

The Bodyguard

by Amelia S. Rodgers

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(a UFO story for SHADO Library challenge)

*As always, my gratitude to Commander Straker for sharing this incident with me and assisting me in writing it down. I located something for him * and he promised me dinner. He's buying, I mean he's cooking.*

In loving memory of George "Ed" Victor Bishop deceased June 8 2005



Chapter One: Poison Ivy

"Good afternoon, Alec." Straker said without looking up as Freeman entered jauntily.

"Hi, Ed. You ought to spend some time up top, the weather's terrific."

Straker peered up over a folder that was imprinted with the SHADO logo, narrowed his eyes at his friend.

Freeman helped himself to his customary drink from Straker's office bar. He took it and sat down. Taking a sip, he noticed Straker's steady gaze.

"What? Yeah, yeah, I know. You're busy, no time for enjoying the spring weather. I'm not your second-in-command for nothing, you know. You're having lunch al fresco with me this afternoon, whether you like it or not. You argue, and I start to make noises in the right direction in the medical centre. I mention that a certain Commander hasn't taken personal leave for a year. Now for once in your life, give in gracefully!" Alec grinned.

"One question, Alec." Straker dropped the folder on his desk, and sat back comfortably in his chair, making a steeple of his fingers. He rocked slightly to and fro in the chair. Alec tried not to grin. It often was a sign Straker was either in a rare content mood, or about to hit him with a patented Straker zinger. He guessed the latter.

"Fire away."

"Who is she?"

"Huh?"

"Oh come on, Alec. You usually come to work in a great mood, except in the few cases where I've awakened you prematurely and demanded you come in early-"

Freeman muttered, "few?" sotto voce, and Straker grinned wickedly, adept at lip reading as he was and went on.

"-but this woman has to be really spectacular to have elicited this reaction from you. So tell me about her."

"Ten out of ten, Ed. Okay. Her name is Ivy, and she's my most recent conquest. Beautiful girl, almost feline in her appearance. Great sense of humor, class, style, warmth. Blue eyes, pale silver with dark streaks. Far as I can tell, it is her natural color, too. Sexy as the day is long. You'd really like her, Ed."

Straker smiled.

"Would I? You check her out?"

"I do follow regulations some of the time, you know. I had Ford come over, and he did the G6 on her. Everything's fine."

"Good, good, that's what I like to hear. "

Straker leaned forward, lifted the folders he had been skimming when Alec entered, and tapped them into a neat stack using his Perspex desktop, in news broadcaster style.

"How's it been here?"

"Hmmm? Oh, Captain Carlin bagged two that got past Moonbase, but other than that, slow, slow. Slow always makes me suspicious. Just this once I will allow myself to be infected by your great mood, and accept that invitation to go out for lunch with you. I'll have Miss Ealand find me Colonel Lake and have her fill in for me for a couple of hours. I could stand some sunshine, if my shaving mirror is a trustworthy judge. Only one stipulation, Alec."

"Name it." Alec set down his glass.

"I'm buying." Straker intoned firmly.

Alec grinned widely.

Ed always was generous. I couldn't get anyone to believe it, though. Certainly not Keith, his personal whipping boy.

Straker thumbed a button, made the necessary preparations with Lake. He thought he heard Lake actually gasp when she heard his command, but she might have been clearing her throat.

Sure she was. Nothing like knocking people off their feet when they think they have you all figured out. Especially when they're Australian.

Straker dropped his perfect stack into his OUT box. He stood, lifted his cream Nehru jacket and put it on, sealing the jacket's Velcro closure over his body with one practiced stroke. As he had done a thousand times, no, a million times, Freeman envied Ed's lithe form. The worse thing was that Straker often ate food like a decorous vacuum cleaner and didn't gain an ounce.

"You won't hear an argument from me. Keeping Ivy entertained is costing me a fortune!"

"Romance doesn't come cheaply these days, I guess, not that I'd know."

Alec caught the bitterness and sorrow in the remark, but didn't react to it.

