



Wounded Dreams

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It had been a long day. Three separate alerts, one Ufo making it past the interceptors to Earth. As usual, the search for the alien craft ended with its self-destruction. The debris was being cleaned up by expert crews. By morning there would be no trace that an alien craft had ever landed on Earth.

It was two in the morning when Alec Freeman, chief of staff, SHADO operations, walked into the office of his commanding officer, accompanied by Paul Foster, senior command operative. Commander Ed Straker was still looking over reports, head resting on one hand. He started when Freeman stepped closer to the desk. The Australian officer suspected he'd been dozing.

"You've been here since seven yesterday morning," Freeman said. "Why don't you go home?"

"The cleanup crews haven't found the aliens, yet," Straker reminded him.

"Peter can handle it," Freeman told him. He was referring to Peter Carlin, another one of SHADO's senior operatives. "Go home, get some sleep."

Straker rubbed his eyes, then gazed up at Freeman's leathery face, as if trying to decide what to do. Freeman leaned over the desk, making an attempt to look stern.

"All right, all right," the blond man finally conceded. "I'll go."

Foster had taken a seat on one of the benches built into three of the office corners. He watched the byplay with barely concealed amusement.

Straker stood and grabbed his briefcase from its place beside his desk. He opened it and began to place several files inside. Freeman reached around and

pulled the files out, laying them on the desk.

"They'll still be here in the morning," Freeman said.

Straker stared at Freeman for a long moment, then snapped his briefcase closed without the files.

"Yes, sir, Colonel, sir," Straker said. There was a bemused expression on his finely boned face and the faintest hint of an amused twinkle in his gray-blue eyes.

"Do you want a driver, sir?" Foster asked.

"No, it's been ages since I've needed a baby sitter, thank you, Colonel," Straker said, walking out of his office, briefcase in hand. The office doors closed behind him.

Foster shook his head and grinned. "You know, you're probably the only person in SHADO who could get away with that."

"Get away with what?"

"Ordering Commander Straker out of his own office," Foster said. "He is your superior officer, remember?"

Freeman grinned as he went over to the drink dispenser built into one corner of the office. He poured himself a whiskey.

"You know what's really funny?" he asked, settling into Straker's brown leather chair. "In the real world, I'd be Ed's superior by two weeks."

"What?"

"It's true," Freeman insisted. "I made group captain two weeks before he made colonel."

"But he's C-in-C."

"Yes, he is," Freeman agreed, taking a sip of his drink.

There was a long silence between the two men. Freeman was forty-nine, a career military officer. Foster was seventeen years younger, a hotshot test pilot recruited to SHADO two years before for a management position.

"How did you end up in SHADO, anyway?" Foster asked, finally breaking the silence.

Freeman laughed. "It's a long story."

Foster didn't say anything.

"Believe it or not, I first met Ed in Thailand," Freeman started. "In 1966, MI5 wanted me to observe American fighter operations in Vietnam. The American intelligence office in Saigon sent me over to the 13th Air Force out of Clark. I ended up in Ubon, Thailand, observing the fighter wing there..."

* * *

Despite its green manicured lawn and country-club appearance, Ubon Royal

Thai Air Base was a very busy place, as Major Alec Freeman of the RAF, recently seconded to MI5, discovered upon his arrival. The base served the Eighth Tactical Fighter Wing of the United States Air Force. They were making bombing runs and air combat patrols nearly every day over their assigned targets in North Vietnam and the section of Laos known as Steel Tiger.

As per his instructions, Freeman had presented himself to the unit's senior officer. This was the Director of Operations. The wing commander, a Colonel Wilson, was at a conference in Tokyo for the next week.

The D.O. was a tall Californian, dressed in a tailored green flight suit, command pilots' wings on the leather patch over his left breast. He looked over Freeman's orders and the request from U.S. Air Force Intelligence to accommodate the Australian RAF major in any way not disrupting the normal working of the base.

"According to this, you're a pilot with F-4 experience," the D.O. said. "You're here to get a feel of how the U.S. runs actual combat operations these days."

"Those are my orders, sir," Freeman acknowledged.

"I don't like the idea of being spied on, Freeman," the man admitted. "But, you're here. I'll get someone to arrange quarters for you. Just stay out of our way, okay?" the D.O. said, dismissing Freeman with a brief nod.

One of the D.O.'s assistants found a billet for him in the officer's quarters. "I'm sure it's not what you're used to, sir, but it's all we have," the young man told him apologetically, giving Freeman the building and room number and directions to get there.

Freeman found the one story motel-style building, and his room, easily enough. The door to the room stood open and he could hear a radio playing rock and roll music.

He knocked lightly on the door and peered inside. The room was small, no more than twelve by twelve. A worn rug covered the wood floor, and walls were a sickly green. It was sparsely furnished with two wooden cots, a night stand and lamp, a desk with a wooden chair and a pair of metal lockers. There was a tall bookshelf secured to the wall next to the door. It was stacked to overflowing with papers and books. Freeman noted that not all the books were in English. Several were in languages he couldn't identify at all.

Sitting tailor-fashion on one of the beds was a deeply tanned young man in blue shorts and an olive green T-shirt. His crew-cut hair was bleached white. He looked more like a college student than an air force officer. Books and papers were spread around him on the bed. A notebook lay open on his lap. Smoke

curled up from the cigarette in his left hand.

Hanging on the door of one of the lockers was one of the green flight suits the USAF favored. The lettering on the leather patch over the left breast showed the owner was Ed Straker, Major, USAF. There was a star above the pilot's wings, showing Straker was rated a senior pilot, seven years and over 2,000 flying hours.

Freeman considered the young man seated on the bed for a moment. He hardly looked old enough to have been flying seven years, much less hold the rank of major.

Freeman knocked again and the young man looked up, annoyance flickering across his face. His eyes were a cold gray-blue. "You must be the guy the Brits sent over to see what we're up to," the young man said, calmly looking Freeman over.

Freeman must have let his surprise show at the man's knowledge because the young major grinned and his eyes warmed. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that the only thing that travels faster than light is gossip?" He held out his hand. "I'm Ed Straker."

"Alec Freeman," Freeman introduced himself, stepping forward to shake Straker's hand. "I also seem to be your new room mate."

"So it seems," Straker agreed. He gave Freeman a puzzled look. "You're Australian."

"It shows that much?" Freeman asked. He threw his bag on the hard mattress of the unoccupied cot.

"The accent."

Obviously Straker didn't like unsolved mysteries. Freeman looked down at the papers spread out on the other bed, maps and diagrams annotated with coded hieroglyphics. He couldn't even begin to guess at their meaning, but they were nice, neat and mathematical.

"I was born in New South Wales," Freeman explained. "Went to college in London, decided to stay. Joined the RAF and here I am. You?"

"Boston, University of Massachusetts, Masters at MIT, and here I am," Straker said, returning to his work.

"So, what do you do around here besides fly?" Freeman asked his new room mate.

"Personally or in general?" Straker asked without raising his head.

"Both."

"The Officers' Club is okay, if you don't mind the Thai version of hamburgers and French fries," Straker replied. "The lovely town of Ubon

Ratchathani is just outside the front gates. There're some restaurants, some nice shops, a couple bars with girls. The locals are friendly. Of course, we're not bombing them. According to our hosts, the Royal Thai government, we're not even here."

"Sounds weird," Freeman commented.

"Politicians," Straker grimaced, looking up at him. "If you pretend long enough, maybe the other side will pretend along with you."

Freeman was confused by the comment.

Straker grinned again. "Don't worry about it, Squadron Leader. Personally, I don't think even the politicians understand it."

