

Herod

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*This is a sequel to my story **Conspiracy**.
Contains some adult material.*

It was the Sunday between Christmas and New Year and the congregation of the little Methodist Church were filing out into the damp. The Strakers stopped at the door to speak to the preacher, Ed carrying the sleeping baby Samantha.

"A good sermon." he told the quiet young woman at the door. "Thought-provoking."

She smiled. "I find it gets a good response. It's surprising how ready people are to deal with the Massacre of the Innocents straight after Christmas. Antidote to all the schmaltz, I suppose."

Kate Straker reached out to stroke her baby's ash blonde hair. "Makes you count your blessings."

"Yeah." Ed said. "It does."

The queue of worshippers behind them pushed them on and they moved out into the car park. Ed strapped Sam safely into the back, then climbed into the driver's seat. They were in Kate's car. She had been reluctant to give up her SHADO sports model for something like a normal estate, even if it was custom-built, but with a baby they had to be practical.

She was watching him as he got in. "Johnny?"

He nodded. "But it's not the same now she's here."

Kate smiled. "I'm glad."

They drove back to the studio. "I've got some things to do round the lots, can you take Sam down with you? There's a bottle in the bag if I don't get back in time for her feed."

Ed smiled. "Sure, no problem. We won't be able to do that for much longer, not once she can walk and talk. But you might want to come down first. I'm going to call Gay and Mark."

She grinned. "You've got it sorted out? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I heard this morning, I could hardly tell you in church."

They went down to HQ, picking up Alec and Ginny on the way.

"We don't get enough good news." said Ginny.

"Nina'll be pleased." said Alec.

"You're all going to interrupt me, aren't you?" Ed sighed theatrically.

Everyone was smiling when he asked for a private channel to Ellis and Bradley. SHADO's grapevine was extremely efficient. The rest of the senior staff hung around in his office, out of the way of the camera.

Gay and Mark looked expectant but slightly apprehensive when they appeared on screen.

"You have news for us, sir?" she asked.

"I do." Straker replied. "Subject to your agreement on certain conditions, I'm able to grant your request."

Gay Ellis gave an uncharacteristic shriek of joy. "We're getting married?"

Bradley was more cautious. "Er, sir... What conditions?"

"Don't worry, they're mostly what you asked for. You'll be able to leave Moonbase within two months. Gay will take over running SHADO's training school and you, Mark, will take over pilot training. You can get married any time after that. You may get called back to active duty in an emergency but there should be no problem with you having children." He smiled. "I'm hardly in a position to stop you now. There's even a house in the grounds you can take, with plenty of garden."

Mark Bradley leaned over and kissed his new fiancée. "Thank you, sir, that's exactly what we wanted."

Alec Freeman stuck his head into the door and told them: "Nina's got a bottle of non-alcoholic champagne on ice for you."

A look passed over Gay's face. "Does she have reason to celebrate?"

Ed nodded. "I'm giving her your job. Do you want to tell her?"

"Please."

They finished the call with some routine business. By that time, Kate had given them her congratulations and disappeared to get on with her own job but Colonel Lake was still hanging around.

"I think I've got some good news of my own, though on a strictly professional level."

She used the intercom to call Keith Ford in. He came carrying a box of transcripts, maps, graphs and other information.

Alec blinked. "OK, you got me. What is it?"

She grinned, making them wait. "We think... We think we've found their breeding colony."

The two senior officers stared at her and her smile broadened into Cheshire Cat proportions as she launched into her explanation. "It's down to Keith, really. He's been looking into anomalous radio traffic. We couldn't tell what it was at first..."

She explained how Ford had brought her the beginnings of a theory and together they had monitored, collected and interpreted data. They had drawn up statistics and applied code breaking skills.

She unrolled a huge map across the desk and stabbed her finger at a speck in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. "There."

"Where?" said Alec. "It's a dot. It's probably a printing error."

"It's there, they're there and they're breeding. I don't have all the details yet but I'm sure."