Straker paused ruefully at his slip in composure, lost in thought, but then he turned aloof.

"Oh, Alec?"

"What?"

"Don't ever threaten me again." Straker tossed him a deceptive crescent of a smile and made a dismissive wave indicating Freeman should leave the office first. Freeman knew from long experience that it hid a nuclear device.

Freeman gulped audibly as the door opened to allow the two men out.

Unseen by Freeman, Straker's blue glass eyes twinkled briefly in supreme satisfaction.

Chapter Two: Hell's Kitchen

"You're buying, huh?" Freeman moaned to his smirking companion, as he lugged a large Sainsbury's paper bag along with him.

"Well, I *did* buy all the groceries, Alec." Straker chuckled, as he unlocked his spacious flat to allow his friend to enter. Freeman could never visit without astonishment at how it was decorated. Not at all the abode one would expect of the cold, calculating Commander Straker. Impressionist and abstract art everywhere he looked, the fur throw on the simple double bed, the sculptures, the mobiles. It was another dimension of Ed that the Commander kept well hidden, in more ways than one.

The two of them entered Straker's kitchen. Freeman could hear a barely audible clicking, but since Straker's senses were razor sharp and Ed wasn't reacting, he didn't panic.

"You want me to peel potatoes or something like that, Chef Gordon?" Freeman inquired, gratefully dropping the sack on Straker's immaculate black and white tile kitchen counter. Straker chuckled, and began to put the groceries away.

"I'm pretty good, but I'm not in Gordon Ramsay's league and neither do I curse as well as he does, Alec. Here, wash and dice my Roma tomatoes, will you?" Straker pointed to a set of knives embedded in a wood stand. "I sharpened them recently, so do be careful, Alec."

"I cut myself, I sue you."

"I have a sufficient insurance policy at Lloyd's, so feel free to bleed excessively anywhere you like. Just don't make too big of a mess. I hate housework."

Freeman chuckled. He knew Straker lied, and did not have a maid come in once a week like he did, but instead Ed kept everything spotless himself, Freeman wasn't sure how Ed did it, since the Commander's schedule was murder. He supposed Ed figured it took care of the security side of it, and Straker remained an enigma who guarded his privacy.

To each his own. I couldn't live without my little woman. Still, I envy Ed's self-determination. The legendary bloody-mindedness.

Straker took what Freeman guessed was a favored large yellow bowl (Alec knew it customarily sat on Straker's glass dining table, chock full of fruit) from a cupboard and started to make a salad. He hesitated, studied Freeman for a moment, put down his spoon, and swept the knife out of Alec's hand in mid-chop.

"What?" Freeman complained in consternation.

"I've seen aliens leave bodies in better shape than those tomatoes you're butchering. Make the salad, it's safer. Although you may be one of those unfortunate few who can't boil water either. Let me give you a piece of advice, Alec-

"-never judge a situation by the end of a conversation?" Freeman finished for him.

Straker stared unpleasantly at him.

Freeman grinned.

In unison, they said "Foster told me."

They chuckled at one another.

"What I actually was going to say was don't attempt to make dinner for Ivy."

"You aren't the only one trained to open a tin can. Just because you have all the latest equipment, you don't fool me." Freeman washed a head of romaine, and began tearing it apart.

Straker had adroitly completed dicing the tomatoes, and swept them into a white bowl with a thin blue line just below its rim. He reached for extra virgin olive oil, fresh garlic and added that mixture to the bowl.

Freeman was shredding sharp cheddar with a gadget that was amusingly shaped like a yellow mouse. Straker had a kitchen even Ramsay would envy. Above their heads on a black wrought iron rack hung copper pots and skillets of various sizes gleaming under the ceiling's fluorescent lights.

