

# Collecting the Set

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*Most of the nasty bits happen off screen but this is not really suitable for younger readers.*

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As Alec Freeman said later, it was really all down to Keith Ford. But then, Alec Freeman always was a generous man.

\* \* \*

Alec Freeman looked out of the car window into what remained of the evening light. The grounds of the house were especially beautiful and he half remembered making a film here about a decade ago. Most of his thoughts were closer in time, however. The autumn trees were spectacular but he did not want to remember last autumn. The overcast sky looked like it was about to pour forth the same rain that he had stood in a year ago, with Ed Straker on his right and a line of people on his left, a line that had gradually grown shorter.

He shook his head. He did not want to remember but the chains around his wrists would not let him forget. Nor would they let him forget what was to come.

With a shudder he wondered what lucky lady Admah was seeing tonight. To judge by the fine Regency mansion and extensive grounds, she was someone of substance in her own right. Which meant, more than likely, that she was a bitch.

Admah was approaching the car, a big man not that dissimilar from Freeman himself. He was carrying an umbrella just in case. An alien with an umbrella still seemed incongruous, though Freeman supposed they must have had them on their own planet. An alien with no green tinge to his skin - well, they were all like that these days.

Admah yanked open the door and unlocked the chains which secured Freeman into his holding cage.

"Out." It was about the only word of English he had bothered to learn.

Freeman squeezed out with as much dignity as he could muster, flexing his stiff muscles. It did not pay to show either reluctance or fear. Admah seized him by his iron collar and propelled him towards the house. Not a long walk but Freeman knew his limp was getting worse.

He sighed. If he was lucky he might get away with a bit of a whipping or a few cigarette burns. The aliens had taken to tobacco as only a people who changed lungs at will could. But Admah had that look on his face - that vicious, lascivious grin - and Freeman knew that whoever the girl was tonight, his owner was out to impress her.

Admah thrust him through the front door and up the grand staircase to the bedrooms. There was no one about, not even a cleaning robot. Cleaned themselves away for the night, he assumed.

The girl was lying propped up on one elbow on the bed. She was petite, with a curvaceous figure and dark flowing hair. Her eyes were huge. She was not wearing very much. In the old days, Freeman would have gone for her like a shot. Then again, in the old days he had not been sure there were any alien women.

After a quick glance at her, Freeman kept his eyes low and respectful as Admah pushed him to his knees.

"What's this?" she asked.

"This is the surprise I promised you."

Freeman had made it his business to learn as much of the alien language as he could over the last year. Though there were plenty of gaps in his knowledge, he knew enough to get the gist of the conversation.

He did not resist as Admah wrenched his head back. "You recognise him?"

"Of course." She slithered off the bed and came over. "Am I supposed to be impressed? I have got one of my own, you know."

Freeman's ears pricked up. If she meant what he thought she meant...

"What are you proposing to do with him?" she asked.

Admah grinned broadly and whispered in her ear. She rolled her eyes, a curiously human mixture of boredom and disgust.

"That's supposed to turn me on?"

Admah looked surprised. "Yes."

She sighed. "Well it doesn't."

She took Freeman by his iron collar and pulled him - surprisingly gently - to his feet. She put her hand on his back and pushed him towards the door. Confused, he did as she wanted.

Admah seemed equally confused. "What are you doing?"

"Getting rid of him. Then we can be alone together." Alec could hear a hardness under the flirtation. "You do want to be alone, don't you?"

"Er, of course."

Once out of the door, she steered him gently through the dark, empty, echoing house - downstairs and towards the back. She went slower when she realised he was limping. He was feeling the kind of relief he had not felt in a long time. Probably she would lock him in a cupboard somewhere. He might even get a decent night's sleep.

Eventually they came to the back kitchen. It was lit and occupied, a man washing up an ivy patterned china dinner service. At the sound of their entrance, he turned, brush in hand.

It was Keith Ford.

\* \* \*

Washing up was not one of Keith Ford's favourite jobs but tonight he was glad to get out of the way. The boss's date was a right thug who gave him an evil look every time he came in to serve dinner. He knew who he was, of course. Admah, the deputy dictator.

Once he got out of there and they had gone to bed, he had not expected to be disturbed. He turned swiftly when the door opened.

The boss. And Colonel Freeman.

*Colonel Freeman.*

*It can't be.*

He was looking back with the same uncomprehending stare.

"Give him something to eat." the boss said as she turned to go. "And keep him out of the way until morning."

"Yes, ma'am."

When she left, the two men just stood there. Ford looked Freeman up-and-down. The weight had fallen off him, his skin tight over his bones. The most obvious scars were the ones on his face. There was a cigarette burn at the outside corner of each eye, like a tear drop, the skin had been cut upwards from his mouth into a grotesque grin. He was not grinning. He looked lost.

Ford put down the brush and took two quick steps across to him. "Sir? Why don't you sit down?"

Freeman blinked. "Keith?"

"Yes sir." He steered him to a seat at the old kitchen table. "Would you like something to eat?"

He shook himself, genuinely smiling now. "You bet."

"What would you like?"

"Anything."

He looked like he had not had a decent meal since... Since they had lost the war.

Ford took a look through the cupboard to see what would be quick. He pulled out a can.

"Soup OK?"

Freeman took a look. "They still make Heinz?"

"Looks like it." He poured the contents into a saucepan and sliced some bread. There was a pause, neither of them knowing what to say because there was simply too much.

When Ford handed him the bowl a few minutes later, Freeman asked: "You seen any of the others?"

Ford nodded as he sat down opposite. "I see Ayesha sometimes. The boss's sister owns her."

"She OK?"

"Yeah. Hers has a temper but it's over in a flash. My boss keeps her in line."

Freeman smiled slightly. "Anyone else?"

He spoke slowly, concentrating more on the food, tearing off a chunk of bread.

"No. You?"

Freeman shook his head. He sighed. "I've seen no one, not since we were split up."

Silence again, memories of rain and fear and the knowledge that there were so few of them left alive.

It was obvious that the Colonel was weak and exhausted so Ford did most of the talking, chatting, trying to come up with anything that might be useful or entertaining. "... Not that I see many people. We have gardeners here, humans, but they're all wary of me."

He flicked his iron collar.

Freeman nodded. "Mostly I only see aliens. He uses me to pull birds, would you believe? Now there's irony. What's yours called?"

"Zeboiim."

"And she's important?"

Ford gestured around him. "She's got this place and me. I mean, I know I'm not exactly top ranking but..."

"But there were only thirty of us."

They both sighed.

\* \* \*

The food felt good going down: taste, substance, warmth. He had almost forgotten. He

was too tired to take in half of what Ford was saying. He guessed it was the release of a quiet night and a friendly face that had allowed his body to admit what bad shape it was in.

He ate on: the remains of a souffle, an apple and a piece of chocolate cake, washed down by a cup of strong coffee. He felt almost normal again. He felt grateful.

"You want to get some sleep?" Ford asked.

"Please" He pushed himself to his feet and groaned as he put weight on his bad leg.

"Painkillers." said Ford as he dived into the cupboard under the sink and pulled out a first aid kit. "Not very strong, I'm afraid, but the best we've got."

He popped a couple of them out of their packet and went to get a glass of water. "Have you got a pocket? Somewhere you can hide the rest of the pack?"

"Won't you get into trouble?"

"I won't, will you?"

Freeman shrugged. "No more than I would otherwise."

He got some sleep after that. Ford had a nice, airy, fair sized room but there was only one bed. He insisted Freeman take it and he did not have the strength to argue. Alec slept the sleep of exhaustion, something like happy for the first time in a year.

In the morning, Keith made him breakfast before Admah shoved him back in the car, too self-satisfied to notice him.

\* \* \*

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, Keith?"

Standing in the breakfast room, he handed her the jug of milk. "The gentleman didn't bring Colonel Freeman -"

She frowned. "He's not a Colonel now."

"No ma'am." he said, making a mental note not to use ranks in front of Zeboiim. "But he didn't."

It was only her second date with Admah and Keith had been hoping to see Freeman, to see what he could do for him.

She picked up a piece of toast and spread it with strawberry jam. She had taken to the variety of human food. "I'm not interested in that kind of entertainment. I suspect he got a quiet night."

