

# If I Should Die Before I Wake

Alison Jacobs  
Copyright 2003

All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

*This is a sequel to my stories Herod and Desert Storm.*

---

"It went off all right?"

Kate Straker was just heading out of the offices of Harlington-Straker studios as her husband and Alec Freeman came in.

Ed put his arm around her and kissed her. "It went fine. Come into the office and I'll tell you all about it."

Smiling, she shook her head. "I've got four meetings in London today. I have to be at the Board of Film Classification in less than an hour to try and argue *The Tears of Summer* down to a PG. Oh, feel, the baby's kicking"

He put his hand on her six-month pregnant stomach. "This one's livelier than Sam."

"You can say that again."

"Are you taking a driver?" Alec asked.

"Only as far as the end of the Tube. There's no point in taking a car into London."

Ed frowned. "You're taking someone."

She pulled a face at him. "I'm fine. I'm going to be fine. They're all within walking distance."

His frown deepened. "You mean all in Soho?"

"That is where the British film industry's based."

"But it's more famous for other things."

She rolled her eyes. "Is that what's worrying you? No kerb crawler's going to go for me in this condition."

Alec broke in. "You're probably right but it wouldn't hurt to take a security man with you."

"See?" said Ed.

Alec mock glared at him. "You're not helping yourself."

"No he isn't," said Kate. "And neither are you, I know you'll always back him up. But alright, I'm not getting into a fight over it. If I agree to take someone, you'll let me get off?"

She reached up and pulled Ed's lips down to hers. "I'll be back soon as I can. I left Sam in the canteen with Keith Ford but she'll probably be in the creche by now. Oh, and Ginny was looking for Alec."

She looked across at Alec, almost embarrassed, as if it was not polite to kiss her husband in front of him.

Alec nodded. "I'll find her. And I'll call through to the gate to make sure that someone's waiting for you."

"Fine, have them meet my car." She looked at her watch. "I have got to go."

She waddled out of the door, both men watching her as she went.

"I was going to suggest a victory lunch." Ed said. "But I guess it can wait until dinner."

He and Colonel Freeman made their way along to his office, smiled at Miss Ealand and took the lift down to SHADO HQ. Colonel Lake was already there, checking with Moonbase about some details of the computer system. She came over when she saw them.

Alec smiled at her. "Kate said you were looking for me?"

"It's nothing urgent," she replied. "Just a personnel matter."

His grin grew warmer. "Personnel or personal?"

She blushed.

Alec looked at her, then at Ed, then away.

Ed stepped in. "There's not a great deal to do until the prisoners arrive in about an hour. They're taking the long way around. Why don't you two grab a coffee and if there's nothing I need to hear about, I'll go grab my daughter."

Lake smiled. "There are the usual reports on your desk but nothing to worry about and Sam was looking forward to seeing you."

"Then page me when you need me." With that he was gone.

"Doesn't hang about, does he?" said Lake.

"You hadn't noticed?" replied Alec. "Now, I'm dying for that coffee."

"I'll get it."

They met up again in his office a few minutes later.

"It all went well?" she asked as she sat down.

Alec gestured expansively. "Textbook operation. Two minor injuries on our side, mothers and babies doing proverbially well and we took all the scientists alive, plus stacks of papers. You'll have a field day."

She grinned. "Can't wait. Especially to compare it to the last lot we took. But I bet Kate's not keen on having more babies to foster."

SHADO's latest operation had been to close down another of the breeding colonies that the aliens had set up to create human alien hybrids. While Ginny Lake dealt with the research, it was Kate Straker's job to find secure, trustworthy and loving homes for these children, despite knowing that if they ever proved a threat to the human race they would have to be killed. So far, those they had rescued seemed to be perfectly normal.

"Are you avoiding the subject?" Alec asked.

"Only slightly. I did want to know and this is a bit tricky. I need your advice and you're right, it is a personal matter."

"Go on."

"I hope you won't take this the wrong way. It's not Ed's sort of thing at all, not that I'd want to bother him, and I certainly couldn't ask Paul but I think I need a male point of view."

He leaned forwards. "Now I'm intrigued."

She sighed. "I want a man. Pathetic, isn't it? And I've had it up to hear with dashing, irresponsible flyboys who couldn't put down roots if you buried them in compost. And believe me, I've wanted to at times. Sorry, not you. You see what I mean about not taking it the wrong way?"

He put his hands up. "I do. And I do recognise myself in that, believe me. Alright, assuming you're not making a pass at me, what can I do for you?"

"I have got my eye on someone."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Ah. But you're not quite sure what to do about it?"

She nodded. "He's polite, reliable, good company and doesn't assume he's God's gift. But I'm not sure how he'd react to a come-on from a woman, let alone a senior officer. "

"Who is it?"

"Keith."

"Ford?"

"Yes, Keith Ford. How many Keiths have we got?"

"Calm down." He smiled. "Lucky dog. You want me to have a word with him?"

She took a deep breath. "No, no I don't think so. For a start, that would scare him even more. I think I just needed to get my courage up. Could you try and make sure he and I aren't disturbed at lunch time?"

"I will if I can. And if you need anything, just ask."

She smiled. "Thanks, Alec. You're a dear."

"Old dear, by the sounds of it."

"Never."

They finished their coffees and went back into the control room.

\* \* \*

Soho Square was quite pleasant in the sunshine, a green oasis centring on the church, and Kate Straker was in a good mood. She had come out of her meeting at the British Board of Film Classification early and while they had not been able to give her their final answer, they had been fairly positive that she would get the Parental Guidance certificate she was looking for.

She looked at her watch. She had allowed herself twenty minutes on a bench in the square before moving on to her next meeting. Wigmore, her security man, prowled around behind her. She wished he would relax, he was making her nervous.

\* \* \*

"Red alert. We have a positive track. Three ufoes are entering range. Red alert." Nina Barry's voice over the Moonbase link was as calm as ever.

Alec groaned. "Get the Commander in here. And find out where they're headed. Nina?"

"Launching interceptors now, Colonel."

"You read my mind."

Straker strode into the control room. "Do we have a termination?"

"Not yet, sir." Barry replied.

For a few moments there was silence except for the machinery humming around them.

Then Barry came back with: "Interceptors are engaging. One target destroyed. Two targets destroyed. Interceptor Three is damaged, returning to base."

"Serious?" Straker asked.

"He'll make it. The third ufoe is through, headed for Earth. Sorry, Commander."

"Get me the termination." He turned to Ford. "Where are the SkyDivers?"

"SkyDiver One is in the South China Sea, SkyDiver Two is off Iceland. Termination is coming through, looks like the English Channel."

"Could be anything." Freeman said. "There's a mass of shipping, never mind coastal installations. Any interesting vessels, Ayesha?"

"Checking that, Colonel. But two of the flights that were following you are approaching the Channel now."

"Oh, great."

"Launch Sky Two." Straker responded.

"Sky Two launching." said Ford. "Termination confirmed, it's the English Channel."

Again there was silence for a few minutes until Captain M'Bondo's voice crackled over the radio. "I have visual confirmation on the target. I can also see one Shadair jet beyond that. Am engaging now."

Straker nodded to himself, turned to Ayesha and asked: "Which one?"

She checked her panel. "Seems we're in luck, sir. It should be the decoy. The transport with the prisoners is also in the area. That with the mothers and babies is out of range."

"Looks like our luck's holding." said Freeman.

"I'll believe that when that UFO is in pieces and our planes are down safely." Straker growled.

"Just trying to look on the bright side."

Sky Two closed with the alien craft, manoeuvring first for a clear shot, then to avoid the alien's energy bursts. M'Bondo could not get in the kill shot but he steered the two craft away from the target plane. A burst of fire clipped his wing and M'Bondo had to struggle with the controls for a moment. The UFO span away, searching for its target. M'Bondo levelled up, finally got his position and fired. The alien craft dropped like a stone, hurtling into the water.