"You just have those up there because they look good." Freeman continued playfully. Straker chuckled, shook his head in mock despair but still almost lovingly stirred his mixture. After a while he set it aside, and pulled out two thawed thick steaks, already bacon wrapped, from the refrigerator. Straker already had the Aga set to the proper temperature and threw them on the broiler, setting a timer. Then he punched in a setting on his espresso maker and followed that by getting out two bottles of wine from a rack. Freeman knew they were designated only for him and no doubt bloody expensive, knowing Ed's great taste. Straker put them into an automatic chiller then brought out silver goblets and two silver mugs.

As much as I kid the old bastard, he'd give Ramsay a run for the money, He's a damn fine cook, Freeman thought with glee. Lunch is going to be great.

Freeman knew his way around the Commander's kitchen and had selected the mouse from a drawer. The rodent was another example of Ed's subtle yet lively sense of humor. He finished with the cheese, and piled it into the salad bowl with olives and tomatoes. He saw Straker turn the bowl around as he added fresh basil, and he spotted what he hadn't seen before. **ED STRAKER** was written on it in bold blue letters.

"Personalized, Ed?" Freeman kidded him. "An old kindergarten masterpiece of yours?"

"I was a wunderkind back then now that I think of it, Alec, but no. This was a gift from one of the studio's pool of writers who never bothered to learn to drive. She was thanking me for driving her home. It was late, with lightning and a fierce downpour, she was stuck in the car park, and her taxi hadn't arrived. I was just leaving SHADO after a long night, so-" Straker shrugged, privately enjoying the Australian's reactions.

"A gift, huh? Which one is she?"

"I'm never telling you in our lifetimes combined, Colonel. You'd have her interrogated."

"Damn it, Ed, who was the lucky girl?"

"Make the salad, Colonel Freeman. That's an order."

Freeman grinned. He had to admit he always relished his rare time off duty with Straker. Ever since the situation they'd codenamed Psychobombs, which took place while he had been on holiday, he'd become more protective of Ed, practically becoming his bodyguard. Virginia had gone out of her way to tell him in great detail in her report what Foster had done. That and the attempt on Straker's life by an alien brainwashed Foster which had followed had been enough to make him insist that Foster be thrown out. Foster seemed rock solid when they'd recruited him, but as time went on, he became more arrogant, more cocky. Ed had saved the man and had argued incessantly that it was an unnecessary loss in manpower, but more and more he felt Ed coming over to his side. Foster's days were numbered, they just had to decide how it would be done. The dark thought that he'd be lost if anything happened to his Bostonian friend came without an invitation into his mind.

He's just on the wrong side of fifty, and in perfect shape, but Ed wore scars he 'd earned from repeatedly being close to death like some macabre tattoo. Just one expertly placed bullet, or one lucky UFO could put my best friend permanently out of my life. The idea scares me more than I want to think about. Still, Ed always had more than his share of the ESP that drove poor Croxley to his death. He didn't replace Henderson by being that much of a fool.

Maybe I just should stop being so melodramatic. It isn't like me. I'm getting old too, I guess.

"What's troubling you, Alec? Foster again?"

"Huh? What?"

Damn the man, he's been staring at me for God knows how long, and I didn't notice.

"Your expression, Colonel. You look like SkyOne's missile fried your little black book."

"A tan Filofax that looks like you tortured it, and a record player with albums you never bother to replace. It figures that you'd think I'd keep my girlfriends' names and numbers in an actual black address book. When are you going to join the real world and upgrade everything to a Smartphone and an i-Pod, Ed? By the way, what the hell is that, anyway? What are you making? It smells good."

"So you *aren't* going to tell me. All right, all right, let me guess. You're being a mother hen again, worried that someone will kill me. I have no intention of dying anytime soon Alec, the aliens would like it too much. As for what I'm making, just wait until you taste it. Do me a favor, Alec. Open that lower cupboard, no, the one at the extreme bottom, to your left. I want to wash up and set the table. No Alec, it doesn't pull out, it swings out. Yes." Straker nodded with satisfaction when he'd opened it properly.

"That thing in there is ticking. "

"It should chime to announce it's done any minute now." Straker smiled.

