that she didn’t think the

relationship was going to work. After they had talked she reluctantly agreed to give them another few weeks and Paul grudgingly agreed to take her to the symphony when they got back to Earth.

She had finally come to terms with Craig's death, and now here he was, unexpectedly, back in the picture. Virginia felt very confused as she didn't know if she was going to feel the same way she did, before she thought he was dead. She knew she was going to have to follow her heart, wherever that led. *I'm going to have to talk with Paul*, she thought.

Straker was in his office with Colonel Grey going over the SID repair project. Straker was saying, "Well let's get this straight before he gets here. When it comes to SID's brain, Craig knows more than anyone, so as of now, he's on the project."

"All I'm saying is Craig Collins and I..."

“Look your personal feelings for him are your own problem.”

“Just tell me who’s in charge.”

“Well, overall, you are. But, when it comes to SID’s engineering, Craig is God, okay?”

The intercom buzzed and Ed reached to answer it.

“Straker.”

“Colonel Collins to see you, sir.”

“Send him right in.”

Colonel Collins walked in and Ed stood to greet him, warmly shaking his hand.

“Craig.”

“Hi, Ed.”

“It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you, too. My, it’s good to see anybody after eight weeks of jungle cats.”

Craig looked over at Grey.

“John.”

“Craig.”

“Well, come on, come on, what happened?” asked Ed.

“Well I don’t know. I sort of lost consciousness on re-entry, and then I came to, and I was floating down over the sea and I smash into the sea and I got out and swam ashore before she sank.”

Collins leaned towards Ed conspiratorially and continued, “Tell your boffins that their survival course actually works.”

Colonel Grey stood to leave.

“Oh Colonel Grey, thank you,” said Ed as he left.

When Ed and Craig were alone he continued, “Well you heard what happened Craig...I had no choice.”

“I would have done exactly the same thing,” said Craig convincingly.

“Sure.”

“Craig, I have some bad news for you. Colonel Lake was sure you were dead, two weeks ago she became involved with Paul Foster.”

“You’re kidding, must have been a moment of weakness, oh well.”

“You’re not upset?”

“Hell no, besides, Foster never keeps them for very long anyway.”

Collins gave Ed a convincing smile.

“So are you ready to tackle repairing SID?” asked Ed, changing the subject.

“Absolutely, of course this means you don’t get to ride the rocket.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Well Ed, I’ve got a lot of work to do, I need to get up to Moonbase this afternoon and get working on this project.”

“All right Craig, take care.”

Ed watched his friend leave somewhat surprised at his reaction about Virginia.

Virginia sat in the leisure sphere considering the recent turn of events. She found out the previous afternoon that Craig was alive and she still hadn't talked to Paul about it. The truth was that right now she wasn't in love with either one of them. Paul was too immature and single minded and her feelings for Craig had faded. She didn't know if they would be reignited if she saw him again.

As Ginny was lost in thought Nina Barry walked in unnoticed.

“Ginny, are you all right?”

Virginia was somewhat startled, “Oh...hi Nina.”

“My, aren't we jumpy.”

“I'm sorry; I've got a lot on my mind.”

“I can imagine that’s why I came to talk to you. This morning you looked like you could use a friend who doesn’t have an ulterior motive.”

Ginny smiled knowing who she was referring to. “Thanks Nina, you’re right. Paul as been wonderful to me, and he helped me get through a rough time. But now he wants more and quite frankly he doesn’t know how to deal with a woman who doesn’t melt at his feet. He’s like a moth to a candle. The more I say no, the more attractive I become to him.”

“Do you want my opinion?”

“I think I know what it is. I tried to break it off the other night, but he convinced me to a least give it until we get back to Earth. He’s taking me to the London Symphony in a few weeks.”

“Paul, going to the symphony? Now that I have to see. Really Ginny, do you think few those weeks will make any difference?”

“No, not really.”

“And what are you going to do about Craig?”

“I don’t know the answer to that either. Craig and I never had a formal commitment, we didn’t need it. Eight weeks ago I was in love with him, now I don’t know how I feel. What does that say about me, am I that hollow?”

“Of course not, you’re human. You were sure that Craig was dead. You mourned and you moved on; that’s what people do. And if you have the courage to ask yourself that question then you’ve already proven you’re not that way.”

“Then why do I feel guilty?”

“Because you care about their feelings, but that doesn’t mean that you should feel guilty. And Ginny, whatever you do don’t tell either of them that. They’re men and they’ll use it against you.”

That brought Ginny to laughter.

“Ginny, follow your heart, you may find out that neither one of these men are the *right* one. Sometimes things happen for a reason.”

“Are we talking divine intervention here?”

