

The Ascent

by Amelia S. Rodgers
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**For my Amelia and
In Memory of David Bowie**

Chapter One: Alien Infiltration!

Miss Ealand peered at the short ball of red fuzz with legs that stood near her desk. She then looked inquisitively at the security guard with the ID showing him to be Mark Donald. Donald gripped the fuzz by its arms. It was clad in torn denim shorts and matching vest, fishnet hose, platforms with brass spikes and studded cropped tee shirt. Its red fuzz hadn't been combed since the ice age, its brown eyes were ringed with so much kohl any vain raccoon would be envious, and its ears were multi pierced to rival Swiss cheese. Miss Ealand's nose was assaulted without warning by a strong perfume coming from the fuzz's general direction. Eau de stay the hell away from me, Ealand guessed.

"*This* was trying to break into the studio." the guard said.

"What's your name?" Miss Ealand said calmly. If Genghis Khan were standing before her, she would have had the same demeanor. Nothing ruffled her. That was why Straker valued her so much.

"This poor excuse for a human being was caught climbing over a wall, she fell, I grabbed her and then she kicked me, shook me free and ran halfway here. Didn't mean to bother you Miss Ealand, but I thought you'd like to hear a bit of a joke. She still *insists* on seeing the boss."

"Are you Straker's secretary?" the fuzz asked.

"Miss Ealand is Straker's executive assistant but that's no business of yours. Lose that tone of voice of yours Miss, or I throw you out. You're lucky I didn't break your arms." the guard warned. "You only got to see Ealand because it amuses me."

"Yeah? Screw you. You only caught me because I screwed up and fell, prick. So put a lid on it!"

"Huh?"

"I think she told you to shut up, " Ealand grinned. "Let her go Donald, and give her back her rucksack if it passed the analyzer scan. I trust you examined it?"

"Yes, I followed protocol. Right, that tears it, off to gaol for you," the guard said. "Her bag was clean, can't say the same for her."

"I'm not one of you stuck up British. You can't stick me in your stupid jail."

"Mr. Donald, you can go. If I need you I'll call for you."

"Right, Maam but if I was you, I'd use disinfectant after I dealt with that lass." He threw the backpack on the floor.

The red fuzz snatched it up and stared at the guard as he walked toward the exit, clearly wishing she could slit his throat with a machete.

"Why don't you tell me what your name is?" Miss Ealand repeated with a smile.

"Kim, not that it's any business of yours. I came to see Straker. After that's done, I'll get out of your hair." The girl who identified herself as Kim watched the security guard close the door and behind his back she made a rude gesture.

"That wasn't polite, but then neither was he. Are you hurt? We have a first aid station on the studio lot." Miss Ealand noticed the girl was rubbing her bruised elbow, and one ankle looked swollen. "No, you'll need our clinic."

"I can take care of myself. Now where's Straker?"

"What did you want to see Mr. Straker about?"

"Ascent! That's what. Your stupid movie Ascent!"

"The science fiction movie we recently released? You didn't like it?"

The door behind Kim had opened. Silently, a familiar figure had entered, seemingly bemused. Kim was so angry she hadn't noticed it.

"Everything was all wrong! Kyrdu was my hero since I was a kid. I couldn't believe it when I read a movie was going to be made from the book The Axis of Kyrdu! Then I

watched it and it was a disaster!` Kyrdu would never have married Mara like that! The corbel mind shock scenes were done all wrong! Now where's Mr. Straker? I'm going to tell him off. And Harlington too, whoever he or she is. I bet Straker and Harlington are two bald fat overpaid elderly snots who couldn't tell their hand from their ass."

"Miss Ealand, I came to give something to Mr. Straker, is he in?" Ed tapped his slim black attaché case.

Miss Ealand smiled at Edward Straker, who had shook his head slightly after entering silent as a ninja. Kim now had turned around. And gaped. Miss Ealand privately referred to it as the **Straker phenomenon**. Women and men tended now and then to melt down into small puddles of goo upon seeing him for the first time. Not that they were to be blamed. She had long thought the man she worked for was not flesh at all, but a work of art.

"No, but if you like I can open the office and you can leave his attaché case in there and wait for him."

"Sounds like a plan. Why don't we let her come in and wait too?"

"He may not appreciate that." Miss Ealand said, amused at her boss playing masquerade. "This is Kim." Kim was trying to find words to describe Straker. She found it difficult to get past his eyes and voice.

"If he doesn't meet the public how is he supposed to make movies for them? Come on, Kim. Open the door Miss Ealand. Donald told me you gave him some trouble, is that correct? I'm assuming he had you and your bag searched."

"The prick did it himself and if you ask me, he enjoyed himself doing it." Kim said. "Who are you?"

"Ed. I work here. I've known Donald for a few years. If he as much thought about enjoying it, he'd find himself up on sexual assault charges and find my boot print on his behind. That kind of thing isn't tolerated here. Come on in."

Miss Ealand opened the door to the office and Kim and Ed went through it.

"Oh, Miss Ealand, have the cafeteria bring me a coffee, would you. My usual. What would you like, Kim?"

"Coke. Not that diet shit."

The two of them settled down in the office.

"You look like I imagined him to look. Except Kyrdu wears his waist length hair in braids held together with Leis feathers. Are you an actor?"

"Tell me more about this book you're describing. I don't have much time to read. The studio keeps me too busy."

"Haven't you ever heard of the Axis of Kyrdu? It won lots of awards. I have a book signed by the author. It was so sad when she died. My dad died from aids too, just like her. And then those idiots protested her book because they found out she was transgender! What difference does it make? Her book made you laugh and cry and gasp in awe. The book got translated into five languages and this stupid studio ruined it by squeezing it all into a two hour pile of shit. "

"The publishing business and the movie business operate on different terms. What works in a book may not work on screen, and the cost involved in adapting it to the author's original vision are unfortunately high. The head of the studio's purpose is not to see that a work is recreated perfectly. It's simply to make movies which are popular enough to make money so that the studio triples the amount they put into it. Unfortunate but the truth and it provides jobs for a lot of people, including me." Ed said. "There's a dull harsh reality behind the shiny artifice of motion pictures. The author would have given us permission to make changes as needed as part of our financial deal with her. We wouldn't have gone against her wishes, she cooperated with us before she died."

"Life sucks sometimes." Kim said in disappointment.

"Kim, let me see your arm."

She looked at him and frowned. Somehow she found herself doing as he wanted. He took her hand in his, and studied her arm carefully and gently as she watched his face. She'd at first thought his wide, electric blue eyes might be contacts but they seemed real. Not the artifice he'd just been describing.

He only seems intimidating. He's gentle. Shit, he's cray cray handsome! How can he be that perfect? Botox? He's got to be an actor. Bet he's a leading man. He's like Kyrdu for real!

"It doesn't appear broken. A lot of soft tissue bruising which accounts for your discomfort. Cuts and scratches, nothing threatening. Ankle doesn't look great though. Donald told me you were climbing the wall. That's a pretty incredible climb. Dangerous, too. Did your hero Kyrdu climb walls?" Ed smiled.

"It was how he prepared for the Deh Oroli Taveh. If he lost his concentration for one second, his mind could be lost forever," she said intently.