"Yes ma'am." He hoped she could hear the *but* in his voice.

She sighed and looked up at him. "You're worried about him."

He took the risk of looking her in the eye. "Don't I have reason to be?"

She smiled. "I'm not making any promises, this is for my benefit not yours, but I'll see what I can do."

\* \* \*

Freeman chanced half a smile when he saw where he'd been taken. Zeboiim's place. Maybe he was in luck.

This time he was sent directly to the kitchen where Keith Ford was fussing over dinner, nervous and efficient as usual. He gave Freeman a quick smile.

"The plan is this, sir: my boss has persuaded your boss that if he's going to be seeing her regularly, he doesn't need you for... Well, you know. So in order for you to be any use to him, I'm to train you up as a house servant." He looked away, embarrassed. "I know it's not exactly what you're used to -"

"It's a great idea, Keith. What do I do?"

Life had been easier the last few weeks, since Admah and Zeboiim had got together. No more excursions to impress Admah's girlfriends. Even so, the food had been more sparse than ever and he had copped a few beatings so it was hard work simply to stand in the shadows at the back of the dining room watching what Ford did and trying to learn the correct manner of service. His concentration was shot and his legs were shaking by the time the two of them could escape back to the kitchen while their owners went to bed.

On their own, he and Keith sat down to the leftovers. Ford made him run through the basics until he had at least a tenuous grasp of them.

"I know it sounds stupid but your life could depend on it."

Freeman nodded, knowing that for now he would have to follow Ford's lead. He had no strength to do otherwise and no better plan.

There was a bed made up in the room next to Ford's, clean sheets and fat pillows.

"With any luck," Ford said "you'll be needing it regularly."

\* \* \*

The third visit went badly and not because Freeman's hands were shaking too much to hold the tureen. Admah only laughed when the soup stained the carpet.

"Stupid human. They thought they were going to win."

It was actually Ford's mistake that caused the trouble. Just a small one. He served the unpronounceable meat dish that Zeboiim had taught him how to make without one of the traditional relishes. So Admah hit him.

As he stumbled back, Zeboiim sprang to her feet. "What do you think you're doing, vandalising my property?"

Admah looked at her, perplexed. "It's only a slave."

"And I'll thank you to keep your hands off him."

Admah pulled a frown to cover his embarrassment. "You mollycoddle him. They're our enemies, remember? They're meant to be hurt."

"The war's over, remember?" she mimicked. "We won."

It ended with a stand up argument and Ford having to put himself physically between them in order to stop her being hurt. Admah dragged Freeman away and, when he finally returned two weeks later, did not bring him with him.

Ford moved warily around the brutal alien, racking his brains for something he could do to help. He mentally kicked himself, remembering again how powerless they were. But he was not going to give up. There was still the indirect route.

"Ma'am?" he asked as Zeboiim relaxed in the gardens after her guest had left.

She turned to him, taking the drink he offered. "Don't tell me, you want me to do something about Freeman?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled indulgently. "I've already sweet talked Admah. He should bring him with him next time. Now get on with the washing up."

"Thank you, ma'am. Already done, ma'am."

"Then I'm sure you can find something else useful to do with your time."

Freeman was there two days later.

"You're in no fit state to wait tables." Ford told him.

"Got to. You were right, I've got to be seen to be useful. You think you can get me a word with her? Because I came up with my own idea."

Ford almost laughed when he found out what the scheme was. Zeboiim slipped into the

kitchen the next morning to see them.

Alec stood respectfully before her. "I would assume, ma'am, that a house like this has a wine cellar?"

"A rather full one." she replied.

"May I ask how much you know about it, ma'am? Because I used to be considered rather an expert on these things."

Ford fought hard to keep a straight face. "That's very true, ma'am."

She looked thoughtful. "I do like human food and it might be interesting... We'll see."

She must have been keener than she sounded because when Admah left an hour later, he did not take Freeman with him. Alec spent two leisurely days cataloguing the cellar and making notes - "I remember coming here with the studio. The old boy who owned the place was a real connoisseur. Wonder what happened to him." - while Ford fed him good, nutritious food.

"Dinner for two tonight." Zeboiim ordered to their dismay.

Freeman went back with his owner the next morning but it was becoming more and more apparent that the two aliens had a long-term, if not exactly stable, relationship. He was soon back at the house.

"Garden party?" Freeman asked when he arrived. "The garden's covered in snow."

"That's the idea." said Ford. "Pass me the sausage rolls, please."

He shook his head at the state of Freeman's clothes. "You're going to freeze. Good job you've lost weight or none of my jumpers would fit you. You can get one from my room. Even so, I think you'd better stay inside as much as possible."

It was not possible, not so much because of Admah as Zeboiim. She had shown off her garden in every season to her guests and now, with Freeman's help, she wanted to show off her collection of 'classic alcoholic beverages'. She even let him taste them but to Ford's surprise, he only took a sip of each.

"Not sure what it would do to me these days and the last thing I need is to get plastered."

Ford kept him surreptitiously supplied with hot food and drink throughout the day but the real treat arrived with one of the guests.

"Alec!" Ayesha breezed into the kitchen and hugged him. "Keith told me you'd be here but I hardly dared believe him. You look..." She frowned. "Actually, you look awful."

"I did warn you," said Ford, fishing a tray of pastries out of the oven. "He's better than he was."

Freeman brushed a hand softly across her cheek. "You're bruised."

She shrugged. "She got a stain down her tunic, said it was my fault. Keith's boss will tell her off if she sees."

The three of them handled a running supply of food and drink from the kitchen out into the garden where the guests were admiring the sculptural forms of the snow covered plants and garden features and looking enviously at the three iron collared SHADO officers.

"None of them have got their own," Ford whispered to the puzzled Freeman.

"We are the *top* status symbol," added Ayesha.

"Suppose we are," said Freeman.

The guests left mid-afternoon, with just Admah and Zeboiim's sister staying for dinner - which left the three humans together for a few hours longer. Keith served the drinks after the meal, leaving Ayesha alone with the exhausted Freeman.

As he sat at the table, she stroked his hair and bent down to kiss him on the neck. When

he turned, she expected him to respond but instead he pushed her gently away.

She looked down. "You don't find me attractive any more."

He put a hand on her arm. "You're as gorgeous as you ever were. It's me I don't find attractive any more."

"I don't understand."

"And I hope you never do. Would it be really unfair to leave you and Keith to clear up. It's been a long, cold day."

As he turned to go, she tried to apologise. "I only meant to make you feel better -"

"It's alright, I appreciate the thought but... I don't know. I've changed."

She nodded. "That I can understand."

By the time the wedding of the two aliens came around in the spring, Freeman was much stronger. Ford had kept feeding, nursing and instructing him on his increasing visits. Freeman also had a few tricks to teach the younger man, picked up from years of the high life. Now he moved permanently into the back bedroom next to Ford.

He sighed contentedly as he stretched and looked out towards the gardens. "No chains, not even when they're not here."

The wedding itself was huge. "Just like a human one," Ford said.

"Suppose there's got to be some kind of contract," Freeman replied. "Otherwise it would be complete anarchy." He smiled wistfully. "I rather liked complete anarchy."

Ford smiled. The shaking wreck of a man who had appeared in his kitchen six months ago was now fitter, sleeker and moved more easily. He would never be Colonel Alec Freeman of SHADO again, his grotesquely scarred face was a constant reminder of that, but he was beginning to look... human.

The guest list of the wedding was extensive. Both of the humans faltered as they recognised faces, flashing back to that day in the rain when the aliens had come to split them up. Some of these people owned other members of SHADO.

A drunken, blond haired young man wandered up to Zeboiim as Ford stood behind her. He gestured inaccurately in the human's direction.

"Absolute treasures, aren't they? Don't know what I'd do without mine, she even got me another one. Amazing."

Admah strode over. "We all know your life's run by your human, Nevin. Some of us know how to keep them in their place."

Nevin blinked owlishly at him. "Why would I want to?"

Ford suppressed a smile and followed him back to the drinks table, where Alec was serving. His eyes met Freeman's. *Listen to this.*

He turned to the young alien. "Excuse me, sir, but could you possibly tell me the name of your human?"

The alien smiled dreamily. "Ealand. And the new one's Holland."

