

Beth

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The party celebrating Colonel Alec Freeman's last night as a bachelor was going strong. This was the second biggest social event of the year for SHADO operatives. The biggest of course, would be Alec and Beth's wedding, which would be broadcast to all of the alien defense organization's facilities, so everyone could share their moment.

Commander Ed Straker stood in a corner of the room, trying to blend into the shadows while watching Alec move about the room. His second-in-command was slapping Captain Peter Carlin on the back; his laughter rang out over something Carlin had said. Smiling, Straker glanced around the other faces in the room and thought how pleased they all were for Alec. No matter what their rank, they were all comfortable in Alec's presence. That was something that couldn't be said about the way they felt in *his* presence, which explained why he was in the corner. He didn't want to spoil anyone's evening. He had planned to leave early, but when Alec had realized his intent, his face had fallen and Ed knew he would be staying. After all, Colonel Lake would call if he were needed at HQ.

While Straker had been lost in thought, Alec had made his way to his side. "What are you doing here, my friend?"

Straker smiled, pleased to have this time with Freeman. "You know me, Alec, I'm a people-watcher. It's a great party."

Freeman grinned mischievously. "It should be - considering what you paid for it."

"Money is no object where friends are concerned. You know Paul Foster did most of the organizing."

"Ah, yes. Somehow I didn't think the dancer was your idea. You know, Ed, I'm marrying a beautiful young woman tomorrow and I owe it all to you."

"Well, I'd certainly like to take credit for your future bliss, but how do you figure that?"

"If you could have driven worth a darn, the UFO wouldn't have hit us when they fired on us, I wouldn't have lost my vision and needed surgery, hence needing a private nurse. If Beth hadn't spent all that time nursing me through my convalescence - something you arranged over the good Dr. Jackson's objections - she would never have gotten to know the real me and I would still be a lonely old bachelor. Yep, I owe it all to your poor driving skills."

Straker chuckled. "You were never a *lonely* bachelor, Alec. And I'm not at all sure I did Beth a favor. Maybe I should call and have a word with her, make sure she knows what she's getting herself into while she still has time to change her mind." He moved as if to put his coffee cup down.

"Oh, no, you don't! Beth has me on the straight and narrow and she knows it. Who'd have thought I'd be sober as a judge at my own party? I'd walk through fire for that woman, Ed."

"I know you would, Alec. You two are good together. I'm glad for you - for *both* of you."

Alec cleared his throat. "Listen, Ed, as soon as we're back from the honeymoon Beth and I want you to come to dinner."

Ed knew Alec was going to go out of his way to assure him that there would still be a

place in his life for Ed after his marriage. Ed also knew first-hand the strain their particular line of work could put on a relationship. Since Beth was a nurse with SHADO, Alec wouldn't have to lie to her about where he was and what he was doing, but the hours were still long and unpredictable and Alec would still have to spend some time on Moonbase. Ed wanted to do everything in his power to ensure his friend's marriage was long and happy.

Ed's tone was upbeat. "Somehow, I doubt that Beth will want 'the Commander' coming to dinner while she's trying to set up a new household. Don't force me on the poor woman; she might have second thoughts about what being Mrs. Alec Freeman involves. We'll get together soon enough."

Alec wasn't having any of it. "Nonsense. After all the stories I've told her about you, she isn't intimidated by you at all!"

Ed let out a groan. "You didn't." He smiled at the gleam in Alec's eyes. "Of course you did. Well, I'll have time to straighten it out on the way to the church tomorrow. I'm still to pick her up at the same time?"

"Yes, indeed. You know, my friend, I wouldn't trust my bride-to-be with just anyone. I know you. You'll get her to the church on time and prevent her from coming to her senses and leaving me standing at the altar."

The two men laughed.

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The next morning, Straker picked Beth up at the appointed time. She had already loaded her luggage into her car.

"I hope you don't mind driving mine. Alec thought you'd be willing to drive his car until we get back. Or you could leave it at my place and pick yours up. I'm sorry my parents were too busy to give me a lift. They have all that family visiting for the wedding. I really appreciate your giving me a lift." She waved her arms to indicate her wedding gown. "It would have been so hard to drive wearing this." Beth blushed as she realized she was rambling.

Ed smiled as he opened her door and helped her in. "Of course I don't mind. I'm honored to be allowed to drive you." Settling into the driver's side, he turned to her and smiled. "Alec is a lucky man."

She blushed slightly. "I'm the lucky one. I still can't believe how many times I refused to go out with him." She smiled at him. "He said you told him he was losing his touch."

"What are friends for if not to keep each other humble? Seriously, you really are good for him, Beth. You bring out a tenderness in him that I haven't seen before. Alec has always been the heart to my brain, that's no secret. But I've never seen him like this before." Straker wasn't normally comfortable having this type of conversation. Ironically, he usually left this sort of thing to Alec. "He's always taking care of everyone else. I'm glad he has someone to take care of him now."

"He's had someone to take care of him all along. You. I saw your face when he realized he was blind. I know you refused to leave his side, even though you were hurt, too. You were there when he was wheeled into surgery and you were there when he came out. You went over Dr. Jackson's head to arrange for me to go home with him so he wouldn't have to stay at hospital until the bandages were ready to come off. You were by his side when the bandages were removed. I guess the truth is we both love him. I just want to thank you for sharing him with me." She looked down, embarrassed at having spoken to the Commander this way.

