

Hell-hole

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*This story comes somewhere between my stories **Two Days and Words of Betrayal**.*

Kate Straker was not sure who was more unhappy, herself or her husband. They had both been summoned to General Henderson's office, had driven to London and were now entering the building. That annoyed Ed because as far as he was concerned he had better things to do. It annoyed her because she felt it was demeaning for her husband, the commander of SHADO, to be ordered around like a newly commissioned Lieutenant. She also had personal reasons to dislike Henderson, reasons that dated back to shortly before her marriage. She did everything she could to avoid him. Every time he asked for her especially - and most particularly if he asked for both of them - she was half afraid that he no longer cared what she could do to his career and was about to humiliate her.

But it wasn't going to happen today, she told herself.

Ed walked briskly past the receptionists. Briskly for him was almost a flat out run for her, so she could tell how unhappy he was. He was rarely so inconsiderate. She had to trot along behind him to the best of her ability.

A moment later they reached the lifts. He pressed the button to hold the doors open for her.

A few more seconds before they saw the General. No, in all probability he would keep them waiting. More time wasted. She had no idea what he wanted. She presumed Ed did not either or he would have told her.

The lift ascended swiftly - and stopped.

Stopped between floors.

She looked at Ed. Ed was looking at the doors. She half expected them to start moving again in a moment but it did not happen.

"What do you reckon?" she asked.

He shrugged but she could already see his muscles tightening. Claustrophobia, the bane of his life. It was bad enough for him to dislike lifts in the normal course of events. Being stuck in one must be a nightmare for him. And what was a nightmare for him was a nightmare for her.

There was a small panel beneath the row of buttons by the side of the doors. The sign on it said *For emergency use only*. She indicated it.

"You think this is enough of an emergency?"

He reached to pry it open. "It's enough of a waste of time. Can't they keep these things working?"

The panel swung open on a hinge. Behind it was a telephone receiver. He lifted it.

"Unless, of course, we're under attack - in which case we should know about it."

That she agreed with. She leant back against the wall while he spoke to someone on the other end of the line. His voice grew more and more icy. The conversation was obviously not going well - which was only to be expected with one of Henderson's staff.

A moment later he placed the receiver back on its mount with a care that indicated he would have liked to have slammed it down. "It's a power failure, confined to the lifts. They can't say when we'll get moving again."

He turned away from her, fists clenched in frustration. "I could almost believe he was doing this on purpose. I mean, of all the lifts to get trapped in..."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "I supposed we just have to relax and let it happen. When they said they can't say, did it seem like they can't say hours or they can't say minutes?"

He looked over his shoulder at her, managing a slight smile. "You want my guess?"

She smiled back. "No, because you're paranoid."

That got a chuckle.

She sat down in the corner, carefully arranging her skirt and wishing she had worn one a little longer. He sat down beside her.

"No point in standing around."

His feet were not quite touching the doors.

She put her hand on his arm. He looked perfectly calm but she could feel the tension in his muscles. She needed to distract him somehow, especially if they were in for a long stay. There was nothing much they could do in the way of work, they had no papers on them because of the unknown nature of the meeting. She had a notebook on her to jot down ideas for the studio.

"What do we do now?" he asked. "Tell ghost stories?"

She smiled. "That's an idea. Though there is one story I'd like to hear. You never did tell me why you don't like..."

"Getting stuck in lifts? Working underground? Submarines?"

"Yeah, that one."

He looked away. "You sure you want to hear that one?"

She did, although she was not sure it was fair to ask him or if this was the best time.

"Were you thinking about it anyway?"

"Yes, I was."

* * *

Commander Edward Straker stood at the door of his office and surveyed the control room with some pride. Today, two years after the foundation of SHADO, was the first day it had been fully staffed and fully functional.

"Three months ahead of schedule, Alec. It's all coming together. We'll even be making movies soon!"

Freeman grinned. "That's the part I'm looking forward to, all those actresses."

Straker raised an eyebrow. "Does Nina know you feel that way?"

