

# ALIEN

by Amelia L. Rodgers ©1985

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*Moonbase Alpha Status report, 2515 days after leaving Earth orbit, Doctor Helena Russell recording:*

*Our sensors picked up a cloud-like mass of energy heading toward Alpha. Cmdr. Koenig sent Alan Carter to investigate it. Before Alan's Eagle reached it, it vanished. When Alan returned to base he discovered an unconscious man wearing a spacesuit unfamiliar to us lying on the launch pad. Commander Koenig believes the man may be linked somehow with the cloud, and that Alpha may be endangered. My concern as a doctor is for the man, who is human, and remains in my care in the Medical Center.*

Helena looked down at her patient as he stirred slightly.

"He's coming around now, John," she told Koenig.

"Good now maybe we'll get to the bottom of this."

"Try not to upset him too much, he's been in a lot of pain."

Impatiently Koenig said, "Helena, you know that my first concern has to be Alpha's safety."

Before Helena could reply, her patient sat straight up, looking terrified.

"I can't breathe! Get it away from me! get it away from me!" he cried. Helena soothed him.

"Lie back down now, I'm Dr. Helena Russell and you're in the medical center of Moonbase Alpha."

He calmed down a little but he stared at her.

"Moonbase Alpha? I know every installation on this moon, and there's no such base."

"Every installation? Look I'm in charge here and I want some questions answered. Who are you and how did you get here?"

"The name is Straker, and until I find out what's going on here, that's all you get out of me," he replied coolly.

Koenig was about to reply but Maya came in looking very curious, eager to tell what she had discovered.

"Computer data shows his suit and gear date back to the 1980's on Earth!"

"Then you may have come through some kind of time. . .What is it?" Helena asked. Helena saw that the man was staring at Maya.

"An alien? So that's it." he said bitterly. "I'm a prisoner here." He threw off his covers and got halfway up, wincing in pain as he did so. Helena tried to calm him, but he pushed her away

roughly. "Don't touch me! Stay away from me! You call yourself a doctor? What kind of doctor sells out her own kind to aliens?"

He lunged toward Maya but Koenig held him and forced him down. Helena checked the contents and dosage of a sedative and injected the man. As it took effect, he stopped struggling, gave Helena a look of dismay, and fell unconscious. Maya seemed very disturbed and looked to Helena for assurance.

"I didn't mean to frighten him. I forgot about my appearance, will he be all right?"

"Are you okay Maya?" Koenig asked. The Psychon nodded but said nothing. Helena covered the man then turned to Koenig with a nod.

"He'll be fine. he just needs to rest."

"Run what we have on him through Main Computer. He gave his name as Straker, and he seemed to think there were other bases on the Moon. See if you come up with anything further. Any traces of that cloud mass?"

Maya was looking at the sleeping man thoughtfully.

"No trace Commander. I'll get to Command Center and start checking. " Maya gave the man one last glance and departed. Helena was clearly not pleased with Koenig.

"John, that cloud or whatever it was didn't harm Alpha., but its possible it may have been the cause of his injuries. I won't allow you to question him any further until I say he's well enough. He's still my patient."

"Your patient attacked Maya and might have attacked you if I hadn't stopped him. I want him put in restraints."

"John you can't mean that! That's the last thing I should do. He already thinks he's a prisoner here."

"And he is, until I decide otherwise. My order stands. Restraints."

Koenig did an about face and left.

Helena sighed. She was angry but she realized John was right. She fastened the restraints on the man's arms and legs. Then she checked him over with a professional eye. When she was finished, and assured he was all right, she checked him over with a woman's eye. He looked to be in his forties, slim, fine boned, with white blond hair cut close to his head with a fringe of bangs on his forehead. His eyes were a clear blue. Even in sleep he seemed very determined, a man with a purpose, stubborn. Attractive. And in need of her care. Right now that was all that mattered.

### **SHADO Moonbase**

"All right. Go over it again. Everything. " Alec Freeman's face on the screen was grim, and Paul Foster's as he watched it, was equally grim.

"Right." Foster said. "SID reported a UFO headed straight for Moonbase. Before we could launch Interceptors, the computers and radar tracking went crazy. All we got was a visual . It wasn't a UFO or at least not like any UFO we've dealt with before. It looked like a rolling cloud. Straker figured it was a diversion, something to keep us occupied while leaving us open for UFO attack. We went out on the lunar surface, armed. We stayed in radio contact, and split up taking cover. A few seconds later I heard Straker scream over the radio. I rushed over but he'd vanished, and so had that cloud."

"I want Ed found. I'll contact you in an hour and I expect you to have some kind of lead." Alec knew that was an unlikely possibility but he fought to remain hopeful.

"Right. Oh..Alec. . ."

"What?"

"It was Ed's idea to go out there. He wanted a first hand look at it, and he gave the order to split up, but I never should have left him. I keep hearing that awful scream. . ."

"Paul, you were under orders and you know Ed knew there was a risk involved. Just find him. Over."

Alec felt very weary and nodded at the fellow in Control who was filling in for Ford to cut the Moonbase video link. Alec remembered his name was Clark. Clark seemed uneasy.

"It doesn't look good, does it, Sir? Without Commander Straker. . .uh, that is to say, I didn't mean to question your ability to comma. . ."

"That's enough Clark." Alec growled. He left the station and found himself drawn to Ed's empty office. My ability to command. What a joke, Alec thought.

He looked at the abandoned desk, the paperweight Ed characteristically toyed with, the soothing patterns of color in the mural. His eyes fell on the chair.

There's only one man qualified to sit in that chair, he thought. Ed, wherever you are, if they took you - hang on. I won't rest until you're back where you belong. If they've taken you then they've got one hell of a fight on their hands. . .