"Sounds like he was quite the driven individual. I may see if I can pick up the book in audio format and listen to it in my car. Ah, refreshments. Thanks, Miss Ealand. Coffee smells great. Has Col-has Alec come in yet? What possessed me to give that clown time off?"

Miss Ealand and Ed Straker exchanged somber glances for an instant.

The alien bastards cut open a four year old kid, Ed. I spent some time with the body, said a prayer I was surprised I remembered. Her mother found her and was still screaming when our UFO incident containment crews moved in. Sick bastards. She was just a beautiful little girl. I held the mother and tried to comfort her so our medics

could sedate her and give her the amnesia drug. She'll never be the same.

Alec, forget finishing the incident report, you're relieved of duty tonight, come in tomorrow when you feel like it, I'll have Ealand clear my schedule and we'll go have dinner. I have to put on the chain mail and battle Henderson tomorrow and I'll need a break too.

I need to work, Ed.

No, that's my line. You need to go drink excessively with those RAF ruffians you consider your mates. That's an order.

Ed, thanks.

Thank me? You don't ever need to thank me, Alec Freeman and don't you forget it.

No, I know that. I mean thanks for letting me be a part of your ongoing fight to bring those sons of bitches down. Thanks for choosing me to be the first Shado recruit, Ed.

Thanks for being worthy enough to make it the easiest and best decision I ever made. Besides my brilliant decision to choose you as my friend. Go carouse, Alec Freeman. For me and that little girl.

"No Sir, but he's already on the way here. Stuck in traffic. Terrible downpour all day." she answered.

"Inform me when he arrives."

"Yes Sir."

Miss Ealand left, and Kim watched Ed gratefully sip his coffee, admiring his long fingers and the way fine wisps of his perfectly groomed platinum hair curled around his forehead and ears.

"So this is the big boss's office. What the heck is that white bird thing on the desk?"

Ed chuckled.

"Abstract art. I understand he likes it. I don't think much of the giant lips though. I probably would have nightmares if I was forced to work here every day. How's the soda?"

"I didn't know British people even drank soda." Kim said. "I thought they drank tea."

"Some people live on tea. My partner Alec claims my blood is mostly caffeine from all the coffee I drink. He's probably right. He lives on scotch. He thrives on it, as a matter of fact. I've never been able to understand it. I've never been able to understand him."

"You sound American, is he?"

"I am. He's Australian, but he sounds most of the time like he doesn't know what a koala is . Which is fortunate for me, because in the times he goes full Aussie on me, I need the Rosetta Stone to understand what he's saying."

"Is he your life partner?"

"Goodness no. I'd never survive and neither would he. Business partner. We've been friends for several years. Look, Kim, how the studio handled your favorite book shouldn't need to distress you. It won't change what you see in your mind. That's the beauty of art. We all see and interpret it differently. Tell me about yourself."

"Look at me. What is there to tell? My mom and dad broke up when she found out he was gay, and then I found out from him I wasn't even their real daughter. It took me a long time to get over it. People can die of a broken heart, you know."

"I know. Yes, yes I know. Often heartbreak can be more damaging than any physical threat. What's your living situation?"

"God I hate it. It's a stupid orphanage, okay? They placed me several times in foster homes because my foster mom just got rid of me. As if I'd want to be with her just for her stupid money!"

"She's wealthy?"

"Yeah. My dad sold her a house, that's how they met. He worked in real estate but he got laid off when his realty company got bought by some mega corporation. We lived on welfare until he died. My dad was terrific, I loved him and he loved and accepted me. It didn't matter to him where I came from. We never went to the places my foster mom did. Fuck status and shit. I never got a penny from her that I didn't pay back. I came out here on a school trip the orphanage arranged. Some charity or something. As soon as I'm a legal adult I'm moving out. I'm already saving money. I've got a job part time making burgers, and at nights I clean out a gym that has a rock climbing room. That's how I learned to climb so well. It's sick!"

"Sick? Ah. You mean you like it. I lost track of slang after farrrrr outttt dude, I'm afraid."

She giggled at him. He has to be an actor. He really sounded like a stoner just then!

"So are you throwing me in jail?"

"I have to follow security protocols for the studio. What's your full name and where are you from?" Without signaling that he had, Ed hit a button concealed behind his desk under his screen which connected him to where Ealand was working. It signaled that he wanted Miss Ealand's special attention. Outside, Miss Ealand acknowledged it and took notes. All conversations in the office were recorded and filmed, as a security measure. However often something would be of particular interest to her commander, in this case, Kim. In that situation she added notes for Straker to look over. Not that he needed them.

"Kimberly Hazel, I live in Frisco and I don't know. The adoption papers never said. Whoever my real mother was, all I know is that the cops think she was homeless and sold her body to eat. She dumped me at a hospital sometime after she had me. She split, and they never found her." Kim shrugged. "Why do you want to know?"

"You're quite the survivor. It doesn't surprise me that you attached yourself to a hero in a book." Ed told her.

"He's my hero but he isn't a comic book super hero. He has doubts about himself. He knows he isn't perfect, but he tries to be. People think he's a fucker without feelings because he's so disciplined but he's got a sweet nature he rarely shows. The wild magical Leis birds aren't afraid of him, and the Lei birds are telepathic. They try to force the D'Shee Mara on him for a life mate but he refuses because he knows it's just for political reasons and she just wants him as a trophy to show off to her sect. She never had any more feeling for him than the poor lei birds she killed out of vanity to be made into her fucking dresses. He's decent and genuine like that, you know. He's immortal, powerful and can never die. But he's lonely sometimes. Like me." she shrugged.

She wondered why he looked ill at ease for a moment, then he composed himself.

"Kim, want a couple of aspirin? Maybe a cold pack for that ankle?"

"You feel sorry for me, don't you? Okay know this, mister big shot. I don't want your pity. Okay if I can't see Straker, I'm going. Hey, this door is locked!"

"First, sit down, I don't feel pity for you." he said briskly. "Pity accomplishes nothing and doesn't do either of us justice. I do feel compassion for you. My mother passed away in my hometown of Boston from cardiac arrest when she believed she'd lost her only son. I pretty much fell apart hearing about it as you must have when your father died. The door is locked because I required complete privacy. As for seeing Straker, you have been for about ten minutes now." Ed smiled. "Now sit and finish your soda."

"You're lying to me!" Kim accused, shaken.

"Why are you so sure of that?"

"Okay if you're Straker, prove it."

"Only if you don't frisk me like Donald did to you." Ed replied in mock horror. Kim almost laughed, but she bit her lip and took a chair.

"You ought to have identification somewhere. Show me."

"You give orders often?" Ed smiled. He reached into the inside pocket of his cream Nehru jacket and slipped his studio pass to her. "Will that do?"

"Shit. You *are* Straker. You made a crummy movie!"

Fuck, how lame. I thought he was a real son of a bitch and he's an angel, funny and

nice.

"I'm innocent, although my partner would choke at that description. I have little power over what films are made here. All I do is sign papers and run the studio. Now since I cooperated with you, you're going to cooperate with me. Give Miss Ealand your address in the States. To begin with, if you clear the final security protocols, no charges will be raised against you, I'll see to it. I want you to be seen by our medical division and then if you want, I'll briefly show you around the studio. I had a rough day with the guy that holds the purse strings and I need some air to clear my head."

Ed glanced at his Certina wristwatch and reached for the phone but it rang.

