

# Lines of Communication

by Amelia L. Rodgers ©2010

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A UFO Series story all rights reserved (challenge story for SHADO Library ) (sequel to **The Bodyguard**) (makes a reference to another character that Straker mentions in my story **Life Without Living**)

As in *The Bodyguard*, Commander Straker did all the driving in this one, I just sat back and enjoyed the ride.

This one is dedicated to my significant other, my own personal Commander Straker. I love you. (which you already know)

Special thanks to Dulce for rating the story about Ivy five meows out of five. Thanks to Nans for Lake's catty explanation to Straker. Also special thanks to Janice Foss.

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## Chapter One: Under The Weather

The phone rang. He groaned.

There hadn't been any exceptional music on the radio so he switched it off. He guessed nobody really cared about mediocre music at four am in the morning.

*His exhaustion normally wouldn't have been detected by anyone who didn't have experience with and insight into his self-imposed high standards of excellence, he knew. No, the only one who would infuriatingly detect his imperfections was Colonel Alec Freeman.*

*Alec Freeman, professional pain in the ass, don't try this at home.*

"Good morning, Alec."

"And how is the Commander of SHADO feeling this morning?"

"You want it off the record, Alec?"

"Always." Straker could hear the amusement in his friend's tone. Even if he hadn't, he knew it was lurking there. He had his headlights switched to max, because the fog seemed to have escaped from Poe and he suspected some leakage of fog had crept into his brain. Straker emitted a heartfelt four letter word describing his situation.

"Commander Straker! Is that any example to show to your operatives?"

Straker chuckled wearily.

"I'm finally headed home which you already know, I'm exhausted which you already know and although Attila the Hun Shroeder finally released me from Mayland I hurt like hell, which again you already know. He shot me full of some experimental drug we got out of Germany that finally took care of the infection."

"Yeah he told me that you were at the SHADO academy for the second day in a row getting some shooting practice in at the range against his advice. Why not just use the one at H.Q.? You aren't supposed to be straining that hand anyway, Ed."

"I scored a ninety-seven, Alec. A lousy ninety-seven because I hurt from that new girlfriend of yours clawing me and wrecking my gun hand. I've never shot anything below a perfect score in my life." Straker confessed with authentic sorrow.

"A mere ninety-seven? You don't deserve to live."

"It helped my ego somewhat to notice that Foster shot an eighty-eight." Straker told him in a little more of an animated fashion.

"Foster was there too? Ed, I keep telling you-"

"What do you want, Alec? A better question is what language do you prefer I say no in, so you'll finally understand it?" Straker said to divert Freeman's paranoia about Foster. Straker heard a deep chuckling.

"It's such a long drive to your place in this rotten weather I figured you could come crash at my place for the weekend instead," Alec suggested. "It's closer."

"No I'm fine, Alec." he lied.

"Good, I'll expect you in about fifteen minutes." Freeman hung up.

**"ALEC!"**

Straker glared at the phone balefully then hung up.

He glanced at his wristwatch again then out at the dismal weather, sighed, surrendered, and turned the car around.

He was five minutes away from the exit to Mayfair and yawning when the car phone rang again.

"Straker."

"Ed, you've got to get back to H.Q." Foster said. He sounded almost hysterical. "You've got to get here right now!"

Straker suddenly forgot how tired he was. His eyes narrowed.

"What's going on, Foster?" His voice was steel.

The only response was static. It was the same when he dialed H.Q. He dialed Alec.

Nothing.

He turned the car around in a sudden move that emitted squeals of protest from the tires. He was doing a unsafe hundred miles per hour, a fraction of what his bronze SHADO car could actually pull off, when he saw a figure leap out of the foliage and run toward the car. He slammed on his brakes, skidded in a semi circle on the wet road and finally stopped. He got out of his car. The rain pummeled away at him without asking. Straker drew his Glock from his shoulder holster, assumed firing position while ignoring the fireworks display in his hand.

"Don't shoot! "

To his confusion, in the beams of his headlights he identified Paul Foster. Straker put away his gun with a second jolt of pain.

"Paul, how the devil did you know where I was?"

"I've been following your GPS signal." Foster grinned with self-satisfaction.

"Why? What's happening at H.Q.? My car phone went dead."

"Nothing, Ed. I just jammed your car phone's frequency, cut off your lines of communication. How does it feel to know you're completely helpless?"

"What did-"

Realization hit. Straker drew his gun a full ten seconds before Foster did. He fired. His eyes widened at Foster's jubilation.

"I switched your supply of bullets to blanks at the range. I told them you'd run out. They trust me there, Straker. They made it easy for me. " Foster was holding an odd looking gun on him. He had to risk it.

Straker rushed him, but felt a stinging on his neck. His hand flew up in an attempt to dislodge a dart, the landscape revolved, and he hit the ground hard.

"I should have listened to Alec," Straker said painfully, gasping. There were three Fosters looming over him now. "Whatever you--think--you can---get away--with--"

"Having problems with your breathing, Straker? Enjoy air while you can. Where you're going you won't need it."

"Go to--hell--Foster."

"Oh no, Commander I wouldn't dream of it. I've reserved hell just for you." Foster pulled a large hypodermic full of bright orange fluid out of his parka. After uncapping it, he approached Straker. Straker was having problems focusing on a single Foster as he came closer. Foster roughly jabbed the needle in Straker's neck and eagerly pushed the plunger. It felt like being bathed in fire.

Straker had no problems screaming.

## Chapter Two: The Hunt

Colonel Lake was grim-faced as she ordered the SHADO forensics team to examine every inch of Straker's bronze car where he'd been found slumped over his seat, bloodied, bruised and unconscious. Freeman had already gone on the medi-chopper that had sped the Commander to Mayland Hospital two hours previously. Fortunately, the weather had broken, and although it was overcast it gave them a better look at Straker's car and surroundings.

"I want to know what happened here as if I'd seen it with my own eyes. I want a report theorizing on what happened to Straker in the moments before we got the signal from his car. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Lake wandered up to one of the operatives who was making a cast of a footprint.

"Found Straker's footprints. He left his car at some point before he collapsed. Someone else was with him, men's boot, size twelve, prints leading up to his car. Deep impression, as though the suspect was carrying something heavy, probably Straker's body. I think he was attacked elsewhere and dumped inside his car. No sign of another car so the perpetrator may be on foot. Our second team is still out there searching for any other evidence they can find."

"Commander Straker may still be *alive*, Lieutenant. Don't you let me hear you refer to him as a body again." Lake snapped, instantly regretting it.

*Damn it, yes you admired Straker but this is your job. Do it.*

"Yes Ma'am," the man replied, not penitent enough for her taste. "Call just came through. We detected skid marks further ahead. Looks like the Commander nearly ran off the road."

"Straker wouldn't lose control of his car unless he was made to, or forced to or someone else was at the wheel. Someone or something assaulted him. Colonel Freeman informed me the Commander had just recovered from a nasty bacterial infection in his hand from a puncture wound and he remained impaired by that injury. He'd just been released from Mayland hospital, worked that evening until dawn, headed out to the Academy range for some practice. He returned to work for another full day and only headed home earlier this morning. I already have people at the range. Colonel Freeman spoke with him this morning and he sounded tired but nothing suggested he was in danger. I want anyone living in a ten mile radius of the incident to be checked out. I want any witnesses located. Any sign of a UFO that may have gotten past defenses? Any foliage burnt or disturbed?"

An American by the name of Dr. Jeremy Norcross, the senior in charge of the group, had a ready reply. She seemed to recall Alec say his wife had been taken by the aliens, leaving him a widower with two children.

"Somebody was in a thicket of bushes right here. I'd guess they were crouching there, waiting for the Commander to show up. There's a half full flask of coffee here." he pointed it out with a finger encased in latex. "We can get prints and DNA off of it with any luck. Leaving it behind like that, our suspect must be a pretty cocky bastard."

*Cocky. That fit only one person she knew. After the situation with the cat, he'd be pretty infuriated. All right, Straker would have my head if I jumped to any conclusions without proof. Alec Freeman isn't wrong about people often. If he isn't this time, then I want Foster. More than I ever wanted anything before. I'll eat him alive.*

"Any chance at all an alien or aliens is involved in this?" she asked with no sign of just how much her blood was boiling.

"I worked for New Scotland Yard on cases just like this one before Alec recruited me to

SHADO. You learn to listen to your evidence, but you're a fool's fool if you don't listen to your guts as well. I say we have a traitor in our midst. Somebody who knew right when Straker was released from Mayland, knew how to trace Straker's GPS signal and jam his phone.. Someone who knew just how to knock out his lines of communication with SHADO, and put him out of commission." The man seemed uneasy.

"There's something you're not telling me."

"Straker wouldn't be a hard man to kill from a distance. If our suspect is an insider, it would be easy enough to get a Molly and take out his car, depending on how fast he was driving, and the initial report from our techs say Straker was pushing the car's speed for some reason but not all that dangerously so considering his driving skills. Maybe he was trying to escape from someone in a panic, but running away doesn't sound like him to me unless a UFO was after him and so far there's nothing that tells me one was involved. Still, if someone was determined enough, he could at least badly injure him. Only we found Straker alive. Just. Someone wanted Straker to suffer, someone wanted to scare him out of his wits. They didn't want him dead, Colonel. We have a psycho on our hands, either working with the aliens or by themselves. "

"You can help me find the bastard, Lieutenant." It was not a question.

"I've always liked Commander Straker. I'll dig for this nutcase as if it was my own kids they injured, Virginia."

For the first time that morning, Colonel Virginia Lake smiled.

## Chapter Three: The Angels Will Weep

"Jackson."

"Yes Colonel." The psychiatrist turned around from his desk and hissed in his reptilian accent at Freeman. "I heard what happened. I was just finishing up a psychological profile on the subject. Dr. Norcross requested it. What can I do for you?" Jackson added.

It usually rattled Freeman, the leisurely way in which Jackson spoke, as if he was an insect burrowing steadily beneath your skin.

*Not this time. Not when I may need him to help save Ed.*

"Remind me that the Commander is tough. Remind me that when God made Straker, he threw away the mold. Remind me that on more than one occasion, just when we thought he was lost, he came through and reversed the odds."

"You know the Commander as well as I do, Colonel. I will however remind you that I personally witnessed the conclusion of Straker's fight to save H.Q. after he and Colonel Lake were affected by the aliens' time freezing device. He has considerable will power. We have the best people in medicine working for us, the best equipment, the best drugs. Indeed, my esteemed colleague Dr. Shroeder managed to heal the Commander's infection without a standard antibiotic. It was fortunate that he has friends at our H.Q. in Germany. They were testing an experimental anti-bacterial agent in their lab, and it was successful in healing the Commander with no side effects."

"What do you think his chances are?"

"There is no way of telling. We do not know yet what kind of drugs were injected into him. So far it just seems to have put him into a coma, and made it necessary to keep the Commander on full life support systems and IV fluids. His vitals are sound. It is just the drugs, and the damage they may be still doing to him which makes the outcome difficult to determine."

