

Visiting Hours

by 'Ed Straker' with my wife ©2012 a UFO short story

Dedication : For Him because of you know what and to her with a promise.

Reason: Fifteen years of dust, who cleans up around here?

Author's note: Nothing new. Just how I'd like it to have been.

"To think that Alec Freeman said I depended on computers too much. Damn computers, keeping me alive now. They couldn't save *him*."

"Sorry, Commander what did you say?"

"Nothing of consequence. Tell Dr. Harrison to come in."

"He's making rounds, he's scheduled to see you this evening."

"Sister, do I have to pull this damn rig out and find him myself?"

"Sir, you're much too weak, no! Settle down. I'll have him paged."

"Be quick about it. Time is a commodity I don't have much of. I never had to consider time before. I knew where my place was, what my duties were. Now, now I'm just useless."

"Sir, you really should make an appointment with our psychiatrist. It's perfectly natural for you to be depressed, after the accident."

"Accident? That was no accident. Those aliens predicted we'd come for the civilians and we walked right into their trap. I gave you an order to get Dr Harrison. Carry it out."

"Only if you rest."

"I'll rest when I'm dead. Get out of here. That's right go. All alike, those medical people, they're all alike. I'm only interesting to them as a case folder, a bunch of numbers and symptoms. Waiting. Waiting until they roll my corpse into the morgue, and they roll the next poor bastard in here. Waiting, waiting. Talking to myself. Well, what more can you expect? It's that stuff they're giving to me. Maddening beep beep beep of the telemetry machines. Computers, all run with computers. Who the hell are you?"

"What's the matter, are you so sick now you can't see a face clearly any more? The word is, the staff here at Mayland draws straws and the poor bastard that draws the shortest straw comes in and takes care of you. You're quite the problem child around here, Commander Straker."

"Wipe that damn smile off your face, or I'll wipe it off for you. Besides, visiting hours are over."

"Still have the old Straker charm, huh? I wouldn't pull that IV out like that, Ed. They aren't going to be happy with you bleeding all over the floor."

"Damned if I care. I'm not staying here a moment longer. Now do you help me or do I do it myself? What are you, one of those people that keep poking me for my blood or what's left of it? You here to do more tests? **NO!** No more tests! Look. I'm standing up. You see? They said that wouldn't be possible for months. Look at me. I may be weak but I can walk. I just get tired more easily these days. Anyone would, if they had my job."

"You had to push Alec Freeman out of the way, didn't you? Your middle name ought to

be Sacrifice. You know, every day he saw you in that bed there, it was like his heart was being blown up by a hundred UFO's. He died because he couldn't go on. He couldn't go on knowing it should have been him in that bed, not you. But you drove out to the UFO landing site anyway. Got out of your car, didn't even try diving for cover."

"What was I supposed to do? He was dying, dying because of those damn cigarettes we all thought were harmless. We didn't understand the punishment our bodies were taking. Our lungs. By the time they found his cancer, it was late stage. Terminal. If he'd only told me. I could have helped. Don't look at me like that, I would have done *something*! If only I'd known! No, he went out to that UFO, hoping to go out in a blaze of glory. Another old man in the field, another one like me, out there long after his expiration date. If I had known, maybe I would have made it easy for him. Put my pistol at the back of his skull and pulled the trigger. I owed him that much, and more. If he'd only told me. Didn't he understand that I made my choice a long time ago? He was important to me. I'd do anything to save his life. Anything. But what does it matter now?"

"After all that time, you still blame yourself. At least you're consistent. Come on, take a walk with me. I need air."

"I forgot what air smelled like. My God, it's wonderful. This is all the therapy I needed, but those idiot medics never listen. But I shouldn't be breathing and enjoying it. I let him down. I couldn't even tell him it was all right, that I'd never consider him a coward. Nobody had a finer friend than I did. **Why?** How could it happen? How many days and nights did he sit at the side of my bed, while I was in the coma nobody expected me to wake up from? Why? Why?"

"Why do you always blame yourself, Edward? Do you think he'd lie to you?"

"No. Never. Yes, **yes**, he **did**. If he only had told me--"

"What would that have mattered? Don't you see? It would have taken you both. It didn't matter who was in that bed and who was keeping vigil. You two were like brothers. Sure, you were close friends. But the depth of your feeling went further than that. You carried out your duty. Now you have to allow the ones you personally trained carry on with the work."

"Amateurs! The entire lot of them. Youth is wasted on the young. I did what I could. I hated every minute of it. My minutes ran out too soon."

"You had to work less hours as you got ill."

"I got old first, that was worse."

"Nobody prepares you for it, do they?"

"The body quits. It throws in the towel and quits. You tell it to run and it sputters, grounds to a halt, dies. And when? When the fight is just beginning. I wanted to see it end. I wanted to see that my sacrifices had meant something. I was denied that, too."

"Mary, John, I know. You were superb, Ed Straker. You know it. You're your harshest critic. I know it makes you uneasy, but you're a hero."

"What a load of crap."

"Those aren't elegant words, Commander."

