

To Settle a Score

To settle a score an original UFO by Amelia Rodgers (plot, most of the writing and frantic typing by my husband) ©2014 Non-Canon. All rights reserved. No warnings other than adult language and graphic violence, so don't read if that absence disturbs you.

For Jessica Bishop who truly stands as her father's 'Shado', she gave up her time and extended her friendship and trust to my husband and me. I am honored. I thank the cop and the Amazon, too. :-D

To my glorious husband Ed, for December 18th.

To Ed Bishop. I tried not to wrinkle it, Ed. Or is it George again?

Chapter One: A matter of meat but *not* potatoes

"Alec, you've been quiet all during dinner. Are you really going to treat me this way considering its one of my final days on earth?"

"Shut up Ed. You have no idea how much I've wanted to say that to you to your face these past fourteen years."

"I see now my greatest mistake was asking you not to resign. Remind me, how many times have you handed in your resignation now? Bring me up to date, will you? These pills I've had to take are murder on the memory."

"Shut up and hand me another of those whiskey bottles."

"I'm assuming you don't mean one of the empties?" Ed Straker chuckled softly and surprisingly deftly opened the bottle for his friend and poured more into Alec's glass, and a splash into his own which sat for the most part untouched. Alec had witnessed it and grew even more sour.

"You do that like you're an expert, considering you rarely touch the stuff." Alec Freeman grumbled and sloshed the liquid around in his glass. Most of it created an expensive stain on his brown jumpsuit having spilled far short of the target.

"I'm full of surprises, Alec."

"I can vouch for that, you bastard." Alec replied, and his tone demonstrated that he meant it.

"There's no need for insults on this pleasant Sunday in December." The commander pushed a morsel of steak around on his plate. It had no bite marks that Alec could see. Ed had always existed on air anyway and now he was appallingly thin. It was painful to look at him now.

"You're going to voluntarily die in a few days, you idiot. All evening you've fed me expensive food and gotten me drunk on expensive whiskeys. You're asking me to celebrate when I know I'm losing the finest senior officer I ever knew. You're happy about it. I'm not perfect like you. You can't order me to be. You may not like what I tell you, but you're going to listen. You're wrong to do this thing. "

"No. You are, to not understand. I keep trying to explain to you, Alec. You keep trying to deny the truth."

"Stop lecturing me! You want to die this way, that's the truth, isn't it? You'd never allow anyone to think you were human-'

Straker slammed his fork down onto the table. The fork gave a squeal, bounced off then was silent shortly after hitting the black and white tiled dining area floor.

"I'm going to die anyway, you fool. This way my death can mean something. Don't you see? Can't you at least try to understand? For fourteen years I've pursued those liquid breathing sons of bitches. At best I've kept them in check. I've never come close to beating them. Then the breakthrough."

"Right. One of them comes to us and naturally you believe every word it said. We don't know if the newer translation device the boffins developed from a downed UFO is accurate. He - no, I'm not even giving that freak a gender - it could be telling us lies."

"You know as well as I do that we've been over this. He's sick of the war between us. He suggested to them they ask Shado for help in stopping their destruction. It wasn't any good, Alec. They consider him a traitor. So he gave us the one thing that could put an end to all of this. It'll destroy every last one of them. Earth will be safe."

"Except from the ordinary war loving idiots wanting to play soccer with nuclear balls. Right, the lethal alien created bug that you just calmly allowed to be injected into your spine. In the forlorn hope that thing was telling us the truth. Maybe those pills are interfering with your memory after all. You forget how many human beings they cut open in their so called desperate need to survive. They want all the marbles, Ed. Especially the most desirable one of all."

"You mean me." The commander shook his head. "No, Alec. He is male, practically the last to be born alive, one of the few who survived what's killing off his species. If he wanted me he had a million chances to

get me. He wants to live. He's-"

"He may want to live but you don't, do you, Ed? How long were you looking for something like this after Jackson's diagnosis? An excuse to go out with a bang instead of in agony with the cancer spreading through your body? Tell me something, are you even scared Ed? We're going to shoot you up in space, and he claims they'll think he conned you and he's handing you to them on a silver platter so he can live here. So they won't come after him. The minute they come in contact with you the virus you're carrying will destroy them, he claims. You're so driven to destroy them and determined to see this through you aren't even considering that you may be playing right into their hands. We don't even know if the coordinates he gave us are accurate. You're a damn fool, Ed. You're too sick to see it."

"Fine then, Alec. You're soon to be acting commander. Put me away somewhere until either the cancer or the alien infection kills me. Then cut me open to finally see if I have a heart, whatever you like. You call me a fool, Alec. Once I gambled with my child's life and lost. You recall that? You're the one who diverted the transporter. I might have won back then, as it turned out I gambled and lost it all but I had to try. I have to try now. Trying is all that I've got."

"Are you saying you blame me after all these years? Jesus Christ, Ed! You allowed in all probability the only child you'll ever father to die, what are the chances you'll ever be intimate with another woman after that ugly divorce, and now with what little time you have left. I saw what Mary did to you. " Alec saw Ed flinch and instantly regretted his words.

"I let John die because I needed to try ending our war, Alec. That alien with the blind woman was the first to even try to communicate with us. I couldn't not take the chance that he'd do precisely what the alien we have captive in Shado is doing now. Giving us a chance at a win. I never blamed you. I never intended for you to even know. I would have had Miss Ealand bury the file before you found it, but I was a little distracted-"

"Distracted? That was your son for crying out loud. Don't you grieve either? Or is that not allowed in your little world where everything's tied up neatly. "

"Not grieve? That's me, all right! The icy cold Commander Straker. No feelings. I let computers do all my thinking for me, right, Alec? You've said that to me plenty of times! I hoped you didn't mean it. I see you did."

"Ed, damn it, I-"

"Oh, get out. Do you know why I invited you here tonight? To say goodbye. To reminisce. To be with my most loyal friend in the world. I didn't tell you about John because I wanted to protect you! Not because I thought you would finally be certain that I was as heartless as you always seemed to think and want to harm me for killing an innocent boy. I knew precisely what I was doing, Alec. I had enough pain, why share it? The one woman I loved wound up with another man. A Naval captain, if you'll recall, Alec. Just another face in a uniform to impress her girlfriends with. Sometimes you don't see things even if they're right in front of you. I didn't want to see that I had made the wrong choice in Mary. He was at the reception, Alec, remember? He had it in for me from the beginning. He wasn't as pretty. I'd come along, had more medals, and I was. Simple as that. You're right. I will never be a father. I will never grow old. I will never love or be loved or even be liked. But I will die in my own fashion and maybe this time I'll win. I have a score to settle with those bastards. Now get out. Try not to get too drunk tonight, Freeman. If you're right, I'm going to be singularly responsible for another mess, and you're all Shado will have left to get them out of it. If that thing in the cell is sending me to my death, I trust you'll thank him for me. A man who lets his son die to save a world should die in agony, right? After all, they crucified Christ and he'd preached peace and saved the world from sin or the story goes. That should be fodder enough to amuse you and your Shado drinking mates who criticize me behind my back. Commander Straker comparing himself to God."