Something about that statement seemed to deflate Freeman slightly. "I was meaning to ask you..."

"Go on." Straker moved to sit behind his desk and his friend took the other chair.

"Nina and I have decided that we can't survive her being posted to Moonbase when it becomes operational."

"You want me to assign her somewhere else? I don't think -"

Freeman shook his head quickly. "I might but she doesn't, she's looking forward to it."

Besides, you can't run an organisation on that basis. No, all I'm asking is that you give us plenty of warning. We'd like to break up properly, make an event of it."

Straker smiled. "That should be quite an event. It's not a problem. Should be two or three months before we can get the first crew up there - and I would like her to be on the first crew. I've got the construction reports if you want to take a look."

"Which brings me to SkyDiver."

He could see the amusement in Alec's eyes. He had been banging on about it since he had come up with the idea. A plane launched from a sub, they were dealing with completely new technology. Then again, most of what they had was new technology and Straker was thrilled by it.

"It's ready, then?" Alec asked.

"Captain Carlin's taking her on a shakedown cruise next week. Want to come?"

Alec gave a theatrical shudder. "It's not natural, sitting in a tin can under the sea."

"And flying is?"

They had had this conversation so many times they could repeat it word for word but Straker was determined to be on board when she set sail. As far as he was concerned it was one of the perks of the job.

Alec continued to think he was mad. "Though I have to admit, I'll be glad when we can hit back. Building this stuff is taking too long for my liking."

Straker had to agree with that. But then, he had said it would take SHADO seven to ten years to be up and running. It looked like they might beat that by a year at least.

He was looking forward to that day more than he was looking forward to going home that evening. Home - that was with Mary and Johnny but the divorce had come through three weeks earlier. Now he lived in a bachelor flat, painfully aware that he was no bachelor. He tried to make the place comfortable but more than that, he tried to avoid it.

He went home anyway, cooking himself a simple meal and preparing to do more work.

He wondered what Alec and Nina were doing that evening and grinned. Might there be some way he could keep them together?

He read a couple of scripts and went to bed.

The burglar alarm woke him but too late to stop the tranquilliser darts hitting him from across the room. As he returned to unconsciousness, his only comfort was that the studio would be fully aware he had gone.

* * *

He woke up in a tiny space that smelled of exhaust fumes.

Trunk of a car, he thought. *Hope I don't suffocate.*

He was effectively bound and gagged, so he decided to lie back and wait until there was something useful he could do.

I guess there are worse places to be.

It was only a few minutes before the car stopped. Moments later the lid was lifted and weak sunshine fell on his face. He blinked.

Two pairs of strong hands bundled him out of the car and across a gravel drive. It seemed to be a large garden, set well back from the road. He looked at the two men who held him. One was in his mid-or-late Forties, the other only sixteen or seventeen. There was a clear family resemblance in the shape of the face and the hard eyes. Father and son, he presumed.

They took him through the front door of a decent sized Victorian house, red-brick with stone detailing.

Nice place, he thought.

There were people in the house, a woman and two children eating breakfast in a front room. They looked up as he was taken past.

"Got another one, Dad?" a boy of about ten asked keenly.

"You're not going to be too busy for parents' evening, are you dear?" the woman asked.

"No, of course not." his elder captor assured her.

The exchange chilled Straker. This was normal to them, this was how they lived.

A girl, perhaps just entering her teens, looked up at him then went back to eating her toast.

Straker was hustled down the hall. The younger man opened the door under the stairs and the older one pushed their prisoner down the steps into a stinking cellar.

Straker landed badly, his legs twisting. He lay winded until they followed him down and pulled him to his feet. He was pushed up against a wall.

"Soften him up." the father instructed.

The teenager laid into Straker, pounding him until he was barely conscious. Straker tried to kick at him but he was dazed after his fall and the boy dodged easily, enjoying himself.

"That's enough." The father again.

Straker struggled to remain on his feet as they looked him up and down. The father reached over and tore the tape from his mouth. Now the questions would come. Now the real trouble would start.

