

NOBODY IS PERFECT - a SHADO - UFO Story

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PART 1

Ed Straker stared at the screen. The beeps had disappeared and the silence of the personnel in the operations room told its own tale - the UFO had disappeared, probably hit by Sky1, but not before hitting Sky 1 and either incapacitating it or annihilating it. The jet which the UFO had attacked originally had been destroyed only seconds before the final battle, and the 135 people on board would have perished together with the crew.

Lieutenant Ford kept saying "Sky 1, come in please. Sky 1, come in please." As if his words could somehow undo what happened, could somehow bring the pilot back to life.

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Straker turned around stiffly and walked into his office without saying a word. Alec followed him in and headed for the liquor cabinet. Ed Straker observed him empty the glass in one go and fill it up again. For a moment he was envious - at least Alec had something to fall back on, even if drinking was definitely a cop-out in Ed's eyes. Only a coward needs a drink, because he doesn't have the courage to face up to his actions, or the consequences of his actions, or his life in general.

But then what did he, Ed Straker, have? Dedication to his work? Hardly satisfactory at the best of times, all the near misses with fate, all the deaths he couldn't prevent, all the failures. The aliens were winning, and there was nothing he could do about it. Even if SHADO won each and every individual battle, the aliens would still win, because they kept on coming and coming and coming - and nobody on Earth had the knowledge to even guess where they came from, so there was no way to stop them. This was a war without an ending, an eternal war, that would wage until Earth technology became advanced enough to meet the aliens on their own ground, or half way.

When would that be? In a 100 years? 1000? Or 50 - whatever, Ed Straker and the current SHADO personnel wouldn't be there to see it. It was hopeless, entirely hopeless. Each day they had to face another onslaught of alien ships, and each destruction of one only meant another one was on its way, heading for Earth, waiting to pounce.

"Sorry Ed. Did you want something? The usual?"

Ed stared at Alec. The usual? What was he talking about?

"A coffee?"

"Oh yes, Alec, thank you" he said, wondering how come his thoughts had been so far away that he hadn't understood what Alec meant.

The intercom crackled and said "Wreckage of Sky 1 found, Commander, grid reference 325, Sky 2 is over-flying the area. Shall I send the mobiles?"

"Yes lieutenant. Any sign of the wreckage of the UFO?"

"No Commander, nor of the Jet."

* * *

"That's it then" Alec said, "unless he was able to get out before the crash."

"Impossible Alec, they were too high up, and both explosions occurred almost simultaneously. Which means our pilot was still there shooting at the UFO when both exploded."

"One should never give up hope"

Ed Straker shrugged but didn't say anything. He drank his coffee while staring at Alec's glass. Would drinking that stuff really bring oblivion? Only the problems wouldn't go away, surely, they would still be there, and one would have a hangover to go with it. It seemed so senseless - but then right now chasing UFOs seemed pretty senseless to him too.

* * *

The phone went and Ed picked it up. "Yes Miss Ealand?"

"Your cousin is on the line Sir."

"Tell him I'm not in."

"He says it's urgent Sir."

"OK, put him through."

"Hi Ed, how is tricks at Harlington-Straker?" Ed's cousin said.

"All is fine Jimmy, how are you?"

"I'm fine, but my mother is not. She's not getting any better, and she asked for you this morning. She would like to see you, while she can still... well, enjoy your company. The doctor says that in a few weeks time it will be too late. She's slipping away fast Ed, and I hoped... well, could you come?"

"Of course Jimmy. Is she still in the Queen Elizabeth hospital?"

"Yes. Visiting hours are from 5 to 7 p.m."

Ed looked at his watch. 4 p.m. "I'll try to come today"

"Thanks Ed." and Jimmy rang off.

* * *

"Your aunt?" Alec asked.

"Yes."

"She has been ill for a long time, hasn't she?"

"Two years ago the doctors gave her 6 months to live." Ed smiled. "She was determined to show them they were wrong."

"Determination must be a family trait."

Ed stared at Alec. Was it a family trait? In the end, what had his aunt gained from outliving the doctor's estimate of her life expectancy? Two years of pain, rather than 6 months?

* * *

Lieutenant Ford came in and said "The preliminary computer report, Commander."

Ed knew by the expression on Ford's face that something was wrong. He looked at the computer printout for quite some time, then said "Thank you, lieutenant."

He shoved the report over to Alec, with a gesture of disgust.

Alec read it and said "If only we had known this..."

"I should have noticed the UFO's course was erratic, Alec. Actually, I did notice it, but its implication wasn't clear to me - until I read this."

"You weren't to know."

"I should have Alec, I should have. I'm going to see my aunt."

Ed stood up and left the office, nodding to the people he encountered on the way like an automaton, without really seeing them. The UFO had been damaged by the interceptors after

all then, he thought. And it had exploded of its own accord, without the help of Sky One's fire. Sky One had missed the target altogether, but had been so close to the UFO that it had blown up with it. And he, Ed Straker, Commander of SHADO, had let it happen. He had noticed the UFO's erratic course, and had failed to draw the right conclusion.

* * *

He looked around him, and wondered for a moment where he was and what he was doing here. Then he recognised the hospital building, so he duly parked his car, went across the road to the flower shop, and went up to see his aunt.

"Eddie my boy, it is good to see you. I've missed you so. You should really come and see your old aunt a bit more often."

Ed said a few friendly words, regretting he had come - he wasn't in the mood for a cheerful conversation.

"Good to see you aunt Ruth" he said, after which he shook Jimmy's hand.

"It seems like last year that you two boys were playing together. And it seems like only yesterday that the two of you got married. And got divorced. What is the world coming to these days, all these divorces, it shouldn't be allowed. In my day people lived with their mistakes."

"Mum, the times have changed," Jimmy said.

"Oh is that your excuse for marrying again? And again? At least Eddie here had the good sense to remain single."

"I'm happily married mum, you know that."

"Yeah, but for how long? You're not the marrying type, Jimmy, just as Eddie isn't. You're both obsessed with work, and neither of you have ever once considered the needs of a woman. Do you know what it's like to sit home day after day, feeling your husband slip away from you, and not being able to do anything about it? It's so tragic, so very, very tragic. Another woman one can fight, but how can one fight a job? Impossible. I should know."

Neither of the men spoke and Ruth continued "Jimmy, make more time for your wife, don't make her come second to your job each and every time. Because if you do, she too will leave you, and you will be back where you started.

"And you too Ed, should you ever marry again, make time for your partner, because your job isn't worth it in the end. Believe me. Your uncle Roger said so on his death bed. He regretted having given his entire life to his ambition, he regretted having lived only for his work. Because in the end it had all been futile, he said. Because they lost the war anyway. The nation won, but the individuals lost."

Ed wondered how come his aunt's conversation fitted in so closely with his own thoughts earlier. Uncle Roger had been in the army, and had died as the result of the war. They had brought him home severely wounded and uncle Roger had died only three days later. Ed wasn't aware that uncle Roger had even been conscious at the end, but then he must have been, or aunt Ruth wouldn't say what she just said.

"Mary came to see me two days ago." Aunt Ruth said, and Ed stared at her. Mary?

"Yes Ed, your Mary. Her son had been brought into the hospital, he had broken his arm falling off a swing. She brought him over here to say hello. He looks very much like Johnny, don't you think?"

Ed mumbled something incomprehensible and she said "What is that, Eddie?"

"I'm sorry, aunt Ruth, I have to go, I have a meeting later."

He said his goodbyes as well as he could, trying to maintain his usual cool exterior, trying

not to show how sick he felt.

In the car he groped for his cigarettes, but found he had run out. He stepped on the gas and his tyres screeched as he turned out of the hospital parking lot. He looked at the shops he passed, but couldn't see a single one that sold cigarettes, and hell, he wanted one. He stopped at a pub and walked in there.

He didn't have enough change for the cigarette machine and walked over to the bar.

"What will you be having Sir?" the barkeeper said in a friendly manner.

"A coffee" Ed said.

"I'm sorry, the machine is broken. These repair men... impossible to get them to come out quickly."

"Could you change a fiver?" Ed asked "I'm right out of cigarettes."

"Sure."

Ed went and got a packet of cigarettes and sat down at the bar. After lighting up a cigarette and inhaling deeply, he felt slightly better.

The bar tender had gone in the back and Ed looked around. It looked like a very friendly place, and the group of four men sitting at one of the tables looked at him in what seemed like an expectant manner. Why were they looking at him that way? Could they sense the turmoil in his mind? Or was it because he was a stranger? Maybe they didn't like strangers in their pub.

* * *

"Welcome to our little pub" one of the men said, and suddenly they were all talking again, and one of them drew a chair out from under another table and said "You look like you could do with a drink, son. Come and join us." He turned towards the bar and bellowed "George, another round please."

Ed sat down at the table and the man who had pulled up a chair for him said "My name is Robert" and stuck out his hand.

"I'm Ed."

They shook hands. Robert said "Meet Ed, my friends" and introduced the other people sitting around the table.

The barman came over and put a whisky in front of all the people sitting there. Ed stared at it, and opened his mouth to say he didn't drink.

"A toast, my friends, to friendship. Come on, son, raise your glass."

Ed picked it up hesitantly and looked as each person around the table downed his drink in one go.

"Don't you want to drink with us?" Robert said, sounding hurt, and Ed made up his mind and did as the others had done - emptying his glass in one go, wondering how to get out of here without being impolite.

"They have got you now" a soft voice behind him said. He looked around and saw a dark, Spanish-looking beauty standing there.

He frowned - what did she mean?

The beauty pulled up a chair and sat down next to him. "It's a game they play, and it seems to work every time. A stranger comes in, they offer him a drink, then the stranger has to offer a round in return, and their circle of friends grows each day. People come back to this place because here we're all friends, and there are no strangers."

"Whose round is it now?" Robert asked, and judging by the sudden silence and the looks being thrown at him, everybody considered it was his turn.

"I guess it's my turn" Ed said hesitantly and Robert called out "George, our new friend

just offered us a drink."

After what seemed like only seconds later, George deposited whiskeys in front of the men, only this time the portions seemed larger. Ed frowned, and the beauty by his side said "It's a double right enough. The price a newcomer has to pay. You don't mind, do you?"

