

Decoy

By K.T. Welch

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Ed Straker was a man in a hurry. He scooped up the file on the desk in front of him and shoved it into the open briefcase and snapped the case shut with a decisive click. There wasn't much more he hated than being five minutes late with a plane to catch. The irritation was plain to see in the line that ran up between his light blue eyes and the tightly compressed lips. He flipped the button of the intercom, "Is Freeman here yet?"

Miss Ealand's voice answered precisely, "He's just now here, Sir."

He met him at the door, catching it as Alec Freeman swung it open. "You're late, Alec," Straker said tightly. Not waiting for an explanation, he headed through the outer office and said over his shoulder, "I need a ride to the airport. We'll talk on the way." He walked past Miss Ealand's desk and nodded briskly. "Don't forget to reschedule with Harrington; he expects me this afternoon."

She nodded efficiently and Alec muttered, "He'll like that!" He nodded at her and grinned, not quite winking; but it was there, just behind the eyes. Miss Ealand smiled back in sympathy.

Alec's car was parked in front, low slung and made for speed. Straker slid in next to Freeman and sat his briefcase on his lap. He looked at his hands clasped tightly together and willed himself to relax. Neck, shoulders, and arms, a vain attempt to implement Jackson's relaxing techniques. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Alec glance in his direction. He tried to decide if he should ignore him and stay wrapped in his own thoughts or respond. Alec threw him another look.

Straker sighed, "What?"

"I don't like this plan, not one little bit of it."

Straker smiled derisively; "I'm open for a better suggestion, if you have one, Alec."

Alec gripped the wheel tighter, "You're putting your life and Paul Foster's life at risk, Ed; is ten minutes off of our early-warning system worth the cost?"

Ed Straker's blue eyes flashed, "I don't know, Alec, you tell me. How much is ten minutes worth, my life, yours? How many lives will be saved? Ten minutes sliced from our early warning system." He shook his head, thinking of the times when two minutes would have made a difference. "Yes it's worth my life. It's worth your life, it's what we fight for, Alec."

"They'll break it, you know."

"Then we'll come up with something else! Just barely ahead, is still ahead. They're not going to win, Alec. Even if we have to fight and crawl and scrape our way forward an inch at a time and stay forward an inch at a time, they're not going to win! So yes I'll go, and it will be worth my life if necessary."

The worry was plain on Alec's face as he asked, "So you leave on a commercial flight and Paul leaves on the company jet. When they find out that neither one of you has the information Ed, what then?"

Straker looked out the side window. Familiar landscape sped by without being noticed. "Then the actual courier will have had time to deliver the first two-thirds of the information to our scientist in the states." He sighed again, deeply. "When they came to me with the news that they could give me these ten minutes, it felt like I'd been handed a gold nugget on a silver platter. Then the attacks increased and we lost one of the key men that had originated this idea. It didn't take a genius to realize the other side was aware of our advance."

"You're sure that the aliens don't have the information already? When Webster was found dead. . ."

Straker shook his head and cut him off, "Webster died of a heart attack before they could get the information, we're sure. The signs of an alien encounter were there, but nothing was done to the body. We think shock brought on the attack. Webster had a bad heart, unfortunately we can't choose the physiques that house our best scientific minds."

Alec looked at him with amusement; "It must be frustrating not to be able to control everything, Ed"

Straker met his gaze briefly with a small smile: "It is inconvenient at times."

Alec snorted, "So you needed a plan to protect the information. I want you to know Ed that I think this plan really stinks! I confess I've seen you do a lot of things, but I've never seen you be a decoy."

"I'd serve coffee if it would help. So," He slapped the top of the briefcase, "I'll take the commercial flight and Paul will take the jet; and we'll both do what we can to divide the enemies' attention. Besides Alec, I'm not without resources you know, I have a couple of aces up my sleeve."

"I hope it's an ace you can bet your life on Ed, because that's what you're doing. If one thing goes wrong, it'll be the ace of spades you draw. At least Paul Foster has some weapons aboard the jet, all you have are your wits, obviously very few of those!"

