

UFO - Dragon Slayer

by Jeff Warshaw

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1. snowblind-12 dec. 1971

Katya trudged through the deep snow, trying to keep up with her father, Ivan Ulianov. Ivan was a huge bear of a man. He even looked like a polar bear in his snow-dusted coat and hat.

"Come on, Katya!" he called. "Look, here's the snow dragon's lair!"

Katya really believed in the snow dragons. Her father told wonderful stories of how they hid in deep snow caves, only coming out at night, when no one could see them unfurl their leathery white wings. When you could see your breath, that was really a snow dragon breathing behind you. Katya ran. She wanted to see the snow dragon's lair.

As her tiny feet staggered through the thickly packed snow, she heard the strangest noise. It sounded like the "puff-puff" noises the air tank in her aquarium made, with a sloshy, watery sound added. Looking up, she saw a big silver balloon floating down from the sky.

"Look, Daddy!" she cried. "A balloon! Catch it for me!"

Her father gazed up at the bright silver ball. It was cone-shaped, and had a blinking green light on top, like the clown cars at the Moscow Circus.

"Stay here, Katuska," he said. "Stay back. It looks like it's landing!"

Snow swirled around the balloon as it slowly rotated, spinning like a giant top. It settled into the snow. Katya's eyes opened in wonder. It was the largest, most wonderful balloon she'd ever seen.

"I want to see the balloon!" she cried, tugging at Ivan's coat. "Please, Daddy, carry me to see the balloon."

"No, Katya," Ivan replied, his voice suddenly stern. "Stay here. I will go and see if it's safe. Then I'll come back for you."

"It's just a balloon," Katya insisted. "How could it be unsafe?"

"Just promise me you'll stay right here," Ivan said, fixing her with his steely blue eyes. "Promise me you won't move from this spot until I come back."

"I'll stay," Katya promised. "But hurry, Daddy. I want to see the balloon!"

Ivan stomped his boots and walked through the woods towards the silver top. Halfway there, Katya saw the clowns come out. She knew they were clowns because they wore silly red uniforms with chains and diving helmets. They waved at Ivan with their silver gloves, and he went over to talk to them. They held his armpits and pulled him into their balloon. Then the balloon started to spin again, shooting columns of snow all around. The swirling snow blinded Katya. She could not see the balloon rising into the heavens in the bright morning sun.

When her eyes cleared again, the balloon was gone, as was her father.

She shivered as the sun set, tears streaming down her young face. Where was Daddy?

Why had he gone off with the clowns, and when was he coming back. She had promised him she wouldn't budge from this spot. She knew he would be angry with her if she disobeyed him, so she stayed put. But she was hungry and cold and frightened. Where was he?

Two hours later, near eight o'clock, her Uncle Vladimir had found her shivering and weeping by the snow bank.

"Katya, where is your father?" he said as he hoisted her onto his massive shoulders. "Where has he gone?"

* * *

She told him the story about the magic balloon, and the clowns in the red suits, silver chains and diving helmets, but her Uncle told her it was just a dream she'd had. She knew it wasn't a dream.

"Where is he?" her mother screamed. Her face was redder than the Borscht she'd made for Easter. "Who did he run off with this time, the blonde, or the brunette?"

"I told you," Katya wept. "The clowns took him up in the sky in their balloon."

"Enough childish fairy tales!" her mother hollered. "Which one of his trollops is he shacking up with? Magda? Elena? That fat-titted milk maid from Mr. Koreshnikov's farm? Tell me, you little bitch!"

Katya told her story over and over, which only resulted in a severe spanking and no supper. She'd tried to run away the next day, but Uncle Vladimir found her.

"It's not your fault, little angel," he'd said, kissing her forehead. "Your mother has had a rough life and your father? Well, he has not always been the best husband."

"But I told the truth," Katya protested, stamping her feet angrily. "Nobody believes me. But I told what happened. He's with the clowns in the balloon!"

