

Power Play

By K.T. Weltch

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A UFO Story based on characters by Anderson and Hill

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Alec Freeman entered the down stairs office of Ed Straker with a scowl on his face. He sat down in a chair opposite his desk and raised a brow, daring him to comment. Up to any challenge, Straker looked back at him and grinned, "And good morning to you, Alec."

Alec sighed back in impatience.

"That good." Ed leaned back in his chair and settled in for the discourse.

"It's incredible," Alec shook his head in wonderment, "it's just incredible! I started out my day with a call from Susan, you remember Susan?"

"Brown hair, blue eyes and likes to laugh? If I remember, you've been seeing her for about six months."

"Yes, the one I euphemistically called my girl friend. She phoned this morning to cancel our dinner date for tonight, and all future dinner dates."

The smile faded from Ed's face as he said, "I'm sorry to hear that, Alec. What happened?"

He looked back at him in disgust, "Some time in the middle of the night she decided that I flirt too much, drink too much, and stay too late at work."

Straker grinned, "Very perceptive of her."

"Hmm," Alec rolled his eyes upward in offence.

"I'm sorry Alec, you know that in this business, a personal life is the first thing to suffer."

Freeman threw up his hand in dismissal, "I know that, Ed. That was just the beginning of my day. I've actually lived three days in the past two hours. After I stormed about the house a bit, I realized that if I didn't put some speed on, I was going to be late for work. I tried to find out how many ways I could cut my face with a safety razor before I left my flat."

Ed looked around at the side of Alec's face. "You do look a little ragged around the edges, Alec."

Alec ignored him. "As soon as I shut my front door my landlord greeted me with the news that he was going to turn our building into a retirement center."

"At your age, that might not be too bad." Ed pointed out helpfully.

He received a glare for his efforts. "It this point I decided that I better hurry before I was completely late and a little speed was in order. And " He nodded in response to the expression on Straker's face. "Exactly, I got pulled over. And to top it off, I nearly ran over a couple standing right in the middle of my parking space arguing their heads off over some foolish thing."

Ed leaned forward; "Well that one's easy, he was probably working too late."

A small smile played around the corner of Alec's lips. "Or he drank too much"

"Or flirted too much," Ed finished with aplomb.

"The icing on the cake was when your secretary wouldn't let me through the front door."

Straker grimaced sympathetically. "Miss Ealand is on vacation. Miss Robbins is her replacement. She has the right security clearances, but "

"The I.Q. of a door knob?" Alec's irritation still showing. "What happened to Miss Ealand's usual replacement?"

"Unavailable; this girl is actually from accounting. I admit that I have considered calling down for a replacement."

"Someone without the brain of a red-head, long neck, short tailed loon?"

"I've never heard of a red-neck, long neck, short tailed loon," Ed said with a grin, willing to play Alec's straight man.

"She's sitting upstairs in your office, take a look. A new subspecies of loon."

"To be fair, she's not really to blame for your lousy day, you know."

"Too true, but she could become the focal point of a lot of irritation."

"Well Alec, I hate to put a blight on your uplifting mood, but we do have a meeting in Henderson's office this morning. He wants to introduce General Watkins wonder boy."

Alec's shoulders slumped down a little lower, "Well, that should round out my day. Who is this wonder boy, anyway?"

Straker stood to his feet and put on his cream colored jacket. "He's a pilot. He has security clearance up to his eye balls and from what I understand he even beat Paul Foster's record in the cockpit."

"Impressive. Henderson wants to recruit him?"

"Yes, he pushing for that," annoyance played over his fair countenance. There wasn't too much he hated more than generals that circumvented proper channels by pulling rank. He caught the grin on Alec's weathered face and chose to ignore it. He picked up his leather brief-case and looked at Freeman, "You want to drive?"

Alec shrugged, "I've already had my quota of tickets for the day; it should be safe."

* * *

Straker led the way at a brisk pace. Alec noticed the extra activity in the control room, glanced at Ed and said, "The new equipment is arriving today I see."

Straker looked at the area of activity. He could see the technician, a woman name Thomlinson, with the top of her dark head just barely showing from behind a box-like piece of equipment. Straker assumed that the other technician was behind as well. "Yes, and two new technicians. I haven't taken the time to study their files; I've more or less left that to Col. Lake. General Watkins has been pushing for the last three months for this." Straker shook his head in disgust.

"You're not happy with it?"

"It's a redundant system, Alec. We have efficient power back-ups in our computer system now. The equipment Watkins insists on is a waste of space."

"Then why are you allowing it?" Freeman looked at him in mystification.

"Politics. Watkins tied this updated' power back-up system and the technicians to monitor it, to the funding we needed to make some adjustment in SID; we couldn't have one without the other. He convinced Henderson and the entire funding committee that this was a necessity. In the six months that he has been on the committee, General Watkins has fully defined the meaning of the word redundant." The doors to the outer office opened before them and they stepped inside to wait for the room to ascend to the upper levels.