M'Bondo reported in.

"Good shooting." said Straker. "Were you observed?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Never mind. Escort the planes back to base. Straker out." Once more he turned to Ford. "Scan the airwaves, make sure we don't have a containment problem."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll be lucky if we haven't." commented Freeman.

"You're the one who said our luck was holding. Don't you have paperwork to do?"

"Thanks a bunch."

\* \* \*

As much as she might protest otherwise, Kate Straker did find Soho threatening. She knew all about the fine restaurants, the intriguing galleries and all that but the fact was the place was primarily there to sell sex. To sell people as a commodity. It reminded her of the aliens' interest in humans as spare parts, brood mares or involuntary sperm donors. They did not see people as people. Except maybe Ed, they seemed to take him seriously.

As she strode briskly past the neon signs and lurid advertisements, she was grateful for Wigmore's solid presence a few steps behind. On her way to her next appointment, she wondered what quirk of fate had seen the British film industry also centred here.

"Rather be at Denham." she muttered.

She checked an alleyway to her right for a street sign but it was too small. The place was a maze. She needed to turn down the next side street, which would doubtless have alleyways of its own. Except for the costumes of the crowd, the place was positively Dickensian.

Her feet were killing her.

\* \* \*

An hour after the UFO attack, the rescued women and children were being tended to at the Mayland Hospital and the prisoners were being brought into SHADO HQ. Straker knew which one he wanted to interrogate himself. Most of them were hired muscle or scientists, greedy or misled. The man in charge was Bale. They had yet to determine whether he was under the aliens' mind control or had gone over to them voluntarily. Straker was inclined to

favour the former, he had that air about him. Whichever it was, he was the one Straker wanted to see.

"I think he's their voice, Alec. I think he has things to tell us."

"I think those two statements are contradictory." Alec grumbled.

The two men strode into the interrogation room. Two guards stood to attention. Bale sat on one side of the small table. He was an average looking man, balding.

He looked up, directly at Straker. "What time is it?"

"Why is that important?"

Bale stared blankly at him.

"You answer my question, I'll answer yours," Straker said calmly.

"Timing."

Alec stepped forwards. "What kind of an answer is that?"

Bale ignored him.

Straker sat down on the other side of the table. There was a long moment of silence.

"Why?" asked Straker finally. "Why breed the children?"

There was no reply.

Ed sighed. "Drug him."

One of the guards moved to the intercom and called for the waiting medics.

"What time is it?" Bale repeated.

Straker looked at his watch. "2.45. Now, why?"

Bale looked him full in the face. "This is the second time you have stolen our children. As a lesson to you, we will take your daughter."

Ed was out of the room in seconds, Alec close behind him.

"Where is Sam?" Alec asked.

"I dropped her at the studio creche before I came down. She should be safe there -"

"But with this lot you never know."

As they entered Straker's underground office of the phone was already ringing. He leaned over the desk to answer it.

"Miss Ealand, I want my daughter brought into the main building and a guard put on her. She is to be brought down here at the first sign of trouble... Good..." He frowned. "I'm not concerned with... Very well, put him through."

He looked up at Alec. "She wants me to take a call from some film people."

"Why?"

"I don't know but she's usually right." He flicked the speaker on. "Straker here, Mr... Posner?"

The voice was young. "Mr Straker? I don't like to bother you, only I know Mrs Straker's pregnant and she's... Well, she's not here."

Alec sat down with a bump, mouthing 'the baby'.

Straker's colour had drained away. He switched onto the other line.

"Miss Ealand, has my wife reported in?"

"Not that I know of, sir. I'll check with Miss Mehta."

"Do that. Mr Posner, I think there may be a problem."

He could almost hear the young man nodding. "I'll go and take a scout around. I don't know where she was due before us -"

"Good point. Can you call me back if you find anything?"

"Certainly." Posner said. "And you'll let me know if she's alright?"

He rang off. Straker got Miss Ealand to check Kate's previous appointments. Miss Mehta had not heard from her either. Then he put his head in his hands.

Alec walked round to his side. "The baby, is it a girl?"

"I don't know. We didn't want to know."

"The hospital does?"

"Yes."

"I'll find out. Do you want me to let people know what's happening?"

Straker paused a moment. "We have to. It's a direct threat."

Alec nodded and stepped out.

\* \* \*

Alec Freeman stepped out of the office and shuddered. Kate. If there was threat against the baby there was a threat against the mother.

Kate. The woman he loved, against all conscience and all friendship. Not that he would ever break his loyalty to Ed over her.

Before he knew what he was doing he was shouting orders, diverting resources, checking, looking, doing his job, supporting his boss. Looking for Kate.

Colonel Straker.

\* \* \*

"And you didn't think to call us? Despite the fact she's six months pregnant?" Straker's voice was low, icy. "No, I don't think we will be doing business again."

He slammed the phone down as Alec entered. "She never made her previous appointment."

"The one before that?"

"Came and went fine. Gives us a time frame at least. Thank God that Posner guy had more sense. What did the Mayland say?"

Alec hesitated a moment and Straker knew. "It's a girl."

Freeman nodded.

Ed groaned. "They know they can't get Sam. If they could get into the studio we'd simply pull her down here. They'd need an all-out attack. It has to be Kate."

"Then we'll find her." Alec put his hand on Ed's shoulder. "You want me to put a security team into the area?"

"Yes. People know we're looking, they can be open that they're studio security. And Alec, check there's nothing else going on. This could all be a diversion."

"What about you?"

Straker stood up. "I know I shouldn't but I'm going to look for her myself."

He went to the door and Freeman followed him. "Paul can cover things here, I'm coming with you."

Straker half turned and opened his mouth to speak, then turned away. As the door opened, the phone rang.

Alec got it. "It's Posner - and it doesn't sound like good news."

Ed took the receiver. "Hello?"

Posner's by now familiar voice answered. "Mr Straker, I have the police with me. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? How sorry?"

Ed could see Alec blanch.

Another voice replaced Posner, male but older and calmly concerned. "Mr Straker? I'm

Detective Sergeant Peterson. I have some bad news."

"Is she dead?"

Alec stiffened, moving closer to the phone.

"No sir. She's on her way to hospital at the moment. It is very serious but I'm afraid the ambulance men wouldn't give me any further details. I'm sorry not to speak you in person -"

"But the phone is faster." Straker's hand was clenched around receiver. "We have an agreement with a private hospital near the studio -"

"I think she needs to go to the nearest hospital, sir."

Ed nodded grimly. "I'm going to get my car. If you'll give my secretary the details, she'll pass them on." He hesitated. "They don't have a helicopter pad, do they?"

"I'm not sure."

"I'll take the car." He rang off. "Alec, I need all the details. Get into the emergency services' frequencies and computers -"

"That's Ford's job, not mine."

"What's yours?"

"Driving you to the hospital."

\* \* \*

Peterson walked back down to the alleyway. The ambulance containing Mrs Straker passed him as he arrived. WPC Debbie Harker was in that one.

Further down, the scene of crime people were busy, steering clear of the corpse until the pathologist arrived. Straker had not asked about the man, Wigmore. Then again, he had other things on his mind.

Peterson shook his head as he looked at the corpse. Cause of death: massive trauma. It would be a miracle if the woman survived.

\* \* \*

Straker cursed the thickening London traffic. He was on the phone to Miss Ealand. Jackson had taken over the interrogation but so far had learned nothing. Ford was searching the airwaves for more information on Kate's condition. It was not sounding good. And Wigmore was dead. Straker had totally forgotten him in the shock of the moment but now he knew the man was dead.