"Yes Miss Ealand? He is? Good. Tell him I want him to mind the store just until Lake arrives. I have something I want to do this evening. Miss Ealand, run the G6 check, would you? Exactly. Hold on a moment. Kim, where are you staying?"

"Some dumb hotel. The orphanage booked it. Hold on a minute. I've got it in my pocket. Okay Hotel Chadwick. Listen, I can't do what you want. I ditched my group while they weren't looking and it's getting late. They'll be looking for me and I'm probably already in deep shit with them for what I did."

"I'll handle it. The Hotel Chadwick isn't impressive or comfortable enough for a flea. I'll arrange something else for you tonight and for the rest of your stay. "

"I don't know."

"Kim, look at it this way. I owe you something for screwing up the book." Ed grinned.

"Okay, I guess." Kim looked excited.

"Come on, let's go see Miss Ealand."

They stepped into the outer office. Kim gave Ealand her information.

"Miss Ealand, get through to the Hotel Chadwick, tell them Kimberly Hazel is with me, and I'll advise them when she will return later. If you have any problems, tell Alec to discuss it with Aegis."

Miss Ealand looked surprised. Aegis was a multi-national security systems company that Straker himself had created and done some coding for. Created initially for SHADO to bypass other situations and authorities that would have interfered with SHADO's mission, rarely was it used for the Commander's personal projects or struggles with red tape. Obviously, Kim was going to be one of the exceptions. Miss Ealand smiled and assured her boss that it would be done.

Chapter Two: Femme Fatale

"Just bruises and a mild ankle sprain Mr. Straker. Fortunately she didn't fall far. All the same I gave her some salve that should reduce the inflammation, some pain killers,

put a walking plaster on her foot and I took care of some minor cuts and scratches she had."

"Thank you, Doctor." Ed said to the studio physician who also worked in SHADO. He was one of the small handful of transplanted Americans that worked for the Commander.

"She's a sweetie. Needs to watch the language though."

"The tough language goes with the territory when you're her age. She in the main lobby?"

"Yeah. Asked a lot of questions about you, I think she has a crush on you. Ed, lately I see more patients like her who have whiplash because they've met you for the first time. You should feel guilty with those he-man looks of yours."

"Doctor, you've been talking to Alec way too much." Ed chuckled. "Besides, I can't help my genes."

"It takes more than genes to look the way you do at your age. It takes hard work and you know it. How did it go with Henderson?"

"It blew chunks. I scored a stash, though. "

"What?" the doctor blurted out, wondering if he should bring in Jackson to check Straker's sanity. A twinkle in Straker's remarkable eyes told him it wasn't needed.

"Never mind. Catch you later, Doctor."

Straker turned on a heel and walked off, chuckling softly to himself.

Kim was waiting impatiently in the lobby of the medical building after having been seen by the physician. He'd been funny, given her chocolates and had taken care of her. Whatever he had put on her arm had wiped out her pain.

Where is Ed? I shouldn't have trusted him. Why was he asking me so many questions? What did that mean a G 6? Code for something I bet. Maybe this studio is just a cover for British intelligence and Ed's a spy. Listen to yourself, God what a moron. You read too many books. Why can't I have telepathy like Kyrdu? Then I'd know what Ed is really about. I wonder if he's married. No ring. That doesn't mean anything. There's just something about him, something I can't put my finger on.

"Excuse me, but did Ed Straker come in here with a woman?" a rugged looking man asked the bored to death medical building receptionist. She pointed at Kim.

"He came in with me. Who are *you*?"

Alec Freeman laughed heartily.

"I got told by Miss Ealand that Ed was hopelessly entangled with a femme fatale, so I

came to rescue him before you robbed him of his virtue. Hiya, you must be Kim. I'm Alec Freeman."

"I'm no femme fatale. Are you his friend? He was waiting for someone to take over for him so he could give me a tour of the studio."

"A *personal* tour from the boss? Maybe Miss Ealand was right the first time. You *are* a femme fatale. Did you actually break in here?"

"Sort of. Are you the one Ed was talking about? He said you were his friend and business partner."

"I have that unfortunate connection to Ed, yeah." Alec sat down next to Kim with a wide grin. "What's on your mind?"

She'd been studying him.

"Your face is all messed up. What happened to it?"

"*Life!* We all can't go around looking like Ed Straker. You know, count yourself lucky. Ed was in one of his better bad moods. If he'd been in a really *BAD* bad mood you might have been shot. By *him*. How long have you been waiting for him?"

"About a half hour. I thought he got lost. Listen, you don't sound much like his friend. Tell me about him."

"Translated is he married? No. He's divorced, has been for years now. The fool married the wrong woman. You don't have much of a chance though. You're a bit young for the old geezer. I can practically smell the baby food stains on you."

"Why in the world does he like you so much? And I never asked if he was married, you jerk. I just kind of wanted to know more about him. He doesn't say too much about himself. Just that he came from Boston and his mother died and it pretty much made him fall apart when he found out. What?"

"I was in hospital with him when he got the telegram saying his mother passed, and he was already close to death himself. Up to then she was probably the closest person to him. It took me years to get through the walls he built around himself. Even I don't know everything about him. I do know he likes kids. So what else do you want to know about him?"

"Really? Okay, you said he was in a hospital?"

"Wire thin. Sick as a kennel full of dogs. Got his shoulder drilled full of lead in Nam trying to help his fellow p.o.w's escape on a marine chopper after the S.R.O chickened out. The medics barely put him back together with glue, figured he was fubar. Grounded him. Told him he wouldn't have much use of his left arm. They didn't know Ed Straker. He'd defy God Himself."

"Wait, wait, he got captured like in war movies?" Kim blurted out.

"Milk run. Doing recon sorties. He and his m.i.b. were hit, and couldn't return fire. He went down, hard. Spent the good part of two years as food for everything that owned a mouth and could crawl or fly on top of the daily torture. He should have been dead."

"He was-tortured? Shit!" Kim exclaimed.

"I know someone who's *going* to be tortured and it isn't me." Ed Straker said in irritation.

"Ed Straker. Where did you come from?" Alec joked, ignoring the genuine anger in Ed's expression.

"Don't be mad at him. You're friends, remember?" Kim put in. "Aren't you?"

"Sometimes I wonder why. Kim, sorry I'm late. They're still shooting on all the indoor stages right now and I'll have to reserve the tour for later. I'm beat and I'm hungry, I missed breakfast and lunch. Lake's going to take care of things so dinner's on me, Alec. Miss Ealand said I could find you here. I arranged reservations for the three of us."

"How do I know you won't poison the overpriced, perfectly broiled steak you're going to buy me?" Alec announced. Kim grinned at Alec.

"I won't need much poison. You'll be long dead after the generous tip, which you're providing." Ed grumbled.

Kim giggled.

That she did was noted with pleasure by Ed Straker.

Chapter Three: Finger Dipping Dilemma

"Shit, I'm stuffed! I never ate so much in my life! What's this? Ed, do I drink this?" Their waiter had set down a finger bowl.

Ed gave her an inquiring glance, then took her hand and gently put her fingers in the crystal bowl of water then he did the same with his bowl, and then wiped his hand with his napkin. She copied his actions. He smiled at her. Alec was grinning.

"You might have taught her what is expected in a fine restaurant before you brought her here, Mr. Straker." the waiter said, professionally smiling.