Ed's eyes misted. This really was an exceptional woman. He reached over to cover her hands with one of his. "Thank you."

Her eyes met his. Freeman's two favorite people had just formed a special alliance.

They drove in silence for a time. There wasn't much traffic and Ed was enjoying the countryside. He liked the city, but scenery like this was good for the soul. Finally, Beth moved in her seat and cleared her throat.

"Sir, there's just one more thing..."

"Ed."

"Excuse me?"

"We aren't at work, Beth. I think that, when we're off duty, you can call me Ed, don't you?"

"Ed. Thank you. Well, since we both want what is best for Alec..."

Ed gripped the wheel a little tighter. To a wife, what was best for a husband was for him to be at home with her. So much for sharing. Still, he couldn't blame her. Beth would be a wonderful wife and companion. Alec deserved that.

"I expect to have a lot of opportunities to call you Ed; because I expect you to dine with us on a regular basis. I'm a fairly decent cook and Alec thinks I can fatten you up. He won't be happy unless you are happy and I won't have you making him unhappy by turning down our invitations. I want you to think of our home as yours. You are welcome any time. Is that clear?"

Ed relaxed and gave her a huge smile, something not many people got to see. "Yes, ma'am, very clear. I'd appreciate it, though, if word didn't get out that I'm taking orders from you. It might ruin my reputation."

She laughed. He glanced over at her. Suddenly, a red convertible roared past them. A blast from the horn of an oncoming car made Ed swear. The driver of the convertible must be drunk or crazy to try passing in this space. He had just come up behind them and immediately pulled around. If he'd waited, he could have passed safely as soon as the lone oncoming car had passed by them. Ed hit the brake to allow him room to pull in front of them, but the driver cut back in too soon and the front of Beth's car clipped the rear of the convertible. Ed managed to maintain control of the car. He glanced at his passenger in concern. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Beth assured him. "People like that shouldn't be allowed on the roads. What are they doing now?"

Straker frowned. The red car was slowing and pulling to the shoulder of the road. "Looks like they may have car problems. I'll stop and let them know I'll call and send someone to tow them. It'll just take a minute and we'll be on our way. We don't want to keep the groom waiting."

Beth smiled.

Straker eased the car up alongside the convertible and rolled the passenger side window down slightly. "Is everyone alright?"

Five men, all apparently in their early 20's, looked at each other. The driver answered as they slipped out of their car. "Sure, Pops, we're fine. How's your lady here? Are you sure it's safe for her to be riding with you?" The men jerked Beth's door open and pulled her out. Too late, Straker realized his mistake. He'd forgotten they were in *her* car. If he'd been in his car, the gull-wing doors would not have opened and she would have been safe. And he'd left his gun behind in his car. He lunged across the seat, pushing himself out on Beth's side. She was struggling with 2 of the men; that left 3 for Ed to deal with before he could assist her. One of them kicked the door as he was trying to get out, catching his leg between the door and the

car. Swallowing a cry of pain, Straker forced his way out. As he thrust the door open, one of the men was pushed backward and fell to the ground. Straker swung at the one to his right, unbalancing him, but the one to his left moved in - Straker kicked out and caught him in the stomach; that attacker doubled over in pain. He turned toward Beth and saw her eyes widen. She called out a warning, but it was too late. Straker spun around, just in time to see the tire iron descending. His last thought was that he wouldn't get Beth to the church on time, after all. Thankfully, he lost consciousness before he could imagine the look on Alec's face when they didn't show.

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Straker came to as something wet hit his face. He spat as he tasted its bitterness - urine. He tried to raise his hand to wipe his face and found they were tied behind him. Their captors were howling with laughter, but he ignored them as he assessed the situation. It looked like they were in an abandoned stable. His legs were bound at the ankles and the knees. Someone was tying a rag around his mouth. Blinking, he tried to get his eyes to focus. He bit back a moan as pain from his head reminded him of the tire iron. Someone jerked him to an upright position and roped him to a post. A wave of dizziness hit him and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, his gaze fell on a white mound about 6 feet in front of him. Beth. She was still in her wedding gown, but it was torn and dirty. She must have put up a better fight than he had. Their eyes met - hers were beseeching and full of terror. His head cleared and he swallowed bile as the full impact of their circumstances hit him. He began pulling against his ropes.

The driver leaned close and smiled. "This is what happens when you don't treat other people's property with respect." Apparently, someone had tried to teach this young man responsibility. The phrase reminded Straker of something a father might say while disciplining a child. He suspected this young man had not learned what his father had intended. The driver's next statement confirmed his suspicion. "You hurt something that belonged to me. Now I'm going to hurt something that belongs to you."