Ed nodded. "It fits. It's what we've been looking for. It could be a bluff, it could easily be a bluff, but it might be right. You two get back to it while we go through this. I'll call a staff meeting for..." He checked his watch. "First thing tomorrow. We don't want to rush this, we need to get it right."

She ushered Ford out. Ed and Alec got down to studying the information.

"You think they're right?" Alec asked.

"I don't know. It's what we want to hear and I'm always suspicious of that." He looked across at Sam, sleeping peacefully in her carry cot. "On the other hand, half of me hopes they're wrong."

In the end he was convinced. The problem was, who should he take. Himself, of course.

And the attack needed to be of overwhelming force to ensure victory with the least number of casualties. That meant he need senior officers in charge of the different wings of the assault. Which meant Alec and Paul.

Could he really justify taking both of them? He would need to take Colonel Lake to sort out the scientific aspect as soon as they were in. That would mean the entire senior staff except Kate. Besides the fact that he did not like leaving her alone, it was an enormous risk.

Reluctantly he decided that he could not justify leaving any of them behind.

"It's a bloody awful place to attack." said Alec. "Too far from anywhere." but SHADO threw everything they had onto the bleak speck of volcanic rock in the middle of the all-encompassing ocean. Sky One and the new Sky Two engaged half a dozen sleek fighters while aircraft and landing craft brought in every spare man and woman that SHADO could muster. Straker came in with the transport planes, a bumpy landing. His party took the airstrip, trying to prevent the enemy craft from returning home.

He looked up as something exploded above him. Sky Two by the looks of it. Shrapnel rained down into the sea.

The enemy were not ready for them. They had got their planes up but the anti-aircraft guns - he could see four - were not yet manned, though there were people running for them now. Straker shot down three guards and ran for the controls of the nearest. There were four planes dog fighting above him so Sky One was badly outnumbered. Carlin needed help.

Yet the guards seemed more interested in something else. Most of them had formed up around the collection of buildings at the foot of the volcano. They were blocky, concrete structures, though one was taller. Straker waved some of his own people to the guns and pressed on.

Plumes of sand and rock were exploding on the beach, had been since the first landing craft had arrived. Alec and Ginny were leading them in. He saw a shell fall close to them. Through the debris, he could not see what had happened. He faltered.

Then Alec was across from him, spraying machine gun fire around to cover those cutting through the barbed wire wreathing the complex.

Straker smiled.

He pressed on, searching for cover around the corners of buildings and taking out man after man as they fired back. He wondered how much they knew - whether they had been compelled or brainwashed - but he had no time for that kind of thought, for sympathy, nor for his burning curiosity as to what lay inside those buildings. There was no sign of any aliens but he had not truly expected them.

Someone was coming up on his right. He swung round, ready to fire.

It was Paul. He had a fierce grin on his face and dust on his clothing. He said nothing but kept on firing. They moved forwards together.

There were still gunmen at the windows but none on the door of the main building. Straker and Foster raced between the deafening hail bullets and made it to the shelter of the doorway.

It was a hospital, not that different from the Mayland, only smaller.

They were wearing the opposition down now. Alec's party made it through the backdoor a few moments later. He had blood running from cuts on his face and hands but it did not seem to be troubling him. The last of the guards, standing on the stairs, looked around at the overwhelming opposition and threw down their weapons.

"Who's in charge?" Straker asked but they were not willing to answer that.

He sent Paul and Alec to check the other buildings. Lake was in now and he set off with her to take a look around.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" Alec asked for the door.

"What?"

"To let Kate know it's over."

"We don't know it is yet. I'll call her when I'm sure." He was relieved, though. Bringing almost the entire senior staff had been a huge gamble and for himself, he had more to live for now than he had ever had.

But Kate would keep SHADO going if she had to. Not that it looked like she would have to, now.

"I'll call her and let her know we're in."

"Alec, tell her I'm OK."

Alec smiled and nodded as he left.

