

Catalyst

a UFO Story by Yuchtar, Lyn, Nancy Hickman and Amelia L. Rodgers

It was exactly like what some people said your last moments of life was like. He kept seeing flashes before him, like watching some macabre music video. They all involved Alec Freeman.

"What do you do for relaxation, Colonel?"

"I don't believe in relaxation, Freeman."

"You can't be serious."

"Did you discern that from reading my name badge? It says Straker."

"You said that without a trace of a smile. I think I'm going to enjoy working with you, Colonel Serious. Was that a genuine chuckle I just heard coming from you?"

"No, I don't believe in chuckling either."

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"Ed, for crying out loud, you've been working for three days without a break, you need to go home and get some food into yourself and then sleep."

"Three days, is it? Good to know that all the money we put into your training enabled you to be capable of basic arithmetic, Alec."

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"Do you hear me, Ed Straker? Open those damn eyes of yours. Don't you even think about dying on me."

"Don't get too maudlin on me, Alec, it would ruin my image of you."

"You son of a bitch, how long have you been conscious?"

"Long enough to have a lot of blackmail material on you, if I was one of those characters inclined toward such a thing."

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Alec Freeman was his friend, and he literally was incapable of thinking about day-to-day life without the Australian being a part of it. So why was the automatic pistol in his hand, and why was he headed toward where security held Colonel Alec E. Freeman, with the intent of putting a bullet through the man's heart? All the evidence pointed to Freeman being a traitor to the organization. The remedy was execution. He wouldn't be what he was by allowing anyone else to carry out this duty. His head told him he had to do this. The war was bigger than anyone. His heart told him to put the gun muzzle into his own mouth, and blast his own brain fragments all over the SHADO corridor before he ever did such a terrible thing. Yet all he did was walk coldly up to the guard, and nod. The door slid open.

"Ed, don't do this. You're making the mistake of your life. There has to be a part of you that is still humane enough to know it."

Silence. Icy blue eyes. Then Straker spoke.

"You haven't given me anything to believe anything else but what is in that folder on my desk. You sold us out to the aliens. I buried six of my men and nine of my women and several innocents who never even heard of Shado. Because of you. The court martial findings were conclusive, Freeman."

"Someone's set me up. It has to be. Someone wants me out of the way." Alec Freeman pleaded.

Straker raised the pistol.

"For the love of God, Ed, don't!"

"You won't feel a thing, Freeman. I'm an expert shot, you may recall that little fact."

"Ed, I'm begging you. Please, please don't. PLEASE."

For the first time, Alec saw doubt in the blue eyes. The pistol never wavered. The distinctive voice did, but no one but Alec Freeman would have detected it.

"Then give me a reason not to."

"I need time Ed. At least allow me that."

"Why should I?" said Straker trying with all seriousness to steady his tone.

"Come on Ed. You know me. You know I'm loyal!" Alec said almost pleading with his blue eyes.

"Do I." said Ed pursing his mouth. He didn't want to believe his friend of all these years could be a straight-out traitor. The allegations against Paul Foster practically bounced to mind. He had been innocent. Surely Alec Freeman had to be. "Alright, Alec what time do you need?" Ed said leaning his head back tapping the gun against his hand.

"A few days at a minimum." Alec said with a sigh of relief.

"Right, you have that." Ed turned to walk away. "I hope you are being straight with me. If not you'll force me to follow through with this. No one gets fired from Shado."

Alec put his head down in silence as Ed walked out of the room.

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Huddled inside the small SHADO tracker station on the antarctic subcontinent, Lt Ian Matherson stared vacantly at the blinking lights and radar screens on yet another long night shift. It mattered little of course as night or day it was still dark in the dead of the Antarctic winter. He and his two work companions were here for at least six months until summer returned and the ice melted enough for the supply ship to break through and relieve them. It was in effect more isolated than Moonbase and the perfect place from which to orchestrate his revenge against the man he hated most in the world. Commander Ed Straker.

He let a smile break his face as he congratulated himself on how well his plan was going so far. He only wished it was possible to have bugged SHADO Control to keep up with the unfolding of his plans. Still he learned enough just listening in on the SHADO frequencies. Breaking Ed Straker was his remaining life's ambition and it was time to put the next part of his plan into action.

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Who could have set him up? Alec Freeman had gone over everything in his head a hundred times and no matter how he arranged things, it had to be an insider. It had to be a SHADO operative. But why? Freeman was an affable, easy going kind of guy - he rarely made enemies and when he did, he didn't turn his back on them. So, it wasn't about Freeman. It was about ... what? SHADO?

Why would someone working for SHADO - someone who understood the alien threat and all the implications - why would someone like that want to discredit and/or undermine SHADO?

Freeman ran a hand over the two days growth of rough stubble on his face and sighed heavily. For the umpteenth time, he reached out for the Scotch bottle nearby and for the umpteenth time, he stopped mid-reach and clenched his fist instead. He needed to keep his head clear. He didn't have much time left before Straker would be forced to ... Wait a moment. Straker ... The man would be torn apart if he were forced to shoot Freeman. Was it possible

that some nut job had set up Freeman in an effort to get to Straker? Ed Straker was a hard man with a hard job and enemies were always part of the picture, but a SHADO operative? Who could Ed have pissed off enough to provoke this sort of retribution?

Freeman allowed himself that drink before heading out the door to find out.

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An unmarked auto sat down the block watching the Freeman house, the occupant sat watching for any movement. Damn he wanted a cigarette. Freeman was walking back and forth now leaving.

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"Freeman leaving his residence," He spoke into the radio

"Continue surveillance." The radio crackled back.

"Yes, Sir." He started the engine and followed at a safe distance. He looked at his watch; the 48 hours that Commander Straker had given Freeman was ticking down, minute by minute. He recalled what had happened earlier that day.

