



## Double-Double

Written by Deborah Rorabaugh

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"You've been practicing," Ed Straker complained. He was losing the handball game to Alec Freeman. He didn't like losing, to anyone.

"I've been coming out here a couple times a week with Paul," Freeman explained as he hit the little white ball. It bounced off the concrete wall.

"Fraser's been on your case, too?" Straker hit the ball back.

"Of course. We're the only ones he can't get out to the research center for checkups."

Straker was aware that SHADO's medical staff had been pestering the senior officers to take better care of themselves, especially SHADO's C-in-C. He had been back at work less than a month after three weeks in the hospital, then a month medical leave. He still wasn't fully recovered physically. Both Doctors Frazer and Jackson continued to worry about unforeseen complications.

Straker found their concern both amusing and annoying. Except for tiring too easily, he felt fine.

"I've been out to the research center once, already," Straker reminded his friend. "That was enough."

"That was with Jackson," Freeman argued. "It doesn't count."

Freeman hit the ball hard and rebounded toward the left. Straker made a lunge after it, before it went out of bounds. He slipped and went into the concrete wall, twisting as he fell.

"Ed, are you okay?" Freeman asked. He ran over to where Straker had fallen to the wood floor.

"Yeah," Straker mumbled, pushing himself up to sit with his back against the wall. He rubbed his left shoulder and winced.

"Maybe we should go back to work and have somebody look at it," Freeman suggested.

Straker shook his head. "No, I'm fine. It's just bruised."

Freeman frowned, unconvinced.

"If it gets bad, I'll have one of the medics check it, okay?" Straker promised. Freeman grabbed his right hand and helped him back to his feet.

"Are you gonna' be able to drive home?" Freeman asked.

Straker cradled his arm against his chest. It hurt to move. He was angry with himself for being so clumsy.

"I'll drive you home," Freeman said. "You can have somebody pick your car up in the morning."

\* \* \*

It was already dark as Freeman's Saab sped down the road the tree lined country road that led to Straker's house.

"When will you have the analysis of last month's mess to me?" Straker asked.

"When I get back from Moonbase inspection," Freeman answered. "Everything's ready. I just want to make sure I've written it in English, after reading all those reports in Russian."

"Okay," Straker said. "The shuttle leaves, at what, six?"

Freeman nodded. "When does Paul get back from cleaning up that problem in China?"

"Monday," Straker answered. "About the same time you'll be getting back from Moonbase, I expect. By the way, Kate's planning Esther's birthday party for next Saturday and she's expecting you to be there."

Freeman started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"You. Who'd've thought three months ago, you'd be worried about a birthday party for a five-year-old."

"Who'd've thought three months ago, I'd be living with a five-year-old?"

Freeman shook his head, still grinning. "What does Short Stuff want for her birthday?"

"Oh, the usual, I expect. Stuffed toys, Barbie doll stuff, toy planes and guns."

Freeman laughed again. "Toy planes and guns? I see she takes after you. It's easier with big girls, you know. Flowers, candy and dinner usually handles it."

"Kate prefers books to candy and her flowers better come in a pot."

"Well, I always knew she was strange. After all, she agreed to live with you."

Straker smiled. The past two months were among the happiest he could remember. Even though officially, it had been a medical leave, he'd had his first real vacation in more than ten years. SHADO was functioning without any major problems besides the cleanup after the mass UFO attack a month before. The mother of his child agreed to try to work things out and had moved in with him.

It was a dream, too good to last.

"She's good for you," Freeman said. "It shows."

Straker gave him a curious look. "Oh?"

"There've been days recently some of us actually think you might be a human being after all," Freeman said. His grin grew even wider.

"Can't have anyone thinking that." Straker laughed. "It'll ruin my carefully cultivated image as an ogre."

Freeman's car stopped in front of Straker's small cottage, fifteen miles north of Harlington-Straker Studios, twenty-five miles north of London. A dark blue Mercedes wagon was parked by the side of the house.

Straker climbed out of the car. His shoulder was starting to stiffen up and his left hand had an annoying pins and needles feeling. By morning, he would have a beautiful bruise.

He swore at himself again for agreeing to play handball with Freeman in the first place. He knew better. In all the years he'd known the Australian, he'd never beaten him at anything involving large muscle coordination.

"You're sure you're all right?" Freeman asked.

"Yes," Straker said. "Just remind me to stick to jogging from now on. It's safer."

"Joggers get run over by cars. Whoever heard of getting run over by a wall?"

"Very funny," Straker grouched. "I expect to see that report when you get back."

"You'll have it," Freeman promised. "Give my love to Kate and tell her I promise to make it to Esther's party."

Straker nodded. He shut the car door and headed for the front door of the flat. He noted that Freeman waited until he had the door open before driving off. That was like Alec, watching out for other people.

Straker had been joking about cultivating a monster image. However, he knew many people, especially within SHADO, considered their commanding officer to be cold, hard, even ruthless in the cause of SHADO - Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization. Sometimes his duties needed him to give orders that seemed heartless. He took SHADO's mission very seriously: defend an unsuspecting Earth against a horrific invasion from the stars.

Freeman, on the other hand, was warmer, more likeable, more approachable. He was a good chief of staff for SHADO - the velvet glove as opposed to Straker's iron hand. They made a good team, keeping SHADO in running order for the past twelve years.

Freeman was also a good friend. Although Straker had many acquaintances, he had to admit, there were only a handful of people he could call friends.

\* \* \*

Elizabeth Kathryn Komack woke with a start. In the dim light of the bedroom she could see her lover's face contort in psychic agony. His upper lip and forehead were beaded with sweat.

He was having a nightmare, the second one in less than a week. She reached out and touched him. He shuddered and opened his eyes, jaw clenched to keep from crying out.

"Ed?" She watched as he relaxed, finally coming awake. "You were having a nightmare."

"Yes."

"The usual one?"

"No," he said, running a hand through his blond hair. "It was different. It was about Alec. He was lost and I couldn't find him."

"Lost how?" she asked, keeping her voice low. Esther was asleep in the other bedroom.

"I don't remember."

Komack glanced at the clock on shelf above the headboard. Five-thirty.

"I know that look," Straker said. "You want to check on Alec."

"I'm just a little worried," Komack admitted. "But he's already at the air field. It'd be a little silly to call him there."

"I don't know who worries more, you or him," Straker chided. "It was just a bad dream, that's all." He reached out and caressed her long auburn hair, curling it around his fingers. She snuggled into him, tracing the fading scars on his body with one finger, letting him pull her even closer.

He kissed her. She could feel the soft roughness of his beard against her lips, the warmth of his naked skin against hers. He smelled of fading cologne, maleness, fresh sweat.

He came at her urgently, hungrily. It was as if, by affirming his aliveness, he could dispel the specters of death that haunted his dreams. His hands hunted across her skin. She molded her body to his, arching up to meet him, matching her need to his.

Afterwards, he laid back, a pensive, faraway look on his face.

"A penny for your thoughts," Komack offered. She ruffled the sparse patch of hair that grew along his breastbone.

"You'd be wasting your money," Straker said. "I was just thinking how quickly I've gotten used to having somebody around. And how much I'd miss you if you went away."

"I'm not planning on going anywhere," Komack said with a little laugh.

"I know," he said. "But, it's funny, how nice this feels. Living with Mary was never this comfortable."

"Comfortable? Old shoes are comfortable." Komack grinned at him.

"You bear no resemblance at all to an old shoe." He smiled and caressed her cheek. The smile faded and a worried shadow fell over his face. "Alec thinks you're good for me. I think he's right. Promise me you won't leave me."

She propped herself on one elbow. "I told you, I wasn't planning on going anywhere."

The worried look didn't fade.

"That nightmare must have been a beaut. Want to talk about it?"

He shook his head, but his expression didn't change. She wished he would talk about his nightmares, what was troubling him. But, he was stuck with the American male ethos of suffering in silence. Even SHADO's psychiatric staff had trouble getting him to talk to them.

"Okay, if it will make you feel better," she said. "I promise not to leave, so long as you promise to remember I'm not military and I don't take orders at all well."

He finally smiled again. "That's an easy one. You've never taken orders from me before. I figure it's a little late to start now."

She kissed him, then looked at the clock and made a face. "I guess I'll make coffee while you get cleaned up."

"That sounds reasonable to me," he told her, getting out of the warm bed. He flexed his bruised shoulder and winced. "It wasn't hurting before. Why now?"

"Maybe you were too busy to notice?"

"I can't imagine why."

She threw a pillow at him. He didn't move quite fast enough and it hit him on his naked backside.

\* \* \*

It was a beautiful late fall morning. The air was cold and clear, the sky, a deep, cloudless delft blue. The maple and birch trees along the road had surrendered their leaves to the winter, opening the view almost to the main road. The frost made the ground crackle beneath their feet.

Esther was chattering inanities to her Barbie doll as she climbed into the backseat of the car. Her mother checked her seatbelt and locked the rear door.

Straker opened the front passenger's door with his own key. He didn't like being a passenger, but it was her car. She grinned at him as she walked around to the driver's side of the Mercedes. Suddenly, she stopped and looked around, smile fading from her lips.

"Something wrong?" Straker asked.

"I'm not sure," Komack admitted. "I thought I saw something over by the trees, behind the rhododendrons."

Straker looked over at the area she nodded to.

"I don't see anything there now," he said.

"It's probably nothing. Your nightmares are giving me day-mares," she said, climbing into the Mercedes.

Straker took another moment to look around the area. The large bushes were outside the property line. The perimeter alarm system wouldn't pick up anything out there. He filed the incident in his mind, telling himself to have SHADO security check the alarm system, just in case.

Straker didn't pay a lot of attention to the beige sedan off to the side of the road.

"You know," Komack said. "There's an actor on that new Anderson series on B and C stages, who sounds so much like you it's bizarre."

"Really?" Straker commented. "What's his name?"

"Ed," she answered. "King, or Knight, or something like that. Newall over in makeup thinks this fellow even looks enough like you, with the right make up, he could pass for you to the camera."

"That's a scary thought."

"No kidding," Komack said with a grin. "I don't think the planet could stand a second Ed Straker."

"Maybe I should meet this actor."

"Not without me. I want to make sure I'm taking the right one home afterwards." They both laughed.

After a moment, Straker settled back in the leather passenger seat. There was something about this morning's nightmare that still clung to the back of his mind. Something just at the edge of his remembering. Mirrors and double images, doppelgangers. He couldn't quite place the image or why it bothered him so much.

Most of his nightmares had to do with death. His son John, Craig Collins, all the others who had died due to decisions he had made, actions he had or hadn't taken. The ghosts of SHADO's past.

This morning's dream was one of the rare, different ones. One of the dreams he wouldn't talk to do SHADO's psychiatrists about. A rare, tantalizing, terrifying glimpse into the future. He'd had one the night before he lost his F-4 over Viet Nam. Another, days before John was struck by the car in front of his mother's house. The last such dream he remembered was just before Craig Collins was found alive on that island, before it was discovered Collins' had been programmed by the aliens to kill him. Straker didn't much like his dreams.

Komack turned the Mercedes to the left, onto another lane.

"The other way's shorter," Straker observed, suddenly paying attention.

"Yes," Komack said. She adjusted the rear view mirror and watched the image in the mirror. "Is Alec's tradecraft as rusty as yours?" she asked.

"What to do you mean?" He wasn't sure if he should be insulted or not.

"We have a tail. The beige sedan from the intersection."

Straker didn't bother turning to look. Instead, he pulled down the visor and flipped open the panel that covered the cosmetic mirror. He adjusted the mirror to look at the car following them.

"You're sure it's the same one?"

She nodded. "The license plate has mud on it. Deliberately illegible. The rest of the car is clean."

"Can you lose them?"

"Not on this road," Komack said. "Of course, they must know we're heading to the studio, so if we do lose them, they'll just catch up with us there."