Straker and Lake proceeded into the building, half aware of what they would find. There was administration on the ground floor. That was quickly secured. The next floor up held two delivery rooms and an operating theatre - it was not a large building.

The first of the prisoners were on the second floor, in an open ward. They cowered in their beds, distressed by the fighting, arms curled around their unborn babies.

"Please," whispered a petite Chinese girl by the door "please, have you come to rescue us?"

Straker held out his hand to her. "We have. As soon as it's safe we'll get you out of here."

He needed to move on. There were two more floors and the thought of these women held here to be used as brood mares turned his stomach. He saw Kate in their place, Kate as she had been only a few months ago.

He raised his voice. "These guards will protect you. You are perfectly safe. You'll be out of here soon."

He left four men there and moved on up, Lake beside him.

"It's exactly what I expected," she said. "Can't wait to get at their records."

Then she shivered. "Glad it's not me."

"So am I," he said, surprising both of them.

The next floor held a similar scene to the last except that here it was nursing mothers. The babies were picking up the tension in the air and wailing with all the might of their little lungs. This was driving him crazy with thoughts of his own family. Once again he gave the prisoners a few words of reassurance and moved on.

The way to the next floor was locked and barred, a well built structure that seemed integral to the building.

A quavering voice came through the intercom. "We're not letting you in. We've got hostages."

Straker stepped forwards. "Then you'll give them up. We hold the whole island and you have nowhere to go."

"What if we kill them?"

"We kill you."

There was no response so he pressed on. "We don't want to use force but we will if we have to. Open the door."

He gave it a moment, then turned to order the door blown open. There was a noise behind him and he suppressed a smile as he swung round to see the door thrown wide. A group of the

white coated medics, male and female, trooped out with their hands in the air.

There was no longer any sound of fighting outside and, although he proceeded cautiously, he was considerably more confident than he had been half an hour ago.

This floor was different. Instead of an open ward there was a corridor lined with six doors. Cell doors.

There was a guard at the end, standing ready. He opened fire.

Straker dived for the floor, trying to take aim. Above him, someone fired. The guard dropped, dead.

Straker pulled himself to his feet. "Serves me right for thinking we'd finished. Thanks."

Lake nodded. "You think he's got the keys?"

He took a look, finding them attached to the man's belt. He opened the first cell door, scared of what he might find.

It was small enough that even looking in brought on a rush of claustrophobia. The woman sat on the bare bed dressed in a hospital gown, her hair matted. She looked up angrily.

"Who are you? A new doctor?"

He shook his head. "I'm here to get you out of here."

She hesitated, then smiled radiantly. "I knew somebody would. That's why I'm in here, I wouldn't give up. Come on, let's get the rest of the girls out."

He helped her to her feet and together they opened up the rest of the cells.

That was where Kate would be.

He headed downstairs to talk to her.

Alec was in the lobby. "Everything's secured. Got the preliminary casualty figures. You want them?"

Straker nodded grimly.

"At least eighteen of theirs dead and about twenty injured. We've got three confirmed dead: Bryson, Murphy and Lew Waterman. Peter Carlin ejected and we haven't found him yet. We're missing one transport plane and two landing craft and we've got twelve injured."

Straker sighed deeply. "Could have been worse, I guess. Let's hope for some good news. At least it didn't turn out to be a bluff. Now I've got to talk to HQ."

He made his way to the temporary communications post. Keith Ford - who had insisted on accompanying them to see if he was right - was frowning into his radio set. He looked up, saw the Commander coming and held out the handset to him.

"It's Colonel Straker, sir."

"Kate? It's been a success. We -"

"I'm glad to hear it." her voice crackled over the airwaves. "Now, could you send me Sky One and Two?"

He frowned. "You've got a situation?"

"Moonbase has two incoming. Was four. The interceptors are a bit stretched."

He gritted his teeth. "We lost both planes."

"Then we'll just have to do without them. Can I do anything for you? Because if not, I'd better get onto this."