"Of course he is darling," Vladimir said. "Of course he is."

II. Dragon slayer

24 January, 2000

Katya heard her mother's harsh, accusing tones ringing in her ears. Forty years of hard drudgery and a philandering husband envenomed every word as she accused her daughter of concealing Ivan's whereabouts. Then the voice changed. It was speaking English in urgent tones. Major Katya Ulianov sat bolt upright. The echoing voice was Commander Gay Ellis. She was speaking into the tannoy system, repeating words Katya had heard many times before: "Interceptors, immediate launch! Repeat, immediate launch!"

Katya pulled the blue and white flight suit over her long, lean legs. She zippered the tight outfit over her breasts and pulled on her white helmet. Gloves helped keep out the absolute cold of space. She ran to Launch Bay Three where her mount, Interceptor 12 waited. Today was no ordinary UFO intercept mission. Today was the test of a weapon system that could change the whole course of the conflict.

"Hi, Blondie!" Tom Harris smiled. The handsome American Interceptor pilot waved as Katya ran to her launch tube. "Good luck out there."

"I'll need it," Katya frowned. "Even Straker himself will be watching me today."

"Go get 'em, tiger!" Tom said, giving her a thumbs up as he threw his feet up and slid down his own tube.

"That's tigrass," she replied when he was gone. "More jungle cat than you can handle, Lieutenant."

"This is Space Intruder Detector Two," SID 2 spoke. "I have UFOs on positive track, area Green 152, speed, SOL Decimal 8 and dropping."

"Confirmed, SID 2," Katya said from the cockpit of Interceptor 12. She depressed a red button on her left-side console. The nose cone of her missile split in half, revealing its deadly surprise. Inside was the new Mark VII multiple rocket launcher, a spinning "gatling gun" pod with nine mini-missiles. Each had long range capacity and a small nuclear warhead.

Katya tapped information into her onboard computer.

"Programming missile firing sequence," she said. "Missiles One, Two and Three receiving telemetry from SID 2 onboard computer."

She watched her HUD display as numbers rolled by.

"Timing locked in and set," she spoke into her throat mike. "Preparing long-range firing test. I have UFOs on deep radar, but no visual sighting. Distance, 30,000 kilometers."

Interceptor 12 shuddered, and the red dart of Missile One streaked silently away.

"Missile One fired," Katya said, sweeping hair out of her eyes. "Telemetry positive. Impact in one minute, 14 seconds."

Two seconds later, the Interceptor jolted again, as Missile Two, guided by an advanced Utronics radar designed by Col. Virginia Lake locked onto its target. Missile Three followed a minute later. Now all Katya could do was sit and wait for the results.

"All three missiles, positive launch," Katya reported.

"Confirmed," Gay Ellis's pleasant voice replied from Moonbase. "We have missiles on positive track. Awaiting result from SID 3."

A tense two minutes passed. Katya did not see the bright flashes of the hyper-light speed missiles, or the explosion of their targets. But she somehow knew they'd hit. Ten seconds later, SID 3 confirmed her intuition.

"This is Space Intruder Detector Three," the satellite AI spoke. "Destruct positive. All three UFOs destroyed at 25,000 kilometers."

A huge cheer screeched in Katya's helmet.

"Congratulations, Major Ulianov," Commander Ellis said over the video link. "Return to base."

"Affirmative," Katya said, firing her retrorockets. She began to head back to her crater-based hanger, when her head throbbed painfully. She grabbed her temples, temporarily blinded.

This was no time to get a migraine! She couldn't pilot the Interceptor blind!

"Dragons in the dark," a gruff, Russian voice echoed. "Dragons in the dark, Katushkya. Slay them. Slay the dragons in the dark!"

It was impossible, but it was Ivan Ulianov's voice. It was speaking directly into her brain. She turned Interceptor 12 back towards deep space.

