

# **Any Time, Any Place A UFO Story**

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*A gift for my mother Denise Felt on her birthday.*

# Chapter 1

Ice blue eyes stared coldly out across the windswept, snow-filled plain. Visible distance was diminished, reduced by the whirling snow and the fog of the blizzard. But that did not encourage him to give up his search. He stared through the blizzard as if his will alone could cut through the weather.

With a gloved hand, fur-wrapped wrist lashed tight, he tugged thoughtfully on the full white beard and braids that dangled from his chin. It was a habitual gesture when he thought, one that hailed from a time when that beard had been a patch of scruff on his cheeks.

A looming giant appeared at his shoulder and he stopped the reach for his well-loved bastard sword when he recognized the form. Alec Freeman was a large Viking, powerfully built. The double-headed axe on his back was work for any two men, but he made the wielding of it look easy. He was a strong arm; a loyal arm.

But it wasn't the familiar ragged mop of brown hair or the long proper Viking beard that gave him away. Instead it was the smell of expensive liquor on his breath.

"What are you lookin' at, Ed?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm not sure, Alec," Edward Straker replied, brow furrowing as his cool clipped tones were devoured by the storm. "Witchcraft perhaps. A star fell there, on the horizon but I thought I caught a glimpse of movement before this damned hoarfrost devoured the site. It was as if something had come out of the star."

"Witchcraft?!" Alec's hand reached for his axe instinctively.

In all the years he'd known Alec, the man had never liked the thought of Witchcraft. In truth it scared him, but Ed knew better than to accuse his oldest friend of fear.

"Yes," Ed nodded thoughtfully, keeping his eyes aimed in the direction of the crash. "Get me Foster and Jackson."

"They're down with the horses, Ed, that's a hell of a walk!" Alec complained.

Ed smirked back at his friend, the expression out of place on a face normally so stoic and contained. "Are you volunteering to investigate yourself, Alec?" he mused dryly.

Alec straightened and grimaced. "I'll be back in a moment," he grumbled.

A moment later Alec returned up the snow covered hillside with two men in tow who couldn't be more different in appearance to one another. Paul Foster was an imposing, muscular man of the north countries. The hilts of his swords, for he favored two in combat, were worn and well used; he was no stranger to combat. His face was rakish and charming, beard well kept and hair as well.

Beside him Jackson was as night to day. The dark Slavic complexion of the foreigner made him stand out in the group on his own, though if that were not enough his slender build and neatly trimmed facial hair also marked him an outsider. His eyes were constantly looking everywhere, and his expression gave nearly as little away as that of Straker.

"Gentlemen," Straker said, getting right to the point. "A star fell a league to our north, I need you to investigate it."

"Investigate a fallen star?" Foster asked incredulously.

"Yes, I believe something is amiss about it," Straker replied to Foster.

"As you say, commander," Jackson replied in his quiet voice.

"Why do you call him that, Jackson?" Foster asked grumpily.

"Is that not what he is, Mr. Foster?" Jackson mused with an incisive look at the younger man that spoke clearly his opinion of the other man's intelligence, "the commander of this expedition?"

"Yeah, but..." Foster started angrily.

"Gentlemen," Straker interceded. "King Henderson wants us back in the Shadow Hall in short order. And I want that star investigated e'er we depart."

Foster straightened and nodded, his mouth clicking shut, and the smaller Jackson did the same. And then the two of them trudged off into the blizzard locked valley to the north.

"Is it smart sending those two together?" Alec questioned with a grimace.

"Foster is a strong arm," Ed replied thoughtfully.

"And Jackson? You know he's just Henderson's pet snake..."

"Jackson is also the best able to see truth through seemings of magick, Alec," Ed replied, hitching up his sword and gazing broodingly back into the snow. "And I feel we may need that in this situation."

In the distance a sudden sound erupted through the valley, violent like the rebuke of an angry dog and followed by a brief angry howl. Straker tensed and he half-drew his weapon as Virginia Lake, the last warrior of their party and the only woman, charged up the hill towards them. Alec already had his axe off his back and his expression was violent.

"It's just the two of them," Freeman said, hands tightening on his weapon, "Only one with the will to fight."

"Let's go," Straker replied as he charged off into the snow with the other two on his heels.

"What's happening?" Ginny called.

"A star fell!" Alec replied. "Straker said there was movement where it fell and sent Foster with Jackson to investigate."

"What was that sound?" she asked, fear and eagerness warring for a place of supremacy in her expression and voice.

"We don't know," Straker called back as his eyes peeled apart the snow looking for an enemy. "But it didn't sound good."

"Possibly that witchcraft you were thinking, Ed," Freeman responded, an edge to his voice that could have been eagerness or fear.

"Would that it were not, Alec," Ed replied.

There was no more time for conversation, only for the relentless churning of snow with well-lashed boots. Virginia, despite her lighter build, fared no worse than the larger warriors as they sprinted towards the place where the sound had originated. All of them kept their eyes peeled, searching every shadow and hillock of snow for signs of an opponent to no avail.

It was Straker that spotted it. With a commanding shout he drew his fellows as he slowed and dropped to a knee in the snow. His hand hesitated over the splatter of red blood in the snow.

"A man was injured here!" Alec declared as his eyes picked out what his commander had

seen.

"It was a brief struggle, flight, pursuit," Virginia continued, already moving on to what she knew Straker would want to know next.

"They chased the witch over that hill!" Straker noted quicker than her eyes could follow the trail.

"Which was injured?" Alec asked.

"Jackson's tracks lag behind Foster's," Virginia noted as she took a moment to get her breath before moving to follow Straker, who had already begun to traverse the snowy tracks with blade in hand.

"Foster would move faster injured or no," Straker said to Alec. "It's he that was injured; note the location of the blood."

Virginia as well looked to where blood was on the trail ahead, always on the right hand side where Foster's heavy track was visible. He had barely looked at the tracks! How could he glean such breadth of information from such casual perusal? She didn't know, but she knew she trusted him, and the blade he rarely bared.

They rushed up over the hillock and down the other side, breath trailing in the snow. Alec cursed the lack of visibility, hands twisting with restrained nervousness on the hilt of his axe. Give him an enemy to face! And soon, lest the bourbon wear off. He fought better when drunk...

They crested two more hills and slid to a halt behind Straker to look down on the scene as it came into view. Below them Jackson stood, a slender black flame in the snow with empty hands. He was looking away from them, down to the base of the slope where Foster crouched, blades naked in his grip and covered in dark blood. Beyond him was the fallen form of something inhuman, but the angle prevented a good look at it.

"Report!" Straker demanded as he descended through the snow.

Jackson turned his basilisk gaze towards Straker and his eyes lit with some infernal delight.

"It is a marvel, commander," he said with unwonted glee. "As we moved to approach the star a creature appeared from the snow before us. From its hands it launched a powerful bolt that moved so fast eyes could not follow it. If there had been no sound of warning even the reactions of Mr. Foster would have been insufficient to escape its path!"

"Hah!" Foster barked, breathing heavily as blood dripped from his swords. "I could have escaped the spell of the demon no matter its speed! And even its spells could not save it from my sword."

"A demon?" Straker pressed with a sharp glance.

"Foster calls it thus, commander," Jackson replied, expression guarded. "But I do not believe it so mystical a creature."

"Tend to your wound," Straker told Foster as he continued past Jackson to the Viking and the fallen form. "You'll need that leg."

Looking down to where the demon's spell had grazed his thigh, Foster grimaced. Now that the adrenaline of the fight had faded he could feel how it burned, and the warmth of the blood running from the wound. Nodding to Straker's command he slipped out of the way to

settle into the snow and begin stripping the furs from his thigh. Virginia approached with a packet of bandages, ever prepared.

Straker approached the red-skinned form cautiously. It certainly seemed a demon, with its glossy skin and bulbous round head. However, as he settled into the snow, he saw past the shocking surface. The head was not bulbous as he'd thought; instead there was some sort of helmet of iron that protected the creature's head on all sides. Expensive thick glass covered the front to allow the creature to see.

Hooking his fingers underneath the helmet he heaved it off the creature's head with a powerful surge of his muscles. The metal helm spun into the snow, rolling on its round metal top as green smoke erupted from its interior. Green smoke? How could a living creature live with green smoke filling its nose and mouth?

As the smoke cleared it revealed the face of the creature and his eyes narrowed to see a face that looked so human. Hairless, as no Viking would allow himself to be, it nonetheless resembled the face of a human being. There was a nose, and eyes milked over as if dead for a long time; also a mouth, and ears on the side of its head.

His eyes noted how the skin was not a glossy red, and his hands found that the red was but a cloth of some unknown make that covered its skin. Sinking closer he examined the damage done by Foster's swords, noting how the creature seemed to be composed on the inside as a man as well.