"Should I try pulling out the red wire? Or the green?"

"Paranoid, aren't we? Stop worrying about me and the bread maker. Ah. There. I set it this morning so I'd have fresh bread for lunch." Straker chuckled. "Put it on the counter, will you Alec?"

"Finally."

Straker was meticulously washing his long fingers, and glanced in Freeman's direction.

"What? Oh, Alec, for God's sake, you don't put everything in the salad until it's ready to be served. God help me. You might as well season it and put the vinaigrette on it. Now what did you mean by *finally*? I know from your tone it isn't good."

Straker dried his hands, checked the broiler, glanced at the salad, stole some cheese out of it and popped it into his mouth and looked insufferably pleased with himself for a full three seconds.

"You. You *cheat* by using the bread maker. Commander Straker cheats." Freeman smirked with satisfaction.

"You don't have many wins if you never allow yourself to cheat once in a while for a worthy cause, Alec and you know how I feel about losing. Haven't you ever watched Star Trek? Besides, I'll have you know I made that bread dough from scratch, then baked it in the Aga. I was only letting what was leftover from last night's dinner heat up in the bread maker."

"I can't win." sighed Alec, trying to picture Straker watching Star Trek on the screen that was strangely set dead in the middle of the flat, built into a brick wall under which was a loveseat you'd have to snap your neck to see the screen from, and failing. Ed had told him he rarely had time to watch anything besides the occasion news programme, so he didn't bother with being seated across from the screen in comfort. Straker could be oddly frugal and puritanical about some things, and extravagant with others.

*Others includes that eighty pound grocery bag he made **me** carry, Alec mused.*

"I hope you never do and I've been lucky so far. Get me that oven mitt, Colonel, then wash up. You'll be having the meal of your life as soon as the steaks are done. Give me a hand

setting the table. I hope Lake remembers how to keep a command chair warm, I'm running late again."

Freeman rolled his eyes.

"You running late more than once a year is a sign of the Apocalypse." Freeman told him with a grin.

"You being early always made me want to repent for the same reason, just in case Saint John was right, and theologians even argue about which John wrote the book of Revelations so who knows? Or so a chaplain I knew from my Nam days once told me." Straker countered mischievously. "Now help me, Alec, or we'll never eat! I'm starving."

Straker rarely spoke about being a POW during the Vietnam conflict, and Freeman reluctantly changed the subject.

"I didn't do much, Ed. I'll help load the di-"

The Commander recoiled.

"I'm too fond of everything in my kitchen to even think of letting you near my dishwasher." Straker replied in mock apprehension. "Believe me, *I'll* do the dishes!"

Freeman laughed.

-o-o-o-

"What's this stuff again? It tastes terrific, like your steaks, Ed. I want the recipe. It'll impress Ivy."

Freeman and Straker sat at the dining table, their plates empty, taking in the relaxing atmosphere of the Commander's glowing ebony wax candles in their matching candleholders.

"Checca. I often have it as a late night snack, it's very nourishing for you. Forget any idea of making it, I've seen you cook. I'll give you some to take home. Good?" Straker passed over another wedge of hot bread with the tangy tomato topping to Freeman with unspoken pleasure at Alec's compliments on the meal. He then bit appreciatively into a second himself.

"Ed, why don't you come to dinner tonight and meet Ivy? Strictly casual." Freeman took the very last gulp of his costly chilled Pinot Noir from a silver goblet.

Ed's choice of the grape was excellent, like I expected, no surprise there.

Straker took a sip of his espresso, frowned.

"I hardly think she'd appreciate me barging in like that on the two of you, Alec. I don't think it's a good idea."

"She likes strangers, Ed. Besides, I've told her all about you. She's been dying to meet you. She mentions you in our conversations all the time. Come around tenish?" He knew Straker worked well into the night. Freeman put his fork down, wiped his mouth, stood up.