"Ed, stop it, we're both on edge, we aren't-"

Ed pulled Alec's jacket from the back of a chair.

"Get out, Commander. Shortly I'll be a civilian. You have no right to be here. My house is the last thing I

still have left in this world to help me keep warm." Ed threw Alec's Nehru jacket at him. He walked stiffly to the door and opened it, and a cold blast of English winter air cut through both men. "Even a heartless bastard like me can feel cold, Freeman." Ed continued. " So I'd appreciate if you left. NOW. I arranged for a driver to pick you up. A car is waiting for you as we speak." Ed turned his back on him.

"Ed, for God's sake-"

The Commander swung around and snapped at his second-in-command.

"If it makes you feel better, Commander, if I am their tethered goat and this is a set up, I'm taking enough nuclear firepower with me in the capsule to make a supernova look weak. My housewarming gift to the aliens. I intend to jam it down their throats at the last second if things go fubar. So yes, Freeman, I know I may be wrong. I'm prepared for it. I hope you are."

"You didn't say anything about *that* in the briefing!"

"I told you, Alec. I'm full of surprises. Incidentally, not that its any of your damn business, but that question you asked me earlier? Yes, yes, I'm afraid. I'm going to carry out this assignment anyway. I suggest you carry out yours."

When Freeman had gone out, slamming the door behind him, Straker went to the window, lifted the curtain. He watched the driver cheerily wave at Alec. The two spoke for a few minute despite the bitter cold. Pleasantries. Sports, the weather, Alec's plans for the New Year. Probably something like that, Straker told himself. As the car finally drove off, Straker allowed the curtain to fall and brushed away unwelcome tears with a hand. That gesture brought his attention to his fingers. On one there appeared to be an elastic bandage. During dinner he'd explained it away as a slip of the knife when cutting the potatoes. He carefully peeled it off. As he'd been pouring the whiskey into Alec's glass, he'd squeezed his fingers against one another, putting pressure on the capsule hidden beneath it. The transparent and minuscule flakes of the Shado drug had fallen into the whiskey unseen.

"Sleep well tonight, Alec." Straker said softly to the empty room, and entered his kitchen, tossed the doctored bandage into the rubbish bin. "Sleep tight and dream sweet dreams old friend for this is goodbye."

Chapter Two: Tea and a piss

Alec Freeman woke up completely sure that Ayers Rock had fallen on his head. After that distressing thought, his stomach went south and he rolled off his couch and dashed in to the loo and stuck his head into the toilet the way an ostrich might take cover. Commander Straker's expensive dinner swirled down the bowl a few seconds later. Alec, who'd been so exhausted he'd merely stripped to Y fronts and tee shirt then collapsed on his couch after the Shado driver had taken him home, awkwardly rummaged in his medicine cabinet. You weren't capable of being Australian and drinking most anything alcoholic sometimes under circumstances that would make a street walker blush without having enough hangover remedies to open your own chemist shop with and he was no exception. He knocked over a tin of elastic bandages. He frowned. Ed. *What the hell was the matter with him? Tearing into his longtime friend like that. Ed had given him the top job, and he had been nothing short of damn cruel to the Commander. Alec felt like something putrid one scraped off a shoe. Ed who so prided himself on his pristine appearance and stamina. Now being reduced by a mere disease into a tired old man who cut himself cooking-*

"Wait a minute," Alec said aloud. "Potatoes, He said *potatoes*. There *weren't* any potatoes at the table - and no damn drug would make *that* man clumsy - why the bastard! He drugged me! That filthy bugger drugged me. Oh my God. No!"

Alec glanced at his watch, ran into the living room and switched on a telly he rarely bothered to watch considering he often had to deal with the fools who appeared on it at the studio. He zipped past dog food commercials and soaps to what he wanted. The morning news. There it was. People all over the world celebrating New Year's day. Yet that Sunday night it had still been December. Ed had drugged him, and kept him unconscious for three days. No wonder he felt so ragged. Ragged but not really ill, and a thought gnawed at him. He inspected his arms for telltale marks. He found them on his right hand. Signs of an I.V. He could still make out the smidgen of elastic on his skin. So Ed had kept him drugged and probably ordered fluids. Had the driver been in on this? Alec! So good to see you! The old man had me wait and take you home figured you'd be tight. Yeah, and keep me in chemical wonderland so I wouldn't - God. Reality clawed at his nerves, and he picked up the one secure phone that would connect him with headquarters.

"Why?" he cried aloud involuntarily, but even as he heard the familiar voice of the Shado communications officer and numbly gave his codes so he could be identified, he knew. He could hear the Commander speaking.

I had enough pain, why share it.

He had protected Alec. *Again.*

When Keith Ford came on the line and confirmed the nightmare, he found he couldn't stop shaking.

Or weeping, without a trace of it in his voice that would give his weakness away. *Christ, I already sound like that bastard American.*

"I'm coming in. I know and I want everything, Ford. *EVERYTHING.*"

"Colonel, I'm so sorry, but-"

"How many were in on this game?"

"I don't know, Sir. He had it planned quite a while. "

"The filthy bastard. I've been his friend for years. Did he bloody think I couldn't take it?"

There came four words that crushed Alec's hard won calm.

"Yes, sir. He did."

Alec slammed down the phone and the waves of grief swept over him.

"Potatoes. You must have really enjoyed that, Ed. Seeing if I'd pay attention. Manipulating me into being angry at you so that I'd go. Jackson had to be in on this to have cleared whatever blasted drug you used, I'll tear him limb from limb or did you just take it without him knowing? I'll tear him limb from limb anyway.

"

Alec stopped, swallowed a gulp.

"It can't be, Ed. Please tell me this is one of your American schemes within schemes. Please."

There was no answer, and Alec strode out of the room and turned on his shower tap.

Maybe soap would wash away his guilt at not supporting a man whom he would have easily died for, and equally easily killed on the odd occasion. Ed had a score to settle, and he had no right to interfere. He had no right to feel grief and loss and anger at him. Maybe the soap will work, he thought.

It didn't.

* * *

The faces around the conference table in Ed's office were all known to him. Jackson, Lake, Ford, Carlin, heads of section, the IAC representative serving as Henderson's aide who apparently had cleared the use of a nuclear warhead in the capsule Straker had apparently rammed down the aliens' throat. Yet Alec longed for something missing, and he didn't want to imagine the sliver of white which usually leaned against a wall, arms crossed, expression like a fired bullet, demanding to know about UFO's. That eloquent voice like a slap in the face and just as memorable. Ed was a beckoning blue eyed snake with beautiful scales, but God help you if you ever forgot it had fangs. He had made several operatives laugh at that comparison. He had even told Ed that once. Ed had given one of his rare laughs when he'd heard it. Now the snake had slithered into its hole, gone.

No. No jokes. The human being.

It was like the whole world had fallen silent.

Alec leafed through the blueprints of the classified report.

"Christ, the blasted thing is the circumference of a tea cup. I'm not giving out classified medical information now, the man is dead. Why in hell choose this bloody tin can when he could have gone in something that wouldn't affect his claustrophobia?"

"It wasn't his way, Commander. He knew it would be blown to bits, and so he chose something that wouldn't put a dent in Shado funding. It was an old spacecraft on lend from NASA which their techs updated. He has solid friends there."