* * *

As the tropical days at Ubon wore on, Freeman discovered that the cool reception he'd gotten from the base director of operations was hardly universal. The men maintaining the planes, including the civilian team from McDonnell-Douglas, enjoyed telling him about their work, and anything else they could think of. Freeman was an F-4 pilot, after all.

The pilots and their GIBs (Guys in Back), like flyers everywhere, loved talking about flying and how the war was going, how Washington might pull it off if only the politicians would let them do their jobs.

Freeman was a history major, and a veteran of the counter insurgency efforts in the British holdings of the Middle East. He suspected it wouldn't be nearly as easy to win this war as the pilots all claimed it should be. Technology wasn't everything. To win any war, you had to know who the enemy was and why you were fighting him. The Americans didn't seem to have a good grasp on either of those two necessary pieces of information.

For about a month, Freeman looked around, asked questions and generally tried to stay more or less invisible to the D.O. Then, he was asked if he wouldn't mind taking the place of a pilot who was in the base infirmary for some, as yet unidentified, tropical disease.

He agreed. It was an opportunity to get a better look at the actual conditions the Americans were flying combat under.

Straker was leader for Rambler flight and had the reputation of being an excellent combat pilot and flight leader. Unlike some of the other 'fast-burners' who were there for their hundred missions over North Vietnam, then home with a promotion, Straker seemed willing to accept advice, and a certain amount of ribbing about his age, especially from older and more experienced pilots, even when they were of lesser rank.

He was, it was admitted by anyone who knew him, brilliant and ambitious,

with every chance of making general and running the Moon before he was forty. However, his ambitiousness was tempered by a good leader's concern for the men under him. It was an excellent combination. His flight crew liked him, despite the fact he was extremely demanding of both them and himself.

Freeman was checked out on the Phantom F-4C and given a temporary flying assignment. Officially, he was borrowing the plane in order to observe combat conditions and was instructed to refrain from taking part in actual combat. But, the armament team still loaded the missiles and bombs on his jet, just like the others in the flight. For self-defense, they said, although Freeman couldn't quite figure how bombs could be considered defensive weapons.

"The one good thing about having a new guy on board," Straker had commented wryly after being told who was joining his flight, "is that they should give us about ten easy missions over PAC One before they throw us back to the wolves."

"Easy, the kid says," Big Mike Courtland, Straker's GIB, chortled over his beer as they sat at a table in the Ubon Officers Club. Courtland was several years older than Straker, several inches taller, and a captain.

"Eddie boy, you think going to the Moon should be easy," Big Mike continued. A huge grin split his dark brown face as he regarded his front-seater.

"Relatively speaking, going to the Moon will be easy," Straker replied, all bright eyed innocence. It was fun to watch him. The Moon has one of his favorite topics. He'd spent two years with an MIT study project on the subject. "Getting back will be a little more tricky, but not near as bad as PAC Six. At least on the Moon, nobody's shooting at you. Get the engineering to match the physics and you've got it made."

"You make it sound simple," Freeman commented. "When were you planning your first trip?"

Straker grinned over his Coke. He didn't drink alcohol. "When I've finished this tour, I've been promised a crack at Houston. I've got my test pilot's ticket and my aerospace research pilot's ticket."

"If you're qualified for NASA, what the hell are you doing here getting shot at for, boy?" one of the older pilots at the table wondered aloud. Freeman didn't remember his name.

Straker simply shrugged and grinned. "I forgot the number one rule of military life, never volunteer. Besides, it'll look good on my service record."

"You're out of your mind," Courtland intoned solemnly.

"Distinctly possible," Straker agreed.

* * *

As Straker predicted, Rambler flight's first ten missions with Freeman as Rambler Two Alpha, were over the most southern portion of North Vietnam, near the DMZ. Their assigned targets were railroad tracks and alleged truck parks.

It surprised Freeman a little, though it shouldn't have, that Straker really was an excellent combat pilot. It took several missions over Route Package One before Freeman, a very good pilot himself, was able to adequately maintain his position as wing man to Rambler Leader and still hit the designated target. He was told that it frequently took twenty-five sorties for pilots to get up to speed on that type of flying. Freeman could believe it.

His eleventh mission was a bombing run into the lion's den, the industrial suburbs of Hanoi. Rambler flight had been assigned to follow a group of F-105 Thunderchiefs out of Tahkli.

The flights over PAC-One had been bad. This was far worse.

Hanoi was the most heavily defended city in the world. It was surrounded by flack guns and anti-aircraft artillery, and surface to air missile emplacements. Even the mill workers had rifles and instructions to fire at anything overhead.

Despite the Wild Weasels taking on the SAMs and the MiGCAPs, MiG combat air patrols, on the lookout for enemy fighters, the route to the oil refinery that was their target was a rough one.

Freeman wondered at the sanity of pilots and GIBs who volunteered for that type of punishment. Then he wondered at his own sanity for volunteering to fly when Britain wasn't even involved in the conflict. Australia's involvement was limited to a couple of battalions and a bomber squadron out of Phan Rang.

Rambler flight managed a successful run on the refinery, despite the heavy flack. The secondary explosions proved that at least some of their bombs hit home. Reconnaissance photos would show how badly the refinery had been damaged by their raid.

Then, they were away from Hanoi's suburban sprawl, over the rough tree-covered hills known as Thud Ridge and making the slow climb to 20,000 feet, exactly according to briefing. That was when Straker radioed Freeman, "Rambler Two, I have a little problem. Could you come over and take a look?"

Freeman acknowledged the request, sliding his plane just aft and below the lead plane as he and his own GIB looked it over. "Jesus," Wheeler, Freeman's back-seater, muttered as he assessed the damage.

The port side of the Phantom was riddled with small holes. Luckily, the doors protecting the landing gear appeared to be intact.

Freeman continued his vertical circle around Rambler One until he was

back in position on Straker's right wing. Then he reported what he'd seen.

"Thank you, Two. The bad guys seem to have missed anything important," Rambler Leader responded as he initiated the southerly turn that would let them avoid the heavily defended area around Dien Bien Phu. "Fuel status, gentlemen?"

The other three planes reported how many pounds of fuel they had remaining. As was normal, Three and Four had the lowest amounts left since they had to expend more fuel keeping up with the antics of One and Two.

Red Crown, the communications ship in the Gulf of Tonkin, called in with a report of heavy weather over their home base. Rambler flight and the other F-4 flights with them were advised to divert to Da Nang.

Ten minutes later, Red Crown reported a downed navy pilot and radar intercept officer. They requested Rambler flight provide air cover for the pair while search and rescue made their way to the crash site, just south of the demilitarized zone. Their location was very near Rambler's new flight path.

Red Crown also told them that North Vietnamese Army ground troops had been spotted in the area.

As requested, Rambler flight diverted to provide air support for the downed pilot and RIO. Since Rambler Three and Four were low on fuel, Straker ordered them to continue to their rendezvous with one of the huge KC-135 tanker planes maintaining station over the Gulf of Tonkin, and then return.

Dropping to a height of 2,000 feet above average terrain, Rambler One and Two buzzed the area indicated by Red Crown's report, listening on their radios for calls from the men on the ground. With nothing left in their armament, and no guns, there was little the pair of F-4s could do about the North Vietnamese ground troops. Unfortunately, the NVA soldiers also knew it.

The Search and Rescue team announced they were only ten minutes away.

The navy pilot radioed that the NVA had several trucks on the road to the north of them and there was an anti-aircraft emplacement nearby. The pilot also reported that they could hear people approaching.

Anti-aircraft fire began exploding around the two Phantoms. Over the radio, Freeman heard Straker swear and announce, "I'm hit, but not bad, I think. I'm going to the deck to take them out."