*Moonbase Alpha status report, 2516 days after leaving Earth orbit. Dr. Helena Russell recording:*

*Alpha is coming within Eagle range of a planet unsuitable to live on but rich in ores we can use including tiranium. Maya tells us the planet is covered with snow and ice and has no detectable life forms. Commander Koenig will choose a landing party when we are in range.*

*In the meantime we've learned a great deal about our unwilling addition to Alpha, Commander Edward Straker. Back in the 1970's not widely known, Earth was under attack by hostile aliens. The heads of state saw the need for a organization to deal with the attacks. So SHADO-Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization was created. Its existence, and the alien threat was kept secret to prevent mass panic and hysteria. Ed Straker, at that time a Colonel in United States Air Force intelligence was selected as its Commander. His cover was posing as the executive of the film studio under which SHADO was secretly located. SHADO maintained its Moonbase long before Alpha was conceived.*

*At first Commander Straker refused to believe what had happened, a time warp of some kind, ending up on a moon traveling through space, he dismissed it all as nonsense. He was certain it had something to do with the aliens he had spent ten years battling. But after going over the records, venturing out on the lunar surface and realizing the star systems in this part of space were different, he seems to have accepted his fate. However he makes no secret of hating Maya. He doesn't believe her any different from the aliens he fought. Ed is more than qualified to join the command staff, but I must help him overcome his prejudice toward Maya.*

Helena turned off the recorder and went to the treatment room where Ed waited for her. He was in conversation with Alan Carter, and he looked frustrated. During the weeks of recovery from his injuries, he'd gone over every scrap of history on Alpha and the surprisingly little they had on SHADO. He'd been stunned to find out the data on SHADO had been declassified. Helena entered but neither man noticed her right away.

"Look Ed," Alan was saying, "SHADO must have been a success, otherwise there wouldn't be a Alpha. Don't let it bother you."

"I don't like it. I need to know what happened." Ed said.

"Don't worry about it, mate, you have a new life with us." Alan smiled.

"Maybe." Ed shrugged his shoulders, uncomfortable in the Alphan uniform with one

khaki sleeve. "Alan I wanted to ask you. Your accent sounds Australian. . ."

"That's right." Alan grinned. "I come from the land down under."

Ed nodded, lost in thought.

"Why did you ask? Why did you want to know?" Alan suddenly scowled. "Hey now don't tell me you've got something against Australians as well?" Alan knew Ed was repulsed by Maya. Alan stared at Ed.

"I'm sure that isn't what Ed meant," Helena put in, alarmed. Ed finally acknowledged her presence.

"There you are. Hmm? I thought you got lost. No, no, its just that I know. . ." Ed's expression saddened for a moment. ". . .Knew an Australian. The first recruit to SHADO. You remind me of him. The same spirit, the same humanity, zest for life."

Alan brightened.

"I knew straightaway there was something about you I liked. We Aussies choose our mates very carefully. Tell me about him! Where in . . ."

"Alan. You can find out all about him later. I need to do a check on Ed."

"Sure. See you later, Ed."

Helena guided Ed to the treatment couch and he looked uneasy as she fastened the sensor disks to his head. She smoothed down a stray strand of his hair. It wasn't necessary to check the instrument readout to see that he was nervous.

"Try and relax Ed. How do you feel? How have you been getting along?"

"Fine."

Helena frowned.

"We both know that isn't true. You've been sleeping poorly, having nightmares, and you've hardly eaten at all. You're far too calm for a man who's been torn from his family and friends and job and thrust into a place full of strangers. I know adjusting has been hard on you. I want to help you."

"I don't need any help," Ed replied curtly.

"Now listen to me. I'm responsible for the physical and mental health of everyone on Alpha. We depend on one another. We trust one another. I've been concerned about your failure to adjust."

"Failure? It isn't failure. I have no intention of becoming part of a society that calls an alien its friend, makes it part of the command staff." retorted Ed.

Helena didn't respond to his hostility. "We all have walls we put up to protect ourselves when we're experiencing trauma. But its time to put aside yours. I'm your doctor. In matters like these I could use my authority and. . ."

"Get what you want, from my subconscious? NO. What is it you really want?" he asked her angrily.

"You haven't talked about any family."

"I have no family." Ed said.

"Friends then. You mentioned someone to Alan..."

"Alec Freeman."

"You must miss him.."

"Life goes on Doctor." Ed said.

"So that's the way you see things?"

"That's the way I see things. Now, if you're through with your probing of my personal life. . ."

"No, You'll wait until I'm through. Sit back, breathe normally. Want to hear a theory of mine?"

Ed looked at her. "As if I actually have a choice?" he snapped.

Ignoring his attitude, she began, "I find that so-called, hard, tough, unemotional men have a soft core. I believe that's true of you. Your job toughened your heart. But now your job and the life you knew are gone forever. You're despondent, uncertain, so you cling to your old beliefs, standards that don't apply here. Here, you aren't in control. And that's painful for you. So you throw up a cold facade. Am I close?"

"You have quite an imagination, Doctor. But none of that has anything to do with me. It's just what you prefer to believe," he said calmly. Helena was watching the monitors. The indicators all were doing a zig zag. He was obviously identifying with what she'd said, and trying to hide it.

"You're far too intelligent to feel real bigotry toward Maya. You know perfectly well. . ."

"Maya, huh? If you'd seen what the aliens were capable of doing, you wouldn't be so quick to trust her. Look what do you want from me anyhow?"

"The truth." Helena said.

"Truth? Truth can be pretty ugly sometimes. I ought to know."

"Maybe the truth isn't as ugly as you think. Why not tell me about it. Then we both can decide."

Ed looked up at her as she lay a hand on his shoulder. Should he really tell her he'd let his marriage and child die for SHADO? For a cause that now didn't even exist, he thought. He'd felt something for her for a while now. He'd been aware of how beautiful she was, how dedicated in her own way. Beauty and Intelligence. It had gotten him in trouble with that reporter Jo Fraser. He'd sworn never to be that much of an idiot again. But he was so damned lonely. He would have given anything to hear Alec's voice. But he knew Alec must be dead by now. Everything he'd ever cared about was gone, finished. . .