"This is no demon," Straker finally declared, standing and scouring the area with his ice blue eyes. "It is a man, dressed up as a demon, likely to scare children and elders. He wears a helm, sturdy and the likes of which I have never seen. Aim not for the head, lest your weapons prove useless against its strength. But this cloth, the likes of which no loom has ever produced, it will serve no hindrance to your blades."

"And the bolt he launched, commander?" Jackson asked, approaching through the blizzard for his own examination. "Have you come upon how he did that?"

"It looked as if he had a wand when I charged him," Foster spoke up from where Virginia tended him. "Ow, not so tight, Ginny!"

"Stop whining, Paul," Virginia replied offhand. "He'll live sir, it left a clean wound."

"Here!" Alec declared, circling a spot in the snow with his axe. "I'll not touch the arcane implement. It's like no bow I've ever seen."

Jackson abandoned his examination of the corpse to scurry through the snow to where Alec walked. Eagerness filled his posture as he crouched down to examine the man's wand. Straker had already turned his mind back to the star. Was this what he'd seen moving at the fallen star? Were there others?

He trudged through the churning snow up to the cap of the hill once more and turned his eyes towards the place the star had fallen.

"Why are you touching it, Jackson?!" Alec demanded, stepping backwards and setting his feet, both hands on the axe.

"It cannot harm you, Mr. Freeman," the snake replied with a superior twist at the corners of his lips. "You see it is but a tool. Without the hand of a master it is simply material. This is no witch's wand, commander. It is much more complex than that."

"If you can collect it without it launching any more bolts, do so," Straker decided. "Else leave it. We're making for a cave on that ridge to the east to wait out this blizzard. Once the snow stops we're moving forward to the site where the star fell. Alec, help Foster."

"I can walk fine," Foster protested.

"Don't argue," Alec grunted, hooking an arm beneath the shorter man's and taking some of his weight.

"Virginia," Straker said.

"Of course sir," She replied, taking point and keeping her hands on the knife at her left hip and the whip at her right.

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The wind howled as the sun sank unnoticed into the mountains. The sky, already covered with dark clouds, darkened just a little further as the snow finally slowed. Warmth permeated the little cave in which the party of Vikings had taken camp. It was warmth filled with the smell of rabbit stew, fireside bread, and mead. Foster, Freeman, and Lake sat around the fire talking softly in the companionable quiet of the cave while Jackson poured relentlessly over the device he'd retrieved from the snow near the horses at the cave's back.

Straker joined none of them. Instead he stood at the cave's entrance and watched, waiting patiently for the snow to end so that they could continue towards the answers he sought. King Henderson would likely growl about the delay on their return to the Shadow Hall, but Straker paid that thought little mind.

It was as he stood there thinking, and waiting, that he saw a flicker of movement down the snow-covered slope below their cave. His eyes zeroed in on the spot and he tore it apart with his perception as one hand went to his sword. Conversation stopped behind him as the other Vikings noted his movement but his concentration could not be spared for them.

Then the movement came again, and he got a good look at it. It was a woman, dressed for warmer weather despite the blizzard. She listed as if drunk or injured, long vibrant red hair cascading down about her shoulders. She staggered a step and fell, but Straker was already moving before she hit the snow.

His stride ate up the snow as he sprinted down to where she fell. He heard calls of alarm from behind him, but he held the hand that had left his hilt up to keep them in the cave. If this was a trap he would have them ready to respond and not be caught in its web. He reached the fallen form and crouched, eyes peeling apart the scene with obsessive precision.

She was mid-to-late thirties, a peasant woman from a village. She was not, in fact, dressed for warmer weather; instead her clothes had been torn and damaged and too much skin was evident to survive in the blizzard. She was pale and cold though she didn't shiver; her breath was only a faint mist of warmth in the air. She was bleeding, a wound in her arm that needed tending if her trail was any indication.

His hands searched quickly but thoroughly for weapons, and when he found none he hefted her easily into his arms and retreated to the cave. His eyes did not cease their search of the surroundings until he was once more enfolded in the warmth of the cave's interior.

"What's going on, who is that?" Alec asked.

"I don't know Alec," Straker replied brusquely, annoyed with the inane questions at such

a time. "Virginia; bandages please. Foster, I need water, warm water. Alec get Jackson away from his toy and over here I need his medical knowledge."

Galvanized into action by Straker's clipped tone, the others scattered as he settled the woman down onto a bed of pine boughs Foster had gathered for himself. Her face twisted into an expression of pain as she began to struggle, shivering violently now that she was in the warmth of the cave.

"Bandages, sir," Virginia said from his elbow, pressing the roll of cloth into his hand.

"Water on the fire, Straker," Foster called from a few feet away.

"Ed," Alec gathered his attention.

Straker looked up to see Jackson, expression irritated to be drawn away from his studies, but guarded so few would be able to tell it if they did not know him.

"Jackson, this woman is injured. She's been in the snow for an unknown length of time." Straker said, ignoring the other man's irritation. "You know medicine; prevent the white death from taking her."

Focused now on the task at hand, Jackson crouched swiftly to the stone ground next to the bed. He impatiently pushed Straker aside to examine the woman, resting an ear to her heart, feeling for her breath with an open hand held above her mouth, and peeling back an eyelid to look into her eyes. He slid one hand under her arm and grimaced.

"Her heat dissipates. I need her to be warmed and swiftly." Jackson declared. "Strip the blankets from your packs. Do it now! Ms. Lake, I am going to need you to take off your clothes."

"Excuse me?!" Virginia asked, incensed, hand falling to her knife.

"Body heat is the easiest and swiftest to transfer, do not question me this woman has little time left to her." He ignored her discomfort. "Would you rather I asked one of the men to strip naked and climb into bed with this defenseless woman?"

Blushing furiously Virginia started to reach hesitantly for the straps of her weapons.

"Oh by all the gods," Jackson muttered with irritation. "All of you, keep your backs turned once you have dropped the blankets here. Now, swiftly!"

With that, Jackson began to take off the remnants of the injured woman's clothing. Straker stood uncomfortably with Foster and Freeman, faced away as the sounds of rustling cloth filled the small cave. Traveling with Virginia Lake they had all tried their hardest to forget she was a woman. It seemed smarter simply to treat her as a man, despite her obvious differences. Situations like this one, however, simply underscored those differences.

After a few moments, Jackson cleared his throat.

"You may look once more, gentlemen," he said in amused tones.

When Straker turned around he saw that Virginia lay beneath the blankets Jackson had assembled, covered to her head with the injured woman pulled up against her body below the blankets.

"This will prevent the white death," Jackson told Straker, "But she will still bleed out if her injury is untended. I will need water and ban-"

Straker cut him off by holding up the bandage roll he had asked Virginia for.

"Ah yes, you are prepared, good," Jackson said. "But I will still need wa-"

"The water's heated, Straker," Foster said from the fire.

Jackson's lips twitched.

"Excellent commander, now give me space to work, and insure no one touches the implement I'm studying." Jackson requested in a polite, but firm manner.

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Straker paced restlessly back and forth while Jackson worked to save the unknown woman's life. As he paced, Alec approached, leaning against the wall of the cave with a flagon of expensive alcohol in one hand.

"Why is this woman's life so important, Ed?" he asked softly, so as not to reach her ears should she have woken.

"Beyond the obvious, Alec?" Straker asked wryly.

"Yeah, you're more focused than usual on this," Freeman responded with a smirk, "More than if it was simply to save a life."

"She has a wound similar to Foster's," Ed revealed.

Alec's expression tightened as he considered the potential ramifications of that. He glanced towards where Jackson worked and then out of the cave before returning his eyes to Straker. His worried expression said he'd come to some of the same conclusions Ed had.

"Exactly, Alec," Straker agreed. "If she was injured before Paul then the situation is contained and under control, but if it was afterwards..."

"Then there could be more of those strange men and their wands out there," Freeman finished for him. "You want to question her."

It was not a question, but Straker answered it anyway.

"Yes. Her garb makes her from a village. If that village is under attack or being harried by these men, then we need to do something about it."

"You know what the King would say about us getting involved with local squabbles," Alec mentioned unnecessarily.

"Yes," Straker replied with a grimace.

"Well I'm behind you every step of the way," Alec assured him.

Straker knew that Alec's loyalty was to him and not to the King. It was something that they rarely felt the need to express verbally, but Straker was comforted by the reminder now.

"You'll have to watch out for the snake," Alec mused.

"If we have to handle this with just the four of us, we will," Straker answered firmly.

"Commander, she is awake," Jackson's voice intruded on their conversation.