"If I get my paperwork done in time and there are no major UFO sightings, and Colonel Lake doesn't mind guarding the fort again, you have a deal. I may run a little late. You cooking, Alec? I may change my mind depending on the answer to that question." he teased.

Straker pushed away his dish, dabbed at his lips with his mustard linen napkin, then took out a cigar as a sweet and was about to light it, but Freeman reached over and snatched it away from him.

"That's akin to treason, Colonel." Straker warned him.

"You told Jackson you'd quit smoking, same as I did. I'm only trying to keep you alive, Commander," Freeman reminded him fondly.

"I can't win-" Straker shrugged and complained, with a returning gleam in his eyes.

"I hope you never do and I've been lucky so far." the two of them echoed one another. They burst out in a joint chuckle.

The Australian and the Bostonian were still chuckling all the way to Straker's bronze SHADO car.

Chapter Three: Femme Fatale

The buzzer to the Mayfair flat sounded. Colonel Alec Freeman, in a faded blue polo shirt, a pair of torn, weather-beaten jeans that competed with his pockmarked face, and beat-up trainers, checked the video screen and recognized Commander Straker awaiting entrance. Reluctantly, he opened the door.

"What the hell are you trying to do, Ed?" Freeman shoed Straker into the foyer and shut the door, reset the security alarms, and even used the common lock for good measure.

It was a credit to the Commander's sangfroid that Straker didn't gaze in astonishment at his friend. After all, Alec *had* invited him. He had a mind to throw the cardboard box he'd brought as a gift into the nearest rubbish can. However he'd baked the contents on a whim on the previous day, but he decided not to tell Freeman that.

"How hath I offended thee now, oh Lord?" he asked mildly. "By the way, we didn't have time for dessert this afternoon so I stole this from our restaurant. Boston crème pie. "

Straker mentally crossed his fingers.

Freeman ignored the held out box, took Straker lightly by the shoulders and turned him around to face a full length mirror. Straker stared at the perfectly groomed, slim man in impeccably shined black wingtips, a dove gray suit, silk wine tie and white French cuff shirt that looked back at him with equal puzzlement.

"I still know what I look like, Alec." he said dryly.

"You're dressed like you're going to get the medal of honor, Ed-"

"Actually, I'd be in dress blues if that were the case, Colonel-"

"Oh shut up Ed. What part of strictly casual didn't you understand?"

"Your wide variety of skills simply amazes me, Alec. I'll promote you as the studio's fashion coordinator first thing in the morning."

Freeman sniffed Straker. Straker remained calm, but it was taking about 99% of the iron clad control Alec believed he possessed not to laugh.

"*Cologne?* You wore *cologne* to see Ivy? Now *that's* akin to treason, Ed."

"Let me see if I have this right. You think I'm here to steal your girl? Not that it wouldn't be easy, with the way you behave, drink and dress, but I'm hurt, yes, deeply hurt by your lack of trust in me."

"Commander Straker, commander-in-chief of SHADO. You think you're so damn smart." Freeman grinned.

Straker's mood shot from zero to ten on the Richter scale. His mouth pulled into a deadly slash.

"Enough, Alec. She may overhear us."

"She wouldn't need the amnesia drug if she did. Come meet her. Give me that cake."

"Pie. You better have a good explanation for this behavior, Colonel Freeman."

Freeman guided Straker into his bedroom after putting the cake on the dining table. The bedroom was in the usual state of disarray that Straker was so familiar with. However it was empty. Straker actually jerked back when something shot out from under the bed and rubbed up against Alec's legs.

"*Christ.*" Straker said, and then chuckled. "*Christ. That's Ivy*, isn't it? So she mentions me in your conversations all the time, does she? I knew twenty years of drinking would finally rot out your brain. Gorgeous cat. Bengal, if memory serves me. Where'd you get her?"

