

Mutual Admiration

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Alec Freeman watched Virginia Lake with only slightly concealed lust, after all, this **was** a SHADO conference on job performance. He was concentrating not only on her superb figure and crowning glory of blonde hair, but on gleefully guessing exactly what she was feeling. Around Straker, the woman was a lit firecracker but what woman wasn't around Straker? Even some men. How many starlets had bit the dust trying to get Ed Straker to give them the eye. More often than not, as the Americans put it, he gave them a pink slip instead. Momentarily he allowed himself to look at Ed to double check his impression. Yes, the expression was there all right. The ever so subtle curl of the mouth, the sparkle in his dominantly blue eyes. Spot on. He had to admit that he was proud of seeing what others didn't or couldn't see when it came to his friend. This was a perfect example. There at his desk sat Straker, signing their papers without any sign of what he might be thinking, but a slight amused movement of his lips gave him away. He was enjoying himself immensely as he shot and killed all the ducks in a row. Alec approved of it. It had been a rough month. Ed didn't do this often. *Besides, one of the actors at the studio had recently complained to Alec that doing an especially tough scene in a sci-fi series Harlington-Straker was shooting was like trying to comb his hair in five mirrors. Straker could have pulled off the level of concentration needed for the scene with ten. It was the idea of taking a holiday that put the fear of God in him.

Straker wasn't doing this purely for any sadistic reason. The only thing linking Straker and sadism was the letter S, as Alec knew, contrary to the many fools who would believe otherwise. Straker might kill aliens in cold blood, but he might also consider any alternatives before he swatted a single fly. Few knew about that humane side of him and fewer would believe it. No, Ed was doing this so that his operatives would have something to complain about to one another, a healthy vent. That too was a release from the hell of the month. February. Who said it was the shortest month anyway? It felt like a year with the way the aliens had hit them. Straker knew all that. Alec smiled to himself. He hadn't chosen to be Ed Straker's friend and confidante all these years for nothing. The man was simply incredible to be around. Alec enjoyed being with him, even with his own job performance report on the line, which hadn't been all that great either, and Ed had let him know it. No preference there.

Virginia Lake was glaring at Straker. Straker just seemed to be waiting for something, like a camera laden photographer at dawn hoping to capture an elusive omega sunrise on film and have a result that even a professional photographer would envy.

One by one the senior operatives went out, looking like identical dying flowers falling from a bouquet. Alec could easily imagine half their petals on the floor from Straker's drilling their facades of self-confidence into pollen.

Now. It had to be. Round one.

"I dismissed everyone. Did you still have something to say to me, Colonel Lake?"

"Commander, this report on my job performance, it's..."

"Accurate?" Straker asked in his characteristic crisp manner.

Alec turned and pretended to admire Straker's animated kaleidoscope mural to hide a huge grin.

"No... no. It's unfair. With all due respect, considering how hard I worked this past month that's what it is, Sir."

"You think its unfair? Colonel, let me ask you a question. What do you do for a living?"

Alec is right, she's the most beautiful when she's angry. I wonder why that seems to be the case when women are angry? Perhaps the ridiculous idea of the so called weaker sex not kowtowing to men and being obedient and submissive is in men's minds when they see women that angry, and it intrigues them, draws them in when women act contrary to their imaginations. Part of their charm. Fortunately the idea of a woman simply existing to go chasing a man or woman with their feminine wiles, hoping to lure them in like prize fish, a trophy husband or boyfriend has no place in this organization.

"Excuse me?"

Straker waited.

"I'm third in command at this headquarters, **Sir.**"

Alec nearly winced at the mention of command and emphasis on that Sir. She sounded tired but unfortunately for her, petulant. This wasn't good. Alec saw a killer blow coming, and true to form, Ed delivered it.

"Exactly. I didn't give you that promotion for you to think this was going to be a sinecure. Don't talk to me about fair. " Straker dramatically slammed his fist down on the stack of UFO reports on his desk that somehow, he had actually finished going through. Alec hated him, he himself was behind by seven reports. He consoled himself with knowing Ford was behind by ten, and had lost the hearing in both ears when Straker had lectured him about it. And, Alec thought in amusement, Straker had probably enjoyed that, too. Alec suspected the Commander tended to ride Ford harder because he saw a younger, more innocent Straker in him.

"Take a good look at this pile of UFO reports, Colonel. We've lost three operatives, fifteen civilians. All of them had families who are grieving while you waste my time discussing what's fair and what isn't. Maybe you ought to talk to the alien bastards about fairness. While you're doing that Colonel, I suggest you toughen up and do your job. Unless you want a hypo full of the amnesia drug. Dismissed."