"It didn't take Watkins long to begin to throw his weight around." Alec noted.

"If he throws any more weight around we all be crushed under the load." Straker shifted

his briefcase to his other hand and checked his watch.

"This should be interesting," Alec said with a twinkle in his eyes. "I always admire the way you handle these things. You can be so charming you know."

"Hmm," Straker shot him an exasperated look. "Luckily I wasn't hired for my charm."

The doors opened to the outer office and both men glanced at Miss Ealand's replacement with carefully schooled expressions. Straker made a mental note to call personnel.

They were barely out the doors when Alec said with a crooked smile, "Maybe General Watkins will have a suggestion for a good secretary for you, Ed."

Straker replied dryly, "I'm sure he could, would, and will."

Freeman had just barely started around the front of his car when Straker caught sight of something moving fast from the corner of his eye. "Alec, Look out!" He yelled.

Alec looked up and threw himself backward on the hood of his car as a black Audi bore down on him, missing him by inches. The Audi scraped along the side of his car with the scream of metal on metal and threw Alec onto the pavement on the other side. The vehicle accelerated, fish-tailing around the corner of the parking lot; clipping another car in its haste.

Alec had landed at Straker's feet. "You okay?" Ed asked, as he knelt beside him and helped him sit up.

"I think so." The stunned look in his eyes belied the statement.

"Are you sure, there's nothing broken?" He asked again, pulling back Freeman's torn pant leg to expose some nasty looking scraps.

Alec managed a pained smile. "I think everything's intact but my dignity and about half the skin off my back side."

Ed helped him to his feet and steadied him for a minute. "Let's get you back inside."

The look he gave his secretary as he helped Alec through the outer office brooked no questions. He barked out an order. "Get me Paul Foster. I want him in my office in five minutes. He's somewhere on the lot, find him. And call Henderson and tell him we're going to be late."

"Yes, Sir," she said in bewilderment.

* * *

Straker was just hanging up the phone in his lower office when Paul Foster strode through the door.

"What's happened?" Concern brought a frown to Foster's usually amiable face.

"Someone in a black Audi just tried to run down Alec in the parking lot." Straker said tensely, his eyes blue pools of ice.

"What?"

Ed nodded. "Security says that a stuntman name Jason George came through the gate an hour ago in a black Audi. He never showed up to set up for the stunt he was to do and he never left. I want you to take teams one and two out and make sure that black Audi doesn't leave this lot."

"Yes, Sir."

As Foster turned and left, Ed gave Alec a searching gaze and asked, "Are you sure you don't need a doctor?"

Alec smiled ruefully; "No I think I'll just nurse my wounded dignity in the privacy of my own bathroom, thank you. You need to get to your meeting with Henderson."

"Henderson can wait." Ed said with determination.

"That's not going to help his usually sparkling personality be any more sparkling." Alec

said with a smile, "Go on Ed, I'm fine. I'll have someone from security drive me home. Don't worry so much."

"It tends to worry me when my second in command almost gets killed in front of me." Sometimes Freeman's cavalier attitude was extremely irritating.

"Why should you have all the fun, Ed?"

The phone buzzed on Straker's desk and he picked it up with a frown. "I see," the frown deepened and he looked up and caught Alec's eye. "Well, get our people on it."

He replaced the receiver quietly in the base and said: "They found the Audi. The stuntman is in the trunk."

"Well, that makes it interesting, doesn't it." He shifted in the chair and unconsciously rubbed the side of his leg.

"You don't happen to have an alphabetized list of the people that want to kill you, do you Alec?"

"Not on me, no." He paused and considered Straker thoughtfully. "You know there is a possibility that they weren't trying to kill me at all. We did walk out together, you know."

"That would make it a little more difficult, because my list is longer than yours."

"You are a popular fellow in some circles, aren't you, Ed."

Ed grunted in reply. The phone buzzed again and he lifted the receiver, "Fine," he said curtly and replaced it in its cradle. "Henderson will be here in forty-five minutes. You want to make good your escape?"

"No, if it's just the same to you I think I'll stick around and bleed on your carpet some more. It'll take blood to pacify Henderson by this time."

"Well that's thoughtful of you Alec, I was thinking of replacing this carpet, anyway. But if you intend to wait, why don't you go down to medical and have them clean out a few of those scrapes. I promise not to start anything interesting without you. Besides it looks to me like you have already left enough evidence on the carpet to pacify Henderson."

"As long as I've been some help."

Straker watched as Alec limped to the door with a smile that didn't quite wipe the worry out of his blue eyes and he was extremely worried. Something told him that there hadn't been any mistake; someone was trying to kill Alec Freeman someone that was willing to kill another person to achieve his objective and didn't mind that there was a witness. Any one that determined would eventually accomplish their goal.

* * *

Henderson entered Straker's office looking like a storm cloud on the horizon. His upswept brows gave him a thunderous look even when he wasn't irritated, and he was definitely irritated now. At any other time Straker would have found this extremely amusing; today it only added to his annoyance. He wasn't in the mood to spar with General Henderson.