"Hey, jackass, just because I didn't know what to do with your fucking bowl..." Kim snarled. Straker suddenly stood up, tapped her shoulder. Kim looked at him with fear.

"Ed, I didn't-"

Straker had turned to step in front of the waiter, face impassive.

"A word with you. In private." Straker's words were a fired bullet.

"Of course, Mr. Straker."

The two walked off.

"And God have mercy on your soul," Alec quipped.

"What just happened?"

"Kimmers, Ed isn't upset with you," Alec assured her.

"Kimmers?"

"I nickname people he likes that I like, it makes Ed jealous." Alec grinned. She brightened up, then looked dubious.

"Is he still gonna be my friend?"

"You have that pompous perfectly mannered over-educated Bostonian showoff wrapped around your little finger."

"Why do you constantly insult him?" she laughed.

"He's allergic to praise. You'll see. How about more pop while we wait for Ed?"

"They actually served me coke in this fancy joint."

"They'd serve anything Ed requests."

"Alec, does he have a girlfriend?"

"You volunteering for the position?" Alec teased.

"As if!" she looked glum.

Alec suddenly looked serious, and it took her by surprise.

"He's a loner, Kimmers. His job is his only girlfriend."

"That's sad."

"What's sad?"

"Nothing Ed. So how was your one on one with our anal mate back there?"

"I was a magician. I separated him from his attitude and then his job. Come on. We'll find somewhere else to eat dessert. This place is an epic fail."

"Hey! You know slang!" Kim accused. "You swore you didn't."

"Did I? My bad." Ed chuckled.

Alec's smart phone rang.

"Freeman. Yeah. Cheerio, Rob! No, no problem. What? Again? Right. Give me about fifteen minutes."

"Trouble back at the studio, Alec?"

"Nothing like that, that was one of my RAF mates Robin calling me for assistance from the pub. He's close with a vet who has a constant problem with the drink, and he doesn't want our metropolitan buddies to lock him up again. Ed, you and Kim go and have a great night. Good thing we brought separate cars."

"Alec, you sure you want to handle this yourself?"

"I'm good. I won't run down too many civilians. Kim, make him take you home with him, get him good and drunk and record the whole thing for me to upload to the internet."

Kim giggled. Ed stared at Alec.

"The little people are enjoying themselves tonight I see. Let's go." Straker picked up the bill. The manager of the restaurant hurried up to him.

"Mr. Straker, no that is not necessary. I am terribly sorry, your meal is gratis with my apologies."

"I couldn't possibly accept that, my Puritan humility won't permit it. Mr. Freeman is paying for everything." Straker took Alec's hand and put the bill into it firmly. Kim laughed out loud and giggled.

"I'm going to get you for this one Edward Straker. Good and solid. Just remember that." Alec grinned.

Straker winked at Kim.

Chapter Four: Icicle Man

"You're lame!"

"How has your humble servant offended thee now, Lady Kim?" Ed asked, switching the windscreen wipers to max. Kim was in seventh heaven, seated beside him in his bronze Shado automobile.

"That Baskin Robbins had at all those flavors and you picked vanilla?"

"When did they make picking a flavor you genuinely like a capital crime? Now the cotton candy flavor *you* put away like an entire military platoon on maneuvers , that's

an offense to gastronomy that deserves death by lethal injection. "

"Stop being silly and talk to me. You've been too quiet."

"This is a really bad storm, Kim. I have to concentrate on my driving. You warm enough?"

"I'm good."

He hid a grin at her copying Alec.

"Glad to hear it. It's going to be about two hours until we get to the hotel, why don't you nap?"

"Nope. I want to stay awake. I want to keep you company."

"I'll turn on the radio if you like. You can pick the music."

"No, you drive Jeeves, I'll do it. This dial?"

"Uh huh. *Hell!* For the love of God, not that station and not that loud. I value my hearing too much."

"You said I could pick," she complained.

"*Kimberly Hazel.*" was all he said. It was usually all he needed to say. He suddenly understood epic fail all too well.

"Oh shit. That's the adult voice. Never mind, I'll turn it off. Does this panel work?"

"Stop fiddling with things. Nap. Now."

"Loser." she announced, trying to coax his playful mood back.

"Go to sleep." There was a fresh edge to his voice that made her nervous.

She muttered to herself for several minutes but she curled up, and after a while he heard her breathing pattern change. Not long after that, he was introduced to her snoring. He gave her a quick glance then returned to his driving. He smiled.

That music was preferable to your snoring, Kimberly. All the same, I'm going to miss you after they give you the amnesia drug. A few phone calls back home, and I may find someone willing to foster you until you're old enough to be on your own. You'll need somewhere nice to live. I need to ask Alec the name of that arborist woman he dated a couple years back. Leave it to Alec to pretend he didn't even know what a carabiner was just so he could get her alone with him. I'll never forget his disappointment when he discovered she climbed trees for a living, not mountains. Maybe I could talk her into training Kimberly. Maybe I could relocate Kimberly to the UK. Alec could visit you more often that way. Having Alec as a substitute for that guy in the books you love so much will be good for you. You need a real hero for a change

and Alec is one. Jesus, this storm is one for the books.

He pressed a button built into the steering wheel which connected him to the built in voice identification operated computer systems.

"Miss Ealand." he intoned softly. There was a beep. Kim was still snoring, he saw with relief.

I don't think even a nuclear blast could wake you up right now.

There was a second robotic beep. The car had been completely computerized, armored, equipped with fire power and several modifications that his own U.S.A.F would envy. Shado's Aegis Security engineers and technicians had stripped it from the bottom up, turned it into a mobile weapon and it had been christened Predator Class One.

The speeds it could move at would make a traffic cop ticket happy, he mused. Of course, it was adapted to slip under radar checks, too.

Basically she's a tank with four puncture proof wheels and those wheels folded up and into the chassis whenever needed. Rank does have its privileges. Ten were conceived and Alec and I got the first babies out of the cradle. Judging from Henderson's response to the price tag, you'd think he'd be the one that went into labor.

Ed grinned.

"Good evening, Harlington-Straker Studios, how may I assist you?"

"It's me, Miss Ealand. I'm driving Miss Hazel to the hotel right now," he added meaningfully. "Any news on Alec? He got a call-"

"Yes, Sir. Mr. Freeman is fine, settled everything and back at home. He told me you'd probably ring to check in on him. Oh my word do be cautious, is that lightning I heard? He told me he made it home before the worse of it. Oh and he mentioned you sacked that waiter but didn't bother with telling Kimberly that the studio owns the restaurant."

"Correction, Alec and I co-own it as you know perfectly well." He heard her chuckle.

"Yes Sir."

"About Alec, glad to hear it. No worries about me. She's hugging the motorway like a pro."

"Will you be coming back tonight, Sir?"

He groaned audibly.

"Would you ask Lake if she'd pull an all nighter for me?"

"That's why I asked, Sir. She said with this weather front it was better you stay home for the weekend, so she offered to do just that. Mr. Freeman is relieving her first thing tomorrow morning. "

"I don't know about the whole weekend, but tell her I appreciate it and I will head straight home after I drop Kimberly off. Good night, Miss Ealand. Stay dry."

Ed clicked off then looked thoughtful. He tapped the button again.

"Night vision."

