

The List

By K.T. Weltch

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It's been many years since I have been to Germany, so I hope all will forgive the spelling errors. I realize Furth may not actually be spelled that way and things may have changed over a period of twenty years. I just wanted to get out of Oregon for awhile. Also a lot of changes happened to my life smack in the middle of this story, so I hope the ending hangs together with the beginning. All most all of the characters belong to someone else, as all well know. This is my last UFO story, so I hope it won't be too slow for most of you. I hope a few of you agree with my vision of 'the guys'. Take care all!

Ed Straker leaned his head back against the rough-hewn stones of the old church exterior. The blackness of the night enfolded him in its security, giving his dark clad figure a cloak of invisibility. He pulled the knit cap down firmly over his ears and tucked in a stray strand of light blond hair that could gleam in the faint light from the street.

He eased his leg up and rested the sole of his shoe against a protruding piece of stone, trying to sooth the ache in his upper thigh where a stray bullet had gouged out a four-inch piece of flesh. It burned with a steady heat that, Straker thought with mirthless humor, was the only warm thing about him right now. The bandage he'd wrapped around it was beginning to stick and he didn't relish the unpleasant task of removing it.

From a distance he could hear some late night Oktoberfest revellers singing a ribald song in loud German phrases. Oktoberfest was in full swing in this picturesque little German town of Furth. Picturesque that is, unless you were standing in the bushes in the covering darkness of an old church, Ed thought sourly. He knew he'd have to move soon, but for now he was contented just to wait in the obscurity of the night, leaning against the wall, thinking and planning.

Straker was a man that enjoyed knowing exactly what his next move would be. But at this moment, he had absolutely no idea what to do next. He thought back forty-eight hours, to the time he'd left his office, his step assured and confident. He wondered irrationally if it was possible to be jealous of an image of your former self. He'd always considered jealousy to be beneath him, but he realized with a sinking feeling that there was nothing actually beneath him. He thought back over the last few days and wondered if there were things that could have been done differently. He knew with a certainty that there had been. There are always alternatives.

* * *

The door to Straker's office slid open and both the Commander and Col. Alec Freeman emerged from his office and walking swiftly down the corridor toward the control room.

"Did he give a reason for wanting to meet in the Frankfurt airport?" Alec asked, his rugged face tight with concern. He was frequently concerned about something that Straker was planning to do, usually something that didn't involve safety. There were times that Alec thought his title should be changed to Alec Freeman, in charge of the fret and stew section.

Straker glanced at and took in the sharp line that ran up between his eyes. "Roger Hanson is a reliable man."

Alec responded, "He wears that star like a hood ornament on a Mercedes."

Ed grinned, "Well it is pretty new, give him time for them to settle in on those shoulders."

"But why an airport in Frankfurt?" They paused just outside the control room.

The smile faded from Ed's face; "I don't know what any of it is about. I do know that Roger Hanson is a friend and I owe him a lot. His son is stationed at an army base in Nuremberg and Frankfurt is on the last stop toward home. I'd trust Hanson with my life. In fact, when we were in the Airforce, I did trust him with my life on several occasions. I know if Hanson has information that he says is important, then it is important. Who's my pilot, by the way?"

"Lt. Beck."

"Does he know that he is to accompany me into the airport?"

Alec nodded, "He's been briefed," not adding that he'd informed Beck that if anything happened to Straker, he'd have his tail.

"Good!" Straker laid a hand on Freeman's shoulder and started them past the control room. "Besides Alec, it's Oktoberfest! Can you think of a better time to visit Germany than Oktoberfest? Germany is at her best during Oktoberfest."

"It's not Germany that I'm worried about."

"Oh really, I thought the only thing that you didn't worry about was yourself."

Alec shrugged, "You have to draw the line somewhere. Besides as you know, worrying is a dirty job..."

Ed finished for him, "...but someone's got to do it! Well Alec, keep up the good work. I'll see you in a couple of days."

Alec stopped at the opening of the lift, "See that you do, Ed and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Straker shot him a grin, "That leaves a lot of leeway, I know for a fact that there isn't much you wouldn't do! By the way, a Stevenson called from the Prime Minister's office. Since I have to leave immediately, guess who will have get back to him. And Henderson want's the figures for the extra personnel that I requested. I gave Miss Ealand the figures."

"Thanks a lot, Ed. Henderson and the PM's office. Are you anticipating any massive UFO activity, as well?"

Straker smiled, "No, I've cleared my calendar of any massive attacks; sent out a memo through SID."

"That's comforting. Be careful!"

"Aren't I always?" Ed threw over his shoulder in response.

The lift door slid shut leaving Alec alone, with a sigh he turned and prepared to shoulder the greater worry of Shado Control.

* * *

Straker leaned back in the plush seat of Shado's version of a company jet and watched Lt. Beck finish his checklist and taxi the jet into position for takeoff. He presented a reserved exterior; he wasn't in the mood to chat. Even though he wouldn't discuss his upcoming meeting with Alec, he was just as concerned. He'd known Roger Hanson for years and in spite of Alec's opinion, he was a good general and those under his command respected him. Hanson knew that Straker had connections, but he didn't know how far reaching Straker's authority extended. He didn't know about SHADO. The fact that he came to Ed Straker with classified

information indicated a level of knowledge that Hanson wasn't supposed to possess.

Hanson had sounded almost frantic on the phone. Phrases like; 'international security' and 'life and death' had been sprinkled heavily through the conversation. In the end, it had been the reminder of a twenty-year friendship that had clenched it. Twenty years was too long to simply dismiss.

Straker watched through the window as they pushed up through the clouds and leveled out. "Are you comfortable, Sir?" Beck's voice was slightly hesitant, as if afraid to break in on Straker's thoughts.

"Yes, thanks." He studied the back of Beck's head for a moment. The first time he met Beck, he was sporting a crew cut that made him look like a model for GI-Joe. Now he had a more relaxed look. He thought he could see shades of Paul Foster in that hair cut. "How did you draw this detail, Lieutenant?"

Beck grinned, "I volunteered, Sir"

Straker laughed, "Surely you know the first rule in the military is, never volunteer."

"That's what I understand, Sir. But, to tell you the truth any chance I get to set in the cockpit is a pleasure."