He seemed quite happy to talk. He pointed waveringly to a tall, hawk faced man talking to Admah. "You know who that is? That's Janoah. He's got Straker."

Straker.

The name no one ever mentioned.

Alec coughed. "He's still alive, sir?"

Nevin smiled. "Far as I know. Tell me, what's in that bottle? The green one?"

Ford and Freeman spent the honeymoon at Zeboiim's sister's town house. She enjoyed lording it over them but was quite charmed by Alec's manner.

"Nice to know it hasn't deserted me completely," he commented.

"She's positively purring," Ayesha assured him.

He frowned. "You'll warn me if she gets... too friendly. That..."

She put her hand over his. "I'll make sure that doesn't happen."

They were all three of them sitting on Ayesha's bed late at night, having finished the chores. They had discussed Miss Ealand's apparent success.

"He seemed nice," Ford said.

Ayesha nodded. "My boss dated him a few times. A real gentleman but Bertie Wooster isn't in it. I can just imagine her running his life."

Alec smiled.

"I'm glad," was his only comment.

But they had not discussed Straker. They knew who Janoah was, the genius behind the invasion with a reputation that scared even his own people. Freeman could imagine the two leaders finally meeting that rain soaked day, ice against ice. But the humans had lost and he had little desire to know what was happening to his friend now.

"We have to do something," he said.

The others looked expectantly at him but he had no answers.

"Zeboiim," said Ford eventually.

"Or Nevin," said Ayesha.

*Or something*, they thought.

Things got back to normal once the happy couple returned. They were fighting as much as ever. Things were easier for Freeman, with Ford and Zeboiim to protect him, but harder for Ford, who would get kicked or punched when his own owner was not about. He noticed it did seem to be when she was absent. Admah stalked the house, a long, springy whip in his hands, complaining of his wife's promotions.

"You should be pleased for me," she said. "And keep your hands off my slave."

So it was still Alec who caught the worst of it. Ford never found out what caused the incident that meant everything fell apart. He was checking up on the house robots when he heard cries of pain coming from Admah's bedroom.

Alec was on the floor by the far door, face down, hand outstretched and clawing the carpet. He was crying out at every blow as Admah laid into him in a murderous fury.

Ford's own anger burned. He thought about seizing the alien, striking him. He wouldn't be expecting that. But no, that was too dangerous for himself and Alec.

Looking quickly around, Ford spotted Admah's sculpture - a baroque glass fantasy that had come from his own planet and was irreplaceable.

Admah still had his back towards the door. Ford stepped swiftly forwards, seized the slippery object and threw it against the wardrobe.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said as the alien turned. "I -"

He got no further as Admah turned his wrath on him. That had been the object of the exercise, though as he fell Ford wished he had had time to think of a better plan. He had never taken a real beating before, not even after the invasion. This one made him buck and howl, pain coursing through his body as the blows fell over and over.

Alec was crawling towards him, trying to help though he was barely conscious. It did no good.

He came round in his own bed, with Alec sitting in the chair next to him.

He groaned.



"I quite agree," said Alec.

"What happened?" he asked, his mouth dry.

"He gave up in the end, ran out of steam. I made sure she saw what he'd done. He won't talk his way out of that one in a hurry."

Keith rubbed his eyes. "What are we going to do?"

Alec shrugged. For the next two days, he was the one who waited on Ford though he was not in much better condition himself.

"I'm used to it, you're not."

"That's no excuse. I should... Oww..." He sunk back onto the bed.

For as long as possible they kept themselves to themselves, only coming out of their quarters when they had to. Admah and Zeboiim were too distracted to notice, moving warily around each other.

She seemed quite relieved when she announced to her humans that she would be away for two days. "I'm having my heart replaced."

Alec stiffened.

Ford said: "Will we be going to your sister's, ma'am?"

"That would hardly look like I trusted my husband, would it? You'll be staying here."

Ford sighed as she left them. "I hope she's all right."

Freeman stared at him. "You know where that heart has to come from. Someone's going to die."

Ford blushed, crossing his arms around himself. "I still hope she's alright."

Freeman sighed angrily. "I should have said something."

"Keep your head down, Alec. We're going to be alone with him. We have to look after ourselves. I mean, it's not like we can do anything."

They were surprised to find that as soon as she left, Admah locked himself in the attic. He had never shown much interest in work - "Lost his edge when we won the war," Zeboiim said. Now he only came down for meals, smiling hungrily at the two servants. He did not speak except to demand what he wanted and did not lay a finger on either of them. It was unnerving. Even after his wife returned, fit and healthy as she had ever been, he kept it up.

"What are you doing?" she complained.

"Keeping out of your hair."

She sighed and left him to it.

It was after dinner on the fourth night that he took hold of Alec's collar and shoved him towards the stairs.

"You too," he told Ford, who followed willingly, not wanting to leave them alone together.

At the top of the narrow backstairs leading to the attic, he threw the door open. Stood behind them, Ford could only see Alec's shoulders slump. He was pushed a few steps into the room, Ford following.

A space had been cleared amongst the debris of previous owners and equipment had been installed. It was the chains that Ford saw first. Chains had been secured to the rafters, the floor and a large, old table. Each chain ended in cuffs, hooks or an iron belt. Between them were racks of whips, skewers and other items that Ford had no wish to understand - though he could see from his face that Alec did.

"Things are going to get back to normal," Admah said, smiling wolfishly. "Be here tomorrow morning, first thing. You won't leave."

He turned to Ford. "And you, be warned."

He threw Alec away from him, Freeman stumbling in the doorway, almost falling downstairs, disappearing as fast as he could get out of there. Ford hurried after him. He did not catch up with him until they were back in the servant's quarters.

Alec was lying on his bed, sobbing. Keith hesitated in the doorway, shocked even now to see him like this. After a moment, he bent down and put his arm around Alec's shoulders. Somehow he found his friend crying into his chest a moment later.

The storm blew over and Alec broke away angrily, striding to the window. "God, look at me. I used to be a man."

"You still are, Alec... But nobody can take that kind of abuse. Remember the state you were in the first time you came? I won't let it happen again."

Alec turned to him, concerned. "You don't put yourself in danger, Keith. That's an order, as far as I can give one. He wants to get his hands on you and you are not going to give him an excuse."

"I'm protected."

"You are not invulnerable. Now go on, let me put myself together."

Ford left, thinking hard but coming up with no answers. He finished his chores and went to bed, tossing and turning. It seemed he had only been asleep a moment when he felt his shoulder been shaken.

Alec was standing over him, smiling wryly. "I just wanted to tell you there's no way out of the garden. Especially not if you have a bad leg."

Ford yawned. "I did try that, you know. Long time ago."

"Go back to sleep."

"It was you that woke me up."

\* \* \*

Freeman stood in the moonlit garden, staring at the ten foot razor-wired wall and wondering what was beyond it. He was cold and tired but this was as close as he was ever going to get to freedom.

He wondered where Ed was and fervently hoped he was dead.

But he did not want to think of either the past or the future. He stood in the moment, looking out over the moonlit garden.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Ford and Freeman managed to surprise each other. Ford had cooked up a full English breakfasts for Alec. He brought it on a tray into his room, to find Freeman immaculately turned out and sitting at the table with an unopened bottle of the best Napoleon brandy in front of him.

Alec spoke without turning. "I'm not sure which was the biggest temptation, getting blotto or killing myself. In the end I decided I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of either. Stupid of me. Could you put the bottle back, please?"

He turned, blinking when he saw what Ford was carrying. "That for me?"

Ford's voice was tight. "Least I could do."

"I can't eat it."

"Why not?"

"Won't be able to keep it down. Thanks, anyway."

Ford placed it firmly on the table. "Eat as much as you can. I'm going to take the boss her breakfast."

He did not wait to see what Freeman ate. He took Zeboiim's breakfast of fruit and cheese up to her room. She was looking out over the gardens as usual.

"Ma'am?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes."

"Ma'am, you know what's going to happen to Alec today?"

"Yes."

"Isn't there any way to stop it?"

She turned to him, her face not unkind. "We've been over this. You belong to me, he belongs to my husband. We do not interfere with each other's property. That way he can't harm you -"

"But ma'am, if you both owned us jointly -"

"No, Keith."