Freeman and his GIB watched from 2,000 feet as the unarmed Rambler Leader dove for the deck, directly over the two trucks and let loose both of the missile racks. The racks smashed through the trucks, pushing them off the road. One truck began to burn and the men in it jumped out and ran for safety.

Rambler Leader tapped his afterburners twice, then pulled up from a mere

two hundred feet above the ground, going vertical. The pilot on the ground informed them that the soldiers had dived for cover. But, the enemy was still coming closer to their position.

Freeman repeated Straker's maneuver, going to the deck and dropping his missile mounts on the NVA soldiers. As Rambler Two pulled out of the dive, Freeman's GIB called his attention to Rambler One. More holes had appeared in the other plane. One group had hit the cockpit.

"Rambler One, what's your condition?" Freeman radioed.

"Two, we got caught by some triple-A. The computer's out, so's radar and ICS is only intermittent. Mike's hurt," Straker reported. His voice was tight.

"Do you want to go for 'feet wet'?" Freeman asked, referring to the nearest safe bailout area, over the South China Sea, where U.S. Naval vessels kept constant patrol.

"Negative, Rambler Two. I don't want to do that," came the reply.

Freeman checked his fuel status. The fuel indicator was dropping rapidly. They must have taken a hit without realizing it and were leaking fuel.

From the ground, one of the navy men confirmed seeing a leak from the bottom of the second Phantom. They couldn't tell if it was fuel or hydraulic fluid. "Just don't go on afterburner," the flier advised, watching the two planes veer away toward the coast and refueling.

"Alec," Straker called a few minutes later. "It might be a good idea if I came in on your wing."

"Roger, One," Freeman agreed. "I've got the lead." Freeman slid out to the left, bringing his Phantom abreast of the damaged plane. Straker pulled in closer to Freeman's plane, keeping about twenty feet between Rambler Zero-Two's right wingtip and his own cockpit.

"How you boys doin' over there?" Freeman called as they approached the rendezvous point where they were to meet up with the tanker for refueling.

"I'll let you know once we're down," Straker said.

"Sir," Wheeler spoke up on the internal communications system. "They're not doin' so good."

Freeman had to agree. Straker sounded stressed and on the verge of exhaustion. He had fallen back a bit, putting greater distance between himself and Freeman's plane. Rambler Zero-One's flight seemed a touch erratic. Freeman couldn't be sure if it was due to additional problems with the plane, or with the pilot.

Freeman dropped back to maintain his own position, relative to Straker. It wasn't exactly proper procedure, but Freeman had a hunch his GIB was right.

Zero-One wasn't doing so well.

They spotted the KC-135 right where it was supposed to be. Despite Rambler Zero-One's problems, the two planes refueled without incident. They turned and headed south-west, towards Da Nang.

As they crossed over the coast, Freeman heard Wheeler swear. Freeman looked over to see that Zero-One's right engine had caught fire. Straker was side-slipping to the left in an effort to put it out. The wing disintegrated as Freeman watched and the plane went into a wild roll downwards.

"Oh dear God," Freeman heard Wheeler whisper on the internal communication system. Freeman breathed a silent prayer of relief when two parachutes appeared above the ground below. He called the coordinates into Red Crown so a rescue team could be dispatched.

* * *

Freeman and Wheeler made it back to Ubon from Da Nang three days later. There was no report on Straker or Courtland. They were declared missing in action.

The debriefing officers were remarkably understanding about the whole situation. After all, Freeman had brought his plane back.

In fact, their only complaint, besides losing his flight leader, was the fact that both Freeman and Straker had gone below the mandated safe flying limit of 1,500 feet. The maintenance people had found a large number of rifle bullet holes in his plane.

The McDonnell-Douglas people joked about finding arrows in his tail feathers.

The following day, Freeman received orders to report to the British base in Singapore. His superiors had been less than pleased when they'd found out he'd been flying missions over North Vietnam.

* * *

On his arrival in Singapore, Freeman reported to his superiors in MI5.

His lecture was milder than expected. The Americans weren't admitting to flying missions out of Thailand. Therefore, he couldn't have been flying with them.

The report he submitted was commended for its accuracy and insight into the state of mind of the American flyers. Freeman thought it was a bunch of bunk.

He was assigned as British intelligence liaison to the American 13th airforce.

* * *

Freeman had been in the Philippines almost exactly a year when he got word from his sources at Clark Air Base. Major Ed Straker and Captain Mike Courtland had been found by a Marine patrol and were being evacuated to Clark.

* * *

Freeman found Courtland first. The big black man was a shadow of his former self. The hospital pajamas hung loose on him. His hair, once stark black, now had gray in it. His eyes were old and wary. It was hard to tell it was the same man.

"It must have been pretty bad out there," Freeman said. Courtland shook his head.

"We were lucky," the black man said. "There were a lot of guys that didn't make it. Some of 'em got sent up north. A lot of 'em died." Courtland swallowed hard. "We were damn lucky the Marines got to us when they did. I'll never complain about Marine fliers hitting their mark, either."

"What happened?" Freeman asked. He took a seat opposite the American officer and offered him a cigarette. Courtland accepted it and a light.

"We came down into a nest of V.C.," Courtland said. His expression was almost blank, as though he'd rehearsed his story so long it no longer held meaning. "It was ugly. We were force marched for days. I don't know how long. Finally, we were taken into the tunnels. The whole countryside is riddled with tunnels. Miles and miles of tunnels. They live down there, like rats." Courtland shook his head again. "If I never see another tunnel again, it'll be too soon."

Freeman simply sat, saying nothing. After a bit, Courtland started talking again. "They kept at us. Wanted to know weird stuff we couldn't answer if we wanted to. When they didn't like what they heard, they'd use torture. Finally, they stopped asking questions, but the other stuff didn't stop."

Courtland took a deep drag of the cigarette. He gazed off into space. "They were worse to Ed than to me. I guess I was a novelty, a black man. They seemed to think I was a slave or something. A poor, downtrodden, underling of the American imperialist establishment."

"And if you were a slave, Ed was your master?"

"Him being so young didn't help," Courtland said. "They figured he was special, being so young and a major and all. When the Marines bombed the tunnel complex, Ed just about dragged me out of there. We almost reached the patrol when he got shot. I don't know how he survived to get here. That boy's got a guardian angel working over time. He should have been dead six months ago."

* * *

"They're sending me home," Straker told Freeman when the Australian

officer found him.

Freeman almost didn't recognize him. He had been thin before, now he was positively skeletal. His tan had been replaced by an unhealthy pallor, as though he hadn't seen the sun in the entire year he'd been missing.

Straker looked so frail, if it weren't for the large cast on his left arm and shoulder, a strong breeze could have blown him away. The cast kept his arm raised like a half-built bridge. The V.C gunman had managed to get off two shots before the Marines killed him. The first round had shattered Straker's shoulder. The second had gone through his chest. He was lucky to be alive.

After eight hours of surgery, the doctors at Clark had managed to save his arm and reconstruct his shoulder, although the stainless steel pins used to secure the bones would be with him for the rest of his life.

"I'm told I'll be at least six weeks in this cast," Straker said. His words were a little slurred. Freeman assumed it was from the painkillers.

"Then there'll be therapy for God knows how long. The docs here say they can't be sure how much use I'll have of the arm after it's healed. All they'll tell me is I'm lucky to be alive and I'll be DNIF (he pronounced it duh-nif, Duty Not Involving Flying), probably forever."

"You're alive. Is being grounded after all you've been through really so bad?" Freeman asked, knowing the answer. Straker glared at him.

"Aerospace won't take an astronaut candidate with a bum shoulder, not to mention a POW," Straker said, voice bitter with disappointment. "Even if I manage to keep my flight rating, I don't have a chance. A year's gone out of my life. How do I catch up?"

"You'll do fine. You always have, haven't you?" Freeman said.