Still the man looked him up and down. Finally he spoke.

"You're Straker? Of course you are. You've been building a film studio - only the kind of equipment you're ordering looks more like you're trying to run a small war. Small and highly sophisticated. Half your personnel are ex-services and the rest are high-quality scientists. What's going on, Mr Straker? What are you really doing?"

Straker said nothing. He was not sure he could speak. The younger man leaned over and offered him a mug of water. It was brackish but he drank it. He knew he would need it.

The father walked over to a table that was placed against one wall and pushed it aside. Straker had not had much chance to look around. There was not much to look at. It was a perfectly normal cellar, not a torture chamber - at least not how the movies would picture one.

Once the table was moved, Straker could see a grating in the floor. It was two, maybe three feet square. One side was hinged and the man opened it. The younger one pushed Straker towards it.

"Take a look down." he was instructed.

He did. The hole was deep and narrow. There was something pale at the bottom and glints from the walls. This was where the fetid smell was coming from. It made him want to throw up.

"You go down that hole and you don't come up until you tell me what you're doing and why. I also want the technical specifications for the new equipment and information as to how and why you're recruiting."

"Why?" Straker asked. "Who are you? How do you know anything?"

His captor ignored him. "It's not an infallible method - you can probably see two of your predecessors still down there - but it works nine times out of ten. The knife blades are concreted into the walls to stop you climbing out. There's also a microphone so I know when you want to talk. Or you could decide to tell me now and save us all a lot of trouble. I do have other things to be getting on with."

It was tempting. He could see the blades now he knew what they were. He could see the bones at the bottom. He did not want to go down there. He did not want to die down there. He said nothing.

"No answer, Mr Straker?" The man waited a few moments more. "Throw him down."

He tried to resist but that only destabilised him further. The younger man gripped him firmly, kicked his legs out from under him and pushed.

Straker fell, down and down. The knife blades caught him, slicing through his pyjamas, his skin. He landed with a crunch at the bottom, bones shattering under him. He fell forward, twisting to avoid a knife. It passed within a whisker of his face.

The voice drifted down from above: "Tell me when you're ready."

The grating clanged down and Straker heard the table being pushed back over it. Footsteps walked away.

There was still a little light. He looked around. There was barely room to stand, less with the knives. He was lucky he had not been cut more seriously in the fall. He could not lean back against the walls. With an effort he turned all round. With careful positioning he could rest against the wall between certain blades. Maybe he could squat.

He looked down.

Bones.

People.

Dead people.

The flesh still clung to some, rags of clothing even. There were two skulls. One was picked clean, as if it was on display at a medical school. The other still had the remnants of a face, one eye and most of its brown hair.

A person.

And he was next.

He did the only practical thing he could think of. With great care and deliberation he used one of the blades embedded in the wall to slice the bindings from around his wrists. He managed to do it without removing any more skin. That was something.

He wove himself into a corner between the knives. When he was as comfortable as he could get - not very - the next thing was to make a proper assessment of the situation.

The pit was perhaps twice his height. There were no hand holds except for the knives and these were distributed at random intervals, making it impossible to chimney up to the top. He was not sure if the grating was locked. Below him were what he thought were two complete skeletons. Below that, he presumed, was a concrete floor. There was nothing he could see that would make a realistic tool or weapon.

As for his own condition, he was barefoot and still dressed in the pyjamas he had been wearing when he was taken. He had no useful items on him, not even his watch. His head was still groggy from whatever tranquilliser he had been given. He was in pain from a serious beating and two bad falls. He had at least two cuts on his back, he could feel the blood trickling down, but he did not think they were too bad. And he needed the toilet.

He knew nothing useful about his captors except that this was a family business.

All in all, he was in serious trouble. He could think of nothing he could usefully do to get himself out of there. Except talk, of course.

He leant back in his constricted corner to try and catch up on his interrupted sleep. Maybe later he could come up with some lies that would satisfy them. At the moment his head was too groggy to think clearly.