Virginia Lake had jumped at the sound of Ed's fist coming down and just as fast bit her sensuous lip to pretend Straker hadn't startled her.

"Sir, may I please speak off the record?"

Straker studied her for a full five seconds, expression rigid as ice .

I wonder what you'd do, Virginia, if I ever told you what's on my mind? What was on my mind as you knew instinctively what to do, as I walked down that hospital garden path, trying to see that poor young woman as she had been, not as I'd seen her ten minutes earlier. The way you knew I needed a friend, and was able to convey your support

*without a word. How much I appreciated it when I got home and could give in to the guilt and grief that seized me and refused to let me go. Or should I confess even in the middle of the fight we codenamed Time Lash, how amused I was at your shock that I had that weapons room concealed as a precaution should there be an emergency too close to home and no one knew about it but me. I could always read your mind. Just when I thought I knew him... But you **don't**, Virginia. You don't. It needs to be that way. My job comes first. The aliens are tough. I intend to be tougher.*

Oh God, Alec thought., the challenge thrown out. He may give her the shot himself if she keeps this up. The patented Straker stare. Virginia has to really be exhausted to have handed Straker this opportunity to kill her on an eighteen karat gold platter, standard SHADO issue.

Virginia looked hopeful, even risked a captivating smile. Alec got pale. *Oh bloody hell she's even going to try feminine wiles on him? Maybe I should give her the amnesia drug. Ed so hates dead bodies in his office.*

Straker became one of the steel lined walls. He leaned forward. *He might as well have been aiming his Glock at her heart for all the understanding in his expression, Alec mused. Fire one! Target destroyed.*

"**NO.**" Straker snapped. "Wipe that smile off your face, Colonel. This carnage is no matter to smile about."

Christ, to have done that she must be exhausted. Sometimes what I have to do in the course of my job is - well, Virginia put it accurately enough. Unfair. Unfair to her, unfair to me. The job comes first. This is for your own good. In time, you'll figure that out. Otherwise I never would have hired you.

The one word. Those steely blue eyes, about as compassionate as an atomic bomb. The open shock in Virginia's. Alec could hardly wait to see her next move. He hoped Jackson had brought in a new shipment of aspirin. She'd need it. Alec's mouth fell open at her response. He hoped Straker's Glock was too far away for human target practice.

"Sir, you yourself gave me a command position. Am I to be silenced, like some dutiful woman considered too stupid to command because she wasn't born a male? I never expected that *you* of all people would do that, Commander. You chose me, and everyone knows it. Are you saying you made a mistake because I'm a female?" There was anger in her voice. Alec tried to remember childhood prayers. He failed. Okay, Alec thought. Way off line. This is **my** department.

"Colonel Lake, nobody but nobody speaks to the Commander that way or accuses Commander Straker of sexism while I'm still breathing. As a matter of fact, I want to hear your apology. Now." Alec tried to sound like Straker when he said now, but it probably sounded like a sheep trying to growl like a lion. You had to accept your inferiority around Straker, Alec thought in amusement despite the seriousness of her insult, which he knew she didn't mean. She was just as burnt out as the rest of them to be showing anger. But sometimes

enough was enough.

Straker just sat like a far from serene Bostonian Buddha, arms folded. *Thank you, Alec. Some of my battles are more appropriately fought by you.*

"I'm sorry, Commander. It's just - one of those civilians was a friend of mine," Virginia said.

That smug bastard. So that's the way he's going to be about this. Fine, have it your way. I thought you might give just a little, like a crack in concrete. Just this once. You have sometimes, guess not today. Just when I thought I knew him. The bloody weather is more predictable!

"I read your report in full and am aware of that detail. Dismissed." Straker responded. Ed slammed the door button as if he was killing something with eight legs, Alec noticed. Pissed with a capital P. Alec accurately guessed why. *Me, he thought. I did too. I'd known Donald forever, and he left a grieving young wife and four tikes who depended on him and a weighty bill for his funeral services.*

Ed looked for a moment at Alec. He gave him a slight nod that spoke volumes.

One of those civilians was a friend of Alec's, Virginia, and yet Alec did his job as if he hadn't been to his funeral to do the impossible, comfort the family and he hardly had any time to do so with the aliens giving us a beating. Most people underestimate him on the basis of the hard drinking and the womanizing. They see it as flaws. I see it as evidence of his humanity, and I see how he takes care of my people when I can't get up from this damn desk and do it myself.