"Maybe they want to scare us away from going in this morning," Straker suggested.

"Maybe," Komack said. "Hold on."

It was barely enough warning. She hit the accelerator. There was an icy patch in the shadows ahead. Komack pumped the brakes as the Mercedes hit the ice. She threw the steering wheel over and the heavy wagon turned a complete one-eighty in the middle of the lane.

The wagon passed the sedan at nearly eighty miles per hour. The sedan was forced into the hedge to avoid being hit.

"Who the devil taught you to drive?" Straker demanded. He hadn't decided whether to be appalled at the stunt or pleased she'd managed to pull it off. The beige Ford was nowhere in sight. He released his hold on the dashboard, flexing his fingers to get circulation back.

She grinned, not taking her eyes off the road. "Nick. Extreme measure driving and proper tradecraft were about the only things my father took time to teach me. He didn't want me to be a liability in case he ever needed me in the field with him."

"Maybe there is something to be said for having a CIA field agent for a father," Straker commented. "Any idea who they were?"

"I was going to ask you."

He shook his head. "I didn't recognize either of them, but it was hard to get a clear look with the caps and dark glasses they were wearing. Maybe security will have some ideas."

"Maybe," Komack said. "But it's funny. I had an impression the driver looked a lot like you."

"Your actor friend?"

"No, I don't think so."

\* \* \*

Moonbase inspections were getting smoother every month, or so Gay Ellis told herself after Freeman signed off the inspection report in record time. He hadn't bothered to double check the computer reports, staying with the hard-copy Ellis and Barry provided. He hadn't asked Mark or Jay about the changes the two astronauts had made to the launch procedures, cutting seconds off where seconds counted.

Freeman must be tired, Ellis thought to herself. He'd been awfully quiet during their walk-through. Maybe Commander Straker'd been keeping him up too late writing reports, especially after that big bang-up last month. One hundred-fifty UFOs in one attack. SHADO was still picking up the pieces, taking care of the security problems with the various governments who found their forces coopted by SHADO for the emergency.

Moonbase had performed well above expectations. Everyone on Moonbase had received commendations for their efforts. Still, it wouldn't do for SHADO's most remote base to get lax, even if the monthly inspection was only cursory this month. Next month, he'd probably slam them.

"It's time for our November morale booster," Ellis said, leading the way to the astronauts' lounge.

"What morale booster?"

"It's the first Saturday of the month," Ellis reminded him.

Freeman gave her a blank look.

"Birthdays, sir," Ellis said. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes, Mark's all of thirty-two this month," Freeman said with a grin.

Ellis suddenly had the oddest feeling that Freeman really hadn't remembered and that was peculiar. Mark Bradley's birthday was three days ago. Freeman had called up to wish him a

'happy birthday'.

Lieutenant Barry's voice over the speaker interrupted Ellis's musings.

A U.F.O. was spotted coming in, fast.

"We've been waiting for this one. I guess the morale booster can wait," Ellis said as she led the way to the Control Sphere.

"Have U.F.O. on positive track," S.I.D.'s computer voice announced over the speakers. "Four-zero-three, One-three-two, Blue."

"I have it, Lieutenant," Barry announced from her station.

"Red alert," Ellis announced, going to her station at the center console. "Interceptors, immediate launch."

In the leisure sphere, the three duty astronauts grabbed their helmets and jumped feet-first into the launch chutes. Within ninety-one seconds, the three interceptors were space borne and ready for battle.

"Ninety-one seconds, Lieutenant," Harrington announced from her station. She beamed at Freeman.

"Congratulations," Freeman said. "Commander Straker will be pleased." He turned to Barry. "What's the projected termination?"

She checked a readout in front of her. "Grid reference G-12, Southern England."

Freeman seemed to consider her report for a moment, then: "Tell the interceptors to return to base."

"Sir?" Ellis looked over at him in astonishment.

"Straker's orders," Freeman said. "The next U.F.O. coming in close to H.Q. is to be let through to be captured."

\* \* \*

"What's going on?" Straker asked Ford as he entered the Control room.

"A Ufo just made it past Moonbase, sir," Ford explained. "Trajectory termination, Southern England."

"What happened?" Straker wondered aloud. "Didn't the interceptors make contact?"

"No, sir, they were in range when Moonbase recalled them," Ford said. Straker gave him a surprised look. He flipped the console switch that would connect Ford's station to the Moonbase Control Sphere.

"Lieutenant, what the hell's going on?" Straker demanded when Ellis's face appeared on the monitor.

"Sir?" Ellis said in confusion.

"You recalled the interceptors and let a Ufo through," Straker spelled out. Freeman's face came on the monitor.

"You gave me explicit instructions to let the next one headed for Southern England through to be captured," Freeman said.

"I see," Straker said. The anger had shifted to puzzlement and more than a little worry, or so it seemed to Ford as he watched them flicker across Straker's finely chiseled features.

"Control, out," Straker said, flipping off the connection to Moonbase. He turned to Ford. "As soon as that crate's landed, get the mobiles after it."

"Sir, do I tell the mobiles to capture or destroy the Ufo?" Ford asked.

There was another brief flare of anger, then: "I really don't care."

Straker seemed to catch himself before he said more. His lips thinned into a familiar expression of controlled fury and he headed to his office without saying another word.

Ford relayed orders to Green's Mobile unit crew. Then, he turned his station over to Lieutenant Johnson and headed for Straker's office.

The office door slid open at his approach and he walked in. Straker was sitting in his desk chair, his back to the door.

"Sir," Ford said quietly.

Straker turned. He seemed a little surprised to see Ford standing by the desk.

"I've given Captain Green instructions to capture the Ufo if possible," Ford continued.

"Fine," Straker said. He didn't seem to be listening. Ford was reminded of a night more than two years before. Straker was distracted then, too. Later they found out his son lay dying in a hospital while the commander was at SHADO headquarters, waiting through an alert.

"Sir, is everything all right?" Ford asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"You don't seem to be quite here today, sir," Ford admitted. "Colonel Lake will be coming on in few hours, if you want to go home early."

Straker smiled at the suggestion. The anger was gone, as though it had never been.

"Thank you, Keith, but I'll be fine. I just don't understand what's going on up on Moonbase, that's all. It's not like Freeman to..." His voice faded and worry lines reappeared between his eyebrows.

"You didn't give those orders, sir?"

"No, I didn't," Straker said. "I'm pretty sure I'd remember if I did." He rubbed the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. Ford was familiar with the gesture. It usually meant Commander Straker was stressed and getting a headache.

After a moment, Straker reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small prescription bottle. Ford noticed he was trying to take the cap off one handed and not having much success.

"Need some help with that, sir?" Ford asked. Straker grimaced and handed the bottle over.

"I forgot Jackson put it in a childproof bottle," Straker complained. "There's never a child around when you need one."

"I'll try not to take that personally, sir," Ford quipped. He glanced at the label before twisting the cap off and handing the bottle back to Straker.

"Those are pretty potent, Commander," Ford observed, watching Straker shake two of the blue and pink capsules into his hand.

"I promise not to drive any heavy equipment or do anything else that requires reflexes and brain working together for several hours at least," Straker said with a glimmer of a smile.

"Yes, sir."

"And, if you're thinking these are why I'm not screaming about that Ufo, you may be right," Straker continued. "But I got over any notion that pain was good for the soul sometime ago. Pain just hurts."

Ford smiled at that. "Yes, sir. If I may ask, what happened?"

"I got run over by a wall last night."

"Sir?"

"Don't ask. You don't really want to know," Straker assured him.

"Yes, sir," Ford said, turning to leave. He stopped at the door and looked back. "Sir, if you don't mind my saying, you really should go home when Colonel Lake comes on duty."

"I'll see how I feel when she gets here," Straker promised. The doors closed behind Ford.

Straker keyed the intercom to connect to SHADO's chief of security, Vladimir Natiroff.

"Major, have you come up with anything on that little problem Colonel Komack and I had this morning?"

"Yes, sir," Natiroff's heavily accented voice came over the intercom. "It is difficult to identify a car without its license number, however, we were lucky. The sedan had mismatched tires. A 1982 Ford Granada in that color with that mix of tires was reported stolen a month ago from a rental agency near Stanstead Airport."

"It was stolen?"

"Yes, sir," Natiroff said. "It was reported stolen near Regent's Park by the couple who rented it, Mr. and Mrs. Hempstead. They own a farm near Coggeshall."

"The police were satisfied with their report?"

"The case is still open on the incident. Our contacts within the metropolitan police seemed reticent in discussing the subject."

"Any ideas why?"

"No, Commander. But we will keep looking into it."

"Keep me informed," Straker said before keying off the intercom. The painkiller had kicked in. It was making him sleepy, too sleepy to concentrate on the pile of reports stacked on the corner of his desk. He folded his arms on the desk top and laid his head down. Suddenly, he found himself in the nightmare once again.

He was in a hall of mirrors, no way out, no way to tell what was real and what was a reflection. Alec was lost in there somewhere, or was it Alec? He couldn't tell. The mirrors started to shatter. His own image broke into a million pieces, taking him with it. Komack stood by a broken wall. She screamed his name and vanished, leaving only the scream behind.

"Sir?" Ford's voice intruded. Straker woke with a start, heart pounding, cold sweat on his upper lip.

"Are you all right, sir?" Ford asked worriedly.

Straker managed a shaky nod.

"You weren't answering the intercom," Ford explained.

Straker took a deep breath and tried to stop trembling. "I'm okay," he assured the duty officer. "Anything from the mobile unit?"

"They've just arrived in the termination area. It's about halfway between Maldon and Coggeshall, mostly farmland. Captain Green shouldn't have any problem finding the Ufo. There's not many places to hide."

Straker nodded. He knew Ford knew what he was talking about. He also knew Naomi Green was a superb mobile unit leader. The search operation was in good hands.

"I'm going home, Lieutenant," Straker said. His head had begun to pound and he closed his eyes momentarily to will it away. "Try to keep from blowing the place up until Colonel Lake gets here."

"Yes, sir," Ford said.

\* \* \*

The following Monday, Paul Foster spotted Alec Freeman entering the CEO's office at Harlington-Straker Studios. Straker wasn't in the office. He rarely was. His real office was eighty feet below, in SHADO headquarters.

He hurried to catch up with the older man. Freeman saw him and waited.

"Morning, Alec. How's it going?" Foster asked as the electronically controlled doors closed behind him.

"Fine," Freeman replied. He seemed worried about something.

Foster went to the broad desk and flipped open the silver cigarette box on its surface.

"Foster," he said to the air.

"Voice Print identification positive: Foster, Paul J."

Foster reached over and flipped a switch. The entire room began to drop downwards, like a high-speed elevator. It was an elevator, the formal entrance to the concrete caverns of SHADO headquarters.

"You're awfully quiet this morning," Foster commented as the elevator stopped and the doors opened onto a gray corridor.

"I've got a few things that are bothering me, that's all."

"Anything I can do?" Foster asked. They left the office/elevator and turned down the corridor to the main control center.

"Maybe," Freeman said. "I'm a little worried about Commander Straker. He's seemed a little 'off' the last couple days when I've talked to him from Moonbase."

"Off?" Foster repeated. "How?" He didn't know what Freeman was talking about. Foster had spent the past two weeks in China, cleaning up a multiple Ufo crash that took out two Chinese fighter jets. Even SHADO's communications were a little sporadic from the middle of China.

"It's hard to say," Freeman said. "He's been sounding stressed, nervous. It's, I don't know, like when Roper got into trouble. He just feels wrong, somehow. And he didn't remember telling me to let one through so we could capture it."

They stopped in the hallway before entering the control room.

"Have you tried to talk to him about it?"