What looked like a green film swept obediently over all the windows in the car. It was as if he was crouched over a sniper rifle in the blackest of nights, yet seeing everything as clear as day. He might even have counted the raindrops with precision.

Bless Shado technology in this muck. No wonder old man Henderson was as docile as a Tasmanian devil this morning and afternoon. I gave him the bill for Shado's new toys. He was so cooperative. Okay, I actually think he spit at me at one point. Maybe I can make that a court martial offense. Oh what's all this then? If this is one of Alec's revenge jokes-no, that's a real police cordon up ahead all right. Great! Just great.

He switched off the night vision lenses and slowed to join the impossibly long queue.

In his judgment, at least a decade had passed before he reached one of the yellow slicker clad servants of her Majesty. Ed lowered the driver side window a fraction.

"Good evening, officer. What's the queue about?" Ed had to shout to make himself heard. The officer shook his head and motioned for Ed to get out. Ed made a mental note to swap curse words with Alec, but complied. Ed Straker produced his International driving license and transformed from Shado Commander to soaked Commander in a matter of seconds.

"Road accident I'm afraid. Multi car smash with casualties. You'll have to turn around, I'm afraid," the policeman shouted, handing him his license.

"I'm taking this young lady to a hotel about a kilometer from here. I have a reservation there." Ed responded in the same tone.

"Marsh Wind Manor, that would be?" the officer shook his head. "No sir. It's been closed up to incoming guests and turned into a temporary shelter by emergency services for the survivors who were seriously injured. No more argument now, good man. Move along. Follow the flashing lights."

By this time, Kim was already wide awake from the blast of air and rain caused by the door opening. She yawned and looked around at her surroundings in puzzlement. She winced when Ed got into the car and the gull wing door blessedly closed around them.

"Ed, you're soaked!"

"Well, it might have escaped you sleeping beauty, but there's a hell of a storm going

on."

"Ed at least take your jacket off. Alec would kill me if you caught pneumonia. Here, I'll help.."

My shoulder holster.

"Kimberly. I'll only say this once. Take your hand off me."

"But Ed-"

"One more word and I throw you out of the car. Do we understand each other?"

"Why aren't we headed to the hotel?" Kim pulled her hand away reluctantly, watching the rivulets trickle down Straker's face and jacket. The Nehru jacket was now pasted to his lithe body.

My God, no wonder Alec likes this child. She isn't afraid of me at all. I've encountered a small Alec Freeman. Damn! All right. Go to red alert, Straker.

" I mean it!"

His voice was more chilling than the storm. It had the desired effect of silencing her voice. But not her heart.

His lips compressed into a thin line, and he hardened himself against her muffled weeping. She'd buried her head into her knapsack.

Chapter Five: Super Freaky Stoner Strikes Again

"Is it okay if I ask something?"

"Sure." Ed was relieved, she hadn't said a word to him at all through the rest of the exhausting trip.

"This isn't the hotel, is it?"

"This is my house. Emergency and Police services took over the hotel. That's why we had to drive all the way here. Go in there, and get your wet things off. That bedroom to the right of the front door is where Alec stays when he visits. You'll sleep there tonight. It has all the amenities you'd find in the hotel anyway. You'll find clean clothes and everything you need. Feel free to use or keep anything you find in there that you like. Once you're comfortable, find the kitchen and have some hot chocolate if you-"

She was crying.

"Sweetheart, don't cry." he said softly.

She wasn't having any of it. The old Kim had returned. She switched moods the way Alec switched girlfriends.

"Why did you yell at me, you rotten jerk?"

"Honey, I had a lousy day, and that drive back here was rough on me. I was tired. I need to shower, dry off and get some pajamas and a robe on, then we'll have a chat before we both turn in. You can look through my books to find something to read before you sleep if you like."

"Can I look around?"

"Naturally." He pushed damp hair off his forehead.

"Where will you be?"

"In my bedroom getting dry. Go on now. Get changed. Alec will kill me if you catch pneumonia." Ed disappeared into his room.

She looked surprised, then smiled a little. It didn't take her long to find the guest bedroom with its green and white wallpaper, and to perch on the mattress to test it out. The sheets were crisp and the blankets were electric, and the tartan bedspread was adorned with what looked like a fox fur throw. She scowled, but a quick examination showed it to be fake. She picked it up and snuggled it, then realized with horror that she'd gotten it wet. She hung it up on the door hook but it refused to stay. In frustration, she let it drop.

"Shit! He's going to kill me. Wait, he said Alec stays here too, Alec won't let Ed kill me. Fuck, he'll probably still kill me. Damn it, Ed, why did you have to turn out to be like all the other blockheaded adults I've known?"

Discouraged, she explored the bathroom next. The tub had sliding doors and was huge, with Jacuzzi jets and a retractable hand held shower wand built into the wall. She peeled everything off and turned on the tap. There was a large bar of unused soap on a wire shelf, with towels of various sizes and a loofah. No bubble bath in sight. Maybe England didn't have bubble bath? No, there was a cabinet, or maybe a closet? She threw the doors open. Several pairs of pajamas still wrapped in cellophane lie neatly on the shelves in one section. In another, three terrycloth robes hung up neatly on a rail that smelled wonderfully of cedar. In a drawer compartment was what appeared to be a whole pharmacy aisle of shampoos, toothpaste, paper cups, cotton balls, bath oils, bubble bath and several fragrant wrapped soaps all arranged by size.

"Who needs a grand hotel?" she said gleefully. "I wonder what soap Alec uses? Alec smelled super good. Shit!"

The tub had filled more rapidly than she'd counted on and was dripping off the sides, hitting the bamboo spa mat. She hit the taps, gathered up shampoos and bubble baths and slipped blissfully into the tub to soak up the bubbles.

Some time went by and she'd reluctantly gotten out of the tub after scrubbing herself

spotless until she thought Ed just might find her acceptable, then she toweled off briskly, and brushed her teeth with the electric toothbrush. She'd discovered that Ed had a dental tool that squirted water, and played with it a while. She giggled at the way the oversized pajamas fit her. She caught a look at her appearance in the mirror over the sink. She studied the fuzz. It had gone flat. She washed everything up on the sink, checked for incriminating evidence left behind, then looked at the mirror again.

"Did Ed scare my hair into behaving too? Where's my backpack? Oh, Alec's bedroom." She rummaged through it, and repeated the word fuck as if she was trying to commit it to memory.

"Did that Donald fucker take my hairbrush? Ed's not going to like that! He fired that other pig who thought I wasn't good enough for his dumb restaurant. Wait until Ed hears about this!"

She half marched, half tripped down the few steps into the main area and looked for Ed after peering curiously at the globes of numerous sizes that hung beside the sleek white couch. Finally, slinging her backpack over her shoulder, she found Ed's bedroom. He was in blue pajamas similar to his Moon base pair. He lie as if slung across the black and white fur throw on his bed, one arm outstretched and dangling over the edge, face pale. A waxen-looking figure, ominously still.

She'd found her Dad's body that way along with his suicide note.

She launched herself at him in horror and for her trouble got seized powerfully with an inarticulate cry and thrown across the room like a Frisbee. Dizzy, she watched him roll effortlessly up onto his bare feet to glare at her.

"Fuck! Ed! You're okay! How did you do that? You know that Bruce Lee stuff too?"

