

Now for the next weekly installment of "SHADO Boxing":

Where is Everybody?

By John D'Alton

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Part 1

"Where is everybody?" thought Colonel Pieten.

She'd driven the moonmobile lazily about the area for nearly 30 minutes, but still none of the others had arrived for the moon-golf tournament. Maybe it was a joke on her- visiting Marsbase champion and all that. She'd wait another 30 minutes before calling Moonbase- Gay would tell her the truth, they were friends from way back.

Until then she'd just turn off the engines and enjoy the view. It was pretty spectacular at the moment. Mars was blazing warmly just above the horizon, and with the Sun on the other side, the sky was awash with a panorama of glittering beads of light. She loved the stars- they reminded her how small humanity was, and how beautiful the universe was, and of that time in France when...

The grey dust in front of her suddenly spouted up like a whale, and cascaded over the moonmobile, obscuring her view. "Phew" she thought, that was a close meteorite. If it had hit just a few metres closer I'd be cactus.

Spectacularly, the grey dust came alive again. Within seconds another three small plumes arced before her, shattering the serenity of the moonscape. Alarmed, Colonel Pieten decided it was time to race off before the meteor shower decimated her mobile. But she only went 200 metres before the moonmobile was brutally smashed sideways and stopped, and a piercing scream started to engulf the cabin. Colonel Pieten only just had time to lock down her helmet before an explosion ripped through the engine section and completely tore out one side of the moonmobile.

Staggering behind a nearby rock, she watched horrified as the moonmobile exploded in a soundless fireball of light and heat.

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"So where is everybody Paul?" Commander Straker fumed from behind his cluttered desk. "Look at this desk- usually by 8.30 I've got 14 inches of reports in, but today it's only 5 inches. How can we function effectively with so many people away. Even our new base under DiddlyWorld is affected, so what's behind this pattern? It's a potential disaster for Earth security." Ed paused for dramatic effect, and then thumped his desk, like he'd recently learnt from his studio role topside. "We've never had such a major absentee scare, and I want to know why."

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It was hot that August on Marsbase. Hotter than anyone could ever have dreamed. Even the cooling system couldn't cope with the thermal affects of the volcanic activity under the base.

"And I thought this was meant to be a nice cold planet for our championships. This heat's intolerable" groaned Lt. Rodgers to Agent Johann. "Most", he replied.

They stared forlornly out at the blistering red Marscape and at the rows of fluorescent green markers outlining the SHADO sports fields. It was cooler here near the surface than far below, and it seemed like nearly the whole staff were crammed into the observation dome.

Lt. Rodgers wondered if any work was being done down below at all. Somehow it really bothered her, even though she was just visiting from Earth. SHADO was meant to be efficient and cool and calm. But for the last week Marsbase had been gradually reaching boiling point, and not just physically speaking either. She wondered how long it would be before someone snapped with the ever-present oppressive heat. And with Colonel Pieten away on the Moon...

Part 2

"Pieten stew ready at last" called out Lt. Audet, the new chef, beaming from ear to ear. She was obviously pleased with her newest creation, named in honour of the Marsbase commander. The bowl billowed clouds of fragrant steam and it looked pretty inviting Lt. Rodgers thought, even in the intolerable heat. It even overcame her usual dislike for sausages.

Miss Ealand elbowed her way past her with a plate of "Johnno's BBQ spare ribs", and didn't even say hello. She was up for the sports competition too, replaced by Miss Weller for the week. It was good to have a few other Earthies up to show these Marsbasers that they couldn't win *all* the competitions.

Lt. Rodgers couldn't wait for the weapons events and the Scotch-drinking contests afterwards. Good to have a break from the dreariness of being cooped up underground for months on end. At least here they could look outside more often, she thought, and peered out at the barren orange slopes again.

