

Paying the Price

by Elizabeth Neill

Timeline: This story takes place immediately after the episode "A Question of Priorities"

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Warning: Slash - this story contains descriptions of m/m sexual activities.

Ed Straker stood alone in the hospital foyer. People came and went around him, but he didn't see them. He slowly became aware that a nurse was calling to him, but he couldn't seem to understand what she was saying. For a moment, the ground seemed to lurch beneath his feet, and he thought he was going to fall. He closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a deep shuddering breath.

He made it to the car park, and felt some measure of relief as he climbed into his car. Tires screeched as he sped out of the car park, not thinking about where he was going, just needing to get away from the place.

Straker realised, almost with surprise, that he was outside his house. He brought the car to a halt in the driveway and switched off the engine. His grip tightened on the steering wheel as he thought about the empty house waiting for him. It had always been a house rather than a home, a place where he spent little time. There were few happy memories there.

The commander let go of the steering wheel, but made no move to get out of the car. Only when the phone rang did he realise he'd been staring out into the darkness for some time. He flinched at the noise and stared down at the handset, but didn't answer it. When it finally stopped, Straker climbed out of the car. As he was letting himself into the house, his radio went off. He took the device from his pocket, hesitated with his thumb on the answer button, then put it away again.

In the SHADO control centre, Lt. Ford turned to Alec Freeman with a worried look.

"He's not answering on his radio either, sir," he said.

Alec frowned. "Do you have the current location of his car?"

Ford called up a set of co-ordinates on the screen in front of him. "Yes, sir. It's at his house." The lieutenant waited for a response, but Freeman hesitated. "Should I send security round to Commander Straker's house?" Ford asked.

"No, it's all right. I'll go myself."

* * *

Freeman parked his car just behind Straker's. He slipped his gun into its holster before getting out. He wasn't expecting trouble, but it paid to be careful. The crunch of gravel under his feet sounded loud - the place was quiet. The house was dark too, Freeman noted. He wondered whether his superior had decided to get an early night.

Freeman walked up to the front door and rang the bell. He stood there for a long time, long enough to think that no one was going to come. Then lights went on somewhere in the house, followed by the hallway. The door opened, and Ed Straker stood silhouetted in the entrance.

"What are you doing here, Alec?" Straker asked, with no attempt to hide the asperity in his voice.

"You're lucky it's me, and not half of SHADO security on your doorstep. And they wouldn't have knocked."

Straker still blocked the doorway, and for a moment Freeman thought he wasn't going to let him in. Then Straker turned on his heel and walked back up the hallway. Freeman realised that the open door was the only invitation he was going to get, and hurried after the other man.

"What's going on?" Freeman asked as he followed Straker into the lounge. He tried to keep his tone light, but didn't entirely succeed. "You ignored your car-phone and your radio."

"Alec!" It was the strangled tone in his friend's voice that made Freeman stop. Straker tried to walk away, but Freeman caught him by the arm and turned him round. Then he saw Straker's face clearly for the first time. He'd never seen such a look of despair there before, and it scared him.

"What is it?" Alec asked in a hoarse whisper. Straker sank onto the steps leading down into the room.

"He's dead," he said.

"Who?"

"John. He's dead."

"But when? How?" He sat down beside the other man.

"It was an accident." Straker's voice was flat, the words coming out almost mechanically. "He ran out in front of a car. At Mary's house."

"Mary ..." echoed Freeman. Sometimes he thought that that woman was Ed's own personal jinx.

"It wasn't her fault," Straker said. There was a growing bitterness in his voice. "It was mine."

Straker got to his feet and walked over to the drinks cabinet. Freeman followed him over, and Straker pressed a glass into his hand.

"I think you need this more than me," Alec told him, but he just shook his head.

An awkward silence followed. Straker took a seat, and stared across the room. Freeman followed his gaze to a framed photo of his son. It was one of the few personal touches that softened the cold masculine décor of the room. Freeman downed his drink in one go, then went and sat next to his friend.

"I know you like to take the whole world on your shoulders, but this isn't your fault."

That drew a bitter laugh from Straker. "Of course not. Ed Straker could never screw things up."

"No, but I know how much you love John. I know you'd never let anything happen to him. Not if there was anything you could do about it."