"You do that. Call me back. Straker out."

He turned back to his own work, confident in her ability but still wishing he was there. It was not that long since he had first let Alec take charge.

He went to find Colonel Lake, who was busy sorting information in the office.

"We're getting reams of data. Lots of it in English, some in code, some in the aliens' own

language by the look of it. That'll give us something to get our teeth into."

She was seriously enjoying herself and he could not blame her. This could be the most important, most productive day for SHADO at least since Kate had captured the UFO.

"Have you been over to the nursery?" she asked absently.

"No, I've been too busy." He knew he was lying, he wondered if she did too.

She did not seem to take a great deal of notice, too wrapped up in her papers. No one would think it odd if he did not spend time with the children, would they? It was not his job. It was all too much.

He changed the subject to himself. He hoped Kate was getting on OK. Had he been a fool to commit all their resources here? Yet anything else might have lost them the prize.

Within hours the injured and prisoners were being evacuated from the island. Lake had the first mass of information packed up and ready to be transported to HQ.

"There are so many different things we might learn from this." she enthused, almost bouncing with uncharacteristic excitement. "What do you want first?"

He frowned, looking across to the nursery building that Alec had secured. "The children. Are they human? Are they alien? We need to know how to deal with them. We also need which of the adults were under compulsion and which were volunteers. Who can we trust?"

She nodded. "We'll get on to it."

Then she got on the plane.

Alec was coming out of the nursery. "Are you ever coming over? Because there's something I think you ought to see."

"Is it a security matter?"

"Not exactly."

"Then you deal with it. I'm busy with the medical data."

Alec pulled a face. "You know, don't you?"

But he left it at that.

Half an hour later, a call came through from Kate. "We got them. The interceptors took out one more, the Mobiles got the other."

He smiled. "Well done."

"I wasn't driving." but he could hear the pride in her voice. He would catch up on the details later but first time out, she had succeeded.

He went to tell Alec, avoiding any other subjects.

Alec lifted an eyebrow. "You're surprised?"

He shook his head. "No but I'm pleased."

He and Alec were on the next transport out, taking the long flight back to the UK. Alec was restless because he was not the pilot, pacing up and down the gangway. Straker watch him through half closed eyelids, got a dirty look when he muttered "Backseat driver.", then fell asleep.

Kate was glad to see them back in one piece. He kissed Sam and sent them home to get some sleep. "We'll all be busy tomorrow."

She had been on duty for over three straight days.

And then he got down to work and the nightmare he had been holding off closed in. He went home himself a few hours later, played with his daughter and made love to his wife - who asked: "Is this a time when I ask you what the matter is or when I don't?"

He grimaced. "I'm off my game?"

"Not at all, you're just more... frantic than usual. Was there something on the island that

you weren't expecting?"

"I only wish there had been. Forget it for tonight, you'll find out soon enough."

Twelve hours later he called a meeting in the conference room. All the colonels were there, except Foster who had been left in charge of clearing up on the island prior to demolition. Doctor Schroder and Doctor Jackson, the heads of their physical and mental medical sections, were also included.

Colonel Lake addressed them. "I have the preliminary findings from Tracy Island."

Straker frowned. "Tracy Island?"

"Sorry, sir. That's what people have taken to calling it."

"Off that children's TV programme." Kate explained.

"The one with the improbable flying machines." Alec added.

Straker was momentarily thrown by his senior staff's familiarity with children's television. But then, that was the business they were supposed to be in. He put it down to keeping an eye on the competition. He hoped Jackson was not putting it down to anything else.

He told Lake to carry on.

"We now know that ninety seven children have been bred at the colony."

"There weren't anything like that number on the island." Alec said.

"I know. The older ones are with foster parents. We're still retrieving some of the names and addresses. Preliminary genetic analysis and the records we've deciphered tell us that these children are basically human but they do have added alien DNA. We don't yet know what that's for or what it does. To be honest, we're not entirely sure what the children are for. They could be simply a living organ bank but the fact that care has been taken over their education and upbringing - rather than simply leaving them on the island and keeping them healthy - indicates they could be a different kind of invasion. They could be intended as the new ruling class of Earth."