"Hell, Peter, his seat isn't cold yet. Call me Alec."

"Sir, protocol demands-"

"Fuck! Fuck protocol. He isn't officially dead and I'm not officially Commander. That's an order. We lost the heart and soul of this organization and I for one am not going to follow protocol. Ed never did."

"General Henderson, were he still with us, would confirm that last remark, Alec."

There were soft chuckles around the table. The infant, or so Alec thought to himself, who had been Henderson's aide and tongues wagged probably soon to be the IAC chair replacement too, didn't look like he quit fit his Shado overalls. Alec wondered how old he was. Probably twelve. Other tongues wagged that he was Henderson's bastard whelp and stood to inherit most of Henderson's fortune. God knew what his mother looked like. Alec reluctantly found he liked him. *So far.*

"*That's* why we lost a legend," Alec said.

The irritating chuckling came to an abrupt stop, as he intended it would.

"So, fill me in, Keith."

"You aren't going to like it, Sir."

Alec opened his mouth to say stop calling me Sir, but he knew it was hopeless.

"I can't think of anything worse than my friend being murdered, *yes murdered*. So quit stalling."

Ford looked down at the table.

Virginia Lake pushed something in an sealed envelope at Alec.

"I think you should start with this."

"What the hell is it?"

"His diary." Lake explained.

"Ed kept a diary?"

"A personal one with additional messages for you, yes, Colonel," came Jackson's purred comment. Alec

told himself his ears hadn't been violated with the end of a balalaika and resolved to keep from spitting, after all, the IAC brat wasn't there only for decoration. He was sizing Alec up. Alec knew it, the brat knew he knew it, and Alec wondered if he could adjust to prison after killing both he and Jackson. Ford too, he figured. Ford was a capable officer, but right now he looked like he might cry.

Hell, so may I, Alec thought. For the rest of my life.

Alec opened the package, and found a huge black journal. He opened the journal at page one.

"Christ! *Nineteen!* He was nineteen when he started this."

"Evidentially he never missed making an entry. Incredible considering his education, his career and his responsibilities here. I suggest you turn to present day." Jackson replied

Alec did so, but his brain and heart were crying out.

Had Ed really written about him? Did he write of that day, where he had so ironically suggested he was comparing himself to Christ? Christ's life wasn't classified. Ed's was. Had he actually stopped the aliens with the virus he'd agreed to carry in his body, no one would put his statue in a place of honor. The world would not know what a sacrifice he had made for them. Yet he too was crucified. By his own hand. There would be no triumphant resurrection, no adoration from the masses, no demands to capture those fine honed features for all time with a marble statue in Black Park. It wasn't Ed's way.

Alec put aside pain, and began to skim the pages. He looked up, stricken.

"He knew! He knew that the murderous bastard in there-"

"Yesss, Colonel." Jackson hissed back, a Polish reptile. "He knew he was telling lies. There is much about Operation Potatoes you don't know. The Commander's code name for his plan. " Jackson gave the grimace he passed off as a smile.

Alec wondered if he was up to date with all his shots for any infection the psychiatrist might have passed on to him by being smiled at and winced at the name.

"Fill me in. Nobody's leaving this room until I know all of it. Nobody. Not for tea or a piss. When I leave this office, I'm going to know what Ed Straker knew and why he did what he did. Clear?"

They exchanged dulled nods of assent, like doomed people chained to a wall. Alec began to read. He soon forgot them. Now and then he chuckled.

Chapter Three: Dear Diary

Cancer. Funny, I'd think I'd be frightened when Jackson confirmed it. I wasn't. I knew. I suppose too, I'd expected something like this. So I took a couple of days off, and I went to my house and looked around. I stepped out into my garden and memorized each petal, each twig. I watched the birds, who were the original reason I wanted to fly someday. I filled each feeder, and listened to their melodies afresh. I went inside and looked through my refrigerator and threw a tasty meal together. I imagined that soon I wouldn't be able to eat, it threw me into a panic and sure enough, there went my composure, and shortly after that, the hastily thrown together meal.

Jackson had assured me I wouldn't lose my hair. As if that mattered. All right, it did. It had gotten me nicknamed Q-Tip in the service, and there were still personal friends and people in NASA that called me that.

He also said there was confidentiality between patient and doctor. Yeah. Right. In this organization, the dust bunnies already know more than I do. So it would be a matter of days, weeks if I got lucky, har har. The condemned man bravely jokes at his impending demise. I felt lousy and I went to bed. For days. It was a whole new side of me I didn't want to get to know. Then I stopped feeling sorry for myself and began to make grandiose plans.

* * *

This morning I showered briskly, thought about reporting in and then decided it was time for me to do exactly what I wanted all day. So I had a look around in my cabinet and found and unwrapped a bottle of some stuff that smelled like a tree. No, a damn whole arboretum. A Christmas present from Alec. I poured half the bottle into my tub, and lavished in it. Christ almighty. I nearly suffocated. Maybe I wanted to.

I was in there for an hour, maybe two. A bathtub is a suitable place to think. Good place to think about your death. My porcelain coffin. Is everything going to remind me of death now? Not that I haven't thought about it. All the men and women I've sent to their deaths. My son. Will he be waiting for me? How could I stand the look on his face? How do you tell a child that other lives are more important than his? How, for the love of God? What have I become now? Order man. Everything is orders. I made my choice a long time ago, yes. That doesn't mean that when I walk into a mall to buy presents for Alec and close friends and I see the fathers with their wives and kids that I don't regret it.

Once I went to Harrods to buy a Christmas slip for my executive assistant that I hoped would make Ealand blush and saw Alec in the lingerie department. He looked like the Beast among beauties. I knew he knew every last shapely sales assistant there. Which tart was that little bit of red lace nothing for? Does he keep count? Alec, Alec. You will be reading this, and my additions to it and you will grieve for me. No, don't deny it. You will.

If there is anything to this afterlife business, I will come and protect you. God knows someone has to protect you from your ex-girlfriends. Once I had a little discussion with Henderson about you. No, I didn't tell you about this one. We all knew his heart was bad, so even I tolerated his bile in the end. He suggested you were a security risk, with your familiarity with the ladies and the amount of alcohol you drink. Naturally I agreed and had you fired right away. No? Oh, right, right, these pills I have to take, the memory goes and the tongue slips. Okay, no, I told him I would trust you with security and my life even if you were caught in delecto with an alien. Of all times not to have a camera. I thought he might have the heart attack right then. All I got was the 'I suppose you think that's funny, Straker, I'll have you know-blah blah blah.

I pretended to have a important phone call, the aliens or something, and I backed out of there. I questioned my sanity. Jackson had warned me I'd have strange impulses as the cancer chewed my body and sat satiated in my brain. What really had happened was the diagnosis, and well, I just didn't want to deal with him pulling my leash right then, I was too busy dying from cancer. It's a full time job, you know. I resolved not to be bitter, whatever happened to me.

Its been hard, Alec. Hard. Am I afraid? Yeah. With the training and everything, it becomes a part of you, bravery, not something you don't know already with your background and the size of your balls. But Alec, all

those ladies. One day you'll have to face them!