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." Ed decided to take charge of the conversation from the onset.

Following Henderson was General Watkins. He was a small man, with little black pebble eyes and a receding hairline that he attempted to camouflage with a few long hairs swept over the top. Behind him and bring up the rear, was a much younger man; with green eyes and what, in Straker's younger days, was called a flattop hair cut. The look he gave Straker was serious and intelligent.

"Straker," Henderson began menacingly.

"General," Ed responded coolly.

"What was the problem this morning, Straker?"

"As my secretary informed you, an incident arose that caused us to be unavoidably detained. I prefer not to go into it at this time, but I assure you that you will have a full report at a later time."

Henderson looked at him with half veiled eyes. "Incident, huh." His look said that he wasn't a bit mollified.

"That would be me, General." Alec said with perfect timing as he walked through the door and stood beside Straker's desk. Ed knew he was perfectly able to handle two irate generals, but it was comforting to have Alec at his side.

Henderson's brows took flight again, "What happened to you?"

"I fell; hard," he said.

"As I said," Straker interjected, "You'll have a full report at a later date."

For a few seconds the general didn't seem inclined to be gracious, but he apparently thought better of it and began introductions. "Of course you know General Watkins. But." he turned and clapped a firm hand on the other man's shoulder, "this is the young man we've been talking about. Lt. Jeffery Beck."

Straker reached out to take his hand. He liked his grip, firm and confident. "Are you German?"

Beck grinned, "Third generation American."

"I understand that you have impressive flight scores."

Watkins said with a glint in his eye, "I doubt that anyone in this organization could top them."

Straker only glanced at the general as he continued to address the lieutenant. "Your qualifications look good. But I want you to know that from this point on, those qualifications don't mean a thing. You'll start at the bottom and work up just like any other raw recruit."

Henderson cleared his throat. Straker wouldn't allow him to interrupt, "That's how I run this organization. Everyone proves themselves here."

Beck looked at him anxiously, "I wouldn't want it any other way."

A little of the ice left Straker's eyes. "That's fortunate, because you aren't going to get it any other way." He glanced up at Freeman, "Alec, do you feel up to handing Beck, here over to Col. Lake?"

After the two men left, Straker turned Watkins and said, "I appreciate your personnel recommendations, General. But from now on I have to insist that you go through the proper channels."

The general wore his indignation like a ruffled robin. "I beg your pardon, Commander?"

Straker continued, "General, you haven't been on the committee that oversees this organization for very long, so your confusion is understandable. The two technicians you sent over I just considered part of the new equipment you insisted we have. But I usually hand pick my pilots and my success rate is extremely high.

"The committee you belong to General, is simply a watch group. They do just that, they watch over the funding of SHADO. They are required to take no active part in the hiring or dismissal of any personnel. SHADO, like any other organization, or any other organism, can not operate with two heads, or it becomes a grotesque and uncontrollable monster. SHADO and all its personnel are a highly efficient organization that has a proven track record.

"Any time an organization with security as stringent as SHADO's overlooks the proper procedure, it effects the safety of every other member." Straker threw a glance at Henderson.

"I confess that I'm very surprised that General Henderson didn't inform you since he and I set up the security protocol for SHADO."

"Yes well, Straker," Henderson looked uncomfortable.

Straker kept the ice in his eyes, while mentally enjoying himself. It was at the top of his entertainment list to make Henderson crawl.

"Now see here, Straker," General Watkins cut in. "If you think you can get away with talking to me that way, you have another thing coming."

Straker rose to his feet behind his desk and leaned forward on his knuckles. "General, when it comes to the security of SHADO, I not only have the right to talk that way, I'm required to talk that way."

There was silence in the room for a few moments while Straker's words were consumed like a bad taste by the general on the other side of his desk.

Henderson cleared his throat again, "Pull in your horns Watkins, he is absolutely right, you know."

Something flickered in Watkin's eyes as he continued to make eye contact with SHADO's commander. Straker tried to read those black orbs in Watkin's face, but the only thing he could read clearly there was anger.

"I think we have taken up enough of Commander Straker's time, don't you, Watkins?"

Straker shifted his weight off of his knuckles and stood squarely on his feet, deliberately dismissing Watkins; and looked back at Henderson. "You're welcome to stop by any time you want to General, you know that."

Henderson smiled ingratiatingly; "The wife and I haven't seen you for dinner in a while, Ed. How about next week."

Straker returned Henderson's smile and answered, "That sounds good, I'll get in touch with you about a time."

"Good, good, just let me know." He hesitated, "Just give Beck a chance, Ed. I'm sure you'll be happy with his performance."

Straker nodded slightly, "I'll let you know."

Henderson laughed gruffly, "I'm sure you will, Ed, I'm sure you will. Watkins," Henderson slapped him on the shoulder, "I think we're finished here. We need to let the commander get back to the job of running this organization."

