

November Third, 1983

by Pamela McCaughey (2001)
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created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, and Reg Hill

It was a day seemingly like any other. Shit, shower and shave, grab a cuppa before heading out to the Harlington-Straker studio. The weather was typically British as well - a damp misty late autumn morning. In deference to the cooler temperatures, Straker had put a warmer, cream-colored turtleneck on under his brown jumpsuit, and he velcroed his matching brown Nehru jacket right to the neck to keep out the chilly air. No point in getting the sniffles. He pulled on a pair of brown leather driving gloves too, and turned the heater in his car up to high.

The colored leaves of fall were now gone. Instead, only bare trees awaited the winter snows. How many winters had Straker spent in Britain? Because of his work, he rarely had time to notice the changing of the seasons, or appreciate their individual beauties here in Jolly Olde.

He passed through the security check point at the Harlington-Straker studio gates, and parked his car. He took out his battered old briefcase, the one which had survived an explosion many years ago, and walked into the front foyer. He nodded absentmindedly at Miss Ealand, his watchdog-personal assistant-secretary, entered his office, and pressed the appropriate buttons which would send his office down to subterranean regions to the SHADO headquarters buried beneath the studio complex.

Various SHADO operatives nodded to Straker as he made his way around the network of corridors leading to his private office. Most of them were young, and too shy to speak to him. Straker had a reputation for being a hard-assed, taciturn commander. Nobody wanted to draw his attention unnecessarily. His demeanor always came across as a man who was brooding about something and didn't wish to be disturbed. Most SHADO people had never even seen him smile.

Straker sat down behind his desk. He paused before lighting a cigarillo - one of the few personal pleasures he permitted himself - and considered his calendar. There it was. THAT day. It came every year, no matter the circumstances. For the most part, Straker tried to ignore it. Not because he feared getting older. No, it was the fact he alone knew what the date meant. There was nobody to share it with. No pressies, no cakes, no cards, no good wishes. He had kept this information scrupulously to himself, as well. Somehow it was less painful to him if others didn't know what he couldn't celebrate. He couldn't bear their looks of pity. November 3rd was his private day of mourning - mourning everything he didn't have - no wife, no child, no home. Not a real home, at any rate. He owned and lived in a house, but her certainly didn't classify it as a home. A real home had family, pets, plants, sunlight, delicious smells coming from the kitchen, and good cheer. His house had a kitchen he never used, a bed he slept in occasionally, and a complete absence of anything else suggesting life. He almost hoped for a crisis today, just to distract his mind. He hated pity, but he also hated self-pity. There was a sheaf of files of his desk, each one marked URGENT, so he decided to occupy himself with his reading.

Alec Freeman dropped by, and helped himself to a healthy helping of scotch.

"A little early in the morning for that, don't you think, Alec?" Straker asked, as Alec plopped informally into the seat across from him, and lit up a ciggie.

"Not at all. A little hair of the dog that bit you is good for recovery in the morning," Alec smiled cheerfully, swigging down the scotch.

"Good God, you didn't go out carousing again last night did you?"

"Oh, Paul and I just had a few drinks - which turned into a few more drinks - you know how these things happen!"

Straker shook his head, "I shouldn't give either of you any time off - look how you waste it."

"All work and no play...," Alec waved his ciggie at Straker, "You could use a bit of R&R yourself."

"No, thank you, I have work to do."

"It's been pretty quiet lately. You could afford a few hours off to take in a film or go out to dinner."

"Why would I do that? I can watch movies here if I want, and order in Chinese take out when I get back to the house."

"What's the fun in that?"

"I don't need fun," Straker pursed his lips, "Look, did you come in here for a legitimate reason, or just to harass me about my lack of a social life?"

Freeman waved his ciggie hand and put down his now empty scotch glass, "Just thought you might like a little cheer this morning, Commander. Guess I'll take my good mood somewhere it'll be appreciated." He got up to go.

"Alec...sorry I'm so bitchy this morning. Just bear with me, ok? I've...got a lot to think about," he indicated his stack of reading material, but privately he knew the files were not the cause of his funk.

"Yeah, well, I'll just go take care of some things, then."

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The offer of getting some lunch for him down at the SHADO commissary went unheeded by Straker. He was immersed in his reading, and he dictated out some reply correspondence for Miss Ealand to type up for him later. Hours fled, and before he knew it, the suppertime period was upon him. Straker smiled grimly. He'd managed to occupy himself rather well and the day was almost over. And, best of all, nobody else knew what day it was.

The hoped-for crisis did not erupt. It was a smooth day with no problems. At suppertime, Straker opted to take himself out for a well-deserved dinner at his favourite Indian restaurant. He'd discovered it during his married days, and continued to go there because the cuisine and quiet atmosphere suited him. Curry was the only spice in Straker's life!

His favourite table was available, even though he'd forgotten to make a reservation. There was soft lighting, the gentle perfume of incense, and the soothing tinkle of an indoor water fountain. Tiny bouquets of exotic flowers decorated each table. Plush emerald-colored velvet cushions and clean white napery were part of the decor, as well as gleaming silver ware and pale green china. His eyes wandered over to the color portraits of the Taj Mahal, the Bengal tigers (nearly extinct and doubly precious) and the black and white news images of Mahatma Gandhi. The great man's non-violent stand would have been useless against the vicious aliens, Straker mused.