He would have lived if Straker had not insisted Kate take someone with her. Would Kate have lived? Straker knew in theory that all human lives were equally valuable but in practice, no one was impartial. No one.

\* \* \*

Alec Freeman kept his mind on the traffic. He needed something to keep it off what was happening. Kate was alive, that was something. But it had to be serious. Pregnant, she was more vulnerable than ever. He knew he had no right to grieve, no right to be angry or worried.

No, that was not true. She might not be his wife but she was his friend.

He spared a moment's thought for Ginny Lake. This had fouled up her romantic plans as well but at least she might get a second chance.

He and Ed barely spoke as he made his way mechanically through the traffic. Would anything have been different if she had used the car? Probably not, she would have had to park somewhere.

They reached the hospital eventually.

"Where do I go?" he asked.

Ed frowned. "I didn't ask. Casualty? If she's not there, they should be able to direct us."

Alec double parked. "If you're not out in ten minutes, I'll find a space and follow you."  
Ed sprang out, heading for the entrance.

\* \* \*

Ed walked into the crowded casualty department. Row after row of brown plastic chairs were filled with people in various states of distress and those trying to comfort them. Nurses buzzed to and fro, tending, assessing. In the distance were cubicles where white coated medics treated their current cases, whoever's number had come up this time. In the centre of the room was a huge, oval counter where the receptionists sat. Ed went up to them.

"My name is Straker. I believe my wife was just brought in."

The receptionist gave him a brief smile, too busy to display more but with good enough intentions. "Straker? S - T -?"

He spelt it for her, added Kate's name and the fact that the police may have been with her.

The woman's face clouded. "If you'll just wait a moment."

She spoke into an intercom. He stepped back but he could hear every word that she said. Not that it told him anything new, except that someone was on their way to meet him. The receptionist repeated that as if he could not have heard and he nodded, wondering which of the many doors they would come through.

In fact the doors were behind him. He turned as he felt someone approach. Two people: a middle-aged, slightly hunched man in a brown mac and a uniformed WPC with blonde hair that bubbled out from under her hat.

Ed took a step forward. "I'm Straker. You've seen my wife?"

The man reached out to shake hands. "She's in surgery at the moment. I think it's best the doctors give you the details."

Ed nodded, recognising his voice from the phone. "And Wigmore, you haven't mentioned him. I'm assuming he's dead."

The man just nodded, the WPC waiting patiently behind him.

There was a moment's silence, then the policeman added: "There is a great deal to talk about, sir, both ourselves and the doctors. If you'll come with me, the hospital have lent us somewhere more private."

Ed glanced back towards the entrance. "My friend's parking the car. He won't know where to find us."

"I can wait for him, sir." It was the first time the policewoman had spoken. She had a musical, bubbly voice to match her hair.

"Fine. I'll go where you like. I just want to see Kate as soon as possible."

"Of course." Peterson ushered him through the doors and into a lift. Odd to feel so out of control. Straker's thoughts seemed a blank, the situation unreal. He should be at SHADO HQ fighting the aliens, interrogating the prisoners, but SHADO itself seemed like some half remembered film project. He wanted Alec to arrive now. Alec gave the world a sense of solidity.

The doors opened onto a concrete corridor that could almost be under the studio if it were not for the occasional windows. He did not bother to look through them. At the end were double doors, painted a dull blue. Beyond that was a T-junction leading on to a corridor lit by fluorescent tubes and with doors on both sides.

"In here, sir."

The door was only three or four along, the same dull blue. It opened onto a small, square



room with a small, oblong window. The walls were painted cream, which helped slightly, and there were department store prints of flowers. The furniture was comfortable enough, the type upholstered with long, straight slabs of plastic foam. The covering was pea green and rough. There was a uniformed policeman seated in the corner, who jumped to his feet as his boss entered.

"It's alright, Armstrong. This is Mr Straker."

"Pleased to meet you, sir. Wish it was under different circumstances." The man was young, nervous.

Straker gave him a brief, perfunctory smile. He turned back to his guide. "Do you know when my wife will be out of surgery?"

Peterson shook his head. "Armstrong, go find that nurse."

"Yes, sir."

Ed paced to the window, looking at the sky, not seeing it.

The policeman cleared his throat. "While you're here, Mr Straker..."

"You have questions."

"Yes."

"Go ahead."

The man sounded uncomfortable. It was hardly surprising, though he must have had practice at this sort of thing. "Mr Straker, this is probably a simple but tragic mugging. But it may not be. Do you or your wife have any enemies?"

Ed sighed, part of him longing to tell the truth. "Not that I know of. The film business is pretty competitive but it's not violent. If an actor or director has a beef with studio, they go somewhere else. If it's bad enough, they hire a lawyer and sue us. They feed stories to the tabloids. That's how you get attacked in this business."

He noticed a cloud scudding across the sky, part of his mind using it to calculate the wind speed.

"You don't have any personal enemies?"

"Not really. We keep ourselves to ourselves, work at the studio. I have an ex-wife who doesn't like me but she's never been violent. Just screamed at me a few times. She's never met Kate and we divorced years ago."

"I see. We'll need to check on her. By the way, where were you, sir?"

That made Ed smile slightly. "Just routine? I was at the studio. You can ask my secretary and there are... Must be at least two dozen people who saw me, maybe more."

"That's fine, sir. We'll need to check but like you said, it's just routine. Now, this man Wigmore? Can you tell me who he was and why he was with your wife?"

Ed thought for moment. "He was studio security. I don't know much about him. Alec, my friend who's coming - he should be here by now, are you delaying him? - Alec's head of personnel. He can tell you more. As to why he was with Kate, she's pregnant. I didn't want her walking around London on her own, simple as that." He sighed. "Guess I'll never know if that was the right decision."

"That was the only reason? Nothing else?"

"Nothing. We met in the lobby as she was leaving. I insisted. That's all." He turned and sat down. "If I can't get any news, can I get a cup of coffee?"

\* \* \*

Alec was half relieved he had something to get annoyed about. Was there no hospital in the country that had adequate parking? It was bad enough at the Mayland. Here in central

London it was frantic. He had driven round and round in circles on the car park for several minutes before giving up and heading out onto the street. He had found a space just down the road and poured all the change he had into a parking meter before jogging back to the entrance of the casualty department.

Inside, he could not see Ed but there was a female police officer looking towards the doors. He strode up to her as she headed in his direction.

"You're with Mr Straker?" she asked.

"How did you know?"

"You've got the same tailor."

He made a mental note of her observation. "You're right. Where is he?"

"My boss has taken him upstairs. If you'll come with me..."

They went through swing doors and into the lift.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" he asked. "How's Kate?"

"In surgery. I can't tell you any more than that."

He nodded and lapsed into silence until the bell chimed as they reached the correct floor. His mind was still running along the same lines. Kate. Ed. The fact that Ed was married to Kate. And he wasn't. Pulling himself together he made an effort to be the Alec Freeman everyone expected.

With a half smile he said: "I'm sorry."

"Sorry, sir?" she asked.

"Under normal circumstances, I'd have asked you to dinner by now."

She grinned. "That's quick."

"That's practice."

She ushered him along the corridor. "I would have to say no - at least until this isn't an active investigation."

"And I can't ask till I know Kate's alright." They had reached the T-junction.

She smiled. "Then we'll pick up this conversation later."

She opened the door. Ed was inside, drinking coffee. He looked up hopefully as they entered, then sagged.

"You parked the car?"

"Yes. No news?"

Ed shook his head. "Nothing." He gestured at the other man in the room. "Tell the Detective Sergeant about Wigmore."

Alec sat down. "Not much to tell. Been with us ten years, good character, no family. He just happened to be free, that's why he was with Kate. I don't think anybody asked for him. I can get the studio to pull his personnel file if you want."

