

Shadow of a Doubt

Alison Jacobs
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The sun was shining like it always did these days. Mary was weeding the garden, while the younger children played around her. Johnny wanted to discuss his school work with his father. O-levels were coming up soon, not that he had anything to worry about. He was a fine boy, his father could not imagine why he had ever been worried about him. Even as he talked about his plans for the future he played with the model sailing boat that his father had given him years before.

Then it came back. The accident. The car. Johnny, little Johnny flying through the air in front of his father. The pain. The guilt. Again and again and again and again, Johnny flying through the air. Johnny dying. The look on Mary's face. He had lost her forever now. Again and again and again and again. The shocks that coursed through his body hardly mattered. It was the pain of loss that twisted his soul.

And then the voice. The little, whispering voice - too quiet for him to hear what it said yet he knew that the words were important. He knew that the words would destroy him.

* * *

Alec Freeman strode through the building, gun in hand, waiting for some kind of trap. It was too quiet. He knew that was a cliché but it was. There was no resistance. There was no one to offer any.

It took him a couple of minutes to find what he was looking for. It was not so bad as he had allowed himself to imagine but it was still pretty grotesque. A bare, whitewashed room. Straker was clamped down onto a metal bench, his head covered in something that Dumas might have come up with if he was writing science-fiction. The whole face was covered and the hair. The only way to recognise him was by his suit and that indefinable something that Straker gave out. He was writhing slowly, as if to some sound that only he could hear. Freeman checked himself. That was probably the case.

He tried talking, though he doubted it would do any good yet. "Ed? Can you hear me? Ed?"

He carried on as he tried to find some way of freeing him. There was a very obvious lever on the side of the bench. Too obvious, it was probably the kill switch. Yet there seemed to be nothing else. He hated being second in command. He hated having to take these decisions. He threw the switch.

The clamps retracted from Straker's wrists, ankles and waist. The face-plate of the mask swung slowly upwards.

"Ed? Can you hear me?"

It did not look like it. Straker stared straight into the air, his eyes blank. Freeman's

breathing was starting to speed up when finally he blinked, blinked again and shifted his head slightly to the side.

"Alec?" Then his eyes closed again and he was out cold. He stayed that way right back to SHADO HQ. Freeman knew, he rode with him in the ambulance.

It was when Straker came round that the trouble really started. Doctor Jackson had examined him and said there was nothing wrong apart from a few cuts and bruises and the burns were the electrodes had been attached.

"Rather less than usual." he commented coldly.

But Straker knew different. "I've been brainwashed."

Freeman sat down heavily on the bedside chair. "You've been what?"

He did not need it repeating, he simply could not take it in. Straker brainwashed would be the death of SHADO or at the very least the death of Straker. Not that there was much difference between the two.

He looked around at the bare concrete walls, at the sparse metal furniture, anywhere but at his boss. Anywhere but at his friend. Everybody knew that there were only two ways out of SHADO. If you had a chance encounter with a UFO, you would be OK for drug treatment. If you knew more than that, it was a bullet in the brain. Straker knew everything. And Freeman knew who would have to fire the gun.

"Brainwashed to do what?"

Straker was perfectly calm. "I don't know."

Freeman slammed the chair back against the wall. "How can you be so... You know what this means."

Straker nodded. "It's better to face the truth. There may be a solution. It's not like they haven't tried it on other people."

Freeman walked back to the office, convinced they were due for a major attack now that the aliens knew SHADO was understrength. He had no idea what tests Jackson would run but they could take hours. There was no point in worrying. Jackson was good at his job, whatever else he might be.

The tests took days. Jackson refused to give a report until he was finished so Freeman just sat there, drinking coffee and waiting for a menace that never came. The aliens must be laughing behind their backs.

"He'll be alright. He always is." Ginny Lake handed him another drink.

"Explain to me again what Jackson's doing."

She did but it made no more sense to him this time round. *Heaven only knows the brain is complicated, Straker's more than most, but shouldn't they have found what they're looking for by now?*

Straker himself had banned him from the medical section - "You've got work to do." - so it was a relief when he was called back down there. The relief was short lived.

"Nothing? You found nothing?"

Jackson nodded.

"That's alright then." But hard as Jackson's expressions were to read, he knew it was not.

"Commander Straker still insists there is a problem."

"He would."