Freeman gave a slight shrug. "Haven't had much of a chance. Besides, Straker doesn't talk about his problems, even to me. Hell, he never bothered telling anybody down here when his son died. It wasn't any of SHADO's business."

Something didn't ring true. Foster knew Freeman and Straker had their differences. They occasionally had heated arguments that broke down into shouting matches in Straker's office. Freeman had even walked out once and assigned himself to a project in Alaska after a particularly nasty disagreement. But like the professionals they were, they tried to keep their arguments behind closed doors.

"Maybe I can talk to him, see what's going on," Foster offered.

Freeman snorted. "Sure, maybe he'll talk to you." Freeman turned and entered the control room. Foster followed him in.

They were in a red alert. Moonbase had the interceptors out after a U.F.O. heading into Earth. After a moment, Space Intruder Detector announced the U.F.O.s destruction.

Straker was standing in his usual spot, beside the duty supervisor's station. Freeman had moved to stand about an arms length from his superior, behind Ford.

Straker reached over, took the microphone from Ford's station and keyed it on.

"Congratulations Lieutenant. One hundred forty seconds, alert to destruction," he said to Ellis, on the monitor. Straker was smiling and Ellis fairly glowed from the praise.

Foster knew Moonbase had been working hard to get their interceptor launch times down below ninety seconds, bed to battle. He did a quick calculation in his head to confirm that Moonbase had managed to launch within the ninety second time frame. He glanced at Freeman.

Freeman still looked worried.

Foster noticed Straker was watching Freeman as well. The commander seemed puzzled by Freeman's lack of enthusiasm.

"Alec," Straker said. "Is something wrong?"

Freeman shook his head.

"No, everything's fine," the Australian officer said.

"Really?" Straker's tone went cold. "We still haven't found the Ufo you let through Saturday."

"Of course, you wouldn't have lost it if everything was in place like it should have been," Freeman shot back.

"What do you mean?" Straker asked.

"You knew we were going to let the next one targeted for Britain through," Freeman said. "You gave me those instructions yourself the night before I went to Moonbase. If SHADO lost that Ufo, it was because you weren't ready for it." With that, Freeman turned on his heel and walked away. Straker stared after him.

"Colonel Freeman," Straker called, after a moment.

Freeman stopped and looked back at him. "Yes, Commander?"

"When will you have that report ready?"

"Report?"

"Yes, the one on the *Angel* operation. The one you've been working on for the past two weeks."

"I'll have in on your desk tomorrow morning, sir."

"Good," Straker said. "I look forward to reading it."

Freeman walked out of the control room.

"Commander, what's going on?" Foster asked.

"You heard." It was a statement, not a question.

"You let a Ufo through and it got away," Foster said.

Straker's expression darkened. He beckoned the younger man to follow him into the office.

Inside, Straker flipped the switch to close and lock the electronically controlled door.

"Paul, I didn't let one through. I never gave those instructions, not to Alec, not to anyone," Straker said. He sat on the bench set into the corner beside the desk, elbows on knees, head bent.

"Then what's going on?"

"I wish I knew," Straker admitted.

Foster leaned against the desk.

"Sir, Alec claims you gave those instructions. And you claim you didn't. You can't both be right."

"I know that, Paul," Straker said. "And either way, we have a security problem." He looked up at Foster. "If I gave the order, I don't remember doing so. If Colonel Freeman is acting on his own, then he's put civilians at risk, compromised our security and is insubordinate on top of everything else."

"So, what do we do?"

"Colonel Foster, I'd like you to check out Colonel Freeman."

Foster took a deep breath and frowned.

"Is there a problem with that, Colonel?" Straker asked.

"Commander, when I came in this morning, Colonel Freeman expressed some concerns

about you," Foster admitted.

"Oh?"

"He said he thought you were acting off, nervous, stressed. He mentioned Roper, how he was acting before we found out about Dawson."

"I see," Straker said.

"I told him I'd ask you about it."

"And do you think I'm acting off?" Straker asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Foster said.

Surprised worry crossed Straker's face.

"But not the way he was meaning," Foster continued. "You're taking this whole thing a little too well. I bet most of the Control operatives are holding their breath, waiting for you to explode."

"And hoping I don't explode all over them?"

"It has been known to happen."

Straker sighed.

"Do you still want me to check out Alec?" Foster asked.

Straker nodded.

"And if I feel Alec's concern about you is equally legitimate?"

"Then you know what to do, Paul," Straker said. "You will report any and all findings to General Henderson and the commission. I'm out of the loop on this one. So is Alec Freeman."

"Yes, sir," Foster agreed, wondering what he was getting himself into.

"Paul, before you tell Henderson about our problem down here, you might want to talk to Lieutenant Ford about last Saturday, when the Ufo got through," Straker said. "And then, I think you should come with me to the medical center."

"Why?" Foster asked.

"Talk to Ford, please."

\* \* \*

Freeman was talking to Keith Ford when Foster entered the control room. Freeman looked up as Foster approached.

"I'll talk to you later," he told Ford before hurrying away.

"What's going on?" Foster asked.

"Colonel Freeman was asking how Commander Straker's been the last couple days," Ford said.

"And how has he been?"

"It's hard say since he wasn't here most of the weekend," Ford said.

"I thought we were still on alert for a missing Ufo?" Foster said.

"Yes, sir, we are. But, Commander Straker wasn't feeling well," Ford answered. "He wasn't really himself. When Moonbase let that Ufo through, I asked him whether Captain Green should be told to capture or destroy the Ufo. He said he didn't care."

"That doesn't sound like Commander Straker," Foster noted.

"No sir, it doesn't, but he was also taking Darvon Saturday," Ford said.

"Darvon? Why?"

Ford shook his head. "When I asked him, he said he'd been run over by a wall. He was favoring his left arm, so I assume he hurt it. Later, I found him asleep in his office. I think he was having a nightmare when I woke him up. He seemed pretty upset by it, whatever it was. He left here early Saturday afternoon and didn't come in at all Sunday."

Straker had come out of his office and was waiting a short distance away. His hands were in his pockets and he was leaning against the concrete wall. His entire demeanor reminded Foster of a kid who knew he was in trouble and was waiting for the headmaster to give him a lecture. The only thing missing from the picture was the untied shoe scuffing along the floor.

"How much of this did you tell Colonel Freeman?" Foster asked Ford.

"Nearly everything I've told you," Ford admitted. He gave Straker an apologetic look. "I wasn't aware I was violating a confidence."

"You're not," Straker said, voice very quiet. "I asked Colonel Foster to talk to you about Saturday. I hadn't realized exactly how bizarre I was acting."

"Not bizarre, exactly, sir," Ford said. "Just not you."

"But, if I'm not me, who am I?" Straker wondered.

\* \* \*

Doctor Harris was on duty in the medical center when Foster and Straker walked in.

"Commander, Colonel, how can I help you?" the young physician asked. Harris was only a few years out of medical school, but he was a top notch researcher.

"I bruised my shoulder Friday night," Straker explained. "It's still bothering me quite a bit."

"Are you taking something for it?" Harris asked.

"Aspirin mostly. I was taking Darvon," Straker answered. Harris raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Jackson gave me the prescription. But I don't much like the side effects."

"I see," Harris said. He gestured to the examination table in the corner of the room. "Why don't you take your sweater off and have a seat?"

Harris went over to the desk and keyed in an instruction into the computer terminal. He quickly read through the record on the screen.

Straker pulled his turtleneck sweater over his head. Foster noted how clumsily he was moving. He barely used his left arm at all. It was painful to even watch.

Harris noticed it as well. He was at the examination table before Straker even sat down.

"That's some bruise," Harris commented. Straker's left shoulder was a swollen and mottled with green and black. Harris touched the top of the joint.

Foster watched as Straker's jaw clenched.

"Whatever did you do?" Harris asked, seemingly oblivious to the pain he'd caused.

"I was run over by a wall," Straker said.

Harris just looked at him.

"I slipped while playing handball and ran into a wall," Straker amended.

"If you don't mind, I'd like some x-rays of that shoulder," Harris said.

"Nothing's broken," Straker said.

"Humor me, Commander," Harris said with a grin. "I'm just a doctor. Besides, I don't see anything in your medical records about all this scarring on your shoulder, or the bullet scar on your back."

"What do you mean, we don't have records?" Straker asked.

"Look for yourself, Commander," Harris said, pointing to the computer screen.

Straker threw his sweater over his shoulders and went to the desk. He looked at the screen, keying through the pages of the document.

"The surgical records from Da Nang and Clark aren't here," Straker said. "Everything else seems to be."

"The records from Mayland are complete," Harris pointed out. "But it looks like the other surgical records have been edited out. Who would want to do that?"

"I have no idea," Straker admitted. "Could you check and see what other records may have been tampered with?"

"I'm a medical doctor, not a computer expert, Commander," Harris reminded him.

"Get Lieutenant Masters to help you," Straker said. "You should be able to check our medical records against those on file in General Henderson's office. When that's done, give the list of alterations to Colonel Foster."

"Yes, sir," Harris agreed. "In the meantime, how about those x-rays?" He indicated the door to the radiology lab in the next room.

"I'll get onto Henderson about getting the IAC's records downloaded to us," Foster said, heading for the door.

Straker nodded agreement.

\* \* \*

Even though Foster hadn't called ahead, Henderson, chairman of the International Astrophysical Commission, didn't seem surprised to see him.

"Colonel Freeman was just on the phone to me," the gray old man told him. "He claims Straker's acting weird, using drugs. He wants me to look into it."

"Yes, sir," Foster said.

Henderson gestured for him to take a seat opposite the desk.

Foster sat. "However, Alec Freeman's been acting a little strange too, and Commander Straker's asked me to look into that. My orders from him include bringing all my findings to you."

"Colonel Foster, what the devil's going on down there?" Henderson demanded.

"I don't know, sir," Foster admitted. "I do know our medical records have been tampered with. Specifically, Commander Straker's."

"Tampered with? How?"

"Some of the surgical records are missing," Foster explained.

"Have any other records been tampered with?"

"We don't know yet. The commander suggested I get copies of your files to compare against ours."

"I'll have copies sent over to you," Henderson said. He scowled. "Colonel Foster, exactly how serious is this drug accusation Freeman's making against Straker? Especially his assertion that SHADO operatives have been covering up for the commander, hiding his problem?"

Foster took a moment before replying. "Commander Straker was taking some fairly strong prescription pain medication over the weekend. Some of the control room operatives were aware of it. I wouldn't say they were covering it up. It certainly wasn't a secret. He was given the medication by SHADO medical staff and they don't seem to think his usage, or behavior, has been out of the ordinary. In fact, he stopped taking it."

"I see," Henderson said. His expression became thoughtful. "Colonel, I'd like you to concentrate on the problem with Freeman. The last time a situation like this cropped up down there, it turned out the aliens had affected that officer's mind. You remember the incident, don't you?"

"Oh yes, sir," Foster said. He did indeed remember it. "You think the aliens are at it again?"

"Don't you?"

\* \* \*

Naomi Green brushed a curl of black hair away from her forehead as she checked the topographical map of area G-12, between Maldon and Coggeshall, once again. Her team had covered 95 percent of the area in the first twenty-four hours after the U.F.O. came to Earth. There was still no sign of the alien ship and it was running out of time. The alien had to be underwater, somewhere.

She checked the map again. There were no bodies of water shown on her map, besides the Blackwater river, five miles to the east. At least, there were no bodies of water large enough to hide a U.F.O. She pulled out a larger scale map of the last area to be searched.

It was a farm whose owners had refused to let the SHADO search teams onto their property. This was despite Green's identification as a British military officer whose team was looking for debris from a radioactive space probe.

A satellite photograph of the area showed there was a small pond on the property. The pond didn't show on the topographical map. There was no way to tell how deep the pond was, or if it was in fact large enough to hide a thirty-five-foot diameter U.F.O.