With a swift stride Straker crossed the cave to where Virginia still held the woman beneath a pile of blankets. He gave his warrior an approving smile for her fortitude, noting the sweat on her brow and dampening her hair. Virginia's cheeks colored at the approval in Straker's expression and she felt her heart skip a beat or two. It was so rare to acquire his approval that she held the memory of that smile close, something to treasure.

Straker's eyes fell second to the injured woman, her arm out of the blankets and bandaged. The cloth of the bandage looked harsh against the smooth roundness of that pale arm, speckled as it was with red blood. But his eyes could not dwell on the rest of her long; they were drawn inexplicably and completely to her own eyes. He felt everything come to a

complete stop around him and he felt a constriction in his chest that prevented him from breathing for a moment when their eyes met.

Her eyes were like moss growing across a fallen branch in a verdant forest. They were luminous and full of life and he imagined for a moment that he could taste loam and wood in the back of his throat as they pierced him to the spot. Such fanciful imaginings were far from the norm for his scientific mind, and that same mind rebelled against them but he couldn't escape them.

Her face once slackened with unconsciousness was now so fully alive, flushed pink with heat and expressive as she gazed at him. Wreathing that face was hair so red it looked unnatural, large curls cascading down around her face and across her shoulders. Her small red lips parted and whispering forth from her throat were two words that seemed to hang in the silence like the clarion call of a crystal bell.

"Help me..." she whispered.

With her words the spell was broken and Straker could breathe once more. Jackson was looking at him with an expression of curiosity on his features that was quickly masked by his traditional guard. Straker ignored him and knelt beside the woman where she lay. Her eyes followed him as he crouched there, beseeching in their intensity. He couldn't explain what had happened when their eyes had met, nor when she spoke but those questions slid into the background.

"You're safe," Straker promised her. "You are surrounded by warriors, and you've been brought back from the brink of death."

She looked unconvinced and a single tear pooled at the corner of her eye, wrenching his insides painfully at the fear he saw in her expression.

"Help me..." She repeated, the words once more falling into a suddenly silence so he could not miss them, nor escape their meaning.

"Straker there's movement on the hill!" Freeman bellowed from the cave entrance and Ed felt it difficult to pull his gaze away from hers despite the urgency, until she turned to look herself.

Standing abruptly from her side he looked towards the cave entrance where Alec had drawn his axe.

"Paul, Virginia!" Straker called, drawing his own weapon and moving towards the entrance of the cave. "How many, Alec?"

Behind Straker Paul scrambled to tighten down his armor and grab his blades while Ginny disentangled herself from the injured woman. She ignored her indecency in the rapid need to get clothes and weapons to face the approaching threat. Truly none were looking in her direction anyway, but if they had she would have cared little. Even Jackson produced a knife from somewhere about his person.

"I count three," Freeman replied. "They stand out like bloody flags in this snow."

"Remember their weapons, gentlemen," Jackson cautioned with an edge of strange excitement to his voice. "Do not charge them on open ground."

"We're not fool novices," Paul barked in response, hands tightening on weapons.

"What's the strategy, Straker," Virginia asked, coming up beside Paul in only leggings

and a tunic, whip coiled around one arm and knife in hand.

Foster glanced at her startled and she scowled back at him, gesturing brusquely for him to meet her eyes threateningly. Having the grace to blush, Paul returned his attention to Straker and Freeman.

"Alec, break from the cave and make for the left slope. Stay low and fast," Straker commanded. "Virginia, move right through the snow and stay below the drift line. Jackson, you're with me. We're going to be moving slowly down towards them from the front."

"The front, commander?!" He asked startled.

"Yes. Alec, when you have vantage toss a stone down the left slope to draw their attention," Straker continued. "Virginia as soon as their attention is diverted I want the right enemy handled. Break cover and charge him. Once he's down, hit the snow once more and don't come up unless I call you. Once he's down we're moving, Jackson. Quiet but as fast as you can."

"What about me?!" Foster demanded.

"Not with your leg, Paul," Straker said calmly. "You're on guard duty. Anything gets past us, you deal with it. I have a feeling they're after the woman, you make sure she stays safe."

"Hell's bells," he cursed, scowling.

"Move!" Straker commanded.

With a twist Alec disappeared into the night, footsteps muffled by the snow as he crouched and wove his way to the left slope. A bark roared from down the hill, loud in the closeness and snow exploded near where Alec moved, but the giant kept his pace steady as he disappeared behind snow. The flash of the shot pinpointed one of the enemies to Straker and his hand tightened on his bastard sword.

"That's our target, Jackson, be ready to move," He murmured as Ginny sprinted out of the cave to the right.

"Caution commander," Jackson said softly. "If my studies are right, they do not need to reload as a crossbow would."

A ten-count passed and then Alec bellowed from the left, voice echoing off the mountains as a large boulder smashed into the ground low on the left slope. Three flashes illuminated the red-sheathed men at the hill's base and roar's announced their shots as they peppered the area where the rock had made such a noise.

On the heels of their shots Virginia erupted from the ice-cold snow, hair trailing behind her as she flew into motion. Her whip lashed the man around the throat with a dexterous flip and she yanked hard, pulling him off balance and towards her. With a vicious backhand she opened him up with her knife, ending the stroke with a fierce jab that sank the blade into his throat before flipping the whip loose and diving back into the snow.

When Straker saw Virginia strike like Odin's Valkyrie he threw himself forward into motion, forswearing the battle cries of his ancestors for speed and stealth as he barreled down the hill towards his enemies. He felt more than heard Jackson beside him, and he took a moment to be surprised by the King's snake. The man was not a brave man, Ed had expected him to lurk in the cave, finding some excuse not to do as he was told.

Wind whistled past Straker's face, cold and biting against his cheeks above the beard as

he rushed towards the leading man. Off to his left Alec surged into view, axe already swinging before the enemy even noticed his arrival. The left man turned his weapon towards Alec, but he seemed to be moving in slow motion, unable to correct his aim quick enough.

Freeman propelled his heavy axe through space with the full weight of his shoulders and back behind it, hands jarred with impact as the blade connected below his enemy's waist. The red-sheathed man was lifted completely off the ground with the force of the blow, even as Alec's blade proceeded through him. There was a splatter of dark blood as Alec concluded his stroke and the enemy fell in pieces to the ground.

Straker urged his legs to faster movement, aiming for the one remaining opponent and his sword was ready. The man raised his weapon towards Alec, but his eyes were not on the true threat. With a fierce cry, Straker ran into the man, thrusting with all his might to skewer his enemy on the blade of his fathers. Steel sprouted from his enemy's shoulders and he was lifted off the ground by the blow, dead before Straker's hilt met his chest.

But even as silence fell on the scene, bodies collapsing to the ground like marionettes with their strings cut, Straker somehow felt the end had not reached them. With sudden clarity his eyes picked out the lone enemy still crouched behind the treeline ahead of him. The man's weapon was already raised, aimed at Straker's chest. With a sudden surety he knew he was going to die.

Ed's brain fired demands to his limbs, muscles clenched and twisted in preparation to move, but his ears recorded the violent roar of the enemy's weapon before his feet could finish the demand.

"Commander!" Jackson yelled

The impact took Straker off his feet, unexpected as it was, as Jackson barreled into him from the side. He was tossed into the snow, eyes still dazzled by the flash of the enemy's weapon. Blood splattered onto the hill and Jackson was flung backwards from the force of the shot while Straker tried to make some sense of how he'd reached the ground.

Alec roared and Straker heard his charge as he pushed himself out of the snow to his knees.

Freeman didn't know how badly hurt Straker had been by the shot, but he couldn't hesitate. He didn't know how long it took these men to reload their weapons, and he didn't care. He would kill the man who had shot Ed, nothing would stop him. The weapon roared again in his direction, but the shot was rushed, its aim untrue, and the only damage Alec took was from fragments of wood blown off the tree near him.

The muzzle of the weapon corrected, but it was too late. A whip snaked around his neck and tugged him backwards even as Alec swung, blade splitting branches on its relentless quest for the man's blood. With a tremendous heave he split the enemy in two, burying his axe into the tree next to him with the impetus of his swing.

"Straker!" Paul cried from the cave.

"I'm alright!" Straker called back, shifting up the hill to where Jackson lay in the snow.

The small, slender man had a little blood trickling from his lips and his hand was slack on the hilt of the knife he'd been carrying. He looked up at Straker with lucid eyes though his expression showed pain. A neat hole had been blown into his shoulder, boring through cloth,

fur and flesh. It was close to the heart and Straker hurriedly pulled the fur from his shoulders to press it against the wound.

"Front and back, commander... the bolt went... straight through..." he gasped out, face twisting at the pain.

