

Words of Betrayal

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*This is a sequel to my stories **The S Factor** and **Honeymoon***

It was a quiet morning. There had been no urgent phone calls about crises at the studio so Mr and Mrs Ed Straker were sitting down to a leisurely breakfast.

The phone did ring, just as Ed was finishing his toast. He reached over to get it but Kate intercepted him.

"I think that's for me."

He shrugged and let her take it. Most calls were for him but if she was expecting someone... He did his best not to eavesdrop, although she had not bothered to leave the room.

"Yes. Yes, thank you. I'll be round to see you later today, if you can fit me in? Thanks. I'll speak to you then."

She hung up.

"Anything important?" he asked.

"Yes."

He looked up, not expecting that answer.

She pulled her chair round beside his and sat down, taking his hand. "Something I didn't expect has happened. I'm not quite sure how you're going to take it. That was the hospital."

His heart thumped in his chest. *Hospital?* He squeezed her hand tight. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. I'm pregnant."

He felt the coldness sweep over him like a glacier. "You're what?"

"You heard." She sounded torn between exasperation and concern.

So she should. They had agreed. "I told you, no kids. It's too dangerous."

It was the last thing he wanted, the very last.

She stood up, withdrawing her hand. "I didn't plan it. We got shot down, remember? I didn't see you taking precautions."

He was trying to be reasonable, though the ice had got hold of his heart. "I thought you were dealing with that?"

"And I told you I wasn't going on the Pill. The amount of times we make love -" She sighed. "Not that it isn't worth the wait."

He got to his feet, turning away from her. He knew what had to be done. He knew she was not going to like it. "You'll have to get rid of it."

"No."

He spun back towards her. "No? *Colonel* Straker -"

She stepped towards him, right up in front of him. She barely came up to his chest. "Don't try that on me, we're not in the office now."

He was ice cold furious. "It is too dangerous for us to have children. You will have an abortion."

Her clear brown eyes locked on to his blue ones. "Are you so scared that someone will kill your child that you'd rather get in and do it first?"

He grabbed her arm, raising his hand to strike her. She did not move, she simply stared him down. He saw his own ice reflected in her and it shook him to the core. His hands fell away.

As he continued to stand there, she walked out. "If you want me, I'll be at the studio."

He sank onto the sofa, head in hands, overwhelmed by emotion: anger, sorrow, fear, guilt and - somewhere at the back - a tentative kind of joy.

Eventually he came to a decision. He was not going to bottle this up, he was going to get help. He had learnt *that* much in the last few years. If he could not turn to Kate, he knew where else he could go.

He drove to the studio, checked at the gate that Mrs Straker had arrived safely and continued on to his office. He noted Miss Ealand's concerned frown.

Another one that can read me like a book, he thought. *Or maybe she's been talking to Kate.*

All he said was: "Is Mr Freeman in?"

"Yes, sir, I believe he's waiting for you."

He took the office down.

Alec was waiting for him. "What's up?"

"Have you been talking to someone?"

"Don't need to. You should see your face."

Straker sighed, beckoned him into his office and shut the door. "You may want to get yourself a drink."

Alec got one, then sat in front of the desk. "Now, what's up?"

Slowly Ed opened up. "I had an argument with Kate."

"Bad?"

"Oh yes. I grabbed her arm. I nearly hit her."

Alec whistled. "That's bad. How did she react?"

"She walked out."

"*Out?* As in..."

Straker shook his head. "She's at the studio. I *assume* she wants to make up but..." He turned a helpless look on his friend. "Do you think you could go and ask her if I can come and apologise?"

Alec chuckled. "That bad. You want me to order some flowers? Or jewellery?"

Ed thought about that. "Flowers. Jewellery maybe later. I can pick that myself. Do you think that's OK? I feel like I need something more. We've never had a real argument before."

Alec shrugged. "One step at a time. Married a year and no arguments is doing pretty well. You still haven't told me what it was about."

Ed told him. Alec sat silent through the whole story. Then he asked one question.

"Was she right?"

Ed nodded miserably. "I can't go through that again, I can't. Losing Johnny... But I can't take it out on Kate - or the baby. I don't know what to do."

Alec reached across and put his hand on Ed's arm. "First you sort things out with Kate. Then the two of you work things out together. I'm sure that's what she wants. Is there anything

else I should know before I see her?"

The intercom buzzed.

Both men cursed but Ed flicked the switch. "Yes?"