"Normally I don't drink."

Her laughter rang out as silver bells "Nothing is normal in this world, not any more. Or don't you ever get tax forms? We all just got ours, and that's what we are celebrating. How our wonderful government is going to decide what to do with the money they plan to steal from us this time."

Ed smiled and Robert said "You're not with the Inland Revenue, are you, son? Because if you are, we're going to chuck you right out of here."

"I'm not with the Inland Revenue."

"Good. We really should put up a notice at the entrance, 'Inland Revenue personnel not welcome'. Right guys, a toast. What shall we toast to?"

"The Inland Revenue" a couple of voices said

"The Inland Revenue it is then."

Ed raised his glass with the rest of the group, and downed his drink in one go the way they all did - all but the beauty by his side.

"So, why aren't you drinking?" Ed asked.

"Ach, here women aren't expected to drink the heavy stuff."

"Men are men, and women are women" one guy said, and everybody started to laugh, as Ed did, even though he couldn't see how this was in any way funny.

Was he getting drunk, Ed wondered. Well, he wasn't going to drink any more, he wasn't used to drinking and keeping up with the guys here would prove to be an impossible task - even if he wanted to keep up with them, which he didn't. He liked the easy atmosphere though, the inconsequential talk. He knew that the two drinks had loosened him up some, and he liked the way that felt. He was having a good time for a change, and the group around the table obviously didn't think he was 'different' - the way SHADO personnel did. And he badly wanted to be normal, at least tonight - he badly wanted to keep away from his thoughts about SHADO, and Johnny's little brother who looked so much like him. Staying here for a few hours might just help him get over today's happenings. He didn't relish the thought of going to his empty home, or a sleepless night, or - even worse - a night full of nightmares.

Only minutes later the next round arrived but Ed didn't touch his drink, not even after Robert insisted. "I'll have a coke" he said.

"Oh come on," Robert said "one more won't hurt."

"One may not hurt, but from one comes another" Ed said obstinately. "I'll have a coke."

Robert shook his head and called to the barman "George, our friend here wants a coke instead." He continued to Ed "in which case I'll have your whisky, so that it won't go to waste."

When George brought Ed's coke one of the guys had started to tell a story and Ed leaned back in his chair and listened. The story was funny, and the storyteller even funnier. Ed felt relaxed, even though being slightly under the influence worried him a little. But then the effect of two whiskeys could hardly last for long, Ed decided, and drinking a few cokes should help to water the drinks down.

"So why don't you normally drink?" the beauty by his side said, and Ed turned to her.

"I have a lot of responsibilities, and I never saw the point in getting drunk. Drinking too

much isn't good for one and the after-effects aren't exactly pleasant - I just don't think it's worth it."

"You may be right."

* * *

Several hours and over a dozen cokes later, Ed got up and said "I have to go, gentlemen. Thanks for the nice evening."

He didn't really want to leave, he was enjoying himself, and his stomach was hurting from laughing so much - but he felt more and more dizzy, the effect of those whiskeys seemed to increase rather than diminish. He really wanted to go home and sleep. He realised that leaving meant his taking his car and drive it, and he didn't feel exactly up to that. Maybe he would call a cab from his car phone and come back to pick up his car later.

He wondered where the Spanish beauty had gone off to, somehow she seemed to have disappeared - somewhere between the sixth and the seventh coke.

"You're not leaving us already, Eddy my boy?" Robert said "We only just met. Stay for a while, come on, we're all friends here, and nobody can leave until 11. That's the rule."

Ed sat down again, not so much because he wanted to, but because his legs wouldn't carry him any more.

"Good boy." Robert said "Anyway, it looks to me as if you're still feeling those whiskeys you drank earlier, and I don't think you should drive. How about we call you a cab later? Let's all have another drink. George !!!!!"

"He has had enough dad, he isn't used to drinking. Leave him be." Ed looked at the Spanish beauty who had reappeared suddenly and smiled at her.

"I'm drinking coke, not whisky" Ed said, and when the bartender arrived with the drinks he lifted his glass to show her. "But thanks for your concern."

She sat down next to him and took his glass from him, drinking some of it. "You're right, there is coke in that." she said and gave him his glass back. "Are you having a good time?"

"Very much so. I haven't laughed so much in years."

She looked at him doubtfully and Ed wondered why she looked so serious.

"Excuse me" she said to Ed, and then to her father "Dad, can I have a word?"

She left and Ed went back to listening to the others sitting around the table.

* * *

The explosions woke him up. He opened his eyes wide, in shock, only to be blinded by the light. He closed his eyes again immediately, wondering why someone was taking a hammer to his head. Ed wondered where he was - had the aliens taken him? Drugged him? That might explain the dryness of his mouth and his feeling as sick as he did.

He tried to open his eyes again, slowly, cautiously, and the light caused a blinding headache. All of a sudden he remembered - that day in college, when they had all gotten drunk. How the day after he had felt like this as well. How his friends had laughed at him, saying he was so very funny when he was drunk. How he had vowed to never ever get drunk again.

Then last night, the pub, Robert, the drinks... He didn't understand. He had had two drinks, and even if the second one had been a double whiskey, surely this shouldn't produce such a tremendous effect? He had seen Alec down half a dozen whiskeys and not show any signs of drunkenness. So why did he, Ed, feel exactly like he had felt the morning after that wild night in college?

"You're awake" a voice said. He put his hand over his eyes, shading them from the sun,

and looked around for the source of the voice. The Spanish beauty from last night! He frowned while he looked at her naked body lying next to him.

"I'll pull the curtains a bit" she said and got up and went to the window. The light got less intense and Ed looked around him. He too was naked, and lying on a bed without even a sheet covering him. He felt silly, lying here and not remembering how he got here.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"10 am."

"I should go to work." he said.

"On a Sunday?" said the Spanish beauty.

"Sunday? Surely-" he broke off. Sunday, how could it be Sunday?

"Yeah, Sunday. Nobody works on a Sunday."

"I do, sometimes" he said, trying to figure out where Saturday had gone, or Friday for that matter.

"Where am I?"

"At my place. I thought it was about time I rescued you from that crowd. They would have gone on drinking until your credit card refused service."

"My credit card?"

"Yeah, your credit card. Your handwriting on the slips may be a bit shaky, but it is still your handwriting. We checked with your driver's license, it was close enough. You weren't exactly happy when I dragged you out of there, you insisted on having another drink, but I thought I would put an end to it."

"Oh" Ed said, not really sure what it all meant, wondering if he was in the middle of a bad dream. He hesitated, then said "I was drinking coke most of the time. I don't get it, how can drinking a couple of whiskeys make me feel this bad? Something isn't right."

"You went back to drinking whiskeys after a while."

Ed ignored that statement and looked around for his clothes. They were neatly folded on a chair and he went over there, intending to put them on.

"We're alone in the house, so if you're just going to the bathroom, there is no need to put anything on."

He looked at her, trying to convey that he thought all this was in bad taste, but she just said "First door on the left in the hallway."

* * *

When he came back into the room she was still lying on the bed and said "How are you feeling?"

"Apart from having one hell of a hangover, I'm all right"

"Would you like something to eat?"

"No, definitely not."

"How about a drink?"

"No !!"

"I could make coffee, or tea.."

"Coffee, please. If it isn't too much trouble."

She put on a dress without bothering to put on underwear and walked out of the room. Ed dressed and went in search of her. She was in the tiny kitchen making coffee but he stayed in the living room and went to sit on the windowsill. His car was parked outside, and Ed wondered how it had gotten there. Had he driven it? If he had, he didn't remember. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the cool wall. He tried to focus on that evening, remembering

some of the stories, remembering drinking lots of cokes, but not remembering going back to drinking whiskey. How was this possible?

Credit cards, he wondered, what about the credit cards she had mentioned? He took out his wallet and opened it. All seemed to be in place, and there was still about a hundred pounds in it, so at least nobody had taken any of the money, since that was about the amount he usually carried.

When she came out of the kitchen carrying two cups of coffee, Ed asked "What's your name?"

"Marguerita."

"Well, Marguerita, could you please tell me what this is all about? I walked into that pub on Thursday, and now it's Sunday, or so you say. I had one whiskey and one double whiskey first, after which I drank coca cola for the rest of the evening. I wouldn't have gone back to drinking whisky, that I'm sure of."

"You had a good time, and at one point you got so fed up with drinking cokes you went back to drinking whiskey. The party lasted until early Saturday morning, then I brought you along here, and you slept until just now."

"A party that lasted a day and a half?"

"That's right."

"Surely a pub is supposed to close at 11, or does it have an all-night license?"

"The party went on at my dad's place. You went along, don't you remember? You even insisted and wanted to drive over, we had to forcibly restrain you to prevent you going and driving your car."

Ed sighed. "You said something about my credit card."

"They bought a dozen bottles of whisky, and you signed for it. At the pub. And for quite a few rounds of drinks before that"

"I did?" he asked, disgusted, wondering what else he had signed.

"And some beer. Judging by your car, it won't make a big dent in your bank account. You'll live."

"Anything else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did I sign a credit card slip to pay for your services too?"

"You passed out as soon as you hit the bed. I don't charge for services I don't perform" she said indignantly, and Ed was sorry he had asked that, but also glad she had provided an answer to the other question in his mind - if the two of them had made love.

"I'm sorry" he said, "I shouldn't have said something like that. I - I don't feel too good."

His words were meant as an apology, after all it was hardly her fault that he misbehaved when he got drunk. If only he could recall some of what had happened later on. . Would he have gone back to drinking whiskey? Surely not. He would at least remember drinking the first one.

"This is only the second time in my life I ever got drunk." Ed said "It happened once before, at college, and I vowed never to get drunk again. Seems like last night put an end to that resolution. Or last Thursday, whatever."

"So why did you break your vow?"

"I guess I wanted what most people seem to look for when they drink - oblivion, even if it that doesn't last. Then after those first few drinks I decided that I didn't like the effects and drank coke instead."

"Things that bad huh?"

"Just some problems at work. . and some personal ones. Anyway, thank you for putting me up - you're very kind."

She looked uncomfortable all of a sudden and asked.