"That's the only place it can be," Green murmured to herself, putting the maps away in their proper places. She pulled out a pair of binoculars from the cabinet below the map case.

"Going sightseeing, Captain?" her driver, Leon Grayson, asked with a grin.

"Bird watching," Green replied, opening the hatch to the roof. She climbed the extended ladder to the roof of her command mobile and scanned the farm across the road and down the hill from her position. A line of tall cedar trees blocked her view of the pond. The trees seemed to completely encircle the body of water.

"That's the only place it can be," she repeated to herself.

\* \* \*

"That's the only place it can be," Green told Straker that afternoon. She had brought her maps, the photographs of the farm and the satellite photos with her. They were spread out on the conference table in Straker's office.

"The pond is surrounded by cedar trees on one side and an apple orchard on the other. From the looks of the orchard, I'd say it hadn't been tended to in sometime," Green said.

"And the property owners are refusing to cooperate in the search?" Straker asked.

"Yes, sir," Green said. "They were very firm about it. They will not permit a search of their property without a search warrant and they want their solicitor present."

"What do we know about them?"

"Almost nothing," Foster said. "Thomas and Emmaline Hempstead. No passport, no driver's license until six months ago, no school records, no marriage records, nothing. They purchased the property six months ago, cash."

"Cash?" Straker repeated curiously. There was something annoyingly familiar about the name. "Could they be part of some sort of witness protection program?"

"Both the F.B.I. and C.I.D. do a better job of back filling the paper work," Foster pointed out. "I've had Natiroff check with his sources and they're not Soviet or Chinese plants as far as he can find, either."

"They'd do a better job, too," Straker said.

"Yes, sir. But, what does that leave us?"

"Stuck," Straker responded. "Until and unless we have concrete evidence that Ufo is on their property, we can't move. SHADO may be at war, but Britain isn't. The Hempsteads have rights."

"But, sir, what kind of people would refuse to let the government look for a dangerous piece of government property on their land?" Green asked.

"If this were Idaho, I'd guess anti-government extremists," Straker said.

"This isn't Idaho," Freeman said, contributing to the discussion for the first time.

"I am well aware of that, Colonel," Straker said. "Which makes the possibilities even worse. If the Hempsteads aren't working for the aliens, who are they working for?"

"Why assume they're working for anybody?" Freeman asked. "Maybe they just want their privacy. It's not that inconceivable an idea."

Straker chose to ignore Freeman's comment. "Paul, can we trace down the money they used?"

Foster shook his head. "The cashier's check was drawn on Barclay's. The money to open the account came from a numbered Swiss account. Another dead end."

"I guess we wait for that Ufo to move, then," Straker said. He nodded to Green. "Thank you, Captain. You can go back to your unit. We'll keep all tracking stations on yellow alert until further notice."

"Yes, sir," Green acknowledged.

"I have a few things to take care of," Foster announced. He followed Green out of the office and the doors closed behind them. Straker was left alone in the office with Freeman.

"Alec, what the devil's going on with you?" Straker asked.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Come off it," Straker said. He was getting angry. "We've known each other too long to be playing games."

"Maybe that's part of it," Freeman said. "Maybe I've worked for you too long. Maybe you've been in charge down here too long."

"So you think SHADO needs a change in command?"

"I think you've lost it," Freeman said. "You're taking drugs that are affecting your decision making ability. Even Paul admits that. You should have taken more time to recover from Turner's attack and now you're falling apart. You can't handle it. Pretty soon you're going to make another mistake. Only it won't be a Ufo just hiding from us in somebody's yard. It'll be a damn sight worse."

"You still claim I gave you those instructions?"

"Yes," Freeman said. "And the fact you don't remember proves that you are not competent to be in command of SHADO."

"In that case, you'll be pleased to know that General Henderson is already investigating your allegations," Straker said.

"Who has he assigned?"

"I don't know," Straker said very quietly. "But until the Commission meets and votes on the issue, I am still in command of SHADO. Is that understood, Colonel Freeman?"

"Perfectly, Commander," Freeman said. There was something ugly in his voice, something Straker had never heard before.

He turned away from Freeman, cradling his left arm against his body. He didn't like confrontations and emotionally heated scenes. He knew he had the bad habit of disengaging himself from those situations when they happened. He walked away, often literally. It irritated people, making them think he didn't care.

But right now, he really didn't care. He was just angry. Angry that he didn't know what was going on in his chief of staff's head, angry that the UFO hadn't been found and destroyed

before its crew could kill innocent bystanders.

His shoulder still hurt and his left hand had an annoying tendency to go numb. Harris had changed his prescription. The new painkiller wasn't as effective as the Darvon, but didn't have the side-effects, or so Harris promised. Straker took a moment to get control of his anger, work the numbness out of his hand.

He heard Freeman go to the drink dispenser. "Want one?" Freeman asked. The ugliness was still there.

"You know better than that, Alec," Straker said, turning to watch him.

"Oh, yes. That Puritan ethic of yours," Freeman said. "No spirituous liquor or any other weaknesses flesh is heir to."

"Alec, what on earth has gotten into you?" Straker asked.

Freeman normally took a while to finish his whiskey, savoring it, using the time to collect his thoughts. This time, he downed the drink like it was water.

"Forget it," Freeman said, putting the glass back on the shelf. "You wouldn't understand." Freeman gave him an appraising look. "What's wrong with your arm?"

Straker simply stared at him. For a moment, he was filled with a sense of unreality, as if in a dream, a nightmare. The question, the entire conversation, was simply unreal. It was as if...

Further speculation was ended by the sound of the alert siren.

"What's going on?" Straker asked, approaching Ford's station. Foster was already standing there, watching the monitor.

"The second one today," Foster said. "It's on almost precisely the same course as the one the interceptors got this morning. They're already space borne."

Again, within a few minutes Space Intruder Detector announced: "Confirm U.F.O. destroyed."

"I don't get it," Foster complained. He followed Straker into the commander's office. Freeman was right behind him.

"Why even bother coming if they're going to set themselves up like sitting ducks?"

"There's a reason, Paul," Straker said. "We just don't know what it is, yet."

"You're sure of that, aren't you," Freeman said.

"Yes, I'm sure," Straker said. "They don't come all that way to watch the sunset."

"If you say so," Freeman said. "I have a report to finish." His expression was unreadable as he turned and left the office.

"What is going on with him?" Foster asked as the door closed behind Freeman.

Straker shook his head. "I don't know." He frowned, rubbing his temples against another headache.

"Was I that bad when ... ?" Foster paused, too embarrassed to finish the question.

"When the aliens tried to program you to kill me?" Straker completed the question for him. "No, you were angry, not hateful, not really. Besides, we knew the aliens might have gotten to you. Alec hasn't been within shooting distance of a Ufo in the past year."

Straker looked around his office. He knew it was his imagination, but the walls felt like they were closing in.

"I need to get some air," he said.

Foster followed him out.

Paulson looked up from her station as the two men entered the control room.

"Sir," she called. "Were the translations all right?"

Straker stopped, puzzled by the question. "Translations?"

"Yes, sir, Colonel Freeman said you wanted to see the translations of the Soviet reports on the Angel operation," Paulson said.

"I haven't seen them, Lieutenant," Straker said slowly.

"That's odd, sir," Paulson said, frowning. "I gave them to him at least an hour ago. He said you wanted them immediately."

"Where's Colonel Freeman now?"

"I don't know, sir," Paulson said. "I didn't see him come through the control room."

Straker turned to Foster. "Find him."

"Yes, sir," Foster acknowledged. He picked up the phone that connected SHADO underground with the offices of Harlington-Straker Studios, upstairs.

"Miss Ealand, has Mister Freeman left the building?"

"Yes, sir," came the reply. "He just left."

"Thank you, Miss Ealand," Foster said, hanging up the receiver. He turned back to Straker. "He can't have gone too far."

"Find him," Straker repeated.

"Yes, sir," Foster said. He picked up the receiver again and keyed in the sequence to connect him to Natiroff.

"We need to find Colonel Freeman," Foster said. He glanced at Straker. "Do you want him brought back here or followed?"

"Followed," Straker said. "I want to know what he's playing at and where he's taking those papers."

"That's assuming he hasn't just taken them so he can work on that report at home," Foster suggested.

Straker shook his head. "Alec's report was almost done last Friday. He told me so himself."

"Maybe he needed to double-check something," Foster said.

"He wouldn't need the English translations for that. He did the translations," Straker said.

Foster relayed the instructions to Natiroff, then hung up the receiver.

"I'll be in my office," Straker said.

\* \* \*

His head was starting to throb. He wanted nothing more than to disengage, to walk away from the entire mess, but he couldn't. Too much was at stake. His headache was making it hard to think. Damn this medication, he thought. The Darvon wasn't this bad. At least if he was asleep, his head wasn't hurting.

There was a buzz at on the door. Straker flipped the switch to open it.

Lieutenant Masters and Doctor Harris walked in, followed by Foster. Harris was carrying a thick file.

"Commander, we have the data you and Colonel Foster requested," Masters said. "You wanted us to report as soon as we had it."

"Go on," Foster instructed.

"Someone did a very thorough job of editing a fairly large number of the files. The most recent instructions went into the main computers through the key station in Colonel Freeman's office," Masters began. "We have a list of the files that were altered, as well as the dates and times."

"How long has this been going on?" Straker asked.

"A large number of edits were made about six months ago. We figure Dawson did that,"

Masters explained. "The most recent alterations were this morning, starting at about eight o'clock, and ending about noon. Whoever did it knew enough about our computers to try and alter the date codes, but we have a redundant security system to catch just that."

"In the changes made today, whose files were affected?" Foster asked.

"Commander Straker, Colonels Freeman, Foster, and Lake, Doctor Jackson, Lieutenants Ford, Anderson, Johnson, Paulson, and Travis," Masters read off the list on the front page of his report.

"And what was altered?" Straker asked.

"Surgical and dental records," Harris said. "And in the case of Lt. Paulson, birthmark notations. She has a very distinctive mark on her thigh." He grinned.

"Surgery leaves scars," Straker said, thinking aloud. "Scars, birthmarks and dental work can all be used for identification." He looked up at Foster. "Somebody's messing with our identification system."

"Sir," Masters said. "We also found evidence of a virus in our mainframe. Major Graham and his team are working on that right now."

"Computer virus? How?" Straker demanded. "The mainframe isn't connected to any outside communication source."

"That's correct, sir," Masters said. "As near as we can tell, the virus was uploaded from one of the control room stations."

"How much damage is there?"

"It's hard to tell just yet," Masters said. "Graham was pretty sure we caught it before any irreparable damage was done. But, from what I saw, it was a very sophisticated virus. We were lucky to have caught it at all."

Straker sat back, thinking for a long moment. Finally, he nodded to Harris and Masters. "Thank you, that was good work."

The two men smiled at the unexpected compliment and left the office. Straker flipped the switch to close the door behind them. He glanced over at Foster who'd taken a seat at the conference table.

"I wonder what else can go wrong today?"

"I'm afraid to guess," Foster said.

The intercom buzzed and Straker keyed it on. "Straker."

"Is Colonel Foster there, sir?" a man's voice asked. Straker recognized it as Lewiston, from security.

"I'm here, Lieutenant," Foster said.

"We've just received a report from the security detail we placed on Colonel Freeman."

"Go on," Foster ordered.

"They lost him in the M-6 interchange. They said it was a very professional job. Also, both transponders in his car have been deactivated."

Foster simply stared away in amazement.

"Keep us posted, will you, Lieutenant?" Straker said. "And thank you." He keyed off the connection.

"Lieutenant Hawkins assured me there was no way Alec could find or deactivate that second transponder," Foster sputtered. "That was assuming he suspected enough to bother looking."

"Paul, how did he manage to lose the security team tailing him?" Straker asked. "Alec's tradecraft is at least as rusty as mine. And I doubt I could lose a SHADO security team if I

wanted to, not without help."