"The truth is *always* elegant. Everyone can be a hero in war. Even the civilians. Hell, those pieces of medal on my blues, I got some for just showing up at a place on time. They're

worth nothing. All right, wipe that look off your face, I earned them. I was proud. I knew what I wanted. I wanted to make a difference in this world, make a name for myself. I thought I could have a normal life too. I was wrong. No man was more stupid than I was. I thought I had everything."

"You married the wrong girl, that's all. You were in love with love. Alec tried to warn you, but you wouldn't listen even if he had. For once, place the blame for your son's death where it belongs. In the hands of your ex. Don't wave your hand in dismissal at me. If she had cared enough to stop him from running out like that, if she hadn't meekly followed her new husband like a sheep ready to be shorn, it wouldn't have happened. She loved you in the beginning, yeah. The thrill of snatching up a trophy husband for a young British girl. American. Rich. Educated. Good-looking, young, ambitious, a full bird. She didn't understand the furnace you were molded in, the way you were shaped for your fate like a piece of fine glass, like the crystal you kept on your desk. For once, give up the burden of guilt."

"Why? What does it matter now? Where are we going? I seem to know this place. It looks almost like Boston. I loved Boston in Autumn, watching the rainbow of leaves tumble down. I almost forgot that. Who are you anyway? You're being damn mysterious about it."

"Look at the birds soaring, Ed."

"I used to dream of flying as a kid. I'd watch them, know all their names, their nesting habits, their courtship rituals. Why do people just run and not stop to see how beautiful this world is? Why must there be strife, and war? Earth is so beautiful. Yet we're no closer to being free of those aliens. The poor bastards I helped train. Will they know how important it is, this war? Will they know they can't waste a single second, minute, hour in the cause? They've got to be stopped! The aliens must be stopped. Don't you see? I can't go now! I can't! **I can't!** Damn it! What good have my human feelings ever been to me? Look at me, crying like this. I wasn't fit, never fit to run Shado. When Henderson gave me the choice, I should have run away. No. I took it all on. I never asked for help. I never cried."

"You didn't have to, with Alec. He *knew*, Ed. He knew what kind of man you were. That's why he nearly walked out on you. He couldn't stand to see the sharp, ambitious, playful and at the same time serious young colonel turn into the hardened Shado Commander. He loved to hear you laugh. Think back. Think back, Ed."

"No. I'm done with all that. That's what I wanted to tell Dr. Harrison. I wanted the machines stopped. My choice. I'm not afraid to die when the time comes."

"That's because you never allowed yourself to live."

"Who are you, damn it? That's it, I'm through with-*my God!* no-hallucination-the damn morphine-"

"You know who I am. You've been closer to me than many. No. You never knelt in life, Edward. You never bowed to anyone or anything. Don't disappoint me and start now."

"What is it you want of me?"

"What did you expect to see? Stop that, get up. Look at me."

"Your face, the light. Then I'm finally-"

"Very."

"This is funny to you? Me. You're the image of me. How?"

"After Alec's jokes about you thinking you're-"

"I see where you're going with that. I confess I-"

"Confess? We don't use those overrated terms around here, Edward. "

"Have I offended-"

"You'd know if you did."

"Heh heh. I suppose I would. What happens now? Is there a job for me to do here?"

"You're still obsessed with duty and work? Why am I not surprised?"

"Then what will I do with my time?"

"You have an eternity to figure that out."

"Very funny. I mean-no-I didn't-"

"Yes, you did. That's the Commander Ed Straker I created and know. It's a refreshing change from all the kneeling you're doing. Get up. Your formality exasperates even me."

"Sorry. Habit. Episcopalian. Catechism. Later I went on to the Naval prayer-"

"Is he tiring you out **already**? He has a bad habit of showing off his higher education, the damn snotty Bostonian."

"Is it really **YOU**? Is it? Don't let this be the drugs! I've never felt this peaceful. I feel as if I've come-"

"*Home*? I kept telling you to go home, you know. Not that you ever listened. Shut up for once and stop holding my hands and looking at me like a cow with those baby blues of yours. There's something I have to do to you that I never quite found the balls to do when we were-you know. Then I'll take you to see your son, he's been waiting for you. The first thing he did on arrival was to demand his name back. He didn't realize when he shared your blood that any name change was meaningless, but he insisted. I guess all Strakers love to hear the lofty sound of their name. He's a chip off a very old block. I had to spend a lot of time carefully explaining to him you didn't deserve the pedestal he'd put you on."

"You're going to break my bones hugging me like that. It feels so good, Alec. So much to say. So very much to say. I'm so sorr-"

"*Bloody hell!* Stop apologizing. When will you learn that there isn't much you could tell me that I already didn't know? What I didn't know, I could guess. The rest, your son told me. One more word of guilt and I'll smack you right here and now and risk court martial. It's my misfortune that I'll have to listen to you endlessly now without a holiday in sight! Quit laughing. I have a lot of people I want to introduce you to. Come on."

"I give the orders around here, Alec Freeman."

"You're pulling rank on me *here*?"

THE END