Ed nodded his understanding; he'd felt that way one time. Before the responsibility of SHADO had settled around his shoulders. Now his pleasures tended to be much simpler. A decent cup of coffee and five minutes to drink it in was sometimes enough. Sometimes simply thinking about one thing at a time was a pleasure. Straker turned back to the window and began chewing on the inside of his bottom lip. It was an irritating habit he'd picked up lately. Finger nails, cuticles, bottom lip, he was going to have to stop chewing on himself, before Jackson came around with a bottle of the stuff they put on children's fingers to keep them from sticking them in their mouth. Thinking back, he thought he'd ripped off the first cuticle back in September while waiting for a detonation confirmation. He wondered if it was more noticeable than a nervous tick. He hadn't noticed any nerves jumping around on his face yet, but then again, maybe he wouldn't be the first to notice anyway. Of course that would come just before the straightjacket. He liked to give Alec a bad time about worrying, but he knew he probably could give him a few pointers on the subject himself.

Straker leaned back in the seat again and pulled a file out of the briefcase beside him. There was nothing from SHADO in the case. SHADO security didn't allow for any hardcopy information to be carried to an international airport. The folder before him contained a proposal for a project at Harlington-Straker Studios. In fact one of the worst proposals that Straker had read in a long time. It was a terrible science fiction script with an exorbitant budget. There would have to be some budget changes, but he would approve the script, simply because the props in this Sci-fi disaster movie would cover some of the equipment updates that SHADO was going to need in the next months. Besides, who knew, a big name actor and lots of fireworks, it might make a big profit.

He rejected the next two proposals, no commercial value and no Shado potential. By the time the plane was ready to descend, he had scanned through ten proposals. Three of them he'd signed his consent for. One being a science fiction and the other being a love story that appealed to Straker's romantic side, something most people wouldn't dream that he possessed. However, like many people that put their lives on the line, Straker was an extreme romantic, albeit a hidden one. Simply because candle light and soft music had been pushed to the back burner so often, didn't mean that the burner couldn't still get hot. Sometimes he wondered if, by the time he got to that back burner, he'd know what was cooking.

The airport in Frankfurt was busy. As an international airport, Frankfurt was a major gateway for Germany. Not exactly the place Straker would choose for a discussion of sensitive material. He sincerely hoped there would be any nasty surprises.

He made a couple of notations to Miss. Ealand and stuck then in with the proposals and sealed up the briefcase. As the plane taxied to a stop, he put on his smoky gray jacket, concealing his shoulder holster. In spite of Alec's persistent protests that Straker wasn't careful enough, Ed had no intention of being unprepared.

As soon as they entered the airport they headed straight for the information desk and gave the woman behind the desk his name. She handed him an envelope with his name printed across the front in bold black letters. He stepped over to the side and flipped open the back with impatient fingers. Straker hated games and right now he felt that he was being lead around by the nose. Hanson has reserved a VIP conference room and Straker was to meet him there as soon as he arrived.

In short order, after obtaining directions from the desk clerk, Straker and Beck stood outside the conference room. The voice that bid them to come in at their knock was recognizably Hanson's. Straker ordered the lieutenant to stay in the hall outside the room and shut the door firmly behind him.

Roger Hanson has been a general for almost a year. . He was proud of the fact that he was a general and he wore that pride like a shield of honor. He was a man of average height, with a big barrel chest that was ample background for the ribbons that he wore on his uniform. The first thing that Straker noticed as he observed the general sitting at the table was that his face was almost as gray as his iron gray hair.

"Straker," He said in such relief that Ed's earlier irritation changed into concern.

"General," he asked, "what is all this?"

"Ed, he responded, standing to his feet and reaching out to take his hand. He motioned to the chair next to him and continued, "Please sit down, I don't have much time.

Straker sat down at the table next to the general and folded his hands before him. He regarded the general with grave blue eyes and waited for the general to continue.

It was only a moment before Hanson said, "Ed, I know about SHADO."

"About what?" Straker said, not allowing the shock he was feeling to touch his features.

The general slashed a solid slab of a hand through the air as he said, "I don't have time for games Ed. I know about SHADO and so do a lot of other people."

Straker continued to regard him coolly and didn't say anything.

"There is an organization growing. So far it is still under ground, but it gaining momentum. They are not adverse to violence and they are your enemy, as sure as the others you have been fighting, Ed. They call themselves the Open Skies Coalition and they are firmly convinced that the things that you are fighting are benevolent. They believe in this cause so strongly that they are willing to die for it and indeed they have killed for it."

"Do you have proof of this," Straker said quietly, his eyes never leaving the general's ashen face

"Yes," he said, his voice dropping to an agonized whisper. "I have a list, but I don't have it with me. There wasn't any way I could get away with it in my possession. So I did the best I could do, I hid it in a place where you could retrieve it yourself. Just outside of Nuremberg there is a small town called Furth; as you come down the hill into the town, there is a park. Just inside the park there is an old stone church. In the bushes to the side there are two headstones. They're very old, eleven something, I don't remember the date on them, but there are only two.

I put the list behind one of those headstones. I was watched so carefully, this was the only chance I had."

"Where did you get this information, General?"

Hanson grabbed Straker's arm with the strength of a drowning man. "I got it from my son, Straker, my only son. He's a part of it."

Straker didn't say anything and the general continued. "When David was ten, his mother left us for another man. I never had the heart to tell him that she walked out of our lives and never looked back. I made stupid excuses for her for fifteen years. And now these people walk into his life and tell him she's been on another planet all this time and they will reunite them if he follows their cause. And he believes them! I've tried to tell him the truth, I've tried Ed."

The general shook his head; "I can't understand how he could believe them. It's funny," he said remorsefully, "I've lied for so many years and these people come in with one more lie and convince him that it's the truth."

Straker wondered briefly if they could actually be telling the truth, before the general released his arm and shook his head with a frown. "Not my proudest moment, Ed. I can't even go back for the list. My son doesn't know I made a copy of it. He doesn't even know I found it. I've put his life at risk and now I have put your life at risk and there is not a thing I can do to help."

"You know, Ed. I've spent my entire career enforcing the ideal of the US military, but for the past twenty-four hours all I have been trying to do, is to think of who I can sell out to save my son. That doesn't make me much of a man, does it."