“Call it God, call it fate, call it the universe, whatever you name it, the principle is the same. I’ve always believed that there are forces that we don’t understand working behind the scenes affecting our lives.”

“My mother is a believer, and I was raised that way, but I don’t know what I believe now.”

“The nice thing about this is you don’t have to understand it, just be ready when fate puts Mr. Right in front of you. He may be closer than you think.”

“I know who you’re talking about; I still think you’re off the deep end with that.”

“Remember our bet, within a year of being posted Earth side.”

“I’m already looking forward to collecting my dinner.”

“We’ll see.”

As the two women were talking Paul Foster and Steve Harris walked into the sphere.

“Oh, hi Steve, hi Paul,” Nina said then turned back to Ginny. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Nina and Harris walked over to the coffee dispenser while Paul sat across from Ginny.

“Craig’s ship has landed; he’ll be here in a few minutes. Ginny, I know this is going to be hard for you. I’m willing to step aside if you think you’re still in love with Craig. I’m sure I’ll regret this later but it’s only fair.”

Ginny was shocked, “You would do this for me?”

“Yeah, you said something to me the other day that stuck in my mind.”

“We’ll see you two later,” said Nina as she walked out with Steve. After they left Ginny continued.

“I think I might have underestimated you Paul, thank you.” She gave him a warm smile and

they gently kissed each other. They ended the kiss just before the door opened and Craig Collins walked in the room. Ginny quickly turned her head as Paul still had his hand on her shoulder. She knew Craig must have noticed.

She stood and walked quickly to greet him, “Craig! I was so glad when I heard.”

“Well it takes more than a little barbeque to fry me you know,” he said as he took her in his arms squeezing her tight, *too tight!*

He let her go saying, “Gee I’m sorry. I do hope I haven’t cracked a rib. I just don’t know what came over me.”

Ginny gave him a concerned look, *Craig was never that rough*, she thought.

Collins turned to Foster, “Well Foster, nice to see you again. I’m glad you’ve been keeping an eye on things for me while I’ve been away.”

“I can’t say I know what you mean.”

“Oh now, of course you do.”

“Craig,” said Ginny, a tone of warning in her voice.

Collins turned to Ginny and said, “Now how about...How about getting this old jungle cat a cup of coffee, now that he has returned.”

“All right,” she said as she went to the coffee machine.

“If it’s all right with you, Foster.”

“Yeah...” Foster turned to Ginny, “See you later.”

After Paul left Ginny handed him his coffee and they sat down at the table. He sipped the coffee and grimaced.

“Still making this moon dust I see.”

Craig looked at Ginny almost apologetically.

“I just wanted to say that there’s no reason to feel guilty about anything.”

Virginia did feel guilty, but remembering her conversation with Nina she chose not to admit it right now.

“I don’t feel guilty, Craig. I cried a little when I thought you were dead. After a while I stopped crying. People do.”

“Yes they do.”

“And we weren’t exactly Romeo and Juliet.”

Virginia got up from the table and walked to the couch while Craig continued.

“Virginia, Ginny you make it ah...You make it very hard for a man...Who only wants to say ah...no hard feelings.”

“I’m sorry, if that’s really what you’re trying to say.”

Collins looked dejected as he said, “What else in the world would I do?”

“How was the jungle?” she asked lightening the subject.

“Well I’ll tell you one thing. There was no one there who looked like you.”

That brought a smile to her as Collins continued, “You know, I used to lie there and look up at the old moon and I’d say to myself, you know somthin’ ol’ Ginny’s up there.”

“I did think about you.”

Ginny got up from the couch and Craig took her arm. She turned to face him.

“Did you? You mean there’s still a chance for this singed old astronaut?”

“I never said there wasn’t. It’s just that I resent you looking upon me as your property.”

“Now you know I’d never do that.”

Collins drew her into a kiss gently at first and she closed her eyes realizing there was still an attraction between them. The attraction quickly became horror as Collins held her tighter and grabbed her hair. She struggled to get away breaking loose for a second and finally breaking

out of his grip. She looked at him horrified as to what he had become.

“You didn’t leave the jungle! You brought it back with you!”

She quickly stormed out of the room leaving a dumbfounded Collins standing there.

Later that day Ginny was talking with Nina in her quarters. She was still visibly shaken by the incident between her and Craig.

“Ginny you should tell somebody about this.”

“Nina, if I do that Craig can pretty much kiss his career goodbye. What he did today was borderline sexual assault.”

“I still can’t believe it, Craig was never like that. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Something must have happened to him while he was stranded in the jungle. Maybe he just needs time to work it out. But I’ll never trust

him again. I should have known something was wrong when he started acting so possessive.”