The policeman nodded. "That would help. Just to rule out any connection. You're head of personnel, Mr...?"

"Freeman, Alec Freeman. And yes, that's one of my jobs."

"Alec helped me set up the studio." Ed put in. "He and Kate are my second in commands. Kate's in charge of the artistic side, Alec and I handle finance, administration, that kind of thing."

The conversation went on for two more cups of coffee and three inconclusive calls to the studio. They could not say much in present company and it seemed as if there was not much to say.

After a while, Alec asked: "Ed, have you thought about Sam? What you're going to tell

her?"

Peterson pricked his ears up. "Sam?"

"My daughter." Ed explained. "She's at the studio creche and I have no idea what to tell her." He stood up and paced. "I don't know what's going on myself, how can I explain it to her?"

Alec said nothing, watching him.

In the end Ed stopped, turned to his friend. "She needs somebody with her. I can't go. Will you?"

Alec stood. "She could stay with Miss Ealand."

"No, Alec, go. Make sure she's alright, check if our people have turned anything up. If everything's quiet you can get back here. If not, send me someone else over."

Alec nodded. "Anything else?"

"No."

Freeman left. He would have preferred to stay but there was work to do. He could get back before Kate came round at least, maybe before she came out of surgery.

There was a parking ticket on the windscreen of the car. He shoved it in the glove compartment and drove off.

\* \* \*

Ed was cat napping on the sofa when news finally came. The WPC had stayed with him, her head nodding. When the door opened, Ed sprang awake.

"You're a doctor?"

The man was tall and skinny, a few years older than Straker. He was wearing expensive casuals that looked as if he had just dragged them on. "Mr Straker?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

The man took a step forward, his face composed. "Mrs Straker has just come out of surgery. You should understand, first of all, that your wife has miscarried the foetus."

Ed turned away, nodding tightly. "I guessed. I hoped - It doesn't matter. What about Kate?"

"She's in an extremely serious condition but she is currently stable. She's been taken up to intensive care. If all goes well, you'll be able to see her shortly."

\* \* \*

*The first thing she had felt was a hand around her wrist. She had registered that quite clearly in the split-second before she had been jerked off her feet and into the alley. There was a hand over her mouth before she could cry out.*

*I hope Wigmore has the sense to call this in first.*

*Her back was to the entrance, she could not see what he was doing.*

*There were three men in front of her, young and scruffy. The one in the centre had straggly hair, a scuffed leather jacket and was wielding a bicycle chain.*

*I thought those went out with the Ark. Or at least the Mods and Rockers.*

*One of the others held a baseball bat, the third something like a scaffolding pole. They were trying slightly too hard to look menacing. Still, she was unarmed and she could feel there were more of them behind her. And Wigmore, somewhere.*

*She struggled heavily to her feet, trying to forget for the moment that she was pregnant. She could not afford that vulnerability.*

*"Why?" she asked.*

*The youth with the chain shrugged. "Dunno. Ask the bloke with the money."*

*He had an accent but it could only be described as bad.*

*"Where do I find him?"*

*She heard movement behind her and glanced over her shoulder, saw nothing as she was dragged further down the alley. She bounced against the wall.*

*She heard "Ma'am." then grunts, blows, nothing.*

*And then they started on her and all she could think was: Ed and Sam will be so upset.*

\* \* \*

Alec Freeman arrived back at the studio with a face that kept most people well away. He would have stormed past Miss Ealand but she stopped him.

"How is she?"

His shoulders slumped. "She was still in surgery. It isn't looking good. When do you get off here?"

The secretary half smiled. "With all the time I'm owed? Anytime I like. It's just that he likes to see me here and not a replacement."

"Can you get to the hospital? He needs somebody with him and I've got things to do."

She nodded. "What about Sam?"

He looked away, shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know what to tell her. Ed doesn't, either."

She put her hand on his arm. "Never mind. I'll finish up here, get one of the girls to take over and I'll go and see her before I leave. I assume the Commander wants some time on his own or he wouldn't have sent you away."

Alec also managed a half smile. "He has a pretty little WPC with him, not that he'd notice at the best of times."

He carried on down to SHADO Control. "Ford, have you got anything?"

"Everything that's gone out over police radio or onto their computer. Quite difficult to hack, that. I'll have it on your desk in five minutes."

"Good. Tell Colonel Foster and Colonel Lake I want to see them and somebody get me a coffee and some sandwiches."

Ford was still looking at him. "Sir...?"

Alec sighed. "She's still in surgery, that's all I know."

"Yes, sir."

Freeman felt eyes moving away from him, back to monitors and read-outs. They all wanted to know. They all liked Colonel Straker.

The report, the food and the other senior officers arrived in his office at about the same time. Paul Foster pinched a sandwich. Ginny Lake sat on the edge of the desk. Neither of them asked.

He sipped the coffee and speed read the report, passing the pages to them as he finished them. It was thorough, of course. Ford had long since learnt to be careful and he had a definite fondness for Kate.

"Tells us nothing." Foster said, dropping the pages on the desk.

"Tells us a little." Lake countered. "And there will be more. I think we can rely on their forensics when they come in. Can we pull a few strings to make that faster?"

Alec nodded. "Do that. Anything else?"

"I know this Posner," she continued, "in my special effects capacity. I could have a quiet word."

Again, Alec nodded. "That too."

"What about me?" Foster asked. "What do I do?"

"Look after SHADO." Freeman told him.

Foster stood a little straighter for that. Alec felt an angry impulse to take that away.

"Report anything to me, immediately."

Paul deflated slightly and Alec felt sorry but it was too late now. "Okay, anything else?"

"I'll get back to you." Lake was absently heading out of the door, mind already three steps ahead.

Paul shrugged. "It's time for Moonbase to report in. I'm sure they'll have heard by now. I'll speak to them."

Alec nodded. A thought had struck him and he flipped the intercom to speak to Miss Ealand. She was not at her desk but he found her at the creche.

"How about the Bradleys?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied "she'd enjoy that. I'll call them."

Gay and Mark Bradley's family were about the only children that Sam knew well. Those at the studio creche came and went. Few of the regular staff had family, being also members of SHADO. Mostly the creche was filled with the children of actors and specialists brought in for one film. Sam went to see the Bradleys at SHADO's training school every few weeks. The eldest even looked as if he might be Sam's brother.

Alec turned away from the problems of his goddaughter - what were they going to tell her about her mother? - and back to the reports. There was little useful information in them, there had not been chance.

This would be a tricky one to work at the best of times. The involvement of the police was far too deep-rooted to simply warn them off. How they were going to get the culprits out from under their noses was a difficult question - one of many questions to be asked before they wrapped this one up.

He got on the intercom again and checked to see how Jackson was doing with the prisoners.

\* \* \*

Straker drank another cup of coffee and found the nearest gents before he was called up to Intensive Care, his police shadow coming with him at a discreet distance. He was not sure if they suspected him of some involvement in the attack on Kate or were simply trying to be helpful. He wondered if his being a studio head had anything to do with it. He hoped not, either way.

Intensive Care was two floors above, divided into two sections on either side of a small reception area.

A tall, Jamaican Sister met him. "Mr Straker? Your wife's settled in nicely. I'll take you to her in a moment. I just want you to be prepared for the way she looks."

"Wires and tubes? Bruises? I know what to expect. I just want to see her."

"If you're sure you're ready?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

She went ahead of him, through another set of double doors which opened onto a four bedded ward. He had expected a single room and was mentally starting to curse the cash strapped NHS but he could also see the logic of it. At the moment there was a nurse by each of the three occupied beds but they could assist each other or take a short break without leaving their charge unattended.