But Virginia, when I push you by deliberately subtracting some job performance points from your record, you do exactly what I rated you so highly for. Your standards of excellence make you push yourself even harder. The people around here give you a hard time over your beauty, brains and sex life. Not in my presence, of course. Cowards all, if I had the slimmest of excuses I'd toss them out on their ass, but even I have limitations in command, as Alec is fond of reminding me.

Me sexist? Sexism? That's as absurd an idea as judging a person's character as inadequate because they happen to have a different skin color from mine. You're throwing blame where it doesn't belong. You're letting off steam, I get it. You're too proud to put those mostly female morons in their place, morons who think you're cotton candy with a brain. Better suited for perfume and pearls instead of professionalism and pride and perseverance. I wanted you because you could beat the performances of a third of my male operatives in intellect and even brawn, judging from our martial arts specialist's report on you in that area. I know from experience he doesn't make allowances for anybody studying hand-to-hand combat. I still have several bruises from my last encounter with him. You make me proud, Virginia. In deference to Alec, I know you fit that purple blouse damn well, too. But I'd sell out to the aliens before I ever admitted to you I noticed it. That's one of my flaws or so my Australian friend there has told me. And as only God and Alec knows, I have them. I just hide them better than other people do. Goes

with the job. The job comes first. I told you I made my choice a long time ago. I meant it.

Virginia gathered up her nerve, plastered a unreadable look on her face, stood composed.

"Yes, Sir." This time, Alec noticed, her Sir was respectful. Alec watched her leave, watched her disappear out the doors, head held high and found himself feeling a little sorry for her.

"Well?" Straker's tone had completely changed. Even the statuesque contours of his face seemed to transform, a porcelain doll suddenly becoming a living human being. He leaned back in the seat, allowed it to cradle his tired body, like Atlas suddenly deciding to put the world down.

Straker appeared totally spent, and Alec felt the first tremor of worry. Ed didn't take proper care of himself. What the hell was he doing here having a bit of selfish fun watching Ed and Virginia go at it as equally matched competitors in a verbal boxing ring? Ed was in trouble, and he not only was Straker's guardian and second but his only friend.

Straker leaned back in the chair, stretched, and studied Alec thoughtfully.

If you only knew how much I appreciate your company when it gets rough Alec, you'd develop a swelled head. I'm fine, Alec. Nothing that grabbing some food and a shower and some sleep can't cure. Preceded by a prayer for the dead. Even if it doesn't benefit them, it'll make me feel better. That way I'll cover all the bases. Those families, our people, lost. They didn't deserve to die like that. I wish I could do more than send a wreath, Alec. Miss Ealand prepared a little something for you in that area at my request. I hope it helps.

"Well what, Sir?" Alec grinned and replied. Straker smiled.

"None of the usual rants about how I push them too hard? No threat of resignation de jour? How about a go home, Commander Straker, you look awful and need sleep."

"Go home, Commander Straker. You look awful and need sleep."

Straker smiled again. Then he hunted through the folders neatly stacked on his desk.

"Lose your address again? Wrote it down somewhere and you can't remember it? You're getting old, Commander."

"Actually Colonel Freeman, I thought you might like to see this." Straker pushed an envelope across his desk, ignoring the barbs but wincing at the word old.

"*You're* finally resigning? I may need another drink," Alec announced.

"You should be so lucky." Straker commented sourly. They exchanged grins.

Alec picked the envelope up, recognized that it was not SHADO material but made of fine parchment. Well well well! Ed's own expensive personal stationery! Alec tried to hide his impatience to see what Ed was up to and he opened it and took out and read what was inside. He looked at Straker. Straker looked grave. So did the craggy faced Australian. Alec's voice was unusually quiet when he finally found words.

"I appreciate it. You didn't need to do this, Ed."

"Are *you* questioning my actions too, Colonel? Is something going around? Shall I put in a call to the CCD?" Straker snapped and mimed reaching for one of his pastel colored telephones. His vivid blue eyes, almost supernaturally large and beautiful, still sparkled with wit, Alec noted.

"The *what?* Quit showing off your college education, you Bostonian snob." Alec feigned ignorance, and Straker knew it, it was a game they played.

"The Center for Communicable Diseases, Alec. Read a book on them sometime. It'll do you good. I recommend you reading it while you're still sober."

"Are you stereotyping me again, Commander?"