Straker's eyes fell from Hanson's and thought about his own son. "You're here now," he said quietly.

The general snorted in self-disgust. "Does selling out my son make me a better man?"

Ed felt Hanson's words like a knife in the pit of his stomach and he shook his head, "No Roger, it doesn't make you a better man, it's just what we have to do."

The other man expelled his breath in a cold imitation of a laugh. "That's not much comfort."

Straker pushed back his chair and said, "It wasn't meant to be; the truth rarely is. You're not the first man to put his life on the line for what is right and you won't be the last. We'll get the list, general and we'll do our best to protect you and your son."

Before the general had a chance to reply, the conference room swung slowly open and Lt. Beck stood framed in the doorway. His face wore an expression of, oddly enough, regret. The only expression the Straker wore was one of extreme irritation as he said, "Lieutenant we aren't finished yet."

"Commander, I'm..." Beck began.

"What the lieutenant is trying to say is that you are finished, Commander, extremely finished." That man that stepped into the conference room to stand at Beck's side had hair as black as Straker's was light. Raven wings swept back from a strong face; with full lips and eyes as dark as his hair. In his leather clad hand he carried a large pistol. "Please, Gentlemen, do not attempt to reach for your weapons." The accent was British, with something mixed in that Ed couldn't place. "Lieutenant, confiscate their weapons, please. Lieutenant" he said sharply, "your gloves."

Beck pulled from his pocket a pair of surgical gloves and slipped them on his hands with a snap. He hesitated next to Straker as the other man sighed in disgust, "Lieutenant, we do not have a lot of time, I suggest you hurry." Straker never took his eyes off of Beck as the

lieutenant reached inside his jacket and removed his weapon. He went to the general who said quietly, "I'm not armed."

"Check it," the other man ordered.

When a search revealed no weapon on the general, he walked over to stand beside the other and laid Straker's gun on the table in front of him.

"What do you want," Hanson asked, his voice thick with fear and dread.

"You know what I want General, I want your copy of the list," the other said reasonably.

"What list."

"Please General, don't insult my intelligence. Are you waiting for some help to come in at the last minute? May I remind you that all the players in the game are sitting at this table." He leaned forward with one hand on the table. "I want the bloody list that your stupid son allowed you to get away with."

"My son..."

"Is dead, of course. An unfortunate traffic accident that occurred right after you left."

Hanson groaned deep in his throat, an agonized sound that made Straker want to wrap his fingers around the neck of the creature across from him.

"Did you really think that we would allow such a weak link to stay in the chain of our command? You're even more stupid than your son." The contempt in the other's voice made Hanson half rise out of his chair. "Sit down General, or I assure you that Beck will shoot the Commander." Beck had returned to Straker's side and had his gun pressed against his temple.

"Just give us the stupid list, General. Then you and the commander may leave and go out and drown your sorrows, or what ever it is you do when you're feeling blue."

The general surged to his feet. "I haven't got the list!" He yelled at him. "Do you understand? I haven't got it, I haven't! And if I did, I bloody well wouldn't give it to you."

The gun that was leveled at the general never wavered. "That is a shame. But you will, of course take us to it. Or we will extract the information from you at some point."

"You may as well kill me here," the general snarled.

The man at the other side of the gun actually laughed at this. "I don't think so, general. It's human nature to survive. Inside you won't be able to let go of the chance that there is that one hope of escape; something that the Commander here may even now be planning. I do hope he tries." He picked Straker's gun off the table with his leather-clad fingers and put it in his pocket. "I couldn't be more pleased, General that you chose this conference room as a meeting place. However the one across the hall would have been a slight bit more convenient, it contains an outside exit. But, we'll just nip across there and be out of here in good time. Gentlemen," he motioned toward the door with the other pistol in his hand.

"Commander, you have been very quiet through this whole thing. I have to wonder what your thoughts are at this point."

Straker glanced at Beck and responded, "I'm just wondering what the Lieutenant will look like with a hole in his midsection. I'm wondering what he will look like when his usefulness is at an end and all he is good for will be body parts."

"The only body parts I would worry about, at this point, Commander are your own. The lieutenant knows his value in our organization. Now if you please, Gentlemen," He motioned again toward the door.

The lieutenant pulled Straker to his feet, with his hand on his arm and the gun still at his head and pulled him toward the door. He opened the door slightly and glanced in the hall, "Clear," he said. It only took a moment to cross the hallway. They moved into the other room

quickly.

Outside the building was an undeveloped area, a grassy patch that led to the corner of the building. As they exited the building through an outer door, Straker heard the general shout; his voice high pitched and loud. "Go, Straker!" Ed heard the sound of a pistol report behind him, almost lost in the sounds of a departing 747. Beside him Beck half turned and Straker grabbed the weapon that had been against his temple, and pulled down sharply. The weapon went off between them and Straker brought his elbow up sharply into Beck's face. Ed grabbed a handful of jacket material and pulled Beck around between him and the activity behind him as the other's pistol went off again.

The bullet hit Beck straight in the chest, throwing his full weight against Straker. He brought Beck's weapon up and fired off a round in the direction of his adversary. He didn't take the time to aim, but it was close enough that the other dropped to the ground, taking cover behind a bush outside the building.

Straker half-sprinted and half-jumped for the outside corner of the building. He heard the sound of the gun going off behind him again and felt the cold-hot burn of a bullet across the front of his leg. He returned fire as he made the corner of the building. He glanced around the corner to fire again and saw the general's body. His face was turned toward him; the mouth agape and a bloody red hole where the left eye had been. The other shot again, splintering wood against Straker's face.

As Straker returned fire, another sound caught his attention. Across the grassy courtyard a woman's scream was added to the sounds of jets and gunfire. The content of her glass was pouring unnoticed down the front of her dress as she took in the scene before her, Straker with the gun in his hand and the body of the general on the ground between them. Straker had no problem imagining what it looked like. "Get back!" Ed yelled, as the girl stood there paralyzed with shock. Until a bullet went through her permed, blond hair and she dove back through the door she had come through.

No shots had been fired from the other direction for a few moments and Straker decided it was time to attempt to leave before his enemy had a chance to find another route around the building. He made his way cautiously around the side, ducking low beneath the higher windows. The first order of the day was to get hold of Alec; the second, to get hold of that list. He knew better than to try the jet. Once inside the door, he would be again be the unwilling guest of the Open Skies. Coalition.