Straker looked away. He seemed about to speak, but nothing was forthcoming. Alec wondered what his friend still wasn't telling him. Unfortunately, one of the first things he'd learnt about Ed Straker was that he'd tell you things in his own good time.

"Let me get you a drink," Freeman said. "A cup of tea, if you won't take anything stronger."

"Tea and sympathy, Alec?" Straker asked, but there was a weary resignation in his voice.

Freeman went into the kitchen and switched on the kettle. Then he walked quietly to the bathroom, opened the cabinet, and quickly rummaged through the contents. He came away with a bottle of sleeping pills, which he added to Straker's drink in as strong a dose as he dared.

Straker drank slowly, without seeming to notice the taste. When he'd finished he laid the cup aside. He sat in determined silence for a long time.

"You've been through some rough times," Freeman said at length. "We both have. I'll be here, whenever you need me."

Freeman listened to a clock ticking somewhere nearby, marking out the minutes. Straker's face was slowly freezing into a cold mask. Freeman tried again.

"You need to talk to someone, even if you won't talk to me."

This earned him a dirty look, but that was progress of sorts.

"You'll have to deal with it sooner or later. It may as well be now. Take some time off, get it out of your system. I can look after things until you're ready to come back."

Straker's mask crumpled, and he looked tired and vulnerable.

"I'm scared," the commander confessed. "I'm scared that if I let it all out, I won't be able to stop. I'm scared that if I stay away for a few days, I won't ever be able to go back."

"I won't promise you that things will go back to the way they were. We both know better than that. John's dead, you're never going to forget it. But things will get better."

There was another silence, but the tension between them had eased. Freeman saw Straker's eyes close for a moment, then flutter open.

"What did you put in the drink, Alec?"

"Just a little something to help you sleep."

"Always looking out for me," Straker murmured drowsily.

Freeman could see that he was losing his friend to the effects of the drug, and there was something he had to say.

"I'll get in touch with Mary, find out about the funeral arrangements. Leave it all to me."

The blond head lifted at that, but there was no reply. Alec draped one of Straker's arms across his shoulders, and got him to his feet.

"You'll take care of things for me, won't you Alec?" Straker asked as Freeman walked him to the bedroom.

"For as long as you need."

Freeman settled Straker into bed, and switched off the light.

"I'll call you in the morning," he said, but the other man was already asleep.

* * *

"Sir!" said Lt. Ford as Straker walked into the SHADO control room. "We weren't expecting to see you for a few days."

"Do you have a problem with my being here, Lieutenant?"

"I just meant, if I had the flu, sir, you wouldn't get me out of bed for a week."

"Well, maybe it wasn't flu after all," Straker said in a conciliatory tone. Then, more briskly, "Is Colonel Freeman in?"

"He's in your office sir. Lt. Johnson just took in a stack of reports for him to sign off."

Straker smiled at the thought of Alec landed with his paperwork. Then his smile faded. He stopped as the thought hit him. Alec would be reading the previous day's reports, including the one for the SHADO transporter flight from New York.

"Are you sure you're all right, Commander?" Ford asked, noticing his dishevelled appearance.

"Yes," Straker told him distractedly, "I'm fine thanks."

When Straker walked into his office, he found Alec Freeman seated at his desk reading one of the reports. Freeman looked up, started guiltily when he saw who it was, and closed the folder in a hurry. Straker knew the contents of the report without having to ask.

Freeman tried to regain his composure, to muster a cheery greeting. "I wasn't expecting

you in today," was all that he could manage.

Straker looked at him grimly, then closed the door behind him. He took a seat across from the other man.

"So now you know," he said.

"Ed, I—"

"Well, you were bound to find out sooner or later."

"That transporter ..." Alec trailed off, but Straker didn't step into the opening. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"What difference would it have made?"

"Maybe there was something else we could have done, some other way—"

"Do you think I didn't consider that?" Anger and despair were blended in Straker's voice. "There wasn't anything else we could have done, and you know it."

"So you let me go ahead and give that order."

"It was my decision, Alec; my responsibility."

Freeman gave his friend a calculating look. "It was the right decision," he said at length.