Sneering, he stepped back and began unbuckling his belt. Straker's eyes widened and he shook his head frantically, pulling more furiously against his restraints. When the driver turned toward Beth and she started trying to snake backwards, Ed realized her hands and ankles were also bound. One of their captors reached down with a knife toward Beth and cut the ropes restraining her. Before she could get to her feet they pounced. Two of them grabbed her legs and pulled them apart, holding them bent at the knee; two others held her shoulders and arms to the ground. Then the driver straddled her. Slowly and deliberately, he ran his hands over her, then reached up for the neckline of her dress and ripped it from her body. Beth screamed. Their tormentors laughed louder and the observers cheered their companion on. Beth fought harder, her screams momentarily stifled by the driver. Ed pulled desperately against the ropes, his eyes darting about looking for something sharp to use to cut himself free. As the driver became more aggressive, Beth began calling Ed's name, begging him to help her. Over and over she pleaded for him to come to her aid. Ed's wrists began to bleed as the ropes cut into them. Finally, the driver was satisfied and moved to switch places with one of his friends. Taking advantage of that moment, Beth's free hand found the knife that had been used to cut her ropes. She swung the knife in a sweeping motion and kicked at the men. When they fell back, Beth rose, circling. Straker's hands were beginning to slide thru the ropes - thanks to the blood. If she could hold them off another minute, he'd be free. Then it happened. One of the men grabbed for Beth, she avoided him, but lost her footing and fell hard, making a small

sound of surprise. Instead of re-taking her as he'd expected, their captors fled. He heard an engine start as his hands finally came free. He loosened himself from the post and pulled himself over to her without bothering to untie his ankles and legs. He tore the rag from his mouth.

"Beth?" He turned her over gently and his heart sank. She had fallen on the knife.

She looked at him, her eyes not quite focused. "Ed?" It was barely a whisper. Before he could answer her, she was gone.

Her head was still cradled in the Commander's arms with his jacket covering her when SHADO security found them there. When they hadn't arrived at the church when expected, Colonel Lake had called from the church and ordered a search. Security had homed in on the tracking device in Straker's car and gone to Beth's house. Eventually, they'd realized that the 'abandoned' car by the side of the road was Beth's and found the stable in a search of the area.

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The Commander was totally silent on the ride to Mayland Hospital, not even reacting when the medics treated his injuries. SHADO HQ was like a tomb. Beth had been popular. The medical staff was especially devastated. Ed felt the stares of his people on him. When he limped into a room, conversation stopped. This death wasn't like most they experienced. They'd lost friends before, but most of those were pilots, killed in combat with the aliens, soldiers who were prepared to die. Beth was a gentle young woman who had nursed many of them back to health; she was a healer, not a warrior. Her death had been ugly and pointless. Unbelievably, their Commander had been unable to protect her.

Straker felt the weight of his failure. He had failed Beth and worst of all, he had failed Alec. Alec - who had stood with 'him' on 'his' wedding day and had handed him a cigar when his son was born. Ed had looked forward to returning those favors. He would never be able to do that now. Alec was refusing to see him; he wouldn't even take his call.

Instead of broadcasting the wedding to all facilities, SHADO broadcast Beth's final services. Ed watched alone, tears flowing down his cheeks, from his office at HQ. Alec had sent word through Paul Foster that he would not be welcome in person. Foster had tried to smooth it over, saying Alec just needed time, but Ed wasn't so sure. He still heard Beth's voice, calling to him for help. How could anyone forgive *that*, no matter how long the time?

* * *

The following morning, Alec was waiting for him in his office.

"How could you let them do that to her? What kind of man are you? I trusted you..." Alec's voice broke.

"Alec, please..."

Freeman cut him off. "Please? Please what? Please pretend it never happened? Pretend I never loved her, never held her close? Pretend I'll ever be able to forget the smell of her or the feel of her, the sound of her laughter? Pretend that YOU weren't the one that took her from me? Pretend that I can ever forgive you; ever stand the sight of you? Send me to Moonbase, Commander, and be quick about it, before I do something I might regret".

With that, Freeman stormed from the room. Straker dropped into his chair, crossing his arms before him on the desk and allowing his forehead to rest on them. Finally, he took a steadying breath, reached for the intercom and began making arrangements for his best friend and second-in-command's departure to Moonbase.

On Moonbase

Alec was sitting in Central Park, trying to compose a letter to Beth's parents. It was far from his first attempt. "What's a man to say, anyway?" Alec thought, fuming.

Lt. Nina Barry entered the room just as he threw the writing pad against the wall. She reached down, picked up the pad and placed it on the low table in front of him. Sitting down in a chair nearby, she asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Alec stiffened. "I appreciate the offer, but what good will talking do? She's gone. Talking won't bring her back."

"Maybe it will help bring *you* back."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You're becoming hard, Alec. The crew is worried about you. You're cutting yourself off from us instead of letting us help."

"I've told you already - no one can help!"

Nina considered him for a minute, then stood and spoke quietly. "We've been friends a long time, Alec. You know where to find me." She turned and left the room.

Alec let his head fall back on the headrest of the chair and closed his eyes.

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In her quarters, Nina placed a call to Earth.

"Control."

Nina had to smile. Hearing Keith Ford's voice was always reassuring.

"Hello, Keith. Could you find Colonel Lake for me, please? It's a personal matter."

Whether or not that was true was debatable, but she didn't want the Commander or Paul Foster take the call. She wasn't sure she could come up with a work-related bluff they would believe and this wasn't something she could discuss with them. In that way, at least, it was personal.

"Of course, Lt. Barry, she's upstairs. I'll have her paged."

Nina took advantage of the time to slip off her boots and collect her thoughts. As she settled onto her bed, Ginny Lake's voice came over the line. "Lake here."

"Ginny, it's Nina Barry. I hope I haven't caught you at a difficult time."

"Of course not. What's on your mind, Nina?"

"I thought we might compare notes - off the record."

"About our bosses?"

She was grateful that Colonel Lake liked to get to the point. It was a trait they shared.