Freeman was not happy to see that a guard had been placed outside Straker's room. It might be necessary but it looked bad. Straker himself looked no different from usual except, perhaps, for a little tension around his eyes. He stood up as they entered and began to pace the

floor. He looked a little apologetic.

"You don't get much exercise down here. Jackson's told you the news?"

Freeman nodded. "So what do we do about it?"

There was a long silence. It seemed like no one had any answers. Then Straker spoke. "I think you know what you have to do."

"No." Freeman took a step towards him, almost grabbed his arms but desisted at the last moment. "It's too early for that. There must be a solution."

Straker and Jackson both looked at him. They had made up their minds. So had he. "You gave me temporary command while your judgment was impaired because of this."

"I said in case." Straker broke in but Freeman ignored him.

He carried on. "I am therefore ordering your continued detention. Dr Jackson, you will re-run all the tests you have performed - and any others you can think of. We need an answer to this. If they get away with this one, they'll only try it again. We'll have to find an answer sometime.

"And if the pair of you think you can get round me, I'll have you -" he pointed to Jackson "- up on a charge and I'll have you -" he looked at Straker "- restrained."

He walked out before they could talk him out of it. He had never felt so low in his life. He wondered if he ought to report this to General Henderson. Technically he should have reported it days ago. Not telling Henderson unless absolute necessary was usual SHADO policy but this was not a usual situation. He was not sure he was up to the job.

He re-arranged the duty rota to give him more space. He called Paul Foster back from Moonbase and told Peter Carlin it was about time he took a land assignment. It made him feel a little better. If anything happened to him, three of the most senior officers were in a position to take over. But what could he do to save Straker?

If it was going to take days before he knew the results again, he had better find something to distract himself with. There was a distinct lack of activity in the skies so he headed above ground to take a turn around the studio. He had always liked the idea of being a studio executive, although unlike Straker he found it hard to keep production facts and figures in his head - the real work took up all the available space. He had to check the notices on each door of the sound stages in order to tell which production was where.

He did know that the big new spy movie was filming on lot seven. That was Paul Foster's responsibility, he liked that sort of thing. He could even sit through it without laughing. It was a problem going to the premiers of your own films and finding it hard to keep down a chuckle in the more serious moments. This one was called 'Shadow of a Doubt'. He knew the chap who was directing it, maybe he ought to go and have a word if he was not busy. It looked like the lunch break. You did lose all track of time underground.

There was something playing around at the back of his mind. Shadow of a doubt. Shadow of a doubt.

He had it. He rushed back into the building, sweeping past Miss Ealand with a smile and a thumbs up. She looked puzzled. He had kept her up to date with developments, she knew they were not good. They soon would be - if he was right. *If* he was right.

Jackson was not pleased to see him. Initially he would not let him into the medical section but Freeman overruled him. "I've got the Commander's authority now."

He knew Straker would hear him out, even if he did not believe him.

Straker was surprised to see him so soon, even if it only showed in a briefly raised eyebrow. "You have something?"

Freeman sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm not sure if I ought to tell you this before they run the tests but I think I've got it. The aliens are devious little so-and-sos, we know that, but I think this could be their cleverest trick yet. Answer me one question and you might feel a bit different about dying."

Straker sat down on the other side of the bed. "Dying is not something I feel too keen on at the moment. If you have an alternative..."

"Then tell me, which is more destructive: finding a traitor or suspecting a traitor?"

Straker smiled. "Yes. Yes, that's it. Doctor Jackson, can you test for that?"

Jackson looked at them, curious and a little annoyed. "I'm afraid Colonel Freeman's logic has escaped me."

So they explained, as they explained to everyone in SHADO after the tests confirmed the hypothesis. "They brainwashed the Commander to know that he was brainwashed, no more than that. Can you think of anything more likely to have us tearing ourselves apart? Or we fall into factions about whether or not he should die and even when the decision is taken, we wonder if we got it right. We wonder if it would have been safe for him to live. We wonder if leaving him in his post would one-day get us all killed."

The two friends walked down the corridor out of the medical section.

"After that, I think we both need a good night's sleep." Freeman commented.

Straker shook his head. "First I need some fresh air, after being stuck in that hole. Maybe I'll take a turn around the lots and see where you found the sign."

Ahead, a technician was bustling towards them. "Commander, Colonel, Moonbase reports we have incoming."

Straker smiled. "Now that's what I need for a good night's sleep."