"But there must be -"

"No."

He took his dismissal. She would not help and he could think of nothing. Nothing constructive. Poisoning Admah's food - it crossed his mind - would bring down such dire consequences on both of them...

He accompanied Alec to the foot of the stairs. Freeman turned to him, shrugged and walked up to where Admah was waiting. Ford had never admired him more.

All through the upper reaches of the house he could hear the screams. He had intended to stay downstairs, to run away, but instead found himself drawn involuntarily upwards as if the mere act of listening could help his senior officer. Friend. SHADO was gone, there were no more ranks and Alec was his friend.

Which made it all the more imperative that he do *something*.

After thirty six hours he was standing in the corridor, staring up at the attic door in a very calm state of madness. He turned on his heel and walked down to the kitchen where he took up a silver tray, a bottle of Irish whiskey, a crystal tumbler and a very large carving knife. With the knife hidden under the tray, he proceeded up to the attic once more and knocked on the door. He had to knock three times before he made himself heard - or perhaps Admah was ignoring him.

In the end the alien opened the door. His face was red and his eyes wild. He was probably high on whatever it was the aliens used as a recreational drug. Ford had never found out what but he had heard whispers.

"What do you want?" was the slurred greeting.

Ford was the perfect butler. "I brought you some refreshment, sir."

Admah scowled but let him in. Ford deliberately did not look at Alec, sprawled on the floor. He did not know if he was conscious, did not know what he was making of the scene in front of him. He put the tray on a side table, slipping the knife from beneath it and turned.

Admah was still standing in the doorway, his brows knitted. "What are you doing?"

Ford rushed him. Admah flinched, stepped back, lost his footing. He fell noisily down the narrow, twisting stairs.

Ford followed after him, heart pounding, thoughts swirling. If this, if that, maybe...

Admah's corpse lay sprawled at the foot of the stairs, eyes open and neck twisted. For a moment he was aware of nothing else until the footsteps stopped.

He looked up. Zeboiim was standing in front of him, her face cold. He had nothing to say.

"Did you stab him?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I didn't even touch him."

"Are you asking me to believe that?"

"It's not what I intended, ma'am, but it's what happened."

She looked down at her husband's corpse for a moment longer. Then she stepped over it and Ford gave way so that she could climb the stairs.

At the top, Alec had pulled himself as far forwards as his long chains would allow.

"He dead?" he asked, his voice an almost inaudible croak.

Ford still found it almost impossible to look at his injuries. Instead he concentrated on his sweat-bathed face. "Yeah, he's dead."

Zeboiim was looking around. "Keith, remove the items you brought."

He blinked. Was she going to let him get away with it? He was not inclined to argue.

"Yes ma'am... And I'll wipe them for fingerprints."

Alec raised his head. "No. Everything in that kitchen -" he coughed harshly, taking a long moment to get his breath back "- everything'll have your prints on. If that doesn't..." he gestured weakly towards the knife and trailed off.

Zeboiim took up the thought. "That would be suspicious. Good. Keith, do as I said then call my doctor."

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'll just find the keys and release -"

"No. Everything must be preserved exactly in case the police become involved." She looked from one to the other. "My husband was over indulging himself, slipped and fell. It was an accident. But understand me, if there is any suggestion of foul play I will not be the one who pays the penalty."

Freeman looked her in the face, his gaze remarkably steady. "It will be me."

Ford decided this was not a good time to argue. Twenty minutes later he was showing the alien physician up to see the corpse. He hung around in the background, trying not to show any nervous tics that would give the game away.

Or to sigh with relief when the doctor pronounced it a most unfortunate accident. The police were never involved. Finally he was allowed to haul Alec away to his bed.

Freeman was in a bad way. Ford carefully bound up the larger gashes and even managed to find some burns cream but he suspected there were internal injuries he could do nothing about and Alec's mangled and swollen right hand was beyond him. He placed it on a cushion and left it. He dosed him up with as many painkillers as he dared and got on with serving the stream of guests who came to pay their condolences.

Even with Ayesha's help - her owner came round immediately - he spent the next few days serving snacks and dancing attendance, most of the time having to leave Alec to fend for himself. The former colonel was now running a low fever that was getting worse and though he was not yet delirious, Ford feared he might be going that way.

"We have to get you to see a doctor."

"Not letting one of theirs touch me. They'd do experiments or something."

He could hardly disagree with that.

On the evening of the day after the killing, Janoah arrived. He was as lean and frightening as he had been at the wedding.

The first thing he said to the grieving widow was: "You will have his SHADO executed at the funeral?"

Ford was horrified, though strangely gratified that the alien leader still used the old name.

Zeboiim smiled at her guest. "Freeman is inheritable property therefore he's mine now,

not my husband's. Therefore he lives."

"That is not proper." Janoah told her.

"When was I ever proper?"

He scowled but she would not be moved.

The next day she surprised the humans. She called Ford up to the room that had been turned into a 'mourning parlour'. Zeboiim gestured towards the woman standing in the corner and Ford had to quickly suppress a smile.

"I've borrowed this one for you." she said. "And a box of drugs. Asked them to give me a selection."

She frowned at the newcomer. "You are a medic, aren't you?"

"Indeed I am, ma'am." Belle Stewart had been one of SHADO's more colourful characters - claiming ancestors from every continent except Antarctica - but she was also a trauma specialist of the high standard needed in such an organisation.

She and Ford manhandled a large carton of medicine has across to the servants' quarters.

"I've got a million questions for you." Stewart said. "But I guess the first one had better be, who's the patient and what's the matter?"

Ford filled her in. Even so, she was shocked when she saw the state of Freeman. She let out a long string of swear words in several languages.

Alec smiled weakly, his eyes a little too bright. "That would be pretty impressive even for me."

"Don't talk," she instructed him. "Except to answer my questions."

"Yes, Doc," said Alec meekly, his grin broad if a little strained.

It did not work out quite like that. They brought her up to date on their situation and she did the same on hers.

"I mean, I'm fine where I am. I'm dirt in his eyes but if I don't do anything to annoy him, he leaves me to myself. Only now he's hard up and I'm worried. I don't want to end up somewhere worse. Like here."

Ford shook his head fervently. "The boss is alright, it wasn't her that did this."

Alec agreed. "We should be safe here now. What does your one need?"

The discussion continued. The names of Miss Ealand and her alien, Nevin, were mentioned but no one could come up with a sure fire way of contacting her.

"*He* might be at the funeral," Ford said. "Though how we work it..."

Two hours later Freeman was in a drugged sleep, fixed up as well as Stewart could manage in the circumstances. She ran through the appropriate drugs with Keith.

"He's out of danger and he should be pretty much in one piece but every bone in that hand is broken and even if we had the facilities, we'd need a specialist to put it back together. I've strapped it up and he should get some use back but I don't know how much."

Keith did his usual and gave her a good meal before she left.

When the boss wanted her dinner - bereavement had, if anything, strengthened her appetite - he broached the subject of Stewart.

"If I might speak freely, ma'am?"

"Of course."

He handed her the relish. "We are, as I understand it, a status symbol. Perhaps the top status symbol."

"Indeed you are."

"And you now own two of us. Would you be interested in owning three?"

She looked at him. "Nevin has three. No one else has more than one, not even Janoah. I think I would be interested."

Ford smiled. "Then I think, ma'am, I can help you."

After a little research on her part, it turned out that Belle's owner was not so much hard up as bored. He wanted something new and the new thing he wanted at the moment was paintings.

"Do I have any interesting paintings?" asked Zeboiim and Alec dragged himself out of his bed to look, helped by a leftover 1950s guide book with a cover painted by Harold Barklam.

Alec whistled. "I knew they were good but not this good. Two Gainsboroughs, two Romneys, a Lely, a Holbein, three El Grecos, two Rembrandts and a small Raphael. Not to mention a nice collection of miniatures - Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver amongst them - *and* a da Vinci drawing of the Madonna and child. That's impressive."

Zeboiim looked at him blankly. "What's the best deal I can get?"

In the end of Stewart cost all three El Grecos and both Rembrandts.

"I think I should be flattered," she said.