A door slammed somewhere in the corridor. Straker started and went even paler than he already was.

"You okay?" Freeman asked suddenly worried.

Straker gave him a shaky nod. "I'm just not used to civilization yet, I guess."

"Sure," Freeman said. He didn't believe Straker's explanation. The younger man was still in shock. It might be years before he fully recovered, if ever.

"Look, I have to go to work. I'll stop by in a couple days and see how you're doing."

* * *

Freeman was back two days later. Straker was looking better. The pallor was beginning to color into a more normal skin tone.

"Congratulations on your promotion," Straker said. He'd noticed the new rank of Freeman's uniform.

"Thanks," Freeman said. "It came through last week. I'm getting reassigned to London."

"Congratulations again," Straker said with a smile. "You're heading back to the real world."

"They'll be shipping you back to the States in a week or so," Freeman reminded him.

Straker's expression became distant and worried. "And what do I do then?" he wondered aloud.

Freeman pulled a thick book from a paper sack he'd brought in with him. He handed the book to Straker, who read title off the spine: "Winston Spencer Churchill. A message?"

"Maybe," Freeman admitted. "There's more than one way to skin a cat, you know. And there'll be more than just pilots going to the Moon. Think about it."

* * *

"I knew the commander had to have been a pilot. After all, he replaced me on the SID2 mission," Foster said. "I hadn't realized he'd been a prisoner of war."

"They did a lot of damage," Freeman said. "Sometimes I wonder what's even holding the pieces together in his head. Just plain stubbornness, probably. That's what kept him alive those twelve months. Kept Mike alive, too."

"What happened to Courtland?" Foster asked.

"He's director of operations over at Lakenheath, of all places," Freeman said with a grin. "If you want to wring out an American fighter one of these weekends, he's the one to see."

Freeman went to the dispenser and poured himself another drink.

"Maybe I'll check it out sometime," Foster said. "Being a POW explains a few things about the commander, but it doesn't explain you and SHADO."

"True," Freeman admitted. "When I left Clark to go back to England, I figured Ed would leave the air force and end up working for some multinational corporation with aerospace interests."

"That's not what happened."

"No, it's not," Freeman admitted. "I was surprised, though, when I saw his picture on the front page of the London Times after Melvin Talbot was killed."

* * *

"You know him, Group Captain?" General Bond asked, throwing the newspaper on his desk. The photograph on the front page was grainy, but Freeman recognized the face under the colonels' cap, Ed Straker.

"Yes, sir, I know him," Freeman admitted. "I met him in Thailand."

"Good," Bond commented to himself.

Freeman picked up the paper and skimmed the article that went with the picture.

Miracle Survival of USAF Colonel, blared the headline. The text described Straker's survival, virtually unscathed from the Rolls Royce 'accident' that claimed the life of Defense Minister Melvin Talbot, the two escort motorcyclists and the special branch man with them. The article explained that Straker and his superior were in England to discuss the routine matter of USAF personnel on British soil, cost adjustments, that sort of thing. There was no explanation of how the 'accident' occurred.

It was a cover up. Freeman knew that. He could have written the article himself. The question was, what were they covering up?

"They don't mention what happened to the officer with him or the driver," Freeman commented.

"General Henderson is still in critical condition at London General," Bond told him. "We shan't be getting anything out of him for some time." Bond looked up at him from his desk.

"The driver's dead. Complications, the Yanks tell us. Complications my foot," Bond grouched. "Somebody pulled the plug on him to keep him from talking in his sleep. That means our only witness to as who, or what, killed our Mister Talbot is this American boy wonder, Colonel Ed Straker. I want to know what he knows, Freeman. I want to know what the Americans are trying so hard to keep us from knowing. I want to know why he's lying to us."

"What makes you think he's lying?" Freeman wondered.

"He says the tires blew. The driver lost control and the car went through that stone wall," Bond grated. "And I don't buy it."

Bond pulled open a desk drawer and handed Freeman a file. "Read that," Bond ordered.

Freeman skimmed the type written report. It was the preliminary report on the site investigation, submitted to MI5 by the American analysts. The Americans had insisted on handling the investigation since two of their high ranking military officers were involved. Special Branch was helping them with contacts. Why the Prime Minister had agreed to their restrictions, no one was saying. It stank.

According to the first report, the Rolls's tires blew, sending the limousine out of control, through a stone wall. The motorcycle escort had the misfortune of being caught between the Rolls Royce and the wall.

Freeman flipped to the second report. This one had been submitted by a member of the emergency team that first arrived at the accident site.

A former RAF intelligence officer had been on the police squad. According to him, all the evidence pointed to the Rolls having been attacked from the air. He had taken samples of the fused glass in the roadway, and quietly sent them to people he still knew in Air Intelligence. MI5 analysts claimed the effect could be created by lightning, only the day in question had been clear. There were also no radar reports of suspicious aircraft in the area that day.

"It doesn't make sense," Freeman complained.

"It's your job to make sense of it, Group Captain," Bond told him. "I want to know what the Americans are playing at."

* * *

Straker had been given an office at Mildenhall Air Force Base. From the other reports Freeman was given, Straker had spent the last year and a half as a senior assistant to Lieutenant General James Henderson. Freeman noted that Straker wasn't technically Henderson's aide, although they let the press say he was. Henderson's job in the United States Air Force was unspecified except for a reference to a Project Angel. However, the report also mentioned frequent trips to Nevada, to a highly classified aircraft test ground known as Dreamland. It was very close to Groom Lake, the place known as Area 51, where the alleged flying saucers were studied. The report also said Henderson was one of the investigators in the famous Roswell Incident in '47, and had been involved in Project Blue Book.

Freeman didn't believe in flying saucers or little green men from Mars.

He found the office and knocked on the open door. Straker looked up. He still looked like a college student, even if he was wearing colonel's eagles on his uniform. It took a moment for recognition to come into Straker's face. When it did, his face lit up with a grin.

"Group Captain Freeman, what are you doing here?"

"I saw you were in England, decided to check in on how my old roommate was doing."

The grin faded a bit. "I'm fine."

"How's the shoulder?"

"Not bad, considering," Straker said. He came out from behind the desk to sit on one corner of it. He gestured for Freeman to take a seat in one of the old chairs opposite the desk. "The docs at Clark were better than they knew. I have almost 95 percent mobility."

"But still not good enough for an astronaut slot?"

Straker gave a tiny shrug. "I got another job. It's not what I'd planned on, but it's interesting at least."

"I see you got your flight rating back." Command pilot wings were on Straker's uniform.

Straker grinned. "The doctors argued about it some, but yes, I'm flying again."

"The papers say you walked away from that car crash without a scratch. Your guardian angel must still be working overtime. You're damn lucky."

"Yes," Straker agreed. "It wasn't exactly without a scratch. I was just a lot luckier than everyone else."

"How's your CO?"

"General Henderson? They've upgraded his condition to serious," Straker said. His expression turned more solemn. "His wife flew in yesterday. She's trying to get him transferred back to the States, but the doctors aren't going for it."

"Tough luck," Freeman said. "So, what do you plan to do now?"

"I see you're still in the spook business," Straker commented. Freeman shook his head, a little confused. "You're still in intelligence, asking questions people may not want to answer," Straker explained. "A spook."

"Yes, I'm still with MI5, trying to keep England safe from whichever devil they've decided against this week," Freeman said with a grin. "So what do you plan to do now?"

"Hold down the fort till the general's back on his feet," Straker said. "I have more than enough paper work to keep me out of trouble."

"I imagine there would be a lot of paperwork involved with the NATO negotiations and that."

There was a pause as if Straker hadn't understood the comment. Then: "Oh, yes. That's all been taken care of."