"Yes, please. I tried to talk to Alec today. I'm afraid I may have made things worse."

"Unless he's putting you outside without a suit, I don't see how that would be possible."

"I take it things aren't any better down there?"

"No. Frankly, I'm a little envious of you. People up there weren't as close to Beth. You're dealing with a Moonbase Commander in mourning. We're dealing with a group of mourners led by a Commander who has lost his best friend."

"People here are beginning to mourn Alec. I honestly think it would be easier if it were Commander Straker here. They're used to him being the cool professional who doesn't socialize with the crew. Having Alec snap at them one minute and freeze them out the next just isn't easy for them to handle. Only the ones who have known him longest venture into Central Park now. The others are afraid of running into him there."

Ginny's sigh was heart-felt. "People avoiding Alec Freeman - the man every man wanted to be and every woman wanted to love. It's hard to believe."

"I know. He's lost Beth; he's left Earth - and Commander Straker. Morale is slipping and I can live with a certain amount of that. We all owe him the right to take some of his pain out on us after the way we've turned to him for help over the years. The crew remembers it was Alec that guided them through those first challenging weeks and months of SHADO training. Most of them think they wouldn't have gotten through it without his faith in them. It's so hard, Ginny. Oh, I hope Gay's real hair turns purple! I can't believe she's on leave at a time like this."

Ginny gave a short laugh. "Believe me, I know how you feel. If Paul weren't here, I don't know how I'd manage. And I know he feels the same way. Watching people you respect and care about suffer isn't supposed to be easy, Nina. We're just going to have to get them through it. Give your crew a pep talk. They'll rally around you - and Alec. If things don't show signs of improvement in the next couple of days, I'll talk to Paul and we'll arrange for Peter Carlin to come here. That will free Paul up for a trip to Moonbase."

Nina managed a slight smile. "Thanks, Ginny. I know Alec's hurting, but I'm beginning to worry about the effect his attitude is having on overall job performance and I can't shake the feeling that Gay would have forced him to deal with it by now. I'm just not sure I'm up to the task."

"If you weren't qualified, you wouldn't have been left in charge while Gay took vacation. You can handle it."

"If you say so. I guess you can tell Paul not to pack his bags just yet."

"I'll tell him. Goodnight, Nina."

"Goodnight, and thanks."

Just as Nina cut the connection, her door buzzed. She leaned forward and touched the button to open it, instinctively standing and coming to attention as she saw who was there.

Freeman's smile was rueful as he stepped into the room. "At ease, Nina. I guess I have been a real bear if the sight of me has you 'snapping to' after all these years."

Nina relaxed and returned the smile. "Have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?"

Freeman hesitated, then chose a chair and sat on the edge of it. It occurred to Nina that he probably hadn't been in a woman's room since Beth's death. He spoke. "No, I just wanted to come by and apologize for the way I snarled at you earlier."

Nina perched on the edge of the bed. "That's what friends are for."

"Thank you for understanding."

"I learned it from you. A lot of us have. You have encouraged and supported every person in SHADO without fail for as long as you've known them."

Freeman looked uncomfortable. He took a weary breath and stood. "I should be going. Thanks again, Nina."

"Anytime. Goodnight, Alec." She sighed as the door closed behind him, wondering if either one of them would sleep.

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Nina hesitated outside Freeman's door. She took a deep breath and punched the intercom. "Colonel Freeman, it's Lt. Barry. May I come in, please?" For a moment, there was silence; then the door slid open with a hiss. She stepped across the threshold and allowed her eyes to adjust to dim lighting.

Freeman was picking up papers and stacking them on a table at the end of the couch. He cleared his throat and looked sheepish. "Sorry about this. Guess I've gotten a little lax with my house keeping." He quickly picked up an afghan and pillow from the couch and tossed them into a corner. Nina wondered if that's where he'd been sleeping. If so, it was another reason for

his irritability. The couch was at least a foot shorter than Freeman. "There. How's that?" Freeman indicated the now cleaned off couch.

Nina's smile was tight as she sat down. "It's fine, thank you. I'm sorry to come by unexpectedly like this, but I just spoke with Colonel Lake and I wanted to talk to you tonight - before this hits the grapevine."

Freeman was on the other end of the couch. He tensed momentarily, then leaned back, and placed his arm on the back of the couch and forced a smile. "What did Ginny have to say?"

"It isn't good, I'm afraid. Paul Foster is temporarily in command at HQ." Nina waited for a response from Freeman. When there was none, she continued speaking. "Dr. Jackson has placed Commander Straker on a minimum 2-week medical leave. Ginny said that the Commander had been pushing himself even harder than usual, not going home, not eating properly and that his sleep was - disturbed." Nina swallowed. Most of the symptoms Ginny had recited about Straker were things Nina had been seeing in Freeman. It frightened her to think that Freeman might be just a step behind Straker and that this conversation would be what pushed him over the edge. "Dr. Jackson repeatedly tried to get him to cut back on his work hours and get more rest. Apparently, the final straw was when the doctor had Ayesha Johnson take a tray of food into the office and the Commander threw it at her. After that, Dr. Jackson contacted General Henderson, who signed off with Jackson on the forced medical leave."

"Are you saying Straker has had some sort of breakdown?"

"I think Jackson is trying to prevent one. Ginny said the Commander had difficulty coping with your transfer...and the events that preceded it."