With Admah gone, the atmosphere in the house was far more relaxed. The humans knew that they did not need to pussyfoot around Zeboiim, that she would behave fairly towards them at least by the standards of the master/slave relationship. If she did snap at them, it was usually as a consequence of the extra responsibilities she had inherited on the death of her husband.

One morning, as she sat at the workstation in the summer house, she threw her coffee at Freeman's feet. He jumped back, missed his footing and fell awkwardly. She was with him in a moment, giving him her arm as he struggled to rise.

"I'm sorry, it's all this paperwork. How do we keep the human population happy?" She frowned thoughtfully, then asked again. "How do we keep the human population happy?"

He glanced at the workstation screen. "Ma'am, I can't work your technology and I can't read your language but if you can give me the information in a form I can understand, I'm fairly certain I can provide you with something."

"You'd do that?"

"If it would help people." He sighed and risked a comment he knew was dangerous.

"SHADO was created to defend the human race from your people. Perhaps in some small way I can still do that."

She looked at him sharply, then nodded. "Fair enough."

He took that as his dismissal but as he turned to go she asked: "What about protecting SHADO?"

He smiled. "They seem to have been protecting me."

Again she nodded. "I want more."

"And we'll give you any help we can. Did you have someone in mind?"

"Perhaps. We'll see."

The information came two days later, in English and on sheets of paper. He stayed up all night reading through it, making notes and drinking pot after pot of coffee.

"I'm getting too old for this," he complained to no one in particular.

The others could see he was masking something.

Stewart played along. "You're not making my life any easier, Alec. Do I have to put knock-out drops in your drink?"

But he had to tell them eventually, could not keep it himself. "In the two-and-a-half years since the aliens invaded, the human population of this planet has declined by one and a quarter

billion and it's still going down."

That sobered them up.

"Why aren't people rebelling?" Stewart asked. "There can't be that many aliens."

"Roughly a million but they've got everyone drugged and brainwashed. Just lightly but enough to keep most people in order. We're about the only humans on the planet who can think clearly. We have to do something."

"The boss can do something," Ford said with a reasonable degree of confidence.

Freeman took his findings to her. "You need humans to produce food and goods and - I hate to say it - for organs."

She nodded. "Suggestions?"

"They're not getting enough food. You're looking at long-term malnutrition and that's bad for production. I've listed half-a-dozen industries where simple safety precautions could prevent deaths and I'm sure there are more. You can't cull people just because they have an injury, they're still useful. By these standards I should have been dead years ago but you're asking my advice. And as for these medical experiments... Well, besides anything else they're bad science. They aren't producing useful results."

He went over the suggestions in more detail and she agreed with most of them. "But I don't have the power to implement all of them. I'll try the food ration to start off with."

Over the months she came back to him with a variety of questions and he wracked his brains for answers or directed her to old, human sources of information. Occasionally she would inform him of some positive result.

"We're restarting basic health care for humans."

"The food ration has been increased by twenty five per cent."

Then one day she came back with something different. "I need to prove Kiriath wrong. He's blocked me every step of the way, always speaking against me to Janoah. With your help I've been proved right most of the time. If I can prove him wrong now, he's out."

She paused, watching for Freeman's reaction. "He was third in command when we landed. He's got Lake."

Freeman's mind flashed back to that day in the rain, all that remained of SHADO lined up in the courtyard, gradually being taken away. Ginny Lake had stood at his left-hand for hours until her legs had shaken with pure exhaustion. He remembered the flabby face of the man who had taken her, the way his eyes and then his hand had run up and down her body. The way she had not reacted but Freeman and Straker had, had had to be clubbed to the ground to prevent them killing him. And when she had gone, they had looked at each other as they were made to stand once more.

Freeman closed his eyes and shuddered. "You'll get her?"

"Somehow. "

"Then you've got a deal."

The problem was over the justification for medical experimentation so that it was, in fact, Belle who did the majority of the work. Freeman helped her sift through reams of data to find that which would support the argument and also played devil's advocate, digging up whatever would not. Ford, who had picked up a basic knowledge of the aliens' written language, helped with points of translation. Each night would be a brainstorming session, followed in the morning by a meeting with Zeboiim. She would correct points of language, ask more questions and work on the translation back with Ford. They came up with a strongly worded arguments that although humans were close enough to be adapted for use in organ transplants and other

similar procedures, they were not close enough in their natural state to mimic the aliens' reactions in experimental situations. Experiments on aliens (which would never be permitted) would show this clearly. In the absence of such tests, the data already obtained showed clearly that experimentation on humans lead to data applicable only to humans and to use it on anyone else could be potentially disastrous.

"Those are the findings I shall present," said Zeboiim. "It's just a question of whether other people want to go on with them anyway. Janoah's hard but he's not wasteful."

The day she went off to the meeting they watched her go out of the gate, then carried on distractedly with their domestic tasks. Alec's mangled right hand had healed up enough to allow him some movement but not a proper grip and the range of jobs he could do was limited. At that time he was cataloguing the books in the library. Belle was helping Keith in the kitchen and overseeing the cleaner robots. She had tried to befriend the gardeners but they shied away from her.

"Looks like they've been programmed to avoid us. Professionally fascinating, that level of control," she remarked.

It was late when Zeboiim got back, smiling tiredly. "Kiriath's out. The experiments will be restricted to those that can be shown to have direct relevance."

The humans breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"And Lake?" Freeman asked.

She pulled an exasperated face. "What, did you expect me to turn up with her in the back of the car? It'll take a few days. Supper, please, Keith. Ten minutes."

"Yes, ma'am."

Zeboiim was in a better mood after she had rested but the subject of Colonel Lake did not come up for several days and the humans did not dare raise it for fear of jeopardising the rescue.

Then she arrived home one evening. "She'll be here tomorrow."

It was hard to sleep that night. The humans sat up late around the kitchen table, talking around the subject. Stewart had made up a spare bed in her own room: "So I can keep an eye on her if necessary. I don't know about you two but one of my worst problems was loneliness."

Ford nodded strongly.

Freeman agreed. "If she hasn't seen anyone, human I mean, for the three years it's bound to cause a reaction. Of course it might mean she can't deal with company at all."

Stewart shrugged. "We have plenty of rooms, I can always make one up elsewhere."

Freeman nodded. "We can help her sort herself out when she gets here. Until then, we won't know what she needs."

Zeboiim was only gone for about an hour but her face held an annoyed scowl when she returned. "Wasteful. Might as well cull her." She sighed. "She's in the back of the car."

Ford's heart was pounding and he looked warily at the other two. He had always had a soft spot for Colonel Lake. Now he wondered what he was going to find and it seemed by their tense body language that the others did too.

She was almost unrecognisable. Strapped into the back of the car, she had made no attempt to free herself but sat slumped forwards. Her matted hair hid her face. Her clothes were new and ill-fitting. Ford suspected that Zeboiim had provided them. Otherwise she was dirty and smelt strongly of - he did not want to go down that road. She was very thin.

"Ginny?" Alec asked softly.

She made no response.



"Ginny?" This time more loud.

Again nothing.

He took her gently by the chin and turned her face towards him. It was blank. She showed no sign of recognition.

Alec sighed deeply but he kept on talking to her as he freed her from the safety belt.

"Ginny, we're take you inside now. You're safe here. Nobody is going to hurt you. Do you remember me? Alec Freeman?"

It was as they lifted her from the car that they discovered her legs were limp and useless so they carried her carefully to her new, soft bed.

She remained totally unresponsive as they cleaned her up. When Stewart examined her she groaned once or twice. Still she showed no sign of recognising them. Once she flinched as Alec put his hand on her shoulder but the look of pain was on his face rather than hers.

In the end of Stewart shrugged wearily. "She's malnourished, she has an impressive collection of injuries and she's paralysed from the waist down. As for the change in personality, I can't even tell you if it's psychological or neurological and if I could, I couldn't treat it. There's evidence of a head injury but if it's non-physical, the change in her circumstances might make a change in her condition. All we can do is take care of her and hope for the best. I warn you, it's going to be hard work."

And it was. More than once Zeboiim shook her head and mentioned the word *cull* but mostly she left them alone if it did not interfere with their duties.

"Another senior officer *is* another senior officer, even if it's a wrecked one."