Miss Ealand's reply was a little tentative. "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but Brian Dixon is on the line. It sounds urgent."

"This morning just gets better and better," Alec growled.

Straker knew what he meant. Dixon was one of the few people who knew about SHADO without being in it. In fact, he had been effectively fired. ("What a shame we can't shoot him.": Alec again.)

Dixon had been a spy - not for the aliens but for General Henderson. He had been tolerated for several years on the grounds that it was better to have the devil you did know than the devil you didn't. But he had gone too far when he had informed the General of Ed and Kate's upcoming wedding, a wedding the General had tried to wreck.

Henderson had reluctantly taken him onto his own staff in order to save embarrassment, which meant the man had got away without a dose of the amnesia drug. Since then Dixon had put titbits of information SHADO's way, perhaps in the hope of making amends, perhaps in the hope of getting his job back. It was not working.

Now Dixon's voice had an edge of desperation and excitement. "Sir, I have something. Something big. I can't tell you over the phone."

Straker spoke wearily. "Take it to the General. He's your CO now."

"I can't, sir. You'll understand when you see. I'm at the lay-by near Carhampton Church. Do you know it?"

"I know it."

The line went dead. Frowning, Straker turned to Freeman. "Either he hung up or we were cut off."

He stood up.

Alec did likewise. "Where are you going?"

"To meet him."

"Then I'm coming with you. This," he grumbled "is turning into one of those days -"

"Tell me about it."

"- and I am not letting you out on your own. I'd only have to pick up the pieces."

They were in the lift by now.

Straker was shaking his head. "I need you to talk to Kate. I can't leave that to anyone else."

"Miss Ealand?"

The door opened. Straker hesitated long enough for his friend to be through it and leaning over his secretary's desk.

"Miss Ealand, how would you like to be a real heroine and go and explain to Mrs Straker how sorry her husband is feeling -"

"Alec."

"Then contact the florists I usually use and order a number twenty three with an appropriate message. We have to go out on business. She'll understand that."

She beamed a smile at her boss. "Don't worry, sir, I'll see to everything."

She would, too.

Slightly reassured, Straker continued out.

* * *

He let Alec drive, his mind full of other things. Kate. He had to work things out with Kate. She would forgive him, wouldn't she? And then what?

A thought struck him. He smiled. "I'll give up smoking. Then she'll know I'm serious."

"*What?*" Alec almost drove them into a tree.

Straker ignored that, completely calm. "Kate doesn't like it and I can't smoke if there's a baby in the house. If we keep the baby."

He was not ready to think about that yet. Alec's anguished cry distracted him.

"You can't do that, you won't have any vices left. What will the rest of us do?"

For the first time that day, Ed Straker laughed.

They saw the tower of Carhampton Church rising above the trees. Then they saw the phone box and the blue Volvo parked next to it. Dixon was pacing nervously up and down. Alec parked their car behind his, scowling, and they both got out. It was not an obvious place for a set-up, there were houses in sight in both directions and light traffic on the road.

"What's so important?" Straker asked Dixon.

The man eyed Freeman warily but did not look surprised. "If you want to get in the car, I can take you there."

"Where?" Freeman demanded.

"The base for the aliens' breeding programme."

Straker eyed Freeman, who looked as surprised as he felt. If this was true, it was massively important.

Dixon hurried on. "It's not where the babies are actually born, I don't know where that is but I think there are several sites. This is where they co-ordinate it from. No aliens there but a bunch of human scientists."

"How do you know this?"

"Same reason I couldn't go to Henderson. We have alien infiltrators. Not in SHADO, I don't think, but I've been listening to the ones in our department. They got a bit over confident."

Straker nodded. It was not beyond belief.

It was starting to rain, the drops falling faster and heavier each moment.

Dixon turned his collar up. "Let's get into the car."

Freeman smiled at him. "You do realise that if you make any false moves, I'll shoot you."

He moved the gun in his pocket to emphasise the sentiment.

"It's not a false move." grumbled Dixon. "I just don't want to get wet."

The rain was coming down in fat droplets now. It did not seem sensible to stand outside. Straker opened the passenger door of the Volvo and got in. Dixon took the driver's seat and Freeman climbed into the back, reaching his gun out so that he would have a clearer shot.

"So tell me more." Straker commanded.

Dixon hesitated a moment, then began. "It's like this. In my new job I'm not much more than a filing clerk but when I was checking some records - unofficially -"

He reached under his seat for Manila folder.