They arrived at the airport and pulled into the loading area. Straker could feel Freeman's concern wrap around him and was comforted by it. Alec would never know how much his friendship meant to him. He climbed out of the car and leaned down for a last word. With a smile and a slight gleam in his eye he said, "I'll be back, Alec, and when I do, we'll discuss why you were late!"

Alec smiled in return, but the smile was gone as he watched Ed Straker walk through the doors.

* * *

The airport was busy, which was very irritating. You're getting spoiled, Straker, he thought wryly. He didn't spend a lot of time on commercial jets these days. A matter of security and just plain economics; the value of his time far exceeded the value of the company jet. As C in C of SHADO, Earth's first defense against alien attack, he knew his value. He also knew there were some things that exceeded his or any other individual's value in this organization. Maybe in a year from now ten minutes wouldn't be enough. But for now the people milling around him in this airport would be safer with those precious few minutes.

A large woman with a large satchel slammed into him from the side, almost sending the briefcase flying from his hand. "Watch where you're going," she huffed in disgust. On the other hand, maybe there were a few local weapons they hadn't thought of, he considered this with a raised brow. A woman in a hurry in a crowded airport, given any size or shape, could stop an alien invasion.

He handed the woman at the counter his ticket. She looked at him with surprise. "Mr.

Straker. Welcome to our flight, Sir! If there's anyway we can make your time with us more convenient, please let us know." Her surprise was understandable. Harrington-Straker film studio was important to this area and Straker was a celebrity of sorts himself, important, influential, the man with the name and the power. The film studio that was a cover for SHADO was well known for the money it injected into local economy; and quite a few of the people in the entertainment business would give their capped teeth for an introduction to Edward Straker, CEO.

He forced his lips into a smile and picked up his boarding pass, "Thank you, I'll be sure to let you know." He smiled in turn at the people within earshot that were looking at him with interest. After all, a high profile was his intention. As he swung on his heel and turned toward the boarding gate, he knew it would be a matter of minutes before most of the people in the terminal knew that he was aboard this flight. Nothing was more effective than a human chain of information. As he walked through the crowd he looked for familiar faces. None, that was comforting.

The flight attendant pointed Straker toward first class with smiling efficiency. A second attendant showed him to an aisle seat and offered refreshments. He leaned back in his seat and wondered if Jackson's relaxing techniques were more effective with the other personnel than they were for him.

Straker closed his eyes and tried to think of anything that might have been forgotten. He had the uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching him. A little paranoia wouldn't be unusual under the circumstances, he decided, as he attempted a casual glance around the cabin. The source of the feeling was sitting right across the aisle. He looked about five or six, with short red hair and large brown eyes that studied him with solemn intent.

He was slightly younger than Straker's son had been when he died. Since his son's death, children were a source of pain and fascination for him. On one hand wanting to ignore them and on the other, being entirely conscious of their presence. "Hello," Straker offered up his privacy.

"Hello, Mister." He lisped slightly, revealing a missing front tooth. "My name is Stevey. What's yours?"

"My name's Ed. It's nice to meet you Stevey. Is that your mom?" He indicated an equally red headed woman, busy digging through a purse larger than Straker's briefcase.

"Uh huh. We're going to see Grandmum and Gramps. We haven't seen them for ages and ages. Are you going to see somebody too?"

"No, this is business."

"That's what my daddy says all the time. He works for a company that makes trains. Where do you work?"

"I work for a place that makes movies."

For the first time the little face lit up. "Really? Do you have cowboys there?"

Straker smiled and thought about Alec's expression if he could see him now. "Some times we do, and horses, too."

"And spacemen?"

Straker laughed out loud and responded, "Yes, we have spacemen."

"Wow, that'd be cool! I want to be a cowboy when I grow up, or a spaceman. I'm not sure which."

"Maybe you can be both. I've heard that some spacemen are cowboys, too."

Stevey nodded knowledgeably; "I know that. But they ride big lizards. I'm going to get a

big dog when we get back. He's going to have lots of hair and be in Mummy's way all the time. Dogs are good for boys, you know."

Stevey's mother spoke from the depths of her purse. "Don't bother the man, Stevey."

"I'm not bothering him, Mummy. Am I bothering you, Ed?" Brown eyes looked with imploring intentness into Straker's blue ones. He felt some of the tension ease out of his shoulders and thought that Jackson could use this kid. "You're not bothering me, Stevey."

