

Life Goes On

by maslider

Summary: Commander Straker deals with an anniversary of his son's death.

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Rating: G

Ed Straker casually glanced at his secretary's calendar on his way out of his Harlington-Straker Studio office. En-route to a meeting with General Henderson, he reflected with amusement on his current secretary's unfathomable preference for cute puppies and soulful kittens, a peculiar calendar choice for one of SHADO's more ruthless security operatives. She'd replaced his last secretary after a security breach earlier in the year. Gazing more carefully at today's date, he felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. The date on the calendar completely wiped out any memory of his original errand. He felt the world shift beneath his feet.

He had forgotten the day.

It wasn't an adequate excuse, but working in SHADO, the days and nights all blended together hidden deep within the earth. Time - didn't fly - but it did grind inexorably onward.

He could remember his wedding day and his son's birth as if it was yesterday - but had no idea what he'd had for dinner last night. 'Getting old, senile? I'm young, but it could be an aftereffect of some alien attack.'

'How could I forget? I can remember the current tactical procedures for a hundred different strategic scenarios and a dozen new equipment development projects in progress, but I forgot what day it was today.'

Five years ago, today, he'd killed his only son.

He'd be older now. Taller, just starting to notice girls. Instead, he was dead. His son, John Straker, rotted beneath the beautiful English countryside.

Buried under another man's name in a foreign land.

'I let him down that day out of fear. Fear that I was letting my personal feelings interfere. Fear that letting his needs interfere with SHADO's requirements would be a slippery slope. Fear that, if I ever let my feelings rule, I could never be sure again. I couldn't work for SHADO like that. And you can never quit SHADO.' He turned abruptly away from the accusing calendar and strode automatically out the door.

SHADO's needs, the world's needs -- had prevailed that day.

What about John's needs? A simple drug would have saved his life. He would have lived. Straker reflected bitterly that he would have seen his son on weekends and holidays. Watched him grow. He'd have five years of happy memories.

What would it have mattered? A single transporter tied up for another hour? Would the world have lost anything? Was it any better for John's death?

Would anyone have even noticed?

Alec would have known. That the transport was sidelined for a private reason, the crew, the schedulers.... In the end everyone would have known. Commander Straker's.... weakness.

A father's concern for his only son. An understandable weakness in a man. But, once shown, the aliens would have never stopped targeting it.

Any weakness was a danger. The sharks always start to circle when they smell blood in the water.

Would it have been seen as a weakness? Perhaps he had grown so warped and paranoid by the weird life he led fighting this hidden war. Perhaps he could have and should have forced SHADO to save John's life.

The self-absorbed commander noticed with a start that his car was blocking the studio drive, while his driver waited patiently for his instructions. He sighed with impatient resignation. He'd vastly preferred the old days of driving himself; it was one of the few times the Commander of SHADO could be alone outdoors. Unfortunately, the aliens took advantage of the fact once too often. So now, when the Commander of SHADO moved, it was under a complete security net.

John loved cars. He enjoyed playing with all the flashy cars Straker was forced to drive as part of his studio executive cover. He enjoyed exploring the studios and all the exciting gadgetry involved in making movies. He would love one of the new tours Harrington-Straker ran through the outer sections of the studio. They'd gone to the studio for lunch the day he died. He would have enjoyed visiting the vastly expanded studio complex which remained an excellent cover. The occasional hit film inadvertently selected by one of SHADO's moonlighting personnel did wonders for the organization's cash flow.

His old secretary, Miss Ealand, had a surprisingly good nose for spotting hits. SHADO had to delegate her entirely to the studio last year when gathering the primary funding for the planning phase of Mars Base. Some of the studio's worst disasters, filmed only to provide a cover for various anti-alien campaigns over the years had become astoundingly successful cult favorites. Their very wretched ghastliness attracting a rabid fan following.

"Home." The solemn driver's impassive face revealed nothing, but Straker sensed his surprise. The driver efficiently radioed their destination in to the central security office without comment.

Straker brooded silently during the drive through the newly developed suburban sprawl, surfacing with a start later to find himself sitting in the motionless car in front of his house. John would have liked the yard. Of course, it was only there to provide an easily secured zone of sight around the property, but his son would have loved it.

Straker moved quickly past the blinking answering machine on up the stairs. He reluctantly decided to call Henderson now and cancel their meeting. He'd have to think up some reasonable sounding excuse. Maybe illness? He had just picked up the phone when he felt the blood drain from his face as he noticed the picture of a young Johnny on his bedside table. It was his last school picture.