“I still think you should tell Straker. Craig is a friend of his, and maybe he can get him to get some help.”

“If Ed Straker were to catch wind of this, Craig would be in front of a court martial before the day was out, friend or no friend. You know as well as I do that Straker doesn’t tolerate that kind of behavior.”

“You’re probably right, but what if he tries this again?”

“If he did that, I would report him, but I don’t think he’ll come near me now.”

“Let’s hope not. So you’ve got what three weeks left before you go home?”

“Yeah, I can hardly wait. It’s funny; I really looked forward to this assignment when Straker gave it to me last year. And it was an enjoyable posting. I met some great people. But I’ll be

glad to be home and working out of HQ for a while.”

“I know, second in command. I can hardly believe it. Maybe you’ll be running the show one of these days.”

“Are you kidding me? Ed will never retire. And you know what, I’m okay with that. There is no one in the organization, man or woman, who could step in and replace him.”

“Yeah, you’re right. So did you get your new airplane?” Nina asked, changing the subject.

“It should be in next week. I was lucky to get a hanger berth at Heathrow. At least it will keep it out of the rain. I’m looking forward to doing some flying when I get back. Gay is supposed to have furlough that week so the two of us will take her up on her maiden flight.”

“That sounds like it could be fun. Tell Gay I said hello when you see her.”

“I will.”

## **Chapter 6:**

Straker was reading the SID project updates when John Grey walked into his office.

“Oh, hello John. I was just going over these reports. It looks like we are right on schedule.”

“That’s what I came to talk to you about. I’m concerned about Craig Collins.”

“What about him, John?”

“There is something not right with him, Ed.”

Straker looked hard at Grey, “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“I know that you think I’m biased, but Virginia Lake noticed a change in him too. I cornered her about it while I was on Moonbase.”

“Under the circumstances, her opinion doesn’t carry much weight right now.”

“I played a game of chess with him a few nights ago. Collins has never beaten me. The other night he beat me in six moves.”

“And you’re trying to tell me that just because he beat you at a game of chess, he’s a psychotic? Oh, come on John, what are you, a sore loser?”

“No, it’s not just that. It’s the way he’s been riding Foster.”

“He’s training Foster for a difficult mission, not for a game of ping pong. Foster has to shape up,” said Ed getting impatient.

“And Virginia Lake?”

“Virginia Lake is a girl who fell out of love,” he said dismissively.

“Look I know he’s a friend of yours, but all I’m saying is that what he went through in that jungle...” Straker flipped on the monitor across the room and pointed at it.

“Doctor Adams, full clearance, Doctor Jackson, full clearance, Doctor Buden, full clearance.

Now all of these reports have been computerized. Full clearance.”

“Computers aren’t God.”

“Are you John?”

“I just have an instinct about him.”

“Look, just now, you implied that my friendship with Craig could warp my judgment. Just make sure your personal feelings don’t bend yours.”

Grey just nodded and walked out of the office. Straker didn’t let on but the comment about Virginia troubled him. Craig had told him that he had a falling out with her a few days ago but the way it was described didn’t sit right with him. He never knew Virginia Lake to be as vindictive as Craig had painted her, although Ed never figured her to be involved with someone like Foster. *As smart as she is, she is still a woman, a puzzle no man will ever solve.*

A week and a half later Paul was in the medical bay on Moonbase with his ribs strapped up. He had been effectively knocked out of the mission by Craig Collins' foolishness. The door opened and Virginia walked in to see him.

"Does it hurt as bad as it looks," she asked.

"Collins is a real clown, what an idiot."

"They're shipping you Earth side later on this afternoon Paul. It looks like you're going to beat me home."

"Yeah, but I won't be doing much for a few days."

"Well at least you'll stay out of trouble for a while."

Paul winced as he tried to shift position.

"Who is going to replace me on the mission?"

"It looks like the Commander is going to fly it after all. Paul I'm worried."

"About what?"

“I told you, Craig was different and I told you what happened between us. I have a bad feeling about him. Last week the pressure goes on Colonel Grey’s quarters while he was here and now you almost get yourself killed in a free weight accident with him. Paul I talked with the environmental technicians that designed that regulator. They never fail like that.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything, it’s just that I have a bad feeling about it.”

“Are you going to say anything to Ed?”

“I don’t think I have much choice at this point.”

“Good luck with that. He’ll want to know why you didn’t report it in the first place.”

“I’d rather face the consequences for that than have something happen to Ed that I could have prevented. I’d never forgive myself.