"All right, what is it? I have a meeting-"

"Sir, with all due respect, Colonel Freeman didn't do what we're accusing him of doing."

"You testified at the Court Martial, you're aware of what the finding was. Now if this is all you wanted to talk about, this conversation is over."

"Damn you!"

The frosty blue eyes rose up to meet his.

"What was it you just said?"

"You heard me, Sir. I looked up to you. We all did. But you're ready to throw Colonel Freeman to the dogs, ready to put a slug in his head, when he's the closest friend you have. I just don't understand it!"

"So you don't think what I am doing is fair?" Straker dropped the folder pertaining to the evidence that had brought down his friend, and interlaced his fingers, looking straight at the Lieutenant.

"No I don't."

"You're not in the command seat, are you? You're dismissed, take the rest of the week off, without pay. I can't have any of my operatives so emotionally overwhelmed that they can't conduct themselves properly."

"Good, I can't stand to be in your presence one more minute. There, I said it, how I really feel, now are you going to shoot me, too?"

Straker stared at him so long he started to believe the older man just might say yes. What Straker did say surprised him.

"I need someone reliable to watch Freeman, without Freeman knowing it. Oh, he'll expect it, but I doubt he'd think it would be you I'd send. I'll stay in touch with you by radio. Take one of our unmarked civilian cars. Interested?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. See to it."

"Yes, sir. Thank you sir."

"Look after him, Ford."

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And so he sat on surveillance, trying to decipher what he'd detected in Straker's voice in that last sentence. Did Straker not really believe Alec was guilty? Just what the hell was going on?

Keith felt a moment of panic as Freeman closed his front door and walked over to the garage. He opening the garage door and walked inside, turned on the light and seemed to be searching of something. Finally he lifted something, turned towards the light, turned it off and walked out, closing the door. Keith wondered what was in the package the Alec carried, but gave a sigh of relief when the colonel got into the SHADO car and departed. The surveillance device in Keith's passenger seat beeped happily away.

Ford glanced at the left side mirror, rearview mirror and right side mirror and back again as he gave petrol to the engine. He was also very grateful to the tracking device all SHADO were fitted out with. BEEP, BEEP, Beep, beep, beep. The colonel was far enough ahead for Keith to follow without Alec getting suspicious. Keith grinned, Alec was always suspicious. The auto continue to follow the beeping noise the tracker sounded. Keith gave the car some more gas. When he was in denser traffic he could follow closer, but for now he was at a safe distance to not allow Alec to detect him. Before this was over Keith was going to hate that sound, Beep.

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Alec drove off in the direction of the studio. What had he missed. He knew he was not the real target, Straker was. Someone was getting at Straker through him. Ed doing the "Blood and Guts" Patton single shot to the brain, so no pain, yeah that's a laugh. There would always be pain. The pain of knowing failure, the worse kind, to Ed. Alec shook his head, this was not the time to get distracted. He need to decide on a course of action. "Think Freeman!" though Alec. His mind was racing, his jaw ached from clenching his teeth, and his finger ached from griping the starring wheel as he drove. Today the glass was half full, and that was not his way of thinking. He needed a break and he needed it badly.

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As the car pulled away from the house another set of eyes took note and waited a while longer. They took note that another car pulled away, a knowing smile on the face. "They don't trust you anymore, Freeman." The figure thought. The figure hugged the side of the building moving quickly to closed the ground to the back door of the quarry.

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The back door was an easy target as it had been opened yesterday to set up the second part of her brother's plan. The gum was still in place so the alarm was not active. She walked over to the counter to retrieve the Scotch bottle. A smile spared over her face, "You are mine Freeman, no matter what happens you are dead!" She put the bottle into her backpack, went to the back door removed the gum, cleaned off the residue, and headed to the studio with a skip in her step.

Freeman was heading for the studio when his cell rang. "Freeman," he answered.

"You want info?" Said a subdued voice. "I got info."

"What ...?" Freeman started to ask, but the voice interrupted.

"Meet me now. 149 Bailey Lane, and make it quick." And the caller clicked off.

Well, it was obviously a trap, wasn't it? Of course it was, but there was no other way to find out what the heck was going on, so he made a quick U-turn and headed towards Bailey Lane.

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Ford's brow creased into a frown as the blip on his screen started heading back his way. He had a momentary panic when Freeman's car sped past him heading back the way they'd come. *Christ, did he see me?* he thought to himself as he tried to find a spot to turn around

himself.

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"Man, I must be nuts," Freeman muttered to himself. "Could have sworn that driver looked just like Keith." He chuckled quietly at the thought of Ford tailing him.

149 Bailey Lane turned out to be an isolated little cottage. No surprises there. Freeman parked a ways from the cottage and took gun to hand, carefully scanning his surroundings as he slowly made his way towards the cottage.

He didn't make it, and he never saw it coming either. All he felt was a sharp pain at the back of his neck before the ground rushed up and hit him in the face.

He groaned loudly when he came to. Not because he felt any particular pain, but because he felt intolerably stupid. His head hurt a bit and he was obviously tied securely to a chair - the numbness in his hands were proof of that. He sighed and looked around. Judging by the shadows on the walls, it must have been early evening, but he didn't think he was in that cottage on Bailey Lane. It looked more like an empty warehouse.

He didn't hear anyone else about, so he went to work trying to loosen his bindings.

* * *

"You WHAT?!"

Ford cringed at the voice. "I ... I lost him, sir. I got stuck in traffic on the M1 and the Colonel's car was empty by the time I got to it. I have no idea where he's gone, Commander. I'm sorry."

Straker swallowed the bitter reply he was about to make and simply said, "Get back here now," before slamming the receiver down. What the hell else could go wrong?