"Who is Mary? Is she your former wife?"

"What makes you say that?"

"It says on your papers that you're divorced."

"Mary is my ex-wife, yes." he admitted.

"And Johnny is your boy?"

"Johnny is dead."

"Is that what bothered you so much? Is that why you started to drink?"

Ed thought about that - well, it certainly had played a part, hadn't it?

"I had those two drinks because your friends didn't give me much choice," he said.

"You could have said no, don't blame it on them."

That shook him - he could, indeed, have said no. Why hadn't he? Because he had wanted to forget, that's why - only the truth was still there, the UFO destroying Sky One, Johnny dying, Mary leaving, and now she had another son, a son that had reminded his aunt Ruth of Johnny. He wished he knew the boy's name, he wished someone had told him Mary had another son now. Yesterday had been the wrong day to find out - only it wasn't yesterday, he kept forgetting - it was last Thursday. What would Alec and the rest of the SHADO personnel think?

* * *

He heard the sound of a door opening, then the living room door opened and the man Robert he had met in the pub last Thursday was in the room and standing in front of him. Robert looked slightly menacing, towering over Ed, and said "So, have you and my daughter been hitting it off?"

Ed looked at Robert steadily until he looked away. "Your daughter was nice enough to put me up because I was too far gone to drive. If you're insinuating anything, I would prefer you to say what you mean straight out, my friend." Ed said with a cynical ring in his voice. The hint of menace in Robert's demeanour gave Ed the feeling they had set him up, and he wondered what else was to follow.

"Leave it, Dad" Marguerita said, "he's not like the others."

"No way, Meg."

"Just go, Dad. I'll handle this."

"Does he know about the photos yet?"

"Leave, Dad, please."

Robert hesitated, looked at his daughter, then at Ed, and said "OK, Meg, whatever you say."

Ed watched the man go out and waited until he heard the door slam to look at Marguerita-Meg. He didn't say anything and noticed her becoming uncomfortable under his stare.

She stood up to go to a chest of drawers and took an envelope out of the top drawer.

"Here they are." She said, handing the envelope to him.

He opened it up and looked at the photos. They were much as he had expected the moment Robert mentioned the word 'photo'. He wondered how they had done this, make it look as if he had been enjoying what was happening - he certainly didn't look drunk, his eyes

were open, and he was smiling on some of the pictures.

"Very professional" he commented dryly and Meg started to laugh. "It took hours to get the desired effect." She said.

"I can imagine. So what's the usual asking price? Or does it depend on your victim?"

She looked at him steadily, then stood up again and opened a safe standing in the corner, built into a cupboard.

"Here are the negatives." She said. "Burn them, before I change my mind."

Ed was puzzled by her giving him the negatives but took out his lighter and burned them. He counted the photos and none seemed to be missing.

"How many copies of the photos?" he asked

"Just the one set. I developed them in the back room, you have my word that there aren't any more."

Ed looked at the photographs one by one, then tore them to bits. "Why?" he asked.

"A source of income."

"I mean, why give them to me?"

"I just thought I would do somebody a favour, just this once."

"Thank you." He said and went on "Could I have another coffee, please?"

His attitude seemed to surprise her, but she went and got the coffee, while he went and sat in one of the easy chairs.

"You're very beautiful" he said "Surely you don't need to do this to make a living?"

"I don't. I have a job, a good job even. It's just what I do in the weekends - and some nights in the week, occasionally."

"Get a guy drunk, then take incriminating photos, then blackmail? How can you live with yourself?"

"Let's just say living is a lot easier with money in the bank."

"What's your regular job?"

"I work for a photographer."

Ed sighed - somehow he wanted to convince her that what she was doing was wrong, and he wished he knew why he bothered. He should leave, really, call Alec, see how things were at SHADO HQ. But he was intrigued, so he stayed. And of course he had to make sure there wasn't a security leak, didn't he? Apart from which he was feeling rather shaky and didn't think he was up to driving a car.

"How did you know about Mary?"

"You talked in your sleep."

"What else did I say?"

"Lots of things, I couldn't make sense of most of it. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Anyway, next time someone offers you a drink, say 'no'."

He smiled. "You warned me - why? And now you gave me the photos back, which I don't understand either. So why don't you tell me the whole truth?"

"The whole truth? What about?"

"I wouldn't have gone back to drinking whiskey, I know that. So what did they put in my coke? Did they drug me? Is that why I was out for so long?"

"Vodka. They put vodka in your coke."

"That's another criminal offence."

"We had never done that before. I didn't even know about it until I tasted your coke. I'm

sorry, I really am."

"You could kill a person that way - giving him drink after drink, especially someone who isn't used to drinking."

"I already said I was sorry. I didn't know they were lacing your drink at first."

"And when you did find out you didn't stop them."

"I asked my father not to do it but he wouldn't listen."

There was a knock on the front door then, a heavy, ominous knock. Meg stood up but by the time she was at the living room door they could hear the front door open.

Meg stood in the door frame of the living room and backed up, obviously frightened.

"Put your hands up" the intruder said.

Meg just stood there, frozen.

"Where is Ed Straker?"

"What do you want with him?"

"It's all right Alec, why don't you come in?" Ed called out.

Alec came in, flanked by two SHADO security guys.

"Ed, are you all right?" Alec said, sounding worried.

"Put that gun down Alec, and send your friends away."

Alec motioned to the guards that they could leave and stared at Ed, then at Meg.

"Alec, meet Marguerita. Meg, meet Alec, a friend of mine, who works with me."

Meg didn't answer and Alec shook her hand.

"You've been gone for over two days." Alec said.

"I needed a break."

"You didn't even call in."

"I'm sure you held the fort. Would you like some coffee? Or a whiskey, that is if there is any left." Ed said, and, turning to Meg "Is there?"

"Sure."

"I'll - eh, a whiskey will be fine," Alec said and Ed was amused at Alec's reaction. This was apparently the last kind of situation he would ever have expected to find Ed in.

"Have you been drinking?" Alec asked and Ed nearly laughed.

"What if I have?"

"But. . you don't drink. Ever."

"There is always a first time."

"And you didn't call in," Alec said once again, his tone one of accusation.

"I didn't think of it. And I doubt I could have recalled the number," Ed said, finding it funny to see Alec so shocked.

"I'll be damned."

"That describes the situation exactly Alec," Ed said, while Meg handed Alec his drink. "Only it isn't you, it's all of us. Whatever we do, we're damned. We're in a no-win situation."

"How did you know where Ed was?" Meg asked, and Ed wished she hadn't asked that.

"Alec is conscientious. He probably had the whole police force on the lookout for me, right Alec?"

"Yes, that's right. Your car isn't difficult to find," Alec said, and stood up. "I think I had better go. Eh - Ed, will you be coming in today?"

"I shouldn't think so. I'll see you tomorrow morning, OK?"

"OK." Alec replied, and left, after saying "I'm sure we'll meet again." to Meg.

Meg frowned and looked at Ed "Why should he think we'll meet again?"

"Alec is old-fashioned. He's quite a womaniser actually, and he knows I'm not. So he automatically assumes that my being with a woman means it's for keeps."

"Oh."

"So, where were we? Oh yes, my talking in my sleep. What else did I talk about?"

"Lots of strange things. UFOs, and a car crash, and red alerts. And Johnny's little brother."

"I'm a director of a film company. I guess that accounts for the UFOs, we're in the midst of doing a sci-fi movie. As to Johnny's brother - I went to see my aunt, and she told me that my former wife has a son, something which I didn't know. She said my ex-wife's son looked a lot like Johnny."

"Johnny died in a car crash?"

"Yes" Ed said, asking himself why he was discussing this with a woman who had wanted to blackmail him and had allowed her father to lace his drink.

"When was that?"

"Eight years ago."

"I'm sorry. Maybe you should start a family again. Find yourself a girlfriend, marry, have children."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Because of your work?"

Ed looked at her pensively. He should leave, rather than stay here and allow Meg to draw him out.

"Partly. I don't think I make a good husband. The break-up of my marriage was my fault."

"Did you divorce her?"

"No. But I was impossible to live with." He smiled. "I'm a workaholic, or so most people seem to think."

"It's not what most people think that matters, it's what you think. If you think of yourself as a workaholic, of course you are one. What did your wife do for a living?"

"Nothing, she looked after the house, and - and Johnny."

"Wrong choice - workaholics should only marry other workaholics, or at least people with a job of their own, interests of their own. Housewives usually live their lives through their husbands. It must be terribly boring for them never seeing their husbands much."

She had a point, Ed thought, and changed the subject.

"Now tell me why you decided not to blackmail me."

"You seemed like a decent man. Mostly, when they wake up, they assume that we did something, and are annoyed with themselves for not remembering the act. So the first thing most guys do is start kissing me. That's usually when I mention the photos. It's kind of fun to see their faces. Only you - you seemed embarrassed, and you were friendly, even after I showed you the pics." She smiled "As I said, I thought I would do somebody a favour for once."

"Are you happy doing this? Deceiving people, setting them up, blackmailing them, lacing their drinks if they refuse to drink alcohol?"

"I'm happy when I see my bank statements."

"Let me give you a piece of advice, young lady. Stop doing what you're doing. Because one day you'll be sorry. One day one of your victims isn't going to take your tricks lying down,

and there will be trouble. One day someone is going to sue you and that father of yours for doing what you do."

She shrugged. "It would be hard to prove somebody laced their drinks, besides this was the first time - usually people don't say no after the first drink. Also the incriminating pictures would stop people from taking action."

"I'm divorced - and I don't have a lady friend. So those revealing pictures wouldn't do me any harm. Actually, getting talked about is never a bad thing in the film business - it would be free publicity. I might very well have said 'publish and be damned'."

"You're not going to sue us, are you? I did give you the negatives back."

"I'm not going to sue you because I hope I can convince you never to do this again, and I hope your father won't find someone else to participate in his schemes."

"He won't be pleased."

"And you?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you really enjoy doing this kind of thing to people? I think not, or you wouldn't have been so quick to hand over these negatives. So, tell me, how often have you and your friends done this?"

"About a dozen times."

"Well, I think it's about time you stopped doing it."

"I'll think about what you said."