"What have you been doing since Thailand?"

"Oh, here and there, Germany, NORAD, the usual," Straker answered.

Freeman already knew Straker's history. That was also one of the reports Bond had handed him. The file simply added to what Freeman already knew.

Straker was third generation military, second generation Air Force. His father, Barrett Anthony Straker, retired a few years before as a colonel. Ed's older sister, Barbara, was married with two school aged children. They lived in California.

His mother died when he was thirteen. Her parents had money and on her death had paid for their grand-children's education. For Ed, that meant military high school then University of Massachusetts. He graduated with honors with a triple major of astronomy, physics and aeronautical engineering. From the

University, he joined the US Air Force.

So far, he had an outstanding career. Every promotion had come with minimum time in grade. Even his loss of a year as a POW hadn't hurt. POWs were placed at the top of their respective promotion lists. He made Lieutenant Colonel in record time.

Straker was now one of the youngest full colonels in the United States Air Force. Even having his dream of NASA taken away by the Viet Cong hadn't affected his air force career in any way Freeman could see. The one thing that was missing was a wife. Freeman knew the US military establishment preferred their senior officers safely married.

"I kind of figured you'd land on your feet," Freeman said. "Still heading for the Moon?"

"Oh, I'll get there someday," Straker assured him.

"I'm sure of it," Freeman said and for a moment he knew, with absolute certainty, that it was true. He turned back to his assigned task. "I have a question you can answer, though. Why was a general officer out of NORAD and his assistant scheduled to negotiate NATO base allocations directly with the Prime Minister of Great Britain?"

"I don't understand."

"Don't give me that," Freeman said, getting out of the chair. The younger man didn't move from his seat on the corner of the desk.

"In that case," Straker said slowly. "It's a need to know situation."

"And I don't need to know?" Freeman said. "I didn't know you were in the spook business."

"It came with the territory," Straker said.

"And what territory is that?" Freeman asked.

Straker shook his head. There was a glimmer of amusement on his face.

Freeman decided to lay his cards on the table. "Look, I've got an general from the Royal Marines on my case who wants to know how Defense Minister Talbot died and why."

"And I'm the only one who knows?"

"You got it."

"Your boss got a full report on the incident."

"And it was a pack of lies."

"I not going to ask how you came to that conclusion," Straker said carefully. "You do know your general was told to keep out of this. It's none of his concern."

"He doesn't see it that way," Freeman explained.

"That's not my fault."

"So, what's going on?"

Straker simply shook his head once more.

"We're going to find out," Freeman told him. "So you can make it easy on yourself and cooperate, or you can make it hard and end up in a cell somewhere with a couple of fellows with rubber hoses."

"Is that supposed to worry me?" Straker asked with a little laugh.

"I can see that it doesn't," Freeman observed. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and shook one cigarette partly out of the pack. He handed it to Straker who accepted it. Freeman took another cigarette for himself.

"Well, I've done my duty," Freeman said, accepting a light from the younger man. "I've found out what I could. It's not much, but maybe, it'll be enough to keep an angry general off my back. Where are you staying?"

"I have a friend with a flat in London," Straker answered. "I can stay there as long as I need to."

Freeman knew that as well. The flat belonged to an RAF wing commander named Craig Collins.

Collins was one of the first foreign nationals allowed into NASA's astronaut program. Straker and Collins had met at MIT and had gone through the test pilot program at Edwards together. Collins had stayed on to become a pilot instructor, Straker had gone to Thailand. Collins had gone on to NASA, Straker had ended up - where?

Here, up to his neck over Talbot's death.

Freeman wondered what Straker was into that could make him so certain that MI5 couldn't touch him.

Straker must have noticed his expression. "Alec, tell your general to lay off. He doesn't know what he's getting himself into by pursuing this." Straker stood and went around to sit at the desk. "By the way, what are you doing this afternoon?"

"I'm pretty open," Freeman told him.

"Good, would you mind running me into London?" Straker asked. "I have a three o'clock appointment at Downing Street."

"The Prime Minister?" Freeman asked.

Straker nodded.

"I thought you said the NATO negotiations had been handled."

"So I did," Straker admitted with a cold smile.

* * *

Freeman had never visited Number 10 Downing Street and he never expected to visit the Prime Minister. His duties in military intelligence rarely

involved politics. His specialty was air force and although his last promotion had put him into an administrative position, he preferred field work.

Freeman recognized the two men protecting Prime Minister Heath. He'd been in training with them over at the SAS base in Hereford. One of the men nodded to him, recognizing him as well. Freeman recalled his name, Will Gardner, Special Branch, Diplomatic Protection Group.

Gardner came over to him.

"I didn't know your people were in this," he said. Freeman simply nodded and said nothing. He wasn't being unfriendly. It was simply that they answered to different masters.

"You know Colonel Straker?" Gardner asked.

"We served together a while back," Freeman said.

"Any idea what's going on?" Gardner asked. Freeman shook his head.

"It must be major," Gardner continued. "The P.M.'s cleared his afternoon calendar just to talk to him. My people offered to give him protection, but he turned us down. We do have people assigned to his CO."

"Why?" Freeman wondered. It was the first he'd heard of it. Gardner's people were usually assigned to important dignitaries and politicians, not military officers.

Gardner shook his head. "I'm guessing they don't want whoever took out Talbot to come back and finish the job."

"So, Talbot was murdered?" Freeman asked. Gardner gave him a curious, worried look, as though he'd just realized he'd spoken out of turn.

"There are people who believe that," Gardner said carefully. "There are people who believe in flying saucers, too."

* * *

General Bond took the whole matter better than the MI5 officer expected.

"I've been given orders directly from the PM himself to leave the Talbot matter to SIS and the Americans," Bond said after Freeman had made his report, including Gardner's comments.

"I guess that's it then, sir," Freeman said.

"I suppose it is," Bond said. "Freeman, I can't order you to keep working on the Talbot matter, but I don't like being kept out in the cold on things this important."

"I understand, sir."

Bond nodded. "I did manage to get one concession out of Number 10. As of now, you're officially assigned as an aide to this boy colonel. All the clearances are in order for you to work at Mildenhall."

"That was fast. He's that important?" Freeman asked.

"A little scary, isn't it?"

* * *

Freeman was at Straker's office again the next morning.

"Don't you have a job or something?" the young American grouched, seeing the Australian in the doorway.

"Yes, you," Freeman replied. "I've been assigned as your aide for as long as you're here."

"How did that happen?" Straker wondered aloud.

"The PM thinks you're a very important person," Freeman told him.

"Me?" Straker's voice was filled with disbelief. "I'm so important he gives me an RAF group captain as an aide?"

"Yep," Freeman grinned at him. "He gave you an RAF group captain who has more time in grade than you do. I checked."

"Wonderful," Straker muttered. "I'm outranked by an aide I never asked for, and I have your special branch pestering me over why they can't post a body guard on me in the middle of an American air base. I've had to see the base commander over it already this morning."

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was an old habit Freeman had seen in Thailand. It usually meant he was tired or stressed, or both.

"Well, since you're here, I guess I'll put you to work," Straker said after a long moment.

"Doing what?" Freeman wondered. There was a tall pile of color coded files on the desk and Straker pushed them toward him.

"Filing these, Group Captain, sir," Straker said. Freeman opened one of the folders. There was a type written document inside stamped Confidential. A fuzzy photograph of a blob-like object was paper clipped to the document.

"What are these?"

"Flying saucer reports."

"I thought the U.S. was out of the flying saucer business," Freeman said.

"Somebody's got to keep track of these things."

"But I thought Project Blue Book proved there wasn't any such thing? It was all mass hysteria and mistaken identification?"