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Straker's SHADO automobile screeched to a halt in front of Alec's small home, and he gave a curt nod to the security team swarming around it like bees. As he figured, they found nothing. Alec was good at Intel, maybe even better than he was. He went past them, and went straight to Alec's study to brood. When the teams had collected their evidence, Straker remained. Why did I ever allow Ford to handle this? The man is raw, you don't sit in front of a radar screen for days on end, and still remain sharp. That isn't it, is it, Straker? he asked himself. You're beginning to wonder if Alec Freeman really is a traitor. Damn him, if he'd needed more time, I would have given it to him. Now it isn't only..that's odd. He was staring at Alec's wet bar. A bottle was missing, a bottle of rare scotch that Straker had given to him as a gift. Straker had been in this house on several occasions. In happy times. In bad times. Straker knew every inch of it as well as he knew all the Shado passwords. Straker rose and looked into Alec's rubbish bin. No empty bottle. Why would Alec suddenly vanish with a bottle of scotch? A chill crept over Straker. Was Alec a traitor? Had the experience of being found guilty driven him to take his own life? Damn it, no. Alec's made of stronger stuff. Putting a bottle and a bullet down his mouth wasn't his style. He knew Alec drank under pressure, but he'd always remained a professional. Straker had no choice but to continue with his plans. Doing anything else would signal to the real traitor that he suspected something. A quick look in the bedroom safe assured him Alec's passport and other personal documents were still there. A forgery would be easy to acquire, but it still gave him hope Alec was still Alec. His eyes fell on the manila envelope which he knew contained Alec's will. He slammed the safe closed.

He went back to his car, and drove to Shado H.Q. Ford would answer for this, but you didn't send a boy to do a man's job.

He'd find Alec Freeman himself.

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Alec tried to loosen his bound hand, those big hands that could do damage in close quarter combat were useless now. A tremor of anger floated across his face and his icy blue eyes clouded with the same emotion.

Sweat stains had leaked through his jacket. His face was white and had turned clammy. A shudder ran down Alec's body. Sweat broke at his hairline. He struggled some more then sank back against the chair and closed his eyes.

Alec was brought back to consciousness by a sound of heels heading in his direction. His eyes opened and traveled towards the sound. He had no idea how long he had been out. He turned to face the source of the noise.

A figure clothed in black advanced on Alec. Circling him. "Well, well what have we here?" The figure glared down at him. Alec's head hurt, but there was something familiar with that voice. "Not feeling well are you?" The figure asked?

She reached forward and ripped off the tape covering his mouth.

"Surprised, Alec? You were one of my best customers. This is a terrible way to repay you, don't you think? Oh, and you can forget about screaming for help. Nobody will ever hear you, I bought this house because there's nothing around it for miles. "

"What the hell is going on here?"

"Tell me something," she said in her sultry voice. Alec wanted it all to be a dream, just a crazy dream. "Do you believe in justice? If someone does something to a person you love, wouldn't you want blood in return?"

"Look if it's money you want.."

"Money doesn't interest me. All the money in the world won't bring my loved one back to me. But killing you, that'll turn me on. Don't you want to turn me on? Oh, I'm such a bad hostess, you look thirsty. I borrowed your best scotch."

"You were in my house!"

"More than one time. You're a sloppy housekeeper. Here, have a pull. Oh, sorry, your arms are tied. Here." She opened the bottle and Alec desperately worked at his bonds, but he remembered a feature of her act was tying knots and practicing bondage. He choked as she forced whisky down his throat.

"So what is it you want?"

"Oh Alec, did I hurt you?"

She bent over him, and raked her false fingernails through his hair. He had dreamed about being that close to her, and now as he took in her intoxicating perfume, he swore he'd go celibate if he could only get out of this. Somehow, she had to be connected to the nightmare of his being found guilty of court martial. Then his eyes fell on her neck. What the hell was this? An adam's apple?

"You're not even a bloody woman!"

"That won't matter, Freeman. Because you're poisoned. I stole that bottle of scotch so that I could make your last moments as painful as possible. When Commander Straker orders the post-mortem on you, that will be like the torture I am about to do to you.."

Catalyst stared at Alec and shook her head. Dark almond eyes focused on Alec with such hatred, that Alec briefly closed his eyes.

Alec did not react to her anger. His throat was raw and his body was sheathed in a clammy sweat and his eyes were feverish as they opened again, showing defiance.

Catalyst moved over to the cadenza where the video camera was and turned it on. She

moved the lens till Alec was in the viewfinder, carefully so nothing of the back of the room where he was being held could be seen and identified. Shocked, Alec realized she was going to film him. Oh dear God. For Ed.

She began to move again and Alec followed each movement with interest and dread. He heard some noise behind him that did not sound good, as if a heavy object was the desire of Catalyst.

"Yes, this will do. The report said that my brother had a broken arm at the time of his death." She lifted the heavy lead pipe and swung it as she twirled around in a cat like dance. Coming closer and moving away, she played to the camera. "Commander Straker, you disappointed me in not carrying out your court marital sentence of Colonel Freeman, but this will be much better. You will watch Freeman die slowly and terrible death knowing that you are the one responsible. I hope you enjoy this little film, maybe you can show it at your studio." She twisted closer to Alec and this time the pipe connected with his arm. The sound of the bone cracking was audible through the video speakers.

Alec had expected the blow and had used an old torture technique to endure the pain. His body on the other hand reacted and went into shock mood, his skin went ghostly white and he swayed in his bonds. A wave of vertigo hit him, a white hot burning sensation. He screamed and more sweat washed over his already soaked body - too strong to control by his Shado training, Shit he thought. Alec struggled to maintain for Ed's sake, but lost the battle to his body's needs. His head fell on his chest as he lost consciousness.

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Straker paced around his desk. He finally dropped down wearily into his chair, head in hands, with a fresh headache. The agony of not knowing what was going on, and especially the agony of the situation slipping beyond his control, added to his physical and emotional pain. He had to do something, anything. Abruptly he slammed down his finger on the switch that connected him to Control.