I'll be out of town that day. I hope you just laughed.

*I don't want pity. I don't want you to grieve for long. Just have my wake in that Chinese place you always took me to when you wanted something, which was **often**. You know, the one about as big as a mouse hole that smells twice as bad.*

The first time you took me there I thought finally you'd decided to poison me and then resign. I ate all eight courses of poison. Absolutely delicious. Just tell that Chinese fellow to hold the incense, will you? In my memory.

My phone beeped at me and I recall I still jumped. Now that's funny. I was still afraid for my life. Can you believe it? I slid out of the water smelling like an aquatic gigolo, towed myself down, groomed and put on my thick white terry cloth dressing gown, and picked the phone up.

The screen said Frog, which was the current code for Douglas Jackson which I thought up. Now you're asking yourself why frog, aren't you, Alec? Because after he did my medical exam I reverently wished he'd croak too. You'd think I was nine again. My son loved frog jokes. The thing about Jackson, more accurately the trouble with Jackson is that he more than likely knew what I was thinking.

He'd sent me an electronic book on After death experiences. I read the title, cringed, and then deleted it. He probably knew I'd do it.

I was tempted to delude myself with it, Alec. Only for a minute. He probably knew that too, bastard. Have him give the offensive thing to you.

Chapter Four: Rumour has it

"Commander Straker for once was not correct. I thought the reports of after death experiences might interest and comfort him. He had one of those minds that had a passion for everything. It is true that some of his behavior was predictable due to the illness."

"Right, just a diagnosis in your case file, a number, someone to do experiments on." Alec lashed out at him.

"It may surprise you, Alec, if I may use-"

"You *may NOT*." Alec fired at him.

Jackson just smiled. Alec visualized sticking the doctor's tongue in Ed's vapourizer.

"Very well, Colonel, or is it Commander Freeman now. It may surprise you that I do believe in a life after death. I also considered the Commander to be a hero. I do not use that term lightly or often. Yes, in the beginning I worked for the late General Henderson. I had my orders, as you all do. I slowly got to know the Commander beyond my expertise as an interrogator and a psychiatrist and his physician. When I announced to him the cancer was already terminal, I did not think he would want me to sweeten the blow. In that I was right. He took the diagnosis with good humor and dignity. Of course I knew it was his practiced facade but a lesser man would have broken down. I will always consider him to be a unique and exceptional officer and a superlative leader. His death is a tragedy. However we may want to remember him now, we still have a job to do. If you will flip through the pages you will find the significant passages."

"He knew, Sir. He knew that monster in there that we agreed to shelter, agreed to do a surgical operation on so he could stay on Earth, he knew he wasn't telling the truth. That's when everything came together for him." Ford said.

"I don't understand. He told me he might have been making a mistake in trusting that, that thing. That it would cooperate with us for protection. That it was his only chance in destroying the aliens. He had a score to settle, he said." Alec explained.

"No, Colonel. First, and I believe you are not completely aware of this since our science department rarely interests you, the translator we took from a downed UFO was completely operational and absolutely accurate. So what the alien said was what he hoped we would believe, especially Straker. My studies of his behavior and body language based on what little we knew indicated to me that he wished to trap the Commander. He stated he was a scientist, and he'd been developing a cure for what was wiping his race out. He had no success with the serum being a cure and he begged his people to ally with Shado, ask for help, surrender and stop the senseless war. He told us through the translation device that his people had turned against him, considering him a traitor. So he said that it was no use, and that he could alter the serum to make it deadly but only to his race. He said he did not know what it would do to humans, but he didn't think it would harm us." Jackson said.

"Only all he wanted was to sell his race out." Ford said. "He wanted to protect himself, and he didn't care what happened to them. He didn't think Straker would go for that, alien or not, being a traitor, selling out a world. So he dreamed up the lethal serum story."

"Ed knew, Alec. He knew. He ordered all of us to act as if we'd accepted what he'd said. He assured the alien that he would take care of it. The alien asked why we would allow our leader to possibly sacrifice himself, and Ed said that wasn't his concern. He figured it was a double cross anyway." Lake said.

Virginia's eye makeup was smeared, and Alec wondered how much she had cried.

Why in hell hadn't Ed done anything about her? She wasn't the kiss and tell type. She plainly wanted Ed. One night of comfort, sharing a bed, and she delivered in bed, all right. Alec had broken it off because he was starting to have nesting feelings for her. One night with Straker. He knew she knew he was dying. But neither of them were like that.

Alec frustratingly turned his attention back to what was being said.

"The Commander asked me to make preparations which would look as if we were going to perform the

operation that would allow the alien to stay on earth, comfortably. What he privately told me was to put a drug in the alien's fluids that would act very much like our amnesia drug. It in fact was based on that drug. What it actually did was open the mind. We had to take a chance that it wouldn't kill him. You may recall the Commander being injected with an early version of the drug during the circumstances we codenamed Time Lash. In short, without the alien knowing, we were getting the truth from him each day. It was the Commander's plan. The Commander played the role well. He pretended to be grateful, he even spoke often to the alien, reassuring him that over the course of time, we'd found successful ways to preserve the enemy after capture. Brilliant, really. The Commander had no intention of having his life prolonged. He jokes several times about the drug I gave him to fight the cancer in his diary. That it interfered with his memory, which was clear and sharp to his last second, as was he, no doubt. I do not believe he ever took it, knowing him."

"The damn fool! Why couldn't he tell me all this?"

"Colonel," Ford said sorrowfully, "You never would have let him go. So he came up with all this and saw it through. He knew you. That's why he met with you for the last time, and then ordered you to be kept unconscious. He even went to your flat to see you the day before he left. He wanted to make sure you were all right. He stayed with you a while."

"Bloody fool. Reckless idiot." Alec said harshly, fighting to remain composed.

"We do not know what happened, Colonel. He left on that last mission, with the nuclear device aboard that antique spacecraft. There is absolute evidence that he activated it so he and whatever he encountered at those coordinates the alien gave us - accurate by the way. That diary has his last words on it. He indicated only you should read it. Will you be wanting us here, or shall we move to another office?"

"You're all dismissed for now. Jackson, I'll want to see you in a half hour."

"Very well, Colonel. My deepest sympathies." As the others left, looking haggard, even the young replacement for Henderson, Jackson slowly got up to follow.

"Oh get out! Wait. Not yet. I have something to ask you."

The doors slid shut and Jackson appeared calm as a rock.

The rock had more feelings, no doubt.

"You can be assured that death was instantaneous, Colonel. Far from the death he awaited from the cancer that had invaded his entire body. A quite merciful end."

"Mercy? Bullshit. Ed never showed himself any mercy for anything. He punished himself to the end for sacrificing his son and he may have thought the cancer was another punishment. He grieved at the loss of a family, probably more than most men. He lost more than a wife and a son. He lost the chance to ever be normal."

"Colonel, are you not aware that he played? You were not present at the meeting with General Henderson in which he'd secretly recorded the General's words. He quite clearly was enjoying the General's discomfort. The Commander was a man of humor. He simply did not display it often. Not all of his life was difficult. You must know all this."