"This is Interceptor 12 to Moonbase," she reported, her voice sounding distant and hollow. "I have radar track on three additional UFOs. Request confirmation, Grid 225 Blue, Sol 7 and decelerating."

"Major Ulianov?" Commander Ellis called. "We do not have confirmation. Return to base. Repeat, return to base."

"They're out there, Gay," she replied. "I can feel them. They're using some kind of cloaking technology. A darkness shield of some kind. I'm setting missiles Four, Five and Six to intercept."

"Negative!" Ellis's voice called. "Do not launch! Repeat, do not launch those missiles, Major! Return to Moonbase immediately."

Katya was no longer in control of her body. Something had a hold of her, and wouldn't let go. She tried to turn Interceptor 12 back towards Moonbase, but her hands wouldn't move. A bright blue diamond appeared on her forehead, right between her eyes. She fed information into the firing computers, her hands moving at impossible speed.

"Missile timing commenced," she said with someone else's voice. "Missile Four launch in three, two, one!"

The hyper-light missile lanced out into the darkness.

"Major!" Commander Ellis was screaming. "Major Ulianov, do you read me? Interceptor 12, do you read me?"

"Missile Five launch in five, four, three, two, one," Katya's eerie, zombie-like tones replied. "Missile Six in three, two, one, fire!"

"Moonbase to Major Ulianov, do you read me?" Joan Harrington called. "Interceptor 12, do you read me?"

Two tense minutes passed. Katya heard the voices of Ellis, Harrington, and Nina Barry calling for her return, but she couldn't force her hands to hit the intercom switch.

"This is Space Intruder Detector 3," SID 3 spoke. "Missile detonation positive. Radiation signature of debris indicates destruction of three undetected UFOs. Repeat, destruction of three additional UFOs confirmed."

Katya snapped out of her fugue, confused, head throbbing with pain. Where was she? What had happened. She hit the intercom.

"This is Interceptor 12," she said weakly. "Returning to base."

* * *

Commander Ellis, Commander Straker and Colonel Virginia Lake stared down at her.

Ellis looked genuinely concerned. Straker looked mad enough to kill her. The lovely Colonel Lake retained her blonde ice-goddess persona, her face showing neither emotion nor concern, but rather a distant curiosity.

"What happened out there, Major?" Commander Straker asked. "How did you detect those three stealthed UFOs?"

"I don't remember," Katya repeated. "Something---took control of me. I couldn't turn the Interceptor around. My hands wouldn't move. I--I'm sorry I disobeyed orders."

"Never mind that," Straker replied. "We're dealing with a new and frightening prospect. UFO's even the SIDs can't detect. Yet somehow, you did. Not only did you detect them, you knew the exact timing for the hyper-missiles."

"I can't explain that, Commander," the exhausted woman replied. She'd been hit by a massive migraine the moment she'd landed Interceptor 12.

Straker frowned. He looked at her medical chart.

"Doctor Harker, is she well enough to come back to Earth with me?" Straker inquired of the Moonbase head surgeon.

"I don't see why not," the gray-haired man said. "Her migraine will pass in a matter of hours."

"Good," Straker said. "If you don't mind, Major, I'd like Dr. Jackson to give you a full psychological workup. Oh, one other thing, Major. Have you ever been tested for ESP?"

"Yes," Katya replied. "I failed even the most basic tests. I have no psi powers whatsoever."

"That's what worries me," Straker said. He glanced at Colonel Lake and smiled. "Congratulations, Virginia. Your system works even better than expected."

"Thank you, Commander," Colonel said. She had a beautiful smile, Katya thought. She would never admit it, but like half the SHADO personnel, she had a bit of a crush on the icy blonde beauty. She'd hardly aged a day in twenty years. Part of it was the new anti-aging drugs, and she kept her figure through a strict exercise regimen, but part of it was just Virginia Lake.

"Oh, and Major?" Straker added. "You'll be pleased to hear Commander Ellis has put you in for a pay raise and a Distinguished Combat Cross."