Helena sensed he was on the verge of opening up.

"Ed, don't you know we all genuinely care about you? Can't you let yourself believe..."

Her commlock buzzed and she swore softly. Ed actually grinned slightly, for the first time.

"Doctor, there was a phrase. . . 'saved by the bell'. . ."

She smiled at him.

### **SHADO Headquarters.**

"Drink?" Paul asked Alec Freeman. Alec was acting commander of SHADO now and Paul thought Alec looked like he'd aged a hundred years in a matter of weeks. He and Alec were in Ed's office.

"How long has it been now?" Alec said, studying Ed's paperweight crystal ball. Paul frowned. It was the fourth time Alec had asked that question this week.

"Two months." Paul said. He hated having to give that same reply.

"TWO MONTHS!" Alec sagged with an invisible burden. He set the ball back in its stand. "DAMN! No trace of that cloud. Nothing. All we've had is the usual UFO activity."

"Alec, you could use a drink."

"No, I haven't touched a drop since. . . well, when we get Ed back I'll celebrate. Henderson's been on my back, with that damn missing astronaut rule, wants to declare Ed dead, wants me to give it up, saying the search has been taking up too much manpower. He wants me to take this chair officially."

"So do I," admitted Paul.

The icy look Alec shot Paul was might have come from Straker himself. There was contempt in Alec's lined, beaten face.

"Just what the bloody hell does that mean?"

"Alec, You know its likely Ed is dead, his organs being used. . ."

"Now you look, Foster. It may be easy for you to give up. Straker was nothing but the boss to you. Ed was more than just the guy in charge to me. Ed Straker was . . .damn it..IS my close friend. So don't let me EVER hear you say he's dead again."

"Alec, look, Alec, Ed saved my life on more than one occasion. I considered him a friend too, I'm sorry," Paul said quietly.

"No." Alec sighed. "I'm sorry for snapping at you like that. My nerves are shot,"

"You need a break, go home and rest." Paul suggested.

Alec looked at Paul. "Rest? Ed Straker never knew the meaning of that word. Look, I'll make the search voluntary for any off duty personnel. That should hold Henderson for a while."

"Sounds good to me Alec. You've got your first volunteer." Paul grinned.

"Now you're talking," Alec grinned back.

Neither man believed they'd ever see Straker again, and Paul knew it.

\* \* \*

### **Alpha**

Helena had been summoned to a command conference and had released Ed and ordered him to have a full meal and eight hours of drug induced sleep. She also figured Ed would ignore the order. As she came in, Tony Verdeschi was discussing Ed's fate. Helena knew Tony wasn't likely to care much if Ed fell out of an airlock. The Italian was fiercely protective of Maya.

" - .remember John, this guy had a command once and he may try and undermine your authority here. If he, well, if you ask me, the guy should be thrown out on the lunar surface without his spacesuit."

"Tony you can't mean that! He'd be killed," Maya said anxiously.

"That was the general idea," The Italian grumbled.

"How can you talk like that? Do you really think killing him will solve the problem?"

Sandra Benes spoke up.

Helena took a seat besides John and he smiled at her.

"I'm sure that he wasn't being serious," Helena said.

"Helena's right. But what if we threw him out in a suit that had a slow leak in one of the oxygen tanks?" Alan suggested. Maya giggled and everyone smiled or laughed. Alan and Helena were two of the few Alphans who had tried to befriend Ed. Helena was very grateful to see Maya laugh. Ed's treatment of her had hurt her badly.

"Maya listen. You don't really have anything to do with Ed's failure to adjust here. He's just frightened and trying to cope with his loss. Remember what it was like when you first came here? He's just having the same feelings we all did after we lost all contact with Earth. You know when you joined us you thought you'd never really belong. And we told you everyone was an alien until we took the time to know one another."

The Psychon nodded. "You all made me feel welcome. You made me forget I was different. But Ed hates me, he makes me feel like an alien." Maya seemed close to tears.

"But don't you see? Ed's the alien now. We have to help him belong," Helena said.

Koenig was nodding. "Helena is right."

"He's a scientist you know," Alan said. "He studied astrophysics, lunar research. He practically saved Earth single-handedly back then. If he'd been born in a different time, he'd be a candidate for Alpha. I feel sorry for the guy. He seems obsessed with his SHADO. If he hadn't won that war, none of us would probably be here."

"Yes. We have to remember he spent a good part of his life fighting something that most people didn't even know was being waged. With no one to acknowledge him as a hero," Koenig said. "With no acknowledgment in the history books." The more he'd learned about Ed, the more respect he'd had for him.

"John, you know what a struggle it's been for him. The rug has been pulled from underneath his feet. All he had was his job. Now he has a chance to live a new life with us. But he's running scared. He refuses to open up and trust me. John, he's a troubled lonely man. If I can't break through to him, if he won't join us freely, what will happen to him?"

"My heart bleeds for the guy. But what about Maya?" Tony insisted. "Where does she fit in this new life for Straker?"

Maya smiled at Tony. "Helena is right, Tony. We have to try harder."

"Maya, you don't know what you're getting . . ." The buzz of Koenig's commlock interrupted Tony.

"What is it Yasko?"

"Alpha is now within Eagle range of the planet, sir."

"Thank you Yasko." Koenig turned the comm off. Alan was eager.

"What do you say John? we get out our flannel underwear and go prospecting?" the Australian grinned.

Koenig seemed lost in thought.

Ed Straker sat numbly in the quarters he'd been assigned, his food and the sleeping capsule untouched.

Right, he muttered to himself. Right, she's right. But I don't belong here. They trust that alien. That cloud or whatever it was should have killed me. It's just a twist of fate I landed here. That cloud, I haven't been able to think clearly since it took me, I can still feel it crushing me, cutting off my breathing. God. God. Put it out of your mind.