"KIMBERLY! Don't-ever-do-that-again!"

"I thought you died!"

"You've never seen anyone fast asleep before?" Ed pinched the bridge of his nose, winced further and rubbed his shoulder.

"Oh you little sarcastic jerk. I found my Dad like that. Okay? I thought you were dead- and I love you like my Da-"

Ed vanished into his bathroom. She marched right in after him. He sighed.

"You *sure* you aren't related to Alec?"

"As if! That would rock! Now that I see you in your jammies-"

"These-are-**NOT**-jammies." he pronounced indignantly.

"Now that I see you in jammies, Alec was right. You *are* wire thin. You need to eat more. You grabbed me like one of those football goons on TV or a dog clamping his

teeth on a bone. I didn't think you looked strong at all."

"It's the weak looking silent types you have to look out for, Kim. Let that be a lesson to you. Did I hurt you?"

"Nope. What are you doing?"

"You've driven me to drug use," Ed said grimly. He had opened the medicine cabinet and was unscrewing a prescription bottle. Without bothering with water, he swallowed two capsules and the resulting expression suggested he'd swallowed ghost peppers with a petrol chaser. Her eyes became brown trash can lids. He chuckled in spite of himself.

"That all expenses paid glamorous two year stay in the fabulous Southeast Asian prisoner of war camp left me with a permanent shoulder injury along with other physical problems. When insolent young women barely out of puberty take advantage of the one time I show weakness and fall asleep, I wind up doing things better suited to a twenty year old body I no longer have, and I pay the price for it. Thanks to the wonders of medical science, I've got drugs that don't allow the damn pain to incapacitate me for long."

Damn wonders of medical science couldn't save my son.

"So I finally find out you're really a freaky stoner." she giggled and then she remembered. "Hey! That Donald prick took something of mine. My hairbrush!"

"Good work, Detective. Yes, yes, I know he did. For a DNA sample. After all, you infiltrated our studio or have you conveniently forgotten that?"

We couldn't ignore the slim chance that you weren't what you seemed to be, that you were an alien but you don't need to know that.

"Wait, your studio takes DNA samples from anyone that breaks in? I bet you have black helicopters too and run a secret government! You're a super freaky stoner, Ed."

"Be sure to pass that bit of illumination about me to Alec. He'll appreciate it. Before you assault me with further questions about my hidden nature, I'll need coffee. Lots and lots of it." He shoved the bottle back in the cabinet and vanished again.

She hesitated. She seemed to think for a very long time, then she took the bottle and stuffed it into her backpack.

Chapter Six: The Vivisection Of Edward Straker

"Is your shoulder feeling better, Ed?"

"I'll live."

"You don't have anything good in your refrigerator." Kim was wearing Ed's robe and

he had helped her safety pin the pajamas she was borrowing so that they fit her better. She still bloody mindedly had her backpack on her back, explaining that his black ops wasn't going to steal anything further out of it. He'd chuckled at her.

"You know, I'm beginning to understand Kim speak. I don't know if that's good or not. What you really mean is there's no junk food in there, right? I hide the good stuff in the bottom drawer. I'm sneaky like that. Cut us a couple of generous slices, would you?"

"Oooh apple pie! Cool beans! I bet Alec bought this for you?"

Ed had put fresh Sumatran beans in the grinder, had his back to her and was now busily brewing coffee. Sometime back, Alec had bought him a Keurig which remained in its box stored under the sink. Ed had reprimanded his second-in-command and told him he refused to drink swill that came out of any pod, explaining pods were for peas. Alec had reminded him he freely drank the swill at the studio. Ed ignored him. The red light on the coffeemaker went off and he poured himself a steaming cup of coffee. He'd already given her coke and ice, retrieved from the home bar he kept equipped especially for Alec.

"Alec did not, although he brings me a lot of food in an attempt to put weight on me, and then he eats most of it. I cook for him quite a bit too, as a matter of fact. I baked that pie you're slobbering over."

Ed poured fresh cream into his glass cup and measured out his teaspoons of sugar with precision.

"Oh please, you big blue eyed fibber. I'm beginning to understand Ed speech and you did not. " she scoffed.

"What is it you kids say these days? *Whatever.*" Ed turned around, cup in hand, expression a blank.

"You really did?"

"I'm not on a par with Julia Child or Gordon Ramsey, and I confess it was refrigerated dough I picked up from Tesco because I was in a hurry, but I did. Pie ready? Let's go eat at the table like civilized human beings."

There was an eerie sound Ed Straker knew only too well. A spine chilling whine.

She'd set down the pie plates on the counter, confused.

"What the fuck IS that?"

The coffee cup slipped free from his hand and crashed to the kitchen floor. Ed raced to her, and she screeched as he picked her up bodily and carried her to his bedroom. He kicked a switch concealed in the black and white tile floor and his wardrobe doors opened with a mechanical whirr. His clothes and shoes retreated out of sight and a curious compartment, barely large enough to hold a grown adult, slid forward. He set

her down on her feet.

"Go in there. Kimberly go in there! NOW!"

"Fuck! What's happening!"

"GO IN THERE!"

"I'm not leaving you-"

He dealt her a single blow with the edge of his hand, known in the parlance as a rabbit punch. He lifted her unconscious body and placed it inside the compartment. He punched a button inside it, steel doors slid closed and swallowed her up. The wardrobe slowly became a wardrobe again. Then he stripped naked, took a small packet from underneath the night table and opened it. The contents were what resembled a tube balloon and a pot of some dark substance. He stretched it until he could slide inside it, and it covered his entire body except for a small slit over eyes and nose that allowed him to see and smell, similar to that of a professional scuba divers suit. He smeared the substance over his face then snapped the hood into place. He retrieved his shoulder holster and Glock. The whole process had taken him less than sixty seconds from hours of practice. It had to. Every second lost might mean loss of life.

Heart pounding as if it was a wild animal struggling to be free, he ran into the living room and up to the brick partition which served as a room divider, and housed a television screen. He picked up the odd female breasted vaguely Aztec looking bust, which had seemed deceptively light and heaved it at the screen. It smashed with a series of sparks, and now gave off a high pitched alarm and then the brick partition shuddered and moved up, showing it had been hollow. He didn't pause as it revealed a collection of various weapons, looking more like it belonged on a military base than a secret kept by the head of a motion picture studio. He chose a curious looking rifle and then he heard the blood freezing cccrrracck and the bits of flying glass that hit him at high velocity and telegraphed to him they'd finally breached his window. He ignored the dozen of bleeding cuts.

My windows. The ones designed to withstand anything. So much for advanced technology. Back to the drawing board. At least Kim is safe.

It's me they wanted, it's me the aliens crave.

What was that song? You can't always get what you want.

There was silence. That's a dark, bottomless pit of silence full of monsters that cut open children in a savage attempt to live. Monsters that eagerly await the vivisection of Edward Straker, he thought.

He rolled, somersaulted and blasted the alien behind him that he had sensed was reaching for him. The green liquid from its helmet burst out over him together with chunks of dead flesh and arterial spray of what passed for their blood, and blindly he swung and fired again in a semi circle, killing its companion. Something burning hot hit his hip and then something jumped on him, trying to pry his rifle away. At first he

struggled with every inch of his strength, teeth clenched and then he rolled his eyes back in his head, feigned weakness, felt the grip lessen. He jerked away violently, swung his legs up and with legs and feet transformed into battering ram slammed them into the alien's chest. The alien went flying, and he quickly blasted it into nothing but an unpleasant and unwanted memory.