* * *

Ed Straker stared out at empty space as the lunar module drifted towards Earth orbit insertion. It had been a long twenty years. In the beginning, it had been a struggle just to survive. He'd had to fight General Henderson for every penny, and the personnel losses had been staggering. A lot had changed. Moonbase was three times the size it had been. It was getting hard to keep it a secret, even on the dark side. Last year alone, NASA'd had to budget two million dollars to doctoring lunar surface photos from space telescopes and probes. The SkyDiver fleet had likewise expanded, but they were now protected by stealth shielding, and could operate with relative impunity. And now they had the multi-rocket Interceptors and a mystery. Straker hated mysteries.

"You're awfully quite, Commander," Virginia Lake said, touching Ed's arm. "Contemplating your navel?"

"Just thinking about those stealth UFOs," Straker said. Colonel Lake had been a good friend. Her stalwart good nature had somehow gotten him through the ups and downs of the past 20 years. Especially after Alec Freeman's death. Senseless. It wasn't even the aliens. It was a stupid car crash on the M5 motorway. Drunk driver, veered into the wrong lane--bam!

Scratch one Security Chief and best friend.

"Don't think too hard, Ed," Colonel Lake advised. "You'll fracture something up there!"

* * *

"I have to know how she spotted them," Ed said. "It could mean the difference between winning this war and losing it."

"Well, I'm sure Dr. Jackson will figure it out," Virginia smiled. "He always does."

"I hope so," Straker said. "I really hope so."

"I do not understand it," Dr. Jackson said. He folded his gaunt hands behind his back. "All of her psychological tests are one hundred percent normal. And it's as she told you. She has no ESP whatsoever."

"Damn it, Jackson!" Straker fumed. "Something happened up there. Not just to anybody, to the pilot of the newest, most-advanced weapon we've got. My best Interceptor pilot shot down three UFOs SID missed, and she doesn't know how she did it."

"Well, you have the cockpit computer data," Jackson replied. "She does admit to getting migraines. Memory lapses are not uncommon with migraines."

"What are you saying?" Straker said, reviewing Jackson's computer notepad reports. "That she punched in a set of precise trigonometric calculations, calculations requiring an advanced knowledge of astrophysics and fluid dynamics, and she just forgot them because her head hurt? I don't buy it, Jackson! There's got to be some other explanation."

"Dragons," Jackson smiled enigmatically. Straker had come to hate that smile. It usually meant Jackson was thinking something horrible. He was about to begin another sentence with those dreaded words "I have a theory."

"What?" Straker said. "What are you talking about, Jackson?"

Jackson sat down at his computer console and tapped a stylus on the desktop.

"When I asked Major Ulianov what she'd seen just before she blacked out," Jackson said. "She said she saw dragons. Dragons in the dark. She heard a voice telling her to slay the dragons, and then she saw the missiles firing from Interceptor 12."

"Are you saying she was hypnotized?" Ed said. Hypnosis had played a key part in their battle with the aliens. The aliens often used hypnosis to turn ordinary citizens into their unwitting agents.

"Not exactly," Dr. Jackson said. He tapped a file. "Read this."

He slid the file over to Straker.

"This is a missing persons report," Straker said. "Ivan Ulianov. Yes, I know all this. We knew this when we recruited her. Her father was abducted by a UFO in 1971 in Siberia."

"They were playing a game," Jackson replied. "She told me. Before the UFO came, she and her father were playing a game. Hunting snow dragons."

"Dr. Jackson, is it possible to get a straight answer from you?" Straker said, throwing back the folder.

"You know psychology is not a precise science, Commander," Dr. Jackson said. "Many of our theories are just that, theories. We have no instruments to measure how the mind works, or why one person goes in Door A, another Door B."

"But you do have a theory?" Ed offered. He needed an aspirin.

"Yes," Jackson replied. "You recall what happened to your friend, Craig Collins?"