Straker made a move to take it but he found he had no strength. He tried to speak but all that would come out was a croak. "*Alec.*"

Then the dashboard hit him in the face.

* * *

Straker came round rapidly but without opening his eyes. He was not aware of time having passed but, judging by his situation, it had. He was lying on his side on the floor, going

by the feel of rough concrete against his face. His hands were bound behind him. His ankles were also restrained. He tested his bonds. It felt like some kind of tape had been used, too much for him to break it. There was also tape across his mouth but none across his eyes.

He lay still for moment, listening, but there were no identifiable sounds so he opened his eyes. Alec was lying a few feet away and looking angry enough to do serious damage if Dixon should get in his way. He felt in a similar mood himself but also slightly foolish.

Alec flashed him a *How did we fall into this one?* look. He managed to return a tiny shrug. He was still not sure how Dixon had done it. If it was him.

He heard footsteps behind him. They came slowly round his feet, then Dixon walked up between the two of them. He was grinning smugly.

"How are the mighty fallen. Feeling comfortable, Commander? I do hope so."

Incapable of replying, Straker ignored him. He looked around the bare room, rags of paper hanging off the walls and broken glass in the windows. A derelict house. Could be anywhere. He sighed. *One day I'm going to get every derelict house in the area checked out before I get locked up in it.*

Dixon aimed a kick at his ribs, hard. "Don't ignore me. You always ignored me."

Straker shrugged, as if to say *I can't talk.*

Dixon had no problem talking. He seemed to be keen on the idea.

"I bet you've got loads of questions. Where do you want me to start? I'm working for the aliens, of course. *They* recognised my potential. I'm going to be a big man when they take over. Bigger than you."

Straker sighed inwardly. He had heard it all before. How could the man be so blind as to believe it?

"I could have been something in SHADO if you'd taken any notice of me. But why should I bother?"

Tell me how you caught us, Straker thought.

"They want you alive." Dixon kicked back at Freeman. "He's an added bonus. I think they were half expecting him. But they said they weren't bothered if you're in one piece."

He stalked over to a corner. There was debris all around and Straker did not know what he was looking for.

"By the way, you want to know how I got you? Gas in the car. I'd already taken the antidote."

When Dixon turned round he was holding a solid piece of timber. He was grinning.

"This isn't much but it'll pass the time."

He walked back between the two men, smiling, and raised the two by four slowly over Straker. He held it there a moment.

Alec had not been able to see what he was doing before but now he grunted angrily and tried to kick him. It did not work.

Straker braced himself for the blow. Blows, because he could see the hatred and contempt in the man's eyes. This was going to be bad.

The wood swung down and hit him in the stomach, doubling him up with pain. The breath exploded through his nose, unable to leave through his mouth. This was going to be bad. The wood swung up again as Straker braced himself once more.

But a thoughtful look passed over Dixon's face and he lowered the weapon. "No, that's not the way, is it? You want that, it would make you feel important." He smiled again. "I know how to get you."

Very deliberately he turned and raised the timber once more and laid into Alec Freeman with a vicious delight that made Straker's heart sick.

Alec was trying not to react, he could see that, but only the tape over his mouth kept him from crying out. His eyes were screwed tight with pain and his body jerked with each blow.

Straker closed his own eyes. He could not bear to watch yet he felt that not to look was desertion.

I'll get you, Dixon. I'll get you back.

Hold on, Alec.

But there was nothing he could do.

It seemed like forever before the beating stopped. Dixon, breathing hard, leaned on his weapon and surveyed his handiwork. Alec slowly opened eyes that were bright with pain. It was hard to tell the details of his injuries, hidden as they mostly were by his clothes, but Straker could guess he would be looking at serious hospital time.

Dixon nodded to himself then disappeared behind Straker again. He heard him pop a ringpull and take a drink.

Straker locked eyes with Alec. *Hold on.*

Alec was all too conscious.

What, Straker wondered, would their captor do next?

Dixon soon let him know. He stood over him and aimed a leisurely kick at his guts.

"It's up to you what happens next. I can go on hitting him -" He raised the baton threateningly. "- or you can stop me."

Straker raised an eyebrow. What could he do, trussed up like he was? He could not believe that Dixon was proposing to free him.

The man carried on speaking. "If you ask me very, very nicely I might just stop." He grinned. "You think you can do that, Mr high and mighty Straker? You think you can beg?"