'Open Skies,' he thought with disgust. He wondered how many of the people in this group were naive enough to believe in benevolent aliens. However, propaganda came in many forms and many of the people actually did believe in them. One thing about it, Straker thought as he looked down at his torn pants and the blood that stained the edges, they were definitely ahead at this point. There was no way he was going to be able to walk through the airport without looking as guilty as sin. It was a long walk to Nuremberg.

He finally took off his jacket and wrapped Beck's pistol and the shoulder harness in it and let the rest hang down to cover the red stained tear in his slacks. He tapped on the window of one of the cabs that invariably haunt the front of airports and had them take him to a moderately priced guesthouse at the outskirts of Frankfurt.

He found a payphone a few blocks down from the guesthouse. The smell of the food cooking in the tavern by the phone made him promise his stomach satisfaction after he talked to Alec. A quick glance at his watch made him dial the number for Alec's apartment first. Alec picked up on the second ring, much to Straker's relief.

"Alec," he said in response to the hello on the other end. "I have a bit of a situation here." Alec groaned, "Why do I think that I'm not going to want to hear this."

"There is no doubt," Straker said, "you're not going to want to hear this. There isn't a lot I can tell you since this isn't a secure line. But Alec, Roger Hanson is dead."

"Dead, how?" Alec sounded shocked.

"He was shot, but I wasn't exactly on a first name basis with the man that shot him. But he is with an organization called the Open Skies Coalition. Hanson had some information about them that I intend to collect as soon as I can. I'll contact you as often as possible."

"What about Beck?"

"He 'was' on a first name basis with the man that shot Hanson. He's dead as well, and if I don't get off this line I could very well follow suit. I'll get in touch with you as soon as I can."

"Take care of yourself, Ed. I don't want to break in a new commander just yet, you know."

Ed's laugh was soft and low, "I'll do my best, Alec."

He picked up his jacket again and stepped into the shadow of the building. The cut on his leg burned and itched where the ragged edges of his pants rubbed against it. It wasn't deep, but he knew he needed to get it cleaned up before infection set in. Not having foreseen current events his cash and his options were limited.

He eyed the clothes hanging in the alley across the street with distaste. A youthful indiscretion when Ed was eight coupled with strong persuasion on the seat of his pants had permanently cured him of any desire to steal. However, there was no question that he needed the pants he could see gently moving in the breeze across the street. He had no idea just how long he would have to depend on the dwindling funds that he had in his pocket. He needed a pair of pants that didn't look like the after effects of an armed robbery. Come to think about it, this was robbery. He was definitely glad Alec couldn't see him now; although knowing Alec, he probably would be cheering him on.

He crossed the street as casually as possible and ducked into the alley. He quickly pulled the pants off of the line and wadded them up under his jacket. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined himself in this situation.

He passed a variety store on the way back to the guesthouse and carefully tucked the pants in a fairly clean patch of ground behind a some shrubbery. He took as little time as possible buying a few supplies. A variety store meal wasn't at all appetizing, he finally settled on the least offending junk food available.

The proprietor at the guesthouse barely glanced at him as he made his way up to his room. Straker closed the door to his room and leaned against it in relief. Hopefully this would be over tomorrow. He'd have the list and could bundle up these stupid black jeans and send them back to the original owners.

Ed sat down in the edge of the bed and stripped off the ruined slacks. As he had thought, the gouge across the top of his leg wasn't deep. But it was painful and could be a problem if not taken care of. There wasn't a bath in the room, so he bundled the slacks under the leg and poured half of the bottle of peroxide over the wound. It took a few moments of extreme concentration not to alert half of the inhabitant of the guesthouse that there had to be a better way to clean a wound. Instead, he held on to the offended leg in a strangle hold and gasped in short breaths.

He waited a moment for the peroxide to work on the wound and then washed it again with the rest of the bottle. He wiped it clean with part of a roll of gauze and wrapped the rest

around his leg several times. He smiled grimly; he knew what Frazier's opinion would be of his version of first aide.

He stripped off the gray turtleneck and hung it over the back of a chair before crawling under the comforter covering the soft feather mattress. Ed knew he needed a couple of hours of sleep. He'd been running on adrenaline for too long now and it was beginning to affect his judgement. He had no idea how far reaching the Open Skies Coalition was, but he couldn't afford to make the mistake of underestimating the enemy.

One of the things that bothered him most was that Lieutenant Beck had come through Shado security so easily. Right now, he didn't know whom he could trust. He was so tired that his thoughts were crowding over one another. He wondered just how many of the people that they had entrusted the safety of the planet to were on that list. It made his stomach turn just to think about it.

Straker woke just a little before midnight and ran his tongue over teeth that hadn't seen a brush since the day before. He eased his legs over the side of the bed, flexed his bandaged leg slowly, and looked with distaste at the black jeans draped over the end of the bed.

He had a good eye; the jeans fit. A little snug, but that would help hold the bandage in place. He slipped into the shirt and the shoulder harness and slid Beck's pistol into the holster. As he sat down on the edge of the bed to pull on his socks and shoes, he caught his reflection in the mirror across the room. Nice look, Straker, he thought in disgust. The face that looked back at him in the mirror needed a shave and the hair stood straight up in the back; not one of his better moments.

On the way out of the guesthouse, he stopped at the bathroom and splashed water over his face, ran his finger over his teeth and forced his hair to lay down. The stubble would have to wait.

An hour and a half later he was lucky enough to catch a ride with a trucker on his way to Nuremberg. The Mercedes engine on the big truck ate up the distance on the Autobahn in spite of his heavy load of scrap metal. Straker's command of the German language didn't lead itself to too much in the way of conversation. After the preliminary introductions, a silence settled in the cab of the truck. But then, Straker wasn't in the mood for small talk in any language.

The driver dropped him off at the outskirts of Nuremberg; where Straker found a place that served strong coffee and a strawberry filled pastry. A previous customer had left a newspaper on the counter and Straker pulled it over to look at it and almost dropped his coffee in the process. On the bottom of the page was the general's picture and right next to it was Straker's. He folded the newspaper up and tucked it under his arm, laid some coins down on the counter and quietly left.

