

Another Computer Affair - A SHADO-MarsBase story

Lieve Peten

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Dedicated to our friend Dave Walsh - may he get better soon!

Note: Two of the Fab-Ufo mailing list members, Dave Walsh and Sheelagh Hathaway, had to be taken to hospital in June. Dave has been on Fab-Ufo for ages and has become a friend. So here's to you, Dave and Sheelagh! I hope you enjoy the story.

"How bad is it?"

Col. Wright looked at General Straker. "They got through MoonBase defences, General, there were just too many of them. Of the 19 UFOs that made it to Earth, ten were destroyed - as were two Sky Ones, one Skydiver and a MoonBase Interceptor. The remaining UFOs scattered and HQ is presently trying to locate them."

A beep sounded and both men looked in the direction of the sound, and saw Gay Ellis' head pop up on the monitor.

Col. Wright hurried over to the console, followed by Gen. Straker and Cmdr. Peten.

"Yes, Gay," he said - the expression on her face told him the news wasn't good.

She hesitated, and her eyes went from him to Cmdr. Peten and the General.

Her voice sounded sad as she said. "We located the MarShuttle, Richard. It must have been shot down just as the attack here started. It was making its final approach and was found directly underneath that path."

"The occupants?" Cmdr. Peten asked, in a cool unemotional voice - but Richard knew this wasn't how she felt. Some of their best friends had been on that shuttle.

"Not a sign of them. The shuttle is intact, apart from a gaping hole on the side. They must have been taken."

"Which UFO was in the area? Any chance of determining its individual signature, separating its signal from the other UFOs, and find out if it was one of those destroyed by Earth defences?" Cmdr. Peten barked.

"We're working on that, Lieve. We'll let you know as soon as we have more information."

"Upload all the relevant data to MarsBase, Gay, maybe our guys here can help. We have a few gadgets installed that MoonBase doesn't have. Or Earth, for that matter."

"I'll get right on it."

Cmdr. Peten nodded a dismissal and Col. Wright shut off the monitor. She looked at him. "Get Lt. Hemmings and Lieutenant D'Alton to work with you on this. I'll expect the three of you to tell me just which UFO took them and just where it was last located on Earth."

"Yes ma'am," Col. Wright said and hurried out, heading for the computer room.

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General Straker picked up the list they had been looking at earlier. He sighed. "Lt.-Col. Walsh, Lt. Sutherland, Lt. McCullough, Lt. Freeman - Alec's son - and Ms Sheelagh Hathaway, the new recruit, were on board."

Cmdr. Peten looked at him. "They weren't killed, they have been taken." She added confidently. "We'll get them back. Somehow. If they weren't on a UFO that was shot down." She turned towards Col. Martin, who had just walked in the control room. "Take over, Marc.

I'll be in my quarters."

Straker watched her walk out and knew quite well she wasn't as confident as she had sounded. But she had always been one to put a good face on things and to make sure morale stayed high.

He glanced at Col. Martin. "If you need me, I'll be with Commander Peten."

Marc nodded and Straker detected the flash of amusement in his eyes as he turned away. Straker shrugged. They all thought something was going on between him and Lieve - this wasn't the time and the place to worry about this. There were more important issues at stake here.

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Straker looked around the computer room and the various people studying the print-outs. The atmosphere was positive, as if they all thought they would manage to rescue the missing operatives. Yet he knew this could not be so, that they knew this might be a lost cause.

He liked staying on MarsBase. Commander Colonel Peten had done a good job - she, and the other high-ranking officers. He had given them a free hand, and the first time he had come here, which was the day MarsBase had become operational, he had been shocked at the friendly atmosphere. Everyone calling everyone by their first names - this was unheard of in a military community. He had taken Lieve to task on that and she had said that since they were shut off from Earth and had to rely on themselves to get things done, it was for the best if they were all friends. She had added that it had been Lt. Wray's suggestion. In the end, their staff psychologist should know what was best for an establishment like this to work.

Straker had been doubtful then, but it had worked very well. MarsBase was a close-knit community full of people who trusted one another and relied on one another.