Freeman sat upright on the couch. "HE had problems coping?! The woman I love - loved - is dead and you're telling me HE had problems coping with it?" As Freeman's voice rose, Nina reached over and put her hand on his arm. Freeman pulled away and stood up with his back to her, composing himself. Finally, he turned back to face her.

"I appreciate your coming by to tell me, Nina, but why didn't I hear this from Foster?"

Nina had known this would come up. "Paul was just following recommendations set by Dr. Jackson when you transferred - to keep your contact with Earth as limited as possible."

"What the heck kind of recommendation is *that*?"

"Since you felt so strongly about leaving, Jackson felt that keeping contact between you and HQ to a minimal would be in your best interests...that it would speed your recovery."

"Recovery?!"

"Look, Alec, I'm not the best person to explain it. All I can tell you is that we all wanted what was best for you. Maybe when you contact Paul you can straighten it out."

Alec just glared at her.

"I'm sure Paul would be pleased to hand command over to you if that's what you wanted."

Alec gave a short laugh. "Trying to get rid of me, Nina?"

"No, sir." Nina's tone was serious. "A lot of us have lost people we love, but we've made it through with the help of family and friends. You haven't let your friends on Moonbase help you. Maybe if you go back, your friends on Earth will have better luck. People talk about the importance of closure. I don't think you'll get that while you're here, Alec. We really care about you, Alec. We want what's best for you."

"Yeah, you've mentioned that."

"It's true. Let me ask you something, Alec." Her eyes sought his. "If our positions were reversed what would you do?"

Alec thought a long time about that. Finally, he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "I'd send you back and tell you to face it. I'd tell you that you can't run from it forever and that until you deal with it you aren't really doing SHADO any good up here anyway."

Nina's gaze dropped. Alec realized her hands were clasped together so tightly that her knuckles were turning pale. He moved closer to her and patted her shoulder awkwardly. When she glanced up at him her eyes were damp.

"You've been a good friend, Nina. Thank you. I know I'll be leaving Moonbase in good hands."

At HQ

Alec Freeman couldn't believe what he was hearing. "When I left Moonbase, Straker was on forced medical leave because Jackson thought he was headed for a breakdown. Now you're telling me he's had a heart attack?"

Ginny Lake leaned against Straker's desk. "Paul went by the house to check on him. He said the Commander just hadn't sounded right when he spoke to him on the phone. Paul suspected he was working on something at home. After all, what else would he do? According to Paul, when Straker came to the door, his color was 'bad' and he looked like he'd lost more weight. They were still at the door when the Commander collapsed."

Freeman remained silent.

"You realize that this is difficult for the crew, Alec. The way you present yourself will make a lot of difference to those men and women out there."

"They're professionals, they'll handle it."

Ginny sighed. It was a measure of his personal despair that Freeman was so abrupt about the operatives. He was fiercely protective of the people who worked for the organization and had often intervened on their behalves with Commander Straker. While Straker had considered Freeman too *soft*-hearted, it was widely believed (especially among new operatives) that Straker had *no* heart. Obviously, they were wrong, since he was now in Mayland Hospital's Coronary Care Unit fighting for his life. The door opened to admit Dr. Doug Jackson. From the look on Dr. Jackson's face, the Commander's battle was not going well.

"Well?" Freeman demanded.

"As I'm sure Colonel Lake has told you, the Commander's attack was not totally unexpected. He had been pushing himself past any human limits for weeks despite my repeated protests. Even after General Henderson backed me regarding his leave, he circumvented our actions by working from home on a major project. Judging from what he'd accomplished, he must have been working on it almost around the clock. Not only are we dealing with exhaustion, but with mild malnutrition and some possible damage to the heart muscle itself. It was fortunate Colonel Foster was there or we would most likely have lost him."

"Now tell me something I don't know!" Jackson had always made Freeman's skin crawl. Under these circumstances, Freeman wasn't going to waste any effort in appearing civil.

Jackson stiffened. "Very well. I can tell you that the Commander's physical condition, while serious, is not what concerns me most. What I believe to be most critical is his mental and emotional recovery."

"And what do you plan to do about that?"

"I don't plan to do anything. There is nothing I can do or it would have been done by now... other than giving him the amnesia drug, which he repeatedly refused."

Freeman jerked at that. Colonel Lake shifted uncomfortably. Freeman's glance went slowly from Jackson to Lake and back, then he spoke slowly. "You wanted to give Ed the amnesia drug? For what reason? To what extent?"

Jackson moved to a wall and leaned against it, crossing his arms. He took a moment to consider his answer. "I suggested a short-term memory removal. It would have gone back to the day of your wedding." Freeman flinched at that. "He would still have to be informed of your fiance's death and any other significant events that took place during that time, such as your departure, but *knowing is not the same as remembering*. It would have been less traumatic for him." Freeman was now glaring at the doctor.

Undaunted, Jackson continued. "Another thing, he depended on you, more than even he realized. Capable as they are, neither Colonel Lake nor Colonel Foster could fill your shoes. The loss of your friendship was almost unbearable for him. He tried to fill the void by working himself to exhaustion. He felt you would never forgive him. Indeed, that he did not deserve your forgiveness." Jackson paused. When Freeman remained silent, Jackson stood straight. "Well, if I've answered your questions for now, I'll be returning to my patient."

"You'll let us know if there is any change?" Freeman's voice was tight.