It was obvious by Watkin's expression that he was nowhere to being finished; but it would have appeared churlish to continue the confrontation. Without a word Watkins turned and stalked toward the door. Henderson looked at Straker and smiled awkwardly, "I'll see you next week, Ed"

Straker nodded, "Good bye, General."

Straker escorted the general to the door. His expression was grim as he returned to sit at his desk. He swiveled his chair around to look at the moving collage of colors behind his desk. He knew from what he'd glimpsed in General Watkin's eyes that though Ed had won the skirmish, he wasn't at all sure that he would win the war.

* * *

An hour later Straker keyed the intercom button, "Foster, have the security teams had anything to report yet?"

Foster's voice answered immediately, "No Sir, no prints, no witnesses and the stuntman's wife said he left at the usual time."

"Well, keep me informed. Has Col. Freeman left yet?"

"No Sir, he hasn't," Foster returned.

"Tell him not to leave without an escort." He hesitated for a moment, "As a matter of fact tell him I'll take him home myself. There's a couple of things we can discuss on the way."

Straker met Freeman outside the door to his office and looked him up and down carefully. "Well, you look a little better than you did the last time I saw you."

Freeman grinned back at him. "The wonders of modern medicine. Tomorrow I'll feel like a ninety year old man, but today I feel great."

Straker let Alec set the pace as they walked to the doors that let to the upper level. Paul Foster fell into step on the other side of Straker. "Foster?" Straker slowed, thinking the young colonel had more information for him.

"I'm your driver, Sir," he said with a finality that brooked no contest.

"My idea, Ed," Alec interjected. "We're still not sure that I was the target this morning. A car isn't exactly a specified weapon. Besides, I'm hungry and Paul's buying."

"I am?" Foster said. "Well, that's nice of me."

"I thought so too," Alec responded cheerfully. "I really feel like I need a steak tonight. How about you, Ed?"

Straker glanced at Alec and followed his lead. "That sounds great to me. How about that new place up the road."

Foster looked relieved. "You need reservations a week in advance to get through the door."

Alec looked at Ed. "I don't think the head of Harlington-Straker Studios should have any problem getting through the doors of any local restaurants, do you Ed? Just a word in the right ear and a big tip."

Paul groaned, "How big is big?"

The car that waited for them outside was a limo with bulletproof windows, darkened against any public curiosity. Further modification that would never occur to the general public made this vehicle perfect protection for studio heads and high-ranking SHADO personnel. Straker noted the car that pulled out behind them. He recognized two of the best of SHADO's security officers.

Dinner at Norman's was exclusive, but Alec had been right. Once the identity of their guests was known, a table was secured with quiet efficiency. The day had been frustrating enough that Straker was willing to take advantage of one of the few privileges he would allow the Harlington-Straker name to afford him. The three sat down to enjoy their meal with as much light-hearted companionship as the events of the day would allow.

Straker knew Alec enough to know what lengths he would go to cover up his feelings. Not only the girl that he had been involved with for the last six months, but the attempt that had been made on his life as well. That danger was a constant companion to all of them. It became easy to push aside the fear. Straker would bet his severance pay that he was more concerned for Freeman's safety at this point than Alec was.

As they finished their meal and left the building, Straker noted the security car in the shadows across the street. Ed smiled as he half-listened to the good-humored argument that his two companions were having.

From the corner of his eye Straker saw Freeman jerk suddenly and felt Alec grab his arm as he tried to stay on his feet. Ed turned and gripped a handful of Freeman's coat as Alec looked in surprise at the growing red stain on the front of his jacket. "Foster!" Straker shouted a warning as another silent bullet splintered a piece of wood from the wall beside them.

Paul Foster pulled his weapon and dove behind one of the bushes beside the entrance in one fluid movement. Ed pulled Alec over into the limited safety of the shadowed alcove and pulled his own weapon. He couldn't see anything and the only thing he could hear was Alec's labored breathing. He knew it would only be a matter of moments before someone would come out of the restaurant and present another target.

Foster was working his way around to the other side of the building. Straker heard a pop as Foster broke one of the decorative lights that highlighted the bushes along the side with the butt of his gun. Straker wondered where the security guards were all this time, but feared the worst. There wasn't a chance that any of this would be allowed to continue if there was a live SHADO security guard in the car across the street.

Straker turned his attention to Alec. He pulled open the light blue jacket; the front of his shirt was becoming soaked with blood. "Hold on, Alec," he whispered as he applied pressure to the wound in his chest. "Don't you even think about dying on me."

The door of the restaurant opened and a middle-aged couple stopped in shock at the sight before them. "Get back inside and call the police and an ambulance," Straker ordered. They hesitated a moment and Straker repeated the order with an authority that demanded obedience. The doors closed, shutting off the inside light.

Alec looked at him with pain filled eyes and Ed said, "Don't you leave me Alec. Come on now, hold on." Straker ordered.

Paul Foster moved in beside him. "How is he?"