"Of course," Straker said. "Tragic loss."

"Yes," Jackson nodded sadly. "But he didn't kill you when he had the chance. Why?"

"Because part of him was still my friend," Ed said. "The aliens couldn't burn that out of

him."

"Precisely," Jackson countered. "He had a strong will. Stronger than even the aliens' surgery and brainwashing techniques could subdue. Suppose Ivan Ulianov had a similarly strong will?"

"Are you saying he's still alive?" Straker said, his mind racing.

"Well, we know the aliens can preserve life," Jackson said. "Even suspend aging, as they did with Miss Fraser. Perhaps they kept Katya's father alive as well. Until now."

"What do you mean?" Straker asked.

"It's only a theory," Jackson said. "But I think he was the one with ESP, not Katya. I think he somehow communicated with her. I think---he was on one of those hidden UFOs."

"My god!" Straker said. "Have told any of this to her?"

"No," Jackson said. "It would only upset her. As I said, it's only a theory. I can't prove a word of it."

* * *

Katya was restless. She wanted to return to duty. Sitting around while various SHADO doctors probed her and prodded her wasn't her idea of serving the organization. Over the past ten days, she'd tried to make sense of her experience, without success. All she knew was that it happened, not why or how. Somehow, part of her mind had sensed the presence of those three stealthed UFOs, and set the missile launcher to destroy them. It was as much an anomaly to her as to Straker, Commander Ellis, Paul Foster and everyone else who'd interviewed her.

Finally, her video link rang. Ed Straker's face appeared on the monitor.

"Major Ulianov, I want you back on Moonbase," Straker replied. "Your flight leaves tomorrow at 5:45 a.m."

"Thank you, Commander," she said, combing a hand through her long, honey-blond locks.

"Oh, and Major?" Straker added. "I'd like you to know you'll be Squadron Leader of four new Interceptors, as soon as the missile launchers are installed. Interceptor 12 is yours. I don't want anyone else flying her. Is that clear?"

"As glass, Commander," Katya replied.

She was already packed.

III. Legend

4-7 march 2000

A week after Katya returned to active duty, it happened again. She was on a routine patrol, when she felt dizzy and disoriented.

"Dragons in the dark," her father's deep baritone called. "Dragons, Katya. Slay them. Hurry."

"Moonbase, this is Interceptor 12," she called. "It's happening again. I'm detecting six UFOs, Blue 412, speed, Sol 8 and closing at 45,000 kilometers lunar azimuth 998.841."

"We do not confirm," Commander Ellis said. "But you have permission to pursue and destroy. Repeat, pursue and destroy. Interceptor 13 ETA twelve minutes to your current location."

"Setting missile firing sequence," Katya said, feeling a million miles distant. Her hands moved at lightning speed, entering the complex calculations into the onboard computer. "Firing sequence confirmed."

The missiles streaked away into the deep darkness.

"This is Space Intruder Detector 3," the satellite reported. "Confirm detonation. Six UFOs destroyed."

By the time she got back to the fighter bay, she was a legend.

"Look," Tom Harris said. "It's the dragon slayer! All hail the dragon slayer!"

The other Interceptor pilots, male and female, clapped and hooted, and carried her on their shoulders to the mess receptacle for a night of drinking and dancing. In the morning she found herself entangled in her sheets between two pretty brunettes and a redhead. But it got old quickly, and she came to loathe the notoriety.

"Listen, Tom," she said to the American over morning coffee. "I want you to stop calling me the 'Dragon Slayer.'"

"Why?" he asked. "It's tremendous for morale. UFO kills have increased tenfold since your last incident."

"It's embarrassing," Katya said. "People think I'm some kind of little tin hero. I'm just a pilot doing my job."

"No," Tom scowled. "I won't let you denigrate your accomplishments like that. If you want me to stop calling you 'Dragon Slayer,' I will. But you're the best damned Interceptor pilot we've got. I'm just a pilot doing his job. You're a goddamn quadruple ace!"