"Good." Ed said and stood up, ready to leave.

"I never slept with any of the guys we tricked" she said.

"I didn't think you had," Ed said, trying to fight the wave of nausea that overwhelmed him. He took a deep breath, but it was no use, and he fell back into the armchair.

He tried to breathe slowly and steadily, tried to will himself into ignoring how sick he felt, but it was no use. He had been ignoring how his body felt in the last hour, ever since he had woken up, and he had no strength left to continue doing so.

"Drink this" a voice coming out of the mists said. He opened his eyes, unaware that he had closed them previously, and saw Meg standing there with a glass in her hand and a worried look on her face.

"What's in there?" he asked.

"Something my dad often takes when he has a hangover."

Ed hesitated - she wasn't going to pull another trick, was she? He studied the expression on her face, decided to risk it, and took the glass. His hand was shaking and he had to use both his hands to drink the water with whatever medication was in it.

"Come" Meg said, and helped him up and back to the bedroom. He didn't resist, and fell asleep the moment his head met the pillow.

* * *

When he woke up again and looked around him it was dusk, and looking at his watch confirmed this. Well, he thought, at least she hadn't removed his clothes this time. He got up, carefully, expecting to feel dizzy, but he seemed OK - no more nausea, and his head was clear. He walked out of the bedroom into the bathroom and splashed some water on his face. Well, he looked all right - his eyes were red, but there was no sign, apart from that, that he had been on a binge. He smiled at that thought - he had been a rather unwilling or at least inactive participant in most of the last two day's events, and he should really be angry, only he wasn't.

He tried to imagine what Alec would have said if he had walked into the pub to find Ed,

rather than here some two days later. Now that would have been quite a scene - Alec seeing his friend dead drunk. Ed smiled, and wondered if he would tell Alec what had happened - no, he decided, he couldn't. After all, his actions could entail a breach of security, and even though he was convinced that Meg hadn't picked up anything useful, he didn't really want SHADO security all over this place and the pub.

* * *

He went to the living room, then to the kitchen to check what the aroma meant. Meg was standing with her back to him, busy cooking.

"That smells nice." He said, which made her jump.

"Oh - I hadn't heard you come in." She said. "How are you feeling now?"

"Fine. Never better. Whatever it was you gave me certainly did the trick."

"I hope you like chicken."

"Chicken?"

"Chicken Provençale. Would you prefer potatoes with that or spaghetti? Your choice.."

He laughed. "I should be getting home."

"You live by yourself, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, you have to eat. I didn't put any alcohol in the sauce, I promise. You haven't eaten for at least two days, the least I can do is make you dinner."

"Oh well, why not." Ed said, realising he felt hungry.

She opened the fridge and took out a bottle of what looked like Champagne. "Why don't you open this" she said.

"I'll stick to something non-alcoholic, thank you."

"It is. Check the label if you don't believe me."

Ed checked the label and found it said 'alcohol free', so he opened the bottle and filled two glasses. He sat down on the kitchen table and said, after tasting his drink "Good stuff, this."

"I drink it a lot."

"Pretending it's champagne while pouring the real stuff down the victim's throat?"

"No. I wasn't the one who got you drunk, please believe me."

"True. You leave that part of it to your father huh."

"Oh, stop it. I thought about what you said earlier, and I've decided not to participate in my dad's schemes any more. Happy now?"

"Why did you agree to it in the first place?" Ed asked, because he really was curious. She didn't seem a bad sort, and she definitely had been kind to him, in spite of letting her father get him drunk. Ed shook his head - he should really not forget the scenes on the photos either.

"Just one of those things. . It started off quite naturally, and we went from bad to worse, I guess."

"Tell me, how did it start then?"

"It's a long story."

"I'm not in a hurry."

"About a year ago there was this guy who came into the pub and he and my dad got drunk together. I came in to help uncle George as I sometimes do after work and the guy pounced on me. He was really offensive, and in the end my dad punched him out because he wouldn't leave me alone. Uncle George and dad let him sleep it off in the pub, on the bench, and he left the next day saying he had enjoyed himself and that he would be back. So a couple

of days later he came back, he got drunk again and the same scenario repeated itself. Only he had been telling dad about his wife and kids, and how he loved his wife and all that jazz, so dad decided to teach him a lesson and we took some rather suggestive photos.

When he came back a few days later my dad showed them to him and the guy said 'how much do you want?' just like that. Dad was rather surprised and said 1000 pounds, and they guy said he would bring the money by the next day. It was so funny, really. ."

She looked at Ed and went on "We weren't planning to make any money off the guy, we just felt he shouldn't chase other women while proclaiming to be in love with his wife. Then, when he brought the money, of course dad accepted it. I mean, why refuse it? We hadn't threatened him or anything like that."

She paused and said "spaghetti or potatoes?"

"Spaghetti" Ed said. "Go on."

"Then dad's car was stolen, he wasn't insured against theft, and he didn't have enough money to buy another car. A few days later he rang me and asked me to come over to the pub. When I got here he and uncle George had this guy in the pub and they asked me to go and talk to him.. That guy was really offensive too, as soon as he saw me he was all over me in spite of uncle George and dad being there. Well, I ended up going along with them when they wanted to make another set of photos, and have done so ever since. Once dad's car was paid off we split the money three ways. I. . I wasn't present all the time, and I didn't know dad would ever go as far as lacing someone's drink. Actually, until you showed up, most of the guys dad picked were guys that deserved it - nearly all of them expected me to go to bed with them, just because they think that's what barmaids are for I guess."

"Why did you bring me here?" Ed asked "surely the photos weren't made here?"

"They were taken in uncle George's bedroom. Apart from the first guy, we took the other photos in a bedroom, we thought it would look more convincing. The pub only has one bedroom, and uncle George sleeps there of course."

"So you bring your victims to your place to sleep it off?"

That really sounded bizarre to Ed.

"Of course not, we drove most of them home. We don't like people to drink and drive. Even the next morning the alcohol level is way too high, it wouldn't be safe."

"How very responsible" Ed said sarcastically, but went on in a normal tone of voice to say "Why didn't you guys drop me off at my place then?"

"You live by yourself - and you're not used to drinking. I thought it would be better to keep on eye on you in case. . well just in case something went wrong, in case you needed a doctor."

"How very kind of you," Ed said, sarcastically again.

"And I wasn't even going to show you the photos, if you really want to know, I was going to tear them up and not mention them."

"If you're all that concerned about my well-being, why did you let your dad go on feeding me that vodka?"

"Because once dad is drunk there is no arguing with him, that's why."

Ed wondered what her dad would say when he found out she had returned the photos and the negatives without demanding money. They had nearly finished dinner by now and he said "You're a great cook. How come you're not married?"

"I'm not really interested in marrying. I usually get fed up with a guy after a few months, so I kick him out again."

"Do you have a boyfriend? Right now, I mean?"

She smiled "No, I have not.. Don't tell me you're thinking of applying for the job?"

"No."

"Well if you ever do, you're welcome."

Ed looked away, slightly embarrassed.

"I am attracted to you - do you think it's wrong for a woman to admit that?"

"No, of course not."

"I guess you think of me as a criminal, and you don't seem to be the kind of guy to condone my actions. Oh well, plenty more fish in the sea."

"What does going from man to man get you in the end?"

"In the end it makes me despise them. Or most of them."

"Maybe if you found the right kind of man, and took your relationship seriously, you would talk differently." He said, wondering why he was moralising. Surely he was the wrong person to point this out to her, his own failed marriage hardly made him an expert on relationships - apart from, perhaps, an expert on how not to do things.

She didn't answer and he stood up, ready to go. "Well, I have to leave. Thanks for making me dinner."

"I'm sorry about what happened. Really."

"Don't worry about it. One lives and learns - I'll chalk that one up to experience, and be more careful who I drink with next time."

"Good." She said and accompanied him to the door. She stood in front of the door and looked at him intently. "There is just one thing." she said.

"What?" he asked. Her answer took his breath away - she put her arms around him and kissed him, and he couldn't help responding.

She broke off the embrace after a few minutes, stood back, and said "Goodbye, Ed."

He stared at her for a few moments, feeling rather light-headed, his heart still beating like mad, said "au revoir" and left.

* * *

On his way home he wondered about the last two days - two missing days. He, Ed Straker, drunk. Well, the drinking hadn't helped, but having to resolve a relatively simple problem had. Maybe it was time he tried to take some time off, or at least not work around the clock the way he had been doing. He felt tired, and he still felt the after effects of the alcohol a bit - or was it the memory of that kiss that made him feel dizzy?

It was a different type of tiredness though, and he knew that a good night's rest would cure that.

He drove past the studios on his way home, but didn't even consider stopping to go and check how things were going there. No, he was going home, he was going to switch the TV on, and he was going to watch whatever was on and have an early night.

And next week he was going to give Meg a call and find out if she would have dinner with him. She intrigued him, and she was just what he needed - someone to talk to, someone who wouldn't ask too many questions because she felt embarrassed by what she and her father had tried to do. Somebody to take his mind off SHADO, if only for a few hours.

Yes, Ed thought, he was finally going to do some living again. If not with Meg, then with somebody else. He needed something or someone to balance the pressures from work, and a casual relationship with someone like Meg might just be enough to accomplish that. But he was definitely going to stay away from whiskey. That he was sure of.

PART 2

Ed sat staring into empty space, not able to concentrate on the report in front of him. The last few days he hadn't been able to keep his mind on the job. He felt empty, spent and useless. His desolate mood of last week had at first been overshadowed by the events in the pub - somehow it had provided a welcome relief - but now he was back where he had started. What use was he as commander of SHADO if he made mistakes? If because of him lives were lost?

Henderson had been and gone, complaining about the loss of Sky One, the loss of life, the wrong decision Ed had taken. Ed hadn't said a word to defend himself and had offered Henderson his resignation. Henderson had fallen quiet then, and said that he, Ed Straker, was still the best man for the job.

Part of him had been amused at Henderson's saying so - after all, who else was there? Neither Alec or Paul could do it, so in the end there wasn't anybody else - but him, and Henderson knew it.

Ed sighed - had he been serious when he offered his resignation? He didn't know.