Under a street light, he pieced together the article. The American general Roger Hanson had been killed in the Frankfurt airport and the main suspect for the killing was Edward Straker, CEO of Harlington-Straker Studios. An anonymous tip had informed officials that Straker had been the one that had pulled the trigger. A young clerk had then identified his picture as being the man she had seen standing at the corner of the building with a gun in his hand. Apparently Lt. Beck was his second victim.

A search of the private jet owned by Harlington-Straker studios had led to the discovery of papers that indicated a blackmail scheme. Straker's fingers tightened on the newspaper in his hands. Something no doubt planted by the person actually responsible for killing Hanson. But in the eyes of the entire world it was motive for a double murder.

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Not too long after Ed Straker read his name in the German newspaper, an English version of the same article was being read eighty feet below the surface of Harlington-Straker Studios, by a very angry Alec Freeman. For a moment his mind was a stunned and total blank. His next reaction was to tear the paper in two and throw it in the trash. The idea of Ed Straker involved in blackmail and murder was ludicrous to the point of being laughable; however, Freeman wasn't laughing.

The intercom buzzed on Straker's desk in front of him. He punched the button and Miss Ealan's so efficient voice informed him that General Henderson was on the line. Alec grimaced, he was sure the general wouldn't be laughing either.

She put the Henderson through, "Yes, General," he said into the phone.

"What has Straker gotten himself into this time!" The general growled.

Freeman's face darkened even more, exasperated with trying to figure out what to do and to having to deal with an angry general at the same time. "Commander Straker contacted me yesterday, General. He informed me that a group called Open Skies, had killed General Hanson and Lieutenant Beck. He has access to information that will name members of this group. He felt that the highest priority was to get to that information and that the only way to obtain it would be to get to it first."

"Straker's problem," the general snapped, "is that he has no concept of personal security."

Freeman on one hand silently agreed with the general, while on the other he wanted to jump down his throat with both feet. "Commander Straker's problem is that he puts the security of everyone else above his own."

"That's his job," said the voice from the other end. Alec had a mental vision of the general's feathered brows taking flight.

"So which is it, General, incompetent lack of security, or just doing his job?"

"Don't be impudent, Freeman. The question now is what do we do about this mess?"

Alec rubbed his forehead and tried to think. "I'll be in Frankfurt by this afternoon and will try to keep as high a profile as possible. After that, I'll just wait for Ed to contact me. I don't think that we have any other choice, do you General? Maybe a statement from Harlington-Straker Studios, that unless someone can produce a witness that actually saw him pulling the trigger, they had better be prepared for a law suite."

"And when they ask his whereabouts?" Henderson sounded skeptical.

"I'll let them know about how worried we are about Mr. Straker's personal safety and that we are holding the German police totally responsible for his safety." Alec knew he was winging it, but tried to keep the doubt from his voice.

"Yes well, there is a possibility that Straker is dead already."

Alec leaned back in the chair. "I don't think so. If he is dead, why the frame up? No, he's alive. And they are worried enough about it that they are trying to discredit him."

There was a pause at the other end of the line while the general digested this thought. "That is a possibility. Just be careful, Freeman. One man isn't worth the possibility of exposing Shado."

Alec felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck, bristling in resentment. "I realize that, General. However this one man and the information that he may obtain could save Shado. He is willing to risk his life for it, I think that we should at least give him the opportunity to get back alive, don't you?"

"Watch your mouth," he said gruffly. "Of course, we need to try to help him; but we simply cannot compromise Shado. Is that clear, Colonel?"

"Completely, General." Freeman's fingers were white on the receiver.

"Fine. Make sure that you keep in close contact. And Freeman," he paused before adding, "take care of yourself."

"Yes, Sir," Alec replied as he laid the receiver down. He sat dismally for a moment, staring at the phone and thinking that he had said somewhat the same thing a few hours before to Ed.

* * *

The object of Alec's concern was being as careful as he could at this moment. Not for the first time in his life, he cursed how light blond hair stood out in the crowd. The same pale hair that made it easy for anxious personnel to spot him in a crisis, would also make it easier for the local polizei.

In the distance he could hear the sound of a siren and he shrank back as far as he could into the rugged stones of Nuremberg's wall. Beside him a thorny bush picked at the threads of his jacket. The great stone wall that surrounded Nuremberg, afforded little protection against the brisk breeze. But, a slight curve cut some of the wind. About ten feet on the other side of the bush was the door to one of the local ladies of the evening. Nuremberg's wall, once a fortress for the castle, now housed several of the ladies of trade. He would leave before business picked up.

The stones retained a little warmth from the October day, but he shivered against the wind that moved the bush beside him and caught again at his sleeve. It was overcast, but at least it wasn't raining. But given how the last twenty-four hours had gone, rain wasn't out of the question.

He considered in frustration the last few miles it would take to reach Furth. At one point he considered hot-wiring a car. Except for two things, one, the concept of the end justifying the means was a concept that wasn't new in Straker's life, but not actually a desired option. Two, hot-wiring a car wasn't exactly something offered in military academy.

He leaned his head back against the stones and tried to ease his leg out in front of him and still stay within the out lines of the bush. He couldn't afford to be picked up by the local authorities. Straker knew that this wasn't just a plot to discredit him. If the locals picked him up, he knew he would be dead within the hour. Even Shado used the tools at hand. He had to stay alive and free long enough to get this list to Alec.

Open Skies, he thought with disgust, what a nauseating name. Even more nauseating were the people on that list that thought they were opening up the earth for a new future. He'd like to rub their noses in some of the autopsies that he'd witnessed over the years. Bodies and lives he'd seen destroyed by these things. He wondered how much gratitude these aliens would show these people when they were through with them. He knew the answer to that one and a part of him felt a spark of satisfaction.

He spent some time trying to think up and discarding plans for getting hold of Alec. Knowing Freeman the way that he did, he'd be making himself highly visible right now. The plan he came up with was so ludicrous that it might work. The only problem with this or any other plan he came up with, was that at some point, he was going to have to come up with something to cover this blasted blond hair!