Straker abruptly dropped the phone and grabbed his running clothes, ripping them from their hook in the wardrobe. Banging out the back door, he concentrated mindlessly on slowly stretching to warm his muscles as he prepared for a run. It was hard to get into the right mindset, blanking every thought, while ignoring the abrupt flurry of activity next door.

"Sir? It'll be a few moments." Straker ignored the guard completely as he finished stretching his hamstrings.

The tall, lean American agent hastily blocked his way as Straker moved towards the drive. "Sir, just a second, we just need a minute to get pulled together here first."

"Never mind, I'll stay close." Moving away from the security chief's hasty protests and frantic waves to the concealed Guardhouse.

SHADO security hated his running. If they had their way, any running the SHADO

Commander did would be on a guarded indoor track beneath several tons of reinforced titanium. But Straker had discovered jogging a few years back and found it a great deal more satisfying than golf. His doctors agreed it did wonders for both his claustrophobia and his cardiovascular system, so the security team had learned to reluctantly work around it.

Straker set a fast pace during the first mile, cutting alone into a path through the local wood despite his airy promise to the security chief. His security team would catch up soon enough.

Today he felt desperate to be alone. This was alone as he ever got nowadays. He ran on, vainly trying to outrun his memories. It was all a needless precaution anyway; the aliens would never target him on a weekday morning. They'd never expect to find Commander Straker at home during working hours.

Despite his headlong rush away from the empty house and its yellowing picture with its shining eyes and eager smile, it was the image of his last sight of his bleeding son's face that filled his mind's eye.

He could never run fast enough to escape his own thoughts.

Even as he surged faster up the steep hill he could hear the thud of other footsteps, following his own thudding steps. He slowed to find the echo in perfect synchronicity. John had adored him, wanted to follow him everywhere despite Mary's concealed rage and petty obstructions of his visitation rights. It was following Straker that got him killed that day. If only he'd waited to see Johnny's boat like he'd promised. Straker sprinted up the old tor, stumbling slightly on the piles and drifts of old rotting leaves beneath the overhanging branches.

He felt his heart pounding and slowed at last, he was already past his usual turning point and his chest was heaving as if he'd been running a marathon. "I have got to stop smoking." He gasped disgustedly.

His already pounding pulse jerked into overdrive and he was embarrassed to find himself instinctively reaching for the concealed holster in the small of his back when he heard a rueful voice directly behind him, "we're too old to be in training for the Olympics. If you stop smoking, we'll have to start running relays."

The normally impeccably turned out security chief was dressed in an oxford shirt soaked in sweat and limping slightly now in his jeans and Nikes as he staggered to a halt, inhaling great breaths of cold air.

Straker froze for an instant before pivoting to start jogging slowly back towards the distant house. "There was no need. I told you I'd only go a short distance." He carefully ignored the other man's skeptical grunt as they moved down the long sloping hills. He tried to block the other's footsteps from his mind.

Straker felt an unaccountable surge of rage as he walked tiredly up to the porch of his house to see Alec Freeman sitting patiently on a bench quietly working on some papers in his briefcase.

He ruthlessly suppressed his feelings, "Colonel".

Alec looked oddly constrained and formal, "Commander, I'm sorry to bother you at home. I'd just like to have a word."

Straker nodded, reluctantly ushering the other man into the kitchen. Noting with annoyance the security man's unobtrusive presence at the back of their little parade.

He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and poured a glass. He hesitated for an instant and then poured a second glass that he slid down the counter towards the sweating security officer. "Would you like something to drink Alec?" He forced his face into a polite

smile. If only someone else had brought it out, anyone but him. Seeing Alec Freeman today simply ground salt into an open wound.

"No, yes. No, I'd better not." The other man flushed.

Straker felt a wintry amusement over the other man's atypical behavior. "Just as long as you know what you want."

Then the other man's eyes met his and Straker saw the repressed pain in Freeman's eyes. He regretted his own forced humor.

"It's not what I want, but what needs to be done. We need to talk about it. What happened."

There could only be one thing he was referring to and Straker tried to buy some time. "Did? Why, Alec? I don't think we need to go into all that."

"I think we do. We need to talk about what I did."

Straker could feel the security officer's puzzlement without glancing in that direction. "No." He throttled down a rising panic as he set the glass of untouched water down.

"Yes. It's been five years, Ed!" Freeman gazed intently over at the inverted face and the smooth blond cap of short-cropped hair. "I was getting ready to go to Moonbase when I heard we had an A alert."

"A? Who?"