"Project Blue Book's official finding was that if there were such a thing, they had not been proved to present a military threat to the United States," Straker said.

"So, why are you collecting flying saucer reports?"

"Why does your boss insist on getting you involved in Talbot's death?" Straker asked in return.

"He doesn't believe the official report," Freeman said. "Your report."

"My boss doesn't believe Blue Book's report," Straker said.

"And what do you believe?" Freeman asked.

Straker's expression became distant and a little cold. "Maybe someday I'll be able to tell you, Alec. But not today."

* * *

Straker's schedule had him commuting for two weeks at a time between Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado and Mildenhall in England. Freeman sometimes marveled at the younger man's stamina. It was a killing schedule.

When Straker was at Mildenhall, Freeman found himself filing reports and interviewing people who claimed to have seen strange things in the sky. He noted that not all the reports that crossed Straker's desk went into the file cabinets that lined the wall of the office. Some, about one a week, went into the safe. Straker hand carried these reports to General Henderson.

The doctors still hadn't cleared Henderson to return to his duties but that wasn't stopping him. He was running his staff from a room at a convalescent center not far from the air base. His staff at the moment consisted of Ed Straker, Alec Freeman, and whoever was running his office at Peterson. Sprenger was the name Freeman heard. Straker didn't like the man.

During the two weeks Straker was in the States, Freeman checked out, quietly, the circumstances of Talbot's death. Unofficially, of course.

His findings were disappointingly meager. The Americans had done a very thorough job covering up the incident. The entire roadway had been torn up and repaved. The stone wall had been repaired to the point no one could tell it was new construction. Even the greenery along the roadway had been taken out and replanted.

Freeman interviewed the repair crews. They told him they had been under constant surveillance the entire time they were working. No souvenirs were allowed to be taken from the sight. The concrete taken from the road had been dumped into the sea as part of a sea-wall off the coast of the Netherlands. When he asked why, all they could do was shake their heads and complain about bureaucracy.

The information from the hospital staff was equally sparse. The two motorcycle drivers were dead on arrival, as was the special branch man. The motorcyclists had been horribly burned and their injuries, from what the admitting physician could remember, looked as though they had been caught in

some sort of explosion. Or, they could have been crushed by the car. It was too hard to tell and he hadn't looked that closely. They were dead and he was concerned with the living.

When Freeman went back to the hospital the next day to continue his interview, he found the physician had suddenly resigned to move to a clinic in the Falklands. Family trouble was what the hospital chief of staff told him. That stank too, but there was nothing Freeman could do about it. Bond wasn't going to authorize him to fly to the Falklands to find the doctor.

After two months, Freeman was forced to admit he was at a dead-end as far as the Talbot investigation was concerned. He was almost looking forward another round of interviewing flying saucer sighters.

Straker was flying into Heathrow that Friday evening from another two weeks handling the staff at Peterson. Freeman was there to pick him up.

"Do you mind dropping me off at the Zodiac Club?" Straker asked. He was still in uniform. "I'm supposed to be meeting some people there at seven and I'm running a little late."

"Sure," Freeman said. "Who're you meeting?"

"You ask a lot of questions, you know that?" Straker replied.

"So I've been told, repeatedly."

"I'm having dinner with Craig, General Henderson's niece, Kate, and her roommate. I think her name is Mary," Straker answered the question. "Do you want to join us for drinks?"

"I think I'd be a fifth wheel," Freeman said.

"I'm sure Craig could find somebody for you," Straker said.

"No thanks," Freeman said. "I couldn't afford anybody he'd find for me. Besides, I have a girl friend."

"Oh, yes, I forgot about Fiona," Straker said with a grin. "Do you think there's something Freudian about you dating a bar maid?"

Freeman didn't bother answering. He pulled to a stop in front of the Zodiac.

"Sure you don't want to have a drink with us?" Straker asked as he climbed out of Freeman's car.

"Positive. I'm tired and I'm heading home. Some of us like to sleep at night," Freeman said. "I'll see you Monday at the office."

Freeman was tired and considered heading home to his flat in Mayfair, but he knew there was nothing there he wanted to do and it was too early to go to bed. Instead, he stopped at the bar where his friend, Fiona Barrett worked.

"Hello, Alec," she called when she caught sight of him. "I'll be off in an hour. We can grab a bite."

"Sounds good," Freeman agreed, finding a booth in the back of the pub to wait.

From his seat, he could watch her work. She wasn't beautiful, or even pretty. Her dark brown hair was frizzy and almost unmanageable. Her eyes were coffee brown and she couldn't see without her glasses. She was a little on the dumpy side, but Freeman didn't care. They laughed together and they could talk about anything - sex, politics, sports, it didn't matter. She had an opinion and if it didn't match his, that didn't matter either.

Freeman knew he wasn't in love with her. He didn't think she was in love with him. There was little romance or overwhelming passion between them, but they had a lot of fun.

* * *

Straker didn't show at the office till Tuesday afternoon. When he did come in, it was a Straker Freeman had never seen. The younger man was hopelessly, passionately, in love.

"She's beautiful, Alec," Straker told him.

"Who?"

"Mary," Straker said, as if that explained everything.

"Kate's roommate?" Freeman clarified. He'd met Kate Komack only a few weeks before. She was a college student, spending the year at Oxford on scholarship. He hadn't met the roommate, although he knew she worked for Kate's father. Nick Komack was a well-known art dealer, among other things. Mary Oster was a buyer for his London gallery.

"I thought you were supposed to be going out with the general's niece?" Freeman asked.

"No, I'm supposed to be escorting her around town," Straker corrected. "There's a difference. The general doesn't want her getting involved with some local fortune hunter. Besides, she likes Craig a lot better than she likes me."

"Really," Freeman commented. He didn't agree with Straker's assessment of the situation.

Kate had a hopeless crush on her uncle's assistant. Freeman saw it in her face the first time he met her.

On the other hand, Straker seemed oblivious to her many charms. Freeman supposed it was due to the difference in age. She was nine years younger than Straker. But, she was gorgeous. She had auburn hair, green eyes, and legs that went all the way up via the scenic route. The fact that she was bright was an added bonus. She was going to make some man very happy one of these days.

"I've asked her to marry me," Straker said. Freeman had to mentally

scramble to understand the change in subject. The younger man had a talent for doing that to him.

"We're going over tonight so I can meet her parents," Straker continued.

"Aren't you rushing things just a little?" Freeman said. "You've only just met the woman."

"She's wonderful, Alec," Straker said. "And I'm in love with her."

Freeman simply shook his head and hoped it would all work out. He didn't believe in love at first sight any more than he believed in flying saucers.

* * *

"Mary, this is Alec Freeman," Straker introduced them over lunch at the Officer's Club at Mildenhall.

"How do you do, Group Captain," the woman said. A diamond glittered on her left ring finger. She held out her right hand to be shook.

Freeman shook her hand and took a moment to look her over. She was pretty rather than beautiful, with blue eyes and ash blonde hair. She looked like she might be one of those women who wouldn't show her age if she managed to keep her weight down as she got older.

"What looks good?" Straker asked her as they looked over the menu. Freeman didn't bother looking at the menu. After two months, he knew it by heart.

"You choose," Mary said. She didn't take her eyes off Straker. She'd taken his hand and it seemed she would never let go.

"They have a nice trout almandine," Straker told her. He seemed hypnotized by her, oblivious to everything around except her. It was so unlike the Ed Straker Freeman thought he knew, it was almost as though the younger man was ill.

"That sounds marvelous, darling," she said. She let him order for both of them - trout almandine, rice pilaf, Caesar salad. Freeman had his usual - a burger, heavy on the mushrooms, with a garden salad.

Mary excused herself to go 'powder her nose' before their meals came.