With her overthrow of Kiriath, Zeboiim was now very much the centre of attention. That meant more work and more visitors.

"Don't get time just to enjoy my garden," she complained. "We never had gardens at home, plant life has long gone." she sighed. "I suppose I could collect more gardens but when would I have time to enjoy them? Must take steps to preserve the ones we've got. Some of my compatriots are a bunch of philistines."

Janoah began to visit once or twice a month, scaring the humans by his very presence and raising worried thought of Straker. Nevin also began to visit, with his retinue of human secretaries. There was practically a party going on downstairs as the SHADO officers met up.

Miss Ealand, along with Miss Holland and Miss M'Bondo, had managed to put together an *at risk* list from information that Nevin had picked up or that they had taken directly from the information net.

"Four dead, I'm afraid. This group of eleven are all reasonably safe. These five are in serious danger - indeed, I fear Mr Cheung may also be dead. Mr Morris I don't have any information on. And then, of course, there's the Commander."

"You have something on him?" Alec asked eagerly.

She shook her head. "According to Nevin, he's alive but no one has seen him for the whole time. I have no idea what condition he's in but judging by Miss Lake..."

She changed the subject. "Nevin has been very friendly towards me and I think he feels..." She turned to him and asked straight out. "Would it be very wrong of me to have a relationship with one of the enemy. I know that's what he is but I can't think of him like that. He's so sweet and silly and I know all the others look down on him but he's always behaved honourably towards me and together... I think I want to be together with him but I don't want to feel like a traitor, especially with so many of our people still in danger."

Alec smiled and shook his head, taking her hand gently between his. "If you love him,

look after him. I won't condemn you for it and if anyone else does, send them to me. From everything I've seen he's a good man and frankly - well, to treat him as anything else would be as prejudiced as they are."

She sighed with relief. "I knew you'd understand."

They began to visit on a regular basis. Perhaps it was that that prompted Keith Ford to say:

"You know, I haven't been out of these grounds in more than three years."

He looked out towards the garden wall. "I think I'm in two minds as to whether I want to."

In the end there was no formal ceremony of marriage between Nevin and Miss Ealand because there was no law which covered such an eventuality. Nor was there any that said that the two species could not intermarry. They simply set themselves up as a couple, which made Nevin something of an outcast to his own people and something of a hero to the humans.

Some members of SHADO did mutter behind the bride's back but that was soon quelled by Freeman.

Zeboiim found it vaguely amusing. "I would never have credited him with that much courage or originality. Although he always did seem to merrily go his own way, even when we were children. I think we all put it down to stupidity."

One evening at dinner she announced: "I may be getting remarried. To Janoah."

Ford dropped the plate.

Over the next few weeks the humans waited anxiously to discover what her decision would be and how it would affect them. It might - might - bring relief to the Commander and they agreed without discussion that that far outweighed any deterioration in their own situation.

"But it wouldn't be right for her," said Ford. "He only wants her for her position. He won't treat her right."

"And that," said Belle behind his back "shows where his loyalty lies."

Freeman scowled at her. "Keith doesn't have a problem."

She shuffled her feet. "Did I say he did?"

Whenever Janoah came to the house he stared coldly at them, Freeman in particular, or else ignored them entirely. It was all any of them could do to stop themselves shuddering and they kept themselves strictly to the servants' quarters unless they were summoned.

The situation did, however, have unexpected side-effects. With Zeboiim's star constantly in the ascendant, a string of petitioners came bearing quite blatant bribes that she would take without giving any promises on her part. The best of these bribes -

"I'm a what?" -

was Marco Scarlatti from security, who Miss Ealand had put on the *at risk* register.

"I'm alright, really I am. I just don't want to go near anything electrical ever again."

They fed him up and let him talk, which he did at every opportunity.

"He's not changed much," said Belle.

He even managed to talk a pair of binoculars out of Zeboiim so that he could carry on his hobby of bird-watching in a limited fashion. He also made himself useful by advising her on how to attract more wildlife to the garden.

She was extremely pleased. "We didn't have any of these small creatures at home."

But things with Janoah were not going well. One day Zeboiim arrived home scowling, made a point of being particularly polite to each of her servants, had a go at feeding Lake and never mentioned Janoah again except to complain about his running of the planet.

She set to collecting SHADOs with renewed enthusiasm. Several were given up without too much friendly persuasion. Jo Barker was swapped for the Holbein and Jim Wong - after long and agonised consideration - for a collection of rare roses.

"You don't know how valuable you are." Ford told him.

Over the course of a year the number of humans had tripled to twelve. Space was becoming a little tight in the servants' quarters but it was tacitly agreed that if at all possible Keith Ford would get a room to himself because it was *his* house and so would Alec Freeman because, even if they no longer used ranks - because the boss didn't like it - he was still the senior officer.

Zeboiim's rise had indirect effects. Two suitors gave their SHADOs to her sister - "Thank goodness," said Ayesha. "I was getting rather lonely over here." - though neither won her hand in marriage. Being *in* with Zeboiim also offset some of Nevin's social ostracism and he increased his total to five, all the secretarial staff that remained.

Which left three SHADOs isolated. One of them, Metcalfe, was reasonably safe. Ford, Freeman and Ealand put their heads together and decided that Morris had probably escaped, that no one was talking and that if he had there was no way for them to find or help him. Best of luck to him. And then there was Straker.

Ford ran the ever growing household with his customary efficiency. By now all the gardeners had been replaced by SHADO officers and the colony was entirely isolated from other humans. Even Colonel Lake appeared to find some satisfaction in simple tasks, though she had to be watched to make sure she did not weed out prized specimens or cut herself on the roses. Nevertheless, she appeared more animated. Freeman pored over documents in an attempt to persuade Zeboiim it was sensible to improve the subject race's lot or bolster her evidence when she was already persuaded.

And always in the background were Janoah and Straker.

One afternoon Zeboiim summoned to Alec to her summerhouse. He limped across the lawn, avoiding Stewart on the motor mower.

"You sent for me, ma'am?"

She nodded, motioning him to a seat. "Janoah's made me an offer, Straker for half of you."

Freeman froze, a dozen conflicting thoughts and emotions going through his mind, feelings at war with common sense, his responsibility to his officers conflicting with his loyalty to Ed.

She kept on looking at him levelly and eventually he made a tentative response. "I don't suppose he could be persuaded to take just me?"

She snorted, though he was not sure whether it was amusement or astonishment. "You'd go? You must know what he'd do to you."

He nodded slowly. "I don't want to but if it's the only way... I've had time to get my strength back, I could last until you got me out - assuming you were still interested."

"Aren't you happy here?" The question was almost teasing but he thought he could hear earnestness underneath.

"My response to that would have to be - compared to what, ma'am? Compared to being used as a sex toy by your late husband? I'm ecstatic. Compared to being Colonel Freeman, second in command of SHADO? What do you think?"

He knew he was letting his frustration bubble dangerously close to the surface but he kept on. "Do you know what my name means, ma'am? Freeman, free man. Just slightly ironic. But

I'm grateful for what you've done and I know we're safe here, safe as we can be in this world, and I want Ed here. So can I ask you, ma'am, what you're going to do about it?"

Her mouth made an 'O', the equivalent of a small shrug in a human. "I turned him down. He specifically asked for Keith and -"

Alec banged his fist on the table. "Then why are we even talking about it?"

He pulled back, knowing he had gone too far, nervous of her reaction.

"He'd be very pleased to have you," was all she said, turning her back on him for a long space while he shook with fear. She might. He did not think she would but she might give him up for advantage or as an example to the others.

At length she said: "I want to know why Straker has such a hold, not just on your people but on mine too."

"Then you'll have to meet him."

"I will. Someday. Go back to the house, Alec. Don't come until I call for you."

He left as fast as his injured leg would carry him.

He rarely saw her for the next few weeks but she piled on the paperwork. He could see the trend of it, moving away from general observations and plain policy documents to detailed critiques of Janoah's actions that she needed his help to back-up. He worked hard. It was obvious she intended to bring Janoah down. Perhaps that would deliver Ed but always at the back of his mind was the fear that it would lead to his death.

*Like you never wanted to die?*

The humans were so detached from the outside world that he rarely discovered the result of his actions - only when Zeboiim cared to tell him or they were included in further documentation. At the moment she had gone very quiet, was home little and rarely talked to anyone but Keith.