Freeman was silent for a long time. Jackson stepped away for a moment and then unexpectedly handed him a coffee.

"Thanks."

"I normally would recommend rest for a man under great strain, but I know you will not follow my suggestions. Perhaps a sufficient amount of coffee will help just as much. Is there anything further on your mind? I do not wish to dismiss you, but I should get this report to Dr. Norcross immediately." Jackson fed the report into the transmitter, then turned toward an ashen looking Freeman again. Jackson simply waited.

"Jackson, what if this is it? What if Ed dies?"

"Considering your friendship and loyalty to him, you would indeed be inconsolable for an undetermined amount of time. Considering that we would have lost a man with priceless value to SHADO, the organization would suffer a dreadful blow. As for my own relationship with the Commander, I too would grieve, as is proper for such a man. The Commander is a rare breed, irreplaceable. It is said that when such men and women die, even the angels may weep."

"Where did you hear that phrase?" Freeman said quietly, moved.

"The Commander said that himself." Jackson offered up his eerie smile, with an unreadable expression in his hypnotic eyes.

Freeman smiled sadly.

"I should have known. It sounds like something he'd sa-----"

A buzzer sounded, cutting into his remark like a chisel and he dropped the plastic cup of

coffee nearly baptizing the psychiatrist. "What the hell is that?" Freeman snapped, his gun making an appearance, Jackson noted. The P.A. system crackled into life and Jackson glanced up at it.

***--CODE BLUE CODE BLUE I REPEAT CODE BLUE ALL AVAILABLE  
MEDICAL PERSONNEL TO CRITICAL CARE UNIT ONE STAT CODE BLUE CODE  
BLUE***

"I am afraid that the Commander's heart has stopp-"  
Colonel Alec Freeman was already gone.

## Chapter Four: Abbandonate Ogni Speranza-

*---think think think think! Out. Out of this. Get word to Alec. Foster. Foster, that double crossing son of a bitch. Should have listened. Listened. No time now. Have to warn them. Cold here, so cold here. Scared. So scared. No. Don't feel sorry for yourself. Won't help matters. Damn you, get me out of this. No, what are you doing? NO NO. GOD THAT HURTS, STOP-oh GOD GOD, NO. Gel, cold. Burning. No NO, I'm NOT dead! I'm NOT DEAD! Cardiac arrest? No! No! Drug-the DRUG! Help me! HELP ME! Lis-ten to me! Should have listened. So close at the range. Always around. Smirking at me. Why didn't I listen? Shocking the heart? NO, not again! Oh GOD that hurts! GOD help me! Oh please, please! Ninety-seven out of one hundred. Didn't want them to know. Ashamed. Couldn't let them see my failure. Must be perfect, must be. I made my choice a long time ago. Must set an example-oh Alec! See him. See HIM. NO! Don't take him away! NO! Didn't want them to know, wasn't perfect. THINK, damn you, THINK! STOP IT! STOP IT. They're burning me! Oh GOD, oh GOD! No. No No No. Stop it! Trained. TRAINED. Resist torture. Straker, Edward Major, United States Air Force. Serial number 73- No. Home. Home. England. Safe. Why are they hurting me? What did I do to them? WHY? OH GOD. God. What did that drug do to me? I can feel it, feel it. Twisting my brain. Crushing me. Trapped. Trapped. Can't anyone hear me? I can't get out! Can't hear me! HEAR ME! Crushing me, dear sweet Jesus I'm being crushed. Oh that. Well the dictionary says it's a morbid fear of confined spaces- ALEC! ALEC! I'm here, God damn you. I haven't died! Oh GOD, I'm HERE, Alec! Eyes. Can't move eyes. Open. They have to be open, I can still see. Where are they taking me? No. Damn you, cover me up! You can't treat me like this, I have my dignity. Take your damn hands off me! Machine MRI-small, damn hole, hole, burying me in a hole! Can't breathe, shoveling dirt over me! OH GOD, no! Oh GOD. Where is God? Hell. Foster mentioned Hell. Dante- Abbandonate Ogni Speranza, abandon all hope-lines of communication cut NO. I'm Straker, damn you! Have to find a way-have to find a way home. Johnny? Mother? Why won't you help me? ALEC! Alec look at me! You know my soul! HELP ME! NO NO, don't sedate me-don't-don't-sleep, must sleep. Quiet here. So tired. Just a short nap. I'm not tired Alec. SLEEP? NO! No! FIGHT IT, damn you to blazes! FIGHT the drug! ALEC HELP ME! Scared, scared! So alone! Help! Won't anyone please help me?---*

Unheard and unseen and devoid of tears, Straker sobbed.



## Chapter Five: Fostering Suspicions

"Let me get this straight, Jackson. Just because I happened to be in the same place as Straker a couple of times off duty-"

"Eight times in the past month. You were spotted outside Commander Straker's secured room at Mayland Hospital yet you never entered it. Most recently, twice at the SHADO Academy shooting range. The man on duty informed us you went to get bullets for the Commander."

"That's right. Ed told me he was short, and asked me to get another box while he used the men's room."

"The man also informed me he did not see the Commander go anywhere near the men's room. He added that in the rare times he has seen the Commander at that range, he characteristically always brought his own ammo."

"Oh for God's sake, Straker does something unusual for once and that makes *me* a prime suspect?"

"Shut UP Paul," Virginia Lake yelled, jumping to her feet. Her words reverberated off the walls of the SHADO courtroom. "I know you're involved in this. Alec knows you're involved in this."

"Colonel. Please sit down." Jackson instructed her.

"But-"

"If you please-" Jackson said, as courteously as he could manage. Seething, she obeyed him. Beside her, Freeman laid a comforting hand on hers. She nodded, glad for his company. Jackson was deliberately pacing the room. He came uncomfortably close to Foster and melded his eyes with the former test pilot's.

"Now, Foster, shall we continue?" he purred as if inviting Foster to join into some wicked game with him.

"Bloody hell yes! I want you to get to the bottom of this! You're wasting time on me when you could be finding the real killer."

"No one has confirmed yet that Commander Straker is deceased, Foster. Perhaps that was a slip of the tongue?"

"Look Jackson, I've had enough of your rot! You forget that Ed's a friend of mine too."

"Indeed? Why is it then that you never asked to be put on the Commander's list of visitors when he injured his hand recently? Why were you seen near the room but you never entered?"

"I wanted to give Ed some privacy, for Christ's sake. I haven't known him as long as some have, like Alec for instance. Look, nobody buys that story that Straker injured himself on a dagger at Freeman's place. Why don't you go question Freeman? "

"Unlike you, Freeman requested to be questioned under drugs and hypnosis and was cleared. Since he was in touch with him only minutes before the alarm signal came in from Straker's car, he remains a part of this investigation. However, it is you who harbored ill-will against the Commander after the aliens brainwashed you, and accused him of empire building and tried to take his place. It is you who attempted to kill Straker. It is you who made many verbal and visual jokes at the Commander's expense behind his back. We have many statements from operatives on videotape attesting to this fact, including Colonel Freeman's. What is your response to that, Foster?"

"I was cleared! Cleared by Straker himself. If it wasn't for him, I really would have had to have a bullet put through my heart! As for my jokes, everyone jokes about how tough Straker

is and makes fun of him behind his back. I bet they didn't admit that to you, did they? What's your response to that, Jackson?"

"My response? Simply this, Foster. Everyone lies or conceals the truth at some time or another. Including you. However you are used to deception. It is necessary in your job. You are excellent at it. Perhaps you are lying now? Perhaps you did murder Commander Straker?"

"This is outrageous! I'm a loyal member of SHADO and you know it. I demand to speak with my counsel. I'm being framed."

"Framed? How dramatic," Jackson said mockingly. He turned away from Foster and linked his hands behind his back. Suddenly he turned, now mere inches away from Foster and raised his voice to an accusatory roar. "I have evidence here that proves without doubt that you assaulted Commander Straker and injected him with an alien drug with the intention to kill him. What have you to say now, Foster?"

"*You're* the one who's lying now, Jackson. I know this is some damn psychological trick you're trying to pull on me."

"Is it?" Jackson pulled on a pair of latex gloves from a pocket and lifted a small box from a table to show to the operatives gathered there. "Ladies and gentleman, I offer you two further exhibits, labeled N12 and N13. You may sit down, Foster. I would caution you not to get too comfortable, but perhaps the security team will make sure of that? Ah, yes I see it seems they will. Dr. Jeremy Norcross, would you be so kind as to take the witness stand and offer additional testimony?"

"My pleasure, Douglas."

"You will indulge me and tell this court what your position in SHADO is along with pertinent details from your curriculum vitae?"

"I am Chief of SHADO's special UFO forensics team. We investigate UFO abductions and the homicides involved in such crimes. We also investigate criminal acts that may be carried out by our own colleagues here at SHADO. I have a doctorate in pharmaceuticals and pharmaceutical chemistry, and doctorates in criminal science, and in forensic science because they were fields I had an interest in. I soon tried out for and was accepted at the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia in the United States. I worked at New Scotland Yard as a crime scene investigator as a part of a special exchange program that enabled me to take the place of my British equivalent who wished to gain further experience with our FBI. When my term came to an end, I realized I'd grown to love it here and I left my job, applied for British citizenship and moved here permanently. I met and married a woman I encountered on a case, and we have two sons. I then tried to find a full time job without much success due to my inability to get used to the ins and outs of your class system." he chuckled. "Afraid I lost my temper debating that issue on more than one occasion."

"Go on."

"I came home one night to find that my wife Patricia had been slaughtered and mutilated by the aliens for her organs. The only reason that they didn't get my kids was that they'd been at her sister's house over the weekend. Alec Freeman was assigned to my case, and I have to admit he saved my sanity. I found out later that Alec had appealed to Commander Straker to consider me as a possible recruit for SHADO. Straker agreed after seeing my record and meeting me, and I've been working here for him ever since then in my various fields of expertise. Straker told me during our meeting that he shared my distaste for judging people on the basis of their status in society. I was very much relieved. He also offered me his condolences on the death of my wife and I found his compassion to be absolutely genuine."

"You were assigned to this case after Commander Straker was discovered unconscious in critical condition in his car yesterday morning?"

"I was. Initially I examined and photographed the crime scene and collected materials and data with my teams that related to the case under the authority of Colonel Lake. Later, assisting Dr. Shroeder, I helped establish that the Commander had been shot with an anesthetic dart, similar to the one which is used to tranquilize zoo animals. The anesthetic used was completely unknown to me, so it may be alien in nature, perhaps some kind of opiate. I had feared it actually be etorphine which is safe on some animal species but would have killed him in a matter of minutes. However that was not my main concern. At the scene, I took note of a puncture wound on the Commander's neck that I guessed was made with a large bore hypodermic needle, the kind of needle we normally use for biopsy. My theory was correct, since we eventually found the hypodermic, and brought it back to the lab using hazardous materials protocols. I dusted it for prints and collected the remaining fluid in it for testing once I was back at our lab."