Straker didn't take his eyes off Alec as he replied, "It's bad. The guards?" Foster shook his head.

"Both of them?"

Paul nodded. "Both dead."

Straker wasn't surprised but the news still hit him like a knife in the pit of his stomach. He could hear sirens in the distance, but it did little to still the fear as he listened to Alec's breath come in short shallow gasps. Ed looked at his friend lying on the ground and with everything in him willed him to live.

* * *

There was a fire of anger that kindled in the pit of Ed Straker's belly, it presented itself as a smoldering flame behind the icy blue of his eyes. It was clear from Paul Foster's gasp as he walked through the emergency waiting room door that it was an anger that he wouldn't be able to hide. "He didn't make it." Paul said, a statement rather than a question.

Straker didn't answer, but looked down at the stain that covered the front of his cream colored jacket. He looked into Foster eyes; "There was so much damage."

Foster shook his head and expelled a heavy breath. He walked away a few paces, running his hand through his hair.

Inside Straker the fire burned in response. "I need you to take me back to the office."

Paul looked up at him in surprise. "Wouldn't it be better Sir, if I take you home and start fresh in the morning?"

Straker shook his head. "We haven't time for that. Who ever did this," he hesitated, "not only took out our second in command, but also two trained security personnel. Who ever did this Paul, knows about SHADO. We haven't got any time to lose."

* * *

The news about Alec had gone before them into SHADO, sweeping the organization like a flash flood. He could feel the speculation in the looks of his personnel, new and old alike,

weighing his response. No doubt he would come up wanting again. Only those few that knew him well enough would be able to understand that the icy exterior that he presented to the world, covered not only his concern for an entire planet but the pain he held inside. Pain that at this point he didn't even have time to acknowledge to himself.

Colonel Lake stepped in beside him, with Foster following behind as they entered his office. The door closed behind them shutting out the rest of SHADO control. Straker crossed to his desk and sat the brief case down on the desk. He quietly laid the stained jacket across the top of the case.

"Commander," Colonel Lake began, "all of us would like to express our sympathy at the loss of Colonel Freeman. He will truly be missed."

Straker hesitated a moment before he turned to look at her. The expression he wore as he turned to look at her was one of utter weariness. "Thank you Colonel," he said quietly. "As difficult as this is, we have to put our grief for Alec Freeman aside for the time being. The first priority for the moment is SHADO's security." He moved around to set in his chair behind the desk. "Until further notice, SHADO is on complete alert."

"Yes Sir," she said.

He continued, "All leaves are canceled, all personnel are to check in personally."

"Sir, you feel then that Colonel Freeman's death was alien instigated?"

Straker nodded slowly. "Yes I do. And if I am right, the next target could very well be this headquarters."

Lake glanced at Foster.

Something flickered in Straker's eyes as he considered his two officers. He leaned forward in his chair and sighed. "I admit that I am upset, but I'm not thinking irrationally. So let's just say that the two and two I've put together doesn't come up with the answer that I like. So I intend to make it conform to my solutions." He waited a moment. "You have your orders."

"Yes Sir." She turned on her heel and strode toward the door.

"Oh, and Colonel Lake."

"Yes Sir?" She turned back.

"The equipment that General Watkins had installed, the back-up power system."

"Yes Sir?"

"Is the technician monitoring that system?"

She looked puzzled. "Yes Sir, she is."

Straker nodded. "Thank you, Colonel, you may go." He turned next to Foster. "Paul, I want you outside of SHADO. Pick up some communication equipment that will operate separately from the usual devices in SHADO control. At the first sign of trouble, I want Sky-one in the air and I want to be able to contact you without possible internal interference. Your priority is to protect this base. Have Waterman back you up."

Foster's expression was troubled, but he nodded and started toward the door. "Paul," Straker said quietly, "I'm asking you to trust me."

Paul nodded "As a matter of fact Commander, I do trust you." He left through the sliding door.

Straker leaned back in his chair and sighed he looked at the jacket lying across the case on his desk and felt bone weary. He knew that as soon as Colonel Lake left the office it would only be a matter of minutes before SHADO would be at complete alert. The brilliantly strategic part of Straker's mind assured him that he was correct. However, there was a portion of soul that hoped against hope that he was wrong.

* * *

Straker leaned back in his chair and rubbed eyes that burned even after catching two hours of sleep on a bed in the medical center. For ten hours now all of SHADO operations had been on alert and would continue to be so until he ordered them to stand down.

The inside of Straker's mouth tasted like yesterday's socks, which come to think of it he was still wearing. He thought about the dinner that he and Alec had shared with Paul, more than thirteen hours before at the steak house. He hadn't realized how much he missed being able to bounce ideas off of Freeman's quick mind. Ed would be the first to admit that there were times that Alec Freeman was the tempering compassion to Straker's intellect; the voice of conscience when the job that demanded everything pushed Straker past the point of humanity.

He was thinking about this when the lights went out.