There was one other person there, a man about his own age. His clothes were good

quality but ruffled and the five o'clock shadow on his chin could not easily be mistaken for designer stubble. He looked up from the woman whose side he sat by, then returned his gaze to her.

Straker turned to the Sister. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Not at present. We'll keep you informed."

"Thank you."

Dismissed, she returned to her work.

He turned to the WPC. "You should get some rest. Shouldn't your shift have ended?"

She looked at her watch. "Soon. I'll go check-up on what's happening and if I'm being replaced. I won't leave without telling you."

He nodded, turning away.

The nurse by Kate's bedside smiled, getting to her feet. "I'll leave you together for the moment. If there's any trouble, we're all right here."

Now, for the first time, he looked at his wife. He could hardly see her, let alone recognise her, under all the medical equipment. Tubes and wires made a kind of nest around her. Beneath them her skin was purple with bruises. The readings on the monitors were steady but very weak. He sat down beside her, eyes only for her, not knowing where or how to touch her, whether to speak.

He heard footsteps behind him. His head snapped round. It was the man from the other bed.

"Er, hi. I'm Gary Walker. My wife's been here two days. Road accident."

Straker blanched. "My son was killed in a road accident."

"I'm sorry. Just...?"

"No, few years ago."

"And your wife? That is your wife?"

"Yes. She was mugged. "

"I'm sorry. That's even worse, somebody doing it on purpose. The staff are very good here. Best possible care."

"I'm sure. Couldn't save our baby -" He pulled up short, his thoughts jumping.

There was the sound of voices beyond the doors, slightly raised. A moment later Miss Ealand strode in, elegant as ever.

"Sir, Mr Freeman sent me." She turned to Kate. "Mrs Straker, don't worry. Sam's fine, the family are being taken care of."

Straker was grateful for the gesture. "Mr Walker, this is my secretary, Miss Ealand. Mr Walker's wife is also a patient."

The two shook hands. "Sorry to meet you under these circumstances, Mr Walker."

Straker intervened. "Miss Ealand, I need you to do something for me. Kate lost the baby."

"I'm so sorry, sir. You want me to make arrangements for the funeral?"

He found he was fidgeting. "That's right. I'm afraid I didn't ask what they'd done with the body."

"I'll see to it, sir." She turned on her high heel and left.

"Very efficient." Walker commented.

"Very. Been with me for years. So, what do we need to know about this place, the insider's view?"

\* \* \*

Miss Ealand was used to dealing with bureaucracy, obfuscation and idiots, so the NHS

held no terrors for her. It took her almost half an hour to find out who she should be talking to and as long again to get to see him. Perhaps it was because she was not the parent but she did wonder why there was not some desk somewhere where she could sign a form and release the body of the Strakers' child to SHADO's regular undertaker. Instead, she found herself talking to the consultant who had operated on Kate. Under his professional blandness, the man seemed surprised to see her.

"I'm not sure why you're here, Miss Ealand. The foetus has been properly disposed of according to hospital procedure."

She turned the stare that had terrified a generation of actors and directors on him.

"Disposed of? Could you clarify that?"

He pursed his lips, looking away. "You understand, we find it better for the parents to simply remove the foetus -"

"I wish you'd stop calling her that. As far as Mr and Mrs Straker are concerned, she's their daughter."

He gave a quick, tight shake of his head. "A most unhelpful attitude."

"For you or for them?"

"Psychological damage could result -"

"They've just lost their daughter and Mrs Straker is in intensive care, I should think there would be psychological damage. And I should think that damage would be rather less if they can say a proper farewell to their daughter instead of pretending she never existed."

She had gone from coolly calm to glacial, yet she did not believe this man was being deliberately difficult. He looked grey with fatigue - from working on Kate, no doubt - and his hands were fidgeting slightly on the desktop.

She sighed. "I'm sure you do have a procedure to follow but I have an employer who is grieving for his child - not to mention in agony over his wife - and he wants to show his little girl the proper respect. Now, will you release the body to me before someone does something irrevocable."

He looked at her then nodded, finally giving in. "It may already be too late though, frankly, they aren't that efficient."

He rang a bell on his desk and began to scribble a note. As a secretary came in, he told her: "Find a porter to take Miss Ealand to collect the Straker foetus I removed. Here's my authorisation and I'll complete the proper paperwork later. Miss Ealand, if you'd like to follow her."

She did, thinking what snooty cow the other secretary was. The woman gave her no more than an: "If you'll come with me." then abandoned her to the nearest male orderly without so much as a farewell.

The man, built to push trolleys and lift heavy equipment, took a look at the note and quickly decided it was illegible. Instead he got Miss Ealand to explain to him what was required. When she did, he pulled a concerned face and sucked in his breath through his teeth.

"You sure you want to do that, love? Not very nice down there."

\* \* \*

In SHADO's medical centre Alec Freeman looked down his nose at the snake-like man in front of him. "Well?"

"They know nothing." the doctor replied and Freeman thought once again that if this man's name was Doug Jackson, his own must be Vladimir Illyitch Lenin.

"You've not got a thing?"

Jackson curled his lip slightly. "I was referring to the problem with the Commander's wife. You will make sure he sees me when he returns? As to the breeding programme, we are receiving interesting information."

Freeman leaned over him. "They knew there was going to be an attack."

Jackson shook his head. "Most of them had no idea. One of them was given a message for the Commander. I do not believe he knew what it meant. Indeed, his brain function since reprogramming by our opponents is most fascinating. I look forward to studying him in more detail."

Freeman winced, images of dissection running through his head. "Not till Commander Straker gives the go-ahead."

"Then can I start on the mothers?"

"No way, they've been through enough."

"But Colonel -"

"No. Go work on what you've got. I want a formal report by the morning. You'll get more orders after that."

The Colonel walked away, shoulders slumped. Nothing seemed to be leading anywhere.

\* \* \*

Miss Ealand and the porter made their way down dingy, concrete backstairs to the lowest levels of the hospital. The man led her up to a side door set by yet another pair of double doors, these ones firmly locked.

"Should be somebody in here, love." He pushed the door open, revealing a youth in hospital overalls sipping a cup of coffee. "Hi, Wayne."

"Hi Mike. What you doing down here?" Looking over Mike's shoulder, the youth noticed Miss Ealand and got to his feet. "Mike?"

The porter chuckled. "Don't worry, she doesn't work here. Have you had a... what d'they call them, miscarried foetus brought down here in the last few hours?"

"Oh, yeah. Hate those." He glanced at Miss Ealand once more. "You're not..?"

She shook her head. "My employer's wife. She's in intensive care."

"Sorry to hear that. You want to see the body? Hang on a minute, I'll get my keys."

A moment later the two men brought her into the mortuary proper: a cold, clinical room with metal drawers along one wall. Wayne opened one up. Inside was the tiny, perfect body of a baby girl. The men stepped back and Miss Ealand stepped forwards, lifting the lifeless child into her arms.

"I'm godmother to her sister, you know." she said absently. "Sam will never see her. She doesn't know that yet. Poor thing. Poor, poor thing. It shouldn't have happened."

She turned to her helpers. "Can I take her with me? I was going to call the undertaker's but - but I'd rather take her myself."

Mike and Wayne looked at each other.

"I guess." Wayne said. "But there's a lot of paperwork."

"I'm a secretary." she said, rocking the baby gently. "That isn't a problem."

\* \* \*

It seemed clear that the attack on Kate was not a diversion to cover any other alien project. Nevertheless, Alec Freeman stayed longer at SHADO Control than he had intended, reading and re-reading reports. Nothing doing on that front and it looked as if the police already had some leads on the young thugs who had carried out the attack. He was sorely tempted to get out there and beat seven bells out of them but Kate and Ed would not thank



him for knocking a hole in SHADO's cover.

He wanted to be with Kate, even more than he wanted to be with Ed. Which made him delay his return to the hospital. He had no business there.