"You refer to this hypodermic labeled N12," Jackson said holding aloft a sealed bag, "do you not?"

Virginia Lake looked over at Paul Foster. He was visibly sweating. She balled her hands into fists without being conscious of it. Next to her, Alec Freeman sat straight up in his chair.

"I do. My lab people are currently in the process of breaking down the drug chemically. Based on the data I've seen so far I believe it to be some type of half hallucinogenic and half paralytic drug, but by no means am I even sure of that. I can tell you it seems to have been designed to be lethal in nature, and that it scares the hell out of me. I believe it to be what killed the Commander."

"What other significant evidence did you find on the scene?"

"A flask which when found, was half full of coffee. I brought it back to SHADO as I did the hypo, dusted it for prints and sent the biological evidence on it to the DNA lab."

"You refer to this flask labeled N13, do you not?" Jackson had set down the bag and lifted another larger bag from a second box.

"That is correct."

"Dr. Norcross, if you will be patient with me and move aside so that Foster may again take the stand."

Norcross looked over at Foster oddly then did as Jackson requested.

"Accompany Foster back to the stand, will you?" the psychiatrist instructed the guards.

Bring wasn't exactly how Virginia Lake would have described the way the two guards half-dragged Foster to the stand, but she wouldn't have had it any other way. Neither would have Alec Freeman, who had hand chosen them for their ruthlessness in such matters.

"Now, Colonel Foster, you have seen all the evidence?"

"This is all a sham, you bastards. You have your tethered goat. It's just a matter of time before you plan on roasting me."

"How quaint, Foster. Perhaps you will tell me if you recognize either or both of the articles of evidence I have just shown you and the court?"

"No! I haven't seen either of them! You're making a big mistake, Jackson."

"Dr. Norcross, did you receive a psychological profile report from me describing what I felt the personality of Commander Straker's murderer might be like, based on the methodology of the crime?" Jackson asked, unruffled.

"I did."

"Did those characteristics seem to fit Paul Foster?"

"Yes, at first." Norcross admitted.

"This is obscene! I demand to have my counsel defend me!"

"You'll get to speak to your counsel before sentencing, Colonel Foster. Please continue, Doctor."

"As I was saying, I believed that at first. I remarked to Colonel Lake that by leaving evidence behind like that, our suspect must be a pretty cocky bastard. That describes Foster to some extent, but something bothered me."

"Go on," Jackson said slowly in his voice which sounded like audible poison to Foster.

"To leave evidence that would inevitably tie him to the murder like that was the act of a man who might be cocky and arrogant, yes. If Foster planned this in that manner, he must have known we'd catch him eventually. However, Foster is not a fool, and I don't believe he realized he'd be captured."

"Please continue."

"I came to the conclusion that over the period of the last, oh, say five or six months, Paul Foster was directed by the aliens to stalk Commander Straker with the intent of eventually paralyzing him and injecting him with a drug they knew would eventually kill him. Only as they have done several times before, most notably in the case codenamed Timelash, they tricked the victim they controlled, in that particular event one of our radio operators, Turner. I feel that they may have promised Foster something big for going along with their scheme. What they didn't tell him is that after he had accomplished what they wanted most, the cold blooded murder of Commander Straker, they would cleverly manipulate him to make mistakes so that he would unwillingly draw us straight to him, and we'd be the ones to finish him off."

"That's preposterous, that's obscene!" Foster shouted, face grey. "If the aliens could control me so easily, what makes any of you think they can't control any one of you? Like Jackson and Norcross for instance? Control Norcross so that he'd put into motion a plot to kill Commander Straker and blame me for it!"

"Are you making a direct accusation saying that is what I am doing, Foster?" Norcross asked.

"What if I am?" Foster sneered. Norcross looked for a moment like he might strike him, and Jackson knew Norcross wasn't a violent man.

"Dr. Norcross-" Jackson began to say, looking at him strangely.

Norcross was deep in thought for a moment.

"Lieutenant Chapman, do you have live ammo in your pistol?" he asked gravely.

"Of course, Sir." The guard said, puzzled.

"Shoot me please."

"Excuse me, Sir?"

"I told you to shoot me. Shoot to kill. Or the first chance I get, I'll slit my own throat open," he added, beginning to tremble.

"Sir?"

"Dr. Norcross," Jackson intoned, clearly disturbed for the first time and not caring who saw it. "We have gone over this before. You cannot do this. You will not do this."

"The man's a mental wreck, and you trust his judgement?" Foster exclaimed.

"What the hell are you playing at, Jeremy?" Colonel Lake exclaimed, horrified.

"I saw what they did to my beloved wife's body, Virginia. Before I'd ever be a tool for those murdering bastards I'd rather be dead," he sobbed. "So shoot-" Norcross covered his

face in his hands. There was silent murmuring all around the courtroom.

Alec Freeman got up and put a hand around Norcross' shoulders and led him carefully to a seat.

"I'm sorry, Alec. I know I'm supposed to be a professional. I know I owe you and Straker everything, but that-that-"

"Take it easy, Jerry. I think that pretty much demonstrates this man's loyalty to Straker and SHADO, Jackson," Freeman said quietly and dropped heavily into his own seat.

"I agree. However, I have one more task for him to perform."

"For God's sake, Jackson. The poor man's had enough!" Virginia spat out. She had come to greatly admire Norcross in the short time she'd known him.

"No. I know what he wants Virginia, I'll do it." Norcross wiped his tears away roughly with the back of his hand. He stood up and returned to a position not far from Foster.

"Oh bravo, bravo! Let's hear some applause for that performance!" Foster exclaimed crazily, clapping.

"You keep that fat mouth of yours shut or I'll sentence you to a bullet in your brain right here and now, Foster." Lieutenant Chapman promised him.

"Why don't you do it? Give them a real show. After all, we're below a movie studio."

"Dr. Norcross, I believe you found partial prints on the hypodermic and complete prints on the flask, is that correct?"

"That is correct." Norcross said, dead calm again. All eyes were riveted on Norcross and Foster, and not a soul noticed Alec Freeman slowly begin to stand, not even Virginia Lake who wiped away her tears.

"You also found saliva on the flask, from which you were able to extract DNA, is that correct?"

Norcross looked directly at Foster now.

"That is correct." he said very clearly.

"Were you able to identify Commander Straker's killer from those fingerprints and DNA?"

"I was. In the case of the DNA, without a doubt. Commander Straker's murderer is Paul Foster."

In the mounting clamor that followed, Alec Freeman had shot across the courtroom in a blind rage and leaped upon Paul Foster, efficiently beginning to strangle him to death with his bare hands.

## Chapter Six: The Condemned Man

"He broke, Jeremy." Virginia Lake told Norcross. "Foster finally broke down and confessed to killing Ed Straker."

"I expected he would. It's surprising how fast even the toughest of men can break down, it all depends on the situation. What will happen to Alec, Virginia?"

"Nothing. Jackson made it clear to Henderson that under the circumstances, what Alec did was perfectly understandable. No one is going to dare debate the matter. I must confess that even when I was trying to get Alec off of Foster with the help of Chapman and Hickman, something deep in me wanted Alec to succeed in killing him."

"You know, it wasn't Foster's fault. It was exactly as I thought. They made use of the earlier brainwashing, and any man's repulsion at following orders he feels aren't justifiable. He felt Straker's orders deliberately threatened his life."

"He knew that we are at war, Jeremy. He knew he was supposed to follow Straker's commands to the letter. For heaven's sake, for months Foster was acting suspicious, and still Straker refused to condemn him without proof. If he'd only listened to Alec's concerns-" she let her voice trail off.

"The Commander's always been a highly moral man, and he'd never give a command that he himself would not carry out, should need be. He had to give Foster every chance to prove Alec wrong. Look, Virginia, I'm sorry about the way I acted in there. You know that I pretty much had a nervous breakdown when she died. It just touched a live nerve deep within me, when Foster was able to think on his feet and accuse me of being a victim like he was."

"You almost sound like you pity him," she said with revulsion.

"I'm sorry Virginia, but I do. He was just as much an innocent target of the aliens as my wife was. Foster was right in a sense. It could have happened to any one of us. He was a condemned man, right from the start. He just didn't know it. What will happen to him now?"

"Alec's in charge now with Straker gone, it'll be up to him to decide."

"Alec's not in any shape to make a decision like that plus he's still out for blood. I pity Foster, I'm afraid."

"And what about Ed Straker? Wasn't he a condemned man too? What about what Foster did to him? Just thinking about it chills my blood. The suffering poor Straker must have gone through! He must have known there wasn't anything he could do, no way to warn us that Alec Freeman had been right, that Foster was plotting his death. It must have been so terrifying for him in those last moments of consciousness."

"Virginia, I'm truly sorry, I admired Straker's dedication. Remember, I know what it's like to lose someone important in your life, to have those precious lines of communication cut off. Did Straker leave a will?"

"Yes, I'm sure he did, Alec knows where it is. Straker told me once he'd made his choice a long time ago. I believe he knew he'd be prematurely killed one day, just from being in this kind of work, and he'd accepted that risk completely. And yet he startled me at the same time, he'd made preparations in secret for such an attack. There was a weapons station he'd concealed that nobody even knew about. Straker saved my and everyone else's life that day."

"Yes, I read the report, Alec showed it to me after I joined SHADO. I think he wanted me to know how extraordinary the man I'd be working for really was, that I could honor Patricia's memory by taking on Straker's cause. I am truly sorry that we've lost Ed, Virginia. Listen, I'm going to go up top, will you join me? I could use a stiff drink and some fresh air."

"Jeremy, some other time, perhaps. My place right now is Straker's office. I'm filling in for Alec. I don't think he ever imagined he'd actually be carrying out Straker's last command."

"What do you mean?"

"Alec had Straker's lasting power of attorney in health and welfare, in making medical treatment decisions. Knowing Straker as I do, I believe the will states he wouldn't want his life prolonged by extreme measures, and Alec will have to tell the doctors to take Ed off life support and let him go."

"Dear God, Alec has to do that? The poor wretch."

"I know. I can imagine at this point in time he is wishing with all his heart that Foster did manage to kill Commander Ed Straker."

## Chapter Seven: The Final Command

"Tell me again, Jackson. I want to know everything."

"There are certain procedures Dr. Shroeder, Dr. Frazer and I did to determine whether a patient is brain dead, as we have determined the Commander became due to the drug he was injected with. I have made them easier for you to understand by listing them for you on this chart." Jackson said quietly.

Freeman looked down at it. His heart was as dead as the piece of paper he held. He read it to himself numbly.

The patient has no response to command, verbal, visual or otherwise.

The patient is flaccid, with areflexic extremities. The patient has no movements -- the arms and legs are raised and allowed to fall to see if there are adjacent movements, restraint or hesitation in the fall.

The pupils are unreactive (fixed). The patient's eyes are opened and a very bright light is shined into the pupil. The light will activate the optic nerve and send a message to the brain. In the normal brain, the brain will send an impulse back to the eye to constrict the pupil. In the non-viable brain, no impulse will be generated. This is performed in both eyes.