Then Ed Straker leapt madly through the mammoth jagged hole in his living room window, like a snarling black Jaguar hell bent on escaping from those who had meant for it to be dead, running out rebelliously into the bleak, damp night.

But the Jaguar was sick, bleeding. And the drug they'd put in the pellet they'd fired into his hip was already beginning to make its long and deadly journey, freely traveling through his bloodstream at a tremendous rate.

Chapter Seven: Awakening

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Alec Freeman sat straight up, assured himself it was only a nightmare and looked at the clock. Two am. He reached for his secure smart phone but it was already yelling its little computerized chip brain out at him.

Ed. I know it is.

"Freeman."

"Alec, its Virginia. Two UFO's got past Moon base defenses to Earth, eluded the Interceptors, targeting Straker's house. It got blown to bits by the UFO, and Captain Carlin returned the favor. We still have a heat signature from his safe room, but its female. Alec?"

Alec Freeman was already in his car, calling for a SHADO assault chopper, and a couple of pub mates. Who just happened to be Special Ops.

Kimberly had awoken and after minutes of screaming and kicking and trying to get out, she sank down, sobbing. How could this be happening to her? Well, she would never see Ed again. She had known that. She'd seen safe rooms on TV. He'd tried to protect her from whatever that creepy sound was. She had memorized every movement he made, the gentle touch of his hand, his faint smell of citrus soap, the sound of his throaty chuckle, the way his honeyed voice could suddenly cut like the jagged edged knife she'd used to slice the pie. She had admired his huge blue eyes that seemed to be lighted from within but could blaze when he turned angry. The forlorn look when she'd cried. The pleasure in his voice when he was around Alec, and when he teased her. Now it was her time to climb. Deh Oroli Taveh. The ascent.

She fished around in the backpack and found her pencil, tore a blank page out of the notebook she kept inside her dog eared and battered copy of The Axis of Kyrdu, and wrote a goodbye note for Ed. She wrote about everything, especially Deh Oroli Taveh. When she finished, she wrote instructions for Alec, and thanked him.

She sighed, it would have been nice to sit and eat the pie he baked. But there really were no happy endings in life. She opened the book, slipped the note inside it and then started to read it like she had so many times before.

This would be the final time.

Car. He had to get to it. That's what mattered, that's what was important. They were gaining on him. Hide. HIDE. **HIDE!** He could hear the choppers circling the area. He squirmed down deeper, like a over-sized worm, deeper and deeper into the mud. He'd wait. His rifle was empty, and he'd lost his gun, but he still had the knife strapped onto the body stocking that concealed him the way a chrysalis covered a butterfly. The knife was especially manufactured and it also was razor sharp. If they came for him, and his luck ran out he'd use it. But not on them.

On himself.

He had barely seen the camouflaged figures dropping to the earth like locusts from the ropes that had dangled, swaying slightly in the wind and rain, but he had trained eyes. Men dropped from bizarre helicopters equipped with gun turrets built into their side. Enemies! Enemies, all of them. He suddenly gagged and painfully threw up, and not for the first time.

Sick again. So tired, so very tired.

SHADO and classified UK Special Ops personnel were gathered in tents hastily put up for the occasion.

"Colonel, we found three alien bodies in what was left of his house. He must have put up one a hell of a fight. We're still working on getting the girl out. The release mechanism isn't working, its jammed. The life support systems in the safe room show green for fully operational, so no worry there."

"Have you located the Commander yet?"

"We're searching for infrared heat signals now. Stand by. No, wait, something from one of-"

"Give me that bloody thing, you fool. Alec, its Rob. Ed must have went out in a black condom, I found the charred package it was sealed in and its empty." Alec's special ops friend used the slang term for the skintight body stocking Ed had put on for reasons of stealth.

"Christ! I hope it doesn't blot out the thermal readings as well as our Aegis labs said it would or we'll never find him. Bloody hell."

"It gets better, mate."

Robin Ambrose always had a dark sense of humor. Alec steeled himself for whatever was to come.

"I found a lot of blood on broken glass from the window and on what was left of the floor. Tests human. I fear it's his. Your people and mine have got the best medics standing by with a fully equipped medical airlift. They can scrub up and operate in flight if they have to."

"That's it. I'm going out there myself, storm or no storm."

"Bollocks to that, I'm not burying two friends when it clears."

"Rob. You know me. I'll find him."

"If anyone can, you will. Best of luck, mate."

"Alec, he'd kill you if he knew you were volunteering to do this. You're acting commander, and this is against regulations." Virginia Lake said. Her eyes were moist.

"Ginny, just hope I find him alive so you can tell him."

Chapter Eight: The Creature in The Black Lagoon

An hour of searching became two. Nothing. Alec was starting to feel like a drowned rat begging not for cheese but for burial. Then his radio crackled into life.

"YOU HEAR ME? I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME. I HAVE TWO OF YOU ALIEN BASTARDS! THIS IS FOR THE LITTLE GIRL!"

"ED? ED? ED!"

"NO NO, LET ME GO! LET ME GO!"

Alec Freeman ran. In all his life he had never ran so fast. He ran through the mud and the rain with lightning as a bizarre soundtrack for his efforts. He ran until he reached the tent, dreading what he might see.

"LET ME GO, YOU BASTARDS!" Ed was shouting. Behind him, they were wheeling away bodies covered by sheets on trolleys.

Robin and other special ops mates of Alec's had Ed held down by arms and legs while doctors scanned and probed him with various instruments. He was still struggling.

"Fever 102 and rising. He's delirious, eyes dilated, on some alien drug. Robin caught him heading for the car. He collapsed twice but he just kept going. The medics say they never saw anything like it. They're trying to decide what would be the safest to sedate him with, and they have his special antibiotic prepared." Virginia said.

"Talk about bloody mindedness. He was submerged in the mud just a few feet from us and suddenly jumped out at me like the creature in the black lagoon! After this, I'll never watch another horror movie again," Robin joked. "I thought this entire property was flat. The woods away a couple of miles, yeah, but how did he find all that mud?"

Not only that, the doctors found some strange substance in the worse of his cuts that kept him from bleeding out."

"Let him go, Rob."

"Alec have you lost your mind?" Virginia yelled.

"You're the one that said I was acting Commander. That's an order."

"That temperature keeps climbing, he's at risk for further damage so whatever you're going to do make it fast." one of the medics said. Alec nodded.

They did. Ed looked wildly around him and then tried to rise, fell, crawled away, leaving streaks on the soaked grass and curled himself into a ball under the table in the corner of the tent. Alec knelt by him, cautiously just a couple of inches away.

"Ed do you remember me? Alec?"

"I-I-are they all dead?"

"The aliens? Count on it."

"Al-ec." he said slowly, like a child beginning to say his first words.

"That's right. Ed, you're hurt, they're going to give you something to help you sleep."

"I don't need-anything-I can go back-to duty now-"

Alec drew closer, reached to him.

"Sure you can." Alec said, gratefully amused as Ed slumped over into Alec's arms, unconscious. Alec effortlessly lifted him up and onto the trolley.