Alec shook his head with disgust. "They're just kids. They're no threat."

"Maybe." said Straker. "But we don't know what the genes do. We don't know how much indoctrination the older ones have had already. Give us some facts and figures, please, Colonel."

Lake reeled them off. "Like I said, there are ninety seven children. The eldest is three years and nine months, the youngest was conceived two weeks ago. Roughly fifty male and female. There are a number of burials on the island that we have yet to investigate, they could be early attempts.

"There are thirty one mothers registered but we have only found twenty six of them. Again, we think the others are buried on the island. They all have good genes - we've got scientists, athletes, etc, etc. They include two or three high-profile disappearances that we hadn't linked to the aliens."

She hesitated a moment. "We don't have positive IDs on the fathers yet. All we know is that there are only six of them and one of those fathered over half."

Straker caught Kate giving him an odd a look.

Lake handed round a folder to each person. "This is what we have already, although what some of it means I don't know."

Straker took his and glanced through it, though he was aware of most of the contents.

"The question" he said very deliberately "is how dangerous are these children? Can we allow them to live?"

He could feel their eyes on him.

He looked at Lake. "Can you answer that?"

She shook her head slowly. "And, worst case scenario, it may be years before we do know. We're years away from deciphering the human genome, let alone that belonging to the aliens. If the relevant information is filed in the aliens' own language - well, we've never had enough of it to attempt any translation work. Worse still, it may not be there at all. They may not have kept the doctors informed of what they were really up to. It could come down to simply watching and waiting and that - I hate to say it - could take a lifetime. I'm sorry, sir, but that's how it stands."

He nodded sharply. "How soon before you've got through all the documentation in English?"

"In detail? Months. Enough to tell you if the information is there? Probably twenty four hours."

"Then we'll meet again in twenty four hours. Dismissed."

He rose slowly as the others left the room. Kate went over to Sam, who was sleeping peacefully in the corner of the room. She was such a placid baby. He realised they had got lucky in that respect.

"I've got a meeting with Mr Imura and his financial people in half an hour." Kate said. "It would help if you could stick your head round the door."

He wondered then if she had understood the implications of what he had said. But she squeezed his hand without looking up at him. "Twenty four hours. It might be good news."

"It might." he said, squeezing back.

Someone cleared their throat behind him. He turned to see that Lake was waiting by the conference table, looking vaguely embarrassed.

"Could I have a word, Commander? In private?"

Kate nodded. "I must be going." she asked to Ed: "Do you want to take Sam?"

He shook his head quickly. "She might... alter my judgment."

Kate nodded, picked up their daughter and walked away. "You know where to find us if you need us."

That left him with Lake and he already had an idea what she was going to say.

"Sir... Ed... I didn't like to say anything in the meeting but I've identified one of the fathers, the one who... The one with the most."

He sighed. "Just tell me, Ginny, because I suspect I already know."

"You saw the children?"

"No, I was too busy." and again he knew he was lying to himself.

She looked down at the table then back up at him. "Well, there are an awful lot of blue-eyed blondes. They're yours, fifty one of them." she paused, apparently glad it was out. "I suppose this is sincerest form of flattery."

He smiled wryly. "I suppose it is. Do you know any of the other fathers?"

"Not for certain, not yet. Though I've got some ideas."

He picked up his folder, fidgeting with it. "If they could take my sperm without my knowledge, it could be anyone."

"Might not even be sperm. They might have a technique to extract DNA from ordinary cells. They could have done it any time you were captured and unconscious - maybe even some other time when they just managed to get a cell sample."

He nodded once more. "Ginny, I want this kept quiet. Not really for me, though I'm going to need to explain to Kate. If the kids are as obvious as you say, it's going to be an open secret."