"Ford. My office. NOW."

Ford sat at his radio communications station listening, when the call that he most dreaded came. Straker's voice sounded as merciless as the act of imbedding ground glass in an open sore. The other members of control shot looks of mixed contempt and pity at Ford.

He took a deep breath as he strode toward the hell hole that was Straker's office, and plunged toward it. The doors of Straker's office slid open like a mouth threatening to devour him whole.

"I won't even try to tell you what I think of your inadequate attempt at surveillance, I don't have time. I want to know Lieutenant Ian Matherson's current whereabouts." Straker said, seated in his chair.

Ford swallowed. Did Straker have to add to the guilt he already felt at losing track of Alec? What a stupid question. He was Straker. Of course he would.

Ford tried to sound confident. He succeeded as well as a blind horse trying to win the Nationals.

"Sir, his tour of duty is over, he's back in London on leave."

"Good, good. I want him brought in by security and taken straight to interrogation. I'm making this your responsibility, Ford. You louse this up and I can promise you I'll invent a reason to use you for target practice in the range."

"Sir, I'll.."

The telephone buzzed. Talk about being saved by the bell, Ford thought. Straker picked

up the phone.

"Straker. Yes, Miss Ealand. What's wrong?" Straker's stomach plummeted at her tone of voice, but he continued listening. Ford hesitated, a rabbit frozen in the road. "An audio and video transmission for me? Put it on my main screen. Ford, wait." Ford finally had gotten his legs moving, determined to at least get this right, and trying not to wonder why Straker wanted Matherson. he froze again. A transmission appeared on the screen, and Straker hung up the telephone, then turned in his chair to watch it. Ford saw a expression he'd never dreamed he'd see on Commander Straker's face.

Anguish. Unmistakable anguish. Then Ford's own mouth fell open at what was being transmitted. Alec Freeman, bound to a chair, helpless, gray with agony, screaming. They could not see who was causing him to scream, but a voice could clearly be heard. Ford turned white, almost afraid to look back at Straker as the woman spoke directly to him, mocking Straker. Straker looked as if he was the one being tortured. Ford had never seen Straker like this. It made him uneasy. It blotted out his own pain at seeing the Australian in peril.

As if he sensed Ford's thoughts, Straker jumped up in resentment at allowing his true feelings to show, his expression rigid again, and started snapping off one command after the other almost directly in Ford's face.

"Well don't just stand there like an idiot! I want the source of that transmission identified and located, with every available security operative ready to get there in an instant! I want that voice digitalized and identified! I want Mayland to have a surgical theatre open, and surgeons standing by for emergency surgery. Have our medical-rescue choppers fully equipped, staffed, and on call and ambulances ready. Have Sky One ready to do recon if needed. And I want Matheson here within the hour! The hour, do you hear me? GO, Ford! Get the hell out of here! MOVE, man!" Straker hit the switch to open the doors like he would have preferred to hit Ford.

Ford moved.

Alec again screamed on the video. Straker shuddered.

The doors closed behind Ford. Straker locked his office. Then, and only then did he utter a single cry of despair, more the sound of a wounded animal than the man who commanded Shado. A long, low keening sound. His eyes filled with tears, and he wiped them away roughly with his fingers. You could almost see him rein back his self- control, like breaking a wild horse doing everything in its power to escape.

"Alec. Hang on. You need to hang on. You must."

Straker made a fist with both hands, then unclenched them, and picked up the phone again.

"Get that filth off my screen, but continue monitoring. No, wait, Miss Ealand. Never mind. Keep it going. We must find Colonel Freeman, and that's our only link with him. Straker out."

Straker hung up, then forced himself to look at and hear his friend's torture.

"I can hang on, if you can." he whispered.

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The pain finally won out and Alec looked at his attacker, but seem to be talking to Ed though clenched teeth, "Don't do something stupid." and with that he slipped into unconsciousness.

Catalyst looked over at Alec's head down on his chest as it rose and feel. "No, no that will not do Colonel Freeman, you must stay with us, you me and the Commander." She walked

over and poured some more of the scotch down Alec's throat. He coughed and opened his eyes turned towards the camera and nodded, winced and his breath caught. Alec gave a cold smile. He was feeling nausea and his arm was throbbing.

Straker own heart pounding, he forced his way past the anxiety and studied Freeman on the monitor, almost as if willing his own courage into his friend.

Freeman willed himself to remain calm as he gazed into the camera. He knew Ed was watching and he needed to bolster the other man's confidence, regardless of how much his own was slipping. "Is this how you get your kicks, Catalyst?" he asked. "When you're not shaking that pretty ass of yours at the Kit-Kat Klub?"

* * *

Straker's ears perked. *Good going, Alec,* he thought as he ordered a security team to check out a dancer named Catalyst from the Kit-Kat Klub.

The woman sauntered around to sit on Freeman's lap, her faced carefully turned away from the camera, but the straight razor was clearly visible glinting in the light. Ignoring his comment, she said, "We've done blunt force, which worked out quite nicely, I thought. So, now we're gonna try sharp." She flicked her thumb against the blade. "And it's very sharp indeed."

Alec sighed inwardly, but was less worried about this form of torture. The blade was obviously very sharp and he probably wouldn't even feel it as it cut. The blood loss could be a problem, but not painful.

She swung her arm in a downward arc, blood splattering back with the follow-through as she slashed across his chest.

It hurt a bit more than he had expected and he had a sharp intake of breath, but he had no urge to scream. Instead, he grinned.

Catalyst evidently didn't like that. She roared and slashed his chest several more times before pushing off his lap and stomping off camera to rant about him being a smug bastard.

He winked at the camera - at Ed, and contemplated what would be next.