Ed jumped up and paced in his unfamiliar quarters. His mind was filled with images of Helena, the way she'd cared for him. Her style is a long way from Jackson's, he thought, amused, Alec would prefer - oh Christ, Alec. How I wish you could help me now. No I haven't got any right to want Alec pulled into this. I can only hope it wasn't too difficult, taking my place as he must have, or maybe Paul. So what happens now? I'm finished. Ed Straker is finished.

He thought about the armory, the guns he'd seen the security personnel wearing. He hadn't bothered to find out about the science involved in the weaponry.

I don't belong. I'll never belong. All I have to do is get one of those guns, put it to my head and it'll be all over. MY GOD! What's wrong with me? I have to beat this despair I've been feeling, I have to think things out, I have to. . .

He jumped as his commlock buzzed and startled him. It took him a moment to remember how to operate it the way Alan had showed him. He'd been amused at the clunky commlock device. Mankind, it seemed, still didn't quite understand that simpler was better. Ed found himself missing his pager. This commlock gadget was like the wristwatches in his own time that did everything you could think of but show the correct time. Ed grinned.

It was probably Helena checking in on him. He was attracted to her, under a set of different circumstances he might have fallen in love with her. When he answered, it was with a little of the old authority.

"Straker," he answered forcefully. The tiny screen held Koenig's face.

"Colonel, I want you in the conference room right away."

"I'll be there." Ed answered. But when the tiny screen went blank, he resented it. What right did that John Koenig have to order him around? Suddenly he grinned. Here, he, Ed Straker, was a lowly green underling. Alec would relish the idea of my being an underling again, he mused with a sad smile. and smoothed his uniform.

When he stepped through the door a few minutes later, he felt all eyes on him. No reaction showed on his face.

"Commander Koenig?" he gave Koenig an expectant look.

"Have a seat, Colonel," Koenig indicated a seat at his left. He looked at Helena, trying to read her expression. She smiled encouragingly at him. His eyes shot her an unspoken question. 'What was this about?' Clearly she didn't know.

Ed sat. He waited, ignoring the hostile look from Verdeschi, and not looking at Maya at all.

"Colonel I'm sending a landing party to that planet. It has . . ."

"Tiranium?" Ed said. Inwardly he grinned at Koenig's surprised reaction. Ed had kept busy doing his homework.

"I see Helena is as good a teacher as she is a doctor. Tiranium. Like I said, I'm sending a landing party down to that planet, with Alan Carter as Eagle Pilot, Helena, and Maya, and you. You'll be assisting Maya as science officer." Koenig sat back to enjoy the chaos his order had caused. To his credit, Straker never blinked, but Koenig thought he saw him momentarily flinch. Sandra smiled. Alan grinned openly. Helena was delighted. Tony was, well, red-faced.

"STRAKER? You're sending STRAKER? With Maya? John have you lost your mind?" Tony raged.

Maya's mouth dropped open. Straker turned deliberately to meet Verdeschi's glare. Koenig went on calmly.

"Oh and Colonel," Koenig addressed Ed, who turned back to him, "I want to tell you that you're being considered to join our command staff. With your experience and education you'll make an invaluable addition to Alpha. My final decision will ride on your performance on that planet. If you get out of line, I'll stick you in a back room somewhere doing inventory for the rest of your life. Clear?"

Ed's expression was austere but his large blue eyes seemed hopeful.

"Clear enough, John," Ed said. He deliberately called the Alphan leader by his first name to further annoy Verdeschi. Koenig didn't admonish him.

"Good. That's all. Alan, get the Colonel ready, brief him on procedure."

"Come on mate, let's get you measured for your winter woollies." Alan grinned.

Ed gave Alan a puzzled look. It didn't last long. Ed chuckled slightly.

"After you." He nodded at Alan.

People filed out of the room. Helena rose from her seat and squeezed Koenig's hand.

"Oh John. This is perfect. It's just what he needed, to see that he belongs, to make him feel needed. You're doing the right thing John."

"I hope so Helena. He deserves a chance."

Helena smiled and left. Only Tony remained.

"She's wrong. You're making a big mistake. Straker will never play by the rules, and being under Maya? You're. . ."

"Straker does deserve a chance, Tony. And Maya can take care of herself. Stop worrying, you'll get grey hairs," Koenig got up and patted Tony's shoulder in a fatherly fashion.

"If that guy lays one hand on Maya I swear on my sainted mother I'll personally rip his eyeballs from his sockets and tear him limb from limb."

"I wouldn't have sent him if I didn't trust Helena's judgement of him. And you can take any precaution you feel is necessary."

Tony was muttering several things in Italian, names for Ed that his sainted mother wouldn't approve of.

Later, aboard the Eagle, en route to the planet, Alan hummed to himself and Maya came into the cockpit and sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"How's it going back there? Everything okay?"

"He makes it plain he doesn't like following my orders and working with me, but its okay so far," Maya sighed.

"Hey he's not bad. Give him some time to get to know you. He'll be okay." Alan grinned.

"So Helena tries to convince me. I admit he learns very quickly. Helena told me privately he seems like a little boy set loose in a toy shop with all the equipment." Maya smiled. "He does seem fascinated with it."

"Yeah? Ask him to come up here," Alan grinned again. Maya rolled her eyes, sure that Alan was up to something, but went, and returned with a frowning Straker.

"Ever fly, Ed?" Alan said.

"Not when I can leave the flying to the experts. This Eagle is a far cry from the spacecraft I'm accustomed to. But, I've flown."

Alan pointed to the co-pilot's seat. "Sit."

Ed's already large eyes grew larger and he was unaware of Maya's glee at his discomfort. He slid his lean body into the seat and studied the instrument readouts, listened attentively as Alan tutored him and then gave him the controls. Soon Ed was flying the Eagle. Ed was surprised to find that he liked it.

"You handle this baby like you were born at those controls." Alan said to Ed.

"All this is very impressive, Alan. I could have used, to borrow your phrase "this baby" in SHADO," Ed said wryly. He gave Alan back the controls. "What's our ETA to our location?"