But it could well be that other people in SHADO -"

"- are also fathers? I know. I'm dealing with this myself and I'll bring any results straight to you."

"I'm grateful." He smiled and made to go out.

"Ed?"

He hesitated. "Yes?"

"If we do know the fathers and... And the children... If they..."

"If they have to be killed."

"If they do, will you tell the fathers?"

He took a deep breath. "I don't know, Ginny, I really don't."

He went back to his office and sank his head in his hands. Children. Ninety seven children. Ninety seven children who might be too dangerous to live and he would be the one to order their deaths.

No, he would be the one to kill them because there was no way on earth that he could delegate a job like that. Yet there was also no way he could endanger the Earth in order to save their lives.

He applied himself to studying the data he already had but his thoughts kept drifting to Sam and Johnny. He had begun to come to terms with his part in his son's death, especially since the birth of his daughter. Now he was about to compound that crime many times over. And Sam, she was safe for now but what would be her eventual fate? What would he one day have to do to her?

But he was the Commander of SHADO and he had to save his world and not those he loved.

God damn the world.

There was a knock at the door and Colonel Lake came in.

"Anything?" he asked, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice.

She looked apologetic. "There's a little but it's not what you want to hear. The most important thing is that I've identified the second father. It's Alec."

He nodded, not in the slightest surprised. "Can you ask him to come in?"

"Sure but there is one other thing." Again she looked embarrassed. "Awkward in a different kind of way. I ruled somebody out. Paul Foster is not one of the fathers and I'm really not sure what he'd feel about that under the circumstances. Not if he found out about you and Alec."

Straker looked up at her. "Then he'd better not find out."

She nodded. "I'll get Alec. You want me to stay?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm not sure how he's going to take this."

She left and he looked at his watch. It had been six hours already.

Alec and Kate came in together. She was carrying Sam and he was not sure he wanted to see either of them. How could he go back to them if...

He shook his head. "Kate? Did you have something?"

She and Alec looked at each other. "We've been talking."

"And?"

"And we thought we'd better talk to you."

He sighed, sitting back in his chair.

"We were worried about you." she said. "Worried about what it's doing to you."

"And you've come to talk me out of ordering the executions."

"Not exactly." said Alec.

Straker looked at him sharply. "What, then?"

Alec sat down. "We came to tell you that it's your decision and we'll back that decision, even if it means pulling the trigger ourselves."

Kate was nodding quickly, holding tight to Sam. "We're in this together. Always."

Straker opened his mouth but no words came out. He did not know what to say, was not even sure what he was feeling. Gratitude, mostly, tinged with guilt.

"Thank you." he said. "Thanks. I hope it won't come to that."

He took a deep breath. "Kate, there's something I need to say to you but I have to speak to Alec first."

She nodded. "I can guess. I'll leave you to it."

She left.

Straker stood up, hands behind his back, not looking at his friend. "There's no point in beating about the bush. Ginny's identified two of the fathers. I'm one and you're the other."

There was no answer. A very long no answer.

He turned. "Say something, Alec."

"Say something? It's impossible, you know that. I can't have kids." Alec's face was blank, too closed off for Ed to read.

Straker sighed to himself. He had expected it to be like this. Alec had always kept his 'little problem' very quiet. As Alec himself had said "In my position, it's kind of an advantage."

Neither of them had ever really believed that.

"Impossible?" Straker said. "We are talking about people who perform inter-species organ transplants on a regular basis. To them it's child's play." He winced. "No pun intended."

After a moment Alec nodded. "It's a shock, though. I've known all my adult life, just about, I couldn't have kids and now I've got some. What does it mean? What do I do?"

Straker grimaced. "You might want to reconsider your offer."

Alec shook his head vehemently. "If it has to be done, it has to be done. In a way, this makes it easier. I'm not treading on someone else's ground. Except the mothers', of course."

Ed nodded, guiltily glad to share the pain. "But we can't assume the worst. We have to judge it on the facts."