The patient has no oculoccephalic reflex. The patient's eyes are opened and the head turned from side to side. The active brain will allow a roving motion of the eyes; the non-functional brain will not. The eyes remain fixed.

The patient has no corneal reflexes. A cotton swab is dragged across the cornea while the eye is held open. The intact brain will want the eye to blink. The dead brain will not. This is performed in both eyes.

The patient has no response -- either purposeful or posturing -- to supra-orbital stimulation. The patient's eyebrow ridge is compressed with the thumb. The resulting stimulation pressure will cause motion of the extremities, either purposeful or primitive posturing, in the living-brain patient, but none in the brain-dead patient.

The patient has no oculovestibular reflex. The patient's ear canal is inspected to ensure an intact tympanic membrane and that the ear is free of wax. While holding the eyes open, ice water is injected into the ear canal. The drastic change in ear temperature will cause a violent eye twitching by the intact brain but no reaction in the brain-dead patient. This is performed in both ears.

The patient has no gag reflex. The movement of the breathing tube (in and out) or the insertion of a smaller tube down the breathing tube will cause a gag reflex in a comatose patient, but will not elicit a reflex in the brain-dead patient.

The patient has no spontaneous respiration. The patient is temporarily removed from life support (the ventilator). With the cessation of breathing by the machine, the body will immediately start to build up metabolic waste of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) in the blood. When the CO<sub>2</sub> level reaches a level of 55 mm Hg, the active brain will cause the patient to breathe spontaneously. The dead brain gives no response.

If, after this extensive clinical examination, the patient shows no sign of neurological function and the cause of the injury is known, the patient can be pronounced brain dead.

"You're certain, Jackson? You and the other doctors? You're absolutely certain?"

Freeman pleaded with him.

Jackson sighed.

"I am afraid so. There are a few additional tests we can perform, but they will take time to



set up."

"See to it. I want to see him. I want to be alone with him now. I don't want to be disturbed."

"As you wish."

The two of them walked together toward the intensive care unit as if already marching to the rhythm of a dirge.

"Jackson?"

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Tell me, is he in pain?"

"No, Colonel. Do not trouble yourself with thinking that."

"Thank God for that. Thank God. Did he suffer much from the cardiac arrest?"

"I do not believe so."

"But Foster sticking that hideous monster of a needle into him, he must have suffered!"

"If you will recall from the testimony, Dr. Norcross believes Foster incapacitated him beforehand to prevent the Commander from defending himself. The drug in the dart blocked out all his senses. He would not have felt anything. I do not believe he even knew what was happening to him," Jackson fabricated the answer.

*Forgive me for the lie to your friend, Commander. But it is the living we must concern ourselves with now, and not the dead.*

The two of them stopped outside critical care unit one. Chapman stood guarding the door. He nodded at them respectfully.

"I can't do this." Alec said wildly. "I can't go in there and just order for his plugs to be pulled out like that. I can't do that to Ed. He's asked too much of me."

"Colonel Freeman, you must. You have a personal and professional responsibility to the Commander. You should think of this as simply obeying his final command."

"Bloody hell! It's easy for you, isn't it? He's just a interesting chunk of meat to you and the medical staff now, isn't he? A carcass dependent on your damn machines to keep him alive."

"Colonel, you must pull yourself together. I too have a responsibility. If you do not carry out the Commander's wishes, General Henderson will see that you do. If you still refuse he can and may take certain measures to have you removed as acting Commander of SHADO."

"You filthy son of a bitch. Angels may weep? You had me almost convinced with that rubbish, you know that? Did Ed even actually say that? Or was that an attempt to get me on your and Henderson's side, soften me up?"

"The Commander said that. I will give you as much time as you need. I will speak to my colleagues about getting the other tests done."

Jackson turned and left.

"Alec, I'm-"

"Oh go to blazes, Chapman!"

"Sorry, sir."

"No, it's me who should be sorry, Ron. It's just that its been one nightmare of a day, and the man in there wasting away has been my closest friend for years. I've been there in Thailand when he was so sick he could hardly sit up without help, when he fell in love, when he got married, when his marriage ended, when his son was born, when he laid flowers on his son's grave, when he despaired, when he was wounded, when he was angry as hell at me, when he gave up on himself, when he was frightened out of his mind and doing everything in his power

not to show it. Straker's always been so-well, vibrant. So full of life. What's that damn verse of poetry he recited to me? Invictus. Something about I am the captain of my soul."

"Sorry Alec. I didn't have the head for that kind of thing in University. Always seemed a bit of a bore to me, I'm afraid. " Chapman was clearly embarrassed at Alec opening up to him, and he looked down at the floor as if to seek asylum there.

"Ed is never going to recite poetry to me like that by heart ever again and I can't even remember all of it," Alec said with absolute emptiness in his heart . He put his hand on the wall scanner, and the doors swung open to admit him.

## Chapter Eight: The Solution is No Solution

*No, NOOOOOO, nooooooooooooo. Hide, hide, mustn't find me. Make myself small. Warm here. Warm milk. Story time. Mama? Why won't you come for me? Mama? Mama? Gone Gone Gone. Ba Ba black sheep, have you any wool? Black sheep. FOSTER! FOSTER! Must scream, can't scream, black box. Gone gone gone. Earth dead. No brain. They say no brain. Who mourns for a dead brain, Mama? Does a dead brain cry?*

*Ed.*

*I don't know you. Go away!*

*Ed, it's Alec.*

*Alec why did you let them all hurt me so bad like that? I kept screaming and nobody came to help!*

*Ed, you can't give in to insanity. You're Commander of SHADO. You don't have much time. You need to tell them-*

*HOW? HOW? No more, Alec! No more responsibility! No more loneliness. My life is all gone, Foster took it away. Brain GONE! It's so damn dark here, Alec! Nobody to touch! Oh GOD oh GOD they'll bury me! Trapped, trapped!*

*Ed, fight!*

*Fight? Fight what? Fight HOW? All my years of leadership training, wasted! I'm a freakshow, Alec! They stripped me! They won't even let me have clothes-no, NO, someone's here! Someone's here! No STOP! STOP!*

*Ed.*

*How? How? There's no solution! I'll be here forever! I can't scream! I am screaming! I can't scream!*

*No solution, Ed. Trapped!*

*Touch me, please somebody touch me? I'm so damn lonely. Fight it, fight it. Straker, Edward, Major, United States-oh just let me go, oh God, not this, not buried, have pity on me-I was never WANTED! Never WANTED! I'm going insane, heh, crazy crazy. Who mourns a dead brain? HEH HEH HEH. NO! NO! Don't give in! Do-not-break!*

*No solution is the solution. So cold, so cold. Help me scream? I'm screaming! How? No solution is the solution. This isn't real. Hallucinating? No, Foster shot me full of something. That was real. Alec was right. Brain dead. Death. Process of death. People have out of body experiences. Hallucinations. Dying! Get out of here, OUT! There MUST be a way! There has to be.*

*That's it, Ed, fight it fight it!*

*Not real. NOT REAL! Foster, that murdering son of a bitch, that filthy worm! Make him pay. Find him, yes, yes, find him. Think! Think! NO. No. The solution is not the solution. I can't solve this with just intellect. They're making me believe in the unreality. No. I MUST believe in the unreality to free myself. YES! The solution is no solution. God never abandons us, Ed. In the hole, in the hole in Nam, they're shoveling dirt on me! NO! FAITH! NOW! NOW! Angel believed! It's my only chance! The solution is not an intellectual solution. Got to believe. Must. Must. Got to believe I can go back. Faith is the key Q-Tip! NOW! NOW! NOW!*

*"GOD!" An explosion of sound light and feeling hit Straker, and he sank to the ground slowly sliding against the wall, shielding his eyes, screaming until his throat was raw. Slowly he brought his hands down still crouching, still in massive pain, gasping, moaning. He saw he was*

near the brig. He unsteadily got to his feet. Two guards were on duty, guzzling down coffee. With immense dignity in spite of his whole body being on fire, Straker walked over to one of them.

"Lieutenant. Open it. My orders."

Nothing. The guard raised the cup to his lips, and took a swallow.

Straker slammed down a fist on the guard's arm in anger, and nearly fell over when it passed right through him.

"Non-corporeal? Have I become a ghost? Christ, am I really dead now?" he pressed his lips together to keep from sobbing. He allowed himself several deep breaths of luxurious air, managed to become calm. His expression remained tortured. "God that was wonderful, even if it is canned air. At least you're not alone anyone, Ed. You did it! Focus on that. Come on. At least you still can see and hear. If only you couldn't feel! I can't stand this pain, got to do something about it, got to do something."

Another SHADO operative was coming up with a tray. Redheaded. Female.

"Hi there gorgeous. Feeding time for the monkey in the zoo?"

"How is our Foster? Maybe that's where bananas foster comes from." she laughed. He howled, showing uneven teeth.

"How is he? Dumb question. How would you be if you were waiting for a firing squad to show up?"

"They doped him up, he's flying without a spaceship. A firing squad is too good for that piece of manure. Freeman should have finished strangling him." another guard said.

"Hey, think of it another way. He got rid of old man Straker for us!"

"I always said Straker was brain dead," the other guard laughed.

"That's right, enjoy yourselves. Call a dead man names behind his back, you cowards." Straker snapped at them.

"Hey, if Freeman caught you saying that, you'd soon be keeping Foster company. Okay open it up."

The doors slid open and Straker dashed through them like a jet.

The woman handed Foster the tray. Foster looked up, flung it in the air, horrified, screaming as Straker jumped on him and smashed him against the far wall like he was a racquet and Foster was a tennis ball. The guard smacked the alarm button, only seeing Foster hurl himself across the room and then pitch sideways onto the floor.

"NO! You're dead, you can't be here! You can't! They promised me command of SHADO! You're dead, you have to be dead, Straker!"

"What did you shoot me full of, you traitor? Tell me ! Tell me or by God I'll tear you into pieces! I risked my life when I went into that shooting range to force you to fight the brainwashing! I should have killed you when I had the chance, Foster. *Tell me!*"

"This can't be happening!"

"You disgusting piece of filth!" Straker grabbed him by the hair and pulled his head back until he fell to his knees, then he wrapped an arm around his neck mirroring Alec. He started to squeeze. *"I said tell me!"*

Foster struggled with him, shrieking.

"They said you'd appear to be brain dead to the doctors, they said it would appear that all your brain functions had ceased! That's all I know!"

"What happened?" Jackson had appeared with more guards and they grabbed Foster while Jackson prepared a hypodermic.

"I brought the lunch tray and he just went crazy Doctor."

"Damn it, Jackson, no, don't knock him out! Don't inject him, why show him any mercy? What kind of mercy did he show me?"

Straker watched Foster sink down into sleep, and then passed Jackson and wandered listlessly out, shaking uncontrollably, his eyes full of tears. He made his way to medical centre, searched the shelves desperately until he found what he wanted and fell into a chair. He injected himself swiftly in his arm muscle with 10 cc morphine. Straker winced as he withdrew the needle, rubbed his arm, fighting the fatigue and dizziness.