"Jackson, I know what a nuke does, I know Ed died quickly, the way he wanted, and God grant he took as many of those alien bastards with him when he did. That's not what I wanted to know."

"You are free to ask me anything."

"Do you think I have the balls to run Shado? How can anyone replace Commander Ed Straker?"

"Commander Straker hand chose you to be his second-in-command. He would not have done that if he had the slightest doubt that you weren't capable of following him. As to your second question, no one can. To succeed, you must be Alec Freeman. No one can, forgive the phrase, step into Edward Straker's shadow. You are you, you are who *he* chose. You will recall Foster being furious when he wasn't groomed for the seat you sit in now. His ego devoured him so the Commander wisely let him go. There are rumors that Foster suggested you were not suitable for that seat. Far from it for me to spread gossip, but I have heard the Commander met with Foster in the medical center, with me not present, of course-"

"Bullshit." Alec said.

Jackson grinned.

"Perhaps I was there. Perhaps I observed the Commander taking the syringe full of the amnesia drug and smiling. Saying something about it not being - but you will read it in his diary. The Commander exhibited a lot of strange behavior due to the illness taking its toll on his mind. For the most part he isolated himself at home because of it. I will be in my office if needed."

Jackson sauntered out and Alec picked up the diary again, trying to find a reference to Foster. There! He'd heard the rumors too. He hadn't believed them. Fish catch stories weren't as exaggerated as the rumors about old man Straker. He began to read.

Chapter Five: Getting His Point Across

Alec had been telling me for years he was still uneasy about Foster's programming to kill me. Even after I demonstrated by putting my tender ass on the line that he would not, Alec gave me warnings. It was when Jackson started to give me warnings that I worried. Naturally it didn't take a lot of time for people to know I was sick. My whole body showed it. I dropped weight, I was slow. I had started to behave strangely. I smelled like a tree. Jackson said so once. So I ordered a meeting of the department heads and confirmed what people were whispering about. You'll remember, you were there. Unless your memory went where your liver did. Jackson is violating my privacy reading this now that I'm dead. The bastard. Anyway I looked at all of them. Jackson, bless his lack of a little heart, (like I noted, I know he's reading this and will laugh) was stone faced. The perfect poker player. The others were grim.

Ealand. Lake. Virginia was the hardest to look at. You had long tried to get us together. It just wasn't to be. (Besides, she'd been with you, Alec, and I never shop second hand. Alec, tell me you are laughing. I will take your shouting with me, and your weekly threats to resign, and your countless escapades to get me to relax, and your liquored breath and juvenile pranks. More than anything else I will take your laughter with me.)

So I tell you this to make you laugh. Please laugh. That's an order.

The department heads were gathered, and they were looking at me so sanctimoniously that I thought I'd be called upon to part the Thames, or something. Except Foster. He looked to me like a kid who just was handed the key to the chocolate shop. So I thought I'd ruin his day. I announced that you would take my position after my death and I would put that into the rules of Shado and seal it. Jackson knew of course, and said that although I was ill, I was of sound mind etc, etc. The other medics went the same way. That didn't exactly make Foster's day. When the group broke up, as Jackson and I knew he would, he approached me. I've put his words in bold, and written mine.

Yes Colonel? I believe I concluded the meeting.

Ed, don't you think Alec is a bit unsuitable for the job?

Unsuitable? You mean old? Everyone gets old, Foster. I've made my selection. You weren't among my choices.

Why? You proved I wasn't a danger to you. You proved the point with live ammo, as I recall.

*And? (I played innocent. Now I *know* you must be laughing)*

Ed, I know you've known him for a long time and he's your friend. I just think you should chose a younger man. For the good of the organization.

Don't you mean for the good of Paul Foster? You think he's old? He's a mere four years older than me. Do you think I'm old, Foster? (my real age was classified as you and my close friends well know, Alec. We wouldn't want brass to fire cannons in heated discourse about me breaking rules. It taxes their minuscule minds.)

No, Ed. You're a good man, the best. But right now, you're ill, not yourself. Do you really think you're well enough to make a decision like this?

Yes. So does Jackson. So does General Henderson. So do the senior physicians. So do the people who have worked and served with Alec for fourteen years now. The man at the top has to be responsible, Paul. That would be me. But the man at the bottom is the foundation, the heart of Shado. Alec's a seasoned veteran. He's flown in combat situations that you'd require a nappy for. (I watched Paul scowl and then remember he was supposed to be softening me up. What was it you once told me, never forget the pretty blue eyed snake has fangs.)

I know he's got an impressive combat record. Look Ed, I'm going to go ahead and just say it.

Hurry up. Today is pot roast at our restaurant, and I'm already late for lunch. (as if I was going to tell him Jackson had me on I.V. lines at home and in Shado, and I couldn't eat a damned thing. Besides, Alec, I loathe pot roast)

He's going to be useless when you die. You've held him up all these years. *(what a joke, Alec. If anything it was the opposite. He didn't have a clue. This is the guy you trawled for women with. They're going to be your downfall one day. Mark my words.) I have? (I smiled prettily. I was trying hard not to push his head into the vapouriser. You'd be proud of my composure, Alec. Even though it lasted about as long as a starlet's virginity did)*

You can't say there's not sentimentality in this decision, Ed. *(That was the only thing he'd said that came close to the truth. I was impressed. I almost pinned all my gongs on him right there and then. Are you laughing yet, Alec?) You have a **point** there. Come on. I need to stop in medical center, pick up a new prescription from Jackson. Keep this to yourself, Foster. (That was akin to asking a fish to wear diving gear. Totally absurd. When I *wanted* someone spreading something around I told Foster. Or you.)*

Sir?

Sorry, I got distracted. I find walking tiring these days. Will you accompany me to the medical center? I don't want control staff knowing how weak I am. You don't need to take my arm.

Sure, Ed.

I trust you Paul. (Like I trust that alien)

I'm honored, Sir. *(what happened to Ed? I guess he suddenly could count my stars again. What he couldn't do, and you've always been able to do, even better than your pal Jackson on occasion, was read me. I was lying to him through my porcelain caps. He didn't realize it.*

* * *

So we went into medical center, and I asked him to wait for me, and I went into Jackson's office. When I'd gone in I had nothing but my phone in my jacket pocket. When I went out, it had something to keep it company. It wasn't easy, not at first, Alec.

He'd showed potential. So had Hitler, if you recall. Thought you would.

* * *

You okay, Ed? You were in there a long time. *(he'd probably hoped I'd collapsed already)*

I'm fine. Would you get me a drink of water, Paul? Never could swallow pills without water. (Preferably not poisoned water, Foster and I swallow my damned cancer pills without it, too. I bet Jackson thinks I don't take them. Bastard.)

Sure.

*Paul, there's something I thought I would help me in getting the **point** across. About Alec being the only choice, that is.*

He was bending over the water cooler, Alec. I jabbed him with the needle Jackson had just given me. He dropped the glass with a loud cry. It was a big needle, Alec. And he had such a trim-well you can guess where I put it. His eyes were already dilating. The drug was new and improved and fast acting, like your womanizing.