Now he understood. Straker nodded quickly, then wondered if he was too quick. He did not want to lose the opportunity because Dixon thought he was too keen.

Idiot, you're giving me power, not taking it away.

Dixon bent down and ripped the tape from his mouth.

Straker gasped. Then he closed his dry mouth and tried to work a little saliva into it before speaking. "What do you want me to say?"

Alec was glaring at him but Dixon was smiling smugly. "Beg. Beg me to stop. Lots of please and pretty please. I'll tell you if you're doing it right."

Alec's eyes were blazing. Straker looked away, clearing his throat. Tentatively, he began.

"I beg you not to do this. Please, if you have any humanity, please don't do this. I... Is that what you want? Am I doing it right?"

He had meant it genuinely, unsure what to say but Dixon took it wrong. "Don't mess me about."

He landed another half dozen blows on Alec before Straker's stumbling words could convince him he was serious.

"Please don't hurt him. You've won, you've proved you're better than me. I should have taken you seriously. Please, now you have the power, show mercy..." There were only so many ways you could say it.

Dixon kept him talking for several more minutes before he allowed him to trail off into a hoarse croak. So far, once he was convinced he had the upper hand, he seemed to be enjoying this more than hitting Alec. Straker only hoped that he could keep it that way until help - or the

aliens - arrived.

It struck him then that no one knew where they were. It hardly mattered what Dixon did, the aliens would have them soon. But he had to keep trying. There might be a way out. There had to be a way out.

Dixon was tapping his feet, bored, and that was worrying. Straker wracked his brains for some suggestion that might keep him occupied. As the flow of words started to flag, Dixon turned and struck Alec a heavy blow to the stomach.

Thank God it's not Kate, she'd lose the baby.

He had no idea where that thought came from and no capacity to deal with it right now. He almost felt guilty. He had to focus on Alec. He acknowledged the thought and put it aside.

He still kept up an intermittent flow of words, stumbling over them, his lips dry, but he could see that a thought had distracted Dixon.

What next? he wondered.

"Shut up." the man told him.

He shut up.

Dixon was grinning. He did not like that but if whatever was coming kept Alec alive...

"Lick my shoes."

Straker glanced at Alec, who practically had steam coming out of his ears. His look was all *don't you dare* but he was pale, greenish and sweating, unable to hide the damage their tormentor had inflicted.

I'm doing it, Alec. We can talk about it later.

I hope.

Dixon did not move, which meant that Straker had to struggle to get into the right position. He rolled over onto his front, then pushed himself round in a circle by manoeuvring his bound feet.

"I'm waiting." Dixon growled but Straker could hear the amusement in his voice.

Have your fun. You think I'd rather lie here and let it happen?

His chest was level with Dixon's feet so he had to worm his way backwards as quickly as possible - which has not very quickly at all. At one point, Dixon stamped on his back, knocking what little breath he had left out of him.

"Hurry up, Straker."

"I'm moving as fast as I can."

"Don't give me any cheek."

"All right, I'm sorry. I am trying."

Eventually his face was over Dixon's shoes. There was a lot of mud on them. He hoped it was just mud.

"You do it properly." Dixon ordered. "I want to see a difference."

Straker swallowed his anger and his pride. *It's for Alec, that's all that matters.*

That's all that matters.

The mud was gritty against the smooth leather. It tasted of nothing, almost a negative taste. If he did not think about what he was doing it was not so bad, except that his mouth was so dry that it was hard to shift any of it. Maybe he could use his teeth to scrape it off. This could take for ever - but that in itself was no bad thing.

Just so long as the aliens did not arrive. Dixon must be expecting them some time soon.

It seemed like forever before the man told him to back off so that he could see what difference his prisoner had made.

Straker rolled away from him, taking a quick glance at Alec who now looked barely conscious. He guessed only anger and stubbornness were keeping him going.

He had virtually cleared the right shoe and made a sizeable impression on the left. He chuckled to himself. In spite of the situation, he was perversely proud of his work.

Stupid things you do. Stupid things you think.

But what was coming next?

Dixon was grinning again. "Wish I'd got your ghastly little wife here. You frowning, Commander? Don't frown. You're not meant to like it. Or maybe you do like it, eh?"

He laughed disgustingly.

Straker ignored him, turned his face away. Kate was not here. Kate was safe. What else could he come up with? The man had never shown much imagination. He was grinning, though, grinning broadly and Straker knew it was going to be bad. It was all bad. It didn't matter, nothing mattered, as long as it kept Alec alive.