"God, God, thank God pain ebbing. Got to calm down. Got to be a way out of this. Why does Foster see me and nobody else does? Nothing makes sense! There, there, pain easier now. Let yourself breathe. I'm *still* here, Foster. A part of me refuses to die. It's so lonely here, Alec. Alec? Oh GOD, *Alec!* The life support systems! My last wishes! He's going to *kill* me!"

## Chapter Nine: The Plea

"Ed damn you, why did you do this to me? Is it really what you wanted? That poem of yours, I can't even remember it now. Why did you force me to make a decision to let you die?"

Straker did not respond, he was frozen in space. He had made it past Chapman, and hurled himself into the critical care unit like a comet streaking across the stars. An orchestra of sensations assaulted his consciousness. There was the ever present antiseptic smell, the squiggles and figures on the medical telemetry screen. There was the private weeping of Alec Freeman, who seemed significantly older to him now. There was the steady electronic beep of the cardiac monitor. None of them seemed significant to him.

The one object that kept him immobile and staring fixedly at it, as if he were some ivory sculpture installed there as a ill timed joke was a fragile man half buried under various tubes and apparatus and complex medical equipment.

The man lie there silently, with a white length of thin plastic hose protruding out of his throat like spray from a fountain, sustaining his breathing. He wore a transparent oxygen mask as if dressed to attend some solemn masquerade ball. He wore simple yellow pajamas with an open collar, a mist of fine brown hair showing on his chest. His face was iceberg pale, yet somehow wonderfully serene, almost peaceful, a religious icon of a man. There was a circular burn scab on his neck, the only wound visible. In spite of all the indignities, he seemed infinitely dignified, and mystifyingly ageless.

Straker presently found himself able to speak, but his usually melodious voice was low when he managed it, almost chapel reverent.

"My God, Alec. That's me. Me. I look so peaceful." Straker sat on the edge of his bed, stunned.

"We had our differences, Ed, but I always respected you. I want you to know that. I need you to know that. I did my best, Ed. I always looked up to you. If I'd known just how much you were going to impact my life, I would have turned around and ran out of your hospital room in Thailand until I couldn't feel my legs anymore. Try and understand, Ed. If I don't do this, they won't let me run SHADO. Oh I could turn everything over to Virginia. We both know she's highly qualified for that desk. I'd just feel that I let you down. You always gave everything you had. Remember what Foster accused you of? Empire building. You were the most dedicated man I ever met, you never asked for a thing you didn't need to fight this war. I told him off. I was loyal to you, Ed. It doesn't seem right that you have to go this way. You should have died fighting, that's what you deserved. This seems so damn common. You were always so vital, so commanding. A born leader. A hero. I know a lot of people just thought of you as a cold son of a bitch, and truth be told, you were dead sure of yourself when you really should have listened to me. I always enjoyed being with you. I guess if I ever had a mentor, it was Ed Straker. It's funny, Ed. Normally when I thought of guys reciting poetry, I thought of them in velvet jackets with face powder and curled hair. Yeah, Ed, I know I once was damned narrow-minded and they've earned medals, flied and fought with the best of them in the wars I've been in, including this one with the aliens, and some of them have turned out to be my finest mates. But hear me out." Alec chuckled. He took a long breath, tears marring his vision.

Straker shut his eyes tightly, face twisted with sorrow.

"I had my doubts, with the way you'd be in a bad situation, act tough and then refuse to give up. I'd want to resign and you'd look at me like a lost little boy with those blueberry pie eyes of yours and I'd realize you still needed me, that the independence was all an act. Then

suddenly things would go your way, and you'd say some literary phrase that suited the occasion, and smile in that deceptively sweet way of yours. More often than not, it spelled my doom. I didn't think I'd swear to give my life to protect a cause and a hero who recited poetry more naturally than I cursed. But I did, Ed. I did. I should recite something in your honor at your funeral service. I'll have to dream something up to say to them for you and I don't know how the hell I'll survive that. I never had your gift for it. But for the life of me, I don't remember that favorite inspirational poem of yours. Forgive me, Ed. Forgive me for letting go of our lines of communication. You just refused to listen sometimes, not because you were a cold calculating tyrant. I know better than that, Ed. I always have. Maybe the real sadness is that I was the only one who did."

"Alec. I'm so sorry. So sorry. Don't, Alec. I can't bear it." Straker wept. "Why was it so hard for me to tell you I couldn't have managed it all without you? The things we never say- "

"Ed, yeah they accused you of being the cold, calculating hard ass Commander Straker. But you've made me laugh myself silly on more than one occasion. They claim you had no heart in that skinny chest of yours. They just didn't take the time-" Freeman wept.

"Alec please no-"

"They didn't take the time to really know you. If they had, they would have seen that you had the biggest heart of us all. Your final command means I have to forever still it. Ed, walk with God."

*"DAMN IT, Alec. Don't."*

Freeman was picking up a wall phone.

"Jackson, this is Freeman. I'm ready to do it."

"No, this isn't happening, no! I can't do this! Alec, Alec!"

Straker stood up and helplessly watched as Jackson entered.

"Colonel, we can still do those final tests on him you requested." Jackson said.

"I know, but it's just putting off the inevitable. I don't want him to suffer anymore."

"Colonel, he is beyond pain."

"Then why do I feel that he's right here in great agony, watching me, begging me not to do this, telling me he's still in there?"

"It is simply what you want to believe."

"Jackson, what will happen now?"

"He will be taken off the respirator and the IV's sustaining his life. In a matter of minutes his heart will give out. I don't think Straker would want anything less than for you to live, to go on and survive, for he cannot. I can think of no finer way you could serve the Commander and honor his memory."

"Do it." Freeman whispered. Jackson went near the bed. Straker gasped.

"Alec please. Alec I'm so frightened. No. I've faced worse things than this. No, I won't go out terrified. Out of the night that covers me, no, no, in the fell clutch of circumstance, I have not winced nor cried aloud-" Straker began hyperventilating. He collapsed, weakened, drained of all resolve.

*It's happening, my real death. The aliens won. I've lost. It's over. I have nothing, and nothing left to give.*

Freeman turned around and looked on the bare floor where Straker was sprawled out uncaring, as Jackson started to shut down the machine. He stared at the spot. Straker looked at Alec like an injured child awaiting punishment. Absolute terror clouded his eyes.

*Please just don't hurt me too much, Alec. I don't want to have to be hurt anymore.*

"**WAIT,**" Freeman said sharply. "turn it back on!"

Jackson turned the machine back on. Freeman went up to the shell of Straker in the bed and bent over him. He grasped Straker's hand and held it firmly. Gently he smoothed Straker's silver hair over his forehead to some semblance of the way Straker normally groomed it.

*Give me a sign, Ed. One small sign is all I need. I won't leave your side until the doctors find some way to bring you back. If I have to, I'll bring you home and take care of you for the rest of my life if these bastards won't. Just give me a sign. Help me help you. I'm not ready to give up on you. I won't have you hurt anymore. I'm here. I just need to have faith that you'll make it through this. I don't give a damn what the doctors say. I know you'll get better.*

Straker barely managed to get up, battered by emotional shock. When he did he was still gasping, not even attempting to stop his tears. He found he was shaking badly, close to passing out again. The physical agony was returning as well.

*I'll give you that sign. I'll find a way to do it, Alec. I'll find a way not to lose you. Just hang on.*

Straker left the room.

"Colonel."

"No Jackson. You said there was no finer way to serve the Commander other than giving up on him and going on alone and you are dead wrong. Remember, I'm acting Commander of SHADO now and these are my orders. Straker's life support systems are to remain on indefinitely. I want guards for him round the clock and I want a failsafe monitor installed to alert me if his condition changes in any way. Tell Colonel Lake to get here straightaway, on the double. Until then I'm staying with Straker."

"Colonel, I must warn you that General Henderson-"

"I don't give a damn about General Henderson. You have your orders, Jackson!"

"Very well."

"One more thing. I want Ed moved out of this damn small room into a private room. You know he's claustrophobic. This is obscene the way he's being treated. Soon as I can, I'm going to have Virginia go back out to his place and get some of his things to surround him with. Music. Pictures. That green glass ball he keeps on his desk. Do I make myself clear, Jackson?"

Jackson nodded.

Straker returned to the medical centre's selection of drugs, and again injected himself with morphine. It was strangely eerie to simply walk around and not have anyone be intimidated by his presence. It was more than unnerving. His whole body sagged and cried out for sleep, but he forced himself to press on. He found himself drawn to his office. For a moment he watched his mural solemnly. He ruffled through some papers he'd neatly put in his OUT box before he'd finally headed home on that nightmarish morning.

*How long ago it all seems when I was made Commander. Like a dream I've never woken up from. Twenty years. This has been my only life for so long. Foster cut me off from everything that sustained me. Especially Alec. My God, I'm so tired. The shock's getting to me. I had better sit down for a little while.*

He lowered himself gingerly into his chair, rocked to and fro in it.

His ocean blue eyes fell sleepily back on his desk. He made a steeple of his hands, narrowed his eyes in careful thought, allowed two long slim fingers free to tap his perfectly shaped lips a few times and abruptly, like darkness blazing into light, he smiled.



## Chapter Ten: The Impossible

"What are you doing, Jerry?" Dr. Shroeder asked Norcross the following day as he entered the SHADO lab. Norcross was clad in a lab coat and searching through files on one of the computers.

"I wanted to do a chemical analysis of that drug you used on Straker but I can't find any data on it. I needed to keep busy and you know how I am about new drugs, I get excited. I know his medical records are confidential, but I guess I'm just puzzled as to why you didn't just use one of our fast acting antibiotics on him. He really had a nasty infection, Virginia told me about it. It could have turned to sepsis."

"It was more worrisome than that because Straker is allergic to most of our tougher antibiotics and he easily could have died without treatment. His wound was from a cat's claw. It scratched him up something fierce."

"Excuse me?"

Shroeder smiled sadly.

"Believe me, Straker was just about the most difficult patient I ever treated. If you told him to rest, he would, but only for about ten seconds. Anyway, Alec found a stray cat, took a fancy to it. Jackson told me about it. In spite of his tough demeanor and reputation with the ladies, Alec's a pretty lonely man these days. So I thought having a pet was ideal for him. It has been proven to have health benefits, you know. For some reason, the cat didn't like Straker."

"I find it hard to believe any animal would dare scratch Ed Straker." Norcross chuckled. Shroeder gave him a hard look. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't joke about the dead. It isn't like me. It's just that it's hard for me to think we've lost him, I considered him a friend too. It's bringing up memories of my wife. How is Alec taking Straker's death? I heard he had to take Straker off life support."

"He didn't. Straker's alive."

"*What?*" Norcross seemed shocked.

"He decided against it. Actually, he seems to really have confidence that Straker's going to get out of that bed. Pity really, having false hopes and everything. Alec had us move Straker this morning into his usual secured private room at Mayland. We had to wheel all the equipment in there with him. Between Alec and Virginia and Ford, they've practically made it into a hotel room. They even brought Straker's personal belongings from his house. It's a sad business, Jeremy."