As they talked, Foster realized that Virginia was enamored with Ed Straker. *How the hell do you compete with him?*

Ginny sat in her quarters contemplating the call she was about to make. Craig and Paul were both on their way back to Earth and she felt more relaxed than she had in a while. *I swear to God, I'm taking a sabbatical from men when this is all over!*

Ginny keyed her intercom, “Carol would you raise the Commander and patch him through to my quarters please?”

“Yes ma’am.”

A few moments later Straker appeared on the vidlink.

“Colonel Lake, it’s late. You should be sleeping.”

“That makes two of us, sir.”

“Well what can I do for you?”

“Commander there is something you need to be told, but it’s very personal. I’d like your word as a gentleman that this will stay between us.”

“This sounds serious.”

“It is sir.”

“All right, I give you my word, but why do I get the feeling this has to do with Craig? Did he beat you at chess as well?”

“No sir, what he did could be considered borderline sexual assault.”

“What!”

“He held me against my will while kissing me, sir. I don’t know what would have happened had I not broken free of him.”

“Why didn’t you say anything before now?”

“Because if I had reported it within twenty four hours of the incident you would have had no choice but to court martial him, and that would have ended his career, and probably his life. Ed

he's a friend of yours and I loved him once and regardless of what he may think I still care about what happens to him. He probably went through hell in the jungle and I don't want to see him hurt anymore."

"Why tell me now Colonel?"

"Because you're going up there on a dangerous mission with him, I'm not sure if he's stable, and because I've lost too many people that I care about, I don't want to lose you too!" she said her voice slightly raised at the end.

The words came out of her mouth before she realized what she had said. *Damn, I didn't want to tell him that,* she thought to herself as she turned away, embarrassed by her admission.

"I didn't know you felt that way," he said softly.

"I'm sorry sir I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't be too worried about it, this conversation is off the record, remember."

Virginia smiled at him. Ed Straker was a gentleman in every aspect of the word.

“As far as Craig is concerned,” added Ed, “I can’t do anything official unless you file a complaint and I don’t think you intend on doing that.”

“Yes that’s true,” she paused. “Ed just be careful up their all right?”

“I will thank you.”

“Good night Commander.”

Ed sat back in his chair as he contemplated the conversation with Virginia Lake. Craig was one of his best friends and he would never have believed that he would be capable of such an act. But Virginia had never lied to him, and while he had only known her a fraction of the time that he knew Craig, he knew her well enough to know that she would never make a statement like that unless it were true. Between

that and the conversation he had with Colonel Grey he had to take the threat seriously. But the mission was too important to postpone, Ed would have to take the risk as too much was at stake.

Virginia had unwittingly confirmed what he had suspected for a while. An underlying attraction existed between them. He knew that she would be shocked to learn his feelings about her. A relationship between them while not explicitly forbidden could cause serious problems in the command structure. That was assuming the computer relationship study indicated no other contradictions. *And what of Paul Foster, where does he fit into the equation,* he thought to himself. Still she had risked sharing her feelings with him and that sacrifice just may have saved his life. *Thank you, Virginia.*

The SST flew with Straker and Collins aboard flew over the Atlantic, bound for Cape Kennedy.

The weather at the Cape was clear and it looked as if the late morning launch was going to take place as scheduled.

In the cabin Collins was quietly singing to himself while Ed was lost in thought. He had flown two missions with Craig before, one to commission the satellite and the first service mission, now four years ago. But today Ed felt the apprehension that a rookie would feel on his first space flight.

“This is going to be like old times eh, Ed?”

“Yeah, just like old times.”

“You okay Ed, you seem preoccupied.”

“I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Well don’t fall asleep during the launch.”

“On a Saturn Five? There isn’t much chance of that.”

Both men laughed and Collins went back to flipping through a magazine, leaving Ed free to

pursue his thoughts. When the mission was over he was going to talk to Craig about the incident with Virginia. Craig's version of the event was almost one hundred eighty degrees out from what she had told him. That meant that Craig had lied to him and that fact disturbed him more than anything else.

Paul Foster slowly walked into the control room at HQ. He was still in quite a bit of pain from the busted ribs. He was restricted to light duty for the next few weeks. Colonel Grey had not shown up for duty this evening and he was covering the shift. He wondered about that as Grey was never even late; a no call, no show was completely out of character. Security was out looking for him at the local hospitals and police stations. Hopefully they would find him soon.

His thoughts shifted to personal matters. He had picked up the symphony tickets to take Virginia out next week when she returned from

Moonbase. He was sure that they were going to go their separate ways shortly as they had so little in common, but he still wondered what she would be like in bed. Foster was not used to having to wait for someone in that respect; never mind not getting there at all. She would be forever a mystery to him and that bothered his ego.

“Colonel Foster, I have Colonel Grey for you,” said Lt. Johnson.

Paul took the phone from her, “John, where the hell are you?”