"I didn't think so. My Gramps has white hair like yours but his face is all wrinkly and soft. Daddy says he's as old as the hills. I just think he's fun." The plane began to move, lining up for a place on the runway. Stevey looked past his mother with a worried glance. "I'm not afraid of airplanes, are you Ed?"

"No, and it's really a good thing that you're not; spacemen can't be afraid of airplanes you know. It's my understanding that spaceships have to go really fast to reach the moon."

"That's true," he agreed seriously. The plane began its takeoff and Stevey stiffened and grabbed his mother's hand. She shoved her purse down beside her in the seat and held his hand. She smiled at Straker over Stevey's head and said, "He's a little nervous at take off."

"That's understandable." He sat his briefcase on the empty seat next to him and leaned his head back against the back of the seat. It was no surprise that the seat wasn't taken; he'd left specific orders that both seats were to be his. He could hear the voices around him. A couple of guys behind him were discussing a soccer match they'd attended; a young couple that were completely wrapped up in themselves and two older women in an animated discussion. The mother of the little guy next to him handed him a book and began to read quietly to him. He couldn't tell much about the people in front of him; the seats were too high and besides, he really was getting sleepy. The night before had been taken up with last minute arrangements. He began to drift, aware of what was going on around him, but not completely a part of it. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered how Paul was doing.

* * *

At this moment Paul Foster was extremely busy. He was approximately one hundred and fifty miles in the opposite direction. He'd been flying above the clouds, the sun gleaming brightly off the Harlington-Straker logo on the side of the jet. The sunglasses that covered Paul's deep blue eyes handled any glare that was allowed through the sun-sensitive glass in the jet's windows. It hadn't been a bad day actually, if you didn't mind playing decoy. Paul felt like he'd been sent to run naked across a crowded room so no one would see the entrance of the bearded man.

It would have been easy to forget all that above the clouds, until the detection alarms began to go off. There was no mistaking them; they had been deliberately pitched to sound identical to the alarms at SHADO HQ. What you were accustomed to didn't confuse you in a crisis.

Foster checked his panel; there was definitely a blip on his radar. He checked his air speed and dove down through the clouds; the shadow stayed on his tail, slowly advancing. Paul pulled the nose back up, increased his air speed and broke through the clouds again at 20,000 ft. His adrenaline level was maxed out and he smiled in anticipation. Let's see what this lady can do, he thought, gripping the column firmly. He pulled back on the speed allowing his company to catch up slightly.

Paul Foster's eyes narrowed as he notched forward the speed again and the afterburners on four turbojets screamed as he climbed sharply, banking to the left in a wide arc that brought him into an angled intersection with the other aircraft. He had a visual now; it looked like a

military fighter. But they wouldn't be prepared for the speed and maneuverability of the aircraft SHADO produced.

The other craft made a sharp turn to the right, seeing its danger. A mistake; Paul was now close enough behind him to send a friendly salutation. He flipped a switch and popped two side panels allowing racks holding four heat-seeking missiles to open. Paul let loose the outer two, holding back on the inner ones. These weren't his only options; this jet was so weapon heavy, when they landed they un-taped the knife from her landing gear.

The missiles found their mark; the explosion painted bright spots in his eyes as he pulled up sharply to avoid the debris. Paul Foster smiled slightly and with a sharp nod of satisfaction, returned the two remaining missiles to their berth. It seemed even a naked man in a crowded room could defend himself.

* * *

Straker hadn't dropped off to sleep; that was a luxury he couldn't allow himself. But he could feel some of the tension leave his shoulders. Someone was watching him again and as surely as he knew this, he also knew that this time it wasn't little Stevey from next door. When he caught sight of a dark haired man eyeing him with unpleasant intent, he knew it wasn't Stevey. He looked back at him with cool deliberation.

The man rose to his feet, blending into the natural background of the plane in tan slacks and a matching jacket. He moved back toward Straker, stopping beside him, "Mr. Straker, did you enjoy your nap?"

Straker, the studio executive, looked him up and down and responded, "Do I know you?"