"Alec still thinks Straker will come out of it? But that's impossible, he has to realize that."

"You and I know it, we're scientists. Alec is a complete professional, but he's known Straker just about forever, they were really close and he can't let go. Look, there isn't anything we can do about it, Alec's in command now. Jeremy, I have that experimental drug's data on my computer, and we still have a fair amount of the drug itself I put in storage in case the Commander needed it again. I confess I never bothered to check how it worked because Straker was in such a ghastly state from the infection, he would have died if I didn't take a chance on it and I had no time to do research. You're welcome to access everything if you're that interested. Let me know what you find out."

Shroeder punched in some numbers and letters on his keyboard, and a confidential file opened on the screen. Norcross studied it with great enthusiasm.

"Thanks!"

"See you later, I have to make rounds."

## Chapter Eleven: The Theft

"Miss Ealand, damn it, I told you his paperweight was one of the things I wanted in his room."

"Alec, I searched everywhere. His studio office, his SHADO office. I just didn't find it." she exclaimed.

"You fool! How could you screw up something as simple as that?" Alec yelled.

Ealand broke into tears. He sighed. "Look, forgive me, I know this is hard on you, you were fond of him. Don't you worry, it probably was mislaid. I had no right to take you off compassionate leave for this. I know all this is very upsetting for you. You go home. I'll have Miss Holland continue the search. It's possible Foster stole it, he knew Ed had an attachment to it. We've both seen Ed toy with it on occasions, and he's psycho enough to have taken it without Ed knowing it." Freeman hugged a distraught Ealand.

"I'm so sorry, Alec."

"I know."

"Do you really think Paul Foster took it?"

"I'm going to go beat the truth out of the bastard if he did."

Norcross studied the computer screen eagerly, punched in some figures with latex encased hands that to a lay bystander would have looked like the language of some long lost civilization. He nodded to himself, and his fingers tickled the keyboard yet again. Satisfied, he shut down the computer and went over to where he'd placed a test tube filled with the drug that had cured Straker into a centrifuge. He waited a few minutes for the machine's beep, then powered down the machine and tore a strip of paper off of it. He read it like a starving man given a buffet, and then he opened the lid of the machine. Carefully, painstakingly, he lifted the tube out with tweezers.

In the florescent light of the SHADO laboratory anyone could clearly see that the tube now contained a bright orange fluid. He carefully examined it, nodded again. He set it down in a holder. Norcross went to fetch a hypodermic needle from the Medical Centre's supply room. When he came back, he tore open the packet it was in, placed the needle in the orange fluid and drew it up into the body of the hypo. He placed the cap back on the needle and dropped it into a pocket. Then he got a pair of wire clippers from the maintenance supply room and added that to his pocket.

He then walked purposefully toward the room in which he knew Straker waited anxiously just for him.

## Chapter Twelve: The Assassin in a Lab Coat

"Any change in Ed?" Virginia Lake asked as Freeman came up to her in the control centre in a hurry.

"Nothing. Ford called me and told me we had a greeting card from SID. Where's the UFO headed now?" he asked tensely.

"SkyOne finished it off. Don't worry. I asked Peter Carlin to bring back anything they could. If we only could get our hands on another alien body-"

"I'd sure like to get my hands on a live alien right now for what they've done to Ed." Freeman muttered.

"I feel the same way, Alec. Who's staying with Ed in your absence?"

"Keith, he offered to keep Ed company while I handled the UFO. You know it's funny, I expected for Ealand to take this hard, after all she's worked closely with him almost as long as I have. But Ford, you'd think with the way Ed always was hard on him that he wouldn't be that affected by Ed's being so gravely ill. Yet I saw tears in his eyes this morning. I got out of there as soon as I could, to allow him some privacy. Oh I wanted to thank you for the work you did brightening up Ed's room with his things."

"It was the least I could do. I have to admit I never expected the Commander's house to look like that. I don't know what I expected, but that house with its fur throw and art and statues and white sofas and tiled floors and zebra skin rug and those paper globes-"

"Made him seem human? Did you see that great kitchen of his? Did you know Ed is a damned excellent cook? I ate with him a couple of weeks ago at his place."

"Yes don't you remember, I whipped up that batch of checca and Focaccia for you to take to him in Mayland. Shroeder was almost beside himself with fury when he found out what you'd done. Ed wasn't supposed to have any solid food." she chuckled. "What did Ed cook for you at his place? I'm jealous, he's never invited *me* to luncheon." she pouted.

Freeman grinned broadly at her.

"What did he cook? What *didn't* he cook?" Freeman boasted. "That foccacia with checca. A large fresh green salad with a lemon vinaigrette he threw together himself. Bacon wrapped filet mignons at least an inch thick, garlic jacket potatoes and Italian espressos and some fancy wine he bought just for me that was out of this world. Did you know he has all sorts of kitchen gadgets in there-"

*"Captain Carlin to Control."*

Freeman grabbed the microphone.

"Go ahead, Peter, what have you got for me?"

*"I'm sorry, Alec, but there wasn't enough of the UFO to use to pick your teeth with."*

Freeman sighed.

"Acknowledged. Get back home, Captain."

*"Right."*

"Well, what now, Alec?"

"You take command, Virginia. I need to talk to Paul Foster and find out what the hell he did with Ed's paperweight."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ed's green ball is missing. My gut tells me Foster stole it. Probably his twisted version of a sense of humor. He wanted command and that ball became as important as the bejeweled one that goes with a scepter. Ed's badge of command like a King's crown. Foster was always

pushing for a promotion, pulling Henderson's strings so possessing it would have real appeal for him."

"The filthy little slug! Alec, I'll go with you. And Alec, if you need someone to shoot that bastard in his shrunken balls when the time comes-"

Freeman grinned fiercely at her.

"Believe me, Commander Straker would be surprised at how many people share your appreciation for Foster. Thanks, but you're not the first one that's offered. Besides, that pleasure is going to be carried out by me. "

"Good. That juvenile played me like a piano when Craig Collins went missing, and I'd like to see him get what he deserves."

"Oh he will. He will," vowed Freeman.

\*\*\*

"Hello Keith, how's it going?" Norcross smiled after exchanging greetings with Ed's two guards and entering the hospital room Straker lie prone in.

"Pretty grim now with Straker out of the way like he is. Alec thinks the aliens will try something fishy soon now. We had one UFO incident already. Did you come to visit the Commander?"

"I really considered Ed a personal friend. I don't know how he felt about me. Listen, would you mind if I stayed in here alone? I'd like to pray for him."

"I don't know. Alec made me swear never to leave his side, but seeing as to how it was your hard work that caught Foster, I don't think Colonel Freeman would object."

"Thanks. Why don't you get a bite to eat, some coffee?"

"Okay, sounds good. Just make sure you stay with the Commander until I get back."

"I will. I wouldn't let anything bad happen to him considering what he's gone through."

"All right then. See you in a bit."

Norcross waited for the door to close behind Ford, and then he pulled up a chair opposite Straker's bed and smiled at him in a disturbing way.

*Why is he here? Where did Ford go? Don't leave me, Ford.*

"Alec just couldn't manage to do it, Commander. Believe me I know how that is. But we can't have you just wasting away and perishing like my Patricia did, can we? I need to take care of you, and I'm the only one who can do it. I wouldn't want you to suffer, I can't imagine what Patricia went through but now she's at peace. I only have this one chance to make everything right. I owe a lot to you and Alec, and I know he wouldn't approve of what I'm about to do but it'll be all right. Quite amazing what these machines will do, isn't it? I'm afraid I will have to ruin them, as this isn't exactly my field of expertise, is it? Now I'll have to be careful, or the nasty alarms will go off and my work will be disturbed. First I need to get rid of any drugs they might try and use on you, can't have my work interrupted, the drug must have the opportunity to go into your bloodstream completely pure."

*What the hell is he talking about? No, wait, WAIT! NO! FORD ! Oh my GOD! Help me, Alec! NO!* Straker screamed. He struggled to move, but his now feeble body didn't respond to the frantic signals he was sending it.

Norcross took the wire cutters and snipped the cord of the respirator plug in two. There was a brief burst of electricity and then silence. He snipped the lines of the IV bags one by one and their contents, so vital to Straker's continued nourishment and health, dripped continuously to the floor. Norcross did not notice the failsafe panel on the wall which began to flash a message to the medical team and Alec Freeman that Straker's vitals were failing.

*I trusted you, my God I trusted you. I told Alec I felt that you were psychologically too disturbed by your wife's death, far too unstable to qualify for SHADO, and Jackson backed my suspicions up but Alec urged me to give you a chance, he told me it was what you needed. I allowed Alec to influence me, and now I'm paying for it with my life. God, is this the last thing I'll see? Watching my assassin smile? Oh Alec, you always said you knew people so well. Now you've misjudged Norcross the way I misjudged Foster. Norcross, like Foster before him, sold out to the aliens. Norcross, damn you! God-god- growing weaker. Straker, Edward, Major- no, meaningless now. Farewell Alec my dearest friend. God be with you and guide your hand. I hoped to give you the sign, but I've failed.*

"There, that's much better. Now the piece de resistance, Ed. Recognize this stuff? It's what Shroeder used on you to cure your infection. I made some changes in it. It seems this wonder antibiotic from our German H.Q. is something they developed from an alien substance found on a alien body. It's chemically the same, but much much more powerful. I was excited to see that it matched the analysis of the alien drug Foster used on you. Look. It's almost luminous, isn't it? Beautiful really. Like orange fireflies. I could look at it all day, but I need to use it now. On you. Sorry if I hurt you a bit, can't be helped. I left the cardiac monitor on, so I can see what happens to your heart. This should be very impressive indeed."

Norcross slowly and calmly injected the drug into Straker's neck.

*"God-God-my God-the pain! Oh no no no. Must I die as I lived, alone? NO. No, damn you show some dignity. Go out like the SHADO Commander you are. In the fell clutch of circumstance I have not winced nor cried aloud- ALEC, ALEC-solution is no-oh God-I'm fading-HELP ME"*

Suddenly Alec Freeman burst in through the doors, followed by a medical team and Shroeder and Jackson and Ford.

"Christ, what have you done to Ed, you bastard! **NORCROSS!**" Alec Freeman yelled, and jumped on him pounding him with his fists. Ford desperately tried to pull him off the man but Freeman knocked him down.

"No, Freeman, no, stop we need to find out what drug it is. That's the only chance we have to prevent more damage to Straker." Jackson exclaimed.

"I know what it is," Shroeder said, "he came in and asked me about it. Like a fool I gave him access to it. Oh sweet heaven, he's broken the respirator. Nurse, get oxygen into Straker's nasal cannula stat! Get those IV bags replaced now! Damn that Norcross, he's dumped out all our emergency cardiac drugs!"

"Why in God's name would you try to kill him after he helped you, you monster!" Virginia berated a bleeding and bruised Norcross as the guards seized both of his arms.