"This is a serious organization," Major Ulianov replied. "We're not in this for fun. We have a new technology, but so do the aliens. Somehow, I don't know how, I'm able to detect those shielded ships. But they'll think of some new twist, trust me. Then we'll need pilots like you, not flukes of nature."

"Nice speech," Tom said, clapping her on the shoulder. "But I don't buy it."

He walked out, seeming a bit pissed off.

IV. Betrayal

8 march 2000

"Dragons in the dark," the voice called as Katya slept. "Dragons. A whole wing of them, Katya! Hurry!"

She slid out of bed and hit the red alert siren.

"What is it, Major?" Colonel Harrington asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"I think there's a mass attack underway," Katya replied. "I just had another dream. I heard my father's voice. I think---there may be fifty of them. Their target is Moonbase."

"Red Alert!" the sirens screamed. "All Interceptor crews to launch bays! Interceptors One to 22, Immediate Launch! Repeat, all Interceptors, immediate launch!"

The base was a mass of scrambling feet. The lunar defense system activated, laser cannon rising from craters, ready to flame any UFOs that made it through the gauntlet of Interceptors. Remote controlled rocket launchers rolled across the lunar surface to form a cordon around the ring-shaped base.

"What's going on up there?" Ed Straker asked over the Earth link.

"Major Ulianov reports there's going to be a massed attack," Commander Ellis said, adjusting her purple wig slightly.

"Are the new Interceptors ready?" Straker demanded.

"Affirmative," Ellis replied. "They're being armed as we speak."

"Good," Straker said. "Keep me informed the minute you have confirmation."

"Will do," Ellis smiled. There were some SHADO personnel who thought she and Straker were an "item," but it wasn't true. They were just good friends. He'd helped her fight the rampant sexism of the sixties and seventies and rise to the rank of Moonbase Commander after Paul Foster was promoted to Head of Security. Not that he wasn't still a handsome man, even in his late fifties.

* * *

The Interceptors formed a defensive cordon around the moon, arranged in orbits Katya's mysterious voice had given her. They sat and waited for the firing commands. The newly equipped Interceptors, Number 12, 13, 14 and 15 sat in a Delta V shape, the vanguard of the attack force.

Katya waited for the mysterious force to take over, to feed programming commands into her brain. But the voice didn't come. After twelve hours of waiting, Commander Ellis cancelled the alert.

"All Interceptors, return to base," Commander Ellis ordered. "Repeat, all Interceptors, return to base. Red Alert is cancelled."

The ships around her peeled off, but Katya waited a few minutes before hitting her retrorockets.

"Daddy, where are the dragons?" she thought. "You said they'd be here. Where are they? Where are you, Daddy?"

There was no response from the void.

"Interceptor 12, return to base," Commander Ellis's voice echoed in her headset.

"Affirmative," she said sadly. "Interceptor 12 returning as ordered. I'm sorry, Commander. I was so certain."

"Don't worry about it," Gay Ellis smiled. "We needed a Class One drill, and now we've

had one. Come on home, Katya."

"See you in a few," Katya replied, turning her Interceptor back towards the gray surface of the moon.

"Katya," the voice called, odd, distant. "One more dragon. A snow dragon."

"No," she thought. "I can't trust you. It's an alien trick. You're dead, Daddy. They killed you. They kill everyone they take. You're not Daddy anymore."

"One more dragon," his weary voice cried. "Then they'll let me rest."

"This is Space Intruder Detector 4, " the new SID replied. "I have positive track on one Stealth Shielded UFO. Its target is Interceptor 12. Range, 400 meters and closing, speed SOL 7.4."

She tried to turn the ship around, but it was too late. The particle beams vaporized Interceptor 12 as the stealth UFO passed her.

A few seconds later, the UFO exploded. It had completed its suicide mission. Ivan Ulianov was finally at rest.

The End