"You've done it before," Foster said. "Gotten away from SHADO security, I mean."

"No, I haven't. Security knew exactly where I was at all times when I took off two months ago. And I even had Jackson's help at the time."

"I don't get it then," Foster said. "How could Alec have done it without help?"

"Alec couldn't. He had to have had help," Straker said thoughtfully. "The other possibility is, that it wasn't really Alec Freeman."

"I don't understand."

"I can't explain it, but it fits. I don't think that was Alec Freeman who was here today," Straker said. He suddenly knew he was right. The pieces fit too well and it felt true. "It was someone else wearing his face."

"That's a pretty big leap, Commander," Foster pointed out.

"I know, Paul," Straker said. "But I also know that wasn't Alec Freeman who was doing those things. Alec was there Friday when I fell, and he would never have said the things he said. Also, I talked to Gay a little while ago. She said he was forgetful while he was doing the inspection. He forgot Mark's birthday, other little things he should have known, recent personnel changes, things like that. She said he didn't feel right."

"Okay, if that wasn't Alec here and on Moonbase, then who was it?"

"I don't know," Straker admitted. He slumped back in his leather chair, rubbing his eyes. The headache was still there, behind his eyes. "Remember the underwater dome off of Cornwall?"

"How could I forget? The aliens made duplicates of most of the people down here. They even built a copy of the control room," Foster said. "But those duplicates didn't speak. They had to use recordings."

Straker nodded. "To fool the voice print checks, probably. Or maybe voices are harder to duplicate than faces. Paul, did you check Freeman's voice checks for this morning?"

Foster flushed. "He didn't have one this morning. We came down together."

"Paul, you know better than that. Everyone needs to go through the security checks on the way down here. No exceptions."

"I know," Foster said. "We were talking and it just happened. It won't happen again. But, if that wasn't Alec, who was it and where is he?"

Straker shook his head. "I don't know that either," he said. "But I do know we have to find them both, Paul. Alec and his double. And I don't think we have much time."

\* \* \*

Green spotted a beige Ford Granada driving up the gravel road to the Hempstead's farmhouse. The car pulled to a stop beside the house and a well-dressed man got out, followed by another, more shabbily dressed man. She focused the binoculars on the first, taller one. She was surprised to see it was Colonel Freeman. She didn't recognize the man with him.

Green called headquarters and was put through to Foster.

"Colonel Foster, was Colonel Freeman planning on negotiating with the Hempsteads about letting us on their property?" Green asked.

"Not as far as I know," Foster replied. "Is the colonel with you?"

"No, sir," Green said. "But he just drove up in a beige Granada. He's gone inside the farmhouse."

"Captain Green," Foster said. "If anyone comes out and gives you any instructions, I want you to stall until I get there, understand?"

"Does that include Colonel Freeman?"

"Anyone, Captain," Foster said.

"Yes, sir," Green acknowledged. "May I ask what's going on?"

"That is our problem, Captain," Foster said. "You just stay on your toes."

\* \* \*

"Freeman is over at the Hempstead farm," Foster reported.

"We'd better get going then," Straker said.

"I don't think that's a good idea, sir."

"Why, Colonel?" Straker asked.

"I just don't think it's a good idea for you to expose yourself to danger unnecessarily."

"I'm not made of glass, you know," Straker said. "I don't need a baby-sitter and I really am capable of taking care of myself."

Foster shook his head. "Commander, Ed, if you're right about this, then it'll be a trap."

"The more reason I should go," Straker pointed out. "If it is a trap, we're prepared. They may lower their guard if they think we've fallen for it. Besides, Alec Freeman is my friend. If he's alive, I want him back, and if he's dead, I want to know that, too. I want him properly buried."

"I still don't buy the imposter idea," Foster said. "It's pretty far fetched even for SHADO. I think it's a lot more likely that Alec was snatched and programmed like Collins, or me, for that matter."

Straker shook his head. He couldn't explain why he felt so strongly that SHADO was dealing with a double, an evil twin. He couldn't explain his nightmares. It wasn't rational and he had always prided himself on his rationality, of not letting emotion sway his decisions.

The intercom buzzed. Straker pressed the key.

"Straker."

"Commander Straker," Natiroff's voice said. "We've been able to lift a set of prints from that glass you sent over."

"And?"

"A curious thing, sir. According to the records in our computers here, the prints belong to Colonel Freeman. However, according to the records from General Henderson's office, they are not Colonel Freeman's fingerprints, but they are similar enough to his they could belong to his identical twin brother."

"Colonel Freeman doesn't have a brother, twin or otherwise," Straker said.

"Exactly, sir."

"Thank you, Major," Straker said, keying off the intercom. He looked up at Foster. "Paul, you were saying something about not believing in imposters?"

\* \* \*

Alec Freeman woke up on a hard mattress in a cold dark place that smelled of damp earth, stale urine and sour sweat. He tried to move only to discover his hands were tied to the posts of the iron bedstead. He could feel the rough texture of the bed covering against his skin and realized he was naked under the thin blanket. He couldn't remember how he got there, or how long he'd been there. His mouth was dry and tasted foul and metallic.

There were voices somewhere over his head. He supposed he was in a cellar. The voices were surprisingly clear. There must be a direct connection, an air duct or something, carrying the sound, he reasoned.

"You should have stayed," one of the voices, a woman's voice, said. "We're still being

watched. It's not safe."

"We lost security on the way here and I doubt Green saw enough of me to tell who it was," another man's voice said. This voice sounded oddly familiar. Something in the accent, something that reminded Freeman of home, of Australia, his father.

"You hope," the first voice said.

"I'm sure and even if she did recognize me, there's nothing they can do. Besides, I was running out of time. Straker was suspicious. He assigned Foster to look into Freeman's behavior."

Something clicked. The man's voice sounded like his. He had a sudden vague memory of seeing his own face staring at him as he headed out to his car early Saturday morning. Then, there was only blackness until he woke up here, wherever here was.

"What about your conversation with Henderson?"

"He said he'd look into it. But Straker knew about that, too. I couldn't find out who was assigned to handle him, if anyone," the voice like his said. "I'm not sure the old bastard even believed me. Komack's his niece. He'd have checked with her before anyone else. You know perfectly well she'd have denied everything, even if it was true."

"Then we'll have to take him or kill him," the woman said.

"It will be difficult with Komack acting as guard dog over him," yet another voice said. This voice sounded like Straker. "He hasn't been alone outside of SHADO HQ since Friday. She won't even let him drive himself to work."

"We'll have to take her out as well, then," the woman said.

"Agreed," the Straker voice said. "But not just yet. She may have uses."

Freeman began to struggle against his bonds. He couldn't let them have their way. He couldn't let them finish their 'operation'.

"Our friend is awake," the Straker voice said.

"I don't know why we're even keeping him," the Freeman voice complained.

"He knows more about SHADO operations than anyone except possibly Straker," the Straker voice said. "We need what's in his head. Even the completed report concerning that battle last month leaves too many unanswered questions. We need to know why they suddenly broke their secrecy, what they hoped to gain by it. We've been able to predict SHADO's tactics pretty well until now. What happened?"

"We don't have much time to get the answers," the woman said.

"Leave that to me," the Straker voice said. The voice was so much the same, yet so different, it sent shivers down Freeman's spine.

He heard creaking, like footsteps on a wooden stair. A door opened and someone walked in, closing to the door behind them. Freeman couldn't tell who it was. It was too dark. A hand grabbed his right arm and he felt a needle bite. The drug burned as it coursed through his veins. A strange lethargy came over him. He wanted to close his eyes and fade back into oblivion. He didn't dare. Too much was at stake.

"Tell me about Angel, about the battle," a voice said. Straker's voice. "You can tell me, you want me to know. I'm your friend, remember?"

"No," Freeman managed to croak out through his parched throat, fighting the drug, fighting to stay awake.

"You will tell me, you know," the voice said. A hand began to caress his face, his chest, moving the blanket down. Freeman began to struggle, to escape the voice, the hands touching him, exploring his skin. He was horrified to discover his body responding to the touches when

his mind was rebelling. A smoothly shaved face came close, lightly kissing his face, his mouth.

"Tell me about Angel. If you don't tell me, I'll have to find someone who will and maybe I won't be as nice to them. I am being nice, aren't I?"

The kissing began anew, the hands caressing his body. He recognized the cologne the other was wearing. Givenchy, Straker's cologne.

"No," he moaned. There was a blaze of pleasure, of pain. Then, once again, there was nothing.

\* \* \*

Green heard Foster's Corvette before she saw it climbing the hill to where the three mobiles sat watching the Hempstead Farm.

"No change," she reported. "Colonel Freeman went in, but he hasn't come out."

"Have you seen anyone else?" Straker asked.

"Only the man who was with him, sir," she replied.

"They know we're here, watching," Straker observed. "They won't move so long as we're here."

"So, we wait," Foster said. "That Ufo has to move soon or risk self-destruction."

"Maybe." Straker looked over at Green. "Captain, I want you to radio Headquarters and the other mobiles. Tell them there's no evidence of the Ufo in this area, you're moving out, returning to base until it's found."

"Sir?" Foster asked in amazement.

Straker smiled. "You said you thought this was a trap. Let's make it good one."

Green made the radio call as instructed.

"Now what, sir?" she asked as soon as she switched off the communications channel.

"Bring the vans in as though you were loading up, but instead, move all three mobiles below the crest of this hill, out of sight. Spread them out so you have good coverage of the pond and the outbuildings," Straker said. "When that's done, send the vans back to base, as though you had pulled out."

"If they think the mobiles are gone, the Ufo may move," Foster realized.

"Exactly."

\* \* \*

Kathryn Komack, COO of Harlington-Straker Studios, smiled at the actor and his agent as she shook his hand and escorted them out of her office.

"I'm glad we could get this contract matter settled. I should have these revisions back from our lawyers by tomorrow afternoon," she said.

"I'm sure we won't have any problems," the agent said. "Your company has an excellent reputation in regards to the legalities."

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to you working with us as soon as your other commitments are finished, Mister Bishop," she said as she closed the door. Her appointments done for the day, she called Straker's office, downstairs.

Lieutenant Johnson answered. "Commander Straker went with Colonel Foster out to the landing sight, to the Hempstead Farm," she said.

"Hempstead Farm?"

"Yes, ma'am, outside Coggeshall."

"How long ago did they leave?"

"A little more than an hour."

"Have they checked in?"

"No, ma'am, but I assume they must be on their way back because the mobiles are returning to base," Johnson answered.

"I see," Komack commented, hanging up the phone. She sat for a moment, thinking. It was too much of a coincidence, the Hempsteads losing the same beige Ford that followed them Saturday, and now the alien landing on their land. She didn't believe in coincidences.

The phone rang and she picked it up. "Komack."

"Kate," Straker's voice said. "Paul and I are over at the Hempstead farm. Do me a favor will you?"

"Sure, what?"

"Go down to Alec's office and pick up the Russian reports on the Angel operation and bring them out here."

"Ed, are you sure you want me to do this? Those are highly classified documents."

"Colonel Komack, I want you to follow orders, and that was not a request."

"Very well, sir. I should be out there in about an hour."

"Good," he said, very curtly.

The line went dead. She was glad he couldn't see her face. She was utterly furious. He knew regulations, he'd written them. He also knew how she felt about being given orders. She was a member of SHADO, but she wasn't a SHADO operative. Her rank was a job title, meaningless in the world she really worked in, running SHADO's cover company. She wasn't in the chain of command. It wasn't insubordination, it was simply the way it was.

Komack was suddenly filled with an ominous foreboding as she called and arranged for her aunt to pick Esther up from the baby-sitter. Then she dialed Natiroff's number.

\* \* \*

They waited, but the Ufo didn't move. The sun set in a glorious blaze of orange and pink. The temperature began to drop.