For a brief moment he was disoriented. He slid his hand toward the intercom and keyed the control room. There wasn't any sound at all coming from the intercom. A moment later auxiliary power kicked in, a dim glow of emergency lights.

He surged to his feet and started for the door. He had to wait a moment after he keyed the door. He just allowed it to open enough to squeeze through and headed at a half run to the control room. He stepped down into the room as Colonel Lake turned to look at him from her position behind Lt. Ford.

The screen in front of Ford was dark, as were all the screens in the SHADO control room. The only sound in the room were the voices of operators as they worked to get their equipment to operate.

"Sir, we are on emergency power, none of which is reaching our controls. We have a complete communication blackout," Lake reported.

Straker nodded, "Get Foster on the exterior link. Advise him of our situation and launch Sky-one." Straker watched her leave with a deep frown. He stretched out his arm and braced himself against the top of Ford's console, tapping his index finger impatiently. He looked across the SHADO HQ control room. The weight of the situation seemed as heavy as the eighty feet of reinforced concrete above his head.

Straker's eyes scanned the room, coming to rest on the equipment that General Watkins had insisted upon a few days earlier. The technician, Thomlinson, was standing in front, her hand poised over a control knob. It was her expression that most caught Straker's attention in the dim light. It was one of total concentration. Not on the equipment before her, but on the rest of the control room.

Straker's eyes narrowed and he pushed away from the console. He moved over to stand beside her. For a moment she didn't notice him there, then she jumped visibly as she did and said, "Commander!"

Straker looked at her coolly; "This is power backup equipment, isn't it?"

She had regained her composure by now, "Yes," she replied with equal coolness.

"Then why isn't it backing up?"

She moved a step away from the device and something like resentment flickered in her eyes. "I have no answer to that, Sir."

Straker tilted his head back and said with deadly quiet, "Disconnect it."

Thomlinson stood to her full height and matched his stare. "I can't do that, Sir."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"It would cause a power failure," she said stupidly.

He blinked at her a couple of times. "I don't know whether you've noticed or not, but

we're in a power failure. I want this machine disconnected immediately."

"I think Sir, that we should talk to General Watkins." She hesitated and backed up a pace before the wrath clearly written on Straker's face. He wouldn't allow her to back off, but stepped forward a pace as well.

"Is there an off switch on this machine?" he asked deliberately.

"I don't know, Sir."

He looked at her for a moment and then stepped back to the tall rectangular box against the far wall. He glanced over his shoulder toward Lt. Ford. "Ford, I need your help." Ford moved next to him, following Straker's lead. He felt Thomlinson grab his sleeve and say, "You can't do this! You have to talk to General Watkin's first! You have no authority to do this!"

Straker ignored her frantic tugging and continued to rock the machine an ever-widening arc. Ford lent his hand to the task and in a few moments the device hit the floor between them in a shower of sparks.

Immediately the lights came up and the consoles flickered to life, booting up and relaying information. SID's metallic voice also began to transmit, " confirmed bearing one-three-two, one-one-six green, eight hundred miles out, inbound, point zero zero nine SOL." Ford looked at Straker in alarm and headed for his console.

Captain Carlin's voice was heard next, "Intruder entering visual range."

Straker was beside Ford's station now, waiting for tense moments for a final word. Carlin's voice said, "Intruder intercepted detonation positive."

"Roger that, Sky-one." Ford said into the mike and looked back at Straker in relief.

Straker nodded his response and turned back toward the technician. He walked over to her but, her face was no longer frantic or defiant, it was simply blank. As he watched her, her hands began to tremble. The shaking moved up her arms and grabbed her body in strong convulsions. Straker reached for her as she fell to the floor. Her entire body was straining against the seizures. The attack stopped with such finality, that Straker knew he would never have a chance to question this particular technician.

* * *

The intercom on Straker's desk buzzed. He reached over and opened the circuit as he continued to write in the file in front of him. "Yes?" he said.

"General Henderson and his party are here, Sir." The secretary responded.

"Fine," he said grimly, "send them down." He keyed the switch on the intercom again and said, "Colonel Foster and Colonel Lake in my office please."

"Yes Sir," Foster replied from the control room.

Straker spoke again, "And bring Watkin's technician as well. I believe he's been detained for questioning."

Straker's door slid open to admit Colonels Foster and Lake, with the technician sandwiched between them. The tall thin man looked around Straker's office nervously. Technicians weren't often ushered into the Commander's office. Straker motioned to the bench across from his desk, "Sit down, Adams. It is Adams, isn't it?"

"Yes. Is there a problem, Sir?"

"I'm not sure Mr. Adams. That's something I hope to find out shortly." The door slid open again and General Henderson walked in, followed by General Watkins and Lt. Beck. Straker noticed with grim amusement that Henderson even wore the same thunderous look on his face that he had the day before. Ed stood to his feet and greeted the newcomers.

"What is this, Straker." Henderson asked with a frown. "I want you to know that I

canceled several appointments to be here. I hope you have an explanation for this."

Straker nodded, "Yes, I have an explanation. If you will be patient, General."