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"There is no doubt, this is the one," Lt. D'Alton said and put the print-out on the table with a bang.

"Off the New Zealand coast," Lt. Martin said pensively, looking at the print-out dubiously. "What is it doing there?"

Col. Wright glanced at him and pointed at the other print-outs. "Have a look at the other signals, Marc, at the general picture. They are spread around the globe. My guess is they plan to attack simultaneously and each take care of a different region."

Cmdr. Peten nodded. "Sounds about right, Wright."

Richard groaned inwardly. She was always saying this, it had ceased to be funny. But then she was a terrible tease - at least this meant she wasn't feeling too down. Or pretending not to be.

Cmdr. Peten looked at General Straker and sighed. "General - you'll have to order Earth defences not to destroy this UFO but capture it instead."

Straker shook his head. "That may be impossible. If they all attack at once we can't take the risk-"

"They'll have to." She righted her back and said, determined, "That's our men in there, Ed, we have to try and get them back. It's only one UFO - let SHADO HQ get the other eight, one doesn't pose a danger, we can handle it."

Straker hesitated. "How reliable is that method? How sure are you that they are in that particular UFO?"

Cmdr. Peten looked annoyed at his questioning their program, but explained patiently. "Each craft, be it man-made or alien-made, leaves a recognisable ion trail. My men made a

computer program that isolates this trail." She glanced at Richard and went on. "If you want the technical details, ask Marc or Richard. Marc and Dave - Lt.-Col. Walsh - worked out how to recognise the trail, it's one of their 'Special Projects', and Richard and Rob - Lt. Hemmings - made the computer program based on their findings."

"So why doesn't Earth have this system?"

"It's in a test phase still, General," Col. Martin explained. "The reason Dave Walsh went over to MoonBase was to test-run it there. He had the relevant CDs with him - CD roms - we thought it was safer to take the program along physically rather than upload it, in case of a security leak."

A loud beep sounded, then the PA system burped out a staccato 'Red Alert, Red Alert, Red Alert,' and they all rushed to the Control Room.

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Straker looked at the screen anxiously. He had given SHADO HQ and MoonBase the order not to shoot down the New Zealand UFO but to try and capture it instead, be it against his better judgement. MarsBase was tracking the whereabouts of the relevant UFO and he wondered how they could do that from here. Because of the Red Alert, all but the most essential communications between HQ, MoonBase and MarsBase were shut down, surely they couldn't track UFOs in the Earth atmosphere from here?

Straker pulled Col. Martin to the side and asked him softly. "How do you guys track the UFOs? New Zealand is at the far side of Earth at the moment!"

Marc looked uncomfortable. "Just a slight modification," he said hesitantly.

"All but essential communications must be shut down during a Red Alert,"

Straker said sternly. "It's regulations."

"Ah - not really. The regulations talk about military communications only. We're using a private link. Or links, rather."

Straker looked at him questioningly and Marc went on. "We all have our personal computers here with us. Lt. D'Alton devised a way to tap into the Intelsat satellite system and retrieve the relevant information, using our own pcs. In case of an emergency. The whole idea of shutting down communications is for the aliens not to be able to find out what our next moves will be by tapping into our system. Our own pcs are private and contain no vital information regarding eventual tactics. And Intelsat has satellites all around Earth, so there are very few regions that aren't covered."

Straker was puzzled. "Surely, Intelsat doesn't have the necessary equipment? They are satellites for data communications, telephone connections, and up- and downloading TV images."

Col. Martin grinned in an embarrassed manner. "Maybe someone added a little something."

"Without informing me?"

"You said our Special Projects had a free hand, General," Cmdr. Peten's voice said from behind him.

"Yes, but-"

"Earth defences has already shot down five UFOs, General. The others are hightailing it out of there."

"But-"

"We can discuss this later, General," she said coolly. "The UFOs must be our first priority now."

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Richard watched the two beeps which were coming towards Mars. Two UFOs left, one of which had their men on board. He wished the General hadn't been here as this situation developed, they were all going to get into trouble for ignoring regulations, for keeping communications open when they shouldn't, for going behind Straker's back when adding their own technology to the Intelsat satellites.