* * *

Ed Straker leaned forward on the balls of his feet and looked up at the world with bloodshot eyes. His rounded shoulders and the stubble on his chin gave him a shady appearance. The woman behind the counter on the variety store certainly didn't trust him. He

hadn't been in the store for more than a few moments, before she began following him around as he picked up the few things that he needed. Very few, he knew the exact amount of money that he had in his pocket. The items he laid down on the counter made a big dent in the dwindling supply.

He was waiting for the woman to ring up the small pile of things, when Alec's face on the front of a newspaper caught his eye. He added it to the stack on the counter. He left the store and headed down the street at a good pace, distancing himself from the store. He found a streetlight in a secluded place that gave out just enough light to read the article.

The photographer was caught a frowning Alec, with his hand half raised in denial. That's what the article was about, denial; as loud and as public as possible. He was staying at the Hilton in Frankfurt. Straker rolled his eyes and grimaced. Getting back to Frankfurt seemed as impossible as riding a bike to Moonbase. He didn't have a choice of course, he'd have to get back there.

Ed pulled a black knit hat out of the bag and pulled it down over his hair, feeling like he'd switched off a neon sign. He ate about half of the junk food that made up the greater portion of his purchases and downed it with a warm soda. The rest he shoved into the pockets of his jacket. He tore out the article about Freeman and carefully placed it in his inside pocket along with the other item he'd purchased at the store. Dumping the rest he started on an easy pace on the last leg of his journey to Furth.

* * *

Alec Freeman stared out into the darkness from the window of his luxury suite with dismal eyes. It was exactly the sort of accommodations that the acting CEO of a film studio would be expected to stay in, but he wasn't taking any pleasure in them. The police had already been here to question him. He could honestly reassure them that he had absolutely no idea where Ed Straker was. He was sure that there were police not far from the door of his rooms right now.

He wondered for the hundredth time if Ed were dying or already dead, or if he were hiding in the darkness not far from the building he stood in now. If the sheer force of Alec's will could reach out and gather Ed in, he'd be standing before him now.

He stabbed his cigarette into the ashtray on the table next to him, obliterating the Hilton logo in an in the ash of frustration. Maybe we should form a committee at Shado, dedicated completely to the job of keeping Ed Straker out of trouble. Of course, then there would have to be the second committee to pick up after the first one after Ed chewed them up and spit them out. He remembered the computer print out that someone had stuck on Straker's door after a particularly rough day. 'Caution-the neck he breaks may be your own'. They never did find out who put that one up. The glint in Paul Foster's eyes wasn't much of a clue. Straker hadn't seen the humor in it. In fact he was furious, even more so when Alec did see the humor in it. He located the cord on the drapes and shut out the night.

The need for action was so strong right now that he felt like screaming. He could see the police report. 'At 12:05AM, scream was heard in suspect's suite. At 12:07, entered suspect's rooms to find him banging his head against the wall.'

He turned on the television and sat gracelessly in the chair to watch the news in a language that he didn't understand. The new wasn't anymore optimistic here than anywhere else, dead and dying. He thought about his own tombstone, It would probably read, Died, waiting for Ed Straker to come home...'

* * *

Not for the first time that day, Ed Straker wished he were home. The thought of a fat steak and a warm bed had been haunting his thoughts for the last half-hour. He had the baseless feeling that he'd let everyone down. One thing he was sure of, somewhere out there Alec was thinking ugly thoughts about him and Henderson was having a coronary. Another thing he knew as he started down the last incline into Furth, he was exhausted.

The sights of Oktoberfest were everywhere in the small town. Booths lined up on each side of the street were closed against the night. Against the glow of the street lamps, he could see the outline of a carnival, also shut down for the night.

Straker wasn't far into the town, before he could see the lines of the old church in the soft glow of the park's lighting. He crossed the well-tended lawn, past the barely discernable beds of fall flowers and stepped into the deeper shadows of the trees surrounding the church. He pushed between the bushes at the side of the church, the branches catching at the knit hat and scratching his face. But, the only thing he found behind the bushes was the stone foundation of the church. He pushed out of the bushes, wiping the cobwebs from his face.

On the other side the bushes were thinner. He was only at the side of the old building for a few moments before he banged his shin painfully against something in the dark. He ran his hands over the object, feeling the outlines of a stone marker, worn smooth with time. Next to it was the second marker, no doubt the markers that Hanson had talked about. Running his hands over each side of the stones indicated that nothing was attached to them. But a quick examination of the soil around them was rewarded in another painful discovery, a stone the size of his outstretched hand. Pushing this aside, he dug his fingers into the loose dirt and pulled out a plastic bag, hoping fervently that it wasn't someone's idea of a final resting place for a small family pet. But inside the bag was a thick envelope. There was no hope of reading what was in the envelope, but there could be no doubt that it was the object of his search. He added it to the safer inner pocket of his jacket.

He started out of the bushes when he heard raised voices in the distance. Late night revelers more than likely, indulging in too much of the local brew. He leaned back against the building, resting his foot against the old stones. As he rubbed his fingers across the scrape on his leg, he wondered in the bandage was still covering it, or if the jeans had been rubbing against it for the last mile and a half. It felt like raw fire on the top of his leg.

He knew he should be moving, but for the moment it felt good to lean against the old church. He knew he had to start his cross-country trek again, he needed to reach Alec as fast as possible. But moving seemed an over whelming effort. The lusty voices of the late night singers were gone into the distance, so he moved out from the side of the church and sat on the front steps and ate the rest of his junk food. He huddled in the corner of the entrance and slept for an hour before starting the walk back to Nuremberg.

Light was breaking in the sky when he reached the outskirts of Nuremberg. He found a fairly comfortable place to rest and read the list. Ed was almost growling in frustration as he noted several names that he knew.

He pulled out the pink flowered card that was one of the purchases that he'd made at the variety store and wrote a carefully worded note to Alec. He posted it to the Frankfurt Hilton. Hopefully he would be able to follow it as quickly as possible.

He caught a ride in the back of an open truck that had, from the smell of it, been used to haul livestock. At least with the sides open the air moved freely and huddled back between two boxes it was almost bearable. Ed Straker, CEO of Harlington-Straker Studios and CIC of Shado, huddled in the back of the truck and tried not to think at all.

* * *

It had been three days, three long and seemingly endless days of statements to the media and phone calls from Henderson. Alec was sure that the nice generic prints on the walls would stay burned in his memory forever. Today was the evening of the fourth day and Henderson was demanding that he return to England immediately. But still, Alec hung on. He felt that giving up on this motel room was giving up on Straker and he wasn't prepared to do that yet.