Over the next few hours they reviewed the information as it came in, though it was more a question of what was not coming in. There were no further positive identifications of fathers.

"We may never know." Lake told them. "We can't check every man with a high IQ or good health."

And there was no information whatsoever as to the purpose and effects of the alien DNA. There was little enough on the upbringing of the older children. They were working in the dark. Straker knew that he would have to call it on instinct alone.

He took a short catnap but woke up screaming. Too vivid images of himself with a gun to a child's head and of course the child was Johnny. He had expected that to be the case.

He showered, changed his clothes and got ready for the meeting. The last thing he did was to tell Kate, tell her he was a father again, and walk away before she had time to react. He knew he was being unfair, knew she would forgive him and felt bad about it but there was just too much to cope with at the moment.

He sat down at the conference table, Alec at his right hand, Kate at his left. The same group had assembled as before. He looked around their faces and they looked expectantly or apprehensively back at him.

Finally, he fixed on Colonel Lake. "Do you have any further information that needs to be considered?"

She shook her head. "As I said before, we have enough information to keep us going for months - possibly years - and much of it may be important but preliminary surveys indicate that we will not find out the purpose of the alien DNA added to the children. Sorry, sir."

"It's not your fault if it's not there."

He looked around their faces again, reluctant to announce a decision that he knew was almost certainly wrong.

He began. "I must emphasise that, as ever, this is my decision and any consequences will fall upon my head and mine alone."

(At least, he hoped that was true. Alec was muttering something he did not want to hear and Kate was squeezing his leg under the table.)

He carried on. "The problem is characterised by a lack of information but in such an absence SHADO policy - outlined by myself - is to put security first. The safety of this planet is paramount and in this case, that automatically leads to the decision that these children must be killed."

He could feel the tension around the table.

He hurried on before he could be interrupted. "However, in this case I am not prepared to take that decision."

There was a sigh of relief from everyone around the table - everyone except Jackson.

"To do so would be to treat these children as the aliens have treated them and their parents - as disposable, as commodities. What I am proposing is the more dangerous course. The children will have to be monitored for their entire lives and at the least sign of a problem, any or all of them may have to be killed." He gave them a *believe me on this* look. "But I really think this is the only human option."

With the energy of relief, the group got down to the practical arrangements. Alec was to trace and retrieve all those already placed with foster parents.

"All those adults must be treated with extreme suspicion." Straker said.

Alec nodded. "They're out in the community, the aliens must trust them." He scanned through the list in front of him. "This is going to take a lot of explaining."

"My job, I presume." Kate said.

"Your job," her husband told her "is to find new homes for the children. We need people who can be good parents but who are utterly loyal to SHADO and we're going to need a lot of them. Perhaps some of the birth mothers will be suitable. I should start with the ones who were locked up."

She nodded. "I'll have a preliminary list for you tomorrow."

And she did.

The two of them and Alec were sitting in Ed's office the next day. "I reckon half the birth mothers can deal with the consequences. If they can handle an interview with Jackson, the aliens shouldn't worry them. And Gay and Mark have agreed to take *three*, bless 'em. You're not giving anyone else permission to marry, are you?"

He smiled. "You think we should encourage them?"

"Please. Secure homes for ninety seven babies, it's a little outside our normal remit." Her face grew serious and she turned to Alec. "I'm not going to ask this again and you don't have to answer if you don't want to but - are you one of the fathers?"

He nodded.

She pursed her lips. "What you want me to do about it?"

"Nothing." he said wearily. "I've been thinking about it all night and I don't want to know. If I knew I'd want to get involved and I could never be a proper father to them. Besides, I'd only get in the way of the new parents, so just don't tell me."

She nodded. "Fair enough. If you ever change your mind -"

"I won't."

Satisfied, she turned to her husband. "What about you?"

He also had been thinking about it. "Like Alec, I guess. I can't afford..."

"We could adopt some."

"But not all of them. It wouldn't be fair. And if I have to kill them -"

"You won't." she said. "We'll make sure you won't."