"Four minutes.." Maya began, but Helena peered in, looking concerned. Ed turned and saw her, and lifted himself out of the seat. "Come to my rescue, Helena?"

"I wasn't aware you needed rescuing, Ed?"

"Oh? Then why have you watched every move I made like a mother hen?" Ed said, with a hint of a smile. Alan laughed.

"Don't be silly. Come on, you have to get ready. We'll be touching down soon," Helena said.

Ed gave Alan a knowing look, then he followed Helena into the passenger section.

Maya squealed and giggled.

"Ed the baby chick," chuckled Alan.

"He's right you know, she does fuss over him!" giggled Maya.

Ed slipped on the bulky parka over his uniform, and the insulated turtleneck. Alan landed with his usual finesse, and when everyone was ready, Alan opened the Eagle hatch. Maya was standing next to Ed and she heard him gasp as he saw the planet's surface, ice and snow as far

as the eye could see.

"My God. Is the whole place like this?" He slipped his goggles into place. The air was breathable but even with the insulation his exposed skin stung with the cold.

"Yes. The whole planet. I'd forgotten that planet fall is a new experience for you," Maya said.

Ed was silent for a moment.

"Its breathtaking." he said, awed in spite of himself. The same quirk of fate that had marooned him on Alpha had also made him the first man to walk on an alien soil from his time. He couldn't help but be stunned by that thought.

"Yeah but we don't have long to appreciate it. Alpha will move out of range in a matter of hours. We've got a job to do. Let's get going," Alan smiled.

Everyone agreed and set off into pairs, Helena reluctantly with Alan, leaving Maya with Ed. The ice crunched softly beneath their boots as they set off.

And later it was Ed and Maya who detected tiranium.

"If only we had more time!" Maya sighed. Ed was weary, and paused to rest, he'd been digging for several minutes.

"How long do we have left?"

"Two hours, five minutes, three seconds," Maya answered.

"How could you calculate the time so precisely? I didn't see you look at anything."

"I'm a Psychon. We can . . ." then she remembered Ed's dislike of her.

"Psychon. Just another term for the word alien," Ed said.

"I have a name just like you do. Its Maya."

"Alien. Oh, you're different enough from the aliens I dealt with, but you're still an alien." Ed turned away from her and began to dig again. Maya loaded the precious ore into her specimen box, blinking back tears.

Above them, unseen and undetected, a sentient being looked on with a emotion that might have been amusement. But still it wasn't satisfied with its manipulation of the male it had taken. It turned its attention to the other two Alphans.

At that moment, Alan Carter entered the Eagle and found Helena sitting in front of her scanner. He dumped out the ore he'd managed to dig up.

Helena sighed.

"Still no tiranium? I hope Ed and Maya are doing better than you are."

"Look why don't you get up and go look for it yourself? It isn't easy finding that ore under solid blocks of ice. All you do is sit on your arse and scan it, so don't complain to me!" raged Alan.

"You know very well I have to run tests to make sure the ore is pure." she replied testily. Alan picked up a rock, examined it briefly then flung it against the wall. It smashed into pieces.

"Alan!"

"I didn't spent my life training to be the best pilot there was only to wind up digging for rocks!"

"You know that . . ."

"I'm tired," he interrupted her. "Tired. Just for once I'd like to walk in the sunshine, feel its warmth against my face instead of having to live and breathe in the sterile, plastic environment of Alpha."

"I . . ."

"and I'm sick of hearing your stupid lies about how we're going to find a new home some

day," sneered Alan.

"Do you think you're the only one that's tired? Do you know what its like to be responsible for everyone's health on Alpha? Do you think its easy watching people sicken and die, suffer, lose all hope of ever being normal human beings again?"

"Normal. What a joke. We're all going to die in space anyway." Alan went out of the Eagle.

Helena rushed out after him.

"Alan, oh Alan I'm sorry!"

"Its my fault really, I've been edgy ever since we landed. Am I forgiven?"

"Nothing to forgive. Come on, some genuine artificial coffee is just what we both need."

"Right."

But they exchanged strange looks. Something wasn't right. Something was terribly wrong.

And some distance away, Maya knew it was time to return to the Eagle. She gathered up her things and turned toward Ed. He was nowhere in sight. Fresh footprints lead away from the area. As intent as she'd been upon her work, he hadn't heard him slip away. Frowning, she began to hunt for him.

"Colonel Straker?" she called.

"Behind you," he said. She whirled to see him standing a few feet in front of her, his gun out and aimed at her.

"Don't be an idiot. That gun will only stun," she sneered at him, more angry than afraid.

"This gun can kill. Don't forget, I studied every aspect of Alpha. Don't waste your time trying to convince me otherwise. I know a great deal about Alpha and even more about you," Ed said.

"Ignorant human. Your gun has no kill setting. Tony insisted you be armed with that model instead of Model Two which we normally carry to defend ourselves on a planet fall. Tony didn't want you armed at all but Dr. Russell insisted you have some weapon should you have to defend yourself. Where were you going to hide after you killed me? You have no place to go. You can't escape."

"So the doctor tricked me! She and Koenig just planned to humiliate me, is that it? I know the treachery of those who deal with aliens. I know all about you. I studied your history, you and your father Mentor. How long before it hits you? Mentor, and Dorzak," Ed reminded her.

"What are you saying?"

"They trust you now. How long will it be before you go mad like the rest of your kind, Psychon? Will they trust you then?"

Maya faced him, trembling, furious.

"I've had it with you human. Your mind is so filled with hatred that it's warped your judgement! But you're right about one thing. I am a alien. And I'm going to show you just how alien I can be!" Suddenly Maya transformed into a creature that thrived in sub zero climates. She emitted a loud cry.