"Don't worry, Richard," Cmdr. Peten said softly. "It will all work out."

He looked at her hesitantly. "I re-read the rule book, Lieve. It does not exactly specify that the ban on communications is only for the military ones."

"Ah, but that is what they meant to write. It's open for interpretation."

"We could get court-martialled for this."

"Nonsense - they won't find out."

"But Straker knows!"

She grinned. "If all turns out well, he'll keep his mouth shut. Just you wait and see. He wants what's best for SHADO, he has bent regulations before."

"Range a million miles," the artificial-sounding computer-voice of MarSid, the MarsBase Space Intruder Detector, said.

Cmdr. Peten swivelled round and ordered. "MarsCeptors, go. Give it your best shot, boys - we're counting on you!"

Richard kept an eye on the bleep of the MarsCeptor piloted by young Lt. Rorabaugh. Surely that kid was way too young to participate in an official mission? OK, so he was a wizard at flying these things, and he had come out as number one in the simulator, but there was a lot of difference between training sessions and real combat.

"UFOs changing course to 45 dot 7" MarSid announced.

Cmdr. Peten pushed the communications button and said. "Adam - fire a shot two degrees to their North, get them back on course."

The screen showed a flash, denoting this had been done, then MarSid announced. "Ufo's changing course to 41 dot 2."

Cmdr. Peten nodded. "Well-done, Adam - they are back on course. Yuchtar - get that other UFO."

Richard sighed. Another anomaly - Yuchtar wasn't really meant to be an Interceptor pilot either. But then that woman could fly anything. Why did this have to happen at the worst possible time? Three of their Interceptor pilots were down with flu, and one of them had gone on furlough to Earth - so they had needed to take the reserves.

Briefly the detonation flashed on the screen, then there were only five dots left. Yuchtar had done her job.

"One UFO destroyed. One UFO changing course to 31 dot 7," MarSid spat out.

The four MarsCeptors were spreading out, and the solitary dot was flying towards Mars, heading for the far side, away from the MarsCeptors. The UFO would be out of range soon.

"OK, Bernard, your turn now," Cmdr. Peten said.

Suddenly two more dots appeared on the screen, blocking the UFO's path, and Lt. Farkin fired a shot. Richard grimaced - their idea of training all personnel to become proficient at doing the more essential jobs, like flying MarsCeptors, came off. They had turned it into a competition, and had needed to order a third MarsCeptor simulator in consequence. Turn learning into fun, staff psychologist Grant Wray had said, it will be to our benefit. He had been right. In the end, there was little else to do on

Mars but sit in the MarsBar or go have some fun in the MarsCeptor simulators. He himself had never scored high with the MarsCeptors, but then his main interest was computers - and keeping a tight eye on security, which should be his number one - after all, it was his job.

The UFO now veered away from the two dots, and steered a middle course to keep away from both groups of MarsCeptors. It was heading straight for Mars now, and MarSid announced: "UFO changing course to 37 dot 5."

Cmdr. Peten barked a series of commands, and the resulting detonations forced the UFO to land on Mars.

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A very pensive Straker watched Lt.-Col Rorabaugh scrubbing, she was getting ready to operate. He was trying to make up his mind what to attribute their success to. The UFO had landed on Mars, and the MarsBuggies had been there within minutes. Was this pure chance, or had the MarsBase personnel foreseen where it would land? The aliens had been groggy still and had been easily overpowered by the MarsBase operatives. Neither of them had made it to MarsBase alive though, the rapid ageing process had prevented this.

He decided not to watch the preparations for the operation but check on the other rescued operatives, so he walked to the recovery rooms.

Lt. McCullough and Lt. Freeman were sitting up, relating their experiences to a few of the other personnel which were scattered around the room. They fell silent as they saw Straker enter.

"Paul, Chris - how are you doing?"

"We're fine - we'll be out of here tomorrow," Chris said.

"What's the news on Dave?" Paul asked, worried.

"Deborah will start operating in a few minutes."

After listening to their conversation for a few more minutes, he wandered off and went into the next room. A few of the MarsBase personnel were sitting around, listening to Lt. Sutherland describe how she had told the aliens they were scum and how she was sure they had understood what she was saying. Their newest recruit, Lt. Hathaway, was silent, she looked as if she was in pain.