"No Virginia! You don't understand! Alec wouldn't put him out of his misery! I did the only thing I could do to help Alec! I tried to save Straker! Save him from the aliens! They gutted my Patricia, my poor beloved Patricia!"

Virginia drew her hand back and struck Norcross across the face as hard as she could manage.

"Get him the hell out of here!" she told the guards.

"Damn it, Ford, I told you to STAY with Ed. Your career is over. Finished Get the hell out of my-" Freeman stopped when he heard the buzzer sound. The PA system once again came to life.

**--CODE BLUE CODE BLUE I REPEAT CODE BLUE ALL AVAILABLE  
MEDICAL PERSONNEL TO ROOM ALPHA ONE STAT CODE BLUE CODE BLUE--**

Alec looked at the cardiac monitor. Straker had gone flatline. Shroeder jumped on Straker and began CPR, but to no avail.

"Don't. I've lost him." Alec said quietly. "I've got to accept that."

Virginia let out a single sob and left the room. Huddled in a corner, Ford looked even more guilt stricken.

Shroeder removed the respiratory line from Straker and cancelled the code blue.

"Take as much time off as you need, Colonel Freeman. I will handle General Henderson for you. Come doctor, let us leave and grant Colonel Freeman a little privacy." Jackson suggested.

The room was terribly silent once they had all left. Freeman stared at Straker's body. The Commander appeared to just be peacefully sleeping.

"Alec please believe me--"

"It's all right, Keith. I don't blame you. Norcross had us all fooled. Foster was right about him after all." Alec lifted a sheet and gently draped it over Straker's body. "Sleep well, Ed." Alec stood at attention and saluted Straker's corpse.

"I'll never forgive myself for this." Ford said. Freeman was concealing horrible grief but he patted Ford on the back.

"Come on, Keith. Let's have a drink in his hon--"

There was a loud dull thump. Freeman and Ford looked up. One of Straker's hands had dropped and was dangling out from underneath the sheet with curled fingers as though he had been holding something in them. Something rolled up toward Freeman, hit the wall nearest him and came slowly to a stop. Freeman glanced down and stared at it uncomprehendingly.

*It was Straker's crystal ball paperweight.*

Freeman looked up at the bed. For a moment time seemed to stop. Then he rushed over and threw off the sheet. Straker's blue eyes were full of pain, glassy but open. He jerked several times than lie still. The cardiac monitor showed a definite heartbeat.

"*FORD!* Get the doctors! *HURRY!*"

Ford didn't need to be told twice. He disappeared out the door.

"*ED!* Can you hear me? *ED!* Tell me you're all right. How do you feel?"

"--do you--" Straker croaked in agony. It was clearly taking a great effort on his part to form words.

"want--that---off---the--record--"

"Always, you Bostonian Yankee bastard. Always."

"---record---Alec---stay with me--please--"

Alec started sobbing and grabbed Straker's hand and squeezed it.

"Hush now, I will, you know that, you're going to be all right, Ed. Try and rest. My God how I've missed you."

"---Invictus---"

"Ed, what's that you're saying?"

"William---Ernest---Henley-- poem I--like-- paperweight--sign--show you--sign--- something you'd---recognize--" Somehow, from the depths of his heart, Straker gave a feeble smile.

"I knew you would, Ed. I don't understand how you did it and I don't care, but by God, if anyone could pull off a miracle, it's you. Get some rest now." Tears streamed down Freeman's rugged cheeks.

"---stay---" Straker whispered.

Straker let his eyes close. Freeman held Straker's hand tightly and watched Straker breathe as if it was the most enthralling play in the world and he was the sole spectator. The doctors rushed in, and looked on in disbelief.



## Chapter Thirteen: Kiss and Make up

( Two months later)

"Now I'm finally beginning to really believe you're brain dead, Ed." Alec Freeman was saying with a scowl.

Straker chuckled at him. The two men were in Straker's hospital room. Straker was sitting in an power wheelchair, wearing white pajamas and a dark blue silk robe that brought out the intense blue of his eyes. One IV remained in his arm which was connected to several bags of clear liquid on a pole mounted to his chair. The SHADO Commander was alarmingly thinner, and there were new fine lines resting on his face but he'd gotten back a little of his color, Alec noted. The scar on his neck had nearly faded. Something about him troubled Alec, but he wasn't sure what it was and didn't give voice to his concerns.

"Jackson agrees with me. We can remove all Foster's memories and convince him he's just another actor working for Harlington-Straker Studios. That way we can keep a permanent eye on him." Straker explained.

"After all he did to you, you idiot?"

"You have it all wrong as usual, Alec. Foster simply was duped by the aliens, the way Norcross believed he was. We can rehabilitate him. To my way of thinking, if we executed him, we'd just be doing what the aliens wanted. Oh by the way, how *is* Norcross? He was actually trying to help me, you know. He figured if that drug saved me once, it would save me again. He just went about it the wrong way. That unfortunate soul lost his mind after his wife was killed, Alec. We just didn't know how bad off he was. I had guessed, but even I had no idea how really mentally disturbed he was, He was genuinely trying to help us both. Besides, Alec, his theory about that drug worked," Straker's lips parted in a subtle smile.

"Virginia went to see him at the sanitarium yesterday. She's grown fond of him. His sons are with his late wife's sister. The SHADO psychiatrists think he has the potential to recover fully. It'll just take some time. Ed, there's something that I still don't understand." Freeman said hesitatingly.

"Fire away Alec!" Straker told him with a little of the old zest in his voice.

"You were frozen in that bed, with no contact with the outside world, and yet somehow you managed to get up and get that ball after I told you--wait--"

"Yes, Alec." Straker chuckled. "You never actually *told* me. Somehow we were reading one another's thoughts. Somehow I sat at my desk, and the minute I saw it I knew that having it in my hand would be the ideal sign to give you that I was merely locked up in my head by the alien drug Foster used, and not technically brain dead. How did I do it? I don't know, Alec. I remember very little, but I know there's a rational explanation out there. I'm not going to waste my time trying to figure out what the details are. I'm just going to concentrate on recovering fully so that I can return to work. The doctors say my progress has been good."

"Those terrible tests they did on you while you were fully awake and felt everything, Christ, Ed, what you must have gone through."

"Alec, it's best not to concern yourself about that, I have no intention of dwelling on it myself. They were merely doing their jobs."

"It's so good to have you back, Ed." Freeman said warmly.

"I'll remind you that said that the next time I find your letter of resignation on my desk." Straker said sternly and then winked.

Freeman laughed. He grew quiet and leaned forward.

"Ed, the doctors may say you're making progress but-."

"Pour me another cup of that delicious coffee you brought me as a get well present Alec, would you? What did you say it was called? "

"Sure. Blue Mountain coffee. Damn expensive so don't use it up so fast."

Straker gave him a feigned wounded look. Alec chuckled at him.

"Oh I almost forgot. Virginia is on her way here, and she brought a friend." Alec grinned. Straker frowned and looked disturbed for a second. Alec didn't see it, he was pouring the coffee. Straker made an effort to hide his discomfort while Alec turned back toward him with the fresh cup. Straker accepted the steaming light and sweet coffee and sipped it gratefully. Freeman was more than a little alarmed when he noticed Straker's hands were badly shaking. Straker followed his gaze, and smiled at Freeman.

"No need for concern Alec. Shroeder said the shaking will pass in time. Just a little blip in my battered nervous system. Listen, Alec, about Virginia, I'm not quite ready for visitors other than you. I admit I still get tired very easily so I'd rather not-"

There was a rap on the door. The door opened an few inches.

"Is this a private party or can anyone join?" Colonel Virginia Lake peeked in. Straker sighed and then recovered quickly, offered her a dazzling smile.

"As long as you don't drink all of Alec Freeman's precious overpriced coffee, feel free." Straker remarked. "Hello, Colonel. Come on in and grab a **OH MY GOD!**"

Freeman laughed at Straker as Virginia entered with an all too familiar to the Commander purring ball of fur curled in her arms. She gently placed it down on the floor. It trotted over to Freeman and rubbed against his legs.

"Now, Ed, before you jump to conclusions, we can explain everything." Freeman picked up the cat and stroked it, sparking its purring engine.

"This better be good, Colonel Freeman. Don't you think that damn cat has done enough damage to me?"

"Commander, Alec claims you're just a pussycat yourself, so Alec and I couldn't figure out why Ivy acted the way she did, and then I asked Alec to tell me more details about that night. I finally think I've come up with an answer."

"That beast gets anywhere near me, I'm having you both shot and stuffed and mounted in Control Center as a warning to the rest of the operatives." Straker's patented scowl was oozing with menace.

"Settle down Ed, and just listen to me for once." Freeman laughed.

"You have a full ten seconds and I'm being generous. Start talking, Alec. Ten."

"Virginia knows a lot about cats."

"Nine."

"When you arrived at my place that night, you were wearing some fancy cologne."

"Eight."

"She thinks that the cat was mistreated by someone who was wearing cologne. So Ivy mistook you for him."

"Seven."

"So we decided to bring her here as a surprise and test our theory out on you."

"**What? Six!**"

Freeman set the cat down. With a swish of the tail, it stretched out then began wandering around the room.

"I knew I should have worn my shoulder holster with this outfit. Where's my Glock when

I need it? *Five!*"

The cat trotted up to Straker.

"*Four three two one.* Just remember Ivy, I've become fully proficient with this electric wheelchair. One paw closer and I hit the forward switch and you become my new living room rug."

The cat jumped casually up on Straker's lap. Straker looked down at it like it was a boa constrictor about to get fresh with him on their first date. It meowed meekly and rubbed against Straker's painfully bony chest. Straker cautiously brought up a hand to pet it. Lake and Freeman were chuckling. Straker stroked Ivy on her back. It commenced with contented purring. Straker grinned, enjoying the sensation of the velvety texture of her thick silvery fur against his hand, and held her closer. Lake had to admit to herself she envied the cat. Freeman gave her a look, knowing exactly what she was thinking. He winked at her and she scowled at Freeman. Straker watched them, conscious of what was going on but pretended to be oblivious to the drama.

"She's a old fashioned lady and simply doesn't kiss on the first date, that's what the trouble really was." Straker informed them in the tone of a professor. He smiled beguilingly at the cat. "Ivy, you can come visit me everyday. Just don't bring those two people with you!"

Freeman and Lake burst into laughter. Ivy gave a definite meow of complete consent to Straker.

## Chapter Fourteen: The Baby Bird

(one week later)

"Colonel Freeman, will you get out of here? I need my beauty sleep."

"You sure you'll be all right here at home alone?"

"I'll sleep like a baby. Back in Mayland they kept waking me up to give me sleeping pills," Straker complained. Freeman didn't smile.

"Ed, I don't like the idea of you being out of that chair. You brought it home, you should use it. You're still very weak."

"It was the bad coffee." Straker made an effort to grin. Freeman chuckled.

"I still would feel a lot better if you stayed at my place. This is your first day out of hospital. I still think Shroeder and Jackson sent you back home way too early." Freeman complained.