Then Jackson had come in and tried to draw Ed out - but Ed hadn't felt like talking. He just wanted to be left alone, he hadn't been in the mood for a soul searching session. Besides, in the end, it didn't change anything.

Jackson had ended up saying that Ed needed a break, needed to take a holiday. Only Ed wouldn't have a clue where to go. . he couldn't see himself on a beach in Spain sunbathing, or going to visit places and play the tourist. He wasn't interested in that kind of thing - but then, what was he interested in? Apart from SHADO? Nothing... That, by itself, told him something about his life. There was nothing else - but SHADO. And if he took SHADO out of the equation, there was nothing left but emptiness.

The doors slid open to allow Alec to enter. Ed looked pensively at Alec, who took his usual drink before sitting down. Something was bothering Alec, he kept fidgeting, and didn't even touch his drink.

"So Alec, are you going to tell me what the problem is, or are you going to keep me in suspense?"

Alec looked surprised, then said "I. . did some checking. I don't think you'll be pleased."

"With the results? Or with your doing said 'checking'?"

"Either one."

"So tell me, what or who did you check?" Ed asked, somehow knowing that Alec's problem was linked with Meg - Alec probably had Meg checked out, and Ed could imagine that Meg, or at least her father, weren't the kind of friends Alec thought were suitable for a commander of SHADO. Actually Ed had considered checking out Meg himself, but he hadn't so far, because he hadn't quite made up his mind about seeing her again - unless she showed up here, at the studio, but he doubted that would happen.

"Your eh. . lady friend."

"Go on."

"She. . how much do you know about her?"

"That bad huh." Ed said, amused at Alec's embarrassment.

"Well it's not so much her but her father. Robert Montaigne, his name is. His real name, he goes by the name Sharpe these days."

"Has he done time?"

"Yes" Alec said, surprised, "did she tell you?"

"So what was he in for? Blackmail?"

"Yes, assault, blackmail, extortion - even kidnapping some years ago, but these charges were dropped. Then, in the last two years, nothing. Ever since his daughter moved close to him. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"Maybe she's a good influence on him." Ed said, wanting to avoid admitting he knew about their practices first hand - after all, they had pulled one over him, and he wasn't about to inform Alec of that.

"The police think father and daughter work together on some scheme or other, I don't have the details yet - I know they are keeping an eye on their activities."

"What about the wife? Meg's mother?"

"They were divorced 20-odd years ago, and Meg grew up with her mother. Then her mother had to go into hospital and Meg moved here. My guess is that he hadn't seen his daughter in all that time. Maybe he saw an opportunity, her being so beautiful. I . . . I think you should watch out, Ed."

"I will Alec, thank you." Ed said in a neutral tone of voice. "Is the mother still alive?"

"Yes. She's in Saint John's. It's all here." Alec said and pushed a sheaf of papers across the desk.

Ed considered that - St. John's? Cancer?

"How did the two of you meet?" Alec asked.

"In a pub. We had a couple of drinks together."

"Last Thursday?"

"Yes." Ed said, not really wanting to think of that day.

"It's not at all like you. Your staying away, without notifying us. Drinking even."

"Strange reaction from a guy who has been telling me for years I should relax a bit."

"Well - it just seems a bit extreme, that's all."

Ed smiled and looked at his watch "Well, there doesn't seem to be much happening at the moment, I think I'll go home."

"At five o'clock?"

"Yes, Alec, at five o'clock." He took the papers Alec had just put on the desk and said "I'll have a look at these when I get home."

* * *

"I'm afraid that's confidential sir. And the patient cannot have visitors."

"Why not?"

"She refuses to see anyone. Anyone apart from her daughter, that is."

Ed thanked the nurse and walked out of St. John's Hospital none the wiser. He drove to Meg's place and rang the door bell. There was a car in front of the house, but nobody answered. He went back in his car and called the operator, asking for the number of Jonathan Simmons, the photographer Meg worked for according to the computer printout Alec had given him. He noted down the number and dialled.

"Simmons."

"Mr. Simmons, my name is Ed Straker. Could I talk to Meg please?"

"She hasn't been in to work this week. Call her at home."

"Is she ill?"

"She called in sick, yes."

Ed looked at the car parked in front of Meg's house and said "She drives a Ford Escort, doesn't she?"

"That's right."

"Thank you."

Ed looked at the computer printout once again and dialed Meg's number.

"Meg Montaigu." She said.

"Hi Meg, it's Ed."

"Oh."

"Your employer says you're ill. Is there anything I can do?"

"There isn't. Thank you."

"Why don't you let me in. I assure you I'm quite immune to diseases if that's what's worrying you."

"I don't want to see anyone. Just leave me alone. Goodbye." She said and hung up.

* * *

Ed got out of his car. He stood looking at the windows for a while but didn't see any movement. He was sure she knew he was there, so he went closer to the house and sat on the low wall bordering her garden. He lit a cigarette and waited. He didn't have very long to wait, the front door opened and he could see a silhouette standing there.

He walked towards the house and pushed the door open. She wasn't in the hall any more so he closed the door behind him and walked into the living room. She was standing at the window with her back turned to him.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Just to talk. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I really don't feel like company."

Ed walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders, turning her around, forcing her to face him.

She pushed him away and he let his arms drop, shocked at seeing the bruises on her face and her left arm. He lifted his arm and caressed her cheek, not quite sure what to say. Should he ask her who had done this? Had his prediction come true? Had one of their victims done this? Ed reflected - no, impossible, her boss had said that she hadn't come in to work the whole week, which probably meant this happened on Sunday. Surely they would not have had the time to lure another victim in their web. . He thought back to the file on Robert Montaigu, aka Robert Sharpe, and wondered.

"Who did this?" he asked softly. She didn't answer and he went on "Was it your father?"

She looked at him then and the hatred in her eyes was unmistakable. She looked away again and said "He didn't mean to - he was angry and he had been drinking."

So she was sticking up for him?

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"There is no need, it's only a few bruises, they won't be noticeable any more by the end of the week."

That sounded like he had done this before - the swine. Ed wanted to do something, anything, but didn't know what. He wished he knew what to say to her, or find a way to comfort her. But he had never been good with words, had he.

"I was hoping you would come and have dinner with me." he said. "But I'll quite understand if you would prefer not to go out. How about I get us some take-away?"

"Why bother? What do you want? Why are you here? For heaven's sake, man, we tried to rip you off. Be glad you got out without any damage being done and leave us alone."

"I saw a Chinese place only two blocks away, " he said "and there is a pizza place a bit

further along. Which would you prefer?"

"Neither. I would prefer to be left alone."

"Has your father done this before?"

"It's none of your business. Now will you please leave?" she pleaded.

"You should call in the police." He said, assuming she had not done so.

"He's my father. I can't do that."

"So you are going to let him beat you up every once in a while? Why? You are an adult, you're perfectly capable of standing on your own two legs. Why don't you move away from here, put some distance between your father and yourself. At least then you would be safe."

"You don't understand."

"Then talk to me, make me understand."

"I don't want to talk to you. I want to be left alone. Get out." She went to the front door and opened it. Ed stood there for a while, making up his mind as to what he should do.

"Get out." She repeated and he did.

* * *

Instead of going home he went back to SHADO and walked into Alec's office.

"Are you busy?" Ed asked

"No, nothing much is happening. I thought you had gone home?"

"I saw Meg." He hesitated - should he tell Alec about the bruises? "I want you to investigate the father thoroughly. All his activities, all his contacts. And find out a bit more about the mother too, and why they were divorced."

Alec opened the file in front of him and took out a sheet of paper. "That information came in after you left" he said "She filed for divorce after she had been committed to hospital for the umpteenth time with severe bruises, even a broken arm that time. She got a divorce without any problems, there was plenty of proof. He was supposed to support her and the daughter but she never accepted any money from him." Alec paused and went on "Beats me why his daughter moved close to him."

"There must be a reason Alec, and I want you to find it, OK?"

"He. . . does he beat her up too?"

"Don't ask Alec. Just find out about the guy, will you?"

* * *

Ed looked at his watch - 7 p.m.. He looked at Meg's Ford Escort sitting in front of the Bells and Motley and wondered if she and her father were up to their tricks again.

Why was he here? Was it curiosity, or concern for Meg? Was he trying to find a way to balance his work at SHADO with a romantic interest? Why did Meg get under his skin so much? He couldn't stop thinking about her, but he didn't think he had any feelings for her except concern, apart from being sorry for her. He wanted to find a way to protect her from her father.

He was also intrigued by her, especially after what he had learned earlier today.

Alec had continued his investigation into Meg and her father and Ed was now convinced that Meg was only going along with what her father wanted in order to help her mother. According to the hospital records, her mother was on a drug that the British Health Service couldn't provide - a drug that could only be gotten in the US and that cost the Earth. It had stabilised her mother's condition and would continue to do so if the supply of the drug would keep coming. And Meg had been providing that drug, paying for it out of her own pocket. Alec had examined Meg's bank account and had found several deposits from unknown origin,

followed by money transfers to an account of a US laboratory.

Ed could easily forgive Meg for trying to trick people and blackmailing them, if she did it only to help her mother. It still wouldn't be right, but at least it was understandable. What worried him was the fact that Scotland Yard was investigating Robert, and Ed feared that if the Montaignus kept up this game both would be arrested. So what should he do? Warn Meg? But how could he explain his findings? Could he claim to have a friend in Scotland Yard who had warned him?

Ed got out of his car and walked into the pub. The four men who had been there that Thursday, two weeks ago now, were sitting around the same table, and were in a lively conversation with a fifth man who didn't seem to belong here. Meg was sitting demurely next to the person Ed assumed to be another intended victim. Robert looked up as Ed came in, but Meg didn't take her eyes off the man. Ed asked for a coke and looked at George when he was pouring it into a glass, making sure that George didn't lace his coke with vodka this time. Ed sat down at the bar, turning slightly so that he could observe what was happening at the table.

The scene was much the same as he remembered it, only this time Ed wasn't the victim. He wanted to interfere, stop these guys from tricking the young fellow sitting there, but he wasn't too sure how he should do this. Would the guy believe him if he told him what he thought would happen? And surely Robert wouldn't let Ed tell his story without doing something to stop him.