He did not dare look at him.

He's going to kill me. Alec is going to kill me.

Just so long as Dixon doesn't kill him.

"Kneel up." Dixon instructed him.

That took some doing. He had no time to stop and consider the move, he had to be seen to be obeying. He rolled onto his face and tried to pull himself up by main strength. He struggled for a couple of minutes, trying to rise. It was no use, it was too awkward and he was too tired, too hurt. The odd blows and kicks aimed at him had taken more out of him than he thought.

He lay still for moment.

"You giving up?" Dixon asked harshly and raised the timber again.

"No. No, not at all. I'm trying. You just have to give me a moment. I *am* trying."

He rolled onto his side and pulled his knees up into a ball, as tight as he could make it. Then he jerked himself over onto his knees.

He sighed with relief. He had done it. Now he relaxed back on to his heels and pushed himself up.

"That good enough?" he asked, breathless.

He kept his eyes on Dixon's belt, not looking down in defeat or up in supplication or defiance.

Maybe he has beaten me.

I don't care.

Alec.

"You know what to do now?" Dixon asked.

There was no chance to reply. From outside came the sound that Straker feared most, the warbling of a UFO coming in to land. It was over. The two of them were in the hands of people far worse than Dixon.

Dixon himself tensed. Perhaps he had been supposed to keep them in one piece.

He kicked Straker in the chest, knocking him back. Then he stepped behind him, grabbing him under the shoulders. He started to drag him back.

Straker struggled, twisting and turning with all his remaining strength. Dixon held him tighter.

"What's the point? You're dead. You're both dead. Give up."

It was true but it did not stop Straker trying. He was going to go down fighting. It was the

only thing to do if you were terrified.

He wished he had had time to make up with Kate. He wished they had not argued at all. He did not want her to think badly of him. They had barely had a year married, eighteen months since they met. That was shorter than his marriage to Mary.

Dixon was bumping him over the front doorstep and out into the ravaged garden. He could no longer hear the UFO, it must have landed. The aliens would be here in a moment, then they would shove him into one of those tiny canister things to make the journey back.

There was shooting in the distance.

Rescue? He could barely hope for it.

He looked all round, as far as he could crane his neck, and caught a flash of purple.

Foster.

His heart was thumping. Now was the crucial moment.

Dixon dropped him. He thudded to the ground, breath pushed out of him once more as he saw Dixon reach for a gun.

"Freeze!" Foster shouted. "Drop that. Step away from the Commander."

Slowly, reluctantly, Dixon did as he was told. There was still a slight smile playing over his features, however. "Commander? Do you know what he's done?"

"Shut up." Foster ordered, alongside him now. "Down on the floor."

Straker was grateful for that, sure Paul could guess enough to protect him though not knowing what from.

More SHADO people were emerging from the undergrowth. "Aliens terminated, sir." they reported.

Foster knelt by Ed as they took Dixon away. "Medics are on their way, sir."

He produced a pocket knife to cut him free but Straker shook his head. "Alec. Inside. Bad way."

Foster nodded. "I'll see to him."

After that, things got a little blurred. He remembered the medics arriving and Alec being brought out on a stretcher. He remembered the medics tending to him. They must have given him something, though he protested that he was alright. He remembered arriving at the Mayland and being examined.

He remembered Kate walking in. Things became clearer as she took his hand.

"You look awful." she stated calmly.

"You wouldn't say that if you meant it. I think." His head could not be all that clear.

"Anyway, it's Alec who really got whapped. Can you find out -"

"He's in surgery. They'll let us know as soon as there's any news."

He lay back on the bed. There really was nothing he could do - except worry - and he was exhausted.

But there was something he had to do. "Kate, this morning -"

"You're tired. This isn't the time to talk about it."

"Yes it is. I have to. I'm sorry. I am so sorry. I should never speak to you like that, let alone raise my hand to you. You're my wife. And you were right, I am scared but somehow we'll make it work."

She nodded, stroking his hair. "We will. There's no hurry, we've got nine months.

"Now, do you want to go home or stay here? I've spoken to the doctors and they would rather you stayed in for observation but I convinced them that you'd be more relaxed at home. They've given me some painkillers and a sedative for you. That's assuming you want to go

home."

He did want to go home, he wanted to be with her but: "I should stay with Alec."