Ed froze for a moment. He knew of her ability, but to see her transform in front of him was frightening. He brought up the gun and fired, but the stun had no effect on her in the new form. With a quick move she crossed to him, knocked the gun out of his hand and then knocked him over with a satisfied snarl. Ed rolled and tried to rise but she was quicker, and many times stronger now, and hit him again, so that he glided a short distance over the ice. The blow had stunned him, but he still tried to rise, this time making it up painfully, searching for cover which didn't exist. Maya snarled and started after him. It clearly was no contest. Maya

was nearly on him when he slipped, his boot hit thin ice and he plunged into water. Ed was an excellent swimmer, but with the unforgiving cold, and laden with the heavy clothing, he started to sink. . . .

### **London**

Alec Freeman used his key to open the door of Ed's flat. The drapes were drawn back to let in the sunshine. It made Ed's flat seem cozy and cheerful when there was absolutely nothing to be cheerful about. The man who had once lived there was gone, and forgotten.

Alec moved to the shelf near the door. Hidden behind some books and curio and set into the wall was Ed's safe. Alec was one of the few Ed had shared the combination with. He opened it. It contained some papers, Ed's medals, some photographs..cash, bonds, and a sealed envelope. He stared at it. Written across it in Ed's handwriting was *In the event of my death*.

Alec knew it contained Ed's will. Not that he needed to look at it. Ed probably had wanted Alec to take his place. Or pick the best man for the job. Foster maybe. Command wasn't something Alec had sought. Yes, Foster.

No! Alec suddenly realized he hated Foster, Henderson, the whole lot of them. He was supposed to go to h.q. and formally declare Ed dead, have some ceremony for him, do the "proper thing" and say what a privilege it was to have served under such a dedicated man. He was supposed to accept Ed's death even though there was no body, no action on the part of the aliens. Too many unanswered questions. Why had Ed been taken? Why not Foster? Why? So that morale would slip, so that SHADO would suffer until someone made the blunder that allowed the UFO's to attack and destroy SHADO for good, leaving the Earth unprotected? That was Jackson's theory. He was supposed to go lamely along with the announcement, follow procedure.

Suddenly Alec thrust the envelope unopened into the safe along with the photographs that were all Ed Straker had left of the wife and son he'd loved. He shut it and left the flat, got into the bronze SHADO car and tore out of Ed's driveway like a madman. Tough going if every traffic cop in London was on his tail. He didn't care. SHADO was ready to turn its back on the man who had made it what it was. SHADO had declared Ed Straker dead. Well, Alec wasn't going to give up. No matter how hopeless it seemed, and he cursed himself for even coming close to it. They hadn't found Ed's body. He'd find something, some sign that Ed was alive somewhere. If they had him, well, he knew Ed wouldn't give up without a fight. He'd struggle to the end. If there was anyway Ed could contact them, he'd find it. If he was alive. If. If. If. Henderson wouldn't stand for this. To hell with Henderson. Alec had command now and he'd use it. Henderson didn't understand one thing. He didn't realize that the commander of SHADO was much more than that. Alec remembered the younger, more carefree Ed before all this had happened. He'd seen what the responsibility had done to Ed. He'd seen the torment in his face. No matter what people said behind his back, Ed was flesh and blood. Even though they were nothing alike, Ed had been his friend. Sometimes Ed was almost like a beloved younger, stubborn brother to him who wouldn't give an inch. Alec sighed. They said he'd died. What bothered Alec was, deep down in his gut, he sensed that Ed was not only alive somewhere, but he was in trouble, and calling out to Alec.

Maybe I've gone mad. Maybe it's just me. But, I feel you're out there, and I can't help you, I can't reach you, Alec thought.

Alec made a fist and struck the steering wheel in frustration. In grief that he couldn't reach Ed. He's in trouble. I know it..I can't get to him. . . and it feels like he's dying.

"HELP! Somebody HELP! I'm drowning! Hel. . ." Ed's cries were cut off as he swallowed

a mouthful of water. He choked and started to scream out again, but he was fatigued. After a few minutes he blacked out and disappeared underneath the water.

A few feet away, Maya watched in satisfaction as Ed sunk and vanished. Then she gave a snarl, robbed of killing him herself. KILL? Sickened by her thoughts she made a rare transformation without returning to her own form first. This time she was a sleek sea creature which seized Ed's body from the water and carried him to solid ground. He laid on the ice. He was dead.

"NO NO NO!" cried Maya as she changed to her own form, blessing the instinct that had gotten Helena to teach her artificial respiration. She kept at it, willing him to fight. He stirred. She cried in anguish and gratitude and kept at it, until he coughed up most of the water that had entered his lungs, coughing and gasping for air, throwing up what was left in his stomach. After that he laid on his side shaking.

" . . . why . . . why bother . . ." His voice was weak, but she could make out the words. ". . . why. . . I would rather just die. . . than go back. . . go back where I'll never belong . . . should have. . . should. . . have . . . let me drown. . ."

"I don't want you to die! Oh Ed! I almost killed you! I sat there and watched you suffer, and I enjoyed it! I enjoyed it!" she sobbed. Suddenly she thrust her gun into his hand after setting it to kill. "You were right! All Psychons are mad! Kill me before I harm anyone on Alpha. I am an alien! I am a killer! Kill me!"

" . . . no. . . don't want to hurt you . . . never want..never wanted to hurt you. Don't hate you. . . it's me, me I've grown to hate. . . all of you. . . welcomed me. . ." He struggled to sit up and she let him lean against her and wiped his face. ". . . what. . . what have I done..what have I done..ever since ..am I losing my mind? Ever since that thing..that thing..oh God, its evil..Maya..I'm..I'm.."

"Scared?" Maya asked softly. Ed turned away, chest heaving, body shaking, and didn't answer, didn't need to answer. Forgetting her own fear she gently caressed him and he leaned against her again.

"Don't be afraid. We care about what happens to you. I care about what happens to you."