"You-you-you-"

"I have a score to settle with you, pretty boy. Weaker? Not in shape? I'd take you any day, Foster. Cancer or no cancer. Sure, you're younger. I'd beat you if I hadn't been running out of oxygen, with the odds evened. Know something, Paul? I've known Alec just about forever. I don't think he would have allowed the aliens to brainwash him. No matter what they did to him. You don't have it, Foster. Will power. You just have ambition. Alec has will power, and he has heart. What you are and have is a small ass. In case you haven't guessed, that's the new amnesia drug I just shot into you. For weeks your psych profiles have indicated you might still be under the aliens' influence. You don't get two chances at killing Straker, Foster. Not in my organization.

-You son of a bitch-you son of a bitch-*he was muttering as he fell. I saw Jackson behind him and I grinned.*

"Not ethical, Doctor?"

He pretended to consider it. Bastard.

"I suppose this could be explained away by your illness, Commander. These sudden, rash decisions without consulting your senior officers. The erratic behavior. The over zealously applied cologne. Quite alarming."

"I keep telling you, it isn't cologne, it was Alec's - never mind. You going to play the tape for them, Jackson?"

"What tape, Commander? You merely just preserved your own ass to borrow your vernacular. I think Shado greatly prefers yours to his. Well done. I will take care of cleaning up. I do so despise a mess in the medical center. I suggest you go back to work. Say nothing of it. It was my decision. I did it for your safety. One more suggestion, Commander."

"Name it."

"Do not use that cologne. You smell like Bialowieza forest."

"Get out of my sight, Jackson. Before I stick the needle in your ass."

Jackson chuckled and went back into his office to get ready. I'm sure he knew what you'd bought me. That odious gift probably made my cancer worse. All right, all right. I liked it.

Come on, Alec. You have to be laughing now.

Only I think you may be crying too. That breaks my heart. I do have one, Alec. You'll have to take my word for it, there won't be anything left to do a post mortem on.

** * **

Alec dropped his head into his hands and finally gave way to full grief.

Jackson watched on the monitor.

"You will not think so, Colonel, but you must mourn. You were given the gift of his trust. You must mourn, and then it will be put aside and you will begin your work. I shall watch it with interest."

Jackson looked sad.

"Turn it off, now."

Jackson jerked around so hard with fear he nearly dislocated his neck.

There was nothing there. Just a eerie silence after *that* voice, and a temperature drop. Like the room had filled with ice. Jackson nervously clicked it off.

Chapter Six: The Brightest Star

Alec was dreaming. And not a pleasant dream, either. He couldn't be seeing and hearing it but he was. And there Ed was, looking upsettingly small in his suit, at the controls of the NASA spacecraft. He watched.

* * *

"Eagle Base, this is Q-Tip One. I'm approaching ground zero. Nothing on radar. Wish me luck, and kiss your wives for me. Your mistresses too."

"Q-Tip One, Eagle Base copy. Watch your six. It was an honor to know you. NASA wishes you well, we like it when brass takes out the garbage. That sardine can we souped up that you're in was beginning to smell. Godspeed, Commander."

"If its all the same to God, I'll depend on human ingenuity too to get me where I'm going. The lady I'm occupying demands respect, don't call her garbage. The both of us are sensitive to age. Q-Tip One over." He turned off the communication.

Silence.

"Damn, no car radio. Straker, you're talking to yourself. Am I? Must have been the caffeinated morphine I was shot full of. Continuing course, like anyone gives a damn. Tethered goat awaiting slaughter. Are you feeling sorry for yourself, Sir? At least my subconscious can count stars. You up here somewhere, Mom? Some sweet and light coffee after the trip, oh, and a slice of that apple pie I remember I relished would be great. Not that I can eat anymore, Mom. Damn. Got a definite blip on radar. Steady Straker. You have a score to - wait a minute - I know that pattern - why the sneaky -"

Straker grimaced and then suddenly grinned. He snapped on on board communications, and began to sing boisterously and decently well.

'Oh UFO be going round the mountain when it comes. Yes, it'll be driving six white horses when it comes. They'll be flying into eternity if they even look at me, oh they'll be nuked to hell wait and see, when they come.'

"Captain Carlin, am I in good voice?"

"Always, Commander. Oh. Fuck."

Gotcha. Straker grinned.

"This radar and this Colonel may be dusty, but we're functional. Get the hell out of here. Top speed."

"But Sir - Commander Ellis thought you might need back -"

"I don't give a flying damn what she thought. Carlin, you ruin this for me and I'll haunt you for the rest of your life. Now haul out of here like your life depends on it, and if I was in that Interceptor it would. Take off. *NOW.* That's an order!"

"Complying. I'm going to miss you, Ed. Everyone will. They just don't know it yet."

"Launch that Interceptor, Peter. And Peter, *thanks.* Straker out."

Straker smiled.

*"Took me five seconds to spot him. Figured Moonbase might try something. Not bad for a man about to blow sky high. Hmm. If I get reincarnated as Shado commander, I'll order radios built into all aircraft. It gets lonely up here without the top forty. I miss you, Alec. I never would have done it if there was any other way. I'm not as ill as you think. Okay, I am. Got a sighting, holy hell. No. You learned to drive at six years of age, the car was bigger than you then too. Come on, aliens. I come bearing gifts. Come on. I'm right here. Come on. Jesus, heating up in here. Fuck, on board systems going crazy. **NO!**"*

Alec saw Straker try to shield his eyes despite the visor he wore and heard Ed scream, a horrible scream, and he watched the capsule be enveloped with a blinding ray of light from the vast UFO which dwarfed everything, he had to turn away from it. Instantly he told himself no.

You filthy coward, that's Ed Straker dying for the world to survive! Alec looked again.

Ed seemed shaken, in great pain but determined to the Australian.

He's a finite and beautiful snowflake coated in steel, defying fate again, that's Ed, Alec thought.

*"Filthy bastards. Using me for a lab rat, new weapon. We'll see about that. God, I'm frying, systems going nuts, pain terrible. Thank God we shielded the nukes. You can't put **them** out like a candle like you'll try to do me, you bastards! I ought to be dead now. Alec, this is for you and the victims and the families and friends of UFO victims. No man had a better friend, Alec. Watch those girlfriends. **They'll** be the death of you, not cancer. Farewell, Alec Freeman. You were the impossible older brother I never had but I totally deserved. Are you smiling now?"*

Straker's expression grew totally peaceful.

"God accept your servant's soul. Amen." he uttered softly with a quick gesture of the sign of the cross over his chest.

Without hesitation Ed hit the button that activated the nukes.

Space lit up, brighter than the stars. The brightest star of them all was dead. Sacrificed. Crucified.

Alec sat up in bed, fully awake, crying.

"Ed, I don't know, I don't know how, but that was so real! Ed, I'm sorry! I'll get them. I'll settle your score for you. Or I'll die doing it. You hear me, Ed? You hear-"

He wept again, jumped up entered his kitchen and reached for the empty consolation of whiskey. Then his hand froze, he paused, and he poured what remained in the bottle down the sink. He left the kitchen after tossing the bottle in the rubbish, reached for his secure telephone. He went through the security measures grimly.

"This is Commander Freeman. Look alive, I'm coming in. Yeah. I know Jackson put me on compassionate leave. Screw him. I'm headed **home**."