"Bengal, yeah, that's what Virginia said she was, she tried to steal Ivy away, too, they got

along too well. Ed, I didn't get her, she got me. I came home before daylight and nearly ran her over with my car. She'd been hiding in the ivy. So naming her was easy. She was thinner than you when I brought her in, but I fattened her up and had her professionally groomed and examined by a vet. When she was ready to come home, I had Ford post signs and send notices to veterinarian offices and newspapers to see where she was from. See, he ran her G6," grinned Alec.

"I just hope this doesn't turn out to be a situation like the one we codenamed Cat with Ten Lives." Straker frowned. Alec shook his head.

"Ed, you were at a all night meeting battling Henderson at the IAC and I snuck her into medical centre for a checkup. Jackson was amused, as slippery and repulsive as I find him-"

"Jackson is no more awful than I am." chuckled Straker.

"-he agreed to do it. The comparison between you and Jackson, that's something else we can debate later. Anyway, nobody claimed it, and I was relieved and took her. "

Alec lifted the cat and stroked her. She emitted a loud purring.

"If I knew she looked like that, I would have worn eau de sardine to seduce her. Hand her over, Alec. Let me show you how to treat a lady."

"Ivy, if you leave me for him after all I've done for you-" Alec told the cat. Straker chuckled and held out his hands.

Straker had hardly cradled her against him when she let out a hiss of contempt, and raked a long deep gash down Straker's right hand with a wicked looking claw. Startled and in real pain, Straker dropped her unintentionally, and grasped his hand, which dripped with blood in a steady stream. She flew under the bed again.

"Damn! She's never done that before. I'll take you to Mayland, Ed. Christ, I'm sorry."

"Never done that before, huh? You sure you had Jackson check her out? Maybe she was Henderson in a past life?"

"Ed, stop kidding and let me see that hand. Come in the bathroom, I'll get it washed out and then we wrap it and I rush you to Mayland. Ed, for God's sake it's bleeding like crazy."

"Exactly what do we tell them happened, Alec? That I had a difference of opinion with your newest feline femme fatale?"

"Damn it, Ed, you can't afford to waste much more blood. Come with me NOW."

"And I didn't think Jackson had much of a bedside manner. Alec, you know what this means, don't you? Assaulting an officer is a court martial offense." the Commander tried to smile.

"So you don't want Foster gone, but you'd shoot an innocent cat?" Alec watched Straker go white as he thrust his injured hand into the stream of water in the basin.

"You said you wanted to keep *me* alive? To keep Foster from someday actually killing me? Well, it appears *you're* the one with the perfect bodyguard, and frankly you can keep her."

"This is old fashioned iodine, it's all I have right now. It's going to sting like the blazes."

"Just do it. Nothing can hurt more than Ivy's claw did." Straker said with bravado, and then he looked as effervescent as a maggot. "**CHRIST.** Hurry up, Alec, get it over with!"

"Done. Just let me get this tape and gauze on it. Shit, it's bleeding through!"

A pool of blood splashed down in the water swirling down the drain. Straker actually smiled weakly, his blue crystalline eyes more skewed than Alec had ever seen them. Freeman's heart plunged somewhere down near an organ he'd hate for the aliens to pilfer.

"Ed?"

"Alec?" the ordinarily deep honeyed tones now were definitely as untuned as a deaf man's piano.

"Bloody hell, now what?"

"I'm going-"

"Oh shit, Ed-"

"--to pass ou-"

"Ed, *damn you, damn you*, get down before you split your head open, I have a hard tile floor-**SHIT!**"

Chapter Four: The Gifts

"Dr. Schroeder confined me to Mayland for a month because he's still trying to find an antibiotic to treat my infection with that won't make me comatose. Stop enjoying my captivity, Alec, that's an order."

"I told you it would probably get infected. Oh don't look at me like that, Ed. You look like a Keane painting someone left out in the sun."

"Did you know there was some question as to who actually painted that puerile, obscene collection of-"

"I once gave a fake one done on black velvet canvas to a girlfriend. "

"No wonder you've never been married. Oh, I have something for you." Ed gingerly lifted a hand impaled by a IV line, and pushed a tin across to Freeman.