He closed his eyes for a moment and let himself need her. He opened his eyes and shakily stroked her long red hair. She sobbed against him. He looked at a sky he had never dreamed of seeing, and had a strange sense of defiance as if someone or something was angry at his actions. He shivered. He held Maya at arm's length.

"Maya something's wrong. That thing, that cloud thing . . . it's alive . . . I think its doing something to us."

"Yes! We have to get away, warn Helena and Alan before it happens to them. Can you walk?"

". . . try to . . ."

"Let's go!"

Halfway to the Eagle Maya saw Alan and Helena. Helena gasped at seeing the bedraggled, soaked through figure that was almost not recognizable as Ed.

"We tried to get you on the commlock! What happened? Look no time for that now, Alpha's already moving out of range! Hurry!" Alan warned. With Alan carrying Ed, they went aboard the Eagle.

Alan fired up the Eagle while Helena and Maya settled Ed down and began to remove his clothing. Ed started to cough heavily. He looked irritated at being so helpless.

"What in the world happened to you?" Helena gave Ed an injection to ease his breathing.

"Thin ice." he said in a weak tone, barely managing a smile.

"That should help you. How do you feel?" Maya asked, anxiously. Ed did not look at all well after the ordeal, no real surprise. Ed's reply was soft.

"fine. . ." he hesitated for a moment and then looked directly at Helena. ". . .lousy," he confessed.

Helena laughed. "Now that's what I wanted to hear."

Maya looked very puzzled. Ed closed his eyes.

### **Alpha**

"You're certain now?" Ed asked a giggling Maya. Helena came into the ward and smiled. Ed was progressing well. He still looked a little tired, and Helena had kept an eye on him. But he was recovering.

"Certain about what?" Helena asked.

"Certain that Commander Koenig won't stick me in a back room somewhere doing inventory for the rest of my life?" Ed joked.

"Don't worry. John said as soon as you're well, you'll join the command staff," Helena answered.

She turned as Alan and Sandra came into the ward.

"Ah the star patient is awake!" commented Alan. Ed made a face at him. Sandra set a bowl of flowers besides Ed's bed shyly and Ed smiled at her.

"That's very nice of you Miss Benes. They're very pretty."

"Everyone calls me Sahn." she told him.

"Sahn then. Thank you," Ed replied.

"Never mind all that. I've got some training set up for you, mate. Turn you into a Eagle pilot in no time."

"Oh no, you don't Alan. I get him for sciences." Maya pouted.

Sandra laughed. "Communications! and Main Computer!"

"I could use a new medical tech," Helena said thoughtfully.

Ed folded his arms. "Hate to disappoint you but actually I chose science. Got to hit the books again," Ed grinned. "Of course, I have to take my lessons from an alien. Ah, well, if I need to work for an alien it might as well be a beautiful one."

Maya sat on Ed's bed and looked very pleased with herself. Alan scowled dramatically. Ed looked at him.

"Oh, oh, better not let Tony hear you say that," Sandra warned. Alan nodded.

"You're flirting with the girlfriend of an insanely jealous, quick tempered Italian security chief," Alan said with a chuckle.

Ed looked at Maya. "You and Verdeschi?"

Maya beamed. "Me and Verdeschi."

"Pity. Would he mind if I kissed you on the cheek?"

"Oh yes he would mind very much Ed, but do it anyway!" Maya laughed. Ed leaned over and kissed her.

"That transformation of yours is pretty remarkable. I've never met a woman who could change more than her mind," Ed teased. Maya looked thoughtful, studying him. Abruptly he found himself facing himself. His mouth dropped open. He heard his voice say "Now you have." Ed looked at Maya/Ed, astonished.

He saw himself start to laugh and then it was Maya who laughed.

"Two Ed Strakers are better than one," remarked Alan.



*\*Straker I must take you back you must go back\**

"Oh God, Helena. It's come back. It's come back for me . . ."

**Shado hq.**

Alec looked around. There was a definite feeling on Moonbase. Gloom. He knew they all thought he was a fool to insist upon this. But Ed could at least be proud of all of them. He'd have to at last make that damn speech about what a privilege..but he'd add something to it. His resignation speech.

"Colonel . . .Commander Freeman! It's coming!" Nina shouted.

"What is?"

"That cloud formation. It's coming back."

It took a moment for Nina's words to sink in.

"My God! what's its position?"

"Hard to say sir. We're losing radar tracking, SID, same as before. We only have a visual."

Paul Foster had heard the news and rushed in.

"I say take a Interceptor and shoot the hell out of it!"

Freeman frowned. "NO."

His tone had them all looking at him.

"I want you to go out there on foot. to the exact coordinate, the exact position Ed disappeared in."

Paul couldn't help but be reminded of Straker by Freeman's determination.

"Radio isn't affected by that thing? Good. All right, Paul. Get to it. I want you out there and hold that position until I say otherwise. Now go."

Foster didn't have to be asked twice.

"Positive visual sir." Nina said.

Alec watched the cloud approach. Suddenly he had a horrible thought. What if they did get Ed Straker back, but an Ed Straker that had been turned into a pawn for the aliens? Who knew SHADO as well as Straker? The aliens might have surgically turned him into an ultimate weapon, a walking booby trap.

Then, Alec realized in horror, his final order as SHADO Commander might be: *Kill Ed Straker.*

**Alpha**

"Look Ed, it might go away in time," John Koenig was saying. Ed shook his head. He was wearing his own clothes under his SHADO spacesuit and carrying his helmet underneath an arm. "You can't just walk out there."

"John I have to go back. I'm not sure what it will do but it's different. I don't know how I know, I just do. And I have to go now. Time's running out."

"Ed you're an idiot. It screwed up all our thinking. You can't go out there! We won't have any way of knowing you got back safely." Alan sighed.

"It nearly killed you before," Helena said quietly.

"I have to try. It's likely that if I do make it, you won't have any memory of me."

"Best of luck, Ed." Koenig said.

"Thanks. You're a very lucky man. She's a very special woman." Ed smiled at Helena.

"I know."