“Never mind that Paul; listen to me carefully. Collins has been surgically altered, he almost killed me and he’s going to try to kill Ed. You’ve got to warn him. Jackson should have the test results on him by now.”

“Jackson has been missing since this afternoon.”

“Collins must have done something to him, look you have to warn Ed!”

“All right, I’m sending you over to security; you can tell them where you are.”

Paul hung up the phone and flipped up the mic.

“Commander, Craig Collins is going to try to kill you!”

Straker was at the access hatch to SID when Paul’s transmission came through. He turned to see Collins coming at him; the expression on his face was a blank stare.

“So Grey was right...” he said to himself.

“Listen Craig, you can beat this thing”

Craig and Straker began to struggle with each other with Collins reaching for his air hose.

“Craig, listen to me. Listen! We can help you.”

Ed words fell on deaf ears as Collins was focused on one task.

“They may have your mind Craig, but they can never get your soul! Craig, listen to me!”

In the control room Foster listened to the struggle powerless to intervene.

“Commander...Come in Commander Straker, are you receiving me?”

“Ed, come in, are you receiving me?”

On Moonbase Ginny was listening to the HQ communications loop and she was horrified by what she was hearing. *Oh my God, Ed.* She knew that he was going to have to kill Craig otherwise he would be killed himself.

“Ed...” she said out loud.

As the two of them struggled, Ed realized that it was going to be one or the other. He found the air line on Collins suit and disconnected it. At

the same time he pushed Collins away. Straker watched as Collins tumbled in free space with the last bits of air leaving his suit.

“Are you receiving me?” came Paul’s voice, through the helmet speaker.

“Receiving.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

“What about Collins?”

“He’s out of it.”

“He could have killed you.”

“Yes, he could have killed me.”

Ed watched as the body of his friend floated away. Collins was much stronger than he was and should have easily been able to take him out. Some of his personality must have been left intact, at least enough to give him a fighting chance.

“Paul, get Colonel Lake on the line. I’m going to need her help to get this satellite running.”

Five hours later Ed had most of the systems up and running on SID. All of the damaged modules had been replaced and he was ready to bring up the AI systems. As soon as that was completed the rest of the checkout procedure could be done remotely from Moonbase. If all the systems checked out, he would leave for Earth in six hours. Ed would use that time for sleeping as he had been up for almost twenty hours.

“Colonel Lake, I’m ready to restart the artificial intelligence routine.”

“All right Commander, the startup code is in hexadecimal, four quads. Are you ready?”

“Go ahead.”

“Quad one is Foxtrot, Charlie, zero, zero.”

“Got it, next?”

“Quad two is Alfa, two, three, Delta.”

“Next?”

“Quad three is Echo, Alfa, Delta, five.”

“And the last one?”

“Quad four is seven, one, four, Bravo, then execute.”

Straker punched in the last part of the code and the system began its restart procedure. Ed watched the display inside the satellite go through the permutations as the AI routines started. At some point SID would restart its voice processor and verbally read off the diagnostic procedures.

“Commander, you can exit and secure SID now.”

“All right Colonel, I’m heading back to the ship.”

Straker gathered up the last of the dead modules and put them in the container for

transport back to the SSC. The units were of no use and would be scrapped, but they couldn't be left on board SID or out in space without becoming a hazard. He pushed the container out of SID in front of him and turned to seal the satellite access hatch. Once it was sealed he untied the line going to the container and toolbox. He attached it to his belt and jetted back over to the ship.

On Moonbase Ginny ran the satellite through the diagnostic routines. Normally this would be done onsite but Ed needed to get some sleep for the trip home. As long as there were no problems, with the firmware uploads, she would be able to complete the task without another EVA.

“Coffee, Ginny?”

“Oh thanks Nina. You're an angel.”

“How are you holding up?”

“I want to cry again,” she paused. By now she had learned that the aliens had somehow gotten a hold of Craig and altered him. “Those murderous bastards, it’s just not fair. I’m glad Ed made it.”

“I know and I’m so sorry about Craig.”

“At least he’s a peace now.”

“They found Jackson, drugged and stuffed in a closet at HQ,” said Nina.

“He’s lucky to be alive. Then again so is Ed.”

Nina walked over to Ginny so they could speak without being overheard.

“You were worried about him weren’t you?” she asked quietly.

“Who?”

“You know who I’m talking about.”

“Ed? Of course I was worried. Weren’t you?”

“Yes I was, but not for the same reason.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Ginny.

“I saw the expression on your face when you thought he was in danger. Virginia, I’ve gotten to know you pretty well over the past year. You can’t hide it.”

“It’s a fantasy, and that’s all it will ever be.”