"For the commander of SHADO, it was the right decision. But for a man, for a father ..." Straker stopped, and came over to lift one of the telephone receivers from the desk. "Miss Ealand? I'm in conference with Colonel Freeman. Please hold all my calls and meetings until I'm done."

Alec waited until he'd replaced the handset, then grasped his arm for a moment.

"In this place," Alec said, "you have to make the hard choices. You have to put personal feelings aside. We both know that."

"Do we? You're normally the first one to criticise my 'hard choices'. Oh, you don't have to pretend with me, Alec. I saw the look on your face when you were reading that report. I can't blame you for despising a man who'd do that to his own son."

"Look, Ed—"

"Don't. I know what you think. And the others. They all think I'm some sort of cold-blooded bastard. Well, it looks like they were right after all."

"Damn it, you've had your say, now let me have mine." Freeman rose from his chair, and Straker retreated to his own seat. "Yes, I was shocked when I read that report. I'm not denying that. I wish I'd known what was happening at the time. Although I don't know if I'd have had the guts to go through with it if I had. But you did. That's why you're in charge of this outfit. And no one thinks any less of you for that."

"I do." It was a broken-hearted whisper, but before Freeman could reply, the anger was back again. "You see this?" Straker rubbed a hand across his day-old stubble. "I went into the bathroom to shave this morning. And you know what? I couldn't look at myself in the mirror. I literally couldn't face myself."

Straker's voice cracked, and he hid his face in his hands. "It's my fault," he choked as Alec laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"You didn't kill him. That car did."

Straker lowered his hands, but still refused to meet Alec's gaze. "I might as well have done. He's dead because of me."

"What happened was an accident. It doesn't make it easier to accept, but sometimes these things just happen."

Straker looked up, and there were tears shimmering in his blue eyes. "Oh God, Alec, it hurts so much. He's gone, and there's nothing I can do to bring him back."

"He always loved you. You need to remember that."

"Yes, and I betrayed that love. I sold him down the river, and for what? For another wrecked UFO, and another alien body."

"With hindsight, yes," Freeman said firmly. "But there was no way to know that at the time. That might have been our big break, an alien informant. You had to make that decision."

"How long have we known each other, Alec?"

"Longer than either of us cares to remember," Freeman said, thrown by the change of tack.

"And the man you knew all those years ago, would he have made the same decision?"

"We've all changed, Ed."

"But I've changed into a monster. And I hadn't even realised it until now."

"Look, I don't envy you your job. And I wish you didn't have to go through half of the things you do. But someone's got to do it. I know it's no consolation, but I do understand."

Straker accepted that quietly. The first outpouring of emotion seemed to have run its course. Freeman knew that this was far from over, but Straker had taken a step in the right direction. He only wished he'd chosen a more private place to do it. He picked up the phone.

"Miss Ealand?"

"Yes, Colonel Freeman?"

"Commander Straker is ill. He came in today against my instructions."

"I did try to tell him so, sir."

"Will you arrange for a car to take him home."

"And do you want me to send a doctor round?"

Freeman looked over at Straker. His precious self-control was in tatters, his cherished privacy stripped bare.

"No, that won't be necessary. He just needs a little time to recover."

When Straker was gone, Freeman took up the report again. He read it over one last time, then took Straker's pen and added his signature at the bottom. He closed the folder and put it onto the pile of finished business. Then he went and poured himself a long, long drink.

* * *

Ed Straker arrived at the committal along with the last few mourners. Alec had insisted on parking a discreet distance away, and had made sure they arrived as unobtrusively as possible. Mary Rutland and her husband were at the graveside with the minister, while Straker and Freeman kept towards the back of the group. Their black suits blended in with the others, and even Straker's distinctive blond hair was inconspicuous amongst Mary's fair-haired relatives.

Straker stared in mute grief at the coffin. Freeman felt a lump in his own throat as he looked at it. John had been a good lad, and the apple of his father's eye. When they'd been together, Ed Straker had been a different man, a happy man.

Mary Rutland sobbed as the bearers lowered the small white box into the ground, and the Minister began the service.

"The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. As a father cares for his children ..."

Alec stiffened as he heard these words. He wondered whether Mary had chosen them deliberately, to get at Ed. Fortunately, Straker was lost in his own thoughts and didn't seem to have noticed. Meanwhile, the minister was finishing the brief ceremony.

"... earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ who died, was buried, and rose again for us. To

him be glory for ever. Amen."

"Amen," the two men echoed.

Mary threw a handful of earth on the coffin. She dissolved into tears and Rutland took her arm, fearing she might collapse. Her mother took her other arm, and together they started to lead her away. Muted conversations sprang up among the rest of the mourners, as they began to make their way back to their cars.

Mary's father stood by the grave. He looked up as Straker approached. Unknown to Straker, he'd been the one to tell Freeman when and where the funeral was to take place. Unlike his daughter, he hadn't been able to refuse the man the right to say goodbye to his own son. He gave Straker a weary nod, and walked off to join his family.

Straker picked up a handful of earth and threw it into the grave. The sound of the soil hitting the coffin jerked Mary's head round in his direction. Her face registered surprise, recognition and then rage.

"You!" she shouted. "What are you doing here?"

Straker seemed stunned by the outburst, and stared at her in horror. Mary tried to rush back to the grave, but Rutland kept a firm hold of her arm.

"Get away from him!" she shrieked, trying to twist free. The other mourners had stopped, turning shocked faces in their direction. Mary's mother seemed on the point of joining in, but her husband drew her to one side with a determined shake of his head.

"Mary, don't," Rutland pleaded, trying to calm her.

"You killed my baby. You've got no right to be here."

Straker finally reacted. "Mary," he said, "just listen to me for—"

"Listen to you? I listened to you at the hospital. And look what you did to us."

"Please, Mary, let me—"

"Shut up!" Mary screamed, putting her hands over her ears. "Shut up!"

Alec stepped in, taking his friend by the arm. "For God's sake, Ed, come on."

"I can't just leave like this." Straker protested.

"You're not doing any good here," Freeman told him. "Let's go!"

Straker allowed himself to be led to Freeman's car. He climbed in, and Freeman started the engine. He looked back as they drove away, and saw Mary still sobbing, surrounded by her family.

* * *

Back at Straker's house, Alec headed straight for the drinks cabinet. He poured himself a shot of whisky, knocked it back, then refilled his glass. Straker had slumped into one of the seats. Alec sat down next to him.

"Christ, Ed, you look awful," Alec told him.

"Rough morning."

"I'd forgotten what a harpy Mary could be."

"She's grieving," Straker said defensively.

"So are you."

"Well, she had a point."

"Don't you dare start on that again," Freeman warned him.

"What should we talk about instead?"

Alec found it surprisingly difficult to think of anything, given that they were such old friends. So many subjects were taboo under the present circumstances, but somehow he channelled the conversation onto lighter matters. And if Straker's heart wasn't in it, then at

least he was trying. When the conversation turned to John, Straker seemed able to talk about it, and Alec made sure he dwelt on the good times they'd had together.

The afternoon was turning into a rainy evening and Straker got up and switched on the lights.

"Another?" he asked, gesturing at Freeman's nearly empty glass.

"Better not, I'm driving."

Straker rested his hand on Alec's shoulder for a moment. "You could always stay the night."

Alec felt his heart beat a little faster. He wondered how to read that invitation. He could understand his friend not wanting to spend an evening brooding on his own; but did Straker want something more? He couldn't be sure.

Freeman laid his empty glass on the table in front of them. "It's not easy sharing a few drinks with a friend when he's only drinking water."

"Stopping drinking, Alec? You worried about doing something stupid? Or do you need to get back?"

"SHADO can manage perfectly well without us for one day. I've left Foster in charge."

"Foster." Straker frowned slightly. "You think he's up to the job?"

"It'll be good for him," Freeman said with a slight smirk.

The mention of SHADO dampened Straker's spirits again. Freeman noted the man's change of mood and felt his own smile fade.

"I told you once, a long time ago," Straker said, "that I felt like we were fighting a ten-headed monster. Well, now I feel like SHADO is the monster."

"But you're the most dedicated man I know," Freeman told him.

"Only because I've got nothing else left. I've given up everything. John was my last tie to normal human relationships."

"What about me?" Alec looked away, pain visible on his rugged face.

"You?" Straker placed a hand on Freeman's arm, and waited until he looked at him.

"Alec, you're all I've got left."