What were the elements of physical torture again? Blunt force, sharp ... heat, cold ... What else? Eh, it didn't matter - she would probably get to them all in due time. If the poison didn't do him in first, of course.

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Ed Straker approached the interrogation room after ordering his people to do the G6 on an exotic dancer named Catalyst. Colonel Lake was there waiting for him, surprising him a little, for in the relentless hunt for Alec Freeman he had blotted everything but his own determination to save Alec out.

"Commander, what is this all about? Ian Matherson is one of our own.."

"Colonel, stand aside." Straker said.

He'd put on his dark blue Nehru jacket which matched his form fitting jumpsuit. The man was so physically striking that it was often difficult to keep her mind on duty, but Alec's plight made it simpler. Still, part of her wished Straker was as attracted to her on a personal basis as she was to him, something she never had had the courage to tell him. She scolded herself for being so selfish, moaning about her own feelings in such a desperate situation.

"I'm second-in-command with Alec gone like this, you know that. I should have been informed as soon as possible. I had to hear what was going on from Miss Ealand when I came on duty." Lake complained.

"Don't make me repeat myself. Listen to me carefully. Stand aside."

Straker's tone would have stopped a herd of wild elephants in their tracks. Lake used another ploy, genuinely worried about both men.

"Ed, what is happening to Alec is not.."

Straker reached out before she uttered another word and stunned her by shoving her to one side, none too gently. She scowled, and proceeded into the adjoining room, to watch the interrogation. To her surprise, a steel panel rose up over the two way glass, and all sound from the hidden speakers was turned off. The door to the room itself had been locked after Straker had gone in, she soon discovered. Lake marched off with a pout to track down Keith Ford, sometimes Ed Straker was impossible, and this was one of those times, and damn it, how many other surprises had Straker concealed from her? She hadn't even known about the secret room with the Molly back when the whole business that was code named Timelash had happened, and now this secret panel blocking onlookers from seeing what was happening inside. What the hell was Ed playing at?

Ian Matherson leaned nervously against the wall, jumping up in shock when the panel covered his reflected image on the glass. Then to plunge his heart deeper into an abyss, the one man he hated more than anyone else in the world casually walked in. Without even meeting Matheson's eyes, he placed his hand against a small panel Matherson had not even seen, one that was concealed in one wall. A door slid open, and revealed a keypad. Stepping in front of it so that Matherson would not see what he was doing, Straker rapidly entered a series of numbers. Another inner door slid open, and Ed placed a small device into it. It was his control to operating the steel panel. Under other circumstances, he mused he would have been amused at Virginia's probable surprise about certain elements of SHADO he had designed. One was this very area, which was designed to double as a safe room. Within moments, the panel shut, and was again nothing more than a part of the wall.

"Interesting name for a dancer, don't you think? An agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action, Catalyst."

Matherson blanched. Then he hurled himself toward Straker. Straker was more than ready. Adrenalin surged through him and he threw the man in a graceful judo move. The end result was less than graceful. Matherson went flying and crashed into the opposite wall. Straker just stood there, perfectly balanced, like a dancer might be.

"We spent the money to train you to withstand any form of interrogation, I know that. However, listen to me carefully. I know that you set Colonel Freeman up. I figured from Jackson's report on you, that sooner or later you'd move against him. I just didn't fully understand why. Now I know. You wanted me. You wanted me to kill him, didn't you? So that I would suffer. Oh, you hated Alec, there's no question about that. You never believed him when he told you that your brother Dennis wanted Alec to give the order to blast the Shado sub he was fatally wounded on, with his fellow officers already dead around him. Dennis Matherson understood it was the only way to defeat the aliens who were attacking, to use it as a weapon against them, triggering the nuke aboard, and blasting them to bits. It was a noble way to die that I told Alec to give him. He didn't die in vain. I know from Jackson's and Alec's report that it was you who was supposed to be assigned to that sub, but you exchanged positions with him. I even have a small amount of understanding about the guilt you must feel, the grief in knowing he met what was supposed to be your fate. Jackson was sure you would never get over it. He warned me you might come after Alec Freeman or me someday, but I wanted to give you a chance to prove Jackson wrong. I can piece together how you framed Freeman. Don't waste your time denying it. What I want to know is what part Catalyst plays in

this, and where she has Alec Freeman. "

Matherson laughed sharply. Straker did not respond.

"I have news for you, oh great almighty emotionless God-like Straker, who strikes fear in his operatives. Catalyst is our younger brother, oh yes, surprised, are you, you self-righteous piece of shit? Significant change, you see why she named herself that now? We kept her a secret from you, and Dennis even told her everything about Shado, kept her informed all these years, he loved her still. So much for your security. He always said he was really a woman, so our parents kicked him out when he was small and we left with him. He became a woman like he always wanted, Dennis even earned the money for his operation. If Frank, pardon me, Catalyst, has Freeman, then you might as well start digging Freeman's gra.."

Straker opened his jacket in one swift pull on his velcro seam, revealing his shoulder holster. In a sweep of his hand, he took out his automatic, and took off the safety catch. He pointed it at Matherson.

"This room is soundproof, Matherson. A silencer isn't necessary. I never miss."

"Oh spare me, is that supposed to scare me into telling you where she is? Shooting me would violate Shado's rules and you know it as well as I do. Go bugger.."

There was a single loud shot, and Matherson yelped and hugged his lower leg.

"You son of a .."

Straker fired again, this time into Matherson's hip, shattering bone. The man screamed.

"I always scored well on human anatomy classes, Matherson. Plus I'm a marksman. I know where to shoot without killing you outright, places that will insure your suffering. Now I suggest you tell me where your brother is holding Alec Freeman, or he won't be the only one who is being tortured."

"So she's torturing him? Good. Go to HELL." Matherson said in bravado, shaking. This was a side of Straker he'd never dreamed existed.