He called the Bradley's to make sure Sam was alright. She was fine, playing in the sand pit.

Ginny called. "Posner doesn't know anything else. He's very upset, thinks he should have gone out earlier. I tried to tell him it wouldn't have done any good."

"Did you check the alley?" he asked.

"Police all over it. They won't have missed anything. The aliens may have been behind it but it was humans who did it."

"Okay Ginny, leave that and get home."

"I can stay on if you like."

"No, get in early if you can. You can relieve Paul."

"You're off to the hospital? Look after yourself."

She rang off, leaving him wondering if she suspected something. No, he had always been too careful.

The phone rang again. It was Miss Ealand.

"Sir, I'm in the car. I'm not sure if I've done the right thing."

"You usually do. What's up? Did Ed send you on an errand?"

"Yes, sir, or I'd have stayed with him. But I think I may have exceeded my authority."

"I know you wouldn't leave without him telling you to. Tell me what happened."

He heard her take a deep breath. "He sent me for the baby. I ran into trouble, I won't go into details but - well, I didn't feel I could leave her there. Not even to wait for the undertakers. I've got her here in the car with me, I'm taking her there myself. I haven't told Mr Straker. I hope I've done the right thing."

Alec had to think about that one, he was not used to being stumped by Miss Ealand. "It's fine. You do that, get everything sorted out. Stay with her if you feel the need to. I'm off back to the hospital. I'll tell Ed what you've done."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry to bother you."

"That's alright."

He rang off. This was turning into some kind of surreal Greek tragedy.

Freeman got his things together to go. He had not asked if Ginny had had time to speak to Keith. He guessed she had not. That was SHADO for you.

\* \* \*

Everything was quiet on the ward and the men, frustrated at their inability to think of anything new, anything at all to say to their wives had given themselves a moment's space.

"If you keep taking breaks it's easier." Walker advised. "Things pop into your head but if you just sit there staring at her, there's nothing. Just a blank. Can't think of a single thing to say."

Ed and Gary were at a side table playing blackjack, pontoon as Gary called it, because Walker did not know the rules for poker and did not currently have the patience to learn. Some previous visitor had left the pack of cards. Gary had already checked the deck was complete, having played plenty of games of patience.

"Solitaire." Ed said.

"You don't even play that with cards. We've got a lovely Solitaire set at home that Pam's cousin gave us."

After every couple of hands they would get up and check on their wives. Ed kept Kate informed of the progress of the game. It was something to talk about. He guessed that the sound of his voice would mean more to her now than what the words were. Or perhaps talking about something so inconsequential would help. He really did not know.

"I've won the last three hands, maybe eighty per cent overall. You think I should ease up on him? If I lose badly now, he's going to know. It's not like we're playing for money."

Every so often one or both of them would go over to the third occupied bed. The old lady lying there had been found after a fall.

"She's got family," the nurse had told them "but nobody comes. We look after you, don't we Mrs Moorcock?"

Like Kate and Pam, Mrs Moorcock did not stir.

"Another hand?" Gary asked. "He'll be back in a moment, Kate."

"Yes, I will." Ed moved back to the table and looked at Gary. "Truthfully, how long are you prepared to wait?"

"Forever, I suppose."

"I'm not sure I can."

"Takes it out of you, doesn't it?"

Ed nodded vehemently. "Oh yeah. I have done this before, for my son but... Normally it's someone else waiting for me."

"Really?"

Ed looked around. "Not quite like this. But..." There was no way he could explain without breaking cover.

But Gary was nodding. "You were in the papers a few months ago, weren't you? Funny, I only just thought about that. Got locked up in Marinia or something. That must have been hard on Kate."

Ed flexed his shoulders unconsciously, his body remembering his injuries as his mind tried to forget. "And I've done other dumb things. Now our little girl -" that hurt, it ought to be girls "- is old enough to ask questions."

He sighed. "My turn to deal."

\* \* \*

Sam Straker sat in the sand pit making castles. "Auntie Gay?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Is Daddy in trouble again?"

Gay Bradley frowned and put down her mug of tea. "No, dear. Whatever gave you that idea?"

Sam patted down the top of her sandcastle to make it neat. "Because everybody's acting like he is."

Gay took a deep breath. "You carry on with that, I just have to go and see about something. Mark! "

\* \* \*

Alec was once again attempting to park and wondering if he could avoid another ticket when Control patched through the call from Gay Bradley.

"So I was wondering what to tell her?" she concluded.

Alec ran a hand through his hair. "Can you keep her busy for the moment? I'll talk to Ed about it."

"Sure, I just thought I ought to say something. I can probably keep her distracted till the

morning if I need to."

"Thanks, Gay." He rang off, wondering quite when SHADO had turned from a paramilitary organisation into a support network. Probably when they had let women in, about a week after they started.

The car behind was honking at him. He found a space, parked and walked the couple of hundred yards to the gate and reception beyond. He was pleased to see that there were, as yet, no journalists present. He would have thought they would have got onto such a high-profile story but perhaps SHADO was in luck.

It was still the same woman on duty at the desk. He wondered if she never went off duty, had been off and come back or was simply working a double shift.

"Me again." he smiled. "Is Mr Straker -"

"I believe he's with his wife in intensive care. I'm not sure they'll let you in but if you go with the police..."

A man tapped Alec on the shoulder, a tall man and rather gaunt. "Mr Freeman? From the studio? I'm Detective Inspector Carson."

Alec raised an eyebrow, though he had already heard the man's name via SHADO's intercepts. "We got upgraded? Glad to hear it."

The policeman's tone was cold. "You're not satisfied, Mr Freeman?"

Alec let out a slow breath. "Sorry, long day. I just want to see Ed, see what he needs and hopefully get some good news. If you want to ask me any questions..."

"Not at the moment, thank you. We have our own lines of inquiry."

Alec gave him a sideways glance as they walked to the lift. "Somebody told you to get your finger out because we're film people and they don't want bad publicity."

"Something like that, yes."

Freeman sighed. "We're just human, honest. We're not asking for special treatment."

*Believe me, you'd know about it if we were.*

The policeman led the way to the intensive care unit, he had obviously been there before. The nurse greeted him by name.

"If you're here to see Mrs Straker, she's still out cold. You won't be able to question her for quite some time, if at all."

"At all?" Alec took a step forward.

"This gentleman's a friend of the family." the inspector said.

Flustered, she tried to cover her mistake. "I only meant she won't be conscious for a while. She's stable."

*But you're not sure she'll stay that way, Alec thought. I want her back. For Ed, I mean.*

There was a short but lively discussion about whether or not he could go into the ward but her mistake gave him leverage and Carson backed him up.

"You can introduce me. That's all I'm here for all, really."

"Fine. Ed'll be pleased to meet you - far as he can be under the circumstances."

Alec was surprised to find Ed playing cards with another man. They each made the introductions.

"I'll leave you to it." Gary said. "I should be with Pam."

Ed nodded and walked over to Kate, Alec and Carson following behind. "This is my wife, Inspector. This is what they did to her, not to mention killing one of my people. And if you ever catch who did it, you'd better keep me away from them."

Carson glanced awkwardly at figure on the bed. "We have some good leads, Mr Straker. I

can't exactly say there's honour among thieves but some of the old time villains, certainly, think this is below the belt. We're getting a response."

"I wish I could say the same." Ed sighed. "If you think a reward will help, speak to Alec. The studio will arrange it."

"I'll think about that. If you'll excuse me, I've got work to do."

Ed nodded, dismissing him, and the inspector left.

Alec moved closer to the bed. It was the first chance he had had to see her. She looked like one big bruise tied together with wires and plastic tubes.

"Kate? It is me, Alec. I... We..."