Ed asked for another coke and again watched George pour it out. George then served another round of drinks at the table. Whilst doing so he whispered something in Robert's ear, and Robert started to laugh. He said something to the other men that Ed couldn't catch and now they were all laughing.

"Bottoms up" Robert said, turning towards Ed and saying "Why don't you join us too, son?"

"No thank you." Ed said and drank half of his coke. Meg was looking at him and shook her head. She looked worried and said something to her father that Ed couldn't make out. Robert answered with a laugh and all of a sudden she said "Forget it," stood up, and came towards Ed. "Let's go." She said. Ed took out his wallet and asked "How much do I owe you George?"

"You don't owe him any money, Ed. He didn't give you what you asked for. Now come." Ed frowned but followed her out.

"What the hell did you come here for?" she asked.

"I wanted to see you, and I didn't think you would let me into your house - at least here, in a public place, you can't stop me from coming in."

"Why? Why, for heaven's sake? Are you trying to be my conscience all of sudden? I'm a criminal - you should stay well away from me - or you'll be dragged down with me sooner or later."

"I want to help."

"Haven't you learned anything from last time?"

"What do you mean?"

"He gave you a coke laced with vodka."

"But - I was watching him. He didn't add anything to the coke"

"It's a special bottle, one that already has vodka in it. Apparently they put something else in your second glass, I'm not sure what it is, George called it 'knock out drops'. Where do you live?"

Ed gave her his address.

"OK, I'll drive you home."

He didn't feel at all drunk, and wondered if she had exaggerated. They didn't talk during the drive, then, suddenly, Ed started to feel hot. When she stopped in front of his house and he got out of the car, he did believe her earlier statement - he had trouble standing on his legs, and if she hadn't been there to support him, he would have fallen.

She helped him into the house, and into his bed. "Stay, please" he whispered. "We have to talk."

She helped him undress and pulled the sheet over him, then undressed as well and got into bed with him. He was watching her and it felt like she was part of a dream, and her kisses felt dreamlike too.

* * *

When he woke up the sun was shining, and he was lying with his head on her shoulder. She smiled at him and said "Good morning."

He looked at her face in the light, and still saw faint traces of the bruises even though they seemed to have healed very well.

"Thanks for staying."

"How are you feeling?"

"OK."

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"Oh - that! I think I had better make us some coffee first."

"Tell me now."

Ed hesitated, then said "I have a friend at Scotland Yard. They are investigating your father's activities. It's only a matter of time until they send in one of their own and get the proof they need."

"Did you put them up to that?"

"No, I did not."

"Well I don't think dad will get into trouble now, unless he finds somebody else to pose for the photos." she said cheerfully.

Ed considered reminding her of her promise of not helping her dad again, but he didn't - maybe that was what the bruises had been about?

"Why do you let him beat you up?" Ed asked.

"He doesn't mean to. He's not a bad guy really, but when he's drunk he can get rather rough."

"What was the cause?" Ed asked - "It wasn't you giving me the photos and negatives, was it?"

She looked away, and Ed felt responsible all of a sudden. Ridiculous really, he considered, they had tried to rip him off and now he was the one feeling guilty. But she had warned him and given him the photos back, and he felt no animosity towards her - on the contrary, he liked her. . a lot.

Meg hadn't answered his question and Ed assumed that meant the photos had been why her dad had been angry.

"Does your mum know about this?" he asked.

"No. My parents have been divorced for over 20 years."

"Did you see a lot of your father over the years?"

"No, not until lately."

"And now you let him dominate your life?"

"He doesn't."

"Oh come on, you're helping him with his schemes, you don't even walk away after he beats you up."

"Maybe I like the income it provides more than I fear getting beaten up."

"So what do you do with the money?"

"Nothing very interesting. Maybe one day I'll have enough to be able to get away from here and live a life of luxury in a place where nobody knows me."

Ed looked at her closely and said slowly and deliberately "Would you still help your father if the National Health Service could provide that drug your mother needs?"

She opened her eyes wide in surprise. "Who told you that?"

"One of my friends at Scotland Yard, who looked at where the money from your exploits goes to. They might be prepared to leave you alone if you stop now. They will keep an eye on your father though - sooner or later he'll get caught doing something he shouldn't do."

She didn't say anything, so Ed went on "I don't think you're all that fond of your father, are you? After all, he beat up your mother and now he does the same to you" He smiled.

"Don't worry - we'll sort out the money problem somehow. I mean, sort out a way to make sure your mother keeps getting that drug, without you having to resort to blackmail to pay for it."

"That's easier said than done" she said bitterly, "do you really think if there was another way I would resort to - well, to helping my dad?"

"I'll come up with something, I promise."

"It will be too late. I have to transfer the money today - tomorrow at the latest."

"I'll give you the money. Stop worrying."

"I can't take any money from you."

"You can pay me back later."

"No." she said. "Listen, I have to go. Can I call a taxi from here?"

"You're prepared to cooperate in a scheme to blackmail people, but you won't take money from me? Now that I find a very strange attitude. So tell me, what's more important - your pride, or your mother's health?"

"Damn you!"

"Now that's not very friendly."

"I wish you would stop interfering in my life."

"Sit down Meg, and cool down. I'm going to make us some coffee - in the mean time think about my offer."

* * *

When he walked into the bedroom with two cups of coffee Meg was lying on the bed and her smile was very inviting.

"Come here" she said, "let's talk about your offer. Negotiate the terms."

Ed smiled "Sex doesn't come into it."

She looked puzzled "Then what does?"

Ed considered - he would have to come up with something, or she would refuse, he could sense it.

"How about spaghetti once a week, fries twice a week, rice once a week. Mmm, let me think. . I have a cleaning woman coming in twice a week, so you wouldn't have to do that."

"Are you asking me to move in here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I would like your company. I have a pretty demanding job, and I don't really have the time to play a husband and wife game. So you might just fit the bill - my wife kept on complaining about my coming home late, or not at all, my forgetting to phone home to tell her I was going to be late etc. etc. I've been living alone for years now, and I'm fed up with coming home to an empty place - and marrying and screwing up another marriage isn't my idea of fun. So your moving in might just solve my problem. I have a spare bedroom if you prefer to keep it platonic."

"You're an odd one."

He grinned. "You're not the only person who thinks that."

"So why is your job so demanding? What's so special about that film company of yours?"

"The only other thing I would ask from you is not to ask me any questions."

"Oh." she frowned. "Why?"

"That's a question." Ed said.

"Oh, so I can't even ask you what you would like for dinner tonight?"

"I meant no questions about my work, or about anything not related to the time I spend here, at home - or with you."

"I don't honestly think I could do that you know - how about we agree that you reserve the right to refuse to answer my questions?"

"Fine with me."

"Are you having an affair with a married woman?"

Ed laughed "No."

"Just work huh."

"Just work."

"OK, it's a deal."

"Let's shake hands to seal it then." Ed said, but Meg said "I think we can do better than that" and put her arms around him.

* * *

About a week later Alec came into Ed's office and said "About Robert Sharpe - he seems to have another woman helping him and Meg hasn't shown up at the pub at all in the last week. According to my sources he is quite heavily into blackmail. Scotland Yard have a case on file where he and some woman, believed to be his daughter, were blackmailing a guy with pictures they took of him. The guy claims not to know anything about the pictures, he claims he was too drunk and doesn't remember what happened that night. I saw the photographs, and the woman's face isn't anywhere on the photos, so it's hard to tell who it is - she had fair hair, but it looked like a wig."

Ed smiled - he had noticed when looking at the photos of him and Meg that her face was never shown on them - and said "Who is the woman helping him?"

"Some former prostitute. Scotland Yard are sending one of their own men in to see exactly what he does."

"Good. I hope they catch the guy and sue the hell out of him."

"I wonder if he and Meg had a disagreement, she even moved out of her house. Maybe she didn't know what her father was up to after all and found out about it from someone." Alec said. "Did you tell her Ed?"

"I did, yes."

"Any idea where she is staying now?"

"With me."

Alec stared at him. "You sly old fox. When did that happen?"

"Last week."

"And you never even told me?"

"I wanted to see how things worked out first."

"And are they working out?"

Ed smiled. "Yes - very much so."

"So how about inviting your old friend to dinner huh?"

Ed picked up the phone and dialed Meg's number at work, and asked her if she would mind him bringing Alec over for dinner. He could feel Alec's eyes on him and wondered if Alec sensed that he wasn't too sure of himself. Maybe he should have called Meg 'darling', rather than Meg? "A big juicy steak and plenty of fries should keep him happy" he said to Meg with a wink at Alec, and put down the phone.

"Well that explains why you have been in such a good mood all week." Alec said.

When Alec had left Ed reflected on that - yes, he had been in a far better mood than usual in the last few days. Meg had done wonders with his place - it had never really been 'home' to him, it had been the house he lived in, rather than his home, or a homely place.

Her presence had changed all that. She had moved into his bedroom as well, not mentioning his offer of her using the spare room, and he wasn't sorry about that either. He hadn't had a nightmare since, and the uninterrupted sleep had done wonders - he felt a lot more relaxed, and the tiredness he had felt in the last few months had left him. He was glad he had met her, in spite of the unusual circumstances. Because she had given him back his desire to live and to fight, something he had lost along the way without even noticing. He hadn't realised until recently that he had let himself slip into a far too lethargic state, and wondered if his failure to realise the cause of the UFO's irregular flight pattern wasn't due to that too.

In spite of being happy at her presence in his house, he was becoming slightly apprehensive though. He feared that she would leave him again as soon as she had the chance. He had intended for theirs to be a casual relationship if anything, and him asking her to move in had been prompted by his desire to help her and protect her. It wasn't until a few days after she had moved in that he had started to analyse his feelings for her, and he was worried - because he realised that she meant more to him than he had initially bargained for. And in spite of her passionate response to him, he didn't think it went very deep on her side. He hadn't asked her much about her past, but he was under the impression that she never stayed with a man for long, and since an acquaintance of his had told him that the drug her mother needed was going to be approved by the National Health board soon, he knew their relationship might be short-lived.