Lt. Appleyard was looking wistfully outside too. The orange foreground slope faded into a deep red horizon, and the patterns made by Marsmobiles and the sports-fields made it look like a heavily embroidered old coat. The occasional large rock blighted the scene like a tear in the cloth, and he wished he had a large enough needle to repair the damage. It was a special place for the sports events, and always boosted morale for all involved. He reflected on the times of quiet meditation he'd had sitting near the winners dias, watching the meteors falling and the sun ever so slowly setting.

He loved the coolness of the wearing a suit outside and hated this intolerable heat. Even his Adam's Apple and icecream was melted before he had sat down to enjoy it. And the single lonely Marsbase cat was suffering badly too- poor Tetris. It had shed its fur and lost weight and started spinning around at times. He wondered if it was quite all right upstairs.

"Would you watch where you're walking" someone said a little too gruffly. The observation dome cafe was bursting at the pressure joints full of weary hot personnel. "You Marsies put the temperature up on purpose didn't ya hey!?" an Earth pilot vented.

"No we didn't, it's just the volcanic activity, you loser." replied a fuming Marsbaser, pushing heavily against the pilot. And in seconds it was on. The largest fight ever on Marsbase.

Lt. Rodgers jumped for the exit, sprinted down the corridor, and skidded into the lift just before the emergency locks sealed. She'd have to report this to Straker at once. With Col. Pieten away, there was no-one in charge she could really trust.

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As she stumbled anlong another kilometre, Colonel Pieten was feeling increasingly weary. There was something wrong she thought, the large beacon crater should be around her somewhere, but she could see nothing but flat boring grey.

Starting to panic, she looked at the map again. Already she'd passed Paninni, Garibaldi and Raviolli. Grimaldi should only be 20 km past this crater, but where was it. Sweat was starting to drip into her eyes, and the cold was getting to her. She adjusted the air controls and looked around again.

The grey dust spread for miles like a spilled soup. And the terrible silence seemed to be eating into her suit. Only her harsh breathing broke the soundlessness of death. Endless grey, a black sky, her heart pounding, and the oxygen running lower every second.

In another few hours the searing heat would take it's toll, and her emergency air supplies would run out. There's only been six bottles in the emergency bag she'd grabbed as the

moonmobile has exploded around her. If she couldn't find the crater and the path home soon she'd be dead.

Looking up at the stars once more, almost as a prayer, she suddenly realised her mistake. The fear of the consequences gripped her heart like a vice and Lt. Pieten felt for the first time like having a really good cry. She sat on a rock and hunched over. It had been too long since her last post on the moon. Too many years on Marsbase with a rowdy team of fanatics. Too long since she'd had to read a moonmap. And she now would have to retrace her steps... for she'd read the map upside down.

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"Commander, you're not going to believe this" said Paul Foster in his annoying over-eager voice.

"What is it Paul?" glowered Ed Straker, still fuming over what he'd just heard from Lt. Rodgers.

"Well you know how some security file videos went missing last week? And how so many of our operatives seem to be off duty sick today?"

"Yes, yes, well, what is it- spill it out," Straker demanded. He hated how Paul wouldn't just get to the point more quickly.

"Well when I checked out Lt. Walsh's house, it was full of our 'sick' personnel. And it was the darndest thing. They were all watching one of the missing videos, the ones where you went rampaging around wrecking all the computers a few years back."

Straker wasn't sure whether to laugh or scream. For once he seemed lost for words. Paul grinned widely, enjoying seeing Ed looking totally dumbfounded.

"Security Violation Purple. Security Violation Purple. Marsbase encoder malfunction. Marsbase contact lost."

Straker's jaw actually dropped slightly at the timing of this latest problem, but before he'd finished reaching for the intercom, he was interrupted by a sound that always sent shivers down his spine and caused his stomach muscles to tighten into iron. "Red Alert, Red Alert, incoming UFOs. No warning from SID or Moonbase. UFOs' trajectory originates from the ocean just off London. E.T.A. in 4 minutes. Red Alert, Red Alert."

to be continued...