Ed put a hand on his shoulder. "I don't know what to say, either."

They both stood in silence for a moment, then Ed turned away. "Tell me, what's Henderson doing?"

Alec shrugged. "I know he's heard but it seems even he has enough decency not to dump on you at a time like this. I should think he'll be keeping his head down."

Ed snorted. "Makes a change. And the press?"

"Not been a problem so far."

"I thought everyone would know by now."

Alec shuffled his feet. "Sam -"

"What?"

"She's been asking questions." He repeated the content of Gay's phonecall.

Ed nodded and began to pace. After a moment he stopped and turned to Freeman. "Alec, will you bring her here?"

"Are you sure?"

"No but... I know this is going to distress her but if anything..." He dropped his voice. "I don't want her mother to just disappear out of her life. I hope nothing... I'd rather be wrong this way than the other." He looked at his watch. "It's nearly bedtime. I guess the morning will do unless there's a crisis."

"Kate could be conscious by then."

"She could." Ed stroked his wife's hand. "Have you heard from Miss Ealand? I sent her -"

"I know. She's getting things sorted."

"Good."

Alec glanced across at Gary. "You fancy dealing me in for a hand of cards?"

Ed shook his head. "One of us should be at the studio."

"It's quiet and Paul and Ginny have got things covered. They are grown-ups now."

"I guess. I'm just wondering what else is going to happen."

Alec put a hand on each shoulder and turned Ed to face him. "Kate's going to get well and you're going to nurse her till she's better and that's all that's going to happen."

"Yeah, right."

"Yes, I am."

Ed looked at him and chuckled. "You don't change. You know that WPC who was in here earlier? She was asking about you and I don't think it was routine inquiries."

Alec smiled wolfishly, playing the part everyone expected him to play. "I'm going to track her down when I have a moment. So what about those cards?"

Ed looked at his watch. "I'll give you half an hour. And go easy on Gary, he's a nice guy. Hey, Gary, ready for another game?"

\* \* \*

It was more like an hour later that Ed insisted Alec go and Alec insisted that Ed get some food down him first.

"Kate will go wild if she finds you haven't been taking care of yourself. Won't you, Kate?"

Ed saw the logic in that despite Alec's threats to knock some sense into him.

"What about you?" Alec asked Gary. "Fancy a bite?"

"I do but I'll go later. Now there are two of us we can cover for each other."

Ed nodded. "I won't be long."

The nearest place open was the WRVS coffee stall in the main building. They were just having a new batch of sandwiches delivered for the night shift so the two men had their pick of the fillings. Ed ate tuna, Alec had cheese and pickle, both washed down by plenty of coffee.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

"No, really. It's not as as if I'm on my own. I've got Gary and the nurses."

Alec took a swig of his coffee. "They don't know you."

Ed shrugged. "I'll be fine."

Alec took Ed back up to the ward and brought Gary down.

He laughed. "You don't have to mother me too."

Alec smiled. "Force of habit. And ulterior motive. I know you've got plenty on your mind but Ed - let's just say he tends to bottle things up. If I give you my phone number, will you call me if anything happens?"

"No problem."

\* \* \*

Odd how the ward seemed so empty now that Alec and Gary had left. It was not, of course. There were the three patients and their attending nurses but they were not company for Ed. Not even Kate. He could see her but he could not feel her presence and he had long ago run-out of anything to say to her, just repeating cliches that could have come out of the worst of Harlington-Straker's melodramas.

He did not look up as the doors opened, only when Gary greeted him.

"Alec gone?" he asked.

"Once he got me fed, yes. Did you say he's head of personnel? Wish ours was that good."

"I should have asked him for a chess set." Ed said. "Do you play chess? It would make a change from cards."

Gary shrugged. "You can teach me poker if you like and he'll be back in the morning. I'm surprised they let him in so freely."

Ed chuckled. "He's hard to stop. Another game?"

"In a minute. I'll tell Pam I'm back first."

"I'll come with you. I'll take whatever exercise I can get."

So they walked over to the other bed. "Hi Pam, I'm back. Ed's here too."

"Hi, Pam."

"We're going to play some more cards if that's alright. I'll be just over there. Unless you'd like to wake up first? No? Well, I'll be back in a few minutes."

Ed shook his head as they walked away. "You're so much better at that than I am. But then, I never know what to say to people who are awake."

Gary grinned. "Rubbish."

"No, truly. Alec does it for me. And Kate."

"Then you ought to get some practice in and stop fleecing me at cards." Gary sat down at

the table.

Ed sat down opposite him. "Oh, Alec's better at that too."

"I'd noticed."

They were half way through a hand when Ed's head shot up. Amongst all the noise of the ward he had heard one sound turned to a flat, continuous tone. As he jumped to his feet a siren sounded. He was halfway towards Kate when he realised the nurses were going the other way, towards Pam.

Gary was still at the table. "Whaa-at?"

He knocked the chair over as he blundered towards his wife. One of the nurses was wheeling up a crash cart and a young doctor was running into the ward, doors swinging behind him.

"Pam!" Gary exclaimed, trying to get hold of her.

Ed grabbed him, pulling him out of the way. "Let them work. It's best for her."

Frantic activity continued around the bed but Ed could see it was doing no good. It seemed that Gary also saw. He broke into agonised sobs. Silently, Ed put an arm around him.

After a few seemingly endless minutes, the tension dropped away suddenly. It was too late. The small crowd of medics broke up, each going back to their jobs. Pam's own nurse began to pack away the equipment.

The doctor came up to them. "I'm sorry."

Shamefaced, he turned away.

*Not got used to it yet*, Ed thought. *Good.*

Gary sagged in his arms. "Is that it?"

"I'm afraid so."

A nurse came up to help Gary, deal with Pam's things, complete the business of death. As Walker was led away, Ed slipped him his card.

"You need anything, that will get Miss Ealand. She can help or she can usually find me. Let me know when the funeral is."

Gary nodded. "Funeral. I've never arranged one."

"She can help with that too."

Again he nodded. He turned to the door, stopped and walked back to Pam's bed. He leaned over and kissed her gently.

Straker expected him to leave then but instead he turned and walked up to Kate. "Don't you do that."

Then he went.

Ed sat back by Kate's bed, took her hand and gently stroked it. For a long time he was silent. When the words came, they came in torrents.

"I love you." he said. "I love you. I love you. I love you. I don't want you to go. You're everything to me. More than Alec or the studio or even Sam. You know I can't change my life - believe me I want to, now more than ever. You know how important it is. How important it is to me. I can't do it without you, I'll shrivel up and die. I need you, Kate, I need you. I can't let you die."

Momentarily he was distracted as a nurse handed him a cup of coffee. He nodded his thanks, wanting her to leave them alone. He knew he was not properly in control of himself, not fit to be seen by people. He just wanted to be with Kate.

The nurse withdrew.

On and on he talked, hour after hour until he was hoarse. Eventually sleep dropped heavy

on him and his head fell onto his chest.

\* \* \*

Nurse Jenkins hurried out to the young doctor. "I've done it but I'm not sure it's a good idea. You should have got his consent."

The doctor shook his head. "He wouldn't have given it and he needs something. I know those iceberg types, when they crack they fall to pieces. Look at him. Is that the man who came in here?"

She had to agree. "Mrs Walker's death has affected him."

"And in the morning we may be able to give him good news that will calm him down."

Jenkins looked him in the face. "What if we can't?"

"Then we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

\* \* \*

Ford jumped up from his chair, grabbed a print-out and headed for Colonel Foster's office. As he did so, he almost bumped into Colonel Freeman.

"Watch out, Keith. Have you got something?"

"A list of names, sir. We've got a window, the police don't have enough to pick them up yet."

A feral grin crossed Alec's face. "But we do. Leave it with me. And shouldn't you have gone home by now?"