A malicious gleam lit eyes a generous person would call amber. Straker wasn't feeling at all generous at the moment. They reminded him of nothing more than a guard dog, trained to kill. "Not yet Straker, but you're going to know me very well."

Straker responded with a chilly bite, "If you want to talk studio business, make an appointment with my office."

The other laughed, "It is rather like a script, I suppose. But, you have most of the speaking parts. Let me introduce myself, my name is Philip Carter. We have mutual friends."

Straker's eyes chilled, silver-gray now with an angry glint. "Friends?"

"Yes" He paused for a moment and Straker had the impression that he was enjoying himself. "My friends indicated that you could be persuaded to turn over certain information that would be useful. Surely you can see the how much easier it would be for everyone aboard this aircraft if you simply give my friends what they are asking."

"I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about, what information? None of the projects at Harlington-Straker have any cloak and dagger value. Are you sure you haven't mistaken me for someone else?"

The amber eyes hardened, "Please Straker, spare me. I have no intention of sparring with you. The people that I work for don't make mistakes."

Straker didn't pretend to misunderstand, "I assure you Carter, even the people you work for make mistakes. I have a feeling this is a pretty big one. Are you sure you can handle the repercussions of failure?"

He pulled out a gun from inside the tan jacket. "I don't intend to fail. It's amazing what you can bring aboard an aircraft with convincing ID." He glanced briefly around the cabin, aware of the sounds of fear from the other passengers. He looked directly into Straker's eyes and said calmly to the others, "Ladies and Gentlemen, please be calm. It is not my intention to harm anyone. This gentleman and I have some business to attend to, if everyone stays in their

seat and remains calm; we should complete this satisfactorily. My compatriot is in the next section, keeping the other passengers calm as well. Everything is under control."

Carter kept a steady eye on Straker. "I'm sure we can complete our business without involving these people, aren't you, Ed?"

From the corner of his eye Straker saw Stevey's mom gather up Stevey in her arms and run away as far as she could to protect him. He felt helpless and angry. He asked Carter, "What do you want?"

"You know what I want, Straker. It would be a lot easier for all involved if you give it to me. Surely I can appeal to your humanity."

Straker looked at him with contempt; "Working for the people you work for, what would you know about humanity?"

He slapped Straker across the cheek with a vicious blow, cutting a red line along his jaw with the heavy ring on his forefinger. Straker's ears rang with the blow and he could taste blood from the cuts in his mouth. He could feel the blood running into his collar, but resisted the urge to wipe it away.

From behind them, one of the soccer fans protested, half rising from his seat. Without hesitating, Carter brought up the gun and shot him in the head. He immediately fixed the gun back on Straker, and raised his voice above the outcries of the other passengers. "I hope I don't have to tell you to remain in your seats again." The cockpit door opened behind him and without turning he said, "Please return to the cockpit, everything is under control out here. You will be given instruction shortly, but for now, for the safety of passenger and crew, I suggest you do as I say."

The captain said quietly, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Carter sighed and he raised his voice sharply, "Do you have a problem with English, Captain? Return to the cockpit, now!" The cockpit door shut with a loud snap. "One chap is dead, Straker. These others are terrified, how many more have to die for a stupid bit of information?"

"I don't know what information you're talking about," Straker said dully. Carter slapped him again.

"I'd hoped this would be simple, easy. Maybe I should kill the little boy over here." He swung the gun toward Stevey.

"No!" Straker was half out of his seat when Carter swung the gun back and another shot sounded loud in the cabin. It threw Straker against the seat as the bullet hit him in the left shoulder.

Carter said with resignation, "That was unfortunate. I hadn't intended to get to that until later. Straker, just give me the information, all this can stop."

Straker looked at him through eyes glazed with pain; "I'll give you the information."

* * *

Alec Freeman paced the floor in Ed Straker's downstairs office at SHADO HQ. At least half dozen times he'd made himself sit down, but his fear wouldn't let him sit still. Ten minutes ago the word had come through that the plane Ed was on had been hijacked. At least one person was dead and another injured. Knowing that the aliens wouldn't want the information to die with Ed Straker, he was pretty sure he could supply the name of the injured party. As soon as the news of the plane was handed to him, he had contacted Paul, ordering him to return. Alec wanted the fastest transportation available to reach that plane and he wanted to be on it.