“I’ve got a dinner that says otherwise.”

“Another dinner? You’re going to get me fat.”

“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch girlfriend.”

“You’re on!”

**“This is Space Intruder Detector, all systems operational.”**

“That’s it Nina,” said Ginny as she transferred the tracking system back to SID. They both watched the radar screens expecting sightings to pop up but the screen was clear.

“Go get some rest Ginny; I’ll let the Commander know we’re back up when he wakes up.”

“All right I will. Thanks.”

## **Chapter 7:**

Ed Straker woke up about twenty minutes before he was due to initiate the EOI maneuver. Five hours of sleep wasn't much but it would have to do.

“SSC 1 to Moonbase, how do you read?”

“Loud and clear SSC1, be advised you are go for EOI, SID is operational, sir.”

“That's great news Nina, is Colonel Lake around?”

“She's on sleep period, shall I wake her?”

“No please don't, I'll talk to her later. SSC1 out.”

“Have a safe flight Commander, Moonbase out.”

Straker switched over to the Mission Control frequency.

“Houston, SSC1. Confirm go for EOI.”

“SSC1, Houston, you are go for EOI in nine minutes and fifty four seconds, mark.”

“Synco Houston. SSC1 out.”

Ed thought about the events of the past two weeks as his ship headed home. Another close friend killed, another relationship destroyed, how much more hurt and pain could he stand. Collins was one of his closest friends and he had died twice. It tore Ed up inside and there was only one person in the world who would understand, as she had just gone through the same thing, he felt sorrow for her as well. And that too could be very complicated now that he knew she was attracted to him. Ed would have to be careful from now on not to let his feelings show as she would spot them in a heartbeat and he wasn't ready to risk that. He couldn't even risk calling her by name, as much as he wanted to.

Two weeks later Ginny and Paul were at the symphony together and as much as she was enjoying the music, she was just wishing the night would end. Paul was brooding and fidgeting all night long. *He didn't even have the good grace to pretend to enjoy himself.* Ginny already knew that they wouldn't last although she would have given it a little more time if Paul were more mature. Virginia was grateful when the show ended, but she was not looking forward to the upcoming conversation.

“Did you enjoy the concert Ginny?” he asked on the way to her apartment.

“Not as much as I should have.”

“I'm sorry; this just isn't my cup of tea.”

“I don't mean to seem ungrateful Paul; I do appreciate you taking me tonight. But you and I come from two different worlds. I'd probably

feel the same way you did tonight if we had gone to a hard rock concert.”

“I get the feeling I’m not going to like where this ends up,” he said as he pulled into her driveway.

“We do need to talk Paul, but let’s wait until we get inside as I have a lot to say to you.”

They got out of the car and walked into the lobby taking the elevator to the third floor.

“Can I get you something to drink?” she asked when they were inside.

“Scotch on the rocks?”

“Certainly.”

Virginia grabbed a glass and filled it with ice while she placed a tea kettle on the stove. She poured the amber liquid into his glass and brought it to him.

“Nothing for you?”

“My tea water is boiling.”

Virginia sat down in the chair across from him and began, “Paul let’s be honest with each other, this isn’t what either one of us had in mind is it?”

“Not really, I would have thought by this point we would have a physical relationship. I’ve never been held off this long by anyone.”

Ginny raised an eyebrow at that.

“Maybe you should reevaluate the type of people you have been dating. Let me ask you something, would you want the woman you marry to have been with every Tom, Dick, and Harry in town?”

“I never thought about it, but, no I wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not proper...” He paused for a second “I think I see your point.”

The tea kettle in the kitchen began to whistle.

“Excuse me a second,” she said as she got up to fix her tea. She came back with her cup and set it down on the coffee table to steep.

“Paul it would have been very easy for me to allow myself to get physical with you. I was lonely and I was ready to explore that avenue with Craig. If I didn’t have any respect for myself or for you I would have; I think my loneliness is why I agreed to start seeing you. You see Paul my father died before I was born, so I never had a relationship with him, and because of that my relationships as an adult have been adversely affected. I ended up married to the first guy who showed interest in me and that ended up in a divorce.” She paused and took a sip of tea.

“I’m sorry about that Ginny.”

“Thanks, anyway I knew I had a problem and I spent a year in counseling to learn how to deal with it. I found out that a woman’s relationship with her father sets the tone for her

relationships with men throughout her life. Because I never knew my father, I had no frame of reference to compare to. Fortunately my mom was able to fill in some of the blank spaces. Through her I, at least feel like I knew my father, and it's been an ongoing process.”

“What does that have to do with us?”

“What was your family life like?”