What would they do if he did talk? Leave him here, probably. Shoot him if he was lucky. The two skulls grinned up at him. He wondered what their last thoughts had been.

Time passed. He dozed when he could, thought when he could not but his thoughts seemed to fly round in circles.

It was so tiny, he could reach out and touch the far wall.

He played out several schemes of lies he could tell his captors. He found none of them convincing himself so he assumed they would not convince them either.

He had to get out of here.

He removed his jacket, tore it into pieces and wrapped it around his hands and feet. He grabbed one of the blades and hauled himself up. It sliced straight through the material. He tried to go on - left hand, right foot - but it was impossible. The pads were too thin, they gave no protection. His hands and feet were bleeding. He could not go on. He jumped down.

He used the ragged remains of the pyjama jacket as bandages. He leaned back against the wall once more, exhausted and defeated.

There had to be a way out.

There was no way out.

Time passed.

He still needed the toilet but now his bladder felt like it was going to burst. He had to empty it.

The thought of urinating on human bones sickened him but there was no help for it. The best he could do was to turn away from the skulls, muttering an apology, and let go. Then he settled back into the far corner.

Losing fluid reminded him how thirsty he was. It had to be past lunchtime now. He could do without the food but he needed water. It was surprisingly warm in here.

The walls were so close.

Time passed.

He dozed again, dreaming sporadically. Mary, Johnny in her arms, was riding an escalator away from him, towards a candy coloured land of clouds and balloons. Alec and Nina were getting married. She looked very smart in her morning suit and Alec looked so sweet in his frilly white dress. General Henderson was dressed as a bear and growling. Or was he a bear dressed as General Henderson? It hardly seemed to matter.

Time passed.

He roused a little, aware that he was feverish and burning up with thirst. He must have caught an infection from somewhere. It was hardly difficult round here. There was pain in his hands, his feet, his chest, his back. And the walls, he could see them coming towards him.

He pounded on the concrete, trying to push it back. It kept coming. It was going to crush him. Except it wouldn't, would it? It wouldn't be that quick. He would be left hanging there, pierced and held up by the knives as the walls slowly drove the breath from him and ground his bones to power.

Sobbing with fear, he collapsed once more.

"Grow up." said a voice.

He looked round but there was no one there. Perhaps there was an electronic speaker.

"Leave him alone." said another voice. "You weren't any better."

He turned round and round, unable to see anyone except the skulls. The skulls. The jaws were moving. They were talking to him.

"I never sobbed." said the first one. "I swore but I didn't sob."

"Yes you did."

The two of them were bickering at his feet. He stared at them, uncomprehending.

"You're dead. You're dead." he gasped.

"Don't be so snooty." said the first. "So are you."

He slammed his hands over his ears and screwed his eyes up. And continued to sob.

Time passed and his consciousness rose and fell. Sometimes he would dream tortured and twisted dreams. At times those dreams would mesh with reality. Occasionally, just once or twice, he was granted moments of lucidity. Those were scarcely better. Reason told him he would die, slowly and painfully. There was so much left in his life to do. He hoped Alec could complete SHADO.

But moments of clarity were rare. Mostly he was immersed in pain and fear. More and more often and for longer periods he was unconscious.

It occurred to him to answer his captors' questions. Sadly, longingly he dismissed the thought.

It was so hot.

He was roused by sounds above him. Had they come to urge him to talk? To heap some new torment on him?

No, no one spoke. There was someone in the cellar but they were probably looking for a tool or a mislaid piece of junk.

He wondered if his captor had made it to parents evening.

Footsteps moved away and he heard a faint voice saying: "The Commander's not down there, sir."

Commander? SHADO? Rescue?

He tried to shout but no sound emerged. His mouth was far too dry.

He tried again and this time managed a little squeak but the footsteps were retreating up the stairs. The last he heard was a voice calling: "It stinks down here."

They had gone and taken all hope with them. He really was going to die down here. He contemplated throwing himself onto one of the knives. That would be quicker, if he still had the strength left to do it properly. Otherwise it would just be more pain.