"Sheelagh, how is the back?"

She grimaced. "I'll be all right."

"Suzanne?"

Lt. Sutherland smiled at him. "Never better - it takes more than an alien abduction to get me down! Sheelagh was lucky - they were about to remove her kidneys when the battle started. They had made an incision in her back already, then they rushed out. We put a bandage on, she had lost some blood but nothing vital." Her face became grave as she went on. "Dave Walsh, now that is a different matter. We couldn't see what they were doing to him, and he was unconscious by the time they left us to our own devices. I hear they removed his pancreas?"

Straker nodded. "He lost an awful lot of blood too. It'll be touch and go."

"If it hadn't been for Chris being able to undo his bonds and free us, Dave would have bled to death."

Straker nodded again, then decided he would go and watch the operation, it was bound to have started by now.

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Straker looked through the window - the operating theatre looked bland and harsh. Lt.

Rorabaugh's plastic-gloved bloodstained hands were busy sewing - had they managed to put Dave's pancreas back in already?

"Clamp," she said, and Lieve deftly moved in with the utensil Deborah had asked for. He couldn't hear the whispered conversation, nor did he really want to see all that blood, so he looked away.

He sighed - what was he going to do about that woman? He had made her the MarsBase Commander because she had always shown a lot of initiative and also because he felt a lot safer with her at a distance. He had been afraid of making a fool of himself and this way they could keep their relationship on a business-like level. Most of the time. He had known she would do well as commander, she had the right attitude to make loyal operatives of the people she worked with. This was yet another example. The flu outbreak meant they were short on medical staff, so she had chipped in to help. This was so typical of her!

There was no way he could reprimand her for going behind his back and meddle with the Intelsat satellites - or encourage communications with Earth in a Red Alert situation. The whole of MarsBase would rebel if he punished her, he was sure of it.

Earlier, he had asked Col. Wright who exactly had been responsible for the alterations of the Intelsat satellites, and for building the links of their private computers, and Richard had stated firmly 'all of us, Sir' - which probably meant if he punished Lieve, he would have to punish the other MarsBase operatives too.

He heard laughter and looked back inside the theatre. It looked like the operation was over and... Dave's eyes were open!

Straker rushed inside and was met by a bright smile from Lieve. "Deborah did a great job, General. She managed to patch Dave up."

Dave felt the white bandage tentatively and said jokingly. "Well, I'm glad you decided the aliens couldn't have any of what is legally mine. Are you sure there is nothing missing now?"

"I am sure," Deborah stated, then she looked worried suddenly. "Oh dear, where is that scalpel?"

Cmdr. Peten looked around. "I don't know."

Deborah shook her head and sighed. "I must have left it inside."

"What!" Dave exclaimed, horrified.

Deborah roared with laughter. "Inside my pocket, silly."

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Straker looked at Cmdr. Peten. She smiled at him and said. "Well, have you decided what you're going to do about my ignoring regulations - again?"

Straker's eyes narrowed. "Earlier you said you didn't."

"That was for the benefit of the others. That's what I told them - I didn't want to get them into trouble. The responsibility is mine."

Straker knew quite well this couldn't be true - they were all aware of regulations, and if they weren't they should be. Still, she was in command, in the end it had been her call, not theirs.

"Right, Commander," he said in his official voice, "I cannot let this go by - you've bent the regulations before, it's time this stopped."

She looked worried now, so he threw her a brilliant smile as he went on amicably. "I've decided against telling the Astrophysical Commission about this, and if it should come out, I'll take full responsibility. After all, what your team did was to the benefit of SHADO. You will be punished, however."

Her initial smile dwindled. "How?"

He grinned. "Since Dave is still on the sick list, you'll have to take over from him and fry the meat at tomorrow's MarsBarbecue. And make sure my steak isn't overcooked, do you hear? And I like the pork chops fried long but not too hard."

She grinned, then gave him a military salute. "Of course, Sir, your wish is my command. What shall I do with your sausage, Sir?"