

Priorities

The Long Game Trilogy II - © April 20, 2012

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Straker didn't look up as Alec Freeman walked into the underground office. Eighty feet underground in a lead-lined concrete bunker that few knew about and fewer had access to, Freeman was one of a handful who actually had automatic access to the office of the commander-in-chief of SHADO Operations.

"Is it done?" Straker asked without raising his head. Freeman could see that Straker was going over the Moonbase roster. Normally that was Freeman's job, but he'd had more pressing issues to attend to today. He hadn't told Straker why he had needed the day away from headquarters, but he wasn't surprised that Straker knew. Straker always seemed to know.

"Yes," Freeman said. "Although I admit I wish it hadn't been so quick but the police were already on their way to the incident scene and I didn't want to deal with their questions."

Straker simply nodded and Freeman wondered, not for the first time and probably not for the last, exactly what went through that blond head when Freeman made his reports. Not that Freeman was complaining. Working with Straker these many years had been mutually beneficial. SHADO was top secret and its mission allowed its operatives an extraordinary amount of freedom – including the freedom to feed their sometimes unsavoury appetites.

Freeman would never have admitted it to anyone else, but he'd wanted the woman and her cuckolding lover to suffer before they died simply for what they had done to Straker.

"You know how sorry I am about Johnny," Freeman added. Straker's son, John, had been buried only two days before, the victim of an automobile accident. But Straker hadn't told Freeman about the accident or the drug Straker had arranged to fly in that might have saved the boy – at least not until it was too late.

Straker finally looked up. "It was a gamble that didn't pay off."

Freeman considered his next words carefully. He'd read the report on John *Rutland's* death but he wasn't sure if Straker had. "Ed, you know that Johnny..."

"That Johnny wasn't mine?" Straker interrupted. He chuckled bitterly. "I knew as soon as I saw his blood type when he was six months old that he wasn't mine."

"Then why did you bother letting everyone think you didn't know, especially *her*."

"It amused me to watch her thinking she'd pulled one over on me, even though I knew my sweet, virginal, convent-raised delicate flower of a wife had heels so round she could barely walk." Straker snorted. "I'm surprised she didn't try to get you into her bed, too."

"She tried," Freeman admitted. "And I did try to warn you."

"True, you did." Straker chuckled. "But it also amused me to keep her wondering exactly

how much I knew about her and Rutland."

"She should have been dealt with years ago," Freeman said, taking advantage of Straker's uncharacteristic openness. "You didn't need to suffer through that travesty of a divorce. Trying to make people believe you and I..."

"It's not that far-fetched," Straker said mildly. "Assuming I had any inclinations that way. She needed a reason for my disinterest in her and wanted it to be as demeaning as she could make it. I don't think it even occurred to her that in the film industry, being gay isn't a career killer."

"She still should have been dealt with."

"Oh, I considered it, but trying to raise a child with my duties and schedule... It was better to be a weekend parent. Return him with his head full of how great his 'real dad' was while she didn't dare tell him she didn't know who his 'real dad' was. I figure it was some poor sod she'd coaxed into her bed while I was working. I doubt it was Rutland, though. He certainly didn't act the part of a 'caring father'." Straker sat back in his chair. "The one I should have had dealt with early on was her mother. She pulled Mary's strings like a puppet-master."

"And why didn't you do it when you realized what she was doing?"

"I wanted to see how far she'd go," Straker responded. "Exactly what depths she'd force her daughter to in order to get whatever it was she was after."

"And what was that?"

Straker actually chuckled. "Not what she got."

"You wanted to tell Mary about SHADO, and you know she would have told her mother," Freeman reminded him. The incident had happened years ago, before Johnny was born. Freeman had been surprised that Straker had even considered telling his wife any portion of the truth. Luckily, Straker had seen reason and not told her anything, letting her think the worst – and Freeman was sure that even her worst imaginings were nowhere near the truth.

"A moment of weakness," Straker admitted. "But you know I would never have told her anything."

Freeman wasn't sure he believed Straker's assurances. At the time it had looked like Straker was desperate to save his disintegrating marriage to a needy, suspicious harpy of a woman who he *thought* was carrying his child. At the time it had looked like Straker had succumbed to the woman's wiles despite knowing his priorities put her low on his list of considerations and that *her* priorities included an unswerving obedience to her mother. Freeman still didn't know who Rose Nightly had worked for. She'd chosen death before betraying her masters.

Michael Nightly, Mary's father, had a fatal stroke the night his wife was arrested by officers claiming to be from MI-6. The autopsy couldn't prove it wasn't an alien device in his head that did it, and if it was, whether the man had been murdered or committed suicide.

Freeman had one more question. "Why did you even marry her? With all the women out there, you chose *her*."

"I had to choose someone," Straker said. "The Air Force likes its senior officers safely married. Besides, she didn't object to the games I like to play, at least so long as I didn't leave

marks other people could see. And she liked the idea of being an officer's wife with all the perks and privileges that went with it."

"And then you and Henderson pulled the rug out from under her. As SHADO's CO, you're not openly associated with the USAF. No officer's privileges."

"I admit that she tried hard to convince me she didn't care about that, and she almost had me convinced she was happy with me being a civilian if it got Henderson off my back. Of course, having Rutland on the side must have helped her deal with her disappointment, especially when I got bored with her." Straker chuckled again. "She tried so hard to convince herself and everyone else it was my fault she was sexually frustrated. I doubt it ever occurred to her that I was bored with her lack of talent and imagination in the bedroom. Although she did try for a while after Johnny was born and she finally healed up."

Again Freeman wasn't quite sure he believed Straker's assurances. Straker had tried too hard to convince himself, and Freeman, that everything was all right at home in the months after Johnny was born. It was a possible point of weakness in Straker – a tendency to overlook exploitable flaws in the people he favored.

And favorite son or not, their master despised weakness.