Chapter Seven: Sliver of White

(One week later)

"Alec, I'm telling you. There is no way you could know Gay authorized me for tailing the Commander for backup unless you read the report. Who blabbed?"

"I told you. I saw it in my dream. Peter."

Alec Freeman had invited the senior staff to the Blessed Garden for a private wake at the Chinese restaurant of that name which he and Ed frequently dined at. After double checking that their traditional corner table had not been bugged, and using a frequency on his Shado communicator to block out the world wide despised and overzealous intelligence services' electronic mayhem, he had been surprised to see that the mouse hole, which was Ed's nickname for the restaurant, had gone upscale. The restaurant was elegant and modern and might be American or British except for the colorful Chinese paintings and figurines. Some things never changed. Alec found himself doing a staring contest with a lucky cat, which the restaurant owner had called a maneki neko, a Japanese beckoning cat. The cat won, and Alec still didn't feel happy no matter what paw was up and why. Still, something was missing and he couldn't put his finger on it. That irked him. He felt sure Ed would have caught it immediately.

"In the event that Commander Freeman had been affected in some way by the aliens, I examined him carefully. Unless they have come up with something we are not aware of, your dream may be a true depiction of what happened. We contacted NASA to see if that indeed was Straker's last conversation with them, and they said to their knowledge it was accurate to the word. I have been doing some research on human beings becoming psychic under excessive stress, and while inconclusive, it may be that the events you experienced made you retro cognitive. I would try not to be too upset about it, Commander."

"Jackson, you're here because Ed would have wanted it that way. I don't go for your ridiculous misuse of funding."

"I assure you, as the Commander would say, it was on my own dime. At any rate, we are here to remember him, and not to talk business."

"That's probably the only time I'll ever agree with you, so note it in your file. Here, have some more prawns. On my dime."

"The food is delicious, Alec." Virginia Lake said.

"Ed often had a craving for Chinese. Surprising, when he weighed as much as alien honesty. Only, knowing him and his eccentricities, he never ate out of the cartons. Rarely did he ever let his hair down like that. Claimed it was from being Bostonian, and having a degree in etiquette."

Alec tried to grin, found he couldn't. Sitting in the chair across from him was Keith Ford, looking like a mournful basset hound crossed with a Sharpei. Alec had almost not recognized him without his earphones.

That was Ed's seat. I can't think of that sliver of white, with those azure saucer dish eyes and that enigmatic grin which rarely burst into offered laughter and on the day it did, it was Christmas. Jackson checked me out, but I'm going crazy. I'd kill to see that razor sharp profile, the haughty expression, and that voice which excited the senses more than any whiskey I ever guzzled. Half the time I could have choked him. Now he's dead, and a piece of me is slowly bleeding out. Damn it, Ed. We thought you'd live forever. Sometimes that was our worse fear. How can you be dead? There haven't been any sightings, not a one, and that scares me to my soul. They're planning for a massive attack, I know it. Don't worry. We're ready.

"I think I might see Boston on my leave, Alec. The places he grew up in. The beaches he walked on. I will feel the wind that played with that hair of his. Maybe that will bring him back for me." Virginia said then quickly lowered her head. Alec called for more food and had the waiter refill their glasses with tea, even his.

He had stopped drinking for good.

For Ed. In his honor. No wonder the world is dismal, he thought. No sliver of white, no fire coating the throat. Ed was a lot like whiskey come to think of it. Tough, but mellow. Smooth, but barbed wire on the tongue and mind.

Dead.

They continued to eat in silence. Alec just pushed his rice around on the red and gold platter. It suddenly occurred to him that Jackson had told him the Commander couldn't eat. He shoveled a mouthful after dousing it with soy sauce like it was water on a fire.

Fire. To Ed's ice. My God, why did you die?

"I'm paying a lot for this feast, I want to see it disappear, damn it."

"Was it true, Commander, that he couldn't eat because of - I can't make myself say it." Commander Gay Ellis sighed.

"Yeah. The last meal he may have picked at was with me. No potatoes."

"You have to admit he had your goose good and cooked that day, Alec." Virginia smiled.

"The s.o.b. had me plenty of times, that wasn't anything new. And for an American, he was almost British about it."

"I'm glad his grave is by his son's." Helen Ealand said suddenly.

"It took a lot of doing. His ex fought me like a wildcat. I pulled in a lot of favors to make it happen. Disturbing her like that, Ed wouldn't have wanted it, but hell, he was a victim too. He should have laid in Arlington, but he wouldn't have wanted that either. I had his medals and wristwatch sealed into the empty coffin - Colonel Lake, pull yourself together."

"Alec, he was such a pain in the neck some days, but its because of him I had the chance at this job, to make a difference in the world and you can't do that keeping a chair warm. I'm sorry, I can't seem to stop crying."

"Neither could I until I did." Alec said.

"Perhaps this wake is at an end, Commander." Jackson said. He raised his cup, "To Ed Straker."

They raised their glasses.

"To Ed Straker!"

"Colonel, let me pay for this," Peter Carlin said, reaching for a wallet.

"No! It was my tradition, it was always my treat. That's not going to change. Ed always tried to pay before I did, but I tipped the waiter half my weekly pay cheque so he always failed at the endeavor."

"The Commander never failed at anything." Ealand said fiercely. "Don't say that, *please*, Alec. I'm afraid I can't bear it."

They fell into silence again. Alec motioned for the waiter. The waiter smiled but spoke with the restaurant owner, Mr. Lim. Lim came over to the table, waving a receipt like the Union Jack. He set it in front of Alec.

"No worry, Alec. Bill already paid. Not to worry."

"All right, which one of you bastards did it?" Alec said, angry as hell.

They all looked at one another, puzzled.

"No, Alec. No worry. Friend pay."

"Who? Which one of my ***former*** friends? I'll wring their neck."

"No Alec. Not here. Sorry my broken English. Your friend. He say no incense. He smile. He pay. Friend Straker. He say score to settle, you always pay. He want win once. He say no incense he pay me lots of pounds as tip long time ago, say he love food, tell me make restaurant better. He Ed, come alone and with you many ti-"

Nobody was fast enough to act to stop Alec from jumping up and overturning the table, with noodles and fish going flying. He grabbed a terrified Lim by the collar.

"You think that's funny, do you? My friend is *dead* - do you understand? **Straker's dead!**"

Jackson's eyes widened, as Alec finally let Lim go with the help of Carlin and Ford prying him off the owner, all eyes of the other startled customers on the infuriated Australian. Jackson picked up the receipt, read it, swallowed a gulp of tea and handed it to Alec as the others picked up the table and broken crockery with help of the staff.

"Alec, you need to calm down and see this."

Alec was willing to overlook Jackson using his first name because there was actual fear in the doctor's tone and manner. He grabbed the receipt roughly, slightly tearing it. He went white and fell into his chair. He could see writing on the paper.

Familiar writing. Fourteen years of familiar writing.