Heavy footsteps were coming down the steps, accompanied by Alec's voice: "Look's pretty ordinary but I would like to know where that smell's coming from."

This time he had to do it, this time he had to make himself heard.

"Alec. Alec." He was barely audible to himself.

"Shush, shut up." Alec was saying. "I thought I heard something."

Hoped dawning, Straker tried again. He shouted with all his might. "Alec. Down here."

"Ed? I can hear you, Ed, but I can't tell where it's coming from. Keep talking."

"Can't. Down here. Table."

"Table?" Alec sounded confused. "Ah, I get you. The grating."

Straker could hear the table being dragged away and more light fell on him. A moment later he heard a shot and the grating was lifted. He saw Alec's face above him.

"My God. And the knives." Over his shoulder he called: "Get a rope, quick. And the medics."

Moments later the end of a rope came snaking towards Straker. He tried to tie it around himself but his fingers fumbled.

"Can't... Can't do it."

Alec's voice was encouraging but mildly desperate. "You've got to tie it round you, Ed."

We can't get someone down to you, there's no room."

But it was no use, Straker's injured hands and feverish brain would not function. He was barely conscious by now.

He blacked out for a moment.

Alec was above him, hanging upside down as he tied a rope securely around him. Then he held Straker in place in the centre of the shaft, pulling him away from each knife blade in turn as they made their slow, surreal progress to the top.

Darkness again.

He was lying in Alec's arms, shivering wildly.

"It's alright. It's alright." Alec was telling him. "There's a chopper on the way."

"Out." he gulped.

"Yeah, you're out."

He shook his head. "Outside."

"Whatever you say."

Alec carried him up the steep steps and along the hall to the front door. Straker was vaguely aware of other people in the house. Alec called for blankets and gently wrapped him in them before carrying him out into the rainy garden.

The next time he came round he was in a small, private room at the Mayland Hospital. The walls were closing in. He screamed until the medics came rushing in and sedated him.

The time after that, the curtains were open and he felt like a complete idiot. A complete idiot who was uncomfortably boxed in.

Alec was there soon after. "The guy's been doing it for years and nobody knew. He's a freelance information broker. *Was* a freelance information broker. Is now a corpse."

"And the rest of the family?" Straker asked.

Alec grimaced. "We killed the wife and the elder son on Henderson's orders. They were too heavily involved. The other two kids, we took their memories back before they knew what was happening. They're in a children's home."

He nodded. "The skeletons down the hole?"

"Been given a decent burial." He handed Straker several sheets of printed notes. "A policeman and an industrial chemist. Sounds like people we could have used."

Straker nodded. To hold out to the end...

Slowly his body healed. Slowly he could deal with closed curtains, not being able to see out. He could do it. He could deal with it.

Alec was reluctant to broach the subject but when he did he was to the point. "You're claustrophobic and you work in a hole in the ground. Doesn't exactly go well together. Not to mention planes, rockets and subs."

Straker shook his head. "It's not like that in space, not when you can see forever. See right back to the beginning of time. I could never be claustrophobic up there. I guess it would be the same in a plane. As for the rest... I'll just have to deal with it."

Alec grunted dismissively but he was right behind Straker when, trying so hard to hide his fear, the Commander returned to SHADO HQ. He watched over him as they caught up on the routine paperwork and checked on the developments that had occurred since Straker was last there. And it was Alec Freeman who went out on SkyDiver for her commissioning cruise.

* * *

He was alright as he walked across the open lots. He was alright in the buildings. He was alright looking out of the window of his office. It was as the office descended and the window

disappeared that he started to shake.

It was Straker's third day back at the office. Yesterday and the day before Alec had insisted on shadowing him for the whole day.

"It's a waste of time, Alec. And you can see I'm fine. Do I look like I have a problem?"

Alec didn't answer that one but he had not appeared this morning to shepherd his Commander through the day. And Straker was shaking, scared out of his wits to be alone in an enclosed space, not able to see the sky.