Alec smiled ruefully, "You. Your behavior this morning, well, it was abnormal enough to trigger some alarms. You tend to be pretty predictable on certain things and skipping out on a planned meeting with Henderson to play hooky rang a lot of alarm bells. When SHADO personnel start acting odd nowadays, people notice. It does wonders for our overall security, but it can play hell with people's nerves. Too much like big brother's always watching you. I should have warned your new security team about today, but I.... forgot. Can you believe it? Forgot today was the anniversary."

Straker focused his attention completely on the glinting of the reflected sunlight off the facets of the cut glass tumbler on the counter before him. "No. I'm not surprised at all." He washed his hands carefully, ignoring the other two men for a moment. "How widespread is the alert? Do I need to come in for testing?"

Alec sighed, "No. I had a word with Jackson. Then I called Henderson's office and said you wouldn't be able to make it and would reschedule later."

"Good. Efficient as always, Alec." He focused empty eyes on the beautiful sunlit green leaves waving gently against the window and forced his insane rage back down. He carefully encased every violent thought and sealed the fire within carefully behind a wall of ice. He would be the perfect, emotionless commander before he turned to face the other men. "I'm taking the rest of the day off, Alec. I'll see you after you get back from Moon Base."

"Ed?" The rugged Australian spoke with forced calmness to the other man's slender back. "We, well, never really talked about it."

"Talked? What was there to talk about?"

"What? Everything, we just ignored it. You're ignoring it now." He came to a ragged halt. Straker could feel his footsteps move across the room till he was directly behind his back.

"Damn it Ed, I killed your son."

"I didn't mean to, Ed. You know that, I didn't even know. But I killed him and you know it. As long as we ignore it, we can never resolve it."

Straker could feel the intensity of the other's gaze on his back, but he refused to turn.

"We were friends from the start and I didn't know." There was a broken desperation to

Freeman's voice.

Straker felt his frozen indifference deepen into a dead coldness where nothing and no one could affect him. "It was necessary." He concentrated completely on a small bird perched on the branch of the tree off to his left.

"Would you, at least let me say that I'm sorry? All this time we've avoided the whole subject. You just run away at the first" He sighed. "You're doing it now."

Straker felt a tiny crack form in the glacier that had formed around him, shielding him from the effect of their words. "I'm here. I simply feel that what's past is past. There's absolutely no reason to disinter that particular incident."

"There's every reason, damn it, Ed. We have to clear the air."

"No we don't. Its over."

"No, its not. That's the problem. You block things out and then run away without actually dealing with them."

Freeman was so close now that Straker could feel his breath against his back. "That's where you're wrong." He felt his lips twist and suppressed his inexplicable urge to laugh.

He swung around, in complete control now, every erratic urge frozen into submission. Focusing his full attention on the taller man; "I deal with things as you put it every day."

"No, you don't." His voice softened. "It's been five years, Ed. And I can still feel you blaming me sometimes. It's not necessary - this - silence."

"Necessary? No." He worked desperately on sealing up the crevasses breaking up the ice encasing his emotions. "Its simply counterproductive. Its over and there's nothing to be done." He refused to let any emotion color his voice or face.

He stared impassively at the other man, sure now that no emotion or thought colored his response. He was as cold as ice, the Commander wondered fleetingly if he would ever thaw.

He was surprised to see Alec's eyes sadden and he felt a fleeting touch on his shoulder. "Alright Ed, you're right. Today is not the day to deal with any of this. I think I'll take you up on that drink now."

Straker snorted as he finally took a gulp from the glass of water he found in his hand and turned away from the other man to refill the glass. He was pleased to note that his hands had finally stopped shaking. "There's never any reason to waste time on regrets. They're useless."

Alec sat down, clearing his throat. "I know. I was wrong to bring the subject up today."

He should stop the conversation now. "Any day. You can never go back. Except for the aliens of course, they can stop time, but never really turn it back." He winced, "yet."

Alec grabbed a bottle of whiskey and poured a double, "Well, until then, they'll just have to muddle through from day to day like the rest of us."

Straker knew he should let the conversation die a natural death, but he still felt a compulsion to speak, "It was better. That way." He felt his words were too obscure. "You. Not."

The older man paled abruptly, looking at Straker with shocked eyes. "You could never have done it."

Straker frantically reached for the lost wall of ice. "I've always done whatever's necessary."

"Not that." Freeman was positive.

Straker felt oddly comforted by the other man's surety.

"Life goes on, you know. Even when you don't want it to." Freeman didn't look at the other man as he concentrated on his drink. He had dark memories of his own that he didn't

care to hold up to the light of day.

Straker stood motionless for an instant before nodding and gently tapping his glass against the other man's glass.

It was a toast and a memorial.

"To Life."

THE END