Oh sure, she would not leave straight away, she would wait until she thought she had paid off her debt, but that would only mean the separation would come a few weeks or months later, it wouldn't defer it indefinitely.

Was he really in love with her, he wondered - or would any other woman do the trick?

"Red Alert - Red Alert" said the speaker and Ed went to the operations room.

* * *

Ed drove home, with Alec following on his tail, and called Meg to tell her they were on their way.

"You're late" she said.

"Something came up."

"What have you told him about us?"

"Nothing. Just that you're staying with me."

"Shall I play the dutiful wife, the passionate mistress, or the prim housekeeper?"

Ed laughed "Whichever you prefer."

He sighed - she could always make him laugh. He liked laughing, he liked being with her, in spite of their coming from different worlds.

* * *

When Alec and Ed got to his place Meg opened the door, gave Ed a perfunctory kiss, saying 'Hi darling' and looked at Alec, who stuck out his hand, saying "Nice do meet you again."

"Mmm, no gun today?"

"No no, not today."

She shook his hand then and said "In that case it's nice to meet you again too."

"This place looks different somehow." Alec said, sipping the non-alcoholic sparkling wine Ed and Meg had taken to drinking quite a lot. "Just proves that a house needs a woman to make it feel like a home."

"Maybe you should find a woman friend too." Ed suggested.

"Nah, I'm far too fickle." Alec said to Ed, and continued to Meg "Unless you have a sister? One that looks like you?"

"No sister, I'm sorry."

"Oh well, if you ever get fed up with Ed, give me a shout."

Meg smiled and Alec went on. "Ed is far too serious. I could show you a really good time."

Meg frowned. "I like serious men, dedicated men. I don't think 'having a good time' is the only thing that life is about."

Alec smiled and looked at Ed. "You're a lucky man Ed Straker" and to Meg "I was just joking. I'm glad Ed met you, you seem to be good for him."

"I do my best" Meg said and went into the kitchen.

* * *

After dinner, on which both men complimented Meg, the phone went. Ed picked it up and said, after listening for a minute, "Alec, we have to go."

"Now?" Meg said "It's nearly 11 p.m."

"I'm sorry." Ed said and both men hurried out.

When Ed got back it was getting light already. He tried to sneak into bed as noiselessly as possible but Meg woke up anyway.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Late."

"Where have you been all this time?"

"Don't ask."

"Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right, I'm tired" Ed said and turned his back to her. God, he thought, if only he could tell her. This whole thing was going to mess up their relationship just as it had done his and Mary's, and he didn't think he could take it. He must have been delusional to think that having a more casual relationship with a woman would avoid the questions.

Maybe he had better end it as soon as possible and live alone again - in the end, he was alone anyway, alone with his thoughts, because he couldn't let her or anybody else share them.

He sighed - and felt her hand first on his back, then caressing his body. He turned over and took her in his arms, glad that she didn't say anything, but still worried - because he knew that some day soon the scenes would start, the recriminations - the alternative being that she became completely indifferent to his comings and goings.

* * *

He slept until 10 o'clock. When he went down Meg poured him a cup of coffee and said "I thought I would let you sleep in."

"Nothing urgent this morning," he said "Unless there were any calls?"

"No. No calls."

Ed sensed that she wanted to ask questions and wondered how he would deal with them. Could he fob her off with some excuse? Would reminding her of their agreement make any difference?

"Well, as a matter of fact, somebody called, but it wasn't for you."

He looked inquiring and she said "Somebody of the National Health service - apparently the drug my mum needs has just been added to the list of approved and tested medications. So there will not be any further need for me to come up with huge amounts of money. I should be able to pay you back the amount you paid within two months or so, from my pay."

"There is no need for that" he said sadly, because he thought she would tell him she was leaving next.

"Do you like having me around?" she asked.

Ed was surprised at that. "I do."

"But you don't trust me."

Oh God, he thought, there it was - the first sign of discord.

"I do trust you."

"It's not the film company, is it? There is something else going on."

"Don't ask questions" he said harshly.

"Ed, do you want me to stay?"

He shrugged and tried to sound as indifferent as possible as he said. "Yes, but I'll quite understand if you prefer to leave. No need to worry about the money, I told you that. I have more than I know what to do with."

"I know that. I saw a book with bank statements in one of the drawers and couldn't resist having a peek."

He smiled at that.

"Ed, are you involved with some kind of criminal activity?"

"No."

"Oh, that's all right then. I thought . . . well, you letting me off the hook so easily after I helped dad trick you - I thought maybe you and Alec were doing something criminal too, and that's why you went so easy on us."

"Your dad is going to get caught one of these days. You didn't deserve that, I'm glad you're out of it."

"So am I. I owe you Ed. And I'm sorry for asking questions I shouldn't ask."

He smiled a sad smile "You're only human, I can't fault you for that. I know it's not easy."

"It's not easy for you either."

So she knew that much, he thought - she was very perceptive.

* * *

The next day Ed didn't get back home until well past three am and found Meg still sitting

in the living room, waiting for him.

"Why didn't you go to bed?" he said

"I was reading a book. Have you eaten?"

"Yes, I had something at work."

"They sure keep odd hours over there."

Ed looked at her and was glad he couldn't see any sign of anger. "I'm tired, I'm going to bed. Are you coming?" He asked.

"Yeah."

In bed he put his arms around her, trying to pretend the distance between them wasn't widening, wishing he could tell her, hating having to fob her off.

"I love you, Ed."

"What?" he said.

"I love you."

"Oh God. ." He instantly forgot all about SHADO and the secrecy and how it would break up their relationship eventually, his arms tightened around her body and he started to kiss her.

* * *

When he got up the next morning Meg wasn't anywhere in the house. He looked in the garage, saw her car was there, then he went outside to look for her. He had left his car in the driveway, and he was rather surprised to see Meg sitting in the driver's seat. He walked up to the car and asked "Thinking of swapping cars?"

She looked at him in an odd manner and said "No" after which she got out and walked back inside.

He followed her and asked "What were you doing in my car?"

"I used the phone."

"Why not use the phone in the house?"

"I have been calling every number listed in its memory. Interesting collection."

"Oh my God" he said, mentally kicking himself for not having the password for the phone re-installed when he started seeing her. "Did you say anything, give your name?"

"No of course not. I just said 'wrong number, sorry' or something like that each time."

He sighed with relief, and wondered what he should tell her now. He had to say something, give some reason for the military contacts listed in his car phone memory, but couldn't think of what to say, apart from "Stop trying to find out things Meg, it may be dangerous."

"To me or to you?"

"To you mainly."

"Are you with the CIA or something? Some secret military operations?"

"Don't ask, Meg, please."

"Is that a yes?"

"No it isn't. Stop asking questions. And be careful - you don't know what you're getting into. Leave it alone."

"If you say so."

Ed sighed - how long would she leave it alone? How could he warn her, tell her of the risks involved, without giving her a hint of what it was all about?

* * *

Before leaving to go to work he put his arms around her and said "Don't talk to strangers. If anybody asks you questions about me, or you and me, don't answer them. And tell me

immediately if this should happen. Will you do that?"

"OK. I won't tell anybody anything - it's not as if I know anything anyway."

"That's not the point" Ed said, "Just don't let anybody find out that you're suspicious of what I do. Please."

* * *

In the SHADO office he called Alec in with him.

"Alec she's trying to find out what's going on - and I haven't a clue what to do about it, how to stop her, without revealing the importance of what we are doing," he said with desperation in his voice.

"Are the two of you real serious about each other?"

"Very much so."

"Maybe you should tell her."

"I can't do that - what if they suspected she knew?"

"How and what is she trying to find out?"

Ed told him about the phone numbers and Alec whistled "Good thinking. She really is quite bright isn't she?"

Ed smiled "She is intelligent. That's part of the problem."

"I would tell her if I were you. Or don't tell her about the aliens, say you're CIA or something like that."

"Lie?" Ed hesitated "I think she would know I'm lying."

"Then just talk about a secret military organisation, without divulging what it's all about."

"That's just as dangerous as telling her the whole story. And I doubt it would satisfy her curiosity."

"Then tell her the full story."

"I don't believe this." Ed shook his head, confused. "When I asked the same question all these years ago, only it was Mary then, not Meg, you were against my telling her."

"Meg is far more intelligent than Mary. Apart from which, security isn't quite so tight now as it was then. At least it isn't for us, these days they seem to keep an eye on the new people most of all, kind of assuming the rest of us are not security risks."

"As soon as they find out I'm living with someone they are bound to investigate her."

"Talking about investigation, her dad is going to be arrested. I heard half an hour ago."

"Can they make a case against him?"

"Yeah, they sent in an undercover agent. Robert and his friends first made the guy as drunk as they possibly could, then they took photos of him and that girlfriend of Robert, then they tried to blackmail the undercover guy. He's going to drop off the money this morning, and they will arrest the couple then and there."

"Can they make it stick? I mean, on this single case? Or do they plan to bring this other guy into it too, the one that tipped them off?"

"I don't know." Alec said "does it matter?"

"I don't know - probably not."

"She helped him too, didn't she? Meg, I mean?"

Ed didn't say anything and Alec continued "So that's where she got the money from for her mum's medication."

"She had no choice. I . . ."

"Maybe you should get him a lawyer." Alec suggested. "Or rather Meg should. Make sure the lawyer convinces them to plead guilty. That would make sure that nothing came out in

court about Meg's earlier involvement."

"It's a thought." Ed said, wishing he hadn't admitted to Alec that Meg had been involved.

Just then the intercom went, and Miss Ealand said "There is somebody here to see you, sir. A miss Montaigu. She says you promised to show her around sometime and she's asking if you could find the time now."

"Tell her I'll be free in five minutes, miss Ealand." Ed said in the intercom, then to Alec "I'll have to go, show her around."

"My guess is she's still playing detective." Alec said with admiration in his voice.

"You don't seem to think it's a bad thing." Ed said.

"Would you prefer her to think you're having affairs right, left and centre? At least she got the right idea from the start - which probably means she knows you better after a few weeks than Mary did after years. I'm jealous, Ed, I don't mind admitting it. She's one hell of a woman. And she can cook too."

Ed laughed "You keep away from her, my friend."