"She's not doing it for herself," Keith insisted. "She's doing it for us, for the world."

"It's not her world," said Belle.

"I'm not sure that matters any more," Alec said. "They aren't going away. She's our best bet."

The sense of anticipation grew but so did the dread.

"What if she loses?" Belle asked. "What happens to us then?"

Nobody wanted to answer that.

The end came quickly, five years almost to the day since SHADO had stood in the rain, waiting to be taken away. Zeboiim was tense. She hugged Keith Ford before she went out but said nothing.

"It's tonight," Ford told the others.

Alec went on combing Ginny's hair. Tonight. Rescue for Ed or hell for all of them.

A car came, driven by two armed alien guards. "Ford, Freeman, get in."

They looked at each other.

"Why?" Freeman asked.

One of the guards knocked him to the gravel drive with his rifle butt. "Haven't you learned your place yet?"

Ford helped him to his feet. "Doesn't look like we've got much choice."

They climbed into the back of the car, the others watching from the windows. As they drove out of the gates, Ford shivered.

"Five years behind those walls. I'm not sure I want to see what the world's like."

Alec squeezed his arm with his good hand but he had nothing to say.

As they were driven the few miles into London, Alec was surprised by how little things had changed. There were less people about and the reduced traffic meant that they travelled more quickly but there was still the odd juxtaposition of suburban cosiness, classical grandeur, litter and advertising. The physical scars of the invasion were being repaired by gangs of workers. People seemed weighed down by their problems but that was nothing new. Perhaps there were parts of the world where things had even got better under the aliens.

Their eventual destination was the Dorchester Hotel. The car drove around the famous plane tree, still hung with lights, and the two men and their guards entered the lobby.

Ford was looking around. "Never been here before."

"I have. They used to hold award ceremonies here. Here or the Cafe Royale. Don't know how many times I stood in for Ed..."

They were ushered to the lifts, which ran smoothly although their interiors looked a little scuffed and neglected.

"What goes on here, do you reckon?" Ford whispered.

Freeman shrugged, half remembering that the Gestapo seemed to have a preference for posh hotels during the war. The *previous* war.

They were soon at the top, stepping out into a sparsely furnished suite. Zeboiim and Janoah were standing side by side, serious expressions on their faces. Freeman froze, not sure who had won or what the consequences would be. *Was* she handing them over?

Ford stepped forward, apparently reassured. "Ma'am? You need us for something?"

She smiled, Janoah scowled and Freeman began to breathe normally.

"I could be here for a day or two," she said. "I want you to see to my domestic arrangements, Keith. And Alec, he -" she glared at Janoah "- won't tell me where Straker is but I'm certain he's somewhere in the building. Find him and take him back to the house."

Freeman stumbled over "Yes, ma'am." his emotions moving faster than any conscious thought. Ed. *Ed*. Five years since they had seen each other. He dreaded what condition he might find him in but he would find him, today.

Dismissed, Alec made his way through the building with a small search party of human staff. He was not allowed to command aliens but those he met sullenly co-operated, no doubt having been warned of the consequences if they did not. None of them admitted to knowing where Straker was and Freeman began to wonder if he would have to work his way down to however many basements there were.

Everywhere he went, people stared at his scarred face or looked and glanced away. He ignored them.

He had gone down ten floors when he opened the door onto a white walled room, bare except for half a dozen sets of chains and Ed Straker stretched in mid-air.

Naked, blindfolded, skeletal. Ed Straker, alive.

\* \* \*

I exist. I know I still exist because there has to be someone to feel the pain. Not that I do *feel it like I used to. There's no shock, it simply is.*

*I used to be somebody. Is that a cliché? I don't mean it like that, just that I used to be a person. Like there used to be other people.*

*I can hear Alec's voice but that's alright. I do hear people, see them sometimes, kind of transparent against the whiteness. Perhaps I'll listen for a while. I like Alec's voice, it makes me feel better. Like he still exists. Like I do.*

\* \* \*

Alec Freeman cradled Straker in his arms all the way back to the house. He was not sure whether he was conscious or not. He would occasionally give a low moan but he showed no signs of understanding anything that was said to him. Perhaps he would never understand. Realistically, sanity had to be one possible casualty.

Alec had called through to the house and they had everything ready for him by the time he arrived. They had set up the spare bed in Freeman's own room and Stewart was waiting to examine her latest patient. Everyone else hung back, excited and embarrassed. Everyone except Ginny, who carried on weeding.

Stewart did not say much, curtly nodding to herself as she checked out Straker's ravaged body.

"Well?" Freeman asked finally.

She shrugged, her face difficult to read. "It's bad, obviously, but it's not terminal. Not in the short term at least. I expect it will have taken a good few years off his life span. I can find out more when he's awake."

"How long will he be out?"

"No idea."

She left the two men alone. Freeman pulled the curtains most of the way across and finally removed Straker's blindfold. Unsure how long it had been on, he had been reluctant to remove it before in case the light hurt his eyes. Now he sat down to wait.

He was grateful for the semi-darkness for another reason. Most of the time he almost forgot the damage done to his own face but now he felt curiously self-conscious about it. If the aliens saw it, if the humans at the Dorchester saw it, it made little difference. But he did not want Ed to see it, did not want Ed to know how badly he himself had been hurt. As if he could possibly hide it.

He had dozed off but at Ed's first stirrings, he was awake.

"Ed? Can you hear me, Ed?"

"Alec?" the voice was a rasp, whether from lack of use or damage to the throat he could not tell. "Alec? Are you... You're real?"

Freeman took his hand. "I'm real. And you're safe."

Straker looked baffled rather than pleased. "Safe?"

He moved his head in Freeman's direction but his eyes did not seem to focus and he reached out a hand.

Alec caught it, having to use his bad hand. "Is it too dark in here?"

Ed shook his head. "I don't see too well. Shapes, contrast, movement maybe. I don't know if it's being in the blindfold so long or maybe head trauma. I don't know. It was like this last time I got a chance to look. Months ago."

Alec squeezed his hand. "Maybe we can do something about it when you're rested. Belle Stewart's our chief medic." He forced a cheerful note in his voice after the shock. "Now, are you hungry?"

Straker managed a tentative chuckle. "I think that function shutdown a long time ago. I guess I need food but what I really need is answers."

Alec nodded, then, realising that was little use, began to speak. "They aren't mutually exclusive. We're at a house outside London, the one where we made *Belle of the Ball* if you remember that turkey. It belongs to an alien called Zeboiim..."

His enthusiasm picked up as he got into his tale of how Zeboiim had collected the set of SHADO officers, had protected them in return for little more than good behaviour, of Keith

Ford's part in it all. But his confidence wavered as a frozen look came over Straker's face. Was he in pain? Was he not taking it in?

"You sold out." The voice was almost inaudible but laden with contempt and it stung.

"Ed? You're -"

"You sold out. You betrayed us." He pulled his hand back. "Get away from me." The volume was growing.

"Ed, I -"

"Go!"

Freeman fled as fast as his bad leg would allow, pursued by a torrent of abuse as he slammed the door behind him. It was true. It was all true. But what else could he have done? He had to save their people. He had saved himself.

He stood with his back to the door and shook, tears running down his face.

\* \* \*

Keith Ford arrived back the next day with his shoulders slumped and his head in a whirl, in time to get lunch. He found the others were whispering among themselves. Scarlatti, who had been in the corridor when Alec came out, gave him the best account.

"... And he's been sitting on a chair outside the door ever since. Won't eat, won't sleep. Couple of us tried to get in but just got screamed at. By the Commander, not Alec. He just lies on his face and sobs. I don't think he's sane any more."

Ford's heart sank. After all this time... After all this time it was only to be expected.

"I'll have a go, I'm used to getting shouted at. Make a start on lunch, the boss will be back soon."

Alec looked up as he came down the corridor. He said nothing.

"Can I go in?" Keith asked.

Alec nodded. "Get him to eat something."

Inside, the room was still in semi-darkness. Straker was lying on his front. He did not react as Ford approached him. A large, dark stain discoloured the pillow. Tears. Ford wanted to howl.