"What are they waiting for?" Green asked. She had two cups of coffee in her hands. She handed one to Foster and the other to Straker.

Foster grinned. "To answer your question: What are they waiting for? A - reinforcements, B- bad weather to negate radar, or C- the non-functioning of Earth defenses, namely SHADO Control."

"Very funny, Paul" Straker complained mildly.

"Then, what are they waiting for?" Foster asked, still grinning. He still wasn't buying into Straker's line of thinking.

"I wish I knew," Straker admitted. He sipped the black coffee and grimaced at the bitter flavor. He preferred his coffee light and sweet, but the coffee was hot at least. He drank it anyway, glad of the warmth.

A dark blue Mercedes wagon turned into the gravel driveway to the farmhouse. The car stopped and a tall woman in a dark coat got out. She pulled out a briefcase and locked the car door before stepping back to look over the house. Then, she disappeared around the corner of the building.

Straker peered at the figure through binoculars as she came around the far side of the house and stepped onto the front porch. The front door opened and light flared briefly around the woman.

"Kate?" Straker murmured to himself in puzzlement.

"Kate?" Foster repeated. "What's she doing there?"

"I have no idea," Straker said, handing the binoculars to Foster.

\* \* \*

The front door opened to show Alec Freeman standing in the living room, smoking a cigarette. He appeared to be alone. "You made good time," he said.

"Not much traffic."

"You brought the papers?"

"As per Commander Straker's orders," she said, emphasizing the last word. Freeman didn't seem to catch her meaning, her anger. That wasn't like him. Normally, he could sense her moods even better than Straker could. And Straker was getting quite adept at judging her emotional status. But it had been Straker who'd given her the orders, or was it?

Freeman held his hand out for the briefcase. She gave it to him.

"Where is Commander Straker?" she asked, keeping her voice cool.

"Right here," Straker's double announced. He was in the doorway, left shoulder leaning against the door frame.

"If that's all, I'll be heading back home," she said, suddenly anxious to be gone. Something was wrong here, terribly wrong.

"Not so fast, Colonel," the blond man said. "I have something to show you, and a few questions I think you can help answer."

"Questions?" she asked. Her heart was pounding. The man in the doorway looked and sounded exactly like Straker, but it wasn't. She knew to her soul's core that the man in front of her was not her lover. This man frightened her. Straker had never frightened her, not in all the years she'd known him.

The man crossed the room to a closed door and unlocked it. He beckoned her to come closer. She turned to look back at Freeman. He was holding a gun and the grin on his face wasn't a friendly one.

Freeman gestured with the gun for her to go through the door onto the stairs beyond. She obeyed, Straker's double following right behind her down the steps. There was another door at the bottom, to a small room built into the corner of the cellar. The double grabbed her arm, then unlocked the door. He shoved her into the dark room and followed her in. She heard the key turn in the lock.

"Turn around," he ordered. She did as she was told.

The room stank of unwashed bodies, sweat, other things she couldn't quite place. The double lit a match, taking the glass cover off an oil lamp. He lit the lamp, but didn't put the cover back. The naked flame glittered bright along the bare walls, the rough wooden table the lamp sat on. There was a syringe and needle resting on the bare wood, along with several other shiny surgical-type instruments, a coil of thin rope and a hand gun.

She looked around and saw a cot in the far corner of the room. She could barely make out the shape huddled under the rough blanket. It moved and the blanket pulled away from a pair of muscular arms. The hands were tied to the iron bedposts. The figure moved again, turning its head.

She stifled a gasp of horror as she recognized Alec Freeman. He looked horrible, face bruised, three days' growth of brown stubble on his cheeks and chin. His eyes were sunk in his head and were fever-bright as he looked at her. She couldn't tell if he even recognized her.

She turned back to their captor, the one who looked and sounded so much like her lover. The match had almost burned to his fingers, but he didn't put it out. He was staring at the flame. "I find fire fascinating," the double said. "It gives such exquisite pain." The flame guttered out against his fingers.

"What do you want?" Komack asked. She tried to keep the tremor out of her voice.

"Answers to some questions."

"What questions?"

"Questions I doubt you have answers for."

Freeman began to struggle against the bindings on his wrists. The double smiled. It was a cold, vicious smile. He was enjoying this.

"I see you've joined us," he said conversationally to Freeman. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, shook out one cigarette and lit it from the oil lamp. He took a casual puff on it before walking over to Freeman and placing the cigarette in the other man's mouth.

"It's a nasty habit you know, my love," the double said, still quite conversationally. "You really should stop."

Freeman spat the cigarette out and it fell to the mattress. A faint curl of smoke curled up from the sheet.

"Why don't I start now?" Freeman managed to get out. The double smiled and picked up the still lit cigarette, taking another puff on it. He turned to Komack, toying with the white cylinder in his hand.

"Take off your clothes," he ordered.

She froze. He was by her side in one step, hand grabbing her hair, forcing her down. She gasped in pain.

"I said, take off your clothes."

"She doesn't know anything," Freeman croaked out. "Let her go."

"Maybe I don't believe you."

"Let her go and I'll tell you all you want to know," Freeman said. There was desperation in his voice.

"No!" Komack said through the pain. The double still had a grip on her hair, pulling her around so she was on her knees, her back to his legs.

"Tell me what I want to know, and I won't kill her."

"Alec, no!" Komack cried. She reached up to free her hair. The double stubbed the lit cigarette against the back of her hand. She jerked back, stifling a screech of outraged pain.

"Take off your clothes now, or I will kill you in the most horrible way I can imagine, and make him watch me do it," the double hissed. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I won't."

He loosened his grip so she could stand. She found she was shaking as she started undoing the buttons on her silk blouse.

"You won't get away with this," she said, trying to keep control of her voice as she disrobed. She was hoping to stall, to keep him occupied, to make a connection that might save their lives.

"Oh?"

"SHADO will spot you in a minute. You're nothing like Ed Straker."

"That's where you're wrong," he said. "I am exactly like him, genetically, and in the basic psychological programming. The one, the only, difference between us is he is subject to irrational emotional weaknesses and I am not."

She had stripped down to her lingerie. Her suit and blouse were an untidy heap on the bare floor. She shivered in the cold.

"Everything," he said.

Her bra and panties joined the pile.

The double looked her over as though she was an animal he was thinking of buying or a prime piece of meat. He motioned with his hand for her to turn around. She did so. Before she completed the turn, he grabbed her hair again, forcing her to her knees. He looped the silk rope around her neck, tying her wrists to her ankles, behind her back. The rope cut into her throat, making it hard to breathe. The concrete floor was rough and scraped her knees.

"Alec, my love," the double said. "I would advise you to start talking to me now, because in a few minutes, I doubt I'll be able to hear you."

\* \* \*

"Let me have the keys to your car," Straker said.

Foster handed him the keys. "What to you plan to do?"

"Find out what's going on."

"You're not going alone," Foster protested.

"I don't see there's a choice, Colonel," Straker said. "One of us has to remain in command of this operation."

"Then let me go," Foster offered.

Straker shook his head. "You stay here."

Foster opened his mouth to begin another protest.

"That's an order," Straker interrupted before he could get a word out. "The aliens don't want me, personally. They know SHADO will keep functioning without me. They do want SHADO out of the way, any way they can."

"You are still their primary target," Foster said.

"Maybe so, but I will not let them, or anyone else, dictate what I can and cannot do to do my job," Straker said. "And right now, my job is to find out why two senior SHADO officers and classified SHADO documents have come out to a known Ufo termination site, and that is what I am going to do."

"And the Ufo?"

"If it moves, blast it, no matter what."

"Yes, sir," Foster agreed, reluctantly.

As soon as the Corvette drove off, Green crouched down beside Foster.

"That pond is awfully close to the house. If that Ufo is in the pond..." Green said.

"It'll likely take the house out when we take out the Ufo, yes," Foster completed.

"Colonel Freeman and Colonel Komack are both down there."

"Yes," Foster agreed. "And so will Commander Straker."

\* \* \*

Emmaline Hempstead pushed aside the heavy living room drapes to peer outside at the red Corvette that drove up to park beside the Ford.

"Isn't that Foster's Corvette?" she asked the Freeman double.

He looked out the window. "Yes, but that's Straker getting out."

"Straker? Commander Straker?" Thomas Hempstead said. "He knows. He knows she's here. And if he knows, so does SHADO."

"Not necessarily," the double said.

The doorbell rang. Mrs. Hempstead wiped her sweaty palms against her apron and opened the door.

"Mrs. Hempstead, my name is Ed Straker, I'm with the Air Ministry. I believe some of my colleagues are here, Mister Freeman and Miss Komack?"

"Oh, yes, Mister Straker, come in, please," Mrs. Hempstead said, gesturing him to step

inside. He did and she closed the door behind him. "I was just starting tea," she said, hurrying away toward the kitchen. She motioned for her husband to follow her. He did so.

Freeman stepped forward.

"You had me followed."

"Why should I do that?" Straker asked. "No, we've been watching this place for evidence of that satellite, remember? We were told you showed up here just as they were getting ready to move out."

"You've called off the search?" Freeman asked.

"Well, there's no real evidence it came down here. That pond's not deep enough to hide much," Straker pointed out. "We must have made an error in figuring its termination area. We'll find it. It's running out of time."

"You have it all figured out, don't you?"

"I've always been good at things like that, figuring out puzzles," Straker said. "You know that, Alec."

\* \* \*

The imposter has stuffed a gag in Komack's mouth to keep her from screaming. Her back was bleeding and Freeman could smell burnt hair and flesh. It was all he could do to keep from retching.

He heard voices upstairs and he shivered at hearing one particular voice - Straker, not the imposter, the real one. Freeman began to work harder at the ropes that tied his hands. His wrists were slick with blood, but he didn't care. Straker was in the house and the imposter, the fake, was standing, waiting, holding the gun. Freeman prayed that his friend had enough sense not to open the door, not to investigate the basement.

\* \* \*

Straker heard the U.F.O. winding up its generators. He looked around the room for cover, taking his eyes off the double for just a moment. When he looked back, the double had pulled a gun.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

"No, I suppose not," Straker said. Inside, he berated himself for being so stupid. He knew his tradecraft was bad. He hadn't realized how bad. He'd been caught by someone he knew was dangerous by a simple, stupid slip.

"How did they do it?" he said, keeping his voice calm. Maybe he could buy time.

"Do what?"

"Make you so much like Alec Freeman?"

"I am Alec Freeman."

"No, I don't think so. I know Alec, and you're not him."

The double grinned. A cold, hateful smile. The smile of a madman, a psychotic, a terrorist.

"Exactly how well do you know him?"

"Well enough to know the difference."

"I'm sure you do," the double said, taking a step closer.

The engine whine was louder. A golden light glimmered through the drawn drapes. The U.F.O. was taking off.

\* \* \*

At SHADO Control, SID's voice rang out: "Red alert, red alert, U.F.O. relocated area G-12, reference AA29."

Virginia Lake checked the reference against the map on the table. The coordinates were right in the middle of the pond on the Hempstead farm.

"Get me Sky-1," she ordered.

\* \* \*

Green already had the information from SID and the mobile radar. There was no way the alien ship was going to get away this time.

"Have Ufo ranging and targeting set," Grayson announced.

"Fire at will," Green ordered. Two missiles hit the Ufo amidships. The explosives went off and the Ufo teetered in its path, dropping toward the ground. It plowed into one of the sheds, its momentum carrying it toward the farmhouse.

\* \* \*

Freeman could hear the explosions, the change in engine pitch as the U.F.O. dropped back to Earth. He jerked his hands and they came free. Freeman managed to get to his feet, striking the imposter across the face. The man who looked so much like Straker fell to the dirt floor and lay still. Freeman grabbed the knife from the table and cut the rope that tied Komack's hands and feet together.