She shook her head. "He won't come round until the morning. You can do more for him if you've had a good night's sleep."

She was right and he did not have the strength to argue. "Home, then. If that's OK with you?"

She went to get things arranged, then took him home. He was awake enough to know there were still drugs in his system. Even so, he was too agitated to sleep and reluctant to take the sedative.

"What? What is it?" she asked as she put the bowl of soup down in front of him. "It's more than just Alec getting hurt."

His face crumpled. "Alec's going to be so mad at me."

He told her everything. It was good to get it off his chest. She listened, she fed him, she massaged his shoulders. Even so it was hard to relax.

"Am I forgiven?" he asked her.

"By me? Of course. Do you forgive me? I hurt you too."

He kissed her. She held him close and rocked him, sang him, eventually to sleep. His hand rested against her stomach though there was nothing yet to feel.

He dreamed of her and Alec and Johnny but in the morning that was all he could remember.

Kate insisted on feeding him a proper breakfast before driving him to the Mayland. He was stiff and sore. He did not have to admit it to her, she made sure he saw the doctors himself before he looked in on Alec.

"Colonel Freeman should be coming round soon, sir."

He was not going into the studio, not yet. Not until he had made things right with Alec.

"You want me to stay?" Kate asked.

He shook his head and opened the door. Then something occurred to him and he turned back. "What happened to Dixon?"

There was a slight, sharp smile on her face. "I advised Paul to hand him over to Jackson. He should be finished with him soon. And we informed General Henderson. He hasn't replied yet."

He shook his head wearily. "I must have been out of it, I should have dealt with this last night."

"It was dealt with. That's what you have staff for. Go see to Alec."

Then something occurred to her and she put her hand on his arm. "Hold on a moment."

She turned away from him, pulled out a notebook and scribbled something into it. Then she tore out the page and folded it neatly. She handed it to him.

"If he won't come around, show him this. Sorry, bad choice of words, but it might help."

Then she let him go.

He looked at the note, looked at her, then put it in his pocket.

Alec was laid out on the bed, drips and monitors attached to the backs of his hands. His exposed flesh was black and blue or else had a sickly tinge.

He was beginning to stir. Straker sat down beside him, waiting for him to come fully round. It took some time.

Eventually Freeman's eyes fixed on his friend. He swore and kept on swearing. "How could you?"

Straker took a deep breath. "You think I wouldn't have done more than that? You think I wouldn't have gone all the way, whatever he wanted? Just as long it was only me he wanted it from?"

Alec was still glaring. "You - Gimme a drink, my mouth feels like the Sahara."

"Sorry, it says 'nil by mouth'."

"Don't care."

"I do. You are going to recover from this. Even if you don't forgive me." He carried on speaking, not letting Alec get a word in edgeways. "He was taking you apart and there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing. You know how that feels? And then he gave me the chance. He gave away the power and I took it. I did what I needed to do. Would I do the same thing again? Yes. And would I be mad if you'd done the same thing? Of course I would. Now are you going to forgive me or not?"

"Not."

Straker clenched his fists. This was turning out to be worse than he expected. Alec was a stubborn old goat and he had been humiliated but could he not let it go? Could he not see?

He still had Kate's note in his pocket. He pulled it out and opened it without looking, holding it in front of Alec's face.

"This is from Kate. I don't know what it says. She said it would help."

There was a long pause. Straker looked away and when he turned back, Freeman was still glaring at him.

Finally Alec said: "Alright, you're forgiven."

Straker gave a huge sigh of relief. Both men relaxed.

"Ed?"

"Yeah?"

"Did Kate forgive you?"

Straker smiled. "Of course. She gave me the note didn't she? Why do you think I married her?"

"Lucky devil." Alec replied with vehemence.

Silence again, this time a companionable silence.

"Alec?"

"Yeah?"

"How did Paul know where to find us?"

Alec chuckled. "I'm not telling you that. And don't bother asking Paul, I doubt he knows."

Straker frowned. "Then how -"

"I'm not telling you."

Straker thought about it. There was only one person they had spoken to before leaving to meet Dixon.

The doctors returned and Straker left, not before asking one more question.

"Who are you seeing at the moment?"

"Louise. You know, the big blonde in research."

"No I don't but I'll sent her round."

"Thanks."

Kate was waiting for him outside. "Jackson's finished with Dixon. Henderson's washed his hands of him. He says 'usual procedures'."

Straker sighed. "Did you get your flowers yesterday?"