"Any change will have to come from you, I'm afraid, Colonel. You must find it in yourself to forgive him and to communicate that to him. I do not believe he can win this fight alone. And to the Commander, alone means without *you* at his side!" With that, Jackson turned on his heel and left the room.

After several moments of silence, Freeman turned on Lake, demanding, "You knew about the amnesia drug?"

Lake raised her head to meet his eyes, nodding. "Since it was within the Commander's discretion to refuse, Jackson thought maybe Paul or I might be able to persuade him to take the drug. Of course, he was wrong. The Commander said it was impossible to learn from mistakes if you couldn't remember them. If you want to know what *I* think, I think he didn't want to give up a single memory of his friendship with you, even if it was painful. And Jackson is right. He didn't expect you to ever forgive him. He certainly never forgave himself. Losing you came close to breaking him, Alec. I know that wasn't your intent, at least I hope it wasn't...." Her voice trailed off, uncertain.

"Hell, no. Breaking Straker would be breaking SHADO. I may be a lot of things, but I'm not a traitor." He suppressed a shudder, remembering the last conversation he'd had in this office with his commanding officer.

"Send me to Moonbase, Commander, and be quick about it, before I do something I might regret."

Without another word, he crossed to the bar, poured himself a shot of whiskey and downed it. Then he marched out of the room, took the lift up and strode past Straker's secretary without even glancing at her.

* * *

He drove down the road into the cemetery slowly, pulled over in a graveled area, turned off the motor and took a steadying breath before getting out of the car. He had never been here to visit her. He hadn't been able to face watching them put her into the ground, so he'd waited until dark to come to see where she was; remaining in the in the car with his head on the wheel, sobbing. The next morning, he'd confronted Straker and then there had been the rush of preparations to relocate to Moonbase.

He walked over and stood for a moment at the foot of the grave. Then he sat down on a small concrete bench, clenched his hands together and dropped his head. He closed his eyes as the memories came.

He remembered Beth, in her uniform, the day of his routine exam... "Open wide, please, Colonel." He'd flirted with her, of course. But she was all business. "This is your health, Colonel. You wouldn't really want us to treat that lightly, now would you?" But her eyes had smiled. He'd asked her to dinner, but she'd refused, having heard he was a Ladies Man, probably. He couldn't get her off his mind. If she was playing 'hard to get', it was certainly working! He'd tried again, several times, suggesting different events they could attend. He'd even gotten tickets to the opera and he hated opera. That was more Straker's thing. When

she'd refused - again - he'd made a gift of the tickets to Ed.

He remembered her voice, calming him when he came to after the UFO had forced Straker's car off the road. She'd touched his arm and spoken softly to him. He'd relaxed back onto the bed, feeling safe. As he drifted off, he remembered thinking how soft her hand was and how she smelled of lilacs. He dreamt of chasing her through a field of clouds.

He remembered her brown hair swinging as she pulled him along behind her, through the meadow the day of their picnic - the day he'd proposed; their intense lovemaking after she'd said yes. Just thinking of it made him tremble, even now. He'd been with many women, but not one had ever made him feel like she did, like he was the center of the universe.

He gave himself a mental shake. This wasn't accomplishing anything. He had to pull himself together, if not for Ed, then for SHADO. Ed Straker had been the brains and the driving force behind the organization since the beginning. The position and responsibilities of Commander had been forced upon him by circumstances and had ultimately cost him his marriage and his son. His insight into the aliens was unique and his instinct had saved countless lives over the years. SHADO needed Straker and if Jackson was right, Straker needed Freeman's forgiveness; Freeman only wished he could find the inner strength to give it. He sighed deeply and stood to leave, straightening his jacket.

As he strode toward his car, his attention was drawn to a blond woman placing flowers on a grave further up the hill. She must have felt his eyes on her, because she looked up and her face froze. Alec sighed and moved toward her. "Well," he thought to himself, "this should be interesting."

* * *

When Colonel Alec Freeman entered the studio, he spoke kindly to Ed's secretary. "Miss Ealand, I'd like to apologize about before. I should have told you where I was going. I know you have enough on your mind just worrying about Mr. Straker."

The unflappable Miss Ealand looked startled. "That's perfectly alright, sir." She buzzed him into the office. When Freeman spoke into the cigar box, his stress level was logged as considerably lower than before.

* * *

"Ed, Ed, its Alec. Can you hear me? I went to visit Beth today and you'll never guess who I saw at the cemetery. It was Mary Rutland - your 'lovely ex'. We had quite a talk. It made me realize that history repeated itself. Mary punished you for Johnny's death, even though I was the one who diverted the medicine. If you'd told her it was me, it might have made a difference, but you took the blame on yourself instead. She kept you away from your own son's final services. When Beth died, I couldn't handle not being able to *do* anything. They couldn't find the ones who did it. I couldn't..." Alec had to stop for a minute. He tried to steady his breathing. "I couldn't tear them limb from limb, so I sank to Mary's level. I blamed you. I hurt you the same way she did - by not allowing you to attend Beth's services." Alec stopped, watching Ed closely for any change. Seeing none, he continued. "I know you'd have died to save her, Ed. I knew it all along. I just held on to the anger to survive the emptiness and you paid the price."