"The snow will help slow the blood, stay still," Straker commanded.

"Straker!" Ginny called from the treeline, Alec passing her up as they charged towards him.

"Damn it, I'm alright!" Straker growled. "Virginia get some bandages. Now!"

She didn't wait to see why, she just ran, the cloth of her insufficient attire plastered to her from the wet snow she'd crawled through. She was shivering and she knew she'd need to get warm, and that quick, but Straker needed bandages and he would have them. When she reached the cave, however, Paul forced her towards the bed and the injured woman and took the bandages himself. She couldn't protest, her hands were numb as it was.

"I was certain that shot had struck you, Ed," Alec said, out of breath from all the running.

He slowed behind Straker and looked down at the man he'd always considered nothing more than a useless greasy tool of the King.

"I would have been struck," Straker agreed. "Jackson pushed me out of the way."

"That was... heroic..." Alec admitted grudgingly.

"Don't get used to it Mr. Freeman," Jackson said in a wry, tired voice.

"I've got those bandages," Foster called as he charged down the hill, slowing when he realized who they'd be for.

"Good, give them here, Paul," Straker demanded. "Now keep quiet Jackson, we'll get you bandaged up in no time. And... thank you."

## Intermission 1

Ed Straker woke with a start in the cool, air-conditioned interior of his home, warm blankets pooling about his waist as he pressed himself up on the mattress of his bed. For a long moment he couldn't figure out where he was, or even who he was. He felt like a heavy beard should dangle from his chin and the cool of the air conditioning brought goose-bumps to his skin in memory of arctic snow.

He had not had such a vivid dream in a long while. He wasn't sure which part of the dream was the wildest; the part where he and his command crew were Vikings chasing the aliens through frosty mountains, or the part where Jackson had heroically taken a bullet for him. He chuckled a little in the darkness of his room as he rubbed a hand across his face.

And who was that woman in the dream? He was certain he'd never met her before.

Shrugging he rose to use the restroom and get a drink of water. He would look through the personnel files when he returned to Shado in the morning. He didn't want to risk the small war Dr. Jackson would bring to his office doorstep if he returned to work without a full eight hours sleep after the last forty-eight hour workday. At least, not over something that lacked any degree of urgency.

Returning to his bed he settled once more beneath the covers, eyelids heavy as he stared blearily at the digital clock display on the bedside table. Perhaps if he returned to his dreams she would be there once more...

The redhead with the moss green eyes...

## Chapter 2

With a click the katana resettled in its sheath. Calmly, with studied patience, Ed Straker set the lacquered sheath down on the bamboo floor in front of him. Close cropped white hair glistened briefly in the light filtered through the opaque wall of the dojo, dewed with sweat. Ice blue eyes opened as he took one more deep breath.

Sitting across from him, Alec Freeman huffed breaths, cheeks flushed and dark hair mussed from the exertion. His gi was open to reveal the crisp dark curls of his chest hair, cloth damp with sweat. His hakama settled around his knees where he knelt, sitting back on his heels.

"Damn, Ed," he huffed. "How do you manage to dance circles around me so effortlessly?"

"It's easy, Alec," Straker replied with the twist of a wry smile to his lips. "You're a bruiser. You attack directly and attempt to overwhelm your opponent with brute force and energy. A warrior must fight not only with his arm, but also with his mind. You apply all of your focus to a strike, I apply a minimum amount to my reply. Move like water, old friend."

"Speaking of water, you want some?" Alec asked, the whisper of cloth presaging his rise from the bamboo floor.

"Water, Alec?" The amusement deepened in Straker's blue eyes. "You must be worn out to be seeking water."

Freeman snorted with a grin. "I asked if you wanted any, Ed." He corrected. "After all when I'm grabbing my sake I can get you some!"

Straker couldn't help an answering grin and he nodded as Alec padded across the wood to where the water and his gourd of sake sat. It was a cold day in the Shadow Dojo, high in the volcanic mountains on the island of Japan. Winter had come to the peaks, and snow coated everything in white. A blizzard howled outside the canvas walls and parchment doors, buffeting the small structure.

Despite the weather, however, Straker was quite warm. The workout had certainly burned through some of his morning energy. And the day was not yet over. Henderson-Daimyo had requested a report on the samurai in the dojo to be sent to him forthwith, and Straker had at least two more warriors to test this day.

"Do you know where Paul is at, Alec?" Straker asked calmly.

"Foster-san?" Alec snorted. "Last I spoke with him he was trying to charm the hakama off of Lake-san."

Straker gave his oldest friend a wry look. "He might leave her alone if you had not already explored the bedchambers of the maids so thoroughly, Alec."

Alec treated his friend to a rakish grin.

"It's a man's duty to make sure that even the maids do not suffer a cold night, Ed," Alec replied.

Shaking his head, Straker stood with boneless grace, collecting his katana from the ground and sliding it into the obi of his hakama with a whisper of cloth. His bare feet made little sound as he strode to the doorway of the practice room. Pressing his fingertips to the

wood frame he slid it to his left to open it, revealing the long dark wood of the hall leading further back into the dojo.

"At least that means I should find them together," Straker said. "I'll return shortly, Alec."

Before his bare foot could cross the threshold into the hall the constant wail of the wind was interrupted by a sudden sound. A scream of terror or pain knifed through the air, bringing Alec to his feet so fast it upset the gourd of sake he had placed before him. Straker's hand was at the hilt of his katana and he couldn't remember moving it there. Further back in the dojo he could hear the sudden thunder of two feet as Virginia Lake and Paul Foster slid into view.

"What was that?!" Paul cried, fighting kimono loosened a bit at his waist.

Straker spared no time to answer him, as he had no answers to offer. He turned and flew through the training center and past Alec as fast as his legs could carry him, the pads of his feet beating a machine-gun tempo on the bamboo of the floor. More footsteps followed him, some heavier some lighter, the others keeping pace.

With a fling of his arm that fluttered the sleeve of his gi he slid open the front door of the dojo so fast it made a loud snap as wood cracked against wood. Outside the front doors the wind had quieted though snow still fell with astonishing quickness. He could see a distance to the open front gates and a woman running full tilt in a loose kimono.

Blood stained her robe in two places and her hair was like a brilliant cascade of red fire across her shoulders. She was looking behind herself as she stumbled across the rocky terrain towards them, and Straker could not mistake her body language. She was pursued, and it was likely her pursuers that caused her injury. With a click he loosened the katana in its sheath, wrapping one hand firmly around the rayskin of the handle.

"Virginia, get the girl," Straker barked as he set his feet on the doorframe. "Alec left; Paul right."

"Yosh!" Alec declared, the click of his katana loosening in the mouth of its sheath a compliment to his approval.

"Wakarimasu!" Paul seconded, declaring understanding of his orders.

Straker needed no further prompting. With a surge he erupted forth from the doorway of the dojo towards the woman as she ran towards the safety of the structure. He barely felt the icy pain of his bare feet in the snow. He barely felt the bitter wind lancing straight through the fragile cloth of his gi and hakama. His attention was firmly focused on a space beyond the woman where he was certain her enemy would appear.

To his left Alec charged, heavy footsteps flinging snow into the air. To his right Paul kept pace, lighter treads beating tempo to the rhythmic flutter of his kimono. The ground between Straker and the woman disappeared in a blinding flash of footfalls, and in a second he was upon her, shifting only slightly to pass her. She turned as he reached her, and for a breath her eyes met his.

Her eyes were like the moss that grew on trees in the southern forests. He could taste soil and green in the back of his throat and his heart hiccupped as if time had stuttered out of frame around him.

Straker knew those eyes without knowing how he knew them. They were familiar even though he'd never encountered them in his life. Faint whispers of burning wood and steaming

furs whisked across his nose and for that single instant where their eyes met he thought he should feel a beard against his chest.

And then he was past her and the moment was broken. Both the moment and his concentration as it turned out. His eyes took too long to return to where the enemy would be, where his mind insisted her pursuer would be, and as a result he nearly ran into the opponent as they materialized out of the snow.

He took in the man's appearance in an instant, a red jumpsuit covered his body and an iron helm covered his head. The face below the helm looked out through green fog behind what appeared to be glass of some kind. In his hands he held a weapon, though it had no blade. Straker judged it a projectile weapon, its muzzle moving slowly towards him.

With a shift of his feet made sloppy by his inattention he set himself in the snow as he slid from forward momentum and drew the katana in a brutal arc of steel. He did not question if the man in red was truly an enemy, or the woman truly an ally. He knew the elements of this equation in a place deep within himself that didn't question, it just simply knew.