Straker fired, splintering the man's shoulder. The Shado traitor screamed again.

"Hurts, doesn't it. I ought to know, too. I got hit right there back in my Nam days. Fractured my collarbone into bits. The pins they used to fix it are still in me, and give me pain from time to time, but then I am used to pain and you aren't. I understand from studying the report Jackson did on you that you have a low tolerance for pain. How unfortunate. Now tell me where Alec is."

"I don't fucking know!" he yelled. "She didn't tell me she planned this!"

Straker fired again. The shot nearly blew off Matherson's right hand. He yelled in agony as a spray of blood spread on the wall. Seeing it, Straker was somewhat shocked. He had not intended that shot to be severe, nor was it expertly placed. He was quickly becoming no better than the man who lie in a pool of blood, he was losing control in his desperation, and that wouldn't bring Freeman back to him.

"STRAKER! I'm telling you the truth, please! Pleasssse, he was my brother, Dennis was my brother, do you have any idea what this feels like, losing your brother when it should have been you that had to die?" the man sobbed. "No, because you've never lost anyone, you don't feel anything, nobody in this world would want to be your brother, you filthy bastard! You've never loved anyone and nobody's loved you! Go ahead, finish me off then! Go ahead!"

Straker slowly lowered the pistol and put it back in the holster, closed the seam of his jacket. The phrases Nobody in this world.. you've never loved anyone... you don't feel anything echoed in his head.

Mary.. John, and Alec, whom he'd gladly die for. Alec, most of all... all he had now...and

he might be forever lost to me too. I somehow always push away those whom I..no. Nothing gained by thinking about the past, Ed. You have a job to do.

"You're wrong, Matherson. There is someone. And you better pray I find him alive. Because if I don't, I will finish you off. You can count on it."

Straker pressed the series of buttons that unlocked the door. He stepped through it, and met a relieved Lieutenant Ford and an angry Colonel Lake on the other side.

"Sir! We traced her, and did a search on her credit card record! She'd just rented a house so we tried there first. She tried to get away, there was gunfire, she had to be killed."

Straker looked at Ford. He tried to form words, to beg Ford to tell him Alec was still alive. He found he couldn't. He just nodded numbly.

"Ed, it's all right. We found Alec. He's in Mayland right now in critical condition." Lake said as gently as she could. "But you know Alec, he's a fighter."

"Well, done both of you. I'm on my way to Mayland. Colonel Lake, you now have command. Oh, and get Matherson to medical centre under guard. He met with ... an accident. I want him alive to face Court Martial."

"It wasn't Colonel Freeman at all, was it?" Ford said defiantly, and regretted it straightaway seeing the momentary pain in Straker's eyes. Even Lake winced.

"I never believed it was him, Lieutenant." Straker recovered and said, startling both of them and he started to go, but Lake stopped him. Ford was already using the corridor telephone.

"Ed, she poisoned him before she started torturing him. We're analysing it now. He'll be all right, I'm sure of it."

"Don't, Virginia. I don't want to be lied to when it comes to Colonel Freeman."

"Ed, when the team reached him he had two things to say."

"Damn it, Colonel, I don't have time for this." Straker said, finding he had to lean against the wall to remain upright, and hoping she didn't notice.

"He said what took us so long."

Straker actually smiled slightly.

"Sounds like Alec. What else did he say?"

"That he was afraid you'd do something stupid and for us to make sure you didn't. Then he passed out."

Ed nodded, fighting his feelings again and emerging victorious.

Ford was already walking along with the medical team that was quickly rolling the injured Matherson toward Medical Centre on a trolley. The attending doctor had already put Matherson on IVs. Lake saw the blood and her mouth fell open. She turned toward Straker.

"I never do anything stupid, Colonel." Straker said defiantly. Then he straightened his jacket and strode off toward corridor 32.

Virginia Lake had to grin.

* * *

Ed Straker sat unseen in the observation room as they worked to save Alec Freeman's life. He'd been sitting there, not moving, for six hours, keeping vigil, mentally urging his friend Alec to live. Finally, one of the gowned figures, Dr. Shroeder, came up to him after they wheeled Alec out of the operating theatre.

Shroeder reflected that Straker looked almost more haggard than Freeman, but he didn't mention it. Nor did he mention that he'd been informed that Matherson was full of holes. Or that drilling Matherson until he looked like he could rival Swiss cheese was against the rules.

You didn't question what Straker did, and quite frankly, Shroeder thought, he wished he could have watched as Straker did it. Alec was uniformly liked in Shado.

"It was touch and go, Commander, but he's going to make it, his vitals are stable. The woman wasn't clever about poisons, it was one for which we had an antidote. She didn't expect that we'd get to her so soon, or she would have finished the job. We've taken him to critical care, and he's going to need both psychological and physical therapy for several weeks, but it looks promising. I suggest you go get some sleep, you look terrible Sir."

"Not until I know for certain he's all right." Straker said firmly.

"You keep this up, and I'll.."

Straker turned and left. Shroeder sighed. At this rate, he'd have two patients in CCU instead of one.

* * *

A few days later, Straker dozed lightly, adorned in sterile mask and a gown, slumped in a chair next to Alec's bedside in Mayland. Alec was snoring away. Normally he wasn't meant to stay there so long, but nobody in the unit dared tell Straker that, figuring if they did they'd become a casualty themselves. Nobody had raised any question about why Matherson had faced his court martial still in numerous bandages, and what Straker had done was left out of the report on Lake's orders. Neither had anyone shed any tears when group 2, 3 had executed him, which was the price one paid for being a traitor in a war. Straker had surprisingly not attended the court martial or his funeral service, or even gone back to duty, but he'd requested they bury Matherson in the same plot that his brothers Dennis and Frank's coffins rested in. Lake had testified in Straker's behalf at the Court Martial after he'd told her everything.