"I asked them to be allowed to go home Alec, the baby bird has to leave the nest sometime. Besides, being attended to by beautiful nurses while you sit and do nothing just isn't my style but it's yours. Don't worry, I gave all of them your number and told them to call collect." Straker said wryly.

"You should have gone along with my idea to issue guards outside your door."

"I'm not about to allow myself to be babysitted any further, Alec." Straker told him in a granite fashion.

"Ed, you didn't give me a chance to ask you an important question."

"Make it a short one, I want to go grab some sleep."

"The doctors did tell me you're making progress."

"They wouldn't have released me otherwise, Alec. You know that. So what's your problem?" Straker inquired wearily.

"They can fix up your body, I know that. What about your mind? You went through a horrible trauma, your claustrophobia had to have risen up after that nightmare, the pain you suffered physically and mentally had to be unimaginable-."

"Alec, that's something only I can deal with over time. Now will you please go *home*? Give my best regards to *my* new girlfriend Ivy. Good night Alec." Straker smiled.

"Good night Ed. I'll be here first thing in the morning to check on you, so don't worry."

"Good night."

Alec Freeman frowned uneasily as he drove away in his SHADO car.

*Jackson said Ed was psychologically sound, but how the hell does he know? Ed really wouldn't want to appear weak in front of Jackson or Shroeder or Virginia, he isn't even comfortable being weak in front of me and I'm the only close friend he has. Suppose the aliens are just waiting for him to be left alone? If Ed brought that damn chair home with him like that then he's not telling the doctors the truth about that trembling and that weakness. There was something, oh, I don't know, staged about the way he acted. Damn it, I was out of my mind over thinking I lost him, and here I just casually let him get away with that I'm fine, Alec crap. Some friend you are, Freeman! Go get him you idiot. Sling him over your shoulder if you have to, bring him home, tie him to the bed and get him to rest.*

Freeman turned his car around with a loud screech of his tires and made it back to Straker's house in five minutes flat.

When he walked up to the door, he found to his horror that it wasn't locked. Freeman gritted his teeth as he pulled out his gun and kicked the door open.

"ED!" he yelled.

Nothing. His heart started pounding like cannon fire.

---*stay with me*-- Straker had pleaded. How forlorn and helpless he'd looked. Not at all the self assured Commander of SHADO he normally was.

*Christ what kind of a monster was he to have left Straker alone?*

"ED! Damn it Ed, answer me."

The only response was the steady drip of water. Freeman kept his gun ready and moved further into the house, entered the kitchen. It was still immaculate as when he'd seen it last, when Straker had cooked for him. Freeman headed for the bathroom, senses on edge. He prayed he wouldn't discover Straker's body. No matter how long he'd been in the business, he'd never gotten used to the corpses the aliens left behind. Men, women, children. Once filled with life and then stripped and tossed aside. Even more of a horror was people like Jeremy Norcross, who had to struggle to survive the aftermath of the UFO incidents. They were the true casualties in our war, Ed had said that to him more than once. *Not the victims. The people left behind. Struggling with the terrible guilt of being survivors.*

*Am I going to turn that corner and be one of them again? Dear God, Ed. Be all right.*

Alec Freeman held the gun in a firing position after assuring himself he wouldn't be jumped by anyone lurking behind him. He pushed open the bathroom door. The source of the sound was completely obvious now, the shower was running. He could vaguely make out a unmoving solitary figure standing behind the semi-transparent door.

*Ed, for God's sake, be all right. Please God. I almost lost him once. I can't go through that again.*

With his heart drumming so hard he feared passing out, he slid it open.

He gasped.

Straker was standing there, looking blankly at the escaping water. Slowly he turned and looked at Freeman without much comprehension in his blue eyes.

"Ed?"

"I need to get clean. All those people were touching me all over when I couldn't move and I couldn't stop them. It hurt so bad. I need to get clean." the Commander said in a haunted way. "I can't get completely clean. Why can't they hear me screaming?" he added in a way that broke Freeman's heart.

Straker was fully clothed, and absolutely soaked to the bone, head to toe. The dampness made his body look even more skeletal than it was.

Alec reached for the tap and turned it off. Straker seemed to come out of it after a few seconds.

"Alec, why are you here?"

"How long have you been like this Ed?"

"What are you talking about, Alec? Oh *this*? Can you believe it? This is what all those drugs they pumped me up with to kill the pain have done to me." he chuckled. "Alec, do me a favor. Forget you ever saw me like-"

"Ed, *stop* it. Stop joking. Stop pretending. How long have you been this traumatized and hiding it from Jackson?"

"Alec, *don't*. Please don't. I don't want to talk about it," Straker begged plaintively.

"Damn it Ed, how long are you going to cut off the lines of communication? You said Foster jammed your phone. You're doing it to me. Have you forgotten I'm your best friend? Do you really think I would be so shocked at you if you finally told me you needed help? When

will you ever learn you don't have to hide things from me?"

"Alec, I lied to the doctors, yes, but I'll be fine. I will, I promise."

"Bullshit. Fine my ass. For God's sake Ed, get out of there before you catch pneumonia."

Straker moved toward Alec, slipped and started to fall. Freeman grabbed him and helped him out of the tub.

"You're a walking accident just waiting to happen. You're still having the severe tremors, aren't you?"

"You've been studying Jackson's techniques too long," Straker said resentfully. "Hand me that towel."

"That's not an answer, Ed."

"All *right!* For *WEEKS*, all right? What concern is it of yours?"

"You're so predictable," Alec grinned. "Yelling at me and masquerading behind Straker the Great and Terrible isn't going to cut the ice this time."

"You wouldn't want to turn in your resignation again any time soon, would you Alec? Right about, oh I don't know, now?"

"Forget it, Ed. I'm going to get you nice and dry-"

"Just because I'm shaking like the nineteen oh six earthquake right now doesn't mean I'm letting you anywhere near me." Straker warned, chilled. "Hand me the damn towel, Alec and then get out of here."

"Don't be shy about being naked, Ed. There's a first time for everything, and when it works, a second and a third time for everything."

"Shut up Colonel." Straker said, but a smile played around his lips. He jerked the towel out of Freeman's hand and nagged him out of the bathroom. Freeman took the opportunity to pack some of the Commander's clothes in a suitcase. He was not surprised to find that Straker's closet was immaculate.

Later that evening, Straker sat underneath blankets in Freeman's guest bed, wearing a fresh pair of pajamas and holding on to a mug of coffee numbly. Freeman had moved the guest bed into his own bedroom so that Straker would feel more secure. Straker had then spent a half hour tidying the bedroom up. Freeman had watched him, bewildered but amused.

"I know you said the cleaning woman is taking a week off but Alec, how can you live with that kind of mess?"

"I keep telling you it's my system, Ed. Move or dust anything again one more time and prepare to die. I'll never find anything you put away for weeks." Freeman threatened with a wide grin. Straker chuckled and then grew silent.

"Alec, what I did back there, I'm losing my mind, aren't I?" he finally said.

"Ed, there isn't a person in the world who could have gone through what you did and come out the other end of the tunnel without some bad reaction. If you don't open up about what happened to you, then you *will* go nuts. You saw what happened to Norcross. You just need to trust me a little more."

"I'm really sick, Alec. I just can't get it all out of my mind. I've tried so hard. Back in hospital, I constantly had people all around me. I didn't have time to think about it. They were all over me, poking me, talking to me, I got to where I couldn't stand it, but I was more afraid of being alone than anything else. I knew that if I showed any of what I was going through in my mind to Jackson that I would have wound up as Norcross' room mate."

"I won't let that happen to you."

"I have to tell them Alec. I can't carry on this way. I have a responsibility to carry out. I can't be this weak."

"Your gift for denial astounds me, Ed. You *are* weak right now. Weak as a baby bird just hatched out of the egg. You don't need the psychiatrists to tell you that. I can tell you just what you need, baby bird." Freeman smiled at Straker.

"If you're going to suggest I have a good stiff drink you can forget it." Straker sighed. He sipped his coffee. His eyes remained full of fear.

"It wouldn't hurt you, but what I actually had in mind is you staying here with me while you recover. You need someone around you that you can trust. Virginia can handle H.Q."

"Alec, I just don't know what to do to combat this damn thing."

"The truth is Commander, none of us do. Now go to sleep. We both need a good night's sleep and tomorrow we'll figure out what our next step will be."

"Alec."

"Hmm?"

"Will I have to cook for you if I stay here?" Straker said hopefully with a smile.

"Absolutely, and no more cheating with a bread maker."

"Alec?"

"What?"

"I've always had a rough time asking for what I needed, allowing myself to lean on somebody else and you've always been out there for me. Thank you for coming back and getting me out of the darkness Alec."

"No, thank you for being the kind of man that makes it easy for me to want to come back and save you Ed. Thank you for being my friend all these years."

"Alec."

"I'm going to charge you extra for going over the fifty-five minutes therapy session."

"You're the one who suggested I open up to you Doctor," Straker said with a soft chuckle. "The one time I follow doctor's orders and I get mistreated for it."

"I think I preferred Ivy as my patient." grinned Freeman.

Straker set down his cup unfinished and stared off in the distance. Freeman found he didn't know how to comfort him.

*God help Ed. Help me know how to help him make the long journey back from hell.*

"Alec, I'm so frightened by all the shadows finally closing in on me like this, please help me," he whispered after a long silence. "I'll do whatever you say."

The heartfelt plea hit Freeman straight in the gut but he didn't let on.

*I've never seen him so terrified. I wanted this, and I can't walk away from it now. I have to hold on to our lines of communication with all my heart and soul to make this man better. One wrong move and he'll go to pieces for sure.*

"I will, you bet I will and I'm not going anywhere this time Ed. We just have to have faith that we can see this through together. It took an act of faith to bring you back to me, and it'll take an act of faith to get you whole. Good night."

Straker studied Alec with a strange expression on his slim boned face.

"Ed?"

"The solution is no solution." Straker smiled as if he were some saint who had escaped from his stained glass window, suddenly looking so ethereal that it almost scared Freeman. "I understand it all now."

"What are you talking about Ed?"

"Sometimes you have to let the universe, or God, or a Divine Being if you will, guide you. You don't always have clear answers in life. Science sometimes isn't enough. The more you seek a solution the more it dies away. The solution is to have no solution. You have to allow yourself to be blind when there's no place left to go, no direction to follow. Only then can you break free. Only then can you conquer what seems impossible and tap into miracles. Real metaphysics. Somehow I broke free, Alec. I escaped from the darkness. I can do it again. I'm here. I'm alive. I'm free. I'm meant to be with you for some purpose. I see that now. I don't really need my old hiding places. I'm safe with you."

"That's the spirit. Good night Ed."

"Good night Alec."

Freeman turned off the light.

"Alec?"

"What is it now?"

"How could you have ever forgotten the words to Invictus?"

"Oh shut up Ed. " Freeman complained.

He listened to Straker's throaty chuckle with pleasure.

**THE END**