The blade was a blur of silver lightning, splitting the falling snow flakes with terminal totality. As the blade of his sword passed through Straker's opponent without hesitation, the honed edge of the folded steel sword encountering little resistance in its fleshy target, the snow turned suddenly red beyond it. The man in red kept trying to raise his weapon, not realizing he was already dead as Straker slid past him on numb feet, sliding the blade back home in its sheath.

The click of the sword seating itself once more in its scabbard presaged the collapse of Straker's opponent in a spray of dark blood.

To his left Alec Freeman barreled through the snow, unhesitant as his eyes picked out another target materializing out of the snow. Alec saw the first of the enemies fall, and it brought calm to his center. If Ed believed these men enemy enough to cut one down with so little concern then Alec would do the same. He had rarely known his friend to be wrong when the cards hit the table.

The enemy raised a weapon towards him and Alec's shoulders hunched. A bright flash followed by a thunder-strike emanated from the weapon's muzzle but Freeman was already drawing his sword. He felt the impact of the projectile against the edge of his sword as he cut it in twain, reversing the stroke as he closed to bring the blade crossways through the red-clothed man.

On Straker's opposite side Paul dodged nimbly towards the last form in the snow, sliding low as the opponent's weapon barked angrily, pocking the snow near his feet. With a fierce grunt Foster spitted the man on his sword, thrusting forward and up with enough force to pick the man up off the ground. Paul withdrew his blade with a sharp sound and the enemy arched back with a soundless cry, decorating the ground with his blood as he collapsed.

"Paul, Alec?" Straker asked, voice muted to quiet in the snow.

"No injuries, Ed," Alec replied, resheathing his sword.

"None here, either, Straker-sama," Paul answered.

"Return to the dojo, I doubt this was the extent of the attack force," he directed firmly.

"Yes sir," Paul replied, immediately turning to run back to the dojo.

"They wear strange armor," Alec said thoughtfully.

"There are many factors here that are strange, Alec," Straker replied. "I will meet you back at the dojo."

"Ed..." Alec wanted to say he'd stay but he had an idea how Straker would take that so he said instead, "be careful."

"Always, Alec," Straker replied with wry smile.

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Ed Straker watched from vantage as three red-clothed forms moved covertly through the snow. He grimaced at their ineptitude. If one truly wished to remain covert in the snow, red was a poor choice of color. For all their attempts at stealth they acted as if they'd never encountered snow before. It was a curious idea considering how deep into the mountains they currently were.

Shifting softly to prevent revealing his location to them, Straker slipped away into the snow. His feet were quite warm now that he'd wrapped them in that material the enemies wore. It was quite sturdy for as thin as it was, protecting them from the chill in the mountain air. But the metal they wore on their heads could not be comfortable.

He returned to the dojo as swiftly as he could move, passing through the gate back towards the front door and into the interior as Paul Foster closed the door behind him.

"How is she?" Straker asked without greeting.

"I don't know, sir," Foster replied with a grimace. "When Freeman-san and I got back to the dojo the doctor had... taken over her care."

The way Paul had said that told Straker that it had not been a willing transfer of care. He grimaced as well, dusting snow from his hakama. Doctor Jackson was a competent physician, but he was the Daimyo's spy in the dojo, and that made him a man who could not be trusted.

"Keep the door, Paul," Straker said softly. "There are three more out in the mountains. Don't let them past you."

Knowing his orders would be followed, Straker traversed the hall towards the haunts of Doctor Jackson.

\* \* \*

"Mr. Freeman you are impeding my work!" Jackson fumed, his normally slow and careful Slavic voice tight and furious.

"Work, doctor?" Alec asked with his chin jutting out as he faced down the shorter, wiry man. "This is Straker's dojo, no matter what the Daimyo thinks. What he says goes, and until he says you can perform your 'work' on the girl you'll keep your distance."

"Damn it, Mr. Freeman!" It was as close to frustration as Dr. Jackson had ever shown to Alec and it made him quail just a little inside though he'd never admit it. "Do you think I don't know how I am known among the rest of you here?! 'The Daimyo's Snake', 'Creeping Weasel', 'The Spineless Rat'... I have heard the names Mr. Freeman! But this time I ask you to look beyond your preconceived notions of who I am. I am trying to save this woman's life and you are getting in my way!"

Alec's jaw clenched and his teeth ground together. Could he really trust Jackson to do what he said? Could he trust the dark foreigner's motives? The answer to the second question

was easy: No, he couldn't. But he seemed genuine in his desire to help the woman. Of course that could just be because he wanted to examine her injuries and come up with theories as to how they were made.

In the end, however, the chance that the man could be right and their unintended guest's life was on the line was too great a risk. With a black scowl he shifted slightly, making sure to wrap his fingers around the scabbard of his Katana and brandish the hilt.

"Go then, 'doctor', but the moment I see you doing something I don't like..." he left the threat unspoken.

Ignoring the threat, and the evident katana, Dr. Jackson brushed past him swiftly to reach the side of the mat whereon the woman had been laid. Virginia Lake crouched on her knees nearby, having been unwilling to step between the two when it seemed weapons were so close to being drawn.

Dr. Jackson ignored her too as he slipped his fingers down to test for a pulse and turn her arm and leg to judge the extent of the injury. She was feverish and unconscious and he didn't guess that her chances were very good at this moment. Blood decorated the mat and he grimaced at the quantity. A furious invective flashed through his mind, directed at the stubborn bull-headedness of the samurai of the dojo before he cleared his mind of it to focus on the task at hand.

"We need these injuries cleaned and bandaged, likely stitched as well. Ms. Lake if you would please..." He continued handing out orders and directions, even to Alec Freeman, as he fought a downhill battle against shock, exposure, and bloodloss.

\* \* \*

Straker stepped into the chamber where the woman had been brought unsure of what he was going to find. Whatever he had been gathering himself to expect, however, it wasn't the furious activity he arrived amidst. Alec, scowling and watching Doctor Jackson like a hawk, was gathering tools and supplies while Virginia assisted the doctor in tending the injured woman.

Straker stood silently at the entrance as he watched the proceedings, unwilling to interfere until he was certain it wouldn't be detrimental. Finally Dr. Jackson sat back on his heels and wiped his brow with a hand that only shook a little.

"She'll live." He said softly. "I believe I have her stabilized. Now she must rest."

"I'm not leaving you in here with her alone," Alec began stubbornly, though much of his fire had stilled when he saw how hard Jackson had worked to save the woman. "I'll sit watch."

"That won't be necessary Alec," Straker said softly from the door, gathering their startled attention. "Go and spell Paul at the door. Virginia get some rest you may need it in the hours ahead. I will stay with the doctor."

Jackson met Straker's eyes and caution made his expression close and guarded. The other two samurai departed without complaint and Straker slipped into the room, settling down near the mat and its unconscious occupant.

"That is truly unnecessary, commander," Jackson said softly. "I have stabilized her, she will recover. No harm will come to her in my care I promise you."

"I don't expect it will, doctor," Straker said softly, looking down at the face that had felt

so inexplicably familiar. "I have other reasons for being here."

"Other reasons?" Jackson asked, expression shifting cautiously. "And what are those, commander?"

Straker gave the dark man an inscrutable look with his ice blue eyes.

"Other reasons, doctor," he repeated firmly in a manner that promised no answers.

Jackson raised both of his hands and shifted backwards away from the mat, though his narrowed eyes were direct as they perused Straker near his patient. Of all of the samurai at the dojo, Jackson found it the most difficult to read Straker. His guard was too thick and his defenses too good. Jackson had felt on several occasions that they were lucky Straker's goals lined up so consistently with those of the Daimyo. If they did not... well, he would make a formidable opponent.

"I will be in the corner if you need me, commander," Jackson said, retreating.

Straker acknowledged him, but did not look in his direction, simply staring at the woman as time flitted by. After long moments of perusal, her eyes suddenly fluttered open and sought his as if she'd known he was watching. Once more he was struck by that inexplicable feeling of knowledge, as if he should know her but didn't.

"Help me," she whispered, her voice falling into a sudden silence around them.

"I have helped you," Straker replied softly, focused on her.

"Help me..." She repeated, a tear pooling in the corner of her eye and threatening to roll down her cheek.

"Don't worry, you're safe," Straker said soothingly, impulsively taking her hand. "The doctor has tended your wounds. You'll be up and about again in no time."

"They're closing in around me," she whispered, that threatening tear trailing across her cheekbone. "They will not stop until they have taken me."

"We killed three of them already," Straker told her. "I saw the other three, but they won't make it through the dojo to get to you. How did you end up here in the mountains?"

"My ship... it crashed," she answered, though the fear in her eyes proved she didn't believe his reassurance. "Hurry, you must help me or they will take me. Please!"

Straker's brow knit in confusion. "I don't understand, I have helped you, why do you keep asking me to help you?" He asked.