"What do you think, Alec?" Straker asked. There was something in his expression, the same bright, innocent excitement he'd had in Thailand, when talking about space.

Freeman realized he hadn't seen that innocence in the younger man since his arrival in England. No, Freeman corrected himself, since the bail-out over Viet Nam.

"She adores you," Freeman said cautiously. "I wonder about her mental stability, though."

Straker's expression shifted to confused alarm and Freeman grinned.

"After all, she agreed to marry you," Freeman said. Straker grinned at that. Freeman didn't voice his reservations. He suspected Straker wouldn't listen to him anyway. Mary seemed a little on the dependant side. The MI5 officer had never liked that type.

She had talked about moving to the States, to wherever Straker would be assigned next. Mary seemed to like the idea of being married to an American military officer. She had read books on military wives, the hardships and the rewards. Straker was at a point in his career where the hardships would be minimal. They would have their choice of housing if overseas and his income was more than adequate for a very comfortable lifestyle.

They seemed blind to the possibility that his career might not go as planned.

He hoped Straker knew what he was doing. For himself, it occurred to him that maybe the quiet peacefulness he felt when near Fiona might be better than blind passion. She had no expectations of him. Together they could afford a very comfortable life, maybe even a little house in the country.

* * *

That Sunday night, Freeman waited until after the bar was closed down.

"How about a walk?" Freeman asked her, helping her into her coat. It was beginning to get a little threadbare. Freeman had offered to buy her a new one, but she had refused. She was saving her tips for a good coat at Burberry's. She almost had enough.

They walked to the Thames and followed the river a while.

"I have something to ask you," he began, suddenly nervous.

She stopped to look up at him under the street light. "What is it, Alec?"

He couldn't see her eyes behind her glasses. He pulled a small jewel box from his coat pocket and handed it to her.

"You don't have to make a decision right away," he said as she opened up the box to find the small diamond ring inside.

In answer, she threw her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss on the ear. He pulled her around enough to give her a kiss on the lips and discovered she was crying.

"Oh, yes," she said when they came up for air.

At that moment, Alec Freeman decided he was the happiest, and luckiest, man on Earth.

* * *

Monday morning's filing was already done. Not many reports had come in over the weekend. A young man and a young woman had vanished from the

same area south of Manchester in the past week. There was no apparent connection between the two incidents, but they were very similar. Straker put those two reports in the safe for Henderson.

Freeman still couldn't tell exactly what criteria Straker used for deciding which reports went into the safe and which were filed. Missing person reports generally went into the safe, but not always. Some sightings went in, but very few.

Straker's expression was glum after reading through the reports.

"Maybe we could arrange a double wedding," Freeman joked, to break the mood.

"You've asked Fiona?" Straker asked. His disbelief was almost comical. "I thought you said I was rushing things."

"You are," Freeman agreed. "But I asked Fiona last night and she said yes. We're going up to Manchester this weekend to see her brother. Maybe you and Mary'd like to come along. Make it a foursome."

"I'll ask Mary," Straker promised. "But, I think her mother has plans for us this weekend. Something about showing me off to some cousins in Kent."

* * *

The following Friday, Fiona took off early from work so they could get a good start to Manchester. The M1 was busy, as usual, but the traffic cleared, surprisingly, by the time they reached the M6 interchange. They left the M6 near Stoke to cut across country on the side roads.

They were north of Buxton, in the Peaks National Park when Fiona spotted something in the sky ahead of them.

"Alec, what's that?" she wondered aloud, pointing it out through the windshield.

"Some type of plane, I expect," Freeman answered. All he could see was a bright spot of golden light ahead of them. The spot grew larger.

"I don't see any wings," she said. There was wonder and maybe a touch of worry in her voice.

"Helicopters don't have wings," he reminded her. The spot grew even larger and more distinct. It wasn't a conventional plane or a helicopter. Freeman knew aircraft and it wasn't anything he could identify. It wasn't a flying saucer, exactly. More like an inverted teacup with rotating blobs or plates along the bottom rim. The object seemed to slow as it came closer.

A greenish beam lashed out at the road. Freeman threw the wheel of the car over in an attempt to avoid the blast. A weird whine rang in his ears and another beam lashed down.

Fiona screamed as the car was pushed off the road.

* * *

Freeman woke up in a hospital room. Straker was there, waiting. He looked almost as awful as Freeman felt, but there was something else. There was something cold and distant in his expression.

"What happened?" Freeman asked, trying to sit up. He discovered it hurt. He took a moment to assess the damage. His head hurt abominably and his ribs were bruised. There were no bandages or casts that he could see or feel. He wasn't too badly hurt, whatever had happened. "Where's Fiona?"

"First, it's about eight, Saturday morning and you're in a hospital in Stockport," Straker said, not answering Freeman's question. His expression softened just the tiniest bit. "They found your car in a ditch. Lucky for you, you've got a hard skull."

"Okay, but that doesn't explain what happened," Freeman grouched. He needed an aspirin, or something stronger, badly. As if he read Freeman's mind, Straker handed him a small paper cup with two white pills and a glass of water. Freeman swallowed them without bothering to ask what they were.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Straker asked. Freeman laid back and closed his eyes, trying to remember. It was all a blur and his head still hurt.

"I was driving and Fiona was on the passenger side. We were a couple miles north of Buxton, I guess, when she spotted something weird in the sky."

"Did you see it?"

"Yes, after she pointed it out."

"What color was it?"

Freeman frowned. The question made no sense. "Gold. Whatever it was looked like it was spinning. It made a sort of whining noise."

"What happened then?" Straker's briefcase was on the floor beside him. He opened it and pulled out a file.

"I'm not sure," Freeman admitted. "I think I remember it firing at the car. After that, I honestly don't know."

Straker pulled three sheets from the file and handed them to Freeman. "The object, was it one of these?"

Freeman studied the drawings. One picture was of a standard, tabloid style flying saucer, the three blobs on the bottom and the blob on the top with a pancake-like center structure. The second was more triangular. It was the third drawing Freeman recognized. A slightly squashed sphere with a broad hoop, or maybe rotating plates, around the bottom rim.

"This one," Freeman said, handing the drawing back. Straker hardly glanced

at it. It was as if he'd already known the answer.

"You said it fired on you," Straker said. "What kind of weapon?"

Freeman shook his head. "I'm not sure. It wasn't conventional, I know that. It could have been a laser. It was hot, and it looked greenish. I've never seen anything like it."

Straker put the drawings back in his briefcase. "Alec, the police will be here later this morning to get a report from you on what happened. It would be better all around if you didn't mention being fired on by a flying whatever."

"They'll think I was drunk," Freeman protested. "Otherwise I wouldn't have run off the road into a ditch."

"They took a blood alcohol test when you were brought in," Straker said. "It was so low it didn't register. You might try telling them you swerved to miss a dog or something." The coldness had started to thaw, but something else was still there.

"Ed, where's Fiona?"

Pain crossed Straker's face.

"What happened to Fiona?"

The younger man actually shuddered. "Her body and the body of the woman who was reported missing last weekend, were found about two hundred yards off the road, in some brush."

"I want to see her," Freeman said.

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Alec."

"I want to see her."

The coldness snapped back into place. "As you wish," Straker said. "She's been taken to the morgue in Manchester."

Straker waited for Freeman to get dressed and arranged for his release from the hospital. Before they left, Freeman filled out a brief report on the 'accident' saying there'd been a dog in the road. He had swerved to miss it and went into the ditch. The police officer who took the report seemed dissatisfied, but made no effort to question it.

Straker drove the fifteen miles to Manchester and took them straight to the morgue. Freeman wondered a little at how he knew exactly where the police morgue was. As far as Freeman knew, Straker had never been to Manchester.