Keith pulled back a fraction. "Shouldn't you, sir?"

Freeman chuckled. "Go on, get out of here. We'll need you tomorrow."

"What for, sir?"

"Who am I, Gypsy Rose? I don't know. Now get going."

Freeman banged on the door of Foster's office and barged in. Ford turned and headed for the locker room.

\* \* \*

An hour later a dazed young man was being presented to Doctor Jackson for interrogation. Three more were arriving in SHADO's holding cells and another five were on their way in.

"Do what you like with them." Alec told Jackson. "Just so long as we can drop them back out there if the police get the evidence."

"We don't deal with them internally?" the psychiatrist murmured.

"Security breach, sadly. And I don't want to bother the Commander."

\* \* \*

Ed stirred. The nurses were working around Kate.

"What's going on?" He could hear his voice was slurred.

"It's alright, Mr Straker."

He roused himself. They were removing the ventilated tube from Kate's throat.

"What's going on? What're you doing?" Surely they would tell him if she had died.

"It's all right. She's breathing on her own. She's getting better."

Satisfied, he returned to sleep.

\* \* \*

*Kate looked around. The landscape seemed somehow unreal, blurred slightly and the colours indistinct. Not heaven or hell or any place she knew. The only feature that had any kind of solidity was the road which went onwards to the horizon in both directions - yet even that seemed to be both straight and winding at the same time.*

*There was something heavy in her arms. No, someone. She looked down at her baby and smiled.*

*"I wasn't expecting you yet."*

*The baby gurgled happily.*

*There were a group of people on the road. Several groups, most of which ignored her. Two people, however, came towards her. Wigmore and a woman that she did not know, yet she seemed to have some kind of connection to her. She could not, yet, figure that one out.*

*"Wigmore?" Kate asked.*

*He nodded. "Ma'am. I'm afraid you're in the wrong place, ma'am."*

*She looked around again. "Tell me about it. Why I am I here? Or why shouldn't I be?"*

*The other woman smiled sadly. "I'm afraid my Gary drew the short straw this time. Your husband's the one who got lucky."*

*"Makes a change."*

*"Yes, doesn't it?" said Wigmore. "But I'm afraid we came to do more than say goodbye. You know you have to go back alone?"*

*Kate sighed. The baby was so warm and soft in her arms. She had yet to suckle her. She knew she never would. She stroked her hair a moment longer, kissed her then handed her over to the other woman.*

*Pam smiled. "Don't worry, I'll take care of her till you come for her."*

*Unable to speak, Kate took one last look at her baby then turned and walked away.*

*\* \* \**

Alec Freeman kipped in his office, dreamed about being married to the woman he loved and woke up shaking. He called the hospital to find out how she and her husband were. He asked for Ed but instead got one of the doctors.

"Mr Freeman? Mr Straker's asleep and I'm afraid he may feel a little groggy when he wakes up."

"Groggy? Ed? Not likely." *That's my prerogative* he thought.

"Well, you see he had rather a shock last night and I'm afraid I slipped him a sedative."

Alec's heart thumped. "What's happened to Kate?"

"She's improving. I'm afraid it was the other lady who died."

Alec took a long, slow breath. "I'm sorry to hear that." *But at least it's not Kate. Poor Gary.* "Is it possible to speak to Ed? He'll probably wake up sooner than you think."

A nurse was sent to fetch Straker and he arrived a few moments later, sounding slurred and hoarse.

"Alec? Somebody drugged me."

"I know and I bet you deserved it. How are you? How's she?"

"I feel lousy. Kate looks better. I think she's getting stronger. They told you she's breathing for herself?"

"No, that's great. Look, I'm coming over. Do you want me to pick up Sam?"

Ed hesitated a moment. "I should be there for her myself but Kate might come round soon. Maybe. I don't know."

"You sound like you need more sleep."

"No, I need less." Straker snapped. "Sorry. Bad head. Can you go see her? Tell her the truth, as far as she can understand it and if she wants to come, bring her."

Alec took a swift shower, changed and grabbed a bite to eat as he headed over to the Bradley's place. Their three children were already out playing in the garden. One could pass



for Sam's cousin, at the very least. He always wondered if either of the other two were biologically his - one was distinctly chunky in build - but he had decided long ago that he would never ask that question out loud. It would not be fair to anyone. Sam was playing with one of the Uncle Mark's toy aeroplanes. Alec took her inside and sat her on his knee.

She looked up at him. "What's happened to Daddy, Uncle Alec?"

"It's not Daddy this time, Princess. Mummy's the one who's not very well. Some bad men hit her and she got hurt."

"Is she at the Mayland?"

"No, she isn't. She's in London." He stroked her soft hair. "Do you want to go and see her?"

"Of course."

He had borrowed Kate's car, just in case, and he fixed Sam into her safety seat. She chatted happily on their way into town.

"She'll be alright. Daddy always is, Mummy told me."

*I wish*, he thought.

She ran to her father when she saw him. Ed looked rough but no rougher than Alec expected. His smile was unforced.

"Hi, honey. You come to see Mommy? She's asleep but you can take a look, if you're quiet."

"Of course I'll be quiet if she's sleeping." Sam trotted along beside him, craning her head to look around the ward. "Lots of machines, Daddy."

"Lots, to make people better."

"You can do that with a machine?"

He lifted her onto the chair beside her mother's bed.

"Good morning, mummy. Oh, I'm supposed to be quiet."

"That's okay." Ed told her. "You can talk if you like."

He smiled and ruffled her hair.

Sam's grin turned to a frown. "Oh dear, I woke her."

Ed's head snapped round. Kate's eyes were fluttering open. For a moment she looked confused. Then she made eye contact with her husband.

"Hi, sweetheart." he said.

She smiled and went back to sleep.

"Is she better now?" Sam asked.

"She's getting better."

Nurses were hurrying over to check on Kate. The family moved back a little to let them do their work.

Sam looked up at her father. "What about the baby?"

He sighed. "There isn't going to be one. She went away."

She hugged him. "You're sad."

"Yes, I am. But when Mommy gets better I'll be happy."

She nodded. "Me too."

He lifted her into his arms. "You should go to creche. Uncle Alec will take you."

"Uncle Alec needs a quick word with Daddy," Freeman told him.

Ed carried her out to the nurses desk. "Could you look after my daughter for a moment?"

"Certainly." The nurse smiled at the little girl. "What's your name, dear?"

Ed and Alec went back into a corner of the ward, eyes on Kate all the time. Freeman

brought him up to date with the situation both in terms of the attackers and what Miss Ealand had done.

Ed nodded. "Carry on. And send me a change of clothes. I could use one. Oh, and if Gary calls, help him out."

Alec took Sam back to the studio. Ed remembered to eat breakfast and changed when the clothes arrived.

Late that afternoon Kate came round once more.

"Hi." she croaked.

"Hi. How do you feel?"

"Lousy. I don't - oh no, the baby."

He squeezed her hand. "She died. I'm sorry. Miss Ealand's arranging her funeral."

Her eyes rolled back and he thought she was going to pass out once more but she focused on his face again and recited:

"If I should die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take."

"An epitaph?" he asked.

"Seems appropriate."

He nodded. "We never settled on a name."

"You have one?"

"Would you mind if we called her Pamela?"

She smiled slightly. "Not at all. Going to tell me why?"

"Later. For the moment, you just concentrate on you."

\* \* \*

Ed Straker tried to slip away from Pam Walker's funeral but Gary sought him out at the doorway of the church. "Thanks for the help."

Ed shrugged. "That was Miss Ealand."

Gary smiled slightly. "How's Kate?"

"Getting stronger. You should come and meet her some time."

"I'd like that."

They looked at each other, out of words. Then Gary was called away.