"No you don't understand," she said, another tear following the first as she shook her head. "But you must not forget! Help me, please help me... Time grows short. I don't want to die. Especially... especially like that."

Straker leaned back from the mat as the confusion deepened around him. Her moss green eyes bored into his and her hand gripped his fiercely. She spoke in such riddles he could not understand her, but the portent of her words tickled the back of his mind with some obscure knowledge.

"Please... Help me!" Her expression became desperate. "Commander Straker, please help me!"

The dojo began to collapse around him like a set being knocked down, fog covering his perceptions so that little remained but her on the mat in front of him.

"Now wake up!"

## Intermission 2

Straker sat bolt upright in bed, his heart pounding and adrenaline surging through his veins.

That had not been a simple dream. With calm lucidity he peeled the vivid memories of the dreams apart to analyze. Rising from the bed he picked up the phone on the table beside it, dialing with only a portion of his concentration as the rest focused on what he had just experienced.

"HQ, sir, this is Ford speaking." Came the voice from the other end of his private line to Shado.

"Lt. Ford, wake up Col. Foster, and Col. Lake. I need them at SHADO HQ as fast as they can arrive, and warn Col. Freeman I'll be arriving shortly." He commanded.

"Yes sir! Right away sir!" Came Ford's surprised response.

He hung up the phone with careful precision before heading to his closet for a suit. Jackson be damned, this would not wait until morning.

## Chapter 3

Commander Ed Straker strode into the movie studio that fronted the secret defense organization "SHADO" in the cool dark of a spring night many hours before dawn. He'd left his car parked in his reserved spot as studio executive as he headed towards his office and his analytical mind tore apart the dreams he could still so vividly remember.

Possibility one: the stress of too many forty-eight hour workdays was beginning to wear down his mental faculties, resulting in abnormally vivid hallucination dreams. These dreams bore similarities to things he had encountered or experienced in real life, such as the remake of Seven Samurai by Akira Kurosawa that was in the middle of post production on lot nine of the studio. His mind had manufactured a woman in the first dream based on something he'd heard about the victim of an alien attack and then carefully reconstructed her for the second due to his thoughts before falling into slumber the second time.

Possibility two: this was a trick of the aliens, some sort of mental attack aimed at him as leader of SHADO in an attempt to somehow incapacitate him and leave the command staff in an upset. The aliens, devious creatures hell bent on stripping the earth of its most prolific natural resource: man, had used similar mental tactics in the past. Nothing like what he had experienced, of course, but they were no strangers to tampering with the human mind.

Possibility three: his sense of duty was rebelling at being issued an ultimatum to leave the premises of SHADO and get some sleep when he was the facility's commander. Not a likely possibility, but his mind noted it anyway. It had not felt in the dream, or after waking, as if this was simply a defensive urge or rebellious instinct. It had seemed full of purpose.

Possibility four: and here his footsteps faltered as he pushed open the door into the main building, looking back over his shoulder through the night darkness towards where he'd left his bronze car, still ticking as it cooled. He could not fail to entertain the possibility despite its radical nature, but his mind focused very carefully on the different potential ramifications should it turn out to be true.

Possibility four: a woman of indeterminate origin was injured and being stalked by the aliens and had some means to project her fear and concern into the dreams of another being.

The door shut behind him and Straker passed the empty chair of Miss Ealand, the dutiful secretary that guarded his ground-level office during the daylight hours. It was likely a good thing she wasn't here at this hour of the night. He doubted her face would be free of disapproval to see him back here so soon after leaving. He strode into his office and waited for the door to shut before activating the switch that sent the whole office down below to HQ.

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Keith Ford was no stranger to the odd hours his Commander sometimes kept in regards to SHADO. Commander Straker seemed convinced at times that Headquarters couldn't operate without him there. While Ford wouldn't admit it, it did tend to comfort him quite a bit when he knew the somewhat stoic leader of Earth's last line of defense was sequestered behind the doors of his working office.

It wasn't that Lt. Ford was in any way a timid sort; he practiced often with his own sidearm at the firing range to make sure he could defend himself should the aliens make an

attempt to overthrow HQ. But there was something about the calm, competent air that Commander Straker exuded that was extremely comfortable in such a dangerous line of work as the one they were both in. You knew the aliens weren't going to get him, and as long as you were nearby that meant they weren't going to get you either.

So it was that despite how little time the Commander must have had to sleep since he last left HQ, Lt. Ford was pleased to see him return. He doubted Dr. Jackson would feel the same way once he found out, but the General's pet snake was even less of a threat to the Commander in Ford's eyes than anything the aliens could throw at him.

Oblivious to Lt. Ford's thoughts, Commander Straker nodded to him and headed for the door to his working office in HQ. Stepping through it he was greeted by the familiar sight of Col. Alec Freeman at the expensive drink dispenser he'd had installed there just for his friend.

What was unfamiliar about the sight was the disquiet in Alec's expression, and the somewhat groggy edge to his actions. Straker's eyes narrowed as he slowed, moving to go around the desk to put his back to the constantly moving mural of light that backlit his office.

"Alec," Straker greeted his second in command.

"Ed," Alec replied, leaning against the wall and giving his Commander a half-hearted attempt at a smile.

"Is something the matter?" Straker asked.

"I just..." He scowled at his drink and then looked up at Straker. "Blast, I don't know how you do it, Ed. Days at a stretch tirelessly working to protect Earth from the aliens. And here I can't handle a single graveyard shift without counting bloody sheep halfway through it."

Straker's eyes narrowed further and his lips tightened. Alec was not a negligent man, and despite his penchant for strong drink he was not the sort to doze off during a shift, graveyard or no. Straker told him so without hesitation.

"I know that, Ed," Alec said with a frustrated toss of his free hand. "That didn't stop it from happening, did it?"

"Did it feel... natural?" Straker asked carefully.

"Natural? Hell Ed, you can't blame the aliens for me fallin' asleep during my shift," he grumbled, following the logical train of thought easy enough. Straker grimaced and sat back in his chair as Col. Freeman took a shot of the neat whiskey in his glass. "And damned if I didn't have the strangest dreams..."

Straker's chair snapped up with speed and alacrity as his eyes suddenly bored into Alec where he leaned against the wall, hands gripping the desk nearly hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

"Dreams, Alec?" He hissed in question.

"Yeah, dreams," Alec agreed and then seemed to catch the intense focus his commander was subjecting him to. "Just dreams Ed, strange ones but still just dreams."

"What were they about, Alec?" Straker questioned intently.

"About? They were about what I bloody well should have been doing rather than sleeping," Alec grunted, scowling at his drink again as if it were to blame, "fighting the aliens, of course. Only my mind mixed that thought with a couple of the movies filming in the studio

upstairs. Beowulf I think; and that Japanese remake on lot nine."

Straker slowly allowed himself to sink back into his chair as his mind chewed at that morsel of information. It fit, somehow into the bigger picture, but he didn't know how. At least, he didn't know yet.

"I don't think your sleep was accidental, Alec," Straker said, steepling his fingers and talking to their tips.

"Aw, come on Ed," Alec said, coming off the wall indignantly. "You don't think I just took a nap because I felt like it, do you?"

"No of course not, Alec," Straker said, discarding that thought as irrelevant. "I think you were forced into sleep by an outside source."

Alec's brow furrowed, it wasn't like the Commander to worry a bone that vigorously unless he had some reasoning for it. But what possible reason could Straker have for thinking the aliens had somehow induced his unintended nap? He'd seen all the same reports Ed had about the recent alien activity, and nothing suggested they had a weapon capable of that.

"All right, Ed, I'll bite," Alec said cautiously, refilling his glass and moving to one of the chairs across from his commander to sit. "Why do you think the aliens made me take a nap?"

"I didn't say it was the aliens, Alec," Straker said, a familiar light in his eyes that Alec knew well to mean he was putting puzzle pieces together. "I said an 'outside source' and that's exactly what I think it was. You see, I had those same dreams immediately before coming into HQ."

Alec was flabbergasted and it showed on his face. He blinked wide eyes at his old friend after that proclamation, trying to make sense of it.

"In your dream, there was a woman, was there not?" Ed asked directly. "She had red hair, so red it seemed almost unnatural. And moss green eyes, yes?"

Freeman's jaw dropped. "How did you..? You... you were serious, you had the same bloody dreams, didn't you?"

"Yes Alec, I did," Straker nodded seriously. "I doubt they were simply dreams."

"Col. Foster and Col. Lake were in my dream as well, Ed, as was Dr. Jackson," Alec said with a worried frown. "Do you think they could have experience this phenomenon as well?"