"Jackson says you need my forgiveness, Ed. I do forgive you, Ed. I was wrong to leave. I should have stayed and let you help me through it. You've lost your marriage and your son; you would have helped me if I'd let you." Freeman's voice caught. He dropped his head, his eyes closed and he continued in a whisper, "Please, Ed, please help me now."

* * *

Commander Ed Straker was becoming aware of his surroundings. He felt the coolness of the sheets that covered him and smelled the odors of a hospital. His lips were dry and he fought the urge to run his tongue over them. The darkness was beginning to recede and he heard the sounds of medical equipment. He wanted to return to the unknowing state. He didn't want to feel the emptiness. He had escaped it and had not expected to awaken and have to face it again. He knew he had used up all his reserves and preferred to go quietly rather than breaking down in front of his people. He liked the dark and the quiet. What had disturbed it? He concentrated. Someone was talking. His breath caught. Was that Alec's voice? No, it couldn't be. Alec was on Moonbase. The only time he heard his old friend's voice now was during an alert or while conducting some other official business with Moonbase's new Commander. Even on those occasions, Freeman's voice was hard and his words were clipped. It was a harsh contrast to the lighthearted tones he'd become accustomed to hearing from Alec. Alec - who was never awed or intimidated by 'The Commander' - was the one man Straker could confide in. They hadn't always agreed but they'd been able to talk things out and their friendship had survived many years...until this year.

Ed shuddered and sought the darkness. It closed around him, warming him.

* * *

The beeps from the equipment and his own breathing faded into the background as Alec willed Ed to hear him. He couldn't have waited too late, could he? Please, Lord, let him have heard and understood. Ed at least deserved that.

Jackson came into the room. "You should get some rest."

"I'm not leaving. According to you, my leaving him 'alone' was part of the problem. Maybe my staying here...if he knows I'm here...."

Jackson studied Freeman. "Very well, but you must not try to talk to him or disturb him in any way. You've done what you can to put his mind at ease. Now, we need to let his body rest."

"Fine. Thank you." Freeman watched Jackson leave, then carefully pulled a chair closer to the bed. He sat back and tried to relax. It had been a long day.

* * *

Alec started as he felt a hand on his shoulder and realized he'd fallen asleep by Straker's bedside. Looking up, he saw Lt. Lillian Majors. His heart constricted. Lillian was Beth's best friend; she was to stand with her at their wedding. This was the first time he'd seen her since the day they lost Beth. He stood, straightening his jacket.

"Lil."

"Alec."

She stepped forward and reached up to give him a quick hug. He was caught off guard and by the time he recovered, she'd stepped back, embarrassed. "I'm glad you're back, Alec. We've all missed you."

"I...I couldn't stay."

"I understand. You needed time to heal. Beth would have wanted you to take care of yourself." He winced at the mention of Beth's name. Lillian seemed not to notice. "How about a coffee?"

"No," Alec was finding it difficult to breathe. He wondered if this is what claustrophobia felt like. "I have some things I need to see to." Freeman turned and all but ran from the room. Lil stood, watching him go. Nearby, Straker moved in the bed.

* * *

Lake found Freeman on the soundstage sitting on a staircase. He looked up with reddened eyes when she came through the door. The studio crew had gone for the day. She walked over, sat down on the step next to him, and put her hand on his shoulder.

"This is my fault!" moaned Colonel Alec Freeman. "If I'd been here...."

"You're here now and blaming yourself isn't doing him, you or SHADO any good."

Colonel Ginny Lake tried to ease Freeman's frustration and guilt. She couldn't deny that part of the stress leading to Commander Straker's collapse was caused by Freeman's absence after he'd transferred to Moonbase. Not only had Freeman been Straker's second, but he had been his only real friend and the closest thing to family he'd had since his son's death.

"I've got good news. I've been looking for you for nearly an hour to tell you. Straker came to. He called your name."

"And it took you an hour to find me?!"

"He'd lost consciousness by the time I was notified. But Jackson says it's a good sign. He'd like you to be there if - *when* - he comes to again." She hesitated. "No one is forcing you, Alec. I know how painful this is for you. I wish...."

Alec sighed. "Yeah." He took one of her hands and patted it. "Let's go, shall we?"

* * *

They stepped from the lift and all eyes turned toward them. Lt. Keith Ford spoke. "I was about to page you, Colonel Lake. Dr. Jackson wanted you to know that Commander Straker is awake."

It was Freeman who answered. "Thank you, Keith. Will you let him know we're on our way?"

"Yes, sir." Noting Ford's relief at his response, Freeman realized Ginny had been right. How he handled things - or mishandled them - left quite an impression on the operatives. He made a mental note to be more careful in the future. He'd also need to arrange time to have that coffee with Lil.

Ginny led the way into Ed's room. Jackson came to greet them, speaking quietly. "He's awake, but he isn't out of danger. If he should be unduly upset..." Jackson let the sentence hang in the air.

Freeman thought about the implication of the unfinished sentence. "I'll do whatever you say, Doctor, but I'd like the chance to make things right."

"Of course." Jackson signaled Lake and a nurse out of the room, but remained by the door, watching his patient's monitors.

Alec approached the bed. He spoke very softly. "Ed?"

The figure in the bed stirred weakly. "Alec? It's you?" Alec doubted he would have recognized the voice.

"Yes, Ed. It's Alec. I'm here. You're going to be alright."

"No! Not all right...." Ed's head moved back and forth on the pillow.

"Shh, Ed. You need to rest. We'll talk later."