"Humph," He snorted.

Straker continued, "Several hours ago some interesting things began to happen at this complex. One of the things that happened, is something that has never happened in the history of SHADO. We had a complete and total blackout. I'm afraid General, the equipment you insisted upon had to be," he paused, "disconnected."

Watkins looked at him blankly. "Disconnected?"

"Yes General, you see a few hours ago, SHADO was attacked from without and from within. For the past several days I've been working on a puzzle, General, and yesterday the pieces fell into place. In some way or another, all of you have taken part."

Straker turned to look at Lt. Beck, "And I think, in all honesty Lieutenant, that you aren't entirely a part of this, although you have been used."

Beck looked stunned as he tried to comprehend all that Straker was saying. "Sir?" he said.

"I think what you are Lieutenant is a bit of color added to a longer story. The true purpose behind the events of the last few days was to get that piece of equipment installed in SHADO HQ."

"What are you saying Straker?" Henderson growled.

"What I'm saying is that General Watkins deliberately installed a piece of equipment in SHADO HQ that would completely blackout all power and communications, allowing a UFO attack that we wouldn't be able to defend ourselves against."

Watkins took a step toward him, glaring at him, his hands tight fists at the end of his arms.

Henderson said, "These are very serious allegations, Ed, I hope you are prepared to prove this."

Straker nodded, looking coolly at Watkins. "I can prove it. I don't think I had time to introduce you to General Watkin's other technician. General Henderson, this is Mr. Adams."

Watkins took another step toward the desk, "And I say I had nothing to do with any plot to sabotage this organization. If this technician or Commander Straker have anything to say that is contrary to this, it will be their word against mine."

Without taking his eyes off the General, Straker pulled open the drawer of his desk and pulled out a gun and laid it on the desktop. There was shocked silence in the room as Straker said, "I have more than that, General.

"Two days ago, Alec Freeman came into my office. He was having a very unusual day. I felt sure that he was shot for something that happened that morning. I won't go into the details of his entire morning, however I do want to discuss one particular thing."

He looked at the technician, "One of the things that Colonel Freeman mentioned that morning was something that he merely considered another minor annoyance in a long string of irritations. It was two people arguing in the middle of his parking place. That was you, Adams, and your partner Thomlinson. What you couldn't know of course, was that Freeman didn't hear what you were saying, because he had the earlier frustrations of the morning heavily on his mind. All he said was there was a couple arguing about something. You were just another irritation. I wonder which one of you was getting the cold feet, Adams, you or your partner?"

"This is utterly ridiculous," Watkin's said in disgust. "Your proof includes the testimony of a dead man?"

The anger that had burned in Straker since he had held Alec Freeman bleeding in his arms flamed to life behind the blue of his eyes again. He keyed the intercom next to him. "Miss

Robbins? The call I asked you to put through "

"Yes Sir, it's through."

Straker adjusted the volume on the intercom and said, "Dr. Frazer?"

"Yes?" a voice responded from the other end.

"How is Colonel Freeman today?" Straker asked, still not taking his eyes off Watkins.

From the corner of his eye he could see Foster stiffen in shock. "I'm sorry Paul, the only way I could be sure that Alec stayed alive, was not to say anything about his survival."

"So," Watkins said in a snarl, "he saw two people arguing, what evidence is that."

Straker smiled and turned toward the technician. "Your partner, Thomlinson, had an implant in the back of her brain. That implant was chemically programmed to certain conditions. When her body and her emotions told her brain that the situation was hopeless, the implant loosed a substance into the nerve centers of her brain. The compound caused convulsions and ultimate heart failure. Thomlinson was, in essence told to self-destruct."

The technician looked at him with horror. Straker said, "Are you sure that you want to take a chance that you don't have one in the back of your brain, as well?"

"It was the General's orders," he started.

Watkins snarled, "Shut up you idiot."

"Is that enough evidence, General?" Straker said coldly. Watkins took the last remaining steps to the deck and lunged for Straker's throat. His hands tightened around his neck in a crushing grip. Foster and Lake surged forward to pull at the general's hands, but his hands were like steel. A red haze colored the room before Straker's eyes. He tried to reach for the gun in front of him, but he had to brace himself to keep Watkins from pulling him across the desk. Then he could feel the general's hold loosen slightly as his fingers began to shake in tiny spasms. Foster pulled Watkins back as Ed pushed himself away with his hands on the desk, gasping for air.

The room watched in horror as the general's body began to convulse. Foster lowered him to the floor. For a moment his body strained and then relaxed suddenly, leaving Watkin's a lifeless shell before Straker's desk.

Ed collapsed in his chair and the fire of anger died from within his chest.

* * *

Ed Straker signed his name in bold black lines to the contract he'd been reading in his upstairs office. It was the last bit of paperwork for the day in the more mundane business of running Harlington-Straker Studios. In fact, he was actually feeling fairly satisfied, both upstairs and down. The paperwork that had been looming before him after the last few days was caught up now. The equipment that the aliens had used to sabotage SHADO HQ had been completely dismantled and researched for any scrap of information that could help them understand their enigmatic foe.