"Can I come up with you? Maybe I can show her around the studio, see what she says, if she asks me any questions. I guess us leaving together the other night means she knows I'm involved in this too."

"OK, why not."

"I promise I won't make love to her. Unless she begs me. No, not even then, I promise !"

Ed laughed. "Let's go then."

* * *

Alec ended up showing Meg around the studio as he had suggested to Ed.

She seemed interested enough in the movie business and asked all the right questions. When they sat watching a scene of a movie being enacted in open air, Alec said "I'm glad Ed has found someone like you. He has been alone for way too long. He has a tougher time than any of us - being the boss means everybody blames him when things go wrong, and nobody says 'thank you' when things go right. And what's worse, if things go wrong Ed blames himself, while he hasn't learned to pat himself on the back when he does everything right."

Meg didn't say anything so Alec continued "He must be difficult to live with at times - I just hope you're up to the challenge."

"I do my best."

"I've told him he should tell you what it's all about. I'm sure he will one of these days. I hope you can be patient, and won't try to find out things for yourself."

Meg's face looked blank as she said "What are you talking about?"

Alec smiled "I'm sure you can keep the whole thing a secret."

"What thing? You're talking in riddles, Alec."

"Well, like the two of us having to leave after dinner."

"Oh that" she laughed. "Well if he and you think it necessary to go chasing after an actress having tantrums in the middle of the night because you're afraid she'll chuck in the whole movie, then do so by all means. I don't mind."

"Is that what Ed told you?"

"Of course - what else should he have told me?"

"Nothing" Alec smiled admiringly. "You're good, my dear, very good. So tell me, what do you do for a living? Ed says you work for a photographer."

"We photograph things and play about with the photos to suit the purpose. Commercial stuff mainly - advertising, publicity."

"Oh." Alec said "I kind of imagined you worked for one man, in the kind of shop one goes to to have one's photos developed."

"No, that's the one thing we don't do. Our clients are businesses for the most part. Very few individuals."

"And what do the individuals want then?"

"Have their photo taken and their bellies sized down. Stuff like that."

"How do you alter the photos?"

"Sometimes with the computer, sometimes by using special lenses."

"Could you take a photo of me and make me look slimmer than Ed, for instance?"

"No problem. I could make you look years younger too. Or give you a beard or change the colour of your eyes. But then I guess special effects here could do that too, probably even better."

"Can you work with a computer?"

"Sure. Well, my boss's computer anyway."

"Interesting." Alec said "Maybe you should come and work for us."

"I like my job. And working here might make things difficult - not for me, perhaps, but for Ed. "

"Maybe." Alec said. "So how come you're not working today?"

"I never took any holidays since starting to work there, so I take the odd day off here and there. I was rather curious to see this place - do you think we could go and see the special effects department?"

"Sure."

"So what are you currently working on?"

"A couple of documentaries, a historical drama, some children's programs."

"Nothing much in my line then."

"Which is?"

"Detective stories and science fiction." Meg said.

"Nothing like that at the moment."

"Ever do any?"

"Not for a while actually, at least a year."

"I see."

Alec looked at her, wondering what that strange expression on her face meant. She looked at her watch then and said "Listen Alec, I have to leave - I just remembered I have to go and see someone - I'll look at the special effects department some other time. I hope you'll come and have dinner with us again one of these days. Tell Ed I'll see him tonight."

"Ed says you make a great beef curry."

"OK, I'll make sure that's on the menu next time you come over."

* * *

Alec went in search of Ed and said "Meg had to go, she said she would see you later. By the way, I'm quite sure she wouldn't be a security risk. I tried to draw her out, as a test, and she reacted real well - no hint of her being suspicious as to our activities."

"Good."

"What explanation did you give about us going off after dinner the other day?"

"None."

"Well she came up with an explanation, she must have thought it up on the spur of the moment. I don't think you have anything to worry about, I doubt if anybody could catch her

out."

"It's still a risk."

"Yes - but her trying to find out what's going on is a risk too."

"Maybe I'll tell her about ours being a secret government organisation, and not mention aliens as you suggested."

"Well she might be interested in the alien angle - she was asking earlier if we make sci-fi movies."

"What did you say?"

"That we haven't done any sci-fi for over a year."

"I see." Ed said pensively.

* * *

Later, over dinner, Ed expected Meg to ask about the discrepancy - him saying they were busy doing a sci-fi movie, and Alec saying the opposite. But she didn't ask, and Ed got more and more worried. Was she trying to find out things on her own? And where had she disappeared to after Alec had returned to his office? Ed had checked the time she had left the premises and she had stayed for another hour. Doing what?

He knew he should ask her, but he didn't know how to start. She was talking about her visit to the studio now, and she didn't mention anything was amiss. Why didn't she?

In the end he cut into the middle of something she was saying and asked "Where did you go to after you told Alec you had to leave?"

"What do you mean?"

"You stayed at the studios for more than an hour afterwards. Why?"

"I had a look around, that's all." She grinned. "So it's right at the studios then?"

"What?"

"Whatever it is."

"You're talking in riddles."

"I must have learned that from you. If you really want to know, I stayed because I wondered if you would notice, if you would check up on me. Your actually doing so is rather interesting."

Ed laughed "You told Alec you had to leave and then stayed for another hour - my noticing this was just a coincidence."

"If you say so, my love."

"I say so."

"Did you ask Alec to interrogate me or was that his own idea?"

"He was testing you, and it was his own idea, he didn't tell me about it until afterwards. He also said you asked about Sci-fi projects."

"Did he?"

Ed looked at her, expecting questions, but none came. "Aren't you curious as to why I told you something entirely different from what Alec did?"

"Curious as hell, but you told me not to ask you any work-related questions." She smiled angelically and went on "Asking questions which you'll not answer is pointless. So, would you like some coffee?"

* * *

He followed her into the kitchen and watched her make coffee.

"Maybe I'll answer your questions this time." he said.

"Why the change in attitude?"

"You worry me - you're far too clever, and the idea of your going around trying to find out what's going on is worrying me no end. Maybe telling you the truth is the lesser of two evils."

"Then just tell me. It might be quicker than my asking you questions."

"I will. But I would like to hear your conclusions - see how far you got by yourself."

"Not very far - mainly guesswork."

"I would like to hear it."

"Well my guess is that there is something underneath those studios of yours, a few extra levels nobody knows about. Nobody, that is, except the people in your organisation. It's some branch of the government, probably military, and it may have to do with UFOs and aliens. That's about it."

"You're amazing." Ed said.

"Does that mean I got some of it right?"

"All of it."

"Really? What are they like? The aliens, I mean. Do they look like us?"

"They are humanoids."

"I would love to meet some of them."

"I hope you won't - they are dangerous."

"Dangerous? Why?"

"Because they are responsible for a lot of damage, and a lot of deaths. Which is why we fight them with every possible means."

"Fight them? Oh - I kind of assumed you were involved with research, or communication with the aliens. You mean you actually shoot them down?"

"It's either them or us."

"I can't believe it - they come all this distance, only to harm us? That cannot be right."

"I'm afraid it is. That day you and I first met, a UFO had just destroyed a jet with some 140 people on board. It also destroyed our craft - the craft we sent up to destroy the UFO."

"Why don't you tell me the whole story?" She asked, and he did. It was well after midnight when he stopped talking and she said "Well, that explains what Alec said earlier - how you get blamed for everything bad that happens, while nobody pats you on the back and says thank you for doing such a good job."

"A good job? Not good enough." Ed said softly.

"It seems to me you're fighting impossible odds. You don't know where the UFOs come from, the means of your organisation are limited, and you have to keep the whole thing a secret from the public as well. Apart from which that General you mentioned seems to be on your back all the time, either to scold you or tell you you can't have the tools or means you need to put up a more efficient fight. Maybe you should tell that General Henderson fellow he should run SHADO himself for a few weeks, that may shut him up !!"

Ed smiled "Thanks."

"What for?"

"For saying what I wanted to hear - needed to hear. Sometimes. . well sometimes I don't handle things very well."

"Meaning you get depressed, like you were the day we first met?"

"Mmm."

"Well it seems to me that even Henderson thinks you do a good job, or you wouldn't still be the guy running things over there. Maybe he's like my boss - Jonathan is always

complaining, and I never seem to be able to do anything right - then one day I overheard him talking about me on the phone and he said I was an absolute wizard at my job. Bosses are supposed to complain about their personnel. Besides, I guess Henderson cops a lot of flack from that Commission - maybe he just says to you what they say to him. Don't let what Henderson says get you down. You know what you are worth better than anybody."

"I make mistakes" Ed said, feeling sick when thinking back of the incident, "If I had realised the implications of - well, it's too complicated to explain. But I might have prevented the death of the people on that jet if I had thought things through."

"So you're not perfect - nobody is, my love. How many lives have you saved? How many people are alive today because of you? Apart from which, you may be in command, but there were other people watching what was going on, and none of them came up with a suggestion to save that jet either. So stop being so negative about yourself, and look at the positive side." Meg paused and added "And that's an order."

Ed smiled at that. "Having you to talk to will help" he admitted "But it isn't very fair on you - apart from saddling you with my problems it will mean you too will have to watch your step, think carefully about what you say to people - you'll end up looking over your shoulder too, wondering if you are being watched."

"I'm used to being watched. A few pairs of extra eyes won't bother me."

"I'm being serious here."

"I know you are - but I can handle it, believe me. Don't worry about me. And talking about saddling me with your problems - isn't that what a relationship is all about? As far as Henderson is concerned, I suggest you take a few weeks off. Let's go someplace far away from here, somewhere where they can't get to you, and let them handle SHADO for a while. That might just teach them how difficult it is to run it. Let's go where there are mountains, and go for long walks, or do some mountain climbing, after which you will be so exhausted you'll be glad to be able to feel a bed underneath you and sleep. That will do you the world of good - physical exhaustion is a perfect remedy for mental exhaustion, and I think that's where you are heading if you don't do as I say."

Ed smiled weakly "That's more or less what Dr. Jackson, our psychologist, said."

"Good. Is that a yes then?"

"Well, I have one condition."

"Which is?"

"That you marry me first."

Meg smiled, put her arms around him and whispered "I thought you would never ask."