Jackson moved to the bed. "Colonel Freeman is right, Commander. You need to conserve your strength." Jackson turned to Freeman. "Perhaps it would be best for you to leave now, Colonel."

Straker became even more agitated. "No, no - Alec!"

Freeman stepped closer and took his friend's hand. "It's alright, Ed. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere." He glared at Jackson, daring him to disagree. Jackson simply observed his patient.

Alec's touch seemed to calm Straker. A tear slid down his pale cheek.

"I still hear her."

Have mercy, thought Freeman. This was going to be tough.

"Hear who, Ed?" Even though he knew, Alec figured it had to be said.

"Beth...she begged me to stop them."

Now Freeman's eyes were wet. He swallowed hard, but his voice was steady. "You would have if you could have. There were 5 of them, Ed. You never had a chance."

"Shouldn't have pulled over.... should have had my gun." Ed's breathing was becoming more labored.

This was getting to be too much for Freeman. "Listen to you, you pigheaded...." He felt Jackson's hand on his shoulder. Drawing a deep breath, Alec continued more calmly. "I know you think you can save the world and most of the time you do. But even you have your limits.

"Listen, Ed, Foster's on his way to Moonbase and I'm going to be staying here. I'm going to be in this chair when you wake up and we'll talk more then. Okay?"

"k." Straker gave himself up to sleep again. Jackson, checking his vital signs, seemed pleased.

At Beth's grave, weeks later:

"You got the worst of it, you know. What - what if it had been me? Watching, helpless. Her calling *my* name.- God, Ed." Freeman leaned forward on the bench, pushing his fists into his eyes.

His friend leaned over from his wheelchair to lay a hand on his back. Deciding that wasn't enough, he maneuvered the chair closer and pulled Alec's head onto his shoulder. Freeman grasped Ed's arm and sobbed uncontrollably. When the storm had subsided, he pulled himself up and wiped his face with his hands. Straker handed him a tissue. Freeman nodded his gratitude.

"Ed?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe it's none of my business..."

"I don't keep secrets from you, Alec. I gave up on that years ago."

"I know, but you do have a right to some privacy."

"Ask me. If it's none of your business, I'll say so."

When Freeman finally decided to ask, his words came in a rush. "Why didn't you take the amnesia drug? In your place, I might have taken it."

Ed was silent. Just as Freeman decided he wasn't going to answer, Ed spoke softly. "That last day, she told me how much my happiness meant to you. How I would always be welcome in your home." His eyes watering, Ed continued. "I hated remembering how I let her down," he raised his hand as Freeman opened his mouth to interrupt him, "but I couldn't give up how she saw me as a part of your life."

"But surely you already knew that."

"Maybe, but I'd been preparing myself for that to change. I didn't want to risk your happiness. I guess she made me see that I was a part of that. I'd always hoped you would marry someday, even though I expected that to change our friendship. Beth showed me that you didn't have to choose one or the other."

"Do me a favor, Ed."

"Anything."

"Take the drug."

Straker was speechless. Freeman continued. "Jackson says you're still having the

nightmares - still hearing her screams. He says the chances are good that you always will. Look, Ed, nightmares about Johnny are enough. You don't deserve any more. Erase the memories of the actual event and you erase the nightmares. Believe me, I won't try to hide any of it from you. I'll tell you that you and Beth were taken to a stable by 5 hoods, that she was raped and accidentally fell on the knife. I'll tell you how you got those scars on your wrists trying to reach her and how security found you holding her head in your arms. I'll tell you how much she looked forward to making you a part of our family. I'll tell you how I - I - turned on you." He would have gone on, but Straker cut him off.

"That's enough, Alec. Don't ask me to sit here and listen to you blame yourself! A lesser man would have killed me."

Alec smiled sadly. "Tell me, my friend, why should I have killed you?"

"I caused Beth's death."

"The way I caused Johnny's."

Straker was stunned into silence. Freeman continued. "I didn't know I was hurting - killing - your son when I diverted that transport. I didn't know it was carrying the medicine that would have saved his life. Just like you didn't know Beth would be hurt when you stopped to help those - people. Explain to me the difference, Ed. Because the only one I see is that I didn't actually have to watch Johnny die." Tears were threatening again. Freeman jumped up and began pacing. "Take the drug, Ed. There is just no reason for you to suffer like this."

Straker smiled slightly. "You know what this means?"

"What?"

"It means you and Jackson agree on something."

Freeman laughed softly. "I can live with that."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, Alec. I know how much it would hurt you to relive it for me. And knowing you, you wouldn't let anyone else do it. But even if it weren't for that, even if what Beth said didn't mean so much to me - I can't do it, Alec. I worked on that new project while you were - gone. SHADO can't afford to lose what I learned."

"The heck it can't. What SHADO can't afford to lose is their Commander! The project and what you learned can be redone."

"Give it time, Alec. As you say, I've been through this with Johnny. The nightmares become less - vivid after awhile."

"It's been *months*, Ed."

"But *you've* only been here a few weeks, Alec. Accept it. I'm not going to take the drug. It's your being here that got me out of that hospital bed; that's what will get me out of this wheelchair, through the nightmares and back to work."

"You are the most stubborn, pigheaded... What are you smiling at?" But Freeman smiled in return. "Okay, have it your way. We'll see this through together."

"As usual."

"As always."

THE END