"I certainly intend to find out, Alec," Ed said firmly. "I've called Col. Foster and Col. Lake to HQ, we can ask them as soon as they arrive. If it's in the affirmative then we need to discuss what it could have been and what to do about it."

"But what could do such a thing?" Alec asked, dumbfounded.

"I don't know, Alec," Ed replied seriously. "But if the dreams were any indication our time is short."

\* \* \*

"I saw the same thing," Col. Paul Foster answered, expression showing his astonishment.

"And I, Commander Straker," Col. Virginia Lake added softly.

"Excellent," Straker said with a nod, sitting back in his chair behind the desk.

"Excellent?" Alec scoffed. "It's excellent that the four highest ranking members of this facility shared the same dream? How do you figure?!"

"Very simply, Alec," Straker said with a slight sardonic smile. "It means that I am neither delusional, nor suffering from mental strain due to exertion. The possibilities have dwindled by half in my favor."

"What are the other possibilities, sir?" Virginia asked incisively, leaning forward in her seat as Alec gaped dumbfounded for a moment.

"There are two I've come up with so far," Straker replied, turning his ice blue gaze on her. "The first is the most sinister. The aliens have found some way to penetrate our sleeping minds and feed us dreams of their own choosing; all of us, simultaneously, no matter where we are."

"Why would that be a problem? They're only dreams," Col. Foster responded.

"This time they were dreams, Paul," Straker agreed. "But the human mind is vulnerable in dreams. What could it be next time that they send into our minds while we sleep? Col. Freeman experience the same thing despite being within HQ, we would be safe nowhere."

The others sat back as the possible ramifications of that sunk in. Silence reigned for a moment, broken once more by Col. Lake.

"And the second, Commander?" She prompted.

Straker turned his gaze on her once more, but his expression was more pensive this time.

"That someone... or something, capable of broadcasting their thoughts and emotions into our dreams, has attempted to contact us with a cry for help," he said softly.

Silence answered that theory as well, but it was a thoughtful silence as the members of the command team sifted through their own memories of the excessively vivid dreams they had shared.

"That woman in the dream," Alec guessed. It wasn't a question, but Straker nodded anyway.

"Both dreams shared a common theme," Virginia said suddenly. "The woman was in trouble in both of them, and hounded by a group of six aliens each time."

"They both took place in the mountains, during a blizzard or snowstorm," Paul recalls, brow knitted together as he thought on it.

"I checked with Ford before you both arrived," Alec piped in, sipping on his drink. "SID's been silent, there haven't been any aliens breaking through our outer defenses."

"They could have been here already," Virginia pointed out. "The Interceptors missed a UFO just two days ago, and Skydiver couldn't confirm a positive hit on the craft before it disappeared off our radar."

Straker knew the situation well, one of the reasons he hadn't gone home in nearly two days.

"Have either of the Mobiles in the area reported signs of wreckage, Virginia?" Straker asked.

"Negative, Commander," she replied, shaking her head no. "There were no signs of debris in the area that Skydiver lost the UFO, but Lt. Masters was certain they'd grazed the enemy craft."

"Where did it go off the radar?" Straker asked.

"It was near the Rocky Mountains, wasn't it Ginny?" Col. Foster asked.

"Alec?" Straker asked, eyes sharp as they went to Col. Freeman.

Already anticipating his commander's request, Freeman pressed his hand to the intercom at the door and conversed briefly with Ford. He looked back to Straker as his thumb left the button.

"Lt. Ford reports that blizzard conditions are present in the northern portion of the Rocky Mountains," Alec said, expression tight.

"Virginia, redirect the Mobiles to that area of the Rocky's," Straker commanded as he stood abruptly. "Paul, get in direct communication with Skydiver and divert them directly to run high altitude passes, prepared to take down any craft that break the cloud cover. Alec, you're with me."

He didn't wait for them to acknowledge his words, he simply strode out of his office, Alec at his heels.

"What are we doing, Ed?" Freeman asked as he set his glass down on the nearest console.

"We're going to the Rocky Mountains, Alec," Straker said.

\* \* \*

Snow gusted up across the rise and twisted like sinuous snakes in the air. Straker's pistol was naked in his hand and Alec moved behind him, similarly armed.

"Sir, please stay back," the harried Mobile pilot who was acting as their guide requested for the third time in so many minutes.

Col. Freeman felt sympathy for the man, only two of the aliens had been accounted for, and if the dream had been any indication there were yet four more lurking in the trees of the area. Alec snorted internally at that thought. There only intelligence on the situation had been some mystical dream sending. And yet... it had not been proven inaccurate yet.

"Maybe we should stay back, Ed," Alec prompted.

"We're close, Alec, I can feel it," Straker replied, ignoring all prompting and slipping over the hill into the open, ducking and weaving behind a tree with his pistol at the ready.

"Damn it Ed, you're going to get yourself killed!" He growled after his Commander. "And you're going to get me killed too." He muttered too low for Straker to hear.

"Commander!" Their guide protested.

"Save it, Lt., the Commander knows what he's doing," Alec said. At least, I hope he does, Freeman thought before following Straker over the ridge.

Straker moved stealthily through the dark and silent trees on the mountain's side. This area felt familiar, like a place he'd been to though he'd never seen. It called to him and he ached to charge onward and upward through the trees towards that call, but he knew the danger. He wasn't going to risk his life now when he was this close.

"Ed, what if this is a trap," Alec asked from near his elbow, checking his gun to make sure it was ready to fire.

"It's not, Alec," Ed insisted fiercely in a whisper. "If you had seen her eyes you would feel the same."

"You sure you were looking at her eyes?" Alec whispered back.

Straker ignored that and sprinted to the next tree instead. A sudden bark of gunfire from up the mountain pocked a tree to his left and he crouched, lifting his sidearm with fluid speed. His retort was loud to his ears, being close to the muzzle as he was. An alien stumbled away from its hiding place and hit the ground, gun bouncing across the white snow as it fell from dead fingers. As a continuation of the same movement he rose and walked his gun up the mountain, keeping it trained towards where the enemies might arrive before ducking behind another tree.

Sudden machinegun fire peppered the snow and tree near him and he grimaced as splinters of wood scored his suit and cheek, ducking lower to avoid further shrapnel. Alec came out from behind cover and his gun reported twice in quick succession as he followed it up the snowdrift. Straker came around the opposite side of his tree with gun sliding smoothly into firing position but Alec's shots had dropped the alien already.

His eyes tracked further movement and he shifted effortlessly towards it, squeezing off a round that grazed the snow near the movement. He cursed and ducked behind an outcropping as machinegun fire replied to his miss. Alec's gun spoke again, but the machinegun answered that one too.

Looking across the snowy underbrush, Straker met Freeman's eyes and gestured with his head towards the alien. Alec nodded and opened up a quick spray of suppressing fire as Straker twisted around the far side of his outcropping and charged up across open ground to better vantage. The muzzle of his gun snarled three times, striking the alien twice in the midsection and sending him tumbling to the ground.

Straker charged up the rest of the hill to its peak and stumbled to a stop. Surprise made him falter and his gun arm dropped as he looked over the crest into a small artificial basin. Alec came up beside him, huffing and grunting, but that stopped too as his eyes took in the sight.

Nestled within a basin of melted snow and rock was a spaceship. There were horrible scorch marks across the flank of the chic craft, and it had obviously not landed well against the mountainside. It didn't look to be of the aliens' design, but it also wasn't of Earth design.

She had said her ship had crashed, he thought dumbly.

The last alien, unbeknownst to either of the dumbfounded men on the ridge, slowly rose from his hiding place in the snow and lifted his weapon.

\* \* \*

The sudden report of gunfire was loud in the silence.

Both Straker and Freeman whirled to look downhill towards the sound and saw the alien standing in the snow less than sixty feet away. Even as Straker started to raise his sidearm his memory replayed the sound of the gunshot already fired. Alec's gun mimicked his, raising in time towards the opponent who had them dead in his sights. But the alien didn't fire.

With a sudden spray of blood the alien collapsed, dropping its weapon into the snow. Standing behind him, visible as a slender black flame against the snow with smoking gun was Dr. Doug Jackson. His dark Slavic features were set in an expression of distaste as he gazed on the fallen alien, but there was also certain satisfaction in his eyes.

"Jackson?!" Alec asked, startled into open surprise.

Dr. Jackson's inscrutable gaze flickered up to Col. Freeman and his expression didn't change. With calm and unhurried motions he wiped the muzzle and barrel of his pistol off with a pristine white cloth and carefully holstered it once more at his hip below the edge of his uniform jacket.

"Col. Freeman," he acknowledged blandly.

"Doctor," Straker greeted him, though a bit more guarded than Alec.