"Hold on, I have something for you too, a get well gift." Alec set it on the bedside hospital tray that rolled up, making it convenient for Straker to dine in his sickbed. The tray had a vase of flowers which he figured Virginia had brought Ed. She'd seen him earlier in the day and was still filling in for Straker.

"If it's cigars again, I'm turning you in to Jackson." Straker was saying.

"Oh bloody hush up. Here."

"What's this?" Straker smiled. He had become seriously sick, and Alec had beaten Interceptor speeds to get Ed to the SHADO hospital after he'd collapsed on the bathroom floor. He'd lied and said Ed had been admiring a dagger from his collection, and the blade had slipped off its hilt. Neither Schroeder nor Jackson believed a word of it, but since it had been backed up by none other than Ed himself, his rank again had its privileges.

"It's a *box*. Open it."

"I injured my right hand, Colonel." Straker chuckled.

"Damn it Ed, I forgot. I'll do it for you."

Straker brightened.

"Where did *you* find checca? I know you didn't make it. It smells fresh."

"It is. I found out from Virginia that she could make that Italian stuff you like so I asked her to cook you up a bunch of Focaccia to dip in it. Can you eat by yourself?"

"I learned when I was about four or thereabouts. I'll manage. Thank you, Alec. Now yours."

"It's the bread maker isn't it? You baked up a loaf of C4 plastique and wired it to blow for real this time."

Straker paused in mid-bite, swallowed the bit of bread, grinned.

Alec brought a cardboard carton of apple juice closer to him, and Ed sipped it carefully. I'm the reason you're in that bed, Ed. All because of a stupid prank I played on you. I'm going to make sure you get well, get out of that bed, and then we'll deal with Paul Foster together.

"I know you feel I've made some stupid decisions Alec, but fortunately for me, that wasn't one of them. Open it carefully. No it won't explode on you. Handle it gently. I went through a considerable amount of trouble to get one for you."

Alec began laughing. He held up a white bowl with a thin blue line just below its rim. It read **ALEC FREEMAN**.

"Your pet writer?"

"Who else? She gets them from some Internet site in the States. Shall I have her make a

cat bowl for Ivy? How is the little beast anyway?"

"How would I know? After what happened to you, I realized I had to get rid of her." Alec looked at the floor for a moment.

Straker stared at him, visibly startled.

"Alec, cats aren't like you and I. They survive on pure instinct alone. Predator and prey. She was used to your scent, had adopted you like you said she did, and I was merely an invader, same as the aliens are to us. She was just doing what was still in her bloodline. Bengals are wilder than most, I hear. You should be flattered she picked you. I regret I even joked about it. I know you genuinely had grown attached to Ivy."

"Ed, I didn't have her put down nor did I shoot her myself."

"Ah. Virginia took her," Straker said with relief. "I know she kept cats as a ho-"

"I gave her away Ed, yeah but I didn't give her to Virginia."

"For God's sake, what happened to her? You didn't let Jackson dissect her, did you?"

Straker asked jokingly.

"I'd have *you* dissected before I ever gave Ivy to that small time Himmler."

Straker smiled thinly. He had to, despite the unfairness of Alec's comparison.

*Alec's got a talent for exaggeration. Only I've seen Dr. Jackson's actual dossier, or shall I say Dr. Zradowski's dossier? I wonder what Alec would say if I told him Jackson had his concentration camp tattoo taken off after he escaped twice from those God forsaken camps? No, some secrets have to remain secret. Like the identity of that writer and the fact she sent me that bouquet of roses, **not** Virginia.*

Straker had detected Alec looking at them.

"Well, do I have to beg, Alec?" Straker took another bite of the bread. It was delicious after days of nothing but delectable dishes of lime jelly, or gelatin or even Jello as they called it back home in Boston. He decided not to tell Alec he wasn't supposed to have solid food. Alec would find out soon enough, and he intended to wolf down as much of the manna as possible before Schroeder arrived.