"Please look after yourself Ed," Sahn said tearfully. Ed patted her hand.

"I will."

"Give my regards to that Australian friend of yours, Ed." Alan gave Ed a rough hug and he and Sahn left.

"Carter's a good man." Ed reflected.

Maya was leaning on Tony, eyes full of tears. Ed smiled at her.

"Uh, I, good luck Straker." Tony managed to say.

"Look after Maya. Don't let her get into much mischief." Ed said. Tony nodded. He drew Maya away and Koenig followed him out. Ed turned to Helena. She was weeping. "Please. Don't make this goodbye anymore difficult than it is, Helena."

"Why?" Helena sighed. "Why do you have to go?"

"Why? I don't know Helena. Space is full of mysteries. Like life. I made a choice a long time ago. A choice, a decision to take on SHADO and everything that went with it. Sometimes, in life, you have to stumble along on blind faith. Help me secure my suit now," Ed said. He was holding in his own grief at forever losing a chance at an ordinary life.

"Maya was right you know. You made an impression on us. We all love you." Helena helped Ed fasten his suit and checked his air supply.

"Even Verdeschi?" Ed grinned. It drew a laugh from Helena and he placed his helmet on. He squeezed her hand.

"Wait, I have a going away present for you." She pressed something into his hand. It was difficult to see it through the helmet. It was a rabbit's foot on a chain. He grinned.

"I've had that ever since my medical school days. I want you to have it. Its always brought me luck."

"Okay." He slipped it into a pocket in the suit.

"I'll miss you. Oh Ed. . . "

He held her despite the difficulty of movement from the suit. Pain distorted his features and he cursed his fate and the part of him that wouldn't allow him to deny it and stay. He held her for a while.

"I've got to go now." he said softly. "Goodbye Doctor Russell."

"Goodbye Ed." She turned quickly and disappeared out of sight. He stepped into the airlock and awaited depressurization, waited again and stepped awkwardly out onto the lunar surface. His heart was pounding hard.

Instantly the cloud descended upon him. He thought he heard words of sorrow and regret but he dismissed it. Suddenly he felt the crushing, choking feeling again, and he waited to die. He squeezed his eyes shut, felt an agony that he didn't think he could endure, and screamed in pain. He thought he saw Paul Foster running toward him, but then the darkness swallowed him up.

*Moonbase Alpha Status report, 2515 days after leaving Earth orbit, Doctor Helena Russell recording*

*Our sensors picked up a cloud-like mass of energy heading toward Alpha. Cmdr. Koenig sent Alan Carter to investigate it. Before Alan's Eagle reached it, it vanished. When Alan returned to base he discovered . . .*

Helena blinked, paused in her recording as if she had overlooked something important, shrugged and continued: *He found nothing and had nothing to report. Whatever the strange phenomenon was, we can only guess at. However several of the command staff, including myself, have experienced strange feeling of sadness and loss. I especially feel a sadness, yet none of my medical examination have shown anything that could account for this sadness. Perhaps the cloud did have some kind of effect on us that we've yet to understand.*

Helena turned off the recorder. She sighed heavily. On an impulse she didn't quite understand, she'd looked for a rabbit's foot on a chain that her father had given her just before she'd started medical school. It was a silly thing, but for some reason she couldn't find it anywhere. She shrugged. She sighed and went on with her rounds.

### **Mayland Hospital SHADO section**

"Well Ed, how are you doing?" Alec asked. Ed was thumbing through a magazine. He brightened at Alec's presence.

"Fine, just fine. When do I get out of this place?" Ed sat up. Alec noted he still seemed pale.

"Shroeder and Jackson cleared you. They just want to keep you under observation for another two weeks."

"One week. Oh, and Alec, I want a detailed report of the incident on my desk when I get back. I have this feeling we haven't seen the last of that cloud mass. Has Paul stuck to his story about seeing me disappear then reappear?"

"Like glue. You know Foster."

Ed grinned. "Yes, yes, but all I can remember is crying out, then seeing him coming. I blacked out afterwards." He frowned momentarily. "If the aliens . . ."

"Don't worry Ed. You were pretty bad off when Paul got to you. He heard you scream. You were badly injured. Shock, internal bleeding, busted ribs. . ."

Ed patted his still bandaged chest gingerly. "You're telling me?" He grinned slightly. Alec laughed. Ed sighed.

"I still don't like it. . . Why would. . .?"

"Look Ed, you passed every psych test that Jackson could think of and a few he couldn't. You came out A-OK. He passed you with flying colors."

"But Alec. . ."

"Look I'm minding the store while you're getting all the attention from beautiful nurses. You just get well and leave the worrying to me." grinned Alec. Ed smiled.

"I'll still want to see that report," Ed sighed, determined to have the final word. He looked exhausted. Alec knew it was time to go.

"Get some sleep now. Its late. Oh. almost forgot. Are you a superstitious man?"

"You know perfectly well I'm not. Why?" Ed demanded. He drummed his fingers impatiently on the magazine.

"Found this in a pocket of the spacesuit you were wearing." Alec held up a rabbit's foot on a chain.

"Isn't mine. Probably belongs to one of the Interceptor pilots. Left it in the suit by mistake. Careless," Ed said.

"That's what I figured but nobody claimed it."

"You mean nobody admitted to owning it. Supposed to be lucky. But when it comes down to it, it didn't do much for the poor rabbit," Ed mused.

Alec laughed. "You're right. Get some rest now. I'll visit you in the morning,"

"Alec."

"Hmm?"

"Leave it with me."

Alec's mouth opened, but the stern look on the commander's face didn't invite questions or comments. Even so, Alec grinned and dropped it into Ed's lap. Ed picked it up, watched Alec go out. Ed sighed.

He toyed with it for a moment, closed his fingers around it tightly, possessively. He lay back on the pillow. Odd, he thought drowsily. It feels like its mine. Odd. . .

He was still holding it when he drifted off to sleep.

The End