"I'm beginning to develop an appreciation for Americans. I really believe he would have gone back to duty," Robin said and whistled appreciative notes.

Alec reluctantly let them carry Ed off for treatment.

"He said he didn't need anything to help him sleep, too. He was right. Virginia, I don't care how many hours you've been on. I want you to relieve me. I'm going with Ed to hospital and staying with him until he's well enough to go home. Have Miss Ealand start looking for a new place for him to live. He clearly isn't coming back here. He'll stay with me until we find somewhere safer for him. And see that Kimberly is given the amnesia drug and-"

"Alec. I'm so sorry. She's dead," Lake said.

"Dead? How?" Alec said in numbed shock.

"Overdose. It was all in the letter she left for the Commander, here."

"But why?"

"She didn't want to go back to the orphanage. She didn't think that life could ever be any better than it had been in the short time she was with the two of you. She believed she'd be with her late Dad and Kyrdu, the protagonist in the book she liked, the one the film we made was based on. She confessed to taking the Commander's pain pills from the cabinet and swallowing all of them. And-there was a message for you."

"I'll read it later. Let's get everybody out of this fucking rain."

Chapter Nine : Deh Oroli Taveh

Three months later

"Morning coffee never tasted so good."

"I used the Keurig. I even ground the peas myself."

"Very funny, Colonel Freeman. See Miss Ealand first thing tomorrow, I'm sure she can sign you up to one of our comedy series."

"How are you really feeling? Remember, telling lies to your second-in-command is a court martial offense."

"Alec I can't even *think* without getting tired. "

"You must be on the verge of death. You actually answered me truthfully. Ed, did you read the doctors' recommendation? Six months to a year. You were poisoned and seriously injured, you can't just bounce back as if all you suffered was a paper cut. You should still be in hospital. I even threatened your doctors with castration to get them to allow you to convalesce here in my house."

"Castration wouldn't have been possible. I already did it to them for sticking all those damn needles and tubes in me. Alec, your friend Rob. Was his report solid? I see it is from your grin. I have no recollection of being in mud. Yet I was. I know I was hallucinating, but he says he saw me get out of it and jump him. I nearly severed his neck with my knife."

"Rob's built like a bulldozer. His neck alone is the size of Trafalgar Square. You didn't hurt him. He swears there was mud. We checked the area afterwards, nothing. So the doctors feared the drug in your system was an air borne contagion and stuck us all in isolation but everybody checked out fine, and only he saw the mud. None of the other teams were infected. What's wild is that substance they took out of you. It had a clotting ability the labs don't understand, and not long after they took it out it evaporated so they couldn't study it further."

"Was it some kind of alien substance?"

"Feathers."

"Alec, I don't follow you."

"Ed, they identified it as feathers. Bizarre, right? The ornithologists we consulted couldn't identify the species it came from in the brief time we asked them to study it. It just went poof. It was certainly no bird common to Southern England or anywhere else for that matter."

"I'm sure Kimberly would have said they were magical lei bird feathers. How is she doing?" Ed smiled. The smile died stillborn after seeing Alec's solemn expression.

"Ed, I haven't told you everything. The doctors and I decided you were too ill to be able to handle it."

Ed shakily put the cup of coffee on the hospital style wheeled table and pushed it away in disgust.

"So she *was* alien."

"Ed, no. She died. She committed suicide. The post mortem revealed it was the same opiate you use for pain. She must have gotten your bottle of capsules when you weren't looking - Ed -"

"I'm fine."

He was far from fine.

"She left us both notes. I destroyed yours."

"Colonel Freeman, you willfully destroyed Shado evidence-"

"No Ed, Kimberly made a choice to end her life that wasn't ours to intercede in or to judge and I tore up what would have only caused you more agony. I kept my note. Here."

"Give me a little privacy."

"No."

"Freeman."

Alec shook his head as a response, then poured some coffee for himself and topped off Ed's cup.

Ed glared at his friend, but unfolded the scrap of notebook paper

Alec, its Kimmers! I liked your nickname. Nobody ever cared enough about me to even think of giving me a nickname, so big hugs. I know what I decided will be hard on Ed, but you take care of him okay? Pinkie promise.

Alec, I want something else. I want you to find him a girl that really loves him for himself and won't just treat him as a trophy husband. I know no girl is as good as or deserves somebody as terrific as him, but try, okay? I didn't think there was anybody in this rotten world that was lonelier than I was, but then I looked in those big sorrowful eyes of his. Make him take care of his shoulder, feed him lots of apple pie for me and tell him to forget about pretending he doesn't need anybody. In my book, the holy telepathic Lei birds ask Kyrdu what the most important thing in the universe is and he says the ritual of Deh Oroli Taveh. Pleased, they give him their sacred healing feathers to adorn his hair, which they consider the location of the soul. It means the fall of a person's mental walls and the decision to trust and in his language it literally means the ascent. Ed needs to do the ritual or he'll be lost forever. He looks at letting go as a horrible weakness, but really it isn't. It's the ascent. Love you so much, Alec! Love you lots! Say hello to Miss Ealand for me. And that studio doctor. Kick Donald in the dick! I bet its small. The most important of all, help Ed ascend.

Your Kimmers

"God. God. God."

"Ed, what do you think you're doing?"

"Leaving. Now. I have a job to get to. Alec, let go of me! I mean-I mean it-No. No, please no."

"I was stupid enough to let you grieve for your son and your marriage alone, and damned if I'll make that mistake again."

"Alec don't-I can't let-I can't allow-"

"I'm your friend. Friends do this. More importantly of all, friends don't judge one another. You need me, and damn it, I need you. I always have. I always will. "

"Alec. Alec." Ed's body was shaking and wracked with sobs. Alec held him firmly, pressed Ed's head against his chest with a hand.

"Get it all out Ed. I'm free to take care of you for once without worrying about your rank or your pride. You're not the only one that needs to ascend."

"Alec." Ed muttered into Alec's chest.

"Will you just shut up, and cry? The coffee's getting cold."

Ed chuckled then sobbed, trembling again. It continued for several minutes.

"Enough for now. Come on, you weigh less than that paperweight ball of yours. Have some coffee. I'll go get breakfast."

"I've never liked peas. Not even as a adult. Alec?" Alec reluctantly let Ed go and gave

him his pocket handkerchief. Ed wiped his face, his breathing returning to normal. The remarkably blue eyes were reddened.

"What the bloody hell is it now?"

"Did *everyone* see me in the condom? It doesn't exactly leave any part of the anatomy invisible."

"I sent the video to the BBC. You should have seen the ratings, Ed. You were a hit. They needed a close up camera for the important bit, though. So it wouldn't be mistaken for a cocktail wiener."

"You're the only one that I'm going to hit, you bastard that I've mistakenly thought of as my friend. I need my head examined."

"I've got a sheila to pleasure in the kitchen before I bring you breakfast. Give me a minute, maybe five."

"Clown. Sex obsessed clown. Soon to be dead by my hand clown."

Ed watched Alec go out.

"Clown that I already miss." Ed whispered.

Alec came out.

Ed smiled with new tears, recognition dawning.

"It smells delicious, Alec. Apple pie. Kimberly would approve."

"I've never said no to a woman. I wasn't about to start now." Alec winked. "Before you ask, Mr. Perfectionist, yes, it's from the bakery. Now we'll eat."

They did.

THE END