"If I caught myself ever seriously questioning your worth simply because you like mournfully studying the bottom of a whiskey glass after you empty the bottle, I'd give myself the amnesia drug. And I want that job performance number of yours raised by twenty points. Now get out of here, Colonel."

"**Twenty** points? You still believe in miracles? "

"**Out!**"

"Ed."

"Colonel, I'm warning you..."

"I'm buying you dinner tonight, you're coming with me right now. No protests, no objections, or I go straightaway to those twin cretins Henderson and Jackson and suggest they give you an enforced holiday."

"You **would**, wouldn't you? Very well, Colonel. I hope your wallet is as fat as your little black book, but considering what you buy for that harem you call your string of girlfriends it probably isn't. That's why God created the credit card. I just realized I'm starving. Oh, and Alec, get on the telephone before we go and add to Colonel Lake's misery by telling her she has my chair until I come back."

"**Me?** Why *do* I stay with you anyway?" Alec muttered and made the call, wincing at the response. He mumbled an apology and hung up.

Straker lifted a sparse, fair eyebrow quizzically. Alec knew that feigned innocent expression when he saw it all right. *Poor little me? Did I do something wrong?*

"That bad?"

"That bad? Are you kidding, Ed? I know some RAF personnel that don't use all those curse words, and Virginia is such a pretty girl, too. I mean it Commander, just why do I still work for a ogre of a tyrant like you?"

"Who else would employ you, Alec?" Straker asked casually, slipping on his matching jacket over the ivory jumpsuit that was tailored to fit his lissome, fine-boned body to perfection, and it emphasized his flawless, angelic good looks.

Okay, maybe Virginia would vigorously question the angelic part. She'd be right to do so, too, Alec knew.

"You might have a point there," Alec replied, making a face. Straker actually chuckled softly and Alec's fears for Ed dropped down to their usual red alert status. Alec knew perfectly well why he drank. He worked for this guy who got injured or neglected his own health on a regular basis and pushed himself past human limits under the excuse of work, and people in SHADO still wondered why Alec Freeman hit the booze? Alec frowned at Ed's perfect features, his amused crescent of a smile and hopelessly thought yet again what he could do with the ladies if he looked half that good.

Straker went on looking at him as they left the office, but the reserved face had returned

for the sake of the audience. Alec noted Keith Ford looked like he wanted to hide under his console. They walked to the lift and Ford visibly relaxed. Ed looked at Alec, he too had noticed Ford's reaction.

*If you only knew, Alec. It's an mutual admiration , contrary to what you and others think. I'm lucky to have you at my side. The best decision of my life was choosing you as a second and a friend. Your heart could melt the February snow or so the poets would put it. Unfortunately I can't add your kindness and interest in your fellow human beings to the considerations I use to judge job performance. If I could, you'd get top marks, Alec Freeman. But don't think I'm not leaning on you if those reports don't appear on my desk and that score doesn't go up. I know the potential is in you. **Somewhere**, Ed thought in amusement. I must really believe in miracles.*

That face, those eyes, that voice. Talk about unfair. Some people had all the luck, Alec thought.

No. That isn't accurate at all. Ed just handed me a personal check with a generous amount of zeroes to be given to my late friend's family to tide them over. He didn't need to do that. He knows I passed the hat around already. I'm who has all the luck. I'm the best friend of a man named Edward Straker.

THE END

Writer's Notes: Amelia came up with the idea for this as a break from a longer (and it's getting longer!) story (which we've both been working on as health permits) and suggested I tackle it, because I especially liked and appreciated Alec Freeman and Virginia Lake, and have from the start. Hope you enjoy the story.

If **HE** and I don't mean God, but I think at times "old hard ass Straker "(what Ed Bishop enjoyed calling him)might get a bit pleased with his comparison to a Deity grin) didn't find fault in Lake then that's a plus from me for the lady as well. We all know Straker's standards are high. Bravo, Virginia. Bravo Alec. And...

(at brace) **Bravo, Ed, Sir!**

*Besides, one of the actors at the studio had recently complained to Alec that doing a especially tough scene in a sci-fi series Harlington-Straker was shooting was like trying to comb his hair in five mirrors. - Stated by a guy named Ed Bishop when they were shooting Mindbender.

'ED'

*ED is how Ed Bishop signed his name in e-mails to a friend of his which Amelia had the pleasure of viewing. So I often use that and the Straker nom de plume to honor him. May he rest in peace. There will never be another soul like him.