She managed to get to her feet, grabbed her coat and helped him get up the stairs. He opened the door to the main floor and saw Straker, the real Ed Straker, standing there.

Then, the farmhouse exploded as the fatally wounded alien ship careened into it.

Freeman couldn't really remember getting out of the ruins of the house. He had vague images of smoke and explosions, of Straker pulling him to his feet, carrying his weight when his own legs refused to support him. He knew Komack was on his other side, lending her own burned and bruised body as a crutch. Their bodies were warm, so very warm, beside him. "Come on, Alec, help us," he heard Straker's voice telling him. "We can't stay here."

Freeman gathered his feet under him and let the voices urge him on. He felt himself slip to the cold ground as his companions let go of him. He laid still, trying to gather his strength.

The ground was so cold it hurt. Freeman knew he was in shock and going into hypothermia. He didn't even have the strength to shiver. Some small part of his mind wondered if he'd been hurt when the Ufo crashed, and if he had, why he didn't feel any pain besides the cold.

He heard Komack sobbing, and from a far distance, Straker calling to him.

\* \* \*

Freeman was very still and pale, laying on the frozen grass beside one of the few walls left standing. Komack's face was wet with tears, but she stared, unseeing, into the darkness as she knelt on the far side of Freeman's body. Both of them were in shock, that much Straker recognized. He couldn't tell how badly injured either of them was, except that Freeman's physical state was far worse than hers. There'd been blood on his hand when he let go of his friend.

There was movement from the ruins of the farmhouse. Straker motioned for Komack to get down, to take cover. When she didn't move, he grabbed her arm and pulled her down to the ground. She gasped in pain, then froze as the footsteps came closer.

Two impossibly familiar men picked their way around the rubble. Their faces and clothes were covered with dust and soot. They were both armed.

"Are they all dead?" the Freeman double asked. There was a crack, like a piece of dry wood breaking.

"They are now," the other one said.

The three mobiles poked their noses over the crest of the hill and stopped. Their searchlights picked out pieces of the ruined house.

The blond double stood and turned to look up at the lights. Straker saw him clearly for the first time. It was like looking into a mirror. No, not a mirror. They were more alike even than that.

The double's eyes were like chips of blue-gray crystal as he assessed the situation. Do I look that cold and forbidding, Straker wondered to himself. The double didn't seem to notice the blood on his face.

Foster was coming down from the hill, a pistol one hand, a flashlight in the other. Grayson was with him, also armed and carrying a flashlight. Their faces were shadowed. Straker couldn't read their expressions.

"Hold it," Foster said, coming closer. "Hands on top of your heads."

Straker did as he was told. The position made his shoulder hurt, but there was no helping it. It wasn't smart to argue with someone who had a gun pointed at you and Foster was taking appropriate precautions. He stood, so Foster could see him more clearly. Komack and Freeman were still hidden behind the broken wall.

"Foster, he is an alien imposter. Kill him," the double ordered, ignoring Foster's instructions. Straker was a little surprised at how different the voice sounded. Of course, you hear your own voice from inside your head, not as others hear you. But still, he wondered at how imperious the order sounded, how demanding the speaker seemed. It wasn't the voice of someone he would want giving him orders.

"No, sir," Foster told the double.

"Colonel, I gave you a direct order," the look-alike was saying. "Kill him!"

"No, sir," Foster said. "I won't. And until we get this straightened out, consider yourself, and Mister Freeman here, under arrest. Please, hand over your guns."

"You're finished, Foster," the Freeman's double said.

"Your gun, sir," Foster said, holding out his left hand to the double. Straker's double hefted the pistol in his hand, as if preparing to hand it over.

Under cover of the wall, Komack got her feet under her and began to move in a low crouch. There was something grim and deadly in her eyes as she headed for the far end of the wall.

"Foster, you have no idea what you're doing," Freeman's double said.

"I have an idea," Foster assured him. "And we'll get this whole matter straightened out at headquarters."

"You're a fool, Foster," the double spat. "And you don't have the guts to pull the trigger, I do."

The double raised his pistol in Straker's direction. Straker dropped his hands and steeled himself for the killing shot. His opposite was too close to miss.

"Drop it, sir, now," Grayson ordered, gun held in both hands for stability.

A shot rang out. A dark stain grew across Grayson's chest as he dropped to the frozen ground.

Smoke curled from the barrel of the gun in the hand of Freeman's double. It was pointed at Foster now. "Drop your gun, Foster," Freeman's double ordered.

Foster looked down at Grayson. His eyes had gone wide with horror as he turned back to the look-alikes.

"SHADO dies here," the Freeman double said.

"Killing us won't kill SHADO," Straker said. "We know about your plan to infiltrate and we've already taken steps to keep you from doing anything."

"You're lying," the Straker double said.

"Am I?"

"It doesn't matter. You're dead." The double raised his pistol again and started to pull back the trigger.

"Ed!" Komack screamed. She was standing at the far end of the shattered wall, hands out of sight. Her eyes were cold with hatred.

The blond look-alike shifted his attention to the auburn haired woman and his expression hardened even more.

The pieces to the nightmare coalesced in Straker's memory. In the dream, he had lost her here. He started to pull his gun from its holster under his jacket.

Two shots rang out from Foster's pistol. Freeman's double fell to the ground, clutching his thigh. Straker's double dropped his gun. His right hand was bleeding. He dove for the gun he'd dropped, rolled and came up with it in his left hand. A shot exploded and that double fell back. Freeman's double was struggling to get up. His gun was in his hand and he pulled the trigger.

Straker managed to get off a single shot before he dove for cover.

Another shot was fired and Freeman's double finally collapsed.

Straker turned to see where the other two shots had come from.

Kate Komack was still as one of the pieces of rubble. There was an automatic pistol in her hands. She was staring at the two bodies in the rubble.

"Kate?"

Her head moved and she looked at him. There was no life in her eyes, no emotion in her face. It was as if she didn't see him, didn't recognize him. He stepped through the rubble and took the gun from her hands. Recognition finally came into her eyes. She started shaking. Tears traced dirt lines down her face.

Suddenly, there was an oppressive whine increasing in pitch and volume. The barn exploded as a second alien ship lifted off.

Straker grabbed Komack's arm, pulling her to the ground beside Freeman once again. Foster dove for cover in the rubble.

The first plasma beam hit mobile three. It exploded without getting off a shot. Mobile two managed to fire a missile at the alien. It hit home, but the alien stayed airborne. The second plasma burst took out mobile two.

There was a roar in the sky that could be heard above the flames that engulfed the two mobiles, above the whine of the U.F.O. An improbably bulbous jet cruised in at high speed. It fired on the alien ship. The U.F.O. veered away before firing back.

The shot of green plasma missed the jet.

Sky-1's second shot didn't. The U.F.O. exploded in midair.

Green and radar officer Brahms were out of Mobile one almost before the pieces of the U.F.O. hit the ground. Green motioned Brahms to check out the other two mobiles.

"Paul, Alec needs help," Straker instructed softly. Komack was still shaking.

Straker was heartened to see Foster following his instructions. The young officer came over to where Freeman was laying in the ground.

"Oh dear god," Foster murmured, as he began to check Freeman's condition. After a moment, Foster hurried over to his car, still parked in the gravel driveway. The side windows had been blown out by the blast and the red paint on the hood and roof was scorched. Foster

reached inside and pulled out the car-phone. By some miracle, that still worked.

Straker turned his attention back to Komack.

"They're dead?" she asked softly. He took her hands in his. Her hands were bitterly cold.

"Yes," he said.

"I wanted to kill him. I wanted him dead. I wanted him in hell."

"I know" Straker said.

"It could have been you."

"But it wasn't."

"He hurt Alec, and when Alec wouldn't cooperate..." Her green eyes went wide with the horror of her memories.

"I understand," Straker said. He did understand the terror of being held prisoner, of not knowing what moment would be his last. He understood, maybe too well, the terror of being at the mercy of someone you couldn't possibly mollify.

"You don't have to talk about it right now if you don't want to." He wasn't sure she heard him.

"He was evil. He hurt Alec so bad."

"Kathryn, I know," Straker said, just loudly enough to be heard.

Green and Brahm were finished, waiting. From the looks on their faces, Straker knew there were no survivors in the rest of the mobile crew.

"The plasma bursts," Green said. "It must have been instantaneous."

Freeman groaned. Straker knelt down beside him. "Alec?"

"SHADO's sending out a med-evac copter. It should be here in a few minutes," Foster told him.

"Did we make it?" Freeman mumbled.

"Of course we did," Straker assured him. Freeman's eyes closed.

\* \* \*

Straker hitched a ride on the med-evac copter back to headquarters. Foster and Green had volunteered to oversee the site cleanup.

The arrangement was satisfactory as far as Straker was concerned. It would give Green some experience dealing with the aftermath of her normal duties. The woman was showing promise and could expect further cross training assignments in the future.

Komack had refused to get on a stretcher. She huddled in a corner, one of the copter's blankets wrapped around her, staring into space. She shuddered away from Straker's touch. He let his hand drop away from her.

The paramedic team had already started working on Freeman. They murmured amongst themselves as they started the intravenous drips and checked his condition.

The team leader, Choptki, turned to Straker. "Commander, who did this?"

"Aliens," Straker answered. "They're dead now."

"Good," Choptki replied. "By the way, sir, we're heading back to HQ."

"Wouldn't Mayland be better?" Straker asked.

"Normally yes, sir," Choptki answered. "However SHADO security wants the three of you at headquarters as soon as possible."

The copter landed in the largest parking lot of Harlington-Straker studios, near the main office building. The night gate guard barely flickered an eyelash at the sight. Harlington-Straker was known in the neighborhood for their peculiar comings and goings.

Security Chief Natiroff, General Henderson and SHADO psychiatrist Doug Jackson were

waiting inside the main entrance-office.

"What's wrong now?" Straker wondered aloud.

"Good evening to you too, Commander," Henderson commented with a glimmer of a smile.

Straker simply shook his head. He was tired and he wasn't in the mood for Henderson's questionable humor. Komack hobbled over to the chair at the end of the desk and sat down, watching.

Henderson went on. "Colonel Lake let me know about the possible compromise in SHADO's identification protocols. She's been working with Natiroff's team to get the mess straightened out."

"Yes," Straker said. "But why does that bring you out here at this time of night?"

"Commander, we've managed to positively clear everyone whose records were affected at Headquarters," Doctor Jackson said. "With the exception of yourself, Colonel Komack, Colonel Freeman, Colonel Foster, and Captain Green."

"So now we have to go through your tests to be cleared?" Straker looked from the slender psychiatrist to the old general. He couldn't read their expressions.

"Yes," Henderson said.

"General, I don't think Colonel Freeman will last that long," Straker said. "Kate needs medical attention, too."

"Then, we have a serious problem on our hands," Henderson said.

Jackson went over to the stretcher and did a quick check on Freeman. He spoke with Choptki in low tones.

"We can't permit them or you to enter headquarters without positive identification for security," Henderson continued.

Straker had been so concerned with retrieving Freeman, of destroying the Ufos, he hadn't considered the damage Freeman's double had already done in the few hours he'd been in headquarters. Obviously, the damage had been more serious than he'd originally been told if it was getting this reaction from Henderson.

SHADO had always been a bit paranoid. It came with the territory, the mission. Straker understood Henderson's reasoning, his argument. A few hours before, he would have insisted on these same precautions himself. Not now. He had two injured officers who needed medical attention, attention that SHADO was in a position to give.

He considered how he was going to phrase his next statement. "What if I offer myself as hostage against their behavior pending confirmation of identity?"

"Ed, no," Komack whispered from her seat by the desk.

"We could put him in a security cell," Jackson suggested with the faintest hint of a smile.