This was a stupid plan; he'd told him from the beginning that this was a stupid plan. It

would be nice if Ed Straker would actually listen to him once in a while. He'd seen Ed come up with brilliant plans, mediocre plans that ended up brilliant, but he'd never seen him come up with a plan as idiotic as this. When he could get in Ed's face, he'd tell him that.

A decoy, surely there were other ways to divert the attention of an enemy as powerful as this. But no, Ed would do it his way, he always did. He stepped over to Ed's desk and viciously stabbed out the cigarette that had been burning uselessly in his hand. And those aces you so confidently had up your sleeve, Ed? When did those enter into play?

Alec knew exactly what he'd do to Ed if he could get his fingers on him at this point. He only hoped he would have the opportunity to do so.

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Ed Straker did everything in his power to regulate his breathing so he could speak evenly. "The information you want is in the scripts in my briefcase."

"The scripts?" Carter asked doubtfully.

Straker nodded, "It's in code."

"Code," he spat the word in disgust. "I don't think you understand Straker, the people that I work for are not pleasant " he hesitated before the word " people. I have to confess that the reward for working for them more than compensates for this, if I succeed. But if I fail, well, I don't really want to think about that. It creates a lot of incentive to get the job done. Reward if you succeed death if you don't. So if I bring something back in code, and they can't decipher that code, that might be considered failure. Do you understand?"

"Then it might be a good idea to keep us all alive."

"You're losing a lot of blood there, Straker. I'm not sure I can promise you that. But I'll guarantee that I do everything I can to keep the rest of the people aboard this plane alive if you supply all of the information that I need. How do you break the code?"

"If I give you that what guarantee do I have that you won't just shoot me?"

"No guarantee, Straker. But if it's any comfort, I think a live Straker has more value to these people than a dead one."

Straker nodded weakly, "That's not much comfort."

"Sorry, old fellow. But at least it will give you more time."

"Time." Straker closed his eyes and tried to concentrate through the pain. He slowly brought his eyes up to meet Carter's. "The code for each section is on the last page of each script."

For a moment Carter looked into Straker's eyes trying to see the truth there. He nodded, "Thank you." He put the gun against Straker's head and glanced beyond him to the flight attendant standing against the cabin wall. "You, come here." She shook her head in fear. "I won't tell you a second time." She slowly moved toward him. "If you do exactly as you're told then I won't have to kill this man."

Carter pulled a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her. "I want you to give this to the pilot. He's to follow the instructions exactly. Let him know that the runway at these coordinates is sufficient for this plane to safely land. He's to go there immediately. If I don't feel the plane begin a course change in the next few minutes, then I will shoot this man and after that I will not hesitate to begin shooting others. Is this clearly understood?"

She took the paper from his hand with shaking fingers and said, "Yes." The young woman brushed past him to go to the cockpit. Within minutes they could feel the plane begin a turn.

Carter knelt down beside Straker and put the gun in front of his face. "You know Straker, it's really unfortunate that you had to make this so difficult, when you knew what the end

results would be. Wouldn't it have been better to have simply given me the information and saved yourself all this pain?"

Straker looked back at him, trying to hold on to consciousness.

* * *

Alec had finally stopped pacing and was staring at the collage of moving color behind Straker's desk. His mind drifted back to half-remembered prayers from his childhood. He tried not to allow himself to think about what was happening aboard that flight. But his mind kept supplying its own ideas. Most of them ended with Ed in a pool of blood.

The door to the office slid open and Paul Foster strode through the door. "We have the coordinates," he said.

"Thank God," Alec said fervently. Relief poured over him like a flood that landed in the pit of his stomach with a pang. "Is everything ready?"

Paul nodded. "The jet's refueled and flight ready."

Alec pulled the gun from his shoulder holster and rechecked the clip. "Let's go then."

* * *

Straker knew he was beginning to drift, he'd lost track of something Carter was saying; something about the plane landing. It was really hard to concentrate. A hand shook his good shoulder sharply and Carter's voice said, "Straker, stay awake! I really don't want to have to carry you out. Come on now!"