Alec watched Straker pick up the cardboard carton and sip it slowly with hidden glee, in spite of his earlier attack of mea culpa.

"I made a bet with him and he lost it so I gave her as a gift to Paul Foster. He has to look after Ivy for a month."

Commander Ed Straker spit out his mouthful of apple juice at a high velocity of speed. He coughed repeatedly. Alec broadly grinned at him, then he turned hard.

"He let that woman Linda Simmons walk right into SHADO when he knew you and H.Q. were her target, and he'd seen what Clark did to you. He was a little too fervent for my taste when he accused you of putting yourself ahead of what you gave everything you had so that SHADO would turn into a reality. I've seen him look at you more than once with contempt. He's wormed his way into Moonbase, and he's trouble waiting to happen. I am not in charge of recruitment for SHADO for nothing, Ed. I get along well with people because I have a instinct for seeing what no one else sees."

Straker genuinely smiled at Alec.

"Yes. You do. You've always done that with me. Between handing in your resignation."

"And I'll really mean it someday, too, Ed. Just remember that when you make fun of me next time."

"I'll keep that under consideration, Colonel."

"I joked with him that we managed to get along without him during the Croxley incident

just to toy with his arrogance-"

"In which Foster saved us both." Straker reminded him.

"Faulty memory already, huh Ed? You said it yourself. Croxley gained control at the last moment and saved us, not him. Foster only showed up because he went to that house to clean out his psyche. I don't trust him, Ed. Someday, hopefully before it's too late, you'll see I'm right about him. The aliens could have gone after any of our pilots, Ed. Maybe they chose him to try to kill Straker because it wasn't all that far removed from what he'd like, to replace you. Why do you think I asked him if he had a replacement in mind? You're damn right I gifted Ivy to him."

"My GOD, Alec. Please tell me now this is only one of your darker jokes."

"It was actually Virginia's idea, especially after she's been seething over the business with Simmons for months now. I loved it."

Ed began to press his lips together firmly so he wouldn't chuckle. The chance of him succeeding was a little higher than the possibility Alec Freeman would give up hard liquor and marry an alien.

"But, Alec, he encountered that cat on the Cat with Ten Lives situation..."

Alec grinned.

"I understand Jackson said in his final report stated Foster came away from that with a repulsion toward cats, too."

"Alec, there's no assurance he won't give it away, or even harm it."

"He can't give it away. Virginia's got spies everywhere. Besides, his apartment is bugged again. By her. If he lives through it, and I hope to hell he doesn't, she's taking Ivy home with her after promising me visitations, and if one hair of that cat's hair is harmed by Foster, Virginia will eat him up like he's steak tartare and spit him out. Besides, think this over Ed. That one small cat did in one evening what twenty years of alien attacks couldn't do. It grounded Commander Straker of Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization for a whole month. Now who would you lay odds on as the conqueror and the conquest when you think about *that*?"

"God *help* me. You keep trying to get me to select a personal bodyguard and I've been refusing for years. I'm seriously thinking of getting one now, Alec."

"To guard you against Ivy?" Alec smiled.

"Christ, *no*. To guard me against **YOU**."

The two men's raucous laughter could be heard all the way down Mayland Hospital's special underground corridor 32 and right into SHADO's medical centre.

THE END

Feedback always welcomed.

A few notes:

Some information in this story is canon (such as Jackson's real name) according to The Complete Book of Gerry Anderson's UFO. Chris Bentley with a forward by the late Ed Bishop. I usually mix fact with fiction, so I threw in some of the late Vladek Sheybal's real life experience, also laid out in this book.

So is Straker's expertise with a can opener. Don't let that hogwash he gave Jo about his cooking fool you. The Commander is good and he knows it. He is great at metaphors, too...

I have the Commander tell Alec he hates housework (which he doesn't) because a solid source told me Bishop did and doing that scene made me remember it.

June 8, 2005 was the date he left us and it was one of the saddest days of my life. Please

think of him on that day and always.