Room service would be bringing up dinner shortly. He would definitely have to go on a diet when he finished here. The amount of food consumed out of sheer boredom amazed him. Someone from room service had loaned him a book, 'One Hundred And One Ways To Play Solitaire' He was up to number eighty-nine. He decided that as soon as he had a firm grip on number one hundred and one, he was going home.

Responding to a knock at the door revealed the familiar face of a bus boy, with the irritating smile of a morning person. Alec swung open the door and the bus boy rolled a cart loaded with covered dishes into the room.

"They had some of the pastries you like so well, Mr. Freeman," he said in heavily accented English.

"Wonderful," Alec trying his best to sound pleased.

"I also have your messages and mail from the lobby. I'm afraid that the officers outside to door went through most of it. I did manage to sneak one in, under one of the plates. It seemed...personal, you know?" He pulled a pink flowered envelope out from under one of the covered plates and set it next to the coffee carafe. He winked at Alec and waited with an expectant grin. Alec handed him a tip and the bus boy left with a light step.

The envelope didn't have a return address, but the mark on it showed it was sent from Nuremberg. The handwriting on the front was so light that it bordered on, what Alec called spidery. In side the note said; Dearest Alec, It's been so long since I've seen you. You must realize how happy I was to find out you were actually in Frankfurt again. I still have the same apartment that I had when we used to be together so long ago. You remember how we used to laugh because the name of the street was so much like my little sister Virginia's name. The view of the Lake hasn't changed, although it is fourteen years older, but then so are we, my dear. If you could read my mind, it wouldn't be hard to know how much I want to see you again. I'll wait for you tonight, Alec, my dear and every night, until you come. Love Always, Stella Croxley

Alec was grinning and shaking his head by the time he finished the card. He pushed the card back into the envelope and stood for a moment tapping the card against his fingertips. He picked up the phone and called room service and asked for the same bus boy that had left the cart in his room to return for it now. While he waited, he spread out his map of Frankfort on the bed and got his copy of the German-English dictionary. The street he would be looking for would be SeeStrasse, Lake Street. He scanned the map until he spotted it.

At the knock at the door, he opened it to admit the young bus boy. There was no smile on his face this time as he faced Alec. "Is there something wrong with the tray, Sir?"

"No, no of course not. What is your name?"

"Willem Sir, after my father. Is there something I can do for you, Sir?"

Alec grinned self-consciously, "as a matter of fact there is. The card that you brought me this morning, is from an old..." he hesitated a moment, "an old flame."

"Flame, Sir?"

"Yes, an old girlfriend."

"Ah yes, " Willem grinned back.

"We would like to meet again, but you understand that these things can be sensitive. She is a well-known person in the area and I would like to keep it as confidential as possible. So you see that I really don't want the officers in the hallway to follow me to this lady's house. To expose her name to any 'talk', you see..."

The young man nodded, "I understand. But what can I do?"

"Maybe you could distract them for a moment and I could slip out to the stairwell at the end of the hall?" Alec handed over a couple of good-sized German bills.

"Yes Sir, I will do what I can." He pushed the cart out of the room.

Alec caught the door before it completely shut and watched the bus boy as he walked toward the two policemen that were stationed not far from his door. Just as he passed the two men, he seemed to catch his toe in the carpet and lurch against the cart, managing to tip most of the contents toward the two officers. In the midst of the confusion, Alec slipped out of the room and into the stairwell at the end of the hall.

* * *

Straker leaned up against the side of the apartment building at #14 SeeStrasse. The hulking shadows of the building shielded him from what light was cast from the aging streetlights on the street before him. He had spent most of the day in the storage shed behind the apartments. The dust on the boxes he had nestled between to catch a few hours sleep, had given testimony that the building was rarely used.

He dreamt about Shado, lists and a bullet riddled Hanson, begging for the life of his son. But at last he had gotten some fairly dream free hours of sleep. He'd gotten a stale sandwich from a vending machine and actually felt fairly decent. The thing he craved the most at this point was a hot shower. He smelled exactly like the truck he had ridden to Frankfurt in. Face it, Straker, you stink. No need for a second opinion on that one.

He stiffened suddenly. Somewhere in the darkness he heard a foot scrape against the cobblestone in the alley behind him. He reached carefully for the pistol in the holster.

"Commander," the voice behind him said, as cool as the evening. "Please keep your hands where I can clearly see them." The beam of a small flashlight illuminated the dark alley.

Straker reluctantly replied and said, "Stevenson, I presume."

"Commander, I am disappointed, you read the list. I was sure, at the airport that you hadn't recognized me."

Straker turned carefully around and faced the other man, the pistol in his hand gleamed in the light of the flashlight. The long end of the weapon carried a silencer. "I didn't make the connection until I saw your name."

"You should return my calls, Commander. It could have saved you the trip. I actually made a slip up there; I intended to meet Hanson before you did. I suppose your jet is a little faster than mine. Amusing isn't it, our side brings down a Prime Minister and begins SHADO and now a man from the Prime Minister's office will bring down the Shado organization. Of course, when we are finished, there won't be a PM in England. Nor will there be a Queen. I have, however been promised a position better than both. If you stand in the right place on the latter, a totalitarian government can be so useful, don't you think?"

Straker considered the other for a moment in disgust, before replying, "It doesn't take too much of an understanding of the people that you work for to know that the only place you'll have in their future plans, is spare parts. On the other hand you're what, forty-five, fifty, Stevenson, you won't even make a good spare part."

The other laughed, "I'm not really too concerned, Straker. You see they really do hate you. You are their public enemy number one. When I come back with not only the list that was stolen, but also the evidence of your death, I think I will pretty well write my own place in their government. I think that 's enough chit chat now, Commander. The list, if you please."

Straker grinned humorlessly at the man, "Now why do you think I would hand you the list if you intend to shoot me anyway?"

"Now there's a problem, isn't there," he replied in light tones. "If I shoot you I don't have the list, will I. But, I have a feeling that it might not be far from you. You are waiting for someone, aren't you, Commander? I assume that you haven't been standing in this alley for the view. I have a different thought for you Straker, I'll kill you and if I can't find the list it really won't make that much difference anyway. A random list of names, who will know? I won't leave you here. You know, I think that I like that plan better, after all." His voice lowered and he extended the gun before him, aiming straight for Straker's head.