Straker flashed an ID card at the morgue attendant, who ushered them through to the antiseptic white storage area. The attendant identified the refrigerated drawer and pulled it open before moving back to allow Freeman access to the body. It was covered with a white plastic sheet and there was an odd flatness where there should have been the rounded mound of a belly.

He pulled the sheet down from her face. It was Fiona. There was dirt in her hair, on her face. Her glasses were gone. He started to pull the sheet down further, to see the wounds that killed her. Straker's hand grabbed his wrist, stopping him.

"What killed her?" Freeman demanded. "If she was found six hundred feet away, she wasn't thrown there by the accident. She must have been alive. What killed her?"

Straker gave the attendant a quick nod and the man stepped forward, taking the plastic from Freeman's hand. He covered Fiona's face and closed the drawer, locking her away. Then, the attendant walked away, leaving the two men alone in the cold of the morgue.

"Alec, you're right. She didn't die as a result of the car going off the road," Straker said.

"Then what killed her?"

"She was murdered," Straker admitted. His voice was tight as though he was fighting to stay in control. "And whoever, whatever, killed her and the other woman, surgically removed every internal organ in their bodies. We can only hope they were both dead before whoever it was started their work. We've had some indications that these people, creatures, aren't always careful that way."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know," Straker admitted. "General Henderson's been working on this since before Roswell. There were mutilation incidents similar to this even during World War II and they were almost always accompanied by reports of strange aircraft in the area."

"We can't let this keep happening," Freeman protested. "It's horrible, it's barbaric."

"Yes, it is," Straker agreed very quietly. "And with any luck we may be able to start doing something about fairly soon."

Freeman heard something in Straker's voice, a quiet intensity he'd only heard a few times before. He'd heard it in Thailand, when planning tactics for over Saigon after a plane had gone down, when discussing NASA's missions, colonizing the Moon. Only, this was deeper even than that. Freeman suddenly realized that Straker had replaced nightmare of Viet Nam with the nightmare of an interplanetary war, dreams of the Moon, with something far darker.

Freeman knew the craft he saw had not been made on Earth.

"Are they the ones that killed Talbot and the others?" Freeman asked. He suspected this might be the only chance he'd have to get Straker to talk about it.

"They come in fast and duck under the radar," Straker said. "I don't know

why they didn't finish the job. Maybe they didn't realize I wasn't really hurt when I was thrown from the car. I don't know why they didn't take you when they took Fiona."

Freeman shook his head. "Bond wanted me to find out who killed Talbot," he said. "Now that I know, I can't tell him. He'd never believe me."

* * *

Fiona Barrett was buried next to her mother and father in a little churchyard near Manchester. It was a simple service, well attended. Fiona had a lot of friends. Freeman hadn't realized how many until they came to her funeral.

* * *

Three weeks later, Freeman was best man at Straker's wedding. He couldn't believe how much he missed Fiona. Maybe he really had been in love with her and hadn't known it. Now it was too late.

He drank too much at the reception. Mary's father had splurged on the champagne and Freeman was doing his level best to finish it off. He was also determined that for once in his life, he was going to see Ed Straker drunk. Straker had stayed stone cold sober during Fiona's wake. It had been held at the bar where she'd worked.

"Oh, no more for me, Alec. I have to drive," Straker protested after Freeman filled his glass once more. Freeman wasn't about to let go of the bottle.

"I have a toast," Freeman said. For someone who didn't drink, Straker wasn't getting drunk very fast.

"What? Another one?" the younger man protested.

"Yep," Freeman nodded.

"What to this time?"

Freeman took a large gulp from his own glass and raised it in a toast. "Champagne!"

Across the reception hall, the new Mrs. Straker waved and beckoned them both to the table with the wedding cake. Her mother stood with her, smiling proudly for the wedding photographer. Kate was somewhere around with her own camera.

"Come on," Freeman said, taking Straker's arm. "Cut the cake."

"Ah, the cake... "

Freeman stood back and applauded with the others when the cake was cut. Fiona would have loved it. Fiona liked weddings. She had wanted a big wedding, a white wedding. Suddenly, Freeman wasn't drunk at all. All he wanted to do was to hurt the people who had taken her away from him. But he didn't have the first clue as to how.

* * *

'How' came nine days later. Straker came back to the office after a week off. He and Mary were supposed to have gone to Athens. Freeman already knew they hadn't made it.

One of his buddies told him that instead of being allowed to board the plane to Greece for his honeymoon, Straker had been ordered to report to General Henderson. The next day, Straker was on a plane for New York, to the United Nations. He had gone alone. Mary's visa wasn't ready.

By Wednesday, Straker was in England once more, but in Henderson's office rather than with his new wife. The closest the newlyweds got to a honeymoon was a weekend trip to the coast, where it rained the entire time.

"I won't ask how your week went," Freeman said.

"Thanks," Straker commented. He locked the office door, which was odd, since they never bothered locking the door while they were there. The office was in a secure building in the middle of a U.S. airbase. Base security was only two doors down. The base commander's office was two floors directly above them. Straker didn't even like having the door closed.

Without saying a word, Straker went to the safe and opened it. He pulled out a notebook Freeman hadn't seen before and handed it to the other officer.

"When Fiona died, you didn't ask what the general and I might have in mind to do about the problem," Straker said. He gestured for Freeman to sit at the desk and read through the document.

Freeman speed-read most of it, slowing when he came to the proposal for an international paramilitary organization that could cross international boundaries with impunity to deal with the problem of a known hostile interplanetary threat.

"Pretty ambitious," Freeman commented. "Security will be a major ongoing issue."

"Yes," Straker said.

"You don't have a suggestion for a host country," Freeman observed. "I assume it will be in the States. Lots of room to hide stuff in."

Straker shook his head. "That would be the logical place. They're putting up the most cash. But the committee in charge decided to base it on this side of the Atlantic. Great Britain won the toss. They're donating the land for the initial strike bases as well as our cover corporation. They liked the idea of a film company as cover and the British government has several it wouldn't mind handing off to somebody."

"Have they chosen a commander-in-chief for this pretty little setup?"

Freeman asked.

Straker nodded and got the most peculiar, almost worried, look on his face.

"Don't leave me in suspense, Ed," Freeman said. "I want to know who on this planet an international committee would trust with ten billion dollars."

The odd expression didn't leave Straker's face. "Me."

Freeman felt his jaw drop as he sat back in the chair. Straker grinned.

"And if you don't agree to come onboard to help me get this thing off the ground, I'll have to kill you just to maintain security."

"Do you honestly think I'd say no?" Freeman asked.

In answer, Straker held out his right hand. Freeman shook it.

"Welcome to SHADO, Colonel Freeman."

* * *

Freeman finished his whiskey and rinsed out the glass before putting it back on the shelf above the dispenser.

"I'm sorry, Alec," Foster said. "I never realized you were one of the walking wounded, too."

"Walking wounded?" Freeman repeated.

"Nearly everybody I know in SHADO has been hurt. Most of us by the aliens, one way or another. Peter lost his sister. You lost a fiancée. I lost a co-pilot and my career in civil aviation."

"That's true," Freeman agreed. "A lot of us have lost something we want paid for."

The intercom on the commander's desk buzzed. Freeman reached over and flipped the connection open.

"Yes?"

"Captain Carlin reports two aliens dead, one security member wounded, but not seriously," a voice from the control room announced.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Freeman said, breaking the connection. He turned back to Foster. "Well, I think it's time I went home." The Australian headed for the door.

"Alec," Foster called. Freeman stopped and looked back at him.

"I am sorry."

"Don't worry about it, Paul," Freeman said, giving the young man a crooked grin. "They say time heals all wounds, even wounded dreams, and it does. One way or another." The office doors slid open. "Good night."