“My parents divorced when I was six. I stayed with my mother at first. For the first few years she had a different man in the house every month. She ended up remarried when I was ten. That lasted about two years. When I was sixteen I moved in with my father, he had been remarried for six years and he's still married to the same woman. I joined the service when I was eighteen.”

“Don't you think those events had an effect on your life?”

“Are you saying I need a therapist?”

“I’m not saying anything, that’s a question only you can answer.”

“So what about us, Ginny, I mean, where do we go from here?”

“You told me yourself that you’re not ready to settle down and I’ve told you my hopes and dreams. Has any of that changed?”

“I’m not ready for marriage or a family.”

“And I don’t want to be in a dead end relationship, and Paul I have a clock that’s ticking away. That’s something a man doesn’t have to be as concerned about.”

“So I guess it’s over.”

“Yeah, unless you can give me a reason it shouldn’t be?”

“The fact that I care for you doesn’t count?”

“It’s sweet of you to say that, and I care for you too, but it’s not enough. Even if you were willing

make the changes about marriage and family, would you be happy living my lifestyle?”

“I don’t think I’d ever get used to the symphony.”

“Classical music is one of my loves in life; I listen to it a lot when I’m home. It relaxes me.”

“I see, I guess we are worlds apart.”

“Paul, you helped me get through a difficult time, and for that I’m grateful, I’ll always consider you a friend.”

He finished his drink and stood up.

“Well I should get going I know you have to be at HQ first thing tomorrow.”

Ginny stood and took his hand pulling him into a hug as she started to cry.

“I’m sorry Paul,” she said through her tears.

They held each other for a few minutes before Paul let her go.

“I’ll see you later,” he said.

“Bye.”

When he had left Ginny got herself ready for bed. She cried herself to sleep that night.

The SHADO dress uniform was seldom seen or used except on certain occasions. This morning's ceremony was one of those occasions.

Virginia hated being in the spotlight and she was still upset that Henderson had done this to her. She was just doing her duty as she saw it. Virginia was going to refuse the decoration until the Commander convinced her otherwise. Ed Straker could be pretty persuasive when he wanted to be, especially when he was wearing the Commander's dress uniform. She had to fight to keep her self control. *God he looks so damn sexy in that.* The uniforms were pure white with simple gold rank embellishments

and they all had the SHADO logo. The ladies version had a calf length skirt instead of slacks.

Virginia liked the ladies dress uniform much better than the tight fitting cat suits they normally had to wear. The BDU's as they were called left much more to the imagination.

The doors opened in the back and Commander Straker entered with General Henderson and Colonel Freeman. Everyone in the room stood and snapped to attention.

Behind the podium were three chairs and Freeman and Henderson took two of them as Ed stood at the podium.

Straker surveyed the room and began to speak.

“There are very few times that we are able to honor those of us who have shown great courage and gallantry to defend our planet and our way of life. Most of the time, this award is given posthumously due to the extreme sacrifice that was made by the person receiving the

award. On that note, I call for a moment of silence, to honor those who have paid the ultimate price in defense of our planet.”

After a few moments Ed continued, “Today we honor a woman of great integrity, and courage, who selflessly risked her life to save the lives of her comrades in the heat of battle. Her selfless devotion to duty not only saved the lives of two of her comrades, but all of those on Moonbase. She is a lady that I am honored to call a friend. Colonel Virginia Lynn Lake, step forward please.”

Virginia Lake stood and stepped beside the podium facing the Commander.

“Attention to orders: Colonel Lake, for distinguished action in combat, it is my honor and privilege to award you with the SHADO Silver Star. Your actions under fire showed great selflessness, courage, and gallantry, and reflect highly on yourself and those serving with you. Your actions are keeping with the highest

military traditions and the ideals and principles that this organization is based on.”

Ed placed the medal over her head and shook her hand.

“Congratulations Colonel.”

“Thank you Commander.”

Virginia knew she would be expected to say a few words and she stood at the podium looking out at her comrades.

“Three years ago, I came to SHADO from one of the companies that built the Utronic equipment for the tracking system. I knew as soon as I arrived here that I wanted to be part of this organization. When Commander Straker offered me a position it was a dream come true. It was an honor that I wasn't worthy of and more than I would have ever hoped for. But I wish for the day when we no longer have to defend ourselves from an enemy that we do not understand, a day where we no longer worry

about the lives of our children or loved ones. I pledge myself to work towards achieving that goal. Thank you.”

When Virginia sat back down, Paul leaned over to her and said, “Great speech.”

“Stop it,” she said quietly.

Ed stepped back to the podium and said, “A small reception will be held in the mess hall and there will be refreshments as well. Dismissed.”

Ed walked up to Virginia and said, “Well now that wasn’t so bad was it?”