In perfect Hindi, Straker ordered himself a several course meal, starting with a rich

serving of daal soup, hot chapatis, steamed jasmine rice and a very hot curry. The waiter left a carafe of ice water sitting on his table. Placing his cloth napkin so he could avoid spills on his good suit, Straker cleaned up the soup and started in on the entree. The intoxicating Indian spices tasted as good as they smelled.

He was about to consider dessert when a familiar face landed in front of him.

"What brings you here?" Straker asked, "I thought Indian food gave you gas?"

"Guess you thought you were going to sneak off and celebrate alone, eh?" Alec grinned.

"Celebrate what?"

"Your birthday."

"I don't think that's a cause for celebration."

"You thought nobody knew."

"And, nobody will know. I'm sure you know the necessity of keeping some things top secret."

Alec looked up as the waiter approached and ordered a scotch.

"No dinner, Alec?"

Freeman placed a hand on his tummy, "Unlike you, I don't choose to torment myself."

Straker resumed his meal, chewing ruminatively, "I'm really not, you know."

"Not what?"

"Tormenting myself."

"Uh huh," Alec didn't sound convinced. He lit up a cigarette, "Mind if I smoke?"

Straker shook his head and indicated his plate of food, "What makes you think I'm tormenting myself?"

"I wasn't necessarily referring to the curry. I was referring, instead, to the way you've kept your birthday a secret and slunk off alone to brood over it. Very Scorpio of you, actually."

"Scorpio?" Straker was puzzled.

"November third - you're a Scorpio," Alec smiled.

"Oh. Do you believe in that stuff?"

"Sometimes. I don't know. I suppose it's silly. But, you're the most Scorpio Scorpio I've ever known."

"And, that makes me...?"

"You. Who and what you are."

"That doesn't tell me much."

"I read once where Scorpio was the sign which ruled death and regeneration. And, unlike the other astrological signs which have only one totemic animal or symbol, Scorpio has four."

"Four. Ok, what am I?"

"The snake, the eagle, the scorpion, and the Phoenix."

"Isn't that the mythological bird that rises out of its own funeral pyre?"

"One and the same."

Straker chewed some more, "I could wish that were true."

"Scorpio is also ruled by two planets: Mars, the God of War, and Pluto, Lord of the Underworld."

"Rather appropo, that."

"I thought so, myself."

"Alec...there's a good reason I don't tell anyone about my birthday," Straker pointed his fork at his second in command, "It's a hard day to get through for me. I'd rather suffer it out in

silence than have others feel sorry for me."

"I don't think people would feel sorry for you. I think they'd be delighted you were born like everyone else, instead of being hatched out from under some rock," Freeman grinned.

"Well, smart remarks to the contrary - oh yes - I know what some of the staff say about me! I was born like any other person, and my parents actually were married at the time. But, let's face it, Alec - what have I really got to celebrate? No wife, no child, no home. Whoopee."

It was the first time since the death of Johnnie that Freeman had heard Straker speak so frankly about his life. What was worse, Straker was right. Most people had somebody. He didn't have anyone. Alec himself was as close as Straker could afford to get to any other person. And, thought Freeman ruefully, that wasn't much. Over the years, Straker had become ever more insular.

"Ed, why don't you take a different attitude to your birthday. Instead of it being something you just suffer through, why don't you try to make improvements in your life. Even if they're small ones?"

"It's not even the aloneness that bothers me. I'm used to that."

"So what do you need? A woman? A dog? A Caribbean vacation? A new car?"

"It's not something I can touch, Alec. It's something inside me I can't reach. And, this is the one day out of every year that I feel that lack."

Freeman was silent for a moment. He hoped what his friend was suffering would never be his own lot in life, "Ed, is there anything I can do?"

"You can keep my secret," Straker permitted himself a small smile, "And, keep this place a secret, too."

"What's so special about this restaurant?"

Straker finished his rice and curry and leaned his beautifully chiseled chin on his fist, "I first discovered this place shortly after Mary and I set up housekeeping. She surprised me one night by bringing me here. She knew I loved spicy food, and she knew the ambiance would be very appealing to me. I guess I've continued coming because it holds old memories. Good memories," he smiled again, "And, the food's not bad, either."

"I'll leave that assessment untested," Alec grinned back, "They should rate these places by the number of bottles of anti-acid you'll need to put out the fire!"

"How about some dessert and coffee, Alec? I promise I can order you something easy on the stomach. Maybe even something chocolate, if you'd like."

"Thanks, just the coffee will be fine."

Straker motioned the waiter over and ordered something sweet. When it came out of the kitchen a few minutes later, it came with a single candle on top, burning cheerfully. SHADO's CO stared at it as the waiter placed it in front of him. He looked up at Alec suspiciously, "Did you tell anyone...?" he started to say.

Alec looked up at the waiter, "Why did you put a candle in this dessert?"

"The owner told me to. He said this customer always comes here on the same day each year, so it must be his birthday."