"If you feel that's necessary," Straker said. His fists were balled to keep his hands from shaking. Even the thought of being trapped in one of the eight-foot concrete cubes was enough to trigger the beginnings of a panic attack.

"Uncle Jim, you can't do that," Komack protested.

"My dear Kate, you have no say in this," Henderson said.

"I have no say?" Komack repeated in disbelief. "We've been through hell tonight and now you tell me I have no say?"

"Kate, please don't," Straker said. "We can't afford the time."

He was gratified to see her sit back in the chair, although from her murderous expression, he was probably in as much trouble as Henderson and Jackson.

Henderson gave them both a bemused look before turning to Jackson. The Hungarian born psychiatrist nodded his head.

"Your offer is accepted," Henderson said, going to the desk. He opened the silver cigarette box. "Henderson."

"Voice print identification positive, Henderson, James L." the disembodied computer voice announced. The old man reached over and flipped the switch that controlled the now unlocked the elevator mechanism. The room began to move downwards to SHADO headquarters.

"Now what?" Straker asked. He had to make a conscious effort to unclench his fists. Jackson was watching him like he was some particularly rare animal.

"We take care of what needs to be taken care off," Natiroff offered. The elevator stopped at the bottom and the doors slid open. Two blue uniformed security guards were stationed outside the door, guns drawn.

Natiroff nodded for the medical team to head out of the office. Jackson took Komack's arm. She shook him off with a glare, limping after the medical team. Jackson shrugged and followed her out.

"Come along," Henderson said, taking hold of Straker's left upper arm. Henderson had a surprisingly strong grip for a man in his seventies. Straker's expression tightened at the sudden pain in his shoulder.

Henderson noticed. "You didn't say anything about getting hurt."

"It happened last Friday," Straker explained. "Jackson and Harris both know about it."

"Oh, yes," Henderson commented. They walked out of the office, followed by Natiroff. Straker started to turn to the right, but Henderson didn't.

"Security's that way," Straker pointed out.

"Yes, it is," Henderson agreed, heading in the opposite direction, keeping his grip on Straker's arm. The two security guards fell in behind them.

Instead of the security section, they stopped at the commander's office. The doors opened automatically and Henderson, Straker and Natiroff went inside. The two guards took position outside the door.

A young oriental woman in a security uniform was seated at the conference table, waiting. She stood as they entered. Straker recognized her as Lieutenant Izutsu.

"Commander Straker, if you would please," she said, indicating another chair at the table. There was an ink pad and paper on the table along with several files and a small personal computer coupled to a flatbed scanner.

Straker sat in the indicated chair.

Henderson went around the desk and sat in the commander's brown leather chair. He leaned forward, elbows on the desktop as he watched the procedure.

Izutsu quickly and expertly used the ink pad and paper to take Straker's fingerprints. She scanned the prints into the computer and sat in front of the screen as the image appeared on the monitor. She started taking notes on the writing pad beside the keyboard.

"Well?" Henderson asked after what seemed like an eternity.

"I have twenty-seven points of similarity," Izutsu said.

"And what does that mean?"

"These prints would classify as a match in any criminal court in the world."

"Natiroff?" Henderson asked.

The Russian nodded. "I concur. We have an excellent match."

Henderson smiled and stood up from the desk. "Congratulations, Commander. You passed."

"On just fingerprints?" Straker asked.

"Not just the fingerprints," Henderson explained. "You and Kate both passed the first test upstairs."

"And what was that?"

"Emotional response," Henderson said. "Jackson and Shroeder both believe the aliens are lacking the 'softer' emotions. They're programmed out of them, somehow."

"And I offered..."

"You offered to put yourself in jeopardy so that Alec and Kate could get help."

"And Kate got upset when she thought..."

"Exactly," Henderson agreed. "It was Jackson's idea, really. We figured it was unlikely the aliens could duplicate your reactions to that type of threat."

Henderson paused, watching. Finally: "You look tired, Ed. You should get some rest."

"It's been a long day."

Henderson nodded, reached out and flipped the switch that opened the office door. "You don't mind giving her my apologies, do you?"

"Not at all, General," Straker said, walking past the two guards.

\* \* \*

Jackson was waiting in the hallway outside the medical center.

"How are they?" Straker asked.

"As well as can be expected, Commander, considering," Jackson said. "I've given Colonel Komack something to help her sleep, assuming she took it, of course."

"Of course."

"Her injuries were quite painful, but ultimately not very serious," the little psychiatrist explained. "She should heal with very little physical scarring."

"Physically," Straker said. "And mentally?"

"That is much more difficult to say," Jackson admitted. "However, we are getting pretty good at treating post-trauma shock. It is an occupational hazard around here, after all."

"What about Colonel Freeman?"

Jackson scratched behind his ear. "Frazer and Harris have the Colonel in surgery now. When the Ufo exploded, he was hit by shrapnel. He's lost a good deal of blood. Also, it seems his captors were far harsher to him than to her. His injuries were quite extensive - burns, bruises, drugs, severe dehydration. Assuming he survives the surgery, he should recover, in time."

"Thank you, Doctor," Straker said. He was very quiet and his face was gray with exhaustion, but Jackson knew that Straker wouldn't surrender to his own needs until everyone else was tended to. He was quite predictable that way.

"She's in room A," Jackson volunteered, nodding in the direction of the suite of medical center observation/treatment rooms.

He kept his smile to himself until the door to room A had closed behind his commanding officer. It wouldn't do to tarnish his reputation as SHADO's mad scientist, even to Commander Straker.

\* \* \*

"I see you're finally awake," Straker said, coming into Freeman's room in SHADO's medical center the next morning. Foster was with him. So was Kate Komack. Her feet were

bandaged and she limped, but she was ambulatory.

Freeman still looked wretched, but he looked far better than he had when he was found.

"How are you feeling?" Straker asked.

"Horrible," Freeman said. He was hooked up to several medical monitors and intravenous lines. He obviously hated it.

"Harris and Jackson say you should be out of here in a couple more days," Foster said.

"Yeah," Freeman commented.

"You almost died, you know," Straker said. "Shrapnel wounds, severe dehydration and we have no idea what drugs they were giving you. We were lucky to have gotten you out of there alive."

Freeman's expression went dark. "Maybe you shouldn't have."

"What do you mean?" Straker asked. Freeman looked down at his hands, rubbing the bandages that covered where he'd scraped his wrists raw getting loose from the ropes. He wouldn't meet Straker's eyes.

Straker had a hunch what was bothering his friend. He turned to Foster "Paul, if you don't mind?"

Foster looked from one man to the other. "Sure." He nodded to Freeman as he left the room. "I'll go check on how Major Graham's getting along with figuring out how that Ufo got past our detection net. See you later." He closed the door behind him.

"Alec, what's wrong?" Straker asked.

Freeman wouldn't look up at him.

"Are you worried because they made you talk?" Straker asked quietly. Freeman's horrified expression told him he'd hit the mark.

"How do you know that?"

"You weren't the only one down in that cellar, remember," Straker reminded him. "Kate told us what happened after she got there."

"She doesn't know everything that happened. You have no idea what he was capable of, what he did."

"I have an idea," Straker assured him.

"No, you don't. He said he was exactly like you, genetically and in psychological programming. He..." Freeman faltered, then he went on. "He was a monster. But worse than that, I could see you being just like him. Even when he ... It could have been you."

"We're all capable of being monsters, Alec. It all depends on the choices we make, whether or not we give in to hate, take the easy way to hell."

"What happens now?" Freeman asked softly.

"Nothing," Straker said.

"Nothing?"

"If you're worried about charges, there are none. Isn't that okay with you?"

"No, it isn't okay. I talked. I told him everything he wanted to know." Freeman's voice was low and full of self-loathing.

"Under the circumstances, I don't see that you had much of a choice. You probably saved Kate's life. Besides, they're all dead, the two Ufos were destroyed. Nothing got out."

"Would you have talked?"

"Yes, if it meant protecting someone else, especially someone I cared about," Straker admitted. "None of us are immune from that kind of threat. That's why terrorism works. We got careless, and got caught. It's a mistake we're not likely to make again for a long time."

Freeman was silent for a long moment. Finally, his expression cleared. There was sadness rather than self-hatred now.

"What were they?" Freeman asked.

"Clones," Komack answered. "Genetically identical to the original, namely, the two of you. What we haven't figured out is how the aliens forced them to full growth so quickly. Everything we know requires a host mother and a normal gestation and growth process."

"Obviously, the aliens are ahead of Earth in that science as well," Straker said. "Our medical people haven't quite finished the autopsies. Apparently, the owners of the farmhouse were fully human. We matched their tissue to a missing American couple named Jenkins. Their teenage daughter was taken by a Ufo about three years ago."

"Revenge?"

"We'll never know," Straker said. "Maybe they agreed to cooperate to get their daughter back." There was a long pause. "Harris wants you to rest. He was talking about a couple weeks of light duty, maybe even sending you out to the research center for two weeks."

"Lucky me," Freeman said.

"Well, try to enjoy your rest. The rest of us have work to do," Straker said with a grin. "By the way, I remember something about a report you were working on. Any chance I can see it any time soon?"

"Is tomorrow morning soon enough?"

"Well, I've waited this long for it, another day won't hurt, I suppose. Oh, by the way, Esther's birthday party is still scheduled for Saturday."

"Toy planes and stuffed bears, right?" Freeman said.

"Right," Komack agreed with a smile.

\* \* \*

"Natiroff wants everyone in Headquarters to start reviewing their basic training, anti-surveillance, self-protection, that sort of thing," Straker told Komack as they made their way out of SHADO headquarters up to the film studios. "You were right. We need to be more careful. Not all of SHADO's enemies have green faces."

"Sometimes it's not very comforting to have been proved right," she said.

They left the elevator and headed for one of the building exits. A slender, middle-aged man with light brown hair stood near the door, speaking with an older woman. His voice carried well and there was something very familiar about the timbre of it. Straker realized the man sounded very much like the clone.

Komack froze, her face going white.

"Kate, would you like me to have someone drive you home?"

She shook her head, her breath coming in gasps. "I close my eyes and that monster is there, talking, gloating."

Straker stayed silent, waiting. After a long moment, her breathing became more even, more controlled.

"I don't regret killing him, you know," she said softly. "Does that make me a monster, too?"

"No, no more than a policeman is for having killed in the line of duty," Straker said. He caressed her hair. She flinched away from his touch. He let his hand drop. "It takes time to get over it."

"How long?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "But eventually, you'll find you've spent a day, a week, a

month, without thinking about it, without it bothering you. The psychiatric section is getting good at helping our people get through these things."

"Alec was wrong," she said. "That clone was nothing like you except in looks."

The actor saw them and excused himself from his companion. He came over to Straker and Komack. "Miss Komack?"

He held his hand out to Straker. "You must be Mister Straker. I'm Ed Bishop." The two men shook hands. The actor was a taller than Straker, but with a similar build. There was a vague familial similarity in his facial structure and his accent was much the same, northern seaboard American. But that's where the resemblance ended. The stance and the body language were entirely different.

The actor looked at Komack and a worried expression came into his face. "Miss Komack, we heard you had an accident last night. Are you okay?"

She smiled. "Yes, thank you. Just a few bruises and minor burns. I was very lucky."

"It must have been terrifying. If you'd like to reschedule our appointment for later, I'll certainly understand."

"Thank you," Komack said. "I'll have Miss Ealand get back with you."

"No problem." He had a charming smile. He turned back to Straker. "It was nice meeting you finally, Mister Straker."

"Mister Bishop."

The actor returned to his waiting companion.

"Seems like a nice fellow," Straker commented. "But I think Newall's wrong about the resemblance."

"He is a lot like you," Komack said. "He's a very sweet man who is capable of acting the part of a horrible monster, if the script calls for it. I think you're better looking, though." She took his hand and placed it against her cheek. "Let's go home."