* * *

Straker never really made a request, people figured, even when he said he was not officially on duty. They took what he suggested about the burial as the command it was, and obeyed it.

Ford, who was watching the scene of Straker's vigil on the monitor at the nurses' station that day, shook his head.

"What?" Lake said, joining him in a rare break. She was still in command.

"He used Alec to trap Matherson. Without giving him the least hint that it was all a plan. He allowed Alec to be framed."

"I got a final report from security. Matherson's intent was to paralyze the Commander emotionally by forcing him to kill Colonel Freeman. Revenge on two birds with one stone. He guessed Straker would not allow anyone else to do it. And he had coded information that he intended to give the aliens when Straker was at his lowest, thinking Straker would never suspect him. We prevented an alien attack using info we found at Matherson's home. He didn't know Straker already suspected him. Straker didn't really have a choice. He couldn't tell Alec, if the trap was going to work. Alec will understand and forgive him before long. He's known Straker and has been used to Straker's style for a long time."

"I don't know if I could ever forgive having a gun pointed at me by someone that was supposed to be my friend." Ford complained.

"I know."

"If I hadn't lost the tail ..."

"Alec will forgive you too." Lake smiled.

"Thanks, Colonel. I expect he will, but I don't know about Straker."

"I'd go throw Straker out of there, I'm not afraid to stand up to him, but Jackson seems to

think that wouldn't be of benefit to either of them, so who am I to interfere. Men!"

Ford grinned at her and she grinned back.

"Come on, Straker may not need to eat and drink and sleep, but I do. Join me for lunch?"

* * *

Ed Straker opened his eyes slightly and looked at Alec. He listened to his friend's snoring as if it was one of the Wagner operas he so admired. He smiled, and then changed his position and closed his eyes again.

Some time later, Alec awoke, and looked around in a blurry stupor. The damn drugs they still occasionally force fed him still had him groggy, but they told him he was on the mend. He was not made of porcelain, and it wasn't the first time nor would it be the last time he'd ever be hurt that bad. It was something else he feared, something else that caused the nightmares. He shoved that thought away, and blinked.

Ed Straker was in a chair next to him. He hadn't been dreaming. Ed was snoring. Alec grinned, he couldn't believe it. The commander actually did sleep. Or was he feigning? And how many bloody days had he been there? Shroeder had filled him in during treatments, Christ, those bloody treatments hurt like hell. But Ed hadn't really believed he was a traitor. God, the man was impossible. But then that's why he'd been made commander of Shado.

Ed's own snoring awoke him, and he sat up, uneasy. His eyes met Alec's.

"Good morning, Colonel." he said casually.

"How the hell do you know it's morning?"

Ed lifted up his wrist, and glanced at his Swiss wristwatch.

"All right. I never expected you of all people to be a perfectionist. It's one in the afternoon."

"I could use a drink. I don't suppose you'd smuggle one in for me."

"Sure," Straker said. Freeman's eyes popped.

"Sure," Straker repeated, "and then I'll go have a spot of tea with the aliens."

Freeman groaned.

"Very funny."

"So was the idea of hitting the sauce in the state you're in." Straker reminded him.

They looked at one another.

"Ed."

"Alec." they said at the same time.

They chuckled.

"Beauty before intellect, Alec. You go first."

"That's very funny too. Ed, they've told me I'm on the mend."

"You are. It's a slow process, you just have to be patient."

"Look who's lecturing me about patience. How the bloody long have you been here with me?"

"Long enough to know you snore loud enough to collapse this hospital." Ed shifted his position and winced.

"When's the last time you ate something?"

"Is this a surprise quiz, Professor? I graduated a long time ago." Straker smiled slightly.

"Yes, and you're still as stupid as ever having never learned a damn thing. Get out of here, Ed. Go eat and sleep. I'll be fine."

"I will if you tell me what you wanted to say to me."

"Swear it?"

"I swear it. I wouldn't lie to you, Alec." Straker said mischievously.

"Wouldn't lie...why you..." Alec grinned, then was pensive. "Ed, am I going to be all right in the head after this? That's what bothers me the most."

It was Straker's turn to be pensive. He leaned forward.

"Not the fact that I put you through so much?"

"I don't know how I feel about that yet. I know you did what you thought was right. You didn't know about the woman. You didn't know that even Dennis was abusing the rules. That wasn't your fault. You made the right decision about him, and you made the right decision to trap Matherson. Lives depended on it. You knew if you'd told me straight out, that I'd be on Ian's side, feel sorry for him, and ruin your plans to pin him down. Jackson told me you didn't want to believe what he might do. And I heard from a nurse that you asked them to bury all three brothers together. You did the right thing."

"Did I?" Straker said wearily, leaning back. "That *lady* nearly killed you."

"That was no lady, in every sense of the word. Now answer my question."

"Jackson... yes, yes, I know you don't like him any more than I do, but he and other psychiatrists have said you'll be fine. Being worried about it, and saying so, is the first step toward recovery. But for heaven's sake, Alec, a sex club in Soho? Exotic dancers? Women are going to be the end of you, you know." Ed smiled.

"Yes, at one point while she was chopping me up I considered celibacy if only I was saved." Alec said, hiding his relief, and knowing it was useless anyway, since Ed was good at reading him. Nothing had changed. He couldn't hate Straker for long, no matter how much of a reason the blond idiot gave him, he thought ruefully.

"Sure, and the day you do that is the day I really take up drinking with the aliens. I won't have tea in my cup, either." Straker answered. Alec grinned at him, feeling better by the minute.

"Get out of here, Ed. wait, what were you going to ask ... damn you, Ed!"

Alec said as Straker rose, saluted Alec playfully and left, somewhat wobbily. Damn it, Alec thought, I should drive him home, if I know the idiot, he hasn't left my side, hardly slept, and he's existed on coffee if anything at all. Drive him home and look after him? I can't even cover my own arse with this damn short gown. Enough of this, then.