Alec's hurt faded, giving way to concern.

"I'm just worried one day I'm going to crack," Straker said. "If I keep going like this, I won't be here in another ten years. I work too hard, don't take vacations, go on dates."

Freeman edged a little closer. Straker paused for a moment, but went on. "I hardly find time for a round of golf these days. I think I've even forgotten how to relax."

"Why don't I remind you?" Alec said, leaning in close.

Freeman closed the gap between them, his mouth meeting Straker's for a brief kiss, then pulled back again. Their eyes met. Question and answer were given without words. Freeman slid a hand around the back of Straker's head, and pulled him in for another kiss. Straker felt the gentle pressure of Alec's tongue against his lips, and opened to him. His own tongue slipped into Alec's mouth, tasting whisky and cigarettes, and underneath, the taste of the man himself.

Straker slipped an arm around his friend's waist, and pulled him closer. Straker felt he'd like to stay there, Alec's mouth exploring his; but there was a practised hand working its way up his thigh, and he could feel his arousal growing. He knew that if they didn't get into the bedroom soon they never would. Straker got to his feet, drawing Freeman with him.

"Are you sure?" Freeman asked. Straker nodded, his face clearly showing the depths of his need.

In the bedroom they stripped each other, discarding sweaters and black trousers on the

floor. Alec eased Straker's underwear down over his straining erection, and laughed as Straker pushed him onto the bed. Straker soon had him naked. He ran his hands through the greying hair on Alec's chest, and down to his cock. Alec was already at half-mast, and Straker lowered himself onto him. He let his full weight settle on the other man, groin pressing against groin, and felt him twitch beneath him. Then Straker moved against Freeman, rubbing against him, kissing him hungrily.

Straker tore his mouth away and reached over to fumble in the bedside cabinet. He came away with a tube of lubricant, which Freeman recognised from a previous visit. Freeman took the tube from him. He squeezed a healthy measure of the gel into his hand, and took hold of Straker's cock. Straker gasped. Alec ran his hand up and down the hot shaft a couple of times, smearing it with gel, and enjoying the effect it was having on Straker. He didn't see that abandon, that openness there very often.

"Roll over," Straker urged breathlessly.

Alec moved onto all fours, raising his backside invitingly. Straker eased his buttocks apart, and began to rub himself against the opening.

"Do it!" Alec growled.

Carefully, Straker pushed himself into the other man's hot flesh. Alec's muscles clenched involuntarily, and Straker gave a low moan. He slowly slid in and out, letting Alec get used to the feel of him. He took a firm hold of Alec's cock, bringing him erect again. His hand began to pump with vigorous strokes, knowing he wouldn't last long, and wanting to take Alec with him. He drove into Alec, harder and faster. Soon he came with a shudder, Alec following shortly after.

When their breathing had subsided, and Straker had softened and slipped from his body, Freeman rolled onto his back. Straker lay down next to him, his head on his shoulder, and threw an arm across his chest.

"That was good," Straker said. His breath tickled Alec's throat as he spoke.

"It's been a while," Freeman replied.

"For me, anyway."

Straker retrieved the rumpled bedding and pulled the covers over them both. He propped himself up on one elbow and looked at the other man.

"Spit it out, Ed."

"This whole thing – I don't know – sometimes I feel like I want"

"What? A proper relationship? You know it would never work." Freeman's voice was gentle.

"I know." Straker lay back down with a sigh. "But I want you."

"You just had me. Play your cards right, I might even let you have me again in the morning."

"You know what I mean."

"Don't go sentimental on me, Ed. I'll still be around. And if we sometimes want to ... indulge ... well, no harm done. And no one will be any the wiser. No promises, no strings attached, no repercussions. That was always the deal."

"I'm lucky to have you Alec." Straker's voice was sleepy now, but his arm encircled Alec in a tight embrace.

"Luckier than you know. I don't normally go for men, but you must be my type."

Straker's eyes closed and his breathing began to slow as he drifted off. Freeman craned his neck to get a good look at his friend. His face was pale and there were dark rings under his

eyes, but he looked more peaceful than he had in days. Gradually, Freeman felt Straker's body relax against him, and the arm that was wrapped around him loosened its hold. Freeman lay there for a time, watching Straker sleep.