Straker blinked his eyes several times trying to clear his vision. "What?"

"Don't you pass out on me now!" For a moment Carter was before his face, shaking his shoulder in explosions of pain. He rocked back on his heels and laid the gun across his knees as he reached forward to loosen Straker's collar. "This really is too bad of you, Straker."

Carter jerked hard with surprise and grabbed at the back of his neck to remove a dart. He reached for his gun again and started to turn, but the tranquilizer entered his blood system almost immediately and he collapsed in the aisle. There were the sounds of terrified people. The pain was a fire in Straker's chest as he tried to move; he needed to do something for those people. For some reason they were in danger because of him.

A woman's voice spoke with authority, "Open the emergency exits and get these people off this plane!"

He tried to focus on the face in front of his eyes. Not Carter's, but someone young with blond hair brushing her shoulder. "Colonel Lake?"

"Yes Sir, just stay still. The plane is on the ground. I'm sorry Ed; I had to wait for word that our people were at the coordinates. You were right, it was worth the wait, we caught a nest of conspirators."

Straker looked at her with pain dulled eyes, "Right. . ."

She laid a hand against the side of his face and Alec's voice spoke from beside them, "How is he?"

Straker tried to clear the confusion from his mind. "Alec?"

"I'm here, Ed." Alec glanced down into the aisle and said, "Someone get this garbage off the floor and out of our way!"

Straker felt Alec's hand on his arm. "Take it easy Ed, we're going to get you out of here."

Someone unsnapped his belt and eased him forward in the seat. With a wave of dizziness, the room began to fade. He heard Alec say sharply, "Watch it!" Then he fell forward as he lost consciousness completely.

* * *

It was the sound of someone moving beside him that finally woke him up. He looked up to see a nurse rehangng the I.V. bag on the pole beside his bed. She looked down at him with a smile and said, "Hello. Are you going to be with us for a while this time? Your friend over there has been getting impatient." She smiled at someone on the other side of his bed.

Straker slowly turned his head to see Alec sitting beside him. He sat with his legs crossed making notations in a folder.

Alec said with a smile, "As quiet as you've been, it's hard to convince them you're usually the one doing the talking."

Straker ran his tongue over dry lips. Alec tossed the folder on the floor and moved to his side. "How about some ice chips. It'll help the thirst." At Straker's nod he spooned some chips into his mouth.

After he finished the ice, Straker looked at Alec and said softly, "Tell me everything."

Alec waited for a few moments while the nurse rechecked the I.V. and left the room. He shut the door behind her. When we received the coordinates from Colonel Lake by the way Ed it would have been helpful if you had told me about that particular ace you had up your sleeve. Well anyway, when we had landing point, we headed there immediately. We picked up quite an interesting bunch of characters. I had to almost forcibly hold back some of the men, they wanted to shoot them outright. As irritating as you are Ed, some of them are somewhat protective of you. I guess it's a case of the devil you know. . . !

He paused for a moment to see if Ed was still awake. Satisfied that he was still listening, he continued, "As I was saying, once we got to the coordinates and could secure the area, we contacted Colonel Lake and she took out the two on the plane. By the way, we received word that the information was safely delivered."

Straker nodded, "Good."

"You know it was pretty clever, the way you convinced Carter the information was in the scripts. Did you make that up along the way or did you come up with that before hand?"

Ed replied with a tired smile, "I improvised."

Alec nodded, "Impressive. Most of the passengers were so happy to be on the ground that they believed any story we could cook up. One little redheaded kid was very concerned about you. He was impressed that you told him he could be a cowboy and a spaceman. I couldn't quite follow all that he was saying, he was pretty excited."

Alec crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Speaking of cowboys, Ed. I promised myself, that when I finally got you where I could talk to you, I'd let you know exactly how stupid this plan was. Ed. . .?" He looked down at Straker. His eyes were closed and he was obviously asleep.

Freeman sighed and with a gleam in his eyes, he mumbled, "Oh well, knowing you, I wouldn't have won the argument anyway!" He walked over to the chair, picked up the folder he'd been working on, and settled in to wait.

The end

Based on characters created by Gerry Anderson