* * *

Alec, enjoy your retirement. I am. I settled the score. Undoubtedly by now you've noticed our friends haven't been around. The serum worked, it worked even out there. I saw it. Their huge ship and the ray I spoke about were illusions caused by the cancer. I won. Incidentally, I beat you finally. I paid. That was another score to settle. Be generous to Mr. Lim, after choking him half to death the way I know you will. He doesn't know. Take care of them, Alec. See that they get the best jobs. Tell Miss Ealand not to cry, it'll ruin my utter fear of her. Tell her I don't apologize for the slip. Even when she threatened to resign if I ever gave her something that risqué again. Can you imagine? She threatened to resign! She's been hanging around you too long. Tell her to personally model it for you. I dare you.

Oh and Alec? Get married, that's my final order. Don't choose one of those women in Harrods with an intellect smaller than their ring size. Try Lake. You don't mind second hand.

With affection, Ed

P.S. I gave Lim a package for you. If he's still alive, ask him for it. Relax. I left this note to prove its me, but if that's not enough, the package should do it.

Alec was trembling as he turned it around and around in his hands.

* * *

When he had made apologies and financial amends to Lim, he had asked for the package. He had gone home with no explanation. He left that to Jackson.

He was home, and shaking he held the package. He was still shaking as he carefully opened it. He had given the receipt to Jackson to have analyzed, but he made it clear he intended to keep it. Along with what the package contained.

A cry then sobbing tore from his throat and heart.

It contained Ed's medals and his wristwatch.

Chapter Eight: That doesn't belong to you

Normally, mused Alec Freeman, Shado's job was to blast UFO's out of the sky. That month, it was to pick up the rubbish. Their spacecrafts crashed over like upturned dominoes, and to the last UFO, the aliens in them were obviously diseased and already dead. The post mortems had shown the serum in their bodies. They'd died horribly and not slowly.

Not anywhere slow or horribly enough for me, Alec thought.

That morning, Alec had enlisted cheers by telling them Ed Straker had won the war. Shado would remain open, but they were tackling other big jobs, like terrorism, petty world tyrants playing war games and London traffic.

Alec grinned at his joke, a spring in his step. He had bought a diamond ring that morning, and had made sure it would fit Colonel Lake by enlisting the help of Commander Ellis. The proposal was another matter.

What had Ed said? These things are always a matter of priorities. Something like that.

When he walked into medical center, Jackson was grinning at him. Bastard.

He, Alec had a score to settle. *Psychiatrist or no slippery psychiatrist, I almost like him now. Christ, I need to start drinking again. As soon as possible. Purely medicinal. Oh hell, it tastes good. Ed wouldn't mind. Christ, yes he would. Damn! Well, here I go!*

"I want it, Jackson."

"It is against regulations. We need it for further study."

"Didn't Commander Straker's death mean anything to you, you slippery fucker?"

"There are two guards constantly outside the room where it is contained. They change every two hours. As it is noon, I believe Jacqueline Fuller and Lillian Mason are on duty. Both close lady friends of yours, I believe? Speaking of noon, I am going to the restaurant where we had the wake. I was most impressed by the cuisine there, As you went there often, you will be aware it is a lengthy drive. I shall be away quite a while. Dr. Ward Kohler is on duty, going over the post mortems on the rising amount of alien victims. See you later, perhaps, Commander?"

Alec watched him go out with open astonishment.

I shall be away quite a while. Lengthy drive. Lady friends of yours.

*He **knew**. The guy knew and was green-lighting me as clearly as if he'd used a neon light. He knew what I'd do. The bastard.*

Alec chuckled.

Thanks Ed for scaring him half to death, he told me about it.

Now to settle a score.

* * *

It took two minutes for the attractive guards to pretend they never saw him. They were drowsy from the early lunch they'd taken they smugly claimed. Alec winked back, took something from his pocket and walked into the sterile room after donning gown and mask.

The alien looked rejuvenated from the various medical procedures they'd done to preserve him, but he was still in the bed, life giving fluids flowing into his limbs from several I.V.s He had complained somewhat about the tests done on him, and the questions about the chemical content of the serum, and being poked and prodded and scanned for this and that, but he'd gone along with it.

Alec turned on the translator.

"Greetings, you are the new Commander. I have not been told very much, but one of the nurses mentioned it to me reluctantly. Where is the good Dr. Jackson?"

"At lunch. You remember food? Ed Straker used to have food with me. Then he couldn't eat. Ed had a remarkable appetite for a man of his size. Pity he got sick from cancer. You know, we suspected his exposure in the field during an Shado incident was the cause of the cancer. Radiation exposure from a UFO. We even toyed with the possibility that one of your race had martyred itself in the hope that Straker would be exposed

to radiation. Of course something like that would have been the reason he put himself at risk to investigate it personally even when I asked him not to, because Ed knew it meant more trouble. In short the radiation would cause the cancer that spread to his brain, you wouldn't know anything about that, would you? Because that seems to be the work of someone just like you. Ed hated traitors, even if they were aliens and performed their vile acts on their own kind. He hated a lot of things. Like being sick."

"I assure you, Commander. I simply wanted to live."

"You simply wanted to live? So did my friend Ed. Ed accomplished what he set out to do and he accomplished it while mortally ill and with bravery. He won. Your race is dead."

"The serum worked as I promised it would. Yet you seem hostile."

"Another thing you ought to know. The medical tests they ran on you revealed you have a human donor heart."

"An unfortunate circumstance of the war, my friend. Now it is ended, and I can live. As I heard your friend Ed say about the translation device we lost, to the victor go the spoils."

"Ed hated traitors. There's three kinds of people I hate. Murderers, and by the way, the radiation that killed my friend was confirmed as being on your body, so I know you planned Ed's death. I hate people who lie without just cause, and Ed knew exactly what you were up to--"

"You cannot harm me! They need my body! They told me this!"

"Shut up, I'm not finished. The last thing I hate is people who steal then try to pass the things off as their own. You see this? This is an United States Air Force knife. You have something that doesn't belong to you, you fucking slimy freak. Haven't you heard? Thou shall not steal. Nobody can hear you. This place is air tight and the guards are gone. They told me to take special care of you, and I've been waiting a long time to do this. So I'm taking what you stole back.

Alec Freeman slowly cut the alien's chest open, enjoying his agony and terror up to the moment he cut out his heart.

After he'd cleaned up, he looked at the corpse. He figured just about everyone would have loved to do what he'd just done. That left a lot of suspects. Jackson would know, but no one else would be certain.

"The score is settled, Ed. You always did say your Christmas present of your knife would come in handy some day. Like in everything else you ever did or said, you were right. I'm marrying Lake if she'll have me. Bastard. You knew I wouldn't disobey your last command."

With that, he put the cleaned knife back in his pocket and strolled out of the room, humming.

* * *

One year later, Alec and Virginia Lake-Freeman had a baby son.

They named it Edward Alec Freeman.

At the christening, Alec wasn't quite sure he'd seen an blue eyed immaculate sliver of white leaning against a column, arms folded, smiling. After all, half of Shado and Mr. Lim and a crying Ealand were at the church. The pews were packed, like at his wedding.

It was the distinctive, overpowering smell of pine needles that convinced Alec that the boy's godfather was there to witness everything.

The End

A few notes. I usually write Jackson as Polish to honor Vladek and his courage. Black Park is where they sometimes filmed UFO scenes.

Author: Amelia Rodgers