“Next time I’ll talk the General into doing this to you, sir.”

“You’ve got two weeks furlough coming, any plans?”

“My new aircraft arrived the other day. Gay Ellis and I are going flying tomorrow.”

“Oh very nice. Well enjoy your time off because I’m going to be depending on you, quite a bit in the months to come.”

“Commander may I speak with you privately for a moment?”

“Certainly, let’s go to my office.”

Straker told Alec that they would be along in a few minutes and the two of them stopped in Ed’s office.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked when the doors had closed.

“Commander, because of certain decisions I have made over the past few months you may begin to hear things about me.”

“Yes, the only thing that travels faster than light is gossip,” he said.

“Regardless of what you might hear about me, I want you to know that I don’t sleep around.”

“Well Colonel, what happens in your personal life is really none of my business.”

“I believe it is sir. I’m going to be your executive officer and I can’t be effective if I think that my CO has doubts about my judgment, personal or otherwise. While I don’t worry as much about what others might think, your opinion is very important to me.”

“I see. Well to put your mind at ease I had given you more credit than that.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Well, there is a reception waiting and the guest of honor should be there. Shall we go?”

“Of course.”

They walked out of the office and headed for the mess hall.

The next day, Gay and Ginny, were flying in the new Mooney Bravo that Ginny had purchased.

“So how are things going with the new Skydiver Gay?”

“It’s a lot of work Ginny, I was lucky that I was able to get some furlough time this week. How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay now, Paul and I parted amicably and I’m finally over Craig. That was a tough one to deal with.”

“I was surprised when I heard about you and Paul. More like shocked.”

“I know that will go down as my one big mistake in life, right next to Brad.”

The cockpit filled with laughter.

“So now you’re working with the Commander. That’s got to be a change.”

“Yeah, but I think I’m going to like it. He’s the best boss I’ve ever had.”

“Mark said to tell you hello.”

“Oh give him my regards, Nina says hi as well.”

“You know Ginny; we need to get Nina and Joan together with us for lunch sometime.”

“That would be fun, let me see if I can figure out the next time that our time off coincides.”

“That would be great.”

Virginia sat on her couch later that evening having her nightly cup of tea. Borodin played in the background while she contemplated the events of the past year.

Her assignment as Moonbase Commander had been completed successfully and she had made some good friends along the way. Twice the posting had almost cost her life. She found that thought very sobering and it gave her a new perspective on living.

Ginny had become close to both Gay and Nina, in fact they were her two of her three closest friends. She considered herself to be very blessed.

*Relationships, now there's a subject, she thought to herself. She had allowed herself to fall for Craig, and it might have worked had he not been killed on re-entry almost two and a half months ago. Ginny had decided that whatever had come back was not Craig Collins. And Paul, girl, what were you thinking? Virginia had known right away that it was a mistake but she neglected to put a stop to it. Fortunately she had the wherewithal to keep her head about things and not let it get to the next level. But now her reputation was tarnished and she would have to deal with that.*

The bottom line was that there was only one man she had met that she would consider a relationship with, *Ed Straker*.

Nina was sure that there was an attraction from his side but Ginny never saw any indication of it, if anything he seemed more distant since she had unwittingly revealed her feelings to him. *That was a big mistake!* By trying to do damage

control, by telling him that she didn't sleep around, probably pushed him further away.

“Damn it, me and my big mouth!” she said out loud.

Still Nina was sure that something was there, and she was a good judge of character, not to mention that she had known Ed forever. *Well it's up to him now*, she thought as she headed for the bedroom knowing it was going to be another sleepless night, thinking about him.

## **Epilogue:**

“Dr. Jackson?”

“Colonel Foster. Please come in.”

Paul walked into the office of the SHADO psychiatrist and sat in the chair.

“So Colonel what brings you in to see me?”

“I think I have some unresolved family issues.”

“I see. What is it that makes you think that way?”

“Well, I can’t seem to establish or maintain a meaningful relationship.”

“Ah, you refer to your recent breakup with Colonel Lake.”

“Yes.”

“Colonel Foster I’ve seen the psychological profiles for both of you. The two of you are on opposite sides of the spectrum. The fact that this relationship didn’t work doesn’t mean that you have a problem.”

“It’s not only her, it’s any woman I’m with.”

“Well now, that’s a different story. I can try to help you Colonel, but it will take time for us to work through this. You’ve taken the first step in a long journey Colonel Foster.”

“Will this go on my record?”

“Only if it affects the performance of your duties, in which case I will have to notify Commander Straker. I don’t see that being the case.”

“When do we start?”

“We can start right now. So Colonel, tell me about your childhood.”

END