Alec buzzed for a nurse. He figured he could talk Lake into getting him out of there. And then he could get back at Ed Straker. He had just the idea how to do it, too.

He hadn't told Ed that during the torture, he'd imagined Straker with him, with Ed holding his hand and that he'd held on to that image and sensation. He certainly wasn't going to tell that to Jackson or Jackson would pronounce him a nutter for sure. And that he'd left his body during the surgery, but that Ed had ordered him to come back. Or that Ed had been weeping silently over him while he slept, not knowing if he'd live. It was probably only the drugs, he told himself.

Wasn't it?

Oh bugger all of it anyway. He yelled for a nurse.

* * *

Three months later

* * *

"Good morning, Alec. You look like your time off down under did a world of good. Great tan you have there. Ready to go back on duty?"

Alec stood without saying anything for a moment.

"What is it, Alec?"

"Close and lock the door, would you, Ed?"

Ed looked puzzled, but did as Alec requested.

"Don't you have something to say to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"In hospital. We were telling each other what was on our mind. I told you what was bothering me, but you left."

Ed put down a folder he was studying.

"I was going to ask you if you could ever forgive me for what I did." he intoned softly.

"Ford told me that he didn't think he could forgive you if it had happened to him." Alec answered. Ed nodded.

"I can understand why. I made a mistake in sending him to tail you."

"He did the best he could, under pressure. I keep telling you, you have to let up on these people, Ed. They're flesh and blood."

Ed looked at Alec.

"And I am not, is that what you're trying to say?" He made an attempt to hide the pain in his voice but Alec heard it loud and clear.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't need to. I get the point. All right, Colonel. I acknowledge that you and I see things differently. We've had this little talk before"

"Ed. You always think you can predict everything. Sometimes you're so blind."

Straker got up and crossed to the conference table, on which his meager breakfast of coffee and toast had been laid out. He poured creme into his coffee, and his favoured two sugars, then sipped at it and faced Alec again, concealing his worry and hurt.

"Care to join me and discuss what you think my shortcomings are over breakfas.."

Straker froze. Alec had taken a gun from his customary hip holster, and pointed it at Ed. Straker dropped his mug of coffee, and it smashed on the floor.

"Alec. Don't." Straker looked toward the desk in the hope Alec would look that way, and Ed could knock the gun out of his hand, but Alec did not fall for it.

He knows me too well. Dear God, is he right? Have I really been this blind? Is he going to kill me? Was Jackson wrong?

"You'll never make it over to the desk to call for help. I'll shoot you long before you even think about it."

"Alec, for the love of God."

"Any last words, Ed?"

"No. I don't believe it. You'd never shoot me. Not even if she brainwashed you in some way that we couldn't detect. And some part of you knew I'd never shoot you. I'm going to call for help, Alec. You'll have to shoot me to stop me, but I don't believe you will... "

Straker made a dash for his desk.

Alec shot him right in the chest.

Straker dropped into his chair, looking shocked. He looked ... slowly down at what was dripping off his chest. Then he stared at Alec in disbelief.

Alec Freeman grinned widely with satisfaction and shot Ed again, this time in the face. Ed jerked back at the impact.

"You said I wouldn't shoot. Now will you finally admit how wrong you can be about things?"

"That's very funny, Alec. Ha ha damn ha. Reasonably good shot too for a novice. I take it your water gun is empty now?"

"Novice, huh? You wish. Yeah, borrowed it from one of my grand nephews back in Oz, aged six. Bloody realistic gun, don't you think? Ed, you're dripping something terrible. You should have seen your face when I pulled it out."

"Enjoyed yourself, did you, Colonel?" Ed calmly wiped his face. He was sopping wet. Alec began to laugh.

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"The price for replacing my coffee, and my sugar, and my cream and my mug are coming out of your paycheque." Straker said, eyes shining. "I nearly soiled myself, Colonel. Good thing I didn't, my tailor would never ... damn it Alec, stop laughing, I should have you hauled into interrogation again and really shoot you, you clown."

"Serves you right for what you did to me, Ed." Alec grinned, and took a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to Ed. Ed snatched it and wiped his face. Strands of his hair were plastered to his forehead with a mixture of sweat and water. damn the man, Alec thought, he still looks great, even though he resembles a great big drowned white rat.

"Ed."

"What now?"

"I forgive you. Besides, I've learned my lesson, no more women for me."

Straker smiled, and sat back in his chair.

"I'll have to change. Good thing I keep clothes here. Get out of here, Alec, and be grateful I don't put this nonsense in your permanent record. Oh wait. That new operative in Control..."

"What new operative?"

"Joined us while you were on holiday. Day. Have Lieutenant Day bring me a proper towel, and another mug from the restaurant then I'll go shower and change. Then get back to work."

Alec saluted Ed and went out. Ed grinned. Alec was about to pay for this little game. Celibate, my Boston arse.

"Hey, Keith, where's Lieutenant Day?"

"She's over there."

"She?"

"You wanted me, Sir? I'm Nancy Day." the most gorgeous blonde woman Alec had ever seen looked innocently at him, then set his blood on fire by smiling at him. Straker! Straker knew perfectly well what would happen. Ed had set another trap. And he'd fallen right into it. Now this was REAL torture. Bugger his vow. Goodbye, celibacy, he thought.

"The Commander is needing a mug, he dropped his ..." he began to say in his patented flirtatious manner

He stared at Ed as Ed appeared and calmly went past him, looking like nothing had happened with only a slight tell tale darker blotch on his navy blue Nehru jacket and a hint of boyish mischief and satisfaction in his clear blue eyes that no one else detected but him. But then that was why Ed needed him. He alone could see the humanity in Ed Straker.

Oh bugger that.

I should have really shot the man...

THE END