She brightened. "Yes, thanks, they're lovely though I'd almost forgotten them in the rush."

"I'm afraid Alec chose them."

She shrugged. "He has more experience of these things."

"And Miss Ealand wrote the card. I don't even know what it said."

"What are secretaries for?"

He smiled at her. "What does it say?"

"I'm sorry. Can we talk?"

There was a pause, then she spoke again. "That wasn't the question I thought you were going to ask."

He nodded. "What did the note say?"

"It said 'Don't tell me you wouldn't have done the same.'"

Straker gave a wry smile. "I wonder which one of us is more pig-headed."

When they reach the studio, Kate went off to find the blonde Louise. Straker spoke to Miss Ealand.

"Did you tip people off as to where we were?"

She looked up at him. "Not exactly, sir."

"Then what, exactly?"

She thought for a moment. "It was the flowers, sir. Mr Freeman ordered a number twenty three. It seems that is an order the florists understood but it's also an indication that he's carrying a homing device. When you didn't make contact, I asked someone to check if he was."

Straker nodded, smiling. "He can't get that one past me again."

"I'm sure he'll think of something else."

"I'm sure he will. "

Then he had to speak to Jackson. "You've got everything?"

Jackson nodded. "You can kill him whenever you like."

"I don't *like* killing."

Jackson smiled. "I'll make a note of that."

Straker went down to the cells, the lowest level of the complex.

Kate was waiting for him.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked her. "You should be above ground."

Her voice was mild but concerned. "I was waiting for you."

He could feel his heart thumping. There had to be a reason for her to be here. "Is there news? Alec? "

She shook her head. "Nothing like that. It was you I was worried about." She explained before he needed to ask. "You're down here to kill Dixon, aren't you? Because Dixon's a traitor and we kill traitors and you don't delegate jobs like that no matter how much you hate them."

He nodded. "Though half of me would like to see him dead."

She pulled a wry face. "That doesn't make it any better, does it?"

"No, it makes it worse. But it doesn't explain why you're here."

She placed a hand gently on his arm. "That would take it out of you at the best of times and this is not the best of times. So I'll wait out here while you do it... I'll come in with you if you like..."

He could see how much that offer cost her. "No, I don't want that."

She tried to hide her relief. "Then I'll wait out here and when you've finished I'll take you to lunch. Then you can visit Alec or get some rest."

"I don't need -"

"You should be on sick leave. They may think you're invulnerable but don't try and kid me."

He nodded, grateful. "You stay here."

Then he walked down the corridor towards Dixon's cell.

Dixon was sitting on the bed. He sprang to his feet as Straker entered.

"You going to kill me now? You don't have to kill me, I could be useful. I know I made a mistake."

Straker sighed. This was never, ever easy. The man kept babbling on. It was tempting to take out the gun and just shoot him there and then. Perhaps that was the kindest way.

"Shut up." he instructed him.

Dixon shut up, watching him warily. For a moment there was a tense silence between them.

Straker unholstered his gun and spoke slowly, calmly. "You have twice betrayed this organisation. The first time was less serious but it could have resulted in SHADO losing a good officer. The second time... I think any court in the country would convict you of grievous bodily harm and attempted murder, not to mention treason as SHADO defines it. Treason against the human race. You already knew the penalty. We have to maintain security."

He raised the gun, aiming it directly at the man's heart for a quick, clean kill. "Do you have anything to say?"

Dixon sneered at him, knowing it was over now. "This isn't about security, it's revenge. And I'm not even sure if it's revenge for what I did to Freeman or what I did you. Will you tell me that much?"

"It's not revenge."

"Are you sure?" Dixon smirked. "Will you at least tell me how far you would have gone? And if you weren't enjoying it a little?"

Straker knew that was the wrong point at which to kill him. He knew what the man was implying and it was not true. Maybe the part about revenge but not that.

But he shot him anyway.

The bullet made a neat hole in a Dixon's chest and a mess on the back wall. That was someone else's problem.

He holstered his gun and stepped out of the cell. As he turned, he could see Kate waiting at the end of the corridor. He walked slowly towards her, keeping his steps slow and even because he wanted to run.

It seemed forever before he reached her. He took her arm, not sure who he could feel shaking - her or himself. He ought to say something profound, something about life or death or loyalty, but nothing would come into his head.

All he managed was: "Let's go eat."

She nodded and led him towards the surface and the hospital canteen.