Things improved a little when he got down to the control room, though he knew that he was farther from the open-air. The room was bigger, was full of people, was full of life. Nina was rewiring one of the consoles. Others were monitoring the flow of information from the newly positioned SID.

"Good morning, Commander." said one of the girls, one of the latest batch of recruits. He had not seen her here before. "Would you like a cup of coffee?" she asked.

He nodded, though he suspected she was trying to curry favour. "Bring it to my office."

He settled in to try and work his way a little further through the mountain of paperwork that had built up without him. He could not concentrate. The claustrophobia seemed worse when he was not looking at the walls. He could feel them closing in. On the paper in front of him he could see the two skulls chatting to each other, one picked clean, one still decaying.

That could have been me. That will be me if I go on like this.

He had come so far already. He had, he thought, reduced the fear to manageable levels. At least, levels that were manageable in every day life but he could not see his life becoming every day in the near future. Perhaps not ever.

The walls were closing in. Nothing he did could prevent that. His hands were shaking.

He yelled as the coffee went over his hand, his papers, everywhere. He dropped the mug and sucked on the scalded area. That hurt. But also, in a way, it helped. It helped to bring him back to reality.

He stood up, used his handkerchief to wipe as much coffee off the papers as possible and headed in the direction of the washroom, barking over his shoulder for someone to go clear up the mess. The cold water helped the pain of the large red mark across his skin.

That's nothing to worry about. But you know what is.

All the while he had been in hospital he had resisted seeing any kind of mental health professional in case it cast a shadow over his Commandership. *I can do this*, he told himself. He was not so sure of that now. At the very least he needed help, more help than Alec could give him.

He trudged wearily down to the medical section. Doctor Williams would be checking through profiles of potential new recruits. This, Straker suspected, was rather more urgent.

The old man was sitting at his desk, leafing through papers. He looked up as the Commander entered but did not get a chance to speak.

"Doctor, I'm claustrophobic. And I can't do this job if I'm claustrophobic. What are we going to do about it?"

The doctor nodded and smiled. "You've obviously come a long way by yourself. And I don't see that you can't do the job within certain restrictions. You are eminently suitable in every other way. Now, tell me about the problem."

"The last thing I need is restrictions." But with an internal sigh of relief, Straker spent the next three hours getting it all off his chest.

* * *

"I was right about not having a problem with space but it still amazes me how long it's taken. What is it, ten years now in round figures? I was seeing Williams for two years and I have to say he was a lot of help but it was hard work. And even now..."

Ed's voice trailed away and he looked at his watch. He smiled.

"Mrs. Straker, you are a very devious woman. You know how long we've been here?"

She looked at her watch. "Nearly two hours. You want to get on the phone again?"

"They're probably wondering if we're still awake in here. I'm not exactly living up to my reputation, am I?"

At that moment the lift jerked and their ascent resumed. Kate had to be suspicious, the timing was too good.

When they reached the top floor, Henderson was waiting for them. He was scowling as usual.

She glared at him. She knew. She only wondered if he was going to admit it. Then Jackson appeared around Henderson's office door.

The shrink nodded to the Commander. "Congratulations, sir. A very effective form of therapy."

Henderson was positively growling. "You passed the test. You can go back to your own office."

Ed's expression was as icy as the General's was hot. Then he smiled. He had won. They had won.

"Of course, General. But might I ask who springs these surprise tests on you?"

Henderson just glared at him. Then he swung the glare round to cover Kate's smirk.

Mr and Mrs Straker turned round and stepped back into the lift. The doors slid shut and Ed pressed the button for the ground floor. He put his hand on Kate's arm, squeezing it gently.

"You know, I think Jackson approves of you."

She raised an eyebrow. "You need his approval?"

"No but I prefer to have it." He paused a moment. "You think they're watching us?"

She looked around. "There's got to be a camera in here somewhere or at least a microphone."

"I hope so." He took her in his arms and gave her a very long, lingering kiss all the way to the ground floor.