*At least he's not shouting. He looks exhausted.*

"Sir?"

"Alec?" the voice trembled.

"No sir, it's me, Ford."

"Oh." Was that disappointed or dismissive?

Ford tried again. "Sir, you have to listen. I know things haven't gone how you wanted, how any of us wanted -" *Could I make a bigger understatement?* "- but it's not Alec's fault. Since the moment he got here he's been trying to find you, trying to get you to safety. He's never stopped and he's done more for us in SHADO and humanity in general than I'd ever have dared hope. The boss told me he offered to swap himself for you. Whatever's happened, he doesn't deserve the way you're treating him."

Ford let out a long breath. That had torn it. He had given the Commander piece of his mind and even after all this time he could not shake the fear of his boss. Because Straker would always be the boss, whatever happened.

He stood, waiting for Straker's response, wondering if he should say something else. Apologise? But he had been right.

For a long time there was no reply. Then, in a tiny voice:

"I know."

"You do?"

Straker nodded into the pillow. "You think he'll see me?"

"He's been waiting outside all night."

Straker groaned and Ford gave him a moment before opening the door.

"Alec, he'd like to talk to you."

Alec hauled himself stiffly to his feet. "Thanks."

"I didn't need to do anything, he was ready."

Alec nodded. "You think you could rustle up some food? For both of us?"

"Certainly." He went off to get on with his domestic duties, still dazed that he had answered the Commander back.

\* \* \*

Alec stepped hesitantly into the room. He had no idea what to say so he cleared his throat to give himself a moment.

The response was immediate, whispered. "Alec? Is that you?"

"It's me."

Ed turned his head towards him, tried to turn over but could not manage the effort. Without thinking, Alec was at his side, arm around him to steady him, gently pushing him into the desired position. Straker pulled towards him, arms around him and clinging on for dear life. Alec held his shivering body close.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Alec. I didn't mean it. I'm the one that sold out, I'm the traitor, or I would have been if he'd give me the chance but he never did and -"

"Shush, shush, it's all right. I understand. Believe me, I understand. God help me, you'll never know what I did to make that bastard Admah stop hurting me." He shivered himself with the memories. "But Admah's dead and yours is gone and we're safe. No more pain. No more loneliness. It's all over."

"All over." Straker looked up at him, their faces close. He reached out to touch Alec's, tracing the scars with his fingers. "Over?"

"That's right. Now, you have to eat."

Straker shook his head. "I have to understand. Tell me again what happened, what you tried to tell me before. I promise I'll listen this time."

"I talk, you eat. Then the doctor looks you over, then you get some rest. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

\* \* \*

"I want to see him, Keith. I want him brought to me." were almost Zeboiim's first words when she returned.

Ford sighed. "He's still very weak, ma'am. I believe the doctor is with him at the moment."

"Bring me her report when it's ready. And bring me something to eat." She paused. "I'll see him tomorrow, no later."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ford served her meal then went across, intending to speak to Freeman. When he arrived, Straker was sitting propped up against pillows, so he explained to both of them.

"I think she's testing you, sir. Wants to see -"

"What's left?"

"Yes, sir."

Straker nodded. "Then I guess I'll have to put on a good show."



"You're not ready," Freeman told him. "You can barely sit up, you can't see -"

Straker held up a hand. "Give me twenty four hours. If I can't do it, I can't."

For twenty four hours Straker ate, slept and tested his muscles. He was bathed, his hair groomed and a decent suit found for him. He found he could walk a few steps but his muscles were too wasted to do more.

Alec was by his side constantly, with words of reassurance and arms to catch him. He made no mention of how Straker had behaved earlier, which only made Ed's guilt worse but neither of them spoke of it. Others hovered in the corridor, looking for jobs to do, wanting an excuse to see the Commander. Not that they could use ranks now, Alec had briefed him on that. Indeed, it seemed that relative positions had shifted and that Keith Ford was second only to Alec. If what Alec said was true, he had earned it. Straker wondered what his own position would be now, unsure whether he wanted the responsibility of leadership even if his people offered it to him.

Twenty four hours later, it was time.

"You ready?" Alec asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be. Where is she?"

"In the summerhouse."

"Long walk."

"Too far for you. We've borrowed Ginny's wheelchair."

Straker looked up sharply. "You never told me Ginny was in a wheelchair."

Alec shrugged evasively. "It's been five years, I haven't had time to tell you everything. Shall we go?"

\* \* \*

Alec felt almost more than he could deal with. There was so much to tell Ed, much of it bad news and he himself has so thin and ill. At times Straker seemed about to burst into tears, then he would beam with happiness. Yet, although he was not completely stable, Freeman had no doubt as to his sanity. He worked rationally, if slowly, through everything that was put to him.

Alec hovered over him with paternal pride as he took each rapid step towards normality. Still, even Ed could only make it so far in a day.

He thought Ford agreed with him: "I can try and put her off one more day."

"Would it work?" Ed asked.

"Probably not."

"Then I'd better get moving. Yes, Alec, I'll use the wheelchair. *Most* of the way. No ranks. Call her ma'am. Be polite. I was listening."

Ed flinched as they crossed into the sunlit garden. Alec put a calming hand on his shoulder. He had been coping so well with the blindness that Alec had almost forgotten he could see. He wondered if it might be psychological, might clear up, if that was not grasping at straws. He pointed out major features in the garden and Ed turned his head but how much he could make out Alec did not know.

Zeboiim was waiting for them in the summerhouse. Ford was there too, having hurried ahead with a tray of coffee.

Ed put his hand up to stop the wheelchair and got to his feet. Leaning heavily on Alec's arm, he walked the last few steps.

He inclined his head. "Ma'am?"

She smiled slightly. In English she said: "Please sit down. Would you like a cup of

coffee?"

"Thank you." He lowered himself gratefully into a seat. "May I ask why you wanted to see me?"

She waited while Ford poured two cups of coffee from the pot. Then she asked: "What do you want?"

It was not the reply any of them had expected but there was little hesitation in Straker's answer. "In the short term? The chance to get my breath back, get my health back if that's possible. To speak to my friends, including those living elsewhere. Not to be hungry or afraid or in pain."

"And in the long term?"

There he did pause, searching for words. "SHADO was set up to serve humanity in a way that is no longer possible but that doesn't mean there is no longer a need. Alec's told me a little of what you've done and I'm grateful but I'd like the chance to do something myself, to serve. Will you give me that chance?"

He reached for his coffee and calmly took a sip.

After a moment Zeboiim snorted with laughter.

"I amuse you?" he asked.

"No. No, it's just that you're so much like I expected that I didn't expect you to be like that. Forgive my bad English but I hope you understand what I mean. You are, it seems, the Straker that SHADO still follows and my people still fear. And I own you."

He raised an eyebrow at the obvious challenge. "If that's the case, do you think you could do something about these collars?" He flicked the iron ring around his neck. "They're extremely uncomfortable."

She chuckled again. "We'll see. And you can start work as soon as you feel up to it. Alec will explain things to you. I'd like your opinion on the developments in transportation, the birth control policy and the agriculture and biodiversity initiative. I'm afraid you'll have to keep away from military matters."

"*Not* a problem."

"For the moment, you'd better get back to your bed."

Straker looked around, or so it seemed. "If it's all the same to you, ma'am, this is the first time I've been out of doors in - how long?"

"Five years." Alec informed him.

"*Five years?* That hadn't sunk in. But it only proves my point. I'd kind of like to stay out here and enjoy the garden, if you don't mind."

She gestured expansively. "Be my guest."

Straker finished his coffee and walked steadily back to the wheelchair.

As Alec wheeled him away towards the rose garden, he slumped in the seat, exhausted. "Did I do OK?"

"OK? You heard her, you had her eating out of your hand."

A smile flickered over Straker's lips as he looked up at his friend. "I always did play a good bluff."

He reached out towards the blooms and Alec stopped to bring one of them closer to his face. He inhaled deeply and shivered, Alec could not tell why.

"What's up?"

"It's... It's the contrasts. But we are safe now?"

"We're fine."

"And the world?"

"Still working on that one. But you can do it. Come on, what do you want to see? The trees in the arboretum look great this time of year. Or we could run through the fountain?"

Ed laughed, clear and happy. "Yeah."