Straker felt a hand grab a fistful of his jacket from the darkness behind him and pull sharply down. As he fell to the ground he heard the sound of two muffled shots in the alley. Stevenson grabbed his shoulder and the gun fell from his useless hand.

"Don't even think about moving," Alec's voice came from above Ed. "Or the next one will go between you eyes." The flashlight that Alec switched on showed an angry Stevenson in its beam. Freeman glanced down at Straker, "You all right?"

"Yes," Straker said dryly. "Aside from wearing my backbone in the top of my skull now, I seem to be fine."

Alec grinned, "Is your backbone up to moving?"

"Well, I don't think I'll be leaping any tall buildings..."

"The people at the office will be surprised to hear that!"

"...but I can move." Straker ignored the comment. "Alec, this is Stevenson, with the Prime Minister's office."

"Ah," said Alec, "No wonder you didn't return my calls. Maybe he could be persuaded to join us in a short ride?"

"I wouldn't be surprised." Ed accepted Alec's hand to pull him to his feet. As Alec pushed the reluctant Stevenson from the alley, Straker walked over and picked up the other's pistol. He went to the space behind the shed where he had hidden the list and shoved it into his pocket and then followed the others to the little rental car that Alec had rented when he arrived. Stevenson was firmly tied in the back, Ed was pleased to see. Alec was usually prepared, a good second in command. "Where to, Alec," Ed said, stretching his feet toward the heater in the car.

"A military base out side of Frankfurt. Henderson will meet us there shortly. We have a little charge of murder to clear up, if you remember. As soon as Mr. Stevenson clears that up for us we'll be on our way home."

Stevenson mumbled something from the back seat. Straker half turned toward him. "What was that? Don't underestimate our side either, Stevenson. We have several undetectable ways of making a person tell the absolute truth. If we ask the right questions we'll even know about the lie you told in primary school. In fact, we can even make you tell exactly just what part of the truth we want you to tell. When you confess, there won't be any mention of SHADO, or any mention of aliens, or anything that would be uncomfortable for us to have you remember." Straker turned back to face the front.

Beside him Alec took a deep breath and frowned, "You know Ed, I don't mean to be

personal...I thought it was something back in the alley; but the longer you're here..."

"I know, Alec, I know." Ed thought about some of the places he'd been in the last few days, each leaving its own special aroma. "Believe me, I know!"

* * *

Ed Straker sat behind the desk in the down stairs office at Shado Control. He leaned back in his chair and tried to rub the blur from his eyes. The volume of paper work that waited for him when he got back seemed like another punishment for a crime he didn't commit. The criminal charges that had chased him around Germany were a thing of the past.

The story that they had given to the German officials was a story of an attempt to discredit the English Prime Minister. Since it had involved officials from two governments, there had been several internal investigations started. But the loose ends for every investigation had ended in dead ends, thanks to officials that were members of SHADO, as well as the recognized governments. The tendrils of the SHADO foundation extended into all governments. It was one of the backbones of its strength.

Stevenson had agreed to everything, exchanging cooperation for some form of leniency. His memories were slightly different than actual events, of course, but near enough to the truth to satisfy Ed's conscience.

The next morning he had been found dead in his cell. An apparently self-inflicted wound from an unexplained weapon. A gun that had, as far as Ed knew, not been supplied by SHADO.

The list had revealed several names that had shaken the ranks of SHADO, but not destroyed them. In some cases they could be simply removed, their memories replaced. Others, not in positions of risk, were isolated and watched as possible sources of information. Some simply disappeared, victims of disgruntled employers, Ed supposed.

He picked up the document again and tried to focus. The problem was, he was still tired. He had tried to rest; but his sleep kept being interrupted by dreams of accusations and pursuit. He grimaced and thought with resignation that he thought he'd probably have to talk to Jackson at sometime or another. Before Jackson ended up here on some imaginary errand. Jackson knew with irritating accuracy just when Ed needed to be talked to. Something Straker hated. A man's psyche should belong to himself. Ridiculous sentiment of course, Straker's psyche, like everything else about him, belonged to SHADO.

The door to his office slid open to reveal a grinning Paul Foster, followed shortly by an equally stupid grin plastered on the face of Alec Freeman. He eyed them both with a sinking feeling. He had an idea the direction this conversation was going to take. He threw a frown in Alec's direction and was rewarded by a wider smile.

"We've come to discuss the new procedures you've instigated, Ed." Alec came to a stop beside his desk.

Straker laid the document he was holding down in the desk with a slap and sighed. "What new procedures, Alec?"

"For the procurement of uniforms, Commander. I understand its going to save SHADO thousands of dollars." Straker looked at Alec, who merely crossed his arms and sat down on the edge of Ed's desk. "It was too good to keep to myself, Ed."

"Is there a faint possibility that the rest of SHADO doesn't know where I got my pants this last week?"

"Uh..." Alec looked at Foster with a frown. "I don't think it's gotten to Moonbase yet, do you Paul?"

Foster tried to look innocent. "Not until the next shuttle."

"Did you also include the fact that I sent two pairs of pants to replace the pair I borrowed?"

Alec rolled his eyes upward, "Borrowed, is that what you called it. Well no, actually I don't think that got mentioned. We didn't want to spread gossip; you know how these things get around. So we just mentioned the relevant facts."

"I'm sure you did." He looked at them in disgust. "Don't you two have something to do right now?"

Alec considered this, "I guess we could find something to do." As they started for the door, Alec turned, "Oh Ed, by the way, the control room crew took up a collection for something that might come in handy sometime." He took out an envelope and laid it on the desk and followed Paul out of the office.

Straker eyed the envelope on the corner of his desk with a suspicious eye before he sighed and picked it up. Inside there was a coupon worth twenty pounds at 'Sammy's New and Used Clothing'. Underneath it said, "Quality clothing for prices you can afford". He picked up a cigar that was worth far more than the coupon he'd laid on his desk, and rolled it in his fingers. He pressed the button on his intercom and said, "Put me through to Jackson..."

The end

Based on characters created by Gerry Anderson