Today the report had come across his desk that had completely cleared Lt. Beck of any part of the conspiracy. Straker had been pleased to see that. He'd liked Beck's record and the man personally. He could have a future with SHADO.

The intercom on his desk called for his attention; he thumbed the key and said, "Yes?"

"Colonel Freeman to see you, Sir." Miss Ealand said with a laugh in her voice. Ed smiled; there weren't too many people that Alec Freeman couldn't break up given half a chance, including Straker himself.

"Send him in." he switched off the intercom and left his desk to greet Alec at the door with an out stretched hand. "Alec, what are you doing here? I thought the doctor ordered rest

for the next few days." He clasped Alec's hand, while leading him over to a chair to sit down. He looked a lot better than the last time Ed saw him not too many days before, but he still had signs of the injury that had almost cost him his life. Alec sat down with no argument.

Alec grinned, "I think the orders were, nothing fattening, nothing intoxicating, and nothing overly illegal."

"Bored, huh?" Straker said sympathetically.

"Completely. And since I was already bored, I thought. . ."

"You thought you'd stop in and see me, right?" Ed shook his head ruefully. "You know, Alec, you should be careful, at this point it wouldn't be too hard to cause a complete relapse."

Freeman said quietly, "Not too easy I think, not with the people I have backing me up. Which is my clumsy way of saying, thank you. If I haven't gotten around to that point yet."

"I'll remind you of that the next time you're facing me across my desk with murder in your eye."

"I never want to murder you, Ed. Maybe slap a little sense into you sometimes, but not actual murder."

Straker crossed his arms over his chest and grinned, "That's just because you're not up to speed yet. Just wait a few days and you'll have murder in your eye again. Just like Foster did when he found out I had exaggerated the extent of your injuries."

"Exaggerated."

Straker grinned, "Slightly. Oh by the way," he turned and picked up a folder on his desk and handed it to Alec.

"What's this?" he said suspiciously.

"It's your copy of the report on Watkins."

"Oh no," Alec shook his head and handed it back. "I'm on sick leave. I don't touch reports that look heavier than my train of thought. Just give me the short version."

Straker threw the folder back on his desk and leaned against the edge. "Well, you knew that the implants at the base of Watkins' and the technician's brains were of alien origin. They were like a chemical bomb set to go off when they reached a certain point of anxiety. With Watkins' attitude I'm surprised he lasted as long as he did."

"What about the other technician?"

"It seems he was able to maintain his emotions better than the other two. The implants didn't control their emotions; their emotions controlled the implants."

"Then they were completely responsible for their actions?"

"Not entirely. The general had a deep-rooted feeling that SHADO was mishandling the whole alien conflict. He felt that we weren't being aggressive enough. The technician, of the other hand felt a more peaceful means should be adapted. Adams was simply motivated by greed. Jackson has been learning a lot from the remaining technician. Apparently, the aliens abducted Watkin's and both techs within the last four months. These feelings were enhanced and instead of being hidden feeling and agendas, they became almost overwhelming motivations.

"And as perfect agents, if they were caught, they were suppose to self-destruct. Of course, they weren't willing to take a chance that they would voluntarily do this, so the implants were surgically planted at the base of the brain. I think the most frightening thing, other than the fact that it almost worked, is that they have the ability to turn off the human body so efficiently."

Alec shook his head; "I'm not surprised at that, Ed. As much damage as these monsters

have done to the people on this planet, they probably have a number of ways to turn off the human body."

Straker nodded grimly. "One good thing did come of this."

Alec snorted, "Something good came of this?"

"With the information we gathered from the two bodies and the intact implant, our science department has developed new technology. We're installing monitors at every entrance of SHADO that will be able to detect the presence of any alien implant as you walk through the door."

Alec shook his head. "A costly advance."

"Isn't any advance costly? Another thing, Lt. Beck was completely cleared of any involvement. I think he'll make a good pilot for SHADO."

Freeman smiled, "I'm glad to hear that. He struck me as a good fellow."

Straker noticed that Alec was beginning to look tired. He stood away from the desk and said, "Well Alec," as he walked around the desk to get his jacket and briefcase. "I was just wrapping things up here. How about stopping for something guaranteed not to be fattening, intoxicating, or even slightly illegal?"

"I was thinking along those lines myself. I know another steak house that has steaks so thick, it takes two people to carry them to the table."

"Well, that's not intoxicating, but it might be fattening. How about a soup and sandwich place on the way over to your flat?"

"I think that falls under illegal. I wonder if they have steak sandwiches?" Alec eased slowly out of the chair.

"I see you still insist on having it your way, Alec."

"That part wasn't damaged by the bullet."

"Well, in deference to the parts that were damaged by the bullet, we'll have soup."

"I feel like I'm back already." Alec groused as they walked toward the door.

The End