"Commander," Jackson replied smoothly. "I see you decided to disregard my direction to remain in bed for at least eight hours."

"I see you decided to follow me out into the middle of the Rocky Mountains," Straker rebutted calmly.

Jackson's lips twitched minutely and he began to ascend the hill towards them. Alec tensed, glancing back at the obviously alien craft lying cradled by the mountain nearby.

"If Jackson sees that..." he started softly.

"He will eventually," Straker said with a grimace, irritated at the doctor's out of character decision to come out to a battlezone. "Stall him, I need a little time to investigate."

Alec didn't hesitate he started down through the snow, purpose in his step. As soon as Jackson's attention shifted to Freeman, Straker turned and headed into the warmth of the crash site, holstering his gun to move quicker over the rough terrain. He moved as swiftly as he could towards the side of the small one-person craft, unsure what he expected to find.

When he stopped at the side of the craft he saw the full extent of the damage. One half of the craft's nose had been crumpled and shattered with the impact and the glass dome of a passenger compartment was blood-splattered and fogged with smoke, glass shards broken off from where shrapnel had damaged it.

Curling his fingers on the warm metal of the fuselage, Straker pulled himself up onto the nose of the ship, shifting to peer in through the damaged glass of the passenger compartment. Eyes the color of wild moss met his and he felt something falter inside him at the contact. He had thought the occurrence just a creation of his dream mind, but now he felt it in the real world and it was every bit as powerfully distracting as his dreaming self had conjured it.

Red hair cascaded down around her shoulders, shoulders clothed in a uniform of some kind that was dirty and blood-stained. She was pinned to her seat with a rod of metal through her arm and she seemed fragile and helpless within the craft. When her eyes focused on Straker, however, relief made her whole form tremble.

"Commander Straker! You found me!" She said, biting her lip in sudden pain.

"Don't speak," Straker said firmly, judging how best to get her out of the cockpit. "I'm going to get you out of there."

With a wince at how much he knew it was going to hurt he grabbed hold of the bar that pinned her and braced himself. He saw her squint her eyes shut and tense and knew he didn't need to warn her. With a tremendous heave he yanked the bar free and tossed it aside, reaching in and gathering her up as she bit back a scream, shaking all over.

Moments later he wrapped a fragment of his suit around her arm to stifle the blood flow as she looked up at him with those piercing green eyes.

"I have questions," he murmured to her.

"I imagine you do," she replied in a weak voice. "I have the strength yet to answer a few."

"They can wait until you are safe and stabilized," Straker insisted.

"My ship's sensors picked up six of the Tholians," she whispered in warning.

"We've dealt with the aliens," Straker replied.

Her smile was wry as she looked up at him. "Such a broad term, 'aliens'."

"Is that what you are?" Straker asked.

"I thought the questions would wait?" she teased him softly.

"You're right," Ed replied, fighting the involuntary flush to be so caught. "You're safe with us, I promise."

Slipping his arms beneath her slender form he lifted her from the ground and turned to carry her away from the wreckage. The snow had lessened, and moonlight punctured the clouds in places as he crested the lip of the crash site and looked down at where Alec was delaying a frustrated Doctor Jackson.

"Commander!" Jackson declared, brushing past Alec rudely as he interrupted the taller man.

"Yes, doctor?" Straker asked urbane.

"She is injured, she must be tended," Doctor Jackson replied, eyes turning to the woman, now barely conscious.

"I'm aware of that doctor. Let's get her down to the Mobiles, shall we?" Straker replied easily, continuing to walk.

"You could have left this for others to do, Commander," Jackson protested. "You need your rest. You are no good to SHADO incoherent with fatigue."

"Your concern is noted doctor, but this was something I needed to do myself," Straker said, his tone brooking no dissension.

"Because of this dream you shared with your commanding officers?" Jackson asked directly, his tone querulous.

"You bugged Commander Straker's office?!" Alec began angrily.

"I had to, Col., how else am I supposed to find out what's going on around headquarters?" Jackson replied defensively.

"Gentlemen," Straker interrupted them in an irritated tone. "Yes, Dr. Jackson, because of the shared dream. I promise I'll be returning to my bed for more sleep as soon as this situation is wrapped up, rest assured."

They reached Mobile 1 and Straker gently settled the woman onto a gurney and turned back to look at Alec.

"I'll leave the paperwork for this up to you, Alec," he said with a slight twinkle.

"Oh thanks a million, Ed," Alec grumbled.

"And doctor," Straker turned to Jackson, "You didn't mention why it was that you were out here."

Jackson's eyes met Straker's and the commander could have sworn there was a slight twitch to those vulpine lips. But it was smoothed before he could say one way or the other.

"Well..." the doctor said at length, "I had to repay them for the shoulder, didn't I?"

# Epilogue

Ed Straker sat down in the expensively upholstered salon with a habitual gesture of his hands to resettle the tails of his coat. His long white hair was pulled back and held by a black ribbon tied in a properly fashionable bow. Ice blue eyes perused the dandies at the salon and he grimaced slightly.

Why was he here? His boots didn't have the right amount of heel and his coat was in last season's colors. He didn't apply rouge to his cheeks and the white of his hair was natural, not powdered. This sort of place was not his usual stop.

But then he saw her. She sat at the bar, one hand self-consciously smoothing out her skirt and petticoats. Her head and shoulders were decorated with the reddest curls he had ever seen, and when she looked his way time seemed to stop as her moss green eyes fell on him.

In a heartbeat he was aware that he was dreaming. Contrary to his normal response when he discovered such a thing however, he didn't immediately wake. He simply became aware of how incomplete the scenery was, save for her.

"I don't even know your name," he said, testing out his ability to speak.

She turned towards him and her expression became almost shy as she smiled.

"It's Alora," she told him, moving towards where he sat with effortless seeming grace.

"Alora." It sounded good on his tongue. "I'm dreaming." It was not a question, but she nodded in answer anyway. "Are you causing this?"

"The first of many questions, I assume," she said with an impish smile. "Yes, I have brought your mind to the dreaming place to communicate with you as I did before."

"So those dreams I was having, those were your cry for help?" Straker asked.

"Yes," she agreed with another nod. "I didn't have enough energy left to form complex messages so I tried to shape the imagery of the dream to be the message. That takes much less energy."

"It was effective," Straker told her. "Are the others here as well?"

"No," She shook her head. "I found their minds through yours initially, and though it was a strain I brought them into your dream so that you would know it was a message."

"How did you find me?" This question was very important, but he tried not to frighten her with the directness of his stare.

"It wasn't hard," she demurred, looking down at her gloved hands in the lap of her skirt. "I scanned out of necessity and your mind was the purest and strongest I could read. It drew me in. I could hardly say that I was the one doing the finding."

"Is this an ability that all of your people possess?" he asked. This question was just as important as the last.

"My people?" She glanced at him from beneath her lashes. Her moss green eyes had lost none of their punch and he struggled to keep his reaction in check and unnoticeable. "So you have already decided I am alien?"

"I haven't heard of any humans capable of entering or shaping another's dreams," Straker said wryly.

"I was only teasing, Commander Straker," she said with a smile.

"Call me Ed," he told her.

She blushed prettily. "Well, Ed then, I am an alien to your world that I cannot deny. If you had not seen my ship already I might try to pass myself off as something else but... that seems a moot point to argue, don't you agree?"

"I much prefer the truth anyway, Alora," Straker replied evenly. "You're not..."

"Like the Tholians? No." Alora shook her head. "They don't have the mental capacity as a species to perfect our techniques."

"That's the second time you've called them that," he noted.

"That is what they are called," she replied. "My people know of them, we've encountered them a time or two though it has never turned out favorably. They covet what we have, what we are capable of, and try to steal its secrets for their own. If you had not rescued me... well, that doesn't bear thinking on."

"It looked like you crash landed," Straker noted. "Did they shoot you down?"

"No." She shook her head no. "My ship malfunctioned and I had to force a landing. Those creatures followed me in. If your people hadn't grazed their ship I wouldn't have been alive to send that distress call."

"We didn't pick your craft up on our radar."

"And you won't," she said with a mysterious smile. "But I'll be back eventually I'm sure. You have such fascinating dreams... I'd like to explore more of them."

"Back..?" He felt an inexplicable sadness. "You're leaving."

"Already gone," she admitted. "Your doctor has a noble streak he hides very well, but in his heart of hearts he's a scientist. I'd rather not tempt him with my presence or the knowledge I might hold. Would it... would it be all right to visit your dreams again?"

Straker considered that prospect for all the time it truly deserved considering, about two seconds.

"Yes, Alora, you're welcome in my dreams," he told her.

"Good," she said with a soft smile as she stood. "Because I have a feeling you'll find me a frequent visitor."

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